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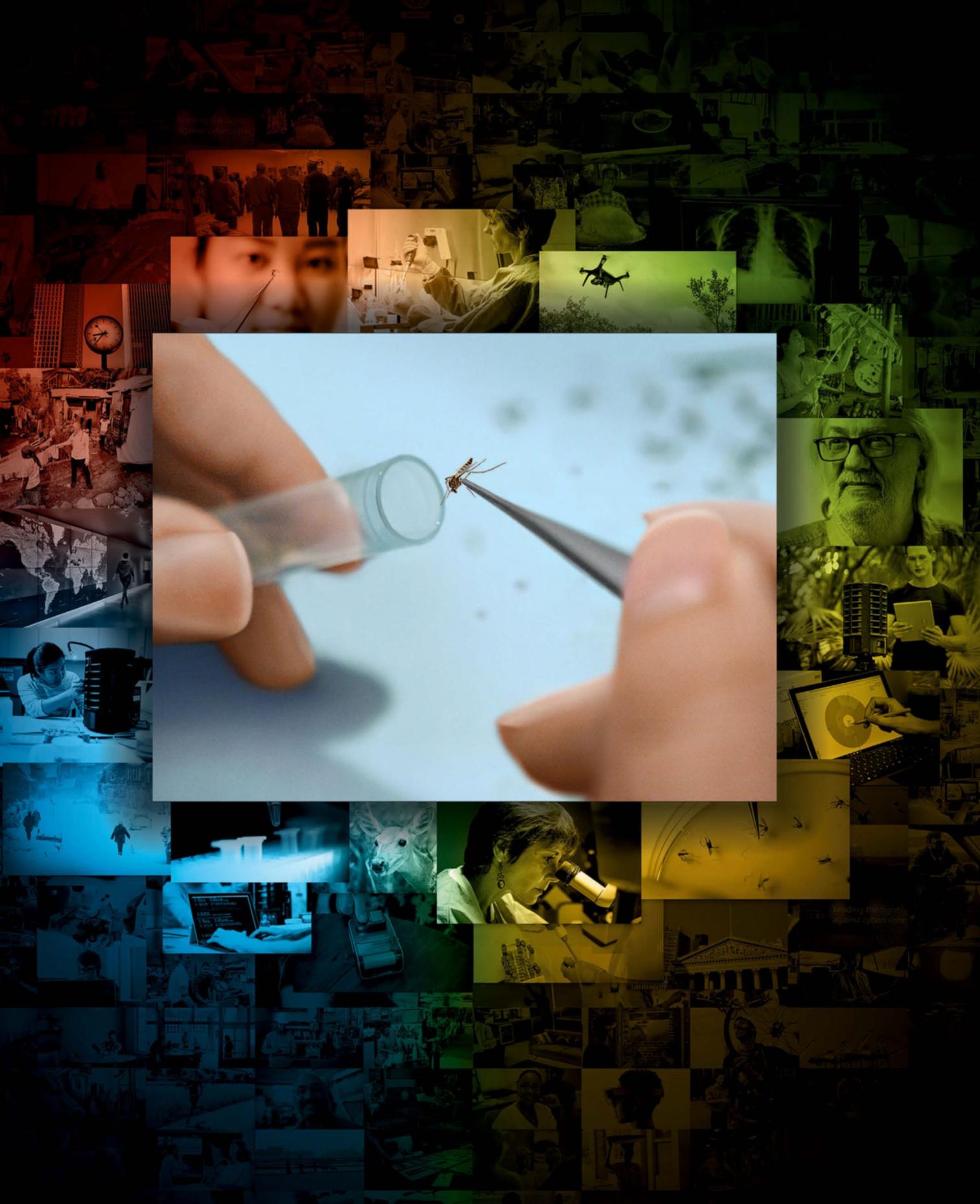
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A woman with long, dark hair is shown from the chest up. She is wearing large, round sunglasses with a leopard print frame and dark lenses. She is also wearing a dark blue, vertically striped dress with a delicate lace pattern. A gold chain necklace with a small pendant hangs around her neck. She is looking slightly to the right of the camera with a neutral expression. The background is filled with green foliage and several lemons hanging from a tree, suggesting a citrus grove.

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VIDEO

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What is your succulent up to when you're away? An illustrated peek into the secret lives of houseplants.

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Andrew Marantz writes about indoor skiing and other highlights of a layover in Dubai.

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THE MAIL

ART AND APPROPRIATION

The debates around Dana Schutz's painting of Emmett Till's body, "Open Casket," which Calvin Tomkins discusses in his recent article about Schutz, highlight the need for contemporary artists to rethink what it means to express solidarity with the suffering of others ("Troubling Pictures," April 10th). Much has been said in Schutz's defense about art as empathy and the importance of resisting self-censorship. These are fail-safe points in discussions of artistic freedom, and they sidestep a foundational problem: the decision to make art without regard for the lives involved, and no matter the consequences. Even well-intentioned artistic empathy can become a form of trespass when it comes uninvited and replays the damage done to the people with whom the artist seeks to stand. The kind of racist violence depicted in "Open Casket" still happens, and still goes unpunished. Protesters, in asking, "Where are the images of Till's murderers?," are asking why America memorializes hate crimes against its black citizens by gazing at the victims instead of holding the perpetrators accountable.

*L. M. Williams
Norfolk, U.K.*

THE ROOTS OF APATHY

Rachel Aviv's piece about *uppgivenhetssyndrom*, the mysterious enervation affecting refugee children in Sweden whose families are facing deportation, shows an extreme example of the interconnectedness of body, mind, and society ("The Apathetic," April 3rd). Medically unexplained symptoms are commonplace all over the world; as many as a third of patients reporting physical symptoms in America today are not given a diagnosis. Doctors often view these patients with skepticism, and many of them struggle to find adequate care. The U.S. medical system could learn

a great deal from the seriousness with which Swedish physicians and immigration officials approached the children Aviv writes about. But we still need to guard against crafting over-determined political narratives about illness, as the Swedes seem to have done with these refugees. Aviv notes that scholars have interpreted the hysterical women of the late nineteenth century as symbols of the oppressive power of a misogynist system—medical rebels against the patriarchy. But more recent histories of the disease caution against collapsing these women's experiences into a tidy political story that categorizes their suffering as exclusively psychological. Physical symptoms are not simply metaphors for mental pain, and physical symptoms of stress surely shape our psychology, just as the reverse is true. If we treat the body as merely a symbol—an on-off switch flipped by a child's immigration status—we risk oversimplifying the complex reality of illness.

*Lindsey Grubbs
Decatur, Ga.*

ITALY'S MIGRANT SEX-WORKERS

As a social worker at a refugee shelter in Tuscany, I have met several young Nigerian women with experiences similar to those that Ben Taub describes in his article about girls who are forced into sex work during the journey from Africa to Italy ("We Have No Choice," April 10th). Taub focusses on the role that intimidation from madams or human traffickers—often in the form of juju rituals—plays in keeping women in prostitution. But, as research by social anthropologists such as Sine Plambech has shown, many women choose to continue on as sex workers even after paying back the "debt" they owe a madam or a human trafficker, because they have seen that prostitution holds the possibility of self-employment and financial independence. Further, life as a streetwalker—indeed a very tough and

risky job—may be a better and more profitable option than going back to Benin City, where life in the poor outskirts isn't just rough and dangerous but is also lacking in opportunity. While we still need to provide alternatives for women and girls who have been forced into sex work or who want to leave it for any reason, we must also work to insure the rights, the safety, and the dignity of those who choose to stay with it.

*Katja Meier
Cinigiano, Italy*

BODY POLITICS

In Margaret Talbot's review of Carol Sanger's book "About Abortion," and others on the subject, the bottom line seems to be that anti-abortion forces have been trying to push the U.S. back to exactly where it was before 1973 (Books, April 3rd). If you have money and resources, you can get a safe, legal abortion. In much of the country, if you are poor or powerless you cannot. In 1956, I was a middle-class woman pregnant from a workplace rape. After trying everything that countless young women are trying today, I had an illegal kitchen-table abortion. Luckily, I survived, and later raised three loved and wanted children. It is tragic that anti-abortion forces are willing to put millions of women at risk by elevating the fetus to a status above that of the woman. I am a friend and a fan of Willie Parker, whose book Talbot mentions. Parker's understanding of the moral and social value of access to abortion today goes to the heart of a situation that threatens the lives and the well-being of women everywhere.

*Fran Moreland Johns
San Francisco, Calif.*

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



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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Golden tickets, Oompa Loompas, the great glass elevator: the world that Roald Dahl conjured in his 1964 children's novel, "**Charlie and the Chocolate Factory**," was as fanciful as it was menacing, and so full of pure imagination that it left an indelible cultural mark. A musical version opens on Broadway on April 23, at the Lunt-Fontanne, featuring songs from the psychedelic 1971 movie and new tunes from the "Hairspray" songwriting team, Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman. Christian Borle plays the candyman, Willy Wonka.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW B. MYERS

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

Metropolitan Museum

"Sara Berman's Closet"

Berman came to New York from Belarus, by way of Palestine, in 1954. But only when her marriage of thirty-eight years ended did she realize her true calling, as a West Village eccentric who dressed exclusively in shades of white. This intimate show, assembled by the artists Maira and Alex Kalman (Berman's daughter and grandson), re-creates her regimentally organized closet from the Horatio Street studio apartment where she lived until her death, in 2004. Berman favored slacks and tailored shirts, which hang tidily near shelves, on which precisely folded garments commingle with other belongings (a bottle of perfume, a potato grater, a jar of buttons); ecru and beige oxfords form a neat row on the closet floor. This tableau is positioned to contrast with one of the museum's more ornate period rooms—the dressing room of Arabella Worsham, the mistress of a railroad magnate, who commissioned a fascinatingly hideous interior of cabinetry and stencilled walls. Beside it, Berman's modest closet is an oasis and a symbol of a fiercely independent life. This impression is reinforced by a snapshot of Berman, at the age of seventy-four, smiling in front of a bougainvillea tree in Rome, wearing a white suit set off—in an exception to her own rule—by a snazzy blue-and-green tie. *Through Sept. 5.*

Met Breuer

"Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space"

Merz is the least-known and, perhaps not incidentally, the only female member of Arte Povera, a movement shepherded into existence, in 1967, as Italy's ambitious riposte to American Pop and Minimalism. About a dozen artists participated, creating large, often sprawling abstract sculptures in humble materials—dirt, rocks, tree branches, used clothes, rope, burlap, industrial detritus—putatively to counter the sterility of consumer culture, but also, more practically, to master the capacious exhibition spaces that were becoming an international norm. Merz was routinely identified as the wife and, since 2003, the widow of Arte Povera's leading figure, Mario Merz, and for years her own work was seldom exhibited and afforded only glancing consideration. Here she emerges as the liveliest artist in a movement that was often marred by intellectual and poetic pretensions. Merz is still at work, in her home town of Turin, at ninety-one. That's a late age for a début retrospective, but an occasion that might have seemed a revisionist historical footnote turns out to be more like the best saved for last. The show opens with immense hanging sculptures of clustered ductlike forms in shiny aluminum sheeting, made with shears and staples. Cut-out swaths loop and overlap, like snakeskin scales, to gorgeous, looming, somewhat sinister effect. Merz refuses to call herself or her art feminist; she even banished the word from the title of one of several fine essays in the show's catalogue. But her very independence makes her an ideal avatar for feminist analysis. She pushed against limits in ways that revealed what and where the limits were, and she turned the friction to shrewd and stirring account. *Through May 7.*

Museum of Modern Art

"Fifth Floor Galleries"

In January, a week after an executive order banned citizens from seven Muslim-majority nations from entering the U.S., the museum rearranged its sacrosanct modern galleries to include artists from several of the countries. The 1964 painting "Mosque," by the Sudanese painter Ibrahim el-Salahi, now shares a room with Picasso. In staging its graceful protest, the museum has also increased the number of women artists represented in these vaunted rooms. The first newly installed piece that viewers encounter is a fragmentary, aerial landscape painting from 1991 by the Iraqi-born architect Zaha Hadid. A big photograph of three primary-color spheres by the Iranian-born, Berlin-based Shirana Shabazi plays call-and-response with the spinning circles of Duchamp's black-and-white film "Anemic Cinema," from 1926. The Iranian artist Tala Madani's silent, stop-motion animation "Chit Chat," from 2007, renders a combative conversation as a vomit-like cascade of yellow paint. Each work is identified in a wall-label text declaring "the ideals of welcome and freedom as vital to this Museum as they are to the United States." *Ongoing.*

Guggenheim Museum

"Visionaries: Creating a Modern Guggenheim" This exhilarating tour of the six great collections that became the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum is so judiciously laid out that the complex germs of early abstraction, the dry but secretly seething state of late-nineteenth-century painting, and the canon-defining tastes and interests of the businessman Solomon, his niece Peggy, the artist Hilla Rebay (who bought her own work, and also introduced the elder Guggenheim to the nonobjective art of Kandinsky), and three other major collectors all become enticingly transparent. Jewels of J. K. Thannhauser's collection, on display, fittingly enough, in one of the building's Thannhauser Galleries, include van Gogh's magnificently eccentric ink drawing "The Zouave" and Cézanne's "Man with Crossed Arms." A bravura sequence running up the museum's central ramp, from Picasso's 1911 "Accordionist" through pieces by Robert Delaunay, Fernand Léger, Marc Chagall, and Franz Marc, captures, in just a dozen canvases, the emergence of Cubism, its overlap with Expressionism, and its far-reaching echoes. *Through Sept. 6.*

Whitney Museum

"2017 Whitney Biennial"

The first Biennial at the museum's two-year-old downtown digs, which is earnestly attentive to political moods and themes, already feels nostalgic. Most of the works were chosen before last year's Presidential election. Remember back then? Worry, but not yet alarm, permeated the cosmopolitan archipelago of new art's creators, functionaries, and fans. Now there's a storm. The Age of Trump erodes assumptions about art's role as a barometer—and sometime engine—of social change. The show is winningly theatrical in its use of the Whitney's majestic spaces. The curators, Christopher Y. Lew and Mia Locks, have opted for depth over breadth, affording many of the sixty-three artists, duos, and collectives what amounts to pocket solo shows. The work that you

are most apt to remember, "The Meat Grinder's Iron Clothes" (2017), by the Los Angeles artist Samara Golden, marries technique and storytelling on a grandiose scale. (She is the most ambitious of several artists in the show who appear bent on rivalling Hollywood production design.) Golden has constructed eight miniaturized sets of elaborately furnished domestic, ceremonial, and institutional interiors. They sit on top of and are mounted, upside down, beneath tiers that frame one of the Whitney's tall and wide window views of the Hudson River. Staggeringly beautiful, in image and sound (including an orchestral version of "Stormy Weather" that just might make you cry), is a documentary video shot on an Aleut-populated island in the Bering Sea, by Sky Hopinka, a Native American from Washington State. The show's most strident agitprop is "Debtfair" (2012-17), an enormous installation by a largely New York-based group, Occupy Museums. In text and in a mélange of mediums, the piece expounds on the plight of contemporary artists burdened by financial debt, mainly from student loans, relative to the profiteers of the booming art-as-asset economy. *Through June 11.*

Japan Society

"A Third Gender: Beautiful Youths in Japanese Prints"

The term *wakashu*, or "beautiful youth," refers to a temporary gender, a sexually subordinate or apprenticeship role bestowed on male-born adolescents in Japan, during the Edo period (1603-1868). As this exhibition illuminates, through an array of prints and artifacts, these young men embodied a culturally prized, androgynous lowness, ruled by a distinct set of conventions. Identifiable by hair style—a shaved pate and forelocks—*wakashu* are shown in mundane as well as poetic circumstances. In one illustrated book from the period, a well-to-do youth appears amid a bustling household, releasing a trapped mouse to a pouncing kitten; in another, more romantic image, a samurai *wakashu* plays a small drum while sitting in a plum tree. A number of sexually explicit prints, or *shunga*, demonstrate the era's diversity of accepted erotic practices, and the flexibility, if not the freedom, of the *wakashu*'s place in them. A color woodblock print of a brothel scene shows two couples—an adult man tended to by a young female prostitute, and a "beautiful youth" hesitant in the arms of an older woman. *Through June 11.*

Studio Museum in Harlem

"inHarlem: Kevin Beasley, Simone Leigh, Kori Newkirk, Rudy Shepherd"

From the elegant mind of the curator Amanda Hunt, a sculptural treasure hunt: four public projects dot Harlem's quartet of historic parks. In Morningside Park, Kevin Beasley has placed three big concave disks, covered in grandmotherly housecoats and slathered in resin; modelled on "acoustic mirrors," which concentrate sound waves, they're Rauschenbergian combines for audio geeks. At first glance, Simone Leigh's striking trio of thatched-roof cylinders in Marcus Garvey Park look inhabitable; but, though based on traditional Zimbabwean mud huts, they don't have windows or doors. Just as the implication of function in Beasley's and Leigh's pieces comes down to conceptual sleight of hand, Rudy Shepherd's "Black Rock Negative Energy Absorber," in Jackie Robinson Park, may or may not clear bad vibes for those who interact as suggested: nestle into the person-size niche in the hulking, handcrafted megalith. Hunt and her

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artists are clearly concerned with context, but none of these works transcends “plop art,” public sculpture that seems to have dropped down like Dorothy’s house into Oz. The exception is Kori Newkirk’s stately “Sentra,” three shimmering plastic curtains that transform an ordinary stroll up the steps of St. Nicholas Park into a pop-up parade. *Through July 25.*

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Keltie Ferris

The Brooklyn artist writes a new chapter in the history of painting as performance—a powerful update of Yves Klein’s infamous use of naked women as blue-dipped brushes. Ferris’s imprints on paper of her own painted form, clad in a button-down shirt and belted jeans, have a cowboyish gender fluidity. The results can evoke Warhol’s iconic Elvis series, especially when Ferris’s hands rest at her hips, as if poised at a holster. In the turquoise-and-crimson “Joan/Joni,” we see a sturdy stance and a blurred head; in “twinK-twin,” the figure is headless and symmetrical, a vision in yellow and silver. The novel self-portraits may surprise viewers who know only the artist’s rambunctious abstractions—they will doubtless earn her some new fans as well. *Through May 6.* (*Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 1018 Madison Ave., at 78th St. 212-744-7400.*)

Joan Wallace

This disarming show—the artist’s first in twelve years—is mordantly beautiful, briskly conceptual, and not to be missed. It spans three decades, beginning with collaborations she made, as Wallace & Donohue, with Geraldine Donohue, in the nine-

teen-eighties. In the alluring “Go,” from 1983, a small blue rectangle floats on a sea of red. The addition of a side-view mirror transforms the canvas into a speeding car—as does the paint itself, which is manufactured to combat rust. (Other works play similar tricks with a refrigerator and a swimming-pool ladder.) Several pieces use the trappings of domesticity to take on painting’s masculinist history. In “Piece of Cake (for Jack Goldstein),” from 2004, a video monitor set into a half-yellow, half-blue painting screens footage of a similarly two-toned layer cake. *Through April 22.* (*Dee, 2037 Fifth Ave. 212-924-7545.*)

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Erwin Wurm

The Austrian artist has been making “one-minute sculptures” for years. But these lightly modified pieces of furniture—kitted out with instructions for viewer participation—seem tailor-made for the times, serving as Instagram bait while also reflecting a general state of high anxiety. One high point, “Head TV,” is a credenza with a skull-size hole cut into its top; seeing gallery-goers nervously approach the piece and then giddily stick their heads inside is like watching a reality-television revamp of a self-administered Milgram experiment. *Through May 26.* (*Lehmann Maupin, 536 W. 22nd St. 212-255-2923.*)

GALLERIES—BROOKLYN

Morag Keil

“Passive Aggressive 2” is the title of this succinct and impressive show by the Scot-

tish-born, London-based artist. Three pieces are placed as far away from one another as possible. A motorcycle helmet is crudely outfitted with a flip camera. An electronic picture frame rests in a drawer, displaying stills from the show’s third piece, a video, which features computer-animated empty rooms, traffic scenes (shot by the helmet camera), and footage of a young woman filming herself. It’s all a bit ponderous, but themes may include motion as metaphor, the colonization of the real world by virtual realms, and the intense self-reflexivity of the art world. *Through April 23.* (*Real Fine Arts, 673 Meeker Ave., Greenpoint. 347-457-6679.*)

Postcommodity

Raven Chacon, Cristóbal Martínez, and Kade L. Twist are the members of Postcommodity, an art collective, based across the Southwest, that is committed to shining a light on the lives of the indigenous people in North America. (A stirring video by the trio is included in the current Whitney Biennial.) Their latest piece, “Coyotoje,” is a surreal re-creation of an illicit border crossing: it isn’t subtle, but it is very powerful. In a dark room, men’s voices are heard whispering phrases in Spanish (English translation: “We have to go,” “They’re going to kill you”), a reference to the decoys allegedly used by the U.S. Border Patrol at the Mexican border at night. A large color photograph of dogs standing menacingly around a horse’s skeleton hangs by the reception desk; near the door, a closed-circuit camera projects visitors’ faces onto an inflatable ten-foot-tall *chupacabra*, a mythical predator. *Through June 3.* (*Art in General, 145 Plymouth St. 212-219-0473.*)



COURTESY TIBOR DE NAGY GALLERY, NEW YORK

“County Mayo” (2016), by Sarah McEneaney, is one of the Philadelphia artist’s recent acrylic paintings on view at the Tibor de Nagy gallery, through May 20.



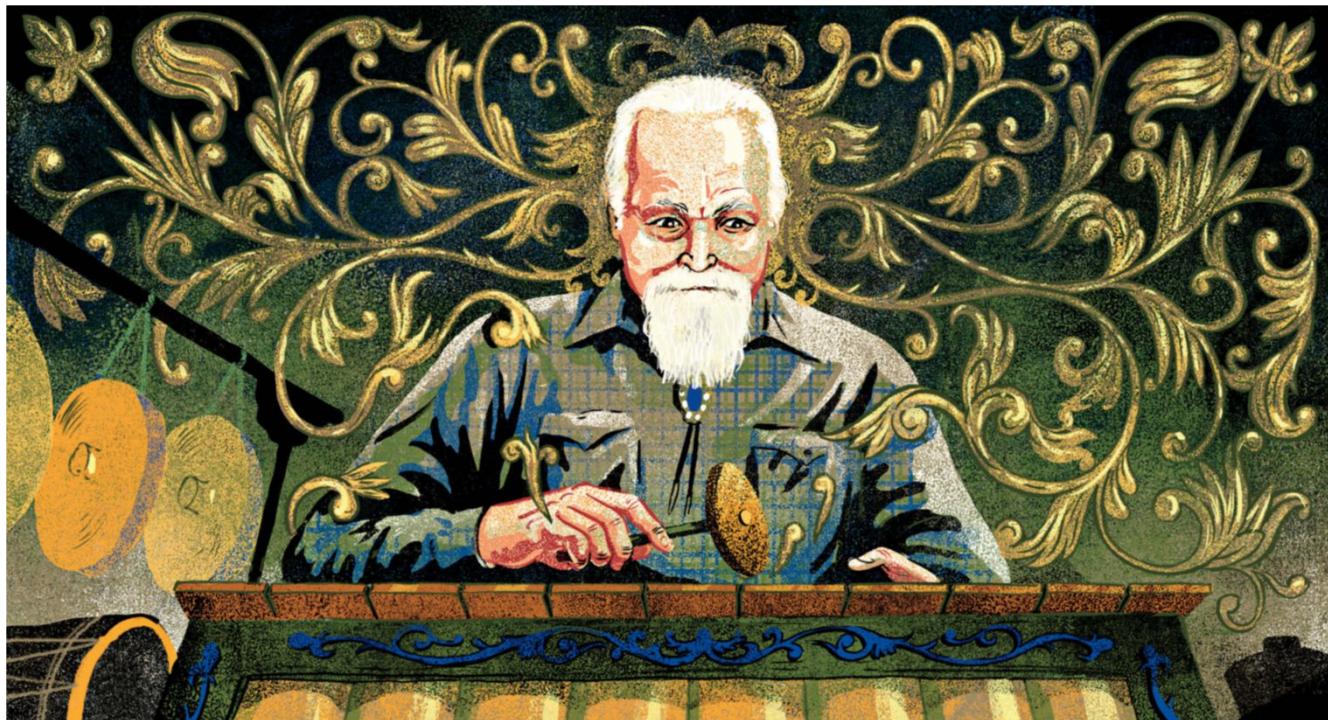
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CLASSICAL MUSIC



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To Lou, with Love

New York celebrates the genius of a composer who left town long ago.

"CERISH, CONSERVE, CONSIDER, create": you could do worse than to live your life according to the principles propounded by the composer Lou Harrison, who would have been a hundred in May. He died in 2003, his profile inextricably associated with the cultures of the West Coast, where he spent most of his life. He was a vegetarian; he spoke Esperanto; he practiced calligraphy; he embraced non-Western music, especially the Javanese gamelan; he was openly gay long before it was acceptable, or even safe. Behind the affable exterior was a keen, questing intellect. Harrison's music traverses a huge stylistic range, from adamantine dissonance to melodies of homespun sweetness. What is striking now, in an age of bloated genre-blending, is his lucid synthesis of extremes. Arnold Schoenberg, who taught Harrison in the early nineteen-forties, passed along advice that became a mantra: "Use only the essentials."

Not surprisingly, Harrison's centennial festivities will crest in California, where he lived from 1953 until his death, making his home in Aptos, near Santa Cruz. In his last years, he built an airy strawbale house just outside Joshua Tree National Park, which was to have been his ideal retreat. Sadly, he died shortly after it was finished, but it now stands as a shrine to his art. The dancer and filmmaker Eva Soltes—who has made an affecting documentary entitled "Lou Harrison: A World of Music"—curates residencies and performances there. On May 14, Harrison's birthday, Soltes will host a twenty-four-hour celebratory marathon. In an un-Lou-like touch—for part of his life he had no telephone—the event will be streamed on the Internet.

Harrison lived mostly in New York from 1943 to 1953. It was a desperately unhappy period for him, leading to a mental breakdown. Before he left, he wrote to his mother, "I long to live simply and well and that just isn't possible here." (This is from Bill Alves and Brett Campbell's "Lou Harrison: American Musical Maverick," a superb new biography.)

Making partial amends, Trinity Wall Street will pay tribute to Harrison in late April. His 1950 score for the ballet "Solstice," one of his first gamelan-influenced works, will be heard on April 20, and on April 23 the Rutgers Percussion Ensemble will present "La Koro Sutro," "Song of Quetzalcoatl," and the Suite for Violin and American Gamelan, a work that employs the bespoke versions of Javanese instruments that Harrison built with his longtime partner, Bill Colvig.

Unfortunately, little attention is falling this year on Harrison's major orchestral scores: the Symphony on G and the "Elegiac Symphony," which show his command of jagged sonorities after the fashion of Ives and Ruggles; and the Piano Concerto, whose gloriously unhinged Stampede movement rouses audiences into a frenzy on the rare occasions that the work is played. Mark Morris, a brilliant choreographer of Harrison's scores, has written, "You either love Lou's music or you haven't heard it yet." Someday, the former may outnumber the latter.

—Alex Ross

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OPERA**Metropolitan Opera**

During the James Levine years, the operas of Richard Wagner were a cornerstone of the orchestra's repertory. It's too soon to tell whether Yannick Nézet-Séguin, the Met's music-director designate, will continue that tradition, but he's dipping a toe in the Wagnerian waters with the passionate and stormy "*Der Fliegende Holländer*," his first Wagner opera for the company. The cast includes Michael Volle, Amber Wagner, Dolora Zajick, Jay Hunter Morris, and Franz-Josef Selig. *April 25 at 7:30.* • **Also playing:** Michael Mayer's flamboyant staging of "*Rigoletto*," which is set in a Las Vegas casino, has been revived by the company almost every season since its première, in 2013. Željko Lučić (in the title role) and Olga Peretyatko (as Gilda) return to reprise their fine portrayals, joined by the honey-toned Joseph Calleja, who sang the role of the Duke in the Met's previous production; Pier Giorgio Morandi conducts. *April 19 at 7:30 and April 22 at 8:30.* • Sonja Frisell's grand production of Verdi's "*Aida*," with its towering sets, ornate costumes, and conspicuous sense of ceremony, glories in the full capabilities of the Met's big stage. Its final performance this season features two outstanding singers, Latonia Moore and Violeta Urmana, as Aida and her nemesis, Amneris, and Riccardo Massi as Radamès; Daniele Rustioni. *April 20 at 7:30.* • In a volte-face from house tradition, Robert Carsen's new production of Strauss and Hofmannsthal's bittersweet comedy "*Der Rosenkavalier*" trades sumptuous eighteenth-century verisimilitude for the savage ironies of fin-de-siècle Vienna, the era in which the opera was composed. The formidable cast includes Renée Fleming (who is reportedly singing the role of the Marschallin for the last time), Elina Garanča, Erin Morley, and Günther Groissböck; Sebastian Weigle. *April 21 and April 24 at 7.* • The Met's current revival of Deborah Warner's production of "*Eugene Onegin*" is a crowd-pleaser by any standard. Anna Netrebko returns to play a memorable Tatiana; Robin Ticciati takes a stylishly fast-paced approach to the score, bursting through the occasional orchestral bottleneck. The impressive baritone Peter Mattei assumes the title role from Mariusz Kwiecien. (This is the final performance.) *April 22 at 1.* (*Metropolitan Opera House*. 212-362-6000.)

Juilliard Opera: "Katya Kabanova"

Toward the end of his life, Leoš Janáček's infatuation with Kamila Stösslová, a married woman thirty-seven years his junior, inspired a string of operas with strong, alluring, independent-minded heroines at their center. The students of Juilliard's Marcus Institute of Vocal Arts take on the first of these, in an English-language production directed by Stephen Wadsworth and conducted by Anne Manson. *April 21 and April 25 at 7:30 and April 23 at 2.* (*Peter Jay Sharp Theatre, Juilliard School*. events.juilliard.edu.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES**New York Philharmonic**

The Phil returns from its European tour to put in a plug for new American music. The guest artist, the intrepid pianist Jonathan Biss, reprises the intriguing pairing of works he presented last July at Caramoor with the Orchestra of St. Luke's: Beethoven's playful Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-Flat Major and "*The Blind Banister*," a concerto written by the sensitive and resourceful composer Timo Andres in response to the Beethoven work. Courtney Lewis, formerly a Philharmonic assistant conductor, is on the podium, also leading music by

Berlioz (selections from "*Roméo et Juliette*") and Elgar. *April 20 and 25 at 7:30, April 21 at 11 A.M., and April 22 at 8.* (*David Geffen Hall*. 212-875-5656.)

East Coast Chamber Orchestra

This conductorless ensemble, ECCO for short, brings together string players from such orchestras as the Boston Symphony and the Los Angeles Philharmonic for special concerts. Its next is at the Chapel of St. Bartholomew's Church, a program that features the New York première of a piece by the Yale composer Christopher Theofanidis ("A Thousand Cranes," for strings and harp), in addition to treasured works along the Franco-Slavic axis by Caplet, Lutosławski, and Suk (the lovely Serenade for Strings). *April 20 at 7:30.* (*Park Ave. at 51st St.* 212-378-0248.)

Orchestra of St. Luke's

Roger Norrington, the celebrated emissary of historically informed performance, leads this versatile and esteemed ensemble in an all-Mozart program, including the Symphonies Nos. 33 and 36 ("*Linz*") and Piano Concerto No. 20 in D Minor, with the English wunderkind Benjamin Grosvenor as soloist. *April 20 at 8.* (*Carnegie Hall*. 212-247-7800.)

Cutting Edge Concerts

Victoria Bond's much admired contemporary-music series, now in its twentieth season, hosts the persuasive pianist Taka Kigawa, an invaluable tribune for modernism, who offers a première by Zosha Di Castri alongside works by Richard Carrick and Sean Shepherd, and the String Orchestra of New York City (SONYC), which plays pieces by Bond and Lisa Bielawa ("*The Trojan Women*"). *April 24 at 7:30.* (*Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St.* 212-864-5400.)

Mannes School of Music Centennial Concert

The respected New York conservatory is a hundred years old, and it celebrates not only by offering a grand orchestral concert (which will include a performance of the finale of Mahler's "Resurrection" Symphony) but also with performances by such distinguished alumni and past and present faculty as Simone Dinnerstein, Frederica von Stade, and the Orion String Quartet. *April 25 at 7.* (*Carnegie Hall*. 212-247-7800.)

RECITALS**Austrian Cultural Forum: "Homages"**

The Forum's sleek little midtown skyscraper is fifteen years old. Concerts usually take place in its intimate recital hall, but on this occasion audiences will have access to the building's rooftop terrace (plus a glass of wine). The hour-long set, repeated throughout the evening, by the excellent Talea Ensemble (with the soprano Juliet Fraser), brings music by two great Americans, Steve Reich and John Zorn, together with works by two leading Austrian composers, Olga Neuwirth ("*Weariness Heals Wounds I*") and Beat Furrer. *April 19, beginning at 4.* (*11 E. 52nd St.* To reserve free tickets, visit acfny.org.)

National Sawdust

A pair of events by vital young ensembles stand out this week at the stylish Williamsburg venue. First comes Nordic Affect, a group that combines Baroque strings and harpsichord with electronic sounds, offering a selection of contemporary Icelandic music from its new album, "*Raindamage*." Then the Spektral Quartet, an adventurous string quartet from Chicago, shows its range by performing (with the flutist Claire Chase) recent works by George Lewis, Katherine Young, Anthony Cheung,

and Samuel Adams. *April 19 and April 21 at 7.* (*80 N. 6th St., Brooklyn*. nationalsawdust.org)

"Three Generations: David Lang, Julia Wolfe, and Michael Gordon"

Steve Reich's mini-festival celebrating the legacy of American minimalism reaches its central generation, the three composers who founded the still-thriving Bang on a Can Marathon and who took the language of Reich and Glass into new, rock-influenced, "post-minimalist" terrain. The intensely committed musicians of the Bang on a Can All-Stars (along with the JACK Quartet) are of course on hand, performing a program of iconic works that includes Lang's "*Cheating, Lying, Stealing*," Wolfe's "*Early That Summer*," and Gordon's "*Yo Shakespeare*." *April 19 at 7:30.* (*Zankel Hall*. 212-247-7800.)

Music at the 92nd Street Y

Two American string players of enduring interest come to the Upper East Side this week. The violinist Anne Akiko Meyers teams up with the pianist Akira Eguchi to offer an unusually expansive program, which uses pieces by Beethoven and Ravel ("*Tzigane*") as a jumping-off point for an array of modern works by Arvo Pärt, Rautavaara, Morten Lauridsen (an arrangement, made for Meyers, of the beloved choral work "*O Magnum Mysterium*"), and Jakub Ciupinski. Two evenings later, the stage belongs to the cellist Alisa Weilerstein, who brings her energetic musicality to Bach's Six Suites for Solo Cello. *April 20 at 7:30 and April 22 at 7.* (*Lexington Ave. at 92nd St.* 212-415-5500.)

Ensemble Mise-En: Music by Yan Maresz

The musical style of Monaco's leading composer is an amalgam of transatlantic influences: he studied not only at IRCAM, the Parisian temple of haute modernism, but also at the Juilliard School and at Boston's Berklee College of Music, where he learned from masters of the American symphonic school and of jazz. His music, fascinating but approachable, gets a rare New York hearing from this expert young ensemble, at the DiMenna Center. *April 21 at 8.* (*450 W. 37th St.* Tickets at the door.)

Emanuel Ax

The much admired pianist, a formidable but sensitive artist and a New York fixture, returns to Carnegie Hall. His program begins with a bushel of impromptus—by Chopin, Schubert, and Samuel Adams ("*After Schubert*")—and concludes with Chopin's magisterial Sonata No. 3 in B Minor. *April 22 at 8.* (212-247-7800.)

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

The Cellists of Lincoln Center are a robust convection of cellists from the Chamber Music Society, the Juilliard School, the Metropolitan Opera, and the New York Philharmonic, who first got together in 2013. The group offers a stylistically omnivorous smorgasbord of works by Gabrieli, Purcell, Glière, Villa-Lobos (with the soprano Leah Crockett), Ligeti, and others. *April 23 at 5.* • It was the St. Lawrence String Quartet that premiered John Adams's "*Absolute Jest*," a quasi-concerto for string quartet and orchestra in which he tinkers with fragments from string quartets by Beethoven. (The Philharmonic, featuring its own principal strings, played it just a few weeks ago.) Now, under the Society's auspices, the Stanford University-based supergroup performs Adams's Second Quartet, another piece designed as a radical homage to the Viennese titan. The program opens with Haydn's genial Quartet in C Major, Op. 20, No. 2, and concludes with Saint-Saëns's gracious Quartet No. 1 in E Minor. *April 25 at 7:30.* (*Alice Tully Hall*. 212-875-5788.)

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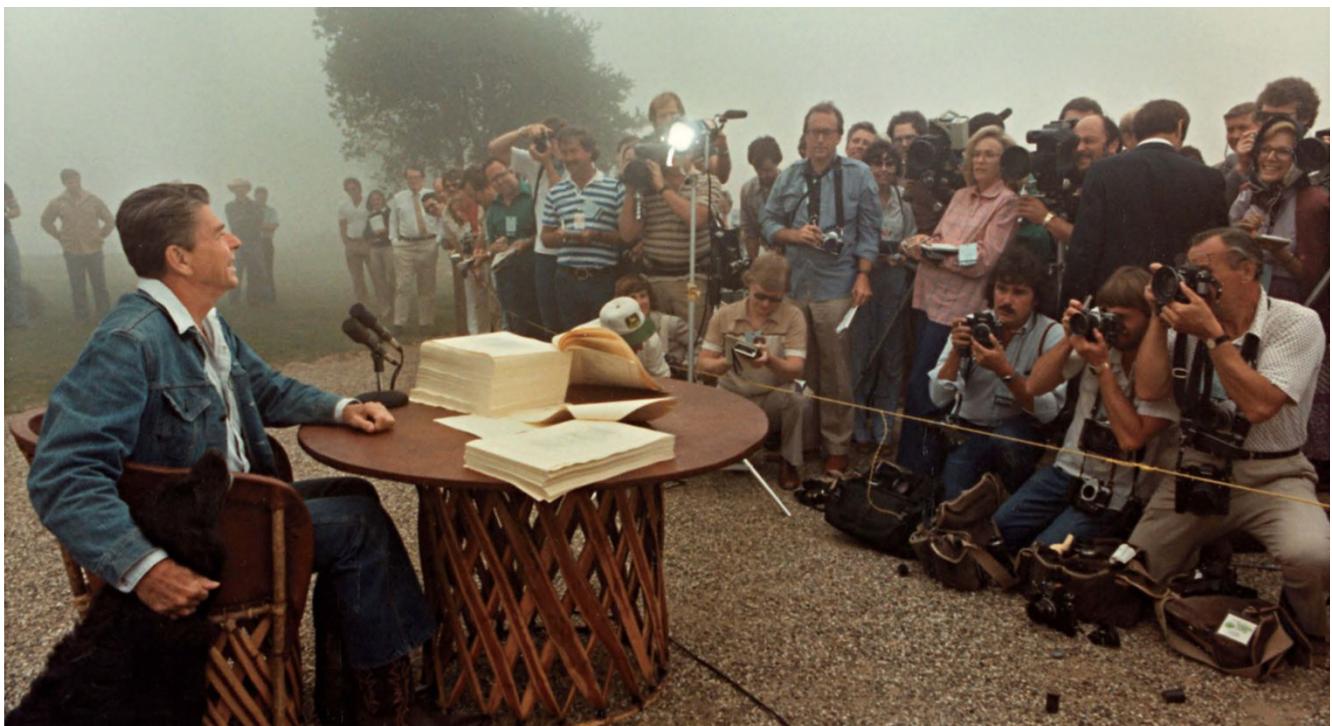
The show has an outsize following online, but while that digital community is a beautiful thing, the intensity of the musical is in an old-school interactive experience in which you show up in person and sit very close to whomever you came with. It's a visceral exchange, one that feels primal and rare.”

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MOVIES



Ronald Reagan's obsessive attention to his media image during his Presidency, and its influence on his policymaking, are examined in "The Reagan Show."

Past Tense

Historical documentaries at the Tribeca Film Festival elucidate current conflicts.

THREE DOCUMENTARIES IN this year's Tribeca Film Festival (April 19–30) intersect to evoke a single arc of American injustice that has not merely gone unredressed but been continually defended and perpetuated. Each one usefully and engagingly displays a crucial facet of the backstory to the current misrule in the U.S.

The New York City police officer Frank Serpico's lonely fight against police corruption, in the nineteen-sixties and early seventies, has been enshrined in legend by Sidney Lumet's 1973 drama starring Al Pacino. In the documentary "Frank Serpico," by Antonino D'Ambrosio, the protagonist, now eighty-one years old, tells his story on camera for the first time. The director takes Serpico on a tour of landmarks from his earlier years, including the Crown Heights storefront where his father had a shoe-repair shop (and where young Frank first encountered police corruption) and the Williamsburg building where, in

1971, he was shot in the head during a drug bust under still unexplained circumstances that suggest police collusion in an effort to thwart his testimony.

D'Ambrosio adorns these stories with sidebars that range from painful (Serpico's uneasy reunion with Arthur Cesare, one of the officers present at that fateful bust) to wondrous (Serpico's discussion of the original plans for Lumet's movie, which was to be directed by John Avildsen and to star Serpico as himself). But, above all, Serpico emphasizes the wall of silence with which police officers, supervisors, and politicians blocked investigation into misconduct—as well as abuses of police power in the years that followed, such as the beating of Rodney King, against which he has publicly spoken out.

Dan Lindsay and T.J. Martin's film "LA92" is largely an assemblage of archival footage about the assault on Rodney King and the riots that erupted after the acquittal, in 1992, of the officers charged with his beating. The film shows that the police violence inflicted on King was a horrific commonplace for the city's black and Hispanic residents. A second incident,

the killing of a black teen-ager, Latasha Harlins, by a Korean store owner, in 1991, led to rioters' attacks on Korean-owned businesses as well as violence against white and Asian Angelenos. The footage overemphasizes that violence and downplays the wider context of unredressed police violence against black citizens, which is nonetheless suggested in a brief clip of Representative Maxine Waters, speaking during the riots on behalf of the Congressional Black Caucus, declaring, "President Bush does not talk to us. . . . We have no access to the White House."

The documentary "The Reagan Show," by Pacho Velez and Sierra Pettengill, shows how the White House doors closed to civil-rights advocates. It, too, is a found-footage film, centered on the former actor and TV host Ronald Reagan's obsession with controlling his own media image as President. It shows a President with little grasp of complexity, who declares his desire to "make America great again," and whose oblivious and narcissistic nostalgia preserved the unquestioned reign of white men.

—Richard Brody



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MOVIES

OPENING

Free Fire Reviewed in Now Playing. *Opening April 21. (In wide release.)* • **The Happiest Day in the Life of Olli Mäki** A bio-pic about the Finnish boxer of the nineteen-sixties, starring Jarkko Lahti and directed by Juho Kuosmanen. *Opening April 21. (In limited release.)* • **Slack Bay** Reviewed in Now Playing. *Opening April 21. (In limited release.)* • **Unforgettable** Katherine Heigl stars in this thriller, as a woman who becomes pathologically jealous of her ex-husband's fiancée (Rosario Dawson). Directed by Denise Di Novi. *Opening April 21. (In wide release.)*

NOW PLAYING

Aftermath

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

Alice in the Cities

In Wim Wenders's 1974 drama, Rüdiger Vogler plays the director's alter ego, Philip Winter, a thirtysomething German journalist on the road in the United States. Taking Polaroids instead of writing a story, Philip loses his job and must go home. But first, in New York, he's thrown together with Alice van Damm (Yella Rottländer), a nine-year-old German girl abandoned by her mother (Lisa Kreuzer), whom he then takes on an odyssey throughout West Germany in search of her grandmother. With this film, Wenders crystallized his style of existential sentimentality. His cool eye for urbanism and design blends a love of kitsch with a hatred for commercialism, historicism with a fear of history's ghosts. Wenders's New York chapter is a loving time capsule featuring the Rockaway Beach boardwalk and the organist at Shea Stadium; his German towns blend grim industry and grubby necessity. The movie runs on American dreams; a jukebox playing Canned Heat, a Chuck Berry concert, and even John Ford's obituary lend a touch of life to Wenders's gray continent. In German and English.—Richard Brody (BAM Cinématk; April 21–23.)

Chasing Trane: The John Coltrane Documentary

A dully conventional film about a brilliantly unconventional musician. The director, John Scheinfeld, starts the account in the mid-fifties, when Coltrane first came to prominence, as the saxophonist in the Miles Davis Quintet, from which he was fired for his drug and alcohol habits. Quitting cold turkey, Coltrane found fresh inspiration in the company of Davis and Thelonious Monk before forming his own band, reaching new heights of popularity and then repudiating it in the interest of deeper and wilder

musical ideas. The sketch of Coltrane's early days emphasizes the influences of his two grandfathers, who were ministers, and the film draws a through-line regarding his spiritual quest. It features many performances by Coltrane (including some fine if familiar film clips) but buries them under graphics and voice-overs; the movie's one enduring contribution is interviews with some of Coltrane's musician friends, including Jimmy Heath, Reggie Workman, Wayne Shorter, and Benny Golson, but these discussions are edited to snippets. Meanwhile, the film offers almost no musical context; Scheinfeld seems more interested in Coltrane's story arc than in his art.—R.B. *(In limited release.)*

Colossal

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

Free Fire

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

Ghost in the Shell

Rupert Sanders's new film, the latest example of Scarlett Johansson's adventures in science fiction, casts her—not without controversy and complaint, in some quarters—as a hybrid law enforcer, in a nameless Asian city. She takes the role of Major, who consists of a human brain, purloined under mysterious circumstances and housed inside a man-

ufactured body. She can think for herself, but if an arm gets ripped off she can always have it replaced: no pain, all gain. We meet her boss, played by the imperturbable Takeshi (Beat) Kitano, her shock-haired sidekick (Pilou Binoche), and the doctor who designed her (Juliette Binoche). All this is loyally adapted from Mamoru Oshii's 1995 film of the same name, which has long been heralded as a high point of anime; Sanders carefully frames some of his shots in tribute to the original. There are startling sights here (to have your mind hacked, we learn, is to be plunged into a writhing pit), and Johansson marches through her scenes with purpose, yet as a whole the reboot is less haunting and less ruminative than Oshii's work, and lacks its strange erotic liquefaction. Also, the plot has acquired an unwelcome strain of mush; who ordered that?—A.L. (4/10/17) (In wide release.)

Graduation

Cristian Mungiu, the Romanian director who made "4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days" (2007) and "Beyond the Hills" (2012), files another withering report from his homeland. Yet his manner remains as unblinkingly calm as ever; for all the intensity of his accusations and his laments, there is no loss of formal control. Maria Dragus, whom fans of Michael Haneke will recall from "The White Ribbon," plays Eliza, a hardworking high-school student who requires top marks in her final exams if she is to take up the offer of a place at a British university. Her plans are derailed by a simple and upsetting turn of fate, and it is up to her father, the laughably named Romeo (Adrian Titieni), to get them back on track. To do this, he must call in favors, bend the rules, and yield to the pressures of everyday corruption, which thus far, as a doctor, he has managed to withstand—though not, we soon realize, in other areas of his life. This portrait of a busted system is all too cogent, and it's no surprise that Romeo and his wife, Magda (Lia Bugaru), urge their daughter to get out while she can. In Romanian.—A.L. (4/10/17) (In limited release.)

The Lost City of Z

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

Norman

Richard Gere channels the mannerisms of middle-period Woody Allen in the title role of this plodding New York-centered drama by the Israeli director Joseph Cedar. Norman Oppenheimer is a fixer who breaks more than he fixes. He elbows his way into acquaintance with Micha Eshel (Lior Ashkenazi), a rising young Israeli politician who visits

New York, and attempts, via urgent schmoozing, to nudge him into an alliance with a big-time financier. Three years go by; Eshel is now Israel's Prime Minister, and Norman pushes and wheedles, doing favors for him and cadging favors in return, until a whiff of scandal arises from Norman's dealings and Eshel is tainted. Cedar's specialty is dialectical—he delights in Norman's rhetorical maneuvers and elaborate deceptions. Norman is a political Zelig, a cipher who lives for his place in photos with powerful people; it's never quite clear what he gets out of the high-stakes transactions, though he seems to crave respect. Cedar plays Norman's story for tragedy but never develops his inner identity, his history, or his ideals; the protagonist and his drama remain anecdotal and superficial.—R.B. (In limited release.)

Slack Bay

This cops-and-cannibals, high-society-drawing-room, and rustic-outdoors comedy, set in a French seaside resort village in 1910, is the boldest and freest of recent genre mashups. The ritzy Van Peteghem clan vacations in their villa overlooking the bay; the Brufort family of mussel-gatherers and ferrymen live on a ramshackle farm in the lowlands. Several tourists have disappeared, and two loopy police inspectors investigate in vain; what they don't know is that the Bruforts have been eating them. Meanwhile, the aristocratic young Billie Van Peteghem (played by the actress Raph) and the taciturn young mussel-man Ma Loute Brufort (Brandon Lavieille) fall instantly in love, but their romance is roiled by Ma Loute's suspicion that Billie is a boy in drag. The director, Bruno Dumont, mashes up his cast along with his genres—the elder Van Peteghems

are played by the cream of French cinema, including Juliette Binoche and Fabrice Luchini, while the Bruforts are played by local nonactors whose gruff precision matches the stars' antic flamboyance beat for beat. With poised and luminous wide-screen images that fuse the ethereal to the grotesque, the ludicrous to the ecstatic, Dumont raises conflicts of class, character, and gender into off-kilter legend.—R.B. (In limited release.)

Win It All

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



Edward Hopper, *Evening Wind*, etching, 1921. Estimate \$80,000 to \$120,000.

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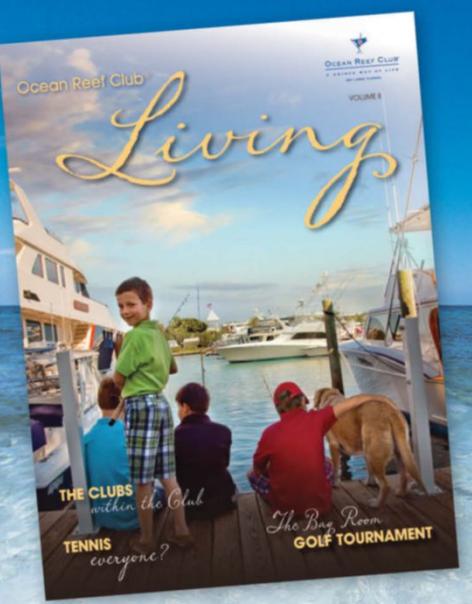
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In "Poor People's TV Room," Okpokwasili looks at the effects of history on Nigerian women.

Body Politics

The performer Okwui Okpokwasili turns to the birthplace of her ancestors.

WHEN OKWUI OKPOKWASILI speaks, let alone laughs, the sound comes from a deep place—from her diaphragm, certainly, but also from her history, which is as profound and complicated as the performer herself. Born in 1972 and raised in the Bronx, Okpokwasili is the daughter of Nigerian immigrants. She graduated from the Yale School of Drama in 1996, and since then she has danced with the choreographer Ralph Lemon and performed in the director and writer Young Jean Lee's "Lear," among other productions. Okpokwasili has always been a standout in New York's crowded performance scene, not least because of what she is able to do with her body: like a latter-day Judith Jamison, she makes whole narratives out of gestures—a back bend can intimate her irrepressible desire to take center stage and stay there.

In 2014, I saw Okpokwasili in her piece "Bronx Gothic," and the top of my head blew off. She was dressed in a dark slip, and her long arms and legs jerked and twitched in an atmosphere composed of strewn papers, lamps, a microphone, and a scrim devised by her frequent collaborator and husband,

Peter Born. The show's script was a series of letters between two young girls in the Bronx; the talk turned to sex, and how little one knew about her body, and how much and how little the girls knew about how to connect. The piece is a tour de force on the order of Toni Morrison's "The Bluest Eye," the author's seminal text on black girlhood and power.

Now, with "Poor People's TV Room" (at New York Live Arts, April 19–22 and April 26–29), Okpokwasili turns her attention to history and women's bodies. The ninety-minute piece draws on two momentous incidents in Nigeria: the Women's War of 1929, when black women challenged colonial British power, and, eighty-five years later, the Boko Haram kidnappings, which sparked the Bring Back Our Girls movement. Created in collaboration with Born, the piece looks backward and forward simultaneously, at a Nigeria that keeps reclaiming Okpokwasili, just as memory draws all of us back and won't let us go. Incorporating text, movement, and sound, "Poor People's TV Room" is part of the grand narrative about politics, the body, and place that Okpokwasili is building, gesture by gesture, whisper by whisper, brick by brick.

—Hilton Als

THE THEATRE

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Anastasia

Darko Tresnjak directs this new musical, by Terrence McNally, Stephen Flaherty, and Lynn Ahrens, drawn from the 1956 and 1997 films about the Russian Grand Duchess. (*Broadhurst*, 235 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. In previews. Opens April 24.)

The Antipodes

The playwright Annie Baker ("The Flick") returns, with a piece about storytelling, directed by Lila Neugebauer and featuring Josh Charles, Phillip James Brannon, and Josh Hamilton. (*Pershing Square Signature Center*, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. In previews. Opens April 23.)

Bandstand

Corey Cott and Laura Osnes play a war veteran and a widow who team up to compete in a radio contest in 1945, in this swing musical by Robert Taylor and Richard Oberacker, directed by Andy Blankenbuehler. (*Jacobs*, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. In previews. Opens April 23.)

Derren Brown: Secret

Brown, an Olivier-winning British performer known for his feats of mind reading and audience manipulation, presents an evening of "psychological illusion." (*Atlantic Theatre Company*, 336 W. 20th St. 866-811-4111. Previews begin April 21.)

A Doll's House, Part 2

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

Ernest Shackleton Loves Me

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

Happy Days

Theatre for a New Audience stages James Bundy's Yale Rep production of the Beckett play, starring Dianne Wiest as a chatterbox half-buried in a mound of sand. (*Polonsky Shakespeare Center*, 262 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111. Previews begin April 23.)

Hello, Dolly!

Bette Midler stars as the turn-of-the-century matchmaker Dolly Levi, in the Jerry Herman musical from 1964, directed by Jerry Zaks and featuring David Hyde Pierce. (*Shubert*, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. In previews. Opens April 20.)

The Little Foxes

Laura Linney and Cynthia Nixon trade off roles night to night in Manhattan Theatre Club's revival of the 1939 Lillian Hellman drama, directed by Daniel Sullivan. (*Samuel J. Friedman*, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. Opens April 19.)

The Lucky One

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

Our Trojan War

Aquila Theatre's piece, about American soldiers who find ancient texts in a Middle Eastern vil-

lage, combines excerpts from Homer and Sophocles with material by U.S. combat veterans, who also perform. (*BAM Fisher*, 321 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. April 19-23.)

Pacific Overtures

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

The Roundabout

As part of the "Brits Off Broadway" festival, Hugh Ross directs J. B. Priestley's 1932 comedy, in which a man juggles his business foibles, his mistress, a gambling butler, and his daughter's newfound Communism. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200. Previews begin April 20.)

Six Degrees of Separation

Allison Janney, John Benjamin Hickey, and Corey Hawkins star in Trip Cullman's revival of John Guare's play from 1990, about a young black con man who enters the lives of an upscale Manhattan couple. (*Ethel Barrymore*, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200. In previews. Opens April 25.)

Sojourners & Her Portmanteau

Ed Sylvanus Iskandar directs two installments of Mfoniso Udofia's nine-part saga, which charts the ups and downs of a Nigerian matriarch. (*New York Theatre Workshop*, 79 E. 4th St. 212-460-5475. Previews begin April 22.)

Twelfth Night

The Public's Mobile Unit performs the Shakespeare comedy for free at its home base, after touring prisons, homeless shelters, and other local venues. Saheem Ali directs. (*Public*, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. Previews begin April 24.)

Venus

Suzan-Lori Parks's play, directed by Lear deBessonet, is inspired by the life of Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman who became a nineteenth-century sideshow attraction because of her large posterior. (*Pershing Square Signature Center*, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. Previews begin April 25.)

NOW PLAYING

The Hairy Ape

In Eugene O'Neill's 1922 play, one of his more directly political works, Robert (Yank) Smith (the stupendous Bobby Cannavale) is a tough-talking, anti-intellectualizing stoker who shovels coal in the boiler room of a ship heading for New York. Coated in grease and pride at what his body can do, Yank is both a man and an Expressionistic impression of a worker, an embodiment of the playwright's ideas about theatrical naturalism and how to elevate it beyond the proscenium and make it deeper, spookier. Disembarking in New York, Yank encounters a cold world of heartless sophistication and greed that repeatedly rejects him as "primitive." The director, Richard Jones, is interested in masks—in returning O'Neill to a dramatic style that inspired him in the nineteen-twenties. By engineering a spectacle of O'Neill's tragedy, Jones makes the playwright's twenties modernism modern now, just for us, and it's astonishing. (Reviewed in our issue of 4/10/17.) (*Park Avenue Armory*, Park Ave. at 66th St. 212-933-5812. Through April 22.)

Christiansand, Vest-Agder Kingdom of Norway

Certificate of Marriage

This marriage certificate authorizes any clergyman within the Lutheran Church who is in good standing in Christiansand Parish in Vest-Agder County to solemnize the marriage of the parties listed below, after the regulation reading of the banns.

LAURIE

METCALF

CHRIS

COOPER

in the city of Christiansand, Vest-Agder, Norway
in the presence of

JAYNE

HOUDYSHELL

CONDOLA

RASHAD

Witness, my hand with the seal of the office
hereunto affixed on this 21st day of December
in the year 1871.

A Doll's House PART 2

A new play by

LUCAS

H NATH

Directed by

SAM

GOLD

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the above named persons, and I further certify that
I am legally qualified to solemnize marriages.

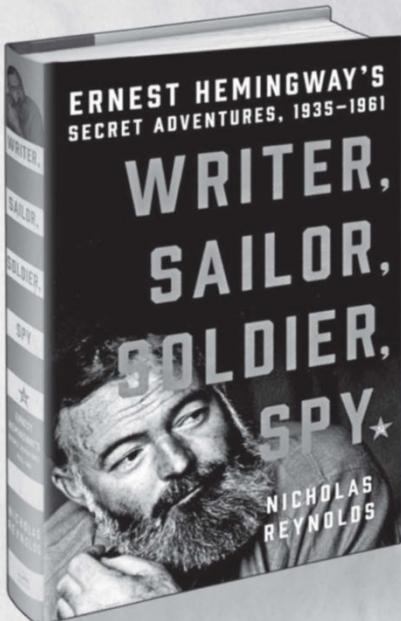
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WILLIAM MORROW

THE THEATRE

How to Transcend a Happy Marriage

Sarah Ruhl has a wonderful way of hearing what people can't say even though they struggle to say it. Her latest play has many amusing moments, largely restricted to the first act, which soars. That's when we meet George (an excellent Marisa Tomei), a middle-class mom whose husband and friends think they're getting into a sexy situation with a free spirit named Pip (Lena Hall) and her two male partners, but it might all be in George's mind. She wants to change her life, and the desire may have been so strong that she's invented a scene in which she and her stolid set lose control. The director, Rebecca Taichman, has cast the piece beautifully (Robin Weigert, whose befuddled matriarch is a comic gem, and Austin Smith merit special interest), but she can't save the second act, which is filled with too much explication and not enough mystery. (*Mitzi E. Newhouse*, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200.)

In & of Itself

Newly imported from Los Angeles, this solo performance by the world-class sleight-of-hand artist Derek DelGaudio is not merely a magic show with theatrical trappings but a thoughtful piece of theatre that makes inspired use of DelGaudio's skills, conjuring a haunting essay on secrets and identity. The level of difficulty at which he executes conventional magician's fare—card tricks, a disappearance, a ship in a bottle—is plenty diverting on its own. What makes these devices linger in the mind is how he uses them to build an ephemeral illusion of intimacy with his audience. If it doesn't all necessarily cohere, it's only in the way a poem might choose not to resolve—to leave ample room for wonder. Frank Oz directs, and Mark Mothersbaugh composed the wistful, carrousel-style music. (*Daryl Roth*, 20 Union Sq. E. 800-745-3000.)

Miss Saigon

Here's a musical that always goes for broke. Ballads aren't intimate but belted to the rafters; characters don't just walk off the stage but are whisked away on a life-size helicopter; emotions aren't muted but operatic—which is natural, since the plot transposes key elements from "Madama Butterfly" to mid-nineteen-seventies Vietnam. Yet this 1989 colossus, about the doomed affair between a G.I. (Alistair Brammer) and a Vietnamese girl (Eva Noblezada), moves with remarkable fleetness, especially in Laurence Connor's dynamite Broadway revival. Richard Maltby, Jr., Claude-Michel Schönberg, and Alain Boublil's blockbuster has been accused of being exploitative, but it's clear-eyed and unsentimental about the impact of colonialism. Embodying the show's critical attitude toward the U.S. is the m.c.-like Engineer, a pimp who dreams of America. Jon Jon Briones plays him with the cunning wink of Sammy Davis, Jr., simultaneously charming and sharklike. (*Broadway Theatre*, Broadway at 53rd St. 212-239-6200.)

Oslo

J. T. Rogers's play, which has upgraded to the big stage at Lincoln Center, introduces us to the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern of the Middle East peace process: a married Norwegian couple who orchestrated the secret talks between Israelis and Palestinians that led to the 1993 Oslo Accords. Played by the exceptional Jennifer Ehle and Jefferson Mays, Mona Juul and Terje Rød-Larsen are tight-lipped diplomatic professionals, as cautiously neutral as their all-gray wardrobes suggest. (Bartlett Sher's staging is Scandinavian in its clarity.) Plying their guests with herring and waffles, they oversee colorful characters from both sides, who

bond tentatively and tell jokes while haggling over Gaza. At nearly three hours, the play provides a journalistic service without having much to say, ultimately, about the conflict itself, aside from a "We Are the World" coda that shows how close we were, once, to peace. (*Vivian Beaumont*, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200.)

The Play That Goes Wrong

Mischief Theatre's combustible farce, originally staged above a pub in North London, invites us to the opening night of "Murder at Haversham Manor," a hoary nineteen-twenties whodunnit staged by the ostentatiously inept Cornley University Drama Society. "The Play That Goes Wrong" is a bit hoary, too—an intricately planned fiasco in which doors slam, cues go haywire, the leading lady gets knocked unconscious, and every inch of the musty drawing-room set (by Nigel Hook) is destined to come crashing down. Of course, it takes incredible skill to pull off such bungling, and Mark Bell's production nails every spit take and sight gag. (This is one of those genres which Brits just do better—you need those plummy accents to paper over the mayhem.) The show never tells us anything about its characters, but it succeeds as pure comedic eye candy. (*Lyceum*, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

Present Laughter

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

The Profane

Emina has decided, at twenty-one, to marry her perfectly adorable classmate Sam, but her family bitterly objects: the problem is that Sam's parents are Muslim, the faith that Emina's parents definitively rejected when they left their home country (unnamed in the play) for Greenwich Village long ago. In Zayd Dohrn's script, directed by Kip Fagan, the battle lines are intriguing—intolerant liberal fundamentalists vs. broad-minded religious conservatives—but all too rigidly defined. The best and truest moments are the ones in which the inherent comedy of the "Meet the Parents" scenario shines through, especially those that come courtesy of Ali Reza Farahnakian, who establishes Emina's exasperatingly bullheaded father thoroughly enough to trigger big laughs with a slightly raised eyebrow. The tragedy fares less well: the climactic twist is too complicated to be effective, the inevitable irrevocable transgression too predictable. (*Playwrights Horizons*, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

Sweat

Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, newly transferred to Broadway from the Public Theatre, opens at top intensity in a parole office in Reading, Pennsylvania, in 2008, as two young

THE THEATRE

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

War Paint

For three decades, Helena Rubinstein and Elizabeth Arden battled for dominance of the cosmetics industry, luring women with lipstick and eye cream in their effort to outdo each other. That they were female entrepreneurs long before "Lean In" is not lost on the creators of this new musical, based on Lindy Woodhead's book, but the focus is on big personalities—the characters' and the stars'. Scott Frankel and Michael Korie tailored the score to their leading ladies, Patti LuPone (Rubinstein) and Christine Ebersole (Arden), both of whom are in

full flower. (LuPone's imperious one-liners, written by Doug Wright, are especially choice.) It's the story that runs out of gas. Both businesswomen join the war effort at the same time, fall out of fashion at the same time, and so on, but the parallelism of their careers, signalled by a split-screen set, is too neat and repetitive a theme to sustain two acts. (*Nederlander*, 208 W. 41st St. 212-921-8000.)

ALSO NOTABLE

Amélie Walter Kerr. • **Charlie and the Chocolate Factory** Lunt-Fontanne. • **Come from Away** Schoenfeld. • **Daniel's Husband** Cherry Lane. • **The Emperor Jones** Irish Repertory. • **Gently Down the Stream** Public. • **The Glass Menagerie** Belasco. • **Groundhog Day** August Wilson. • **If I Forget** Laura Pels. • **Indecent** Cort. • **Joan of Arc: Into the Fire** Public. • **Latin History for Morons** Public. • **Picnic** Gym at Judson. *Through April 23.* • **The Price** American Airlines Theatre. • **Samara** A.R.T./New York Theatres. • **Significant Other** Booth. *Through April 23.* • **Sunday in the Park with George** Hudson. *Through April 23.* • **Sunset Boulevard** Palace. • **Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street** Barrow Street Theatre. • **Vanity Fair** Pearl. • **The View UpStairs** Lynn Redgrave.

NIGHT LIFE

ROCK AND POP

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

Lydia Ainsworth

It's not uncommon for musicians to take cues from visual art, but for this Canadian beat-maker, cellist, and vocalist the connection goes particularly deep. Her mother was a set designer on the bygone Muppets program "Fraggle Rock," and her grandmother was a painter by trade. Ainsworth, who studied film composition, has taken her appreciation for the abstract into the musical realm, where she crafts mighty compositions that fuse electronic pop with string arrangements and darker, more ambient forces, especially on her Juno Award-nominated 2014 début, "Right from Real." On her recently released second album, "Darling of the Afterglow," Ainsworth reflects on the expansiveness of the mind, particularly on the shadowy cut "The Road." As she explained on NPR, "I wondered, What if you could create a state in which your sensations and memories live on forever? What would that sound like?" At Baby's All Right, Ainsworth performs with the solo artist **NOIA**, who describes her own music as "throwing tunes to the ocean of the grid from the laptop of your room." (146 Broadway, Brooklyn. 718-599-5800. April 22.)

The Coathangers

Firing out of basements in Atlanta, Georgia, this all-girl agitprop punk group made a name for itself bashing through rickety no-wave bangers with all the subtlety of a controlled demolition. The trio recently decamped to Los Angeles, where they are soaking up the sun and filing the edges off their screechy garage rock. Though much of their new material has a subdued, beach-psych glow to it, their live shows are still guaranteed parties. A particular onstage highlight is Rusty Coathanger (Stephanie Luke), a commanding drummer with the kind of gravelly rasp that is generally discouraged by vocal instructors. (*Sunnyvale*, 1031 Grand St., Brooklyn. 347-987-3971. April 20.)

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Machinedrum

Travis Stewart, better known as Machinedrum, is a producer capable of moving swiftly through a dizzying array of genres, from juke to pop, while retaining intense focus. His greatest talent, though, is crafting music that's engulfing and communal, spurring connections among fellow rump-shakers on the dance floor. Stewart, who also records with Praveen Sharma in the duo Sepalcure, recently moved from Berlin to Los Angeles, and the effects of the additional sunshine are audible on Machinedrum's ebullient new record, "Human Energy." The album, bolstered by collaborations with the R. & B. singer Dawn Richard, makes a strong case that something divine can be found through DJs and MPCs. (*Output*, 74 Wythe Ave., Brooklyn. output-club.com. April 22.)

Moderat

This Berlin-based electronic trio, a supergroup of sorts, includes the techno wizards of Modeselektor—Gernot Bronsert and Sebastian Szary—and the vocalist Sascha Ring, who also sings and plays several instruments in his solo project Apparat. When the three formed Moderat, in 2002, they were united not by shared musical passions but, rather, by shared aversions.

Making Space: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction Now on View



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NIGHT LIFE

“All of us . . . got sick of the 4/4 rhythms pretty quickly,” Bronsert told *Interview* in 2013. “We were looking for a new advanced kind of electronic music.” That desire has since led them to forge glitchy gems alongside jazz-inflected tunes and, recently, hooky pop earworms. Moderat’s most recent album, “Live,” released in November, finds the sound of the band stripped of studio sheen. At Terminal 5, Moderat will remind audiences why it remains one of the most gripping dance acts around, even after fifteen years and counting. **Vatican Shadow** (a.k.a. Dominick Farrow) will open the show with a selection of pulsating industrial jams. (610 W. 56th St. 212-582-6600. April 19.)

Jerry Paper

Paper is something of a cross between a lackadaisical lounge singer and a mischievous cartoon character. The Los Angeles-based songwriter and vocalist, born Lucas Nathan, croons over sound collages, warbling electronica, jazz instrumentals, and kitsch-informed pop, a blend that has led to strange, swaying wonders like the bummer jam “Everything Is Shitty.” Nathan has recorded nine albums under the Jerry Paper name, including collaborations with Easy Feelings Unlimited, an anonymous jazz ensemble with whom he made the album “Toon Time Raw!,” released last year on Bayonet Records. He’ll treat fans to synthesizers and dad humor at this Brooklyn Bazaar performance, joined by **Field Trip** and **R331 Big Fl\$h**, the latter of which performs a tribute to Sublime. (150 Greenpoint Ave., Brooklyn. bk-bazaar.com. April 20.)

Diana Ross

At one of his final Medal of Freedom ceremonies, last November, Barack Obama offered a characteristic quip about an artist he admired. “As a child, Diana Ross loved singing and dancing for family friends—but not for free,” he said, with a laugh that spread throughout the hall. “She was smart enough to pass the hat.” From her formative work with the Supremes, which shaped the Motown sound, to her decades touring as a solo act, Ross, whose golden voice still quakes, has more than earned the nation’s most distinguished civilian honor. She hosts a five-night engagement starting this week, performing timeless numbers like “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough,” “I’m Coming Out,” and “Stop! In the Name of Love.” (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. April 24-29.)

Ruff Ryders Reunion

One recent evening, during a mix of sizzling dancehall and Afrobeat at the Brooklyn Museum’s Artists Ball, Swizz Beatz stoked a crowd that he deemed too stiff. “I know that technology’s got our minds, but it shouldn’t have our bodies!” he shouted from the d.j. booth. Revelers could be forgiven for snapping photos: since 1998, Swizz, as the central producer for the Ruff Ryders imprint, has been responsible for platinum hits by DMX, Eve, and Jay Z, and electric local smashes by the Yonkers craftsmen the Lox. The labelmates reunite this week at Barclays Center, for a twentieth-anniversary concert, reviving tristate classics for fans who have aged along with them. (620 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn. 917-618-6100. April 21.)

Vatican Shadow

The local New York artist Dominick Fernow is best known for his intensely abrasive work as Prurient, a self-serious noise project with a litany

of releases, some of which contain explicit directions for use, such as “Listen at night while snow falls silently under street lights” and “Listen on headphones at night while driving through tunnels in Europe.” But, even for the sombre subsection of New Yorkers who have turned Fernow into a cult figure, much of his music remains too challenging for casual listening, and certainly bad form for a dinner party. Thankfully, he’s got a few other projects, including the ambient group Rainforest Spiritual Enslavement and the remarkable Vatican Shadow, where he practices cold, stark industrial techno. (*Saint Vitus*, 1120 Manhattan Ave., Brooklyn. saintvitus-bar.com. April 22.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

Joey DeFrancesco & the People

Whirling, churning, and eminently funky, the sound of a juiced-up electric organ has been an essential part of jazz’s DNA since the heyday of Jimmy Smith, in the mid-fifties. DeFrancesco, the pride of Philadelphia, is keeping the tradition alive and kicking. The frisky keyboardist has a new album, “Project Freedom”—with his band, the People, and featuring the saxophonist Troy Roberts—which finds his mind on the volatile social climate, as he essays such tunes as “Lift Every Voice and Sing” and “A Change Is Gonna Come.” (*Jazz Standard*, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. April 20-23.)

Oliver Lake

A revered patriarch of avant-garde jazz, the saxophonist Lake harbors a penchant for large ensembles that can provide him with the orchestral colors he must forgo in such compact groups as Trio 3, which he co-leads with Reggie Workman and Andrew Cyrille. With a sixteen-piece big band at his disposal, Lake will have all the tools he needs. (*Jazz Gallery*, 1160 Broadway, at 27th St., Fifth fl. 646-494-3625. April 21-22.)

Kendra Shank

It’s natural that the imaginative and daring, yet still undervalued, vocalist Shank should want to surround herself with close associates of long standing to celebrate her birthday. Enfolding her in warming tones will be the pianist **Frank Kimbrough**, the saxophonist **Billy Drewes**, and the bassist **Jay Anderson**. (*Kitano, Jazz at Kitano*, 66 Park Ave., at 38th St. 212-885-7119. April 22.)

Wadada Leo Smith

A resurgence of activity and acclaim has enlivened the sixth decade of this trumpeter and composer’s engrossing career. A weeklong residency by the perennially avant-garde figurehead merely skims the surface of his output, but it still features plenty of potentially fascinating encounters with such freethinkers as **Bill Laswell**, **Angelica Sanchez**, and the sound designer **Hardedge**. (*The Stone*, Avenue C at 2nd St. thestonenyc.com. April 18-23.)

Steve Turre

When it comes to stylists who double on dissimilar instruments, Turre is in a class by himself; a trombone virtuoso, he also blows the stuffing out of seashells—the sight of which is worth the price of admission. His hard-bop-leaning quintet includes **Javon Jackson**, on saxophone, and the intrepid eighty-eight-year-old drummer **Jimmy Cobb**. (*Smoke*, 2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts. 212-864-6662. April 21-23.)

DANCE

New York City Ballet

Much of this season is a parade of ballets made in the past three decades, but the first week is dedicated to George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins, the company's éminences grises. The Balanchine lineup contains a virtuoso showcase ("Allegro Brillante"), a modernist masterpiece ("The Four Temperaments"), and an homage to classical order and excess ("Symphony in C"). From Robbins, we get the classic wartime miniature "Fancy Free," a silent ballet ("Moves"), and the comic gem "The Concert." • April 18 at 7:30; April 21-22 at 8, and April 23 at 3: "Allegro Brillante," "The Four Temperaments," and "Symphony in C." • April 19-20 at 7:30 and April 22 at 2: "Fancy Free," "Moves," and "The Concert." • April 25 at 7:30: (All Wheeldon) "Mercurial Manoeuvres," "Polyphony," "Liturgy," and "American Rhapsody." (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-496-0600. Through May 28.)

Ballet Hispánico

The excellent troupe presents a triple bill of works by female choreographers; two of the pieces are the product of its in-house dance incubator, the Instituto Coreográfico. The newest is "Con Brazos Abiertos," by Michelle Manzanales (the director of the company school). It's a highly personal work, a collage of images and songs exploring the experience of growing up Mexican-American in Texas. It will be performed alongside a deconstruction of flamenco, by Annabelle Lopez Ochoa, and "3. Catorce Dieciséis," a 2002 work inspired by the mathematical constant pi, by the Mexican contemporary-dance choreographer Tania Pérez-Salas. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. April 18-23.)

Dance Theatre of Harlem

Since its resurrection from bankruptcy, in 2013, this treasured ballet troupe has been determined but unsteady, struggling to honor its past while adapting to the financial and aesthetic demands of the present. One bright spot has been its resident choreographer, Robert Garland, and so a new work by him (set to Brahms's ballet-friendly "Variations on a Theme by Joseph Haydn") is good news. The season also includes a revival of "Dialogues," a sleek work made for the company in 1991 by Glen Tetley, a once ubiquitous choreographer who has fallen into obscurity. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. April 19-22.)

Okwui Okpokwasili

Tall, striking, focussed, and fearless, Okpokwasili is just about impossible to overlook. In "Poor People's TV Room," she uses the force of her presence in a rumination on the visibility and the invisibility of black women—embodied by herself and three others, younger and older. The work, a collaboration with her husband, the visual designer Peter Born, is an unhurried mix of movement and anecdotes. Like the plastic used in its set, much of it is intentionally opaque. (New York Live Arts, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. April 19-22. Through April 29.)

Doug Elkins Choreography, Etc.

For Elkins, who started out as a b-boy, a love of hip-hop is in no way incompatible with a love of modern dance. His delightful aesthetic flows from, and is continually refreshed by, stylistic polyamory. So it's rather fitting that loving several people at once

is the subject of "O, round desire," his new work for Montclair State University's "Peak Performances" series. A new film, "A Hundred Indecisions," mixes "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" with house dance and voguing (the cast includes the astonishing voguer Javier Ninja). "Mo(or)town/Redux," Elkins's brilliant 2012 mashup of "Othello," Motown, José Limón, and club dance, also gets a welcome reprise. (Alexander Kasser Theatre, 1 Normal Ave., Montclair, N.J. 973-655-5112. April 20-23.)

Maurice Chestnut & Friends

A formidable if erratic tap dancer, best known for his appearances with the Geri Allen Trio, Chestnut teams up with another untamed tap talent, Briana Ali (also known as Alexandria Bradley), for a work-in-progress showing of "Beats + Rhymes + Tap Shoes," as part of the Apollo Theatre's Salon Series. It's a raucous, politically minded tribute to hip-hop, particularly to the music of A Tribe Called Quest. The groove-master drummer Jerome Jennings leads the band. (253 W. 125th St. 800-745-3000. April 21-22.)

Jimena Paz

Born and raised in Buenos Aires, Paz, who has made a career as a dancer in New York, is one of the most gorgeous and bewitching performers in the downtown scene. Her new solo, "Yellow," exam-

ines the layers of that past. Part of the work draws on memories of her childhood, filtered through collaborations with the esteemed American choreographers Ralph Lemon and Vicky Shick. Another part re-creates a dance that a teacher in Argentina taught Paz just before she headed north, more than two decades ago. (*The Chocolate Factory*, 5-49 49th Ave., Long Island City. 866-811-4111. April 21-23. Through April 30.)

"Dancing the Gods"

India has one of the most varied and dramatically rich classical-dance traditions in the world. This festival, presented by World Music Institute, has yielded revelatory performances in the past; the level of talent is dependably high. Neena Prasad (April 22) works in a traditional mode, with live musicians on a bare stage. Prasad is a specialist in the graceful, fluid dance form mohiniyattam, associated with the temples of the southern state of Kerala. Sanjukta Sinha (April 23) works in kathak, a more stylized northern form. Her approach is updated and "immersive"; it includes a recorded sound score, contemporary costumes, and mood-inducing lighting effects. (*Symphony Space*, Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400. April 22-23.)

"Works & Process" / "Music at the Ballet"

There is an art to conducting music for dance. This special synergy will be the subject of a conversation at the Guggenheim, led by Andrew Litton, recently named the music director of New York City Ballet. There will be a performance by musicians and dancers of N.Y.C.B. as well. (Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3575. April 23.)

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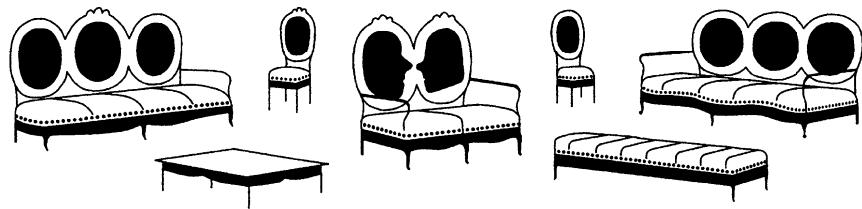
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This exhibition is organized by the Rubin Museum of Art in collaboration with Magnum Photos and the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation. Generous support is provided by The Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, David Solo, an anonymous donor, and contributors to the 2017 Exhibitions Fund.



Kathakali Actors Being Made up for a Performance from the Mahabharata Cheruthuruthi, Kerala, India, 1950
©Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

ABOVE & BEYOND



St. Jordi Festival

In Barcelona, St. Valentine's seat is occupied by Jordi, a knight who, according to medieval legend, slew a dragon and saved an entire village, including the daughter of a king; the dragon's blood produced a rosebush where it dripped. Catalans celebrate St. Jordi each April, by exchanging roses and books with their loved ones. The Farragut Fund for Catalan Culture in the U.S. and the Catalan Institute of America aim to broaden the festival's global influence with a week of events, including a reading by the Catalan poet Maria Cabrera, at El Born Restaurant (April 19), and a bookstore crawl that includes Housing Works, McNally Jackson, and Rizzoli; in keeping with tradition, each attendee who purchases a book will receive a rose. (*Various locations. ciopa.org. April 19–23.*)

Brisket King

Beef brisket is known among barbecue enthusiasts as one of the most difficult cuts of meat to prepare; it can demand ten to eighteen hours of attention, and has a narrow window between undercooking and overcooking. Twenty chefs put their precise methods to the test at this annual competition, now in its sixth year, where celebrity judges—including Aaron Franklin, of Franklin Barbecue, in Austin, Texas; John Tesar, of “Top Chef”; and Jake Dell, the young owner of the Houston Street institution Katz’s Delicatessen—will crown the city’s best. Guests can purchase tickets that are good for unlimited tastings and drinks, and can cast a vote for the People’s Choice award. (*Food Science Academy of LIU, 1 University Plaza, Brooklyn. brisketking-nyc.com. April 19 at 6.*)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

A portion of the library of Maurice Neville—a West Coast bibliophile and book dealer—goes under the gavel at **Sotheby's** on April 24. One of the prize lots is a twenty-three-volume edition of the collected works of Mark Twain, each book of which is inscribed with an aphorism by the folksy author. (Example: “What is the difference between a taxidermist and a tax collector? The taxidermist takes only your skin.”) Gems of a different sort appear on April 25, in a jewelry sale that includes twelve Art Nouveau beauties by Louis Comfort Tiffany. (*York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.*) • **Christie's** holds a two-day sale of prints (April 19–20), heavy on Warhols, Picassos, and Lichtensteins, followed, a few days later, by one devoted to Japanese and Korean art (April 25). The latter contains an eclectic mix, from monumental porcelain jars to suits of Japanese armor to a naughty scroll meant to

be carried discreetly in the sleeve of a kimono. (*20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.*)

READINGS AND TALKS

Strand Bookstore

Adam Kirsch's “The Global Novel” poses a question that may be more intriguing as a roundtable chat than as a slim volume: Is there such a thing as a truly international novel, and how close has anyone come to achieving it? In the book, Kirsch dissects titles by Haruki Murakami, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Elena Ferrante, and Orhan Pamuk, parsing the human traits that appear in fiction from around the world, and also examining their commercial contexts in an increasingly globalized market for information. The author and educator John Freeman and the *New Republic* literary editor Laura Marsh join Kirsch at this discussion. (*828 Broadway. 212-473-1452. April 24 at 7.*)

McNally Jackson

Among punk obsessives, the former journalist John Ingham is a byline to know: he landed the first-ever interview with the Sex Pistols, in 1976. As a young Australian embedded in the nascent punk scene in the U.K., he saw some of the first performances by the Clash and the Damned, and wrote for rock bibles like *Rolling Stone* and *Creem*. He gathers photography and reporting from these years in “Spirit of ’76,” which contains some of the only color photos of the era and first-person accounts of a new sound as it came into its own. He is joined by Will Hermes, the author of “Love Goes to Buildings on Fire,” for this conversation and launch. (*52 Prince St. 212-274-1160. April 19 at 7.*)

New York Public Library

In an early case of domestic terrorism, George Metesky shook the residents of New York City between 1940 and 1957, planting upward of thirty bombs at landmarks including Grand Central Terminal, Radio City Music Hall, and the Port Authority Bus Terminal, and injuring more than a dozen people. The former Marine was apprehended by the N.Y.P.D. with the help of James Brussel, a psychiatrist who studied Metesky's behavioral patterns, as well as letters he wrote to local authorities and newspapers, to offer a psychological profile of the suspect; the process led to criminal-profiling methods still in wide use today. Michael Cannell traces this infamous history in the novel “Incendiary,” which he reads from at the main branch of the New York Public Library, another one of Metesky's targets. (*Mid-Manhattan Library, 55 Fifth Ave. 212-340-0863. April 25 at 6:30.*)

FOOD & DRINK



TABLES FOR TWO

King

18 King St. (917-825-1618)

THE MENU AT King, which was opened last fall on the western edge of SoHo, by three enterprising young women, reads like a lusty love letter to Italian simplicity—something like what Meryl Streep's Italian-Iowan housewife in "The Bridges of Madison County" would cook for Clint Eastwood's lonely photographer, to show him the lost art of food as pleasure. *Coniglio alla cacciatoria*, onglet char-grilled over rosemary branches, poached octopus with *bottarga di muggine*: every item on the short list (which changes daily) seems to have ancient roots, has probably been finished with a deep, peppery olive oil, and may possibly be an ideal version of itself. This is all thanks to the British co-chefs Jess Shadbolt and Clare de Boer, who cooked together at London's exalted River Café; the American Annie Shi, who previously worked at J.P. Morgan, manages the dining room. It's small and cozy, in gentle cream and yellow tones, with a white-tablecloth formality that's slightly confusing for such an unassuming downtown spot.

The service is breezy and attentive and sweet, and before you even order you are presented with a flamboyant whoosh of paper-thin crisp bread resembling a Frank Gehry band shell. Better is the *panisse*, long strips of fried chickpea dough that

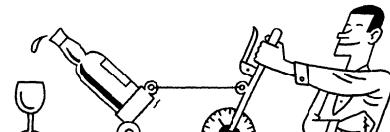
are salted and just the right amount of oily. With it are sage leaves that have been fried until brittle, banishing the mustiness of the herb and bringing out its verdant essence.

A spectacular, bracing salad served at the beginning of March included a pink radicchio that one guest had recently spied in the produce section of Eataly, and a mysterious soft-crunchy, hollow stalk, which turned out to be the heart of a puntarelle, whose chicory-like leaves were more easily identified. The *coniglio alla cacciatoria*, or hunter's rabbit, came as nubs of tender, gamey meat on a bed of polenta larded with cheese and butter, and the onglet appeared as great red slices of skirt steak, alongside al-dente chickpeas. For dessert, a Pernod semifreddo in a dainty coupe was an inspired touch.

On a recent Sunday, a lunch celebrating the food of Veneto started with a delightfully odd fritto misto of polenta, lemon slices, little sage-and-anchovy sandwiches, and radicchio. Before the spring-pea-and-mint risotto, there was a simple salad of the most vibrant, juicy greens. The server, when asked where those exquisite leaves were from, said they had been flown in from Milan. It was a startling admission in this age of locavore politics. As you walk out, a kumquat tree near the door offers a glimpse of orange fruit, and a signal that the world is as close as your back yard. (*Entrées \$29-\$34.*)

—Shauna Lyon

BAR TAB



The Binc

60 Henry St., Brooklyn (718-624-1444)

On a Brooklyn Heights block, near a wine bar and an alehouse, the Binc is inconspicuous, its presence marked most boldly by a sandwich board. The interior is suffused with a warm, orangey glow, and, though it just celebrated its one-year anniversary, it feels curiously unfocussed in time. There is a faded portrait of a mustachioed man from an indeterminate era, and antique marionettes of soldiers hanging on a cloudy, wall-size mirror; the rest-room signs are done in careful Art Deco lettering. On a recent Saturday night, the bar top was crowded with rows of multicolored tinctures, like cardamom bitters and sweet-potato shrub, which added complexity to cocktails such as the Whitaker (vodka, ginger) and the Fall of Roebling (tequila, habanero). Twelve barflies gave the room a pleasantly full, but not overcrowded, air. An impossibly beautiful couple ignored their whipped-cream-topped Irish coffees, gazing intently into each other's eyes. The Binc's clientele look like they've stepped from a J. Crew catalogue, and no one raises her voice above a coy murmur, while the bartenders, stirring assiduously, keep to a formal, timeless dress code: white shirts, neckties, black aprons. (Modern Brooklyn makes its presence known in the ear gauges sported by one of the stirrers.) A drinker mused that if a railroad baron who inhabited this neighborhood in the eighteen-fifties returned, at least he could come here for a decent drink. If cocktails didn't strike the baron's fancy, he could select from a wide range of bubbles, which gives the Binc, short for Bubbles Inc., its name. There's Cava Brut, from Spain, and Champagne, direct from France. The bubbles rise pleasantly, like a dozen quiet conversations.—Talia Lavin



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THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT

REVERSAL OF JUSTICE

THE DISMAY THAT the neophytes in the Trump Administration elicit tends to follow three stages: alarm at what they say, shock at what they do, and outrage at what they propose to do next. Attorney General Jeff Sessions is no political neophyte—he represented Alabama in the Senate for twenty years—but the pattern still applies. His confirmation hearing included a reminder of an indulgent jest he once made about the Ku Klux Klan. On the Senate floor, Elizabeth Warren was silenced when she tried to read from a letter in which Coretta Scott King stated her concerns about his character. And anger has met his defense of President Trump's travel bans and immigration crackdowns, and, more recently, his attempts to undermine criminal-justice reform.

As much as anyone in the Trump Administration, Sessions seems eager to eradicate any trace of Barack Obama's tenure. Last week, he took aim at two Obama Administration initiatives on law enforcement. One established an independent scientific commission to look into faulty forensic practices that can produce unreliable evidence in criminal trials. Sessions said that an internal committee would now handle such matters. The other sought to reduce prison sentences for non-violent drug offenses. Instead, according to the *Washington Post*, Sessions will work on new policies with a veteran federal prosecutor named Steven H. Cook, who is a longtime enthusiast of the kind of severe drug-war penalties that provoked the mass-incarceration crisis in the first place.

Both measures appear to be part of a larger project: to encourage the harshest approaches to law enforcement. On April 3rd, Sessions instructed the Justice Department to review consent decrees in more than a dozen cities, including Ferguson, Newark, and New Orleans. The department also filed a motion for a ninety-day postponement of a decree worked out with the city of Baltimore after Freddie Gray died in police custody there. That filing came just four

days before a scheduled public hearing on the implementation of the decree, and a Maryland federal court denied the motion, stating that to postpone the hearing "would be to unduly burden and inconvenience the Court, the other parties, and, most importantly, the public." On April 6th, at Baltimore's U.S. district courthouse, nearly fifty speakers urged Judge James K. Bredar to approve the decree. The next day, he did so.

A consent decree allows the Justice Department to step in when one of the nation's eighteen thousand law-enforcement departments goes seriously awry. The decrees were created as part of the 1994 crime bill to address situations in which a "pattern or practice" of the police violated citizens' rights. The authors had in mind the notorious, caught-on-video beating of Rodney King by four members of the Los Angeles Police Department. A report found that repeated failures by the city to address police misconduct, including brutality and racial profiling, had contributed to a climate in which, twenty-five years ago this month, the acquittal of the four officers sparked five days of rioting that left more than fifty people dead.

When a law-enforcement crisis arises, the Justice Department may choose to initiate an investigation—in Baltimore, the police commissioner himself requested one. If the department

finds evidence of systematic abuse, it will negotiate an agreement with representatives of the city leadership, the affected communities, and the police. The agreement is submitted to a federal judge for approval, as happened in Baltimore, and a federal monitor is usually appointed to oversee the reforms. Since 1994, seventy police and sheriff's departments have come under investigation; forty-one entered into reform agreements, including consent decrees. Currently, departments in fifteen cities are under federal oversight. A few weeks ago, in a meeting with civil-rights advocates, Sessions complained that oversight penalized entire departments for the actions of a few officers, but that is not the case: the Justice



Department found no systematic abuse in twenty-four of its investigations, and declined to pursue oversight.

The decrees have met with some success: Los Angeles, for example, enacted reforms, including diversification, which substantially changed the way that law enforcement operates in that city, and public approval of the police has risen accordingly. Nevertheless, Sessions has expressed disdain not only for the program but for the very idea that police departments can be systemically flawed. In February, in his first speech as Attorney General, he said that the government needed “to help police departments get better, not diminish their effectiveness.” Elsewhere, however, he admitted that he had not read recent reports on Ferguson or on Chicago.

In the case of the Chicago Police Department, an investigation found that a virtual academy of worst practices led to the circumstances surrounding the death, in 2014, of seventeen-year-old Laquan McDonald—who was shot sixteen times by an officer—and a subsequent coverup of the incident. From 2012 through 2015, the C.P.D. paid out two hundred and ten million dollars to settle more than six hundred lawsuits, many of them alleging misconduct. In January, the Justice Department found that officers employed practices that “unnecessarily endanger themselves and others and result in avoidable shootings and other uses of force,” but, despite widespread local

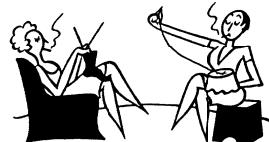
support for a consent decree, there is now little likelihood that the government will enforce one.

Sessions’s position is even more tenuous with regard to Baltimore. Last month, Rod Rosenstein, the U.S. Attorney for Maryland, announced the indictment of seven officers on racketeering charges for, among other offenses, what he referred to as “robberies by people wearing police uniforms”—seizing money from citizens who had not committed any crime. All this allegedly occurred while the department was under investigation for Freddie Gray’s death. Rosenstein is hardly an anti-police crusader; he is currently awaiting confirmation to be Sessions’s Deputy Attorney General.

Baltimore’s police commissioner, Kevin Davis, said that he was “disappointed” by Sessions’s action, adding that the city would benefit from a federal monitor who held its “feet to the fire” on reform. Chicago’s mayor, Rahm Emanuel, said, “We’re on the road to reform. We’re not getting off.” Just a few months ago, Donald Trump threatened to “send in the Feds” to fix Chicago’s crime problem. To the hypocrisies of his Presidency we may now add this one: the dangers in Chicago are compounded by his Attorney General’s refusal to do just that. If Obama’s criminal-justice reforms do not survive the Trump era, the problems they sought to address certainly will.

—Jelani Cobb

AT THE MUSEUMS HAT TIP



LAST MONTH, THE Victoria and Albert Museum, in London, unveiled the newest addition to its Rapid Response Collecting gallery: a pink pussyhat that was worn at the Women’s March in Washington, the day after Donald Trump’s Inauguration. The hat sits on a faceless mannequin head, ears slightly splayed, behind nonreflective glass. Next to it is a mounted card bearing the simple outline of a pussyhat in black pen, like a woke hieroglyph.

The pussyhat’s elevation was the result of what Corinna Gardner, the Acting Keeper of the museum’s Design, Architecture, and Digital department, called a “robust conversation” among the members of the Rapid Response team in the days surrounding the march. The department, which was founded three years ago, is dedicated to acquiring contemporary objects of topical importance; recent additions include a blue burkini and an interactive Hello Barbie. Before an object makes it into the collection, it is

subjected to intense scrutiny. Gardner gestured to a display of stilettos in five shades of “nude” behind glass. “I have to be able to say that these Louboutin shoes are as important as a seventeenth-century inlaid table,” she said.

The pussyhat cleared the historical-relevance hurdle easily, but the logistics of choosing and tracking down the right specimen were complex. “With something like the pussyhat, there are hundreds of thousands of them,” Gardner said, standing before the hat’s display case. She was wearing a navy dress and Nikes. “How do you know which one?”

The curators contacted Jayna Zweiman, an architectural designer in Los Angeles, who, along with a fellow-knitter, a screenwriter named Krista Suh, co-founded the Pussyhat Project. (The two friends had conceived of a pink, cat-eared hat for protesters to wear in solidarity, and when they posted the design online it went viral.) Over Skype, Zweiman discussed options with the curators. The museum wanted a hat that encapsulated the project from start to finish—and preferably one that had gone to Washington. Before the Inauguration, volunteer knitters had sent thousands of pussyhats to a Virginia collection center, which distributed them to marchers. In the rush to

get them out, volunteers weren’t able to track every hat.

Zweiman told the curators that she could trace one of the hats that she’d knitted, because she’d sent it herself, with a note, to a friend of her college roommate, a real-estate developer and mother of three named Song Oh. Zweiman offered to ask Oh to send the hat to the museum, although she had misgivings. “There are some mistakes,” she said of her handiwork. “I’m definitely not a very good knitter.”

The curators didn’t mind. “We all consolidated around the object quite quickly,” Gardner said. “We see each object as a node, a material thing around which we can focus the bigger questions that bespeak how you and I live together, today and in the future.”

What questions does a pussyhat bespeak? “It’s about collective action, it’s about solidarity,” Gardner said. “And I think that knitting, craft, ‘craftivism’ is quite topical as well.” The pattern’s distribution over social media was also important. “To my mind, it’s something of a digital project,” Gardner said.

Another question, voiced by some perplexed onlookers at the march, was whether the hat was supposed to resemble a uterus. The hat takes its name from an “Access Hollywood” tape, released during the

campaign, in which Trump boasts about his ability to “grab [women] by the pussy.”

“You can’t extract the object from that context,” Gardner said. “I mean, ‘pussy,’ ‘uterus’—they’re already words that some people might find quite challenging to vocalize in a public context.”

The museum has received some complaints. “There are lots of people who find it absolutely atrocious that this type of object is finding a home in the V. & A.,” Gardner said. But she likes the way it relates to other items in the museum’s holdings, such as a 1910 cup and saucer, stamped with the logo of the Women’s Social and Political Union, and a striped silk scarf, bearing the words “Votes for Women.” Perhaps other hats, too. Gardner said, “I’m not as familiar as I might be with the millinery collection.”

Kat Coyle, the owner of an L.A. yarn store called the Little Knittery, and the creator of the hat’s pattern, has tried to clear up the uterus confusion. “It wasn’t ever supposed to be anatomically related to the pussy,” she said. “It was more of a verbal pun.”

Gardner takes an academic view of the question. “I embrace it, because it’s part of the narrative of the object,” she said. “It’s not for me to say this is good, or bad, or, actually, it doesn’t look anything like a uterus—you should get real.”

—Anna Russell

DEPT. OF BIG QUESTIONS CHEWING IT OVER



WHAT DOES IT all mean? Why are we here? These are questions with which philosophers have wrestled from the time of the ancient Greeks to—well, two weekends ago, at the main branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. Simon Critchley, a professor at the New School, brought several of his Ph.D. students to the library to conduct seminars with young thinkers, part of the Tilt Kids Festival. “From ages eight to eleven, kids are natural philosophers—before puberty and those awful inhibitions creep in,” Critchley explained. “All you have to do is trigger the question and let it roll.”

First up: the six-to-eight-year-olds.



“You were right—this makes birding way cooler.”

One of Critchley’s students, Joseph Lemelin, whose research interests include the history of ancient philosophy, was discussing the idea of change with them. “What is philosophy?” he asked, in a friendly way, to start things off.

“I want my mommy,” someone whimpered. A boy pulled up his shirt and stuck his name tag to his naked belly.

Lemelin continued, undaunted. “Sometimes you get older, like me, and you forget to ask questions,” he said.

“Why?” a child asked.

“I don’t know!” Lemelin said. He brought out a pack of gum. “I have an exercise I want to do with you,” he said.

“Like pushups?” someone inquired.

“Not that kind of exercise,” Lemelin said. “Are you all O.K. with gum?”

Basically, nobody was O.K. with gum.

“Is it O.K. if I have the gum?” Lemelin said. He held up a piece and asked the kids to describe it, prompting them: “It has kind of a rectangular shape, and it’s greenish.”

“If you were a turtle, you wouldn’t see it as green—you would see it as a different color,” one boy said.

Lemelin held a chewed wad aloft. “Is it the same gum as before?” he asked.

“It has germs on it,” someone observed. Lemelin attempted to move the discussion forward conceptually. “Do you think I’m the same as I was when I was your age?” he asked.

“You didn’t do *phafosity*—whatever it’s called—when you were younger,” a boy said.

“When you were younger, you didn’t like mushrooms, and now you do,” someone offered.

“Does liking mushrooms make me who I am?” Lemelin asked. “What makes me me?”

“Look it up,” one boy replied.

Next: the eight-to-ten-year-olds. They were far more philosophical, starting with their definitions of the term. “It’s like the study of thought,” a boy said.

“It’s the study of everything—like, how is the universe created?” one girl suggested. “I know the one about the two giant balls of mass that smashed into each other. But where did the balls of mass come from?”

“I’ve been asking since third grade—where do we all come from?” another girl said.

Lemelin was encouraged. “What are we supposed to be doing with our lives?” he asked. “We’re here, and then we die?”

“What if we’re not really here? What if we’re in someone else’s dream?” the philosopher-since-third-grade asked.

Lemelin brought out the gum—everyone took it—and asked for definitions.

“What if it’s an object, and it’s gum—but it’s *not*, because those are just words we use for things?” the first girl suggested.

Lemelin looked pleased and extracted

his gum from his mouth. "Now it's A.B.C. gum," someone said. Already been chewed.

"So am I the same person that I was when I was your age?" Lemelin asked. There was some discussion of the soul. "You have it locked up in the back of you," one girl suggested, her hand creeping toward her occipital bone.

"So you're saying it's in the back of my head?" Lemelin asked.

"I was scratching my head," she said.

Finally, it was the turn of the ten-to-twelve-year-olds. Lemelin began, "When we do philosophy, we look at things we see on a daily basis, and try to look at them in a new way."

"Like, 'Why is Siri so awesome?'" a girl who said she had a blog suggested.

"Or Is Siri a person? Does she have her own thoughts?" Lemelin coaxed, offering the gum. "I'm not supposed to chew it, with my braces," the blogger said, then chewed some anyway.

"It's soft, plastic," a tall girl observed.

"So what I'm hearing is, to be gum is to be changeable," Lemelin said. He asked everyone to look at their chewed gum. One boy refused, his arms folded across his chest. Lemelin asked if the gum, and by extension he himself, was the same as before.

"The gum is made of the same thing, and you are made from the same DNA," one boy suggested.

"What is a soul?" the tall girl asked.

"That's a really big question," Lemelin said.

"I have one more question," a boy asked, as the session drew to a close. "Can I have another piece of gum?"

—Rebecca Mead

BRAVE NEW WORLD PRO CANVASSER



LAST AUGUST, Ben Shanahan thought Hillary Clinton had the election in the bag. So the twenty-five-year-old Bernie Sanders supporter, who grew up in Washington Heights, in Manhattan, spent the fall "hitting thousands of doors," as he put it, for Zephyr Teachout, the Democrat, backed by Sanders, who ended up losing her bid to represent New York's

Nineteenth Congressional District. When Trump was elected President, Shanahan became something of a canvassing vigilante. Lately, he's been in the suburbs of Atlanta, working on behalf of Jon Ossoff, a Democratic candidate for Georgia's Sixth District seat, relinquished in February by Trump's Secretary of Health and Human Services, Tom Price. A thirty-year-old documentary



Ben Shanahan

filmmaker who's never held office, Ossoff hopes to flip Newt Gingrich's conservative former district and ignite a congressional backlash against the President. A special election takes place on April 18th.

"One of the reasons I leave New York and regularly travel to work on progressive campaigns is because it forces me to interact with people who come from a different perspective," Shanahan said the other day, at an early-polling place in Atlanta. Another reason he's frequently on the road is that he's lived at home with his parents since dropping out of Washington University, in 2012. "I sleep in my childhood bedroom," he said.

Shanahan, who has a political version of the "playoff beard," estimates that he's knocked on ten thousand doors and "crushed turf" in four states since leaving school. He describes himself as a "positive nihilist," and has developed some unconventional canvassing strategies. "I sometimes use Tinder to recruit new volunteers here in Atlanta," he said. "It hasn't worked very well so far. But a guy can dream, right?"

When Shanahan matches with a woman on Tinder, he immediately tries to enlist her to help the Ossoff campaign.

"Most of the time, the conversation ends there," he said. "They're, like, 'This is a dating app. I'm here to go on a date.' I'm thinking, like, Yeah, I don't have time for that." Sometimes the conversation continues. "A girl I matched with the other day told me I had a good career," he went on. "I laughed and wrote back, 'I do not have a good career. I have a job that I'm passionate about, and I'm fairly certain something good will come of it, eventually.'"

Wearing a backpack filled with snacks and water, and holding a clipboard with a packet listing a few dozen target addresses, he trudged around a hilly, upper-middle-class Atlanta suburb two weeks before the election. "I love the fantastic street names," he said. "Barn Swallow Place. Chimney Swift Circle. You'd never find that one in New York City. We don't have chimneys in New York City. But we do have sidewalks. My whole life, I've walked on sidewalks. I'm still getting used to not having them here. It's dangerous."

An S.U.V. approached from behind, and Shanahan scurried to the curb. The driver lowered his window.

"Hey," a middle-aged man inside said. "Y'all distributing political flyers or something out here?"

"Yes," Shanahan replied.

"Stay away from that first house," the man said, pointing. "My wife's upstairs not feeling well. If y'all beat on the door, she'll come off the hinges."

After the man had driven off, Shanahan said, with a note of anxiety, "What house was he pointing to?" Did Shanahan worry about how the locals would react to a New Yorker ringing their doorbell? "I'm not walking around with a Yankees hat," he said. "But, if people ask me, I'll tell them. I've found that, down here, even lifelong Republicans are polite to me: 'I won't be voting for Jon, but have a nice day.'"

Once the Georgia contest wraps up, Shanahan may return to New York to help with upcoming City Council and mayoral elections. But he's in no rush to move back to his parents' apartment. "I'm staying with a lovely volunteer here named Simone," he said. "She's a real estate agent. Her kids are grown. She seems really excited just to have somebody to mother. She puts me up and feeds me real soul food."

—Charles Bethea

THE FINANCIAL PAGE

SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

WE ARE LIVING in the age of malodor amelioration. You smell better now—and will smell even better in the future—because of the advances that are occurring along Interstate 95 between Philadelphia and Newark. You could call that stretch of road “the stink highway.”

This revolution began in 1990, when George Preti, a scientist at the Monell Chemical Senses Center, in Philadelphia, isolated the specific molecule (3-methyl-2-hexenoic acid) that produces the distinct odor of underarm sweat. Before Preti’s discovery, you had to, in his words, “carpet bomb” smells by applying a perfume strong enough to overwhelm and erase all odors. Once Preti cracked the code, scientists could create scents that adhere only to the nasal sensors that are most sensitive to 3-methyl-2-hexenoic acid. Deodorant designers are now able to create precisely the scent they want, which could be no discernible scent at all.

Along the stink highway, all the stages of innovation are on display. Sixty miles northeast of Preti’s lab, I visited the International Flavors & Fragrances research-and-development center, in Dayton, New Jersey. Michael Popplewell, a scent scientist there, takes basic research, like Preti’s, and transforms it into chemicals that consumer-products companies can buy. His team works on masking odors from bathrooms, garbage cans, and baby diapers. (Researchers at other companies specialize in agricultural stenches, like manure.) Popplewell says that the cutting edge of research is in stopping bad smells before they start. One promising idea is to use probiotics to replace the microorganisms that cause bad odors with ones that cause more benign smells.

Ten miles up the road from I.F.F. is the factory that produces Power Stick, a low-cost deodorant sold in bargain stores like Dollar General and Family Dollar. Fred Horowitz, the C.E.O., showed me around the plant, where dozens of workers combine ingredients—silicon, scent, aluminum sesquichlorohydrate—and operate a machine that squirts the mixture into plastic containers. I wondered why this plant, where a cheap, lightweight commodity is produced by workers who require no advanced education, was in the U.S.; this is the kind of manufacturing more often done in China or Mexico. If retailers are selling Power Stick for a dollar, Horowitz can’t be making much more than a penny or so per stick. I asked if he thought he could increase profits by moving to a country where wages are lower.

“No,” he answered. “I’m in the center of all the innovation. It’s all happening here in New Jersey.”

Major scent companies, as well as logistics managers, branding consultants, and firms developing new packaging and production techniques, pitch their innovations to Horowitz and the many other cosmetic manufacturers nearby. This constant interaction led Horowitz to adopt a technique called microencapsulation, a deodorant breakthrough in which microscopic balloons filled with scent melt at specific temperatures or after a certain amount of time. By staying in New Jersey, Horowitz has access to this fast-moving consumer-goods network. It’s an advantage that outweighs, at least for now, the savings he would achieve by moving to a different country.

Michael Porter, a professor at Harvard Business School, applied the term “cluster” to phenomena like the stink highway: agglomerations of businesses that find it profitable to stay close to one another. There are famous industry clusters, such as Hollywood, Silicon Valley, and Wall Street. But there are many others. Warsaw, Indiana, has a cluster focussed on orthopedic devices; Wichita, Kansas, is big on aircraft.

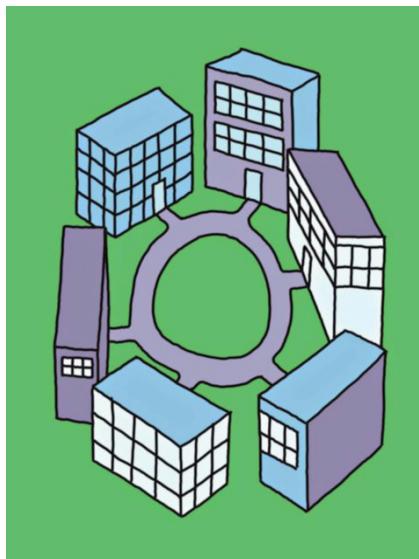
Clusters can be delicate things that grow slowly, even accidentally, over decades. If Dave Packard and Bill Hewlett hadn’t become friends at Stanford, in 1934, Silicon Valley would likely not exist some eighty years later. But, while clusters can’t be built quickly, they can be destroyed with surprising rapidity. A decade ago, I reported on the disappearance of one cluster—sock manufacturing in Fort Payne, Alabama—much of which leaped to San Pedro Sula, Honduras. What struck me was how a minor price differential—about a penny

per sock—caused an entrenched industry to uproot itself.

Most American low-wage manufacturing clusters are gone and won’t return. The clusters that remain are more like those along the stink highway. They stay in the U.S. for one reason: innovation. Innovation has become an over-used word, but, for businesspeople like Fred Horowitz, it has a real monetary value.

Pontus Braunerhjelm, an economist at Sweden’s Royal Institute of Technology, studies clusters and told me that it is all but impossible for government to create a cluster. But it can hasten a cluster’s death. The surest way is to cut off the flow of ideas from around the world. President Trump’s economic instincts—seeking to retain individual companies, not entire economic ecosystems; denouncing the arrival of people and products from elsewhere; cutting support for basic research and education—will only chase clusters away. A few hours on the stink highway would teach him that our highest economic hope is to be the place where the best from all over can come together.

—Adam Davidson



#VANLIFE

How the quest for a simpler life became a life-style brand.

BY RACHEL MONROE



EMILY KING AND Corey Smith had been dating for five months when they took a trip to Central America, in February, 2012. At a surf resort in Nicaragua, Smith helped a lanky American named Foster Huntington repair the dings in his board. When the waves were choppy, the three congregated in the resort's hammock zone, where the Wi-Fi signal was strongest. One afternoon, Huntington listened to the couple have a small argument. Something about their fond irritation made him think that they'd be suited to spending long periods of time together in a

confined space. "You guys would be great in a van," he told them.

The year before, Huntington had given up his apartment in New York and his job as a designer at Ralph Lauren, and moved into a 1987 Volkswagen Syncro. He spent his days surfing, exploring, and taking pictures of his van parked in picturesque locations along the California coast. It was the early days of Instagram, and, over time, Huntington accumulated more than a million followers. He represented a new kind of social-media celebrity, someone famous not for starring in movies or re-

Like the best marketing terms, "vanlife" is both highly specific and expansive.

cording hit songs but for documenting an enviable life. "My inspiration," went a typical comment on one of his posts. "God I wish my life was that free and easy and amazing." Huntington tagged his posts with phrases like #homeiswhereyouparkit and #livesimply, but the tag he used most often was #vanlife.

King and Smith left Nicaragua for Costa Rica, but the idea of the van stuck with them. King, a telegenic former business student, had quit her job at a Sotheby's branch when she realized that she was unhappy. Smith, a competitive mountain biker and the manager of a kayak store, had never had a traditional office job. They figured they could live cheaply in a van while placing what they loved—travelling, surfing, mountain biking—at the center of their lives. When King found out that she'd been hired for a Web-development job that didn't require her presence in an office, it suddenly seemed feasible.

King and Smith, who are thirty-two and thirty-one, respectively, had grown up watching "Saturday Night Live" sketches in which a sweaty, frantic Chris Farley character ranted, "I am thirty-five years old, I am divorced, and I live in a van down by the river!" But, the way Huntington described it, living in a vehicle sounded not pathetic but romantic. "I remember coming home and telling my mom, 'I have something to tell you,'" King said. "She thought I was going to say we were getting married or having a baby. But I said, 'We're going to live in a van.'"

HUNTINGTON'S VANLIFE HASHTAG was a joking reference to Tupac's "thug life" tattoo. "You know, it's not thug life—it's van life!" he told me. Six years later, more than 1.2 million Instagram posts have been tagged #vanlife. In 2013, Huntington used Kickstarter to fund "Home Is Where You Park It," a sixty-five-dollar book of his vanlife photographs, which is now in its fourth printing. In October, Black Dog & Leventhal will publish his second book on the topic, "Van Life."

Scroll through the images tagged #vanlife on Instagram and you'll see plenty of photos that don't have much to do with vehicles: starry skies, campfires, women in leggings doing yoga by the ocean. Like the best marketing

terms, “vanlife” is both highly specific and expansive. It’s a one-word life-style signifier that has come to evoke a number of contemporary trends: a renewed interest in the American road trip, a culture of hippie-inflected outdoorsiness, and a life free from the tyranny of a nine-to-five office job.

Vanlife is an aesthetic and a mentality and, people kept telling me, a “movement.” S. Lucas Valdes, the owner of the California-based company GoWesty, a prominent seller of Volkswagen-van parts, compared vanlife today to surfing a couple of decades ago. “So many people identify with the culture, the attire, the mindset of surfers, but probably only about ten per cent of them surf,” he said. “That’s what we’re trying to tap into.”

“You could buy these vans ten years ago for pennies on the dollar,” Harley Sitner, the owner of Peace Vans, a Volkswagen-van repair and rental shop in Seattle, told me. Sitner, who is forty-nine, said that his generation’s adventurous rite of passage was more along the lines of “backpacking through Southeast Asia, eating mushrooms on a beach in Thailand.” Around five years ago, he began to notice that young people were increasingly interested in old VW vans. “It’s men in their thirties with huge beards, and they’re pretty much all stay-at-home dads,” he said. “Their wives work office jobs and they work on the vans so the family can go out and vanlife on the weekend.”

Part of the fun of vanlife, Sitner theorized, is the old-fashioned, analog pleasure of tinkering. But vanlife, as a concept and as a self-defined community, is primarily a social-media phenomenon. Attaching a name (and a hashtag) to the phenomenon has also enabled people who would otherwise just be rootless wanderers to make their travels into a kind of product. “There are now professional vanlifers,” Huntington told me, sounding slightly scandalized.

Vanlifers have a tendency to call their journeys “projects,” and to describe them in the elevator-pitch terms that make sense to potential sponsors. While still in Central America, King and Smith came up with a name for their project: Where’s My Office Now, a reference to their goal of fusing travel and work. “We wanted to see if it was possible to combine this nomadic hip-

pie life with a nine-to-five job,” Smith explained. After the couple returned from Central America but before they bought a van, King registered a Web site and set up social-media accounts. “The business part of me knew there was potential,” she said. Smith, who was still using a flip phone, was suspicious of his girlfriend’s preoccupation with social media, worrying that it would detract from the experience.

But there was never any doubt about what kind of vehicle they were looking for. Some vanlifers drive shiny new Mercedes Sprinter vans or practical Ford Econolines, but the quintessential van is the Volkswagen Vanagon, beloved for its bulky, unaerodynamic shape. “It’s the Swiss Army knife of the R.V. world,” Smith explained. “And the community is great. And it was going to look great in the photos.” That winter, while living in New England, he and King bought a cream-colored 1987 Vanagon Camper from a woman in upstate New York for thirty-five hundred dollars. The van was sturdy and full of personality; it had a rusty undercarriage and was wired with an external P.A. system that made animal sounds. They called it Boscha, because it sounded like the name of a German grandmother.

They gave away their business-casual clothes and sold their car. In January, 2013, they left New Hampshire during a snowstorm and headed south. Their first post from the road, a picture of the van driving through snowy woods, got ninety-seven likes.

On the first day, the van slid backward down an icy hill and had to be towed. They drove through winds so strong that they worried that Boscha was thrown out of alignment. Progress was slow; even in optimal conditions, the van couldn’t go faster than sixty miles per hour. King and Smith spent Valentine’s Day at a truck stop in Albuquerque, where a security guard accused them of being prostitutes. The uncertainty of life on the road was a constant low-level drain at first, particularly for King, who discovered that she was afraid of the dark.

After the engine conked out in Arizona, a tow truck delivered them to an R.V. park in Sedona. They stayed there for a month while Smith replaced every ground wire in the van. One afternoon,

he called GoWesty to talk through a puzzling repair situation. On a whim, he asked a GoWesty manager named Jad Josey if the company did sponsorships. By the end of the day, Josey had e-mailed Smith a one-page contract, asking for periodic social-media mentions in exchange for discounts and subsidized repairs.

GoWesty’s sales have increased fifty-five per cent in the past five years, thanks in part to the vanlife trend. The company now sponsors fifteen vanlife projects, including one run by a couple selling crêpes and one by a touring folk musician. Smith, who had seen similar deals between cycling companies and mountain-bike racers, was familiar with this kind of arrangement. “I don’t think of myself as an employee of GoWesty but more like an ambassador for their vibe,” Smith told me. He began to see that the time King was spending on social media might have a point after all.

Smith and King slowly grew accustomed to their itinerant life style. They hiked the Grand Canyon and visited hot springs in Oregon. King’s stress abated. With every mechanical breakdown, Smith became more confident handling repairs. He also developed a repertoire of meals suited to the van’s two-burner kitchen. His specialty was a dish he called huevos vancheros: eggs fried in coconut oil, seasoned with turmeric, served over buckwheat with salsa and sauerkraut. The couple bought things to make the van homier and more comfortable: a fruit basket, a travel bidet.

WORKING ON THE road proved harder than expected. Smith took occasional part-time jobs—as a mountain-bike guide; as a P.A. for a television show about aliens—but King was the primary breadwinner. “I was working anywhere from fifteen to forty hours a week, which doesn’t seem like a lot, but when you’re driving around and having all that motion, and what I guess you could call the stress of vanlife—not knowing where you’re going to sleep that night—the anxiety was still there,” she said. “We could never really go deep into national parks or national forests, because I had to always be on call.”

A year into their journey, Smith and King met Zach Driftwood and Andrew

Knapp, photographers who were touring in a van to promote a book featuring images of Knapp's dog, Driftwood and Knapp made money from their popular social-media feeds, through product placement and partnerships with brands. In the course of Smith and King's travels, their following on Instagram had climbed into the tens of thousands, but they had never been paid for a post. Driftwood encouraged the couple to focus on Instagram if they wanted that to change. "He made it clear it was very viable," King said.

In August, 2015, King quit her Web-development job. The following spring, Where's My Office Now posted its first paid, sponsored image to Instagram, on behalf of the water-bottle company Hydro Flask. It showed King heating water in a teakettle, a light-blue thermos conspicuous in the background. "Our bodies, the most precious vehicle for our journey here, run on water," she wrote in the caption. "A big thank you to @hydroflask for creating durable water bottles that help shift the bottled/privatization of water paradigm." King and Smith were now professional vanlifers. They began working more product placement into their Instagram posts. Since then, their sponsorships—which King prefers to call "alliances"—have included Kettle Brand potato chips, Clif Bars, and Synergy Organic Clothing. Last summer, the tourism board of Saskatchewan paid the couple seven thousand dollars

to drive around the grasslands of central Canada with other popular vanlifers, documenting their (subsidized) kayaking trips and horseback rides.

ON A DRIZZLY Tuesday in February, I met Smith and King in front of GoWesty's offices, in the chilled-out oceanside town of Los Osos, California. The parking lot was full of snub-nosed Vanagons in various states of disrepair. So many road-trippers make pit stops at GoWesty that the company has installed a public shower and bathroom.

Smith is short and broad-shouldered, with a mechanic's scraped-up knuckles. He wanted me to see Boscha, which was up on a lift in the back of the shop, its undercarriage exposed, suffering from as yet undiagnosed engine trouble. Because Where's My Office Now is one of GoWesty's most high-profile sponsored projects, the company does some upgrades and any necessary repairs—which would likely amount to thousands of dollars of work—for free. This was GoWesty's second major overhaul of the van; in 2015, it did a thorough upgrade, replacing the engine, the cooling system, the bumpers, and the wheels, and adding a bike rack.

GoWesty had loaned the couple a van so that they could get back on the road while Boscha was being fixed. They had spent the previous four months holed up at their parents' homes in New England, as King recovered from an intes-

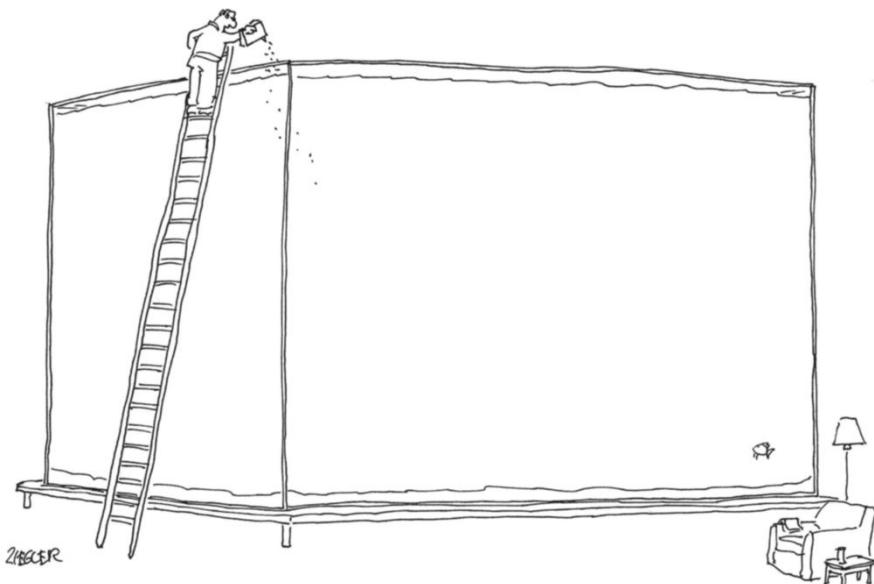
tinal parasite she'd picked up on a backpacking trip in Montana. It was the longest the couple had stayed in one place—and not slept in a van—in four years, and the time off the road presented a problem. Where's My Office Now has nearly a hundred and forty thousand Instagram followers and a dozen corporate sponsors; maintaining that kind of audience requires constant tending. King, who is largely responsible for the project's social-media presence, had done her best to post images from older travels, but the archive was getting thin.

As the afternoon got progressively gloomier, Smith and King transferred their belongings from Boscha to the loaner van: two surfboards (bought at a discount from a sponsor), wetsuits, tins of red lentils and buckwheat, stacks of T-shirts and leggings (mostly from sponsors), a woven blanket (a gift from a sponsor), a hand broom, two yoga mats, three hula hoops in different sizes, a tool kit, a digital S.L.R. camera, and a bag of wheat-free kibble for their soulful, brindled dog, Penny. A sticker on their portable fridge read "It's not a slow car, it's a fast house." The couple travel lighter than they used to—when they first set out, they lashed five bikes to the back of the van.

We didn't pull out of the GoWesty parking lot until almost two the following afternoon, three hours behind schedule. A surfing app on Smith's phone indicated that a promising swell was approaching Southern California, so he headed south on the 101. The borrowed van, a 1990 four-wheel-drive Syncro, made disconcerting noises. "You're wrestling with the van, wrestling with the wind, every truck that goes by you vibrates you," Smith said. King sat cross-legged in the back seat, replying to e-mails.

At a rest stop, a man in his fifties stepped out of a white S.U.V. and eyed the van hungrily. "I bet that can go *anywhere*," he said. Smith, who seemed to have an infinite capacity for small talk, stood in the rain and chatted with him. King was fretful about the delay; sponsors were clamoring for posts. "We *really* need to create content," she said. "And that's hard to do in this concrete jungle."

It had been an extremely wet winter in California, and more rain was expected. At sunset, we were stuck in rush-hour traffic near Santa Barbara, wind-



"Who's ready for some din-din?"

shield wipers ticking, as a chain of red brake lights snaked up the freeway in front of us. It was after dark when we pulled into a campground by the ocean, outside Ventura. Smith found a parking spot between two hulking R.V.s, their generators thrumming.

On sunny days, with the doors wide open, the van seemed spacious enough that the R.V.s baffled me; what on earth did they need all that room for? But on a chilly night, with the doors shut against the rain, three adults and a dog made the van feel cramped. Smith and King seemed to have developed an unspoken system for sharing space, but everywhere I stationed myself I was in the way.

Smith made vegetarian chili that night. After dinner, King lit a stick of incense to cover up the mingled smells of cumin, damp dog, and unwashed human. Smith set up the Syncro's pop-top and strapped on a rainfly. I clambered up to the loft and lay awake in the small wedge of space under the ceiling, listening to the rain pelt the van.

KEN ILGUNAS SPENT most of two years living in a van when he was a graduate student at Duke University in order to avoid racking up debt, an experience he chronicled in a book called "Walden on Wheels," published in 2013. Living in a van makes you thriftier and more self-reliant, Ilgunas told me. You learn to live with discomfort, a quality that he doesn't see in the Instagram version of vanlife. "My van never looked like anything out of a Wes Anderson film," he said. "It was difficult for me to wash my cooking pots. For a couple of weeks, I had mice living in my ceiling upholstery. There were times the van got so hot I thought I would die if I took a nap. And it was lonely. Just knowing that I would have to tell women where I lived deterred even the thought of dating." In contrast, the vans on Instagram look like "aesthetically pleasing jewelry boxes," Ilgunas said. "Usually with one or two good-looking people sprawled out in bed in front of a California beach."

It's true that the same vanlife pictures get taken over and over: the van's back doors opening onto an ocean vista; a long-exposure nighttime shot of the van, cozy and lit from within, against a backdrop of stars; a woman on the van's roof, in the middle of a sun salutation. (There

are so many images of vans parked in improbably beautiful places—the middle of a lake, the edge of a cliff—that there's an Instagram account called You Did Not Sleep There, devoted to collecting the least believable ones.) One vanlife trope, a middle-distance shot of a van on an empty, winding road, seems more self-consciously artificial than most: someone clearly had to hop out and run back to get the shot. The ideal vanlife image has something of the hazy impersonality of a photograph in an upscale catalogue, depicting a scene that's both attractive and unspecific enough that viewers can imagine themselves into it.

There is an undeniable aesthetic and demographic conformity in the vanlife world. Nearly all of the most popular accounts belong to young, attractive, white, heterosexual couples. "There's the pretty van girl and the woodsy van guy," Smith said. "That's what people want to see." At times, the vanlife community seems full of millennials living out a leftover baby-boomer fantasy: the Volkswagens, the neo-hippie fashions, the retro gender dynamics.

But, for all its twee escapism, vanlife is a trend born out of the recent recession. "We heard all these promises about what will happen after you go to college and get a degree," Smith said. "We graduated at a time when all that turned out to be a bunch of bullshit." The generation that's fuelling the trend has significantly more student debt and lower rates of homeownership than previous cohorts. The rise of contract and temporary labor has further eroded young people's financial stability. "I think there's a sense of hopelessness in my generation, in terms of jobs," Foster Huntington said. "And it's cheap to live in a van." And so, like staycations and minimalism, vanlife is an attempt to aestheticize and romanticize the precariousness of contemporary life. "It looks like they're having fun," Huntington said, of King and Smith. "But they're working a lot."

DURING THE COUPLE's four years on the road, hundreds of people have contacted Smith for advice. Last year, he began providing donation-based vanlife consulting, offering to help people "live [their] vanlife vision." So far, he has had meetings on the phone with around a dozen people. "They never

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• •

want to know what the most beautiful place is," he told me. "They want to know: Where do you pee? How do you and Emily not kill each other?" The answer to the first question is relatively simple: outside, or in campground bathrooms, or—on particularly cold nights or stretches of road with little privacy—in a plastic yogurt container. The second is more complicated.

"Everything is magnified, because it's such a small space," King told me. "The trash is in our face, the dishes are in our face, Corey is in my face, I'm in his face. Any personality conflicts, ego conflicts, it's all right there."

Most of the couple's fights revolve around organization: when and how often to sweep out the van; whether they can wait until the morning to do the dishes; if they're posting frequently enough. Smith is neat, and a self-described "planner"; when stressed, he can edge toward control-freak territory. (One afternoon, he watched me tear into a bag of corn chips and shook his head in disappointment. "You open bags wrong, too," he

said.) This regularly brings him into conflict with King, who is more flexible and fanciful, and occasionally prone to sloppiness.

In Smith's consulting sessions, he encourages couples to develop separate habits and to find small ways to spend time apart. While Smith cooks breakfast, King walks the dog; in the afternoons, he'll go for a long bike ride while she practices yoga and writes in her journal. "Having good weather helps a lot," King told me.

ON ANOTHER RAINY morning in Ventura, the air smelled like salt and R.V. exhaust. King checked Instagram on her phone; her most recent post, a shot of a storm building over the Pacific, had been something of an aesthetic departure—most Where's My Office Now images include King, the van, or Penny; the most popular tend to include all three—and it was underperforming. "I don't think people are even reading this post, because it's a picture of the ocean and apparently people don't want to look at that," she said testily.

King and Smith have posted more than thirteen hundred photographs to their account. Scrolling through the feed in chronological order, you can see King, who shoots most of the photos, become better at composing and editing images, and at tailoring them to what the audience wants to see. In the early days, she took pictures of flowers and sunsets. "I'd never post something like that now," she said, looking at a closeup of ripening blackberries, from four years ago. As I thumbed toward the top of the screen, I had the disconcerting sense of watching a life become a life-style brand.

King clicked on the account's most successful post, which has more than eight thousand likes. In the image, the back seat of the van is folded down into a bed; King faces away from the camera, holding a sheet to her chest, her hair cascading down her naked back. The second most popular post was of King wearing a bikini, standing on the van's front bumper. In the next most popular, King is in a bikini, slicing lemons.

"People really want to see beautiful locations," King said.

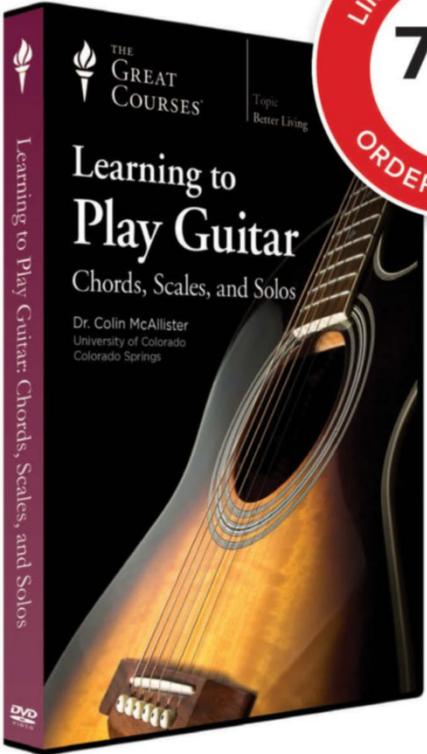
"They want to see Emily in a bikini, they want to see a sun flare, they want to see the van," Smith said. "Ones of Emily in the van waking up with Penny, they crush it."

"It's real and it's kind of moody—"

"It's a naked female," Smith said. "If I'm in that picture, it gets three thousand likes."

Later that afternoon, a rust-brown 1984 Vanagon Westfalia with a vanlife decal on its rear window pulled in to the parking lot. The driver introduced himself as Mike Hagy, a forty-two-year-old ad-agency art director from Santa Monica, and a fan of Where's My Office Now. He had seen on Instagram that Smith and King were in Ventura and decided to come say hello. "In a vanlife-geek kind of way, they are kind of celebrities," he said. "I live in L.A., so seeing celebrities is no big thing—I almost hit Leonardo DiCaprio surfing once. But I was all excited to come down here. My friend was, like, 'You're such a dork.'"

THE COLLAPSING DISTANCE between brand and life has led to social-media influencing, in which advertisers pay for endorsements from people with strong online followings. Celebrity



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endorsements aren't new, of course, but influencer marketing expands the category of "celebrity" to include teen-age fashionistas, drone racers, and particularly photogenic dogs. Advertisers work with people like Smith and King precisely because they're not famous in the traditional sense. They're appealing to brands because they have such a strong emotional connection with their followers. Krishna Subramanian, the co-founder of captiv8, a company that has helped Where's My Office Now connect with advertisers, said, "Their followers know what they're doing day in and day out." Accounts with between fifty thousand and two hundred thousand followers are considered "micro-influencers," and tend to have higher engagement rates—that is, a larger share of their followers like, favorite, or comment on their posts—than those with millions of followers. "It's very niche-focussed," Subramanian said. "That's really interesting to an advertiser who wants to promote something very specific to that audience." One study estimated that the social-media-influencer market was worth five hundred million dollars in 2015; the market is expected to increase to at least five billion dollars by 2020.

Though King and Smith have worked out some of their branding partnerships directly, a growing number of companies serve as intermediaries between influencers and brands. Talent agencies develop entire social-media campaigns; tech start-ups, including captiv8, have built businesses around analytics platforms that identify potential influencers and evaluate the reach of digital campaigns.

Top social-media influencers receive tens of thousands of dollars for endorsing a product, but King and Smith aren't there yet; they make between five hundred and fifteen hundred dollars for each sponsored post. Last year, their first year attempting to earn a living primarily through social media, they made eighteen thousand dollars. In the first two months of 2017, they had already lined up ten thousand dollars' worth of endorsements. Smith and King told me that they work only with brands they feel connected to. "We try to leverage the power we have as influencers in the social-media world to bring light to companies that are doing good in the

world, that are creating products we believe in," King explained. "We see every dollar as a vote." They are sponsored by several companies whose products they use every day, including TruthPaste, which makes clay-based toothpaste, and Four Sigmatic, a "superfood company" that sells instant coffee enhanced with mushroom elixirs.

WE HAD BEEN in Ventura for two soggy days. Smith described the waves as "garbage," and, because he chooses where and when the couple travels, he decided that it was time to move on. He had heard about a hot spring in Los Padres National Forest that he was eager to check out, and King wanted to get back to the woods, where the opportunities for content creation were better. But, in the hour it took to pack up the van, the sun began to peek through the clouds and the wind shifted direction. Smith started casting longing glances at the improving surf. "We're kinda breaking one of our rules," he said, as we prepared to drive out of the parking lot. "Never walk away from good waves."

He reversed back into the parking spot. As Smith pulled on his wetsuit, King unfurled her yoga mat and stretched herself into a long, luxurious forward bend. "This is what vanlife is about," Smith said. They decided to use their extra day in Ventura to take a photograph for one of their newest sponsors, "Outsiders," a WGN show about an Appalachian family living off the grid and battling a greedy coal company. The screener that the network provided had put King and Smith off at first. "It's got quite a bit of violence in it," King said. "We want to stand for peace." But, the more they talked it over, the more they were able to rationalize the partnership. "We aren't promoting violence, but we can't *ignore* violence," King said. It didn't hurt that the company was offering triple their usual rate. But the collaboration had not been an easy one; King had exchanged more than seventy e-mails with the "Outsiders" reps, who asked to approve the photographs and the captions in advance, and wanted to dictate what time they were posted. (Engagement rates are the highest at 11 A.M.)

Smith had a particular image in mind: King sprawled in the back of the van,

reading a book about Ayurveda with Penny nestled next to her, and an "Outsiders" decal featured prominently on her laptop. As Smith shot from the front seat, King tried a few different positions—knees bent; legs propped up against the window—and pretended to read the book. "Sometimes it's more spontaneous," she said apologetically.

"It's about storytelling, and when you're telling a story it's not always spontaneous," Smith said. "Lift your head up a little bit more, look like you're reading."

King positioned Penny at her feet, but the dog kept moving, distracted by grebes bobbing on the waves. Smith grew frustrated by the strong contrast between the dim van interior and the bright ocean beyond. King attempted to placate him. "Corey, this is O.K., this is O.K., this is *fun*," she said.

After more than half an hour, Smith got a shot he was satisfied with. The next day, as he drove in the rain to Los Padres National Forest, King sat in the back and fixed the overexposed ocean in Photoshop. The post, when it went up, looked cozy and relaxed. King added a long caption, about how living in the van had made her reconsider what "work" actually means. "I no longer define work by money, instead seeing it as our focused action collectively creating our world," she wrote. "Currently my work is storytelling and aligning with companies supporting our lifestyle and Earth."

"Such a beautiful lifestyle," one commenter wrote. "This looks like heaven," another said.

Before we reached the forest, we stopped at another surf break, north of Ventura. A middle-aged man in a shiny Volvo station wagon pulled into the parking lot behind us. He'd seen us on the freeway and followed us, he said. He wanted to talk about vans, and self-sufficiency, and freedom. Just a few days into vanlife, I had become accustomed to this kind of encounter: the hunger in the eyes of middle-aged men at the sight of old Volkswagens, and how not entirely bad it felt to be a symbol that other people projected their fantasies onto. Smith smiled politely as the man kept talking. "You're survivors," the man said emphatically, thumping his steering wheel. "You're living in reality." ♦

TRUMP'S CADDY

BY JOSH LIEB

MR. TRUMP ISN'T exactly a great tipper, but the guys he plays with are usually pretty generous. Like, at the end of a round, he'll slap his pockets and say, "Aw, geez. I left my wallet in my other golf pants." Then he'll go, "Boris"—or Yuri or Li or Kim Jong or whoever he's playing with—"take care of Billy for me, will ya?" And one of those guys will hand me a wad of what-

Honestly, I think it's the hats. He loves to put on a hat. It's the first thing he does when he gets to the clubhouse. A couple of times, I've walked into the locker room and he'll be standing in front of the mirror in a golf cap, golf shoes, and a jockstrap, saying, "Excuse me, young man, but I'm looking for *Mister* Trump. He must be your father. Oh, *you're* Mister Trump? But you're

I said, I know how to keep this job.

After a round, if he's in a good mood, I'll get invited back to the nineteenth hole to watch him eat. Sometimes Donnie, Jr., will join us, but he's on a very strict diet—only animals that are on the endangered-species list—which makes it difficult. He's not losing any weight, though, because I guess black rhinoceroses are really fatty, but don't try to tell *him* that.

For his own meals, Mr. Trump flies in the world's greatest chefs from the world's top restaurants, and the world's best veal from the world's cruellest slaughterhouses. Then he has the chefs bread the veal, cut it into strips, deep-fry the strips, and serve them with tartar sauce, as a basket of "veal fingers."



ever he's carrying. Rubles, yen, blood diamonds, Uber stock—you name it, I've been given it.

Not that I get to keep it all. Back at the clubhouse, the boss will make me empty my pockets and show him what I got. And I mean *empty* my pockets. I wouldn't have this job long if I tried to hold out on the boss. So I'll lay out what I got, and Mr. Trump will purse his lips and sort through it—"I just want to wet my beak a little, Billy"—and then he'll take what he wants. Like, "O.K., this is for me, this is for me, this is for me, this is totally mine . . . What's that? A paper clip? I'll take that. And the gum." Usually I get to keep enough for bus fare home.

People ask me why Mr. Trump likes golf so much. Is it the exercise? The competition? The purity of the game?

just a boy! I bet you have full, lustrous, natural-looking hair under that cap!"

Once, I walked in and the draft from the door opening made his hat fly off, and he started crying. So, for people who say that he doesn't feel human emotions, there's that.

I get to hear a lot of very interesting stuff, which I can't talk about here, obviously, but suffice it to say I would not buy stock in any companies that are overly reliant on the First Amendment. One story I *can* tell: There was the time I got to hear him say, "You're fired," just like on TV! But then the guy replied, "You can't fire me, I'm the Speaker of the House." Well, that *really* ticked off the boss. Truth be told, I think he was mainly annoyed because he'd hit only two hole in ones that day, but I fixed that on the back nine. Like

He says the salt from the chefs' tears is the best part.

Sometimes we reminisce. He'll say, "We've come a long way, hah, Billy, hah? Hah?" And I'll nod. And he'll say, "Remember when we started? Remember how they said I was a joke? Remember how they said I didn't know what I was doing?" And I'll nod. And he'll say, "Remember how they said I couldn't repeal Obamacare?" And I'll say, "I don't remember that." And he'll say, "Good boy."

During one meal, Donnie, Jr., piped up and said, "Hey, Pop! Remember all those good jokes you used to make, about how Obama liked to golf too much when he should've been doing his job?" And that's how Donnie, Jr., almost got fired, just like on TV. But that's a story for another time. ♦

HIGH CUISINE

Introducing foodies to cannabis.

BY LIZZIE WIDDICOMBE



Laurie Wolf's recipes appear in High Times, Dope, and Culture.

LAST FALL, the food writer Laurie Wolf invited me to a dinner party at her home. It promised to be a master class in rustic entertaining. Wolf lives in a floating house on the Willamette River, just south of Portland, Oregon. When she has people over, she told me, she has a few rules for herself. First, "have as much done in advance as possible." She goes so far as to set the table the night before and put out serving platters with sticky notes assigning their contents. Next, be sure to check your guests' dietary requirements. These days, everybody has a health concern or a food allergy, and she says, "I always try to accommodate in a big way." Some of Wolf's recommendations are more esoteric. For example: "Start with a sativa and end with an indica." This applies

only to Wolf's area of expertise: marijuana edibles.

Wolf is sometimes called the Martha Stewart of edibles. The designation owes something to superficial similarities. At sixty-two, Wolf resembles a crunchier version of the domestic icon: she has an ample figure, graying hair, and glasses, and she wears loose linen outfits, generally paired with Crocs. But the designation also refers to her role as an educator, schooling people on how best to cook with marijuana. She is the author or co-author of several cookbooks, including "Herb," which seeks to "elevate the art and science of cooking with cannabis" and "The Medical Marijuana Dispensary," which features soothing dishes, like stuffed sweet potato, that will get you stoned. Her recipes appear in all the major cannabis pub-

lications: *High Times*, *Dope*, and *Culture*, as well as the Cannabist, a Denver Post Web site devoted to the booming legal-marijuana industry. There you can watch her instructional videos on making infused delicacies like the creamy chicken-based Mama Leone's soup. ("This soup is worth its weight in *weed*."

Oregon, where Wolf lives, legalized recreational marijuana in 2014. Four more states followed suit in last fall's election: California, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Maine. More than twenty per cent of Americans now live in states where recreational weed is legal. President Trump's appointee for Attorney General, Jeff Sessions, is an opponent of marijuana and is widely seen as a threat to the industry. But over the long term, proponents argue, the country is on a path toward legalization. (Last week, Canada's Prime Minister unveiled a bill, which is expected to pass, legalizing recreational marijuana in that country.) Amy Margolis, Wolf's lawyer and one of Oregon's most prominent cannabis advocates, said, "I think we're seeing an extremely rapid sea change in the way people perceive the safety of cannabis use and the legalization process. There are other issues that have followed the same trajectory, like gay rights—all of a sudden you see the switch flip."

According to the Arcview Group, a market-research firm, the legal-marijuana business in Canada and the United States did almost seven billion dollars in sales last year. Arcview estimates that the industry will grow to more than twenty-two billion dollars by 2020. These profits have brought innovation. Cannabis can now be vaporized, absorbed under the tongue, or smoked in a hyper-concentrated form, a process known as dabbing. Edibles—a category that used to begin and end with the bone-dry pot brownie, served in a college dorm room—have been undergoing a particularly marked revolution. The finer dispensaries in Boulder now sell cannabis-infused candy, breath sprays, spritzers, and savory foods, from bacon to smoked salmon. In Los Angeles, thrill-seekers are paying as much as five hundred dollars a head to have a cannabis chef cater multicourse meals, pairing different cannabis strains with their culinary complements (heirloom-tomato bisque infused with a lemony Sour Diesel, for example).

All of this has produced a new category

of cannabis user: people trying it for the first time, to see what the fuss is about, or coming back to it after a decades-long hiatus. Businesspeople see a future in which cannabis is part of a functional, even aspirational life style. Like Julia Child introducing Americans to French cuisine, Wolf serves as both a guide and an ambassador to this world. She was a chef and a food editor for many years, and she stands out as a source of reliable information in a nascent industry without dependable methods for cooking and dosing. Ricardo Baca, the founding editor of the *Cannabist*, told me, "Laurie represents a voice in the food-and-cannabis space that can be trusted." Her columns are full of global ingredients and lush food photography meant to attract what she calls "the CB2 and West Elm crowd." Her books would not seem out of place on the shelf next to the latest tome from the Barefoot Contessa or Yotam Ottolenghi. Evan Senn, the editor of the California-based cannabis magazine *Culture*, told me that, increasingly, foodies are the target audience for pot. "I love to drink wine, and I'm kind of a snob about it," she said. "I'm not going to drink Franzia out of a cardboard box. I'm going to buy a nice bottle of Pinot Noir and aerate it and enjoy it. I have the same approach to edibles."

WHEN I ARRIVED at Wolf's house for dinner, she was putting around the kitchen. The rest of the Wolf family—which is also a kind of professional support team—congregated in the living room. Laurie's husband, Bruce, is a commercial photographer who takes all the pictures for his wife's columns. Their adult son, Nick, works at an education startup, but his wife, Mary, a thirty-two-year-old Oklahoman, is Wolf's business partner. She helps run their baked-goods operation, which sells a line of edibles under the name Laurie & Mary-Jane. Bruce made a joke about the family business: "They call us the Wolf Cartel."

That evening's festivities were business, of a kind. *Dope*, a "cannabis lifestyle" magazine, was hosting its annual Oregon Dope Cup in Portland. The event is one of many that aspire to be the Oscars of the legal-cannabis industry. Laurie & MaryJane had won a Best Edible trophy at the previous Dope Cup, in Seattle, for its savory nuts. Last year, the company

agreed to host an edibles dinner for the magazine's guests, including the cup's judges, who had flown in from Colorado.

Wolf gave me a preview of the meal: marijuana-free chicken Marbella and couscous, paired with infused sides and appetizers. The dishes had been set out on a sideboard. Next to each one was a card with the potency level noted in calligraphy: "Stuffed Mushrooms, 5 mg THC each." (Five milligrams of tetrahydrocannabinol is about the equivalent of a few puffs from a joint.) The secret to cooking with cannabis is fat. THC, the main psychoactive ingredient, bonds to fat molecules when heated. There are high-tech ways of doing this, but Wolf prefers to do it "the old-fashioned way, with good butter and good oil." Her cookbooks always begin with recipes for what she calls canna-butter and canna-oil.

Wolf pulled a Mason jar of infused olive oil from a shelf and encouraged me to smell it. It had a powerfully green scent. "Olive oil infuses beautifully," she said. "It's very earthy." A jar of infused canola oil, on the other hand, smelled like bong water. Wolf had used the infused olive oil to make the stuffed mushrooms as well as a spinach tart. Those who wanted even more weed could slather their food with an infused feta sauce made with olive oil, garlic, parsley, and red onion. "Strong flavors help conceal the taste," Wolf said. "It is a challenge to keep the foods from tasting like cannabis. That's probably the hardest thing about making edibles." Dessert was a "mildly infused" strawberry trifle in a big glass bowl. For palate cleansers, there were frozen grapes—an old standby for Wolf. "They're wonderful when people get stoned," she explained.

The guests began to arrive. Zach Phillips, the Oregon State director of *Dope*, greeted Wolf with a hug, as did Amy Margolis. "I'm not really an *eater*," Margolis said, taking off her coat.

"O.K.," Wolf said. "Do you prefer joints?"

Margolis nodded. "Joints, vape pens. I like the patch a lot." She elaborated: "It's like a NicoDerm patch." Margolis wears it on her neck; her mother uses it for sciatica.

Next came the Dope Cup judges: Max Montrose, Jeff Greenswag, and Jim Nathanson. They work for a Colorado-based outfit called the Trichome

Institute, named for the tiny crystal-like hairs that cover marijuana buds and leaves. Wolf ushered them into the living room, where smoking materials had been arrayed on the coffee table, including five cannisters with strains of marijuana from a local grower called 7 Points Oregon. "We have a Volcano"—a type of vaporizer—"set up and a couple of other things," she said.

Montrose, a bearded redhead with glasses and a professorial air, sat down in front of the vaporizer. The marijuana industry, as a former black-market business, still lacks the governing bodies and institutions of, say, the wine world, a situation that the Trichome Institute is hoping to remedy. "Most cannabis cups are just complete, utter bullshit," Montrose said. "There's no standard for who's certified to be doing the judging, what the platform is, and how you quantify cannabis quality." He and his partners had developed a "sommelier program for cannabis," to teach people to classify plants by their structures and by compounds that produce fragrance, called terpenes, rather than by strain names. "In each cannabis sample, there are actually sixty to a hundred different types of cannabinoids, two hundred different types of terpenes, and, like, a dozen flavonoids," he said. "That ratio combination is what makes you feel what you feel." The institute had created an in-house smartphone app to help grade weed, and the three men had spent the day using it to judge the entries in the Dope Cup competition. "We look at the trichomes, the ripeness, the flush factor, the cola structures, the style, and the stigma," he said, referring to various biological features of the plant. "All that is done completely sober."

Wolf gasped. "Does that mean you're not smoking them?" she asked.

"Oh, we will," Montrose said, explaining that consumption quality would be judged at a later stage, but that it was essential to examine the plants first. "Some of the cannabis we looked at today, it looked, like, out of this world, outrageous, will blow you away. And you put it under the microscope and it's full of webs and bugs and spiders, fecal matter, exoskeletons!"

"Seriously?" Wolf asked.

"Oh, yeah. There's a lot more shit weed than there is high-quality cannabis."

The edible portion of the evening

commenced. In the dining room, the conversation turned, inevitably, to the subject of the *Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, who, in 2014, shortly after the first licensed cannabis retailers opened for business, travelled to Denver and bought a cannabis chocolate bar. Back in her hotel room, she ate part of the bar, and then, when she felt nothing, ate some more. She described what happened next in that week's column:

I felt a scary shudder go through my body and brain. I barely made it from the desk to the bed, where I lay curled up in a hallucinatory state for the next eight hours. I was thirsty but couldn't move to get water. Or even turn off the lights. I was panting and paranoid, sure that when the room-service waiter knocked and I didn't answer, he'd call the police....

Dowd later learned that she should have cut the bar into sixteen portions. The column sent shock waves through the industry. Wolf was still furious about it. "That was a disgrace!" she said. "It's like if somebody offered you some vodka and said, 'Just take one shot,' and instead you drank the whole bottle."

Nevertheless, the column brought up a hazard of cannabis edibles: eating too much can lead to a terrible experience. Symptoms include hallucinations, panic attacks, and paranoia. What's more, different individuals' responses to a given amount of cannabis can vary wildly. They're affected by tolerance levels, but also by sex, age, genetics, and even what the person has eaten that day. Wolf admitted that this complicates the very idea of responsible dosing. "Tiny people can eat a two-hundred-milligram squib"—a powerful gummy candy—"and they barely feel it. Then there are three-hundred-pound men who eat one of our brownies, which have a five- to ten-milligram THC dose, and it wipes them out." Since the effects of edibles take a long time to kick in—anywhere from thirty minutes to two hours on average—it's easy for novice users to over-indulge, resulting in horror stories along the lines of those described in a tweet by the comedian Bill Dixon:

Every story about edible weed:

1. Not high.
2. Not high.
3. Still not high.
4. Not high.
5. Please drive me to the emergency room.

It's nearly impossible to ingest a lethal amount of marijuana. But people can do dangerous things while under the influence. In one notorious case, in 2014, a nineteen-year-old man jumped off a roof in Denver after eating a pot candy given to him by friends. This and other events prompted the state of Colorado to run a campaign called "Good to Know," aimed at tourists and others whom Andrew Freedman, the state's director of marijuana coordination at the time, called "the marijuana naïve." The Dowd column "was our best possible public-education campaign" about the dangers of overconsuming, Freedman told me. The state has since changed its packaging rules, mandating that products like chocolate bars be split into clearly marked doses of ten milligrams.

Wolf advocates a cautious approach. "Our philosophy is 'less is more,'" she said. "Figure out the littlest bit of cannabis that will get you to a good place and start with that." The Trichome guys agreed. "Cannabis education is the most necessary thing in this industry, across the board!" Montrose said, piously. He talked about having a "number," as for a Sleep Number bed. "I'm an eighty-milligram dude. I know my edible tolerance, because I've dialled it in so precisely," he said. "I know that if I want a really pleasant experience, a relaxing, pain-relieving experience, eighty milligrams is perfect for me. If I want to go to sleep? One hundred and twenty milligrams. If I want to keep working? Fifteen milligrams."

"I would say I'm a ten," Wolf said. She's had only one edibles disaster. Four years ago, in her rookie phase, she and a friend consumed too much cannabis before a Halloween party. She ended up accosting a partygoer who was dressed as a doctor and asking about a bunch of medical issues. "It was absolutely mortifying," she said. "I forgot it was a costume party." She has also had complications with LSD, which she told us about at the table. "Once, when I was tripping, I ate a cinnamon candle," she said. She thought it was cinnamon toast.

Nathanson, one of the judges, popped a stuffed mushroom into his mouth and groaned with pleasure. "How did you make these mushrooms?" he asked Wolf.

She looked at him quizzically.
"The recipe?"

"Oh, sorry!" she said. "I'm a little high."

Montrose was devouring a frozen grape. "These are so-o-o good!"

WOLF, THE YOUNGER of two children, grew up in Riverdale, a wealthy neighborhood in the Bronx. Her mother, a teacher, could be "extremely uptight," she told me. Her father, a dentist, had anger issues. Good food was in short supply, as was good fun. "Looking back, I realize my parents were not at all happy with each other," she said. She attended Calhoun, at the time an all-girl's school, in Manhattan. One day, an administrator called to inform her parents that several girls were suspected of having smoked marijuana. Her mother rightly guessed that Laurie was one of them. "I got home to find her crying hysterically," Wolf said. "She was, like, 'How did I go wrong? You're an addict! You let us down!'"

Wolf learned about food at friends' homes and on vacations, which featured pit stops for roadside delicacies like fried apple pies. After college, at N.Y.U., she ran a catering business, then studied at the Culinary Institute of America, where her nickname was Noodles. She worked in several Manhattan restaurants, including the River Café and a small Upper East Side place called the Wine Bistro. In 1980, she met Bruce, who turned her on to food styling, the art of preparing food for photo shoots. She started doing freelance magazine work, writing recipes for *Self*, *New York*, and *Mademoiselle*, then moved to the parenting magazine *Child*, where, for nineteen years, she wrote a monthly column on family-friendly recipes.

Wolf's own child-rearing was complicated by health issues. One day in the early eighties, not long after she'd had her first baby, she was at Barneys, shopping with a friend, when she began to feel dizzy. She woke up hours later, at home. "I couldn't remember anything." (She'd passed out on the floor of the tie department, and the friend had taken her home in a cab.) Terrified, she saw a doctor, who determined that she'd had a seizure. She was given a diagnosis of epilepsy, and began taking the anti-convulsant Tegretol. It controlled the seizures, but left her with unpleasant side effects: nausea, headaches, exhaustion. Trying to get pregnant for a second time, she went off

the drug periodically, which led to seven or eight seizures a week.

In 2007, *Child* folded. The Wolfs decided to move to Oregon, seeking a change of pace. Laurie busied herself with a cookbook, "Portland, Oregon Chef's Table," for which she gathered recipes from local chefs. One day, when she was getting her car repaired, she struck up a conversation with a man in the service-station waiting room. "He stuck out his hand and said, 'I'm Dr. Phil. Not *that* Dr. Phil. I'm a pot doctor.'" Medical marijuana had been legal in Oregon since 1998, and the doctor, Phil Leveque, was one of the state's first practitioners. Wolf told him about her epilepsy and problems with Tegretol. "He told me, 'Get off that stuff. It's poison.'" Leveque wrote her a prescription for medical cannabis and instructed her to consume a small amount each morning. She found that it not only controlled her seizures but also stopped the "auras"—feelings of dizziness she'd continued to have on the anti-convulsant. She stopped taking Tegretol, and she hasn't had a seizure since. "I don't know if I can say I'm cured, but my symptoms are completely managed," Wolf said.

In those days, dispensaries catered to what Wolf calls "the medical-stoner community," heavy users and people with chronic pain. The edible offerings were informal. "You'd say, 'What kind of edibles do you have?' They'd say, 'Well, my grandmother makes these pot brownies. And my stepmother's cousin makes these.'" The dosage was usually very high—over a hundred milligrams of THC in a single brownie. The taste was "dreadful," Wolf said. "It was like somebody took a bud and dipped it in chocolate."

She decided that she could do better. At home, she came up with a recipe for infused almond bars, using the powerful taste of the almond extract to mask the taste of marijuana. "They had the texture of a thick sugar cookie," she told me. "Crisp on the outside but chewy on the inside, with sliced almonds on top." They contained a hundred and forty-five milligrams of THC. She sold them to local dispensaries, where they were a hit. The only complaint: even the heavy users were getting too stoned. You were supposed to eat only a fraction of the bar. "People would say, 'They're too delicious. I couldn't stop eating it!'" Wolf said.

Two of the early taste-testers were her son, Nick, and his wife, Mary. Growing up, Nick was not a marijuana user. "I was a pure DARE kid," he told me. His mother was disappointed—which was probably the point. "I was, like, 'Come on! A *little* pot,'" Wolf said. "We were terrified that he was going to become a Republican." Mary grew up in Oklahoma, where her father was an Episcopal priest. She met Nick while working in marketing for a financial firm in New York. When Wolf began making her almond treats, she gave the couple a few samples, along with a cookie from another baker. They made the mistake of eating the entire cookie before deboning a chicken. (They had joined a "chicken share.") As the edible kicked in, Nick recalled, he began to get the impression that he was deboning a baby. "I was, like, 'This feels like human skin! I can't do this anymore!'" He spent the night curled up by the toilet. Mary was calmer. "I just left the chicken there and went to bed," she said. The experience put them off edibles for months, and

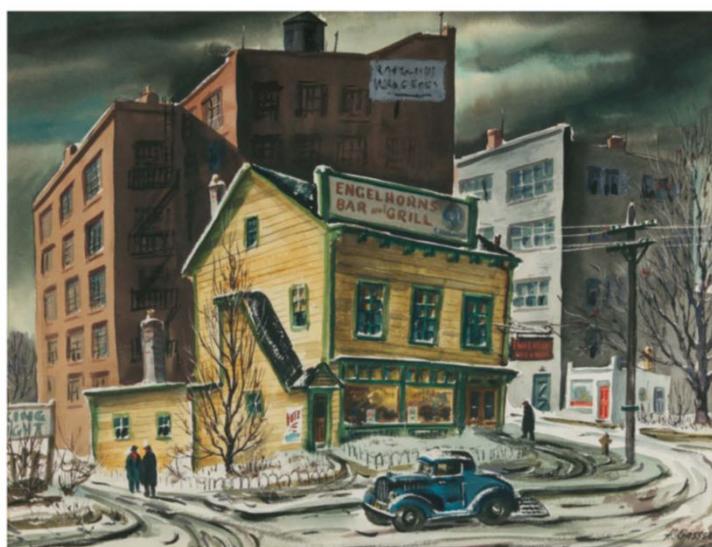
spurred Wolf to make a low-dose version of the almond bar, with only twenty-five milligrams of THC.

Nick and Mary eventually decided to follow his parents to Portland, where Mary began helping her mother-in-law with the company. She created a Facebook page and designed the logo, coming up with a whisk-and-marijuana-leaf motif. Before long, Mary told me, "I realized we could have a real business." She and Wolf are an unlikely pair. In contrast to Wolf's bohemian vibe, Mary exudes wholesomeness. She has short blond hair and rosy cheeks. "I call us Beauty and Obese," Wolf said. In cooking videos on the Cannabist, they have an "Absolutely Fabulous" dynamic. When Mary says, "We're going to mix it all into the pot, and it's going to be delicious," her mother-in-law exclaims, "Ha-ha. You said 'pot!'" But their skills appear to be well matched. Wolf is the right-brain person, dreaming up recipe ideas, while Mary oversees the left-brain tasks, navigating Oregon's complicated regulatory requirements.

Mary only recently told her family

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in Oklahoma about the new turn in her career. "I was so nervous," she said. "I felt like I was coming out to them." She was surprised to learn that they were curious about the medical uses of cannabis. One relative, who has chronic pain, started taking a Laurie & MaryJane brownie instead of painkillers to help him sleep. (He got his doctor's approval.) Another uses their infused coconut oil to treat his aging dog's epilepsy. (He mixes it with dog food.)

THE DAY AFTER the dinner party, Wolf picked me up in her car, a Kia Soul in a shade called kale green. "The perfect Portland color," she said. Despite her affinity with the city, she still thinks of herself as a New Yorker, and seems to enjoy shocking West Coast sensibilities. "People here are so earnest," she said. "I once told a group of people someone's baby looked like a tampon. They were, like, 'I've never heard anyone say that out loud.'"

We pulled up to Wolf's "office," a commercial kitchen called the Bitchin' Kitchen, which was home to seventeen edible-marijuana startups. It has industrial-sized ovens, steel countertops, and a walk-in refrigerator with a vault door. Wolf opened a freezer to show me seventeen pounds of marijuana-infused butter. She and Mary made a fresh batch every week.

It was a busy day at the Bitchin' Kitchen. Marijuana entrepreneurs bustled in and out. A team from Weedmaps, a "Yelp for pot" based in Irvine, California, was visiting the facility, and a photographer had set up a light box, which he was using to take pictures of pot cookies.

Wolf had given me a rundown of the legal-cannabis industry during our drive, dividing it into three broad categories. First are "the black-market people who're forging on," the original patchouli-scented pioneers. Then there are the profiteers: venture capitalists and M.B.A. types who've been pouring funds into the legalizing states, a phenomenon called the green rush. "These are people who've never smoked pot in their lives," she said, with disapproval. "They're just in it for the money." The majority of pot entrepreneurs fall into the vast third category, driven by the complicated blend of motives—ambition, libertinism, a desire to

help sick people—that drives the legalization movement as a whole.

Wolf places herself in the last category, but she admitted that her heart is with the hippies. She seemed troubled by the men of the Trichome Institute. Though they were obviously "passionate" about cannabis, she worried that they were a marketing operation. "Budtender' classes online!" she moaned. She especially disliked a plan to regularize the grading system for cannabis. "To me, it's like picking a baby," Wolf said. "Like saying, 'Well, you definitely want your baby to be blond, but maybe with green eyes.' It feels so removed from the community aspect of this business. It's making it soulless."

Wolf told me that she, like many other people, sees an industry at a crossroads. Down one path is a future that resembles the wine business, or the farm-to-table movement: boutique pot growers turning out harvests that reflect local climates and customs. Down the other is Big Weed: industrial farms, joints by Marlboro and pot cookies by General Mills, Monsanto patenting genetically modified strains of Purple Kush. Wolf had already observed the corporate interests circling.

The Bitchin' Kitchen's tenants represented a cross-section of this world. There was a businessman who had raised venture-capital funds to start a candy operation, and a married couple from Ohio who had saved their money and moved to Oregon to start a strain-specific cookie company called Titan's Kind. Then there



was the facility's owner, a no-nonsense middle-aged woman named Nancy Jones, who started out as a living-room farmer with six plants. "I've been growing for nineteen years," she told me. She is now involved in several enterprises, including Badass Dabs, which makes concentrates and extracts. She handed me a sample of her newest product: a vaginal suppository, which treats pain from menstrual cramps or endometriosis. It looked like a large vitamin. "It's fifty milligrams of THC,

seven milligrams of CBD, and coconut oil and beeswax. All organic," she said.

I followed Wolf into a back room, where Mary was at work, wearing a green apron decorated with the Laurie & MaryJane logo. They'd been hired to provide the desserts for a cannabis dinner party, and Mary was testing some miniature pumpkin pies. She pulled a baking sheet full of pies from a cooling rack. "I used one of Laurie's recipes from the Cannabist," she told me. "We'll have to taste it to see if the flavor is right."

I nibbled a small pie: it tasted like pumpkin, but with a weedy aftertaste, which brought back Proustian memories of high school.

"It might make sense to increase the spices a little bit," Mary suggested. "You could double the ginger."

Her mother-in-law nodded. "I think vanilla would definitely help."

IN SOME WAYS, cooking with cannabis is just regular cooking, with a few adjustments for taste and technical considerations. The food can't be cooked at temperatures higher than three hundred and forty degrees, because that would destroy the THC. "It's been a little bit of a challenge cooking some foods that normally benefit from a really high heat start," Wolf said. An example is fried chicken, which she recommends topping with infused oil or salsa.

In the early days, Wolf tried selling baklava at Oregon dispensaries, which baffled the medical-stoner crowd. "We were catering to the lowest element of pot smokers," Wolf said. Since then, the audience has changed: sophisticated consumers are known today as "cannasseurs." They appreciate savory foods, not only because savories avoid cliché—"everybody infuses desserts," Wolf said—but also because many medical-marijuana users are diabetic, or avoiding sugar for other reasons. Wolf recommends having a bottle of infused salad dressing or pesto on hand. "Infusing a pesto is so easy," she said. "You can make a bunch and toss it with noodles, and you've got a delicious meal."

Wolf's mixed nuts have had a lot of traction. She adapted them from a Danny Meyer recipe and added infused coconut oil, a staple in her kitchen because it can also be used topically, "so you're getting more bang for your buck." (An elderly friend of Wolf's rubs it on his hands to

treat his rheumatoid arthritis.) Wolf's newest book, "Cooking with Cannabis," emphasizes comfort foods like mac and cheese and meatloaf. There's a chapter called "Recipes for One," intended for solo eaters. "It's great to be able to make yourself ramen," she said. (The cannabis goes in the broth, mixed with sesame oil.)

At the end of the day, however, a great marijuana cook has to have a great pot brownie. "Once Mary came into the business, we tested about eight different brownie recipes," Wolf said. They tried one from the back of a brownie-mix box and one that Wolf had learned at the Culinary Institute of America. Nigella Lawson's brownie was delicious, but too mild to counter the weedy taste of canna-butter. Finally, they settled on an adaptation of a "fudgy" brownie developed by a magazine-editor friend of Wolf's, Freddi Greenberg. Wolf's version includes extra vanilla and cocoa as "flavor disguisers." She uses a short baking time, to create a gooey interior. Last year, the cannabis Web site Leafly held a pot-brownie contest to coincide with college basketball's March Madness tournament. Recipes from Martha Stewart, Mario Batali, and Julia Child faced off against pot-oriented recipes from publications like *Edibles List* and *High Times*. Wolf's brownie won. The Cannabist called it "among the most heavenly creations known to ganja-loving humanity." Wolf said, "It's pretty fucking delicious, I have to say."

Laurie & MaryJane's brownies went on sale in February. They come in packages of five, which sell for twenty to thirty-three dollars, depending on potency. Wolf currently has them in thirty-five dispensaries and has developed new products: an almond-cake bite, a chocolate truffle, and a soon-to-be-launched savory cheese crisp. Ultimately, she hopes to conquer Oregon—and then to try for California. "The dream is to be everywhere it's legal," Wolf said, sounding a bit Big Weed herself. "To be the Mrs. Fields of cannabis foods."

THE DOPE CUP was held on a Sunday. Laurie & MaryJane had entered its brownies and almond bites in the competition. The Wolfs arrived at 10 p.m., three hours after the event started, because, as Laurie told me, "everybody's late in this business." The atmosphere



"I like his style. He makes it look like an accident."

was part county fair, part tent revival. A rap group, the Pharcyde, performed on a stage, and reps from marijuana businesses had set up booths. Wolf mingled with the crowd, which was mostly young and male. There were the seven scruffy dudes from 7 Points Oregon, the boutique growers whose product she'd used at her dinner party, and there was a purchasing agent from a dispensary called Canna-Daddy's, who was holding a twenty-three-inch blunt. He wrapped Wolf in a bear hug. "Laurie's the nicest lady I've ever met," he told me.

Wolf returned the compliment. "Andrew makes me wish I had a son," she said. "And then I remember I do have a son."

Nearby was the Trichome Institute's booth. I recognized Montrose, who was wearing a white lab coat and instructing people on how to examine marijuana flowers under a microscope. He had a joint behind his ear. "There's a hundred strains of cannabis in this one joint," he said, when Wolf approached.

Wolf seemed to have softened toward him. "Were you impressed with the level of the weed?" she asked.

Montrose nodded vigorously. "Oregon killed it," he said. "Seriously, some of the best-quality weed I've seen in my life." Wolf seemed proud.

Soon, the awards ceremony began. A *Dope* employee with dark glasses and an Afro led the proceedings from in front of a table full of silver trophies. Wolf told

me that her "main competition" was a Portland outfit called Elbe's Edibles, a beloved purveyor of marijuana cake balls whose slogan is "My balls your mouth."

The Best Savory Edible trophies were distributed to a two-man team called the Baker Bois, which won second place for its hot pocket, and to a company called Cannavore, which won first place for its smoked salmon. Wolf seemed discouraged. "They have a huge, huge grow that makes their cannabis," she said of Cannavore.

A trophy for Best Sweet Edible, Medical, went to an outfit called Lunchbox Alchemy, for a grape-flavored squib. Wolf watched respectfully. "Their squib is tasty and ridiculously strong," she said, as a young woman made an acceptance speech. "Thank you guys for loving the squib as much as we do," one woman said. "We fuckin' love you guys!"

Finally, the announcer came to the category of Best Sweet Edible, Recreational: "Brownie by Laurie & MaryJane!" The crowd cheered, and the Wolf women climbed onstage to accept their trophy. Like many of this year's Oscar winners, Wolf made a political speech: "This is for Hillary!" she said, hoisting her trophy in the air.

When she returned, she was out of breath. "Wow," she said. "Honestly, I thought if anything was going to win, it would be those almond things. But the fucking brownie! People just love it." ♦

AN ODYSSEY

A father and son go in search of an epic.

BY DANIEL MENDELSOHN

ONE JANUARY EVENING a few years ago, just before the beginning of the spring term in which I was going to be teaching an undergraduate seminar on the *Odyssey*, my father, a retired computer scientist who was then eighty-one, asked me, for reasons I thought I understood at the time, if he could sit in on the course, and I said yes. Once a week for the next fifteen weeks, he would make the trip from the house in the Long Island suburbs where I grew up, a modest split-level he and my mother still lived in, to the riverside campus of Bard College, where I teach. At ten past ten each Friday morning, he would take a seat among the freshmen, who were not even a quarter his age, and join in the discussion of this old poem, an epic about long journeys and long marriages and what it means to yearn for home.

It was deep winter when the term began, and my father was worrying a great deal about the weather: the snow on the windshield, the sleet on the roads, the ice on the walkways. He was afraid of falling, he said, his vowels still marked by his Bronx childhood: *fawling*. I would stay close to him as he crept along the narrow asphalt paths that led to the bland brick building where the class met, or up the walkway to the steep-gabled house at the edge of campus which was my home for a few days each week. Often, if he was too worn out after class to make the three-hour drive back home, he would sleep over in the extra bedroom that serves as my study, lying on a narrow daybed that had been my childhood bed. This bed, which he had built himself fifty years earlier, had a little secret: it was made out of a door, a cheap, hollow door, to which he'd attached four wooden legs that are as sturdy today as they were when he built it. I would think of this bed often a year later, after he became seriously ill, and my brothers and sister and I had to start

fathering our father, anxiously watching him as he slept fitfully in a series of enormous, elaborately mechanized contraptions that hardly seemed like beds at all.

But that came later. Now, in the early months of 2011, he would come each week and spend the night in the bed he had made, in the house where I spent a part of each week.

It used to amuse my father that I divided my time among several places: this house on the rural campus; the mellow old home in New Jersey, where my boys and their mother lived and where I would spend long weekends; my apartment in New York City, which, as time passed and my life expanded, had become little more than a pit stop between train trips. "You're always on the *road*," my father would sometimes say at the end of a phone conversation, and as he said the word "road" I could picture him shaking his head in gentle bewilderment. For nearly all his adult life, my father lived in one house, the one he moved into a month before I was born—which over time filled up with five children and then was emptied of them, leaving him and my mother to live a life that was quiet and circumspect, at least in part because she didn't like to travel—and which he left for the last time one January afternoon in 2012, a year to the day after he started my class.

The *Odyssey* course ran from late January to early May. A week or so after it ended, I happened to be on the phone with my friend Froma, a classics scholar who had been my mentor in graduate school and had lately enjoyed hearing my periodic reports on Daddy's progress in the seminar. At some point in the conversation, she mentioned a cruise that she'd taken a couple of years earlier, called "Journey of Odysseus: Retracing the *Odyssey* Through the Ancient Mediterranean." "You should do





it!" she exclaimed. "After this semester, after teaching the *Odyssey* to your father, how could you *not* go?" Not everyone agreed: when I e-mailed a travel-agent friend to ask her what she thought, her response came back within a minute: "Avoid theme cruises at all costs!" But Froma had been my teacher, after all, and I was still in the habit of obeying her. The next morning, I called my father.

As we talked, we each went online to look at the cruise company's Web site. The itinerary, we read, would follow the mythic hero Odysseus' convoluted, decade-long journey as he made his way home from the Trojan War, plagued by shipwrecks and monsters. It would begin at Troy, the site of which is in present-day Turkey, and end on Ithaki, a small island in the Ionian Sea which purports to be Ithaca, the place Odysseus called home. "Journey of Odysseus" was an "educational" cruise, and my father, although contemptuous of anything that struck him as being a needless luxury, was a great believer in education. And so, a few weeks later, in June, fresh from our recent immersion in the text of the Homeric epic, we took the cruise, which lasted ten days, one for each year of Odysseus' long journey.

The hero's return to Ithaca is hardly the only voyage in which the *Odyssey* is interested. It is not for nothing that,

in the original Greek, the first word in the first line of the twelve thousand one hundred and ten that make up the epic is *andra*: "man." The poem begins with the story of Odysseus' son, a youth in search of his long-lost father. It focusses next on the hero himself, first as he recalls the fabulous adventures he had after leaving Troy and then as he struggles to return home, where he will reclaim his identity as father, husband, and king, taking terrible vengeance on the suitors who tried to woo his wife and usurp his throne. And, in its final book, it gives us a vision of what a man might look like after his life's adventures are over: the hero's elderly father, the last person with whom Odysseus is reunited, now a decrepit recluse who has withdrawn to his orchard, tired of life. The boy, the adult, the ancient: the three ages of man. The underlying journey that the poem charts is a man's passage through life, from birth to death. How do you get there? What is the journey like? And how do you tell the story of it?

AS FAR AS my father was concerned, Odysseus wasn't worth all the fuss the poem makes about him. Again and again, as the semester wore on, he would find a way to rail against the legendary adventurer. "Hero?" he would

sputter at some point during each class session. "He's no hero!"

His contempt amused the students, but it didn't surprise me. The first adjective used of Odysseus in the epic—it comes in line 1, soon after *andra*—is *polytropos*. The literal meaning of this word is "of many turns": *poly* means "many" and *tropos* is a "turning" (which is why a flower that turns toward the sun is known as a heliotrope). On one level, the word accurately describes the shape of Odysseus' journey: he's the man who gets where he's going by meandering—indeed, often by travelling in circles. In more than one of his adventures, he leaves a place only to come back to it, not always on purpose. And then there is the biggest circle of all, the one that brings him back to Ithaca, the home he has left so long ago that, by the time he returns, he and his loved ones are unrecognizable to one another. But "of many turns" is also a canny way to describe the hero himself. Throughout Greek literature, Odysseus is a notorious trickster, given to devious twists and evasions. In contrast with Achilles, the hero of the *Iliad*—who declares at one point that he hates "like the Gates of Death" the man who says one thing but means another—the hero of the *Odyssey* has no scruples about lying to get what he wants.

Odysseus' sly proficiency as a fabulist, as a teller of tall tales and an outright liar, has endeared him to audiences over a hundred generations; writers and poets, in particular, see him as a virtuoso of language. (In one memorable episode, he uses a pun on the word "nobody" to defeat the Cyclops, a one-eyed giant who has eaten some of his men.) But all this made him unbearable to my father. A mathematician by training, he valued accuracy, precision—a kind of hardness, even. He had meticulously calibrated standards for virtually everything, as if (I often resentfully thought, when I was young) life were an equation and all you had to do was work out the variables: children, marriage, friendships. Everything, for him, was part of a great, almost cosmic struggle between the qualities he championed and the weaker, softer qualities that most other people settled for, whether in songs or cars or novels or spouses. The lyrics of the pop music we secretly listened to, for instance,



were “soft”: “Assonance is assonance but a rhyme is a rhyme. You can’t approximate!” Many of my father’s pronouncements took this *x-is-x* form, always with the implication that to think otherwise, to admit that *x* could be anything other than *x*, was to abandon the strict codes that governed his thinking and held the world in place. “Excellence is excellence, period,” he would bark. “Smart is smart—there’s no such thing as being a ‘bad test-taker.’” For him, the more arduous something was to achieve or to appreciate, the more worthwhile it was.

All this hardness, the sanity and exactitude and rationality, often made me wonder how he came to acquire the incongruously silly nickname we used for him: Daddy Loopy. True, there were sudden and unexpected softenings that, when I was a child, I used to wish would come more frequently. Some nights, instead of staying hunched over his small wooden desk in the hours after dinner, muttering at the bills as he passed a slender hand over his smooth pate, he would stand up with a sigh and walk across the narrow hallway, into my room, and then, after doing a “super-duper tucker-inner,” sit at the edge of the bed he had built and read “Winnie-the-Pooh” aloud to me. I would lie there in bliss, cocooned like a mummy, unable to move my arms but nonetheless feeling safe as his nasal baritone wrapped itself around the short, straightforward sentences.

And there was the time he took me down to Florida to see his own father, who’d fallen ill. This was in the mid-nineteen-sixties; I was about four. At the beginning of the flight home, we were told that there was “weather” over New York and that we’d have to circle. I was unsettled by the plane’s continual tilting, by the moon passing our window again and again, and just wanted to get home; but, instead of being impatient with me, my father put a book in my hands and said, “If you look at this, you won’t notice.” My father would occasionally tell this story, ostensibly because it showed what a good, patient boy I had been. But now that I know what it’s like to travel with small children I realize that it’s about how good and patient *he* was. Of course, being my father, he didn’t take long to segue from this tender anecdote into mathematics. The story, he would say as he

started to tell it—and this is another reason that the *Odyssey* makes me think of him—hinged on a riddle: How can you travel great distances without getting anywhere? The answer to the riddle was: If you travel in circles.

IN MY FATHER’S eyes, the hero of the *Odyssey* miserably fails the *x-is-x* test. Hence his derision, the sputtered imprecations: “He’s no hero!”

The first time this happened was



around eleven-fifteen on the morning of January 28, 2011, about an hour into the first meeting of Classics 125: The *Odyssey* of Homer. We’d been talking about the way the poem starts. The proem, as the first few lines of an epic are known, establishes the backstory: our *polytropos* hero has been delayed on his return “after sacking the holy citadel of Troy”; having “wandered widely,” he has been detained by the amorous nymph Calypso, who wants to marry him despite his determination to get back to his wife, Penelope; all the men he took with him to fight in the Trojan War have perished, some through foolish misadventures on the journey home. But, after this brief introduction, the poem turns not to Odysseus but to his son, Telemachus, who was a baby when the hero left for Troy. Now a youth of twenty, he sits around the royal palace as the epic gets going, fretting about the disastrous effects that Odysseus’ two-decade absence has wrought. Not only have the suitors overrun the palace, draining its stores of food and wine, carousing day and night, seducing the servant girls, but the social fabric of the island kingdom has frayed, too: some Ithacans are still loyal to Odysseus, but others have thrown their lot in with the suitors. Meanwhile, Penelope has withdrawn to her chambers, dejected. This is how the *Odyssey* begins: the hero himself nowhere in sight, the crises precipitated by his absence consuming all our attention.

As the session began, I tried to elicit ideas from the class about why the poem might begin this way. I looked around the big rectangular seminar table and peppered the students with leading questions. Why focus on the son, an inexperienced youth, and not the father, already famous for his exploits in the Trojan War? What narrative purpose is served by making us wait to meet the hero? Could the information we glean about Ithaca in these opening lines prove to be useful later on? The students stared at their texts in silence. It was only the first day of class, and I wasn’t surprised that they were shy; but nonetheless I was anxious. Oh, God, I thought. Of course this would be the class that Daddy is observing.

But then a young woman next to me, who’d been scribbling in her notebook, straightened up. “I think the first book is meant to be a kind of surprise,” she said. “So here we are, at the beginning of this big epic about this great hero, and the first reference to him is that he’s this kind of *loser*. He’s a castaway, he’s a prisoner, he has no power and no way of getting home. He’s hidden from everything he cares for. So it’s, like, he can’t go any lower, it can only go uphill from there?”

“Great,” I said. “Yes. It provides a baseline for the hero’s narrative arc.”

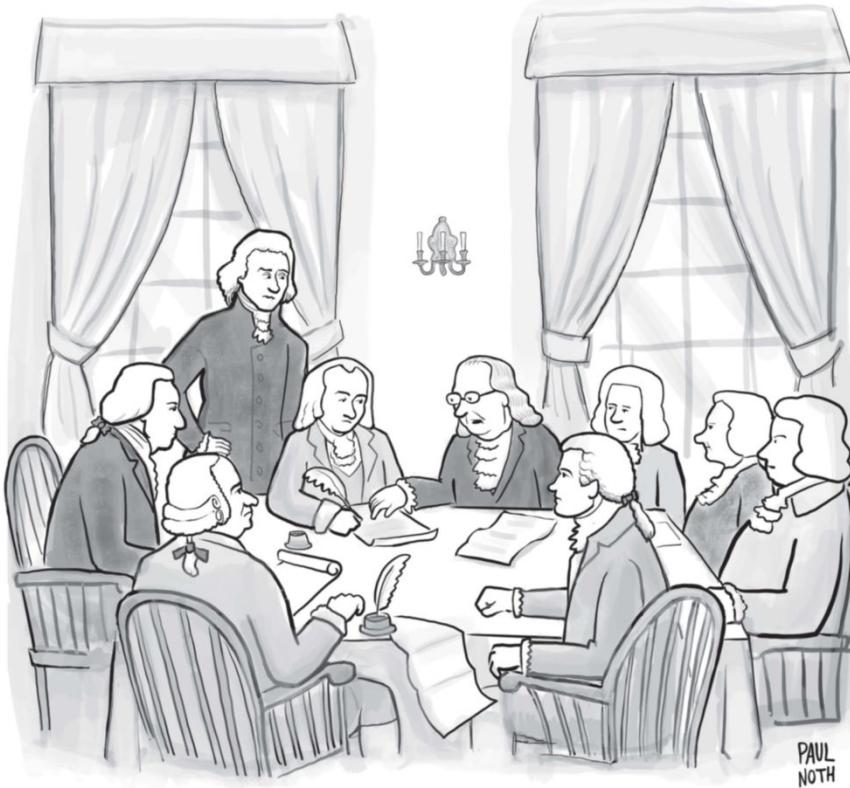
It was at this point that my father raised his head and said, “Hero? I don’t think he’s a hero at all.”

He pronounced the word “hero” with slight distaste, turning the “e” into an extended *a* sound: *haibro*. He did this with other words—“beer,” for instance. I remember him telling my brothers and me, after his father died, that he hadn’t been able to look into the open casket, because the morticians had rouged his father’s cheeks. Then he said, “When I die, I want you to burn me, and then I want you boys to go to a bar and have a round of *baibras* and make a toast to me, and that’s it.”

When we’d first talked about the possibility of his sitting in on the course, he’d promised me that he wasn’t going to talk in class. Now he was talking. “*I’ll* tell you what I think is interesting,” he said.

Nineteen heads swivelled in his direction. I stared at him.

He sat there with his hand in the



"But what if a tyrant comes to power and no one's able to stop him because the whole thing's kind of funny?"

• •

air. A curious effect of his being in the room with these young people was that now, for the first time, he suddenly looked very old to me, smaller than I remembered him being.

"O.K.," I said. "What do you think is so interesting? Why isn't he a hero?"

"Am I the only one," he said, looking around at the students, as if for support, "who's bothered by the fact that Odysseus is *alone* when the poem begins?"

"What do you mean, 'alone'?" I couldn't see where he was going with this.

"Well," he said, "he went off twenty years earlier to fight in the Trojan War, right? And he was presumably the leader of his kingdom's forces?"

"Yes," I said. "In the second book of the Iliad, there's a list of all the Greek forces that went to fight at Troy. It says that Odysseus sailed with a contingent of twelve ships."

My father's voice was loud with triumph. "Right! That's *hundreds* of men. So my question is, what hap-

pened to the twelve ships and their crews? Why is he the only person coming home alive?"

After a moment or two, I said, "Well, some died in the war, and, if you read the proem carefully, you'll recall that others died 'through their own recklessness.' As we go through the poem, we'll actually get to the incidents during which his men perished, different groups at different times. And then you'll tell me whether you think it was through their own recklessness."

I looked around the room encouragingly, but my father made a face—as if he could have done better than Odysseus, could have brought the twelve ships and their crews home safely.

"So you admit that he lost all his men?"

"Yep," I said, a little defiantly. I felt like I was eleven years old again and Odysseus was a naughty schoolmate whom I'd decided I was going to stand by even if it meant being punished along with him.

Now my father looked around the table. "What kind of leader loses all his men? You call that a hero?"

The students laughed. Then, as if fearful that they'd overstepped some boundary, they peered down the length of the seminar table at me, as if to see how I'd react. Since I wanted to show them I was a good sport, I smiled broadly. But what I was thinking was, This is going to be a nightmare.

IN THE WEEKS that followed, my father drew up an extended charge sheet of Odysseus' failings.

"He's a liar and he cheated on his wife," he'd say. (He was right: whatever his yearning for home, Odysseus does sleep with Calypso every night of his seven years with her.)

"He's always crying!" he'd exclaim, referring to Odysseus' bouts of homesick weeping. "What's so *haibroic* about that?"

And then there was the "real weakness" in the epic. "He keeps getting help from the gods!" my father said. "Everything he does, every bit of success he has, is really because the gods help him."

"I'm not so sure," I said, when this came up. We were talking about a passage in Book 6 in which Athena dramatically enhances Odysseus' looks so that he can ingratiate himself with the rulers of an island where he has just washed ashore. "The poem also makes clear that even without the help of the gods he's very clever—"

"No," my father said, with a ferocity that made some of the students look up from their note-taking. "No. The whole poem happens because the gods are always helping him. It starts because Athena decides it's time to get him home, right? And then the reason he's able to get away from Calypso is because Zeus sends Hermes to tell her to let him go."

"Well, yes," I said, "but—"

"Let me finish," he pushed on, the jackhammer rhythm of his argument, with its accusatory emphasis on certain words, familiar from other, much older arguments. "So it's really the gods. And it's *Athena* who keeps dolling him up when he needs to look good."

He made a little face when he said "dolling him up." The students chuckled.

"Yeah, what is that about?" one of them snorted. "Now he has curls 'like the blossom of a hyacinth'? Not very manly!"

"It does seem a bit artificial for him

to get this total makeover,” the girl who sat next to me said. “Why isn’t it good enough for him just to wash off and put on some nice clean clothes?”

“She dolls him up,” my father said again, “and helps him in a lot of other ways. So it’s pretty obvious that he gets a lot of help directly from the *gods*.”

His vehemence took some of the students aback. It didn’t surprise me. The religion thing, I said to myself. Here we go.

He abhorred religion and rituals. Having to attend ceremonies of any kind reduced him to adolescent sulkiness. He would slouch low in the pews at weddings or bar mitzvahs or confirmations, covering his eyes with the fingers of his left hand, the way you might cover your face during a slasher movie, wincing like someone with a headache, and mutter his atheistic invectives to me or my siblings or, sometimes, to no one in particular as the rabbi or the cantor or the priest droned on: “Nobody can prove this crap. It’s like voodoo!” He would leaf through the prayer books as if their pages were evidence of a crime, stabbing a finger at this or that passage with an incredulous shake of his head.

After repeating, “He gets a lot of help from the *gods*,” my father sat back in his chair.

One of the students said, “Well, yeah, I have to agree with what, uh, Mr. Mendelsohn said. The thing that stuck out to me the most this week was how much Athena intervenes in the story. It’s like she’s holding Odysseus’ hand even when it seems unnecessary. After all, if Odysseus is such a great trickster, why can’t he trick his way back home on his *own*? If everything is predetermined to go his way, then why should I be impressed by his masterful cunning or physical abilities?”

My father was beaming: “Exactly! Without the gods, he’s helpless.”

It was when he said the word “helpless” that I suddenly understood. I had been thinking that his resistance to the role of the gods in the *Odyssey* was just part of his loathing for religion in general. But when he said the word “helpless” I saw that the deeper problem, for my father, was that Odysseus’ willingness to receive help from the gods marked him as weak, as inadequate. I thought

of all the times he had growled, “There’s nothing you can’t learn to do yourself, if you have a book!” I thought of the 1957 Chevrolet Bel Air under whose chassis he had spent so many weekends, reluctant to let it die, a pile of car-repair manuals just within reach of one greasy hand; of the Colonial armchairs he had painstakingly assembled from kits in the garage “with no help from anyone.” I thought of how, after taking out the appropriate books from the public library on Old Country Road, he had taught himself how to write song lyrics, how to build barbecue accelerators, to create a compost heap, to construct a wet bar. No wonder he was allergic to religion. No wonder he couldn’t bear the fact that—right up until the slaughter of the suitors, at the end of the poem—the gods intervene on Odysseus’ behalf.

If you needed gods, you couldn’t say you did it yourself. If you needed gods, you were cheating.

A MONTH AFTER THE end of the semester, my father and I were on a ship in the middle of the Aegean, retracing the *Odyssey*.

At the start of the cruise, he’d been tense. He was prickly when his taxi

pulled up in front of my apartment building in New York for the trip to J.F.K. and our flight to Athens. He’d insisted on hiring his local car service for the drive, and when I made a face on entering the sedan—it had no air-conditioning, and the day was very hot—he snapped, “A taxi is a *taxis*.” After we landed and collected our luggage, we boarded the air-conditioned coach that would take us to Piraeus, the port of Athens. My father seemed as tightly coiled as a spring.

As the bus lurched and twisted its way through the traffic, which had been snarled by demonstrations protesting the country’s economic crisis, a representative from the cruise line gave a brief orientation. We’d board our small ship in midafternoon, and at cocktail time there’d be a welcome reception, followed by an introductory lecture. After dinner, we’d start our twelve-hour voyage across the Aegean toward Çanakkale, in Turkey, the site of Troy’s ruins, which we’d visit in the morning.

When my father and I were booking our tickets, a few weeks earlier, he had surprised me by insisting on paying for one of the more expensive



SKETCHBOOK BY BRUCE MCCALL

KNOW YOUR COCONUTS



TSAR NICHOLAS CRADLES a rare albino coconut, a gift from the Sultan of Jub. When no more specimens could be found, a crestfallen Nicholas secured, as substitutes, dozens of ostrich eggs from M. Fabergé, a Russo-French poultryman. The albino coconut was rendered another of history's might-have-beens.



THE WORLD'S SMALLEST COCONUT, examples of which have recently been discovered in the prehistoric palm forests of Saskatchewan, dates from the Fibre Age. Next year, the Littlest Coconut, voiced by Gilbert Gottfried, will star in the six-hundred-million-dollar animated Pixar film "Nuts Ahoy!"



THE CANADIAN FOOTBALL LEAGUE adopted the impossible-to-deflate smooth-husked Borneo coconut for the 2016 season. It was cheap and sturdy but also slipperier than wet soap, so no pass receiver could hold on to it. Every C.F.L. game that year ended in a 0-0 tie.

THE LAPLAND PINE grows wild in northern Finland. Its close resemblance to the coconut palm has puzzled many botanists and maddened more than a few.



UNSUSPECTING G.I.S in the South Pacific fell for this Japanese stink bomb, cunningly designed to look like a freshly opened coconut. Thirsty victims reeked for weeks.



THE WORLD'S LARGEST COCONUT, with a circumference of forty-six feet, was put to work in the Second World War-era half-dance, half-sport known as Tangoball. Couples who could go cheek to cheek without losing their footing were uncommon.

cabins. It had a private balcony. Entering the cabin for the first time, he looked around, surveyed the sleek furnishings, and then walked onto the balcony, loudly sniffing the Mediterranean air. But even though he seemed to approve of the posh touches, the orchids and the cocktails waiting on a gleaming side table, I could sense in him a kind of resistance, as if he were going to prove to me by the end of our ten days at sea that the *Odyssey* wasn't worth all this effort, all this luxury.

Almost imperceptibly, however, he started easing into the rhythm of our days. Mornings were for trips ashore to visit the sites associated with the epic. Many of these were not easy to access, and we'd return from our excursions exhausted and dusty, grateful for the tall glasses of lemonade and iced tea that would be handed to us after we'd climbed back up the gangplank. Early evenings were for bathing and changing; then there was dinner.

After a couple of days at sea, a small group of passengers started to gather after dinner each night around a piano in the ship's bar. My father would invariably request one of his favorites from the Great American Songbook. It was this more than anything, I think, that relaxed him as the days and nights passed. These reminders of home—the words he knew so well, the echoes of the culture of his past—reassured him. He seemed almost visibly to unclench once he was settled into a chair with a Martini, singing along in a raspy Sprechstimme as the pianist played:

Is your figure less than Greek?
Is your mouth a little weak?
When you open it to speak,
are you smaaaart?

My father took a sip of his Martini and smacked his lips. "Ah, so great. Rodgers and Hart. That's when a song was a song!"

To my surprise, it was soon clear that he was enjoying the rituals of the cruise itself—the late-night cocktails and the piano-playing, the desultory conversations with strangers over drinks or at breakfast—at least as much as he did the sites. He even seemed to enjoy the fussy pre-dinner dressing up.

Clothes, to put it mildly, had never been his forte; it was always a bit of a shock to see him wearing anything other than one of his beloved hooded sweatshirts, blazoned with the names of the schools my brothers and sister and I—and, later, our children—had attended. On the first night of the cruise, when we were getting ready for the welcome cocktail party, he started to put on a brown polyester shirt, which I snatched from his hands and threw over the balcony railing into the Aegean.

"Daddy! It's a Mediterranean cruise! Mom must have packed something blue or white!"

"Whaaat? A shirt is a shirt?"

AT THE START of the trip, I'd worried that the physical demands of the daily excursions would be too much for him. He was three months shy of eighty-two, after all, and there was a great deal of walking—which, in Greece, inevitably means walking up hills. But, as it turned out, his problem was something else.

"It doesn't really look that impressive!" he exclaimed, the morning we walked around the ruins in Çanakkale—the first of many times that he let on that a site wasn't living up to his expectations. As he grumbled, Brian, the cruise's resident archeologist, lectured us on the history of the site. He explained that there had been a number of successive Troys over the millennia, each rising and falling in turn. Among the ruins of these, he went on, there was evidence of a "major catastrophe" that had occurred around 1180 B.C.—the traditional date of the fall of Homer's Troy. As he said this, people murmured knowingly and wrote in their notebooks.

My father listened attentively but looked skeptical as we picked our way among the dusty paths and walkways, the giant inward-sloping walls, the heaps of gray stones rising out of patches of yellowed grass. In the obliterating sunlight, the stones appeared weary and porous, as insubstantial as sugar cubes.

My father looked around. "Obviously, it's *interesting*," he said. "But . . ."

His voice trailed off and he shook his head.

"But what?" I was curious.

To my surprise, he suddenly threw an arm around my shoulders and patted me, smiling crookedly. "But the poem feels more real than the ruins, Dan!"

During the week that followed, this became a refrain of his. "The poem feels more real!" he'd say each evening, as people discussed the day's activities. When he did so, he'd cast a quick side-long glance at me, knowing how much the thought pleased me.

One night, after we'd traipsed around a ruin in the southwestern Peloponnese which is known as "Nestor's palace"—Nestor is an elderly comrade of Odysseus', whom Telemachus visits in Book 3, looking for news of his father—he turned to the group around the piano.

"Obviously, I'm glad I got to see the places and be able to make a connection between the real places and what's in Homer," he said.

People nodded, and he went on. "If I would have read Book 3 now, for instance, I would know exactly what the seashore of 'sandy Pylos' looks like"—he wiggled his fingers to indicate that he was quoting verbatim—"where Telemachus landed. And now we all have a sense of Troy, the way it's sited, how it looks out with the water in the distance. That's great. But for me it's a little bit empty compared to the story. Or maybe half-empty. It's like these places we're seeing are a stage set, but the poem is the drama. I feel that *that* is what's real."

I smiled and said, "Don't tell me we've come all this way to retrace the *Odyssey* and now you're telling me that we could have stayed home."

"It's like 'The Wizard of Oz,'" my father said jauntily. "There's no place like home . . ."

Brian turned to me. "Would you say that that movie is actually an *Odyssey*-based story?" he asked.

"It was a book first," my father interrupted. "L. Frank Baum!"

I thought for a moment. "Sure," I said. "Totally. The protagonist is torn from home and family and experiences fabulous adventures in exotic locales where she meets all kinds of monstrous and fantastical beings. But all the time she's yearning to go home."

My father was staring down into his Martini. "That movie came out just before the war started," he said,

wistfully. "Weeks before, as I recall. Your grandfather was working away from home that summer on a big project, but he was home just then, and he took me and my brother Bobby to the Loews Theatre to see it. Man, in those days when you saw a movie it was really an experience. Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney did a floor show. An organ came out of the floor!"

The small group huddled around the bar had grown quiet as he spoke. To them, I realized, this was who he was: a lovely old man filled with delightful tales about the thirties and forties, the era to which the music tinkling out of the piano belonged, an era of cleverness and confidence. If only they knew the real him, I thought ruefully. His face now, relaxed and open, mellow with reminiscence, was so different from the one he so often presented, at least to his family. I wondered whether there might be people, strangers he had met on business trips, say, bellhops or stewardesses or conference attendees, to whom he also showed only this face, and who would therefore be astonished by the expression of disdain we knew so well. But then it occurred to me that perhaps this affable and entertaining gentleman was the person my father was always meant to be, or had possibly always been, albeit only with others. Children always imagine that their parents' truest selves are as parents. But why? "No one truly knows his own begetting," Telemachus bitterly observes, early in the *Odyssey*. Indeed. Our parents are mysterious to us in ways that we can never quite be mysterious to them.

THE ONLY TIME my father didn't cap off an evening in the ship's lounge by saying "the poem feels more real" was after we'd gone to Gozo, a small island off Malta, to see a cave that, according to local legend, belonged to Calypso. We'd been warned that the descent into the cave was rocky and difficult, and that only a few people could go inside at a time, given how cramped it was. Elderly passengers and those who had "mobility issues" were advised not to visit the site.

When I heard all this, I was determined not to go. I suffer from claus-

DAMAGED VILLANELLE

To get rid of the sound of his voice
you take off your ears
but then they grow back.

You try a sharper blade,
two hours hunched over the whetstone,
and, rid of the sound of his voice,

for a day you hear
nothing
until they grow back.

You are not happy.
In birdsong you just hear *I'm hungry* or *Fuck me*,
everything threaded with the sound of his voice

you core out your eardrums to escape
and you do for a while
until they grow back.

Little flesh tom-toms announcing the night-march
from within the ridged whorls of your ears
which to get rid of the sound of his voice

trophobia: simply being in an elevator sets my teeth on edge. There was no way I was going into Calypso's cave.

"What are you talking about?" my father exclaimed when I told him. "You have to go! Seven-tenths of the *Odyssey* takes place there!"

"Seven-tenths?" I had no idea what he was talking about. "The epic is twenty-four books long—"

"Math, Dan! *Math*. Odysseus spends ten years getting home, right?"

I nodded.

"And he spends seven years with Calypso, right?"

I nodded again.

"So, in theory, seven-tenths of the *Odyssey* actually takes place there! You can't miss it!"

"Well," I protested weakly, "actually, no. The poem isn't actually equal to his life. They're two different things."

But he wasn't convinced. "You can't argue with *numbers*," he said.

We got on the bus and went. As the bus rattled and bumped along the rocky roads, it became touchingly clear that my father was trying to distract me. "Look at those beautiful blue flowers!" he would say, pointing. I

looked without seeing; I was thinking about the cave.

We pulled up at the site and found ourselves on the brow of a barren hill. Withered bushes clung to the dun-colored dirt. A narrow parapet above the cave looked out at the glittering sea; about twenty feet below was the opening—a dark vertical gash in the face of the rock, surrounded on either side by parched scrub. A few people had already made the descent and were disappearing into the cleft.

A clammy terror seized me. I shook my head. "No," I said to my father. "Nope, sorry. I'm not going. You go. You'll tell me what it's like."

"Oh, come *on*, Dan," my father said. "I'll be with you. It'll be fine."

Then he did something that astonished me. He reached over and took my hand. I burst out laughing. "Daddy!"

"You'll be *fine*," he said, holding my hand, a thing I couldn't remember him having done since I was a small boy. His own hand was light and dry. I looked at it awkwardly.

"I will *be* there with you every step of the way," my father was saying. "And if you hate it we'll leave."

you burn off this time
with a blowtorch.
They grow back

sooner than your hair does.
Smoother, this time, too,
and in skids the sound of his voice.

We should note now, though,
that it matters less what he said
than when (and where and how and why).

That whatever it was
was always at night
and though morning would reliably come

and snap night off
like a light or a finger extended
night would always grow back.

Different, more attentive maybe,
or gentle and whiny with rain,
but there, in the doorjamb, back.

—Conor Bracken

I looked down at our clasped hands and to my surprise found that I felt better. I looked around to see if anyone was watching and then realized, with a complicated feeling of relief, that the others would assume that I was leading my elderly father by the hand.

And so it was that I visited Calypso's cave with my father holding my hand. He held it as we made our way down the rocky path to the entrance. He held my hand as we crouched down to squeeze through the opening; he held my hand as we shuffled around inside, my heart thumping so hard that I was surprised the others didn't hear it; held my hand as I said firmly that, no, I didn't want to go through a passageway to see the spectacular views of the bay below; held my hand as I scrambled at last into the hot, dry air, not even bothering to conceal my panic. Only after we were back at the parapet above the cave and walking toward the waiting bus did he let go of my hand.

"You O.K., Dan?"

I grinned shakily. "I think this is one time when we can say that the poem does *not* feel more real," I said.

"I didn't want to go," my father said to them. "Hills are hard for me. I thought it would be too much for me physically. But Dan helped me, and I'm glad I went. After all, Odysseus spends seven-tenths of his adventures there!"

He paused, not looking at me, and said, "It was one of the more impressive things I've seen, actually."

Elena murmured, "Your father is a very charming man."

DURING OUR TEN days at sea, we saw nearly everything we'd hoped to see, the strange new landscapes and the debris of the various civilizations that had occupied them. We saw Troy; we saw Nestor's palace; we saw Calypso's cave. We saw the elegantly severe columns of a Doric temple left unfinished, for reasons impossible to know, by some Greeks of the Classical era in Segesta, on Sicily, where Odysseus' remaining crew ate the forbidden meat of the cattle that belonged to the sun god, Hyperion, the climatic instance of foolishness which got them all killed. We visited the desolate spot near Naples which, the ancients believed, was the entrance to Hades. We passed through the Strait of Messina—where Odysseus had to navigate between the man-eating monster Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis. And of course we saw the sea, always the sea, with its many faces, glass-smooth and stone-rough, at certain times blithely open and at others tightly inscrutable, sometimes a weak blue so clear that you could see straight down to the sea urchins at the bottom, spiked and expectant-looking, like mines left over from some war whose causes and combatants no one remembers, and sometimes an impenetrable purple, the color of the wine that we refer to as red but the Greeks call black.

We saw all those things during our travels, all those places, and learned a great deal about the peoples who had lived there. But we were unable to make the last stop on the itinerary. On the day before we were to start sailing to Ithaki, the captain announced that, because of nationwide strikes protesting the austerity measures being forced on Greece, the Corinth Canal was going to be closed. The canal was to have been our shortcut back to Athens from

"Ha!" my father said. Then he lowered his voice and said, "You did good, Dan."

In the lounge that evening, Elena, the tour manager, asked people what they'd thought of Calypso's cave. I looked across at her. That morning, I had told her about my claustrophobia. "You really don't have to go," she had said. "A lot of people are staying aboard because for them it's too difficult." I'd felt a flood of relief so intense that it was vaguely shaming. But something stopped me from accepting the excuse she was offering: I didn't want my father to see me afraid. Later that day, after we'd got back, I bumped into her on deck and told her what had happened: my panic attack, Daddy holding my hand. "Wonderful!" she had cried.

Now, as people recalled the excursion, she smiled at the two of us warmly. "See? You survived!"

"Survived?" someone asked.

I was searching for something to say, when my father cut in.

"We had a *great* time," he said, loudly.

I tried to catch his eye, but he was leaning forward, facing into the ragged semicircle of armchairs like a teacher addressing a study group.

the Ionian Sea, on Greece's west coast, where Ithaki lies; now, in order to get back to Athens in time to make our flights, two days later, we'd have to spend the next day and a half sailing all the way around the Peloponnesian peninsula.

And so we never reached Ithaca, never saw Odysseus' home. But, then, the *Odyssey* itself, filled as it is with sudden mishaps and surprising detours, schools its hero in disappointment and teaches its audience to expect the unexpected. For this reason, I came to feel that our not reaching Ithaca may have been the most Odyssean aspect of the whole excursion. After we got back home—just before my father tripped in a parking lot and fell, the beginning of a chain of events that led, finally, to a massive stroke that left him helpless and unrecognizable, unable to breathe on his own, to open his eyes, to move, to speak—after we got home I would sometimes joke with Daddy that, because we had never reached our goal, our journey retracing the *Odyssey* could still be considered incomplete, could be thought of as ongoing.

But now, on the morning of the last full day of the cruise, we sat glumly on our balcony, thinking about Ithaca and drinking our coffees in silence as the ship strained toward Athens. At one point, trying to lighten the mood, I said, "It's actually sort of cool, our not getting to Ithaca. It's the infinitely receding destination!" But he shook his head and said, "It's just a ten-day tour."

A moment or two later, a steward knocked on the door of our cabin and handed me a note from the captain. It said that he was aware that I had recently published a translation of the works of the modern Greek poet Constantine Cavafy, who lived in Alexandria at the turn of the last century. One of Cavafy's best-known poems is called "Ithaca," and the captain wondered whether, since our destination had suddenly "disappeared," as he put it, I would consider filling the void by giving a reading of the poem and perhaps a short lecture about it. This way, although we would miss the real Ithaca, we would at least visit it metaphorically.

This captain is smart, I thought. For although Cavafy's poem is named after

the most famous destination in world literature, it is about the virtues of not arriving.

This is why, just around the time we would have been visiting Ithaki, I stood at a lectern in front of a small group of passengers on a boat in the middle of the sea, talking about "Ithaca." I started off by discussing the other poets who had taken the *Odyssey*'s hero and refashioned him for their own purposes. In Dante's *Inferno*, Odysseus (given his Latin name, Ulysses) is damned for deceitfulness and madly sails over the edge of the world. In the nineteenth century, the character's perpetual restlessness made him a Romantic hero. In 1833, the young Alfred Tennyson wrote a poem called "Ulysses," a dramatic monologue spoken by the aging hero. Long since returned, the "idle king" reflects on a bitter irony: life back on Ithaca is not what he'd dreamed of during his years away. The homecoming is revealed as odious; it was in the adventuring, he realizes, that the meaning of his life had lain. "How dull it is to pause, to make an end," he muses. In its much quoted final line, "Ulysses" sums up the very spirit of travel, of adventure: "to strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield."

Cavafy knew Tennyson's poem well. In his "Ithaca," published in 1911, he reiterates the earlier poet's wariness about getting where you think you want



to go. "Hope that the road is a long one," his anonymous speaker admonishes an addressee who may be Odysseus but may also be the reader. The poem then goes on to catalogue the riches that only travel can bring: harbors we have never seen before; fabulous treasure from foreign ports, amber and ebony and coral, exotic perfumes; and encounters with wise strangers. Of course, we must remember our destination, whatever that may be; but it

becomes clear that life's meaning derives from our progress through it, and what we make of it:

Always in your mind keep Ithaca.
To arrive there is your destiny.
But do not hurry your trip in any way.
Better that it last for many years;
that you drop anchor at the island an
old man,
rich with all you've gotten on the way,
not expecting Ithaca to make you rich.

"Ithaca" articulates, at a high level of refinement, what has become a cliché of popular culture: that the journey is more important than the destination.

That evening, as we were packing our bags, my father said, "Well, clichés are clichés for a reason." He'd spent the afternoon reading the Tennyson and the Cavafy on his iPad.

"Do you believe it?" I asked. "That stuff about journeys and destinations?"

"I think both are probably important," he replied after a moment. "I mean, obviously I believe in results, in achieving things."

I thought of how hard he'd pushed us to achieve when we were in school, and shot him an amused look, which he chose not to notice.

"So I guess that's what people mean by the 'destination' part," he went on. "Getting where you want, fulfilling your goals. I'm not so sure I believe that that's not important. In life, you're judged by what you accomplish."

I'd heard this before.

"But I can see the other side, too," he added. "You have to explore things, you have to try things . . ." He grew quiet. I thought of the visits we used to make, back in the sixties and seventies, to see his close friend Nino, a professor of mathematics, who loved to travel. After describing his latest trip to Italy, Nino would say, "But Jay, Jay! You should travel sometime!" and my father would shake his head and say, "You don't understand." I wondered how many things my father had wanted to try and hadn't, for one reason or another.

"Well, at least you're trying things now!" My voice sounded brittle in my ears.

He looked mellow. "Yeah, Dan, this has been a great . . ." He seemed to be on the verge of saying something else, but in the end was quiet.

"Now that I'm old," he said presently,

"I guess I can see the part about the importance of being out there and trying things even if you fail. You have to keep moving, at least. The worst thing is to go stale. Once that happens, you're finished. So I guess I agree to some extent that the journey is something, too, if by 'journey' they just mean sticking in the game of life."

After a moment, I said, "Then you do agree with Tennyson and Cavafy: to arrive at the destination means it's all over, it's a ... an end."

With a kind of embarrassment, I realized that I couldn't bring myself to say the word "death." But he knew what I meant.

"I think that they're saying that for these guys to get back home is in some ways like dying. When they stop their travels and adventures, they're foreclosing the possibility that other things will ever happen to them. So being home in familiar surroundings rules out something from their lives."

He looked down at the bed.

"There's no more ... uncertainty," he said after a minute, almost to himself. "There's nothing left to know."

"Uncertainty," I repeated. I was surprised to hear a note of admiration in his voice as he'd said the word. It wasn't one I'd have thought he approved of: what had his life been dedicated to, after all, but certainty—equations, formulas, the tools of quantification? I thought of his struggles over the past few years with ill health: a run-in with prostate cancer, a bout of shingles, an emergency appendectomy. He had endured these afflictions so quietly that it never occurred to me to wonder whether he'd begun to be afraid of what might be next. Did he lie awake at night working out some algorithm, some way of calculating his own chances?

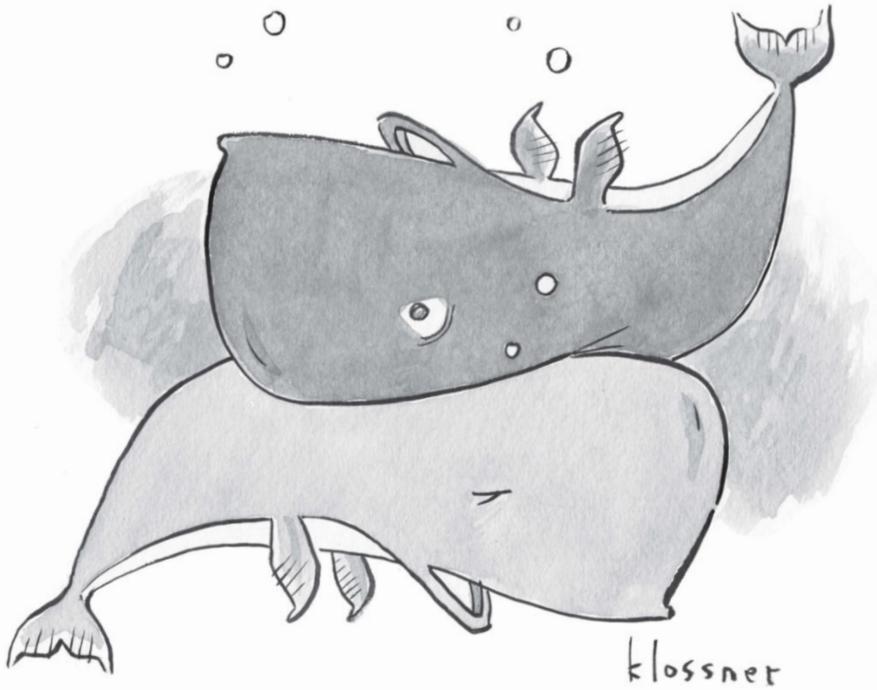
"Daddy," I said.

"What?"

I took a breath. "Are you afraid of dying?"

I was surprised by how swiftly he answered. He frowned a little—not at me, but the way he did when confronted by some knotty problem, a crossword puzzle or a tax return or a set of instructions for assembling a piece of furniture which didn't make sense to him.

"I'm not afraid of *being* dead," he said. "At that point, there's no consciousness.



Whale-to-Whale Resuscitation

You're out of the woods. It's the lead-up to dying that I'm"—his voice trailed off, and I realized he didn't like to say "afraid"—"concerned about. Falling apart, being diminished. Not being all there. You remember what my mother was like at the end."

I remembered. Nanny Kay had had Alzheimer's. I still remember the expression on my father's face when, during what turned out to be her last visit to us, she looked at him and said, "And who are *your* parents?"

"I don't want to get like that," he went on. "Being dead itself can't be bad. It's just nothing. Zero. But what happened to your grandmother—that's worse, as far as I'm concerned. Worse than zero."

"A negative number?" I said, making a joke of it.

"Yeah," he said, although he wasn't smiling. Then he said, "So, yes, you want to keep going, keep doing things. But doing things as *yourself*, not as some kind of zombie."

He looked down again. I knew he was thinking about his mother, what people had kept saying as her illness took its toll. Kay had been so clever, Kay had been so sharp! This wasn't

Kay, it was someone else. She's not *herself* anymore. It was a kind of illness, I thought as I remembered this, that raises questions that are asked by the *Odyssey*, a poem about a hero who's so good at lies, at deceptions and disguises, that, once he finally gets home, he has a difficult time proving that he is who he says he is. What is the "self," exactly? Do you remain "yourself" even after undergoing radical transformations, physical and mental? It was a question that I, too, would be asking, a few months later.

We stood there for a while, not saying anything. Finally, I said, "Anyway, I guess that's what I meant earlier today when the captain made the announcement and I said I liked the idea of not getting to actually see Odysseus' island. By not getting to see Odysseus' home, we've kept the ending at bay. The story can go on and on."

After a pause, he said, "So I was right all along." His voice was sly; the sombre mood had evaporated.

"Right about what?"

"The poem actually *is* more real than the place!"

The next day, we flew home. ♦

SECRETS IN THE SAUCE

The politics of barbecue and the legacy of a white supremacist.

BY LAUREN COLLINS

IN FEBRUARY OF 2015, Kathleen Purvis, the food editor of the Charlotte *Observer*, drove to Birmingham, Alabama, to attend Food Media South, an annual symposium. The keynote session, “Hey, You, Pitch Me Something,” was meant to be a friendly wind-down to a weekend of talks. Participants were invited to get up in front of the editor of the Web magazine the Bitter Southerner and, well, pitch him something.

There were several hundred people in the room. Purvis knew that in the name of politeness she should probably stay quiet, but she couldn’t resist the opportunity to “toss a good word grenade,” she recalled later, into a clubby crowd that she felt tended to overlook, along with chiffon cakes and canning, some of the most complicated questions about Southern cuisine. She raised her hand, and the editor nodded her way.

“Men are the new carpetbaggers of Southern food writing,” she said.

He replied, “Sold.”

The resulting essay argues that “the Southern food-writing world has been unduly influenced, usurped, yes, even invaded, by a barbecue-entranced, bourbon-preoccupied and pork belly-obsessed horde of mostly testosterone-fueled scribes,” who dwell on hackneyed tales of Southern eccentricity without developing “the clear-eyed vision” to see them in a contemporary light. The piece generated controversy, though not as much as Purvis’s investigation into the racial dimensions of the practice of putting sugar in corn bread. “Honest to God, I really hate that hokey-jokey Hey-us-Southerners-aren’t-we-cute stuff,” she told me. “I’ve always said that my beat is food and the meaning of life.”

Gamely, the organizers invited her to the conference the next year as a speaker. “I was getting ready to get up and talk,” Purvis said. “I was sitting there very quietly in a corner, and a woman came up

to me and said, ‘So, is it O.K. to go back to the Piggie Park?’”

The woman was referring to Maurice’s Piggie Park, a small chain of barbecue restaurants, established in West Columbia, South Carolina, in 1953. The original restaurant occupies a barnlike building on a busy intersection and is presided over by a regionally famous electric marquee that features the boast “WORLD’S BEST BAR-B-Q,” along with a grinning piglet named Little Joe. The Piggie Park is important in the history of barbecue, which is more or less the history of America. One reason is that its founder, Maurice Bessinger, popularized the yellow, mustard-based sauce that typifies the barbecue of South Carolina’s Midlands area. Another is that Bessinger was a white supremacist who, in 1968, went to the Supreme Court in an unsuccessful fight against desegregation, and, in 1974, ran a losing gubernatorial campaign, wearing a white suit and riding a white horse.

In 2000, when the Confederate flag was removed from the South Carolina statehouse dome, Bessinger raised Confederate flags over all his restaurants. (By then, there were nine.) A king-sheet-size version went up over the West Columbia location, where he had long distributed tracts alleging, for example, that “African slaves blessed the Lord for allowing them to be enslaved and sent to America.” He was a figure whose hate spawned contempt, leading a writer from the Charleston *City Paper* to fantasize about how “Satan and his minions would slather his body in mustard-based BBQ sauce before they dined.”

In 2007, Bessinger, who suffered from Alzheimer’s at the end of his life, handed the business over to his two sons, Paul and Lloyd, and a daughter, Debbie. In the months before his death, in 2014, they took down the flags and got rid of the slavery pamphlets. “Dad liked politics,” Lloyd, who serves as the public face of the operation, told a reporter. “That’s

not something we’re interested in doing. We want to serve great barbecue.”

By the time the news reached Kathleen Purvis, she hadn’t eaten Bessinger’s barbecue in nearly three decades. She grew up in Wilson, North Carolina, where her father was an R.C. Cola salesman and barbecue sauce is made with vinegar. Early in her career, she’d become a fan of the Bessinger family’s line of packaged foods—“handy for a quick dinner when I was working nights”—but, she wrote, in an article in the *Observer* in December, “When I learned about Bessinger’s history, I stopped buying his products. I followed a simple policy on the Piggie Park: I didn’t go there. Ever.” During the flag scandal, thousands of South Carolinians made the same call, going cold turkey. “I first made Maurice’s acquaintance when I was a child,” the barbecue expert William McKinney wrote, on the Web site of the Southern Foodways Alliance. “His barbecue was sold in the freezer aisle of the grocery store. It would bubble up in our family’s oven, its orange sauce as vivid as a river of lava. My mother would pack his barbecue in my lunch bag routinely, and I ate those sandwiches all the way through high school, wrapped up in aluminum foil and still a touch warm once lunch time came around.” It was as though Jif peanut butter or Katz’s Deli had become irredeemably tainted.

The Piggie Park had bad vibes, but it retained a pull on the community. For barbecue obsessives, it held a special fascination as one of the few restaurants in the country to still cook entirely over hickory wood, using no electricity or gas. One prominent Columbia resident, a black man, told me that he was addicted to Bessinger’s sauce, but that he would never admit it in public. The regime shift, then, represented a touchy moment. Some people wanted to go only if things had changed (but, if they were going to go, they wanted to get there before things



Kathleen Purvis, a food editor, wrote, "When I learned about Bessinger's history, I stopped buying his products."

had changed too much). For others, no amount of change was ever going to mitigate the legacy of a man who had caused so much hurt. Even asking if it was O.K. to return was a form of blindness to that pain. "They could change the last name, redo the building, then dig the old man up . . . it still wouldn't matter to those who continue to carry the 'chip on the shoulder' mentality," a man named James Last, of Wilmington, North Carolina, wrote in response to Purvis's article, prompting Durward White, of Katy, Texas, to reply, "Are you saying no matter how vile and disrespectful his actions were we should move on? People still can't move on from Tom Brady and deflate gate and that was 3 years ago."

BARBECUE MIGHT BE America's most political food. The first significant reference to it that the barbecue scholar Robert F. Moss has been able to find is in "The Barbecue Feast: or, the three pigs of Peckham, broiled under an apple-tree," an account of a 1706 banquet in Jamaica. The revellers were English colonists, but the pigs were "nicely cook'd after the West Indian manner": whole, over coals, on long wooden spits on which they turned as a cook basted them in a spicy sauce (green Virginia pepper and Madeira wine), using a foxtail tied to a stick. Native Americans on the East Coast of North America used similar cooking

techniques. But the main thing about barbecues is that they were social affairs, a day's entertainment for the community. Between 1769 and 1774, George Washington attended at least six of them, he wrote in his diary, including "a Barbecue of my own giving at Accotinck."

A whole hog can feed as many as a hundred people. Barbecues, often held on the Fourth of July, became overtly political in the nineteenth century. As Moss writes in "Barbecue: The History of an American Institution," they were "the quintessential form of democratic public celebration, bringing together citizens from all stations to express and reaffirm their shared civic values." They adhered to a ritualized format: parade, prayer, reading of the Declaration of Independence, oration, and dinner in a shady grove near a drinking spring, after which dignitaries gave a series of "regular" toasts (thirteen of them, on patriotic subjects), followed by "voluntary" toasts from the masses (thirty or forty, on issues ranging from local elections to the free navigation of the Mississippi, or whatever else happened to be the day's concerns). Often, the festivities turned rowdy. If an antebellum politician had wanted to rile folks up about building a wall, he would have done it at a barbecue.

Before the Civil War, enslaved men often cooked these civic meals. They prepared their own feasts, too, either sanc-

tioned by their owners or organized on the quiet. Much of the planning for the rebellions organized by Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner took place at barbecues. After emancipation, black men continued to be some of the country's leading pit masters, catering enormous spreads that featured everything from barbecued hogs, shoats, chickens, and lambs to stuffed potatoes, stewed corn, cheese relish, puddings, coffee, and cigars. In 1909, the *Times* noted the death of a man born around 1865, on a plantation in Edgefield County, South Carolina. "Pickens Wells, one of the most famous barbecue cooks in the South, dropped dead today while preparing a barbecue," the item read. "Pickens prepared the famous barbecue at which President Taft was the guest of honor last Winter. White men here are raising a fund to erect a monument to the negro as a tribute to his fidelity and character."

Barbecue restaurants, like lunch counters, played an outsized role in the desegregation battles of the nineteen-sixties. In Birmingham, in 1964, Ollie McClung, of Ollie's Barbecue, challenged the legality of the Civil Rights Act, arguing that the restaurant's practice of denying sit-down service to black customers was none of the federal government's business, since Ollie's, a mom-and-pop operation, wasn't involved in interstate commerce. Pointing out that forty-six per cent of Ollie's meat came from out of state, the Supreme Court upheld the act's constitutionality in a 9-0 ruling. It included a concurring opinion from Justice Hugo Black, an Alabamian who reportedly voted over the objection of his wife, a regular diner at Ollie's.

In 1964, Maurice Bessinger was the president of the National Association for the Preservation of White People. On August 12th of that year, Anne Newman and a friend drove to the West Columbia Piggie Park. They stopped outside the lot for curbside service. A waitress emerged and, seeing that they were black, returned to the building without speaking to them. Then a man with a pad approached the car but refused to take their order, even though white customers were being served. In *Newman v. Piggie Park Enterprises, Inc.*, the district court asserted that "the fact that Piggie Park at all six of its eating places denies full and equal service to Negroes because of their race is



"Please hurry—I don't know how long my cat can keep him subdued."

uncontested and completely established by evidence,” but it concluded that the restaurants, because they were principally drive-ins, weren’t subject to the public-accommodation provision of the Civil Rights Act. When a higher court reversed the ruling, Bessinger appealed to the Supreme Court, claiming that being forced to serve black people violated his religious principles. He lost, in a unanimous decision. (Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg recently cited the case in her *Hobby Lobby* dissent.) In “Defending My Heritage,” Bessinger’s 2001 autobiography, he claims that he and his family always treated black people well, citing his father’s practice, at a restaurant he owned, of giving a black employee discarded food and old grease. (Then he says that they fired her for stealing half a ham.) He writes, “I have concluded that the civil rights movement is a Satanic attempt to make it easier for a global elite, a group of extremely wealthy men with no Constitutional or national or cultural loyalties, working at an international level to eventually seize power in this country.”

Bessinger launched his run for governor from his cattle range, which he called Tara, after the O’Hara plantation in “Gone with the Wind.” One of his opponents remembered the primary race as “something between a comic opera and depressing satire.” Out of seven candidates, including a competing barbecue baron, Bessinger came in fifth, garnering 2.5 per cent of the vote. Business suffered, whether from his notoriety or his distraction. He decided to focus on rebuilding his restaurant empire, betting that people—white people, at least—would eventually forget about his period of activism. Many of them did. The corollary to white innocence is white passivity, the feeling that what one’s ancestors did was so messed up that it couldn’t possibly make a difference where one eats a barbecue sandwich.

ACCORDING TO HIS birth certificate, Maurice Bessinger was born on July 14, 1930, on a farm near Cope, South Carolina. It occupied land that had been willed to his mother, Genora, by her grandfather, a veteran of the Civil War. Maurice thought that his real birth date was probably closer to July 4th, as his father, Joseph, went to the county court-

house, where births were recorded, only a couple of times a month. Maurice was the eighth of eleven children. In his autobiography, he says that he helped pick cotton from the age of four, using a “small, ten-pound little cloth sugar bag,” and graduating, at six, to “a full, 100-pound bag like the grown-ups used.” The family ate clabber, corn bread, grits, and vegetables that they grew in their garden. Meat was scarce; eggs, occasional. Maurice’s grandmother told him that, anticipating the arrival of Sherman’s troops, she and her neighbors had buried smoked pork shoulders, hams, bacon, and sausage, covering them with desiccated leaves to disguise fresh digging.

When Maurice was nine, his father gave up farming, selling the family’s cow to buy a roadside café from a widow in Holly Hill, about halfway between Columbia and Charleston. Maurice started to work that year at the Holly Hill Café, swatting flies and bussing tables. By the time he was twelve, he was living in a small room in the back of the café, getting up at 5 A.M. to run the breakfast shift, spending a few hours at school, and then returning to the restaurant to work. Tired and skinny, he failed fifth and sixth grades. Two Saturday nights in a row, the local policeman shot a black man dead. Maurice wrote, in 2001, of one incident, “The perpetrator ran, and Mr. Workman dropped him with one shot at about 150 paces!”

By 1946, Joseph had sold the Holly Hill Café and opened Joe’s Grill, where he perfected the secret recipe—its mustard kick supposedly inspired by his German roots—for which the family was coming to be known. In 1949, in Maurice’s senior year of high school, Joseph died of a heart attack. Despite Maurice’s insistence that his father had told him that the business would be his, the restaurant went to one of his brothers, who was seven years older and had come back from the war with three Bronze Stars and a Purple Heart. Furious, Maurice joined the Army and shipped out to Korea.

In the aftermath of the fight over Joe’s Grill, many of the eleven siblings struck out across the state to set up their own enterprises. The Bessinger name

now dominates South Carolina barbecue, presiding over a complex diaspora of interrelated but not always amicable interests. “I grew up being told that yellow sauce was my heritage,” the journalist Jack Hitt, who was raised in Charleston, wrote in the *Times Magazine* in 2001. “But it’s clear that without the siblings’ anxieties and their nomadic habits, Joe Sr.’s recipe would have died out after Joe’s Grill closed. South Carolina would have remained just another outpost in the national camp of red barbecue sauce.”

By 2000, Maurice was easily the most successful of his generation of Bessingers. In addition to the nine restaurants around Lexington County, he had the frozen dinners, a mail-order business, and a bottling plant that distributed his Southern Gold sauce (with a Confederate flag on the label) to three thousand grocery stores along the East Coast, making him the largest barbecue wholesaler in the country. *People* called the Piggie Park “the best all-in-one barbecue restaurant in America.” Pat Buchanan, running for President on the Reform Party ticket, held fundraisers at the main restaurant, whose pits burned non-stop. When an economic boycott of South Carolina, led by the state’s N.A.A.C.P. chapter, resulted in the removal of the Confederate flag from the statehouse dome, Maurice acted quickly. “I surrounded the city of Columbia with Confederate flags,” he later said. “I didn’t even tell my wife. I had it all planned.”

Acting on a tip, John Monk, of the *State* newspaper, went to the Piggie Park and discovered Bessinger’s stock of revisionist literature. The N.A.A.C.P. decided to challenge him next. “We didn’t have any idea that we would change his mind,” Lonnie Randolph, Jr., the chapter’s longtime president, told me. “The goal was to make South Carolina, if there’s such a thing, whole again—to let folks know that this isn’t the way life should be.”

Under pressure from the association, Sam’s Club, Walmart, Winn-Dixie, Food Lion, Harris Teeter, Bi-Lo, Kroger, and Publix stopped carrying Southern Gold. Piggly Wiggly, the lone



holdout, said that it would continue to stock the sauce, owing to customer demand. Bessinger was defiant. He likened his treatment to that of Jewish merchants during Kristallnacht, and told a newspaper, “Winn-Dixie is going to have to take that name off and call it Winn-Yankee.” Eventually, Piggly Wiggly dropped his products, too. Only months earlier, John McCain’s Presidential campaign had been ruined by a series of robocalls that asked voters, “Would you be more or less likely to vote for John McCain . . . if you knew he had fathered an illegitimate black child?” Still, the views that a person could get away with espousing, at least in public, had changed since the nineteen-sixties. Joe McCulloch, a Columbia attorney, recalled, “After that, Maurice became radioactive, as did his barbecue.”

Bessinger claimed that his business shrank by ninety-eight per cent, amounting to a twenty-million-dollar loss. Eventually, he closed several restaurants and shut down the bottling plant. Nonetheless, he held his ground, portraying himself as a champion of free speech and state sovereignty, and vowing, like proud Southerners after Sherman’s march, to “root hog or die.”

In the wake of the controversy, the Bessingers were able to cultivate an alternative clientele. If some diners continued to patronize the restaurants in spite of Maurice’s views (“Elton John’s gay, but I still listen to his music,” one customer told the *Baltimore Sun* in 2002), others showed up explicitly to support his cause (“The man’s got the guts to stand up for his beliefs,” another said). Glen McConnell, then a state senator, began stocking Bessinger’s sauce at CSA Galleries, a Confederate-memorabilia store that he ran with his brother. (I Googled McConnell, and was shocked to learn that he is now the president of the College of Charleston.)

Even today, a rump of supporters regard Bessinger as the heroic victim of a liberal conspiracy. In 2014, a reader wrote to a local paper that “after Bessinger publicly supported keeping the Confederate Battle Flag on the S.C. Statehouse, his business was sabotaged by anti-Southern activists who would go into grocery stores and surreptitiously open a bottle of Maurice’s barbecue

sauce and lay it on the top shelf, ruining a section of merchandise and creating a mess for the store to clean up.”

IN JANUARY, I called Lloyd Bessinger, Maurice’s elder son. Our conversation began smoothly, but, after a few minutes, he asked me if there would be any political angle to the article I wanted to write, and, when I said yes, things got uncomfortable. He sounded anguished as he said that, while he was no racist, he did not want to dishonor his father, whom he had known as a good and loving man. When we hung up, I was left uncertain whether the changes that Lloyd and his siblings had made at the Piggie Park were business decisions or evidence of a genuine transformation. Even if he had taken down the flags, Lloyd had never really explained why he made the move: out of principle, or pragmatism, or even, as a local news channel had reported, because of the rising cost of dry cleaning. (“I think we should all be united by one country and one flag, the American Flag,” he said later.) I wrote to him, asking if I could come to see him in Columbia. “It was nice talking to you today,” he replied, declining. “Hopefully time will heal the past.”

One of the reasons I’d become interested in the Bessinger story is that it struck me as a small, imperfect test case for how to act in our political moment. Of the many moral issues that have beset Americans since November, one of the most nagging is that of the once beloved rel-

sider themselves hugely opposed to the ethics of its purveyors find difficult to renounce. I grew up in Wilmington, North Carolina, eating barbecue at Flip’s Barbecue House. It occupied a cinder-block building with an orange sheet-metal roof, and its hulking stuffed bear, reportedly shot by Flip himself, was once named one of the “seven wonders of the Cape Fear region.” Because barbecue is an intensely regional food, it’s also an intensely emotional one, the sort of thing you wake up in the middle of the night fiending for when, say, you’re pregnant and living three thousand miles from home. I got that. Still, I’d always got over it, even when Flip’s closed, in 2013. (If Eastern North Carolina-style barbecue is your thing, and you can’t have it, dump a pork shoulder and all the vinegar you’ve got into a Dutch oven and let it cook, low, on the stovetop for as long as you can stand to.)

My first stop was Bessinger’s Barbecue, which two of Maurice’s brothers opened in 1960. I ordered a large barbecue plate. I also got a banana pudding. The restaurant’s Web site features testimonials from customers, including Mr. and Mrs. Stephen Beazley, of Evans, Georgia (“We flew in our private plane to shop for rugs. You were near and looked interesting. **BEST BBQ EVER!**”) and the television personality Andrew Zimmern (“The best spicy sauce I’ve ever tasted!”). I found a seat, tore a paper towel from a roll that sat on the table, and started eating. The barbecue was satisfying, full of browned bits and ends, but ever so slightly dry. I kept daubing on more sauce—its bright color suggested a starring role in a stain-removal infomercial—which may have been exactly the point.

After the meal, I asked at the counter if any Bessingers were around. Michael Bessinger, a third-generation barbecue man, appeared, with an apron tied around his waist, and led me to an upstairs office. Near the cash register, amid pictures commemorating visits from Elizabeth Dole and Mitt Romney, I’d seen a framed newspaper article in which a relative had spoken frankly of the Bessinger schism (“Everybody wanted to be a chief and not Indians”). Michael told me that his branch of the family wasn’t close to Maurice’s—they never got together for the holidays, for example—but he seemed to regard his uncle with a sort of detached



ative who appears at the Thanksgiving table spouting contemptible ideas. When something or someone you love troubles your conscience—when your everyday relationships are political acts—do you try to be a moderating force, or are you obligated to make a break entirely?

I decided to visit some less fraught outposts of the Bessinger barbecue empire, hoping to get a sense of what makes yellow-sauce barbecue—a seemingly minor comfort—something that, like Amazon or Uber, even some people who con-

SAUDADE

The city wraps itself up in me.
Covers its ears in me.
Tried me on in one of those public nudity dressing rooms they used to have at Loehmann's.
How I loved in my loneliness the comfort of those pantings & unpantings. How that dressing room is no longer there, as many people from that dressing room just got up and walked out, onto the next myth, died or bore a child or didn't. Perhaps it was an accident. Haven't thought of me since. Should I stop hating my own nostalgia, which places me here on the corner of my sadness so many years later on a mild evening, looking up into lit windows, dinnertimes not my own?
The city wraps me up in itself, does with me as air does to particulate matter.
Lets me float around invisible killing people I don't know.

—Anna McDonald

amusement. "Maurice always liked the spotlight, positive or negative," he said. He said that he, too, was trying to move forward without disrespecting the past. He was thinking about introducing alcohol and had recently added brisket to the menu—a concession to modern customers' expectations of barbecue, however regionally dubious.

Across town at Melvin's Barbecue, I ordered another barbecue plate, this time with a side of butter beans. It arrived on a stylish brushed-metal tray, instead of a plastic plate. A list of the Ten Commandments printed on the side of my cup momentarily counteracted the progressive atmosphere, but then I walked over to the condiments bar, and, scanning vats of pickled peppers, noticed a bullet-shaped bottle with a green nozzle. Sriracha! I wondered if Melvin David Bessinger, who in 2004 inherited the business from his father, Melvin, might be the family's

great unabashed modernizer, the King Abdullah of yellow-sauce barbecue.

Melvin, who died in 2012, was the fifth child of the eleven Bessinger siblings—the older brother who, after their father's sudden death, Maurice wrote, "was conspiring against me to move me out of the business and take it for himself." (Melvin was equally confident of his status as rightful heir, claiming that, when he was ten years old, his father had entrusted him with the secret recipe, promising, "Son, this sauce is gonna make you a million dollars some day.") In 2000, when the N.A.A.C.P. initiated the boycott, Melvin swept in, picking up much of Maurice's forfeited business. Melvin's sauce was called Golden Secret, instead of Southern Gold. To dispel the suspicion that the business might be a front for Maurice's—same sauce, Confederate-flag-less bottles—Melvin David issued a press release: "Melvin and his brother do not share

political or social views. Despite their being brothers, they do not speak to each other. Melvin's views on the Confederate flag, slavery and race relations are not those of his brother." Maurice angrily told reporters, "I taught Melvin everything he knows about barbecue sauce—but I didn't teach him everything I know."

Melvin David was out of town the day I visited the restaurant, but I reached him on the phone later. "When you come from a large family, not everybody's going to agree," he told me. "Some people can't even get along with a brother and sister—how about if you have eleven and you all went into the same business?" Whatever the extent of the brothers' animosity, he said, Melvin and Maurice had reconciled before Melvin died. "I'm ashamed to use my last name," Melvin David had said, in a 2001 interview, a statement he now regretted. "I was being accused of a lot of things, a lot of negative things were coming my way, and it just kind of got to me," he told me. "No doubt this was a great name that we were given when we were born."

LEXINGTON COUNTY, which encompasses all but one of the dozen Piggie Park restaurants now in operation, remains a bedrock of hard-right politics. It is the home of Donnie Myers, the prosecutor known during his decades-long tenure as Dr. Death, for his zealousness in pursuing capital punishment; and Joe Wilson, the congressman who heckled President Obama during a speech to a joint session of Congress, shouting, "You lie!" In the 2016 Presidential election, 65.6 per cent of the county's residents voted for Donald Trump.

Lake E. High, Jr., the president of the South Carolina Barbecue Association, agreed to meet me at the original Piggie Park, in Columbia, one day in January. That morning, while renting a car in Charleston, I struck up a conversation with a late-middle-aged white man behind the counter. When I told him I was writing about Maurice's Piggie Park, he reminisced, "You'd get a few cocktails in you, drive up, get that big-ass fried tempura onion ring, and yum, yum, yum." He continued, "All that stuff you see on CNN, the liberal side—that division, that prejudice, that's not who we are."

I took the keys and headed up to

EIGHTH FLOOR, LAST
OFFICE ON THE LEFT. YOU
HAVE A 9:15 WITH HARRIS—
WATCH YOUR BACK.



DROP YOUR DAUGHTER OFF AT
WORK DAY

Columbia. When I reached the Piggie Park, I pulled the car in under the same formerly futuristic drive-in canopy where, fifty-three years earlier, Anne Newman had been refused service. I walked into the restaurant, where High—a big man in a sweater vest, with a mottled complexion and an omniscient smirk—was sitting at a round table. He explained that he'd got into barbecue as a challenge. "Somebody said, 'We got the best damn barbecue in the nation, and the worst judges,' and I said, 'Well, I tell you what, I think we could fix that,' and we started the South Carolina Barbecue Association in 2004." When Anthony Bourdain visited South Carolina for an episode of "No Reservations," he asked High to show him around. (As for his name, which he shares with his father, when his great-grandmothers were squabbling over what to call the coming child, High's grandfather banged a fist on the table, pointed to a map that was hanging on the wall, and said, "What's behind me?" "Lake Erie," one of the great-grandmothers answered. "Well, that's his name.")

In High's estimation, the Piggie Park

was "hundred-mile barbecue"—worth driving a hundred miles for. "It's the iconic South Carolina sauce is what it boils down to," he said, surveying the restaurant, with its lazy Susans, ceiling fans, and brown linoleum floor. Country music was playing on the radio; a muted television showed Fox News. The crowd was white, mostly older. In the guest book, I found comments that read, "Where's the flag??!" and "Thanks for Taking It Down! God Bless!!" Near the entrance, a portrait of Maurice presided over a shrine of sauces. I ordered some barbecue. The chop was delicate, and the sauce was nearly fluorescent. "It tastes like mustard that's got some mouthfeel to it," High continued. "I'd say it's somewhere in the middle of the light-to-sharp spectrum."

High spoke favorably of the Piggie Park's new management—"Paul and Lloyd, and he's got a daughter whose name I forget, cute girl. They're real dedicated." He had also thought highly of Maurice, who, he said, was always friendly and insisted on top-of-the-line ingredients. "He and Strom Thurmond were talking about all-natural thirty years ago," he said, which seemed a bit like remem-

bering Oswald Mosley for his advocacy of brown bread. I asked whether he thought Maurice's political legacy posed a problem. "It wasn't nearly as bitter as modern day makes it seem," he said. He went on to talk about the trouble with racially interbred societies, the genetic basis of criminality, and his belief that the South should secede. After a disquisition that touched on everything from slavery ("It's been around since Day One, and they talk about it in the Bible") to Trump ("I happened to see him speaking to a crowd before he declared, and I came into the kitchen and I said, 'Lovebug, that man's gonna be President'"), he returned to the Piggie Park. "This is the most taken-for-granted barbecue house in America," he said.

LONNIE RANDOLPH, the N.A.A.C.P. state president who had led the boycott of Piggie Park, told me that Maurice Bessinger was part of an ideological and economic lineage that stretched back to before the Civil War. "He represented a hate that was so deeply rooted," Randolph said. "I knew it was dangerous." He didn't think that it was possible to let the past be the past. "It doesn't affect me"—white people can say that, because it didn't affect them. But, when I think of the damage that has been done, it cannot be undone," he said. Things might be different, he conceded, if the new generation of Bessingers were taking some sort of active steps toward reparation. "But I'm not familiar with them supporting any issues that support the lives of the people he abused for so many years."

Representative Joe Neal, a longtime member of the state legislature and the chairman of the South Carolina Legislative Black Caucus during the flag battles of the early aughts, placed a similar emphasis on the younger Bessingers' actions, or lack thereof, when I got him on the phone in January. (Neal died the next month.) "I don't think they have to apologize," he said. "I think what people are waiting for is to find out who they are."

After talking to Randolph and Neal, I couldn't stop thinking about Nat Fuller's Feast. Nat Fuller, born in 1812, was a slave who became a celebrated restaurateur, opening the Bachelor's Retreat, a Charleston catering hall famed for its pastries, game, and turtle soup. In April of 1865, two months after Charleston

surrendered to Union forces, Fuller orchestrated a grand meal—historians have remembered it as a “reconciliation banquet”—to which he invited dozens of the city’s prominent citizens. A society doyenne wrote in her diary of the “miscegenat dinner, at which blacks and whites sat on an equality and gave toasts and sang songs for Lincoln and Freedom.”

The evening’s menu has been lost to time, but, in 2015, a group of chefs and scholars tried to re-create the meal, using dishes that Fuller had served at other events. On a drizzly April night, forty Charlestonians gathered for the feast. “This is the beginning for all of us,” B. J. Dennis, a black chef, said, making a toast. Fifteen days earlier, Walter Scott, an unarmed black man with a broken brake light, had been shot in the back by a white North Charleston police officer. Two months later, the white supremacist Dylann Roof walked into the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston and killed nine people, including Clementa C. Pinckney, Mother Emanuel’s pastor. Pinckney was at the dinner that night, trying to acknowledge and refute history over watermelon brandy, chowchow, shrimp pie, *chapón chasseur*, and truffled squab served with silver ewers of walnut ketchup.

BEFORE I LEFT West Columbia, I decided to try Lloyd Bessinger one last time. In the wood-panelled office at the main Piggie Park, a secretary invited me to have a seat. Lloyd walked out: trim, mostly bald, wearing navy chinos and a red Piggie Park polo.

Lloyd was as unassuming as his father had been outlandish. His ambition, it seemed, was to be left alone. When I asked about the 2000 boycott, he said, “I try not to think about it that much anymore.”

“Do you support white supremacy?” I asked.

“No! Of course not,” Lloyd said. “White supremacy is totally wrong—and my father was not like that. He was a Southerner and a South Carolinian. He enjoyed reading about the history and the heritage of America.” Lloyd had recently been to a friend’s funeral at a black church, and “two hundred people were there, and”—he chuckled—“ninety per cent of them were black, and that was fine.”

I told Lloyd what Lonnie Randolph and Joe Neal had said, that people needed a tangible sign that the Bessinger family understood the pain they had caused, and that until they gave one it would persist.

“Mmmkay,” he said. “Well, I don’t know how I can do that. I’m not objecting to doing that. I just need to know what that is.”

That Lloyd could afford not to have much of an opinion—that he simply didn’t have to think about race while making choices big and small—was a privilege he had never considered. He seemed caught between the worlds of his parents and his children, the values with which he had grown up and those he now perceived to be ascendant. I recalled what Kathleen Purvis had said to me about Lloyd: “I felt very sympathetic to him. My family’s from Georgia—I have family members who had beliefs, used language that was awful. My grandmother, the last thing she remembered about me when she was disappearing into dementia was ‘Oh, yeah, that’s the girl that loves black people so much.’ That was a very painful thing, and to ask me to denounce my grandmother for that—you can’t. So being Southern always involves that complicated dance.”

“I can’t change anything,” Lloyd said, before I left. “All I can do is speak for myself today. I don’t look at race. I look at people. We’re all equal, O.K.?”

IN 2009, THE Daras family, of Fort Washington, Maryland, moved to Orangeburg, South Carolina. Tommy Daras had just retired from running gas stations. “I’d come down here fishing, and I liked it,” he said recently. “I always thought the people were nice, and Florida was too hot.”

For a while, he and his wife, Deborah, enjoyed the weather and their newfound freedom. Then, in 2015, they spotted a cute brick bungalow on John C. Calhoun Drive, an out-of-business Piggie Park. “We were at home, bored, and decided to clean it up, fix it up, and make some money on it,” Daras said. They added teal-and-white awnings and named the place Edisto River Creamery & Kitchen. Daras recalled, “An ice cream shop near a park, how hard could that be?” They hosted such events as Bible studies and a Pokémon Go tour-

nement. Their outdoor sign welcomed hunters and advertised a bacon palmetto burger. Daras said, “I did notice that there were no black customers”—the population of Orangeburg is eighty per cent African-American—“and I was trying to figure that out. Man, why am I not getting their business?”

The Darases bought the property from Maurice Bessinger’s children, knowing that a Confederate flag flew on a small bit of land in a corner of the lot. From what Daras understood, the parcel, through some quirk of local real-estate history, belonged to the Sons of Confederate Veterans, having been donated to them by Maurice Bessinger in 2005. Daras wasn’t a fan of the flag, but it didn’t really bother him. It became impossible to ignore, however, when, shortly after the massacre at Mother Emanuel, members of the Sons of Confederate Veterans showed up, took down the flag, and replaced it with a new one that was three times as big. “Before, I’d just sucked it up, but then it was, like, ‘Man, I’ve got to try to do something here,’” Daras said, explaining that he could no longer abide “this huge flag sticking up in the air telling everyone to screw themselves.”

Daras reexamined his deed. With the help of a lawyer, Justin Bamberg, he is filing a lawsuit arguing that the corner parcel belongs to him. (The Sons of Confederate Veterans maintain their ownership.) Bamberg, who is thirty, grew up near Orangeburg and now serves as a Democratic member of the South Carolina House of Representatives. I called him to discuss the details of the lawsuit, but, as our conversation went on, he started talking about what the Piggie Park had meant to him as a young African-American man. “It was one of those places I remember as a kid, always riding by there, feeling like in some people’s eyes I was less a person. I did not go into Maurice’s until I was in college,” he said, recalling one afternoon when he had felt compelled to just walk into the restaurant, leaving without ordering anything. “It was a personal thing—for so long, this place always had control over some part of how I felt. For me, it was like, ‘It’s gonna end today.’” It will be up to a court to conclude the story of Maurice Bessinger’s flags, the last of which is, for the moment, still flying, his final provocation. ♦



PORTRAIT

VACATION IN IRAN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY NEWSHA TAVAKOLIAN





IN THE NINETEEN-EIGHTIES, when I was a child, my family rarely took vacations. There had been a revolution in Iran, and there was a war on. Most of our trips were to the gardens of family and friends; a couple of times we went to Shomal, as the green band of forests south of the Caspian Sea is known. In those days, travelling was all about us pleasing the group.

We once rented a house by the sea. Everybody had tasks. The women cooked. I was told to keep the frogs and cats away from my paranoid aunt. In the afternoon, when my uncle went jogging, I had to run behind him, carrying a boom box playing “Eye of the Tiger.” He had just returned from the front, and he loved “Rocky.”

That was a rare memory. At home and on trips, we often spent our time hiding from others. We gathered behind walls and inside houses to avoid the sternness of the Islamic Revolution. Public space was no fun: there was always someone disturbing your privacy, making you feel uncomfortable.

Now I look at the youth of today, who are hitchhiking their way through the country, discovering its islands, mountain passes, and changing-color deserts. It took more than three decades for Iranians to venture out once again; now they can’t seem to get enough of it.

—Newsha Tavakolian

Previous spread: In 330 B.C.E., when Alexander the Great invaded Persia, he destroyed Persepolis. Today, schoolchildren visit the ancient capital and marvel that there was a time when the Persian Empire ruled over much of the world.

MAGNUM; MAP BY LA TIGRE



In the fifth century B.C.E., Persia’s most revered kings were buried in

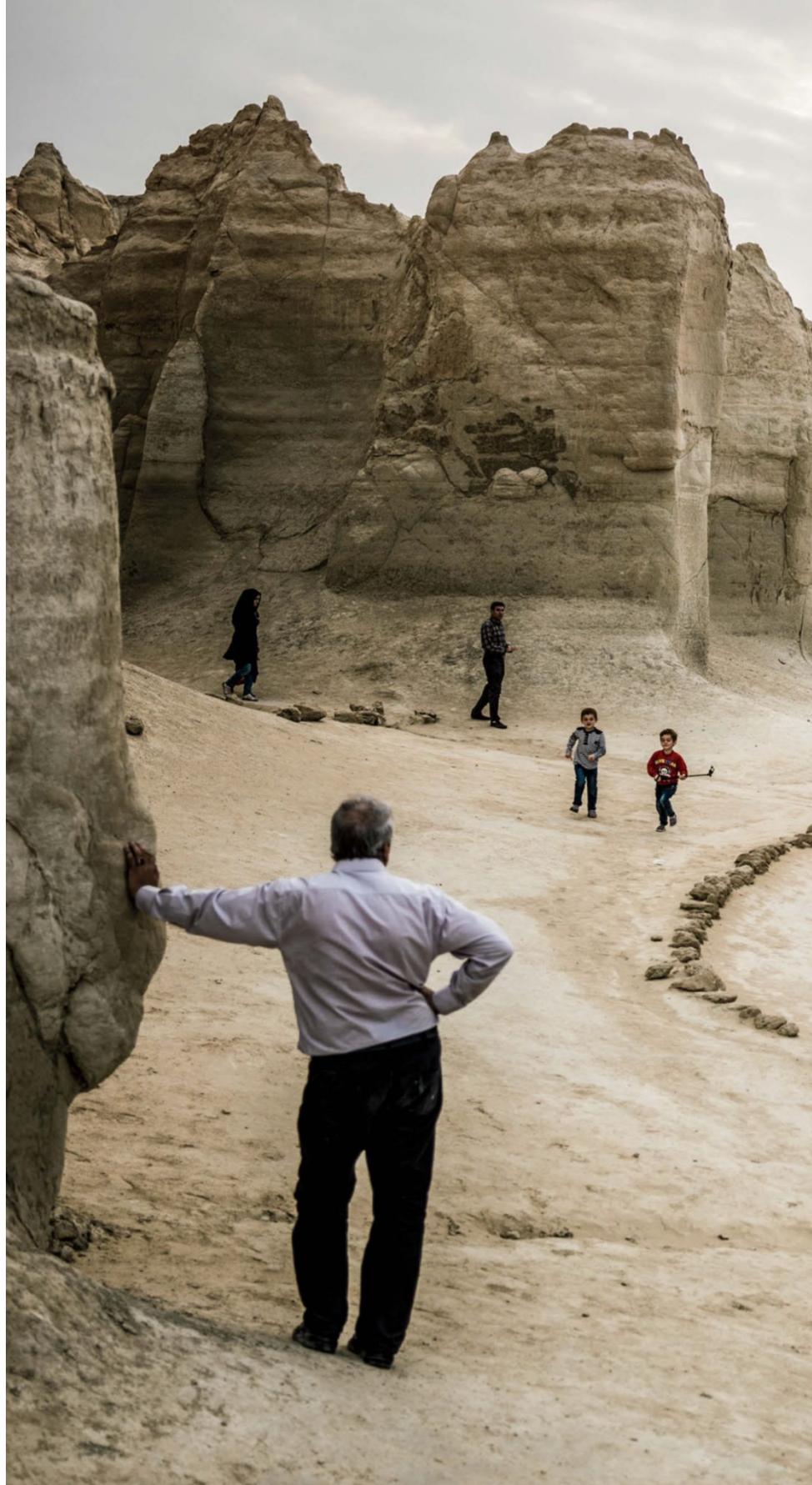


the stone mountain at Naqsh-e Rustam. Robbers have looted the crypts, but tourists still come to see the reliefs cut into the rock.





Nowruz, the Iranian New Year, falls on the spring equinox. In Masouleh, villagers mark the occasion by letting sheep out to graze.



The Valley of Stars, on the island of Qeshm, was likely formed by prehistoric erosion, though legend holds that it was created by a falling star.



FICTION

DEAF AND BLIND

LARA VAPNYAR



THIS DEAF AND blind man, my mother's friend's lover, was on his way to spend the evening. His name was Sasha.

My mother's friend's name was Olga. I had known her since I was a baby, so I considered her my friend, too. She was beautiful. More beautiful than my mother. She had a long soft body and pitch-black hair that reached to her waist. My mother and I also had dark hair, but ours was messy and thin and forgettable, while Olga's hair made people stare at her. Olga lived in a town on the Black Sea, but she visited Moscow often and she always brought a gift for me. My favorite was a necklace made of seashells. I loved to put it on and dance, while Olga clapped and sang. "Poor Olga, she's so good with kids," my mother would remark. I was only a child, but I was very close to my mother, so close that I couldn't help hearing the smug note in her voice. "Both of them really wanted a baby," my grandmother explained to me, "but only your mother was able to have one."

My mother and Olga had met while undergoing fertility treatments at some sort of experimental program in one of the Moscow clinics. In-patient, two weeks long, run by a mustached woman in military boots. The patients had to sleep in the same room and undergo procedures together. There were five of them. All women in their thirties, all (for some insane reason) Ph.D.s. My mother's Ph.D. was in math, Olga's in philosophy. Olga's subject was perception. My mother's was negative numbers. Their beds faced each other, so they had no choice but to become friends. They shared food, books, stories, jokes. My mother told me that Olga wasn't that funny herself, but she always laughed at my mother's jokes. After a couple of days, they began sharing urine. The mustached woman demanded that all the patients produce urine samples every three hours. They were required to pee right before going to bed, at 11 P.M., and then set their alarm clocks for 2 A.M. and 5 A.M. My mother took the 2 A.M. shift. She would get up and pee for herself and for Olga. And Olga did the same for her at 5 A.M. That way, they could both have a half-decent night's sleep. Neither of them cared that this could destroy the validity of the mustached woman's research. "Olga and I are

pee sisters!" my mother loved to say. I was jealous of her. I hoped to have a pee sister of my own one day.

By the end of the program, my mother and Olga had confessed to each other that their marriages weren't happy. Olga explained that her husband loved her like crazy, but she'd never felt more than affection and respect for him. She wanted to know what it was like to love somebody "with every fibre of your being," the way people did in books. She was sure that she would love her child like that. My mother told Olga that she did love my father with every fibre of her being, but she wasn't sure if he loved her back. She had a feeling that he was getting tired of their marriage. She hoped that having a child would bind him to her.

They both lost in the end. Olga's treatment didn't work. And my mother had a child, but my father left her anyway. I was five then. By the time I was seven, my father had a new wife and a new baby. That baby was often sick. Every time my father planned something with me, like going to the children's theatre or the zoo, the baby would get sick and he'd have to cancel. The good thing was that every time he cancelled he promised something else, something much more exciting than the thing we had to skip. I would think how lucky I was that I couldn't go to a concert, say, because now I would get to visit a theatre! And when the theatre was cancelled I was promised the circus. And then the circus was cancelled, too, and I was promised something really special: a cross-country-skiing trip. We'd take a train to the countryside and spend the whole day together. We'd ski through the woods with backpacks full of food, and we might even see some winter animals. I thought what incredible luck it was that my baby sister had been sick for the concert and the circus and the theatre! And we would go really soon. My father said next weekend. "Next weekend" turned out to be an elusive time frame. The weekend after next was technically "next weekend," too, and the weekend after that, and the weekend after that. "You're breaking her heart!" I heard my mother scream on the phone. She was wrong, though. I was O.K. with all that waiting. I knew that one of next weekends would have to be "next weekend." I didn't doubt my father even when win-

ter officially ended. "Everybody knows the March snow is the best," my father said, and I repeated it endlessly. "My father and I are going on a ski trip soon. We're just waiting for the best snow." Meanwhile, the snow in Moscow was melting at a discouraging rate. "There is still plenty of snow in the country," my father said. In the middle of March, a neighbor's sick dog died. I asked my mother, "Why won't my baby sister die, too? It would make it so much easier for everybody." She scolded me, but I overheard her recounting the conversation to my grandmother and laughing.

My father and I did eventually go on that ski trip. It was March 31st, the date when the snow becomes simply perfect for skiing. All expert cross-country skiers know that. "See, there is snow!" my father said when we got off the train. I could hear that he was both surprised and relieved. We put on our skis and went into the woods. We didn't ski for long, because the snow, though pure and brilliant, was too sticky. After a few minutes, a layer of about two inches of it was firmly attached to our skis, so we couldn't really glide; we had to walk on our skis as if we were wearing platform shoes. We didn't see any animals, either. But it was still a magnificent day. My father showed me how to make a campfire in the snow, and we made tea using snow instead of water. We drank that tea crouching by the fire, laughing like crazy whenever one of us lost his balance and fell backward into the snow. On the way home, my father said that we would do it again every year on March 31st, the date for the best snow. He also told me that I should never wear my backpack on the train, because I could accidentally hit other people with it. What I needed to do was to remove the backpack before I boarded the train and carry it in front of me, or drag it by one of the straps if it was too heavy. This stuck with me. I always take my backpack off before I board a train, even if it's a tiny backpack. I don't remember any other life lessons from my father.

When I got home that night I told my mother that I loved my father more than I loved her. That was true, but I don't know what cruel demon possessed me to share it. Perhaps I blamed her for failing to make my father stay with us. Perhaps I sensed that she blamed me for

the same thing. Anyway, if she regretted her fertility treatments that night, I would certainly understand her.

OLGA HAPPENED TO BE in Moscow on March 31st of the next year. She was hoping to spend some quiet time with us and to tell my mother about Sasha. Instead she stumbled onto a scene of total disorder. I was sitting on the floor, wedged in between the large wardrobe and my mother's bed, sobbing and refusing to come out. My mother, my grandmother, and my grandfather were taking turns trying to reason with me, using different tactics ranging from bribes to threats to reassurances that my father loved me very much.

Olga didn't adopt any of my family's approaches. She assessed the situation, then marched into the bedroom as if nothing were out of the ordinary, as if I weren't shaking in the corner, red-faced and covered in snot. She announced that she and I were going to make orange ice cream. She was holding a string bag full of oranges in one hand and a large brick of the best Moscow ice cream in the other. She meant business. I didn't have the strength or the desire to argue with her. Plus, I'd never made or eaten orange ice cream and couldn't possibly say no to that. I crawled out of my hiding place, and it was only then that Olga alluded to my distressed state. She said, "Go and wash your face, dear. We don't want snot all over the ice cream."

Here is how you make orange ice cream: You halve the oranges, carefully scoop out the flesh, and remove all the skin and pith from the segments. Then you mix ice cream with the cleaned, diced pulp, spoon the mixture into the empty orange halves, sprinkle some shaved chocolate on top, and put it all into the freezer. Our small freezer had no space, so we had to temporarily remove a whole chicken and a block of lard. Olga said that it would take at least an hour for the ice cream to set, and that the best way for me to kill the time would be to read a book. My grandfather was napping on the sofa, my grandmother was cooking dinner, and my mother and Olga went into the bedroom to talk. I took out a book and sat down on our living-room

carpet to read, but after ten minutes or so I was knocking on the bedroom door, asking if an hour had passed. "No!" my mother yelled. "Go away!" It took me four more attempts before they finally came out. I saw that Olga had been crying and my mother looked shell-shocked, but I didn't care. I was too excited about the orange ice cream.

It didn't disappoint, the rich ice cream with sparkly orange crystals in round cups so cold they made your fingers ache. I tried to make it many times as an adult, but every time it came out bland and runny and desperately silly. Back then, though, I thought it was magical. I proclaimed it the best food I'd ever tasted and hugged Olga with all my might. I



I did wish for a mother who was more like Olga—kind, pretty, and smelling of oranges—and less like my own mother, who was angry and losing her hair. But I was eight now and my capacity for cruelty had diminished, so I decided not to share this with my mother.

"I have to tell you something," my mother said to my grandparents and me as soon as Olga had left. "And you'd better sit down." My grandparents were putting the dishes away, and I was crouching on the floor, trying to build a castle with the empty orange cups.

"Olga has a lover," my mother said. That got our attention.

My grandmother gasped and my grandfather froze with a wineglass in each hand.

"His name is Sasha."

My grandmother pointed at me to remind my mother of my censoring presence, but my mother just shrugged. She never had a problem with me reading whatever I wanted or watching grownup movies with her or listening in to gossip. Although I didn't know anything about sex, I understood what there was to understand about lovers. People fell in love with people while married to other people. When that happened, they wanted to kiss those other people, instead of their spouses, but they had to lie about it so that their spouses wouldn't be hurt. Most of the movies we watched and most of the books on our bookshelves had this plot twist, so I assumed that the situation was fairly common. It

was clearly upsetting, since the people involved often cried or screamed or even engaged in physical fights, but it was nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, I'd now gathered enough clues to suspect that this was exactly what had happened to my father before he left us.

And now it had happened to Olga. I wondered if she and the man had already kissed.

"O.K.," my mother said. "That's not the whole story. Olga's lover is deaf and blind."

Now my grandmother did have to sit down.

"How can you be both deaf and blind?" my grandfather asked.

"Easy," my mother said. "You can't hear, and you can't see."

This was when I started to laugh. I laughed and laughed and laughed, until my mother had to slap me.

There were more questions.

My grandfather wanted to know if Sasha was all right mentally. "Yes, more than all right—he has a Ph.D. in philosophy," my mother said.

My grandmother wanted to know when and where Olga had met him. A month earlier. At a conference in St. Petersburg on the philosophy of perception. Sasha had been the keynote speaker.

"Speaker? How?" my grandfather asked.

"He hand-signs, Dad," my mother said. "How?"

My mother looked as if she were about to slap my grandfather the same way she had slapped me, but instead she answered him. "You take a person's hand and you touch it in a certain way. Different movements mean different letters."

My grandfather shook his head. "Her poor husband," he said. "To have your wife cheat on you is bad enough, but to cheat with a deaf and blind man!"

"We don't choose who we love," my grandmother whispered.

"This is just another of her whims," my mother said. "I give it a month."

But, of course, it wasn't over in a month. Or in six months. Or in eleven months.

We didn't see Olga in all that time. She didn't come to Moscow often, and when she did she spent her free time with Sasha. But she called my mother now and then, and they talked on the phone for a long, long time. My grandparents and I would hang about waiting

for my mother to finish so that she could recap the conversation for us. My mother always started by saying, "Apparently, it's still going on."

Whenever she could, Olga would beg her boss to send her on a business trip to Moscow. He wouldn't do this without a bribe. One time she gave him theatre tickets, another an expensive bottle of cognac, and then he demanded that she give him her place on the waiting list to buy an imported dining-room set. What did she care about tables and chairs, anyway? She cared only about Sasha. Didn't she care about her husband, too? Of course she did! She felt affection and respect for him! It was very painful to have to lie to him. There were times when she'd return from Moscow on an overnight train, and he'd be there, waiting for her at the station with a small bouquet of flowers. This made her feel just awful!

"That man is crushing me with his kindness," my mother said to us with a mocking smile. She was quoting Chekhov's "The Grasshopper," not that I knew that at the time.

No, Olga's husband didn't suspect anything at all. Olga didn't understand how this was possible. His wife was crazy in love with another man and he didn't see any signs? Sometimes this made her angry. Because didn't it mean that he didn't really know or understand her? If he truly loved her he would notice that something was wrong! Sometimes Olga would get so mad at him that she felt like physically hurting him, like slapping him across the face with that pathetic bouquet.

Once, my mother said that she had a theory, a theory about why Olga had picked a deaf and blind man. It wasn't love. Not really. Olga had always wanted a child, so she'd gone and found a man who would be fully dependent on her. Like a child, you see? My mother sounded mean when she said this, and I could see that my grandparents weren't buying her theory.

During that year, I often pondered what it would be like to love a deaf and blind man, or, rather, what it would be like to be one. I'd close my eyes, put my hands over my ears, and try to walk. It was easier than I'd imagined, but inevitably I'd bump into a bookshelf or a corner of the dining table. I'd cry out in pain and open my eyes and my world would be safe and normal again. But Sasha couldn't do that.

He couldn't just open his eyes and uncover his ears and be able to see and hear, no matter how scared he was in his dark silence. I thought that deaf and blind people had to be exceptionally brave.

"I don't think I can stand it much longer," Olga told my mother one day in early March. What really killed her was how difficult it was to communicate with Sasha when they were apart. Sasha couldn't call Olga, because of her husband, but Olga called him often. Usually, they were assisted by Andrei, Sasha's alcoholic roommate, a blind but not fully deaf man, who would hand-sign with Sasha and then translate to Olga. But he could convey only certain information, not the feelings! He was filthy-minded and rude, and he was often drunk! He made fun of Olga when she asked him to translate how much she missed and loved Sasha, and he never said that Sasha missed her, too. Olga wasn't sure if Andrei was choosing not to translate that part, or if Sasha didn't say that he loved her because Andrei's presence made him shy. At the end of a phone call, Olga would ask Andrei to pass the phone to Sasha so that she could listen to his breathing. Sometimes Olga would sing to him. Sasha said that, even though he couldn't hear her, he could feel the vibrations. Olga knew a lot of weepy ballads, and she would sing them as loudly as she could. This was often more eloquent than Andrei's dumb translations. If only the phone connection were bet-

ter. There were times when the call was disconnected mid-song. Olga would find herself all alone, hundreds of miles from Sasha, sitting on the low wooden stool in the dark hall of her apartment with that greasy old receiver beeping at her like an angry siren, making her want to die.

"It's about to end," my mother said after telling us about the hostile receiver. But it didn't end.

A couple of weeks later, Olga called my mother again, this time from Moscow, and announced that she had quit her job and left her husband and come here to be with Sasha for good.

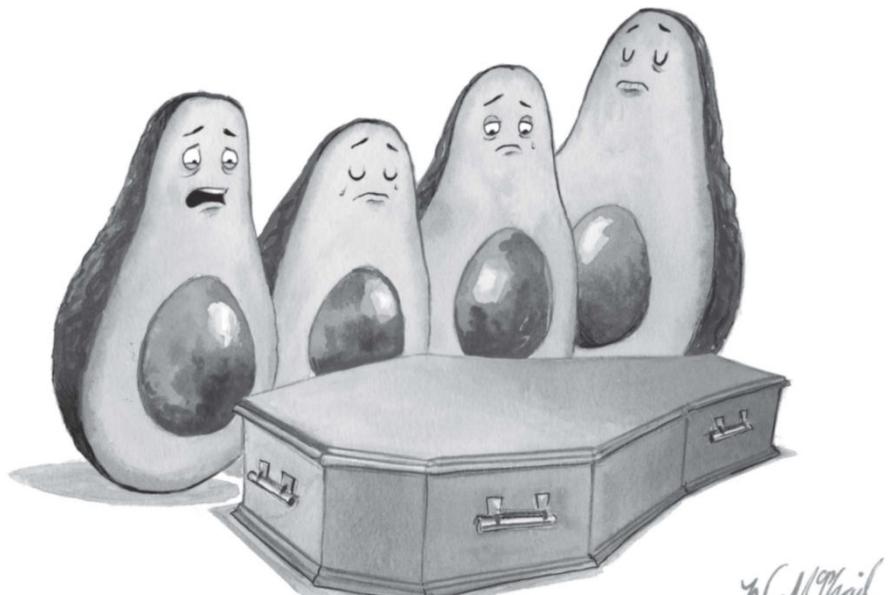
"You'll all meet him in two weeks," my mother said, her voice high-pitched and trembling. "Olga's bringing him to dinner."

"Deaf and blind! Deaf and blind! Deaf and blind is coming to dinner!" I started to scream.

Coincidentally, my father called to say that he wanted to take me skiing on April 7th, the very day that Olga and Sasha were coming to visit. I said no. Who wanted to ski? A deaf and blind man was coming to dinner!

I can't and I won't describe the pleasure of delivering that "no." For that alone, I'll be grateful to Olga forever.

ON THE DAY of their visit, our entire apartment was filled with reverberating bangs. This was the sound of my mother whacking a beef filet with a meat pounder. We had decided to serve Sasha



"It was so sudden."

LOOK! AN INSTAGRAM POST
OF YOUR CARDIOLOGIST
ON VACATION!



and Olga the most festive dishes we knew: Salad Olivier and Meat the French Way. The meat needed to be pounded very hard to work the French Way. I really wanted to pound the meat, too, but my task was to cut up potatoes and eggs for the salad.

My grandmother was polishing the silver and giving the cognac glasses an extra shine.

"Is it safe to use the good glasses?" she wanted to know. But my mother only groaned and gave the meat another whack.

"Is he neat with the toilet?" was my grandmother's next question.

"Please, stop!" my mother begged her. But my grandfather thought this was a valid concern. He said that after he used the toilet my grandmother often asked him if he was blind. And that man really was blind!

But the toilet issue wasn't what troubled my grandfather most. "How will we talk to him?" he asked.

"Well, Olga knows sign language," my mother said. "So I assume she'll hand-sign what we're saying to Sasha, and then translate his responses to us."

That didn't sit well with my grandfather. What he loved above all was impressing new people. He wasn't especially informed about politics or culture, but he loved to express his opinions on these subjects in a booming voice and with a stern lowering of his right eyebrow that

demanded attention and respect. My grandfather was justifiably worried that, without the added power of his eyebrows and his voice, he wouldn't be able to impress Sasha with the mere content of his opinions. He ended up taking a leisurely dump while perusing recent issues of *Pravda*, hoping to build up his opinions so that they could stand on their own.

Then it was my turn to ask a question, and I used a child's license to speak what was on everybody's mind. "Is he scary?"

"No! Of course not!" my grandmother said without much reassurance.

And my mother said, "You should be ashamed of yourself!"

I was ashamed. I decided that, even if Sasha was scary, I'd pretend he wasn't, for Olga's sake.

Don't you just hate those endless minutes between the time that your guests are supposed to arrive and the moment that they actually ring the doorbell? The women in my family are famous for being ahead of schedule, so all the preparations had been made. The Meat the French Way was resting in the warm oven. The salads were mixed and decorated with slices of boiled carrots. The cold cuts were carefully arranged according to a strict color scheme. The people were washed and combed and dressed in their best clothes. All we had to do was wait.

These days, I have social media to fill such moments. I just refresh my feed

again and again, killing minute after nasty minute. But back then what was I to do? I kept running in circles between the kitchen window, from which I could just glimpse the stop where Olga and Sasha would get off the bus, and our front door, where if you pressed an ear to the frame you could hear if the elevator was coming up. This was what I always did when my father was supposed to come and pick me up. "Stop it! You look pathetic," my mother would tell me then, but she was the pathetic one. Trying on different dresses before my father's visit, combing her hair this way and that, applying and reapplying her makeup, and then invariably running to hide in the bedroom as soon as she heard me yell, "He's coming!"

I managed to miss the first sight of Sasha and Olga. The doorbell caught me unawares, sitting on the toilet, with my underpants around my knees. "No!" I screamed. "Don't open until I come out!" Few things were more embarrassing for me than being caught on the toilet by our guests. Especially by guests of such magnitude. But, of course, my mother opened the door. Who ever listens to a child begging for something from the toilet?

I used my grandmother as a shield and came out of the bathroom hidden behind her. By the time we made it to our tiny entrance hall, Sasha and Olga had taken off their coats and were vigorously wiping their feet on the doormat. Sasha was shorter and bulkier than Olga, with a soft square face. His eyes were half-shut; he seemed to be squinting. Olga was holding his left hand. Everybody took turns shaking his right hand, and he sounded out everybody's name in a strained, bellowing manner. I stepped forward. Olga leaned in to kiss me and said that she had told Sasha that I was her favorite person in the whole world and he was eager to meet me. I saw that she wasn't just holding Sasha's hand, but playing with his fingers. Then it dawned on me that this was sign language. That Olga had been talking to Sasha that whole time.

Sasha put his right hand forward, and I put mine into his. He closed his palm over my fingers and smiled at something behind my back. I turned around, but there was nothing there, except our gurgling fridge with a pile of empty boxes

on top of it. Olga took his left hand and put it on top of my head, and he lowered his gaze and almost met my eyes. There's an expression people use when someone is blocking their view: "Hey, you're not made of glass!" But Sasha looked through me and beyond me as if I were, in fact, made of glass. I got scared and wanted to hide, but I caught Olga looking at me, so I smiled and squeezed Sasha's hand. He bellowed my name and signed something to Olga. She translated that Sasha was really, really happy to meet me. I knew that this was true, because she was beaming as she said it. Or perhaps she had been beaming to begin with.

"You look radiant, Olga!" my grandfather said in his booming voice. My grandmother agreed with him. And my mother asked everybody to follow her to the table.

Salad Olivier turned out to be less than ideal food for a blind person. All those hard slippery cubes of vegetables and meat, bouncing off the fork, scattering on the plate. Sasha had to chase those cubes around, tapping his fork against the surface of the plate like a cane against the sidewalk. Whenever he managed to hunt down a cube, he'd take a sip of his cognac, as if in celebration. I couldn't take my eyes off him, even though I knew that this wasn't polite. "You should be ashamed!" I kept telling myself.

At first, Olga let Sasha focus on his food while she took on all the talking.

No, Sasha wasn't born deaf and blind. He'd lost his sight and hearing at the age of four, after a long battle with meningitis. His parents had refused to treat him as an invalid. They'd taught him to be as independent as possible. Then they'd sent him to a special school for deaf and blind children. This was a really excellent school, and Sasha had proved to be a brilliant student. He had been one of only four graduates who were invited to study at the Moscow State University. Olga said this with exactly the same proud expression that my mother had when she told people about my achievements. All four of those students went on to get their Ph.D.s in philosophy, but Sasha's achievement was especially remarkable, because he was the only fully blind and fully deaf person in the group. Sasha's roommate Andrei, for example, could hear just fine with the help of a hearing

aid. Imagine how much easier studying must have been for him! It wasn't really fair to compare his career with Sasha's.

"Of course, it's not fair," my grandfather said with an impressive lowering of his right brow. "In fact, I recently read in *Pravda*..."

But just then Sasha, who couldn't have known that my grandfather was speaking, interrupted him. He made a series of urgent motions with his fingers, and Olga said that he wanted to thank us for the food. Everything was delicious, but especially the meat. He wanted to know the secret ingredient.

"The secret ingredient is a lot of whacking," my mother said.

Olga translated this for Sasha and even punched his hand with her fist several times. That was when he laughed for the first time. His laughter sounded like a series of rumbling groans, but we were all very happy that he appreciated both the food and my mother's humor. (Not everybody did.)

By the end of the meal, Sasha had started to talk more. If alcohol loosens your tongue, perhaps it loosens your fingers as well. He poked his fingers into the flesh of Olga's palms with amazing speed, and she translated for us. He talked about smells and how important they were for him, how he knew that we were good people just by the warm, homey smell of our apartment. "It's the smell of the meat," my mother whispered, but I saw that she was pleased. He talked about the woods his mother used to take him



to when he was a child. She'd lead him to a tree or a bush and ask him to touch it, and she taught him how to pick berries. He knew how to find wild strawberries with his hands. Olga had never tried wild strawberries. Last July, when Olga had visited Moscow, Sasha had taken her to the woods and taught her how to find them.

Then he said something else, and I wanted Olga to translate, but she said that she couldn't, that this was too much

and most of it was private. There were tears in her eyes. Suddenly she grabbed Sasha's hands and kissed them.

At that moment, we all felt the presence of something in the room. Well, I can't be sure about my grandparents, but I felt it, and I know that my mother felt it, too. It was as if something enormous and grand were growing out of our dinner table, reaching up, up and up, like a cathedral breaking through the sky.

It was like nothing else in my life up to then.

I wish I could say that I recognized what it was, but I didn't. What I felt was pure awe, unburdened by understanding.

LOVE IS BLIND indeed," my grandmother said after they left.

"Deaf and blind," my grandfather quipped.

But my mother didn't say anything. She went into her room and closed the door behind her. I went after her. She hadn't turned the light on, so I couldn't see, but I could hear that my mother was crying. I walked over to her bed and put out my hand hoping to find and touch hers. What I found instead was her face, all wet and slippery with tears.

"Get in," she whispered. I climbed into the bed and hugged her from behind as tightly as I could. I was crying into her shoulders, which were warm and shaking. I tried to squeeze them even tighter to stop the shaking, to console her.

I pitied her. But I loved her more than I pitied her. I loved her so much that it was hard to breathe. And another thing: at that moment, I felt close to my mother in a completely new way. Not as a child but as a fellow-woman, an equal.

SASHA AND OLGA got married later that year, as soon as Olga's divorce came through. As far as I know, they lived happily ever after until death did them part. Olga was the one who died. She was only forty-two. Cancer. It's usually cancer when women die that young. Sasha remarried within a year. Strangely enough, his second wife also left her husband for him.

But my mother—my mother never remarried. ♦

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

POLAR EXPRESSED

What if an ancient story about the Far North came true?

BY KATHRYN SCHULZ

IN FEBRUARY OF 1880, the whaling ship *Hope* sailed north from Peterhead, Scotland, and headed for the Arctic. Her crew included a highly regarded captain, an illiterate but gifted first mate, and the usual roster of harpooners, sailors, and able-bodied seamen—but not the intended ship's surgeon. That gentleman having been unexpectedly called away on family matters, a last-minute substitute was found, in the form of a middling third-year medical student making his maiden voyage: a young man by the name of Arthur Conan Doyle.

Conan Doyle was twenty when he left Peterhead and twenty-one when he returned. On Saturday, May 22nd, in the meticulous diary he kept during that journey, he wrote, “A heavy swell all day. I came of age today. Rather a funny sort of place to do it in, only 600 miles or so from the North Pole.” Funny indeed, for a man who would come to be associated with distinctly un-Arctic environments: the gas-lit glow of Victorian London, the famous chambers at 221B Baker Street, and—further afield, but not much—the gabled manors and foggy moors where Sherlock Holmes tracked bloody footprints and dogs failed to bark in the night.

Shortly after returning from the north, and long before writing any of the stories that made him famous, Conan Doyle told two tales about the Arctic—one fictional, the other putatively true. The first, in 1883, was “The Captain of the Pole-Star,” one of his earliest published short stories. In it, a young medical student serving as the surgeon on a whaling ship watches, first in disbelief and then in dread, as his captain goes mad. Although

winter is closing in, the captain sails northward into the Arctic until his ship is stuck fast. Then, obeying a ghostly summons, he walks out alone to his death on the ice.

In addition to launching Conan Doyle’s writing career, “The Captain of the Pole-Star” marked his first contribution to a largely overlooked body of literature: nineteenth-century polar fiction. This unusual subgenre found a kind of epigraph in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s great cautionary tale in verse, the 1798 “Rime of the Ancient Mariner.” (“The ice was here, the ice was there,/The ice was all around.”) By the end, it included works by many of the greatest writers of the era, or of any era: Mary Shelley, Edgar Allan Poe, Jules Verne, Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens. Almost invariably, the poles appear in these works as the place where nature reveals its horrifying indifference to humanity; where humanity itself falls away, leaving men to descend into madness and violence; above all, where the dream of universal mastery goes catastrophically awry.

That ominous vision bears virtually no resemblance to Conan Doyle’s second account of the Arctic. The same year that he published “The Captain of the Pole-Star,” he gave a speech at the Portsmouth Literary and Scientific Society, in England, on the subject of polar exploration. This time, the search for the North Pole was “a challenge to human daring,” those who conducted it were men of “indomitable pluck, wonderful self-abnegation, and devotion,” and the Arctic itself was “a training school for all that was high and godlike in man.”

Conan Doyle was not alone in being

of two minds about the Arctic. From antiquity onward, our stories about the poles have themselves been polar: either the ends of the earth are precious, glorious, and ours for the taking or they are desolate, unattainable, and deadly. For most of history, both narratives were marginal, as distant from the mainstream of culture as the poles are from the metropole. That changed for the first time at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the Arctic, then still largely undiscovered, captured the imagination and fuelled the ambition of the Western world.

In the next hundred years, ships setting out from northern nations—and especially, from England—regularly turned their prows toward the Pole. Some of them went, as Conan Doyle’s expedition had, for the whales, a single one of which could fetch more than a quarter of a million dollars in today’s money. Others went in pursuit of the Northwest Passage: a shorter water route between Europe and Asia whose discovery, it was hoped, would dramatically accelerate global trade. Still others went for the glory of obtaining “farthest north”—in contemporaneous parlance, the highest latitude yet reached by man. In all cases, the stories told by those who returned (and, more grimly, the fates, known or unknown, of those who did not) helped create an enormous appetite for polar adventure. Writing in 1853 in *Household Words*, the popular weekly magazine edited by Charles Dickens, the journalist Henry Morley opined, “There are no tales of risk and enterprise in which we English, men, women, and children, old and young, rich and poor, become interested so completely,



In the nineteenth century, the Arctic, then still largely undiscovered, captured the imagination of the Western world.

as in the tales that come from the North Pole."

Those beloved tales had begun to ebb from memory by the beginning of the twentieth century, as the Arctic gradually lost its political and cultural stakes. Soon the West turned its attention elsewhere: to industrialization and mass production, to the Great War and the Second World War, to rail and to air and eventually to space, that frontierless frontier. For almost a hundred years, the pull of the polar lands went slack, in life as well as in literature. Only in our own time have stories about the Far North started to matter again, owing to a twist no Victorian reader, writer, or explorer could ever have foreseen.

SOMETIMES AROUND 330 B.C., a Greek geographer and explorer by the name of Pytheas left what is now the city of Marseilles and set sail for the Far North. No one knows exactly what landmass he reached—possibly Iceland, possibly the Faroe Islands, possibly Greenland. Whatever it was, it lay six days north of England and one day south of what Pytheas described (per later Greek geographers; his own writings did not survive) as a frozen ocean, a place that man could “neither sail nor walk.” At a time when Aristotle was still hanging out in the agora, Pytheas had discovered pack ice.

Pytheas called the place he encountered Thule, as in *ultima Thule*—the land beyond all known lands. That is one of three names the Greeks gave us for the Far North. The second is Arctic, from *Arktikos*—“of the great bear.” The reference was not to the polar bear, unknown in Europe until the eighteenth century, but to Ursa Major, the most prominent circumpolar constellation in the northern skies.

Whatever the original meaning, “far-away land full of big bears” turned out to be an apt description of the Arctic. But the third name the Greeks bestowed on the north was considerably less accurate—and considerably more important for the future of polar exploration. That name was Hyperborea: the region beyond the kingdom of Boreas, god of the north wind. Somewhere above his frozen domain, the Greeks believed, lay a land of peace and plenty, home to fertile soils, warm breezes, and the oldest,

wisest, gentlest race on earth. “Neither disease nor bitter old age is mixed/in their sacred blood,” the poet Pindar wrote of the Hyperboreans in the fifth century B.C. “Far from labor and battle they live.”

Almost from the beginning, that utopian vision of the Arctic shared the stage with a more menacing story, one whose roots lay not in myth but in history. From roughly the second century B.C. to the eleventh century A.D., successive waves of tribes swept out of the north to plunder, kidnap, rape, and murder the native inhabitants of more southerly lands. Even today, the names of those northern tribes spell trouble; we are talking here about Goths, Vikings, and Vandals. Thanks to those marauders, the Arctic in contemporaneous southern legends was not a paradise but a hell. Or *the Hell*: the Biblical characters Gog and Magog, Satan’s henchmen, hail from the Far North, and the underworld’s inner circle is not a fiery inferno but a frozen lake.

As more explorers ventured into the Arctic, our collective idea of it acquired a few additional details. In 1360, a British friar, returning from the north, reported seeing a tremendous vortex in its farthest waters: a place where the “4 arms of the sea were drawn toward the abyss with such violence that no wind is strong enough to bring vessels back again.” That account eventually made it into the hands of the sixteenth-century cartographer Gerardus Mercator, he of the famous splayed-out map of the world.



In his rendering, a huge whirlpool forms the planet’s northernmost extremity. On the basis of other stories, Mercator added the Lodestone Mountain—a huge iron massif at the North Pole, whose magnetic field was supposedly strong enough to pull the nails out of ships and render compasses useless for thousands of miles.

Despite their seeming differences, the magnetic mountain and the terrible maelstrom tell the same basic story about the Arctic. In both, the Far North ex-

hibits an attraction that turns ineluctable, then fatal. But Mercator’s map also included a less obvious feature: the mountain, the maelstrom, and the North Pole were all situated in an open, ice-free sea. This was Hyperborea redux: the Arctic as a balmy haven hidden away at the end of the world.

Reproduced across continents and centuries, Mercator’s map reached generations of cartographers, explorers, historians, statesmen, scholars, writers, and armchair travellers. It was still shaping both our maps and our mental geography in 1852, when one of Mercator’s most influential successors, the German cartographer August Petermann, averred, “It is a well-known fact that there exists to the North of the Siberian coast and, at a comparatively short distance from it, a sea open at all seasons.” By then, the open polar sea was more than just a choice made by mapmakers. It was an article of faith for champions of Arctic exploration, who saw in the ancient fantasy of a paradise beyond the frost its modern incarnation: the dream of a northwest passage.

BY THE MIDDLE of the nineteenth century, in other words, an ancient myth had mutated into a serious scientific hypothesis: the theory of the open polar sea. The most ardent supporters of that theory believed in a kind of Nordic El Dorado. Beyond the eighth parallel, they held, the ocean was not merely ice-free but actually warm, leading to a kind of tropical paradise—possibly complete with a lost civilization—tucked away at the top of the planet.

More moderate advocates of the theory of the open polar sea, who were also much more numerous, argued that water temperatures reached their nadir at the eighth parallel and warmed enough above it to keep the Arctic Ocean free of ice. In support of that claim, they cited patterns of bird migration, the direction of ocean currents, the perpetual sunlight of the Arctic summer, the physics of icebergs (which were thought, wrongly, to form only along coastlines), and the existence of slight declivities at the ends of the earth (which, they argued, brought the poles closer to the planet’s molten core, thereby creating regions of unusual warmth). “It may be,” Conan Doyle wrote, in 1884, “that

that flattening at the Poles of the earth, which always seemed to my childhood's imagination to have been caused by the finger and thumb of the Creator, when He held up this little planet before He set it spinning, has a greater influence on climate than we have yet ascribed to them."

However plausible in the context of contemporaneous science, these arguments were rooted less in geophysical realities than in geopolitical ones. After the Battle of Trafalgar, Britain, though victorious, found itself at sea by virtue of not being at sea. Since at least the Elizabethan era, English identity had been bound up with English seamanship and imperial expansion. Now the nation faced a shortage of available naval battles, a shortage of new places to plant its flag, and—insult added to injury for a sailing nation—the rise of the steamship. The theory of the open polar sea made credible the quest for the Northwest Passage, which, in turn, gave England a new way to assert its naval prowess and its national identity. The single greatest force behind polar exploration, John Barrow, who was appointed Second Secretary of the British Admiralty in 1804 and held the post for forty years, made this symbolic importance explicit. If Britain failed to find the Northwest Passage, he said, she "would be laughed at by all the world."

These ideological stakes help explain the obsession with polar exploration among the general public, which was wonderfully documented by Francis Spufford in his 1997 book "I May Be Some Time: Ice and the English Imagination." It is difficult, these days, to appreciate just how deeply everyday citizens of the Victorian era were absorbed in Arctic arcana, how central the otherwise remote poles came to seem. Nineteenth-century Britons sang polar-themed songs, attended polar-themed dinner parties, and flocked to re-creations of polar expeditions staged in the temperate bowers of Vauxhall. And, as Henry Morley observed, they read every polar-themed story they could find. In 1821, Captain William Parry, commander of the second Arctic expedition of the modern era, published a best-selling account of that voyage which propelled him on a book tour of Tom Friedman-like scope and lucre. There-

after, publishing an expedition journal became as customary for polar explorers as publishing a memoir is for celebrities today. (The British were singularly prone to polar mania, but other nations were not immune. The American explorer Elisha Kent Kane's 1856 "Arctic Explorations" sold two hundred thousand copies, roughly the equivalent of two million today; when he died, his funeral procession was the second largest in the nineteenth century, bested only by Lincoln's.)

Of all the renowned explorers of the era, none achieved quite as much fame, at quite so high a cost, as Sir John Franklin, a man destined to cause a crisis in Britain about the meaning of Arctic exploration. In 1845, at the age of fifty-nine, Franklin embarked on his fourth polar expedition with twenty-four officers, a hundred and ten crewmen, and two ships, the Terror and the Erebus. We know today what took England eleven long years to determine. Both ships became trapped in pack ice in the Canadian Arctic. Franklin died on board. His men set off by sledge over the unforgiving Arctic terrain, where they gradually dropped off from scurvy, starvation, and hypothermia. There were no survivors.

To say that the doomed Franklin expedition was the most famous in the history of Arctic exploration fails to do justice to its impact; imagine the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines 370, had it been carrying the World Cup champions. The British Admiralty offered the equivalent of nearly two million dollars for Franklin's safe return—or, failing that, a million for information about what had happened. In the next decade, inspired partly by that prize money and partly by the general furor in England, thirty-nine separate expeditions set out in search of Franklin and his crew. As rescue missions, none succeeded. (Franklin's body has never been found; the Erebus and the Terror were only discovered in, respectively, 2014 and 2016.) But in 1854 the widely respected Scottish explorer Dr. John Rae returned from the north with evidence that Franklin's men were dead, and with an electrifying tale. "From the mutilated state of many of the corpses, and the contents of the kettles," he wrote,

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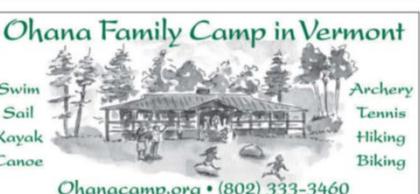
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"it is evident that our wretched countrymen had been driven to the last resource."

Britain immediately went up in arms. Men might die in the Arctic, but their honor and civility were imperishable. Polar exploration was, Henry Morley insisted, "stainless as the Arctic snows, clean to the core as an ice mountain": all the heroics of colonialism, none of the taint. As the scholar Jen Hill noted in her 2008 book, "White Horizons," it was bad to sully that story in any way, and unthinkable to impute to the English precisely the moral horror most closely associated with "savages." Charles Dickens wrote a screed on the allegations that ran to seven thousand words, many of them regrettable. (Among other things, he discounted evidence provided by the Inuit by saying that he "believe[d] every savage to be in his heart covetous, treacherous, and cruel.") In a debate with Rae, in *Household Words*, the novelist countered the explorer's physical evidence and personal experience with, basically, the argument from Britishness: no matter how hungry or desperate an Englishman might get, Dickens claimed, he would never stoop to cannibalism. As a later commentator joked, "Eat a shoe? Yes. Eat a foot? Never."

Quite aside from its utter lack of empirical support, this was an unlikely argument for someone like Dickens to

make. From the moment that politicians first began selling the public on Arctic exploration and defending it as a noble cause that brought forth all that was highest in humankind, novelists had seen the potential for a very different kind of story. The polar fiction they subsequently produced served as id to the era's ego. In place of conquest, they summoned catastrophe; in place of science, the uncanny; in place of heroism, horror.

SIX DECADES BEFORE Arthur Conan Doyle killed the mad commander of the *Pole-Star*, another writer sent a captain sailing northward, full of hope and Hyperborean convictions:

I try in vain to be persuaded that the pole is the seat of frost and desolation; it ever presents itself to my imagination as the region of beauty and delight. . . . There snow and frost are banished; and, sailing over a calm sea, we may be wafted to a land surpassing in wonders and in beauty every region hitherto discovered on the habitable globe.

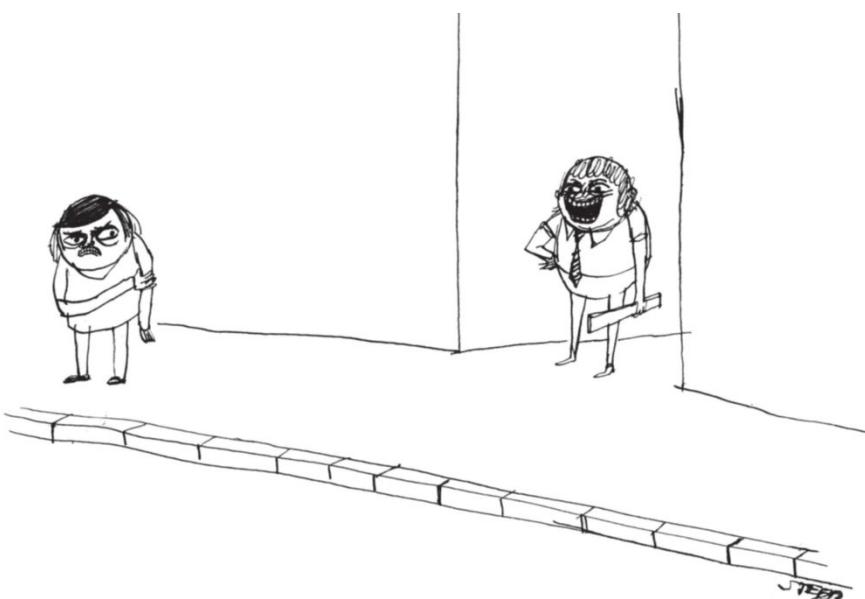
The captain continues toward the Pole, ice gradually closing in around him. One morning, he wakes to an astonishing sight: a man on a sledge has been carried on the shifting floes to the side of his ship. After the stranger is rescued, warmed, and fed, he explains how he came to be alone on the Arctic ice. It is an extraordinary story—and one you surely know. The captain's name is

Robert Walton. The man he rescues is Dr. Victor Frankenstein.

In the hundred and ninety-nine years since "Frankenstein" was published, it has never left our consciousness. We eat Frankenfood, track Frankenstorms, laugh at a cartoon Frankenstein monster scaring the daylights out of Scooby-Doo. Yet few people today recall that Mary Shelley's story begins and ends in the Arctic. Walton goes there to fulfill a dream nurtured since boyhood, when he "read with ardour" accounts of polar expeditions. Frankenstein goes there in pursuit of the monster he created, who flees to the Far North both to escape the cruelty of humanity and to lure his unfaithful creator to an icy death. All of this Frankenstein recounts to Walton, who, in turn, recounts it to us, via a series of letters to his sister back in England.

So the captain narrates the doctor's tale, at least in part. But he also mirrors it. Like Frankenstein, Walton is driven by scientific arrogance, convinced of "the inestimable benefit which I shall confer on all mankind, to the last generation, by discovering a passage near the pole." And, like Frankenstein, Walton sees the dream he has so single-mindedly pursued turn deadly. Nine months after he waxes rapturous about the land where "snow and frost are banished," he writes another letter to his sister: "We are still surrounded by mountains of ice, still in imminent danger of being crushed in their conflict. The cold is excessive, and many of my unfortunate comrades have already found a grave amidst this scene of desolation."

Shelley was only nineteen when she wrote "Frankenstein," but she already had a long-standing interest in the poles. As a child, she sneaked downstairs one evening to hear Coleridge recite his "Ancient Mariner"; in her teens, she, too, "read with ardour" accounts of early Arctic voyages. Yet the polar framework in "Frankenstein" was an afterthought; she added it upon reading about John Barrow's efforts to drum up support for the quest to find the Northwest Passage. To later readers, it can seem arbitrary and tangential, which is why it's often forgotten. But in Shelley's time her choice seemed, as it was, deliberate, central, and unmistakably political. Published in 1818, when John Ross had just returned from the first modern expedition to the



"They don't call me the man who likes to hit people with a piece of wood for no reason for no reason."

Arctic and William Parry was gearing up for the next one, the book reminded readers that their world was already full of Dr. Frankensteins.

Shelley's novel is recognized today as the progenitor of the modern genres of science fiction and horror. But it also helped inspire the wave of polar fiction that followed and establish that canon's enduring themes. With very few exceptions, later writers used the poles to tell premonitory tales about hubris, irresponsibility, the consequences of meddling with the natural world, and our own ultimate impotence in the face of the forces of nature.

One such writer was Edgar Allan Poe, who resurrected in his tales both the myth of Hyperborea and another ancient Arctic fiction: the maelstrom. The latter appears in two different short stories, "MS. Found in a Bottle" (in which the narrator is catapulted onto a Coleridgean ship drawn inexorably toward the Pole) and "A Descent Into the Maelström" (in which two brothers drown and a third narrowly escapes when their boat is dragged into the vortex). And it shows up, too, in Poe's only complete novel, "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket."

Like many adventure tales of the time, "Pym" begins with an elaborate prologue meant to convince readers that the story to follow is true. In fact, it is outlandish, even by the fervid standards of polar literature. The title character survives mutiny, starvation, exposure, an island massacre, and cannibalism (he does the eating), only to wind up adrift on a polar sea so hyperboreally hot that it rounds the bend toward Hell. (It is like Poe not to deny the dream but to realize, in both senses, its potentially nightmarish consequences.) In five days, the water temperature rises from "remarkable" to "extreme," until a "hand could no longer be endured within it." The book concludes with one of the strangest visions of the polar regions ever summoned. Pym finds himself approaching at breakneck speed a cataract that seems to fall from the heavens, creating below it a whirling abyss in the sea. Just as he is about to be sucked in, he sees "a shrouded human figure," far larger than any human, with skin "the perfect whiteness of the snow."

This ambiguous ending displeased

Jules Verne, a man who liked to dot his "i's" and cross his "t's. In his 1897 novel, "An Antarctic Mystery," he saw fit to emend Poe, rescuing Pym from the boiling sea only to kill him off on a lodestone mountain. Its overwhelming magnetic force yanks Pym from his boat by way of the pistol strapped to his shoulder, propels him through the air, and pins him to its rocky face, where he dies, either upon impact or—as so many real-life polar explorers did—slowly and horribly, of exposure and starvation. Elsewhere, Verne made use of other ancient polar fictions. In "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea," the mad Captain Nemo is swallowed up by the maelstrom; in "The Adventures of Captain Hatteras," an obsession with Hyperborea first nearly kills the title character, then drives him insane.

As all this suggests, depictions of the Arctic in nineteenth-century fiction ran a narrow gamut—from, in essence, death by natural causes (hubris, hypothermia, drowning) to death by unnatural causes (ghosts, monsters, magnets, autophagy), give or take madness. A few polar stories, however, were slightly more charitable. In 1857, Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens collaborated on a play about the Arctic, "The Frozen Deep," in which a malevolent explorer by the name of Richard Wardour encounters his romantic rival in the Far North and is presented with the opportunity to kill (and, by implication, eat) him. One suspects that he would have done so if it had been left up to Collins, who had no qualms about using the Arctic to dispatch a different wicked suitor in a later novel, "Poor Miss Finch." But Dickens was still prosecuting the Franklin case in his mind, and so, while the Arctic comes off as a terrible place in "The Frozen Deep," the play is as much a redemption story as a cautionary tale. It was also a tremendous success; Dickens himself played Wardour in Manchester, London, and before Queen Victoria. (Be that as it may, contemporary readers should beware: it's written by two of the greatest literary minds of all time, but it's terrible.)

All this was—to use the apt cliché—the tip of the iceberg. The nineteenth-century obsession with the Arctic in-

truded even in novels not otherwise concerned with the poles. In Jane Austen's "Persuasion," Admiral Croft's wife laments the fact that she had to stay home in Kent while her husband explored the Far North. "Jane Eyre" opens with the title character reading about "the vast sweep of the Arctic Zone, and those forlorn regions of dreary space" where fields of ice "concentrate the multiplied rigours of extreme cold." (Like Shelley, Charlotte Brontë had been interested in the Arctic since childhood. In the imaginary world she created with her siblings, Anne and Emily adopted the identities of Parry and Ross.)

Bram Stoker, who once interviewed Conan Doyle about his time in the Arctic, later sent Dracula to stow away on a Russian schooner crossing the North Sea. By the time the ship arrived in England, its crew—like those of the "Ancient Mariner" and "MS. Found in a Bottle"—was long dead.

These are, of course, just the polar stories by authors we still read today; plenty more were written by those whose names did not endure. Yet, while we continue to venerate the likes of Dickens and Poe and Conan Doyle, we seldom read their Arctic work, or even recollect its existence. This blind spot doesn't reflect a lack of interest in the region, per se. For some years now, we have been gobbling up polar nonfiction, from biographies of explorers to accounts of disasters. The best of these are superb, and wildly fun to read. But it's worth remembering, when we choose Shackleton over Shelley, that, in the long history of Arctic literature, the putative nonfiction has seldom offered the most truthful or most useful account of the poles.

"**I**T HAS CERTAINLY been a splendid voyage," Conan Doyle wrote three weeks into his Arctic adventure. "Beautiful day, wonderfully clear. Icefields, snow white on very dark blue water as far as the eye can reach." Such uncanny beauty was one of the allures of polar travel. There was, in reality, very little to be found at the Pole by way of triumph or material gain. But one could be exhilarated; one could be moved. Conan Doyle was. To



the end of his days, he would sound a rhapsodic note when recalling his time on the *Hope*, crediting it with everything from launching his literary career to sustaining his lifelong good health.

Yet polar travel was more often dangerous than salubrious—and, on the evidence of his journal, Conan Doyle at sea was not quite so sanguine as Conan Doyle on land. On May 11th, he sums up his situation as “Misery and desolation.” May 25th: “Worser and worserer.” June 2nd: “My hair is coming out and I am getting prematurely aged.” June 13th: “It would make a saint swear.” July 11th: “Got up late and would have liked to have got up later, which is a sad moral state to be in.” July 19th: “Blowing a gale all day. Nothing to do and we did it.” His chief complaint was boredom; his chief fear, that the ship would get trapped in pack ice; his chief danger, falling into the frigid water—which he did four times in his first two days on the ice, jeopardizing his life each time. His crewmates jokingly nicknamed him the Great Northern Diver.

The hazards Conan Doyle faced were the hallmarks of the region. For early explorers, the poles amounted to one long frying pan/fire situation, except at the other end of the thermometer: the water was bad, the ice worse. As regards the water, you could wash overboard and drown, fall off a floe and drown, get dragged into the ocean by a kink in the hurtling line of a harpoon and drown. As for the ice, you could freeze to death on it, starve to death on it, get stranded on it, get lost on it, get frostbite on it, or float away on it. William Parry and twelve of his men once walked northward over ice for thirty-five days, hauling eight hundred pounds of gear, only to discover that the ice itself had been drifting south, nullifying their gains.

Of all the bad things that transpired at the poles, however, what sailors most feared was getting trapped in the ice, partly because it happened so often. At one point in 1830, so many ships were stuck in Greenland’s infamous Melville Bay that almost a thousand men were stranded there. Sometimes an icebound ship thawed out unharmed, leaving its crew merely thinner, colder, and crazier come springtime. At least as often, though, the ship was crushed in the shifting pack ice—“like a grand piano caught

in an industrial press,” Barry Lopez wrote in his 1986 book, “Arctic Dreams.” Lopez tells the story of one ship that went down so fast that nineteen men were instantly swept to their death, while the rest were left clinging to what remained of the deck. All but three of them survived, “by bleeding each other and drinking the blood from a shoe.” They were rescued when two Danish brigs were spotted by a man who had abandoned the deck to commit suicide.

This was the reality of polar travel: more ordinary in its awfulness than the gothic horrors conjured up by novelists; more wretched, desperate, and deadly than the stories circulated by the British Admiralty and its publicity machine. Polar exploration wasn’t a leading cause of death in the nineteenth century, but only because so few people participated in it; for those who did, the odds of dying were alarmingly high. Tragically, the novelists were right that much of the death toll was brought about by hubris. As the later Canadian explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson noted, John Franklin’s entire crew died of starvation and exposure in an area where, for generations, the Inuit had raised their children and tended their elderly. It was possible to live and even thrive in the Arctic—but, steeped in the racial prejudices of colonial England, almost all of Britain’s polar explorers declined to imitate indigenous ways of travelling, hunting, eating, and staying warm. Everywhere else in the former British Empire, English chauvinism led to the death of untold numbers of native people. In the Arctic, English chauvinism led to the death of untold numbers of Englishmen.

Moreover, and contrary to the claims of the day, many of those men died in vain. Most expeditions yielded little in the way of scientific discovery or economic worth, and the great age of polar exploration to which they contributed did not end, as promised, in triumph and glory. Indeed, it can scarcely be said to have ended at all. It simply attenuated in both faith and effort until, by the time its original goals were achieved, they had become both trivial and tarnished. The first Northwest Passage was found by Robert McClure, in 1854, while he was searching for the Franklin Expedition. It passes through Canada’s

Melville Sound—but, as everyone had long since known, travel to and through it was far too dangerous to be commercially viable.

As for the North Pole itself: Frederick Cook claimed to have reached it by sled in 1908, Robert Peary in 1909, Richard Byrd by airplane in 1926. Of all the fictions told about the Arctic, these are among the least plausible. To reach the Pole in the time Peary said he had done so, he would have had to average thirty-eight miles a day, or more than three times faster than the highest proven average ever achieved—and that was by snowmobile. Cook would have needed to average a faintly less unreasonable seventeen miles a day, but the rest of the evidence against him is damning. He had already lied about reaching the summit of Alaska’s Mt. Denali, he failed to record celestial navigations for eighty-eight days of his trip, and he later paid someone to fake the missing data. Byrd’s airplane could not have covered the mileage he claimed in the time allotted, and both he and his pilot later privately confessed to the fraud. The first person to actually reach the North Pole over land was Ralph Plaisted, an insurance agent from Duluth, who arrived on April 20, 1968. Fifteen months later, Apollo 11 landed on the moon.

OF THE THREE polar features on Mercator’s sixteenth-century map—the mountain, the maelstrom, and the open polar sea—only the lodestone mountain turned out to be a myth. (It likely arose from the fact that compass readings grow wildly erratic near the poles.) The maelstrom is real, albeit less dramatic and more southerly: it is the Moskstraumen, off the coast of Norway’s Lofoten archipelago, the largest permanent whirlpool on the planet.

As for Hyperborea, its epistemological status has proved far more equivocal. No tropical paradise has ever flourished at the far end of the world; on the contrary, from long before Pytheas to well after Franklin, some four and a half million square miles of ice spread outward in all directions from the Pole. Around the time that the age of polar exploration ended, however, human-caused atmospheric changes began steadily raising the temperature of the earth. Since then, the chilly Arctic has warmed twice

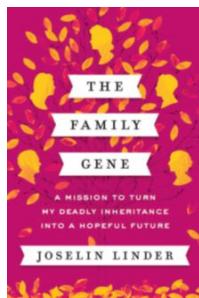
as fast as the rest of the planet, owing to a vicious cycle. Ice, being pale, reflects heat away from itself; the ocean, being dark, absorbs it. As more ice melts, more ocean is exposed. As more ocean is exposed, it absorbs more heat, and the ice in it melts faster.

For the once enormous icescape ringing the North Pole, the results have been dramatic. Since 1980, sea ice in the Arctic has declined thirteen per cent each decade. The Greenland Ice Sheet, which is more than a hundred and ten thousand years old and covers six hundred and sixty thousand square miles of the Far North, has shed two hundred billion tons of water a year since 2003. These changes have already made travel in the region notably easier; in 2007, for the first time in history, a ship navigated through the Northwest Passage without help from an icebreaker. Such travel will only get easier in the future. According to the most recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, by the end of our own century the summertime Arctic will be entirely ice-free.

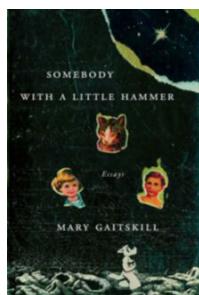
From time to time during the life of our planet, roughly once every half-million years, a curious thing occurs: its geomagnetic field reverses, such that the North Pole and the South Pole swap polarities. Lately, our stories about the poles have done the same. The nineteenth century dreamed of an Arctic that was warm, accessible, and domesticated, but found a remote and frozen region indifferent to human life. Now, in the twenty-first century, as we approach an ice-free, accessible pole that has succumbed to our influence, we dream of a faraway frozen land unspoiled by humankind.

Just before Victor Frankenstein dies, he delivers a speech to Captain Walton's sailors. They are trapped in the floes of the Far North, and their courage is failing. "This ice is not made of such stuff as your hearts may be," he tells them. "It is mutable and cannot withstand you if you say that it shall not." Who knows what our hearts are made of; but the Arctic, unlike the Antarctic, is made only of frozen ocean. Once the ice disappears, there will be nothing there. At that point, if we reach that point, the Pole will become once again what it was long ago: a place we know only through stories.♦

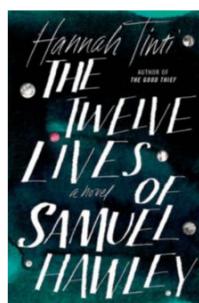
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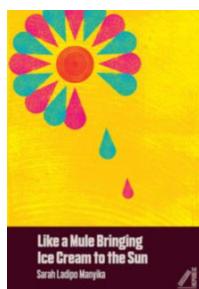
The Family Gene, by *Joselin Linder* (Ecco). When the author was sixteen, her father fell ill with a mysterious, debilitating, and ultimately fatal disease. "We were not a family who routinely dealt with catastrophe. We lived in Ohio," she drily observes. Twelve years later, she had contracted the disease. By then, researchers were closer to identifying the cause—a genetic variant unique to her Ashkenazi Jewish family. This surprisingly buoyant book chronicles the search for a cure as well as the family's life stories, rich in their ordinariness. Describing how it feels to face the likelihood of a shortened life—including her conflicted desire to be a mother, despite the risks for any child—Linder reminds us that hope "isn't the same thing as truth."



Somebody with a Little Hammer, by *Mary Gaitskill* (Pantheon). While Gaitskill is best known for her fiction, this collection demonstrates her power as an essayist, and thrums with the same sexual energy. Many of the topics (foot fetishists, date rape, "Lolita") are squarely in her wheelhouse; others less so (the 2008 election, Dickens, Talking Heads). The most memorable pieces hinge on unexpected connections that illuminate both Gaitskill and her subject. An essay on the Book of Revelation, which recalls a period when she was a born-again Christian, is especially revealing: walking through the city, she felt "angels and beasts looming all about us, incomprehensible and invisible to our senses."



The Twelve Lives of Samuel Hawley, by *Hannah Tinti* (Dial). After years of living on the road, sleeping in motel rooms, and shooting guns for fun, the title character of this novel, an enigmatic rogue, and his tween daughter, Loo, settle in a Massachusetts fishing town. But Samuel has a criminal history, which casts a shadow over the pair's eccentric but functional domesticity. (A constellation of bullet-hewn scars on Samuel's body symbolizes a past that can be concealed but never erased.) Tinti juxtaposes Loo's coming-of-age with her father's past exploits, and the narratives converge in a way that tests familial bonds. Tinti depicts brutality and compassion with exquisite sensitivity, creating a powerful overlay of love and pain.



Like a Mule Bringing Ice Cream to the Sun, by *Sarah Ladipo Manyika* (Cassava Republic). The protagonist of this novel is an elderly Nigerian woman living in San Francisco and determined to match its youthful energy. "It's harder to make young friends here than it is in places like Lagos or Delhi," she laments. But her decision to mark her seventy-fifth birthday by getting a tattoo and buying the best pastries she can find leads to encounters with other rootless inhabitants—fellow-migrants struggling to adapt to a new home and native San Franciscans made newly homeless. A thread of self-deprecating humor transforms what could have been a morbid meditation on aging into a tale of common humanity. When an Italian-American cop resists fining her, she feels justified in believing that "there is much that binds Italians with Nigerians."

A LITTLE STRANGER

Jeff VanderMeer's postapocalyptic "Borne."

BY LAURA MILLER

RACHEL, the twenty-eight-year-old narrator of Jeff VanderMeer's new novel, "Borne," lives in a harrowed, poisoned, semi-ruined city, where she scavenges scraps of food and tradeable detritus from the wreckage, a dangerous enterprise in a landscape haunted by the similarly desperate. Her lover and partner, Wick, remains holed up in their booby-trapped, warrenlike refuge, a former apartment building disguised as a midden. It's essential that their home, a place they call the Balcony Cliffs, be unidentifiable from above, because their unnamed city is intermittently terrorized by a ravenous giant bear named Mord, and Mord can fly.

This is postapocalyptic fiction, a genre that, for all its lamentation over the loss of the world we live in now, often runs on a current of nostalgia for an earlier age. What is a zombie saga like "The Walking Dead," if not a Western? Its premise replaces the civilization that makes our lives soft and easy with that most tenacious of American dreams: the frontier, where settlers get to reinvent society from the ground up and prove their worth in feats of manly valor. And, where the historical myth of the Western is now being eaten away by national guilt over the treatment of Native Americans, the zombie story provides us with the undead, a new category of nonhuman humans who can be mowed down without a twinge of conscience. The postapocalyptic imagination is shot through with unacknowledged wish fulfillment.

Not in VanderMeer's hands, though. VanderMeer belongs to a loose group of literary writers, the New Weird, who bend the old devices of genre fiction to unaccustomed ends. His best—and best-known—work is the Southern Reach Trilogy, three novels published in succession, in 2014. The saga recounts the



"Borne" brings an acute intimacy to the tropes of genre fiction.

experiences of several people charged with investigating a stretch of coastal land where something uncanny has occurred. Within the borders of Area X, all human inhabitants have vanished, and the natural world has returned to its pristine state, without a trace of man-made pollutants. Much to the alarm of the authorities, the border of Area X is

expanding. In a startling reversal, the world shaped by humanity—what one character describes as "dirty, tired, imperfect, winding down, at war with itself"—has been contaminated and invaded by purity.

Rachel's city is the opposite of Area X. The river that rings it is a "stew of heavy metals and oil and waste that generated a toxic mist." Not long ago, a shadowy operation known as the Company set up a biotechnology facility that cranked out freakish new organisms, then set them loose on the city's streets to see what happened. Mord is the result of one such experiment, a creature manufactured to protect the Company from the increasingly restive locals. Now Mord runs amok, like the dragon in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*. Many of the survivors have begun worshipping him as a god.

A bear the size of a department store given the power of flight: VanderMeer couldn't care less about technological plausibility, and "Borne" isn't, at heart, science fiction. With the toppling of the old forms of order, Rachel, Wick, and the other residents of the city have been plunged into a primordial realm of myth, fable, and fairy tale. Their world is a version of the lost and longed-for territory of fantasy and romance, genres that hark back to an elemental, folkloric past roamed by monsters and infested with ghastly wonders. Mord's rival is a mysterious figure called the Magician, a woman clad in biotech robes that enable her to appear and vanish before Rachel's eyes. The Magician's minions are genetically altered children whose

"iridescent carapaces" and "gossamer wings" recall Titania's fairy attendants. In accord with Arthur C. Clarke's famous dictum, the technology devised by the Company has become indistinguishable from magic, but this is not so much a midsummer night's dream as it is a year-round nightmare.

Into this setting comes the novel's title

character, although whether he is a character or not isn't clear at first. Combing for salvage in the dense fur of a sated, sleeping Mord, Rachel scoops up something "dark purple and about the size of my fist," resembling "a hybrid of a sea anemone and a squid." The thing emits a delicious fragrance of beach reeds and passionflowers, a scent that evokes a rare peaceful memory from Rachel's nomadic childhood. "Much later," she adds, ominously, "I realized it would have smelled different to someone else, might even have appeared in a different form." First, Rachel treats the creature like a houseplant, then like a pet. Borne (so named because "he was born, but I had borne him") gets bigger, while small objects and animals left around it disappear. It changes shape, pulses with color like a cephalopod to signal its moods. Whatever it is, Rachel finds it soothing and companionable. Then, one day, Borne speaks.

THE CONCEPTUAL ELEMENTS in VanderMeer's fiction are so striking that the firmness with which he cinches them to his characters' lives is often overlooked. The primary characters in the Southern Reach Trilogy suffer from disorders of connection: one drifted away from the husband she loved; another comes from a family that for generations has been mired in the corrosive web of an intelligence agency. The vegetable invasion that threatens them seems so alien, in part, because it denies the detachment that modernity has made possible. "Borne" is VanderMeer's trans-species rumination on the theme of parenting. "It" becomes "him." Borne learns to read and to play. He asks the thousands of maddening questions familiar to any adult who has spent much time with a four-year-old ("Why is water wet?") and many that are unanswerable for reasons peculiar to Borne himself ("Am I a person?"). Yes, it's a bit creepy that Borne, for all his weirdness, has obviously been engineered to appeal to Rachel, but the same could be said of human babies, with their oversized eyes and adorable cooings. That Wick and Rachel might have had a child in the usual way doesn't seem to have occurred to them. Along with all the tangible things that they have lost in their fall backward into the unchanging domain of myth, they

have forgotten how to envision a future.

Wick mistrusts Borne, and Rachel's refusal to give the newcomer up threatens the couple's already doubtful alliance. No reader will blame her. As improbable a task as it may seem to make a faceless, squid-like creature lovable, VanderMeer does it. Children, their cuteness and their vulnerability notwithstanding, endear themselves by allowing adults to see the worn-out world remade through their eyes. When a protective Rachel grudgingly allows Borne on the balcony, and he gets a glimpse of the city's deadly, multicolored, glowing river, he declares it beautiful. "I realized right then in that moment that I'd begun to love him," Rachel explains. "Because he didn't see the world like I saw the world. He didn't see the traps. Because he made me rethink even simple words like *disgusting* or *beautiful*. That was the moment I knew I'd decided to trade my safety for something else." To take on a child is to step out of fantasy and into history.

Compared with the Southern Reach Trilogy, which brings its readers, like its characters, to the threshold of the incomprehensible, "Borne" has a more conventional adventure plot. An epic confrontation will be forced, a quest undertaken, and secrets from the past unveiled, along with Borne's true nature. The novel's scope is of human dimensions, despite its nonhuman title character. But VanderMeer's take on the postapocalyptic fantasy is not without subversive ambition. At its most regressive, the genre believes that we can truly become ourselves only when we are released from the constraints of a complex, denaturing society, when we're allowed to live as we imagine our ancestors once did, and when we're free to be who we really are underneath our overcivilized veneer. But in "Borne" the lawlessness of the city doesn't provide survivors with a stage that has been cleared for heroic exploits. It's merely Hobbesian: exhausting and degrading. The novel insists that to live in an age of gods and sorcerers is to know that you, a mere person, might be crushed by indifferent forces at a moment's notice, then quickly forgotten. And that the best thing about human nature might just be its unwillingness to surrender to the worst side of itself. ♦

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PRAISE SONGS

Alice Coltrane in Sanskrit.

BY HUA HSU



In the early eighties, Coltrane bought forty-eight acres and built an ashram.

NEAR THE END of his life, John Coltrane decided to buy a harp. The visionary saxophonist and bandleader hoped that having one in his home studio would help him rethink his approach to harmony and texture. The harp he ordered took months to build and wasn't delivered until after his death, of liver cancer, in July, 1967. It sat in the house in Dix Hills, Long Island, where he and his wife, Alice, were bringing up their young children. If the windows were open, Alice later recalled, a strong breeze would make the strings hum, as though some invisible force were strumming them.

Alice and John met in the early sixties in New York City, when she was gigging and he was already a star. She

was born in Detroit in 1937, and, like many contemporaries, received her most formative musical education through the church. She studied the piano, mastering the classical repertoire as well as bebop, and she began touring and recording in her early twenties. She played with John's ensembles, but by the time of his death she had largely stepped back from music.

Those who knew Alice and John described them as kind, gentle introverts who understood each other on an instinctive level. Though they had both grown up in strict Christian households, in the sixties they began immersing themselves in other faiths. They weren't the only ones seeking new

forms of transcendence in the pages of the Quran, the Bhagavad Gita, and books about Zen Buddhism. In 1966, the cover of *Time* famously asked, "Is God Dead?" The seekers thought that maybe people had been taught to look in the wrong place. For black artists, especially, pursuing other systems of belief became a way of rethinking one's relationship with America.

John's death set Alice adrift. She wouldn't eat or sleep; she suffered from hallucinations. Though many people around her worried about whether her emaciated frame was the result of devotional fasting or severe depression, she later described this period as transformational, thanks largely to an encounter with the Swami Satchidananda, an Indian religious leader who toured America in the late sixties and appeared at Woodstock, where he opened the festival. In Alice's mind, Hindu traditions could accommodate the kind of universalist ethos that she and John had imagined at the end of his life. The Swami's teachings appealed to Alice's sense that the Holy Spirit was everywhere, that we were merely the flesh-and-blood manifestations of an infinite life force.

Alice taught herself how to play the harp, which can sound wondrous and mystical even in amateur hands. Her style was impressionistic, effervescent. Her notes sparkled and then dissolved in the air around her. What better way to express one's relationship to the larger world? In 1968, Alice began releasing albums as a bandleader. During this time, especially in the experimental circles that had grown around her husband, opportunities for women to lead their own ensembles were rare. The music she made was initially criticized as derivative of John's. In the case of his posthumous album "Infinity" (1972), purists attacked Alice's decision to dub her own string arrangements over some of his previously unreleased works.

Alice's music was solemn and heavy, filled with stormy passages that felt like nervous attempts at purification—a struggling kind of transcendence. Like much of the more forward-thinking jazz of this era, it was music that felt in a hurry to get somewhere. Every now and then, though,

a glistening sweep of harp would cut through the dirge, sounding the possibility of glory in the wreckage. John's death was a theme, but so was a desire to surrender her ego, and to offer herself to something greater. In the ten years that followed, she released about a dozen albums on Impulse! and Warner Bros., many of them masterpieces that imagine a meeting point between jazz and psychedelic rock, gospel traditions and Indian devotional music. And then, after the release of "Transfiguration," in 1978, she seemed to disappear.

IN THE SLEEVE NOTES for "A Monastic Trio" (1968), Alice's first album as a bandleader, the poet and critic Amiri Baraka called her "one earth bound projection of John's spirit." She had no problem with being defined in terms of her husband's legacy, for some of the most radical music he made was an attempt to translate their private world for the masses. It was the "earth bound" part that she resisted.

On Alice's album covers, she often wore a look of dreamy preoccupation, and their titles—"World Galaxy," "Universal Consciousness"—easily aligned her with many of her outer-space-obsessed peers. For artists like Sun Ra or Herbie Hancock, outer-space futurism offered a potent metaphor—a way of illustrating a sense of alienation, and a dream of shuttling someplace where black people might be free. But Alice was looking elsewhere.

In 1972, Alice and her children moved to San Francisco, where she devoted herself to Vedic practice. She established the Vedantic Center in her home, and, a few years later, moved it, along with her family, to Woodland Hills, a neighborhood of Los Angeles. She took the name Turiyasangitananda—Sanskrit for "the bliss of God's highest song"—and attracted a diverse congregation of worshippers. (Among her youngest acolytes was her great-nephew Steven Ellison, who now draws on her sense of scale and ambition in his brilliant work as the electronic producer Flying Lotus.) She came to believe that bliss was close at hand—it was inside you. The universe wasn't a range of options and futures that were light-years away; it was an idea you

couldn't quite grasp, and in the struggle to try to imagine infinity's sprawl all you could do was just try and align yourself with it. In the early eighties, after the death of her son John, Jr., she bought forty-eight acres in nearby Agoura Hills and built an ashram.

"World Spirituality Classics 1: The Ecstatic Music of Alice Coltrane Turiyasangitananda" will be released on Luaka Bop next month, a little more than ten years after her death. It is the first collection to highlight the music she made during this time. Her children had encouraged her to visit a local music shop to see all the fancy things that the new modular synthesizers could do. While initially reluctant, she became fascinated with the way that these keyboards allowed her to bend or stretch notes at will. She began making her own devotional music, overlaying surging, swelling ambient soundscapes with Sanskrit chants. Residents at the ashram recall Alice waking them up before dawn, so that they could listen to her newest compositions. Many of them, including her children, had never heard her sing.

"Ecstatic Music" draws from four cassettes that Alice released between 1982 and 1995 on a tiny local label devoted to Vedic teachings. The music is astounding. "Om Rama" feels as if you've walked into the middle of a daylong ritual—it's all handclaps, tambourines, and blissful chants chasing after the occasional erratic whoosh of a synthesizer. It stays at a frenzied peak for a few minutes, until a wailing, ascending note sweeps everything away, slowing the song to a stately procession. Through the haze comes Alice's creaky church organ, which sounds as if it had been transplanted from a gospel record.

On "Rama Rama," a sitar's thrum is matched with gentle waves of synthesizer, the kind of juxtaposition between old and new that gives much of this music an uncanny feel. For Alice, synthesizers and organs were simply a new way of humming along with the universe, as she had previously tried to do playing the harp. "Journey to Satchidananda" revisits the melody from one of her masterpieces, "Journey in Satchidananda," released in 1970. Here the original's

insistent rhythm is unravelled, slowed down to a swirl of chants and tranquil synthesizer tones.

RECORD COLLECTING offers a strange approach to historical thinking: yesterday's undervalued commodities often become tomorrow's fetish objects. No genre, style, or level of professionalism is beyond redemption. Still, the renewal of interest in New Age music is surprising. Some of the most exciting labels today, such as New York's RVNG Intl. and Los Angeles's Leaving Records, mix avant-garde dance music with reissues of old meditation or relaxation music. The pianist and zitherist Laraaji, who, following his "discovery" by the producer Brian Eno, released some twenty albums in the eighties, is arguably more popular than ever. (He is also still selling tickets to his famed "laughter meditation" sessions.)

Perhaps it's because we live at a time when notions of wellness and personal care are mainstream that the idea of ambient music with a purpose holds a special appeal. And a lot of people listen to music as an alternative to organized worship; for years, in the Bay Area, there has been a church devoted to John Coltrane. For some, "Ecstatic Music" will be perfect for zoning out, couched as it is in a religiosity that is welcoming, nonjudgmental. But one of the reasons that albums like this have remained obscure is that they were recorded with a specific pursuit in mind: they were for the ashram, devotional songs for fellow-worshippers.

I first encountered this music on a blog specializing in obscure "celestial" music. (I love anything that dares to try to describe the wholeness of the universe, and I'm a sucker for harps.) When I listened to "Rama Katha," which is included on the vinyl version of this album, I was startled by its quiet and its patience. It was so intimate and honest that I almost felt that I shouldn't be listening. I couldn't tell if its ambient drones were the result of the poor digitization of a hissing cassette or part of the music itself. Alice was backed only by her keyboard, which flickered and whirred from a comfortable distance. Her voice—never the instrument she was famous for—resounded with untroubled confidence. This wasn't music that was pushing its makers and listeners to a higher plane. Alice was already there. ♦

THE XX FACTOR

Women and abstract art.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

*Anne Ryan's "Collage, 353" (1949): fusing delicate materiality and powerful form.*

MAKing SPACE: Women Artists and Postwar Abstraction," at the Museum of Modern Art, looks like a typical march-of-styles historical survey, tracking high points in the boom decades of abstract art. There are ninety-four works by fifty-three international artists, all but one of them drawn from the museum's collection, dating from 1942 to 1969. They are grouped in categories of gestural, geometric, reductive, and "eccentric" abstraction, supplemented with fabric arts, ceramics, and decoration. The show's curators, Starr Figura and Sarah Meister, with assistance from Hillary Reder, have exercised just one unusual criterion: nothing by a man.

This isn't to say that no male presence is felt. Rather, the contrary: most of the works were achieved in an art world—and a culture—that discounted the feminine, presenting women less with glass ceilings than with absent floors. The level of quality is high—transcendently so, in works by Joan Mitchell and Agnes Martin—but the drama of the show is in the intermittent, solitary struggles against steep odds. That changes only toward the end, with the dawn of an era in which such newcomers as the post-minimalist sculptors Eva Hesse and Lynda Benglis could at once pioneer important developments in art and invest them with peculiarly sensuous qualities

that are not about what the female body is like—the fascination of male artists, for millennia—but about what it's like to have one. The curators effectively prelude the moment of a rebellion that took critical impetus from a game-changing essay by the art historian Linda Nochlin, published in 1971, in *ARTnews*: "Why Are There No Great Women Artists?"

Great artists, defined as those who establish ideals for subsequent artists, classically emerge from generational cohorts, or gangs, and often in rivalrous pairs: Delacroix and Ingres, van Gogh and Gauguin, Picasso and Matisse, Pollock and de Kooning. There are few hints of such shared, and contested, history in "Making Space." For the most part, female abstract artists of the period made it—whatever "it" constituted at a given time—one by one, often aided by connections to men who had made it already. Anni Albers was married to Josef, Lee Krasner to Jackson Pollock, Elaine de Kooning to Willem, Dorothy Dehner to David Smith, and Hedda Sterne to Saul Steinberg. Helen Frankenthaler was mentored by her teacher and lover Clement Greenberg, before she left him to marry Robert Motherwell.

It's an old story: Artemisia Gentileschi was boosted by her association with her father, Orazio, in the seventeenth century; Berthe Morisot by her brother-in-law Édouard Manet, in the nineteenth; and Georgia O'Keeffe by her lover and champion Alfred Stieglitz, in the twentieth. The circumstance takes nothing away from the distinction of those women's work. But it points to the scarcity of other advantages for an aspiring woman artist, during times when men—or white men, at least—could take no end of them for granted. Without smiles of fortune, there cannot be a commanding career in much of anything, and the rule goes double for the precarious conditions of lives in art.

The show suggests that the rise of abstract art as a paradigm, after the Second World War, opened up possibilities for women, precisely because it masked personal identity. (The previous avant-garde, Surrealism, had consigned women to the role of muse, or of vestal non-virgin.) It was an idealist epoch, cosmopolitan in formation and universalist in ideology. All divisions between people, the national and the sexual included, might be fancied

as obsolete, though of course they persisted—and intensified, even—in the American triumphalism and the masculine pathos of Abstract Expressionism. Women still faced reflexive art-world disdain, with an apparent exception in Brazil, where, starting in the nineteen-fifties, two Lygias, Clark and Pape, figured among the leaders of movements in geometric abstraction. Incidentally notable is a selection of wonderful abstraction-inspired photographs, all circa 1952, of natural, architectural, and still-life details, by Gertrudes Altschul, a German-born Brazilian, whose work is new to me. (Let's recall that many women found camera-work a route to success when the going was rough in painting and sculpture.)

Greatness began to democratize in New York in the fifties. Mitchell, through sheer toughness of personality and boldness of talent, eclipsed all but one of her peers in the second generation of Abstract Expressionism. That one was Frankenthaler, whose ways with liquid paint mightily influenced much abstract art of the sixties. Meanwhile, the immense assembled sculptures of Louise Nevelson, in wood painted black, projected an imperious spirit that defied condescension. Less recognized, even now, are the terrific small collages by Anne Ryan, a Greenwich Village poet who took up the medium late in life (she died in 1954) and managed a fusion of delicate materiality and powerful form which recommends her as a feminist forebear, though she, in her pure aestheticism, would likely have been startled at the thought.

Ryan's quietly subversive art, which miniaturizes the heroic scale of Abstract Expressionist painting in ways that can make you feel even smaller, and awed, when beholding her work, offers a touchstone for interpretations of the show. Two ideas in Nohlin's essay apply, both by being subtly contradicted. Nohlin focussed her polemic on "stultifying, oppressive, and discouraging" sexism in art and art-history education, which burdened students with myths and hagiographies of invariably male "genius." But she was at pains to oppose two then-current feminist arguments: first, that there had indeed been great women artists, but their rights to fame had been suppressed, and, second, that art by women possesses a feminine essence that makes it incomparable with art by men. Noh-

lin called the latter presumption "naïve," because it imagined that art is "a translation of personal life into visual terms." She added, "Art is almost never that, great art never is."

But nearly five decades of feminist and postmodernist thought and invention have brought us, on the first count, to revalue art by women in terms of how they finessed the constraints of their times—Morisot seems a little greater to me every time I see, again, one of her stubbornly independent-minded Impressionist paintings—and, on the second, to recognize "personal life" as a viable and often a capital content in art. Both dynamics are vivid in the retroactive elevation of Frida Kahlo, who initially profited from her marriage to Diego Rivera but has since leapfrogged him in both popular and academic esteem. They also explain the late-blooming recognition of Louise Bourgeois, who is represented in "Making Spaces," and whose psychologically charged semi-abstraction, already mature in the late forties, long suffered regard as a minor eddy in mainstream art.

The show's inclusion of fabric and decorative art marks an insurgent appreciation, taking hold in the sixties, of formerly patronized modes of "women's work." A tremendously effective, huge wall piece in woven sisal by the Polish artist Magdalena Abakanowicz, titled "Yellow Abakan" (1967-68), invites a fighting comparison with some far more well-known minimalist works in felt, from the same time, by Robert Morris. (Is it telling that the tender texture of felt plays second fiddle, for Morris, to the razor cuts that he made in it?) Yet femaleness is at least an arguable nuance of creations in the show by such formidable artists as Agnes Martin, Yayoi Kusama, Bridget Riley, Alma Thomas, and Lee Bontecou. The fact of their womanhood can certainly be overemphasized; all of them keyed their ambitions to the totality of art as they found it. But temporarily zeroing in on the aspect may help us, henceforth, to take it in stride. Femininity isn't really an issue for the artists, who subsumed it at the points of their departure. It matters for viewers, as citizens still absorbing the shifts and counter-shifts in self-consciousness that feminism, like other seismic tremors in identity culture, has not ceased to cause. ♦

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POETIC LICENSE

"A Quiet Passion" and *"The Fate of the Furious."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

ONE EVENING, NEAR the start of "A Quiet Passion," the Dickinsons of Amherst sit in the parlor. The hour is late. We look at Emily (Emma Bell), and the camera begins a patient rotation, through three hundred and sixty degrees, noting each family member in turn: stern Aunt Elizabeth (Annette Badland), half nodding off to sleep;

In the hands of Terence Davies, the writer and director of "A Quiet Passion," this circling movement becomes a thing of beauty, because it tells the time. While the camera turns, we hear the tick of a clock, as if the two mechanisms were interlinked; then comes a chime, and with it a sense of the pace at which the characters con-



Cynthia Nixon portrays Emily Dickinson in a film by Terence Davies.

Emily's bewhiskered father, Edward (Keith Carradine), reading; her brother, Austin (Benjamin Wainwright), also reading, in a recess of the shadows; her adored sister, Lavinia (Rose Williams), known as Vinnie, sewing; and their mother, another Emily (Joanna Bacon), who gazes at the fire. We pass the flames in the hearth, a candelabra, a decanter and a wine glass, and a vase of flowers, before coming to rest once more on young Emily, her features now furrowed by some unspoken dismay.

duct their lives. Do the days crawl by in torment, or is it our own eventful haste that would strike the Dickinsons as unendurable? Were they more at leisure, perhaps, to let the past wash over the present—to lay themselves at the mercy of regret? The eyes of Mrs. Dickinson mist with tears, at the fireside, and she asks Emily for "one of the old hymn tunes." Her dutiful daughter sits at the piano and plays "Abide with Me."

Dickinson was born in 1830 and died in 1886, and the film runs from

her schooling to her open grave. If you are wondering how Davies marks the impact of age, and are bracing yourself for geological layers of makeup, fear not. Special effects do the trick. Starting straight at us, Wainwright, as Austin, makes way for Duncan Duff; Williams, as Vinnie, becomes Jennifer Ehle; and Bell, as Emily, turns into Cynthia Nixon, who will carry the rest of the movie. In each case, the face is transformed by a kind of gentle suffusion. Better still, it's part of a visual joke, because the Dickinsons are sitting for a photographer, who is taking portraits with his cumbersome plate-glass camera. The slow motion of years goes by in a single exposure.

Dickinson's existence, and what sprang from its apparent sparseness, is an enduring object of fascination. Long before her poems found a global audience, her immediate neighbors grew curious. One resident of Amherst, newly arrived in 1881, told of "a lady whom the people call the *Myth*. She is a sister of Mr. Dickinson, & seems to be the climax of all the family oddity. She has not been outside of her own house in fifteen years." Enticing details were added: "She dresses wholly in white, & her mind is said to be perfectly wonderful. She writes finely, but no one ever sees her." Her best biographer, Richard B. Sewall, unpicked this legend in his 1974 study, from which a worldlier and more socialized figure emerged. To an extent, Davies follows Sewall's lead, giving the heroine a friend—an invented figure named Vryling Buffam (Catherine Bailey), whose effervescent heresy gives Emily cause for delight. Girded in full skirts, the two women deal in quips. "Let's not be anything today except superficial," Emily says, as they enter a commencement ball. "Yes, and superficiality should always be spontaneous. If it is studied, it is too close to hypocrisy," Vryling replies.

Sequences like this are the lightest portions of the film, and the least satisfying. You get the slightly starched impression that the characters could be actors, mounting an Amherst production of a lesser-known play by Oscar Wilde. To be fair, "A Quiet Passion" is wittier, in its early stretches, than anyone might have foreseen, but it's when the door closes, and the Dickinsons are alone

with their trepidations, that the movie draws near to its rightful severity. When news comes that Fort Sumter has been fired upon, Austin declares his intention to enlist, only to be thwarted by his father, who will not countenance the loss of a son. How strange it is to hear such protective love expressed in a voice of thunder, and how typically discreet of Davies not to risk the reconstruction of a battle but, instead, to show period photographs of Gettysburg, Spotsylvania, and Antietam, with tallies of the wounded and the dead.

Like Dickinson, the film itself gradually withdraws. We never see a street or a shop. A youthful visit to the opera, in Boston, is succeeded by summery gardens, by interiors and ailments—the adult Emily is diagnosed with Bright's disease—and finally by two deaths, one in the wake of another. (It's amazing how the deathbed scene, a staple of fiction and painting in Dickinson's era, has all but vanished from cinema, the last great gasp being Bergman's "Cries and Whispers," in 1972. Moviegoers wanting mortality today must get it in short and savage doses.) Most stricken of all is a nocturnal talk between Emily, who is permitted by her father to write between midnight and three in the morning, and Susan (Jodhi May), Austin's unhappy wife. "You have your poetry," she says. "You have a life," Emily responds, although Susan's woe suggests that it is not a life worth envying. I have revered May since "The Last of the Mohicans" (1992), when she faced down her Huron pursuers and stepped serenely off a cliff, and here, as Susan, she lends force to the gathering gloom.

At the other extreme is Ehle, who

achieves the near-impossible, somehow convincing us, in her strong smiles, that there is moral lustre, rather than pale pliability, in Vinnie's luminous goodwill. The worst that she can think to say of Mabel Loomis Todd (Noémie Schellens)—Austin's flirtatious mistress, and, though nobody watching "A Quiet Passion" will believe it, one of the first editors of Dickinson's verse—is "I once hoped that Mabel would go up in a balloon and then explode." Emily laughs at such innocence, and readers will recall her own riotous stanza about a falling hot-air balloon:

The Gilded Creature strains—and spins—
Trips frantic in a Tree—
Tears open her imperial Veins—
And tumbles in the Sea—

That strain of surreal violence is never suppressed for long in her work, especially in some of her startling beginnings: "If ever the lid gets off my head/ And lets the brain away." It is not a strain, however, to which Davies pays much heed, and the poetry that we hear in his movie, recited in Nixon's voiceover, is of a wry tranquility, concluding, as one might predict, with "Because I could not stop for Death—/ He kindly stopped for me." The film, in tune with its title, is rich in emotional tact, and plangent to a fault; such harshness as it can muster is supplied by the redoubtable Nixon. What makes her performance unusual, and even, at times, unpalatable, is how few pains she takes to sweeten the woman whom she plays. Watch her lurk upstairs, denying visitors a glimpse of the fabled recluse, or shudder uncontrollably in the throes of illness, as

if prey to her own private earthquake. By seeming so mean and ungracious or coarsened by physical hurt, she scrapes against the grain of the movie's decorum, and asks, What kind of soul did you expect, at the root of poems like these?

B ECAUSE I COULD not stop for Vin—
He would not stop for me—
But drove his Dodge straight at the
hood
Of my—Infiniti—

The Fast—& Furious—has reached
Installment number Eight—
In which the vital word of Fast
Has been replaced by—Fate—

A Diesel going Rogue—alas—
Has left his Friends in shock—
He even swings a Wrecking Ball—
In vain—to crush the Rock—

The Villain is Charlize Theron—
Who makes the Streets explode—
Yet she was more a bomb-ass Bitch
In Mad Max—Fury Road—

The Stunts that gild the Franchise
are
The sickest ever seen—
The modes of Transport now in-
clude
A—fucking—Submarine

You feel—however—that the Guys
Are racing Lamborghinis—
To sublimate a swelling wish
To wave around their—Weenies♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Mick Stevens, must be received by Sunday, April 23rd. The finalists in the April 10th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the May 8th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



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THE FINALISTS

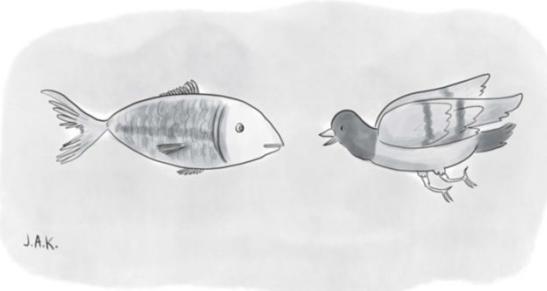


“They keep away the pigeons.”
Suzanne McCuaig, Toronto, Ont.

“Hire the one that said, ‘Whom.’”
Jason Berger, San Diego, Calif.

“Gladys, get me a B.L.T. and nine mice.”
Susan F. Breitman, West Hartford, Conn.

THE WINNING CAPTION

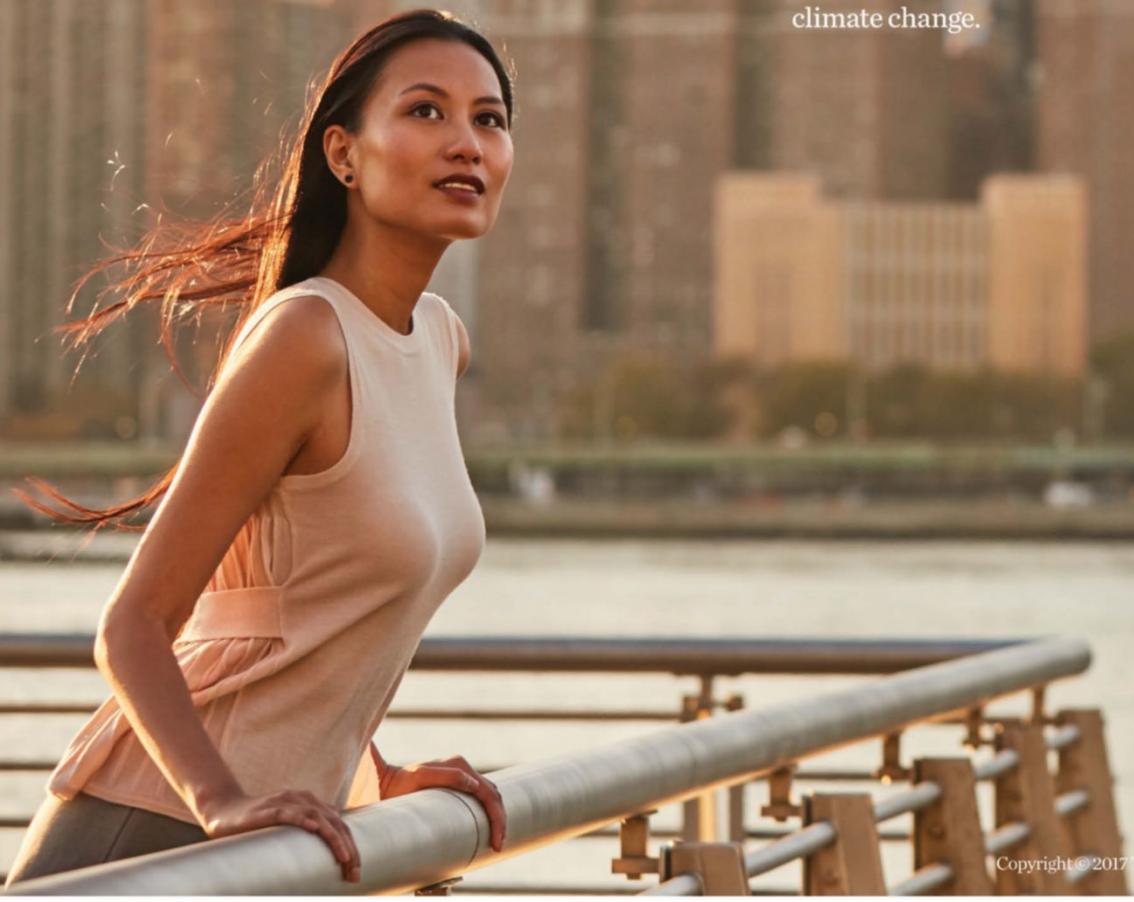


J.A.K.

“But where would we raise the kids?”
Gary Schonfeld, New York City

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