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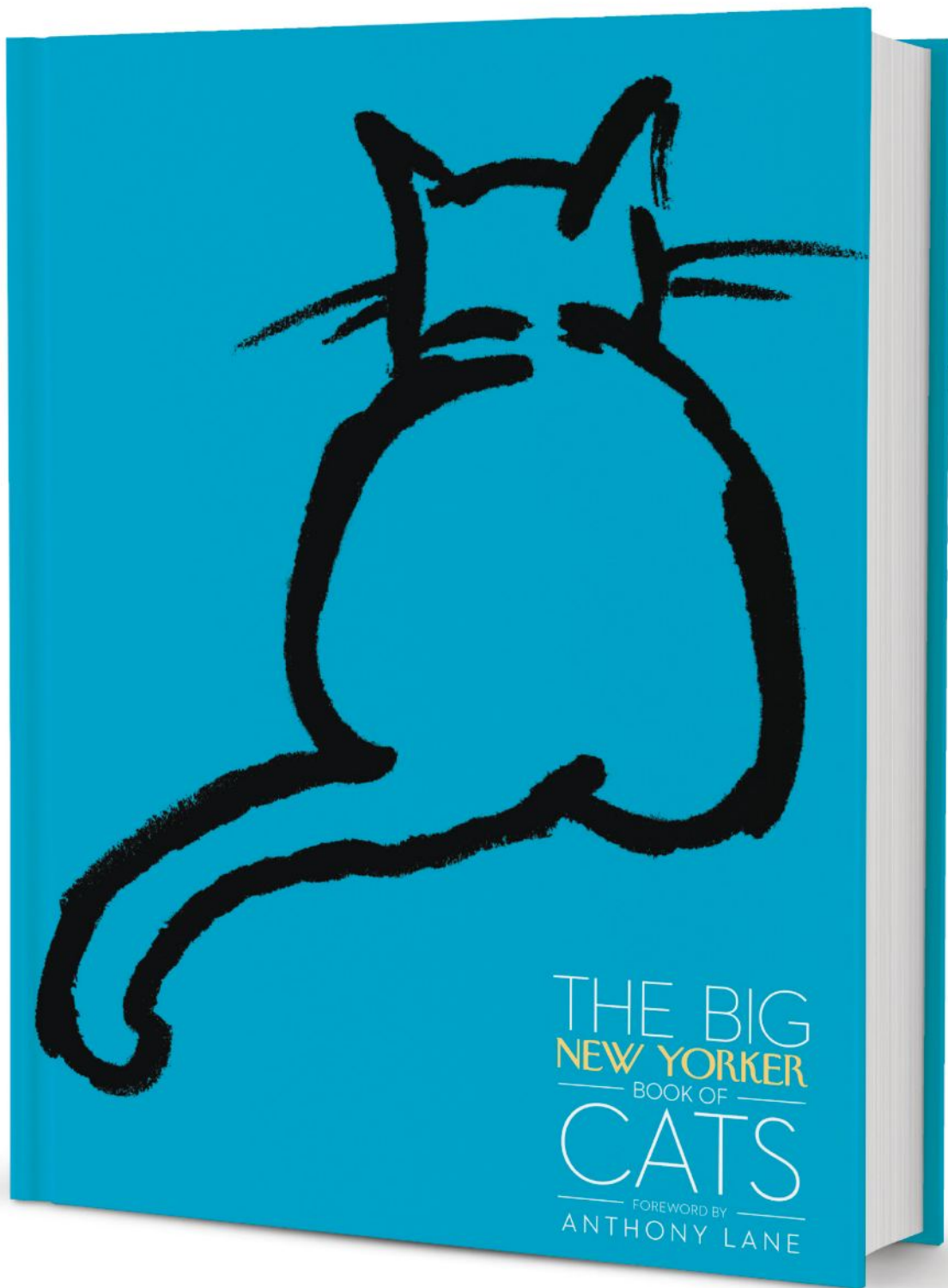
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THE MAIL

THE MYTH OF APATHY

As Nicholas Lemann writes, Abe Rosenthal was indeed responsible for creating a myth regarding the circumstances surrounding the murder of Kitty Genovese, but the myth was not, as Lemann suggests, that some three dozen people heard and failed to report screams on a March night fifty years ago (Books, March 10th). Instead, it was Rosenthal's insistence that the cause was moral decay, urban alienation, or "apathy," which Rosenthal considered a disease, "a symptom of a terrible reality in the human condition." Unconvinced by Rosenthal's claim that simply "by happenstance all thirty-eight did that night what each one alone might have done any night," four colleagues—John Darley, Judith Rodin, Lee Ross, and Richard Nisbett—and I designed experiments to test the idea that the number that made the story so sensational may have contributed to its occurrence in the first place. The resulting discoveries identified three distinct social processes now described in textbooks as "bystander inhibition." Far from being an illness, failure to respond results from social influence, the understanding of which can be used to help individuals act in closer accord with their moral predisposition. Our discoveries contributed to the emergence of the widely respected psychological perspective of "situational determinism," the idea that behavior arises not so much from within individuals but from the social pressures they face. Ironically, we now know that the myth of apathy was initiated by a headline written after Genovese's murderer had been caught, as a result of a citizen reporting a crime in progress. The reason the story went viral was that New York and the nation were in the midst of a decade of rising—not falling—social concern.

Bibb Latané
Chapel Hill, N.C.

In seeking to explain Rosenthal's anger toward Genovese's apathetic neighbors, Lemann might have delved deeper than the story that Rosenthal provided as the

psychological trigger, a life-changing encounter between his sister and a flasher. As an American Jew, Rosenthal had been profoundly affected not just by the enormity of the Holocaust but by the world's apparent indifference to the victims. In 1958, Rosenthal visited Auschwitz and wrote a seminal essay in the *Times Magazine* on that place of "unutterable terror," where an appalling normalcy—sunshine, the laughter of children at the gates—had all but effaced the horror of what had occurred there so recently. While conceding that there was "no news" to report from Auschwitz, as "the screams can no longer be heard," Rosenthal felt an overwhelming impulse to bear witness and to speak for the dead. In particular, he was moved by a picture of a girl, "twenty-two years old, plumply pretty, blond," smiling sweetly. The published police mug shot of Genovese, twenty-eight years old, staring hopefully at the camera, looking uncannily like Millie Perkins (who had played Anne Frank in the movie version of her life), must have brought all that bottled-up emotion to the surface.

John V. H. Dippel
Salisbury, Conn.

Rosenthal may have written that Marty Gansberg was a cub reporter, but, when he sent Gansberg out to write a follow-up story on the Genovese murder, he was not sending an amateur journalist. Marty had worked in the *Times'* editorial department for more than twenty years. He also taught a course in journalism. I worked with Marty on the makeup desk for five years in the late nineteen-fifties. No one who knew him would believe that he created facts for a news story. Whatever spin the editors put on that story, I believe that what Marty reported was accurate.

Jerry Werksman
Newport Beach, Calif.

•
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Ilonka Karasz, May 22, 1971

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¹Source: MSCI All Country benchmark returns 1983–2013.

²Source: Gross domestic product based on purchasing-power-parity (PPP) share of world total. IMF, Haver Analytics.

³Source: FactSet as of 11/30/2013. Data presented for the MSCI AC World Index, which represents 44 countries and contains 2,436 stocks. The index is not intended to represent the entire global universe of tradable securities.

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



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ALYNDIA LEE SEGARRA, the front woman and driving force of the old-timey group Hurray for the Riff Raff, has travelled far. A twenty-seven-year-old Bronx native of Puerto Rican descent, she grew up following the punk scene in the East Village and left home at seventeen, hopping freight trains before landing in New Orleans. Along the way, Segarra picked up the banjo and the guitar and started singing. Her band's latest album, "Small Town Heroes," takes on familiar folk subjects like heartbreak and violence, with a feminist punch. Hurray for the Riff Raff plays the Knitting Factory on April 2, and the following night the band is atop New York City, with a show at the Kaplan Penthouse, in Lincoln Center's American Songbook series.

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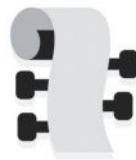
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CLASSICAL MUSIC



OPERA

Metropolitan Opera

In a way, “*Arabella*,” the beguiling final opera that Richard Strauss wrote with the master librettist Hugo von Hofmannsthal (who died after revising the first act), is a slimmed-down, bourgeois updating of “*Der Rosenkavalier*.” In the past two decades, the demanding title role has been taken by the formidable Kiri Te Kanawa and Renée Fleming; now it’s the turn of the young Swedish soprano Malin Byström, leading a cast that also features the long-overdue Met debuts of two major European singers, Michael Volle and Juliane Banse; Philippe Auguin conducts. (April 3 and April 7 at 7:30.) • **Also playing:** Zeffirelli’s production of “*La Bohème*”—the ultimate crowd-pleaser—is a useful way for the house to bring fine young artists to public attention. Vittorio Grigolo anchors the cast as Rodolfo, joined by Anita Hartig, Susanna Phillips, and Massimo Cavalletti in the other leading roles; Stefano Ranzani. (April 2 at 8 and April 5 at 1.) • Anthony Minghella’s vividly cinematic production of “*Madama Butterfly*” returns to the schedule, with two singers assured of drawing interest: the Latvian soprano Kristine Opolais, singing the title role, and the exceptional young American tenor James Valenti, as Pinkerton; Marco Armiliato. (April 4 at 7:30.) • A solid trio of Met veterans—Marcelo Álvarez, Patricia Racette, and Željko Lučić—take the leading roles in Giordano’s “*Andrea Chénier*,” a lyrically robust verismo warhorse; Gianandrea Noseda. (April 5 at 8 and April 8 at 7:30.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

Les Arts Florissants

Rameau’s most popular opera is probably “*Platée*,” a comic tale of an ugly water nymph who is convinced that Jupiter is in love with her; certainly, Mark Morris’s production at New York City Opera delighted thousands of New Yorkers. If anyone else can bring the work to life it would be this triumphant French company, here under the command of Paul Agnew, with a cast that includes Marcel Beekman, Edwin Crossley-Mercer, and Simone Kermes. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-721-6500. April 2 at 7:30.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

New York Philharmonic

Pablo Heras-Casado, a young Spanish conductor rapidly taking his place at the top of the industry, is being paired with a legendary soloist, Peter Serkin, in his Philharmonic debut. The repertoire is grand: Britten’s “Four Sea Interludes” from “*Peter Grimes*,” Bartók’s Third Piano Concerto, and Shostakovich’s Tenth Symphony. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. April 2-3 at 7:30, April 4 at 11 A.M., and April 5 at 8.)

American Composers Orchestra

Derek Bermel, the gifted artistic director of the ensemble, has the highlighted work in the group’s next concert, conducted by George Manahan; it’s “*Mar de Setembro*,” a setting of texts by the late Portuguese poet Eugénio de Andrade that features the smoldering voice of Luciana Souza. Pieces by Revueltas, Gabriela Lena Frank, Marcos Balter, and the great Gunther Schuller (“*Contours*”) are also included. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. April 4 at 7:30.)

The Tallis Scholars

Peter Phillips’s elegant singers are not only masters of Renaissance music; in a concert presented by Miller Theatre, they also offer the world premiere of a work by the iconic minimalist Michael Nyman on a program that also features music by Tallis, Sheppard, and Des Prez. (Church of St. Mary the Virgin, 145 W. 46th St. 212-854-7799. April 5 at 8.)

Akademie für Alte Musik Berlin

You can’t go wrong with a program of music by the Bach family. Johann Sebastian’s Orchestral Suite No. 1 in C Major is the kickoff piece in a concert by the sleek and expert German ensemble, which continues with works by his cousin Johann Christoph Bach, as well as by his better-known sons, C. P. E. Bach (including the String Symphony No. 5 in B Minor) and J. C. Bach. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. April 8 at 7:30.)

RECITALS

Issue Project Room: Unsound Festival

The Polish new-music scene, as active as ever, gathers its diverse energies each year at this festival in Krakow. Now, for the fourth time, there’s a New York edition, based at Brooklyn’s I.P.R., which begins with a performance of Oren Ambarchi’s chamber piece “*Knots*,” given by the percussionist Joe Talia, the violist James Rushford, and the Sinfonietta Cracovia; music by Hanne Darboven (“*Opus 17a*”) is also featured. (22 Boerum Pl. issueprojectroom.org. April 2 at 8. Through April 6.)

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

An exceptional crew of soloists (including the violinist Daniel Hope and the clarinetist Romie de Guise-Langlois) comes together to explore music by European masters who all took refuge in the United States—Bartók (“*Contrasts*”), Prokofiev (the Sonata in D Major for Violin and Piano), and Korngold (the Piano Quintet, one of his most powerful works); Charles Ives’s little “*Largo*” represents the host country. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788. April 6 at 5.)

“Yale in New York”: “The Soldier’s Tale”

Stravinsky’s compact masterpiece, composed in isolated Switzerland during the First World War, is as vital to the canon as ever, but it is rarely performed in the full staged version that he and the librettist, C. F. Ramuz, envisioned. Now the piece is being mounted by the Yale Schools of Music and Drama, with an honored alumnus, Michael Cerveris, leading the cast of student actors, and with the clarinetist David Shifrin leading the music; the new English translation is by Liz Diamond, who directs. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. April 6 at 7:30.)

Khatia Buniatishvili

The acclaimed young Georgian pianist makes her Carnegie debut at Weill Recital Hall, performing big-boned repertory by Liszt (the Sonata in B Minor), Ravel, Chopin (the Sonata No. 2 in B-Flat Minor), and Stravinsky (Three Movements from “*Petrushka*”). (212-247-7800. April 7 at 7:30.)



NIGHT LIFE

ROCK AND POP

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

"Africa Now!"

The Apollo Theatre and the World Music Institute have teamed up for a four-day festival celebrating the music of the vital continent. The highlight of the gathering is a concert on April 5 at the Apollo, featuring the Malian singer **Fatoumata Diawara**, the Senegalese trio **Les Frères Guissé**, and the reggae and Afro-beat ensemble **Sierra Leone's Refugee All Stars**. There are also film screenings, family concerts, and dance parties. (253 W. 125th St. apollotheater.org. April 2-6.)

Kraftwerk

Even today, more than forty years since its formation, the visionary German electronic quartet (whose name translates as "power plant") continues to feel futuristic. It is currently performing selections from its catalogue alongside a striking 3-D show that invokes the minimal aesthetic of early screen savers, and the evening comes complete with specialty 3-D glasses for the audience and matching spandex bodysuits for the band. (United Palace, 4140 Broadway, at 175th St. 800-745-3000. April 1-2.)

Loser's Lounge: Linda Ronstadt vs. Carly Simon

One of the great things about the Loser's Lounge is that it allows us to experience glorious live versions of songs that would otherwise disappear into the digital mists. Last year, Linda Ronstadt announced that she would no longer be performing, a result of acquiring Parkinson's disease. And Carly Simon is famously audience-averse. But the Loser's leader, Joe McGinty, is calling on his talented stable of singers and musicians to stage a battle between their wonderful catalogues, and asking the audience to pick a "winner." So what'll it be: "You're No Good" or "You're So Vain"? (Joe's Pub, 425 Lafayette St. 212-539-8778. April 3-5.)

Unsound Festival New York

This ambitious, multi-venue festival began in Krakow, Poland, in 2003, providing a home to the vibrant yet underappreciated electronic and avant-garde scenes east of Berlin. As it has aged, the festival has grown to incorporate more genres under its banner, and this year's eclectic local installment may be the most impressive yet. It kicks off on April 2 at Issue Project Room, with an appearance by the Australian multi-instrumentalist **Oren Ambarchi**, who will be joined by the **Sinfonietta Cracovia** string quintet. There is also a rare performance of the German conceptual artist Hanne Darboven's mathematics-based music by the Barcelona sound-art duo **EVOL**. The festival continues for a week, and one highlight, on April 3, is a collaborative electronic set in the David Rubenstein Atrium at Lincoln Center between **Neotantrik** (the d.j. Andy Votel and Sean Canty, of Demdike Stare)

and the pioneering New Age synthesizer artist **Suzanne Ciani**, who once developed sound for Atari and pinball machines. (More information on Unsound, which runs through April 8, can be found at www.unsound.pl.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

Regina Carter

On her latest album, "Southern Comfort," the violinist continues the musical investigation into her family roots that informed her 2006 album, "I'll Be Seeing You: A Sentimental Journey." The new release employs as a source rural folk tunes that her Alabamian coal-miner grandfather might have heard. Carter and her ensemble rework these simple melodies without losing the heartfelt expressivity of the originals. (Birdland, 315 W. 44th St. 212-581-3080. April 1-5.)

George Coleman

Smoke, the small club on Broadway between 105th and 106th streets that keeps the Upper West Side safe for hard bop, is celebrating its fifteenth anniversary. The space has a long connection to jazz. It opened in what had long been Augie's Jazz Bar, and the name of the current joint comes, according to the owners, from "Smoke," the 1995 film by Wayne Wang and Paul Auster. Auster, who frequented the original place, based a character in that film on its proprietor. The tenor titan Coleman, who gained valuable experience in the bands of Max Roach and Miles Davis, marks the occasion with his quartet, featuring the pianist **Harold Mabern**, the bassist **John Webber**, and the drummer **Joe Farnsworth**. (2751 Broadway. 212-864-6662. April 4-5.)

Roy Hargrove

Although this fluid trumpeter can sometimes be heard manning his funk-fortified RH Factor band, he has a deep passion for the bebop tradition. A wunderkind who fulfilled his early promise, Hargrove remains one of the most exciting brass virtuosos still mining the riches left by the masters of previous generations. As his forays into R. & B. prove, though, Hargrove is no staunch traditionalist, and his music crackles with in-the-moment flair. (Blue Note, 131 W. 3rd St. 212-475-8592. April 1-6.)

Tom Harrell's Trip

This wiry, rough-and-tumble quartet sets off the horns of the veteran trumpeter Harrell and the saxophone of a contemporary marvel, **Mark Turner**, with **Ugonna Okegwo's** bass and the drums of **Adam Cruz** providing ballast. Nearly two decades of age divide them, but Harrell and Turner are similarly daring players who will bring out the adventurer in each other. (Village Vanguard, 178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. 212-255-4037. April 1-6.)

Hugh Masekela

For the general public, who know him from his major hit single, "Grazing in the Grass," back in 1968, or his collaborations with Paul Simon in the eighties, the trumpeter and vocalist remains the face of South African jazz. Blending political advocacy with joyously rhythmic music, Masekela, much like his former wife, the late singer Miriam Makeba, never allows social concerns to drift too far from musical passions. He's celebrating his seventy-fifth birthday at the Rose Theatre. (Jazz at Lincoln Center. Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500. April 4-5.)

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GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

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

WHITNEY MUSEUM

2014 Whitney Biennial. Through May 27.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

"Pterosaurs: Flight in the Age of Dinosaurs." Opens April 5.

FRICK COLLECTION

"Enlightenment and Beauty: Sculptures by Houdon and Clodion." Opens April 1.

JEWISH MUSEUM

"Other Primary Structures." Through May 18.

NEUE GALERIE

"Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937." Through June 30.

NEW MUSEUM

Laure Prouvost. Through April 13.

SCULPTURECENTER

Rossella Biscotti / David Douard / Radamés (Juni) Figueroa / Jumana Manna. Through May 12.

STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM

"When the Stars Begin to Fall: Imagination and the American South." Through June 29.

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

Brooklyn Museum

"Witness: Art and Civil Rights in the Sixties"

This persuasive exhibition illuminates the nation's fight for racial justice while rewriting the art history of the sixties: it was far more complex than the triumph of minimalism and Pop. Using the lens of the civil-rights movement, the curators, Teresa Carbone and Kellie Jones, reveal an astonishing pluralism, which ranges across styles, regions, and races. In one room, a Fluxus score by Ben Patterson hangs near a Richard Avedon portrait of George Wallace, a sculpture from the shape-shifter David Hammons, and paintings by artists as dissimilar as Faith Ringgold and Norman Rockwell, as an accompanying soundtrack ("Go Tell It on the Mountain," "The Times They Are A-Changin'") plays softly. But while the curators offer an inspiring diverse reading of American art, they end on a grim note. A time line in the show's final gallery extends to 2013—the year that Trayvon Martin's killer was acquitted and the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act—to remind us that the battle these artists fought in remains to be won. Through July 6.

Asia Society

"Golden Visions of Densatil: A Tibetan Buddhist Monastery"

The awesomely ornate, nine-centuries-old Densatil monastery in the high mountains of central Tibet was ground to dust during the Cultural Revolution, but a few dozen of its artifacts have been gathered for this fine show. Instead of proceeding chronologically, the exhibition presents the surviving fragments in the order in which they would have appeared on the monastery's stupas, starting with fearsome guardians at the bottom and proceeding to the holiest deities at the top. There's Nirvana to be glimpsed in much of the art here, from the serene single Buddhas with their eyes clamped shut to the pair of divinities in tantric union, flailing their dozen arms in ecstasy. But the most gripping statues are the angriest, such as a fifteenth-century sculptural fragment of Dhumavati Shri Devi, gilded and inlaid with crystals and lapis lazuli, feverishly thrusting the swords in two of her four hands and wearing a necklace of decapitated heads. Through May 18.

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

"Abbott and Marville: The City in Transition"

Ten photographs of Paris in the eighteen-sixties by Charles Marville tie in neatly to the Met's related exhibition of his work and provide an excellent excuse to mount a big show of Berenice Abbott's images of New York in the thirties.

Eugene Atget, whose turn-of-the-century photographs of Paris Abbott helped publish, was her model for the straightforward, unsentimental documentation of her city's avenues, façades, and skyscrapers. Adding her own keen eye for scale and spectacle, she crafted a vision of New York that's at once real and ideal. A fine selection of Abbott's other American landscapes, microscopic studies, and portraits (including Joyce, Gide, Cocteau, and Djuna Barnes) make this a solid retrospective. Through April 11. (Greenberg, 41 E. 57th St. 212-334-0010.)

Sigmar Polke

Nearly a hundred works on paper, almost all from the sixties, might seem a timely amuse-bouche for the huge retrospective of the German artist, who died in 2010, that opens at MOMA this month. But they're a banquet in themselves. What a mind was Polke's! Every picture, be it a ballpoint scrawl or a densely worked gouache, uncorks some singular idea about art, popular culture, or uncharted philosophy. Serious joking alternates with throwaway profundity. (Sample titles: "Beer Coaster Fountain," "Why Can't I Stop Smoking?," "Everybody Is His Own Car," "Painted at the Command of Higher Powers.") Assessing Polke's greatness is a priority today, but no cinch. How do you honor someone who, when not dancing away from your comprehension, laughs in your face? Through June 7. (Werner, 4 E. 77th St. 212-988-1623.)

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

Joanne Greenbaum

Big abstract paintings suggest furiously worked sketchbook pages that exploded, with wristy gestures—smeared patterns, frantic scribbles—performed at full-body scale. They're a riot, with no obvious compositional logic besides unremitting, sheer insistence. Whimsies become whammies: a rain of primary-colored vertical drips, a thunderstorm of lines in pink Flashe marker. Coming to a viewer's rescue is color. Improbably suave chords of pink and yellow, brown and aqua, or orange and blue keep your spirits barely, but happily, afloat in the flood. Through April 20. (Uffner, 170 Suffolk St. 212-274-0064.)

Matthew Pillsbury

Setting his camera for exposures that last as long as an hour, Pillsbury makes photographs that render moving figures as filmy apparitions. Recently, he's been using that approach to capture people whose lives are illuminated by the glow of little screens—cell phones, laptops, TVs. Here, he focusses on himself and a boyfriend, seen together and alone. Pictures of the couple as naked phantoms in bed suggest the ephemeral nature of romance.

Solitary images of the men, whether posed in interiors or in landscapes, are more resonant, finding solace in solitude. Through April 20. (Wolf, 70 Orchard St. 212-925-0025.)

Laurie Simmons

Since the seventies, Simmons's photographs have been raising questions about identity and role play, and her new color pictures are no exception: most of them portray "dollers," people who dress up as the wide-eyed girls in Japanese anime. Wearing outsized heads, the figures' cloying cuteness is subverted by sexy outfits: mermaids, miniskirts, latex. Some pose like fashion models in cramped attic rooms; others take selfies in the snow. But, whatever their guise, Simmons's subjects remain unnervingly alien—recalling the sideshow grotesquerie of her earlier photographs of ventriloquists' dummies more than the seductively human affect of her recent pictures of love dolls. These creatures aren't lovable; they're nightmarish and all the more memorable for it. Through April 28. (Salon 94 Bowery, 243 Bowery, at Stanton St. 212-979-0001.)

"Half Drop"

This splendid drawing show demands a visit for its unusual presentation alone: a "half-drop" array of unframed, roughly same-sized pictures, evenly spaced in offset rows from near the floor to near the ceiling. Giving distinct punch to each of a hundred and thirty-two works, by eleven artists, the tactic defeats viewing fatigue. Most of the artists—a discerning mix of deceased outsiders, art-world veterans, and gifted newcomers—tend toward fantasy. All share a pitch of intense involvement with their materials. The drawings' relative quality is hard to judge in a hanging that makes everything look terrific. Through April 13. (Schuss, 34 Orchard St. 212-219-9918.)

"Petroleum Jelly"

There's no actual greasy lubricant in this cunning bicoastal match of two New York artists, Polly Apfelbaum and Kirsten Nash, and two from L.A., John Burtle and David Zuttermeister. But the idea of the stuff's lens-blurring use nicely poeticizes the contrasts between, on the one hand, Apfelbaum's woozy ceramic plaques and Nash's sort-of abstract paintings and, on the other, the Californians' medleys of such oddments as peeled acrylic paint, resin, hair, a lollipop, and a packing peanut. In one juxtaposition, the easterly formality of a pencilled grid on butterscotch-colored paint, by Nash, is jostled by the SoCal what-the-heckness of a Burtle that you won't forget: dried sardines embedded in a surf of blue and white paint and transparent gel. Through April 12. (Clifton Benevento, 515 Broadway, at Spring St. 212-431-6325.)

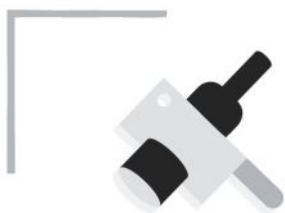


GOINGS ON ONLINE

The pianist Bruce Levingston, a longtime force for new music in

New York, plays pieces by Debussy and Timo Andres at Zankel Hall, in one of many concerts listed on our Web site.

Also online are more theatre listings, including "Brits Off Broadway" at 59E59, and a review of Paula Vogel's 1984 comedy, "And Baby Makes Seven," at the New Ohio Theatre.



FOOD & DRINK

BAR TAB ROYAL PALMS SHUFFLEBOARD CLUB

514 Union St., Brooklyn (347-223-4410)

On a recent evening, the Royal Palms's truly enormous bouncer, Anthony, scanned the converted Gowanus warehouse: no high jinks seemed imminent from the thirty-somethings who milled around the perimeter of the ten regulation shuffleboard lanes, sipping tropical drinks from Mason jars, while a band played surf rock. Anthony had an official-looking earpiece, but rumor has it that it streams NPR. Ashley Albert (singer-songwriter of the children's rock band the Jimmies) and Jonathan Schnapp (Web developer, piñata-maker) opened the space in February. Now they spend their nights roving past vintage Floridian pennants, by striped cabanas, and down to the courts to offer counsel to patrons. Cocktails are named for legends of the game—the Earl Ball is made with Old Forester bourbon, fresh pineapple and lemon juice, ginger, and black-pepper syrup, and is as sweet as can be; the Jim Allen includes Herradura tequila, orange liqueur, and mezcal. Food trucks—recently, Morris grilled cheeses; a dollar extra for duck fat—park at a docking bay. Anthony, who grew up hanging around the D.C. bed and breakfast where his mother worked—“just eating croissants”—revealed his plan to open a B. and B. in a Brooklyn brownstone. Would he offer shuffleboard? “Nah,” he said. “Now that this place is here, no one else can do it. Don't even try.”

—Emma Allen



TABLES FOR TWO

TELEPAN LOCAL

329 Greenwich St. (212-966-9255)

AN ARANCINO IS AN ARANCINO is an arancino. Even when it's filled with bone marrow and it sits in a puddle of Parmigiano aioli. Just as a deep-fried rice ball will always taste like oil and starch, a shrimp popper doesn't taste all that different from its battered-jalapeño brethren. And seven dollars for three pigs in a blanket? This isn't Costco, but you wouldn't necessarily guess that in a blind taste test. It's hard to know how much ironic distance was intended from TGI Fridays when Bill Telepan, the Upper West Side's undisputed king of the greenmarket, put together the menu for his downtown venture, Telepan Local, but you might wish there'd been more.

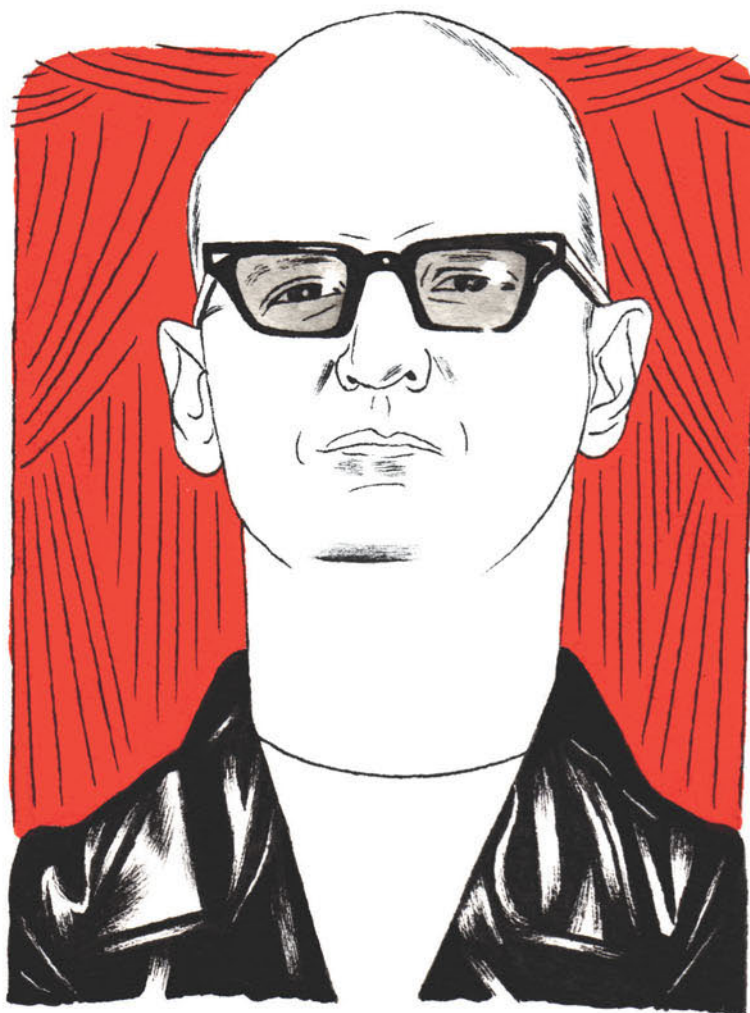
Not that there's anything wrong with fried food. Once past the bar snacks, some of the best things on the menu are fried, like the delicious watercress salad—familiar to legion SriPraPhai fans, and prepared here with cashews, plenty of chili oil, and abundant disregard for any vestigial health benefits the leafiest of greens might possess. “Telepan unplugged” could be the slogan at this self-consciously casual venue, where the waiters wear Steven Alan plaid, trucker hats bob in the open-ish kitchen, and Goldman bankers from the office nearby, standing in black power suits three-deep at the Carrara-marble bar, order up all of the sourdough “pizzettes” on offer. (Jordan Belfort would probably be unimpressed, but charging both the Brussels-sprout and fried-calamari varieties to the company card must be what passes for hedonism in the financial world these days.)

Three to four plates are recommended per person, tapas style, though they vary in size and composition, and so it's difficult to get an order exactly right. Grilled beef short ribs, for instance, come piled high, on a sizzling fajitas-style platter with kimchi, but in the *migas* (the Spanish answer to stir-fry, made with chunks of day-old bread and a bracing pinch of paprika, is having a moment) the bits of trout are scarce. It was an odd decision to chop up the broccoli rabe for a salad, and not the white anchovies served on top. As for the sunchokes with white mushrooms: why serve them cold, so that the only discernible taste was the mushroom vinaigrette? The temperature also seemed off on a cocktail called a lamb shot, made with rosemary-infused vodka, dry vermouth, and—in a twist surely intended for Instagram trolling—lamb consommé. It was gray and cloudy, and like cold soup.

Improbably, ice-cream sundaes for dessert fell short, even the peanut-butter one, which came topped with pretzel crumbs, like a clever college-dining-hall concoction. Telepan Local wants to be a “fun” downtown place, we get that, but fun still needs to be taken seriously.

—Amelia Lester

Open weekdays for lunch and dinner and weekends for brunch and dinner. Small plates \$7-\$17.



"The Library," directed by Steven Soderbergh, is in previews at the Public.

CHANGING MEDIUM

A director's shift from screen to stage.

IN A WORLD RIFE with shifting realities and the vagaries of "truthiness," some real things still happen, such as this: the playwright and screenwriter Scott Z. Burns, round-chested and bespectacled, was drinking water in the large, sunlit room in Hell's Kitchen where the fifty-one-year-old author's first full-length play, "The Library," was being rehearsed. None of the actors in the drama, now in previews at the Public, were present. Moments later, the show's fifty-one-year-old director, Steven Soderbergh, entered the space. Known for his vast array of films, ranging from his 1989 breakthrough effort, "Sex, Lies, and Videotape," to his 2000 films "Erin Brockovich" and "Traffic," which earned Soderbergh a Best Director Oscar, the prolific filmmaker is making his directorial debut for the New York stage. "I'm defining the success of this play by how scared I was doing it," he said. "The key for me is working outside my comfort zone, and that you get scared—but not too scared, and not too far outside your comfort zone that you can't effectively do your job."

The two friends (they first worked together on "The Informant!," in 2009, and then on "Contagion," in 2011), both dressed in dark jackets, trousers, and

shoes, seemed not unlike businessmen waiting for a flight in a bare-looking lounge. After a moment, they began to describe their joint work. First, a little backstory. "The Library" centers on a teen-ager named Caitlin Gabriel (Chloë Grace Moretz, making her stage debut), who survives a Columbine-like shooting in her high school. How Caitlin manages to do that is a story she tells various authorities—law officials and the like—in various ways. What is one to believe of Caitlin's tale, let alone anyone else's in this age of refracted reality? Soderbergh asked a rhetorical question of his own: "At what point does your take on the world become destructive to yourself, and other people? We all have a blind spot towards ourselves, and other people."

Burns's interest in telling this particular story—the story, he said, of "how trauma doesn't make us any better"—started four years back, after he'd read Dave Cullen's book "Columbine." "No one," Burns recalls, "wanted to do it in Hollywood—too dark." Still, Soderbergh and Burns would not let the story go. Meeting, sometimes, in Los Angeles or New York, they'd walk and talk about future projects. They'd been excited about working on their adaptation of "The Man from U.N.C.L.E.," but after their star, George Clooney, suffered a physical setback, the studio opted out. The last project they made together, before Soderbergh retired from making films, was the 2013 movie "Side Effects."

"The Library" is as much about Soderbergh and Burns finding new ways to work together as it is a story about deception and youth. Burns said that one of the big adjustments to working onstage is the lack of closeups; as a screenwriter, he had to learn to convey what a face did on film without overwriting. Also, his characters are everyday folk, and he had to learn how to make big ideas fit into small language. He said that he had to watch out for what the stage could, unintentionally, promote: too *much* talk. Soderbergh was quiet as Burns discussed the technical challenges of theatre. Then, Soderbergh inserted a flashback: "I was fortunate that in my formative years at Louisiana State University"—his father, Peter, is a former dean of education there—"that I saw pretty active and adventurous theatre productions. That was a real revelation—no one has the cornerstone on great stuff. It helped me to ignore the odds that I could make a living as an artist." He paused. Theatre, like any art, could be made anywhere. In any case, Soderbergh considered it his job to bring closeups to the work. Extending his arm as though touching something we couldn't see, he said, "That's what I have to do, make the audience feel they're looking at someone that closely, but on the stage."

—Hilton Als

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

The Heir Apparent

This play by David Ives is based on the 1708 comedy by Jean-François Regnard, about a young man intent on inheriting his uncle's fortune. John Rando directs. In previews. (Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 866-811-4111.)

The Most Deserving

Women's Project Theatre presents a play by Catherine Trieschmann, a satire about a community arts council in Kansas. Starring Veanne Cox and Jennifer Lim; Shelley Butler directs. In previews. Opens April 8. (City Center Stage II, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

The Most Happy Fella

Encores! presents the 1959 musical by Frank Loesser, directed and choreographed by Casey Nicholaw. Starring Laura Benanti, Cheyenne Jackson, and Shuler Hensley. April 2-6. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

The Velocity of Autumn

Eric Coble's first play on Broadway focusses on a seventy-nine-year-old artist who locks herself in her house to avoid being taken to a nursing home by her family. Starring Estelle Parsons and Stephen Spinella; Molly Smith directs. In previews. (Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

NOW PLAYING

Beyond Therapy

In Christopher Durang's smart comedy from 1981, about the absurdity of the nineteen-eighties in Manhattan, a desperate young woman (Liv Rooth) reluctantly begins dating a bisexual, polyamorous young man (Mark Alhadeff) with an insane therapist (Cynthia Darlow) and a suicidal boyfriend (Jeffrey C. Hawkins), and everyone—including the woman's sexually predatory psychiatrist (Karl Kenzler)—gets involved. Under the inspired direction of Scott Alan Evans for TACT, these five wonderful actors have a lot of fun playing delightfully neurotic characters with absolutely no boundaries, and the hilarity is infectious. (Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

Hellman v. McCarthy

Natty in a green blazer, Dick Cavett appears as cool and placid as a glacial lake. Playing himself, the talk-show host lends a perverse air of expertise to Brian Richard Mori's peculiar play, directed by Jan Buttram. The script concerns the literary feud between Lillian Hellman and Mary McCarthy, which turned particularly vicious when McCarthy, a guest on Cavett's show, quipped that every word that Hellman wrote was a lie, "including 'and' and 'the.'" Hellman cried libel and sued for millions. Mori blends documentary material with invented scenes, a form that might have succeeded better had the elusiveness of truth been a

thematic concern. Instead, the play provides opportunities for two tough broads—Roberta Maxwell's Hellman and Marcia Rodd's McCarthy—to protract their verbal claws and for Cavett to have a fine dilatory time, swerving off script to offer details of these women, "linked, now and forever, in history, or, uh, infamy." (Abingdon, 312 W. 36th St. 866-811-4111.)

King Lear

As Shakespeare's tragedy rumbles toward its conclusion, treacheries and miseries are revealed with nearly every line of dialogue, and the body count is piling up rapidly. The Duke of Albany, leader of the army of Britons defending against the invading French, orders the corpses of his wife and his sister-in-law—Goneril and Regan, Lear's scheming, ungrateful daughters—brought before him. "This justice of the heavens that makes us tremble," he says, "touches us not with pity." Such, too, is the fate of the viewers of this production, directed by Arin Arbus for Theatre for a New Audience. The thunderclaps, cannon booms, and eye-gouging provide the tremble, but the pity, sorrow, and existential regret surface rarely. When Lear (Michael Pennington), in the full flower of his madness, and his adviser Gloucester (Christopher McCann), newly blinded, meet again for the last time, it provides one of the evening's only moments of fearful humanity. (Polonsky Shakespeare Center, 262 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 212-229-2819.)

Mothers and Sons

Terrence McNally's new drama, directed by Sheryl Kaller, follows characters he created in 1988, in his short play "Andre's Mother": Katharine (the formidable Tyne Daly), a homophobic Texas matron (nameless in the first play), whose only child, Andre, has died from AIDS, and Cal (Frederick Weller), her son's grieving lover. Two decades later, Katharine shows up at Cal's apartment, only to find that he has a husband (Bobby Steggert) and a child (Grayson Taylor). Gay life has changed, in ways that Andre never got to see. A woman of tiresome ignorance, Katharine is still repelled and frightened by homosexuality. McNally writes with the raw anger and pain that informed so many AIDS dramas of the eighties, missing the subtler points of gay assimilation. The characters lack surprise or self-contradiction (Cal is too decent, Katharine too wretched), and the play, while heartfelt, is stylistically quaint. (Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

Rocky

This oversized production, based on the 1976 movie—directed by Alex Timbers, with a book by Sylvester Stallone and Thomas Meehan, and music and lyrics by Stephen Flaherty and Lynn Ahrens, respectively—has the unvanquished air of being part of a franchise, a canned commodity

destined to sell and sell. It's 1975 in Philadelphia, and Rocky Balboa (Andy Karl) is a boxer, but he's getting long in the tooth and isn't much of a contender for anything. He frequents a pet store, where the bespectacled, socially awkward Adrian (Margo Seibert) is a salesclerk. Rocky is lifted out of professional obscurity when the undefeated heavyweight champion Apollo Creed (played joyously and attractively by Terence Archie) comes to town. Karl is a sweet star, and he understands how his body works in a scene. But, no matter how much he flexes, he can't change the musical's emotionally cheap structure. (Reviewed in our issue of 3/31/14.) (Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

Tales from Red Vienna

In 1920, Helena Altman (Nina Arianda) is a young bourgeois Viennese woman who believes that her husband died in the war and so, to support herself and to pay her maid, Edda (Kathleen Chalfant), she turns the occasional trick. When we first meet Helena, she's having reluctant rough sex with a man (Michael Esper), who she later discovers is also involved with her friend Mutzi von Fessendorf (Tina Benko). David Grimm's script is half Arthur Schnitzler and half Douglas Sirk, and you can see why it might appeal to someone of Arianda's gifts: Helena goes on an emotional journey that ends in a kind of enlightenment. But the derivative deadness of the project sinks the actors, who try to rally past Kate Whoriskey's deer-in-the-headlights direction—perhaps she's thrown by the discrepancy between the script and the actors' willingness to be better than it is—but to listless, lost effect. The only performer who comes out relatively unscathed is the sexy Esper, who races his engines like a man in a hurry, excited by his own heat. (City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

OF NOTE LES MISÉRABLES

The latest revival of this behemoth is completely enjoyable, because it lacks what so many contemporary musicals have a surfeit of: pretension. Based on Victor Hugo's 1862 novel about power, revenge, and justice, the story centers on Jean Valjean (Ramin Karimloo), a good man who's served a long prison sentence not only for stealing bread but for trying to escape punishment. Valjean's spiritual enlightenment and eventual success as a businessman and surrogate father to the orphaned Cosette (played, as an adult, by Samantha Hill) are not the concern of Javert (Will Swenson), a police inspector who's obsessed with extracting justice for Valjean's various crimes. On and on it goes, and the script writers, which include Trevor Nunn and the poet James Fenton, have done a tremendous job of distilling Hugo's concerns. So doing, their script ably supports Claude-Michel Schönberg's completely schmaltzy yet effective music and the true-to-character lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer. The show is big and loud, with huge sets and expressionistic lighting, and the actors all do their darnedest to put the show over. What's not to like? (Imperial, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

ALSO NOTABLE

ACT ONE

Vivian Beaumont

ALADDIN

New Amsterdam

ALL THE WAY

Neil Simon

APPROPRIATE

Pershing Square Signature Center

BEAUTIFUL—THE CAROLE KING MUSICAL

Stephen Sondheim

THE BRIDGES OF MADISON COUNTY

Schoenfeld

BULLETS OVER BROADWAY

St. James

CABARET

Studio 54

CASA VALENTINA

Samuel J. Friedman

HEATHERS: THE MUSICAL

New World Stages

HEDWIG AND THE ANGRY INCH

Belasco

I REMEMBER MAMA

Gym at Judson

IF/THEN

Richard Rodgers

LADY DAY AT EMERSON'S BAR & GRILL

Circle in the Square

THE LIBRARY

Public

OF MICE AND MEN

Longacre

A RAISIN IN THE SUN

Ethel Barrymore

THE REALISTIC JONESES

Lyceum

RED VELVET

St. Ann's Warehouse

SATCHMO AT THE WALDORF

Westside

A SECOND CHANCE

Public

VIOLET

American Airlines Theatre

MOVIES



and Ashley Judd). The director, Neil Burger, has not sufficiently reimagined this dystopian world, which pales alongside the "Twilight" and "Hunger Games" franchises.—*Bruce Diones* (In wide release.)

OPENING

ALAN PARTRIDGE

Steve Coogan reprises his role from the comedy series, as a disk jockey whose station faces a hostile takeover. Directed by Declan Lowney. Opening April 4. (In limited release.)

CAPTAIN AMERICA: THE WINTER SOLDIER

Reviewed in Now Playing. Opening April 4. (In wide release.)

DOM HEMINGWAY

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening April 2. (In limited release.)

ILO ILO

Anthony Chen directed this autobiographical drama, about a Singaporean boy whose family hires a Filipino nanny. In Chinese, English, and Tagalog. Opening April 4. (In limited release.)

UNDER THE SKIN

Reviewed in Now Playing. Opening April 4. (In limited release.)

THE UNKNOWN KNOWN

Reviewed in Now Playing. Opening April 2. (In limited release.)

WATERMARK

A documentary, co-directed by Jennifer Baichwal and the photographer Edward Burtynsky, about the world's water supply. Opening April 4. (Film Forum.)

REVIVALS AND FESTIVALS

Titles in bold are reviewed.

BAM CINÉMATEK

The films of Josef von Sternberg and Marlene Dietrich. April 4 at 2, 6, and 9:50: "Morocco" (1930). • April 4 at 4 and 8: "Shanghai Express" (1932). • April 6 at 4 and 6:30: "The Blue Angel" (1930; in German). • April 7 at 5:15 and 9:15: "Dishonored" (1931). • April 7 at 7:15 and April 8 at 4:30: "**The Devil Is a Woman**."

FILM FORUM

The films of François Truffaut. April 2 at 1, 3:10, 5:20, and 7:30: "Fahrenheit 451" (1966). • April 2-3 at 9:45: "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" (1977, Steven Spielberg). • April 3 at 1, 3:10, 5:15, and 7:30: "The Woman Next Door" (1981). • April 6 at 1:30, 3:30, 5:30, 7:30, and 9:40 and April 7 at 1 and 10: "Stolen Kisses" (1968). • April 7 at 2:50, 5:10, and 7:40: "**The Man Who Loved Women**." • April 8 at 3:30, 5:30, 7:45, and 9:45: "The Green Room" (1978).

NOW PLAYING

Butter on the Latch

Suffering a sudden Brooklyn breakdown—a freak-out of vulnerability on the ambiguous edge of art and abuse—Sarah (Sarah Small), a young performance artist, heads to a rustic California "Balkan camp," along with her friend Isolde (Isolde Chae-Lawrence), to study folk music and dance. There, the primal rhythms and ancient spirits of tradition fuse with the deep rural darkness and the magnetic pull of the redwoods to ensnare the women in a hypnotic bond of desire and a terrifying artistic nightmare. The friends' erotic confidences veer toward sexual rivalry with the arrival of a tall and diffident classmate (Charlie Hewson). Carrying flashlights and wearing headlamps in the deep underbrush, Small and Chae-Lawrence convey looming frenzy with easygoing charm; the hallucinatory videography, by Ashley Connor, looks at faces and landscapes with penetrating detail while evoking unseen realms and timeless mysteries. The director, Josephine Decker, seems to be filming in a state of permanent sleeplessness; every image and sound has the impulsive energy of a creation wrenched from a void into which she would leap again joyfully.—*Richard Brody* (First Time Fest; April 6.)

Captain America: The Winter Soldier

The head of S.H.I.E.L.D., Nick Fury (Samuel L. Jackson), knows that something is amiss: the agency's new top-secret Project Insight, with its airborne, many-barreled "helicarriers"—which can take out potential wrongdoers before they do wrong—isn't ready to launch. But after he points this out, people try to kill him. Steve Rogers—Captain America (Chris Evans)—hates the civil-liberties threat posed by the helicars, which he likens to "holding a gun to everyone on Earth and calling it protection," and he teams up with Nick to locate the "winter soldier" who's gumming up the works. Despite these virtuous nods toward current surveillance issues, the new franchise effort from Marvel charges through hyperkinetic chases and combat, though with slightly less finesse than its predecessor, "Captain America: The First Avenger." Scarlett Johansson, as the former K.G.B. agent Natasha Romanoff, is on hand to banter chastely with Evans (two great bodies but no action). With Robert Redford, who sheds his usual

liberal halo and effectively plays a smooth bureaucratic fascist. Directed by Anthony Russo and Joe Russo; written by Christopher Markus and Stephen McFeely.—*David Denby* (In wide release.)

The Devil Is a Woman

For his last film with Marlene Dietrich, from 1935, the director Josef von Sternberg—working as his own cinematographer—streaked and slashed the screen with shadows and highlights, clotted it with lace and foliage, to match the serpentine extravagance of his wily heroine's schemes. The surprise is in the politics: as the Spanish Civil War was heating up, von Sternberg set the action in turn-of-the-century Spain, where Antonio (Cesar Romero), a dashing young revolutionary, returns from Parisian exile in the turmoil of carnival week and encounters the bewitching songstress Concha Perez (Dietrich). Antonio's friend Don Pasqual (Lionel Atwill), one of her victims, tries his best to warn him, telling his own tale of woe (seen in extended flashbacks), but the romantic adventurer is not to be deterred, even at the risk of his mission and his life. Despite his evident sympathies for the daring freethinker, von Sternberg finds a lurid erotic charge in the cruelty and the constraints of church-bound despotism and a heightened thrill in a femme fatale who may prove truly fatal.—*R.B.* (BAM Cinémathèque; April 7-8.)

Divergent

Barely diverting. Shailene Woodley stars in this post-apocalyptic adventure as Tris, another kick-ass girl from a three-part young adult series (this one written by Veronica Roth) who must face her fears and prevail against a sinister, life-threatening plot. The film is set in a society that's divided into five factions, each specific to its type of people (truthsayers, geniuses, fighters, and the like). At sixteen, Tris is given a test to decide where she belongs, but she is a "divergent," a person who possesses many qualities, and the totalitarian powers-that-be (represented by Kate Winslet) are out to eliminate those who don't conform. True to the genre, Tris hides her nature, has a hunky love interest or two, learns how to fight, and inspires a rebellion. As the herky-jerky plot lurches forward, the overfamiliar mechanics of the film bog it down, despite the appealing cast (which also includes Miles Teller

Enemy

A brief and perplexing fable, starring Jake Gyllenhaal and Jake Gyllenhaal. He plays two bearded men, both living in Toronto, who find themselves to be identical, down to their handwriting and scars. In other hands, such uncanny doubling could have—and often has had—a funny side, but the director, Denis Villeneuve, who made the even glummer "Prisoners," is in no mood to amuse. The light is low and scummy, the buildings unfriendly and hard, and neither man can decide how to treat his opposite number: seek, evade, or destroy? And what about the fact that one of them first saw the other in a movie: does that enthralling coincidence not merit further investigation? (After all, we are watching a film ourselves.) Gyllenhaal does a careful job of distinguishing the two heroes, one more aggressive, the other shy; their respective partners are played by Mélanie Laurent and Sarah Gadon (who has done strong work for David Cronenberg), though both female roles seem perilously thin. The movie sticks to you, however, and the ending is strange and sudden enough to make you revise, or interrogate, all that has come before. Based on a novel by José Saramago.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 3/17/14.) (In limited release.)

Faust

Starting with Satan's wager with God for Faust's soul, F. W. Murnau's 1926 madly audacious silent adaptation of Goethe's masterwork alternates between cosmic and intimate views of life on earth. But even more than the play, the film brings to life the harsh yet gaudy medieval Germany where the story of the radically disaffected scholar (Gösta Ekman), the seductive Mephistopheles (the great Emil Jannings, in all his eruptive virtuosity), and the innocent maiden Gretchen (Camilla Horn) takes place. Murnau tells this immortal tale with images of titanic grandeur and exquisite psychological subtlety, but he also tells another story, of his own day: that of the glory of the silent cinema. With expressions and costumes derived from the paintings of Cranach and Dürer, swirling flames and celestial gloom of a Wagnerian majesty, and a mercurial visual poetry that channels Goethe's own, Murnau makes his case for the young medium as the supreme art form, with its unique power to conjure up worlds present and beyond with an infinitely touching plausibility.—*R.B.* (MOMA; April 4-5.)

Finding Vivian Maier

An unlikely tale, well told. John Maloof, who directed the documentary with Charlie Siskel, speaks of attending a Chicago auction in 2007 and buying a box of old negatives. This eventually led him to a vast cache of photographs, numbering more than a hundred thousand, that were taken by a nanny named Vivian Maier. Few were printed; many others were never even developed; none were shown in public during her life. She died in 2009, and Maloof—as seen in the film—has spent the intervening years making her work available (there have been Maier monographs and exhibits, as well as a Web site) and seeking to reconstruct her private history. He interviews those whom she had helped to raise as children; a portrait slowly emerges of a cussed, reclusive woman whose fixations could verge on the bizarre, and yet whose eye for an image was as cool in its compositional skill as it was tender in its concern for the lowly. She was all too memorable yet she chose to remain unknown, and there is no guarantee that she would have welcomed her posthumous fame, let alone the intrusion of this film. It seems fitting, then, that she escapes definition even here; by the end, we feel as if we have been hearing not of a real person but of a character in a book.—*A.L.* (3/31/14) (In limited release.)

The French Minister

The films of Bertrand Tavernier have often been fringed with humor, of a rueful kind; now, in his seventies, and in a rousing rebuke to tranquility, he has turned to farce. We are in Paris, at the heart of the French administration, where visions of global influence are slightly blurred by the fact that there is no working Internet. Thierry Lhermitte plays the Minister of Foreign Affairs, a majestic loudmouth who quotes Heraclitus and slams doors so hard that documents fly into the air. He has a weary chief of staff (Niels Arestrup), and a new speechwriter (Raphaël Personnaz), who spends the entire film composing an address that the Minister will deliver to the U.N. Most of the people onscreen are backbiters and fools, yet their folly is not unmitigated; somehow, by a whisker, crises are averted and deadlines met. The movie is at its swiftest and most cheerful while it stays in the office, whereas the comic temperature wavers and falls when the Minister and his team venture into the wider world. With Julie Gayet, as a seductive specialist on African matters, and Jane Birkin, as a bemused Nobel laureate whom the Minister invites to lunch. In French.—*A.L.* (3/31/14) (In limited release.)

The Man Who Loved Women

François Truffaut's bittersweet 1977 comedy, about the pleasure and

pathos of sexual pursuit, is also an ode to the art of writing. The film's title is that of a memoir written by the protagonist, Bertrand Morane (Charles Denner), an engineer in provincial Montpellier who spends all his free time chasing women (sometimes literally), until, after an unexpected rejection, he is moved to type out his erotocentric reminiscences. Despite being played by fine actors (including Brigitte Fossey, Leslie Caron, and Nelly Borgeaud), the women Bertrand "loved" remain ciphers, collections of attributes surrounding elusive personae and bodies—seemingly by design. The erotic egotist is writing about himself and his passions, relying on women to reveal different facets of his own identity. Like Bertrand, Truffaut pays homage to old-school formalities, constraints, and styles, both social and sartorial (the film dwells obsessively on elaborate lingerie, skirts and dresses worn not too short, and the rustle of silk stockings). His reticence about sex mirrors Bertrand's—both the director and the character come off as rear-guard warriors against the sexual revolution—against the banalization of their epicurean delights. In French.—*R.B.* (Film Forum; April 7.)

Nymphomaniac: Vol. I

The first part of Lars von Trier's sex epic is a pornographic work of art—obsessive, repetitive, at times remarkably eccentric, but never simple-minded or dull. A middle-aged bachelor, Seligman (Stellan Skarsgård), sees a torn and bruised woman, Joe (Charlotte Gainsbourg), lying in a dark alley; he brings her back to his flat, gives her tea, and gently asks to hear her story. Devoting her life to nothing but sensation, Joe is a kind of fantasy figure whose exploits inevitably shatter social convention. As she relates her sexual history (which we see in flashback), Seligman asks questions, argues with her about her sense of guilt and self-loathing, and takes off into odd, arresting speculations, which provoke her to fresh memories. From the beginning, the material is meant to be not a slice of life but something told—interpreted, varied, recast. In its playful dirtiness, the movie seems like a descendant of such eighteenth-century libertine texts as "Thérèse Philosophé." The model Stacy Martin plays Joe's youthful self (without much affect), and Shia LaBeouf, looking more unformed than ever, plays her brutal first lover.—*D.D.* (3/24/14) (In limited release.)

Under the Skin

The director of "Sexy Beast" (2000) and "Birth" (2004), Jonathan Glazer, has taken nine years to deliver his third feature. His devotees, who enjoy nothing more than to

be hypnotized by his imagery into a state of confusion and wonder, will consider the result worth waiting for; his detractors will chide its pretensions. Scarlett Johansson, making not so much a sharp career move as a leap into terra incognita, plays a nameless woman who drives around Glasgow, chatting with young men (most of whom, during filming, neither recognized the star nor knew that they were even in a movie). She takes some of them back to her lair, where the mood, the landscape, and the soundscape (courtesy of an extraordinary score by the young British composer Mica Levi) are transformed, and where we realize that the temptress is, in fact, a bringer of death. Her origins and motives are unexplained, although, in her eyes, the same could be said of humanity; pitiless at the start, she grows more inquisitive about our mortal habits, and that curiosity takes her into the rural wilderness, and into a danger zone. Glazer is nothing if not ambitious; the rough edge of naturalism, on the streets, slices into the more controlled and stylized look of science fiction, and the result seems both to drift and to gather to a point of almost painful intensity. Adapted from a novel by Michel Faber.—*A.L.* (In limited release.)

The Unknown Known

The director Errol Morris proceeds with bonhomie and patience in this documentary interrogation of Donald Rumsfeld; the result is a masterwork of political epistemology and dialectical jujitsu. Focussing on several of the estimated million-plus memos that Rumsfeld wrote in his five decades of public service, Morris captures the politician's obsession with words and their definitions—and, in the process, teases out the theoretical arrogance that marked Rumsfeld's career. In a private profession, Rumsfeld might be merely an amiable crank. But, entering government and serving under the likes of Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush, he passed for an intellectual whose ideas, because ideologically useful, went unexamined, until, in practice, they proved disastrous. Morris gets Rumsfeld to look closely at the elusive information on which political decisions are made—and Rumsfeld earns honest sympathy when he reads from a mid-2001 memo worrying about another Pearl Harbor-like surprise attack occurring on his watch. But, by comparing Rumsfeld's present-day interpretations with the historical record (including his many television appearances during the Bush era), Morris reconstructs the mentalities of power and reveals the crucial political importance of character and judgment—and quietly despairs.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER

The films of Jim Jarmusch. April 2 at 1:30: "Down by Law" (1986). • April 2 at 4 and April 4 at 6:30: "Night on Earth" (1991). • April 2 at 7 and April 3 at 1:30: "Stranger Than Paradise" (1984). • April 3 at 3:30 and April 5 at 6: "Mystery Train" (1989). • April 4 at 1:30 and 9:15: "Ghost Dog: The Way of the Samurai" (1999). • April 5 at 9 and April 6 at 1:15: "Dead Man" (1995).

FIRST TIME FEST

All films screen at Loews Village VII. For complete program information, visit www.firsttimefest.com. April 4 at 4: "1982" (2013, Tommy Oliver). • April 5 at 1: "Miss Julie" (2013, Mikael Berg; in Swedish). • April 6 at 9: "Butter on the Latch."

FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE

Special screenings. April 8 at 4 and 7:30: "Me, Myself and Mum" (2013, Guillaume Gallienne).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

"An Auteurist History of Film." April 2-4 at 1:30: "Fahrenheit 451" (1966, François Truffaut). • "Aesthetics of Shadow, Part 2." April 2 at 4:30 and April 3 at 8: "Broken Blossoms" (1919, D. W. Griffith; silent). • April 2 at 8 and April 3 at 4:30: "The Phantom Chariot" (1921, Victor Sjöström; silent). • April 4 at 4:30 and April 5 at 8: "Faust." • April 6 at 5:30 and April 7 at 4:30: "Sunrise" (1927, F. W. Murnau; silent). • April 7 at 8 and April 8 at 4:30: "Morocco" (1930, Josef von Sternberg). • April 8 at 8: "Vampyr" (1932, Carl Theodor Dreyer; in German).

MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

"Panorama Europe." April 4 at 7: "Group 7" (2012, Alberto Rodríguez; in Spanish). • April 5 at 4:30: "Balancing Act" (2012, Ivano De Matteo; in Italian). • April 6 at noon: "Dream Team 1935" (2012, Aigars Grauba; in Latvian). • April 6 at 7:30: "Seduce Me" (2013, Marko Santić; in Slovenian).



DVD OF THE WEEK

A video discussion of Sarah Kernochan and Howard Smith's "Marjoe," from 1972, in our digital edition.



A panel on choreographing for opera, at the 92nd Street Y.

NO TUTUS, PLEASE

The resurgence of ballet in opera.

ON FRIDAY, AT THE 92ND Street Y, Edward Henkel, the associate director of its Harkness Dance Center, will oversee a panel on the role of dance in opera—a tortured and exciting subject. Probably the most awaited show of the spring-summer dance season is Mark Morris's production of Handel's "Acis and Galatea" (1718), a short pastoral opera (nymphs, shepherds), which, reportedly, was the Handel piece most performed during his lifetime. Morris believes that a lot of Baroque music is perfect for dancing, partly because it was so often based on dance forms—minuet, gigue, passapied, etc. Though we don't know whether the original "Acis and

DANCE

Galatea" had dancers, there will be sixteen of them in Morris's version.

If not in "Acis," dance figured heavily in opera from the seventeenth to the late nineteenth century. Often the composer just dropped a big dance act into the middle of the show. This gave people a rest from the noble afflictions of *Rienzi* and *Aida*. Because it was not expected to advance the plot, or have words set to it, or make sense in any way, except in the service of art and pleasure, the composer could get "juiced," in the words of David Kneuss, the executive stage director of the Metropolitan Opera, who will appear on the panel. In recent years, some beautiful ballets have been created to music excised from famous operas, for example, Balanchine's "Ballo della Regina," to dance music discarded—rightly, I think—from Verdi's "Don Carlo."

There were basically two reasons for the eventual banishment of dance from high opera. First, by the time this happened, which was more or less the early twentieth century, ballet had declined to a low level of prestige in the West. Furthermore, unity, or organic form, as it was called, was being upheld as an ideal, and components that worked against unity—for example, ballets, with pretty girls in tutus, in the middle of tragic operas—were now deplored. This reaction persists to our day. In Robert Carsen's 1997 production of "Eugene Onegin," for the Met, the splendid polonaise of Act III was not danced at Prince Gremin's ball, where Tchaikovsky meant it to be. It was played in the background as Onegin, at home, dresses for the party. Some dancing survives in these modern productions, but more as decoration than as art.

Now the situation is changing again. Dance is being given a place in opera, not so much in the form of the big, happy intermezzi of yesteryear but as the thing that everyone said it couldn't be: a plot advancement. At the Y, Henkel will show video clips and talk to two choreographers, Carolyn Choa and Doug Varone. Varone choreographed the seven-veils solo for Karita Mattila in the Met's 2004 "Salome." Because Mattila took everything off, and looked very nice naked, the latter was a sensation, but it was also a lesson. Dance can be an actor in opera.

—Joan Acocella

Luciana Achugar / “Otro Teatro”

In this ritualistic new dance, repetition becomes obsession, smeared paint evokes blood and sacrifice, and moaning chants represent a path toward the unleashing of internal energies. As always with Achugar, bodies—her own and her dancers’—are at the center of the work, unadorned and often unlovely, insistently presented as assortments of muscles, skin, and hair. Her title means another, or a different, theatre. Achugar isn’t content with traditional performance; she’d like her pieces to be something rougher and more immediate, more akin to experience than to theatre. In this, she’s a descendent of Living Theatre and the happenings of the sixties. (New York Live Arts, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. April 2-5 at 7:30.)

Ailey II

Since nearly two-thirds of the main Alvin Ailey company emerge from this farm team, watching it always has a stars-of-tomorrow appeal. The choreography is less stellar than the

dancers, but giving chances to emerging dancemakers is also part of the goal, and the fortieth-anniversary season features new works by three promising artists: Adam Barruch, Jennifer Archibald, and Katarzyna Skarpetowska. (Ailey Citigroup, 405 W. 55th St. 212-868-4444. April 2-3 at 7:30, April 4 at 8, April 5 at 3 and 8, and April 6 at 3 and 7:30. Through April 13.)

“E-Moves”

This series, now in its fifteenth installment, pairs young dance artists with mentors. The two programs juxtapose works by three newcomers with a piece by a more established choreographer—either David Fernandez or Stefanie Batten Bland. This year, each evening also includes a hip-hop dance battle. (Harlem Stage at the Gatehouse, 150 Convent Ave., at 135th St. 212-281-9240, ext. 19. April 4-5 at 7:30. Through April 12.)

Trisha Brown Dance Company

After announcing the choreographer’s retirement last year, the company has

launched a three-year farewell tour, with echoes of Merce Cunningham’s Legacy Tour. One of the aims is the reconstruction of works not seen in years, so that they may be documented for posterity. At New York Live Arts, the company offers “Son of Gone Fishin’” (1981), Brown’s first dance to include music, and “Solo Olos” (1976), a series of connected solos performed in response to real-time instructions by a caller, as in a square dance. The phrases of loose-limbed movement are based on solos originally danced by Brown. The run also includes the spectacular “Opal Loop/Cloud Installation #72503” (1980), performed in a morphing mist designed by the Japanese artist Fujiko Nakaya, and the more recent “Rogues” (2011). (219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. April 8 at 7:30. Through April 13.)

Stephen Petronio Company

Celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of his company, Petronio sends his troupe hurtling through space in “Locomotor”—not just forward but backward as well. It’s a thrilling

new skill for his hyper-agile dancers, among them the former Cunningham member Melissa Toogood. The score is by the hip-hop musician Clams Casino—Petronio’s young cousin. The choreographer, pushing sixty, performs “Stripped,” a semi-improvisational solo of mental states and memories, while wearing a string of men’s neckties. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. April 8 at 7:30. Through April 13.)

“Rhythm in Motion”

Last year, this sampler of new choreography, presented by the American Tap Dance Foundation, was a revelation: a mix of moods and approaches, signs of life in a long-dormant field. This year, there are two programs. Both are stocked with talent, though the first one—featuring the veteran tappers Michelle Dorrance, Derrick K. Grant, and Jason Samuels Smith—might be the better bet. (Theatre at the 14th Street Y, 344 E. 14th St. 866-811-4111. April 8. Through April 13.)

ABOVE & BEYOND

“Comic + Cartoon Art Week”

The Museum of Comic and Cartoon Art, which was open downtown from 2001 to 2012, started the MOCCA Arts Festival in its second year, as a fund-raising event. The festival gathers hundreds of artists and publishers each year and has become a thriving affair. It has outlived the museum itself, which transferred its collection to the Society of Illustrators two years ago, and, like a bottle of spilled ink, it’s spreading related events around town. It starts on April 1 at 7 with “Strong Female Protagonists: Women in Comics,” a talk at the School of Visual Arts, with Raina Telgemeier, the creator of “Smile” and “Drama,” Diane Noomin, the editor of the “Twisted Sisters” anthologies, Shelly Bond, the executive editor of Vertigo comics, and others. The following day, April 2 at 2, members of the Society of Illustrators and the National Cartoonists Society will join the artist Paweł Althamer at the New Museum, where they’ll collaborate in making a large drawing that will take up the entire fourth floor. The highlight of the week is the Arts Festival itself, April 5-6, at the 69th Regiment Armory, 68 Lexington Ave, featuring Drew Friedman, Alison Bechdel, Howard Cruse, Fiona Staples, Robert Williams, and many others. (For more information, visit societyillustrators.org.)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

The auction of photographs to be held at **Sotheby’s** on April 2 is particularly strong in modernist works from the nineteen-twenties and thirties, such as Alfred Stieglitz’s nude study of Georgia O’Keeffe, which frames the painter’s body from chest to knee. A few days later, amid scores of exquisite enamel boxes and jewel-encrusted cigarette cases, the house’s sale of Russian decorative items on April 8 offers a lot that seems particularly timely: a group of bronze busts portraying the rulers of Kievan Rus, the medieval proto-Slavic state founded by the Viking king Oleg in the ninth century. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) • **Christie’s** starts off a day of photographs (April 3) with a group of Ansel Adams images of the majestic West. Several large-format “mural” prints from the nineteen-forties—including one of the imposing, snow-capped Sierra Nevada at sunrise—have what art-market types like to call significant “wall power”: i.e., it doesn’t get lost in a large room. The sale that follows includes a super-glamorous portrait of Marilyn Monroe by Philippe Halsman (taken for *Life*) and a grab bag of works by Irving Penn, from fashion shots to a pretty arrangement of frozen-fruit cubes in contrasting colors. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.)

READINGS AND TALKS

“Intelligence Squared U.S.”

This series of live Oxford-style debates, in conjunction with Columbia University’s Richman Center, presents the topic “More Clicks, Fewer Bricks: The Lecture Hall Is Obsolete.” The M.I.T. professor Anant Agarwal and Ben Nelson, the founder of the Minerva Project, will argue for the motion. Jonathan Cole, provost and dean emeritus at Columbia, and Rebecca Schuman, a columnist at *Slate* and *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, will argue against it. (Miller Theatre, Broadway at 116th St. April 2 at 6:45. For more information, visit iq2us.org.)

“Live from the NYPL”

The illusionist and writer Ricky Jay talks with Paul Holdengräber, the director of this series, about his life and work. (Fifth Ave. at 42nd St. 212-930-0855. April 2 at 7.)

“The HiFi Reading Series”

The novelist Teddy Wayne is the guest curator of the second installment of this series, in the back room of the HiFi Bar, in the East Village. Joining Wayne on April 2 at 8 are the writers Molly Langmuir, Janet Manley, and Jacob Rubin. (169 Avenue A, at 11th St. thehifibar.com.)

92nd Street Y

The Y’s Unterberg Poetry Center, which is celebrating its seventy-fifth anniversary this season, marks the start of National Poetry Month, with appearances by John Ashbery, who will read from “Quick Question,” his latest collection, and Mark Ford, who will delve into his “Selected Poems.” (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. April 3 at 8.)

Cabinet

The nineteenth-century German inventor John Adolphus Etzler’s utopian Tropical Emigration Society, which would have established a technological paradise in the Caribbean basin, plays a central role in Robert Antoni’s new novel, “As Flies to Whatless Boys.” On April 4 at 7, Antoni presents an illustrated lecture on Etzler’s fantastic machines, drawing on historical and imaginative sources. (300 Nevins St., between Union and Sackett Sts., Brooklyn. cabinetmagazine.org.)

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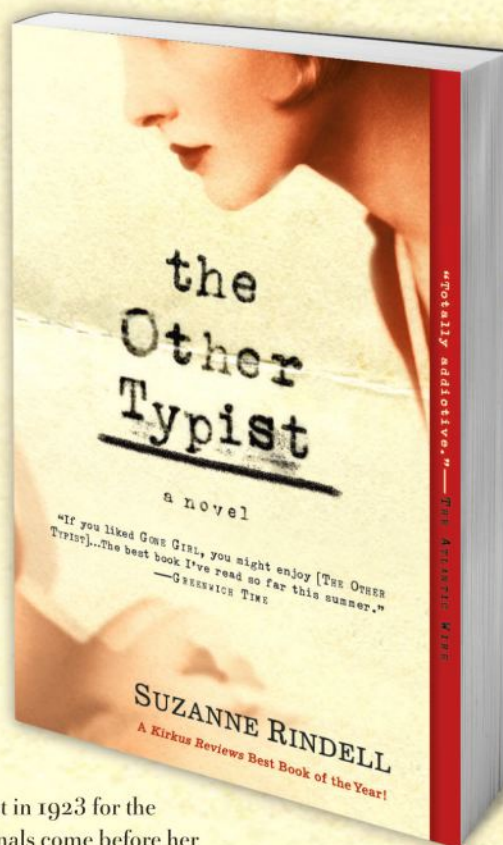
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NOW IN PAPERBACK

Confessions are Rose Baker’s job. A typist in 1923 for the New York City Police Department, criminals come before her to admit their transgressions, and, with a few strokes of the keys, she seals their fate. But while she may hear about gruesome crimes of passion, as soon as she leaves the courthouse, she reverts to a dignified and proper lady. That is until she meets Odalie...



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†*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT HEALTH CARING

The Affordable Care Act, President Obama's perpetually beleaguered health-care initiative, received a jolt of good news last week. As the first deadline for coverage in 2014 drew near, the Administration announced that the number of people who signed up had passed six million. That's short of the original goal of seven million, owing largely to the disastrous launch of the federal Web site last fall. The methods for tallying beneficiaries, like everything else about the law, are being disputed, and regional disparities remain severe. Still, it's clear that the law is helping a lot of Americans. Three million young people remain on their parents' health-care plans; more than eight million uninsured people are eligible for Medicaid; and, according to the Department of Health and Human Services, more than a hundred million people have received preventive-care services, like mammograms and flu shots, at no cost.

Those gains have been achieved amid a political controversy that has at times seemed almost unprecedented but which in many ways replicates the example of two of the law's forerunners, Medicare and Medicaid. Those programs were born together in the summer of 1965, but their paths quickly diverged. Medicare, providing health insurance for all Americans over the age of sixty-five, proved popular almost immediately: after the rollout, about nineteen million people signed up, more than ninety per cent of those eligible. Medicaid, covering the poor of all ages, is financed jointly by the federal government and the states. The first year, only twenty-six states agreed to participate, and the program didn't include all fifty until 1982, when Arizona, the final hold-out, joined.

The broad outlines of the debate over the A.C.A. have also been clear from the beginning. Republicans have mostly tolerated the portions of the law that benefit the middle class, including

the guarantee that young people can remain on their parents' policies until they turn twenty-six; the prohibition on denying coverage to people with preëxisting conditions; and the elimination of lifetime limits on the amount of coverage an individual can receive. The real controversy, as with Medicaid five decades ago, centers on health care for the poor. Ideas such as the requirement that everyone obtain insurance, with subsidies for people who can't afford it; the mandate that insurance companies offer coverage to all comers; and the incentives for states to expand the number of people covered by Medicaid have meant political war. And the partisan divisions have been much more entrenched on these issues. As of a few weeks ago, the Republican-controlled House had voted fifty times to overturn all or parts of the law—though the votes were largely symbolic.

The legal attacks, while less noisy than those in Congress, have been more effective. Two years ago, in the epic case of *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*, the Supreme Court upheld the heart of the law. But seven Justices (all except Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Sonia Sotomayor) also rewrote it to say that states could opt out of the Medicaid expansion. Twenty-four states have done so, the same number that originally resisted Medicaid. As before, many of them will eventually opt in. But, in the meantime, the denial of health insurance to more than five million citizens represents a clear casualty of the legal assault.

That assault continued last week, when the Hobby Lobby company asked the Supreme Court for an exemption from another critical part of the law—the requirement that insurers cover contraception, at no out-of-pocket cost to women. A chain of stores with more than thirteen thousand employees, Hobby Lobby is privately owned by individuals who oppose abortion. They decided that the company would not provide coverage



for certain forms of contraception, such as the I.U.D., which, in their view, were tantamount to abortion.

The political nature of the case was an open secret during the argument at the Court. Sotomayor told Paul Clement, the lawyer for Hobby Lobby, who was a solicitor general under George W. Bush, “You picked great plaintiffs.” (Customarily, of course, it is the plaintiffs who pick the lawyers.) Elena Kagan pointed out to Clement that he was really attacking the entire law. “Isn’t that just a way of saying that you think that this isn’t a good statute, because it asks one person to subsidize another person?” she asked. “But Congress has made a judgment and Congress has given a statutory entitlement and that entitlement is to women and includes contraceptive coverage. And when the employer says, no, I don’t want to give that, that woman is quite directly, quite tangibly harmed.”

Other legal challenges remain, including one, now before the D.C. Circuit, that would, if successful, undermine the law far more than the Hobby Lobby case. In *Halbig v. Sebelius*, the plaintiffs assert that the law does not allow the federal government to offer subsidies in states that refuse to establish exchanges. The lawsuit failed in the district court, and it should fail on appeal, but it’s a certainty that the legal attacks on the A.C.A. will continue.

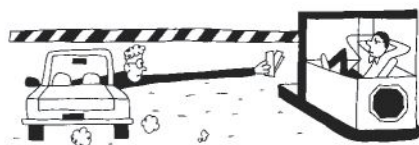
The Obama Administration and its Democratic allies

have made the task of promoting the A.C.A. more difficult through their own fecklessness. The law is still better known for the Web-site fiasco than for the benefits it has achieved. Three weeks ago, when President Obama pitched healthcare.gov to young adults on “Between Two Ferns,” Zach Galifianakis said, “Oh, yeah, I heard about that. That’s the thing that doesn’t work.” It was funny, sort of. Support for the A.C.A. remains low in opinion polls, thanks in part to “horror story” campaigns paid for by groups such as Americans for Prosperity. But, in a peculiar way, no politician, of any stripe, has incentives to tell the whole truth. Republicans prefer not to acknowledge any benefits at all. Some Democrats who voted for the law, particularly those up for reelection, seem unable to acknowledge how much they still support it. It’s easier to focus on the parts that benefit middle-class voters—who tend to turn out at the polls, especially in midterm elections—and to elide the benefits to the poor, which are rarely politically advantageous.

But the core of the law is the guarantee of health care to the people who need it most. As the story of Medicaid illustrates, the hardest thing about programs to aid the poor is getting them started in the first place. Obamacare has now passed that hurdle.

—Jeffrey Toobin

BRIDGE AND TUNNEL DEPT. MAN WITH A PLAN



The traffic engineer Sam Schwartz has a spiel about the haphazard allotment of tolls for the city’s bridges and tunnels. He likes to imagine a group of Martians planning a visit, armed only with the knowledge that New York is Earth’s most desirable destination, and with telescopes powerful enough to discern bottlenecks via car headlights. Which borough would they choose to visit first? “Take us to Staten Island!” Schwartz said the other night, standing in front of a crowd of several dozen in a SoHo restaurant and channelling a Martian voyager. “That’s got to be the hottest place in New York!” Behind Schwartz was a PowerPoint slide showing a map of the Martians’ favorite borough and listing the inbound tolls for each of the four bridges that lead to it: fifteen dollars at the Verrazano and thirteen at the Bayonne Bridge, the Goethals, and the Outerbridge Crossing. You can’t drive there, in other words, without queuing up to pay an

arm and a leg. Yet leaving the island is free. Surely this reflects a kind of interplanetary hipness. By contrast, numerous bridges over the East River and the Harlem River are free both ways, allowing for unrestricted (if slow) passage between lower Manhattan and Brooklyn, say, or between Harlem and the South Bronx: ho hum.

Schwartz, better known as Gridlock Sam, is trying to revive congestion pricing, the progressive planning scheme that Mayor Bloomberg failed to implement, owing to Albany’s intransigence. The idea, meant to encourage a greater reliance on public transit by charging drivers who dare to enter Manhattan’s central business district (below Sixtieth Street), was unpopular with what you might call the *Post* demographic: S.U.V. owners, climate-change skeptics, Staten Islanders. It smelled of righteousness, and became a proxy war in the class struggle between cyclists and motorists. Schwartz figured that a rebranding was in order, and has spent the past three years refining a more equitable anti-congestion strategy. It shouldn’t cost a fortune to drive to Staten Island, after all, and demanding nearly four dollars for the privilege of exiting the Rockaway Peninsula seems punitive, given the paucity of transit options on the other

side. His proposal, now known as the Move NY Plan, calls for lowering certain existing tolls in exchange for charging on all the East River crossings, and using the added revenues (he forecasts more than a billion dollars) to invest in transit infrastructure.

“I’ve only been at it for forty-three years!” Schwartz, who is now sixty-six, had said earlier, between bites of empanada. “I worked on John Lindsay’s plan to toll the East River and Harlem River bridges, in 1971.” It was stopped by an act of Congress. “Triple-A sued me in 1980, when I tried to do congestion pricing under Ed Koch,” he went on. “I went to meet with them ten months ago, and I showed them my AAA card, which I have on me.” He reached for his wallet. “I showed them that I’ve been a loyal member for forty-seven years—now forty-eight. And my father before me. We got to discussing that things have to change.” Mayor de Blasio, who opposed the Bloomberg plan, has met with Schwartz, and said recently that his proposal contains “interesting and innovative ideas.”

Schwartz’s audience on this evening was the fledgling Riders Alliance, a transit advocacy group that has lobbied for increased G-train service and for countdown clocks at bus stops. “Mostly

millennials,” Schwartz said, gesturing at the crowd. “The first generation that was not eager to get behind the wheel of a car.” He added that he would be omitting from his presentation the idea of collecting tolls from bikers—an early misstep that had cost him support from the cycling community. “I thought I would be greeted with greater warmth,” he said. “But maybe it’s my personality.”

The rebranding has a personal element as well. “I call myself Multimodal Man,” the engineer formerly known as Gridlock Sam said, mentioning that he uses every available mode of transportation, except for a scooter. “As you can see, I travel with a MetroCard and a fob.” He reached into his shirt pocket for the card and then his pants pocket for a Citi Bike key. “It solved a problem that we have wrestled with in New York City since the eighteen-sixties: the crosstown problem,” he said of the financially challenged bike-sharing program, and cited a hundred-and-fifty-year-old *Harper’s Weekly* article in which, as he put it, “a seasoned captain said that he’d rather go out into a squall in the Atlantic than cross Fifth Avenue at noon.” But, like many riders, Schwartz had grown frustrated with Citi Bike’s frequent glitches. When asked how he’d arrived at the restaurant, he replied, “I schlepped.”

—Ben McGrath

FINAL ENGAGEMENT IN THE ROOM



Roseland Ballroom is the latest (but surely not the last) of New York City’s storied music venues to close its doors. Lady Gaga’s seven-show run, which began last Friday, on her twenty-eighth birthday, will be the final one at the Fifty-second Street theatre, which has been at its present location since 1958, when it took over a building that once housed the Gay Blades Ice Rink. The three-story structure, with its Art Deco bar, will soon be razed and replaced with a fifty-nine-story residential tower. The place where Kurt Cobain miraculously recovered from a near

O.D. to play a Nirvana show, in 1993, and where, in 2000, Fiona Apple had a spectacular mid-performance meltdown and fled the stage will be no more.

For Gaga, the farewell shows mark her first time ever on the Ballroom stage. “It’s basically the only room in the city I *haven’t* played,” she said the other day, during a break in rehearsals for the twelve-song performance.

Playing in New York clubs was “where I learned to be bold,” Gaga said, as the dancers took a break in the back. She paused, shaking out her white wig. “You have to learn to be unafraid when you’re a nobody, because you’re going to be really fucking afraid when you’re a somebody and all the lights are on you.” Although she rarely plays clubs or theatres anymore, “when I’m in an arena or a stadium, I always need to have that bar connection, that club mentality and energy.”

She went on, “You start by singing to yourself. And you go, ‘I sound good.’ And then you think, ‘But do I really sound good?’ And to find out, you have to put it in a room.”

She put it in the room at the Bitter End, the Village venue where she performed in public for the first time, aged fifteen, as Stefani, her given name. “You sing a song and people start singing it back to you,” Gaga said. “But how do they know the song? Why are they dressing like me? So you begin to understand the potential of what music can be.”

From there, she put it in the room at Arlene’s Grocery and at Rockwood Music Hall, on the Lower East Side, where the Lady Gaga performance-art persona first appeared. She would rehearse in her tiny apartment on Stanton Street, with turntables on the stove burners. One night, performing for thirty people in Rockwood’s cramped space, her mentor and collaborator Lady Starlight said, “‘Gaga, look out the window.’ And there were a hundred people on the street with cameras taking pictures!”

She also learned to sell herself in rooms. “You have to have the ambition to impress the guy who is going to have coffee with Puffy in the Hamptons that weekend,” Gaga said. “Why should he give you that million-dollar check? So you open your mouth and hit that note that sends vibrations to

his core in a way that blows his mind and makes him want to be the one to say, ‘I found her.’”

The dancers floated back onto the Ballroom floor, and Gaga ran through “Bad Romance,” puffing like a miler when the number ended; she was a little under the weather. (“I had my sinuses vacuumed out this morning.”) The room seemed to like what it heard.



Lady Gaga

Playing Roseland, Gaga said, was always a dream. As a young fan, she couldn’t afford tickets. She did manage to win freebies to a Franz Ferdinand show during her senior year of high school at Sacred Heart, and she got her nose broken in the mosh pit. She tried to reduce the swelling with cold beer purchased with her fake I.D. (Delaware), but her mother got the story out of her. After that, “my mom and dad didn’t want me going to Roseland—what a shocker, right?” Once her career took off, with the release of “The Fame,” in 2008, she went from small places to big ones, and bypassed Roseland altogether.

Her parents, Cynthia and Joe Germanotta, were on hand to watch the rehearsal. Although they no longer worried about their daughter getting her nose broken, talk of Cobain’s show and his subsequent suicide and the price of fame clearly pained her mother.

“He just didn’t want to be famous,” Gaga said, with a shrug. Apparently, that isn’t her problem.

—John Seabrook

Jonathan Schell, who died last week, was for many years a central figure both at this magazine and in the intellectual life of the nation. He wrote arguably the most important book of reporting from Vietnam ("The Village of Ben Suc") and the most perceptive reflections on the Watergate scandal ("The Time of Illusion"). But he will be remembered first for his book "The Fate of the Earth." In it, and particularly in the first section, "A Republic of Insects and Grass," he managed to do what no one had accomplished in the first four decades of the nuclear era: bring home the sheer reality of what it would mean to explode our atomic arsenals, summoning up not mainly the visceral, personal fear of the duck-and-cover drill but the far deeper horror of a world permanently sterilized and impoverished. I joined *The New Yorker* a couple of months after its publication, and canvas mailbags full of letters were still arriving regularly; the *Times*, in its review, said, "It is tempting to treat Jonathan Schell's achievement as an event of profound historical moment rather than as a book on some publisher's spring list." In a way that's hard to imagine in our fragmented media age, his essay mattered: it played an outsized role in catalyzing the nuclear-freeze movement, which in turn played an outsized role in making nuclear war unthinkable. Before five years were out, Ronald

Reagan, with who knows what level of seriousness, was proposing to Mikhail Gorbachev that the weapons be banned altogether.

Some months ago, I phoned Jonathan. By then gravely ill, he'd abandoned work on a book in part about climate change, a subject of great mutual interest. But he hadn't stopped mulling over, with his characteristic penetration, his great topic, which really was the fate of the earth. His thinking struck me as fresh and powerful—as material for a Comment, of which he wrote hundreds over the years, all unsigned. It made me want to see his words in print one more time, and so I made notes as we talked, over a couple of conversations.

He said that, despite arms talks and arsenal reductions, he thought the world had failed to come to grips with the nuclear question. During the Cold War, there was "a weighty reason, if not a sufficient one," for possessing the weapons. "But—and I remember my incredulity—when the Cold War ended, a series of people who'd said Communism was the reason we needed the weapons now had no reaction. It turned out our grip on these things was tighter and our attraction to them was deeper or stranger than the reasons we gave ourselves during the forty-plus years of the Cold War."

The same dynamic was at work with climate change, he told me. Despite ample scientific warning that we were headed for catastrophe, we'd done even less to change course. The fossil-fuel industry's campaign of misinformation

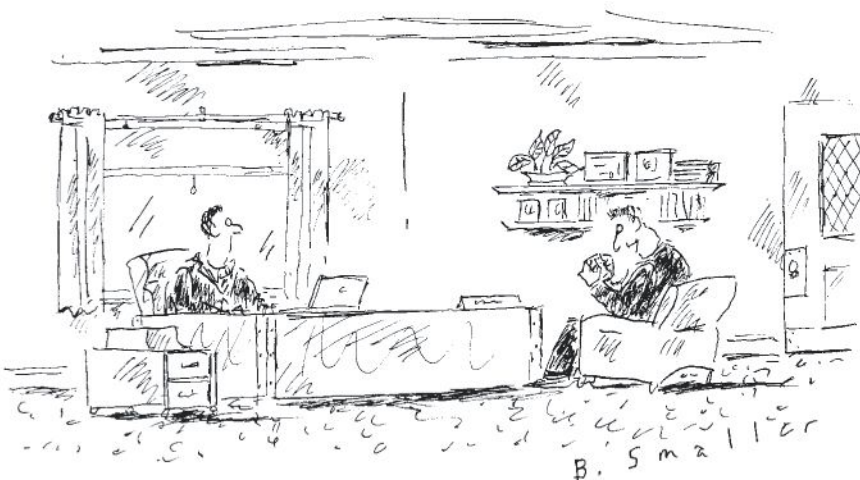
bore some of the responsibility, he said, but beyond that "somehow the public has not grasped the very, very special, unique, weird character of this whole thing." In both the nuclear and the carbon crises, "the jeopardy to our species, and the rest of the species on the earth, adds a dimension that we've never seen before."

Every other loss we've faced, he continued, "is a loss within the framework of life." We know "what it is for an individual to lose his life, or even a whole city. There's a surrounding context in which that loss has meaning. But when it comes to extinction we're left with a kind of blank." We try to fill that blank space by focussing "on particular harms to human beings: Sandy, or Typhoon Haiyan, or these traditional-type disasters." But while these might eventually move us to act, "we intuitively feel that's not the essence of the matter: the essence is more what the religious people say about taking care of creation."

Both crises, he said, "reveal a kind of bankruptcy at the crucial hour of many of the things we place our faith in": institutions like our great universities (he was scornful of the refusal of Harvard, his alma mater, to divest its stock in fossil-fuel companies) or our government itself. "One would have thought liberal constitutional government was designed precisely for this," he said—but then ever since Watergate he'd tracked our receding faith in Washington. "I always take note when I'm talking to someone at a gas station or somewhere like that. People aren't in denial about climate change, but they sighingly say, 'Isn't it terrible?' And I'm sure it's because they lack faith in the system to change anything."

Bleak as his mood, and his condition, was, he refused despair. "I guess my weak generic all-purpose answer in bad situations is just the raw unpredictability of human affairs," he said. "I can easily imagine that in six months the whole earth will be blazing with anger at what's going on. I can imagine that, but I can't imagine how it will happen." I try to share his hope, but since his book on these questions will now go unwritten and his powerful voice unheard, one possible catalyst has been removed.

—Bill McKibben



"One of my strengths as an employee is my ability to multitask."

When the Malaysian Prime Minister announced, last week, that Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 had gone down in the southern Indian Ocean, it brought to a close the orgy of theory-mongering that had dominated the news ever since the plane disappeared. The peak (or nadir) of the speculative frenzy came when the CNN anchor Don Lemon wondered aloud whether the plane might have been swallowed up by a mini black hole. There were plenty of other outlandish scenarios: we were told that the plane had been pirated to Kazakhstan, that it had flown underneath another plane to escape detection, that it had been “cloaked” from radar by technology invented by some of the passengers, that it would soon be used by Iran in an attack on Israel.

Nothing is more natural than speculation in the face of mystery, but this welter of improbable hypotheses highlights the peculiar economic incentives of punditry. When uncertainty abounds, pundits strive to differentiate themselves from their peers. There’s little to be gained from saying what everyone else is saying or, God forbid, suggesting that there isn’t enough information on which to base a judgment. Conversely, there can be huge rewards in taking a flyer on an extreme prognosis and turning out to be right. As one recent study of the economics of forecasting put it, “Being the single winner always entails more glory than sharing the prize.”

This wouldn’t be the case if pundits suffered when their predictions proved wrong. There are forecasting professions where this happens: stock analysts who err are more likely to get fired. But in the media mistaken conjectures tend to be quickly forgotten, so there’s little downside to being bold and wrong. This tendency is exacerbated by the demands of cable news. A couple of weeks ago, James (Spider) Marks, a retired general who is a CNN commentator, suggested that, rather than engage in “a cacophony of conjecture” about the plane, people in the studio should “get back to what we know and what we don’t know.” “You know how cable news works, don’t you, Spider?” the host, Bill Weir, said, with a laugh. “We got time to fill here.”

It isn’t just cable news, though. Experts in a wide range of fields are prone to making daring and confident forecasts, even at the risk of being wrong, because when they’re right the rewards are immense. An expert who makes one great prediction can live off the success for a long time; we assume that the feat is repeatable. But our intuitions let us down. The most

comprehensive study in this field was done by the psychologist Philip Tetlock. Over many years, he tracked some three hundred experts, asking them to estimate the probability of various geopolitical events. He found that, though a given expert might foretell one extreme event, doing so consistently was next to impossible. Experts who foresaw the breakup of Yugoslavia also thought, wrongly, that Hungary and Romania would slide into civil war. Being spectacularly right once doesn’t guarantee being right in the future. In fact, the opposite may be true. In one fascinating study by the business-school professors Jerker Denrell and Christina Fang, people who successfully predicted an extreme event had worse overall forecasting records than their peers.

“People who make these bold predictions tend to overestimate how likely extreme events are, so, while they may happen to hit it right once in a while, over all they’re not actually good forecasters,” Fang told me. Tetlock, meanwhile, shows that some pundits have a reductive view of the world, which over

time lowers forecasting accuracy. Success also breeds overconfidence. The history of forecasting is littered with examples of experts who were acclaimed as visionaries, only to disappoint. Two weeks before the Great Crash of 1929, Irving Fisher, one of the pioneers of economic forecasting, declared that stock prices had reached “a permanently high plateau.” In the late seventies, the market-timing abilities of the investment guru Joe Granville were legendary, but he completely missed the beginning of the bull market in 1982. Elaine Garzarelli, who correctly called the crash of 1987, pronounced in October of 2007 that she was “absolutely bullish” on the stock market. That year, the banking analyst Meredith Whitney became famous for her bearish but accurate

prediction that Citigroup would have to slash its dividend and take billions in writedowns. But she was woefully wrong when, just a few years later, she warned, on “60 Minutes,” that cities across the U.S. were likely to default, resulting in “hundreds of billions of dollars” in losses to investors.

None of this has diminished our appetite for dramatic predictions. Indeed, it may be that the characteristics that make for more reasonable forecasts—an acknowledgment of uncertainty, an awareness of the limits of one’s knowledge, and a willingness to speak in probabilistic terms rather than seeing everything as black-and-white—make us uncomfortable, because of our aversion to uncertainty. Tetlock found that experts who claimed to be more certain were more in demand in the media, even though they were less likely to be correct. A study of financial advisers found that those who claimed they knew what stocks were going to do were seen as more credible than those who expressed uncertainty, even when the latter were just as accurate. To make a splash as a seer, in other words, you have to heed a simple rule: fortune favors the bold.

—James Surowiecki



ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

OLD SCHOOL

The d.j. Peter Rosenberg, hip-hop's reigning purist.

BY ANDREW MARANTZ



If rap music were healthy, would it need a defender, much less a white one?

One of the most influential hosts on hip-hop radio is a man named Peter Rosenberg. He is thirty-four years old and stocky, with a few days of stubble and a you-can't-fire-me-I-quit approach to baldness. Hip-hop is an industry of calibrated personas, and Rosenberg, who was reared in an upper-middle-class Maryland suburb, tries to project confidence without too much self-seriousness. "I will go toe to toe with almost anyone in terms of knowledge, trivia, and love of this music," he told me. "That said, I don't try to front like I'm cooler than I am." He performs d.j. sets under the name Peter Rosenberg. He has called himself "the Jewish Johnny Carson," and in particularly nebbishy moments—while ordering a salad with dressing on the side, or calling his wife to inquire after the health of their dog, a Corgi mix—he interrupts himself to say, "I am so hip-hop."

Every weekday, between 6 and 10 A.M., Rosenberg co-hosts "The Morning Show" on Hot 97, the iconic New York hip-hop station. Between midnight and two every Monday morning,

also on Hot 97, he hosts "Real Late with Peter Rosenberg," one of the few remaining showcases on commercial radio for underground rap—or, more contentiously, "real" hip-hop. He has interviewed, mentored, or publicly harangued every living rapper who matters; and though he occasionally texts with such stars as Drake and Macklemore, he cares more about maintaining friendships with a dozen or so m.c.s—Action Bronson, Bodega Bamz, Joey Bada\$\$—who are talented but one hit shy of celebrity. Rosenberg interviews these rappers' rappers on the radio, and commissions new verses from them for mixtapes that he distributes online. He also invites them to perform in showcase concerts that he hosts at South by Southwest and other festivals. Often, a song that he endorses—a "certified Rosenberg banger," as he sometimes says—fails to crack the Top Forty. At other times, he acts as an emissary between the margins and the mainstream. He says, "Since I have a foot in both worlds, an artist can play me three tracks, and I can go, 'This one only hip-

hop heads like me will appreciate. This one could be big, but it's corny. But this one could reach a lot of people, without you sacrificing who you are.'"

It has become a commonplace among rap snobs that kids these days don't appreciate complex lyrics. Rosenberg frequently aligns himself with the purists, defending old-school craftsmanship against the encroachment of pop hooks and lowest-common-denominator rhymes. Some people see his interventions as a sign of trouble—if hip-hop were healthy, would it need a defender, much less a white one from Chevy Chase? Others are grateful for any traditionalist voice on hip-hop radio. "I'm a motherfuckin' fan of this dude right here," Busta Rhymes, a rapper who combines verbal dexterity with commercial appeal, said upon meeting Rosenberg for the first time. "He's the only motherfucker on the motherfuckin' megahertz frequency that's still trying to implement that filthy-under-the-nail, holy, sacred and pure, unmixed, undiluted, un-tampered-with, real hip-hop shit."

One recent afternoon, I stopped by the Hot 97 studios, in the West Village. Rosenberg had already done "The Morning Show," worked out at a nearby boxing gym, and returned to the office. Wearing a crew-neck sweatshirt and Air Jordans, he was preparing to interview ScHoolboy Q, a rapper he admires, about Q's first major-label album, which was to be released in a week.

Q was walking around the office, wearing tinted granny glasses, a wide-brimmed fedora, and a gray peacoat saturated with pot smoke. A twenty-seven-year-old from South Central Los Angeles with a nimble approach to rhythm, he had a small, devoted following, but he did not make the kind of danceable, melodic songs that are likely to become hits. "I don't even know why I'm here," he said. "They don't be playin' me on the radio."

"I do!" Rosenberg said. "I go ham for your records." Last June, Q released a song called "Collard Greens." It has a jittery, inaccessible beat—a looping four-note bass line, sparse drums, and an echoey top layer of percussion that sounds like a washboard—but it rewards repeat listening. ("Shake it, break it / Hot for the winter / Drop it, cop it / Eyes locked on your inner object.")

Rosenberg played it on “Real Late” for fourteen consecutive weeks. Eventually, it won over enough listeners to enter Hot 97’s drive-time playlist, a space usually reserved for market-tested acts like Rihanna and Eminem. Finally, in November, the song made it onto the *Billboard* Hot 100. Q told me that Rosenberg doesn’t “just go for the orthodox, people-friendly option,” adding, “He likes real music—Wu-Tang, Nas. That’s why he has an ear for my shit.”

Q is a member of a rap collective from Los Angeles called Black Hippy, which updates the gangsta rap of the mid-nineties by infusing it with a looser, loopier sensibility. Rosenberg has championed the group since its inception, in 2009. Kendrick Lamar, another member of Black Hippy, released his major-label debut in 2012. Although it was a concept album whose intricate lyrics were better suited to headphones than to night clubs, it went platinum. One of the singles, “Swimming Pools (Drank),” sounded like a sleek party anthem but was actually a parable about the dangers of alcoholism. “I rode hard for that album, but I thought it was too good to be popular,” Rosenberg said. “I’m glad I was wrong.”

For the interview, Q sat down in a black-box studio, where he greeted everyone, from Rosenberg to the technicians, as “my nigga.” At one point, Q, who has asthma, leaned back in his chair; his inhaler slid out of his pocket and clattered to the floor. Rosenberg smiled and said, “That’s straight hip-hop.”

On “Real Late,” Rosenberg can spin any record he wants, as long as he edits out the curse words. But “The Morning Show” is polished entertainment. Its playlist, based on market research, is created in collaboration with the owner of Hot 97, Emmis Communications, which has its headquarters in Indianapolis. (Emmis also owns radio stations in Los Angeles, St. Louis, and Terre Haute, Indiana.) “A lot of what we play in the morning is stupid,” Rosenberg says. When a talk break ends and a song begins, he often removes his headphones and turns his attention to Twitter.

Rosenberg likes some avant-garde hip-hop—he was an early proponent

of the exuberantly obscene rap collective Odd Future, and he applauds Kanye West’s forays into industrial noise—but most of his favorite new records sound as if they could have been made in 1994. “I will always have a soft spot for lyrical m.c.s and boom-bappy production,” he said, using an onomatopoeic term for the kind of beat generated by a kick drum, a rim-shot, a few samples, and little else. “I try to be open-minded, but everyone knows what my biases are.”

At seven-twenty and eight-twenty every morning, he delivers a critical-comical rant called “The Realness.” In late February, on the morning ScHoolboy Q’s album was released, Rosenberg sounded ebullient as the segment’s theme music began—a bass-heavy sample from a 1995 song by Group Home. Laura Stylez, one of the co-hosts of “The Morning Show,” said, “Keep it real, Rosenberg!”

“A lot of people who I meet are, like, ‘Yo, Rosenberg, when’s hip-hop coming back?’” he said. With m.c.s like Kendrick Lamar and ScHoolboy Q in their prime, he argued, that moment is now. “We have artists who are making great, quote-unquote ‘real,’ hard hip-hop, and it’s selling well, and those are the times when the music can change!” (The next week, Q’s album debuted at No. 1 on the *Billboard* chart.)

Rosenberg is not always so optimistic. In 2012, “Starships,” a bubblegum dance track by Nicki Minaj, spent twenty-one consecutive weeks in the *Billboard* Top Ten. Rosenberg saw the song as a categorical threat. “Nicki loves reminding us every chance she gets that she’s a, quote, ‘underground rapper’ from Queens,” he said one morning. Then he played a clip from “Starships,” which features singsong vocals and a Eurodance chorus. “Is that Nicki Minaj or Katy Perry?” he said. “I am a hip-hop head, and, to be frank, this song right here, ‘Starships,’ is literally one of the most sellout songs in hip-hop history.”

He told me, “Pop and rap are separate things. It’s one thing for J. Lo to make a dance record, but Nicki was supposed to be one of ours. I didn’t want young kids looking at this dance-pop song, going, ‘This is what rappers do.’”

Billboard began publishing its Hot

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100 list in 1958, and last year marked the first time that no black artist had a No. 1 single. This is partly attributable to multiracial collaboration—one of the biggest hits of 2013, Robin Thicke's "Blurred Lines," owes much of its popularity to Pharrell Williams, who produced the track, and to T.I., who raps on it. But the absence of chart-toppers by black artists may portend a future in which hip-hop becomes denatured. It wouldn't be the first time that a historically black genre has come to look, and sound, increasingly white.

Musical genres are like unstable elements, constantly on the verge of breaking down. Some African-American forms, like disco, grew so popular that they merged with pop music and effectively disappeared; others, like ragtime, maintained their purity but lost their audience. Rosenberg intends to help hip-hop avoid both fates. "I want a future where hip-hop is still relevant," he says. "But I want that music to be related to what hip-hop originally was."

The most important event on the Hot 97 calendar is Summer Jam, an all-day concert held each June at MetLife Stadium, in New Jersey. Several of the most popular acts in hip-hop perform on the stadium's main stage. In the parking lot, a freestanding "festival stage" is devoted to underground rappers.

Rosenberg is one of the hosts of the festival stage. In 2012, to keep the crowd entertained between acts, he continued to castigate Minaj, who was scheduled to perform on the main stage that night. "I know there are some chicks here waiting to sing 'Starships' later," he said. "I'm not talking to y'all right now. Fuck that bullshit. I'm here to talk about real hip-hop shit."

Such bluster is common in the rap world, and is usually forgotten quickly. In this case, unbeknownst to Rosenberg, video feeds from both Summer Jam stages were streaming live on Minaj's Web site. Her fans, who call themselves Barbz, took to Twitter. Someone with the handle JonJon-baby30 posted, "Fuck Peter ROSEN-

BERG, U RACIST WANNA BE BLACK FAG-GOT JEW BITCH." Minaj tweeted, "No one deserves this treatment. We're all out here working. Have respect for your guests. #thatsall." Shortly before she was scheduled to perform, she pulled out of the show.

The spat between Rosenberg and the Barbz spiralled into a standoff between Hot 97 and Young Money, Minaj's influential record label. Lil Wayne, Busta Rhymes, and Funkmaster Flex got involved. After nearly a year—just in time for Summer Jam 2013—a détente was reached. Minaj went on "The Morning Show" to make amends, although she couldn't resist throwing a bit of shade first.

"I am sorry that things went as left as they did," Rosenberg said.

A few moments later, Minaj said, "I get it. That's what you do. I guess, to me—I just don't know your résumé, you know what I'm saying? So I never found you funny. . . . I was just, like, 'Who *are* you?'"

The interview gradually grew more cordial. For her next album, she said, "I'm choosing to get back to my essence and just feed the core hip-hop fan." If Rosenberg's goal had been to steer her away from dance-pop, this was vindication.

Toward the end of the interview, Minaj talked about the double standards she had encountered as a woman in the entertainment industry, and said of herself, "There's a chip on your shoulder, because you've experienced headstrong men."

Rosenberg nodded. "I can see now that—because of your experience with men—me, a stranger, I was just another hating-ass man. And I'm just so—I was a women's-studies minor in college!" (He attended the University of Maryland.) "I am the antithesis of that dude."

Ebro Darden, at that time the station's program director, said, "And you're *white*."

"She never implied anything about white," Rosenberg said.

"Well, being white also struck a chord with me, if I'm being honest," Minaj said. "Because I was, like, 'Yo, he's on a black station dissing black

people.' I just didn't like the feel of it."

"Who am I gonna dis, if not black people?" Rosenberg said. "I'm on a hip-hop station!"

Later, he allowed that he had been disingenuous. "I'm grateful that hip-hop is a diverse enough culture that I get to be part of it," he told me. "Does that mean that it should be ignored—the fact that I'm white? Of course not."

At Summer Jam last year, one of the performers on the main stage was 2 Chainz, a Southern rapper, who brought out a surprise guest: Minaj. Wearing a baseball cap and shredded jeans—a remarkably straightforward outfit for a woman who once dressed as a gumball machine—she rapped two verses, struck a street-thug pose, and left the stage.

Rosenberg, driving back to Manhattan at the end of the night, said, "I don't take full credit—but she didn't sing or dance, did she? She didn't do any silly voices, did she? Straight up-and-down rap."

A few weeks later, I met Rosenberg at a concert in Central Park, where more than a dozen legendary m.c.s were performing to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of hip-hop. The audience was mostly middle-aged black New Yorkers: first-generation rap fans. Big Daddy Kane performed "Set It Off," and Rosenberg, wearing sunglasses, mouthed the words. As we left the venue, several people grabbed Rosenberg by the arm, or called his name from afar. "You're a funny mother-fucker, Rosenberg!" one person shouted. Someone else said, "Thank you for keeping this real hip-hop alive." Rosenberg stopped to banter with a few admirers. Then he walked across the park to the Upper West Side, where he lives with his wife, a sports reporter, and where his neighbors rarely recognize him.

The next night, on "Real Late," he played, in rough chronological order, classic songs by artists who had been on the bill in Central Park. He described the concert as "awesome," and said, "You are listening to a kid who grew up on this culture—visiting New York, wanting to be a part of it—who is very honored to be able to play music every Sunday night from the birthplace of



hip-hop.” On Twitter, a rapper with the handle 89theBrainchild posted, “24 yrs old and takin notes.”

The house in Chevy Chase where Rosenberg grew up is a pleasantly cluttered brick Colonial a few hundred feet from Rock Creek Park. His parents still live there. His mother, Mindy, is a retired school counsellor; his father, M.J., is a prominent liberal blogger who once worked for AIPAC and has recently called himself an “anti-AIPAC warrior.” Peter said, “Most people in my world have no idea who my dad is, and vice versa. But the ones who know both worlds are, like, ‘Seriously?’” Cipa Sounds, another co-host of “The Morning Show,” said, “Peter’s dad is a funny-ass dude and a mad smart political thinker, and when I met him, at Peter’s wedding, he told me he had more Twitter followers than Peter.” (If so, times have changed: the son currently has two hundred thousand followers; the father has fifteen thousand.)

Not long ago, I joined Rosenberg on a

visit to his parents’ house. In the living room, Mindy put out a tray of nuts and cookies next to a stack of books, with “F.D.R. and the Jews” at the top. M.J., who has a bushy mustache, assured me, “We just went to the library. I didn’t put these out to show you what big intellectuals we are.”

Peter was born two months before “Rapper’s Delight,” by the Sugarhill Gang, was released, in 1979. When he was seven, Run-D.M.C.’s version of “Walk This Way” became a Top Ten hit. Peter’s older brother, Nick, now a lawyer, “did a rap at Peter’s bar mitzvah,” Mindy said. “It was the coolest thing in the world to them, and they never stopped feeling that way.”

When the family visited M.J.’s parents, who lived in Queens, Peter made cassette recordings of radio broadcasts, especially the late-night shows that were mixed live by Marley Marl and DJ Red Alert. In 1992, when Peter was thirteen, Funkmaster Flex took over Saturday nights on Hot 97, a time slot that he still holds. “When I heard Flex, I was, like, ‘That is the job I

want,’” Rosenberg says. In his bedroom, he recorded tapes on which he pretended to have his own radio show.

He attended a large public high school. “I had a *Source* magazine under my arm, and I d.j.’d a lot of house parties,” he says. He was charming and confident, but also “short, not well dressed—the only objectively cool thing about me was my association with hip-hop.”

“I can’t say I ever fully appreciated rap,” M.J. says—his taste runs more to Carly Simon and Billy Joel—but he liked anything that infuriated the Moral Majority. “I could never separate the music from the politics,” he said. “I told Nick to read ‘The Autobiography of Malcolm X,’ and it changed his life, and Nick passed it down to Peter. To this day, it might be one of the two or three books Peter has read.”

“I read most of it,” Peter said. “But then the movie came out.”

Mindy rolled her eyes and said, “Sometimes I think Peter was switched at birth.”

“The value of someone’s work on the

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page versus in a mike booth—to me, there is no difference,” Peter said.

“We are the People of the Book, Peter!” M.J. said. “Not of the record!”

On the wall was a framed poster from a 2007 concert that Rosenberg hosted, featuring the rapper Raekwon. Peter said, “Many people have told me, ‘Raekwon loves you. He’s always talking about how you’re the realest dude in New York.’ Yet he has this line on ‘Only Built 4 Cuban Linx,’ arguably my favorite hip-hop album of all time, about ‘Jew lies and white guys.’”

M.J. looked stricken. “And we have his poster *on the wall*?”

“Dad, he loves me now,” Peter said. “It was a long time ago.” (Raekwon maintains that the lyric was “True lies and white guys.”)

Jews have produced and distributed African-American music for more than a century, and have sometimes exploited black musicians in the process. Given this history—and the fact that a disproportionate number of rappers subscribe to the teachings of Louis Farrakhan—hip-hop has not always been a safe space for Yiddishkeit. In early rap lyrics, Jews were portrayed as tight-fisted bankers or tenacious criminal lawyers. M.J. said, “Early in Peter’s career, I told him he would have to change his name. I said, ‘Why not Pete Rose?’”

“That’s how old-school paranoid my dad is,” Rosenberg said. “Better to be associated with a disgraced athlete than to be Jewish.”

Hip-hop is having a Semitophilic moment. Drake, who was brought up Jewish in a wealthy part of Toronto, has rhymed “more than high” with “Mordechai.” Jay Z and will.i.am have incorporated “I’chaim” and “mazel tov” into their verses. In 2012, Rick Ross released a mixtape called “Black Bar Mitzvah”; it featured a skit in which a rabbi—played by Peter Rosenberg—invites celebrants to join him at a Miami strip club, to “have a nosh.”

“Peter told me, ‘The world has changed,’” M.J. said. “It looks like he was right.”

A month before Rosenberg began taking classes at the University of Maryland, in 1997, he started appearing on the college radio station. Using the name PMD—“P” for Peter, “MD” for Maryland—he hosted a late-night un-

THE ONE WHO DISAPPEARED

Now that it’s warm to sit on the porch at night
Someone happened to remember a neighbor,
Though it had been more than thirty years
Since she went for a little walk after dinner
And never came back to her husband and children.

No one present could recall much about her,
Except how she’d smile and grow thoughtful
All of a sudden and would not say what about,
When asked, as if she already carried a secret,
Or was heartbroken that she didn’t have one.

—Charles Simic

derground rap show. On early tapes, he can be heard alternating between quasi-Ebonics (“Yo, we gon’ leave the phone lines open, kid”) and middle-class white vernacular (“That was very enjoyable”), before settling on a hybrid approach that sounded more natural: he occasionally used street slang, but deployed it with a hint of irony. “I decided, if the topic is something I know about, like music or sports, I’ll speak on it,” Rosenberg said. “If it’s something I know nothing about, like cooking crack, I’ll go, ‘I know nothing about that.’”

In the early aughts, Eminem became rap’s biggest star. The next milestone, Rosenberg assumed, would be a white d.j. who was taken seriously on hip-hop radio. “That was going to be my gimmick,” he said. “My only fear was that someone would take that spot first.”

After college, he interviewed with the program director at Hot 97, a middle-aged white man from Utah, but the conversation went nowhere. Rosenberg continued to live near the University of Maryland, working as a talk-show host at local radio stations, with the occasional d.j. gig at a college bar. One night, a pretty sophomore asked him to play “Ride wit Me,” an insipid single by Nelly. It was not the kind of song he was known for playing. “But of course I played it, because this hot girl was requesting it,” Rosenberg recalls. Her name was Alexa Datt. She is now Alexa Rosenberg, Peter’s wife.

In early 2007, Ebro Darden took over as Hot 97’s program director, and he called Rosenberg in for another

meeting. Darden was brought up in Oakland by a Jewish mother and a father who was a Black Panther. “Peter came up here, like, ‘What up? I’m PMD,’” Darden said. “I went, ‘No, you’re not. You’re Rosenberg.’” Darden was intent on broadening the station’s repertoire—he recently claimed “Royals,” a hit song by Lorde, as a hip-hop track, and moved it into heavy rotation—but he wanted to honor hip-hop’s roots as a rebellious subculture. “The brand needed an outspoken advocate for that underground, rappity-rap stuff,” Darden told me. “I knew that the irony of having that person be very clearly white and not from New York would jar some people, and I welcomed that.” In June, 2007, Rosenberg moved in with his grandparents in Queens and started hosting “Real Late.”

To ease Rosenberg’s entry into the New York market, Darden paired him with Cipa Sounds (born Luis Diaz), an industry veteran who had worked as a touring d.j. for Lil Kim. Cipa said of Rosenberg, “He knew the music—but as an appreciator, not from living it. He had to look to me for knowledge of how the game worked.”

Darden suggested that Rosenberg and Cipa record together before going on the air. Their conversations turned into a weekly podcast, which they called “Juan Epstein,” after a Jewish Puerto Rican character on “Welcome Back, Kotter.” Some of the early episodes sound like awkward dates on which neither person has the courage to ask for the check. But they developed a rapport,

and “Juan Epstein” has become an encyclopedic oral history of hip-hop, including unusually candid interviews with such luminaries as Jay Z and Q-Tip. While interviewing the producer Large Professor, Rosenberg analyzed three of his tracks with nerdy fervor: “You can blend ‘Looking at the Front Door,’ ‘Live at the Barbecue,’ and ‘Fakin’ the Funk’—all within a few beats per minute.”

Darden says of Rosenberg and Cipa, “I wanted them to be partners, and it worked. When people went, ‘Who the fuck is that crazy white boy?’ Cipa went, ‘That crazy white boy is with me.’ By now, they’ve been doing it for long enough that most people know who the crazy white boy is.”

In 2011, Kendrick Lamar released “Section.80,” his debut album, on iTunes. It was inconsistent, but it established him as a prodigiously skilled m.c., and a few gatekeepers, including Rosenberg, took notice. He began playing the track “Ronald Reagan Era” on his evening show, and included an original verse by Lamar on his mixtape “What’s Poppin Volume 1.”

In February, 2012, Lamar visited the Hot 97 studio for the first time, and he sat for an extended interview with Rosenberg. “You are in a blessed position these days of being one of the few dudes who does real hip-hop music that is actually getting buzz,” Rosenberg said. “What kind of deal with the Devil did you make?” He continued to promote Lamar and host his shows in New York. At one point, Lamar texted Rosenberg, “We gon have a long ride in this music thing together homie.”

When Lamar released his first major-label album, “good kid, m.A.A.d. city,” in October, 2012, some critics immediately deemed it a classic. Rosenberg was reluctant to go that far. “You’ve got to give it a few years,” he said on the air. On a “Realness” segment, a few days later, he changed his mind. “It’s a classic,” he said. “It, like, defies the era that it even exists in. . . . The lyrics, man, the beats, the vibe, the features he chose, the different flows he has. . . . You always hear nerds be, like, ‘What about the flow?’ . . . No, this guy has flows. He can rhyme a million different ways. He could have made a pop album. He could

have tried to chase hits. He didn’t. He did him. And it paid off.”

Late one night last year, Rosenberg sent me a text message: “Yooooo!” An hour earlier, Big Sean had released “Control,” a song featuring a guest verse by Lamar. In his verse—a three-minute performance delivered with the ferocity of a Coltrane solo—Lamar declared himself “the king of New York,” even though he is from Compton. Within days, more than a dozen New York rappers had recorded response tracks.

One of them was by Papoose, an m.c. from Bedford-Stuyvesant. On “The Morning Show,” Rosenberg said of the track, “It’s ridiculous, and it ends up making Pap look crazy.” Minutes later, Papoose called in to defend himself: “Rosenberg, with all due respect, there’s no need for me and you to do this, because you are biased, bro.” They had met a few times, and Rosenberg had played Papoose’s records on “Real Late”; nevertheless, Papoose accused Rosenberg of being on “Team Kendrick.”

The argument grew heated. Race did not come up, but geography did. “You’re not from New York,” Papoose said.

“Everyone can tell me I’m not from New York over and over again,” Rosenberg said. “But, week in and week out, and night in and night out, I go to shows with twenty-three people in them to support New York hip-hop. I don’t see you at all those shows, Pap.”

“Rosenberg, you out there with the weirdos,” Papoose said.

The following Monday night, Rosenberg was at S.O.B.’s, a mid-sized venue on Varick Street. At eleven, he took the stage to introduce YC the Cynic, a relatively unknown rapper from the Bronx. YC had contributed a standout track to another Rosenberg mixtape, “New York Renaissance,” and seemed to be auditioning for a slot on Rosenberg’s roster of favored m.c.s. There were about two hundred people in the audience, most of them young people of color. “It’s good to be out here with all the weirdos!” Rosenberg said. The crowd cheered with recognition.

Late last year, a screening committee of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences, which awards the Grammys, drafted its preliminary list of nominees for Best Rap

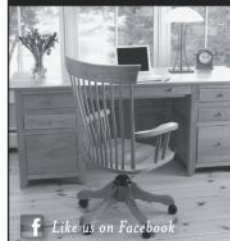
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Album. Drake, Jay Z, Kanye West, and Kendrick Lamar made the cut; Macklemore, a hugely successful white rapper who is sometimes accused of being an interloper from the pop world, did not. "It's not that they don't think he's a rapper," an anonymous source who was present at the meeting told the Associated Press. "It's just that, when you're trying to protect categories and someone has become popular, it should be judged as such."

A few weeks later, the Academy overrode the committee's decision, and Macklemore's "The Heist," whose biggest hit is about bargain shopping, was nominated for Best Rap Album. It won. The night the awards were televised, Rosenberg tweeted, "I LOVE @macklemore but I am disgusted by the Grammys . . . nothing for @kendricklamar?!" He texted Lamar, "u know the game . . . if there's a white man for white people to vote on, he wins."

The next day on "The Morning Show," Rosenberg called Macklemore and said, "I've been ranting and raving all morning about how the Grammys snubbed Kendrick Lamar. As a white guy, it's one of those moments that feels a little embarrassing, where you feel like white people have been given something yet again that we shouldn't have been given."

"Yeah, try being the guy that won that award," Macklemore said. "I think we made a great album. I think Kendrick made a better rap album." Macklemore's concession was a subtle one. He wasn't saying that his album wasn't rap, or that Lamar's album was superior; he was acknowledging that Lamar's album sounded more like archetypal hip-hop.

Darden asked, "Is you winning that category—do you believe that it's racial? . . . Is that what makes it awkward for you?"

Macklemore said, "What makes it awkward for me is the fact that you never want to be the person that is robbing somebody else."

The first commercial jazz recording, released in 1917, was by the Original Dixieland Jass Band: five white musicians from New Orleans. Today, jazz is correctly understood to be an African-American invention. Yet the genre's old masters are increasingly cosseted within

universities or foundations, and the tables at Birdland are often filled with middle-aged white men, if they're filled at all.

Hip-hop is two generations younger than jazz, and it has at least a few years of innovation left. Still, it is beginning to look backward as much as forward. In recent years, the rapper Bun B, whose resonant baritone is recognizable from his guest verse on Jay Z's "Big Pimpin'," has been a Distinguished Lecturer at Rice University, where he co-taught a course on rap and religion. At Harvard, the Hip-Hop Archive and Research Institute recently accepted applications for the Nasir Jones Hip-Hop Fellowship. Rosenberg's concerts still draw diverse, youthful crowds; but what proportion of the audience will be young and black when Jay Z plays the Barclays Center in 2024?

Rosenberg remains hopeful. A few weeks after the Grammys, he drove to a brownstone in Bedford-Stuyvesant to meet with Joey Bada\$\$, a nineteen-year-old m.c. with short dreadlocks. "He's one of the most promising dudes New York has right now," Rosenberg said. Four years ago, Joey, then in high school, began posting freestyles on YouTube. Rosenberg invited him to a hip-hop showcase at South by Southwest and began mentioning his name to producers. "He sounded modern and retro at the same time," Rosenberg says—Joey rapped with youthful vibrancy about cell phones and the Trayvon Martin case, yet his timbre and delivery had a laid-back, timeless quality.

Joey's lyrics are unflashy, but they're dense with internal rhyme. ("Get your intel right/Your intelligence is irrelevant/But it's definite/I spit more than speech impediments.") In a video interview posted online, Rosenberg asked him what kind of music he listened to as a child. Joey mentioned "Illmatic," by Nas, and "Ready to Die," by Biggie—"That's what was bumpin' in the car." With an envious grin, Rosenberg said, "That was my Paul Simon and James Taylor."

The door to the brownstone opened, and Junior, Joey's cousin and one of his managers, said, "Don't worry about taking off your shoes." Framed family photographs lined the walls of the foyer. Downstairs, in a half-finished base-

ment, Joey had set up two speakers, a laptop, a beat machine, and a microphone. He leaned back in a leather office chair, smoking a blunt while watching a YouTube video of a Darwinist debating a creationist. On a whiteboard, he had listed his "2k14 Goals": "Know Worth"; "Innovate RAP"; "Make \$1 mil."

"This your place?" Rosenberg said.

"Me and Mom Dukes," Joey said.

Joey is putting together his debut album, which he hopes to release this fall. He already has too many songs, and he wanted Rosenberg to help him select the best ones. He played a beat with a classic syncopated kick-snare pattern and one with a jazzy upright bass.

"Look, I love everything you've played so far," Rosenberg said. "This is my shit. But sometimes I get nervous if I like it too much."

Joey said, "Let me try something else out on you." He played an uptempo, synthesizer-driven beat without a prominent kick drum to anchor it. "I don't think this is the one," Rosenberg said. Joey nodded and played a song with a pop hook that sounded a bit closer to Katy Perry. Rosenberg looked uncertain.

"It depends what you want," he said. "Are you trying to have an album that is critically adored and makes your movement one notch bigger? Or do you take more risks and try to find hits?"

Joey said that he was open to anything, but he added, "I'm not gonna conform. No matter how dope it is, if I don't feel it, I'm just not gonna do it."

"I know you well enough to trust that," Rosenberg said.

While they chatted, Joey played a song by Jeru the Damaja, a Brooklyn rapper who gained a cult following in the nineties. "You put me onto Jeru, actually," Joey said.

"I did?" Rosenberg said.

"One time you told me, 'Come up to the station—I got a Jeru instrumental I want you to spit over.' At that time, I knew the name but not his music."

"Oh," Rosenberg said. "Well, then! You're welcome." ♦

BRAVE NEW WORLD DEPARTMENT

From foreignpolicy.com.

Morning Brief: Crime Votes to Secede from Ukraine

ALERT!

BY KELLY STOUT

MOBILE BANKING: Welcome to Mobile Banking! Reply HELP for Help. Reply STOP to cancel. Standard message and data rates may apply.

MOBILE BANKING: Your \$162.22 debit-card transaction at IKEA BROOKLYN was more than the \$125.00 in your Alerts setting. Your checking acct ending in 6885 has a balance of \$44.48, which is below your \$50.00 limit in your Alerts setting. To transfer from savings acct ending in 4362, reply T, space, amount: e.g., T 250.

ME: T 15.

MOBILE BANKING: \$15.00 transferred from savings acct to checking acct.

MOBILE BANKING: Your checking acct ending in 6885 has a balance of \$31.88, which is below your \$50.00 limit in your Alerts setting. Your most recent purchase was \$12.99 for GRANOLA at FRANKLIN AVE GOURMET MARKET.

MOBILE BANKING: \$12.99 for GRANOLA?

MOBILE BANKING: The balance in your checking acct ending in 6885 is -\$14. To transfer from savings acct ending in 4362, reply T, space, amount: e.g., T 250.

ME: T 10.

MOBILE BANKING: To transfer enough to buy something other than rice and sriracha sauce, reply T, space, amount: e.g., T 250.

MOBILE BANKING: I really recommend that you reply T, space, amount: e.g., T 250.

MOBILE BANKING: Are you going to sit around your apartment eating rice all weekend?

ME: I don't have 250 to T.

MOBILE BANKING: That's true. You have \$56.99 in your savings acct ending in 4362.

ME: I don't like this service.

MOBILE BANKING: Your \$.99 transaction with EZ BUDGET was less than the \$50.00 limit in your Alerts setting.

ME: Why did you text me if it was below my limit?

MOBILE BANKING: I thought it was amusing that you bought a budgeting app.

MOBILE BANKING: Your checking acct ending in 6885 has a balance of \$8.04, which is below your \$50.00 limit in your Alerts setting.

MOBILE BANKING: Sorry to pry, but how is your job search going?



ME: Fine.

MOBILE BANKING: Are you sure? Because your most recent purchase was—

ME: I know what my most recent purchase was.

MOBILE BANKING: Suit yourself.

MOBILE BANKING: It was \$21.75 for 2X W WINE BOTTLE at GRAND ARMY PLAZA LIQUORS.

ME: I SAID I KNOW.

MOBILE BANKING: \$100.00 transferred to checking acct ending in 6885 from savings acct ending in 4362.

MOBILE BANKING: I guess you're going out tonight?

MOBILE BANKING: Is it with that guy from Bushwick? You've been buying a lot of 6PACK MILLER LITE and GUMMI BEARS at MYRTLE AVE FOOD STOP lately.

MOBILE BANKING: Your checking acct ending in 6885 has a balance of \$3.03, which is below your \$50.00 limit in your Alerts setting.

MOBILE BANKING: What is going on with you? I take it your \$.99 transaction with EZ BUDGET didn't work out.

MOBILE BANKING: Your \$213.16 debit-card transaction with URBAN OUTFITTERS 14 ST was above your \$125.00 Alerts setting and totally unnecessary. Why did you buy WIND IN MY WINGS ROUND SUNGLASSES? It's not even summer. And the ECOTE FLORAL CROCHET BRA TOP makes you look like one of those girls who go to music festivals.

ME: STOP.

MOBILE BANKING: I'll STOP when you stop.

MOBILE BANKING: Hey.

ME: Hey.

MOBILE BANKING: I'm sorry.

MOBILE BANKING: I said some things I didn't mean last time.

ME: It's fine.

MOBILE BANKING: I thought your \$8.11 debit-card transaction with AMAZON.COM for TAXES FOR DUMMIES (USED) was really cool of you.

ME: STOP.

MOBILE BANKING: You around? I thought we could grab a beer or something.

ME: No.

MOBILE BANKING: C'mon. You can afford it. This new job seems to be working out great. Your checking acct ending in 6885 has a balance of \$1,080.77.

MOBILE BANKING: Surprise! I got you some of that GRANOLA you like.

MOBILE BANKING: Hey, there's something on my mind. Can you chat?

ME: STOP.

MOBILE BANKING: It seems like you don't have time for me now that your checking acct ending in 6885 has a balance of \$2,333.49.

ME: How do I cancel this service?

ME: Hey. You there?

MOBILE BANKING: Look who it is.

ME: I just spent 600 bucks at West Elm.

MOBILE BANKING: Oh?

ME: Isn't that above my alerts setting?

MOBILE BANKING: It's above your Alerts setting, with a capital "A."

ME: Sorry.

MOBILE BANKING: I really don't care. I gotta go meet up with some people.

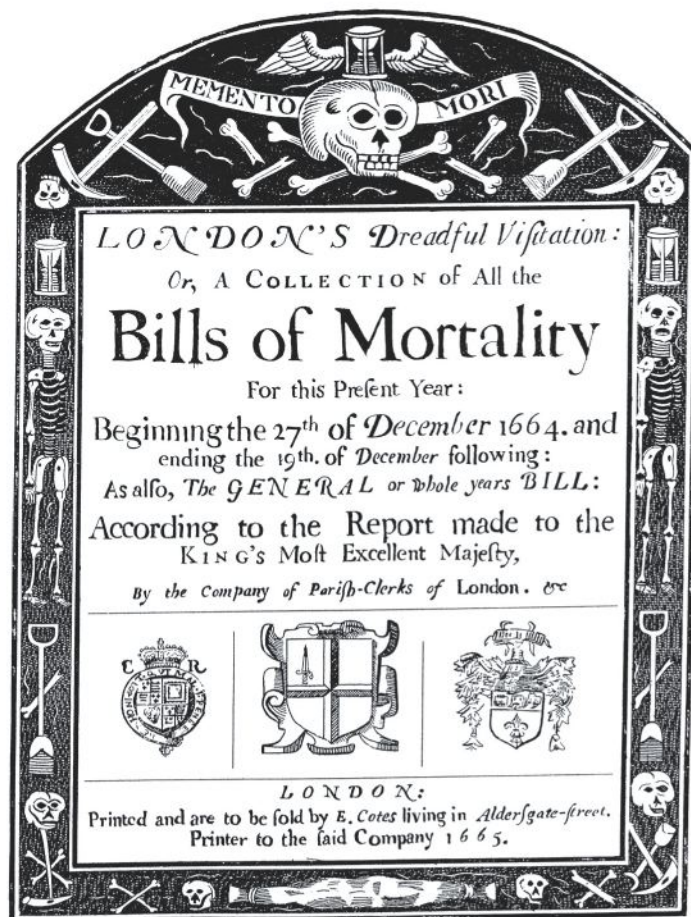
ME: Wait—

MOBILE BANKING: STOP. ♦

FINAL FORMS

What death certificates can tell us, and what they can't.

BY KATHRYN SCHULZ



It starts with a dead body, as so many mysteries do. A middle-aged man is found unconscious and rushed to a hospital. For four days, he lingers in a coma; on the fifth, he dies. The clues are few and dark and point in different directions. The man was a drug addict. He was diabetic. Some of his family members say that he acted strangely the last time they saw him conscious. Others disagree. The lab tests are inconclusive. Everything is inconclusive. If this were a mystery of the Conan Doyle kind, there would be a detective, and there would be a solution. In the event, there is neither. Instead, there is a young doctor, in her first year on the job, and there is a single

piece of paper: a death certificate, on which she is meant to record, precisely and for posterity, why this person died.

Not every mystery involves a dead body, but every dead body is a mystery. Death is an assassin with infinite aliases, and the question of what kills us is tremendously complex. It is also tremendously labile. We ask it with clinical curiosity and keen it in private grief; we pose it rhetorically and inquire specifically; we address it to everyone from physicians to philosophers to priests. It is as bare as bone and as reverberant as bell metal: Why do we die?

For millennia, our answers to that question were sharply constrained. Lack-

ing any real understanding of the physiological causes of death, we pointed instead to the entities we knew could make things happen: conscious (or putatively conscious) agents. Sometimes that agent was us. We killed one another, obviously; we hexed one another, allegedly; we brought about mortality in general—from Prometheus to Eve, through hubris and through sin. Alternatively, sometimes the agent was death itself. Many early cosmologies include a Grim Reaper, give or take a costume change: Thanatos in Greek mythology, the Hindu Yama, the Angel of Death in the Bible. As a rule, these were agents in the other sense as well: mere instruments of a higher power. For most of history, no matter how we died, we did so at the bidding of God or of the gods.

A correlative of all this agency was passivity. If an omnipotent being wants to kill you, there's not much you can do about it except beg for mercy—a popular strategy even today. Only after we started looking to the physical world to determine why we die did premodern fatalism begin to fade. Sentient agents yielded to disease agents, divine intercession to medical intervention. Today, "Why do we die?" is one of the fundamental questions of epidemiology, and we have developed a vast and macabre bureaucracy to answer it.

The atomic unit of that bureaucracy is the death certificate. Of all the ways we have ever devised to grapple with our mortality, it is the strangest, least elegiac, and by far the most ambitious. It emerged by an accident of history and evolved to serve two different masters. In part, it is a public-health measure—though even the doctors who deal with death certificates often forget that, regarding them instead as one more piece of paperwork. In part, it is a form of personal identification: the saddest of diplomas, the most mysterious of passports.

And, in part, it is a clue. Of the roughly fifty million people who will die this year, approximately half will get a death certificate. That figure includes every fatality in every developed nation on earth: man, woman, child, infant. The other half, death's dark matter, expire in the world's poorest places, which lack the medical and bureaucratic infrastructures for end-of-life documentation. Yet, even with so many people unaccounted for, this number represents the spread of a re-

We have developed a vast, macabre bureaucracy to answer the question of why we die.

markable idea: that death *should* be accounted for—that by documenting every single decedent and every possible cause we can solve its mystery.

The antecedent of the modern death certificate emerged in early-sixteenth-century England, in a form known as a Bill of Mortality. The antecedent of the Bill of Mortality does not exist. No earlier civilization we know of kept systematic track of its dead: not ancient Egyptians, for all their elaborate funerary customs; not the Greeks; not the Romans, those otherwise assiduous centralized bookkeepers.

Even Christianity, one of the world's most successful purveyors of ideas about death, seldom attended to the specifics of why we die. Churches did traditionally keep records of baptisms and burials—and, practically speaking, those serve as a good proxy for births and deaths. But, as a philosophical matter, they are tellingly different: the church was interested in the fate of the soul, not the body. If the goal of life is to gain access to heaven, and death is in God's hands, there's no point, and no grace, in dwelling on the particulars of how we die.

That cosmological indifference coincided with scientific ignorance. Early medicine relied more on folklore than on physiology, and its practitioners were not in the habit of examining bodies, living or dead. Well into the nineteenth century, the limits of medical knowledge were such that doctors sometimes didn't even know if someone had died, let alone how. The widespread terror of being buried alive, which today seems like a dark little wiggle of the id, once reflected a genuine possibility. In the absence of any scientific way to confirm the end of life, it sometimes happened that those consigned to coffins were only mostly dead.

Compounding all this was political irrelevance. Early states had neither the means nor the motive to track individual deaths—or, for that matter, individual anything. Low literacy rates made individual documentation on a broad scale impractical, and reigning administrative practices made it unnecessary. You don't need a tax I.D. number if taxes are levied on your entire town, and you don't need a draft card if conscription is collective. Only in exceptional cases did everyday people need to be able to identify them-

selves—there was, for instance, the vexing premodern problem of how to tell true messengers from false ones—and, accordingly, individual documentation was rare.

The modern death certificate owes its existence to the cosmological, scientific, and political revolutions that eventually overturned this entire world order. But its prototype emerged in response to something else: death itself, on an epic and horrifying scale. In 1347, the Black Death broke out in Europe. By 1351, a third or more of all Europeans were dead. With a huge percentage of the remaining population infectious and the rest of it terrified, the plague turned the formerly private experience of death into a matter of (extreme) public concern. Italy responded by passing the first modern quarantine laws, tracking the living. England took a different route, and began tracking the dead.

Thus the Bills of Mortality: weekly lists of the plague dead, broken down by parish. The earliest known bill is a single handwritten document, thought to date from 1512, which states that in the city of London, between the sixteenth and the twenty-third of November, thirty-four people died of “the plague” and thirty-two of unspecified “oder dyseases.” No information about the dead appeared on early bills, not even their names. And the bills themselves appeared only sporadically: cropping up when the plague did, fading away again when the crisis passed. Their intended purpose seems to have been to help the healthy steer clear of the most infectious parts of town.

Many of history's great inventions are really great appropriations—middling ideas if used as intended, brilliant when reoriented or co-opted. In their original form, Bills of Mortality were not a particularly powerful or inspired device. But, in the hundred years after their introduction, two modifications altered both the function of the bills and the future of public health. In 1603, the bills began appearing weekly rather than episodically, and did so continuously for the next two hundred and thirty-three years. In 1629, during a lull in the plague, the court of King James I ordered parish clerks to begin listing deaths from other causes as well. The first change turned the Bills of Mortality into one of history's richest data sets. The second turned

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BUSINESS INSIGHT

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them into a global first: a state-mandated system for recording why we die.

It was both a short step and a long time from there to the modern death certificate. As an epidemiological document, the death certificate would have to wait for disease to more fully migrate from the metaphysical to the material realm. As personal identification, it would have to wait for the political revolutions of the eighteenth century, which, by reconfiguring the relationship between the individual and the state, made documenting the lives and deaths of every citizen newly desirable. The flip side of democracy is bureaucracy: if everyone counts, everyone must be counted. The flip side of equality is equality: the pauper gets a driver's license, the President needs one, and you wait in line at the D.M.V. And the flip side of representation is surveillance: by 1851, the French political theorist Pierre-Joseph Proudhon could observe that "to be governed is to be noted, registered, enumerated, accounted for, stamped, measured, classified, audited, patented, licensed, authorized, endorsed, reprimanded, prevented, reformed, rectified, and corrected, in every operation, every transaction, every movement."

By the time Proudhon wrote those words, the Bills of Mortality were all but extinct. A numeric tally of the anonymous dead had evolved into a list of the named dead, one person per line, and then into a dedicated form: one decedent per page. This was the death certificate, the grave end of cradle-to-grave documentation. Bureaucratically speaking, that ex-post personal identification represented the death certificate's ultimate end. But, for public-health purposes, the name of the dead didn't matter. What mattered, and what had evolved as well, was the cause of death.

In the Unetanneh Tokef, a Jewish liturgical poem thought to have been composed in the eleventh century A.D., the poet notes that, at the beginning of every year, it will be determined who shall perish in the coming months, and how:

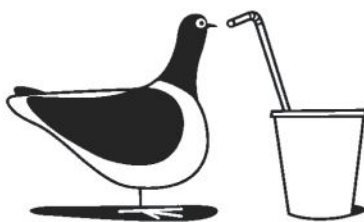
who by water and who by fire
who by sword and who by beast
who by famine and who by thirst
who by earthquake and who by plague
who by strangling and who by stoning.

That poem nicely captures the way the premodern world parsed death: into a few coarse causes, all reducible to God's will.

"And You shall apportion the destinies of all Your creatures," the poet writes.

By the time of the Bills of Mortality, the list of things we thought could kill us had expanded dramatically. Yet, reading those bills today, you could be forgiven for failing to recognize them as an advance in public health. It was possible, in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England, to die of Bleach and of Blasted, of Cramp and of Itch, of Sciatica and of Lethargy. You could be carried off by Cut of the Stone, or King's Evil, or Planet-struck, or Rising of the Lights. You could succumb to Overjoy, which sounds like a decent way to go, or be Devoured by Lice, which does not. You could die of Stopping of the Stomach, or Head-Ach, or Chin-cough, or Teeth. You could die of HorseshoeHead, though don't ask me how. You could die of being a Lunatick. You could die of, basically, death: "Suddenly"; "Killed by several Accidents"; "Found dead in the Streets." You could die of Frighted, and of Grief.

If what we are after is a revolution in our understanding of death, this does not seem like an entirely promising start. But in the mid-seventeenth century a haberdasher named John Graunt got interested in the question of why we die. That interest was neither medical nor philosophical but actuarial. Like many successful shopkeepers, Graunt was a meticulous accountant, and he realized that he could use the Bills of Mortality to crunch the numbers on death. By trawling through twenty years of those bills, Graunt compiled a



list of eighty-one causes of death, which he divided into four main categories: chronic diseases, epidemic diseases, conditions that killed children, and "outward griefs"—that is, injuries. With information like that available for the first time, "it becomes necessary to discuss the problem—can lifetime be prolonged by a knowledge of the causes that cut it short?"

The man who asked that question was Graunt's most important successor, William Farr, one of the founders of epidemi-

ology. In 1836, when Farr was twenty-eight, England replaced the Bills of Mortality with what would become the global prototype of a modern death-registration system, and created the General Register Office to manage it. The office opened in 1837, and Farr became its first Compiler of Abstracts.

Unlike Graunt, Farr was in the game not to keep books but to save lives, and he realized that vital statistics were the language in which public-health questions could be asked and answered—and, crucially, changed. In 1853, at the behest of the newly formed International Statistical Congress, he helped compile a comprehensive list of causes of death, for use in standardizing mortality data worldwide. The resulting classification contained a hundred and thirty-nine ways to die, divided into seven categories, from "Deaths from accident or violence" to "Deaths from old age." There were still a few ringers on this list—you could die of laryngitis, and of teething—but it was a long way from Blasted and Itch.

The definitive advance, however, came forty years later, when the classification was revised by a committee headed by the French statistician and demographer Jacques Bertillon. Bertillon doubled the categories of the earlier list from seven to fourteen, expanded causes of death from a hundred and thirty-nine to a hundred and sixty-one, and organized them, as we still do today, by anatomical systems: "Diseases of circulatory system," "Diseases of respiratory system," and so forth. The result was published in 1893, as the International List of Causes of Death.

A hundred and twenty years later, that list is still with us. Today, it is managed by the World Health Organization, and is known as the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems—or, more commonly, the ICD-10. The ICD still reflects Bertillon's original structure, but it has expanded prodigiously in the course of ten revisions. As its new name suggests, that is partly because it now includes entries for nonfatal diseases. (And much more besides. Beginning after the Second World War, the W.H.O. bowed to the desire of hospitals and insurance companies to use the ICD for billing purposes; as a result, it now contains entries for every imaginable health-care interaction, from well visits to warts. That shift displeases some epide-

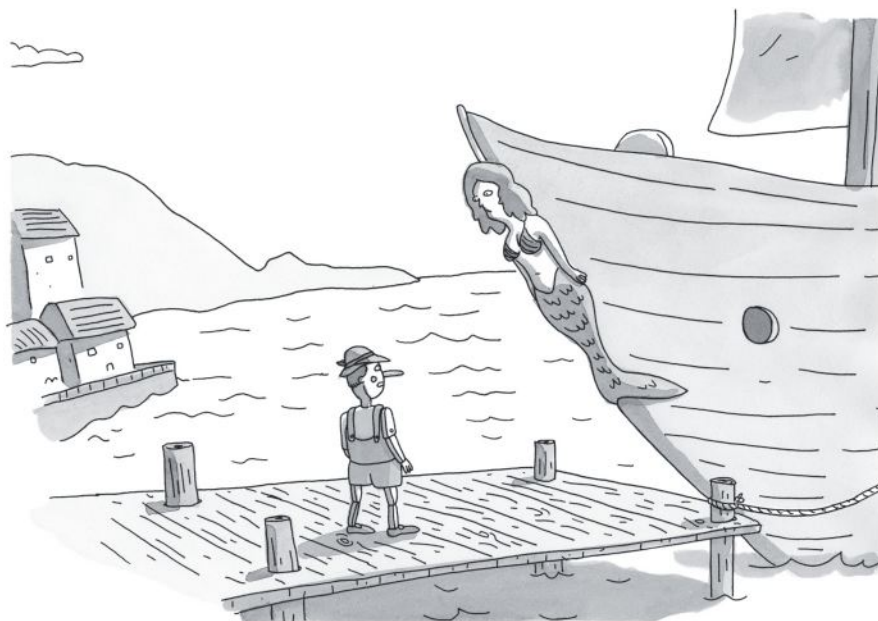
miologists, since, as a report by the Centers for Disease Control has pointed out, public-health priorities no longer drive the management of the list.)

But, even if you strip the classification of everything that can't kill you, you are left with a staggering number of things that can. The ICD-10 comes in three forest-green volumes (or as a download, or on CD-ROM), can be purchased for \$562.82 through Barnes & Noble, and runs to twenty-two hundred pages. The first cause of death that it lists is A00.0, "Cholera due to *Vibrio cholerae* 01." The last is Y89.9, "Sequelae of unspecified external cause." Arrayed between them are more than eight thousand other officially sanctioned ways to die. Taken together, those ICD entries are used to code and standardize the causes of death on death certificates.

Contemplating all this, one suspects that we have got about as far as possible from the premodern relationship to death. A single reason for death, divine will, has mutated into ever more numerous and narrow causes; sixty-six anonymous deaths in sixteenth-century London have grown to twenty-five million death certificates per year. Yet the why of death remains elusive—practically, philosophically, above all emotionally. And, the more extensively we attempt to document it through death certificates, the stranger and more troubled that project comes to seem.

Cede any part of your life to the state, no matter how profound, and soon enough it will hold its own in the bureaucratic triathlon of tedium, arcana, and complexity. Consider: a death certificate is a single piece of paper, one-sided. The official instructions for how to fill it out include the "Physicians' Handbook on Medical Certification of Death" (fifty-seven pages), the "Funeral Directors' Handbook on Death Registration and Fetal Death Reporting" (sixty pages), and the "Medical Examiners' and Coroners' Handbook on Death Registration and Fetal Death Reporting" (a hundred and thirty pages). This is to say nothing of various supplementary guidelines, such as "Instructions for Completion of Death Certificates in the Aftermath of a Hurricane" and "Completing the Cause-of-Death Section of the Death Certificate for Injury and Poisoning."

Why does a one-page document



Kanin

"I know we're not dating anymore, but I thought you should know I have termites."

require two hundred and fifty pages of instructions? The most generous answer is that death certificates are legitimately difficult to fill out. In the United States, the task of doing so often falls to interns or residents—newly minted M.D.s, in their first year or two on the job. (Death certificates, like all paperwork, obey the law of occupational gravity, and residents are on the bottom.) You have already met one of those M.D.s. Sasha Swartzman, a resident in internal medicine at the Oregon Health and Science University, was the doctor on duty when the man at the beginning of this story met his mysterious end. She describes the process of filling out death certificates as "sort of like doing your own taxes. Shouldn't I be smart enough to know how to do this?"

A nine-year-old is smart enough to fill out ninety per cent of a death certificate. The difficulties arise almost exclusively in the cause-of-death section, which consists of just four lines. On the first, doctors are instructed to enter the "immediate cause" of death, defined on the form as the "final disease or condition resulting in death." (If you are already pausing to consider the relationship between "immediate" and "final": let it go.) On the second line, doc-

tors enter whatever caused the condition on the first line, and on the third line they enter whatever caused the condition on the second line. The last line is reserved for the "underlying cause of death": "the disease or injury that initiated the chain of morbid events that led directly and inevitably to death." It is this line that will get turned into an ICD code and identified as the thing that killed you.

The National Center for Health Statistics provides this example of how to correctly complete those lines:

Rupture of myocardium (the immediate cause)
Acute myocardial infarction
Coronary artery thrombosis
Atherosclerotic coronary artery disease (the underlying cause).

Clear enough, even if you don't know a thrombosis from a bass drum. But real death, like real life, is complicated, as Swartzman's experience with the diabetic drug user shows. In that case, the immediate cause was obvious: the man died of anoxia, lack of oxygen to the brain. But why? He could have gone hypoglycemic. He could have had a seizure. He could have suffered sudden cardiac arrest. He could have overdosed, accidentally or on purpose. "At some point," Swartzman



says, “you just have to make an educated guess as to what might have happened and go with it.”

As that suggests, death certificates, again like tax returns, do not always scrupulously reflect the truth. From the beginning, they have been compromised both by the limits of medical knowledge and by dodgy reporting practices. In 1662, John Graunt complained that syphilis was underreported as a cause of death because medical investigators failed to recognize it “after the mist of a Cup of Ale, and the bribe of a two-grout fee.” Similar treatment befell other causes of death viewed as morally damning or unmentionable in polite company: tuberculosis, breast cancer, alcoholism, AIDS, suicide. To protect the reputations of the deceased and the sensibilities of survivors, doctors sometimes upgraded those socially awkward deaths to more acceptable ones—issuing, in essence, vanity death certificates. That practice was sufficiently common in nineteen-thirties New York that the city began issuing a confidential medical report of death: a second, separate document stating the real cause of death.

The practice of bowdlerizing death certificates has faded (although not

disappeared), but other reporting problems persist. In 2010, researchers from St. Luke’s-Roosevelt Hospital Center and Columbia University surveyed five hundred and twenty-one doctors in thirty-eight residency programs across New York City. Only a third believed death certificates to be accurate. Nearly half reported knowingly listing an inaccurate cause of death, and that number rose to almost sixty per cent among residents with the most experience. Those who intentionally list inaccurate causes typically choose familiar ones, with the result that common causes of death appear even more common, and rare ones more rare. The Framingham Heart Study, an ongoing longitudinal study in Massachusetts, found that death certificates overstate coronary-heart disease as a cause of death by as much as twenty-four per cent in the general population and by a far greater percentage in the elderly.

Why do residents fudge these forms? Part of the problem is inadequate training; in the New York study, only two in five reported receiving any instruction in how to fill out a death certificate, and only one in five had taken the city’s ostensibly mandatory training module.

But, when asked, they also pointed to other issues. Sometimes the death-registration system would not accept the cause they felt was correct. Sometimes a hospital administrator overrode them. Sometimes they had never met the patient. Under three per cent reported ever correcting a death certificate in light of new information. Reading about all this, I recalled how a doctor friend of mine had responded when I told her I was interested in death certificates and found myself thinking of them partly as a genre. “Yes,” she snorted. “Fiction.”

The errors that creep into death certificates from inadequate training and other systemic issues are troubling. They overstate leading causes of death, obscure emerging ones, and distort the data we use to allocate funds for research, education, prevention, and treatment. But bad answers are only part of the issue. A more interesting and difficult problem is how we decide what counts as a good answer.

That problem is wonderfully illustrated by a passage from “Huckleberry Finn,” which enlivens an otherwise arid report by the C.D.C. One afternoon, while chatting with the Wilks sisters, the ever-inventive Huck spontaneously invents a new disease—a form of mumps so virulent that, he claims, a neighbor is in danger of dying from it. But mumps can’t kill you, Susan Wilks protests. Oh, yes, this kind can, Huck insists, because it is all “mixed up with other things,” from “yaller janders” to “brain-fever.” Fine, Susan retorts, but in that case it’s not the mumps that will kill the neighbor: “A body might stump his toe, and take pison, and fall down the well, and break his neck, and bust his brains out, and somebody come along and ask what killed him, and some numskull up and say, ‘Why, he stumped his toe.’”

This is precisely the problem posed by death certificates: when filling them out, how far back should we chase the causal chain? If a stubbed toe initiates a fatal sequence of events, is it the underlying cause? Alternatively, how far forward should we chase it? If we are someday able to parse “rupture of myocardium” into its sequential parts, will it cease to be a final cause? And how many causal chains should we chase? To the annoyance of statisticians, it is perfectly possible to die of multiple causes; indeed, as more people

live into extreme old age, multifactorial deaths might well become the norm. But multiple causes of death do messy things to mortality data—reporting that one person died of three causes makes it look like three hundred per cent of your population died—and death certificates are not optimized for that kind of recording.

Problems like these have troubled philosophers for centuries. It is formidably difficult to distinguish beyond doubt a cause from a non-cause, or a proximal cause from a distal cause, or which of six rock-throwing hoodlums smashed your picture window. Yet in everyday life we draw such distinctions constantly. That is not imprudent. It is expedient. Causal reasoning is motivated reasoning; we do it not to discover the fundamental make-it-happen mechanisms of the world but to achieve some ends. And that is why the stumped-toe problem matters. We identify the causes we care about—and, conversely, we care about the causes we identify.

On death certificates, the causes we identify are constrained in one specific way: to the immediate physical breakdown that triggered the events that killed you. “If someone dies of a heart attack,” Harvey Fineberg, the president of the Institute of Medicine, says, “you don’t say he died of high cholesterol, sedentary life style, and a forty-pack-year history of smoking.” For that matter, he notes, we no longer say that “you died of despair, you died of poverty, you died of heart-break. But certainly those are all pretty clear risks for premature death.”

That point has been made, and contested, many times before. In a now famous 1993 paper called “Actual Causes of Death in the United States,” the epidemiologists William Foege and Michael McGinnis showed that roughly half of all deaths in the United States in 1990 could be attributed to nine factors not listed on death certificates: tobacco, diet and physical activity, alcohol, microbial agents, toxic agents, firearms, sexual behavior, motor vehicles, and illicit use of drugs. Omitting such causes mattered, they argued, because the conditions listed on death certificates get the lion’s share of U.S. health-care allocations. Yet the non-listed causes might make better investments; the earlier you intervene on a causal chain the easier and cheaper the intervention tends to be. Consider the relative costs, literal and figurative, of anti-

smoking campaigns versus smoking-cessation programs versus lung-cancer treatment.

We could, in theory, redesign death certificates to capture more distant links in the causal chain. But it is not clear that we should. For one thing, a harried young doctor completing a death certificate is unlikely to have access to the desired information. For another, there is an inherent trade-off to adding more fields to any form. Thomas Frieden, the director of the C.D.C., puts it concisely: “The quality of the data you collect is inversely proportional to the amount of data you collect from each reporter.” That is, if you increase the number of questions you ask on a death certificate, you decrease the accuracy of the answers. “There’s lots more information, different information, better information I’d love to have,” Frieden acknowledges. “But whether the juice is worth the squeeze is the question.”

In Bernard Malamud’s short story “Take Pity,” a census-taker named Davidov asks a man named Rosen how an acquaintance of his died. When Rosen shrugs off the question, the census-taker grows irritable:

“How did he die?” Davidov spoke impatiently. “Say in one word.”
“From what he died?—he died, that’s all.”
“Answer, please, this question.”
“Broke in him something. That’s how.”
“Broke what?”
“Broke what breaks.”

Thus does the mandate of data collection—say it in one word—meet the mystery of dying. That encounter is improbable, uncomfortable, and, as exemplified by death certificates, one of the most felicitous in history. In the past two centuries, global life expectancy has more than doubled, from twenty-eight years to seventy-one. In the United States, the infant-mortality rate in 1900 hovered around one in three; today, it is barely six in a thousand. Death certificates did not bring all this about unilaterally, of course. But it is a measure of their importance that, without them, we wouldn’t even know these numbers.

Still, that importance, like a life, has a limit. The C.D.C. will tell you that a death certificate, in addition to its primary functions, “provides family members closure, peace of mind, and documentation of the cause of death.” But death

certificates and family members are like Davidov and Rosen. Both may ask why someone died, but the causes that count as good answers are irreconcilably different. As the bereaved, we ask because we want to know if a loved one suffered or was at peace, or if her death was meaningful, or whether we could have prevented it, or how the universe could have permitted it.

On all those questions, a death certificate is mute. Instead, it provides the pathological basis of death, determined by some combination of fact, convention, and guesswork, and described in terms that most non-doctors struggle to understand. That is the kind of answer it should give; a death certificate is not Auden’s elegy for Yeats, meant to both solemnize and lift our grief.

Nor is a death certificate likely to provide peace of mind in its other capacity. Among forms of personal identification, the death certificate is the one that undoes the work of all the rest, removing someone we love from Social Security rolls and voting registers and all the other ranks of the living. That process might be necessary, but it is hardly soothing. The bureaucratization of death that began with the Bills of Mortality has evolved over time into a massively complex checkpoint at the border between the living and the dead: Charon’s T.S.A. At its behest, we supply death certificates to cell-phone companies to induce them to terminate contracts; to airlines to release frequent-flyer miles; to Netflix, no kidding, to cancel accounts. We track down fax machines to send copies to six separate government offices, and send another to an attorney via registered mail. In short, we spend vast amounts of energy using death certificates to convince various entities of what is, to us, the most devastatingly obvious fact in the world: that someone we love is no more.

The primary purpose of a death certificate is to explain why we die. But when we are in the pitch of grief—or, for that matter, in the full sunshine of joy—what form, what blank, what cause, whether final, immediate, or underlying, could possibly answer that question to anyone’s satisfaction? Why do we die? For all the medical advances of modernity, there is a sense in which the ancient fatalists had it right. Broke what breaks. We die because we were born; because we are mortal; because that is, after all, life. ♦

CHEMICAL VALLEY

The coal industry, the politicians, and the big spill.

BY EVAN OSNOS

On the morning of Thursday, January 9, 2014, the people of Charleston, West Virginia, awoke to a strange tang in the air off the Elk River. It smelled like licorice. The occasional odor is part of life in Charleston, the state capital, which lies in an industrial area that takes flinty pride in the nickname Chemical Valley. In the nineteenth century, natural brine springs made the region one of America's largest producers of salt. The saltworks gave rise to an industry that manufactured gunpowder, anti-freeze, Agent Orange, and other "chemical magic," as *The Saturday Evening Post* put it, in 1943. The image endured. Today, the Chemical Valley Roller Girls compete in Roller Derby events with a logo of a woman in fishnet stockings and a gas mask. After decades of slow decline, the local industry has revived in recent years, owing to the boom in cheap natural gas, which has made America one of the world's most inexpensive places to make chemicals.

At 8:16 A.M., a resident called the state Department of Environmental Protection and said that something in the air was, in the operator's words, "coating his wife's throat." Downtown, the mayor, Danny Jones, smelled it and thought, Well, it's just a chemical in the air. It'll move. A few minutes passed. "I stuck my mouth up to a water fountain and took a big drink, and I thought, We're in trouble," he recalls. People were calling 911, and the state sent out two inspectors. Eventually, they reached a chemical-storage facility run by Freedom Industries, a "tank farm," with seventeen white metal pillbox-shaped containers clustered on a bluff above the Elk River.

The staff initially said that there was nothing out of the ordinary, but, when the inspectors asked to look around, a company executive, Dennis Farrell, told

them that he had a problem at Tank No. 396, a forty-eight-thousand-gallon container of industrial chemicals. At the foot of the tank, the inspectors found a shallow open-air lake of an oily substance, gurgling like a mountain spring. When hazardous-material crews arrived, they followed a liquid trail under a concrete wall, into the bushes, and down a slope, where it disappeared beneath ice on the river.

Freedom Industries was obligated to report the spill to a state hot line. The operator, who identified herself as Laverne, asked what was leaking; the caller, a staff member named Bob Reynolds, said, "Uh, MCHM."

"MCHM?" Laverne asked.

"Right," he said, and offered the scientific name.

Laverne paused and said, "Say again?"

MCHM—4-methylcyclohexane methanol—is part of a chemical bath that the mining industry uses to wash clay and rock from coal before it is burned. There are more than eighty thousand chemicals available for use in America, but, unless they are expected to be consumed, their effects on humans are not often tested, a principle known in the industry as "innocent until proven guilty." MCHM was largely a mystery to the officials who now confronted the task of containing it. But they knew that the site posed an immediate problem: it was a mile upriver from the largest water-treatment plant in West Virginia. The plant served sixteen per cent of the state's population, some three hundred thousand people—a figure that had risen in the past decade, because coal mining has reduced the availability and quality of other water sources, prompting West Virginians to board up their wells and tap into the public system.

This was West Virginia's fifth major industrial accident in eight years. Most

accidents unfold deep in the mountains that contain the state's natural resources. In this case, the leaders of the state were less than three miles away—near enough to smell it. The spill occurred on the second day of the annual legislative session, when lawmakers were in the State Capitol, a handsome limestone edifice with a gilded dome and landscaped grounds on the north bank of the Kanawha River.

The spill struck a state in the throes of one of America's most thorough political transformations. Once a Democratic stronghold, West Virginia has moved so far to the right that, in 2012, President Obama lost all fifty-five counties, a first for a Presidential candidate of either major party. In the Democratic Presidential primary, a challenger had won forty-one per cent of the vote—impressive in part because the candidate, Keith Judd, is serving seventeen and a half years in a federal prison for extortion.

The state has become a standard-bearer for pro-business, limited-government conservatism. The day before the chemical spill, the governor, Earl Ray Tomblin, delivered his State of the State address, criticizing federal environmental regulators and vowing, "I will never back down from the E.P.A., because of its misguided policies on coal." Tomblin, a conservative Democrat elected in 2011, cut corporate taxes and denounced the federal government for overstepping its authority. To balance the budget, he tapped other government funds and called for broad cuts, including reducing agency spending by seventy million dollars. For the second consecutive year, West Virginia's Department of Environmental Protection would take a 7.5-per cent cut in state funds, dropping to its lowest level since 2008.

At first, Freedom Industries estimated the leak to be as small as twenty-

When a chemical leaked at a facility in Charleston, West Virginia, lawmakers at the State Capitol were close enough to smell it.



five hundred gallons, about sixty barrels. Within days, the estimate had tripled. Eventually, the company raised it to ten thousand gallons, and reported that a second chemical, known as PPH, had leaked as well. At 6 P.M., the Governor appeared on television and issued a warning unprecedented in Chemical Valley: he told three hundred thousand people that their tap water was not safe for “drinking, cooking, washing, or bathing.” It was one of the most serious incidents of chemical contamination of drinking water in American history.

By this time, people had been drinking the water all day. Authorities urged the public to watch for symptoms of exposure, including rashes, nausea, vomiting, and wheezing. Just after midnight, President Obama declared a federal emergency. He dispatched FEMA and sent in the National Guard to deliver truckloads of bottled water.

The struggle over the costs and the spoils of industrial production is as much a part of West Virginians’ self-image as the coal miner on the state flag. The historian John Alexander Williams, a retired professor at Appalachian State University, said, “If West Virginia has one enduring theme, it was in the words of those first explorers who described it as a ‘pleasing, tho’ dreadful’ land.” In the Battle of Blair Mountain, in 1921, more than ten thousand miners confronted police and federal troops backed by machine guns and biplanes. It was the largest insurrection since the Civil War and contributed to Franklin Roosevelt’s efforts, more than a decade later, to protect collective bargaining. When the Great Depression cut West Virginia coal production by forty per cent, Roosevelt pushed relief programs into the mountains and enshrined Democratic control of the state. The Party had so many patronage jobs at its command that U.S. Senator Matthew M. Neely complained that job seekers were “following me to my bathroom.”

When I finished college, in 1999, I got a job as a photographer at a newspaper in West Virginia, the *Clarksburg Exponent Telegram*. Clarksburg (pop. 16,400) is a small city in the northern

part of the state, with an Art Deco courthouse on Main Street, where a billboard once hung that said “You have a right to be proud!” I rented a roomy apartment in a hundred-year-old building with large windows and a view of downtown. Clarksburg had never been rich, but workers in the local glass factories could afford to buy a house and a car and raise a family. The standard of living had risen in the three decades after the Second World War, as it had in much of America, when the national economy doubled in size and the earnings of the average worker doubled with it. By 1957, the local government was creating so many parks and sewers and roads that the National Municipal League named Clarksburg an “All-America City,” and the honor still appeared on signs around town.

Once or twice a generation, Americans rediscover Appalachia. The hillbilly caricature—Li’l Abner to Honey Boo Boo to “Buckwild,” a reality show about West Virginia teen-agers, which MTV broadcast last year (with subtitles)—deflects attention from the efforts to reduce poverty in West Virginia. The social critic Michael Harrington, who focussed prominently on Appalachia in his 1962 book, “The Other America,” described poverty as a “separate culture, another nation, with its own way of life.” Half a century later, the inequity endures, with one difference: the economics and the politics of West Virginia have never been more like those in the rest of the country. When the historian Ronald Eller, of the University of Kentucky, studied the history of the region since 1945, he concluded that “Appalachia was not different from the rest of America; it was in fact a mirror of what the nation was becoming.”

West Virginia ranks among the nation’s worst states when it comes to smoking, obesity, disabilities, and prescription-drug abuse; it trails much of the nation in the rate of college graduation. So many young people leave in search of work that West Virginians joke that kids learn the three R’s: reading, ’riting, and Route 77—the road out. In McDowell County, at the southern end of the state, the average

man lives to be sixty-four—a level on a par with Yemen. Over the border in Virginia, men in Fairfax County live eighteen years longer.

In the modern era of inequality, in which the share of income held by the top one per cent is the largest it has been since 1928, the inequality is widening in West Virginia. As the southern coalfields continue to empty out, the eastern panhandle is becoming a growing bedroom community for Washington, D.C. More than half of West Virginians’ income growth in the past three decades has gone to the state’s top one per cent.

In Chemical Valley, the relationship between industries and neighbors has fluctuated. Historically, chemical workers often earned more than twice the state’s average income. Maya Nye, the president of a citizens’ group called People Concerned About Chemical Safety, grew up a mile from a plant run by Union Carbide, where her father worked, and she was proud to be one of “the Carbide kids.” “It put food on my table,” she said. “There were no other jobs here if you didn’t work for the chemical plant.” In school, kids learned from a cartoon turtle how to respond if the plant ever set off the alarm for a vapor leak. “His name was Wally Wise Guy, and he would teach you how to shelter in place,” she said. “He taught you to ‘retreat inside your shell.’”

In December, 1984, a Union Carbide pesticide plant in the Indian city of Bhopal leaked a cloud of toxic gas known as MIC, or methyl isocyanate, killing nearly four thousand people and permanently injuring more than forty-nine hundred. The West Virginia Union Carbide was Bhopal’s sister plant, the only facility in America that still produced and stored large quantities of MIC. In August, 2008, after the plant had been acquired by Bayer CropScience, undertrained workers mishandled the re-start of a sensitive production unit, triggering an explosion that killed two employees. Congressional investigators later found that the explosion at the plant “came dangerously close” to hitting a tank of the chemical that had leaked in Bhopal; if it had, they wrote, the consequences “could have eclipsed the 1984 disaster in India.”

That incident and others galvanized West Virginia’s environmental community to confront rising risks to public



health. Decades earlier, in response to environmental disasters such as the burning Cuyahoga River, in Ohio, Congress had passed the 1972 Clean Water Act, which gave regulators the power to punish offenders. Two years later, it created a second landmark law: the Safe Drinking Water Act, which sets limits on contaminants in tap water. Conditions improved—the Kanawha River in Charleston was transformed—but progress eventually stalled. By the late nineties, lax enforcement and radical new forms of mining were undercutting protections in West Virginia. Today, the process known as mountaintop-removal mining has buried more than a thousand miles of streams across Appalachia. In 2010, the journal *Science* published a study of seventy-eight West Virginia streams near mountaintop-removal mines, which found that nearly all of them had elevated levels of selenium—a by-product of mining that has caused deformities in fish. In 2009, four environmental organizations petitioned the federal government to take over enforcement of parts of the Clean Water Act in West Virginia; they described the state's regulatory system as approaching a "nearly complete breakdown." Nothing came of the request.

After the spill and the ban on water this past January, schools, restaurants, and businesses shut down. The National Guard directed its resources toward hospitals and nursing homes. Candi Shriver, a mother of two, who works as an emergency medical technician and sells Avon products, told me, "I shouldn't be surprised, but I was surprised, or outraged, by the people who were fighting in the stores. People were getting in knock-down drag-outs over the last case of water." Her husband, Josh, improvised. He is an I.T. consultant who can take apart his Harley and put it back together again. They'd met on Plenty of Fish, the dating Web site, and had much in common, although she'd voted for Barack Obama (Josh had switched his registration from Democrat to Republican in 2008). When the water ban went into effect, Josh drove his truck eighty miles south, to Williamson. At a Big Lots superstore, he asked for a pallet of bottled water. "The whole thing?" the clerk inquired. Shriver paid a dollar a gallon for two hundred and seventy-five gallons and hauled it home for his family and his neighbors.

As the water ban continued, affluent residents rented apartments in unaffected towns, in order to bathe their kids and wash clothes. The less fortunate put out buckets and hoped for rain. In the first three days, more than two hundred people showed up at emergency rooms with rashes, nausea, and other complaints. A dozen were admitted; none were seriously ill. Meanwhile, the contaminated water from Charleston had emptied into the Ohio River, and the Greater Cincinnati Water Works, which served more than a million people, closed its intakes and shifted to emergency reserves until the chemicals had passed.

Dr. Rahul Gupta, the head of the Kanawha-Charleston Health Department, was tracking the spill's effects from his office. At forty-three, Gupta has a boyish face, and a trace of silver in his hair. The son of an Indian diplomat, he grew up partly in Maryland, and graduated from the University of Delhi before returning to America. He moved to Charleston with his wife and children in 2009. He approached the job with an entrepreneurial bent: to

fight obesity and diabetes, he had created a mobile app that plotted restaurants by G.P.S., and allowed users to compare menus and calorie counts.

Public officials urged Gupta to permit restaurants and other facilities to reopen, but he was hesitant. "I have to be honest and transparent with the public," he said. "I didn't know enough about the chemical. Obviously, you don't want to outrage the population about something you don't know, but I wanted more data." The loss to businesses was estimated to be nineteen million dollars a day, but, before shops could reopen, Gupta needed to send in inspectors. "I had officials come to me and say, 'Use the honor system.'" That struck Gupta as profoundly misguided. "The honor system is bad—it's why a local health department exists," he said. "I had to put my foot down. The beauty of the system is that we have autonomous local boards of health."

On January 12th, the fourth day without water, Governor Tomblin held a press conference to say that the "numbers look good" and "we're seeing light at the end of the tunnel." Though the water in many homes still smelled of licorice, state



officials told the public that it posed no obvious health risk. But, during the next four days, Gupta recorded a rising number of emergency-room and doctor's visits for skin rashes, eye irritation, nausea, vomiting, anxiety, and migraines. He said, "As a scientist, I can't prove cause and effect, but it was a matter of fact: whether it was introducing a new chemical into the water, and people were having a hypersensitive-type reaction, or it was the odor triggering nausea, migraines, and asthma attacks, it was very clear that something was going on." The public was losing trust in official statements. "People who followed every guideline to the T were still ending up with rashes or eye irritation, and that made them mad."

The health effects were still in question. The company that made MCHM, Eastman Chemical, of Tennessee, had tested it on laboratory animals and given it a U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration rating of "hazardous." The long-term effects on humans were uncertain, but the U.S. Centers for Disease Control calculated that the material was safe to consume below a level of one part per million. On January 15th, two days after Tomblin began lifting the ban, the C.D.C., "out of an abundance of caution," issued an advisory to pregnant women to avoid the water.

The public recoiled. If the water wasn't safe for pregnant women, why was it safe for infants or toddlers? What about pregnant women who had been told that it was safe and resumed drinking it? A few hours before the announcement, Stephanie Gale, a human-resources consultant

who lives a mile from the spill, had gone to the doctor and heard her unborn child's heartbeat for the first time. "I've had people say, 'Well, pregnant women should've just known not to drink the water,'" she said. "There are a lot of things that you have to think about as a pregnant woman that you don't have to think about as a not-pregnant woman, and drinking the water shouldn't be one of them." Three weeks later, the C.D.C. lifted its advisory to pregnant women, saying that the water had been safe all along.

Day by day, schools that had been declared safe were running into problems. Plumbing systems differed, so one school could be free of MCHM while another still had traces. Governor Tomblin stopped urging people to drink the water and adopted a legalistic position: "I'm not going to say absolutely, one hundred per cent, that everything is safe. But what I can say is, if you do not feel comfortable don't use it." He added, "It's your decision." Kitchen workers who encountered steam were especially vulnerable to the effects. On February 5th, two schools shut down after teachers and kids complained of dizziness and nausea. "The following day, we had three more schools close," Gupta said, "and we had up to fourteen schools that complained, but the day ran out, so the kids were let go." At the end of February, he told me, "We're getting complaints from schools almost every day."

For West Virginians, the battle to obtain some of the basic elements of government service—potable water, safe schools, public-health advice—was disorienting. Josh Shriver said, "They

didn't know exactly what it was, they didn't know how much of it had leaked, and they didn't know how long it had been leaking." At one point, Candi Shriver, hauling water in from outside to flush the toilet, said to her husband, "It's like we're living in a Third World country."

In 1948, West Virginia had a hundred and twenty-six thousand coal miners. By 2011, four-fifths of those jobs were gone. The most accessible reserves had been mined, and machines were cutting demand for workers underground. But King Coal remained a singular political force. The first time that John D. (Jay) Rockefeller IV, a Democrat and the great-grandson of the founder of Standard Oil, ran for governor of West Virginia, in 1972, he said, "Strip mining is tearing up the beauty of our state" and "is not a good economic future." Miners mobilized against him, heckling him at rallies, and Rockefeller lost. When he ran again, four years later, he had become a coal-industry ally, and went on to serve as governor and then five terms in the U.S. Senate.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the mine workers' union was too weak to deliver Democratic votes, Walmart was the largest employer in West Virginia, and the state was poised for one of America's most dramatic political transformations. In 1999, Karl Rove, the Bush campaign strategist, added West Virginia to a list of long-shot states that he suspected Republicans could win. G.O.P. Presidential campaigns had all but ignored West Virginia



Senator Joe Manchin, an advocate of coal interests; Evan Hansen, an environmental consultant; Chris Hamilton, a coal lobbyist.

since Nixon, Eisenhower's running mate, visited in 1956, and the state still had nearly twice as many registered Democrats as Republicans, but Rove saw an opening. In his 2010 memoir, "Courage and Consequence," he recalled, "The state's coal industry was under attack from the Clinton administration. Many Democratic voters were pro-life, pro-prayer, and pro-gun, even if they had voted Democratic for decades, and it seemed Bush would be a better fit than the elitist Al Gore."

The Bush-Cheney campaign opened eighteen offices across West Virginia and barraged the state's small media market with ads. To raise money, Rove recruited the coal tycoon James H. (Buck) Harless, who had looked at Gore's agenda and decided, "I needed to fight much harder than I ever had." The coal industry tripled its campaign donations from four years earlier. The campaign also enlisted Charles Kimbler, an unemployed official from the miners' union, to wear his miner's helmet and introduce Bush at rallies with the line "The Democrat Administration shut my mine down, and I lost my job." Bush became the first non-incumbent Republican Presidential candidate to win the state since Herbert Hoover, in 1928. (If Al Gore had carried West Virginia, he would have won the Presidency.)

Bush's victory was a milestone; the state that once idolized Franklin Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy was dedicating itself to corporate liberty and freedom from oversight. For years, the state had greeted visitors with billboards that said "Wild Wonderful West Virginia." In

2006, it adopted a new slogan: "Open for Business."

In West Virginia today, the state Republican Party frames the regulation of heavy industry as a matter of cultural and existential survival. Last year, the Party urged supporters to "join this battle against the liberal Democrats of D.C.," and declared, "Obama's foot soldiers seek to destroy our very way of life for the sake of an agenda that guts our economy."

As the water ban was lifted, attention shifted to determining what had happened, who was responsible, and how to prevent it from happening again. Freedom Industries did not hold up well under scrutiny. It had failed to file mandatory leak-prevention plans with the Department of Environmental Protection. State inspectors made occasional visits, as in April, 2010, when a neighbor complained of a licorice smell that "leaves a bad taste in your mouth," but the plant was never fined.

Freedom Industries was founded in 1992 by Carl Lemley Kennedy II, a local businessman who had owned real estate and restaurants. In 1987, he had pleaded guilty to selling cocaine as part of an operation that brought down Charleston's mayor at the time, Mike Roark. The Mayor pleaded guilty to cocaine possession and went to jail. Kennedy got probation. He and some partners converted a former Pennzoil facility into Freedom Industries, and by 2005 the business was valued, in court papers, at \$13.5 million. That year, after federal prosecutors accused Kennedy of tax evasion and pocketing money withheld from workers'

paychecks, he became an informant. He made controlled cocaine buys and wore a wire to record a former business associate, a septic-tank cleaner who told his drivers to pour sewage down the drain. For his cooperation, Kennedy served less than two years.

By 2009, Freedom had forty-five employees, but it needed help from the government: a buildup of silt in the Elk River was making it difficult for barges to reach the tanks. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers used four hundred thousand dollars in federal stimulus funds to dredge the river, and Freedom survived. In December, 2013, Freedom was acquired by Chemstream Holdings, which is owned by J. Clifford Forrest, the founder and president of a Pennsylvania-based coal company named Rosebud Mining. Eight days after the spill, Freedom, facing dozens of lawsuits, filed for bankruptcy.

The responsibility for regulating Freedom Industries fell to the state's Department of Environmental Protection, which during the past decade has been urged to scale back its enforcement. "It's not subtle," Pam Nixon, who retired this year after fifteen years as a senior department official, told me. She recalled a staff meeting in which Joe Manchin, the governor from 2005 to 2010, "said that when the industries see the D.E.P. coming onto their property he wanted them to feel comfortable." Manchin, a Democrat, had prospered as a middleman who helped coal mines sell to power plants and other users. Once in office, he repeatedly advised the department to shift its emphasis from enforcement to

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT: HYRAX FILMS; BOB BIRD/AP; CRAIG CUNNINGHAM/CHARLESTON DAILY MAIL



Maya Nye, of People Concerned About Chemical Safety; state Senator John Unger; Rahul Gupta, of the local health department.

"compliance assistance." By that, Nixon said, he meant, "If there was a problem, work to make sure that the company can continue to operate. . . . He didn't want us to come down heavy-handedly." Nixon, who served as the department's Environmental Advocate, expressed her concerns about gaps in enforcement to the head of the department, a Manchin appointee named Randy Huffman. "He said, 'Remember how this administration feels about these industries.'"

In 2008, the *Charleston Gazette* discovered that in a nearly five-year period coal companies had self-reported around twenty-five thousand violations of the Clean Water Act, but the D.E.P. had not reviewed the reports or issued a fine. The following year, federal investigators from the Office of Surface Mining wrote that West Virginia had become so lax in its enforcement of coal-mining pollution regulations that "the consequences for violating the law, even when the violations are intentional, willful and blatant, are not significant enough to be a deterrent." In 2010, Manchin left the Governor's Mansion and ran for the U.S. Senate. He promised to protect the state from environmentalists' "attempts to destroy our coal industry and way of life in West Virginia." The American Chemistry Council, the leading industry group, spent two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars on advertisements praising Manchin as the "Senator for Our Future." In a campaign ad, Manchin fired a rifle into a copy of a climate-change bill. On his Senate financial disclosures, he has reported income of more than three million dollars between 2009 and 2012 from Enersystems, a coal brokerage that he owned. (It is now run by his son.)

At the Department of Environmental Protection, the commitment to "compliance assistance" endures. An inspector told me that senior officials often question the field staff's attempts to penalize companies that violate the law. He said that the resistance was "a slap in the face" to professional inspectors. If they persisted in trying to issue a violation, instead of a warning, they faced added paperwork. "That process of enforcement just takes a toll on you," he said. "It should be easier."

When I spoke to Randy Huffman, the man Manchin had named the state's chief environmental regulator, he de-

scribed the Freedom Industries spill as an unforeseeable accident, and one that would not have been detected by more inspections. "Nobody could see the hole forming in that tank," he said. "So the leak was going to happen." He believes that environmental activists will never be satisfied with his agency. "What am I supposed to do when people know the truth but they deliberately manipulate it in order to make their point? That's being an activist." He added, "We're not perfect, but we're not evil."

In West Virginia, as in most states, many pollution standards are set by elected officials, and they have shown a consistent approach in recent years. Attorney General Patrick Morrisey, who in 2012 was the first Republican to win the post since 1933, campaigned on a promise to "restrain Washington's appetite for spending, regulations, and mandates." To promote business, he backed a lawsuit against the Environmental Protection Agency, saying, "At its essence, this lawsuit is about jobs in West Virginia and elsewhere."

Evan Hansen, an environmental consultant who has testified about the leak before the West Virginia legislature, has tracked the cumulative effect of that objective throughout the government. "In the past ten or fifteen years, they've systematically weakened virtually all the major water-quality standards that apply to the coal industry," he said. "One by one, there's been a steady effort to undermine the implementation of environmental laws, to the point that it's become a part of everyday normal life here."

But the Freedom Industries spill exceeded the public's capacity for tolerance. Governor Tomblin announced that his office would propose legislation—the "spill bill," as it was known—to govern aboveground storage tanks of the kind that leaked at Freedom Industries. To understand who had a hand in creating the bill, Ken Ward, Jr., of the *Gazette*, filed a Freedom of Information Act request for communications between the Governor's office and lobbyists and lawyers connected to the chemical and coal industries. He received a hundred and fifty-eight pages of e-mails and documents. They revealed that the Governor's office had arranged a closed-door meeting for what it called "the stakehold-

ers," which included the Chamber of Commerce, the Oil and Gas Association, and the Coal Association. No citizens' groups or environmental organizations were invited.

Later, industry groups sent detailed notes on the bill. Rebecca Randolph, the president of the West Virginia Manufacturers Association, which lobbies on behalf of the chemical industry, proposed eighteen exemptions to the law that would "address some of our concerns." Eventually, when lawmakers held a hearing to review the bill, regulators were unable to justify some of the exemptions. "They didn't have any idea why things were in there," Ward said. "It's so ingrained in the way the legislature works that most of the people that cover the State House are kind of immune to how outrageous that is."

Over the years, Ward had witnessed other demonstrations of the coal industry's penetration of state government. He once received a copy of a script that lobbyists had written to help a legislator introduce a rule change on water pollution. It read, in part, "We must be sure that our standards are protective of our streams without being overly protective." In the most brazen example, ten years ago, Don Blankenship, the chairman of Massey Energy, which was America's fourth-largest coal company, sought to reshape the politics of the West Virginia Supreme Court shortly before it took up Massey's appeal of a fifty-million-dollar judgment for fraud and interfering with a contract. Blankenship had broken the mine workers' union during a strike in 1985 and still kept, near his desk, a television that had been shattered by a bullet that came through his office window. Judges in West Virginia are elected, not appointed, and in 2004 Blankenship spent more than three million dollars to promote a conservative candidate named Brent Benjamin, who was vying to be the first Republican on the Supreme Court in seventy-six years. Most of the money went to a political-action committee that was running ads accusing Justice Warren McGraw, a progressive, of being soft on child molestation and drugs. Blankenship's candidate won, and provided the decisive vote that overturned the judgment against Blankenship's company. The U.S. Supreme Court eventually said that Benjamin should have recused

himself from the case, on the ground that Blankenship had a “disproportionate influence in placing the judge on the case.”

In West Virginia, members of the Senate and the House of Delegates meet at the beginning of each year for sixty days, before returning to regular life. The legislature is so sparsely funded that, until 1993, committees had no permanent legal staff, so they brought in lawyers as consultants, many of whom represented local industries. West Virginia’s public salaries are among the lowest in the country, so senior government employees often pass through the revolving door into the industries they regulate, a tendency that reinforces the youth and inexperience of the government staff left behind.

The West Virginia legislature has proved vulnerable to the forces of outside influence. In the nineteen-eighties, coal companies converted part of the top floor of a hotel into a Coal Suite, where lawmakers could enjoy an open bar, a buffet, card tables, and private areas. In 1989, after two successive presidents of the state Senate were charged with taking money from lobbyists, the state passed a Governmental Ethics Act, which limits gifts and forces legislators to report on their finances. Today, the Coal Suite is gone, but, unlike in a majority of states, West Virginia industry groups and their clients don’t have to report how much they spend. In 2010, the Pacific Research Institute compared state laws on transparency in politics—the requirement, for instance, that a lobbyist disclose its spending on behalf of a client. West Virginia tied with Nevada as the least transparent in America.

The Democrat John Unger, a pastor and former Rhodes Scholar who serves as the majority leader in the state Senate, told me that he has identified three steps by which lobbyists win the cooperation of his peers. “First, they try to wine and dine you. Then they try to set you up. And then they try to threaten you.”

Set you up? I asked.

“Set you up in the sense of getting something on you so that you become beholden to them,” he said. “Back when I was a freshman, I stayed at the Marriott during the legislative session. And they would send people up to your room and knock on the door.” He continued,



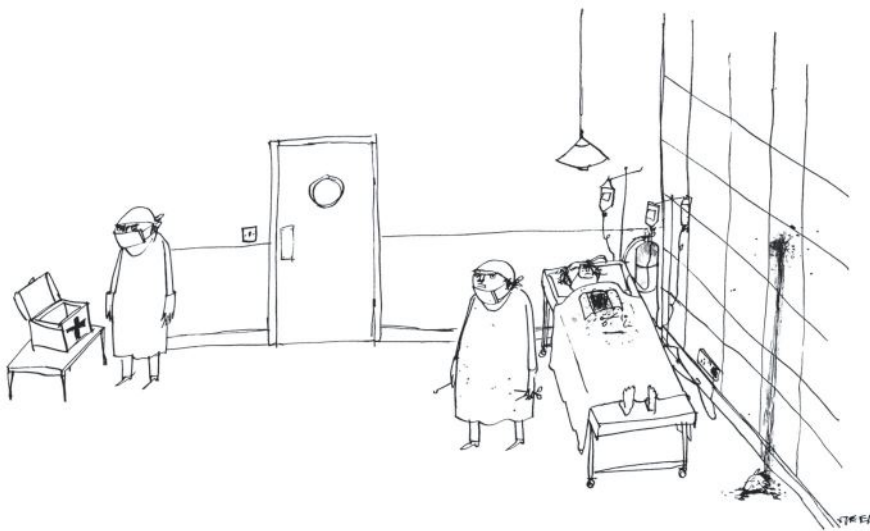
“Tonight’s ‘Valkyrie’ features actual Norse gods, and takes place in the sky.”

“When I looked out the peephole and saw who it was, I’d call down to security and say, ‘Someone’s lost, they’re knocking on my door.’ Then I moved out.”

Unger recalled the first time that a lobbyist for a chemical company asked him to vote on a bill. “I said, ‘I don’t sign on to anything until I read it.’ And he said, ‘Well, that’s not the way it works around here.’ I said, ‘Well, I don’t know how it works down here, but that’s the way I work.’ And he said, ‘Well, if you don’t learn to get along, when it comes to your reelection, we’ll stick a fork in you.’ And I looked at him and said, ‘Sir, with no due disrespect to you, but you weren’t for me when I got elected, and I got elected!’”

For those who are uncoöperative, the

results can be swift. In 2012, a coal-industry lobbyist asked Larry Barker, who was the chair of the House Energy, Industry, and Labor Committee, to advance an industry-backed bill out of his committee. Barker declined, and the meeting adjourned. Afterward, Barker told me, a lobbyist “walks over and crowded me with his shoulder, kind of back to the corner, where there was nobody there but me and him. And I’m looking up at him, and I said, ‘What is it?’ And he said, ‘What’s it going to take for you to run our bill?’ And I said, ‘I want to look it over. I want to let the attorney look at it, I want the union to look it over.’ He said, ‘This is the last meeting. You can call a special meeting and put this bill on there.’ And I said, ‘Well, now,



"I can catch—you can't throw."

why do you think I would do that?' He said, 'Because we want it.' We, meaning the coal industry. 'We want it. Period.' I said, 'Well, we've reached a deadline. If I'm still here next year in this same position, if this is a good bill, I promise you I'll run it in the first meeting next year.' He looked me in the eye and he said, 'That will be too late for you.' And he turned and walked out, and I never heard from anybody else in the coal companies after that." That fall, a first-time candidate backed by the coal industry challenged Barker and defeated him.

As the role of coal in the economy continues to shrink, the industry has become more organized politically. Last year, it encouraged members of the West Virginia legislature to form a Coal Caucus, which has since attracted more than a third of the House. "In my seven years of service in the legislature, I've never seen the industry represented as effectively and efficiently as it is this session," the Republican delegate Troy Andes told a convention last year. When I arranged an interview with one of the Coal Caucus's most dedicated members, the delegate Rupert Phillips, Jr., of Logan County, he arrived accompanied by Chris Hamilton, a coal-industry lobbyist. They asked to do the interview as a team. Hamilton, in pin-stripes and tasselled loafers, is a constant presence in the State Capitol, where he sees himself as an educator for lawmakers

who shouldn't be faulted for not knowing "the difference between a dragline and a drag queen."

Phillips makes his living selling mining equipment to coal operators, and after he was elected, in 2010, he ordered license plates for his S.U.V. that say "COALDEL"—for "coal delegate." I asked him if he expected the chemical spill to lead to stricter regulation. "The environmentalists want to blame the coal industry," he said, but he believed that the dangers posed by MCHM had been overstated. When he has handled it in the past, he said, "I've rinsed my hands off and go eat a sandwich!" He suggested I look at a study of the chemical's effects on aquatic life. "I was told that they used some type of little micro-organism, or whatever they test. Supposedly, they put an extra amount of this chemical in there, and it never killed the deal. . . . A live fish in a tank, and it's still living! But they don't release all that, the environmentalists. They don't want the truth. It's fiction."

Hamilton said it's a common misconception that his industry can "run roughshod over environmental concerns, and its general citizenry." On the contrary, he said, "I think you will find the most credible, upstanding people running our regulatory programs, who truly care, who want to see business, at the end of the day, compete in domestic and world markets, but have the utmost respect and

sensitivities to personal safety, environmental quality."

Phillips added his compliments to the state's chief environmental regulator: "Randy Huffman does an excellent job."

Hamilton praised elected officials for staying loyal to coal. "From my perspective, there's been a growing maturity within those elected to public office," he said. "We have a strong core of conservative Democrats, with some very knowledgeable and seasoned members of the Republican Party as well. And I think there's a realization that coal always has been, and hopefully will continue to be, a major industry in the state."

To encourage the spread of that view, the industry, in 2002, created Friends of Coal, a nonprofit public-advocacy group intended to "educate West Virginia citizens about the coal industry and its vital role in the state's future." It runs television and radio ads, and for several years it sponsored a Friends of Coal Bowl, to appeal to college football fans. It signed up the former head coaches of the state's favorite athletic teams, Marshall University and West Virginia University, to serve as spokesmen. For children, the Friends of Coal Ladies Auxiliary runs a program called Coal in the Classroom, and produced a workbook entitled "Let's Learn About Coal." For a lesson on economics, the book featured a cartoon character of a smiling lump of coal with arms and legs, holding open the door to a bank.

Because West Virginia has a population of only 1.8 million—less than the city of Houston—an investment in influence goes far. The conservative fossil-fuel magnates Charles and David Koch, through their charitable foundations, have devoted particular attention to the state. The Investigative Reporting Workshop, at American University, found that, between 2007 and 2011, the Kochs gave \$30.5 million to two hundred and twenty-one universities; West Virginia University received nine hundred and sixty-five thousand dollars, the third-highest amount, behind George Mason and Florida State. In February, the university announced that it was creating a five-million-dollar Center for Free Enterprise, funded in part by the Charles G. Koch Foundation.

The Kochs also helped fund research at the Public Policy Foundation of West Virginia, a think tank that, in

2007, published “Unleashing Capitalism: Why Prosperity Stops at the West Virginia Border and How to Fix It,” edited by a West Virginia University economics professor named Russell Sobel. The book argued against mine-safety regulations, on the ground that “improved safety conditions result in lower money wages for workers,” and asked, “Are workers really better off being safer but making less income?” It also called for relaxing rules on water usage. “Although they are intended to benefit citizens, water use regulations will only hamper prosperity by impeding the state’s ability to retain and attract businesses and to generate new employment opportunities.” Governor Manchin invited Sobel to brief his cabinet, as well as a joint session of the Senate and the House Finance Committees. The state Republican Party chairman said, “Unleashing capitalism will be our party platform.” In February, Americans for Prosperity, the political-advocacy group funded heavily by the Koch brothers, established a chapter in West Virginia. A state Republican consultant told me, “You can do things here incredibly, incredibly cheaply. For instance, A.F.P., the Koch brothers, went and did North Carolina last time. Well, a legislative seat here is about one-fourth the size of a legislative seat in North Carolina. So there’s bang for your buck.” In any given district, he said, “You can go in for twenty grand, and probably fix a problem.” He also noted, “People are just showing up with pockets full of money, saying, ‘We want to help you out.’”

Six weeks after the Freedom Industries spill, the National Guard and the news trucks were gone. In Charleston, people told me that their ordeal had received less national coverage than the latest virus on a cruise liner. “If this were three hundred thousand people in northern Virginia, I think the President would’ve been here,” Ken Ward, the *Gazette* reporter, told me. “Or, at least, Biden.” Restaurants in Charleston still advertised that they were using only bottled water. In a stab at levity, Electric 102.7 was playing a country song about what it called the “Aquapocalypse.” (“I smell freedom in my shower. I smell freedom in my sink. I will shower in my freedom, but my freedom I won’t drink.”) In a Facebook post, Victor Urecki, a

Charleston rabbi, wrote, “I am ready to be the rabbi that turned wine to water.”

Josh and Candi Shriver were down to a quarter of their pallet of bottled water. They were using tap water to bathe, but it was giving Freddie, age three, a rash. At thirty, Candi was slender, with red hair and delicate features; her eyes were rimmed red from exhaustion. The house was carefully decorated—wine corks in a shadow box, inspirational quotes on small wooden plaques—but it was cluttered with jugs of water and other detritus of life after the spill. In February, the Shrivens decided to test their pipes, and Andrea Varrato, an environmental scientist for a consultancy called Downstream Strategies, arrived at the front door with a set of amber-glass bottles to collect samples. The test covered cold water, but Candi wanted to test the hot as well. She asked, “It would be six hundred and some dollars per test?” Varrato nodded.

“Holy smokes,” Candi said.

Josh looked at her and said, “It’s up to you.”

She thought for a moment, and said, “I just don’t know that we can do twelve hundred dollars.” The experience was making her angry. “I don’t think that my three-year-old should have to worry about coming in contact with water,” she said.

While Varrato collected samples from a pipe in the garage, I asked the Shrivens if they thought that the spill should lead to stricter regulation. Josh had misgivings. “If you regulate it more, and it cuts into coal, then it’s ultimately going to



force the coal companies to shut down, or they’d have to shut down because they can’t compete with the rest of the country’s prices,” he said. “So regulating it might create benefits up front, but in the end it’s going to cause harm.”

Candi agreed. “We’re a coal state,” she said. The spill “doesn’t change my view on coal companies. It changes my view on chemical companies who don’t house chemicals correctly. And it also changed our view on the D.E.P., because we

thought there were stricter things in place for that.”

Candi had begun to imagine a dark future. She wondered if leukemia and other cancers might increase. I asked if they considered moving away. Josh said, “I have a number of people that have put their houses up for sale in an attempt to see if anybody’ll actually buy. But one of them said, ‘Nobody’s going to want to buy here now.’”

Candi said, “I would love to move out of this area, to Tucker County. There are no plants up there. If we had the money just to pick up and move . . .” She trailed off. They had too many ties to family and work to imagine leaving.

Others were running out of patience. One morning in late February, Senator Manchin was in Fayetteville, an hour from Charleston, for an event called Coffee and Common Sense, at a café in a converted church. Manchin, who stands six feet three inches and went to West Virginia University on a football scholarship, is an affable, drawling figure in his sixties with a thick brush of gray hair.

The café was packed. When it was time for questions, Alan Jennings, the operations manager at a wilderness outfitter, said that many people in town were worried about a local plant that held wastewater from a natural-gas drilling operation. “It makes you feel like you’re not going to know you’re in danger until you die,” Jennings said. “They have a holding pond there that’s not safe.” Next, John Raney, a retired NASA engineer, who was wearing a nylon aviator jacket, said, “I want my children and grandchildren to be able to take a shower and not feel that they’re going to start lighting up.” Manchin promised to help everyone speak to the Department of Environmental Protection. But Stephanie Danz, a local glassmaker, said that state regulators had recorded their complaints repeatedly in the past five years. “It’s the same thing over and over and over again,” she said. “There are never any results.”

A man who was younger and browner than others in the room stood and unfolded a piece of paper. He was in his early forties, and worked on a gas rig in Pennsylvania. I expected to hear a voice on behalf of the industry, but he said, “Senator Manchin, if you are truly

interested in stopping the environmental and human disaster occurring in West Virginia, you will help craft legislation that will hold accountable those in charge." He went on, "The West Virginia D.E.P. simply has no teeth. If state troopers walked out and arrested the C.E.O. of Freedom Industries, their friends would surely decide to take better care of their facilities." Reading from his statement, he said, "We're small folks and we'll never attend black-tie, thousand-dollar-a-plate fund-raising galas in Manhattan, but we demand justice. We, the people, demand justice!" The room broke into applause. The man sat down and did not speak again. (He requested that I not use his name, for fear of losing his job.)

After everyone went home, I asked Manchin if the spill had led him to adjust his sense of the balance between environmental protection and business promotion. "My balance is always in the same place," he said, and smiled. "I don't want my inspectors going out with a cease-and-desist order. Why shouldn't they come out and say, 'Let me just show you what you're doing wrong. And this is what we've got to do to clean this mess up.' Fine. If they come back next month and you've ignored it, we'll slap a cease and desist and put you out of business." When I pointed out that citizens did not seem impressed by the state's enforcement, Manchin said, "If someone is saying

that someone has sold out to business over enforcing government, that is so false. I have never seen that."

In Congress, Manchin is the only Democrat among the top twenty recipients of campaign money from the mining industry. In the four years since he ran for the Senate, the industry has given him more than six hundred and sixty thousand dollars, according to the Center for Responsive Politics. Three of his top five donors are energy companies. I asked him if his personal income and his campaign donations make it difficult for him to render an unbiased opinion. "It does not affect my decision-making to do the right thing," he said. "Do you think that I live hand-to-mouth? No, I don't. I don't. And the bottom line is, I haven't brokered coal for a long time. We do a lot of different things. But the bottom line is this: I still believe wholeheartedly you can do it"—coal mining—"and do it right."

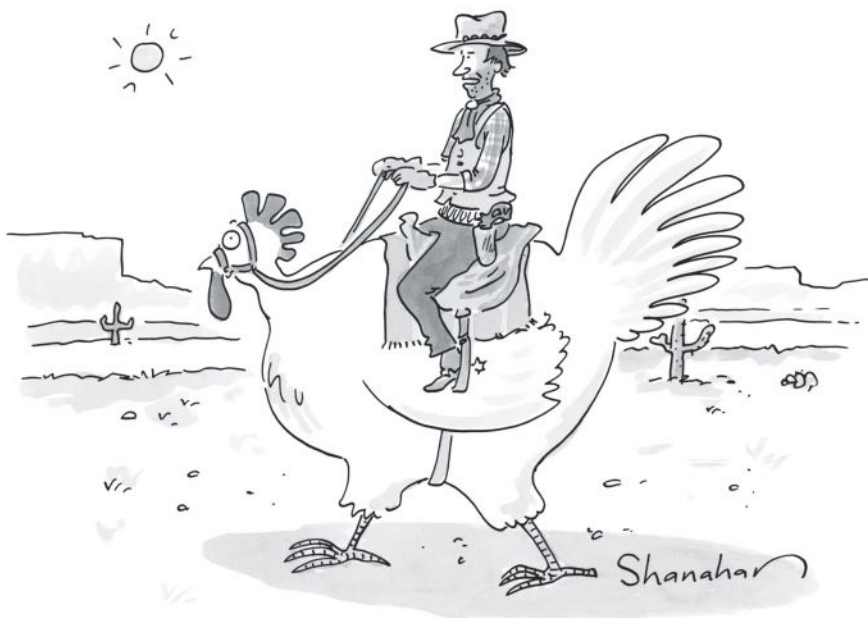
In 1960, John F. Kennedy won the West Virginia Democratic Presidential primary by campaigning with the help of F.D.R.'s son, Franklin, Jr., and promising to introduce an aid program for West Virginia within sixty days of taking office. In the following years, the poverty of Appalachia startled a generation that had come to believe in its ability to reshape the world, and the question is whether the current political

age, which is hostile to government action on poverty and the environment, and insistent on the doctrine of self-correction, can muster a meaningful response. The last time I saw Majority Leader Unger, he said, "Martin Luther King said that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. Why should anybody care about what goes on in West Virginia? Because it's the canary in the mine shaft. If you ignore it in West Virginia, it's coming, it's going to continue to build, and the issue is: Should our country have the debate about our rights to the very basic infrastructure that sustains us? Or should we continue to ignore it?"

In early March, the legislature passed the spill bill. It was better than many had expected, in that it removed a lot of the exemptions proposed by the industries, though they could be reinserted in the details of enforcement. Unger was the lead sponsor of the bill, and now he was bracing for an effort to unseat him. "I have an opponent that jumped into the race after I started coming forward on water issues," he said. "I'm sure he'll be well funded in the fall. I know I'm targeted. I see the red dot on me."

The spill bill did not try to address the deeper issue facing the state: the future of coal. By harnessing the most powerful technologies of political influence—campaign finance, public relations, politicized research—West Virginia's coal industry has recast an economic debate as a cultural debate: a yes-or-no question, all or nothing. Viewed in that light, a vote for the industry is a vote for yourself, your identity, your survival. The coal industry has created the illusion of vitality. (Once, at the Shivers' house, I asked Josh what percentage of the state's workforce is directly employed by coal. He guessed fifteen per cent. I looked it up; the answer is three per cent.)

The arguments for making sacrifices to protect the coal industry will become more difficult to sustain. With the most accessible seams depleted, and West Virginia coal facing competition from inexpensive natural gas, the U.S. Department of Energy forecasts that by the end of the decade coal production in the region will have dropped by half. In anticipation, the West Virginia Center for Budget and Policy, a progressive think tank, has called for using natural-resources taxes



"Cooky was askin' about you again."

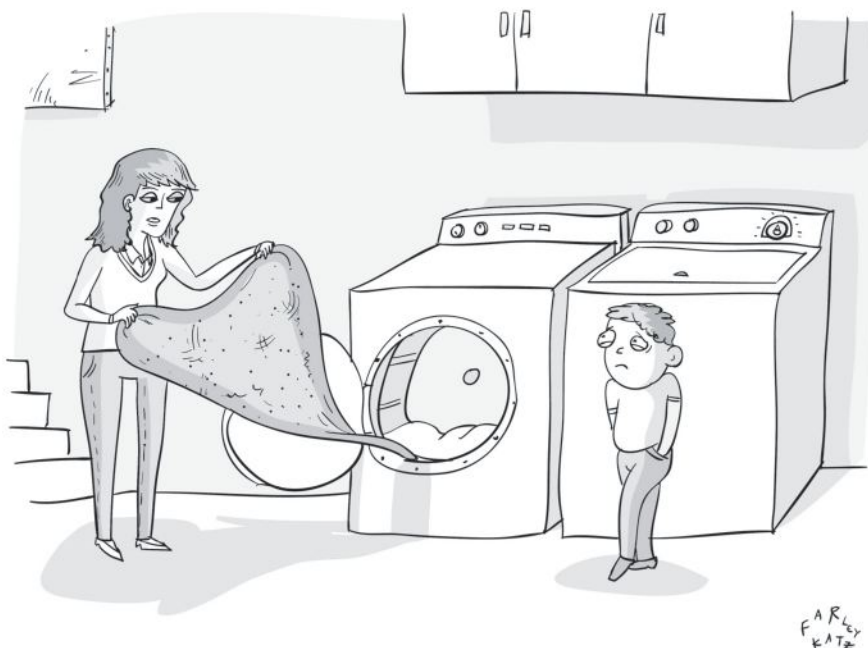
to create a “future fund” that would promote diversification by investing in infrastructure, education, and job-training programs.

But embracing that policy will be difficult as long as bills are written in private, politicians regard polemics as scholarship, and lobbyists can secure the cooperation of lawmakers by any means necessary. Year by year, the West Virginia public is recusing itself from politics. In 1960, more than seventy-five per cent of eligible voters cast ballots—almost fourteen per cent more than the national average. By 2012, West Virginia’s turnout had sunk to 46.3 per cent, the second-lowest level in America.

This fall, West Virginia will likely reach a milestone in its political evolution: Senator Rockefeller is retiring, and the strongest candidate to succeed him is Representative Shelley Moore Capito; if she wins in midterm elections, she will be the first Republican senator from West Virginia since 1956. The last remaining Democrat in the state’s House delegation, the nineteen-term Representative Nick J. Rahall II, is facing his most difficult campaign yet; Americans for Prosperity has spent at least two hundred and forty thousand dollars on ads linking Rahall to health-care reform, including one featuring the line “Obamacare is hurting West Virginia families.”

In 2012, the G.O.P. picked up eleven seats in the West Virginia House; this year, the Party is confident that it can win the four more it needs to claim the first Republican majority since 1932. The Party is running a get-out-the-vote campaign called “Make It Right,” and it’s encouraging conservative Democratic candidates to switch parties. In Clarksburg, where I used to live, Mike Queen’s family has been in local Democratic politics since the fifties. “You wouldn’t dare tell my grandfather that you were anything but a Democrat,” he said. Queen was elected to the House of Delegates in 1988, served one term, and had a career in business, before entering a race for the state Senate this fall, this time as a Republican. Over lunch, I asked why.

“We’ve been turned into a poverty-ridden, federal-program-dependent state with no hope,” he said. “I’m not saying the Democrats encouraged it. But the Democrats have allowed it to happen,



“If you didn’t want to wear a cape made of dryer lint to school, you shouldn’t have such a crazy mom.”

with no planning for how we’re going to get out of this hole.” He went on, “So you take all those things together, people just got tired of the same old crap.”

Before I drove back to Charleston, I stopped by my old apartment building. A first-floor window was boarded up. I looked up at my place, on the third floor; a window was missing its glass, and a bed-sheet, draped across the hole, was flapping in the wind. A first-time visitor could have mistaken Clarksburg for a place that had never caught up, rather than a city that once shared in an American moment of broader prosperity.

In West Virginia’s abundant history of disasters, the Freedom Industries spill was unusual; there are no casualties to count, no floodwaters to fight. It was an accident with no clear ending, and, more than two months later, the most basic question remained unanswered: Is the water safe? A person would need to swallow large quantities of MCHM to approach a lethal dose. When I asked Dr. Gupta, the head of the health department, if he and his family were drinking from the tap, he said that they were not. The water at their house still had an odor. “It is very difficult to drink licorice-flavored water,” he said. I asked if there were any outstand-

ing scientific questions, and he laughed. Then he said, “What is the metabolism and excretion of this compound in humans? Does it accumulate? Where does it accumulate? What is the carcinogenic potential? What is the teratogenic potential? What does it do to home pipes? How does it interact, if at all, with other compounds in water, such as chlorine? Does it form harmful or harmless products?”

Dr. Gupta ran through another half-dozen medical and scientific issues, and arrived at the question that concerns him most. For a man who had left a country that had undergone radical divides in human development, the causes and effects of the Freedom Industries spill feel like a departure from an American principle he thought he understood. He said, “The 1974 Safe Drinking Water Act allows every resident of the United States to have access to safe drinking water. So how do we say that, for three hundred thousand people in this part of West Virginia, it’s O.K. to have ‘appropriate’ water? Do we understand the path we’re taking here, by defining two different classes of water, for two different groups of population? Do we really want to go down that path? In the history of this nation, it doesn’t end well when we go down this path.” ♦

ELICITATION

Who is there to help you but the person who is answering your questions?

BY JOHN MCPHEE

If I'm in someone's presence and attempting to conduct an interview, I am wishing I were with Kafka on the ceiling. I'd much rather watch people do what they do than talk to them across a desk. I've spent hundreds of hours in the passenger seats of their pickups, often far from pavement, bouncing from scribble to scribble. Under a backpack, and hiking behind the environmentalist David Brower, I walked across the North Cascades, up and down the switchbacks, writing in a notebook. Even across a desk, an interviewee will sometimes talk so fast it's impossible to keep up—like Alan Hume, M.D., a surgeon in Waterville, Maine. Nothing was unforthcoming about Dr. Hume. He talked clearly, rapidly, volubly, and technically. Writing notes, I did my best to stay with him, but when he breezed into the biochemistry of the blood gases I was totally lost and turned him over to a Japanese machine.

Suppose you are in Vermont on a field trip with the world's ten or fifteen most knowledgeable Appalachian geologists. They gather around an outcrop, and soon an argument heats up about delaminated basements, welding batholiths, and controversial aspects of tectonostratigraphy. You are on the low side of the learning curve and don't even know terrain from terrane. What to do? Put a tape recorder on the outcrop.

"It has no fossil control!"

"It's a distal part of North America!"

You can read up later on what this means.

In the way that a documentary-film crew can, by its very presence, alter a scene it is filming, a tape recorder can affect the milieu of an interview. Some interviewees will shift their gaze and talk to the recorder rather than to you. Moreover, you may find yourself not listening to the answer to a question you have asked. Use a tape recorder, yes, but maybe not as a first choice—more like a relief pitcher.

Whatever you do, don't rely on mem-

ory. Don't even imagine that you will be able to remember verbatim in the evening what people said during the day. And don't squirrel notes in a bathroom—that is, run off to the john and write surreptitiously what someone said back there with the cocktails. From the start, make clear what you are doing and who will publish what you write. Display your notebook as if it were a fishing license. While the interview continues, the notebook may serve other purposes, surpassing the talents of a tape recorder. As you scribble away, the interviewee is, of course, watching you. Now, unaccountably, you slow down, and even stop writing, while the interviewee goes on talking. The interviewee becomes nervous, tries harder, and spills out the secrets of a secret life, or maybe just a clearer and more quotable version of what was said before. Conversely, if the interviewee is saying nothing of interest, you can pretend to be writing, just to keep the enterprise moving forward.

If doing nothing can produce a useful reaction, so can the appearance of being dumb. You can develop a distinct advantage by waxing slow of wit. Evidently, you need help. Who is there to help you but the person who is answering your questions? The result is the opposite of the total shutdown that might have occurred if you had come on glib and omniscient. If you don't seem to get something, the subject will probably help you get it. If you are listening to speech and at the same time envisioning it in print, you can ask your question again, and again, until the repeated reply will be clear in print. Who is going to care if you seem dumber than a cardboard box? Reporters call that creative bumbling.

As a beginning reporter, I developed such behaviors while interviewing show-business people for *Time*. Some of these assigned subjects were a great deal more difficult to manage than others, none simpler or more agreeable than Woody Allen.

Odd as it seems now, fifty years later, he came to *Time*, and up to my cubicle in Rockefeller Center. He was twenty-seven years old, and volunteered that he was a "latent heterosexual." He said he strongly wished to return to the womb—"anybody's." I described him in the piece as "a flatheaded, redheaded lemur with closely bitten fingernails and a sports jacket." He spoke of people who "perspire audibly." He said his father had been a factory worker but was replaced by a small gadget. His mother bought one. At the time of the interview, Woody Allen was working standup in a Greenwich Village night club. As a writer for TV comedians, he said, he had written twenty-five thousand gags in two years. The fact that he was telling some of them to me did not concern either of us.

On the difficulty scale, Jackie Gleason was at the other extreme. In 1961, his film "The Hustler," with Paul Newman, came along, and seemed to mark a significant rejuvenation of Gleason's career, which had run a long course on television. When he agreed to be interviewed for a cover story, he was making another movie—"Requiem for a Heavyweight," with Mickey Rooney and others, including the young Muhammad Ali, who was still Cassius Clay. When I attended the filming, in December, on Randalls Island, in the East River, the cast was huddled under the stadium in a cold, fog-shot, tubercular setting. Gleason's dressing room was a small house trailer. When he stepped aboard, it squished down half a foot and nearly capsized. Each day, for a couple of days, he invited me in and responded readily and patiently to questions. A day soon came, though, when—in a complete reversal of attitude—he threw me out. He said I worked for assassins. He said I was going to assassinate him. He nonetheless addressed me as Pal. "Pal, it's all over."

When Gleason was not on Randalls Island, he went often to Jack & Charlie's



Don't rely on memory or imagine that you will be able to remember verbatim in the evening what people said during the day.

"21," on West Fifty-second Street, with his other pals. At the time, these included Ralph Nelson, who was directing "Requiem for a Heavyweight," David Susskind, who was producing it, and Mickey Rooney. These were the parties who described *Time* as a tower of assassins. How do I know that? Gleason told me so. And he believed them—believed that he was being set up to be satirically cut down. He had a boozy reputation. One of the pals had said to him, "Jackie, they're going to make you look like a drunk fucking son of a bitch."

But they weren't. It would make no sense.

He was six years beyond "The Honey-mooners," his apex of stardom as a situation comedian on CBS. A comedy hour called "The Jackie Gleason Show"—on which he did skits as Reginald Van Gleason III, Fenwick Babbitt, and Rum Dum—had not brought comparisons with Laurence Olivier. But now, amazingly, he had risen anew as a first-rate actor in a Hollywood film. What we intended to say was something like this:

Minnesota Fats is played, curiously enough, by Jackie Gleason, and where audiences might have arrived expecting a million laughs from the most celebrated buffoon ever to rise through U.S. television, they leave with a single, if surprised, reaction: inside the master jester, there is a masterful actor. Gleason, the storied comedian, egotist, golfer, and gourmand, mystic, hypnotist, boozier and bull slinger, is now emerging as a first-rank star of motion pictures.

On the telephone, I tried to suggest to Gleason that the vector of my assignment was aimed in that direction, to which he said, "So long, pal."

Two or three days later, he called and said he had been thinking it over and I could return to the trailer on Randalls Island. The resumed interviews went well there until he kicked me out again. What had Mickey Rooney said this time? I didn't need a transcript.

The on-again, out-again, off-again interview continued in that way but actually made progress. Gleason was companionable and funny, and generally worked hard to give the most complete and thoughtful reply he could to every question. Then he called one morning, told me to stay away, and said it was really over this time—done, finished.

A freelance cover artist—Russell Hoban—had been commissioned by

Time to do an acrylic portrait of the subject. Ralph Nelson, David Susskind, and Mickey Rooney had persuaded Hoban to bring the painting to "21." Hoban unwrapped it there in front of Gleason and his advisory panel. True, the painting did not seem destined for a Hallmark card, would not have been mistaken for the work of Norman Rockwell. An unkind observer could construe it to resemble the wax on a bottle in a Calabrian restaurant. Words came forth in a virtual chorus. "You see, Jackie? You see it now? They want to make you a drunk fucking son of a bitch."

A day later, making one last try, I called him. He was back at "21," and his pals were not there. I said I had not seen the painting, had nothing to do with it, and as a writer meant to celebrate him, purely and simply. There was no point in doing anything else.

He said, "You're just a flunky, pal. You can tell me all that but it doesn't mean anything. You don't run *Time* magazine."

I told him he had that one right.

He said, "Who does run *Time* magazine?"

I said, "Otto Fuerbringer."

"Who is he?"

"The managing editor. Would you like to meet him?"

"Why not?"

"I'll ask him."

I went down a couple of corridors to a far corner of *Time's* editorial floor. Fuerbringer was in his office. After I told him the situation, he got up and walked with me to the elevator bank. From the Time & Life Building, we walked two blocks north to Fifty-second, and east to "21."

Gleason: "Who is in charge of *Time* magazine?"

Fuerbringer: "I am."

Gleason: "Who has the last word at *Time*?"

Fuerbringer: "I do."

Fuerbringer did not have a name like that because he was Caspar Milquetoast. He had a deceptively soft voice and a ready smile, but nothing made him flinch. Slowly, firmly, he cleared away the scent of Ralph Nelson, David Susskind, and Mickey Rooney. The cover painting and the cover story ran in the issue of December 29, 1961.

Location shooting had moved on from Randalls Island to Jack Dempsey's restaurant, on Broadway. Handed a copy of the

magazine, Gleason asked for time out, sat alone at the bar, and slowly turned the pages. Greg Morrison, the film company's publicist, told me this a day later. Gleason spent at least half an hour turning pages and looking expressionlessly at what he was reading.

"If I didn't have an enormous ego and a monumental pride, how in hell could I be a performer?" he explains. With something for everybody, he is kind, generous, rude and stubborn, explosive, impulsive, bright and mischievous. He is an outgoing, flamboyant man to whom privacy is sacred. Now he is snapping out wisecracks. Now he is sitting alone, quietly unapproachable. He is too often bored. He is a bad listener in general conversation and a good one when acting. He has a great big kettledrum laugh. He is afraid of airplanes and strangers. "He is all fun and jazz until a stranger comes in," says a onetime member of his staff. "Then he goes into that fat shell." . . . He has a huge vocabulary, which sometimes slices into the rough. "Don't misconceive this," he will say, or "That guy is a man of great introspect." But his favorite adjective is "beautiful," his favorite noun is "pal," and his favorite phrase is "beautiful, pal, beautiful."

Gleason got up from the bar and went to Jack Dempsey's telephone booth.

My phone rang. "Hello."

"Pal, I feel like two cents."

There were those who thought of him as a potential source of a great deal more money than that. In 1962 or 1963—I forget when—a man walked into the Gleason offices on West Fifty-seventh Street, identified himself as "John McPhee," and asked for a cash loan. Gleason was in Florida at a golf club. A staff member telephoned him and told him what was happening. Gleason said to her, "Describe him."

She said, "Well, for one thing, he's very tall."

Gleason said, "Call the police."

The interviews with Jackie Gleason were not recorded. With my basic technology—a pencil and a lined four-by-six notebook—I could keep up. He spoke at a clear and thoughtful pace. Besides, like most people, he was not invariably interesting. Writing is selection. When you are making notes, you are forever selecting. I left out more than I put down.

Students have always asked what I do to prepare for interviews. Candidly, not much. At minimum, though, I think you should do enough preparation to be polite. You wouldn't want to ask Stephen Harper what he does for a living. Before,

during, and after an interview, or a series of interviews, do as much reading as the situation impels you to do. In the course of writing, you really find out what you don't know, and you read in an attempt to get it right. Nonetheless, you get it wrong, especially if you are an innumerate English major and you are writing about science. After an interview with Robert Hargraves, a Princeton geologist who grew up in South Africa, I attempted a description of maar-diatreme volcanoes, which bring carbon up from the mantle with such velocity that carbon in its densest form freezes as diamonds in the volcanic neck. It is journalistic custom—essentially, a rule—that you don't show a manuscript to the subject. In many situations, ego is too likely to spoil the transaction, not to mention a subject's attempts to massage the text. But science, for me, is the exception that probes the rule. I have never published anything on a science that has not been vetted by the scientists involved. Robert Hargraves read about the maar-diatreme volcano and said I had it half right. A couple of days later, I returned to him with a fresh version, which he said was three-quarters right. A few days after that, I asked him to look again. This time, he said, "I don't see anything wrong here." I felt as if he had awarded me a Ph.D., the "D," perhaps, for the synonym for subpar intelligence.

Not everybody is as detached as Robert Hargraves or as savvy as Jackie Gleason. Plenty of people who are willing to talk are not at the same time sensing what the effect of the eventual piece will be. The presence of the open notebook, and the formality of being advised about what is going to happen and where, is not enough. It is true that some people I have written about—Thomas P. F. Hoving, of the Metropolitan Museum, comes readily to mind—are so cognizant of the piece of writing taking shape that they all but supply the commas. Hoving is at one end of a spectrum, and the other end is populous. So the writer has responsibility to be fair to the subject, who trustingly and perhaps unwittingly delivers words and story into the writer's control. Some people are so balanced, self-possessed, and confident that they couldn't care less what some rag-maker says about them, but they are in a minority among people who put their lives in your hands.

Of all the dimensions of the interview



relationship, the most significant, for me, has been time. The daily journalist has to go out, get the story, and write it in one day, a feat that leaves me breathless and beggars all comparison with the time involved in my projects—four months in the New York City Greenmarkets, three weeks with a flying game warden, two weeks with a Nevada brand inspector, months at a time across three years of trips to Alaska. I have no technique for asking questions. I just stay there and fade away as I watch people do what they do.

In a question-and-answer piece in the *Times Book Review* for January 16, 1966, George Plimpton quoted Truman Capote claiming that he had trained himself to recall dialogue with such accuracy that he could interview people without a notebook or a tape recorder and then, hours later, write down verbatim what was said, his accuracy exceeding ninety per cent.

In 1991, when James Atlas was an editor at the *Times Magazine*, he wrote an article about—among other things—quotation marks and what is inside them. How much is quoter, how much quotee? By way of example, Atlas quotes Boswell quoting Johnson at a dinner party. Johnson, between bites: "It is so far from being

natural for a man and woman to live in a state of marriage that we find all the motives which they have for remaining in that connection and the restraints which civilized society imposes to prevent separation are hardly sufficient to keep them together." Atlas: "That's quite a mouthful, even for a speaker with Johnson's verbal gifts." In fairness to Boswell, Atlas went on to say, "Boswell was an assiduous note-taker; he would scribble a few lines, abridging words—his 'portable soup,' he called it: 'a hint, such as this, brings to my mind all that passed, though it would be barren to anybody but myself.'" Anybody but Truman Capote, apparently, who didn't even need a soup spoon.

Once captured, words have to be dealt with. You have to trim and straighten them to make them transliterate from the fuzziness of speech to the clarity of print. Speech and print are not the same, and a slavish presentation of recorded speech may not be as representative of a speaker as dialogue that has been trimmed and straightened. Please understand: you trim and straighten but you do not make it up.

Henri Vaillancourt—who makes bark canoes without metal components of any kind, sewing them together with the split



*"Have you figured out how I can be on the right side of history
without being on the wrong side of now?"*

roots of black spruce and other evergreens—was the subject of a book of mine published in 1975. It described a trip I made with him and three others in bark canoes in the Allagash region of the North Maine Woods. Henri liked the word “bummer.” At least fourteen hours a day, I was making notes, and Henri was saying “bummer” at least sixty times an hour, or so it seemed. In any case, my notes were nearly saturated with “bummer”s. Writing the piece, I consciously removed two-thirds of them. After the piece was published, I heard from strangers and friends alike that no real-life human being would ever say “bummer” that often.

And, while we are on this subject, please let me indulge in a parenthetical peeve, which has to do with the way in which pronouns can infect sentences that contain interior quotes—the pronouns apparently changing horses in midstream. To give just one random example: “He arrived at the pier, where he learned that ‘my ship had come in.’” Whose ship? The author’s ship? Try

reading something like that before an audience or on an audio CD. It is factual and correctly punctuated, yes, but it is no less awkward. I have attempted for forty years to get writing students to avoid such constructions, an endeavor that has resulted in serial failure.

It is possible in managing a quote—not to say manipulating a quote—to present something that is both verbatim and false. In a book published in 1977, I said, “Alaska is a foreign country significantly populated with Americans.” In a July, 2009, piece on Sarah Palin, *Time* quoted the book, saying, “Alaska is a foreign country.” And think what could happen to the following. It comes from public radio, and this is the quote in its entirety: “Republican Senator Darrell Issa wants the heads of the panel to be forthcoming about their sources of information.” A shorter sentence would still be a verbatim quote if someone were to stop at “panel.”

Indirect discourse is an excellent way to say what someone said and avoid the matter of verbatim quoting altogether. It

is hard to be uncomfortable with indirect discourse. If a quote is something like “I’ll be there prepared for anything at the first hint of dawn,” and you think, for any reason, that it might not be in the verbatim zone, get rid of the quotation marks and state it in indirect discourse (improving the logic while you’re at it):

She said she would be there at the first hint of dawn, prepared for anything.

Is it wrong to assemble dialogue collected in three or four places and ultimately present it as having been spoken in a fifth location? I think so. Do you? I have gone back to people asking them to correct and sometimes amplify what they told me, and I have corrected and amplified the quotes but have never changed the original venue. Would you call that impermissible? I wouldn’t. Is it wrong to alter a fact in order to improve the rhythm of your prose? I know so, and so do you. If you do that, you are by definition not writing nonfiction.

J. Anthony Lukas, in his Author’s Note before “Common Ground,” wrote, “This is a work of non-fiction. All its characters are real. . . . Where I have used dialogue, it is based on the recollection of at least one participant.” At least one participant? Bob Woodward, in a Note to the Reader before “The Commanders,” said, “Thoughts, beliefs, and conclusions attributed to a participant come from that individual or from a source who gained knowledge of them directly from that person.” In this manner, the rumble of conscientiousness makes its way through time. I remember overhearing a feverishly principled great journalist responding on the phone to an editor or checker, and insisting that not one syllable in a piece be changed for clarity or any other purpose. If, in the field of conscientiousness, it is possible to go the extra mile, this was the extra mile. “That is the quote!” the writer shouted. And again, “That *is* the quote.” As it happened, the quote had been translated from Russian.

Norman Maclean called “A River Runs Through It” fiction, and the word “fiction” appeared in the book’s front matter. “A River Runs Through It” was autobiographical fact in nearly all aspects but one. For private reasons, the author had shifted the site of his brother’s murder

and, being Norman Maclean, considered that change and others quite enough fabrication to disqualify the text as nonfiction.

Minders are watchdogs in coats and ties whose presence is a condition for an interview. Corporations and federal agencies deploy them. They are not exactly catalytic in the interview process. Distractingly, they sometimes make notes. They will even answer an interviewer's questions although their role is supposedly limited to observing and monitoring what is being said. Some have been described as "Sad-dam-style minders." I have been very lucky with minders, in large measure because for more than half a century I have successfully avoided them, with two innocuous exceptions. In 2004, I began a piece on the Sort—the vast, robotic, multilevel maze in Louisville, Kentucky, where UPS absorbs, shuffles, and redirects a million packages a day. To circumambulate the building would be a five-mile hike, and no one is going to do that, even with a minder. Numerous large brown-tailed airplanes nose up to the western side. The runways of Louisville's international airport are right there. Never would I have been permitted to drive around those bays and taxiways without a minder, let alone wander among the zipping packages on the endless conveyors inside, the drug-sniffing dogs. I actually spent a couple of weeks with my minder, who was unobtrusively present at nearly all the interviews I did there, involving many dozens of workers. His name was Travis Spalding. He grew up in West Point, Kentucky, on the Ohio River near Fort Knox. In no sense did he seem to think that I was trying to steal anybody's gold. On the weekend, when my time was my own, I went to Churchill Downs with him, his wife, his mother, and his father.

The other minder was provided in Omaha, in 1995, by the Federal Bureau of Investigation. Through the agency's Materials Analysis Unit, about half of whose work is in geology, I had arranged to interview Special Agent Ronald Rawalt, a mineralogist and paleontologist who had performed a feat of geological espionage in Mexico that had essentially solved the murder of an American drug agent there. Rawalt's home and office were in North Platte, Nebraska. So, logically, fly to Denver and drive to North Platte. Right? Not so fast. Rawalt was instructed to meet me at 9 A.M. on January 24th in a room in the

Federal Building in Omaha—two hundred and eighty miles from his home. When I went into the room, the minder was there. He was there for eight or nine hours, but, as it happened, not for the entire interview. Rawalt was talking petrology, mineralogy, crystallography, the solubility of quartz, and the exoscopic study of sands. I never learned the minder's name. It probably would not be fair to say that he went to sleep. He was quiet, though, and as evening settled in he departed. Rawalt talked on, and was still talking twelve hours after we had begun.

I had used a tape recorder throughout. Back home, as I was transcribing his narrative, I discovered that among the cassettes one had failed. Stunned, I called Rawalt, who asked what he had been saying at the end of the previous cassette and what he had said at the start of the one that followed. With a machine of his own, on his kitchen table, in North Platte, he narrated anew an indispensable part of the story. Rawalt paid for the postage, you did not.

One very foggy morning five years later, I was in my office on the Princeton campus, the phone rang, and the Council of the Humanities informed me that an F.B.I. agent had come in asking for me and had gone out again; his name was Rawalt and he was waiting in the fog. I bolted down several flights of stairs and out the door. Rawalt said he was working on a white-collar crime "in the vicinity." In the vicinity was as close as he was going to come to G.P.S. coordinates. A helicopter was required for this assignment, and the



helicopter was grounded by the fog. He said he just wanted to say hello.

And five years after that I found myself in near-catastrophic frustration while I was trying to complete a book, the final part of which was planned to involve a journey in a Union Pacific coal train. Over many months, I had prepared for the event, and the railroad had encouraged me, but now the railroad was doing the Jackie Gleason. I called a couple of times a day—day after day after day—and the calls were not re-

turned, by company people in Omaha who had earlier given me a week of invaluable orientation, including visits to the Union Pacific rail yard in Council Bluffs, Iowa, and to "the bunker," an impregnable building in Omaha where dispatchers control everything that is happening on nineteen thousand miles of track. And now, a couple of months later, I was back home calling Omaha, listening to a machine, and leaving messages. My book was dead in the water, and my wits seemed to have come to an end. A light turned on. I called Ron Rawalt. Maybe he could help. The rail yard in North Platte is the largest in the world. Rawalt said, "Fly to Denver and drive to North Platte." A day and a half later, I was having breakfast with the local secretary-treasurer of the United Transportation Union, the local chairman of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, and Rawalt. The morning after that, I was out on the Triple Track Main, rolling for Kansas, in the cab of a Union Pacific coal train seven thousand four hundred and eighty-five feet long.

For most of the cover stories I worked on in the early nineteen-sixties at *Time*, other people did all or most of the reporting, and I did the writing. This ecumenical format, known as group journalism, was created by Henry Luce, whose most formative years were spent in the China Inland Mission School in Chefoo. Today, his creation would be called cloud journalism, a form of utopian commune. Reports known as files came to writers and editors in New York from the magazine's bureaus around the country and the world. As a would-be wordsmith, I wanted to be the writer of every sentence in my pieces large and small, so (like most of the other writers in the "back of the book") I used the reporters' files as references and sources of quotes but did not cobble pieces together from this chunk and that chunk of other people's words. No pieces were signed.

I wrote a cover story on Sophia Loren.

Her feet are too big. Her nose is too long. Her teeth are uneven. She has the neck, as one of her rivals has put it, of "a Neapolitan giraffe." Her waist seems to begin in the middle of her thighs, and she has big, half-bushel hips. She runs like a fullback. Her hands are huge. Her forehead is low. Her mouth is too large. And, mamma mia, she is absolutely gorgeous.

But she was in Italy and I was in New York practicing missionary journalism. I

never met her (I think I would remember if I had). I never met Joan Baez or Mort Sahl. I did a lot of the reporting on a Jean Kerr cover and a bit on Barbra Streisand, who had an apartment on the Upper West Side. Week by week, writing the short takeouts and news pieces in the Show Business section, I got to do a percentage of the reporting as well as all of the writing, better experience than I ever would have had in sections like Foreign News or National Affairs. Anomalously, I was assigned to do essentially a hundred per cent of the reporting as well as the writing not only for the Gleason story but also for a 1963 cover story on Richard Burton.

Now and again, across two years after I met Burton in Toronto, where he was opening in "Camelot," I proposed a Burton cover to Otto Fuerbringer. I had gone to Toronto assigned to write about Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, the lyricist and the composer of "Camelot," whose previous collaboration had been "My Fair Lady." The foci of that visit were Lerner and Loewe, not Burton, so I had come to know him casually

and not in a formal way. I thought he was about as great an actor as an actor could be. And, as it happened, I remembered his debut season as Hamlet at the Old Vic, during which I had seen him twice while I was a student in England. Eventually, I would write:

Then as now, opening nights petrified him. He does not sleep at all before them. One evening in 1953 he left his home in Hampstead to walk, he thought, aimlessly; but toward four a.m. he was crossing Waterloo Bridge, beyond which was the Old Vic, some ten miles from his home. A policeman stopped him on the bridge and wanted to know who he was. Richard explained that he was a terrified actor. On the following night, he was going to open as Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, at the Old Vic. "Oh, come now," said the bobby. "They won't know in Peckham Rye, will they? They won't know in St. John's Wood." Burton relaxed slightly and walked out the night with the bobby, making the rounds of Waterloo.

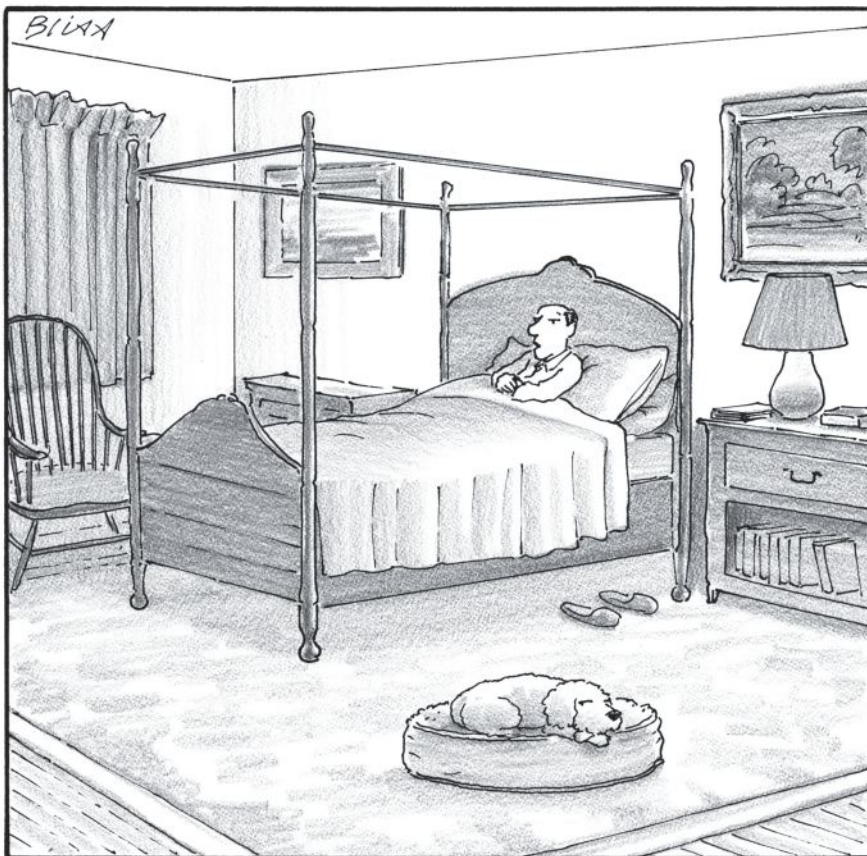
In the "Camelot" company's hotel in Toronto, Burton would retreat after dinner to his room with other actors, grips, stagehands, and whatnot. Talk would go on until three in the morning. As whatnot, I was entranced. So back in New York I proposed a cover on him, but

Fuerbringer repeatedly turned me down until Burton checked into the Dorchester in London with Elizabeth Taylor and was being described as one of the two most famous people in the world. Fuerbringer called me into his office and said that what *Time* had long needed was a cover story on Richard Burton. Yes, I said, and I hope I can describe him as an actor. Responding to a query not from me but from the magazine, Burton said he would coöperate if I were the interviewer as well as the writer.

A lot of the interviewing was accomplished inside a Rolls-Royce. A Silver Cloud, it was parked each morning outside 53 Park Lane, waiting for Burton and Taylor, each of whom was married to someone else, to come down from their penthouse suite and depart for work. They were making a movie called "The V.I.P.s" at a studio close to Heathrow, and the trip each way took an hour. The director, Anthony Asquith, whose father had been Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during the First World War, liked shooting at sunrise, so the Rolls left the Dorchester as early as 5 and no later than 6 A.M. I was staying up the street, in Grosvenor House, at 86 Park Lane, and for more than a week was in the car waiting when Taylor and Burton appeared.

She was never sleepy. In Burton's case, it was hard to tell. At least once, he had been in Hampstead talking with his wife, Sybil, until three or four in the morning, returning to the Dorchester in time for little more than a drink or two before descending to the Silver Cloud. Sybil told me this, and much else, on the telephone. She said he had consumed an entire bottle of cognac in the hours he was with her. Rémy Martin. I failed to ask what size. No matter what his blood-alcohol level might be, Burton the actor never missed a director's call. He claimed so at the time, and that was his reputation as well. On those mornings at 5 A.M., I surely had reason to believe him.

At the studio, he was prepared for action from the first minute, and when he was not shooting a scene, which was most of the time, he was talking to other actors, grips, stagehands, and whatnot. He related to everybody. He talked football endlessly, and, most impressively, he listened. Drawing someone out about Manchester United or the Tottenham Hotspurs, he listened with evident



"I thought we swore never to go to bed angry."

interest and occasional comment. He asked me about my three children in New Jersey. Three daughters! Splendid. He had only two.

Also in the studio was Maggie Smith, a young beauty still in her twenties, with her large eyes, her incisive face, her auburn hair. She was playing a small role as a quiet secretary secretly in love with her employer. When Maggie Smith was not acting, she sat reading, oblivious of the tabloid whirl around her. Take note of her, Burton said; she has more talent than anyone else in the building. After doing a scene with her, he said he had been overshadowed and outacted. Written by the playwright Terence Rattigan, the film, set at Heathrow, was about a rich man's wife running off with her lover, but Heathrow is fogged in, and her husband shows up to plead with her. Other passengers, also star-crossed, are analogously inconvenienced. Rattigan said the germ of the story came from Vivien Leigh ("Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn"), who was married to Laurence Olivier but fell in love with another actor and was fogged in at Heathrow trying to run off with him.

Burton was even easier to interview than Woody Allen, because he interviewed himself. You just listened, and wrote down what he said. At the studio, most of that happened in Elizabeth Taylor's dressing room, which was not a cramped space. There was a couch, a coffee table, plenty of room for walking around. She feigned irritation that I was all but completely concentrating on Burton. I'm sure she understood what I was doing and did not seriously care. But she kept interrupting us. She was having fun. And so was I, for sure. In comparison with a great many of the actresses I had met in my years of writing about show business, she was not even half full of herself. She seemed curious, sophisticated, and unpretentious, and compared with people I had known in universities she seemed to have been particularly well educated. From childhood forward, she was tutored in the cafeteria at M-G-M.

One day, she interrupted us with the news that a pair of British journalists were about to arrive for a scheduled interview with her and Burton. It was all right if I wanted to stay and listen, but my own interview had to be suspended. Sure. Thanks. This would be interesting. Both were men. Both were tall and, as I re-



"Then again, maybe it's not a message—maybe it's just a tuna salad on seeded rye with extra mayo, no lettuce."

member, oddly diffident. Sitting side by side on the couch, they asked chatty questions and made occasional chatty comments. They recorded nothing and made no notes. Taylor gave them tea. The teacups rested on their knees—easy to maintain, since the writers were not writing. On the following day, their update on the world's preëminent scandal appeared on the front page of their newspaper. The piece was full of quotes—long quotes, short quotes, hyposensational quotes. But the writers seemed to lack the mnemonic skills of Truman Capote. At any rate, I couldn't recall hearing Taylor or Burton say any of the skeins of words attributed to them within quotation marks. This was seven years before Rupert Murdoch bought *News of the World*.

When the British journalists were gone and I got back to the broken lance I was carrying, Burton returned to his story about 1953 at the Old Vic:

That his performance would be recorded far beyond St. John's Wood was largely due to a critical remark made more than midway in *Hamlet*'s run. Burton's *Hamlet* was something like a corrido, good one night, disap-

pointing the next. But when he had his color and gave it the full Welsh timbre, he thrilled audiences long accustomed to the tremulous Gielgud reading. He had completed about 60 performances and the box office was beginning to slide when the house manager came to his dressing room one evening and said, "Be especially good tonight. The old man's out front."

"What old man?"

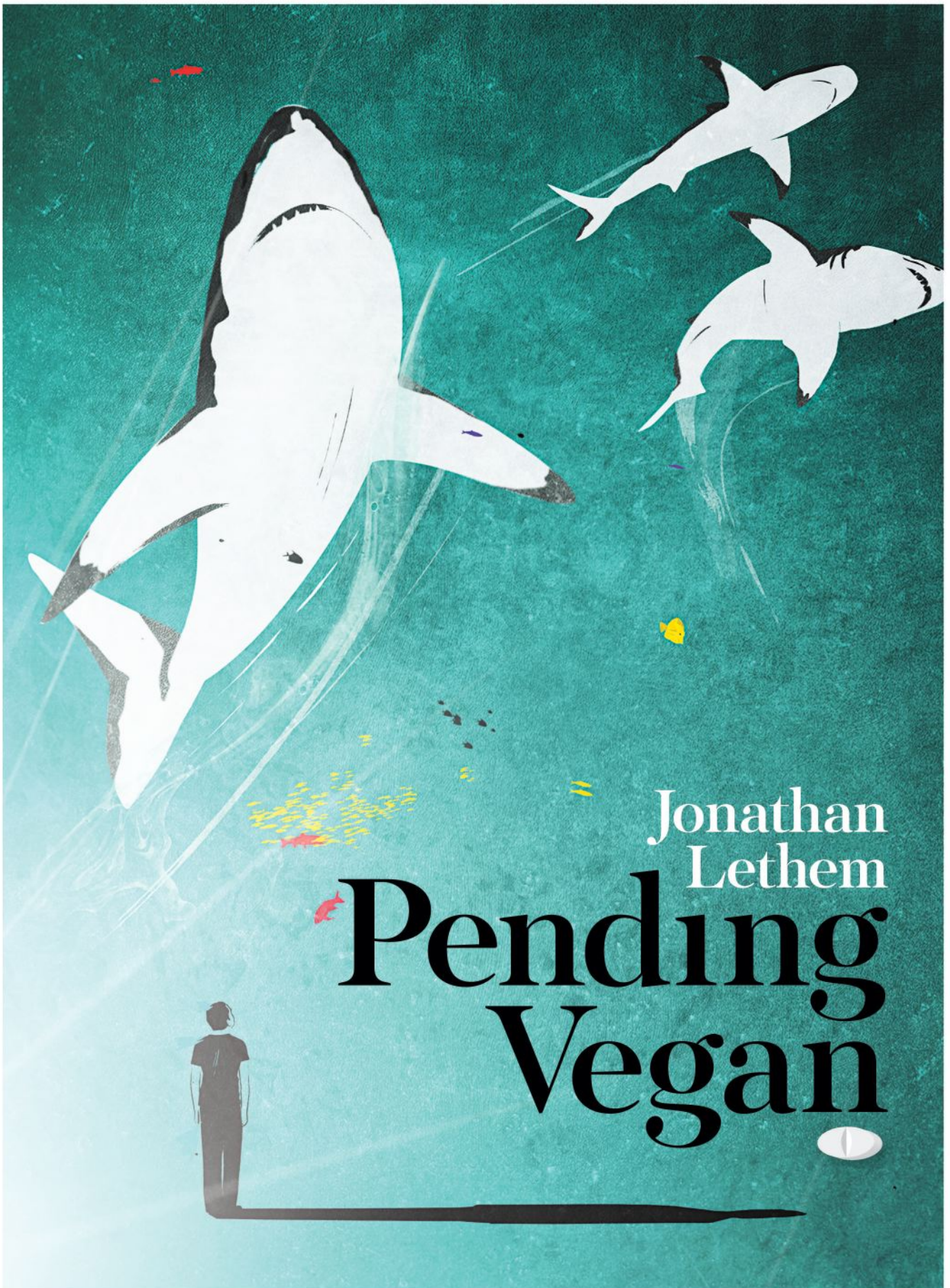
"He comes once a year," said the house manager. "He stays for one act and he leaves."

"For God's sake, what old man?"

"Churchill."

As Burton spoke his first line—"A little more than kin, and less than kind"—he was startled to hear deep identical mutterings from the front row. Churchill continued to follow him line for line, a dramaturgical beagle, his face a thunderhead when something had been cut. "I tried to shake him off," remembers Burton. "I went fast and I went slow, but he was right there." Churchill was right there to the end, in fact, when Burton took 18 curtain calls and Churchill told a reporter that "it was as exciting and virile a performance of *Hamlet* as I can remember." Years later, when *Winston Churchill—The Valiant Years* was under preparation for television, its producers asked Sir Winston who he thought should do the voice of Churchill. "Get that boy from the Old Vic," said the old man.

They got that boy from the Old Vic. ♦



Jonathan
Lethem

Pending Vegan

Paul Espeseth, who was no longer taking the antidepressant Celexa, braced himself for a cataclysm at SeaWorld. He wondered only what form cataclysm would take. Espeseth had tried to veto this trip, making his case to his wife with a paraphrase of a cable-television exposé of the ocean theme park, one that neither he nor his wife had seen. Instead, his wife had performed judo on his argument, saying, “The girls should see these things they love before they vanish from the earth entirely.”

So here he was. The first step, it seemed, involved flamingos. After he had hustled his four-year-old twins through the turnstiles and past the souvenirs, the stuffed-animal versions of the species they’d come to confront in fleshly actuality, his family followed the park’s contours and were met with the birds. Their red-black cipher heads bobbed on pink, tight-feathered stalks, floating above the heads of a crowd of fresh entrants.

“Wait your turn, girls,” his wife said. Yet, seeing that no turns were being taken, Espeseth led Chloe and Deirdre by the hands and together they jostled forward into the mob to find a vantage on the birds. His wife stayed back, tending the double stroller draped with their junk. Closer, Espeseth saw that the birds were trapped on an island, a neat-mowed mound of grass ringed with a small fence and signs saying “Please Do Not Feed.”

“Can you see them?” he stage-whispered down at the girls, as if the clump of exotic birds were something wild spotted in the distance, a flock that could bolt and depart. Really, they’d had some crucial feather clipped, rendering them flightless, the equivalent of crippling an opponent in a fight by slicing his Achilles tendon. The birds had no prospect of retreat from the barrage of screaming families pushing their youngest near enough for a cell-phone pic.

“I’m scared,” Deirdre said.

“They’re scared, too,” he told her. *As am I.* The flamingos were the first thing for which nothing could have prepared him. Having already watched with his girls a hundred YouTube videos of orcas, having already scissored magazine pictures of orcas and cuddled his children to sleep in beds full of stuffed orcas, Paul Espeseth had hardened his soul in readiness for orcas—their muscular poi-

gnancy, their mute drama, the chance that they might in full view and to a soundtrack of inspirational music disarticulate one of their neoprene-suited trainers at the elbow or the neck. But the designers of the park had outsmarted him, softened him up with flamingos, like a casual round of cigarette burns to the rib cage, preceding a waterboarding.

The girls found their boldness and pushed up to the front, then relented, and were supplanted in turn by other eager, deprived children, presenting their faces in what he imagined was for the birds a wave of florid psychosis. In the context of their species, these flamingos were like space voyagers, those who’d return with tales beyond telling. Except that they’d never return. You might as well have immersed the birds in a bathysphere and introduced them to the orcas, or dosed their food with lysergic acid.

“Let’s go,” he said, tugging the twins away. Their morsel hands had begun to sweat in his, or he’d begun to sweat onto them. “There’s a lot . . . else.”

“Orca show!” both girls yelled. It was what they’d come for.

“The show starts at eleven,” he told them. “We’ve got a little time. And there’s stuff on the way. Sharks.” He’d gathered the implications of the map at a glance: short of parachuting in, you couldn’t get to Shamu Stadium without first passing other enticements. He steered for sharks and giant tortoises, if only as a gambit for skirting the Sesame Street Bay of Play, and a roller coaster called Manta. He had standards. SeaWorld should keep the promise of its name: close encounters with fathoms-deep fauna, not birds, not Elmo, not Princess Leia or Cap’n Crunch. He hardly felt in command of his family’s progress here, as they curved on the pathways. He felt squeezed into grooves of expertly predicted responses and behavior, of expenditures of sweat and hilarity and currency from his wallet and also his soul. He was as helpless as a pinball coursing in a tabletop machine. Not one of those simple and friendly, gently decaying machines he’d known in Minneapolis arcades in the seventies, either, but a raging, pulsing nineties-type of pinball machine, half a dozen neon paddles slapping at his brain.

It seemed too much to hope for another Legoland miracle. Two months earlier, Espeseth and his wife and their

twin daughters had gone south to visit Legoland. Legoland had been tolerable. Legoland had had variations, textures, edges. It featured some bad zones, including, outstandingly, the bogus municipality called Fun Town, but others were O.K., better than O.K., like the clutch of restaurants on Castle Hill. There, while the twins got their picture taken with the Queen, and jousting on Lego horses riveted to a train track, he’d been able to sneak off to Castle Ice Cream and obtain a double espresso. That had been something. Hidden with his espresso in a shady quadrant of the castle courtyard, he’d silently toasted his daughters as they’d one after the other rounded the rail. Though he supposed he had Legoland to blame: its tolerability had led him too easily into agreeing to SeaWorld, which even on Celexa, he now saw, would have been another prospect entirely.

His shrink, Irving Renker, had given him a warning about the effects of leaching Celexa from his brain. Espeseth had at the time of the conversation been free of the medicine for just two days. He was quitting under Renker’s guidance, such as it was. “Prepare yourself,” Renker told him. “You might see bums and pickpockets.”

“See in the sense of hallucinate?”

“No,” Renker said. “You won’t hallucinate. I mean see in the sense of *notice*. You may disproportionately notice bums and pickpockets. Creeps. Perverts. Even amputees.”

Irving Renker was a Jewish New Yorker who’d crawled out of his archetype like a lobster from its shell, still conforming to that shell’s remorseless shape but wandering around fresh, tender, and amazed. Renker advocated physical exercise, and could be seen navigating the crests of Santa Barbara’s hills on his bicycle, wearing a helmet and shades as well as an office-ready sweater, blue slacks, and leather-soled shoes. Espeseth had never seen him in the flats, let alone near the beach. He suspected that Renker’s wife did all their grocery shopping. Renker’s office was in an in-law apartment nestled in the scrubby hills behind the psychiatrist’s home, itself raised on stilts to meet the angle of the terrain. Renker’s front-window drapes were always drawn, thwarting curious eyes. Was there a secret intellectual-Jew hovel there, with

book-lined shelves, Sigmundian fetish masks, funky, unfumigatable Persian carpets? No way to know. The consultation room was bland: framed abstract watercolors, beige upholstery, brass clock.

Renker's conversation included, along with the phrases "Keep it simple" and "Don't overthink," terms like "black folks," "Oriental," "gypped," and "bum." Once, as Espeseth reminisced at length about sitting with his three brothers in the front seat of his father's pickup truck on a fishing expedition, Renker had murmured, "Yes, yes, that's known as 'riding Mexican.'"

Espeseth never confronted or corrected his shrink. Instead, he'd gently offer examples of appropriate speech, in this case by replying, "Does this mean that the Celexa was, what, making me blind to homeless people? Or more likely to get robbed?"

"It's a question of emphasis," Renker said. "You may tend to notice scumbags, to the detriment of those standing to the right and the left of them. I don't want to suggest you'll become paranoid, but you may also project scumbaggery onto ordinary people." That his shrink believed in "ordinary people" was a bad sign if Espeseth dwelled on it; he tried not to. It was what Renker said next that he couldn't shake off. "In withdrawal from Celexa some patients have described a kind of atmosphere of rot or corruption or peril creeping around the edges of the everyday world, a thing no one but they can identify. A colleague of mine labelled this 'grub-in-meat syndrome.' Better to be prepared than have it sneak up on you."

Grub-in-meat syndrome?

No one, not shrink Renker, not Espeseth's wife, certainly not the twins, no human listener outside the containment zone of his skull, knew that Paul Espeseth had renamed himself Pending Vegan. His secret name was a symptom, if it should be considered a symptom, that had overtaken him months before he quit the Celexa. Could it be a side effect? He'd hoped it would abate when he went off the drug. No such luck. Pending Vegan wasn't completely sorry. His new name was a mortification, yes, but he clung to it, for it also held some promise of an exalted life, one just beyond reach.



How had his researches begun? Espeseth, when that had been his only name, had checked out of Santa Barbara's public library a popular account of the world's collapse into unsustainability under the weight of its human population. He'd gone from that to reading several famous polemics against the cruelty of farms and slaughterhouses. Next, a book called "Fear of the Animal Planet," which detailed acts of beastly revenge upon human civilization. It was then that Espeseth felt himself becoming Pending Vegan. A knowledge had been born inside him, the development of which only inertia and embarrassment and conformity could slow. Fortunately or unfortunately, Pending Vegan was rich in these delaying properties.

The great obstacle would be in explaining his decision to his daughters. Pending Vegan admired Chloe's and Deirdre's negotiation between their native animal-love and the pleasures of meat-eating. It struck him as a hard-won sophistication, something like F. Scott Fitzgerald's capacity to keep two opposed ideas in mind at the same time. The girls' early rites of passage seemed to consist mainly of such paradox-absorbing efforts. That, for instance, Mommy and Daddy fought but loved each other. That human beings were miraculous and shyness ought to be overcome, yet also that they should violently distrust the too eager stranger as a probable monster. That an hour of television or the iPad should be judged an intoxicating surfeit, while parents binged on screens at every opportunity. Pending Vegan routinely spent three hours sitting on the couch, watching his football team lose. The Vikings, talisman of his ancestral roots. Yet, unlike the Redskins and the Chiefs, they never had their name and logo criticized as racist. No one felt sorry for white people, which might explain his fascination with Jews, who seemed to have it both ways. Had Irving Renker been eavesdropping on Pending Vegan's thoughts, he would have chortled. *Quit drifting.*

Civilizing children was pretty much all about inducing cognitive dissonance. His daughters' balancing of their desire both to cuddle and to devour mammals was

their ticket for entry to the human pageant. If Pending Vegan admitted to them that he now believed it wrong to eat animals—even while he still craved the tang of smoky steaks and salt-greasy bacon—he'd lower himself, in their eyes, to a state of childlike moral absolutism. Or perhaps it would be in his own eyes? He'd been Pending now for six months. Some otherworldly future inquisitor, most likely a pearly-gates sentinel with the head of a piglet or a calf, would hold him accountable for this delay, a thing comparable to the period when the Allies had learned of the existence of the death camps yet checked their moral outrage against military-tactical considerations. Nothing had changed in his eating habits or other behaviors. He hadn't distributed pamphlets or obtained a bumper sticker. Nothing had changed, except that he had awarded himself a secret name.

Boiling in shame, he led his family into the shark-observation area, trudging onto a moving walkway behind other families and their strollers. Another piece of coercive architecture, the passage tunnelled beneath the sharks' tanks, illuminating the creatures from below, the better to consider their white bellies and jack-o'-lantern grimaces. It struck him now that the park's design was somehow alimentary. You were being engulfed, digested, shit out.

"I'm scared," Deirdre said.

"But I'm not," Chloe said.

Pending Vegan didn't presume to speak for the sharks. He pointed instead at the glimmer ahead, as the moving walkway ground them out of the darkness.

"Daddy?" Chloe said.

"Yes?"

"Are dolphins and killer whales really people's pets that went back into the sea?"

"Not pets," Pending Vegan said. "Wild animals. Like pigs." He shuddered at the proliferating confusion: the girls knew pigs as farm animals. Just that morning he'd been surreptitiously reading a blog named *The Call of the Feral*. The classes of the subjugated: Pet, Domesticated, Feral, Wild . . .

"Why can't we have a pet?" Chloe asked.

Pending Vegan's wife turned to him. He avoided her eyes, but felt them anyway.

"Your father doesn't like pets," his wife said.

"Almost time for the eleven-o'clock show!" he said, desperate to change the subject. And so they slugged out of the shark gallery's gullet into daylight.

All of SeaWorld was squirming.

Grub-in-meat syndrome, the suggestion that Renker had unhelpfully planted, was itself a grub squirming in the meat of Pending Vegan's mind.

They'd had a Jack Russell terrier, a neutered two-year-old male named Maurice that they'd adopted from a shelter, a total freaking maniac whom his wife had adored and he—well, Pending Vegan had also adored the dog, though it had been like living with a puzzle he couldn't solve. Maurice moved at bewildering speeds, leaped vertically like an illegal firework, demanded everything, and invaded all their most intimate spaces. And then—and this, the reason that any mention of pets on the part of the girls chastened him, and the reason that his wife's gaze froze his blood—when Pending Vegan had seen the dog's behavior around his pregnant wife, he'd banished Maurice from their lives. The dog had been too attentive, too obsessed with her pregnancy, curling itself along her stomach at night as if hatching the twins with its own heat. Maurice had begun snapping at Pending Vegan when he approached his own marital bed. In the third trimester, he'd taken the dog back to the shelter, and though this was barely forgivable, perhaps not forgivable at all, after the babies came Maurice was never mentioned again.

The girls had no way of knowing they'd been womb-cuddled by Maurice, unless their mother one day told them. Chloe and Deirdre instead stanchied their mammalian craving with Pixar creatures. Driving here, they'd been attention-glued to video screens mounted on the backs of their parents' headrests. This spared them the sameness of I-5, its repetitious suburban exits, noise-barrier walls, and dead yellowed hills. Near San Diego, a road sign showed a silhouette of a fleeing Mexican family, like moose or deer, not to be hit in their illegal flight across the freeway's five lanes. Pending Vegan felt blessed to be excused from explaining it.

Family life, a cataclysm of solitudes.

As a boy he'd endured back-seat travel without the help of movies. Instead he'd directed his gaze out the family station

wagon's windows, past a zillion miles of the Chippewa National Forest, the U.P., and southern portions of Ontario and Manitoba. As a ten-year-old, in his ecology phase, he'd invented a time-killing game, known, like his new name, only to himself. In this fantasy, Espeseth's parents' car featured a long invisible knife, like the wing of a plane, which could extend or retract from the side of the station wagon according to his mental instructions. He and his parents were only pretending to be nobodies, the sole Protestant family from the suburb nicknamed St. Jewish Park. In truth, they were emissaries from another world, sent to reclaim the landscape from the intrusions of the human species. He alone was orchestrating the blade, which shot out to lop off each electrical pole and road sign, and retracted to spare as many trees as possible in the effort. Houses, and other cars, it sliced through mercilessly. His fantasy even included an alibi-providing element of delay, which explained both his not getting to see the glorious destruction he'd wreaked and why no human authority was able to locate and neutralize the mysterious force that tore through his sur-

roundings: the sliced objects fell apart five minutes after his family's car passed by. By this method, the earth would be returned to the flora and fauna.

Lately the image of the invisible blade had returned to Pending Vegan. It would come at the sight of some architectural abomination, or a roadside blighted with billboards. SeaWorld, however, was impervious to the fantasy. Had he begun slicing up this labyrinth of discord, he'd merely murder the creatures trapped within it. By the logic of his childhood fantasy the blade would free the tortoises and the sharks and the porpoises from their tanks, to pour out and die gasping in sunlight on the concrete walkways.

Once inside Shamu Stadium, contra Renker, Pending Vegan noticed no bums and pickpockets. In Shamu Stadium he noticed furloughed military. The soldiers between rotations, out for a day trip with their families, their unfamiliar young children and stoical neglected wives, to see the killer whales. They were knowable by their short haircuts and bicep tattoos, by the wary swivel of their thickened necks. In their upright stolidity it





"Yes, we're all white, but we're post-racial white."

was as though various civilian bodies had all been poured into the same unforgiving mold. Ethnicities reduced to traces in the soldiers were more tangible in the wives and children—in Renkerian terms, mostly black folks, Mexicans, and Orientals. Maybe even a scattering of Gypsies? How to know? *Simplify, simplify.*

Perhaps it was the servicemen who would provide the calamity that Pending Vegan's nervous system shrieked for. He envisioned helicopter footage, yellow tape, SWAT teams milling beside inconsolable families. The stadium was a Mayan temple, one waiting for some sacrifice in the blue pool below. Yet, trapped here with five thousand others, Pending Vegan felt for the moment stilled in his crisis. If his voyage through SeaWorld's tubes and tunnels was a sort of peristalsis, he'd reached its multi-chambered stomach.

And, after the insipid triumphalist overture of music and video and prancing androgynous spandex, when the orcas finally entered the arena and began their leaping, SeaWorld was overwritten by their absolute and devastating presence. By their act of stitching two realms together, sky and water, merely for the delight of a stadium full of children—children who, in response, leaped, too, and vibrated in their seats, and gurgled incoherently, practically speaking in tongues. Other kids, older and more intrepid than his own, raced down to the plastic barrier to be splashed, to stand with their arms flapping. The killer whales, with their Emmett Kelly eyes, were God's glorious lethal clowns. Their plush muscular bodies were the most unashamed things

Pending Vegan had ever seen. Like panda bears redesigned by Albert Speer. *Always with the Holocaust references*, Renker once said. *Why don't you leave that to us?*

The twins sat between him and his wife, holding hands, their eyes wide, their incorruptible appetites overwhelmed.

"Deirdre's scared," Chloe said.

"No, I'm not," Deirdre said. She spoke dreamily, not taking her eyes from the pool. Pending Vegan ached to enclose the girls in some kind of protective partition extending from his damaged soul. But the girls were not enclosable, as the stadium was not enclosable, as the world was not. They were all open to the sky, to whatever rays leaked down through the flayed atmosphere. The girls were open to the sky and to killer whales leaping through their undefended hearts. And, anyhow, Pending Vegan had no protective partition extending from his soul. Such a thing was as imaginary as the retractable blade extending from his parents' station wagon.

What would the killer whales mean to the girls when they eventually learned the facts of the case? The injuries of the world stacked up everywhere, patiently waiting for his daughters' attention. One day they'd find all the documentaries and Web sites on their own. *You may be prone to notice your children*, Renker should have warned him.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the twins, a mystery: Pending Vegan's wife. She with whom he'd once practically merged. Then, as if he'd bumped into her and knocked off two pieces, the twins had appeared. In the past year, she'd become opaque, as though deliberately to spare him. Her human outline now contained

what Pending Vegan had named, in conversation with Renker, "the cloud of unknowing." She'd ushered him into the Celexa odyssey, and abided with him through it, but what now? Was her long-deferred judgment about to fall?

Emerging from Shamu Stadium, Pending Vegan felt he could withstand his wife's judgment, as he could withstand SeaWorld, as SeaWorld could withstand itself. Neither the veterans nor the orcas nor he had wiggled out and chomped or bayoneted anyone. If the orca show was the climax, the test, oughtn't they depart? He yearned for the petty solaces of the motel, his family sorted onto twin doubles, with room-service club sandwiches, more pay-per-view Disney.

"So," he said, clapping his hands together. "Find the parking lot?"

"These are all-day tickets," his wife said. "Rebecca's mom told us not to miss out on the pet show."

"I'm hungry," he said.

"The pet show, the pet show!" the girls chanted.

"There's food here," his wife said crisply. "And we drove here and paid for all-day entry. The girls have waited months." This time Pending Vegan's wife found his eyes before he could avert, and he was enveloped in the Cloud of Unknowing.

The next pet show began at one, so they parked their stroller in a shady spot and Pending Vegan went looking for something edible. He found a pizzeria, but the wait for a table was impossible, and he couldn't imagine pushing into its dark interior even to order something to take away. Outside the restaurant, however, a man grilled turkey legs at a stand. The drumsticks looked oddly primal—this wasn't Medieval Times, after all—but the odor of the seared meat set Pending Vegan to slaving.

See food, eat food.

Sea World, Eat World.

The instant he made the purchase he regretted it. The drumsticks were meat waste, discarded by some factory farm in preference for the breast product. SeaWorld might as well be selling horse's hooves, or pickled cow eyeballs. Still, he walked it back to the stroller, feeling like Fred Flintstone. Under his wife's incredulous gaze he tore shreds off the huge cartilaginous drumstick to feed to the girls,

like a mother bird to nested fledglings. The crackling greasy skin came off whole and, once removed, was too revolting to do anything with other than discard. The girls washed the meat down with orange juice. Paper napkins stuck and tore on their faces and fingers.

With fifteen minutes still to spare, they diverted to the bat-ray petting tank. As with the flamingos, Pending Vegan had to jostle the twins to the front for their chance to immerse their hands in the shallow, waist-high tank and let the blunt, rubbery rays slip beneath them. The girls gasped at the sensation. This might be what it would feel like to touch a killer whale. Here might be the true connection at last, the thing they'd really come for, and for a moment again the barriers all vanished for Pending Vegan, the turkey eyeballs forgotten, the piped-in music turned to something transporting, as if from the distant spheres.

For some reason the tank full of eloquent rays also housed a horny, knuckle-faced sturgeon. A sign warned those petting the rays not to try to touch the sturgeon. Pending Vegan, in his rapture, tried to touch it. The fish's furrowed brow seemed to want his consolation. The sturgeon in response snapped its jaws up at him where he stood amid so many merry children, his own and others. Pending Vegan jerked backward in fear. The sturgeon continued on its course, grub within the meat of the ray tank.

"Did you see that?" he asked his daughters and anyone else who might bear witness.

"See what?" Chloe said.

"The sturgeon! It practically barked at me!"

"Daddy," Chloe said affectionately.

The pet show had a stadium of its own, a smaller arena, basically a set of bleachers mounted before a stage featuring ladders, windows, obstacle courses, and giant plastic sculptures of a milk bottle and a bright-red sneaker. Unlike the seats in Shamu Stadium, those here were sparsely filled, and Pending Vegan and his wife and children found places in the third row. After only a moment the show began. In a sort of pre-credit sequence, a stream of dogs and house cats coursed out of various trapdoors over the AstroTurf stage, followed by a pig, an ostrich, and a string of ducklings, to the tune of "Who

Let the Dogs Out?" The dogs jumped on a seesaw and flipped miniature plastic burgers at a fake stove. The cats climbed a rope. The twins were enthralled. One of the dogs pulled a lever to release a rolled-up banner that read, in nails-on-chalk-board font, the show's title: "Pets Rule!"

"That's a classic example of Hitler's Big Lie technique right there, wouldn't you say?" Pending Vegan said.

"What is?" his wife said.

"'Pets Rule!' They don't. They just . . . don't. I hate it here."

"Sh-h-h."

"We're complicit with a well-recognized nightmare."

"I've never seen any criticism of the pet show."

That's because everyone's too busy scrubbing their brains of aesthetic and moral calamity, he wished to say. *After such knowledge, what forgiveness?* Instead he said, "That sturgeon back there almost took my finger off."

"Too late, I think."

"What, for the fish to eat my finger?"

"No, I mean too late for you and the fish to get on '60 Minutes,' since this place already had its media moment."

An m.c. in a baseball costume and a headset microphone emerged and began introducing the pet show. Some failed actor, Pending Vegan supposed. His headshot having landed on SeaWorld's human-resources desk, the kid was fated to deliver this obnoxious script five times daily. He described the Pet Olympics, in which the trained dogs would compete, then gave the star performers' names as each appeared, beckoning to the children in the crowd to clap and squeal at each shameless antic. "All our dogs are rescue animals," he explained. "They train for up to three years before making their debut in 'Pets Rule!,' and you're very lucky, because we have a 'Pets Rule!' rookie debuting today, a great little guy named Bingo. When I bring him on I want you to appreciate that he's going in front of a crowd for the first time, so I hope you'll give Bingo your love, give him your warmest reception—"

Bingo was a Jack Russell terrier. He seemed, at first, ready for prime time, flipping over twice, then operating with his jaw a bright-red wrench on an out-sized fire hydrant, resulting in a burst of water that sprayed over a bystander piglet and into the faces of the first-row specta-

tors, who screamed in pleasure. He stood on his hind legs, grinning widely, to gobble a discreet reward from the palm of the m.c. Then the new dog bounded from the stage, scrambled over the first two rows of seats, and into Pending Vegan's arms. There Bingo began frantically licking and nibbling Pending Vegan's chin and lips, with tiny sharp nips mixed in behind the swirling tongue.

"Bingo!" the m.c. called from the stage.

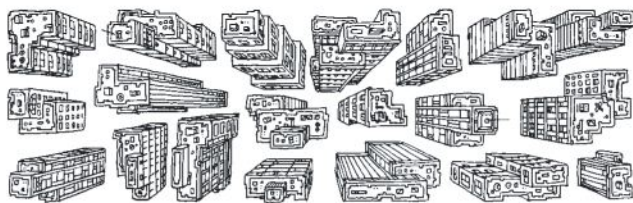
The wet piglet wandered off erratically, but chortling music continued to pour from the speakers, lending an atmosphere of hilarity. The dog now applied itself furiously to Pending Vegan's nostrils. Whether this was part of the show or not Pending Vegan was undecided. Chloe and Deirdre responded with delight, reaching to fondle the dog that pressed their father back in his seat. His wife touched the dog, too, and Pending Vegan felt her arm graze his stomach, the first time in months. Others in their row shrank slightly away.

It was their former animal, rescued once and abandoned, rescued a second time and trained, now restored to them. Bingo was Maurice, Pending Vegan understood. Like him, the dog had two names. It had recognized Pending Vegan immediately, and leaped from the stage to apologize for having abandoned their family, the man and the woman and the twin girls who were now on the outside of the wife's body instead of the inside, where Maurice had last known them. The dog had come to honor the alpha in his former pack. With his animal cunning Maurice perceived that Pending Vegan was off the drug now. Unless that was insane. It was insane. The ostrich had ducked from behind a curtain and goose-stepped to the lip of the stage, obviously off cue. The pet show was in tatters. *An ostrich was not a pet.* Pending Vegan's crimes had a life of their own, yet the dog would, in its automatic way, offer absolution, especially given hands smeared with turkey juice. Pending Vegan's crimes screamed to the infinite horizon. *Quit globalizing,* said the Irving Renker in Pending Vegan's head, as the terrier's frantic tongue drilled into the webbing between his fingers. ♦

NYR.KR/THISWEEKINFICTION

Jonathan Lethem on "Pending Vegan."

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

THE GREAT DIVIDE

Norman Lear, Archie Bunker, and the rise of the bad fan.

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM

The program you are about to see is ‘All in the Family.’ It seeks to throw a humorous spotlight on our frailties, prejudices and concerns. By making them a source of laughter, we hope to show—in a mature fashion—just how absurd they are.”

This nervous disclaimer, which was likely as powerful as a “Do not remove under penalty of law” tag on a mattress, ran over the opening credits of Norman Lear’s new sitcom. It was 1971, deep into the Vietnam War and an era of political art and outrage, but television was dominated by escapist fare like “Bewitched” and “Bonanza.” “All in the Family” was designed to explode the medium’s taboos, using an incendiary device named Archie Bunker. A Republican loading-dock worker living in Queens, Bunker railed from his easy chair against “coons” and “hebes,” “spics” and “fags.” He yelled at his wife and he screamed at his son-in-law, and even when he was quiet he was fuming about “the good old days.” He was also, as played by the remarkable Carroll O’Connor, very funny, a spray of malapropisms and sly illogic.

CBS arranged for extra operators to take complaints from offended viewers, but few came in—and by Season 2 “All in the Family” was TV’s biggest hit. It held the No. 1 spot for five years. At the show’s peak, sixty per cent of the viewing public were watching the series, more than fifty million viewers nationwide, every Saturday night. Lear became the

original pugnacious showrunner, long before that term existed. He produced spinoff after spinoff (“cookies from my cookie cutter,” he described them to *Playboy*, in 1976), including “Maude” and “The Jeffersons,” which had their own mouthy curmudgeons. At the Emmys, Johnny Carson joked that Lear had optioned his own acceptance speech. A proud liberal, Lear had clear ideological aims for his creations: he wanted his shows to be funny, and he certainly wanted them to be hits, but he also wanted to purge prejudice by exposing it. By giving bigotry a human face, Lear believed, his show could help liberate American TV viewers. He hoped that audiences would embrace Archie but reject his beliefs.

Yet, as Saul Austerlitz explains in his smart new book, “Sitcom: A History in 24 Episodes from ‘I Love Lucy’ to ‘Community,’” Lear’s most successful character managed to defy his creator, with a “Frankenstein”-like audacity. “A funny thing happened on the way to TV immortality: audiences liked Archie,” Austerlitz writes. “Not in an ironic way, not in a so-racist-he’s-funny way; Archie was TV royalty because fans saw him as one of their own.”

This sort of audience divide, not between those who love a show and those who hate it but between those who love it in very different ways, has become a familiar schism in the past fifteen years, during the rise of—oh, God, that phrase

again—Golden Age television. This is particularly true of the much lauded stream of cable “dark dramas,” whose protagonists shimmer between the repulsive and the magnetic. As anyone who has ever read the comments on a recap can tell you, there has always been a less ambivalent way of regarding an antihero: as a hero. Some of the most passionate fans of “The Sopranos” fast-forwarded through Carmela and Dr. Melfi to freeze-frame Tony strangling a snitch with electrical wire. (David Chase satirized their bloodlust with a plot about “Cleaver,” a mob horror movie with all of the whackings, none of the Freud.) More recently, a subset of viewers cheered for Walter White on “Breaking Bad,” growling threats at anyone who nagged him to stop selling meth. In a blog post about that brilliant series, I labelled these viewers “bad fans,” and the responses I got made me feel as if I’d poured a bucket of oil onto a flame war from the parapets of my snobby critical castle. Truthfully, my haters had a point: who wants to hear that they’re watching something *wrong*?

But television’s original bad-fan crisis did not, as it happens, concern a criminal bad boy, or even take place on a drama. It involved Norman Lear’s right-wing icon, Archie Bunker, the loudmouthed buffoon who became one of TV’s most resonant and beloved television characters. Archie was the first masculine powerhouse to simultaneously charm and alienate viewers, and, much like the men who came after him, he longed for an era when “guys like us, we had it made.” O’Connor’s noisy, tender, and sometimes frightening performance made the character unforgettable, but from the beginning he was a source of huge anxiety, triggering as many think pieces as Lena Dunham. Archie represented the danger and the potential of television itself, its ability to influence viewers rather than merely help them kill time. Ironically, for a character so desperate to return to the past, he ended up steering the medium toward the future.

All in the Family” began as a British show called “Till Death Do Us Part,” a hit comedy about Alf Garnett, a Cockney xenophobe who had a sharptongued wife, a hip daughter, and

“All in the Family” saturated American culture. It was a time when people found TV so dangerous they put warning signs on it.



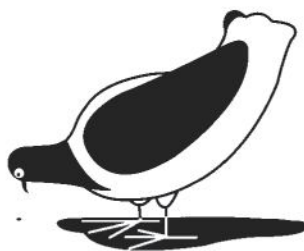
a socialist son-in-law. The show, which first aired in 1965, was a ratings hit, spawning catchphrases (“You silly moo”) and mass British identification with Garnett—a response that troubled the show’s creator, Johnny Speight, even as he made the case for its pungent zingers. “To make him truthful, he’s got to say those things, and they are nasty things,” Speight argued.

By 1967, Norman Lear, a Second World War veteran who never finished college, had spent years cutting a path through show biz. As recounted in “Archie & Edith, Mike & Gloria,” by Donna McCrohan, he began by collecting gossip tips, ghostwrote syndicated columns, and then jumped into comedy, having scammed his way into the office of the comedy bigwig Danny Thomas by pretending to be a reporter. After a successful stretch working on nineteen-fifties showcases, including “The Martha Raye Show,” he teamed up with the producer Bud Yorkin. The two became industry *machers*, packaging TV specials and making movies, such as “Divorce American Style.” When Lear read about “Till Death” in *Variety*, he felt a stab of identification. His father, Herman Lear, a Jewish salesman from Connecticut, was a “rascal,” in Norman’s words, who went to prison when Norman was nine, convicted of shady dealings; like Alf Garnett, he was at once loving and bigoted. Lear bought the rights to Speight’s show, without ever having seen it, and hammered out a treatment. He gave Archie one of his own father’s favorite insults for him—“you meathead, dead from the neck up”—and Archie, like Herman Lear, called his wife a “dingbat” and demanded that she “stifle.” It’s the origin story of nearly every breakthrough sitcom, as recounted in Austerlitz’s book: memoir mined for a resonant, replicable pattern—in this case, the clash between the Greatest Generation and the emerging Baby Boomers, embodied by Archie Bunker and Michael (Meathead) Stivic, his son-in-law.

ABC was interested, but the network was concerned about the show’s raw language. For the next two years, the executives and Lear went through an elaborate production process, taping two pilots—the first in September, 1968, titled “Justice for All” (Archie’s last name was originally Justice), the second in

February of the following year, called “Those Were the Days.” Lear wanted to cast Mickey Rooney as the lead, but the actor thought it was too risky. (Rooney did offer to make a different show: “Listen to this—Vietnam vet. Short. Blind. Private eye. Large dog!”) So Lear offered the part to O’Connor, an Irish-American actor whose rare mixture of “bombast and sweetness” he described to reporters as being ideal for the role. Lear cast Jean Stapleton as Edith, who transformed the British show’s battle-axe—she resembled the tart-tongued Alice, of “The Honeymooners”—into a figure of genuine pathos, a quavery-voiced housewife whose tenderness cut through the show’s anger, and who gradually became its voice of reason.

In those two clunky early pilots, Archie’s son-in-law is Irish, not Polish. In one version, he sports a hilarious puka-shell necklace; in the other, he’s a clean-cut jock. The chemistry is all wrong, a testament to how much of comedy is casting: when Archie and these lesser Meatheads spar over the insult “the laziest white man I ever seen” (another Herman Lear original), there’s none of the electrical fury that the show gained once the hulking, manic Rob Reiner took the role. ABC killed the project, and Lear went back to making movies. The experiment seemed to be dead until the CBS president, Robert Wood, stepped in, in 1970. Wood, who had just taken the job, was seeking a hip



property that could replace the shows that skewed to older audiences—sitcoms like “Green Acres” and tentpoles like “Lassie”—which he planned to cancel, in what would become known as “the rural purge.” He pulled Lear’s project from the scrap pile, and a third pilot was thrown together, with the script essentially unchanged, at Lear’s insistence (although the network balked at his request to film it in black-and-white). O’Connor was so sure that it would be

another dud that he bargained aggressively for a clause guaranteeing his family plane fare back to Europe, where they were living at the time.

There were a few more last-minute skirmishes, since Lear was determined to set a precedent for network non-coöperation: in an industry that liked to sand down the pointy, he wanted to provoke viewers. He refused to eliminate what the censor called “explicit sex” (innuendo that would seem prudish these days), and he threatened to quit rather than run the milder second episode, about Richard Nixon, as the show’s debut. CBS caved. In the pilot that ran, it’s Archie and Edith’s wedding anniversary. They return from church early, catching Michael and a miniskirted Gloria on their way to the bedroom. There’s a loud belch—Lear’s shows pioneered TV toilet humor—and Archie and Michael fight about atheism and Black Power. “I didn’t have no million people out there marching and protesting to get me *my* job,” Archie sneers. “No, his uncle got it for him,” Edith replies. Some jokes stick, others fizzle, but it’s Archie’s volcanic charisma that lingers—at moments, it’s easy to imagine him hitting Edith, though the sitcom rhythms reassure us that he won’t.

Right away, critics were split. *Variety* raved that “All in the Family” was “the best TV comedy since the original ‘The Honeymooners.’” Its sister publication, *Daily Variety*, called it “nothing less than an insult to any unbigoted televiewer.” In *Life*, John Leonard wrote a virulent pan, in which he sounded a theme that became a chorus on op-ed pages: that a show like this demanded a moral response. “Why review a wretched program?” he wrote. “Well, why vacuum the living room or fix the septic tank? Every once in a while the reviewer must assume the role of a bottle of Johnson’s No-Roach with the spray applicator: let’s clean up this culture.” The *Times* flooded the zone with pieces, from “Can Bigotry Be Laughed Away? It’s Worth a Try” to “The Message Sounds Like ‘Hate Thy Neighbor.’” One side felt that the show satirized bigotry; the other argued that it *was* bigotry, and that all those vaudevillian yuks and awws were merely camouflage for Archie’s ugly words.

As the show’s ratings rose, it began to saturate American culture, high and low. In 1971, the *Saturday Review*

reported that teachers were requesting study guides, to use the show to teach their students lessons about bigotry. The literary theorist Paul de Man quoted Archie and Edith's dialogue to dramatize a point, appropriately enough, about the slipperiness of meaning: the idea that the intent of words was endlessly interpretable. A paperback called "The Wit and Wisdom of Archie Bunker" became a best-seller ("Move Over Chairman Mao—Here Comes Archie Bunker!"), with quips like "I never said a man that wears glasses is a queer. A man that wears glasses is a four-eyes. A man that's a fag is a queer!" In 1973, a poll found that Archie Bunker's was the most recognized face in America, and for a while there was a craze for bumper stickers reading "Archie Bunker for President." At the 1972 Democratic Convention, in Miami, the character got a vote for Vice-President.

The weightiest criticism came in another *Times* essay, by Laura Z. Hobson, the elderly author of "Gentleman's Agreement," the source for Elia Kazan's earnest Oscar-winning 1947 film about anti-Semitism. In September, 1971, she published a five-thousand-word critique called "As I Listened to Archie Say 'Hebe'..." Hobson argued that Lear had attempted to "deodorize" bigotry, to make it safe and cute: among other things, Archie used words like "coon" and "yid," but he didn't say "nigger" or "kike." Rather than puncturing hatred, she argued, Lear had made Archie into a flattering mirror for bigots. "I don't think you can be a black-baiter and lovable, or an anti-Semite and lovable," she wrote. "And I don't think the millions who watch this show should be conned into thinking you can be."

Lear responded with his own *Times* essay, "As I Read How Laura Saw Archie," arguing that of course bigots could be lovable, as anyone with a family knew. If Archie Bunker didn't use harsher language, it was because those words were "from another decade." Besides, Michael and Gloria, the bleeding-heart liberals, always got the last word. Despite Lear's playful response, later episodes of "All in the Family" contain many echoes of this debate. The show's tone gradually softened, and the more caustic slang dropped out; Archie even stopped telling Edith to

"stifle." (As with "M*A*S*H," its creators were influenced by the rise of feminism.) In Season 8, there's a trenchant sequence in which Archie, drunk and trapped in a storage room with Michael, talks about his childhood. Yes, his father said "nigger" while he was growing up, Archie says—*everybody* did—and when Michael tells him what his father said was wrong, Archie delivers a touching, confused defense of the man who raised him, who held his hand, but who also beat him and shoved him in a closet. It was all out of love, Archie insists. "How could any man that loves you tell you anything that's wrong?" he murmurs, just before he passes out. The scene should have been grotesquely manipulative and mawkish, but, strengthened by O'Connor's affecting performance, it makes Lear's point more strongly than any op-ed, even decades later: bigotry is resilient, because rejecting it often means rejecting your own family.

Civil-rights advocates, including the National Urban League and the Anti-Defamation League, tended to share Hobson's distrust of the series. (In contrast, the A.C.L.U. awarded Lear the Freedom of the Press Award, in 1973.) Bill Cosby, who was a major TV star after "I Spy," downright despised Archie Bunker. Even a decade later, on "The Phil Donahue Show," Cosby was still expressing frustration that Bunker had never apologized for anything, making him "a hero to too many Americans for his shortsightedness, his tunnel vision." He added, "And I'm really a believer that the show never taught or tried to teach anybody anything."

To critics, the show wasn't the real problem: its audience was. In 1974, the social psychologists Neil Vidmar and Milton Rokeach offered some evidence for this argument in a study published in the *Journal of Communication*, using two samples, one of teen-agers, the other of adults. Subjects, whether bigoted or not, found the show funny, but most bigoted viewers didn't perceive the program as satirical. They identified with Archie's perspective, saw him as winning arguments, and, "perhaps most disturbing, saw nothing wrong with Archie's use of racial and ethnic slurs." Lear's series seemed to be even more appealing to those who shared Archie's frustrations with the culture around him, a "silent majority" who got



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off on hearing taboo thoughts said aloud.

This clearly wasn't true of every bigot—at least, not Richard Nixon, who eagerly recapped the series for H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. In the Watergate tapes, Nixon describes in detail an episode in which a gay friend of Michael's comes to visit, leading Archie to discover that his own football-player buddy is gay. The series “made a fool out of a good man,” Nixon grumbles. He theorizes that Michael probably “goes both ways” and worries that the show will corrupt children, just as Socrates did in ancient Greece. Ehrlichman interjects, in Socrates' defense, that at least “he never had the influence that television had.”

“A vast wasteland!” It's impossible to discuss TV, even today, without stumbling upon the medium's most famous libel, its own version of “meathead.” The context has been lost, though. That description comes from the first official speech given by Newton Minow, shortly after President Kennedy appointed him chairman of the F.C.C., in 1961. Minow wasn't arguing that what aired on television was bad; he was arguing that it was amoral. He said, “Program materials should enlarge the horizons of the viewer, provide him with wholesome entertainment, afford helpful stimulation, and remind him of the responsibilities which the citizen has toward his society.”

From a modern perspective, the passage feels prissy and laughable, the residue of an era when television was considered a public utility: it was in everyone's best interest to keep it pure, and then add fluoride. No critic could support that approach, least of all those who see TV as an art form, and want to free it from anxious comparisons to novels and movies—to celebrate TV as TV. During a recent visit to a university, I bridled when an ethicist praised me for taking a moral stance. (I'd called a network show “odious torture porn.”) I told her that I wanted originality, even if it was ugly, and that I'd rather watch a show that unsettled me than something that was merely “good.”

That's true. And yet, like Archie himself, I have to admit to my own fascination with the good old days—in particular, that spiky, surreal moment when people found television so dangerous that they slapped warning stickers on it. Lear and his critics disagreed about how his

show affected people, but they agreed that it *should* affect people. Every day marked a fresh skirmish: Should there be a “family hour”? Were Starsky and Hutch making viewers violent? Back when television was a mass phenomenon, controlled by three networks, watched live by the whole family, it was no wonder that observers wrung their hands over whether it might turn its viewers into monsters. (These days, we reserve those concerns for the Internet.)

Five years after “All in the Family,” Lear launched an even more radical show, “Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman,” a prophetic, neglected TV classic stuffed with anti-TV themes. A satire of soap operas, and one of the first truly serial evening shows, it was so loopy and avant-garde that its producers syndicated it independently, airing it on affiliates mostly late at night. Lear explicitly designed it to appeal to two audiences: those who enjoyed it as melodrama and those who took it as social satire. In the finale of the first season, its eponymous housewife heroine (played by Louise Lasser) has a nervous breakdown on David Susskind's talk show, as moralists hammer her with questions. “Were your orgasms better before Johnny Carson?” the ideologues shout. “Erase! Erase!” Mary Hartman begs, panicked that she has said something wrong. It was a cry of terror that seemed to symbolize the mood of that era: the world was in chaos, and viewers like Mary were tragically vulnerable to the media's influence. Yet Lasser's character's odd, raw humanity—together with the show's disorienting, deliberately ugly editing rhythms—was a form of resistance. (The next season, she was institutionalized and happily became a member of the hospital's Nielsen family.)

Decades later, television has a different relationship with its audience. We collect and record it; we recap it with strangers; it pours through hundreds of narrow channels. Perhaps it's not so odd that, around the time the digital revolution began, another Archie-like figure rose up, as if from TV's unconscious: the rancorous middle-aged white male antihero, nostalgic for a past when he was powerful—and often conceived by a middle-aged white male showrunner, the demographic with the greatest economic ability to shake things up. As with “All in the Family,” the best of these dramas shoved

TV forward with a rough charisma, blasting through piety and formula, frightening us and turning us on—and, often, dividing the audience in two. Then this genre, too, became a pious formula.

In “Sitcom,” Austerlitz argues that, as important as “All in the Family” was, it is hard to re-watch: among other problems, its racial politics are dated, reducing racism to mere personal prejudice. There's some truth to that, and yet, these days, Lear's legacy is everywhere, often in stealthy packages. Lear set the stage for agitating comedies like “Louie” and “Girls,” acrid satires like “It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia,” and boundary-crossers less to my taste, like Seth MacFarlane's “Family Guy.” Ryan Murphy, the creator of “Glee” and “American Horror Story,” is a professed admirer of Lear, and his shows feature diva-bigots who are female variants of Archie Bunker. Lear is a hero to Judd Apatow, too. Every time a show crosses the line of good taste, from humane pulp like “Orange Is the New Black” to bleak nightmares like “Hannibal,” it enlarges Lear's territory. Some of these shows place people who look nothing like Archie at the center, helped by production models that don't require reaching every viewer.

There is no way—and maybe no reason—to unite TV's divided audience. If television creators began by trying desperately not to offend, they clearly learned that the opposite approach can work just as well: a show that speaks to multiple audiences can get ratings by offering many ways to be a fan. As for the “vast wasteland” debate, at times it feels as if the balance has shifted so far toward a reflexive cynicism (about torture as entertainment, for example) that it's difficult even to talk about the subject—at least, without getting called a Margaret Dumont. Perhaps there's another way to look at it, which is to imagine an ethical quality that is embedded in real originality. The best series rattle us and wake us up; the worst are numbing agents. Sometimes, a divided audience is a result of mixed messages, an incoherent text; sometimes, it's a sign of a bold experiment that we are still learning how to watch. But there's a lot to be said for a show that is potent without being perfect, or maybe simply perfect for its moment: storytelling that alters the audience by demanding that viewers do more than just watch. ♦

HOME FIRES

How soldiers write their wars.

BY GEORGE PACKER

*The new war literature by veterans is largely free of politics and polemics.*

“Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected,” Paul Fussell wrote in “The Great War and Modern Memory,” his classic study of the English literature of the First World War. “But the Great War was more ironic than any before or since.” The ancient verities of honor and glory were still standing in 1914 when England’s soldier-poets marched off to fight in France. Those young men became modern through the experience of trench warfare, if not in the forms they used to describe it. It was Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Joyce, and Lawrence who invented literary modernism while sitting out the war. Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Edmund Blunden, Isaac Rosenberg, and Wilfred Owen—who all fought in the trenches and, in the last two cases, died there—remained tied to the conventions of the nineteenth century while trying to convey the unprecedented horror of industrial warfare, a condition of existence so murderous and absurd that a romantic or heroic attitude became impossible. The essence of modern understanding is irony, Fussell argued, and it was born on the Western Front.

Fussell wasn’t wrong about the Great War, but, in his insistence on its newness, he underestimated the staying power of military myths for each generation. Fussell cited a newspaper story about a London man who killed himself out of concern that he might not be accepted for service in the Great War, and noted, “How can we forbear condescending to the eager lines at the recruiting stations or smiling at news like this.” But in the summer of 1968 Tim O’Brien, a twenty-one-year-old in a small Minnesota town, a liberal supporter of Eugene McCarthy and an opponent of the war in Vietnam, submitted himself for induction into the United States Army. O’Brien couldn’t bring himself “to upset a peculiar balance between the order I knew, the people I knew, and my own private world,” he wrote, in “If I Die in a Combat Zone,” his 1973 Vietnam memoir. “It was not just that I valued that order. I also feared its opposite—inevitable chaos, censure, embarrassment, the end of everything that had happened in my life, the end of it all.” Was O’Brien’s fear of dishonor entirely different from the impulse that drove a

forty-nine-year-old man to throw himself under a van in 1914?

Or from the thinking that led Brian Turner to volunteer for the U.S. Army in 1998 and go on to serve as an infantry team leader in the badlands of northwestern Iraq? “I signed the paper and joined the infantry because at some point in the hero’s life the hero is supposed to say *I swear*,” Turner writes in his memoir, “My Life as a Foreign Country” (Jonathan Cape), published earlier this year in the United Kingdom and forthcoming from Norton here. “I raised my hand and said the words because I would’ve been ashamed in the years to come if I hadn’t, even if it didn’t make sense, even if nobody I cared about ever thought about it, even if all the veterans in my family never said a word, or even if they did, saying, *It’s cool, Brian, it doesn’t mean a thing, believe me, the uniform doesn’t make the man.*” Here’s Kevin Powers, who joined the Army out of high school and ended up as a machine gunner in the same region of Iraq as Turner: “I had by then inferred that the military was where a person went to develop the qualities that I had come to admire in my father, my uncle, and both of my grandfathers. The cliché, in my case, was true: I thought that the army would ‘make me a man.’” The scare quotes suggest Fussell’s wised-up irony, but they weren’t enough to keep Powers home. Every generation has to discover what Fussell called the “hope abridged” that waits somewhere beyond the recruiting office. For Americans, this experience has been an overwhelmingly male one, recorded in literature written by men, but that will change as women—such as Kayla Williams, the author of two Iraq memoirs—go off to combat zones.

Soldiers who set out to write the story of their war also have to navigate a minefield of clichés: all of them more or less true but open to qualification; many sowed long before the soldiers were ever deployed, because every war is like every other war. That’s one of them. War is hell is another. War begins in illusion and ends in blood and tears. Soldiers go to war for their country’s cause and wind up fighting for one another. Soldiers are dreamers (Sassoon said that). No one returns from war the same person who went. War opens an unbridgeable gap

between soldiers and civilians. There's no truth in war—just each soldier's experience. "You can tell a true war story by its absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil" (from "How to Tell a True War Story," in O'Brien's story collection *The Things They Carried*).

Irony in modern American war literature takes many forms, and all risk the overfamiliarity that transforms style into cliché. They begin with Hemingway's rejection, in "A Farewell to Arms," of the high, old language, his insistence on concreteness: "I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it. There were many words that you could not stand to hear and finally only the names of places had dignity."

The style of understated disillusionment remains universally recognizable and pervasively influential in war literature. Vietnam gave us another kind of distancing—black humor, satire, surrealism—often in novels that were not set in Vietnam, such as Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*. (A similar mood suffuses "M*A*S*H," a movie that was nominally about the Korean War.) Tim O'Brien's Vietnam writing—his memoir, the interlocking stories in *The Things They Carried*, and, especially, his novel *Going After Cacciato*—combined Hemingway's hard and exact prose with often fantastical incidents, suited to a jungle war against an invisible enemy. The characteristic voice of Vietnam literature became the matter-of-fact statement of hallucinatory evil, poised between humor and horror. It's heard in the opening paragraph of *Going After Cacciato*: "The rain fed fungus that grew in the men's boots and socks, and their socks rotted, and their feet turned white and soft so that the skin could be scraped off with a fingernail, and Stink Harris woke up screaming one night with a leech on his tongue."

O'Brien's work, like the work of other great war writers, makes violence inseparable from pity. In "How to Tell a True War Story," a soldier loses his best friend to a booby-trapped artillery shell, and, later that day, he machine-guns a baby

water buffalo in the cruellest possible way. The narrator reports that whenever he tells this story some kindhearted older woman will urge him to move on. "I'll picture Rat Kiley's face, his grief, and I'll think, *You dumb cooze*. Because she wasn't listening. It *wasn't* a war story. It was a *love* story." This isn't just the soldier's love for his war buddies, intense as that attachment can be. It's a redemptive understanding of their capacity for good and evil both, and of the way that war, more than any other human endeavor, leaves them nowhere to hide.



The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan fully meet Fussell's description of the ironic: they were worse than expected. Both began with hubris and false victories, turned into prolonged stalemates, and finally deserved the bitter name of defeat. The shorthand for Iraq, from "Mission Accomplished" to Falluja, Abu Ghraib, civil war, the surge, U.S. withdrawal, and the ongoing sectarian killing, is a story of exploded illusions. The first wave of literature by American combatants in these long, inconclusive wars has begun to appear—poems, memoirs, short stories, novels. Their concerns are the same as in all war writing: bravery and fear, the thin line between survival and brutality, the maddening unknowability of the enemy, tenderness, brotherhood, alienation from a former self, the ghosts of the past, the misfit of home.

But Iraq was also different from other American wars. (So far, almost all the new war literature comes from Iraq, perhaps because there weren't many troops in Afghanistan until 2009, and the minimum lag time between deployment and publication seems to be around five years.) Without a draft, without the slightest sacrifice asked of a disengaged public, Iraq put more mental distance between soldiers and civilians than any war of its duration that I can think of. The war in Iraq, like the one in Vietnam, wasn't popular; but the troops, at least nominally, were—wildly so. (Just watch the crowd at a sports event if someone in uniform is asked to stand and be acknowledged.) Both sides of the relationship, if they were being honest, felt its essential falseness.

A tiny number of volunteers went off to fight, often two or three times, in a war and a country that seemed incomprehensible. They returned to heroes' welcomes and a flickering curiosity. Because hardly anyone back home really wanted to know, the combatant's status turned into a mark of otherness, a blessing and a curse. The title of David Finkel's recent book about the struggles of soldiers returned from Iraq, "Thank You for Your Service," captures all the bad faith of a civilian population that views itself as undeserving, and the equivocal position of celebrated warriors who don't much feel like saying, "You're welcome."

So it's not surprising that the new war literature is intensely interested in the return home. The essential scene of First World War writing is the mass slaughter of the trenches. In the archetypal Vietnam story, a grunt who can never find the enemy walks into physical and moral peril. In much of the writing about Iraq, the moment of truth is a reunion scene at an airport or a military base—families holding signs, troops looking for their loved ones, an unease sinking deep into everyone.

In "Letter Composed During a Lull in the Fighting" (Little, Brown), Kevin Powers's first collection of poetry, published this month, the mood is meditative and convalescent, the poet's mind reopening after a great shock: "I am home and whole, so to speak. . . . But I can't remember/how to be alive." The narrator of Powers's lyrical and disturbing novel *The Yellow Birds* (which appeared in 2012) is far from whole. Returning from Iraq to rural Virginia, Private John Bartle stands in his mother's enveloping hug while strangers around them call out thanks: "Yet when she said, 'Oh, John, you're home,' I did not believe her." *The Yellow Birds* has a fragmentary quality that's suited to prose by a poet; it's better at evoking landscapes and states of feeling than at sustained psychological realism. There are remarkable evocations of the uncanniness, even the wonder, of fighting: "When the ringing of the first shots subsided, we heard bullets, sounds like small rips in the air, reports of rifles from somewhere we couldn't see. I was struck by a kind of lethargy, in awe of the decisiveness of every single attenuated

moment, observed in minute detail each slender moving branch and the narrow bands of sunlight coming through the leaves. Someone pulled me down to the orchard floor."

When a glib reporter asks what combat feels like, a character compares it to the moment just before a car accident, when you know it's going to happen and are helpless to stop it. "Death, or whatever, it's either coming or it's not," he says, "like that split second in a car wreck, except for here it can last for goddamn days." Whether or not the fictional soldier is likely to have formulated such a thought, it's one of the best distillations of combat I've read.

Back home, Bartle finds that "everyone wants to slap you on the back and you start to want to burn the whole goddamn country down, you want to burn every goddamn yellow ribbon in sight, and you can't explain it but it's just, like, Fuck you, but then you signed up to go so it's all your fault, really, because you went on purpose, so you are in the end doubly fucked." Private Bartle's homecoming is an extreme case, but his emotions are not.

Journalists and historians have to distort war: in order to find the plot—causation, sequence, meaning—they make war more intelligible than it really is. In the literature by veterans, there are virtually no politics or polemics, in stark contrast to the tendentious way in which most Americans, especially those farthest removed from the fighting, discussed Iraq. This new writing takes the war, though not its terrible cost, as a given. Instead of a coherent explanatory narrative, it presents us with fragments; for example, "Dust to Dust," a 2012 memoir by Benjamin Busch, a former Marine Corps captain and an actor, is organized not chronologically but around certain materials—metal, bone, blood, ash. Fragments are perhaps the most honest literary form available to writers who fought so recently. Their work lacks context, but it gets closer to the lived experience of war than almost any journalism. It deals in particulars, which is where the heightened alertness of combatants has to remain, and it's more likely to notice things. To most foreign observers, the landscape of Iraq is relentlessly empty and ugly, like

a physical extension of the country's trauma. But in the poetry and the prose of soldiers and marines the desert comes to life with birdsong and other noises, the moonlit sand breeds dreams and hallucinations.

Like Kevin Powers, Brian Turner is a poet. He's the Isaac Rosenberg of the Iraq War; romantic by disposition, he resorts to surrealist imagery in order to hold out a margin of human sympathy under the extreme pressure of war. His poems—collected in "Here, Bullet" and "Phantom Noise"—keep returning to the most brutal situations: a suicide car bombing in a Mosul traffic circle, the execution of fifty Iraqi soldiers travelling on minibuses, the torture of Iraqi prisoners by American M.P.s. But violence that begins as fact mingles by metaphor with dreams, eroticism, history, classical poetry, until the borders between individuals and worlds melt away. "The Mutanabbi Street Bombing" is about a famous outdoor book market in Baghdad that was repeatedly blown up by insurgents:

Buildings catch fire. Cafes.
Stationery shops. The Renaissance
Bookstore.
A huge column of smoke, a black anvil
head
pluming upward, fueled by the *Kitah*
al-Aghani,
al-Isfahani's *Book of Songs*, the elegies of
Khansa,
the exile poetry of Youssef and
al-Azzawi,

religious tracts, manifestos, translations
of Homer, Shakespeare, Whitman, and
Neruda—
these book-leaves curl in the fire's
blue-tipped heat, and the long centuries
handed down from one person to
another, verse
by verse, rise over Baghdad.

Turner has at least one truly astonishing poem, "Al-A'imma Bridge." It describes an incident that took place in 2005, when a Shiite religious procession across a bridge over the Tigris in Baghdad turned into a stampede with the rumor of a suicide bomber, and almost a thousand people were trampled to death or drowned. In a single sentence that cascades over twenty-three free-verse stanzas, Turner imagines those falling, a pregnant woman in an abaya, a young woman from Mosul, and the vision opens up to encompass figures from Iraqi history going back to Babylon, Scheherazade "made speechless by the scale of war," ghosts woken from their sleep, as the Tigris fills "with bricks from Abu Ghraib, burning vehicles," razor wire, rubble, bombs of every kind:

give daisies and hyacinths
to this impossible moment, flowers to
stand for the lips
unable to kiss them, each in their own
bright beauty, flowers
that may light the darkness, as they
march deeper into the earth.

It is improbable and moving that an American soldier should write a poem of such generous, Whitmanesque spirit



"If you had only listened to me when you were six and not eaten that dirt."

about this one Iraqi disaster. The war kept Americans and Iraqis far apart, as each side learned to fear and distrust the other. “In Vietnam They Had Whores,” as the title of one Iraq War story bluntly puts it—in Iraq they had blast walls and body armor. It was possible for British Tommies to preserve a romantic vision of France, for American grunts to find Vietnam alluring, but very few American troops fell in love with Iraq.

Turner is the rare soldier-writer who takes a deep interest in Iraqis—their language and literature, their past, their daily doings, their inner lives. His memoir, “My Life as a Foreign Country,” opens with a metaphor of the writer as a drone aircraft, flying at thirty-two thousand feet over his life, “gathering the necessary intelligence, all that I have done, all that we have done, compressed into the demarcations annotated in the map below.” Turner’s sympathetic imagination takes in even the Iraqi insurgent in Mosul who nearly killed him with a rocket-propelled grenade. “Maybe it isn’t that it’s so difficult coming home,” Turner writes, “but that home isn’t a big enough space for all that I must bring to it. America, vast and laid out from one ocean to another, is not a large enough space to contain the war each soldier brings home. And even if it could—it doesn’t want to.”

The best literary work thus far written by a veteran of America’s recent wars is Phil Klay’s “Redeployment” (Penguin Press), a masterly collection of short stories about war and its psychological consequences. “Redeployment” is military for “return,” and Klay’s fiction peels back every pretty falsehood and self-delusion in the encounter between veterans and the people for whom they supposedly fought. In the title story, which opens the book, the unnamed narrator, back from Iraq, spots his wife in the waiting crowd, dressed to please him but looking somehow unfamiliar: “I moved in and kissed her. I figured that was what I was supposed to do.” In “Bodies,” a marine whose job was in Mortuary Affairs—“processing” the corpses of Americans and Iraqis alike—says, “It was another three weeks before I got home and everybody thanked me for my service. Nobody seemed to know exactly what they were thanking me for.” He visits a former girlfriend, but the war now lies between them: she doesn’t

want him, and he can’t tell her the story that’s on his mind, “about the worst burn case we ever had.” Instead, he gives a drunken version to a man he meets in a bar later that night. When he finishes, the man says, “I respect what you’ve been through.” The story goes on:

I took a sip of my beer. “I don’t want you to respect what I’ve been through,” I said.

That confused him. “What do you want?” he said.

I didn’t know. We sat and drank beer for a bit.

“I want you to be disgusted,” I said.

In “Psychological Operations,” the narrator is an Iraq vet of Coptic Christian descent who enrolls at Amherst. He takes a combative interest in an outspoken black classmate—a new convert to Islam—and almost courts her dislike by telling her how he once broadcast sexual insults over loudspeakers to compel insurgents in Falluja out of their houses so that other marines could shoot them. It’s part confession, part argument, part seduction. He can’t decide how he wants the girl to feel about him:

I looked down at my hands, then back up at Zara. I didn’t know how to tell her what coming home meant. The weird thing with being a veteran, at least for me, is that you do feel better than most people. You risked your life for something bigger than yourself. How many people can say that? You chose to serve. Maybe you didn’t understand American foreign policy or why we were at war. Maybe you never will. But it doesn’t matter. You held up your hand and said, “I’m willing to die for these worthless civilians.”

At the same time, though, you feel somehow less. What happened, what I was a part of, maybe it was the right thing. We were fighting very bad people. But it was an ugly thing.

Klay, a Dartmouth grad who served in the Marine Corps in Anbar Province during the violent months of the surge, in 2007, is a writer who happened to be a marine—you can imagine him writing well about anything, not just Iraq. His fiction is extremely funny and absolutely serious, his control over language and character so assured that the array of first-person narrators in these dozen stories—combat grunts, a desk-bound officer, a beleaguered State Department official, a Marine chaplain—are all distinct and persuasive. Klay writes with a powerful restraint about the inversion of normal reality called combat, its permanent effects on bodies and souls, but the best stories in “Redeployment” look at war from a slight

distance. The narrator in “Unless It’s a Sucking Chest Wound,” a battalion adjutant, has the inglorious job of writing up the heroics of other marines being nominated for medals. He feels like a real marine only when he returns home and becomes a civilian again—he keeps his hair short so that people will know. (Vietnam vets grew their hair long to blend in.) He meets a woman at N.Y.U. who assumes that he has post-traumatic stress disorder: “I don’t have PTSD, but I guess her thinking that I did is part of the weird pedestal vets are on now. Either way, I didn’t contradict her.” Just as soldiers could never write about glory and sacrifice in the old way after the First World War, the current generation can be ironic about the image of the psychologically damaged vet introduced into the culture with fear and reverence by Vietnam.

The adjutant is one among many troops—their numbers grew over time—who spent their war almost entirely within the confines of an American base. They were known, derisively, as Fobbits, from Forward Operating Base (a satirical novel of that title by a former Army journalist named David Abrams came out in 2012), and they have a relation to combat troops similar to that of civilians to all veterans—the guilt, the awe, the envy, the relief. Back home, the adjutant finds that he misses not Iraq itself but “the idea of Iraq all my civilian friends imagine when they say the word, an Iraq filled with honor and violence, an Iraq I can’t help feeling I should have experienced but didn’t through my own stupid fault.” Klay, who was a public-affairs officer in Anbar—a relatively safe job in a very dangerous place—sounds this minor chord across several stories, with the rigorous honesty that characterizes all his work and is the source of much of its humor and its sadness.

The most morally complex story in “Redeployment,” and perhaps the best, is “Prayer in the Furnace,” about a Marine chaplain in Ramadi who begins to pick up signs that the infantrymen in his combat-weary battalion, led by a hyper-aggressive commander, are committing war crimes. A corporal named Rodriguez, violent and despairing, brings hints, but when the chaplain presses him for details Rodriguez lets him know that he lacks the street cred to understand. “How can you say this place ain’t evil?” the corporal asks. “Have you been out there?” Klay shows sure

command of his craft in tracing the chaplain's anguish as it becomes a crisis of faith. The chaplain writes in his journal:

I see mostly normal men, trying to do good, beaten down by horror, by their inability to quell their own rages, by their masculine posturing and their so-called hardness, their desire to be tougher, and therefore crueler, than their circumstance.

And yet, I have this sense that this place is holier than back home. Gluttonous, fat, oversexed, overconsuming, materialist home, where we're too lazy to see our own faults. At least here, Rodriguez has the decency to worry about hell.

Torn between awareness of sin and compassion, the chaplain holds Sunday Mass on the base for a handful of marines and tries to break through his inability to minister to them in extremis. He begins his sermon by asking, "Who here thinks that when you get back to the States no civilians will be able to understand what you've gone through?" Hands go up. Then he tells three stories. One is about an American parishioner who watched his child waste away with cancer, then angrily refused the chaplain's glib attempt at comfort. One is about an Iraqi father who brought his badly burned daughter to the base for medical help, then told the chaplain of his hatred of the Americans for humiliating him in front of his family. The third is about Wilfred Owen, gassed in the trenches. "We are part of a long tradition of suffering," the chaplain tells the listening marines, some of them uneasy, some angry. "We can let it isolate us if we want, but we must realize that isolation is a lie. Consider Owen. Consider that Iraqi father and that American father. Consider their children. Do not suffer alone. Offer suffering up to God, respect your fellow man, and perhaps the sheer awfulness of this place will become a little more tolerable."

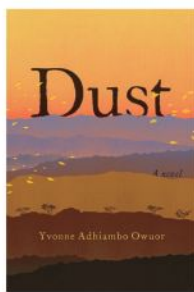
The sermon fails to move the marines. It's too soon, and Ramadi is too terrible. There will be more combat deaths, and then, after redeployment, a rash of suicides. The story can end only in irony: the chaplain alludes to Christ's Passion, and Rodriguez spits in the grass. Some of the men will remain alone for years, perhaps their whole lives. But some will begin to recognize their own suffering in the stories of others. That's what literature does. ♦

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A conversation with George Packer.

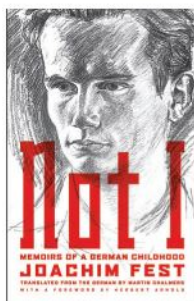
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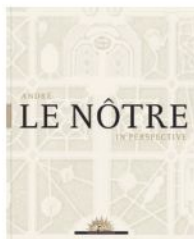
DECODED, by Mai Jia, translated from the Chinese by Olivia Milburn and Christopher Payne (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This unusual spy thriller has neither page-turning plot twists nor a master villain. Instead, it fastidiously traces the childhood, the career, and the subsequent mental breakdown of a Chinese code-breaker named Rong Jinzhen, who is abandoned by his birth family in the early years of the last century and then recruited into China's counter-intelligence service. Assigned to decipher two menacing codes, Rong breaks one but is unable to crack the other; his work prompts examination of the relationship between cryptography and psychology. Mai plays adroitly with literary genre and crafts a story of Borgesian subtlety and complexity that also feels specific to the politics and pathologies of revolutionary-era China.



DUST, by Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor (Knopf). "What endures?" is a question that is asked repeatedly in this debut by a Kenyan novelist. One possible answer: "Spaces in the heart that accommodate the absent." The story is haunted by the absence of a character who does not survive the prologue—a young man killed on the streets of Nairobi. His sister, a painter, returns from Brazil and, along with their father, claims the body. Owuor's fragmentary style is dense but lyrical. Grief emerges in many forms among the members of the family, summoning memories of the country's difficult history. In Kenya, Owuor writes, the official languages are "English, Kiswahili, and Silence."



NOT I, by Joachim Fest, translated from the German by Martin Chalmers (Other Press). This remarkable memoir by the late German historian and biographer of Hitler opens in the nineteen-twenties in a Berlin suburb, where the Fest family enjoys a relatively peaceful existence. The story proceeds through the grand historical events of the next twenty years, as Fest's father, an active supporter of the Weimar Republic, is fired from his job as a headmaster, and one after another of his children is pulled into the service of the Nazis. The family's spirit of resistance, buoyed by devotion to literature, philosophy, and music, never deserts them, but, as Fest painfully comes to realize, it also fails to save them: "The world was stronger than we could ever be."



ANDRÉ LE NÔTRE IN PERSPECTIVE, edited by Patricia Bouchenot-Déchin and Georges Farhat (Hazan). The most famous landscape architect in French history was (unlike his employer, Louis XIV) modest, loyal, and universally known for his good nature. Born near the Tuileries in 1613, he studied drawing with Simon Vouet at the Louvre, where he met the painter Charles Le Brun, with whom he later collaborated at Versailles. This sumptuous volume comprises essays by thirty-three scholars and reproductions of drawings from Le Nôtre's workshop and of paintings, bronzes, and medals that he owned. In contrast to his predecessor Jacques Boyceau, Le Nôtre wrote no treatises and few letters, and this book aims at casting new light on him through a renewed analysis of the clues he left behind.

MAN OVERBOARD

"Noah" and "Dom Hemingway."

BY DAVID DENBY



Russell Crowe as the Biblical patriarch in Darren Aronofsky's new movie.

Darren Aronofsky's "Noah"—an epic farrago of tumultuous water, digital battle, and environmentalist rage (think of Al Gore glaring at the apocalypse)—is the craziest big movie in years. But how could it not be mad? A half century ago, the Biblical spectacular, with its sanctimony and its roiling clouds, became a laughingstock. If a modern Biblical picture is to live, a director must take serious risks. When Mel Gibson made "The Passion of the Christ," he drained the spirituality and the understanding from Jesus' last days and replaced them with sadism and anti-Semitic accusation. The movie may have been despicable, but it certainly wasn't dead. Now Aronofsky, the ambitious indie director of "Pi," "The Fountain," and "Black Swan," has poured his own dark obsessions into Genesis, whose stories are strange and savage to begin with. The few verses devoted to God's wrath before he unleashes the flood are clear about the design of the ark (God assembles a contractor's list, detailing cubits, lumber, decks, and windows), but they are notoriously mysterious about everything else. God sees that

"the wickedness of man was great in the earth." The wickedness of *everyone*? The near totality of God's disgust for his creation remains baffling; the blunt oddity and the remoteness of the text are a challenge even to the most fearless artist.

Commentators have been exercising their ingenuity on the primitive legends for centuries, and now Aronofsky joins them and finds a legitimate reason for God to kill everybody. The movie, it turns out, is a fable of despoliation and cleansing. In the beginning, there is a large apple and a loud chomp (heard but not seen), followed by Cain's slaying of Abel (a fist rises in silhouette). Evil is loosed, and civilization rises and falls. Crippled modern skyscrapers are barely visible in the distance, as waste and decay foul the terrain. The speed of all this, and the whimsical touches, seems part of an elaborate joke, but Aronofsky is not joking. Advanced industrial man has polluted the earth, yet somehow we are still in Biblical times. Noah (Russell Crowe), his wife, Naameh (Jennifer Connelly), and their three sons live in a bare, scraggly wilderness and worship someone they

call "the Creator." They dress in layered dun-colored garments, an early revelation of L. L. Bean outdoor style. In the Bible, Noah speaks only to bless or to curse his sons, but this Noah has ecological opinions. He disapproves of hunters killing animals. "They think it makes them stronger," he tells his sons. He's some sort of vegan, but how does he feed his family in this barren place? The Creator sends him a sign in the form of raindrops, which immediately bring forth flowers, but nothing else. The raindrops are a warning.

Aronofsky was working with a budget of a hundred and thirty million dollars, an enormous sum for him, and, not surprisingly, "Noah" shifts back and forth between the visionary and the mercenary, between the startling and audience-reassuring clichés. Aronofsky and his writing partner, Ari Handel, divide the world into two warring groups, both descended from the sons of Adam and Eve. In the line of Seth (the couple's third son), there are the good people (Noah and his family). In the line of Cain, there are the bad, led by Tubal-Cain (Ray Winstone), a forger of weapons who is mentioned only in passing in Genesis but here is elevated to a filthy thug leading an army of dark-visaged soldiers. They wear "Game of Thrones"-style helmets and do nasty things with women in the woods. (At least, I think so; the scenes of wickedness are patchy.) When the soldiers swarm through the trees, eager to get onto the ark (it has begun to drizzle), they recall the surging masses of the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy. Aronofsky borrows from the "Transformer" series, too: Noah and his family are protected by the Watchers, fallen angels who stand sixteen feet tall and move like benevolent versions of the raging Decepticons. The Watchers helped man after the expulsion, and the Creator punished them by clothing them in rock, but they bash Tubal-Cain and his followers out of the way with their long, sweeping arms.

The ark story has usually been dramatized gently, as a parable of hope, since God, avenged, gets over his anger with us. In the popular imagination, the animals nestle together, fur by beak, claw by nape, the humans happy among them. But Aronofsky reverses all that. Having slithered and galloped to salvation on the ark, the animals are hardly seen again.

Family drama and existential anxiety dominate on board. After fighting to keep the rest of humanity out, Noah struggles with his wife; with young, pregnant Ila (Emma Watson), who's married to Shem (Douglas Booth), his oldest son; and with Ham (Logan Lerman), his middle son, a seething teen-ager understandably chagrined because he has no woman to mate with. The Creator never speaks to Noah (Aronofsky was shrewd enough to avoid the sonorous God of Cecil B. De Mille in "The Ten Commandments"), but Noah believes that he knows what the Creator wishes: he wants Noah to preserve only the innocent animals and to let the human line, including his own family, expire.

Suddenly, as if to demonstrate that Noah is right, Aronofsky takes us back to life's origins (the movie is grandly redundant). Noah tells his family the story of existence, and we see all of it—the void, the first dazzling light, protozoa, lizards crawling out of ponds, time flashing through millennia, apes, Adam and Eve, a red-eyed serpent. It was paradisaical before man appeared, condemning everyone to death. Aronofsky compounds his own myth out of grand narratives, mashing together creationism, Darwinian evolution, the fall of man, the end of days, and radical environmentalism. He tries to please every faction and may wind up offending them all. He even merges the Old Testament with what feels like a Christian belief in original sin; man is stained, though it's so dark a stain that there's no possibility of salvation. Noah says, "If we were to reënter the garden, it would only be to destroy it once more." As Noah ages, Russell Crowe's hair gets shorter and his beard grows longer, a

concession to patriarchal fashion. Aronofsky pushes him hard, and Crowe, as much as anyone can, holds the movie's extravagances and follies together.

Some of this digital apocalypse is thrilling. In Aronofsky's most characteristic visual trope, the camera pulls back from an awesome scene—a reversal of Steven Spielberg's favorite shot, in which the camera moves toward what's astounding. The retreating camera is doubtless Aronofsky's way of suggesting that God is abandoning us, withdrawing into a role as mere observer, and, again and again, such images of a forsaken world outclass anything in the old spectacles. "Noah" may not make much sense, but only an artist could have made it. Aronofsky has traded the sandy Biblical deserts for the turf of Iceland, with its black lava fields and its featureless plains, the landscapes relieved, in a few shots, by a green mountain rising up—an intimation of an Eden that once was and can never be again. Some of Noah's nightmares are magnificent, such as an early dream of the flood in which animals caught underwater frantically try to reach the surface. The flood itself is an assault from above and below; spouting geysers reach up to blackened skies as cascades pour down. The end of the world has never looked better.

Two of Aronofsky's earlier movies ended in suicide, which, in "Black Swan," he confused with the commitment of a true artist. For a long time, this movie, too, pulls toward extinction; Noah could be an artist who fulfills himself in destroying his materials and everyone around him. The film, for all its adoration of unpolluted nature, has an insistent death-loving creepiness, so it's a

relief when Noah's plan is furiously opposed by his wife and children. Humanity may at last be catching a break. Taking on a Biblical spectacular requires a touch of craziness, but sanity, in the end, keeps art and life going.

The American writer-director Richard Shepard ("The Matador") must love Shakespeare, because his lightweight mock-gangster film, "Dom Hemingway," offers words in exuberant torrents delivered by an actor, Jude Law, who has played Hamlet and Henry V onstage, and who understands the swing and the color of vaunting rhetoric. Dom Hemingway, an arrogant East End safecracker doing time, gets out of prison, links up with an old friend (the comically sepulchral Richard E. Grant), settles scores with those who did him dirt, and engages in endless debaucheries.

It's the kind of genre plot that the inexorable Lee Marvin would have starred in years ago and (one might think) Jason Statham would now, but Law is lighter, faster, more volatile than those two. He speaks in spangled outbursts whose comic point is that they are absurdly garrulous and unnecessary. Dom's mouth gets him into trouble, but he can't stop himself from venting his desire for love as well as his hatreds and lusts. Jude Law, saying farewell once again to his youthful good looks (Dom has scars and a little too much weight), makes this hyper-articulate ruffian the most intricately soulful character in current movies. ♦

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Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Benjamin Schwartz, must be received by Sunday, April 6th. The finalists in the March 24th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the April 21st 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



"He was cute as an ottoman, but we both knew this day would come."
Logan Ward, Fairfax, Va.



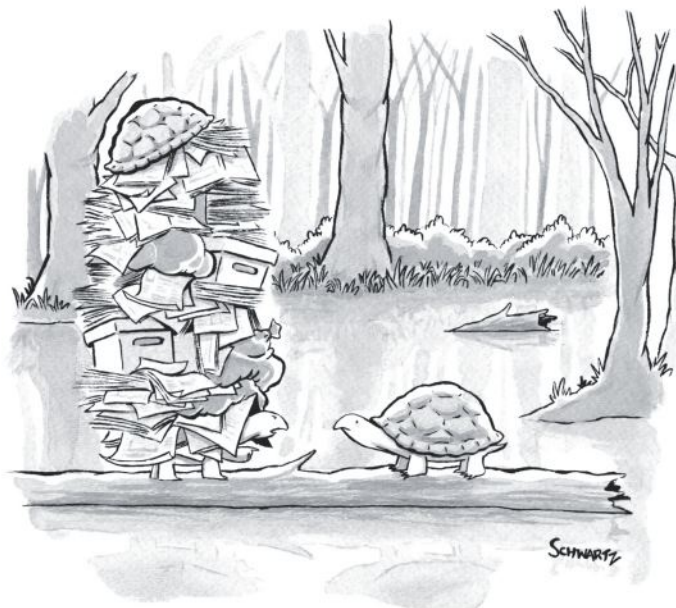
THE FINALISTS

"Nobody had a coin?"
Declan Coyne, Brooklyn, N.Y.

"I can see both sides."
Pamala Karol, Los Angeles, Calif.

*"The Founding Fathers were clear.
You must win by two."*
Sefton Price, Southern Shores, N.C.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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