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THE NEW YORKER

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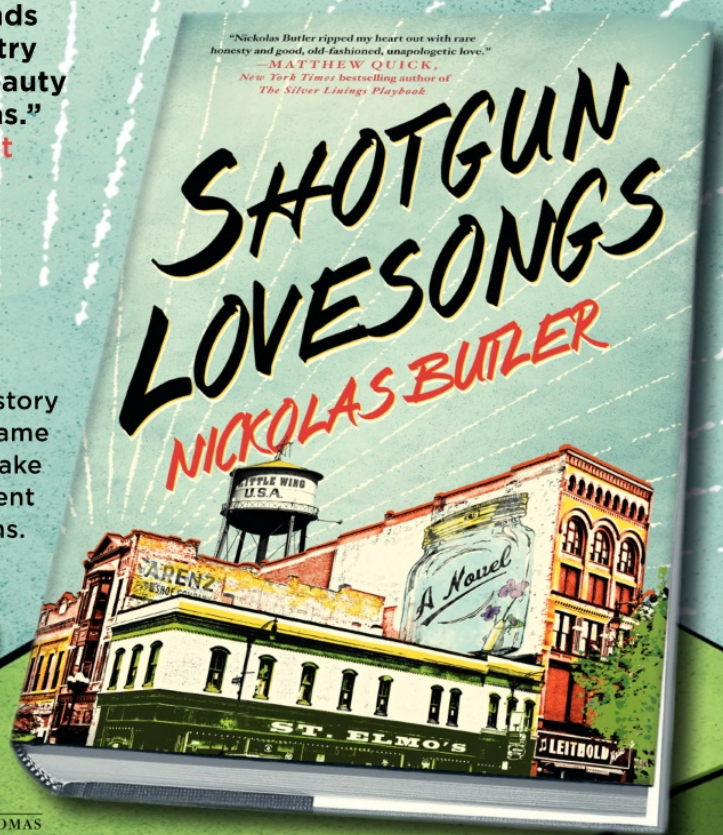

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WRITERS TO WATCH

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A few words with novelist **Nickolas Butler** as he prepares for the release of his critically acclaimed début novel, **"Shotgun Lovesongs."**

A story about four friends from a small Wisconsin town who struggle to reconcile the direction of their lives—and their relationships to each other.

Q: This is your début as a novelist, but what do you consider the start of your writing career?
Getting my first poem published—it was a real confidence builder. I'd been out of school for about a year, and I was working at the Oscar Mayer plant in Madison. On the way in one morning, I saw a *Chicago Tribune* headline about 16 Marines being killed in a helicopter crash—many of them close to my age—and I needed to write about it. I sent the poem to Matt Rothschild at *Progressive* magazine, and they published it. That was a big moment for me.

Q: A poet in a meatpacking plant—what was that like?
It was physically difficult work—cold and wet, and my clothes were always covered in lunch meat. Early on, I suffered carpal tunnel in both wrists because of repetitive knife work. At times it was dangerous. It was always tedious. But my co-workers were great.

Q: Are the characters in "Shotgun" drawn from people in your past, people you knew?
No, not exactly, though the kinds of relationships I grew up with are at the center of the story. The long, easy friendships of youth are just harder to maintain as you get older—people marry, move away, have kids; life intervenes. I wanted to write about the spaces friendship fills, how it works to bind people together.

> "I wanted to write about the spaces friendship fills, how it works to bind people together."

Q: You went to school with Justin Vernon of Bon Iver, who, like Leland in the book, finds success as a musician. Are there any other similarities between the two?
The character of Leland is definitely inspired by Justin Vernon, but I wouldn't say it is truly based on him. You have to understand the long shadow cast by Justin Vernon in Eau Claire—for many, he carries an almost mythic status. Before him, there was no template, no example of how to succeed in something artistically on a big scale. He made that possible. And he's just a genuinely kind man.

Q: What kind of challenges do you face in building these characters?
I think you have to be fair to the people you're willing into existence. Kip, for example, comes across as kind of a villain. But people are complicated, contradictory, multi-dimensional. And if they are in some ways villainous or spiteful, there's usually a reason for it. Something that shaped their world views in very particular ways.

Q: Is there one character whose world view you most share?
I suppose the character I'm closest to, who is most like me, is Kip. He struggles with things; he's the most introspective, prone to examining himself and his actions. He's preoccupied with regret, which I find very interesting.

> "People say regret is wasteful, unproductive. I don't see it that way."

Q: You see regret as a positive thing—that's kind of unusual.
People say regret is wasteful, unproductive. I don't see it that way. I hear a lot of sentiment in popular culture that basically rejects the whole notion of regret, and to my mind that is not particularly thoughtful. I can point to moments in my own life that I look back on with some remorse, and it informs my actions moving forward. It helps us to alter our behavior, to try and be better.

Q: So, what's next—what are you working on now?
Well, I have two plays I'm pretty proud of. I'm intrigued by characterizations as they appear on the page versus those on the stage. It's challenging, and really interesting. I discovered Sam Shepard belatedly, and I am so fascinated by his work, I think he's a tremendous artist, and I just thought, yeah, I want to try that.

Nickolas Butler *grew up in Eau Claire, Wisconsin, not far from where he now lives with his wife and two children. A graduate of the University of Wisconsin and the Iowa Writers' Workshop (MFA, Fiction), he is the recipient of the 2010 Roark Prize in Poetry and the 2007 Davis Demitasse Poetry Award, among other honors.*

Visit Book Talk at **NewYorkerOnTheTown.com/booktalk** to join the conversation on "Shotgun Lovesongs."

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I could tell
everyone
who thinks
we're ruined,
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and you'll
see something
extraordinary,
mystifying,
something
real and true."

—ZELDA
SAYRE
FITZGERALD

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THE NEW YORKER DIGITAL

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THE MAIL

BALLOT INITIATIVE

Jeffrey Toobin, in his article on the Voting Rights Act, omits a significant feature of the legal landscape ("Holder v. Roberts," February 17th & 24th). Contrary to the understanding of most Americans, there is no affirmative constitutional right to vote. Racial animus is a powerful motivation behind voter-suppression legislation, but so is a desire to suppress the votes of the poor and the working class generally. Moreover, the interests that need protection are broader than those covered by the Voting Rights Act. The way to make real progress, and to avoid being constantly on the defensive against efforts to restrict voting access, would be to pass a constitutional amendment guaranteeing a universal right to vote. Then the onus would properly and permanently be on those who would attempt to deny this most fundamental democratic right.
Alison J. Bell
Stowe, Vt.

By the time the Supreme Court ruled in Shelby County v. Holder, Section 4 of the Voting Rights Act had become a relic. Its focus on race and on a few specific states with histories of discrimination made it ill-equipped to address more nuanced voter-suppression efforts that target students, women, immigrants, and the poor. Failure to update Section 4 reflects continuing divisions in our society, even as the political correctness of the Act would allow for easy Senate renewal. We need uniform nationwide polling standards and practices, but political divisions make this highly unlikely. The Sensenbrenner bill to replace the Section 4 discrimination formula underscores existing partisan divisions: despite exempting state voter-I.D. laws from federal scrutiny, the bill still can't attract more than a handful of G.O.P. co-sponsors. It may be a good time for Holder to wage this fight; after all, it is the job of the Justice Department to review and override unconstitutional laws when legislators are gridlocked or unwilling to act. If Holder is willing to bring voting rights into the twenty-first century through litigation, the nation will be better for it.
Niels Erich
San Francisco, Calif.

Toobin highlights the political and legal intricacies that Attorney General Holder is contending with in securing the right to vote. Requiring voters to produce photo identification disenfranchises a large portion of Americans with disabilities, and disability cuts across issues of race and immigrants. Large constituencies of voters who are disabled, physically and mentally, have fought hard and long to actualize their privilege to vote; voting machines and polling centers have only recently become more accessible. Requiring photo I.D. is yet another hurdle. Securing photo I.D. such as D.M.V.-issued identification is time-consuming and costs money. Expanding the franchise to include Americans with disabilities in the fight over constraints on voter rights would accomplish this and more.
Lisa Greco-Joseph
City University of New York
New York, N.Y.

BEDTIME STORIES

For decades, before we went to sleep at night my husband, Dan, and I would read issues of *The New Yorker*, exchanging copies when we had questions about the meaning of a cartoon. My husband's favorites were Roger Angell's sports pieces. When I picked up Angell's article on life in his nineties, my first impulse was to show it to my husband ("This Old Man," February 17th & 24th). He died in October, and so reading the piece was a profound and comforting experience for me.
Carol Brusslan
Highland Park, Ill.

•

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

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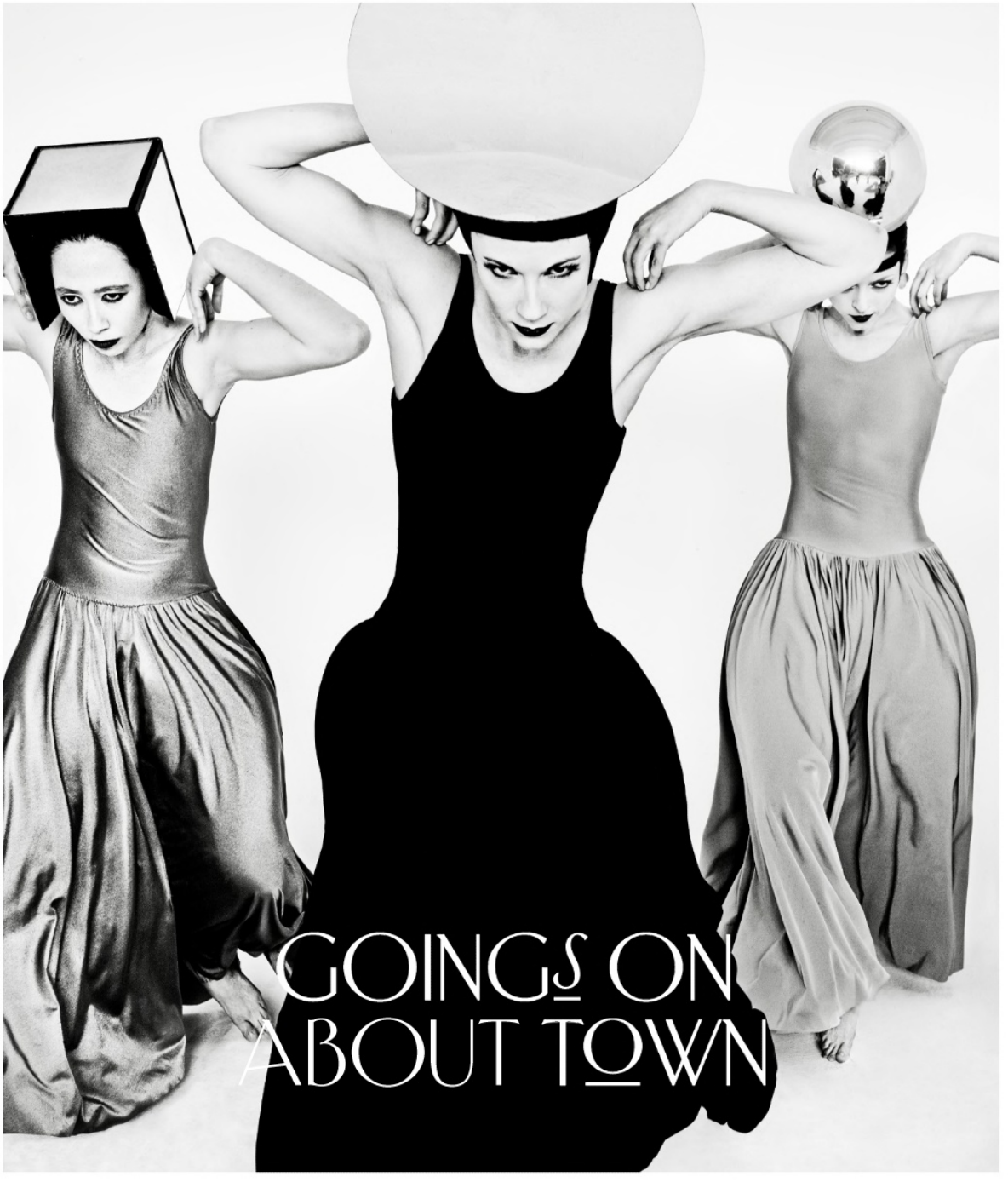

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

MARCH 2014 | WEDNESDAY 12TH · THURSDAY 13TH · FRIDAY 14TH · SATURDAY 15TH · SUNDAY 16TH · MONDAY 17TH · TUESDAY 18TH

PAUL TAYLOR OFTEN populates his dances with creatures who seem half human and half something else rather appalling. The greatest of these pieces is "Cloven Kingdom," from 1976, which is part of the Paul Taylor Dance Company's season at the David H. Koch Theatre this month. The women wear mirror-clad geometric shapes on their heads, but are dressed in lovely, swishing dresses. The dancers alternate between lyrical movements and actions you might perform if you were losing your mind, or inhabited a Hieronymus Bosch painting. They make dog paws, they climb between one another's legs. Taylor gave the piece an epigraph from Spinoza: "Man is a social animal." God only knows why. Thrillingly, man doesn't look very social here.

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

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THE THEATRE

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MATILDA THE MUSICAL
Shubert

MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT
Clurman

LES MISÉRABLES
Imperial

MOTHERS AND SONS
Golden

NO EXIT
Pearl
(Reviewed in this issue.)

ODE TO JOY
Cherry Lane

OUTSIDE MULLINGAR
Samuel J. Friedman

A RAISIN IN THE SUN
Ethel Barrymore

ROCKY
Winter Garden

TALES FROM RED VIENNA
City Center Stage I

GOINGS ON, ONLINE

For more theatre openings—including a new play about a slave's involvement in the Civil War, by Suzan-Lori Parks, at the Public, and "Hellman v. McCarthy," featuring Dick Cavett, about an infamous literary feud, at the Abingdon—go to nyr.kr/theatre.

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

King Lear

Theatre for a New Audience presents the Shakespeare tragedy, starring Michael Pennington. Arin Arbus directs. Previews begin March 14. (Polonsky Shakespeare Center, 262 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111.)

The Realistic Joneses

Sam Gold directs a new play by Will Eno, about two couples, suburban neighbors, whose lives become intertwined. Starring Toni Collette, Michael C. Hall, Tracy Letts, and Marisa Tomei. Previews begin March 13. (Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

The Threepenny Opera

Martha Clarke directs and choreographs Marc Blitzstein's adaptation of the musical by Bertolt Brecht and Kurt Weill. Starring F. Murray Abraham, Mary Beth Peil, Laura Osnes, and Michael Park. In previews. (Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St. 866-811-4111.)

NOW PLAYING

Arlington

It's hard to believe that this musical monologue, directed by Carolyn Cantor, was written by a man (Victor Lodato), so accurately drawn is the inner life of Sara Jane (Alexandra Silber), a young housewife whose husband is away at war. Sara Jane, who grew up in a military family and describes herself as "weak," starts off singing about how great her man is, but by the end of this hour-long play she is devastated, having slowly, inadvertently, revealed to the audience the horror of war as she understands it—and, tragically, she understands it intimately. Silber's voice is tenuous at times (she sings the entire monologue), but her performance as an innocent who has been broken by war and men couldn't be more gorgeous. With music for solo piano by Polly Pen, played by Ben Moss, who doubles as Sara Jane's husband, obscured behind a screen at the back of the stage. (Vineyard, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303.)

The Bridges of Madison County

In this musical adaptation of Robert James Waller's best-selling 1992 novel (with a book by Marsha Norman and music and lyrics by Jason Robert Brown), the completely adorable Kelli O'Hara plays Francesca, the Italian-born wife of an Iowa farmer named Bud (Hunter Foster). Bud is a fine enough husband and father to their two teen-age children, but Francesca doesn't really know what she's missing until she meets Robert (Steven Pasquale), a photographer who's passing through town. He's as butch as Bud, but more sensitive—Byronic, even—because he's an artist. He stumbles onto Francesca's farm looking for a bridge he wants to photograph, and, because Francesca likes him and Bud and the kids are away at a fair, she asks him to supper. So begins her sexual and romantic reawakening. O'Hara and Pasquale are perfectly cast. Each plays off the strengths of the other, and their chemistry is real. The problem is the score. There's nothing memorable about it, and no matter how much the cast brings to the show—and they all bring a lot—it's an oddly tuneless affair, beautifully conceived, but with no real energy at its core. Bartlett Sher directs. (Schoenfeld, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

Character Man

Sometimes the talent of a character actor is so great that he becomes a top banana. That was certainly the case with Zero Mostel, whom the actor and writer Jim Brochu brought to booming life in his one-man play "Zero Hour." Now Brochu, in an evening directed by Robert Bartley, turns his attention to others, principally David Burns, the playwright's mentor, who created iconic supporting roles in "The Music Man" and "Hello, Dolly!" Brochu is a terrific storyteller, and a fine singer, too. Joined onstage by the pianist Carl Haan, he mixes his funny, appealing reminiscences with some classic numbers, including "Everybody Ought to Have a Maid," "Meeskite," and "Trouble." Brochu, who has hovered near the edge of Broadway success but never quite broken through, has created a somewhat rueful showcase for his own considerable gifts, even if, in broad character-man style, the emotion is sometimes compromised by the shtick. (Urban Stages, 259 W. 30th St. 212-868-4444.)

A Doll's House

When Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play is done well, as it is here, in Carrie Cracknell's energetic, excellently cast production, we feel as though we're watching a story told by a director who has the eye and the sensibility of an unusually intense and observant child—one who knows that convention is a bogeyman we are reluctant to cast off, because we dread freedom. Nora Helmer (Hattie Morahan) is Ibsen's multilayered, optimistic, and beautifully obdurate protagonist. She's living a double life, and the secrets she's been keeping to herself, and from her husband, Torvald (Dominic Rowan)—about her marriage, and the money she has borrowed—convey her more interesting truth. Fifteen minutes into the play, Morahan, largely through her exquisite voice and carriage (she sounds like a contralto and is as physically precise as a tango dancer), has already projected Nora's emotional reality—her hunger—and her act: the wife as little girl. (Reviewed in our issue of 3/10/14.) (BAM's Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100.)

The Happiest Song Plays Last

The earlier plays in Quiara Alegría Hudes's "Elliot Trilogy" reverberated with Bach's elegant fugues and John Coltrane's dissonant jazz. For the final installment, Hudes and the director Ruben Santiago-Hudson summon the buoyant, plangent strains of the Puerto Rican *cuatro*. Three expert musicians underscore a script that vaults from a location shoot in Amman to a back yard in North Philly, loosely connecting the stories of two cousins. While Elliot (Armando Riesco), an ex-marine, re-creates his wartime experiences for the film camera, Yaz (Lauren Vélez), a music professor, attempts to repair their childhood home. Less tightly structured than the previous plays, "Happiest Song" overstuffs its two and a half hours with music, food, romance, death, and the Arab Spring, too. Even so, it tenderly re-states Hudes's lyrical theme: how those we love can help us to salve old wounds and endure new ones. (Second Stage, 305 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

Love and Information

Caryl Churchill is a great writer, but even great writers can run their particular style into the ground. And that's partly what's wrong with this, her latest full-length play (directed by James Macdonald, presented by New York Theatre Workshop). It's told in a series of vignettes in which information and love coincide, with all of the characters inevitably ending up in a waiting hall together. We meet these nameless folk in short scenes in which they question the meanings of various things. The characters speak elliptically, and Churchill has left out the play. The cast includes the great Jennifer Ikeda, who was outstanding in the revival of Churchill's "Top Girls," in 2008, and the always charming and sexy Maria Tucci, who makes Churchill's self-conscious, abstractly rendered "politics" sound humane. (Minetta Lane Theatre, 18 Minetta Lane. 800-982-2787.)

The Open House

There's a whisper of a plot in Will Eno's new dark comedy—the patriarch of a dysfunctional American family is so angry that he hires a real-estate agent to sell the family's home without telling them. But the main event is watching each oppressed family member leave the stage and then, a few minutes later, come back

as a different, healthier character: the mystified daughter becomes a feisty Realtor (Hannah Bos), the cowed son morphs into a cocky contractor (Danny McCarthy), the abused uncle and the checked-out mother are replaced by a happily married husband and wife who want to buy the house (Michael Countryman and Carolyn McCormick), and, finally, the awful patriarch becomes the happy couple's relaxed lawyer (Peter Friedman). The writing is sometimes funny, and the acting, under the direction of Oliver Butler, is strong, but, lacking any depth, this twisty sitcom comes across as merely clever. (Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

Satchmo at the Waldorf
The last strains of the set die out, the door to the dressing room opens, and in walks Louis Armstrong (John Douglas Thompson), carrying his trumpet and making his way, stiffly but urgently, to the oxygen tank next to the sofa. It's 1971, and the giant of twentieth-century American music is in a reflective mood. This is the first play by Terry Teachout, the theatre critic and author, whose books include biographies of Armstrong and Duke Ellington. He doesn't fully sidestep the expository pitfalls of the one-man-show form, but, by giving Louis an earthy, true voice, Teachout, Thompson, and the director, Gordon Edelstein, together create an extraordinarily rich and complex characterization. The show centers on the trumpeter's relationship with his Mob-connected Jewish manager of more than thirty-five years, Joe Glaser. Thompson forcefully inhabits both men—and throws in a chilling Miles Davis—delivering an altogether riveting performance. (Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200.)

Stage Kiss
In this metatheatrical mash note, the former lovers She and He (Jessica Hecht and Dominic Fumusa) find themselves cast opposite each other in a revival of a justly neglected drama. As they prepare bad dialogue and worse musical numbers, resentment yields to attraction, then passion. Part backstage farce, part melancholic romance, Sarah Ruhl's play, directed by Rebecca Taichman, skewers rehearsal-room reality and amorous illusion. Goofy, nimble, and brightly charismatic, Hecht proves to be a deft physical comedian, and Fumusa, though charged with crutches and several appalling accents, provides suitably hunky support. Patrick Kerr, as the ineffectual director, and Michael Cyril Creighton, as a hapless understudy, give winning turns, too. While much of the dialogue seems as light and airy as a lemon soufflé, Ruhl offers a bittersweet ending, suggesting both the strength and the limits of theatre's seductive powers. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

NIGHT LIFE

ROCK AND POP

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

Rosanne Cash
Cash was born in Memphis and raised in California but has lived in New York for more than twenty years now. "The River & the Thread," her first album of original material since 2006, is a thoughtful and moving examination of her Southern musical, familial, and spiritual roots. Since the eighties, when Cash had eleven No. 1s on the country charts, she's pursued a path independent of the Nashville scene. She co-wrote all the songs on the new record with her husband, the guitarist, producer, and arranger John Leventhal, who leads her band here. (Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St. ticketmaster.com. March 18.)

Com Truise
The producer and designer Seth Haley has been holed up in New Jersey producing experimental dance music under a handful of names, including this lighthearted one. He stands in stark contrast to the increasing glut of amateurish producers, turning out narcotic and ambient sci-fi funk that's soothing and poised, often enticingly lacquered in aquatic echo. Last month, Ghostly International released his EP "Wave 1," the latest installment in his cosmic oeuvre. (Bowery Ballroom, 6 Delancey St. 212-533-2111. March 15.)

Elvis Costello and the Roots
The pop-music world is full of high-profile collaborations, but few of them turn out to be interesting. One big exception last year was Elvis Costello's album-length summit with the Roots, "Wise Up Ghost," which paired the group's live-performance acumen (especially Questlove's perfectly imperfect drumming) with Costello's dense lyrics; the result was a record as brilliantly pessimistic and knotty as anything else that came out in 2013. Whether writing new material together or reworking Costello's old lyrics, the musicians created an album that moved woozily through a post-optimistic America, making room along the way for cracked mirrors and crooked love songs. (Capitol Theatre, 149 Westchester Ave., Port Chester, N.Y. 877-435-9849. March 12.)

Houndmouth
This much hyped quartet from New Albany, Indiana, has a strong bond with the neighboring city of Louisville, Kentucky, especially when it comes to its swampy folk rock. The mayor of Louisville, Greg Fischer, is a fan, and he declared April 26, 2013, to be Houndmouth Day. The band's début album, "From the Hills Below the City," is a trove of arena-ready Americana, packed with countrified harmonies, catchy riffs, and tales of backcountry high jinks. (March 14: Bowery Ballroom, 6 Delancey St. 212-533-2111. March 15: Music Hall of Williamsburg, 66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 718-486-5400.)

Elliott Sharp
In 1975, when the electric guitarist and composer was studying composition at SUNY Buffalo, he presented "Attica Brothers," an homage to the prison rioters, for amplified string quartet, drums, congas, and orchestral percussion. The following day, the composer Morton Feldman, the doyen of the program, called Sharp into his office and told him, "You put too much sociology in your music. Music should be listened to sitting in red plush seats and your music is for sitting on the floor!" Since then, Sharp has continued writing heterodox and uncompromising compositions, drawing on rock energy, political commitment, classical tropes, scientific principles, and the blues. For this (seated) show at Roulette, Sharp will present a superb fourteen-piece ensemble called SysOrk, which includes the composer on guitar and bass clarinet, performing a new graphic-notation score called "Sylva Sylvarum," along with "Flexagons," a 2011 piece whose structure is inspired by the eponymous geometric concept. (509 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn. 917-267-0363. March 12-13.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

Ambrose Akinmusire
For his new album, "The Imagined Savior Is Far Easier to Paint," the powerful young trumpeter augmented his quintet with the OSSO String Quartet; the singers Becca Stevens, **Theo Bleckmann,** and Cold Specks; and the guitarist **Charles Altura.** As the album's producer and chief composer, Akinmusire skillfully embeds his bravura horn work in an undeniably ambitious new-jazz vision. Bleckmann and Altura join his regular band here. (Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. March 13-16.)

"92 Y Soul Jazz Festival"
This newly organized festival devoted to the funkier aspects of jazz gets under way on March 14 with **DJ Logic** and the organ player **Joey DeFrancesco** and his All-Star Band, featuring the trumpeter **Brian Lynch,** the saxophonist **George Garzone,** the guitarist **Nir Felder,** and the drummer **Billy Hart.** The following night, March 15, the Grammy-winning bassist and singer **Esperanza Spalding,** no stranger to R. & B. and hip-hop, débuts recently composed songs. Her quintet includes another stylistic polyglot, the drummer **Karriem Riggins,** who has worked with both Oscar Peterson and Common. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500.)

Noah Preminger Quartet
This promising gig casts light on Preminger, a lyrical young tenor saxophonist whose alert work as a leader on three albums has drawn considerable critical attention, and also on his special guest, the veteran pianist **Fred Hersch,** a dazzling stylist who recently headlined a prestigious two-week engagement at the Village Vanguard. The two artists will complement each other well, since they share a taste for luxuriant balladry and occasional free-form exploration. (Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. March 11.)

Maria Schneider
"Winter Morning Walks," an atypical collaboration between the celebrated composer and arranger Schneider and the classical vocalist Dawn Upshaw, recently won three Grammys, including Best Contemporary Classical Composition. Here, Schneider—making her first Jazz at Lincoln Center appearance in more than a decade—leads her modern-jazz orchestra, an impressionistically inclined ensemble of loyal and distinctive soloists. (Allen Room, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500. March 14-15.)

CLASSICAL MUSIC

GOINGS ON, ONLINE
Go to our Web site for more events around town, including a presentation by the Boston Early Music Festival at the Morgan Library & Museum and a St. Patrick's Day show at the B. B. King Blues Club & Grill by the local Irish rock band Black 47.

OPERA

Metropolitan Opera

It is safe to say that the Mary Zimmerman era—three productions between 2007 and 2011—is not remembered fondly by a significant portion of the Met audience. Her second production was of Bellini's **"La Sonnambula,"** and, while its setting concept (in a contemporary opera company, which is ostensibly rehearsing the work) created some dramatic inconsistencies, the staging remains a welcome attempt to freshen up a piece that has one of the most absurd plots in all of bel canto. It would be pointless to offer this lyrically seductive score without a major singer in the title role (the sleepwalker, Amina), and the Met has Diana Damrau to meet the challenge. She is joined by the up-and-coming tenor Javier Camarena and the fine bass Michele Pertusi; Marco Armiliato conducts. (March 14 and March 18 at 7:30.) • **Also playing:** The Met revives Jeremy Sams's charming Baroque pasticcio **"The Enchanted Island,"** with a star-strewn cast that features, among others, Susan Graham, Andriana Chuchman, David Daniels, Luca Pisaroni, and Plácido Domingo (in the cameo role of Neptune); Patrick Summers. (March 12 at 7:30 and March 15 at 8.) • Berg's **"Wozzeck,"** the most elemental of Expressionist operas and a specialty of James Levine, returns with Thomas Hampson and Deborah Voigt in the leading roles. (March 13 and March 17 at 7:30.) • The baritonal sound and the noble stage presence of the superstar tenor Jonas Kaufmann, in the title role, are ideal for Richard Eyre's new staging of **"Werther,"** which has a mellow, sostenuto quality appropriate for the most warmly lyrical of Massenet's operas. Also featuring fine performances from Sophie Koch (an intense Charlotte), David Bižić, and Lisette Oropesa; Alain Altinoglu. (March 15 at 1. This is the final performance.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

The New Music Bake Sale, held at Roulette, in Brooklyn, offers several hours of food, fun, and live performances.

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

New York Philharmonic: The Nielsen Project

If there is any composer from the general repertory that Alan Gilbert conducts to perfection, it is Carl Nielsen. His previous concerts in this multi-year series (which are being recorded for the Dacapo label) have been among the best of his tenure, and his latest program is enticing: it includes not only the First Symphony and the "Helios" Overture (in their first performances ever by the orchestra) but also the galvanic Fourth Symphony ("The Inextinguishable," written during the First World War), a work memorably recorded by a previous Philharmonic conductor, Leonard Bernstein. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. March 12-13 at 7:30, March 14 at 2, and March 15 at 8.)

Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

"Vienna: City of Dreams," Carnegie Hall's grand three-week festival, wraps up with three concerts by the group that began it, with three distinctive conductors on the podium. March 13 at 8: Andris Nelsons, the vigorous Latvian who will soon take over the Boston Symphony, conducts an all-orchestral program of music by Brahms (the "Haydn Variations" and the Third Symphony) and by the once ubiquitous Haydn (the Symphony No. 90 in C Major). • March 15 at 8: Christoph Eschenbach, replacing an ailing Daniele Gatti, leads the ensemble in Schubert's "Unfinished" Symphony (No. 8) and Mahler's Symphony No. 4 in G Major (with the soprano Juliane Banse). • March 16 at 7: The final concert is something truly special, with Zubin Mehta (a longtime friend) giving a *tour d'horizon* of Viennese music, all of which has a bit of the sweet tooth that is a permanent part of the city's culture—be they works serious (Mozart's "Ave Verum Corpus"), sumptuous (Korngold's Violin Concerto), frothy (Strauss waltzes), or sublime (Webern's Six Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 6). Mehta's guests are the soprano Diana Damrau, the violinist Gil Shaham, and the New York Choral Artists. (212-247-7800.)

Los Angeles Philharmonic

Gustavo Dudamel, a conductor of boundless energy and considerable breadth, brings his outstanding ensemble to town for two concerts. The first pairs two passionate symphonies, John Corigliano's First—a wrenching elegy for friends lost to AIDS, one of the signal American works of the nineteen-eighties—and Tchaikovsky's Fifth; the second features music by Rachmaninoff (the Piano Concerto No. 3 in D Minor, with Yuja Wang), Brahms (the Symphony No. 2 in D Major), and an L.A. favorite, the young Icelandic composer Daníel Bjarnason ("Blow Bright"). (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-721-6500. March 16 at 3 and March 17 at 8.)

The Schneider Concerts: East Coast Chamber Orchestra

The impressive conductorless string orchestra—comprising young players from several of the most acclaimed string quartets in the country—offers music by Mozart, Satie (selections from the "Gymnopédies"), Gesualdo, and Ravel (an arrangement of the Quartet in F Major), in addition to the young composers David Ludwig and Judd Greenstein, in a concert at the New School Auditorium. (66 W. 12th St. newschool.edu. March 16 at 3.)

Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra

Jeanne Lamon's group, for decades the prëeminent period-instrument ensemble in English-speaking Canada, returns to Carnegie-land for a program that ranges through works by Bach (the Concerto for Two Violins), Vivaldi, Marais, and Handel (the Concerto Grosso in B-Flat Major, Op. 3, No. 2). (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. March 17 at 7:30.)

RECITALS

Natalie Dessay

The glamorous French soprano, having recovered her New York street cred with last season's sparkling performances in the Met's "Giulio Cesare," is back in town for a recital with the pianist Philippe Cassard; on the program are songs by Brahms, Strauss, Clara Schumann, and the usual French combine (Debussy, Duparc, Fauré, Poulenc). (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. March 12 at 8.)

Ethel: "Grace"

"Lamentatio," Trinity Wall Street's Lenten festival, is rich in choral and orchestral concerts, yet it makes space

ILLUSTRATION BY BENDIK KALTENBORN

for the still, small voice—that of downtown's reigning string quartet, which has been known to make a big noise when it wants to. This program is in honor not only of the occasion but also of Jeff Buckley's album of the same name, released twenty years ago; his music is included, along with works by Mary Ellen Childs, Vijay Iyer, Ennio Morricone, and Nico Muhly. (Broadway at Wall St. March 13 at 1. No tickets required.)

Ecstatic Music Festival: Bang on a Can All-Stars
Merkin Concert Hall's intrepid festival catches up with the pied pipers of the post-classical scene, who (with personnel changes) have been going strong for almost a quarter century. The All-Stars' People's Commissioning Fund concert features new works by Daniel Wohl, the Arcade Fire musician Richard Reed Parry, and the experimentalist legend Alvin Lucier ("Firewood"), in addition to music by Julia Wolfe and David Lang ("Death Speaks," with the vocalist Shara Worden). (129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330. March 13 at 7:30.)

SubCulture: The Knights
Versatility is the watchword for the vibrant Brooklyn ensemble, which reduces itself to chamber size for a concert at the new downtown venue. On offer are contemporary works (by Bolcom, Kancheli, and the brilliant young New Yorker Andrew Norman), as well as classics (the Suite from Stravinsky's "The Soldier's Tale" and Webern's arrangement of Schoenberg's Chamber Symphony, Op. 9); the performers include the flutist Alex Sopp, the cellist Eric Jacobsen, and the pianist Steven Beck. (45 Bleecker St. subculturenewyork.com. March 13 at 8.)

Miller Theatre Composer Portrait: Unsuk Chin
This distinguished South Korean composer first gained notice as a protégée of Ligeti, but quickly established her own formidable voice and an estimable European career. Her music—ably performed by Brad Lubman's Ensemble Signal—is the subject of a notable concert at Columbia University that features two New York premières (including that of the Double Concerto for Piano, Percussion, and Ensemble). (Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799. March 13 at 8.)

Hugo Wolf Quartet
Vienna's Alban Berg Quartet has disbanded, but this group (named for another of the city's musical geniuses) continues its tradition of elegant and fiercely expressive performances. Its program in Carnegie Hall's Viennese festival starts gamely (Haydn's "Joke" Quartet) but then dives into the turbulent waters of Romanticism, both early (Schubert's Quartet No. 15 in G Major) and very late (Berg's "Lyric Suite"). (Weill Recital Hall. 212-247-7800. March 14 at 7:30.)

Five Boroughs Music Festival: Les Délices
This group may hail from Cleveland, but its members are acknowledged masters of the French Baroque style. They come to N.Y.U.'s Maison Française to perform diverting pieces by Philidor (his Suite from "Tom Jones"), Rameau, Leclair, and others. (16 Washington Mews. 5bmf.org. March 15 at 3.)

Peoples' Symphony Concerts: Dover String Quartet and Leon Fleisher
The young American string quartet of the moment, having swept the major competitions, joins the revered veteran pianist in a program of works by Schubert (the moody Quartet No. 13 in A Minor), Bach, and Korngold (the entertaining Suite for Two Violins, Cello, and Piano Left Hand). (Town Hall, 123 W. 43rd St. thetownhall.org. March 16 at 2.)

New Music Bake Sale
It's somehow apposite that the Brooklyn generation that is embracing Cronkite-era eyewear and nineteenth-century facial hair is reclaiming yet another retro tradition as its own. Baked goods are indeed on offer into the evening, sold to benefit such groups as Newspeak, the Expano New Music Community Center, and the Talea Ensemble; in addition to the goodie tables, there will be continuous performances by the musicians involved. (Roulette, 509 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn. newmusicbakesale.org. March 16, beginning at 4.)

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center: "Russian Twilight"
Wu Han and David Finckel, the Society's artistic directors, join their esteemed young colleagues in the Escher String Quartet for a snapshot of musical Russia on the verge of revolution—works by Rachmaninoff, Scriabin, Arensky (the rich-hued Quartet for Violin, Viola, and Two Cellos, from 1894), and Taneyev (the towering Piano Quintet). (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788. March 18 at 7:30.)

ART

MUSEUMS SHORT LIST

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
"The Passions of Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux." Through May 26.

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
"Gauguin: Metamorphoses." Through June 8.

MOMA PS1
"Maria Lassnig." Through May 25.

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM
"Italian Futurism, 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe." Through Sept. 1.

WHITNEY MUSEUM
"2014 Whitney Biennial." Through May 27.

BROOKLYN MUSEUM
"Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties." Through July 6.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY
"The Power of Poison." Through Aug. 10.

FRICK COLLECTION
"Renaissance and Baroque Bronzes from the Hill Collection." Through June 15.

NEW MUSEUM
"Pawel Althamer: The Neighbors." Through April 20.

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

New Museum
"Laure Prouvost"

The Franco-British artist, a dark-horse but deserving winner of last year's Turner Prize, puts the museum's tricky ground-floor gallery to good use with her optimistic, discombobulating installation about memory, digital culture, and cold hard cash. On a collaged cyclorama that spans the room, Prouvost splashes images of masked women, disembodied smiles, mysterious squiggles, and a Jeff Koons cracked egg; purses hang from hooks, and windows give onto smaller spaces where televisions flash messages like "It is just you and me." From a less talented artist, this could come off as smug, but Prouvost's inquiry feels as joyous as it does critical. Through April 13.

Morgan Library & Museum
"A Collective Invention: Photographs at Play"

Like Vik Muniz's brilliant 2008 show of works drawn from MOMA's collection, this exhibition aims to make witty and unexpected visual associations. Working with photographs owned by the Morgan and a number of private collectors (including Muniz, Adam Fuss, and Tony Oursler), the curator Joel Smith makes a point of juxtaposing material that represents the medium's history, uses, techniques, and formats, from postcards to publicity shots to a jigsaw puzzle. The variety is diverting, but the sequencing can be too literal, too clever, or simply banal. Ignore the labels pointing out connections left and right and just enjoy the work, which includes pictures by Julia Margaret Cameron, Malick Sidibe, Sara VanDerBeek, and Irving Penn. Through May 18.

Asia Society
"Nalini Malani: Transgressions"

In "Transgressions II," an installation by this stalwart of Indian contemporary art, four rotating transparent cylinders painted with figurative images are suspended in the center of the gallery, as video projectors flashing fields of color and Hindi texts cast shadows on the walls. The images—of Shiva and an English hunter, monkeys and lions, brains and kidneys—float wraithlike around the gallery, transformed by the projectors into strange anamorphoses, like the skull in Holbein's "The Ambassadors." Malani isn't exactly subtle in her ideological and historical concerns: one of the cylinders has the word "Orientalism" scrawled across it, while the accompanying soundtrack features a child mewling, "Amma, please send me to English school." Yet the formal innovations of Malani's shadow play more than make up for its political heavy-handedness. Through Aug. 3.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Roe Ethridge

In one of his best shows to date, the reliably perverse photographer proves himself to be a master of glossy, large-scale randomness. If there's a theme here, it's the allure of surface. Ethridge nods to his own commercial work, in pictures of a Chanel perfume bottle, some big-name models (yes, that's Gisele Bündchen), and a Bonne Maman preserves jar that plays with perceptions of flatness. Set alongside images of uncooked ramen, a glassy-eyed flounder, and a tire dripping with muck, these pretty things look a little ridiculous—but the wonderfully strange, even arbitrary dispersion of subjects is what makes the show such a kick. Through March 29. (Kreps, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-741-8849.)

Simon Evans

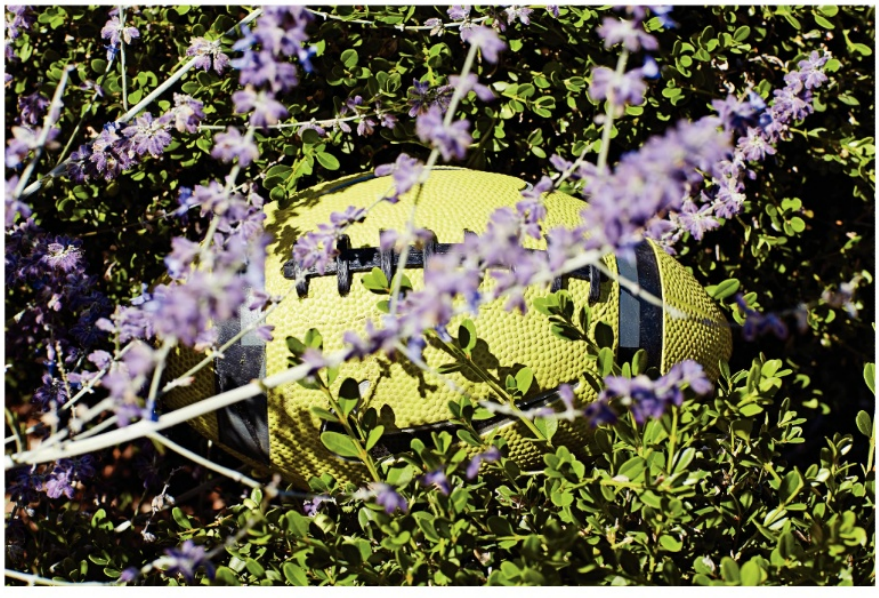
The mundane opens onto the unexpected in Evans's obsessive assemblages, which combine his own written notations ("Does form envelop everything?") with notes on paper found in the street. Some works allude to the allover compositions of Abstract Expressionism, especially those which have been painted over in washes of black or white. In one dumbfoundingly intricate weaving, a geometric pattern emerges, calling to mind a QR code. One of the best pieces here is the mutest: a compact disk that bears the inscription "Thank you, we love the mix." Embellished with gold leaf, it suggests the halo of a Byzantine icon. Through March 22. (Cohan, 533 W. 26th St. 212-714-9500.)

Kate Levant

Poetic, provisional sculptures made of feathers, tinfoil, leather, magazine pictures, and, in one case, a "squid spine," among other materials. (Never mind that squid are invertebrates.) At their best, the concatenations set off a chain of allusions that elevate them above mere formal curiosities: an assemblage of tin, paper, and plastic, for example, feels like a piece of industrial equipment from a Dadaist factory. One work is simply a brake lever, perhaps from a truck or a tractor, shoved at waist height into the wall—as if, amid her pulsing network of associations, Levant thought to offer viewers an emergency stop. Through March 29. (Feuer, 548 W. 22nd St. 212-989-7700.)

Michelle Segre

Two years ago, the mid-career sculptor took a big risk that paid off, moving beyond her signature twilight-zone realism—painted sculptures, often in beeswax, of giant mushrooms, chicken bones, and free-floating eyeballs that might be termed voodoo vanitas—and toward a more abstract, rough-and-tumble, less monolithic approach. (Here, Segre hints at this leap into the unknown with her prevalent use of the International Blue favored by Yves Klein, who famously made a leap of his own.) The star of this tight installation of three sculptures and a tomato-red wall jam-packed with drawings is "Self-Reflexive



"Football and Lavender" (2013), by Roe Ethridge, at the Andrew Kreps gallery.

Narcissistic Supernova," in which one of the artist's old mycological sculptures acts as a launching pad for a drawing-in-space, lines of colorful yarn from which a constellation of dried mushrooms dangles. Through March 15. (Eller, 615 W. 27th St. 212-206-6411.)

Pat Steir
The New York painter, still going strong in her seventies, shows large-format abstractions whose washes of color are so dense and broad that they might swallow you whole. Atop huge fields of gold, silver, amber, or orange, Steir pours skeins of paint that sometimes amplify the backgrounds and sometimes obscure them; she then inserts Newmanesque zips down the middle of many, though those serve not as a testament to her bodily presence but as a further displacement of her hand. Individually, each painting testifies to the artist's trust in the aleatory. Together, the effect is the opposite: mastery. Through March 29. (Cheim & Read, 547 W. 25th St. 212-242-7727.)

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

Heidi Bucher
Bucher's latex casts of domestic interiors evoke contradictory moods: cheerful and downcast, familial and isolated. The Swiss artist's first American show in forty years (she died in 1993) includes skins of her parents' bedroom walls, suspended in the gallery like muddy and overweight flags, plus a drooping, burnt-ochre imprint of the façade of a hotel by Lake Maggiore. Bucher's ghostly sculptures prefigure the work of both Rachel Whiteread and Do-Ho Suh. Don't miss the films being screened downstairs, in which the camera documents the process of casting and passes through rooms of Bucher's empty home with a gaze that feels almost forensic. Through May 11. (Swiss Institute, 18 Wooster St. 212-925-2035.)

Richard Caldicott
The British photographer's elegant new pictures are abstractions, pared down to shape, line, and color. A series of small-scale diptychs combine simple black-and-white photograms with the paper stencils in bright green, blue, red, and yellow that he used to create them. Although the work is light and unpretentious, echoes of Kasimir Malevich, Ellsworth Kelly, and Robert Mangold give it some weight. Larger abstractions—bold compositions of bars and rectangles—look more like paintings than photographs, betrayed only by their flatness and the tendency, here and there, of the color to blush and flare as light leaks out of Caldicott's strict geometries. Through March 29. (Sous les Etoiles, 560 Broadway, at Prince St. 212-966-0796.)

MOVIES

NOW PLAYING

Barabbas
Anthony Quinn has tremendous reserves of power in this offbeat Biblical epic about the violent bandit who, on the brink of execution, is freed in place of Jesus and spends the rest of his life wondering why fate intertwined him with the Messiah. As this clenched, volatile character, Quinn projects an aura at once weary and wary; his ornery dignity gives Barabbas's pattern of making every wrong move yet still approaching redemption the immediacy of a modern antihero's odyssey. Problems of dubbing and pacing and a lack of scene-to-scene variety weigh the movie down, but Christopher Fry's pointed and intelligent free adaptation of Pär Lagerkvist's 1950 novel resists grandiloquence. And, under Richard Fleischer's direction, the cinematographer, Aldo Tonti, and the production designer, Mario Chiari, imbue the imagery with a mournful grandeur, doing imaginative work both in the terse, expressionistic renderings of torture and crucifixion and in the spectacular gladiator sequences, which rival the ones in "Spartacus." Released in 1961.—*Michael Sragow* (Anthology Film Archives; March 15-16.)

Bethlehem
Yet another intimate-scale spy drama set amid the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This one concerns Razi (Tsahi Halevi), a young and hip-looking Israeli secret-service officer who has recruited a Bethlehem teen-ager, Sanfur (Shadi Mar'i), as an informant. When the planning of a suicide bombing in Jerusalem that left thirty dead is traced to Sanfur's brother, Ibrahim (Hisham Suliman), Razi is ordered to coax Sanfur to lure Ibrahim out of hiding and into a meeting that will mean death for both brothers. But Razi—who influences Sanfur under the guise of a quasi-paternal affection—has misgivings about his orders. The Israeli director Yuval Adler, who co-wrote the script with the Palestinian journalist Ali Wakad, gives Palestinians the bulk of the attention. Internecine struggles among the various Palestinian factions and parties—and the deadly cloak-and-dagger games woven deep into domestic life in the occupied territories—are revealed in fascinating and harrowing detail. Meanwhile, Israeli officials appear as apolitical technocrats whose efficiency is threatened, above all, by their irrepressible warmth and humanistic sentiments. The suspense plot is effective yet familiar; the direction is brisk, even hasty, and impersonal. In Arabic and Hebrew.—*Richard Brody* (In limited release.)

The Grand Budapest Hotel
In Wes Anderson's new movie, the past becomes visible in stages, as if seen through the wrong end of a telescope that gets repeatedly extended. The movie is a kind of pastry-chef fantasia, set in a fictional country in some hapless corner of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire. The chief character is the hotel concierge Gustave H., played by Ralph Fiennes as a man of intricate sexual tastes—he's homosexual but sleeps with elderly bejewelled ladies staying at the hotel. The opéra-bouffe plot serves as a strand of bright golden wire on which Anderson hangs innumerable encounters, scampering chases, and an archly decorative style of commentary. The director likes to cozy his visual imagination; he devotes himself to the rectangular hotel lobby, and to closets, prison cells, cable cars, train compartments and their adjoining windows and doorways. He handsomely boxes himself in, perhaps as a way of avoiding the coarse physical vitality that has been central to so many great movies. With Jude Law, F. Murray Abraham, Tilda Swinton, Tony Revolori, and, in the movie's best bit, Bill Murray, Bob Balaban, and other savory actors, as masterful Old World concierges making haughty demands into ornate telephones.—*David Denby* (Reviewed in our issue of 3/10/14.) (In limited release.)

The Lego Movie
As a rule, movies about toys need to be approached with extreme caution; some of them have been bad enough to count as health hazards. This one is the exception. Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, who made "Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs," have delivered another essay in controlled madness, bombarding you with far more candy-colored detail than you can process—though, by some miracle, not too much to stomach. In short, pop culture eats itself. Everything you see, until the closing scenes, is Lego: people, landscapes, and products. Even fiery bolts of laser beam are orange plastic rods. You could try to resist or lament this marketing frenzy, but the movie is way, way ahead of you, landing joke after joke about the shiny pretensions of the Lego world. Our hero is a construction worker who stumbles on a magic brick that will reveal some higher truth, though the film takes ruthless comic pains to knock down the pomposity that usually attends—and spoils—the genre.—*Anthony Lane* (3/3/14) (In wide release.)

The Lunchbox
This gentle romantic drama, by the Indian director Ritesh Batra, packs twenty minutes of action into its hour-and-three-quarters running time. The story involves Ila (Nimrat Kaur), a neglected young housewife and mother in Mumbai, who begins an epistolary affair with Saajan (Irrfan Khan), a widowed older accountant, when a messenger mistakenly delivers to him the lunches that she has lovingly prepared for her husband. Saajan, on the verge of retirement, is saddled with the training of his eager successor, Ahmed Shaikh (Nawazuddin Siddiqui), who, in turn, tries to coax the grieving, weary introvert out of his shell. Batra's poised, observational direction gets much mileage from his actors' soulful gazes, shading the sentimental mist with unspoken misery. Yet his loving attention to local customs—starting in Ila's kitchen, including the very lunch-delivery network on which the story runs, involving Saajan's white-collar workplace, and extending to the particulars of public transportation that bind the city together—serves mainly as an ornamental backdrop for a slight, undeveloped anecdote. In Hindi and English.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

The Monuments Men
An all-star dud about a group of connoisseurs—architects, art historians, curators—who attempt to retrieve the classic works (the Ghent Altarpiece, Michelangelo's Madonna of Bruges, and thousands of other pieces) that the Nazis stole from museums and private collections. The movie feels like a cross between a jaunty "Ocean's Eleven"-style caper and a large-scale war film about misfits operating behind enemy lines, such as "The Dirty Dozen" or "Inglourious Basterds." But George Clooney, who wrote the screenplay with Grant Heslov, directed, and also stars, can't find the right tone. The picture runs back and forth between wheezy high-mindedness

OPENING

ENEMY
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening March 14. (In limited release.)

TEENAGE
Reviewed in Now Playing. Opening March 14. (In limited release.)

LE WEEK-END
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening March 14. (In limited release.)

REVIVALS AND FESTIVALS

Titles in bold are reviewed.

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
The films of Richard Fleischer. March 15 at 8:45 and March 16 at 6:15: **"Barabbas."**

BAM CINÉMATEK
"Under the Influence: Scorsese/Walsh." March 12 at 7:30: **"Regeneration."** • March 14 at 2, 4:40, and 9:45 and March 15 at 7 and 9:45: "Raging Bull" (1980, Martin Scorsese). • March 14 at 7:15: "Gentleman Jim" (1942, Raoul Walsh). • March 17 at 4:30, 7, and 9:30: "White Heat" (1948, Walsh). • March 18 at 4:30, 7, and 9:15: "The Man I Love" (1946, Walsh).

FILM FORUM
The films of Alfred Hitchcock. March 12 at 2:50 and 7:15: "The Man Who Knew Too Much" (1956). • March 13 at 10:10: "Psycho" (1960). • March 14 at 1:30, 4:15, and 7 and March 15 at 1:30, 3:30, 7:20, and 9:30: "Vertigo" (1958). • March 17 at 2, 4:50, and 9:30: **"Stage Fright."**

FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER
"Rendez-Vous with French Cinema." March 12 at 4 and March 14 at 6:30: "Tonnerre" (2013, Guillaume Brac). • March 14 at 1 and 9: "Tip Top" (2013, Serge Bozon).

IFC CENTER
"Rendez-Vous with French Cinema." March 13 at 7: "Tonnerre" (2013, Guillaume Brac). • March 13 at 9:30: "Tip Top" (2013, Serge Bozon).

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
"See It Big!" March 15 at 4: "Seven Chances" (1925, Buster Keaton). • March 15 at 6:30: "Trouble in Paradise" (1932, Ernst Lubitsch). • March 16 at 2: "Modern Times" (1936, Charlie Chaplin). • March 16 at 4: **"Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?"**

DVD OF THE WEEK
A video discussion of John Ford's "The Wings of Eagles," from 1957, in our digital edition.

and self-deprecating comedy, and most of the encounters with Nazis and confrontations with other dangers fizzle out. With Matt Damon, whose caddish behavior with Cate Blanchett's Paris Resistance operative is an insult to the animal spirits of art restorers everywhere.—*D.D.* (2/17 & 24/14) (In wide release.)

Non-Stop

Liam Neeson, as an alcoholic air marshal who must defend a packed flight against a terrorist, is even grimmer and angrier than he was in "Unknown," his previous collaboration with the Spanish-born director Jaume Collet-Serra. Essentially, you've seen this bomb-on-a-plane movie before, but Neeson, who brings enormous conviction to these late-career action roles, moves his big body through confined spaces (virtually the entire movie takes place in the airplane) with so much power that you expect him to rip out the seats. With Julianne Moore.—*D.D.* (In wide release.)

Omar

Omar (Adam Bakri) is a young Palestinian living in the West Bank, under trying conditions. In order to merely visit his friends Tarek (Iyad Hoorani) and Amjad (Samer Bisharat), not to mention the beautiful Nadia (Leem Lubany), with whom he is furtively in love, he must scale the concrete security barrier that cuts through his community. A plan is hatched to attack Israeli soldiers; Omar is apprehended, tortured, turned, and sent back among his comrades. From here on, up to the final moments, the movie is snared in secrets and divided loyalties, and the point of the action sequences—in which Omar hustles and leaps through local houses and alleys, chased by the law—is not just to thrill but to offer a burst of release, away from the tangles and traps of fate. The director, Hany Abu-Assad, is Palestinian, and there is no doubt where his political sympathies lie; yet his finest coup, in a fraught film, is to grant dramatic space and substance to the enemy—an Israeli intelligence agent who becomes Omar's handler, and who is played by Waleed Zuaiter with fierce purpose plus a dangerous touch of playfulness. In Arabic and Hebrew.—*A.L.* (3/3/14) (In limited release.)

Regeneration

There is perhaps no cinematic view of slum life as shockingly squalid as the one on view in this 1915 drama, one of the first gangster films, made largely on location in New York. The director Raoul Walsh, who grew up in the city, infuses his first surviving feature with the raw street life of his youth and a colorful, disturbing array of broken-down, life-worn extras he recruited from saloons. It's the tale of a brutalized orphan who rises to gangland leadership. While the swaggering gangster (played by Rockliffe Fellowes, a dead ringer for the young Brando) plies his bloody trade, he meets a frivolous socialite (Anna Q. Nilsson) who is slumming in a Bowery dive. The redemptive ending foretold in the title does little to dispel the air of grimness induced by the sight of cracked walls, ragged clothes, filthy tin buckets of beer, and ugly fistfights of a knock-down, drag-out inconclusiveness. Revelling in the cinema's power to set a vast scene in a single glance, Walsh imbues the spare story with a wild, irrepressible vitality; his vision is both awesome and awful. Silent.—*R.B.* (BAM Cinématek; March 12.)

Stage Fright

In Alfred Hitchcock's theatre-centered mystery, from 1950, good acting is a matter of getting away with murder. Marlene Dietrich plays Charlotte Inwood, a star of the London stage, who recruits her caddish boyfriend, Jonathan Cooper (Richard Todd), to help conceal her husband's suspicious death. Jonathan, in turn, recruits his steadfast young girlfriend, Eve Gill (Jane Wyman), a student at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, to help him slip out of town. Eve decides to take matters into her own hands and launches her own private investigation, but when a handsome detective, Wilfred (Ordinary) Smith (Michael Wilding), is put on the case her affections begin to waver. As deceptions and disguises pile up, the layers of mystery grow thicker—and the lurid symbolism of material objects is thrust to the fore. In the portrayal of Eve's father, an urbane and audacious seaman dubbed Commodore (Alastair Sim), Hitchcock conjures a deep-rooted, irony-rich complicity of father and daughter that seems borrowed from the films of Howard Hawks and suggests the inner compass that helps to guard against chasing the wrong man.—*R.B.* (Film Forum; March 17.)

Teenage

A delightful and substantial provocation, and something of a cheat. The director Matt Wolf's documentary tells the story of the invention and the self-assertion of the adolescent with a diverse assemblage of historical footage and incisive attention to detail. The voice-over text focusses on the impact of such political events as the two World Wars and the Depression, but depoliticizes them to come up with strange sets of parallels—such as the Hitler Youth and the Civilian Conservation Corps. The apparently archival images that fill the screen from beginning to end are piquant and nuanced, but the end credits reveal Wolf's reliance on some dramatic re-creations of old times, which are "aged" to render them indistinguishable from the truly archival. It's a disappointment; the cannily chosen (or, as it turns out, staged) scenes have a time-capsule aura that invites home-video contemplation through slow motion and freeze-frames. Such analytical devices might unmask the trickery; meanwhile, if ever a feature film needed truth in labelling, not in the fine print but in real time onscreen, this is it. Based on a book by Jon Savage; with Alden Ehrenreich, Malik Peters, and the voices of Ben Whishaw and Jena Malone.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

Will Success Spoil Rock Hunter?

With a cartoon-fuelled comic genius that's on view from the very first shot, featuring Tony Randall as a master of ceremonies with tenuous control of movie magic, the director Frank Tashlin lampoons TV, Hollywood, advertising, corporate life, and domestic order—in short, he sends everything up in order to peek at what's hidden underneath. Randall also stars as Rockwell P. Hunter, a mid-level copywriter who, in trying to win an endorsement, gets mistaken for a starlet's "lover doll" and finds his sudden tabloid fame transformative. Jayne Mansfield plays the buxom celebrity, who squeals like an oversexed ferret at the sight of a serviceable man but always keeps one hand on the wheel of her personal fortune. Tashlin fills the frame with Freudian gags and the soundtrack with ribald riffs (the story climaxes in the executive washroom), but he also keeps the movie dead center: it really is about the self-consuming, self-perpetuating echoes of mass media and their jangling yet liberating amplification of intimate cares. Released in 1957.—*R.B.* (Museum of the Moving Image; March 16.)

The Wind Rises

Hayao Miyazaki's masterly animated bio-pic of Jiro Horikoshi, Japan's great airplane engineer of the nineteen-thirties, feels intensely realistic. Using pastel colors and sharply outlined figures, Miyazaki creates as detailed an impression of prewar Japan as conventionally photographed live-action movies do. Much of the textural and aural actuality of this world touches him. The sound of tobacco and paper burning while someone takes a long drag on a cigarette is given the same emotional weight as, say, the view of the Japanese countryside from the air. Miyazaki's hero, Horikoshi, eventually created the forerunner of the Mitsubishi A6M, or Zero, the fighter-bomber that was used to subdue China and assault Pearl Harbor, and the movie is suffused with a melancholy sense of doom. What begins as an aesthetic passion—the design of a beautiful new airplane—ends in tragedy. With the voices of Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Emily Blunt, Martin Short, and Werner Herzog.—*D.D.* (3/10/14) (In wide release.)

EVERETT

FOOD & DRINK

BAR TAB WILLIAM BARNACLE TAVERN
80 St. Marks Place (212-388-0388)
In 1964, Lorcan Otway's father, a Quaker playwright, bought the building that now houses William Barnacle Tavern, and turned the jazz club there into Theatre 80. The site had once been a speakeasy favored by New York City Council members, and its walls were pockmarked by bullets and packed with dynamite for a quick escape. As a child, Otway watched the previous tenant retrieve two million dollars in gold certificates from a basement safe, beginning his long obsession with the building's history. After taking over the theatre, in 2010, Otway added a bar to the space, named it after a legendary local sailor, and picked absinthe as its featured drink. Banned in the U.S. for almost a century, owing to temperance-movement humbug, absinthe, Otway explains, "fit our Prohibition history." Nearly two dozen varieties, most of them from France and Switzerland, are served in the traditional manner: icy water is poured over a torched sugar cube, dissolving it in a reservoir of the verdant liquor. A Breton in a booth makes crêpes to order, notably one with blueberries, topped with freshly whipped cream. Unlike other bars on the block, this one is devoid of televisions and brand swag. It feels both experimental and trapped in time, recalling something Otway's father often said: "When you climb a ladder, you don't cut the rungs below you."

—Rob Fischer

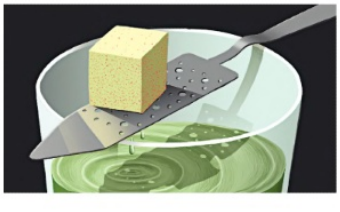


ILLUSTRATION BY MICHAEL KIRKHAM

PHOTOGRAPH BY MALÚ ALVAREZ

TABLES FOR TWO

ALL'ONDA

22 E. 13th St. (212-231-2236)

THE NAME OF THIS NEW restaurant near Union Square means "of the waves," which refers both to the ideal, soupy state of a proper risotto and to the concept of combining the cuisines of two archipelagos, Venice and Japan. Those places have drastically different approaches to food, but both hold tradition in high regard, and find exquisite ways to elevate the bounteous seafood available to them. All'Onda has fashioned a lovely menu of seafood-driven crudi (or is it creative sashimi?) and homemade pastas, for a sophisticated foodie crowd.

Who can resist arancini? The rice in the fried bite-size spheres at All'Onda is mixed not with the classic Fontina cheese but with jet-black squid ink. They are garnished with scoops of fresh uni, resulting in a rapid progression of sensations—creamy, crunchy, oozy—and then they're gone. Monkfish liver has been turning up as a sly substitute for foie gras; here it's molded into a disk, set onto a square of grilled bread, and topped with a layer of smooth compressed persimmon, for a decadent riff on peanut butter and jelly. The crudi and the antipasti are plated as beautiful tableaux. Sardines, cut into chunky parallelograms and soaked with rice vinegar, are scattered silver skin up over a sweet fennel purée on a slate-gray slab. The delicately fried sweetbreads ("What are sweetbreads again? Thyroid? Oh, right, thymus") arrive at the table crowned with pale-pink bonito flakes, which dance in the air, as if alive.

The glazed white tiles and the handsome wood-planked ceiling say "farm to table," but the rustic-looking pastas belie a complicated wrangling of many ingredients that suggests an approach more akin to modernist cuisine. The chef, Chris Jaeckle, who cooked previously at Ai Fiori, under the direction of Michael White (Marea, Osteria Morini), no slouch with noodles, takes what he has learned and twists it. Jaeckle's bucatini is like a carbonara, with egg yolk, more of that uni (it's sourced from Maine), and crunchy bread crumbs. One Michael White devotee deemed it even better than Marea's vaunted uni-and-crab spaghetti. Great pastas abound—lumache with bitter braised Treviso, sweet shredded duck, and a touch of bittersweet chocolate; peekytoe-crab garganelli, zingy with herbs and yuzukosho paste (chili pepper, yuzu peel, salt); Manila-clam spaghetti, with an intense garlic-clam flavor infusing homemade square noodles.

After a sublime primi course, the entrées feel beside the point, and the dorade and the monkfish are competent if not ethereal. The guinea hen, however, rivals the great roast chickens in town, with a crispy-skinned breast and a moist confit leg; it goes well with the memorable polenta mixed with miso-cured egg yolk. A lot of very nice people work here, and they make you want to like the strange soy-sauce gelato and the heavy olive-oil cake, just to make them happy, but you can't. That's O.K. Call it a night, step out into the cold, and dream of warm weather in the waves.

—Shauna Lyon

Open every night for dinner. Entrées $17-$39.

DANCE

THE REFUSÉ

Israel Galván and the evolution of flamenco.

IN ALL ARTS, there are quarrels between the old order and the new—the Academy versus the Refusés—but dance is a special case. It is the only major art form that has no text: no canvas, no book on the shelf, no score to speak of. Therefore dancers are especially anxious to preserve their art. In popular dance, the situation is even more urgent. Many artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were entranced by ballet dancers and made paintings and prints of them in action. But the virtuosos of the street and the tavern—flamenco dancers, tap dancers—were less often portrayed. In some cases, we barely know what they did.

Because non-academic dance is so scantily recorded, it breeds debates about authenticity. In the realm of flamenco, the arguments are especially passionate. Many groups—Andalusians, Gypsies, Arabs, Jews, all of whom lived in southern Iberia in the eighteenth century, when flamenco emerged—probably contributed to the form. These people came together and forged a shared style, out of poverty and café life, and they soon regarded it as a traditional art, a cry of pain from the soul of the Spanish people.

Today, as a result of globalization, flamenco is danced just about everywhere, which means that there will be more authenticity disputes. A leader of the upstarts is Israel Galván. Galván's parents, too, are dancers—the preferred lineage in flamenco, as in many traditional dance forms—and he is from Seville, which is where you are supposed to come from if you want to be a flamenco dancer. He is a truly breathtaking virtuoso. No one on the stage today can best him in speed or precision. But in the piece that he will dance at the Schimmel Center this week, "La Curva," his accompanist is not a guitarist, as would be customary. Sylvie Courvoisier is a pianist, whose major inspiration seems to be John Cage. To the sounds of her prepared piano, Galván sometimes dances on a pile of flour, or with a folding chair hanging from his neck. He adds notes of tai chi and jazz—I think I saw the twist, too—and, in contrast to the cummerbunded machismo of the standard male flamenco dancer, he looks a little androgynous. Actually, he looks like a lot of things, especially modernism, and he wonders why people should find that strange. "I went to college," he says. "I use the Internet, and I go to the movies."

—Joan Acocella

ILLUSTRATION BY JONNY RUZZO

Paul Taylor Dance Company
This season, the troupe's sixtieth, brings two premières, Nos. 139 and 140. "American Dreamer," set to Stephen Foster songs, is another Taylor take on the American pastoral; "Marathon Cadenzas," accompanied by Raymond Scott recordings, promises to be fast, and maybe funny. The company, in fine shape, has announced plans to present masterworks by other choreographers, but this season's two dozen pieces are all drawn from Taylor's unequalled repertory. Highlights of the first week include the moving war poem "Sunset" and the Baroque beauties "Airs" and "Arden Court." (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-496-0600. March 11-12 and March 18 at 7, March 13 at 6:30, March 14 at 8, March 15 at 2 and 8, and March 16 at 2. Through March 30.)

Brazil Festival / DanceBrazil
This New York troupe has made dances using the Afro-Brazilian martial art capoeira for more than thirty years. Its program here features two premières: "Búzios," which depicts a cowrie-shell game of divination, and "Gueto," which celebrates the disenfranchised. The dancers, acrobatic and alluring, are accompanied by live music. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. March 12 at 7:30, March 13-14 at 8, March 15 at 2 and 8, and March 16 at 2 and 7:30.)

"Works & Process" / Wayne McGregor
The concepts that move this British choreographer—cognitive science, astronomy, and the history of ideas—are sometimes more interesting than the resulting dances, which tend to be jagged, loopy, and structurally loose. Ahead of his company's performances in Montclair, N.J. (March 15-23), McGregor and the members of Random Dance deconstruct his latest work, "Atomos," which delves into "tonal colors," atomic structures, and the translation of biometric information. (Guggenheim Museum, Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3587. March 12 at 7:30.)

Les Ballets de Monte Carlo
"LAC (After Swan Lake)" is an update. It uses Tchaikovsky's score, but the choreographer Jean-Christophe Maillot and the dramaturge Jean Rouaud, in their misguided modernizing, emphasize archaic fears and Freudian psychology. Straightening out implausibilities, they strip away the poetry. The deconstructed swans looks shorn and spiky, but the dancing is sleek and not without visual appeal. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. March 14 at 8, March 15 at 2 and 8, and March 16 at 3.)

Kyle Abraham
Last year, Abraham was awarded a MacArthur "genius" grant, but he's still really a newcomer. For the 92nd Street Y's Harkness Dance Festival, he brings back "Radio Show," from 2010, the work that first gained him wide recognition. The piece, which combines Abraham's response to the loss of a radio station and his feelings about his father's Alzheimer's disease, shows the promise of Abraham's invention in movement and metaphors, if also his struggles with structure. Following the festival's pedagogic format, Abraham discusses his sources and shows video of early rehearsals. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. March 14-15 at 8 and March 16 at 3.)

Alonzo King LINES Ballet / "Constellation"
The San Francisco-based company returns to New York with an evening-length work whose choreography, visual design, and music are based on astronomical themes. King's dances employ a hyperextended ballet technique and the fluid upper body of modern dance; his dancers tend to be tall and lean and incredibly flexible. He specializes in twining pas de deux infused with ripe, eroticized emotion and is partial to musical collages; "Constellation" includes vocal music by Handel, Vivaldi, and Strauss, sung onstage by the mezzo-soprano Maya Lahyani to recorded accompaniment, as well as excerpts by Arvo Pärt, the Japanese neo-traditionalist Somei Satoh, and others. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. March 18 at 7:30. Through March 23.)

ABOVE & BEYOND

St. Patrick's Day
The parade up Fifth Avenue, long a favorite of local politicians, is in the news this year, with Mayor de Blasio boycotting it because of its policy of not allowing gays to march in it openly. (He marched earlier this month in the more inclusive St. Pat's for All parade, in Sunnyside, Queens.) With or without the Mayor, the event starts at 11 A.M. on March 17, at 44th St., and can be viewed on television and at nycstpatricksparade.org. Later that afternoon, at 4, Sober St. Patrick's Day, an annual gathering that started in 2012, promises a drier but no less celebratory affair, with the Irish singer Cathy Maguire, the champion fiddler Brian Conway, the acclaimed button-accordion player John Whelan, and many other performers. (Cathedral High School, 350 E. 56th St. soberstpatricksday.org.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

As spring approaches, the auction circuit turns its attention to Asian art and artifacts. Chinese art goes first at **Sotheby's** (March 18). The sale begins with the oldest lots, a series of twelve archaic bronzes, some dating from as far back as the thirteenth century B.C. Later that morning, the house holds a more general sale of ceramics and works of art; one of the highlights is a cheerful pair of canary-yellow-and-jade-green bowls, depicting boys at play, from the Qing dynasty. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) • The focus of **Christie's** first day of Asian-themed sales (March 18) is on the increasingly lively market for Indian art, particularly for works by the modernist circle of Syed Haider Raza, Tyeb Mehta, and Maqbool Fida Husain; a dedicated sale offers works by Francis Newton Souza, from his daughter's collection. An auction of Japanese and Korean art will take place earlier in the day; it includes various specimens of Korean porcelain, as well as a marvellously detailed Japanese figurine depicting a small dragon, with jaws agape and whiskers flying. The house also offers a separate cache of Korean pieces (scrolls, screens, and porcelains) from the holdings of Robert Moore, who began collecting shortly after serving in the Korean War, buying mostly from the families of missionaries and diplomats. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.)

READINGS AND TALKS

Lower East Side Tenement Museum
The novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie kicks off the spring season of talks here by discussing her most recent book, "Americanah," with the *New York* book critic Kathryn Schulz. (103 Orchard St., at Delancey St. 212-982-8420. March 12 at 7:30.)

Community Bookstore
Siri Hustvedt reads from her latest novel, "The Blazing World." (143 Seventh Ave., Park Slope, Brooklyn. 718-783-3075. March 13 at 7.)

(Le) Poisson Rouge
The English writer Julian Barnes, in a rare New York City appearance, presents a night of readings about music. He'll read from his own work and that of others, and the pianist Angela Hewitt will perform. (158 Bleecker St. 212-505-3474. March 13 at 7 and 9.)

Greenlight Bookstore
More literature and music, as the novelist and singer-songwriter Wesley Stace shares passages and songs from his new novel, "Wonderkid," about a rock band that finds success playing for children. He'll be joined by Dan Zanes, a real-life rock guitarist turned children's musician. (686 Fulton St., at S. Portland Ave. 718-246-0200. March 14 at 7:30.)

92nd Street Y
Donald Sheehy and Mark Richardson, who helped edit "The Letters of Robert Frost, Volume 1, 1886-1920," which was published recently, discuss the poet's early career. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. March 16 at 11 A.M.)

Barnes & Noble
The true-crime writer Kevin Cook talks about his latest book, "Kitty Genovese: The Murder, the Bystanders, the Crime That Changed America." (Broadway at 82nd St. 212-362-8835. March 17 at 7.)

THE NEW YORKER

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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
PUTIN'S PIQUE

In 1990, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn emerged from his isolation in Cavendish, Vermont, and issued a vatic manifesto entitled "How to Revitalize Russia." Published at great length in *Komsomolskaya Pravda,* it was a document out of time, written in a prophetic nineteenth-century voice, with archaic diction and priestly cadences. Solzhenitsyn, a heroic dissident, was always at the nationalist end of the spectrum, but he was not calling for some sort of tsarist revival and imperial maintenance. Rather, he endorsed a hyper-local, Swiss-style democratic politics, a transition to private property, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. "We do not have the energy to run an Empire!" he wrote. "Let us shrug it off. It is crushing us, it is draining us, and it is accelerating our demise." Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, along with the Caucasian republics, were to make their own way. But on the question of Ukraine he had a different view. Russia must be at the center of a "Russian union," he declared, and Ukraine was integral to it.

At the time, Ukrainian nationalists, particularly in the western part of the republic, were joining the Baltic states in their bold drive for independence, and had formed a "people's movement" called Rukh. Leonid Kravchuk, a dreary Communist Party hack who had previously shown nothing but indifference to Ukrainian nationalism, won the Presidency, in 1991, by deciding to stand with Rukh. This was a trend that Solzhenitsyn, in the woods of New England, and so many Russians throughout the Soviet Union, could not easily abide. It defied their sense of history. To them, Ukraine was no more a real nation than Glubbdubdrib or Freedonia. Vladimir Putin, a former officer of the K.G.B., was the first post-Soviet leader to deliver a state prize to Solzhenitsyn, who had spent a lifetime in a death struggle with the K.G.B.; a large part of their common ground was a rough notion of what Russia encompassed. As Putin told the second President Bush, "You have to understand, George. Ukraine is not even a country."

ILLUSTRATIONS BY TOM BACHTELL

Solzhenitsyn, one of the great truth-tellers of the twentieth century, harbored an exceedingly benign view of one of the more ominous figures of the twenty-first. Putin is an unabashed authoritarian. He masks the Pharaonic enrichment of his political circle by projecting an austere image of shrewd bluster and manly bravado. He is also the sum of his resentments. His outrage over the uprising in Kiev, like his subsequent decision to invade Crimea, is stoked by a powerful suspicion of Western motives and hypocrisies. Putin absorbed the eastward expansion of NATO; attacks on his abysmal record on human rights and civil society; and the "color" revolutions in Tbilisi and Kiev—even the revolts in Tehran, Tunis, Cairo, Manama, and Damascus—as intimations of his own political mortality. He sees everything from the National Endowment for Democracy to the American Embassy in Moscow as an outpost of a plot against him. And the U.S. clearly does want to curb his influence; we can't pretend that he's entirely crazy to think so. The Olympics was his multi-billion-ruble reassertion of Russian power on the level of pop culture; the invasion of Crimea is a reassertion of Russian power in the harsher currency of arms and intimidation.

The invasion demands condemnation: Ukraine is a sovereign state; it has been for a generation. Its cultural, linguistic, and historical affinities with Russia do not make it a Russian vassal. Putin's pretext—that frightened masses of Russian-speakers in Crimea and eastern Ukraine were under physical threat from "fascists," and were crying out for "fraternal assistance" from Russia—is a fiction generated by his intelligence services and propagated by Russian state television. (Pro-Russian Cossacks in Crimea are no less anti-Semitic than the racists among the Ukrainian nationalists—something you are not likely to learn on Channel One, in Moscow.)

Putin's aggression took Western leaders—especially Barack Obama and Angela Merkel—too much by surprise, but they have acted since with clarity and prudence. The decision to forgo martial threats and

to concentrate on strong economic sanctions and diplomatic exertions is, in a world of radically limited options, wise. But not all those most directly involved in this crisis evince an understanding of the complicated politics of Ukraine. It is worth remembering that, in the back-and-forth of Ukrainian governments since 1991, both the pro-Russian leaders, like Viktor Yanukovych, and the pro-Europeans, like Yulia Tymoshenko, have been brazen thieves, enriching themselves at fantastical rates. Both sides have played one half of the country against the other. And the fact that the protests in Kiev were not, as Moscow claims, dominated by fascists and ultra-nationalists does not mean that such elements are absent from the scene. Ukraine has yet to develop the politicians that its fragile condition and its dire economy demand. In December, when John McCain spoke to demonstrators in Kiev's Independence Square, he stood side by side with Oleh Tyahnybok, who was once expelled from his parliamentary faction after demanding battle with "the Muscovite-Jewish mafia." Perhaps this was bad advance work from team McCain—much like the advance work on the Sarah Palin nomination—but it did manage to fuel Moscow's bonfire of suspicion.

McCain's allies in the Senate have shared his propensity for incautious grandstanding. Lindsey Graham, of South Carolina, who is facing a Republican primary challenge from his right, says that the invasion of Crimea "started with Benghazi." He tweeted, "When you kill Americans and nobody pays a price, you invite this type of aggression." And McCain, who alternates with Graham as the voice of the G.O.P. in foreign affairs, told AIPAC that the invasion was "the ultimate result of a feckless foreign policy where nobody believes in America's strength anymore." Soon Hillary Clinton, who should know better, pitched in with an unhelpful analogy to Hitler.

Right now, Putin retains his familiar strut and disdain. His opposition at home is on tenterhooks, fearing a comprehensive crackdown, and the West, which dreams of his coöperation in Syria and Iran, is reluctant to press him too hard. But it may be that his adventure in Crimea—and not the American Embassy in Moscow—will undo him. Last month, a Kremlin-sponsored poll showed that seventy-three per cent of Russians opposed interfering in the political confrontations in Kiev. The Kremlin has proved since that it has the means, and the media, to gin up support for Putin's folly—but that won't last indefinitely.

In other words, Putin risks alienating himself not only from the West and Ukraine, to say nothing of the global economy he dearly wants to join, but from Russia itself. His dreams of staying in office until 2024, of being the most formidable state-builder in Russian history since Peter the Great, may yet founder on the peninsula of Crimea.

—David Remnick

AROUND CITY HALL

LADIES AND GERMS

The New York City Council convenes on the second floor of City Hall, in an august chamber with a frescoed ceiling. On a recent Saturday, the chamber was open, but empty. "Over here!" a voice called from an adjacent room. Seated around a table were nine current and former City Hall reporters. Average age: nearly eligible for a reduced-fare MetroCard. Average outfit: rumpled shirt, jeans, maybe a sweater vest. They were the writers of the Inner Circle Show, a political-satire revue that has been staged nearly every year since 1923, and is notable for luring the mayors of the City of New York onstage, sometimes in drag. Shelly Strickler, the show's director, said, "You got any good Cuomo jokes?"

"No joke is too bad for us," Bob Liff, formerly with *Newsday*, said. "Every year, we try to get in some stupid line about the town of Coxsackie."

The head writer, Larry Sutton—ex-*News*, now at *OK!*—read from the opening of Act II. "Lord Cuomo," he said, "the Mayor of Sherwood Forest is approaching from the left! He *still* wants us to approve his repugnant Pre-K tax plan!"

Liff looked up. "That's gonna be *Chirlane* Forest instead of Sherwood, right?"

"Yes, thanks," Sutton said, making a note. He continued reading, now as Cuomo: "The day I approve a new tax in an election year is the day Sandra Lee's kitchen gets four stars from Michelin."

Andrew Siff, a broadcaster with the local NBC affiliate, asked, "Should we do something else there? Maybe about Alec Baldwin?"

"Baldwin as his new head of anger management?" Sutton said.

"We did something like that a few years ago," Strickler said. Next joke: "I'm opposed to fracking," Sutton read. "Why? It gives me gas."

In 1923, the *Times* reported that the Inner Circle was "composed exclusively of the men covering politics on the city newspapers." The group now includes women, broadcasters, and bloggers. Cigars are no longer allowed at rehearsals, but the tenor of the show remains intact: hoary slapstick, wigs, parody songs in the mode of Allan Sherman. The show, which takes place this year on March 22nd at the Hilton, is attended by the city's political brass; all proceeds go to local charities. After an intermission, the Mayor always performs a "rebuttal," often with the help of Broadway ringers. The photographs that helped sink Rudolph Giuliani's Presidential campaign in 2008—Rudy as a platinum blonde in a sequinned gown—were from an Inner Circle performance.

Siff tried out a song about Albany, to the tune of "Honesty," by Billy Joel ("Everyone is so untrue"). Then Inner Circle members dressed as horses—the ones Mayor de Blasio has threatened to ban from Central Park—would sing a parody of the "Mister Ed" theme, titled "Bill the Mare."

"Are they going to get that 'mare' is a pun on 'mayor'?" Strickler said.

Next came a duet between "Caroline Kennedy," the new Ambassador to Japan, and "Masahiro Tanaka," the new Yankees pitcher. It was to the tune of "The Siamese Cat Song," from "Lady and the Tramp." (Kennedy: "I just have to kissy-face and give some hugs." Tanaka: "I must very careful be I take no drugs.")

Sutton called for a break. Over egg sandwiches, the writers discussed news from beyond the metro area, including the crisis in Crimea ("Not good for the Jews"). "We're coming off of twelve long years of Bloomberg," Strickler said. "He was a great sport, and the shows were always fun—but how many times can you do *rich* jokes?"

"De Blasio is manna from Heaven," John Slattery, of CBS, said. "The fights over the schools. The snow."

"Normally, with a new mayor, not much happens," Strickler said. "With him, it's something new every week."

"And his speeches about taxing the rich!" Slattery said. "It didn't take us long to come up with the Robin Hood theme."

"When something happens—the Huma story, the Christie story—we do think about it as news, because we are also reporters," Strickler said. "But I've got to say, the first thing you think is, This is gonna be great for the show."

They continued the table read. "We should add an Eva Moskowitz joke," Liff said, referring to the charter-school founder and de Blasio antagonist.

Richard Steier, of the *Chief-Leader*, said, "How about a really old-fashioned sexist line: 'She gives pushy broads a bad name'?" Silence.

"Maybe the joke is that the unions would rather get back at Moskowitz than negotiate their own contracts," Liff said.

" 'We'll take *payback* over *back pay*,' " Steier suggested. The writers groaned. The joke went into the script.

—Andrew Marantz

THE MUSICAL LIFE

LADS

Last month, during the Beatles-fiftieth-anniversary hoopla, a hot young European foursome with distinctive hairdos—Asbjørn Nørgaard, Frederik Øland, Fredrik Schøyen Sjölin, and Rune Tonsgaard Sørensen—landed in New York for a high-profile gig. They are the Danish String Quartet, from Copenhagen, and they're at the beginning of a three-year residency with CMS Two, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's emerging-stars program. A few nights before a concert at Alice Tully Hall (which yielded raucous cheering, four curtain calls, and a woman exclaiming, "This has never happened before!"), they laced up their sneakers and hit the town.

The evening began at Bar Centrale, where they slid into a booth and ordered margaritas. Their instruments were in Chelsea, locked in a room with a man named Max, awaiting a late-night set in the bar at the McKittrick Hotel, on Twenty-seventh Street. "They're not our instruments—we borrow them from generous Scandinavian foundations," Nørgaard, the viola player, said. He has a full beard and hair that evokes Björn Borg's at its fluffiest. "They're a work tool, but also a piece of history. My viola is four hundred and fifty years old."

"My violin was built in 1708, in Venezia," Øland said. He has a swoop of yellow hair and wore a black T-shirt with a galaxy on it. As drinks arrived, he admired a Manhattan served with a "dividend"—a little extra drink, in a carafe, on ice. "It's like a My Little Chemist set," he said.

Sjölin, the cellist, is Norwegian. (He started the beard trend. "He came in with this Norwegian Viking look," Nørgaard said. "My wife said I looked like a little boy. She said, 'Fredrik has a beard, can't you?' ") Sjölin's cello is from 1688. "People who play the instrument also form the instrument," he said. "It's kind of a hippie thing to say, but true."

Sørensen's violin is from the eighteenth century, on loan from the Goof Foundation. "Yeah, Goof," he said. "He was a dentist, and he started buying instruments." (Actually, Goof was a dentally inclined businessman.) Sørensen has shaggy hair and wore a T-shirt with an image of a man who had a birdcage for a head. "It's a rather feminine instrument, very light and slim. Before it, I played a Stradivarius."

That night, they were seeing the Cotton Club revue "After Midnight," on Broadway. They like jazz, and other genres—indie, folk, bluegrass—with one caveat.

Sjölin: "I hate the word 'crossover.' "

"Like, 'Oh, my God, classical is boring—we have to fix it,' " Nørgaard said.

They do not find classical music boring. The three Danes met as boys, at an all-ages summer music camp, where long days spent playing violin and viola came with interludes of soccer and romance.

"It was the magic week of our year," Nørgaard said.

"The week after, so empty, the worst week of the year," Sørensen said.

Øland said, "Everywhere else, you have to play perfectly, but there you'd pick the hardest thing you could, and just *play*." He shook his head, smiling. "You'd get kidnapped by some old dudes and play fifteen Beethoven string quartets."

"After Midnight" had a similar blend of discipline and joy. The group sat with Wu Han, the artistic director of the Chamber Music Society, and watched in amazement as the show unfolded—Fantasia, tap dancing, feathers, red balloons, cartwheels, the Jazz at Lincoln Center All-Stars, "East St. Louis Toodle-oo." At the curtain call, they clapped and hollered. In the car, Wu Han said, "The way the girl used the vibrato was so *sexy*."

"It was a very sexy show in general," Sørensen said.

At the McKittrick, before the set, there was time to catch the end of "Sleep No More," the nightmare-funhouse "Macbeth" spectacle. The Scandinavians found themselves navigating dark hallways, wearing white masks, with beaks. "This is like 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre,' " Øland said. They observed fistfights, negligees, and taxidermy, and, Nørgaard later pointed out, heard what sounded like Herrmann's "Psycho: A Suite for Strings."

The Danish String Quartet

"Maybe for a New Yorker it's not that strange, but to go from the most happy show on earth to this, with people getting murdered, it's very strange," Nørgaard said.

The hotel's Manderley Bar was an anteroom to normalcy, but only just: red walls, stray masks, candlelit tables. The musicians sat onstage under orange and blue lights, and raised their bows. With precision and warmth, they played the last movement of the Beethoven "Serioso,"

Opus 95—sombre, then urgent, and ending with a flourish of happiness. The audience waited several seconds, in silence. Then it went crazy.

—*Sarah Larson*

BRIGHTON BEACH POSTCARD
TABLE TALK

Confused by the recent events in Ukraine? It was hard to find clarity the other night at Café Glechik, a Ukrainian restaurant on Sheepshead Bay Road, near Brighton Beach. You could find comfort, though: the borscht was hot, the *vareniki* pillowy, and the atmosphere tranquil.

Near the front, two burly men with shaved heads were hunched over a plate of beef Stroganoff. "I am boxer," the one with the thicker neck said. He pointed to his companion, who wore a yellow-and-electric-blue jumpsuit that said "UKRAINE" on the front. "This is my trainer." The boxer was Vyacheslav (Czar) Glazkov, an Olympic bronze medallist from the eastern city of Lugansk. His trainer was Eduard Mienchakov, formerly with the Ukrainian national boxing team. Mienchakov wasn't touching the Stroganoff, Glazkov explained, because he was on an annual "medical experience"—a prolonged diet of water only. "Feels good."

Glazkov, who is twenty-nine, was in town to fight the Polish boxer Tomasz Adamek, in a match that will be aired on NBCSN's "Fight Night." The winner will have a shot at fighting Wladimir Klitschko, the world heavyweight champion and the brother of the Ukrainian opposition leader Vitali Klitschko, who was also a heavyweight champ. Glazkov was reluctant to comment on the events back home. "I am not political," he said, spearing a potato-and-mushroom *varenik*. "I am sportsman." But he offered a review of his experience here: "In U.S., life big. Big country, big money. Good ocean. Good boardwalk. Manhattan good place. Empire State Building is very good. Big town. Busy town. People go go go!" He added, "Food better in Ukraine."

Nearby, a New Jersey businessman named Dmitry and his friend Jane, a lawyer, were enjoying a spread that included herring, Stroganoff, brown bread, and a dish called "sausage Christian style." Asked for his opinion on the situation in Crimea, Dmitry, who is Ukrainian, poured some clear liquid into a little glass. "If I talk to you, you gotta drink the vodka." Dmitry explained that he is from the Crimean city of Sevastopol, and he approves of the secession movement being pushed by Vladimir Putin. He said that he was in contact with relatives back home, and "everyone I'm talking to, they're Russian. . . . They're very happy."

Pouring more shots, he enumerated the reasons that people in Crimea want to join Russia: "First, language. Second, stability." He went on, "It's not like if, in Cleveland, Putin were to come in and say, 'Be Russian!' " As the soup course (*solyanka*) came around, Dmitry discussed Putin, whom he admires. "A *tough guy*. Everyone knows that," he said. "But this is stability."

At the next table, a group of Russian-Jewish friends who go by the acronym LEAVE (Lena, Elaine, Alla, Vera, and Ella) disagreed. "Putin is K.G.B. and was a murderer all his life," Elaine said. Their waiter, Bogdan, who'd recently immigrated from Kiev, Ukraine's capital, said, "Everybody from Ukraine is for the E.U." He advised disregarding the opinions of his customers. "They're just watching the propaganda of Russian TV. They're like zombies."

Upstairs, a couple was arguing about Crimea. "My opinion is, Putin's overstepping his jurisdiction," Dan, from Boston, said. His date, Olga, said that she'd heard stories about Russian speakers getting beat up by Ukrainian nationalists: "My opinion is, Putin's protecting Russian people who are scared for their lives."

"Even if that is true, it gives him no right to break the sovereignty of Ukraine," Dan said.

"Where's the blood? There's no blood," Olga said.

Dan said, "Most political arguments are about facts."

There was disagreement, too, about the protesters in Kiev. Some patrons of Café Glechik called them brave. Others called them "bandits."

Downstairs, there was another couple—both Ukrainian. Sergei, a tech guy, was drinking vodka and eating a Georgian soup called *harcho*. He is from Lviv, in the west. Reflecting on his homeland, he sighed. "Generally, the film of civilization over humankind is overrated," he began. "It's much thinner than one thinks. Let's hark back seventy years ago: Germany was swept away by a charismatic leader, and the whole country went bananas."

He went on, "Different nations are at different levels of being prepared for democracy. Ukraine has forty-six million people. It's quite diverse: one half, let's say, are banging down the doors of Europe, whereas the other half don't speak Ukrainian." He had a low opinion of the leadership in Kiev: "The former President was ousted and is on the run. The new government, from what I've read, are billionaires." He shrugged. "From what I see, the Ukrainian nation deserves the government it elects."

His dinner partner said something in Russian, and Sergei translated: "She disagrees. But that's between us."

—*Lizzie Widdicombe*

"Jessica tells me you have a Twitter following in the six figures."

THE FINANCIAL PAGE

ONE-HIT WONDERS

For more than a year now, tens of millions of Americans have found time each day to devote themselves to an essential task: swiping at their phones and tablets to arrange colorful candy icons in rows. They are playing Candy Crush Saga, a wildly addictive mobile game that has been downloaded more than half a billion times. You can play the game for free, but enough people have been willing to pay for extra lives and various performance-boosting tools to make it staggeringly profitable. Last year, Candy Crush's maker, an Irish company called King Digital Entertainment, had almost two billion dollars in sales, five hundred and sixty-seven million dollars of which was pure profit. Last month, King filed for an initial public offering, which is expected to value the company at five billion dollars.

The I.P.O. is no surprise, given King's domination of the booming mobile-game business, but it's likely to end badly, because King is part of a venerable tradition: the one-hit wonder. Like Coleco, with Cabbage Patch Kids, or Ty, Inc., with Beanie Babies, King's business is dependent on its one star product; although the company has more than a hundred titles, almost eighty per cent of its revenue comes from Candy Crush. King has done a great job of making money from the game, and of keeping it fresh, but Candy Crush is still a fad, and, like all fads, it will fade. Indeed, as King's filing makes clear, the number of people who pay for the game has already begun to taper off, as have sales and profits.

In its I.P.O. filing, King claims that a "unique and differentiated model" for developing games will enable it to create new hits, and plenty of analysts believe that King has cracked the code of hooking consumers. But that's unlikely. The world of pop culture contains many more one-hit wonders than hit factories. After all, luck plays a huge role (is there really a good explanation for the hula-hoop frenzy of the fifties?), and, more fundamentally, serial innovation is just tough: studies suggest that most new products fail. In the gaming industry, success has always been highly unpredictable. Parker Brothers, according to a history of the company, found that there was no secret formula: products that tested well often flopped in the marketplace, while "an in-house flop could become the hit of the industry." It says something that King, which has been making games for a decade, had profits of just $7.8 million in 2012. The company didn't make eighty times more in 2013 because it had cracked a code; it just caught lightning in a bottle.

It's true that a few companies—Disney, say—have been able to consistently ride the Zeitgeist. But King has the misfortune to be in an industry where this is especially difficult, simply because it faces so much competition. "With traditional industries, it's typically very expensive to get into them, and very expensive to actually make a product," Michael Cusumano, a professor at the M.I.T. Sloan School of Management, told me. "But, with software, marginal costs are close to zero. That makes it easy for new competitors to enter the business." Disney flourished not just because of creative genius but also because, historically, animation was incredibly labor-intensive and costly, and few companies could afford the distribution network and marketing operation necessary to get films in front of millions of people. Such high barriers to entry still exist in Hollywood or in traditional video-gaming. Only companies like Marvel or Activision can afford to make The Avengers or Call of Duty. Even then, things are chancy—that's why studios love sequels—and failure is an ever-present threat. The company Harmonix, which launched Guitar Hero and Rock Band, games that in their day were as huge as Candy Crush, ended up being sold, after a few years, for fifty bucks and a pile of debt.

Development costs in the game-app world are very low. Angry Birds was made for just a hundred and forty thousand dollars, and Candy Crush was created by a team of fewer than ten people. Established companies have some advantage when it comes to marketing power, but hits can come from anywhere. Flappy Bird, a game that was recently downloaded fifty million times in a couple of weeks, was created in a matter of days by a single designer. No wonder that even the industry's powerhouses have struggled to generate new hits. Zynga has never come close to the success it enjoyed with FarmVille. Angry Birds is still by far Rovio's most successful product. King has released a couple of successors to Candy Crush, but neither is a breakthrough. What Cusumano says of the software industry in general seems true of mobile gaming in particular: "Typically, companies will have that one big product, and then they'll sell some sequels to it. But, unless they manage to become the center of an ecosystem, over time they tend to weaken and disappear."

It's easy to see why King's founders want to go public: money. But the money isn't worth the hassle. As a public company, King will have to show shareholders consistent results and ever-growing profits. Such expectations are, frankly, silly in crazily competitive, hit-driven industries, and trying to meet them is a recipe for frustration. If King stayed private, it could milk its cash cow and build games without having to worry overmuch about hatching a new cultural juggernaut. We expect companies to constantly be in search of the next big thing. But, for one-hit wonders, the smartest strategy might be to just enjoy it while it lasts.

—James Surowiecki

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN

LIFE AND LETTERS

LONG STORY SHORT

Lydia Davis's radical fiction.

BY DANA GOODYEAR

Somewhere in the files of General Mills is a letter from the very-short-story writer Lydia Davis. In it, Davis, who is widely considered one of the most original minds in American fiction today, expresses dismay at the packaging of the frozen peas sold by the company's subsidiary Cascadian Farm. The letter, like many things that Davis writes, had started out sincere and then turned weird. Details grew overly specific; a narrative, however spare, emerged. "The peas are a dull yellow green, more the color of pea soup than fresh peas and nothing like the actual color of your peas, which are a nice bright dark green," she wrote. "We have compared your depiction of peas to that of the other frozen peas packages and yours is by far the least appealing. . . . We enjoy your peas and do not want your business to suffer. Please reconsider your art." Rather than address her complaint, the company sent her a coupon for Green Giant.

The story that resulted from her complaint, "Letter to a Frozen Peas Manufacturer," is only a couple of hundred words long and appears in "Can't and Won't," which comes out next month. "Can't and Won't" is Davis's first collection since 2009, when her "Collected Stories" was published: some two hundred pieces, amounting to just seven hundred pages, thirty years' worth of work. (Her novel, "The End of the Story," was not included.) Before then, she had been known, if she was known, as "a writer's writer's writer"—dismissal by hyperbole. Some said her stories sounded like translations, vaguely alien. The "Collected" surprised people; taken together, her work—cerebral, witty, well built, homey, homely, sometimes vanishingly small—had heft. It was the kind of book that could be used, as one critic attested, to jack a car and change a flat. In May, Davis won the 2013 Man Booker International Prize, Britain's highest literary award for a noncitizen. Michael Silverblatt, the erudite host of the Los Angeles radio show "Bookworm," says, "Literary people know that at the sentence level and the word level she's the best there is."

Davis is sixty-six, with chin-length once blond hair, pale lashes, and eyes the color of blue milk glass. Her eyeglasses are lined with pink, like a conch. She wears small earrings in flattering shades of blue, and the loose, dark clothing of a city shrink. She works from life, in the way that Samuel Beckett did—life's interactions partway estranged from their contexts—with a notebook always secreted in her purse. Her subjects can be humble to the point of mundanity: lost socks, car trips, neighbors, small fights. ("He said she was disagreeing with him. She said no, that was not true, he was disagreeing with her.") According to the novelist Jonathan Franzen, "She is the shorter Proust among us. She has the sensitivity to track the stuff that is so evanescent it flies right by the rest of us. But as it does so it leaves enough of a trace that when you read her you do it with a sense of recognition."

Davis lives with her husband, Alan Cote, an abstract painter, in a tiny village in Rensselaer County, New York. Cote is large, warm, taciturn, and wears a mustache. Their house is a converted elementary school, built in 1930 by the W.P.A.: neo-Georgian, brick, with Boston ivy and fifteen-foot ceilings. He paints in the gymnasium; the bathtub is in the teachers' lounge. On the fence outside, a sign made from found sticks spells "L'Ecole."

One recent morning, Davis sat at her kitchen table with a pocket-size black notebook and a hardcover novel by a popular writer, whom she asked me not to name. "I don't like to hurt people's feelings, and I don't like to knock other writers as a matter of principle," she said. Though enjoyably soap-operatic, the novel, that month's selection for her book club—local women, wine, family talk—was full of mixed metaphors. "I've gotten very alert not just to mixed metaphor but to any writing mistake," she said. "A little bell goes off in my head first. *I know something's wrong here.* Then secondly I see what it is." She opened the notebook and read a sentence about an acute intimacy that had eroded into something dull. "Acute is sharp, and then eroded is an earth metaphor," she said. She read

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID LEVENSON/GETTY

ILLUSTRATION BY CHANG PARK

another: " 'A paper bag stuffed with empty wine bottles.' I thought about that. You'd think he could get away with it, but he can't, because 'stuffed' is a verb that comes from material. It's soft, so it's a problem to stuff it with something hard." There were sentences about camouflaging with a veneer, and girding with an orb, and boomeranging parallels. "Whenever I read this kind of thing, it tells me the writer is not sensitive to the full value of the idea of comparison," she said.

But to be curmudgeonly was not the point. As she was noting the mistakes, she kept flipping to the back jacket to look at the author's photograph: a relaxed, good-looking man, smiling openly at the camera. A little idea started to take shape, enough for a one-line story. "I just write down one sentence," she said. "This would be me assuming a kind of yenta voice: 'Such a handsome young fellow to write such bad mixed metaphors.' " She smiled. "It's me feeling a little sorry that I'm writing down all his mistakes, because he looks so friendly and nice and in a way innocent. Some author photos don't look so innocent."

In the summer of 1973, when Davis was twenty-six, she and her boyfriend Paul Auster went to live in the South of France, as caretakers of an eighteenth-century stone farmhouse with a red tile roof and an enclosed garden. They had been in Paris for two years already, translating French novels and poems and art catalogues and film scripts—sometimes the pay amounted to five dollars a page—and working assiduously on their own writing.

At Barnard, where Davis went to college, she had been a distracted student, occasionally accompanying Auster to his classes at Columbia rather than attending her own. (They met in the spring of their freshman year.) They played touch football and one-on-one basketball. Davis had long honey-colored hair and a dreamy affect. "She had pheromones, and men and boys followed her around panting," an old friend said.

Auster was sunken-eyed and soulful, with a cocked eyebrow, or, as he puts it, "a dark-haired Jewish boy from New Jersey with a public-school education." Davis had gone to Brearley, and then to Putney, a boarding school with farm work, in Vermont. Her father, Robert Gorham Davis, taught English at Columbia—modern short stories—and her mother, Hope Hale Davis, wrote fiction for women's magazines and occasionally for *The New Yorker*. First they were Communists, then liberals (he was questioned by the House Committee on Un-American Activities); always they were avid party-givers. Lionel Trilling came to the apartment, Erica Jong, Grace Paley, Edward Said. In memoirs, Auster portrays himself as helplessly impressed by Davis, loving more than he was loved. He writes, "For the most part you were the pursuer, and she alternated between resisting your advances and wanting to be caught." Among their friends—"arcane, avant-garde intellectuals," Mitch Sisskind, who was one of them, said—Davis was the eccentric. "We were all reading Kafka," he told me. "She read Kafka, too—and you can see the influence—but she also read 'The Making of a Surgeon.' "

In the country, Auster wrote poems; Davis struggled to write traditional short stories, of the kind her parents admired. (Later, they would say, Why don't you write about your travels or something more cheerful?) She copied out lines of Beckett to understand how the sentences functioned, and tacked them to the wall. The stories, however, were too masterly to imitate. She read mysteries, weighed herself, threw pebbles in an urn. She tried to make herself stay at her desk till lunch. Auster, on the other hand, could easily work all day.

At the end of August, Davis happened to read a strange little book of very short stories by the poet Russell Edson. Here was a contemporary, an American, whose stories, unlike those of her literary heroes, sometimes failed. Within days, she had started writing strange little stories of her own. She set a goal, two per day. "I didn't think too hard about what I was going to do," she told me. "I just snatched an idea from the air, I just went with it, and I didn't think about what the meaning was of the story, and I still don't like to do that." She started to enjoy herself. A month after reading Edson, she wrote "The Thirteenth Woman," a hundred-and-thirty-eight-word story in two sentences, which she sees as "the first seminal story." The same day, she wrote "The Transformation," a page-long fable about a woman who turns into a stone. She worked in a plain cardboard notebook, with a studied hand. "Must conquer this

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ON THE TOWN

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afternoon malaise," one late-September entry starts, followed by six stories. "She would get an idea, three or four sentences or a paragraph, and she would write it clean off the top of her head and that would be it," Auster told me. "The stuff she labored over never turned out as successfully."

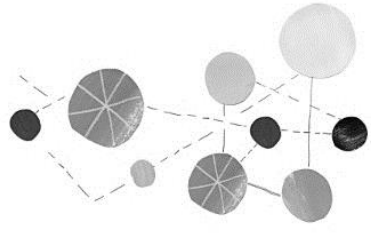
Anything Davis wrote might turn, unbidden, into fiction. In her notebook, she composed a letter to her friend Jack LeVert (part of their Kafka-reading, touch-football-playing crowd), who was planning to visit them at the farmhouse:

> If you were to look in on us, you would be amazed at the elegance in which we live. You would see us sweep into the driveway in a pale green station wagon, casually pat our thoroughbreds as we entered our restored, pre-revolutionary home with its thick beams and red tiled floors. . . . You would see us during the day with dreamy looks in our eyes writing poetry and little dibs and dabs of nothing, as though we had been born to idleness. Perhaps I would invite you to go sketching and we would take the folding chairs and our pads of sketch paper. Perhaps later we would listen to an opera from where we lounged beside the bright medieval fireplace, our Labradors sleeping at our feet on their deerskin rug. But as dinnertime approached you would notice that we grew nervous. At first it would be hardly perceptible, the smallest haunted look in our eyes, a dark shadow on our faces. You would intercept embarrassed glances. I would blush suddenly and turn pale and when dinner arrived, though the pottery were of the finest quality, hand turned, and the mats from Japan and the napkins from India, the beans would stick in your throat, the carrots would break the tines of your fork and you would recognize the taste of cat. How much more painful is poverty for the caretakers.

The hardship was romantic, self-imposed. "We both came from families that had enough money to rescue us," Davis said. "This was all our own choice, really. It was for our so-called art." When they finally ran out of money, they returned to New York, nine dollars between them. Davis's father helped get them an apartment on Riverside Drive, and they were married there in the fall of 1974. (Auster, in "Winter Journal," a memoir: "Given the frequent changes of heart that had afflicted the two of you from the beginning, the constant comings and goings, the affairs with other people, the breakups and makeups that followed one another as regularly as the changing of the seasons, the thought that either one of you should have considered marriage at this point now strikes you as an act of delusional folly." Davis: "I read about some town in Northern California, where the pastor at the church—or is it the law?—said you're not allowed to get married without three or four visits to the pastoral counselor ahead of time to discuss your expectations or habits or needs. It's worked out very well. People don't get divorced.") Davis briefly studied to become a speech therapist. Instead, she and Auster moved to Berkeley and published a collection of her pieces, "The Thirteenth Woman and Other Stories," in an edition of five hundred. The poets in their circle loved it.

The following year, expecting a child, they bought an old house in Dutchess County—a cursed house, according to Auster, who found "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion" in a box on the back porch and a dried-up crow, like an omen, behind a chest of drawers. Their son, Daniel, was born in 1977, and when he was eighteen months old they separated. Auster moved back to the city, and, after they divorced, married the novelist Siri Hustvedt. Eventually, Davis moved back, too, and lived a few blocks from them in Brooklyn to make it easier for Daniel to go back and forth. Davis worked as a typesetter at a small Brooklyn newspaper; the checks the paper wrote her bounced.

The question of what constitutes a story is troublesome. E. M. Forster wrote, "'The king died and then the queen died' is a story. 'The king died, and then the queen died of grief' is a plot."



Davis's stories have very little in the way of plot; sometimes people get indignant and ask her why she doesn't call them poems or fragments. (She prefers the deeper associations of the word "story.") Like thoughts, her pieces are reiterative; she sooner makes chronology a subject than a formal device. She says her work arises from a conjunction of humor, language, and emotional difficulty. Sometimes that means high culture, low culture, and animals; that is, a contradiction, plus the life force. Usually, she sets out to answer a single question and tries to stop between incomprehensibility (too little detail) and boredom (too much). Her longer pieces slacken and drift, but at fifteen hundred words the line is taut. As one of her narrators says, "You can't tell everyone the truth all the time, and you certainly can't tell anyone the whole truth, ever, because it would take too long." Even poets find her concentration bracing. Matthew Zapruder, a poet and editor who keeps Davis's "Collected Stories" on his shelf and turns to it whenever he needs a jolt, says, "It almost feels like a challenge to poetry. She can do this, why can't we?"

"By fiction now I just mean a construct that's a little different from reality," Davis told me. "One aspect of that is a narrative voice that's a little artificial, not quite my own." As a person, Davis is tactful if particular; the speakers of her stories tend to be grand and hysterical, flies in bottles, frustrated by obstacles they can't see. The woman who goes over and over a sequence of events, trying to establish whether her lover is being unfaithful; the man who calculates the cost per hour of a ten-day affair. (Those two examples come from "Break It Down," her first full-length book, published by Farrar, Straus & Giroux in 1986. *That* author photo—her frank gaze—gave rise to at least one come-on letter.) "The narrators are overthinking, and the overthinking tends to be funny, but the overthinking tends to be rooted in strong feeling," Lorin Stein, who worked with her on two later books at FSG and is now the editor of *The Paris Review*, says. "You have the sense of characters who have a strong motivation to do something absurd and unproductive."

"I see people sometimes who remind me of my narrators," Davis said. "I'll see a kind of mousy, earnest person at a reading, a woman with limp, long, dark hair, kind of very woebegone and sincere." Some of her narrators, she thinks, are desperate to be understood. "That's why they go into too much detail," she said. "'In case you didn't quite get it, let me explain further.'"

When Davis was younger, the obsessions of her narrators tended to be amorous; now they are philosophical. "The Two Davises and the Rug," in the new collection, is the story of two people named Davis, who "were not married to each other and they were not related by

blood." They are kindred nonetheless: "They were both indecisive people, or rather, they could be very decisive about some things, important things, or things to do with their work, but they could be very indecisive about smaller things, and change their minds from one day to the next, over and over again, being completely decided in favor of something one day and then completely decided against the same thing the next day."

In the story, "this Davis" decides to sell a red-white-and-black wool rug at a yard sale to benefit a good cause. The rug has been lying in her son's room, but her son doesn't live at home anymore. At the yard sale, "the other Davis" considers buying it but doesn't. By the time he has decided that he wants the rug, this Davis has decided to keep it. For the next twelve hundred words, this Davis worries extravagantly: should she, who had not really valued the rug until someone else desired it, keep it, or should she let the other Davis, whose house is "clean and tidy and thoughtfully arranged," have it? Which one of them deserves it?

Davis did the same thing with a rug a few years ago, after Theo, her son with Cote, went away to college. "With that story, I'm not leaving out anything relevant," she says. "But the obsessive quality is exaggerated. A lot is true, the ins and outs of reasoning, but a lot of normal life went on the same. In the story, you get the impression that the rug was the only thing happening. In real life, it's just one strand. It's, O.K., let's see what happens if this rug and this dilemma becomes everything."

For a contemplative, Davis is remarkably social. When Daniel was a baby, she joined a softball team; later, when Theo was young, she took a line-dancing class. She escapes herself, and the house, given half an opportunity—to collect stories for an oral history of the village, to sit on a town zoning board. "I don't go into it thinking I need material," she says. "I follow my interests pretty—I don't like the word 'intuitively.' I follow them in a kind of natural way, without questioning them too much. Alan tries to be the brake on my impulses."

Cote's reservations have not stopped Davis from running for a seat on the governing board of her village. One snowy Saturday morning in late January, she had plans to go door to door collecting signatures with "the other Davis," whose name

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is Bill, and who was running for reëlection. For her nominating petition, she needed signatures from five per cent of the previous election's voters, which amounted to two or three people. (The village has a population of five hundred and seventy-one.) The mayor told her they didn't really pay attention to Democrat or Republican, and suggested she make up her own affiliation, so she is running as a member of the Schoolhouse Party. "I'm interested to see on a small scale how people get along or don't get along," she said.

The temperature was ten degrees. Davis got a clipboard and a notebook and put on her winter coat. She was excited. "But they're all people you know," Cote said. When Bill Davis arrived, they drove half a mile down the road, to Helen and John Mullaly's house. John, once a teacher at Davis and Cote's schoolhouse, had recently celebrated his ninety-first birthday. Helen, a former head nurse, was in her late eighties. The Davises stayed for more than an hour, listening to their stories, in an overheated dining room crowded with clocks and photographs and figurines. Twice, John showed them a picture, cut from a newspaper, of Davos, Switzerland, where he had been during the Second World War. "Cleared the summit, met the Pope, pushed back the Germans," he said. When Helen mentioned that the house had been owned by a doctor, who kept a log which she had found in the attic, Lydia's eyes shone. The different clocks ticked out of time.

Later, Davis said, "I'm kind of always working, in a sense. Sitting and talking to my neighbors, I'm not really working, but I'm always sort of alert to things." Two things had struck her particularly: the objects in the dining room, and Helen's remark, as they left, that she loved driving in snowstorms the way some people love skiing—the opposite of a cliché about an old lady. (Davis, unexpectedly, plays tin whistle and Ping-Pong, and several years ago publicly sang scenes from "The Magic Flute" dressed as a witch, in a cast made up mostly of teen-agers.) "I'm not bored," Davis said. "I don't like the high-powered literary life. I'd rather sit and listen to Helen and John and their stories than be at a cocktail party in New York."

On their rounds, the two Davises had stopped in at Bill's place, a white clapboard house with a single dormer window. "See how clean and nice it is?" Lydia said, entering a dining room with an open fireplace and a Shaker rake on the wall. Susan Shapiro, Bill's wife, was inside. Naturally, the rug came up for discussion. "Where would it have gone?" Lydia asked. "We had picked out a spot in Mark's room," Bill said. "Now I feel guilty!" she said. The rug was still upstairs in her house, in Theo's rarely used bedroom.

Both Davises asked Shapiro for her signature. Shapiro looked at them wryly and said, "The Two Davises and the Village Board."

Evasion is the shadow side of overwrought explanation: dwelling on minutiae can mask a problem of unspeakable magnitude. In "Letter to a Funeral Parlor," when Davis objects to the company's use of the portmanteau word "cremains" in reference to her father—before his death, the company had called him her "loved one"—distress over vocabulary stands in for mortal rage. What is left out gives the shape to what remains. Fictionalizing real events, Davis says, has to do with the selection of material, in the way of a teen-ager recounting to her mother how an evening was spent: "We went over to Joan's house and hung out and listened to music, and then we went to McDonald's." Not the part about the vodka in the orange juice, not the part about the making out. Not a lie, just a different story.

For the most part, Davis leaves her children out of it. They represent a grammar problem in "A Double Negative": "At a certain point in her life, she realizes it is not so much that she wants to have a child as that she does not want not to have a child, or not to have had a child." In "Selfish," which Davis calls "a tongue-in-cheek monologue about parenting that's less painful," her children, unnamed and featureless, are faint but pervasive, stubborn as ghosts. "The useful thing about being a selfish person is that when your children get hurt you don't mind so much because you yourself are all right," she writes. Difficulty arises from not being quite selfish enough:

> If you are just a little selfish, you take some trouble over them, you pay some attention to them, they have clean clothes most of the time, a fresh haircut fairly often, though not all the supplies they need for school, or not when they need them; you enjoy them, you laugh at their jokes, though you have little patience when they are naughty, they annoy you when you have work to do, and when they are very naughty you become very angry; you understand some of what they should have, in their lives, you know some of what they are doing, with their friends, you ask questions, though not very many, and not beyond a certain point, because there is so little time; then the trouble begins and you don't notice signs of it because you are so busy; they steal, and you wonder how that thing came into the house; they show you

"The new piece of paper you like to keep on your desk came in."

what they have stolen, and when you ask questions, they lie; when they lie, you believe them, every time, because they seem so candid and it would take so long to find out the truth.

Incomplete selfishness, like a vaccination that doesn't take, cannot protect against suffering. The only foolproof approach is to be totally selfish, to the point of being "privately relieved, glad, even delighted, that it isn't happening to you." In an e-mail, Davis wrote to me, "The narrator takes a pose. Or I take a pose through a confident narrator—in the beginning. Then—as so often happens in actual conversation—once one begins discussing a situation in detail, reliving it, one's emotions change, one's relation to the material changes. And that's what happens in the story. When the narrator goes into detail, about the stealing and the lying, then she loses some of that confidence. She ends up pushing the difficult material away, saying, Don't let it get near me."

That story, with its shifting sense of culpability, is the closest Davis comes to describing her struggles with Daniel. As a teen-ager, he started going to clubs in New York City and became deeply involved with drugs. In 1996, when he was eighteen, he was present in the apartment when a dealer named Andre Melendez was murdered by Michael Alig, a former club promoter, and his roommate, Robert Riggs. Auster was given three thousand dollars of Melendez's money in exchange for his silence, and later pleaded guilty to possession of stolen property and served a five-year probation. A decade ago, Hustvedt published a best-selling novel, "What I Loved," which reimagines the events with all the obliquity of an episode of "Law & Order." The story features a troubled boy whose mother, a poet, produces work that is "scrupulous, concise, and invested with the comedy inherent in distance." Hustvedt describes the poet herself as "all boarded up and shut down like a condemned house."

Lifting from life, Davis is cautious. She tends to ask her friends for permission before including them in stories. "I don't really want to offend people, so I try to avoid it," she said. "It's a shock to see yourself depicted in someone's writing, even if it's not particularly negative. It's a matter of being taken away and used." Her mechanisms can be subtle, though—a change of gender, or of name, or less. Mitch Sisskind recalled being in a bookstore, leafing through a literary journal. "I started reading this story and saw that one of the characters was me, by name," he said. "I thought I was losing my mind. I've never known anyone else that did that. I was flattered, but I was surprised." She had referred to him as Mitchell, which no one does, thinking that it would disguise his identity.

"Now, suppose some guy comes at you balanced between two blocks."

• •

A few years ago, when *Harper's* was preparing to publish "Varieties of Disturbance," a story about Davis's mother, who was then still alive, Davis asked Daniel's advice. (He lives in Florida and works at a performance space.) He suggested a small cut to spare his grandmother's feelings. When the piece was collected in a book of the same name (a finalist for the National Book Award), she had died, and Davis restored the damning phrase, also at his suggestion.

"Hurting children is where I would draw the line," Davis told me one evening, sitting in the kitchen with Cote. "A husband—you can hurt a husband. He does have to O.K. everything." She turned to Cote. "You veto. But of course it's not really fair to him, because then he's called on to be gentlemanly."

"There's certain private stuff I don't think is relevant," Cote said.

"You've put up with it."

"I was generous."

"He'd have to think it's a good piece of writing," she said. "But the children are off limits."

In her twenties, in Paris, Davis got about two-thirds of the way through "Swann's Way," in French, carefully writing down vocabulary and making notes. For the next thirty years, she earned a living mostly through translating. In a talk on the subject, she described her body of work as "books of all degrees of excellence and non-excellence, of interest and no interest . . . including a sentimental biography of Marie Curie, various histories of Chinese politics, art catalogues, the strange novels of Pierre Jean Jouve, a volume of travel essays by Michel Butor, and several books of fiction and literary philosophy by Maurice Blanchot."

In 1997, Davis agreed to translate "Swann's Way" for a new edition of "In Search of Lost Time." She had never read the version by C. K. Scott Moncrieff, whose enhanced Edwardian style may be the reason most readers in English flag after a volume or two, and she didn't read it then. She started working through the French, page by page, not skipping ahead to see what came next. "Just the way I wouldn't write anything, even an e-mail, if it wasn't decently written, the translation has to be good right away," she told me. "I write it quickly but well, so that some of the time I would feel like a sieve or funnel, or maybe 'pipeline' is a better word."

When she finished her draft, she

looked carefully at the previous translations, particularly Scott Moncrieff's. "Proust is plainer in his language and more straightforward and in a way more contemporary than the translation," she says. "My aim was to stay very close." The response to what one critic called Davis's "sans-serif version," published in 2003, was reserved: some reviewers felt that her accuracy—which kept intact word order and punctuation, and often preferred an obscure cognate to a flashier English rendering—came at the expense of felicity. The *Times*, however, praised her "fine rigor and exactitude."

The book's success is as important to Davis as that of any of her fictions. "I'm more jealous, almost, of my translations," she says. "I really want my Proust to take the place of the Scott Moncrieff, because I think it's closer."

Davis's downstairs office has rose-pink floor-length curtains, a space heater, and a cat. Small shelves are filled with books—"Studies in Lowland Scots," "Famous Dogs in Fiction"—relevant to "Bob, Son of Battle," a children's book, published in 1898, that she read as a child and is now "translating" from tricky Victorian English into language a present-day Brearley girl could manage. Her desk is two file cabinets with a board laid across the top. Above it, on a bulletin board, is a homemade family tree that traces her connections to an ancestor whose description of life in a nineteenth-century New England village she has fashioned into verse. A photocopied page from an old notebook serves as another kind of genealogy, some two hundred years' worth of fiction writers, from Swift to Hemingway. "I found it and thought, Well, that's worth looking at every now and again," she said. "I don't really have the picture in my head. I probably did it when I was quite young. I was always trying to learn and remember."

It is not only the act of writing that forces Davis to write fiction; reading is a danger, too. "I don't need to go to other writers to get excited," she says. "The problem is almost the opposite. Certain kinds of writing will give me too many ideas. I have to keep stopping and reacting." She recently got a collection of lectures Roland Barthes gave at the Sorbonne. "I found that there were so many interesting ideas in one paragraph that I almost couldn't read it."

E-mail can be equally threatening. In the office, Davis opened up her account to a folder of messages from the Listserv at Bard College, where she used to teach occasionally and where Cote was on the faculty for three decades. Material, practically ready-made. Here was a message from a woman named Lisa Hedges, wondering if anyone had seen her glasses. "I loved her name," Davis said. "This is what it started as: 'Round, faux tortoiseshell glasses, bifocal lenses, lost sometime Friday, between the Nursery School, B Village, A Sacred Space. It would be great if somebody has found them and they aren't in a place covered in a foot of snow!' "

What it became:

Personal Announcement

Woman named Shrubbs
Has lost faux tortoiseshell eyeglasses

Where?
Somewhere between nursery school
and sacred space

They are possibly
covered by snow.

"This is very vestigial," Davis said. "Or maybe it isn't, I don't know. I kind of like it the way it is." Sometimes the longer something sits, the more finished it seems. A little while later, she said, "When you're spying, when you're looking, when you're on the alert for a story, part of it is seeing the thing in isolation, apart from the normalizing context."

Found objects emerge frequently as source and as finished work. ("An Example of the Continuing Past Tense in a Hotel Room": "Your housekeeper *has been* Shelly.") Davis sees this repurposing as thrift. She says, "My grandmother, my mother, and me—we were always making do and saving, very economical. I like the idea that the writing would belong to that practical tradition."

Even now, much of Davis's writing has its first life in obscure literary magazines. All the editors have to do is ask. If she likes the cover letter, and feels she can trust them, she'll send work. In small magazines she feels free to experiment. "There's an opposition between what's good for my career and what's good for my writing," she said, walking back into the kitchen, where Cote was waiting for his lunch. "What's good for my writing is these little places."

"You're building your fan base," Cote said.

"I don't think I'd ever think of it as 'building my fan base.' I would never sit back and do that intentionally."

"Then they go on YouTube and start talking about it," Cote said.

"I really like being read by young people," Davis said. "I love it that friends of my son Theo, who is twenty-five, will say, 'Is your mother Lydia Davis? I love her work.' "

In 2001, Davis published a book with McSweeney's, after Dave Eggers wrote her a fan letter. New, young readers found in her work an idiosyncratic approach to the problem of storytelling, something handmade or unmade, each story like a cool thing from an old junk shop. The title piece—"Samuel Johnson Is Indignant:"—was one line long: "that Scotland has so few trees." (Humor, language, emotion.) "That's such a radical act and so liberating to put that on a page and call it finished," Eggers told me. "For those of us who are attracted to people who make room for new ways of defining a short story or who defy categorization at all, she was a real hero."

By the time FSG published her "Collected," in 2009, American fiction had more fully accommodated itself to the insubstantial. Everything is too hard to understand until it isn't. For the first time, Davis's writing was acknowledged as belonging to an American tradition. Jonathan Galassi, the president and publisher of FSG, says, "People caught up with her."

"I have to guard against the tendency—I could make anything into a story," Davis told me. Several years ago, she started writing a long note to her literary executor, but had to stop when it began to take on a life of its own. "I was trying just to write instructions, you know, 'My notebooks should go here,' 'You should look through my notebooks and make sure to take out any references to blah blah blah,' " she said. "But it began to get too elaborate, too detailed, too opinionated, and too irrational. It wasn't a straightforward document any more. I didn't really want it to be a story, because I needed it to be an actual letter to my executor." She could not pull it back into real life, though, and for the time being the letter is stopped midstream. ♦

NEW SAT PRACTICE QUESTIONS

BY CORA FRAZIER

The SAT college entrance exam is undergoing sweeping revisions . . . to make the exam better representative of what students study in high school and the skills they need to succeed in college and afterward.
—*The Daily News.*

1. Reading comprehension. Consider the following passage by a nineteenth-century female writer:

Elizabeth, having rather expected to affront him, was amazed at his gallantry; but there was a mixture of sweetness and archness in her manner which made it difficult for her to affront anybody; and Darcy had never been so bewitched by any woman as he was by her. He really believed that, were it not for the inferiority of her connections, he should be in some danger.

How would you title the above passage to generate the most "likes"?

(a) haters make you stronger, God forgives

(b) Hey, friends, I've written about some stuff that's been going on with me lately, which is why I've been out of touch and not on social media so much or too responsive to your posts, and it would be really great to get some feedback from you intelligent people on this. A lot on my mind & greatly appreciated (etc.)

(c) 10 Reasons You Are Never Getting Married

(d) Cats Dressed Up Fancy

2. Student-produced-response math. According to an electronic sign in the subway, an uptown 2 train is arriving in 3 minutes. You lose a game of Tetris on your phone and see that 4 minutes have gone by, at least. The electronic sign says that a 3 train is arriving in 0 minutes. 0 minutes go by. Do you just say fuck it and walk from Barclays?

3. Multiple-choice math. You receive several e-mails from your insurance company with "amounts you may owe" that so far total $789. What do you do?

(a) Read your explanation of benefits.

(b) Look for your explanation of benefits somewhere in your "important" Manila envelope, which is different from the other "important" Manila envelope that is more personally important and includes a note your college roommate wrote on unicorn stationery.

(c) Cancel your allergist appointment but even it out by eating an orange.

(d) Send a text message to your mom saying, "NYC doesn't care if I live or die."

4. Math diagrams. Choose one of the following short-response prompts, and include illustrations, if necessary:

(a) Describe how to wear a peplum and still seem like a person of significance.

(b) Describe how to wear diaper pants while asking to see the bouncer's "list."

5. Student-produced-response math. What is the limit of y=2x as your love of Beyoncé approaches infinity?

6. Vocabulary. I threw Gianna serious —, because I was —.

(a) elocution / nonplussed

(b) paraphernalia / permeated

(c) shade / like, she can't be serious

7. Student-produced-response math. You have one remaining pair of clean underwear, besides the pair you are currently wearing. You have an additional pair of underwear that doesn't cover your entire butt and says "Thursday." How many days can you go without doing laundry?

8. Student-produced-response math. At what surface area does facial hair suggest a lack of vital personal possessions?

9. Reading comprehension. Consider the following exchange:

"Why don't you like to be touched?" I whisper, staring up into soft gray eyes.
"Because I'm fifty shades of fucked up, Anastasia."

What does the final line of dialogue indicate?

(a) Christian is fearful of his responsibilities at Grey Enterprises Holdings Inc.

(b) Christian is ambivalent about physical relationships.

(c) Christian would like to return home to finish an entry in his Cooking with Celiac Disease blog.

(d) Christian is desirable.

10. Short-response logic. If you wear your high-heeled boots, you will be as tall as or taller than your date. But, if you don't wear your high-heeled boots, you will feel less cool. Should you stay at home and watch anything featuring Connie Britton?

11. Improving sentences. You receive the following text message: "You're an animal." This is an autocorrection of:

(a) "You're almost at Ludlow."

(b) "Young Leo DiCaprio."

(c) "Do we need eggs?"

(d) No autocorrection.

12. Optional-essay response. Choose one of the following writing prompts and respond in essay form, drawing on what you have read, your observations, and your experiences.

• Write a letter to your building's superintendent explaining that although it was you who left the roof entrance open the other night, because you wanted to show that "you're not old yet!," you are nevertheless a responsible tenant who puts the recycling in the right bins, unless the bins are empty and it's unclear which is which.

• Write a controlled yet scathing Yelp review that conveys just how profoundly wrong your waiter was to refer to you and your friends as an "especially large" party, causing this waiter deep moral shame and personal fear.

• Write for as long as you can, in as many words as you can, in the space provided. ♦

ZOHAR LAZAR

PERSONAL HISTORY

ARE YOU LISTENING?

Conversations with my deaf mother.

BY ANDRÉ ACIMAN

The author's mother on her engagement day, in Alexandria, in 1946.

COURTESY ANDRÉ ACIMAN

I always knew my mother couldn't hear, but I can't remember when it dawned on me that she'd always be deaf. If I was told, I didn't believe it. It was no different when I learned about sex. Someone may have sat me down for the facts of life, and although I wasn't really shocked and probably already knew, I couldn't bring myself to trust any of it. In between knowing something and refusing to know it lies a murky chasm that even the most enlightened among us are perfectly happy to inhabit. If anyone gave me the official report on my mother, it would have been my grandmother, who did not like her daughter-in-law and who found my mother's deaf friends as repellent as ungainly fowls squawking in her son's living room. If it wasn't my grandmother, it would have been the way people made fun of my mother on the street.

Some men whistled when she walked by, because she was beautiful and sexy and had a way of looking you boldly in the face until you lowered your eyes. But, when she shopped and spoke with the monotone, guttural voice of the deaf, people laughed. In Alexandria, Egypt, where we lived until we were summarily exiled, like all of the country's Jews, that's what you did when someone was different. It wasn't full-throated laughter; it was derision, the stepchild of contempt, which is as mirthless as it is cruel. She couldn't hear their laughter, but she read it in their faces. This must be how she finally understood why people always smirked when she thought she was speaking like everyone else. Who knows how long it took her to realize that she was unlike other children, why some turned away, or others, meaning to be kind, had a diffident way when they allowed her to play with them?

Born in Alexandria in 1924 in the wake of British colonial rule, my mother belonged to a middle-class, French-speaking Jewish family. Her father had done well as a bicycle merchant and spared no expense to find a cure for her deafness. Her mother took her to see the most prominent audiologists in Europe, but returned more disheartened after each appointment. There was, the doctors said, no cure. Her child had lost her hearing to meningitis when she was a few months old, and from meningitis there was no coming back. Her ears were healthy, but meningitis had touched the part of her brain responsible for hearing.

In those days, there was nothing resembling deaf pride. Deafness was a stigma. The very poor often neglected their deaf children, condemning them to a lifetime of menial labor. Children remained illiterate, and their language was primitive, gestural. In the snobbish view of my mother's parents, if you couldn't cure deafness, you learned to hide it. If you weren't ashamed of it, you were taught to be. You learned how to lip-read, not sign; you learned to speak with your voice, not your hands. You didn't eat with your hands; why on earth would you speak with them?

My mother was initially enrolled in a Jewish French day school, but within weeks her parents and the teachers realized that the school couldn't accommodate a deaf child, so she was shipped off to a specialized school in Paris, overseen by nuns. It turned out to be more of a finishing school than a school for the deaf. She was taught good posture by walking with a book on her head and by holding books between her elbows and her waist when she sat at a dinner table. She picked up sewing, knitting, and needlepoint. But she was a volatile, rambunctious child and had grown into

a tomboy who collected bicycles from her father's shop. She didn't like to play with dolls. She had no patience for French *savoir* or for French grace and deportment.

She came back to Alexandria two years later, where she was turned over to a well-intentioned and innovative Greek woman who ran a French private school for the deaf in her villa. The school was welcoming and forgiving, and vibrated with a sense of its mission. Classwork, however, consisted of long, gruelling hours learning how to mimic sounds that my mother would never be able to hear. The rest of the time was devoted to lipreading sessions: frontal lipreading and, in my mother's case, because she was a quick learner, profile lipreading. She learned how to read and write, acquired a rudimentary knowledge of sign language, was taught history and some literature, and at graduation was awarded a French bronze medal by a general who happened to be passing through Alexandria.

Still, she had spent her first eighteen years learning how to do what couldn't have seemed more unnatural: pretending to hear. It was no better than teaching a blind person to count his steps from this pillar to that post so as not to be caught with a white stick. She learned to laugh at a joke even if she would have needed to hear the play on words in the punch line. She nodded at precisely the right intervals to someone speaking to her in Russian, to the point where the Russian was convinced that she understood everything he'd been saying.

The Greek headmistress was idolized by her students, but her method had disastrous consequences for my mother's ability to process and synthesize complex ideas. Past a certain threshold, things simply stopped making sense to her. She could talk politics if you outlined the promises made by a Presidential candidate, but she was unable to think through the inconsistencies in his agenda, even when they were explained to her. She lacked the conceptual framework or the symbolic sophistication to acquire and use an abstract vocabulary. She might like a painting by Monet, but she couldn't discuss the beauty of a poem by Baudelaire.

When I asked her a question such as "Can God create a stone too heavy for Him to lift?" or "Is the Cretan lying when he says that all Cretans are liars?," she did not understand it. Did she think in words? I'd ask. She did not know. If not in words, how did she organize her thoughts? She did not know that, either. Does anyone? Asked when she realized she was deaf, or what life was like without hearing, or whether she minded not hearing Bach or Beethoven, she'd say she hadn't really thought about it. You might as well have asked a blind person to describe colors. Wit, too, eluded her, though she loved comedy, jesting, and slapstick. She was an accomplished mimic and was drawn to the voiceless Harpo Marx, whose jokes were rooted not in speech but in body language.

She had a circle of devoted deaf friends, but unlike a deaf person today, who might be able to finger-spell every word in the Oxford English Dictionary, they used a language without an alphabet, just a shorthand lingo of hand and facial signs whose vocabulary seldom exceeded five hundred words. Her friends could discuss sewing, recipes, horoscopes. They could tell you they loved you, and they could be unsparingly kind with children and old people when they touched them, because hands speak more intimately than words. But intimacy is one thing, and complex ideas quite another.

After leaving school, my mother volunteered as a nurse in Alexandria. She drew blood, gave injections, and eventually served in a hospital, caring for wounded British soldiers during the Second World War. She dated a few of them, and would take them out for a spin on the motorbike that her father had given her on her eighteenth birthday. She liked to go to parties, and had a surprising gift for fast dancing. She became a coveted partner for anyone who wanted to jitterbug or go for an early-morning swim at the beach.

When my father met her, she wasn't yet twenty. He was stunned by her beauty, her warmth, her unusual mixture of meekness and in-your-face boldness. That was how she compensated for being deaf, and it sometimes made you forget that she was. She charmed his friends and his family, except for his parents. Her future father-in-law called her "the cripple," his wife "a gold-digger." But my father refused to listen to them, and three years later they were married. In her wedding pictures, she is beaming. Her Greek teacher applauded her triumph: she had married out of the deaf ghetto.

Now I can see that with a better education she might have become someone else. Her intelligence and her combative perseverance in the face of so many obstacles in Egypt as a Jew—and, after Egypt, in Italy and then the U.S.—would have made her a great career woman. She might have become a physician or a psychiatrist. In a less enlightened age, she remained a housewife. Even though she was well off, she was not only a woman but a deaf woman. Two strikes.

She spoke and understood French, learned Greek and basic Arabic, and when we landed in Italy she picked up Italian by going to the market every day. When she didn't understand something, she pretended that she did until she got it. She almost always got it. In the consulate in Naples, weeks before immigrating to the United States, in 1968, she had her first encounter with American English. She was asked to raise her right hand and repeat the oath of allegiance. She babbled some soft-spoken sounds that the American functionary was happy to mistake for the oath. The scene was so awkward that it brought out nervous giggles in my brother and me. My mother laughed with us as we walked out of the building, but my father had to be told why it was funny.

Her deafness had always stood like an insuperable wall between them, and the longer they stayed married the more difficult it was to scale. In retrospect, it had always stood there. My father loved classical music; she had never been to a concert. He read long Russian novels and modern French writers whose prose was cadenced and brilliant. She preferred fashion magazines. He liked to stay at home and read after work; she liked to go dancing and have friends over for dinner. She had grown up enjoying American movies, because in Egypt they had French subtitles; he preferred French films, which had no subtitles and were therefore lost on her, because lipreading actors on the screen

proved almost impossible. His friends spoke about the most rarefied things imaginable: the Greco-Egyptian god Serapis, the archeological digs around Alexandria, the novels of Curzio Malaparte; she loved gossip.

Not long after they were married, they both realized how utterly unsuited they were. They loved each other until the very end, but they misunderstood and insulted each other, and quarrelled every day. He often went out when her deaf friends visited. In the nineteen-sixties, he left home altogether for a few years, coming back just weeks before we were to leave Egypt. Those of her friends who married out of the deaf community had tumultuous marriages, too. Only those who stayed with the deaf seemed to find as much happiness as the hearing.

My mother never really did learn English. Lip movements were not clear or declarative enough, unless you seemed to parody what you were saying for comic effect. She didn't like it when I exaggerated my lip movements to her in public, because they proclaimed her deafness. Many pitied her, and some made an effort to cross the barrier. Some well-meaning people tried to communicate with her by mimicking the speech of the deaf, aping a raucous voice and making distorted faces. Others spoke loudly, as though raising the decibel level might get their point across. She could tell they were yelling. Then there were those who, try as they might, were never able to understand what my mother was saying to them, and those who didn't care to make the effort. They refused to look her in the face or even to acknowledge her presence at the dining table.

Or people just laughed.

When friends at the playground asked why my mother spoke with that strange voice, I would say, "Because that is how she speaks." Her voice didn't sound strange until it was pointed out to me. It was Mom's voice—the voice that woke me up in the morning, that called out to me at the beach, that soothed me and told me tales at bedtime.

Sometimes I tried to persuade myself that she was not really deaf. She was a mischievous prankster, and what better way to keep everyone hopping than to pretend she was deaf, the way every child has, at one point or another, pretended to be blind, or played dead? For some reason, she had forgotten to stop playing her prank. To test her, I would slide behind her when she wasn't looking and yell in her ear. No response. Not a shudder. What amazing control she had. I sometimes ran to her and said that someone was ringing the doorbell. She opened the door; then, realizing I had played a low trick on her, she would laugh it off, because wasn't it funny how the joy of her life—me—had hatched this practical joke to remind her, like everyone else, that she was deaf. One day, I watched her get dressed up to go out with my father and, as she was fastening a pair of earrings, I told her she was beautiful. Yes, I am beautiful. But it doesn't change anything. I am still deaf—meaning, And don't you forget it.

It was difficult for a child to reconcile her ready smile, her love of comedy and good fellowship with her enduring grief as a wife and a deaf person. She always cried with her friends. They all cried. But those of us who have lived with the deaf stop feeling sorry for them. Instead, one jumps quickly from pity to cruelty, like a pebble skittering on shallow water, without understanding what it means to live without sound. I seldom have been able to sit still and force myself to feel her seclusion. It was much easier to lose my temper when she wouldn't listen, because she never listened—because part of understanding what you said seemed to involve a mixture of guesswork and intuition, where the shading of facts meant more than the facts themselves.

Nothing was a greater ordeal than making phone calls for my mother. She often asked my brother or me to help her, dialling the number and speaking for her as she stood there, watching every word. She appreciated it and was proud that at so young an age we were able to call the plumber, her friends, her seamstress. She told me that I was her ears. "He is her ears," her mother-in-law would proclaim. She meant, Thank the good Lord there was someone to do her dirty work for her. Otherwise, how could that poor woman survive?

There were two ways to get out of making phone calls. One was to hide. The other was to lie. I would dial the number, wait a while, and then tell her

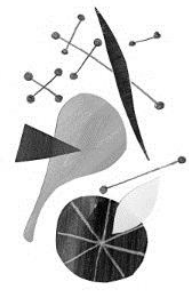
that the line was busy. Five minutes later, the line was still busy. It never occurred to me that the call might be urgent or, when her husband failed to show up for dinner, that she was desperate to talk to a friend or a relative, anyone to shield her from her loneliness. Sometimes men called, but, with my brother and me as go-betweens, the conversations were awkward. The men never called again.

When I went to graduate school, it fell to my brother to stand by as a middleman. I would speak to him, he would relay the message, and in the background I would make out her voice telling him what to say, which he would relay back to me. Sometimes I would ask him to put her on the phone and let her tell me whatever came to mind, because I missed her voice, and wanted to hear her say the things she had always said to me, slurring her words a bit, ungrammatical, words that weren't necessarily words even, just sounds that reached far back to my childhood, when I didn't know words.

As a child, I had fantasized that someday someone would invent a gizmo that would allow my mother to telephone another deaf person. The miracle occurred about thirty years ago, when I obtained a teletypewriter for her. For the first time in her life, she was able to communicate with her deaf friends without involving me or my brother. She could type long messages in broken English and arrange to see them. Then, seven years ago, I installed a device on her TV that allowed her to communicate visually with friends around the country. Most were too old to travel, so this was a godsend.

Open to any new experience, she fell in love with each technological advance. (My father, ever reluctant to approach anything new, remained attached to his shortwave radio.) Several years ago, when my mother was in her mid-eighties, I bought her an iPad, so that she could Skype and FaceTime for hours with friends abroad, people she hadn't seen in ages. It was better than anything I had imagined as a boy. She could call me when I was at home, at the office, at the gym, even at Starbucks. I could FaceTime with her and not worry where she was or how she was doing. After my father died, she insisted on living alone, and my biggest fear was that she would fall and hurt herself. FaceTime also meant that I was spared having to visit her so often, as she well understood: "Does this mean that you're not coming over tonight because we're speaking with my iPad?"

My mother, for all her deficits, was among the most sagacious people I have known. Language was a prosthesis, a grafted limb that she had learned to live with but that remained peripheral because she could do without it. She had more immediate ways of communicating. She was acutely discerning and had a flair for people and situations—from the Latin verb *fragrare*, to scent. Her radar was always on: whom to trust, what to believe, and how to read an inflection. She made up in scent what she had lost in her deafness. She taught me spices, naming them in a grocery store by dipping her palm into the burlap bags and letting me sniff each handful. She taught me to recognize her perfumes, the smell of damp wool, the smell of leaking gas. When I write about scent, I am channelling not Proust but my mother.



People were often immediately drawn to her. You might attribute this to the expansive good cheer she radiated whenever she went out. But my mother was a profoundly unhappy soul. I think it was her unhindered capacity to let intimacy happen at a glance, with everyone—rich, poor, good, bad, butcher, postman, grandee, or Senegalese workers at supermarkets on the Upper West Side who helped her without knowing that she, too, was a native French speaker. If she had been dropped into Kandahar or Islamabad, she would have had no trouble finding the cut of beef she wanted and haggling over the price until she prevailed, while making friends with others in the marketplace.

She made you want to offer intimacy, too. Better yet, she made you reach into yourself to find it, in case you'd mislaid it or never knew you had it in you to give. This was her language, and, as with prisoners in separate cells learning to tap a new language with its own peculiar grammar and alphabet, she taught you to speak it. Sometimes my friends, within an hour of meeting her, forgot that she couldn't hear them and came to understand everything she said, even when they couldn't understand a word of French, much less French spoken by a deaf person. I'd try to step in and interpret for them. "I get it," my friend would say. "I understand perfectly," my mother would say—meaning, Leave us alone and stop meddling, we're doing just fine. I was the one not understanding.

One day a few years ago, I stopped by my mother's apartment during a jog on a very cold day, to warm up and catch my breath, and see how she was doing. She had been watching TV. I sat next to her and explained that I wasn't able to come to dinner that night because I was going out with friends, but that I might drop in the next day for our ritual Scotch and dinner. She liked that. What did I want her to cook? I suggested her baked ziti, with the top slightly crisp. She thought it was a great idea. I had forgotten to remove my ski mask, and the entire conversation took place with my lips covered. She was listening to me by following the movement of my eyebrows.

In the new world where my mother ended her days, you got respect and had equal rights, you thrived with dignity and security. She liked it better than the Old World. But it wasn't her home. Now that I think of what Shakespeare might have called her "unaccommodated" language, I realize how much I miss its immediate, tactile quality, from another age, when your face was your bond, not your words. I owe this language not to the books I read or studied but to my mother, who had no faith in, and no talent or much patience for, words. ♦

CONSTABULARY NOTES FROM ALL OVER

From the Chagrin Solon (Ohio) Sun.

A Sperry Road man asked police to investigate May 1 for possible Satanic cult practices on his property. He found a pile of pine needles and a broken twig resembling a pitchfork on his property. Police found no evidence. The officer did note pine trees in the area.

ANNALS OF PSYCHOLOGY

THE RECKONING

The father of the Sandy Hook killer searches for answers.

BY ANDREW SOLOMON

BACKGROUND: AP/WESTERN CONNECTICUT STATE UNIVERSITY; FAMILY PHOTOGRAPH: COURTESY PETER LANZA

In Peter Lanza's new house, on a secluded private road in Fairfield County, Connecticut, is an attic room overflowing with shipping crates of what he calls "the stuff." Since the day in December, 2012, when his son Adam killed his own mother, himself, and twenty-six people at Sandy Hook Elementary School, strangers from across the world have sent thousands upon thousands of letters and other keepsakes: prayer shawls, Bibles, Teddy bears, homemade toys; stories with titles such as "My First Christmas in Heaven"; crosses, including one made by prison inmates. People sent candy, too, and when I visited Peter, last fall, he showed me a bag of year-old caramels. He had not wanted to throw away anything that people sent. But he said, "I was wary about eating anything," and he didn't let Shelley Lanza—his second wife—eat any of the candy, either. There was no way to be sure it wasn't poisoned. Downstairs, in Peter's home office, I spotted a box of family photographs. He used to display them, he told me, but now he couldn't look at Adam, and it seemed strange to put up photos of his older son, Ryan, without Adam's. "I'm not dealing with it," he said. Later, he added, "You can't mourn for the little boy he once was. You can't fool yourself."

Since the shootings, Peter has avoided the press, but in September, as the first anniversary of his son's rampage approached, he contacted me to say that he was ready to tell his story. We met six times, for interviews lasting as long as seven hours. Shelley, a librarian at the University of Connecticut, usually joined us and made soup or chili or salads for lunch. Sometimes we played with their German shepherd. When Peter speaks, you can still hear a strong trace of rural Massachusetts and southern New Hampshire, where he and his first wife—Nancy, Adam's mother—grew up. He is an affable man with a poise that often hides his despair. An accountant who is a vice-president for taxes at a General Electric subsidiary, he maintains a nearly fanatical insistence on facts, and nothing annoyed him more in our conversations than speculation—by me, the media, or anyone else. He is not by nature given to self-examination, and often it was Shelley who underlined the emotional ramifications of what he said.

Peter hadn't seen his son for two years at the time of the Sandy Hook killings, and, even with hindsight, he doesn't think that the catastrophe could have been predicted. But he constantly thinks about what he could have done differently and wishes he had pushed harder to see Adam. "Any variation on what I did and how my relationship was had to be good, because no outcome could be worse," he said. Another time, he said, "You can't get any more evil," and added, "How much do I beat up on myself about the fact that he's my son? A lot."

Depending on whom you ask, there were twenty-six, twenty-seven, or twenty-eight victims in Newtown. It's twenty-six if you count only those who were murdered at Sandy Hook Elementary School; twenty-seven if you include Nancy Lanza; twenty-eight if you judge Adam's suicide a loss. There are twenty-six stars on the local firehouse roof. On the anniversary of the shootings, President Obama referred to "six dedicated school workers and twenty beautiful children" who had been killed, and the governor of Connecticut asked churches to ring their bells twenty-six times. Some churches in Newtown had previously commemorated the victims by ringing twenty-eight times, but a popular narrative had taken hold in which Nancy—a gun enthusiast who had taught Adam to shoot—was an accessory to the crime, rather than its victim. Emily Miller, an editor at the Washington *Times*, wrote, "We can't blame lax gun-control laws, access to mental health treatment, prescription drugs or video games for Lanza's terrible killing spree. We can point to a mother who should have been more aware of how sick her son had become and forced treatment."

Inadequate gun control and poor mental-health care are problems that invariably define the debate after atrocities such as the one at Newtown. But, important as those issues are, our impulse to grasp for reasons comes, arguably, from a more basic need—to make sense of what seems senseless. When the Connecticut state's attorney issued a report, in December, CNN announced, "Sandy Hook killer Adam Lanza took motive to his grave." A *Times* headline ran "CHILLING LOOK AT NEWTOWN KILLER, BUT NO 'WHY.' " Yet no "motive" can mitigate the horror of a bloodbath involving children. Had we found out—which we did not—that Adam had schizophrenia, or had been a pedophile or a victim of childhood abuse, we still wouldn't know *why* he acted as he did.

Interview subjects usually have a story they want to tell, but Peter Lanza came to these conversations as much to ask questions as to answer them. It's strange to live in a state of sustained incomprehension about what has become the most important fact about you. "I want people to be afraid of the fact that this could happen to them," he said. It took six months after the shootings for a sense of reality to settle on Peter. "But it's real," he said. "It doesn't have to be understood to be real."

Adam Lanza was never typical. Born in 1992, he didn't speak until he was three, and he always understood many more words than he could muster. He showed such hypersensitivity to physical touch that tags had to be removed from his clothing. In preschool and at Sandy Hook, where he was a pupil till the beginning of sixth grade, he sometimes smelled things that weren't there and washed his hands excessively. A doctor diagnosed sensory-integration disorder, and Adam underwent speech therapy and occupational therapy in kindergarten and first grade. Teachers were told to watch for seizures.

Still, photos show him looking cheerful. "Adam loved Sandy Hook school," Peter said. "He stated, as he was growing older, how much he had liked being a little kid." Adam's brother, Ryan, four years older and now a tax accountant in New York, used to joke about how close Peter and Adam were. They'd spend hours playing at two Lego tables in the basement, making up stories for the little towns they

Adam and Peter Lanza on a hike when Adam was about ten. As a child, Peter says, Adam was "just a normal little weird kid."

built. Adam even invented his own board games. "Always thinking differently," Peter said. "Just a normal little weird kid."

Even in an age when a child's every irregularity is attributed to a syndrome, the idea of a "normal weird kid" seems reasonable enough, but there were early signs that Adam had significant problems. He struggled with basic emotions, and received coaching from Nancy, who became a stay-at-home mother after Adam was born. When he had to show feelings in a school play, Nancy wrote to a friend, "Adam has taken it very seriously, even practicing facial expressions in the mirror!" According to the state's attorney's report, when Adam was in fifth grade he said that he "did not think highly of himself and believed that everyone else in the world deserved more than he did." That year, Adam and another boy wrote a story called "The Big Book of Granny," in which an old woman with a gun in her cane kills wantonly. In the third chapter, Granny and her son want to taxidermy a boy for their mantelpiece. In another chapter, a character called Dora the Berserker says, "I like hurting people. . . . Especially children." Adam tried to sell copies of the book at school and got in trouble. A couple of years later, according to the state's attorney's report, a teacher noted "disturbing" violence in his writing and described him as "intelligent but not normal, with anti-social issues."

Meanwhile, Peter and Nancy's marriage was starting to unravel. Peter's own father had been relatively disengaged from his wife and buried himself in work, and Peter didn't have a strong model for family life. "I'd work ridiculous hours during the week and Nancy would take care of the kids," he told me. "Then, on the weekends, she'd do errands and I'd spend time with the kids." Peter frequently took the boys on weekend hiking trips. In 2001, Peter and Nancy separated. Adam was nine; when a psychiatrist later asked him about it, he said that his parents were as irritating to each other as they were to him.

Peter recalled, "The funny part is that the separation didn't really change things for the kids very much." He moved to Stamford, nearly an hour from Newtown, but still saw the boys every weekend. When Adam entered middle school, he proudly took Peter to see it. "And talk about talkative: man, that kid, you couldn't shut him up!" Peter said. In the years that followed, they would talk about politics. Adam was a fan of Ron Paul, and liked to argue economic theory. He became fascinated with guns and with the Second World War, and showed an interest in joining the military. But he never talked about mass murder, and he wasn't violent at school. He seldom revealed his emotions, but had a sharp sense of humor. When Peter took him to see Bill Cosby live, Adam laughed for an hour straight. He loved reruns of "The Bob Newhart Show" and "Get Smart," which he would watch with his dad. One Christmas, Adam told his parents that he wanted to use his savings to buy toys for needy children, and Peter took him shopping for them.

"Water is on sixteen."

When Adam began middle school, Peter and Nancy's worries increased. The structure of the school day changed; instead of sitting in one classroom, he had to move from room to room, and he found the disruption punishing. Sensory overload affected his ability to concentrate; his mother xeroxed his textbooks in black-and-white, because he found color graphics unbearable. He quit playing the saxophone, stopped climbing trees, avoided eye contact, and developed a stiff, lumbering gait. He said that he hated birthdays and holidays, which he had previously loved; special occasions unsettled his increasingly sclerotic orderliness. He had "episodes," panic attacks that necessitated his mother's coming to school; the state's attorney's report says that on such occasions Adam "was more likely to be victimized than to act in violence against another."

"It was crystal clear something was wrong," Peter said. "The social awkwardness, the uncomfortable anxiety, unable to sleep, stress, unable to concentrate, having a hard time learning, the awkward walk, reduced eye contact. You could see the changes occurring." It is hard to be sure whether new problems were setting in or old ones were becoming more apparent. Michael Stone, a psychiatrist who studies mass murder, said that, as children grow up and tasks become more difficult, what seems like a minor impairment becomes major. "They're a little weird in school. They don't have friends. They do not get picked for the baseball team," he said. "But, as they get to the age when kids begin to date and find partners, they can't. So the sense of deficit, which was minor in grade school, and getting to be a little bit

more in junior high, now becomes very acute." He added that, without the brain getting worse, "life challenges nudge them in the direction of being sicker."

All the symptoms that afflicted Adam are signs of autism that might be exacerbated by the hormonal shifts of adolescence. When Adam was thirteen, Peter and Nancy took him to Paul J. Fox, a psychiatrist, who gave a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome (a category that the American Psychiatric Association has since subsumed into the broader diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder). Peter and Nancy finally knew what they were up against. "It was communicated as 'Adam, this is good news. This is why you feel this way, and now we can do something about it,' " Peter recalled. But Adam would not accept the diagnosis.

Peter and Nancy, who remained amicable in dealing with their children's needs, looked into special schools, public and private. Peter went to a meeting of the Global and Regional Asperger Syndrome Partnership (GRASP) to talk to adults on the spectrum and to try to imagine a life for his son. He hoped that "eventually we could get him into GRASP and he would form relationships and maybe get married to somebody else with Asperger's." Nancy considered moving to a town fifty miles away, where the school system had strong programs for children with special needs, but concluded that the disruption involved would cancel out any benefits. She briefly enrolled Adam in a Catholic school that seemed to offer more structure, but that didn't go well, either. Fox recommended homeschooling, arguing that the disadvantages of sending Adam to a regular school were worse than those of isolating him from his peers. From eighth grade on, Nancy taught Adam the humanities and Peter met with Adam twice a week to handle the sciences.

Nancy coördinated the home curriculum with Newtown High School to insure that Adam could graduate rather than simply get a G.E.D. She initiated all such major decisions. "I took the back seat," Peter said. Even after beginning homeschooling, Adam continued to attend Newtown High's Tech Club meetings. "He fit in there," Peter said.

"All of our menu items have a tobacco-juice base."

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"They're all weird and smart." Adam once held a Tech Club party at home; Nancy wrote to Peter, "It was nice to hear Adam talking to the other kids and everyone joking with him and treating him so well." But he didn't understand popularity, and once asked Peter, "Why do you need friends?"

Adam displayed what his father described as "the arrogance that Aspies can have." He wrote that he was "not satisfied if information related to me is not profound enough. I could not learn anything from the ninth grade history textbook because it did not explain events to a sufficient extent and did not analyze the implementations of the events." He went on to discount his parents' teaching, asserting that he had taught himself chemistry.

When Adam was fourteen, shortly after Ryan had left for college, Peter and Nancy took him to Yale's Child Study Center for further diagnosis. The psychiatrist who assessed Adam, Robert King, recorded that he was a "pale, gaunt, awkward young adolescent standing rigidly with downcast gaze and declining to shake hands." He also noted that Adam "had relatively little spontaneous speech but responded in a flat tone with little inflection and almost mechanical prosody." Many people with autism speak in a flat tone, and avoiding eye contact is common, too, because trying to interpret sounds and faces at the same time is overwhelming. Open-ended questions can also be intolerable to people with autism, and, when King asked Adam to make three wishes, he wished "that whatever was granting the wishes *would not exist.*"

King noted evidence of obsessive-compulsive disorder, which often accompanies autism. Adam refused to touch metal objects such as doorknobs and didn't like his mother to touch them, either, because he feared contamination. "Adam imposes many strictures, which are increasingly onerous for mother," King wrote. "He disapproves if mother leans on anything in the house because it is 'improper.' . . . He is also intolerant if mother brushes by his chair and objected to her new high heel boots, because they were 'too loud.' . . . If mother walks in front of him in the kitchen, he would insist she redo it." King was concerned that Adam's parents seemed to worry primarily about his schooling, and said that it was more urgent to address "how to accommodate Adam's severe social disabilities

in a way that would permit him to be around peers." King saw "significant risk to Adam in creating, even with the best of intentions, a prosthetic environment which spares him having to encounter other students or to work to overcome his social difficulties." And he concluded that Nancy was "almost becoming a prisoner in her own house."

Kathleen Koenig, a nurse specialist in psychiatry at Yale, gave some follow-up treatment. While seeing her, Adam tried Lexapro, which Fox had prescribed. Nancy reported, "On the third morning he complained of dizziness. By that afternoon he was disoriented, his speech was disjointed, he couldn't even figure out how to open his cereal box. He was sweating profusely . . . it was actually dripping off his hands. He said he couldn't think. . . . He was practically vegetative." Later the same day, she wrote, "He did nothing but sit in his dark room staring at nothing." Adam stopped taking Lexapro and never took psychotropics again, which worried Koenig. She wrote, "While Adam likes to believe that he's completely logical, in fact, he's not at all, and I've called him on it." She said he had a biological disorder and needed medication. "I told him he's living in a box right now, and the box will only get smaller over time if he doesn't get some treatment."

Paul Appelbaum, a forensic psychiatrist at Columbia, points out that many young men are asocial and unhappy, spend too much time online, become video-game addicts—but cause no harm. The few dangerous ones are impossible to identify. "Even if we knew who they were or were likely to be, whether they'd actually accept treatment is an open question. Among the hardest people to engage in treatment are young males who may be angry, suspicious, and socially isolated. Coming to a therapist's office for an hour a week just to pour their heart out doesn't seem like a particularly attractive opportunity, in general."

"Adam was not open to therapy," Peter told me. "He did not want to talk about problems and didn't even admit he had Asperger's." Peter and Nancy were confident enough in the Asperger's diagnosis that they didn't look for other explanations for Adam's behavior. In that sense, Asperger's may have distracted them from whatever else was amiss. "If he had been a totally normal adolescent and he was well adjusted and then all of a sudden went into isolation, alarms would go off," Peter told me. "But let's keep in mind that you expect Adam to be weird." Still, Peter and Nancy sought professional support repeatedly, and none of the doctors they saw detected troubling violence in Adam's disposition. According to the state's attorney's report, "Those mental health professionals who saw him did not see anything that would have predicted his future behavior." Peter said, "Here we are near New York, one of the best locations for mental-health care, and nobody saw this."

Peter gets annoyed when people speculate that Asperger's was the cause of Adam's rampage. "Asperger's makes people unusual, but it doesn't make people like this," he said, and expressed the view that the condition "veiled a contaminant" that was not Asperger's: "I was thinking it could mask schizophrenia." Violence by autistic people is more commonly reactive than planned—triggered, for example, by an invasion of personal space. Studies of people with autism who have committed crimes suggest that at least half also suffer from an additional condition—from psychosis, in about twenty-five per cent of cases. Some researchers believe that a marked increase in the intensity of an autistic person's preoccupations can be a warning sign, especially if those preoccupations have a sinister aspect. Forensic records of Adam's online activity show that, in his late teens, he developed a preoccupation with mass murder. But there was never a warning sign; his obsession was discussed only pseudonymously with others online.

Both autism and psychopathy entail a lack of empathy. Psychologists, though, distinguish between the "cognitive empathy" deficits of autism (difficulty understanding what emotions are, trouble interpreting other people's nonverbal signs) and the "emotional empathy" deficits of psychopathy (lack of concern about hurting other people, an inability to share their feelings). The subgroup of people with neither kind of empathy appears to be small, but such people may act out their malice in ways that can feel both guileless and brutal.

Autism is increasingly invoked in courtrooms as an argument for leniency, sometimes on the ground that the autistic person is confused about cause and effect—a befuddlement defense, as it were. Adam Lanza, however, clearly understood what he was doing. He destroyed one of his hard drives, and left behind an electronic spreadsheet on mass murder, and photographs of himself with a gun to his head. A recent

MANATEE

This is the way your life began to end with the words
"I don't feel so hot" but when I think of the red-eye

to Florida the plane wallowing in turbulence my memory
is not of you in a diaper gonged on morphine drifting

up out of sleep but a manatee approaching the window
in the underwater viewing chamber curious about us

transfixed behind the cloudy glass your granddaughters
gazing openmouthed having forgotten about you entirely

or is this the way you now loom up in memory whiskered
entranced in folklore thought to have once been human

—John Witte

study suggests that a lack of empathy may be connected to insensitivity to physical pain. Despite Adam's hypersensitivity to more minor irritants, this seems to have been one of his symptoms; his mother warned the school that he might not stop doing something because it hurt.

When I visited Peter, he produced four binders of printouts of his e-mails with Nancy and Adam since 2007. By 2008, when Adam turned sixteen and was going to school only for occasional events, Nancy's e-mails describe his escalating misery. "He had a horrible night. . . . He cried in the bathroom for 45 minutes and missed his first class." Two weeks later, she wrote, "I am hoping that he pulls together in time for school this afternoon, but it is doubtful. He has been sitting with his head to one side for over an hour doing nothing." Later that year: "Adam had a rough night. He moved EVERYTHING out of his room last night. He only kept his bed and wardrobe cabinet."

In the period that followed the decision to homeschool Adam, Nancy regularly asked Peter not to come when Adam was having a "bad day," but her correspondence shows no sense of crisis commensurate with the Yale assessment. Peter had begun to feel distanced by the intensity of Adam's relationship with Nancy, although he did not feel that the intensity was "by its nature problematic." His approach to parenting was as docile as Nancy's was obsessive. She indulged Adam's compulsions. "She would build the world around him and cushion it," Peter said. Adam had difficulties with coördination and, when he was seventeen, Peter told Nancy that he had had to pause to retie his shoes on a hike. Nancy responded in astonishment, "He tied his own shoes?"

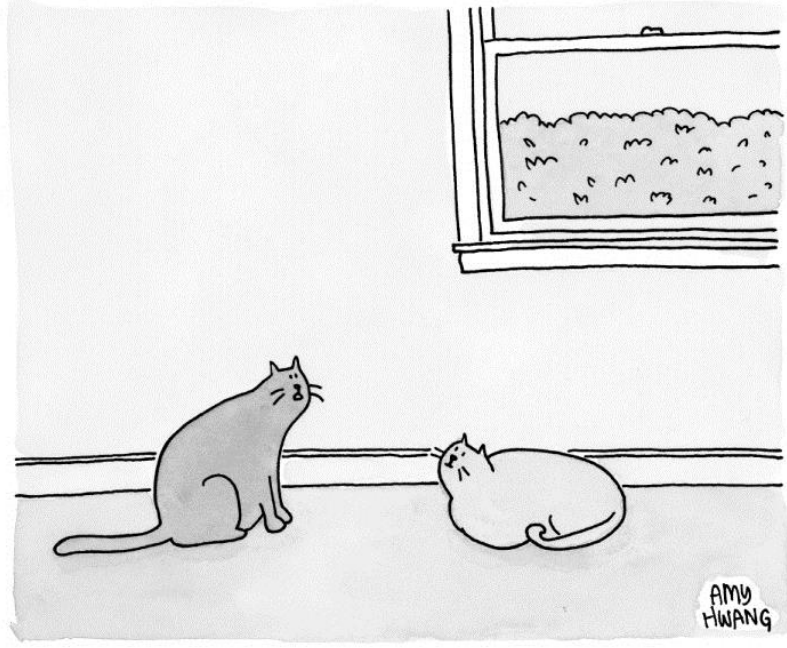
Adam's sense of humor endured. When he was sixteen, he found a picture of Karl Marx (huge beard), Lenin (small beard), Stalin (mustache), and Mao (clean-shaven), and sent it around with a caption, "Comrades, we must rectify the faltering facial hair standards." Peter thought it was hilarious and got T-shirts made with the image and Adam's words. Everyone tried to encourage Adam and looked for ways to engage with him. Nancy would take him on trips to the shooting range. Nancy and Peter thought that their son was nonviolent; the best way to build a connection to someone with Asperger's is often to participate in his fascinations.

All parenting involves choosing between the day (why have another argument at dinner?) and the years (the child must learn to eat vegetables). Nancy's error seems to have been that she always focussed on the day, in a ceaseless quest to keep peace in the home she shared with the hypersensitive, controlling, increasingly hostile stranger who was her son. She thought that she could keep the years at bay by making each day as good as possible, but her willingness to indulge his isolation may well have exacerbated the problems it was intended to ameliorate.

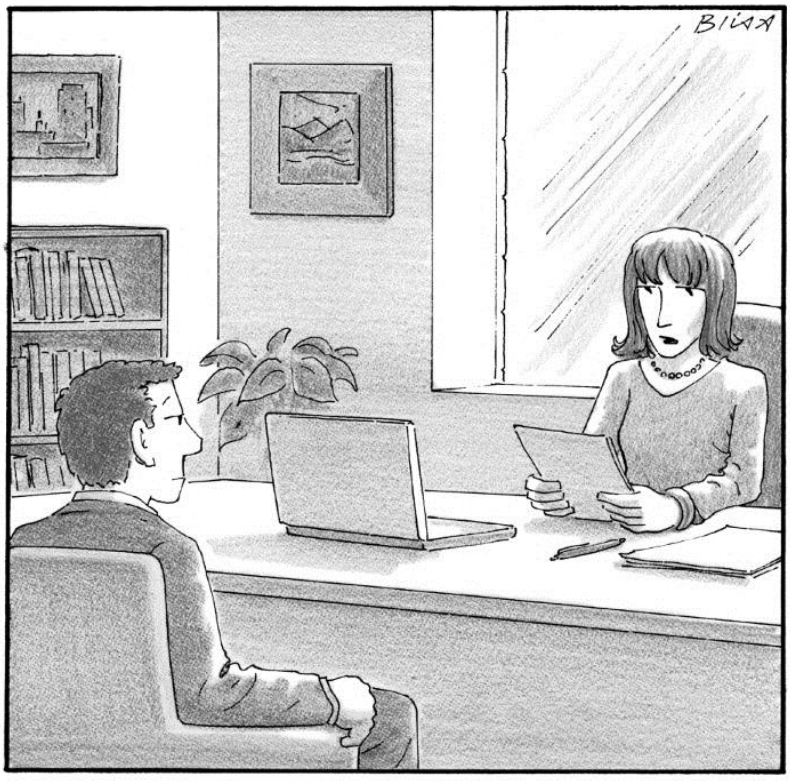
In the fall of 2009, the Lanzas finally divorced. One provision of the divorce was that Peter buy Adam a car. Peter bought him a Honda Civic and taught him to drive, and he told me that his son was "the most cautious driver on the face of the earth." Peter never worried about Adam's breaking rules of any kind. He did feel that Adam was losing interest in him, but the estrangement didn't strike Peter as ominous; he, too, had become alienated from his parents in late adolescence. "I had to give him space," Peter explained. "He'll get more mature; I'll just keep doing what I can, staying involved."

During that year, Adam developed his private obsession with killing. He started editing Wikipedia entries on various well-known mass murderers and seems to have been eerily well informed. But although there were still no outward signs of violent tendencies, he was becoming ever harder to deal with. Nancy wrote to Peter that Adam would sometimes close his door when she tried to talk to him.

Schoolwork often triggered a sense of hopelessness. "He was exhausted and lethargic all day, and said he was unable to concentrate and his homework isn't done," she wrote. "He is on the verge of tears over not having his journal entries ready to pass in. He said he tried to concentrate and couldn't and has been wondering why he is 'such a loser' and if there is anything he can do about it." He had been taking classes at Western Connecticut



"I can't decide whether to nap right now or in ten minutes."



"I can see from your résumé that you're a man."

• •

State University—for high-school credit—but he struggled there. "He wouldn't speak on the way home and had his hood completely covering his face," Nancy wrote one day. "He went straight to his room and won't eat. I gave him time alone to compose and have tried to speak to him twice now, but he just keeps saying, 'It does not matter' and 'leave me' 'I don't want to speak of it.' " Two months later, Nancy recorded his despair when faced with some coursework in German: "He finally and tearfully said that he can't complete the German. He can't understand it. He has spent hours on the worksheets and can't comprehend them."

Nancy wanted to take him to a tutor, but, she wrote, "Even ten minutes before we should leave he was getting ready to go, but then had a meltdown and began to cry and couldn't go. He said things like it's pointless, and he doesn't even know what he doesn't know." In early 2010, when Nancy told Peter that Adam had been crying hysterically on the bathroom floor, Peter responded with uncharacteristic vehemence: "Adam needs to communicate the source of his sorrow. We have less than three months to help him before he is 18. I am convinced that when he turns 18 he will either try to enlist or just leave the house to become homeless." Nancy replied, "I just spent 2 hours sitting outside his door, talking to him about why he is so upset. He failed every single test during that class, yet he thought he knew the material." Later that day, she wrote, "I have the feeling when he said he would rather be homeless than to take any more tests, he really meant it." Nancy said that Adam had been pretending to go to classes and passing his time in the library.

Adam always had aspirations beyond his abilities. His list of colleges started with Cornell, for which he clearly didn't have the academic record. Then he announced that he was going to enlist in the military when he turned eighteen, in April, 2010; he wanted to join the Army Rangers, an élite regiment. "What do you do?" Peter wondered. "You tell him, 'Adam, that's unrealistic'?" When the time came, Adam didn't sign up. Peter took Adam to visit Norwich University, which has a military program, but they concluded that Adam should take classes at Norwalk Community College, near Stamford, before attempting campus life anywhere. Adam wanted to take five classes, but Peter said it was more than he could cope with, and suggested two classes that they could work on together. Peter went to pick him up for a weekend visit, and Adam refused to go. Peter said, "Adam, we've got to figure out a system so I can work with you." Adam was angry. "I hardly ever saw him pissed, but he was pissed," Peter recalled. "And it was, like, 'I'm taking the five classes. I'm taking them.' " It was September, 2010: the last time Peter saw his son.

Earlier that year, Nancy had written, "He does not want to see you. I have been trying to reason with him to no avail. I don't know what to do." An e-mail that Adam sent Peter to get out of another meeting sounded innocuous—"I apologize for not wanting to go today. I have not been feeling well for the last couple of days"—but Nancy's updates painted a more fraught picture. "He is despondent and crying a lot and just can't continue. . . . I have been trying to get him to see you and he refuses and every time I've brought the subject up it just makes him worse," she wrote. Nancy surmised that Adam resented Peter's warning about the heavy course load.

Peter was frustrated but felt that he couldn't show up at the house in Newtown to force an encounter. "It would have been a fight, the last thing I'd want to be doing. Jesus. . . . If I had gone there unannounced and just, 'I want to see Adam.' 'Why are you doing this?' Adam would be all bent about me." Later, Peter remarked, "If I said I'm coming, she'd say, 'No, there's no reason for that.' I mean, she controlled the situation." Peter tried to remain conciliatory, and never introduced Adam to Shelley, suspecting that it would be more than he could handle.

(He did introduce her to Ryan, who had moved to New Jersey after graduating college.) He considered hiring a private investigator "to try to figure out where he was going, so I could bump into him." If he had, he might have discovered that Adam went regularly to a local movie house to play a game called Dance Dance Revolution, spending up to ten hours at a stretch listening to music and trying to keep up with complex dance moves on an illuminated platform. He was still doing so a month before the shootings.

I wondered how Peter had felt through this period. "Sad," he said. "I was hurt. I never expected that I would never talk to him again. I thought it was a matter of when." He asked, "How much do you accommodate the demands and how much do you not? Nancy tended to, as did I." Peter added, "But I think he saw that he could control her more than he could control me." Adam had also cut off communication with Ryan, whom he last saw two Christmases before the shootings. According to Peter, Ryan reached out several times, but Adam never responded. Peter and Shelley now suspect that Adam deliberately shut them out to hide his psychological decay. Peter said, "I didn't understand that Adam was drifting away."

By 2011, Nancy's messages had grown terse. Peter attributed this to his remarriage rather than to a change in Adam's condition. That October, a little more than a year before the shootings, she related that Adam "has been doing very well and has become quite independent over the last year. He is starting to talk about going back to school which would be nice." But the state's attorney's report notes that people who worked on the property couldn't enter the house and were warned never even to ring the doorbell.

In early 2012, Nancy said that Adam had agreed to see Peter in the spring, but nothing came of it. Nine months later, Peter protested that Adam never even acknowledged his e-mails. Nancy wrote, "I will talk to him about that but I don't want to harass him. He has had a bad summer and actually stopped going out." She said that his car had sat unused for so long that its battery was dead. She played down the significance of Adam's failure to answer his father's e-mails: "He stopped emailing me a year ago or so, but I assumed it was because he actually started talking to me more." However, the state's attorney's report suggests that Nancy's account was misleading: Adam had stopped speaking to his mother and communicated *only* through e-mail. "It bothers me that she was telling me he doesn't use e-mail at the same time she was e-mailing him," Peter told me. He thinks Nancy's pride prevented her from asking for help. "She wanted everyone to think everything was O.K."

As Adam's isolation deepened, Nancy's naïveté began to blur into denial. She started making plans to move with Adam, possibly to Seattle, although she didn't mention those plans to Peter. She had also suggested to a friend that she'd be living with Adam for a "very long time," a situation that could have been upsetting for a young man too set on independence to let his father help him with his coursework. Nancy's mixture of hovering appeasement and disregard for professional help now seems bewildering. Yet similar choices have worked well for others: some people with autism respond best to a mixture of laissez-faire and active indulgence.

Peter's final communication from Nancy, the month before the shootings, was about buying Adam a new computer. Peter wanted to give it to

Adam personally. Nancy said she'd discuss it with Adam after Thanksgiving. "I was doing everything I could," Peter said. "She was doing way more. I just feel sad for her." Peter is convinced that Nancy had no idea how dangerous their son had become. "She never confided to her sister or best friend about being afraid of him. She slept with her bedroom door unlocked, and she kept guns in the house, which she would not have done if she were frightened." About a week before the shootings, Nancy reportedly told an acquaintance, "I'm worried I'm losing him." But losing him seemed to be a matter of his withdrawal, not of violence. The cautiousness with which Nancy responded to her son's demands indicates anxiety rather than fear, and it must have made her as lonely as it did him.

Matricide is usually committed by overprotected boys—by a son who wishes, as one study puts it, "with his desperate act, to free himself from his state of dependency on her, a dependency that he believes has not allowed him to grow up." Another study proposes that, in each case examined, "the mother-child relationship became unusually intense and conflict-laden," while the fathers "were uniformly passive and remained relatively uninvolved." The state's attorney's report says that when Nancy asked Adam whether he would feel sad if anything happened to her, he replied, "No." A Word document called "Selfish," which was found on Adam's computer, gives an explanation of why females are inherently selfish, written while one of them was accommodating him in every possible way.

Peter does not think that Adam had any affection for him, either, by that point. He said, "With hindsight, I know Adam would have killed me in a heartbeat, if he'd had the chance. I don't question that for a minute. The reason he shot Nancy four times was one for each of us: one for Nancy; one for him; one for Ryan; one for me."

On the morning of December 14, 2012, Peter went to get lunch at work and found colleagues clustered around a television. Shocked by the developing news, Peter said, "Both my kids went to that school," and went back to his office. Then news reports mentioned that a twenty- and a twenty-four-year-old were involved (the ages of his two sons) and that the shooter had attended the school. Unable to get any work done, he drove home to watch the coverage. A reporter was waiting in his driveway, and told him that somebody at his house was involved in the shootings. Peter closed the door, turned on the TV, and saw

that CNN was identifying Ryan as the shooter. But he knew better, and called Shelley at work. She told me, "Peter said, 'It's Peter. I think it's Adam.' I didn't recognize his voice. And he just said it again: 'It's Peter, it's Peter, it's Adam.' And I still didn't understand him. And he said, 'I think it's Adam, it's Adam.' When it hit me, I screamed and started shaking violently."

As soon as she got home, they called Ryan and began the two-hour drive to his place, in Hoboken. Ryan had also left his office early; by the time he got home, the police had taped off his apartment building. Adam had been carrying Ryan's I.D., which had led to the confusion. Ryan approached the police with his arms up and said, "You're looking for me, but I didn't do it." He was taken to a police station, so Peter and Shelley headed there, too. They were questioned for a couple of hours and were made to wait for two more before they were allowed to see Ryan. They went to the home of an aunt of Peter's to regroup; they were shuttled to a hotel, then to Shelley's family's house and other safe houses, with a canine unit supplied by the police for security; they were interviewed by the F.B.I., the state police, and various local authorities. "We didn't even have clothes," Peter said. "I had to borrow my lawyer's pants." Eventually, they headed to New Hampshire to arrange Nancy's funeral, and had to evade a stakeout by news media, which wanted to cover it. I asked what they had done about a funeral for Adam. "No one knows that," Peter said. "And no one ever will."

Adam Lanza was a terrorist for an unknowable cause who committed three distinct atrocities: he killed his mother; he killed himself; he killed children and adults he'd never met before. Two of these acts are explicable; the third, incomprehensible. There are many crimes from which most people desist because we know right from wrong and are careful of the law. Most people would like to have things that belong to others; many people have felt murderous rage. But the reason that almost no one shoots twenty random children isn't self-restraint; it's that there is no level at which the idea is attractive. Since 2006, according to a *USA Today* study, there have been two hundred and thirty-two mass killings—meaning, more than four deaths apiece, not including the killer—in the United States. But fewer than fifteen per cent involved random, unknown victims.

The problem with generalities about mass murderers is that the sample size is tiny, and most die before they can be examined. Almost half of all mass murderers commit suicide in the act, and many others are killed by police. Indeed, Paul Appelbaum, the forensic psychiatrist at Columbia, views such cases as "suicides with murder as an epiphenomenon, rather than murders that happen to end in suicide." The opposite view is equally possible: Henry J. Friedman, a psychiatry professor at Harvard, has said that for these killers murderousness is "a primary rather than a reactive state," and that their "desire to end life early surrounded by an aurora of apocalyptic destruction" does not signal the "true depressive despair" typical of suicides. But, for Adam, killing others and suicide were both crucial. The link seems clear: the more Adam hated himself, the more he hated everyone else. Émile Durkheim, the great scholar of suicide, wrote that it can be "not an act of despair, but of abnegation." Adam abnegated humanity with his act.

Scientists are sequencing Adam's DNA to see if they can find anomalies that might explain what was broken in him. And yet, if someone has committed heinous crimes and is then found to have bad genes or a neurological abnormality, should we presume that biology compelled him? It's a circular argument that conflates what describes a phenomenon and what causes it. Everything in our minds is encoded in neural architecture, and if scanning technologies advance far enough we'll see physiological evidence of a college education, a failed love affair, religious faith. Will such knowledge also bring deeper understanding?

Legal definitions of insanity still focus on psychosis, the delusions of which are held to diminish responsibility. Medical conceptions include many additional bizarre behaviors, thoughts, and feelings. The legal definition has historically encompassed both questions of agency (he didn't know what he was doing) and morality (he didn't know that what he was doing was wrong). The psychiatric profession doesn't consider mass killers to be necessarily insane, which distresses Peter. For him, the crime defines the illness—as he said, soon after we met, you'd have to be crazy to do such a thing. He found the

"Who do we talk to about buying your planet?"

idea of Adam's not being insane much more devastating than the thought of his being insane. Peter has searched the psychiatric literature on mass killers, trying to understand what happened to his son. He came across the work of Park Dietz, a psychiatrist who, in 1986, coined the term "pseudocommando." Dietz says that for pseudocommandos a preoccupation with weapons and war regalia makes up for a sense of impotence and failure. He wrote that we insist that mass killers are insane only to reassure ourselves that normal people are incapable of such evil.

Crimes of passion are relational, whereas plotted crimes such as Adam's are unsocial. But the dichotomy isn't clear-cut; most crimes lie along a spectrum. So Sandy Hook was a culmination—neither sudden nor entirely calculated, at least until the very end. James Knoll, a forensic psychiatrist at SUNY, has written that Adam's act conveyed a message: "I carry profound hurt—I'll go ballistic and transfer it onto you." That's as much motive as we're likely to find.

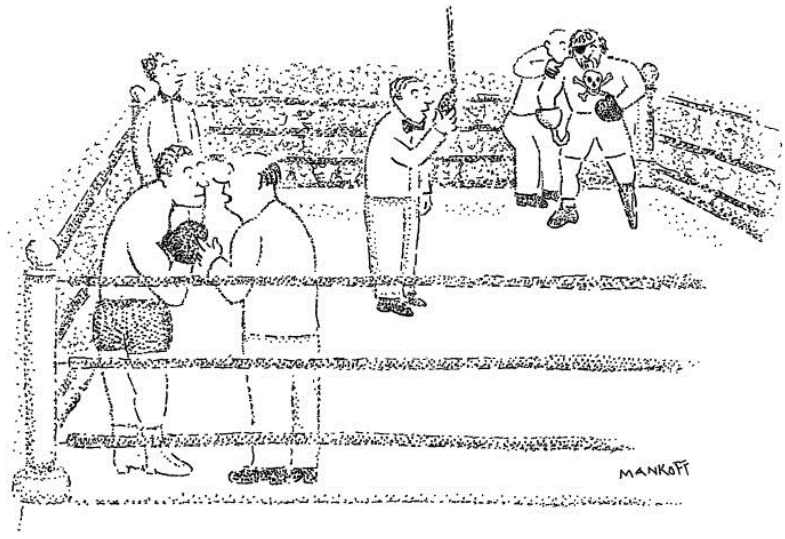
On the anniversary of the massacre, Peter and Shelley finally went through "the stuff," reading letters of support they previously hadn't felt able to face. Peter wanted the writers to know how much their words helped him. "There was a woman whose brother shot up a church," Peter said. "Killed a bunch of people and himself. Saying how sorry she is. There was a woman whose husband stabbed and killed a child. People having Masses said for Adam." Some included phone numbers and said to call if he needed anything. Other letters were peculiar: one suggested that Adam had been drugged by the C.I.A. and forced to his acts in order to foment support for gun-control legislation. The anniversary itself felt insignificant. "It's not like I ever go an hour when it doesn't cross my mind," Peter said when we met that day.

Peter has offered to meet with the victims' families, and two have taken up his offer. "It's gut-wrenching," he said. "A victim's family member told me that they forgave Adam after we spent three hours talking. I didn't even know how to respond. A person that lost their son, their only son." The only reason Peter was talking to anyone, including me, was to share information that might help the families or prevent another such event. "I need to get some good from this. And there's no place else to find any good. If I could generate something to help them, it doesn't replace, it doesn't—" He struggled to find the words. "But I would trade places with them in a heartbeat if that could help."

Peter told me, "I get very defensive with my name. I do not like to even say it. I thought about changing it, but I feel like that would be distancing myself and I cannot distance myself. I don't let it define me, but I felt like changing the name is sort of pretending it didn't happen and that's not right." But Peter has found the visibility hard. Old friends have been unflagging in their support, but Peter said he thought that he might never make new friends again. "This defines who I am and I can't stand that, but you have to accept it."

The last time I saw Peter, he had taken out a picture of himself at the beach with his two sons. "One thing that struck me about that picture is that it's clear that he's loved," he said. Peter has dreamed about Adam every night since the event, dreams of pervasive sadness rather than fear; he had told me that he could not be afraid of his fate as Adam's father, even of being murdered by his son. Recently, though, he had had the worst nightmare of his life. He was walking past a door; a figure in the door began shaking it violently. Peter could sense hatred, anger, "the worst possible evilness," and he could see upraised hands. He realized it was Adam. "What surprised me is that I was scared as shit," he recounted. "I couldn't understand what was happening to me. And then I realized that I was experiencing it from the perspective of his victims."

I wondered how Peter would feel if he could see his son again. "Quite honestly, I think that I wouldn't recognize the person I saw," he said. "All I could picture is there'd be nothing there, there'd be nothing. Almost, like, 'Who are you, stranger?' " Peter declared that he wished Adam had never been born, that there could be no remembering who he was outside of who he became. "That didn't come right away. That's not a natural thing, when you're thinking about your kid. But, God, there's no question. There can only be one conclusion, when you finally get there. That's fairly recent, too, but that's totally where I am." ♦



"Watch out for his right hook."

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NEWYORKER.COM/GO/OUTLOUD
A conversation with Andrew Solomon.

HEAVY WEATHER

Darren Aronofsky gets Biblical.

BY TAD FRIEND

Russell Crowe, crewcut and burly in a woollen shift, arrived on set, marched to the video monitors, and planted himself behind the director. A musk of cigarettes and resentment filled the air. It was 2:30 A.M. at Brooklyn's Marcy Armory, during an ice storm in November, 2012. The room temperature was fifty-eight, and Crowe, who plays the title character in Darren Aronofsky's Biblical epic "Noah," was scheduled to get really wet. He'd already shot a version of the scene outdoors, in slightly warmer conditions: Noah, soaked from the deluge, peers at a battleground where a barbaric army surges toward him, seeking shelter in his ark. But Crowe's eye line, the place his stare fell, had been too low, so now he had to do it all over again.

Aronofsky gazed at Crowe, waiting. His eyes, slightly narrow-set in a broad face, consider the world like a hypnotist's. *When I snap my fingers, you will wake and remember my entire film.* At forty-five, he can seem youthful, even delicate: he revisits every conversation that keeps him from sleeping and wears a scarf in all weathers, suggesting a susceptibility to drafts and auteur theory. But on set he is unwavering. "Russell doesn't like getting wet, and it's fucking cold," he'd just told me. "I don't want him to get sick, but"—he balanced scales—"I need the shot."

In his deepest, most Australian voice, Crowe said, "Now, just bear with the logic—the fighting out there isn't *real*." Almost all of the sixty thousand people he was supposed to be looking at would be created by computers later. "So you could just *move the fight*."

"The geography is very well established, Russell," Aronofsky said, summoning the flat vowels of his Brooklyn boyhood. "Thank you, sir."

Crowe stabbed a finger at the monitor: "You see how the rain makes my eyes roll back when I look up?" At the end of the shot, Noah watches a pillar of light soar to the heavens—the departing soul of one of the ark's defenders.

"We'll lower the rain," Aronofsky promised, intending no such thing. As he walked Crowe toward his mark on the ark's ramp, he was solicitous but firm, the manager of a luxury hotel guiding a volatile head of state to the elevator. Matthew Libatique, Aronofsky's longtime cinematographer and friend, observed, "You come in with big shoes as a collaborator? Darren will take your suggestions, but he's also going to give you a box the size of one shoe."

As the rain bars began to shower, Crowe mustered a penetrating stare. Worry and calculation and determination shone from his eyes—he was suddenly a star. Breaking off, he shouted, "Don't fucking do that to my eyes, all right, mate?" Aronofsky called to his crew, "Watch the eyes!," then told Crowe, "Great, great! But you do have to look up." The actor gritted his teeth and threw his head back, willing his eyelids open.

Crowe is just the sort of white-hot metal Aronofsky likes to beat in his forge. The director's characters stare at the sun, slice their faces with razor blades, stab themselves with mirror shards. He weeps every time he sees Cirque du Soleil, amazed at what the human body can do; he is the ringmaster of too much. Aronofsky shot his first feature, "Pi," the 1998 indie standout about a paranoid mathematician who ends up drilling a hole in his head, on black-and-white reversal film for its extremity of contrast; in "Black Swan," his deliberately overwrought 2010 melodrama, the heroine, a dutiful White Swan, must locate the passionate Black Swan within in order to dance "Swan Lake." The film seemed both stringently and pulpily uncommercial; Marco Müller, the director of the Venice Film Festival, where it débuted, called it "Bergman seen through a De Palma lens." Tom Rothman, then the chairman of Fox Filmed Entertainment, still seems both proud and astonished that he planted Aronofsky's I.E.D. in theatres: "It was a ballet film that's a horror film where the central character is psychologically very damaged—and dies at the end!"

The film's unanticipated success—it brought in nearly three hundred and thirty million dollars worldwide—gave Aronofsky access to new and dangerous toys. He had wanted to make the Noah story ever since he came to Hollywood. Now Paramount Pictures agreed to produce it, at a final cost of a hundred and thirty million dollars; the visual-effects budget alone was triple the entire cost of "Black Swan." No longer would a *succès d'estime* count as a success. Aronofsky says that when his friend David Blaine, the magician, heard about "Noah" 's budget, he warned him, "Don't take that much money from anyone—then it won't be yours anymore."

There were grounds for concern, because Aronofsky's vision was hardly the stuff of a standard studio epic. To begin with, the ark was not the jolly hulk of popular conception but a three-story, pitch-slathered pine box intended to resemble a coffin. The scenes on it, firelit and shot by handheld cameras, feel as intimate as a nine-figure film set on a three-hundred-cubit-long ark can. The script that Aronofsky constructed with his writing partner, Ari Handel, honored the Old Testament narrative—but that narrative is barely an elevator pitch. (Once the Lord takes against the creeping things and the fowls of the air, the rest is mostly rain.) So they added family strife, an epic battle, sci-fi—including pipe guns, six-armed fallen angels, and an explosive substance they called "tzohar"—and Darwinian evolution. When Noah tells his family the creation story, we see a time-lapse sequence of life morphing from amoebas to apes before,

Aronofsky, whose great strength is creating a tone that people haven't encountered before, wants his crowds squirming.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD BURBRIDGE

in a separate act, God creates man.

Paramount suggested that the film be shot in Hawaii or the Canary Islands. Aronofsky insisted on Iceland, and had his visual-effects team litter the flinty landscape with mine tailings, stacks of skulls, and metal artifacts that resembled David Smith sculptures. Aronofsky is a passionate environmentalist—in high school, he studied as a field biologist in Kenya and Alaska—and he told me, "There is a huge statement in the film, a strong message about the coming flood from global warming. Noah has been a silly-old-guy-with-a-white-beard story, but really it's the first apocalypse." His Noah, believing that God's message privileges animals over men, becomes a scourging Earth First! activist. When the film's characters call to the heavens for aid, all we see is lowering skies or wretches clinging to a crag before the swells wash them away. "It is," Aronofsky said proudly, "the least Biblical Biblical film ever made."

This was the director's attempt to emerge from the art house and join his contemporaries Quentin Tarantino, David Fincher, Paul Thomas Anderson, and Christopher Nolan as a mainstream visionary—and to show a Spielbergian touch with an epic. When Aronofsky worried that his film, "written by two not very religious Jewish guys," might be too existential for either a mass or a Christian audience, he was reassured by the fact that Paramount's vice-chairman, Rob Moore, a devout Christian, had said that he loved the script. Moore told me early in the production, however, "We'll position the film using the pedigree of the cast, the visual effects, and the action." In other words, Paramount wouldn't lean too heavily on what audiences actually respond to in Aronofsky's work: its stubborn, cussed Aronofskyness. Because how could it count on a crowd-pleaser from a director so suspicious of pleasure?

One of the challenges of turning the Noah story into a film is that the only conflict in the Biblical narrative is, implicitly, between Noah and God (whose impossible demands Bill Cosby famously answered with "Right. . . . What's a cubit?"). Aronofsky was more interested in the tribulations that the Bible elides: the anguish of all the people denied room on the ark. What if one of them did get aboard—and then tried to thwart Noah's plan? To deepen this tension, he and Handel played up the Biblical division of man into two teams: the descendants of Cain (wicked) and the descendants of Seth, including Noah's family (righteous).

Just after soaking Russell Crowe, Aronofsky turned to submerging Tubal-Cain, a minor Biblical figure whom he and Handel had turned into Noah's adversary. A warlord who murdered Noah's father, Tubal-Cain combines brutality and wounded bewilderment: why does God speak to Noah but not to him? He's played by Ray Winstone, a British character actor who is a master of the endearing thug. "Where Russell is an aikido opponent—you have to accept the force coming at you and work with it—Ray is a fun sparring partner," Aronofsky said. He put his arm around Winstone and explained the scene: Tubal-Cain is climbing the ark with an axe, trying to hack his way in, when the flood hits. "It's going to be 'Oh, shit, here comes the wave!' And then we're going to dump a whole fucking lot of water on you, and you look around, amazed—this is the end of the fucking world!—and keep chopping."

"When you want amazement or awe, it helps to silently work your lips," Winstone said, his words a Cockney blur. "I say 'cunnilingus.'"

"Beautiful!" Aronofsky said. After watching a take on his handheld monitor, he added an air mortar to the six buckets of water, so the actor would have to struggle to stay upright. Winstone, who got sunstroke and lost movement in his right arm during the filming, later told me, "I think Darren takes great pleasure in seeing you go through pain—you go again and again and again. He pushes you to the limit, looking for perfection."

After watching several more takes, Aronofsky told Matthew Libatique, the cinematographer, to get even closer. In dramatic moments, the director brings the lens in extremely tight. (Ellen Burstyn, the star of his second film, "Requiem for a Dream," told me, "I've never had anybody strap the camera on me before.") Aronofsky said, "The best invention of the twentieth century was the closeup. That you could put a camera right in front of Paul Newman's eyes and look into his soul changed storytelling." Once Aronofsky is in close, he turns the camera around to put us into his characters' heads. Since they're scrabbling to get out of them, this is a disturbing place to be. "Darren can portray the inner mind better than almost anybody," the studio head Harvey Weinstein said. "Whatever that character is feeling—the emptiness, the obsessiveness, the nightmarish—he gets it into *your* head."

When Aronofsky screened "Re-

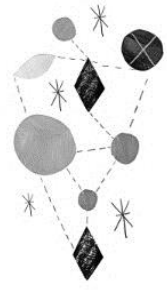
"Back when we were in college, and occasionally sleeping together, I never thought I'd be here, toasting you at your wedding to a woman."

quiem for a Dream"—a scarifying portrait of four addicts—at Cannes, in 2000, the audience's prolonged discomfort swelled into catharsis. One of his executive producers, Nick Wechsler, began laughing hysterically during the film's assaultive final barrage, which intercuts among the main characters as Harry has a gangrenous arm amputated, Ty is brutalized on a chain gang, Marion labors in a sex show to feed her heroin habit, and Sara convulses from electroshocks in a psych ward. When Aronofsky asked what Wechsler was laughing at, he pointed at the crowd: "Look what you're *doing* to those people!" The French audience rose for an ovation that lasted fifteen minutes, overcome by the film and delighted that they'd never have to see it again.

At the Armory, Aronofsky watched as Winstone practiced steeling his jaw. "Maybe it's two things," he suggested. "Disbelief at what's coming, and then defiance." "Fuck you, you motherfucking cunt, giving me two seconds to do all 'at," Winstone said. "I know you will amaze me," Aronofsky said, radiating belief. Cradling his monitor, he crept so close that he was almost in the frame. When the flood hit Winstone, Aronofsky's knees buckled, and then he surged up in unison with the actor, fighting back to life.

Aronofsky told me, "The closest I get to the unconscious is between 'Action!' and 'Cut!' When the actor is in the Michael Jordan zone, dunking high above the rim in super-high resolution, I become aware of what the camera is shooting without seeing my screen—I'm in the movie, feeling what the audience will feel." He laughed. "And then, after 'Cut!,' the reality of limited time and money floods back, and I think, Fuck, can I get another hit before I've got to leave?"

Aronofsky writes his films on the second floor of his place in Manhattan's East Village, at a custom-built desk of Bastogne walnut, inlaid with responsibly harvested macassar ebony and pink ivory. Twenty-five puzzles are concealed within it, cunning locks and springs and slides, and the front houses an octave of organ pipes you can play by sliding drawers in and out. As you solve the puzzles, you find hidden pieces of wood, each of which displays a few musical notes. When you put the pieces in order and play the resulting tune on the organ—an Irving Berlin song that was the first thing Aronofsky learned on the piano—it opens a secret safe: the final prize. It took him six weeks to pop the safe, and he had the plans. David Blaine told me, "The desk is a very cool thing that's a lot like Darren himself—there's always another twist and turn."

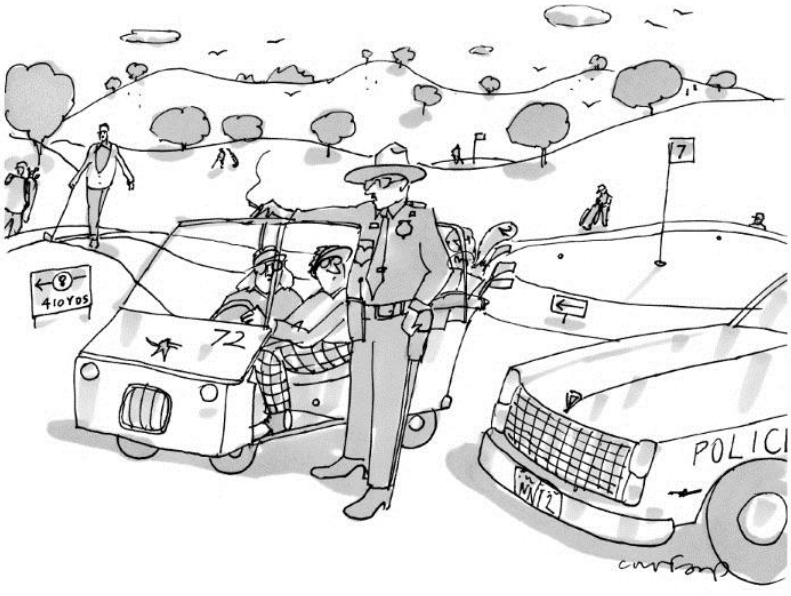


Aronofsky enjoys the all-access life: introducing a speech by the Dalai Lama, or having his friend Patti Smith write a lullaby for Russell Crowe to sing in "Noah." (Smith said she was so determined to meet Aronofsky's expectations that "I wrote like a hundred versions of this tiny little song.") But at his fortieth-birthday party the only celebrity present was the actress Rachel Weisz, who was then his fiancée. The room was filled by the friends he played Chinese handball with as a boy in Brooklyn's Manhattan Beach—a lawyer, a bar owner, and a gastroenterologist—and by members of his longtime production team, most of them friends from his college years at Harvard or from the American Film Institute, where he studied directing in the early nineties. (In an unconscious gesture of solidarity, Aronofsky's team often adopts his current hair style—recently a shaved head and a thick beard—as if someone were mass-grooming them using the magnetic Wooly Willy game.) "His films are all about one character who's very isolated—and that's the opposite of Darren," Ari Zablozki, the bar owner from the Manhattan Beach posse, said. "He needs people, interactions."

When Aronofsky interviewed the famously low-key Clint Eastwood for the Tribeca Film Festival, last year, he said, "You make it seem so easy—and for me filmmaking is pain. I'm in pain the whole time. I'm in pain writing, I'm in pain shooting, and I'm in pain editing, and I just—how do you do it?" Eastwood drawled, "If it was that painful, I would consider myself somewhat of a masochist." Away from the set, though, Aronofsky can experience a kind of withdrawal. In 1996, he wrote in his diary about going to a rave in Thailand: "The tide came in, the sun came up, everyone kept dancing; the tide went out, the sun went down, everyone kept dancing. I was miserable because I wasn't making films." Many of Aronofsky's characters seek to escape themselves through drugs, either dulling the pain or opening the doors of perception. (In the new film, Noah's vision of the ark is inspired by psychedelic tea.) When Nina, the rigid ballerina played by Natalie Portman in "Black Swan," finally loosens up after rolling on Ecstasy, the camerawork, too, strobes and skips and melts, and we're briefly having fun. "Darren's not a druggie at all—he's a nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn," Portman told me. "But he wanted me to try it before doing the scene. I said, 'Just tell me what it's like!' " So he did. When I mentioned Portman's recollections to Aronofsky, he assumed an expression of exaggerated rectitude. "I would never encourage Natalie to do drugs," he said. "Write that down. I think Google is an incredible research resource. C'mon, write that down."

Harvey Weinstein said that, on the basis of Aronofsky's films, "you'd expect him to be living in an attic with a door that someone shoves food under. But when he's not making a film Darren is the kind of guy—so much fun, with a great, hearty laugh—you'd go out for a beer with and talk about kids, girls, anything but psychological obsessions." On a recent vacation in Mexico, the director hid a rubber lizard under his older sister Patti's pillow. After she screamed, Aronofsky cried, "That makes up for the butter!" Forty years earlier, Patti had told him to open his mouth and close his eyes—then placed a pat of butter on his tongue. He never ate butter again, and is now a semi-vegan. When he must drive, he drives a Prius, an unusual model painted Habanero orange, but much of the time he navigates the city on a scooter. It keeps people off balance: "You're not a skateboarder, you're not a biker, you're not an asshole—they don't know how to deal with it."

It pleases Aronofsky that almost no one seems to like all his films. " 'Pi' was a cult experience for the young," he said. " 'Requiem' was big with film students and drug addicts. 'The Fountain' appeals



"I had you doing six in a five."

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to those who've dealt with a painful or unexpected death. 'The Wrestler' attracted people who relate to Randy's"—the hero's—"outsiderness, that soulful sadness. And I don't think the fans of 'Black Swan' are as committed. That's more of a straight-up piece of entertainment." He resists being overidentified with his biggest hit, and never revisits his old work: "My mentor, Stuart Rosenberg"—the director of "Cool Hand Luke"—"would say that watching your old films is masturbation. I did watch 'Requiem' later, because they turned it into a Blu-ray, and I thought, I do not know the person who made it—that's not me anymore."

In the mid-nineties, Aronofsky wrote down ten film ideas he wanted to pursue. All six of his films have come from that list, and all have been informed by his early years: the stress and the bloody toes his sister incurred in ballet practice became Nina's in "Black Swan"; his parents' cancer scares informed Izzi's cancer in "The Fountain." After he wrote a prose poem about Noah for his seventh-grade English teacher, Vera Fried, he got to read it over the P.A. system—"The rain continued through the night and the cries of screaming men filled the air"—and was transformed from a math geek into a writer. He rewarded Fried by giving her a walk-on in "Noah" as a one-eyed hag.

Yet whenever we were scheduled to visit his childhood home, near Coney Island, he'd disappear, sometimes for months. He worried that exposing his finite store of childhood imagery would sap its seminal force. "My parents will tell you my nickname was the Ostrich," he said. "I don't seem shy, but I am. Once you let all that stuff into the world, it no longer fully belongs to you."

The final shoot for "Noah," on a frosty late-November day in a meadow in Oyster Bay, Long Island, was a pivotal scene: the director's first explosion. Noah's eldest son, Shem, has built a raft to take his wife and leave the ark, preferring to brave the ocean than to remain with his increasingly genocidal father. Noah surprises them as they're about to board and hurls a fire bomb at their raft, then cuts it loose. As Aronofsky's special-effects crew soaked the raft with accelerants, he cried, "I love the smell of rubber cement in the morning!"

But arranging the pyrotechnics took hours, and blocking the scene for three cameras—for the first time, Aronofsky was using multiple cameras, to save time and money—took hours more. Aronofsky and Libatique, in matching black Arc'teryx parkas, wrangled with their customary intensity about the huge cranes overhead (in the shot? casting a shadow?). Even though Emma Watson, playing Shem's wife, and Jennifer Connelly, playing Noah's wife, had hot-water bottles under their gowns, they kept running to the heaters. Then the wave machine broke, and the raft wouldn't drop when Crowe cut the ropes, because the hidden cable that actually held it up wouldn't release. "This is a fucking ridiculous fucking shot," Crowe groused, stamping his feet on the ark's roof.

"Five hours in and no shot!" Aronofsky muttered. They hadn't even broken for lunch, and already the light was waning. He sprinted a hundred yards through the mud to the far side of the water tank that held the raft, checked the view through a boom camera, and had the raft raised a foot, so it would be perfectly centered in the frame. Then he ran back: "Two hours of daylight—let's go, let's go, let's go!" Douglas Booth, who plays Shem, announced, "This is Darren's Michael Bay moment!" Aronofsky gave him a wry look.

The director intended the explosion not as mindless spectacle (or not just as that) but as an illustration of the family's struggle to abide by divine command. As the raft burns, Shem cries to Noah, "I thought you were good. I thought that's why He chose you!" His father replies, "He chose me because He knew I would complete the task"—wiping out humanity. Filial tensions vibrate through the film; while Handel and Aronofsky were writing it, Handel became the father of two children and Aronofsky of one, with Rachel Weisz. (Aronofsky and Weisz's five-year engagement broke off in 2010, when she began seeing the actor Daniel Craig, whom she later married.) Aronofsky told me, "In the Bible, when Noah gets drunk and ends up naked, and Ham"—his middle son—"doesn't cover him and gets cursed, there's a lot of learned commentary about 'Did Noah sodomize Ham?' We didn't subscribe to that interpretation, and getting into it explicitly might have been too much for our PG-13 film"—he laughed—"but we kept that fractious dynamic."

Early in the film, when Noah refuses to find wives for his younger sons, Ham runs away. Once the deluge begins, Noah finds him frantically trying to remove an animal trap from the ankle of

a girl named Na'el, whom he hopes to bring along—even as Tubal-Cain's hordes are running to storm the ark. Noah grabs Ham and leaves Na'el to die. "That scene is the fulcrum of the movie—it's when Noah becomes the antagonist and we're almost rooting against him," Aronofsky told me. "And the studio was terrified of it. They wanted a moment of empathy." Paramount's Rob Moore said that the studio wanted to insure that "you'll feel like Noah has a singular focus on rescuing his son and that time is running out. You won't feel he *chose* to abandon her." Yet that wasn't how Aronofsky shot the scene—he doesn't give his characters excuses—or how Crowe played it. "Russell wasn't afraid of that moment, the way a lot of actors would be," Aronofsky said. "He was, like, No, that's my decision, forget about the girl."

On the set, Emma Watson, contemplating the prospect of a tzohar bomb going off ten feet away, murmured to Aronofsky, "Can we practice this?" He replied, "There is no practice. There's only"—he called to David Poole, his special-effects foreperson, "Dave, is this safe?" Poole replied, "I've done seventy-four movies." Aronofsky smiled at Watson and raised his arms in a benediction: *This is the world I have made, and it is good and beautiful and reasonably safe.*

Crouching in front of his bank of monitors, he murmured, "We've probably got one shot at this—forty-five people doing their jobs perfectly." On "Action!," Crowe hurled a beanbag representing the bomb, and the raft ignited so fiercely that the other actors started back. When Crowe cut the ropes, the raft dropped in synch, then drifted away, tugged by another hidden cable. Aronofsky watched the flaming scow, holding his breath, his eyes searching the frame as cameramen and actors hit their marks. "Fucking awesome, right?" he cried at last, his relief nearly epidural.

As the sun dipped behind the trees, he shook hands with the crew, saying, "Thanks for the day!" Then he told me, "O.K., one war is over. But you're going to witness the real war in post-."

In December, 2012, Aronofsky retreated to an editing suite near Union Square and began attacking a three-hour-and-six-minute assemblage of the film. As he talked his editor, Andrew Weisblum, through changes, trying to find a more direct and exciting path through a maze of more than seven thousand takes, he sometimes shuffled a deck of cards, pulling out the king of hearts and staring at it. He prides himself on constructing his stories so snugly that he's never done a day of reshoots, but there were clearly times when he longed to call everyone back into production. After they fiddled with a moment for an hour or two, he'd finally say, "Not terrible." Weisblum told me, "It's 'Good,' 'Not terrible,' and 'That sucks!' "

Aronofsky was dissatisfied with the early scene where the boy Noah sees Tubal-Cain kill his father, Lamech. "It's just too much information, too long," he said. "I could do something you hate," Weisblum offered. He made a few moves on his editing console: Noah sees his father on the ground, and then we jump cut—or "bounce in"—to a closeup of Lamech's lifeless head. Brash cuts were a trademark of Aronofsky's early work: in "Requiem for a Dream," he established his characters' compulsion to get high by repeating a rapid montage of teeth, cells, flame, bubbles, a syringe, a dilating eye, fumes, surging blood, and then a sigh of pleasure. He told me, "I was trying to get the idea of hip-hop sampling, which came from Brooklyn, into film—the power of the cut." But not this cut, now. "Dude, I hate it," Aronofsky said. "It works, but it's not pure, it's not the way the scene was conceived."

"It's punctuation," Weisblum argued. "The French call it *le cut Americain*. It's the direct result of shooting with multiple cameras."

Aronofsky watched the bounce-in again, squinting. "Leave the cut for now," he said, "and we can massage it a lot, later." In the end, the bounce-in stayed.

Over the months, the two men put black shades over the windows, and Aronofsky rolled his office chair ever closer to the screen. The primary sticking point was the battle scene, which featured the film's boldest conceit: the Watchers, angels whom God abandoned on Earth after they defied him by helping men. Aronofsky and Ari Handel had dreamed up these six-armed, sixteen-foot-tall creatures from a passing reference in Genesis to Nephilim, Hebrew for "giants." The Watchers lumber about encased in rock and tar, outraged by the descendants of Cain, who turned on them. Once Noah convinces them that he's from the righteous line of Seth, and that God has chosen him, they help him build the ark—and when Tubal-

"Let's look at projected earnings for the next quarter."

Cain and his army arrive they defend it with their lives.

Ben Snow, an executive at the effects house Industrial Light & Magic who served as the film's visual-effects supervisor, told me, "The studio wanted lions and tigers and was very resistant to the Watchers, to these giant beings that you have to explain." Aronofsky believed that if he could imbue them with dignity and suffering they'd become magnificent symbols of a degraded environment—outsized seagulls coated in oil. When he first watched the battle, though, it was twelve minutes and forty seconds long, and magnificence was far from view. Extras ran randomly through the rain, while stuntmen, perched atop football tackling sleds, swung sticks to simulate the swipes of the Watchers. "This is what's going to change the most," Aronofsky said, dolefully. "It should be six minutes, and kick-ass."

He still wasn't sure exactly how he wanted the Watchers to look: his early directive to the visual-effects team was "Stay away from the alien and go for a basic, six-armed, two-legged, some-type-of-head human." Aronofsky had never worked with computer graphics on this scale, where entire scenes are digitally constructed; now three hundred and twenty visual-effects artists, mostly from I.L.M., would create not only the Watchers but also his animals, his flood, and his heavenly emanations. A long pullback shot of some twelve hundred pairs of animals entering the ark set an I.L.M. record for processing hours: it would have taken one computer more than thirty-eight years to build. (Once the digital animals come to life, Noah and his family waft them into hibernation with magic smoke, removing any suspicion that Aronofsky might be pro-zoo or pro-adorableness.)

Three months later, the scene had been pared to eleven minutes, and the Watchers, in an intermediate state of realization, resembled crusty SpongeBobs. "Yikes!" Aronofsky said, after running the sequence. "They feel way too human in their movements. O.K.—we're going to film ballet dancers with yoga boxes taped to their arms and legs as a reference, to show how labored the movements should be. Because they ruined it. It's just dead." He was particularly concerned about the lead Watcher, the bearish Samyaza, who took his sufferings at the hands of men especially hard. "More emotion would help," he muttered. "It always does." He frowned when the Watcher dropped his war hammer and switched to hand-to-hand combat: "We need to see Samyaza's *decision* to start grabbing people after his hammer breaks. Maybe he leans in a bit and his eyes get brighter?" Working with actors was one thing, working with digital zeroes and ones another. "How do you make something made out of rock and tar and energy emote?"

A few weeks later, he sought help from his composer, Clint Mansell, when he came by to discuss the score. The two men have worked together since "Pi," and Mansell's dissonant, pile-driving chords are a hallmark of the director's work. They examined the scene where Noah's family, captured by the Watchers and flung into their prison pit, gets its first look at the strange and soon-to-be-awesome beings ringed above. Mansell said the Watchers theme should sound primitive, and Aronofsky agreed, adding, "We need sort of an Ornette Coleman, free-jazz—"

"—what-the-fuck?, sound-of your-own-mind-melting—"

"—Jimi Hendrix feedback time," the director said. "It should be tension-building, fear-evoking, and mind-expanding."

Mansell nodded gravely: "I'll just dip into my tension-building, fear-evoking, mind-expanding palette of sounds."

Aronofsky fell into a brown study. "When Eric"—Watson, Aronofsky's former producer—"saw 'The Wrestler,' he said, 'Cut the first twenty minutes, because there's no story.' It's the issue with all my films, because we're setting up a world. Right now, the beginning is slow, the first twenty minutes, but after we get to the ark it's great—right?"

"If there's anything we can do to make your stay more pleasant, just rant about it all over the Internet."

Aronofsky has two traits that alarm studios. Though he is organized, conscientious, and fiscally responsible, he is also incorrigibly rampageous. In "Black Swan," he shot Natalie Portman on a subway heading to Queens, at 3 A.M., without acquiring the requisite permits or even waiting for her contract to get signed. So it's impossible to persuade him to adopt the studio mind-set—to persuade him, for instance, that a film should have a happy ending.

The other, related problem is that he insists that the audience come to him. Studios test films to make sure that people are comfortable with them; Aronofsky, whose great strength is creating a tone that people haven't encountered before, wants his crowds squirming. When "Black Swan" was tested, he told me, "Fox

used the scores to attack me with notes. They wanted me to cut the bird-legs thing"—the freaky moment when Natalie Portman's legs become swan legs and then snap backward—"and the gore of Winona Ryder stabbing herself in the face. It was the best stuff in the film!" Aronofsky refused to make the suggested cuts, and argued with Claudia Lewis, the president of production at Fox Searchlight Pictures. Lewis understood that these disputes were intensified by Aronofsky's longing to connect. "Darren has unabashed braggadocio about his work," she told me. "But fiery conversations with him often end up in a quieter, more introspective yearning for understanding."

In March of last year, Aronofsky screened his rough cut of "Noah" for Paramount and its funding partner, New Regency Productions. It was two hours and forty-six minutes long, filled with half-realized effects, and had only twenty minutes of music. Clint Mansell urged him to include additional "temp music," borrowed from other films, to help sell the experience. "Darren said absolutely not," Mansell told me. "He's more comfortable with other people feeling uncomfortable with the film than with him feeling uncomfortable with it."

After the screening, Aronofsky said that the performances and the story had gone over well, and that the executives had only a handful of concerns: "So, over all, a big win." Paramount's Rob Moore told me, "Though there were a lot of rough parts, we had no question that this was a compelling movie." Arnon Milchan, the head of New Regency, told Aronofsky that the film had made him weep.

Then, in August, at a test screening in suburban Phoenix, the audience responded equivocally. Paramount, which had the right of final cut, asked for some radical changes before the remaining three test screenings. The idea was to see if the studio could placate the audience that had flocked to Mel Gibson's "The Passion of the Christ"—the twenty-nine per cent of Americans who, the studio's research said, consider themselves evangelical or "Bible-minded"—even if that meant making the film less faithful to Genesis and more faithful to people's sentimental recollections of Genesis. What if Noah, who gets drunk in the Bible, stayed sober? What if Ham, who gets cursed in the Bible, had a more upbeat character arc? Moore told me that the audience had no problem accepting the extra-Biblical introduction of Tubal-Cain as a warrior king, or with his leading an attack on Noah. "What makes the movie compelling as a piece of art is Tubal-Cain's need to get on the ark," he said. "But enough people had problems with him stowing away, sharing the ark with Noah's family, that we had to test the film without that element—which Darren absolutely did not believe in."

Aronofsky told me, "I don't give a fuck about the test scores! My films are outside the scores. Ten men in a room trying to come up with their favorite ice cream are going to agree on vanilla. I'm the Rocky Road guy." He added, "Problems with pacing, motivation, character development I would listen to. But I can't respond to 'Why do innocent people get slaughtered in the battle?' They were trying to change the DNA of the project they had green-lit. I said to them, 'What are you chasing? Russell Crowe is a brooding guy in every scene—that's the movie.' "

Paramount assured him that this was standard process with big-budget films. "With a film like 'World War Z,' " Moore said, "our screenings of it really changed the DNA of it for the better, from a very dark film to one where the third act offered the hope that people wanted to leave the theatre with—and the director came around and agreed with us." (The director, Marc Forster, said that he wanted to change the ending even before he shot it.)

When Aronofsky refused to make the suggested edits, Paramount began putting together its own versions of the film. Arnon Milchan said, "It wasn't the studio against Darren—nobody took the movie away from him—but when you're spending a quarter of a billion dollars, including marketing costs, you have to think about marketing to a wide audience. And because Darren closed himself, and said 'I'm not going to do anything other than my vision,' Paramount had to try stuff in a heavy-handed manner."

In 2006, when Aronofsky met Mickey Rourke for lunch in Manhattan's meatpacking district to pitch him on playing the lead in "The Wrestler," the aging fighter Randy (the Ram) Robinson, they were both at a low ebb. Rourke had no money and no career; Aronofsky was finishing "The Fountain," a troubled film that ended up as a total bomb. And yet, Rourke recalls, "within thirty seconds he started reading me the riot act. He said, 'You blew *this* part, and you never should have done *that* part, and everybody's afraid to work with you—everyone except me. I want you for this role, because Randy had everything, and he threw it away, just like you.' " Aronofsky had conditions: he told Rourke that he could be nominated for an Academy Award, but only "if you do your work." And, Rourke recalls, he said, " 'You can never fuck with me. O.K.? Never, ever fuck with me!' He's an old-style Jew gangster, and that's why a lot of actors are afraid of him, because he won't back down. And at the end of this tirade he goes, 'And I can't pay you.' " (Rourke got a salary of a hundred thousand dollars and asked to receive a portion of it in a brown paper bag.) Rourke admits that he inclines to laziness, but says that Aronofsky refused to allow it. "He'd pull me aside and say, 'You can do better. I need one more.' And then, 'You're still holding out—just one more.' During the shoot, he'd call the bartender at the place I liked to go at 1 A.M. and ask to speak to me. 'How many drinks have you had?' 'Come on, Darren—' 'One drink—*one*—and then go home. I'm going to call back in fifteen minutes.' "

"The Fountain," which came out seven months after the two men met, was Aronofsky's favorite film to that point. It was an ambitious epic that snaked among three time periods: in the present, Izzi (Rachel Weisz) is dying of cancer, so her lover, Tom (Hugh Jackman), searches for a cure, in mystic communion with his alter egos in the Mayan world and in the future. Or something like that. A version starring Brad Pitt had shut down in preproduction, in 2002, after Pitt withdrew, citing script issues—Hollywood code for "This doesn't make any sense, and I'd rather go star in 'Troy.' " Dan Schrecker, Aronofsky's roommate at Harvard and his longtime visual-effects supervisor, said, "It was a drug movie. If you try to figure out what the bald guy in pajamas is doing in the soap bubble with the tree, you're going to be confused." Aronofsky told me, "I was

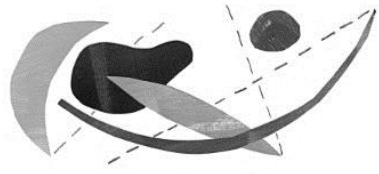
reading a lot of Krishnamurti, and what came out, Eric Watson"—his producer—"said, was 'a love poem to death.' And I realized I expected it to make money!"

There had always been a danger that Aronofsky could go the way of Jean-Jacques Beineix after "Diva" or John Dahl after "Rounders"—that his devotion to montage and striking compositions, and his refusal to let his sense of humor leak into his work, would make him merely the world's best student filmmaker. "The reception of 'The Fountain' was really, really rough on Darren," Aronofsky's agent, Bryan Lourd, said. "If he were a different person, he'd have drifted toward a safer project, like a superhero movie. But he kept himself vulnerable." Aronofsky decided to keep portraying talented mortals called to self-annihilation, but—as he split with several of his usual collaborators—to film them in a looser, more handheld, more improvisational way. He would shift from playing Baroque harpsichord to leading a jazz quintet. "Early on, I was very observant of film's rules," Aronofsky told me. "Now I realize that audiences don't care about that. They just want stories." He added, "My whole thing is that the story dictates the visual style, as opposed to Alejandro Jodorowsky or Wes Anderson, where their strong style is part of every story they tell."

Early in Aronofsky's career, the shot—the elements in the frame—was what he cared about. Because he had only one camera on "Pi," with its budget of sixty thousand dollars, he kept all the other characters' eye lines tight to Max the mathematician, so it felt as if the whole film were seen from his point of view. This subjectivity was enhanced by using a "heat-cam," which created ripples of body heat in front of the lens, and a "vibra-cam," which shook to represent Max's seizures. Aronofsky didn't trust omniscience, the God's-eye point of view.

He also didn't entirely trust his actors. Sean Gullette, a college friend, played Max and helped Aronofsky develop the story. "Darren was very tough," Gullette said. "There was a scene where I had to smash a cow brain in a sink, and it was foul and rotten and going to get all over my face, and I was cursing the crew as incompetent. Darren walked up and whispered in my ear, 'You going to be a pussy now? I thought you were tough.' I cursed him out in front of everyone, called 'Roll' myself—and did exactly what he wanted."

While making "Pi," Aronofsky took acting classes in the Meisner method. The other students were trying to open themselves to impulse; Aronofsky wanted to become unself-conscious enough to cry in class. The day he did,



he said, "that's the day I quit. I was never interested in being an actor—I wanted to learn how to speak to them." On "The Wrestler," he began to plan his shots after rehearsing rather than before—to capture instead of to ordain. Aronofsky had become an actor's director, yet he didn't relinquish his mordant edge. Rourke's Randy Robinson was so lovable that you naturally expected him to have a "Rocky II"-like triumph, or at least a "Rocky I"-like triumph of the human spirit. You didn't expect to see a doctor yank out staples gunned into his flesh during a match, leading to a near-fatal heart attack. And you certainly didn't expect to see him essentially commit suicide by leaping back into the ring.

Natalie Portman, who won an Academy Award for her performance in "Black Swan"—where she, too, commits suicide in an aesthetically pleasing way—told me, "Darren was much gentler with the actors than with anyone else on his set; there was an almost paternal love. Usually, a director hates himself and projects that onto the male actor and is fighting him the whole time, and then treats female actors as an avatar. You're either 'The woman I wish women would be like' or 'The woman I hate women for being like.' With Darren, it's not a dream version or a projection; it's just a character."

That kind of clear-eyed care elicits tremendous loyalty. Rourke, who was indeed nominated for an Academy Award, said, "There was a move I had to do, a scissors kick around a guy's neck, and I just couldn't get it. I could have had the stunt guy do it, but I wanted to do it for Darren, to impress him. I would practice on all my time off. When I nailed it, first take, it was the most proud moment I've had in a movie, ever."

When I asked Aronofsky about Rourke's recollection, he gave a rueful shrug. "I didn't necessarily want it," he said. "It was (a) dangerous and (b) out of character—it was a young man's bump. Also, it's not perfect. If you look at it closely, there's a little telegraphing from both of them that it's coming. I have the curse of seeing those tiny mistakes very clearly. If I could stand a lonely room I'd be an editor." Rourke said, "I feel for Darren—he doesn't make life easy for himself. He's always looking for the perfect acorn. And there is no perfect acorn."

After six months of delays, Aronofsky took me to Coney Island. His tour included a spin on the bumper cars at Eldorado, where "guys would jack you for your quarters"; lunch at Totonno's, whose coal-oven pizza he declared the city's best; and a visit to the handball courts, where he shouted, "You gotta love this smell!"

"Briny and sort of decayed?" I said.

"It's dead rat, is what it is."

Then we went to see his childhood home, in Manhattan Beach, a few miles to the east. He recoiled at its new fake-fieldstone siding: "Jesus Christ, it is ugly! That's not my house. No, it must be, because of this gingko tree." The tree had heaved aside both sidewalk and telephone lines: "Look how great this fucking bad-ass gingko grew up!"

As a child, Aronofsky was watchful, "a slow, thoughtful eater," his older sister, Patti, recalls. "We'd sit down to dinner at 5:30 P.M., and Darren would still be wrapping up when prime-time TV started." Aronofsky's parents, Abe and Charlotte, who were public-school teachers, noticed that he was an extra-credit sort of boy. When they took their children to look at a new house, Charlotte recalls, "Patti said, 'Look at all those kids, I'll have a great time playing with them.' " Abe took over the story: "And Darren, who was four, said, 'You see those things coming off the roof?' "—meaning the drainpipes. " 'Where does all the water go to?' "

Aronofsky was the first of the Manhattan Beach posse to get a computer, the one who introduced Dungeons & Dragons: a nascent ringleader. In second grade, he and Eric Cohen created Monster Club, where they'd draw strange creatures—Aronofsky came up with Brick Man, who shot cement—and outline their origin myths. One of the unmade films in the director's decalogue is about the Manhattan Beach posse, with Monster Club in a starring role.

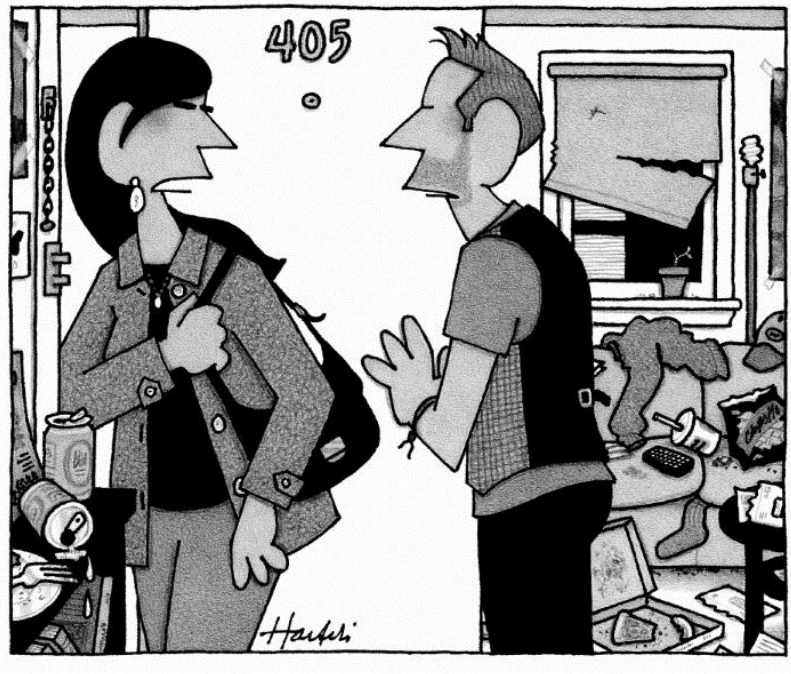
Aronofsky understood that his childhood might not seem particularly unusual to anyone else; what mattered was that it continued to strike him as extraordinary. As a kid, he'd loved the way his neighborhood nestled between the mean streets of Sheepshead Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, loved navigating the local "Saturday Night Fever" culture and hip-hop culture, loved the safety amid the danger. He told me, "A lot of kids I grew up with became brokers for guys like Jordan Belfort"—the model for Martin Scorsese's "The Wolf of Wall Street"—"and a lot got caught up in crack. Brooklyn was just more extreme—everyone's outcomes were polarized." Later, studying social anthropology at Harvard, Aronofsky was known as the guy with the Brooklyn accent, representing rough but authentic.

Abe and Charlotte intended their son to be a doctor, but artists hatch from a cuckoo's egg. In high school, Aronofsky haunted the local Video on the Bay, burning through all the Fellini and Kurosawa; it troubles him, as a matter of karma, that he still has a VHS copy of the long-defunct store's "La Dolce Vita." He loved "Breaking Away," too, his sister said: "He had a passion for those character-persevering, happy-ending type of movies, which is funny, because he doesn't really do happy endings." When Aronofsky began making films at Harvard, he said, "I noticed that I'd rather be in the edit room than with my girlfriend—that my passion was for a great cut." His parents were gamely supportive, but Charlotte told me, "Honestly, a movie director? Not on my list."

In the summers, Aronofsky spent much of his time on Coney Island's Cyclone, the rackety wooden roller coaster built in 1927. He led me to it, then cried "Bawk, bawk!" when I declined to go aboard. "Everything about myself as a filmmaker is only understandable by going on the Cyclone," he said. "That minute and fifty seconds is unlike any other ride in the world—eight people have died on it!" (Or three.) "We would go on it sixty or seventy times a day, until we were black and blue and passing out from the hysteria—my friend Ross lost his shoes and didn't realize it until we were a block away." Gazing up at the wooden labyrinth, he said, "The lesson is, never bore an audience. The Cyclone gave you at least four types of excitement: the suspenseful build, as the slow, ancient motor ratchets you up that first hill; the Oh-my-fucking-God-I-can't-believe-I'm-on-this-thing as you descend that first vertical, where the back car can whip off the track; the painful, shattering turns; and the bumpy thrill at the end, where you come in super fast and stop sharp and can't believe you survived."

By the fall, Aronofsky had no idea whether he would emerge as the author of "Noah." Paramount had added a fifth test screening in December, again in suburban Phoenix. "It's a war of attrition," he told me. "By mid-January, picture has to lock, and either we win or we lose." He looked at his watch, and remarked, "I've been engaged a year." He had proposed to his girlfriend, a Canadian film producer named Brandon Milbradt, during Hurricane Sandy. "I've gotta do something about that. It's hard when you're in post-."

As he waited anxiously, he trimmed the film to two hours and ten minutes, and the battle to a relatively crisp eight. In mid-November, he spent a long day at the San Francisco offices of Industrial Light & Magic, giving notes on two dozen visual effects. In a conference room, he looked at the cities and mines that I.L.M. had overlaid on a landscape he'd shot in Iceland. "There should be more toxic runoff," he said. "Major blood trails and cattle effluent. And we need more human grid work in the shot, so it's clear this is all because of *us*." When he saw a flashback shot of the Watchers emerging from the mud after they plunge to Earth, he said, "I'm not asking for an animation change"—Paramount was watching the budget—"but could we get a feature in there, an open, screaming



"Call me when you've learned how to have an adult relationship with your apartment."

mouth?" He whipped his head back and forth in simulated agony.

He showed the visual-effects team a new opening that he and Andrew Weisblum had devised, with title cards that explained the Watchers and laid out the "Cain people bad / Seth people good" dynamic. For the first time, Aronofsky had shown a rough cut of his work to a number of other artists, and both the director David Fincher and the writer Michael Chabon had urged him to establish the rules of his genre-bending world early—a move that Paramount applauded. Musing aloud, he said, "The problem is, it's a hundred-and-twenty-five-million-dollar film. The way I do it is let the audiences be detectives and figure out what's going on. But here we're just bluntly saying, 'These are the good guys, these are the bad guys, this is a fantasy film taking place in a mythical quasi-Biblical world.' Aesthetically and stylistically, it's not clean, but"—he balanced scales—"narratively it allows people to relax and understand what they're going to see."

Ben Snow, from I.L.M., showed Aronofsky the most kinetic moment in the battle. Four months earlier, at a meeting in New York, the director had told I.L.M., "Samyaza's three arms in the back are doing nothing—we need a whole other layer of digi-double people flying out like knee-high grass from a lawnmower as he throws and crushes. And I like the idea of a stunt arm that's a point that could just be squashing people on their heads, like a kid squashing ants." Now here it was: an entirely composited scene of a Watcher whirling and stamping and clubbing and kicking and smiting about twenty digital humans. "That's fucking gory!" Aronofsky said. With a measure of chagrin, he added, "So why do I have to go to the set anymore? Next time, can't I just show up here and see what you've done?"

In December, Paramount tested its least Aronofskian version of "Noah": an eighty-six-minute beatitude that began with a montage of religious imagery, ended with a Christian rock song, and skipped the whole middle, the dramatic part of the drama comprising Tubal-Cain's bloody machinations and Noah's turn against his family. Rob Moore explained, "Most people do have a sense that the Noah story is a short, happy journey where Noah rescues mankind and the animals. They're not thinking, All but eight people die." So if that cut had tested strongly, Moore said, "who knows what would have happened?"

Yet neither that version, nor any of Paramount's others, scored higher than Aronofsky's rough cut had in August. Arnon Milchan, Paramount's funding partner, said, "Darren was probably afraid that the studio's version would look like 'Pretty Woman' and test like 'Free Willy.' But the other tests confirmed that you can't reinvent the movie that Darren did. Once you lose the texture of his 'Noah,' the moral complexity, all you have is a sweet little Hollywood movie that you could make for twenty million dollars." So Paramount declared victory and surrendered the field. In February, Aronofsky told me, "The process sucked." But, he added, with a renewed strength born of surmounting an affliction, "I don't know if you can find another over-a-hundred-million-dollar movie that didn't have reshoots. And, at this point, Paramount ninety-eight-per-cent supports everything I want in the movie. So I live and die by this version, and take full responsibility."

The studio, stuck with a film that had scope and brawn and intensity (and one that, perforce, had a happy ending), began to put its marketing power behind it, advertising "Noah" during the Super Bowl and the Olympics. In response to the test screenings—and to some unrest in the Christian community, gleefully exacerbated by the Hollywood trade papers—it took care to introduce Tubal-Cain in its ads, and put a label on all its marketing materials, warning that "artistic license has been taken" and that "the Biblical story of Noah can be found in the Book of Genesis." The ads also omitted the Watchers, presented Noah as a beefy Gandalf, and gave no hint of the film's ineradicably indie soul.

For even as Aronofsky began the film by spoon-feeding the audience the rules of his genre-bending world, he had Clint Mansell unfurl a jarring, nearly hostile D chord—repeated throughout

"And you thought it was so easy just to ignore me on the subway."

the film—that suggested the yawning gates of Hell. "It's like Black Sabbath," Aronofsky told me, as he supervised the recording. Mansell added, "Black Sabbath was from horrible Birmingham, England, and it got its sound because its guitar player, Tony Iommi, cut off his fingertips on a lathe as a boy, so he has to"—he mimed snapping a gnarled fist across a guitar's neck. "I wanted that atmosphere of foundries and smog and no fingertips."

In a final bit of character work, Aronofsky flew to Los Angeles to record Nick Nolte as the voice of Samyaza. He'd called Nolte twice to discuss the role, but never heard back, so he wasn't entirely sure the actor—he of the dishevelled mug shot—would show. Nolte arrived at the studio in Santa Monica only fifteen minutes late. He came in slowly, a heavy man now, at seventy-three, his blue oxford shirt billowing over his pants like a caftan. Aronofsky introduced himself and explained Nolte's first scene, when the Watchers discuss what to do with Noah and his family in the pit, and an embittered Samyaza declares, "Leave them here to rot."

"I know that pain," Nolte said, "because the Watchers have got no purpose—and I understand that." After rumbling through some vocal exercises, he exploded into character, becoming a roaring bull elephant. Then he tweaked his delivery to add every nuance that Aronofsky proposed: more disgust, a heightened formality, a disenchantment with mankind.

Aronofsky raced into the control room and cried, "How fucking talented is that guy? God damn! He's giving us character *and* emotion, which is what was missing. I might have to write a movie for him. Oh, it's a shame—he's had more work than Mickey, but he hasn't done enough. It's so heartbreaking."

After a rest, Nolte told an involved story about a small role he had in "Run All Night," a forthcoming film starring Liam Neeson. "Wow," Aronofsky said, when the story appeared to be over. "So who's the director?"

"No idea," Nolte said.

Aronofsky laughed. "I hope you remember my name tomorrow. It's Darren, by the way. *Darren*." Then he led Nolte through the rest of Samyaza's lines, pulling out shadings of wonder and fury and anguish. Patches of sweat bloomed on Nolte's back, and soon he was soaked. "So this is your death in battle," Aronofsky said. "You have a glorious death—Ray Winstone kills you." As Nolte watched the scene, the director had him attack his dying line: "My creator, forgive me!" "Try begging," Aronofsky suggested. "Great, faster." After Nolte had played a full octave of choices, the director said, "One last one—everything you've got left. Beautiful!"

Nolte, gasping, seemed overcome. "Maybe I'll get forgiven," he said shakily.

"You O.K.?" Aronofsky said, taking his arm. "It's just acting."

"Lying for a living, Marlon called it," Nolte said, bent double.

Aronofsky had what he needed, but he said, "Let's do a war cry—but don't blow it out, don't destroy yourself. Not yet, not until I've got everything." He smiled conspiratorially at Nolte, who grinned crookedly back. After several war cries, Aronofsky said, "Here we go—you're speared, here's your death." Nolte emitted an astonishing squeal of pain and surprise. Aronofsky applauded and said, "Wow! I've never heard a sound like that out of you."

"Neither have I," Nolte said. "You make me twenty years younger."

Aronofsky asked for "ten or fifteen hits of pain, for when you get shot and then stabbed—the pains of sharp impact, and then a deep pain." Nolte complied, trailing off in a series of bloody gasps. "I've lost my lower register," he said, clearing his throat in a vain effort to regain his Tobacco Road pitch. Then he said, "Hepburn told me artists shouldn't marry."

"Each other?" Aronofsky said.

"No. Other people. They love what they do—"

"—but not each other," Aronofsky said.

"No," said Nolte, who has been divorced three times. "I'm afraid not. We don't."

Aronofsky considered this idea, then shrugged it off. "I have to do one more war cry, just so I can feel that again," he said. He stood facing Nolte, barely beyond his microphone. When Nolte roared, Aronofsky leaned in to elicit even more aggression. They stared at each other, unblinking, inches apart, as Nolte drew out his growl, on and on and on. Aronofsky gave him a sweaty hug and said, "That I'll take to my grave." ♦

"If somebody's listening to this conversation, I need a job."

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THE RELIVE BOX

T. CORAGHESSAN BOYLE

ILLUSTRATION BY JULIEN PACAUD

Katie wanted to relive Katie at nine, before her mother left, and I could appreciate that, but we had only one console at the time, and I really didn't want to go there. It was coming up on the holidays, absolutely grim outside, nine-thirty at night—on a school night—and she had to be up at six to catch the bus in the dark. She'd already missed too much school, staying home on any pretext and reliving all day, while I was at work, so there really were no limits, and who was being a bad father here? A single father unable to discipline his fifteen-year-old daughter, let alone inculcate a work ethic in her?

Me. I was. And I felt bad about it. I wanted to put my foot down and at the same time give her something, make a concession, a peace offering. But, even more, I wanted the box myself, wanted it so baldly it was showing in my face, I'm sure, and she needed to get ready for school, needed sleep, needed to stop reliving and worry about the now, the now and the future. "Why don't you wait till the weekend?" I said.

She was wearing those tights which all the girls wear like painted-on skin, standing in the doorway to the living room, perching on one foot the way she did when she was doing her dance exercises. Her face belonged to her mother, my ex, Christine, who hadn't been there for her for six years and counting. "I want to relive now," she said, diminishing her voice to a shaky, hesitant plaint that was calculated to make me give in to whatever she wanted, but it wasn't going to work this time, no way. She was going to bed, and I was going back to a rainy February night in 1982, a sold-out show at the Roxy, a band I loved then, and the girl I was mad crazy for before she broke my heart and Christine came along to break it all over again.

"Why don't you go upstairs and text your friends or something?" I said.

"I don't want to text my friends. I want to be with my mom."

This was a plaint, too, and it cut even deeper. She was deprived, that was the theme here, and my behavior, as any impartial observer could have seen in a heartbeat, verged on child abuse. "I know, honey, I know. But it's not healthy. You're spending too much time there."

"You're just selfish, that's all," she said, and here was the shift to a new tone, a tone of animus and opposition, the subtext being that I never thought of anybody but myself. "You want to, what, relive when you were, like, my age or something? Let me guess: you're going to go back and relive yourself doing homework, right? As an example for your daughter?"

The room was a mess. The next day was the day the maid came, so I was standing amid the debris of the past week, a healthy percentage of it—abandoned sweat socks, energy-drink cans, crumpled foil pouches that had once contained biscotti, popcorn, or Salami Bites—generated by the child standing there before me. "I don't like your sarcasm," I said.

Her face was pinched so that her lips were reduced to the smallest little O-ring of disgust. "What *do* you like?"

"A clean house. A little peace and quiet. Some privacy, for Christ's sake—is that too much to ask?"

"I want to be with Mom."

"Go text your friends."

"I don't have any friends."

"Make some."

And this, thrown over her shoulder, preparatory to the furious pounding retreat up the stairs and the slamming of her bedroom door: "You're a pig!"

And my response, which had been ritualized ever since I'd sprung for the five-thousand-dollar, second-generation Halcom X1520 Relive Box with the In-Flesh Retinal Projection Stream and altered forever the dynamic between me and my only child: "I know."

Most people, when they got their first Relive Box, went straight for sex, which was only natural. In fact, it was a selling point in the TV ads, which featured shimmering adolescents walking hand in hand along a generic strip of beach or leaning in for a tender kiss over the ball return at the bowling alley. Who wouldn't want to go back there? Who wouldn't want to relive innocence, the nascent stirrings of love and desire, or the first time you removed her clothes and she removed yours? What of girlfriends (or boyfriends, as the case may be), wives, ex-wives, one-night stands, the casual encounter that got you halfway there, then flitted out of reach on the wings of an unfulfilled promise? I was no different. The sex part of it obsessed me through those first couple of months, and if I drifted into work each morning feeling drained (and not just figuratively) at least I knew that it was a problem, that it was adversely affecting my job performance, and, if I didn't cut back, threatening my job itself. Still, to relive Christine when we first met, to relive her in bed, in candlelight, clinging fast to me and whispering my name in the throes of her passion, was too great a temptation. Or even just sitting there across from me in the Moroccan restaurant where I took her for our first date, her eyes like portals, as she leaned into the table and drank up every word and witticism that came out of my mouth. Or to go farther back, before my wife entered the picture, to Rennie Porter, the girl I took to the senior prom and spent two delicious hours rubbing up against in the back seat of my father's Buick Regal—every second of which I'd relived six or seven times now. And to Lisa, Lisa Denardo, the girl I met that night at the Roxy, hoping I was going to score.

I started coming in late to work. Giving everybody, even my boss, the zombie stare. I got my first warning. Then my second. And my boss—Kevin Moos, a decent enough guy, five years younger than me, who didn't have an X1520, or not that he was letting on—sat me down in his office and told me, in no uncertain terms, that there wouldn't be a third.

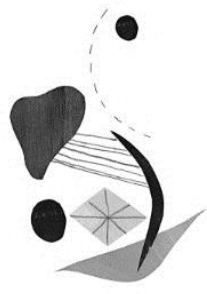
But it was a miserable night, and I was depressed. And bored. So bored you could have drilled holes in the back of my head and taken core samples and I wouldn't have known the difference. I'd already denied my daughter, who was thumping around upstairs with the cumulative weight of ten daughters, and the next day was Friday, T.G.I.F., end of the week, the slimmest of workdays, when just about everybody alive thinks about slipping out early. I figured that even if I did relive for more than the two hours I was going to strictly limit myself to, even if I woke up exhausted, I could always find a way to make it to lunch and just let things coast after that. So I went into the kitchen and fixed myself a gin-and-tonic, because that was what I'd been drinking that night at the Roxy, and carried it into the room at the end of the hall that had once been a bedroom

and was now (Katie's joke, not mine) the reliving room.

The console sat squarely on the low table that was the only piece of furniture in the room, aside from the straight-backed chair I'd set in front of it the day I brought the thing home. It wasn't much bigger than the gaming consoles I'd had to make do with in the old days, a slick black metal cube with a single recessed glass slit running across the face of it from one side to the other. It activated the minute I took my seat. "Hello, Wes," it said, in the voice I'd selected, male, with the slightest bump of an accent to make it seem less synthetic. "Welcome back."

I lifted the drink to my lips to steady myself—think of a conductor raising his baton—and cleared my throat. "February 28, 1982," I said. "9:45 P.M. Play."

The box flashed the date and time and then suddenly I was there, the club exploding into life like a comet touching down, light and noise and movement obliterating the now, the house gone, my daughter gone, the world of getting and doing and bosses and work vanished in an instant. I was standing at the bar with my best friend, Zach Ronalds, who turned up his shirt collars and wore his hair in a Joe Strummer pompadour just like me, only his hair was black and mine choirboy blond (I'd dye it within the week), and I was trying to get the bartender's attention so I could order us G.-and-T.s with my fake I.D. The band, more New Wave than punk, hadn't started yet, and the only thing to look at onstage was the opening band, whose members were packing up their equipment while hypervigilant girls in vampire makeup and torn fish-net stockings washed around them in a human tide that ebbed and flowed on the waves of music crashing through the speakers. It was bliss. Bliss because I knew now that this night alone, out of all the long succession of dull, nugatory nights building up to it, would be special, that this was the night I'd meet Lisa and take her home with me. To my parents' house in Pasadena, where I had a room of my own above the detached garage and could come and go as I pleased. My room. The place where I greased up my hair and stared at myself in the mirror and waited for something to happen, something like this, like what was coming in seven and a half real-time minutes.



Zach said what sounded like "Look at that skank," but since he had his face turned away from me and the music was cranked to the sonic level of a rocket launch (give credit to the X1520's parametric speaker/audio-beam technology, which is infinitely more refined than the first generation's), I wasn't quite sure, though I must have heard him that night, my ears younger then, less damaged by scenes like this one, because I took hold of his arm and said, "Who? Her?"

What I said now, though, was "Reset, reverse ten seconds," and everything stalled, vanished, and started up once more, and here I was trying all over again to get the bartender's attention and listening hard when Zach, leaning casually against the bar on two splayed elbows, opened his mouth to speak. "Look at that skank," he said, undeniably, and there it was, coloring everything in the moment, because he was snap-judging Lisa, with her coat-hanger shoulders, Kabuki makeup, and shining black lips, and I said, "Who? Her?," already attracted, because in my eyes she wasn't a skank at all, or, if she was, she was a skank from some other realm altogether, and I couldn't from that moment on think of anything but getting her to talk to me.

Now, the frustrating thing about the current relive technology is that you can't be an actor in the scene, only an observer, like Scrooge reliving his boarding-school agonies with the Ghost of Christmas Past at his elbow, so whatever howlers your adolescent self might have uttered are right there, hanging in the air, unedited. You can fast-forward, and I suppose most people do—skip the chatter; get to the sex—but, personally, after going straight to the carnal moments the first five or six times I relived a scene, I liked to go back and hear what I'd had to say, what she'd had to say, no matter how banal it might sound now. What I did that night—and I'd already relived this moment twice that week—was catch hold of the bartender and order not two but three G.-and-T.s, though I only had something like eighteen dollars in my wallet, set one on the bar for Zach, and cross the floor to where she was standing, just beneath the stage, in what would be the mosh pit half an hour later. She saw me coming, saw the drinks—two drinks—and looked away, covering herself, because she was sure I was toting that extra drink for somebody else, a girlfriend or a best bud, lurking in the drift of shadow that the stage lights drew up out of the murky walls.

I tapped her shoulder. She turned her face to me.

"Pause," I said.

Everything stopped. I was in a 3-D painting now, and so was she, and for the longest time I just kept things there, studying her face. She was eighteen years old, like me, beautiful enough underneath the paint and gel and eyeliner and all the rest to make me feel faint even now, and her eyes weren't wary, weren't *used*, but candid, ready, rich with expectation. I held my drink just under my nose, inhaling the smell of juniper berries to tweak the memory, and said, "Play."

"You look thirsty," I said.

The music boomed. Behind me, at the bar, Zach was giving me a look of disbelief, like *What the?*, because this was a violation of our club-going protocol. We didn't talk to the girls, and especially not the skanks, because we were there for the *music*, at least that was what we told ourselves. (Second time around I did pause this part, just for the expression on his face—Zach, poor Zach, who never did find himself a girlfriend, as far as I know, and who's probably someplace reliving every club he's ever been in and every date he's ever had, just to feel sorry for himself.)

She levelled her eyes on me, gave it a beat, then took the cold glass from my hand. "How did you guess?" she said.

What followed was the usual exchange of information about bands, books, neighborhood, high school, college, and then I was bragging about the bands I'd seen lately and she was countering with the band members she knew personally—like John Doe and the drummer for the Germs—and letting her eyes reveal just how personal that was, which only managed to inflame me till I wanted nothing more on this earth than to pin her in a corner and kiss the black lipstick right off her. What I said then, unaware that my carefully sculpted

pompadour was collapsing across my brow in something very much like a bowl cut (or worse—*anathema*—a Beatles shag), was "You want to dance?"

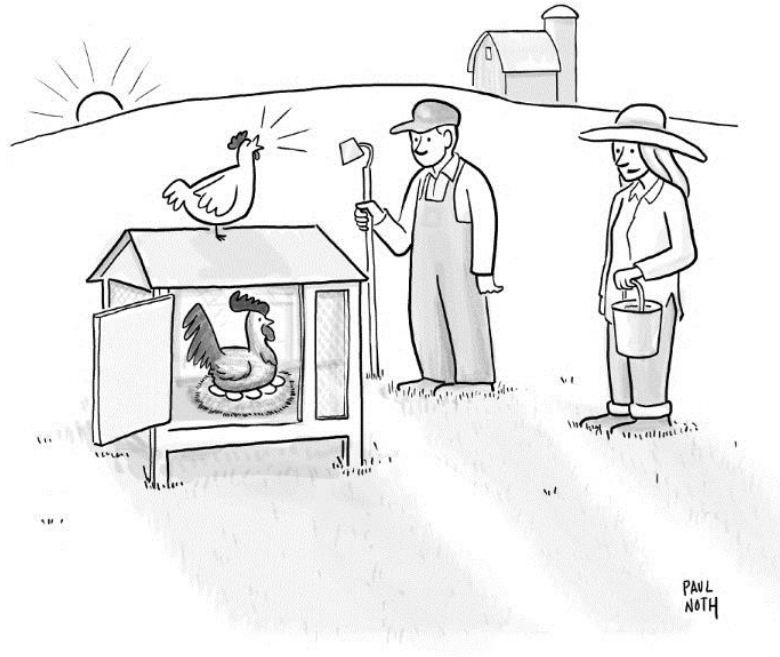
She gave me a look. Shot her eyes to the stage and back, then around the room. A few people were dancing to the canned music, most of them jerking and gyrating to their own drugged-out beat, and there was no sign—yet—of the band we'd come to hear. "To this?"

"Yeah," I said, and I looked so—what was it?—*needy*, though at the time I must have thought I was chiselled out of a block of pure cool. "Come on," I said, and I reached out a hand to her.

I watched the decision firm up in her eyes, deep in this moment which would give rise to all the rest, to the part I was about to fast-forward to because I had to get up in the morning. For work. And no excuses. But watch, watch what comes next . . .

She took my hand, the soft friction of her touch alive still somewhere in my cell memory, and then she was leading me out onto the dance floor.

She was leading. And I was following.



"They're organic, vegetarian, and they challenge traditional gender roles."

• •

Will it surprise you to know that I exceeded my self-imposed two-hour limit? That after the sex I fast-forwarded to our first date, which was really just an agreed-upon meeting at Tower Records (March 2, 1982, 4:30 P.M.), and then up to Barney's Beanery for cheeseburgers and beers and shots of peppermint schnapps (!), which she paid for, because her father was a rich executive at Warner Bros.? Or that that made me feel so good I couldn't resist skipping ahead three months, to when she was as integral to my life as the Black Flag T-shirt that never left my back except in the shower? Lisa. Lisa Denardo. With her cat's tongue and her tight, torquing body that was a girl's and a woman's at the same time and her perfect, evenly spaced set of glistening white teeth (perfect, that is, but for the incisor she'd had a dentist in Tijuana remove, in the spirit of punk solidarity). The scene I hit on was early the following summer, summer break of my sophomore year in college, when I gave up on my parents' garage and Lisa and I moved into an off-campus apartment on Vermont and decided to paint the walls, ceiling, and floors the color of midnight in the Carlsbad Caverns. June 6, 1982, 2:44 P.M. The glisten of black paint, a too bright sun caught in the windows, and Lisa saying, "Think we should paint the glass, too?" I was oblivious of anything but her and me and the way I looked and the way she looked, a streak of paint on her left forearm and another, scimitar-shaped, just over one eyebrow, when suddenly everything went neutral and I was back in the reliving room, staring into the furious face of my daughter.

But let me explain the technology here a moment, for those of you who don't already know. This isn't a computer screen or a TV or a hologram or anything anybody else can see—we're talking retinal projection, two laser beams fixed on two eyeballs. Anybody coming into the room (daughter, wife, boss) will simply see you sitting there silently in a chair with your retinas lit like furnaces. Step in front of the projector—as my daughter had done now—and the image vanishes.

"Stop," I said, and I wasn't talking to her.

But there she was, her hair brushed out for school and her jaw clenched, looking hate at me. "I can't believe you," she said. "Do you have any idea what time it is?"

Bleary, depleted—and guilty, deeply guilty—I just gawked at her, the light she'd flicked on when she came into the room transfixing me in the chair. I shook my head.

"It's 6:45 A.M. In the morning. The *morning*, Dad."

I started to say something, but the words were tangled up inside me, because Lisa was saying—had just said—"You're not going to make me stay here and watch the paint dry, are you? Because I'm thinking maybe we could drive out to the beach or something, just to cool down," and I said, or was going to say, "There's, like, maybe half a pint of gas in the car."

"What?" Katie demanded. "Were you with Mom again? Is that it? Like you can be with her and I can't?"

"No," I said, "no, that wasn't it. It wasn't your mom at all . . ."

A tremor ran through her. "Yeah, right. So what was it, then? Some girlfriend, somebody you were gaga over when you were in college? Or

high school? Or, what, *junior* high?"

"I must have fallen asleep," I said. "Really. I just zoned out."

She knew I was lying. She'd come looking for me, dutiful child, motherless child, and found me not up and about and bustling around the kitchen, preparing to fuss over her and see her off to school, the way I used to, but pinned here in this chair, like an exhibit in a museum, blind to anything but the past, my past and nobody else's, not hers or her mother's, or the country's or the world's, just mine.

I heard the door slam. Heard the thump of her angry feet in the hallway, the distant muffled crash of the front door, and then the house was quiet. I looked at the slit in the box. "Play," I said.

EASTER ON THE RIO GRANDE

After Lorca

That sailor whose throat was just cut
has grown another throat, which grows

another cut. It's an old saw: the blade
that goes around comes around, which

is why the sailor throws his voice
into the sea, why I hold a space

in my glacial lungs for him,
why I keep swimming.

—*Andrea Cohen*

By the time I got to work, I was an hour and a half late, but on this day—miracle of miracles—Kevin was even later, and when he did show up I was ensconced in my cubicle, dutifully rattling keys on my keyboard. He didn't say anything, just brushed by me and buried himself in his office, but I could see that he was wearing the same vacant pre-now look I was, and it didn't take much of an intuitive leap to guess the reason. In fact, since the new model had come on the market, I'd noticed that randy, faraway gaze in the eyes of half a dozen of my fellow-employees, including Linda Blanco, the receptionist, who'd stopped buttoning the top three buttons of her blouse and wore shorter and shorter skirts every day. Instead of breathing "Moos and Associates, how may I help you?" into the receiver, now she just said, "Reset."

Was this a recipe for disaster? Was our whole society on the verge of breaking down? Was the N.S.A. going to step in? Were they going to pass laws? Ban the box? I didn't know. I didn't care. I had a daughter to worry about. Thing was, all I could think of was getting home to relive, straight home, and if the image of a carton of milk or a loaf of bread flitted into my head I batted it away. Takeout. We could always get takeout. I was in a crucial phase with Lisa, heading inexorably for the grimmer scenes, the disagreements—petty at first, then monumental, unbridgeable, like the day I got home from my makeup class in calculus and found her sitting at the kitchen table with a stoner whose name I never did catch and didn't want to know, not then or now—and I needed to get through it, not to analyze whether it hurt or not but because it was there and I had to relive it. I couldn't help myself. I just kept picking at it like a scab.

Ultimately, this was all about Christine, of course, about when I began to fail instead of succeed, to lose instead of win. I needed Lisa to remind me of a time before that, to help me trace my missteps and assign blame, because, as intoxicating as it was to relive the birds-atwitter moments with Christine, there was always something nagging at me in any given scene, some twitch of her face or a comment she threw out that should have raised flags at the time but never did. All right. Fine. I was going to go there, I was, and relive the minutiae of our relationship, the ecstasy and the agony both, the moments of mindless contentment and the swelling tide of antipathy that drove us apart, but first things first, and, as I fought my way home on the freeway that afternoon, all I could think about was Lisa.

In the old days, before we got the box, my daughter and I had a Friday-afternoon ritual whereby I would stop in at the Italian place down the street from the house, have a drink and chat up whoever was there, then call Katie and have her come join me for a father-daughter dinner, so that I could have some face time with her, read into her, and suss out her thoughts and feelings as she grew into a young woman herself, but we didn't do that anymore. There wasn't time. The best I could offer—lately, especially—was takeout or a microwave pizza and a limp salad, choked down in the cold confines of the kitchen, while we separately calculated how long we had to put up with the pretense before slipping off to relive.

There were no lights on in the house as I pulled into the driveway, and that was odd, because Katie should have been home from school by now—and she hadn't texted me or phoned to say she'd be staying late. I climbed out of the car feeling stiff all over—I needed to get more exercise, I knew that, and I resolved to do it, too, as soon as I got my head above water—and as I came up the walk I saw the sad, frosted artificial wreath hanging crookedly there in the center panel of the front door. Katie must have dug it out of the box of ornaments in the garage on her own initiative, to do something by way of Christmas, and that gave me pause, that stopped me right there, the thought of it, of my daughter having to make the effort all by herself. That crushed me. It did. And as I put the key in the lock and pushed the door open I knew things were going to have to change. Dinner. I'd take her out to dinner and forget about Lisa. At least for now.

"Katie?" I called. "You home?"

No response. I shrugged out of my coat and went on into the kitchen, thinking to make myself a drink. There were traces of her there, her backpack flung down on the floor, an open bag of Doritos

spilling across the counter, a Diet Sprite, half-full, on the breadboard. I called her name again, standing stock-still in the middle of the room and listening for the slightest hint of sound or movement as my voice echoed through the house. I was about to pull out my phone and call her when I thought of the reliving room, and it was a sinking thought, not a selfish one, because if she was in there, reliving—and she was, I knew she was—what did that say about her social life? Didn't teen-age girls go out anymore? Didn't they gather in packs at the mall or go to movies or post things on Facebook, or, forgive me, go out on dates? Group dates, even? How else were they going to experience the inchoate beginnings of what the Relive Box people were pushing in the first place?

I shoved into the room, which was dark but for the lights of her eyes, and just stood there watching her for a long moment as I adjusted to the gloom. She sat riveted, her body present but her mind elsewhere, and if I was embarrassed—for her, and for me, too, her father, invading her privacy when she was most vulnerable—the embarrassment gave way to a sorrow so oceanic I thought I would drown in it. I studied her face. Watched her smile and grimace and go cold and smile again. What could she possibly be reliving when she'd lived so little? Family vacations? Christmases past? Her biannual trips to Hong Kong to be with her mother and stepfather? I couldn't fathom it. I didn't like it. It had to stop. I turned on the overhead light and stepped in front of the projector.

She blinked at me and she didn't recognize me, didn't know me at all, because I was in the now and she was in the past. "Katie," I said, "that's enough, now. Come on." I held out my arms to her, even as recognition came back into her eyes and she made a vague gesture of irritation, of pushing away.

"Katie," I said, "let's go out to dinner. Just the two of us. Like we used to."

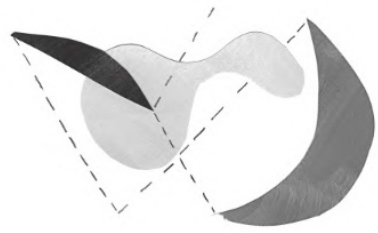
"I'm not hungry," she said. "And it's not fair. You can use it all you want, like, day and night, but whenever I want it—" And she broke off, tears starting in her eyes.

"Come on," I said. "It'll be fun."

The look she gave me was unsparing. I was trying to deflect it, trying to think of something to say, when she got up out of the chair so suddenly it startled me, and, though I tried to take hold of her arm, she was too quick. Before I could react, she was at the door, pausing only to scorch me with another glare. "I don't believe you," she spat, before vanishing down the hall.

I should have followed her, should have tried to make things right—or better, anyway—but I didn't. The box was right there. It had shut down when she leaped up from the chair, and whatever she'd been reliving was buried back inside it, accessible to no one, though you can bet there are hackers out there right now trying to subvert the retinal-recognition feature. For a long moment, I stared at the open door, fighting myself, then I went over and softly shut it. I realized I didn't need a drink or dinner, either. I sat down in the chair. "Hello, Wes," the box said. "Welcome back."

We didn't have a Christmas tree that year, and neither of us really cared all that much, I think—if we wanted to look at spangle-draped trees, we could relive holidays past, happier ones, or, in my case, I could go back to my childhood and relive my father's whiskey in a glass and my mother's long-suffering face blossoming over the greedy joy of her golden boy, her only child, tearing open his presents as a weak, bleached-out California sun haunted the windows and the turkey crackled in the oven. Katie went off (reluctantly, I



thought) on a skiing vacation to Mammoth with the family of her best friend, Allison, whom she hardly saw anymore, not outside of school, not in the now, and I went back to Lisa, because if I was going to get to Christine in any serious way—beyond the sex, that is, beyond the holiday greetings and picture-postcard moments—Lisa was my bridge.

As soon as I'd dropped Katie at Allison's house and exchanged a few previously scripted salutations with Allison's grinning parents and her grinning twin brothers, I stopped at a convenience store for a case of eight-ounce bottles of spring water and the biggest box of PowerBars I could find and went straight home to the reliving room. The night before, I'd been close to the crucial scene with Lisa, one that was as fixed in my memory as the blow-up with Christine a quarter century later, but elusive as to the date and time. I'd been up all night—again—fast-forwarding, reversing, jumping locales and facial expressions, Lisa's first piercing, the evolution of my haircut, but I hadn't been able to pinpoint the exact moment, not yet. I set the water on the floor on my left side, the PowerBars on my right. "May 9, 1983," I said. "4 A.M."

The numbers flashed and then I was in darkness, zero visibility, confused as to where I was until the illuminated dial of a clock radio began to bleed through and I could make out the dim outline of myself lying in bed in the back room of that apartment with the black walls and the black ceiling and the black floor. Lisa was there beside me, an irregular hump in the darkness, snoring with a harsh gag and stutter. She was stoned. And drunk. Half an hour earlier, she'd been in the bathroom, heaving over the toilet, and I realized I'd come too far. "Reset," I said. "Reverse ninety minutes."

Sudden light, blinding after the darkness, and I was alone in the living room of the apartment, studying, or trying to. My hair hung limp, my muscles were barely there, but I was young and reasonably good-looking, even excusing any bias. I saw that my Black Flag T-shirt had faded to gray from too much sun and too many washings, and the book in my lap looked as familiar as something I might have been buried with in a previous life, but then this *was* my previous life. I watched myself turn a page, crane my neck toward the door, get up to flip over the album that was providing the soundtrack. "Reset," I said. "Fast-forward ten minutes." And here it was, what I'd been searching for: a sudden crash, the front door flinging back, Lisa and the stoner whose name I didn't want to know fumbling their way in, both of them as slow as syrup with the cumulative effect of downers and alcohol, and though the box didn't have an olfactory feature, I swear I could smell the tequila

on them. I jumped up out of my chair, spilling the book, and shouted something I couldn't quite make out, so I said, "Reset, reverse five seconds."

"You fucker!" was what I'd shouted, and now I shouted it again, prior to slapping something out of the guy's hand, a beer bottle, and all at once I had him in a hammerlock and Lisa was beating at my back with her birdclaw fists and I was wrestling the guy out the door, cursing over the soundtrack ("Should I Stay or Should I Go"—one of those flatline ironies which almost make you believe everything in this life's been programmed). I saw now that he was bigger than I was, probably stronger, too, but the drugs had taken the volition out of him, and in the next moment he was outside the door and the three bolts were hammered home. By me. Who now turned in a rage to Lisa.

"Stop," I said. "Freeze." Lisa hung there, defiant and guilty at the same time, pretty, breathtakingly pretty, despite the slack mouth and the drugged-out eyes. I should have left it there and gone on to those first cornucopian weeks and months and even years with Christine, but I couldn't help myself. "Play," I said, and Lisa raised a hand to swat at me, but she was too unsteady and knocked the lamp over instead.

"Did you fuck him?" I demanded.

There was a long pause, so long I almost fast-forwarded, and then she said, "Yeah. Yeah, I fucked him. And I'll tell you something"—her words glutinous, the syllables coalescing on her tongue—"you're no punk. And he is. He's the real deal. And you? You're, you're—"

I should have stopped it right there.

"—you're *prissy*."

"Prissy?" I couldn't believe it. Not then and not now.

She made a broad stoned gesture, weaving on her feet. "Anal-retentive. Like, who left the dishes in the sink or who didn't take out the garbage or what about the cockroaches—"

"Stop," I said. "Reset. June 19, 1994, 11:02 P.M."

I was in another bedroom now, one with walls the color of cream, and I was in another bed, this time with Christine, and I'd timed the memory to the very minute, postcoital, in the afterglow, and Christine, with her soft aspirated whisper of a voice, was saying, "I love you, Wes, you know that, don't you?"

"Stop," I said. "Reverse five seconds."

She said it again. And I stopped again. And reversed again. And she said it again. And again.

Time has no meaning when you're reliving. I don't know how long I kept it up, how long I kept surfing through those moments with Christine—not the sexual ones but the loving ones, the companionable ones, the ordinary day-to-day moments when I could see in her eyes that she loved me more than anybody alive and was never going to stop loving me, never. Dinner at the kitchen table, any dinner, any night. Just to be there. My wife. My daughter. The way the light poured liquid gold over the hardwood floors of our starter house, in Canoga Park. Katie's first birthday. Her first word ("Cake!"). The look on Christine's face as she curled up with Katie in bed and read her "Where the Wild Things Are." Her voice as she hoarsened it for Max: "I'll eat you up!"

Enough analysis, enough hurt. I was no masochist.

At some point, I had to get up from that chair in the now and evacuate a living bladder, the house silent, spectral, unreal. I didn't live here. I didn't live in the now with its deadening nine-to-five job I was in danger of losing and the daughter I was failing and a wife who'd left me—and her own daughter—for Winston Chen, a choreographer of martial-arts movies in Hong Kong, who was loving and kind and funny and not the control freak I was. (*Prissy*, anyone? *Anal-retentive*?) The house echoed with my footsteps, a stage set and nothing more. I went to the kitchen and dug the biggest pot I could find out from under the sink, brought it back to the reliving room, and set it on the floor between my legs to save me the trouble of getting up next time around.

Time passed. Relived time and lived time, too. There were two windows in the room, shades drawn so as not to interfere with the business of the moment, and sometimes a faint glow appeared around the margins of them, an effect I noticed when I was searching for a particular scene and couldn't quite pin it down. Sometimes the glow was gone. Sometimes it wasn't. What happened then, and I may have been two days in or three or five, I couldn't really say, was that things began to cloy. I'd relived an exclusive diet of the transcendent, the joyful, the insouciant, the best of Christine, the best of Lisa, and all the key moments of the women who came between and after, and I'd gone back to the Intermediate Algebra test, the very instant, pencil to paper, when I knew I'd scored a perfect one hundred per cent, and to the time I'd squirted a ball to right field with two outs, two strikes, ninth inning and my Little League team (the Condors, yellow Ts, white lettering) down by three, and watched it rise

majestically over the glove of the spastic red-haired kid sucking back allergic snot and roll all the way to the wall. Triumph after triumph, goodness abounding—till it stuck in my throat.

"Reset," I said. "January 2, 2009, 4:30 P.M."

I found myself in the kitchen of our second house, this house, the one we'd moved to because it was outside the L.A. city limits and had schools we felt comfortable sending Katie to. That was what mattered: the schools. And, if it lengthened our commutes, so be it. This house. The one I was reliving in now. Everything gleamed around me, counters polished, the glass of the cabinets as transparent as air, because details mattered then, everything in its place whether Christine was there or not—especially if she wasn't there, and where was she? Or where had she been? To China. With her boss. On film business. Her bags were just inside the front door, where she'd dropped them forty-five minutes ago, after I'd picked her up at the airport and we'd had our talk in the car, the talk I was going to relive when I got done here, because it was all about pain now, about reality, and this scene was the capper, the coup de grâce. You want wounds? You want to take a razor blade to the meat of your inner thigh just to see if you can still feel? Well, here it was.

Christine entered the scene now, coming down the stairs from Katie's room, her eyes wet, or damp, anyway, and her face composed. I pushed myself up from the table, my beginner's bald spot a glint of exposed flesh under the glare of the overhead light. I spoke first. "You tell her?"

Christine was dressed in her business attire, black stockings, heels, skirt to the knee, tailored jacket. She looked exhausted, and not simply from the fifteen-hour flight but from what she'd had to tell me. And our daughter. (How I'd like to be able to relive *that*, to hear how she'd even broached the subject, let alone how she'd smoke-screened her own selfishness and betrayal with some specious concern for Katie's well-being—let's not rock the boat and you'll be better off here with your father and your school and your teachers and it's not the end but just the beginning, buck up, you'll see.)

Christine's voice was barely audible. "I don't like this any better than you do."

"Then why do it?"

A long pause. Too long. "Stop," I said.

I couldn't do this. My heart was hammering. My eyes felt as if they were being squeezed in a vise. I could barely swallow. I reached down for a bottle of water and a PowerBar, drank, chewed. She was going to say, "This isn't working," and I was going to say, "*Working*? What the fuck are you talking about? What does work have to do with it? I thought this was about love. I thought it was about commitment." I knew I wasn't going to get violent, though I should have, should have chased her out to the cab that was even then waiting at the curb and slammed my way in and flown all the way to Hong Kong to confront Winston Chen, the martial-arts genius, who could have crippled me with his bare feet.

"Reset," I said. "August, 1975, any day, any time."

There was a hum from the box. "Incomplete command. Please select date and time."

I was twelve years old, the summer we went to Vermont, to a lake there, where the mist came up off the water like the fumes of a dream and deer mice lived under the refrigerator, and I didn't have a date or time fixed in my mind—I just needed to get away from Christine, that was all. I picked the first thing that came into my head.

"August 19th," I said. "11:30 A.M. Play."

A blacktop road. Sun like a nuclear blast. A kid, running. I recognized myself—I'd been to this summer before, one I remembered as idyllic, messing around in boats, fishing, swimming, wandering the woods with one of the local kids, Billy Scharf, everything neutral, copacetic. But why was I running? And why did I have that look on my face, a look that fused determination and helplessness both? Up the drive now, up the steps to the house, shouting for my parents: "Mom! Dad!"

I began to have a bad feeling.

I saw my father get up off the wicker sofa on the porch, my vigorous young father, who was dressed in a T-shirt and jeans and didn't have even a trace of gray in his hair, my father, who always made everything right. But not this time. "What's the matter?" he said. "What is it?"

And my mother coming through the screen door to the porch, a towel in one hand and her hair snarled wet from the lake. And me. I was fighting back tears, my legs and arms like sticks, striped polo shirt, faded shorts. "It's," I said, "it's—"

"Stop," I said. "Reset." It was my dog, Queenie, that was what it was, dead on the road that morning, and who'd left the gate ajar so she could get out in the first place? Even though he'd been warned about it a hundred times?

I was in a dark room. There was a pot between my legs, and it was giving off a fierce odor. I needed to go deeper, needed out of this. I spouted random dates, saw myself driving to work, stuck in traffic with ten thousand other fools who could only wish they had a fast-forward app, saw myself in my thirties, post-Lisa, pre-Christine, obsessing over Halo, and I stayed there through all the toppling hours, reliving myself in the game, boxes within boxes, until finally I thought of God, or what passes for God in my life, the mystery beyond words, beyond lasers and silicon chips. I gave a date nine months before I was born, "December 30, 1962, 6 A.M.," when I was, what—a zygote?—but the box gave me nothing, neither visual nor audio. And that was wrong, deeply wrong. There should have been a heartbeat. My mother's heartbeat, the first thing we hear—or feel, feel before we even have ears.

"Stop," I said. "Reset." A wave of rising exhilaration swept over me even as the words came to my lips, "September 30, 1963, 2:35 A.M.," and the drumbeat started up, *ba-boom*, *ba-boom*, but no visual, not yet, the minutes ticking by, *ba-boom*, *ba-boom*, and then I was there, in the light of this world, and my mother in her stained hospital gown and the man with the monobrow and the flashing glasses, the stranger, the doctor, saying what he was going to say by way of congratulations and relief. A boy. It's a boy.

Then it all went dead, and there was somebody standing in front of me, and I didn't recognize her, not at first, how could I? "Dad," she was saying. "Dad, are you there?"

I blinked. Tried to focus.

"No," I said finally, shaking my head in slow emphasis, the word itself, the denial, heavy as a stone in my mouth. "I'm not here. I'm not. I'm not." ♦

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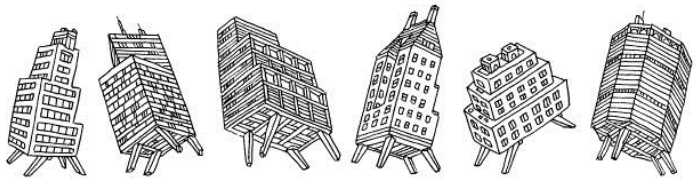
T. Coraghessan Boyle on "The Relive Box."

THE CRITICS



POP MUSIC

SNEAK PEAK

St. Vincent's stealthy magnificence.

BY SASHA FRERE-JONES

Annie Clark, who performs under the name St. Vincent, is a musician who arrived fully formed. Her début album, "Marry Me" (2007), showed her to be a nimble guitar player, an expert arranger of voices, and a collector of unidentifiable sounds. Her work lives at a distance from most rock or pop, owing to the contrast between her even, unshowy temperament and her taste for fertile clashes of language. ("You're a supplement, you're a salve. You're a bandage, pull it off. I think I love you, I think I'm mad" is a lyric from the song "Actor Out of Work," from 2009.) Her new album, "St. Vincent," her fourth, is her simplest and most potent. It is odd but accessible, detailed though never ornamental, personal but stripped of narcissism.

In her past work, Clark played with the artificial and the imaginary; she has never been a particularly confessional songwriter. She has cited Disney soundtracks as inspiration, and she titled her second album "Actor." "St. Vincent" feels like the first album direct enough to be self-titled; she might equally have called it "Annie Clark." But, while the use of proxy characters is gone, her relish for proper dramatic staging is not. What before was drawn in subtle lines is now pressed into the surface with broad strokes. "St. Vincent" is Clark's détente with rock. It offers emotionally transparent music that doesn't sacrifice the pleasure of a performance that acknowledges that it is one.

Clark grew up in Dallas and, when she was fifteen, began going on tour with her aunt and uncle, a vaguely New Age jazz duo called Tuck & Patti. She performed with them only occasionally, but she watched, and wrote songs, and eventually attended Berklee College of Music, in Boston. (Rock musicians often apologize for or qualify the fact that they attended Berklee, possibly because they believe that too much technical skill interferes with the visceral mandate of rock. When we first met, Clark expressed a similar regret.) Soon after leaving school, Clark toured as a musician and singer with an ensemble group called the Polyphonic Spree, which had a large chorus and seemed to be forever rewriting "Jesus Christ Superstar." Later, she played in Sufjan Stevens's touring band.

"Marry Me" established her preference for the vivid over the familiar. The opening song, "Now, Now," begins with two tracks of plucked guitar harmonics entwined like earrings and hair. A spare but violent drumbeat enters, and Clark begins a call-and-response with a children's choir. The choir sings the first two words of each line, and Clark replies: "I'm not/your mother's favorite dog, I'm not/the carpet you walk on, I'm not/one small atomic bomb, I'm not/anything at all." The choir eventually repeats a circular phrase, as if in a schoolyard: "You don't mean that, say you're sorry." At the distance of almost seven years, the song sounds even more like a mission statement—let's get weird and stay there.

For three albums, Clark worked well in the Technicolor mode. Her vocals wandered upward, often into straight falsetto, with plenty of woodwinds and backing vocals filling the empty spaces. Her guitar playing was, and still is, a shank held in her pocket. She has a taste for effects pedals and is remarkably good at tucking melodies into rude vortices of sound. However elegantly and precisely she lays her table, she has an equivalent and opposite desire to break into room-clearing noise.

In 2011, Clark began collaborating with David Byrne; the result, the following year, was "Love This Giant." Centered on the idea of using horns on almost every track, the album sounds uncannily as if it could be in the solo catalogue of either artist. At first, it appears to be dominated by Byrne, as his voice is so familiar, but the rich and loopy horn arrangements are so Clark-like that she pries it back. Walk out of the room, and the record begins to sound more like hers than like his.

In early 2013, after touring extensively for "Love This Giant," Clark came back to New York, where she now lives, and quickly started writing. What she produced is both a break and a leap forward. Stylistically, the most notable changes are that she sings less often in her airy high voice, and that there is much more space around each instrument. Her singing is close in range to her speaking voice, which is deep in pitch. Her band pairs her with keyboards and drums. The sonic backdrops tend to be minor atmospheric disturbances that don't distract from her voice and guitar. As Clark described them to me, the guitar and keyboard sounds are "primary colors"—thick, strong, bright. They hover in the low midrange area, giving the songs heft and unity rather than enormous, blinding sound.

The drum sounds on "St. Vincent" are swollen and often brutal, but they pivot quickly, helping create an audible frame: with the drums under her feet, the keyboards buzzing to one side, and her guitar flaring on the other, Clark

ABOVE: VASCO MOURÃO

In an age where the guitar hero has become something of a rarity, Clark is a shredder; her solos are marvels of tone and feeling.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARK PECKMEZIAN

has a wide space left for her voice. She wants you to hear these songs without a struggle.

The lyrics are plainer now, and backing vocals are comparatively rare. If Clark used to weave her experiences into words sung by a cast of characters, she now often just tells you what she's been up to. Although being naked in the desert with a rattlesnake is the kind of dream imagery she would have used before, this time it comes from an experience. The repeated "running, running" and "sweating, sweating" lyric of "Rattlesnake" is not figurative but reported, from a trip out West.

Clark's words revel in the everyday and the mundane. Garbage is taken out, someone masturbates, and people look at the world exclusively through a digital lens. The slow, devastating "I Prefer Your Love" emerged from watching her mother go through a serious illness. "Mother, won't you open your arms and forgive me of all these bad thoughts, I'm blinded to the faces in the fog, but all the good in me is because of you, it's true," Clark sings, as close to a direct croon as she comes.

Last month, at the cavernous Terminal 5, on the far West Side of Manhattan, Clark gave a performance that was both solid and ecstatic. For the album cover (and for herself), she dyed her hair gunmetal gray, with a few chromatic streaks. Add her wide shoulders and the triangular planes of her face, and she looks exactly like the cult leader she apparently had in mind. Indeed, the album cover has her on a throne. Live, Clark substituted a three-tiered pyramid platform for the throne, which stood behind her as she sang center stage.

The crowd met the feeling of careful control with jubilation. Occasionally, in coördination with the keyboardist and guitarist Toko Yasuda, Clark doled out deliberate, short movements, shuffling her feet and gliding like a Roomba or bending an elbow precisely, like a robot factory arm looking to screw on a lid. During "I Prefer Your Love," she draped herself over the tiered platform, deliberately rolling down—a burlesque routine slowed to a freeze-frame pace.

It would have taken an act of willing denial to miss the fact that, in an age where the guitar hero has become something of a rarity, a thirty-one-year-old woman was shredding. Clark's solos are marvels of tone and feeling, eruptions that explode her beloved grids. For some of the younger people in the audience, Clark could have been the first woman they'd seen play a guitar solo. Watching gender bend in this way must have pleased Prince, who was at the show. Prince entered the mainstream by balancing sainthood, sin, and identity. Annie Clark, in her own small patch of the pop landscape, is close to redefining the rock star. Though she's not Prince's equal in impact or skill, she is doing a similar job of twisting the tools of pop to her own ends. ♦

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BOOKS

HOLLYWOOD AT WAR

Five major directors with a mission.

BY DAVID DENBY

Frank Capra, who enlisted after Pearl Harbor, at his desk in the War Department.

AP

The spring of 1942 was a perilous time for Americans, caught, as they were, in a new war. The preceding December, the Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. American troops in the Philippines were close to surrender. The Wehrmacht had advanced across Europe and into the Soviet Union and North Africa. Many people wondered whether the United States had a "crusading faith" to fight for. In April, Frank Capra, the ebullient director of "It Happened One Night" and "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington," stepped into the Museum of Modern Art to see, for the first time, Leni Riefenstahl's "Triumph of the Will," a celebration of the Nazis' 1934 Party congress, in Nuremberg. Again and again, Riefenstahl makes heraldic use of torchlight parades, banners, and trumpets raised to the sky like artillery. German history, German labor, and German military force are summoned to communal ecstasy, as Adolf Hitler, in a guttural roar, demands obedience and victory. The movie was overwhelming, mystical—a product of romanticism and modernism pushed to extremes. Capra was shocked. In later years, he often told the story of seeing the film. One of his initial reactions was "We're dead. We're gone. We can't win this war."

"Triumph of the Will" was a call to hatred and to combat, but Capra had additional reasons to be alarmed. Eager to serve, he had enlisted in the Army shortly after Pearl Harbor, and had agreed to make training films for recruits. George C. Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, was assembling a vast fighting force, and many of the young draftees and volunteers were isolationist, ignorant, or indifferent. Marshall wanted to explain to them the aims of the war and the nature of the enemy; he wanted soldiers who knew what they were fighting for. The Army had commissioned a series of lectures on military history from the end of the First World War through 1939, but lectures put recruits to sleep. And Marshall was not impressed by what the Army's Signal Corps—which had used films for training purposes since 1929—was turning out. Capra knew that he had to find an explicitly American way of selling the war to soldiers and to the public as well; he became one of the key figures in the largest movie-propaganda campaign the government had ever undertaken.

A number of Hollywood directors signed up, and, as Mark Harris writes in "Five Came Back: A Story of Hollywood and the Second World War" (Penguin), the most prominent among them had different ambitions and needs. Capra, a Sicilian immigrant who had found success in the United States, was an emotional patriot; his films expressed a boyishly guileless belief in American goodness. The truculent, sometimes alcoholic, but indefatigable John Ford, who between 1939 and 1941 had made seven major movies ("Stagecoach," "Young Mr. Lincoln," "Drums Along the Mohawk," "The Grapes of Wrath," "The Long Voyage Home," "Tobacco Road," and "How Green Was My Valley"), loved the military, especially the Navy; he wanted to go to the front and record what the fighting man was experiencing. William Wyler was a legendary perfectionist, who directed such Bette Davis classics as "Jezebel" and "The Letter." When Pearl Harbor was attacked, he was working on "Mrs. Miniver," a celebration of middle-class Britons in wartime, and he deliberately turned the film into sentimental propaganda. It became a huge hit and won six Academy Awards, but Wyler began to feel that "Mrs. Miniver" was naïve. Filming combat in the European Theatre became for him an emotionally indispensable "escape into reality."

John Huston, who began as a screenwriter, and, in 1941, directed "The Maltese Falcon," was a roughneck of literary bent who longed for danger and excitement. He, too, wanted to put something more demanding on the screen than Hollywood's genteel standards allowed. George Stevens, the creator of the classic Astaire-Rogers musical "Swing Time" and the Anglophile adventure "Gunga Din," had actually tried to adapt Humphrey Cobb's bitter First World War novel "Paths of Glory" but was unable to persuade his studio, RKO, to take it on. (The book was eventually filmed, in 1957, by Stanley Kubrick.) Instead, Stevens made comedies like "Woman of the Year" (the first Tracy-Hepburn film) and "The

More the Merrier," and, by 1943, he had begun to think of his films as trivial. They weren't, but he also desperately needed to get out of Hollywood.

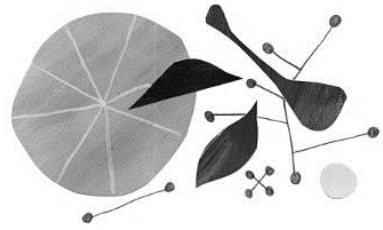
These five men were at the heart of the establishment, but they rebelled against it. Even Capra was dissatisfied—"bored," he later said, with what he was doing. The studios, having largely ignored Nazism throughout the nineteen-thirties, made countless combat films in 1942 and 1943, and inserted war boosterism into romances, musicals, and gangster movies. (Sherlock Holmes and the Invisible Man were updated and turned into Nazi hunters.) These five men wanted none of that. They gave up honeyed lives and big Hollywood projects and submitted, at military pay, to the frequent interference of bureaucrats in the War Department in order to make films that they thought the country needed—and that they needed themselves.

Fusing art, politics, and history, Riefenstahl had composed a symphonic ode to domination. For the American filmmakers, living in a rowdy democracy, no such grand synthesis was possible, or even imaginable. But how do you create war propaganda in a democratic country? Do you just make movies promoting victory? Is it possible to work, under military sponsorship, as an artist and a truthteller?

Mark Harris's account of the cultural and commercial shifts in the Hollywood of the late nineteen-sixties, "Pictures at a Revolution" (2008), is a film-history classic. He's a good storyteller and a good critic: he describes both documentaries and features with warmth and perceptive detail. "Five Came Back" is a splendidly written narrative, but it presented Harris with a structural problem. Moving slowly and steadily, he uses the directors' adventures as a way of informally telling the story of America's participation in the war. It's a strategy that causes him to jump back and forth among his heroes, and, at times, he leaves a director stranded at the start of a project, crew at the ready, only to pick him up thirty pages later. Writing a definitive history has its perils, and Harris tells us more than we want to know, chronicling aborted or stalled projects and endless tussles with the military over assignments and the tone and the explicitness of combat footage that the public might see. But his characterization of the directors is shrewd and engrossing, and he's at his best when he dramatizes the men facing live fire and grappling with the film medium.

On occasion, Capra assigned documentary projects to Huston or Wyler, but most of the time he devoted himself to fulfilling Marshall's request to indoctrinate recruits. He outlined a seven-part series of films called "Why We Fight," and, in the first film, "Prelude to War," he laid eager hands on Axis propaganda, including "Triumph of the Will." Capra repurposed (i.e., stole) some of Riefenstahl's most remarkable images (the camera descending slowly, as if from heaven, into a vast stadium filled with men). "Let our boys hear the Nazis and the Japs shout their own claims of master-race crud," Capra said, "and our fighting men will know why they're in uniform." "Prelude to War" traces the rise of the Nazi Party and of the militarist élite in Japan. It ends with the two nations prepared to engulf their neighbors.

The great actor Walter Huston (John's father) reads the narration, in the tones of an angry American fed up with Axis treachery and aggression. The tempo is breathless. Capra used rapid montage, zooming in on alarming newspaper headlines, and reënacted such events as a political assassination, the gun firing in close-up. "Prelude to War," in its brazen excitement, feels like a thirties gangster movie. Yet the didactic intent anchors the rush of words and images. Capra hired



the Disney studio to do animated maps: black ink spills menacingly out of Japan and into China. "The chips are down," Huston says. "Two worlds stand against each other. One must die, one must live."

Seen now, "Prelude to War" feels luridly obvious, but it hasn't become period camp—there's too much genuine threat in it, and our knowledge of what Japan and Germany did in the war makes the enraged tone seem reasonable enough. Capra exhorted the recruits, and he flattered them, too. Democratic man is superior to the jackbooted automatons that tyranny creates; he will fight for decency and for freedom, and will prove his superiority by winning. Morale-building and instruction mesh: the audience was certainly not encouraged to have any opinion of the war other than the one Capra offered, yet he managed to insert an extraordinary amount of history and politics into the film.

Capra, with his artless, colloquial war salesmanship, had made an American answer to Riefenstahl's film. Marshall was pleased, and the movie and its successors in the series—including "The Nazis Strike," in which ink spills from Germany across Europe, and "The Battle of Russia"—were shown to millions of recruits. Some of the films eventually opened in theatres, and later worked their way into schoolrooms and summer camps, where they were screened on rainy days. Those inky fingers entered the visual storage bank of millions of American children.

In 1939, John Ford sailed his yacht down the coast of California and Mexico. He had arranged to do semi-official reconnaissance work, Harris writes, and filed a report to the Navy about Japanese trawlers in the area. Ford officially joined up earlier than the other directors—three months before Pearl Harbor—and, in the spring of 1942, he finally got the assignment he wanted. Admiral Chester Nimitz sent him to Midway, an atoll in the middle of the Pacific. The United States had a base there, and American intelligence anticipated a Japanese attack. On June 4th, as Japanese Zeroes assaulted the main island, Ford and his assistants filmed the attack from the roof of a power station. Bombs exploded nearby, and the building heaved. Ford was thrown off his feet, and he took shrapnel in his arm. Film was torn from the sprockets of his camera, which we see in the finished movie—an unprecedented bit of cinéma vérité. During the next three days, American carrier-based planes bombed the Japanese fleet, sinking a significant part of it, and swinging the Pacific war permanently in America's direction. But the eighteen-minute documentary that Ford made, "The Battle of Midway," is less about victory than about danger and loss. Shooting from under the bombs as they fell, Ford showed Americans what it felt like to be vulnera-

ble. As black smoke curls around an American flag, a narrator quietly says, "Yes. This really happened."

William Wyler also wanted to see battle. In early 1943, he was attached to the Army's Eighth Air Force, stationed in England, and made repeated trips in B-17 bombers over occupied France and Germany. Operating in daylight, the B-17s dropped their load from twenty-five thousand feet. The planes were unpressurized (everyone wore an oxygen mask) and open to the air in places along the fuselage. Temperatures inside fell to forty below zero. In a run over Wilhelmshaven, Wyler tried to film flak bursts through the openings; he even asked the pilot to move closer. The attack missed its target, and Wyler's camera froze. In another run, his oxygen-bottle tube came loose, and he passed out. If he hadn't come to in time to reconnect it, he would have died.

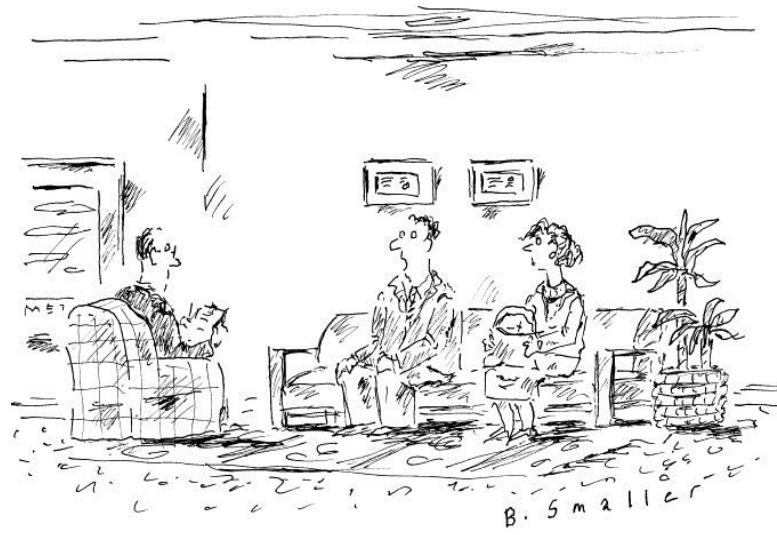
The casualty rates for B-17s were high, but the ten-man crew of a plane called the Memphis Belle survived twenty-five raids. In 1943, the Army turned the men into celebrities and sent them home to raise money for the war effort and to instruct young fliers. Wyler, meanwhile, used footage that he and other cameramen had taken in a variety of B-17s, including the Memphis Belle, and created a kind of documentary fiction of the crew's final run. "The Memphis Belle" is a mini-epic (forty-two minutes long) that joins moment-by-moment anxiety to disturbing beauty. At the beginning, the big planes nestle like awkward animals among English farms and villages. As they climb to peak altitude, Wyler gives us stunning images of cold blue skies crossed by vapor trails, images almost abstract in their patterning. Menace and fear arrive in waves: German fighter planes fly directly at the bomber and at Wyler's cameras, rolling and turning as they fire, and veering away only at the last second. This kind of aerial combat has been faked many times with miniatures and, more recently, with computer-generated imagery, but Wyler's record of actual combat brings us closest to exhilaration and terror.

Authenticity, reality, the furious violence of war: the aesthetics of these films embodies a precise moral imperative—the public must see and feel what American fighting men endure. But what if a director is physically unable to capture the experience? On a rooftop and in the belly of an airplane, Ford and Wyler filmed the essence of combat from a fixed position. But shooting a large-scale ground battle is virtually impossible. With bullets flying overhead, a cameraman can hardly roam around freely. Even a group of cameramen wouldn't be able to shoot more than a small portion of a complex ground action.

In early 1944, John Huston made a film about an infantry unit's tortuous struggle to clear the Germans out of San Pietro, a small town northwest of Naples, and the surrounding countryside. When "The Battle of San Pietro" came out, in 1945, it was hailed for the power and the grit of its combat scenes and for its portrait of civilian misery, and Huston was praised for his courage. The film has been honored in those terms many times since. Yet, as Harris reports, the scenes in "The Battle of San Pietro" were largely re-created after the town had been taken from the Germans. Huston had access to official accounts of the struggle, culled from interviews with soldiers who had fought in it, and he used maps and a pointer to keep the American tactics and the chronology straight. But the bloody progress of the G.I.s across fields and along a stony ridge outside the town was staged; Huston's actors were soldiers whom the Army assigned to the project. The men certainly look the part, their faces fatigued and worried. Huston asked them to stare into the camera now and then, as people do in newsreel footage. At times, the camera jerks wildly, as Ford's camera had in Midway. Huston turned the signatures of authenticity into artifact.

"San Pietro" ends with text that demurely admits that some of the footage was taken before or after the actual battle—which hardly amounts to full disclosure. Harris has seen the mass of uncut footage, and he's indignant about the imposture. Yet the issue remains complicated. Certainly, it's dishonest to claim that something is authentic when it's not. But all movies are illusions of one sort or another, and perhaps it's best to say that some illusions are truer than others. In the case of war, what kind of representation brings you the most vivid and the most accurate sense of a terrible event? Steven Spielberg, staging the D Day landing in "Saving Private Ryan," delivered a greater sense of the deadly turmoil on Omaha Beach than either John Ford or George Stevens, both of whom were in Normandy during the landing, with multiple crews and hundreds of cameras. Many of the cameras were unmanned or didn't work; the footage recorded that day is largely out of focus or grisly in a fragmentary way.

The War Department wanted morale-building movies for the home



"I don't want a divorce, but I would like a gap year."

• •

front, and, under pressure, both Ford and Wyler softened their groundbreaking work. Ford added hokily reassuring dialogue (spoken by Jane Darwell and Henry Fonda) to "Midway"; Wyler included scenes of ceremonial visits to the Memphis Belle by top generals and by the King and Queen of England. In "The Battle of San Pietro," Huston offers no such reassurance. As the soldiers advance through smoke and mist, many of them falling to machine-gun fire, the tone of the narration, which Huston himself speaks, is grim. The beautiful old town, when the Americans get there, is nothing but rubble. The survivors look exhausted—not jubilant but merely relieved that their part of the war is over. Huston not only presents the physical hardships of battle; he creates the war as a cultural and moral catastrophe. The sense of desolation is broken only at the end of the movie, by a scene of children playing in the street, their innocent faces making a minimal claim against despair. Even if the images are mostly contrived, "San Pietro" is aesthetically of a piece—and magnificent.

Stevens was at Omaha Beach because Capra had asked him to organize a Special Coverage Unit to photograph the American invasion and the liberation of Europe. In August, 1944, he filmed the U.S. Army's entry, to delirious acclaim, into Paris. But in December, lodged just inside Germany, he found himself in the middle of the Wehrmacht's counterattack in the Ardennes—the Battle of the Bulge. He was unsettled by the casualties and the fear that surrounded him, and what he saw only got worse. In the spring of 1945, as the Allies liberated the concentration camps in Germany—Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, Dachau, and others—the primary function of Stevens and his group, as Harris notes, significantly changed. They were no longer capturing combat and its aftermath; they were gathering evidence.

Stevens became obsessed with what had happened in Dachau. Talking little to his crew, he worked relentlessly in the camp for weeks, Harris writes, "pushing into corners and shadows, his movements steady as he recorded the carnage that surrounded him." But, after the war, Stevens "wondered, for the rest of his life, if he had filmed enough, if he had brought to the task before him the ruthlessness and skill it required." He assembled the footage into two compilations, which the Supreme Court Justice Robert Jackson, the chief American prosecutor at the first Nuremberg Trial, in November, 1945, used as evidence against Nazi leaders.

As expressions of extreme experience, both cinematic modes—Stevens's plain record of horror and Huston's fictional recreation of it—have their advocates as the right way, the only way. What matters, however, is the power of the result, and both men did work that was central to America's understanding of some of the most appalling events of the twentieth century.

Harris's book has a strong coda. In 1945, as the war wound down, Capra, Ford, Wyler, Huston, and Stevens returned to Hollywood, and Harris's attention shifts from adventure to memory. What use could they make, as newly reborn feature filmmakers, of what had happened to them? The work of all five deepened, or at least got weightier, after the war.

Ford shot a beautiful and leisurely picture, "They Were Expendable," about the small PT boats (commanded by Robert Montgomery and John Wayne) that harassed Japanese ships in the Philippines during that anxious spring of 1942. The film is suffused with an elegiac melancholy that is unique in American movies. Ford, as he did in "Midway," embraces a moment of vulnerability: the Americans lose not only a military campaign but a much loved colony, which is evoked as a gentle, palm-treed heaven, where officers in Navy whites and grizzled seamen commingle with respectful Filipino helpers. Politically, Ford's imperialist nostalgia doesn't pass muster, but "They Were Expendable" is free of the crudely righteous anger and patriotic tub-thumping common in such movies as the 1945 Errol Flynn vehicle, "Objective, Burma!," and it remains the most emotionally satisfying of Second World War combat films.

In 1945, Wyler filmed the ravaged coast of Italy from the open fuselage of a B-25, and, as a result, permanently lost most of his hearing. He had been away from Hollywood and his family for three years, and when he returned, handicapped, he found himself ill at ease. His producer, Samuel Goldwyn, owned the rights to a *Time* article about a group of marines on leave. The novelist MacKinlay Kantor first worked on the screenplay; then the playwright Robert E. Sherwood, who had been one of F.D.R.'s speechwriters, took over. Wyler joined him and together they developed a screenplay about three vets returning to a Midwestern city: an Army sergeant (Fredric March), who has trouble settling back into his life as a banker; an Air Force bombardier (Dana Andrews), who can't find a good job or hold on to his wife; and a young sailor (Harold Russell), who has lost his hands and shrinks away from his girlfriend. "The Best Years of Our Lives," as Wyler's masterpiece came to be called, is a surprisingly dissonant portrait of homecoming, in which the cheerful American surface is consistently punctured by disappointment and dread. Much of what Wyler had gone through, Harris writes, was fed into the experience of the three men. At the climactic moment, Andrews's flier walks through a field of discarded B-17s, and is overwhelmed by memories of bombing runs that went bad. The camera bores in; the bombardier sweats and then relaxes. For him, Wyler implies, the war may finally be over—as it was, perhaps, for Wyler, too. He picked up his career where he had left off.

John Huston, racked by memories of the devastation of San Pietro, made a documentary about soldiers suffering from trauma, "Let There Be Light," which was shot in a psychiatric hospital on Long Island. The film so upset the Army that it kept the movie out of the public view for decades. Huston's determination to face the worst—his "sardonic cynicism," as Harris calls it—colors Humphrey Bogart's famous performance and everything else in the first feature that Huston made after the war, "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre."

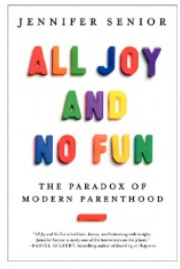
Huston had a long and illustrious postwar career. Stevens did, too, but in some ways he was a casualty of the war. Shaken and demoralized when he got home, he kept to himself, drank heavily, and didn't work for several years. In the

nineteen-fifties, he reëmerged as the director of large-scale productions with important-sounding titles and themes: "A Place in the Sun," "Shane," "Giant," and "The Diary of Anne Frank." They were major public events, but the early spark was gone.

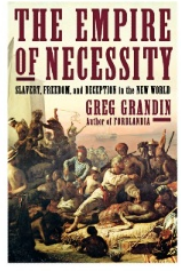
Capra's fate was the strangest. Just before the war, he had announced that he was leaving Columbia Pictures, his longtime studio, and now he set up as an independent. After a while, he began adapting a Christmas story, by a writer named Philip Van Doren Stern, which had been knocking around the studios since 1939. Capra commissioned screenplays from a series of top writers, but finally wrote most of the script himself. The story became "It's a Wonderful Life," a sub-Dickensian fable of despair and redemption, in which a bright and virtuous young man (James Stewart), sacrificing himself to the needs of his home town, is so frustrated and failure-prone that he's ready to jump off a bridge, only to be granted at the last moment a harrowing view of what life would have been like in his town if he had never existed. In Harris's view, Capra created a neurotically brilliant parable of his own situation. Welcomed on his return to Hollywood with parties and awards, he irrationally came to feel that no one really wanted him. The movie was his way of convincing himself that he was a man of consequence.

"It's a Wonderful Life" was nominated for five Oscars but was a box-office flop—a failure from which Capra never really recovered professionally. In the end, however, the film became a double triumph for him. It grew to be one of the most beloved of American movies, and, as such, it provided his final answer to the Riefenstahl film that had troubled him so many years earlier. Capra created his own myth—not a self-immolating ecstasy of national greatness through purity and death but a garrulous and funny portrait of what a good life might mean in an American town. Family, friends, economic struggles, neighborly help, good cheer: the movie exudes an almost hysterical desire for ordinary happiness. "It's a Wonderful Life," with its mawkish benevolence, felt out of date in the noirish forties, but its vision of a democratic community, seen now, seems like something for which Americans would have gone to war. ♦

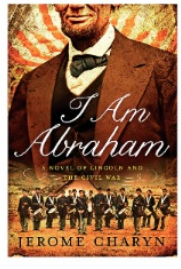
BRIEFLY NOTED



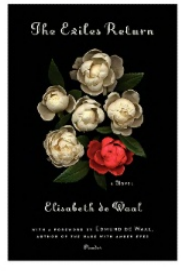
ALL JOY AND NO FUN, *by Jennifer Senior (Ecco)*. This far-ranging essay on modern parenting follows a variety of parents—stay-at-home, working, single—from parent support groups and Cub Scout sign-ups to the privacy of their messy, middle-class households. Always generous in tone, Senior is a keen observer of the impact children have on their parents' marriages, mental health, work, and social lives, and she makes deft use of social-science research to tease out cultural shifts that have occurred. The distinction she draws between joy and fun is slippery (a lot of what she documents sounds like fun) and the book's most useful contribution may be the connection it makes between joy and a darker set of emotions: loss, vulnerability, and, surprisingly, grief.



THE EMPIRE OF NECESSITY, *by Greg Grandin (Metropolitan)*. In 1805, an American seal hunter named Amasa Delano spotted a slave ship in distress off the coast of Chile. The ship's captain seemed strangely cagey, and it took Delano most of the day to realize why: the slaves had taken control, and the captain was their captive. Grandin's book, inspired by Melville's novella "Benito Cereno," which is based on the incident, traces the rebels' route from their initial capture, in West Africa, to eventual execution, in Concepción, and offers a primer on the South American slave trade along the way. Several scenes are indelible: the slaves' forced march across the Argentine pampas and over the icy Andes; a mad scramble to slaughter seals by the thousands in the South Pacific, until none were left to kill.



I AM ABRAHAM, *by Jerome Charyn (Liveright)*. This daring novel narrates the life of Abraham Lincoln, focussing less on the broad strokes of history and wartime politics than on the intimate daily life of the Lincoln household. The portrayal of Mary as a Kentucky belle whose assertiveness had no socially acceptable outlets in her time, and whose fits of madness rivalled Lincoln's own depressions, is particularly memorable. Secondary characters, some real and some imagined, include a feisty female Pinkerton who saves Lincoln's life from an assassination attempt. Charyn's richly textured portrait captures the pragmatism, cunning, despair, and moral strength of a man who could have empathy for his bitterest foes, and who "had never outgrown the forest and a dirt floor."



THE EXILES RETURN, *by Elisabeth de Waal (Picador)*. This novel, unpublished for decades and brought to light by the author's grandson, is set in Vienna ten years after the end of the Second World War and follows three new arrivals: a Jewish scientist returning to reclaim his laboratory; a Greek-American tycoon seeking to reëstablish his family's name in the city that made their fortune; and the daughter of an Austrian princess who settled in America. In a moment of confrontation with the past, the scientist sardonically thanks a colleague who unrepentantly admits his involvement in experiments on concentration-camp prisoners. But much of the book's plot, involving class and unrequited love, seems independent of the theme of postwar moral reckoning.

THE THEATRE

CASE CLOSED

Posthumous and political wrangling in "No Exit" and "All the Way."

BY HILTON ALS

Dead souls: Cover, Abraham, and Luqmaan-Harris in Sartre's existential drama.

Jean-Paul Sartre's "No Exit" is a play with a fantastic theme, but, as directed by Linda Ames Key (at the Pearl), it's not so fantastic to watch. First produced in Paris in 1944, "No Exit" was the philosopher's third effort for the stage in nearly as many years. His first significant theatre piece, "The Flies," had premièred the year before, when he was thirty-seven; a distinctly anti-Fascist work produced in Vichy-era France, "The Flies" generated a critical dialogue that helped fuel Sartre's growing notoriety. "No Exit," on the other hand, grew less out of politics than out of the demands of love. Or, more accurately, the demands of desire combined with the fantasy of love.

In the early forties, when he was working on his seminal text "Being and Nothingness" and becoming ever more deeply involved with his lifelong partner, the feminist writer and thinker Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre took up with a young woman named Wanda Kosakiewicz, whose older sister, Olga, was an actress and a onetime lover of de Beauvoir's. The Sartre-de Beauvoir ménage never lacked for incident: after procuring a female lover, de Beauvoir would sometimes pass her along to Sartre. But although Sartre admired Olga, a charismatic performer, Wanda was as close as he ever got to her; it further wounded the little man with the big ego when the somewhat dim Wanda told him that she wanted to be an actress, too. Annie Cohen-Solal, in her first-rate biography, "Sartre: A Life" (1985), suggests that the two women in "No Exit"'s four-person cast—Inez (played in this production by Jolly Abraham) and Estelle (Sameerah Luqmaan-Harris)—are a version of the Kosakiewicz sisters. That may be true, but a closer look at the script can bring other things to mind, such as the author's use of the stage to display both his Cartesian logic and his Cartesian anxiety: in a way, the skeptical Inez represents the former, while Estelle, as she cries for control and for a body other than her own, preferably that of a man named Cradeau (Bradford Cover), represents the latter.

By now, you may have noticed that I haven't mentioned where "No Exit" is set or how its characters meet. That's because Sartre himself keeps us in the metaphorical dark. The play (adapted from the French by Paul Bowles) begins with two men entering a room:

> CRADEAU: So this is it.
> BOY: This is it.
> CRADEAU (*musingly*): And this is the way it looks.
> BOY: This is the way it looks.
> CRADEAU: I—I suppose in the end you get used to the furnishings.
> BOY: That depends. Some people do.

Dressed like a bellhop in navy blue with red trim, the slim, ironic Pete McElligott, as the boy (called Valet, in this staging), is so good as the bearer of facts that you keep looking over Cover's square shoulder to see what he'll say next. But, after answering a few more questions in a perfunctory manner, Valet exits upstage center through a kind of gate leading into a dark space. We hear what sounds like an elevator ascending: an elevator to the gallows? Or out of the stifling confines of an imagined version of Hell? Left alone, Cradeau takes in his surroundings: it's an elegant, well-lit room, but with a transparent wall through which we can see a jumble of old chairs and other junk. (Harry Feiner has done a more than credible job of establishing the play's order and disorder.) With his neat little mustache and sand-colored jacket, Cover may remind you at first of a middle-aged Art Carney, but he soon disabuses you of that happy association as he romps about, under Key's abysmally depthless direction, trying each of the set's three ice-cream-colored divans, entranced by his own choreographed cuteness.

We hear the elevator return. Valet enters, followed by Inez, who mistakes Cradeau for someone she calls the torturer (and implies that she had a relationship with the torturer's wife). Cradeau doesn't reveal much, but he does confess that he'd rather be alone. For him, he explains later, "Hell is just other people." Does that mean we're in it? Hell, that is. And, if we are, do the characters know it? That's where the fantastic comes in. All the characters in "No Exit" are dead, though they

ILLUSTRATION BY RICCARDO VECCHIO

don't talk about their deaths directly, not at first: giving words to the truth would mean facing it. Eventually, we learn their stories, in language that's alternately poetic and matter-of-fact. (You can hear how Sartre's dialogue must have influenced his future protégé Jean Genet, particularly in "The Balcony," another play about fantasies that is rooted in the reality of politics and recrimination.) Cradeau drove his wife to despair by bringing a lover home, and was executed for deserting his military unit during the war; Inez, for her part, stole her cousin's wife, who then killed Inez and herself.

Inez's vision of evil rankles Cradeau. To accept it would mean living in the isolation that he claims to crave but resists with his continual preening, his restlessness and insecurity. As Harold Rosenberg noted in this magazine in a 1965 review of Sartre's memoir "The Words," Sartre struggled with the sense that he was "missing." As a child, he invented any number of "illusory egos" to fill "the gaps of his being." This is an interesting conundrum for a boy whose father died when he was an infant, and who feels he must embody masculinity, or the more stereotypical aspects of masculinity, like provocative naughtiness and bluntness. In some sense, Inez represents Sartre's problematic self-perception, but why pin it on a female character? Sartre shows us something of Inez's "masculine" nature by having her resort, again and again, to hard-nosed rationality. The only time she loses it is when the third inmate, Estelle, enters the room and hijacks it with her neediness. Estelle is a ridiculous figure—not a woman but a female impersonator, Sartre's dumb idea of the seductress who undoes reason. Although Cradeau is not attracted at first—Estelle's demand for love is as overblown as his refusal of it was in life—he's fascinated by Inez's rather predictable reaction to Estelle's artificial attempts to charm, by the way that a toss of Estelle's head or her come-hither look can make Inez shriek with hatred or desire. At first, Inez is a *beau mec;* then she's a shrew.

Oddly, the actor Bryan Cranston, lately of the television series "Breaking Bad," embodies similar characteristics as Lyndon B. Johnson in Robert Schenkkan's "All the Way" (directed by Bill Rauch, at the Neil Simon). Indeed, as I watched the actors in Sartre's "avant-garde" drama order in ham instead of working in the service of character, scenes from Schenkkan's overlong, overcrowded, and middlebrow play kept flashing through my head. "All the Way," which is mostly set in the House of Representatives, where the characters sit, stand, act, and exit as needed, takes place during the course of a year—November, 1963, to November, 1964—during which time the Civil Rights Act is passed and Johnson works to get out from under the long shadow of John F. Kennedy's assassination. Schenkkan manages to make various issues digestible by treating them not as political abstractions but as stories. One particularly touching moment has the Texas-born Johnson in a heated but affectionate conversation with a racially "go-slow" Democratic senator from Georgia named Richard Russell (John McMartin), while also trying to deal with Martin Luther King, Jr. (Brandon J. Dirden), then the president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. (McMartin and Dirden fully realize their roles.)

Schenkkan and Rauch are very good at choreographing the internal rhythms of political life—a world where "commitment" passes for depth—but that isn't quite enough to distract us from Cranston's huff-and-puff butch acting. (It's part of a new trend, to distinguish straight male actors working with middle-of-the-road directors who want nothing to do with the idiosyncrasies of genuine art and its fey "quirkiness.") Like Cover, he takes up more than his fair share of aural space. His L.B.J. shouts when he hangs up a phone, shouts when his wife, Lady Bird (the very good Betsey Aidem), restricts the amount of gravy he can have with his meal, shouts because his secretary has a flat ass, and then waits for his cue to shout again. As he throws his arms about or adjusts his glasses to show that he's having an intense, "quiet" moment, Cranston tries to fill the stage with the sort of outward physicality and noise that the camera abhors. Grimacing, perspiring, gesticulating, he and the actors in "No Exit" demonstrate Roland Barthes's assertion, in his essay "Two Myths of the New Theatre," that "in the bourgeois theatre, the actor, 'devoured' by his role, is supposed to seem fired by a veritable conflagration of passion." Sometimes Hell is other actors. ♦

THE ART WORLD

GET WITH IT

The Whitney Biennial.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Works by Joel Otterson, Sheila Hicks, and Molly Zuckerman-Hartung.

PHOTOGRAPH BY RAYMOND MEIER

The current Whitney Biennial will be remembered as the last at the noble Marcel Breuer building, on Madison Avenue, before the museum moves to its snazzy new quarters, designed by Renzo Piano, in the meatpacking district. But most of the art in the show will likely be remembered only in a general way, as expressing a frazzled, peculiarly melancholy Zeitgeist. Like the previous Biennial, this one isn't limited to American artists and to new works, but no other has so extended its range beyond the grave. Several of the artists are deceased, having died young, or relatively so. They include two distinguished but lesser-known Pictures Generation artists, Sarah Charlesworth and Gretchen Bender, who died in 2013 and 2004, respectively; Tony Greene, a promising maker of pictures that impose painted, sensual patterns on tinted photographs of animals and male bodies, who died of AIDS-related illness in 1990; the documentarian Malachi Ritscher, who immolated himself in protest of the Iraq War, in 2006, and is memorialized by a group called Public Collectors; the flamboyant and influential art critic Gregory Battcock, who was murdered in 1980 (the case is unsolved), and is evoked in an installation by Joseph Grigely; the politically minded photographic artist and noted CalArts professor Allan Sekula, who died of cancer last year; and the great writer David Foster Wallace, who committed suicide in 2008, and is represented by notes for his last, unfinished novel, "The Pale King." The presence of these individuals gives this Biennial an air of vigilant self-consciousness and uncertain bearings.

The show, presenting works by a hundred and three participants, has been organized by three guest curators, each with his or her own floor. (That's a novelty, which suggests either praiseworthy openness or a wish to spread around the critical rancor that routinely befalls Whitney Biennials.) Start on the fourth floor, which is, by far, the most visually appealing—it's practically buoyant. The curator here is Michelle Grabner, a painter and conceptual artist who teaches at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and at Yale. She has selected assertive works by mid-career female abstract painters of established reputation: Louise Fishman, Jacqueline Humphries, Suzanne McClelland, Dona Nelson, and Amy Sillman. They affirm the lately revived confidence and vigor of painterly abstraction, which is thanks, in part, no doubt, to encouragement from the hungry contemporary-art market. Grabner also favors things whose chief reason for being is shameless splendor, such as a vast curtain of slim metal chains, spangled with costume jewels and weighted with antique hand tools, by Joel Otterson; and a hanging cascade of colored cords by the veteran fabric artist Sheila Hicks. Especially ravishing is a shelf crowded with elegant ceramics by Shio Kusaka, a Japanese potter living in Los Angeles, who inflects traditional forms with subtle, idiosyncratic imperfections. Seemingly aware of a backward crouch in her fondness for soulful craft, Grabner elegiacally invokes Wallace's struggle to reanimate literary fiction, with pages from a notebook that has on its cover the image of a winsome kitten.

Be warned that the other floors are not as viewer-friendly. Prepare to consult explanatory wall texts. Stuart Comer, the chief curator of media and performance art at the Museum of Modern Art, and Anthony Elms, an associate curator at the University of Pennsylvania's Institute of Contemporary Art, thrill to the esoteric, in works by artists who virtuously resist the art world's prevailing values of

commerce and spectacle. That sounds like a good thing, but the results can strain a person's patience. The curators' shared impulse smacks of passive aggressiveness, either withholding or gingerly ironizing aesthetic pleasure. Even Charline von Heyl, an abstract painter of abundant zest and charm, appears glum, as Elms has chosen to represent her with a wall of thirty-six puritanically black-white-and-gray combinations of painting, drawing, and collage. (The pictures' impacted energies impress, though, given time.) Comer keynotes the third floor with pleasant abstract paintings and foldout, doodled books by Etel Adnan, who is eighty-nine and seems valued more for her cosmopolitan biography—in locales from war-torn Beirut to Paris and Sausalito—than for her artistic achievement.

But, if you admire artists whose forte is a matter of attitude, you may come away from the show with a newfound enthusiasm: perhaps the photographic team of Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, who picture their attractive, transsexual selves in and out of both humor and their clothes; or a mash-up installation of Early American images and objects, reproduced in mediums including 3-D printing, by editors of the adventurous online magazine *Triple Canopy*. Elms earns some good will by borrowing space on the fourth floor for the always provocative Zoe Leonard, who has turned it into a colossal camera obscura, projecting the buildings across the street onto the walls, upside down, via a lens set in the museum's cockeyed front window. Comer likewise ingratiates with a fantastic projected video by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and Véréna Paravel, members of the Sensory Ethnography Lab, an experimental group of anthropologists and artists at Harvard. They dragged cameras from a fishing boat through turbulent North Atlantic waters and hoisted them aloft into flocks of seagulls. I could happily have watched the video for its full eighty-seven minutes. But even those seductive offerings evince a hermetic condition, in much recent art, which I'll term the Age of Practices.

The word "practice" pops up as a leitmotif throughout the show's densely texted catalogue. We used to speak of what artists do as their art or their work or, tangentially, their style, vocation, discipline, allegiance, or passion. But now all is practice, with a sense of discrete, professional enterprise. In a way, the fashionable usage recalls the rage for academic critical theory that dominated highbrow art and art talk during the nineteen-eighties and nineties. A subsequent, general rejection of that brainy orientation remains tied to it as a shift of emphasis in the formula "theory and practice." A practice presumably speaks for itself, in a community of practitioners, like those with nameplates in an office complex of doctors or lawyers. The connotation is both absurd and sort of touching. It tenderly dissembles the Darwinian contest for precedence that has always been endemic, and exciting, to the art world. In the Biennial, only Grabner's abstract-painting women feel engaged in healthy competition, challenging one another's notions of what a painting should be and do. Elsewhere, it's pretty much just one damned or, occasionally, blessed thing after another.

The three curators write, in a collaborative introduction to the catalogue, "If there is any central point of cohesion, it may be the slipperiness of authorship that threads through each of our programs." That's only too true, Grabner's section somewhat aside. They continue, "In many ways, it has simply become inefficient to slow down and figure out who is responsible for a specific idea or action, opening up interesting areas of collaboration." Now, is any word more reliably predictive of boredom than "interesting," when applied to a creative endeavor? And what, in contemplating art, is laudable about "efficiency" and reprehensible about a willingness "to slow down"? The speed of developments in the current culture, along with the tendency to group-think, poses problems that aren't solved by aping them, in a rushing blur of "slippery authorship." That said, at least acknowledging those conditions may mark an inevitable and necessary phase for emerging artists—few of whom, in the Biennial, appear terribly happy about it.

The show's tributes to the dead seem telling. It's as if only dying could decisively counter today's unholy momentum, with its pressures to get with this or that program. Death suspends practice. ♦

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THE CURRENT CINEMA

DOUBLE TROUBLE

"Enemy" and "Le Week-End."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Two men come together in a hotel room near Toronto. The day outside is flat, and the room is dim; nobody turns on the light. The men have never met before, although they have spoken on the phone. Now, at last, they find themselves face to face. And here's the curious thing: it's the same face.

Denis Villeneuve's "Enemy" stars Jake Gyllenhaal, twice. His first and mousier role is that of Adam Bell, who teaches history to patently bored students. As befits someone who specializes in the study of dictatorships, he seems to be bowed beneath the yoke of an invisible tyrant. He works, eats, lives alone, walks with a mixture of shuffle and trudge, and has glumly regular sex with his girlfriend, Mary (Mélanie Laurent). A colleague suggests a diversion: "You don't go to the movies, do you?" "Movies?" Adam replies, as if the guy had recommended foxhunting, or a bungee jump.

Jake Gyllenhaal in Denis Villeneuve's new movie, adapted from a novel by José Saramago.

Nonetheless, Adam rents a film—a flighty-looking farce—on DVD, and watches it at home. And there, suddenly, at the back of a scene, is him. He's a smiling bellhop in a pillbox hat, holding suitcases, but it's him all right, or an actor who resembles him. (A warning to any viewers who, as a matter of habit, claim to "identify with" characters onscreen: this movie will teach you a lesson.) Using the cast list, plus Google, Adam tracks the fellow down. He is Anthony Claire, a bit-part performer with a pregnant wife named Helen (Sarah Gadon). He's more forthright than Adam, and better dressed, and he reads motorcycle magazines rather than history books. In other respects, however, the two men match. They both live in Toronto. They have the same beard, the same voice, and the same scar on their midriff. They even have the same handwriting, which somehow feels creepiest of all. A pair of souls, in other words, armed with a single body. How can two be one? What happens when the alter meets the ego?

"Enemy" is adapted by Javier Gullón from "The Double," by José Saramago—one of many writers who have grappled with the theme. They make a frighteningly distinguished bunch. Even if you lay aside "The Comedy of Errors," you are left with E.T.A. Hoffmann, Robert Louis Stevenson, "The Prince and the Pauper," Poe's "William Wilson," and Dostoyevsky's "The Double"—his best book, according to Nabokov, who himself conjured up "Despair," in which a businessman kills a tramp whom he believes, quite wrongly, to be his doppelgänger. The novel was filmed by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, in 1978, with a script by Tom Stoppard, and Dirk Bogarde in the lead, and the result, unsurprisingly, gave off a dandified chill. For a warmer hall of mirrors, there was "The Double Life of Véronique" (1991), Krzysztof Kieślowski's generous masterpiece, which offered two helpings of Irène Jacob.

Now we have a couple of Gyllenhaals to play with. The actor is thirty-three, and until recently he bore the mark of boyishness. It both brightened his appeal, in zippy films like "Source Code," and meant that his more solemn roles, in "Zodiac" and "Brokeback Mountain," took him to the limits of his range. Finally, weathered and wearied, he looks his age. One reason, perhaps, that Adam and Anthony become mutually and manically obsessed is that each wants to know if, and how, the other has made better use of his life. The mood becomes one of jealous unease, with our heroes prowling and sparring like alley cats. Even their respective partners start to merge; both women are pale-skinned, blond, and tinged with sorrow, as if fearing that no good can come of the unearthly coincidence between their menfolk. The psychoanalyst Otto Rank thought that a person's double could be a shadowy harbinger of his or her death, and "Enemy" seconds that view.

In a sense, Villeneuve makes this easy for himself, by placing the whole thing under a cloud. If his previous film, "Prisoners," struck you as dungeon dark, get a load of the new one. It's an hour shorter than "Prisoners," which is a mercy, but it's shot in a kind of brown and cream, with characters begrimed by the light. Architecturally, no quarter is given to the graceful or the serene: the director guides us through a panorama of hard blocks and housing developments, as his compatriot David Cronenberg did in his early work, although "Enemy" draws upon a more recent asset—Absolute World, the twinned and twisted condominium towers in Mississauga, west of the city. Completed in 2012, and stared at in wonder-

ILLUSTRATION BY CONCEPCIÓN STUDIOS

ment by the camera, they furnish the film with its most daunting double of all.

Did it have to be like this? Must the world of a movie be so absolute? It's near impossible, as you emerge from "Enemy," to convince yourself that doubling might have a dashing or a funny side—remember "The Prisoner of Zenda" or Ivan Reitman's "Dave," in which Kevin Kline, as a mean American President, inspects his humble look-alike (the Dave of the title), and says, "You're a very handsome man. Just get rid of the grin." After they swap, it takes Sigourney Weaver, as the First Lady, to spot the difference, when she catches Dave glancing at her legs in the limo. Her husband would never do that. Sexual frisson is seldom far away, in tales of doubling, and you can see why: they challenge our vain assumption that erotic allure is private and unmistakable. If that can be duplicated, nothing is sacred, not even love, and so, in "Enemy," the two men wind up exchanging partners, with Anthony seducing Mary, and Adam going to bed with Helen, who suspects the truth but seems, if anything, aroused by what it portends. Talk about a double date. Only one shock remains, in the closing scene; it yanks the movie toward Kafka, and leaves you scratching your head and other body parts. "Enemy" may crawl and infuriate, and, boy, does Villeneuve get rid of the grin. But the film sticks with you, like a dreadful dream or a spider in the bedclothes. Shake it off, and it's still there.

One sequence in "Le Week-End" may be the best thing that Jim Broadbent has ever done. His has been an exemplary career, with supporting roles for Martin Scorsese ("Gangs of New York") and Woody Allen ("Bullets Over Broadway"); an Oscar for "Iris"; a florid turn as the ringmaster in "Moulin Rouge"; and a long-standing loyalty to Mike Leigh. But here is something new: in closeup, we see his face contorted, though whether in pain or in pleasure is unclear. Then we get it: he is plugged into an iPod, listening to Dylan, and dancing—or passionately staggering—around the room. Without spectacles, his eyes look milky with age; he must have been young when Dylan was young. A lonely long shot frames him for what he is now: an oldster-in-waiting, standing in his underwear and his socks. "How does it feel / To be without a home," Dylan asks, and you can see what our guy is thinking: Well, at least it might be an adventure. Or would I get lost?

All of which shows that "Le Week-End," written by Hanif Kureishi and directed by Roger Michell, is far from the airy confection that the trailers, the posters, and the simpering title suggest. Broadbent plays Nick, a college lecturer, with Lindsay Duncan as his wife, a schoolteacher named Meg. They travel to Paris to celebrate their thirtieth wedding anniversary and to ask themselves, really, what there is to celebrate. (In a fitting highlight, they make a pilgrimage to Samuel Beckett's grave.) We get bright glances at the city, yet its glory lies at arm's length, or beyond; the focus is squarely on the central couple, locked like struggling swimmers in each other's embrace. Their bickering has a nasty bite, tightened by the constant cursing that marks out the educated English middle class, plus a tang of carnal excess. "That's the nicest thing I've ever put in my mouth," Meg says, as she samples a glass of wine.

Now and then, the movie jolts and re-starts: the couple tries to flee without paying a bill, first from a restaurant and then from a hotel, thus halving the comic effect. As Meg shoves Nick against a wall, like a cop manhandling a suspect, and says, "Love dies," you start to feel exhausted by their plight. It is at this juncture, however, that help arrives, in the lanky shape of Jeff Goldblum. He plays Morgan, an old college friend of Nick's, now living on the Rue de Rivoli, with a new French wife and a successful book to his name. Instantly, he invites Nick and Meg to a soirée. The monologue that Goldblum delivers there, grand with illusion and larded with mouthfuls of canapés, is entirely delicious—roguish and absurd, but lending the film a zest that it was in danger of losing. Later, as the story fades, Morgan joins Nick and Meg in a light-footed dance that pays homage to Godard's "Bande à Part." Old movies, food and drink, dead authors with much to impart, and a love that comes back to life: such are the joys, according to this uncomfortably honest film, worth setting against our disappointments, and against the many ravages that lie in store. "Think of me as falling out of a window, forever," Nick says, but there are still some things, Paris included, that catch us as we fall. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM/GO/FRONTROW
Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by P. C. Vey, must be received by Sunday, March 16th. The finalists in the March 3rd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 31st issue. The winner receives a signed print of the cartoon. Any resident of the United States, Canada (except Quebec), Australia, the United Kingdom, or the Republic of Ireland age eighteen or over can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit newyorker.com/captioncontest.

THE WINNING CAPTION

"She got it in the divorce."
Richard Wolf, Westminster, Md.

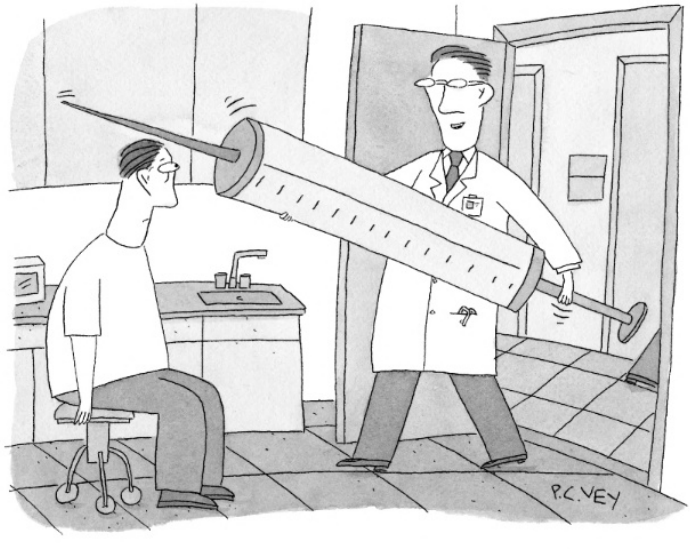
THE FINALISTS

"Don't blame me—I voted for the other thing."
Daniel Straus, Toronto, Ont.

"Why does this never happen on the way to work?"
Brett McArthur, Lincoln, Neb.

"This better be a real monster attack and not some political-payback scheme."
B. D. Grisham, Seattle, Wash.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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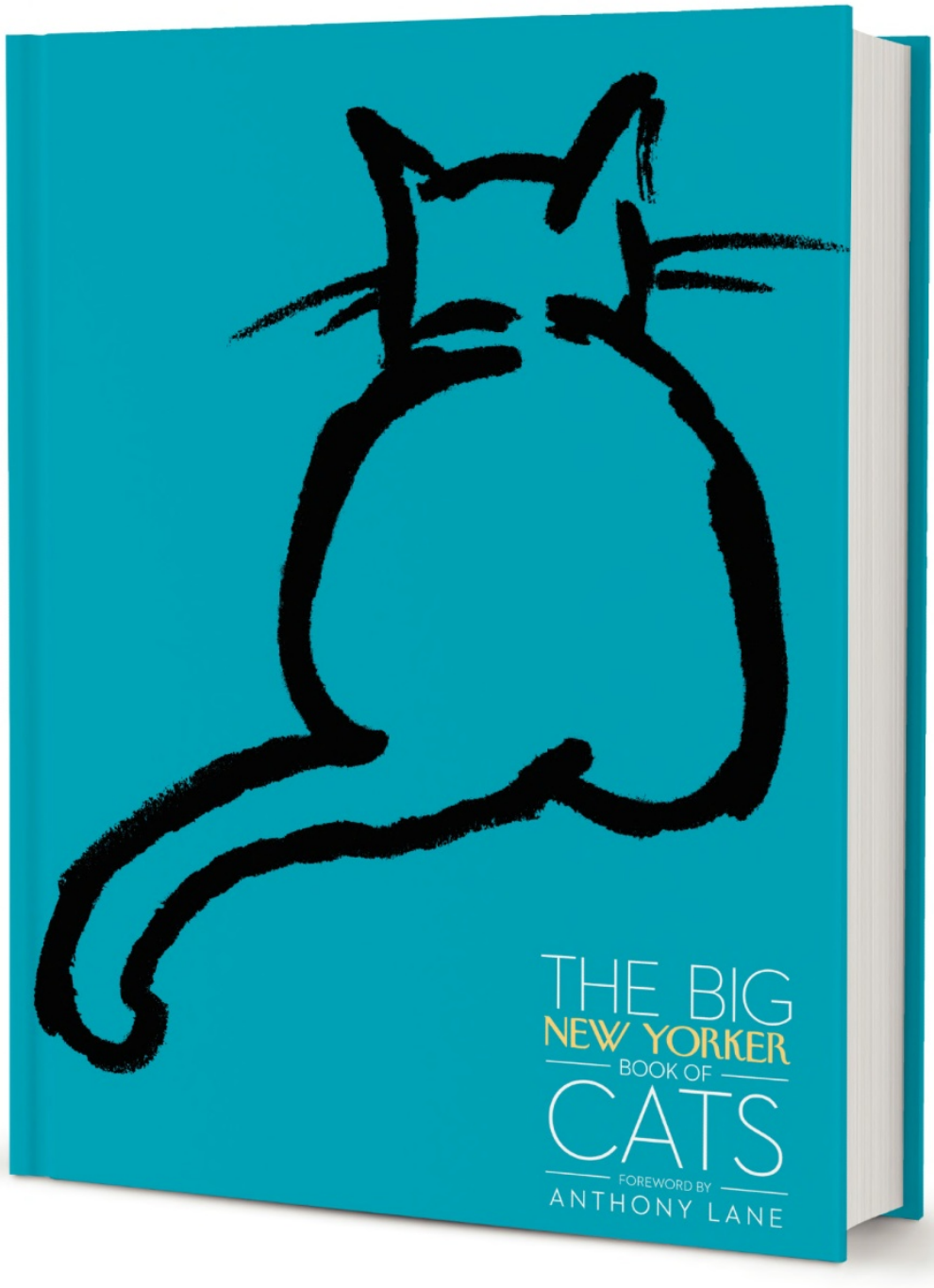

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