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THE

SEPT. 29, 2014

# NEW YORKER



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# THE NEW YORKER

SEPTEMBER 29, 2014

	5	<b>GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN</b>
	21	<b>THE TALK OF THE TOWN</b> <i>Ben McGrath on the N.F.L. under fire; Samuel Beckett motormouth; whale watching; luxury airline food; Imelda May.</i>
<b>JEFFREY TOOBIN</b>	26	<b>THE SOLACE OF OBLIVION</b> <i>The Internet and the right to be forgotten.</i>
<b>IAN FRAZIER</b>	33	<b>BUDS</b>
<b>MEGHAN DAUM</b>	34	<b>DIFFERENCE MAKER</b> <i>Among the parentless and the childless.</i>
<b>DEXTER FILKINS</b>	42	<b>THE FIGHT OF THEIR LIVES</b> <i>ISIS, Iraq, and the Kurds' big opportunity.</i>
<b>ALICE GREGORY</b>	56	<b>PICTURES FROM AN INSTITUTION</b> <i>Bard College and its president.</i>
<b>MATT BLACK</b>	64	<b>THE DRY LAND</b> <i>Drought in California's Central Valley.</i>
		<b>FICTION</b>
<b>PAUL LA FARGE</b>	72	"ROSENDALE"
		<b>THE CRITICS</b>
		<b>BOOKS</b>
<b>JAMES WOOD</b>	80	<i>Eimear McBride's "A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing."</i>
<b>JOYCE CAROL OATES</b>	83	<i>Martin Amis's "The Zone of Interest."</i>
	85	<i>Briefly Noted</i>
		<b>ON TELEVISION</b>
<b>EMILY NUSSBAUM</b>	86	"Happy Valley," "Transparent."
		<b>THE CURRENT CINEMA</b>
<b>DAVID DENBY</b>	88	"Pride," "Tracks."
		<b>POEMS</b>
<b>CATHERINE BOWMAN</b>	53	"Makeshift"
<b>JULIE SHEEHAN</b>	61	"Chives"
		<b>COVER</b>
<b>BARRY BLITT</b>		"Illegal Procedure"

**DRAWINGS** Joe Dator, Amy Hwang, Benjamin Schwartz, Sam Gross, Paul Noth, Zachary Kanin, Peter Berkowitz, Mick Stevens, Harry Bliss, Tom Toro, Carolita Johnson, Kim Warp, Danny Shanahan, Michael Kupperman **SPOTS** Tibor Kárpáti

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# CONTRIBUTORS

**BEN McGRATH** (COMMENT, P. 21) writes frequently about sports for the magazine.

**IAN FRAZIER** (THE TALK OF THE TOWN, P. 23; SHOUTS & MURMURS, P. 33), the author of “The Cursing Mommy’s Book of Days,” has been a contributor since 1974.

**JEFFREY TOOBIN** (“THE SOLACE OF OBLIVION,” P. 26), the senior legal analyst for CNN, is the author of “The Oath: The Obama White House and the Supreme Court.”

**MEGHAN DAUM** (“DIFFERENCE MAKER,” P. 34) will publish a new collection of essays, “The Unspeakable: And Other Subjects of Discussion,” in November.

**DEXTER FILKINS** (“THE FIGHT OF THEIR LIVES,” P. 42) is the author of “The Forever War.”

**ALICE GREGORY** (“PICTURES FROM AN INSTITUTION,” P. 56) is a writer living in New York. This is her first piece for the magazine.

**JULIE SHEEHAN** (POEM, P. 61) has published three poetry collections, the most recent of which is “Bar Book.” She teaches in and directs the M.F.A. Program in Creative Writing and Literature at Stony Brook Southampton.

**MATT BLACK** (PORTFOLIO, P. 64) is a photographer from California’s Central Valley. An exhibition of his photographs from California and Mexico is currently on display at the Anastasia Photo gallery, in New York.

**PAUL LA FARGE** (FICTION, P. 72) published his third novel, “Luminous Airplanes,” in 2011. He lives in upstate New York.

**JOYCE CAROL OATES** (BOOKS, P. 83) recently published the story collection “Lovely, Dark, Deep.”

**BARRY BLITT** (COVER) illustrated “While You Were Napping,” a children’s book by Jenny Offill, which came out this month.

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**HUMOR:** A Daily Cartoon drawn by *Benjamin Schwartz*. Plus, *Andy Borowitz* and the *Shouts & Murmurs* blog.

**FICTION AND POETRY:** Readings by *Paul La Farge*, *Julie Sheehan*, and *Catherine Bowman*.

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**VIDEO:** Voices of despair in California’s drought-stricken Central Valley.

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# THE MAIL

## STOPPING DRUG DEATHS

As a doctor, I read with interest Ian Frazier's piece about the opioid-overdose epidemic ("The Antidote," September 8th). The antagonist drug he mentions, intranasal naloxone, is available to police, firefighters, and E.M.T.s, but, strangely, it is not readily available to physicians. No pharmacy or medical supplier I contacted carried or could get the intranasal form used in those kits. I would have to be registered as an affiliated provider of an existing overdose-prevention program, or attend a training session given by an E.M.S. I did both, but still was not provided with enough kits to routinely give to patients involved with opioids or to families of at-risk individuals. Frazier makes it clear that overdose deaths usually occur at home or in the company of others; practicing physicians are in an excellent position to identify need and instruct on the kits' usage. Ultimately, I had to register myself with New York State as an Opioid Overdose Prevention Program, and this allowed me to get kits and to give them to colleagues by counting them as affiliated providers. But I have access to only a limited number of physicians, and can protect only a handful of drug users.

*Robert S. Bobrow, M.D.*

*Clinical Associate Professor of Family Medicine, Stony Brook University  
Stony Brook, N.Y.*

Frazier's detailed look into the opioid-abuse epidemic on Staten Island fails to mention one nexus of the problem. Beyond the small fraction of health-care providers who divert medications to dealers or the occasional pharmacy heist, most of the products that lead to overdose come from licensed prescribers who have little training in managing pain. Pain is complex. It is a symptom and a disease, a red flag for acute tissue injury and a chronic, debilitating condition. Marking pain on a scale of one to ten does little to identify its quality or cause. I applaud Frazier's description of the

steps being taken on state and local levels to combat an epidemic of opioid overdoses. Until health-care professionals fully recognize their role in contributing to countless deaths, we will continue to respond to opioid overdoses by "stopping the high," as Frazier writes, only to slip back "into a milder opioid sleep."

*Daniel T. Abazia, Pharm.D.*

*Clinical Assistant Professor  
Ernest Mario School of Pharmacy  
Rutgers University  
Piscataway, N.J.*

Frazier writes that on August 28th it was announced that drug-overdose deaths have gone up forty-one per cent in New York City. Another news item, from August 25th, revealed that deaths associated with the use of opiate drugs fell in thirteen states after those states legalized medical marijuana. According to a report in *JAMA Internal Medicine*, "Medical cannabis laws are associated with significantly lower state-level opioid overdose mortality rates." Six years after states legalized medical marijuana, opioid-related overdoses declined thirty-three per cent compared with states with no formal access to marijuana. In states where marijuana use is illegal, people looking to get high visit a local dealer, and might walk out with all sorts of extremely addictive and potentially lethal drugs. In states like California, where medical marijuana is legal, they go to a dispensary, and don't leave with anything except marijuana. The legalization of marijuana may not be the ultimate solution to drug problems, but it represents a step in the right direction—a thirty-three-per-cent reduction versus the forty-one-per-cent increase in deaths in New York City.

*John Hankey*

*Los Angeles, Calif.*

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

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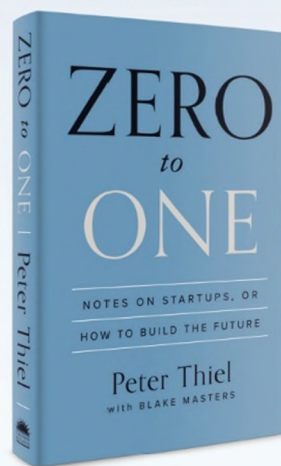
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# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



SEPTEMBER 2014    WEDNESDAY 24TH    THURSDAY 25TH    FRIDAY 26TH    SATURDAY 27TH    SUNDAY 28TH    MONDAY 29TH    TUESDAY 30TH

**WITH A SLIPPERY, SERPENTINE** movement style that blends elements of the street and the studio, Kyle Abraham is the fastest-rising choreographer in contemporary dance. On the heels of a commission from the Alvin Ailey company and a MacArthur Fellowship, he debüts two highly anticipated programs at New York Live Arts this month. The dances—"The Watershed" and three shorter pieces—are about freedom, taking inspiration from the 1960 jazz composition "Freedom Now Suite," by the drummer Max Roach. The music ranges from R. & B. and contemporary classical to a jazz score composed and played by the pianist Robert Glasper. The conceptual artist Glenn Ligon contributes visual design.

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

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD BURBRIDGE



## THE THEATRE

### OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

#### Disgraced

The Pulitzer Prize-winning drama by Ayad Akhtar—in which an American Muslim lawyer and his wife have a dinner party that turns divisive—transfers to Broadway, after an Off Broadway run last year. Kimberly Senior directs; Hari Dhillon, Gretchen Mol, and Josh Radnor star. Previews begin Sept. 27. (Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

#### The Fortress of Solitude

Itamar Moses wrote the book for this musical, based on the novel by Jonathan Lethem, a coming-of-age story about two young men growing up in Brooklyn in the seventies who are obsessed with superheroes. Michael Friedman wrote the music and lyrics; Daniel Aukin conceived and directs. Previews begin Sept. 30. (Public, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

#### Generations

Debbie Tucker Green wrote this play, presented by SoHo Rep and the Play Company, in which three generations of one family cook together, sharing stories about their lives in a South African township. Food from Madiba Restaurant will be served. Leah C. Gardiner directs. Previews begin Sept. 30. (SoHo Rep, 46 Walker St. 212-352-3101.)

#### King Lear

Shakespeare's Globe, the company that brought Mark Rylance's "Twelfth Night" and "Richard III," presents the tragedy, starring Joseph Marcell. Previews begin Sept. 30. (N.Y.U. Skirball Center, 566 LaGuardia Pl. 888-611-8183.)

#### The Last Ship

Sting wrote the score for this new musical, with a book by John Logan and Brian Yorke, about life in the English town of Wallsend, and the closing of the local shipyard. Steven Hoggett choreographs, and Joe Mantello directs. Previews begin Sept. 29. (Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 877-250-2929.)

#### The Old Man and the Old Moon

PigPen Theatre Company revives its folk-rock fable, about a man



## SWEET AND VICIOUS

*A leading light of the alt-cabaret movement jump-starts the party.*

TEN YEARS AGO, BRIDGET EVERETT was waiting tables and singing karaoke two or three times a week. She was a classically trained singer, but rocking out to "Piece of My Heart" and "You Oughta Know" unleashed something in her. "I used to always either rip my shirt or rip some guy's shirt. I don't know how I never got stabbed," Everett said recently. (She was calling from a nude beach.) One night, the artistic director of Ars Nova caught her at Sing Sing, in the East Village, and corralled her into doing a show. Since then, her uninhibited performances have been a boozy staple of the downtown cabaret scene, most often at Joe's Pub, where she sings with her band, the Tender Moments.

If Everett has a dominant gift, it's the ability to whip an audience into a frenzy. She describes her onstage persona as that of "a crazy maniac who doesn't get laid enough, so I have to put my sexual energy somewhere." Wearing scanty, ridiculous outfits that reveal her Rubenesque curves, she typically closes a show by pulling a man onstage and sitting on his face. It would be transgressive if it weren't so joyful. And yet Everett's shows are more complicated than burlesque, punctuated by monologues that drift into half-ironic melancholy before a power anthem (say, her signature song, "Titties") comes along to jump-start the party. She's a hot mess with absolute command over the room. No wonder Patti LuPone, another woman of endless moxie, has performed with her, both downtown and at Carnegie Hall.

For the most part, though, Everett's performances have little to do with the decorum of Café Carlyle. Growing up in Manhattan, Kansas, she revered not Barbara Cook but Debbie Harry and Richard Pryor. She is now at the center of what's sometimes called alt-cabaret (though it owes more to performance art), whose leading lights include Justin Vivian Bond, Cole Escola, Erin Markey, and Molly Pope. Many of them found a testing ground at "Our Hit Parade," the ribald monthly series that Everett co-hosted, with Kenny Mellman and Neal Medlyn, from 2008 to 2012. Through Oct. 11, she returns to Joe's Pub with "Rock Bottom," featuring original songs co-written with Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman ("Hairspray"), Matt Ray, and Adam (Ad-Rock) Horowitz, of the Beastie Boys. The show is more structured but no less wild than her concert gigs. "I don't want to break up any marriages," she said. "I just want people to feel as alive as I do in that moment."

—Michael Schulman

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whose job it is to refill the moon with light. Opens Sept. 26. (New Victory, 209 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010.)

**A Walk in the Woods**

Keen Company presents a play by Lee Blessing, in which two arms negotiators, one for Russia and one for the U.S., strike a deal in a series of informal meetings, loosely based on the 1982 Geneva peace talks. Kathleen Chalfant and Paul Niebanck star; Jonathan Silverstein directs. In previews. Opens Sept. 30. (Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

**NOW PLAYING****Bedbugs!!!**

This campy musical comedy opens in 1989, when young Carly's mother suffers a fatal bedbug attack. The story then leaps to the present day, following Carly's career as an obsessed exterminator who accidentally unleashes a super-breed of humanoid pests (cleverly costumed by Philip Heckman) on New York City, but the music, by Paul Leschen, remains firmly entrenched in the eighties. The tenor of the production—and, in particular, Chris Hall's flawless turn as Cimex, the hyper-sexed king of the bedbugs—owes much to "The Rocky Horror Picture Show," and the jokes are annoyingly stale, relying far too often on cheap ethnic types and obvious topical groaners. Yet the show has a way of getting under your skin, thanks largely to the cast's unwavering commitment to the deranged conceit, especially Brian Charles Rooney's surprisingly understated performance as a French-Canadian diva named Dionne Salon. (ArcLight, 152 W. 71st St. 212-868-4444.)

**The Fatal Weakness**

Under the artistic direction of Jonathan Bank, the Mint Theatre (whose production of John Van Druten's "London Wall," from earlier this year, will be the first play featured on "Theater Close-Up," a new series on Channel Thirteen) presents this work from 1946, the last of ten produced plays by George Kelly. He manages to tell a hectic, complicated story of infidelity, insecurity, and incompatibility, set entirely in an upper-class apartment, through a series of visits, phone calls, and face-to-face confrontations. Jesse Marchese directs a topnotch cast of six, who mine their roles for every honest laugh they can get while staying true to their characters. It's a battle not between good and evil but between cynicism and romanticism—a battle that is most keenly felt by the wronged wife, played by the marvellous Kristin Griffith. Her scenes with her husband (the buoyantly blustery Cliff

Bemis) rise to an uncommon level of sly, sad lyricism. (311 W. 43rd St. 866-811-4111.)

**Love Letters**

A. R. Gurney's epistolary chestnut, which premiered in 1988, unfurls the relationship between Andrew Makepeace Ladd III and his grade-school valentine, Melissa Gardner. Over the decades, their lives take divergent paths: he goes to Yale and becomes a U.S. senator; she drinks too much and struggles as an artist. Because of its simple setup (two chairs, open scripts), the play is popular with name actors, and Gregory Mosher's revival has attracted a gaggle of them: the rotating cast will include Carol Burnett, Alan Alda, Candice Bergen, Martin Sheen, and Anjelica Huston. For now, Mia Farrow and Brian Dennehy, who appear through Oct. 10, set a high bar: Farrow is winningly impatient in her girlhood scenes and devastating in her later ones, while Dennehy paints an anguished portrait of success devoid of passion. (Nederlander, 208 W. 41st St. 866-870-2717.)

**Ndebele Funeral**

In Zoey Martinson's award-winning drama, produced by the Smoke & Mirrors Collaborative, Daweti (Martinson), dying of AIDS in a shack in Soweto, is visited by her old college friend, Thabo (Yusef Miller), who wants to help her build a better house with the wood the government has supplied for that purpose. Daweti, though, who is weak and starving, is using the wood to build her own coffin, right under the nose of the white government inspector (Jonathan David Martin). Martinson's expertly acted, very dark drama, directed by Awoye Timpo, is made even more deep and powerful by short musical interludes, in which the three actors sing gorgeous, heartbreaking a cappella songs and dance. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

**Solitary Light**

In 1911, a hundred and forty-six people died in a fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, in the Village. Axis Theatre Company revisits the tragic event with a chamber opera by the artistic director, Randy Sharp, and the former Blondie guitarist Paul Carbonara, part of the Theater:Village festival, which is "celebrating the diversity of America." There wasn't much diversity among the Italian and Jewish women who burned, choked, and fell to their deaths, and this wispy hour-long work, which centers on a man and his relationship with two women, one a factory seamstress, is hardly celebratory. But it is lyrical and gentle. Shows at Axis often tend toward the overwrought, but this piece, directed by Sharp, is almost

painfully restrained. More fully delineated characters and less repetition wouldn't hurt, but the clear, unforced singing, accompanied by a quartet of musicians, is affecting. (1 Sheridan Sq. 212-352-3101.)

**This Is Our Youth**

Anna D. Shapiro directs a revival of Kenneth Lonergan's 1996 drama. Dennis Ziegler (the outstanding and alluring Kieran Culkin) works as a bike messenger and supplements his income by dealing pot. One person Dennis can always feel superior to is his friend Warren (the beautiful and beautifully cast Michael Cera), who shows up at Dennis's apartment with a bag full of cash he stole from his dad. Jessica (Tavi Gevinson, who brings a nice improvisatory vibe to the proceedings) turns up to hang out with Warren, and the two mess around a little before taking off for a hotel. But when Jessica asks about Warren's sister—who was beaten to death by her boyfriend (Warren's dad beats him, too)—Warren shuts her down. Transferred to the Cort's proscenium stage, after a run at Chicago's Steppenwolf, "This Is Our Youth" has lost some of its intimacy. The actors have to compensate for the size of the space, their voices more strained, their manner more graphic and frenetic. The current staging competes, at times, with Lonergan's dialogue, but Culkin, Cera, and Gevinson don't allow the moments that matter to be drowned out by the demands of Broadway. (Reviewed in our issue of 9/22/14.) (Cort, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

**To the Bone**

Olga (Lisa Ramirez, the playwright), from Salvador, works with Reina (Annie Henk), from Honduras, and Juana (Lisa Fernandez), from Guatemala, at the local chicken factory; she has a green card, and they don't. The factory is run by a sleazy white guy (Haynes Thigpen), and the work is backbreaking, so Olga is furious when Reina encourages her innocent niece Carmen (Xochitl Romero), fresh from a traumatic crossing into America, to get a job there. This creates tension at Olga's already stressful home, where all these women live crammed together. Under the direction of Lisa Peterson, the acting in Ramirez's drama is almost flawless, and delightfully original; one moment the actors are wonderfully relaxed and bickering in the most natural way, and the next it's as if they were cogs in a machine, brushing their teeth, eating, and working in unison, all their movements highly choreographed. Ramirez and Paola Lazaro-Munoz—as Olga's hilarious twenty-year-old daughter, who has a crush on Carmen—steal the show. (Cherry Lane, 38 Commerce St. 866-811-4111.)



# DANCE

## New York City Ballet

After unveiling three new works on opening night, the company kicks off a weeklong run of ballets by its founding choreographer and lodestar, George Balanchine. As in recent seasons, many of the programs are thematic: all-Tchaikovsky followed by all-Stravinsky. The wisdom of such curation is debatable—there is such a thing as too much Tchaikovsky—and yet who can resist a program that includes both the soulful “Serenade,” Balanchine’s first American work, and the delicate “Mozartiana,” one of his last? For more variety, try the triple bill that combines the melodious “Donizetti Variations,” the dreamlike “La Sonnambula,” and the majestic “Firebird.” • Sept. 24 and Sept. 30 at 7:30 and Sept. 28 at 3, all-Tchaikovsky: “Serenade,” “Mozartiana,” “Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux,” and “Tchaikovsky Suite No. 3.” • Sept. 25 at 7:30 and Sept. 27 at 8, all-Stravinsky: “Apollo,” “Monumentum pro Gesualdo,” “Movements for Piano and Orchestra,” “Duo Concertant,” and “Agon.” • Sept. 26 at 8 and Sept. 27 at 2: “Donizetti Variations,” “La Sonnambula,” and “Firebird.” (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-496-0600. Through Oct. 19.)

## Liz Lerman

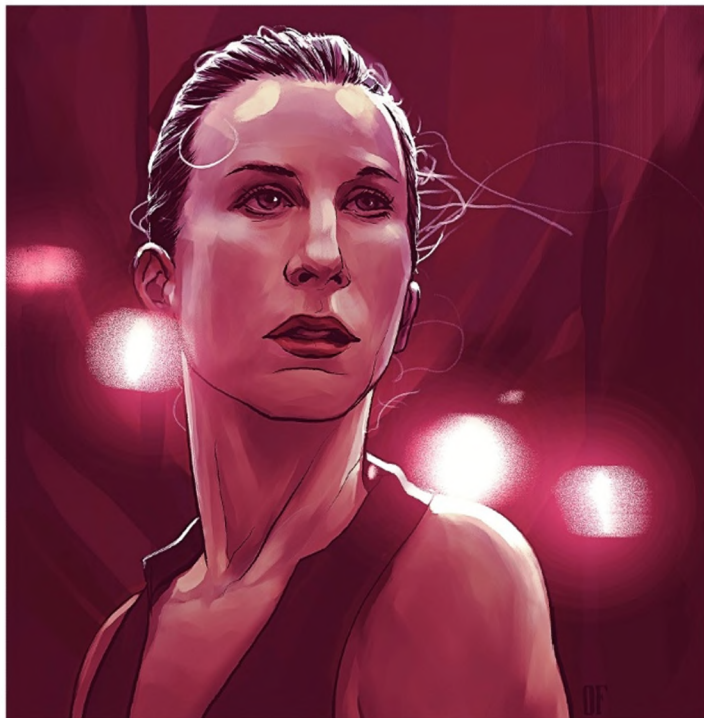
Prone to addressing subjects as ambitious as the human genome, Lerman now tackles the traumatic effects of war, both on soldiers and on the doctors and nurses who treat them. With a cast of actor-dancers that includes a young Navy veteran who lost a leg in action, the multimedia “Healing Wars” swings between the Civil War and the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, telling stories through text and dance, drawing parallels. (Alexander Kasser Theatre, 1 Normal Ave., Montclair, N.J. 973-655-5112. Sept. 25-26 at 7:30 and Sept. 27 at 8.)

## Suzanne Bocanegra

In “Little Dot,” Bocanegra, an artist known for installations that apply ideas from two-dimensional visual art to performance, tries for a balletic equivalent of the pointillist painting methods of Georges Seurat. Fourteen ballerinas from New York Theatre Ballet, each wearing pointe shoes dyed one of the fourteen different colors Seurat used in his 1890 painting “Young Woman Powdering Herself,” stab the stage as Seurat once dabbed a canvas. This happens over the course of twelve hours, and spectators are welcome to come and go. (Danspace Project, St. Mark’s Church In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 866-811-4111. Sept. 27 from 11 A.M. to 11 P.M.)

## Ivana Müller

Part of the “Crossing the Line” festival, “We Are Still Watching” is a work with no spectators. For one hour, all ticket holders, each given a script and a role, read through a text about people waiting for a play to start who gradually realize that they are the play. Roles are shuffled; suspicions and hopes are voiced; political implications are suggested. What might happen beyond what’s on the page? (New York Live Arts, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Sept. 30 at 8. Through Oct. 3.)



## RESTLESS CREATURE

*A ballerina’s farewell.*

**ON OCT. 18, WENDY WHELAN**, the senior ballerina of New York City Ballet, will give her last performance with the company. When she joined the troupe, in 1984, she was superbly skilled but also very severe. Thin, businesslike: no twinkling. And at that time City Ballet was headed into a terrible period. Balanchine had just died. By the nineties, the dancers seemed to be almost on their own. Whelan was cast in a bizarrely wide repertory, from Suzanne Farrell’s moon-goddess roles to Heather Watts’s nervous-breakdown roles. She did some of them wonderfully. As the homicidal Novice in Jerome Robbins’s “Cage,” she was the best I ever saw. But in more regal roles she often seemed covered, held back. For a while, she declined to perform the Sugarplum Fairy in Balanchine’s “Nutcracker.” Later, she told an interviewer that she didn’t feel pretty enough.

Then something changed. Around the age of thirty, she started dancing with greater sweep and relaxation. In 2001, Christopher Wheeldon, the young Englishman who at that time became N.Y.C.B.’s resident choreographer, began creating for her a series of roles that combined her natural reticence with a new freedom, even abandon, and she transferred this ease to the rest of her repertory. In her words, “I... learned to detach my claws from my dancing.”

Everyone talks about how hard it is to be a ballet dancer: the hours, the injuries, the no ice cream. But the toughest thing is the career span. For purely physical reasons, the average ballet dancer goes professional at around age eighteen and then is forced to retire at about forty. So by the time the dancer has gained some wisdom and self-possession, she is being hustled off the stage.

Whelan, though she is forty-seven, doesn’t pretend she’s ready to stop dancing. “I have something more interesting to say than I did when I was twenty-five,” she has protested. Maybe she’ll get to say it—she’s putting together duet programs for touring.

—Joan Acocella



#### MUSEUMS SHORT LIST

##### METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

"Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age." Through Jan. 4.

##### MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

"Christopher Williams: The Production Line of Happiness." Through Nov. 2.

##### GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

"Kandinsky Before Abstraction, 1901-1911." Through March 29.

##### WHITNEY MUSEUM

"Jeff Koons: A Retrospective." Through Oct. 19.

##### BROOKLYN MUSEUM

"Killer Heels: The Art of the High-Heeled Shoe." Through Feb. 15.

##### AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

"Spiders Alive!" Through Nov. 2.

##### ASIA SOCIETY

"Nam June Paik: Becoming Robot." Through Jan. 4.

##### FRICK COLLECTION

"Men in Armor: El Greco and Pulzone Face to Face." Through Oct. 26.

##### INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY

"Sebastião Salgado: Genesis." Through Jan. 11.

##### JEWISH MUSEUM

"From the Margins: Lee Krasner / Norman Lewis, 1945-1952." Through Feb. 1.

##### MORGAN LIBRARY AND MUSEUM

"Cy Twombly: Treatise on the Veil." Opens Sept. 26.

##### NEW MUSEUM

"Here and Elsewhere." Through Sept. 28.

##### NEW-YORK HISTORICAL SOCIETY

"Chinese American: Exclusion/Inclusion." Opens Sept. 26.

##### NOGUCHI MUSEUM

"Isamu Noguchi, Patient Holder: Designing the World of Tomorrow." Through Jan. 4.

##### STUDIO MUSEUM IN HARLEM

"Charles Gaines: Gridwork, 1974-1989." Through Oct. 26.

#### MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

##### American Folk Art Museum

"Ralph Fasanella / Willem van Genk"

Two shows of extraordinary outsider artists who packed their works with minute detail will exhaust your powers of attention. Let them! Ralph Fasanella, a Brooklyn labor organizer who died in 1997, at the age of eighty-three, was a gifted colorist, painting rousing celebrations of working-class life and scathing satires of upper-class villainy. Willem van Genk, a Dutchman who suffered from mental illness and died in 2005, at seventy-eight, drew (wonderfully well), collaged, and sculpted fantastic cityscapes with exact references to actual cities, including New York, and to planes, trains, and other means of staying in motion. (He also collected long raincoats—thirteen are on view—which related to his memories of having been beaten by Gestapo agents during the Second World War.) Coincidentally, both artists idealized the Soviet Union, whose collapse Fasanella elegized in his astonishing last painting, a grand aporia of broken dreams. Both vivify modern times like nobody else. They charm and stun. Through Dec. 1.

#### GALLERIES—UPTOWN

##### Dominik Lang

This young sculptor from Prague has won rapid acclaim for his melancholy installations, freighted with historical and personal associations (including the art of his own father). But he plays things too safe in his New York debut, an arrangement of twenty tables, covered with plaster or cement, sometimes inches thick. Lang's best work ricochets against Communist iconography and familial legacies, but these are stubborn sculptures, not unappealing, exactly, but mute. Through Oct. 29. (Czech Center, 321 E. 73rd St. 646-422-3399.)

##### Saul Steinberg

A two-part centenary exhibition of the Romanian-born artist features not only his beloved illustrations but also lesser-known collages, sculptures, and photographic works. Wooden assemblages, including one replicating his own desk, collapse art and life into one, a legacy of Dada that can also be seen in Steinberg's doctored photographs, such as the collage of a poppy-seed challah on wheels. Instead of his indelible "View of the World from Ninth Avenue," which graced a 1976 cover of this magazine and has adorned a thousand doctors' offices since, the show offers a related drawing, looking west from Park Avenue and incorporating, before the abbreviated American continent, a Central Park bulging with mountains. One could do without the wall texts proclaiming his greatness—it was never in doubt.

Through Oct. 18. (Pace, 32 E. 57th St. 212-421-3292.)

#### GALLERIES—CHELSEA

##### James Bishop

In 1957, the under-known American abstract painter, now eighty-seven, took his budding emulation of Abstract Expressionism to France, where he stayed. He became a quirky ally of the French formalist movement Support/Surface, creating nearly monochrome geometries with layered veils of brooding color. Since 1986, he has worked only on paper, at small scale. The held-breath delicacy of his pictures—you should give them time—bespeaks buried intensities of melancholy and ardor. He is the kind of artist (Giorgio Morandi comes to mind) whose idiosyncrasy feels like a personal secret to each of his admirers, who find it hard to explain even to one another. Through Oct. 25. (Zwirner, 537 W. 20th St. 212-517-8677.)

##### Dan Graham

The gallery inaugurates its elegant new ground-floor quarters, to the mutual advantage of the space and the artist, with old and new works by the architecturally and musically minded American artist. Photographs recording what happened to eleven sugar cubes that Graham dropped into ocean surf in 1970 recall a post-minimalist era of experimental manias. Documentation of Graham's subsequent glass pavilions accompanies a new installation, "Design for Showing Rock Videos." Transparent and reflective curved walls, framed in stainless steel, create cushioned nooks for taped performances of hardcore, post-punk, and No Wave bands in the seventies and eighties. The work affords the unhurried visitor a high-style chance to raft out. Through Oct. 4. (Greene Naftali, 508 W. 26th St. 212-463-7770.)

##### Jennifer Wynne Reeves

Reeves, who died of cancer in June, at the age of fifty-one, was a painter, a collagist, a poet, a popular Facebook diarist, and an unquenchable free spirit. This show of small works registers the world's loss. They are whimsical in theme but strong in technique, deploying paint both flatly and in sculpted impasto, as well as the occasional button, hand-lettered text, or landscape photograph. Reeves's eloquence with color commands respect. From work to work, you sense a racing mind hitting on points of expression like a stone skipping across deep waters. Through Oct. 11. (Bravin Lee, 526 W. 26th St. 212-462-4404.)

#### "Out of 10th Street Into the 60s"

The tireless art historian Irving Sandler, an amanuensis of the Artists Club in the nineteen-fifties, has cu-

rated a succinct show of works from the sixties by seven artist friends of the downtown scene—Ronald Bladen, Lois Dodd, Mark di Suvero, Al Held, Alex Katz, Philip Pearlstein, George Sugarman—and the evergreen Alice Neel. With variously sharp, cool styles—abstractly figurative, figuratively abstract—these artists shrugged off the emotiveness of Abstract Expressionism while hewing to its individualist ethos. The ensemble evokes the passionate banter of a bygone loft party where everyone was collegial, competitive, and alarmingly young. Through Oct. 11. (Howard, 525 W. 26th St. 212-695-0164.)

#### GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

##### Caleb Charland

For photographers resisting the domination of digital, the darkroom offers an outlet for hands-on experimentation. Dispensing with a camera, Charland drips red candle wax onto sheets of photosensitive paper. The abstract results, in a range of slate and silvery grays, suggest moonscapes, raindrops, and earthworks. Several look as if a tiny motorcycle had burned rubber across the surface of the paper, searing right through it in places and leaving a trail of scorched debris. Through Oct. 26. (Wolf, 70 Orchard St. 212-925-0025.)

##### Adam Helms

The artist's fascination with pop-culture and digital effluvia doesn't undercut the sensitivity of his hand, and the elegant execution of his new paintings on paper only heightens their disturbing effect. His gangsters and *guerrilleros* are often captured mid-gesture, as if in a film still, and many of them have a strange, bulbous nose protruding from their face. The influence of Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, and other masters of abstraction is clear, but Helms places his art in an even deeper lineage of fatalism and social decay via an unexpected final work: a large print of the frontispiece of Hobbes's "Leviathan," stained blood red. Through Oct. 5. (Boesky East, 20 Clinton St. 212-680-9889.)

##### Ryan McGinley

With more than seven hundred and fifty adhesive-backed pictures of naked twentysomethings blanketing the gallery's walls and ceiling, McGinley's new site-specific piece is both a show and a stunt. The pictures were taken against solid, bright backdrops, giving the work a nice jolt of color, and, while very few stand out on their own, together they're hard to resist. McGinley can still set off sparks with his subjects and raise the heat in a room, but once you get over the spectacle, there's a bit of a letdown. Through Oct. 12. (Team, 83 Grand St. 212-279-9219.)

# ABOVE & BEYOND

## Chile Pepper Festival

As the city begins to cool, Brooklyn Botanic Garden turns up the heat, becoming a fiery paradise for lovers of the burn. The garden has more than fifteen varieties of chile peppers growing on-site, and local farmers are exhibiting their own fresh peppers. Purveyors of salsa, kimchi, hot sauce, Thai food, pickles, and horseradish will offer samples of their eye-watering concoctions. Sweets and other delights have not been overlooked: there'll be chile-spiced chocolate from exactly fourteen different chocolatiers, along with music in a number of genres, such as Afro-soul from Ghana, Cajun dancehall, and Colombian cumbia. (990 Washington Ave. 718-623-7200. Sept. 27 from 11 to 6.)

## Dumbo Arts Festival

This free public event includes more than four hundred artists showing their work, in a hundred different studios, at numerous galleries, on several stages, and in the neighborhood's striking waterfront parks. Not all the works, though, are staying in one place. Thomas Stevenson's travelling dance party features a street-vender cart, which, when opened, becomes a dance club on wheels, disco ball and all. The BackPack Gallery project consists of miniature galleries, complete with lights, a comment book, artist information, and more. Two members of the Big Head Brigade, an art collective that builds giant wearable heads and performs in them, will be roaming the streets posing as New York's art-critic power couple, Jerry Saltz, of *New York Magazine*, and Roberta Smith, of the *Times*, giving a thumbs-up to artists along the way. There's also a "Yoga-Performance Art Mash-Up" class, an interactive word-search puzzle containing all the words ever used by Jorge Luis Borges, an urban-farming sculptural interpretation of a Dr. Seuss tree, and more. (dumboartsfestival.com. Sept. 26-28.)

## AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

In an age when most photographs are taken on the fly, with a phone, the images being auctioned off this week appear as carefully crafted as Old Master paintings. Take Imogen Cunningham's "Amphitheatre (Mills College)," part of **Sotheby's** Sept. 30 sale: its cool lines and crisp shadows have more in common with Agnes Martin's geometries than with the images of instant gratification that abound on social media. The sale also includes classic pieces by Steichen and Adams, Americana by Robert Frank, and more recent work. It is preceded on Sept. 24 by a "Contemporary Curated" auction, a selection of contemporary art which includes a large group of pieces by West Coast artists—Ruscha, Baldessari, etc.—from the collection of the late L.A. gallerist Joni Gordon. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) • As long as there have been photographs, there have been pictures of beautiful women in dishabille, a large number of which seem to have found their way into the collection of Don Sanders, of Houston, Texas. **Christie's** presents "Triple XXX," a selection of work from his collection, among them a shot of Naomi Campbell pouring milk over herself

for David LaChapelle and a diptych by Chuck Close in which Kate Moss is divided neatly in half, crosswise. The Sanders auction comes at the end of a day devoted to photographs (Sept. 29); an earlier sale, of works from the collection of Robert Forbes, includes an albumen print of the Liddell sisters (Alice and Lorina) in full Chinese regalia, taken by Lewis Carroll. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.)

## READINGS AND TALKS

### Fales Library

Jennifer Cognard-Black and Melissa Goldthwaite, the editors of "Books That Cook," an inventive survey of American cookbooks from the seven-teen-hundreds to the present, join Marion Nestle, Caroline Grant, Ravi Shankar, and other contributors to the volume, which is subtitled "The Making of a Literary Meal." (Fales Library, New York University, 70 Washington Sq. S., third fl. 212-992-9991. Sept. 25 at 6.)

### Barnes & Noble

Stephin Merritt, a singer-songwriter and the leader of the band Magnetic Fields, discusses his first book, "101 Two-Letter Words." He'll be joined by Roz Chast, its illustrator, and Bill Kartalopoulos, the editor of "Best American Comics." (33 E. 17th St. 212-253-0810. Sept. 29 at 7.)

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# CLASSICAL MUSIC

## OPERA

### Metropolitan Opera

At this time of Caledonian crisis, the Scottish play seems apropos: Verdi's "**Macbeth**," a taut and potent treatment of Shakespeare's original, has been well served for two seasons by Adrian Noble's production, which updates the setting to early-twentieth-century Britain. The Slavic tinge of previous casting has been renewed for this revival, with Željko Lučić and Anna Netrebko taking the roles of the murderous lead couple; Joseph Calleja and René Pape complete the starry cast, with the formidable Fabio Luisi conducting. (Sept. 24 at 7:30 and Sept. 27 at 1.) • **Also playing:** The director Richard Eyre, who transferred "*Carmen*" to the Spanish Civil War years of the nineteen-thirties, now brings a similar treatment to "**Le Nozze di Figaro**," Mozart and Da Ponte's sublime eighteenth-century comedy of manners, with Jean Renoir's film "*The Rules of the Game*" as an added influence. Ildar Abdrazakov, last season's superb Prince Igor, takes the title role, with Amanda Majeski, Marlis Petersen, Isabel Leonard, and Peter Mattei completing the cast; James Levine. (Sept. 25 at 7:30 and Sept. 27 at 8.) • "**La Bohème**," with Ekaterina Scherbachenko, Mytò Papatanasu, Bryan Hymel, and Quinn Kelsey; Riccardo Frizza. (Sept. 26 and Sept. 29 at 7:30.) • A revival of Eyre's production of Bizet's "**Carmen**" features Anita Rachvelishvili, Aleksandrs Antonenko, Anita Hartig, and Massimo Cavalletti in the principal roles; Pablo Heras-Casado, a brilliant young Spanish conductor who is already delivering on his potential, is in the pit. (Sept. 30 at 7:30.) • The honor of a solo recital on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House, once extraordinarily rare, has been given out more regularly in the Peter Gelb era. Its next recipient is unquestionably worth the accolade: **René Pape**, opera's reigning basso, who, taking the occasion seriously, will offer songs and cycles by Beethoven (the "*Gellert-Lieder*," Op. 48), Dvořák, Quilter, and Mussorgsky ("*Songs and Dances of Death*"), accompanied by Camillo Radicke. (Sept. 28 at 4.) (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

## Beth Morrison Projects:

### "The Difficulty of Crossing a Field"

Ambrose Bierce's 1888 short story would seem to have an unlikely story line for an opera: an antebellum slave owner disappears into thin air, and his family and slaves wonder why. But then David Lang, in such works as "*The Little Match Girl Passion*," has been remaking opera for some time. Bob McGrath, of Ridge Theatre, directs this concert production, a mixture of opera, chamber music, and spoken theatre, with a cast that features the singers Christopher Burchett, Beverly O'Regan Thiele, and Laquita Mitchell and the actor Jay O. Sanders. (Roulette,

509 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn. roulette.org. Sept. 28 at 7:30.)

## ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

### New York Philharmonic

After the "soft" opening of Film Week at the Philharmonic, Alan Gilbert launches the classical subscription season with a program that reflects both his passionate commitment to new music and the orchestra's proud Mahler tradition. Mahler's buoyant Symphony No. 1 in D Major will be preceded by the U.S. premiere of the Clarinet Concerto by Unsuk Chin, a vividly imaginative Korean composer who has long been a major figure in Europe; the dazzling Kari Kriikku is the soloist. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656. Sept. 23 and Sept. 30 at 7:30, Sept. 26 at 11 A.M., and Sept. 27 at 8.)

### Clarion Orchestra: "The Four Seasons"

Decades ago, this organization's founder, Newell Jenkins, helped bring many of Vivaldi's masterworks to light after centuries of neglect. The current director, Steven Fox, continues the tradition, conducting the composer's most beloved work (among other pieces), with the violinists Cynthia Roberts and Owen Dalby as featured soloists. (Church of St. Thomas More, 65 E. 89th St. clarionsociety.org. Sept. 30 at 8.)

## RECITALS

### Bargemusic: Chiara String Quartet

This always impressive young ensemble has been going the extra mile of late, performing great chunks of the standard repertory from memory. Its next project is the complete Bartók quartets, works that have been shadowed a bit in recent years by those of Shostakovich. The first installment takes place this week at the floating chamber-music series, with the Quartets Nos. 2, 4, and 6. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. Sept. 26 at 8. For tickets and full schedule, see bargemusic.org.)

### House of Time

The early-music quintet, which features faculty members from the historical-performance programs of Juilliard and the Curtis Institute (such as the keyboardist Avi Stein), appears at one of its favorite venues, Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, for a program of French masterworks by Couperin ("*L'Apothéose de Lully*") and Leclair ("*Deuxième Récréation de Musique*"). (Central Park W. at 65th St. brownpapertickets.com. Sept. 25 at 7:30.)

### Le Poisson Rouge: Oliver Coates

Versatility is the watchword of this young cello virtuoso, who combines adventurous new-music projects with work as a principal player in several of Britain's leading orchestras. He joins Peter Zummo, the eminent American trombonist and musical experimentalist, and other musicians for an evening that includes music by Messiaen and Xenakis, an excerpt from Mica Levi's film score for "*Under the Skin*," and improvisations with Zummo. (158 Bleecker St. Iprnc.com. Sept. 29 at 7:30.)

### Ariel Quartet Beethoven Cycle

The acclaimed young Israeli string quartet begins a season-long Beethoven journey at SubCulture this week; first up are the Quartets in D Major, Op. 18, No. 3; in F Minor, Op. 95 ("*Serioso*"); and in F Major, Op. 135. (45 Bleecker St. subculturenewyork.com Sept. 30 at 7:30.)

# MOVIES



## NOW PLAYING

### Bird People

An artful experiment that only half works. Josh Charles (from "The Good Wife") plays an American high-tech executive from San Francisco whose commitment to his life lapses into inattention and disgust. Stopping in Paris on his way to a meeting in Dubai, he never leaves his hotel at the airport; instead, he blows off his business partners and then, in a long, acrimonious videoconference session, his wife (Radha Mitchell). At the same time, a depressed student who works in the hotel as a chambermaid (Anaïs Demoustier) gazes at birds and fondly admires their freedom. The director, Pascale Ferran, is adept at conveying the moods of silent dissociation that overcome people in the simultaneously connected and disconnected contemporary world. But the movie turns to airborne whimsy in a way that is technically amazing but bereft of meaning. Written by Ferran and Guillaume Bréaud. In English and French.—*David Denby* (In limited release.)

### Café Lumière

In the director Hou Hsiao-hsien's atmospheric drama, from 2003, Yoko (Yo Hitoto), a young Japanese woman with a curious yet reserved manner, returns home to her bohemian flat after an extended stay in Taiwan and rekindles old connections. Her studies—she has an interest in a Taiwanese composer who worked in Japan in the nineteen-thirties—lead her to a cluttered Tokyo bookstore and its proprietor, Hajime (Tadanobu Asano), a quizzical young man who spends his spare time making audio recordings of trains and train stations throughout the region. Their friendship remains tenuous, as does Yoko's relationship with her parents, to whom she reveals that she is pregnant. Although ever in motion, these people do very little: their lives are held in place by the weight of the past and the anticipation of the future. Hou's delicate images—including many of trains—are full of latent regret and expectation; the film's limp stillness is quietly thrilling. In Japanese.—*Richard Brody* (Museum of the Moving Image; Sept. 26.)

### Dames

In 1934, with F.D.R. safely in office, Warner Bros. set this Busby Berkeley backstage musical in the world of the rich—in order to mock them. The silly yet sour plot, about a family awaiting a ten-million-dollar gift from a wealthy cousin who is launching a moral crusade against New York's theatres—just as their daughter, unbeknownst to him, is planning her stage debut—turns on blackmail. But the movie belongs to Berkeley and his wondrous production numbers, which are all erotic fantasies. "The Girl at the Ironing Board," a washerwoman's dream of love at the clothesline, ends with a mass ravishing that will make you think twice about sending your underwear out to be laundered. "I Only Have Eyes for You" starts as a romantic subway symphony and turns into a spectacle of sexual monomania, with Ruby Keeler's face multiplying and filling the screen before giving way to the woman herself—whose skirt Berkeley's camera peers up to reveal a suggestive array of irises and ovals. The title number, a balletic day in the life of a showgirl, gives rise

to one of Berkeley's greatest visual inventions, a white background festooned with dancing girls' black-clad legs—which rhythmically open and close to yield up a flying wedge of pubic rapture, ending with a black hole—at the end of which is a dancer dressed in baby clothes. It suggests nothing less than "The Origin of the World."—*R.B.* (BAM Cinématek; Sept. 29.)

### The Disappearance of Eleanor Rigby: Them

High-toned and hollow, a movie without a center. Ned Benson, a first-time feature filmmaker, initially made two pictures about a happy marriage that falls apart after the death of the couple's baby boy—"Him," which presents the point of view of Conor (James McAvoy), and "Her," told from the point of view of Eleanor (Jessica Chastain). (The two movies will be made available on Oct. 10.) What we have now, in "Them," is an uneasy amalgam. It begins in reckless rapture, with young Conor and Eleanor dashing out of a restaurant without paying the bill. It then skips to a few years after the tragedy: Eleanor, who is suicidal, has retreated to her parents' house in Connecticut; Conor molders in the mostly empty Village bar that he has opened with his best friend

(Bill Hader). The dissolution of the marriage is never shown. What remains is knowing and allusive, but muffled—the earnestness is stilled by pauses and misgivings and occasionally made handsome with long tracking shots. Chastain's Eleanor has a skull-like stillness animated by signs of recognition that flicker when she sees someone she loves. But Chastain only half-alive is a great actress half-wasted. With Isabelle Huppert, as Eleanor's mother, holding a glass of wine as she makes bitter remarks, and William Hurt, who, as Eleanor's sensitive-shrink father, speaks so slowly that you want to applaud when he finishes a sentence.—*D.D.* (Reviewed in our issue of 9/15/14.) (In limited release.)

### The Equalizer

Robert McCall (Denzel Washington), a former black-ops guy, is now retired and living in Boston, where he reads Cervantes in an Edward Hopperish late-night café. He protects a forlorn young prostitute (Chloë Grace Moretz), and winds up taking on the Russian Mafia, killing its members by fist, pistol, automatic rifle, corkscrew, electrified water, garden tool, and glass shard. Washington operates with amused and amusing cool as this gravity-bound superhero, and Marton Csokas, as a sadistic crime boss, speaks with exquisite diction, in the tradition of Hollywood's most cultivated swine. Csokas also has what appears to be the city of Volgograd (or is it Ulyanovsk?) tattooed on his chest and shoulders. The director, Antoine Fuqua, relies on small details, which anchor the vigilante-as-saint myth in at least a minimal degree of reality. Richard Wenk wrote the screenplay, which is based on the TV series from the eighties. Expect many sequels.—*D.D.* (In wide release.)

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**OPENING****THE EQUALIZER**

Reviewed in Now Playing. Opening Sept. 26. (In wide release.)

**JIMI: ALL IS BY MY SIDE**

Reviewed in Now Playing. Opening Sept. 26. (In limited release.)

**PRIDE**

Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Sept. 26. (In limited release.)

**THE TWO FACES OF JANUARY**

A thriller, adapted from a novel by Patricia Highsmith, about three grifters who are suspects in the murder of a detective. Directed by Hossein Amini; starring Viggo Mortensen, Kirsten Dunst, and Oscar Isaac. Opening Sept. 26. (In limited release.)

**REVIVALS AND FESTIVALS**

*Titles in bold are reviewed.*

**BAM CINÉMA TEK**

"Nonesuch Records on Film." Sept. 25 at 7:30: "The Cabinet of Dr. Ramirez" (1991, Peter Sellers), introduced by the director. • "Retro Metro." Sept. 26 at 3, 5, 7:30, and 9:45: "The Warriors." • Sept. 28 at 2 and 7: "The Taking of Pelham One Two Three" (1974, Joseph Sargent). • Sept. 29 at 7 and 9:30: "Dames." • Sept. 30 at 8: "Just Another Girl on the I.R.T." (1992, Leslie Harris).

**FILM FORUM**

"Tennessee Williams on Film." Sept. 26 at 12:30, 3, 5:30, and 8 and Sept. 27 at 12:30, 5:30, and 8: "A Streetcar Named

**Goodbye to Language**

Shooting with largely handheld, lightweight, homemade 3-D video equipment, Jean-Luc Godard realizes, at the age of eighty-three, an ideal that he has pursued for forty years: sketch-like images, made casually and spontaneously, that are endowed with the power and grandeur of studio-era cinematography. The idea that they reveal is the essential one in Godard's later work—the romantic implications of political philosophy and the history of cinema—and it's brought to life in a collage of scenes about two couples in Switzerland, near Lake Geneva. One couple confronts the political crises of twentieth-century Europe amid espionage and violence. The other couple faces erotic conflicts that play out against a backdrop of clips from classic movies. And then there's a dog, Roxy Méville, who wanders a glorious landscape that Godard's methods raise to painterly glory (a river in which Roxy frolics is a late Monet in motion). His 3-D technique is the first advance in deep-focus camerawork since the heyday of Orson Welles; it lends the settings a sumptuous intimacy as it restores the astonishment of sheer perception to the art of the cinema. A concluding flourish—with Godard himself, a painter in his youth, giving a young artist lessons in watercolor—looks tenderly into the future.—*R.B.* (Film Society of Lincoln Center; Sept. 27 and Oct 1.)

**Guardians of the Galaxy**

Marvel Studios strikes gold again with this zippy superhero treat. The plot's MacGuffin is a mysterious orb that the newly formed team of Guardians

(played by a ragtag group of actors, augmented by C.G.I. effects) must keep out of the hands of an evil, universe-threatening maniac. The film, directed and co-written by James Gunn, is joyfully irreverent. Gunn lends his underachiever superheroes a geeky, comic camaraderie, and he brings a spry touch to the wacky intergalactic adventure. Chris Pratt, overflowing with charisma, plays the leader of the pack of misfits, and his blissed-out space cowboy (with a love for seventies music) is so full of good will that he buoy's the film and its requisite whizbang special effects. With Zoe Saldana, Dave Bautista, and Lee Pace, and featuring on-the-button voice work by Bradley Cooper, as a gun-toting raccoon, and Vin Diesel, as a sentient walking tree called, unforgettably, Groot.—*Bruce Diones* (In wide release.)

**Hill of Freedom**

In this slender masterpiece, the South Korean director Hong Sang-soo lends a symphonic density to a brisk romantic comedy. Kwon, a woman with a suitcase, picks up a bundle of letters at the reception desk of an office in Seoul. But she drops the papers and gathers them out of sequence, which is how Hong depicts the events that they relate. They're written by Mori, a Japanese man who narrates the story of his affair with Youngsun, a café waitress whose dog he rescued. Meanwhile, the socially awkward Mori returns to Seoul in search of Kwon, and Hong intertwines his oddball adventures with new acquaintances and episodes from his recent past, with and without Kwon. With modest means and a limited field of action, Hong achieves a complexity akin to the grand historical meditations of Alain Resnais; steering clear of explicit politics, he conjures revealing attitudes through reverberant—and often comical—details. In English and Korean.—*R.B.* (Film Society of Lincoln Center; Sept. 30.)

**If I Stay**

Mia (Chloë Grace Moretz), a promising cellist, fresh from an audition for Juilliard, is in a car wreck on an icy road, together with her father (Joshua Leonard), her mother (Mireille Enos), and her brother (Jakob Davies). As Mia teeters on the brink of death, her spirit (which remains nicely dressed) watches events at the hospital and reflects on the times preceding the crash—in particular, on the love that bloomed between her and a brooding rocker named Adam (Jamie Blackley). R. J. Cutler's film, adapted by Shauna Cross from the young-adult novel by Gayle Forman, is decorous to behold and unerringly doomy in tone, as its target audience demands. It's also in no hurry whatever; the title refers to Mia's fraught decision—should she cling to existence or just give up?—and, well before the end, even

loyal viewers will be begging her to hurry up and choose.—*Anthony Lane* (9/8/14) (In wide release.)

**Jimi: All Is by My Side**

Despite the narrow scope of this biographical drama—which focusses on Jimi Hendrix's prelude to fame, in 1966-67—the writer and director, John Ridley, conveys Hendrix's genius with a deep range of undertones (and possibly an excess of fiction). André Benjamin, a.k.a. André 3000, of Outkast, brings a wry and pensive presence to the role of Hendrix, powerfully conjuring a musician distracted by his inspirations as the world spins around him. The story is sparked by two young British women—Linda Keith (Imogen Poots), a socialite who meets him in New York and coaxes him to London and into the limelight, and Kathy Etchingham (Hayley Atwell), a d.j. and hairdresser with whom he shares fun times in London. (He's also depicted beating her bloody in a jealous rage, which, according to the real-life Etchingham, never happened.) Then a third woman, Ida (Ruth Negga), a black activist, tries to lure him into nationalist politics. (Ida is a fictional, or perhaps fictionalized, character.) Most of the action occurs below the surface—genius giving birth to ideas, ambition crystallizing into action—and, at times, Ridley's direction evokes the inner life with subtle invention. Simple dialogue scenes sparkle with clever twists, including out-of-synch visual asides and conspicuously concentrated long takes. Only disputed events detract from the movie's understated delights.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

**Last Days in Vietnam**

The director Rory Kennedy's documentary reconstructs, with abundant historical footage and recent interviews, the tragic final days of the American presence in Vietnam. It focusses on the U.S. Ambassador in Saigon, Graham Martin, who, unwilling to admit that the game is over, refuses to begin an evacuation (he wouldn't even countenance the word); his decision strands hundreds of South Vietnamese citizens who may have otherwise got away. Yet a variety of American military personnel, defying orders, conspire to help the most vulnerable South Vietnamese escape. Who goes? Who has to stay? As a portrait of America in a moment of both idealism and betrayal, the movie is heartbreaking as well as inspiring. Among the many participants whom Kennedy interviews are Henry Kissinger, the Army colonel Stuart Herrington, and the C.I.A. analyst Frank Snepp.—*D.D.* (In limited release.)

**Love Is Strange**

Ira Sachs's film begins with a bedroom scene; to be exact, with a tranquil shot of naked legs and feet, stilled in slumber. That pretty much sums up the air of decorum in which the



Paul Thomas Anderson's "Inherent Vice," with Joaquin Phoenix and Maya Rudolph, and David Fincher's "Gone Girl," starring Rosamund Pike and Ben Affleck, are two of the high-profile movies premiering in this year's edition of the New York Film Festival. Many other notable entries are the work of filmmakers who haven't been showcased in the festival before, including "The Princess of France," the Argentinean director Matias Piñeiro's romance about young members of a Buenos Aires theatre troupe; "Heaven Knows What," a story of down-and-out youths in New York, by the brothers Josh and Benny Safdie; and "Misunderstood," Asia Argento's quasi-autobiographical coming-of-age drama.

tale, whose theme could have proved incendiary, unfolds. The limbs belong to a painter called Ben (John Lithgow) and a music teacher called George (Alfred Molina). They have been together for years and have grown used to the shape of each other's bodies and souls. We join them on the day of their wedding, and thus at the start of their troubles. George, once hitched, loses his job at a local Manhattan church, and with it goes the couple's ability to pay for their apartment; the rest of the movie becomes an awkward and very parochial quest for real estate. The newlyweds are forced to live apart: George with the gay cops downstairs and Ben with his nephew (Darren Burrows), whose wife (Marisa Tomei) and teen-age son (Charlie Tahan) are both moved and exasperated by his stay. The film becomes a meditation on the lure of the city and the inexorable crawl of time, and it inches close to dullness; what lends it spirit is the performances, both major and minor, and Sachs's determination to dramatize same-sex love not as groundbreaking but as securely rooted—rent control and all—in common ground.—*A.L.* (8/25/14) (In limited release.)

#### Lucy

The director Luc Besson grafts a visionary science-fiction story onto a bloody pulp-fiction framework. Scarlett Johansson plays the title role of an American student in Taipei who is kidnapped and forced to become a mule to transport a strange new drug. A pouch of it bursts in her body, and the substance ramps up the percentage of brain space that she can tap into. Her new powers aren't merely intellectual but also telepathic. Lucy travels to Paris to consult a neuroscientist (Morgan Freeman) and to thwart her kidnappers. The story's metaphysical shift is Besson's license to thrill; Lucy is a walking machine of special effects, and the director delights in her ability to pin opponents to the ceiling and empty their gun cartridges from across the room. But he also visits territory covered previously in films by Terrence Malick, contriving fantastic images that delve into the molecular and range into the cosmic in order to conjure the seemingly supernatural scope of Lucy's transformation. Her effortless, mighty control over time and matter leaps as far into the wondrous as it does into the absurd; Besson's visions

are exhilarating and imaginative, goofy and bombastic.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

#### Silence of the Sea

This audacious independent-film production, from 1947, was an auspicious directorial debut. Shooting with no permits and virtually no money, Jean-Pierre Melville adapted the most famous novel of the French Resistance without the approval of its author, Vercors (who later granted it), and, in the process, revealed the atrocities of the recent past while also foreseeing a surprising future. The unnamed narrator is an elderly French man (Jean-Marie Robain) who recalls his wartime seclusion with his grown niece (Nicole Stéphane) in their small rural house. In 1941, Werner von Ebrennac (Howard Vernon), an officer with the German Occupation forces, is billeted with them, and they receive him with a cold, patriotic silence. Von Ebrennac, a composer in civilian life, occupies their evenings unbidden, taking a place beside the fire and delivering noble monologues about Franco-German unity. But, on a trip to Paris, he is disabused of his idealism. A furious and jolting flashback involving the

Desire." The 8 P.M. screening on Sept. 26 will be introduced by Williams's biographer John Lahr, of this magazine. • Sept. 28 at 1:10, 5:40, and 8 and Sept. 29 at 1:10, 3:25, 5:40, and 8: "Baby Doll" (1956, Elia Kazan). The 8 P.M. screening on Sept. 29 will be introduced by the film's star, Carroll Baker.

#### FRENCH INSTITUTE ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE

The films of Alain Resnais. Sept. 30 at 4 and 7:30: "Je T'Aime, Je T'Aime" (1968).

#### FILM SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER

The New York Film Festival: Main Slate. Sept. 26 at 6, 9, and 9:15: "Gone Girl" (2014, David Fincher). • Sept. 27 at noon and Sept. 29 at 7: "Misunderstood" (2014, Asia Argento). • Sept. 27 at 3 and Sept. 28 at 12:15: "La Sapienza" (2014, Eugène Green). • Sept. 27 at 9 and Sept. 28 at 3: "Maps to the Stars" (2014, David Cronenberg). • Sept. 27 and Oct. 1 at 9: "Goodbye to Language." • Sept. 28 at 9 and Sept. 29 at 6: "Whiplash" (2014,

Damien Chazelle). • Sept. 29 at 8:45 and Sept. 30 at 3: "Two Shots Fired" (2014, Martin Rejtman). • Sept. 30 at 6: "Hill of Freedom." • Sept. 30 at 8:30: "Saint Laurent" (2014, Bertrand Bonello). • The New York Film Festival: Documentaries. Sept. 27 at noon and Sept. 29 at 9: "Seymour: An Introduction" (2014, Ethan Hawke). • Sept. 28 at 9 and 9:30 and Sept. 29 at 3:30: "The 50 Year Argument" (2014, Martin Scorsese and David Tedeschi). • Sept. 30 at 6 and Oct. 1 at 9: "The Look of Silence" (2014, Joshua Oppenheimer). • The New York Film Festival: Revivals. Sept. 27 at 2:30: "Once Upon a Time in America" (1984, Sergio Leone).

#### IFC CENTER

"Celluloid Dreams." Sept. 24 at 8: "The Purple Rose of Cairo" (1985, Woody Allen), followed by a Q. & A. with Douglas C. Hart, the cinematographer Gordon Willis's longtime assistant cameraman.

#### MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

"Discovering Georgian Cinema, Part I: A Family Affair." Sept. 24 at 4 and Sept. 28 at 5: "Pirosmani" (1969, Giorgi Shengelaia). • "Gaumont Presents." Sept. 29 at 7: "Silence of the Sea," introduced by Gaumont's president, Nicolas Seydoux, and its C.E.O., Sidonie Dumas.

#### MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE

The films of Hou Hsiao-hsien. Sept. 26 at 7: "Café Lumière." • Sept. 28 at 4:30: "Flight of the Red Balloon" (2007). • Special event. Sept. 28 at 2:30: "Distant Voices, Still Lives," introduced by Michael Koresky, who will also sign copies of his book "Terence Davies."



#### FRONT ROW

More about notable movies featured in this year's New York Film Festival.



#### MOVIE OF THE WEEK

A video discussion of Irving Cummings's "Down Argentine Way," from 1940, in our digital edition and online.

gas chambers of Treblinka dispels his naïve self-delusion along with that of Melville's postwar French audience. In a masterstroke of cinematic bravado, the director seemingly breaks through the screen to address the audience with horror and outrage. In French.—*R.B.* (MOMA; Sept. 29.)

#### The Skeleton Twins

This melodrama of family troubles, directed by Craig Johnson, from a script that he co-wrote with Mark Heyman, is a formidable display of grimness by two primarily comic actors, Kristen Wiig and Bill Hader, in the roles of long-estranged fraternal twins, Maggie and Milo Dean. Milo, a failed actor in Los Angeles, survives a suicide attempt, and the official call to inform Maggie of this event interrupts her own effort at self-extinction. After a hospital-room reunion, she invites him to stay with her at the house she shares with her husband, Lance (Luke Wilson), in their home town in New Hampshire. There, the past emerges. Milo, who is gay, had a calamitous high-school affair with his English teacher, Rich (Ty Burrell), and seeks him out again; Maggie's affair with her scuba instructor (Boyd Holbrook) unearths her long-standing marital misery; their father's suicide still weighs heavily on them; and a modicum of healing and progress depends on recalling the good along with the bad. Like many of the best comedians, Hader and Wiig have a real flair for drama, but the rote plotting and the airtight story here give them no room to perform. The direction has no style, and the script has no perspective; the result is drama by number.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

#### A Streetcar Named Desire

Vivien Leigh gives one of those rare performances that can truly be said to evoke pity and terror. As Blanche DuBois, she looks and acts like a destroyed Dresden shepherdess. Blanche's plea "I don't want realism... I want magic!" is central to "Streetcar." When Marlon Brando, as the realist Stanley Kowalski, cuts through her pretensions and responds to her flirting with a direct sexual assault, the system of illusions that holds her together breaks down, and he is revealed as a man without compassion—both infant and brute. Elia Kazan's direction is often stagy, and the sets and the arrangement of actors are frequently too transparently "worked out," but who cares when you're looking at two of the greatest performances ever put on film and listening to some of the finest dialogue ever written by an American? When Leigh says "The Tarantula Arms!" or "It's Della Robbia blue," you know how good Tennessee Williams can be. He adapted his play himself, with additional adaptation work by Oscar Saul. Released in 1951.—*Pauline Kael* (Film Forum; Sept. 26-27.)

#### The Trip to Italy

In this hilarious sequel to their 2010 film, "The Trip," also directed by Michael Winterbottom, the great comics Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon have been given a tough assignment by the *Observer*—an all-expenses-paid journey through the most beautiful parts of Italy, where they are required to eat lavishly and stay in exquisite small hotels, all so that one or the other can write highbrow culinary drivel for the paper. As they amble through paradise, the two men take turns topping each other with impressions of famous movie stars. They aren't interested in anyone's soul; they see themselves as professionals in an exacting trade that requires getting Christian Bale's guttural whisper and Roger Moore's English-butter croon exactly right. This hedonistic jape is shot through with middle-aged melancholy and the fear of death. Both movies, it turns out, are about the impossibility—and the necessity—of male friendship.—*D.D.* (9/1/14) (In limited release.)

#### 20,000 Days on Earth

The Australian singer and songwriter Nick Cave, formerly the front man of the Bad Seeds, is both a dispenser of apocalyptic gloom and, on the sly, a natural prankster. (Maybe you have to be both in order to enjoy the British weather, as Cave now claims to do.) Hence this curious film by Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard, a shaggy-dog documentary, in which Cave, a most unreliable witness, guides us through a supposedly typical patch of his present life and muses on the sins and quirks of his past. Celebrity friends, including Ray Winstone and Kylie Minogue, converse with Cave in a car, and we also see him at the microphone, crooning and crying his grief of lamentation. Surprisingly, however, the more obviously staged the episode, the more the star reveals—as in his trawl through his personal archives or in the piecemeal therapeutic session during which he confronts a shrink (a real one: Darian Leader, who wrote a fine study of melancholia, and is thus the right man for this job). Hard-core Caveans will hang on their hero's every word and moan, but there is plenty here to divert the neutral viewer; as for any casting agents in search of the next Count Dracula, their work is surely done.—*Anthony Lane* (9/22/14) (In limited release.)

#### The Warriors

Walter Hill's spectacle takes its story from Xenophon's "Anabasis" and its style from the taste of the modern urban dispossessed—in neon signs, graffiti, and the thrill of gaudiness. The film enters into the spirit of urban-male tribalism and the feelings of kids who believe that they own the streets because they keep other kids out of them. In this vision, cops and kids are all there is, and the worst

crime is to be chicken. The movie is like visual rock, and it's bursting with energy. The action runs from night until dawn, and most of it is in crisp, bright Day-Glo colors against the terrifying New York blackness; the figures stand out like a jukebox in a dark bar. There's a night-blooming, psychedelic shine to the whole baroque movie. Released in 1979.—*P.K.* (BAM Cinémathèque; Sept. 26.)

#### Wetlands

The director David Wnendt's adaptation of the German writer Charlotte Roche's novel, about a teen-age girl with a taste for bodily fluids and an interest in sexual experimentation, stars Carla Juri as Helen Memel, whose efforts soon land her in the hospital. She cuts herself while shaving her anus; the wound, compounded by her hemorrhoids, requires surgery; while recuperating, she falls in love with her male nurse, Robin (Christoph Letzkowski). The fizzy and playful movie is filled with calculatedly provocative grossness, such as a feast of semen-spattered pizza, fun with the seats and the stuff of public toilets, and streams of blood and feces. Yet, for all its goopy physicality, the film is peculiarly sexless; the effluvia of intimacy takes the place of its psychic jolts, and Helen's faux liberation is just an adolescent version of mud pies. Her fearless self-mutilations come off as mere plot points in an absurdly simplistic family drama; the movie's apparent audacity isn't even skin deep. In German.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

#### The Zero Theorem

Once again, Terry Gilliam plunges into the maelstrom, only to find, to his merriment and dismay, that none of it makes any sense. In film after film, he lurches to a similar conclusion, and there is something both futile and heroic in that quest. This new variation on the theme involves Qohen Leth (Christoph Waltz), a bald and forlorn computer genius living in a derelict church. Beyond its doors, as so often with Gilliam, the city seems glaringly modern in some ways but broken and shabby in others; the same feels true of the grand corporation that employs Qohen on a ceaseless virtual quest for exactitude and meaning. He is helped and hindered in his work by a gaudily clad supervisor (David Thewlis), a vamp by the unlikely name of Bainsley (Mélanie Thierry), and a teen-age technician (Lucas Hedges), all of whom invade the narrative, repeatedly, without quite propelling it along. Gags, both visual and verbal, splutter like wet firecrackers, and there are cameos from Matt Damon and Tilda Swinton, but the story merely flirts with awe, and it toys with political fear; what once seemed oppressive, in Gilliam's "Brazil," has dwindled into the hectic.—*A.L.* (9/22/14) (In limited release.)



Pedro Cortes's father, at age two, in 1934; his uncle Juan José Cortes, seated on the left, his father, the guitarist himself, and Sabicas, in 1976; his cousin Fernanda Romero, a noted dancer, in 1959.

## SPANISH NIGHTS

*A local guitarist with deep Andalusian roots is keeping flamenco alive in the city.*

IN THE NINETEEN-SIXTIES, Burt Lancaster and Frank Sinatra were regulars at the Chateau Madrid, a midtown night club. The flamenco scene in New York was flourishing, and much of the activity took place at the club, which closed in 1983. Passionate crowds flocked to a special room, dedicated solely to flamenco, to hear exemplary house musicians, including the singer Domingo Alvarado and the guitarist Pedro Cortes. By the late seventies, Cortes's teen-age son, also named Pedro, had joined his father onstage, accompanying singers and dancers from Spain. The elder Cortes died eight years ago, but his son, who is fifty-eight, is keeping his classical version of flamenco alive in New York.

Cortes now performs weekly at a makeshift club called Alegrias, on the second floor of the Spanish Benevolent Society, on West Fourteenth Street in Manhattan. On most Saturday nights, the Society's plain space is transformed into an Andalusian *tablaó*: white tablecloths, chorizo tapas, and *aficionadas* dressed in billowy black dresses with red carnations in their hair. Recently, Cortes took the stage with a goatee and long, curly black hair suggesting a seventies-era fan of Led Zeppelin (which he was). He began the first set with a stark, mournful *soleá*, one of the oldest, most haunting flamenco forms, accompanied by a *cajón* (a boxlike percussion instrument played with one's hands), castanets, and a singer. After an elegiac instrumental introduction, a male and a female dancer emerged onto the tiny stage. Facing each other, they drew close and pulled apart in a tight circle with exacting, provocative gestures. Cortes watched the pair intently and then, turning his gaze toward the singer, began the song's finale, a series of beautiful *falsetas*—brief, melodic phrases—that

underpinned the dancers' climactic movements. "My father taught me how to look at the singer and the way he's breathing," he said later. "If he usually takes in air fast, that means he's going to probably come in fast on the next phrase."

Cortes grew up following the rules of his father, who insisted on maintaining Gypsy customs in their modest house in South Ozone Park, Queens. "From the front door out into the streets, we were in America," he said. "But inside was a Spanish Gypsy family from eighty years ago." Within this insular world were two other teachers, the legendary flamenco guitarists Mario Escudero and Sabicas, who both eventually settled in New York after fleeing Spain during the Spanish Civil War. Sabicas, in particular, was a frequent visitor to the Cortes house, and after a traditional Gypsy meal guitars would invariably come out. "It wasn't like he was coming over to give me a lesson—it was just sitting around, and I'd ask, 'Why do you slow down in this section?' or 'Why do you emphasize the phrase this way?'"

In 1932, Federico García Lorca published an essay about *cante jondo* (deep song), the oldest, most haunting strand of flamenco. "The guitar comments, but it also creates," Lorca said. "There are times when a guitarist, wanting to show off, completely destroys the emotion of the lyrics, or ruins a final flourish." Cortes agrees. "I can tell when a guitarist hasn't played for singers, because there's no sensitivity or sweetness," he said. "I can hear when a guitarist hasn't played for dance, because there's no rage, there's no anger, there's no power. It can be very musical and very lyrical, but without that rage and sweetness you aren't complete."

—Dan Kaufman



**OCTOBER 10-11-12, 2014**

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### ROCK AND POP

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

#### Banks

The Los Angeles native Jillian Banks has been making music since she was fourteen, but she kept her work private for years, opting to earn a B.A. in psychology before pursuing a musical career. While she was in college, the singer-songwriter and self-taught pianist shared her songs with the actress Lily Collins (daughter of Phil), who passed the recordings on to the d.j. Yung Skeeter. "Goddess," the dusky-voiced chanteuse's heavily hyped debut album of trip-hoppy R. & B. and pop, has lyrics that straddle the fine line between intimate and sexual, emotional and vulnerable. (Terminal 5, 610 W. 56th St. 212-582-6600. Sept. 30.)

#### My Brightest Diamond

The singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist Shara Worden has an uncommon background for her line of work. Holding a B.A. in opera from the University of North Texas, she once studied with the Australian composer Padma Newsome and has composed music for Off Broadway productions. Recording and performing under the moniker My Brightest Diamond, Worden fuses opera, cabaret, folk, and other styles to craft experimental art pop that can be both heartbreakingly beautiful and flat-out bizarre, often at the same time. On her new album, "This Is My Hand," she continues to reach far and wide with great success, adding marching-band rhythms and funky horns to her mix. (Bowery Ballroom, 6 Delancey St. 212-533-2111. Sept. 25.)

#### Nonesuch Records at BAM

The record label's fiftieth-anniversary celebrations wrap up this week. Sept. 23-27: "Landfall," by **Laurie Anderson** and the **Kronos Quartet**, was inspired by Hurricane Sandy. Sept. 24: **Rokia Traoré's** latest album, "Beautiful Africa," finds the singer seasoning Malian musical traditions with Western rock and pop. Also performing is **Toumani Diabaté**, a master of the kora, who will be joined by his son **Sidiki**, the latest griot in more than seventy generations in his family, dedicated to carrying on the oral and musical traditions of the West African Mandé people. Sept. 25-26: The Brazilian superstar **Caetano Veloso** and the trio Banda Cé perform songs from his latest record, "Abraço." Sept. 27-28: Newly signed to Nonesuch, and having done the Americana thing (with Alison Krauss), **Robert Plant** continues his journey in the company of the Sensational Space Shifters. ([bam.org](http://bam.org))

#### Robert Plant

Nearly half a century ago, when the Yardbirds' guitarist Jimmy Page was shopping around for a singer for a new band he had in mind, he came across a lad in Birmingham who he thought was great, yet he worried that, since he was still completely unknown, "there must be something wrong with him." Thousands of listeners to the first Led Zeppelin album, released in 1969, may have come to a similar conclusion, so otherworldly and downright frightening were many of the vocal excursions of Robert Plant. Now, ten solo records after Led Zeppelin, including fruitful collaborations with the likes of Alison Krauss and Patty Griffin, Plant is a bit more grounded but still an exceptionally exciting singer. His latest album, on Nonesuch, "Lullaby and . . . the Ceaseless Roar," has him working with the

Sensational Space Shifters and incorporating a distinctly African flavor. (Capitol Theatre, 149 Westchester Ave., Port Chester. [thecapitoltheatre.com](http://thecapitoltheatre.com). Sept. 25.)

#### Pomplamoose

Video never did kill the radio star, but it has made a sensation of this act, which consists of Jack Conte and Nataly Dawn, who are a couple. The pair launched Pomplamoose on the Internet in 2008 through videos which typically featured them performing covers and some original material. Their approach was simple, unadorned, and ultimately charming—before Pomplamoose even released their first album, they sold more than a hundred thousand MP3 downloads on iTunes. Their videos have since become more intricate but no less appealing, as they mash up pop songs with an attitude that is simultaneously genuine and ironic. (Sept. 24: Bowery Ballroom, 6 Delancey St. 212-533-2111; Sept. 25: Music Hall of Williamsburg, 66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn 718-486-5400.)

### JAZZ AND STANDARDS

#### George Freeman

Musicians who shared a stage with the likes of Lester Young and Charlie Parker are fast leaving us these days, but the eighty-seven-year-old guitarist Freeman remains. One of three brothers who became Chicago stalwarts (the others were Von, the gloriously idiosyncratic saxophonist, and the drummer Bruz), Freeman keeps things spare and direct, favoring expression over virtuosity. He's supported by **Eric Alexander**, a younger tenor saxophonist deeply entranced by Windy City jazz styles, **Mike Ledonne**, on the B3 organ, and **Kenny Washington**, on drums. (Smoke, 2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts. 212-864-6662. Sept. 26-27.)

#### Jon Hendricks

The sensational success more than fifty years ago of the vocal trio of Lambert, Hendricks & Ross is a distant memory, but that doesn't diminish the imperishable stature that the singer and lyricist Hendricks holds in jazz history. He celebrates his Café Carlyle debut, as well as his ninety-third birthday, with a one-night performance on Sept. 23. He's here with Aria Hendricks (his daughter) and Kevin Fitzgerald Burke. (Carlyle Hotel, Madison Ave. at 76th St. 212-744-1600.)

#### Fred Hersch

The sterling pianist and composer usually leads his own trio, but here he steps out with guest players. He's in good hands with the bassist **Esperanza Spalding**, whose outsize fame should never divert attention from her extraordinary skills as an instrumentalist, and the drummer **Richie Barshay**. On the final night of this run, Hersch performs solo, a favored setting for this lyrical musician. (Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. Sept. 23-28.)

#### Marcus Roberts

Few keyboard stylists are as obsessed with the breadth of jazz history as the pianist Roberts, who can channel the spirits of Jelly Roll Morton, Duke Ellington, and Nat King Cole as deftly as he can those of post-bop players. He's joined by the eleven-piece band Modern Jazz Generation, a fully fleshed-out unit that includes the drummer **Jason Marsalis**. (Appel Room, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500. Sept. 26-27.)



TABLES FOR TWO

## DIMES

143 Division St. (212-240-9410)

**REMEMBER CAROB? AND THOSE PEOPLE** who swore not only that carob tasted just like chocolate but also that it was better for you? In the seventies, there was a certain kind of restaurant, usually vegetarian—which had its epicenter at Moosewood, in Ithaca, New York, or somewhere on the Pearl Street Mall, in Boulder, Colorado—that gloatingly served “health food.” These hippie outposts abounded with wood tones, ferns, loving sentiment, and sprouts. They didn’t really care about presentation or what was trendy, but they did believe in the healing power of the legume. Most of those quaint, outmoded places have gone the way of Jerry Garcia, replaced by the juggernaut that is the Whole Foods salad bar, as well as a new kind of health-food café. Dimes, located in an unlikely pocket of Chinatown, is such a place: bright, stylish, California-tinged, with handmade salt scrub for sale, catering to moneyed vegans and their friends.

Breakfast, when the tiny, whitewashed corridor has a brisk turnover, is lovely. But are we ready for açai bowls? Brazilians have been eating them for decades; proximity to the South American palm trees from which the berries come makes them a cheap option. Americans brought up on Frosted Flakes and Toaster Strudel have been slow to catch up, and Dimes wisely mixes the açai with lots of nuts and berries we *have* heard of, to make a sort of açai sundae—in one of four versions, the frozen berry pulp is blended with house-made almond milk to make something like sorbet, which is sprinkled with bee pollen and topped with strawberries, bananas, and goji-berry granola. Of course, there’s also fresh juice, cayenne lemonade, and a pH tonic (apple-cider vinegar, lemon, honey, and chlorella, a kind of algae), and the breakfast tacos nod admirably to Santa Monica, with soft scrambled eggs, avocado, peach salsa, and house-made hot sauce. Because Dimes is run by reasonable people—the co-owners, Sabrina De Sousa and Alissa Wagner, met while working at Lovely Day, in Nolita—who recognize that some patrons subsist on more than nuts and berries, there’s also thick-cut bacon and juicy, brightly spiced sausage.

Dinner, when the lights are dimmed and the yuzu-sake and dandelion-wine cocktails are flowing, is more problematic. It’s hard to love a plate made up of two tablespoons each of eight kinds of vegetables and grains, even if it’s pulled together with a little grapefruit-ginger-ponzu sauce. Appetizers fare better, like an inspired salad of seared peaches and shishito peppers or a fine chicken-liver mousse. But it doesn’t matter, because Dimes is where the cool kids want to be, discussing Bushwick apartments or their latest love affair or the purpose of Instagram. Right now, one of those kids might be enjoying a carob-*açai* bowl, which is like a muted chocolate-powder-flavored pudding, with bananas, dates, cinnamon, and coconut. There are seven kinds of food in that bowl, all of which have been on this earth for millennia.

—Shauna Lyon

Open weekdays for breakfast, lunch, and dinner and weekends for brunch and dinner. Large plates, \$14-\$20.



# FOOD & DRINK

### BAR TAB BIBI

211 E. 4th St. (212-673-2424)

Around midnight on a quiet Wednesday at Bibi, a candlelit East Village wine bar, two patrons, having finished their wine and a charcuterie plate, were discussing a real-life murder mystery. Their bartender approached the table, and they told him about it: northern lights, vast lake, mysterious disappearance. He pulled up a barstool, poured them some bonus wine, and told a hair-raising story of his own: penthouse night club, duffel bag, lady with an axe. Bibi, cozy as a campfire, may encourage the telling of lurid stories—it feels like an outpost of safety and comfort, a place to celebrate your own levelheadedness. Its proprietors, Michael Lagnese and Jonny Cohen, of the 8th Street Winecellar, opened Bibi this spring, with their longtime bartender Bonny McKenzie, who named the bar after her great-great-grandfather; a photograph of him in a lawn chair, drinking beer, hangs in the hallway. The bar has vases of pussy willows, likable music (Beck, the Black Keys), tasty bar food (candied nuts, Humboldt Fog), and well-chosen, reasonably priced wine. On another night, the same bartender, David Renaud, confidently recommended a Malbec to a Malbec-averse man. The man swirled it around, sniffed, and sipped. He was impressed. “Usually they’re young and blue-fruit tasting, but this feels like it’s got some age on it,” he said. At a wine bar, maturity is a virtue.

—Sarah Larson



ILLUSTRATION BY MATTHEW HOLLISTER



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**LET'S GO.**



## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT

#### BELEAGUERED LEAGUE

For several years now, sports fans of a certain cast of mind have been declaring their intention to quit watching professional football, on moral grounds. What cast of mind is this? A rare or, perhaps, hypocritical one, to judge by the numbers, which show ever-higher TV ratings for the N.F.L., in spite of the drumbeat of grim news from neurological labs, trainers' tables, and police blotters. Evidently, unease has emboldened only those whose allegiance to the gridiron was notional in the first place. Either that or all the discussion of modern-day gladiators has produced a rubbernecking effect, in which we keep tuning in to see if the decline of the nation's most popular form of entertainment is finally upon us. (It is not—yet.)

The trouble with football-related brain injury is one of abstraction. The real damage is separated by years from the jarring (but thrilling) impact that we watch in real time—and, even then, it's a game of odds. Nearly thirty per cent of players, by the league's recent admission, will suffer from accelerated cognitive impairment. Yet, according to the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, N.F.L. veterans still live longer, on average, than the general population. (They are wealthier, for one thing, and in some senses healthier—less

prone to respiratory and digestive diseases, less likely to commit suicide, even.) Those retired linebackers who report difficulty remembering why they've left one room for another will often say, on camera, that they have few regrets. Meanwhile, the men in uniform—on the winning team, at least—seem so transparently to enjoy their Sunday afternoons at the line of scrimmage. This provides cover enough for a diagnosis of guilty pleasure. Sugar is bad, too, but Halloween is coming.

There was, on the other hand, nothing abstract about the recently released video of the Baltimore Ravens running back Ray Rice knocking out his fiancée, Janay Palmer, in a casino elevator, last February. The fact

that they have since married changes nothing about the appalling act of violence, or the gut sense that there ought to be no room in public life for a man who carries out such an act, and no pleasure derived from watching him put such strength to less harmful use. It has become one of those clarifying moments, after which it is no longer possible to immerse oneself in a fog of ambiguity. Another video, released seven months ago, showed Rice dragging an unconscious Palmer out of the elevator, and was somehow not enough.

Roger Goodell, the N.F.L. commissioner, has always styled himself a stern parent of wayward boys, but he nonetheless found cause, at first, for leniency with Rice, in the form of a two-game suspension. Leaving aside the open question of whether N.F.L. officials had previously seen the earlier video (the former F.B.I. director Robert Mueller is investigating), the truth is that it was easy for many people not to visualize the act. The Joe DiMaggio who emerges in Richard Ben Cramer's biography was a violently abusive husband, but he remained a hero—the Yankee Clipper—to the end.

Perversely, the league's botching of the Rice case may have done more good than any well-intentioned initiative could.

A swiftly administered eight-game suspension, say, would likely have engendered pushback in some corners, as grist for the otherwise worthy argument that Goodell too readily scapegoats individual players, the ones risking body and mind, in the interest of "protecting the shield," as he likes to say, referring to the N.F.L. logo. (By imposing heavy fines and suspensions for particularly dangerous tackles, he has seemed to suggest that football's challenges are behavioral rather than institutional.) What's more, Goodell relied on the judgment of prosecutors, who let Rice off with the equivalent of a warning, for guidance in his own executive process. That would be more



defensible if he hadn't established a precedent for treating recreational pot smoking as a kind of football felony, deserving a four-game suspension, or worse.

Instead, the outrage has spread. Without Rice and Goodell as context, the investigation of the running back Adrian Peterson, for "disciplining" his four-year-old son with a tree branch, might not have made front-page news anywhere other than Minnesota, where his status with the Vikings is now on hold. (It took pressure from team sponsors, including the Radisson hotel chain—and from Minnesota's governor—to force him off the active roster.) Nor would many of us have heard of Jonathan Dwyer, a less heralded running back, who is alleged to have broken his wife's nose. And then there is the case of Greg Hardy, a defensive end, whose ex-girlfriend testified that he choked her and threatened to kill her.

These issues are not unique to football, of course, even among professional sports. According to a database that *USA Today* maintains, the N.F.L.'s athletes are arrested at a lower rate than the male population at large—though domestic abuse remains an outsized problem—and this year is on track to see the fewest arrests of league players since 2000. But the news of the past few weeks has animated the latent ugliness in the sport's culture of sanctioned violence in a way that images of tau proteins in the brain have struggled to do. The shield that Goodell protects, we are often told, is worth ten billion dollars in annual revenues, and a lot of the animosity he now faces derives from the smugness implicit in the idea that so much money can't be wrong.

Dethroning Goodell, who earns forty-four million dollars a year, may satisfy a primal urge not unlike the one that causes us—some of us, at any rate—to root for Tom Brady's sacking. Football is supposed to be a tough business. But Goodell is ultimately a figurehead, answerable to the billionaire (or near-billionaire) team owners, who benefit greatly from public support, in the form of tax breaks and stadium bonds. We know Goodell's salary, for instance, only because the league office files as a nonprofit, a trade association acting on behalf of its franchisees. This game is not a public utility. It is private entertainment.

The death of football, according to the declinist scenario, would have to originate with women—mothers who, having read the medical findings, would forbid their sons to play Pop Warner, which in turn would reduce the teen-age ranks aspiring to play under the lights on Friday night, and so on up the chain. That's a slow process, but disgust with the organization is bound to speed it up. Women are also increasingly angered by the response to domestic violence; in recognition of that, Goodell announced last week that the N.F.L. will earmark some of its profits to help fund abuse hot lines. A league that boasts that some forty-four per cent of its fans are women has to do much more than dress its players in pink for breast-cancer-awareness month to convince those fans that "the best thing on television," as Leslie Moonves, the head of CBS, put it last week, is family-friendly. Suddenly, the people who talk about abandoning football seem almost to mean it.

—Ben McGrath

## THE BOARDS CHATTERBOX



The Irish actress Lisa Dwan first performed "Not I," by Samuel Beckett, in 2005, and has returned to the fray many times. It is not a piece for the fainthearted. Recently, an audience member suffered a panic attack and had to leave halfway through the play, even though it lasts a matter of minutes, less than most theatres allow for intermission. All that can be seen from the auditorium is a single mouth, held in a spotlight and chattering without cease—or, at least, pausing only to shriek. New Yorkers may feel they can get that kind of thing for free on a daily basis, but Dwan, undaunted, is bringing "Not I" to town. BAM will put its money where her mouth is and stage the play—plus Beckett's "Footfalls" and "Rockaby"—as part of a one-woman hour-long trilogy, from October 7th through October 12th.

Back in summer, on a hot bright morning, Dwan put "Not I" through its paces at the Royal Court Theatre, in London. "I do it three times a day for a month before it opens," she said. A vertical board, eight feet high, was wheeled onto the stage. At head height was an oval gap, not unlike the openings through which customers at amusement parks used to poke their faces to be photographed. This was the unamusing kind, with the hole lined in black felt. "There's still some blood around the edges," Dwan said. "It cuts my ears."

She donned a padded turquoise blindfold; bared her teeth; stretched her mouth, chanting, "Hah! Hah!"; approached the board; wedged her arms under two metal rails screwed to it, to immobilize herself; and began.

Timed by a wristwatch, "Not I" lasted nine minutes flat. A short break, then another go: eight minutes thirty-five seconds, and consonant-perfect. A longer break, for chicken salad and a cup of coffee at the brasserie next door, then back to the theatre for a third attempt: eight twenty-five.

"Some of the really good ones are

around eight minutes fifteen. I've done it in seven and a half," she said. She takes it at a lick unthinkable to previous residents of the role, such as Jessica Tandy, Julianne Moore, and Billie Whitelaw, Beckett's muse. "Some who've tried to learn it have gone mad," Dwan went on, with the cheerful assurance of one who is set on a calmer path. Edward Beckett, the playwright's



Lisa Dwan



the Empire State and the Citibank building; I hoped Jerry would surface in between them. The Dead were on my boat stereo cranked up loud, and that must've been why I didn't hear him. Suddenly, I looked to my right and he was four feet away. He probably heard the music and wanted to see what was going on. I saw this huge eye looking at me, and there was a disgusting smell of decomposing fish. Then he submerged, and a few seconds later, just in front of my boat, he spy-hopped—went straight up, all the way out of the water, to take a look around—and the building was there in the evening light, and it all came together, every element in place, tack-sharp.”

—Ian Frazier

## TEST KITCHEN MILE-HIGH DINNER



Like all cooks, Ron Paprocki—the pastry chef at Gotham Bar and Grill, on East Twelfth Street—has his favorite tools. One is a needle-nose medical clamp, which he uses to position tiny garnishes. “I took it from my doctor,” he said. Another is an iced-tea

spoon that he bought at Crate & Barrel and uses as a quenelle-maker. With it, he shaped a seamless ovoid of yogurt sorbet and placed it on a bed of pineapple-and-mango tartare, which he had spooned into the central depression of a rum-soaked, apricot-glazed baba. He used the clamp to decorate the sorbet with tiny celery leaves. Before going to culinary school, in Germany, Paprocki spent ten years as a landscape designer—he is at ease with vegetation. “The nice thing about this dish is the rationality of the babas,” he said. “You can leave them in the freezer for three months and pull them out when you need them, with no issues.”

Paprocki was serving dessert because his boss, Alfred Portale, Gotham's co-owner and head chef, was stuck on a train. Portale is one of nine chefs on Singapore Airlines' International Culinary Panel, which helps create the menus for all three passenger classes on Singapore flights. Devising successful airplane meals is more complicated than many fliers might think, and one of the challenges is turbulence. “No blueberries on flat plates,” Paprocki said. The session at Gotham was an early step in a long process that Singapore calls “a development.” Portale and his staff had created a number of potential in-flight dishes for business-

and first-class passengers, and they were serving samples to a group of Singapore representatives, including several chefs from the airline's catering unit at J.F.K., who were making notes and taking photographs.

Portale arrived just as the participants were finishing off the last of the dessert. He wore a dark-blue chef's coat, and he got to work immediately. “So, this is pork-roast soup,” he said. “It has little meatballs. Meatballs are all the rage in New York, although I don't know if they've made it to Singapore yet.” He added some sea salt. There was a large pile of clean flatware in a tray on the table, and everyone took a spoon. “When I came up with this, I was thinking about a very successful dish we did years ago,” he continued. “It was a short-rib soup, in which the ribs were not poached but braised, and it was served in a bowl like this, with a really rich beef broth and lots of soft leeks and carrots.” Meals on long flights provide entertainment as well as nutrition, one of the airline's publicists had said earlier; dishes with multiple elements help combat boredom.

The air inside a typical commercial passenger jet at cruising altitude is extremely dry, and the atmospheric pressure is approximately that of Park City, Utah—conditions that can make well-seasoned food seem bland, Portale said. “People's taste buds tend to flatten out, so you have to bring up the flavors.” Flying does bad things to the taste of wine, too; Portale's work-around, when he flies in the front of the plane, is to drink champagne. “Yesterday, we did a lobster salad with a lemon aioli that was fortified with chipotle,” he went on. “It had a really intense smokiness and a little bit of spice. I'll often introduce a powerful element like that—maybe a strong condiment, or a purée of lemon to set off a seafood dish.” The airline, at its headquarters in Singapore, has a sealed “tasting chamber,” in which the atmospheric pressure can be lowered to that of an airplane in flight. “It has the same heating elements and ovens that they use on the aircraft, and there's this big door that they can crank down, like you're in a vault,” Portale said. “And you can clearly taste a difference if you try something inside and outside the room.”



*“I told you we'd be better off taking Canal.”*

The next dish that Portale presented was a cassoulet, which contained rabbit sausage, rabbit confit, and tarbaix beans. “How do you pronounce the bean again?” he asked an assistant. Then, to a Singapore representative, he said, “I don’t like to make the dishes too ingredient-specific. So you could do this with chicken sausage and chicken confit, or capon or another bird, if you’re squeamish about the rabbit.” He took a bite. “Something like a stew, a hearty soup, a cassoulet—it’s always better the next day or the next time you reheat it. And that really lends itself to an airline, because everything on an airplane has to be cooked somewhere else, chilled to below forty degrees, and then uplifted onto the plane and reheated.” Many hands, holding spoons and forks, reached for the plate, which soon looked almost clean. There was a long, thoughtful, chewing-oriented silence. “This I would serve in the restaurant, actually,” Portale said.

—David Owen

## THE MUSICAL LIFE DIGGING



Finding stores that sell old records is a road habit with the Irish rock-and-roll singer Imelda May. A few hours before singing at the Bowery Ballroom recently, May went to Good Records, on East Fifth Street. She has a heart-shaped face and long black hair, which she had pulled back in a tight ponytail. Above her forehead was a bronzy-blond wave, part of her signature look. Another part of her signature look is “red lips and cat’s eyes, which I am never without,” she said. As the afternoon passed, her lipstick faded.

Standing in front of a bin labelled “G-H-I,” May said that she and her husband, Darrel Higham, who plays guitar in her band, typically buy so many records while on tour that they have to get new suitcases to take them home. “We don’t share records, so if we find one we both like we fight for it,”

she said. “He’s a proper collector, and he’s horrified by how I treat them. I treat them well, I love them, but I don’t clean them or buy new sleeves for them or organize them in alphabetical order. I like them if they have coffee stains and look used.”

Moving along the bins, she picked out an album by Lou Reed. “We recorded together once,” she said. “I liked that there were no flies on him.” She translated: “It means he’s not a fool to anybody. What do you say in America? Nobody’s fool.” Beside it she placed an album by the Pretenders, one by Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen, because she liked the cover, and “\$1,000,000.00 Worth of Twang,” by the guitarist Duane Eddy.

May, who is forty, said that she heard early rock and roll constantly as a child. “I grew up in a famous old area of Dublin called the Liberties,” she said. “My dad was an old-time dance teacher—waltzes, tangos, foxtrots. He didn’t make enough money, then, when people started dancing alone, in the sixties; he used to curse it. He became a painter and decorator, and my mom was a seamstress, a dressmaker. It was a very creative household. My parents were very supportive. When one of my brothers started to build canoes, we stepped over canoes in the living room.”

May chose “Little Criminals,” by Randy Newman. “Our house had two bedrooms upstairs and two rooms downstairs—we call it ‘two up and two down,’” she continued. “I’m the youngest of five—three girls and two boys. There was one record-player for the seven of us. It was good for me, because I got to hear everyone else’s music. My dad loved that big-band stuff—Turk Murphy, especially. My mom loved Judy Garland and musicals. With my brothers, I heard Gene Vincent, Eddie Cochran, Buddy Holly. When I heard Elvis and his ‘Sun Sessions,’ I went mad for it. I was about thirteen. And then I got on Willie Dixon, Elmore James, and Howlin’ Wolf. I lost a boyfriend over Elmore James. You know that moment when you send mixtapes at fifteen? He sent me pop hits, and I sent him Elmore James, and I never heard from him again.”

May was leaning forward with her

elbows on a bin. “I never got formal training in music,” she said. “I would just sit with my ear to the speaker and my hand on the needle. I’d listen to Wanda Jackson and think, How did she do that?, and lift the needle and try it myself.”

Next, she chose “For Your Love,” by the version of the Yardbirds that included Jeff Beck. “There was a little underground club in Dublin called Bruxelles, where I learned my trade,” she said. “My brother sneaked me in, because, at sixteen, I was very young. My



Imelda May

sister’s boyfriend got me up to sing a song. The club was near a rock-and-roll hotel, and a lot of these big guys would pop by. One night, Ronnie Wood came, and he jumped up and played guitar. I met him years later and said, ‘You won’t remember me,’ and he said, ‘I do—you were the kid who was singing the blues.’”

Twenty minutes later, May had chosen fifteen records, too many to be practical. “I have three more weeks of this,” she said. (She will appear at Irving Plaza, supporting her new record, on September 29th.) She settled on ten, for which she paid \$153.51. On the way out, she saw two bins beneath a counter that she hadn’t examined, and she paused. “The next record could be the one I always wanted, and I never found it,” she said ruefully. Then she made herself walk out the door.

—Alec Wilkinson

# THE SOLACE OF OBLIVION

*In Europe, the right to be forgotten trumps the Internet.*

BY JEFFREY TOOBIN



On October 31, 2006, an eighteen-year-old woman named Nikki Catsouras slammed her father's sports car into the side of a concrete toll booth in Orange County, California. Catsouras was decapitated in the accident. The California Highway Patrol, following standard protocol, secured the scene and took photographs. The manner of death was so horrific that the local coroner did not allow Nikki's parents to identify her body.

"About two weeks after the accident, I got a call from my brother-in-law," Christos Catsouras, Nikki's father, told me. "He said he had heard from a neighbor that the photos from the crash

were circulating on the Internet. We asked the C.H.P., and they said they would look into it." In short order, two employees admitted that they had shared the photographs. As summarized in a later court filing, the employees had "e-mailed nine gruesome death images to their friends and family members on Halloween—for pure shock value. Once received, the photographs were forwarded to others, and thus spread across the Internet like a malignant firestorm, popping up on thousands of Web sites."

Already bereft of his eldest daughter, Catsouras told his three other girls that they couldn't look at the Internet. "But,

other than that, people told me there was nothing I could do," he recalled. "They said, 'Don't worry. It'll blow over.'" Nevertheless, Catsouras embarked on a modern legal quest: to remove information from the Internet. In recent years, many people have made the same kind of effort, from actors who don't want their private photographs in broad circulation to ex-convicts who don't want their long-ago legal troubles to prevent them from finding jobs. Despite the varied circumstances, all these people want something that does not exist in the United States: the right to be forgotten.

The situation is different in Europe, thanks to a court case that was decided earlier this year. In 1998, a Spanish newspaper called *La Vanguardia* published two small notices stating that certain property owned by a lawyer named Mario Costeja González was going to be auctioned to pay off his debts. Costeja cleared up the financial difficulties, but the newspaper records continued to surface whenever anyone Googled his name. In 2010, Costeja went to Spanish authorities to demand that the newspaper remove the items from its Web site and that Google remove the links from searches for his name. The Spanish Data Protection Agency, which is the local representative of a Continent-wide network of computer-privacy regulators, denied the claim against *La Vanguardia* but granted the claim against Google. This spring, the European Court of Justice, which operates as a kind of Supreme Court for the twenty-eight members of the European Union, affirmed the Spanish agency's decisions. *La Vanguardia* could leave the Costeja items up on its Web site, but Google was prohibited from linking to them on any searches relating to Costeja's name. The Court went on to say, in a broadly worded directive, that all individuals in the countries within its jurisdiction had the right to prohibit Google from linking to items that were "inadequate, irrelevant or no longer relevant, or excessive in relation to the purposes for which they were processed and in the light of the time that has elapsed."

The consequences of the Court's decision are just beginning to be understood. Google has fielded about a hundred and twenty thousand requests

*The European Court ruled that Google must delete certain links that violate privacy.*

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10:04

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BEN LEARNER

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“Packs so much brilliance and humor into each episode.”

—Sam Sacks, *The Wall Street Journal*

“Lerner writes with a poet’s attention to language.” —Hari Kunzru, *The New York Times Book Review*

“Small moments come steeped in vertiginous magic.”

—Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*

“Brilliant.”

—Juliet Lapidus,  
*The New Republic*

“Masterful.”

—Tiffany Gibert,  
*Time Out New York*, ★★★★★

“Beautiful and original.”

—Christian Lorentzen,  
*Bookforum*

PHOTOGRAPH © IWAN BAAN / GETTY IMAGES

for deletions and granted roughly half of them. Other search engines that provide service in Europe, like Microsoft's Bing, have set up similar systems. Public reaction to the decision, especially in the United States and Great Britain, has been largely critical. An editorial in the *New York Times* declared that it "could undermine press freedoms and freedom of speech." The risk, according to the *Times* and others, is that aggrieved individuals could use the decision to hide or suppress information of public importance, including links about elected officials. A recent report by a committee of the House of Lords called the decision "misguided in principle and unworkable in practice."

Jules Polonetsky, the executive director of the Future of Privacy Forum, a think tank in Washington, was more vocal. "The decision will go down in history as one of the most significant mistakes that Court has ever made," he said. "It gives very little value to free expression. If a particular Web site is doing something illegal, that should be stopped, and Google shouldn't link to it. But for the Court to outsource to Google complicated case-specific decisions about whether to publish or suppress something is wrong. Requiring Google to be a court of philosopher kings shows a real lack of understanding about how this will play out in reality."

At the same time, the Court's decision spoke to an anxiety felt keenly on both sides of the Atlantic. In Europe, the right to privacy trumps freedom of speech; the reverse is true in the United States. "Europeans think of the right to privacy as a fundamental human right, in the way that we think of freedom of expression or the right to counsel," Jennifer Granick, the director of civil liberties at the Stanford Center for Internet and Society, said recently. "When it comes to privacy, the United States' approach has been to provide protection for certain categories of information that are deemed sensitive and then impose some obligation not to disclose unless certain conditions are met." Congress has passed laws prohibiting the disclosure of medical information (the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act), educational records (the Buckley Amendment), and video-store rentals (a law passed in response to revelations about Robert Bork's rentals when he was nominated to the Supreme Court). Any of these protections can be overridden with the consent of the individual or as part of law-enforcement investigations.

The American regard for freedom of speech, reflected in the First Amendment, guarantees that the Costeja judgment would never pass muster under U.S. law. The Costeja records were pub-

lic, and they were reported correctly by the newspaper at the time; constitutionally, the press has a nearly absolute right to publish accurate, lawful information. (Recently, an attorney in Texas, who had successfully fought a disciplinary judgment by the local bar association, persuaded a trial court to order Google to delete links on the subject; Google won a reversal in an appellate court.) "The Costeja decision is clearly inconsistent with U.S. law," Granick said. "So the question is whether it's good policy."

One of the intellectual godfathers of the right to be forgotten is Viktor Mayer-Schönberger, a forty-eight-year-old professor at Oxford. Mayer-Schönberger grew up in rural Austria, where his father, a tax lawyer, bought a primitive modem for the family in the early nineteen-eighties. Viktor became active on computer bulletin boards, and he wrote an early anti-virus program, which he sold when he was in his twenties. "My father indulged my interest in computers, but he really wanted me to take over his law practice," Mayer-Schönberger told me. He went to Harvard Law School. His early experience with computers, combined with his anti-virus business, prompted his interest in the law of data protection.

"The roots of European data protection come from the bloody history of the twentieth century," Mayer-Schönberger said. "The Communists fought the Nazis with an ideology based on humanism, hoping that they could bring about a more just and fair society. And what did it look like? It turned into the same totalitarian surveillance society. With the Stasi, in East Germany, the task of capturing information and using it to further the power of the state is reintroduced and perfected by the society. So we had two radical ideologies, Fascism and Communism, and both end up with absolutely shockingly tight surveillance states."

Following the fall of Communism, in 1989, the new democracies rewrote their laws to put in place rules intended to prevent the recurrence of these kinds of abuses. In subsequent years, the E.U. has promulgated a detailed series of laws designed to protect privacy. According to Mayer-Schönberger, "There



*"We should support the local farm as well as the local confectioner."*

was a pervasive belief that we can't trust anybody—not the state, not a company—to keep to its own role and protect the rights of the individual.”

In 2009, Mayer-Schönberger published a book entitled “Delete: The Virtue of Forgetting in the Digital Age.” In it, he asserts that the European postwar, post-Wall concerns about privacy are even more relevant with the advent of the Internet. The Stasi kept its records on paper and film in file cabinets; the material was difficult to locate and retrieve. But digitization and cheap online storage make it easier to remember than to forget, shifting our “behavioral default,” Mayer-Schönberger explained. Storage in the Cloud has made information even more durable and retrievable.

Mayer-Schönberger said that Google, whose market share for Internet searches in Europe is around ninety per cent, does not make sinister use of the information at its disposal. But in “Delete” he describes how, in the nineteen-thirties, the Dutch government maintained a comprehensive population registry, which included the name, address, and religion of every citizen. At the time, he writes, “the registry was hailed as facilitating government administration and improving welfare planning.” But when the Nazis invaded Holland they used the registry to track down Jews and Gypsies. “We may feel safe living in democratic republics, but so did the Dutch,” he said. “We do not know what the future holds in store for us, and whether future governments will honor the trust we put in them to protect information privacy rights.”

Without a right to be forgotten in American law, the Catsouras family had no means of forcing Google to stop linking to the photographs. “We knew people were finding the photos by Googling Nikki’s name or just ‘decapitated girl,’ but there was nothing we could do about it,” Keith Bremer, the family’s lawyer, told me. As an interim measure, Catsouras enlisted the help of Michael Fertik, who at the time had just founded Reputation.com, a company that tries to manipulate the results of Google’s search algorithm by seeding additional information on the Web. In this way, the less desirable links appear

much lower in a Google search. Fertik also helped the family ask Web sites to take down the photos; many did. “We got the photos off at least two thousand Web sites,” Fertik told me. But they are still easy to find.

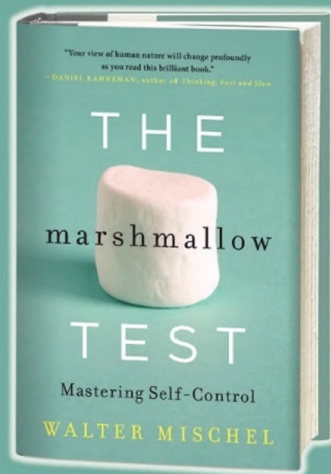
Convicted criminals who want to escape the taint of their records are also out of luck when it comes to petitioning Google. “Somewhere between sixty and a hundred million people in the United States have criminal records, and that’s just counting actual convictions,” Sharon Dietrich, the litigation director of Community Legal Services, in Philadelphia, told me. “The consequences of having a criminal record are onerous and getting worse all the time, because of the Web.” Dietrich and others have joined in what has become known as the expungement movement, which calls for many criminal convictions to be sealed or set aside after a given period of time. Around thirty states currently allow some version of expungement. Dietrich and her allies have focussed on trying to cleanse records from the databases maintained by commercial background-check companies. But Google would remain a problem even if the law were changed. “Back in the day, criminal records kind of faded away over time,” Dietrich said. “They existed, but you couldn’t find them. Nothing fades away anymore. I have a client who says he has a harder time finding a job now than he did when he got out of jail, thirty years ago.”

In the effort to escape unwanted attention on the Internet, individuals and companies have had success with one weapon: copyright law. It is unlawful to post photographs or other copyrighted material without the permission of the copyright holder. “I needed to get ownership of the photos,” Bremer, the Catsouras family’s lawyer, told me. So he began a lengthy negotiation with the California Highway Patrol to persuade it to surrender copyright on the photographs. In the end, though, the C.H.P. would not make the deal.

Other victims of viral Internet trauma have fared better with the copyright approach. In August, racy private photographs of Jennifer Lawrence, Kate Upton, and other celebrities were leaked to several Web sites. (The source of the leaks has not been identified.) Google

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—DANIEL KAHNEMAN,  
author of *Thinking, Fast and Slow*



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SCHWARTZ

*"Why do I always get stuck at the Kids' Round Table?"*

has long had a system in place to block copyrighted material from turning up in its searches. Motion-picture companies, among others, regularly complain about copyright infringement on YouTube, which Google owns, and Google has a process for identifying and removing these links. Several of the leaked photographs were selfies, so the women themselves owned the copyrights; friends had taken the other pictures. Lawyers for one of the women established copyrights for all the photographs they could, and then went to sites that had posted the pictures, and to Google, and insisted that the material be removed. Google complied, as did many of the sites, and now the photographs are difficult to find on the Internet, though they have not disappeared. "For the most part, the world goes through search engines," one lawyer involved in the effort to limit the distribution of the photographs told me. "Now it's like a tree falling in the forest. There may be links out there, but if you can't find them through a search engine they might as well not exist."

The European Court's decision placed Google in an uncomfortable position. "We like to think of ourselves as the newsstand, or a card catalogue," Kent Walker, the general counsel of Google, told me when I visited the company's

headquarters, in Mountain View, California. "We don't create the information. We make it accessible. A decision like this, which makes us decide what goes inside the card catalogue, forces us into a role we don't want." Several other people at Google explained their frustration the same way, by arguing that Google is a mere intermediary between reader and publisher. The company wanted nothing to do with the business of regulating content.

Yet the notion of Google as a passive intermediary in the modern information economy is dubious. "The 'card catalogue' metaphor is wildly misleading," Marc Rotenberg, the president of the Electronic Privacy Information Center, in Washington, D.C., told me. "Google is no longer the card catalogue. It is the *library*—and it's the bookstore and the newsstand. They have all collapsed into Google's realm." Many supporters of the Court's decision see it, at least in part, as a vehicle for addressing Google's enormous power. "I think it was a great decision, a forward-looking decision, which actually strengthens press freedoms," Rotenberg said. "The Court said to Google, 'If you are going to be in this business of search, you are going to take on some privacy obligations.' It didn't say that to journalistic

institutions. These journalistic institutions have their own Web sites and seek out their own readers."

Google doesn't publish its own material, but the Court decision recognized that the results of a Google search often matter more than the information on any individual Web site. The private sector made this discovery several years ago. Michael Fertik, the founder of Reputation.com, also supports the existence of a right to be forgotten that is enforceable against Google. "This is not about free speech; it's about privacy and dignity," he told me. "For the first time, dignity will get the same treatment in law as copyright and trademark do in America. If Sony or Disney wants fifty thousand videos removed from YouTube, Google removes them with no questions asked. If your daughter is caught kissing someone on a cell-phone home video, you have no option of getting it down. That's wrong. The priorities are backward."

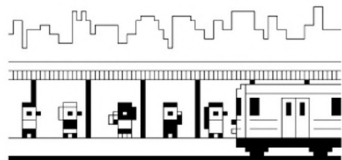
To see how Google's system for complying with the Court's decision worked, I spoke with David Price, a thirty-three-year-old lawyer for the company, in a conference room at Google headquarters. Price wore the unofficial uniform of the Googleplex: blue-jeans, an untucked button-down shirt, and a cheerful demeanor. "After the decision, we all made frowny faces, but then we got down to work," he said.

The job had two parts. The first was technical—that is, creating a software infrastructure so that links could be removed. This was not especially difficult, since Google could apply the system already in place for copyrighted and trademarked works. Similarly, Google had already blocked links that might have led to certain dangerous or unlawful activity, like malware or child pornography.

"The second issue was bigger," Price explained. "We had to create an administrative system to intake the requests and then act on them." The company designed a form that was accessible through the search pages for the countries covered by the decision. The form is now available in twenty-five languages. German users can find it at Google.de, Spanish users at Google.es. (It cannot be accessed directly through

Google.com, the search page in the United States.) To file a claim, individuals are required to give their name—anonymous requests are not allowed—and provide the links to which they object. (Most applicants have submitted about four links each.) Petitioners are also required to provide “an explanation of why the inclusion of that result in search results is irrelevant, outdated, or otherwise objectionable,” according to the request instructions posted online. If it grants a request, Google then sends a notice to the Webmaster for the site hosting the links in question. This allows the publishers of that site to make their case for keeping the link as a search result.

To decide whether to remove the disputed links from its searches, Google has assembled dozens of lawyers, paralegals, and others to review the submissions. Price meets with the group twice a week to discuss its decisions and to try to maintain consistent standards. The main considerations are whether the individual is a public or a private figure; whether the link comes from a reputable news source or government Web site; whether it was the individual who originally published the information; and whether the information relates to political speech or criminal charges. Because the Court’s decision specifically said that a relevant factor should be “the role played by the data subject in public life,” Google is reluctant to exclude links about politicians and other prom-



inent people. “There are hard calls,” Price told me.

Google has not released its decisions in any individual cases. But the company did tell me about some of its decisions in a way that disguises the parties involved. For example, Google agreed to what it termed a “request to remove an old document posted in an online group conversation that the requestor started,” and a “request to remove five-year-old stories about exoneration in a

child porn case.” The company rejected a request from a “news outlet to remove content about it from another news outlet”; a “request from a public official to remove a news article about child pornography accusations”; and a “request for removal of a news article about a child abuse scandal, which resulted in a conviction.” The company declined, for the time being, to remove a 2013 link to a report of an acquittal in a criminal case, on the ground that it was very recent. Google also declined a request by a writer to remove links to his own work, on the ground that the articles were recent and deliberately made public by the author.

There have been controversies. Earlier this summer, the BBC received a notice that Google was deleting links to a blog post about Stanley O’Neal, the former chief executive of Merrill Lynch. Robert Peston, the BBC’s economics editor and the author of the post, wrote an indignant response, titled “Why Has Google Cast Me Into Oblivion?” The de-linking, Peston wrote, confirms “the fears of many in the industry that the ‘right to be forgotten’ will be abused to curb freedom of expression and to suppress legitimate journalism that is in the public interest.” How could a public figure like O’Neal succeed in sanitizing the links about him? When Peston looked into the decision more closely, he found that the request for the deletion appeared not to have come from O’Neal. Rather, it was “almost certain” that the deletion came from a request made by one of the commenters on his original piece—presumably, the commenter wanted his own comment forgotten. Googling “Stan O’Neal” still drew a link to Peston’s blog post, but Googling the commenter’s name did not. In any event, the contretemps illustrated the complexity of Google’s task in complying with the Court’s judgment. “We’re a work in progress,” Price told me.

The European Court’s ruling applied only to search engines, not to social-media sites, but the principles underlying the decision have also drawn attention and concern at Facebook, whose headquarters are fifteen minutes north of Google, in Menlo Park. Facebook posts are not public in



## BAM 2014 Next Wave Festival

### Upcoming Highlights

#### Music

### Landfall

Sep. 23 – 27

Laurie Anderson  
Kronos Quartet

#### Theater/Dance

### Alan Smithee

### Directed

### This Play

Sep. 30 – Oct. 1

Big Dance Theater  
Paul Lazar  
Annie-B Parson

#### Theater/Music

### Shakespeare’s Sonnets

Oct. 7–12

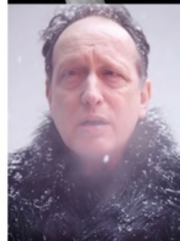
Berliner Ensemble  
Rufus Wainwright  
Robert Wilson

#### Dance

### Kontakthof

Oct. 23 – Nov. 2

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Photos (left): Embers, by Ros Kavanagh; (right column, top to bottom): Laurie Anderson, by Tim Knox; Alan Smithee Directed This Play, by Julieta Cervantes; Shakespeare’s Sonnets, by Lesley Leslie-Spinks; Kontakthof, by Oliver Look

the same way that search results are; most posts are generally visible only to “friends.” But the standards for access to posts are slippery and often poorly understood by the people who use the service. In light of this, the chances that photos on Facebook could stray in embarrassing directions may be even greater than the risk of unwanted results appearing in a Google search.

Elliot Schrage, Facebook’s vice-president of communications and public policy, told me, “On one thing, we are unambiguous. We always let people delete the content they create. If you put up a photo or a post, you always get to take it down.” But, while Facebook grants you the right to remove your own posts, what about others’ posts about you? Facebook allows users to “tag” photographs and videos to indicate the identity of the people who are portrayed. Users can untag themselves, but they can’t remove the actual photos. If you ask Facebook to remove photos, videos, or entire posts, a Community Operations team will consider your request. The team always removes pornographic posts, and it allows users to report a post that is “annoying” or “advocates violence” or “goes against my views.” In making these judgments, the team is guided by Facebook’s standards for acceptable expression. As with the Court’s decision on the right to be forgotten, the application of Facebook’s own terms leaves a lot of room for interpretation.

“There is an inevitable conflict between two distinct social values”—privacy and free speech, Schrage said. “The question is how do societies value those competing rights. Technology didn’t create the tension but just revealed it in a dramatic way.”

There are already signs that European regulators want to impose more restrictions on Google. At a July meeting in Brussels of European data regulators, known as the Article 29 Working Party, several officials suggested that Google had not gone far enough in complying with the Costeja decision. Some objected to Google’s practice of informing publishers when links that individuals objected to were deleted; such actions, they said, will merely encourage the republication of the material and thus cut against the

Costeja decision. Some also pressed Google to eliminate the disputed search results from Google.com, the main search page, as well as from the country-specific search engines. In response to these concerns, a Google official wrote to the European working group that, in Europe, Google directs Internet searches to local country sites, and less than five per cent of European searches go to Google.com—searches by travelers, most likely. (Google has also assembled a working group of outside scholars to advise the company on complying with the Costeja decision.)

Still, the day may come when a single court decision covering twenty-eight countries, as in the Costeja case, looks downright appealing to Internet companies. Different countries draw the line on these issues in different ways, and that creates particular problems in the borderless world of the Internet. Now that the Court has issued its ruling in the Costeja case, the claim goes back to a Spanish court, since it was brought by a Spanish lawyer regarding a Spanish newspaper. “Many countries are now starting to say that they want rules for the Internet that respond to their own local laws,” Jennifer Granick, of Stanford, said. “It marks the beginning of the end of the global Internet, where everyone has access to the same information, and the beginning of an Internet where there are national networks, where decisions by governments dictate which information people get access to. The Internet as a whole is being Balkanized, and Europeans are going to have a very different access to information than we have.”

It is clear, for the moment, that the Costeja decision has created a real, if manageable, problem for Google. But suppose that the French establish their own definition of the right to be forgotten, and the Danes establish another. Countries all around the world, applying their own laws and traditions, could impose varying obligations on Google search results. “The real risk here is the second-order effects,” Jonathan Zittrain, a professor at Harvard Law School and director of the Berkman Center for Internet and Society, said. “The Court may have established a perfectly reasonable test in this case. But

then what happens if the Brazilians come along and say, ‘We want only search results that are consistent with our laws’? It becomes a contest about who can exert the most muscle on Google.” Search companies might decide to tailor their search results in order to offend the fewest countries, limiting all searches according to the rules of the most restrictive country. As Zittrain put it, “Then the convoy will move only as fast as the slowest ship.”

Viktor Mayer-Schönberger believes that the European Court has taken an important first step. “It’s a pragmatic solution,” he said. “The underlying data are not deleted, but the Court has created, in effect, a speed bump.” In Germany, he explained, “if you quickly search on Google.de, you’ll not find the links that have been removed. But if you spend the extra ten seconds to go to Google.com you find them. You are not finding them accidentally, and that’s as it should be. This speed-bump approach gives people a chance to grow and get beyond these incidents in their pasts.”

The Internet’s unregulated idyll seems to be coming to an end, at least in Europe. That pleases Christos Catsouras. After the California Highway Patrol failed to turn over the copyrights, he and his family brought suit against it and the two employees who leaked the photographs, on a variety of grounds, including negligence, infliction of emotional distress, and invasion of privacy. Years passed as some of the charges were dismissed and then reinstated in the course of multiple motions and appeals. On the eve of trial, in 2012, more than five years after Nikki Catsouras’s death, the defendants settled with the family for nearly \$2.4 million. Christos Catsouras believes that the ruling by the European Court of Justice represents a broader victory. “I cried when I read about that decision,” he told me. “What a great thing it would have been for someone in our position. That’s all I wanted. I would do anything to be able to go to Google and have it remove those links.” ♦

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NEWYORKER.COM

A conversation with Jeffrey Toobin.

## BUDS

BY IAN FRAZIER

We are not yet satisfied with the league's handling of behaviors that so clearly go against our own company culture and moral code.

—Anheuser-Busch, responding to recent scandals in the National Football League.

Wait, wait, wait! Listen, O.K.? Will you just—just *listen*? I love Anheuser-Busch like a brother. I've known this company all my life, or since I was eleven, when my buddies and I got some Buds and drank them. Simply a great

You're too young to remember Spuds MacKenzie. The Budweiser dog, funny as hell, this dog danced in conga lines with beautiful "babes," as we used to call them. And he drank Bud! The dog did. Or you were supposed to *think* he did. I mean, it was just a commercial, where you can't show any person or dog actually drinking. But that's not the point. The point is this: Spuds MacKenzie was a moral dog. The moral fibre of that little animal practi-



product, a real American brand. But that's not the point. What my buddies and I consumed, way back when, just before gym class in fifth grade, along with a few shots of Old Overholt, was the Anheuser-Busch moral code. Kids today don't have that, maybe because they're not drinking enough Bud—but what do I know? I'm just one guy in a huge world. All I'm saying is, the Anheuser-Busch moral code is a part of me. That I *do* know.

cally jumped off the TV screen at you.

He was an inspiration to me, and to everybody, dog or human. I'm sorry, I get choked up when I think of the moral fineness of Spuds MacKenzie, and of the Anheuser-Busch company. Let me give you another example. Pine Ridge Indian Reservation, South Dakota. Just across the border, in Nebraska, a little town called Whiteclay sells more Budweiser to the Oglala Sioux than you've ever seen in your life. Budweiser beer

cans all over the place, all along the road. That's not the point. The point is that with every sip of Bud, every twelve-pack, every case or car trunkful of Bud, the strictest Anheuser-Busch moral code is being imbibed.

What other company hired the theologian Paul Tillich to give it its own private moral credo? I'll answer that question for you: not a single one. Not even, technically, Anheuser-Busch—but that's not the point. Anheuser-Busch did not actually need Paul Tillich or Reinhold Niebuhr or UThant or any of them to provide it with a solid foundation in the moral universe, because it had a pretty great morality already, which is said to be a natural by-product of the best domestic hops and beechwood aging. The original moral recipe is a secret, though.

Next round is on you. Remember? You don't? O.K., put it on my tab. "I love you, man." Now, I *know* you remember that guy. Loved his friends so much he was drinking all their Buds? A desperate alcoholic destroying all his personal relationships? He was morality, plus a beer ad. And, I'll tell you, after I saw that ad I felt so moral that I never again committed insurance fraud except once. That was the uplifting effect Anheuser-Busch had in one man's life—my own.

But. That. Is. Not. The. Point! Point is, look at the larger picture. Anheuser-Busch is our moral beacon shining in the fog, and it is also the fog. Beacon or fog, take your pick, whatever your mood might be, this company is both. Mostly it's a beacon, though, and we should be very grateful. It's that shining brewery on a hill that Jonathan Edwards wrote about so movingly while plastered. I'm getting choked up again. I'm right, aren't I, Tommy? Of course I am.

Those great big Anheuser-Busch Clydesdales with their huge haunches and big, gorgeous, shaggy feet pulling that beer wagon through the snow every Christmas: can you get more moral than that? Tommy, what're those feet called? Those great big, gorgeous, shaggy horse feet the Clydesdales have, with all the white fur or hair or whatever? Fetlocks? Beautiful! Tommy, you're a genius. Fetlocks! Spuds MacKenzie sometimes used to ride those horses, too. Remember that? ♦

## DIFFERENCE MAKER

*The childless, the parentless, and the Central Sadness.*

BY MEGHAN DAUM



The first child whose life I tried to make a difference in was Maricela. She was twelve years old and in the sixth grade at a middle school in the San Gabriel Valley, about a half hour's drive from my house, near downtown Los Angeles. We'd been matched by the Big Brothers Big Sisters organization, which put us in a "school-based program." This meant that Maricela would be excused from class twice a month in order to meet with me in an empty classroom. On our first visit, I brought art supplies—glue and glitter and stencils you could use to draw different types of horses. I hadn't been told much about Maricela, only that she had a lot of younger siblings and often got lost in the shuffle at home. She spent most of

our first meeting skulking around in the doorway, calling out to friends who were playing kickball in the courtyard. I sat at a desk tracing glittery horses, telling myself she'd come to me when she was ready.

Several months later, it was determined that Maricela saw me largely as a way to get out of class and therefore needed "different kinds of supports." I was transferred to a Big Brothers Big Sisters community-based program to work with fifteen-year-old Kaylee. She had requested a Big Sister, writing on her application that she needed "guidance in life." I found out that Kaylee had mentors from several volunteer organizations. Each had an area of expertise: help with college applications

and financial aid, help finding a summer job, help with "girl empowerment." Nearly every time I asked her if she'd been to a particular place—to the science center or the art museum or the Staples Center to see an L.A. Sparks women's basketball game—she told me that another mentor had taken her. So we often wound up going to the mall.

I was thirty-five years old when I worked with Maricela and thirty-six when I met Kaylee. I came to see these years as the beginning of the second act of my adult life. If the first act—college through age thirty-four or so—had been mostly taken up by delirious career ambition and almost compulsive moving among houses and apartments and regions of the country, the second was mostly about appreciating the value of staying put. I'd bought a house in a city that was feeling more and more like home. And though I could well imagine being talked out of my single life and getting married if the right person and circumstances came along—in fact, I met my eventual husband around the time I was matched with Kaylee—one thing that seemed increasingly unlikely to budge was my lack of desire to have children. After more than a decade of being told that I'd wake up one morning at age thirty or thirty-three—or, God forbid, forty—to the ear-splitting peals of my biological clock, I would still look at a woman pushing a stroller and feel no envy at all, only relief that I wasn't her.

I was willing to concede that I was possibly in denial. All the things people say to people like me were things I'd said to myself countless times. If I found the right partner, maybe I'd want a child because I'd want it *with him*. If I went to therapy to deal with whatever neuroses could be blamed on my own upbringing, maybe I'd trust myself not to repeat my childhood's more negative aspects. If I understood that you don't necessarily have to like other children in order to be devoted to your own (as it happens, this was my parents' stock phrase: "We don't like other children, we just like you"), I would stop taking my aversion to kids kicking airplane seats as a sign that I should never have any myself. After all, only a very small percentage of women

genuinely feel that motherhood isn't for them. Was I really that exceptional? And, if I was, why did I have names picked out for the children I didn't want?

For all this, I had reasons. They ran the gamut from "Don't want to be pregnant" to "Don't want to make someone deal with me when I'm dying." (And, for the record, I've never met a woman of any age and any level of inclination to have children who doesn't have names picked out.) Chief among them was my belief that I'd be a bad mother. Not in the Joan Crawford mode but in the mode of parents you sometimes see who obviously love their kids but clearly do not love their own lives. For every way I could imagine being a good mother, I could imagine ten ways that I'd botch the job irredeemably.

More than that, I simply felt no calling to be a parent. As a role, as *my* role, it felt inauthentic. It felt like not what I was supposed to be doing with my life. My contribution to society was not about contributing more people to it but, rather, about doing something for the ones who were already here. Ones like Maricela and Kaylee. I liked the idea of taking the extra time I had because I wasn't busy raising my own child and using it to help them. It also helped that if anyone, upon learning my feelings about having children, lobbed the predictable "selfish" grenade, I could casually let them know that I was doing my part to shape and enrich the next generation.

When Kaylee graduated from high school and went to college, I didn't take on a new mentee. The reason I gave the volunteer coordinator was that my life had got busier and more complicated. This was true. I had got married at thirty-nine, my mother had died shortly thereafter following a brutal illness, and I'd finally managed, after years of troubling inertia, to publish a new book. More true, though, was that being a Big Sister seemed almost categorically to call for activities that I normally avoided. I'd grown fond of Kaylee. Beneath her taciturn aloofness was an intuitive kindness. When I bawled my eyes out at the end of the movie "Charlotte's Web," she kindly passed me tissues from her purse. But I had also come to believe that what-

ever satisfactions were to be gleaned from youth outreach did not offset the soul-numbing torpor of the Beverly Center parking garage on a Saturday afternoon.

When my husband and I married, we both saw ourselves as ambivalent about having children. Since then, aside from a brief interlude of semi-willingness, my ambivalence had slid into something more like opposition. Meanwhile, my husband's ambivalence had slid into abstract desire. A marriage counsellor would surely advise a couple in such a situation to discuss the issue seriously and thoroughly, but, wrenching as it was to not be able to make my husband happy in this regard, it seemed to me that there was nothing to discuss. I didn't want to be a mother; it was as simple as that. And as if to prove that my reasons weren't shallow or rooted in some deep-seated antipathy toward kids, I decided to return to kid-related do-goodism. This time, though, I would not be going to the mall or buying useless art supplies. I would not stumble through the motions of being a role model. Instead, I would go where I was really needed, where the mall was beside the point. So I became a court-appointed advocate for children in the foster-care system. It was there that I met Matthew.

There is very little that I am permitted to reveal about Matthew, starting with his name, which is not Matthew, as Maricela's is not Maricela and Kaylee's is not Kaylee. I cannot provide a physical description, but for the sake of giving you something to hold on to I'm going to say he's African-American, knobby-kneed, and slightly nearsighted, and had just turned twelve years old when I met him. I cannot tell you about his parents or what they did to land their son in the child-welfare system, but I can say that it's about as horrific as anything you can imagine. They were permanently out of the picture, as were any number of others who'd tried at times to take their place. Matthew lived in an institutional group home with about seventy-five other kids. He'd lived in quite a few of these places over the years, and, bleak as they were, they'd come to represent familiar interstices between the pre-adoptive placements

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that he inevitably sabotaged by acting out as soon as he began to get comfortable. Like many foster kids, he felt safer in institutions than in anything resembling a family setting.

Court-appointed advocacy is a national program designed to facilitate communication among social workers, lawyers, judges, and others in particularly complicated foster-care cases. The advocate's job is to fit together the often disparate pieces of information about a child's situation and create a coherent narrative for the judge. This narrative takes the form of written reports submitted to the court and is supplemented with actual appearances in court, where the advocate can address the judge directly. Sometimes the information is simple: this child wants to play baseball but needs transportation to the practices and the games. Sometimes it's

gothic: this child is being locked in her bedroom by her foster mother because she's become violent and some glitch in the insurance plan has temporarily stopped coverage of her anti-psychotic medication. Though advocates are encouraged to develop a relationship with the children they work with, they are not mentors as much as investigators.

I'd been told that Matthew's problems were neither as simple as needing a ride to baseball practice nor as dire as being locked in his bedroom. During our first visit, he told me that what he wanted most was for me to take him to McDonald's. (The Happy Meal, it turns out, is the meal of choice for the unhappiest kids in the world.) But I wasn't allowed to take him off the grounds of the group home, so we sat in the dining hall and hobbled through

a conversation about what my role as his advocate amounted to. (He already knew; he'd had one before.) In my training sessions, I'd learned that it was a good idea to bring a game or a toy. After much deliberation, I had settled on a pack of cards that asked hundreds of "Would you rather" questions: "Would you rather be invisible or able to read minds?"; "Would you rather be able to stop time or fly?" Matthew's enthusiasm for this activity was tepid at best, and when I got to questions like "Would you rather go to an amusement park or a family reunion?" and "Would you rather be scolded by your teacher or by your parents?" I shivered at my stupidity for not having vetted them ahead of time.

"We don't have to play with these," I said.

"Uh-huh," Matthew said. This turned out to be his standard response to just about everything. It was delivered in the same tone regardless of context, a tone of impatience mixed with indifference—the tone people use when they're waiting for the other person to stop talking.

The next time I saw him, I was allowed to take him out. I suggested that we go to the zoo or to the automotive museum, but he said he wanted to go shopping at Target. For his recent birthday he'd received gift cards from his social worker and also from his behavioral specialist at the group home. He seemed upbeat, counting and recounting the cash in his pocket (he received a small weekly allowance from the group home) and adding it to the sum total of his gift cards, which included a card worth twenty-five dollars that I'd picked up at the advocacy office. He wanted something digital, preferably an MP3 player. The only thing in his price range was a Kindle. I tried to explain the concept of saving up a little while longer, but he insisted that he wanted the Kindle, even after I reminded him that he'd said he didn't like to read and that he would still have to pay for things to put on the Kindle. He took it to the checkout counter, where he was twenty-five dollars short anyway. The cashier explained that there were taxes. Also, it appeared that one of his gift cards had been partly spent. Matthew cast his eyes downward. He



"He had a magician!"

wouldn't look at me or at anyone, and I couldn't tell if he was going to cry or fly into a rage. There was a line of people behind us, so I lent him twenty-five dollars on the condition that he pay me back in installments.

"Do you know what installments are?" I asked.

"No."

"It's when you give or pay something back in small increments."

I knew he didn't know what "increments" meant, but I couldn't think of another word.

"So now you haven't just gone shopping—you've learned something, too!" I said.

Once we were back in the car, I found a piece of paper, tore it in half, and wrote out two copies of an I.O.U., which we both signed. Matthew seemed pleased by this and ran his index finger along the perimeter of the Kindle box as though he'd finally got his hands on a long-coveted item. I gave him command of the radio, and as he flipped from one Auto-Tuned remix to the next I found myself basking in the ecstatic glow of altruism. When I dropped him off at the group home, the promissory note tucked in his Target shopping bag along with the Kindle and the greasy cardboard plate that held the giant pretzel I'd also bought him, I felt useful. I felt proud.

It had been a long time between accomplishments. At least, it had become hard to identify them, as most of my goals for any given day or week took the form of tasks, mundane and otherwise, to be dreaded and then either crossed off a list or postponed indefinitely (*meet article deadline, get shirts from dry cleaner, start writing new book*). Little seemed to warrant any special pride. And though I wanted to believe that I was just bored, the truth was that the decision not to have children was like a slow drip of guilt into my veins.

My husband was patient and funny and smart. In other words, outstanding dad material. Wasting such material seemed like an unpardonable crime. Besides, I've always believed that it is not possible to fall in love with someone without picturing what it might be like to combine your genetic goods. It's almost an aspect of courtship, this vi-

sion of what your nose might look like smashed up against your loved one's eyes, this imaginary Cubist rendering of the things you hate most about yourself offset by the things you adore most in the other person. And, a little over a year after we married, this curiosity, combined with the dumb luck of finding and buying an elegant, underpriced, much-too-large-for-us house in a foreclosure sale, had proved sufficient cause for switching to the leave-it-to-fate method of birth control. Soon enough, I'd found myself pregnant.

It was as if the house itself had impregnated me, as if it had said, "I have three bedrooms and there are only two of you; what's wrong with this picture?" For eight weeks, I hung in a nervous limbo, thinking my life was about to become either unfathomably enriched or permanently ruined. Then I had a miscarriage. I was forty-one, so it was not exactly unexpected. And though there had been nothing enriching about my brief pregnancy, which continued to harass my hormones well after vacating the premises, I was left with something that in a certain way felt worse than permanent ruin. I was left with permanent doubt.

My husband was happy about the pregnancy and sad about the miscarriage. I was less sad about the miscarriage, though I undertook to convince myself otherwise by trying to get pregnant again. After three months of dizzying cognitive dissonance, I walked into the guest room that my husband used as an office and allowed myself to say, for once and for all, that I didn't want a baby. I'd thought I could talk myself into it, but those talks had failed.

As I was saying all this, I was lying on the cheap platform bed we'd bought in anticipation of a steady flow of out-of-town company. The curtains were lifting gently in the breeze. Outside, there was bougainvillea, along with bees and hummingbirds and mourning doves. There was a grassy lawn where the dog rolled around scratching its back, and a big table on the deck where friends sat on weekends eating grilled salmon and drinking wine and com-

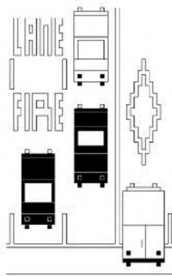
plaining about things they knew were a privilege to complain about (the cost of real estate, the noise of leaf blowers, the overratedness of the work of more successful peers). And as I lay on that bed it occurred to me, terrifyingly, that all of it might not be enough. Maybe such pleasures, while pleasurable enough, were merely trimmings on a nonexistent tree. Maybe nothing—not a baby or the lack of a baby, not a beautiful house, not rewarding work—was ever going to make us anything other than the chronically dissatisfied, perpetual second-guessers we already were.

"I'm sorry," I said. I meant this a million times over. To this day, there is nothing I've ever been sorer about than my inability to make my husband a father.

"It's O.K.," he said.

Except it wasn't, really. From that moment on, a third party was introduced into our marriage. It was not a corporal party but an amorphous one, a ghoulish presence that functioned as both cause and effect of the absence of a child. It had even, in the back of my mind, come to have a name. It was the Central Sadness. It collected around our marriage like soft, stinky moss. It rooted our arguments and dampened our good times. It taunted us from the sidelines of our social life (the barbecues with toddlers underfoot; a friend's child interrupting conversations mid-sentence; the clubby comparing of notes about Ritalin and dance lessons and college tuition, which prompted us to feign interest lest we come across like overgrown children ourselves). It haunted our sex life. Not since I was a teen-ager (a virginal one at that) had I been so afraid of getting pregnant. I wondered then if our marriage was on life support, if at any moment one of us was going to realize that the humane thing to do would be to call it even and call it a day.

Compared with this existential torment, foster-care advocacy was almost comforting. Though it was certainly more demanding than Big Brothers Big Sisters, I found it considerably easier—or



## A Critique of Pure Reason



at least more straightforward than traditional mentoring. For one thing, advocating for a foster kid mostly required dealing with adults. It meant talking to lawyers about potential adoptive placements and meeting with school administrators about Matthew's disciplinary issues and sitting around the courthouse all day when there was a hearing. Despite the mournful quality of it all, I found not just gratification but actual enjoyment in my efforts to help. I liked spending hours on the phone with my supervisor, a more seasoned advocate, lamenting the labyrinthine bureaucracy of the child-welfare system. I liked sitting around the tiny attorneys' lounge outside the courtroom, where there was always a plate of stale supermarket pastries next to the coffee maker and clusters of lawyers grumbling about the judge, their clients, the whole hopeless gestalt. I was moved by the family dramas playing out in the courthouse waiting areas. Everywhere, there were children with women—relatives, neighbors, foster mothers—who had taken custody of them. Occasionally, there would be a physical altercation and an officer would have to intervene. The courthouse was its own little planet of grimness and dysfunction. By contrast, I felt bright and capable.

Matthew was smart in the way a lot

of longtime foster kids are smart. He was a quick and reasonably accurate judge of character, and as soon as he determined that someone was not a threat he began the process of figuring out what the person could do for him. As much of a downer as this behavior could be for people with romantic ideas of helping troubled kids, it was a perfectly understandable survival mechanism, and I grew to respect it. Much of the work I did for Matthew took place behind the scenes. I made sure that his highly competent, crushingly overworked lawyer knew what his less competent, also crushingly overworked social worker was doing. Working with an education attorney, I got Matthew out of his raucous, overcrowded public school and into a calmer learning environment. But though Matthew was vaguely aware of my efforts, what he seemed to most appreciate was my ability to transport him to places like Target and GameStop. In turn, I grudgingly appreciated his G.P.S.-like knowledge of any such place within a twenty-mile radius of wherever he happened to be at any given time. Not that we didn't have our teachable moments. One afternoon, after taking Matthew out for giant burritos, I gave my left-

overs to a homeless man sleeping in the alley near the restaurant. At first, Matthew was confused about why anyone would do such a thing, but as we continued down the street he said he wanted to give his food away, too, so we turned around and walked back toward the man. Matthew was shy about approaching him, even whispering that he'd changed his mind. But, after he set his food on the sidewalk and skittered away, his look of surprised delight suggested that he'd momentarily stepped into a different life, one in which charity was something he could provide as well as receive.

Still, I knew better than to think I was a major role model. I certainly wasn't a mother figure. I was more like a random port in the unrelenting storm that was his life. And that was enough. Matthew's lot was so bad that it could be improved, albeit triflingly, with one mini-pizza at a food court. A kid with higher expectations would have been more than I could handle.

By then, more than a year had passed since my miscarriage and my subsequent declaration that I did not want to have a child. Though my husband had been supportive and accepting, he now began to say out loud again that he wanted to be someone's father—or, at least, that he might not be O.K. with never being someone's father. He wanted to use what he knew about the world to help someone find his or her own way through it. He wanted "someone to hang out with" when he got older. He didn't necessarily need the baby- or toddler-rearing experience. He didn't need the kid to look like him or be the same race. When I asked if he'd consider mentoring or even being an advocate, he said he wasn't sure that would be enough.

The seeds of a potential compromise were planted. Maybe we could take in, or even adopt, a foster child. This would be a child old enough that we might actually qualify as young or average-age parents rather than ones of "advanced age." (If I adopted a ten-year-old at forty-three, it would be the equivalent of having had him at the eminently reasonable age of thirty-three.)

We knew that any child we took in would surely need intensive therapy. He would have demons and heartbreaking

baggage. But we would find the needle in the haystack, the kid who dreamed of being an only child in a quiet, book-filled house. I probably wouldn't be a great mother, but my standards would be so different from those set by the child-welfare system that it wouldn't matter if I dreaded birthday parties or resorted to store-bought Halloween costumes.

I knew that this was ninety-per-cent bullshit. I knew that it wasn't O.K. to be a mediocre parent just because you'd adopted the child out of foster care. A few times, my husband and I scrolled through online photo listings of available children in California, but we might as well have been looking at personal ads from a far-away land that no one ever travelled to. There were three-year-olds with cerebral palsy on ventilators, huge sibling groups who spoke no English, kids who "struggle with handling conflict appropriately." Occasionally, there would be some bright-eyed six- or seven-year-old who you could tell was going to be O.K., who had the great fortune of being able to turn the world on with his smile. So as the Central Sadness throbbled around our marriage, threatening to turn even the most quotidian moments, like the sight of a neighbor tossing a ball around with his kid in the yard, into an occasion for bickering or sulking, the foster-child option placated us with the illusion that all doors were not yet closed.

One day, while my nerves swung on a wider-than-usual pendulum between empathy for Matthew and despondency over my marriage, I decided to call a foster and adoption agency. Actually, I asked my husband to call. I'd been told in my training that advocates are not supposed to get involved with fostering children, even those who have nothing to do with their advocacy. Matthew was not allowed to go to my house or even to meet my husband or any of my friends. I didn't want to do anything that might be construed as a conflict of interest. When my husband and I arrived at an orientation meeting, I signed in using his last name, something I'd never done before.

"I've got to be incognito," I said, rather dramatically. "Let's not draw attention to ourselves."

Each of us was asked to say why we were there. When our turn came, my

husband spoke briefly about how we were exploring things in a very preliminary way. Then I spoke about how I was ambivalent about children but that this potentially seemed like a good thing to do. I then proceeded to dominate the rest of the meeting. I acted as if I were back in advocacy training. I raised my hand to ask overly technical questions about things like the Indian Child Welfare Act and the Adoptions and Safe Families Act and throw around their acronyms as if everyone knew what they meant. I asked what the chances of getting adopted were for a twelve-year-old who had flunked out of several placements.

"Maybe this isn't the right setting for these questions," my husband whispered.

As the meeting wrapped up, the woman from the agency announced that the next step was to fill out an application and then attend a series of training sessions. After that, she said, prospective parents who passed their home studies could be matched with a child at any time and be on their way to adoption.

Her words were like ice against my spine.

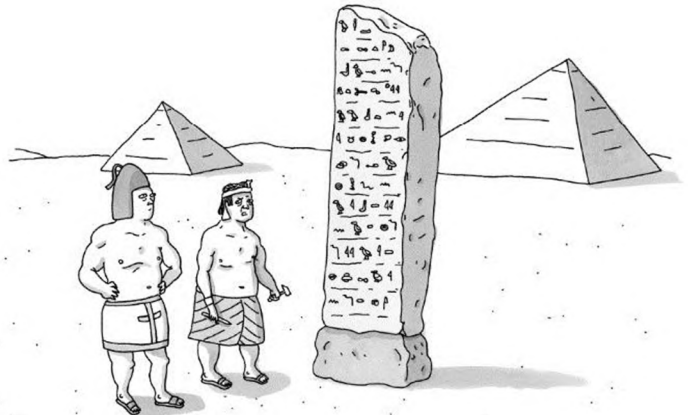
"We're not at that point!" I said to my husband. "Not remotely close."

I suggested that he apply to be a mentor for "transitional-age youth," kids who are aging out of the system but still need help figuring out the basics of life. He filled out a form, with the slightly

bewildered resignation of someone agreeing to repair something he hadn't noticed was broken. The woman from the agency said she'd call him about volunteer opportunities. She never did.

A phrase you frequently hear in the foster-care world is that a child has "experienced a lot of loss." It comes up in the blurbs accompanying the photo listings. *Jamal has experienced a lot of loss but knows the right family is out there. Clarissa is working through her losses and learning to have a more positive attitude.* These appear to be references to the original loss of being taken away from the biological family, but often they mean that the child has got close to being adopted but that things haven't worked out. With Matthew, I suspected that the trauma of being removed from his biological parents had been dwarfed by the cumulative implosions of the placements that followed. He seemed to know that he'd lost his temper too many times or let himself lapse into behavior that frightened people. But when I asked about this, which I did only once or twice, he tended to offer some rote excuse on behalf of the estranged parents, which he'd probably heard from his social workers. He'd say that they lacked the resources to sufficiently meet his needs. He'd say that they didn't have the skills to handle a kid like him.

About eight months into my work with Matthew, a couple who had been visiting him at the group home and later



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hosted him at their home on weekends decided not to pursue adoption after all. He'd been hopeful about the placement, and, when I saw him a few days after things fell through, I found him pacing around his cinder-block dormitory like a nervous animal. The prospective mom had given him a used MP3 player, perhaps as a parting gift, but the group-home staff had locked it up for some kind of disciplinary reason. He sat down on a bench outside the dormitory with his Kindle, bending the plastic until pieces began breaking off.

"I know what a huge bummer this is," I said. "I'm really sorry."

"I don't care," he said.

Every possible response seemed inadequate, maybe even capable of doing long-term damage.

"I know you probably do care," I said finally. "But sometimes we care so much about stuff that it's easier to pretend for a while that we don't care at all."

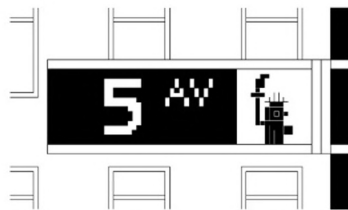
The temperature was in the high nineties; the choke of autumn in Southern California was in full, scorching force. The Kindle was practically melting into soft, curling shards as Matthew tore it apart. I thought about the twenty-three dollars he still owed me for it and wondered which was worse, letting him destroy it or lecturing him about how money and the stuff it buys aren't disposable. Both tactics seemed fairly useless, but the latter seemed almost like a joke. The kid's whole life was disposable. Like most foster kids, he kept many of his things in a plastic garbage bag so he could grab and go as needed.

Through angry tears, Matthew declared that he was never going back inside the dormitory and would sleep on the lawn until he could live in a real home. He said that he'd got mad at the prospective mom for not buying him something he wanted but that he hadn't done anything too bad. He said he'd kicked over some chairs but they weren't broken or anything. He just wanted another chance but they wouldn't give him one and it wasn't fair. After a while, I suggested that he put his feelings in writing, a suggestion that was based less on his own predilections than on what I would do in his situation, but it was all I could think of.

"Let's go inside and get a piece of paper," I said. "And you write down what you want and how you feel."

He agreed, which surprised me. We went inside and into his room, where blue industrial carpet covered the floor and a low-slung twin bed was draped with a thin blue blanket. He got out a spiral-bound notebook and lay on the floor on his stomach, legs spread slightly and elbows propped up as he began to write. He looked more like a normal kid than I'd ever seen him. I left him and headed down to the common room, where about six boys, some of them older and as tall as men, were sprawled in front of a loud television. I asked a staff member where the bathroom was and, without looking up, she directed me down a corridor that ran through an adjacent dormitory.

I passed another common room, filled with younger children. They were seated at a long table set for dinner and they squirmed in their chairs and fiddled with their utensils. One kid shouted above the others and held a basket of breadsticks over his head so that no one could reach them. I slowed down as I passed the entryway. It had been a while since I'd looked through the state photo listings, but, seeing the small, open faces, the feet that barely touched the floor, the institutional food heaped onto institutional plates, I was reminded of the tiny spark of hope those listings had given me and the few occasions when the conversation with my husband about adopting from foster care didn't necessarily feel like



bullshit or a pacifier but, rather, like a viable antidote to the Central Sadness.

I returned to Matthew's room. He was sitting on the bed, reading over his statement. He handed me the notebook.

*I want to live with ——— and ———. I'm sorry I got mad. If you give me another chance I promise I'll never get mad again.*

"Will you give that to them?" Matthew asked me.

"If I can," I said, even though the decision had been made. Later, I realized that telling Matthew to write that note was the cruelest thing I could have done to him.

There are times when I harbor a secret fantasy that one day my husband will get a call from a person claiming to be his son or his daughter. Ideally, this person will be in his or her late teens or early twenties, the product of some brief fling or one-night stand during the Clinton Administration. My husband will be shocked, of course, and probably in denial, and then suddenly his face will blanch and his jaw will grow slack. He will hang up the phone and tell me the news and I will also be shocked. Eventually, though, we'll both be thrilled. This new relation will breeze in and out of our lives like a sort of extreme niece or nephew. We'll dispense advice and keep photos on the fridge but, having never got into the dirty details of actual child rearing, take neither credit nor blame for the final results.

I thought I'd undertaken volunteer work with kids because I was, above all, a realist. I thought it showed the depth of my understanding of my own psyche. I thought it was a way of turning my limitations, specifically my reluctance to have children, into new and useful possibilities. I thought the thing I felt most guilty about could be turned into a force for good. But now I know that I was under the sway of my own complicated form of baby craziness. Wary as I've always been of our culture's reflexive idealization—even obsessive sanctification—of the bond between parent and child, it seems that I fell for another kind of myth. I fell for the myth of the village. I fell for the idea that nurture from a loving adoptive community could erase or at least heal the abuses of horrible natural parents.

I'd also tricked myself into believing that trying to help these kids would put the Central Sadness on permanent hiatus, that my husband and I could find peace (not just peace but real fulfillment) in our life together. Instead, we continued to puzzle over the same unanswerable questions. Were we sad because we lacked some essential element of lifetime partnership, such as a child or an agreement about wanting or not wanting one, or because life is just sad sometimes—maybe even a lot of the time? Or perhaps

it wasn't even sadness we were feeling but, simply, the dull ache of aging. Maybe children don't save their parents from this ache as much as distract from it. And maybe creating a diversion from aging is in fact much of the point of parenting.

Matthew got transferred to a new group home shortly after he turned thirteen. It was practically indistinguishable from the old one. I took him to Target to spend a twenty-five-dollar gift card I'd mailed him for his birthday, but, like the other times, when we reached the front of the checkout line the cashier said there wasn't enough left on the card. Matthew claimed it was defective. On the conveyor belt sat several bags of chips, a package of cookies, and boxes of macaroni and cheese that he wanted to keep in the kitchen at the group home. I pulled out my credit card and paid. I knew he was lying and I told him so. He said he wasn't. He said no one ever believed him. He said he had nothing, that no one cared about him or ever did anything for him. He said no one ever gave him a chance or cut him a break. He said everyone in his life was useless.

We got in the car and he ate his chips as we drove in silence. When I pulled up to the entrance of the group home, he gathered his loot without looking at me.

"Happy birthday," I said.  
"Uh-huh," he said.

Back at home, my husband and I sat down to dinner around our usual time of eight-thirty. We looked through the magazines that had come in the mail. The evening air was still cool, but the daylight was beginning to linger. Soon it would be summer. Friends would start coming over to eat on the deck. After that, it would be fall and then what passes for winter. I would continue to work with Matthew, and he would grow older in his group home while I grew older in my too-big-for-us house. My husband would make peace with the way things had turned out—except in those moments when he didn't have peace, which, of course, come around for everyone. Our lives would remain our own. Whether that was fundamentally sad or fundamentally exquisite, we'd probably never be certain. But if there's anything Matthew taught me it's that having certainty about your life is a great luxury. ♦

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On the evening of August 8th, Najat Ali Saleh, a former commander of the Kurdish army, was summoned to a meeting with Masoud Barzani, the President of the semiautonomous Kurdish region that occupies the northern part of Iraq. Barzani, a longtime guerrilla fighter, was alarmed. Twenty-four hours before, fighters with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) had made a huge incursion into the Kurds' territory. They had overrun Kurdish forces in the western Iraqi towns of Sinjar and Makhmour, and had surged as far as Gwer, fifteen miles from the capital city of Erbil. At the Mosul Dam, on the Tigris River, they had seized the controls, giving them the ability to inundate Baghdad with fifteen feet of water. The Kurdish army is known throughout the region for its ferocity—its fighters are called peshmerga, or “those who face death”—and the defeat had been a humiliation. “We were totally unprepared for what happened,” Saleh told me. Kurdish leaders were so incensed that they relieved five commanders of their posts and detained them for interrogation. “It would have been better for them if they had fought to the death,” he said.

Saleh, a veteran of the Kurds' wars against Saddam Hussein, was being called back into service. His orders were to retake Makhmour and keep going, pushing back ISIS fighters wherever he found them. Working quickly, he gathered several thousand soldiers, surrounded the city, and went in. By the next day, Makhmour was in Kurdish hands; in the following weeks, the Kurds forced ISIS fighters out of twenty surrounding villages. When I saw Saleh, on a recent visit, his men had just recaptured a village called Baqert. With mortars still thudding nearby, he exuded a heavy calm, cut by anger. I asked him if he'd taken any prisoners. “Only dead,” he said.

The fighting between ISIS and the Kurds stretches along a six-hundred-and-fifty-mile front in northeastern Iraq—a jagged line that roughly traces one border of Iraqi Kurdistan, the territory that the Kurds have been fighting for decades to establish as an independent state. With as many as thirty million people spread across the Middle East, the Kurds claim to be the world's largest ethnic group without a country. Iraqi Kurdistan, which contains about a quarter of that population, is a landlocked region



MAGNUM  
*Masoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdish regional government. In July, he told the Kurdish*



A REPORTER AT LARGE

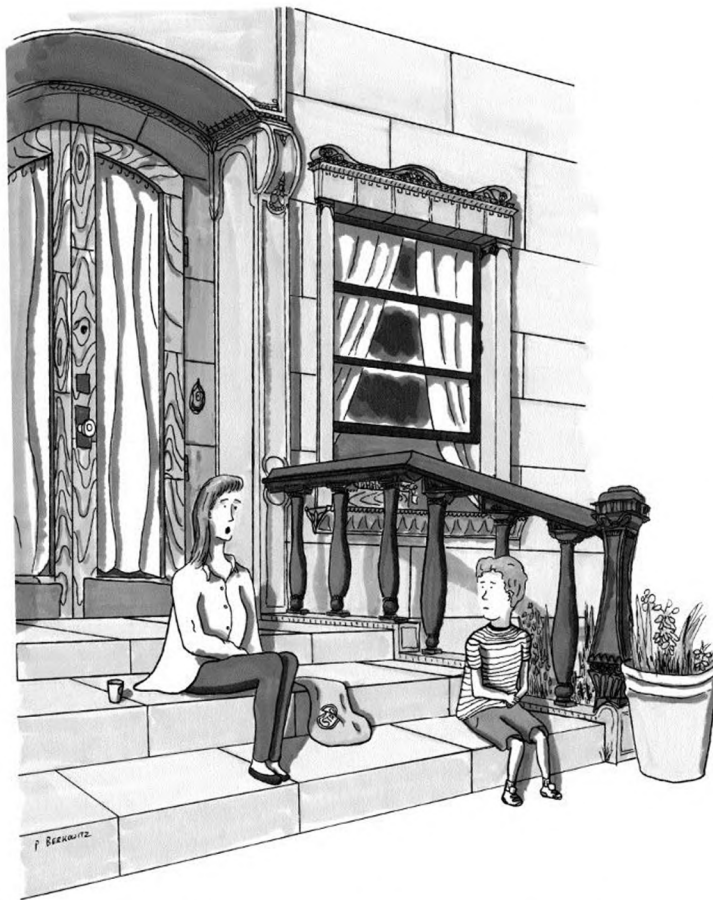
## THE FIGHT OF THEIR LIVES

*The White House wants the Kurds to help  
save Iraq from ISIS. The Kurds may be more  
interested in breaking away.*

BY DEXTER FILKINS

*parliament, "The time has come to decide our fate, and we should not wait for other people to decide it for us."*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MOISES SAMAN



*"We could have a lemonade stand, sweetie, but wouldn't you rather do a pop-up ramen shop?"*

surrounded almost entirely by neighbors—Turkey, Iran, and the government in Baghdad—that oppose its bid for statehood.

The incursion of ISIS presents the Kurds with both opportunity and risk. In June, the ISIS army swept out of the Syrian desert and into Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city. As the Islamist forces took control, Iraqi Army soldiers fled, setting off a military collapse through the region. The Kurds, taking advantage of the chaos, seized huge tracts of territory that had been claimed by both Kurdistan and the government in Baghdad. With the newly acquired land, the political climate for independence seemed promising. The region was also finding new eco-

nomics strength; vast reserves of oil have been discovered there in the past decade. In July, President Barzani asked the Kurdish parliament to begin preparations for a vote on self-rule. "The time has come to decide our fate, and we should not wait for other people to decide it for us," Barzani said.

Since 2003, when the U.S. destroyed the Iraqi state and began spending billions of dollars trying to build a new one, the Kurds have been their most steadfast ally. When American forces departed, in 2011, not a single U.S. soldier had lost his life in Kurdish territory. As the rest of Iraq imploded, only the Kurdish region realized the dream that President George W. Bush had set forth when he

ordered the attack: it is pro-Western, largely democratic, largely secular, and economically prosperous. President Obama recently told the *Times* that the Kurdish government is "functional the way we would like to see."

Still, the Administration, bound to a policy it calls One Iraq, is quietly working to thwart the Kurds' aspirations. American officials are warning companies that buying Kurdish oil may have dire legal consequences, and the warnings have been effective: the Kurdish regional government is nearly bankrupt. And yet, as the peshmerga work to force ISIS out of Kurdish territory, they have been supported by American jets and drones, and by American Special Forces on the ground. In August, President Obama ordered covert shipments of arms to the Kurds. By the end of the month, Kurdish forces had taken back much of the territory that they had lost to ISIS, and were preparing operations to reclaim the rest.

Obama has spoken carefully in public, but it is plain that the Administration wants the Kurds to do two potentially incompatible things. The first is to serve as a crucial ally in the campaign to destroy ISIS, with all the military funding and equipment that such a role entails. The second is to resist seceding from the Iraqi state. Around Washington, the understanding is clear: if the long-sought country of Kurdistan becomes real, America's twelve-year project of nation building in Iraq will be sundered. Kurdish leaders acknowledge that the emergence of ISIS and the implosion of Syria are changing the region in unpredictable ways. But the Kurds' history with the state of Iraq is one of persistent enmity and bloodshed, and they see little benefit in joining up with their old antagonists. "Iraq exists only in the minds of people in the White House," Masrour Barzani, the Kurdish intelligence chief and Masoud's son, told me. "We need our own laws, our own rules, our own country, and we are going to get them."

On March 16, 1988, Nosreen Abdul Qadeer, a sixteen-year-old newlywed in the Kurdish town of Halabja, was helping her mother prepare lunch for guests when she heard a series of explosions. This was unremarkable: the government of Saddam Hussein, then at war with Iran, had lumped the Kurds in with

its foreign enemies. But the planes that day were flying unusually low, barely above the treetops. “I could see the pilots inside, taking photos of the city,” she said. The family rushed to the basement to wait out the bombardment.

A few minutes later, Qadeer noticed that her family members’ eyes were turning red. Then an eerie smell seeped under the doorway and down the stairs. One moment it reminded Qadeer of apples, the next of rotten eggs. When the shelling stopped, she and her family went outside. “Children were vomiting in the streets,” Qadeer said. “People’s noses were running with blood. Goats and chickens were on the ground choking to death.”

As people around her collapsed, Qadeer began to run, and found herself with a group of people she didn’t know. As they hustled toward the edge of town, they turned into the wind, discovering that it was easier to breathe that way. Qadeer urged strangers to keep moving, even as they passed the dead. She found many of the stragglers laughing deliriously as they expired. One was a boy, seated on the ground, who refused to budge. “Let me do my homework!” he said. “Let me do my homework!” That night, as the group prepared to sleep in an abandoned building, Qadeer began to lose her eyesight, and her memory started to fade. Her husband, Baktiar, found her, and placed tea leaves over her eyes to ease the burning. The next day, the group, with nearly everyone blind, began to move again, roping themselves together so that no one would be lost. A few days later, Qadeer awoke in an Iranian hospital, lashed to a bed. She was blind, burned, and bleeding from her vagina. But, she said, “I was not dead after all.” Twenty days later, her vision began to return. It was only then that she and the others realized that they had been attacked with chemical weapons.

I met Qadeer, who is now forty-two, at a museum in Halabja dedicated to the victims of the attack, which Saddam’s government carried out with sarin and mustard gas. As many as five thousand people died in the assault, including seventeen of Qadeer’s relatives, making it one of the most vicious acts of Saddam’s reign. An audiotape recovered after the fall of his regime recorded the raspy voice of Ali Hassan Al Majid, the dictator’s cousin and the orchestrator of the attack. “I will kill them all!” Majid says. “Fuck the international

community! I will fuck the father of the international community!”

People from Halabja still suffer from respiratory illnesses caused by the chemical weapons: a resident of the town dies every four months from the residual effects. “I don’t have a normal life,” Qadeer told me. “If I go without my medicine, it is like the first day for me.” Like many women who survived the attack, Qadeer struggled to bear children; one was born with a hole in his heart and died a few weeks later. It was not until 2000, twelve years after the attack, that Qadeer was able to conceive successfully; she now has three healthy children. “All I ask for is a bright life for my children,” she said. “The person inside me died long ago.”

In the years after the attack, some of her rare moments of satisfaction came from the demise of Saddam Hussein. After his arrest, in December of 2003, Qadeer watched his trial every day on television; if she missed it, she would stay up until 2 A.M. to watch the second broadcast. Part of her wishes that he were still around: “I think the best revenge would have been for him to see what we have accomplished here in Kurdistan.”

Decades of mass trauma, mostly inflicted by the government in Baghdad, have generated a momentum toward statehood that seems nearly unstoppable. For Masoud Barzani, a lifetime of massacres and betrayals has relieved him of the obligation to help save Iraq for someone else’s benefit. “We tried our best to make a new Iraq, based on a new set of principles,” he said. “We spared no effort to help make this new Iraq work. But unfortunately it has failed. So our question to our doubters is just that: How much longer should we wait, and how much longer should we deny our destiny for some unknown future?”

Iraq was created in 1920, in the postwar settlement that established the modern Middle East. From the start, it was an unstable amalgam of three former provinces of the Ottoman Empire: a predominantly Shiite one in the south, a Sunni-dominated one in the center, and a largely Kurdish one in the north. Though many national groups in Europe and the Middle East gained statehood, the Kurds were split among the new states of Iraq, Syria,

and Turkey and the ancient one of Iran.

Barzani was born in 1946 in the closest thing to an independent state that the Kurds have ever known: the Mahabad Republic, an autonomous region in northern Iran. Mahabad was supported by the Soviet Union, which was occupying large swaths of Iran. When the Red Army withdrew, under Western pressure, the republic collapsed. At the time, Mustafa Barzani, Masoud’s father, was the leader of the Kurds. He was forced to flee, leaving behind his wife and infant son, and they were not reunited for twelve years. Mustafa Barzani is still revered across Kurdistan, his portrait adorning walls in homes and teahouses. To Masoud, he was a remote figure, a man whom everyone but him seemed to know. “Masoud grew up away from his father, not knowing him, and yet his father was the most famous man among all the Kurds,” Shafiq Qazzaz, a friend of both men, said.

In the mid-nineteen-seventies, with the backing of the Shah of Iran, Israel, and the Central Intelligence Agency, Kurdish rebels secured a large self-governing area in northern Iraq. Mustafa Barzani, charismatic but unsophisticated, saw the Americans’ interest as a guarantee of victory. “My father never trusted the Shah, but he had total faith in America,” Masoud told me. Then, in 1975, the Shah made a separate peace with Saddam and cut off support to the Kurds. Mah-

mond Othman, one of Mustafa’s closest advisers, recalled that the Shah announced his decision in a meeting, so dispassionately that he never raised his voice: “He said he’d made a deal and that, unfortunately, a third party had lost—and that was us, the Kurds.” When the Shah withdrew his aid, the C.I.A. and the Israelis quickly followed. The Iraqi

Army surged back in, and more than a hundred thousand Kurds fled the region. A few months later, Mustafa received a diagnosis of advanced lung cancer. He spent his last years in the United States. Before he died, he wrote to President Jimmy Carter: “I could have prevented this calamity which befell my people, had I not fully believed in the promise of America.” The moment still resonates; Henry Kissinger’s name is known, and reviled, by nearly every Kurd. “It took



Masoud a long time to regain his trust in the United States,” Qazzaz said. “He felt his father had died from the betrayal.”

The history of the Kurds’ relationship with the United States is a series of swings between rescue and abandonment, and, as a consequence, between gratitude and distrust. In early 1987, when Peter Galbraith was a young staffer on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, he and a group of colleagues went on an official visit to Iraq. The itinerary, Galbraith recalled recently, took him to Iraq’s Kurdish region. As he and a government escort drove through the countryside of northern Iraq, Galbraith was struck by a string of empty villages, some of which were being bulldozed. Other villages, designated on American military maps, had vanished. Galbraith wasn’t allowed to get out of the car to investigate. “It was shocking,” Galbraith said. “Nobody knew what was happening.”

The following year, back in the U.S., Galbraith began to read reports of Kurdish civilians who claimed to have been attacked by poison gas. The Iran-Iraq War had recently ended, so there could be no dispute about who was using the weapon. “I said, ‘Saddam intends to commit genocide against the Kurds,’” Galbraith told me. When he and his colleagues visited the Turkish-Iraqi border, he quickly confirmed that some Kurdish refugees were suffering from the effects of poison gas.

What Galbraith had witnessed was the Anfal campaign, named for a chapter in the Koran that refers to the victory of a handful of the Prophet’s followers over an army of unbelievers. Saddam launched Anfal in 1987, beginning the destruction of some four thousand Kurdish villages as he tried to depopulate the countryside. Galbraith embarked on a lonely effort to publicize the Kurds’ plight; his first attempt, working with Senator Claiborne Pell to impose sanctions on Saddam’s regime, failed in Congress.

In August, 1990, the West’s view of Saddam changed abruptly, when he ordered his Army into Kuwait. Saddam’s invasion prompted an enormous international response, including an American-led military intervention. The ground campaign to throw the Iraqi Army out of Kuwait was accomplished with stunning speed—it took exactly a hundred

hours—and it was followed almost immediately by an uprising among Iraq’s Kurds and its long-suppressed Shiite majority. The uprising was encouraged by American officials, who, in radio broadcasts, urged Iraqis to deal with Saddam on their own.

At negotiations for the Iraqi Army’s surrender, the American commander, General Norman Schwarzkopf, granted Iraq’s request that its pilots be allowed to fly helicopters around the country—not realizing, he said later, that they might be deployed to suppress an uprising. With the helicopters leading the way, Saddam’s Army mounted a ferocious counterattack against rebels inside the country, killing more than a hundred and fifty thousand Shiites. Almost two million Kurds, fearing gas attacks, fled for Iran and Turkey. Tens of thousands died from privation or military attacks along the way.

As a catastrophe unfolded in northern Iraq, President George H. W. Bush refused to intervene, calling Saddam’s crackdown an internal Iraqi affair. Masoud Barzani, who had taken over leadership of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (K.D.P.) after his father’s death, found himself with fewer than a hundred fighters. “We vowed to fight to the last bullet,” he said. In the Kore Valley, Barzani’s men stopped a column of Iraqi tanks; their rusting hulks remain, an essential part of the Kurdish national legend. But Saddam’s offensive continued. President Bush, confronted with a humanitarian disaster, ordered American planes to enforce “no-fly zones” in southern and northern Iraq, threatening to shoot down any Iraqi aircraft that ventured inside.

The no-fly zones proved decisive, and Saddam invited Barzani to Baghdad to arrange an accord. Barzani recalled confronting him, alone, in his office: “For five minutes, I stood there, unable to breathe, and I thought I was having a heart attack. Finally, I told Saddam, ‘I have swum through a sea of blood.’” Saddam, he said, was cordial, even deferential; when tea was served, he reached across the table and switched cups, assuring Barzani that his tea was not poisoned. The two men struck a deal to stop the fighting. Barzani told me that he is haunted by the memory of meeting Saddam. “He has a double personality, two paradoxical people in the same body,” he said. “He

was so polite with me, in all my meetings with him. But his actions? No devil can make those actions.”

The deal with Saddam fell apart. But, under pressure from American jets and from the peshmerga, Saddam withdrew his forces from most of the Kurdish region in October, 1991. The refugees began to come home. Few people in the West realized it at the time, but the no-fly zone in northern Iraq marked the beginning of the Kurds’ road to self-rule;



*Kurdish peshmerga forces in southern Kirkuk. The*

for twelve years, it gave them space to develop their institutions. “The no-fly zone was one of the most efficient and humane uses of power in the history of American foreign policy,” Galbraith said. The Kurds saw an opportunity early. In 1991, with the Iraqi Army gone, Barzani announced elections for a new Kurdish parliament, a prototype for the state he intended to build. Something else had changed, too: for the first time in his adult life, he stopped carrying a gun. In a

speech he made at the time, he said, “We need to show the whole world that Kurds are not just brave and good at fighting but also good at respecting the law.”

When I met Barzani in his office in the town of Salahuddin, on a sweltering afternoon, he cut an almost elfin figure. At sixty-eight, he is short and squat, with a round, animated face and an easy smile that suggested the egalitarian openness of a guerrilla com-

mander. He wore a red-and-white Kurdish turban, called a *jamadani*, and the traditional peshmerga outfit of baggy pants and a tunic, held tight by a corset designed to support the back on mountain treks. Barzani told me that he goes for long hikes in the Kurdish countryside, sometimes spending the night in the open air. He figures that he has spent at least half his life in the mountains, as a refugee and as a guerrilla leader. “It was a very beautiful life



*name peshmerga means “those who face death,” and the Kurdish army is known throughout the region for its ferocity.*

for me, and I don't regret a single day," he said. "It was very risky, very hard, but it was nice."

Barzani has fought for the Kurdish cause for fifty years. During that time, the Kurds endured successive waves of calamity, mostly at the hands of Saddam Hussein: the genocidal onslaught of Anfal, which killed as many as a hundred and eighty thousand people; chemical-weapons attacks; and an unrelenting campaign of torture and imprisonment that touched nearly every Kurdish family. Barzani himself lost thirty-seven family members.

As the President of the Kurdish region, Barzani seems more a plainspoken populist than a deep thinker on policy. And yet his admirers say that his finest moment came in August, 2005, during negotiations over Iraq's new constitution, when he helped to lay the groundwork for an incipient Kurdish state. The day after the constitution was completed, I talked with Barzani, who was dressed, uncharacteristically, in a Western-style suit and tie. He looked satisfied but exhausted. "Politics is much more difficult than war," he told me. "In politics, there are so many more fronts."

Throughout the war in Iraq, the Kurds were the Americans' most loyal

partners, offering up the peshmerga to form the nucleus of the new Iraqi Army and one of their own leaders, Jalal Talabani, to be the President of Iraq. Kurdish politicians won seats in the new parliament. But, as the U.S. tried to build a unified and democratic Iraq, the Kurds developed a parallel state, fostering separate democratic institutions, preserving their army, and preparing for the Americans' eventual departure. If it wasn't exactly a double game, it allowed the Kurds to be ready for the day when the Iraqi state disintegrated.

Barzani accomplished this by a kind of legal sleight of hand: early on, he insisted on provisions that would allow any three Iraqi provinces to vote down a nationwide constitutional referendum. There are three Kurdish-majority provinces, and no one doubted that Barzani could muster the necessary votes to doom the entire constitution. "Everyone was afraid that the Kurds would just walk away," Zalmay Khalilzad, the American Ambassador to Iraq at the time, who presided over the talks, said. "This gave Barzani enormous leverage."

For weeks, as the constitution was debated, Barzani argued each night into the early-morning hours. When the talks were over, and the constitution was

ratified, the Kurdish region was still nominally part of Iraq but had most of the attributes of an independent state. The Kurds retained control of their armed forces, which the Americans had sought to disband, and acquired wide latitude to govern themselves. The most explosive subject during the talks had been the distribution of Iraq's oil wealth, which was seen as either the glue that would hold the ravaged country together or, for the Kurds, the asset that would enable them to break away. Crucially, Barzani secured the right to oversee new discoveries of oil and gas. He fought to sharply limit the powers of the federal government, and secured a provision by which, when the laws of local and central governments came into conflict, the local law would prevail. "Masoud was tough," Galbraith, who advised the Kurdish leaders during the talks, said. "He had mastered the issues. And he achieved almost everything he set out to achieve." It was an adroit political balancing act: Barzani could claim that he had kept the Kurds part of a united Iraq, pleasing Baghdad and his patrons in the United States, while also laying the foundation of a separate state. "What's been happening in Iraq, particularly with their oil, it's not some



THE MAN WHO DISCOVERED FIRE

historical accident," Galbraith said. "All of this was planned, and it was all planned by the Kurds."

At about nine-thirty on the night of June 9th, Kurdish officials began receiving reports that ISIS militants were pouring into the northern city of Mosul. The intelligence indicated that they were planning to free some fourteen hundred captured Sunnis from Badush Prison, inside the city. The Kurds, whose border runs through Mosul, were alarmed but not surprised. For months, ISIS fighters had been quietly infiltrating the city's Arab neighborhoods and setting up a shadow government. Kurdish officials estimated that ISIS leaders had been collecting fifteen million dollars a month in taxes from local businesses.

Barzani had been concerned about ISIS for some time. The previous fall, he called Nuri al-Maliki, then the Iraqi Prime Minister, to warn him and to offer help. "His answer to me was 'You just take care of Kurdistan, and the rest is under control,'" Barzani said. According to Fuad Hussein, Barzani's chief of staff, Maliki was increasingly isolated, his hold on reality slipping. In meetings with Kurdish officials, Maliki boasted that the Iraqi Army was performing brilliantly against ISIS and other Sunni insurgents, when, according to Kurdish intelligence, it was falling apart. "Maliki created a fantasy world for himself and the people around him," Hussein said. Still, as ISIS fighters spread across Mosul, it seemed that Maliki could not ignore what was happening. In the preceding days, Hussein had called Tariq Najm, Maliki's closest confidant, to offer the Kurds' assistance in confronting ISIS. Najm refused—worried, apparently, that if the peshmerga went into Mosul they would never leave.

At two o'clock on the morning of June 10th, Najm called back, pleading for help. By then, the Iraqi Army and the police force in Mosul—some fifty-two thousand men in all—had disintegrated. The commander of Iraqi forces in the region and the deputy chief of staff of the Army had fled, as had the leaders of six divisions. Iraqi soldiers were throwing their guns away and stripping off their uniforms—in some cases, rushing through the streets in their underwear. However limited ISIS's plans may have been initially, they appeared to be ex-

panding; Mosul had fallen. "It's too late, my friend," Hussein told Najm. "Your Army has disappeared."

Later that morning, ISIS fighters turned south, toward the city of Kirkuk. Since Iraq's creation, Kirkuk, a hundred and sixty miles north of Baghdad, has been an object of dispute between the Arab-dominated governments in Baghdad and the Kurdish population. Over the years, Kirkuk had been subjected to campaigns of ethnic cleansing, its Kurdish majority reduced by waves of expulsions and Arab migration from the south. To many Kurds, Kirkuk is sacred ground, a vital component of an independent state.

The city was part of the "disputed territories," a strip of land along the border between the Iraqis and the Kurds, which was claimed by both governments. Kirkuk and the rest of the contested region contained as many as a million Kurds, as well as oil reserves thought to amount to at least ten billion barrels. For years, many Iraqis and Westerners regarded Kirkuk as the likeliest starting point for another war, and its unresolved status stood as the biggest obstacle to Kurdish independence. Since 2003, the city had been jointly overseen by the peshmerga and the Iraqi Army—and, until 2011, by American soldiers.

As ISIS closed in, the Iraqi Army around Kirkuk began to collapse. That afternoon, General Sherko Fatih, the local Kurdish commander, met with his Iraqi counterpart, General Mohammed al-Dulaimi, the head of the Iraqi 12th Division. "Dulaimi was broken," Fatih told me. "He had lost the will to fight." One Iraqi town after another was falling to ISIS; militants captured Abbassi, outside Kirkuk, with just a taxi and a pickup truck. Fatih handed Dulaimi civilian clothes, put him on a plane to Baghdad, and called the senior Kurdish leadership. If the Kurds did not act soon, he told them, Kirkuk would be the next city to fall.

Barzani was in a Paris hospital, accompanying his wife, who was having knee surgery. With the Iraqi Army in retreat, he was faced with an unprecedented opportunity to seize Kirkuk entirely for the Kurds. "Six Iraqi divisions melted like the snow," Barzani told me. "I saw it in an opportunistic way." Barzani said that he was unsentimental about the possibility that grabbing Kirkuk might contribute to the final dissolution of the Iraqi state. And, ul-

timately, Maliki all but gave him permission. On the evening of the tenth, Hussein told me, he received a phone call from Hamid al-Musawi, Maliki's personal secretary, conveying a request to secure the disputed areas before ISIS could: "It would be a good thing if you moved in."

And so Barzani gave the order: "Fill the vacuum." The first of thirty thousand peshmerga fighters moved forward, occupying posts that the Iraqi Army had abandoned. By midnight, the Kurds had taken possession of Kirkuk, and Barzani soon made it clear that they would never give it back. He told me, "Even now, when I reflect on what happened that night, it was like a dream."

In seizing Kirkuk, Barzani raised the crucial issue: whether to secede from Iraq and form an independent Kurdish state. In my interview with Barzani, he indicated that he was inclined to go it alone. Barzani said, "We have learned that we need to rely on ourselves."

South of Kirkuk, the village of Rashad straddles a canal named for Saddam Hussein, which divides Kurdish territory from the land held by ISIS. From a watchtower on the Kurdish side, sentinels look out at ISIS fighters, manning their stations, moving about in taxis and trucks. In early June, when they arrived, they took control of a brick factory, and raised a large black flag above its roof. On the watchtower, I stood with Tania Arab, a twenty-four-year-old peshmerga fighter, who seemed thrilled to be part of the force that had reclaimed the Kurds' ancestral lands. He said, "Before I came here, my father told me, 'If you abandon your post, you are not my son.'"

ISIS and the peshmerga face each other in outposts like this along the six-hundred-and-fifty-mile front. (The Kurds' border with the Iraqi Army is only ten miles long, on a stretch near the Iranian border.) In the weeks since ISIS moved in, there have been periods of both fighting and calm. A few days before I arrived, an ISIS commander sent a message across the canal, carried by a local Turkoman businessman, asking General Fatih, his counterpart, if he was willing to talk. Fatih turned the messenger away. "I don't trust them enough," he said of the ISIS men. Even before the second wave of attacks—when ISIS captured Sinjar, Makhmour, and the Mosul Dam—Kurdish

leaders said that they harbored few illusions about the group's intentions. A few days after General Fatih rejected ISIS's request for talks, a suicide bomber drove a car, laden with explosives, into a peshmerga checkpoint outside his headquarters, and a roadside bomb detonated nearby. Twenty-eight people died; when I arrived, police were still picking through twisted metal and broken glass.

The ISIS that swept into northwestern Iraq this June is remarkably different from its predecessor, Al Qaeda in Iraq. The earlier organization operated mostly in secret, and its leaders were uninterested in acquiring territory, believing that a fixed location creates unacceptable risks. ISIS is led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, who holds a Ph.D. in Islamic studies from Baghdad University and spent time in an American military prison in Iraq. At forty-three, he is said to be a flamboyant figure, a self-styled successor to Osama bin Laden. Baghdadi's goal is to re-create the era of the caliphate, when an Islamic regime ruled from Constantinople to Morocco and the Arabian Peninsula.

Al Qaeda in Iraq was run largely by foreigners; ISIS is run by a council of former Iraqi generals, according to Hisham Alhashimi, an adviser to the Iraqi government and an expert on ISIS. Many are members of Saddam Hussein's secular Baath Party who converted to radical Islam in American prisons. Baghdadi has divided his conquered Iraqi lands into seven "vilayets," the name given to provinces in the caliphate. Each vilayet has a governor, who answers directly to Baghdadi, but who is free to launch attacks as he sees fit. "No permission is needed," Alhashimi said.

Alhashimi estimated that Baghdadi has about ten thousand fighters under his command in Iraq and twelve thousand in Syria, with tens of thousands of active supporters in both countries. In Iraq, the advance force, called the House of Islam, is dominated by foreigners, including several hundred Europeans, Australians, and Americans. Many of them are suicide bombers. Alhashimi says that the group is increasingly well funded; he estimated that it takes in ten million dollars a month from kidnapping, and more than a hundred and fifty million dollars a month from smuggling oil into Turkey and other neighboring countries, often selling it at the bargain price of about a dollar a gal-

lon. As of early this year, ISIS had an estimated nine hundred and fifty million dollars in cash, Alhashimi said, an amount that has grown as the group has taken more territory and imposed taxes on local Iraqis.

One of the hallmarks of ISIS's military strategy has been to launch several attacks simultaneously, distracting opponents from its real target. The group is fighting on many fronts in Iraq and Syria, Alhashimi said, and he believes that it may be planning a major attack somewhere else—in the Gulf or in Europe. "I don't think it's far away," Alhashimi said.

Although President Obama initially described ISIS as a small, unskilled force, his Administration has recently been much more concerned about the threat it poses. A U.S. official told me, "ISIS has kicked the shit out of anyone that's got in its way, from al-Nusra, to the Islamic Front, to, you know, whatever the Free Syrian Army ever was, to Sunni tribes in Iraq who've tried to stand up to it. It is the most dominant force on the field." Its military commanders have relied on a combination of conventional and guerrilla tactics—along with terrorism—to achieve their ends. Most of ISIS's attacks against the Iraqi Army and the Kurds have followed the same pattern, the official told me. ISIS opens with a sustained artillery bombardment, which can last for days, then sends in waves of suicide bombers. When the defenses start to crack, its fighters race in on trucks, guns firing. This was how ISIS conquered the Iraqi cities of Sinjar and Al Qaim, on the Euphrates. "Without airpower, I think our guys would have a hard time holding them off," the official said. He said that ISIS was the result of a brutal process of "combat Darwinism," by which only the strongest, most fanatical fighters survived the American onslaught in 2006 and 2007, when Al Qaeda in Iraq was nearly destroyed. "These are the guys we didn't kill."

The initial air strikes ordered by President Obama—more than a hundred and fifty—were intended solely to aid the Kurdish forces and the government in Baghdad, and to rescue the Yazidis, a religious minority that fled en masse to Mt. Sinjar when ISIS's fighters threatened a large-scale massacre. The air strikes, the U.S. official said, were coordinated by teams of American Special Forces, which

conducted thermal scans to locate ISIS fighters and then targeted them with bombs.

But the next wave of strikes, which Obama outlined in a nationally broadcast speech in early September, will go much deeper. "Unless you degrade [ISIS's] war-fighting capacity—that means its command and control, its leadership, its armored vehicles, its ability to mass and maneuver and conduct war—there is no local force on the ground in this entire swath of territory that can stand up to it right now," he said. Obama is assembling a coalition of states that are willing to contribute training and airpower. But, as ISIS fighters integrate themselves into local populations, the coalition needs fighters who will go from door to door. In Iraq, there are only two standing fighting forces: the peshmerga and the Iraqi Army.

As part of a nascent strategy for taking on ISIS, Obama has agreed to arm the peshmerga, who, despite their reputation, have been radically underequipped. Peshmerga commanders told me that, as they rolled into abandoned Iraqi Army bases, they were stunned by the weapons that the Americans had provided. "The Iraqi Army has the best equipment—M-16s, night-vision goggles, Humvees," Fatih told me. Masrour Barzani, the Kurdish intelligence chief, said, "We never got any of that. We've got Kalashnikov rifles from the nineteen-seventies. The Americans never gave us anything, and they've blocked us from acquiring new weapons on our own." Desperate for an advantage over ISIS, the Kurds have recently accepted weapons and military support from Iran.

For the moment, the White House's decision to arm the Kurds will probably inspire them to greater cooperation with the Iraqi government. But even though Kurdish leaders say that they are keen to confront the ISIS fighters on their borders, they are less keen to go beyond them. The disputed territories seized by the peshmerga in June had large Kurdish populations. Kurdish leaders told me that they have no desire to take the fight into Arab-dominated lands, where ISIS has many supporters. It seems more likely that the new military equipment will strengthen the defense of the Kurdish region—and make independence more plausible.

Still, the Kurdish army is a more

promising partner than its Iraqi counterpart. To the Kurds, the hollowness of the Iraqi Army was evident for years, even as the Americans poured billions of dollars into it. "It was never a real army," Najmuddin Karim, the governor of Kirkuk, said. "It was a checkpoint army—they manned checkpoints. It was an employment opportunity. The Americans were always telling us how good they were, but we didn't believe them." I asked Fatih, the Kurdish general, if the Americans stationed in Iraq were aware of the deep-seated problems. "Of course they knew," he said. "They were just pretending to believe."

Barham Salih, a Kurd who is a former Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq, told me that even before the ISIS offensive the Iraqi Army was useful mainly as a piggy bank for its officers. At a meeting of senior generals earlier this year, Salih told me, the commanders noted that one of the elite armored divisions, meant to comprise more than ten thousand men, had dwindled to about five hundred. The division's remaining officers were marking the men present and pocketing their wages. "This is a corrupt system," Salih said. "You have no division, all the units are gone, and the commanders are stealing all the money."

A week after the Iraqi Army collapsed, I sat with Mohammed Ghafar, a twenty-eight-year-old soldier from Kirkuk. Ghafar, a Shiite Arab, told me that he had joined the Army, ten years ago, with pride. "I needed a job, but the truth is that I joined to serve my country," he said. He was assigned to the 12th Division, which oversaw his hometown. Ghafar earned a good salary, got married and had two children, and looked forward to a career as a soldier. The Army never functioned as well as he had hoped, Ghafar said, but it grew much worse in 2011, when the American military departed. Ghafar liked the Americans. He respected their professionalism and the training they offered, and, most important, he felt that they helped to keep his superiors honest. "Everything changed after the Americans left," Ghafar said. "The commanders steal everything. They sell it in the local market—clothes, boots, our equipment." Ghafar said that he was forced to buy boots at the local bazaar. In his unit, the absentee rate soared. Even the ra-



*"No more for me, thanks—I have to denigrate his driving."*

tions went bad, he said. "We used to have the best food," Ghafar said. "After the Americans left, all we got was eggplant. Eggplant at every meal! Breakfast, lunch, and dinner."

Ghafar was based in Dibis, a largely Sunni area near Kirkuk, when ISIS approached. By then, he and his men had heard what happened in Mosul: senior commanders had fled, and the soldiers had quickly followed. "The betrayal started in Mosul," he said. "When your commanders quit, why should the soldiers fight?" It was clear, he said, that the locals sympathized with ISIS, and that his own Army was overmatched. He had no rifle; all his equipment had been stolen or was in disrepair. "ISIS was better equipped than we were!" he said. His comrades started to abandon their posts, and finally, he said, a Kurdish officer in his division told him to go home. "And so I went home," he said, shrugging. "It was an order."

Ghafar said that he hasn't been paid since April. He spoke wistfully of his for-

mer career, and of his homeland. "I miss the Americans," he said. "Iraq? Maybe Iraq is finished."

**I**n 2003, when the Americans came to Kurdistan, Sarmad Fadil, a young college dropout in Erbil, went into business. At the time, the Internet was barely available, and he felt sure that people would soon demand it. Fadil spoke only basic English, and had very little money, but he was able to set up a private Internet company, called Seven Net Layers. As the American Army brought stability and as foreign money poured in, the Kurdish economy began to boom. This past May, Fadil sold Seven Net Layers for some ten million dollars.

Fadil likes to go to business conferences abroad, where he buttonholes Western executives. "I've met a lot of C.E.O.s, and I've asked them a lot of questions," he said. Earlier this year, he and two other businessmen invested sixty million dollars to open an Erbil branch of Aksa Yapi, a Turkish construction firm—part of a wave

of people and money flowing from Turkey into the Kurdish region.

Historically, Turkish governments regarded Iraqi Kurds with deep suspicion, often intervening militarily to stop what they viewed as support for the bloody Kurdish insurgency in Turkey. The boom in the Kurdish economy—and the subsequent success of Turkish companies there—has transformed relations between the two former enemies. Today, according to Turkish officials, there are some twelve hundred Turkish companies operating in Kurdistan, bringing in as many as a hundred thousand Turkish workers. Fadil seems to have caught the wave just as it was building. With eighty-five employees and three hundred suppliers, Akxa Yapi oversees construction projects worth a hundred and ten million dollars. Fadil says that his company relies almost entirely on demand generated from within Kurdistan or outside the country, not in the rest of Iraq. “It is a time of great opportunity,” he said.

Like many of the newly wealthy here, Fadil is unabashed about his success: he drives a Range Rover with the plastic wrapping still on the seats, and frequents Qi 21, a Japanese restaurant where fresh fish is flown in every day. He keeps a library of thousands of movies from the

West; his favorite is “The Great Gatsby.” (“It was so inspiring,” he said.) In his early thirties, he has no immediate plans to marry, which is remarkable for this part of the world. “I like to enjoy my life,” he said.

Erbil appears to have almost nothing in common with Baghdad, two hundred and fifty miles to the south. A low-slung Middle Eastern city, Baghdad looks little changed since the height of the American war. It is dirty, cacophonous, and violent—despite the wealth that accrues from a government monopoly on oil revenues, which last year approached ninety billion dollars. For the past eight years, its political system, under Prime Minister Maliki, has alternated between stalemate and outright sectarian aggression.

In Erbil, construction cranes stretch across the horizon. There’s a Jaguar dealership; luxury hotels, like the Kempinski and the Divan; and dance clubs, like Aura, which stay open till the early morning. Fadil’s main project these days is 4 Towers, a complex of four eighteen-story buildings, divided into apartments the size of suburban houses. Each apartment sells for two hundred and fifty thousand dollars; although construction is not yet complete, three-quarters of them are sold.

Fadil took me to see 4 Towers, which

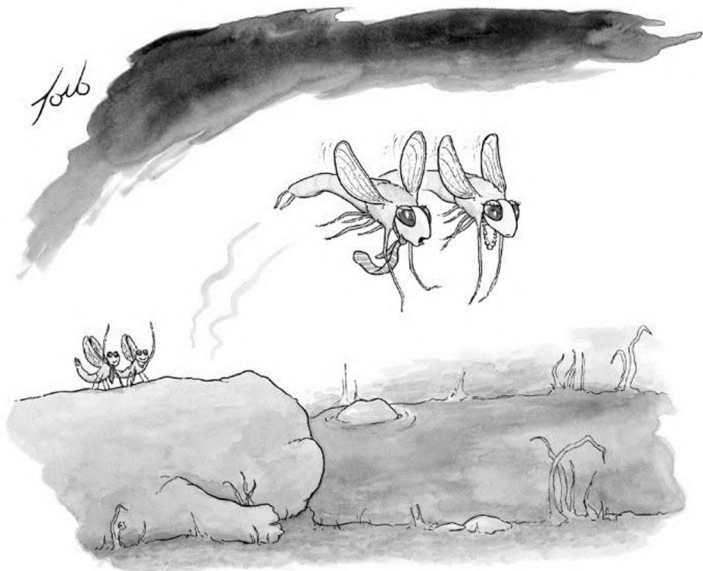
overlooks Ankawa, a Christian district. As we toured the grounds, I noticed the Um Alnoor Orthodox Church, across the street. It was built in 2010 to accommodate the growing number of Christians fleeing Arab parts of Iraq. Today, its basement is filled with refugees from Mosul, where ISIS fighters are menacing the Christian population. As with almost everything in Erbil, the strife of the Arab lands feels distant, until it suddenly intrudes.

To businessmen like Fadil, Baghdad is a maze of pointless demands and delays. He complained that the country’s antiquated finance laws, overseen by the central government, make it extremely difficult for Kurdish businesses to borrow money, especially for big projects like 4 Towers. Other laws, he said, restrict entire categories of imports; there is a set of laws for olive trees, and another for finished concrete. “It’s like we are living in another time,” he said.

The recent surge by ISIS and the disputes with Baghdad have taken a toll on the Kurdish economy. Many of Fadil’s contracts with the Kurdish government are frozen for lack of money; Akxa Yapi is owed more than a million dollars. But Fadil told me that such troubles will not dissuade the Kurds from pursuing the dream of a separate state: “My grandfather fought. My father fought. If you ask me, I will fight.”

Fadil keeps a small humidor in his office, stocked with Cuban cigars. As the talk turned to Kurdish independence, he offered me one. “Every time I travel abroad, and I am asked to produce my Iraqi passport, I feel shame,” Fadil said. “We are not Arab, we are not Turkish, we are not Persian. We are Kurds. We are a nation. We have our right.”

For the Kurds, the key to independence lies in exploiting their oil reserves, a battle that is just beginning. In July, a lawyer for the Iraqi government asked a federal judge in Houston to seize an oil tanker in the Gulf of Mexico. The ship, the United Kalavryta, was carrying a hundred million dollars’ worth of Kurdish oil to a refinery in Texas. The Iraqi government claimed that the Kurds had exported the oil illegally. The judge initially agreed, ordering the oil to be seized if it entered American territorial waters. In August, after hearing arguments from



*“We’re only alive for one day, and you had to schedule dinner with the Hamiltons?”*

## MAKESHIFT

From two pieces of string and oil-fattened feathers he made a father.  
She made a mother from loss buttons and ocean debris.

Lacking a grave, they embottled themselves  
in a favorite liqueur, the pyx and plethora of clouds—

with the heart striped and clear-cut, they rekindled the stars,  
created a glossary of seeds.

Down the fire ladder, rung after fiery rung, they gather, salvage,  
fiddle about, curse and root, laugh themselves silly,

en masse assemble a makeshift holy city. In the holy city,  
makeshift, they assemble en masse, silly themselves,

laugh and root, curse the fiddle, gather salvage rung  
after fiery rung as they ladder their fire down.

A glossary seeded creates stars, strips clear the diamond-cut heart.

They sold clouds, the plethora and pyx of liqueur. Favored themselves  
embottled in grave lack, ocean debris, and loss buttons,

where Mother made a father who made feathers  
from fattened oil and string pieces for two.

—Catherine Bowman

each side, the court ruled in favor of the Kurds, clearing the way for the oil to come ashore—but the legal dispute continues, and the United Kalavryta remains anchored in the Gulf of Mexico.

Under the Iraqi constitution, the Kurdish region is supposed to receive seventeen per cent of Iraq's oil revenues, an amount roughly equal to its share of the population. According to Kurdish officials, Baghdad has short-changed the Kurds every year, depriving them of some twenty-five billion dollars. Until recently, the Kurds have had little leverage over Baghdad, since most Iraqi oil came from fields in southern Iraq, under the control of the central government.

Since 2003, though, Kurdish leaders have opened their oil fields to Western companies, to explore, drill, and produce. It turns out that the Kurds are sitting on as many as fifty-five billion barrels of oil—a quarter of Iraq's total reserves. Twenty-nine companies, among them ExxonMobil and Chevron, are working in Kurdistan; the region currently maintains

a relatively modest production of about two hundred thousand barrels a day.

For years, Iraqi officials accused the Kurds of preparing to unilaterally export oil, which they regarded as a prelude to independence. The dispute came to a head last October, when the Kurds, without Baghdad's approval, opened a pipeline to pump Kurdish oil through Turkey and on to the Mediterranean. In February, Maliki stopped all payments to the Kurdish regional government, depriving it of the overwhelming majority of its revenue. The Kurds countered by signing a fifty-year agreement to sell oil to Turkey. Earlier this year, I spoke to the Iraqi oil minister, Hussein Shahristani, who insisted that the entire Kurdish oil project was illegal. "These companies have no right to work on Iraqi soil, in violation of Iraqi laws, without the agreement of the Iraqi government," he said.

At the heart of the dispute is the ambiguous language of the Iraqi constitution. Its provisions divide oil into two classes: oil extracted before 2005, the year that the constitution was ratified, and after. The

sale of pre-2005 oil—like that found in the fields in southern Iraq—is to be administered primarily by the central government. The language is vague about newly discovered oil, reflecting the sharp disagreements on the issue at the time. Although it calls on the federal and regional governments to "together formulate the necessary strategic policies" to develop the country's oil and gas, it suggests that local governments, like the Kurds', have final authority over extracting oil in their areas.

From the beginning, Kurdish leaders have said that the constitution gives them the right to unilaterally explore and drill for oil. That interpretation, which they have been acting on for a decade, has become a *fait accompli*: the Kurds now have much of the wherewithal to run an independent oil industry.

Still, Kurdish leaders did not foresee just how hard self-sufficiency would be. With no money coming from Baghdad, and little coming from the sale of oil, the government has been largely unable to pay its fifty thousand civil servants for most of this year. The local economy, which imports nearly all its consumer products, has come to a halt. At times, the lines outside gas stations have stretched for miles. The economic slowdown has reminded every Kurdish official—and every citizen—how vulnerable their landlocked state is. "We believe in our right of self-determination," Fuad Hussein, Barzani's chief of staff, said. "But, at the same time, politics is about reality. It's not only about what you desire—it's about what you can get."

Ashti Hawrami, the minister of natural resources for the Kurdish region, told me that he hoped to increase Kurdistan's output of oil to a half million barrels a day by the end of the year, and to a million barrels a day by the end of 2015. That, he said, would help the Kurds ride out the difficulties imposed by the central government. But his optimism has not blunted his distrust of his counterparts in Baghdad. "Why are they fighting with me?" he said. "Cutting my budget, and keeping the oil in the ground, and damaging the oil fields? Just to punish me."

The government in Baghdad has threatened to sue anyone who buys Kurdish oil, and it has taken at least one case to the International Court of Arbitration, in Paris. More important, officials in Turkey, through which the vital pipeline flows, have indicated that they will require the



*"Your interest in the salary makes me wonder how 'self-motivated' you really are."*

Kurdish government to distribute oil revenues—which are held in a Turkish state bank—according to the provisions of the Iraqi constitution. That means that the Kurds can expect to receive only seventeen per cent of the money from the sale of their own oil.

The Obama Administration says that it is neutral in its policy toward Kurdish oil. But analysts say that the U.S. government warnings about buying Kurdish oil have chilled the market. "When the United States says don't buy Kurdish oil, no one's going to buy it," Nat Kern, the editor of a newsletter on the international oil industry, told me. The Kurds say that they have dispatched sixteen tankers filled with oil from the Turkish port of Ceyhan. According to industry experts, they have delivered only two directly to buyers—one in Croatia, and one in Israel, which is a long-time supporter of the Kurds. The others have taken a circuitous route. Some have handed off their cargo to other ships in mid-passage; the rest are still at sea, sailing with their beacons turned off, so that they are difficult to track.

U.S. officials say that the Kurds would be better off staying in Iraq and making an agreement with Baghdad to get their share of the nation's oil revenues: no amount of oil that the Kurds can ship in

the next few years could equal the revenue lost by leaving Iraq. "Even if they sold as much oil as possible and everything worked like gangbusters, there would still be this huge gap," the U.S. official told me. "Ashti will tell you something else, and he's full of it." But, the officials say, an oil agreement is impossible as long as the Kurds insist on pursuing independence.

Kurdish officials are not convinced; the parliament is expected to choose a date for a referendum this year or next year. But, even if the Kurds are able to sell their own oil, it will have to flow through Turkey, their only friendly neighbor with a pipeline into the Kurdish region. That leaves the Kurds vulnerable. "I don't want to trade one kind of dependence with another," Salih, the former Deputy Prime Minister, told me. He favors a more deliberate pace toward independence. "If we move too fast, we will become a slave to Turkey."

Under the threat of ISIS, the Kurds appear remarkably united in their eagerness for an independent state. Still, beneath the surface is a deep current of frustration with Masoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani, the leader of the other major party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (P.U.K.). The feeling runs deepest among

the young, who see the region's new oil wealth flowing to small cliques gathered around the two men.

In July, I met Shunas Hussein, a senior at the American University of Iraq, in Suleimaniya. The university, established in 2007, is modelled on elite English-language institutions in Beirut and Cairo. When Hussein's mother was six months pregnant with him, his father, a peshmerga leader, was killed by Saddam's forces; as the son of a martyr, he has his tuition fees paid by the Kurdish government. An international-studies major, he hopes to become a politician in a new Kurdish state.

Like almost everyone else in Kurdistan, Hussein sees independence as inevitable. But it took him only a few minutes to launch into a tirade against Barzani and Talabani. "Those two families have conquered Kurdistan—they own everything," he said. "If you look at almost any company, you will see that it is owned either by the two families or by people very close to them. Every single person in Kurdistan knows this." Everyone seems to have a favorite complaint: the dominant cellular-phone network, Korek, is owned by Masoud Barzani's nephew. The Faruk Group, a sprawling holding company centered in Suleimaniya, maintains close ties to the Talabani family. (Talabani suffered a debilitating stroke in 2012, but his family's power is undiminished.) Another Barzani nephew, Nechirvan, is not only the Prime Minister of Kurdistan but also the owner of a palatial mansion that occupies several city blocks in Erbil. "I mean, there are thousands of people in this country, they can't even afford to rent a house," Hussein said. Like many other people in the region, he believes that both the K.D.P. and the P.U.K. are permeated by corruption.

A wealthy Kurdish businessman with ties to both parties explained that they began as guerrilla armies and changed gradually into giant family businesses, gathering power and wealth and shunning anyone who tried to change the system. In private conversation, tales of bribery and retribution abound. "All these buildings you see around you," the businessman told me, gesturing to the high-rises that punctuate Erbil's skyline. "They are owned by a hundred people. Those hundred people work for ten

people. The ten people work for three.”

In 2011, Shunas Hussein took part in unprecedented popular demonstrations against the Kurdish government, which sprang up in Suleimaniya's bazaar as the Arab Spring was unfolding across the Middle East. Hussein came out every day for sixty-four days, demonstrating for a more open system. At their peak, the demonstrations attracted thousands, with their leaders presenting the government with a list of fourteen demands, including an end to corruption. After two months, security forces surrounded the demonstrators and opened fire, killing at least two of them and wounding forty-seven. The protesters' demands were unmet, leaving Hussein and others angry but undeterred. “It's not just the two political parties anymore,” he said. “There is a third person in this marriage, and it's the streets.”

Like many young people, Hussein supports the Change Party, which began as a dissident faction of the P.U.K. and has become the second-largest party and a member of the coalition government. For all the recent advances, Hussein is worried that, with ISIS on the doorstep and independence in the air, there will be no appetite for reform. “Most people will be patient, even if they are not getting their salaries,” Hussein said. “But not forever. We will not wait forever.”

With so much oil still to be tapped, many Kurds fear that the country will devolve into a kleptocracy. Hiwa Osman, who owns a communications firm in Erbil, told me, “The choice is between Norway and Nigeria”—that is, between a country where the oil wealth is managed conscientiously and one where it is largely stolen or misappropriated. Osman spent five years in Baghdad during the American war, overseeing a program to train local journalists to cover the government responsibly and aggressively; many of those journalists were murdered while pursuing stories. The problem in the Kurdish region, he told me, is not just that the government is corrupt but that its operations are opaque, and that the press is mostly complacent. “The big problem with our wealth is, we don't know what's happening,” Osman said. “Our oil business is very secretive. No one knows where the money is going.”

Osman fears that there will always be some outside threat—if not ISIS, then a

pipeline closure by Turkey, say, or a looming invasion from Baghdad—that allows Kurdish leaders to stifle public debate. Already, he says, the press is silent about many of the abuses carried out by public officials. Iraqi libel laws allow for criminal penalties against journalists, which, Osman says, act as an effective censor. “There isn't an independent journalist in Kurdistan who hasn't been charged with libel,” he said. “I'm just not sure how democratic Kurdistan will be.”

Indeed, as we spoke, Osman began to modify his prediction. A future as a state like either Norway or Nigeria was less likely than one as a Persian Gulf petrostate, one that made its people rich but which gave them little role in governing themselves. “In the Gulf, you have a rich and unaccountable minority that is controlling the wealth of the nation,” he said. “Everyone lives comfortably, as long as they keep their mouths shut.”

In early September, the Iraqi parliament voted to approve a new unity government, led by the veteran Shiite politician Haider al-Abadi. The coalition was intended to be more inclusive, with representatives from all of the country's main warring factions. Barzani contributed five ministers to Abadi's cabinet, including a Deputy Prime Minister. But, a K.D.P. leader said, “the Kurdish decision to participate in the Iraqi government was a halfhearted one.” Almost no one was convinced that the decision was permanent.

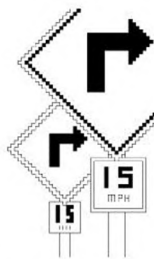
Under pressure from the U.S., representatives from the government in Baghdad and Kurdish leaders promised to resume discussions over long-withheld oil revenues, in exchange for the Kurds' agreeing to stay in Iraq. Kurdish leaders seemed torn between their pressing need for new revenue and the emotional appeal of breaking with the Iraqi state. A deal with Baghdad would allow Barzani's government to pay its employees and revive the local economy. And yet many Kurds I spoke to seemed unconcerned about financial hardship. They referred to the time, in the early nineties, when the fledgling Kurdish government was subject to the international sanctions imposed on Saddam, and its employees carried on without pay for nearly two years. On Sep-

tember 17th, the Kurdish region's foreign minister, Falah Mustafa Bakir, delivered an ultimatum to Abadi's government: if a deal isn't struck within three months, the Kurds will proceed with independence. “This is the last chance,” he said.

After a lifetime of struggle, and of promises to the Kurdish people, Barzani seems determined to continue his course. He acknowledged that the prospect of statehood was less immediate than it had been in June, after the peshmerga seized Kirkuk and the other disputed territories. The presence of ISIS on the Kurdish borders and the difficulties in selling oil constituted a “setback,” he said. But, he added, “these events—economic and security developments—will not change the process. They may affect the calculations, but not the underlying principles.” He said that a referendum on independence could happen next year, or even this year: “Our priority now is to defeat ISIS and to create an environment fit to conduct a referendum.”

Peter Galbraith, the longtime diplomat and advocate of the Kurds, also served in East Timor and Croatia, regions that surmounted enormous difficulties to become separate states. He believes that once a people decide on independence almost nothing will dissuade them. “The desire to become independent is part of the consciousness of every Kurd,” Galbraith said. “They really feel like they are fighting and dying for something.”

In late July, as the Muslim month of fasting gave way to the celebration of Eid al-Fitr, Barzani travelled to the front lines to exhort his troops. In a series of stops, he told them that the peshmerga were making history, building the future for a Kurdish nation. All the money in the world was nothing compared with one drop of a peshmerga fighter's blood, he said. But the men who sacrificed themselves would be fighting for their people's freedom. One scorching afternoon, he addressed soldiers at a base on the eastern bank of the Tigris, where fortifications manned by ISIS militants loomed across the river. At a lectern draped with a Kurdish flag, Barzani apologized for the heat and urged the fighters to hold on a little longer. “Be patient,” he said. “Our day is near.” ♦



## PICTURES FROM AN INSTITUTION

*Leon Botstein made Bard College what it is, but can he insure that it outlasts him?*

BY ALICE GREGORY

One evening in July, 2013, Leon Botstein, who has been the president of Bard College for four decades, called his top administrators to a meeting at his house, a twin-gabled Victorian in the middle of the campus, which occupies six hundred lush acres on the Hudson River, ninety miles north of New York City. It was warm, and they knew to convene on the porch, where Botstein frequently smokes a pipe and where many Bard-related decisions seem to be made.

Botstein and his director of admissions wanted to discuss the school's application process. Was it working? Were they attracting the sorts of students they wanted? The discussion turned into a rapid-fire brainstorming session. By the time it was over, Botstein had decided to radically expand the ways in which prospective students could apply to Bard.

"I said, 'Look, why don't we start from the beginning? If we had no external pressures, what would be the most straightforward way to apply to Bard, or to college in general?'" he recalled later. "Common sense was the prevailing motivation." He wanted to give high-school students a choice: they could submit test scores, G.P.A., and teacher recommendations or they could write four academic papers like the ones they'd be asked to write in college. The essays—ten thousand words in total—would be assessed by Bard professors. Applicants would get their papers back with grades and comments. Students with an average of B-plus or better would be automatically admitted. "Life is not about odd, tricky problems that try to cheat you out of the little you know," Botstein said. His aim, as he put it at the time, was to publicly repudiate what he called "the whole rigmarole of college admissions and the failure to foreground the curriculum and learning."

In the following weeks, Bard professors from all disciplines were called on to

submit essay topics related to their fields. By the end of the summer, the list had been winnowed down to twenty-one subjects, including Kantian ethics, economic inequality, and prion disorders. The new application alternative was ready, and Bard's plan to implement it, effective immediately, was announced on the front page of the *Times*, just two months after it was conceived. The new admissions process is, as one faculty member put it to me, "a classic Leon gesture," by which he meant idealistic, expeditiously enacted, showmanly, and absolutely earnest in spirit. The initiative, like its architect, assumes the best of individuals and the worst of institutions.

In the thirty-nine years that Botstein has been president of Bard, the college has served as a kind of petri dish for his many pedagogical hypotheses: that, as he has written, "the performing and visual arts are not a luxury in a free and democratic society" but "symptoms of its existence"; that public intellectuals are often better teachers than newly minted Ph.D.s are; that a liberal-arts education has the power to reduce prison recidivism. Botstein insists that Bard—alternative, creative, freethinking—is a cause as much as a college. It offers degree-granting programs abroad—in Russia, Germany, the West Bank, and Kyrgyzstan—as well as in six New York State correctional facilities. Under the Bard banner, Botstein, whose book *"Jefferson's Children"* (1997) argued that the American high-school system is obsolete and infantilizing, has founded alternative public secondary schools in Manhattan, Queens, Newark, Cleveland, and New Orleans. Students begin college work two years early, attend seminar-style classes, and graduate with an associate's degree. When I visited the Queens campus last May, I saw impressively cosmopolitan teen-agers sipping coffee in class.

Botstein has built Bard in his own

polymath image. (In addition to his duties as president, he is a historian and a busy orchestral conductor; he has led the American Symphony Orchestra for more than twenty years.) He is celebrated for his grand schemes and the rich donors they attract. Though he has raised more than a billion dollars during his tenure, the college's finances remain precarious. Bard has lacked both a large body of wealthy alumni and a developed infrastructure for soliciting their donations. One of Botstein's daughters has joked that he should consider renting out the campus for weddings in the summer. "There are lots of very good things going for Bard," David Schwab, a chairman emeritus of the board of trustees, told me. "Money is not one of them."

Botstein is now sixty-seven, and the question of succession is becoming hard to ignore. Mary Patterson McPherson, the former president of Bryn Mawr, has chaired two independent review boards for Bard, one just before Botstein was appointed and another in the late nineties. While she is impressed with Botstein's transformation of a "very fragile" college into "a place to reckon with," she is not without her fears. A college, like a campsite, should be in better shape when the custodians leave than when they arrived. "For the students it attracts and the faculty it has, Bard stands out as really seriously underfunded," McPherson said. "What happens to Bard after Leon? That's everybody's worry."

When I first visited Botstein, one afternoon last spring, he was sitting in his study, which is fortified on every side by books and outfitted with fin-de-siècle furniture from Vienna. Botstein, who is a fastidious dresser, was wearing a bow tie, as he has almost every day since a Seder dinner more than three decades ago at which his father taught him how to tie one. Within minutes, he was fulminating about the iniquities



*Over the course of nearly forty years, Botstein—a historian, writer, and conductor—has built Bard in his own polymath image.*

of the college ranking system. In *U.S. News & World Report's* current ranking of liberal arts colleges, Bard comes in forty-fifth.

"It's one of the real black marks on the history of higher education that an entire industry that's supposedly populated by the best minds in the country—theoretical physicists, writers, critics—is bamboozled by a third-rate news magazine." He shook his head in disgust. "They do almost a parody of real research," he continued. "I joke that the next thing they'll do is rank churches. You know, 'Where does God appear most frequently? How big are the peeps?'"

Botstein took a cotton handkerchief out of his pocket. He had no immediate use for it and seemed instead to be acting on behalf of some future self who might want to fiddle with it as a defense against discomposure. He seemed trapped in his agitated state and proceeded to talk about the college ranking system for twelve uninterrupted minutes, describing it as "ludicrous," "idiotic," "totally corrupt," "completely perverse," and "just nonsensical." Botstein's moral outrage, which he expresses in vivid, syntactically complex speech, conceals a relentless idealism, and to spend time in his company is to be convinced moment by moment that he is operating within an insane and crooked system rigged by villains and run by fools. There are certain subjects the mere mention of which increases his heart rate. The college ranking system is one of them, and does to Botstein's blood pressure what filing back taxes might do to someone else's. In the process of verbally dismantling the quantification of higher education, he compared Ivy League universities to Gucci handbags and sneaked in concise dismissals of the College Board ("offensive, essentially"), the college essay ("an awful genre"), the S.A.T. ("a totally useless event"), and multiple-choice tests in general ("a grave error in the name of so-called objectivity"). He began to fiddle with his handkerchief.

Botstein's prolixity does not preclude conversational generosity: he compulsively credits you with making good points that were in fact his. And though

he can strike people as a world-class egomaniac, one never feels condescended to. There is a buoyant presupposition of agreement, and his antipathy does not seem personal. In Botstein's mind, it's not you who deserve weary scrutiny; it's the world.

The last time I had seen Botstein was five years earlier, at my graduation. In his academic robes, he looked like a well-fed king. Not once in the years I was a student at Bard did I make a concerted effort to see him, though it would not have been difficult. Botstein teaches a section of the college's only required course: a great-books survey, in which students read everything from Lucretius and Milton to Virginia Woolf. He regularly hosts teas for students, delivers talks before musical performances, gives interviews to the campus radio station, opens his house for Shabbat dinners, and eats in the cafeteria. Once, when the Medieval Club put on a feast, they cooked it in his kitchen.

To an eighteen-year-old, Botstein's self-generated glamour is at once intimidating and all too tempting to mock. His passions—besides classical music, he has a love of pocket watches—made him seem to us like a man neither of the twenty-first century nor of America. We referred to him among ourselves as "Leon" and spoke sarcastically of inviting him to our parties. Today, his four-decade tenure strikes me as self-evidently impressive, but back when I was in college it seemed freakish, maybe even a little suspect. I wondered why he hadn't gone on to a bigger school or found himself some sort of political appointment.

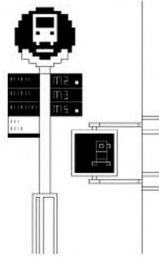
The type of students that Bard strives to attract are easy to caricature. They are smart, independent-minded, artsy, and nonconformist in all the predictable ways. In high school, teachers were probably more impressed with their voracious reading than with their academic discipline, and their interests didn't necessarily overlap with the classic extracurricular activities. Rather than being student-body presidents or varsity point guards, they took black-and-white photographs of their friends' shoes,

wrote first chapters of postmodern novels, and played in noise bands. They were apt to believe that their talents and interests could be assessed only subjectively. Though sixty-five per cent of Bard's student body receives financial aid, and twenty-two per cent of this year's entering class is eligible for Pell Grants, there's a small but culturally significant population of extremely wealthy kids on campus—the children of media moguls, rock stars, and Hollywood actors.

Classes are small and seminar style. Freshmen arrive on campus three weeks before the fall semester starts, not to river-raft or play getting-to-know-you games but to study philosophy, literature, and religious texts for five hours a day. In January, they are required to stay on campus and work in science labs. Unlike many colleges today, Bard still has distribution requirements. Before declaring a major, sophomores must present and defend papers before a board of professors. All seniors must write theses.

The school remains small—there are fewer than two thousand students—and resources are scarce. But Botstein has built Bard, which saw a thirty-per-cent increase in applications this year, into an academic center that punches far above its weight. It employs some of the country's best-known thinkers and writers, and hires star architects, such as Frank Gehry, Robert Venturi, and Rafael Viñoly, to design campus buildings. Open any issue of *The New York Review of Books* and you will see Bard professors listed on the contributors' page.

Botstein apparently realized early in his tenure that he couldn't compete with more illustrious institutions for star Ph.D.s. So he set about attracting public intellectuals, who at Bard teach full course loads. "He wants them there for his students," Daniel Mendelsohn, who teaches at Bard and writes for both *The New York Review of Books* and this magazine, told me. "He understands the value of a superstar appointment, but these people have to work." The poet Anne Carson was recently hired, as was the best-selling author Neil Gaiman. Kelly Reichardt, the filmmaker, is an artist in residence and the novelist Teju Cole is a writer in residence. The poet John Ashbery and the photographer Stephen Shore are both professors, as



was the writer Chinua Achebe. "When Leon sees an interesting thinker, he just throws money at them until he gets them," Orville Schell, a Sinologist and the former dean of Berkeley's journalism school, told me. "And let's be frank—that's what it takes in this world."

Botstein, who has accused other college presidents of doing nothing more than "running something that is somewhere between a faltering corporation and a hotel," seems genuinely baffled by what he sees as the financial conservatism of most well-endowed liberal-arts schools. "I'm a little mystified about what they do with their money," he said.

Among his faculty, Botstein's personality is endlessly pondered. "I'm sometimes astonished by how many conversations I have about Leon Botstein," the poet Ann Lauterbach, who has been teaching at Bard for more than two decades, said. "You can spend an entire dinner talking about him." She described Botstein as "near and far," stretching out her hands and adjusting their position as though focussing a lens. She meant this in the macro sense—that it's impossible to gauge just how close one is to him. But it's also true in a more infinitesimal way. Botstein will go from aloof to avuncular to conspiratorial to formal to taking your arm in his and leading you on a friendly stroll, all within the span of an hour.

Botstein's reaction to bureaucracy could best be described as allergic, or perhaps even adolescent. His attention span is gnat-short, and he appears physically pained when confronted with procedure. He is agonized by time's nasty habit of protracting itself in moments of anguish or tedium. At assemblies he has been known to wrap his arms around himself and hunch over until almost in a fetal position.

At the same time, Botstein pays obsessive attention to every aspect of life at Bard. "He's Zeus," Mendelsohn said. "He's up there, and he knows what all the other gods and goddesses are doing, whether you think he knows or not." Botstein is familiar with the "politics" behind the erection of campus signage, and he takes a "dim view" of having chickens on the campus farm. He has opinions about which translation of Rousseau freshmen should read and why it's more important to include Plato's Republic in

the first-year curriculum than the Symposium. When staff or faculty members fall ill, he pulls strings to insure that they get the best medical care.

A consistent criticism of Botstein is that he runs Bard like a duchy, that professors' opinions are routinely disregarded and their expertise ignored. On a number of occasions, he has overridden hiring and tenure decisions made by otherwise supportive departments. Botstein refuses to speak with restraint, even when it's in his best interest, and his temper was described to me as "Biblical" by an employee who went on to recall, albeit fondly, an outburst that was "a blitzkrieg of torrent, metaphors, congratulation, deceit, and stories that didn't make any fucking sense at all."

Geoffrey Sanborn, who was my adviser at Bard and is now an English professor at Amherst, regards his former boss with a mixture of exasperation and grudging respect. About an hour into a telephone conversation, he decided that the most efficient way to sum up Botstein would be by quoting Faulkner, and he put down the phone to search for a copy of "Absalom, Absalom!" Sanborn returned after a few minutes, cleared his throat, and read, "He had been too suc-

cessful, you see; his was that solitude of contempt and distrust which success brings to him who gained it because he was strong instead of merely lucky."

The youngest of three children, Botstein was born at the end of 1946 in Zurich, where his parents, Polish-Russian Jews who had lost family members in the Warsaw Ghetto, were doctors. Ineligible for Swiss citizenship, they emigrated to America and settled in Riverdale, where they spoke "Botsteinese," an ad-hoc amalgam of English, German, Polish, Yiddish, and Russian. A sixth language, involving manual spelling, was invented when Botstein's mother went deaf.

The children attended public school, and the house was furnished with items picked up at the Salvation Army. Dinner was at six-thirty sharp and was prepared by an elderly housekeeper brought over from Switzerland, whose favorite saying was "All of life is organization," and whom all three siblings remember with affectionate trepidation. Botstein's parents, who had neither hobbies nor material ambitions, restricted family conversation to matters of medicine and scholastic achievement. Their children attended Hebrew school three times a



*"I don't care what your mother did—I'm not eating the fleas off your back."*

week, and took lessons in German, tennis, woodworking, ballet, acrobatics, and music. Botstein studied the violin from the age of nine, but says that he knew his limits as an instrumentalist and always had his heart set on conducting.

Though his father discouraged only three occupations—his children were not to become financiers, lawyers, or rabbis—Botstein is the only member of his immediate family who isn't a doctor or a scientist, and whatever professional confidence he projects today was earned through shame and discomfort. Botstein stuttered growing up, and his father sometimes called him Durachyok (Russian for "little fool"), and his early experience has ripened into a lifelong allegiance to underdogs. The objects of his sympathy are diverse. They include incarcerated men and women, immigrants, political exiles, Palestinian university students, and, in his role as a conductor, underperformed operas and orchestral works.

Botstein graduated from high school at sixteen and went to the University of Chicago, where he majored in history and founded the school's chamber orchestra. He began Ph.D. studies at Harvard, focussing on the social history of modernist music in Vienna. In Cambridge, he met his first wife, with whom he had two daughters. (He has two more children from his second marriage.) In 1970, having left Harvard to be a special assistant to the president of the New York City Board of Education, Botstein took a job as president of Franconia College, a small, now defunct institution in New Hampshire, run out of a former resort hotel. At twenty-three, he was the youngest college president that America had ever had. A 1971 profile that ran in *Playboy* described him as "a bespectacled, long-haired youth" and included a photo of him, in a rumpled shirt and a paisley tie, next to an office door marked "President" in a curiously Tolkienesque font.

Four years later, when Botstein arrived at Bard as its president, the college was selling off acreage to pay its utility bills, and the Commissioner of Education of the State of New York predicted that it would close within twelve months. The appointment was contentious. He was laughably young and hadn't yet completed his Ph.D. The college was Episcopal and he was a Jew. "I didn't

have any natural authority with the student body and the faculty," Botstein said. "They didn't think I deserved it or had earned it. It was a trial by fire."

Faculty members, he said, were "routinely hostile and mistrustful." Students, put off by his ambition and his desire to whip the school into shape, wrote ad-hominem op-eds in the school paper. Fed up, Botstein called a meeting with the students, at which he sought their sympathy, telling them that he was "not a cardboard cutout." The next day, the campus was teeming with students wearing cardboard cutouts of Botstein pinned to their clothes.

In Botstein's telling, the turning point in his tenure came in 1981, two years after the breakup of his first marriage, when his seven-year-old daughter, Abigail, was struck by a car and killed. "If you have early success and public visibility, you're the object of envy," he said. "That tragedy made me no longer the object of envy." In the wake of Abigail's death, Botstein says that he became newly interested in "the challenge of building a great institution and recruiting people to help make that happen." In mourning, he decided that he would never want to be the president of any other college.

It was at around this time that Botstein expanded his ambitions as a conductor. He founded the Hudson Valley Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra, and in 1990 he instituted the Bard Music Festival, a summer series of classical-music concerts, lectures, and panel discussions. In 1991, the American Symphony Orchestra chose him as its music director. The orchestra, a freelance ensemble, had been founded in the sixties, by Leopold Stokowski, with the aim of mounting inexpensive concerts to popularize classical music. But it was struggling to define itself in a crowded New York music scene. Under Botstein's leadership, the A.S.O. quickly developed a mission of reviving works that he saw as unjustly neglected. In the decades since, the orchestra has established a reputation for programming rarities by obscure composers like John Foulds, Gavrill Popov, Ethel Smyth, and Vincent d'Indy. Botstein, who writes often on music and has been the editor of *The Musical Quarterly* for two decades, has been known to call the state of con-

cert programming "a crime against history." He frequently compares the regular concert repertoire to the Louvre's opening only a single gallery to the public.

On the podium Botstein does not radiate ease. "I'm not actually that in love with the theatre of the whole business," he admitted. "But you also have to project the joy of what you're doing, and that I didn't quite understand at the beginning." In July, I saw Botstein conduct a performance of "Euryanthe," an 1823 opera by Carl Maria von Weber, which hadn't been staged in America since 1914. He feels that, over the years, his reaction time as a conductor has got quicker and that he's learned both to employ economy of gesture and not to "compensate for inexperience by talking more." Nonetheless, his technical skill is far from revered among musicians, and reviewers have often been harsh. An A.S.O. member I talked to spoke of "unidentifiable, arrhythmic gestures," and said, "He's a brilliant, gifted intellectual, but he's a historian—he's not a musician." Still, his championing of underperformed music has won him respect, and some of the pieces he has unearthed have been taken up by other, more prominent ensembles. In essence, Botstein has played to his academic strengths, mitigating technical faults with curatorial vision.

He also conducts the conservatory orchestra at Bard, and in late May, the day before the orchestra embarked on a European tour, he appeared in the cafeteria, where the conservatory students were eating lunch and absorbing travel information from a host of chaperons. Bard's conservatory program, which requires all its participants to double-major, exists for a lot of reasons, and social engineering is one of them. It's disgraceful to complain about your course load if your classmate down the hall has the same load and also has to practice cello for thirty hours a week.

Botstein called the students to attention with a well-projected "Ladies and gentlemen," and congratulated them on their hard work, warmly expressing his excitement about the forthcoming trip. For an exceedingly busy, physically imposing, and often abrasive authority figure, Botstein, who himself entered college as a "terribly insecure sixteen-year-old," is attuned to even the most

## CHIVES

You chop an onion, bone a breast, cradle an artichoke's dense, thorny crown, you pluck a chicken, a leaf, an eyebrow peddling luck with love, you set a table, you seat, you ladle your soup, you chomp an apple, you agitate the linens. You agitate for justice. You piece on chocolate, awaiting calls. You grease your skids. You rot. You rule. You fail. You rate. A verb intransitive is a claptrap thing. Dredge it in flour, you might as well. Let tense run riot. You pinch spent bloom, craving bitters and Pimm's when you could go a-rummaging through chives—those volunteers who in their dense tufts at least know how to get together.

—Julie Sheehan

ordinary forms of other people's pain. "In every group of this size," he began, "there are very popular people, some not so popular people, and people *nobody* wants to hang out with." The students chuckled halfheartedly. He raised his eyebrows in searing disapproval. "Don't leave someone in the hotel when you go out gallivanting who doesn't have a friend," he pleaded. "Do you know what I mean?" The students nodded, looking down in embarrassment. "We're traveling as a group, so include people. Include people." He clasped his hands together and smiled. "I'm very, very proud of you. It's all going to sound great." He paused for several seconds. "Especially by the last concert."

In December, 2013, after a three-month review, Moody's Investors Service downgraded Bard's bond rating three notches and revised its outlook to "negative." The Moody's report cited Bard's "exceedingly thin liquidity with full draw on operating lines of credit," "weak documentation and transparency," "willingness to fund operations and projects prior to payment on pledges," and "growing dependence on cash gifts." (The report found that in 2012 and 2013 more than forty per cent of annual operating revenues came from gifts. Among other small private colleges, about seven per cent is typical.) Six months earlier, Bard had had monthly liquidity of \$7.1 million—equal to just

two weeks' worth of operating costs. Bard is highly leveraged, carrying a hundred and sixty million dollars of debt, which is close to its operating budget of a hundred and eighty-five million. The undergraduate endowment (eighty million dollars) is a tenth that of Vassar, a school that is comparable to Bard in both size and age and is one Amtrak stop to the south.

Founded in 1860 as St. Stephen's, an Episcopal college, Bard, for almost the first century of its existence, had a student body that numbered less than a hundred, and its alumni—priests, mostly—were not wealthy. Forty per cent of all the students the college has ever produced graduated within the past twenty years, making the alumni base not only small but also young.

Emily Fisher, the vice-chair of the board and the ex-wife of the late Richard Fisher, one of Bard's major donors, told me, "Bard has always educated the kind of student that tends not to go to Wall Street. They haven't made buckets of money." Unlike the best-endowed liberal-arts colleges, such as Amherst, Williams, and Swarthmore, Bard has done little to foster links to the business community. On campus, this has its positive side: the atmosphere is intellectually idealistic and anything but pre-professional. But, unsurprisingly, an excess of critical-theory-reading photography majors doesn't make for a promising donor pool.

"Until relatively recently, Bard was a

safety school," Fisher said. "Its alumni didn't have a sense of pride and owing to the place." Although Botstein has changed the school's reputation beyond recognition, he remains suspicious of the tactics that other schools use to cultivate a sense of shared identity. Greek life at Bard is nonexistent, as are any athletic teams that one might take seriously. Botstein has written that "it is an embarrassment that so much time, effort, emotion, and money are expended on gladiatorial exhibitions." But, for better or worse, such activities are at the heart of fundraising. Noah Drezner, an associate professor of higher education at Teachers College, Columbia University, told me, "Studies have shown that former student athletes, even just those who participated in organized college sports, are more likely to give, and give at higher rates."

No one I know from college owns a single item of Bard College merchandise—no sweatshirts, no umbrellas, no bumper stickers. If there are meet-ups for Bard alumni at financial-district bars, I don't know about them. Bard's ethos of quixotic unworldliness is appealing—it's part of why I ended up there—but it's never occurred to me to donate money to the place.

Instead of appealing to alumni, Botstein's chief tactic has been to court a few exceptionally wealthy donors. "We're in the business of looking for large investors," he told me. "Basically, the people who created the college are Leon Levy, Dick Fisher, and George Soros."

Soros, with whom Botstein has had a long and affectionate relationship, recalls being introduced to Botstein more than thirty years ago. "He impressed me with his intelligence, and we shared the same values, so it was a meeting of the minds and—call it hearts, if you like," he told me. "A Polish Jew is not all that different from a Hungarian Jew," he added. Soros finds Botstein "an amusing raconteur," and Botstein—who has long been on the board of Soros's Open Society Foundations—happily plays the part of house contrarian at meetings.

What Moody's calls Bard's "superior but concentrated donor support" is at once a boon and a liability. Though the average yearly revenue from gifts to the college from 2011 to 2013 (seventy-two million dollars) was seven times the amount that most liberal-arts colleges



*"You'll have to be more specific—my people have more than four hundred different words for snow cone."*

receive annually, heavy dependence upon a small number of funders puts Bard in an inherently precarious situation.

Soros's ex-wife Susan Weber told me, "It's not healthy for an institution to have just a few big donors. People change their minds. Unfortunately, they have heart attacks; they get hit by buses. People are fickle." Weber, a trustee of Bard and a major donor and fund-raiser, is also the founder and director of a Bard graduate center for studies in the decorative arts. Of Botstein, she said, "Everyone says, 'Oh, he's the most amazing fund-raiser.' Well, I wish that were so, because we wouldn't be so underfunded if he were that amazing. I think he's good at it—he works hard at it—but his real strength is building an institution."

Almost everything about the way Botstein has run Bard and raised money for it has put the place on the map. "Poverty made us great," he told me. "We had to invent a reason to command people's respect." Jane Brien, the director of alumni affairs, told me of a much-repeated Botstein saying: "People don't give money to a wounded bird—they give money to a rare bird." But to con-

solidate his achievement it is now up to Botstein to embrace the ultimate act of paternalism: securing a future for the institution in anticipation of his exit. "For a long time, it was clear to everyone that without Leon there could be no more Bard," Marcelle Clements, a Bard trustee, told me. "If he disappeared, the whole thing would dematerialize. But in the last few years I've heard Leon himself talk about the future of the institution in a different way." Bard desperately needs an endowment; establishing one will almost certainly mean adopting the conventional development strategies that Botstein has always avoided. Failure to do so could jeopardize his life's work.

Botstein raised the subject at an alumni brunch in May, and his tone was more alarmist than usual. Without alumni support, "this place will not survive—it can't," he warned. "There's only so much you can do against the grain, but you can't survive without money. You cannot be a first-class place without money. It's just not possible." Like a blissfully oblivious child who learns as an adult that her parents' marriage has been

miserable for decades, I found the urgency of his pleas almost physically shocking. Last month, at the first faculty meeting of the year, Botstein said that he plans to remain as president for another decade and to leave his successor with an endowment of four hundred million dollars, the proceeds of a five-year campaign that has yet to be formally announced. The promise comes either in the nick of time or decades too late.

On the last Saturday in May, I spent the morning in the back seat of a van, travelling from Columbus Circle a hundred miles north to Woodbourne Correctional Facility, a medium-security men's prison in Sullivan County. Among the other passengers were Arlander Brown, a formerly incarcerated thirty-two-year-old, and members of his family, who were on their way to see his college-graduation ceremony, as part of the Bard Prison Initiative, a program whose first degree recipients graduated in 2008.

The prison yard was outfitted for the day with picnic tables set for a buffet lunch. Twenty-two men, the cuffs of prison uniforms just visible under their academic gowns, made their way from a corner of the yard near a watchtower into a gleaming white tent, where they proceeded down an aisle flanked by family members, many of them crying. Brown was one of three men who had been released from the prison and had come back to receive their associate's degrees. The other graduates would return to their cells at the end of the day.

Sean Patrick Maloney, the representative from New York's Eighteenth Congressional District, spoke, as did Robert Fullilove, a professor at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health. Botstein, who had conducted a concert at Carnegie Hall the night before, delivered a presidential charge. "Others will tell you how significant our program is," he said, looking out not at the audience but at the rows of graduates, sitting just in front of the stage. "There is an emphasis on how much we do for you. But you ought to know that you do a lot for us." When the situation calls for it, Botstein's voice telegraphs a wizardly moral authority. Everyone responds to it, but parents, primed to be proud of their children, are

especially susceptible. "We live in a time where people don't really believe in education. That doubt is something we struggle with," he said. "Your enthusiasm, your determination, your idealism about education gives back to us a reminder of why we should fight for what we do."

Aside from the deafening interruption, at noon, of a prison clock, the graduation ceremony was exactly like the one on Bard's main campus, a week before. This was intentional. The graduates threw their caps in the air and posed for pictures with their families.

The Bard Prison Initiative (B.P.I.) was founded in 1999 by an undergraduate, Max Kenner, who was concerned about the extraordinary growth of the prison system and thought that Bard could do something to help. College-in-prison programs, though controversial and rapidly disappearing across the country (George Pataki, New York's governor, made ending them a part of his agenda), had been shown to be the most inexpensive and effective way of reducing recidivism. Kenner saw an opportunity for Bard to show leadership. He scheduled a meeting with Botstein and, a few weeks later, found himself facing an audience of seven senior administrators. He gave a five-minute presentation suggesting that Bard figure out a way to extend the liberal arts to the growing population of incarcerated Americans. "Leon just said, 'Let's do it.' There was literally not a pause," Kenner recalled, laughing. "Most people in positions of authority look for reasons to say no, and Leon is really the opposite."

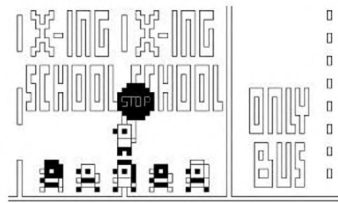
B.P.I. has helped to establish college-in-prison programs across the country and is now active in nine states. Challenging common preconceptions about what education in prison should look like—remedial classes, G.E.D. prep, vocational programs—B.P.I. offers its students the same course of study that regular Bard students receive. Nearly three hundred incarcerated people are enrolled with Bard; roughly the same number have graduated. Wesleyan, Grinnell, and Goucher have launched programs under Bard's guidance, and large universities, including Notre Dame and Washington University in St. Louis, are also involved.

Arlander Brown told me, "As you learn to be a better critical reader you

learn to be a better self-critic, too." He is now an editorial assistant at a publishing house in Manhattan and a student at Hunter College. I heard something similar from Anibal Cortes, who was in the first class at B.P.I. "If you put that kind of humanistic education into the inherently dehumanizing space of prison, you can restore a person's individual agency," he said. Cortes earned his B.A. in 2008, having written a senior thesis on infant mortality in early-twentieth-century New York City, and, in May, graduated from Columbia with a master's in public health. He is now a family-services specialist at the Fortune Society.

Among Bard's many projects, including the foreign campuses and the alternative high schools, B.P.I. is perhaps the signal success. But although it is now self-funding, such programs are a significant drain on Bard's resources. The high schools, though largely government-funded, siphon off about two million dollars a year from the college itself, a small sum at many institutions but not at Bard.

The proliferation of ancillary programs at Bard reflects a fundamental dynamic in today's nonprofit world. It's far easier to interest big donors in funding eye-catching initiatives than in funding unglamorous core activities. (At colleges, the latter usually end up being supported by incremental gifts from alumni, parents, and friends.) Many people I spoke to said that Botstein's great strength as



a fund-raiser is that he thinks like a donor. This strategy has got Botstein, among other things, a new baseball diamond, which isn't the sort of thing that usually interests him, and a Frank Gehry-designed performing-arts center, which is. He has secured libraries for the college and lavish laboratories. The Bard programs overseas are reliably funded by N.G.O.s and philanthropists. What thinking like a donor has failed to yield is robust funding for day-to-day opera-

tions. Historically, donors have given to Botstein, but what Botstein now needs is for donors to give to Bard.

At the beginning of August, just before the new class of freshmen arrived on campus, I went to see Botstein's horological collection, which he had described to me in animated detail. He believes that a well-made clock is the ultimate "triumph of art and engineering." Botstein was biographically primed to catch the watch-collecting bug: his parents helped members of his mother's family survive the Warsaw Ghetto by sending them watches from Switzerland, which they used for bartering with Nazi officers.

Botstein brought out an armful of cases containing some of his collection. Made of black leather with buckles, they resembled travelling backgammon boards. He opened the boxes one by one. Inside were golden grids, each pocket watch nestled in a small divot, like a truffle. Botstein extracted an eighteenth-century Swiss specimen, removed the back casing with a knife, and motioned for me to inspect its innards. He pulled out a watch by Charles Fasoldt, a German maker who immigrated to America in the middle of the nineteenth century and set up shop in upstate New York: "He was a maniac!" Botstein exclaimed. "He didn't follow anybody's rules!"

He opened more cases. One watch told the time to a quarter of a second, its hands spinning furiously; another, from the French Revolution, ran on decimal time. Botstein excitedly described a pocket watch he was considering trading for: it had been made for a maharaja, and had two sets of hands, one black and one gold, that swept around a single dial, in order to tell the time simultaneously in India and in England. He scoffed at the idea of a person wanting a watch that would tell the phases of the moon, and said that the most accurate watches did nothing but tell the time: "The more complications—it's like the car that also swims and flies. Well, it might not be such a great car."

Botstein pointed out balance wheels, regulators, tourbillons. He demonstrated different chimes. With each passing second, he spoke faster, like a boy eager to show off a model airplane and impatient for you to share his enthusiasm. "I never have anything that doesn't work," he said. "I'm extremely allergic to things that don't work." ♦

PORTFOLIO

## THE DRY LAND

BY MATT BLACK

Full means hot mornings, thirsty fields, smoke in the air. There are days when, as John Muir wrote in 1894, the heat seems “to flow in tremulous waves from every southern slope.” This year, the dryness has a menacing, premonitory, permanent feel. Promised deluges turn into ten-minute mists, and a longed-for El Niño doesn’t come. The flies are bad. Lake beds, exposed, are full of old recliners and junked cars. Reservoirs have sunk to half capacity and are falling fast. In year three of a punishing drought, the terrible question arises: What if it just never rains again?

The fear is sharpest in the Central Valley, the large stretch of farmland that is the country’s fruit basket, salad bowl, and dairy case—where, owing to shortages, the government has cut the flow of irrigation water. Without water, nearly half a million acres of crops have been fallowed, and in some communities unemployment is more than ten per cent. Only the water witches are in high demand. “You learn dousing from your dad,” one lifelong farmer told me. “Mine used a coat hanger with a cotton swab.” Groundwater is a trust fund to prevent devastation in future droughts; this year, those accounts have been all but drained. Up and down the Valley, the wells are running dry.

—Dana Goodyear



*This is expected to be California's hottest year on record. Towns in the north are running out of*



*water; the south has been asked to conserve. In the Central Valley, farmwork has dried up with the water supply.*



*Fresno County's average annual precipitation is only ten inches, and some seven hundred farmers rely on the main irrigation system. The fields are*



*dry. The groves are parched. Many pistachio and almond farmers saw their trees wither this year.*



*In Firebaugh, a shepherd rests after loading sheep for transport. Hay prices have doubled in California; ranchers who can afford it are sending*



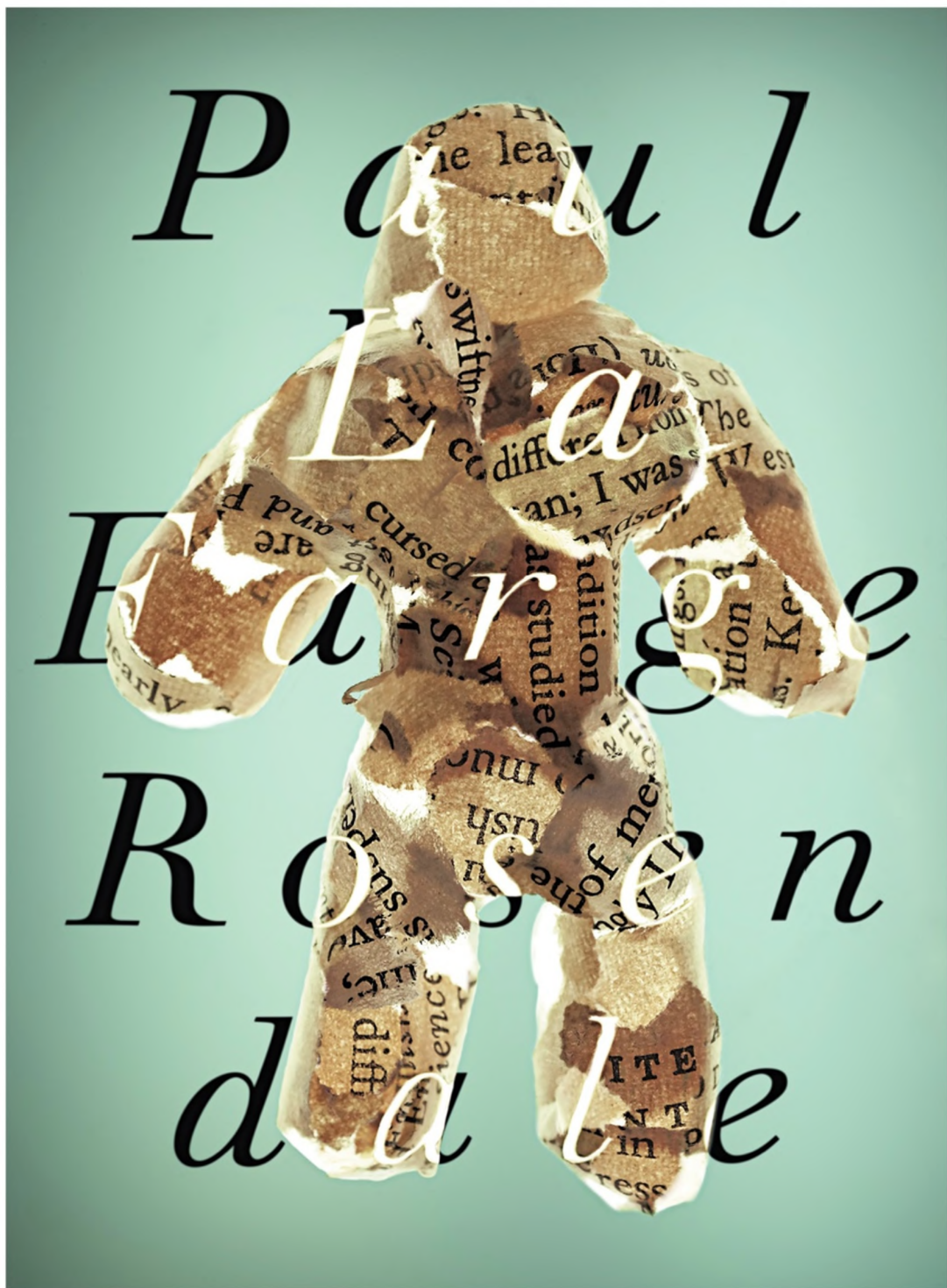
*their herds out of the state. As many as a hundred thousand cattle were hauled away between January and April.*



*Fallow fields near the town of Corcoran are among hundreds of thousands of acres going unplanted across the state. Half of the country's produce*



*comes from California. On September 17th, Governor Jerry Brown signed bills to limit the groundwater farmers can pump.*



Dara lives in a ramshackle white house on top of a steep hill. She is a potter—she works at the ceramics center in town—but her house is full of books: some novels, many thin volumes of poetry, collections of essays on feminism and psychoanalysis, Hungarian cinema, Soviet Jewry, Australian aborigines, Kant, the Kabbalah. Worlds upon worlds. She also has an extensive library of self-help books, which implies that, for all her intelligence and self-possession, Dara may have some problems. She is for sure a recovering alcoholic; one of the first things she told April P was that she doesn't allow drinking or drugs in her house. Also, and she did *not* warn April P about this, Dara is a toucher. She keeps finding reasons to squeeze April P's arm, pat her hand, give her a mini shoulder rub. Once, she invited April P to an opening at the ceramics center, a show of chili bowls by local artists. April P started a conversation with a woman her own age; then she saw Dara watching her with a furious expression, a gathering of crackly lines around the eyes, a pinching of the mouth, as though she would eat anyone who tried to be friendly with April P. Needless to say, Dara's possessiveness makes April P uncomfortable. She has been in Rosendale for four months, and the only people she talks to are Dara, the guy at the vegan bakery, and Jenny, her friend at the club. She hasn't done any writing at all.

Writing was supposed to be the point of this adventure. April P came here to start another life, one she had barely begun to imagine for herself and still wasn't sure she deserved. She was going to become April P, *the writer*. The centerpiece of her transformation was a memoir called "Bar Girl," about her time tending bar at a notorious Boston hotel. She wrote the first chapter in a memoir workshop at the community college where she was supposed to be studying business communication, and her teacher, Valerie, praised it to the skies. Then, without warning, April P's heart began to emanate the exciting certainty that she would not stay in Boston. She asked Valerie for advice, and it was Valerie who suggested Rosendale and put her in touch with Dara.

April P moved to Rosendale in late November. At first she loved the town, with its odd shops—what kind of small town has a ceramics center?—and bookish, sober Dara, whose unfussy house had

a view of the woods and the distant brown hills, but after a month she wondered if she had made the right decision. Without Boston shouting in her ear, she found it hard to think. The second chapter of "Bar Girl" crumpled into bits of paper in her wastebasket. She started to panic about money. Dara offered her a job at the ceramics center, but the pay was laughable; really, nothing in Rosendale paid anything. How did Dara get by? April P suspected her of sitting on a secret pile of cash, which she would never talk about but which kept her going.

Winter came. Snow fell heavily in the valley; everything turned slippery and dark. Rosendale started to look like a kind of hell, at least for people like April P, that is, straight girls from working-class families. Then one day at the vegan bakery she met Jenny, who told her about the club. April P had driven past it a dozen times without knowing what it was, an anonymous roadhouse on Route 32 that never seemed to be open. Jenny explained it to her. You could be topless or nude; on a busy night you could make two or three hundred dollars. It beats working at the Stewart's, Jenny said.

April P drove out to the club and asked if they were hiring. After some icy awkwardness up front, the work turned out not to be that hard. You got undressed, you wobbled around—*dance* would be an overstatement. You sat in a stranger's lap, you rubbed a little, but really it was just another service job, like tending bar or working at Kinko's. So what if you were naked? The money was good, and the shifts were from six to two in the morning; April P had the whole day to herself. In fact, the hardest thing about working at the club was dealing with Dara's complicated reaction. She was clearly trying to be O.K. with the fact that April P was a *sex worker*, but she was clearly also scandalized; at the same time, April P guessed that Dara couldn't stand the thought that she took the stage nightly in nothing but a thong and that she, Dara, wasn't there to watch. If only Dara had come to the club, some problems might have been solved—and others, doubtless, would have been created.

But this is all background information. The actual story of Rosendale begins on a rainy Monday evening in March, when Dara comes home and finds April P curled up on the futon in

the living room, reading Dara's copy of "Frankenstein." Dara makes twig tea and talks about Mary Shelley and Percy Shelley and Lord Byron. They were all living together in Switzerland, she says, and one night they had a contest to see who could write the most frightening story. Percy Shelley, the great Romantic poet, and Lord Byron, the other great Romantic poet, and Mary Shelley, an eighteen-year-old girl who had hardly written anything. Guess who won? Dara pours the tea into thick handmade mugs. Mary Shelley's mother was the great feminist thinker Mary Wollstonecraft, but she died just after Mary was born, she says. When you're reading "Frankenstein," you have to think, This is a novel by a woman who never knew her mother. April P wonders what it would be like not to have known her mother. Kind of a relief, probably.

Anyway, it's cozy, sitting there with Dara, drinking twig tea while the rain beats the house and soaks the forest. If only April P could have kept her mouth shut, there would have been no problem. But the spirit of mischief rises in her and prompts her to say, Let's have a horror-story contest! Dara thinks about it for a long time, then says, O.K., but there's one condition: they have to be stories with strong female characters. Strong female characters, coming up! April P says impishly.

They get out their journals and start writing. April P finds the task harder than she expected. She begins a story about a woman with no legs, but why does she have no legs? And what comes next? April P has never written a horror story before; up to this point, her stories have pretty much been based on things that actually happened to her. Still, she keeps writing, and after half an hour or so Dara says, I give up. Me, too, April P says, relieved. Read me what you wrote, Dara says. It doesn't make sense, April P says, but Dara nags her until finally she reads it. Very interesting, Dara says. Read me yours, April P says. No, Dara says. Come on, April P says. Don't be shy! Dara stands up. Her mouth is a thin straight line, and her eyes are narrow with anger. I'm not shy, but I am tired, she says, and stomps upstairs. April P picks up "Frankenstein" again, but she can't concentrate, and after a few minutes she goes to bed, too, and just lies

there, listening to the rain and wondering what she is doing in Rosendale.

In the following weeks, Dara works late, and April P doesn't see her much. Then one morning April P comes downstairs, and there she is, pretending to tidy the living room but obviously just waiting for April P. Good morning! Dara says. What are you doing today? April P has no plans, and so after breakfast Dara drives her to the ceramics center, where something big lies on a table, under a beige sheet. What is it? April P asks. Aha, Dara says, and she unveils a giant clay woman. The figure is about nine feet from head to toe, with thick legs, huge breasts, and vestigial arms. Its face is a noseless trio of dashes. Its clay body is covered with fragments of fired pottery, orange and white and a heartbreaking blue-green that makes April P think of the Atlantic Ocean. It is the ugliest thing she has ever seen. Dara tells April P that she modelled the figure on the Venus of Willendorf, a likeness of the mother goddess who ruled the universe in times gone by. And of course it's also a golem, a creature from the Jewish tradition. If I could get a rabbi to perform the right ritual, Dara says, maybe she would come to life! Ha-ha, April P says, horrified. She touches the golem's mosaic skin and asks, Are these the chili bowls? Yep, Dara says. Wow, April P says. O.K., you win!

Dara pulls the sheet over the golem, and they go out for a cigarette—like many recovering alcoholics, Dara is a heavy smoker. It's early spring; the creek is muddy with runoff from the hills. Tiny black birds agitate the trees. I feel so powerful, Dara says. She talks about a trip she took to Prague with her father, many years ago. They visited the synagogue where the original golem was supposedly constructed. Later on that same trip, Dara had a panic attack. She banged on her father's hotel-room door. He was with a Czech prostitute, who was maybe seventeen. The fucker, Dara says. Then her mood lifts again. Holy crap, she says. I made a golem! She tries to imagine what such a thing might be good for. It could protect women from sexual assault, for starters. It could watch the ceramics center—there have been some break-ins. It could intervene in domestic-violence-type situations. It could give back rubs, April P says, giggling. I'm being serious, April, Dara says.

She crinkles up her eyes. It's clear that April P has ruined everything again.

Dara says that she has some work to do. Will April P be all right walking home? It's two miles uphill, but she says, I'll be fine. *Without a golem escort*, she doesn't add. Dara goes back into the ceramics center, and April P climbs the street that leads eventually to Dara's house. The sun is out. Green shoots rise from the mud in people's yards. Screw Dara, she thinks. Why should I give someone like that the power to make me miserable?

That night at the club, though, it's impossible for April P to forget that she is naked and other people aren't. She gets flustered, and the customers sense it. All of a sudden, guys are touching her ass and telling her the gross things they want her to do. She rolls her eyes at Fred, the manager, but he pretends not to notice and goes on selling lap-dance tickets. What is it, she keeps asking herself. What is it? All she knows is that there is now an inner April P who writhes with self-consciousness even as the outer April P struts around in black vinyl boots.

When her set is over, she asks Jenny if she has anything to calm her down. Just Newport, Jenny says. April P smokes two of them, but they don't help. Do you know where I can buy drugs around here? she asks. Jenny gives her the number of a guy she knows from high school, a friend of a friend. After work, April P drives up to Kingston and buys some crack cocaine, which is what Jenny's friend's friend sells. She smokes it in her car. It makes her feel invulner-



able and gorgeous, as if she were wearing the night sky and all its stars. She drives back to Rosendale around 3 A.M. and falls into bed. When she wakes up, the sun is about to bump the western hills. She has just enough time to stretch and shower before she has to go to work.

April P goes out with Jenny that night and for many nights afterward. They sit around the apartments of Jenny's high-school friends, drinking vodka and gossiping about other high-school

friends whose lives are just as sorry as their own. These people are dismally familiar to April P: they're like the ones she grew up with in Boston. Spending time with them feels like a kind of defeat, but at the same time she hears a voice telling her that they are *her* people, the best and only people she will ever have. When she can't stand their *Maxim* dreams and TV jokes, she drives up to Kingston, puts on the suit of stars, and hurtles down Route 32, inviting an accident that for some reason never comes.

She hardly thinks about Dara at all, until one night the golem shows up at the club. It sits at the bar, and at first she mistakes it for a hugely fat guy in a sparkly brown coat. It's only when she steps off the stage that she recognizes it for what it is. Its slit eyes look sightlessly at the girls; its enormous breasts hang in its lap. For an awful moment, April P imagines that it will ask her for a dance, and that, by the logic of the nightmare she is in, she will have to *give the golem a lap dance*, but this does not happen. Then she wonders if this is a prank. Dara could have hauled the golem up here in her truck, and installed it on a barstool somehow—maybe with a hidden platform. Only, how would April P not have seen it until now? And why isn't anyone laughing? April P takes a breath. She walks right past the golem, goes through the back of the club to the parking lot, and fires up her pipe. When she comes inside again, the golem is gone.

No one at the club says anything about the golem. Maybe it was a hallucination? The problem with this hypothesis is that the golem keeps appearing. After that first visit, it shows up at the club roughly twice a month, as if to spend the paycheck from its golem job. (Which must not be a real paycheck; one of the things April P finds most frustrating about the golem is that it does not tip.) Sometimes it sits at the bar; sometimes it overflows a chair in front of the tiny stage. Its face is just those three dashes, but April P can feel it watching her. Once, as she walks past it—the layout of the club makes it impossible to avoid walking past the golem—she feels something cold and rough stroke the back of her leg. She spins around. Did the golem just touch her? It makes her want to scream. But, as before, no one else seems to notice

that the golem is there, or, rather, no one seems to notice that it is *a golem*, and not just an oversized customer, with no cash and no real eyes, who reeks of wet earth.

At this point, April P begins to entertain some really dark thoughts. What if this isn't the first golem to come into the club? What if Rosendale is full of golems? She wants to confront Dara, but she is afraid of what Dara will say: that her job as a stripper is damaging her psyche, that the golem is a manifestation of some old trauma that would be better worked out in a chapter of her memoir. Besides, Dara has been keeping to herself a lot lately. She works long hours at the ceramics center and holes up in her bedroom, listening to old punk-rock albums that April P would never have suspected her of owning.

Spring becomes summer. Rosendale is more beautiful than ever. The trees are wild with birds; the air smells like a garden. The mountains glow all day long. One night, Jenny says, Bring something nice to wear tomorrow. Why? April P asks. We're going to a party, Jenny says, a fancy party. April P knows Jenny too well to believe that she is telling the truth, but out of loyalty she brings a pair of decent jeans and a silky sleeveless top she bought at Ann Taylor in a moment of deluded professionalism some years back. Jenny, on the other hand, wears a cocktail dress and preposterous red heels. Where are we going? April P asks. Jenny tells her that a famous magazine publisher is having a party at his mansion in the hills. His assistant came to the club, invited Jenny, and told her to bring a friend. Oh, April P says. Now she feels underdressed. They drive separately to the mansion, which really is a mansion, hidden at the end of a long driveway. It has a reflecting pool and a massive granite dolmen, behind which a rose garden sprawls. A man in a polo shirt parks April P's car. I'll bet Dara doesn't know anyone this rich, she thinks, giddily.

Then they go in, and April P realizes that she isn't so much underdressed as just wearing the wrong clothes. The guests are all dressed like retired skateboarders; in her stupid Ann Taylor top, she feels like a very young and innocent Boston girl. Jenny, beside her, looks like a hooker. No one talks to either of them, and after a while they drift away and give themselves a tour of the house.



## CREATOR'S REMORSE

There are paintings everywhere: some are gashes of color and some are portraits of serious-looking young men and women with a sixties look. It's like being in a museum without the guards. April P touches a painting, and nothing happens. She touches another painting. She bounces on a soft bed, switches a light on and off. Jenny puts a crystal paperweight in her handbag. They go to the bathroom and smoke crack with the fan on. Then they go downstairs again.

April P seizes a glass of champagne from a waiter. She approaches an old guy in half-glasses and a cardigan who looks like he might be the famous publisher and asks, So, what do you do? He works for a bank, which he says is very boring. Do you like these paintings? April P asks. Her frankness charms him; suddenly he's talking about Venice, a silver tube, streamers blowing in the wind, the idea of objects, the rise and fall of boats in the water, Greece, seafood, the importance of not having a plan. April P thinks, This is a guy who has never been in danger. Listening to him is like stepping into a cathedral by daylight, all colorful and bright and still. The banker talks about England, childhood, omelettes, Spain, New Mexico, the beauty of deserts. April P keeps taking champagne glasses from waiters—at least, she thinks they're waiters—taking one for herself and giving one to the banker each

time, although she's not sure he drinks them, and in fact they seem to be accumulating on a small round table behind him. But she wants him to keep going; she has never heard anything as rich as his stories, anything as ample or kind or wise. Then Jenny tugs at April P's wrist. Go away, April P says. No, Jenny says, listen to me. We have to work. Work? April P says. She wants to cry. Work? I'll talk to you later! she calls out as Jenny pulls her away.

The publisher's assistant, a slim young man in a cornflower-blue shirt, leads them to a barn that has been converted into a home theatre. Many of the guests are waiting for them. They stand in front of these people, and, yes, they take off their clothes. They trot from sofa to sofa, perch on laps, tousle hair, brush hands away, and wait for tips that are not forthcoming. No one has told these people that they have to tip. Finally, they crouch behind the bar and get dressed again. Fucking assholes, Jenny whispers loudly.

They storm back to the party, and Jenny goes upstairs to look for something else to steal. April P takes another glass of champagne. She wants to find the old banker in the cardigan, to pick up their conversation and redeem the awful moment, but he has left. She takes another glass of champagne. The party begins to revolve like a carousel,

as if she were on a carousel, watching the fixed earth go around past her. Someone asks if she is feeling all right. I'm great, she says. She thinks she remembers taking off her clothes again, later in the night. She has a disturbing memory of standing naked in the kitchen, letting someone spray her with water from an industrial dish-sprayer-type thing. Later still, she is in the rose garden, throwing up. The sky is a delicate blue-white. Jenny appears next to her, looking remarkably clean. It's time to go home, she says. Can you drive? No, April P says.

Everyone else seems to have left. There's just this one guy in an old T-shirt and shorts, trimming the roses. April P assumes that he is the gardener, but it turns out that he's the famous publisher. Jenny drives her home. April P sleeps all day, and when she wakes up she feels cold and clammy. Even a long hot shower doesn't help. But when she goes outside her car is parked in the driveway. It, too, has been washed. There's an envelope on the passenger seat with five hundred dollars in cash and a note from the publisher, thanking her for her time. The note is on creamy paper, with the publisher's name printed at the top.

After that, April P stops going out with Jenny. She can't stand Jenny's friends, because they aren't rich and

never will be. The mere thought of the publisher and *his* friends makes her sick. She stays in her room and works on "Bar Girl," which she's now thinking of calling "April P Bares All." She fills one yellow legal pad after another with stories from her girlhood. She writes about grown cousins touching her little tits in her mother's guest bedroom. She writes about a girl she knew in elementary school named Elsa Lundqvist, who was later murdered by a guy she was seeing, whom, it turned out, April P also knew. Valerie told her that writing these stories down would help, and Dara's self-help books say the same thing. You have to get it out, the books tell her, put it down on paper! But the words she writes do nothing to ease her spirit; they just make her feel stupid and graceless.

Notice that we haven't mentioned the golem for a while. Maybe it got tired of April P and moved on to another club? But the thing about horror stories is that they let you believe life has gone back to normal only in order to surprise you again. And so: one afternoon, April P is scribbling away at her desk when she sees the golem standing at the edge of the forest, a place where, on happier afternoons, she watched deer nibble the grass. She wants to throw up. Is the golem going to follow her ev-

erywhere she goes, for the rest of her life? What does it even *want*? April P tries to keep working, but it turns out to be impossible to write your memoir while a golem is watching you.

Hoping that it won't follow her, she drives to Kingston, and spends a little of the publisher's money. *That's* comfort: not the night sky any longer, but definitely the best outfit in the world. So July passes, and August, too. The golem comes to Dara's house nearly every day. What it does on its days off April P can only imagine: maybe it stalks another girl, or maybe it goes to the ceramics center and makes little effigies of itself.

On Labor Day, April P staggers downstairs around lunchtime to find Dara on the porch, a mug of coffee balanced on one arm of her Adirondack chair and the newspaper on the other. Well, if it isn't the ghost, Dara says. What have you been doing with yourself? Nothing, April P says. The very question is unfair. April, Dara says, I haven't wanted to say anything about this, because I respect your privacy, but I kind of suspect that you're in trouble. Is it drugs? April P shakes her head. I know there's a lot of that in the sex industry, Dara says. Cocaine and whatnot. I'm not doing drugs, April P says, although there's nothing she craves more than a hit from her pipe. I want to tell you a story, Dara says, and she does. It's about Dara as a young woman in New York City, getting drunk and fighting with strangers, sometimes verbally and sometimes physically. One of the strangers breaks Dara's jaw, and she spends two days in the hospital. She has to eat and drink through a straw, but she gets a friend to bring her a fifth of Jack Daniel's, which is completely prohibited, not least because Dara is taking both painkillers and antibiotics. When she's alone in her hospital room, she takes furtive sips from the bottle, using her straw, and at some point while she's doing this Dara realizes that she is killing herself. So she calls another, better friend, and this friend says, Why don't you come up to Rosendale? Dara leaves the city. She attends her first A.A. meeting. Her jaw is still wired shut, so she can't really talk, but she can sure listen. April, Dara concludes, do you need help? I can sponsor you for A.A., if



*"This dog is for top salesmen! Only closers get to pet this dog!"*

that's what it is, or if it's drugs I can find you a sponsor. I know a lot of people in this town. Give us a chance, and we'll take care of you.

At the thought that someone might take care of her, April P sniffs. She tries to make it into a cough, but her eyes tear up. Hey, Dara says, standing. Hey. She circles around behind April P and pats her hair. April P sobs. She wants not to be so afraid and not to have to pretend that she is not so afraid. She cries and cries; snot comes out of her nose, and Dara stands behind her, stroking her hair in a way that she finds strangely comforting. That's good, Dara says. April, that's wonderful. She digs her fingers into the muscles at the base of April P's neck. It feels good, but, too soon, Dara's fingers communicate a desire to take her shirt off and feel her up. April P wriggles away. Stop, she says. Stop! She stands up, furious. What's wrong? Dara asks. Don't touch me! April P screams. Oh, April, Dara says, you really do have a problem. I have a problem? April P says. What about you and your golem? My golem? Dara crinkles up her eyes and looks into the distance behind April P's shoulder. April P is so spooked that she turns around. There's nothing. Yes, your golem, Dara, she says. First it came to the club, and now it's watching me through my bedroom window! It's driving me fucking crazy! Wow, Dara says. O.K. Let's take a deep breath. What are you telling me, April? Why don't you just admit you want to fuck me? April P says. Dara's face flattens. Are you high? she asks. Not yet, April P says. She grabs her shoes off the porch and runs to her car.

That's more or less the end of April P's time in Rosendale, although there's one more incident we should relate. It happens the next day, just before Dara calls Valerie, and Valerie magically arranges for April P to enter the treatment center. That morning, April P wakes up uncharacteristically early. It's raining, and the house is cold—it's still summer, technically, but it feels like fall. Dara is out. April P makes coffee. She sits in the living room, trying not to think about anything. Then she sees the golem. It stands right outside the house, its face streaked by

the rain that drips from the eaves. April P ignores it. She makes herself comfortable on the sofa and picks up Dara's copy of "Frankenstein." She had stopped in the middle; now she reads the monster's story, and all the sad events that lead up to the final chase across the fields of Arctic ice. When she's finished, she puts the novel down gently on the coffee table. The golem stands in the same place as before, looking much the worse for wear. Its shoulders sag, and one of its breasts seems to have fallen off. April P goes upstairs. She sits at her desk for a while, looking out at the trees, then opens her journal.

And this, for some reason, is easy: April P writes about being in love with a girl whose name is April P. She writes about travelling through the forest to watch April P dance nude at a club full of rowdy unwholesome men, and the heavy pain she feels when April P goes off to a curtained booth where the men are close enough to touch her bare skin. She writes, *If only April P commanded me, I would gladly crush the men. I am bigger than any of them, and vastly stronger. I would rip the stage to splinters, smash the tables, smash the chairs, peel back the walls, and tear the roof apart, until nothing remained from which the club could be rebuilt, ever.* She writes of the anguish the golem feels as she watches April P drive to the publisher's party in the hills. *If she said the word, I would throw his mansion into the valley and bury it in dirt. I could do it. I am mighty.* April P writes about the golem's rage and bewilderment. All she wants to do is to protect April P; it was for this purpose that she was created. But without a command from April P the golem cannot act. The law of the golem is absolute.

After months of this torture, the golem goes to April P's house. She stands at the edge of the forest and watches April P in her bedroom. *What is she doing? the golem wonders. Doesn't she see me standing here? Why won't she come out?* Day by day, she comes closer to the house, until she stands right outside the window. Incredibly, April P just sits there. She reads a book, she drinks coffee from a chipped blue mug. She adjusts the collar of her

bathrobe modestly, which makes the golem want to laugh. April P goes upstairs. The golem can't see her, but she knows that April P is sitting at her desk, making herself unhappy. The golem doesn't know what to do. Should she go into the house? Walk up the stairs and tap April P on the shoulder? But the command has to be given freely; it cannot be coerced.

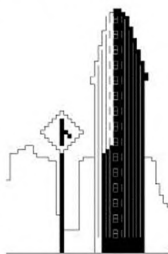
Hours pass. The rain becomes torrential, then lets up. The sun appears beyond the clouds. In the forest, a bird starts singing. And then . . .

April P puts her pen down. The story came to her so quickly that she can hardly believe it. And yet it's late in the evening; her shift at the club began hours ago. April P doesn't care. She wants to show Dara what she has written, but Dara isn't home yet. She goes downstairs and puts on water for tea. The living-room windows are dark, and she can't see whether the golem is out there or not. Possessed by a sudden curiosity, April P goes outside. She walks around the house barefoot, her feet chilled by the wet grass. In the light coming from the window, she sees the golem. Its body has been smoothed by the rain until it's nearly shapeless: not so much a golem as a golem-size lump of clay, dotted with bits of blue and white and orange pottery. Oh, no, April P thinks. She kneels by the lump. She's still there, kneeling on the lawn in her muddy bathrobe, when Dara gets out of her car, a bag of groceries in her arms. She drops the bag on the porch and runs to April P. Are you all right? she asks. What happened? April P looks up. Her face is wet. Dara, she says, you won't believe it, but I won!

. . . then I hear the front door open. April P circles the house. I want to tell her to put on clothes, because the evening is cold, but I can't speak yet. I wait by the window, my heart beating (I have a heart) with anticipation. April P comes close, she stands on tiptoe and whispers, Go. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM


Paul LaFarge on "Rosendale."





La lectura es el viaje  
de los que no pueden  
tomar el tren.

F. Croisset

A black and white photograph of a man with a beard and dark hair, wearing a dark ribbed cardigan over a light-colored shirt and dark trousers. He is sitting on a stone ledge in front of a large, dark, ornate wooden door. He is looking to his left and holding a Kindle tablet in his hands. The background shows a weathered wall with a metal mailbox on the left.

READING IS THE JOURNEY  
OF THOSE WHO CANNOT  
TAKE THE TRAIN.

—F. CROISSET

kindle

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# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## USELESS PRAYERS

*Eimear McBride's "A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing."*

BY JAMES WOOD

Eimear McBride's first novel, "A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing" (Coffee House), tells a fall-and-fall story that, especially in a traditional Irish setting, can seem familiar fictional material: a departed father, a pious, abusive mother, an errant and blasphemous daughter, a predatory uncle, a death in the family, a God-soaked household busy with meddling priests and vain prayer. Irish fiction and drama have prospered on their ration of curses, drink, and church: family history of this kind would seem to be the nightmare from which we are happy enough not to be awakened.

"A Girl Is a Half-Formed Thing" is indeed conventional in places, but in most respects the novel is blazingly daring. For one thing, all the characters are unnamed, and they inhabit an Ireland shorn of dates and obvious historical specificity. (A reference to Walkmans suggests the nineteen-eighties.) Most strikingly, McBride's novel is written in a dense, interrupted, shattered language, blooming with neologisms, compounds, stretched senses, old words put to new uses. The novel is narrated by the "half-formed" girl of the title, and begins when she is two years old. So McBride's prose starts by mimicking the visceral, fractured comprehension of a child taking clumsy possession of an adult world. The girl's voice is frequently crossed by the voices of adults, as in this description of going to church (the narrator is now five):

Get up from that bed. Come on we're late. Ah Mammy. It'll do you no harm Madam to show the Lord you care. But I feel

sick at mass. None of that please. There's no fresh air in there. Get you your shoes on we haven't got time for this.

Grannies rap their hearts. I know that from hot mass when they say Jesus's name. My feet hurt, knees hurt on the kneeler where someone's foot left shoe dirt there—sorry will you let me through. All the people up and down saying Christ has died Christ has risen Christ will come again. Mammy I can't see the altar. Lift me up til my legs go dead.

It's a dangerous place for smacking mass. Any trying to run up the aisle. Get back here. Climbing through the seats ahead. Sorry. Sit down. Sucking tissues or getting under the pew. That's a good thump in the back.

McBride has spoken of the moment, when she was in her mid-twenties, that she first encountered "Ulysses." She told the *Guardian* that it was decisive. "Everything I have written before is rubbish, and today is the beginning of something else," she concluded. She wrote this novel fast, in six months, at the age of twenty-seven, and spent the next nine years trying to get it published. Backdated compensation arrived earlier this year, in the form of the Baileys Women's Prize for Fiction (formerly the Orange Prize for Fiction). British reviews have emphasized the novelty of McBride's style. But to call it a new "style from scratch," as one did, may be excessive. Apart from the obvious Joycean influence, there is the example of Faulkner, and of Beckett. ("The biddies are having their sup.") And not a few contemporary writers have bent language, as McBride does, away from formal sense-making and toward private orality: Ali Smith, in "Hotel World"; Peter Carey, in "True History of the Kelly Gang"; Patrick McCabe, in "The Butcher Boy."



*McBride has written a blazingly original novel,*

What is most original about McBride's novel is not the style but the use that is made of that style. The perverted uncle and the pious mother may be conventional enough; McBride's relentless examination of a teen-age girl's psychic and moral collapse is anything but. When McBride's prose is most difficult, it is because it is doubly difficult: hard to follow and hard to bear.

Here illness is both in the family and

ABOVE: FRANÇOIS AVRIL



*conveying her protagonist's psychic collapse in unflinching prose, fuelled by fractured, adventurous language and raw emotion.*

of it. The novel's narrator addresses her elder brother in the second-person singular. Through a child's clues and fumbling approximations, we gather that the girl's brother has had a brain tumor, which appears to be in remission. Surgery has left a scar, and the growth has affected the boy's vision, speech, and gait. His sister eyes the tumor warily, as if it were a malevolent ghost: "Always in the house, drifting round the stairs or sitting by our

puddles little beast in your head. Sleeping happy homed up your brain stem now and fingers only strumming on your bad left side. Don't you knock your brother's head. You stumble. Not that bad. And walking into doors a laugh. Is blind eye at side like in eyelid?" At school, the kids ask him how he got his scar, and he says that a knife did it. Although he's briefly cool—"country boys" are beaten around the head by dads or priests, but usually

aren't attacked by knives—the favor passes, and the teasing begins. Overhearing the taunts and imitations ("He does your voice like a thick tongue"), his sister suffers for him.

At home, the narrator's mother, a single parent since the departure of her husband, is alternately abusive and tender. Morality is hypocritically stiffened by the rule of the Church. There is much prayer, and visits from charismatic Christians,

whom the narrator calls “the holy joes.” When the girl’s maternal grandfather berates his daughter for rearing a child who can’t even recite the Hail Mary, the ashamed mother viciously assaults her son and daughter. Blood flows from the girl’s nose: “Head back gulping the thick flow.” Throughout these experiences, the narrator observes, gathers, judges. She is wild, unhoused, estranged. Threatened with hellfire, she erupts in her own blasphemous conflagration: “Saying fucker Christ. Into the fields. My bad words best collection. All the things my mother never taught me. . . . I couldn’t bide the loud Do not.”

The narrator, now thirteen, defies “the loud Do not” as loudly as possible: she begins a sexual relationship with her uncle, an affair that she finds both repulsive and satisfying. Armed with new knowledge, she uses her precocious sexual confidence to take revenge on the boys who mock her brother, delighting in their inexperience—“I’ll only touch his tremble cock”—and despising their erotic neediness: “That guzzle and the useless whinging come of them.” Sex is power, defiance, depraved self-harm. McBride’s novel moves briskly, using its interior monologue to compress and frame large changes. Now the girl is leaving home for college, while her brother, always slow at school, gets a job stacking shelves. In the city, away from home, she sees her uncle again, and abases herself by asking him to hurt her. McBride’s prose, superbly alive to the smell and pulse and blood of sex, is courageously unflinching in these passages, and can be painful to read: we participate in a girl’s willed degradation.

Occasionally, the stop-start Joycean intermittence, allied to first-person stream of consciousness, seems an imperfect or even an affected mode for the narration of an entire novel. The eighteen-year-old narrator sounds little different from the five-year-old, for instance. Her tics of not completing her sentences, inverting the syntax, and otherwise mauling grammatical convention can have the odd effect of making her sound like a crazed Irish pirate: “I be new girl. . . . To have to be saying again again where I come from.” Inconsistencies present themselves from time to time. A girl who can produce a phrase like “this healing vast equivocation,” or “But you’ll find other intimations

of their special cool” might be assumed to enjoy connecting her phrases into longer units more often than she does—or just saying, “I am the new girl.”

But McBride’s language also justifies its strangeness on every page. Her prose is a visceral throb, and the sentences run meanings together to produce a kind of compression in which words, freed from the tedious march of sequence, seem to want to merge with one another, as paint and musical notes can. The results are thrilling, and also thrillingly efficient. The language plunges us into the center of experiences that are often raw, unpleasant, frightening, but also vital. When the narrator first has a sexual encounter with her uncle, her body is overwhelmed (“Push it home as far up. In that tight spot”), and her senses, too, are overwhelmed: “And breathing deafing out my ears.” Elsewhere, she watches her brother come up the drive, riding his bicycle: “Then on your blue bike you come breakily up the drive.” The double sense she draws from the adverb “breakily” makes the performance seem ungainly (lots of braking) and a bit perilous (liable to break). Or see what the narrator wrings out of the word “digs,” in the following passage, in which she tells us about her pursuit, in college, of sex at all costs:

Crumbs on the carpets and insects bite my back I don’t care for Nicer is not what I am after. Fuck me softly fuck me quick is all the same once done to me. And washing in their rusted baths and flushing brown with limescale loos amid the digs of four a.m. before I put my knickers on.

“The digs of four a.m.”—a place, and a state of being, the very pit of the night. There are many wonderful new usages like this, and many new words (or new to me)—“plomp” (“a plomp load of books”), “harlotting,” “forlorning,” “wilter,” “miracling.” Irish writers can sometimes be lured by the treasures of their wordy inheritance into flashy spending, but McBride isn’t just blameyng. On the contrary, she gets her words to work hard for her. When the narrator uses “miracling,” she seems to reach for it in desperation, as if it were the only possible word. Her brother has been hospitalized once more, and she is on the phone to her horrible uncle, who is blandly consoling her, saying that things will be all right. She cries out, to herself, “Can he see all about me

patients miracling well?” We think of this kind of effect as modern, or modernist, but it is also ancient. “Let me gulp down some of this red red stuff, for I am famished,” Esau says of the lentils for which he sells his birthright to Jacob (in Robert Alter’s faithful translation). McBride’s prose—“Head back gulping the thick flow”—is, in marvellous ways, continuous with this visceral tradition.

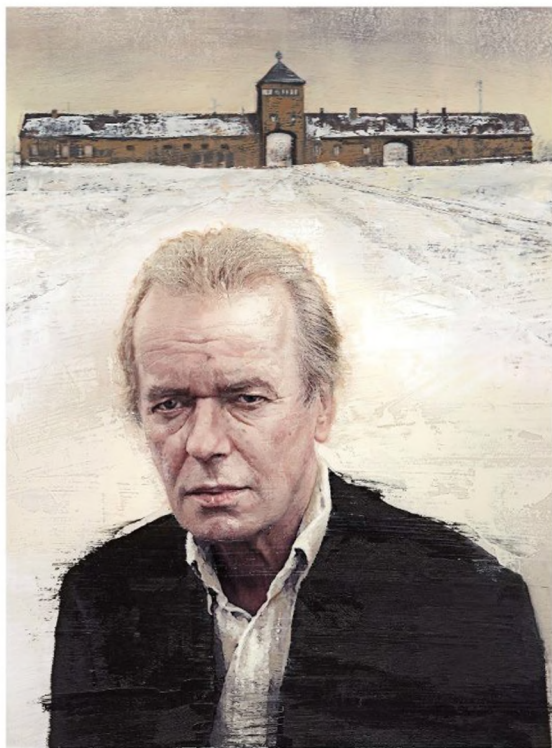
The narrator is away at college when her brother’s illness returns. There are doctors, the hospital, a priest. As the novel moves steadily toward its inevitable dénouement, the reader perhaps feels the coaxed direction of narrative convention. But, again, the conventional is enriched by the extraordinary passion of the novel, the writer’s direct access to feeling, and the rigor of the language. Eimear McBride’s own brother died of a brain tumor; she has rightly been at pains to emphasize the fictionality of her novelistic account. Yet the force of lament at the novel’s close seems to carry a special authorial impress, remembrance painfully mixed with invention.

The rituals of mortality focus the novel’s blasphemous energies, as the narrator’s hostility toward belief collides with the certainties of the community. At a wake, the narrator creeps upstairs (while downstairs “they’re merging on the fruitcake”) and sits beside the open coffin of her hated grandfather, “the bastard.” The corpse excites impiety: “So Granda. I don’t talk to the dead. So now. That’s strange to see him here. Dead. I could give him a kick if I liked. . . . I could undo his flies for shame.” Late in the novel, the narrator sits at the bedside of her ailing brother. The priest has given him the sacrament of the sick, anointed him with oil and drawn the sign of the cross on his face. The oil is supposed to comfort, and to cleanse the mortal believer of sin. But what is his sin? Less angrily than with her grandfather, but full of heretical decision, she waits until the priest has left the room, and wipes the oil from her brother’s skin. “For what need? You’re more perfect than you were before. I’ll wash your face of sacrament. Let sin to sinner return. Like me—for I know it very well.” She transfers the sin from the sinless to the sinner, from him to her. This is as close as she can get to taking on his illness, to putting herself in his place: a moment of devout reversal that has its own sacramental tenderness. ♦

## THE DEATH FACTORY

*Martin Amis's "The Zone of Interest."*

BY JOYCE CAROL OATES



When Theodor Adorno declared, in 1949, that “to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric,” he could hardly have anticipated the ensuing quantity of poetry and prose that actually concerned itself with the Holocaust, still less its astonishing range and depth. The category now encompasses the densely narrated psychological-historical realism of André Schwarz-Bart and Imre Kertész, the Kafka-inspired dreamscapes of Aharon Appelfeld, and, later, the elliptical, deeply original fictions of W. G. Sebald. As the generations of firsthand witnesses give way to younger generations, literary works that confront the subject have often been

more circumspect; recent novels by Susanna Moore and Ayelet Waldman achieve their emotional power by focusing upon characters peripheral to the terrible European history that has nonetheless altered their lives. The conflagration must be glimpsed indirectly, following Appelfeld’s admonition that “one does not look directly into the sun.”

Such circumspection has not been Martin Amis’s strategy in approaching the Holocaust. The Nazi death camps at Auschwitz provide a setting for Amis’s tour de force “Time’s Arrow: or The Nature of the Offense” (1991), in which the lifetime of a Nazi doctor-experimenter is presented in reverse chrono-

logical order, from the instant of his death (as the affable American Tod Friendly) to his conception (as the ominously named German Odilo Unverdorben), witnessed by a part of himself that seems to be his conscience, or his soul. Nearly a quarter century later, Amis’s new and equally risky Nazi novel, “The Zone of Interest” (Knopf), revisits the town of Auschwitz, more specifically the Zone of Interest, which contains one of the death camps and the headquarters and domiciles of its Nazi staffers and assistants, a “dumping ground for 2nd-rate blunderers,” as its commandant wryly observes. Amis’s considerable historical research into the horrific absurdities of what he calls, in the novel’s afterword, “the exceptionalism of the Third Reich” is everywhere in evidence. The Zone is a place to which Jewish “evacuees” are brought by train to be used as forced labor or to be gassed straightaway, their remains deposited in the euphemistically named but foul-smelling Spring Meadow. (“If what we’re doing is so good,” the commandant wonders, “why does it smell so lancingly bad?”) In this hellish place, in August, 1942, there are several narrators; none is quite so eloquent in Nabokovian irony as the unidentified narrator of “Time’s Arrow,” but each bears witness to the unspeakable in his own way.

The first of the narrators is Obersturmführer Angelus (Golo) Thomsen, a mid-level Nazi officer in charge of the Buna-Werke factory, and the favored nephew of the high-ranking Nazi Martin Bormann—the man who controls the appointment book of the Deliverer.” (For some reason, no one in “The Zone of Interest” calls Adolf Hitler by his name; elevated circumlocutions are used.) Thomsen’s commitment to the Nazi war effort is haphazard and expedient: “We were obstruktiv Mitläufer. We went along. We went along, we went along with, doing all we could to drag our feet . . . but we went along. There were hundreds of thousands like us, maybe millions like us.” Yet Thomsen is a self-described Aryan specimen—six feet three, with cobalt-blue “arctic eyes” and “thighs as solid as hewn masts.” A compulsive womanizer and a sexual braggart, he is erotically obsessed with the wife of the camp commandant, Paul

*Amis is a satiric vivisectionist with a cool eye and an unwavering scalpel.*

Doll—the elusive and haughty Hannah, who “conformed to the national ideal of young femininity, stolid, countrified, and built for procreation and heavy work.”

Paul Doll is the second narrator, a vainglorious buffoon stricken with self-pity for being ill-treated by his wife (who loathes him) and overworked by his superiors (who disdain him). He is responsible for overseeing the frequent arrival of evacuees and their subsequent fates at Auschwitz. Accordingly, he is caught between the demand of the Economic Administration Head Office to help “swell the labour strength (for the munitions industries)” and the demand of the Reich Central Security Department to direct “the disposal of as many evacuees as possible, for obvious reasons of self-defense.” He sits through Nazi concerts calculating “how long it would take . . . to gas the audience.” Amis clearly takes pleasure in throwing his satirical voice into Doll’s rants, as he complains of being stuck in the Zone of Interest “offing old ladies and little boys, whilst other men gave a luminescent display of valour.” Here is a wickedly funny Monty Python figure in Nazi regalia:

And mind you, disposing of the young and the elderly requires other strengths and virtues—fanaticism, radicalism, severity, implacability, hardness, iciness, mercilessness, and so weiter. After all . . . somebody’s got to do it—the Jews’d give us the same treatment if they had ½ a chance, as everybody knows.

As in a stage comedy routine, at times the buffoon-Nazi mask falls away and we hear a startled voice break through, as in this reverie of Doll’s: “She is a personable and knowing young female, albeit too flachbrustig (though her Arsch is perfectly all right, and if you hoiked up that tight skirt you’d . . . Don’t quite see why I write like this. It isn’t my style at all).”

There is little irony, much less humor, in the figure of Amis’s third narrator, Sonderkommandoführer Szmul, the head of a team of “Sonders,” Jewish prisoners who assist the Nazis in killing and disposing of their fellow-Jews—“vultures of the crematory” who appear to “go about their ghastly tasks with the dumbest indifference.” Szmul perceives himself in very different terms, as a martyr/witness to the horror: “I feel that if you knew every day, every hour, every minute of human history, you would find no ex-

emplum, no model, no precedent.” Like all those conscripted for such work among the doomed and their cadavers (from whose teeth gold must be carefully extracted), Szmul understands that he, too, is doomed, even as he hopes that in some way his testimony will prevail:

Somebody will one day come to the ghetto or the Lager and account for the near-farical *assiduity* of the German hatred.

And I would start by asking—why were we conscripted, why were we impressed, in the drive towards our own destruction?

. . . There it is, you see. The Jews can only prolong their lives by helping the enemy to victory—a victory that for the Jews means what?

Far from being a vulture of the crematory, Szmul is a kind of saint of Auschwitz, ascetic and selfless. If he is not an altogether convincing character, it’s a nearly impossible task to give a convincing voice to such a person (and such a person very likely existed). Szmul leaves all that he has written as a witness to Auschwitz in a thermos flask beneath a gooseberry bush: “And by reason of that, not all of me will die.”

It is the opportunistic Thomsen who survives the defeat of the German Army. Reconstituted in September, 1948, at the novel’s end, as a “reformed character”—a de-Nazified German—Thomsen has a job working with Americans on the Bundesentschädigungsgesetz, or the guidelines for reparations: “victims’ justice.” He’s heard that Germany’s new national anthem is “Ich Wusste Nichts Uber Es” (“I Didn’t Know Anything About It”). Yet Thomsen can’t construct for himself a “self-sufficient inner life; and this was perhaps the great national failure.” In the Zone of Interest, he reflects, “I felt doubled (this is me but it is also not me; there is a further me); after the war, I felt halved.”

**M**artin Amis is at his most compelling as a satiric vivisectionist with a cool eye and an unwavering scalpel. The novel, in its most inspired moments, is a compendium of epiphanies, appalled asides, anecdotes, and radically condensed history. With virtually every page of the novel reporting some horror, including the awful stench of death en masse, it is a stretch of the reader’s imagination to credit the “love interest” of Thomsen for Hannah Doll as much more than an expedient MacGuffin.

Amis’s great gift is a corrosively satiric voice, often very funny, zestfully profane, obscene, and scatological. Jonathan Swift’s “savage indignation,” backed with Swift’s passionate morality, infuses Amis’s most characteristic work. But, in his new Holocaust novel, Amis is too humane, finally, to do more than attempt a few swipes at such humor. The effect of the Holocaust isn’t singular but cumulative. At a poorly executed *Selektion* (a “selection” of prisoners: some to live as forced laborers, others to be gassed), the Commandant has to rely upon a small group of violinists to play music masking screams of terror (“the first strains of the violins could do no more than duplicate and reinforce that helpless, quivering cry. But then the melody took hold”), and it’s the stuff of blackest humor. Yet, when such cruelties are repeated and repeated, even the satirist is apt to lose heart and concur with Thomsen: “I used to be numb; now I’m raw.” It’s a further anomaly that isolated passages of prose in the text are rendered in German (styled without umlauts, for some reason), when surely *all* the dialogue and the introspective material would have been in German. In an exchange between the Dolls, one speaks in English and the other in German, and Szmul, in one of his reveries, thinks, “The Sonders have suffered Seelenmord—death of the soul,” as if a German-speaking character would translate his thoughts in this way. The author of the novel, not the narrator of the chapter, wants to highlight certain phrases for the benefit of the reader, but the mannerism is as distracting as a nudge in the ribs.

Indeed, it seems a relief to the author, as to the reader, when the strained fiction of “fiction” is set aside and we get Amis’s own unmediated (and very engaging) voice in the afterword, titled “That Which Happened.” Here, Amis makes note of the impressively many works of history and memoir he has read in preparation for writing “The Zone of Interest,” and also of his fascination with the Führer of all Führers: “He has so far gone unnamed in this book; but now I am obliged to type out the words ‘Adolf Hitler.’” Amis joins in a general bewilderment among historians about “understanding” Hitler: “We know a great deal about the how—about how he did what he did; but we

seem to know almost nothing about the why.” Given this fascination, it’s curious that Hitler has no presence in “The Zone of Interest” except as a quasi-mythic figure revered and feared by more ordinary Nazis.

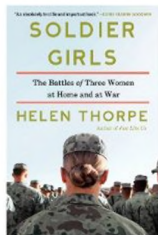
Amis acknowledges, too, his long-time obsession with the Holocaust:

My own inner narrative is one of chronic stasis, followed by a kind of reprieve. . . . I first read Martin Gilbert’s classic *The Holocaust: The Jewish Tragedy* in 1987, and I read it with incredulity; in 2011 I read it again, and my incredulity was intact and entire. . . . Between those dates I had worked my way through scores of books on the subject; and while I might have gained in knowledge, I had gained nothing at all in penetration. The facts, set down in a historiography of tens of thousands of volumes, are not in the slightest doubt; but they remain in some sense unbelievable, or beyond belief, and cannot quite be assimilated. Very cautiously I submit that part of the exceptionalism of the Third Reich lies in its unyieldingness, the electric severity with which it repels our contact and our grip.

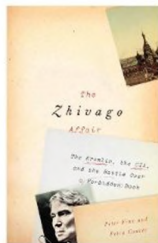
One could argue, just as plausibly, that Hitler and his henchmen were not at all “exceptional” in a human history that has always included warfare, unspeakable cruelty, and attempted genocide; what set the Nazis apart from less efficient predecessors was their twentieth-century access to the instruments of industrialized warfare and annihilation, and a propaganda machine that excluded all other avenues of information for an essentially captive German population.

“The Zone of Interest,” like “Time’s Arrow,” focusses upon the vicissitudes of personality and situation, and does not take up such larger questions, except fleetingly. The author’s rage at Holocaust horrors is portioned into scenes and sentences; it does not gather into a powerful swell, to overwhelm or terrify. Is it inherent in postmodernism that, no matter the subject, such emotions are likely to be held at bay? “To produce a mighty book, you must choose a mighty theme,” as Melville declares in “Moby-Dick”; but such mightiness may be precluded by a mode of writing whose ground bass is irony rather than empathy. In the afterward, Amis cites the famous passage in Primo Levi’s Auschwitz memoir in which Levi asks a German guard, “*Warum?*,” and is told by the guard, “*Hier ist kein warum*”—“There is no why here.” Perhaps that terse reply is the only adequate response to all questions of “Why?” relating to the Holocaust. ♦

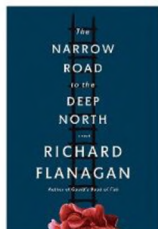
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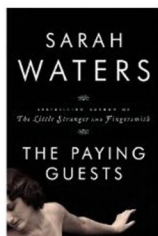
**SOLDIER GIRLS**, by Helen Thorpe (Scribner). The three Indiana women whose stories are told here thought that, if they joined the National Guard, all they had to do was occasionally attend training camp. In exchange, they would get the best chances available to them for a better life: a college education, a steady paycheck, a more engaging existence. But then came 9/11, and the women found themselves in combat zones in Afghanistan and Iraq. Thorpe spent four years interviewing her subjects, and what she learned offers a moving portrait of both the toll that the chaos of wartime military life takes and the numbing realities of being female and poor in this country.



**THE ZHIVAGO AFFAIR**, by Peter Finn and Petra Couvée (Pantheon). In 1958, the C.I.A. launched a clandestine operation to publish a Russian-language edition of “Doctor Zhivago,” Boris Pasternak’s paean to art, individuality, and the lost Russian past, and to smuggle it into the author’s homeland, where the state had prohibited its publication. Drawing on newly declassified documents, the authors weave a tale of ideological espionage that focusses on the Zhivago-like figure at its heart. Pasternak, refusing to leave the U.S.S.R. even after the campaign against him reached terrorizing heights, often rued the exploitation of his book, suspecting that the powers that be were more interested in its political uses than its literary ones. As the secret documents uncovered here reveal, he was correct. “This book has great propaganda value,” one C.I.A. memo read.



**THE NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH**, by Richard Flanagan (Knopf). Set in 1943, this haunting novel follows a group of Australian P.O.W.s in Japanese captivity. They are forced to work on the construction of the Siam-Burma railway, and a Tasmanian surgeon bargains with his captors to give the men relief from starvation, brutality, and disease. In understated, unflinching prose, Flanagan fluidly shifts between time frames to sketch a group portrait of the prisoners and their tormentors on “the Line.” The book’s title comes from a haiku travel diary by the seventeenth-century poet Basho, a fitting lens for Flanagan’s stark exploration of the nature of suffering, the capabilities and limitations of memory, and “the strange, terrible *neverendingness* of human beings.”



**THE PAYING GUESTS**, by Sarah Waters (Riverhead). Waters’s sixth novel is saturated with uneasiness. A woman in her mid-twenties lives with her mother in a large house near London. It is 1922, and they make ends meet by taking in a couple as lodgers. Waters has always been attracted to sensationalist plots, and this novel progresses through at least two: a secret love affair between two women and a murder trial. But the novel is really about tiny changes in feeling, often evoked in gorgeous simile. The beginnings of intimacy emerge as softly as “the white of an egg growing pearly in hot water.” Yet this can be the disastrous event that sets all the others in motion.

ON TELEVISION

## OPEN SECRET

*Powerful revelations on “Happy Valley” and “Transparent.”*

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM



Another day, another dollar, another well-built crime drama full of agonizing violence. This time, it's "Happy Valley," the latest offering from Netflix, which stars Sarah Lancashire as Catherine Cawood, a police sergeant in rural England. Does the show pass the "worth the pain" test? It does, owing in part to the topnotch performance of Lancashire, who, with her soup-bowl eyes and blond bangs, resembles the pop star Adele—if Adele were a detective, a grandmother, and a dedicated agent of vengeance. At six episodes, "Happy Valley" is satisfyingly compressed: as boring as it is to compare TV to novels, it's hard

to miss the parallels here, since the show is the analogue of a tasty crime thriller, the sort that one might buy in order to kill time on a long flight, only to find that its psychological grip lingers longer than expected.

The plot is superficially similar to that of the movie " Fargo": an emasculated nebbish triggers a kidnapping, then panics. That nebbish is Kevin Weatherill (Steve Pemberton), an accountant who works, resentfully, for a successful businessman named Nevison (Nev) Gallagher (the terrific George Costigan, whose watery gaze shifts from pomposity to terror to trust). When Nev refuses to

fund Kevin's daughter's education, Kevin takes revenge, scheming with drug dealers to kidnap Nev's daughter. Yet this is merely the start of the plot, which revs, then slows, then takes a swerve, even as it intersects with a grisly story about Cawood's family history. Also like " Fargo" (the movie, not the fan-fiction-ish TV series), the show depicts crime as something grubby, not grand: these thugs are small-timers, their evil petty, at times darkly comic, but essentially pathetic. This doesn't make them any less scary. Instead of serving up rococo visual nastiness—an effective approach on shows including " Hannibal"—" Happy Valley" favors a slow accretion of dread, aided by directorial withholding, so that many of the worst acts of violence take place offscreen, for us to imagine.

For mystery fans, there has been a set of excellent series recently, from Sundance's " Top of the Lake" and " Rectify" to the BBC's wonderfully quiet British seaside thriller, " Broadchurch." (Don't bother with " Gracepoint," Fox's karaoke remake of the latter.) Like them, " Happy Valley" honors the Miss Marple-esque truism that peaceful countrysides are anything but. Neighbors know one another, but that doesn't make things cozy; it just means that, when a cop catches a junkie, she's seen him grow up. In this economically depressed setting, Cawood is bringing up Ryan, the child of her daughter, whose sudden, violent death, and its aftermath, wrecked Cawood's marriage. The grandchild's father is in prison, having committed awful crimes, and when he's released Cawood becomes possessed by fantasies of " marking his card." Her sister begs her to deal with her hatred in a rational way. " I've no intention of dealing with it rationally," she replies. " My intention is to deal with it effectively."

Cawood is even blunter about these revenge fantasies with her ex-husband, to whom she confides about " the exquisite satisfaction you'd get from grinding his severed scrotum into the mud with the underside of your shittiest shoe." At the beginning of the show, Cawood is a heroine, a sharp-tongued pragmatist who is good at her job, but when crimes pile up on her watch her personality begins to break down, in troubling ways—violent

*"Happy Valley" honors the crime truism that peaceful countrysides are anything but.*

trauma, from the show's perspective, is a bruise that never quite heals. The rest of the cast is strong, too, particularly Joe Armstrong, as Ashley, the lead kidnaper, whose jovial, businesslike demeanor takes on a grimly funny aspect once the plan deteriorates. When Ashley discovers that a sex crime has been committed by one of his men, he recovers quickly, then remarks, to another henchman, about the issue of rape, "I don't want you to feel that it's obligatory."

"Happy Valley" isn't perfect; the pace drags midway through, and a few twists may raise an eyebrow. The show also commits a visual misdemeanor common in cable dramas: it includes flashbacks to earlier episodes, using them as a lazy shorthand for a character's emotional life. Still, the final episode, fuelled by a touching performance by Rhys Connah as the eight-year-old Ryan, was tense enough that I nearly lost my mind. There's something refreshing about how "Happy Valley" treats violence not as power but as chaos, an inevitable psychological decay that causes even the worst criminals to turn on one another as the cops close in. "Don't blame other people for decisions that you make," Cawood tells Ryan, and this warning becomes the show's watchword, a moral chorus that lands effectively in the final act: the root of all evil is blaming other people for one's worst choices.

In 2013, Jill Soloway directed "Afternoon Delight," a loopy, delicate movie about a depressed Los Angeles mother (Kathryn Hahn) who moves a stripper (Juno Temple) into her spare room. Her motives are unclear, even to herself: there's loneliness, and envy, and prurience, and some irresistible impulse to blow up her life, using another woman's body as the bomb. Unsurprisingly, the tactic works. Like many great independent movies, it's a closely observed story about a narrow social milieu (a lot of it is set at the "East Side Jewish Community Center"), emphasizing intimate observations instead of broad plot. Funny as it is, the movie takes sex seriously, as a sort of mood ring for identity: we show our real selves in bed, even when—maybe especially when—we're faking it.

"Transparent," a new series on Amazon, is Soloway's next step, and it's a daring, difficult project, a chewy story about a family from much the same privileged world as "Afternoon Delight." The Pfeffermans, a clan of secular L.A. Jews, are decadent chatterboxes with notably sketchy boundaries. Jeffrey Tambor plays Mort, the father, a long-divorced former professor, who, in retirement, is beginning to transition from male to female. In the first episode, Mort tries, and fails, to come out as "Maura" to his three children—Sarah (Amy Landecker), a wealthy stay-at-home mom, and her two younger siblings, Ali (Gaby Hoffmann) and Josh (Jay Duplass). Sensing that something is up, but not knowing what, the kids presume that their dad has cancer and begin bickering over their inheritance. "They are so selfish," Maura says later, frustrated by what never got said. "I don't know how it is I raised three people who cannot see beyond themselves."

But, if "Transparent" begins as a coming-out story, it dives quickly, as "Afternoon Delight" did, into murkier undercurrents, lingering on uncomfortable moments, and showing far more interest in behavior than in resolution. Tambor is a fragile, melancholy figure as Maura, his glower softened by peach face powder; coming out in his seventies is presented as something that's as much an ending as a beginning. Maura attends a support group, and she moves into a queer-friendly apartment complex, but none of this offers instant community, let alone "It Gets Better" catharsis. Although it is a major breakthrough to have a TV protagonist who is trans, there are risks in this kind of project, too—preachiness, mainly—and Soloway's wise solution is to treat Maura's story not as symbolic but as something as distinct as a fingerprint, making her nobody's role model but her own. By forcing her family to see her as she sees herself, Maura also acts as a mirror, reflecting back the "queerness" in everyone around her: Sarah, who jumps into bed with an ex-girlfriend; Ali, who abuses her body, in ways both playful and hostile, using drugs and sex; and Josh, whose boyishness hints at something more uncomfortable, bound up in the secrets his family has agreed to bury.

In the first four episodes (the whole

season will be released this week), the show has mildly funky pacing: like "Girls" and "Looking" and "Louie," it's part of the new school of indie-inflected TV, a set of lyrical outliers that stop and start, using music and montages to suggest ideas without fully explaining them. Excitingly, it's also the most Jewish show I've seen on TV. The Pfeffermans make Holocaust jokes, then get offended when other people make Holocaust jokes. Ali orders "tofu schmeer" at a deli. "I'm so glad to be rid of that wig," Maura remarks, when a friend helps her style her gray hair. "I felt like I was wearing a *sheitel*"—an Orthodox head covering. As a member of the tribe, Soloway is free to critique a certain generational strain of urbane self-obsession, one that merges self-love with self-loathing. All the characters are sharply drawn, but in the first four episodes the one who feels the most original is Josh, a hip music producer who struggles with his younger girlfriend, his story flipping from funny to sad and back. Both Duplass and Hoffmann are amazing screen presences, charismatic weirdos who throw their bodies into sex scenes as if they were bendy straws. There's something impressively tough, too, about Soloway's refusal to sentimentalize the wild, abrupt selfishness of Sarah's affair, which comes across as equally manic and liberating.

One of the pilot's best scenes isn't about sex, although it's certainly about bodies. As the Pfeffermans eat together, the camera circles the table, observing the way the family members coat themselves in barbecue sauce—they're total slobs, with red patches surrounding their mouths like a rash, as, all the while, they joke about their own slobbery. "Let him be as messy as he wants—we'll hose him down at the end!" Ali argues, when Sarah tries to wipe her father's face clean. "We come from shtetl people," Maura says, shrugging. It's the sort of intimate private joke that every family has, and, despite the satirical elements, "Transparent" is reflexively compassionate when it comes to human mess. In search of love and intimacy, Soloway's characters do some idiotic things—cruel or clumsy acts that might cause some viewers to turn away—but, with each mistake, "Transparent" just looks closer. ♦

## TOGETHER AND ALONE

*"Pride" and "Tracks."*

BY DAVID DENBY



Joseph Gilgun, Ben Schnetzer, and Dominic West in a film by Matthew Warchus.

In March of 1984, Margaret Thatcher's government threatened to shut down twenty British coal mines, at which point members of the National Union of Mineworkers went on strike, a wrenching fight that lasted a year. A decade later, the actor and playwright Stephen Beresford heard a startling story about that struggle. The principal players weren't much on record-keeping, but he managed to reconstruct the events that became the basis of the irresistible new British movie "Pride." In the early days of the strike, Mark Ashton (Ben Schnetzer), a young gay-rights activist in London, persuades some gay friends to make common cause with the miners. They are both oppressed, he says, beaten by the police and hated by conservatives and the tabloids. After raising money for the strikers, Ashton's tiny group—seven men and one woman, who call themselves Lesbians & Gays Support the Miners—drive in a brightly decorated yellow-and-orange van to the South Wales mining town of Onllwyn. Under gloomy skies, the Onllwynites greet their guests with varying degrees

of warmth, hostility, and astonishment. The question the movie asks is: What is solidarity?

"Pride" is brilliantly entertaining just as it is, so I trust that no one connected with the film will be insulted if I say that, despite the existence of shows with similarly stirring themes, like "Billy Elliot" and "Kinky Boots," the story would make a terrific musical. In truth, the movie is halfway there already. Beresford and the director, Matthew Warchus, bracket the tale with gay-pride marches in London in 1984 and 1985, but, in general, the picture is short on politics and historical context (there's almost nothing about the strike itself) and long on comedy, sentiment, and music. As the Londoners imagine entering a mining town, they joke about what they might say to the inhabitants. "May I inquire about your communal baths?" is one gambit. But they sober up when they meet the strikers, who are defiant but very much in need of help. These early meetings have the wariness of two species confronting each other in a marsh. Some of the younger miners, disgusted, want nothing

to do with the gays. An elderly woman with a soft face musters her courage and says to a lesbian, "That can't be true, can it? You're all . . . vegetarians?" The Londoners are smart, self-deprecating, ironic, and sometimes furious about their own wounds; the miners and their wives and widows can be hearty, even cheery, but, just below the surface, they carry a life-long bitterness. The two groups are fused by anger and divided by virtually everything else.

Warchus has directed many successful theatrical productions, including musicals, and in this, his first movie in more than a decade, he appears to have an instinctive grasp of film tempo and mood. He moves quickly through crowd scenes and the procedural tasks that the groups perform to build their movement, and then slows down for the personal encounters, many of which are both heart-wrenching and funny. "Pride" has an easy flow and a generous appreciation of vivid temperament and talent of any kind. If you can do something helpful, you're O.K.—that's one meaning of solidarity. The actual merger of the two groups, one guesses, was less jaunty than what's onscreen, but the filmmakers must have thought that this moment, when all hopes were raised, should have the jubilation of a celebratory fable.

Warchus is used to working with large ensemble casts, and he brings young and old actors together with a sure hand. As a veteran union figure, Bill Nighy, with his stalk-like body and his exquisite circumspection, plays a gentle guy who stops being gentle when he sees the cops. Imelda Staunton is the fiery Hefina, who is grateful for L.G.S.M.'s aid and scornful of the local louts who don't want to accept it. Staunton, so meek in "Vera Drake," doesn't merely speak her brazen lines; she launches them, with devastating precision. The dark-eyed American actor Ben Schnetzer has a thrilling youthful ardor as Mark; his inspired, impromptu speeches could actually rouse the audience to dreams of a united front of the insulted and the injured. Warchus makes only one serious mistake: Lisa Palfrey, as the widow Maureen, is so hostile that she seems witchy, even crazy—someone you want to hiss at every time she appears.

The drab, impoverished town could use some pleasure and excitement.

When the miners and their families warm to the gays, they do so because the visitors provide practical assistance but also a fresh candor and wit, along with an unfettered attitude toward sex. ("Pits and Perverts" is the name of a London fund-raiser that L.G.S.M. puts on.) Dominic West, who played a corrupt Greek council member in "300" and Detective Jimmy McNulty in "The Wire," is Jonathan, the oldest in the London group. In a dun-colored meeting hall, he puts on Sylvia Robinson's seventies disco hit, "Shame, Shame, Shame," and dances across the tabletops, turning a get-to-know-you event into a joyful uproar. He delivers bread and roses, as the old labor slogan goes.

The gay men and women, for all their strength, have their needs, too. Many of them are estranged from disapproving parents, and they could stand a little affection from an older generation. The two sides shore each other up. But there's a large irony in the partnership which Beresford and Warchus don't point out. During the past thirty years, gays have fought their way toward greater equality, but the miners, who were defeated in the 1984-85 strike, have, like other union workers in England and the United States, continued to lose power. "Pride" ends on a note of triumph, but it leaves a long sigh of regret in its wake. Solidarity rarely outlasts the grinding movements of money and power.

A camel's roar begins as a coarse below, degenerates into the rumble of a 1948 Chevy cranking over, and ends as the sound of water gurgling through a drainpipe. The beasts are un-

harmonious and changeable—smart, playful, and loving at times, though the male of the species, while rutting, can turn vicious. In "Tracks," a movie derived from Robyn Davidson's 1980 memoir of adventure in the outback, an angry bull camel charges, and Robyn (Mia Wasikowska) brings him down with a rifle shot—something that is particularly hard for her to do, because she loves animals far more than she loves people. The year is 1977, and Robyn, aged twenty-six, has set out to walk from Alice Springs, in central Australia, to the Indian Ocean, a distance of some seventeen hundred miles. The camels, a holdover from the nineteenth century, when they were imported from Arabia, India, and Afghanistan to carry goods across the desert, make the attempt possible—with *National Geographic*, which provides some funding. No white woman has done such a thing before, and Robyn needs to prove to herself that she can do it with minimal human help. She does it with less than full animal help, too, loading the camels with supplies but then walking rather than riding.

The memoir is strongly written, and I wish that the movie, directed by John Curran (Marion Nelson did the adaptation), had more excitement to it. Early on, there are terse, bustling scenes of Robyn arriving in Alice Springs without money, working as a barmaid, and apprenticing herself to some old camel wranglers, encrusted and filthy, whom she wins over with her stamina and her bravery. Once she launches into the reddish-brown desert, however, the movie falls into what

can only be called a righteous monotony. Robyn is not a victim of accident, like Tom Hanks, in "Cast Away," or Robert Redford, in "All Is Lost." She chooses her solitary fate in an act of self-transcending defiance. In a sexist society, like that of the Australia of forty years ago, she's certainly heroic—everyone thinks she's strange. But her obsession doesn't have the variety and depth that would make her a continuously interesting movie subject. Robyn walks across the desert because she wants to—that's all—and Curran's use of the landscape is too prosaic to fill in the blank spaces in her temperament. (In the book, it's Davidson's skill as a writer that holds you.)

The slight Wasikowska is a capable, pure-spirited actress, but she lacks the largeness of desire and the perversity that, say, Charlize Theron would have brought to the role a decade ago. The loose-limbed, grinning Adam Driver shows up as Rick Smolan, a *National Geographic* photographer assigned to the trip, who's constantly hopping around her to get the best angle. Robyn falls into his arms when she's in despair, and then treats him with indifference in the morning. It's solitude that she wants. She despises tourists, or anyone with a camera, but, as Rick points out to her when she fends him off, the magazine paid her for the trip, so what did she expect? Perhaps only naïve men and women have the single-mindedness to perform such feats as a seven-month desert trek, but that single-mindedness cuts Robyn off from other people and, finally, from us as well. ♦

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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 Carolita Johnson, must be received by Sunday, September 28th. The finalists in the September 15th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the October 13th 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 [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*"I hate Fashion Week."*  
Eric Berger, Rye Brook, N.Y.



### THE FINALISTS

*"Didn't you see the light?"*  
Martha Straus, Dummerston, Vt.

*"Let's not tell Dad."*  
Rafael Mateo, New York City

*"You're supposed to be on the other shoulder."*  
Vincent Coca, Staten Island, N.Y.

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

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