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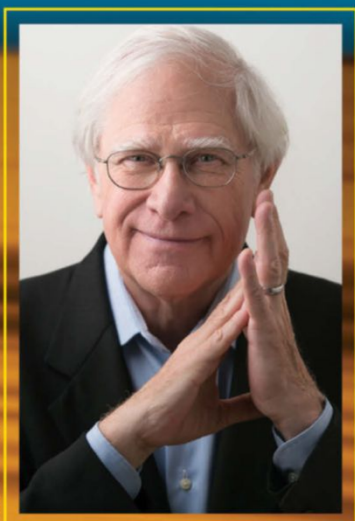
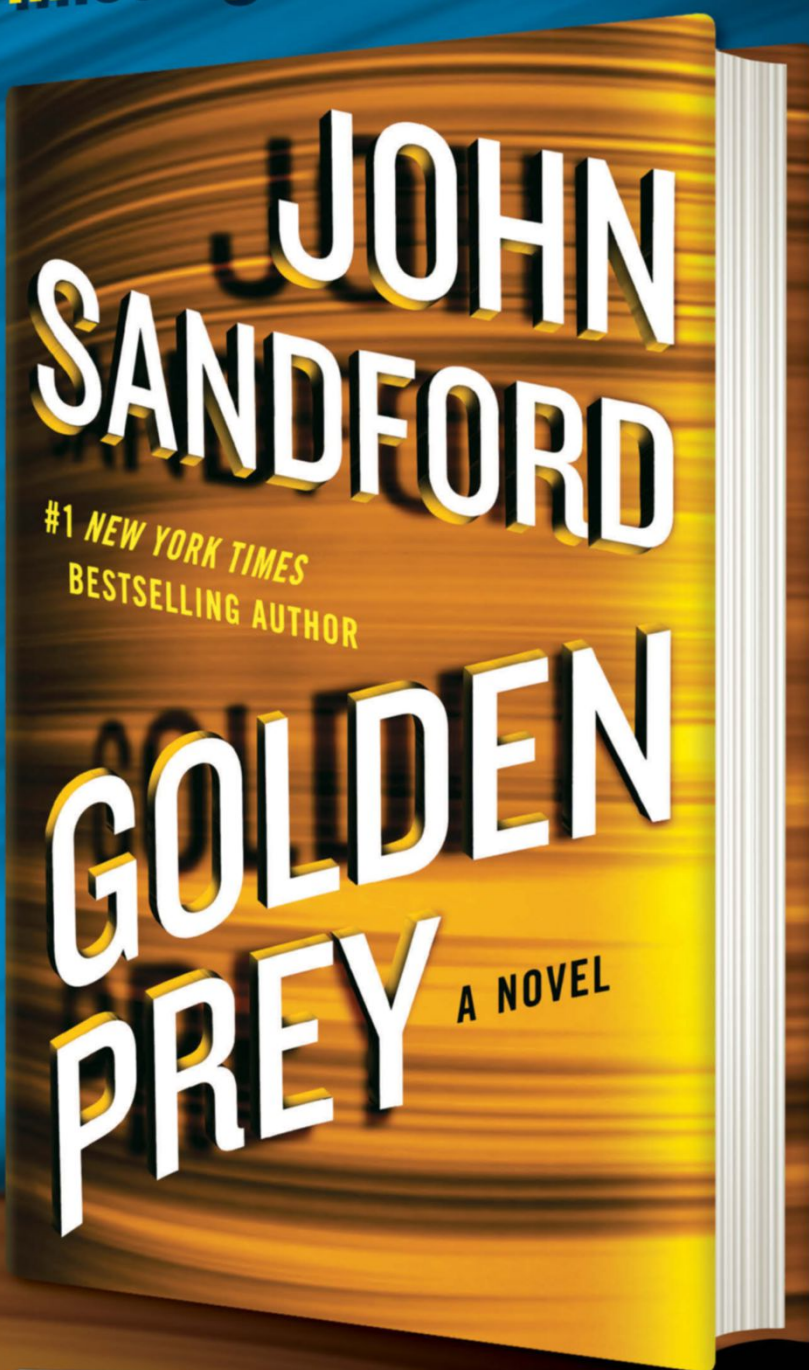
MAY 1, 2017

# THE NEW YORKER

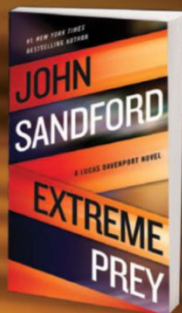


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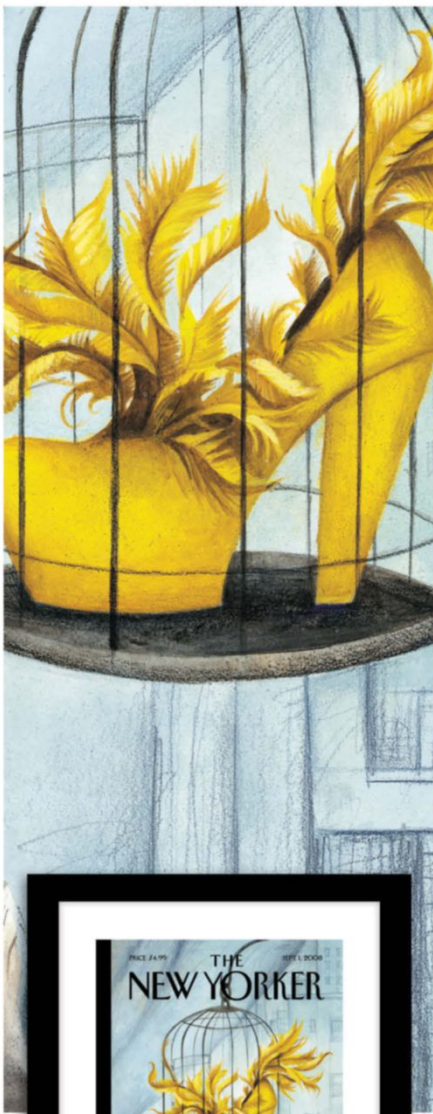
MAY 1, 2017

- 4 **GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN**
- 17 **THE TALK OF THE TOWN**  
*David Remnick on the first hundred days of Donald Trump.*
- LIFE AND LETTERS
- Ariel Levy** 22 A Long Homecoming  
*Elizabeth Strout's small-town novels.*
- SHOUTS & MURMURS
- Calvin Trillin** 27 The Irish Constellation
- LETTER FROM COLOMBIA
- Jon Lee Anderson** 28 Out of the Jungle  
*Former guerrillas try adapting to peace.*
- THE POLITICAL SCENE
- Connie Bruck** 34 A Hollywood Story  
*What, exactly, did Steve Bannon do in the movie industry?*
- PROFILES
- Joshua Rothman** 46 The Seeker  
*A Christian concedes the culture wars.*
- SHOWCASE
- Pari Dukovic** 52 *Rei Kawakubo at the Costume Institute.*
- FICTION**
- David Means** 56 "Two Ruminations on a Homeless Brother"
- THE CRITICS**
- THE THEATRE
- Hilton Als** 60 *Bette Midler in "Hello, Dolly!"*
- BOOKS
- Louis Menand** 63 *Rereading Norman Podhoretz's "Making It."*  
69 Briefly Noted
- A CRITIC AT LARGE
- Anthony Lane** 70 *The films of Jean-Pierre Melville.*
- POP MUSIC
- Hua Hsu** 74 *Kendrick Lamar's "DAMN."*
- ON TELEVISION
- Emily Nussbaum** 76 *"American Crime."*
- MUSICAL EVENTS
- Alex Ross** 78 *Icelandic music in Los Angeles.*
- POEMS**
- Dan Chiasson** 38 "From 'The Names of 1,001 Strangers'"  
**Anne Carson** 50 "Saturday Night as an Adult"
- COVER**
- Mark Ulriksen** "Strike Zone"

---

**DRAWINGS** Danny Shanahan, Shannon Wheeler, John Klossner, Jason Adam Katzenstein, Drew Dernavich, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Trevor Spaulding, Will McPhail, William Haefeli, Rox Chast, Harry Bliss, David Sipress, Corey Pandolph, Amy Hwang **SPOTS** Miguel Porlan

# CONTRIBUTORS



"Object of Desire"  
Ana Juan, September 1, 2008

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**Connie Bruck** (*"A Hollywood Story,"* p. 34) has been a staff writer since 1989. She is the author of three books, among them "The Predators' Ball."

**Hilton Als** (*The Theatre,* p. 60), *The New Yorker's* theatre critic, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He is an associate professor at Columbia University.

**Louis Menand** (*Books,* p. 63) has been a staff writer since 2001. Last year, he was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Obama.

**Anne Carson** (*Poem,* p. 50) is the author of several books of poetry, including "Float," which was published last October.

**Mark Ulriksen** (*Cover,*), an artist and illustrator, has contributed fifty-five covers to the magazine since 1994.

**Hua Hsu** (*Pop Music,* p. 74), a contributing writer for the magazine since 2015, is the author of "A Floating Chinaman: Fantasy and Failure Across the Pacific."

**Jon Lee Anderson** (*"Out of the Jungle,"* p. 28), a staff writer, began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 1998.

**Joshua Rothman** (*"The Seeker,"* p. 46) has been the magazine's archive editor since 2012, and is a frequent contributor to [newyorker.com](http://newyorker.com).

**Ariel Levy** (*"A Long Homecoming,"* p. 22), a staff writer, is the author of the memoir "The Rules Do Not Apply," which was published in March and is based on her *New Yorker* essay "Thanksgiving in Mongolia."

**David Means** (*Fiction,* p. 56) has written several books, including "The Spot," a short-story collection, and the novel "Hystopia," which came out last year.

**Pari Dukovic** (*Showcase,* p. 52) is the magazine's staff photographer.

**Anthony Lane** (*A Critic at Large,* p. 70), a film critic for *The New Yorker* since 1993, is the author of "Nobody's Perfect," a collection of his writings for the magazine.

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### DAILY SHOUTS

In this comic by Gabrielle Bell, a woman faced with a very smart mouse calls 1-800-CATS.



### PODCAST

Rebecca Solnit joins Dorothy Wickenden in a discussion on the politics of sexual harassment.

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# THE MAIL

## RUNNING THE COURT

Jeffrey Toobin does well to expose the enormous influence of Leonard Leo and the Federalist Society, a conservative organization that has infiltrated many levels of the U.S. judicial system (“Full-Court Press,” April 17th). Toobin says that Leo, who has been the executive vice-president of the society for many years, in effect chose three of the nine current Supreme Court Justices. This is alarming, particularly because Leo and the society are committed to an “originalist” interpretation of the Constitution, which is anything but what the Framers had in mind. (Justice Antonin Scalia called himself an originalist, as does his admirer and replacement, Neil Gorsuch.) As Toobin explains it, originalists believe that the government “can’t do anything unless it’s specifically authorized in the Constitution.” If that’s so, the originalists of the Federalist Society are frauds. Where does the Constitution specifically authorize the treatment of corporations (which the Framers distrusted) as people—or of money as speech? Where does it specifically authorize judicial review of executive and legislative actions? Where does the Constitution give the President the right to start wars? Where does the Fifteenth Amendment, intended to protect the voting rights of African-Americans, allow for racist voter suppression? The originalists don’t really give a hoot about what the Framers wanted. Rather, they are using the Framers as cover for their right-wing policies. It’s disappointing that this piece didn’t do more to expose their hypocrisy.

Roger Carasso  
Santa Fe, N.M.

## CONDEMNING COLBERT

It would be just as preposterous for me to chastise Emily Nussbaum for not writing her columns in the style of Dr. Seuss as it is for her to criticize Stephen Colbert for not being an investigative journalist on “The Late Show” (On Television, April 17th). Colbert is an entertainer first and foremost—one who does bril-

liant political satire. Nussbaum critiques him for abandoning the kind of sharp questioning that distinguished “The Colbert Report,” and she cites as proof his softball interview with Susan Sarandon about politics. But Sarandon is an actor, and her political opinions don’t merit the serious cross-examination that Nussbaum demands. At a time when buffoonery rules the White House, I find it a relief to watch Colbert turn the day’s disasters into hilarious jabs, providing me with a little joy before I go to bed.

Jamie K. Sims  
Richmond, Va.

## POPULAR WARMONGERING

In Steve Coll’s piece on Trump’s choice to send fifty-nine missiles into Syria, he mentions the role that Trump’s “continual search for approval” plays in his unpredictable decision-making (Comment, April 17th). It seems highly plausible that Trump launched the missiles because he wanted to raise his low approval ratings, and to assert that he is not in Putin’s pocket. Shortly after the attack, his son Eric, in an interview with the *Telegraph*, claimed that the action disproved the “ridiculous” stories involving Russia and his father’s Administration. If Trump’s real motivation had been a sense of compassion for the Syrian people, as he has claimed, he would not have been opposed to Obama’s taking action after Assad used chemical weapons in 2013, harming even more people. Trump’s approval ratings did increase following the attack, and, as Coll notes, he was applauded by people and by governments around the world. It remains to be seen what lesson Trump takes from this, but his insatiable need for approval gives us reason to be concerned.

Eugene Golden  
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.

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APRIL 26 – MAY 2, 2017

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



**Sophie Calle** wants you to carry your secrets to the grave—to the Green-Wood Cemetery, to be precise. For the next quarter century, the French artist and Creative Time invite you to jot down confessions, seal them in envelopes, and insert them into an obelisk (pictured) at a grave site in the Brooklyn landmark. (When the plot becomes full, Calle will cremate the remains and begin again.) On April 29 and 30, from noon to 5 P.M., the artist will transcribe select participants' secrets, on a first-come, first-served basis.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC

# CLASSICAL MUSIC

## OPERA

### Metropolitan Opera

With its surging orchestral colors and brief flights of melody, Franco Alfano's "**Cyano de Bergerac**" is a fluent example of Italian opera after Puccini, but it really owes its twenty-first-century revival to a few star tenors who have been unable to resist the chance to play the immortal title character, with his silver tongue and unsightly nose. (The opera first came to the Met, in 2005, as a vehicle for Plácido Domingo.) The French tenor Roberto Alagna headlines the current revival, opposite Jennifer Rowley and Atalla Ayan; Marco Armiliato conducts. *May 2 at 7:30.* • **Also playing:** It would be hard to top Simon Keenlyside's blistering portrayal of Mozart's lecherous aristocrat from the fall performances of "**Don Giovanni**," but the Met has stacked the cast of the spring run with topnotch talent, including Mariusz Kwiecien, Angela Meade, Isabel Leonard, Marina Rebeka, Matthew Polenzani, and Erwin Schrott. Plácido Domingo, whose conducting repertory typically hews to Italian composers, leads his first Mozart opera for the company. *April 26 at 7:30 and April 29 at 8.* • Michael Mayer's flamboyant, Vegas-style staging of "**Rigoletto**" features Željko Lučić (in the title role) and Olga Peretyatko (as Gilda), returning to reprise their fine portrayals, and the honey-toned Joseph Calleja, who sang the role of the Duke in the Met's previous production; Pier Giorgio Morandi. (This is the final performance.) *April 27 at 7:30.* • Robert Carsen's unmissable new production of "**Der Rosenkavalier**" brilliantly updates Strauss and Hofmannsthal's eighteenth-century setting to the turbulent, militarized pre-First World War Vienna of Schnitzler, Klimt, and Musil, even if some of his gestures—such as setting Act III in a brothel—go too far. (Touches of Marlene Dietrich and Billy Wilder also spike the mix.) Renée Fleming is a poignant Marschallin, Elina Garanča a thrilling and highly original Octavian, and Günther Groissböck a surprisingly dashing and youthful Ochs; Sebastian Weigle. *April 28 and May 1 at 7.* • During the James Levine years, the operas of Richard Wagner were a cornerstone of the company's repertory. Now Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the Met's music-director designate, continues that tradition, leading the passionate and stormy "**Der Fliegende Holländer**," his first Wagner opera for the company. The cast includes Michael Volle, Amber Wagner, Dolora Zajick, AJ Glueckert, and Franz-Josef Selig. *April 29 at 1. (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)*

### Manhattan School of Music Opera Theatre: "**Der Zigeunerbaron**"

Johann Strauss II's operettas don't get much play in the U.S. outside of compulsory outings of the eternally appealing "**Die Fledermaus**." But, with this production of "**The Gypsy Baron**," M.S.M.'s artistic director of opera, Dona D. Vaughn, continues to lead the conservatory's students down less trodden paths of the operatic canon. Linda Brovsky directs, and Kynan Johns conducts. *April 27-29 at 7:30 and April 30 at 2:30. (Neidorff-Karpati Hall, Broadway at 122nd St. msnyc.edu/tickets.)*

### National Sawdust: "**Madrigal Opera**"

Philip Glass's little creation from 1980, commissioned by the Holland Festival, is a strange bird,

a work for violin, viola, and six voices that leaves matters of content and narrative entirely to the performers. The edgy and imaginative young director R. B. Schlather mounts it at the stylish Williamsburg music space with an impressive group that includes the ensemble Choral Chameleon, the violist William Frampton, and the Brooklyn Rider violinist Johnny Gandelsman (who will also perform Glass's Partita for Solo Violin). *April 28-29 at 7. (80 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. nationalsawdust.org.)*

### The English Concert: "**Ariodante**"

With New York City Opera ceding its claim to Handel's operas and the Met maintaining a very limited repertoire of just two of them, the English Concert's annual presentations at Carnegie Hall have emerged as the most reliable way for New Yorkers to experience these works in all their Baroque majesty. Harry Bicket conducts a strong cast that includes Joyce DiDonato, Christiane Karg, Joëlle Harvey, and Sonia Prina. *April 30 at 2. (212-247-7800.)*

## ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

### New York Philharmonic

Esa-Pekka Salonen may be the Philharmonic's current composer-in-residence, but he also remains one of the orchestra's most enterprising and welcome guest conductors. His latest program includes two auspicious local premières: "**Funeral Song**," composed in 1908 by a twenty-six-year-old Stravinsky and long thought lost, and "**Forest**," a new concerto for French-horn quartet by the resourceful English composer Tansy Davies. (The soloists are current and former principals of the Philharmonia Orchestra, of which Salonen is principal conductor.) Strauss's cosmic "**Also Sprach Zarathustra**" concludes what promises to be an ear-opening evening. *April 27 at 7:30 and April 29 at 8. (David Geffen Hall. 212-875-5656.)*

### Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment

One of the most proficient and exciting ensembles to emerge from the historically informed performance revolution, the O.A.E., directed by Matthew Truscott, accompanies the dynamic violinist Isabelle Faust in Mozart's Violin Concertos Nos. 1 and 5. The program also includes Haydn's stormy Symphony No. 49 in F Minor ("**La Passione**") and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's blithely unpredictable Symphony in G Major. *April 26 at 7:30. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-721-6500.)*

## RECITALS

### "Three Generations: Bryce Dessner and Nico Muhly"

In the final installment of Steve Reich's mini-festival celebrating the legacy of American minimalism, an impressive collective of musicians—including the violinist Pekka Kuusisto and the violist Nadia Sirota—gathers to perform work by two of the most prominent younger exponents of the brand, in a program that includes world premières from both composers. The event includes a discussion with Reich, Dessner, and Muhly. *April 26 at 7:30. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800.)*

### Natalie Dessay

The French soprano's blazing theatrics and astonishing coloratura facility have made her one of the biggest names in opera during the past twenty years, so it should come as little surprise that her Carnegie Hall recital strikes such an individual profile. The program offers operatic arias by Mozart and Gounod; songs by Schubert, Pfitzner, Chausson, and Debussy; and two Debussy preludes performed by Dessay's accompanist, Philippe Cassard. *April 26 at 8. (212-247-7800.)*

### Miller Theatre "**Composer Portrait**":

#### Klas Torstensson

Miller's distinguished series wraps up its season with a concert devoted to this veteran Swedish composer, well-known on the European modernist-festival circuit but relatively obscure over here. Sweden's Ensemble SON teams up with the fine New York players of Either/Or to perform the U.S. premières of three works (including "**Elliott Loves Bebop**," from 2016). *April 27 at 8. (Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. 212-854-7799.)*

### Leif Ove Andsnes and Marc-André Hamelin

Two powerhouse pianists, each with an indelibly distinctive style, combine to offer a piano-duo recital at Carnegie Hall. The repertoire is gilt-edged: works by Mozart, Debussy ("**En Blanc et Noir**"), and Stravinsky (the serene and neoclassical Concerto for Two Pianos and the savage "**Rite of Spring**"). *April 28 at 8. (212-247-7800.)*

### "Wall to Wall Steve Reich"

Celebrations of this crucial contemporary composer's eightieth birthday have been a highlight throughout the season, but none has been more elaborate or extensive than this latest entry in Symphony Space's long-standing free-marathon tradition. The opening sequence offers canonical works in novel arrangements: "**Six Pianos**," revised for a single player; "**Electric Counterpoint**," for guitar and tape, rendered by a live ensemble; and so on. In the second part of the show, Alarm Will Sound plays "**City Life**" and "**Radio Rewrite**." The home stretch includes a conversation with Reich and performances of two essential works: "**Different Trains**," the watershed string quartet, and "**The Desert Music**," a still undervalued piece for chorus and orchestra based on poetry by William Carlos Williams. *April 30 at 3, 5:30, and 8. (Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400.)*

### "Music Before 1800" Series: **Sequentia**

The harper Benjamin Bagby's enduring ensemble returns to Corpus Christi Church to wrap up the series' season. As usual, Bagby and his colleagues (Hanna Marti, also on harp and vocals, and Norbert Rodenkirchen, on bone and wooden flutes) take a deep dive into medieval lore, presenting "songs of heroes, gods, and strong women" sung by monks in the ninth through the twelfth centuries; the very pagan subjects include Orpheus, Dido, and Cleopatra. *April 30 at 4. (529 W. 121st St. 212-666-9266.)*

### Lark Quartet: "**Now & Then**"

The outstanding all-female quartet, which, with personnel changes, has been a going concern for thirty years, takes a well-deserved victory lap at Carnegie's Weill Recital Hall. The current players team up with the four original members for a concert that includes not only works by Debussy and John Harbison (the New York première of the String Quartet No. 6) but also octets by Mendelssohn and Andrew Waggoner (a world première). *May 1 at 8. (212-247-7800.)*

# ART

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### MOMA PS1

#### “Maureen Gallace: Clear Day”

Sixty-eight calm, cool little oil paintings—of landscapes, seascapes, barns and cottages, and flowers—hang in big rooms on walls painted a warm white. It’s heaven. For thirty years, Gallace has wondered, with brush in hand, if semi-realism is still viable in wisecracked art. Each picture is a new guess: maybe so, given the insistent appeal of a breaking wave, a humble house, or a shadow on snow. Gallace doesn’t so much see as notice, suspending observation in states of unending, mild surprise. Like the poetry of Elizabeth Bishop, her work generates power from reticence. She serves us with practical, remedial beauty. Once seen, this show won’t be forgotten. *Through Sept. 10.*

## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

### William Cordova

The Peruvian-born American sculptor’s third solo show at the gallery is so overstuffed it verges on overbearing, but it is studded with lovely moments nonetheless. Wooden scaffolding fills most of the main room, leading visitors through an interior spiral to a dead end (unless, that is, they choose to squeeze around it). This is intended to “disrupt assumptions of linear history,” but feels needlessly coercive. More appealing is a mixed-media collage, nearly thirteen feet long, of neatly overlapping colored squares. Two small sculptures cob-

bled together from found materials—cardboard, a candle, a spray can—are genuinely startling in their balanced beauty. A series of confidently understated abstract drawings, made with cacao, deserves a show of its own. *Through May 13. (Sikkema Jenkins, 530 W. 22nd St. 212-929-2262.)*

### Max Ernst

Ernst hit a late-life peak in sculpture, based on the evidence here: an unfamiliar suite of three big bronzes cast from stone, which he carved in 1967. (The German artist died in 1976.) Titled “Big Brother: Teaching Staff for a School of Murderers,” it consists of the eponymous sinister watcher, wearing a flat cap over close-set holes for eyes and a tapering face that is all knife-edged nose, and two “neophytes,” long-headed crouching figures with clownish caps and broad, stuck-out tongues. As often with Ernst, there’s a *longueur* of the “primitive”—vaguely Mayan, in this case. But an unusual formal rigor (was Ernst aware of Minimalism?) infuses the playful works with a menacing might. *Through May 13. (Kasmin, 515 W. 27th St. 212-563-4474.)*

### Aki Sasamoto

Sasamoto makes art that thinks out loud, constructing sculptures and environments that double as evocative props and settings for performances, which are equal parts lecture, experiment, and standup routine. Her latest subject is the “yield point,” the amount of stress under which a given material will fall apart. Garbage bags stick to the gallery walls thanks to the magic of static electricity, lights pulse, and a rattling

sound intermittently fills the room; in an austere handsome video, a plastic bag undergoes a mechanical stress test. A trampoline is installed inside one of two immaculate green dumpsters, as if to abet dumpster diving. The over-all effect is that of a charmingly hopeful retro-futurism. (Sasamoto performs on Thursdays and Saturdays.) *Through May 13. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793.)*

## GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

### Lisa Alvarado

The Chicago-based artist-musician’s first solo show in New York is an abundance of lovely hanging pieces from an ongoing series she calls “Traditional Objects.” The geometric compositions recall Mexican textiles and float between categories—they are at once screens, paintings, and tapestries. Alvarado began making the works in 2010, as portable sets for her band Natural Information Society, an experimental ensemble of traditional and electronic instruments. (The group provides the atmospheric recorded soundtrack that plays in the gallery.) She makes elegant use of the gallery space, installing her vibrant, two-sided works to create airy partitions, evoking both theatrical and ceremonial uses. Visitors may feel as if a live happening is about to occur, and, indeed, musical performances are scheduled for 7:30 on May 8 (Angelica Sanchez, Gerald Cleaver, Joshua Abrams) and May 10 (Battle Trance). *Through May 21. (Donahue, 99 Bowery. 646-896-1368.)*

### Sara Cwynar

The cerebral young New York-based photographer takes on consumerism, the epistemology of color, and the ambiguities of female experience using irresistible imagery and sophisticated in-camera tricks. Several resonant works featuring the same model, seen lounging against brightly colored cloth backdrops, were made by overlaying Cwynar’s portraits of her with found photographs, objects, and clippings from a dictionary, then rephotographing. The results suggest that, surface appearances to the contrary, a photograph is rarely as flat as it seems. In the show’s centerpiece, a video titled “Rose Gold,” a male voice reads a meditation on the iPhone of that color, drawing on Wittgenstein, Toni Morrison, and the Encyclopædia Britannica, among other sources. Also sampled are a few remarks of Cwynar’s own, including, “Several male artists I know have told me that I’m having a moment.” *Through May 14. (Foxy Production, 2 E. Broadway. 212-239-2758.)*

### Tam Ochiai

Remember ashtrays? Now banished from nearly all indoor spaces in the city, they’ve been rescued by the Japanese artist from secondhand shops and incorporated into surprisingly graceful tabletop abstractions. In most of these quiet compositions, one or two sit on a painted base. “CD (Carrie Fisher, Debbie Reynolds)” features kindred squares of metal-trimmed marble—one big, one small—with matching cigarette rests, like modernist memorials on an avocado-hued ground. The artist strikes a very different tone with a blue-plastic promotional giveaway from the New York State lottery: the lone ashtray sits in the corner of a wooden rectangle decorated with expressive squiggles. Those who haven’t yet given up the vice are invited to smoke in the gallery, and the sight is practically shocking. *Through April 29. (Team, 83 Grand St. 212-279-9219.)*



The American painter Jackie Saccoccio’s show “Sharp Objects & Apocalypse Confetti,” at the 11R gallery through April 30, includes the riotously beautiful “Portrait (Nabokov), 2017.”

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## THE THEATRE



"Seeing You," starting May 2, transforms a former meat market into Hoboken in the nineteen-forties.

## Happenings

Randy Weiner stages immersive war games under the High Line.

IT'S NOT EASY to describe what Randy Weiner does for a living. Some people call him an "impresario," but he comes across more like a mild-mannered cardiologist than like P. T. Barnum. With his wife, the director Diane Paulus, he created "The Donkey Show," a disco version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream" that ran Off Broadway from 1999 to 2005. More recently, he founded the seedy-opulent Lower East Side burlesque club the Box; helped to import the immersive-theatre juggernaut "Sleep No More," by the British group Punchdrunk; created the ballroom spectacle "Queen of the Night"; and brought "Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812" to a pop-up Russian supper club in the meatpacking district. A former science teacher (he studied biochemistry at Harvard), Weiner said recently, "If we boil down theatre to its essence, what is it? It's about a performer and an audience member having an interaction. Well, the interaction doesn't have to be on a stage."

Weiner has now joined forces with another artist with a blurry job description, the choreographer and "movement director" Ryan Heffington. Best known

for choreographing Sia's "Chandelier" video, in which a little girl in a geometric wig dances spasmodically around a dilapidated apartment, Heffington grew up in California's Central Valley, and moved to Los Angeles in the early nineties to be a "video ho," he said, meaning a backup dancer. He got by on odd jobs—dancing for Julio Iglesias and in a hallucination sequence on "Roseanne"—while staging feisty happenings at L.A. night clubs under the title "Psycho Dance Sho." "We'd come on at midnight and, like, throw meat at people," he recalled. "We'd have Super Soakers."

What do you get when you put these two together? "Seeing You," an interactive theatre "experience" beginning May 2, in a former meat market on Fourteenth Street, under the southern tip of the High Line. Speaking at the hollowed-out venue not long ago, Weiner and Heffington were tight-lipped about the piece, which has something to do with Hoboken in the nineteen-forties, the Pacific theatre of the Second World War, and the ethics of collateral damage. But they did disclose that the show will guide audiences through a maze of ever-shifting spaces. "We're not trying to do something commercial that all ties up and makes sense," Weiner promised.

—Michael Schulman

## Babes in Toyland

Kelli O'Hara, Bill Irwin, Lauren Worsham, and Christopher Fitzgerald appear with the Orchestra of St. Luke's in the 1903 musical, conducted by Ted Sperling. (Carnegie Hall, Seventh Ave. at 57th St. 212-247-7800. April 27.)

## Bandstand

Corey Cott and Laura Osnes play a war veteran and a widow who team up to compete in a radio contest in 1945, in this swing musical by Robert Taylor and Richard Oberacker, directed by Andy Blankenbuehler. (Jacobs, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. Opens April 26.)

## Derren Brown: Secret

Brown, an Olivier-winning British performer known for his feats of mind-reading and audience manipulation, presents an evening of "psychological illusion." (Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St. 866-811-4111. In previews.)

## A Doll's House, Part 2

Lucas Hnath's play, starring Laurie Metcalf, Chris Cooper, Jayne Houdyshell, and Condola Rashad, picks up years after Ibsen's classic leaves off, with the return of its heroine, Nora. Sam Gold directs. (Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. In previews. Opens April 27.)

## Ernest Shackleton Loves Me

In this new musical by Joe DiPietro, Brendan Milburn, and Valerie Vigoda, a put-upon single mother (Vigoda) embarks on an Antarctic adventure with the famous explorer. (Tony Kiser, 305 W. 43rd St. 866-811-4111. In previews.)

## Happy Days

Theatre for a New Audience stages James Bundy's Yale Rep production of the Beckett play, starring Dianne Wiest as a chatterbox half-buried in a mound of sand. (Polonsky Shakespeare Center, 262 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111. In previews.)

## The Lucky One

The Mint revives A. A. Milne's 1922 play, directed by Jesse Marchese, about two brothers whose enmity erupts when one of them lands in legal trouble. (Beckett, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)

## Mourning Becomes Electra

Target Margin stages Eugene O'Neill's dramatic trilogy, which resets Aeschylus's "Oresteia" in New England just after the Civil War. David Herskovits directs. (Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand St. 212-598-0400. In previews.)

## Pacific Overtures

John Doyle directs Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman's musical from 1976, which recounts the opening of nineteenth-century Japan, starring George Takei as the Reciter. (Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 866-811-4111. In previews.)

## The Roundabout

As part of the "Brits Off Broadway" festival, Hugh Ross directs J. B. Priestley's 1932 comedy, in which a man juggles his business foibles, his mistress, a gambling butler, and his daughter's newfound Communism. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. In previews. Opens April 30.)

## Seven Spots on the Sun

In Martin Zimmerman's play, directed by Weyni Mengesha, a reclusive doctor in a town ravaged

by civil war and plague discovers that he has a miraculous healing touch. (*Rattlestick*, 224 Waverly Pl. 212-627-2556. In previews.)

### Sojourners & Her Portmanteau

Ed Sylvanus Iskandar directs two installments of Mfoniso Udofia's nine-part saga, which charts the ups and downs of a Nigerian matriarch. (*New York Theatre Workshop*, 79 E. 4th St. 212-460-5475. In previews.)

### 3/Fifths

James Scraggs conceived and wrote this interactive piece, which transforms the theatre into a dystopian theme park called SupremacyLand, celebrating white privilege. (*3LD Art & Technology Center*, 80 Greenwich St. 800-838-3006. Previews begin May 1.)

### Twelfth Night

The Public's Mobile Unit performs the Shakespeare comedy for free at its home base, after touring prisons, homeless shelters, and other local venues. Saheem Ali directs. (*Public*, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. In previews. Opens April 27.)

### Venus

Suzan-Lori Parks's play, directed by Lear deBessonet, is inspired by the life of Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman who became a nineteenth-century sideshow attraction because of her large posterior. (*Pershing Square Signature Center*, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. In previews.)

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## NOW PLAYING

### Come from Away

Canadian hospitality doesn't seem like grist for drama, but this gem of a musical, by Irene Sankoff and David Hein, makes kindness sing and soar. On 9/11, thousands of airline passengers were rerouted to the tiny Newfoundland town of Gander, population nine thousand. The Ganderites opened their doors—and fetched sandwiches, underwear, and kosher meals—while the “plane people,” trapped in a five-day limbo, reckoned with a changed world. A splendid twelve-person cast plays dozens of characters, but Sankoff and Hein deftly spotlight a few, including an American Airlines pilot (Jenn Colella) trying to maintain control of her charges and an Egyptian chef (Caesar Samayoa) coping with the first glimmers of post-9/11 Islamophobia. Christopher Ashley's production doesn't dwell on inspirational messaging, instead letting the story, along with some fine fiddle playing, put the wind in its sails. (*Schoenfeld*, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

### Groundhog Day

Harold Ramis's 1993 film had it all: an inspired performance by Bill Murray, a sweet romance, and a premise that was both a vehicle for endless comedic variation and a spiritual brainteaser, akin to a Buddhist parable. After all, aren't we all repeating the same day over and over again, trying to find meaning in the banal? Credit this fine musical adaptation for not simply inserting songs into a readymade formula but teasing out new ideas. The Australian musical satirist Tim Minchin wrote the catchy and cerebral score, his follow-up to “Matilda,” with Danny Rubin, the original screenwriter, updating the script. As Phil Connors, the weatherman stuck in a time loop on February 2nd, Andy Karl doesn't re-create Murray's misanthropic euphoria—who could?—but gives the character his own sardonic stamp. And the director, Matthew Warchus, in-

fuses the tale with clever theatrical flourishes, like a vertical car chase. (*August Wilson*, 245 W. 52nd St. 877-250-2929.)

### Indecent

Paula Vogel's revelatory play—her belated Broadway debut—begins in Warsaw in 1906 and ends in Connecticut a half century later, but it's as intimate and immediate as a whispered secret. It tells the story of another play, Sholem Asch's Yiddish drama “God of Vengeance,” which toured the theatres of Europe before coming to Broadway, in 1923, and causing a scandal, in part because of a passionate lesbian kiss. The cast was tried for obscenity, and Asch chose to distance himself from the work—all before Nazism overtook the play, its people, and the world it came from. Directed with poetry and polish by Rebecca Taichman, Vogel's play thrums with music, desire, and fear, and it's shrewd about the ways in which America isn't free, and about how art does and doesn't transcend the perilous winds of history. (*Cort*, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

### Oslo

J. T. Rogers's play, which has upgraded to the big stage at Lincoln Center, introduces us to the Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern of the Middle East peace process: a married Norwegian couple who orchestrated the secret talks between Israelis and Palestinians which led to the 1993 Oslo Accords. Played by the exceptional Jennifer Ehle and Jefferson Mays, Mona Juul and Terje Rød-Larsen are tight-lipped diplomatic professionals, as cautiously neutral as their all-gray wardrobes suggest. (Bartlett Sher's staging is Scandinavian in its clarity.) Plying their guests with herring and waffles, they oversee colorful characters from both sides, who bond tentatively and tell jokes while haggling over Gaza. At nearly three hours, the play provides a journalistic service without having much to say, ultimately, about the conflict itself, aside from a “We Are the World” coda that shows how close we were, once, to peace. (*Vivian Beaumont*, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200.)

### Present Laughter

This harmless production of Noël Coward's 1939 comedy about theatre, pretense, and lies should verge on farce—and does, at times—but the director, Moritz von Stuelpnagel, plays it safe when he shouldn't. Still, there are bright spots amid the dullness, and Kevin Kline, Kristine Nielsen, and Kate Burton are performers you look forward to seeing again and again. Kline plays the actor and rogue Garry Essendine; he can't remember who's loved him, but that doesn't matter, because he loves himself more. As his handy assistant, Monica Reed, Nielsen does what no one else does better: tries to make sense of another character's madness. And as Garry's wife, Liz, Burton is a model of good sense and strong character, poised and maternal. Each of these actors makes Coward's language sound fresh and contemporary while understanding that the play has nothing to do with naturalism. (*St. James*, 246 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

### Rebel in the Soul

In 1951, the Irish minister for health, Dr. Noël Browne (Patrick Fitzgerald), tried to persuade the influential Archbishop of Dublin, John Charles McQuaid (John Keating), to support new legislation designed to improve Ireland's awful child-mortality rate. This arcane (to the non-Irish) encounter has dramatic potential, confronting science and religion, church and state. Larry Kirwan's new docudrama begins with Browne gearing up for his audience in McQuaid's antechamber, and it looks as

if the play, directed by Charlotte Moore, will build up to a fiery debate between two men fighting for control over their country. Instead, we end up stuck in a dull recounting of the life of the driven, tuberculosis-afflicted Browne, with acting to match. Salient issues, like the connection between money and health, are buried under a thick layer of theatrical dust. (*Irish Repertory*, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)

### Samara

Richard Maxwell's last play, “The Evening,” signalled a fascinating departure. This new piece, produced by SoHo Rep, never gets going. It wanders. Then it idles. Then there's a light show. Hazy and questing, it unfolds in a postapocalyptic frontier built from repurposed milk crates. As Steve Earle reads stage directions, a murderous kid (Jasper Newell) sets out in search of a few dollars more. He comes to a bad end. So do some other people. Probably. SoHo Rep's artistic director, Sarah Benson, crowds the audience together on more milk crates, unyielding benches designed to withhold comfort just as the script stints on character and world. Yet a few pleasures remain, among them the luminous face of the ninety-two-year-old actor Vinie Burrows, Earle's blissfully weirdo score for Uilleann pipes and deconstructed piano, and Maxwell's unrelenting need to push through the artifice of playmaking toward something truer on the other side. (*A.R.T./New York Theatres*, 502 W. 53rd St. 212-352-3101.)

### Sweet

Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, newly transferred to Broadway from the Public Theatre, opens at top intensity in a parole office in Reading, Pennsylvania, in 2008, as two young men, one black, one white, attempt to confront the mess they've made of their lives. But this is really the story of their mothers (embodied with rich authenticity by Michelle Wilson and Johanna Day), who have spent their adult lives working the assembly line of a steel-tubing factory, and whose friendship crumbles the day in 2000 when the plant locks the workers out. By the end, everything is fully explained—perhaps too fully explained, depending on your taste. But Nottage isn't interested in hinting at what went wrong; she wants to make it known. It's a play that listens deeply to the confounding plight of blue-collar workers in the world's richest country, and which, in a just world, would shake their bosses to the core. (*Studio 54*, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-239-6200.)

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## ALSO NOTABLE

**Amélie** Walter Kerr. • **Anastasia** Broadhurst. • **The Antipodes** Pershing Square Signature Center. • **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory** Lunt-Fontanne. • **Daniel's Husband** Cherry Lane. *Through April 28.* • **The Emperor Jones** Irish Repertory. • **Gently Down the Stream** Public. • **The Glass Menagerie** Belasco. • **Hello, Dolly!** Shubert. (Reviewed in this issue.) • **If I Forget** Laura Pels. *Through April 30.* • **In & of Itself** Daryl Roth. • **Joan of Arc: Into the Fire** Public. *Through April 30.* • **Latin History for Morons** Public. *Through April 28.* • **The Little Foxes** Samuel J. Friedman. • **Miss Saigon** Broadway Theatre. • **The Play That Goes Wrong** Lyceum. • **The Price** American Airlines Theatre. • **The Profane** Playwrights Horizons. • **Six Degrees of Separation** Ethel Barrymore. • **Sunset Boulevard** Palace. • **Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street** Barrow Street Theatre. • **Vanity Fair** Pearl. • **The View UpStairs** Lynn Redgrave. • **War Paint** Nederlander.

# MOVIES

## OPENING

**Buster's Mal Heart** A fantasy drama, about a survivalist in the Montana mountains (Rami Malek) who is obsessed with a recurring dream. Directed by Sarah Adina Smith; co-starring Kate Lyn Sheil. *Opening April 28. (In limited release.)* • **Casting JonBenét** Reviewed in *Now Playing*. *Opening April 28. (Metrograph and Netflix.)* • **The Circle** A science-fiction drama, based on a novel by Dave Eggers, about a young woman whose job at a high-tech startup turns into a living nightmare. Directed by James Ponsoldt; starring Emma Watson and Tom Hanks. *Opening April 28. (In wide release.)*

## NOW PLAYING

### Aftermath

A grieving Arnold Schwarzenegger is something to behold. Heavy with despair but girding himself for revenge, he lumbers through Elliott Lester's film in the role of Roman, a construction worker living in Columbus, Ohio, who loses his wife and his daughter in a midair crash. It was caused by an air-traffic controller (Scoot McNairy), and he is the luckless fellow who, despite changing his name and his city of residence, is tracked down by Roman—not with the remorseless tread of the Terminator but in a mood of sullen perplexity. The script is by Javier Gullón, who also wrote Denis Villeneuve's "Enemy" (2013), and the first third of the film is as spare and unconsole as anything in the Schwarzenegger canon; often unnerved by comedy, he seems surprisingly at home with bleakness. (Arnie's King Lear cannot be far away.) Sadly, as the plot proceeds, it loses definition, and the finale is an unconvincing rush. With Maggie Grace and Hannah Ware.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 4/17/17.) (In limited release.)

### Casting JonBenet

This narrowly reflexive documentary reduces its participants to reality-TV entertainers. The filmmaker, Kitty Green, goes to Boulder, Colorado, and auditions, on camera, local residents for a dramatization of the unsolved killing of JonBenét Ramsey (which occurred there in 1996) and its aftermath. She shows only brief performances from her script by the aspiring actors, and instead interviews them at length about the case and their interest in it, eliciting speculations and reminiscences as well as deep and traumatic personal stories, which they divulge in the hope of being cast. Meanwhile, Green stays above the fray and out of the question; her motives and interests, as well as her presence in the locale and her presentation of the project to its participants, are rigorously kept out of the film. (Also, she doesn't speak with any nonwhite Boulder residents.) Green's editing squeezes the actors' outpourings into sound bites; meanwhile, the snippets of dramatizations that she films are insubstantial, undeveloped, disengaged. Every aspect of the movie is trivialized—the experiment in documentary form, the participants' experiences, and the case itself.—*Richard Brody* (Metrograph and Netflix.)

### Chasing Trane: The John Coltrane Documentary

A dully conventional film about a brilliantly unconventional musician. The director, John Schein-

feld, starts the account in the mid-fifties, when Coltrane first came to prominence, as the saxophonist in the Miles Davis Quintet, from which he was fired for his drug and alcohol habits. Quitting cold turkey, Coltrane found fresh inspiration in the company of Davis and Thelonious Monk before forming his own band, reaching new heights of popularity and then repudiating it in the interest of deeper and wilder musical ideas. The sketch of Coltrane's early days emphasizes the influences of his two grandfathers, who were ministers, and the film draws a through-line regarding his spiritual quest. It features many performances by Coltrane (including some fine if familiar film clips) but buries them under graphics and voice-overs; the movie's one enduring contribution is interviews with some of Coltrane's musician friends, including Jimmy Heath, Reggie Workman, Wayne Shorter, and Benny Golson, but these discussions are edited to snippets. Meanwhile, the film offers almost no musical context; Scheinfeld seems more interested in Coltrane's story arc than in his art.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

### Colossal

The director Nacho Vigalondo's new movie is partly a blandly schematic drama of self-discovery and partly a thinly sketched sci-fi monster thriller—yet his mashup of these genres is ingenious and, at times, deliciously realized. Anne Hathaway stars as Gloria, a hard-drinking and unemployed New York blogger whose boyfriend (Dan Stevens) throws her out of his apartment. She retreats to her late parents' empty house in her rustic home town, bumps into a childhood friend (Jason Sudeikis), gets a part-time job in the bar he owns, and tries to take stock of her life. Then she and the world are gripped by the sudden appearance of a gigantic monster that wreaks havoc in Seoul for a few minutes each day. The connection between Gloria's story and the monster's is too good to spoil; suffice it to say that its metaphorical power brings a furiously clarifying and progressive insight to Gloria's troubles and aptly portrays them as the quasi-universal woes of humanity at large. The trope takes a lot of setting up, but it's worth it—and Hathaway's self-transformative, forceful performance brings Vigalondo's strong idea to life.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

### The Fate of the Furious

The latest and loudest addition to the franchise that will not die. Most of the regulars return, including Letty (Michelle Rodriguez), Roman (Tyrese Gibson), and Hobbs (Dwayne Johnson), who grapples once more with the problem of finding a vehicle large enough to fit him. He also has to lay aside his enmity with Deckard (Jason Statham) for the sake of a higher purpose: the taking down of Dom (Vin Diesel), who has turned against his erstwhile pals. Such is Diesel's dramatic range that the difference between the good Dom and the bad Dom is almost too subtle to be seen by the naked eye. Behind the chaos lurks the figure of Cipher (Charlize Theron), who combines the roles of hacker and seductress, and whose party trick—the hot spot of the story—involves taking command of multiple vehicles, by remote control, in New York, and making them race around the streets like packs of dogs. The rest of the film, directed by F. Gary Gray, is threatened by both silliness and exhaus-

tion; cracking crime at the wheel, you sense, is not a theme on which variations can be spun forever. With Helen Mirren, who doesn't even get to drive.—*A.L.* (4/24/17) (In wide release.)

### Free Fire

A smug knockoff of Quentin Tarantino's brand of ironic violence, at several degenerations' remove. In the vast confines of an abandoned factory, somewhere in Massachusetts in the nineteen-seventies—a time that's marked, on the soundtrack, by John Denver and Creedence Clearwater Revival—a weapons deal is going down. The sellers are a mismatched pair made up of a white South African man (Sharlto Copley) and a former Black Panther (Babou Ceesay), and the buyers are Irish Republican Army agents (Michael Smiley and Cilian Murphy); both sides have crews of gunmen, as do the shrewd and cool brokers (Brie Larson and Armie Hammer). When a fight breaks out among two crude subordinates (Sam Riley and Jack Reynor), a chaotic and apocalyptic shootout ensues—it lasts for more than an hour and cuts its suspense with sassy verbal humor and gags involving ricochets and explosions, oddly trivial practicalities and roughneck idiosyncrasies (including a germaphobic killer). The director, Ben Wheatley (who wrote the script with Amy Jump), revels in the gory breakdown of bodies and the mental derangement that goes with it. The linchpin of the story is an off-screen act of violence against a woman, but Wheatley never lets social or international politics impinge on his empty amusements.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

### Ghost in the Shell

Rupert Sanders's new film, the latest example of Scarlett Johansson's adventures in science fiction, casts her—not without controversy and complaint, in some quarters—as a hybrid law enforcer, in a nameless Asian city. She takes the role of Major, who consists of a human brain, purloined under mysterious circumstances and housed inside a manufactured body. She can think for herself, but if an arm gets ripped off she can always have it replaced: no pain, all gain. We meet her boss, played by the imperturbable Takeshi (Beat) Kitano, her shock-haired sidekick (Pilou Asbæk), and the doctor who designed her (Juliette Binoche). All this is loyally adapted from Mamoru Oshii's 1995 film of the same name, which has long been heralded as a high point of anime; Sanders carefully frames some of his shots in tribute to the original. There are startling sights here (to have your mind hacked, we learn, is to be plunged into a writhing pit), and Johansson marches through her scenes with purpose, yet as a whole the reboot is less haunting and less ruminative than Oshii's work, and lacks its strange erotic liquefaction. Also, the plot has acquired an unwelcome strain of mush; who ordered that?—*A.L.* (4/10/17) (In wide release.)

### Graduation

Cristian Mungiu, the Romanian director who made "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days" (2007) and "Beyond the Hills" (2012), files another withering report from his homeland. Yet his manner remains as unblinkingly calm as ever; for all the intensity of his accusations and his laments, there is no loss of formal control. Maria Dragus, whom fans of Michael Haneke will recall from "The White Ribbon," plays Eliza, a hardworking high-school student who requires top marks in her final exams if she is to take up the offer of a place at a British university. Her plans are derailed by a simple and upsetting turn of fate, and it is up to her father, the laughably named Romeo (Adrian Titieni), to get

them back on track. To do this, he must call in favors, bend the rules, and yield to the pressures of everyday corruption, which thus far, as a doctor, he has managed to withstand—though not, we soon realize, in other areas of his life. This portrait of a busted system is all too cogent, and it's no surprise that Romeo and his wife, Magda (Lia Bugnar), urge their daughter to get out while she can. In Romanian.—A.L. (4/10/17) (In limited release.)

### Hospital

Frederick Wiseman's fourth feature, from 1970, displays the inner workings of New York's Metropolitan Hospital, a public facility in East Harlem, and reveals the decisive impact of the art and science of medicine—and the ways of government—on the lives of ordinary people. Wiseman had extraordinary access to the hospital (including its operating rooms), but the film is centered on the relationships between doctors and patients. The troubles that come to light—the persecution endured by a gay man, the despair of a single father who has no one to care for his children while he's at work, the panic of a young man from Minnesota adrift in the city—extend beyond immediate physical sufferings. Meanwhile, doctors are forced, in effect, to play lawyers as they argue at length, by phone, with bureaucrats applying rules that impede proper care. For all Wiseman's powers of analysis, he's a sensuous humanist who tenderly gathers gestures and expressions, tones of voice and turns of phrase, that arise in the ultimate drama—the struggle against death.—R.B. (Film Forum; April 26.)

### The Lost City of Z

The new James Gray film has a scope, both in time and in geographical reach, that he has never attempted before—an anxious wrestle with the epic form. The movie, based in part on the book of the same name by David Grann, of *The New Yorker*, stars Charlie Hunnam as Percy Fawcett, a British soldier who journeyed repeatedly up the Amazon in the first quarter of the twentieth century. His goal, which came to consume his life and to cut it short, was to locate the remains of a forgotten civilization in the jungle. So implacable a quest could be taken as foolish or futile, but Gray prefers to frame it in terms of heroic striving. Whether Hunnam is the right actor to assume such a burden is open to question, and the whole movie, though shot with Gray's defining elegance and his taste for deep shadows, is often a dour affair. Still, there are welcome touches of levity and mystery, supplied by Sienna Miller, in the role of Fawcett's long-suffering wife, and by Robert Pattinson, overgrown with facial hair, as his equally loyal sidekick. With Tom Holland, as the explorer's eldest son, who vanished in the company of his father.—A.L. (4/17/17) (In limited release.)

### Norman

Richard Gere channels the mannerisms of middle-period Woody Allen in the title role of this plodding New York-centered drama by the Israeli director Joseph Cedar. Norman Oppenheimer is a fixer who breaks more than he fixes. He elbows his way into acquaintance with Micha Eshel (Lior Ashkenazi), a rising young Israeli politician who visits New York, and attempts, via urgent schmoozing, to nudge him into an alliance with a big-time financier. Three years go by; Eshel is now Israel's Prime Minister, and Norman pushes and wheedles, doing favors for him and cadging favors in return, until a whiff of scandal arises from Norman's dealings and Eshel is tainted. Cedar's specialty is dialectical—he delights in Norman's rhetorical maneuvers and elaborate deceptions. Norman

is a political Zelig, a cipher who lives for his place in photos with powerful people; it's never quite clear what he gets out of the high-stakes transactions, though he seems to crave respect. Cedar plays Norman's story for tragedy but never develops his inner identity, his history, or his ideals; the protagonist and his drama remain anecdotal and superficial.—R.B. (In limited release.)

### A Quiet Passion


Terence Davies, who has previously adapted the work of Edith Wharton, in "The House of Mirth," and Terence Rattigan, in "The Deep Blue Sea," now turns his attention to Emily Dickinson. The arc of the film is a long one, marked by regular readings of her poems; we meet the author first as a defiant schoolgirl, played by Emma Bell, and trace her through the years of her maturity, her gradual seclusion in the Amherst family home, and the shuddering awfulness of her death, in 1886. Cynthia Nixon takes the role of the adult Dickinson, and does so without ingratiating, willing to make her difficult or, when occasion demands, unlikable; Dickinson's manners, always forthright, grow more barbed as her ailments worsen. There is strong support from Keith Carradine and Joanna Bacon, as her parents; Jodhi May, as her sorrowful sister-in-law; and Catherine Bailey, as a flirtatious friend, although the social badinage seems forced in comparison with the quieter scenes around the hearth. Most striking of all is the presence of Jennifer Ehle, whose compassionate calm, as the poet's sister, does much to lighten the movie's dark distress.—A.L. (4/24/17) (In limited release.)

### The Saragossa Manuscript

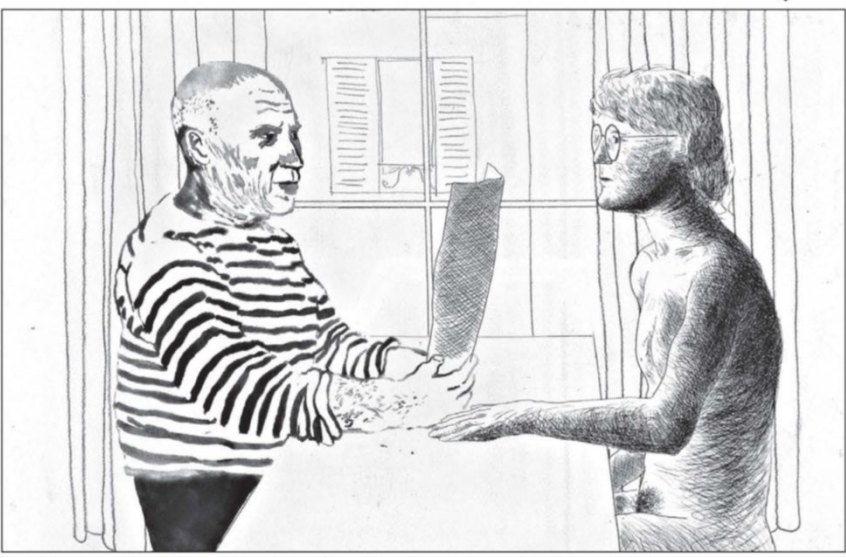
This three-hour swirl of Polish phantasmagoria, from 1965, is an epic piece of japey; it celebrates visions and magic by means of labyrinthine storytelling. Flashbacks within flashbacks make up the story, which is catalyzed when two soldiers on opposite sides of an unexplained nineteenth-century war stumble upon a manuscript that transfixes them with its potent, sexy language and imagery. The book recounts the picaresque adventures of Captain Alfonso van Worden, who travels between Andalusia and La Mancha during the Spanish Inquisition, encounters two gorgeous Muslim women in a boudoir at a deserted inn, and awakens beneath a gallows. The rest of his journey circles back to these euphoric yet troubling experiences, as such characters as a possessed peasant, a hermit exorcist, a cabalist, and a gypsy chief regale him with stories involving stumbling suitors, busy beauties, ridiculous duels, and mystical symbols. The director, Wojciech Has, sustains a sardonic, slaphappy tone; the elegantly modulated black-and-white cinematography, with tones ranging from bleached to silken, and the off-kilter compositions suggest that the director himself is sporting a death's-head grin.—Michael Sragow (*Museum of the Moving Image*; April 30.)

### Slack Bay

This cops-and-cannibals, high-society-drawing-room, and rustic-outdoors comedy, set in a French seaside resort village in 1910, is the boldest and freest of recent genre mashups. The ritzy Van Peteghem clan vacations in their villa overlooking the bay; the Brufort family of mussel-gather-



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David Hockney, *The Artist and Model* (detail), etching, 1974. Estimate \$20,000 to \$30,000.

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ers and ferrymen live on a ramshackle farm in the lowlands. Several tourists have disappeared, and two loopy police inspectors investigate in vain; what they don't know is that the Bruforts have been eating them. Meanwhile, the aristocratic young Billie Van Peteghem (played by the actress Raph) and the taciturn young mussel-man Ma Loute Brufort (Brandon Lavieville) fall instantly in love, but their romance is roiled by Ma Loute's suspicion that Billie is a boy in drag. The director, Bruno Dumont, mashes up his cast along with his genres—the elder Van Peteghems are played by the cream of French cinema, including Juliette Binoche and Fabrice Luchini, while the Bruforts are played by local nonactors whose gruff precision matches the stars' antic flamboyance beat for beat. With poised and luminous wide-screen images that fuse the ethereal to the grotesque, the ludicrous to the ecstatic, Dumont raises conflicts of class, character, and gender into off-kilter legend.—*R.B. (In limited release.)*

### Thirst Street

Nathan Silver's new feature, a drama of romantic obsession set mainly in Paris, is a sort of experimental film. Silver, whose spontaneous melodramas tend to focus on the closed spaces of confining institutions, here condenses an entire city into the pathological bounds of a few tight venues—and woe unto his protagonist, Gina (Lindsay Burdge), when she ventures beyond them. Gina, a lonely flight attendant on a layover in Paris, meets Jérôme (Damien Bonnard), a slick bartender at a louche night club. For Jérôme, Gina is a one-night stand; for Gina, Jérôme is the love of her life, and she moves to Paris to pursue him, secretly taking an apartment across the street from his home in order to spy on him. Though there's something theoretical, almost mathematical, about Gina's passion (which seems borrowed from other movies), it provokes free and energetic performances from Bonnard and the rest of the supporting cast, headed by such notables as Jacques Nolot, as the club's owner, and Françoise Lebrun, as Gina's landlord. Burdge infuses her rigidly and scantily defined role with tremulous vulnerability, and Silver, aided by the splashy palette of Sean Price Williams's cinematography, evokes derangement with a sardonic wink.—*R.B. (Tribeca Film Festival; April 29.)*

### Win It All

The ambient violence in Joe Swanberg's previous feature, "Digging for Fire," bursts into the foreground in this casually swinging yet terrifyingly tense drama of a compulsive gambler on the edge. Jake Johnson (who co-wrote the film with Swanberg) stars as Eddie Garrett, a part-time Wrigley Field parking attendant and full-time poker player who's constantly in debt. When a rough-hewn friend prepares for a term in prison, he gives Eddie a duffel bag to hide. Eddie finds cash in it, and, despite the best efforts of his Gamblers Anonymous sponsor (Keegan-Michael Key), yields to temptation. Eddie turns to his easygoing but tough-loving brother, Ron (Joe Lo Truglio), who runs a landscaping business, for help; besides saving his own neck, Eddie also wants to save his new relationship with Eva (the charismatic Aislinn Derbez), a nurse whose intentions are serious. With a teeming cast of vibrantly unglamorous Chicago characters who hold Eddie in a tight social web, Swanberg—aided greatly by Johnson's vigorous performance—makes the gambler's panic-stricken silence all the more agonizing, balancing the warm veneer of intimate normalcy with the inner chill of secrets and lies.—*R.B. (Netflix.)*

## DANCE

### New York City Ballet

The "Here/Now" festival begins with three programs of recent ballets, each devoted to a different choreographer with strong links to the company: Christopher Wheeldon, Alexei Ratmansky, and Justin Peck. The Wheeldon program includes one of his most abstract and elegant works—and one of his best—"Polyphonia," from 2001, set to music by György Ligeti. Peck is represented by four pieces that show off his quick-moving, sharp, inventive style, including "The Dreamers," a pas de deux from last year packed with complicated, scrolling moves. But if you can see only one program, make it the Ratmansky double bill ("Russian Seasons" and "Namouna, A Grand Divertissement"), which showcases his prodigious imagination, musicality, and wit. • April 25 at 7:30 and April 28-29 at 8: "Mercurial Manoeuvres," "Polyphonia," "Liturgy," and "American Rhapsody." • April 26 and May 2 at 7:30 and April 29 at 2: "Russian Seasons" and "Namouna, A Grand Divertissement." • April 27 at 7:30 and April 30 at 3: "In Creases," "The Dreamers," "New Blood," and "Everywhere We Go." (*David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-496-0600. Through May 28.*)

### Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

Founded in 1996, this small but ambitious troupe, which divides its time between two cities, has shown an admirable devotion to commissioning new choreography. It's too bad that its taste tilts toward a trendy European shallowness. This program features recent work by two ubiquitous Spanish-born dance-makers. Alejandro Cerrudo's "Silent Ghost" is muted and melancholy; Cayetano Soto's "Huma Rojo" is flamboyant and self-mocking. "Eudaemonia," by Cherice Barton, is a jazzy search for happiness. (*Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. April 26-30.*)

### "From the Horse's Mouth"

The long-standing series has a reliably charming, easily adaptable recipe, blending film footage, dance snippets, and anecdotes about dance. This time, the subject is the history of Indian dance in America, from the exotica of Ruth St. Denis and Ted Shawn through the present. The large cast includes the always stunning Surupa Sen and Bijayini Satpathy, of the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble. (*Theatre at the 14th Street Y, 344 E. 14th St. 212-780-0800. April 27-30.*)

### "We're Watching"

The subject of this exhibition is surveillance: how technology affects privacy, security, and citizenship. Among the twelve works—a mix of performance pieces and installations spread throughout the nooks and crannies of Bard College's Frank Gehry-designed Fisher Center—is "What Remains," an immersive look at violence and truths that won't stay hidden. It's a collaboration by the poet Claudia Rankine, the choreographer Will Rawls, and the filmmaker John Lucas. Also noteworthy is "The Rehearsal," a dance in the form of a voyeuristic social-science experiment, performed by the excitingly original Michelle Ellsworth.

(*Richard B. Fisher Center for the Performing Arts, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y. 845-758-7900. April 27-30.*)

### Tamar Rogoff Performance Projects

A sensitive and tactful director-choreographer, Rogoff aims for an expansion of empathy, often in domestic tales set in a deceptively innocent past. Her new work, "Grand Rounds," alludes to Cherry Ames, a Nancy Drew-like nurse who was the heroine of mystery novels in the nineteen-forties and fifties. Inspired by her, a curious ten-year-old girl investigates family secrets, medicine, and death. (*Ellen Stewart, 66 E. 4th St. 646-430-5374. April 27-30. Through May 14.*)

### James Sewell Ballet / "Titicut Follies: The Ballet"

The veteran documentary Frederick Wiseman is no stranger to ballet; he has made a few films on the subject, including "La Danse," from 2009, a deep dive into the bowels of the Paris Opéra Ballet. In this latest project, conceived under the auspices of N.Y.U.'s Center for Ballet and the Arts, Wiseman tries his hand at developing a ballet based on one of his films, in collaboration with the choreographer James Sewell. Their new work is based on Wiseman's harrowing documentary "Titicut Follies," from 1967, about life inside a hospital for the criminally insane. Can you make a convincing ballet out of forced feedings, strip searches, and hospital talent shows? We'll soon find out. (*N.Y.U. Skirball Center, 566 LaGuardia Pl. 212-998-4941. April 28-30.*)

### New York Theatre Ballet

Though it's best loved for revivals of rarely seen repertory, this modest chamber-ballet troupe also has a good track record with original works. Here, a première by the longtime American Ballet Theatre corps member Zhong-Jing Fang joins one by Martin Lawrence, an alum of the Richard Alston Dance Company. The program hedges the risk of the new with three brilliant and bristling pieces by Pam Tanowitz, and for the Sunday matinee the company switches to Keith Michael's clever children's ballet "Alice-in-Wonderland Follies." (*Schimmel Center, Pace University, 3 Spruce St. 212-346-1715. April 28-30.*)

### "Works & Process" / American Ballet Theatre: "Whipped Cream"

In 1922, between the operas "Die Frau ohne Schatten" and "Intermezzo," the German composer Richard Strauss made a little ballet, "Schlagobers," about a boy who gobbles up too much whipped cream and then dreams of dancing cakes. (If it sounds like "The Nutcracker," you're not wrong.) The original ballet was a flop, but now the Russian-American choreographer Alexei Ratmansky has given it a new life, as "Whipped Cream," for American Ballet Theatre. At this preview, he will discuss his vision for the work, which includes outlandish designs by the Pop Surrealist Mark Ryden. Dancers from A.B.T. will perform excerpts. (*Guggenheim Museum, Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3575. April 30-May 1.*)

# NIGHT LIFE

## ROCK AND POP

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

### Laurie Anderson

As Manhattan music venues continue to go the way of the ticket stub, it's heartening to see a midsized night spot celebrate its tenth anniversary. This cavernous club, nestled beneath the High Line, in Chelsea, is owned by Steven Bensusan, a businessman whose father, Danny, started the Blue Note jazz club, in 1981. The Highline opened in 2007, and Lou Reed held court during its inaugural night; this week, ten years later, Reed's widow, the avant-garde artist and composer Anderson, will perform, honoring both her late husband and the venue. (*Highline Ballroom, 431 W. 16th St. 212-414-5994. April 29.*)

### Brooklyn Folk Festival

Held in the borough for nine years, this festival honors string-band music in a celebration of folk, blues, bluegrass, ska, and Irish musical traditions. Thirty bands perform across three days; there will also be vocal and instrumental workshops, square dances and swing jams, and an infamous contest in which participants compete to see who can toss a banjo the farthest into the Gowanus Canal. Gloves and a rope are provided; tips on shot-put form are not. This year's highlights include a set from the **Last Poets**, the firebrand Harlem band whose recitations foreshadowed hip-hop by a decade. (*St. Ann's Church, 157 Montague St., Brooklyn. 718-875-6960. April 28-30.*)

### Low End Theory NYC

Los Angeles, for all its shimmer, isn't celebrated for innovation. But this weekly party, founded in Lincoln Heights, in 2006, by the producer and label head **Daddy Kev**, created a space for beat-obsessives to pull their tracks out from under rappers' voices; composers like Nosaj Thing and Flying Lotus cultivated followings of their own through regular appearances, and fans learned to hear their instrumentals not as potential canvases but as works in and of themselves. A sound was soon incubated: rubbery jazz riffs, prog-funk keyboard tones, and glitchy, cosmic drums that gave East Coast hip-hop's icy swing a bit of sun. More than a decade after its inception, Low End Theory arrives in New York City, with sets from Kev, the **Gaslamp Killer**, and more. (*Paper Box, 17 Meadow St., Brooklyn. 718-388-3815. April 28.*)

### Mitski

The most vexing, and entrancing, aspect of this low-slung New Yorker's jaggedly confessional songwriting is the sense that, despite all she leaks onto the page and into the microphone, she's keeping her darker wounds covered up. Her fourth record, "Puberty 2," has furthered the power belter's notoriety, led by the ripping single "Your Best American Girl," on which she negotiates a fractured cultural identity with a proto-bro who knows that he's the center of the universe by birthright: "You're the sun," she sings in a plainspoken quiver. "But I'm not the moon, I'm not even a star." Mitski invites the fellow bleeding heart **Told Slant** to support her latest home-town gig. (*Brooklyn Steel, 319 Frost St., Brooklyn. April 29.*)

### Pinegrove

Bands like this Montclair, New Jersey, outfit are vessels for memories shared within small circles. Evan Stephens Hall and Zack Levine have been playing music together since high school, and committed to Pinegrove after graduation, producing blooming college rock that aspired to early Wilco and Built to Spill while maintaining an adolescent thumbprint. "You'll know it when you hear it / 'Cause you know the way my voice felt," Hall sings on "Cadmium," the brightest spot on the band's breezy, melodic album "Cardinal," from 2016. Stacked guitar swells break away at the song's midpoint, low and rumbling, stepping just ahead of the beat; the effect is wistful and centripetal, the sound of moving forward with friends who know your past. (*Bowery Ballroom, 6 Delancey St. 212-260-4700. April 27; Music Hall of Williamsburg, 66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 718-486-5400. April 30.*)

### The Revolution

Prince is gone, but the Revolution lives on. In the mid-eighties, the Purple One's astounding backing band earned credits on three records—"Purple Rain," "Around the World in a Day," and "Parade"—before calling it quits, in 1986. Now, a year after the death of their spiritual leader, the classic lineup has re-formed for a North American tour in his honor. Originally slated for a two-week run, the Revolution added two months of performances to appease grieving fans. But don't expect the musicians to take on Prince's role: the guitarist Wendy Melvoin recently told *Rolling Stone* that "we only perform songs that don't distance us as the band. . . . Wherever we go, there's going to be an artist who loved him deeply and they can come up and sing." That's thinly coded language for special guests, so do what you can to snag a ticket to this historic show. (*B. B. King Blues Club & Grill, 237 W. 42nd St. 212-997-4144. April 28.*)

### Diana Ross

At one of his final Presidential Medal of Freedom ceremonies, last November, Barack Obama offered a characteristic quip about an artist he admired. "As a child, Diana Ross loved singing and dancing for family friends—but not for free," he said, with a laugh that spread throughout the hall. "She was smart enough to pass the hat." From her formative work with the Supremes, which shaped the Motown sound, to her decades touring as a solo act, Ross, whose golden voice still quakes, has more than earned the nation's most distinguished civilian honor. She hosts a five-night engagement starting this week, performing timeless numbers like "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," "I'm Coming Out," and "Stop! In the Name of Love." (*City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. April 26-29.*)

### Travis Scott

Whatever the popular murky blend of jackhammer drums, haunting film-score chords, and half-human Auto-Tune riffs comes to be called in the future, Scott will be known to have mastered the format, delivering roller-coaster raps in clothes soaked with logos. He's lent his bottomless well of spastic energy to more ubiquitous names like Kanye West, Drake, and the Weeknd, managing to channel their greatest strengths and discernible traits into effective singles of his own; great pop moves with the time, and if you've seen Scott onstage you know just how fast he can go. (*Terminal 5, 610 W. 56th St. 212-582-6600. April 30.*)



Lin-Manuel Miranda

Anthony Bee

Amy Schumer

Laura Poitras

Gloria Steinem

Jonathan Safran

Ta-Nehisi Coates

Patti Smith

Leonard

Kenya Barris

Amy Poehler

Angela

David Axelrod

Michelle

Jill Soloway

Bruce Springsteen

Diego

Junot Díaz

Siddhartha

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar



THE NEW YORKER

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**White Lung**

In 2009, this Vancouver band popped up on a compilation record called “Emergency Room: Volume 1,” named for the downtown D.I.Y. music-and-arts venue where they came of age, playing early demos and dodging flying limbs at rambunctious all-ages gigs. “Therapy” closed side A; on it, the lead vocalist, Mish Way, sings, “I know it won’t take too long before your genius rips open the world.” The line might’ve been self-fulfilling—in the decade since the band formed, White Lung has outgrown local haunts and labels and developed into a punk act beloved by fans and critics from Austin to Moscow. On the band’s fourth album, “Paradise,” Lars Stalfors, who has produced records for Chelsea Wolfe and Alice Glass, tries his hand at taming Way’s yowl, with clean results. (*Webster Hall, 125 E. 11th St. 212-353-1600. April 29.*)

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**JAZZ AND STANDARDS**
**Alan Broadbent**

He’s played the role of the best man for years now, both as the pianist for Quartet West—the celebrated ensemble led by the late, great bassist Charlie Haden—and as an A-list studio arranger and conductor. But Broadbent also deserves considerable attention for his work as a probing stylist who deftly balances the rhapsodic and the propulsive. He’s joined by the bassist **Don Falzone** and the open-eared drummer **Billy Mintz**. (*Mezzrow, 163 W. 10th St. mezzrow.com. April 28-29.*)

**“Celebrating Ella: The First Lady of Jazz”**

No jazz singer was ever adored with more passion by both hardcore aficionados and the John Q. Public listener than the incomparable Ella Fitzgerald. Honoring this sorely missed genius of song on her centennial will be the singers **Roberta Gambarini** and **Kenny Washington**, supported by the **Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra**. Expect gems to be flung about the stage—only a chosen few (Sinatra, Crosby) brought as much classic American Songbook fare into the mainstream as Fitzgerald. (*Rose Theatre, Jazz at Lincoln Center, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500. April 27-29.*)

**Jimmy Greene**

Greene lost his daughter, Ana, in the Sandy Hook tragedy, and channelled his loss into fervent music-making, as heard on the two-volume “Beautiful Life” album, dedicated to her memory. He splits this engagement equally, kicking off with a taut quartet and concluding with a sextet featuring the pianist **Renee Rosnes** and the guitarist **Lage Lund**. (*Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. April 28-30.*)

**King Vulture**

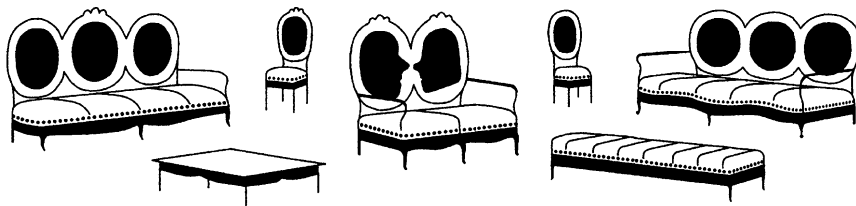
The compositions of the pianist Russ Lossing remain deliberately sketchy, which gives his associates in this exploratory quartet plenty of leg room to contribute in equal kind. Tossing ideas about and reacting in telepathic communion with the leader and with one another are **Adam Kolker**, on saxophones; **Matt Pavolka**, on bass; and **Dayeon Seok**, on drums. (*Cornelia Street Café, 29 Cornelia St. 212-989-9319. April 30.*)

**Jane Monheit**

On her recent album, “The Songbook Sessions: Ella Fitzgerald,” Monheit pays homage to a major vocal influence while having her pick of choice material from the likes of Rodgers and Hart, Arlen, and Porter—a win-win situation. While the album benefits from the work of the guest trumpeter Nicholas Payton, here this congenial stylist will share the spotlight only with the spirit of the great lady herself. (*Birdland, 315 W. 44th St. 212-581-3080. April 25-29.*)

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# ABOVE & BEYOND

**Sakura Matsuri Cherry Blossom Festival**

Today, only those vulnerable to pollen’s seasonal assault dread the impending bloom of New York’s cherry blossoms. But, as depicted in the 1975 horror film “Under the Blossoming Cherry Trees,” the flowers were feared by some in ancient Japan, who avoided passing beneath their petals as stories spread of the trees driving travellers mad. The Brooklyn Botanic Garden is home to more than two hundred cherry trees across at least twenty-six species; this two-day festival, celebrating the blossoms’ arrival, is packed with performances reflecting both traditional and modern Japan, including taiko drumming, martial arts, and a cosplay fashion show. The biggest threat might be an ill-placed photobomb interrupting your well-framed shot, flush with pink. (*990 Washington Ave., Brooklyn. bbg.org. April 29-30 at 10 A.M.*)

**Street Games**

Since 2007, residents near Thomas Jefferson Park have welcomed spring by introducing their youngest neighbors to a bygone form of entertainment commonly referred to as “going outside.” At this event, kids five and older can enjoy classic recreations from the nineteen-sixties and seventies, including pogo sticks, hula hoops, rumbling boxcar races down First Avenue, and quick-skipped double Dutch, while spectators take in a yo-yo master at work or a performance by the Dance Theatre of Harlem. Food and drinks will be sold on site; children who complete five of the ten activities on their personal Street Games Passport can claim a prize. (*112th St. at First Ave. nycgovparks.org. April 29 at 11 A.M.*)

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**AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES**

For its sale of silver, ceramics, and furnishings on April 26, **Sotheby’s** has taken a deluxe approach, arranging the items in the manner of Dutch still-lives. The photos in the catalogue are by Paulette Tavormina, a specialist in such sumptuous arrangements. (Anything to stimulate the pulse of prospective buyers.) Prints, including the Motherwell collage “The Red and Black”—made out of bits of other prints—go up the following day. (*York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.*) • After a sale of extravagant gems (April 26), **Christie’s** settles in for a day of Old Masters (April 27). The morning includes works dating to the fourteenth century—a Florentine gothic triptych, centered on a Madonna Enthroned—but most of the pieces hail from the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries. These in-

clude a spare trompe-l’oeil depicting an ivory-and-wood crucifix against a white wall, made in Lille in the early nineteenth century. The afternoon session adds sculptures and statuary to the mix. A petite and very ancient marble female figure, made in Turkey during the Chalcolithic period (3000-2200 B.C.), leads “Exceptional,” a small sale of extraordinary furnishings and objects (April 28). The ovoid head, slightly tipped back, as if to take in the night sky, has earned it the name “Stargazer”; an estimate can be had upon request. (*20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.*) • Jewels from the collection of the gossip columnist Aileen Mehle—a.k.a. Suzy—will be sold off at **Doyle**, on April 27. Like her prose, the jewelry, which includes an endless array of chunky bracelets in the shapes of various animals, is colorful and bold. (*175 E. 87th St. 212-427-2730.*)

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**READINGS AND TALKS**
**Brooklyn Public Library**

Christia Mercer teaches in Columbia University’s philosophy department, but her curriculum also extends beyond the classroom: in 2015, she taught a course on “Oresteia,” the two-millennia-old story of a woman who murders her husband and his mistress, in a New York City women’s correctional facility. This week, she excavates storied plays and writings for an examination of women’s roles in the very shaping of Western thought. She builds on ideas put forth by medieval women who reckoned with newfound self-awareness and cognition, and measures their influence on early modern philosophy. (*10 Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn. 718-230-2100. April 27 at 7.*)

**Just a Show**

Harris Mayersohn is a staff writer for “The Late Show with Stephen Colbert,” and also hosts a regular comic variety show at a venue named after the Trailer Park Boys. On the last Sunday of each month, he gathers fellow standup performers and yuckster writers, who frequent the greenrooms of grimy clubs and have credits across cable comedy, for an unpredictable night of antics and pranks. This week’s edition brings Aparna Nancherla, of “Inside Amy Schumer” and “Late Night with Seth Meyers”; Steven Markow, a contributor to this magazine’s Daily Shouts; and Joe Pera, whose unsettlingly wholesome strain of standup has become an improbable favorite on the edgy late-night network Adult Swim. (*Sunnyvale, 1031 Grand St., Brooklyn. sunnyvalebk.com. April 30 at 6.*)

# FOOD & DRINK



## TABLES FOR TWO

### Flora Bar

945 Madison Ave. (646-558-5383)

FOR ALMOST FIFTY YEARS, as the home of the Whitney Museum, Marcel Breuer's inverted ziggurat on Madison Avenue was a place to take in the American avant-garde—and the basement cafeteria a place to fortify oneself with starchy staples. The kitchen was run early on by Daka, a purveyor of the cheese-and-fruit-platter variety; the nineties brought Sarabeth's and its Goldie Lox plate; and in 2011, at Untitled, Danny Meyer introduced his banana-hazelnut French toast. Now that the Whitney has moved to the meatpacking district and the Met is staging contemporary exhibitions at the Breuer, the eatery has again been recast, with a downtown gaze.

The chef is the Uruguayan-born Ignacio Mattos, who, four years ago, joined with the restaurateur Thomas Carter to open Estela, a Houston Street hideaway beloved by the likes of Barack and Michelle Obama for its imaginative Mediterranean small plates. Last year, Mattos and Carter debuted the nearby Café Altro Paradiso, a petite-portioned take on the Italian bistro. In Flora Bar, the pair faces its steepest challenge yet: museum café by day, neighborhood restaurant by night, Mediterranean-Pacific tapas menu at all times—think olives, yogurt, and jamón ibérico, plus daimon, yellowfin, and Szechuan peppercorns.

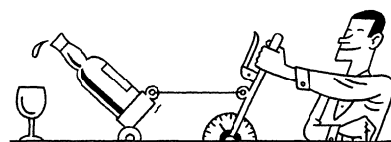
On a recent Tuesday evening, with the

galleries dark, the food was the focus, and deservedly so. A seafood platter seemed the work more of a sushi chef than of a lobsterman, the snow-crab legs split carefully, the morsel-size blue shrimp sweet and crunchingly fresh. Eating a straciatella dish recalled spelunking, its glopping texture giving way to sharper, brighter edges: cubes of fennel and Meyer-lemon rind. Some victories were simple, like a Caesar dressing that replaced anchovy with fermented rye berry, whose clean acid left room for the romaine. Others were grand, like the seafood dumplings; involving a mixture of lobster, scallop, and crab, they somehow tasted of each one individually, but also of bitter sorrel, in a gentle yuzu broth.

Rich food, lightly rendered—this is Mattos's art. Yet it could not quite stand up to the demands of the brunch hour. The maître d' had no space at one o'clock the other Sunday, but the online-reservations system did. The service, which ranges from forgetful to chilly and is always slow, upset both art-viewing plans and basic motor function: More coffee, pretty please? Even the chef seemed to have been caught flat-footed with his savory truffled tart, which had lost, among other ingredients, its toothsome dinnertime topping—slender disks of rutabaga—and gained a slimy fried egg. Mr. Mattos, don't forget your root vegetables, and send those surly servers back downtown. (Dishes \$9-\$120.)

—Daniel Wenger

## BAR TAB



### Diamond Reef

1057 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn

With all the fuss over artisanal liquors and bespoke ambience, drinking establishments in New York can be inclined toward the overserious. Which is why a new spot from the team behind the Lower East Side's Attoboy has flouted many of the elements that speakeasy lovers generally cherish—elaborate recipes, elusive reservations, waistcoats. "I just wanted to do something as opposite as possible for this bar," the co-owner Dan Greenbaum said. Instead of, say, obscure free jazz, there's dance music in a space that is echoey enough to give a person an excuse to lean in closer. The airy plant-filled bar, which is tucked along a strip of auto-body shops, recalls California—or, at least, a New Yorker's version of it. (No crystals; no one lurking around a corner, waiting to read your aura.) On a recent Sunday afternoon, locals in stripes and wide-brimmed hats conspired over highballs while large men in resort-branded T-shirts ordered Presidents and mingled on the spacious patio. "Everything is fast, so you can get back to your friends," Greenbaum said. But the speed of service belies the quality of the drinks—the Booze + Juice (a whole Granny Smith apple blitzed to order and combined with your choice of liquor) is pleasantly tart and tantalizingly green, and pairs well with mezcal, for a touch of smoke. Diamond Reef's signature cocktail harks back to a darling of New York mixology: the Penicillin (Scotch, lemon, honey, ginger), invented by the co-owner Sam Ross when he worked at Sasha Petraske's Milk & Honey, and now a classic worldwide. Diamond Reef's frozen take (the Penichillin) employs an age-old principle: anything is more fun when tossed into a slushy machine.—Wei Tchou



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# Paul Fredrick



## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT

#### ONE HUNDRED DAYS

ON APRIL 29TH, Donald Trump will have occupied the Oval Office for a hundred days. For most people, the luxury of living in a relatively stable democracy is the luxury of not following politics with a nerve-racked constancy. Trump does not afford this. His Presidency has become the demoralizing daily obsession of anyone concerned with global security, the vitality of the natural world, the national health, constitutionalism, civil rights, criminal justice, a free press, science, public education, and the distinction between fact and its opposite. The hundred-day marker is never an entirely reliable indicator of a four-year term, but it's worth remembering that Franklin Roosevelt and Barack Obama were among those who came to office at a moment of national crisis and had the discipline, the preparation, and the rigor to set an entirely new course. Impulsive, egocentric, and mendacious, Trump has, in the same span, set fire to the integrity of his office.

Trump has never gone out of his way to conceal the essence of his relationship to the truth and how he chooses to navigate the world. In 1980, when he was about to announce plans to build Trump Tower, a fifty-eight-story edifice on Fifth Avenue and Fifty-sixth Street, he coached his architect before meeting with a group of reporters. "Give them the old Trump bullshit," he said. "Tell them it's going to be a million square feet, *sixty-eight* stories."

This is the brand that Trump has created for himself—that of an unprinci-

pled, cocky, value-free con who will insult, stiff, or betray anyone to achieve his gaudiest purposes. "I am what I am," he has said. But what was once a parochial amusement is now a national and global peril. Trump flouts truth and liberal values so brazenly that he undermines the country he has been elected to serve and the stability he is pledged to insure. His bluster creates a generalized anxiety such that the President of the United States can appear to be scarcely more reliable than any of the world's autocrats. When Kim In-ryong, a representative of North Korea's radical regime, warns that Trump and his tweets of provocation are creating "a dangerous situation in which a thermonuclear war may break out at any moment," does one man sound more immediately rational than the other? When Trump rushes to congratulate Recep

Tayyip Erdoğan for passing a referendum that bolsters autocratic rule in Turkey—or when a sullen and insulting meeting with Angela Merkel is followed by a swoon session with Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, the military dictator of Egypt—how are the supporters of liberal and democratic values throughout Europe meant to react to American leadership?

Trump appears to strut through the world forever studying his own image. He thinks out loud, and is incapable of reflection. He is unserious, unfocussed, and, at times, it seems, unhinged. Journalists are invited to the Oval Office to ask about infrastructure; he turns the subject to how Bill O'Reilly, late of Fox News, is a "good person," blameless, like him, in matters of sexual harassment. A reporter asks about the missile attack on Syria; he feeds her a self-satisfied description of how he informed his Chinese guests at Mar-a-Lago of the strike over "the most beautiful piece of chocolate cake that you've ever seen."

Little about this Presidency remains a secret for long. The reporters who cover the White House say that, despite their persistent concerns about Trump's attempts to marginalize the media, they are flooded with information. Everyone leaks on everyone else. Rather than demand discipline around him, Trump sits back and watches the results on cable news. His Administration is not so much a team of rivals as it is a new form of reality entertainment: "The Circular Firing Squad."

This Presidency is so dispiriting that,



at the first glimmer of relative ordinariness, Trump is graded on a curve. When he restrains himself from trolling Kim Jong-un about the failure of a North Korean missile test, he is credited with the strategic self-possession of a Dean Acheson. The urge to normalize Trump's adolescent outbursts, his flagrant incompetence and dishonesty—to wish it all away, if only for a news cycle or two—is connected to the fear of what fresh hell might come next. Every day brings another outrage or embarrassment: the dressing down of the Australian Prime Minister or a shoutout for the “amazing job” that Frederick Douglass is doing. One day NATO is “obsolete”; the next it is “no longer obsolete.” The Chinese are “grand champions” of currency manipulation; then they are not. When Julian Assange is benefitting Trump's campaign, it's “I love WikiLeaks!”; now, with the Presidency won, the Justice Department is preparing criminal charges against him. News of Trump's casual reversals of policy comes with such alarming regularity that the impulse to locate a patch of firm ground is understandable. It's soothing. But it's untenable.

There is frustration all around. During his first hundred days in office, Trump has not done away with populist rhetoric, but he has acted almost entirely as a plutocrat. His Cabinet and his cast of

advisers are stocked with multimillionaires and billionaires. His positions on health care, tax reform, and financial regulation are of greatest appeal to the superwealthy. How he intends to improve the situation of the middle class remains obscure. A report in Politico described thirty staffers holed up in a conference room in the Eisenhower Executive Office Building, attempting a “rebranding” of this first chapter of the Trump Administration. The aides furiously assembled “lists of early successes” on whiteboards.

One success they can name is the appointment of Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court, although Democrats rightly judge that his seat was stolen from Obama's nominee, Merrick Garland. The first hundred days are marked most indelibly by Trump's attempted ban of travellers from six Muslim countries, which failed in the courts, and the effort to “repeal and replace” the Affordable Care Act, which imploded in the House of Representatives. The list of domestic initiatives is largely confined to reversals of achievements of the Obama era. Trump has proposed an expansion of the prison at Guantánamo and ordered the easing of Dodd-Frank financial regulations. He has reversed plans to save wetlands and protect waterways from coal waste; he has reversed executive orders that banned gun sales to the mentally ill and that protected

L.G.B.T. federal employees from discrimination; his Vice-President voted in a Senate tiebreaker to allow states to defund Planned Parenthood clinics. Trump, because of the lavish travel habits of his family, is shaping up to be the most expensive executive in history to guard. At the same time, his budget proposals would, if passed in Congress, cut the funding of after-school programs, rental-assistance programs, the Community Development Block Grant program, legal assistance for the poor, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Scorekeepers will credit these as promises kept. Guardians of democratic values and the environment, champions of economic opportunity and the national well-being will view them as an ever-growing damage report.

“THERE'S A SLIGHT madness to thinking you should be the leader of the free world,” Obama admitted before he went ahead and ran for President. But even after Richard Nixon's anti-Semitic rants and Ronald Reagan's astrology-influenced daily schedule, we are at a new level of strangeness with Donald Trump—something that his biography had always suggested.

Trump emerged from neither a log cabin nor the contemporary meritocracy. He inherited his father's outerborough real-estate empire—a considerable enterprise distinguished by racist federal-housing violations—and brought it to Manhattan. He entered a world of contractors, casino operators, Roy Cohn, professional-wrestling stars, Rupert Murdoch, multiple bankruptcies, tabloid divorces, Mar-a-Lago golf tournaments, and reality television. He had no real civic presence in New York. A wealthy man, he gave almost nothing to charity. He cultivated a kind of louche glamour. At Studio 54, he said, “I would watch supermodels getting screwed . . . on a bench in the middle of the room.” He had no close friends. Mainly, he preferred to work, play golf, and spend long hours at home watching TV. His misogyny and his low character were always manifest. Displeased with a harmless Palm Beach society journalist named Shannon Donnelly, he told her in a letter that if she adhered to his standards of discretion, “I will promise not to show



“Someone's at the hole.”

you as the crude, fat and obnoxious slob which everyone knows you are.” Insofar as he had political opinions, they were inconsistent and mainly another form of performance art, part of his talk-show patter. His contributions to political campaigns were unrelated to conviction; he gave solely to curry favor with those who could do his business some good. He believed in nothing.

By the mid-nineties, Trump’s investment prospects had foundered. Banks cut him off. He turned to increasingly dubious sources of credit and branding opportunities at home and abroad. A typical deal, involving a hotel in Baku, Azerbaijan (described at length in these pages by Adam Davidson), included as partners an Azerbaijani family distinguished for its outsized corruption and for its connections to some Iranian brothers who worked as a profit front for the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. There is little mystery as to why Trump has broken with custom and refuses to release his tax returns. A record of his colossal tax breaks, associations, deals, and net worth resides in those forms. It may turn out that deals like the one in Baku will haunt his Presidency no less than his grotesque conflicts of interest or any of the possible connections to Russia now being investigated by the F.B.I. and congressional committees will.

As Trump struggled in business, he made a deal with NBC to star in “The Apprentice,” which, for fourteen seasons, featured him in a role of corporate dominance. It was there that he honed his peculiar showmanship and connected to a mass audience well beyond New York City, perfecting the persona that became the core of his Presidential campaign: the billionaire populist. That role is not unknown in American history: in the eighteen-seventies, wealthy leaders of the Redeemer movement, a southern faction of the Bourbon Democrats linked to the Ku Klux Klan and other white paramilitary groups, set out to defund public schools, shrink government, lower taxes for land owners, and undercut the rise of a generation of black politicians.

And yet Trump has discovered that it’s far more difficult to manage the realities of national politics than the set of “The Apprentice.” In the transitional period between Election Day and the Inauguration, Obama’s aides were told that

Trump, who has the attention span of a hummingbird, would not read reports of any depth; he prefers one- or two-page summaries, pictures, and graphics. Obama met with Trump once and talked with him on the telephone roughly ten times. The discussions did little to change Obama’s mind that Trump was “uniquely unqualified” to be President. His grasp of issues was rudimentary, at best. After listening to Obama describe the framework of the nuclear agreement with Iran—a deal that Trump had previously



*Jared Kushner and Ivanka Trump*

assessed as “terrible” and vowed to dismantle—he conceded that maybe it made sense after all. In one of the many books published under his name, “Trump: Think Like a Billionaire,” he said, “The day I realized it can be smart to be shallow was, for me, a deep experience.”

On Inauguration Day, at the Capitol, Trump no longer affected any awe of the task before him or respect for his predecessors. He furiously rebuked the elected officials seated behind him and the international order that they served. Using the language of populist demagogues, from Huey Long to George Wallace to Silvio Berlusconi, the new President implied that he, the Leader, was in perfect communion with the People, and that together they would repair the landscape of “American carnage” and return it to its prelapsarian state of grace. In this union, it seemed, there was no place for the majority of the electorate, which had voted for Hillary Clinton. African-Americans, Muslim Americans, Latinos, immigrants—it was hard to tell if Trump counted them as the People, too. More likely, they remained the objects of anx-

iety, fear, and disdain that they had been during the campaign. As George W. Bush was leaving the grandstand, according to *New York*, he was heard to say, “That was some weird shit.”

By all accounts, the West Wing has become a battlefield of opposing factions. The most influential of them is also the only one with a guarantee of permanence—the Family, particularly Trump’s daughter Ivanka and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner. (His sons Eric and Donald, Jr., have remained in New York to run the family business. Despite the responsibility to put country before personal profit, the President refuses to divest from the business.) Kushner has no relevant experience in foreign or domestic policy, but he has been tasked with forging a peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians, steering U.S. relations with China and Mexico, reorganizing the federal government, and helping to lead the fight against the epidemic of opioid use. It is hard to know if Kushner, as an executive, is in charge of everything or of nothing at all. But, as a counsellor, he clearly is powerful enough to whisper in his father-in-law’s ear and diminish the prospects of rival counsellors, including those of the Administration’s most lurid white nationalist, Steve Bannon. Ivanka Trump’s duties are gauzier than her husband’s, but they seem to relate to getting her father to go easier on L.G.B.T. and women’s-rights issues and calming his temper.

The way that Trump has established his family members in positions of power and profit is redolent of tin-pot dictatorships. He may waver on matters of ideology, but his commitment to the family firm is unshakable and resists ethical norms. The conflicts and the privileges are shameless, the potential revenues unthinkable. On the day that the Trump family hosted Xi Jinping in Palm Beach, the Chinese government extended trademarks to Ivanka’s businesses so that she could sell her shoes and handbags to the vast market from Harbin to Guangzhou.

Trump is wary of expertise. During the campaign, he expressed his distrust of scientists, military strategists, university professors, diplomats, and intelligence officers. He filled the executive branch accordingly, appointing a

climate-change denier as the head of the Environmental Protection Agency; a Secretary of Education who, during her confirmation hearing, displayed stunning ignorance of public education; an Energy Secretary who previously called for closing the Department of Energy; a United Nations Ambassador whose international experience is limited to trade missions for the state of South Carolina; and a national-security adviser who trafficked in Islamophobic conspiracy theories until, three weeks into the job, he was forced to resign because he lied to Vice-President Pence about his ties to the Russian government.

Trump has left open hundreds of important positions in government, largely because he sees no value in them. “A lot of those jobs, I don’t want to appoint, because they’re unnecessary to have,” he has said. “I say, ‘What do all these people do?’ You don’t need all those jobs.” Among the many federal bureaucracies that are now languishing with countless empty offices are the Departments of State, Treasury, Commerce, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, and Defense. A recent article in *The Atlantic* described the State Department as “adrift and listless,” with officials unsure of their duties, hanging around the cafeteria gossiping, and leaving work early.

Trump seems to believe that foreign affairs require only modest depths of thought. It’s the generals who are the authoritative voices in his Administration. To a President whose idea of a strategic move is to “bomb the shit out of” ISIS, they are the ones who have to make the case for international law, the efficacy of NATO, the immorality of torture, and the inadvisability of using the rhetoric of “radical Islamic terrorism.” At the same time, the pace of bombing in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Yemen appears to have increased; tensions with Iran, Russia, and North Korea have intensified. Trump, an erratic and impulsive spokesman for his own policy, needs competent civilian advisers, if only as a counterweight to the military point of view and his own self-admiring caprices. When conservative columnists write about Trump and fondly recall Richard Nixon’s “madman theory” of international relations—a calculated unpredictability directed at the North Vietnamese—they

tend to leave out that it did not work. The war in Southeast Asia went on for years after Nixon’s brinksmanship.

**T**HE TRUMP PRESIDENCY represents a rebellion against liberalism itself—an angry assault on the advances of groups of people who have experienced profound, if fitful, empowerment over the past half century. There is nothing about Trump’s public pronouncements that indicates that he has welcomed these moral advances; his language, his tone, his personal behavior, and his policies all suggest, and foster, a politics of resentment. It is the Other—the ethnic minority, the immigrant—who has closed your factory, taken your job, threatened your safety.

The Trumpian rebellion against liberal democracy is not a local event; it is part of a disturbing global trend. When the Berlin Wall fell, in 1989, and the Soviet Union dissolved, two years later, the democratic movement grew and liberalism advanced, and not only in Eastern and Central Europe. During the course



*Vladimir Putin and  
Recep Tayyip Erdoğan*

of thirty years, the number of democracies in the world expanded from thirty to roughly a hundred. But, since 2000, nation-states of major consequence—Russia, Hungary, Thailand, and the Philippines among them—have gone in the opposite, authoritarian direction. India, Indonesia, and Great Britain have become more nationalistic. The Arab Spring failed nearly everywhere. The prestige and the efficacy of democracy itself is in question. The Chinese Communist Party,

which crushed a pro-democracy movement on Tiananmen Square, in 1989, then set out to make the case that it could achieve enormous economic growth while ignoring the demand for human rights and political liberties. In Russia, Vladimir Putin has suppressed political competition, a nascent independent media, and any hope for an independent judiciary or legislature while managing to convince millions of his countrymen that the United States is hypocritical and immoral, no more democratic than any other country. In Turkey, Erdoğan has jailed tens of thousands of political opponents, muzzled the press, and narrowly won a referendum providing him with nearly dictatorial powers. Western Europe is also in question. In France, Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Front, is polling credibly in a Presidential campaign guided by two of her longtime associates and fascist sympathizers, Frédéric Chatillon and Axel Loustau.

The stakes of this anti-democratic wave cannot be overestimated. Nor can it be ignored to what degree authoritarian states have been able to point out the failures of the West—including the wars in Vietnam, Iraq, and Libya—and use them to diminish the moral prestige of democracy itself. As Edward Luce writes, in “The Retreat of Western Liberalism,” “What we do not yet know is whether the world’s democratic recession will turn into a global depression.”

If we were ever naïve enough to believe that progress in political life is inevitable, we are experiencing the contradiction. Freedom House, a nongovernmental organization that researches global trends in political liberty, has identified an eleven-year decline in democracies around the globe and now issues a list of “countries to watch.” These are nations that “may be approaching important turning points in their democratic trajectory.” The ones that most concern Freedom House include South Africa, Iraq, Kyrgyzstan, Ecuador, Zimbabwe, and, the largest of them, the United States. The reason the group includes the U.S. is Trump’s “unorthodox” Presidential campaign and his “approach to civil liberties and the role of the United States in the world.”

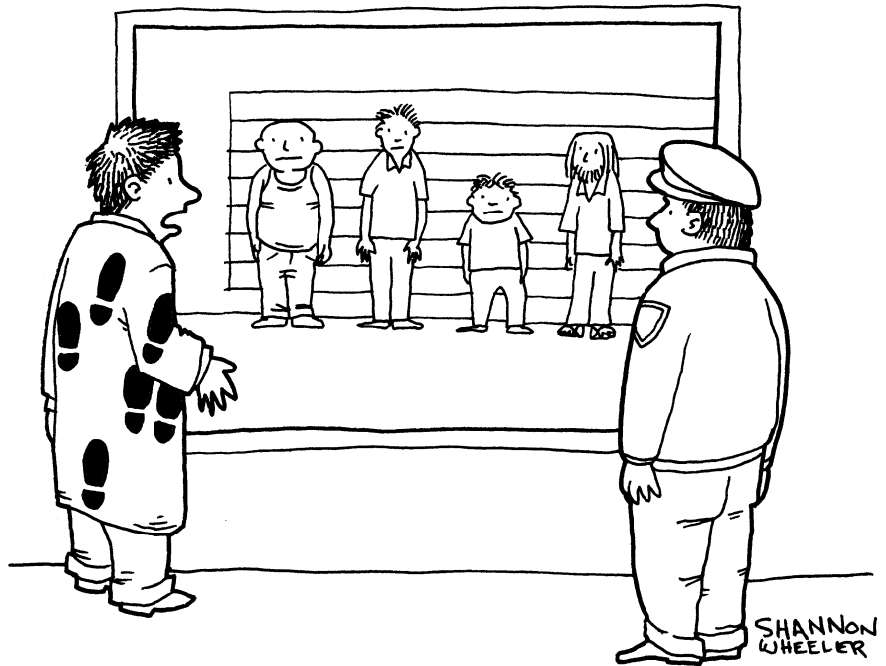
In 1814, John Adams evoked the Aristotelian notion that democracy will inevitably lapse into anarchy. “Remember, democracy never lasts long,” he wrote to

John Taylor, a former U.S. senator from Virginia, in 1814. “It soon wastes, exhausts, and murders itself. There never was a democracy that did not commit suicide.” As President, Donald Trump, with his nativist and purely transactional view of politics, threatens to be democracy’s most reckless caretaker, and a fulfillment of Adams’s dark prophecy.

Pushing back against Trumpism will not be easy. Even if the President drops some of his most brutal promises, even if he throws his smartphone into the Potomac, and ceases to titillate his base with racist dog-whistling and to provoke his enemies with a rhetoric of heedless bravado, he still commands a Republican Congress, and he is still going to score some distressing political victories. He is certainly not finished with his efforts to repeal Obamacare in a way that would deprive millions of people of their health insurance; he is certainly not going to relax his effort to enact hard-line immigration restrictions; he is certainly not through trying to dismantle legislative and international efforts to rescue an environment that is already suffering the grievous effects of climate change.

Trump forces us to recognize the fragility of precious things. Yet there are signs that Adams and the doomsayers of democratic values will be proved wrong. Hope can be found in the extraordinary crowds at the many women’s marches across the country on the day after the Inauguration; in the recent marches in support of science and a more compassionate, reasonable immigration policy; in the earnest work of the courts that have blocked the “Muslim ban” and of various senators and House members in both parties who, unlike Mitch McConnell and Paul Ryan, have refused to put cynicism and expedience before integrity; in the exemplary investigative journalism being done by traditional and new media outlets; in the performance of anti-Trump candidates in recent congressional races in Kansas and Georgia.

The opposition to Trump also has to give deeper thought to why a demagogue with such modest and eccentric experience could speak with such immediacy to tens of millions of voters anxious about their lives and their prospects, while the Democratic nominee could not. The intellectual and political task ahead is at once to resist the ugliest manifestations



*“Can you ask them to do a little dance?”*

of the new right-wing populism—the fears it plays on, the divisions it engenders—and to confront the consequences of globalism, technology, and cultural change. Politicians and citizens who intend to defeat the forces of reaction, of Trumpism, need to confront questions of jobs lost to automation and offshoring head on. Unemployment is at five per cent, but that does not provide an accurate picture of an endangered middle and working class.

The political math is clarifying: four hundred and eighty-nine of the wealthiest counties in the country voted for Clinton; the remaining two thousand six hundred and twenty-three counties, largely made up of small towns, suburbs, and rural areas, voted for Trump. Slightly fewer than fifty-five per cent of all voting-age adults bestirred themselves to go to the polls. That statistic is at least as painful to process as the Comey letter, the Russian hack of the D.N.C., the strategic failures of the Clinton campaign, and the over-all darkness of the Trump campaign. It’s a statistic about passivity, which is just what a democracy in the era of Trump can no longer afford.

There is still time for younger politicians to gather themselves for the 2018 midterms and the 2020 Presidential

race. One well-established figure, Senator Elizabeth Warren, of Massachusetts, just published “This Fight Is Our Fight,” a book on the decline of middle-class prospects and conservative ideology since the Reagan era. It’s the sort of manifesto, like “The Audacity of Hope,” that frequently augurs higher political ambition. Warren came by our offices last week for an hour-long interview, and, while she made the ritual demurrals about a run for the Presidency, she spoke with a combative focus on precisely the issues that Clinton ceded to Trump in the 2016 race. Warren will be sixty-nine when it comes time to make a decision, but it would be foolish to think that she is not among those who are testing the waters.

The clownish veneer of Trumpism conceals its true danger. Trump’s way of lying is not a joke; it is a strategy, a way of clouding our capacity to think, to live in a realm of truth. It is said that each epoch dreams the one to follow. The task now is not merely to recognize this Presidency for the emergency it is, and to resist its assault on the principles of reality and the values of liberal democracy, but to devise a future, to debate, to hear one another, to organize, to preserve and revive precious things.

—David Remnick

# A LONG HOMECOMING

*The novelist Elizabeth Strout left Maine, but it didn't leave her.*

BY ARIEL LEVY



JUST OUTSIDE the town of Brunswick, Maine, the Harpswell Road runs along a finger of land poking into the ocean. It passes clapboard houses and mobile homes, stands of red-tipped sumac and pine, a few farms, a white Congregational church, and the Harpswell Historical Society, which used to be Bailey's country store, when the writer Elizabeth Strout worked there as a teen-ager. "I remember sitting on the front porch eating a lollipop," Strout, who is sixty-one, said one damp day in March, as she drove past. "And this woman came by, and she goes, 'Oh, you're so cute! Can I take a picture?' My mother was furious. I think

my mother felt like the person was . . . a summer person."

Strout longed to be one of them—these people who were free to experience the world beyond New England. "They'd come in with their tennis racquets, and I would want so much to be friends with them," she said. "I just don't think I existed for them on any level." In her mind, they came from places where a person wouldn't feel so stuck—as Strout did, in the house that her parents had built next to her grandmother's cottage, down a dirt road from her two great-aunts. "My parents came from many generations of New Englanders, and they

were skeptical of pleasure," Strout has written. They didn't drink or smoke or watch television; they didn't get the newspaper. "By the time I went to college, I had seen two movies: 'One Hundred and One Dalmatians' and 'The Miracle Worker.'" Strout's family still owns the house, and as she walked in the front yard—which isn't really a yard so much as a perch among the pine trees, on a rocky outcropping high above Casco Bay—she said, "It's a long way from nowhere."

And so she left. After college, at Bates, she went to England and worked in a pub. She went to law school, in Syracuse, because she was afraid that otherwise she'd end up a "fifty-eight-year-old cocktail waitress," instead of a fiction writer. She met her first husband, Martin Feinman, there, and moved with him to New York City, where she taught at a community college and he worked as a public defender. They had a daughter, Zarina. "I just was so happy that she had the *world* right around her," Strout said, looking out at the gray sea. "That she didn't have to live like this."

For Strout's most vivid characters, leaving their small towns seems either unthinkable or inevitable. The protagonist of "Olive Kitteridge," which won the 2009 Pulitzer Prize, is the embodiment of the deep-rooted world where Strout grew up: Olive could no more abandon Maine than she could her own husband. ("Oh God, yes, she was glad she'd never left Henry," Olive thinks, when she's older, and her husband has been incapacitated by a stroke. "She'd never had a friend as loyal, as kind.") But she also remembers "a loneliness so deep that once, not so many years ago, having a cavity filled, the dentist's gentle turning of her chin with his soft fingers had felt to her like a tender kindness of almost excruciating depth.") The narrator of "My Name Is Lucy Barton," a writer, cannot remain in the remote community where she was raised: there is an engine in her that propels her into the unknown.

Strout dislikes it when people refer to her as a "Maine writer." And yet, when asked, "What's your relationship with Maine?" she replies, "That's like asking me what's my relationship with my own body. It's just my DNA." It took her decades to understand this. After law school, Strout quickly decided that she didn't

*"I often felt that I had been born in the wrong place," Strout says.*

want to be a lawyer after all, and that she didn't care if she ended up an aging, unpublished cocktail waitress: at least she would have spent her time writing. ("I took myself—secretly, secretly—very seriously!" Lucy Barton says in Strout's novel. "I knew I *was* a writer.") Strout barely published before she turned forty, except for a few stories in "obscure literary journals" and in magazines like *Seventeen* and *Redbook*. "It was a long haul," she said. "I kept going, long past the point where it made sense." Zarina told me, "I remember being really small and registering that she was miserable about it, and I was, like, 'Why don't you just stop?' And, of course, she was, like, 'Because I can't.'"

Strout had an intuition that the problem was, as Lucy Barton says of another writer, that "she was not telling *exactly* the truth, she was always staying away from something." Strout remembers thinking, "I'm not being honest. But what am I not being honest about?" She had always been interested in standup comedy, and it occurred to her that what's funny is true. "That's why people respond, because the unspeakable is getting said," Strout told me. "So I thought to myself, What would happen if I put myself in that kind of pressure cooker where I was responsible immediately for having people laugh?" She enrolled in a standup class at the New School, which required students to perform at the Comic Strip. She was terrified before going onstage. "My whole routine, I made so much fun of myself for being an uptight white woman from New England," Strout said. "And the incredible part is it *worked*."

A few years later, Strout published her first novel, "Amy and Isabelle," about an uptight white woman who lives with her daughter in an old Maine mill town. It was a national best-seller. Maine—Strout's DNA, the isolation and emotional restraint she had abandoned for bustling, gregarious New York City—was the thing that she'd been staying away from.

Maine has served as the setting for four of Strout's books, and now she lives there part-time, with her second husband, in the middle of Brunswick. It's just twenty minutes away from the house where she grew up, at the other end of the Harpswell Road. As we drove back past what was once Bailey's store, Strout

noticed a lanky girl on the front steps. "Ooh! Ooh! Ooh!" she shrieked with delight. "Little skinny girl sitting there with her big feet!" It could have been Strout, half a century ago, except that the girl had a cell phone, and the store is now defunct. "All the sadder for her," Strout said, shaking her head. "Jesus. I want to say, 'Come on, kid—get in the car, and we'll give you a ride out.'"

"OLIVE KITTERIDGE" has sold more than a million copies, and to many readers, particularly in Maine, the woman at its center—who explodes with rage but is often unable to access her other emotions—feels like an intimate. "I can think of at least a half-dozen real-life Olives in Maine who helped raise me," one woman said when Strout gave a reading in Portland recently. Another said, "I just love Olive, and I'm always wondering about her backstory. What formed her? What made her Olive Kitteridge? Do you have any insight on that?"

"I do," Strout replied from the stage. She was wearing black, as she tends to, and her blond hair was up in a clip.

"Oh, good," the woman continued. "Will you tell us?"

Strout smiled and said, "No." The audience laughed, but she wasn't kidding. "She does have a backstory. We all do. And I would love to tell you." Strout sighed. "But I just don't think I will."

Withholding is important to Strout. She never speaks about books before they're finished, because, she said, "there's a pressure that has to build, and if I talk about it then I can't write it. It's like putting a pin in a balloon and just popping the air out." Her characters are no less circumspect: there are always things that they can't remember or can't discuss, periods of time that the reader can only guess at. Critics frequently note the starkness of Strout's writing—what Claire Messud, reviewing "Lucy Barton" in the *Times*, called her "vibrating silences." This encompassing quiet is always there, like the sea on the edge of the horizon.

Strout has an aesthetic as spare as the white Congregational church, where her father's funeral was held. The dramatic turns are understated—tone on tone—but the characters are nearly bursting with feeling. One of the central agonies of their lives tends to be an inability to communicate their internal state. It's as

if they needed Strout as an interlocutor.

On the day that Olive Kitteridge's son, Christopher, is getting married, to a doctor from California named Suzanne, Olive hides in the couple's bedroom, suffering:

Olive, on the edge of the bed, leans her face into her hands. She can almost not remember the first decade of Christopher's life, although some things she does remember and doesn't want to. She tried teaching him to play the piano and he wouldn't play the notes right. It was how scared he was of her that made her go all wacky. But she loved him! She would like to say this to Suzanne. She would like to say, Listen, Dr. Sue, deep down there is a thing inside me, and sometimes it swells up like the head of a squid and shoots blackness through me. I haven't wanted to be this way, but so help me, I have loved my son.

Growing up, Strout told me, she had a sense of "just swimming in all this ridiculous extra emotion." She was a "chatterbox," people said. "Liz has always been a talker," her brother, Jon, told me. "I'm much more reserved, much more of a Maine Yankee. My sister's not much of a Yankee."

Her passion and volubility were frowned upon in the taciturn world she inhabited. "I can remember my father saying to me at Thanksgiving, when my aunts would be around, 'When I put my hand on my tie, it means you're talking too much,'" Strout said. "I often felt that I had been born in the wrong place."

ELEVEN GENERATIONS AGO, a sixteen-year-old named John MacBean came from Scotland to New England. "He made leather shoes," Strout's mother, Beverly, said one morning. "And the funny thing is that L. L. Bean—who is also descended from that line—made leather shoes. He was cousin to my grandfather." We were sitting in a diner at the Topsham Fair Mall, not far from where Jon used to have a dental practice. (He had stopped by the diner earlier for a blueberry muffin. His mother ordered one, too, though she worried that it would be too large.) Mrs. Strout, who will turn ninety in July, was carrying a bag of cloth she'd bought next door, at Jo-Ann Fabrics, and was wearing a gray-blue wool cloak that she'd made: she still sews all her own clothes, and used to make clothes for Elizabeth, whom she called Wizzle. "Anyway," she said. "That's the Beans."

Her late husband, Dick—who was "kindness itself," she said—was from a

similarly old New England family; one of his forebears, a cousin of his great-great-grandfather's, was appointed the lighthouse keeper of the Portland Head Light during the Ulysses S. Grant Administration. (The job stayed in the family for six decades.) Dick was a professor of parasitology at the University of New Hampshire in Durham, and Beverly taught expository writing at the local high school, which her children attended; the family shuttled between Durham and Harpswell.

In an interview on NPR, Strout told the host, Terry Gross, "I understood that my father in many ways was the more decent person, but my mother was much more interesting." Her mother taught her to observe others, and to write what she saw in a notebook. "She kind of whetted my appetite for characters," Strout told me. "We would be sitting in a parking lot, waiting for my father to come out of a store, and she'd point to a woman and say, 'Well, *she's* not looking forward to getting home.' Or, 'Second wife.'" It was Strout's first experience of contemplating the interlocking lives that make up a small town, the way their disappointments and small joys—"little bursts," Olive calls them—can merge into a single story.

In the diner, a man wearing a maroon work shirt approached the table. "Well, hello, it's been a long time!" Mrs. Strout said to him.

He explained their history: "I did a lot of work for these people—septic system, road."

"I need some more septic system," she told him. "They broke through the pipe. Are you doing it still?"

"I might take a look at it, yah. Jon still gets me out of some jams with my teeth. He said you were going to be celebrating a big birthday this summer. Mine's this Saturday. I'm going to be seventy."

"Well," Mrs. Strout said. "I guess you're growing up."

The connections and constraints of small-town life—and the almost erotic ache for something more—remain Strout's primary subject. Her new collection, "Anything Is Possible," takes place mostly in Lucy Barton's childhood home, a depressed farming town in Illinois that is strikingly similar to the towns that Strout has written about in Maine. (Many Mainers who survived the Civil War moved to the Midwest, where there were

open spaces to farm and timber to log.) The inhabitants are white, reserved, generally decent, and suspicious of new arrivals. "It's a similar kind of person who has gone from the East to the Midwest," Strout said. "They're Congregationalists"—like her family—"and they're plain, plain, plain."

In the communities that Strout creates, the mores are set by tradition, and people aren't confused about their roles. But this continuity provides no protection. In "Olive Kitteridge," a young man, returning home to Maine to commit suicide in the same place that his mother did, worries about who will find his corpse: "Kevin could not abide the thought of any child discovering what he had discovered; that his mother's need to devour her life had been so huge and urgent as to spray remnants of corporeality across the kitchen cupboards." (As he contemplates this, Olive barges in and interrogates him. "Jesus,' Kevin said quietly. 'Does everybody know everything?' 'Oh, sure,' she said comfortably. 'What else is there to do?") Lucy Barton's parents hit her "impulsively and vigorously" throughout her childhood, and lock her in the cold cab of a truck as a punishment. Her father is tormented by his experiences in the Second World War, and, in an indelible embarrassment, is caught by a farmer "pulling on himself, behind the barns." In "Anything Is Possible," the barns have burned down, and the farmer has become a janitor, haunted by the "terrible screaming sounds of the cows as they died." The tone of Strout's fiction is both cozy and eerie, as comforting and unsettling as a fairy tale.

Strout feels misunderstood when people ask her if characters are based on her mother, her father, herself. "It's not even remotely how it is," she said. "Because these are all different people that have visited me. I use myself—I'm the only thing I *can* use—but I'm not an autobiographical writer." (When her first book came out, Strout asked her editor if she could do without an author photograph on the jacket. He said no.) "Some people have an idea," she continued. "I just see a person, and I start describing who this person is."

Strout recalls having almost mystical experiences of temporarily inhabiting other people. The first time it happened, she was twelve years old, working at

Bailey's. "This woman came in—she seemed old to me, but she was probably like fifty-five—and she started to talk to me about how her husband had had a stroke, and it had left him depressed," she recalled. "And I remember so clearly almost feeling her *molecules* move into me—or my molecules move into her. I understood there was some sort of merging." This is also how Strout feels when characters "show up, just like that." They seem like real visitors, bringing dispatches from their lives. "I have a very specific memory. I was loading the dishwasher, and Olive just arrived," Strout told me. "She was standing by the picnic table at her son's wedding, and I could peer into her head." She heard Olive thinking, "It's high time everyone went home." So I wrote that down immediately. And that was it—there was Olive."

ONCE, WHEN STROUT was young, she asked her father, "Are we poor?" because they lived so austere. "He said, 'Yes!'" Strout told me. "And he said it with great pride." In her telling, this was a Yankee fiction, an attempt to embody the understated flintiness that they valued. (Jon remembers it differently. "We were poor," he told me. When I asked in what sense, he said, "Financially.") It was almost incomprehensible to her family when Strout married into a wealthy, demonstrative Jewish family and moved to New York. "My former husband and his father would *kiss* when they met," Strout told me. "I just thought that was so lovely." Her mother-in-law liked to hear her pronounce Yiddish words in her clipped New England accent. "I could never say anything right except *oy vey*," Strout said. "I was made for *oy vey*."

Strout and her family lived in a brownstone in Park Slope, which, she said, "felt almost like a village," except that it was full of people she didn't know. She joined a writing group, and took classes from the editor Gordon Lish. "She really found what she was looking for in New York," Zarina said. "I remember clearly stacks of manuscripts throughout my childhood on the dining-room table. They weren't sacred—we'd kind of eat on them and live around them."

Strout's parents didn't often visit. "They were well educated, but in some ways very provincial," Feinman said. "New York was alien—it was like Sodom and

Gomorrah to them.” (Olive Kitteridge laments having “a little relative” living in the “foreign land of New York City.” She tells a friend, “I guess it’s the way of the world. Hurts, though. Have that DNA flung all over like so much dandelion fuzz.”) Strout feels that her parents disapproved of the way she raised her daughter. “My generation was the one that turned around and became friends with our kids,” she said. “I think they thought that I paid her far too much attention. I mean, I don’t *know* that, but I *think* that.”

After Zarina left for college, Strout, who was then working on her second novel, “Abide with Me,” moved out of the brownstone. Feinman told me, “I know that one piece was a desire to really just focus on her writing. A desire to not have to be responsible for anybody else.” It was almost a decade, though, before she and Feinman got divorced. “They like each other so much—that made it confusing,” Zarina, who is thirty-four, said. “My takeaway is that love itself is not enough.”

Unlike Strout’s other books, “My Name Is Lucy Barton” is in the first person. It is about a writer who flees a place where she feels stifled and ends up in New York, delighted by the buzzing humanity around her. She dearly loves her mother, a tough woman who sews and who calls her Wizzle. She is a passionate mother herself, who leaves her first husband.

Barton is told by a friend that to be a writer she would have to be ruthless. Decades later, when she is successful enough to sit with wealthy people “in the waiting room for the doctor who will make them look not old or worried or like their mother,” she reflects on her friend’s advice. “The ruthlessness, I think, comes in grabbing onto myself, in saying: This is me, and I will not go where I can’t bear to go—to Amgash, Illinois—and I will not stay in a marriage when I don’t want to, and I will grab myself and hurl onward through life, blind as a bat, but on I go! This is the ruthlessness, I think.”

**E**IGHT YEARS AGO, Strout was onstage at Symphony Space, in New York City, when a man in the audience stood to ask a question. “I’m from Maine, too,” he said. She was skeptical: she had become accustomed to people in Manhattan telling her they were from Maine,



flossnet

## Open Mike for Spotlight Operators

when in fact they’d gone to camp there one summer. She asked where he was from. “He said, ‘Lisbon Falls,’” Strout recalled. “I thought, Oh, my God, he really *is* from Maine. I mean, everything’s shut down, the paper factories are gone.” Lisbon Falls is not a place where people go on family vacations.

When Strout signed books afterward, the man was first in line, and he introduced himself as Jim Tierney. “We chatted for a while, and then, when he left, I remember turning and looking at him and thinking, That should have been my life,” Strout said. “I had no idea that I would ever see him again.” But she realized later that he had slipped her his e-mail address. “We wrote back and forth a few times,” she said. “And then we met twice. And then he moved in.” On their second date, Strout told him that she had been rejected from his alma mater. “He thought about it for a second, and then he said, I’ve never had dinner with someone so stupid they couldn’t get into the University of Maine law school before.’ And I thought, Oh, my God—I love this man.”

Tierney, who became Strout’s second husband, was Maine’s attorney general for ten years, and, before that, a member of the legislature. “My mom married Maine incarnate,” Zarina said, “except that he talks even more than she does.” Once, when they were visiting her in Brooklyn, Tierney noticed a car parked

in front of her apartment with Maine plates; he left his business card on the windshield. “They share an intense relationship with Maine,” Zarina added. “It’s a need and an adoration and a loathing.”

Since 2010, Strout and Tierney have split their time between Manhattan and Brunswick, where they live in an old brick house that has been converted into apartments. Down the block, she rents a modest office, decorated with a vomit-colored carpet and a floral thrift-store couch. “It’s just my weird little place!” she said. On the wall is an old photograph of the Libbey Mill, in Lewiston, where her grandfather worked, and a framed copy of the *Times* best-seller list with “Olive Kitteridge” at the top.

In “Anything Is Possible,” Lucy Barton returns home after seventeen years; she tells her sister, Vicky, that she’s been busy. “‘Busy? Who isn’t busy?’ Vicky pushed her glasses up her nose. In a moment she added, ‘Hey, Lucy, is that what’s called a truthful sentence? Didn’t I just see you on the computer giving a talk about truthful sentences?’ ‘A writer should write only what is true.’ . . . Well. I don’t believe you. You didn’t come here because you didn’t want to.”

It’s a recurring theme in Strout’s novels, the angry, aching sense of abandonment small-town dwellers feel when their loved ones depart. Olive Kitteridge never quite recovers from the “ghastly blow” of having her son “uprooted by his pushy

new wife, after they had planned on him living nearby and raising a family.” When I asked Strout if people she grew up with resented her for leaving, she said, “I don’t know. I haven’t stayed in touch.”

Tierney, however, seems to know one out of every ten people in Maine, and he frequently stops to chat with them for as long as they’ll listen. One afternoon, the couple walked into Gulf of Maine, a bookstore down the block from their house in Brunswick, to say hello to the proprietor Gary Lawless, a poet with a long white beard and hair, whose father was once the police chief in a town up the coast. “I never get tongue-tied except when you’re here,” Lawless told Strout. “When Jim’s here, I get *ear*-tied.”

Tierney, who was wearing corduroys, a navy sweater with holes in it, and his grandson’s red Spider-Man cap, teaches at Harvard Law School and has been working with progressive groups mounting legal challenges to the Trump Administration, but he spends as much time as possible with Strout, accompanying her to readings and events; they cling to each other with the urgency of mates who’ve found each other late in life. “When I read Liz’s work, I forget she wrote it,” Tierney declared. “The strength of the voice takes me away—I go right down the tube with everybody else.” He continued, “She’s the hardest-working person I know. I work hard, she works harder.”

“Whatever,” Strout said.

Looking at a stack of copies of “Olive Kitteridge,” adorned with Pulitzer insignia, Strout recalled once visiting the shop and seeing a woman—“short, blond, bustling, chubby”—inspect the display. “She goes, ‘Olive Kitteridge’—well, I guess *that* wasn’t the best book I’ve ever read!” Strout said. “That really blew a few hours for me.”

“Olive Kitteridge” is dedicated to Strout’s mother—“the best storyteller I know.” When I met Beverly Strout, I asked what she thought when the book was awarded a Pulitzer. “I thought that was fine,” she replied. “At the university, there was a professor who won a prize—it wasn’t a Pulitzer—and the truth was he won the prize because he had friends on the committee. And I don’t think *that* was fair. I knew it wasn’t true of Elizabeth, so I was very proud of her not cheating.”

Though Strout has always been am-

bitious, when she accomplishes something she “can’t take it in fully,” she said. It upsets her when friends call her modest, because it means that they don’t really know her. The truth, she insists, is that her successes are “inaccessible” to her, which she attributes to her upbringing in the Congregational Church, where her father was a deacon. “We were not supposed to think about who we were in the world,” she said. In a draft of “Abide with Me,” Strout wrote of what it felt like for the protagonist—a Congregational minister in Maine—when parishioners praised his sermons: “Compliments would come to him like a shaft of light and then bounce off his shoulder.” It is, Strout suggests, literally against her religion to feel pride.

When Strout told me about meeting Tierney, I asked her why her immediate reaction was regret rather than excitement—why she thought, That should have been my life, instead of, It’s about to be. “I’m a Strout,” she said. “We never think we’re going to . . . whatever.”

THE DAY AFTER the Trump Administration made its second attempt to ban travel from a half-dozen Muslim-majority countries, Strout went to visit the Telling Room, a youth writing organization in Portland, Maine, where she met refugee and immigrant high-school students, mostly from Africa and the Middle East. The students stood in a circle and told Strout what they were working on. “My name is Abass, and I’m trying to define what home is,” a teen-ager from Ethiopia said. Steff, from Burundi, told her, “I’m writing about how I find my voice in America.” Another boy said, “I’m writing about second chances.”

Strout’s fourth novel, “The Burgess Boys,” which Robert Redford is adapting for HBO, was based on an incident she read about in the newspaper after her mother alerted her to the story: in Lewiston, which has a large Somali community, a young white man threw a frozen pig’s head through the door of a mosque during prayers. Strout spent months lingering in Somali neighborhoods before she started writing: “I would drive by the school to watch—I wanted to see, with the little kids, if they were playing with white kids, and so I would just watch and watch and watch. I was

afraid I was going to get arrested,” she said. “Then, eventually, I went into their store—at that point they only had one, now they have like a million—and they had different things: sheets next to rice next to nutmeg next to a broom.”

Eventually, Somalis began inviting Strout into their homes. “It took a long time, but it was so *interesting*,” she whispered. “The men all hang out on the sidewalk because they like to see the sky, they miss the way the sky is in Somalia. And these beautiful teen-age girls would flutter downstairs—these young, butterfly-type girls. And I really saw the difference between the young ones, who had come out of the camps early, and these women who had obviously spent years there, and had such difficult lives, and their faces were just ravaged.”

Strout told me she thinks of herself as “somebody who perches—I don’t sink in. So I feel like New York has been this marvellous telephone wire for me to perch on, and I can come back here and perch. But Maine people sink in. This is their home.” One of the costs of living in a place where everyone seems interconnected is that outsiders stand out. These days, Maine isn’t a place that many people move to, as Strout’s ancestors did. It is the whitest and among the oldest states in America, and is increasingly far from political power. Maine, which once had eight congressmen, now has two, and may lose another one as its population stagnates.

Before Strout left the Telling Room, her hosts introduced her to Amran, a seventeen-year-old, wearing jeans and a yellow head scarf, whose family emigrated to Maine from Kenya four years ago. She had just won a competition for poetry recitation, and, in the hallway, she gave an impromptu performance of W. E. B. Du Bois’s “The Song of the Smoke.” “I am swinging in the sky, / I am wringing worlds awry,” she said, with vibrant feeling, nearly singing the words. “I am the thought of the throbbing mills, / I am the soul of the soul-toil kills.” Strout listened, so rapt she could have been exchanging molecules.

In the parking lot, Strout looked back in through the windows. “The people I write about are almost disappearing,” she said. “And that’s fine. It’s time. It’s like, Please, hello—let’s have others in here now.” ♦

## THE IRISH CONSTELLATION

BY CALVIN TRILLIN



NOW THAT EVERYBODY'S confessing everything, I'm ready to confess that, until about five years ago, I was under the impression that the constellation Orion was the constellation O'Ryan. I thought of it as the Irish constellation, sort of the way that actors refer to "Macbeth" as "the Scottish play." Had I never seen "Orion" in print? I had, in fact, but I suppose I thought it was pronounced "oar-e-un." I thought it was some other constellation that had nothing to do with the constellation people were referring to when they pointed to the sky and said what I heard as "Do you see O'Ryan's Belt?" This is not so crazy. I know somebody who, not having been read to much when he was a child, grew up thinking that "Pat the Bunny" was a book about a bunny named Pat. These things happen.

My customary answer to the question about whether I could see the belt, by the way, was "No." I have been called a constellation denier. I don't accept the term. Like many people who are called climate-change deniers—say, the people in our government who are now in charge of doing something about climate change—I prefer to say that the jury is still out. There may be definable clusters of stars up there which can be seen from Earth as constellations, or there may not be. If there are, I can't make them out. When somebody asks me if I can see Orion's Belt, I sometimes vary a simple "No" with something like "No, but if you look a

bit to the left I think you can see Penelope's Pants Suit."

It was during one of those Penelope's Pants Suit occasions that the misapprehension I'd been under was revealed to me. When asked if I could see the belt, I said, after shaking my head, "I always pictured an Irish guy wearing suspenders instead of a belt, anyway."

"What Irish guy are you talking about?" my companion said.

I'd rather not relate the rest of the conversation. It still stings.

Before that revelation, how did I imagine a constellation had come to be named O'Ryan? I hadn't given it much thought, but when I discovered a list of the eighty-eight recognized constellations that was compiled, in 1922, by the International Astronomical Union, I came up with a couple of ways it might have happened. It's certainly within the realm of possibility that the people in charge of the meeting at which that list was adopted operated the way they would have operated as commissioners in New York's City Hall. According to the New York way of keeping the peace, if you cancel alternate-side-of-the-street parking regulations on Yom Kippur, because Orthodox Jews are prohibited from driving on that day, then, fair being fair, you also cancel the regulations on the Feast of the Assumption, and on Greek Orthodox Holy Thursday, and, eventually, on Eid al-Adha. So someone could have stood up in the meeting of

astronomers and said, "How come the Italians are the only ones with a constellation? Canes Venatici sounds like the newly elected mayor of Salerno." At which point, the chairman starts handing out constellations to the Greeks (Camelopardalis) and the Spaniards (Dorado) and, eventually, the Irish.

But it's difficult to picture astronomers as New York pols. And I don't think an astronomer would quietly slip his girlfriend's name onto a constellation—although I must say that the presence on the list of a constellation named Norma gives me pause.

It also may have been that constellations are sometimes named for the astronomers who discovered them, the way a medical researcher's name is sometimes attached to the disease he managed to isolate. There's one name on the list that supports this supposition. As I imagine it, the most distinguished astronomer at the meeting is Professor Szczepański, of the University of Lodz. It's agreed to name a constellation he discovered for him—although, since there is some concern that his surname is too difficult to spell, they use his first name. Thus, the constellation Leo.

After Professor Szczepański's graceful acceptance speech, a vote is about to be taken on a list of eighty-seven constellations. But a voice is heard from the back of the room: "Sure, and there's one more." The speaker is a small man with a striking resemblance to the Irish character actor Barry Fitzgerald. (As it happens, Fitzgerald was only half Irish and was born William Shields. But if you need to imagine a stage Irishman who starts sentences with "Sure, and" or "Begorra," he's your guy.) The comment is met with skepticism, but then the astronomers look up to where the Barry Fitzgerald character is pointing. (The meetings, for obvious reasons, are always held outdoors, at night.) For a while, nobody can make it out.

Then Leo Szczepański says, "I think I can see someone pointing."

"Begorra," the Fitzgerald look-alike says. "It's me uncle telling that gobshte Callahan to keep his sheep on his side of the feckin' fence."

"And what is your uncle's name?" Professor Szczepański asks.

"Sure and begorra, it's O'Ryan." ♦

LETTER FROM COLOMBIA

# OUT OF THE JUNGLE

*After half a century of civil war, former guerrillas seek a return to society.*

BY JON LEE ANDERSON



**L**AST SEPTEMBER, Carlos Antonio Lozada, a commander of Colombia's FARC guerrillas, returned home to a jungle encampment in the vast wetland region called Yari. He had spent the past two years in Havana, staying in a villa near Fidel Castro's home, while working with other guerrilla leaders and Colombian diplomats on a peace agreement to end the FARC's fifty-two-year insurgency—the longest in the Western Hemisphere. His time there had been gruelling: an endless succession of arguments, proposals, and counterproposals, with painful testimony from vic-

tims of both sides. "It was non-stop," Lozada told me. At last, though, on August 24th, the two sides reached an agreement. When Lozada's plane touched down, *los camaradas*—his fifty-odd personal bodyguards, young men and women who had been with him since they were little more than children—greeted him on the airstrip with a song that they had composed. "They made me cry," he told me. "Toward the end of my time in Havana, all I could think about was being back here. The FARC is my family."

As Lozada told me this, he was sit-

ting in a thatched hut in Yari, which has long been dominated by the FARC, sipping Old Parr Scotch. Communist guerrillas are not known for their fashion sense, but Lozada, a limber man with a shaved head and a small paunch, has a dandyish streak. In Havana, he wore loud tropical shirts and suede loafers. In Yari, he favored T-shirts in hot pink, canary yellow, sky blue. With such bourgeois tastes, Lozada is an unlikely seeming Marxist revolutionary. But, at fifty-six, he is the youngest member of the seven-man secretariat that governs the FARC.

By the terms of the peace treaty, which he had helped negotiate, some seven thousand FARC fighters will submit to a process of transitional justice. In exchange for full confessions and reparations to victims, those who committed war crimes will receive "restorative sanctions," which offer the possibility of community work rather than prison. The FARC will become a political party, and, before long, former guerrillas will be able to run for public office.

Lozada, who has spent decades shuttling between jungle outposts and Colombia's urban power centers, is a crucial leader for the FARC as it tries to reengage with the world. But his history also creates complications. The Colombian government has tried several times to assassinate him, most recently in 2014, when an air strike on his camp killed three of his comrades. The U.S. State Department has a \$2.5-million price on his head, accusing him of trafficking hundreds of tons of cocaine to raise funds for the FARC, and of murdering hundreds of people in the process. When pressed for details of his guerrilla activities, Lozada, obeying a long-established instinct for self-preservation, likes to reply with a revolutionary maxim: "You own your secrets, but your words enslave you."

When I visited, Lozada had spent the previous two weeks helicoptering around the country with a Colombian Army general and a group of U.N. officials, inspecting spots where guerrillas can meet and surrender their weapons. Earlier that day, he had spoken to a group of young fighters, and told them to prepare for peace. Sounding delighted, and a bit incredulous, he kept repeating, "The war is over." Most of the combatants had been living as fugitives in their own country, and were now contemplating a return to

*Carlos Antonio Lozada's young fighters now search for their families on Facebook.*

towns and families they had not seen in years. At a nearby farm, Lozada had set up a satellite Internet connection, and he marvelled at its effect on his young fighters. “That’s all they talk about: getting on Facebook to find their parents, and making WhatsApp calls,” he said. That afternoon, the mother of one girl who had run away to join the FARC ten years earlier arrived at Yarí unannounced. When she found her daughter, she broke down. “For ten minutes, no words came,” Lozada said. “She just sobbed.”

But, after half a century of vicious conflict, family reunions do not necessarily portend an easy political reconciliation. Lozada looked out from the hut where we were sitting. Past a detachment of bodyguards, in the open kitchen of an adjacent farmhouse, guerrilla cooks stoked a fire to prepare the evening meal. A dark-green expanse of jungle stretched to the horizon. The scene was deceptively peaceful. Concealed behind the tree line, the guerrillas had war-ready camps, with trenches to foil a ground invasion and bunkers to protect against air raids. *Los camaradas* were readying themselves for peace, but they could also return to war if they had to, for it was war, after all, that they knew best.

**B**EFORE LOZADA WAS born, his parents lived as farmers in an area of central Colombia called Marquetalia—a mountainous, inhospitable frontier that for the Lozada family was a haven. Like other settlers, they had come in search of land and a respite from the country’s conflicts. For more than a decade, Colombia’s two major political parties, the Liberals and the Conservatives, had fought a brutal civil war, which killed at least two hundred thousand people and became known simply as La Violencia. In the late fifties, the two parties put an end to the conflict by agreeing to alternate terms in power, in a coalition called the National Front. All those outside the Front—especially those on the left—were effectively shut out.

In Marquetalia, a charismatic peasant named Manuel Marulanda organized a group of Marxist-Leninist partisans, dedicated to fighting the Front. As fears of a Cuban-style revolution grew in the capital, the government struck back, shooting and bombing. Marulanda recalled, “The state expropriated farms,

cattle, pigs, and chickens from us, as they did with thousands of other compatriots.” In the early sixties, the government, backed by the U.S., sent in thousands of troops to attack the area, where the residents were guarded by some forty armed men. Marulanda and his followers fled, and, in hiding, they founded the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia—the FARC—to carry out a war against the state.

By then, Lozada’s parents had escaped to Bogotá, where his father worked as a pushcart peddler and his mother sold arepas. Lozada was born there in 1961, one of six children; his given name was Julián Gallo. His father was a member of the Communist Party, and family conversations revolved around Marxist theory, Cuba, and the Soviet Union. He joined the Party’s youth wing when he was fifteen. Soon afterward, he attended an antigovernment demonstration, and was beaten by the police and jailed for a month. Like many of his peers, he became radicalized. “Armed struggle was the order of the day,” he said. His parents warned him against joining the FARC: his mother objected on religious grounds, and his father told him that a city boy wasn’t suited to guerrilla life. Against their wishes, Lozada dropped out of school and headed for the countryside to join the guerrillas. He can still remember the date: October 20, 1978.

Lozada went for training to a FARC stronghold in a mountainous area of the Valle del Cauca, and was quickly sent into combat. The first seven or eight months—hiking through the mountains, sleeping on the ground, and eating whatever could be scrounged—were excruciating. He suffered bouts of malaria and considered quitting, but he eventually acclimatized. After three years, the FARC sent him back to Bogotá and put him in charge of the organization’s urban networks, which infiltrated universities and unions to recruit new members, gathered intelligence, raised funds, and, occasionally, launched attacks. Lozada remained in the urban underground for nineteen years, calling himself Arnulfo, or Omar, or Alberto, and telling people he met that he was a taxi-driver, a shopkeeper, or a peddler. To avoid scrutiny, he found, it was best to live in apartment buildings, where neighbors ignored one another. Even so, he changed apartments fre-

quently. When I asked if it was awkward bumping into friends from old neighborhoods, Lozada said that no one ever seemed surprised. “It’s what people do in cities,” he said. “They move all the time.”

The life he described sounded claustrophobically circumscribed, but Lozada told me that his main regret was not finishing school. At one point, he took exams and obtained a high-school diploma, but because of what he called the “dynamic” of his guerrilla duties he was never able to attend university. In his free time, he listened to boleros and salsa and read, returning often to Mario Vargas Llosa’s “The War of the End of the World,” a fictionalized account of a rural revolt in Brazil, led by a charismatic figure called the Counsellor. On days when he wasn’t working, he liked to cook for a small circle of friends. He brags about his asado, Argentine-style barbecue, which he learned from a “*ladrón internacional*”—an international thief—who helped his cell run a check-kiting scheme that secured them millions of pesos.

Lozada is vague about the specifics of his work for the FARC, but he said that his primary responsibilities were “financial and military.” Guerrilla armies have few viable sources of funding, unless they are supported by foreign governments, and, he said, “We were always looking for ways to make money.” The FARC sustained itself by taxing merchants and ranchers in areas of the countryside that it controlled. More controversially, it took hostages and kidnapped people for ransom.

In the late eighties, Lozada went to Ecuador with a group of guerrillas to kidnap a wealthy narco-trafficker linked to the Cali cocaine cartel. At the narco’s mansion, Lozada stood guard while the others broke in, grabbed the man, and dragged him into a waiting car. As they sped away, the narco’s bodyguards began shooting; Lozada shot back, and then followed his comrades on a motorbike. The getaway car didn’t get far down the road before the driver lost control and crashed into a passenger bus. As Lozada raced toward the crash, he saw the narco emerge from the car and disappear into the forest. Inside the car, he found the driver dying of his injuries, and two comrades in the back seat bloodied and in shock. Lozada tried to help them escape on foot, but they were surrounded by uniformed men; behind the bus they had

crashed into was another bus, full of Ecuadoran soldiers.

In custody, Lozada protested that he had simply been a bystander. But when the police found his Colombian identity card, they grew suspicious. He found himself seated in an interrogation room, hands cuffed behind his back, facing two men wearing black hoods over their faces. One of them produced two wooden bats. "There was a big one and a small one," Lozada recalled. "The guy with the bats said, 'O.K., so which one do you want me to use to get the truth out of you?' I said, 'Neither?' The man said, 'O.K.,' and left the room. He returned with a really huge bat, and showed it to me. It had 'Neither' written on it."

I asked Lozada what happened next. "He started to beat me," he said bluntly. Finally, Lozada acknowledged that he was a guerrilla but claimed that he was from a different Colombian rebel group—one that had already entered into peace negotiations with the government. With the help of a canny lawyer, he served just two years in an Ecuadoran prison, and then returned to work in Bogotá, though with a major difference: his first child, a son, had been born while he was in prison.

THE COLOMBIAN attorney general has accused Lozada of terrorism. The military claims that he is responsible for a bike bomb in a police station; a car bomb in a military school; an explosion in the Hotel Tequendama, in Bogotá; and attacks against politicians. The Colombian media have linked him to an attack on the Presidential palace of Nariño, in which a rocket went astray and killed at least ten homeless people. (Lozada denies all the charges.) The FARC, justifying its past use of violence, has sometimes referred to a Communist principle that calls for "a combination of all forms of struggle." In Colombia, the rhetoric on both sides has often served as cover for unrestrained brutality.

In the mid-eighties, a FARC commander named Javier Delgado and another officer formed a splinter faction and began accusing their fellow-guerrillas of being spies. In one horrific episode, they chained a hundred and sixty-four fighters—including close friends of Lozada's—and methodically beat them to death. "They even filmed some of it," Lozada said with disgust. Eventually, FARC commanders

came to believe that Delgado had been co-opted by Colombian military intelligence, as part of a larger operation to cause internal strife. When I asked Lozada what had happened to Delgado, he said, "He died in jail," adding, "He was strangled with a guitar string."

As the conflict dragged on, successive Colombian governments held peace talks, but the state did not always operate in good faith. In the mid-eighties, the FARC agreed to call a truce and to recast itself as a political party—only to see thousands of its loyalists murdered by government death squads and paramilitary vigilantes. But the FARC did little to maintain moral superiority; at one point, it was kidnapping as many as three people a day, including landowners, military officers, tourists, congressmen, even a Presidential candidate. Some were held for years, in appalling conditions. Eventually, the FARC moved into Colombia's booming drug business, levying taxes on coca growers and cocaine traffickers. After a new round of peace negotiations failed in 2002, the fighting became more vicious; Lozada moved from Bogotá to the jungle, and began leading combat operations.

That year, a new President was elected, on a promise to crush the FARC: Álvaro Uribe, the scion of a wealthy ranching family in Medellín. Uribe's father had died in a botched kidnapping attempt, which he attributed to the FARC; in response, after he entered politics, he helped organize a series of armed self-defense groups. Many grew into right-wing paramilitaries, allied with drug cartels and landowners. The *paracos*, as they were called, operated across the country, massacring civilians suspected of guerrilla ties, sometimes in close coordination with the Army: one favored method of instilling terror was to chainsaw people to death in public.

As President, Uribe negotiated with the *paracos*, even as he escalated the war against the FARC. One of his schemes, which offered rewards to soldiers who killed guerrillas, led to the murder of more than two thousand civilians—a campaign that became notorious as False Positives. With the aid of a multi-billion-dollar U.S. program called Plan Colombia—which included financial and intelligence assistance, a fleet of Blackhawk helicopters, and a contingent of American advisers—Uribe

began landing decisive blows. During an Army attack in 2007, Lozada was shot in the back. Unable to walk, he crawled through the jungle as soldiers combed the area for survivors. In agony, he contemplated ending his life, until he was rescued by a guerrilla named Isabela. In Yari, he lifted his T-shirt to show me the ugly scar on his back.

In 2010, Juan Manuel Santos, Uribe's defense minister, became President and continued the crackdown. But Santos, unlike Uribe, hoped to be seen as a peacemaker. The following year, he sent officials to meet with the FARC and offer to negotiate. The guerrillas, losing influence and membership, agreed. Around the same time, the Army located the FARC's new leader, Alfonso Cano, a former anthropology student who had taken charge after the elderly Marulanda died. As Santos told me in an interview, one of his generals called and said, "Mr. President, we have Alfonso Cano surrounded. Should we proceed?" Santos, who is said to be an astute and ruthless poker player, said that he had to make a quick decision: "We had begun our talks with the FARC, and I didn't want to ruin them." But, he reasoned, if the FARC commanders were talking it must be because they were weakened by the strikes. Cano's death wouldn't change that; it could even help. "I thought about it for a minute and then told the general to proceed," he said with a jaunty smile. "And it worked out."

A WIND WHIPPED ACROSS the Yari plains, and the sky darkened. In the distance, lightning flashed. Lozada told me that the weather reminded him of the *borrascas*, tropical storms that terrorized guerrillas in the forest. "You look up and watch the trees swaying, falling, and wonder which way you're going to run," he said. "You look for the biggest trees to get behind. Comrades have died in some storms, and also from lightning strikes."

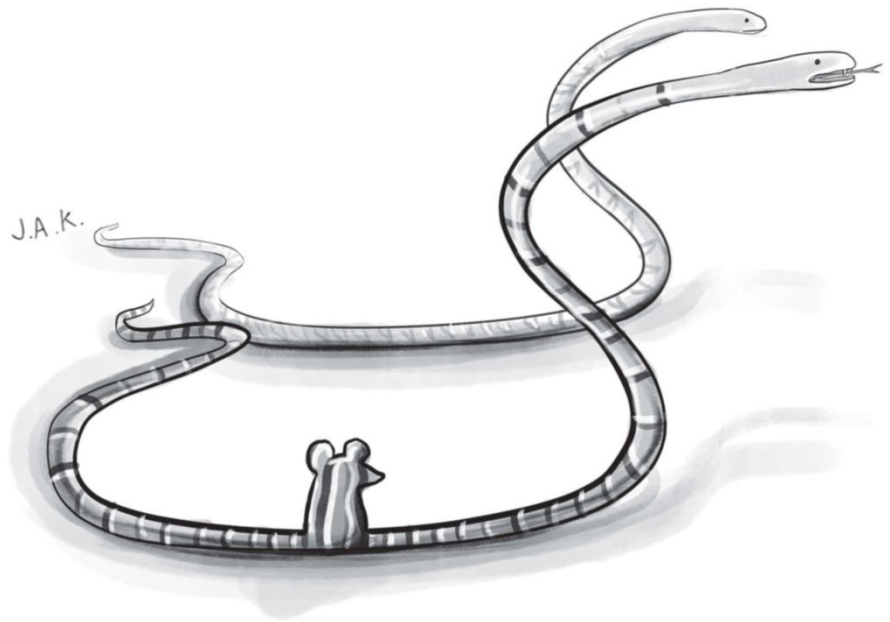
The guerrillas I spoke to didn't seem to question their way of life. Many were the children of peasants and had never been to a town; all they knew was the jungle, the Yari plains, and the occasional farm hamlet. Lozada, gesturing toward his security detail, said, "Many of these young fighters joined the FARC because the *paracos* killed their parents."

During my visit, Lozada was often accompanied by a friend named Chepe,

a husky man in his early thirties, who mirrored Lozada's style choices: shaved head, T-shirt, fatigue trousers, rubber boots. Chepe explained that he was the son of the FARC's former military commander Jorge Briceño, a swashbuckling character known as Mono Jojoy. After Chepe was born, in a guerrilla camp, Jojoy sent him away for his safety, and he had been raised by surrogate parents in Bogotá. When he was ten, they swore him to secrecy and revealed his true parentage, then took him to briefly meet Jojoy. Later, during one of the intermittent periods of peace talks, they took him again, and this time Chepe, who was then sixteen, wanted to join Jojoy in the forest. His surrogate parents, weeping, begged him to return with them, but Chepe insisted. Adapting to guerrilla life wasn't easy; he was a city kid, educated at an elite Catholic school. But, like Lozada, Chepe eventually settled in. He and his father acquired the habit of going to sleep very early and getting up at 2 A.M. to read the news and study together.

When Santos became President, he designated Jojoy as a primary target of his campaign against the FARC. He knew that Jojoy, a diabetic, suffered from swollen feet, and when intelligence services learned that a pair of custom boots was being made for him they arranged through a double agent to have a U.S.-supplied microchip inserted into the sole. The boots were delivered to Jojoy, who began wearing them with evident relief. Soon afterward, at two o'clock in the morning, a military plane bombed Jojoy's compound, obliterating him instantly but sparing Chepe, who had slept through their customary meeting. Lozada, who was a few hundred yards away during the bombing, became a kind of father figure to him.

Lozada had a second child, a daughter, in Bogotá, but neither child showed any interest in following him into the FARC. He couldn't fault them—they were urban kids, raised by their mothers. Still, their lives hadn't been free of risk. Both had, at one time, been evacuated from Colombia for their safety, after the intelligence services began trailing them. In Havana, Lozada saw his children for the first time in twelve years. He told me proudly that his daughter would soon graduate from high school, and that his son had attended medical school in Cuba.



*"It's mostly mouse weight."*

In a camp near Yari, young guerrillas, waiting to be reintegrated into Colombian society, lived in a way that their peers in Bogotá would have found unimaginable. They woke up at four-thirty every morning to muster and perform calisthenics, chanting FARC slogans, and finishing with the Colombian national anthem. Then they did chores: cooking, bringing in supplies, chopping kindling for the cook fire, or lugging sacks of sand to spread on pathways to dry out the jungle mud. Every morning, a married couple from Bogotá delivered political lessons: Lenin and Che and highly ideological explanations of the World Trade Organization. In the afternoon, the fighters played volleyball, and in the evening they watched movies in an underground earthen bunker. When I asked what they wanted to do with their lives when peace came, the answer was, invariably, "Whatever the Party asks of me."

ON SEPTEMBER 26TH, President Santos and the FARC's leader, who goes by Timochenko, signed the peace treaty in a ceremony in Cartagena, as thousands of Colombians looked on and cheered. In Yari, Lozada had organized a conference for guerrillas to vet the treaty—the FARC's final summit as an armed organization. For a week, hundreds of delegates discussed the terms,

and in the evening danced to cumbia bands. In a culminating moment of "FARCstock," as reporters dubbed the conference, a chorus of white-clad guerrillas gathered onstage to sing the "Ode to Joy" before a jubilant crowd. At the end of the week, the guerrillas voted to ratify the accord.

The deal, though, had to be approved by national vote—effectively, a referendum on whether the FARC fighters should be readmitted to Colombian society. Álvaro Uribe, the former President, who is now a congressman, led a campaign against the deal, describing it as a "surrender" that would reward the guerrillas for their violence. In an op-ed, he warned that if they were allowed to participate in politics "FARC kingpins who ordered massacres, kidnappings, child-soldier recruitment and extortions will now run for mayors and governors of the regions they victimized." Although the FARC and the government agreed that both sides had committed war crimes, Uribe demanded that former guerrillas be tried under different conditions from government soldiers. (Uribe might also have feared being brought to justice himself, because of his long-standing association with paramilitary groups.)

The country was tired of war, and polling suggested that the proposition

would pass easily. Instead, on October 2nd, the Colombian public rejected it, by a sliver-thin margin—fifty-three thousand votes, out of thirteen million—in what became known as *el Brexit colombiano*. But Santos was encouraged by the approval of the international community. On October 7th, the Nobel committee announced that it would award him the Peace Prize for his “resolute efforts” to end the civil war. A couple of weeks later, Queen Elizabeth held a reception in his honor at Buckingham Palace. At a subsequent gathering, attended by Beefeaters and liveried trumpeters, I asked Santos if he would be able to negotiate a new deal before the Nobel ceremony, the following month. “It’s going to happen,” he said, and winked.

On November 12th, Santos and the FARC announced a “new final deal”—which Santos, who controlled a majority in Parliament, was able to push through without a referendum. They offered a few concessions, including tightened language for the sentencing of guerrilla leaders, but ignored demands that the FARC be banned from political participation. As Timochenko said, “The reason we agreed to lay down our arms was on the basis that we could enter politics.” For its part, the FARC acknowledged, after years of denials, that it possessed a deep reservoir of funds—presumably acquired through kidnapping, extortion, and drug trafficking—and promised to turn over the money to compensate war victims.

That week, Lozada flew by military

helicopter to join the rest of the FARC’s secretariat, in a walled Catholic center at the foot of the mountains that abut eastern Bogotá. The guerrillas were supposed to remain sequestered, but Lozada ventured out to an upscale shopping mall in the city, where he stopped by a clothing shop called Arturo Calle, the local equivalent of Brooks Brothers. Shadowed by bodyguards from the Interior Ministry’s Special Protection Unit, he wandered among mannequins and racks of clothes, picking out a gray blazer, a mauve shirt, and a tie. On November 24th, when Santos and the secretariat signed the new peace accord, Lozada wore his new jacket and tie.

**I**N A YARÍ camp, a senior FARC commander named Mauricio talked to me enthusiastically about his fighters’ career options. They could be park rangers, he said, or guides for ecotourists: “We know the jungle better than anyone.” For years, Mauricio’s fighters have operated in the vast national park of Chiribiquete, an area that has been inaccessible to most Colombians because of the war. On his laptop, he showed me photos of guerrillas posed against dazzling backdrops: rivers, jungle peaks, ancient cave paintings. With the enthusiasm of a boxing fan, he showed me a video of a captured ocelot sparring with an anaconda.

At the U.N. building in Bogotá, Lozada told me that the FARC secretariat had appointed him to lead the former militia’s new “productive sector.” After

decades of fighting for Marxist ideas, he is now trying to devise “economic projects that, in coöperative form, can help sustain the group.” Along with ecotourism, he has been considering bus and trucking services, agriculture, ranching, and the arts. But many Colombians despise the FARC, and it will be difficult to persuade employers to hire ex-guerrillas—especially when jobs are already scarce. In other Latin American countries, similar reconciliation programs have largely failed; ex-combatants who couldn’t find regular employment returned to militias. For some of Colombia’s former guerrillas, drug trafficking might provide the only available work. “It’s a problem,” Lozada said. “Unless they have a very strong ideological understanding, some will be vulnerable to the appeal of the narco world.” Most people I talked with anticipate that, based on previous demobilizations, about ten per cent of the former rebels will resort to crime.

In Colombia, though, a government technical institute, with branches around the country, has agreed to train former guerrillas as plumbers, electricians, or carpenters; in the demobilization camps, they will learn animal husbandry and farming. The peace accord calls for a sweeping program that will set aside millions of acres of land for peasants, and provide assistance for agricultural projects.

Most of the fighters have no formal education, other than the political training provided by the FARC. Still, Lozada hopes that some of them can go on to white-collar careers. One morning, he went with his bodyguards to visit the Universidad Distrital, a state college with a reputation for left-wing activism. Years before, he had infiltrated the college in order to recruit cadres. Now he was asking whether the school would allow his former guerrillas to complete their education there; if time permitted, and the peace held, he was thinking about going back to school himself.

Chepe, Lozada’s young friend, told me that his schooling had been interrupted when he left Bogotá as a teenager, and he was eager to finish it. The approach of peace had made him curious about his former classmates, and he had used the recently acquired Internet access to look some of them up. One friend, whom he found through LinkedIn,



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*“We don’t sell anything. This is the corporate office.”*

had told him that he worked in forensic medicine, and asked what Chepe did. Chepe replied that it was a long story. “What was I supposed to say?” he asked. “*Guerrillero* of the FARC?” Lozada said that a Colombian Army general involved in the peace process had invited him to join LinkedIn. He had tried, but had been stymied by the online membership form. “It asks you for ‘curriculum, professional contacts and qualifications, and references,’” Lozada exclaimed, erupting in a fit of laughter. “Job description—commander for the FARC! References—Timochenko!” He had tried to skip the questions, but he kept receiving the same message, in English: “Turn Back.” He and Chepe laughed hysterically, and when they regained their composure, Chepe said, “I think we’re a ways off from using apps like LinkedIn.”

“We’re still not sure how we’ll maintain this big family once the armed struggle ends,” Chepe said. “All we really know, though, is that this is the moment for peace. War hasn’t achieved the changes in Colombia that we fought for. We are totally against the economic model of the country the way it is. With peace, we still hope to be able to change the state.”

Lozada was more circumspect. “We have a Marxist way of interpreting society, but that doesn’t mean it’s our only reference,” he said. “As to what our new model will be, that’s something we have yet to invent.”

ON A BLUSTERY night, after the peace agreement became final, Lozada and Timochenko were driven in armored S.U.V.s to a television station in downtown Bogotá, to appear on a talk show called “Semana en Vivo.” As their bodyguards fanned out, the station’s staff waited excitedly to greet them. It was an unprecedented event in Colombia: two guerrilla leaders, who had been at war with the state for decades, sitting down to discuss their plans. As people tuned in, the host, María Jimena Duzán, looked at Twitter on her phone and exclaimed, “We’re trending!” Seeing her guests’ confusion, she chuckled and said, “That’s a good thing.”

On the show, Lozada and Timochenko spoke of the threat of renewed violence. A few months earlier, one far-flung rebel unit, linked to drug traffick-

ing, had announced that it would remain in the jungle, rather than join the peace process. More pressing, as the FARC withdrew from territory, the paramilitary narco-gangs were moving in, killing as they came. A pamphlet had circulated in San Vicente del Caguán, a town near FARC territory, bearing a stencilled machine gun and the insignia of the fearsome paramilitary group Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia. The text read, “We have arrived . . . and have come to stay,” adding that the group’s purpose was to purge the town of FARC supporters. Three local peasant leaders had been shot, and left-wing activists accused the mayor, a follower of Uribe, of ordering the murders. (The mayor denied involvement.) According to human-rights observers, more than seventy such activists were killed last year, inspiring fears of an extermination campaign. “A culture of violence has been formed,” Timochenko said. The society itself needed to change.

Part of that change, of course, is reckoning with the FARC’s own violent acts. Lozada will eventually have to appear before a tribunal and confess to any crimes he committed. When I asked if he felt sorry for anything he had done in the war, he gave me a long look and said, “The exercise of violence always gives one pause.” Like his colleagues, he had come to regret the FARC’s ties to the narcotics trade. “We know that it helped delegitimize us, and we have concluded that without a doubt it did us great harm.” Despite this, he said, his revolutionary ideals allowed him “to live with peace of mind.”

His greatest regret was for lost comrades. In 2012, the Army bombed a camp where Lozada was training officers, and thirty-nine of his students were killed. “That day was one of my worst in the whole war,” Lozada said, with tears in his eyes. “To lose so many comrades all at once like that, you never get over it.” He lamented that it had often been impossible for the guerrillas to bury their dead with dignity, or even to mark their graves. The FARC and the government have agreed to build three monuments to the war, made from the melted-down weapons of the guerrillas.



Duzán, the host, wondered how the guerrillas imagined their new lives. Timochenko mused that it would be nice to be in an apartment building inhabited entirely by former guerrillas, to keep the family together. The FARC and the government have established a deadline of May 31st for final disarmament, and, in recent months, FARC fighters have been moving from their forest hideouts to demobilization camps, in a motley procession of buses, jeeps, and motorized canoes. Female guerrillas have come carrying babies, and families have brought jungle pets: monkeys, pigs, river otters, and coatis. Lozada’s camp, shared with a few hundred of his fighters, is three hours outside Bogotá,

in an area that was friendly toward the peace process. From there, he travels frequently to the capital for “political work.” In August, the FARC will announce the creation of its political party; in the meantime Lozada has been invited to expound his views at academic forums and at the Bogotá Book Fair. Buoyed, he said, “In a few years we’ll be openly involved and active in the political life of the country.”

When I asked Lozada if he still considered himself a guerrilla, he nodded and said, “We will carry on with the guerrilla way of life and way of interpreting things. But one begins to be aware that there is a new way of doing things.” He explained, “I’ve begun to realize that I can now go and visit my family, for instance, without fearing that something might happen to me at the hands of the state—and this is creating a new expectation of how life can be.”

When the show ended, station employees rushed to pose for selfies with the guerrillas. Then Lozada and Timochenko left to celebrate with a few friends in a walled parking lot, encircled by their bodyguards. Timochenko smoked a cigarette, and he and Lozada sipped Scotch from plastic cups. Lozada introduced a young woman standing nearby—Milena, his *compañera*—and pointed to her bulging stomach. She would soon be giving birth to their child. Lozada beamed proudly, and the guerrillas raised their cups in a toast. “*Al futuro*,” they said. “To the future.” ♦

# A HOLLYWOOD STORY

*Did the movies really make Steve Bannon?*

BY CONNIE BRUCK

STEPHEN K. BANNON, who maintains a precarious hold over the nativist wing of the Trump White House, honed his skills in the art of conservative persuasion in the most liberal precinct of the American imagination, Hollywood. He became himself in the byways of the movie business. These days, Bannon is a dishevelled presence in the Oval Office, but he cut a different figure in Beverly Hills, where he looked the part of a Hollywood executive—fast-talking, smartly dressed, aggressively fit, carrying himself with what one former colleague described as an “alpha swagger.” He worked out of an impressive office on Canon Drive. He was passionate and knowledgeable about film, and boasted about his connections, his production credits, and his background in mergers and acquisitions at Goldman Sachs. He was a Republican, but not dogmatic, and he tried not to let his political beliefs get in the way of his work.

Bannon moved from New York to Los Angeles in 1987, to help Goldman expand its presence in the entertainment business. Two years later, Bannon and a senior colleague struck out on their own, opening a small investment company in Beverly Hills. According to Bannon, the firm’s clients over the next half-dozen or so years included Crédit Lyonnais, M-G-M, and PolyGram. In 1998, the company was acquired by an offshoot of the French bank Société Générale, and he remained there for a couple of years. He had brief stints at Jefferies, an investment bank, and at a talent-management company, the Firm, as a strategic adviser. By the early aughts, the former Hollywood colleague recalled, “he was sitting on Canon Drive, in his fabulous office, his bookshelves lined with military and history books, and he would take meetings all day with people, some of whom came to him for money for their movies.”

Tim Watkins, the president of a small advertising company in Maryland, was one of those people. A conservative and a devout Catholic, Watkins had an idea for a film, based on the book “Reagan’s War: The Epic Story of His Forty-Year Struggle and Final Triumph Over Communism,” by the political consultant Peter Schweizer. As Watkins began looking for someone to help make the movie, he was introduced to Bannon. He was impressed by Bannon’s enthusiasm about Ronald Reagan, and by his Hollywood connections. Watkins showed him a trailer he had made, and Bannon “jumped in full-bore,” Watkins told me. He understood that Bannon would raise the money to produce it and would also distribute it. To Watkins, he seemed an ideal partner. “Steve was very good at whipping people up into a passion,” he said.

Before 9/11, Watkins had planned to make a traditional documentary, but by the time he started working with Bannon, he said, “something ticked in us—that life is about good versus evil, and history repeats itself.” The film, called “In the Face of Evil: Reagan’s War in Word and Deed,” opens with archival footage from early-twentieth-century cataclysms—the First and Second World Wars, the Soviet labor camps and famine—and proceeds to Hollywood, where Reagan rose to prominence. Throughout the film, a female narrator invokes “the Beast,” an authoritarian force that threatens “anything that elevated or empowered the individual.”

The triumphal final scene shows the destruction of the Berlin Wall, in 1989, but it is followed by an ominous coda that warns of the dangers of Islamic radicalism, with militants hoisting rifles, and people falling to their deaths from the Twin Towers. “War had not been wished away,” the narrator says. “Reach-

ing out: first to convert, then turning in to destroy. That was the nature of the beast.”

Julia Jones, who worked as Bannon’s screenwriting partner for a decade, helped write the script, but she told me that she was not involved in the coda. She described how Bannon admired the documentary films made by the Nazi propagandist Leni Riefenstahl, such as “Triumph of the Will”: “Her playbook was key for him. I think he used her technique of fear, which you can see in that movie.”

Ultimately, Bannon was able to secure only about a third of the film’s financing, and Watkins covered the rest. He told me he would never use his own money again: “Because Steve was a Hollywood guy, I hoped there was going to be a great distribution program behind it, and there really wasn’t.”

The first major profile of Steve Bannon appeared in *Bloomberg Businessweek*, in October, 2015, after he had become the chairman of the conservative Web site Breitbart News and moved to Washington. He was working out of a Capitol Hill town house, which he called the Breitbart Embassy, and the image he had cultivated years earlier in Hollywood was gone. In a photograph for the story, he sits slumped on a couch in the house. Wearing an open-necked striped shirt that bulges around his ample middle, and cargo shorts that ride up his thighs, he looks at the camera with a baleful gaze.

The article, by Joshua Green, was titled “This Man Is the Most Dangerous Political Operative in America,” and it set the tone for subsequent coverage. In it, Bannon said of Breitbart, which was publishing a slew of attacks on the mainstream media and on establishment politicians, “We’re linking to everybody else’s stuff, we’re



*People were bewildered by Bannon's account of his early career. "I never heard of him, prior to Trumpism," Barry Diller said.*

aggregating, we'll pull stuff from the Left. It's a rolling phenomenon. Huge traffic. Everybody's invested." Green described Bannon's two decades in California as "a succession of Gatsbyish reinventions that made him rich," including a period of "Hollywood moguldom." When Donald Trump hired Bannon to be the C.E.O. of his campaign, in August, 2016, it seemed a fulfillment of Bannon's challenge to the liberal elite, in the movie business and in Washington.

People in Hollywood were bewildered by Bannon's story of himself as a major dealmaker. "I never heard of him, prior to Trumpism," the media mogul Barry Diller told me. "And no one I know knew him in his so-called Hollywood period." Another longtime entertainment executive said, "The barriers in Hollywood are simple. First, you have to have talent. And, second, you have to know how to get along with people. It's a small club."

Many who did have dealings with Bannon were unwilling to be interviewed. Others would not speak for attribution, saying that they feared what he might do with the instruments of government—one spoke of a possible I.R.S. audit. He worked hard to join the Hollywood establishment, and several people who knew him said that they were startled by his conversion to what one called "conservative political jihad." Another said, "All the years I knew him, he just wanted to make a buck."

**B**ANNON WAS REARED in an Irish Catholic family in Richmond, Virginia. Bannon's father, Martin, spent his career at A.T. & T., and his mother, Doris, was a homemaker. After attending Benedictine College Preparatory, a private military high school, he went to Virginia Tech, graduating in 1976, and spent seven years in the Navy—four at sea and three as a low-level official at the Pentagon, dealing with budget and planning. He has told reporters that his parents were Kennedy Democrats, and that he wasn't political until he entered the Navy, and witnessed President Jimmy Carter's handling of

the Iranian hostage crisis. He became a Reagan Republican.

While Bannon was at the Pentagon, he attended Georgetown University at night, and received a master's degree in government. By then, the Wall Street boom was under way, and Bannon wanted to be part of it. He entered Harvard Business School in 1983. He was twenty-nine, older than



many of his classmates, and without the family and professional connections that some of them enjoyed. Bannon told *Bloomberg Businessweek* that he attended a Goldman Sachs recruiting event, where he stood on the edge of the

crowd and struck up a conversation about baseball. He later found out that he had been talking to John Weinberg, Jr., whose father ran Goldman Sachs, and he was offered a summer job.

Bannon became an associate at Goldman in 1985, and two years later the firm sent him to the Los Angeles office. Japanese companies were becoming increasingly interested in Hollywood, and Bannon focussed his efforts on Japan. Thom Mount, a movie executive who had a long career at Universal Pictures, had just started a production company. Bannon and an associate offered to raise financing for him, and during the next six months they made at least a dozen trips to Tokyo, meeting with executives at NHK, Japan's most powerful media company. After Bannon helped raise the money for Mount's production of "The Indian Runner," written and directed by Sean Penn, he demanded a producer credit. When some of the NHK financing did not materialize, Bannon offered to raise funds from other sources, in return for a small stake in the Mount Company. He negotiated a deal for millions of dollars of risk equity, spread over several pictures, from the Japanese conglomerate Nisho Iwai, but that, too, fell apart.

In 1990, a senior Goldman colleague, John Talbott, made a deal with a Japanese conglomerate to create a private-equity fund, with two hundred and fifty million dollars in capital. Talbott decided to leave Goldman and set up his own firm. Bannon had convinced

Talbott that he had some local small-company clients, and Talbott asked Bannon to join him. That year, Talbott Bannon & Co. launched, and opened an office in Beverly Hills. But the deal with the Japanese conglomerate came undone, and within a year Talbott left. At Talbott's request, Bannon removed Talbott's name from the firm.

**R**UNNING BANNON & CO. was Bannon's full-time job, but he was increasingly engaged by moviemaking. He became a voluble, intimidating presence at Thom Mount's Burbank office. One former colleague saw him yelling at Mount about some financial matter, as though Mount were his subordinate. Sometimes he assumed the affect of a drill sergeant, barking orders at employees. He was passionate about military history. "He'd go into long diatribes about the Visigoth invasion and the Peloponnesian Wars," another colleague said. "He talked in military terms all the time: 'We'll set up a Trojan horse!'"

Others found Bannon entertaining and compelling. Someone who worked with him pointed out that he had loyal colleagues who tended to follow him from one endeavor to the next. Mindy Affrime, who was the head of development for Mount, recalled how her friendship with Bannon started. They were at a meeting with other people when he said something insulting to her, and she insulted him back. That seemed to take him by surprise, and he laughed. Affrime told me that they remained friendly for many years, mostly because they shared a commitment to moviemaking. "The art of it was what interested him," Affrime said. "He really wanted to learn how to make movies."

Another colleague recalled that Bannon seemed out of place in Hollywood: "The business runs on talent relationships. He had this real will-to-power vibe that was so off-putting. He came on so strong, and in a way that I couldn't imagine he would be successful with creative people."

Bannon left Mount in 1991, but still wanted to make movies. He had long been drawn to Shakespeare's play "Titus Andronicus," in which Titus, a Roman general, sacrifices the eldest son of Tamora, the Queen of the Goths, and

her younger sons rape and cut off the hands and tongue of Titus' daughter. In 1991, Bannon hired Jones as a screenwriting partner, and their first project was an adaptation of "Titus," which featured galactic travel and an episode of "ectoplasmic sex" between a "lower human" (a Moor in the original play) and a space queen. Bannon could not sell it. But in 1994 he reportedly optioned Julie Taymor's Off Broadway adaptation of "Titus." (Taymor denies this account.) Three years later, Taymor, who by then had directed Disney's "The Lion King" on Broadway, wrote and directed the "Titus" film, and Bannon was an executive producer.

Bannon hoped to have an active role in the creative process. A former colleague who knew Taymor said, "Steve tried to be involved—I think he really cared about it. But Julie wouldn't let him near it." Taymor says that she did not even know he had any connection to the film until she saw his name on the poster. The film, which came out in 1999, did poorly at the box office. Bannon told Jones that if Taymor had used his ideas it would have succeeded.

**L**AST NOVEMBER, when Bannon was named Donald Trump's chief White House strategist, many articles highlighted an extraordinary fact about his Hollywood career: that he had negotiated a profit participation in "Seinfeld" in 1993, two years before the show went into syndication. *Forbes* reported that, if Bannon had a one-per-cent share in the profits, "he would have made about \$32.6 million since 1998," and went on to say that "Bannon's steady 'Seinfeld' income" was supporting his career as a conservative propagandist.

The "Seinfeld" story first became widely known after the *Bloomberg Businessweek* profile. Bannon said that, in 1992, Westinghouse Electric hired Bannon & Co. to sell its small stake in Castle Rock Entertainment, a TV production company. It soon emerged that Ted Turner was interested in buying all of Castle Rock, including its minority shareholders. Bannon advised Westinghouse to accept Turner's offer, which included an interest in a package of several Castle Rock shows.

Bannon claimed that the Westing-

house executives told him, "If this is such a great deal, why don't you defer some of your cash fee and keep an ownership stake" in that package? He agreed. One of the shows was "Seinfeld." "We calculated what it would get us if it made it to syndication," Bannon said. "We were wrong by a factor of five." *Bloomberg Businessweek* said that Bannon continues to benefit from "a stream of 'Seinfeld' royalties."

Some of those who were responsible for "Seinfeld" became agitated by Bannon's story. Larry David, the show's head writer and executive producer, told me, "I don't think I ever heard of him until he surfaced with the Trump campaign and I had no idea that he was profiting from the work of industrious Jews!" Rob Reiner, one of the founders of Castle Rock, has said of Bannon's profits from the show, "It makes me sick."

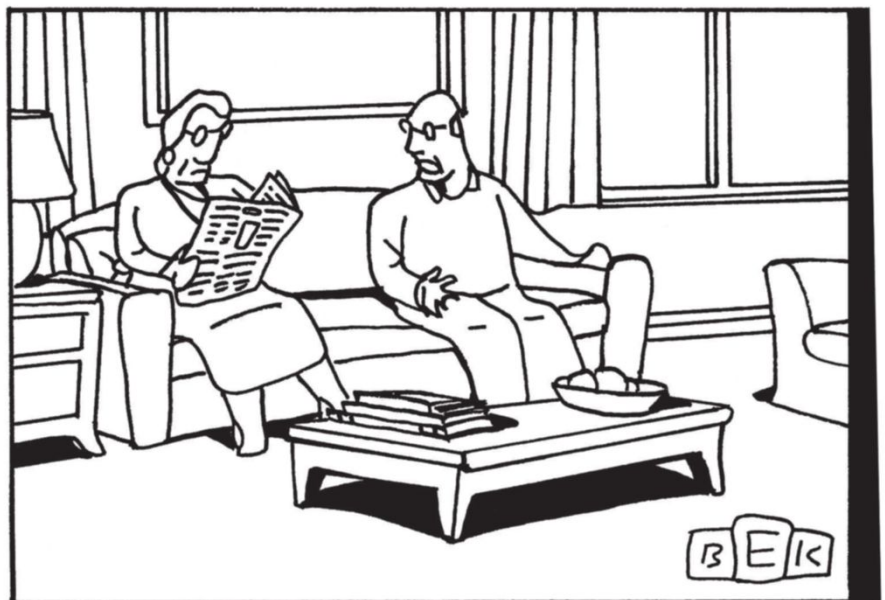
There were several companies involved in the deal: Turner Broadcasting Systems; Castle Rock; Sony, which owned a stake of about forty-four per cent in Castle Rock; and Westinghouse, with a fifteen-per-cent stake. In the end, Westinghouse received its cash compensation, plus a small percentage of the TV package, and Bannon & Co. got a smaller one. In 1995, Westinghouse acquired CBS, and CBS became the surviving company.

That fall, "Seinfeld" went into syn-

dication. After Turner Broadcasting merged with Time Warner, in late 1995, Turner's Castle Rock came under the Warner Bros. umbrella. Warner Bros. started sending out all "Seinfeld" profit-participation statements, including Westinghouse's, which goes to CBS. The Castle Rock and the Westinghouse records from the early months of syndication are not readily available. It is possible that Bannon's deal was capped and paid out at that time. But, since then, neither CBS nor Castle Rock nor Warner Bros. has records of payments to Bannon, if those records are as they were described to me.

**I**N EARLY 1993, Bannon was hired by Ed Bass, an heir to one of the biggest oil fortunes in Texas. While Bass's older brother managed the family's wealth, Ed moved to Santa Fe, where he spent time at Synergia Ranch, an intentional community devoted to ecological sustainability.

One of Synergia's founders was John Allen, an ecologist and playwright. Allen and Bass became friends, and Bass eventually became the chief financial backer of Biosphere 2, a closed ecological system that Allen planned to build outside Oracle, Arizona, about thirty miles north of Tucson. Bass committed to spending a hundred and fifty million dollars to create the three-acre compound, which included a rain



"I'm sixty-six—I don't want to see puppets in anything."

forest, a desert, an ocean, and a farm, with thousands of species of plants, insects, and animals. It also included people: a team of eight “biospherians” was sealed inside for two years, from 1991 to 1993, and a second team began a shorter stay the following March.

By 1993, Bass had spent an additional fifty million dollars on the project, and he wanted to get its finances under control. He assigned that task to Bannon, and to Bass’s Texas banker, Martin Bowen. Bannon went to New York investment banks, looking for venture capital. When he couldn’t raise the money, he came up with a marketing plan, to sell biospheres to governments around the world, and to build Biosphere 3, a Las Vegas casino and resort, but those efforts, too, were unsuccessful. Meanwhile, Bannon said that Biosphere 2’s managers were resisting financial discipline. “The people at the biosphere just treated huge amounts of money like it was petty cash,” Rebecca Reider quotes Bannon as saying in her 2009 book, “Dreaming the Biosphere.” Ultimately, Bass agreed, and he and Bannon concluded that the only solution was to seize Biosphere 2 from Allen’s management, and to install Bannon as the acting C.E.O.

Bannon planned the takeover as meticulously as a paramilitary operation. On April 1, 1994, he and Bowen rode toward Biosphere 2, accompanied by armed U.S. marshals and a phalanx of support people. The marshals went first, followed by investment bankers, accountants, public-relations people, and secretaries. Bannon had placed his younger brother Chris, a former Navy pilot, at the head of the first team. Chris Bannon told Reider, “We had to secure the gate out front, get out with the federal marshals, serve the security person at the gate, secure the gate, and then move into the other critical areas that had already been defined in order to insure the safety and security of the Biosphere and its systems.” Several weeks earlier, the second team of biospherians had entered the sealed area.

As the Bannon brothers knew, John Allen and several other members of the Biosphere 2 management were travelling in Japan, but two of them, Abigail Alling and Mark Van Thillo,

## FROM “THE NAMES OF 1,001 STRANGERS”

1

Tom the stutterer’s brother  
had the backhand:  
we were doubles partners  
deep inside the quarry.

Camel’s Hump was frozen  
on the horizon or  
snapped mid-undulation.  
Everyone died climbing it.

La Tulip: the feared, the hated,  
later embezzler of electricity:  
he smashed a fucking asteroid  
past my racquet to Quebec.

Mike’s Civic bazooka’d Ratt  
to cross-bias La Tulip—  
party sled, hedonistic pod, our papers  
in the glove box, glow-lit, post-match ...

and so we drift, apparently all the way,  
to a background of bug zappers,  
thunder, and GNR. The Strezzles cough haze  
and wheezed in the back.

Soon the way became time,  
and we were still drifting,  
fresh from the worst slaughter,  
drifting west and west and west

returned as soon as they learned of the seizure. Alling, known as Gaie, was thirty-four, with a master’s degree in ecology from Yale, and one of the Biosphere’s most passionate defenders. Van Thillo, thirty-three, was a Belgian-born engineer. It was night when they arrived at the compound, and Alling instructed Van Thillo to break the system’s safety valves and open the doors. In a melodramatic flourish, Alling, in the local press, compared the situation to that of the Challenger, which exploded in 1986, killing seven astronauts.

On April 6th, police officers arrested Alling and Van Thillo at a Tucson hotel. The detective who was assigned to investigate the break-in had decided that if any charges were brought they would be misdemeanors, and the deputy county attorney agreed.

But the new Biosphere management contacted the county attorney and demanded felony prosecution, saying that Alling and Van Thillo had done tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of damage by breaking the safety valves. Alling and Van Thillo were charged with three felonies, including criminal property damage. A grand-jury hearing was set for April 21st.

Bannon tried to assert control over Biosphere 2, but some of the staff remained loyal to John Allen and the original mission, and were deeply suspicious of their new boss. On April 17th, four days before Bannon was to testify before the grand jury, William Dempster, Biosphere’s director of engineering, went to talk to Bannon with a tape recorder hidden in his underwear. Bannon, speaking to Dempster about Allen, said, “Johnny thought

to a party in a cattle pasture,  
the cattle vaguely suspect.  
Mike's father, as you know, dealt  
in prize semen. All of this

turned out to be made of paper.  
Imagine that: paper and notes to self,  
emotionless, like origami.  
Even the backhand, even the match.

2

Who changed change, die, eight ball, tarot, oracle?  
Who put the flux in flux? It was my go-to  
when the slipstream slowed to a trickle, my hangover cure,  
the reason reason gave the river wonder left behind.

One day I'm looking around in my underwear for  
Maria Porizkova, the next I'm the leech-gatherer.  
One day I'm carded trying to buy Coppertone,  
suddenly I'm mistaken for my own pallbearer.

God, who made change, made change change,  
he made reason reason, bother bother, dust dust:  
then, lo, the mother bleeper goes and vanishes  
before he makes decrease decrease, limit limit.

Maria Porizkova and I are having a party.  
Bill Bixby is tangoing with Jo Anne Worley.  
We're all very small, and very hungry, and lonely,  
since our friends are dead: we're aphids, alone on a dianthus.

—Dan Chiasson

they got a rough lesson on April 1st, and they did. And you tell Johnny who delivered that lesson—I delivered it, O.K.?" Referring to Alling, and to his upcoming testimony, he said, "On fucking April 1st, I kicked his ass, and I'm going to kick her ass on Thursday."

Bannon was preoccupied by Alling's remark about the Challenger, and her general intransigence, saying over and over, "I am going to ram it down her fucking throat." He went on, "She thinks she is a goddess, she thinks she is above us all. She thinks she has transformed to something that we are not worthy of. Well, you know what? I don't buy that. I think she is a self-centered, deluded young woman, and she is about to get a reality check, and I am going to deliver it to her." He added, "I am not about to have a twenty-nine-year-old bimbo criticize the peo-

ple at this place for running something." He also said, "But she's going to pay. She's going to pay. When this is over, she's finished."

Later, at a pretrial interview, Bannon said he understood that he was to conduct himself as if he were under oath. He was asked if he had made some of those remarks. Bannon, unaware that he had been recorded, claimed that he had not. "I've never referred to Ms. Alling as a bimbo," he said.

As the criminal case proceeded, Alling and Van Thillo filed a civil suit against Space Biospheres Ventures, Ed Bass's company, for breach of contract, and S.B.V. countersued. The civil lawsuits were consolidated, and went to trial in May, 1996. The jury ruled mainly in Alling and Van Thillo's favor, awarding them more than six hundred

thousand dollars in damages; S.B.V. appealed, and the parties settled.

William Walker, Alling and Van Thillo's trial lawyer, told me that he spoke with the jury foreperson after the verdict. Walker said, "What sunk Bannon was, he lied. I was able to introduce that he had said those things about Abigail, and then he denied it." The criminal case was dropped. (Bannon declined to comment.) Alling is the founder and now the president of the Biosphere Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to stewardship of the earth's resources.

Bannon's team helped maintain Biosphere 2 as a center for scientific research. In November, 1995, Columbia University agreed to manage Biosphere 2, which the school thought could be a site for ambitious climate-change experiments. Bannon, who remained the acting C.E.O. for a little more than two years, said, in an interview with *C-SPAN*, in January, 1995, that Biosphere 2, which produced high levels of carbon dioxide, was an ideal place to study the effects of greenhouse gases. Speaking about scientists who study climate change, Bannon added, "Many of them feel that the earth's atmosphere in a hundred years is what Biosphere 2's atmosphere is today." Bannon went on to run Breitbart, which routinely describes climate science as fraudulent; his brother Chris remains on the staff of Biosphere 2.

WHILE BANNON WAS embroiled in the Biosphere 2 litigation, a complaint was filed against him by the Santa Monica district attorney's office. Bannon, who had a daughter with his first wife, began seeing another woman in 1989. According to police records and her divorce filing, they had violent fights during their early time together and went to counselling. Five years later, the woman, then forty-one, became pregnant with twins. Bannon said that he would marry her, but only if the fetuses were healthy. After an amniocentesis confirmed that they were, he sent the woman a prenuptial agreement, which they negotiated for three and a half months. They were married in April, 1995, three days before she gave birth to two girls.

On the morning of January 1, 1996,

a Santa Monica police officer arrived at the couple's home, after being alerted to a 911 call. The caller had hung up, and when the operator called back the phone was off the hook. In the officer's crime report, he wrote that a woman answered the door. She appeared to be very upset, and began to cry. It was several minutes before she was calm enough to tell him what had happened.

According to the officer's report, the woman said that Bannon had slept on the living-room couch the preceding night. She got up early in the morning to feed the twins, and Bannon was upset because she was making too much noise. Later, as he got ready to leave, she asked him for the American Express card so she could go grocery shopping. He told her to write a check. She followed Bannon as he went to his car. The police report said, "She asked him why he was playing these games with the money, and he said it was his money."

After she threatened to divorce him, "[she] said he laughed at her, and said he would never move out. [She] said she spit at him, and [he] reached up to her, from the driver's seat of his car, and grabbed her left wrist. He pulled her down, as if he was trying to pull

[her] into the car, over the door. [She] said Mr. Bannon grabbed at her neck, also pulling her into the car. She said that she started to fight back, striking at his face so he would let go of her. After a short period of time, she was able to get away from him."

She ran into the house, followed by Bannon, telling him that she was calling 911. "Mr. Bannon jumped over her and the twins to grab the phone from her," the report went on, and he threw the phone across the room. The woman later said, in a sworn divorce filing, that he screamed, "Crazy fucking cunt!" She complained to the officer about her sore neck, and he wrote, "I saw red marks on her left wrist and the right side of her neck."

Bannon was charged with spousal abuse, simple battery, and dissuading a witness, because he had made it impossible for his wife to talk to the police. The case was called for trial on August 12, 1996. Bannon's wife later said that his lawyer told her that, if Bannon went to jail, "I would have no money and no way to support the children." Bannon, she said, told her that, if she went to court, "he and his attorney would make sure that I would be the one who was guilty." Bannon and his attorney

arranged for his wife and their daughters to leave town, she said. (Bannon's lawyer denies intimidating Bannon's wife or arranging for her to leave town, and Bannon declined to comment.) On August 12th, the judge in the case, ruling that the "victim/witness" was "unable to be located," ordered the case dismissed. In January, 1997, Bannon's wife filed for divorce.

The divorce file covers more than a dozen years. During that time, the two fought over Bannon's repeated failures to make court-ordered support payments, and other issues involving the twins. In April, 1997, he submitted an "income and expense declaration," indicating that his annual salary was roughly five hundred thousand dollars, and that his total assets were around \$1.1 million. Any profit participations from "Seinfeld" should have shown up at that time. Either they were not substantial or Bannon failed to disclose them in a sworn statement.

Bannon rarely saw the twins, but, according to the marital-settlement agreement, he was responsible for their private-school tuition—as long as he approved of the school. When the girls were ready to start kindergarten, Bannon and his ex-wife visited a number of schools. During an interview at one of them, she wrote in a court filing, Bannon "asked the director why there were so many Chanukah books in the library." After visiting another, "he asked me if it bothered me that the school used to be in a Temple." Then, she went on, he "began a campaign of threatening every school to which I applied. He claimed that he would sue the school if they accepted our children. Needless to say, this had a devastating effect on the girls' ability to get into a school." The court file contains letters from administrators at two schools, who wrote that Bannon threatened them. At Odyssey, in Malibu, Dr. Steven Mecham wrote that Bannon, after he visited, said there would be "no tuition from him. He further said that if we did enroll his children, he would sue me personally and the school." The girls went to public elementary school.

For middle school and high school, the girls wanted to attend the Archer



*"Because when it actually works they just call it medicine."*

School, a girls' school in Brentwood. Their mother, without informing Bannon, had them apply, and they were admitted for the sixth grade, in the fall of 2007. She then told Bannon that the girls had been admitted and urged him to visit the school. As they argued about Archer, Bannon's ex-wife wrote, he told her that "the biggest problem he had with Archer is the number of Jews that attend. He said he doesn't like Jews and that he doesn't like the way they raise their kids to be whiney brats."

This account of Bannon's comments about Jews and Archer has been widely reported, and Bannon's supporters have dismissed them as the fabrications of an angry ex-wife. But the divorce file, which includes e-mails between Bannon and his ex-wife, contains further evidence that he did complain about the number of Jewish students. On March 19, 2007, she told him that Archer had accepted the girls. Twelve days later, she wrote to Bannon, "As for the % of Jewish girls at Archer I have no idea what it is nor do I understand why that is such a concern for you. I certainly have not been raising the girls to be prejudice[d] against Jews or anyone else for that matter."

A spokesperson for Bannon said that he is not an anti-Semite, and pointed out that the girls went to Archer, and Bannon paid their tuition. But that was only after his ex-wife went to the Los Angeles County Superior Court, later that year, laid out Bannon's history of having sabotaged her efforts to find a school, and said that she hadn't notified him about the girls' applications to Archer because she feared that he would do so again. In Bannon's court filing, he said that he did not want his children "attending a secular school," and that, "based on my income, the expense of the proposed school is excessive."

On the income statement that Bannon submitted to the court, he wrote that his employer was Bannon Strategic Advisors, a consulting firm that he set up in 2005. He left blank the space for his salary, and reported \$967,465 in stocks, bonds, and other assets, and \$41,401,067 in other property. The figure is inexplicable, and inconsistent with his other publicly available filings. In late August of 2007,



*"Can I get a coffee and a relatable protagonist?"*

Bannon agreed that the girls could go to Archer, and that he would pay their tuition.

LAST MONTH, the *Washington Post* reported that, during the nineties in Hollywood, Bannon became "very wealthy" from various deals and from the sale of Bannon & Co. The *Post* said that the sale of PolyGram by its parent company, Royal Philips Electronics, in 1998, was "one of Bannon's biggest deals." Bannon told the *Post* that he brought in Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, of Saudi Arabia, as a possible bidder for PolyGram, and that although Seagram ultimately bought the company, the prospect of another bidder drove up the price by twenty per cent. Bannon said that he received "a big fee," presumably from PolyGram. (The Prince declined to comment.)

But a senior PolyGram executive at the time said that Prince Alwaleed was not a bidder, and that he had never met Bannon. When I asked Michael Kuhn, who was the president of PolyGram's filmed-entertainment division, whether PolyGram could have paid Bannon a "big fee," he said, "There's no way. We were just being sold, by Philips—logically, we wouldn't have paid. We were the target."

Pehr Gyllenhammar, who was on

the board of Philips and was involved in the transaction, told me that he doesn't remember Prince Alwaleed or Bannon playing any part in the sale. Kuhn did say that, a year or two earlier, Bannon & Co. had helped PolyGram when it was considering buying M-G-M, but that acquisition never happened. "So I don't know where all this comes from," he concluded.

Several months after the PolyGram deal, in September, 1998, SG Cowen, the Société Générale subsidiary, acquired Bannon & Co. According to an official at SG Cowen, no meaningful consideration was exchanged for Bannon & Co., but Bannon and his partner, Scot Vorse, were given employment contracts.

Kim Fennebresque, the head of investment banking at SG Cowen, who became the C.E.O. a year after the acquisition, recalled about Bannon, "What I saw was a smart guy, who was funny and likable and enjoyable, who had a quick laugh, who was ineffectual." Fennebresque described the years that Bannon and Vorse worked for SG Cowen, from 1998 to 2000, as "a high-octane time," adding, "Anybody could make chicken salad out of chicken shit in that period." Bannon "was one of those guys who always had big stuff about to happen," he said. "But, after a quarter

or two or seven, you become highly skeptical. Ultimately, we parted ways.”

Bannon kept searching for a breakthrough deal that would elevate him into the Hollywood establishment. In the spring of 2002, he joined the Firm, a new talent-management company headed by Jeff Kwatinetz. A Harvard Law School graduate, Kwatinetz had some success in the music business, and sometimes said that he wanted to make the Firm the next AOL Time Warner.

When Bannon arrived, Kwatinetz was negotiating to acquire Artists Management Group, the talent company created by Michael Ovitz. In the eighties and early nineties, Ovitz was often described as the most powerful man in Hollywood, but A.M.G. had been weakened by enormous overhead, and a run of bad publicity was causing clients to leave.

“They had essentially negotiated the number,” a Firm executive familiar with the A.M.G. acquisition told me. “One day, Bannon goes to see Michael, cuts the number dramatically, and says, ‘This is it.’” In the end, this executive continued, the deal got done for a number closer to the original one. In late 2003, Bannon left the Firm.

**A**ROUND THIS TIME, Bannon was working on the Reagan documentary. One of the more curious sequences in “In the Face of Evil” may shed some light on Bannon’s transformation from a Hollywood operative to a conservative activist.

The film’s narrator praises the early studio bosses, “Jewish entrepreneurs,” who “differed in taste and style, yet shared two common elements: ruthlessness and uncompromising patriotism.” These men were not particularly kind to Reagan: “In the unforgiving calculus of the studio system, he was weighed, measured, and found wanting.” But a middling film career led to something greater. Reagan became the most powerful figure in the world by exploiting what he had learned from working in the movies.

When “In the Face of Evil” was released, in October, 2004, mainstream

critics were mostly dismissive. Lou Lumenick, of the New York *Post*, noted that it was “very much like Soviet propaganda.” But a small, fervent group of conservatives in Hollywood embraced it. That December, it was shown at the Liberty Film Festival, a new conservative event. At the festival, Bannon met Andrew Breitbart, at that time a thirty-five-year-old blogger for the Drudge Report, who was planning to start his own Web site.



At another screening, Bannon met David Bossie, a longtime opponent of Bill and Hillary Clinton. Bossie had first become known to the public as a Whitewater investigator for the House

Committee on Government Reform; he resigned from his position after he produced misleading evidence about the Clintons’ real-estate investments in Arkansas. By 2004, Bossie was the president and chairman of Citizens United, a conservative nonprofit. After seeing Michael Moore’s film “Fahrenheit 9/11,” which came out during the Presidential campaign and fuelled attacks on George W. Bush, Bossie decided to get into filmmaking himself. Citizens United quickly produced the documentary “Celsius 41.11,” which mounted a right-wing defense of the President and was released just weeks before the election.

When Bossie and Bannon met, Bossie was working with Kevin Knoblock, the director of “Celsius 41.11,” on “Border War,” a documentary about the perceived threat of illegal immigration, and Bannon signed on as a distributor. Bannon and Bossie also started planning a series of movies that Bannon would work on for Citizens United.

Julia Jones, the screenwriter, suggested to a friend, James Ulmer, an entertainment journalist, that he do a story about the new cadre. “I’d never heard of Steve Bannon, and when I called my friends in L.A. none of them knew who he was,” Ulmer told me recently. But Bannon cultivated Ulmer, who was struck by his persistence. “If anyone knows how to grab an opportunity, it’s Bannon,” he said. Ulmer published an article in the *Times*, in June, 2005, that described Bannon as a “Roman Cath-

olic filmmaker, conservative-film financier, Washington networker and Hollywood deal-chaser,” who was “emblematic of a new wave in Hollywood, a group that intends to clean those media pipes with pictures that promote godliness, Pax Americana, and its own view of family values.”

The two men had a number of conversations in the spring of 2005, Ulmer said, and Bannon told him several times that he hoped to destroy the Hollywood establishment. In the *Times* article, Ulmer said that Bannon had told him, “We’re the peasants with the pitchforks storming the lord’s manor.” Ulmer recalled, “He was always making these grand, hyperbolic analogies between good and evil, the culture of life versus the scourge of death that, in his view, Hollywood had become. Hollywood was the great Satan.”

Ulmer met with Bannon at his Santa Monica office, where Bannon had written the names of some recent movie releases on a whiteboard. Ulmer reported that Bannon had said, “On Ash Wednesday, ‘The Passion of the Christ’ is released theatrically, and on Sunday, ‘Lord of the Rings’—a great Christian allegory—wins 11 Academy Awards. So here you have Sodom and Gomorrah bowing to the great Christian God.” Ulmer recalled, “I was watching him draw all these configurations and connecting lines about the Beast and Satan, and half of my brain was saying, ‘This guy’s a comic stitch,’ and the other, ‘He’s really off the deep end.’”

Bannon seemed to have absorbed Bossie’s anger toward the Clintons. Ulmer was taken aback, he said, when Bannon began talking about Hillary Clinton’s likely campaign for the Presidency in the next election. According to Ulmer’s memory of the conversation, Bannon told him, in graphic terms, that he and others were preparing to destroy Hillary in 2008. (A source close to Bannon says that this conversation never took place, and that Bannon never met Ulmer in person.)

**B**ANNON TRIED TO keep his personal politics separate from his efforts to make money. By 2004, he was the chairman of a film distributor, American Vantage Media. He used American Vantage to acquire another

distributor, Wellspring Media, which was well respected and reliably liberal, and became its chairman. According to Ulmer's recollection, Bannon told him that his Wellspring colleagues were his friends, even though they thought he was a reactionary and he thought they were "communists."

At Wellspring, former employees said that Bannon was an erratic manager. He was overbearing in his demands, and then would disappear for weeks at a time. But they also found that he tended to judge people on talent, without regard to politics. He was supportive of the films they wanted to work on, including "Going Upriver: The Long War of John Kerry," a documentary about Kerry's journey from Vietnam soldier to peace activist, which countered conservative attacks on his military record.

The following year, Bannon orchestrated a deal that had considerable promise. Trevor Drinkwater, who was the C.E.O. of a film-distribution company, Genius Products, recalled that he and Bannon decided to merge Genius and American Vantage; Bannon became chairman of Genius Products. Harvey and Bob Weinstein were starting their new production company. "Goldman Sachs was raising the money for the Weinstein Company, and Steve called one of his buddies at Goldman," Drinkwater said. Bannon and Drinkwater offered the Weinsteins a low-priced distribution deal. Drinkwater said that he and Bannon hoped that Genius might eventually be folded into the Weinstein Company. It did not work out that way. Genius lost money year after year, and was forced into bankruptcy in 2011. The bankruptcy trustee later sued T.W.C., which countersued; the two companies are still involved in litigation.

Bannon's other large deal in 2005 involved a company called Internet Gaming Entertainment, founded by the former child actor Brock Pierce, which sold virtual currency to players of the video game World of Warcraft. Pierce and Bannon pitched the company to Goldman Sachs, and in February, 2006, Goldman, along with a consortium of private funds, reportedly agreed to invest about sixty million dollars in I.G.E. It was a

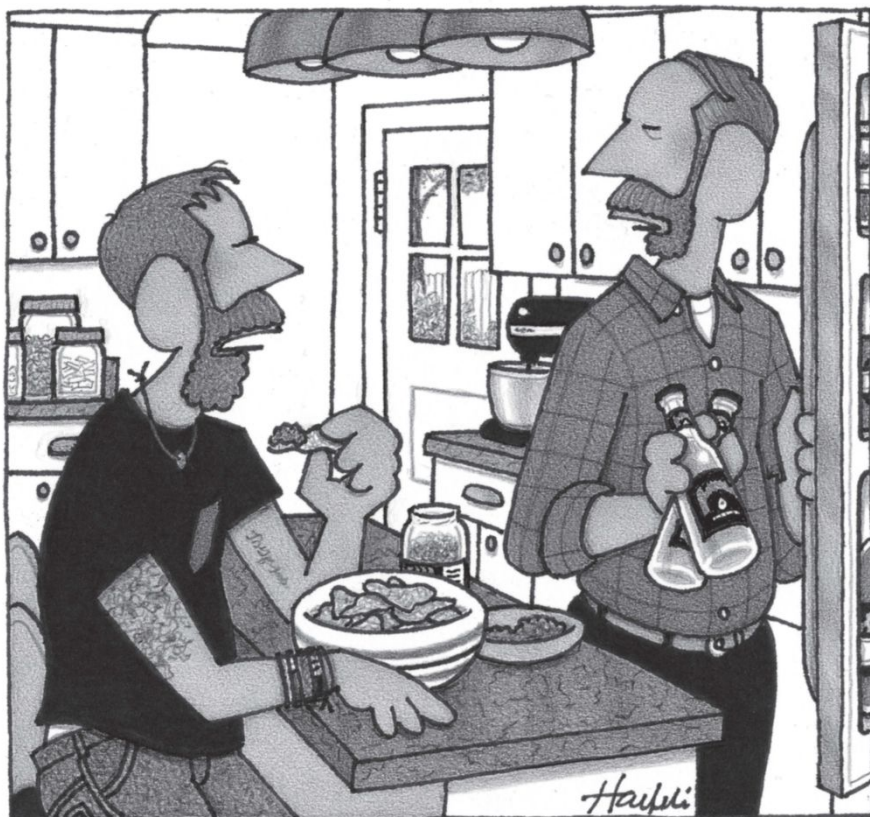
validation for Bannon, who regularly courted Goldman and boasted about having worked there. But, according to *Wired*, I.G.E.'s profits started to decline in 2006, and the next year the company sold some of its operation at a deep discount.

DAVID BOSSIE PRODUCED two documentaries for the 2008 campaign season: "Hillary: The Movie" and "Hype: The Obama Effect." The most damning review of the Hillary film came from the Federal Election Commission, which concluded that it was a piece of political propaganda, and that Citizens United's marketing efforts should be subject to campaign-finance regulations. Citizens United filed suit against the F.E.C., and the Supreme Court ultimately heard the case. In January, 2010, the Court issued its landmark ruling against the F.E.C.: nonprofits could spend as they saw fit on campaigns, with no government restrictions.

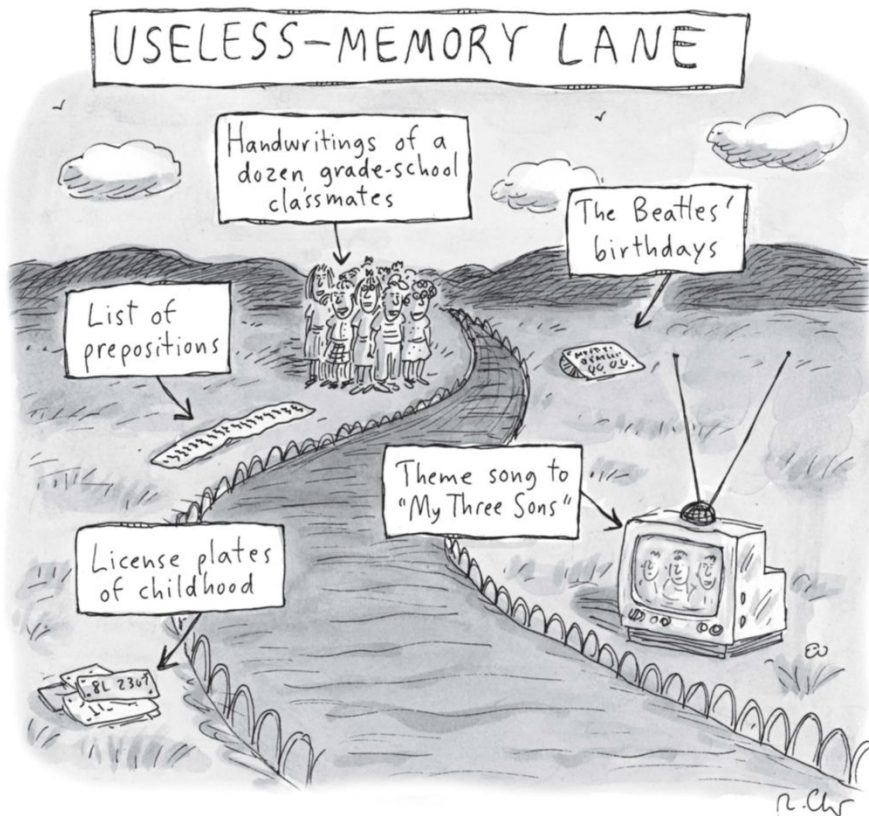
The Clinton and Obama documentaries had none of the bombast

of Bannon's Reagan movie, but they were unapologetically crude and, in the case of "Hype," arguably racist. "Hype" opened with footage of Obama dancing to Beyoncé on "The Ellen DeGeneres Show," and showed him eating waffles. It twice mentioned Obama's relationship with the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, suggesting not only that he agreed with Wright's inflammatory remarks but also that he wasn't really a Christian.

Bannon went back to James Ulmer, telling him that he should write a profile of Bossie. "David is very controversial and proud of it," Bannon wrote in an e-mail to Ulmer in September, 2008. "He has established a conservative film making studio at his headquarters in dc and is preparing to roll out an entire slate starting with the obama film." A week later, he wrote again: "Do you think there is going to be any interest in the story as other people are starting to chase him but he obviously wants to see if you have an interest." And the following week, after Ulmer said that he had proposed



*"Dad, when someone your age grows a beard  
it's cultural appropriation."*



the story to editors at the *Times*, Bannon wrote, “Dude . . . any progress on the article????” When Ulmer finally said that the editors weren’t interested, Bannon replied, at 3 A.M., “Come on baby . . . this is a big story.”

**B**ANNON SENSED THAT the political mood of the country was changing. As the financial crisis deepened, Obama made his insurgent run for President. Once he took office, the Tea Party flourished in opposition to him and to the bank bailouts, and, in 2010, it helped Republicans recapture the House. The Tea Party’s success also sparked Bannon’s productivity. That year, he released three documentaries: “Generation Zero,” which laid the blame for the financial crisis on the profligacy of liberal baby boomers; “Fire from the Heartland,” which showcased the women of the Tea Party, above all Michele Bachmann; and “Battle for America,” which rallied conservative voters. Citizens United Productions, a company created by Citizens United, produced all three Bannon documentaries in 2010, along with four by Kevin Knoblock. According to financial filings obtained

by the *Washington Post*, Citizens United spent \$1.9 million on film production that year; Citizens United Productions spent \$1.7 million on production and distribution.

Bannon became a fixture at Tea Party rallies and conventions across the country, where he gave rousing speeches. At a Tax Day Tea Party in April, 2010, held on the streets of midtown Manhattan, Bannon told a raucous crowd that America is “addicted to a drug,” debt, that is “provided by the pushers on Wall Street and the mules on Capitol Hill. America needs an intervention, and the Tea Party is going to give it to them.”

Bannon also started appearing regularly on Fox News, where Sean Hannity produced a special about “Generation Zero.” During this time, Bannon went through “a visible transformation,” a friend said. “In his days in business, he dressed like an investment banker from Connecticut—shirt and jacket, tie or not, boring men’s shoes, a short, conventional men’s haircut. But he couldn’t show up at the Tea Party dressed like that. He started dressing more casually. There *was* this other side of him—he was from the South,

he could be in a sports bar in West Virginia, and he would be accepted.”

The friend continued, “He never fit in in the world of investment banking—he was this gauche Irish kid. Never fit in in the Hollywood world—his politics were much too conservative. Never fit in in the mainstream Republican world—he wasn’t uptight like them. But then he got embraced by the Tea Party world. He really started playing that role, and he came into his own. He loved being on TV.”

**I**N 2011, BANNON released a documentary about Sarah Palin, “The Undeclared.” Although Obama had beaten John McCain and Palin in 2008, Bannon saw her as an avatar of populist conservatism. Friends fought with him about Palin. One recalled, “His excitement about her was completely cynical. He thought she was a lightweight, but he was convinced she was going to be a star.”

Bannon hoped that “The Undeclared” could be a mainstream success, and kick off a Palin campaign for the 2012 Republican Presidential nomination. Palin, however, does not appear to have been involved in its production. Bannon purchased the audiobook rights to her memoir, “Going Rogue,” and used it as voice-over, but the documentary does not feature an interview with its subject. Bannon managed to track down the Palin family’s lawyer, in Alaska, but apparently did not speak to any members of Palin’s staff or her family.

The real star of the movie was Andrew Breitbart, whose Web site had just helped to discredit and destroy the liberal activist network ACORN. Breitbart appeared throughout “The Undeclared,” pale, heavyset, curly-haired, speaking angrily about the character of the Republican establishment. Over footage of a young man wearing a fitted suit in a corporate office, Breitbart says, “When you go to Washington, D.C., and you meet with the conservative movement, it’s as if they’ve read the exact right books, taken the right tests, met the right people, are wearing the right outfits, wearing the right tie—and you almost feel like an outsider, even though you’re in the actual conservative movement.”

Breitbart denounced mainstream

Republicans' dismissive treatment of Palin. "She's also an existential threat to these eunuchs who have run as men, but aren't men," he said. "They look at Sarah Palin and they say, 'You know what? We're going to destroy her.' That's how I feel when I go into Washington: I see eunuchs."

When Bannon was focussed on Hollywood, he had emphasized his Goldman Sachs connection. Now he stressed his upbringing, which he described as blue-collar. In October, 2010, he appeared on "Political Vindication," a right-wing radio show in Los Angeles. One of the hosts said that Bannon had been "evil" while he worked at Goldman Sachs. He replied equably, saying, "It was a private partnership then, and a firm of the highest ethical standards," but it had changed when it went public. He did not mention that since it went public, in 1999, he had made every effort to do business with Goldman. Now, he said, "I'm fifty-six years old, and I'm a filmmaker full time." He described David Bossie as his partner. "What I've tried to do is weaponize film. I want these films to be incredibly provocative. I want to present our point of view. I'm not interested in saying 'on the one hand and the other.' I'm conservative. I believe in the Tea Party movement. I believe in the populist rebellion." He added, "I make films of the highest artistic quality."

Bannon's warnings about Islam had become even more dire since the making of "In the Face of Evil." On the radio show, he said, "The left is starting to drumbeat an idea that we should have the rapprochement with radical Islam. Well, that's unacceptable. Sharia law and the freedoms of the U.S. are mutually exclusive terms." Americans were "in a hundred-year war," he said repeatedly. As the interview ended, Bannon told his hosts, "You guys are the backbone of this revolution. So please don't give up the fight!"

**B**ANNON WAS CONFIDENT that the populist revolution would eventually vanquish the Republican establishment, "school district by school district, city council by city council," but, with an assist from his friend An-

drew Breitbart, it came far sooner than he had expected. By March, 2011, Breitbart had been speaking at Tea Party events for more than a year and he was out promoting a memoir. At these events, he had perfected a funny, occasionally vulgar way of speaking to conservative crowds, describing himself as a Los Angeles rollerblader who was out to take back the culture from liberals. At a conservative donors' conference in Palm Beach, Florida, Robert Mercer, the hedge-fund billionaire, and his daughter Rebekah saw Breitbart speak. Charmed by his speech, they started talking to him about the future of Breitbart News. Soon, Breitbart introduced the Mercers to Bannon.

Bannon had long encouraged Breitbart to expand his Web site, which at the time was largely aggregating news from the wire services. That spring, Bannon drafted a business plan that called for the Mercers to invest ten million dollars in Breitbart News. In return, they would receive a large stake in the company. Bannon joined its board.

In March, 2012, Breitbart, then forty-three, suffered a fatal heart attack. A former employee told me about the aftermath at Breitbart News. Larry Solov, Breitbart's co-founder, had helped start the company "not because Larry is politically driven," the former employee said, but because Solov and Breitbart "were best friends since they were kids." He went on, "Andrew was the alpha, Larry was the beta. So, when Andrew died, Larry didn't know what to do. Bannon came in and said, 'I'll save the day!'" Solov agreed to name Bannon the chairman of Breitbart News.

Meanwhile, the Mercers funded a slate of conservative projects that paid Bannon as a consultant. In 2012, Bannon and Peter Schweizer, the author of the Reagan biography, set up the Government Accountability Institute, a conservative nonprofit, to which the Mercers donated two million dollars during the next two years. In the same period, they gave more than \$3.5 million to David

Bossie's Citizens United, and in 2013, as Jane Mayer has reported in these pages, they became the principal investors in Cambridge Analytica, a data-analytics firm, for which Bannon served as vice-president and secretary of the board. That year, Bannon reported receiving a seven-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar salary from Breitbart News, and a hundred-thousand-dollar salary from the Government Accountability Institute, according to records reviewed by the *Washington Post*.

The Mercers helped place Bannon at the center of a conservative network that intended to overthrow the political establishment. He continued making documentaries—including "Occupy Unmasked," which described the Occupy movement as the product of a broad liberal conspiracy—and used Breitbart to promote them. At the Government Accountability Institute, Schweizer wrote "Clinton Cash: The Untold Story of How and Why Foreign Governments and Businesses Helped Make Bill and Hillary Rich." The book, which was published by HarperCollins in May, 2015, played a role in raising doubts about the Clinton Foundation. Bannon made an hour-long "Clinton Cash" documentary, which was produced by Glittering Steel, a film-production company that he founded with the Mercers.

After decades of pursuing opportunities that disappointed, Bannon's appropriation of Breitbart News, and his securing the Mercers as patrons, changed everything. When Trump announced his candidacy, at Trump Tower, in 2015, Bannon saw something that others missed. Perhaps it was their temperamental similarities, and their faith in their own business instincts despite repeated failure. Trump, too, was a brash huckster who despised the élites that had always spurned him. Bannon sensed that he had finally found the figure who could express that anger, leading the populist rebellion of millions of Americans who felt they had been left behind. ♦



# THE SEEKER

*Rod Dreher thinks we've lost our religion. Do we want it back?*

BY JOSHUA ROTHMAN

**R**OD DREHER WAS forty-four when his little sister died. At the time, he was living in Philadelphia with his wife and children. His sister, Ruthie, lived in their Louisiana hometown, outside St. Francisville (pop. 1,712). Dreher's family had been there for generations, but he had never fit in. As a teen-ager, when his father and sister went hunting he stayed in his room and listened to the Talking Heads; he read "A Moveable Feast" and dreamed of Paris. He left as soon as he could, becoming a television critic for the *Washington Times* and then a film critic for the *New York Post*. He was living in Cobble Hill on 9/11, and watched the South Tower fall. He walked with his wife in Central Park. He wrote a book, "Crunchy Cons," about how conservatives like him—"Birkenstocked Burkeans" and "hip homeschooling mamas"—might change America. Ruthie never left. She was a middle-school teacher, and her husband was a firefighter. She could give a damn about Edmund Burke and the *New York Post*. She was not a crunchy con, and she found her brother annoying.

In truth, annoying wasn't the half of it—there was a rift between Dreher and his family. His father, a health inspector, had never forgiven him for moving away; his nieces found his urbanity condescending. During one New Year's visit, Dreher made bouillabaisse for his parents and his sister; they watched him cook the stew and let him serve it, then declined to eat any: they preferred meals made by a "country cook." Later, Dreher learned that Ruthie and her husband were struggling financially and resented the fact that he made twice their combined salaries for reviewing movies. His father considered him a "user"—someone who succeeded by flouting the rules. Dreher loved his father and sister for their rootedness and their vibrancy. He longed for

their approval with painful intensity.

On Mardi Gras, 2010, Ruthie was diagnosed with Stage 4 lung cancer. She was forty years old and had three daughters. Dreher began visiting St. Francisville as often as he could, and discovered that she was a pillar of the community that he had left behind. She gave Christmas gifts to the poorest neighbors and mentored the most difficult kids in school; she was a joyful presence at bonfires, creek parties, and crawfish boils. Though exhausted by chemotherapy, she drew up a list of friends in need and prayed for them every night. She made a new rule for her family: "We will not be angry at God." When friends threw her a benefit concert, a thousand people came. To Dreher, a devout Christian, she seemed beatific in her suffering. He wondered, Why does she like everybody but me?

All through Ruthie's illness, Dreher wrote about her and the rest of his family on his blog, which is hosted on the Web site of *The American Conservative*, where he is a senior editor. For a decade, daily and at length, Dreher has written about his obsessions—orthodox Christianity, religious freedom, the "L.G.B.T. agenda," the hypocrisy of privileged liberals, the nihilism of secular capitalism, the appeal of monasticism, the spiritual impoverishment of modernity, brisket—while sharing candid, emotional stories about his life. Dreher writes with graphomaniacal fervor and ardent changeability. He is as likely to admire Ta-Nehisi Coates's dispatches from Paris as to inveigh against "safe spaces" on college campuses, and he delights in skewering the left and the right simultaneously—a recent post was called "How Are Pope Francis & Donald Trump Alike?" Because Dreher is at once spiritually and intellectually restless, his blog has become a destination for the ideologically bi-curious. Last year, his interview with J. D. Vance, the author of "Hillbilly

Elegy," was largely responsible for bringing the book to the attention of both liberal and conservative readers. He gets around a million page views a month.

A bad Dreher post can be mean-spirited and overwrought, but when he's at his best his posts are unique: deeply confessional, achingly sincere, intellectually searching. The day after Ruthie died, in September, 2011, Dreher wrote a twenty-seven-hundred-word entry describing her funeral. He recalled how, the night before the service, half of St. Francisville had waited in the rain to pay their respects. Her friends sprinkled creek sand over her body, pulled up beach chairs, and sang to her. The next morning, because Ruthie often went barefoot, her daughters stood barefoot in their pew. When the funeral party arrived at the cemetery, Dreher saw that the pallbearers, too, had removed their shoes. The six burly men "carried Ruthie to her grave across the damp cemetery grounds in their bare feet," Dreher wrote. The love he had seen was "of such intense beauty that it was hard to look upon it and hold yourself together."

Ruthie's funeral made him wonder about his own life, in Philadelphia. He and his wife, Julie, had friends there, and a rich cultural life, but it was impossible to replicate the deep roots his family had in St. Francisville, which seemed an illuminated place. The people there had an expansive, natural, spontaneous relationship to God that made his own faith feel intellectual and disembodied by comparison. This, he thought, was a function of how they lived: to really know God, one had to feel as much love as possible, and to really feel love one had to live among loved ones. The following month, Dreher moved with his wife and kids to St. Francisville. His plan was to fall back in love with his family and with God at the same time.

From the porch of a rented house, he began to codify his intuitions. He



*In “The Benedict Option,” Dreher says that Christians have lost the culture wars, and calls for a “strategic retreat.”*

had long been fascinated by Benedict of Nursia, the sixth-century monk who, convinced that it was impossible to live virtuously in a fallen Roman Empire, founded a monastery where the flame of Christianity might be tended during the Dark Ages. This March, Dreher published “The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation,” which David Brooks, in the *Times*, has called “the most discussed and most important religious book of the decade.” It asks why there aren’t more places like St. Francisville—places where faith, family, and community form an integrated whole.

Dreher’s answer is that nearly everything about the modern world conspires to eliminate them. He cites the Marxist sociologist Zygmunt Bauman, who coined the term “liquid modernity” to describe a way of life in which “change is so rapid that no social institutions have time to solidify.” The most successful people nowadays are flexible and rootless; they can live anywhere and believe anything. Dreher thinks that liquid modernity is a more or less unstoppable force—in part because capitalism and technology are unstoppable. He urges Christians, therefore, to remove themselves from the currents of modernity. They should turn inward, toward a kind of modern monasticism.

AS A LONGTIME reader of Dreher’s blog—an experience alternately enthralling and exasperating—I’d always wondered what he’d be like in person. I imagined him as argumentative and intense: a twenty-first-century version of a nineteenth-century preacher. In most of the photographs I could find online, he wears thick, round glasses; as a result, I nearly didn’t recognize him when we met, earlier this spring, at a Manhattan steak house. Without them, Dreher, now fifty, has an open, vulnerable, and strikingly handsome face. His graying beard and fashionably upswept haircut suggest a Confederate soldier in a historical drama. He wore black Chelsea boots and an oversized black leather jacket, and, around his left wrist, a knotted prayer rope. “Nice to meet you, brother,” he said. He speaks slowly and quietly, with a soft Louisiana drawl.

Over dinner—Dreher, who was observing Lent, confined himself to oysters

and crab cakes—I learned what happened when he moved back to St. Francisville. “The thing that I dreamed of and hoped for didn’t work out,” he said. “They just wouldn’t accept me—not my sister’s kids, and not my dad and mom. They just could not accept that I was so different from them. I worshipped my dad—he was the strongest and wisest man I knew—but he was a country man, a *Southern* country man, and I just wasn’t. All that mattered was that I wasn’t like them. It just broke me.” He fell into a depression and was diagnosed with chronic mono, then went into therapy and read Dante. When Dreher speaks, his emotions flow across his face with complete transparency, changing phrase by phrase. (His glasses, I realized, provide him with some emotional privacy.) As he told his story, he looked freshly wounded, as if it had all happened that morning.

Dreher had planned to travel the next day to Washington, D.C., where he was scheduled to give a talk at the National Press Club, but a blizzard struck the East Coast. Because trains were cancelled, his publisher hired a driver to take him there that evening, after dinner, through the storm. Dreher sat in the back seat, his hands folded in his lap, regarding with serenity the spun-out cars along the highway. “I’ve been thinking a lot lately about my own longing for order,” he said. “I think it has to do with my dad. He was such a force. You thought the sun was in the sky in the morning because Daddy had hung it there, while he was making our honey buns and getting us ready for the school-bus ride.”

Ray O. Dreher grew up so poor that his family hunted squirrels for food. He liked to build, repair, hunt, and fish, and his forearms were freckled from the sun. He raised Rod and Ruthie with a firm sense of right and wrong. When he saw or read about an alcoholic, a philanderer, a shoplifter, he said, as if stating a fact, “That’s not how we do things.”

Once, when Dreher was seven, he did something mean to his sister—he doesn’t remember what—and his father told him it was time for a spanking. Dreher lay face down on the bed while his dad removed his belt. Then Ruthie, who was five, ran into the room and threw herself over him; she cried, “Whip *me!* Daddy, whip *me!*” After a moment, Dre-

her’s father and sister left. He remained on the bed, mystified by what had happened. He sometimes wonders if his sister’s later wariness toward him flowed not from a divergence of values but from some long-forgotten habit of childhood cruelty for which he was never punished.

When Dreher was fourteen, he went hunting with Ray and Ruthie, and, with a shotgun, he killed two baby squirrels. Filled with remorse, he sat on the ground and cried. “You sissy,” his father growled.

Year by year, the distance between father and son grew. In college, at L.S.U., Dreher was a leftist who invited Abbie Hoffman to campus; he tried to debate politics with his father, who once responded, in genuine bewilderment, “Why would I lie to you?” It was as though his dad couldn’t comprehend the concept of difference. Dreher describes his father and his sister as “Bayou Confucians.” He explains, “They had this idea that, if you did what you were supposed to do, you would succeed. I didn’t do those things, but I didn’t fail, and that drove them crazy.” (Dreher moved right after college—he has worked as a blogger for *National Review* but now says that he is more “traditionalist” than conservative: “I think there’s an individualism at the center of both parties—the economic individualism of the Republicans and the secular, social individualism of the Democrats—that I find really incongruous with what I believe to be true because of my religion.”)

In South Louisiana, religion was everywhere, but, as a kid, Dreher was indifferent to it. Then, when he was seventeen, his mother, Dorothy, won a trip to Europe in a raffle and sent Rod in her place. He visited Chartres and felt judged by the beauty of the cathedral. He began to take religion seriously. When he was eighteen, he went to see Pope John Paul II at the Superdome, in New Orleans. The Pope appeared, and a thought flashed in Dreher’s mind: “I wish he were my dad.” In his twenties, Dreher wanted nothing more than to fall in love—he had a poster for the French film “Betty Blue” on his bedroom wall—but his romances felt increasingly shallow, even sad, compared with what he’d seen in France. At twenty-six, he converted to Catholicism. Fed up with what he perceived as his own cad-dishness—he had dated one girlfriend

longer than he should have—he decided to embrace chastity until marriage. Three years later, he proposed to Julie in a church, kneeling before an icon.

Dreher left Catholicism in 2006; after covering the Catholic sex-abuse scandal for the *Post* and *The American Conservative*, he found it impossible to go to church without feeling angry. He and his wife converted to Eastern Orthodoxy, and, with a few other families, opened their own Orthodox mission church, near St. Francisville, sending away for a priest. It was Dreher's Orthodox priest, Father Matthew, who laid down the law. "He said, 'You have no choice as a Christian: you've got to love your dad even if he doesn't love you back in the way that you want him to,'" Dreher recalled. "You cannot stand on justice: love matters more than justice, because the higher justice is love." When Dreher struggled to master his feelings, Father Matthew told him to perform a demanding Orthodox ritual called the Optina Rule. He recited the Jesus Prayer—"Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner"—hundreds of times a day.

Two life-changing events occurred after Dreher began the regimen of prayer. He was alone at home one evening, lying in bed, when he sensed a presence in the room. "I felt a hand reach inside my heart and put a stone there," he said. "And I could see, in some interior way, that the stone said, 'God loves me.' I'd doubted all my life that God really loved me." A few months later, Dreher stopped by his dad's house to organize his medications. Ray was sitting on the porch, reading the newspaper and drinking coffee. When Dreher leaned down to kiss him on the cheek, his father grabbed him by the arm. Tears were in his eyes. "He was stammering," Dreher recalled. "He said, 'I—I—I spent a long time talking to the Lord last night about you, and the transgressions I did against you. And I told him I was sorry. And I think he heard me.'" Recounting the story in the back seat of the car en route to D.C., Dreher still seemed astonished that this had happened. "I kissed him, and said, 'I love you.'"

Dreher's father died in 2015. The next summer, the mission lost its priest and one of the founding families moved away. To be near an Orthodox church, Dre-



"No, the other kitten."

her and his family moved to Baton Rouge. Looking back on his time in St. Francisville, Dreher thinks that, if he hadn't moved there and then forced himself to follow the rules—prayer, proximity, love—he would have stayed an angry child forever.

**T**HE BENEDICT OPTION traces the decline of faith in the West all the way back to a fourteenth-century debate about the nature of God. God tells us how to be good—but are the things he deems good actually good in themselves, or good just because God says they are? According to one group, the "realists," God is constrained by reality: the goodness toward which he points really exists in the world. According to the second group, the "nominalists," God is totally free: simply by saying that something is good, he makes it so.

The nominalists thought they were doing God a favor, by recognizing his power. In fact, Dreher writes, they undermined him. Today, most people are nom-

inalists. They doubt that entities like God, beauty, and evil are real in the same sense that the physical world is real. Even if they believe in God, they imagine a boundary between the transcendent plane, where God lives, and our material one. This boundary makes God abstract—a designer, a describer, a storyteller—rather than a concrete presence in our everyday life. By contrast, the early Christians were realists. They lived "sacramentally," as though the world itself were charged with God's presence. Last year, in a blog post called "Re-Sacramentalizing My Life," Dreher wrote, "We won't start to recover spiritually and morally until we begin to recover this ancient Christian vision to some significant degree—though how we Christians in postmodernity do so out of our own traditions is a very difficult question."

"I liken liquid modernity to the Great Flood of the Bible," Dreher said, at the National Press Club, speaking to a standing-room-only crowd of priests and journalists. The election of Donald Trump,

he said, proved that the country was in the midst of a profound moral and spiritual crisis; the fact that so many Christians voted for him suggested a weakness in their faith. American Christianity had been replaced with “a malleable, feel-good, Jesus-lite philosophy perfectly suited to a consumerist, individualistic, post-Christian society that worships the self,” he said. “The flood cannot be turned back. The best we can do is construct arks within which we can ride it out, and by God’s grace make it across the dark sea of time to a future when we do find dry land again, and can start the rebuilding, reseeding, and renewal of the earth.”

Christians have always lived together in intentional communities. The Book of Acts describes how the early Christians, having sold their possessions, held “everything in common.” In the nineteen-sixties, a wave of Christian communes sprang up, some inspired by the counterculture, others reacting against it. In the main, however, Christians have sought to make America itself one big Christian community. Dreher thinks that this effort, most recently associated with the religious right, has been a disastrous mistake—it has led Christians to worship the idol of politics instead of strengthening their own faith. “I believe that politics in the Benedict Option should be localist,” he said. The idea was not to enter a monastery, exactly. But Christians should consider living in tight-knit, faith-centered communities, in the manner of Modern Orthodox Jews. They should follow rules and take vows. They should admit that the culture wars had been lost—same-sex marriage was the law of the land—and focus on their own spiritual lives. They should strive to make Christian life meaningfully different from life under high-tech, secular capitalism; they should take inspiration from Catholic dissidents under Communism, such as the Czech activist Václav Benda, who advocated the creation of a “parallel polis”—a society within a society. They should pray more often. Start their own schools. Move near their church. St. Benedict, Dreher said, didn’t try to “make Rome great again.” He tended his own garden, finding a way to live that served as “a sign of contradiction” to the declining world around him.

After a Q. & A. session—Was it re-

We really want them to like us. We want it to go well. We overdress. They are narrow people, art people, offhand, linens. It is early summer, first hot weekend. We meet on the street, jumble about with kisses and are we late? They had been late, we’d half-decided to leave, now oh well. That place across the street, ever tried it? Think we went there once, looks closed, says open, well. People coming out. O.K. Inside is dark, cool, oaken. Turns out they know the owner. He beams, ushers, we sit. And realize at once two things, first, the noise is unbearable, two, neither of us knows the other well enough to say bag it. Our hearts crumble. We order food by pointing and break into two yell factions, one each side of the table. He and she both look exhausted, from (I suppose) doing art all day and then the new baby. We eat intently, as if eating were conversation. We keep passing the bread. My fish comes unboned, I weep pretending allergies. Finally someone pays the bill and we escape to the street. For some reason I was expecting snow outside. There is none. We decide not to go for ice cream and part, a little more broken. Saturday night as an adult, so this is it. We thought we’d be Nick and Nora, not their blurred friends in greatcoats. We cover our ears inside our souls. But you can’t stop it that way.

—Anne Carson

ally a good idea for Christians to live more cloistered lives?—Dreher made his way to a table, where he sat down to sign copies of “The Benedict Option.” A line stretched down the hall and around the corner. Many of those in it were longtime readers of his blog, and he seemed relieved to be offstage and among his people. (A friend of Dreher’s told me that, if Dreher had stayed in Brooklyn, he would have found exactly the kind of thick community he longed for: “He left too soon.”)

“I can’t do what I normally do when I’m waiting in line, which is read a new blog post from you,” one man said.

Dreher chuckled. “That’s me! Rod Dreher: no unblogged thoughts!” He wrestles with his addiction to blogging and to Twitter, and has covered the Apple logo on his laptop, which he calls “my precious,” with a sticker of the Benedictine emblem.

A well-dressed, middle-aged couple ambled up. “If I take the Benedict Option, I may have to give up reading you,” the man said. Laughing, his wife said that reading Dreher’s blog was the first thing that her husband did each morning.

“Give it up!” Dreher told him, pleased but embarrassed. “At least for Lent. It’ll increase your holiness.”

Two Dominican friars were next. One of them introduced himself as Brother Henry. “If you’d write something about the Dominican Option, I don’t have money to pay you, but I’d be tickled pink,” he said. He joked that he had been personally offended by the negative use of the word “cloistered” during the Q. & A.: “Hey, I actually live in a cloister!” Dreher looked a little awed as he signed Brother Henry’s book.

DREHER TAKES THE phrase “the Benedict Option” from “After Virtue,” a 1981 work by the Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre argued that Western civilization had lost its ability to think coherently about moral life. The problem was the Enlightenment, which put individuals in charge of deciding for themselves what was right and wrong. This, MacIntyre thought, rendered moral language meaningless. Try to say that something is “good,” and you end up saying only that it’s “good (to me)” —whatever that means. It becomes impossible to settle moral questions or to enforce moral rules; the best we can do is agree to disagree. Such a world falls into the hands of managers and technocrats, who excel at the perfection of means but lack the tools

with which to think deeply about ends. Surviving this new age of darkness might call for the construction of local forms of community, where a realist approach to morality lives on. Today, MacIntyre wrote, “we are waiting not for a Godot but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict.”

Dreher’s book describes a number of intentional “Benedict Option communities” that serve, in his view, as arks in a liquidly modern sea. (Dreher hopes that many different kinds of communities—even, in theory, Muslim and Jewish ones—will adopt the “Benedict Option” label.) One is in Hyattsville, Maryland, a small suburb of Washington, D.C. The community has no name—residents just call it Hyattsville—but, judging from the size of its two gendered Listservs (“Barn Raisers,” for men, and “Hyattsville Catholic Women”), around two hundred Catholic families live there, in modest brick homes with front porches. They send their kids to St. Jerome Academy, a local Catholic school that they have more or less taken over.

The Hyattsville community got its start after Chris Currie, a public-relations consultant with a philosophy degree from Georgetown, moved there with his family in 1997. He persuaded his friends to join him, and one thing led to another. (He’s now the director of institutional advancement at St. Jerome’s.) Although Dreher had corresponded with Currie, he had never been there, and it took several minutes of pre-dawn driving to find Vigilante Coffee, where we had agreed to meet. Hyattsville’s relative affordability is especially appealing to large Catholic families, and the café was in an industrial space that might once have belonged to a body shop. Inside, indie rock jangled on the sound system. One wall was decorated with colorfully painted skateboards.

Currie turned out to be a tall man in a dark suit, with an emphatic, energetic manner. He was discussing Vigilante’s unofficial Catholic mission with Diane Contreras, the coffee shop’s thirty-year-old manager, who had moved to Hyattsville a few years ago, from Los Angeles, where she’d been a teacher at a charter school.

“The baristas here, some are Catholic, some aren’t,” Contreras said. “But we’re always talking about: How do you

effect goodness in the world through your actions in the café? I want to be Catholic in every part of my world. That’s what I’m trying to do here, through coffee.”

“It’s all very intersectional,” Currie observed.

Although Dreher is voluble in one-on-one conversations, he is quieter in groups. He looked on in eager curiosity, resembling, in his thick glasses, long leather jacket, and black boots, a monk from some arctic monastery.

Currie led us outside, where we climbed a steep hill toward the school, an imposing brick pile. Inside, in the hallway, we passed a diverse group of students in Catholic-school uniforms. In the principal’s office—a dingy, institutional room with seafoam-colored walls—Currie introduced us to Michelle Trudeau, the vice-principal, and Merrill Roberts, a science teacher. Both had children at St. Jerome’s. Trudeau, who had an air of ironic mischief, had come to Hyattsville after dropping out of an anthropology Ph.D. program at Columbia; Roberts was about to finish his doctorate in solar physics at Catholic University, which is nearby.

They described some typical communal events. “Sunday-evening prayer is one of the largest community draws,” Roberts said. “People get together at somebody’s house and pray the office and have a big potluck dinner.”

“I trained in anthropology, and I was really interested in culture and theology, and this community has a lot of richness in those areas,” Trudeau said. “I’ve belonged to a bunch of book clubs in my life. They were always, ‘Did you like the book?’ ‘Yeah . . .’ Then it was celebrity sightings and what restaurant have you been to recently.” In Hyattsville, she said, book-club conversations included philosophy and theology, and continued afterward, on the Listserv.

“Well, on the men’s Listserv we talk about trading tools,” Roberts said, to general laughter.

In a teacherly way, Dreher broke in. “There’s something very Benedictine about the simple things, like exchanging tools,” he said. “That’s how Benedictine life is—contemplation is a part

of it, but it’s also how to eat together. I like how St. Benedict says, in his Rule, ‘Treat your utensils like they were tools for the altar.’ In other words, he’s saying, treat everything as sacred, as a gift. If you do that, even the ordinary things you do can be done for Christ and for your neighbors.”

“I think that’s right,” Roberts said. “You can sanctify the simple things.”

“I mean, there are downsides,” Currie said. “The other day—it was seventhirty in the morning—I was in the bathroom, and somebody knocked on the door. It was one of my Catholic neighbors. He didn’t apologize for it or anything. He was on his morning run, and he thought, ‘Oh, I’d like to talk to Chris about this.’”

“If you want to be a little more private, or isolated, then this might be kind of a difficult place to live,” Roberts said. “But that’s the point of intentional community. I tell myself, I chose to be part of this. I want my neighbors to talk to me about their lives. This conversation is a higher good.”

“People today, they want close community without sacrifice,” Dreher said. “They want the good things, and they want to edit out the bad things. But you cannot have that closeness without being up in each other’s business. The benefits come at a price.”

Afterward, in the car, Dreher seemed unusually quiet. We talked for a while about what distinguished a religious community like Hyattsville from a secular commune of progressives. (Dreher thinks that faith is the only rudder deep

enough to change the course of life for an entire community and its children: “Religion isn’t a statement of how we feel about things but a standard to which we have to conform.”) We discussed the extroversion

and effervescence of the Hyattsville Catholics (“That’s the difference between a monastery and a community”).

Our visit had been short, but he seemed wistful, even a little sad, to be leaving a place where he might have belonged. In a 2013 post, Dreher meditates on his perennial outsidership. He says he likes visiting places where he could live but doesn’t—places where he



SHOWCASE BY PARI DUKOVIC



*A Rei Kawakubo design from an exhibition of her work opening on May 4th at the Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute.*

is “a stranger, but not strange”—more than he enjoys fitting in at home. “I don’t want to feel this way, but I do,” he writes. He wonders if he is “an outsider by nature,” chasing a “sense of fitting-in, of Home, that. . . I am incapable of experiencing.”

One of Dreher’s favorite writers is Walker Percy, whose novel “The Moviegoer” is set in a fictionalized version of West Feliciana parish, where St. Francisville is situated. (Every year, Dreher hosts a Walker Percy Weekend, combining lectures from literary scholars with crawfish, bourbon, and beer.) Binx Bolling, the book’s protagonist, is a young stockbroker who finds himself on “the search”—the search being “what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life.” Binx explains, “To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.”

The Catholics in Hyattsville seemed happy and at home. Later, in New York, I met some young Benedict Option Christians who seemed, like Dreher, to be on the search. Over artisanal mac-and-cheese, Leah and Alexi Sargeant told me about their own “Ben Op” initiatives. She was twenty-seven, worked for an altruistic for-profit, and wore a T-shirt advertising the “Metaphysical Transit Authority”; he was twenty-four, sported a bow tie, and worked as an editorial assistant for the religious magazine *First Things*. They had organized Benedict Option-themed poetry recitations and had begun hosting dinner parties for their Christian friends. An entire gathering had been devoted to debating the Benedict Option.

“We did an evening of job applications and prayer, because job applications suck,” Leah said. “Applying for jobs is profoundly depressing. When you don’t hear back, the message is: ‘You’re worthless.’ And that feeling of worthlessness isn’t only unpleasant. It’s untrue, from the point of view of being a Christian.” For the Lenten season, Alexi had adopted a new habit: praying morning office—a liturgical ritual that varies according to the calendar—with the help of a smartphone app, as he walked to work.

“It’s more techy than Rod would like, but it’s still great,” he said.

Another young Ben Op Christian

who lives in New York told me that she didn’t share Dreher’s sense of outsider-ness. “I grew up on the Upper West Side,” she said. “This is my St. Francisville.” At the same time, she said, “when I was growing up, there were these moments in the fall when you’d be walking in Central Park, and you’d see that pink, 7-P.M.-in-September sunlight on the buildings, and it seemed like there was another place the city was pointing to.” In an existential sense, she said, Christianity figured human beings as “resident aliens” in the world; the Benedict Option gave a name to the deliberate maintenance of that difference. Several years ago, with some friends who were also readers of Dreher’s, she had tried to start a theologically conservative church. She saw the church that she currently attended, in Manhattan, as a “deliberate community.” “A couple from my church lives in my house,” she said.

“What the Ben Op means to me is this,” Leah told me. “You’re married, right? Imagine a world where people didn’t agree that marriage was a concept—where there was no social understanding of marriage. And imagine that your marriage was really important to you, and that, when you interacted with other people, no one mentioned your marriage; there was no respect for it and no acknowledgment of its existence. You would do a lot to claw out some space to manifest that your marriage was important. And that’s how it is with the Benedict Option. We have a relationship with Christ. Really, it should be our most important relationship. But my relationship with Alexi is treated as more real and important and relevant. If I say, ‘Oh, I can’t make it, Alexi and I have a thing,’ that’s normal. But if I say, ‘Sorry, I have to go to church,’ that’s weird.”

They weren’t sure if they would stay in New York or move somewhere else. They loved the city, but its values—competition, individualism, transience, capitalism—seemed in tension with their faith. They were still making up their minds about how they wanted to live.

**T**HE UPSIDE OF being a realist—of believing that the rules are as real, in their way, as the sky and the earth—is that you live in a morally sanctified world. The downside is that you risk

being a realist about the wrong set of rules. Toward the end of our time together, I told Dreher that his life story seemed very similar to those of many gay men I knew. He had grown up in the South, with a hypermasculine father who found his sensitivity and difference alienating; he had gone away to find himself, and, since then, has struggled for a place in the world he left behind. Surely, I said, he must have sympathy for gay Christians. And yet Dreher is certain that gay marriage is wrong.

Like many orthodox Christian intellectuals, Dreher holds labyrinthine views on homosexuality. He is opposed to same-sex marriage but in favor of civil unions. In principle, he is against gay adoption, but in practice, he told me, “there are so many gay couples who are wonderful parents that I find it hard to maintain any ardor for stopping it.” Early in our correspondence, he referred me to an essay called “The Civic Project of American Christianity,” by Michael Hanby, a Catholic philosopher. The essay represents same-sex marriage not as a rights issue but as part of an ongoing, technology-driven revolution in our view of personhood. Hanby argues that, where we used to see human beings as possessing intrinsic properties—masculinity, femininity, the ability to glorify God through procreation—we now take a nominalist view of ourselves, seeing our bodies as subservient to our minds. We use technology, such as the birth-control pill, to subvert the natural way of things. Gay marriage, in this account, is a stepping-stone to a profoundly technologized society in which “the rejection of nature” is complete. Today, it’s sex-reassignment surgery and surrogacy; tomorrow, we’ll be genetically engineering our way into a post-human future.

The point of the essay is that there’s an irreducible conflict between orthodox Christianity and political liberalism. On his blog, Dreher acknowledges that “gays, understandably, find their personal dignity insulted by people who believe that their sexuality is in any way deficient.” He writes that gay couples can “genuinely, deeply, and sacrificially love each other.” Still, he maintains,

“our bodies have intrinsic moral meaning. Christian orthodoxy is not nominalist.” He regularly defends religious people who act illiberally “for conscience reasons”—Orthodox Jews, traditionalist Muslims, the florist Baronelle Stutzman, who was sued when she refused to provide flowers for a gay wedding.

Dreher’s many critics sound a few common notes. They argue, first, that he is an alarmist about the decline of Christianity, and that he exaggerates the legal threats to its orthodox expression. They say that he has a blind spot about race and class, and note that many Christians seem just fine with the way society is changing. (“Ten years from now, ‘The Benedict Option’ will be an interesting artifact showing just how anxious white conservative Christians were about their changing place in society,” Robert P. Jones, who runs the Public Religion Research Institute, told me.) A deeper criticism is that Dreher’s anti-pluralism is too pessimistic—a rejection of the American project. Dreher writes that, on gay marriage, there can be “no tenable compromise” between orthodox Christians and progressives; many Christians would prefer a softer approach. They agree with Patrick Gilger, a Jesuit priest who, in a review of “The Benedict Option,” complained that Dreher’s “reading of pluralism as a problem prevents him from seeing it as a gift.” Earlier this year, *Christianity Today* put Dreher and “The Benedict Option” on its cover, and asked four experts to weigh in. John Inazu, a law professor at Washington University in St. Louis who focusses on religion and free speech, argued that Christians should avoid Dreher’s defensiveness and embrace “confident pluralism”: “Our confidence in the gospel lets us find common ground with others even when we can’t agree on a common good.” When it comes to same-sex marriage, in other words, even orthodox Christians tend to be nominalist. They’d prefer to say, “Gay marriage is wrong (to me).”

The writer Andrew Sullivan, who is gay and Catholic, is one of Dreher’s good friends. Their friendship began in earnest in 2010, when Ruthie got sick and Dreher, moved by a spirit of generalized repentance, e-mailed Sullivan to apologize for anything “hard-hearted”

he might have said in their various online arguments. Sullivan has a long-standing disagreement with Dreher over same-sex marriage, but he believes that the religiously devout should be permitted their dissent. “There is simply no way for an orthodox Catholic to embrace same-sex marriage,” he said. “The attempt to conflate that with homophobia is a sign of the unthinking nature of some liberal responses to religion. I really don’t think that florists who don’t want to contaminate themselves with a gay wedding should in any way be compelled to do so. I think any gay person that wants them to do that is being an asshole, to be honest—an intolerant asshole. Rod forces you to understand what real pluralism is: actually accepting people with completely different world views than your own.”

In “The Benedict Option,” Dreher writes that “the angry vehemence with which many gay activists condemn Christianity” is the understandable result of a history of “rejection and hatred by the church.” Orthodox Christians need to acknowledge this history, he continues, and “repent of it.” He has assured his children that, if they are gay, he will still love them; he is almost—but not quite—apologetic about his views, which he presents as a theological obligation. He sees orthodox Christians as powerless against the forces of liquidly modern progressivism; on his blog, he argues that “the question is not really ‘What are you conservative Christians prepared to tolerate?’ but actually ‘What are LGBTs and progressive allies prepared to tolerate?’” He wants them to be magnanimous in victory; to refrain from pressing their advantage. Essentially, he says to progressives: You’ve won. You wouldn’t sue Orthodox Jews or observant Muslims. Please don’t sue us, either.

“What I really love about Rod is that, even as he’s insisting upon certain truths, he’s obviously completely conflicted,” Sullivan said. “And he’s a mess! I don’t think he’d disagree with that. But he’s a mess in the best possible way, because he hasn’t anesthetized himself. He’s honest about a lot of the questions that many liberal and conservative Christians aren’t really addressing.” Talking to Sullivan about Dreher, I was reminded of Father Matthew’s law:

“You’ve got to love your dad even if he doesn’t love you back in the way that you want him to.”

TWO DAYS AFTER his visit to Hyattsville, Dreher returned to Manhattan to talk about the Benedict Option at the Union League Club, in midtown. Various Christians came out to see him. A flock of young men in gingham hailed from *The American Conservative*; hip-looking Manhattanites slouched in their seats; Orthodox priests, wearing dark robes and heavy crosses, waggled their beards in groups. In sober suits and head scarves, men and women from the Bruderhof, a vowed community in upstate New York, stood on the fringes of the crowd, behind tables stacked with copies of their magazine, *Plough*. There are a number of Bruderhof communities around the world—the first was founded in Germany, in 1920—and those who take the membership vows agree to give up private property and embrace non-violence. Their presence seemed to have the effect of supporting and challenging Dreher simultaneously.

After Dreher spoke, there were a few respondents. Ross Douthat, the conservative *Times* columnist, suggested that even a watered-down version of the Benedict Option was useful: all religious people could stand to be a little more devout. Jacqueline Rivers, who directs the Seymour Institute for Black Church and Policy Studies, said that the Benedict Option was unlikely to help Christians address social injustices like segregation and inequality; in fact, it might perpetuate them. (Dreher’s theory is that intentional communities, by “living in truth,” can inspire the rest of us to change in more worldly ways.)

The most striking comments came from Randall Gauger, a bishop at the Bruderhof, who, with his wife, had lived for many years in a Bruderhof community in Australia. (They now live in a Pennsylvania Bruderhof community.) A bald man in his sixties wearing a tan sports coat, a black shirt, and a tan tie, Gauger described what he and his wife had done after “withdrawing.” They hung out with their neighbors at barbecues; they babysat and visited elderly shut-ins. Gauger became a police chaplain. Other Bruderhof members became firefighters or E.M.T.s. They collaborated with farmers

on sustainable agriculture, partnered with charities, volunteered in “crisis situations,” and hosted thousands of guests, including politicians and Aboriginal leaders. “Would we have done as much as a solitary nuclear family?” Gauger asked. “I doubt it.” He pointed out that capitalist society caters to people with “extraordinary talents”: “Only in a communal church can the old and the very young, hurting military veterans, the disabled, the mentally ill, ex-addicts, ex-felons, or simply annoying people, like myself, find a place where they can be healed and accepted and, what’s more, contribute to life.” His criticism of “The Benedict Option” was that it did not go far enough. “Why stop at Benedict when we can go back to the original source of Christianity? Christians living in full community is how the church began . . . and the early church was far more radical than anything Rod has so far proposed.” Dreher, sitting next to him onstage, listened, enraptured, with his head on his hand.

Afterward, Dreher and the other panelists retreated to the club’s library. Bartenders served the Benedict Option (“another—doubtless very different—cocktail,” made with whiskey, amaro, St-Germain, lemon juice, and simple syrup). Dreher, aglow, worked the room.

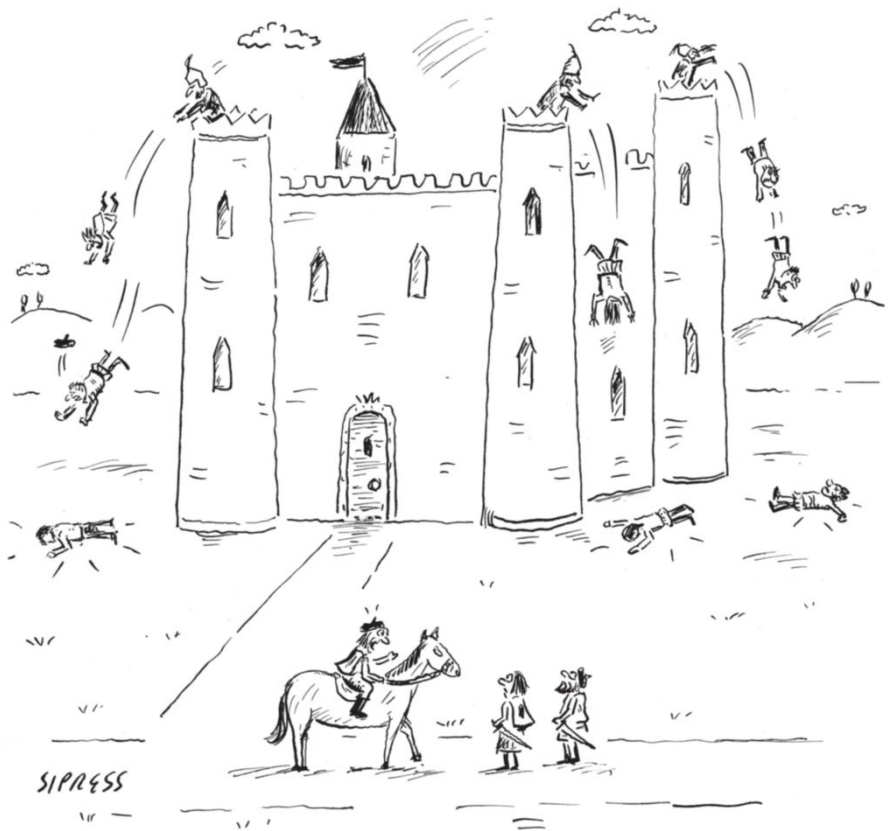
“Everybody’s feeling a bit of a spiritual earthquake,” Jonathan Coppage, a onetime colleague of Dreher’s at *The American Conservative*, said. “He’s a seeker. He’s a rolling stone.”

Mattia Ferraresi, the New York correspondent for *Il Foglio*, mused on Dreher’s Americanness. “The idea of a ‘community’ that’s somehow separated, I think it’s foreign to Italians,” he said. “For us, it’s about blending and layering in a small space—the Romans, the Church . . .”

“Part of the problem with religion is that it can just be an aestheticization of life,” a young Orthodox priest from Yonkers said. “It’s still late-modern capitalism working its insidious tentacles. We need a vocabulary to get outside of that.”

A group of fresh-faced young people from the Bruderhof hung together in a book nook. They were not drinking Benedict Options.

Dreher had long been fascinated by the Bruderhof, and the next morning he travelled upstate to learn more about the community. Members of the Bruderhof



“Major shakeup of the senior staff.”

told me they were uncomfortable with a journalist tagging along, so after his visit Dreher called to tell me what it had been like. He had sung with them in church and eaten with them in their communal dining hall. (Their brewmaster, unfortunately, was out of beer.) He had stayed with a family who lived without television or the Internet, and he read stories to their little boy. He’d visited the primary school; in a classroom, he noticed a teacher holding a child in her arms.

“Oh, he’s asleep,” Dreher observed.

“No, he has cerebral palsy,” his guide said.

“It was like a Pietà, that woman with that boy in her arms,” Dreher told me. “If that child were out in the world, who knows how expensive his treatment would be. It would be thoroughly medicalized and impersonal. Later, I saw him being brought into the luncheon assembly with his dad and his mom.” The very old, too, are fully integrated into Bruderhof life, Dreher said. A man he met had told him, “One of the measures of our community is how much dignity we give to our elderly.” Dreher said that he

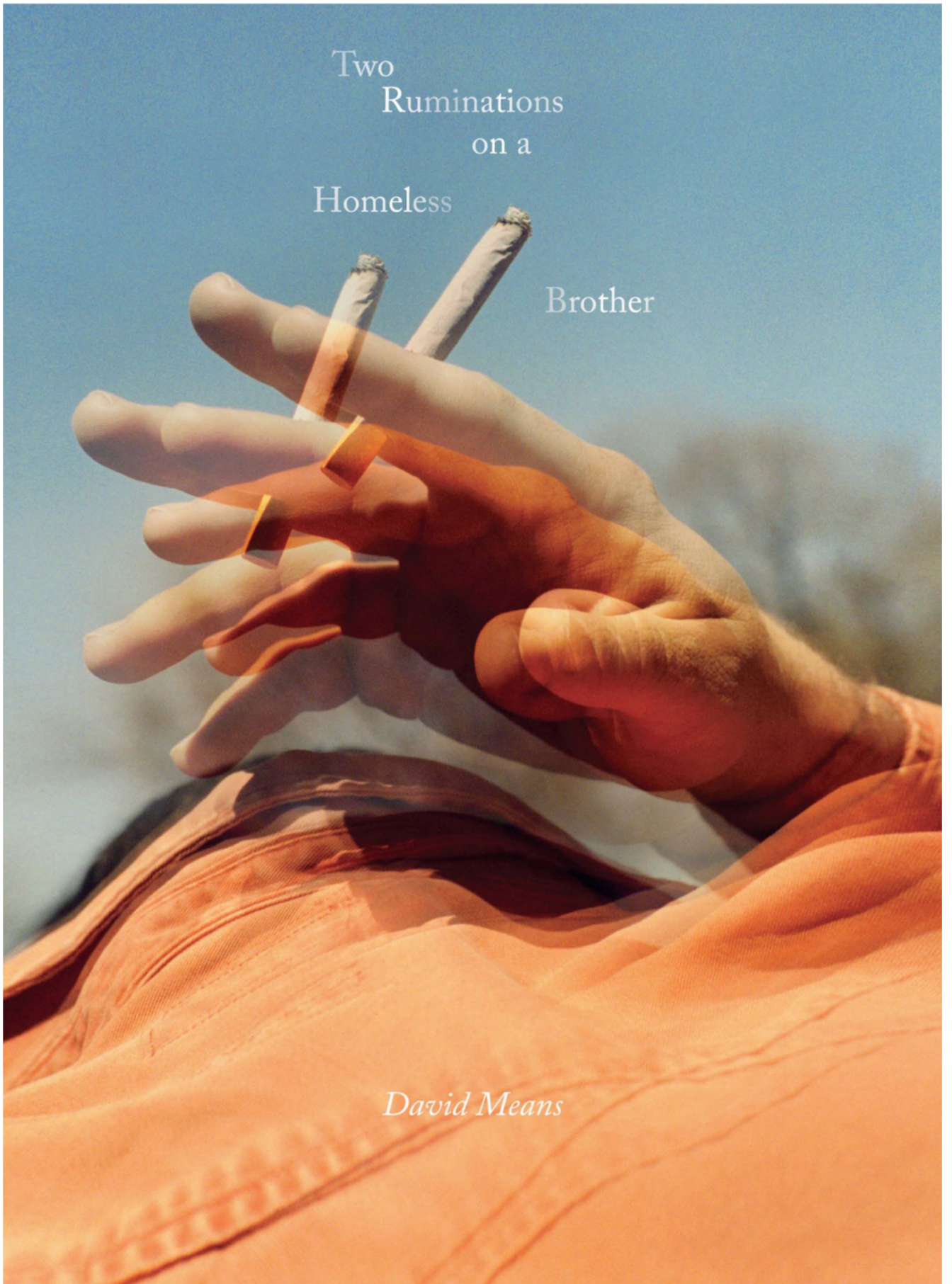
now regretted the occasionally “shrill” tone of his book: “I’m truly trying to shake people out of their complacency about church, but to visit the Bruderhof is to go to a place of quiet and contemplation and kindness. I wish I’d been able to capture more of that.” He urged me to go to the Bruderhof Web site, where I could read the community’s rule of life.

“There seemed to be such order there,” Dreher said. “Not a forced, grim, tense order—just life. Life wasn’t directed by the television or the computer. It was ordered by the sacred. They’ve sacrificed their liberty and their comfort in ways I would probably find impossible. The gentleness of the people, how serene they seemed, and not in any weird or ethereal way—it reminded me of the old country people I grew up with around South Louisiana. They were just more at home in the world than I am. At the Bruderhof, they seem so . . . normal. It makes me think, Who are the abnormal ones here? These people, who live in such close rhythm with their own lives and the life of the church, or people like me, who live like I do?” He paused. “It was a sign to me of what could be.” ♦

Two  
Ruminations  
on a  
Homeless

Brother

*David Means*



THERE'S THIS old man who walks along the fence next to the hospital, or, say, down near town, wobbling in his loose, flapping shoes, digging around in the garbage can on the corner, smoking a cigarette, clutching it between his battered fingers, or simply walking with his shoulders braced as if he knew he was some kind of fodder for speculation, because it seems to be so consistent, his homeless rooting, keeping to a pattern, moving south on Midland Avenue for a half mile to Franklin Place and then left on Franklin and down Franklin to River Road, along River Road to Front Street, left on Front and up Front back to Midland, and then, presumably, around again. By virtue of his consistency, he has edged his way into the consciousness of just about everybody who has driven more than once down Midland Avenue, or Front Street, or, to a lesser degree, Franklin Place.

Rain or shine, for about a year and a half, give or take, he has slogged with the same gimp, the same loping swing of arms, the same cigarette burning between his fingers, and he's rooted in the same trash cans—the one on the corner of Midland and Franklin, or the one on the corner of River and Front. Leaning down with his underwear showing in winter, pale yellow, say, or his pants hiked up too far over his shirt in summer, he goes against the elemental facts in a disconcerting way that makes those passing him shrug and wonder briefly what his story might be before going back to their lives, half caring and half not caring, subsumed in the responsibilities at hand, so to speak, or caring deeply with a flash of intense sadness and wonder, resolving to sign up to work at the shelter in town, the Soup Haven, or whatever it's called, or not caring one iota and getting riled up thinking about the ease with which a man can pass his life in what must be a pleasurable vortex of non-time that comes from following a set path day after day, say, insane or on the edge of insanity, as a way of escaping responsibilities, dodging them for the poetic stance of being the odd homeless gent, strangely formal in the way he daintily roots, poking at the trash with a stick, his face like that of

an old sea captain, say, or of a farmhand of some type, which leads some to speculate that he was once one of those ship workers, river pilots who at times come in to land at the dock on the river to catch a cab down to the Bronx, expounding stories of bridge heights and the way the tides have to be calculated before you take a ship upriver, attesting to the way it all works—one man captaining the boat from the harbor to the river mouth, another bringing it upriver. Weather-beaten, some think while passing him on a windy day, watching the way he lists with his arms out at his sides, winglike, the tail of his shirt fluttering behind him as he walks.

The way he roots through the garbage cans in the winter snow and in the summer heat with an admirable persistence serves as a touchstone, fuelled by the concept of mental illness afloat over the land, even, say, for the less educated observers who just see him and think, Fucking crazy old homeless bastard hanging in there, still going, still doing his thing. The phrase “mental illness” shrouds his body as he walks, and orients him, slips him like a peg into whatever dreamy ideas of madness fill the minds of those passing and pushes away the thought that he is, in a way, say, a reflection of some part of themselves that might, someday, under the right circumstances—a financial loss leading to ruin, say, or some neurological disorder, an improper linking of nerves, or a shady haze of undetected tumor, or some sharp trauma abrupt enough to throw off their general balance—irrevocably force them into the same circumstances, wandering day after day, sticking to the same general pattern, stopping to dig in the public trash can for discarded bottles or scraps of food or newspapers to read.

Those who pass have had a sense that perhaps, at least in theory, at least as some kind of innate potential, they may—unlikely, hugely unlikely—someday find themselves in the same circumstances, although with variations, of course, find themselves feeling something that isn't simply shame but something deeper in the self, an obliviousness that allows for wandering in ice-cold air with your shirt wide open, a deprivation of life force, or of gumption, or of will that could leave you

shuffling through a limited space, say, always keeping close to the safety of shelter if there is shelter, or to the house of older parents who, bewildered by the state of your life, will take you in and give you a bed and care for you as best as they can, telling you to stay in when it's cold, building a fire, listening and waiting for you to speak with coherence, to give a sign that somehow you are going to pull out of this and get your life back together, say, or that you are just gathering your equilibrium and finding a foothold in reality, or at least in common sense, having known you—your parents—when you were a full-blown functioning adult in the world, making deals, establishing relationships with others, cleaning your body and dressing in accordance with the climatic conditions, enjoying good days and bad days, lingering over the beauty of the world, over, say, an amazingly graceful football play in which the receiver hooks his arm up without looking to clutch the ball in a way that seems to defy not only the nature of physics itself but something more, the potential in the act itself, or, better yet, over, say, the way a kid, like your own son or daughter, if you have one, looks up at you, beaming after accomplishing some new task, such as putting a round peg into a round hole instead of a square one, or, even better, over, say, the way the pianist Sviatoslav Richter occasionally held back from playing while the audience waited and grew impatient, first making noise, mumbling and talking, anxious and expectant, while he sat on the bench and held his fingers poised to play, letting the sound of the Moscow hall reverberate with all the coughing and tense laughter, the whispering, and then waited and waited until a deep quiet fell, a silence that anticipated the first notes and then grew even deeper, it was said, until there was nothing but the creak of the seats and the soft, muted thump of shoe soles against wooden floorboards, and then an even deeper, astonished silence that seemed, in all its starkness, accusatory and frank, judging the ineptitude of those who would, in a few minutes—or by that point perhaps never—listen to the beautiful music that his fingers would produce if they received the proper instruction from the brain of the virtuoso, who was

temperamental and elegant and oddly dumb at the same time, a man holding his fingers clawed over the keys and casting back upon the world an innate sense of that which lies between the flesh and the soul, forcing it on the audience with his unusual—albeit par for the course when it comes to creative geniuses—behavior.

## OH, ROCKLAND!

IT'S NOT JUST that you went to visit him when he was in Rockland, now called Blaisdell Addiction Treatment Center, stopping on the way to pick up some hard candies and a bagel and a large coffee, as he had requested, and that you went in and checked in with the receptionist and signed the register and ignored (as best you could) her blunt, bored stare from the other side of the window—the grille of the voice-hole mute and silent—and then went through what seemed like a set of air-lock doors to the elevator, standing alongside one or two other visitors who also held bags of food, and then went up to attend the obligatory class, hearing the same nurse give the same speech about FREEDOM (Focus on thought, Remember where it leads, Eliminate the error, Explore other options, Don't react, respond, Organize thoughts, Motivate to do better), her face slack and sweet but also bored, everyone uncomfortable on the hard steel chairs, with the sense that through the door the patients were gathering, waiting.

It's not just that you drove over there and parked and felt the sorrow of the locked ward from the outside—the building relatively new on the old hospital grounds, the other buildings, some barracks-like, others elegant and Gothic, their windows boarded up with blank sheets of plywood, mildewed gray, gaping—knowing that you'd enter his building and go through the above-mentioned routine, also aware as you sat in the car for a minute that the same hospital had a mention in the Ginsberg poem, again and again (“I'm with you in Rockland!”), which made you feel part of literary history somehow, and also made you wonder if perhaps you could use this in a story, take advantage of the fact that you were in a real situation with your real brother, who was back again

in what might be the terminal treatment for his condition.

It's not just that the third time you visited him you sat in the car and rehashed the way it would happen, at least until you got in and sat with him face to face, listening to whatever he was going to say, sharing the food, leaning back, taking in the room—the little kids visiting fathers, the older folks visiting young patients, the celebratory hilarity of the homecomings lifting the air with a sweet vibration—sat in the car and rehashed the way you'd go in, face the mute receptionist, go through the air-lock device, and then sit through the talk on FREEDOM again, after checking your food bag with the orderly. It's not just that the third time you went to visit, on an autumnal day with the leaves brilliant in the sharp morning sunlight, you'd go through the routine and then sense again, while you were talking, trying to coax him into a positive vision of what he might become, the cycle of the entire story up to that point, rolling in hoops, swinging around both of you, and you'd shrug it off and watch while your brother removed the lid of his cup, blew across the surface, and took a sip and then another sip and then leaned his head back and swallowed, flexing his throat and the sinewy muscles of his neck, exposing his gaunt breastbone, which looked covered in tissue paper, and then, when his head came back down, met your gaze with deep brown eyes while between you, in the quiet, unspoken silence that suddenly opened, there would be such a thick exchange of information that you'd both tear up and clear your throats and you'd push the bag forward and say, I brought you a bagel, like you asked, and some hard candies, and he'd give you a look that was so thankful, so absurdly out of proportion to your act of kindness that you would know right there—amid the din of love talk between visitors and patients—that the tenor of his thank-you would come back to haunt you later, no matter what happened.

It's not just that in the car before going up on the third visit you'd granted yourself a bitter kind of solace, because you were not locked up there and he was, and you were able to find words to situate yourself in life, and he didn't seem

able to do so at that moment—a kind of purity of resolve (in the car) that sat behind your eyelids when you shut your eyes and let the sunlight purge through in a blood burst of warm red. It's not just the clean, hard facts that you understood, in the car, and that were so threadbare and old hat that almost anyone could have recited them, beginning with the use of chemicals that sparked dopamine production and lodged themselves in organic compounds called receptors, and then from there took over what was originally a unique story—the Hudson River house, the art work, his stone-carved faces in the front yard, the view of the river from his back patio, his name, Frank, the minutiae of his story—and transmuted it into a clichéd tale that changed only in the terms that were used to describe it, so that those who were once known as mad, Skid Row bums, stumblebums and drunkards and junkies were now seen as diseased victims who might be treated.

It's not just the fact that in the car, or a few minutes later, riding up in the elevator with an older couple who told you they were from the Bronx, both working people, you were aware that part of the tragedy of the situation was the loss of story inherent in the hospital walls, the sealed doors, the sign-in sheet, and the folding chairs that were standard issue for this sort of place, along with the social worker who had a heavy Haitian accent and told you, when you were done with the visit, that he'd watch out for your brother in particular, responding to your politeness (you were extra polite), his face wide, moonlike, and his eyes watery, at his place behind the nurse's desk outside the meeting room. It's not just the way he told you that your brother stood out as a lively patient, that he was getting his act together, and that he would, quote, soon find his path, he likes to draw and everyone knows he's an artist, unquote.

It's not just that you went home and read Thomas Merton and reread a line you'd underlined in his book “Seeds of Contemplation,” which stated in no uncertain terms that humility was the only antidote to despair—that you read it a few times and then went into a deep contemplation out on your back deck, smoking a cigar, wondering if there was a way to become humble before the

preordained humiliation of a chemical addiction, wondering if the narrative thrown around your brother would look just as absurd when folks in the future found out that it had nothing at all to do with the way the compounds locked into receptors but originated with something else that was, at that time, out on the deck, out in the world, as mysterious to you as it was to everyone else.

It's not just that he went from a halfway house called Open Arms, a neat and tidy little house in the town of Haverstraw, tucked up amid the river-town streets, with a view of the river—a glint of blue through the trees in the summer, more stark and open in the winter—to the hospital cleanup ward, and then up to Rockland for the first time, and then back to Open Arms again for a second stay, and then back to the emergency-room cleanup ward, and then up to Rockland (as you'd think of it some of the time), and then out of Blaze (as you began to call it later) into Open Arms again, and then to Blaze for a third, final time, which seemed to matter so much the third time you went to visit him, sitting in the car, watching the rain come down, the smell of the bagel and the coffee in the air, ruminating over the way the names of the institutions seemed to map out with neat concision, to make orderly what wasn't orderly, as if language itself were straining to show in clear terms the structure of the story that was forming around him, just as his wife's name had matched the name of his first roommate in the halfway house, and he had felt the mockery of fate itself, had said to you, Jesus, what are the chances that I'd have a roommate with a slightly feminine name and a wife with a slightly masculine name, and that somehow I'd be put in with this guy who is half my age and just going through this for the first time, with his life spread out before him, for God's sake, while I'm here with my life not spreading at all, because even if I stay clean I've only got, what, a dozen years left?

It's not just that it seemed, on the third visit, as you signed the clipboard, that you were a signatory to some insoluble time-sense, and that the duration of your visit would be a stasis of time that would forever play itself out

in the revisiting of the situation from that particular point of time in relation to what happened later, and that would, in hindsight, seem marked, somehow, in relation to the way the hospital ward stood, even as you signed in, as a momentary, fleeting refuge from the wild torments of the outside world, the indelible real places—the old house on the river that had been empty since your brother's divorce, and the old art studio in the rehabilitated mill building where he had worked on his paintings, and the river itself, the shoreline down near the state park where he'd hiked with his son—that would when he thought back on them spark in him a need, a desire, to rehash his relationship with the chemicals that eased the pain they produced. It's not just that you're constantly embarrassed by or ashamed of the circularity of the story when you think of it. It's not just that no matter how hard you try to see his story in simple tragic terms, as an Aristotelian process, you also feel yourself spinning back into the cycle that might eventually devour him, losing touch with whatever cathartic elements might lie hidden within the structure of his story as it relates to your own, partly because you are still part of the story and it has yet to reach its terminus and therefore the overarching arc hasn't been reached yet—at least, so it seems.

It's not just that you went to the state park to walk one afternoon and found his boots near the edge of the palisade, the sheer drop-off to the shore of the river. It's not just that no matter how often you sort and pick through the story, alongside your parents and your sister and everyone else, you can't help but find yourself, against your better nature, feeling the big sway and spin of the cosmos—the dark eternal matter of the stars, which, however isotropic or evenly balanced, seem, when you think of him, to be moving in a circular pattern that reminds you that the nurse explained, each time, during each pre-visit orientation, that part of the healing process was to step off the merry-go-round and never step back on.

It's not just that so many of the or-

ganic compounds, landlocked by their restricting bonds, all those fuzzy quantum orbitals, tend toward formations that are elegantly circular. It's not just that he took his boots off and leaped from the palisade and lifted his hands and flew out over the river and then back and that he felt himself relinquished of his condition and totally free for a few seconds, with the water

below him. It's not just that you imagined this as you sat in the car in the parking lot, after the third, maybe the fourth, visit, with the smell of damp paper bag and steaming coffee and—between those smells—the bready bagel smell. It's not just that you only imagined the boots and then felt

strange about the image, and remembered hiking back down the trail and along the railroad tracks to the road, stopping to stare at his house, now under new ownership, situated a quarter mile up the road from the stone quarry, the one you used in one of your stories, years back, when you were first beginning to locate the sober source of your own vision.

**N**O, IT'S THE fact that he never had a chance to fly and that you never really found those boots and that each time you visited him he seemed to be only slightly better. It's the fact that when you left him behind, speeding down the road past the old Rockland buildings, boarded up and unused now that most of the mad and crazy are outpatients, medicated, wandering the streets and the homeless shelters, you felt a keen elation. It's the fact that once again you were joyfully facing the harsh limitations of reality, admitting that it all had to be taken and turned into a story of some kind. Otherwise, it would just be one more expression of precise discontent. And expressions of discontent—you think in the car, sitting in front of your own house now—no matter how beautiful, never solve the riddle of the world, or bring the banality of sequential reality to a location of deeper grace. ♦

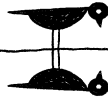


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David Means on his short story.

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# THE CRITICS



THE THEATRE

## THE STAR

*Bette Midler brings the best of herself to "Hello, Dolly!"*

BY HILTON ALS

**B**ETTE MIDLER IS such an incredible self-creation—an artist like no other—that finding roles that can harness her enormous energy while allowing room for her wit and her extraordinary skill as a balladeer must have long been a nightmare for her agents. Early in her now more than fifty-year career, Midler did happen upon a part that tapped into her many talents. In 1979, she starred in “The Rose,” a fictional film portrait of a Janis Joplin-like singer, which moved a lot of people, not least because the script reflected aspects of Midler’s own life: her camaraderie with her gay fans and the distance she may have felt from her parents. (Her father wasn’t supportive of her aspirations and saw her perform only once.) Although “The Rose” was a milestone in Midler’s wildly diverse career—in addition to acting onstage and onscreen, she makes records, performs solo shows, and runs a charity that helps transform vacant lots into gardens and public spaces—it was just one of many. As recently as 2013, she was a hit on Broadway in “I’ll Eat You Last,” in which she played the late mega-agent Sue Mengers to superb effect. Now she is back on Broadway, in “Hello, Dolly!” (directed by Jerry Zaks, at the Schubert).

Midler was born in Honolulu in 1945, a few months after the end of the Second World War. (She has a special fondness for the Andrews Sisters and other wartime vocalists.) The Midlers were not only one of the few white families in their area; they were also Jewish. Although Midler became known for the swift, self-mocking stage patter of her

creation the Divine Miss M—she’s looser and more cynical than Dolly Parton—she sometimes lets the island girl come out, and her ukulele playing while she sings a Hawaiian song is soft, slow, and tender. Midler arrived in New York in 1965. (She earned her fare by being a seasick extra in the epic, and epically boring, 1966 movie “Hawaii.”) Given that she didn’t grow up as a member of anything even approaching a majority, it makes sense that she discovered her most adoring company among other outsiders, in the pre-Stonewall gay community. In that milieu, Midler found her voice and honed it. She could speak—loudly—not just for herself but for all those men who weren’t allowed to be as out there in the world as she was.

Part of Midler’s genius has always been her ability to translate an underground sensibility for a general audience without losing either. It’s a fascinating process, one that Ellen Willis described in a 1973 piece in this magazine about one of Midler’s performances:

As an ambitious artist in every sense, she was facing familiar contradictions: how to remain “the last of the tacky women” and preserve her special relationship with her “real” fans while playing the Palace at fifteen dollars top; how to make the mass audience love her while resisting subtle and not so subtle pressures to pander.

Willis goes on to criticize Midler for how she handled that dilemma onstage, but I think that much of her best work has been inspired by the tension between being accepted and being outraged by the very idea of acceptance. Whether Midler is playing the Rose,

Sue Mengers, or Dolly Levi, her quick, exaggeratedly showgirlish walk is a walk away from the audience. She needs our love, but she wants to be out of its reach, too: if she isn’t at our mercy, she can survive without us, trouper that she is.

But how can we survive our love for her? I felt that love, in a rush, when Midler made her entrance in Zaks’s fairly standard production of “Hello, Dolly!” The musical, which was first produced on Broadway in 1964, is based on Thornton Wilder’s 1955 comedy, “The Matchmaker.” Although Wilder worked on “The Matchmaker” for years, it’s not one of his more interesting pieces; it contains all the whimsy and strained humor that he disciplined himself against in more substantial plays, such as “Our Town” (1938) and the overlong but fascinating “The Skin of Our Teeth” (1942). Nevertheless, mediocre comedies can make good musicals—a great score can bolster a weak story—and “Hello, Dolly!”’s composer and lyricist, Jerry Herman, and Michael Stewart, who wrote the book, pretty much stuck to the scenario that Wilder laid out. Horace Vandergelder (David Hyde Pierce) is a sour, money-grubbing merchant from Yonkers. He looks after his niece, Ermengarde (Melanie Moore), a crybaby who’s in love with an artist named Ambrose Kemper (Will Burton), whom Vandergelder does not like. Still, the young couple are determined to marry, with the help of the matchmaker Dolly Levi. In the meantime, Vandergelder’s two young assistants, Cornelius Hackl (Gavin Creel) and Barnaby Tucker (Taylor Trensch), head into New York City,



*The role of Dolly isn't tailor-made for Midler, but she has remade the character in her own image—as a scrappy trickster.*

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Maira Kalman, February 1, 1999

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where they fall for two women: Irene Molloy (Kate Baldwin), a hatmaker on whom Vandergelder has set his sights, and her assistant, Minnie Fay (Beanie Feldstein).

It's not my favorite musical—Vandergelder is a one-note creation, a long misanthropic whine, and Herman is not the subtlest lyricist in the world—and until I saw Midler in the role I was partial to the 1969 Barbra Streisand film version, directed by Gene Kelly. The movie is, more or less, a reprise of “Funny Girl,” down to its overhead shots of Streisand travelling on or near water, as she did when she sang “Don’t Rain on My Parade,” in her Oscar-winning performance as Fanny Brice. Some critics thought Streisand was too young to play the middle-aged Dolly, but I didn’t mind: she looked sort of dewy, perfectly turned out, and the period costumes and the locales were richly detailed. Santo Loquasto’s costumes and sets for the current production are a little chintzy, not in comparison but in fact, though I liked the music-hall feel of the piece.

As in Wilder’s original story, the characters address the audience from time to time, which gives Midler a chance to connect with us by drawing on who she really is, as well as whom she wants to portray. (Midler’s own instincts about what works onstage and why are always her best director.) The night I saw the show, she entered with a good Yonkers accent and a lot of bounce. She was, after all, in an American musical, and an iconic one to boot; in addition to Streisand, stars ranging from Carol Channing to Pearl Bailey have tackled the role, and that’s because it plays to a diva’s strengths. The plot turns on Dolly, and the show offers ample opportunity for whoever plays the part to showcase her ability to convey pathos and defiance, grief and comedy. And who better than Midler to give us all that? (Pierce’s acting style—distant, ironical, and quizzical—complements Midler’s perfectly. Of the supporting players, Creel is the most charming and the least stressed.)

The role of Dolly isn’t necessarily tailor-made for Midler—she’s infinitely more complicated and funny and there isn’t a corny bone in her body—but she

has remade the character in her own image: as a scrappy trickster with needs and vulnerabilities. No matter how much Dolly tries to engineer things in her favor, she’s forever an outsider—a widow suffering from, though not debilitated by, loneliness—and the only person who would understand how she feels is her dead husband, Ephraim. Toward the end of the first act, Dolly asks Ephraim to send her a sign so that she’ll know it’s O.K. to move on and love again. It was very sweet to watch Midler walk to the center of the stage, turn her face up to the pin spot, and start addressing a lost love: the moment was filled with memories of Midler, Bette in a thousand and one previous incarnations, including herself. It didn’t feel like nostalgia; it was more like anticipation, the excitement of looking forward to a wonderful evening with an old friend—who has such an interesting way of pronouncing things when she speaks and sings, those round “o”s and drawn-out “love”s and “you know”s.

But a different kind of reality soon intruded. Just before Midler launched into “Before the Parade Passes By,” that paean to keeping going, to moving forward, she started to cough and couldn’t stop. You could feel the audience holding its breath. As she tried to catch hers, Creel ran onstage with a glass of water and knelt before the star, whose mortality we could suddenly sense and see: Bette wouldn’t be Bette forever, and the idea was intolerable. After drinking the water, Midler lay down on the stage in a caricature of weariness, as the audience stood up to meet her energy, which, though flagging, was still greater than anyone else’s. Then she rose and walked over to the orchestra pit and asked the conductor to start again. “I can’t hear you, honey,” she said. Turning back to the audience as the music began, Midler said, “Ugh—live theatre,” and rolled her eyes. When she started to sing, the number became unlike any version I’d heard before—plaintive, sweet, a folk song about love and desire. That Zaks’s staging soon turned it into show business, with dancers and so on, wasn’t annoying; he was only doing his job, just as Midler, breaking our hearts with both her character and her real self, was doing hers. ♦

## OP DE STEZ

*Norman Podhoretz's classic success story.*

BY LOUIS MENAND



In "Making It," Podhoretz outraged friends by writing candidly about ambition.

HE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN the book was loaded. Norman Podhoretz started writing "Making It" in 1964. He was thirty-four years old and the editor of *Commentary*. His idea was to write a book about how people in his world, literary intellectuals, were secretly motivated by a desire for success—money, power, and fame—and were also secretly ashamed of it. He offered himself as Exhibit A. By confessing to his own ambition, he would make it safe for others to confess to theirs, and thereby enjoy without guilt the worldly goods their strivings had brought them. As he put it, he would do for ambition what D. H. Lawrence had done for sex. He would make the case for Mammon.

Podhoretz was a young man, but he had been in the business for a while. He had published his first piece in *Commentary* when he was twenty-three, his first piece in *Partisan Review* when he was twenty-four, and his first piece in *The New Yorker* when he was twenty-six. He had even published a piece in *Scrutiny*, the British quarterly edited by F. R. Leavis, a critical Gorgon few could hope to please, when he was just twenty-one. He had been named editor of *Commentary* at twenty-nine. He was invited to cocktail parties with all the smart people. He hung around with Norman Mailer. Jackie Kennedy was a friend.

Those pieces were all book reviews, actually, and *Commentary* was a non-profit monthly, owned by the Ameri-

can Jewish Committee, with a circulation of around forty thousand. But Podhoretz assumed—as, in our own cases, we all tend to assume—that since his accomplishments were supremely gratifying to him, they must rank high in the world's estimation as well. He suspected—he was certain—that others were envious of his precocity and success, and he was writing the book to explain why he had no reason to pretend humility.

When he finished, he showed the manuscript to mentors, colleagues, and friends. Almost all of them advised him not to publish it. Lionel Trilling told him that it would take ten years for his reputation to recover. Diana Trilling told him that the book was "crudely boastful" and humorless. Daniel Bell told him that it lacked "irony and self-distancing" (cardinal virtues in New York intellectual life back then), and recommended adding three or four pages at the end in which he took it back. His close friend Jason Epstein, an editor at Random House, begged him to throw it out. "If I were God," Epstein is supposed to have said, "I'd drown it in the river."

Those who read the manuscript felt little compunction about sharing their reactions with others, and the word of mouth quickly became toxic. Friends of Podhoretz's started wondering if he had lost his mind. Nearly a year before the book came out, Edmund Wilson noted in his diary that it was one of "the principal subjects of conversation" in New York. "Everyone I saw who had read it thought that it was awful," he wrote.

Podhoretz's publisher, Roger Straus, of Farrar, Straus & Giroux, refused to promote the book. Podhoretz's agent, Lynn Nesbit, said she would no longer represent it. Podhoretz withdrew the book from FSG (handing back the advance) and retained a new agent, Candida Donadio, who managed to sell it to Random House. (Epstein was not involved in the acquisition; it was enthusiastically approved by the head of the company, Bennett Cerf, no stranger to chutzpah.) "Making It" came out at the very end of 1967; a reprint has just been issued by New York Review Books. Trilling was wrong about one thing: ten years was not enough.

With a couple of exceptions, it wasn't

the reviews that hurt the most. The one in the *Times* was quite positive; the reviewer, Frederic Raphael, called the book “frank and honest . . . a warning and a model.” What hurt the most was the parties. “Parties,” Podhoretz had explained in the book, “always served as a barometer of the progress of my career.” Friends took note, and the invitations stopped coming. Podhoretz underwent what amounted to a ritual shunning. He might as well have worn a scarlet “A,” for “ambition.”

The experience was crushing, and he never got over it. “When I talked to Norman, it was almost as if the whole thing had happened yesterday afternoon,” a reporter for the *Times* wrote, four years after the book’s publication. “None of the sores had scabbed over.” Four years after that, Podhoretz still sounded dazed. “I was raised intellectually to believe there was something admirable in taking risks . . . but the people who raised me, in effect, punished me whenever I did what I was raised to do,” he complained to another interviewer. “I’ve never quite understood why.”

In 1979, he published a second memoir, “Breaking Ranks,” and devoted several pages to the reception of “Making It.” In 1999, now retired as the editor of *Commentary*, he published a *third* memoir, called “Ex-Friends,” and devoted many more pages to the subject. “Making It” was the pivotal episode in Podhoretz’s career.

It also appeared at a pivotal moment in American intellectual life. Intended, naïvely or not, as a celebration of a little-magazine world created largely by the children of immigrants, some of whom had, by 1967, risen triumphantly to a place at the national table—“Jews were culturally all the rage in America,” as Podhoretz put it in the book—“Making It” marked a fissure that would never be healed. It was the end of more than Podhoretz’s social life.

**P**ODHORETZ TOLD HIS story as a combination of Exodus and “Saturday Night Fever”: gifted youth escapes an ethnic cul-de-sac in the outer boroughs and makes it to cosmopolitan Man-

hattan. In Podhoretz’s case, the promised land was a big apartment on West End Avenue. He called crossing the East River “one of the longest journeys in the world,” and he believed, correctly, that his story was also, more or less, the story of many of the people he hoped would admire the book—people like Bell, the Trillings, and the writers and editors at places like *Dissent*, *The New Leader*, *Partisan Review*, and *The New York Review of Books*. What he did not imagine was that his version might not be one they wished to be identified with.

As Thomas Jeffers tells us in a scholarly and sympathetic biography, “Norman Podhoretz,” published in 2010, Podhoretz grew up in Brownsville, a neighborhood of Brooklyn that was then equal parts Italians, Jews, and African-Americans recently arrived from the South. Podhoretz’s parents were immigrants from Galicia; his father, Julius, spoke Yiddish and drove a horse-drawn milk truck. Podhoretz went to P.S. 28, where, one day, a teacher asked him what he was doing. “I goink op de stez,” he explained, and was immediately placed in a remedial-speech class. His assimilation had begun.

Little Norman was a natural student—“everyone knew I was the smartest kid in the class,” he says in “Making It”—but he also had an active street life as a member of a “social athletic club” (i.e., gang) called the Cherokees, whose red satin jacket he wore everywhere. (In the book, he is boyishly proud of this part of his past.) At Brooklyn’s Boys High School, where Mailer had also been a student, he was plucked out by a teacher he calls, in “Making It,” Mrs. K. Her real name was Mrs. Haft, and she took on Norman as a Pygmalion project. Her goal was to gentrify him sufficiently to win him a scholarship to Harvard. One of the best bits in “Making It” is Podhoretz’s description of Mrs. K’s disastrous attempt to introduce her teen-age protégé to genteel manners by taking him to lunch in a (non-kosher) restaurant in Manhattan, where he is confronted with some sort of dish involving duck.

Podhoretz did get into Harvard (as did Mailer, who went there), but he

also won a Pulitzer scholarship, which was awarded to graduates of New York public schools and covered the costs of attending Columbia. He entered the college at the age of sixteen (commuting from Brooklyn) and took the required great-books course, Literature Humanities. “Possessed,” as he explains, “by something like total recall and a great gift for intellectual mimicry,” he quickly became a star student in Columbia’s famous English Department.

There he attached himself to Trilling, whose major book, “The Liberal Imagination,” came out in 1950, the year Podhoretz graduated. He took away from his Columbia education the belief that being a serious literary critic meant holding in contempt the things that belong to Caesar. “It was at Columbia,” he writes, “that I was introduced to the ethos—destined to grow more and more powerful in the ensuing years—in which success was replacing sex as the major ‘dirty little secret’ of the age.”

Podhoretz was awarded a Kellett, a postgraduate fellowship that, at Columbia, is almost as prestigious as the Rhodes. John Hollander, who graduated from Columbia in the same year, later said that Podhoretz had had his eye on the Kellett even as a freshman. Podhoretz was amazed by his classmates’ reaction. “It was the first time I had ever experienced the poisoning of success by envy,” he says in “Making It.”

He went to Cambridge. He loved it, especially the perks that students there then enjoyed. “There are few things in the world easier to get used to than having lots of space to live in and being called ‘Sir,’” he writes. It was at Cambridge that he sought out Leavis. “Soon he was inviting me . . . to the indoctrination sessions, thinly disguised as tea parties, which he and his wife Queenie, a famous critic in her own right, would hold on the lawn of their home every Saturday afternoon,” and it was not long before he scored his big *Scrutiny* assignment. It was to review “The Liberal Imagination.” In his piece, Podhoretz called Trilling “the most significant American critic now writing.” The “American” was a judicious sop to Leavis.

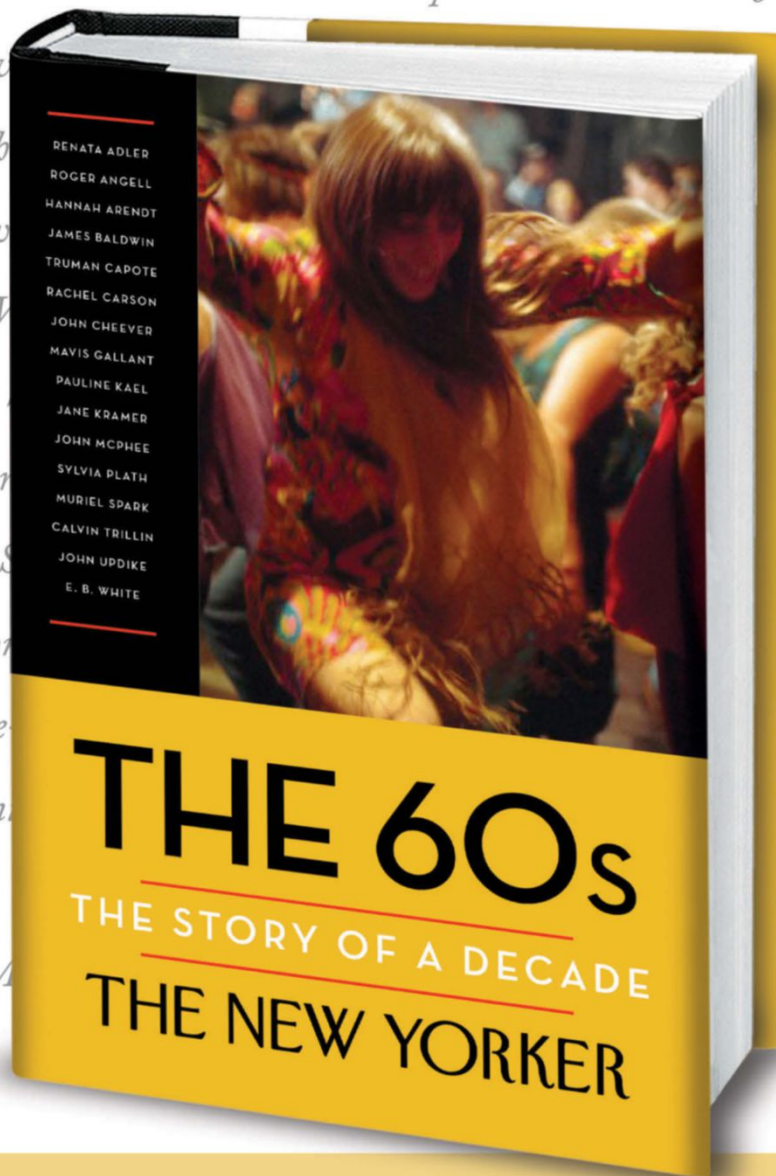
Podhoretz did some travelling while he was on the fellowship, and, after a visit to Israel, he wrote to Trilling to



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report his impressions. “They are, despite their really extraordinary accomplishments, a very unattractive people, the Israelis,” he confided. “They’re gratuitously surly and boorish. . . . They are too arrogant and too anxious to become a real honest-to-goodness New York of the East.” Trilling typed these words out and sent them to the editor of *Commentary*, Elliot Cohen. Cohen had another editor, Irving Kristol, contact Podhoretz about writing a piece, and the connection was made.

This might not seem the obvious way to recommend a new writer to a magazine published by an organization dedicated to the welfare of Jews, and, in “Making It,” Podhoretz leaves out the part about his letter to Trilling. He possibly felt that it suggested a calculation a shade too subtle. For in fact, as Benjamin Balint explains in his history of the magazine, “Running Commentary” (2010), the people around *Commentary* and the A.J.C. in those days were cool to Zionism. (By the time “Making It” came out, of course, this had changed.) It is easy to believe that Podhoretz would not have characterized Israeli Jews in quite those terms if he had not guessed that his observations would meet Trilling’s preconceptions, and if he had not also guessed that a bright young diaspora Jew comfortable in America and skeptical of Zionism might be just the kind of writer *Commentary* was looking for. If so, he guessed right. His first piece was a review of Bernard Malamud’s novel “The Natural.”

Podhoretz had thoughts about continuing at Cambridge for a Ph.D., and even went back, but an article he submitted to Leavis on Benjamin Disraeli was returned with a classic rejection (mentioned, though not quoted, in “Making It”). “We couldn’t print anything that did so little more than a hundred or two readers of *Scrutiny* could do impromptu,” Leavis told him. Podhoretz read this, not inaccurately, as “You don’t belong,” and he returned to the United States, where he was duly drafted. He served two years. (Interestingly, in the light of his later views, he is completely contemptuous

of military life and culture in “Making It.”) When he was discharged, in December, 1955, he started working as an editor at *Commentary*.

Elliot Cohen was hospitalized with severe depression, and the magazine was being run by two men referred to in “Making It” only as The Boss. In real life, they were the art critic Clement Greenberg and his brother Martin. The Greenbergs belittled and abused Podhoretz. He had a hard time managing his resentment, and, by 1958, he was out. He got involved in a couple of short-lived publishing ventures with Epstein that didn’t pay off. *The New Yorker* had dropped him, without explanation, but he had become known as a fearless young critic—“I came to be held by some in almost priestly regard” is his description—and he was able to survive as a freelancer. Then, in 1959, Cohen committed suicide, and the A.J.C. offered Podhoretz the job.

FRIENDS ADVISED HIM not to accept, some of them making disparaging remarks about the magazine which he unwisely printed, with attribution, in “Making It.” But Podhoretz had few doubts; this was what he had been waiting for. “I’m . . . exhilarated by the possibilities that may now open up for me, and by the power (which is something you can understand as my high-minded friends can’t), and by the money (my income will be more than doubled),” he wrote to the English novelist C. P. Snow, Balint reports.

Podhoretz had spent a decade observing the little-magazine business; he knew what worked and what didn’t; and he transformed *Commentary*. He fired most of the staff, expanded the letters section (which, for readers of intellectual journalism, can be as addictive as crossword puzzles or cartoons), stopped publishing poetry, and got rid of the remnants of Yiddishkeit. As one contributor put it, he removed the mezzuzahs from all the doors. He made *Commentary* what Cohen and the Greenbergs had tried but failed to make it: a magazine for every educated reader, run by Jews.

Podhoretz understood how maga-

zine writing works—his account in “Making It” of what it is like to write a magazine piece, and not only for magazines like *Commentary*, is the best that I have ever read—and he was a talented editor. He turned down the seminal document of the New Left, the Port Huron Statement, but he serialized Paul Goodman’s “Growing Up Absurd,” which is now almost unreadable but which at the time was received as an important diagnosis of contemporary life. Podhoretz’s own politics were liberal. He loved Kennedy; he opposed the war in Vietnam. He was in synch with the highbrow readership of the day.

He was invited to be co-editor, with Jason Epstein’s wife, Barbara, of *The New York Review of Books* when it was launched, in 1963, but he told them the salary was too low. (“Thank God,” Barbara later said.) He continued to write, and he was disappointed when critical praise for a collection of his pieces, “Doings and Undoings,” published in 1964, was not unmitigated. “I had been dreaming that the appearance of the book would become the occasion for a general proclamation of my appointment to the office of ‘leading young critic in America,’” he admits in “Making It”; “instead it became the occasion for several people to present me with the first installments of the bill for all those glorious years when everyone had been on my side.” But the nineteen-sixties was a boom time for magazines, and *Commentary* thrived. By 1968, its circulation was up to sixty-four thousand. That was the year the bomb went off.

THERE ARE TWO ways to understand the reaction to “Making It.” One has to do with the politics (small “p”), and the other has to do with the merits. Politically, Podhoretz did an unfathomably stupid thing. The reason that people like Jason Epstein and Lionel Trilling argued so strenuously against publishing the book—Diana Trilling reported taking Podhoretz and his wife out to dinner on a trip to Berlin in 1967 to make one final plea—was not, or not only, that they were concerned for the reputation of their friend and protégé. It was that their own names appear all through it.

It seems not to have dawned on Podhoretz that he was not only writing

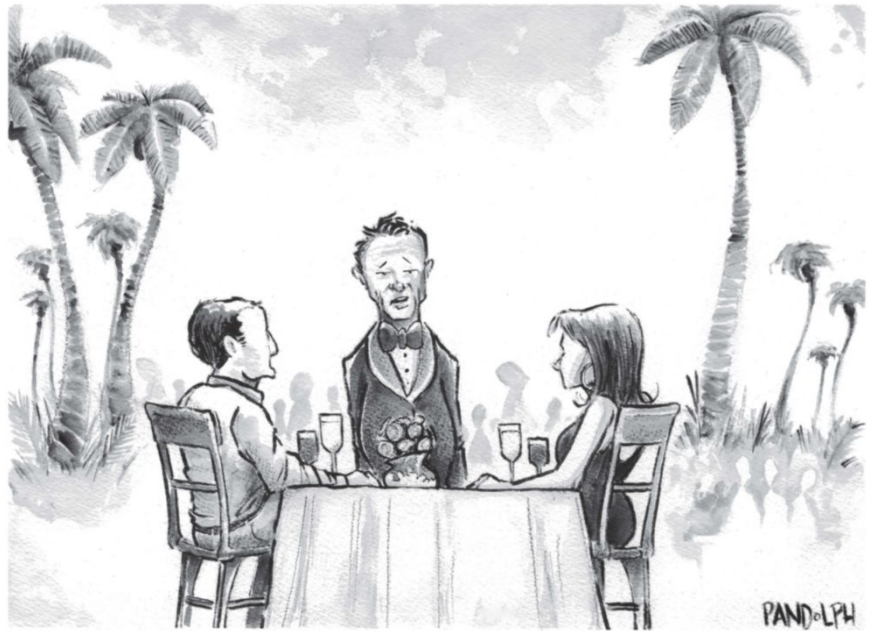


about himself; he was telling stories about people he worked and socialized with. People do not like to read about themselves in someone else's book, and this goes double for writers. Writers are control freaks engaged in what is, among other things, a business of self-presentation. If they are in a story, they want to be the ones to tell that story. No one would have understood this better than Podhoretz, but somehow it failed to register when he was showing his book around.

Even worse, at the same time that he was confessing to his own ambition, he was implicitly accusing his friends and colleagues of hiding theirs. In the brief acknowledgments section, Podhoretz thanks Lionel Trilling, who, he says, "has taught me more than he or I ever realized—though not, I fear, precisely what he would have wanted me to learn." This reads pretty clearly as a suggestion that Trilling, too, was a suck-up who wrote literary criticism in the hope of getting invited to a party with Jackie Kennedy. You can see why Trilling was not eager for Podhoretz's memoir to see the light of day.

And not only Trilling. "Making It" is a book about what Podhoretz, borrowing the term from Murray Kempton, calls the Family—the writers and editors, mostly but not exclusively Jewish, who dominated the New York intellectual scene in the decades after the war. It is as their proud product that Podhoretz presents himself, and he obviously hoped to retain the approval of these people, as he had done so often in the past, by daring to write something they were afraid to write. He believed that they would admire his courage, recognize the justice of his account, forgive any indiscretions he may have committed, and, freed at last from a stifling hypocrisy, embrace him and the book. Many writers have tried this kind of thing. It never works.

On the merits, the idea that English professors, magazine writers, and intellectuals generally are consciously competing for various types of worldly recognition, and that success in those lines of work requires some awareness of the contours of the playing field, is non-controversial today. As with members of any profession—rock stars, concert pianists, Olympic athletes, even politi-



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cians—there is an implicitly observed and tacitly enforced distinction between what counts as success and what counts as selling out. (In no profession does owning an apartment on West End Avenue constitute selling out.) There is a sociology of intellectual life. Podhoretz's mistake was to overgeneralize from his own experience.

This is often the flaw in his writing. His most talked-about early piece, "My Negro Problem—and Ours," published in 1963, an essay about coming to terms with "the hatred I still feel for Negroes," is based entirely on observations of the young African-American men he encountered as a teen-ager on the streets of Brooklyn or, later, on the sidewalks of the Upper West Side. From these experiences, he is able to conclude that African-Americans are characterized by "superior physical grace and beauty . . . They are on the kind of terms with their own bodies that I should like to be on with mine." As usual, the root of the problem is envy. The solution? Intermarriage: "I believe that the wholesale merging of the two races is the most desirable alternative for everyone concerned."

As a personal reflection, "My Negro Problem" is compelling. As a take on

the problem of race in the United States, it is ridiculous. For Podhoretz, though, as he confesses in "Making It," the real significance of the essay was that, by publishing it, he was putting the reputation he had struggled to achieve on the line—and his reputation only got better! (Goodman, however, did tell him he needed to see a therapist.) He called the essay "certainly the best piece of writing I had ever done." Something like this was his hope for "Making It": that it would be received as "my ambition problem—and ours."

The reaction to the book changed Podhoretz's life. He started looking for academic positions, and he began drinking when he was at home alone, almost a fifth of Jack Daniel's a day, his stepdaughter later told Jeffers. He had a contract to write a book on the nineteen-sixties—he had hated the Beats, and he regarded the counterculture as the legacy of the Beats—and he went to Yaddo, the writers' colony in Saratoga Springs, where he had written much of "Making It," to work on it. Writers' colonies are not where you ideally want to be if you have a drinking problem. One day, a fellow-colonist, the critic Kenneth Burke, told Podhoretz that he needed to straighten out. So

Podhoretz got in his car and drove, a little under the influence, to a farmhouse he had bought in Delaware County, and it was there, in the early spring of 1970, that he had a vision.

AS HE TOLD the story to Jeffers, he had finished his writing for the day. He was walking outside, carrying a Martini and feeling content, when it happened. "I saw physically, in the sky, though it was obviously in my head, a kind of diagram that resembled a family tree. And it was instantly clear to me that this diagram contained the secret of life and existence and knowledge: that you start with this, and you follow to that. It all had a logic of interconnectedness." Not quite Allen Ginsberg's "Sunflower Sutra," but strangely close. The vision lasted thirty seconds, and when it was over Podhoretz realized what the diagram was telling him: "Judaism was true." He did not mean the ethical teachings of Judaism; he meant Judaic law. He vowed to change his life.

To all appearances, he did. He stopped drinking, he began interrogating friends about their spiritual condition, and he transformed *Commentary* again, this time into the scourge of left-wing permissivism and progressivism. The magazine attacked feminism; it attacked homosexuality; it attacked affirmative action. In 1972, Podhoretz wrote a column that effectively announced the new editorial policy. Its title was "Is It Good for the Jews?" He did not mean it ironically. It was exactly the mentality that Cohen and his successors, including Podhoretz I, had been trying to get away from.

Old friends stopped speaking to Podhoretz and old contributors dropped away. They were replaced by a new stable of hawks and neoconservatives: Joseph Epstein, Edward Luttwak, Michael Ledeen, William Bennett, Elliott Abrams (who married one of Podhoretz's stepdaughters). Podhoretz adopted a new test of his own importance: the celebrity of the people he was no longer speaking to. "It's important to have enemies," he once told Cynthia Ozick, "because everything depends on the *kind* of enemies you have." (Ozick was a little taken aback.)

In 1972, Podhoretz voted for Richard Nixon in the Presidential election.

He voted for Jimmy Carter four years later, but called it "the worst political mistake of my life." Ronald Reagan was his political messiah, and he believed that *Commentary* had something to do with his election. "People like us made Reagan's victory," he proclaimed in 1983. By 1990, subscriptions were down to twenty-nine thousand, and the magazine was obliged to raise money in order to keep going. It was legally separated from the A.J.C. in 2007.

Podhoretz developed his own interpretation of the reaction to "Making It": he decided that he was praising the pleasures of success in America, and that his critics were America haters. This doesn't correspond to what most of the reviewers actually said, but the book did appear at a politically fractious moment, during the height of agitation against the war in Vietnam. Although Podhoretz had been an early opponent of the war, he feared and despised the main active ingredient in the antiwar movement, the New Left.

The New Left was a problem for the Family. The Family was Old Left turned liberal anti-Communist. The New Left was cavalier about Communism, it was hostile to liberalism, and it was hugely disrespectful of the engine of social mobility that had carried so many members of the Family out of Egypt, the university. And the identity-based movements that emerged after 1965—the women's movement and black separatist movements like the Panthers—seemed to threaten a crucial value for diaspora Jews, cosmopolitanism. After 1965, if you were a white, male, anti-Communist, and integrationist liberal, Jew or Gentile, whose side were you on? The question split what used to be called the liberal left, and that political-intellectual coalition has never been put back together. The fact that the Podhoretzes stopped being invited to Manhattan cocktail parties was not the cause of the split. But it was a symptom.

THE NEW YORK intellectual community Podhoretz grew up in was compulsively internecine. Its members were like cats in a bag. They thrived on—they got off on—the narcissism of small differences. People at a magazine with a circulation of ten thou-

sand were more interested in what people at a magazine with a circulation of twenty thousand were saying about Communism than they were in what the President of the United States was saying about it. Life with the Family was like a Thanksgiving dinner from hell. This is why little magazines are little.

In this tiny cosmos, Podhoretz was therefore in the awkward position of being reviewed by people he knew in magazines run by people he knew. Two reviews of "Making It" were especially galling. One was in *The New York Review of Books*. The reviewer was Edgar Z. Friedenberg, a sociologist, whose piece was not exactly a strike at the jugular; it was mainly focussed on sounding dismissive. Podhoretz was annoyed by it because he had reason to believe that he had "discovered" Friedenberg for *Commentary*, and now his own writer was condescending to him in someone else's pages.

Podhoretz assumed that Jason Epstein was behind that review, and he made sure that Epstein's (rather good) book on the trial of the Chicago Seven, "The Great Conspiracy Trial," published in 1970, was solemnly lacerated in *Commentary* by a professor at Yale Law School. *The New York Review* became a regular punching bag at *Commentary*, and Podhoretz and Epstein began a feud that was soon made the subject of a long article in the *Times Magazine* and that is not over yet. (Both men are still with us. It's amusing that the reprint of "Making It" is from the publishing arm of the *Review*.)

Podhoretz had better reason to resent the piece that ran in *Partisan Review*. Mailer was the critic. He had read some of the manuscript and had told Podhoretz how much he admired it, but the piece in *Partisan Review* was a put-down. Most of the reviews had already come out, and Mailer did his readers a favor by quoting several of the nastiest. (*The New Leader* had called the book "a career expressed as a matchless 360-page ejaculation," a phrase Mailer liked so much he quoted it twice.) He summed the book up as "a blunder of self-assertion, self-exposure, and self-denigration." It failed, Mailer said, because it didn't go far enough.

## BRIEFLY NOTED

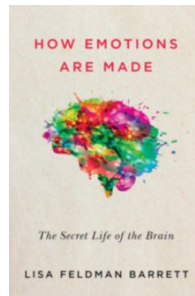
Podhoretz had pulled his punches. He should have called out the Family as a bunch of second-raters who were terrified of being exposed. But he was nice to everyone.

Podhoretz was right to rank this as a betrayal. He had known Mailer since 1957, when they met at a party at Lillian Hellman's, and they had been close friends. He had stood by Mailer through many difficult times. In 1960, after Mailer stabbed and nearly killed his wife during a party in their apartment, Podhoretz was one of the first people he sought out, and he accompanied Mailer to the police station for booking.

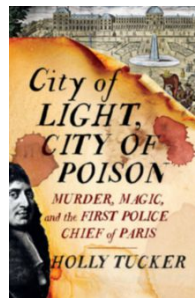
Podhoretz had even paid homage to Mailer in the final pages of "Making It." Mailer had already written a book like "Making It," Podhoretz admitted; this was "Advertisements for Myself." That book had come out in 1959, when Mailer was at a low point; it attacked, by name and with Mailer's special gift for invective, several prominent book publishers and many of Mailer's contemporaries; and it relaunched Mailer's career. Podhoretz called it "one of the great works of confessional autobiography in American literature," and concluded his book by saying he hoped that "Making It" would be appreciated as a similarly bold literary act.

By 1968, when Mailer wrote his review of "Making It," his career was at its peak. He had just finished "The Armies of the Night," which was published in May and which won him his first Pulitzer Prize. That book, a nonfiction account of Mailer's participation in an antiwar march in Washington, was serialized in two magazines. The first half was published in *Harper's*, where Mailer's editor was Midge Decter, who happens to be Mrs. Norman Podhoretz. The second half was published in *Commentary*.

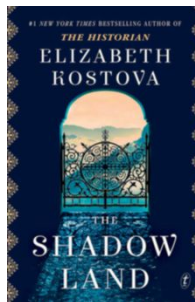
Many years later, Mailer was asked why he had turned on his friend. He said that he thought that the rest of the book didn't live up to the promise of the pages he had read in manuscript. Then why hadn't he recused himself? The reason, Mailer said, was that he was angry at Podhoretz for not inviting him to a party that Jackie Kennedy was expected to attend. Not the classiest excuse, but at least the punishment fit the crime. ♦



**How Emotions Are Made**, by Lisa Feldman Barrett (*Houghton Mifflin Harcourt*). Drawing on neuroscience and experimental psychology to overturn the assumption that emotions are innate and universal, this book describes them as "goal-based concepts" designed to help us categorize experience. Emotions, Barrett writes, are learned and shaped by culture, so "variation is the norm": "Russian has two distinct concepts for what Americans call 'Anger.' German has three distinct 'Angers' and Mandarin has five." Upbringing has the biggest influence, but we can all reshape our mental makeup and learn new concepts. The latter part of the book considers how doing so can affect our health, the law, and our relationship to the natural world. As Barrett frequently repeats, "You are an architect of your experience."



**City of Light, City of Poison**, by Holly Tucker (*Norton*). In 1667, Louis XIV, hoping to reduce crime in Paris, created a law-enforcement position—the lieutenant general of police—with sweeping powers of surveillance and detention. Tucker's history focusses on the first incumbent, Nicolas de la Reynie, who built up a network of informants and discovered more than he'd bargained for: an underground world of poisoners, witches, and chiromancers who were linked to a rash of deaths at Versailles and were plotting against the King. Working from la Reynie's extensive notes and reports, Tucker blends an artful reconstruction of seventeenth-century Paris with riveting storytelling, presenting a contest between terror and surveillance that has strong contemporary resonances.



**The Shadow Land**, by Elizabeth Kostova (*Ballantine*). When Alexandra, a young American writer living in Sofia, happens upon an urn of cremated remains, her search to learn about the deceased and to find his family engenders an exploration of Bulgaria's fraught history from the Second World War to the present. The novel is both a coming-of-age story and a thriller—Alexandra and a taxi-driving, poetry-writing ex-detective soon find themselves in danger—and the attempt to unite various plot and stylistic strands leaves the protagonist's character amorphous. The book is strongest when the story of the dead man, a violinist who was a tragic victim of the communist era, takes over.



**The Woman on the Stairs**, by Bernhard Schlink, translated from the German by Joyce Hackett and Bradley Schmidt (*Pantheon*). At the heart of this terse novel is a love rectangle, decades in the past: a businessman commissioned a portrait of his wife, Irene; she left him for the artist; the narrator, a lawyer called in to settle a dispute over the painting, fell for Irene, too; then both she and the painting disappeared. Forty years later, a chance glimpse of the picture in a gallery on the other side of the world leads to a series of reunions and examinations of male possessiveness. Tellingly, it is Irene's story that saves things from lapsing into aimless retrospect. Rejecting the roles of trophy, muse, and damsel in distress, she refuses to accept that a woman "belongs in the hands of some man."

A CRITIC AT LARGE

## KEEPING COOL

*Jean-Pierre Melville's cinema of resistance.*

BY ANTHONY LANE



THIS IS HOW you should attend the forthcoming retrospective of Jean-Pierre Melville movies at Film Forum: Tell nobody what you are doing. Even your loved ones—especially your loved ones—must be kept in the dark. If it comes to a choice between smoking and talking, smoke. Dress well but without ostentation. Wear a raincoat, buttoned and belted, regardless of whether there is rain. Any revolver should be kept, until you need it, in the pocket of the coat. Finally, before you leave home, put your hat on. If you don't have a hat, you can't go.

Melville was born almost a hundred years ago, on October 20, 1917. The cen-

tennial jamboree starts on April 28th and ends on May 11th, followed by a weeklong run of “Léon Morin, Priest” (1961), starring Jean-Paul Belmondo in the title role. (Thanks to Godard’s “Breathless,” released the year before, Belmondo was at the time the coolest Frenchman alive, so what did Melville do? Put him in a dog collar and a black soutane.) In all, the festival, which after New York will travel to other cities, comprises twelve features and one short. Only a single work is missing, a rarity entitled “Magnet of Doom” (1963).

Melville was far from prolific, and his death, from a heart attack, in 1973, came too soon; he was only fifty-five.

*In Melville films starring Alain Delon, cops and robbers feel interchangeable.*

On the other hand, he compensated for the modest tally of his films by insuring that pretty much every one is a gem. String them together, and you end up with a necklace to die for—a necklace, let us say, like the one in “Bob le Flambeur” (1955) that a croupier named Jean (Claude Cerval) lays proudly on the pillow of his wife, whom he is striving to please. She immediately asks where he got the money to buy it. We don't see the conversation that ensues, but we don't need to, because we know what will happen. In Melville country, all slopes are slippery, some of them fatally so.

The safe at the Deauville casino, where Jean plies his trade, is rumored to contain eight hundred million francs, and a heist is in the offing. He is the inside man, who is paid in advance for his troubles, only to blow his money on the trinket. A classic error, this: the minor gesture, often well meant, that gives the game away. Thus, in “Army of Shadows” (1969), set during the wartime struggles of the French Resistance, the heroine is serenely efficient, fearless, and discreet, save for one tiny weakness. In her handbag, against the advice of a comrade, she carries a picture of her daughter. When the Gestapo arrest her, they find it and use it, promising to send the daughter to a brothel on the Eastern Front unless her mother complies with their demands. Such is the price of love.

One thing to know about Melville is that he was not Melville. He was somebody else. No wonder camouflage came so naturally. He was born Jean-Pierre Grumbach, in Paris, to a Jewish family from Alsace. Early on, he adopted his nom de plume, or what became his *nom de caméra*, because of what he called “pure admiration and a desire to identify myself with an author, an artist, who meant more to me than any other.” That would be the creator of “Moby-Dick,” although it was another Melville novel that triggered the awe of his French namesake, who described “Pierre: or The Ambiguities,” published in 1852, as “a book which left its mark on me for ever.” The peculiar title, you feel, could have been dreamed up by either man.

Melville was given his first movie camera, a simple hand-cranked machine, at the age of six or seven, although the

obsession that colonized his childhood was not making films but watching them. They crowded his nights no less than his days; he remembered—or chose to remember—going to the cinema at nine in the morning and not emerging until 3 A.M.

As a teen-ager, he ran with a loutish gang, before military service intervened. He was conscripted into the Army in October, 1937, and was still there at the start of the war. In 1940, he was evacuated to England from Dunkirk; returning to France, he joined the Resistance in the South. Details remain hazy, but we know that he served with the Free French forces, first in North Africa and later in the campaigns to liberate Italy and France. Now and then, in interviews, bright recollections suddenly break through the haze:

On 11 March 1944, at five o'clock in the morning to be precise, I crossed the Garigliano below Cassino. With the first wave. At San Apollinare we were filmed by a cameraman from the U.S. Cinematograph Service. I even remember acting up when I realized we were being filmed. There were still Germans at one end of the village, and Naples radio was playing Harry James's "Trumpet Rhapsody."

There speaks a man who is determined, and even destined, to make movies. The scene feels at once authentic—we have little reason to doubt the accuracy of his report—and somehow staged. It even gets its own soundtrack. Melville later described his experiences of the Second World War as awful, horrible, and marvellous, and discovered a surprising nostalgia for the period, as if its intensity were a legacy on which he could continue to draw. A movie director, he said, should be "constantly open, constantly traumatizable," and he made three films on the trauma of Occupied France: "Le Silence de la Mer" (1949), "Léon Morin, Priest," and "Army of Shadows." Yet that is not the end of the affair. Although most of his works are tales of private crime, internecine rather than international, and set in postwar France, there is almost no corner of them that is not illuminated by what he saw and heard when his country was ruled by oppression, and when ordinary people were forced to decide what, or whom, they would obey—and, in some instances, to keep their decision a secret. In the roll call

of cinema, and with good cause, Melville is the laureate of mistrust:

Why do you think I have chosen solitude? Commerce with men is a dangerous business. The only way I have found to avoid being betrayed is to live alone.

He said that in an interview in 1971. It was as though the war had never ended. In the same vein, he added, "What is friendship? It's telephoning a friend at night to say, 'Be a pal, get your gun, and come on over quickly.'" It is?

Melville's singular habits extended to his professional career—not easy, when the profession in question calls for a cast, a crew, and the difficult raising of funds. After being demobilized, in October, 1945, he founded his own production company the following month, in part because the technicians' union, which was overwhelmingly Communist, would not give him a union card. Hence, in "Le Silence de la Mer," the grandeur of the opening logo: "MELVILLE Productions." Two years later, he had his own studios built, on a dour Paris street, with two sound stages, two editing rooms, a wardrobe room, and a screening room. He gradually became, to use his own term, "opocentric," convinced that everything should revolve around his work, and that "undue disorder in one's daily life excludes all possibility of creativity." He lived above the studios, with a woman named Florence Welsh, whom he married in 1952 and stayed with until his death. They had no children and three cats.

The first thing we see in "Le Silence de la Mer" is a man walking along a sunny street. He carries a suitcase, which he puts down beside another man, before moving on. No word is exchanged. Could these be smugglers, or spies? The second man opens the case, at the bottom of which, under a layer of clothing, he finds a book, "Le Silence de la Mer," by Vercors—the contraband wartime novel that Melville has adapted for the screen. We are watching the opening credits. How stylish can you get? Such is the start of Melville's first feature film, and already his touch is sure.

Most of the movie takes place in the home of an elderly man and his niece, in rural France. A German officer is billeted with them. He turns out to be a cultivated fellow and an ardent Francophile;

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every evening, he stands and talks to them, as they sit in front of the fire, about his interests, his past, and his hopes for civilization. The old man smokes his pipe, the young woman sews, and they say nothing—not until the final minutes, when, in a seraphic closeup, she utters one word of farewell. Ingmar Bergman constructs a similar plight in "Persona" (1966), where a nurse chatters helplessly, as if filling a void, to her patient, who stays mute, but for Bergman the clash—the waves of speech beating against a rock—is psychological, whereas the old man and his niece, like their homeland, are under siege. Silence is their resistance.

Things are noisier and busier in "Léon Morin, Priest," which twitches with the feuds and the frictions, great and small, that beset a French provincial town during the war. At one point, the graceful heroine, Barney (Emmanuelle Riva), slaps an office colleague who is said to be consorting with the enemy. Barney has a young daughter; the father, now deceased, was Jewish, so a baptism must be hastily arranged, if the child is to stay safe. From here, we enter into an extraordinary spiritual joust between

the widow and the combative priest (Belmondo), which feels as fraught as any gun-toting standoff in one of the director's later thrillers. Even if you know and love this masterly movie—the first and last occasion, for Melville, in which a female character takes center stage—seek it out afresh at Film Forum, where eleven minutes of additional footage have been restored, most of it overtly concerned with the ethical agonies of occupation. Should Barney tip off a friend who has been targeted for summary justice by the Resistance? Or risk her neck by going to collect ration cards for a family on the run? "I never answer when the doorbell rings. It could be the Gestapo," she tells Morin. He answers, "It could also be someone who needs you."

What has to be borne in mind, under such conditions, is that the plainest action, or a preference for inaction, can brim with political intent. Those French who neither struck back at the invading Germans nor entered into official collaboration with them were said to be practicing *attentisme*—a policy of wait and see, exemplified by Marshal Pétain in the early stages of the Vichy government. If mere waiting can rep-

resent a crisis (as Samuel Beckett, who also dwelled in Occupied France, knew well), where does that leave the moral virtue of patience, or the dramatic virtue of suspense? No director, save Hitchcock, delved further than Melville into these anxieties; moreover, unlike Hitchcock, he had witnessed their effects on the world around him, in an era of profound risk, and that is why his best films are timed with a precision that verges on the excruciating. He is not playing games with us. He is putting us through the mill.

Anybody with a heart murmur should probably consult a cardiologist before heading to Film Forum. Melville requires nerve. The tick of the grandfather clock in the peaceful parlor of "Le Silence de la Mer" is echoed, twenty years later, in "Army of Shadows," when Gerbier—a leading light in the shadows of the Resistance, played by the matchless Lino Ventura—is taken to Gestapo headquarters, in what used to be a luxury hotel. He and another suspect sit in an antechamber, off a hallway, with a German guard standing nearby. We hear the clock. We know that this is Gerbier's last chance; the moment must be seized, but not quite yet. Wait and see. The ticking grows louder. Gerbier gets to his feet, politely requests a cigarette, pulls a knife from the guard's belt, stabs him in the throat, lowers him to the floor, and runs through the doors and away. The camera, hitherto so calm, picks up speed, travelling beside him down the avenue, under falling snow.

The movie was not popular in some quarters of France. There were accusations that it was a Gaullist work of art, leaning rightward—hardly a badge of honor in the late nineteen-sixties. It's true that General de Gaulle, or an actor resembling him, appears briefly during a strange interlude, mid-film, when Gerbier goes to London, but then de Gaulle was the leader of what he considered to be the legitimate French government in exile. In the course of Gerbier's trip, he watches "Gone with the Wind"—as did Melville, when he was in London on leave, in 1943. In fact, he saw twenty-seven films in one week. In a shirtmaker's shop, a few days after gazing at Rhett and Scarlett, he encountered Clark Gable in person, "whom I recognized by the sound of his voice before I saw

him and he flashed his teeth at me in a smile." Melville was not a Gaullist, or a Communist, or a believer in God. He did own up to being an "anarcho-feudalist," whatever that may be. But he was a *cinéaste*. That was faith enough.

ONE WAY TO take stock of Melville is to watch him act. Spooky and unhurried, with dark sleepless rings around his low-lidded eyes, he could be the chubby offspring of Buster Keaton. He appeared a few times onscreen, and you catch a glimpse of him in the dining car of a train, in his second film, "Les Enfants Terribles" (1950), with Jean Cocteau, whose novel, about the near-incestuous rapport of a brother and sister, was the superheated source of the movie. Nine years later, Melville assigned himself a far weightier role, as a journalist, in "Two Men in Manhattan," his billet-doux to New York, complete with a suitably blowzy score. The film made explicit a debt to America—or, at least, to a vision of America that had possessed Melville since his childhood days of moviegoing, in Paris. He liked barge-size American automobiles, and regularly wore a Stetson.

Such habits were not to be construed as affectation. Melville was immune to the idle whim. He was convinced that you had to be madly in love with movies, and cheerfully burdened by "a huge cinematic baggage," in order to make movies of your own. Thus, he could brag that the cop's office, where the long interrogation scene in "Le Doulos" (1961) unfolds, is "an exact copy of the office Rouben Mamoulian had built for 'City Streets' and which he copied from the New York police headquarters." In other words, a real room became a room in one movie, made in 1931, which became an identical room in another movie, thirty years later. Why not just build a room? If you insist on getting your dose of life filtered through cinema screens, or strained through the pages of books, how much life are you actually consuming?

Take the case of Alain Delon, satanically handsome, who stars in "Le Samourai" (1967), "Le Cercle Rouge" (1970), and "Un Flic" (1972), a trio of late Melville dramas in which cops and robbers feel almost interchangeable. In the first film, he plays Jef Costello, dressed and armed like Alan Ladd in

"This Gun for Hire," or Humphrey Bogart in "Casablanca," both from 1942, or Robert Mitchum in "Out of the Past" (1947). A cynic would say that the Frenchman is no more than a faded simulacrum of his English-speaking forebears, and that would be true if the only evidence were a sheaf of stills. Follow Jef on the move, however, as he crisscrosses Paris on the Métro, with the law on his tail, and you soon understand how far he has strayed from the land of the free. Neither the snarl of Bogart's disappointed romantic nor Mitchum's amused languor leave any trace on the boulevards or in the subway cars. The recent history of France had taught Melville a lesson—that existence is treacherous—and not for a moment will he allow his hero to forget it.

In the opening shot, Jef is laid out on a bed, at one side of the frame, like the dreaming St. Ursula in Carpaccio's famous painting from 1495. The only difference is that the blessed saint is not enjoying a slow Gitane. Eventually, Jef rises from his restful pose to don his coat and gray hat, standing before the mirror and running his fingers around the front of the brim to insure that he looks sharp. This is not vanity; the sharpness is like a blade—a guarantee that his presence, and his skills, will slice into his environment at the most acute and most profitable angle. Jef is an assassin for hire, and he has a man to waste today.

Most of Melville's leading men, and not just the murderers, take time out to check themselves in a mirror. The hoodlum at the heart of "Le Doulos" does so just before he dies, confronting his image one last time and correcting the tilt of his hat, which slips off and rolls away as he subsides to the floor. Most dapper of all is the wonderful Bob Montagné (Roger Duchesne), the older but sly-hearted gent who strolls through "Bob le Flambeur." He, too, pauses at the looking glass, to gauge the immaculate sweep of his silver hair. He opens a drawer and hesitates, reluctant to choose between a crisply laundered white handkerchief, for his breast pocket, and a revolver—a handy tool, since Bob is off to a robbery. He takes the handkerchief.

A *flambeur* is a gambler, and Bob cannot pass by a game without sizing

up the odds or joining in. Open a closet door in his apartment and you find a slot machine, for his personal use. Like Dracula, he sleeps by day and comes alive at night, craving the blood of a bet. That is why the movie begins in the ravishing sorrow of dawn, in Montmartre and Pigalle, with the street lamps going off; the cinematography, gray on gray, was by Henri Decae, who, in addition to his films for Melville, also shot Louis Malle's "Lift to the Scaffold" (1958) and François Truffaut's "The 400 Blows" (1959), a crest of the French Nouvelle Vague. Melville is sometimes acclaimed as a godfather of that movement, but he came to spurn the honor, and you can see why. Despite all the mirrors, his movies lack the self-reflecting air and the glancing wit of the New Wave, and they move with a classical intent, wary of anything but the most mournful jest. Melville had to be his own man. Nevertheless, we should treasure his cameo in "Breathless," as an author named Parvulesco, who meets the press in dark glasses. When asked, "What's your greatest ambition in life?," he takes off his shades and responds, "To become immortal, and then die."

So far, the plan is going pretty well. Melville's stoical films, from first to last, look like his and nobody else's; he remains, in his own phrase, "the same man with the same colors on his palette." To that extent, he fulfills one criterion of what it means, by New Wave standards, to be an auteur. Not that his style is imitable. On the contrary, he has fervid fans and emulators, as Quentin Tarantino's "Reservoir Dogs" can attest. But Melville's style is at one with his substance—hard, cold, illusionless, yet presented with such panache that, against all expectation, it breeds joy. The prospect of a retrospective would doubtless gratify him, although the skeptic in him would be astounded:

I don't know what will be left of me fifty years from now. I suspect that all films will have aged terribly and that the cinema probably won't even exist any more. I estimate the final disappearance of cinemas as taking place around the year 2020, so in fifty years' time there will be nothing but television.

You have been warned. The enemy is closing in. Resisters, rise up! To Film Forum, on West Houston Street! Be a pal, get your gun, and go. ♦

## LEGACY MEDIA

*Kendrick Lamar's sense of debt to those who came before.*

BY HUA HSU



AT SOME POINT during 2015, Kendrick Lamar came to seem like much more than a rapper. One of his best songs, “Alright,” was adopted by the Black Lives Matter movement as an informal anthem; sing-alongs erupted at rallies and protests across the country. “Alright” somehow manages to sound carefree yet urgent, like a radio jingle perforated by drum fills. “We been hurt, been down before,” Lamar raps, preaching about the glory inherent in struggle. “We gon’ be alright.” He sounded like a prophet, capable of articulating what people in the streets desired but couldn’t put into words.

Lamar appeared to embrace the role. In the video for “Alright,” he soars over

Los Angeles and the Bay Area, astonishing all who see him, until a cop brings him down. At the BET Awards, he performed the song on the roof of a vandalized police car. At the 2016 Grammys, he began his performance as part of a chain gang. His verses felt like pronouncements, the words rushing out as though he had been tasked with conveying an entire community’s joys and sorrows. It has become commonplace for hip-hop’s biggest artists to see themselves as globalist curators, absorbing and spreading new sounds. But Lamar’s circle seems only to grow smaller, his music indebted to those who came before.

Lamar was born in Compton in 1987,

the same year Eazy-E released “Boyz-n-the-Hood,” which, for many people, came to define the city. While in high school, he began recording mixtapes, which caught the attention of a local manager named Anthony (Top Dawg) Tiffith. In 2012, Lamar put out his major-label debut, “good kid, m.A.A.d. city.” It was loosely structured around a seemingly average day from his teens: seeing about a girl, testing his parents’ patience, hanging out with friends and imagining that they are inside the reckless lyrics of a Young Jeezy song. What made the album powerful was its acknowledgment of life’s precariousness, an awareness that arrives in the course of the day, as someone close to him is shot and Lamar begins rethinking his faith. (He is a devout Christian.)

The success of “good kid” helped inspire “To Pimp a Butterfly,” released three years later. The songs on that album communicated Lamar’s ambivalence about his sudden fame, particularly at a moment when the nascent Black Lives Matter movement was casting light on all the young people, growing up just as he had, who would never see their twenties. He wanted to stay grounded, and not to sell out, and he explored this desire by making dark, adventurous music steeped in seventies funk and spaced-out jazz. It’s not that he spurned the mainstream. His albums have sold well, and he’s contributed verses to hit songs by Taylor Swift and Maroon 5. But these simple, tidy guest appearances underscore how much attention he pours into the carefully rendered characters, symbols, and places that populate his own albums.

On April 14th, Lamar released “DAMN.” It’s filled with contradictions, seesawing between supreme needs and animal wants, heroism and self-loathing, loose thrills and the possibility of eternal damnation. The songs are at odds with one another: “LOVE.” is an ode to trust and commitment, backed by majestic, gliding synths; “LUST.” is rash and hellish, as Lamar, over a drum loop played backward, raps about seeking the quick affirmation that comes from being desired. “ELEMENT.” is Lamar at his most effortless and cocky, peering down from on high; it’s followed by “FEEL.,” which finds him nursing a chip on his shoulder, mind racing toward the conclusion that his insecurities may never fade. He

*On “DAMN.,” he’s drawn to the idea of being judged by what we leave behind.*

begins recognizing his own sense of megalomaniacal paranoia: "I feel like this gotta be the feelin' what Pac was/The feelin' of an apocalypse happenin'."

The phrase "What happens on Earth stays on Earth" is repeated on a few songs—a reminder of something greater, beyond this existence. Throughout "DAMN.," Lamar wonders if it is nature or nurture that determines who he is. "I got power, poison, pain, and joy inside my DNA," he raps. The question becomes whether that means his fate is preordained by virtue of his blood, his faith, or his skin color.

The considerable pressure put on Lamar has been unfair, and "DAMN." rejects the notion that he has all the answers. Still, within hours of its release, there were theories, which proved to be untrue, that on the first track Lamar represents his death, and that a follow-up album, in which he is resurrected, would come out on Easter Sunday. It feels like a relief when the renowned New York d.j. Kid Capri, a voice from a different era, pops up between tracks to play the role of the hype man, as though to remind you that what you are listening to is still hip-hop, not holy scripture.

RELIGION IS OFTEN invoked in hip-hop in a metaphorical way, a method of dramatizing one's struggles against temptation or judgment. Two of last year's most acclaimed releases, Kanye West's "The Life of Pablo" and Chance the Rapper's "Coloring Book," turned spirituality into a kind of guilt-edged aesthetic. Those artists' songs were radiant and euphoric; you wanted to see the light that they saw.

Until "GOD.," the album's penultimate track, Lamar's version of faith feels heavy-handed and wearying: far from the megachurch's spotlit pulpit, he's more like a street-corner preacher whom people go out of their way to avoid. God is invoked not merely to lend texture to his triumphs. Lamar's faith reminds him of the possibility of judgment, of an old-fashioned belief in the discrete categories of good and bad. Where others might simply bow to self-contradiction as inevitable, Lamar remains drawn to the idea that we will be judged by the path we walk, and by the work we leave behind. "I don't love people enough to put my faith in men/I put my faith in

these lyrics, hoping I can make amend," he raps, over Steve Lacy's slowed-down, jingle-jangle guitar, on "PRIDE."

"DAMN." ends with "DUCKWORTH.," a song about faith and the possibility of karma, a reminder that every decision matters. It recounts the story of Anthony, a gangster from Nickerson Gardens, a public-housing complex in Watts. Over a loping beat by 9th Wonder, Lamar describes Anthony as a good-natured kid who grew up too fast, whose family history of "pimpin' and bangin'" instilled in him a very narrow vision of the good life. His crossroads seems minor: he is thinking about whether to rob the local KFC, when a worker there named Ducky starts sliding him extra chicken and biscuits, hoping to get on his good side.

Anthony is Top Dawg Tiffith, Lamar's manager. Ducky is Kenny Duckworth, Lamar's father. As the story comes into focus, in the final seconds of "DAMN.," so much of what has preceded this chance encounter begins to take on a new significance. Suddenly, the references throughout the album to an entire people being "cursed," trapped in situations beyond their grasp, gain in resonance. "I'll prolly die anonymous/I'll prolly die with promises," he had rapped on "FEAR."

"DUCKWORTH." is the sound of turning back these fates. Anthony takes Ducky's kindness to heart and decides to spare him. "That one decision changed both of they lives/One curse at a time," Lamar raps, some twenty years later, of Anthony and Ducky's reunion in the recording studio. Their anonymous lives have been made monumental. Their everyday choices led to magnificent consequences: "Because if Anthony killed Ducky/Top Dawg could be servin' life/While I grew up without a father and die in a gunfight."

The track ends with a gunshot and then the sound of a record getting spun back, as if Lamar were speaking in tongues. Or maybe it's a moment of profound, almost divine hope that he can turn back time. The record rewinds all the way to "BLOOD.," the first song, picking up just after the opening words, which begin to resound with possibility: "Is it wickedness? Is it weakness?/You decide/Are we gonna live or die?" There are the choices we inherit, which may not be choices at all, and there is the path that we make by walking. ♦



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THE  
NEW YORKER

ON TELEVISION

## FIELD NOTES

*The disciplined power of "American Crime."*

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM



CAN A HUMORLESS show be great? My bias has long been that truly ambitious dramas are also funny, however submerged or black their jokes. And yet John Ridley's "American Crime," on ABC, which is currently ending its third season (and likely its last, given the ratings), breaks that rule and is still a keeper. An astringent outlier in a dizzy age, it has none of the ironic pop songs and retro homages that dominate so many modern cable dramas. It's serious in an old-fashioned sense: sincere, thoughtful, and heartbreaking.

Like several other recent series, "American Crime" uses an anthology structure: each season tells a separate story, with the

cast members in fresh roles. Season 3 is set in North Carolina, in our era of stagnant wages and opiate addiction, starved social services and skewed law enforcement. It begins on a sprawling tomato farm, staffed by migrant workers who sleep in firetraps, neglected by the family that owns the business. But the show keeps stepping off into grim motel rooms, drug-testing offices, an abortion clinic, a dorm-like house filled with runaway teens, and these isolated locations slowly form a constellation. "People die all the time on that farm. Nobody cares," one minor character explains, exasperated, during a police interrogation. "Women get raped, regular." His aim isn't to point out what

an injustice this is but how ordinary, how useless it is to even resist. "It's all set up so that the people at the top don't get dirty," he adds, shrugging.

The theme is human trafficking, but that term is insufficient; as the show repeatedly demonstrates, this is modern slavery, camouflaged as labor and protected by the illusion of democracy, its repercussions disguised even to those who enforce it. "I know, this can be depressing," a social worker named Kimara (Regina King) says, as she solicits a donation from Clair (a layered Lili Taylor). They're at a fancy benefit for an anti-human-trafficking organization, bonding on a beautiful night. Kimara is black, unhappily single, a debt-ridden do-gooder who longs for a child; Clair is white, miserably married, a late-in-life mom who opted out. The women have plenty in common, too, including infertility—although only one of them can afford I.V.F. But, even as Clair writes a generous check, she's in denial about her exploitation of her own nanny, an immigrant whose passport is locked up in Clair's safe.

Along with Kimara and Clair, the characters include Shae (Ana Mulvoy-Ten), a pregnant teen prostitute; Coy (Connor Jessup), a white junkie enlisted to work on the largely Latino farm; Luis (Benito Martinez), a Mexican father searching for his lost son; Jeanette, a newly radicalized wealthy woman (Felicity Huffman, exceptional in every season of the show), who is the wife of one of the farm owners and the sister of a recovering addict; and the remarkable Mickaëlle X. Bizet, as the French-speaking Haitian nanny, Gabrielle, who enters halfway through the season, then steals every episode she's in.

At base, the show is about exposing systems of false choices: Shae shuttles from an abusive family to a pimp, then to a state-imposed Christian shelter and to Webcam porn, but each option is a trap. On the farm, getting a promotion means tricking recruits into debt, then beating them into productivity. But what really makes "American Crime" pay off is its *own* stark system: even as we get helplessly attached to certain characters, their stories end, often violently, and the show coolly moves on. The series never buys into the comforting fantasy that exceptional people can escape bad odds through decency or grit just because we're

*For all its wrenching subject matter, the show doesn't feel like homework.*

watching. Instead, it tucks their unhappy endings in where they belong, at the middle of another story, as part of a bigger picture.

Along the way, the show makes unexpected leaps of sympathy: the rich wives, who could be cartoons, turn out to have made bad economic gambles of their own. Even Clair's bitter husband (Timothy Hutton) gets to state his case, as he bonds with another business owner over their resentment at being breadwinners. "We don't get a hashtag," he gripes. But it's the more marginalized, inarticulate characters—whose lives rarely take center stage on TV—that linger, their struggles composed of ugly anecdotes that might fuel an exposé in *Mother Jones*. (At times, the journalistic hyperlinks feel deliberate: a line about the "green motel" of sexual abuse in the fields prompted me to Google the topic.) The show's style isn't realism; in daily life, social workers tell morbid jokes. But, for all its theatricality, the series isn't agitprop, either. It's full of unexpected angles, more like gazing into a prism than like reading a manifesto.

Some of this is due to the strong ensemble, but it's also the result of a set of distinctive, stylized directorial choices. There's almost no music. Many scenes are shot from a distance. In one, Coy gets beaten up in the deep background, but the camera blurs the violence, focussing instead on two unmoving observers who stand in the foreground. Then another character—a man we know to be brave and heroic—walks into the frame, sees what's happening, and, ignoring the crime, turns toward us and walks past the camera, back into his own story. There are other gambits of this type, bold but unflashy trademarks: monologues that flicker with small cuts, like quick blackouts, or a mini flashback. This chronological shuffling is gently disorienting, forcing the viewer into a small seizure of empathy, a taste of lost control.

THERE'S A RISK to this sort of solemnity—and Ridley's other new show, "Guerrilla," on Showtime, demonstrates it. A six-episode miniseries about the British Black Power movement in the nineteen-seventies, the series is centered on an internal debate among radicals about how best to fight a hideously racist, anti-immigrant government. (Fight violence with violence? If so, what kind?)

It's fascinating, relevant material, framed with urbane glamour. But, unlike "American Crime," "Guerrilla" too often feels as if it were cornering us at a party, muttering about hegemony. Despite a strong cast, which includes Freida Pinto and Idris Elba, its rebels are mostly ciphers. There's a great deal to admire here, in theory. Certainly, the show doesn't do much spoon-feeding—it delves deeply into the characters' alliances with German Marxists and Québécois separatists; it shows police torture, graphically. But it verges on being unwatchably glum. The same editing decisions that enliven "American Crime"—the mini flashback, the rigorous use of silence—become tics in "Guerrilla." Why does one show succeed and the other fail? It's hard to say, but this may be a case in which an artist, sublimating his vision to a network, produced something less pure but finally more effective than his passion project.

And, for all its wrenching subject matter, "American Crime" doesn't feel like homework. (It's glum, too, but watchably so.) At its best, it's a stark fairy tale about how power can disguise itself. Gabrielle's story, in particular, is a smartly told fable about the false intimacy of domestic labor. When Gabrielle meets Clair, at the airport, her new position seems like a dream job. She's shown a lovely bedroom and one small child, to whom she will speak only French. But what she can't know is that Clair's marriage is on the rocks—and that, as the marriage worsens, financially and emotionally, the rules will tighten. Soon, Gabrielle needs permission to eat in the kitchen. Her things are moved into a closet, so that Clair can have an office. Yet Clair keeps telling Gabrielle that she's family, urging her to share her traumatic past. By the time that Gabrielle spins out, and tries to break into the safe, we know she's doomed: there's already an archetypal story, about an unstable immigrant worker, that she has unknowingly stepped into. "*Mon passeport est dans la maison,*" she tries to explain, in the back of a police car. "You would never know she was hiding all these dark things," Clair says in wonder. And when the cops leave, Clair's husband snarls at her, "You brought *that* into this house . . . that crazy woman." It's Gabrielle's tragedy, but Clair and her husband see themselves as the victims. Their sense of innocence is the world's default setting. ♦



Kim Warp, December 15, 2008



Roz Chast, February 26, 1996



Liza Donnelly, April 26, 2010

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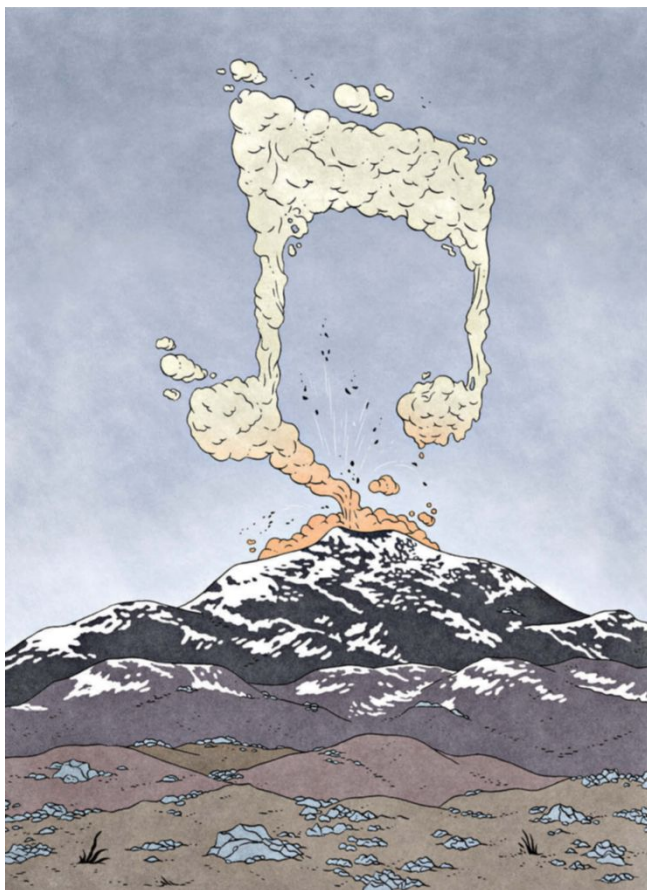
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THE  
NEW YORKER

## NORDIC FIRE

*The Los Angeles Philharmonic celebrates the music of Iceland.*

BY ALEX ROSS



SON FOR SON, *dóttir* for *dóttir*, Iceland may be the most musical nation on earth. It has a population of three hundred and thirty-two thousand—about the same as that of Corpus Christi, Texas—and an international musical presence that is out of all proportion to its size. In April, the Los Angeles Philharmonic hosted the Reykjavík Festival, which sprawled across eight days of programming. There were around fifty musical compositions, six nonclassical groups, and nearly a hundred and fifty Icelandic participants. The corridors of Disney Hall were blonder than usual. Local hotel receptionists contended with names containing *þ* and *ð*. A huge installation by the Icelandic artist Shoplifter, consisting

of a hovering mass of multicolored hair extensions, occupied one of Disney's lobby spaces, setting a characteristic Icelandic tone of epic whimsy. And the country's preëminent musical figure had not yet arrived: in a postlude to the festival, Björk will perform at Disney at the end of May.

The explanation for the Icelandic music surge is difficult to pin down, but it may have to do with the persistence of a communal, close-knit culture, which resists reducing music to a faceless digital utility. The country has some two hundred choirs, nearly a hundred music schools, a world-class orchestra (the Iceland Symphony), and an unknown number of bands. Much of this activity is supported by the government, which

prizes culture instead of punishing it. At a pre-concert talk, the musicologist Árni Heimir Ingólfsson said, "Iceland won its independence from Denmark only in 1944, and, like so many young countries, it has legitimized itself through culture." Because so many Icelanders have studied singing or learned to play an instrument, classical music has a less isolated position in their society. It was no stretch for the L.A. Phil to reach out to Björk and members of the bands Sigur Rós and Múm, who already knew most of the principals on the classical side. Sigur Rós performed in three programs, with Esa-Pekka Salonen and the L.A. Phil providing accompaniment. Before the band took the stage, the orchestra played on its own.

No pop idol will ever rock as granitically hard as Jón Leifs, with whom the modern history of Icelandic music begins. On the final night of the orchestral series, the convulsive dissonances of Leifs's *Organ Concerto*, completed in 1930, startled a hall full of Sigur Rós fans. Leifs was a visionary musical thinker who tried to capture volcanoes, geysers, and Norse gods in sound, and largely succeeded. He was also an irascible curmudgeon who entertained theories of Aryan supremacy. He lived in Germany for most of the Nazi period, his career hampered by his brazen modernist tendencies and by his marriage to Annie Riethof, a German Jewish pianist. A performance of the *Organ Concerto* in 1941, in Berlin, led to mass walkouts and denunciations in the press. Somehow, he and Riethof survived, escaping to Sweden in 1944.

The concerto not only unleashes spectacular sounds—screaming organ-and-brass chords at the outset; ritual hammer blows on the timpani, bass drum, and tam-tam—but also possesses an intricate structure, in the form of thirty variations on a passacaglia theme of dour folkish character. There are problems of balance: at the L.A. Phil, one saw the strings more than one heard them. The finale is protracted to the point of exhaustion, as the music hits a climactic wall and then runs into it again and again. Yet Leifs's maniacal overemphasis is integral to his work's aesthetic, which might be described as one of sublime derangement. The English organist James McVinnie conquered the daredevil solo part, and the ever

*Icelandic composers are united by a feeling for landscape.*

more masterly Salonen—who, earlier in the month, led the L.A. Phil in what seemed to me a definitive rendition of Sibelius's elusive Sixth Symphony—gave shape to the chaos.

Contemporary Icelandic composers tend not to imitate Leifs, which is just as well, given his habit of running ideas into the ground. They do, however, echo his feeling for landscape, exchanging blood-and-soil philosophy for cosmopolitan environmentalism. At the festival, scores alluded variously to earthquakes, glaciers, long nights, weather phenomena, and—inevitably—a volcanic eruption. (The last was heard in a delightful children's program called Maximus Musicus, telling of mice that go on tourist expeditions in an orchestra's baggage.) Other pieces dwelled more generally on elemental textures, such as fixed harmonies, drones, and shimmering patterns. Players were often asked to abandon the standard twelve pitches: glissandos, microtones, whistling harmonics, and other breathy noises proliferated. The effect was usually more evocative than assaultive. A few too many composers favored moods over ideas, anticipation over event; this may be the downside of inhabiting a bohemian-friendly culture in which artists seldom assume antagonistic roles.

Anna Thorvaldsdóttir, a thirty-nine-year-old composer who divides her time between Iceland and England, is a particularly artful purveyor of Icelandic atmospherics. Her short tone poem "Aerality" leans on sustained notes, yet its sonorities are so alive with ever-changing instrumental filigree that it simultaneously achieves a state of stasis and of transformation. The thirty-eight-year-

old composer and conductor Daniel Bjarnason, who also served as the festival's co-curator, contributed a majestically brooding symphonic triptych titled "Emergence." (This and other recent Icelandic works can be heard on a new Sono Luminus album entitled "Recurrence," with Bjarnason leading the Iceland Symphony.) The fifty-seven-year-old Haukur Tómasson employed a brighter palette in his Second Piano Concerto, with much of the solo part—virtuosically executed in L.A. by Víkingur Ólafsson—given over to crystalline scampering in the treble clef. Even here, though, abyssal tuba notes exposed a sonic substratum.

The Sigur Rós element of the equation felt more strained. The band first gained fame in the late nineties with airy, falsetto-driven soundscapes; its recent work is heavy with guitars and drums, verging on black metal. A starry array of composers supplied arrangements of their songs—Bjarnason, David Lang, Missy Mazzoli, and Nico Muhly, among others—but much of their effort disappeared beneath the band's bass-heavy roar. (Owen Pallett fared best with an impish wind-and-brass scoring of "Starálfur.") Disney's hypersensitive acoustics have never responded well to amplified music, and to my ears the sound became oppressive, although the gentleman who did a paganistic touchdown dance in the aisle next to me obviously disagreed. I wish that I had found the courage to do the same during the Leifs.

THE L.A. PHIL balanced all that Nordic thunder with events of more intimate potency. The superb chorus Schola Cantorum Reykjavík prefaced the orchestral concerts with a selection

of a-cappella pieces, including Leifs's Requiem, which is as spare and sad as the Organ Concerto is savage. The group cast an even deeper spell in a free concert at the First Congregational Church, a handsome Gothic Revival pile near MacArthur Park: the program featured "Hvöld," an ethereally dissonant work by Hörður Áskelsson, the chorus's director. Just as restorative was a series of early-evening appearances by Nordic Affect, a Reykjavík early-music quartet that has compensated for the lack of an Icelandic Baroque by commissioning scores for period instruments. Here, too, Anna Thorvaldsdóttir stood out. Her "Shades of Silence" begins with droning strings and with barely audible sounds produced by plucking, brushing, and rubbing the strings of a harpsichord. Eventually, chiming figures emerge from the cloud of timbre. You seem to be present at the birth of music itself.

The festival had many other highlights: Puridur Jónsdóttir's "Cylinder 49," in which Schola Cantorum sang an old Icelandic song into ceramic teacups, replicating the distortions of an Edison-cylinder recording; Úlfur Hansson's "Þýð," in which the audience was asked to hum drones in support of Nordic Affect's playing. As with past festivals, the L.A. Phil has masterminded an experience too absorbingly complex to be summarized in brief. In the coming months, this most imaginative of orchestras faces a crucial decision about its future: Deborah Borda, who has served brilliantly as its president and C.E.O. since 2000, is moving on to the New York Philharmonic, and the organization is seeking a new leader. The internal memo should be brief: "Change nothing." ♦

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VOLUME XCIII, NO. 11, May 1, 2017. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for five combined issues: February 13 & 20, June 5 & 12, July 10 & 17, August 7 & 14, and December 18 & 25) by Condé Nast, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Elizabeth Hughes, chief business officer; Risa Aronson, vice-president, revenue; James Guilfoyle, executive director of finance and business operations; Fabio Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast: S. I. Newhouse, Jr., chairman emeritus; Robert A. Sauerberg, Jr., president & chief executive officer; David E. Geithner, chief financial officer; James M. Norton, chief business officer, president of revenue. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

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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 Jeremy Nguyen, must be received by Sunday, April 30th. The finalists in the April 17th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the May 15th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

### THE FINALISTS

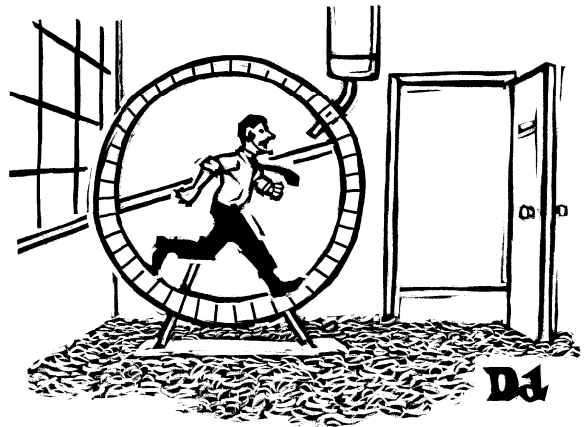


“Your insurance company got back to us.”  
Laurie Blayney, Louisville, Ky.

“Have you tried exercising?”  
Sam Seckel, Austin, Texas

“Good news. We found a match.”  
Dean Massey, Sequim, Wash.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



“Honey, is the Tesla recharged yet?”  
John Woodbridge, Larkspur, Calif.



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