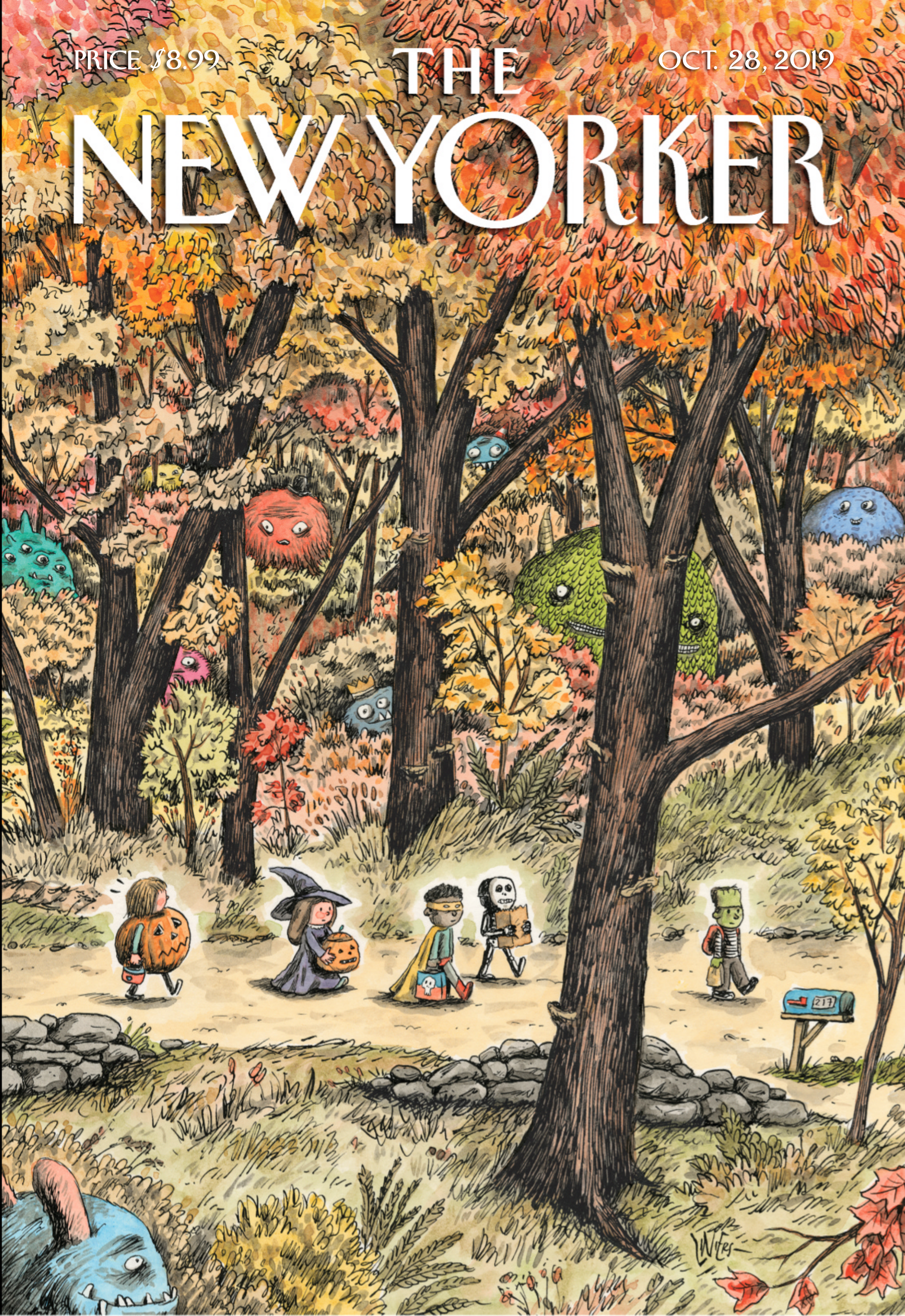


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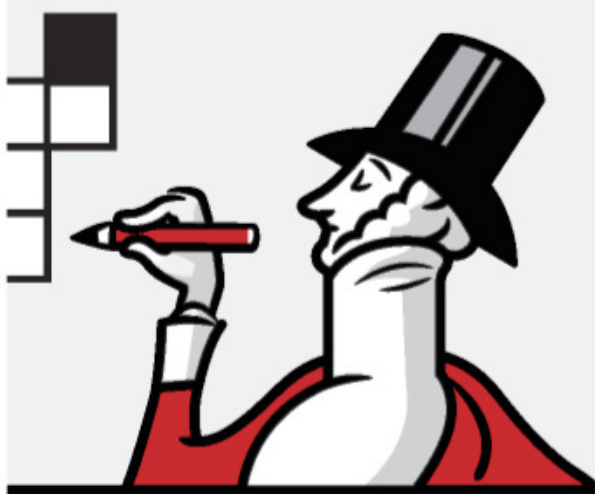
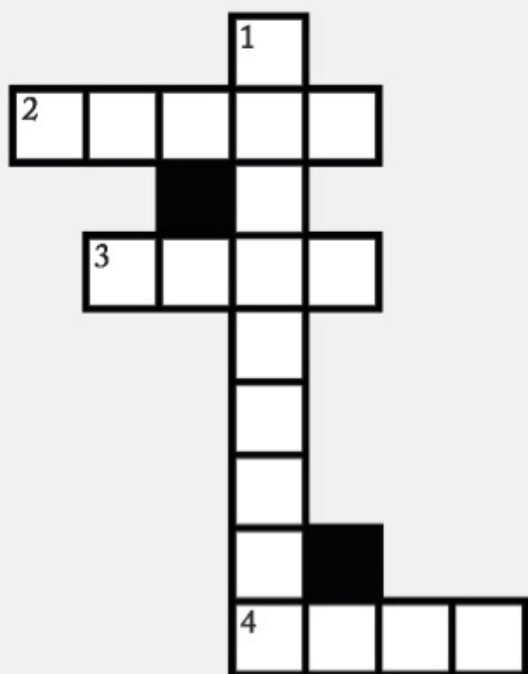
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**DRAWINGS** *Barbara Smaller, Pia Guerra and Ian Boothby, Paul Karasik, David Sipress, Joe Dator, Lars Kenseth, Maggie Larson, Elisabeth McNair, Liana Finck, Tom Toro, Edward Steed, Roz Chast, Michael Maslin, Frank Cotham, Colin Tom, Julia Bernhard* **SPOTS** *Marie Assénat*

# The New Yorker Crossword Puzzle



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3. N.Y.C. club said to have catalyzed the punk movement.
4. Apt to snoop.

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# CONTRIBUTORS

**Luke Mogelson** (“*The Afghan Way of Death*,” p. 32) is the author of the short-story collection “These Heroic, Happy Dead.” In 2017, he wrote for the magazine about Kurdish efforts against ISIS in Syria. His piece in this issue was supported by the Pulitzer Center.

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**Jill Lepore** (“*You’re Fired*,” p. 26) is a professor of history at Harvard. Her books include “This America” and “These Truths.”

**Adam Ferguson** (*Photographs*, pp. 32–51) is the recipient of two World Press Photo awards and multiple Photo District News awards. He has worked in Afghanistan since 2008.

**Rachel Felder** (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 16) is a writer based in New York. Her latest book is “Red Lipstick: An Ode to a Beauty Icon.”

**Casey Cep** (*Books*, p. 72) is a staff writer and the author of “Furious Hours: Murder, Fraud, and the Last Trial of Harper Lee.”

**James Richardson** (*Poem*, p. 58) published “During,” a collection of poetry and aphorisms, in 2016. A new book, “For Now,” is due out next year.

**Alexandra Schwartz** (*The Theatre*, p. 86), a theatre critic for the magazine, has been a staff writer since 2016.

## THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM



**ANNALS OF TECHNOLOGY**  
Anna Louie Sussman on a Polish law that allows the government to seize single women’s frozen embryos.



**PAGE-TURNER**  
Diary entries by Allen Ginsberg upon Jack Kerouac’s death, fifty years ago, annotated by a Ginsberg biographer.

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# THE MAIL

## MACHINE OPERATIONS

I was delighted to read D. T. Max's article about my own discipline, general surgery ("Dr. Robot," September 30th). Max is not wrong to be captivated by the elegance of the da Vinci robotic-surgery system, which is a triumph of engineering. But, as Max acknowledges, the question that must guide the analysis of any medical breakthrough has still not been fully answered: Does it help patients? Minimally invasive surgery offers clear benefits—including less postoperative pain and fewer complications—and robotic surgery allows for greater precision than laparoscopic surgery. But, in most cases, robotic surgery takes significantly longer to perform than open or laparoscopic surgery, and time under anesthesia in the operating room is incredibly expensive. Thus, robotic surgery costs patients and the health-care system much more money—and there have been no demonstrated improvements in meaningful patient outcomes. The gallbladder removal that Max describes likely cost significantly more than a standard laparoscopic cholecystectomy, and the patient would have gone home two hours after the operation in either case.

*Isaac Howley*  
*Memphis, Tenn.*

---

## CLIMBING THE LADDER

In an otherwise characteristically astute piece about the meritocracy debate in higher education, Louis Menand offers an unconvincing defense of Ivy League universities, and of legacy admissions in particular (Books, September 30th). He is right that Ivy Plus schools and their admissions policies are a small factor in American socioeconomic inequality over all. However, legacies represent between ten and twenty-five per cent of the student body at some institutions. No argument can make this statistic consistent with the rhetoric that Ivy League schools broadcast about their progressive role in society.

Menand also rightly takes exception

to the anti-intellectual sentiment that universities are "bad for America," and his defense of the good work of academics is welcome. But surely he affects false naïveté when he pretends that elite schools function innocently to "produce knowledge," and that it is only the market that perverts the degrees from such colleges by treating them as tickets for entry into a higher income bracket. Disproportionate endowments are not accidents: these schools are fundamentally implicated in an unfair system, and they benefit from it.

*William Dingee*  
*Princeton, N.J.*

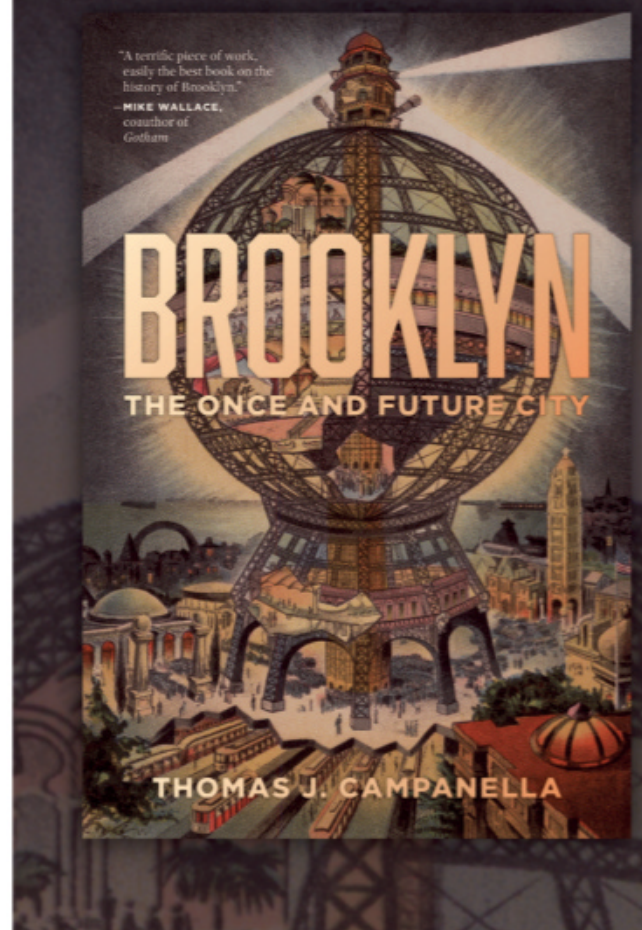
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## FALSE ADVERTISING

Andrew Marantz, in writing about misinformation on social-media platforms, attributes many failures of Big Tech to the unchecked optimism of people like Mark Zuckerberg (A Critic at Large, September 30th). But blaming tech founders' dorm-room inventiveness is misguided. Point the finger instead at unchecked capitalism—the greed fuelling a growth-at-all-costs approach to product monetization. Facebook's misinformation and privacy scandals have often originated in the company's deliberate prioritization of advertising revenue above everything else. The more unmoderated content, the more users on the platform; the more data shared by users, the more fine-tuned the ad targeting. The greater the number of targeted users, the farther an advertiser's reach. When I worked at Facebook, between 2013 and 2015, Sheryl Sandberg used to say that there is no higher-margin business than online advertising. If Marantz is looking for a culprit, he should start there.

*Julie Kim*  
*Oakland, Calif.*

•  
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OCTOBER 23 – 29, 2019

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



One man, standing on another man's shoulders, serves as a third man's perch. When this human tower topples, all three hit the ground in perfect rolls. The Australian troupe Circa (above, in "Humans") tilts acrobatic daring toward thematic dance theatre, often with canonical classical music. In "**En Masse**," in Lincoln Center's White Light Festival, at the Gerald W. Lynch, Oct. 23-25, the music is Schubert lieder and "The Rite of Spring." The performers climb upon and hurl one another through the end—and the beginning—of humanity.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CARLOTA GUERRERO



Four years have passed since the Australian soul-fusion outfit **Hiatus Kaiyote** released its latest album, “Choose Your Weapon,” and it still sounds like the future. Anchored by the gorgeous, athletic voice of its front woman, Nai Palm, the band absorbs influences from disparate genres—the free-form textures of jazz, the swinging grooves of funk, and the occasional dash of fantastical electronic music—and whips them into magic. On wax, the music is an exercise in technique and in idea-building, but onstage it’s sheer dynamism. Hiatus Kaiyote offers old fare and, perhaps, a sample of the new during its stop at Brooklyn Steel, on Oct. 28. The following evening, at Brooklyn Bowl, Nai Palm, whose 2017 solo effort, “Needle Paw,” thrust her soaring vocals against acoustic backdrops, performs alone.—*Briana Younger*

## NIGHT LIFE

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

### Billy Hart Quartet

#### Village Vanguard

What the Billy Hart Quartet has going for it, besides a veteran drummer whose C.V. is as rich in mainstream work (Stan Getz) as it is in left-of-center endeavors (Herbie Hancock’s Mwandishi outfit), is a triumvirate of compelling players—the pianist Ethan Iverson, the saxophonist Mark Turner, and the bassist Ben Street—who take cues from the ecumenical leanings of their leader. This is an exemplary post-bop band whose excellent recordings offer only a taste of what it achieves live.—*Steve Futterman (Oct. 22-27.)*

### Auntie Flo

#### Good Room

It can be a tricky undertaking for non-African dance d.j.s and producers to utilize the continent’s music for their own aims. But the Glasgow-born, London-based Brian d’Souza, who works as Auntie Flo, commingles Nigerian

highlife, Afrobeat, and South African Kwaito in his house and techno constructs, subtly rendering the joins imperceptible. He can be a mild-mannered producer, but on the decks—as with this appearance—his slow-burning style takes off.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Oct. 24.)*

### Songhoy Blues

#### Baby’s All Right

Songhoy Blues coalesced in Bamako, Mali, where its members fled after Islamic jihadists seized their native Timbuktu. The Islamists violently opposed cigarettes, alcohol, and music; the world’s rock and rollers, duly affronted, rallied around Songhoy Blues. The band’s records have featured contributions from Will Oldham and Nick Zinner, but its contemporary lilt and empathetic aspect come courtesy of its young members. The evening before this show, Baby’s All Right also welcomes Good Morning, a Melbourne indie duo whose songs travel a different path to like-minded consciousness.—*Jay Ruttenberg (Oct. 24.)*

### BRIC JazzFest Marathon

#### BRIC House

The annual BRIC JazzFest marathon lives up to its name by offering no less than full

immersion in the genre’s inclusive, boundary-less waters. Among the throng of open-eared performers who take the fusion of jazz and contemporary R. & B. as a given are Kneebody, Joel Ross’s Good Vibes, and Tia Fuller; Myra Melford’s Snowy Egret speaks for today’s avant-garde ethos, and Makaya McCraven juxtaposes hard-edged grooves with spacey sonics. Enter with any musical prejudices and preconceptions at your own risk.—*S.F. (Oct. 24-26.)*

### El Alfa

#### La Boom

Dembow, a rhythm that hails from Jamaica, is the pulsing heart of reggaetón, and, during the past few years, the Dominican artist El Alfa has been working to make sure that those roots aren’t forgotten. He’s far from a purist—the rapper has contorted strands of dembow into a blend of blustery hip-hop and serrated electronic sounds—but his rise has put a spotlight back on the Afro-diasporic style, reminding listeners of its foundational place in today’s urbano genres.—*Julysa Lopez (Oct. 25.)*

### Jay Som

#### Elsewhere

Melina Mae Duterte, an artist who goes by Jay Som, has always made quiet dream pop with a measured intensity. On her latest album, “Anak Ko,” she pulls from her emotional depths and faded memories to shape a stunning sonic tapestry coated in eighties nostalgia and shoegaze-inspired levity. Gauzy but endlessly catchy songs—such as “If You Want It” and “Superbike”—gleam under layers of reverb and jagged guitars, showing off Duterte’s delicacy as a producer and also the ethereal power of her voice.—*J.L. (Oct. 25.)*

### Christian Sands Highwire Trio

#### Jazz Standard

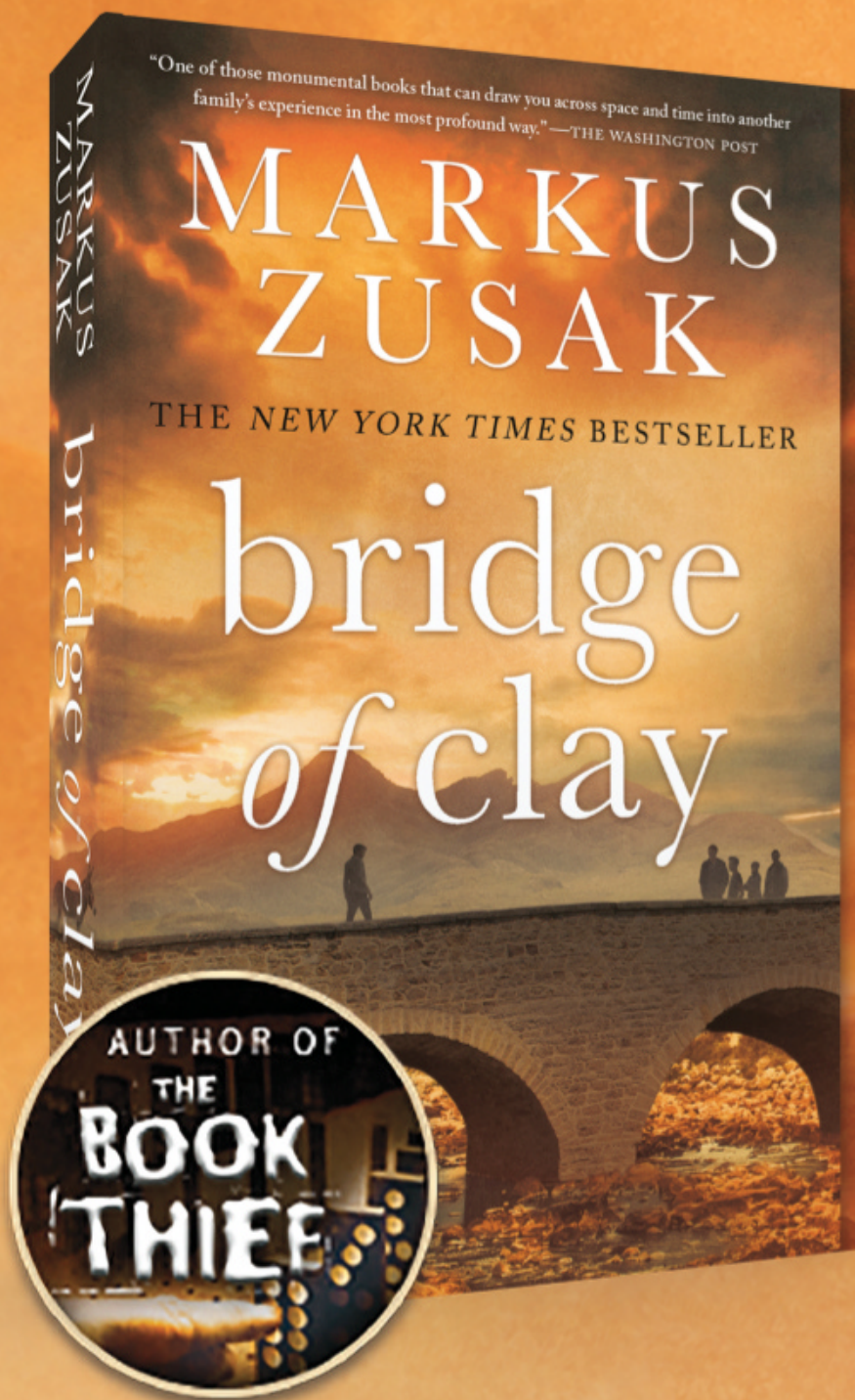
“Facing Dragons,” Christian Sands’s latest album, has a version of the Beatles standard “Yesterday” that, in its daring and near-hysterical strength, epitomizes the power that this fully charged pianist can generate. His aptly named trio includes the bassist Luques Curtis and the drummer Ulysses Owens, Jr., a dashing rhythm team that is as willing to bravely follow its stout-hearted leader as it is able to accommodate Sands’s more contained effusions.—*S.F. (Oct. 25-27.)*

### “Live from Here”

#### Town Hall

Paul Simon has flourished in many roles; retiree is not one of them. After signing off with a farewell tour last year, the songwriter has cropped up with a refreshing regularity that now extends to a broadcast of “Live from Here,” the public-radio program hosted by the mandolinist Chris Thile. Since migrating from Minnesota to midtown’s Town Hall, in September, Thile’s variety show is turning into an indispensable promotional stop for musicians in New York—even those artists seemingly destined for the golf course.—*J.R. (Oct. 26.)*

# THE WORLDWIDE PHENOMENON IS NOW IN PAPERBACK



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## Prince Language The Sultan Room

Each month, the Brooklyn d.j. Prince Language plays a two-hour slot on the Lot Radio, a local online station, that he fills with spacious, active grooves that reflect a globalist approach to disco. His sets radiate outward, even as his tempos tend toward the ruminative. It's a technique he began cultivating in the early two-thousands; he made his name spinning at NegroClash, held at the cozy West Side club APT, alongside Duane Harriott and DJ Lindsey. Here, the trio reunites at a similarly sized Brooklyn boîte.—*M.M. (Oct. 26.)*

## ART

### “A New MOMA” Museum of Modern Art

The Vatican, Kremlin, and Valhalla of modernism has reopened, after an expansion that adds forty-seven thousand square feet and many new galleries. Far more, though still a fraction, of MOMA's nonpareil collection is now

on display, arranged roughly chronologically but studded with such mutually provoking juxtapositions as a 1967 painting that fantasizes a race riot, by the African-American artist Faith Ringgold, with Picasso's gospel “Les Femmes d'Alger (O.K.)” (1911). Some of the rehungs electrify, notably in the first room of the permanent collection, where a sequence of Symbolist work—by the likes of Redon, Vuillard, Ensor, Munch, Gauguin, and Henri Rousseau—leaps, after a de-rigueur pause for van Gogh, to Cézanne, who comes off more than ever as revolutionary. (The room also has six lyrical ceramics by George E. Ohr, the nineteenth-century “Mad Potter of Biloxi”—one of several invigorating nods to formerly scanted outsiders.) Piet Mondrian's “Broadway Boogie Woogie” (1942-43) is freshly recontextualized, as an outrigger to an eye-opening historical show of Latin-American art, which includes work by the ingenious Brazilians Lygia Pape and Hélio Oiticica. The best time to visit the revamped MOMA is your first, punctuated with reintroductions to old artistic companions. Masterpieces dulled by overfamiliarity in an account that had become as rote as a college textbook spring to second lives by being repositioned.—*Peter Schjeldahl (Ongoing.)*

## AT THE GALLERIES



Photography is indiscriminate: a picture is a picture whether it lands on your phone, in a magazine, or on the wall. Few photographers working today understand the fickle nature of their medium better than **Roe Ethridge**, whose strong ninth show with the Andrew Kreps gallery (on view through Nov. 2) inaugurates its handsome new Tribeca digs. The subjects of these big color images—the soap-opera vixen Susan Lucci, a school bus, the nonbinary model Oslo Grace, wilting carnations, the Verrazzano Bridge, writhing snakes, a bottle of ketchup—are diffuse, but collectively they convey the inundation and the randomness of today's image world. Ethridge is not only an artist; he also shoots editorial and commercial campaigns, a dual identity with a rich history reaching back to Man Ray. Here, as in his past exhibitions, outtakes from his for-hire projects, including a peppy group portrait for the streetwear label Telfar, of all-American youth, are indistinguishable from the work he shoots for himself.—*Andrea K. Scott*

## “Embodiment” Mitchell-Innes & Nash

**CHELSEA** The Chicago-based adept Pope.L is a triple threat in New York this fall, with concurrent shows at the Whitney and MOMA and a recent Public Art Fund performance for which some hundred and fifty participants put their bodies through punishing paces, re-creating one of his legendary mile-long crawls. Pope.L's Manhattan gallery pays homage to his body-centric concerns in this dynamic exhibition, which combines text works from his series “Skin Sets” with paintings by a trio of young rising stars: Jonathan Lyndon Chase, Cheyenne Julien, and Tschabalala Self. Chase's bristling language-and-image assemblages of spray paint, acrylic, marker, glitter, and oil stick on canvas are the closest in spirit to Pope.L's politically pointed capers—and not simply because both artists goof around with green skin to invoke ideas of racial difference. Julien is a deft portraitist whose five-foot-high canvas “Can't Go Out, Can't Stay In” captures the FOMO tensions between meditative seclusion and alienation as beautifully as its Bonnard-esque interior contrasts a magenta rug and a pistachio bedspread. Self's striking female figures integrate painted canvas and collaged fabrics with a pictorial logic that suggests a collaboration between Hannah Höch and Jacob Lawrence.—*Andrea K. Scott (Through Oct. 26.)*

## Dalton Gata Chapter

**DOWNTOWN** A series of small, close-cropped paintings portray outré visages (some, supernaturally so), styled per the edgy look of luxury-good ads and magazine editorials. “You Know What I Mean” features a glaring New Romantic in velvet whose sunglasses suggest sharpened bat wings; “Elena” depicts a runway-ready version of Snow White's enemy queen, her signature severe makeup offset by a mouthful of uneven teeth. Gata, who was born in Cuba and now lives in Puerto Rico, affects a beguilingly juvenile style of thinly painted acrylic color for his canvases; his mural-size, ink-on-paper “Bathroom Line” ups the ante with a delightfully lewd absurdism. This show, a collaboration with Mexico City's Galería Agustina Ferreyra, marks his promising New York debut.—*Johanna Fateman (Through Oct. 27.)*

## “Modernisms” Grey Art Gallery

**DOWNTOWN** The globe-trotting American collector Abby Weed Grey established the gallery at New York University in 1974. This bustling exhibition showcases works from the nineteen-sixties and early seventies, which she acquired on her travels to India, Iran, and Turkey. Grey was drawn to artists who, as she put it, “were breaking with the past to cope with the present” while maintaining their ties to tradition, whether this meant bridging local and global aesthetics or resisting Western influences. The many standouts here include the Indian artist Prabhakar Barwe's fiery cosmograms, inspired by both Tantric painting and Paul Klee; the entrancing calligraphic abstractions of the Iranian modernist Charles Hossein Zenderoudi; and the prints of Mustafa Aslier, whose flat geometries incorporate Turkish folk motifs. The show is as edifying as it is eye-catching.—*J.F. (Through Dec. 7.)*

## Jill Mulleady Swiss Institute

**DOWNTOWN** Apocalypse looms in “Fight-or-Flight,” this Uruguayan born, Los Angeles-based artist’s exhibition. Its ambitious centerpiece is a surreal allegoric painting, which alludes to Bruegel’s “Land of Cockaigne,” with its satirical depiction of sloth in a land of plenty. In Mulleady’s twilit scene, a dazed giant embodies gluttony (for the Earth’s resources), his body splayed across a fenced-in vista. A length of pipeline on the floor below makes the target of Mulleady’s climate-crisis allegory clear, as does her forbidding installation in the back room, where the glowing inner workings of an A.T.M. are seen through the bars of a bank-vault gate. Upstairs, a suite of colorful woodcuts suggest outsized tarot cards, each of which features a rat demon riding a horse against a city skyline—harbingers of doom.—*J.F. (Through Dec. 29.)*

## DANCE

### American Ballet Theatre David H. Koch

The Argentine-born Herman Cornejo has long been one of the world’s top male dancers, a paragon of both form and artistic integrity. On the evening of Oct. 26, the company celebrates his twentieth season with a dedicated program that opens with his long-overdue New York debut in George Balanchine’s “Apollo.” Expect musicality, purity of execution, and warmth of manner—all Cornejo signatures. (He will also dance a tango, by Ana Maria Stekelman, with his sister, the recently retired Boston Ballet principal Erica Cornejo, and a première by Twyla Tharp.) And two new works will be introduced into the repertory: “A Time There Was,” by the rising choreographer Gemma Bond, and “New American Romance,” by James Whiteside, a current member of the company.—*Marina Harss (Oct. 23-27.)*

### Armitage Gone! Dance New York Live Arts

Since her days, decades ago, as the “punk ballerina,” Karole Armitage has been fascinated and influenced by Noh theatre. “You Took a Part of Me,” which debuted at Japan Society in April, and is now being reprised at New York Live Arts, is her most direct engagement yet with the conventions of Noh and its expression of deep and intense emotion through strict formality. On a Noh-like set, to a Noh-like score by Reiko Yamada, a ghost (the longtime Armitage muse Megumi Eda) gets erotically entangled with her lover, her double, and her past.—*Brian Seibert (Oct. 23-26.)*

### BalletCollective Gelsey Kirkland Arts Center

Troy Schumacher’s BalletCollective presents two new ballets, by Schumacher and by Preston Chamblee, inspired by the “overview effect,” a radical change of perspective experienced by astronauts when they gaze down at our planet from outer space. Schumacher, Chamblee, and the dancers are all members of New York City Ballet. (Keep an eye out for the luminous

## AT THE BALLET



New Yorkers like to think that they have the best ballet companies, but **Houston Ballet** gives them a run for their money. Since 2003, the Australian choreographer Stanton Welch has led its stable of exemplary dancers with a varied repertory. It’s one of the few ballet companies that the choreographer Mark Morris, who is picky, is willing to work with. This is lucky for us, because the company is bringing one of Morris’s recent works to City Center for a short run, Oct. 24-26, its first New York engagement in six years. Morris’s “The Letter V,” set to a Haydn symphony, is witty, lucid, and formal—he describes it as “pastoral.” The other two dances on the program are Aszure Barton’s “Come In” and “Reflections,” by Justin Peck, a choreographer usually associated with New York City Ballet. The Peck work, which he created for Houston this year, is quiet and full of clean geometries, a meditation on order and symmetry set to a piece for two pianos by Sufjan Stevens. Musical accompaniment will be provided by the Orchestra of St. Luke’s.—*Marina Harss*

Mira Nadon and the powerhouse Emilie Gerity.) The music, which includes new works by Judd Greenstein and Paul Moravec, will be played by the Brooklyn-based ensemble the Knights.—*M.H. (Oct. 23 and Oct. 25-26.)*

### Charles Atlas Baryshnikov Arts Center

The career of this veteran filmmaker has always been tied up with dancers and choreographers, most fruitfully with Merce Cunningham. But never before has Atlas drawn his collaborators from the world of ballet. Now, characteristically, he’s teamed up with some of the best: Sara Mearns and Taylor Stanley, both of New York City Ballet. This work-in-progress showing also includes footage from an experimental film he is making with the hyper-subtle choreographer Jodi Melnick.—*B.S. (Oct. 25.)*

### Mette Ingvarsten N.Y.U. Skirball

Ingvarsten, a Danish choreographer, is a specialist in sex. “To come (extended),” now receiving its U.S. debut, is an expansion of a 2005

work that grew into a whole series of public art orgies. In this one, fifteen performers, covered head to toe in blue body socks, shift from one pornographic tableau vivant to another, swapping partners and positions, speeding up and slowing down. The climax, when it arrives, may not be what you expect.—*B.S. (Oct. 25-26.)*

### Sara Mearns/Isadora Duncan 92nd Street Y

Isadora Duncan’s physically liberated, musical, and spontaneous-seeming dancing influenced everyone from the Russian turn-of-the-century choreographer Michel Fokine to Mark Morris. But, as with all things shrouded in myth, it is difficult to get a sense of what Duncan’s performances really looked like. Lori Belilove, a dancer and a Duncan expert, has devoted her life to reviving and preserving Duncan’s work; she recently passed several solos on to Sara Mearns, a New York City Ballet principal, who performed them electrifyingly at Fall for Dance, accompanied by the pianist Cameron Grant. In this program, both Belilove and Mearns will dance, and Belilove will reveal new information that she has uncovered about Duncan’s training methods.—*M.H. (Oct. 28.)*



No more joyous chamber-music collection has arrived this year than “Fanm d’Ayiti,” the exuberant, expressive song cycle that **Nathalie Joachim** recorded with Spektral Quartet, a brilliant Chicago-based string outfit. The flutist and composer, best known for her work in the ensembles Eighth Blackbird and Flutronix, dug deeply into her Haitian heritage for this work, which she and Spektral perform at Merkin Concert Hall, on Oct. 26, as part of the Ecstatic Music series. Over soaring flute figurations, crystalline string textures, a recorded girls’ choir, and electronic beats, Joachim sings sweetly and strongly in praise of Haitian women—some of whom, including Joachim’s grandmother, speak for themselves in pre-captured testimony.—*Steve Smith*

## CLASSICAL MUSIC

### Pianists at 92Y 92nd Street Y

Two artists of superlative technique and illuminating insights sound off on the Upper East Side this week. Paul Lewis offers an idiosyncratic mix of pieces from an ongoing project in which he links Haydn sonatas and Brahms piano works, using Beethoven’s music (here the “Diabelli” Variations) to bridge them. Later, Shai Wosner joins the East Coast Chamber Orchestra in Mozart’s Piano Concerto No. 14 in E-Flat Major and in Christopher Cerrone’s “The Air Suspended,” a local première.—*Steve Smith* (Oct. 24 at 7:30; Oct. 27 at 3.)

### Vijay Iyer Miller Theatre

Vijay Iyer, a pianist, composer, and bandleader of striking originality, is most closely associated with the jazz world. But his work as a composer of concert pieces, many of them animated by socially conscious themes, makes up a substantial part of his creative portfolio. This “Composer Portrait” concert, for which the versatile Brooklyn orchestra the Knights

serves as the house band, offers the New York débuts of several works, including the exuberant violin concerto “Trouble,” with Jennifer Koh as the soloist, and the world première of “Song for Flint.”—*S.S.* (Oct. 24 at 8.)

### “Orfeo ed Euridice” Metropolitan Opera House

The story of Orpheus, who travels to the underworld to rescue his beloved Eurydice, still resonates with audiences today. Look no further than Anais Mitchell’s folk musical “Hadestown,” which swept the Tonys, in June, with its soaring melodies and cheeky narrative that turns the titular villain into an industrialist tycoon. Mark Morris, the director and choreographer of the Met’s 2007 production of Gluck’s poignant “Orfeo ed Euridice,” has a different way of exploring the story’s impact, making it timeless instead of timely. In Morris’s staging, Orpheus, a legendary musician, performs for an equally legendary audience: choristers costumed as famous people throughout history, such as Cleopatra, Napoleon, and John Lennon, gather to hear his heartbroken song. The Met revival stars Jamie Barton, Hei-Kyung Hong, and Hera Hyesang Park; Mark Wigglesworth conducts.—*Oussama Zahr* (Oct. 24 and Oct. 29 at 8.)

### Munich Philharmonic Carnegie Hall

Valery Gergiev, the Moscow-born music director of the Munich Philharmonic, delivers reliable pleasures in large-scale Russian repertoire, and he launches the orchestra’s two-day stopover at Carnegie with the irresistible dramatics of Tchaikovsky’s Piano Concerto No. 1, featuring the soloist Behzod Abduraimov. The startling, consuming sounds of Shostakovich’s Symphony No. 5 anchor the second evening’s program, which also includes Jörg Widmann’s “Con Brio” and Brahms’s Violin Concerto, with Leonidas Kavakos.—*O.Z.* (Oct. 25 at 8; Oct. 26 at 8.)

### “The Turn of the Screw” Wave Hill

As in Stanley Kubrick’s “The Shining,” the creeping anxiety of Benjamin Britten’s chamber opera “The Turn of the Screw” stems from its setting’s relative isolation. A governess tends to her charges at a remote country estate, and the prologue quickly establishes that she is not to bother the children’s guardian in London under any circumstances. On Site Opera, which has a knack for dialling in to a work’s subtext, stages Britten’s nerve-jangling masterpiece at Wave Hill, a twenty-eight-acre public garden in the Bronx that was originally built, in 1843, as a private country home. Eric Einhorn’s immersive staging takes the audience and the cast—led by the soprano Jennifer Check and the tenor Dominic Armstrong—to indoor and outdoor locations throughout the grounds; Geoffrey McDonald conducts.—*O.Z.* (Oct. 25–26 at 7:30 and Oct. 27 at 5.)

### “The Dither Extravaganza!” 17 Frost

Dither, a resourceful and imaginative quartet comprising the electric guitarists Taylor Levine, Joshua Lopes, James Moore, and Gyan Riley, is about to drop a rich new album titled “Potential Differences.” But this seven-hour houseparty—the seventh the group has hosted—is all about uncovering the common threads that bind the disparate factions within New York’s indie-music community. Appearing alongside Dither are the singers Alicia Hall Moran and Ryan Power, the Mivos Quartet, and the Italian-cinema-besotted pop orchestra Tredici Bacci, among others.—*S.S.* (Oct. 27 at 2.)

### “Zauberland” Gerald W. Lynch Theatre

The Syrian civil war and the subsequent refugee crisis provide the backdrop for “Zauberland”—a stage adaptation of Schumann’s song cycle “Dichterliebe”—one of the principal offerings at this year’s White Light Festival. In a program note for the production’s première, in Paris, this past April, the director Katie Mitchell decries “how our Western European society tries to insulate itself from the bigger world events, like mass migration, and fails to.” She works with the composer Bernard Focroulle and the writer Martin Crimp to crack open the self-contained world of Schumann’s wistful protagonist with nineteen new songs. The result is meant to express the trauma of

a Syrian refugee (the soprano Julia Bullock) caught between her new home in Germany and the life she was forced to leave behind. Also playing: The baritone Christian Gerhaher, an arresting lieder interpreter, makes his contribution to the festival with an evening of Mahler songs at Alice Tully Hall (Oct. 29 at 7:30), accompanied by the pianist Gerold Huber.—*O.Z. (Oct. 29-30 at 7:30.)*

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## THE THEATRE

### Forbidden Broadway Triad

Have you been jonesing for Beth Leavel jokes? Aching for a satirical takedown of “Haddestown”? Fortunately, Gerard Alessandrini has returned with “Forbidden Broadway: The Next Generation,” the latest edition of his decades-long Broadway spoof, taking on “Harry Potter and the Cursed Child,” the Yiddish “Fiddler on the Roof,” and “Woke-lahoma!” Alessandrini casts a cynical eye on Broadway’s irksome trends, whether clueless tourists or endless film-to-stage adaptations. (“Toot, toot, Tootsie, you’re hexed. / Mrs. Doubtfire’s next!”) A bewigged cast of six—including a thirteen-year-old boy, Joshua Turchin, earning his keep as Evan Hansen—cycles through impersonations of Bernadette Peters, Lin-Manuel Miranda, André De Shields, and dozens more, with Aline Mayagoitia seeming to have the most fun. As always, the numbers are hit and miss, but the show’s schlocky charm and Alessandrini’s obvious love of his targets win the day.—*Michael Schulman (Through Nov. 30.)*

### Heroes of the Fourth Turning Playwrights Horizons

In this new play by Will Arbery, directed by Danya Taymor, a group of young conservative college friends—the gentle but fearful Justin (Jeb Kreager); the sick, empathetic Emily (Julia McDermott); the self-hating, religious Kevin (John Zdrojeski); and the Brooklyn Bannontite Teresa (Zoë Winters)—meet in a town in western Wyoming, in honor of Emily’s mother, Gina (Michele Pawk), their Catholic alma mater’s newly inaugurated president. Much of the thrill of the play comes in hearing ultraconservative ideas discussed in earnest and carried to their most ominous conclusions. Winters plays Teresa with unnerving precision, carefully walking the line between naturalism and a kind of stentorian, hysterical Fox News presentation. There’s just enough ideological and attitudinal space between the characters to make for revealing arguments in each direction—Can one be pro-choice and, in any meaningful way, also be a good person?—and to reveal the despair lurking behind their rhetorical and emotional poses.—*Vinson Cunningham (Reviewed in our issue of 10/21/19.) (Through Nov. 10.)*

### The Lightning Thief Longacre

“You never listen to me!” So sing a group of half-blood tweens (played by adult actors) in this goofy new Broadway musical—because

having a Greek god as a parent doesn’t mean you don’t have relatable issues. Based on a novel by Rick Riordan, “The Lightning Thief: The Percy Jackson Musical” aims for daffy fun on a budget—it has been expanded from its hour-long beginnings, for the family-friendly company TheaterWorksUSA, while retaining the original’s scrappy aesthetics. Rob Rokicki’s pop score is largely unmemorable, but the book writer, Joe Tracz, and the director, Stephen Brackett (both alumni of “Be More Chill”), confirm that they have a sure touch with adolescent confusion in this quest to retrieve Zeus’ missing lightning bolt. The likable cast makes the most of the material, especially Chris McCarrell, as Percy Jackson, and the rubber-limbed, vocally dexterous Ryan Knowles, in multiple roles, a scene-stealer of the highest order.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (Through Jan. 5.)*

### Little Shop of Horrors Westside

The director Michael Mayer has a straightforward mission in this Off Broadway revival of Howard Ashman’s demented and beloved musical comedy (with music by Alan Menken), about a bloodthirsty plant in a Skid Row flower shop, circa 1960: to reclaim it from the nation’s high-school theatre departments and give it an impeccably faithful and professional production, as close as possible in spirit to the original Off Broadway show that Ashman directed, in 1982. The show succeeds beautifully, and everyone watching it and performing in it—including Jonathan Groff, as Seymour; Tammy Blanchard, as Audrey; and Christian Borle, as Orin and many others—seems to be having a blast. The script’s handful of domestic-abuse jokes strike a discordant note, but over all its pitch-dark Faustian shtick feels delightfully appropriate to these miserably venal times.—*Rollo Romig (Through Jan. 19.)*

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## OFF BROADWAY



### Notes on My Mother’s Decline Fourth Street Theatre

The dual protagonists of Andy Bragen’s new play, about the final days of his mother’s life, are bound together in their billing as Mother and Son. But the pair exist on separate planes, leaving onlookers with only one side of every interaction: Mother (Caroline Lagerfelt) monologues about her childhood memories and her present needs while Son (Ari Fliakos) remains intent on narrativizing her end. Fliakos’s tone is matter-of-fact as he recounts the grim realities of Mother’s post-cancer decline, reducing the act of care to a litany of costs, doctors, and co-morbidities. This distancing is deliberate, but the lack of physical or verbal contact proves more frustrating than affecting. “Notes” is at its best when the boundaries that Bragen and the director, Knud Adams, have painstakingly drawn begin to collapse; only then does the quiet, complicated affection at the heart of the piece shine through.—*Alexander Barasch (Through Oct. 27.)*

### Terra Firma

#### Baruch Performing Arts Center

In 1967, a British war veteran and his family seized a tiny, disused military platform off the coast of Suffolk, eventually declaring it a sovereign constitutional monarchy called the Principality of Sealand. Barbara Hammond’s absurdist comic drama, directed by Shana Cooper, takes these basic facts and transplants them into a highly Beckettian post-apocalyptic future. The characters’ eyes glow with delusion as they squabble over a cornucopia of urgent contemporary themes—nationalism, migration, border security, climate calamity, resource scarcity—but the ideas never convincingly coalesce, and the play’s promising premise, though anchored by Andrew Boyce’s stunning set, goes adrift. It’s the first production by the Coop, a breakaway republic of its

Late in the summer of 1991, Crown Heights, Brooklyn, erupted into race riots after a seven-year-old black boy was run over by a Hasidic leader’s motorcade; a group of young black men retaliated by fatally stabbing an Orthodox Jewish student from Australia. In the wake of the tumult, the playwright and performer Anna Deavere Smith interviewed more than fifty people, from the Reverend Al Sharpton to a local Jewish matron. The resulting piece, “**Fires in the Mirror,**” premiered in 1992, with Smith playing every role. A breakthrough in documentary theatre, it returns in our own era of racial conflagration as the first entry in Smith’s season-long residency at the Signature. Michael Benjamin Washington performs the piece (starting previews on Oct. 22), directed by Saheem Ali.—*Michael Schulman*

own: its artistic director, Andrus Nichols (who plays the Queen), recently split from the celebrated company Bedlam, which she co-founded with Eric Tucker.—R.R. (Through Nov. 10.)

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## MOVIES

### Gemini Man

To what extent will fans of Ang Lee, and of his delicate work in “The Ice Storm” (1997) and “Brokeback Mountain” (2005), be able to detect his hand in this latest venture? Will Smith stars as Henry Brogan, an assassin of high repute who, on the verge of retirement, finds himself the target of a hit. His nemesis turns out to be his younger self—also played by Smith, with a helping hand from digital effects. A clash between the two Henrys sounds rich in promise, yet the result is curiously glum, and Smith at times seems almost disengaged. The liveliest presence is that of Mary Elizabeth Winstead, as the hero’s sidekick, and the brightest patch of the plot is a chase through Cartagena; there, at least, Lee’s eye for color and composition proves as sharp as ever. With Clive Owen,

as Henry’s moody boss.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 10/21/19.) (In wide release.)

### Ghosts of Sugar Land

This twenty-minute documentary, by Bassam Tariq, unfolds a personal drama with a geopolitical scope. Tariq returns to the Texas town of Sugar Land, where he grew up, and interviews nine of his high-school friends about a tenth one. They refer to the friend by a pseudonym, Mark, and they wear toy-store masks for a serious reason: they fear discussing him on camera because they are Muslims of South Asian descent and Mark, who is black, converted to Islam and then became radicalized. In social-media postings and personal communications, Mark exhorted them to commit acts of violence in the name of Islam, and he claims to have gone to Syria and joined ISIS. Mark’s friends cannot tell, however, whether he is a militant or an F.B.I. informant seeking to entrap them. Tariq’s interviews aren’t talking heads but, rather, spacious compositions that feature the participants in a variety of private and public settings; their experiences as Muslims under suspicion and surveillance fill the frame to evoke a national disgrace.—Richard Brody (Netflix.)

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## IN REVIVAL



As part of its reopening, MOMA celebrates the groundbreaking work of Iris Barry (above), the curator who founded the museum’s Film Library, in 1935. Barry was a crucial early film critic who, writing in the nineteen-twenties, discerned the preëminence of directorial artistry and was a leading advocate for the recognition of movies—including popular ones made in commercial contexts—as modern art. The Film Library programs that she assembled for circulation to colleges and other museums, along with her accompanying “Film Notes,” are the basis of the series **“Iris Barry’s History of Film,”** running through Dec. 31. Barry collected and presented silent movies, such as F. W. Murnau’s “Sunrise” (screening Oct. 25), not with nostalgia for a lost golden age but, rather, with a vision of the medium’s continuity. Her programs, drawing on the MOMA archive, also offered talking pictures of enduring power, including Ernst Lubitsch’s musical comedy “The Love Parade,” from 1929 (Dec. 5 and Dec. 30), starring Maurice Chevalier and Jeanette MacDonald.—Richard Brody

### Parasite

Bong Joon-ho’s new film is a tale of two families. Park Dong-ik (Lee Sun-kyun) is smooth and serene, with a home to match. He has two children, an anxious wife, and a housekeeper. Meanwhile, in a lowlier part of town, Kim Ki-taek (Song Kang-ho) and his loved ones struggle to survive. An opportunity arises: one of the Kim children is hired as a private tutor to the Parks’ privileged daughter, and before long the rest of the Kim family has, in a fine display of initiative, found employment in the Park family home. The joke, in a story shaded with dark humor, is that the rich don’t know that the poor have all but taken over their lives. Not only is Bong alert to the volatile state of social injustice, he is wily enough to keep us guessing as to whether, and when, it will explode. In Korean.—A.L. (10/21/19) (In limited release.)

### Pickpocket (Xiao Wu)

From the modest yet precise opening sequence of this drama, from 1997—his first feature film—the Chinese director Jia Zhangke displays an incisive mastery of political symbolism. As the title character, Xiao Wu (Wang Hongwei), boards a bus and slips his fingers around a stranger’s wallet, he observes a portrait of Mao dangling from the rearview mirror; minutes later, he hears a loudspeaker blare an official call for “self-denunciation.” Crime, in Jia’s view, starts at the top and spreads through Chinese society with a blankly ordinary enormity, at the price of nothing less than its citizens’ souls. Xiao Wu’s quietly arrogant marginality contrasts with the government-ratified success of his nouveau-riche brother, Xiao Yong, whose wedding makes the local news. Despairing of his solitude, the pickpocket pursues a relationship with a call girl (Hao Hongjian) who is practicing her own defiant deceptions. Jia’s restrained yet fierce X-ray of the ills of modern China also evokes a calm, intimate tenderness for its struggling survivors. In Mandarin.—R.B. (MOMA, Oct. 28.)

### Synonyms

The Israeli director Nadav Lapid delivers a deeply personal rant in the form of a wild and reckless drama, starring Tom Mercier—in his first movie role—as Yoav, a young Israeli man who arrives in Paris in order to shed his Israeli identity. Yoav nearly dies of cold in an empty, palatial apartment, but is rescued by a young couple, Émile (Quentin Dolmaire), a writer, and Caroline (Louise Chevillotte), an oboist, whose wealth and culture both attract and repel him. Raised on tales of martial glory and having just completed his military service, Yoav plays the Jewish bull in the French china shop; he learns French with frantic discipline but repudiates the country’s refinements, seeking a secret of Frenchness that he discovers only through the rigid laws, norms, and prejudices lurking behind its stylish façades—and that he tests with his own furious violence, both physical and emotional. Lapid’s sense of form is more modest than his impulses; his direction falls short of Mercier’s clenched intensity and unhinged energy. In French.—R.B. (In limited release.)

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## TABLES FOR TWO

### Golden Diner

123 Madison St.

On a recent Thursday at Golden Diner, two patrons took three-hundred-and-sixty-degree spins, in perfect unison, on their swivelling stools. They looked gleeful. And who could blame them? It was a gorgeous fall morning. Warm light flooded the room on the Lower East Side, just south of Chinatown. They were drinking Yuzu Palmers, a cocktail that cleverly replaces an Arnold Palmer's lemonade with yuzu-ade and iced tea with Darjeeling-flavored soju. On the other side of the counter, Samuel Yoo, a pedigreed chef masquerading as a short-order cook, was making them something delicious to eat.

In New York, the classic diner is an endangered species, mostly owing to rising costs of rent, food, and labor, and one that's unlikely to be protected from extinction. When, after thirty years in business, the Cup & Saucer, on Canal Street, packed up shop, in 2017, it seemed as if that would be it for greasy spoons in the area. But then, this past spring, Yoo, who once cooked at Momofuku Ko, opened Golden Diner, which does an

excellent job of upholding the archetype while meeting modern standards.

Take, for example, Yoo's grilled cheese. It's a perfectly unpretentious, familiar-looking specimen: yellow goo melting between buttery slices of white bread, branded by the griddle and sliced on the diagonal. It arrives alone on a plate unless you upgrade to deluxe, which gets you a pile of medium-cut fries and a wedge of sour pickle for three dollars and fifty cents. The fact that the sandwich is vegan—made with coconut-oil-based Gouda and pepper Jack from Follow Your Heart, the company behind Veganaise, and griddled in garlic oil instead of butter—is negligible from a flavor perspective, especially when you compare the ingredients in the dairy-free cheese with those in, say, Kraft Singles. Both are highly processed. Both taste of fat and salt. What the imitation lacks in stretchiness, it makes up for in buoyant ooze.

The fact that the sandwich is vegan is crucial and exciting if you believe, as I do, that humans should cut down on animal products for environmental reasons but enjoy, as I do, a diner-style grilled cheese. There's a vegan Caesar salad, too, which made me want to spin around on *my* stool, a simple but exceptionally satisfying bowl of crunchy green romaine in a punchy, garlic-heavy dressing made with Tabasco and mushroom powder and tossed with shreds of Follow Your Heart Parmesan and big toasty croutons.

This is not a vegan diner. Neither of those dishes comes with a hint of sanctimony, or even of prescription; in

fact, the menu suggests adding crispy (real) chicken to the salad. It's also not a trendy restaurant posturing as a diner for the sake of nostalgia. It's a genuine catchall, in the mode of its forebears, but better. There is plenty to satisfy the staunchest traditionalists. The matzo-ball soup is plainly excellent, no bells or whistles. Two eggs are indeed served, as the menu promises, "How you want 'em," scrambled, fried, or folded into an omelette, and plated with a superlative crackly edged hash-brown patty rough-chopped into bite-size pieces. Just like at your local Athenian, you can order half a grapefruit; a side of bacon; a Diet Coke. Coffee refills are free.

Unlike your local Athenian, Golden Diner tops its enormous, fluffy pancakes with salted honey-maple butter instead of syrup, in homage to a popular South Korean potato-chip flavor. Like a formal poet, Yoo, who is Korean-American and grew up in Bayside, Queens, finds creativity within constraints, telling an enchantingly personal story without ever quite coloring outside the lines. Why does the fairly ordinary-looking burger taste so distinctive? Because the extra-shiny bun is a sesame-scallion milk roll from a Chinatown bakery, and because the patty is dressed with a dash of mushroom-gochujang sauce. Why can't I stop thinking about the pumpkin-seed-and-cranberry granola? Because it's topped, in a stroke of genius, with fresh orange zest. The diner is dead; long live the diner. (Dishes \$8-\$15.)

—Hannah Goldfield

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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT RETREAT

Much of the world watched aghast, last week, as President Donald Trump shattered any notion of an informed or sane U.S. foreign policy. He paved the way for President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, of Turkey, to invade Syria, abandoning America's Kurdish partners in the Syrian Democratic Forces, who had eliminated the Islamic State's caliphate in March, after five years of gruelling warfare. (The S.D.F. lost eleven thousand soldiers; the U.S. lost six.) Erdoğan views Kurds—the world's largest ethnic group without a state—as terrorists, because of a Kurdish separatist campaign in Turkey. After a phone call with Erdoğan, Trump ordered the withdrawal of a thousand U.S. Special Forces soldiers, who had been backing the S.D.F., even though ISIS sleeper cells are still waging an insurgency in Syria and Iraq. The retreat was so abrupt that the U.S. had to bomb a depot full of arms that it didn't have time to remove.

Trump's ignorance of the world has never been so blatant—or produced such bipartisan opposition. The House of Representatives voted 354–60 to condemn the pullout. On the Senate floor, Mitt Romney, Republican of Utah, rebuked the President for leaving “a bloodstain on the annals of American history.” Yet Trump seemed delighted with his decision to let the Turks and the Kurds—both U.S. allies—fight it out. “It was unconventional, what I did,” he told the crowd at a campaign rally in Dallas, on Thursday. “Sometimes you

have to let them fight like two kids. Then you pull them apart.”

Trump and Erdoğan share a crude egotism and a paranoia about deep states trying to undo them, but Erdoğan deftly gamed Trump. On October 9th, Trump sent a remarkably puerile letter to the Turkish leader, warning him not to go too far. History, he wrote, “will look upon you forever as the devil if good things don't happen.” He added, “Don't be a fool!” Erdoğan reportedly tossed the letter into the trash. The same day, he launched Operation Peace Spring, to destroy the S.D.F.

Erdoğan's perfidy dates back years. His government allowed thousands of jihadis to cross the Turkish border and join the caliphate. With Turkey as a partner, the Obama Administration spent millions of dollars training and equipping Syrian Arabs to fight the jihadis; those militias failed. Obama turned to the Kurds as a last option, in 2014. Over time, two thousand Special Forces sol-

diers were deployed in Syria. Erdoğan has long pressed Trump to remove them. Last December, he persuaded him to do it, even though the caliphate had not yet been defeated. The Pentagon called for leaving half the soldiers in place, and prevailed. To forestall an invasion, the U.S. agreed to get the S.D.F. to withdraw up to nine miles from the Turkish border. In August, U.S. troops supervised as the Kurds destroyed their own military posts along a sixty-mile stretch of the border; meanwhile, Turkey deployed more troops and matériel. “The real salt in the wound,” a U.S. official said last week, is that “we told the S.D.F. not to worry.” He went on, “Turkey was building up for an invasion the whole time. We made it easier for them.”

Last Thursday, Vice-President Mike Pence, after a hastily arranged trip to Ankara, announced a five-day ceasefire. The terms of the agreement give Erdoğan exactly what he wanted: Turkey claims that the S.D.F. has to retreat twenty miles along three hundred miles of the Turkish border, in order to create a buffer—a “safe zone”—for Turkey. Trump took a kind of perverse credit for the ceasefire. “What Turkey is getting now is they're not going to have to kill millions of people,” he said. Where exactly the Kurds would go—or whether Turkish troops would stay—remained unclear.

The deal immediately appeared tenuous. The Turkish foreign minister said that Turkey had agreed only to a “pause”—not a ceasefire—“for the terrorists to leave.” General Mazloun Kobani Abdi, the S.D.F. commander, said in an interview that his troops would begin to



withdraw only along the sixty-mile border where the Turks invaded. The Kurds, he said, “are not leaving the lands and graves of their grandfathers.” Brett McGurk, who resigned last year as the U.S. special envoy for the coalition fighting ISIS, said that the safe-zone plan is “totally non-implementable.” He added, “This is Erdoğan’s fantasy scenario, and it includes, of course, nearly all the Kurdish, Assyrian-Christian, and other minority areas of Syria.”

The impact of Trump’s decisions—on the campaign against ISIS, on the balance of power in the Middle East, and on America’s image globally—can’t be undone by the deal that Pence negotiated. “I don’t understand how, in any way, the U.S. is better off on the ground,” Richard Haass, the president of the Council on Foreign Relations, said. “It’s a question of when, not if, American forces will have to return to the region to deal with a reconstituted ISIS.” And,

just as Trump was abandoning the most effective campaign ever conducted against jihadi extremists, he committed some three thousand troops to Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of the ideology that spawned Sunni jihadism, including Al Qaeda—a movement that was inflamed when the U.S. stationed troops in the Kingdom during the first Gulf War.

The Kurds, left stranded, turned to the Syrian government for military help. President Bashar al-Assad regained control of more territory in a day than he had in years of fighting Syria’s civil war. Russian troops, who are propping up Assad’s regime, also moved in. A Russian journalist posted a video from a strategic U.S. base in Manbij—once the hub where foreign ISIS fighters plotted attacks on five continents—showing food left uneaten on plates in the mess hall and cans of Coke in a refrigerator. The American withdrawal coincided with Vladimir Putin’s arrival in Riyadh.

“Saudi Arabia appreciates the active role of the Russian Federation in the region and the world,” King Salman said last Monday, welcoming him. During the Turkish offensive, Putin invited Erdoğan to Moscow. Turkey’s agreement to a pause expires on October 22nd, the day that Erdoğan will meet with the Russian President.

Trump’s actions are already raising questions about America’s trustworthiness. “Partnership is a principal way we establish and maintain influence, particularly as we strive to maintain a competitive advantage against our great-power rivals,” General Joseph Votel, who retired in March as the head of the U.S. Central Command, said. “It is hard to see how this policy decision will contribute to that end.” Trump claimed that he withdrew to avoid being sucked into another “endless” Middle East war. He may instead have facilitated one.

—Robin Wright

## DOOR TO DOOR AVOCADO AL DENTE



Miguel Gonzalez wakes up just after 4 A.M. on most weekdays with one thing on his mind: avocados. In the past few years, Gonzalez, who lives in Long Island City, has become the private avocado dealer to dozens of New York City restaurants, from Michelin-starred spots (Daniel and Eleven Madison Park) to low-key brunch places (Sunday in Brooklyn). His avocados can end up in sixteen-dollar avocado-lettuce cups with toasted cumin at abcV, but his daily operations are decidedly no-frills; they start with him sitting on his sofa in the dark, his sons’ Nintendo games strewn about, planning the morning’s delivery routes in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and Queens.

Since March, he has also been delivering avocados (\$7.50 for three, \$12.50 for five) to individuals, who typically hear about him on Instagram. Ordering from Davocadoguy—Gonzalez’s nom d’avocat—is only slightly more complicated than using Postmates for take-out gua-

camole: requests are made by direct message a day in advance, with payment via Venmo or Apple Pay or in cash.

The other morning, after collating the day’s orders on a spreadsheet, Gonzalez, who is thirty-seven, drove his white van down still-dark streets to his warehouse, in Queens, not far from a couple of cemeteries. The space holds several thousand avocados at various stages of ripeness. Chefs prize his ability to deliver a perfectly ripe product; his aging method is the opposite of leaving a rock-hard avocado on the kitchen counter and crossing your fingers. He treats the details of his process like the recipe for Kentucky Fried Chicken. “That’s part of my trade secret,” he said, adding that developing the method had involved plenty of trial and error.

Given the way that Gonzalez behaved in his warehouse, the formula appears to include obsessively watching the goods, which are stored in cartons in two temperature-controlled rooms that are a bit warmer than a home refrigerator, and periodically prodding them through holes in the cartons. He provides avocados at several levels of ripeness, from firm (a foil for crabmeat in a California roll) to creamy (for mashing). “It’s not my job to assume that you will eat them all right now,” he

said. “My goal is to give you something that’s different than the supermarket.”

Gonzalez never planned to deal avocados, although he did grow up in Los Reyes de Salgado, a city west of Mexico City that is known for its avocado farms. (Mexico now produces more than half of the world’s avocados; drug cartels are reportedly fighting for control of the billion-dollar avocado trade.) Gonzalez moved to Long Island with his mother when he was a teen-ager and began selling mortgages at JPMorgan Chase. The work was gruelling and left him with no time for fun, so he quit and joined his brother importing berries from Mexico. Finding that business too seasonal, he shifted to avocados. “I didn’t do any studies or research,” he said. “I just needed something to sell on the slow times.”

At 7:30 A.M., he made his first drop-off, at a nearby deli, then headed into Manhattan. He stopped at a white brick building in midtown and handed a brown bag, labelled in Sharpie, to a doorman. He headed to the Upper West Side for another doorman handoff, then took the West Side Highway down to the restaurant Perry St. Inside the gleaming kitchen—in lunch-prep mode, the smell of roasting garlic in the air—Gonzalez put down a heavy case and chatted with Cédric Vongerichten, the chef, who told

him about a new mushroom dish and the nuanced avocado texture that it demanded.

"It's almost like pasta," Vongerichten said of Gonzalez's avocado variations. "If you want al dente, you can have it that way. If you want it very ripe for a guacamole, he can do that."

After a stop at Wayan, in Nolita, Gonzalez travelled to Brooklyn, making drop-offs in lobbies and at brownstones. At a red brick house in Carroll Gardens, he discreetly tucked a bag into a designated spot, hidden behind a metal gate. By noon, he was on the day's final order: a cash delivery in a graffiti-tagged block of Bushwick. The customer stood him up, and Gonzalez left with his paper bag and a dejected look on his face.

Gonzalez said that his delivery business was inspired by childhood memories of a milkman who would deliver bottles every morning to his grandmother's house. Demand for avocados was high when Gonzalez started, and, after a couple of months of working with wholesalers in Mexico, he went out on his own. Cosme Aguilar, a friend of Gonzalez's and the chef at Casa Enrique, was his first client.

Gonzalez isn't starstruck by the celebrity chefs on his client list. "I'm just looking to be part of their back-end team," he said. "They often don't see me, but they know that they don't need to worry about the avocados."

—Rachel Felder

## PUBLIC WORKS WHOLLY MOSES



In Jonathan Lethem's detective novel "Motherless Brooklyn," from 1999, Lionel Essrog, a private investigator with Tourette's syndrome, shadows some bad guys from a Zen Buddhist retreat in Manhattan to a Japanese sea-urchin-harvesting operation in Maine. A new film adaptation, written and directed by Edward Norton and set four decades earlier, scraps the unlikely Japonica and has Essrog, played (with some restraint) by Norton, digging into the villainous schemes of a powerful city official named Moses Randolph, who is based on the New York



"He's Anonymous and I'm Unnamed Source."

master builder and political titan Robert Moses, with elements of Darth Vader and Strom Thurmond as well.

In the film, Randolph, played (to the hilt) by Alec Baldwin, is the head of the Borough Authority, a fictional variation on the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority (T.B.T.A.), Robert Moses's real postwar seat of power. In one scene, a character says, "This town is run by the Borough Authority, and the Borough Authority is Moses Randolph." He quotes Emerson: "An institution is the lengthened shadow of one man." This remark is accompanied by a shot of Baldwin emerging from a building into the glare of headlights, his shadow rising monstrously up the façade.

"That was my idea," Norton said one recent morning. He was standing in front of that same building, the longtime headquarters of the T.B.T.A. (now operating as M.T.A. Bridges and Tunnels), on Randall's Island. It's a squat but strangely regal stone stronghold, tucked under the span of the Triborough Bridge that connects Randall's Island to Harlem. (The Triborough Bridge, now officially called the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge, is essentially three bridges—three spokes, with Randall's and Wards Islands at the hub.)

In the thirties, Moses moved his base

of operations from lower Manhattan to this out-of-the-way location, to consolidate his power and to conceal it, and perhaps to get closer to the source of it: the money from the toll plaza directly upstairs. "So they could bring it right down into the building, without anyone else getting their hands on it," Norton said. "It was a straight line of cash. The tolling mechanism was supposed to sunset once the bridges were built, but Moses just kept it going. The genius of this was he had access to permanent capital."

Norton and his director of photography, Dick Pope, had filmed only the T.B.T.A. building's exterior. Now, escorted by two M.T.A. officials, Norton ducked inside to show why. Past a modest Deco lobby and up a great curving stairwell, he entered a warren of drywall and drab office space. In a conference room, he said, "When a cinematographer like Dick Pope walks into a room like this, he says, 'Please, for the love of God, don't make me do it.'" Traces of Moses were scarce: an elevator, installed in 1964, when advancing age made it harder for him to use the stairs, and, on a third-floor landing, his old desk, a giant round slab of wood. "In my research, I learned that he often flat-handed surfaces

for emphasis—a heavy smack on a desk,” Norton said. He had Baldwin do this in “Motherless Brooklyn.”

For Moses Randolph’s office, the filmmakers chose the panelled grandeur of the library at the New York Academy of Medicine, across the bridge, on Fifth Avenue. It has big arched windows similar to those on the front of the T.B.T.A. building. Continuity! Using computer graphics, the filmmakers filled those windows, onscreen, with a vista of the suspension bridge to Queens, the most majestic of the Triborough’s three spans. Impossible! This view from the T.B.T.A. building does not exist; Moses’s office had, in fact, looked out onto the less picturesque Triborough toll plaza. “We wanted a more cinematic sense of the seat of power,” Norton said. A production designer painted some W.P.A.-like murals to cover the Academy library’s walls of medical books.

Like a lot of movies shot in the city, Norton’s film is an intriguing puzzle of locations and camouflaged anachronisms. The old Penn Station is rendered entirely with computer imagery. For the old toll booth on the Triborough, the filmmakers shot the existing one at Jones Beach, on the Meadowbrook Parkway (a Moses road, as it happens), and grafted it onto a scene staged on the bridge today.



Edward Norton

The pool where Randolph does laps (as the parks commissioner, Moses, an avid swimmer, had access to all the pools in town, though he preferred private ones or the ocean) is a remarkably unaltered pool in Harlem, but its lavish exterior is actually that of the Asser Levy Recre-

ation Center, on East Twenty-third Street, a legacy of the settlement-house movement, which Moses’s mother had supported and whose ideals Moses himself, with his decimation of entire neighborhoods and his promotion of the automobile, eventually forsook.

Norton’s grandfather James Rouse was a progressive urban planner, whose ideas about cities were in sharp opposition with Moses’s. “My granddad met Moses in the sixties,” Norton said. “He told my uncle that he was the most dangerous man in America.” Norton said this in such a way that the notion seemed both credible and quaint.

—Nick Paumgarten

## DEPT. OF P’S AND Q’S THE RULES



Let’s say you’re Rihanna, and let’s say, last month, you were at a preview of “Slave Play,” the edgy comedy about race. Is it O.K.—since, after all, you’re a superstar—to take out your phone and text during the performance? Does it make it less rude if the recipient of your texts is Jeremy O. Harris, the playwright of the play in question? Sadie Markowitz, a nine-year-old from Pleasantville, New York, took time off from doing her English homework the other night to weigh in on this matter over the phone. “Just because she’s a huge celebrity, it’s still definitely wrong,” Sadie said. “It’s disturbing to all the people around her and disrespectful to the actors onstage.”

Sadie is the unlikely new Emily Post of the theatre community. In June, just before leaving for sleepaway camp, she put Magic Marker to paper and laid out what she calls her Broadway Rules, and the manifesto made the rounds. Her ten do’s and don’ts include some items that seem obvious (“Stay in seat until intermission,” “Listen to the Ushers”) as well as a few that rarely make it into etiquette primers (“NEVER sing along,” “No ‘gas passing.’”)

“Uncle Seth was going to take my little sister, Isabel, to see ‘Frozen,’” Sadie said recently, over lunch at John’s Pizzeria with her mother and Seth Frad-

koff, who is an old family friend. “It was my sister’s first Broadway show, so, before I left for camp, I had to give her a few tips on how to behave.” Fradkoff had taken Sadie to her first show, “Aladdin,” when she was five. During that outing, she repeatedly broke one of the rules that she would later codify: “It was the rule that there is no kicking the seat in front of you,” she said.

Sadie, finishing her pizza, was about to see her seventh Broadway show, “The Prom.” As she sipped a Shirley Temple, standing up so that she could reach the straw, Fradkoff, a movie publicist, explained that he’d posted Sadie’s rules on Twitter while she was at camp, and that the list soon became, if not viral, at least as contagious as a cough in the mezzanine. In a retweet, Bebe Neuwirth called it “genius.” Donna Murphy urged, “Sadie! Preach & teach!!” The critic Terry Teachout called it “a MAJOR contribution to Broadway civility. It should be printed up as a flyer and distributed at all shows!” There was talk of Sadie joining him and his fellow theatre writers Peter Marks and Elisabeth Vincentelli on their podcast, “Three on the Aisle.”

What does it feel like to find out from your mother, on the drive home from camp, that you’re famous? “It was embarrassing for me at first, because I’m just a little girl, and sometimes I get speechless about things,” she said. “But after Mommy showed me a bit online and I thought about it, I got really excited.” Is she interested in a career on Broadway? “I’d rather be a culinary chemist,” she said. “I actually learned how to make molecular spaghetti from a book I have.”

A topic not covered in the rules is attire. “Usually, I like to wear fancy stuff like this,” she said, gesturing to her flowered dress and gold sandals. “Also, whenever I am wearing a dress, I use cartwheel shorts to cover up my undies.” She lifted her hem to reveal black elastic shorts. “You should always dress appropriately,” she said. “For instance, you should definitely not go to a show in a Captain Underpants T-shirt.”

Walking to the theatre, she continued the tutorial. What to do if someone breaks a rule? “Most people would get out of their seats and quietly talk to the ushers about it,” she said. She told a story about how once, when her Uncle Seth was seeing “Tootsie,” a woman



*Sadie Markowitz*

nearby was making so much noise with a pack of Twizzlers that he grabbed the wrapper from her and threw it into the aisle. “That’s how he got kicked out of ‘Tootsie,’” she said. “If I’d been there, I’d have felt mostly proud.”

Before the musical began, Sadie sat sidesaddle in her aisle seat and studied the playbill. Her mother said, “I think part of Broadway etiquette should also be keeping your shoes on. What do you think?”

Sadie had slipped off her sandals. She thought for a moment and said, “My feet are sweaty.”

—*Patricia Marx*

## THE CREATIVE LIFE VISITATIONS



On a recent Thursday, in a library-like speakeasy at a labyrinthine event space in Chelsea, the actors Rufus Collins, Willem Dafoe, and Kathryn Hahn sat around a coffee table strewn with scripts and bananas. They were conducting a read-through for a performance, guided by the writer-director Tamara Jenkins. The actor Lucy Liu was on her way. Hahn wore a dramatic skirt. (“It’s just an old fisherman’s net.”) She read, “I’ve lived chiefly in Alabama, Louisiana, Connecticut, New York City . . . have never attended college, or taken a formal course in writing. Though Capote

(pronounced Ca-Po-Te, more or less) is really a Spanish name, my mother is Dutch, my father Scotch-English.”

“Dear Miss Ames,” Dafoe read. “I am writing to ask whether there would be any possibility of a place at Yaddo, sometime this winter, for James Baldwin, a very gifted young writer of my acquaintance.” He concluded, “Sincerely, Lionel Trilling.” The script consisted of letters sent to and from Yaddo, the writers’ and artists’ retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York, founded in 1900 and centered on the fifty-five-room Tudor mansion where its founders, Spencer and Katrina Trask, summered with their four children, who all died young. Paintings of the Trasks hang on the walls, and their silverware and photographs remain in the house; ghosts, literary and familial, have long infused the Yaddo experience. That night’s performance, for a Yaddo benefit, aimed to conjure a few.

As Collins read from Katherine Anne Porter’s description of the Trasks (“as wildly romantic as any two Babes in the Woods you could ever expect to find”), the lights in the room dimmed suddenly—“Ooh!” the actors said—then brightened again. A few minutes later, Liu appeared, looking tidy and practical: smart bob, eyeglasses, striped turtleneck, overalls, pumpkin-colored raincoat. “I was lost in the basement,” she said. Hahn squealed and reached out, wiggling her fingers.

“Do you know each other?” Jenkins asked.

“No, but I want to!” Hahn said. Liu took her seat and a script. “I am a composer studying music at Harvard,” she read. “I am ready to come at any time, and at very short notice. . . . Very sincerely, Leonard Bernstein.” They continued on. Dafoe: “I am sitting here at my desk drinking a queer but rather good mixture of tea, red wine, and orange juice.” (Carson McCullers.) Liu: “I am trying to write a handful of good short stories.” (John Cheever.) Hahn: “At Yaddo I would like to work at completing a first volume of poetry.” (Sylvia Plath Hughes.) Flannery O’Connor wrote that she was looking forward to Yaddo, and not just because it wasn’t Georgia. “Lately we have been treated to some parades by the Ku Klux Klan,” Collins read. “It’s too hot to burn a fiery cross, so they bring a portable one made with red electric light bulbs.”

“Oh, my God,” several actors said. After

more letters, and a tally of prizes won by Yaddo alums (some seventy-nine Pulitzers, sixty-nine National Book Awards, a Nobel, etc.), they gossiped a bit.

“Howard Doughty—he was whose boyfriend?” Dafoe said.

“Newton Arvin’s, and then Truman became Newton’s lover,” Elaina Richardson, Yaddo’s president, said.

“It’s where it all happens,” Jenkins said.

“It’s like a Tinder for artists,” Liu said.

Allan Gurganus writes in his essay “The Ghosts of Yaddo” that, according to legend, a young, “satyr-like” Cheever was caught creeping between bedrooms late one night, naked, when he was happened upon by peers. Cheever froze and assumed a glassy-eyed expression. “I am a ghost,” he said.

Gurganus claims to have seen a female, skirted ghost at Yaddo; other atmosphere-enhancing visitations come from bats. “It’s, like, total Preston Sturges absurd,” Jenkins, a Yaddo alum, who set part of her film “Private Life” there, said. “You’re all having cocktails and some writer runs through with a net.”

“I am famous at Yaddo for catching bats,” a writer named Boomer Pinches said, at the benefit. Pinches worked on a seven-hundred-page novel at Yaddo. “They made me a T-shirt about how many bats I caught.” He mimed wielding a net. “In the mansion, they fly in figure eights,” he said. “There’s a method so you don’t hurt them.” (Use two nets.)

“Nothing bonds you faster than grabbing sheets and chasing bats for two minutes,” Doug Wright said. He wore a glitzy, vaguely Masonic dinner jacket. At Yaddo, he worked on his play “I Am My Own Wife,” and a new play about castrati. His Yaddo adventures include playing a prank with Rick Moody and having Martinis at the racetrack with Joy Williams. Ghostwise, he said, “People—and not people you’d expect to watch ‘Ghost Hunters’ on A&E—have told me about sightings of the children. But they had a consoling air—kind of a copacetic coexistence.”

“Artists getting along with ghosts is not really that weird,” the novelist and performer James Hannaham, a “total colony rat,” said.

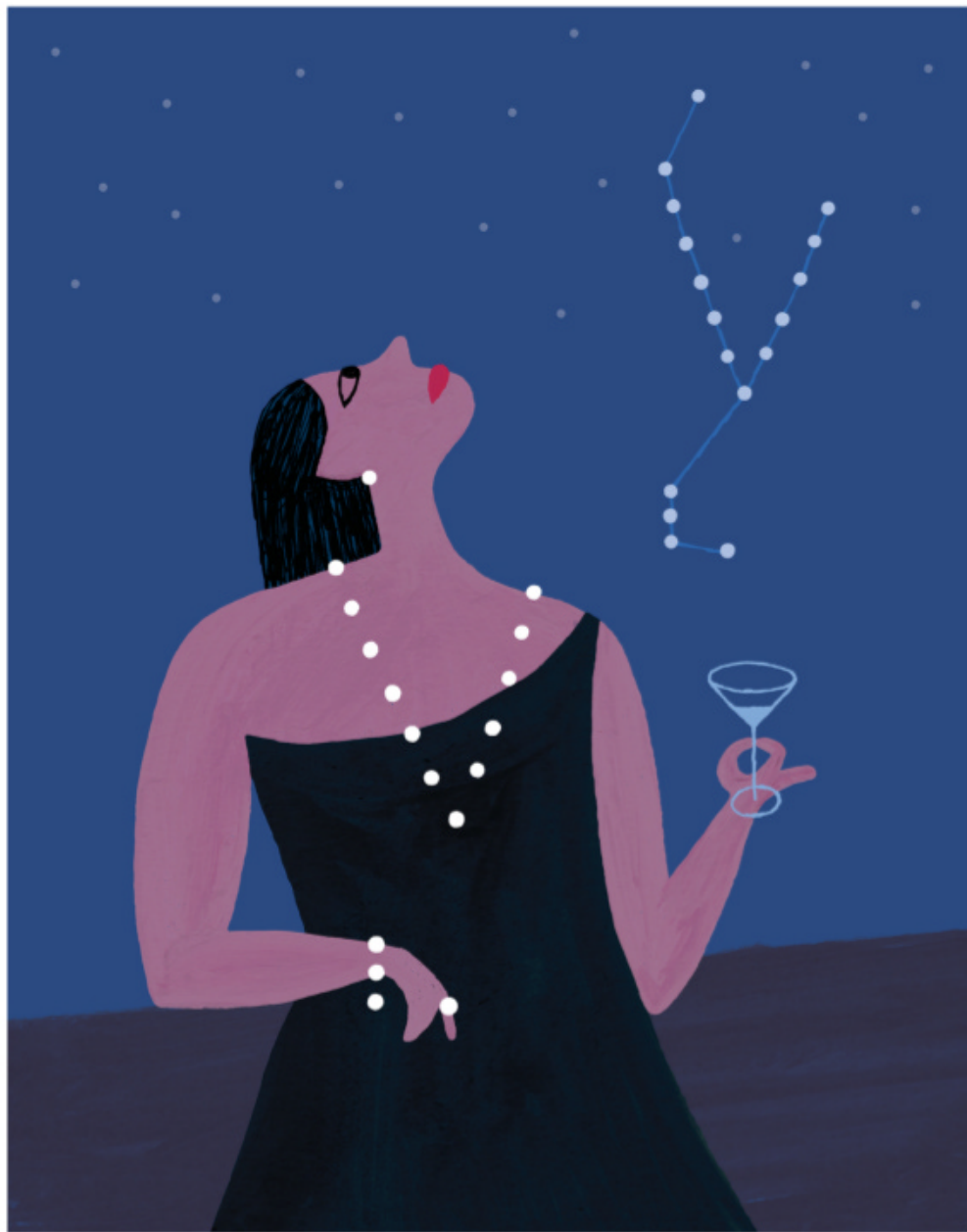
“A ghost is nothing compared to a long day of typing and only getting three sentences,” Wright said.

—*Sarah Larson*

## STARSTRUCK

*In uncertain times, astrology makes a comeback.*

BY CHRISTINE SMALLWOOD



On a Sunday night in June, the twenty-nine-year-old astrologer Aliza Kelly was preparing to broadcast an Astrology 101 live stream from her apartment, on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. A glittering SpectroLED light panel made the living room feel like a tiny movie set. “My manager took me to get these lights at B&H,” she said.

A windowsill was lined with gifts from clients—an illustrated zodiac, a white orchid. Kelly sat cross-legged on a taupe ottoman, wearing cat eyeliner and large hoop earrings, greeting people and waving as they appeared in the online chat room. “That is one of my favorite things, as a Leo and as a person—building com-

munity,” she said. It was a little before eight-thirty, and some of the fifty-two participants—who had paid between \$19.99 and \$39.99 each—were typing hellos; one woman, in Europe, had set her alarm for 2:30 A.M., to log in. Once the class started, Kelly clicked through a slide deck about ancient Babylonia; William Lilly, the “English Merlin,” who was consulted by both sides during the English Civil War; and the signs of the zodiac. To explain the traits of Aries, she put up a picture of Mariah Carey (“She loves getting presents”). For Pisces, she had Rihanna and Steve Jobs. “My main favorite thing is to talk about the signs as celebrities,” she said. “Because these are

modern-day mythological figures. In ancient Greece, if you said ‘Athena,’ everyone knew, Oh, that’s what Athena is like.”

Kelly’s schedule is typical for a millennial astrologer. She writes books (on zodiac-themed cocktails); does events (at the private club Soho House); offers individual chart readings (a hundred and seventy-five dollars an hour); hosts a podcast (“Stars Like Us”); makes memes (“for lolz”); manages a “virtual coven” called the Constellation Club, with membership levels that cost from five dollars to two hundred; and has worked as a consultant for the astrology app Sanctuary. She also writes an advice column for *Cosmopolitan*, and hosts an occasional *Cosmo* video series in which she guesses celebrities’ signs based on their answers to twelve questions. According to the editor-in-chief, Jessica Pels, who has expanded the magazine’s print coverage of astrology to nine pages in every issue, seventy-four per cent of *Cosmo* readers report that they are “obsessed” with astrology; seventy-two per cent check their horoscope every day.

Astrology is currently enjoying a broad cultural acceptance that hasn’t been seen since the nineteen-seventies. The shift began with the advent of the personal computer, accelerated with the Internet, and has reached new speeds through social media. According to a 2017 Pew Research Center poll, almost thirty per cent of Americans believe in astrology. But, as the scholar Nicholas Campion, the author of “Astrology and Popular Religion in the Modern West,” has argued, the number of people who know their sun sign, consult their horoscope, or read about the sign of their romantic partner is much higher. “New spirituality is the new norm,” the trend-forecasting company WGSN declared two years ago, when it announced a report on millennials and spirituality that tracked such trends as full-moon parties and alternative therapies. Last year, the *Times*, in a piece entitled “How Astrology Took Over the Internet,” heralded “astrology’s return as a compelling content business as much as a traditional spiritual practice.” *The Atlantic* proclaimed, “Astrology is a meme.” As a meme, its life cycle has been unusually long. “My account, it was meant to be a fun thing for me to do on the side while I was a production assistant,” Courtney Perkins, who runs the Insta-

*A new generation of practitioners is meeting the public’s appetite for astrology.*

gram account Not All Geminis, which has more than five hundred thousand followers, said. “Then it blew up and now it’s like—I don’t know. I didn’t mean for this to be . . . life.”

In its penetration into our shared lexicon, astrology is a little like psychoanalysis once was. At mid-century, you might have heard talk of id, ego, or superego at a party; now it’s common to hear someone explain herself by way of sun, moon, and rising signs. It’s not just that you hear it. It’s who’s saying it: people who aren’t kooks or climate-change deniers, who see no contradiction between using astrology and believing in science. The change is fuelling a new generation of practitioners. Fifteen years ago, astrology conferences were the gray-streaked province of, as one astrologer told me, “white ladies in muumuus decorated with stars.” Kay Taylor, the education director of the Organization for Professional Astrology, said that those who came of age in the seventies were worried about the future of the profession. Now, she said, “all of a sudden there’s this new crop.” In the past year, the membership of the Association for Young Astrologers has doubled.

The corporate world has taken note of the public’s appetite. Last year, the astrologer Rebecca Gordon partnered with the lingerie brand Agent Provocateur to produce a zodiac-themed event where customers could use their Venus signs to, in Gordon’s words, “find their personal styles.” This spring, Amazon sent out “shopping horoscopes” to its Prime Insider subscribers. Astrology is also being used to help launch businesses. This summer, the forty-six-year-old siblings Ophira and Tali Edut, known as the AstroTwins, started Astropreneurs Summer Camp, a seven-week Web-based course. Participants analyzed their birth charts to determine whether they were Influencers, Experts, or Mavens/Messengers, and got advice on how to tailor their professional plans accordingly.

The popularity of astrology is often explained as the result of the decline of organized religion and the rise of economic precariousness, and as one aspect of a larger turn to New Age modalities. Then, there’s the matter of political panic. In times of crisis, it is often said, people search for something to believe in. The first newspaper astrology column was commissioned in August, 1930, in the af-

termath of the stock-market crash, for the British tabloid the *Sunday Express*. The occasion was Princess Margaret’s birth. “What the Stars Foretell for the New Princess” was so popular—and such a terrific distraction—that the paper made it a regular feature. After the financial collapse in 2008, Gordon, who runs a popular online astrology school, received calls from Wall Street bankers. “All of those structures that people had relied upon, 401(k)s and everything, started to fall apart,” she said. “That’s how a lot of people get into it. They’re, like, ‘What’s going on in my life? Nothing makes sense.’” Ten years later, more than retirement plans have fallen apart. “I think the 2016 election changed everything,” Colin Bedell, an astrologer whose online handle is Queer Cosmos, told me. “People were just, like, we need to come to some spiritual school of thought.” As Kelly put it, “In the Obama years, people liked astrology. In the Trump years, people need it.”

**T**he idea at the heart of astrology is that the pattern of a person’s life—or character, or nature—corresponds to the planetary pattern at the moment of his birth,” the historian Benson Bobrick writes in his 2005 book, “The Fated Sky.” “Such an idea is as old as the world is old—that all things bear the imprint of the moment they are born.” Western astrology had its origins in ancient Mesopotamia, and spread throughout Egypt, Greece, the Roman Empire, and the Islamic world. Astrology helped people decide when to plant crops and go to war, and was used to predict a person’s fate and interpret his character. Would he have good luck with money? Would he ascend the throne? (When the astrologer Theogenes cast Augustus’ chart, Bobrick writes, the astrologer “reportedly gasped and threw himself at his feet.”)

According to Bobrick, Theodore Roosevelt kept his birth chart on a table in his drawing room, and Charles de Gaulle and François Mitterrand sought advice from astrologers. (Astrology has also been used to intentionally mislead political enemies. In 1942 and 1943, the Allies distributed a fake astrology magazine called *Der Zenit*, which, among other things, endeavored to disguise the Allied ambush of German U-boat operations.) Ronald Reagan’s chief of staff said that Reagan consulted an astrologer before

“virtually every major move and decision,” including the timing of his reelection announcement, military actions in Grenada and Libya, and disarmament negotiations with Mikhail Gorbachev.

For some adherents, astrology can explain everything from earthquakes (Saturn crossing the south node) to the rise of social media (an increase in Cesarean sections has led to an increase in births between 9 A.M. and 5 P.M., and thus a rise in the number of suns in the tenth house, which governs reputation and prestige). But what attracts most people to astrology today has more to do with psychology. Psychological astrology, influenced by Carl Jung, treated the birth chart—a diagram that shows the individual’s relation to the cosmos at birth—as the representation of the psyche and used it to talk about such things as purpose, potential, and self-actualization. It’s hard to understand the deep appeal of astrological practice without having or observing an individual chart reading, an experience whose closest analogue is therapy. But unlike therapy, where a client might spend months or even years uncovering the roots of a symptom, astrology promises to get to answers more quickly. Despite common misconceptions, an astrologer is not a fortune-teller. In a chart reading, she doesn’t predict the future; she describes the client to herself.

The power of description can be great. Couching characteristics in the language of astrology seems to make it easier for many people to hear, or admit, unpleasant things about their personalities—and to accept those traits in others. (The friend who comes over and never leaves? She can’t help it. She’s a Taurus.) Most astrologers say that it’s important not to use your sign to excuse bad behavior. Still, as the AstroTwins have written, “astrology is kind of like the peanut butter that you slip the heartworm pill in before giving it to your Golden Retriever. You can tell someone, ‘You’re such a spotlight hog!’ and they kind of want to slap you. But if you say, ‘You’re a Leo. You need to be the center of attention,’ they’re like, ‘Yeah baby, that’s me.’”

**F**or centuries, drawing an astrological chart required some familiarity with astronomy and geometry. Today, a chart can be generated instantly, and for free, on the Internet. Astrology is

ubiquitous on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, and in downloadable workshops, classes, and Webinars. A new frontier has opened with mobile apps.

In July, I was ushered into a glass-enclosed conference room on the sixth floor of a building in Tribeca to meet with Banu Guler, the thirty-one-year-old co-founder and C.E.O. of the astrology app Co-Star, whose Web site promises to allow “irrationality to invade our techno-rationalist ways of living.” Guler is a casting director’s idea of a tech executive. She is a vegan who used to design punk zines and was a bike messenger until she got into “a gnarly car wreck.” She has cropped hair, a septum piercing, and a tattoo of Medea on the back of one leg. Why Medea? I asked. “Witchcraft,” she explained. A copy of Liz Greene’s “Relating: An Astrological Guide to Living with Others on a Small Planet” lay between us. Guler hasn’t read it, but it’s been on her Goodreads list forever.

The market for astrology apps has changed dramatically in the past few years. In 2015, when Aliza Kelly was raising money for a short-lived astrology dating app called Align, she was mocked by prospective investors. (“Literally, this one guy wrote, ‘I usually wish people well, and in your case I don’t, because you’re defying science and the Enlightenment era,’” she told me.) Now venture capitalists, excited by a report from IBISWorld which found that Americans spend \$2.2 billion annually on “mystical services” (including palmistry, tarot reading, etc.), are funnelling money into the area. Co-Star is backed by six million dollars. Since its launch, in 2017, it has been downloaded six million times. Eighty per cent of users are female, and their average age is twenty-four.

Co-Star has competitors. There’s the Pattern, an app whose creepily accurate psychological and compatibility analyses are generated by birth charts but are delivered free of any astrological references. (The actor Channing Tatum recently had a meltdown on social media—“How do you know what you know about me, Pattern?”—after his pattern, apparently, hit too close to

home.) The doyenne of popular astrology, Susan Miller, employs an assistant, four editors, and eight engineers to produce her books, calendars, Web site (it has eleven million views annually), and app, which caters to those who find the forty-thousand-word forecasts on her site insufficient. (Miller was an early Internet presence, and her style is at once maternal and optimistically pragmatic. At a recent event in Macy’s flagship store, in Herald Square, she told the audience, “Freezing your eggs is expensive, but I want every girl here who doesn’t have a baby to do it!”) Sanctuary offers free daily horoscopes and, for twenty dollars a month, a fifteen-minute text exchange with an astrologer.

One person I interviewed compared it to “a psychic 900 hotline for the DM era.” The most informative app is Vice’s Astro Guide, which the company imagines as a “tool not just for self-care but for cosmic wellness.”

Co-Star’s daily horoscopes appear under categories that are only slightly incomprehensible, such as “Mood Facilitating Responsibility” or “Identity Enhancing Emotional Stability.” The app generates content by pulling and recombining phrases that have been coded to correspond to astronomical phenomena. Currently, the company employs four people to write these “bits” of language—two poets, an editor, and an astrologer. The app sometimes generates nonsense—“You will have a bit of luck relating to your natural sense of self-control,” it told me recently—and can be blunt to the point of rudeness. Users like to screenshot and post Co-Star’s push notifications, activities that help explain why the company doesn’t spend anything on advertising. “Don’t even try to make yourself understood today. It’s not worth it” is a typical example of the tone. Guler relishes it. “It’s not, like, ‘Go sit and journal and write four sentences about the world you wish to see,’” she said, leaning across the table. “It’s, like, ‘Go take a fucking cold shower.’”

On the day we met, Guler, like everyone in her office, was wearing all black. This happens, she said, “not in-

frequently.” (Whether it happens more frequently when journalists are visiting, she did not say.) Guler first realized that astrology could be a business when she went to a party for a friend’s newborn with a birth chart as a gift, and everyone at the party wanted one for her baby, too.

When Guler was a child, her mother used to do readings from the grounds in her thick Turkish coffee. It was, Guler said, a way to have conversations about feelings that would otherwise be difficult. “The sludge, for lack of a better word, forms shapes,” she said. “It’s, like, ‘There’s this divot or valley here—what’s going on with you? Something bad?’” Today, she said, “anxiety’s up, depression is up, loneliness is up.” But, with astrology, “you can use this language to walk into a room and be, like, ‘I’m going through my Saturn return. I’m reckoning with restrictions and limits and boundaries right now.’”

On the one hand, Guler said, today’s problems are bound up with the rise of technology: “We’re really operating from this place that technology is doing something weird to our brains.” On the other hand, she said, technology will be the antidote, by teaching us to speak about ourselves. Co-Star currently allows you to find friends and read their astrological profiles, and its future plans call for more “social” features. Co-Star, like all tech companies, dreams of “bringing people together”—to spend more time, presumably, on the app itself.

In “The Stars Down to Earth,” Theodor Adorno’s 1953 critique of a newspaper’s sun-sign column, he argued that astrology appealed to “persons who do not any longer feel that they are the self-determining subjects of their fate.” The mid-century citizen had been primed to accept magical thinking by systems of fascistic “opaqueness and inscrutability.” It’s easy to name our own opaque and inscrutable systems—surveillance capitalism, a byzantine health-insurance system—but to say that we are no longer the self-determining subjects of our fate is also to recognize the many ways that our lives are governed by circumstances outside our control. We know that our genetic codes predispose us to certain diseases, and that the income bracket we are born into



can determine our future. “Fate” is another word for “circumstance.”

On a hot Tuesday night this summer, two dozen students of astrology gathered in a stuffy back room of the Open Center, in midtown Manhattan, to discuss a partial lunar eclipse and the birth chart of Jeffrey Epstein, who had recently been arrested on charges of sex trafficking. Anne Ortelee and Mark Wolz, astrologers who have been leading the class in various locations for twelve years, sat up front. Ortelee, talking fast, mixing jargon and dry jokes in a manner not unlike that of a sportscaster calling a game, pointed to the details of the chart. Epstein had his sun in Aquarius and his moon in Aries, so he was used to having his way. Venus, which rules love, money, and pleasure, and Mars, which rules action, desire, and war, were in Pisces, suggesting trouble with boundaries and addictive tendencies. She said that his “Mercury-Uranus-Venus-Mars configuration” represented “sex with young children—Mercury is young children, Mars is sex.”

Some of the students were studying to pass accreditation exams; others were simply interested in deepening their knowledge. A few had been coming to the class for years. A young man in the front row with deep-set eyes and a faint mustache noted that the arrangement of Saturn, Neptune, and Uranus could indicate a sudden and unexpected death. Ortelee, who wore a flowered dress and held a sweating cup of iced coffee, nodded. “This is not a guy who’s going to live long in prison,” she said. A woman in a red dress raised her hand to point out the connection between the July eclipses (there were two) and the astrology of October, 2018, when Brett Kavanaugh was sworn in as a Supreme Court Justice. “Kavanaugh was also an evil Aquarius,” she said, to general murmurs.

Some teachers use students’ birth charts in classes, but because a chart is personal—“Looking at your chart is kind of like looking at you naked,” the student with the mustache told me—Ortelee prefers to use the charts of notable figures. Astrologers have been doing so for a long time. In 1552, Luca Gaurico, a court adviser to Catherine de Médici, published a book of horoscopes about Popes, cardinals, princes, and other famous men. Similar books

followed, featuring analyses of Erasmus, Albrecht Dürer, and Henry VIII. More recently, Ortelee’s class had studied the charts of Tucker Carlson and Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, who lit up the Internet this spring when a staffer confirmed her birth time (one of the three pieces of data, along with date and location, that are needed to calculate a birth chart). In another class this summer at the Open Center, I listened as the students discussed the birth chart of Boris Johnson. “Does anybody see why he has the hair that he has?” a woman in tortoiseshell glasses asked. In September, the class turned its attention to Capitol Hill. On Instagram, Ortelee pointed out that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi announced an impeachment inquiry into Donald Trump only minutes before “Mercury was sextiling Jupiter, promising information and news that we should all pay attention to.”

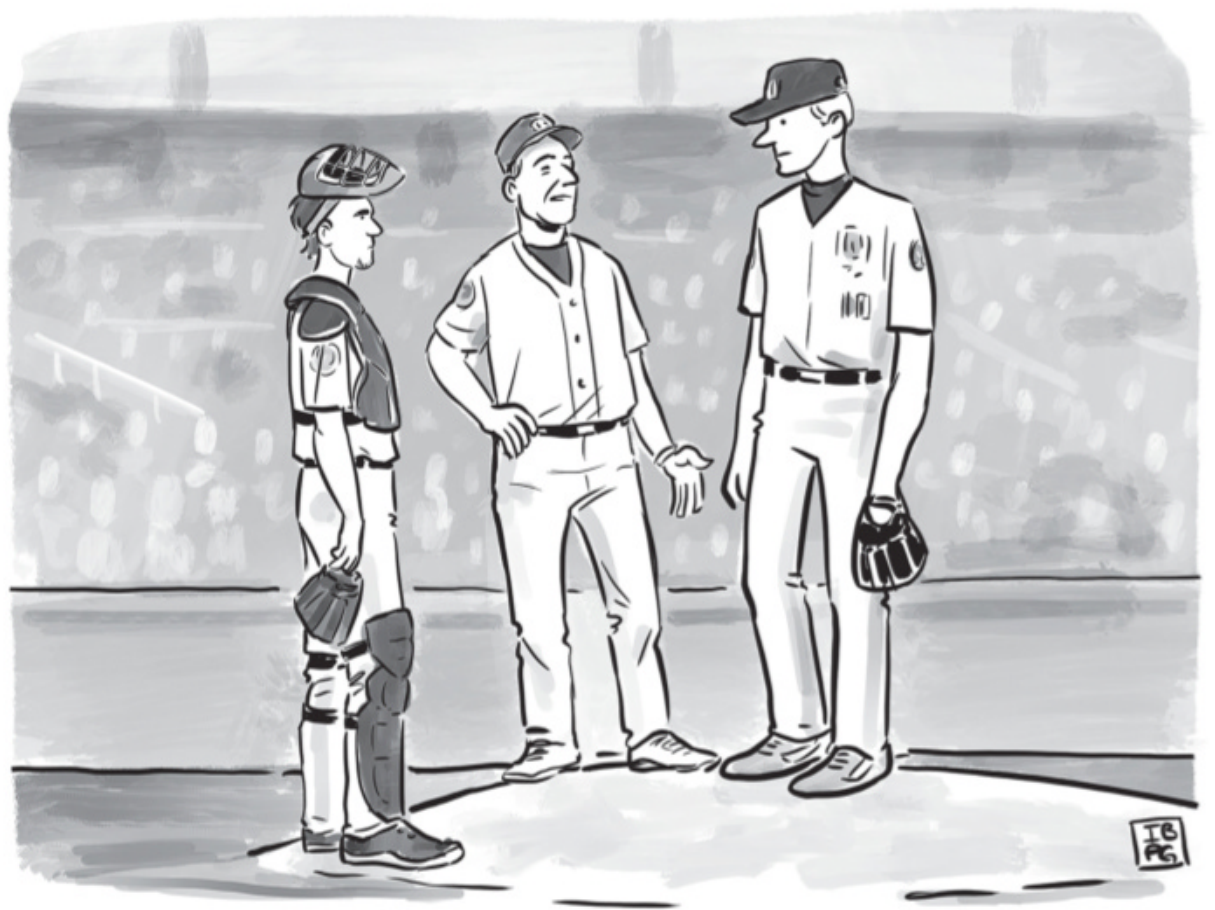
It’s a commonplace to say that in uncertain times people crave certainty. But what astrology offers isn’t certainty—it’s distance. Just as a person may find it easier to accept things about herself when she decides she was born that way, astrology makes it possible to see world events from a less reactive position. It posits that history is not a linear story of upward progress but instead moves in cycles, and that historical actors—the ones running amok all around

us—are archetypes. Alarming, yes; villainous, perhaps; but familiar, legible.

Ortelee later explained to me that people pop up in the news *because* the movements of the planets through the sky, known as transits, are activating their charts. This can work on many levels. “When the Titanic happened, there was a big Neptune transit, and when the ‘Titanic’ movie came out, years later, there was a huge Neptune transit,” she said. “You heard Celine Dion everywhere. And now there’s a mini Neptune transit, so there’s a ‘Carpool Karaoke’ with Dion and James Corden singing the ‘Titanic’ song in the fountains in the Bellagio.”

Others see astrology as having the power not just to explain the political situation but also to change it. Chani Nicholas uses astrology as a tool for social justice and radical action. “To be a human is to suffer,” she said when we met. “I don’t think we should fight that. But we also can’t dwell there.” Nicholas’s work includes readings about what a new moon in Scorpio means for the #MeToo movement, and the import of Saturn’s position for the future of DACA. “I’m interested in helping people get to the core of their purpose and then to use that to be of service in the world, as quickly as possible,” she said.

I met Nicholas, who is in her forties, in July, when she was visiting Brooklyn from Los Angeles. She had arranged



*“It’s such a nice day. Just let him walk the bases.”*

for a private tour of the exhibition “Nobody Promised You Tomorrow: Art Fifty Years After Stonewall,” at the Brooklyn Museum, with her friend Tourmaline, who had short films in the show, and two of the exhibit’s curators. While the curators talked, footage of the transgender activist Sylvia Rivera flashed on a video screen. Nicholas pulled up Rivera’s chart. At the moment of Rivera’s birth, the sun—which, Nicholas said, represents the essential self—was at the same degree as Uranus, the planet of disruption, which, she said, will “tear this whole thing down.” But all this, Nicholas went on, was happening in the sign of Cancer, which signifies home and nurturing. “How do we care for people radically?” she asked, explaining how the chart was relevant.

Nicholas has a million online readers. She now rarely books private chart readings, because the demand was overwhelming. Her business is based on selling downloadable workshops, and she curates free monthly Spotify playlists for each sign. In January, she will publish her first book, “You Were Born for This: Astrology for Radical Self-Acceptance.” Back in 2012, Nicholas was one of the organizers of the first Queer Astrology Conference. “When you queer something, you try to see it outside cultural norms,” she said. She uses astrology to talk not just about sexuality and gender but also about race, class, and climate.

Nicholas believes that astrology appeals because it gives “context” to people and to world events. Like religion, it says that there is something beyond material existence, but it doesn’t teach dogma, or prescribe action. Many astrologers I interviewed expressed concern that astrology can be misused to generate fear or to extort, but mostly, Nicholas said, it’s a way of “framing the thing we’re in.” As humans, she said, “we need rhythm. We need ritual. We need timing.”

“I absolutely love astrology,” Alex Dimitrov said. “But it’s a gateway drug to the real magic, which is poetry.”

On a Friday night in July, I had dinner at the Odeon, in Tribeca, with Dimitrov and Dorothea Lasky, who run the Twitter account Astro Poets, which they launched in November of 2016, just after Trump’s election. Ten weeks

later, they got some negative feedback because of a joke about yoga, and Lasky called Dimitrov at three in the morning and said that she wanted to delete the account. “I was, like, ‘Excuse me?’” Dimitrov remembered. He took a sip of rosé. Dimitrov, who is dark and compact, was wearing fitted jeans and a Def Leppard shirt. “That was Aries behavior,” he said. The feed now has five hundred thousand followers.

Dimitrov and Lasky think of the signs formally, as “poetic constraints,” and imagine them interacting like characters in a novel. On their Twitter feed, in addition to the horoscopes, lists, and pop-culture references that populate all astrology social media, they quote poets they admire. The night before, someone had texted Dimitrov a line by Eileen Myles—“It is summer, I love you, I am surrounded by snow”—and he had tweeted it. “Honestly, it’s the Sagittarius mantra,” he said. (Dimitrov, like Myles, is a Sagittarius.)

The Astro Poets’ horoscopes employ exquisite images, turning sharply from low to high, from humor to pain or grief. Here’s the horoscope they tweeted about Pisces for the week of August 4th: “A wind is a little reminder. Reminder of what, you ask. The rain. The rain!” Don’t ask them what it means. Lasky, resplendent in sparkling eye makeup and a crocheted necklace, said that the whole point of a poem “is it’s supposed to be your friend, and you’re supposed to commingle with it.” On the first episode of the Astro Poets podcast, which debuted in August, she explained that astrology is also a friend—something that can witness your life and help make sense of it.

Still, those who turn to astrology for clarity will be bemused by the Astro Poets. Some of their most passionate readers long for plainer speaking, or at least for someone to put their poetry into prose. “We have these translators,” Lasky said. “There was one translator who was an Aquarius, Mimi—as soon as I would write a tweet, Mimi had an alert and would translate it for people. But Mimi, after a few years, has retired, and everyone is really sad.”

A few weeks later, I met the Astro Poets at Enchantments, a store in the East Village, where the poet Alice Notley used to shop. Dimitrov, Lasky, and I picked out herbs and figurines and

candles. Then we went to Canal Street to have our aura photographs taken. (Lasky’s and Dimitrov’s auras seemed to match, like two halves of a blue-and-purple rainbow.) The plan was for us to do a “very positive” spell on the Brooklyn Bridge. But it was more than ninety degrees, and we wandered for a long time looking for the pedestrian walkway, and eventually settled on a bench in the shade under the bridge. Lasky lit the candles, and we all silently meditated on our intentions for this article. A pigeon hopped tentatively nearer.

One way to cope with uncertainty is to demand certainty. Another is to learn to dwell in uncertainty, to find solace and even beauty in what is, and must be, unknown. Dimitrov and Lasky’s new book is called “Your Guide to the Zodiac,” but for a long time they toyed with putting the word “mystery” or “magic” in the title. “Those ideas are so important to us,” Dimitrov said. As Samuel Reynolds, who began researching astrology in the nineteen-eighties in order to disprove it and is now on the board of the International Society for Astrological Research, told me, “To talk about the planets literally having some measure of effect on you brings up all kinds of questions that I don’t think astrology is prepared to answer.” Instead, Reynolds said, astrology is “symbolic and spiritual”—a literary language whose truth can neither be validated nor invalidated by empirical science.

For some people, the complex system itself is a source of pleasure: there’s math involved, rules to master, vocabulary to memorize. For others, it permits a play of interpretation. As the planets transit, they move into different signs, picking up different meanings. In one context, Uranus indicates sudden death; in another, revolutionary energy. There are myriad combinations for storytelling. At the Odeon, Lasky said that when poetry transits—when it moves from meaning to meaning—it doesn’t let go of what came before. She started to explain the Greek root of the word “metaphor” (“to carry across”), when Dimitrov broke in.

“It’s about negative capability,” he said. “To endure doubt is ultimately the only thing you can do in life—not strive for meaning or answers, and to endure the state you’re in.” ♦



## YOUR IMMORTALITY APPLICATION

BY CORA FRAZIER

**W**e regret to inform you that your petition to not die has been denied.

We had a tremendous number of applicants this year, more than five hundred million, as awareness of our services, once considered a “hoax,” spread across unedited social-media platforms.

We assure you that we reviewed your application thoroughly. We remind you that omission of any material was cause for rejection, and you wrote “N/A” on the areas marked “heirs,” “life-insurance policy,” and “number of times you’ve used the expression ‘I could just die.’” However, we conducted our review with the information available.

According to your Statement of Eternal Purpose, you have an idea for an app that decodes dreams and then recommends charities based on those dreams; you fact-check people who post misleading information on Twitter about your favorite TV shows; and you plan to adopt a dog from a rescue shelter. These attributes, while encour-

aging, describe more than ninety per cent of our applicants, many of whom are children.

A few judges were initially persuaded by your argument that your parents told you that your death was “so far away it would practically never happen,” and therefore it would be unfair if you actually had to die. However, we ultimately concluded that if we granted you immortality on these terms we would have to spare everyone whose parents told them this, which would create an insurmountable logistical and metaphysical problem for our systems.

We are pleased that your yoga practice has helped you recognize the light in all beings, and that you “don’t even feel weird” about having the loudest ujjayi breathing in the class. But your story about meditating for thirty minutes did raise some questions among our panel about your ability to handle an eternity of the mind.

The judges were unclear whether

you have a fatal illness or another imminent threat to your life. A few members of our panel argued that your answer to the adversity question—“Body pains that could be cancer”—was the reason for your petition, but others pointed out that the doctor’s report you submitted indicated that you are in excellent health.

Which made us wonder whether your impetus for submitting this application was simply your realization that you would one day die. And, Madam, we must admit, this gross lack of understanding, only recently corrected, did not recommend you to our judges as a candidate for eternal life.

In terms of a future resubmission, we suggest that you take another look at your references. The descriptions your boss provided of the skills you’ve acquired and the projects you’ve managed at the media company where you work were impressive, but they offered our judges little insight into how you would perform when faced with the burden of infinity. The rest of your references appear to be recommendations for college written by high-school teachers.

Madam, we caution you: immortality is not for everyone. If you have a cowlick, you will have a cowlick for all time. You will have to forgo any plans to haunt anyone. You will have to forgo fantasies about your own epic funeral.

We hope that you understand how incredibly selective this process is. We wish it could be different. We wish all human beings could be afforded the gift—or, some might say, the curse—that we provide. Every day, we’re working to bring you new solutions. But, at the moment, our immortality options are limited to cryogenic freezing, vampirism, and really, *really* good gut bacteria.

We know this news must be devastating. We appreciated the opportunity to read your application, including the supplemental childhood drawings you submitted of yourself beside a bearded figure with a wizard hat labelled “GOD.” It’s always disappointing to hear that your entire existence, your body, soul, and consciousness, will rot into the soil of a temporary earth and disappear into vast nothingness. We encourage you to reapply, reminding you that we accept application fees on a rolling basis. ♦

## YOU'RE FIRED

*A short account of the long history of impeachment.*

BY JILL LEPORE



**B**ird-eyed Aaron Burr was wanted for murder in two states when he presided over the impeachment trial of Supreme Court Justice Samuel Chase in the Senate, in 1805. The House had impeached Chase, a Marylander, on seven articles of misconduct and one article of rudeness. Burr had been indicted in New Jersey, where, according to the indictment, “not having the fear of God before his eyes but being moved and seduced by the instigation of the Devil,” he’d killed Alexander Hamilton, the former Secretary of the Treasury, in a duel. Because Hamilton, who was shot in the belly, died in New York, Burr had been indicted there, too. Still, the

Senate met in Washington, and, until Burr’s term expired, he held the title of Vice-President of the United States.

The public loves an impeachment, until the public hates an impeachment. For the occasion of Chase’s impeachment trial, a special gallery for lady spectators had been built at the back of the Senate chamber. Burr, a Republican, presided over a Senate of twenty-five Republicans and nine Federalists, who sat, to either side of him, on two rows of crimson cloth-covered benches. They faced three rows of green cloth-covered benches occupied by members of the House of Representatives, Supreme Court Justices, and President Thomas

Jefferson’s Cabinet. The House managers (the impeachment-trial equivalent of prosecutors), led by the Virginian John Randolph, sat at a table covered with blue cloth; at another blue table sat Chase and his lawyers, led by the red-faced Maryland attorney general, Luther Martin, a man so steady of heart and clear of mind that in 1787 he’d walked out of the Constitutional Convention, and refused to sign the Constitution, after objecting that its countenancing of slavery was “inconsistent with the principles of the Revolution and dishonorable to the American character.” Luther (Brandybottle) Martin had a weakness for liquor. This did not impair him. As a wise historian once remarked, Martin “knew more law drunk than the managers did sober.”

Impeachment is an ancient relic, a rusty legal instrument and political weapon first wielded by the English Parliament, in 1376, to wrest power from the King by charging his ministers with abuses of power, convicting them, removing them from office, and throwing them in prison. Some four hundred years later, impeachment had all but vanished from English practice when American delegates to the Constitutional Convention provided for it in Article II, Section 4: “The President, Vice President and all civil Officers of the United States, shall be removed from Office on Impeachment for, and Conviction of, Treason, Bribery, or other high Crimes and Misdemeanors.”

It’s one thing to know this power exists. It’s another to use it. In one view, nicely expressed by an English solicitor general in 1691, “The power of impeachment ought to be, like Goliath’s sword, kept in the temple, and not used but on great occasions.” Yet this autumn, in the third year of the Presidency of Donald J. Trump, House Democrats have unsheathed that terrible, mighty sword. Has time dulled its blade?

**I**mpeachment is a terrible power because it was forged to counter a terrible power: the despot who deems himself to be above the law. The delegates to the Constitutional Convention included impeachment in the Constitution as a consequence of their knowledge of history, a study they believed to be a prerequisite for holding a posi-

*Impeachment is a legal instrument first used in 1376. Has time dulled its blade?*

tion in government. From their study of English history, they learned what might be called the law of knavery: there aren't any good ways to get rid of a bad king. Really, there were only three ways and they were all horrible: civil war, revolution, or assassination. England had already endured the first and America the second, and no one could endorse the third. "What was the practice before this in cases where the chief Magistrate rendered himself obnoxious?" Benjamin Franklin asked at the Convention. "Recourse was had to assassination, in which he was not only deprived of his life but of the opportunity of vindicating his character."

But the delegates knew that Parliament had come up with another way: clipping the King's wings by impeaching his ministers. The House of Commons couldn't attack the King directly because of the fiction that the King was infallible ("perfect," as Donald Trump would say), so, beginning in 1376, they impeached his favorites, accusing Lord William Latimer and Richard Lyons of acting "falsely in order to have advantages for their own use." Latimer, a peer, insisted that he be tried by his peers—that is, by the House of Lords, not the House of Commons—and it was his peers who convicted him and sent him to prison. That's why, today, the House is preparing articles of impeachment against Trump, acting as his accusers, but it is the Senate that will judge his innocence or his guilt.

Parliament used impeachment to thwart monarchy's tendency toward absolutism, with mixed results. After conducting at least ten impeachments between 1376 and 1450, Parliament didn't impeach anyone for more than a hundred and seventy years, partly because Parliament met only when the King summoned it, and, if Parliament was going to impeach his ministers, he'd show them by never summoning it, unless he really had to, as when he needed to levy taxes. He, or she: during the forty-five years of Elizabeth I's reign, Parliament was in session for a total of three. Parliament had forged a sword. It just couldn't ever get into Westminster to take it out of its sheath.

The Englishman responsible for bringing the ancient practice of impeachment back into use was Edward

Coke, an investor in the Virginia Company who became a Member of Parliament in 1589. Coke, a profoundly agile legal thinker, had served as Elizabeth I's Attorney General and as Chief Justice under her successor, James I. In 1621—two years after the first Africans, slaves, landed in the Virginia colony and a year after the Pilgrims, dissenters, landed at a place they called Plymouth—Coke began to insist that Parliament could debate whatever it wanted to, and soon Parliament began arguing that it ought to meet regularly. To build a case for the supremacy of Parliament, Coke dug out of the archives a very old document, the Magna Carta of 1215, calling it England's "ancient constitution," and he resurrected, too, the ancient right of Parliament to impeach the King's ministers. Parliament promptly impeached Coke's chief adversary, Francis Bacon, the Lord Chancellor, for bribery; Bacon was convicted, removed from office, and reduced to penury. James then dissolved Parliament and locked up Coke in the Tower of London.

Something of a political death match followed between Parliament and James and his Stuart successors Charles I and Charles II, over the nature of rule. In 1626, the House of Commons impeached the Duke of Buckingham for "maladministration" and corruption, including failure to safeguard the seas. But the King, James's son, Charles I, forestalled a trial in the House of Lords by dismissing Parliament. After Buckingham died, Charles refused to summon Parliament for the next eleven years. In 1649, he was beheaded for treason. After the restoration of the monarchy, in 1660, under Charles II, Parliament occasionally impeached the King's ministers, but in 1716 stopped doing so altogether. Because Parliament had won. It had made the King into a flightless bird.

Why the Americans should have resurrected this practice in 1787 is something of a puzzle, until you remember that all but one of England's original thirteen American colonies had been founded before impeachment went out of style. Also, while Parliament had gained power relative to the King, the Colonial assemblies remained virtually powerless, especially against the authority of Colonial governors, who, in most colonies, were appointed by the King.

To clip their governors' wings, Colonial assemblies impeached the governors' men, only to find their convictions overturned by the Privy Council in London, which acted as an appellate court. Colonial lawyers pursuing these cases dedicated themselves to the study of the impeachments against the three Stuart kings. John Adams owned a copy of a law book that defined "impeachment" as "the Accusation and Prosecution of a Person for Treason, or other Crimes and Misdemeanors." Steeped in the lore of Parliament's seventeenth-century battles with the Stuarts, men like Adams considered the right of impeachment to be one of the fundamental rights of Englishmen. And when men like Adams came to write constitutions for the new states, in the seventeen-seventies and eighties, they made sure that impeachment was provided for. In Philadelphia in 1787, thirty-three of the Convention's fifty-five delegates were trained as lawyers; ten were or had been judges. As Frank Bowman, a law professor at the University of Missouri, reports in a new book, "High Crimes and Misdemeanors: A History of Impeachment for the Age of Trump," fourteen of the delegates had helped draft constitutions in their own states that provided for impeachment. In Philadelphia, they forged a new sword out of very old steel. They Americanized impeachment.

This new government would have a President, not a king, but Americans agreed on the need for a provision to get rid of a bad one. All four of the original plans for a new constitution allowed for Presidential impeachment. When the Constitutional Convention began, on May 25, 1787, impeachment appears to have been on nearly everyone's mind, not least because Parliament had opened its first impeachment investigation in more than fifty years, on April 3rd, against a Colonial governor of India, and the member charged with heading the investigation was England's famed supporter of American independence, Edmund Burke. What with one thing and another, impeachment came up in the Convention's very first week.

A President is not a king; his power would be checked by submitting himself to an election every four years, and by the separation of powers. But this did

not provide “sufficient security,” James Madison said. “He might pervert his administration into a scheme of speculation or oppression. He might betray his trust to foreign powers.” Also, voters might make a bad decision, and regret it, well in advance of the next election. “Some mode of displacing an unfit magistrate is rendered indispensable by the fallibility of those who choose, as well as by the corruptibility of the man chosen,” the Virginia delegate George Mason said.

How impeachment actually worked would be hammered out through cases like the impeachment of Samuel Chase, a Supreme Court Justice, but, at the Constitutional Convention, nearly all discussion of impeachment concerned the Presidency. (“Vice President and all civil Officers” was added only at the very last minute.) A nation that had cast off a king refused to anoint another. “No point is of more importance than that the right of impeachment should continue,” Mason said. “Shall any man be above Justice? Above all shall that man be above it, who can commit the most extensive injustice?”

Most of the discussion involved the nature of the conduct for which a President could be impeached. Early on, the delegates had listed, as impeachable offenses, “mal-practice or neglect of duty,” a list that got longer before a

committee narrowed it down to “Treason & bribery.” When Mason proposed adding “maladministration,” Madison objected, on the ground that maladministration could mean just about anything. And, as the Pennsylvania delegate Gouverneur Morris put it, it would not be unreasonable to suppose that “an election of every four years will prevent maladministration.” Mason therefore proposed substituting “other high crimes and misdemeanors against the State.”

The “high” in “high crimes and misdemeanors” has its origins in phrases that include the “certain high treasons and offenses and misprisons” invoked in the impeachment of the Duke of Suffolk, in 1450. Parliament was the “high court,” the men Parliament impeached were of the “highest rank”; offenses that Parliament described as “high” were public offenses with consequences for the nation. The phrase “high crimes and misdemeanors” first appeared in an impeachment in 1642, and then regularly, as a catchall for all manner of egregious wrongs, abuses of authority, and crimes against the state.

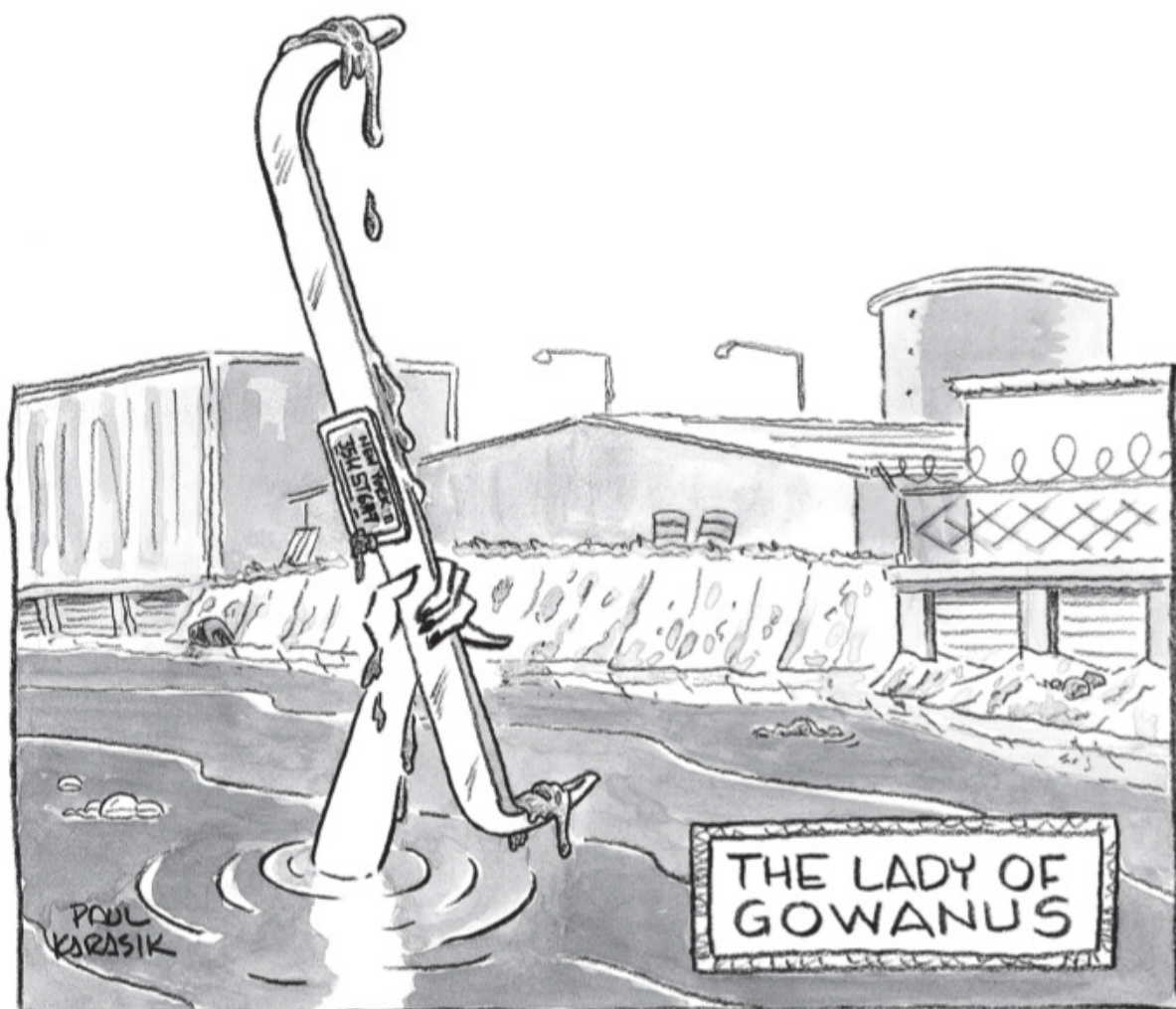
In 1787, the delegates in Philadelphia narrowed their list down to “Treason & bribery, or other high crimes & misdemeanors against the United States.” In preparing the final draft of the Constitution, the Committee on Style deleted

the phrase “against the United States,” presumably because it is implied.

“What, then, is an impeachable offense?” Gerald Ford, the Michigan Republican and House Minority Leader, asked in 1970. “The only honest answer is that an impeachable offense is whatever a majority of the House of Representatives considers it to be at a given moment in history.” That wasn’t an honest answer; it was a depressingly cynical one. Ford had moved to impeach Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas, accusing him of embracing a “hippie-yippie-style revolution,” indicting him for a decadent life style, and alleging financial improprieties, charges that appeared, to Ford’s critics, to fall well short of impeachable offenses. In 2017, Nancy Pelosi claimed that a President cannot be impeached who has not committed a crime (a position she would not likely take today). According to “Impeachment: A Citizen’s Guide,” by the legal scholar Cass Sunstein, who testified before Congress on the meaning of “high crimes and misdemeanors” during the impeachment of William Jefferson Clinton, both Ford and Pelosi were fundamentally wrong. “High crimes and misdemeanors” does have a meaning. An impeachable offense is an abuse of the power of the office that violates the public trust, runs counter to the national interest, and undermines the Republic. To believe that words are meaningless is to give up on truth. To believe that Presidents can do anything they like is to give up on self-government.

The U.S. Senate has held only eighteen impeachment trials in two hundred and thirty years, and only twice for a President. Because impeachment happens so infrequently, it’s hard to draw conclusions about what it does, or even how it works, and, on each occasion, people spend a lot of time fighting over the meaning of the words and the nature of the crimes. Every impeachment is a political experiment.

The ordeal of Samuel Chase is arguably the most significant but least studied impeachment in American history. The Chase impeachment was only the third ever attempted. In 1797, the House had impeached the Tennessee senator William Blount, who stood accused of scheming to conspire with the British



and to enlist the Creek and Cherokee Nations to attack the Spanish, all with the design of increasing the value of his highly speculative purchase of Western lands. (“Whether the scheme was merely audacious or just plain crazy remains debatable,” Bowman writes, darkly foreshadowing more recent shenanigans, involving the possible acquisition of Greenland.) The case rested on a letter allegedly written by Blount, describing this plan; after two senators said they recognized Blount’s handwriting, the Senate expelled him in a vote of 25–1, and he slinked off to Tennessee. The House had voted to impeach, but Blount’s lawyers argued that senators are not “civil officers,” and so can’t be impeached. (“#IMPEACHMITTROMNEY,” Trump tweeted recently. The Blount precedent went some way toward establishing that this is an impossibility.) The motion to dismiss was read aloud in the Senate by Jefferson, who was Vice-President at the time.

Samuel Chase’s troubles began when Congress passed the 1798 Sedition Act, aimed at suppressing Republican opposition to John Adams’s Federalist Administration. Chase, riding circuit (which Supreme Court Justices used to do), had presided over the most notorious persecutions of Republican printers on charges of sedition, including the conviction of the printer James Callender. The Sedition Act expired on March 3, 1801, the day before Jefferson’s Inauguration, but, through a series of midnight appointments, Adams had connived to insure that Jefferson inherited a Federalist Supreme Court. Chase had actively campaigned for Adams and spoke intemperately for the bench, denouncing Republicans. In an overheated charge to a grand jury in Baltimore, he attacked Republicanism, describing it as “mobocracy.” Jefferson set an impeachment in motion when he wrote to House Republicans, “Ought this sedition and official attack on the principles of our Constitution . . . go unpunished?”

If the proceedings against Blount tested whether senators could be impeached, the proceedings against Chase tested a new theory of executive power—that Supreme Court Justices serve at the pleasure of the President. This test came in the wake of *Marbury v. Madison*, in 1803, in which John Marshall’s



*“Then what happened?”*

Supreme Court exercised a prerogative not specified in the Constitution: the Court had declared an act of Congress unconstitutional. A Republican leader of the Senate told the Massachusetts senator John Quincy Adams that he hoped to impeach the entire court. Judicial independence? Judicial review? No. “If the Judges of the Supreme Court should dare, AS THEY HAD DONE, to declare an act of Congress unconstitutional . . . it was the undoubted right of the House of Representatives to remove them, for giving such opinions,” he said. “A removal by impeachment was nothing more than a declaration by Congress to this effect: You hold dangerous opinions, and if you are suffered to carry them into effect you will work the destruction of the nation.”

John Randolph, a steadfast Republican but no lawyer, drafted the articles of impeachment against Chase, which broadly charged him with prostituting his high office to the low purpose of partisanship but, narrowly, rested on all manner of pettiness, including the charge that during Callender’s trial Chase had used “unusual, rude, and contemptuous expressions toward the prisoner’s counsel” and had engaged in “repeated and

vexatious interruptions.” Notwithstanding the weakness of the charges, not to say their vexatiousness, the House voted to impeach. The trial in the Senate opened on February 4, 1805.

An impeachment trial is a medieval play, with its mummers and its costumes and its many-colored cloth-covered tables. Chase’s trial lasted a month. Burr ran a well-ordered court. He warned the senators not to eat apples and cake while in session. He censured them for leaving their seats. He hushed the spectators in the galleries.

The trial turned less on what Chase had done than on whether he could be impeached for having done those things. John Randolph, though, didn’t really have a theory of impeachment. He had a theory of vengeance. His arguments, a distressed John Quincy Adams wrote in his diary, consisted “altogether of the most hackneyed commonplaces of popular declamation, mingled up with panegyrics and invectives.” Randolph called eighteen witnesses, few of whom aided his case, and some of whom aided Chase’s. “Saw nothing that struck me as remarkable,” one witness, who had attended Callender’s trial, said. As an observer put it, “I swear if they go on much farther,



*“Sally, will you make me the happiest man in the world, and accept full responsibility if I should fail to be the happiest man in the world?”*

they will prove Judge Chase an angel.”

Chase’s defense called thirty-one witnesses, including some of Randolph’s. Chase’s attorneys said the charges were plainly silly, and they didn’t much bother to refute them, especially since Randolph had done that job so well himself. Instead, they argued about the nature of impeachment. One of Chase’s younger lawyers, Joseph Hopkinson, insisted that “no judge can be impeached and removed from office for any act or offense for which he could not be indicted.” In other words, an impeachable offense has to be an indictable offense: a crime. “High crimes and misdemeanors,” Hopkinson argued, meant “high crimes” and “high misdemeanors.”

The trial reached its climax on February 23rd, when a red-faced Luther Martin rose from behind the defense’s table. He spoke for a day and a half, expounding on his own theory of impeachment. A judge could commit a crime, like hitting someone, for which he could not be impeached. He could even commit a high crime for which he could not be impeached. All that he could be impeached for were crimes

“such as relate to his office, or which tend to cover the person, who committed them, with *turpitude* and *infamy*; such as show there can be no dependence on that integrity and honor which will secure the performance of his official duties.” To be impeached, Martin said, a judge had to commit crimes that either derived from his judicial power or were so horrible, so grotesquely unethical, that they disqualified him from holding a position of public trust.

Republicans outnumbered Federalists in the Senate 25–9. On March 1st, for each article, Burr asked of each senator, “Is Samuel Chase, Esq., guilty or not guilty of a high crime or misdemeanor in the article of impeachment just read?” A majority voted guilty for three articles. None earned the required two-thirds super-majority. Six Republicans broke ranks on all eight articles. By a vote of 19–15, the Senate came closest to convicting Chase on the article regarding his partisan zeal in his charge to the Baltimore grand jury. Burr stood up. “It becomes my duty to pronounce that Samuel Chase, Esq., is acquitted,” he said. Then he bowed to Chase and

left the chamber. As for Burr, he was never convicted of killing Alexander Hamilton. (Two years later, in an unrelated incident of amazing sneakiness, he was tried for treason, and acquitted.)

The acquittal of Samuel Chase established the independence of the judiciary. It also established another principle, as Bowman argues: “The price of the independence granted by life tenure is abstention from party politics.” It did not, however, establish a lasting theory of impeachment. Brandybottle Martin had stated his case beautifully, and easily defeated the hapless John Randolph, but Martin’s argument was wrong. Nothing in American history, from the founding of its earliest colonies, suggests that an impeachable offense has to be an indictable crime, not for the King’s men, not for judges and Justices, and not for the President of the United States. Presidents can be impeached for actions that are not crimes, not least because the criminal code was not written with Presidents in mind. Most of us cannot commit such staggering outrages as to direct the F.B.I. to spy on our enemies or enlist foreign powers to interfere in our elections. The President has powers that only a President can exercise, or abuse. Were these powers beyond the reach of the people’s power, impeachment would be a dead letter.

If the House votes to impeach Donald Trump, it is by no means clear that the Senate will hold a trial. And, if the Senate does hold a trial, the likelihood that it will convict is small. Impeachment is a tall and rickety ladder; conviction is a tiny window, barely cracked open. It’s difficult and dangerous to climb the ladder, and no one who has made it to the top has ever managed to crawl in through the window.

After the acquittal of Samuel Chase, in 1805, the House, in the next decades, impeached two more judges, one in 1830 and one in 1862; the Senate acquitted the first and convicted the second. The first real attempt to impeach a President came in 1843, when a Virginia congressman accused John Tyler of “corruption, malconduct, high crimes and misdemeanors,” but the House voted down a motion to investigate, 127–83.

In 1868, “out of the midst of political gloom, impeachment, that dead corpse,

rose up and walked forth again!” Mark Twain wrote. Republicans in the House impeached President Andrew Johnson by a vote of 126–47. They were desperate, as Brenda Wineapple chronicles in her gripping new book, “The Impeachers: The Trial of Andrew Johnson and the Dream of a Just Nation.” Johnson, a Tennessee Democrat who didn’t free his slaves until 1863, after the Emancipation Proclamation, had been Abraham Lincoln’s improbable Vice-President, and had assumed the office of the Presidency after his assassination, in 1865. Lincoln and congressional Republicans had one plan for Reconstruction: it involved welcoming the freedmen into the political community of the nation. Johnson, who believed that, “in the progress of nations, negroes have shown less capacity for government than any other race of people,” betrayed that vision. “Slavery is not abolished until the black man has the ballot,” Frederick Douglass declared. But granting the franchise to black men was the last thing Johnson intended to allow. While Congress was out of session, he set in motion a Reconstruction plan that was completely at variance with what Congress had proposed: he intended to return power to the very people who had waged war against the Union, and he readmitted the former Confederate states to the Union. “No power but Congress had any right to say whether ever or when they should be admitted to the Union as States and entitled to the privileges of the Constitution,” the Pennsylvania representative Thaddeus Stevens said during Johnson’s impeachment proceedings. (Stevens, ailing, had to be carried into the Capitol on a chair.) “And yet Andrew Johnson, with unblushing hardihood, undertook to rule them by his own power alone.” Johnson vetoed the 1866 Civil Rights Bill and nearly every other congressional attempt to reassert authority over the law of the United States. But the Republicans’ strategy, to pass a law they expected Johnson to break, so that they could impeach him, backfired.

The Senate acquitted Johnson, falling short by a single vote of the two-thirds majority necessary to convict. Stevens died a couple of months later, “the bravest old ironclad in the Capi-

tol,” Twain wrote. The Republicans had tried to save the Republic by burying the Confederacy for good. They failed.

Every impeachment reinvents what impeachment is for, and what it means, a theory of government itself. Every impeachment also offers a chance to establish a new political settlement in an unruly nation. The impeachment of Samuel Chase steered the United States toward judicial independence, and an accommodation with a party system that had not been anticipated by the Framers. Chase’s acquittal stabilized the Republic and restored the balance of power between the executive and the judicial branches. The failed impeachment of Andrew Johnson steered the United States toward a regime of racial segregation: the era of Jim Crow, which would not be undone until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Acts of 1965 were passed, a century later, in the Administration of another Johnson. Johnson’s acquittal undid the Union’s victory in the Civil War, allowed the Confederacy to win the peace, and nearly destroyed the Republic.

Johnson’s acquittal also elevated the Presidency by making impeachment seem doomed. Jefferson once lamented that impeachment had become a “mere scarecrow.” That’s how it worked for much of the twentieth century: propped up in a field, straw poking out from under its hat. A Republican congress-



man from Michigan called for the impeachment of F.D.R., after the President tried to pack the Court. Nothing but another scarecrow.

The impeachment of Richard Nixon, in 1974, which, although it never went to trial, succeeded in the sense that it drove Nixon from office, represented a use entirely consistent with the instrument’s medieval origins: it attempted to puncture the swollen power of the Presidency and to reassert the supremacy of

the legislature. Nixon’s Presidency began to unravel only after the publication of the Pentagon Papers, in 1971—which indicted not Nixon but Lyndon Johnson, for deceiving the public about Vietnam—and the public anger that made impeachment possible had to do not only with Nixon’s lies and abuses of power but also with Johnson’s. But a new settlement, curtailing the powers of the President, never came. Instead, the nation became divided, and those divisions widened.

The wider those divisions, the duller the blade of impeachment. Only very rarely in American history has one party held more than two-thirds of the seats in the Senate (it hasn’t happened since 1967), and the more partisan American politics the less likely it is that sixty-seven senators can be rounded up to convict anyone, of anything. And yet the wider those divisions the more willing Congress has been to call for impeachment. Since Ronald Reagan’s Inauguration in 1981, members of the House have introduced resolutions for impeachment during every Presidency. And the people, too, have clamored. “Impeach Bush,” the yard signs read. “Impeach Obama.”

Not every impeachment brings about a political settlement, good or bad. The failed impeachment of Bill Clinton, in 1999, for lying about his sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky, settled less than nothing, except that it weakened Americans’ faith in impeachment as anything other than a crudely wrought partisan hatchet, a prisoner’s shiv.

Clinton’s impeachment had one more consequence: it got Donald Trump, self-professed playboy, onto national television, as an authority on the sex lives of ego-mad men. “Paula Jones is a loser,” Trump said on CNBC. “It’s a terrible embarrassment.” Also, “I think his lawyers . . . did a terrible job,” Trump said. “I’m not even sure that he shouldn’t have just gone in and taken the Fifth Amendment.” Because why, after all, should any man have to answer for anything?

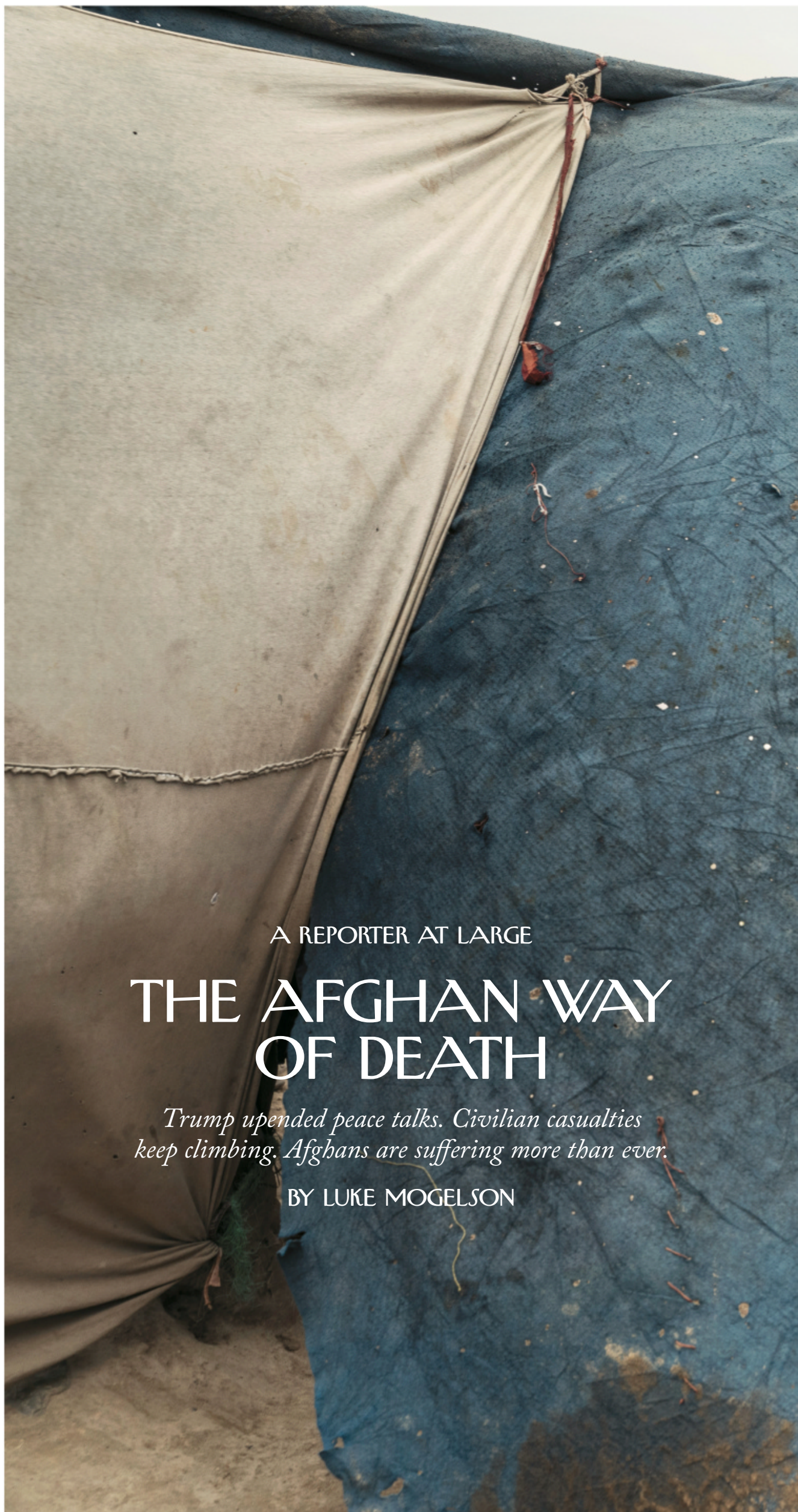
“Heaven forbid we should see another impeachment!” an exhausted Republican said at the end of the trial of Samuel Chase. The impeachment of an American President is certain to lead to no end of political mischief and almost certain to fail. Still, worse could happen. Heaven forbid this Republic should become one man’s kingdom. ♦

In 2008, when Zubair was seventeen years old, he left the refugee camp in Pakistan where he'd grown up, crossed into Afghanistan, and joined the war against the Americans. Although he and his family had fled the country during the Taliban regime, everyone Zubair knew seemed to agree that it was his religious duty to resist the foreign occupation of his homeland. One of his teachers arranged his enlistment in the Taliban. Zubair underwent a brief training program in Kunar Province, in northeastern Afghanistan, where his father had died during the war against the Soviet Union. He was deployed to his native village, in the Korengal, a narrow, cedar-forested valley that harbored one of the U.S. Army's remotest outposts. For more than a year, Zubair conducted ambushes, engaged in firefights, and hid from jets and drones. He lost eight friends. Forty-two Americans were killed and hundreds were wounded in the Korengal, which became known as the Valley of Death. In 2010, the Americans surrendered it to the Taliban. Some of Zubair's comrades remained to launch attacks on Afghan government forces; Zubair asked to be sent to neighboring Nangarhar Province, where there were still foreigners to fight.

In June of 2018, the Taliban and the President of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, announced a three-day ceasefire—the first of the war—for the Eid al-Fitr celebrations at the end of Ramadan. Zubair was in Shirzad, one of Nangarhar's most restive districts. In the provincial capital, Jalalabad, he had aunts, uncles, and cousins he hadn't seen for almost a decade. The government promised the Taliban freedom of movement during the festivities, but Zubair's commander forbade him to leave. On the second day, Zubair hopped on a motorcycle and went anyway. Unsure what to expect, he wore a pistol under his vest. He'd passed through Jalalabad only once, at night, and he'd never visited any other city. He had spent most of his life on the front lines of the insurgency, where it was a given that urban Afghans were infidels. He knew that many of them despised the Taliban. Confronted with them in the flesh, what would they do?

"I was amazed," Zubair told me this summer. "They welcomed us."

It wasn't only in Jalalabad—the glimpse of peace offered by the ceasefire



A REPORTER AT LARGE

## THE AFGHAN WAY OF DEATH

*Trump upended peace talks. Civilian casualties keep climbing. Afghans are suffering more than ever.*

BY LUKE MOGELSON

*Children living in an encampment, in Jalalabad, after fleeing violence between ISIS*



*and the Taliban. There are now two and a half million internally displaced Afghans.*

inspired a national outpouring of optimism and unity. On social media, people uploaded photographs and videos of citizens, soldiers, and police jubilantly embracing Taliban fighters. The day that Zubair left Shirzad for Jalalabad, Muhammad Ajmal Omar, a member of Nangarhar's provincial council, left Jalalabad for Shirzad. Although Omar represented the district, he hadn't been there in fifteen years, because it was so firmly in the grip of insurgents. When I met him, in June, he showed me a cell-phone video of his arrival. Walking side by side, Omar and a Taliban commander raise their arms in mutual submission, as a crowd surrounding them chants, "We want peace! Afghanistan is great!"

"These are all Taliban," Omar said, looking at the screen as if, a year later, he still couldn't believe it. "We were crying the whole way."

Zubair heard that Omar was returning to Jalalabad with a large caravan of Taliban fighters. The governor of Nangarhar Province had invited the militants to spend the night at his guesthouse. Zubair decided not to join them. While wandering around the city—which teemed with mango-colored rickshaws, raucous bazaars, and

pink bougainvillea spilling over compound walls—he had been surprised to discover that it was full of mosques. Everywhere, Muslims were praying. At some point, Zubair asked himself, "What if I stayed here? What would my life be like?"

On the final day of the ceasefire, as some of the Taliban from Shirzad were leaving the governor's house, a suicide bomber attacked them, killing eighteen. No one claimed responsibility, but the culprit was widely thought to be a member of ISIS. A branch of the organization had appeared in Nangarhar four years earlier, and had since become the Taliban's staunch enemy. The Taliban subscribe to a nationalist agenda: they wish to overthrow the government and impose Sharia law, but their ambitions do not extend beyond Afghanistan. ISIS, which seeks to create a global Islamic caliphate, does not recognize the existence of Afghanistan as a sovereign country, and accuses the Taliban of practicing a lax interpretation of Islam that accommodates heretical Pashtun customs.

Zubair felt caught in the middle of this fight. The teacher who had recruited him to the Taliban had subsequently joined ISIS, and had sent him text mes-

sages urging him to do the same. In recent months, Zubair had been fighting against ISIS more than against American or Afghan forces. What had begun for him as a resistance against a foreign occupation increasingly felt like Muslims killing Muslims. Zubair was at his uncle's house when he learned of the suicide attack. By then, he'd made up his mind. His war was over.

During our interviews, which took place in my hotel room in Jalalabad, I never had the impression that Zubair had renounced the Taliban or what it stood for. He was simply tired. "I want a normal life," he told me. "I want a piece of land and a house, that's all." Zubair asked that I not use his real name, and he kept his face wrapped tightly in a scarf, though it was oppressively hot. "The Taliban want to kill those of us who quit," he said. Muhammad Ajmal Omar told me that the Taliban had been unnerved by how many of their fighters had defected during the ceasefire, and Zubair confirmed that many of his comrades who went to Jalalabad that weekend were now pursuing lives as civilians.

If the ceasefire revealed a profound desire for peace among Afghans, the ensuing year has shown how grievously difficult that will be to achieve. An effort at diplomacy collapsed spectacularly: the U.S. spent months in historic negotiations with the Taliban, but, in September, President Donald Trump abruptly scuttled a nearly completed accord that would have provided for a phased withdrawal of American troops from the country and direct talks between the Taliban and the Afghan government. An underlying premise of the accord was the recognition that neither side could decisively vanquish the other—that there is no military solution. Now it appears that they will go on fighting anyway.

Last month, Taliban suicide attackers killed twenty-eight people in Zabol Province, thirty in Parwan Province, and twenty-two in downtown Kabul; U.S. warplanes dropped more bombs than at any point since 2010, when a multiyear "surge" ordered by President Barack Obama was approaching its peak. Between July and October, the United Nations documented more civilian casualties than it had during any other three-month period since it started keeping count, in 2009. So far this year, more than



*"Trust me, son, if there was a monster under your bed I would have claimed it as a dependent by now."*

eight thousand civilians have been killed or wounded. In much of Afghanistan, life has never felt more precarious, and the violence has never made less sense.

President George W. Bush announced the invasion of Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, from the White House Treaty Room. Explaining the choice of venue, he said, “The only way to pursue peace is to pursue those who threaten it.” The Taliban, who had sheltered Al Qaeda while it plotted the 9/11 attacks, were deposed within months. In 2003, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld declared, “We clearly have moved from major combat activity to a period of stability.” Since then, more than a hundred and fifty thousand people have been killed in Afghanistan, and about seven hundred and fifty thousand Americans have served there. The U.S. has spent about eight hundred billion dollars on military operations and on a multitude of economic, governance, education, health, gender-equality, and counter-narcotics initiatives. Today, most Afghans live in poverty, corruption is endemic, literacy and life-expectancy rates rank among the lowest in the world, approximately a third of girls become child brides, and no country exports more illicit opium. The Taliban control or contest more than half the country.

During the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign, the candidates barely mentioned the war. Trump, however, had long criticized America’s presence in Afghanistan. In 2012, on “Fox & Friends,” he asked, “What are we doing there? These people hate us.” Back then, nearly a hundred thousand American troops were deployed in the country. I spent most of that summer in Helmand Province, in the south, where U.S. marines were embattled on multiple fronts. At Camp Leatherneck—part of a massive complex with fast-food restaurants, an airfield, and state-of-the-art medical facilities—General John Toolan, the top American commander in the south, foresaw a sustained presence. Gesturing toward a construction site near his office, he told me, “Look at this place—it’s just being built. We’re not going anywhere.” The U.S. military withdrew from Helmand Province two years later, and by the end of Obama’s Presidency the number of troops in Afghanistan had

dwindled to ten thousand. Camp Leatherneck now resembles a ghost town, vast swaths of it engulfed, Ozymandias-like, by the surrounding desert.

After Trump became President, he chose General H. R. McMaster as his national-security adviser. McMaster had served in Afghanistan during the surge, and is said to have resented Obama’s unwillingness to give it more time. A former official who was involved in developing Trump’s Afghanistan policy told me that McMaster was resistant to undertaking a peace process and pushed for stepped-up military action: “His view was, we should not be negotiating with the Taliban while they are ascendant. We need to put them on their heels first.” The official added, “The idea that any plausible amount of additional military effort and resources would change the trajectory of the conflict at that stage was absurd.” For McMaster, however, “it seemed emotional—as if he couldn’t accept the failure of American counter-insurgency strategy in Afghanistan.”

In 2017, Trump unveiled his “new strategy” for the war. “My original instinct was to pull out,” he admitted. But, after studying Afghanistan “from every conceivable angle,” Trump instead deployed several thousand more troops (including a contingent of marines, to Helmand Province). He also relaxed Obama-era rules intended to reduce civilian casualties, such as constraints on air power. These changes, Trump argued, would finally enable the military to apply “overwhelming force.” No timeline was imposed. “Someday, after an effective military effort, perhaps it will be possible” to negotiate with the Taliban, Trump said. “But nobody knows if, or when, that will ever happen.”

A year later, little had changed militarily, McMaster had been fired, and Trump had apparently lost patience. (Secretary of State Mike Pompeo later acknowledged that Trump wanted a troop reduction before the 2020 Presidential election.) Throughout the Obama Administration, negotiations had been frustrated by the Taliban’s refusal to engage with the Afghan government, which they considered illegitimate, and by the U.S.’s

equally obstinate refusal to sideline the government. In July, 2018, a few weeks after the Eid ceasefire, Trump agreed to exclude the Ghani administration and negotiate directly with the Taliban.

The U.S. named Zalmay Khalilzad, an Afghan-born former Ambassador to Iraq and Afghanistan, as a special envoy. Khalilzad contacted Taliban representatives in Doha, Qatar, where the group had been permitted to open an office in

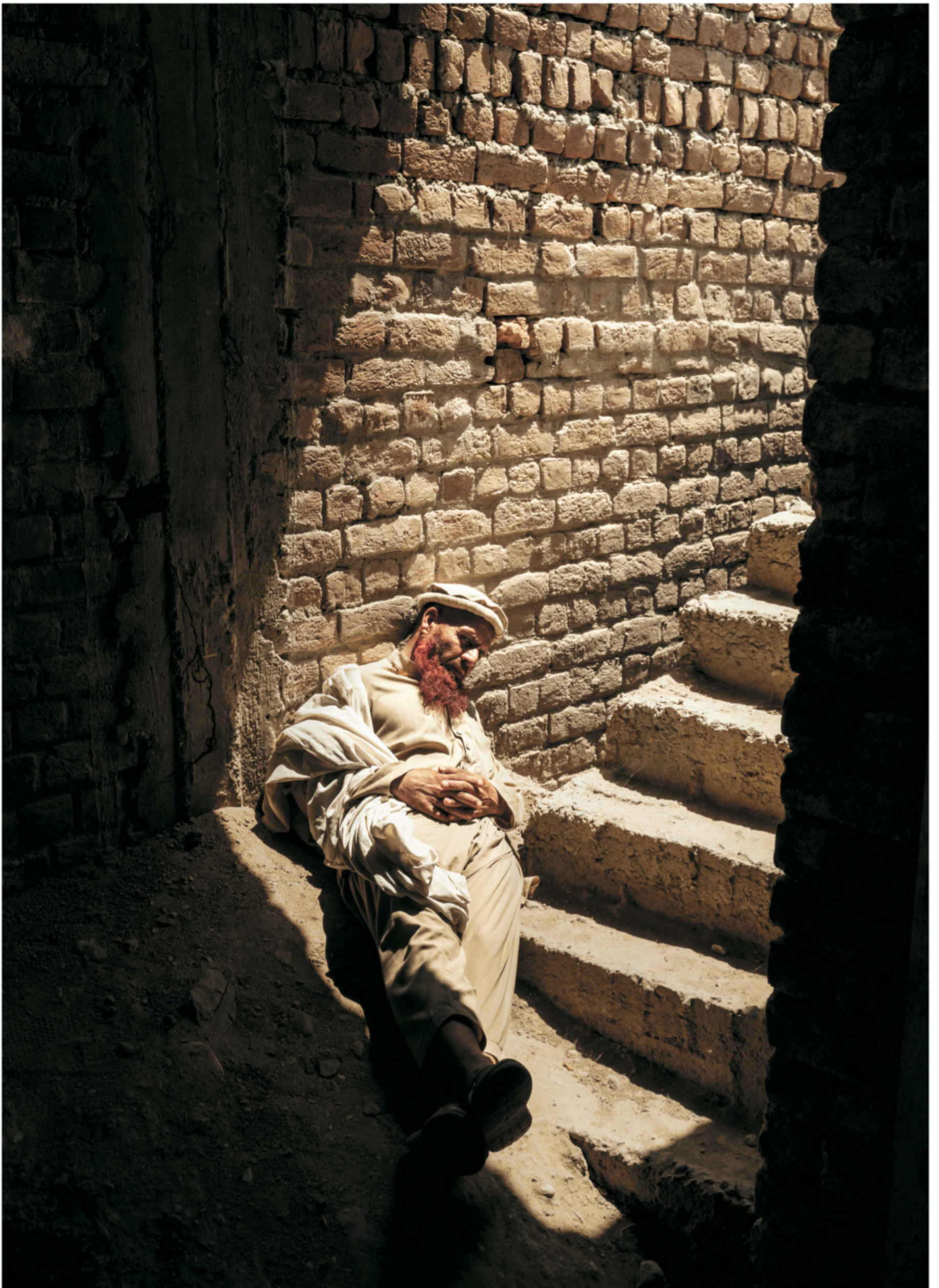
2013, in part to facilitate the exchange of five Guantánamo Bay detainees for Bowe Bergdahl, an American soldier who’d been captured by the Taliban after going AWOL. (As a Presidential candidate, Trump had excoriated the Obama Administration for the exchange, calling Bergdahl a “dirty rotten traitor” and the detain-

ees “killers who want to destroy us.”) Over the next ten months, Qatar hosted nine rounds of intensive discussions. The U.S. negotiating team included senior officials from the State Department, the Pentagon, and the White House. The Taliban negotiating team included the five former Guantánamo detainees.

Negotiations to end wars can have the perverse effect of escalating them: sometimes, combatants strive to gain leverage at the table by showing strength on the ground. As the Doha talks proceeded, the conflict in Afghanistan became the deadliest in the world. Raids and air strikes killed and wounded a record number of civilians—more than a hundred a month—while the Taliban attacked Afghan Army bases and mounted large offensives on provincial capitals. ISIS, which wasn’t a party to the talks, introduced a new dimension of unpredictability and cruelty to the violence, terrorizing Kabul and Jalalabad with suicide bombings. The result, for many Afghans, was a painful dissonance: unprecedented hope that peace might finally arrive, and unprecedented anguish over the nightmare consuming them until it did.

On September 2, 2019, Khalilzad announced that an agreement had been reached. Some details had already leaked out. The U.S. would remove fifty-four hundred troops from Afghanistan within a hundred and thirty-five days, and the





*Mohammad Azam, who lost five members of his family in a night raid conducted by Zero-Two, a C.I.A.-sponsored unit.*



*Haroon, age twelve, witnessed a Zero-Two raid on his family home. He was the oldest male survivor.*



*“At what point does it stop being sustainable?”*

remaining eighty-six hundred would leave within the next year and a half. The Taliban, for their part, would break with Al Qaeda, which still has a limited presence in some parts of the country, and help prevent other terror groups from gaining a foothold there. They would also begin negotiations with the Afghan government and other stakeholders in Oslo, Norway, for a durable political settlement.

In the U.S., the arrangement came under immediate criticism. In an open letter, John Negroponte and other high-ranking diplomats warned that pulling troops out before a reconciliation between the Afghan government and the Taliban risked “total civil war.” The retired general David Petraeus—McMaster’s former boss in Afghanistan—predicted that the Taliban would attempt to “overthrow the Afghan government and reimpose medieval rule,” thereby energizing “Islamist extremism worldwide.” Senator Lindsey Graham cautioned that a withdrawal could “pave the way for another 9/11.”

Supporters of the deal viewed it as the best one that the U.S. was likely to get—and immensely preferable to no deal at all. A Western consultant who had been helping to prepare the Oslo talks told me, “The Taliban have always said, ‘We will never negotiate the fu-

ture of Afghanistan while foreign troops have their boots on our soil.’ They compromised on that, and that’s huge.” Laurel Miller, the Asia program director for the nonprofit International Crisis Group, said that securing the Taliban’s commitment to sitting down with the Afghan government in Oslo was “a major achievement.” Miller also noted that few people had seen the precise terms of the accord, and that its most vociferous detractors were likely not among them. “Those are people who only believe in a peace process that is tantamount to the Taliban negotiating its surrender,” she said. “And that’s not going to happen.”

Suhail Shaheen, the spokesman for the Taliban in Doha, told me that Khalilzad and the lead Taliban negotiator had initialled a draft of the agreement and deposited it with the Qataris; an official signing ceremony was scheduled to take place in Doha, in mid-September. The Oslo talks would begin shortly afterward. Khalilzad had arranged to brief America’s coalition allies at NATO headquarters, in Brussels. President Ghani had selected delegates to represent his country in Oslo, and the Norwegians had rented a wing of a hotel on a hillside overlooking the fjords.

On September 7th, Trump tweeted, “Unbeknownst to almost everyone, the

major Taliban leaders and, separately, the President of Afghanistan, were going to secretly meet with me at Camp David on Sunday. They were coming to the United States tonight. Unfortunately, in order to build false leverage, they admitted to an attack in Kabul that killed one of our great, great soldiers, and 11 other people. I immediately cancelled the meeting and called off peace negotiations.”

Americans and Afghans alike were stunned. On the one hand, the prospect of such a summit, on the eve of September 11th, seemed quixotic and unseemly. On the other hand, Trump’s contention that he had scrapped a year’s worth of painstaking diplomacy because of one American fatality was suspect. It was also hard to ignore the hypocrisy: after Trump’s tweet, Mike Pompeo told CBS that the U.S. had “killed over a thousand Taliban in just the last ten days”—which, he said, had been “necessary to get the negotiated outcome that we’re looking for.”

A more plausible explanation for why Trump rescinded his Camp David invitation is that the Taliban had declined it. Shaheen told me that, when Khalilzad said Trump wanted them to fly to Washington, they replied that they would do so only after the agreement had been signed. “We said that we will close this chapter—the chapter of hostilities—and then we can start a new chapter, which will be one of cooperation,” Shaheen said.

If Trump had been hoping to strong-arm the Taliban into accepting last-minute changes, or to stage a public rapprochement between them and Ghani, he grossly underestimated the situation’s delicacy. A former diplomat told me, “The idea that purportedly Trump had for Camp David—that he was going to be shuttling back and forth between Ghani and the Taliban, even though no preparation had been done for discussions at that level—it’s insane.”

But why did Trump shut down the entire peace process? It’s possible that he’d always been ambivalent about the deal, and his misgivings ultimately prevailed. Or he might have wanted to punish the Taliban for snubbing him.

In recent weeks, Khalilzad has attempted to salvage the peace process, travelling to Pakistan to meet with the Taliban, who remain willing to sign the

accord. “The sooner, the better,” Shaheen said. “We stand by what we have agreed to.” The same impulsiveness that led Trump to cancel the talks might cause him to resume them. To date, however, his stated position is: “They’re dead.”

When Trump laid out his Afghanistan strategy, in 2017, he barely mentioned the Taliban, whose ranks have grown to more than sixty thousand full-time fighters. He instead framed the war as a campaign against international terrorist organizations, particularly ISIS, that threaten the American homeland. Although ISIS has never had more than a few thousand militants in Afghanistan, counterterrorism tactics—identifying targets and eliminating them—have eclipsed traditional U.S. priorities such as expanding the reach of the Afghan government and helping it win popular support. This year, the U.S. stopped calculating how many Afghan civilians live under government versus Taliban rule. According to the Defense Department, the statistic now has “limited decision-making value.” Trump has been more straightforward. “We are not nation-building again,” he has said. “We are killing terrorists.”

In this iteration of the war, collateral damage is incidental: according to the U.N., during the first half of 2019, U.S. and Afghan forces killed more civilians than the Taliban and ISIS did. The shift has been accompanied by curtailed transparency. U.S. air strikes pummel isolated areas where casualties are impossible to confirm, and night raids are conducted by C.I.A.-sponsored groups that operate independently of both the U.S. and the Afghan militaries. Journalists are often denied access to combat units. America’s longest war has never gone well, and American leaders have always lied about it. Obama’s surge was a failure, which he misrepresented as a success. Under Trump, however, the conflict has entered perhaps its most troubling phase, one that is being prosecuted largely in secret.

ISIS established its first stronghold in Afghanistan in Nangarhar’s Achin District, on the country’s eastern frontier. Achin abuts the Federally Administered Tribal Areas of Pakistan, or FATA, a mostly ungoverned region that is home to various Islamist groups. The border

is demarcated by the Spin Ghar range, sheer, jagged peaks that mellow into foothills with lush river valleys. As early as 2010, militants from the FATA fleeing Pakistan Army offensives started entering one of the valleys in Achin, called the Mamand. “They came with their wives and children, on foot,” Asil Maizullah, a tribal elder there, told me. “They said that they were enemies of Pakistan. We said, ‘Then, you are welcome.’”

Maizullah estimated that, over several years, two thousand militants from Pakistan settled in the Mamand. His older brother, Mohammad Younis, hosted eight families in his house. Eventually, the militants took over, imposing a conservative form of Islam on local villagers—closing schools, opening fundamentalist madrassas, and forbidding poppy cultivation. “They started creating problems, calling us spies for the infidels,” Maizullah said. In 2014, several militant leaders in the FATA aligned themselves with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the Iraqi founder of ISIS, and the next year ISIS formally announced its expansion into Afghanistan, where the militants in Achin declared their allegiance to the group.

The ISIS fighters in the Mamand Valley began clashing with the Taliban and demanding that locals side with them. People suspected of disloyalty were executed. Maizullah, who had a son in the Afghan National Army, decided to flee. He urged Younis, his brother, to join him, but Younis refused. That summer, ISIS ordered nearly a hundred local elders to assemble at a mosque. One of them, Fateh Gul, told me, “They accused us of supporting the Taliban and put us in an abandoned house. They beat us on every part of our body.” After twenty days, Gul was released. Ten elders, including Younis and eight of Maizullah’s cousins, were less fortunate. ISIS later published a highly produced video, complete with sound effects and slow motion, showing the men kneeling on a row of explosives, surrounded by their former guests. Younis is the first in line, and dies with the others when the explosives are ignited.

“They tricked us,” Maizullah told me.

We were sitting behind a wall of sandbags in a fortified checkpoint on the

southern slope of the valley. Below us stretched terraced cornfields, rocky creeks, and rampant wild marijuana. To the east, the bald faces of the Spin Ghar peaks were patched with oblong white shapes, which, Maizullah said, were talc mines. Most Afghan talc is exported to Pakistan, where much of it then continues to Europe and America, ending up in household products ranging from makeup to baby powder. According to a report by Global Witness, an N.G.O. that monitors natural resources in conflict zones, the Taliban have long taxed Afghan talc producers in Nangarhar, generating millions of dollars a year in revenue. Ironically, the marines in Helmand Province used to carry baby powder on patrol, to mark routes free of Taliban explosives.

Access to talc and other minerals appears to have been a factor in early skirmishes between the Taliban and ISIS. In 2015, an ISIS commander told Global Witness, “At any price, we will take the mines.” But the rift between the groups was also more fundamental. The Taliban publicly repudiated al-Baghdadi’s authority, calling his apocalyptic ideology a “scourge,” while ISIS denounced the Taliban’s relationship with Pakistan, which supports the insurgency and harbors its leaders.

The theatrical killing of Younis and the other elders, though unremarkable compared with countless ISIS executions in Iraq and Syria, appalled many Afghans, including members of the Taliban. The fact that the perpetrators were foreigners rendered the offense even more egregious. The Taliban, who have killed thousands of Afghan civilians, sometimes savagely, released a statement condemning the “horrific video.”

As long as ISIS and the Taliban were fighting each other, the U.S. and Afghan militaries were slow to intervene. But, in 2017, the year that President Trump defined one of his main priorities in Afghanistan as “obliterating ISIS,” the coalition launched a concerted offensive to reclaim the Mamand Valley.

At the time, Maizullah was living in a settlement of internally displaced people, outside Jalalabad. Afghanistan’s





*Workers shovelling talc, on Afghanistan's eastern border. Most Afghan talc is exported to Pakistan, and much of it goes on to the West.*



*The Taliban reportedly generate millions of dollars a year by taxing producers. ISIS hopes to seize control of the talc mines.*

intelligence agency, the National Directorate for Security, or N.D.S., proposed organizing his tribe into a militia that would join the assault on the valley. Maizullah and five hundred others volunteered. Forty of them were killed. "ISIS didn't retreat," Maizullah recalled. "They didn't care about dying."

That April, the U.S. deployed the largest non-nuclear weapon in its arsenal, a twenty-thousand-pound Massive Ordnance Air Blast, or MOAB—colloquially known as the Mother of All Bombs—against an ISIS redoubt in the Mamand. Afghan officials say that the MOAB killed ninety-six militants, and credit it with precipitating ISIS's decline in Achin.

To reach Maizullah's checkpoint, I'd accompanied the district governor in a convoy up a rutted dirt road that paralleled a river flowing swiftly with snowmelt. Trucks loaded with talc bounced by, carrying local workers, who looked as if they'd been coated in flour. We passed the ravine where the MOAB had been dropped and a collection of clay houses that had been badly damaged by the blast. Nearby, two Black Hawk helicopters were lifting off from a U.S. Special Forces base. As Maizullah and I spoke, the Americans lobbed mortars into distant hills.

The 2017 offensive had pushed ISIS out of the villages, but militants persisted in the mountains, and they had spread to other areas of Nangarhar Province, including Shirzad District, adding local and foreign fighters to their ranks along the way. Ahmed Ali, the chief of the provincial council, told me, "In Nangarhar, ISIS is now more dangerous and more numerous than the Taliban." Although ISIS has been confined to the regions along the eastern border, it continues to carry out catastrophic attacks in population centers. In August, an ISIS suicide bomber killed sixty-three wedding guests in Kabul. This past Friday, in Nangarhar Province, near Achin, explosives brought down the roof of a mosque full of worshippers. No one immediately claimed responsibility. More than a hundred people were killed or injured.

If the U.S. were to return to the Doha accord, and the Taliban and the Afghan government began negotiations in Oslo, ISIS could attract hard-line insurgents averse to a brokered peace. According to Ahmed Ali, many criminal networks

currently affiliated with the Taliban in Nangarhar might also "change their white flag to the black flag—ISIS could replace the Taliban."

Before I left Maizullah's outpost, I asked about his son, the soldier, whose name was Shamsuddin. Maizullah said that Shamsuddin had been stationed in Helmand Province, not far from Camp Leatherneck. When Maizullah fled Achin, Shamsuddin's five-year commitment to the Army was almost over. "I asked him to please come home," Maizullah said. "He told me, 'It would be shameful.'" Ten days before Shamsuddin's contract expired, a Taliban sniper shot him in the head.

The Americans formally turned over control of the war to Afghan security forces at the end of 2014, having lost twenty-one hundred service members. Since then, fewer than a hundred have been killed. Shamsuddin, however, is one of at least forty-five thousand Afghan soldiers and police officers who have been killed in the past five years—a fatality rate comparable to America's at the height of the Vietnam War.

The alarming losses for Afghan troops, and the steep reduction in American troops, have caused both countries to rely increasingly on their elite branches. A significant portion of the fourteen thousand U.S. personnel currently deployed in Afghanistan are Special Forces. Many of them partner with the Afghan Army's Commando Corps, which conducts a disproportionate share of the combat against ISIS and the Taliban. This summer, I met Hamdullah Mohib, Afghanistan's national-security adviser, at his office in the Arg—a sprawling citadel in the heart of Kabul containing expansive gardens and the castle-like Presidential palace. "We are using our Special Forces to the maximum effect we can," Mohib said. This also applies to what he called "hybrid units," which are jointly supervised by the N.D.S. and the C.I.A.

Despite the significant role that such units play in Afghanistan, little is known about them. We don't know how many Afghans and Americans belong to them, how members are recruited, what their budget is, how their hierarchy functions, or if they are subject to oversight. We do know that they are organized regionally: Zero-One in central Afghanistan,

Zero-Two in the east, Zero-Three in the south, and Zero-Four in the north. When I asked an American defense official about the Zero units, he suggested that I contact the N.D.S. for more information. I told him that I had recently met with General Nazar Ali Wahedi, the N.D.S. chief for Nangarhar Province, who had said of Zero-Two, "They coordinate closely with the Americans. They do operations together." The American official responded, "Whether or not there are Americans outside of the U.S. military that are potentially with them, I just can't tell you."

It appears that the Zero units are composed primarily of Afghans but answer to the C.I.A. Ahmed Ali, the chief of the Nangarhar provincial council, told me, "They're N.D.S. in name only." My interview with General Wahedi took place in his office, at the N.D.S. headquarters in Jalalabad. I asked if it was possible for me to meet a member of Zero-Two. Wahedi made a phone call and told the man who answered that a journalist wished to talk to him. "O.K.," Wahedi said, and hung up. "They're not allowed to see you," he told me.

Every Afghan official I spoke with, including the governor of Nangarhar, said that Zero-Two had been instrumental in fighting ISIS and the Taliban. Wahedi claimed that two thousand insurgents had been killed in the province in the past year, the majority by Zero-Two. "They're good at their jobs," Ahmed Ali said. "They're very well trained. They have the best weapons and equipment. The problem is, sometimes they go into people's homes and just shoot everybody."

Many Nangarharis have accused Zero-Two of atrocities, especially in areas where ISIS has made inroads. Last winter, a seventeen-year-old Afghan named Rabbani was inside his house, in Shirzad District, when he and his father, Khan Wali, heard helicopters in the sky. According to Rabbani, Khan Wali was a mason who raised goats and cows to feed his family. An explosion blew open the front gate of their compound. An Afghan using a megaphone ordered everyone to come outside. As Khan Wali and Rabbani emerged, Khan Wali was shot in the face.

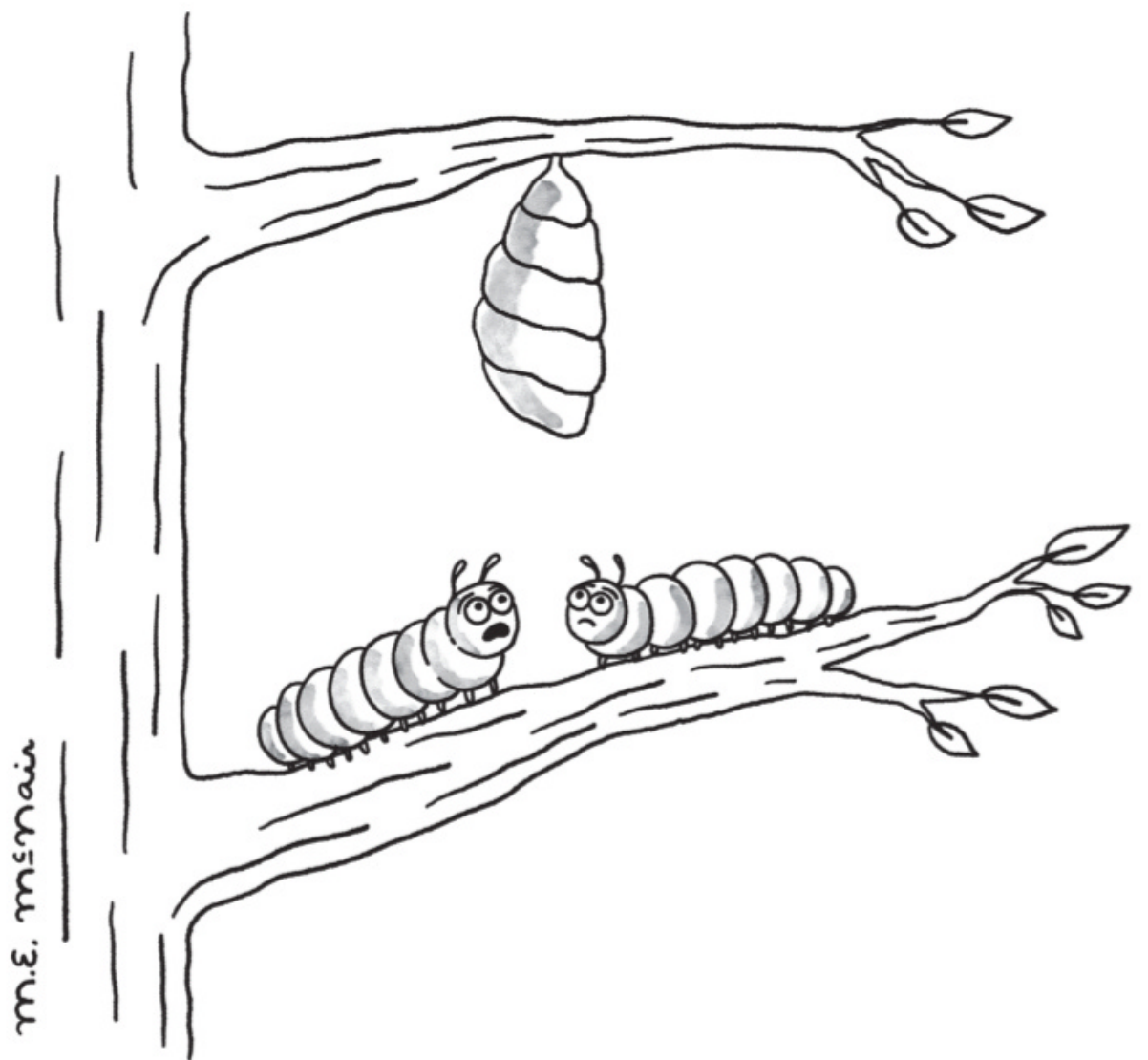
Uniformed men, wearing helmets with night-vision devices, stormed the compound. Rabbani's hands were

bound behind his back. He was thrown to the ground and kicked repeatedly. His mother, who was inside at the time, told me, “I had my baby in my arms. I didn’t understand why they were killing us. I didn’t understand who they were.” After the men left, Rabbani discovered that his eleven-year-old brother, Layakat, and his ten-year-old brother, Shaokat, were dead. Next door, three of Rabbani’s cousins, one of whom was thirteen, had also been killed. The family’s car and tractor were ablaze, and all their animals had been shot.

An Afghan government official who is in contact with Zero-Two told me that the unit had confirmed its role in the raid, and had attributed it to bad intelligence. A forthcoming Human Rights Watch report on C.I.A.-sponsored units in Afghanistan investigated more than a dozen raids, in nine provinces, and found that victims were sometimes targeted for having given food to insurgents, or for living in areas with insurgent activity. Patricia Gossman, the report’s author, told me that such clandestine operations were “causing appalling civilian casualties, but, because they happen largely in rural areas, they are off the radar.” When I asked the American defense official if the U.S. tracked any of Zero-Two’s military operations, he said, “They’re not military operations.”

I met a number of other survivors of Zero-Two raids who described similar scenes. One of them was Hela, a ten-year-old girl, also from Shirzad District, who gripped her right thumb in her left fist and spoke breathlessly while staring wide-eyed into space. Hela said that, a week earlier, she and her father had been sleeping on the veranda of their house when aircraft woke them. “It sounded like a waterfall,” she said. “Like rushing water.” Their gate exploded. “My father told me not to cry. A light came on his face, and they shot him.” Hela said that her father, Saeed Wali Khan, had gathered timber from the mountains and sold it as firewood.

An elderly man named Lal Jan, from another village in Shirzad District, said that the gate to his family’s compound was blown open and everyone was ordered to come outside. Eight of his male relatives were immediately executed, as drones circled above. Their car and some motorcycles were set on fire. According



*“I don’t feel ready to commit to a cocoon, either, but do you ever worry we’ll wake up one day and be forty and still caterpillars?”*

to Lal Jan, three Americans were there. “I could see them,” he told me. “They were speaking English.” One of the intruders bound Lal Jan’s hands behind his back. “I asked them why were they doing this to us—we were only farmers. The person standing over me said, ‘The informant fucked us.’” Lal Jan was hooded and brought to Jalalabad Airport, where Zero-Two is based. After being locked in a shipping container for three days, he was released. People from his village had petitioned the governor to intervene—no other men in the family remained to preside over the burial of its dead.

None of the victims I spoke to had received any form of redress. Because the C.I.A. does not acknowledge any involvement with the Zero units, it is unknown whether such incidents have led to investigations, changes in protocol, or disciplinary action. The chances seem slim. In a 2017 speech, Mike Pompeo, then the agency’s director, declared that “the C.I.A., to be successful, must be aggressive, vicious, unforgiving, relentless,”

and added, “President Trump gets this.” Last year, the chief prosecutor of the International Criminal Court requested an investigation of possible war crimes by U.S. forces in Afghanistan, including abuses by the C.I.A.; the U.S. State Department revoked the chief prosecutor’s visa and threatened the court with sanctions. Trump has pardoned an American soldier convicted of murdering an Iraqi detainee, and lobbied for the acquittal of a Navy SEAL accused of fatally stabbing a teen-age P.O.W. in Mosul.

Due process from the Afghan government appears equally unlikely. Last month, a Zero-Two raid killed four brothers in Nangarhar Province, provoking protests in Jalalabad. President Ghani vowed to “bring the perpetrators to justice.” So far, this has not happened.

In July, I visited the site of another Zero-Two raid in Nangarhar, in the town of Shahidan Mina. The place had a forsaken feel, with empty, dusty streets and half-built houses. In December,



*Abdul Qayum, a former ISIS commander, recently renounced the organization, in a ceremony led by Afghan police.*

Zero-Two killed fourteen people there, in two compounds. An N.D.S. officer provided a statement to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission: “Zero-Two had a report that four suicide attackers were inside Mohammad Alam’s house. Zero-Two arrived at the house and, using a megaphone, announced that they had come to conduct a search. They were fired upon and, in order to defend themselves, returned fire.”

Alam’s son, Mohammad Azam, a middle-aged laborer whose beard was dyed orange with henna, met me at the house. Inside the main gate sat the carcass of an incinerated vehicle. Azam hadn’t been home at the time of the raid. He pointed out where he’d later found the corpses of his father, his three brothers, and his brother-in-law Orfan Allah—an Afghan Army soldier home on leave. Azam’s mother, Mahbuba, had sustained a bullet wound, deforming her right foot. I later met Mahbuba, who said, “The neighbors took me to the hospital. The doctor said I needed to stay, but I left the same day so I could bury my husband and sons.” When I described the N.D.S. account of the raid, Mahbuba said, “I swear to God, the only weapons in our house were kitchen knives.”

Azam said that he and his family had been targeted only because they were originally from a part of Nangarhar that was now controlled by ISIS. One of his brothers still managed a small grocery store there, Azam admitted. “But we bought this house because we dreamed of living in a place where we could sleep peacefully,” he said.

Azam and Mahbuba now lived in a nearby compound that had also been raided that night. There, the oldest male survivor, Haroon, was twelve. He told me that he had been sleeping outside with his fourteen-year-old brother, Salman, and a cousin, Hedayat, who was also twelve. Moments after the gate blasted open, Salman and Hedayat were shot dead. Haroon ran inside, to his mother’s room. People entered the house and started firing. A search was conducted. When the intruders left, Haroon discovered that all three of his uncles had been killed, including Zahid, a doctor, who had raised Haroon since his father’s death, some years earlier. In a nearby

room, one of Haroon’s aunts, Laima, was covered in blood. Bullets had pierced her shoulder, the left side of her neck, and her lower jaw. She was weeping while clutching her nine-month-old daughter, Hafsa, to her chest. As Haroon approached them, he realized that Hafsa, too, had been killed. Someone on the raid had patched up Laima’s wounds and left behind supplies, so that she could change the dressings.

I had been escorted to the compound by district security forces. “These people came here to live in peace, and Zero-Two killed them,” one of the officers said. “There was no need for it.”

A few minutes later, when we were alone, the officer indicated that he had something else to add. “I was only saying that stuff in order to assure them I’m on their side,” he said.

Did this mean that he approved of the raid?

The officer gave a thumbs-up. “One hundred per cent.”

What about Orfan Allah? Wasn’t he in the Afghan Army?

“If he was, it was only so he could spy for ISIS.”

No one had specified what, exactly, Mohammad Alam and his sons had been guilty of. Were they would-be suicide bombers? Had ISIS fighters shopped at the brother’s store? Or had the family’s crime been something murkier, such as “sympathizing” with the group? The security officers did not seem overly concerned with these details.

ISIS has become such a singularly abhorrent spectre that any alleged association with it—“They are ISIS”—can be seen as sufficiently damning. Once applied, the label is also uniquely dehumanizing. It opens the door to extraordinary violence, such as Zero-Two raids or the Mother of All Bombs, distorting our normal standards of restraint and tolerance for collateral damage. In Iraq and Syria, American bombers razed entire cities in order to kill the ISIS fighters living in them. Trump had referred to those blitzes when laying out his Afghanistan strategy: “As we lift restrictions and expand authorities in the field, we are already seeing dramatic results in the campaign to defeat ISIS.”

When I met with the governor of Achin District, he told me that the ninety-six people killed by the MOAB

had included women and children. “But they belonged to ISIS,” he added. “No civilians were killed.”

In 2009, when General Stanley McChrystal assumed command of the war in Afghanistan, he said that “we run the risk of strategic defeat by pursuing tactical wins that cause civilian casualties.” He championed a counter-insurgency doctrine that promoted winning the allegiance of the population by protecting it. This doctrine was always more aspirational than operational, but today even the pretense of protecting the population has been discarded. The increase in night raids by Afghan Special Forces and C.I.A.-sponsored units has coincided with a spike in American air strikes, which have become less discriminate. Last month, a U.S. drone killed thirty pine-nut farmers in Nangarhar Province; a few days later, a U.S. bombardment killed at least forty members of a wedding party. A series of air strikes in May caused seventy or more civilian casualties, many of whom were women and children. Currently, children make up nearly a third of the civilian casualties in Afghanistan.

ISIS might have provided a convenient justification for “overwhelming force” in 2017, but more recently the U.S. military has offered another rationale: bringing the Taliban to the table and pressuring them into compromising. Yet the Taliban have always been willing to talk with the U.S. It wasn’t the American escalation of violence that enabled the Doha talks; it was Trump’s decision to bypass the Afghan government. Similarly, some analysts questioned the assumption that increased strikes against the Taliban, which continued throughout the negotiations, would yield concessions from them. According to Borhan Osman, a senior researcher at the International Crisis Group, “For the Taliban, it is *not* a cost-benefit calculation. They have a rigorous zeal to not surrender. Their pride wouldn’t allow them even to acknowledge they are being pressured. They double down.” The strategic utility of the relentless U.S. bombardment since the Doha talks collapsed—nearly a thousand “weapon releases” in September—is still more dubious, considering that Trump, not the Taliban, cut off discussions.

While U.S. air strikes and paramilitary raids have made the war even more

hellish and destructive for Afghans, they have also made it even more abstract for Americans. The rise in the number of Afghan dead and injured has corresponded with a decline in the number of U.S. dead and injured. This might explain why some people in Washington—including many of those who decried the Doha deal—argue for the status quo, envisaging a generation-long war of attrition in which ISIS and Al Qaeda are vigilantly kept in check and the Taliban, perhaps, eventually falter. It would be expensive but would cost relatively few American lives. If current trends continue, however, within a decade, hundreds of thousands more Afghans could die.

If indifference to civilian suffering underlies some arguments for perpetuating our military presence in Afghanistan, it also seems to animate some advocates of withdrawal. Trump has always expressed more interest in “extricating” the U.S. from Afghanistan than in forestalling a cataclysm there. “As soon as we leave, it’s all going to blow up anyway,” he said, in 2012. This July, he told reporters, “If we wanted to fight a war in Afghanistan and win it, I could win that war in a week.” He added, “Afghanistan would be wiped off the face of the earth.”

I was in Kabul when Trump made this statement, and the next day I met with Nader Nadery, the chairman of Afghanistan’s Civil Service Commission and a former senior adviser to President Ghani. During the Taliban regime, Nadery was imprisoned and tortured for his activism as a student at Kabul University. He later studied at Harvard’s Kennedy School. When I entered his office, Nadery invited me onto a balcony with a view of Darul Aman Palace, a colossal neoclassical structure that looked as if it had been teleported from the Latin Quarter of Paris. Darul Aman was erected to house the country’s parliament not long after Afghanistan became independent from Great Britain, in 1919. Coups, fires, and civil wars later reduced the building to a roofless shambles. Three years ago, the Ghani administration commissioned a renovation, and, in August, celebrations for Afghanistan’s centennial were held at the refurbished palace.

When the subject of Trump’s comments came up, Nadery seemed at a loss for words. “It hurts,” he said.

The prospect of a hasty U.S. with-

drawal is deeply worrying to Afghan officials. “We feel a strong urgency for peace,” Nadery told me. “But if we rush it the end result will be that it is very short-lived.” He cited the “decent interval” that Henry Kissinger wanted between the departure of U.S. troops from Vietnam and the complete takeover of the country by the North Vietnamese. A closer analogy might be Iraq. At the end of 2011, when President Obama withdrew American forces there, Iraq appeared more stable than Afghanistan does today. Within a few years, however, ISIS had taken over several major cities, and the Iraqi Army had disintegrated, prompting U.S. troops to return.

During the Doha negotiations, Khalilzad had promised that “no agreement will be done if we don’t see a permanent ceasefire.” The Taliban agreed only to guarantee safe passage to departing American troops, insisting that any ceasefire with the Afghan government be negotiated after Doha. This meant that they would be free to continue attacking Afghan forces and civilians throughout the U.S. withdrawal.

President Ghani’s spokesperson openly expressed satisfaction that the deal fell through. Members of the Ghani administration felt that the negotiations had galvanized Taliban fighters in Afghanistan and had elevated their leaders abroad. Hamdullah Mohib, the national-security adviser, told me, “Directly negotiating with the United States gave the Taliban a platform to also gain recognition from other countries across the region. That led to a boost of morale on the ground.” An Afghan official who met the Taliban representatives in Doha said that they acted as if they had won the war. When it was reported that the Taliban would sign the accord as “the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan,” the news outraged many people in the government, whose official name is the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. “That was hard to digest,” one official said. “It felt like all our sacrifices were for nothing.”

As legitimate as such concerns may be, Afghan opposition to the Doha framework might prove tragically myopic. Trump could choose to withdraw U.S. troops from Afghanistan tomorrow, unilaterally and without conditions. He recently did this in northern Syria, abandoning the U.S.’s Kurdish allies and

leaving them vulnerable to slaughter by Turkey. Republicans joined Democrats in assailing that decision as an unconscionable betrayal. Standing firm, Trump tweeted, “The stupid endless wars, for us, are ending!”

The Taliban insist that, once the U.S. commits to withdrawing from the country, they will work out their differences with their fellow-Afghans, in the interest of a lasting peace. Not unreasonably, some question their sincerity and the wisdom of taking their promises on faith. Yet Taliban leaders have already shown that they are willing and able to talk to their countrymen in a way that would have been unthinkable not so long ago. This July, a German organization helped put together an unofficial two-day “dialogue” between the Taliban negotiators in Doha and forty-five Afghans from various sectors of society. Although President Ghani was not involved, three government officials, including Nader Nadery, participated in the event.

So did eleven women. One of them was Jamila Afghani, the forty-five-year-old founder of a nonprofit organization that advocates for gender equality. Afghani, who lives in Kabul, grew up in a refugee camp in Pakistan and had never met a Talib. On the delegation’s first evening in Doha, a dinner for both sides was held in the hotel where the conference would take place. “I had to push myself to leave my room,” Afghani told me. “I didn’t want to go.”

By the time she arrived, everyone was seated. There were seventeen Taliban. Passing their tables, Afghani, who had polio as an infant and uses a cane, said “Salaam” and kept walking. One of the men stood up and hurried after her. “If you need any assistance, I am at your service,” he told Afghani.

“I was shocked,” she remembered. “It was not what I was expecting.”

The next day, in a large hall, Sher Mohammad Abbas Stanikzai, the Taliban’s chief negotiator, read a statement. A veteran of the war against the Soviets, Stanikzai called for the defeat of the infidels and condemned the Ghani administration as a puppet of the West. Nader Nadery spoke next. He recounted being tortured by the Taliban, and told Stanikzai and his colleagues, “I am willing to forgive you for what you have done to me and



*Jamila Afghani, a promoter of gender equality. She recently confronted Taliban members about their killing of civilians.*

the rest of society. But that forgiveness must have meaning. You must join us.”

During the speeches, Afghani checked her phone. There had been an attack in the capital of Ghazni Province, in central Afghanistan, where her family lives. The Taliban had detonated a car bomb that had damaged an elementary school attended by two of her cousin’s children. Both boys had been wounded by shrapnel. “Psychologically, I was under pressure,” Afghani said. When it was her turn to speak, she set aside the speech she had prepared and talked about the boys.

Seven-year-old Ahmad and eight-year-old Shah Agha were born in a rural part of Ghazni Province. Their father, Noor Agha, was a farmer. After night raids intensified in their village, Noor Agha decided to move his family to the city. This required abandoning his land and his livelihood, which plunged them into poverty. Noor Agha arranged for his fifteen-year-old sister to be married, to obtain a bride price. Ahmad and Shah Agha made the wedding invitations and accompanied Noor Agha when he delivered their work to the groom’s family, who lived in another neighborhood. According to Afghani, police officers in the area, identifying a strange vehicle, opened fire without warning. Noor Agha was killed and Ahmad sustained a glancing wound on his face. When Noor Agha’s father heard the news, he had a heart attack and died. “The money from the marriage was spent on funerals and medical bills,” Afghani said. Ahmad and Shah Agha moved in with their grandmother, and Afghani paid to send them to a private school—the one just bombed by the Taliban.

Afghani was in tears when she finished telling the story. “Why are you killing us?” she demanded. To her surprise, several of the Taliban negotiators were also crying. Stanikzai, the chief negotiator, wiped his eyes with the tail of his turban. “I couldn’t stay there any longer,” Afghani said. “I went to the bathroom and I emptied my heart.”

Only two Talibs spoke that day, but the next morning the group provided detailed responses to the grievances the government delegates had shared. Sev-

eral delegates told me that they were impressed by how organized the Taliban were. “They have become evolved political operators,” one delegate said. Throughout their negotiations with the U.S., the Taliban have presented themselves as a different organization from the one that ruled Afghanistan between 1996 and 2001, when they enforced a Draconian form of Sharia law that incorporated flogging and public executions. Many observers believe that the Taliban’s evolution is more than merely cosmetic. Borhan Osman, the Crisis Group researcher and a native of Ghazni Province, said that the emergence of ISIS in Afghanistan obliged the Taliban to moderate some of their positions. “They wanted to strike a clear contrast with them,” Osman said.

Some of these changes predate ISIS. In 2006, the Taliban code of conduct banned all N.G.O.s and sanctioned the burning of government schools. By 2013, an address attributed to Mullah Omar, the founder of the Taliban, declared that “modern education is a fundamental need of every society” and welcomed the “selfless activities” of international humanitarian organizations. Today, the Taliban coordinate with N.G.O.s to improve health care and medical facilities in areas that they control. Many Taliban-administered districts have functioning government schools. Qual-

ity and accessibility vary, especially for girls, but a report by the Overseas Development Institute found that, from a sample of twenty districts, “the majority of interviewees felt that the Taliban had improved the running of the government education system,” and noted, “Teachers turned up to work, chil-

dren attended class, books and supplies did not go missing, and there was more order in the classroom.”

Ashley Jackson, the author of the report, said, “There was a shift, around 2014, when the Taliban began to take and hold territory, and they realized that they needed to out-govern the government.” Both Jackson and Osman describe the Taliban’s overarching objective as “winning hearts and minds.” That phrase recalls the counter-insurgency doctrine

once promoted by Stanley McChrystal.

An urgent question looming over any potential political settlement with the Taliban is their attitude toward women, and to what extent it has changed. When the Taliban were in power, women were largely forbidden to work, to study, or to speak in public. They could leave the house only when wearing a burqa, escorted by a male relative. In a statement in February, however, the Taliban affirmed that the rights vouchsafed to women by Islam included business ownership, inheritance, education, work, choosing one’s husband, security, health, and “a good life.”

One of the delegates in Doha was Fawzia Koofi, a former parliamentarian who, in 2009, drafted legislation that criminalized violence against women. Koofi is from Badakhshan Province, in the north, where her husband was arrested during the Taliban regime. When Koofi visited the jail to petition for her husband’s release, a Taliban commander spotted polish on her nails and threatened to stone her. (Her husband later died, from tuberculosis contracted in jail.) In Doha, Koofi sat on a committee that produced a joint public statement with the Taliban negotiators. The discussions lasted fourteen hours. When Koofi proposed a sentence recognizing women’s “social, political, economic, and education rights, in accordance with Islamic values and international human rights principles and treaties,” the Taliban successfully demanded the removal of everything after “Islamic values.”

Koofi told me, “We exchanged some words that were not very nice. Honestly, my mind was about to explode. I wanted to walk out.” She recalled that she told the Taliban, “You have not changed, don’t pretend,” and that another woman said, “We remember how you were whipping women on the streets.”

Koofi suspects the Taliban of disingenuously placating American anxieties about betraying Afghan women, and worries that the appeasement act will come to an unceremonious end if the U.S. disengages from Afghanistan. She said that any weakening of women’s rights, no matter how minor, would be unacceptable, because the situation for Afghan women is already so dire: “Even under *this* government, women have no opportunity and are subject to system-



atic discrimination and violence. Now, in addition, they want to oppress us *more*?"

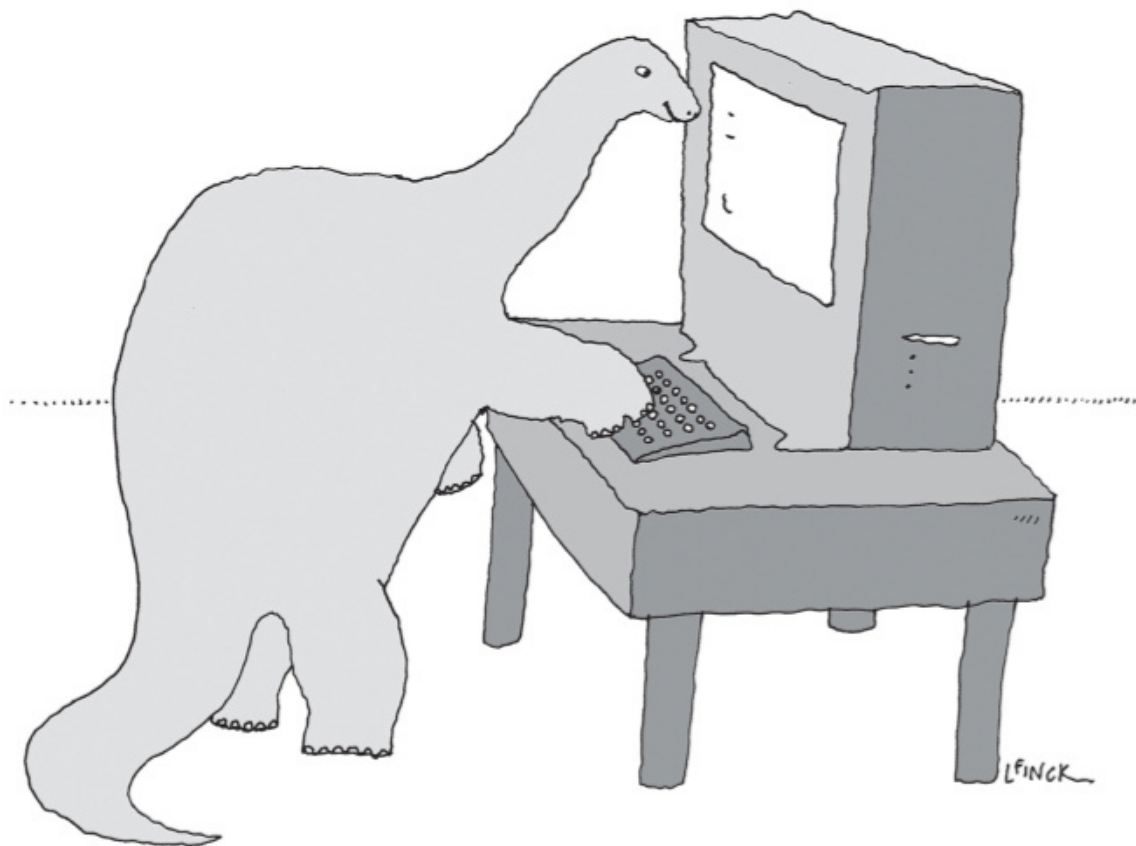
Nevertheless, Koofi said, it felt momentous to be able to criticize the Taliban face to face in Doha. That alone indicated that something had changed. At one point, she asked the Taliban committee members about their position on the burqa. It wasn't necessary, they said—the hijab was suitable. When the conference ended, the Taliban gave gifts to the delegates from Kabul: cologne, prayer beads, a prayer mat, and, for the women, hijabs.

The democratic experiment in Afghanistan, which began in 2004, when Hamid Karzai was elected President, has demoralized many citizens, who have watched brutal strongmen be rewarded with cabinet postings, age-old patronage networks mobilized on behalf of party politics, and elected officials enrich themselves through cronyism and corruption. Fraud has profoundly contaminated every political race. When Ghani was elected, in 2014, the vote was so unreliable that the U.S. had to invent a new position—chief executive—for his rival, Abdullah Abdullah. This past September 28th, Ghani faced Abdullah and more than a dozen other opposition candidates for a second five-year term. Only a quarter of registered voters went to the polls—a record low. In a triumphant press release, the Taliban, who killed or wounded two hundred and sixty-three civilians that day, declared that the “foreign-imposed process was rejected and spurned by the masses.”

Although preliminary election results have yet to be announced, Ghani and Abdullah have—again—both claimed victory. If neither candidate receives more than fifty per cent of the vote, there will be a runoff. Because of harsh winter conditions in much of Afghanistan, a second round might have to be delayed until the spring. During the interim, any progress toward peace seems doubtful.

Ghani is expected to win in the end. A former World Bank researcher with a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology from Columbia University, he began his career as an anticorruption crusader, but has since developed an aptitude for political survival. To secure Afghanistan's ethnic-Uzbek vote in 2014, he chose for

## WHY EARLY COMPUTERS WERE SO BIG



his running mate Rashid Dostum, a warlord accused of murdering his wife, crushing people with tanks, and asphyxiating thousands of Taliban prisoners in metal shipping containers. (Dostum wasn't on the ticket this time, in part because of allegations that he had abducted a political rival and ordered guards to sexually assault him with Kalashnikovs. During the recent campaign, Dostum threw his support behind Abdullah Abdullah, who has lauded his “authentic style.”)

Ghani has promised to make peace negotiations with the Taliban a priority of his second term. But some Western officials who have worked with him in the past doubt that he would agree to any deal with the Taliban that might diminish or abbreviate his authority. In Kabul, Ghani's former chief of protocol, Hamed Akram, told me, “Ghani will sabotage the peace process to remain President.” Fawzia Koofi said of Ghani, “Will he be willing to share power with the Taliban? To step down and agree on a political arrangement? No.”

A political settlement with the Taliban would require tremendous compromise from everyone involved. Laurel Miller, of the International Crisis Group,

said, “It will have to be more of a merger than an acquisition.” Ghani appears to have in mind a framework that would permit the Taliban to participate in elections and hold political office while leaving the current constitution and state structure basically intact. The Taliban, meanwhile, have given no indication that they would accept anything less than the return of their previous Sharia-based system, in a less extreme form. As of now, in other words, both sides want an acquisition. “And that is why it's going to take a long time,” Miller said.

As divided as Afghanistan can seem, the line between enemies is seldom indelible. Afghan society is a complex web of relationships and bonds that often transcend ideologies, which are themselves mutable. Many Afghan bureaucrats and military officers used to be ardent communists. Members of the same family can belong to the government and to the insurgency, while remaining loyal to one another. The shrinking of a foreign presence has further blurred these lines, making them easier to cross.

The last time I saw Zubair, the Taliban fighter who defected during the

Eid ceasefire, he told me that he had recently attempted to return to his home village, in the Korengal Valley, in Kunar Province, north of Nangarhar. He had not been able to do so: the valley, where Zubair and his comrades had defeated the U.S. military, was now occupied by ISIS. Despite ISIS's advances in Kunar, though, some militants there had been abandoning the group. This summer, I visited a police headquarters in Kunar's capital, Asadabad, where thirteen ISIS militants, all locals, had surrendered to the government, in exchange for immunity. When I arrived, their weapons—Kalashnikovs, Dragunovs, mortar tubes, and rocket launchers—were displayed on a table outside. A brief ceremony was conducted. The police commander, Lieutenant Colonel Shafiqullah Sahaar, held a Quran, which each militant kissed before disavowing ISIS. The governor of the province then placed colorful garlands around their necks and traditional *pakol* hats on their heads.

After the ceremony, Sahaar invited the ISIS commander, Abdul Qayum, to eat lunch with him and his lieutenants. Sahaar, a muscular, clean-shaven former Special Forces officer, sat as far away as he could from Qayum, who nervously picked at his food. Later, Sahaar said, "I didn't want to look at his face. I don't know how many of our men he's killed. If it were up to me, I'd hang him."

Qayum was a slim man in his mid-thirties with shaggy black hair, a bleary gaze, and thin eyebrows permanently tented in lackadaisical amusement. When he was a boy, his father was killed by Russian soldiers, and his mother's leg was mangled in a Russian air strike. She and Qayum moved to a refugee camp in Pakistan, where, for eleven years, Qayum studied at a madrassa, becoming a mullah. They stayed away from Afghanistan while the Taliban were in power. After the U.S. invasion, Qayum and his mother returned to their village, in a remote corner of Kunar, where Qayum became the imam at a mosque. When the newly formed Afghan government offered to finance a primary school in the village, Qayum was named headmaster. It took him three days to transport chalkboards, textbooks, and other supplies from Asadabad. Classes were held on carpets under trees. More than a hundred boys



*A market in Jalalabad, where crime is rising. Doctors there recently threatened to strike,*



*because so many of them are being extorted. "It's not only doctors," one told me. "It's all businessmen, anyone with money."*



*"It gets rid of the spiders and it doesn't make any noise, so as far as I'm concerned it can stay."*

and girls attended. "The people were happy," Qayum said.

In 2003, the Taliban began reëmerging in Kunar. They closed Qayum's school, burned the books, and killed a teacher. Qayum fled. Word was conveyed to him that, if he joined the Taliban, he could return. "I was the only person taking care of my mother," he said. "So I came back."

Despite his initial reluctance, he quickly embraced his new identity. During the Presidential elections of 2004, he fired from a ridgeline on Afghans at a polling station in his home district. He remained with the Taliban for about a decade, sometimes fighting U.S. and Afghan forces, other times collecting taxes and acting as a Sharia judge. If Qayum saw a contradiction between this life and his previous one, he didn't acknowledge it to me. Whenever I pressed him on the subject, he replied, "We were doing jihad." In Kunar, as in many other parts of Afghanistan, the government had become synonymous with the American military, which had become synonymous with foreign occupation.

In 2014, when ISIS appeared in eastern Afghanistan and began accusing the Taliban of serving the interests of Pakistan, Qayum found himself agreeing.

He knew that Pakistan gave the Taliban financial support, and in refugee camps across the border he'd seen Pakistani agents pushing young people to join the Taliban. Qayum had even accompanied his superiors to a meeting with Nasrullah Barbar, a former interior minister of Pakistan, who is widely considered an architect of Pakistan's alliance with the Taliban. Qayum asked himself, "If we're taking orders from another country, can we call this jihad?"

On Facebook, he began watching ISIS videos from Iraq and Syria. The leader of ISIS in Afghanistan, Hafiz Saeed Khan, had attended the same madrassa as Qayum. In 2016, Qayum, who now had a wife and four children, joined Hafiz in the Mamand Valley. He was placed in charge of thirty-five men, whom he led in combat against the Taliban. After eight months, Hafiz asked Qayum to leave the front lines, return home, and recruit more Afghans from Kunar Province. Qayum began preaching at mosques about the coming caliphate.

It was apparent why Qayum had excelled as an imam, a teacher, a commander, and a recruiter. He liked an audience, and held forth with aplomb and a disarming sense of humor. He could

also read a room: he seemed to relish playing whatever role circumstances demanded of him. Hours after quitting ISIS, he was disparaging the group he had persuaded others to join. "When I saw they were finished in Syria, I knew ISIS was false," he said. "The Prophet didn't say there will be a caliphate that is defeated."

An interest in self-preservation might have spurred this epiphany. U.S. air strikes had killed Hafiz Saeed Khan, his successor, and that successor's successor. The Taliban had looted Qayum's house and forced his family to flee. He had nowhere to turn.

The deputy police commander for Kunar, Mohammad Yousef, came from the same district as Qayum, and, for years, the two of them had fought against each other. According to both men, the experience had created a certain bond of trust between them. Yousef, whom I met at the station, told me, "He said that he would surrender, on one condition—if I guaranteed his safety. I gave my word."

I returned to Asadabad a few weeks later. The former ISIS militants were living in a safe house guarded by an Afghan counterterrorism unit. They were free to leave, but they felt that their lives would be imperilled if they did. I was impressed by how reverentially Qayum's men, all of whom he had recruited to ISIS, still deferred to him, despite the predicament he had led them into. No doubt they respected his stature as a mullah, but I also wondered if they recognized the value, in such uncertain times, of his ideological versatility.

Mohammad Yousef had told me that, when he and Qayum were enemies, Qayum had written songs about wanting to kill him. I asked Qayum if this was true. He said he didn't remember, but quickly added that he'd written a song about Yousef just the other day. Reaching into his pocket, he unfolded a piece of paper with lyrics in blue ink and sang, "You are strong for the people, strong like Russian steel/May your operations succeed, may you win more territory/Your enemies fear you, they do not sleep because of you."

Qayum's recruits, many of whom had lost family members to Afghan and U.S. forces, listened attentively. Abdul Salam, a slight man with large hazel eyes, told

me that, in 2002, a U.S. bombing raid had killed his father, in Jalalabad. Salam joined the Taliban when he was twelve, along with his older brother, Kashmir. "I wanted revenge," Salam said. In 2009, a U.S. air strike riddled his legs with shrapnel and killed Kashmir.

One of the counterterrorism police officers guarding the house, Mohammad Aziz, was from Salam's village, in Kunar. As I spoke with Salam, Aziz came over and sat next to him on his cot. They were about the same age. Putting his hand on Salam's knee, Aziz said, "My cousin was killed by the Taliban. I'm not going to let you live."

Everybody laughed.

"We've been sharing war stories," Aziz explained.

"We're friends," Salam added.

At one point, I asked Qayum how he would summarize the crucial difference between ISIS and the Taliban. He said, "ISIS never compromises. The Taliban compromises." Although Taliban leaders shun the Afghan government, their field commanders sometimes find common cause with it. The governor of Kunar, Abdul Mirzakwal, told me that he is in regular contact with the Taliban's shadow governor, who, among other things, helps monitor the safety of government-salaried teachers and health workers in Taliban-held areas. Mirzakwal said that a medical clinic in Kunar had recently been looted by Taliban fighters. "I called the Taliban governor at ten in the morning and asked him why they did this," he said. "By four, the clinic manager informed me that all the equipment had been returned."

I asked Mirzakwal if ISIS had brought the Taliban and the government closer. "The Taliban is an *Afghan* phenomenon," Mirzakwal said. "We have common values. ISIS is not Afghan." While reporting in eastern Afghanistan, I saw several cemeteries with both Afghan and Taliban flags adorning the graves of soldiers and insurgents. ISIS fighters are buried without markers, and only in land belonging to the caliphate.

Even peace will not solve many of the problems that plague Afghanistan, and it could create new ones. The economy depends on foreign aid; donor countries directly financed about half of this year's national budget, and much

of Afghanistan's G.D.P. is generated by Western militaries, companies, and organizations. As the number of U.S. troops in the country has gone down, poverty, unemployment, and crime have gone up. While I was in Jalalabad, doctors threatened to strike, because so many of them are being kidnapped and extorted. "It's not only doctors," the head of their association told me. "It's all businessmen, anyone with money." At Nangarhar's provincial hospital, I saw a patient—a dentist—who'd been shot in the head for having failed to pay a ransom. At Emergency Surgical Center, a hospital in Kabul dedicated to battlefield injuries, surgeons are increasingly treating stab wounds instead of bullet and blast wounds. According to Fabrizio Foschini, a researcher who has been studying criminality in Kabul, a "mafia culture" has taken hold, and "all major enterprise is threatened by violence, intimidation, and extortion."

In the event of peace, a lot of professional fighters might find themselves out of work. Nearly three hundred thousand Afghans serve in the security forces, which cost the U.S. approximately five billion dollars a year. If American troops leave Afghanistan, and if the government and the Taliban are no longer at war, how much longer will Congress and the President continue to approve these funds? Tens of thousands of Taliban militants would also need to be reintegrated into Afghan society, as would at least thirty thousand irregular-militia members armed and funded by U.S. Special Forces. An end to the conflict might cause Pakistan and Iran to forcibly repatriate millions of refugees.

There are already two and a half million internally displaced people in Afghanistan, many of them living in destitute conditions on the fringes of provincial capitals. (Kabul's population has more than tripled since 2001, and now exceeds five million.) Outside Jalalabad, I visited a neighborhood called Behsud, where thousands of families were squatting in abandoned compounds after fleeing violence and poverty in their home districts. In a part of Behsud known as Burned Tank—where a destroyed Soviet tank sat on the roadside, its cannon supporting the canopy of a makeshift watermelon stand—

people had recently arrived from Kunar Province, after a Zero-Two raid there. Several local officials told me that ISIS has been recruiting in Behsud. Ahmed Ali, the provincial-council chief, believes that the Afghans living in Behsud, and in similar settlements, are primed for radicalization. "They've lost everything," he said. "And they have no support. The government is not helping them."

Children were everywhere in Behsud, roaming the streets, swimming in irrigation ditches, and playing cricket in dirt lots with wickets made from cinder blocks. Rabbani, the seventeen-year-old from Shirzad District, whose father, two younger brothers, and three cousins had been killed by Zero-Two, now lives in Behsud. The compound where he was staying was at the end of a rutted lane bordered by wheat fields and rice paddies. He shared the house, an unfurnished concrete shell without windows or doors, with more than a dozen relatives: siblings, cousins, nieces, nephews. All had been orphaned by the raid. "I'm the breadwinner now," Rabbani told me. He had been loading stones onto trucks for construction projects, earning just under three dollars a day.

In Afghanistan, the future is as uncertain as it has ever been. Jamila Afghani, the delegate who went to Doha, told me, "We don't know what is coming." After she made several Taliban negotiators weep, they agreed to include, in the joint public statement, a commitment to reducing civilian casualties to zero. The gesture was understood to be symbolic—and the Taliban's recent attacks have proved its hollowness—but when Afghani returned to Kabul she noticed that she felt different. Normally, when she left the house, she was accompanied by an almost physical tension, an awareness that at any moment something terrible might happen: gunfire, an explosion. As she walked down the street, shopped in the market, or commuted to work, this awareness might briefly subside, but it never went away. The morning after she came back from Doha, it was gone. For the first time in a while, Afghani moved through her day as if she lived in a world where sudden, devastating violence was not a constant menace.

Then the day ended and the next one began. ♦

# ORIGINAL MAN

*Why do so many directors want to work with Adam Driver?*

BY MICHAEL SCHULMAN

When white phosphorus touches skin, it can burn through to the bone. As the particles ignite, they emit a garlic-like odor and melt everything in their path. Adam Driver, Marine lance corporal, 1st Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, Weapons Company, 81st Platoon, was aware of these effects when he looked up at the California sky, during a drill exercise, one day in 2003, and saw a cloud of white phosphorus exploding above his head. The only thing to do was run.

Driver had joined the Marine Corps the previous year, when he was eighteen. After high school, he'd been renting a room in the back of his family's house, in Mishawaka, Indiana, and mowing the grass at a 4-H fairgrounds. He had vague ambitions of being an actor and had auditioned for Juilliard, in Manhattan, because he knew that it didn't check grades. When he was rejected, he decided to go to Los Angeles and try to make it in the movies. He packed up his 1990 Lincoln Town Car with his minifridge, his microwave, and everything else he owned, and said goodbye to his girlfriend. "It was a whole event," he recalled recently. "Like, 'I don't know when we'll see each other again. Our love will find a way.' And then: 'Bon voyage, small town! Hollywood, here I come!'"

His car broke down outside Amarillo, Texas, and he spent nearly all his money fixing it. When he got to L.A., he stayed at a hostel for two nights and paid a real-estate agent to help him find an apartment ("A total fucking scam"). He walked around the beach in Santa Monica, calculated that the two hundred dollars he had left was enough for gas money, and drove back to Mishawaka, where he got his job with the 4-H back. He'd been gone a week. "It was all just embarrassing," he said. "I felt like a fucking loser."

After 9/11, he found himself filled

with a desire for retribution, although he wasn't sure against what or whom. "It wasn't against Muslims," he said. "It was: We were attacked. I want to fight for my country against whoever that is." His stepfather, a Baptist minister, had given him a brochure for the Marines, which he'd thrown in the trash. But now he reconsidered. He craved a physical challenge, and the marines were tough. "They kind of got me with their whole 'We don't give you signing bonuses. We're the hardest branch of the armed forces. You're not going to get all this cushy shit that the Navy or the Army gives you. It's going to be *hard*.'" His decision to enlist was so abrupt that a military recruiter asked if he was running from the law.

He was sent to a processing center in Indianapolis for a physical exam, then to the Marine Corps Recruit Depot in San Diego, for boot camp. The first night, the recruits lined up to get their heads shaved. A guy four spots ahead of Driver had a mole on his scalp which got shaved off, leaving him bleeding and screaming. Driver was six feet three and lanky, with squinty eyes, a beaky nose, and ears that stuck straight out. Another recruit, Martinez, also had big ears, and he and Driver were nicknamed Ears No. 1 and Ears No. 2. Basic training was as grueling as it was in the movies. "I was allowed one call, and my parents weren't home," Driver recalled, "so I didn't talk to anybody for a long time."

After two and a half months, he was sent to Camp Pendleton, in Southern California, where he trained as a mortarman. In one exercise, he and another trainee had to pound a nerve on each other's thigh until it was numb. "That's kind of what the Marine Corps is like," Driver said. "They'll just keep hitting it until it's numb. Until you conform."

During a simulated battle scenario, the mortarman were to drive Humvees into a valley and fire mortars at a dis-

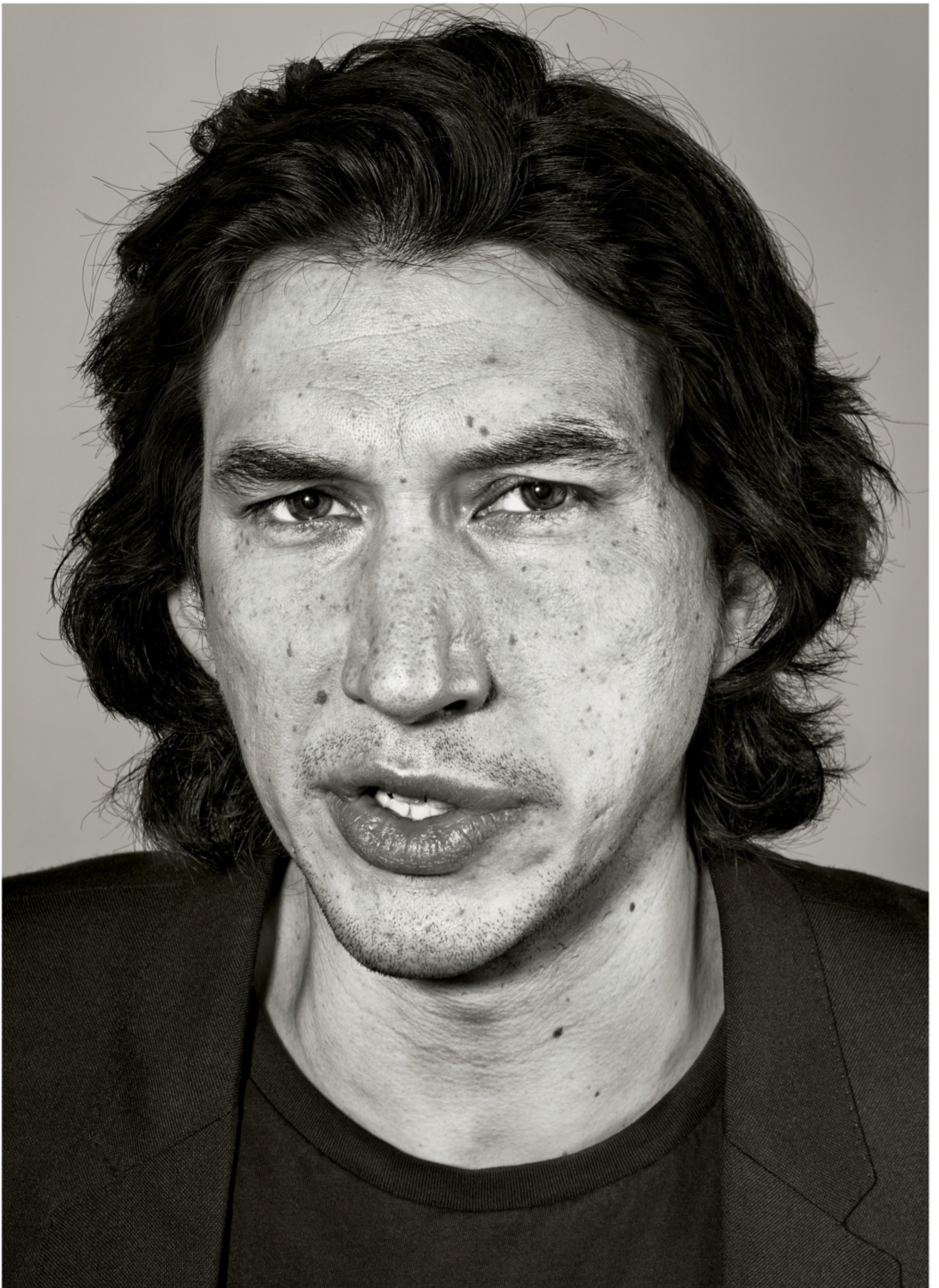
tant target, to be designated by a white-phosphorus explosion. In a screwup, the phosphorus exploded not over the target but over the men. Driver heard a boom overhead. Luckily, the wind was blowing, so the toxic plumes wafted a bit, and the marines sprinted to safety.

Later, as Driver was collecting himself at the barracks, he thought about the two things that he really wanted to do in life, and he vowed to do them. One was to smoke cigarettes. The other was to be an actor.

Driver, who is thirty-five, was telling me this story one morning in June, at an industrial-chic trattoria in Dumbo, over a lemon herbal tea. To help me picture the scene, he positioned a saltshaker to represent the target. His phone was the panicked mortarman.

A tattooed waiter came by for our order, and Driver, who lives nearby, in Brooklyn Heights, chose scrambled eggs with spinach. He said that he smoked cigarettes for a few years after the white-phosphorus incident but quit, more or less, in his twenties. The acting thing stuck. In 2012, he got his big break on HBO's "Girls," playing Adam Sackler, a mysterious weirdo whom Lena Dunham's character, Hannah Horvath, visits for booty calls. The character, a peripheral one at first, became central. Adam Sackler was an odd specimen of boy: as big as a tree trunk yet affected in his tastes, particularly sexual ones. In one episode, he masturbates as Hannah berates him, demanding money for cab fare, pizza, and gum. It took seven episodes before he appeared outside his apartment. When Hannah spots him at a party in Bushwick and announces, "That's Adam," her friend Jessa deadpans, "He does sort of look like the original man."

The same year, Driver had a small part in Steven Spielberg's "Lincoln," as a telegraph operator. (He studied Morse



*Colleagues view Driver as a throwback to the off-center movie stars of the seventies. "Game respects game," Spike Lee observed.*

code for the role.) I remember being jarred by his presence in the film: What's the pervy hipster from "Girls" doing in the nineteenth century? But Driver has a range and an intensity that have transformed him into one of Hollywood's most unconventional leading men. In just six years, he has worked with an astonishing roster of directors: Spike Lee, Martin Scorsese, Jim Jarmusch, Steven Soderbergh, the Coen brothers. Scorsese, who cast him as a seventeenth-century Jesuit priest, in "Silence," told me that he was impressed by Driver's "seriousness, his dedication, his understanding of what we were trying to do." When I asked Lee, who directed Driver last year in his Oscar-nominated performance in "BlacKkKlansman," why directors were drawn to him, he said, "There's a very simple answer: game respects game."

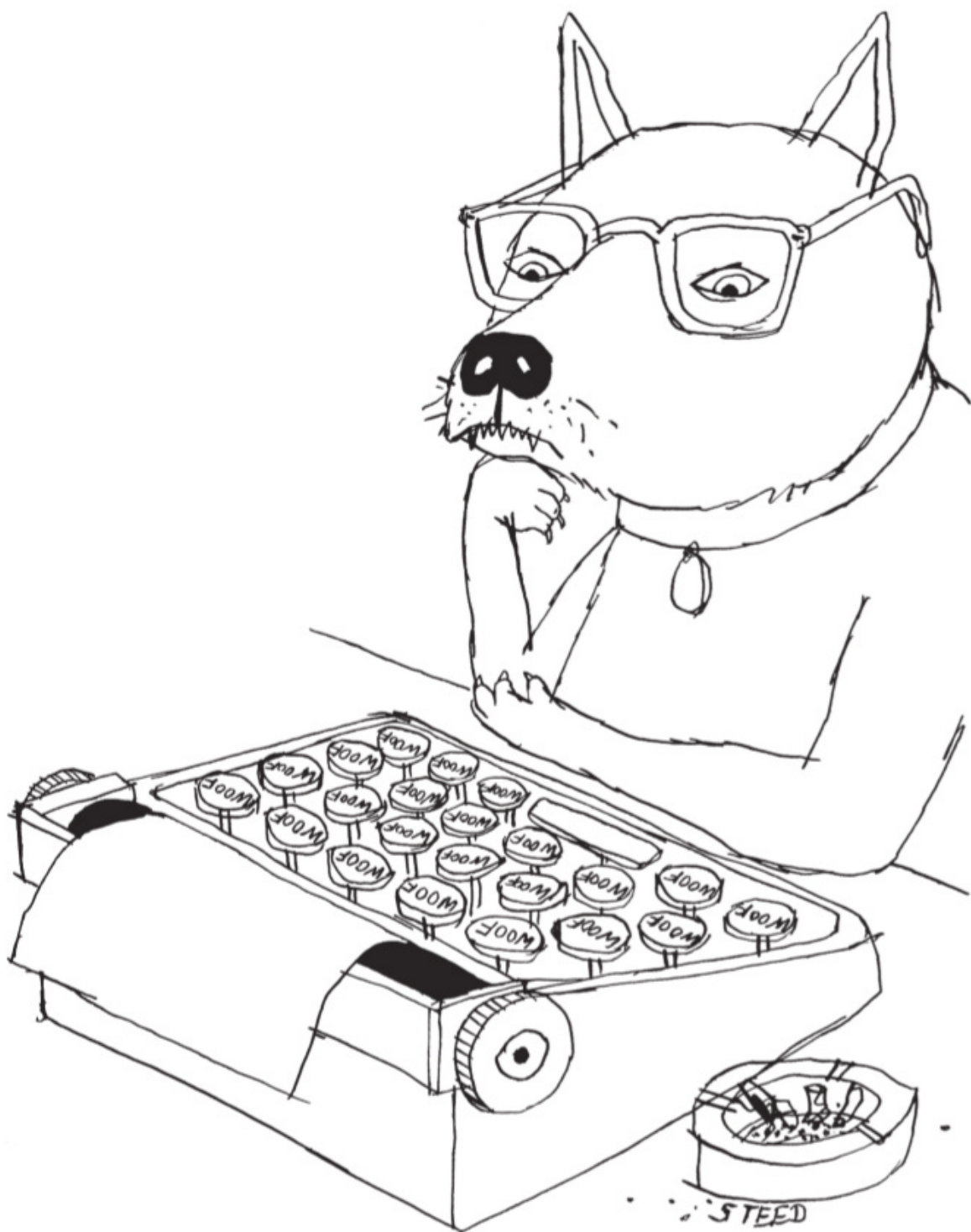
Driver has the bearing of a self-effac-

ing vulture and a face like an Easter Island statue. (Not since Anjelica Huston has a movie star so embodied the concept of *jolie laide*.) Despite his stolid presence, his characters are often thwarted and befuddled—high-strung alpha males driven by an ancient code of valor but tripped up by contemporary frustrations, like a Cro-Magnon man airdropped into Bed-Stuy and handed the wrong person's latte. Jarmusch, who cast Driver as a poetry-writing bus driver, in "Paterson," and as a hapless police officer who fights zombies, in "The Dead Don't Die," pointed to his "unusual usualness." Directors love his peculiar contradictions and his syncopated speech. (When the trailer for "The Dead Don't Die" was released, in April, the Internet went briefly gaga over his elongated pronunciation of the word "ghouls.") "He's very disciplined, and yet he can be absolutely goofy,"

Terry Gilliam, who directed Driver in "The Man Who Killed Don Quixote," told me. Soderbergh cast him in the heist comedy "Logan Lucky" after seeing him on "Girls." "He seemed to be operating with some different kind of compass," Soderbergh said. "His physicality, his speech rhythms were all unexpected and yet totally organic. You didn't feel like he was putting on a show or that it was mannered. He just seemed to be from another universe."

In 2013, a column in *Variety* posited that Hollywood was suffering from a "Leading Man Crisis." George Clooney, Brad Pitt, and Will Smith were all middle-aged, and few younger actors seemed poised to take their place. But, six years later, there appears to be no shortage of leading men. Hollywood is awash in sad-eyed brooders (Ryan Gosling, Jake Gyllenhaal), muscled he-men (Channing Tatum, Dwayne Johnson), sophisticated gents (Benedict Cumberbatch, Eddie Redmayne), high-spirited underdogs (Michael B. Jordan, Ryan Reynolds), bug-eyed misfits (Rami Malek, Jared Leto), and the interchangeable hunks known as the Chrises: Evans, Hemsworth, Pine, and Pratt.

Driver doesn't fit any of these molds. In some ways, he's a throwback to the off-center movie stars of the seventies—Dustin Hoffman, Al Pacino, Jack Nicholson—who blurred the line between matinee idol and character actor and infused their roles with a sense of alienation and neurosis. Next month, he stars in two films, each as a man navigating a tortuous modern maze. In Noah Baumbach's "Marriage Story," he plays a theatre director whose divorce from an actress (played by Scarlett Johansson) turns into a nightmarish, yet totally ordinary, ordeal. In "The Report," directed by Scott Z. Burns, he plays the former Senate staffer Daniel J. Jones, who spent years investigating the C.I.A.'s use of torture in the war on terror, only to be stymied by Washington bureaucracy. Soderbergh, who produced "The Report," told me, of Driver, "He just radiates obsession, and that is what 'The Report' needed above anything else: somebody that you believed would willingly lock himself in a room for five years to perform a task that may or may not end up being relevant or even known."



Then there's the "Star Wars" reboot, in which Driver plays Kylo Ren, an interplanetary warlord who can't seem to live up to the infamy of his grandfather Darth Vader. During the course of the trilogy, which wraps up with "The Rise of Skywalker," in December, Driver has managed to transpose the wounded virility of his twenty-first-century characters to the saga's galactic scale. (The comedian Josh Gondelman recently said that he empathized with Kylo Ren, "the only 'Star Wars' villain who can correctly rank all the best Death Cab for Cutie albums.") Kylo Ren is the J. Alfred Prufrock of space: a self-conscious poseur, needled by his own insecurities. J. J. Abrams, who cast Driver in the role, said, "Kylo Ren feels like he hasn't arrived. Even as he becomes supreme leader, he is wanting. It's like anyone you know who thinks that, when he arrives where he's going, he will feel fulfilled. For Kylo, the hole only gets bigger."

Baumbach, who has directed Driver in four films, once heard him call acting a "benign rebellion." He told me, "It does accurately describe what he does so beautifully, because he's both serving the role and the story and the director, and at the same time always looking for other things and pushing back." Baumbach first cast Driver in a small role, in "Frances Ha," as a hipster in a porkpie hat. One of his lines was: "Amazing." "The way Adam says it is like a song: 'Ab-ma-zinnggg,'" Baumbach said. "I always think of that word that way now."

When I asked Driver about "benign rebellion," he said, "Sometimes you have to shock yourself out of your rhythm." I first met him one evening this summer, in his dressing room at the Hudson Theatre, where he was starring in a Broadway revival of Lanford Wilson's 1987 drama "Burn This." He was playing Pale, a boorish, coke-addled restaurant manager who bursts into the apartment of his late brother, Robbie, and begins an unlikely affair with the brother's dancer roommate, played by Keri Russell. "This supposedly was Ethel Barrymore's dressing room at some point," Driver said, wearing a Naval Base Coronado hat. "But I can't prove that."

On the table was a poetry collection by Sharon Olds, which his wife, the actor Joanne Tucker, had given him as an opening-night gift. He showed me a few favorite lines, in which Olds envisages her parents as college students and yearns to stop them from making the mistake of their marriage, but relents: "I want to live. I / take them up like the male and female / paper dolls and bang them together / at the hips, like chips of flint, as if to / strike sparks from them, I say, / Do what you are going to do, and I will tell about it."

"The language is so great," Driver said, as he shovelled down a burrito bowl. "Striking sparks between two things—it's kind of similar to plays. That's it, right? You have an experience and then you go tell about it in your work." "Burn This" was more taxing than he had anticipated. Unlike with "Angels in America," in which Driver appeared Off Broadway, in 2011, he couldn't let the language take him where he needed to go: "It's very much about everything that they're *not* talking about, which is the death of Robbie and the grief, you know?"

Driver is protective of his process and of the enigmas of acting, but he agreed to let me watch his preshow routine, of which the burrito bowl was the first step. When he finished eating, he went into the bathroom and put his head under a running faucet, while we talked about movies. "Have you ever seen 'The Miracle Worker'?" he said mid-dunk. "There's a scene with Anne Bancroft and Patty Duke where they're just beating the hell out of each other. Fucking one of the best scenes in film. That's a non sequitur." He squirted gel into his hand and smeared it into his shaggy black hair. "With this play, I've been really going to town on this shit. I think you're only supposed to use a handful, but I fucking plow this stuff on."

As he blow-dried his hair, he talked about his taste for Danish-modern chairs; he and Tucker have a knockoff Hans Wegner, and he joked that if he weren't an actor he might have been a furniture-maker. He sat in front of a

mirror and wound a bandage around his right hand. (When Pale first appears, he's been hurt in a bar fight.) "This bandage for some reason is the part that gives me the most anxiety," Driver said. "There's a lot of trial and error over what is the right amount of blood. And the bandage cuts off circulation, so by the time I'm done my fingers are purple." He drew a red trickle on his knuckle with a marker. Then he traced over it in brown. "It's not a fresh wound," he reasoned. "It's, like, an hour or two hours old."



He stood up. "Now I'll brush my teeth, because I have to kiss Keri," he said. On the couch was a piece of fan art he had received at the stage door. During "Girls," strangers would often share details about their sex lives with him. (One guy stopped him in the subway and said, "I love that scene where you pee on her in the shower," then turned to his girlfriend and said, fondly, "I pee on her all the time.") But "Star Wars" has made him uncomfortably famous. "This one woman who has been harassing my wife came to the show and gave me a creepy wood carving that she made of my dog," he said. He and Tucker have a young son, whose birth they kept hidden from the press for two years, in what Driver called "a military operation." Last fall, after Tucker's sister, who was launching a peacoat business, accidentally made her Instagram account public and someone noticed the back of his son's head in one picture, the news wound up on Page Six. Driver stretched his foot on a foam roller and lamented his loss of privacy. "My job is to be a spy—to be in public and live life and have experience. But, when you feel like you're the focus, it's really hard to do that."

He lay down on the roller and massaged his back; his body seemed to take up the entire room. His physique is sometimes regarded as a riddle of nature. When the play opened, the style blog The Cut convened four writers to discuss the question "How Big Is Adam Driver in *Burn This*?" ("I was so flustered by his quads that at one point I spilled all of the contents of my purse on the

floor,” one said.) After stretching, he boiled water for his throat-soothing “potion”: half a teaspoon of salt, half a teaspoon of baking soda, and half a teaspoon of corn syrup. At seven-twenty, he raced downstairs to the stage, where the cast had gathered for their nightly fight call. Russell, who lives in Driver’s neighborhood, was gossiping on the sofa about snotty Brooklyn preschools. They ran through their fight scenes, stomping and kicking and smacking at half speed, as if they were in a Three Stooges routine.

Driver went back upstairs to shave and to gargle his potion. Because of Actors’ Equity rules, I wasn’t permitted to see the rest of his routine, but he told me what would happen next. When the play started, he listened on the speaker system until he heard his cue. As he headed to the stage, his dresser reminded him to put a prop watch in his pocket. He thought about the character of Robbie, his dead brother. Sometimes he would picture Robbie as the idea of “losing something beautiful.” Or he would think about a mass shooting in the news. Or he would peek out at the silhouettes of the ushers in the theatre and view them as Robbie. Or he would think about the AIDS epidemic—Robbie is gay but dies in a freak boating accident—and project it onto the audience: “Maybe they were all Robbies, and here I am facing them all. And they’re faceless. All these artists who are gone.”

And then he tore through the apartment door onto the stage and delivered a ten-minute rant about parking and potholes and “this shit city”—Wilson wrote it in the throes of an anxiety attack—as he thrashed around like a wild bird in a cage. “Sometimes everything I’m thinking about helps,” he told me, “but every once in a while it doesn’t. And, the minute I get in my head, it’s fucked.”

“**M**arriage Story” begins after the marriage in the title has ended. Charlie and Nicole, played by Driver and Johansson, are in a mediator’s office, the air between them thick with resentment. The film is, in some ways, an update of “Kramer vs. Kramer,” the 1979 drama starring Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep—but while Streep’s character dis-

appears for most of the movie, allowing the audience’s allegiance to drift toward Hoffman, “Marriage Story” toggles between the spouses, as if they’d been granted joint custody of the story. At one point, when Nicole seems to be winning the battle over their young son, Charlie tells his lawyer, through tears, “He needs to know that I fought for him.”

Driver’s parents divorced when he

was seven. Until then, the family lived in San Diego, and Driver has happy memories of their life; every Friday, they’d go to the beach and eat hot dogs. His father, Joe, was a Baptist youth counsellor, and his mother, Nancy, who met Joe at Bible college, played piano at church. After their split, Nancy moved Driver and his older sister to her hometown of Mishawaka. He said, of “Mar-

## ON THE FLY

Though twice I forgot them  
in that apartment between two lives,  
when I was—well,  
what *was* I doing?—  
it is well to consider the flies

and their flights, the soft stumble  
of the moth fly,  
or the pixel drifting up  
from a peach so soft it’s torn  
by its stone,  
or the soot fly, or the evening

hoverfly,

the sweat fly, the deer fly,  
or the laser flight  
of the corpse fly, which from miles away

hears your breathing  
pause  
and soon too soon homes in.

\*

Though mostly it is houseflies  
we notice,  
taking off backward  
(swatters must compensate)  
as if they’d suddenly remembered something.

\*

*Magnets, magnets!*  
shrilled my landlady,  
when I got back from weeks  
of doing what I was doing.  
She meant, of course  
(I had forgotten  
to tie my trash),  
*maggots.*

\*

Precise in their prissy,  
hand-wringing way,  
  
flies are by our lights  
filthy, walking in shit,  
  
though light, light on your brow  
is their sixfold grip.

\*

Some things in a life  
happen once, but then again,  
some happen twice.  
  
More weeks away,  
and I strode into my kitchen—wrong,  
dark at noon,  
  
its one window  
inwardly black,  
flat black with flies.

\*

They are necrophiliacs,  
sure, but shriven in passing  
through the strait white gate  
  
of a fly's egg, maggots,  
though they turn our stomachs, come out  
pure as magnets.  
  
So much more pointed than a scalpel's  
is their distinction, cell by cell,  
of dead from viable flesh  
  
that surgeons defer to their soft mouths  
to clean wounds,  
  
so hard and true it is  
to leave life carefully behind.

—James Richardson

riage Story,” “It feels very familiar. Just trying to wrap your head around your parents not being together anymore—and not only that but you’re moving to the Midwest. Like, the first time seeing my father cry, as we’re leaving. It’s just all those very raw feelings that stick with you that you don’t articulate.” After the divorce, Driver’s father left the church, and he now works at an Office Depot

in Arkansas. While shooting “Marriage Story,” Driver said, “something I thought about all the time was the things that my dad didn’t do that this guy does in Noah’s movie. The fighting to get custody”—he took a long pause—“was moving to me. My dad didn’t do any of this. He didn’t put up a fight.”

Mishawaka was a jolt. “We were living with my grandparents, and that

sucked,” Driver said. “I mean, they were nice.” His father had shown him grownup movies such as “Predator” and “Total Recall,” but his new classmates talked about “Saved by the Bell.” Nancy got a job as a legal secretary in South Bend (she is now a paralegal) and reconnected with her high-school boyfriend, Rodney G. Wright, who drove a cab. With Nancy’s encouragement, he became a Baptist preacher. He also became Driver’s stepfather.

Driver began to pick up on strange tensions in their religious community. At Twin City Baptist Church, the pastor refused to officiate at his mother’s marriage ceremony, since she had been divorced. Around the same time, a girl in the Youth Department accused the pastor’s wife of being a lesbian, an assertion that split the congregation and led to screaming matches that Driver struggled to comprehend. “I remember this idiot yelling at my mom, saying, ‘No wonder your husband left you!’” he recalled. “Only recently did I realize, Oh, I hate organized things, because I feel like I’m missing something. I’m being told it’s one thing, but it’s actually something else.” The family soon joined another church nearby, where Driver’s stepfather became the preacher.

There wasn’t much to do in Mishawaka, a blue-collar town that had been devastated by the demise of a Uniroyal plant. As teen-agers, Driver and his friends Noah and Aaron would climb radio towers or set things on fire. (“Leaves. Clothes. Tires. Things like that, that you have to really douse,” he said.) They would dumpster-dive behind a potato factory and feast on expired chips. They rented movies from P. J.’s Video, down the street. “Because my parents were religious, we wouldn’t watch any of these movies in the house,” he recalled, so he would go to his friends’ houses and binge on Scorsese and Jarmusch and “Midnight Cowboy.” “I started to form opinions on what was good and what was bad, through conversation with those guys.” The first time he saw “Fight Club,” he said, “I felt kind of sick. It made me feel very strange. But then I watched it again almost immediately.”

In the woods behind a Kroger supermarket, the trio made camcorder

movies. “It was, like, John Woo ripoffs, where we’d take plastic guns and paint them black and wear long trenchcoats,” Driver said. “They had no plots. They were just action movies.” The friends also started their own fight club, in the field behind an event space called Celebrations Unlimited. The one rule was: “Don’t hit in the balls.” Driver doesn’t believe that he was expressing latent anger. “I think it was something that scared me, getting hit, and the challenge in yourself to just turn the volume down on things.” The club dissolved after neighbors called the cops.

By then, Driver had developed an interest in stage acting. In his father’s church, in San Diego, he played Pontius Pilate’s water boy in an Easter cantata. In middle school, he auditioned for a play and didn’t get cast, so he operated the curtain. Then he landed a one-line part in “Oklahoma!” (The line was “Check his heart,” spoken by a cowboy as Jud lay dying.) In his sophomore year, a new drama teacher cast him as a lead in “Arsenic and Old Lace.” His teachers urged him to audition for Juilliard, so he drove to Chicago for regional tryouts. “I didn’t get in, I think, because I wanted to please,” he said. “I had no opinion about what I was saying.”

Instead, he bummed around Indiana, doing odd jobs. His stepfather had him wheel their lawnmower around to neighbors’ houses and offer to mow their lawns, which he found humiliating. He made telemarketing calls for a basement-waterproofing company. He sold Kirby vacuums, or tried to—he doesn’t remember selling a single vacuum. At one point, he was driving around Chicago in the three-piece suit he wore for church, hawking stress balls and National Geographic videos about whales. “I was basically peddling shit,” he said. He convinced himself that he could use his acting skills to entice people. During one telemarketing call, he asked a woman if her husband was home. “There was a long pause, and she says, ‘My husband’s dead!’ and started crying and hung up the phone. I felt terrible.”

Joining the Marines gave Driver a

sense of purpose and some distance from his conservative religious upbringing. “The nice way of saying it is, it’s not part of my life anymore,” he said of the church, though he emphasized that he considers faith and religion to be two separate things. He is wary of discussing his parents or religion. In 2014, his stepfather told the South Bend *Tribune*, “I don’t agree with everything that he does, but I agree with his work ethic.” His mother didn’t know that he was on “Girls” until the second season, when she found out from a co-worker.

The pull between faith and apostasy has interlaced his movie roles. In “Silence,” he based his character, Father Garupe, on St. Peter. “He’s the only one that’s questioning, and I find that is healthier,” Driver said. “Doubt is part of being committed to something, I think. They’re very hand in hand, and that seemed more human to me. Garupe, in that story, he’s committed, and then at a certain point he’s, like, ‘This is fucking bullshit.’ I feel that with religion. I feel that with acting. I feel that with marriage. I feel that with being a parent. I’m constantly filled with doubt, regardless of what I’ve accomplished. It doesn’t mean anything. You still don’t know how to do anything, really.” He described Kylo Ren, in “Star Wars,” as “the son of these two religious zealots”—meaning Han Solo and Leia—who “can be conceived as



being committed to this religion above all else, above family.” Part of him still feels blindsided, as if he’d missed a class and hadn’t yet caught up on the wider world. While discussing “Fight Club,” he asked what I thought of the movie. I said that I hadn’t seen it in years but wondered how it would play in an era when people are hyperaware of toxic masculinity.

“What do you mean, ‘toxic masculinity?’” he asked.

I suggested that male aggression is seen as less purifying now than it may have been portrayed as being in “Fight Club.” “I’d have to think about it,” Driver said. “I mean, I haven’t heard much about toxic masculinity.” He

chuckled. “Maybe because I’m part of the problem!”

Hours later, in his dressing room, he was talking about how his suspicion of dogma shaped him as an actor. “For a lot of times in my life, I was told there was a right answer,” he said. “And then, when I got older, I was, like, ‘That’s fucking total bullshit.’ I feel that very much with acting, too. If you knew how to do it, you would do it perfectly every time.” He added, “So anytime anyone tells me, ‘This is the right answer,’ or ‘There’s something called toxic masculinity,’ I’m, like, What? What are you talking about? I’m skeptical of it, because I feel like I was duped for seventeen years of my life.”

In early October, Driver was at Lincoln Center, where “Marriage Story” was the centerpiece of the New York Film Festival. He had flown in from Brussels, where he was filming “Annette,” with the French director Leos Carax, and landed at 3:30 A.M. That evening, there was a red-carpet premiere, and at midnight he would fly to England, for the London Film Festival.

Baumbach said that when he was writing “Marriage Story” he had long phone conversations with Driver in which they discussed such classic movies as “The Red Shoes” and “To Be or Not to Be.” One of their abandoned ideas, a film version of Stephen Sondheim’s musical “Company,” found its way into the script in the form of two musical numbers. (Baumbach told me that Driver had recently sent him a photograph of the Mets pitcher Noah Syndergaard, who has a blond, Thor-like mane, with the message “This would be good for something.”)

At noon, Driver was clutching a cup of coffee in a greenroom at the Walter Reade Theatre, before a press conference. The cast trickled in: Laura Dern, Alan Alda, Ray Liotta. (Johansson was stuck in traffic.) Liotta, who plays a divorce lawyer, approached Driver. “Hey!” he said in greeting, then struck a reverent tone. “Did you serve?”

“Yes,” Driver said shyly, standing to shake his hand.

“Wow,” Liotta said. “Thank you for your service. Seriously. My trainer was a marine.”

Driver quickly changed the subject.

His military background makes him anomalous in Hollywood; the days of Clark Gable and Jimmy Stewart leaving pictures to fly combat missions are long gone. Though his time in the Marine Corps was formative—and gave rise to a nonprofit organization he founded, Arts in the Armed Forces, which fosters art appreciation among the troops—it came to a disappointing end. After more than two years of training, Driver was preparing to ship out to Iraq. At the time, he wasn't thinking about the politics of the Iraq War, he said, just about his loyalty to his guys. One morning, he and his friend Garcia went mountain biking in Pendleton's Camp Horno. On the way down, Driver hit a ditch. The handlebars slammed into his chest, and he dislocated his sternum.

Driver's first sergeant told him that he was too injured for the deployment. Attempting to prove otherwise, he loaded up on hydrocodone and worked out in the gym, but he made the damage worse. He was honorably discharged, while his former platoon shipped out to the southeast tip of Iraq, to run security missions on the Iranian border. It was early in the war, and the unit returned safely. But Driver was devastated. "They had gone and done the thing that we trained to do together," he said. "And I felt like a piece of shit."

Driver's platoon commander, Ed Hinman, had always found him more "pensive" than the others. "There was something more going on, I could tell, between his ears," he told me. Hinman said that life after the Marines can be tough under any circumstances. "You go from being in a family to being on your own, without an identity and without a mission. And, if you know it's coming, that's one thing. But if you don't, like Adam, that can be pretty scary."

Humiliated, Driver drove back to Indiana in a Ford F-150 he'd bought from an officer and enrolled at the University of Indianapolis, where he acted in Beckett's "Endgame" and in the musical "Pippin." He applied to be a policeman but was turned down, because he was under twenty-one—"Which was ironic to me, because I was a SAW gunner, and suddenly I can't handle a Glock?"—so he got a job as a security guard. But he felt adrift, his mission unfulfilled. Then, remember-



ing his brush-with-death vow to be a professional actor, he went back to Chicago and re-auditioned for Juilliard.

Richard Feldman, a Juilliard teacher, recalled, "This very interesting young man walked in the room—big, tall, lanky, with hair partially flopping over his face." Driver performed the opening lines from "Richard III," a contemporary monologue he'd found at a Barnes & Noble, and, for his musical selection, "Happy Birthday to You." His acting wasn't polished, but, to Feldman, he radiated something genuine. Driver was guarding a Target distribution warehouse when he got the call that he'd been accepted. "I ran up and down the truck area, jumping around," he said. "I was fucking elated."

In the summer of 2005, he moved into a closet at an uncle's house, in Hoboken. He got a job at Aix, a French restaurant on the Upper West Side, where he

served asparagus to Tony Kushner. He was as good at waiting tables as he was at selling vacuums. "I'd never heard of broccoli rabe," he said ruefully. Juilliard was a shock. He'd gone from firing mortars to pretending to be a penguin in improv exercises. He was disdainful of civilian life, sneering at classmates who wore their shirts untucked or arrived late to class. One time, he snapped so sharply at a student who had used his yoga mat that he reduced the guy to tears. "I was, like, I gotta be better at communicating," he said. He holed up at the performing-arts library and read plays by David Mamet and John Patrick Shanley, and found that drama helped him express his roiling emotions.

His classmates were mystified by the hulking ex-marine. Gabriel Ebert, who later won a Tony Award for his role in "Matilda the Musical," recalled their 9 A.M. movement classes: "I probably



*"No, not a hostile witness, Your Honor—a frightened armadillo."*

got there at eight-forty-five to stretch, and Adam was already in a full sweat, like he'd been there for at least an hour working out. He brought a discipline to his physical prowess that most of us didn't learn until well into our second year." Driver and Ebert got an apartment in Queens, and Driver would run five miles to school every day. He did pushups by the hundreds in the hallways and ate six eggs for breakfast (minus four of the yolks) and an entire chicken, from Balducci's, for lunch.

Driver met Joanne Tucker, a classmate, during his first year. "She read a lot of books, knew a lot of shit," he said. "She was very composed." Her family lived in Waterside Plaza, in Murray Hill, and Driver would go over and eat all their cereal. Feldman, who, in 2013, officiated at their wedding, told me that Tucker didn't stand for Driver's holier-than-thou attitude: "She doesn't take any nonsense."

Acting wasn't entirely different from

military life: both required a team effort and a sense of mission. But when Driver saw his marine buddies he would poke fun at his cushy new life, ashamed that he hadn't joined them overseas. In his third year, he and Tucker started Arts in the Armed Forces. At Camp Pendleton, the "mandatory fun" had included a skateboarding show and a trivia game in which you could win a date with a cheerleader. (The "date" was a stroll around the parade deck.) "Even at the time, I was, like, This is nice, but it's playing to the lowest common denominator," Driver said. He wanted to bring the troops something smarter, and show them that theatre didn't necessarily mean men in tights. Feldman told me, "Adam was always trying to unite these two aspects of his life that seem to us in contemporary America so contradictory: how can you be a soldier—a marine, of all things—and an artist?"

Driver appealed to the U.S.O., but

was told that the military demographic wouldn't be interested in plays, so he went to Juilliard's president for funding and solicited alumni to participate. In January, 2008, he returned to Camp Pendleton for AITAF's inaugural show, along with Ebert, Juilliard graduates including Laura Linney, and Jon Batische, a jazz student from the music division (he is now the bandleader for "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert"). Ebert recalled, "Jon and I stood in front of a grocery store at Camp Pendleton and handed out flyers for hours. 'Hey, you want to see some monologues? You want to see some jazz?'" Around a hundred people showed up—the competition was the college-football championship—and watched monologues by Danny Hoch and Lanford Wilson, under a marquee that read "Juilliard Performance: Adults Only."

During his third year, Driver was cast in a play at the Humana Festival, in Louisville, Kentucky. Juilliard has a policy against students taking professional roles before graduation, so he would have to drop out. Feldman urged him to stay. "I asked him to think about whether he had ever had the chance to finish anything in his life," Feldman recalled. "He'd left college. He had to leave the Marines, because he got injured. And I challenged him to finish this." Driver went through every step of quitting except for turning in his keys—and then changed his mind. His fourth year, he performed "Burn This" with Tucker and got an agent. He graduated in 2009.

Driver had thought about becoming a firefighter if acting didn't pan out, but his career took off almost immediately. In 2010, he appeared in a Broadway revival of Shaw's "Mrs. Warren's Profession," with Cherry Jones, and in the HBO movie "You Don't Know Jack," starring Al Pacino as Dr. Kevorkian. The next year, he played a gas-station attendant in "J. Edgar," directed by Clint Eastwood, and Frank Langella's son in the Broadway play "Man and Boy." He and Langella became close. "He'd come up to my country place on his motorcycle, play badminton, help move furniture, do the dishes," Langella recalled. "Once, at my New York place, I gave him some old suits of mine, and he left, bunching them in his arms, heading for the

subway. 'Take a taxi,' I said. 'Nope,' he said. 'Too expensive.'

Driver initially turned down the audition for "Girls," on account of television being evil ("I was an elitist prick," he says), but his agent persuaded him. The casting call described Adam Sackler as "a carpenter, incredibly handsome, but slightly off." Driver showed up with a motorcycle helmet under his arm. Jenni Konner, Dunham's co-showrunner, recalled the reaction in the room as ecstatic. "Remember the old Beatles films, where the women are screaming?" she told me. "That's what his audition felt like." As the show evolved, details of Driver's life would seep into the scripts; in the third season, the fictional Adam lands a role in Shaw's "Major Barbara" on Broadway, a nod to Driver's appearance in "Mrs. Warren's Profession." "He was always someone I saw as a rhinoceros, who picked one thing and ran toward it," Driver said of his character on "Girls." "He can't see left or right at all, just sees what's immediately in front of him, and he chases it until he's exhausted."

The first time Driver saw himself in "Girls," on Dunham's laptop, he was mortified. "That's when I was, like, I can't watch myself in things. I certainly can't watch this if we're going to continue doing it," he said. Many actors decline to watch themselves, but for Driver that reluctance amounts to a phobia. In 2013, he watched the Coen brothers' "Inside Llewyn Davis," in which he has one scene, singing backup on a folk song called "Please Mr. Kennedy": "I hated what I did." He swore off his own movies, until he was obliged to sit through the premiere of "Star Wars: The Force Awakens," in 2015. "I just went totally cold," he recalled, "because I knew the scene was coming up where I had to kill Han Solo, and people were, like, hyperventilating when the title came up, and I felt like I had to puke."

The directors I spoke to sympathized with Driver's aversion. "I think he's rightly concerned that he would become conscious of himself in a way that would be harmful to his acting," Soderbergh said. When I spoke to Baumbach, he was still "in a discussion" with Driver about watching "Marriage Story." Spike Lee told me that Driver *did* see "BlacKkKlansman," at Cannes ("It was

very, very happy"), but Driver corrected the record: he had hidden out in a greenroom and returned for the closing bow.

In September, I met Driver in Brussels, where he was shooting "Annette" on a soundstage. He plays a failing comedian; his wife, played by Marion Cotillard, is an opera singer on the rise. To ease the resulting tension, they take a sailing holiday with their baby, Annette, and get caught in a storm. That day's scenes took place during the squall. In one corner of the studio, half of a life-size sailboat was mounted ten feet high on a gimbal, a mechanism that would toss and turn the boat like a mechanical bull, while a cyclorama projected a tempestuous curved backdrop around it. Sprinklers would unleash rain and fog, while water cannons spewed waves. Also, the film is a musical, so there would be singing.

Carax, the director, smoked a cigarette in his sunglasses, as Driver and Cotillard emerged from a pair of black makeup tents. They rehearsed the scene in which Driver draws Cotillard into a drunken waltz on the sailboat's deck. He mocks her theatrics ("Bowing, bowing, bowing"), and she pleads with him in song ("We're gonna fall, gonna die"), before he flings her offscreen. The film's co-writers, Ron and Russell Mael, known from the seventies band Sparks, watched on a monitor. "We spoke very briefly to Adam about three years ago, just about the style of his singing," Ron whispered to me. "We didn't want it to be Broadway, you know?"

Driver, wearing a fake mustache, measured the exact distance to spin before accelerating in the final moment. "If I'm throwing her, I don't want to wing it," he said. There was little leeway for benign rebellion. Driver later told me, of Carax, "His movies to me feel very much like freedom—like captured chaos—but they're very, like, 'Turn here, move left here.' So it's like doing math, but then not making it look like we're executing choreography."

A crew member yelled, "*Silence, s'il vous plaît*," and in came rain, thunder, lightning, and waves. Between takes, Cotillard sang her lines to herself, while Driver stretched his legs on the railing of the boat, like a dancer at a barre. During one take, they slipped and fell. "Are you O.K.?" Driver said, helping her up, then

asked the gimbal operators if the device was turned on too high: "We did this all yesterday, and we didn't slip once."

Like Robert De Niro in his "Raging Bull" days, Driver is known for embracing physical feats. For "Silence," in which Garupe is captured by the Japanese, he lost fifty-one pounds, on a diet of chocolate-flavored energy goo, sparkling water, and chewing gum. For "Paterson," he learned how to drive a bus. For "Logan Lucky," in which he plays an amputee, he learned how to make a Martini with one hand. "He wanted to be able to do it in a single take," Soderbergh said.

After Driver and Cotillard had been soaked half a dozen times, Carax called a twenty-minute break. "Let's do a *tight* twenty minutes," Driver requested. He dried himself off for the next scene, in which the comedian wanders the ship alone, pummeled by waves and singing an ambiguous mantra, "There's so little I can do." By the end, he is crouched on the deck, his palms pressed to his ears.

They tried it again, and again. "Our timing was off," Driver said after one take, wringing water from his black T-shirt. He and Carax went over the timeline of waves, music, boat rocking, and drunken stumbling. By now, Driver had been singing in a fake thunderstorm for five hours, and he was drenched. But he wanted more. "It doesn't match up to the music," he said of the boat movements, leaning over the railing.

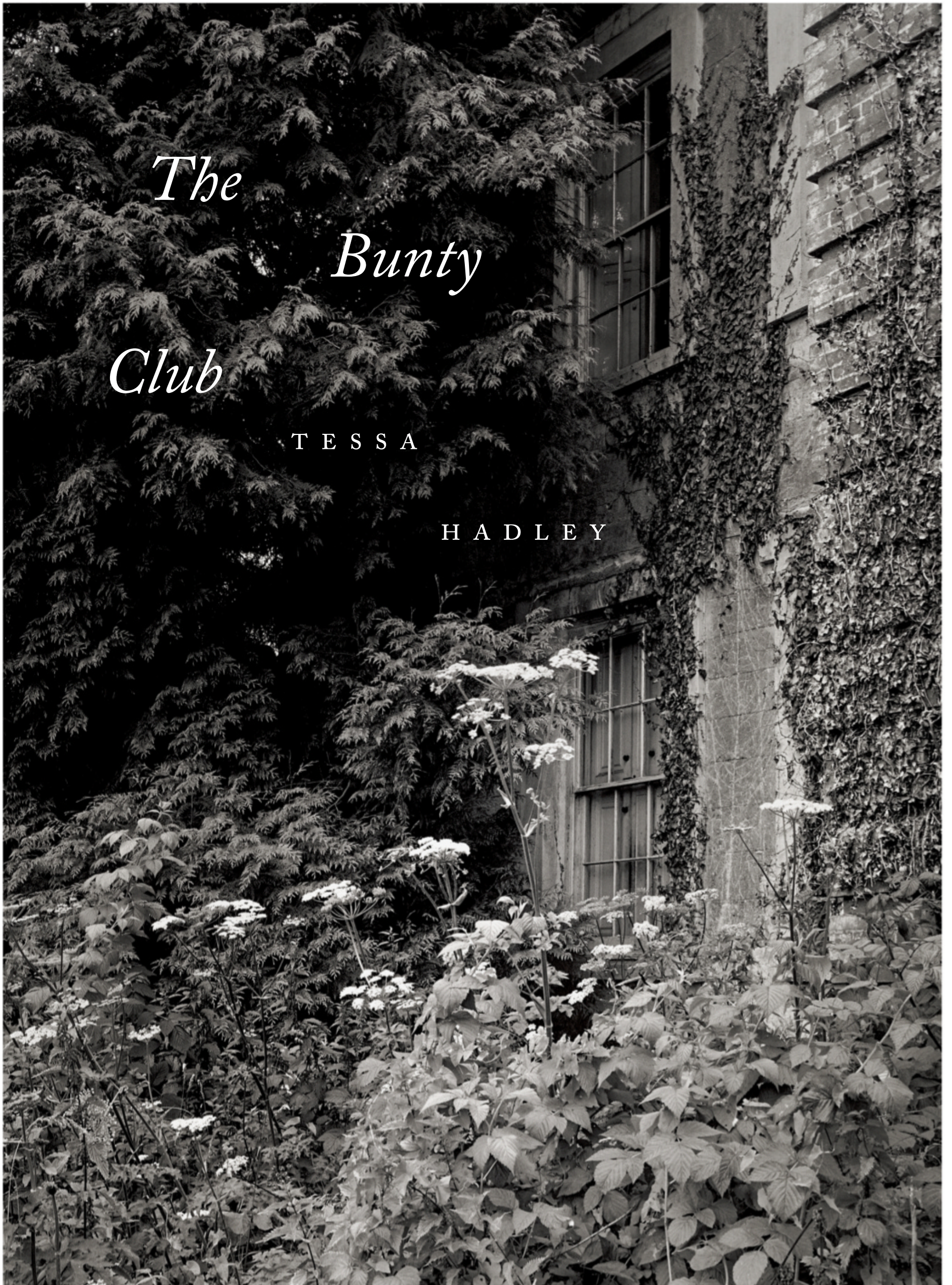
Carax suggested that they had what they needed. "If you already have it, then fine," Driver said, sounding agitated. "I'm trying to move on, but I don't understand. And the timing is wrong." He listened for a moment. "All right, then. I'm fine moving on. It's just unsatisfying."

Then they had a revelation: the boat choreography didn't need to match the underscoring. They did the scene one more time, a cappella. Finally, for safety, they recorded a clean audio track of Driver's singing. Wrapped in a towel, he sang his line repeatedly into a boom mike, alternately braying and mumbling, and then trailing off into a near-whisper. "There's so little I can do," he sang, dripping and determined. "There's so little I can do. There's so little I can do. There's so little I can do. There's so little I can do. There's so little I can do. There's so little I can do. There's so little I can do. There's so little I can do." ♦

*The  
Bunty  
Club*

TESSA

HADLEY



Serena was out in the garden in the early morning, before her two sisters got up. It was the best time. Reflected off the estuary water, the light seemed a blond powder, sifted through the summer air onto grass that grew waist-high, its mauve seed heads heavy with dew that soaked her skirt. She dipped to wash her arms in it, even her face—she was fanciful and ecstatic, and she loved long grass. Earth smells and the pungency of privet and balsam were still acute at this hour, unmingled; the shadows were as bold as in a child's picture book; swifts and house martins tracked across the pale sky overhead, shrilling in thrilled anticipation. Everything was to come! This unknown day! The garden was so much more lovely now, Serena thought, than in the past, when it was scrupulously cared for. A crimson rambler rose, unmoored from its trellis, had flopped fatally forward into the grass, where it bloomed copiously but mostly unseen; flower beds were knotty with convolvulus and bramble; the dense hedge of blackthorn and holly had grown too thick and high for her to see over the top. She was alone, enclosed with everything enchanting, hidden.

And yet the house itself was unromantic: a stolid Victorian villa, built of massive blocks of red sandstone, on a steep hill overlooking a small seaside town. Beyond the house, the road meandered upward past more villas, then dustily through a cluster of old cottages around the medieval parish church, which had a distinguished rood screen. It opened up, above the town, onto headlands scrubby with gorse and heather, with views of the water all the way across to Wales, before dwindling into a gravel car park, where it ended. Here, on the hill's lower reaches, the old-fashioned hotels and detached large houses had been intended to accommodate a certain sort of privileged, discreet, unexceptional, unchanging middle-class existence—which had changed after all, because it hardly existed any longer. A number of the houses had been turned into nursing homes. The hill looked across, with a distaste that it mostly kept to itself, at the white faux pavilions of the holiday camp on the

other side of the town, which hosted wrestling weekends or heavy-metal or evangelical ones.

When Pippa, the eldest of the sisters, ventured out from her bedroom with sponge bag and towel to use the bathroom, Gillian, the middle one, was also venturing. "Beat you!" Gillian even said, dashing ahead through the door as if they were still fifteen and seventeen. But they were middle-aged now, self-consciously aware, as they performed their jokey girlishness, of the heavy shelves of bosom under their nightdresses. They had outgrown Fern Lodge, the house that had seemed so spacious and gracious when they were children in it. Pippa and Gillian both had adult children of their own, and careers behind them; they lived in two different northern cities and each owned, jointly with a husband still more or less on board, a big house with ensuite bathrooms for every bedroom. Gillian, who was the most businesslike and got on with things, had grandchildren, too. Serena, the youngest sister, was different; she lived alone in London. The three of them were assembled in their childhood home because a week ago their elderly widowed mother had fallen and was now in hospital. They were taking it in turns, two at a time, to drive the forty-five minutes to the hospital and spend the day with her, although she seemed barely to know that they were present.

Waiting in her bedroom for the bathroom to be free, looking out through the gap where the curtains never quite met in the middle, Pippa caught sight of Serena drifting in the garden and was irritated—partly because the neglected garden made her feel guilty. If Serena wanted to commune with nature, she thought, she might as well take the secateurs with her and achieve something. Or the strimmer—Pippa had bought a strimmer at Argos the last time she'd visited, though no one had tried to use it yet. Still, the morning was lovely, and she lifted her face to the yellow light and heat that splashed through the curtains' gap. Hadn't she made these curtains herself, more than forty years ago? Unconsciously, her fingers sought out a place where the thread on the sewing machine had snarled under a seam and she couldn't be bothered to unpick it; she had been too eager to see the curtains' finished effect. The mustard-

yellow Laura Ashley print was peppery with age now, faded almost to white. Pippa met her own eyes in the round mirror that hung above the chest of drawers; those same eyes had once concentrated on themselves in that mirror with keen hope, as she painted on her first eyeliner. Now she was in her late fifties, with a craggy, plain face—which was partly a relief. At least I've got that over with, she thought. Her love for certain unattainable rough town boys had been an anguish, she remembered then, surprised, because she was used to thinking of them, if she ever thought of them, with fond condescension, as a bit of a joke.

Meanwhile, Gillian shuddered at the bathroom's dubious flecks and stains and gritty surfaces, the yellowed toilet brush clogged with paper, the packets of laxatives and Tena lady pads out on unapologetic show. Their mother had a cleaner, but she wasn't much good; Gillian and Pippa had worked up quite a head of indignant steam, uncovering the signs of her neglect around the house. Gillian had meant, on her days off from hospital visits, to give the whole house a deep clean, and then was taken aback by the depth of her own reluctance to tackle the job—but why should she, after all, if the others didn't care? Instead, she'd trekked sturdily in the sunshine, pleased with herself, three miles each way along the coastal path, using the expensive boots and walking poles she'd bought last year for a holiday in the Lake District, taken without her husband and with a woman friend—although nothing sexual. In the bathroom now, she managed fastidiously by standing on one clean towel and drying herself with another. How long, actually, had it been since their mother had had a proper bath? She wouldn't hear of installing a shower, and yet even Gillian didn't find it easy to climb in and out of the deep tub, its enamel dulled to gray by the innumerable baths the family had run in it over the years. Such thunderous floods of hot water, walls and mirror dripping time and again with condensation; such intimate smells, pleasant and unpleasant; such fun, the bubble baths and slippery, screaming games; then, later, such secret longings and excitement and dread, solitary behind the locked door—hair dye and

Tampax and vomiting, girl flesh burgeoning out of control. Thank goodness all that was over with.

"All clear!" she halloooed when she had finished, popping her head, dowagerlike in its wrapped towel, around the door to Pippa's room. Gillian was quicker and lighter on her feet than her older sister, worked harder on her appearance; she had her gray hair chopped stylishly short, and favored big dangly earrings. Pippa was bookish where Gillian was capable; she wore her hair pinned up, or in a long plait on one shoulder, which someone had once said—long ago, when it was still a rich chestnut brown—made her look like an Augustus John Gypsy. Still, you could see the two sisters' close likeness: they were big and broad-shouldered like their father, with forthright, open pink faces, long, flat cheeks, an obstinate, set jaw. Both sisters had recently retired. Gillian had done something high up in management for the National Grid, and her husband had a business making thermostats for heating systems. Pippa's husband worked on the eighteenth century in the history department at Leeds University; she had been the director of an archive at the city museum.

"Bathroom's empty!" Gillian said. "You should get in quickly before Serena embarks on any aromatherapy. I wish she'd wash the bath out when she's finished."

"She's up already," Pippa said. "Look! Worshipping in the garden."

Gillian came to stand beside her, and together they watched Serena dance in the long grass, flitting like a sprite in her tiered black cotton skirt and satiny top, which she had most likely got at a charity shop—she was solemn about waste and recycling. Seven years younger than Gillian, an afterthought in the family, their father's favorite, fey and fine-boned, Serena had had whatever success she wanted with the town boys and disdained it. She exasperated Pippa and Gillian because she was intolerant and touchy, had no sense of humor; everyone trod carefully around Serena. As a newborn, she'd been very sick, with a hole in her heart; their father, who was the headmaster of the local secondary school and a lay preacher in the C. of E., had prayed over her cot in the intensive-care ward, begging God to save her. No doubt that had affected her character.

Serena lifted her bare feet high and thrust out her arms, and Gillian said that she was doing Tai Chi. Serena must have heard them murmuring, because she turned her face up toward the window and smiled at them, without interrupting the stately sequence of her moves, and they could see that she wasn't as pretty as she used to be. In the strong light she looked drawn and faded, her

arms and neck skinny. The two of them meant to say something dry and funny about their sister, but they were ambushed then by a sadness that had mostly evaded them, in spite of the fact that they were here in their old home, waiting most probably for their mother to die, and for the end of their past. Sadness made its claim on them now, winding through the daily clutter like a long cool note played on a flute.

It was Pippa's turn to stay behind, while Gillian and Serena drove off to their vigil at the hospital. She got the strimmer out of its box and read the instructions, but recoiled from actually attempting to use it, all that crude noise and violence erupting into the peace of the empty house and garden. There was no hurry, anyway. The others wouldn't be back till late afternoon—she had all day to cut the grass and make something for supper. Wandering around the downstairs rooms stuffy with heat, their light thick with dust motes, the blinds at their windows lowered to half-mast, as they always were in summer, she pressed down keys—startling herself out of her own reverie—on the out-of-tune piano, which none of them had played with any talent.

In the years since their father died, their mother, Evelyn, hadn't changed anything in these rooms—less out of respect than out of indifference. The old-fashioned good taste and extreme orderliness had been their father's idea, it turned out, not hers. Gradually, after he was gone, the place had filled up untidily with her hobbies—oil painting for a while, then weaving, then the University of the Third Age. Photographs of her grandchildren and great-grandchildren and the cleaner's grandchildren were propped at random behind ornaments on the drawing-room mantelpiece; there were sacks of birdseed on the teak sideboard in the dining room. Also, she'd stopped attending church. She'd surprised Pippa recently by insisting that what she'd wanted all her life was to run a farm, though of course there had never been any serious possibility of that—Evelyn's father's farm, adjoining the edge of the moor above the town, had been passed on, without even a discussion, through the male line, to her brother first and then to her brother's son. Anyway, Evelyn had always been



*"He's just now passing beneath the triumphal arch."*

vague and shy, thin and awkwardly elegant, with a muffled irony—you couldn't imagine her in caked boots in the muck or castrating lambs or perched high in the driver's seat of a tractor. Pippa was embarrassed by these gauche and faintly theatrical eruptions of veiled feminist protest, coming so much too late.

Wandering upstairs to her bedroom, Pippa checked the e-mails on her phone, then succumbed to the desire to lie down on the bed with her George Eliot novel. She couldn't remember the last time she had lain down to read during the day—it was like being a teen-ager, time stretching out voluptuously in all directions. Dreamily, she even half imagined that she could hear her mother at work downstairs: a consoling clatter of pans and crockery in the kitchen, water running in the sink, voices rumbling on the radio—as if some substratum of ordinariness were so fundamental that it must always be carrying steadily on somewhere, below all the agitation of change. Though Pippa sometimes asked herself what their mother had actually done all day, when she was keeping house. She had seemed so perpetually worn out and preoccupied, yet she'd always had help with the cleaning and ironing, wasn't much of a cook, disliked entertaining, and had never worked outside the home. Pippa and Gillian had managed bigger households more robustly alongside full-time jobs.

Then Pippa became absorbed in Maggie Tulliver's forbidden meetings in the Red Deeps with wounded, intelligent Philip Wakeham, her efforts to love him. Pippa urged her on—love Philip, not handsome, conventional Stephen!—though she'd read the book many times before, and knew what must happen. Eventually, she fell asleep, Maggie's travails merging with her own. She woke only hours later, in the early afternoon, when someone rang the doorbell. With a stale mouth and a ghastly fog in her head, she struggled up and hurried downstairs, blinking, into the confusing shadows of the hall. Its tiled floor was dazzling, spattered with ruby and emerald and topaz light, beamed through the stained-glass picture panels in the porch door—a heron among green reeds, a kingfisher beside a stream, a swan on its nest.

When she opened the door, a man in a sleeveless orange vest and shorts

and ragged trainers was leaning against a porch post, chewing, one foot on the ground, the other knee jackknifed up in front of him. He spat out his gum apologetically and held out a hand, said that he was Sean, a friend of Evelyn's, and he'd come to ask after her. He was lanky and rangy, good-looking, browned by the sun. Although he arranged his face to be exaggeratedly solicitous, the way he sprawled there and sought out her glance sympathetically with his own seemed at first to Pippa provocative and challenging, insolently flirtatious; he had the local accent, slow and suggestive, even when there was nothing to suggest. For a moment, she thought he might be one of those town boys she remembered from her past, but he was much too young for that. Twenty years younger than she was, probably, or twenty-five: more like the age of her oldest son—although he didn't look after himself the way Toby did. Sean was muscled, but not from the gym, and there was a defiant, leering gap in his grin, where one of his front teeth was missing.

She repeated to him the familiar litany of their news: that their mother was mostly sleeping, and when she did wake she seemed very confused. The doctors couldn't predict what kind of recovery she'd make—they thought the fall might have been due to a seizure. Sean asked if there was anything he could do. Pippa said she didn't think so, but it was very kind of him to offer.

"I'm used to doing a few odd jobs around the place for Evelyn."

"Oh, I see, you mean for money."

He stood up on both feet away from the porch post, frowning as if he were offended, and said that he was happy to work for nothing at a time like this. Pippa was compromised, sorry. "No, I'm happy to pay, but I don't think there's anything. Though I suppose there is the strimmer . . ."

So it was that when Gillian and Serena arrived home, a couple of hours later, they found the deep peace of Fern Lodge ravaged by the strimmer's snarling and whining, as Sean, shirtless, went at the long grass in the garden, filling the air with whirling, glinting dust and

shards. It had taken some comradely effort between him and Pippa to assemble the strimmer and go through the instructions. Then, while it was charging, she'd made him coffee. Before he attacked the grass, he'd hacked away, with a pruning knife he'd fetched from the shed as if he knew his way around, at the brambles overgrowing the flower bed.

Serena heard the strimmer as soon as she came through the front door, and took in its implications like a blow. She walked straight through the house and burst out again at the back, through the French windows in the dining room, into a scene of devastation: grass lay in heaps where it had fallen on the ragged pale stubble. White-faced, her black eye makeup incongruously gothic in the strong light, she turned on Pippa in impotent fury. "What have you done?" she shouted. "Why did you spoil our garden? It was the only beautiful thing left here, and you've spoiled it."

Sean stopped the strimmer respectfully, seeing her expression.

"It needed tidying," Pippa said weakly.

Now, when it was too late, she could see how graceful the grass had been as the accompaniment to Serena's dance that morning, how it had moved with her movement. And she saw, too, how the cutting of the grass might look like a deliberate affront, a contemptuous stroke of brute practicality against imagination and spirit. Serena had a way of construing the most harmlessly neutral acts as provocations. "We couldn't just leave it," Pippa tried to explain.

"But why not?"

Her question couldn't be answered without invoking the whole fabric of everything. Sean looked tentatively between them. "Should I stop there?"

Serena glanced at him, absorbed still in her rage against her sister, scornfully taking in his tan and his naked torso. "You might as well finish it now!" she said. "The place is ruined anyway."

She stormed off; Gillian and Pippa, left behind in the familiar aftershock of one of her scenes, made wry faces at each other. Pippa told Sean to go on and cut the rest; it was all her fault, not



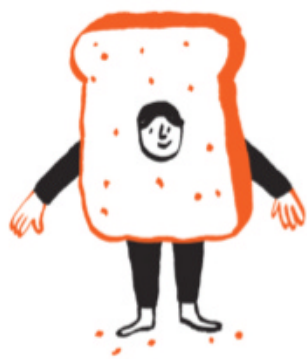
his. Upstairs, clenching her fists, Serena stood confronting the full-length mirror in her room. Her ferocity hadn't subsided. She couldn't bear the resumption of the strimmer's noise, and thought that she had to go out; she painted on a fresh slash of lipstick, changed her heels for higher ones, fluffed up the thick bird's nest of her rust-black hair, put on dark glasses. The picture panels in the porch door juddered when she slammed it behind her. On her way down through the sloping residential streets to the town's center, breaking the sleepy silence with the scrape and rap of her heels, she felt at least the relief of escape—anything was better than that hospital. Then she sat solitary at an outdoor table at a café on the main street with a black coffee, lighting a cigarette and smoking it, the cigarette's poison a kind of bravado in the face of sickness and death.

Since she'd first had any clear idea of who she was, as a teen-ager, Serena had seen herself as set apart like this: dangerous and intriguing, her black clothing outlined against the summer pastels of sloppy holidaymakers in their flip-flops, or the dowdy decency of her own family. To her credit, she'd never been interested in worldly success or fame—though she had been talented, in a minor way, as a singer and an actress. It had been hard enough, she considered, simply becoming herself. She earned a living now as a freelance legal secretary, cared nothing for the work, and was more than competent, easily making herself indispensable. Today, in any case, over her coffee cup—intense, absent, indifferent to her surroundings, not checking her phone or reading—she had an aura that was just as significant as if she were a celebrity, improbably washed up at the seaside, having shaken off her entourage of admirers or detractors, thirsting to be left alone with her luxuriant inner life.

The café was quiet; the town's morning bustle had long since subsided, its wash of tourists receded. Shops were closing already. The trees' elongated shadows stretched at intervals across the road. On the beach, the estuary waters

ran up across the flat sand, flooding the stale pools that had been left behind hours earlier in cracks in the jutting shelves of shale; any remaining families had retreated to a last redoubt, a bank of pebbles marked with a crusty high-tide line of dried seaweed, cracked plastic bottles, washed-white bones, driftwood, and faded crisp packets. The water was rich with silt, chocolate brown; a few children investigated at its edge with buckets, paddling where it foamed lazily, curling warm around their ankles, sucking under their soles.

After Serena's performance in the garden, Sean might have avoided her when he spotted her. Having finished strimming, he was making his way home to the caravan where he was living temporarily because his wife had kicked him out; on foot, because his vehicle was with his brother-in-law, who was looking at the fuel pump. But he was intrigued, and drawn to Serena, who was dressed so exotically and looked so concentrated and self-possessed, with her small, heart-shaped face and painted eyes and mass of hair. He thought he recognized in her—in her bearing and black clothes and cigarette, in the sharp point of experience in her expression—the signs of that freemasonry of difference, an alternative life style, to which he also belonged in his own way, though he'd taken out his earring a while ago, finding it childish.



When he was younger, there'd been a passionate frisson between boys like him and certain middle-class girls; those girls had woken up to sex when the boys of their own sort were still playing Monopoly or practicing wheelies on their BMX bikes. Later, the girls

left, to go to university or to work elsewhere, and Sean had left, too; he'd travelled around in Europe and the Far East and Australia, and then he'd come home, and got married and had two kids. Serena didn't look too bad, although he had calculated, from things her mother had said, that she must be fifty at least. Her cheekbones jutted like knuckles under her white skin. But then, he was no oil painting himself these days.

He stood beside the café table, said

that he was sorry she was upset, waited so that she was forced to acknowledge him: she looked up as if she, too, felt the nudge of the old freemasonry, only wearily. "Don't worry about it. My sisters annoy me."

"You're like your mother."

She stiffened at his presumption. "I'm not. Am I?"

"I offered to cut the grass a couple of weeks ago, and she said, 'No, why bother?' I think she liked it the way it was, same as you do."

Serena stubbed out her cigarette thoughtfully, gratified. "So then what did you do, when she said not to cut the grass? Just go away? I suppose you needed the money."

You had to be careful with the truth when it came to money, Sean knew, although he'd never for one moment have cheated the old lady. He told Serena that he'd done all sorts of odd jobs for her mother around the house: unblocking sinks and changing light bulbs, opening a jammed window, fixing the TV. In fact, though, Evelyn often couldn't think of anything for him to do; if he just sat drinking tea and talking with her, she insisted on paying him anyway. Sliding between his fingers in his pocket the two twenties that Pippa had given him, he asked Serena if he could buy her another coffee; when she shook her head, he believed at first that he was dismissed. "Just a glass of water," she added, glancing at passersby in the street as if they were more interesting than he was.

It was a shame about the tooth, she thought, watching him maneuver competently around the tables on his way back from the counter, bearing his own coffee and her glass. Drawing up a chair opposite hers, he sat ripping open little packets of sugar one after another to stir into his cup, which perhaps helped to explain why the tooth was missing. Still, he was good-looking: strong, with wiry shoulder-length hair, burned yellow by the sun and pushed behind his ears, a skewed long nose that might have been broken once, the hazily intent gaze of a weed smoker. A crowned tooth would be expensive, for a casual laborer: though he told her that he was trained as a joiner, with a job coming up soon at the new power station. Serena said that she hated the

## THE POETS ARE DYING

It seems impossible  
they seemed immortal.

Where are they going  
if not to their next poems?

Poems that, like lives, make do  
and make that doing do more—

holding a jolt like a newborn,  
a volta turning toward a god-load

of grief dumped from some heaven  
where words rain down

and the poet is soaked. Cold  
to the bone, we've become. Thick-

headed, death-bedded, heartsick.  
Poets. Flowers picked, candles wicked,

forgiving everyone they tricked.

—*Brenda Shaughnessy*

power station, was opposed to nuclear. Sean shrugged. "We need the work round here."

"You could go somewhere else."

"I tried that. Anyway, my kids are here. They stay with me at the weekends."

She smiled at him warmly, conventionally. "And how old are they?"

Once his children were out in the open, Serena and he could be friendlier; she felt the old tide of flirtation rising between them, promising to lift her from wherever she was stranded. He had a girl, five, and a boy, three. "I never wanted children," she explained. "Probably because I was born with a hole in my heart: my father prayed all night over my crib in the hospital. I can't remember this touching scene, but I've carried it with me, that burden of hope. After his prayers worked, he thought he owned me. It's why I've got this horrible name, too."

"It's not so horrible."

"Worse than you think. Actually, I'm Angel—Angel Serena. You can imagine why I dropped the Angel part. Mum had nothing to do with choosing it—Dad was the sentimental one. Did you

know he was headmaster at Daresbrook? He was an awful bully. I'm glad he was never my headmaster."

Sean said that he had gone to Daresbrook, but it must have been after her father retired.

"We heard that it went to the dogs," she said. "But then, he would say that, wouldn't he?"

Sean tried to weigh his experience at school impartially. "I didn't react well," he confessed, rueful, "to being confined in a classroom."

"You were probably one of the dogs. I mean, that my father thought it went to."

Wondering whether to feel insulted, Sean said that he regretted it now. "I wish I had my time over again."

She widened her eyes at him, doubting it, and said that she never regretted anything. Whatever happened had to be that way. As she spoke, however, she was waylaid by a vision of her mother in that hospital bed, so miniature and yellow, her jaw slack, absent from herself, held up between the bleeping heart monitor and the drip and the catheter, the tight knot of her long life loosen-

ing. The sadness that had evaded Serena when she'd searched for it, so that she had believed her own heart was a dry husk, found her here in the café when she least expected it. She blotted her eyes with a tissue, sipped her water.

"It's a difficult time for you," Sean said sympathetically.

He covered her small cool hand on the table with his own, which was huge and hot, calloused across the palm, black dirt rimming the nails. Of course Serena couldn't begin to describe all of her private difficulty, not to a stranger. She pulled her hand away and spoke instead about climate change, the political chaos that would follow it. "I should act," she said. "But I don't have any conviction. I'm no good at conviction."

Sean wrote his phone number on the back of his receipt from the café. "Text me," he said, "so that I've got your number, too."

"All right, I will."

"No, do it now."

She smiled, watery-eyed, at his scrap of paper lying untouched on the table between them.

"Go on, you might as well. In case you need anything, any odd jobs done."

She wouldn't text him while he watched. But she picked up his number before she left, dropped it into her bag.

That evening, while Pippa and Gillian watched television, Serena went rummaging through the cupboards upstairs, renewed and energized. Her sisters were still jarred by the scene she'd made; she'd always had this trick—of unleashing her worst and then being the first to recover from it. "Look what I've found!" she sang out, but the others were reluctant to move from in front of their documentary on Minoan Crete. "Come and see! It's the Bunty Club."

"Oh, the Bunty Club!"

Gillian was perplexed. "The what?"

"You remember the Bunty Club! We had those secret club meetings in the shed. 'We swear not to do good and never to help people.'"

"I've got no memory of it. Were we horrid?"

"It was just a reaction to Daddy," Pippa reassured her. "The actual bad things we did were terribly innocent, mostly. I think we hid his slippers, dug up some potatoes he'd planted in the

garden. He always thought it was a fox. We jammed Mum's knitting machine. 'Bunty' was the comic we wanted to read, and he said it wasn't suitable. We were only allowed 'Look and Learn.'

"It's a treasure trove," Serena said. She stood blocking their view of the television, with a cardboard box in her arms, reading aloud from papers inside it. "Chairman Philippa Anne Styles drew the meeting to a close with three cheers for Bunty Club members for all their hard work on doing wrong. Vice-Chairman Gillian Elizabeth Styles seconded the motion. Who knew you were such budding bureaucrats? And actually wasn't it usually me doing the wrong, under orders from you two?"

"You enjoyed it," Pippa said briskly. "You wanted to be in the club. And we knew you wouldn't get in as much trouble as us if you were caught, because you were little and they always said you didn't know what you were doing, though I'm sure you knew perfectly well."

Serena dropped the box on the carpet; her sisters knelt heavily beside her to unpack it, exclaiming over the contents. There were the minutes of club meetings and lists of enemies and bad deeds, a top-secret codebook, homemade badges covered in Fablon which fastened with safety pins on the back, a dried-up ink pad, a date stamp turned to the fifth of October, 1969. "Miss A. S. Styles was permitted to enter the meeting on strict condition of sharing all sweets and other grub etc." All the paperwork was typed, the individual letters not quite aligned and indented deep into the paper, wavering between black ink and red; they had acquired a typewriter when the parish office bought a new one, and it had seemed Biblical in itself, presiding over their playroom, as ancient as Methusalem, too heavy for them to lift, its action thunderous and punitive. When a locked tin cash box rattled intriguingly, Pippa levered it open with a screwdriver, and they were perplexed by what was inside until she recognized the club's Sacred Objects: a bone, a screwed-up page from a prayer book ("We spat on it," she said), a wrapped razor blade, their father's bronze medal for swimming, a gold ring set flashily with a green stone.

"A stolen ring," Pippa announced, suddenly quite certain. "We actually stole it."

"No! Who from?"

"No idea. I knew once, but now I'm simply blank. Not from our parents, obviously—anyway, it isn't their kind of ring. Imagine Mummy wearing this! The name of the victim ought to haunt us, oughtn't it? So much for a bad conscience."

"We could have it valued."

Pippa dropped the ring back into the cash box. "Best not, perhaps."

The textures of the past rose around the sisters like an uneasy dream, alien and stale and intensely familiar. For twenty minutes, it was intoxicating, hilarious. Then, in the present, they began to be bored and their knees were stiff. Gillian still insisted that she didn't remember the club. She was distracted by the television; she and Pippa had visited the palace at Knossos a few years ago with their husbands, who hadn't got on; Pippa had sprained her ankle while clambering on the ruins. It was an awful holiday.

Gillian had given her mobile number to the hospital. She left the phone charging on her bedside table, and was woken very early the next morning by its ringing; whatever her dreams had been, they dispersed in that instant, iridescence breaking up on the surface of deep water. Abruptly she sat up in bed, pressed the green circle without fumbling. The same nurse who'd been on duty the day before said in an emotional voice that the sisters should come to the hospital at once. They would leave as soon as they were dressed, Gillian said. Leaping up, sick with excitement and dread, she crossed to the window and parted the curtains, looking out into the garden's subdued blue light as if she had to check that it was still there: the massy forms of the apple trees, the black incontrovertible bulk of the shed, birds stirring, invisible, in the undergrowth. This was the exceptional, the awaited day. She was seized and rigid in its tension. She needed to go to her sisters at once and wake them, tell them to get ready, yet she had the revelation for this one moment to herself; alone, she rose to its occasion. Through the open window came the cool long breath of earth.

Then, finally, she remembered the Bunty Club—not all the funny detail but the actuality of it, the clandestine meetings in the shed, crouching on the plank floor among all those dangerous tools they weren't supposed to go near,

the splintery walls fragrant with creosote, her arms wrapped tight around scabbed knees, feeling scalded and enthralled by what was forbidden. The shed had been ripe with the smells of tomato plants, 3-in-One oil, mealworms for the bird table, crusts of cut grass souring on the blades of the mower; beams of brilliant light from knotholes pierced the stuffy dimness. Her thighs were wet with sweat under her shorts, and her silky shoulder-length hair tickled her freckled arms, which tasted sun-baked as she sucked at her own skin, leaving purple marks.

Clever Pippa had got the idea for their club out of the storybooks whose contents she seemed to absorb so effortlessly and with actual pleasure. Before Pippa grew into a teen-ager, and lost her nerve, she had been so full of ideas, running in the garden and in races on Sports Day with such flat-footed eager assurance, her plait flicking bossily behind her, her plain long face raised to the sun. Gillian had adored and envied her, felt herself formless and dull by contrast. When their father called Gillian his sensible daughter, it had sounded like a consolation prize.

The house was still quiet; her sisters hadn't been woken by the phone ringing. Important with her mission, Gillian went out onto the landing, calling their names in a low voice, raising her hand to knock before she poked her head around their bedroom doors into the fusty half-light. She had the odd sensation of resuming some ceremonial left unfinished a long time ago; then she remembered how fervently she and Pippa had prayed, after Serena was born, for her to live. Their actual baby sister, when eventually she came home from hospital, had been problematic and prosaic, and not the all-transforming mystery they'd thirsted for. Was this the mystery now? Gillian tried to imagine their mother calling them in from the garden for tea, standing in her apron in the kitchen doorway—but the indefinite figure wouldn't come into focus, dissolving like her dream. In their bedrooms, her sisters were rousing from sleep, lifting their heads to stare at her, confused, embryonic in the cocoons of their duvets, not yet ready for her news. ♦

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Tessa Hadley on the bonds of childhood.

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# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## THE PERFECTER

*A new biography of Thomas Edison recalibrates our understanding of the inventor's genius.*

BY CASEY CEP

There were ideas long before there were light bulbs. But, of all the ideas that have ever turned into inventions, only the light bulb became a symbol of ideas. Earlier innovations had literalized the experience of “seeing the light,” but no one went around talking about torchlight moments or sketching candles into cartoon thought bubbles. What made the light bulb such an irresistible image for ideas was not just the invention but its inventor.

Thomas Edison was already well known by the time he perfected the long-burning incandescent light bulb, but he was photographed next to one of them so often that the public came to associate the bulbs with invention itself. That made sense, by a kind of transitive property of ingenuity: during his lifetime, Edison patented a record-setting one thousand and ninety-three different inventions. On a single day in 1888, he wrote down a hundred and twelve ideas; averaged across his adult life, he patented something roughly every eleven days. There was the light bulb and the phonograph, of course, but also the kinoscope, the dictating machine, the alkaline battery, and the electric meter. Plus: a sap extractor, a talking doll, the world's largest rock crusher, an electric pen, a fruit preserver, and a tornado-proof house.

Not all these inventions worked or made money. Edison never got anywhere with his ink for the blind, whatever that was meant to be; his concrete furniture, though durable, was doomed; and his failed innovations in mining lost him several fortunes. But he founded more than a hundred companies and

employed thousands of assistants, engineers, machinists, and researchers. At the time of his death, according to one estimate, about fifteen billion dollars of the national economy derived from his inventions alone. His was a household name, not least because his name was in every household—plastered on the appliances, devices, and products that defined modernity for so many families.

Edison's detractors insist that his greatest invention was his own fame, cultivated at the expense of collaborators and competitors alike. His defenders counter that his celebrity was commensurate with his brilliance. Even some of his admirers, though, have misunderstood his particular form of inventiveness, which was never about creating something out of nothing. The real nature of his genius is clarified in “Edison” (Random House), a new biography by Edmund Morris, a writer who famously struggled with just how inventive a biographer should be. Lauded for his trilogy of books about Theodore Roosevelt, Morris was scolded for his peculiar book about Ronald Reagan. Edison may have figured out how to illuminate the world, but Morris makes us wonder how best to illuminate a life.

Edison did not actually invent the light bulb, of course. People had been making wires incandesce since 1761, and plenty of other inventors had demonstrated and even patented various versions of incandescent lights by 1878, when Edison turned his attention to the problem of illumination. Edison's gift, here and elsewhere, was not

so much inventing as what he called perfecting—finding ways to make things better or cheaper or both. Edison did not look for problems in need of solutions; he looked for solutions in need of modification.

Born in 1847 in Ohio and raised in Michigan, Edison had been experimenting since childhood, when he built a chemistry laboratory in his family's basement. That early endeavor only ever earned him the ire of his mother, who fretted about explosions, so, at thirteen, the young entrepreneur started selling snacks to passengers travelling on the local railroad line from Port Huron to Detroit. He also picked up copies of the *Detroit Free Press* to hawk on the way home. In 1862, after the Battle of Shiloh, he bought a thousand copies, knowing he would sell them all, and marked up the price more and more the farther he got down the line. While still in his teens, he bought a portable letterpress and started printing his own newspaper aboard the moving train, filling two sides of a broadsheet with local sundries. Its circulation rose to four hundred a week, and Edison took over much of the baggage car. He built a small chemistry laboratory there, too.

One day, Edison saw a stationmaster's young son playing on the tracks and pulled the boy to safety before an oncoming train crushed him; as a reward, the father taught Edison Morse code and showed him how to operate the telegraph machines. This came in handy that summer, when Edison's lab caused a fire and the conductor kicked him off the train. Forced out of newspapering, Edison spent the next few



years as a telegrapher for Western Union and other companies, taking jobs wherever he could find them—Indiana, Ohio, Tennessee, Kentucky. He had time to experiment on the side, and he patented his first invention in 1869: an electric vote recorder that eliminated the need for roll call by instantly tallying votes. It worked so well that no legislative body wanted it, because it left no time for lobbying amid the yeas and nays.

That failure cured Edison of any interest in invention for invention's sake: from then on, he cultivated a taste for the practical and the profitable. Although legislators did not want their votes counted faster, everyone else wanted everything else to move as quickly as possible. Financial companies, for instance, wanted their stock information immediately, and communication companies wanted to speed up their telegram service. Edison's first lucrative products were a stock-ticker device and a quadruplex telegraph, capable of sending four messages at once. Armed with those inventions, he found financial support for his telegraphy research, and used money from Western Union to buy an abandoned building in New Jersey to serve as a workshop.

In 1875, having outgrown that site, he bought thirty acres not far from Newark and began converting the property into what he liked to call his Invention Factory. It was organized around a two-story laboratory, with chemistry experiments on the top floor and a machine shop below. Workshops are at least as old as Hephaestus, but Edison's was the world's first research-and-development facility—a model that would later be adopted by governments, universities, and rival corporations. Menlo Park, as it came to be known, was arguably Edison's most significant invention, since it facilitated so many others, by allowing for the division of problems into discrete chemical, electrical, and physical components, which teams of workers could solve through theory and then experimentation before moving directly into production.

Menlo Park also included a three-

story house for Edison's family. In 1871, when he was twenty-four, he married a sixteen-year-old girl named Mary Stilwell, who had taken refuge in his office during a rainstorm. They had three children, two of whom Edison nicknamed Dot and Dash. It is likely thanks to them that the first audio recording ever made, in November of 1877, features Papa Edison reciting "Mary Had a Little Lamb."

The phonograph came about because Edison had been experimenting with telephones, trying to improve on Alexander Graham Bell's transmitter to achieve better sound quality across longer distances. He first had in mind a kind of answering machine that would transcribe the contents of a call, but he quickly realized that it might be possible to record the voice itself. To test the idea, Edison spoke into a diaphragm with a needle attached; as he spoke, the needle vibrated against a piece of paraffin paper, carving into it the ups and downs of the sound waves. To everyone's surprise, the design worked: when he added a second needle to retrace the marks in the paper, the vibrating diaphragm reproduced Edison's voice.

So novel was the talking machine that many people refused to believe in its existence—understandably, since, up to that point in history, sound had been entirely ephemeral. But once they heard it with their own ears they all wanted one, and scores of new investors opened their pockets to help Edison meet the demand. With this infusion of cash, Edison was able to hire dozens of new "muckers," as the men who worked with him would eventually become known. (The endearment may have taken hold during his ill-fated mining days: "muck" is a term for ore, which his men tried, and failed, to remove from mines more efficiently.)

This was the team that banished the darkness, or at least made it subject to a switch. By the eighteen-seventies, plenty of homes were lit with indoor gas lamps, but they produced terrible fumes and covered everything in soot. Arc lights, which buzzed like



welders' torches in a few cities around the world, were, in the words of Robert Louis Stevenson, "horrible, unearthly, obnoxious to the human eye; a lamp for a nightmare." What Edison and his muckers did was figure out a way to regulate incandescent light, making the bulbs burn longer and more reliably, and at a more bearable brightness. The filament was the trickiest part, and he and his team tried hundreds of materials before settling on carbon, which they got to burn for fourteen and a half hours in the fall of 1879. (A year later, when they tried carbonized bamboo, it burned for more than a thousand hours.)

By the New Year, individual light bulbs had given way to a network of illumination around Menlo Park, which became known as the Village of Light. Gawkers came every night to see the apricot smudges of light through the windows of Edison's house and along the streets, marvelling at how the bulbs stayed lit through wind and rain, shining steadily and silently, and could be turned on and off with ease. The world was still measured in candlepower, and each bulb had the brightness of sixteen candles. Menlo Park had barely been a stop on the railway line when Edison first moved there. Now, in a single day, hundreds of passengers would empty from the trains to see the laboratory that made night look like noon.

Edison's patent attorney worried about the publicity, especially when the likes of George Westinghouse and Edward Weston came calling. But, by February, 1880, Edison had executed Patent No. 223,898, for the electric lamp, and No. 369,280, for a system of electrical distribution. He put both to use in winning a contract to electrify part of New York City, and built a generating plant on Pearl Street that eventually served more than nine hundred customers. While supervising the construction of the plant, Edison moved his family to Gramercy Park; then, in August, 1884, Mary died suddenly, officially from "congestion of the brain," though possibly of a morphine overdose. She was twenty-nine. After her death, Edison left Menlo Park for good.

One long season of grief and two years later, he married Mina Miller, the twenty-year-old daughter of one of the

founders of the Chautauqua Institution. She and Edison had three children of their own, and the family moved to West Orange, New Jersey, where Edison built another laboratory. This new complex improved on the already astounding pace of invention at Menlo Park and greatly expanded Edison's manufacturing capacity. "I will have the best equipped & largest Laboratory extant," he bragged in a letter, "and the facilities incomparably superior to any other for rapid & cheap development of an invention." He wanted to be able to "build anything from a lady's watch to a Locomotive," and employees were soon working, in separate teams, on alkaline batteries, sound recordings, fluoroscopes for medical radiography, a device that measured infrared radiation, motion-picture cameras and projectors and the pictures themselves, and anything else that Edison thought he could market.

Like tech C.E.O.s today, Edison attracted an enormous following, both because his inventions fundamentally altered the texture of daily life and because he nurtured a media scrum that fawned over every inch of his laboratory and fixated on every minute of his day. Newspapers covered his inventions months and sometimes years before they were functional, and journalist after journalist conspired with him for better coverage; one writer even arranged to co-author a sci-fi novel with him. A recent book by Jeff Guinn, "The Vagabonds" (Simon & Schuster), chronicles the publicity-seeking road trips that Edison took with Harvey Firestone and Henry Ford every summer from 1914 to 1924, driving a caravan of cars around the country, promoting themselves as much as the automobiles. Edison's life had already been thoroughly documented for the public: the first authorized biography, two full volumes' worth, appeared in 1910. All the way up to his death, twenty-one years later, at the age of eighty-four, Edison was still making headlines, even if, by then, his rate of perfecting had finally slowed.

**H**ow many biographers does it take to change a light bulb? Who knows, but it takes only one to change a narrative. Every decade or so, for a century now, a new book about Edi-



*"Why didn't we ever move out while we lived here?"*

son has appeared, promising to explain his genius or, more recently, to explain it away. In the earliest years after his death, those biographies expanded on Edison's personality, revealing the complexities of his family life and his work habits. He adhered, readers learned, to the prescriptions of a sixteenth-century Venetian crank named Luigi Cornaro, drinking pints of warm milk every few hours and consuming no more than six ounces of solid food per meal. He worked fifty hours at a time, and sometimes longer—including one stretch of four consecutive days—taking irregular naps wherever he happened to be, including once in the presence of President Warren Harding. His eating was disordered; his moods disastrous. He was affectionate but absent-minded with both of his wives and emotionally abusive with his children—one of whom, Thomas, Jr., he sued in order to stop him from selling snake oil under the family name.

Edison left behind millions of pages of notes and diaries and reports, providing one biographer after another with new source material to draw on. Then, a dozen years ago, Randall Stross, who has written extensively about Silicon Valley, published "The Wizard of Menlo Park: How Thomas

Alva Edison Invented the Modern World." Despite its admiring subtitle, Stross's book sought to reveal the man behind the curtain—in his view, a humbug whose bigotry and bad business sense were salvaged only by the creativity, savvy, and cowardice of his munchkins, who toiled away on invention after invention for which their wizard took credit.

That kind of correction was surely inevitable, given Edison's status and the culture's increasing skepticism about great men and their ostensible genius. Although Stross's book was not the first to consider Edison's faults—Wyn Wachhorst probed his self-promotion in "Thomas Alva Edison: An American Myth," from 1981, and Paul Israel catalogued his belief in racial stereotypes and phrenological theories in "Edison: A Life of Invention," from 1998—Stross portrays Edison as a patent-hungry P. T. Barnum or, perhaps, a proto-Elizabeth Holmes. But that argument is not entirely convincing. Edison's hype was not for its own sake; it was to raise capital, which he rarely held on to for long, partly because he never was much of a businessman, and partly because he only wanted more of it in order to keep working. Nor were his inventions

fake, even if they were sometimes impractical or borrowed from other people. And he didn't hide the borrowing: like Santa's elves, the muckers were always a part of the mythology.

So, too, was the drudgery. Edison not only rhymed "perspiration" with "inspiration"—he also talked endlessly about his experiments and trials, emphasizing just how much work went into every discovery. Unlike his one-time employee and sometime rival Nikola Tesla, Edison insisted that answers came not from his mind but from his laboratory. "I never had an idea in my life," he once said. "My so-called inventions already existed in the environment—I took them out. I've created nothing. Nobody does. There's no such thing as an idea being brain-born; everything comes from the outside."

In that conviction, Edison was, perhaps, ahead of his time. Three decades after Edison died, the sociologist Robert K. Merton put forward a theory concerning simultaneous invention, or what he called multiple discoveries: think of Newton and Leibniz coming up with calculus independently but concurrently; or Charles Darwin and Alfred Russel Wallace thinking their way to natural selection at nearly the same time; or inventors in Spain, Italy, and Britain sorting out steam engines within a few decades of one another. In Merton's terms, "multiples" are more common than "singletons," which is to say that discovery and invention are rarely the product of only one person. The problems of the age attract the problem solvers of the age, all of whom work more or less within the same constraints and avail themselves of the same existing theories and technologies.

Merton provides a useful context for Edison, who, as he himself knew, was never inventing *ex nihilo*; rather, he was nipping at the heels of other inventors while trying to stay ahead of the ones at his. It may be satisfying to talk of Alexander Graham Bell inventing the telephone, but Elisha Gray filed a patent for one on the same day, and Edison improved on both of their designs. Similarly, we may safely refer to Edison as the inventor of the phonograph, but his failure to recognize the demand for lower-quality, more

affordable audio recordings meant that he quickly lost the market to the makers of the Victrola. Stross makes much of that failure in his biography, but consumer markets are hardly the only, and rarely the best, measure of genius—a point made clear, and painfully so, by Edison's preference for and optimism about electric cars. It seems odd to judge Edison negatively for making fuel cells before their time, or for trying to find a viable domestic source for rubber, even if, on those fronts, he never succeeded.

The delight of Edmund Morris's "Edison" is that, instead of arguing with earlier writers or debating the terms of genius, it focusses on the phenomenological impact of Edison's work. He tries to return readers to the technological revolutions of the past, to capture how magical this wizard's work really felt. He reminds us that there was a time when a five-second kinoscopic record of a man sneezing was just about the most astonishing thing anyone had ever seen; people watched it over and over again, like a nineteenth-century TikTok. And he makes plain the cosmological significance of Edison's phonograph—how, against all understandings of human impermanence, it allowed the dead to go on speaking forever. "Here now were echoes made hard," Morris writes, "resounding as often as anyone wanted to hear them."

Allowing the dead to speak is also what biographies do. And "Edison" does it doubly, because it is the last book that Morris finished before his death, earlier this year, at age seventy-eight. Morris's first book, "The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt," won both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize after it was published, in 1979, but it was his second book that really caused a stir. The success of Morris's Roosevelt biography was shortly followed by the election of Ronald Reagan, and, after the Inauguration, the new Administration courted him to be the President's official scribe.

Morris spent fourteen years working on a book that he ultimately published under the confused title of "Dutch: A Memoir of Ronald Reagan." Devoured by the public, scorned

by the academy, debated by the Boswells of the world, the book featured a fictional narrator, who claimed to have known the fortieth President since they were teen-agers. To support that narrative voice, Morris created additional characters, staged scenes that never happened, and fabricated footnotes to corroborate the counterfeited material. It was easy to assume that the invented voice belonged to Morris himself, since the "I" of the book expresses frustration about holding off on a planned trilogy on Teddy Roosevelt in order to write about Dutch Reagan. But many of the details contradicted those of Morris's own life. When critics assailed his approach, Morris defended himself on the ground that he had found Reagan too boring for a standard biography, then later claimed that his performative style had been mimetic of his subject, a performer whose entire Presidency, he suggested, had been an act.

There's nothing intrinsically wrong with an artist of the court adding himself to the portrait, as Diego Velázquez did in "Las Meninas." Morris's transgressions lay first in making things up and second in failing to disclose what he was doing. His critics found those actions disqualifying in a biography; his champions found "Dutch" formally innovative. Some argued that, to one extent or another, all biography is just historical fiction in more respectable packaging.

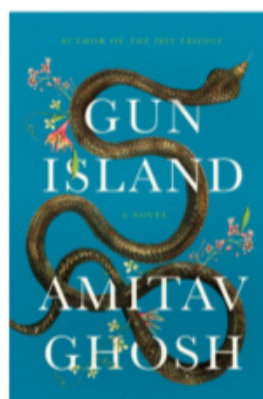
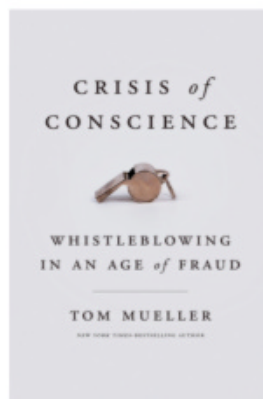
There is a faint echo of that formal tomfoolery in "Edison," which begins with the inventor's death and then takes a turn for the Benjamin Button. Morris moves backward through the decades of Edison's life; like Merlin, this wizard ages in reverse. Life within each section is still lived forward—Part 1 starts in 1920 and runs until 1929, Part 2 goes from 1910 to 1919, and so on. The whole thing has the halting feel of two steps forward, one step back: Edison has a second wife before we ever learn what happened to the first; Menlo Park has already been disassembled and re-created as a museum in Michigan before we get the story of its founding, in New Jersey; the inventor is completely deaf in one ear and half deaf in the other for six hundred pages before we find out that he lost most of

his hearing by age twelve from an unknown cause.

Reverse chronologies might work well in fictions like Christopher Nolan's "Memento" or Harold Pinter's "Betrayal," where they are serving grander themes of the fragility of memory and the failures of fidelity, but they are an unsatisfying solution to the problem of how to structure a biography. Morris gestures toward a better one, by titling each section with a discipline in which Edison distinguished himself: each backward-marching decade is matched to botany, defense, chemistry, magnetism, light, sound, telegraphy, or natural philosophy. Tracing someone's intellectual interests across a lifetime can be more meaningful than dragging the subject and the reader ever onward through calendrical time. But a backward biography, while certainly an invention, is, as Edison might have pointed out, neither practical nor profitable.

Even if you make your peace with this reverse narration—which, to be honest, I did, partly because Edison feels so much like a time traveller—"Edison" is still a frustrating book. It contains little new material, good prose but far too much of it, and no novel argument or fresh angle to motivate such an exhaustive return to an already storied life. If anything, Morris offers the same strange apologia for "Edison" that he did for "Dutch." "Nobody around him understood him," Morris said of Reagan. "Every person I interviewed, almost without exception, eventually would say, 'You know, I could never really figure him out.'" In the same vein, Morris once compared Edison to electricity itself, an invisible force seen only when it acts on the world around it. "What he was in person is harder, maybe impossible to say," Morris concluded, "because he put so much of himself into his work."

And yet figuring people out is the fundamental task of the biographer. Every person is elusive in one way or another, sometimes even unto herself, but it is possible to confront those inner mysteries in a biography without resorting to fabrications or gimmicks. It's a lesson Morris could have learned from Edison: sometimes, what's called for isn't invention but perfection. ♦



## BRIEFLY NOTED

**Crisis of Conscience**, by Tom Mueller (*Riverhead*). This trenchant examination of whistle-blowing is based on interviews with more than two hundred people who have exposed wrongdoing in areas such as national security, finance, and health care. Whistle-blowers emerge as "prickly and doctrinaire"—under ordinary circumstances, stubborn to a fault—but this is what enables them to place conscience above institutional pressures, often at great personal cost, legal protections notwithstanding. The book went to press before a whistle-blower's complaint triggered a Presidential impeachment inquiry, but Mueller notes that, under the current Administration, the federal government has seen a surge in leaks and whistle-blowing, which, amid our present troubles, he sees as both a "symptom and a potential cure."

**The Collector of Leftover Souls**, by Eliane Brum, translated from the Portuguese by Diane Groszklaus Whitty (*Graywolf*). A Brazilian journalist, aiming to transcend reductive stereotypes of her country—"Carnival and soccer. Favelas, butts, and violence"—writes about what she calls "everyday insurrections." In poetic, immersive essays, Brum assembles a chorus of "many Brazilian tongues": forest-dwelling midwives, elderly-care-home residents, a terminal cancer patient, far-flung Amazon populations. In a São Paulo favela, she investigates not violence and death but "the delicate things that made life possible," challenging herself to maintain an "eye of astonishment" while chronicling inequality.

**The Shadow King**, by Maaza Mengiste (*Norton*). Flitting across decades and perspectives, this capacious novel centers on the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, in 1935, in which Mussolini's forces overran an underequipped Ethiopian Army and Emperor Haile Selassie was forced into exile. (The Italian occupation lasted until 1941.) The novel's cast includes Fifi, a prostitute risking her life to spy on an Italian general; Ettore, a Jewish Italian soldier who uses his camera to record atrocities in which he is complicit; and Hirut, an orphaned servant who becomes a rebel sniper, "a girl standing on a mountain, gazing at her fallen enemies with the gun in her hand." Mengiste adopts the register of myth to shape an epic of nationhood and resistance.

**Gun Island**, by Amitav Ghosh (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). While visiting his childhood home, in Kolkata, the protagonist of this novel, a rare-book dealer living in New York, hears a Bengali tale about a gun merchant who angers a snake goddess. Struck by parallels between the story and a thesis he once wrote, he sets out on an exploration that leads from a shrinking island in the Sundarbans to Venice. Every step introduces him to a new character and a new connection, and the tangle of coincidences reveals the devastating effects of climate change on animal behavior, and also the trauma of human migration. Blending a mystery-novel plot with something more folkloric, Ghosh surveys an increasingly ravaged world.

## WE BUILT THIS CITY

*What can we learn from a long-reviled master of “urban renewal”?*

BY ADAM GOPNIK



My first memories of life are in a public-housing project. My parents, then college students, had two kids, and then quickly three, and soon found subsidized housing in a new high-rise in Philadelphia, with brightly colored plastic doors and gray concrete terraces, where we lived for three years. At the tail end of the great period of the fifties Western, all the kids on the concrete balconies played at “Davy Crockett” and “Gunsmoke,” riding hobbyhorses and firing cap guns up and down their gray length, a form of play as alien now as Homeric poetry.

This was the heyday of urban redevelopment, when city planners, doing

what was then called “slum clearance,” created high-density, low-cost public housing, often on a Corbusian model, with big towers on broad concrete plazas. In the still optimistic late fifties and early sixties, it was possible to imagine and actually use public housing as its original postwar planners had imagined it could be used: not as a life sentence but as a cheerful, clean platform that people of various racial and ethnic backgrounds without much money could use in a transition to another realm of life.

It was a dream that was over almost before it began and has since been condemned by all sides: by urbanists who came to hate the uniformity of its struc-

tures and their negation of street life; by minority communities who increasingly recognized these places as artificial ghettos, without the distinctive character and variety of real neighborhoods; and by the city officials who had to police the plazas. As Alex Krieger, a Harvard professor of urban design, writes in “City on a Hill: Urban Idealism in America from the Puritans to the Present” (Harvard), “Having an address in such places was like wearing a scarlet letter—perhaps a *P*, as in ‘I am Poor.’” Such places were publicly executed throughout the eighties and nineties, imploded with dynamite by despairing state and city governments. (All the great implosion videos are of either casinos or public housing, a sign of the American times.) Schuylkill Falls, the public-housing project of my happy early memory, was among them, demolished in 1996 after sitting abandoned and desolate for twenty years.

Now, however, for the first time in a half century, the people who built the bad stuff are reëmerging as possible models of how we might yet build good stuff—with a reclamation of such once-banished terms as “urban renewal” and “high-rise housing.” This revival has been pushed forward by the same force that has recently pushed other forms of public neo-progressivism, at least rhetorically: a desire for public action in the face of the obvious impasse of the private, with free-market mechanisms having left city housing so costly that teachers and cops often live two hours outside the neighborhoods they serve. You “can’t trust the private sector to protect the public interest” was the city planner Edward Logue’s most emphatic aphorism on the subject, and it is one that has taken on new life.

Even New York’s “master builder,” Robert Moses himself, a hate object for later urbanists, who preferred preservation to innovation and the small-scale to the large, has come in for a revisionist look: whatever his faults, he built city amenities for city people—playgrounds and parks and the Triborough Bridge—rather than splinters filled with condos for the ultra-rich. Not since the Beaux-Arts revival of the mid-seventies, when neoclassical ornament and elaborate façades became fashionable again—when Philip Johnson could put a Chippendale edifice on the A.T. & T. build-

*The city planner Ed Logue cared deeply about racial and economic inclusion.*

ing—has there been such a return of the architectural repressed. It is even possible to speak again in praise of the brutalist style in which much of that fifties and sixties public building was done. When people begin to cast a fonder eye on the Port Authority Bus Terminal, it means an epoch has altered.

Ed Logue was the consensus villain of the old urban planning. In a 2001 interview between the writer James Kunstler and the sainted urbanist Jane Jacobs, Logue was the subject of an extended hate:

Q: He went on to inadvertently destroy both New Haven and much of central Boston by directing Modernist urban renewal campaigns in the 1960s. Did you watch these schemes unfold and what did you think of them?

A: I thought they were awful. And I thought he was a very destructive man and I came to that opinion during the first time I met him, which was in New Haven.

Lizabeth Cohen's new book, "Saving America's Cities: Ed Logue and the Struggle to Renew Urban America in the Suburban Age" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), is an attempt to salvage the villain's reputation, mostly by putting it in the Tragedy of Good Intentions basket instead of the Arrogance of Élitist Certainties basket, albeit recognizing that these are adjacent baskets. Cohen, an American historian at Harvard, reminds the reader, as any first-rate historian would, that what look, in the retrospective cartooning of polemical history, like obvious choices and clear moral lessons are usually gradated and surprising. Logue, whose career was more far reaching and ambitious than that of any other urbanist of his time, helped remake New Haven, Boston, and New York, and his ambitions for city planning were thoroughly progressive: "To demonstrate that people of different incomes, races, and ethnic origins can live together . . . and that they can send their children to the same public schools." Despite his reputation as a "slum-clearer," Logue was uncompromising about the primacy of integration. "The pursuit of racial, not just income, diversity in residential projects animated all his work," Cohen writes. (Jane Jacobs, to put it charitably, didn't really notice that her beloved Hudson Street, in the West Village, tended toward the monochrome.)

Simple sides-taking exercises between good guys and bad guys turn out to betray

the far more complicated fabric of big-city life. Logue's mixed achievement is a testament either to the inadequacies of his proposals or to the intractability of his problems, and probably to both at once.

In black-and-white photographs from the fifties and early sixties, Logue has a look that was once called Kennedyesque: square-jawed and confident, with the slightly weary gaze, of a kind perhaps more Bobby than John, of a good man trying to elevate his countrymen while being perplexed by his colleagues—the kind of man who can use the phrase "fellow-citizens" often and sincerely. The patrician look was slightly misleading, as it was for the Kennedys, too. Logue was the child of an Irish immigrant family, reared in Philadelphia in a family that was strongly pro-union and pro-New Deal. He went to Yale, where he got into some hot water as an undergraduate for helping to unionize the service workers, and then got a law degree there, in 1947. His first serious work as an urban planner, still in New Haven, was driven by impeccably progressive purposes. "Logue had a clear political position: pro-labor and anti-Communist," Cohen writes. At a time when "liberal Catholicism" was a movement, not a contradiction, his faith tempered and gave values to his progressivism.

In 1953, he was recruited by New Haven's newly elected, reformist mayor, Dick Lee. The two men devoted themselves to renewing the city, using mostly federal money, some earmarked, in the Eisenhower years, for building highways. The problems that Logue and Lee faced in the mid-fifties were not the ones we face now: the idea that downtown San Francisco and the lower-Manhattan factory districts could become the Park Place and Boardwalk in the game of American Monopoly would have seemed to them absurd. They lived in a world in which suburbanization seemed an irresistible force, and the emptying out of cities an unstoppable problem. Their concern wasn't to make downtowns affordable to people other than the rich; it was to make cities remotely as appealing as the suburbs to people who had the choice to leave.

Since downtown New Haven was obviously losing retail sales to the suburban malls, Logue and Lee decided to

bring the new-style retailers into the center of the city. They wanted, as Cohen writes, to get rid of "dated stores, modest personal services, and cheap luncheonettes," and attract solid bulwarks of secure retailing, like Sears, Roebuck and Company and Macy's. The result was the Church Street Project, including the Chapel Square Mall (planned in 1957, although it didn't open for another decade), and it proved to be a disaster. It walled off the New Haven city core, and was attractive neither to city dwellers nor to repenting suburbanites.

Although Logue left New Haven for good in 1961, to work for the new mayor of Boston, Cohen tells us how the tragedy of New Haven unfolded after his departure. With the urban riots of 1967—New Haven had some, though not the worst—the old political machine, briefly stayed by Lee's reformism, reawakened. In 1970, an Italian machine politician became New Haven's mayor, and ended the city's remaining urban-renewal projects. This story was repeated elsewhere throughout the sixties and early seventies: high hopes for urban revival, followed by disappointing results, and then fear of urban crime leading voters to replace reformist administrations with reactionary and pro-cop ethnic ones, usually Italian—Frank Rizzo in Philadelphia was the same kind of politician as the New Haven guy, with Giuliani, in New York, a lagging indicator.

In Boston, as Cohen points out, the worst had been done for Logue: the West End renewal project, of the early fifties, was already universally understood to be a disaster. Racial conflict was secondary to the ancient Brahmin-Irish one, with Jews and Italians caught in the crossfire. Logue, who headed the Boston Redevelopment Authority, was far from the bulldozer-in-a-blue-suit stereotype. Soon after he arrived, he grasped that a tech-and-educational core was the golden ribbon of Boston's persistence—that the city's comparative advantage lay in its universities and colleges, in its identity as a "City of Ideas."

Nor was he insensitive to preservationist concerns. His big central project, Government Center, designed by I. M. Pei, originally involved the destruction of two important small-scale nineteenth-century buildings. When protests against their demolition arose,

Logue made sure that they survived.

Designed in 1962, and finished at last in 1968, Boston's City Hall Plaza, the heart of Logue's Government Center project, is still hard to love. The preserved elements have been poorly absorbed into the newer ones, and the plaza, built with visions of Venice's San Marco in mind, has become one more windswept brutalist wasteland. It's about as bad and depressing as any public space can be. It did, however, succeed at spurring downtown development around it.

What defeated Logue's vision in the magazines and universities was the rise of Jane Jacobs and the conservationist left. For Jacobs, "dated stores, modest personal services, and cheap luncheonettes" were the city. In "The Death and Life of Great American Cities" (1961), she showed a generation how small enterprise helped sustain the complex ecology of mutual unplanned effort that makes cities work. Logue and Jacobs once had an onstage debate, in which Logue needled Jacobs about her highly romantic vision of her West Village neighborhood—*he'd* been out there at 8 P.M. and hadn't seen the ballet of the street that she cooed over. (Jacobs was an instinctive Whitmanesque poet, not a data collector: you don't count the angels on the head of a small merchant.) Logue also made the serious point that the emerging anti-renewal consensus was fine for someone who already had a safe place in the West Village. For those who didn't, it was just a celebration of other people's security.

But what defeated people like Logue on the ground was the increasingly agonized racial politics of big cities. In 1967, Logue ran for mayor of Boston, and, though regarded as a serious contender, was squeezed between another reformist candidate, Kevin White, and Louise Day Hicks, a ferocious anti-busing activist. (Her slogan: "You know where I stand.") Determined to protect Irish neighborhoods from interfering outsiders who wanted to bus their children, and from "the element"—that is, minorities who wanted to take over their beloved blocks—Hicks is a reminder that the fault lines visible now in America are a long-standing feature of the American foundation.

Cohen makes a larger point about the context in which Logue and his colleagues rose and fell. In the early years of the Cold War, "expertise" was seen as a powerful support of liberal democracies. This was the expertise of engineers and architects—and of a growing class of professionals who had been able to go to colleges that their parents could not attend. The traumas of the sixties upended faith in experts. The same people who designed the Strategic Hamlet Program, in Vietnam, had remade downtown New Haven (and, one could argue, on similar principles: replacing the exposed, organic village with a secured fortress, the mall). The expertise of the urban planner was undermined as well, by the new prestige attached



to the preservationist, which, for good or ill, remains undiminished. As the next generation of development would show, however, what tends to replace expertise is not the intelligence of the street. What replaces expertise is the idiocy of the deal.

In 1968, Logue, his reputation oddly undiminished by his Boston travails, was appointed to head New York's Urban Development Corporation, a Nelson Rockefeller initiative; the failure of urban renewal having become abundantly clear, the new notion was to build from scratch, in undeveloped spaces, rather than tearing down and starting over in the same place.

Logue's most lasting monument puts his vision to its more serious test: Roosevelt Island, in the middle of the East River. The original 1969 plan, by Philip Johnson and John Burgee, with Johnson caught between his Miesian and postmodern moments ("This is my Jane Jacobs phase," he announced), was, in the touching way of architectural presentations, full of cheerful families celebrating life on the river. And the project had all sorts of virtues, many of them, as Cohen shows, killed off, in the familiar pattern, by rising costs and imponderable problems. What was to be an open plan with broad vistas to the river got closed in as it became plain that the project wasn't financially viable at its original scale. The closest thing to a civic building that Roosevelt Island has is a giant parking garage, which may

win the blue ribbon for the most brutal brutalist building in the city, a highly competitive category, with the Fashion Institute of Technology and the Port Authority Bus Terminal in the running.

The difference between the inspiring plan for the island and its less than inspiring completion can't be put down simply to a stylistic failure of the period, or to inadequate funding. As Roosevelt Island was going up in the mid-seventies, SoHo was, so to speak, coming round. The old loft buildings were made into a shining village of art that was an ideal urban environment of galleries, residential and working spaces for artists, restaurants, and entrepreneurial startups, until it was lost to money and homogenization. The choice in housing seems to be between something like Roosevelt Island, which doesn't quite work and lasts, and something like SoHo, which does work but can't last.

Historic figures are relegated to the background and then, like animatronic puppets in Disney's Hall of Presidents, are called upon to step forward and speak again when they seem to have wisdom to offer on a new problem. Frederick Douglass, long a revered statue, has become a living presence again, in the light of the renewed sense of the centrality of slavery to the American experience. Logue has clearly been summoned in response to the current crisis of the American city: the crisis of affordable housing, and, with it, the disaster of cities' being made monocultural by their success. The new generation of residential towers, rising in their vertiginous narrowness and affordable to only the elect, are the symbols of our time: the wealthy giving the finger to the city. They are as much the visual symbol of New York now as the great thirties skyscrapers were the symbols of a romantic view of American industry, or as the great buildings of Riverside Drive were of middle-class New York in its ascendancy. (My great-aunt, who worked as a translator at the U.N., lived in a ten-room apartment on 115th and Riverside, but abandoned it in the eighties, during the worst of the crime wave.) We suffer these days from urban diseases of affluence—too much money chasing too little land—but we should remember what diseases of privation were like.

Now, a rational case can be made that

there is, in fact, no general urban-housing crisis. Kevin Drum, of *Mother Jones*, has made this case at length and with detailed data. Housing prices are about where they have always been, with the exception of a handful of places—including New York and the Bay Area, where, not coincidentally, a lot of people who write for a living about their problems living live. Nonetheless, a new movement, sympathetic to Logue’s old dream of massive building even at the price of remaking neighborhoods, has arisen in the past few years. This YIMBY movement (for “Yes, in my back yard”) says that the answer to the housing problem in big cities is to build more housing in big cities, even if that means building high-rise buildings in low-rise neighborhoods and ugly new spaces in quaint old ones, because the alternative, the monochrome suburbanization of the urban, would be worse.

The attendant ironies are hard to overlook. Traditional progressives have, in effect, aligned with real-estate developers; the truth is that big buildings get built by big builders, even if they are subsidized by the state. Community control, always an ambivalent concept—it was embraced by Logue’s segregationist enemies even more than by Jane Jacobsian preservationists—is once again becoming an evil to be eradicated by state power in the state capitol. Local zoning that protects low density, and with it, supposedly, real-estate values, has to be trumped by state law, as is already under way in California.

Though the problem of building new housing is usually discussed in terms of plans and zones and taxes, it is, in some largely unrecognized part, also an aesthetic and architectural one. Logue tended to treat the architectural issues of his redevelopments as secondary. How the thing was to be planned and paid for was what counted most. How it was going to look and feel was a Christmas-wrapping problem. Yet, since the time of the great critic John Ruskin, in the mid-nineteenth century, a central lesson in thinking about building is to think about buildings. The small stuff—style, scale, façade, signs of life, the richness of decorative detail, variety rather than uniformity, the encrustations of ornament—counts big.

Putting up tall buildings in the West Village is one way to get more supply to meet the demand, but the demand in

this case—or, at least, the acceptance of new buildings by local incumbents—will alter as the supply becomes unappealing. It is not location alone that makes such neighborhoods attractive but what is *local* about the location, its particular spell of kinds and purposes and incomes. Change zoning laws that prevent multifamily housing in single-family precincts in Seattle, and you may have served the many, but only by breaking down the reasons that the many want to be there in the first place. If people thought that the new buildings going up in cities would be appealing to live in, they would not protest new building in advance. If we knew how to make new buildings better, we would accept new buildings more.

An odd alliance between progressives and reactionaries arises as progressive people blame modern architects for the badness of modern cities, just as their reactionary counterparts did. The magazine *Current Affairs*, firmly on the left, not long ago published an eloquent piece called “Why You Hate Contemporary Architecture,” tracking almost argument by argument, without quite acknowledging it, the Reaganite Tom Wolfe’s polemic on the topic. Singling out a building in Logue’s Government Center project as “a hideous concrete edifice of mind-bogglingly inscrutable shape,” where “terrified immigrants attend their deportation hearings,” the

authors seem unaware of the plaza’s impeccably progressive origins. Where Wolfe insisted that postwar American architecture was a leftist conspiracy, inflicting its vision of socialist workers barracks on comfort-loving Americans, the new progressive story is that modern American architecture is a right-wing corporate insult inflicted on us all.

Both stories could be true, of course—or neither of them. The complete condemnation of modern urban architecture is obviously unconvincing: some building types *are* universally seen to be successful. City museums—whether built anew, like Frank Gehry’s Bilbao Guggenheim, or rehabilitated from old industrial buildings, like the Tate Modern—play the kind of social role we associate with medieval churches, attracting a crowd of peddlers, lovers, gawkers, dogs, and loiterers. The original Guggenheim, in New York, violates rules of scale and neighborhood harmony, but it creates the neighborhood around it. It *is* the neighborhood. Much the same is true of the steps of the Met, or the new Whitney, near the High Line. Nor are these “elitist” projects; as museum people never tire of pointing out, more people go to look at art in museums each year than go to stadiums to watch sports.

Not elitist projects, they still are reflective projects. The pioneer baseball analyst Bill James once said that money



*“It’s only sexy if the faucet isn’t on your side.”*

X-rays values: we pay shortstops more than teachers because most of us actually care more about watching baseball than about educating our children. We as a civilization perhaps care more about how art is housed than about how common people are housed.

Yet every civilization carries a mystery, or several, within it. (Why didn't the Toltecs, who had wheeled toys, make wheeled vehicles?) Our great mystery may be why there is no readily turned-to model of what humane, high-density, inclusive urban housing would look like. Or, rather, we do know what humane, high-density, inclusive urban housing looks like. It looks like what we've got already and don't have enough to share. The examples that are occasionally trotted out as counterinstances, such as Moshe Safdie's Habitat 67, in Montreal, are hard to scale and to re-create. As it happened, I lived with my family in Habitat 67, a scant decade after leaving the Philadelphia housing project, and its concrete passageways were terrific. But it has since become an oddity in a corner of Montreal, though much loved by dog owners who like its easy walkable spaces.

What we want is—well, the entire old housing stock of the city. The trouble is not that we don't recognize it but that we can't reproduce it. People want to live in New York's West Village, San Francisco's North Beach, or Philadelphia's Society Hill; they're drawn to the right kind of density. Harlem has been expensively "reoccupied" by urban professionals because the streets and the housing stock of Harlem, paralyzed by prejudice for so long, are intrinsically appealing to anyone who has the chance to live there. It is not a taste for the retro, or mere nostalgia, that makes this happen. It is a recognition that the building habits of times past created spaces that are more hospitable than the sterility of time present. There may be no fix to this, but it is the unspoken reality within which we all live. No one rooted harder for the implosion of the Corbusian housing projects than the people forced to live in them.

Ruskin spent his entire life trying to get nineteenth-century people to build like fourteenth-century Venetians. He hated the results, but we love them—all those "streaky bacon" buildings, the

masonry interspersing red brick with pale stone, which every British city now lovingly restores. The most quixotic current proposal in New York is to rebuild Penn Station in its original form; it sounds absurd, but, given that we are sooner or later going to build a new Penn Station, it is hard to come up with good arguments for not going back to the old one.

An earnest search for award-winning, successful contemporary public-housing schemes turns up disappointingly little; they tend to be French, Spanish, and Slovenian, and, though they doubtless have many virtues, for the most part they do fall prey to the Jacobsian sins of streetlessness, and typically still take the form of towers in the middle of a plaza, albeit often more brightly colored or oddly shaped than their dynamited predecessors. *We're* not Corbusian nightmares, they seem to insist. *We're neighborhoods*—thirty stories high, on a plaza.

Cohen ends her life of Logue with a laundry list of lessons, some items bleached and clean, some still stained. The lessons are compounded to the point of contradiction: Big Government is essential to building housing, because "state and national governance are crucial tools of redistribution within vast and diverse territories," but we must "involve community residents in divisions that affect their homes, neighborhoods, and cities." (We need Big Government to override local bigotries and local control to override Big Government insensitivities.) Urban circles are very hard to square. Do we really want to revive, on progressive grounds, the old imprecations against outsiders coming into settled neighborhoods when "the element," in this case, are gentrifying hipsters in fedoras rather than black-hatted Hasidim? Krieger, too, ends his book with a set of recommendations, all commendable—minimize inequality, share access to abundance—but none tied to particular buildings or developments that work. There are, tellingly, lots of insinuations and no illustrations.

The legendary urbanist Alain Bertaud has observed, in reference to housing policies, that, while the law of supply and demand may be as fixed as the law of gravity, we defy the law of gravity all the time. We build balloons and

airplanes and elevators to counter it. What we can't do is repeal the law of gravity—take an ordinary rug and declare that it's a magic carpet.

Some city planning is like the crafting of an airplane, or at least an elevator: we can protect small merchants with ordinances that limit the size of their competitors, as happens in France, or with tax structures that would discourage landlords from maintaining empty storefronts while holding out for national chains that could pay the exorbitant rents they hope for, rather than continuing to accept lower rents actually available from the bookstore or the wine shop. We can insist (as we're already beginning to do) on social housing as part of every development.

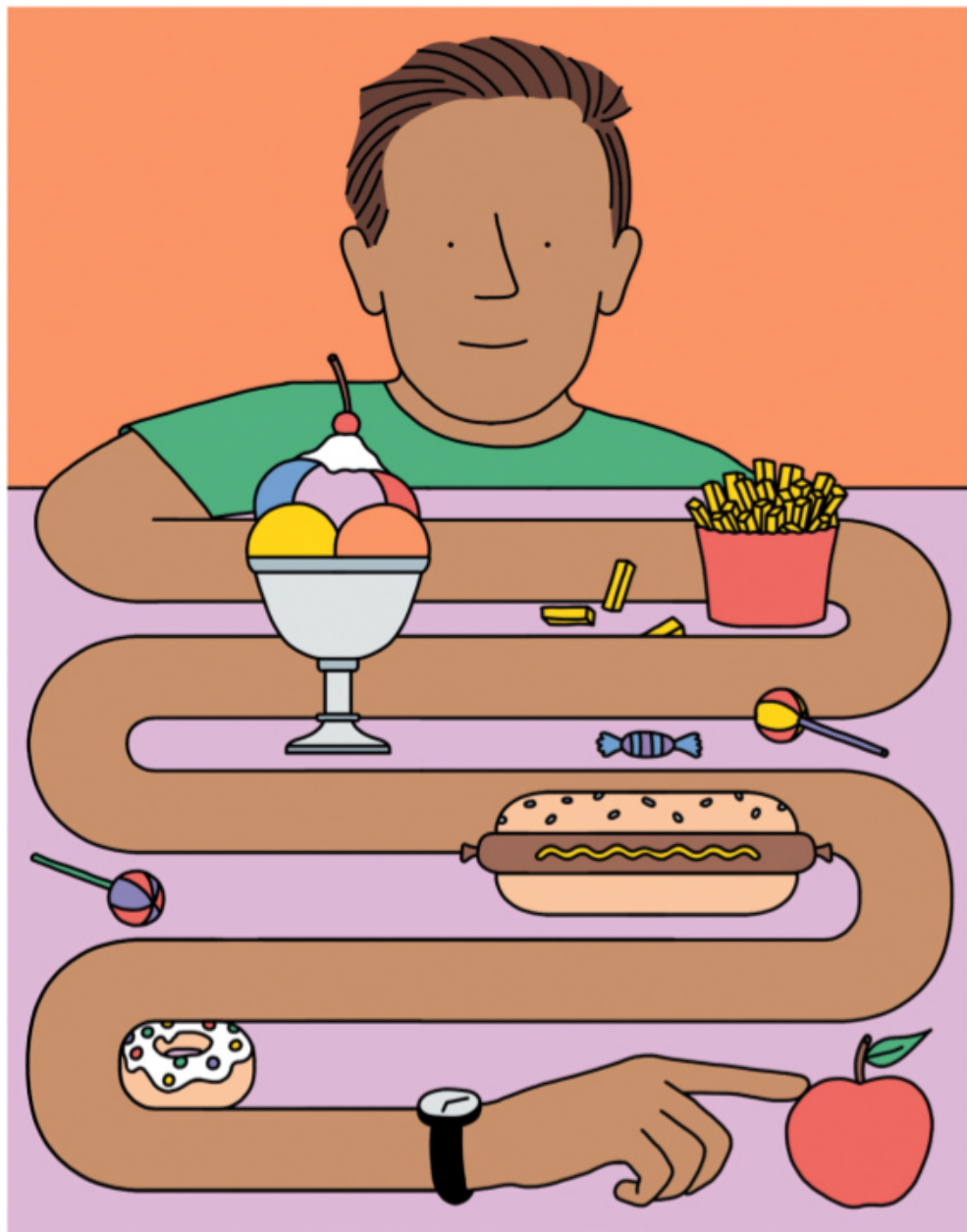
Other projects, like rent control, are clearly magic carpets that won't fly: with the best intentions in the world, all rent control does is to reward the incumbents and punish the incomers. What makes cities even trickier to regulate than falling objects is that the pull of their gravity alters all the time: the progressive ambition of Logue and Lee's time, to lure the rich folks back, is very different from the logic of ours, when we are saving cities from being filled only with rich folks. Perhaps we don't need departments of urban planning so much as graduate degrees in city problem-solving, alert to the pragmatic perplexities each inch of pavement presents.

Sometimes left and right converge on a common cause out of common sense; sometimes left and right converge on a common cause out of a reluctance to face the inherent contradictions in a problem. What aspects of Ed Logue's legacy do we really want to revive? Essentially, the intentions but not the edifices. We want a generous state investment in affordable housing—which means subsidized housing—but we want it not to look like most of the affordable housing that's been built before. (It's noteworthy that the de Blasio administration's public-housing initiatives tend to involve rehab more than construction.) We want Logue's principles and Jacobs's places. We want the project of public housing so long as what we build does not look like a public-housing project. The contradictions are self-evident, but, then, cities are contradictions with street lights, or else they are not cities at all. ♦

# THE RESISTANCE

*Can science help us change our habits?*

BY JEROME GROOPMAN



Several years ago, I bought a smartphone and soon came to love it. Being able to send an e-mail, look up a fact, or buy something no matter where I was meant a previously unimaginable gain in productivity. Every time I got an e-mail, the phone emitted a ping and I would deal with whatever it was, priding myself on my efficiency. Texts arrived with the tones of a French horn and were similarly dispatched. Soon, I was reaching for the device every time it made a sound, like Pavlov's dog salivating when it heard a bell. This started to interfere with work and conversations. The machine had seemed like a miracu-

lous servant, but gradually I became its slave.

I'd always prided myself on my will power. Like most people who've made it through medical training—with its early mornings and its long shifts when your friends are partying—I had an established track record of delaying gratification. It didn't matter. When I tried switching the phone to silent, I ended up checking it perhaps even more often, *just in case* there was something to deal with. The only time I managed to resist was during Shabbos, when I don't read e-mail. But I'd be watching the clock, counting the hours till I could turn the thing on. For the first

time, I could imagine what it's like to be a smoker craving a cigarette. Checking the smartphone had become a bad habit that I couldn't break.

Habits, good and bad, have long fascinated philosophers and policy-makers. Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, surveyed existing notions of virtue and offered this summary: "Some thinkers hold that it is by nature that people become good, others that it is by habit, and others that it is by instruction." He concluded that habits were responsible. Cicero called habit "second nature," a phrase that we still use. And when Alexander Hamilton, in *Federalist Paper No. 27*, considered how to create citizens who would obey the federal laws of the newly formed republic, he used another proverbial phrase: "Man is very much a creature of habit." If federal law permeated matters at the state level, it would seem part of everyday life. "The more it circulates through those channels and currents in which the passions of mankind naturally flow, the less will it require the aid of the violent and perilous expedients of compulsion," he wrote.

In the modern era, habits have become a significant area of scientific inquiry. Psychologists have explored the genesis of habitual behavior and its impact on health and happiness. William James, echoing Aristotle, wrote, "All our life, so far as it has definite form, is but a mass of habits,—practical, emotional, and intellectual . . . bearing us irresistibly toward our destiny."

Few of us like to think of ourselves in such passive terms. What about will power? Marketers flatter our sense of agency with slogans like "Just Do It" (Nike) and "Declare Your Path" (New Balance). Much popular psychology, too, bolsters our belief in self-control. In the famous Stanford marshmallow experiment, devised by Walter Mischel, in the nineteen-sixties, children were seated alone in front of a marshmallow and were scored on whether they resisted gobbling it down. The resulting determination of a child's level of "executive function" supposedly distinguishes life's winners and losers, predicting such things as performance on the SAT, duration

*Because the brain forms habits unconsciously, resolutions rarely work.*

of relationships, and career success. But how can that be, if we're just creatures of habit?

In "Good Habits, Bad Habits" (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), the social psychologist Wendy Wood refutes both James's determinism and glib exhortations to be proactive, and seeks to give the general reader more realistic ideas for how to break habits. Drawing on her work in the field, she sees the task of sustaining positive behaviors and quelling negative ones as involving an interplay of decisions and unconscious factors. Our minds, Wood explains, have "multiple separate but interconnected mechanisms that guide behavior." But we are aware only of our decision-making ability—a phenomenon known as the "introspection illusion"—and that may be why we overestimate its power. The executive functions that make will power possible give us, she writes, "the sense of agency that we recognize as 'me.'" But that comes at a cost in terms of effort. To go about our lives, we need to make some behaviors automatic.

Functional MRI scans have given researchers a peek into the respective neural networks that are active during rote and conscious tasks. A brain scan of someone learning a task shows activity in the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus, networks associated with decision-making and executive control. With repetition of a task, brain activity moves into areas of the putamen and the basal ganglia, deep in what Wood calls "the rudimentary machinery of our minds." There, a task is turned into a habit.

These more primitive areas of the brain demand less of our mental energy. Whole sequences of actions become linked, a process known as "chunking." When we get into a car and drive off, we don't need to think about the separate actions of buckling a seat belt, turning on the ignition, putting the car in drive, checking the mirrors and the blind spot, and pressing the gas pedal. All these steps, chunked into a single unit in the memory, are triggered by the environmental cue of getting into your car. This frees us up to concentrate on what most requires conscious attention. We can think about where we're going or the day's tasks, and keep an eye out for anything unusual on the road.

Wood's research originally focussed not on habits but on persistence. For "one-off, occasional behaviors," like getting a flu shot, conscious decisions were all that was required. For behaviors involving repetition, though, habits were crucial. William James estimated that "ninety-nine hundredths or, possibly, nine hundred and ninety-nine thousandths of our activity is purely automatic and habitual." This was a guess; Wood, however, devised a study to quantify just how often people act out of habit. Using a research technique known as experience sampling, she had participants spend two days recording what they did while they were doing it. Results varied across the groups studied, but the basic finding was that our actions are habitual forty-three per cent of the time.

This explains why conscious knowledge is not in itself enough to change behavior, and why public-health initiatives that educate people about healthy choices tend to fail. In 1991, the National Cancer Institute determined that only eight per cent of Americans were aware of the recommendation to eat at least five servings of fruit and vegetables daily. A national campaign was declared: 5 a Day for Better Health. Six years later, thirty-nine per cent of Americans knew about five servings a day, a nearly fivefold increase, but actual diets had barely changed. In 2007, government officials tried again, launching a program called Fruits & Veggies—More Matters. Even so, by 2018 only twelve per cent of Americans ate the recommended two servings of fruit daily, and only nine per cent ate three servings of vegetables. Simply informing us of what's good for us doesn't work, because so much of our eating, cooking, and shopping is governed by habit.

In Mischel's marshmallow experiment, only a quarter of the subjects were able to resist eating the marshmallow for fifteen minutes. This implies that a large majority of us lack the self-control required to succeed in life. But a less discussed part of the study suggests a way of circumventing our frailty. The researchers compared the results of two situations: in one, children could see the marshmallow in front of them; in the other, they knew that it was there but

couldn't see it. On average, the children lasted only six minutes when presented with visible temptation but could manage ten minutes if the treat was hidden. For Wood, this outcome shows that self-control is "not so much an inherent disposition but instead a reflection of the situation we are in." A few tweaks to our environment may enable us to emulate people who seem more disciplined.

A study of self-control among college students bears out this hypothesis. The students were told to report every time they thought, "Oops, I shouldn't do this"—for instance, when they stayed up too late, overslept, overate, or procrastinated. They were most successful at adopting productive behaviors not when they resolved to do better, or distracted themselves from temptation, but when they altered their environment. Instead of studying on a couch in a dorm, with a TV close by, they went to the library. They ate better when they removed junk food from the dorm refrigerator. "Successful self-control," Wood writes, "came from essentially covering up the marshmallow."

Even people who score high on self-control questionnaires may owe their apparent virtue to situational factors rather than to sheer fortitude. A study of such people in Germany found that they reported resisting temptation surprisingly rarely. "They were living their lives in a way that hid the marshmallow almost all the time," Wood writes. This observation leads to the crux of her book's thesis: the path to breaking bad habits lies not in resolve but in restructuring our environment in ways that sustain good behaviors. Wood cites the psychologist Kurt Lewin, who argued that behavior was influenced by "a constellation of forces" analogous to gravity or to the fluid dynamics that make a river run faster or slower. Those forces work depending on where you are, who's around you, the time of day, and your recent actions. We achieve situational control, paradoxically, not through will power but by finding ways to take will power out of the equation.

The central force for eliminating bad habits, according to Wood, is "friction": if we can make bad habits more inconvenient, then inertia can carry us in the direction of virtue, without ever requiring us to be strong. She cites the

ways in which increased friction has produced a decline in smoking: laws that ban it in restaurants, bars, airplanes, and trains; taxes that have helped triple the price of cigarettes in the U.S. in the past twenty years; the purge of cigarettes from vending machines, and of tobacco ads from TV and the radio.

Meanwhile, however, businesses all around us try to reduce friction. A cashier taking an order at McDonald's is scripted to ask, "Would you like fries with that?" This simple question encourages us to eat more fat and carbs. Binge-watching on Netflix or Hulu is facilitated by the way that the next episode starts automatically as the credits roll on the previous one. Wood talks to M. Keith Chen, a former head of economic research for Uber, who explains that the app was designed to minimize friction. "The phone's GPS knows where you are," he says. "You don't even need to think about it. . . . You get out without handling cash."

The tendency of companies to act as our enablers was extensively examined in Charles Duhigg's best-seller "The Power of Habit" (2012). Like Wood, Duhigg, who when he wrote the book was a reporter at the *Times*, notes ways that the fast-food industry designs prompts to make us consume more. McDonald's standardizes the appearance of its restaurants, in order to trigger habitual eating routines. The foods at many chains are specifically engineered to deliver bursts of salt and fat that immediately light up the reward centers of the brain.

Examining corporate efforts to capitalize on habit formation, Duhigg describes the work of an early-twentieth-century advertising guru, Claude C. Hopkins, whose campaign for Pepsodent toothpaste is said to have established toothbrushing as habitual among Americans. When Pepsodent first appeared, in 1915, few people bothered to brush their teeth, and a leading dental researcher of the time pronounced all toothpastes useless. Hopkins focussed his marketing message on the film of plaque that covers our teeth; in 1917, his newspaper ads proclaimed it "the basic cause of all tooth troubles." In fact, plaque can be temporarily removed simply by eating an apple, and toothpastes of the

time didn't remove any more of it than brushing without toothpaste did. Nevertheless, Hopkins set about amping up the dangers of plaque and telling the public that Pepsodent was the only way to get rid of it. "Just run your tongue across your teeth," another ad read. "*You'll feel a film*—that's what makes your teeth look 'off color' and invites decay." In just a few years, Pepsodent had become one of the best-known products in the world.

Duhigg, like Wood, sees habitual routines as being driven by cues and rewards. Pepsodent wasn't the only brand that claimed to remove the film on teeth, but ingredients that it used to insure a fresh taste, such as citric acid and mint oil, also happened to be mild irritants, which produced a satisfying tingle in the mouth. If Hopkins, by making consumers aware of the film on their teeth, had created a cue, the toothpaste itself provided a physical reward. Such loops of cue and reward are powerful: if we haven't brushed our teeth, something feels wrong. Two decades after Hopkins launched his campaign, using toothpaste had become the norm for a sizable majority of the U.S. population. Hopkins, as Duhigg puts it, had "created a craving."

Where Wood emphasizes situational control as a way of making good habits easy, Duhigg writes about a woman who bites her nails and is advised to find something else to do with her hands that will produce a comparable physical stimulation, such as rapping her knuckles on a desk. The idea is to keep the powerful structure of cue and reward intact but to tweak the content of the routine. For both writers, though, the key lies not in breaking a habit through will power but in replacing one habit with another.

Both, too, emphasize the role of conscious effort—not in resisting habit but in analyzing it, the better to formulate a strategy for reform. Duhigg describes how, after having gained some weight, he gave up getting a cookie each afternoon in the *Times* cafeteria. Putting a no-cookie injunction on a Post-it note was a non-starter: he'd ignore it, wander to the cafeteria, chat with colleagues

at the cash register, and buy and eat his cookie. So he set about identifying the trigger for his habit, adopting five categories proposed by researchers: time, place, emotional state, other people, and the action immediately preceding the habitual one. Was he hungry, or bored, or in need of a break or a blood-sugar boost? He switched up his routine, eating a doughnut at his desk instead of visiting the cafeteria, or taking a brief stroll outside. He was testing hypotheses: if eating the doughnut at his desk didn't sate the urge to go to the cafeteria, he could rule out sugar. By a process of elimination, he determined that his habit was really driven by a need for interaction and distraction. The best replacement for a cookie turned out to be going over to a friend's desk to chat.

Wood ends her book with advice for those of us who have become hostages to our smartphones. She offers a stepwise strategy. First, recognize your dependency, and acknowledge how the habit disrupts work, social interactions, and safe driving. Next, "control the context cues," meaning identify what triggers you to grab the phone. For me, the cues are aural (the ping, the French horn) and visual (pop-ups on the screen). I already knew that putting the phone on silent wasn't enough to break the habit, but, as in the marshmallow experiment, out of sight could be out of mind. In the mornings, preparing breakfast, I found that it helped to leave the phone in another room. In the car, it went in the glove compartment. When walking around, I'd put it in a zippered pocket. There were other ways of generating friction and making the habit harder to indulge. Turning the phone off completely was much more effective than silencing it, not because I wasn't curious about who might have e-mailed me but because turning it back on was a hassle.

Wood advises us to come up with new rewards as substitutes for the ones the phone provided. I listened to music on the car radio. In the evening, instead of scrolling through tweets and e-mails, I sought out authors I'd never read. At the end of each day, I felt calmer, and free. ♦



## AMERICAN DREAMS

*The pursuit of happiness in “The Rose Tattoo” and “Soft Power.”*

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ



“My love-play to the world,” Tennessee Williams called “The Rose Tattoo,” which was first mounted on Broadway in 1951—the production made Maureen Stapleton a star—and was later adapted into a film with an Academy Award-winning performance by the larger-than-life Anna Magnani. Williams wrote the play in a swoon of romantic gratitude for his great love, Frank Merlo. Merlo, a Sicilian-American, first entered Williams’s life as a conquest in Provincetown; some years later, a chance encounter on a Manhattan street brought him back into it, more or less for good. In his memoirs, Williams, “too long accustomed to transitory attachments,” recalls his initial reluctance to commit and

his subsequent realization that, with Merlo, contentment could finally be his. The next day, Williams tells us, he came home to find “little Frankie” asleep “on the huge bed,” the picture of cozy devotion. Instant attraction, comic hazard, the providential abundance of a happy home: these are also themes in “The Rose Tattoo,” now in a Roundabout Theatre Company revival, directed by Trip Cullman (at the American Airlines).

But those aren’t the only themes. Williams—who, as a child, was smothered by his grandiose mother and tormented by his seething, frequently absent father—revered, craved, and feared love. Domestic joy was not a natural subject for him. Before “The Rose Tattoo” reaches

toward ecstasy, it wallows in despair; there is a wanton, operatic hysteria to the play and to its heroine, Serafina delle Rose, a Sicilian-immigrant seamstress with the soul of a diva. Roses are everywhere—in Serafina’s name and the names of her daughter, Rosa, and her husband, Rosario, who combs rose oil into his hair and bears the titular tattoo on his chest. You can almost smell them, sweet, heavy, and verging on rotten.

The delle Roses live in a Gulf town that is imbued, according to Williams’s production notes, with a gaudy, tropical brightness. (Mark Wendland, the set designer, has bordered the stage with sand and loosed on it a flock of plastic flamingos.) Rosario, whom we never see, drives a banana truck, with “something extra” hidden under his cargo—drugs, we gather. This, along with the suspicious appearance of a lanky blonde (Tina Benko), should worry Serafina (Marisa Tomei), but nothing seems to. Fervently devoted to Rosario, she brims with pride and gladness: she is pregnant, but, before she can tell her husband the news, he crashes on the road. This is the end of Rosario’s life, and also, apparently, of Serafina’s. Three years later, she is still deranged by mourning. (She lost the baby, too.) She barely leaves the house, and, when she does, she wears only a slip, like a tart, or a lunatic. A gaggle of neighborhood women, fellow-Sicilians, peck at her with glee. Worse, Rosa (Ella Rubin), a beautiful, blooming fifteen-year-old, is bitterly ashamed of her mother. She’s in love with a fresh-faced young sailor (Burke Swanson), whom Serafina, having at last cottoned on to Rosario’s infidelity, treats like a seasoned predator. In a spectacular act of parental overreach, she makes the boy kneel down and swear to the Virgin Mary that he will respect her daughter’s innocence. Then she goes back to wailing in agony, and the kids skip off to a party, like the Americans they are.

One way to see “The Rose Tattoo” is as a reversal of “The Glass Menagerie”: instead of frigid, domineering Amanda and obedient, recessive Laura, we get a mother who shrinks from the world and a daughter who runs toward it. Amanda spins fantasies with words; Serafina, caught between languages—her mamma-mia English is studded with Italian—fantasizes, too, but with her flesh. Tomei, delicate and vital, does

*Tomei’s exceptionally physical performance in “The Rose Tattoo” verges on dance.*

not have the plumpness that Williams's script calls for. (At fifty-four, she is also fifteen or twenty years older than Serafina would be, though you'd never guess her age.) But she gives Serafina the body she needs, one that speaks on its own behalf. A comically flung arm, the sharp, dismissive flick of a wrist, a round, swivelling hip: this is Italian that we can all understand. To Serafina, the sensuous is holy. "They make the life without *glory*," she says, spitefully, of the dried-up women who mock her. "To me the big bed was beautiful like a religion." You can hear Williams, who was so repressed by his upbringing that he didn't so much as masturbate until he was well into his twenties, sweeping away years of wasted chastity with one line.

Tomei's exceptionally physical performance is so fine-tuned in its expressiveness that it verges on dance, but it doesn't become a pas de deux until the play's third act, when another banana-truck driver, Alvaro Mangiacavallo (Emun Elliott, buffo and pheromonal), appears on her doorstep. He gets into a fight with a nasty local—xenophobia bristles here—and, afterward, has a good cry. In this surprising moment, we see how Williams, using a man and a woman to explore his own love for a man, does heterosexuals a favor, too, by planting the seed of satisfaction in the unconventional. Alvaro, younger than Serafina and penniless, is passionate but unheroic, and Serafina, used to a blunter kind of masculinity, can't make up her mind about him. He embarrasses and excites her. "My husband's body, with the head of a clown!" she marvels. That is what this centaur of a play is like, too: a tragic torso from which comedy sprouts, ungainly and irrepressible, singing a song of hope.

**S**oft Power," a metafictional fever dream by David Henry Hwang, directed with flair by Leigh Silverman (at the Public), is a hybrid of a zanier kind. In New York, just before the 2016 election, a playwright called David Henry Hwang (Francis Jue) takes a meeting with Xue Xing (Conrad Ricamora), a slick film producer from Shanghai, who wants him to write a musical, for Chinese audiences, about a married couple who are tempted to stray. (The title: "Stick with Your Mistake.") Hwang, the deracinated son of Chinese

immigrants—his Mandarin pronunciation is a catastrophe—isn't sure he can oblige. He likes American stuff: happy endings, personal fulfillment, representative democracy. Then comes the shock of Trump's win, followed by personal disaster, when Hwang is attacked in the street by a man wielding a knife.

The real Hwang was himself the victim of a vicious stabbing. His vertebral artery was severed; police deemed the attack a possible hate crime. The moment onstage is horrible to watch. What follows, though, is a woozy delight. Lying insensible in the hospital, Hwang imagines a big, brash, classic American-style musical, replete with high-kicking chorus lines and bright harmonies. (The go-for-broke choreography is by Sam Pinkleton, the music and some lyrics by Jeanine Tesori; Clint Ramos designed the splashy set, with its lamé curtains and red lacquered stage.) The catch: the actors are ethnically Asian. The story, about a Chinese film producer's trip to America—cue bedazzled Golden Arches—is, in part, a cheeky inversion of "The King and I," that touching tale of a lone British woman's efforts to modernize the Kingdom of Siam. Here, the King is none other than a disappointed Hillary Clinton (Alyse Alan Louis, the one white cast member, who looks like she could be Chelsea's sister); her salvation, and America's, depends on Xue Xing, who just might have something to teach us about the pragmatic, unwavering Chinese way. If we don't learn his lessons, it's our loss: as America stumbles on the world stage, China is waiting in the wings.

Not everything in "Soft Power" feels fresh; there are fair but worn observations about the spectacle of American politics, though I much prefer Hwang's antic Hillary, who struts her stuff like a showgirl when she'd rather be poring over policy, to the embittered shrew in Lucas Hnath's recent "Hillary and Clinton." But the show is bighearted, goofy, and something more. American theatre-goers these days are used to having their noses rubbed in their greed and tribalism, but Hwang ends on a different note, affirming the things that could make America good again: care, compassion, mutual respect. In Chinese, he tells us, there's an expression used by those who suffer calamity: "Good fortune will follow. If we somehow survive." ♦

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## IN EXTREMIS

*"The Lighthouse" and "Jojo Rabbit."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

Calling all fans of Virginia Woolf. If you go to see "The Lighthouse" under the impression that it's based on "To the Lighthouse," prepare for a nasty shock. Nobody in the novel, unless my memory deceives me, gets to make out with a mermaid. Or a mattress. Nor do any of Woolf's characters strip bare and stand next to the lamp in the lighthouse,

inhabitants for four weeks, and keep the place in working order. Ephraim, younger and less weathered, will perform the lowlier chores, like scrubbing the floors and emptying the waste into the waves. Thomas has a higher calling. "I tend the light," he declares. "The light is mine."

The film is largely a two-hander, with brief incursions from the animal

like a cowboy at the back of a saloon.

The movie is shot in black-and-white, in a format close to square. There is no loose space, for errant details, in the fringes of the frame. Images are centripetal, sucking all the energy into the heart of the screen as if into a whirlpool. Thus, we are met by a single staring eye, wide with alarm; by a living bird being thrashed against concrete, until it's no more than feathery rags of flesh; by a human head in a lobster pot; and by the hapless Ephraim, wheeling a barrow of coals toward us, in foul rain. As he lurches and spills his cargo, we realize how impossible it is, on this accursed isle, to hold fast. Your temper, your self-control, your mind, your life: anything can be lost.

From where does "The Lighthouse" spring? In terms of climate, if not on the map, we're a long way from the sunlit lighthouse at Cape Elizabeth, Maine, that was repeatedly painted by Edward Hopper in the nineteen-twenties. Notice, however, how often Hopper shuts out the ocean from view, preferring the loneliness of the man-made structures, and how, in the finest picture, "Lighthouse Hill," blocks of shadow all but overwhelm the day. Then, there is Ingmar Bergman, and the Swedish island of Fårö that he came to regard as home. The first feature that he made there, "Through a Glass Darkly" (1961), creeps into Eggers's movie in its shape, its tonal spectrum, and its fixation on delirium and neurosis. What "The Lighthouse" most resembles, though, in its severity and its starkness, is a silent French rarity, Jean Grémillon's "The Lighthouse Keepers." Made more than ninety years ago, it's all about—you guessed it—an old man and his junior, who assume their duties at a lighthouse. Up and down the spiral staircase of the tower, the new film follows in the winding footsteps of the old.

What fans of "The Witch" will want to know is: How much sleep can we hope to lose after watching "The Lighthouse"? The first half, I reckon, is well up to the mark, with Eggers hellbent on his mission to astound. It's when the two protagonists begin to drink together, do battle, and even slow-dance that the story tilts and sways. Dafoe remains in his element, and there's a startling moment in which he is shown, or imagined,



Willem Dafoe and Robert Pattinson star in Robert Eggers's film.

arms spread wide, bathing in the rays as if worshipping a luminescent god. The film, however, is crammed with such oddities, and more.

The director is Robert Eggers, whose previous work, "The Witch" (2016), recreated the rustic pieties of New England, in the early sixteen-hundreds. Travel coastward, jump two and a half centuries or so, sail into the fog, and you'll soon make landfall in "The Lighthouse." The setting is a small island—scarcely more than a rock—off the coast of Maine, to which, as the action begins, two men, Thomas Wake (Willem Dafoe) and Ephraim Winslow (Robert Pattinson), draw near. A foghorn groans. Their task is to relieve the current occupants of the island, remain there as the sole

kingdom, and from brutish dreams. There's an excellent performance from a one-eyed seagull, who presumably went to drama school with Black Phillip, the fiendish goat in "The Witch." But Dafoe and Pattinson have the stage pretty much to themselves, and the result is a beguiling crunch of styles. Dafoe is gnarled, unabashed, and as voluble as a revivalist preacher, though his gospel is that of the sea; you have to go back to Melville—who is name-checked in the end credits—to find monologues so salted with madness, swaying between aria and rant. ("Sparkle like a sperm whale's pecker" is a typical turn of phrase.) Pattinson, by contrast, is glowering and guarded. "I ain't much for talkin'," Ephraim says,

as a kind of Triton, encrusted with barnacles and shells. But Pattinson, who is at his best when smooth and withdrawn, in films like “Cosmopolis” (2012), is encouraged here to stretch his wings, becoming a thing of rage, and his character starts to disgorge a load of backstory. Is that really what the fable requires? There were times, to my shame, when I struggled to tamp down a laugh, and something about Eggers’s tale feels cooked up and overwrought; at one telling point, Ephraim accuses Thomas of sounding “like a goddam parody.” Whereas the dread of devilry, in “The Witch,” was rooted deep in the faith of the early settlers, “The Lighthouse” has to create its own mythology as it goes along. For all its savage wonders, it lies beyond belief.

The funniest film of 2015 was “What We Do in the Shadows.” And the funniest film of 2017 was “Thor: Ragnarok.” That, indeed, was slightly *too* funny for some Marvel addicts, who suspected (quite correctly) that it was making fun of the entire Marvel project. All of which, needless to say, made the film funnier still.

Both movies were made by Taika Waititi, who now returns with “Jojo Rabbit.” He also wrote the screenplay and, for good measure, takes a supporting role, as Adolf. Yes, *that* Adolf, complete with the mini-mustache and the dark diagonal of hair. He pops up throughout the story, visible only to us and to Jojo (Roman Griffin Davis), a ten-year-old German boy. Everyone deserves an imaginary pal, and Jojo—a decent but impressionable lad—has Adolf, whose encouragement is sorely needed.

Jojo is, by his own admission, “massively into swastikas,” and it took him three weeks to get over the fact that his grandfather wasn’t blond, yet he worries that he might not be up to the job. Sometimes it’s hard to be a Nazi.

We are in the final months, and then the dying days, of the Second World War. So dire is the German predicament that the young and the elderly are pressed into service. Jojo and his friend Yoriki (Archie Yates)—round face, round spectacles, and an all-round delight—go off to training camp, where they are taught not only combat skills but the rudiments of racial hatred. Sam Rockwell plays the resentful officer in charge, with Rebel Wilson as his hearty sidekick. “Now get your things together, kids, it’s time to burn some books!” she says.

It doesn’t take long to spot the angle from which Waititi, who is half Maori and half Jewish, has chosen to approach his awkward theme. He wants to make an upbeat “Downfall.” You can imagine Mel Brooks, who dressed up and rapped as Hitler in “To Be or Not to Be” (1983), looking on in approbation as this new Adolf greets Jojo with a merry cry of “*Heil* me, man!” I half expected them to exchange *heil* fives. Ridicule, the more buffoonish the better, is a well-used tool in the unpicking of Fascist ideology, and Waititi cleaves to the Brooksonian principle: that which does not kill me makes me ruder. Problems can arise, though, when satirists feel compelled to lay aside the weaponry of scorn and tell a gentler tale—when Waititi, for instance, comes to deal with Jojo’s adoring mother, Rosie (Scarlett Johansson), or with the Jewish girl named Elsa (Thomasin McKenzie), to whom Rosie

has given refuge and who lives in a crawl space at the top of the house.

Both actresses are on exemplary form. Johansson seems livelier and more emotionally pliable than most of her roles allow her to be, and McKenzie fulfills the promise of “Leave No Trace” (2018), in which woods, not eaves, became her hideaway. As Elsa, she barely smiles, except in wry amusement at everything that Jojo doesn’t know. Once he discovers, to his confusion, that she lacks a forked tongue and a tail, he quizzes her about Jews. “We’re like you, but human,” she replies. Adolf, of course, is freaked out by this evidence of normality—even superiority—in one whom he has sworn to erase. “She’s like a female Jewish Jesse Owens,” he exclaims.

And so this singular movie flicks back and forth between its contradictory moods. On the one hand, there is the growth of love and understanding between Elsa and Jojo; on the other hand, there is the defiance, or the near-desperation, with which Waititi flies the banner of farce. How are we supposed to laugh—*can* we still laugh—when we’ve just seen corpses swinging from the gallows in a town square? It’s no surprise that the film should so often stumble and trip, yet I would sooner watch it again and sort through my mixed feelings about it than revisit, say, the nullity of “Joker.” There is genuine zest in the unease of “Jojo Rabbit,” and it’s weirdly convincing as a portrait of childhood under surreal strain. As Adolf says to our hero, summing up the lunacy of the times, “You’re ten, Jojo. Start acting like it.” ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Liza Donnelly, must be received by Sunday, October 27th. The finalists in the October 14th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the November 11th 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



*“You pinch me one more time and you’re going to find yourself in hot water.”*  
Janet Doherty, Isleton, Calif.

*“I can’t believe you wore shorts. Everyone was staring.”*  
Charlie Choi, Villanova, Pa.

*“Yeah. Like you’re such a great catch.”*  
Ryan Burns, Burien, Wash.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“Well, after you beheaded the groundskeeper, we had to go with something low-maintenance.”*  
Kyle Johnson, Eureka, Ill.



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