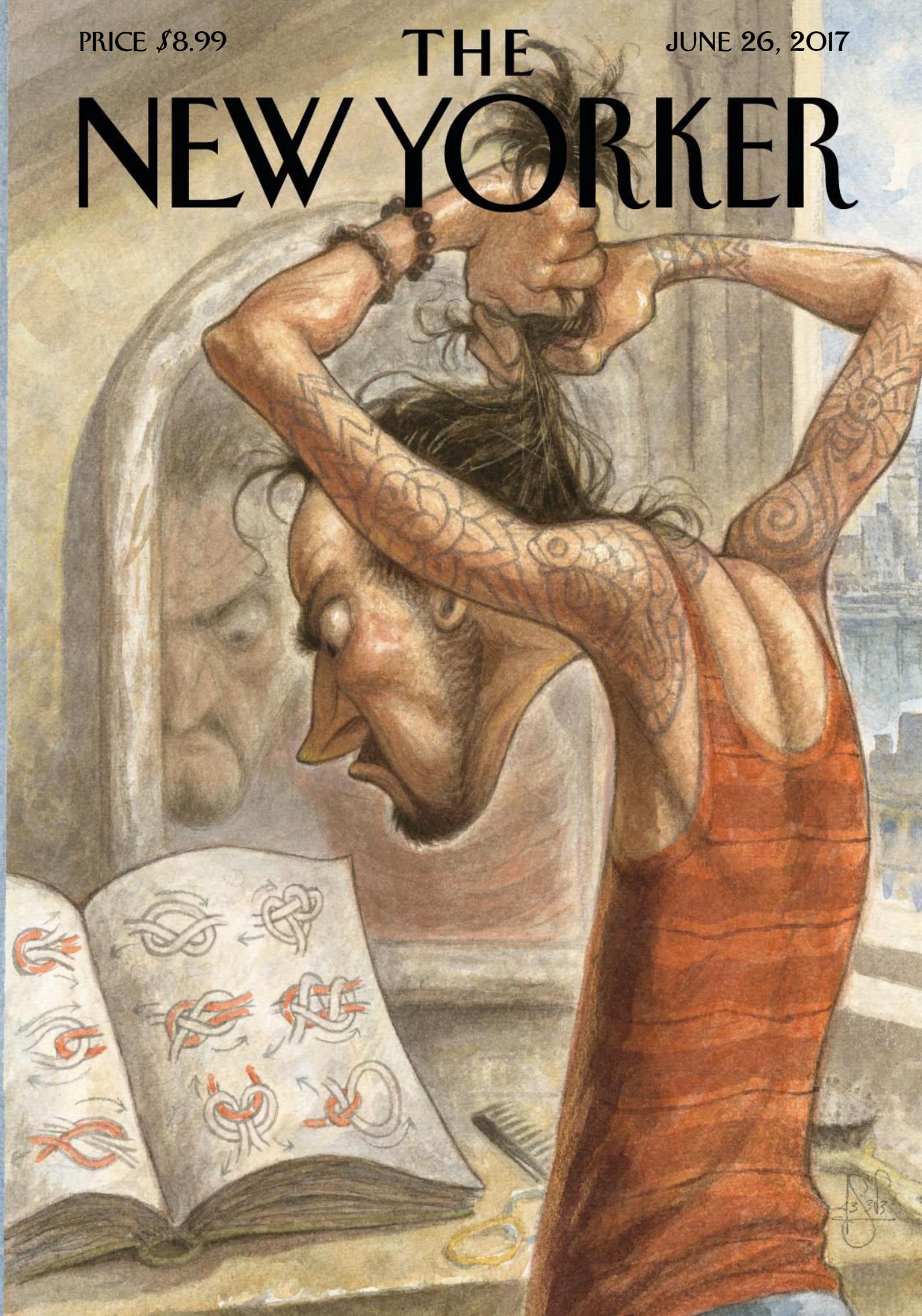


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JUNE 26, 2017

# THE NEW YORKER





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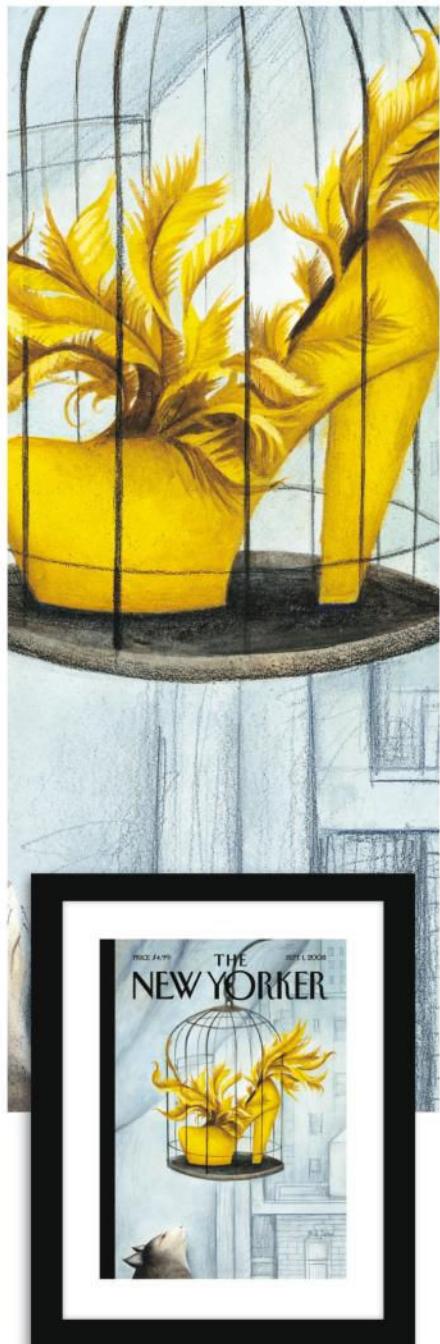
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"Object of Desire"  
Ana Juan, September 1, 2008

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**Jennifer Gonnerman** ("Neighborhood Watched," p. 30) became a staff writer in 2015. She received the 2016 Front Page Award for Journalist of the Year from the Newswomen's Club of New York.

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**Charles McGrath** (*Books*, p. 63) is a former deputy editor of *The New Yorker* and a former editor of the *Times Book Review*.

**Emma Rathbone** (*Shouts & Murmurs*, p. 29) published "Losing It," her second novel, in July, 2016.

**Peter de Sève** (*Cover*) is an illustrator and a character designer for animated movies. His work can be seen in the feature film "The Little Prince."

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### VIDEO

Father John Misty performs "The Memo," a song from his new album, "Pure Comedy."



### PODCAST

Rebecca Mead and Dorothy Wickenden discuss Shakespeare and political theatre in the age of Trump.

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# THE MAIL

## ROTH'S AMERICAN IDENTITY

Philip Roth gives an eloquent account of how his high-school reading of Midwestern and Southern writers took him beyond his Newark Jewish childhood and shaped his American sensibility ("I Have Fallen in Love with American Names," June 5th & 12th). He relished becoming "a free American," part of a vast, victorious "colossus." But the list of writers who inspired him—including Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, and Thomas Wolfe, all born between 1871 and 1900—betrays how America's presumption of white male superiority shaped him, as well as his taste in literature. Willa Cather (born in 1873) and Zora Neale Hurston (born in 1891) are conspicuously absent.

*David Leverenz  
Eagles Mere, Pa.*

Roth ends his essay with a sense of his "irrefutably American" identity as a novelist, which reminded me how far we are from the time when anyone could call herself an "unhyphenated American." My parents came to the United States from Central Europe in 1938, but I was simply American. In the early sixties, as a young writer, I travelled to England, where I met writers—the playwright Harold Pinter among them—who, to my amazement, defined themselves as Jews. I thought they were all nuts. The current practice of qualifying "American" with one's race, background, sex, or anything else risks taking away our wholeness and leaving us fractured.

*Kathrin Perutz  
New York City*

Roth has much to say about the Stephen Vincent Benét poem that ends "Bury my heart at Wounded Knee," and about the "potent lyrical appeal" of American names. His description of himself as a young reader typifies an adoration of American mythology that overlooks precisely the American heritage that Wounded Knee represents: the massacre of Lakota men, women, and children by the U.S. Army's 7th Cavalry Regiment, on December 29, 1890. This tendency to romanticize what

it means to be American persists today. I am one of the 6.6 million people who became a naturalized U.S. citizen in the past decade, and, as with Roth, the writers who shaped my relationship with my adopted country were mostly born in the United States: Sandra Cisneros, Héctor Tobar, Maya Chinchilla. They attempt to confront their experiences in a society that aims to erase them, a result of the kinds of grand nativist notions that Roth seems unwilling to question.

*Fanny Julissa Garcia  
New York City*

## MATTIS'S MISSION

Reading Dexter Filkins's Profile of Secretary of Defense James Mattis, I was shocked to learn how readily Mattis was approved by Congress, since he seems like the opposite of someone who would be interested in civilian oversight ("The Warrior Monk," May 29th). A sixty-six-year-old career soldier who has no substantive experience outside the military cannot possibly bring an impartial perspective to leadership at the Pentagon. When you have spent your whole life engaged with real and imagined threats, the lens through which you view the world will inevitably be biased toward the military. A person with a different background could have brought an outside perspective to the job, maybe one that would have complemented the military mind-set. The fact that Mattis's subordinates undertake major bombing missions without his explicit knowledge or approval is one troubling sign that he has already created an environment in which actions can take place without his oversight but still receive his support. He will not be someone who challenges or attempts to reshape the military; he is more likely to be the ultimate enabler.

*Doug Hurdelbrink  
Chicago, Ill.*

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

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## THE GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN APP

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JUNE 21 – JUNE 27, 2017

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Decades before hip-hop was born, in New York, swing dancers (like the couple pictured above) favored a hop called the Lindy. On June 19 and June 27, even novices will have a chance to get into the swing on **Pier Forty-five**, off Christopher Street, in Hudson River Park. The festivities kick off at six-thirty, with a dance lesson; then, at seven-fifteen, the Baby Soda Jazz Band starts to play and a dance party ensues. As of July 11, the action switches to salsa, with a tutorial followed by a d.j. every Tuesday until August 15.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC

# THE THEATRE

## OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

### Hamlet

Oscar Isaac stars in Sam Gold's production of the tragedy, featuring Keegan-Michael Key as Horatio. (*Public*, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. *In previews.*)

### Harbored

As part of the River to River Festival, En Garde Arts stages this site-specific collage of immigration stories from the past two centuries, some drawn from casual conversations with passersby. (*Winter Garden at Brookfield Place*, 230 Vesey St. [artsbrookfield.com/harbored](http://artsbrookfield.com/harbored). June 22-25.)

### Marvin's Room

The Roundabout revives Scott McPherson's 1990 comedy, directed by Anne Kauffman, in which two estranged sisters (Janeane Garofalo and Lili Taylor) reunite after one of them is diagnosed as having leukemia. (*American Airlines Theatre*, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300. *In previews.*)

### Napoli, Brooklyn

Three daughters in a traditional Italian-American family in nineteen-sixties Park Slope have secrets, in Meghan Kennedy's play, directed by Gordon Edelstein for the Roundabout. (*Laura Pels*, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. *In previews. Opens June 27.*)

### 1984

Robert Icke and Duncan Macmillan's adaptation of George Orwell's dystopian novel transfers from the West End, featuring Tom Sturridge, Olivia Wilde, and Reed Birney. (*Hudson*, 139-141 W. 44th St. 855-801-5876. *In previews. Opens June 22.*)

### Pipeline

In Dominique Morisseau's play, directed by Li-leana Blain-Cruz, an inner-city public-school teacher sends her son to a private academy, where an incident threatens to get him expelled. (*Mitzi E. Newhouse*, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. *In previews.*)

### The Traveling Lady

In Horton Foote's play from 1955, directed by Austin Pendleton and featuring Karen Ziemba, a woman goes to Texas to reunite with her husband after his release from prison. (*Cherry Lane*, 38 Commerce St. 866-811-4111. *In previews. Opens June 22.*)

## NOW PLAYING

### Animal

Rebecca Hall is an exceptional actress, open to all sorts of experience that isn't necessarily particular to the script she's making come alive with her fine voice and imagination. Clare Lizzimore's comedic drama should be dream material for Hall, but its weaknesses far outweigh its strengths. As Rachel, a thirtyish woman undergoing a psychic break with reality, Hall is great but limited, because the play is, too; you can feel redemption coming a mile away. The attractive Morgan Spector plays Rachel's patient husband with the right combination of incomprehension, love, and exas-

peration, but it's David Pegram's Dan who sexes things up. Dan is black and possibly a figment of Rachel's imagination, but Pegram saves the role from the danger of racist undertones by being real in his appetites and in his interest in Rachel, whose various indecisions and fears amuse him, somehow. (*Atlantic Stage 2*, at 330 W. 16th St. 866-811-4111.)

### ANT Fest 2017

Ars Nova's tenth annual festival of theatre, music, and comedy features "Night Soap," Matt Rogers and Bowen Yang's camp dramatization of the rivalry between Hershey and Nestlé (June 22); "East o', West o'!," a bluegrass-and-folk musical by Michelle J. Rodriguez (June 24); and Shaky Misha Chowdhury and Laura Grill Jaye's "How the White Girl Got Her Spots and Other 90s Trivia" (June 26). For the full program, visit [arsnovanyyc.com](http://arsnovanyyc.com). (*Ars Nova*, 511 W. 54th St. 212-352-3101.)

### The Artificial Jungle

This delightful sendup of film noir, written in 1986 by Charles Ludlam (who died the next year), presents in lurid color the doomed romance between a sexy drifter and the bored wife of a dim-bulb mama's-boy pet-shop owner. (The piranha puppeteer, Satoshi Haga, plays a particularly crucial role.) Like the best parodies, it offers many of the pleasures of the form: it's satirizing, especially in its overheated take on hardboiled dialogue ("I didn't get these lips from sucking doorknobs") and preposterous mock-philosophical musings. Produced in recognition of the fiftieth anniversary of Ludlam's Ridiculous Theatrical Company and directed by Ludlam's partner and collaborator, Everett Quinton, the show is performed by Theatre Breaking Through Barriers, a troupe featuring disabled actors—an inspired expansion of Ludlam's riotously inclusive vision. (*Clurman*, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

### Bella: An American Tall Tale

So much love has gone into the composer, lyricist, and book writer Kirsten Childs's fable, about a nineteenth-century black woman who makes her way out of the American South to the West, where she becomes a novelty and a star, that it seems that much more awful to dislike it. A failure of organization, the two-and-a-half-hour show branches out in so many different directions that the protagonist, played with pluck and energy by Ashley D. Kelley, doesn't so much get lost in the proceedings as get flattened out. She's on the same level as the supporting characters, including an enthusiastic Chinese cowboy (Paolo Montalban, doing a great job) and Bella's mild-mannered suitor (Brandon Gill). The show owes much to Suzan-Lori Parks's "Venus," but that's an original piece, while Childs's is a pastiche of so many other composers' and playwrights' works that it's hard to keep track. (*Playwrights Horizons*, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

### Invincible

Torben Betts's dark comedy starts by pitting two sets of shrill caricatures against each other, as a newly relocated liberal couple (Emily Bowker and Alastair Whatley) invite their rough-edged working-class neighbors (Elizabeth Boag and

Graeme Brookes) over for drinks. The evening, which brings to mind the work of Mike Leigh and Alan Ayckbourn, goes as badly as you'd imagine, and Betts fires off cheap shots at both sanctimonious lefties and loud ruffians. (A farcical scene is even set to "Benny Hill" music.) Briskly directed by Stephen Darcy and impeccably acted, the "Brits Off Broadway" production recovers after intermission, as Betts fills in the contours of the protagonists' lives. While the posh transplants remain essentially insufferable, we at least get an understanding of why they do what they do—and the neighbors acquire genuine pathos. (59E59, at 59 E. 59th St. 212-279-4200.)

### Master

A heart-grabber and a head-wrecker, W. David Hancock's riddling evening amalgamates theatre, funeral oration, literary exegesis, gallery show, and ethical gauntlet. A crowd gathers for a celebration of the life of James Leroy (Uncle Jimmy) Clemens, a genius, a crackpot, and often a real jerk. An African-American outsider artist, Uncle Jimmy devoted most of his career to an alternative, multimedia version of "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" that shifts the focus from white Huck to black Jim. (His art works and ephemera—much of it created by Wardell Milan—ring the space.) In the center of the room, Uncle Jimmy's widow (Anne O'Sullivan) and then his son from his first marriage (Mikéah Ernest Jennings) deliver conflicted and conflicting eulogies in words holy and profane, serious and irreverent. As directed by Taibi Magar, the Foundry Theatre's production becomes an exploration of how art can vitalize and wound. (Irondale Center, 85 S. Oxford St., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111. Through June 24.)

### Woody Sez: The Life & Music of Woody Guthrie

Devised a decade ago by David M. Lutken, who plays Guthrie, in collaboration with the director Nick Corley and three other highly versatile performers (two of whom remain in the cast for this production), this outstanding biographical show about the radical American folk giant makes its New York City début, and it couldn't have arrived at a better time. Simply as a revue of dozens of Guthrie's songs, it's superb: the orchestrations offer a delightful variety of approaches to the material, and all four cast members are rich singers who totally shred on their instruments and seem ready for anything after their years on tour. But it's also a politically invigorating and inventive reflection on Guthrie's life and times, whose echoes with our own are frequent but never forced. (*Irish Repertory*, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)

## ALSO NOTABLE

**Come from Away** Schoenfeld. • **Cost of Living** City Center Stage I. • **Derren Brown: Secret** Atlantic Theatre Company. Through June 25. • **A Doll's House, Part 2** Golden. • **The End of Longing** Lucille Lortel. • **The Government Inspector** The Duke on 42nd Street. Through June 24. • **Groundhog Day** August Wilson. • **Hello, Dolly!** Shubert. • **In & of Itself** Daryl Roth. • **Indecent** Cort. Through June 25. • **The Little Foxes** Samuel J. Friedman. • **The Lucky One** Beckett. Through June 25. • **Oslo** Vivian Beaumont. • **The Play That Goes Wrong** Lyceum. • **Present Laughter** St. James. • **Somebody's Daughter** McGinn/Cazale. Through June 25. • **Sunset Boulevard** Palace. Through June 25. • **Sweat** Studio 54. Through June 25. • **War Paint** Nederlander.

# CLASSICAL MUSIC



In "La Mère Coupable" ("The Guilty Mother"), the Almaviva family (from "The Barber of Seville" and "The Marriage of Figaro") faces a final crisis.

## Family Dynamics

*On Site Opera takes a chance with a rare, dark work by Darius Milhaud.*

A great work by Darius Milhaud (1892–1974) is like a blast of complicated sunshine. The composer, a scion of one of the most ancient and distinguished Jewish families of Provence, produced a brand of Gallic savoir-faire that was a multicolored phenomenon. The "Suite Provençale" for orchestra may be a light-classics favorite, but its jubilant mood has a scorching intensity. Even ostensibly simple moments, like the wistful, gently pulsing slow movement of the Seventh String Quartet, seem to echo an immemorial past. An early adopter of polytonality (music that suggests multiple keys simultaneously), he charged his basically melodic style with a power that could sometimes overwhelm.

Near the end of Milhaud's long and astonishingly prolific career, his compositional resources were tested in "La Mère Coupable" (1965), an opera based on the play of the same name by Beaumarchais. It was the last of the writer's "Figaro" trilogy, which began with "The Barber

of Seville" and "The Marriage of Figaro"—each of which was turned into an opera you may have heard of. But On Site Opera, one of the most vibrant of New York's recently established "indie" companies, has avoided Rossini and Mozart, instead mounting site-specific productions of works, based on the first two plays, by Giovanni Paisiello and Marcos Portugal, respectively. "La Mère Coupable" is the company's pièce de résistance—it is the first U.S. performance of the piece in any form.

"La Mère Coupable," Beaumarchais's final drama, is far darker and more twisted than its predecessors. The Almavivas, twenty years on from "The Marriage of Figaro," are in a troubled state. The Count and Countess have each produced illegitimate children, who are, unfortunately, in love with each other. Figaro and Susanne, still devoted servants, are once more trying to prevent the vain Count from ruining the family: he's being manipulated by Begearss, an Irish adventurer, who seeks to separate the Count from his fortune. Milhaud's adaptation is generally considered an interesting failure, excessively talky

and too heavily scored. But that didn't scare off Eric Einhorn, On Site's artistic director. "We've had past success in producing pieces that have gotten historically bad press from more traditional presentations," Einhorn said, citing the company's production of Gershwin's "Blue Monday," staged at the Cotton Club in 2013.

As is his way, Einhorn will confront the work's eccentricities head on. Milhaud's neoclassical orchestration resembles that of Stravinsky in "The Rake's Progress," but is sometimes over-energized by his characters' inner lives—a flaw that should be mitigated by Nicholas DeMaison, who has made a chamber version for thirteen players (drawn from the ranks of the superb International Contemporary Ensemble). And Einhorn will clarify the drama by staging the opera at the Garage (June 20 and June 22–24), an open-plan space in midtown. The Almavivas, whose buried secrets have brought them to the brink of destruction, are at the end of their journey. Tracked by the audience, which will change seating as the plot unfolds, they will have no place to hide.

—Russell Platt

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CONCERTS IN TOWN**Wu Man and the Shanghai Quartet**

Wu Man, who for some two decades has been the leading ambassador to the West of the pi-pa (a Chinese lute), joins her old friends in the estimable string quartet for two concerts at the Park Avenue Armory's Board of Officers Room. The program—including solo pi-pa music as well as ensemble works—mixes traditional Chinese music with recent pieces by the superb composers Zhou Long and Tan Dun. *June 20–21 at 8.* (*Park Ave. at 66th St. armoryonpark.org.*)

**Make Music New York**

The extraordinary all-day, all-points celebration of music-making returns, with events presented free of charge throughout the city. Among this year's classical and new-music highlights are "49 Flutes," a city-wide happening involving ninety-eight flutists, inspired by "49 Waltzes for the Five Boroughs," John Cage's love song to Gotham; "Concertos for Buildings," in which cast-iron façades of historic buildings on Greene Street serve as percussion instruments; a performance of Gérard Grisey's cosmic percussion fantasy "Le Noir de l'Étoile," at the American Museum of Natural History; and "The Gauntlet," a vocal assemblage by the musical polymath Sxip Shirey, featuring the excellent ensemble Choral Chameleon. *June 21, all day.* (*For full schedule and locations, see makemusicny.org.*)

**St. Luke's Chamber Ensemble:  
"Facets of Schubert"**

The sterling ensemble's Schubert miniseries at the Morgan Library & Museum ends on a particularly creative note. Adam Gopnik, a writer for this magazine (and a Schubert devotee), will read from a collection of original essays on the intersection of music and life in between the movements of Schubert's capacious Octet—which, in a welcome deviation from the usual practice, will be performed with an intermission. A post-concert discussion follows. *June 21 and June 23 at 7:30.* (*Madison Ave. at 36th St. oslmu.org. This concert will be repeated at the Brooklyn Museum on June 25.*)

**American Composers Orchestra:  
Underwood New Music Readings**

The twenty-sixth annual presentation of this vital program offers a chance to hear works by the emerging composers James Diaz, Nick DiBerardino, Martin Kennedy, Hilary Purrlington, Alexander Timofeev, and Yucong (Zoe) Wang, in a morning rehearsal that is open to the public and an evening concert, both conducted by George Manahan. *June 22 at 10 A.M. and June 23 at 7:30.* (*DiMenna Center, 450 W. 37th St. To reserve free tickets, visit americancomposers.org.*)

**"The Opera Party" with  
Antony Roth Costanzo**

Costanzo, a captivating countertenor, hosts the last event of a spring series at WQXR's Greene Space studio. In a celebration of Pride Week, he joins the tenor Anthony Dean Griffey and the cabaret artist Justin Vivian Bond for an evening that also features special contributions by the artist Doug Fitch and the cake-maker Elizabeth Hodes. *June 22 at 7.* (*44 Charlton St. thegreenspace.org.*)

**Rite of Summer Music Festival**

The series, now in its seventh year, offers new and unusual music in a casual outdoor setting on Governors Island. The next concert is a presentation of John Cage's iconic "Sonatas and Interludes," but with the Interludes replaced by newly commissioned works by Angélica Negrón, Daniel Felsenfeld, Justin Hines, and Eleonor Sandresky. Four excellent pianists—Phyllis Chen, Anthony De Mare, Pam Gold-

berg, and Blair McMillen—are on hand. *June 24 at 1 and 3.* (*No tickets required. riteofsummer.com. Ferries leave from South Ferry in Manhattan and from Brooklyn Bridge Park; for more information, visit govisland.com.*)

**Naumburg Orchestral Concerts:  
Lara St. John and Ensemble LPR**

Le Poisson Rouge's house orchestra gets some fresh air, decamping to Central Park's Naumburg Bandshell for a free concert with the magnetic Canadian violinist, who headlines a program featuring new music by Jessie Montgomery and Matthew Hindson ("Maralinga," written for St. John, in its U.S. première) as well as classic repertory by Vaughan Williams ("The Lark Ascending"), Britten, and Stravinsky (the "Dumbarton Oaks" Concerto). *June 27 at 7:30.* (*Mid-Park, enter at 72nd St. No tickets required.*)

**Music for Strings 2017 Festival**

Accomplished student musicians perform alongside seasoned professionals, guided by the Emerson String Quartet violinists Philip Setzer and Eugene Drucker, in the first stateside iteration of a festival mounted jointly by faculty members from Stony Brook University and the Royal Academy of Music in Aarhus, Denmark. The program includes works by Beethoven, Barber, Gérard Grisey, Per Nørgaard, Joan Tower, and Drucker. *June 27 at 8.* (*Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.*)

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**OUT OF TOWN****"Whitman, Melville, Dickinson:  
Passions of Bloom"**

The Norfolk Chamber Music Festival, the Yale School of Music's leafy summer outpost, begins

on a note of grandeur this year, with an oratorio for chorus, soloists, and orchestra—a secular Passion—by Martin Bresnick, one of the school's most distinguished composers and a main mentor of the Bang on a Can composers' group. The Bloom of the title is Harold Bloom, the revered Yale professor and tribune for American literature, who will be played by the tenor James Taylor, as other singers take on the roles of Whitman, Dickinson, and Melville (as well as his alter ego, Ahab). With the Yale Choral Artists. *June 21 at 7:30.* (*Norfolk, Conn. norfolk.yale.edu. No tickets required.*)

**Caramoor: "Edward Arron & Friends"**

The elegant Westchester series is always the first of the bigger summer festivals to get the music rolling. Arron, a deeply expressive cellist, returns with several first-class colleagues (including the pianist Andrew Armstrong and the violinist and violist Arnaud Sussmann) to perform English music by Purcell and Vaughan Williams as well as one of England's great honorary musical citizens, Mendelssohn (the blithe and winning Sextet for Piano and Strings). *June 23 at 8.* (*Katonah, N.Y. caramoor.org.*)

**Boston Early Music Festival**

The company has made it a tradition to head to the Berkshires for a weekend of performances after wrapping up its festival proper. Pergolesi composed both "*La Serva Padrona*" and "*Livietta e Tracollo*" as intermezzos to provide comic relief between the acts of more serious operas, and the festival is making use of their palate-cleansing properties to provide a lighthearted coda to the high-minded music-making of the previous week. *June 24 at 8 and June 25 at 3.* (*Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center, Great Barrington, Mass. hemf.org.*)

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**ART**

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**MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES****Museum of Modern Art****"Project 106: Martine Syms"**

In a purple-painted room, three monitors screen the up-and-coming L.A. conceptualist's first feature-length film, "Incense, Sweaters & Ice"—but not simultaneously. To follow the slow-paced, vérité action, you have to move from one screen to the next. The film's protagonist is an introspective young woman named Girl; her aunt is a regal motivational speaker who advocates personal empowerment through dignified comportment. Syms artfully demonstrates how these two very different personalities respond to the stereotyping and the surveillance of black women. Striking long shots of Girl putting on a blond wig in a motel bathroom, gazing at her phone in hot-pink hospital scrubs, and texting with her elusive love interest, WB ("white boy"), are intercut with her aunt's charismatic inducements to be positive. The spare installation—which also incorporates wall text, movie posters, and an app—is Syms's most ambitious and revealing work yet. *Through July 16.*

**Jewish Museum****"Florine Stettheimer: Painting Poetry"**

It's a good time to take Stettheimer seriously. The occasion is a retrospective of the New York

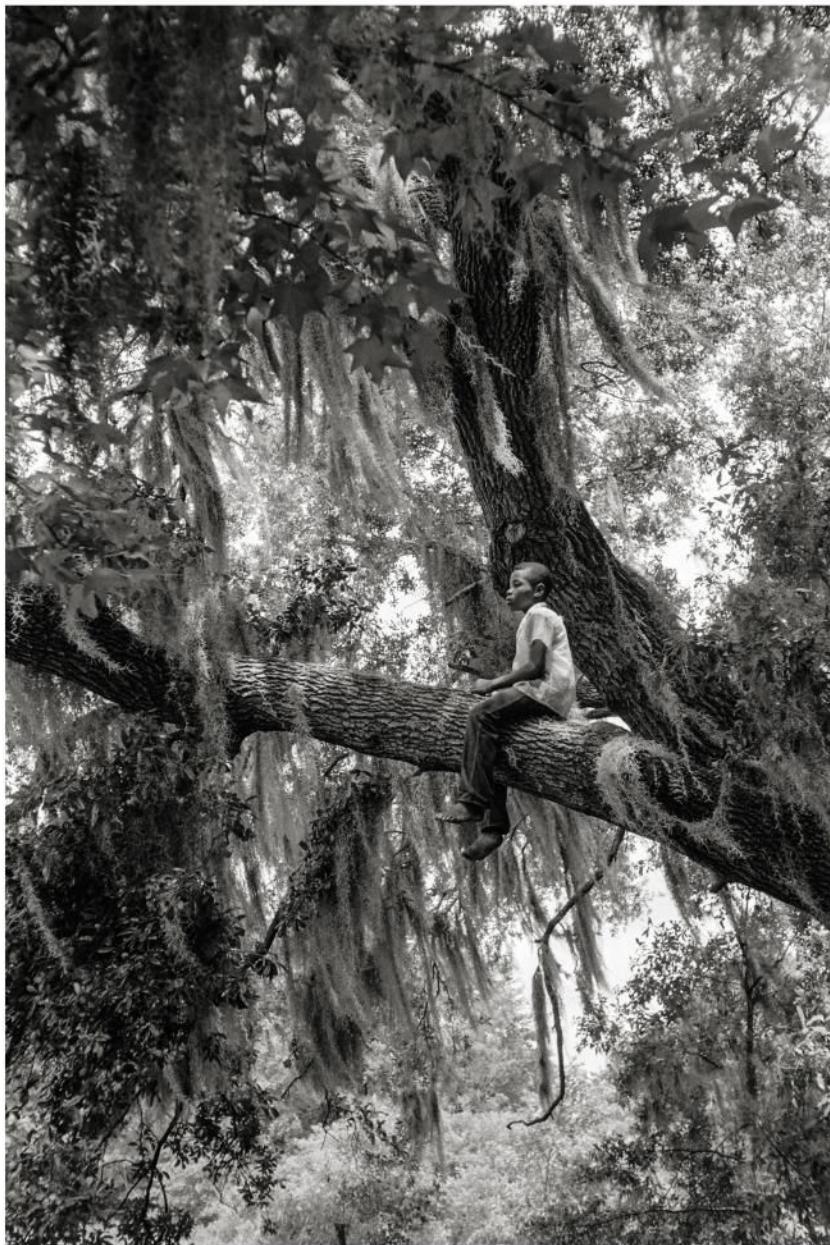
artist, poet, designer, and Jazz Age saloniste. It's not that Stettheimer, who died in 1944, at the age of seventy-three, needs rediscovering. She is securely esteemed—or adored, more like it—for her ebulliently faux-naïve paintings of party scenes and of her famous friends, and for her four satirical allegories of Manhattan, which she called "Cathedrals": symbol-packed phantasmas of Fifth Avenue, Broadway, Wall Street, and Art, in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum. She painted in blazing primary colors, plus white and some accenting black, with the odd insinuating purple. Even her blues smolder. Greens are less frequent; zealously urbane, Stettheimer wasn't much for nature, except, surprisingly, for the glories of the outsized cut flowers that barge in on her indoor scenes. She painted grass yellow. She seemed an eccentric outlier to American modernism, and appreciations of her often run to the camp—it was likely in that spirit that Andy Warhol called her his favorite artist. But what happens if, clearing our minds and looking afresh, we recast the leading men she pictured, notably Marcel Duchamp, in supporting roles? What's the drama when Stettheimer stars? *Through Sept. 24.*

**Museum of the City of New York****"AIDS at Home: Art and Everyday Activism"**

From Nan Goldin's intimate 1994 portraits of patients in hospice care to ephemera from grass-

## GALLERIES—UPTOWN

roots organizations, this thoughtful exhibition elucidates the ways in which the AIDS plague transformed community activism. Strangers became caregivers, friends became family, and domestic spaces became sites of support and resistance. The Buddy Program, initiated by Gay Men's Health Crisis, in 1982, to assist AIDS patients at home, is poignantly commemorated with documentation that includes a handwritten sign-up sheet and a photograph of God's Love We Deliver volunteers ladling soup into takeout containers. The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power—better known as ACT UP—is represented by Bill Bytsura's charming portraits of its diverse membership. The show also includes a broadsheet, from 1989, condemning the current U.S. President for receiving a lavish tax abatement for Trump Tower while the sick were dying on city streets. In one photograph, a prescient drag Dorothy is seen holding a protest sign that reads "Surrender Donald." *Through October 22.*



Constantine Manos (whose 1952 image of a boy on Daufuskie Island, in South Carolina, is pictured) is one of seventy-five photojournalists featured in "Magnum Manifesto," at the I.C.P. Museum, to mark the seventieth anniversary of the Magnum photo agency.

## Claude Viallat

The octogenarian Frenchman, who co-founded the influential Supports/Surfaces abstract movement, found his signature in 1966, when he first pressed a paint-soaked sponge against an unstretched canvas. It's a simple motif, and Viallat's variations of color and surface are simple, too. But his painterly imagination, as demonstrated in this unforgettable survey of works made between the mid-sixties and this year, is inexhaustible. The materials of the systematically titled "1979/020" are acrylic on parasol; the piece resembles a psychedelic flower, with each of its ten petals bearing a different pattern. In "2016/005," tilted marks of solid black march intensely across brown fabric, a phalanx of Brobdingnagian dashes. *Through July 14.* (Ceysson & Bénétière, 956 Madison Ave., at 75th St. 646-678-3717.)

## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

## Charlie Ahearn

The New York artist has been documenting the city's hip-hop culture since its early days, in the Bronx, most famously in his 1983 movie, "Wild Style." It's no surprise, then, that his show indulges in plenty of old-school nostalgia, including enlargements of party invitations and a twenty-minute-long slide show, titled "Scratch Ecstasy," of images from around 1980. Recent pieces, made between 2004 and 2016, concern the form's evolution and its global reach, and include videos of a Tanzanian m.c. busting rhymes in Swahili, a graffiti writer at work in the Paris Métro, and the WAFFLE Crew, a troupe of supernaturally talented subway dancers, performing on a J train. *Through June 24.* (P.P.O.W., 535 W. 22nd St. 212-647-1044.)

## Judith Barry

In 1991, Barry made the video-sculpture "Imagination, Dead Imagine," which is the only piece in this austere and disquieting show. Video footage of an androgynous head appears on five sides of an enormous cube, which rests on a mirrored plinth. As a series of viscous, sometimes clotted liquids pour down the face (on the front of the cube), the eyes close, but the treatment is otherwise endured—again and again—without flinching. (A low-res image that suggests dripping water resets the scene between onslaughts.) Barry confronts viewers with a psychological test: the story you invent to explain this inscrutable situation will likely correspond to your own anxieties. *Through July 28.* (Boone, 541 W. 24th St. 212-752-2929.)

## Hilary Lloyd

The British artist fills the gallery with mysterious constellations of audiovisual equipment, architectural details, and curious plywood forms that resemble deconstructed stage sets, with swaths of fabric and dyed feathers as grace notes. "Seascape" is a nautically themed jumble featuring a jigsaw cutout of an anchor, airbrushed with a pastel rainbow and draped with a black extension cord. Stock photographs of dogs and cats, digitally adorned and effaced with blurry dots, add to the over-all air of pop-culture detritus. Casually shot videos—of abstract imagery, women, the Adidas trefoil, blossoms—shed ambient light on painterly wallpaper. "Dock Lands" is the winningly cryptic show's title, suggesting that its contents are just so much flotsam and jetsam. *Through June 24.* (Greene Naftali, 508 W. 26th St. 212-463-7770.)

## "Betty Parsons: Invisible Presence"

Parsons, who died in 1982, decided to become an artist after visiting the 1913 New York Armory Show as a child. She went on to become a legendary art dealer, launching the careers of such postwar giants as Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman. But she never stopped making her own work. This engaging exhibition traces her development from early figurative bronzes to the totemic, color-driven abstractions she began painting in the forties. In the 1940 gouache "Celeste Beach, Acapulco, Mexico," leaping hills, tussling waves, and coils of orange sand seem to chafe against their borders. Her later paintings are just as arresting, including "Bird in a Boat," from 1971, in which jagged slivers of blue float across a field of green. *Through July 14.* (Gray, 508 W. 26th St. 212-399-2636.)

# NIGHT LIFE



Aaron Rieseberg, Mike Scheidt, and Travis Foster play three nights in Greenpoint.

## The Seer

*The doom-metalheads of YOB return to Brooklyn, with a brighter perspective.*

Mike Scheidt is the guitarist and vocalist behind YOB, which practices an extreme style of rock called doom metal. The music is bleak and slow, and tends to follow a format codified on early Black Sabbath records: spiritualist-satanic homilies sung over pitched-down guitar riffs played at a trudge. Most bands don't stray far from the script, for fear of the dreaded "false metal" tag. But the genre's strict posturing suggests that feelings of actual doom are not necessarily required.

The pain that Scheidt brings to his performance, however, extends far beyond mere aesthetics. He is disarmingly open about his personal problems, which include a history of clinical depression and struggles with eating disorders. He is also intensely thoughtful—a friend referred to him as "a Zen yogi-master type"—and offers an intellectual, vulnerary take on a genre that often borders on juvenilia. At forty-six, Scheidt is husky and covered in tattoos, with a flower-power haircut and circular John Lennon glasses. He is a regular meditator, and the opener of YOB's excellent album "Clearing the Path to Ascend," from 2014, is punctuated by recordings of the British philosopher Alan Watts. YOB songs, which often exceed fifteen minutes, are contem-

plative incantations similar to chakra-alignment music. But Scheidt, for all his solemnity, is a crusher of a guitarist, a vocal force, and a gripping songwriter, touching on themes of depression, spirituality, and transcendence.

This past January, while grocery shopping not far from his home, in Eugene, Oregon, Scheidt was struck with a violent pain down his left side that froze him in the aisle. "It was the kind of pain that stopped my mind—that touched on a mortal sense of fear," he told me recently. The cause turned out to be a severe case of acute diverticulitis, an intestinal disease. He was rushed to the hospital, where he underwent surgery a few days later, and YOB's tour was postponed indefinitely. With the help of his fans, who banded together to raise nearly thirty thousand dollars to help with his medical bills, he can work again, and has set upon making up for lost time, and gigs.

YOB returns to New York for a three-night stand at Saint Vitus, the Greenpoint metal bar, June 23–25. Attendees can expect a group with a reinvigorated sense of purpose. "We all feel the same way," Scheidt told me, describing "this heightened feeling of love for each other and our music—that we're intact after all of this." His recovery has brought on smaller changes as well. "I'm wearing less black," he said—a bold move for a metal-head. "I'm attracted to color."

—Benjamin Shapiro



## It's Raining Cats and Dogs

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ROCK AND POP

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

**Anthesteria II**

The ancient Greek festival of Anthesteria took place every year at the beginning of spring, in honor of Dionysus. Over three days, Athenians competed in wine-drinking contests, made offerings to the wine god, and smeared their doors with tar in order to ward off spirits, whom they believed walked among the living during the festival. The art collective Cixous72 nods to the modern festival season's Greek roots with this immersive three-day party at Trans-Pecos, celebrating the best and brightest artistic experimentalists of the moment. The bill includes the minimalist techno d.j. **Umfang**; **Olivia Neutron-John**, a solo project from the D.C.-area musician Anna Nasty; and the anodyne electronic stylings of the d.j. and producer **Bookworms**. There will also be jewelry vendors, tattooing, readings, and an "antidote" workshop; no word yet as to whether the ceremonial Anthesterian opening of new casks of wine is on the schedule. (915 Wyckoff Ave., Ridgewood, Queens. [thertranspecos.com](http://thertranspecos.com). June 23–25.)

**Margaret Glaspy**

On "You and I," this twenty-six-year-old Red Bluff, California, native rips and stomps like Pink covering a "Pinkerton" deep cut—it's a crunchy, catchy rock single that's digestible enough to compete for airtime against mainstream pop and R. & B. Glaspy honed her musical abilities for three years in Boston, sneaking into workshops and master classes after a semester at Berklee, then toured as a backup vocalist for several local bands. Her latest release, "Emotions and Math," arrives on ATO Records, home to Alabama Shakes and King Gizzard & the Lizard Wizard, and it's worthy of this impressive company, nailing crispy grunge gestures with an ambitious sheen and whip-smart songwriting. (*SummerStage, Rumsey Playfield, Central Park, mid-Park at 69th St.* [summerstage.org](http://summerstage.org). June 22.)

**Palm**

This quartet from Hudson Valley is slicing and dicing indie rock in its own image, forging a collaged, frantic take on predictable song structures. Palm, which formed amid the fruitful music scene at Bard College, writes songs that bob across odd time signatures, looping together asymmetrical phrases and barely tonal harmonies, as if applying William S. Burroughs's cut-up technique to pages of sheet music. The jazz-ish result is entrancing, especially when the knotty rhythms support the vocals of Eve Alpert and Kasra Kurt. "Shadow Expert," the band's latest batch of songs, is an essential summer play for long road trips through weird towns. (*Baby's All Right, 146 Broadway, Brooklyn.* 718-599-5800. June 23.)

**DJ Paypal**

When he was still in college, this Berlin-via-North Carolina d.j. took to footwork, the Chicago-based style of frantic electronic dance music, by way of obscure Web forums and closed Facebook groups. In 2012, he released "Why," a blitzing collection of bebop samples and torrential juke drums, and he now splits his time between Chicago's pioneering footwork crew Teklife and the Los Angeles imprint Brainfeeder, headed up by the producer Flying Lotus. Paypal released an excellent batch of instrumental tracks, gathered in an EP called "Sold Out," in 2016; the lead-footed loops on cuts like "Awakening" hit a hundred and sixty b.p.m. and stay there, daring dance-floor patrons to keep up. (*Sunnyvale, 1031 Grand St., Brooklyn.* 347-987-3971. June 24.)

**Summer Frenzy**

The Brooklyn label Mixpak, which straddles the electronic and dancehall spheres, is partnering up with the Tryna Function collective to kick off the season, just a few days after the summer solstice. The all-day blowout starts outside, with sets from **Spice**, the Jamaican dancehall vocalist famous for "Romping Shop," her duet with Vybz Kartel; **Tink**, a gifted rapper and R. & B. upstart; the Jamaican d.j. crew **Equiknoxx**; the Staten Island rapper **Squid-nice**; and Mixpak's own d.j.s **Dre Skull** and **Jubilee**. As the sun wanes, the bash moves indoors, to the Knockdown Center, where the club-music jockeys **Tygapaw**, **DJ Bebe**, and **DJ Jayhood**, as well as London's **Kamixlo**, will play loud, fast bounce late into the evening. (52-19 Flushing Ave., Queens. 347-915-5615. June 24. at 3 P.M.)

**Wiki**

This Upper West Side native stepped out from his Ratking trio to deliver a solo full-length, "Lil Me," at the tail end of 2015. Throughout the record, Wiki assesses Manhattan's constant regeneration, and is left just as conflicted as any New Yorker with a conscience. The nasal-voiced twenty-three-year-old adores and abhors his city in equal measure, considering the "old blocks" he grew up on while wandering past the "new kids" who now share his sidewalks. Terse, frostbitten beats drag inventive new rhythms from grime and noise influences, and Wiki's thick, buoyant cadence keeps the subject matter from getting too heavy. The rapper, modest in stature, is a ball of rage in concert, prone to whacking his own head with his microphone mid-verse. (*Knitting Factory, 361 Metropolitan Ave., Brooklyn.* June 21.)

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**JAZZ AND STANDARDS****Joshua Breakstone**

A fluent improviser not heard enough around these parts, the guitarist Breakstone adds tonal distinction to his ensemble with the addition of pizzicato cello, as handled by **Mike Richmond**. Drawing on a boppish repertoire from the likes of Sonny Clark, Elmo Hope, and Cedar Walton, Breakstone's atypical cohort (complete with bass and drums) revels in its string-based affinity. (*Smalls, 183 W. 10th St.* 212-252-5091. June 23.)

**Adam Kolker**

"Beckon," the saxophonist and bass clarinetist Kolker's recently released album, is a standout recording of 2017, bristling with invention and lyricism, and confident in its chamber-jazz eloquence. The standard Kolker trio, featuring two highly nuanced players, the guitarist Steve Cardenas and the drummer Billy Mintz, will be augmented by three wind instrumentalists, the better to capture the evocative textures of the project. (*Cornelia Street Café, 29 Cornelia St.* 212-989-9319. June 21.)

**Azar Lawrence**

Time hasn't quite stood still for Lawrence, but the extended, fervently voiced John Coltrane-infused solos that garnered the saxophonist attention in the nineteen-seventies still echo today. Though any number of contemporary saxophone stylists traffic in the master's idiom, Lawrence is closer to the source than most, having refined his prodigious skill in the bands of the key Trane associates McCoy Tyner and Elvin Jones. His quintet this week includes an inspiring horn partner, the trombonist **Steve Turre**. (*Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St.* 212-576-2232. June 22–24.)

**Mike LeDonne and Peter Washington**

LeDonne possesses a split musical personality. Though he can be found uptown at an electric organ nearly every Tuesday night, leading his aptly named Groover Quartet, this bop-soaked stylist made his name as a vigorous pianist alongside such legends as Milt Jackson and Benny Golson. He sticks to the 88's here, joined by the elegant bassist Washington. (*Mezzrow, 163 W. 10th St.* [mezzrow.com](http://mezzrow.com). June 23–24.)

**Harold Mabern Trio**

You can take the man out of Memphis, but the bluesy refinement and soulful phrasing that this veteran stylist soaked up from such resident masters as Phineas Newborn, Jr., is now solidly part of his musical makeup. Mabern, a New York fixture for nearly sixty years, will galvanize the room with assistance from two like-minded associates, the bassist **David Wong** and the drummer **Joe Farnsworth**. (*Smoke, 2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts.* 212-864-6662. June 23–35.)

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**DANCE****American Ballet Theatre**

John Cranko's "Onegin," based on Pushkin's novel in verse, has become a staple of the dramatic-ballet repertory. Its attraction lies mainly in the arena of theatre, as a vehicle for dancers with larger-than-life personalities who are not averse to a little scenery chewing. The ballet is the setting for a farewell, for Diana Vishneva (June 19 and June 23), and a return, for Alessandra Ferri (June 20 and June 22). It's followed by eight performances of Alexei Ratmansky's new work "Whipped Cream," a delightful and sophisticated confection set to a nearly forgotten ballet score by Richard Strauss. The whimsical designs are by the artist Mark Ryden. Don't miss it. • June 21 at 2 and 7:30, June 22–23 at 7:30, and June 24 at 2 and 8: "Onegin." • June 26–27 at 7:30: "Whipped Cream." (*Metropolitan Opera House, Lincoln Center.* 212-477-3030. Through July 8.)

**L.A. Dance Project**

The troupe, directed by the French-born choreographer Benjamin Millepied, performs a well-curated mix of ballet and contemporary and modern dance. This program includes works by the Israel-based superstar Ohad Naharin (of Batsheva Dance Company), Justin Peck (of New York City Ballet), Merce Cunningham, and Millepied. "Yag," a twenty-year-old piece that depicts the complicated dynamics within a family unit, offers a glimpse into Naharin's lesser-known early style. Millepied's new "In Silence We Speak" includes performances by two greatly loved retired ballerinas, Janie Taylor and Carla Körbes. (*Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St.* 212-242-0800. June 20–25.)

**"Prismatic Park"/Rashaun Mitchell and Silas Riener**

Through October, sculptures of glass, tile, and wood by Josiah McElheny turn Madison Square Park into "Prismatic Park," a public art exhibition with

a twist: the sculptures also serve as platforms and backdrops for poets, musicians, and dancers, in a succession of two-week residencies. First up among the dancers are Mitchell and Riener, extraordinary movers whose choreography can be elusive and mannered. In "Desire Lines," they join forces with eleven other striking performers to test out ideas about collective consciousness and social change in public spaces. (*Madison Ave. at 25th St. danspace-project.org. June 20-25 and June 27. Through July 2.*)

#### **Lydia Johnson Dance**

Johnson is a craftsman and a poet; her works, which stress the ensemble and attend closely to the music, have an ebb and flow in addition to a strong emotional current. The basis of her technique is ballet, and her dancers are strong. The program at New York Live Arts includes four works, two of them new, set to a variety of musical styles, from Handel to Golijov. (219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. June 21-23.)

#### **River to River Festival**

Wally Cardona and Jennifer Lacey's "The Set Up" is a multiyear project in which crash courses in foreign dance traditions have been transformed into postmodern deconstructions. The resulting episodes, both exasperating and beautiful, get reprised on Governors Island for this year's festival, alongside performances by some of the foreign teachers. (The mind-boggling Kutiyattam master Kapila Venu is not to be missed.) Amid the mast-like pillars of the South Street Seaport Museum's Melville Gallery, Marjani Forté-Saunders performs "Memoirs of a . . . Unicorn," a ritualistic solo invoking African-American magic. And, in City Hall Park, Maria Hassabi presents an adaptation of "STAGED," the latest of her works treating glamorous bodies as slow-moving sculpture. It's all free. (*Various venues. rivertorivernyc.com. June 21-25.*)

#### **Raja Feather Kelly / The Feath3r Theory**

For several years now, Kelly, a standout dancer who's also an on-the-rise choreographer, has been making campy works referencing Andy Warhol, though it's not always clear what, exactly, Warhol's influence is, beyond an interest in pop culture and celebrity worship. The latest, "Another Fucking Warhol Production, or Who's Afraid of Andy Warhol?" part of the Lumberyard's monthlong festival at the Kitchen, is billed as a "post-ballet theater musical" and a "docufiction performance" that purports to reenact lost footage from an imagined "Saturday Night Live" episode featuring Kanye West. (512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793. June 22-24.)

#### **EXPLODE! queer dance**

This festival of performances and conversations, curated by the dance scholar Clare Croft, tries to activate the coalition-building potential of queer dance with a more diverse than usual assortment of genres, including traditional Irish and Indian forms. Notable contemporary dancers, such as Jennifer Monson and DD Dorvillier, are in the lineup, too. The desi drag artist LaWhore Vagistan hosts. (*JACK, 505½ Waverly Ave., Brooklyn. jackny.org. June 22-24.*)

#### **Bryant Park Presents: Contemporary Dance**

For this series, the pleasant midtown park becomes an open-air venue for free musical and dance performances. The headliner in an evening of modern dance is Hope Boykin, a dancer and choreographer based at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre. Her ensemble performs ". . . In a Moment," a collection of numbers riffing on the subject of finding love; her style is easygoing and jazzy, with an empowering vibe. The program also includes works by KineticArchitecture Dance Theatre (choreographed by the transgender artist Arrie Fae Bronson-Davidson), Bryn Cohn + Artists, and the student company

at the Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts. (*Sixth Ave. at 42nd St. June 23.*)

#### **"Slow Dancing / Trio A"**

Slow motion reveals a lot about movement, and even more about people. The visual artist David Michalek has used this idea to his advantage in a series of video dance portraits, in which he films dancers at extremely low speeds. The newest iteration explores "Trio A," a work from 1966 by the experimental choreographer Yvonne Rainer, performed in sequence by a long list of dance-world stalwarts of different ages and backgrounds, including David Thomson, Wendy Whelan, Jodi Melnick, and Rainer herself, at the age of eighty-two. (*Danspace Project, St. Mark's Church In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 866-811-4111. June 23-24 and June 26-27. Through July 1.*)

## OUT OF TOWN

#### **Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival**

In the five years since Lourdes Lopez took over as the artistic director of Miami City Ballet, she

has sustained the company's distinctly winning spirit—exuberant, musically brilliant, warm—as well as its character as a faithful descendant of New York City Ballet. Both qualities should be apparent in the program that opens the Pillow's eighty-fifth season, at the Ted Shawn Theatre: Balanchine's concentrated capsule of classical dance, "Allegro Brillante"; Christopher Wheeldon's hauntingly modernist "Polyphonia"; and Peter Martins's crossbreeding of ballet and modern dance, "Barber Violin Concerto." At the Doris Duke, Jonah Bokaer presents his "Rules of the Game," in which choreography of physical competition is overwhelmed by Daniel Arsham's film projections of shattering ceramics and Pharrell Williams and David Campbell's soupy score. "Study for Occupant," a solo for the choreographer, displays his greater prowess as a dancer and his elegant, enigmatic allure. And, on the open-air, vista-backed Henry J. Leir Stage (June 21-23), the physical illusionists of Pilobolus Dance Theatre première a Pillow-commissioned work that illustrates natural processes and cycles. (*Becket, Mass. 413-243-0745. June 21-25. Through Aug. 27.*)

## MOVIES

## NOW PLAYING

#### **The Bad Batch**

This dystopian drama, set in the desert-dry wilds somewhere out West, stars Suki Waterhouse as a young woman named Arlen, who's one of America's titular rejects. Tattooed with a number to mark her exclusion from mainstream society, then victimized and mutilated by cannibals in a lawless zone from which she manages to escape, Arlen kills a young mother whose child (Jayda Fink) she abducts. Pursued by the girl's father (Jason Momoa), Arlen takes refuge in a heavily guarded compound called Comfort. It's run by a fabulously wealthy polygamist (Keanu Reeves) who keeps a cultlike grip on his bedraggled and desperate followers by means of tawdry entertainment; there, Arlen has a crisis of conscience. The writer and director, Ana Lily Amirpour, delivers this imaginative tale as a simplistic allegory of the haves and the have-nots; she ruefully delights in the wasteland's postindustrial wreckage while leaving characters' thoughts and motives blank. A subplot involving a black man's attempt to kidnap Arlen is only one of several grotesquely stereotypical details; Amirpour deploys her diverse cast obliviously.—Richard Brody (*In limited release.*)

#### **Bad Blood**

A masterpiece of ecstatic cinema from 1986, directed by Leos Carax at the age of twenty-five. The neo-noir plot concerns Marc (Michel Piccoli), an older gangster who gets Alex (Denis Lavant), the son of his slain cohort, to break into a laboratory and steal an AIDS-like virus. Along the way, Marc's mistress, Anna (Juliette Binoche), falls for Alex, whose tender romance with his blond teen-age girlfriend (Julie Delpy) is threatened by his rhapsodic obsession with the dark-haired gamine. Carax sends Alex and Anna airborne in a parachute-jump sequence that is one of the movie's many anthology pieces. (The feral Lavant's self-punishing ex-

ultation to the strains of David Bowie's "Modern Love" is another.) With an emotional world akin to that of the New Wave masters, a visual vocabulary that pays tribute to their later works, and a visionary sensibility that owes much to Jean Cocteau's fantasies, Carax suggests the burden of young genius in a world of mighty patriarchs who aren't budging. In French and English.—R.B. (*Transmitter Park, Brooklyn, on June 23, and streaming.*)

#### **Beatriz at Dinner**

Salma Hayek plays the Beatriz of the title, a healer who lives in Altadena and works, much of the time, at a cancer center. One evening, after giving a massage to a wealthy client named Kathy (Connie Britton), Beatriz is invited to stay on for a dinner party: an awkward affair, the highlight of which is Beatriz's clash of wills with Doug (John Lithgow), the guest of honor. As a real-estate developer with scorn for radical attitudes of any kind, he represents everything that the heroine holds in contempt, and she makes her feelings abundantly clear. More often than not, the film, which is written by Mike White and directed by Miguel Arteta, opts for a scathing but easy lampoon of the rich; it grows more intense and more ambivalent, however, as it tightens into a two-hander between Hayek and Lithgow. Hers is a finely poised performance, making the character both tranquil in her demeanor and angered by the state—political, ecological, and spiritual—of the world. Though the smiling Doug is lofty, in every sense, he is perturbed, despite himself, by the fervid certainty of Beatriz's beliefs. With Chloë Sevigny.—Anthony Lane (*Reviewed in our issue of 6/19/17.*) (*In wide release.*)

#### **Dawson City: Frozen Time**

Archival research morphs into historical detective work in Bill Morrison's elegiac, sharply analytical documentary. The story begins with the discovery, during excavations in 1978 in Dawson City, Yukon, of hundreds of reels of highly flammable nitrate film, from the nineteen-tens and -twenties. Morrison

draws on that salvaged footage, as well as on other early films and home movies, to tell the story of the town's place in the turn-of-the-century gold rush and the rise of movie theatres to entertain its residents. It also shows the political and cultural tributaries of that seemingly isolated site, including early dealings of Donald Trump's grandfather and crucial early-Hollywood connections. A remarkable arc linking baseball's 1919 gambling scandal to anti-Communist paranoia displays the intellectual power of Morrison's film-editing virtuosity. Meanwhile, mottled clips from recovered films (including ones by D. W. Griffith and Lois Weber) seem like ghostly traces of a lost world. There are no voice-overs; the spare commentary appears on-screen as supertitles, leaving the silence of silent films all the more haunting. The insistent music is an unfortunate distraction.—R.B. (*In limited release.*)

### I, Daniel Blake

Not for the first time, a Ken Loach movie strikes a viewer as the cinematic equivalent of a shaken fist. The setting is Newcastle, in the north of England, and we see local people, on the brink of poverty, lining up with their families for handouts of free food. Dave Johns, solid but bewildered, plays Dan, who can carve wood and fix pretty much anything around the home but hasn't a clue how to operate a computer. This is a problem, because, having suffered a heart attack that leaves him unable to work, he needs to apply for welfare benefits. The system chews him up, and it is the consuming complexity of that system—of modern life, you might say—that Loach seems to regard as unjust and inhumane. You can quarrel with his arguments, but there is no denying the vehemence skill with which he marshals the many scenes of exasperation and despair. With Hayley Squires, as Katie, a single mother of two young children, who comes to the city and finds herself dragged toward its depths.—A.L. (*6/19/17*) (*In wide release.*)

### The Mummy

This ludicrously overplotted and underconceived horror thriller, directed by Alex Kurtzman, also squanders a fine cast, headed by Tom Cruise and Sofia Boutella. Cruise plays Nick Morton, an antiquities hunter working with the U.S. Army in Iraq, who accidentally exhumes the five-thousand-year-old mummy of the Egyptian Princess Ahmanet (Boutella), a murderer possessed by a curse. Meanwhile, a London Underground excavation uncovers a medieval vault filled with Crusade plunder—including the gem that gave Ahmanet her evil powers—and she comes back to life, with devastating results, to recover it. Along the way, she tries to possess Nick, who's in love with the archeologist Jenny Halsey (Annabelle Wallis), and gory violence ensues. There's also a Jekyll-and-Hyde story featuring Russell Crowe, storms of crows and swarms of rats and spiders, live embalming, face-eating, and urban apocalypse; the over-all effect is that of a grab bag of supernatural shock tropes thrown together at random. The movie's huge sets, big stars, and fussy cinematography are at odds with the slapdash direction and the flimsy story, which are better suited to grade-Z low-budget fare.—R.B. (*In wide release.*)

### Rough Night

This bright-toned, blandly ribald comedy is centered on a consequence-free romp on the middle-class wild side. During a bachelorette weekend in a lavish Miami Beach house, the soon-to-be-married thirtysomething Jess (Scarlett Johansson) is being feted by three college friends (Jillian Bell, Ilana Glazer, and Zoë Kravitz) and one new friend (Kate McKinnon), who's Australian. When a male

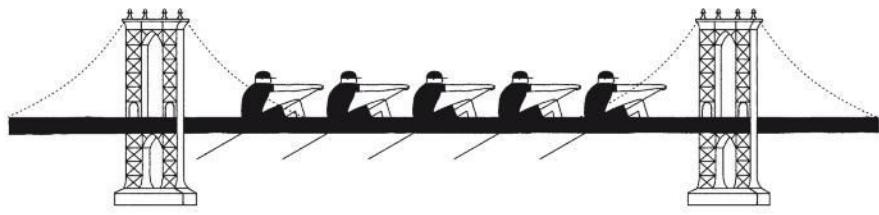
stripper arrives to entertain them, a fatal accident ensues, and the women, fearing the law—and Jess, a candidate for local office, fearing scandal—dispose of the body. In the process, they get involved with the swingers next door (Demi Moore and Ty Burrell) and a batch of criminals. Meanwhile, Jess's nerdy fiancé, Peter (Paul W. Downs), misinterpreting a phone message, speeds to the beach to save the relationship. As directed by Lucia Aniello, the consistently—even relentlessly—energetic cast of gifted comedians rattles off lines as if hitting verbal marks. The story is obviously hermetic; its twists are signalled from miles away, and the contrived action seems to take place under glass.—R.B. (*In wide release.*)

### Wonder Woman

Patty Jenkins's first feature film since "Monster" (2003) covers a lot of ground. We start in present-day Paris, snap back to a mythological island in

ancient Greece, then leap ahead to the First World War, initially in London and later on the Western Front. The constant, amid this variety, is Wonder Woman (Gal Gadot), known as Diana to her fellow-Amazons, with whom she lived a splendidly man-free life on the blessed isle until the modern age rolled up and spoiled the fun. Thanks to Gadot, the heroine seems determined but never glum, and, even when righting the wrongs that beset the world, she finds time to be amused by regular mortals. The movie just about manages to survive the curse of the superheroic mode—a climax that numbs the senses and refuses to die down. With Robin Wright, as Diana's pugnacious aunt; Danny Huston, as a German general; David Thewlis, as a British statesman; and Chris Pine, as a cheerful American spy who, once he has mastered his doubts about consorting with an invincible legend in a breastplate, settles down to enjoy the ride.—A.L. (*In wide release.*)

## ABOVE & BEYOND



### Skankfest

The organizers of this three-day festival, which is held in celebration of free speech and positivity in the comic community, aim to reshape the relationship between comedians and audiences. More than a hundred top comics will converge on Long Island City to record live podcasts, take part in meet and greets, host contests, and more, across various stages. Guests include Reggie Watts, Artie Lange, Michelle Wolf, and Jim Gaffigan. With so many intense personalities swirling about, the envelope will be pushed on more than one occasion: at the Naked Roast, for example, several comedians strip down to their funny bones and lob improvised insults at one another. If nude crackups aren't your thing, you can bounce between the food vendors and the tattoo booths. (*The Creek and the Cave*, 10-93 Jackson Ave., Long Island City. [skankfestnyc.com](http://skankfestnyc.com). June 23-25.)

### Pride March

Despite its common categorization as a parade, this annual gathering is, in fact, a march: a political event, meant to honor decades of L.G.B.T.Q. history and social progress while acknowledging the many gains still to be made. The Pride March has swept Fifth Avenue every June since 1969, and is the culmination of a month of events across the five boroughs. In the wake of the attack on Orlando's Pulse night club, a year ago, and an election that has rewritten American politics from every angle, the queer community and its allies have urgent cause to take to the streets, and the event's message of unwavering pride in one's identity resonates more loudly than ever. (*March begins on 36th St. at Fifth Ave. and ends at Christopher and Greenwich Sts. nycpride.org. June 25 at noon.*)

### READINGS AND TALKS

#### Strand Bookstore

Wallace Shawn, the son of the *New Yorker* editor William Shawn, has forged a far-reaching and unpredictable career as both a pillar of dissent and a fixture of popular culture. During his five decades in entertainment, he's written surrealist alternative theatre and children's films, giving voice to proletariat rage and cartoon dinosaurs alike. He sets his sights on our current political climate in "Night Thoughts," a collection of essays and anecdotes addressing the Islamic State, Yemen, Osama bin Laden, 9/11, Marxism, and, not least, President Donald J. Trump. But the author is hesitant to suggest that he has answers, and instead offers "conversation starters." He discusses his writings at this talk with Hari Kondabolu, a young comedian from Queens with a similarly wide gaze and sharp tongue. (828 Broadway. [strandbooks.com](http://strandbooks.com). June 22 at 7.)

#### Scandinavia House

It could be plausibly argued that at least half of the ballets created in the past six decades derive in one way or another from George Balanchine's 1957 masterpiece, "Agon." This symposium, "Agon at 60," marks the work's anniversary by hosting panel discussions with such distinguished participants as Arthur Mitchell, who was an original cast member; the former New York City Ballet stars Allegra Kent and Jacques D'Amboise; the current City Ballet principals Maria Kowroski and Amar Ramasar; and the *New Yorker* writers Claudia Roth Pierpont and Joan Acocella. (58 Park Ave. 212-779-3587. June 26.)

# FOOD & DRINK



## TABLES FOR TWO

### Otway

930 Fulton St., Brooklyn (917-909-1889)

According to the chef Claire Welle—who closed her much loved Clinton Hill café Tilda All Day in December, after an owner dispute, and launched Otway there a month later—the concept for the new place is simple: “A modest bistro.” But when dining at Otway, after the foie-gras torchon, served with a petite glass of Sauternes, and before the smoked tongue showered with carrot greens and peppercorns, you might mistake it for an extremely ambitious enterprise. Rich refinement shows up everywhere: in the natural shades of toffee, rhododendron, and sunlight filling the lovely corner space; in the creative cocktails, such as a refreshing rhubarb shrub and an easy-drinking sorrel-vodka soda; and on the rotating menu, lavish with uni, escargot, duck, and lamb.

It’s surprising, then, that Welle pulls it all off on a rather tight budget. You will not find rib eye or salmon on her menu, because, she says, “I can’t afford it.” Following the advice of a friend—“If you know how to do it, you have to do it”—Welle not only butchers whole animals but also makes her own crème fraîche, butter, lardo, charcuterie, and bread. And, oh, that bread! Depending on the night, you might be gifted a small plate of seeded rye, sourdough, or miche

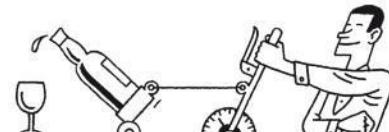
made with red wheat, ground in house, and a generous hunk of cold, salted butter. (Hot tip: Welle sells loaves out of the kitchen’s back door during the day.)

Savory snacks can extend to chickpeas fried in beef tallow and sprinkled with sherry vinegar, as light and addictive as popcorn; an uni-topped rolled-up buckwheat crêpe; or snails bathed in a vibrant-green soup of nettle, spring garlic, and basil. One evening, a duck dish involved faro that had been cracked by hand and fried in rendered duck fat, yielding a crispy-chewy foil to sweet cherries, earthy nasturtiums, and tender seared breast. Lamb belly, dry-braised with onions and garlic, was soft and rich, topped with coriander yogurt, a nod to Welle’s Norwegian roots.

After many years as a line cook, at up-and-comers like Rebelle and Gwynnett St., Welle takes pride in her staff, most of whom are friends, and all of whom are women. She realized, she said, that she wants to be a manager with reasonable expectations. “We started with Tilda, but it wasn’t sustainable—we were working sixteen hours a day. The concept for Otway is great wine, great food, shift drink and dancing after work. Showcasing technique in a comfortable setting—but it’s also about quality of life.” They just got a pig, she said, and next week it’s tête de cochon. (*Entrées \$23-\$29.*)

—Shauna Lyon

## BAR TAB



**Julius'**  
159 W. 10th St. (212-243-1928)

On a balmy afternoon in the spring of 1966, three young men from the Mattachine Society, an early gay-rights organization, entered Julius’, a no-frills tavern in Greenwich Village, and announced to the bartender that they were homosexuals. “The State Liquor Authority said people had to be orderly, and men kissing or dancing together was considered disorderly,” Dick Leitsch, the lead organizer of the “sip-in,” recalled half a century later, over a cup of coffee at Julius’. “As soon as I said the word ‘homosexual,’ he said, ‘I can’t serve you.’” The next day, the *Times* ran a story with the headline “3 Deviates Invite Exclusion by Bars,” and the city’s Commission on Human Rights soon vowed to put an end to the injustice. Three years before the Stonewall riots, the L.G.B.T.Q. movement’s opening salvo had been fired. “Before Stonewall, I was the only homosexual in the world,” Leitsch said, laughing genially. “Now everybody’s gay.” Today, Julius’ self-identifies as a gay bar, with a mostly male clientele bridging several generations. On a recent Friday evening, the Tony Award-winning actor John Cameron Mitchell dropped by in sweatpants for an Absolut Citron and soda; he lives three blocks away and co-hosts a monthly dance party at Julius’ called Mattachine, in tribute to Leitsch and his fellow-pioneers. “A lot of beautiful things have happened here throughout the years,” Mitchell said. “Bars have always been our centers of dissent and political action, as well as sanctuaries.” For decades, the old-timey aesthetic of the place has remained largely unchanged, with a few notable exceptions. Adorning the walls now are several large rainbow flags, and a black-and-white photograph of Leitsch that was taken at Julius’ on the day of the sip-in.—David Kortava

# Out Here

IF YOU'RE UNSURE WHERE THE TRAIL LEADS,  
YOU'RE ON THE RIGHT PATH.

SOUTHLANDS





## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT THE POLITICS OF ANGER

In June of 1968, following the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy, President Lyndon Johnson set up the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence. A task force made up of academics studied killings, attempted killings, and assaults on eighty-one state legislators, congressmen, senators, governors, and Presidents, dating back to 1835. Their findings presented a discordant medley: cases involving mentally disturbed people, extremists, and terrorists; political grievances that escalated; and one incident, in 1890, in which a journalist shot and killed a congressman who had been harassing him. Over all, attacks on politicians seemed to spike in times of social instability, such as during Reconstruction.

Last week, James Hodgkinson, who was sixty-six, and had recently expressed anger toward President Trump and the Republican Party, etched himself into this dark ledger. Hodgkinson's decision to open fire on an early-morning baseball practice organized by House Republicans in Alexandria, Virginia, was horrifying even by the macabre standards of mass shootings. (According to the *Times*, on average, at least one shooting in which four or more people die or are wounded occurs in the United States every day.) The attack, which critically wounded the House Majority Whip, Steve Scalise, and injured four others, was the worst assault on congressional office-holders since 1954, when Puerto Rican nationalists fired shots from a vis-

itors' gallery in the Capitol, wounding five House members.

Following last week's attack, Republican and Democratic leaders immediately called for solidarity. "We must stand together," Gabby Giffords, the former representative from Arizona, who was shot and severely wounded during an appearance in Tucson, in 2011, said. Speaking from the White House, Donald Trump noted, "We may have our differences, but we do well, in times like these, to remember that everyone who serves in our nation's capital is here because, above all, they love our country."

The President was praised for his dignified, conciliatory message. Then, the next morning, he returned to trolling. Repeating a charge that he has made before, he tweeted that the F.B.I. and congressional investigations of his campaign and his Administration constitute "the single greatest WITCH HUNT in

American political history." At this point, it feels unnecessary to analyze Trump's incongruities. He believes that lashing out at opponents strengthens him, and he does not respect the integrity of prosecutors, judges, intelligence officers, or even his own Cabinet appointees. No other President in the television era has humiliated his Cabinet the way Trump did last Tuesday, when he invited cameras to record members praising and thanking him.

The President further alleged, on Twitter, that the investigations were "led by some very bad and conflicted people." He was apparently echoing allies who seek to impugn Robert Mueller, the special counsel appointed by the Justice Department to take on the investigations; they complain that some people on Mueller's team are Democrats. Those investigations originated with evidence of possible collusion between Russia and members of Trump's Presidential campaign, but last week the *Washington Post* reported that Mueller will broaden them, to consider whether the President obstructed justice by seeking to interfere with the F.B.I. inquiries, and that Mueller will also look into Jared Kushner's business activities. On Friday, Trump tweeted criticism apparently directed at Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein, a career prosecutor, who appointed Mueller. If Trump wanted to fire Mueller, he would likely have to go through Rosenstein, or remove him.

In the annals of Washington investigations, the President's jeopardy is unusual, because he so often makes his own problems worse. Normally, when the capital's investigative machinery cranks up,



Presidents quiet down and let their aides and lawyers speak for them. Trump, however, made his fortune largely by talking about himself, and it appears to be the only methodology he knows. Judging by the former F.B.I. director James Comey's vivid sworn testimony before the Senate Intelligence Committee regarding the President's inappropriate conversations with him, it would seem almost certain that Trump has had similarly ill-considered discussions with others. He told Lester Holt, of NBC News, that he fired Comey because he was upset about the F.B.I.'s investigation into his campaign. Obstruction charges partly turn on the offender's intentions; Trump admitted his.

All of this is unfolding at a time when the country's politics appear to be as volatile as they were in the Watergate era. Last week, an Associated Press poll reported that nearly two-thirds of Americans disapprove of Trump's performance, and a similar number don't think he has

much respect for the country's democratic institutions. The Republican-controlled Senate is preparing, in secret, a health-care-reform bill that is likely to deprive millions of Americans of insurance coverage. The Democratic Party is divided, and without an obvious standard-bearer, yet Democratic voters are galvanized; in Virginia's gubernatorial primaries, last week, turnout among Democrats was almost double what it was during the last contested primary, and it dwarfed Republican participation. It has been some time since the two major parties both lacked a clear, popular leader and faced such a roiled electorate.

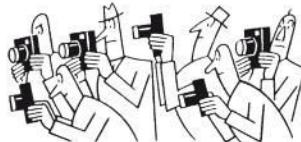
Perhaps all these disruptions will be addressed through elections and by constitutional and legal means. The Constitution does appear to be alive and well: prosecutors and the F.B.I. have vigorously defended their independence; judges appointed by Presidents of both major parties have blocked the Admin-

istration's discriminatory travel ban; and a robust and well-sourced Washington press corps is keeping the public apprised of the Administration's activities.

Yet this remains a disquieting political season of hatred and anger. According to the Anti-Defamation League, anti-Semitic crimes rose by more than a third in 2016, and even more steeply in the first part of this year. The Council on American-Islamic Relations reports a more than fifty-per-cent increase in anti-Muslim attacks last year. A researcher at California State University who has been tracking hate crimes in nine metropolitan areas found a rise of more than twenty per cent last year. Earlier this month, near an elementary school in the largely African-American Hillcrest neighborhood of Washington, police found a noose hanging from a beam at a construction site. As of yet, no arrests have been made.

—Steve Coll

## HERDING DEPT. FRESH



It is difficult enough to get one over-scheduled rap star in a room during business hours; it's a herculean task to get ten of them there before noon. On a Monday in April, Vanessa Satten, the editor-in-chief of *XXL*, the hip-hop magazine, pulled off this feat for the tenth time. The occasion was a daylong photo shoot for the cover of the magazine's annual Freshman Issue, which anoints ten new artists as the rising stars of hip-hop. The selection process involves hundreds of rappers coming to *XXL*'s offices to pitch themselves and to play new music. (Kendrick Lamar, Future, and Chance the Rapper have all made the list.)

The identities of the chosen ten are kept secret; even the artists and their managers don't know who else has been selected until the day of the shoot. As the rappers began to trickle into a photo studio in Bushwick, it felt like the first day of middle school. *XXL* staffers checked off names on lists, and one played watchdog, monitoring social media to

make sure that none of the artists or hangers-on leaked any information. "Stylists are always trying to post something on social," Satten said. She wore a hoodie, has short platinum hair, and speaks in a raspy, authoritative voice.

The call time was 8 A.M. By eight-thirty, half the group had arrived. An artist named Ugly God strolled in, wearing a gray hoodie and glasses. Behind him came the lone female of the group, the Oakland rapper Kamaiyah. She had on a bonnet to protect her pristine braids. She headed to a dressing room, without acknowledging her peers. In 2016, she had threatened that if *XXL* didn't offer her a spot on that year's freshman list she'd never accept one. "I was just talking my shit," she said, with a shrug.

By nine, three security guards had arrived, followed by a beanpole of a rapper named PnB Rock, from Philadelphia. He whooped loudly and fist-bumped everyone in sight, then began surreptitiously snapping pictures on his phone. (He got a scolding from Satten.) The most sociable of the group was MadeinTYO, who stood not more than five feet four. Dissatisfied with the wardrobe options presented, he put on a green Supreme T-shirt he'd brought with him. He sat down near Kap G, a lanky Atlanta rapper of Mexican descent. Kap had shown up early,

since he needed to leave by 6 P.M. for a gig at the Barclays Center.

For some, an invitation to be on the Freshman Issue cover is a chance to flaunt their nonchalance. In 2014, the Atlanta superstar Young Thug cancelled the night before the shoot. Last year, Lil Uzi Vert made his fellow-freshmen wait five hours. "Not to give him a crown," Satten said, "but that was probably the latest person we ever had." This year's wild card was a nineteen-year-old Florida rapper named XXXTentacion—XXX, for short. He'd just been released from jail, having been held on charges of home invasion and aggravated battery, and was facing a court date for charges of domestic abuse of a pregnant woman. Satten's job occasionally involves writing letters to judges and parole officers to explain the importance of the photo shoot, and she'd lobbied hard on his behalf.

At nine-forty-five, XXX reported for duty. He looked like Cruella De Vil, with half of his dreadlocks bleached white. His smile seemed to contradict the tattoos on his eyelids ("BAD VIBES") and he embraced PnB Rock. The two had made a bet about which of them would pick up more girls during their trip to New York. The bet was for a dollar. "Real player shit?" PnB said.

Satten's brother Travis, who was video-

taping the proceedings, said, of the shoot, "It's like they say about World War Two: hours of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror."

By ten-fifteen, his sister had started to panic. All ten rappers were accounted for, but they were waiting on the d.j., Sonny Digital, who had left with his manager after being asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement. Without him, there would be no beats for the day's cyphers, taped sessions in which groups of rappers take turns freestyling. Satten got Sonny on the phone. "So far, you're the most difficult one," she told him. "*Mad* unprofessional." Within the hour, he was back.

"I'm surprised that Young M.A. isn't here," XXX said, referring to the female Brooklyn rapper, whose breakout single, "OOOUUU," topped the charts last year. Satten explained that when Young M.A. had met with the *XXL* staff she'd said that she felt like too big a star to be deemed a freshman. The staff, for its part, considered her recent singles a bit flat. "It's almost like dating," Satten said.

At one point, a staffer divided the group into cyphers. A-Boogie, a solemn rapper from New York, sulked when he was separated from PnB Rock and stuck in a dorkier group. "Get over yourselves," Satten said later.

By 6 p.m., the freshmen were wilting. Aminé, an impish rapper from Portland, Oregon, tried to keep spirits up by goofing around. "I was trying to convince Playboi Carti to throw Cheetos," he said. "It's cool to meet other artists and find that they're not, like, dicks."

—Carrie Battan

## NINE LIVES DEPT. REAL WORK



Bobby Cannavale, the actor, was recently lying on his back on a massage table, talking to Alaina Hesse, his physical therapist. "I wake up sometimes, and I have this limp and I'm, like, What if someone chases me, and it's on a bad-knee day? I need to be able to *get away*." Cannavale, who is forty-seven, was wearing shorts and a gray T-shirt on which an image of Vince Carter's famous dunk,

during the 2000 Olympics—over the head of Frédéric Weis, of France—had been remade with President Trump in the place of Weis. Hesse was investigating the area around Cannavale's left knee. The table was at Neurosport Physical Therapy, in midtown, whose décor—strip lighting, brown carpets—gave it the air of foreclosed office space being used to store stolen exercise bikes.

"It feels pretty good," Hesse said.

"Yes? Does the quad feel O.K.?"

In a week, Cannavale would begin filming for the third season of "Mr. Robot," the USA Network thriller, whose cast he was joining. Before then, he would finish a four-week run in Eugene O'Neill's "The Hairy Ape," at the Park Avenue Armory, playing Yank, a stoker on a transatlantic liner. This role had required displays of simian strength and agility, and had left him in constant pain; he was seeing Hesse five times a week.

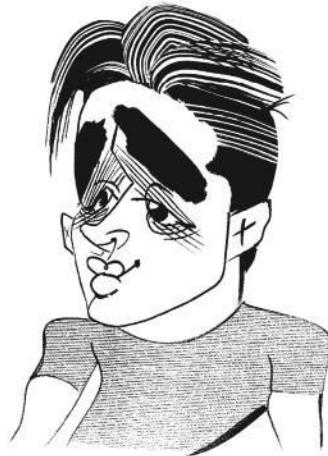
Describing a history of workplace injury, Cannavale recalled "The Motherfucker with the Hat," in which he starred on Broadway with Chris Rock and Elizabeth Rodriguez, in 2011. During a scene of domestic conflict, "I'm screaming, 'You fucked him right here!,' and I punched the bed, and I tore my rotator cuff." Rehearsing another scene, Cannavale proposed to colleagues that, while reaching for a dropped gun, he should hit his head on a table. Demonstrating this, he knocked himself out. "Six stitches," Cannavale said. "Nobody's ever going to hire me to choreograph fights." Later, during a performance of the play, he walked into a metal beam. Blood spurted from his head—Cannavale did a mime—and the theatre's management asked if there was a doctor in the house. "And an ophthalmologist came back," he said.

"Various things go," Cannavale went on. "The back and the neck and the knee." He recalled a scene in "Boardwalk Empire" where his character beat someone to death with a shovel. "I'm whacking this rubber head, and I didn't *have* to do it that hard. They were, like, 'Do you want the fake shovel, which weighs nothing?' 'No! I don't want the fake shovel! What are you talking about?'" He pulled something in his back.

"Look, I didn't train to do this," Cannavale said. "I didn't go to college. Maybe there is a part of me that thinks I have to leave it all out there. Nobody in the long

line of my family, both sides, has ever done anything like this. They're all working people, they worked with their hands, and there's probably something in there that's, like, This isn't real work." He looked at his scarred, bruised knuckles. "I don't need to punch the steel table every night."

Hesse said that Cannavale had invited her to watch a rehearsal of "The Hairy Ape." Afterward, she advised him to adjust his crouch. "I told him, 'If you arch your back—*bend* back with your



Bobby Cannavale

hips—you'll still have that ape posture,'" she said. But, by then, he'd already jumped off a table and, landing on one foot, torn the meniscus in his left knee. He had a cortisone shot, and decided to have surgery a few weeks later, midway through the "Mr. Robot" shoot. In "The Hairy Ape," he began wearing braces and padding on both knees, and a footballer's cushioned shorts. He compared himself with the trussed character once played by Dan Aykroyd on "Saturday Night Live"—Fred Garvin, Male Prostitute.

Three nights later, shortly after coming offstage at the Armory, Cannavale was alone, sitting beneath a portrait of George Washington, in a narrow, wood-panelled dressing room. He limped to get beers from a fridge, and limped back, and then sat with an ice pack on his knee. "It hurts," he said. He would soon go home to Greenwich Village, where he lives with his partner, Rose Byrne, the actress, and their infant son. "I take a cold shower, then I take a hot shower, and then I ice, and eat my cereal. And I take meloxicam, so I don't have to take four Advil."

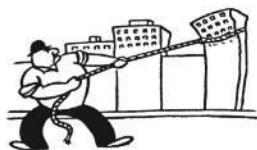
He recalled a Louis C.K. bit about going to his doctor with a painful ankle,

and being advised to take painkillers—and to stretch. For how long? “No, you just do that now,” the doctor says. “That’s just a new thing that you do. Until you and your shitty ankle both die.”

“I talked to Louis yesterday on the phone,” Cannavale said. “I was, like, ‘Dude, I get so much mileage out of your joke about Advil. I bring it up all the time.’” C.K. had replied, “It’s because we’re old, that’s why. It’s one of the jokes for old guys.”

—*Ian Parker*

## NOSTALGIA DEPT. DEARLY DEPARTED



New Yorkers are accustomed to things disappearing. Every week, it seems, some beloved old diner, art-supply store, or punk den folds, to be supplanted by a CVS. (Latest heartbreak: Sunshine Cinema, on the Lower East Side.) Requiems follow. Then city life resumes, at its punishing clip. For the past ten years, a blogger going by the pseudonym Jeremiah Moss has refused to let go, grouchily chronicling each demise. The first entry of Jeremiah’s *Vanishing New York*, in July, 2007, mourned the Greenwich Village speakeasy Chumley’s, which had

closed after a chimney collapsed. When it reopened, not long ago, as a restaurant serving thirty-six-dollar cod, Moss wasaghast. “The powers-that-be have body-snatched Chumley’s,” he wrote.

In 2014, Moss turned from elegist to activist, when he launched a movement to save the Café Edison, a show-biz canteen on West Forty-seventh Street. He started a campaign with the hashtag #SaveCafeEdison and organized lunch mobs, causing several hundred New Yorkers to swarm the place for matzo-ball soup. It closed anyway, but Moss kept the movement going, lobbying politicians with #SaveNYC tweet storms and staging a funeral for a doomed shoe-repair shop in the Empire State Building. Through it all, he obsessively hid his identity.

Jeremiah Moss is now ready to unmask himself. He is Griffin Hansbury, a forty-six-year-old psychoanalyst and social worker. “It’s nerve-racking,” he said on a recent afternoon, sitting near Astor Place. He could have been mistaken for an undercover agent—black cap, sunglasses, red beard—were it not for a T-shirt that said “More Jane Jacobs, Less Marc Jacobs.” Hansbury grew up in Massachusetts. He first visited New York in 1978, when he was seven years old and accompanied his father, a clothing salesman, on a business trip. On his way to see “Annie,” Hansbury was enthralled by the “scruffy sidewalk buskers” in Times Square. In 1993, he moved to the city to

get a master’s degree in creative writing at New York University and settled in an East Village walkup, where he still lives. (“It was just purchased by an L.L.C. behind an L.L.C.,” he said. “They want to get us all out.”) Back then, his favorite spots were Verchovyna Tavern, on Seventh Street (vanished in 2005), and the De Robertis pasticceria, where he would get pignoli cookies (2014). He looked at a spot on Astor Place where there used to be a parking lot. “There was a guy on the other side who sold pornography,” he said, wistfully. “He had a table of milk crates filled with vintage porn magazines.”

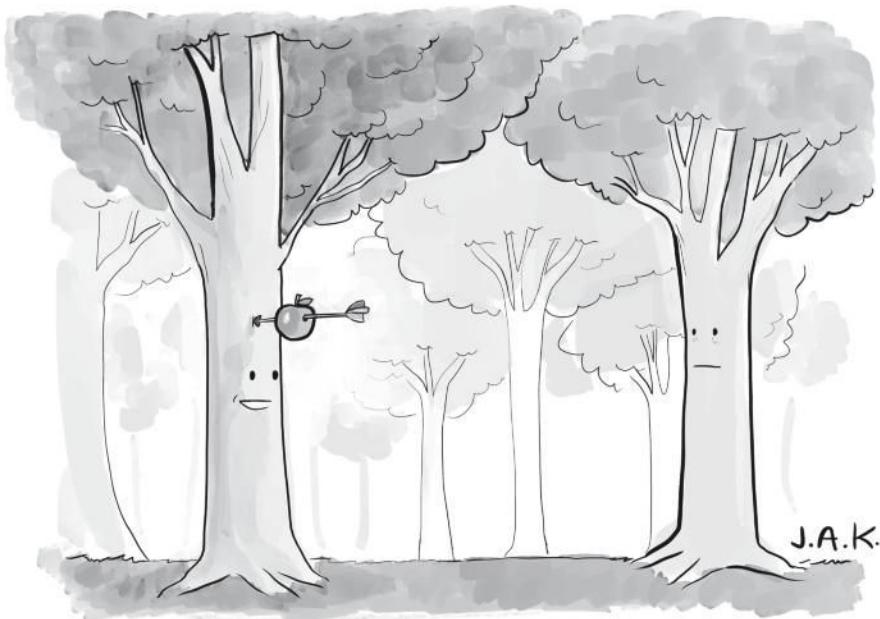
The biggest change in the neighborhood, he said, has been the demographic: punks and Ukrainians have been displaced by yuppies. Hansbury, who is transgender, was transitioning in the nineties, and he found a home in the downtown counterculture. Now, he said, “I feel alienated in my own neighborhood. It’s like a frat house.” He was feeling particularly glum in 2007, after writing a novel about a dyspeptic East Villager named Jeremiah Moss. When he started *Vanishing New York*, he didn’t give much thought to using a pen name, but he soon found that writing as Jeremiah was freeing: “If you took the crankiest part of me and isolated it, it would be him.” The novel was never published, but “Jeremiah” picked up thousands of readers, who sent in tips on endangered mom-and-pop shops. Hansbury said, “I’ve been writing and trying to publish since college, and having little to no success, and then this Jeremiah comes along and it’s, like, no problem.”

Hansbury decided to reveal himself, he said, so he can show up at his own rallies and on panels. Also, “*Vanishing New York*” is now a book. Walking down St. Mark’s Place, past a dark-glass building that he called the Death Star, he mentioned a study that measured pedestrians’ skin conductivity outside a sleek Whole Foods and on a more diversified street. “They found that blocks that are all this glass stuff actually shorten the lives of senior citizens, because they’re so depressing,” he said. He stopped at Gem Spa, a stalwart cigarette-and-candy shop, where he ordered an egg cream.

“How long has this place been here?” he asked the cashier.

“A long, long time,” the guy said. “Since the start of Manhattan.”

—*Michael Schulman*



“Oh, this? Crazy story...”

## THE FINANCIAL PAGE

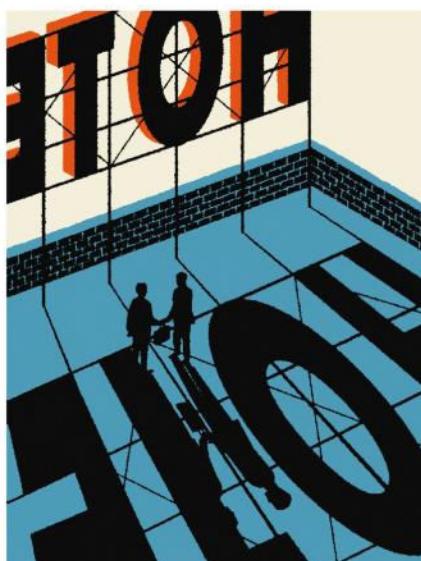
### TRUMP HOTELS' WEIRD PITCH

A couple of weeks ago, at Trump Tower, on the same spot where Donald Trump announced his Presidential bid, Eric Danziger, the C.E.O. of Trump Hotels, formally launched a new line of three-star hotels, called American Idea, which will cater to lower-income, rural areas of the country. It was the most blatant instance yet of the Trump family's profiting from its political power—in this case, by shifting from its long-standing focus on luxury markets in order to make money from the very demographic that put Trump in the White House. Within the hotel industry, the event raised eyebrows for another reason: it was unbelievably haphazard. Danziger, though a veteran of the industry, had almost nothing to show his audience. There was no Web site or marketing material, and the logo was just the brand name and a crudely drawn picture of a light bulb. (A company representative told me that she wasn't sure if it was the final logo or a work in progress.)

"It is incredibly rushed," Jan deRoos, a professor at Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration, told me. "This feels like someone woke up on a Saturday and had to roll something out in ten days." DeRoos has worked for many hotel companies, and oversaw, for Hilton Hotels, the construction of some of the first Hampton Inns. He said that a successful launch would normally take years to plan and would include confirmed contracts for at least twenty locations, with dozens more in the pipeline, in addition to a fully operational marketing plan and a "brand bible" that lays out, in minute detail, what every hotel must contain. Crucially, the company would also need a reservation system to direct guests to its properties. Big hotel companies these days own very few of the properties that bear their names. Instead, local operators pay a share of their revenue to affiliate with a brand, and in return the brand provides marketing and refers customers via a

centralized Web site. (Most hotels get at least half their guests this way.) The key challenge for any brand is persuading hotel owners to sign contracts. Owners must believe that a brand will provide enough "heads in beds" to justify the licensing cost.

So what, exactly, was the Trump Organization offering potential licensees? So far, only one company, Chawla Hotels, which owns seventeen properties in the Mississippi Delta, has signed on. When I spoke to Dinesh Chawla, the company's C.E.O., he made clear that the core attraction was being the first to partner with the President's new brand. "Think of the marketing powwow I get out of doing this," he said.



"We'll attract tourists from all over the world." He said that he was "using" the Trump family: "They can't afford us to be failures. If we don't do well, they look like schmucks."

Chawla was stunned by how quickly it had all happened. He first heard of American Idea when a Trump Hotels executive called early one Saturday in March. It usually takes three years to finalize a deal, he said, but this one happened in just three months. He confided that the final contract was signed ten minutes before the public announcement. Under the terms of the agreement, Chawla Hotels will convert three aging properties to the American Idea brand and build a four-star hotel under another Trump brand, Scion, which launched, in a similarly shambolic fash-

ion, last fall. (Scion was aimed at a hip, millennial market in places like Seattle and Austin. The fact that its first hotel will be a Chawla property in Cleveland, Mississippi, tells you how that's going.) Chawla's attraction to American Idea was rooted in being first. It's hard to see what would attract the second, or the twenty-second, franchisee to this vague sketch of a brand.

Many hotel companies are launching sub-brands; recent examples include Tru by Hilton and Wyndham's Trademark line. But these are huge companies, trying to target precise customer groups. Trump Hotels, by contrast, is a tiny player, with only fourteen hotels and little of the backbone required to manage a fast-growing brand. And rapid growth is crucial for a three-star franchise. Unlike the five-star hotels that the Trumps are used to, three-star ones don't generate enough profit for a small portfolio to be viable. It's a circular challenge. To attract more hotels, the Trump Organization needs to show that it will attract more hotels. But no plan for growth was announced at the launch, and the key speech, by Donald Trump, Jr., was devoid of any business specifics. Instead, he spoke about his father—how the idea came about during the Presidential campaign, and how Mississippi's governor, Phil Bryant, introduced the Trumps to Suresh Chawla, the company's co-owner. (Suresh had written warmly about Trump in a letter to his local paper, which Bryant saw.) The implication was clear. Trump Hotels may lack the infrastructure to turn a niche brand into an empire, but it has one unique competitive advantage: it is owned by the President of the United States.

Like many things in the world of Trump, the event was both corrupt and inept. Trump Hotels had nothing to offer but words, and nearly all of those words were about the President. A normal company would have chosen to wait a couple of years and then launch properly, but the Trump Organization is not a normal company, and it has other considerations. Given that a brand launch typically takes three years and that a Presidential term lasts only four, the executives may feel that there's no time to lose.

—Adam Davidson

# THE THIRD PERSON

*China's marriage crisis gives rise to a new job: the mistress dispeller.*

BY JIAYANG FAN



Yu Ruojian was pleased to learn that his target ran a sex shop. Someone who worked in retail would be used to talking to strangers, and it would be easy, posing as a customer in such an intimate store, to bring the conversation around to personal matters. In March last year, he visited the store, in Wuxi, a city about seventy miles from Shanghai, where he lives. He told the proprietor, a gregarious woman in her forties whom I'll call Wang, that he was looking for herbal remedies to help a friend whose marital relations were hampered by shyness. They chatted for half an hour before exchanging contact details. "I'll be back to pester you soon

enough," Yu said as he left. "You'd better!" Wang responded, unaware that she'd walked into the first in a series of carefully laid traps.

A month earlier, Yu had heard from a woman in her fifties, the wife of a factory manager in Wuxi, who explained that her husband was having an affair with Wang. She had tolerated it for years, but now she'd found that he had spent more than two hundred thousand yuan—thirty thousand dollars—on her, savings that should have been going toward their old age and a house for their son.

Yu, a gentle-looking man in his early forties, with the placid demeanor of a

*An escalating divorce rate shows the depth of gender inequality in Chinese society.*

yoga instructor, works as a mistress dispeller, a job that barely existed a decade ago but is becoming common in major Chinese cities. His clients are women who hope to preserve their marriages by fending off what is known in Chinese as a *xiao san*, or "Little Third"—a term that encompasses everything from a partner in a casual affair to a long-term "kept woman." Mistress dispellers use a variety of methods. Some Little Thirds can be paid off or discouraged by hearing unwelcome details of their lovers' lives—debts, say, or responsibility for an elderly parent—or shamed with notes sent to friends and family. If the dispeller or the client is well connected, a Little Third may suddenly find that her job requires her to move to another city. A female dispeller sometimes seeks to become a confidante, in order to advise the targeted woman that the liaison will inevitably crumble. In certain cases, a male mistress dispeller may even seduce the woman. Like all the mistress dispellers I spoke to, Yu said that he never resorts to this tactic, but he acknowledged that there are those who do.

A week after his first visit, Yu went back to the store. He had heard that Wang had recently purchased property nearby, and he let drop that he was looking to buy an apartment in the neighborhood. She offered to take him on a tour and introduce him to agents with properties to sell. In the course of several weeks, Yu and Wang started getting meals together, and eventually Yu invited her to Shanghai for a weekend sightseeing trip. She demurred at first but later accepted, on the condition that she could bring a girlfriend along.

Using his client's money, Yu put the pair up at a hotel, showed them the city, and took them to sample its culinary specialties. On Shanghai's famous river promenade, Yu took pictures of the two women and then got the friend to take several of him and Wang with their arms around each other. Once the weekend was over, these pictures found their way to Wang's boyfriend. "A picture speaks louder than a thousand words, and, in a jealous man's imagination, it can speak ten thousand," Yu told me. The man ended the relationship, and returned to his wife, appreciative, if nothing else, of her loyalty.

The mission had taken around four months in all.

As Yu spoke, it was hard to gauge his attitude to what he or anyone else had done. He seemed neither proud nor defensive, and offered no judgments on the behavior of those he encountered. He'd had all kinds of jobs, he told me, working in computer sales, right out of college, and then learning about psychology, Buddhism, and traditional Chinese arts. The emotional turmoil he'd caused seemed remote to him, as if his studies had enabled him to regard it with Zen composure. Things had been messy and painful before his involvement, and though the treatment he administered was painful, too, he'd been able to bring about a situation that was, on the whole, better.

Yu told me that he was on his second marriage and had one daughter from each. When I asked why his Wuxi client hadn't considered divorce, he was incredulous. For a woman, divorce was rarely a sensible choice. "In today's world, a secondhand woman is like a secondhand car," he said. "Once it's been driven, it's not worth a fraction of its original selling price." A second-hand man, on the other hand, Yu explained, is like renovated property in China's real-estate market: "The value only appreciates."

A volatile mixture of rapid social change, legal reforms, and traditional attitudes has created something approaching a crisis in Chinese marriage. In the past decade, the divorce rate has doubled. Adultery is the most prevalent cause, accounting for about a third of the cases, and men are more than thirteen times as likely to stray as women are. These trends are seen as troubling in a country that places a high social value on matrimony. Media outlets with close ties to the state frequently run stories with titles like "The Five-Year Itch" and "DNA Testing in China: Eroding Wedlock?" The government has signalled that it takes public morality seriously, in part by exposing the sexual misdeeds of high officials who fall afoul of President Xi Jinping's anti-corruption crusade. According to Xinhua, the state news agency, Zhou Yongkang, a former security chief who was arrested and expelled from the Communist Party in 2014, "committed adul-

tery with a number of women in power-for-sex and money-for-sex trades." Wild rumors spread on Chinese media that he had had more than four hundred lovers.

In divorces, women suffer disproportionately. Yu's view of a woman's poor chance at remarriage is widely shared, but there are more concrete issues, arising from economic disparity within marriages. Mistress dispellers are only one part of a broader industry that has sprung up to help wives rescue their unions, but their work has aroused particular fascination, as has the figure of the mistress herself, often portrayed in films and TV dramas as a predatory but irresistible homewrecker. While I was in a taxi in Shanghai, a song came on the radio that the driver mentioned was a favorite of his. Titled "Little Third," it was the breakout single by a Henanese singer called Leng Mo, who sings to a woman about his bitter realization that he could never make her happy, given that "finally you have become someone else's Little Third." In another hit—"Di San Zhe" ("Third Party"), by the Malaysian-born superstar Fish Leong—a woman is magnanimous toward her rival, taking responsibility for the loss of her man and insisting that the third party shouldn't be blamed: "Although your choice has destroyed me, I will take it positively." It is an attitude that few wives in China can afford to share.

**Y**u is one of about three hundred employees of Weiqing Group, which bills itself as China's "first professional transnational love hospital." Weiqing—the name translates as "preserve feeling"—was founded sixteen years ago and provides an array of services, designed to save a marriage at all costs. One morning last December, I visited the headquarters, on the eighteenth floor of a weathered corporate high-rise.

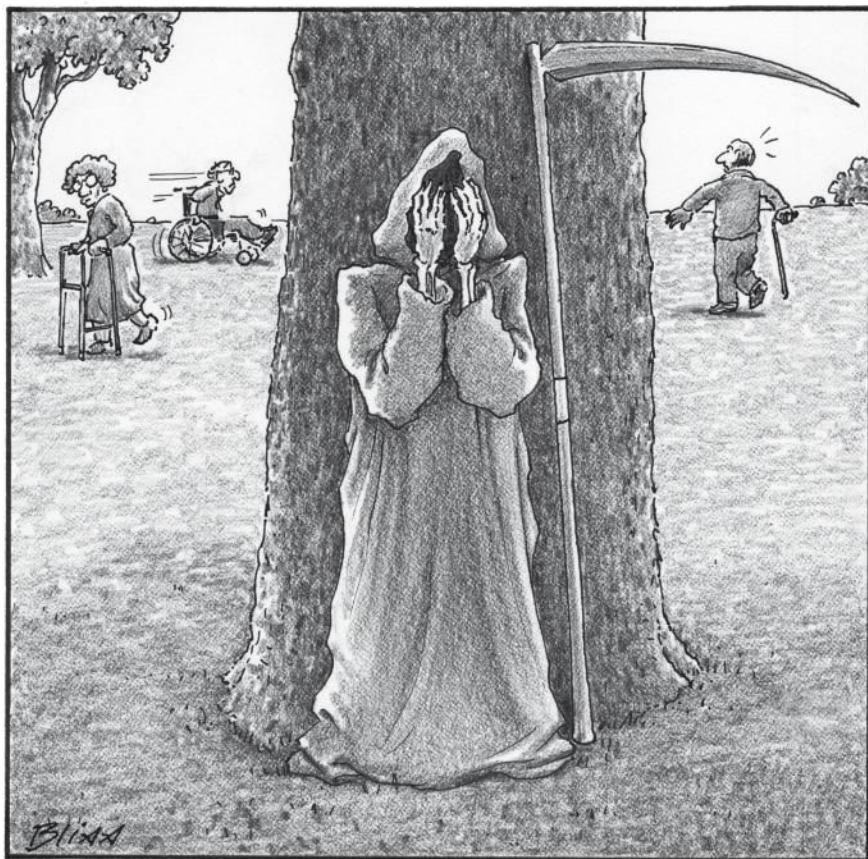
The company's co-founder, a woman in her late forties, came out to meet me. She wore a crimson cape coat, which, combined with her swift stride, gave the impression of imminent flight. She introduced herself as "Ming *laoshi*"—Teacher Ming. Her actual name is Ming Li, but she was formerly a teacher and has kept the honorific, because she still sees her role as instructional. She took me to her office, which resembled that

of a high-school principal, adorned with award banners, framed group photos, and gold and crystal trophies. Books with titles like "Women Must Marry Well" and "'Bad' Women: Modern Chinese Mistresses" lined the walls. "There are no enduring marriages," she told me matter-of-factly. "Only mistresses who haven't worked hard enough at tearing it apart."

While we spoke, Chinese love songs emanated from her pockets, ringtones from five cell phones that she carries at all times. She joked that, although she has been married for twenty years and has a teen-age daughter, her primary relationship is with her work. Weiqing's hotline is open twenty-four hours a day, and inquiries also come in through every social-media platform in the country. Junior staff conduct an hour-long consultation, explaining the company's services and fees. A basic course of counselling starts at a hundred thousand yuan, around fifteen thousand dollars. The price rises to three times that if there is a mistress to be dispelled and five times that if, as is often the case, the mistress has a child by the errant husband. During the initial consultation, staffers try to get a sense of what they're up against—a sexless marriage, say, or a wordless one—and they ask the women questions about their behavior: "Do you nag him?"; "Do you make him feel good?"

These questions typify the company's approach. There is little sense that a couple should work together to address the underlying dynamics of their relationship. Instead, the clients seek training in how to win back their husbands through unilateral effort, mostly while keeping the consultations secret. One of them told me, "If he finds out I went to a therapist, he'll think this is a ploy and that I am actually entrapping him with my newly learned techniques."

Ming's lessons consist of strategy tips that amount to a kind of Art of War for marriage. A wife who has run out of things to say to her husband might be advised to buy him presents or to plant an unexpected romantic note in his suit pocket. From a Western perspective, Ming's method offers an odd vision of empowerment, achieved through pragmatic acceptance of a retrograde model of marriage. Husbands are to be flattered, seductive clothes



*“...nineteen, twenty. Ready or not, here I come!”*

• • •

dispelling, a trend that they put down to extensive media coverage.

Shu, a compact man in his fifties with wide-set cheekbones, took pride in recounting the origins of the company. In the late nineties, he was writing an advice column for a local newspaper, and Ming was his assistant. Discussions about marriage and family—previously controlled by state authorities—were beginning to be freely aired in the media. Call-in shows and advice columns addressed such topics as affairs and how to deal with in-laws. At the time, marital discord was rarely talked about outside the home in which it occurred, and often not even there. “Emotional honesty can be taboo in Chinese homes,” Shu told me. “What’s more, people don’t know how to discuss it, where to begin.”

Shu’s columns were posted in neighborhood bulletins all over Shanghai, and he started receiving calls for help from beleaguered spouses anxious for advice. One day in 1998, a distraught

woman called and asked if Shu could meet her at a nearby park to talk. She turned out to be a fitness instructor in her thirties, who was married to a Taiwanese businessman and lived in Taipei, raising their two children, while he commuted to the mainland. On a chance visit to an apartment they maintained in Shanghai, she discovered women’s toiletries and cosmetics. The first thing that came to her mind was suicide.

“I told her that, practically speaking, death was not a solution,” Shu recalled. “She would be handing her husband over to the mistress. Furthermore, suicide was very irresponsible: who would care for her kids?” As they sat on a park bench, he laid out a course of action. She should accompany her husband more frequently on his business trips and participate in his social engagements, so that the mistress would see that she had no intention of giving up on the marriage. In the long run, Shu counselled, the wife must “gauge her husband’s emotional needs and, whenever possible, smooth out discord before he turns to another source.” Shu talked to the woman for an hour and a half, and, when she got up to leave, she handed him an envelope containing a thousand yuan. “At the time, a thousand yuan was a month’s salary,” Shu said. “I wasn’t even sure I should take it. But I learned two important lessons from that encounter. First, you can collect money from such consultations. And, second, just talking to someone can actually bring about concrete results.”

Shu and Ming set up their company in 2001, just after an amendment to a law made divorce easier to obtain. This new freedom created a business opportunity, and, indeed, Shu framed the threats to marriage in material terms. “Today’s Little Thirds want a good bargain,” he told me. “They are of the post-nineties generation—competitive, shrewd, worldly.” Likewise, the best course for wronged wives was to follow the money: “Secure the marriage to secure the assets. Secure the assets to secure happiness.”

It seemed a cynical view, and yet, as Shu and Ming spoke, it was clear that they also maintained, without any sense of contradiction, a more old-fashioned belief that the social importance of marriage was absolute. Both of them frequently cited a Chinese idiom, “Protect

worn (“a relationship necessity”), and all the work of the relationship done by the wife, without the husband ever being aware of it. “Marriage is like the process of learning to swim,” Ming said. “It doesn’t matter how big or fancy your pool is, just like it doesn’t always matter how good your husband is. If you don’t know how to swim, you will drown in any case, and someone else who knows how to swim will get to enjoy the pool.”

Around noon, Ming took me to meet the company’s other co-founder, Shu Xin, whom she called Principal Shu, at a hot-pot restaurant nearby. He was late and arrived with a suitcase, packed for a trip to Beijing to see a V.I.P. customer. Both he and Ming dropped hints about government officials and wealthy entrepreneurs whose wives they had helped, but they refused to elaborate. Although Shu and Ming were at pains to emphasize the range of counselling services the firm offered, they said that eighty per cent of their new clients requested mistresses

the home—protect the country,” and even seemed to view their work as a matter of patriotic duty. The institution of marriage was changing fast, faster than the attitudes surrounding it, but, as Shu put it, “If the basic unit of society isn’t secure, how can a country be fully at peace?”

I’d asked Teacher Ming to introduce me to some of her clients and, one day at her office, I met an attractive woman in her late forties, who arrived wearing a cashmere coat and dark-brown aviator sunglasses, which she kept on for the duration of our conversation. She wouldn’t tell me her name, but said that her husband was the owner of a successful supermarket chain, which she occasionally helped to manage. They’d been married for more than twenty years and had a son in college.

Some eight months before we spoke, she’d begun to suspect that her husband was having an affair. There was an inexplicable business trip and a receipt for a dress. “He’s never bought me a dress in all our years of marriage,” she said. Going through his cell-phone records, she discovered one number that her husband was calling daily, for up to eight hours at a time. One day, he asked her for a divorce, complaining that they hadn’t had sex for six months. (He said nothing about another attachment.) She was shaken, but knew she had a little leverage. “Even while asking for a divorce, he wanted to preserve his own image and wanted me to initiate the proceedings,” she said. “He thought it would look bad for him if other people thought that he was the one who wanted to end things.” So she contacted Ming.

Ming’s diagnosis was that years of being a boss had accustomed the husband to praise and adulation. “Teacher Ming told me that when he came home after a day of being treated like a prince he might have expected similar words of approval from me,” she said. Ming encouraged her to think of her marriage in business terms: “It requires management and upkeep, just as running a company requires hard work after you get it registered and trademarked.” Her sessions with Ming were not limited to the usual advice about flattery and flirting. “So much of what I have learned at Weiqing is the importance of com-

munication,” the woman said. “You have no idea how new these insights were to me. I felt like I was finally getting the remedial courses in marriage that I should have taken long ago.”

Her parents, cadres in the Party, had never encouraged the expression of feelings through words. “It simply wasn’t done,” she said. “If I wanted to tell my parents I loved them, I knew the thing to do was to do well in school or help Mom with chores. To say the words ‘I love you,’ that would be too ridiculous.”

Ming told her client that unexpressed feelings could eventually atrophy or, worse, fester into disgust, and the woman realized that she had carried this reserve into her marriage. For her parents’ generation, this hadn’t been a problem. Divorce and adultery were considered shameful, and the era was one of making do—the prevailing maxim was “*Cou he*,” or “Improvise together.” People learned to be content with patched clothes, bland meals of leftovers, and serviceable if unromantic unions. But now, she said, economic progress had diversified people’s choices: “Money buys options. Men with cash want upgrades in everything, wives included.”

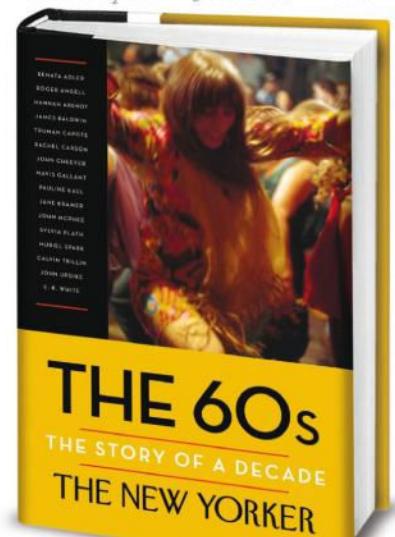
Turning her face away from me, the woman said quietly, almost to herself, “Something I figured out recently is that, in my bones, I don’t respect him—not his character or treatment of others. I think that, deep down, he knows this.”

I asked her why, in that case, she didn’t consider divorce, and she paused, brushing a finger across the rim of her sunglasses. “You know, for a while, I also asked myself the same question,” she said. “I realized it’s because I’ve sacrificed too much for this marriage. It’s like a house I’ve given my life to construct, but that effort is hardly felt by people on the outside. Then, one day, he decides he wants to kick me out because he feels like it—how can I let him?”

Although her sense of hurt was still acute, she believed that Ming’s advice was helping the relationship “return to the right track.” Her husband came home at regular hours and hadn’t brought up divorce again. He’d proposed taking a trip together and they had resumed having sex. She had originally come to Weiqing with the hope of a miraculous shortcut to marital bliss, but now she said that she was learning

## HISTORY IN REAL TIME AS TOLD BY THE NEW YORKER

*U-2 Spy Plane • Bay of Pigs • Civil-Rights Movement • Summer of Love  
Martin Luther King, Jr. • Truman Capote • Bob Dylan • Woodstock  
Dwight Macdonald • Simon & Garfunkel • Twiggy • Apollo 11  
Rachel Carson • Vietnam War  
E. B. White • The Beatles • J.F.K.  
Environmentalism • James Baldwin  
1969 World Series • John Cheever  
Muriel Spark • Joan Baez • Free-*



*Pauline Kael • Sylvia Plath • The Cuban Missile Crisis • Allan Ginsberg  
Portnoy's Complaint • John Updike*

### WITH NEW PERSPECTIVES FROM

Malcolm Gladwell  
Adam Gopnik  
Jennifer Egan  
Kelefa Sanneh  
and many more

A RANDOM HOUSE HARDCOVER AND EBOOK

to be content with “this gentle slope of slow thawing.” If nothing else, she said, “I get to stay in my home.”

**C**onfucius wrote, in his Book of Rites, “The woman obeys the man. In her youth she obeys her father and elder brother; when married, she obeys her husband; when her husband is dead, she obeys her son.” Confucianism also held that marriage was of supreme importance not so much for the love between two individuals but for the alliances they forged between clans. In traditional Chinese culture, arranged marriages were the norm, and a woman became part of her husband’s family as soon as she was married. Daughters could not inherit property from their parents, even in the absence of sons. Poor families, in a custom known as *tongyangxi*, or “little daughter-in-law,” often married off their daughters as children to young boys in better-off families. For destitute parents, it meant one less mouth to feed; for wealthier ones, a convenient source of unpaid domestic labor.

These social arrangements went largely unchallenged until the last days of the Qing dynasty, which ended in 1912. Perhaps the most famous feminist of the time was Qiu Jin, the daughter of a scholarly family in Zhejiang. Unhappy in an arranged marriage, she joined a revolutionary group, began wearing men’s clothing, and left her husband and children to study in Japan. On her return, in 1906, she declared that men and women were born with equal rights and wrote about the need for women to obtain financial and political independence. In an essay published that year, “A Respectful Announcement to My Sisters,” Qiu wrote, “We spend our lives knowing only how to rely on men—for everything we wear and eat we rely on men.” She put out two issues of a feminist newspaper, *China Women’s News*, before the authorities closed it. In 1907, during reprisals against revolutionaries, she was executed, at the age of thirty-one.

The ideals of feminism gained wider currency during a series of student demonstrations in 1919 that became known as the May Fourth Movement.



Among those drawn to the cause was the young Mao Zedong. That year, he wrote an essay about a woman who had slit her throat rather than consent to an arranged marriage. Mao argued that, because women in China could not achieve genuine individuality in life, they were able to assert their will only through suicide, and he concluded that the country needed an overhaul of social norms.

After Mao’s revolution, in 1949, traditional gender roles were abolished, at least on paper. “Women hold up half the sky!” he declared, and the Party attempted to boost productivity by recruiting them to the labor force. Women worked in factories for the first time, both on production lines and in administrative roles, competing with men to achieve the highest quotas. They drove tractors and trains and operated turbines; joined fishing crews, the police, and the Army. Those who distinguished themselves most were nationally celebrated as “iron women.”

In 1950, the Party passed the New Marriage Law, which prohibited arranged marriages and concubinage as bourgeois vices. For the first time, women could divorce their husbands. Private life, however, was rigidly controlled by the state. A couple wishing to marry had to obtain the consent of their *danwei*, or work unit, which invariably denounced people who had affairs. The work unit’s consent was required for divorces, too, and although the law now allowed for no-fault divorce, courts were often reluctant to grant it.

After Mao’s death, in 1976, Deng Xiaoping instituted economic reforms and, in 1981, another set of marriage laws went into effect. Divorce became somewhat easier to obtain, and, in an attempt to curb population growth, people weren’t allowed to marry until they were in their early twenties. As social mobility increased, gender attitudes suppressed by Communism began to reassert themselves. Wage inequality rose and arrangements concerning property—private ownership had been banned under Mao—favored men. In 2010, a nationwide survey conducted by the Women’s Federation and the National Bureau of Statistics showed that only one out of every fifteen single women in China owned a home in her own right. A controversial ruling by China’s Supreme Court, in 2011, further disadvantaged women, by stipulating that property bought before marriage should revert to the buyer after a divorce. Even today, many parents prefer to give money to a nephew rather than to their own daughter.

Grace Gui, a Shanghai divorce lawyer at Watson & Band, one of the largest law firms in China, told me that most of the cases she handles revolve around property rights. “In divorces, many Chinese people transfer assets ahead of time,” she said. “There are three ways they go about it: first, hide the assets; second, register them under someone else’s name; third, overstate their liabilities.” She has seen cases in which husbands take on high-interest debt on purpose. “Most housewives have no way of incurring this kind of debt, so it’s mostly men, especially entrepreneurs, who benefit.”

Occasionally, she discovers that clients have embarked on sham divorces, in order to buy property on preferential terms that are available only to unmarried people. Men have been known to lure their wives into this arrangement and then take up with mistresses as soon as the papers are signed. The phenomenon is common enough that, last year, it constituted the plot of a critically acclaimed film, “I Am Not Madame Bovary.”

Gui mentioned that, during a decade in practice, she has noticed a steady uptick in divorces and that more than half of the ones she handled last year involved a mistress. Accordingly, her job has grown in complexity and scope. “As lawyers, we have to be familiar with property law, company profiles, company shares, the stock market, and so on. More than ever now, we also have to be half-psychologists.”

She told me that courts remain conservative and try to encourage couples to stay together. Judges usually don’t grant a divorce application the first time around, and couples must wait six months before refiling; this leaves an interim period during which the court hopes for reconciliation. Gui acknowledged that, by this stage, reconciliation is often unlikely, but, because there is

no legal provision for spousal support in China, many of her clients are determined to preserve even very troubled or abusive marriages.

**A**lthough Ming and Shu's love hospital offers conventional counseling alongside mistress dispelling, other enterprises are scrappier. One morning, in the lobby of my Shanghai hotel, I met a man in his early forties who introduced himself as Detective Li. "The difference between your actual appearance and your WeChat profile is considerable," he said by way of greeting.

He had brought along a friend, Detective Dai, who was wearing a Louis Vuitton tie and belt and carrying a Louis Vuitton briefcase. Li and Dai are private detectives, and fifteen per cent of their business involves mistress dispelling. Their profession exists in a gray zone in China—they referred to themselves as a "shadow apparatus"—neither outlawed nor officially recognized. Though the government regards detective work with suspicion, there is a ready market for it. State control of information makes it hard to conduct even a simple public-records search, and ordinary people are reluctant to go to the police unless it is absolutely necessary.

Li showed me a short video on his phone. In a hotel room, a man and a woman were in bed together, apparently naked under the sheets. After a few seconds, the door to the room burst open and a man with a beer belly came charging in, pointing and yelling, "The police are on the way! Don't get dressed!" Li told me that the fat man was the woman's husband, his client. Li had engineered this moment of exposure so that the client could call the police. Evidence from private detectives alone would never be considered admissible in a divorce case, but, once the police were involved, the adultery became a matter of official record.

The detectives said that clients often approached them when they realized that they couldn't get what they wanted through normal channels. Sometimes people came with outlandish plans for murder or maiming, seemingly cribbed from Hollywood thrillers. "They are usually very desperate people at the end of their wits," Li said. Both men said that they would never countenance

physically harming anyone, but such attacks have occurred. In Beijing, a woman called Zhang Yufen has, for more than a decade, been helping wronged wives track down and punish mistresses and has become popularly known as "the mistress killer." (No one has actually been killed.) Zhang's services include sheltering women thrown out by their husbands, but her specialty is coaching clients on confronting and beating up the mistresses. She recently told a Chinese newspaper that violence was therapeutic for the wives: "Those who don't dare to beat will develop diseases including esophageal cancer, uterine cancer, lung cancer."

The expense of hiring a detective and funding the many bribes the work entails means that Li and Dai's clients tend to be wealthy—most often the wives of businessmen, or Party officials, such as judges and mayors. "Those with the most have the most to lose," Dai explained. But, like other detectives I spoke to, he and Li were from humble backgrounds, having grown up in peasant families. What they lacked in education and resources they made up for in ambition, ingenuity, adaptability, and an outsized appetite for risk.

"We are chameleons," Dai told me, with satisfaction. "If you spend all of your time watching and analyzing peo-

ple, you come to some conclusions about broader patterns in society."

Their attitudes toward marriage were more cynical than those of Teacher Ming, and the pair were contemptuous of the idea that therapy could help a marriage. "That's all empty words," Li said. "Every day, we get orders to collect evidence about professors, surgeons, artists, and writers. Their wives are looking for actual solutions, not time on the couch."

Dai agreed: "China is moving fast, and it needs problem solvers. It's the current reality that's created odd creatures like us."

**O**n my last day in Shanghai, Teacher Ming told me that she had another client for me to meet. The woman was in her early sixties, and dressed in loose dark linen. Alone among the clients I met, she insisted that I use her real family name, Li. (She kept her given name to herself.) We sat down to tea in an empty consultation room at Weiqing, and she explained why she was keen to talk: "I think I'm a person of my time, and I want to record it."

Li was born in Shanghai in 1954, and came of age during the Cultural Revolution. In her late teens, like millions of other urban youths, she was dispatched to the countryside to take part in peasant-run brigades. There she met her husband, "an earnest, solid man,"



*"The scientists never stopped to ask if they should—only if they could."*

who eventually became an elementary-school teacher.

They returned to Shanghai in the period of Deng's economic reforms and she went to work in a bank. It was a time, she said, when a few people were leaving their "iron rice bowl"—a secure government job—and entering the business world, a decision whose novelty, uncertainty, and risk were expressed in the phrase "descending into the sea." Money was tight and Li was restless. She had just given birth to a daughter and took advantage of her maternity leave to get a job in a steel company. "Others were doing it and I thought, Why can't I?" she said.

Li describes herself as "social, outgoing, and self-reliant," and it was easy to imagine how good she'd have been at creating the networks of friendships upon which so much of Chinese deal-making depends. She quickly found that she had a head for numbers and, in the construction boom that followed Deng's reforms, business went very well indeed. Often, she was the only woman at the negotiating table. "Back then, it was all men. They were the adventurous sort willing to take a gamble," Li told me. "For a woman of that era, I was distinctly ambitious."

Li paused and took a slow sip of her tea. "There was one man named Yu, with whom I got along particularly well," she said. He was the first man she'd met whom she could talk to endlessly. "There was mutual respect and admiration," she said. "And, over time, something more."

Li characterized her marriage as "thin and colorless, like water." Two years after meeting, Yu and Li decided to leave their spouses. "He had a son about seven years older than my daughter," she said. "You can't imagine the kind of scandal this was at the time." Both her husband and Yu's wife fought the divorces, and all the families disapproved and tried to mediate. "I felt genuinely brave, despite everything, like we were breaking new ground and doing something truly revolutionary," Li said. "I'd always been independent-minded, which is perhaps what makes me odd as a Chinese woman. I was doing this thing for myself and for love." She eventually married her lover, in 1992, and set up a business with him, selling rebar. Although they paid generous child support, they were each legally

forbidden from bringing their children to the new home.

When comparing the experiences of her two marriages, Li used the words "heaven and earth." "My first husband wasn't a bad sort," she said, but, amid the poverty of rural China, there was little to their relationship beyond day-to-day survival. "We needed each other to just keep our stomachs full and our bodies warm at night," Li said. The kind of desire Li discovered with her second husband, with its "somersaults of excitement and yawns of blissful fatigue," was an awakening.

Li paused again and drew a deep breath. "The enemy of marriage is time," she said, smiling. By the eighth year, the honeymoon period had long given way to "the salt and vinegar of daily life." "Even the tongue and teeth occasionally get in each other's way," she said. One day, a friend hinted that Yu was spending nights at the home of his ex-wife and his son. At first, Li rationalized away her concern. She knew that he felt great guilt about abandoning his child and wife, and that his son missed him deeply. But eventually she confronted him, asking if he was intent on "mending the broken mirror of his first marriage." He was silent, and then said that he very much wanted to raise his son well.

Li moved out, bought a house of her own, and consulted Teacher Ming for the first time. "I was feeling very alone and despondent," she said. "I wanted to know if it was a mistake to have left my second marriage and whether it would be too late to fix it." Ming told her, "You were a Little Third, do you know that? This is the fate of a Little Third." Ming's comment made her reassess how she'd arrived at her situation. "Chinese women of my generation are conditioned to accept their fate," she said. As Li spoke, her cheeks grew slightly flushed. I offered her some more tea, but she shook her head. "Marriages are their own kind of confinement," she said. "The institution was never designed to be fair to women."

Li, who is now retired, told me that she was using some of her savings to travel. On a cruise to Japan, four years ago, she met a man of around her own age, a former mid-level government official from Shanghai. The two struck up a friendship. They shared a love of classical Chinese poetry, and would send

each other verses over WeChat late into the night. Soon, they began travelling together, and, on their third trip, Li spoke candidly about her family and her divorces. The man had previously mentioned a son, and when Li asked him directly if he was married he admitted that he was. "I was developing feelings for him, but that stopped me in my tracks," she said. The man confided that, although he no longer had sexual relations with his wife, he had built his life around his marriage and could not leave it.

"He asked me why we couldn't be lovers, and it tortured me," Li said. She again consulted Ming, who asked, "How can you consider being a Little Third after all you've been through?" The problem with being a mistress, Ming said, was that the man retains all the power: with no social or family ties, he can drop you at will. Li told her friend that they couldn't become involved unless he was single.

Li told me that she doubted she would ever remarry. "The truth is, in China, at least, the last thing a marriage is about is the relationship between two people," she said. "It's about property, the children, and the vast and various entanglements of those two things."

She went on, "Sometimes I look back and think my generation is long gone. What we've been through, no matter how absurd and incomprehensible, it's all history. We've given so much of ourselves to our country, our family, our values, our past." Her daughter was now thirty-six, a bank manager, married, with a six-year-old son. Despite it all, mother and daughter had a good relationship. "Occasionally, I tell her that she must face up to the reality of this world and pamper her husband and mother-in-law," she said with a laugh, "or else she'll suffer a fate like mine."

Outside, it was getting dark, and Li took out her phone to check the time. On the home screen was a picture of a toddler in bathing trunks, her grandson. She hadn't yet shared with her daughter the full story of her life and her marriages: "I told her that someday, when her child has grown up, when she's not so busy herself, I would, but that she could not judge me. 'This is your mother's life,' I want to tell her. 'You can approve or disapprove, but I lived it, it's mine.'"



## BEFORE THE INTERNET

BY EMMA RATHBONE

**B**efore the Internet, you would just sit in an armchair with a book open on your lap, staring into space or staring at a decorative broom on the wall—kind of shifting back and forth between those two modes of being.

Before the Internet, you might take it upon yourself to do a drawing. You'd quietly start sketching something in a notebook, not sure what it was, but you'd let inspiration guide you and then—*woop!*—turns out you'd drawn a squiggly alligator with a cockeyed approach.

Before the Internet, you'd have yawning summer afternoons when you'd flop down on one couch, then flop down on another, then decide to craft a fake F.B.I. card. You'd get some paper from your dad's office, copy the F.B.I. logo and your signature, laminate it with Scotch tape, put it in your wallet, take

it out of your wallet, look at it, then put it back in your wallet with a secretive smile.

It was a heady time!

You'd be in some kind of arts center, wearing roomy overalls, looking at a tray of precious gems, and you'd say, "That's cat's-eye," and your friend would say, "Nope. That's opal." And you'd say, "That's definitely cat's-eye." And there would be no way to look it up, no way to prove who was right, except if someone had a little booklet. "Anyone got a little booklet?" you'd ask, looking around. "Is there a booklet on this shit?"

Then you'd walk outside and squint at the sky, just you in your body, not tethered to any network, adrift by yourself in a world of strangers in the sunlight.

Before the Internet, you could move

to a new state and no one at school would know anything about you. You'd have no online history. You could be anyone. You would lean against the lockers with a faraway expression on your face and let people assume whatever they wanted. Like that you were a girly girl but could also be a tomboy. Or that back in your home town you'd been friends with a bunch of crows. And everyone assumed that if they saw a crow it probably knew you, because you had some kind of understanding with crows owing to undefined telepathic abilities that made you look troubled now and then but also really important.

And if anyone wanted to track down an old friend of yours and write her an actual letter to find out if any of this was true, well, best of luck to them.

Before the Internet, you could laze around on a park bench in Chicago reading some Dean Koontz, and that would be a legit thing to do and no one would ever know you had done it unless you told them.

Before the Internet, if you were in need of some facts you might actually decide to consult an old person, like the one living in your finished basement. But then you'd find yourself watching "The Bridge on the River Kwai," which you agreed to do because the old person asked in such a fragile way that you couldn't say no.

About ten minutes in, you'd say you needed some water, then wander up to the kitchen, where you'd get caught up staring at a refrigerator magnet. Then, for no reason, you'd do a little dance. You'd wonder if you should expand that dance right then and there. "Maybe I'll direct music videos," you'd say to yourself. But you'd have no way to follow up or to look it up; you'd just be standing in the deafening quiet of your kitchen at midday, alone with your thoughts.

"Should I test out these pens on this turquoise pad?" you'd ask yourself, staring at some pens by the phone.

Instead, you'd take a sip of your drink and say, "Aah," like a person in a commercial. Then you'd go do that in front of a mirror, to see how it looked. Because that's what it was like before the Internet. You made your own fun. ♦

# NEIGHBORHOOD WATCHED

*Little Pakistan persevered after 9/11. Can it survive in the age of Trump?*

BY JENNIFER GONNERMAN



Mohammad Razvi (center) greets neighbors on Coney Island Avenue.

Tahira Khan was helping her son get ready for school, in Midwood, Brooklyn, when she heard a knock on the door. She opened it to find two immigration agents, who held up a photograph of her husband, Shahid Ali Khan, and asked where he was. Khan, who worked as a day laborer, was on his way to a construction site. The officers told Tahira to call him, and then one of them got on the phone and ordered him to come home. Outside the building, several other officers were waiting with a van. When Khan arrived, they handcuffed him, locked a chain around his waist, and pressed him into the back seat. They took him to the Immigration and Customs Enforcement office at 26 Federal Plaza, in downtown Manhattan. That evening, immigration agents left him at a detention center in Elizabeth, New Jersey, where he was given an inmate uniform and placed in a dormitory with dozens of other men.

Khan's arrest occurred on May 5, 2005, seventeen months after an immigration judge issued a deportation order. He and Tahira had left Islamabad in 1997, when

their son, Mansoor, was a year old. Mansoor had been born with a heart defect, and doctors told them that he needed surgery that was not available in Pakistan. Khan, who worked as a bank manager, applied for a one-year leave, obtained temporary visas for the family, and brought his wife and son to New York. Doctors at Mount Sinai Medical Center performed open-heart surgery on Mansoor when he was two.

After the surgery, Mansoor suffered a devastating complication: a rare movement disorder called post-pump chorea, which made his limbs flail uncontrollably. It was difficult for him to walk, talk, or eat; he needed a wheelchair and a feeding tube. The Khans remained in New York so that Mansoor could continue to see his doctors at Mount Sinai. In late 2003, Khan received the deportation order. He hired an immigration lawyer, Elinor Drucker Rahmani, who submitted a request for a stay. When Khan was arrested, the request was still pending.

Shahid phoned Tahira from 26 Federal Plaza and told her to call Drucker

Rahmani. She suggested that Tahira speak to Mohammad Razvi, who ran the Council of Peoples Organization (Copo), a community group serving South Asian and Muslim immigrants, whose office was five blocks away. The next day, Razvi joined Tahira and a few friends in the Khans' cramped living room, as Tahira tearfully told the story. "It was like I'm at a funeral," Razvi recalled. "Everybody was consoling her, like, 'Don't worry, it's going to be O.K.'"

Razvi walked back to his office, on Coney Island Avenue, passing Raheela Beauty Parlor and Bukhari Restaurant. The avenue is the center of Little Pakistan, where thousands of immigrants like the Khans have settled in the past several decades. Razvi, who came from Lahore in 1980, when he was eight, grew up working at his father's grocery store, on Coney Island Avenue. During the year after 9/11, when hundreds of Pakistanis were detained for immigration violations, he founded COPO, to support the detainees and their families. Razvi became an aggressive advocate for the community, learning how to navigate government bureaucracies and to enlist the help of journalists and politicians.

Razvi and Tahira visited the offices of Senator Chuck Schumer and Representative Major Owens, to plead Khan's case. Razvi also spoke to Robert Polner, a reporter for *Newsday*. On May 10th, the paper published a story titled "Father's Deportation to Pakistan Could Deprive Sick Boy of Care or Force Mom and Son to Stay Behind Alone." Khan was released from the detention center that day and subsequently placed under an "order of supervision," which allowed him to remain in the U.S. temporarily, as long as he checked in regularly with immigration officials. Mansoor, who was then nine, made a thank-you card for Razvi, using crayons, stickers, and yellow construction paper.

Twelve years later, the family was still living in the same apartment. Khan sometimes introduced Razvi to friends who needed help with immigration problems. Many of the detainees Razvi tried to help after 9/11 ended up being deported, but the Khans' story, he told me, was "one of the happy, wonderful cases I loved." He still has Mansoor's card at his office.

Over the years, Razvi had shifted the focus of COPO, offering programs for

children and seniors, but after the Inauguration of Donald Trump, this past January, people in the neighborhood panicked. Razvi started receiving ten or fifteen calls a day from Pakistanis who worried that law enforcement would round up every immigrant who was in the country illegally, and that anti-Muslim hate crimes would escalate, as they had in the fall of 2001. In February, a friend told Razvi that her husband, a cabdriver, had been threatened by another driver, who was wielding a bat and shouting something about Trump. Razvi feared for neighborhood residents, and especially families like the Khans. Recalling the era after 9/11, he said, "I think what's happening is, it's ripping those wounds open again."

New York City officials calculate that seventy-three thousand Pakistanis live in the five boroughs, though the true number is likely much higher. The largest concentration resides in and around Little Pakistan. On Coney Island Avenue, between Newkirk Avenue and Avenue H, men stroll down the sidewalk in shalwar kameez, and newspaper boxes are filled with copies of the *Pakistan Post* and the *Urdu Times*.

Razvi's family was part of the first wave of Pakistani immigrants. They are Shia, and, as members of a minority in largely Sunni Pakistan, they were vulnerable to violence and discrimination, which worsened after the coup led by General Muhammad Zia ul-Haq, in 1977. Razvi's mother, who was a nurse, obtained visas for the family. In 1981, Razvi, his parents, and his three younger brothers moved into a housing project in Sheepshead Bay, where nearly all their neighbors were African-American or Puerto Rican.

At the time, Midwood was mostly Jewish, but in 1982 a mosque, Makki Masjid, opened on Coney Island Avenue, and began attracting Pakistanis to the neighborhood. Looking at the growing immigrant population, Razvi's father, Abbas, said, "I was thinking this place could go up." In 1984, he rented a storefront and opened Punjab Grocery, the first Pakistani grocery on Coney Island Avenue.

Abbas Razvi quickly developed a reputation as a neighborhood broker, helping customers find apartments and land-

lords find tenants. When people asked if he knew of any jobs, he wrote down their names and introduced them to potential employers. He extended credit to regulars, keeping their accounts in a binder behind the counter. Mohammad and his brothers worked in the store after school, stocking shelves, working the cash register, and cutting goat meat for customers. He learned English from his classmates, but, because he spoke Urdu at the store and at home, he remained fluent in his native language.

In the late eighties, Razvi attended Sheepshead Bay High School, where there were some Russian immigrants but almost no other Pakistanis. The year after he graduated, his mother took her sons on a trip to Pakistan, where she introduced them to relatives. When he met Narjis Razvi, a cousin by marriage, he recalled, "I was, like, 'Oh, my God, she looks so beautiful.'" In July, 1990, Mohammad and Narjis married, in a town outside Lahore. Back in Brooklyn, they moved into an apartment above the grocery store, and before long Narjis gave birth to a daughter, named Aasma. Four more children followed.

The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 had allowed more people from Asia, Africa, and South America to come to the United States. Then the Immigration Act of 1990 increased the over-all number of visas. During the next decade, the Pakistani population in New York City grew from fifteen thousand to nearly forty thousand. Those who didn't live in Little Pakistan flocked there. New immigrants came to buy spices, halal meat, and sweets, and to attend concerts by Pakistani musicians. Fareeha Haq, who grew up a mile away, recalls having kulfi, a traditional ice cream, with neighborhood children while her mother shopped at Punjab Grocery. "There were crowds and crowds of people all the time," Haq said. "It was like a big bazaar filled with all different ages." Makki Masjid came to occupy three buildings, but it was still not large enough: so many men attended Friday prayers that latecomers had to kneel on the sidewalk out front.

In the nineties, Razvi helped his father expand Punjab Grocery, and he opened a ninety-nine-cent store called Urdu Bazaar, across the street. Razvi started a construction company whose

main business was renovating apartments, and the family bought four buildings containing rental units. "I was doing so great, I thought I was going to retire at thirty-five," Razvi told me. In July, 2001, he signed a lease on two more Coney Island Avenue storefronts. He turned one into a restaurant, Punjab Sweets, and planned to open Punjab Fabrics, a clothing and textile shop, in the other.

On September 11, 2001, Razvi was at the D.M.V. in Coney Island, paying a ticket, when one of his brothers called and told him that a plane had flown into the World Trade Center. Within days, F.B.I. agents were knocking on doors in Little Pakistan, leaving business cards with handwritten messages: "Please call. I need to ask you some questions ASAP." They apprehended immigrants at their homes, at their jobs, on the street. Women came into Punjab Grocery at all hours, saying that their son or husband had vanished. Many did not speak English, and rarely left the neighborhood. "Some of these women, for ten, fifteen years, this was their four-block radius—that was it," Razvi said. His father, who often enlisted him to navigate the world outside Little Pakistan, asked him to help these people.

Razvi would call the detention center on Varick Street, in Manhattan, and then the Metropolitan Detention Center in Brooklyn, and then a jail in Passaic, New Jersey. If he still hadn't found the missing man, he'd try the county jails. Before long, he realized that his ignorance about the law wasn't the only reason he was having trouble getting answers. When he gave his name, the response was often something to the effect of: "Whoa. What do you mean your name is Mohammad?" Once, when he called a jail in New Jersey, "they kept me on the phone for over an hour," he said. He began using his high-school nickname, Moe, and found that, when he did, it was easier to get his questions answered.

The F.B.I.'s investigation into the 9/11 attacks became the largest in the Bureau's history. By the following summer, it had led to the arrest of seven hundred and sixty-two immigrants across the country; nearly five hundred were picked up in New York, and two hundred and fifty-four were Pakistani. None of the 9/11 hijackers were from

Pakistan, but law enforcement was concerned by Al Qaeda's presence there. To Razvi, it appeared that many immigrants were arrested simply because they had overstayed their visas. "If they were looking for Jane Doe, they picked up John Doe and everyone else who didn't have immigration paperwork," he said. "They were fishing."

In 2003, the Inspector General of the Justice Department released a report on this group of immigrants, who came to be known as the September 11 Detainees. It supported Razvi's account: "We believe the FBI should have taken more care to distinguish between aliens who it actually suspected of having a connection to terrorism from those aliens who, while possibly guilty of violating federal immigration law, had no connection to terrorism." A second report described the mistreatment of detainees at the Metropolitan Detention Center, where "some officers slammed detainees against the wall, twisted their arms

and hands in painful ways, stepped on their leg restraint chains, and punished them by keeping them restrained for long periods of time." Most of the September 11 Detainees were eventually deported for immigration violations.

In February, 2002, Razvi and his father turned the storefront intended for Punjab Fabrics into a home for COPO. They planned to keep it open for about six months, but, that June, Attorney General John Ashcroft announced the Special Registration Program. Any male visa holder who was over the age of fifteen and a citizen of one of five Muslim countries—Iraq, Iran, Syria, Libya, and Sudan—was required to report to an immigration office, where he would be photographed, fingerprinted, and interviewed under oath. The program soon expanded to include visa holders from twenty-five countries.

In December, 2002, Pakistan was

added to the list, and Razvi held an emergency forum with lawyers from the New York Civil Liberties Union. Hundreds of Pakistani men crowded into the storefront. "This stuff is very, very, very complicated," one of the lawyers said, as Razvi translated his words into Urdu. "There is a possibility that they might arrest you and detain you." Many had overstayed their visas, and even those with pending green-card applications could be deported. By May, 2003, eighty-two thousand men had registered nationwide, and deportation proceedings had begun for more than thirteen thousand of them.

One was Shahid Ali Khan, the father of the disabled boy. Early one February morning, he joined the line of hundreds of men waiting to register with immigration officials at 26 Federal Plaza. Some were able to register without a long wait, but many were held for further questioning. Khan finally left at two o'clock the next morning, carrying a document called a "Notice to Appear," which declared that he was "deportable." The following month, he went before an immigration judge, the first step in the process that eventually led to his detention. Two years later, ICE started deportation proceedings against his wife and son.

Rather than register, thousands of Pakistani men and their families fled Brooklyn; many settled in Canada or returned to Pakistan. In Little Pakistan, Razvi counted thirty businesses that shut down, including a barbershop next to Punjab Grocery. The proprietor simply abandoned his storefront, leaving spray bottles and a brush on the counter. The crowds on Coney Island Avenue vanished. "Special Registration is the thing that killed the community," Razvi told me.

Many of those who stayed behind endured harassment and abuse. In the 2001–02 school year, Razvi's eldest child, Aasma, was in the fifth grade at a public school in Brooklyn. She wore a hijab, which made her a target. "That whole year, I was being bullied by the kid sitting next to me," she said. "He'd say, 'Your father is a terrorist. You need to go back to your country.'" The boy also said that if she told anyone how he spoke to her he would kill her. Aasma,



who is now twenty-six and pursuing a Ph.D. in mental-health counselling, recalled, "I used to hide everything from my father, because I was sure he would get hurt."

The following year, at Aasma's middle school, a boy shoved her down the stairs and pulled off her head scarf. A girl attacked her at a bus stop, pushing her and calling her a "Muslim bitch." Her father happened to be driving by, and when he did a U-turn the girl ran off. Aasma finally told him what had been happening to her. "Oh, my God, did he flip out," she said.

Razvi visited Aasma's schools to report her classmates' behavior, but he felt that his concerns were not taken seriously. He suggested to Aasma that she stop wearing a hijab, as many other girls had done after 9/11. She tried that for one day, but then refused. "I felt so naked," she told me. Razvi often told Aasma and her siblings, "You have nothing to do with 9/11. You have nothing to do with those bad people, and they have nothing to do with our religion." But Aasma remembers thinking, "Yes, I am Muslim, and I am probably responsible for this horrific attack." She became severely depressed.

As Aasma started eighth grade, Razvi enrolled all four of his school-age children in an Islamic school in Queens. "I did what I felt I needed to do just to keep them safe," he said. All the girls at the new school wore hijabs, and Aasma recalls thinking, "It's a dream come true—everyone looks the way I do." But after a few years the family could no longer afford the tuition, which totalled more than twenty-five thousand dollars a year, and eventually all four children returned to public school.

In 2002, the New York City Commission on Human Rights developed a survey to document discrimination against Muslims, Arabs, and South Asians since 9/11. The Council of Peoples Organization was one of several groups that circulated it, and Razvi enlisted his wife and children to help. Aasma handed out copies on Coney Island Avenue, at her school, and at mosques across the city. She recalled her father asking her for help

documenting what was happening to her peers: "Probably they're not telling their parents, like you didn't tell me—but it's very important to find out."

Sarah Sayeed, a community activist, met Razvi around 2003, when she was working with a group called Women in Islam, Inc. "At that point, government really had little understanding of Muslim communities," she said. "You had to be a broker—you had to explain our communities to electeds and agencies." Sayeed, who is now a senior adviser to Mayor Bill de Blasio, recalled that Razvi brought the completed surveys with him to meetings with law-enforcement agents and city officials. "He would carry around this big, thick binder," she said. "It was his documentation, and evidence to say, 'Hey, look, this is what I'm dealing with—our community is in crisis.'"

In 2003, the F.B.I., in an effort to improve its relationship with Muslim communities, began holding town halls and meeting with local leaders. In May, Amy Jo Lyons, a counterterrorism supervisor in the New York office, spoke at Makki Masjid. "We're in a war against terrorism, and we're in it together," she said, according to *Newsday*. That year, an F.B.I. agent recommended that Razvi attend the F.B.I. Citizens Academy, which teaches civilians how the Bureau works. Razvi did so, and afterward he invited agents to set up a table at the Pakistan Independence Day street festival, held each August on Coney Island Avenue. Later, he worked with the F.B.I. to establish an annual career fair, at a Brooklyn community college, where Muslim students learn about jobs in law enforcement.

Diego Redondo, an F.B.I. special agent who oversees the New York office's community-outreach program, said that Razvi plays a "huge role" in the Bureau's efforts. "You can genuinely see he really wants to make things better for the people in his community," Redondo said. In 2012, the Bureau's New York Division nominated Razvi for the Director's Community Leadership Award, and he and his fam-

ily went to Washington, D.C., to attend a ceremony with Robert Mueller, the F.B.I. director at the time.

The N.Y.P.D., too, had been reaching out to Muslim communities. In 2011, though, the A.P. published the first in a series of articles revealing that, since 9/11, the N.Y.P.D.'s Intelligence Division had systematically spied on Muslims. Plainclothes officers mon-

itored cafés and other gathering places, while informants infiltrated mosques and student groups. Many Muslim leaders were outraged when they learned of the surveillance, and demanded the resignation of the N.Y.P.D. commissioner, Raymond Kelly. Razvi was one of the few who publicly

defended the police. Civil-liberties groups filed two lawsuits against the N.Y.P.D. over the program; this spring, the city settled the cases. Still, Razvi maintained his support for some of the surveillance operations. "All of our mosques are open," he told me. "If there is a bad person, we want the N.Y.P.D. inside to make sure it's O.K."

Fahd Ahmed, the executive director of DRUM, a South Asian immigrants'-rights organization in Queens, told me that he thought Razvi's close ties to law enforcement compromised him as a community activist. "There is a commitment to that relationship and essentially to being a legitimizer for law enforcement within our communities," Ahmed said.

Sayeed, the Mayor's adviser, said, "People who were perceived as siding with the police department still haven't won back the trust of the community, in the same way that the police department hasn't fully earned the trust." She added, "It takes a long time to work through these things."

This past February, twelve days after Trump's Inauguration, Razvi sat in his office, where an enormous American flag covers the wall behind his desk. "Today, guess who comes to see me," he said, holding up a white folder labelled "U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement." A woman from ICE's community-relations office had stopped by to introduce herself



and to leave the folder, which contained promotional materials. Razvi said that he told her, referring to ICE, “I’ll be blunt—people hate you.” But he took note of one flyer, about the ICE Detention Reporting and Information Line, and pulled it out to make copies. “I never had this before,” he said. Now, if he heard that an immigrant had disappeared, he would know what number to call first.

Razvi tried to hide his fears about immigration raids, he told me, “because if I show the worry it’s going to be a ripple effect.” False rumors were spreading through Little Pakistan, including one about immigration agents making arrests at the Church Avenue subway station. Strangers were approaching him on the street, to tell him that they were concerned about their legal status and to beg for his help. One Sunday, he spoke to men at a local mosque about what to do if a law-enforcement agent stopped them: “We want you to stay quiet. Say, ‘I won’t answer any more questions until I speak to an attorney.’”

Afterward, the imam told the group that, if they were fearful, maybe they should consider moving to Canada. Razvi was taken aback, though he understood the appeal. A decade earlier, he had visited Toronto and run into the man who had abandoned his barbershop. “He had a house, his own business. He had everything happening for him,” Razvi recalled. “He’s, like, ‘I’m living the American Dream—in Canada!’” Razvi’s brother D.C., who runs a store across the street from Punjab Grocery, heard people talking about moving to Canada every day. “Nobody has actually done it,” he said. “But everyone is preparing.”

At his office, Razvi has dozens of the business cards that F.B.I. agents left at doors in the neighborhood after 9/11, and a red I.D. bracelet that a detainee wore in a New Jersey jail. Seated at his computer, he opened an old document: a twenty-three-page time line of events that followed 9/11, including the introduction of the Special Registration Program and hundreds of arrests and deportations. He said of Trump, “What if he says, ‘O.K., now I want all the Muslims to register?’ That’s triggering in my mind. That’s my fear—going

back to square one.” He went on, “And if, God forbid, something does happen”—if there is another terrorist attack in the U.S.—“what will happen with this Administration? That’s what’s killing me.”

**O**n a Thursday morning this March, Razvi took the subway to the F.B.I.’s New York Field Office, at 26 Federal Plaza, to attend a meeting of an advisory group called the Muslim Leaders Council. The group, which Razvi helped found in 2015, includes an imam from Côte d’Ivoire who runs a mosque in East Harlem, the founder of the Moroccan-American Council to Empower Women, and the imam of the Albanian Islamic Cultural Center of Staten Island. Diego Redondo, of the community-outreach program, told me, “They wanted to be reassured that they still had a positive relationship with the F.B.I.”

That evening, an F.B.I. staff member e-mailed Razvi a statement from a spokesperson, which explained that the Bureau’s authorities “do not extend to immigration matters that are handled by various components of the Department of Homeland Security.” It continued, “We believe it is critical to our mission to have an ongoing, two-way dialogue with the various diverse communities we serve.”



Razvi told me that, when he read the e-mail, “I was so happy. The wording is very, very important to me.”

The next afternoon, he took a stack of copies of the statement to Al-Mahdi, the mosque where he worships. After Friday prayers ended, he grabbed a microphone and announced that he had met with the F.B.I. the day before. “They are not going to be asking anybody about their immigration status or picking them up,” he said, distributing the copies. Razvi headed to Makki Masjid, where hundreds of men were stream-

ing out the doors. He stood on the sidewalk, handing out the statement and receiving appreciative hugs. Afterward, when he was back in his office, a weary-looking man in a black vest and a black jacket walked in. “The famous Mohsin Zaheer!” Razvi said. Zaheer, a reporter for *Sada-e-Pakistan*, a local Urdu-language newspaper, often came to see him after Friday prayers. “You’re one of the persons I should give this paper to,” Razvi said. “Look what they gave me.”

Zaheer read the statement. “This is good, very good,” he said. “Once you scare the community, they’re not going to talk.” For the F.B.I., this was the crucial point. Last year, after Trump claimed that Muslim Americans don’t notify law enforcement about suspicious people in their communities, James Comey, then the F.B.I. director, corrected him. “Some of our most productive relationships are with people who see things and tell us things who happen to be Muslim,” Comey said. “It’s at the heart of the F.B.I.’s effectiveness to have good relationships with these folks.”

**S**ince 9/11, Razvi has worried about the long-term effects on Muslim children of being harassed and abused. He remembered what Aasma had endured in school, and feared that another child in the same situation might turn to violence later in life. “As adults, we can understand and relate to hate crimes at this moment, but the kids—it’s going to burn in their memories,” he said. “You’re just not going to be able to erase that.”

On Sundays, the Moroccan-American Council to Empower Women holds Arabic classes for children at COPO. By March, a few of the students had reported being targeted in public schools. Razvi brought in three city officials, including Detective Mohamed Amen, from the N.Y.P.D.’s Community Affairs Bureau. Amen, who was born in Egypt and has a law degree from Cairo University, spoke to the students in a mixture of Arabic and English, telling them, “Be proud of who you are. We are American, and we are Muslim. Be very proud.”

There were about forty children in the room, most of them in elementary or middle school, and several mothers.

A tall boy raised his hand, stood, and asked, “What if the President told all the police and the F.B.I. to, um, like, harassinate people—are you going to do that?”

Amen said, “President Trump, he is our President. I can’t deny that. He can command federal agencies—meaning the F.B.I., immigration enforcement—but he cannot direct the New York City Police Department.” He added, “Our rules and regulations tell us not to stop someone based on their immigration status.”

The youngest children were wriggling in their chairs. “I want everyone to know that this is your police department, O.K.? This is your city,” Amen said. “You guys are future leaders. You know that, right?” He went on, “You’ve got to show them who you are, what you’re made of, in everything. Your behavior at school should be the best. Your look, your smell . . . Everything should be the best that you are, O.K.? That’s very important. Then, *Inshallah*, through your success, you’re going to prove everybody wrong.”

He asked, “Who’s going to promise me here to become a senator?” Three children put up their hands. “Who’s going to become a lawyer?” Four hands went up. “Who’s going to become a doctor?” Five hands.

When the children had finished asking questions, the mothers, all wearing hijabs, started raising their hands. One said that a man in a passing car had “called me names, bad names, in front of my kids—he called me bin Laden!” A pregnant woman, wearing a floral-print head scarf, stood, with her young daughter clinging to her leg. She explained that she was a “working mom,” and described a recent encounter on a subway platform. “Somebody was about to hit me,” she said. “Thank God, I escaped.” About a week later, she saw the same man, and noticed that he was looking at her again. “I don’t know what to do,” she said.

**O**n Thursday, June 8th, Shahid Ali Khan walked into Razvi’s office, wearing a white dress shirt, gray slacks, and black leather shoes. When he sat in a chair facing Razvi’s desk, he looked defeated. “I’m coming from Federal Plaza,” he said.



Khan, his wife, and his son had just left the ICE Enforcement and Removal Field Office, where they were required to appear every nine months. Their deportation orders were still in place, but each year the family’s attorney, Elinor Drucker Rahmani, had requested a “stay of removal,” and each time the request had been approved. “But this time they tell me, ‘You have no chance,’” Khan said.

“How many days?” Razvi asked.

“They gave me only until July 6th to go back.”

Razvi pushed a box of tissues across his desk. As Khan sat in silence, pressing a tissue to his eyes, Razvi found the *Newsday* story about Khan and the thank-you card that Mansoor had made, and went to scan them. He wanted to send them to ICE.

Back in Islamabad, Khan had owned a house and two pieces of land. But over the years he sold them to help cover his son’s medical expenses. In 2007, he started driving a yellow cab. After saving a few thousand dollars to buy a used car, he began driving for Lyft and Juno this year, and he now takes home about four hundred dollars a week.

Mansoor, who is twenty-two, attended a public school for children with special needs, where he received speech, physical, and occupational therapy, and he continues to see special-

ists at Mount Sinai Medical Center. He can now speak, although it’s not always easy for strangers to understand him. When he was fourteen, he stopped using a feeding tube. By last year, he no longer needed a wheelchair, although his gait remains unsteady. Still, Khan noted, “He cannot do anything himself. If he goes to the bathroom, we help him.” He gestured toward his shoes. “He cannot tie the laces.” His physicians have said that it is essential that the family remain in the U.S., because Mansoor would not be able to receive the necessary treatment in Pakistan.

Drucker Rahmani was with them that day at ICE. She called Khan, and after they spoke briefly he handed the phone to Razvi. By now, Razvi was blinking back tears. He told Drucker Rahmani that he wanted to write to a contact at ICE; she explained that first she needed to file another request for a stay of deportation. She told me that she was not optimistic. “The political climate is a lot different now,” she said.

As Razvi worked at his computer, Khan sat silently, staring at the floor, hands clasped in his lap. On July 6th, the family will return to the ICE office. Ultimately, if the government doesn’t grant them a reprieve, immigration agents will put the family on a plane back to Pakistan. “Go home and pray,” Razvi told Khan. “I’m going to pray, too.” ♦

# RAMBLING MAN

*The indie-rock provocateur Father John Misty explains himself.*

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN

In the chronicles of Father John Misty, the thirty-six-year-old singer-songwriter whose real name is Josh Tillman, the cardinal psychedelic encounter has him naked in a tree, in Big Sur, in 2010, zonked on magic mushrooms. At the time, Tillman was the drummer for Fleet Foxes, the popular indie folk band, and was living in Seattle. He'd also made eight mostly neglected albums of gloomy folk music under the name J. Tillman. Amid interpersonal discord, creative frustration, and turning-thirty discontent, he split town in an Econoline van, with a big bag of mushrooms, and meandered down the coast. One day, he went for a hike, and, as the psilocybin kicked in, he began to shed layers of clothing, until he found himself perched on a limb, stripped bare before an indifferent universe. Scratching himself, he thought, I'm an albino ape, and I can do whatever I want. He realized that he didn't have to identify himself exclusively with his disappointments as a musician or with his bitterness about being in someone else's band: "I should just be myself." "Myself" was a funnier, more playful, more self-lacerating—and just plain lacerating—version of whoever he'd tried to be as J. Tillman. He returned to Seattle, packed up his things, moved to Los Angeles, and started working on a novel. He recognized his voice in it, in a way that he hadn't in his music. After a while, he picked up a guitar and started writing songs again, and these, too, seemed different. One of the songs was a country-rocker called "I'm Writing a Novel." The hook went, "I'm writing a novel, because it's never been done before."

This is when he invented the alter ego of Father John Misty—or, in his rendering, discovered a truer self and gave it a name. The moniker, he has often said, is a random and admittedly silly collection of syllables. But it ac-

commades his unease about the role of the singer-songwriter and the characters one has to play onstage. "There's something innately false about performance," he told me. "I wanted to be authentically bogus rather than bogusly authentic."

The first Father John Misty album, "Fear Fun," came out in 2012. Critics loved it. It was a fresh-sounding folk-rock record full of witty, withering songs about Tillman's decadent adventures in Hollywood. His clear tenor served as a gorgeous deadpan. He'd found a way to be both flamboyant and self-deprecating, to make art out of making fun of himself and others like him who were engaged in the vain act of making art. A pair of foldup four-by-four-foot posters included in the vinyl release of the album contained, in impossibly small script, the text of that novel, which he called "Mostly Hypothetical Mountains." "I liked relegating this thing I'd worked really hard on to a gag," he said recently.

Two more albums followed—"I Love You, Honeybear," in 2015, and "Pure Comedy," this spring. Along the way, the creation of the semi-satirical Father John Misty persona, this handsome devil with a big beard and a forked tongue, had put in motion a cycle of provocation and retort that became a kind of performance art, played out mainly on the Internet—in the corner of it, anyway, that's obsessed with the poses and codes of indie musicians. He tangled with his critics, pulled social-media pranks, and gave loquacious high-wire interviews while drunk or high, often dropping pretentious or contentious pronouncements. He could seem to be in control of all this, even as he himself often appeared to be out of control: simultaneously conductor and train wreck. He'd built a post-modern fun house. Some came to love him more because of the bluster and

brag, or to like him in spite of it, but many declared him insufferable. Whatever the case, people were talking about him. He'd become a meme, as he later put it, in a mocking kind of way—think-piece catnip, a Miley Cyrus for the clever kids. He'd invited you to say Father John Misty is what you'd get if Harry Nilsson, Loudon Wainwright III, James Taylor, Elton John, Randy Newman, Kanye West, Jim Morrison, Eminem, Captain Beefheart, and Warren Zevon had a baby.

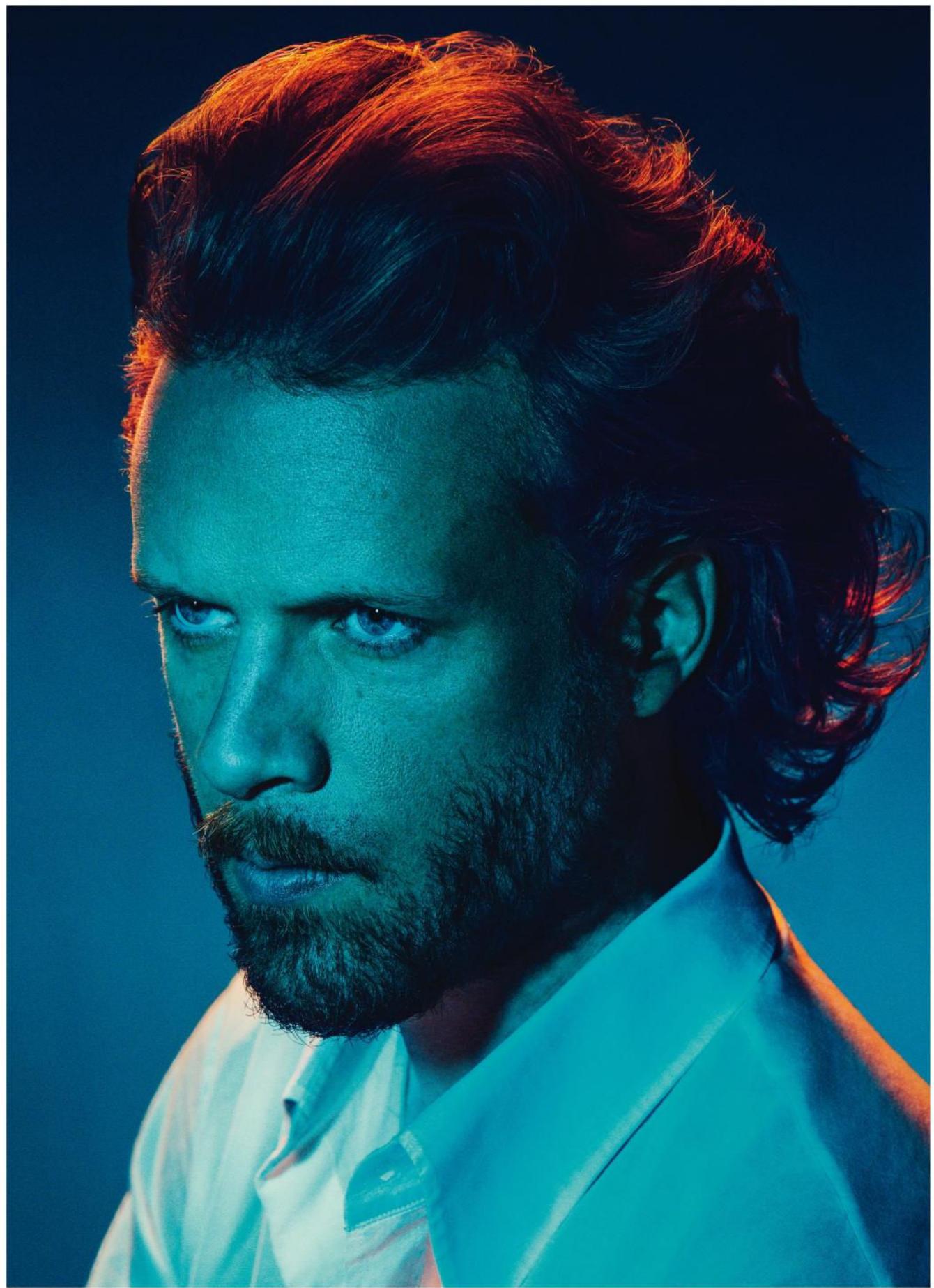
His feelings about all this could change from day to day. Sometimes he seemed almost to be hate-watching himself. One afternoon, Tillman sent me a text:

This just  
Takes  
The  
Cake

"This" was a link to a column by the eminent critic Greil Marcus, on Pitchfork, the music Web site. "Father John Misty is a *persona*, one of those people . . . who *perform as*—who perform as artists of such pretentiousness you couldn't possibly figure out how to talk to them," Marcus wrote. "Such characters allow themselves to appear as if touched by God, which is what they're selling, and laugh at you if you're so square not to know who they really are: to join their club."

"Of all people, GREIL MARCUS is getting hung up on persona," Tillman texted me. "What a fucking dum dum." Dylan, Johnny Rotten, Madonna, Sun Ra: everyone makes a mask. A couple of decades earlier, Marcus had written, "Perhaps the most pernicious strain of contemporary criticism says one thing before it says anything else, says it to whatever historical event or cultural happenstance is supposedly at issue: 'You can't fool me.'"

The presumption tends to be that



*“Songwriting is like encountering a bear in the woods,” Tillman said. “Your body knows before your mind does.”*

Tillman is playing tricks, putting one over on us. Listeners can get their backs up: You can't fool me. "People think I'm toying with them, playing twelve-dimensional chess," Tillman said. "And if you take it that way, and you think I'm despicable as a result, I get it, because that is a despicable thing to do. But you're not getting suckered."

**L**ife is album cycles—at least, for a recording artist, in a life without seasons or weekends or kids. An album cycle is the period from the completion of recording, through the rollout and the press campaign, to the last gig on the tour. In April, when I first met Tillman, he'd just released "Pure Comedy." The ever-evolving argument about him was in full swing.

A month earlier, he'd performed a couple of songs on "Saturday Night Live," including the title track, which begins the album:

The comedy of man starts like this  
Our brains are way too big for our  
mothers' hips  
And so Nature, she divines this alternative  
We emerge half-formed and hope that  
whoever greets us on the other end  
Is kind enough to fill us in  
And, babies, that's pretty much how it's  
been ever since.

He also played "Total Entertainment Forever," a peppy/apocalyptic indictment of our addiction to amusement, which had already gained some notoriety for its creepy opening couplets: "Bedding Taylor Swift / every night inside the Oculus Rift / After mister and the missus / finish dinner and the dishes." The song—and perhaps the comedy of man—ends like this:

When the historians find us  
we'll be in our homes  
Plugged into our hubs  
Skin and bones  
A frozen smile on every face  
As the stories replay.  
This must have been a wonderful place.

The performances were polished, even though he had consumed an unholy cocktail of chemicals. (Later, each time he or his band and crew mentioned that night in my presence they made that universal wide-eyed oh-boy expression of recollected intemperance.) As ever, his pitch was perfect and his look was sharp—his hair swept

back above his forehead, in a borderline pompadour, and his trademark beard replaced by a mustache. He did his customary wriggly dance moves: Jaggerish swirls and poses that come off as (and actually seem to be) both ironic and sincere.

"If you can't hold two ideas in your head at the same time, you're not going to get what I do," he said in April. He'd picked me up on Second Avenue in a livery cab, for a trip out of town. He had on black stovepipe jeans with a small hole in one knee, brown suède pointy zip-up boots, a black T-shirt, and a gray Lemaire overcoat. ("I don't like sports, I don't fix cars, so I just buy clothes," he said.) He was pretzeled in back, a tall man in a small car. From time to time, he cracked his knuckles. "I try to avoid talking about the perception of me in the press," he told me. "It creates this feedback loop." It may be that he doesn't try hard enough. He has a droll, almost effete way of speaking, which he moderates by making fun of himself or of the whole construct of giving interviews. He says, "Brackets, laughs bitterly" to convey some degree of irony or self-loathing. Pronouncement, caveat, thrust, parry. "Once you're on the hamster wheel of self-justification, it's hard to get off," Tillman said. "You're, like, I can fix this interview with the next interviews."

Tillman, by now, had been marinating in the "Pure Comedy" material, and the ideas behind it, for several years. Its origins go back two album cycles, to 2013, when he and his wife, Emma, a filmmaker and photographer, were newly married and living in Echo Park, Los Angeles, in a two-hundred-and-fifty-square-foot adobe house on top of a hill, abutting Elysian Park—urban rustics, living half outdoors. They had a potting shed, where Tillman was writing "I Love You, Honeybear," largely about what was going on in that adobe. The extended tour for "Fear Fun," a decadent slog, with a band whose members have, for the most part, since been replaced, had netted Tillman only four hundred dollars. So he went back out on the road with just Emma and the comedian Kate Berlant. Tillman had got a little carried away with the rock-and-roll life style. In his telling, he'd become a "speed freak"—cocaine and

Adderall. "I was gray," he told me. "I was beat down. I thought, I need to take a year off." When the tour took them through New Orleans, he and Emma hatched a plan to retreat there.

Tillman went cold turkey—he even quit the Internet—and, at dawn on New Year's Day, 2014, they left Los Angeles in a U-Haul and drove east. (Some of this is depicted in a thirteen-minute ballad called "Leaving LA," "Pure Comedy's" centerpiece and, for some, because of its length, the album's greatest stumbling block.) They found a rambling old house in the Bywater, for the same monthly rent as their Echo Park hut. Tillman fell into a depression, wandering around the house in his bathrobe, doing little besides reading and the crossword. Emma was writing a screenplay, at least, and taking pictures. She'd grown up without any siblings on a sailboat in Santa Barbara (her father is a sailmaker); she knew how to occupy herself. "But it was difficult for Josh," she told me. "Music is his life. It's the only thing he likes to do. And he genuinely thought he'd never make anything again."

He'd been battling depression since he was a teen-ager. "It's hard to talk about," he said. "I get this thought where there's someone out there whose real depression I'm doing a disservice to."

After six months, they bought a piano at a junk shop for five hundred dollars, and Tillman taught himself to play. Messing around, he soon found that he was writing songs again. "Songwriting is like encountering a bear in the woods: your body knows before your mind does," he said. "When you drink that much and do that much speed, it takes a while for your emotions to come back on line. 'Pure Comedy,' or the first half of it, anyway, was created in this emotional bubble. I'd been walking up and down Bourbon Street, sober, observing the collective state of stupor—people puking neon purple. It felt like the edge of the country, the edge of the world."

His previous records had been written in real time. For "Fear Fun," he'd go out, raise hell, come home late, and write about it until dawn. For "Honeybear," he chronicled his romance with Emma as it mutated into a marriage. (He wrote the song "Holy Shit" on the

eve of his wedding day: “Maybe love is just an economy based on resource scarcity/What I fail to see is what that’s got to do with you and me.”) For “Pure Comedy,” he sat at the piano for hours at a time, thinking about the human experiment from a distant vantage, as though from space.

By the time he began recording, last year, with the producer Jonathan Wilson, with whom he’d made his previous two albums, he’d been honing and rehearsing the songs for more than a year. (He’d also forsaken sobriety—selectively.) Thomas Bartlett, a producer and pianist who performs under the name Doveman, and who plays piano on the album, said, “Josh knew exactly how those songs were supposed to go, in a way that was almost irritating. He’d lived with these songs in a really intense way.” Tillman and Wilson wanted to be so fluent with the material that they could record it while tripping on LSD—to give the thing a little sprinkle of magic,” as Wilson put it.

“Josh was in tears a goodly amount of the time,” Bartlett said. “I love the part of him that’s ready to have an ecstatic experience.”

Tillman was single-minded even about the cover art. He sent an e-mail to Ed Steed, his favorite cartoonist. “I hadn’t heard of him,” Steed told me. “I Googled the name and saw a beard man with an acoustic. Thought, I know what this is going to be.” He clicked on a video of “I’m Writing a Novel.” “My assumptions were wrong. It was funny, sexy, great.”

Tillman sent Steed a link to his performance of “Bored in the USA,” a song from “Honeybear,” a few years ago on Letterman: Tillman starts the song at a piano. When he swivels away, another camera shot reveals it to be a player piano. “Here’s one I have a feeling you’ll appreciate,” he told Steed.

Steed also checked out the earlier J. Tillman stuff. “That’s what I had been expecting when I saw his photo. Self-important, gloomy.” He added, “I’m sure people will criticize F.J.M. for being egocentric, self-absorbed, but I find the J. Tillman stuff much more deserving of that criticism.”

Tillman sent him the first half of “Pure Comedy,” requesting only two things: an image, somewhere, of a skel-



eton pissing into a dumpster fire and another conveying some smidgen of hope. “Hope is a powerful ingredient,” Tillman said. “Just a little is all you need. It’s like adding vanilla bean to something.” Steed drew a dense Hieronymus Bosch-like carnival of depravities and horrors. In the middle of it, a naked couple embrace on a blanket, a manifestation of the album’s faint valedictory message that, as one song puts it, “each other’s all we got.”

The album, in its sardonic despair, was widely considered, on release, to be a commentary on the age of Trump, but it was written and recorded before Trump was elected, and its bemusement and scorn aren’t limited to any particular person or party. Tillman belongs to the school of thought that believes Trump is a symptom, the leader we deserve. The world is the way it is because this is the way we want it to be. Anyway, he readily acknowledges that the observations about our vanity, greed, and violence, the folly and absurdity of existence, and the fraudulence and hypocrisy of the media, politics, entertainment, and religion aren’t exactly new. But Voltaire and Lenny Bruce, they didn’t make self-conscious

folk rock. “The content isn’t that outrageous,” Tillman said. “It’s a question of whether I have the right to say it”—whether the world wants to hear from “another white guy in 2017 who takes himself so goddam seriously,” as he sings in “Leaving LA.”

“This album isn’t a delivery system for my ideas,” Tillman says. Then he’ll say that the best summation of his ideas is the album. One can certainly strive to keep both assertions in mind at the same time.

In July, a day after Trump accepted the Republican nomination, Tillman, coming off an all-nighter, took the stage at a festival in Camden, New Jersey, and launched into a harangue about the politico-entertainment complex. “Do we think our hilarious tyrant is going to be met with a hilarious revolution led by hilarious revolutionaries and the whole thing is gonna be, like, entertaining as fuck the whole time?” he asked from the stage. “I always thought that it was going to look way more sophisticated than this when evil happened.” Someone called out, “Play a song!,” but he kept going, a lot of it a paraphrase of the lyrics in “Pure Comedy,” which was still months from

being released. Eventually, he played “Leaving LA,” which people mistook for ad-libbing, and a cover of Leonard Cohen’s “Bird on the Wire.” Then he pulled a Yeezy and quit the stage, leaving his paycheck behind. The ensuing Twitter bombardment went on for days, with Tillman popping up now and then to lay down some covering fire, until a certain fatigue set in. Tillman was offended by any suggestion that his behavior was a cynical ploy for attention, that it was anything other than an honest meltdown, albeit an artful one. He told me, “My attitude is, whatever I decide to do onstage, that’s my show.”

“Ever been to a Christian university?” Tillman asked. We were in the livery cab, en route to Nyack College, an evangelical school twenty miles north of Manhattan. He dropped out of Nyack in the spring of 2002, and hadn’t been back since.

Tillman was reared in a strict and turbulent evangelical Christian house-

hold, in Rockville, Maryland, and, in many respects, his career is an elaborate, improvised rebellion against it. His mother, Barbara, grew up mostly in Ethiopia, the daughter of missionaries. His father, I.C., is an engineer at Hewlett-Packard. They met at a Christian youth group, in Maryland, when they were in junior high, after I.C. had declared himself to be born again.

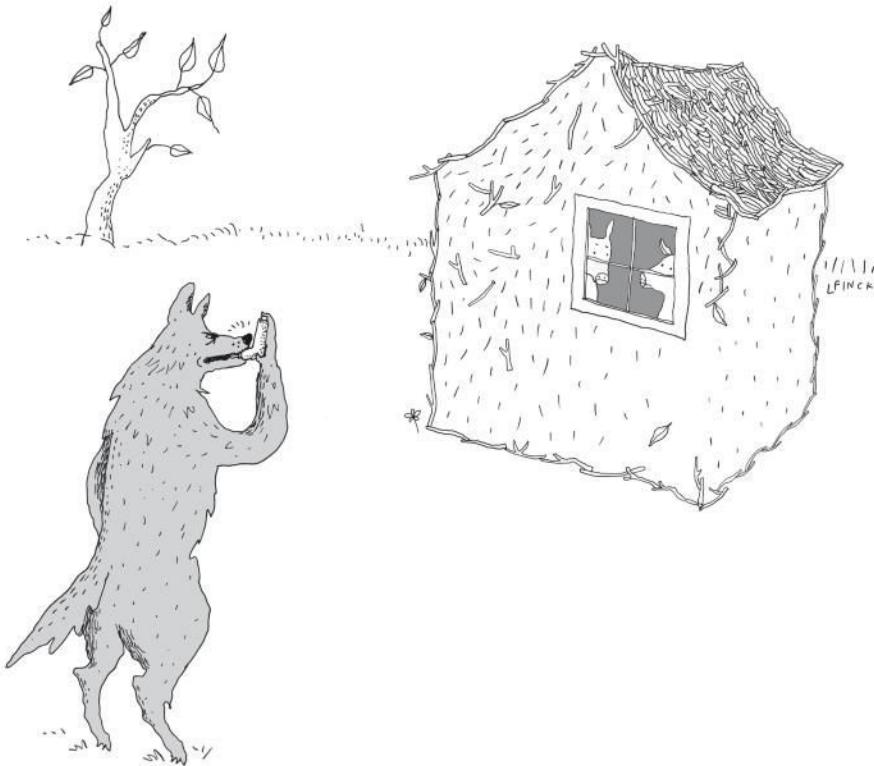
Josh is the oldest of four children (he has a brother, Zachary, who is sixteen months younger, and two sisters, Kelci and Amanda, younger by seven and fourteen years) and as a result apparently bore the brunt of his parents’ piety. He doesn’t much like to talk about it in great detail, for fear of being entangled in it again. (He speaks with his parents every few years.) He has always been game, anyway, to talk about the household ban on secular pop music. When the boys were in high school, their father removed the car stereo, to keep them from listening on their drives to and from school.

They picked up what music they could at friends’ houses or on a portable radio under the covers, and managed to sneak in a few CDs (Doc Watson, Bob Dylan) under the pretext that they were Christian rock. Josh remembers his father instructing him to smash a Red Hot Chili Peppers album to bits. Josh had come across the band on a pizzeria jukebox. (Barbara Tillman denies that her children’s upbringing was strict, or that there was any ban on secular music. “I.C. was playing pop music all the time!” she said.) All this left him, as he once said, with “a bazillion musical blind spots,” and no real connection to the pop culture of the time. “I feel nothing when I hear Michael Jackson,” he told me. “I never put the Smiths on.” Such deprivation nonetheless begat a pop-culture savant, remarkably adroit at reading and fooling around with the signs and styles: a Horatio Alger story of Generation MTV.

There was always worship music. It laid the groundwork and still informs the act. His father played acoustic guitar, and his mother sang. He was encouraged to take up the drums, to burn off excess energy. Zach picked up the bass. The Tillman boys sang and played in church. “I remember swelling the cymbals, watching people get more and more agitated by the spirit,” Tillman said. “My brother and I looked at each other, exchanging that ‘Can you believe this?’ look. At that age, you’re so binary with the recognition of hypocrisy, so we were, like, This is a total scam.”

Josh’s education was an odyssey of religious and secular schools, notably five years in a small non-accredited Messianic Pentecostal Jewish school. There was speaking in tongues, laying on of hands, baptism by fire, slaying of the spirit—his first psychedelic experiences, in a way. He was told that he was possessed by demons. But, if he was possessed by anything, it was anxiety and fear of drama at home. “When I was a kid, like fourteen, I mastered the art of shutting down completely,” he told me. “I was terrified.”

He didn’t give any thought to college. “I sort of assumed I was just going to pack up a bindle sack and start



roaming the earth," he said. "My parents went crazy with rage." A member of their church was on the board at Nyack College, and helped get Tillman a spot.

"O h my God, these poor children," Tillman said when we reached the Nyack campus. He needed a cigarette. "We don't want to be busted," he said, and so he crossed the road, wandered down a suburban lane, and, half hidden by a stand of bamboo, sucked down a couple of American Spirits—a long, lean gent in an overcoat, with a roué's mustache, smoking in the shadows near the missionary college.

He hadn't told anyone he was coming. We slipped into the chapel as it was filling up with students and slid into a pew in back. We were soon surrounded by athletes, mostly women. Softball uniforms, lacrosse sticks. "More multicultural than when I was here, but it's basically the same 'Breakfast Club' demographic," he observed. "The ones you really gotta look out for are the fetishists of the individual. The ones with the pierced noses and dyed hair, the leather jacket or the studded belt. They've made the concession to rebellion. They're the ones who go on to become pastors. They're the real little monsters." He kept going, in a kind of stage whisper, "Here's the thing that drove me insane: what is it about Christianity, or this version of it, that is so compatible with late-era capitalism, the cult of the self, the commercial-humanist idea of individuality? Christianity is an adaptable avatar for these social movements. It's very good at resembling the scenery."

Tillman paused. Students were hugging. "That being said, there is no analogue for this in the secular world. The electricity in the air, the pre-service buzz, is a total narcotic to me."

On a stage at the front of the chapel were some unattended instruments: a guitar, a drum kit, two pianos, and a row of music stands. "What you're about to hear is going to sound an awful lot like Coldplay," he said. "A lot of indie rock skews closely to worship music. This style of worship music operates on a ten-year cultural lag."

Eight musicians began to play.

"Ooh, kind of a Steely Dan vibe," Tillman said. He sang along for a while, supplying a high harmony. The singer was playing one of those electric keyboards that hang from your shoulder like a guitar. "Dude, he is leading worship with a fucking keytar."

Tillman arrived at Nyack in 1999. "I was here when 9/11 happened," he said. "The soccer field was full of students gnashing their teeth and asking God for forgiveness for a culture of homosexuality. That began a crazy year here, wild stuff. A whole lot of prophesying. It was widely believed that in May the spirit of God was going to fall on America. The day came, and there were a hundred people in the field, waiting for the national revival."

The keytarist was improvising a prayer: "We praise you, God, there's no one like you. We want you to invade our lives, God, and to be yourself."

"This is heartbreaking," Tillman said. "Ten years ago, I would've had a panic attack, coming here. Well, actually, ten years ago a friend took me to church and I did have a panic attack."

A junior from the Youth & Family Studies Department stood to deliver a PowerPoint sermon called "Satisfaction in Christ." "Boring," Tillman said, after a few minutes. He stood to leave. "When you live in this psychotic cloud of nonsense, the only way to combat it is with clear thinking."

"I can't even tell you how unhappy I was at this place," he said outside. "Sex was not even within the realm of the possible. I was a virgin till I was twenty-two."

"I'm a very bizarre mix of variables," he went on. "People see a caricature of a white know-it-all. But I'm not overeducated. I'm not some kind of blueblood. I didn't grow up in some bohemian enclave with an artsy outlet. There were zero examples. Anything you hear me say about religion in my songs is incredibly hard-won. I have license to be even more judgmental about it than I am. And it's not purely conceptual. This is me. And there's nothing 'cool' about it.

There is something weirdly, cellularly conservative in me. You can only run so far."

When Tillman dropped out of Nyack, in 2002, he hitched a ride to Seattle with a drummer he knew. He lived in the drummer's brother's basement. He donated plasma, worked construction, and washed dishes. Seattle

was soon to be the epicenter of an indie-folk renaissance—Neil Young acolytes in ponchos and heavy sweatshirts, with monkish beards and mulled wine. The singing was pretty, the sentiment serious, the mood gentle, if a touch druidic—a post-grunge over-correction, maybe. Soon, Tillman was writing his own

disconsolate songs, recording them at night before taking the dawn shift at a local bakery. A demo tape reached Damien Jurado, a singer-songwriter with a small but reverent following, who asked Tillman to join him on tour. There followed a series of J. Tillman records—eight in all, in about as many years—on a series of labels, plus occasional tours with other bands. His brother, Zach, had moved to Seattle, too, and they lived together for a while in the University District and played on each other's recordings and at each other's gigs. People knew about J. Tillman, he had admirers, but despite the persistence nothing quite took. "That stuff, it was a huge inspiration to me, but it's not getting anyone's dick hard," Zach told me. "He'd play these sets of sparse, dry material, and then between songs he'd light the room up with his humor, and then he'd sink back into the music."

In 2008, Fleet Foxes, an ascendant Seattle pop-folk troupe characterized by high harmonies, heavy reverb, and delicate, layered orchestration, asked Tillman to sign on as their new drummer. He had the voice and the beard for it. The band was about to release its first album. He quit the construction job and toured with them, as the record garnered year's-best acclaim. Here was industry success: a global audience, a thriving partnership, real money, and even love, of a kind. (Aja Pecknold, the band's manager and the older sister of the band's leader, Robin



Pecknold, had become his girlfriend.) But, as work commenced on the next album, "Helplessness Blues," the collaboration began to fray. Tillman was still making his own music and chafing at the supporting role. "We all started hating each other," he told the *Guardian*. "A lot of people have complicated relationships with Robin," he told me. "I don't wanna talk about it." Pecknold, for his part, recently told *Rolling Stone* that he hasn't listened to Tillman's music—"like, intentionally."

Videos of the band's live performances from this time show a sullen drummer, scowling and crossing his arms between songs. Singing such moonlit, almost twee material amid such acrimony felt counterfeit to him. In 2012, while the band was in Japan, Tillman announced that the next show, in Tokyo, would be his last. "Back into the gaping maw of obscurity I go," he wrote, on his Tumblr. Toward the end of the second-to-last gig, he kicked over his drum set and stalked off the stage. He wound up sobbing in the arms of the band's keyboard player, as Pecknold improvised a few songs solo.

Tillman and Emma recently moved to Laurel Canyon, to a two-bedroom house at the end of a cul-de-sac. He'd lived in the neighborhood when he first moved to Los Angeles, and critics drew the inevitable line back to fabled predecessors—Gram Parsons, Joni Mitchell, Crosby, Stills, and Nash. "Yes, that 'unmistakable Laurel Canyon sound,'" Tillman said. "The sound of Laurel Canyon is entertainment lawyers screaming at their dogs."

As spring went on, the album cycle called for rehearsals. Tillman gathered his band at S.I.R. Studios, on Sunset Boulevard, in preparation for an appearance at Coachella and then a round of theatre gigs. He'd selected these theatres because he had been planning to put on a musical of "Pure Comedy," and he wanted the band to be in an orchestra pit. "There were to be trucks full of twelve-foot-tall therapist puppets and giant banana-peel costumes driving around the country," he told me. "I had builders ready to make sets." He'd written the musical, he said, "to contextualize the record in its comedy and absurdity, and to drive home how personal it

is." "Personal" seemed a mild way of putting it. His description of the musical made it sound like a Robert Wilson fever dream—on acid. He was to appear onstage as Father John Misty playing the role of Josh Tillman, while the character of Father John Misty was to be played by a troupe of dancers. "Father John Misty and child Josh Tillman are Jungian shadow selves," he said. "One exists because of the other. They do horrible things to protect each other. And when they meet they die." He had them, at the end, drowning in a leaky rowboat.

In February, he had been aboard a flight with his choreographer, en route to New York to audition dancers. "She asked me a question: 'So why in this scene do you have these Girl Scouts sexually assaulting Mother Earth?' And I had a panic attack. I was, like, I have to get off this plane. But, obviously, I couldn't. So, I thought, I have to have a cigarette. Couldn't do that, either. So I went to the bathroom and e-mailed my manager and said the musical was off."

Still, he kept the dates. He'd play rock concerts instead. The arrangements on the album are mostly sparse, to emphasize the vocals, but onstage Tillman goes for a heftier sound; he aims to entertain. He'd be touring with

## NOW WE EAT THE DARK VEIN

The first legs are minute claws,  
small hands, cheliped.  
Following are the walking legs  
and swimmerets, then tail and flipper—  
all of which I peel.  
Then put into the mix  
of buttermilk and egg  
the contradicted body,  
on which there was clawed hand for leg.  
Shrimpers worked in the night  
with simple lights offshore  
our land, to trawl and bring to land  
what once was the living thing,  
complex in even its primal tract.  
Elemented and soiled, not yet voided.  
*Gulf Shrimp 16/20 Count*  
*Regular \$16.99/lb.*  
*You save \$4*  
*Valid 7/29-7/31.*  
A deal. Whole Foods.

horn and string sections, plus his regulars: a bass player, two guitarists, two keyboardists, and a drummer. At S.I.R., the day I visited, word got around that Kiss and the Foo Fighters were rehearsing in the studios next door. You could hear muffled arena rock in the halls. "If a meteor hit this place, it'd be the end of the male gaze," Tillman said.

Tillman has an easy rapport with the guys in his band, who are crack musicians and who, in a few cases, have their own recording careers. (They seem more comfortable with the arrangement than he did as a Fleet Fox.) Tillman had on snakeskin loafers, no socks, the black jeans, and a white shirt with the top few buttons undone. He and his team had learned, earlier that day, that "Pure Comedy" had reached No. 10 on the *Billboard* pop chart, and was the No. 1 album on the Rock, Alternative, and Americana charts as well. That this was the product of just thirty-five thousand units, in the first week, didn't dim the thrill of having a hit.

They ran through a song called "Strange Encounter," from "I Love You, Honeybear," about the aftermath of a one-night stand. It begins, "Only ever be the girl who almost died in my house." In a section after the chorus ("The moment you came to, I swore I would

To shake in a bag of panko  
and fry in my FryDaddy,  
though neglecting to debride, remove the vein.  
And for my puppy Summa  
there is the sac of gonads—  
male or female, I know not which—  
glistening memento of pursuit, colonizing  
whithero tide or tidings sway.  
As in the affairs of men,  
*no gulf stream setting forever in one direction.*  
Firm truth, but in the same stream of news  
truths halved, quartered, nulled.  
Walls cellular, membranes of containment,  
and walls tremendous, storied,  
clichés and claims abundant, ample for the need.  
All with specifics, contradictions we vote.  
Oh, my country, my country.  
Now we eat the dark vein  
of ruin that runs  
lengthwise.

—James Seay

change”), Tillman stopped and said, “Don’t just truck through that bit. Let’s play that section on a loop till it sounds slinky. Let’s pretty that bitch up!”

Someone dimmed the lights. Next up was “Fun Times in Babylon,” the first song from “Fear Fun.” He sings, in a sad kind of way, “Look out, Hollywood, here I come.” (The music video has him strolling through the smoldering wreckage of an airplane crash, a set left over from Steven Spielberg’s “War of the Worlds.”) Even in the absence of an audience, he threw in some wags of his ass and wristy gestures. Mostly, though, he stood still and made his serious singer-at-work face: lips pursed, nostrils flaring slightly, eyes trained on the middle distance.

At one point, Dave Grohl, of the Foo Fighters, appeared in the studio. He and Tillman talked near Tillman’s microphone stand. They’d never met, but Grohl acted as if they had—the old assumption that all celebrities know one another, or, at least, drummers from iconic Seattle bands who have gone on to have big careers of their own—while Tillman’s nonchalance edged into indifference. As Grohl was leaving, Tillman called out, “You’re welcome to come in anytime and listen to some folk rock!”

“Feel free to turn on some lights,” Grohl said.

purpose does trolling actually serve? In a word: control.” And then, “Trolling creates a window of freedom through which artists can do whatever they’d like for a limited time: While false leads are being chased, they can live their real lives.”

“So obtuse,” Spencer said. “It was basically a fart joke.”

“Wait to see how those words look on the Internet,” Tillman said.

Tillman often marvels that people take such interest in him—that, for example, a trio of Chicago critics would devote a podcast of more than two hours to the question of whether he is an asshole. (The conclusion seemed to be yes; even the host, a fan, had to concede so, though she did not endorse one panelist’s hot take that Misty is Trump.) And yet Tillman can’t help poking the bear. Salient attention-seeking escapades include a mock confession, via Instagram, to the apparent theft of a valuable rose-quartz crystal from a Moon Juice shop in Silver Lake; a press release, picked up by the *Times*, regarding a made-up visitation, in a dream, from Lou Reed; the merchandising of a Misty line of fragrance called Innocence; a video in which Tillman picks himself up in a bar and goes to bed with himself; and, recently, his dissemination of a new development in the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, which had him involved in the Satanist-pedophilia ring based in a D.C. pizzeria. Once, when I was talking to Tillman or, rather, listening to him talk, at length, about himself, and the misperceptions that keep springing up around him, he suddenly said, “Aw, fuck it, that’s enough.” He began singing a little ditty in a froggy voice: “Everybody’s my therapist. Everybody’s my therapist.”

Spencer and Tillman left S.I.R. Studios together. In the parking lot, they saw Gene Simmons in an Escalade, taking a nap. They took Tillman’s car, a black 1999 Jaguar XJ8, which he’d bought for three thousand dollars. (Emma has one, too. It replaced an old Cadillac hearse. The Misty vehicles are part of the lore.) There was a yoga mat on the back seat and a pile of parking tickets on the floor. Crawling down Hollywood Boulevard, they spoke dryly of eminences they held in less than high regard. David Crosby. Art Garfunkel. Tillman

remembered a night when Garfunkel visited Fleet Foxes backstage after a show: “The first thing he says, ‘Isn’t it great to hear that sold-out crowd cheering, so you know business is booming?’”

“He also said, ‘I hear you’ve been ripping me off.’”

They were quiet a moment. “Music attracts more decent people nowadays, much to its detriment,” Tillman said. “Boring guys who make nice music.”

Later, he had dinner with his friend Emile Haynie, a pop and hip-hop producer (Eminem, Kid Cudi, Bruno Mars), on Hollywood Boulevard at the Musso & Frank Grill, the old-school touristy chophouse. Tillman ordered spaghetti and meatballs, garlic bread, and creamed spinach. There was white wine and talk of lost weekends, prompted by Tillman’s discovery of some artifacts in the pocket of an overcoat that he hadn’t worn in a while. Haynie often counsels Tillman to give up trying to explain his music and himself. Be more like Jay Z, he says: Let the work speak for itself. “I’m, like, ‘Dude, you have to stop,’” Haynie said. “It’s almost like he’s explaining it to himself and you happen to be there.”

They’d first met at the Chateau Marmont, when Haynie was living there, making a record. Tillman, who’d just finished his second album, was a guest for a few nights, while shooting a video with their mutual friend Lana Del Rey. “Emile was across the hall, playing music at wayward volumes,” Tillman recalled. They started hanging out. Haynie encouraged Tillman to write pop songs and connected him with some artists. “We recorded a song together,” Tillman said. “It was the first song I ever wrote for somebody else. Beyoncé bought it. She cut it. She was working on ‘Lemonade.’ But it’s not on the record. It’s in the stash.” Tillman also wrote the refrain, the first verse, and the melody of “Hold Up,” one of the big singles from “Lemonade.” He had written, “I’m not gonna lose my pride if I’m gonna lose my shit,” but Beyoncé changed it to “Fuck me up a bitch,” which became everyone’s favorite. “There’s no way I’d write that,” Tillman said.

Haynie said, “Once the songs come out, he wants them back.”

Ventriloquism has its rewards. Tillman recalled one line from a song he’d written for Lady Gaga. “Gaga was, like, ‘What’s this bit about the fish?’ The metaphor revolved around fishing as an occupation, as an expression of freedom. No woman thinks of fishing that way. For her, freedom was the fish. I didn’t have a perspective on how a woman would see it. That blew my hair back. That I fucking loved.”

At a certain point, he began telling everyone that he didn’t want to work with pop stars again, because the credit and the pay had not seemed to align with the contribution: “You only get paid as much as your manager is a total asshole.” But he’d recently run into Ellie Goulding, the British pop singer, at the Bowery Hotel. “We hit it off, she’s a fan,” he said. “Once you have that appeal to your vanity, you’re doing it.” A few weeks later, there he was at the laptop at home, 8 A.M., in reading glasses and a tank top, trying to make a hit. “I’m cranking out a banger, in the trashiest way. Abusing GarageBand for fame and profit.”

Tillman once described himself to me, with an indeterminate degree of sincerity, as the best lyricist in the business. Critics certainly give him his due for the words. They tend to overlook the melodies. Some people have dismissed “Pure Comedy” as an undifferentiated trudge of mid- and slow-tempo piano ballads in the mode

hymn about aging, with some killer falsetto—“they’ve got some really strange changes in them. He has these sets of chord changes that, harmonically, I don’t know anyone who has them.” In this regard, he’s self-taught. No theory, just feel.

After dinner, Tillman had a gig at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, sufficiently atypical that he’d been reluctant to have me along. “It’ll hurt your eyeballs,” he said, which meant that his being observed there would hurt his. A tattoo artist and fan named Dr. Woo, who had a studio next to the hotel’s pool, had asked Tillman to come play a few songs at a “connectors” party there, in exchange for a free tattoo. Tillman, on a lark, said yes, then learned that it was a branded event, a promotion for Apple’s Beats headphones. In the past, he had loudly resisted promoting anything, besides local radio. He’d turned down two hundred and fifty thousand dollars from Chipotle to cover the Backstreet Boys’ “I Want It That Way.” (Chipotle got Jim James, of My Morning Jacket, and Brittany Howard, of the Alabama Shakes, to do the ad.) “I don’t want your fucking burrito money!” he declared, from the stage of the Newport Folk Festival. It wasn’t Dylan-goes-electric, but it filled up the news feed again.

The hosts got Tillman a room across from the tattoo studio. It opened onto a patio that was part of the palmy poolside lanai where the party would be. While Spencer got to work on Tillman’s setup, Tillman retreated to the patio. He broke out a vial of kava, an herbal extract supposedly good for building serotonin, and added a few drops to a glass of water. Room service brought two bottles of Casamigos tequila, mainly for his friends, who’d be coming later. “I’ve been chilling on the booze,” he said. “I found myself thinking, like, ‘I didn’t used to cry so much.’” He also doesn’t smoke pot: “I don’t like it. That didn’t stop me from smoking it every day for ten years.” His go-to medicine is micro-doses of LSD, which he finds help keep the depression at bay. “It’s like what people say weed is like,” he said.

At the height of Tillman’s acid period, not long ago, he was taking ten



of early Elton John. Tillman told me, “Someone said somewhere, ‘It’s all of my dad’s music thrown into a blender and turned into a smoothie.’” Dad-music guy talking here, but there seems to be more going on melodically in the songs than first meets the ear. “Josh is more elegant and understated about how smart and complex he’s being musically,” Thomas Bartlett said. “Even the songs that sound really simple, like ‘Magic Mountain’”—a

hits at a time. He'd built up a tolerance, so much that he concluded that the sell-by date on his vial had expired, or something. When Elijah Thomson, his bassist, wanted to try this microdose thing, Tillman told him to take a lot, since the batch had lost its oomph. This was before a gig. "Eli proceeded to have a full acid trip," Tillman said. "I kept turning around during the set, to give Eli a little . . . love and light, make sure he was O.K. One time I turned and he looked at me and silently mouthed, 'Who are you?'"

Before the show, Tillman, alone in his room with guitar in hand, sat facing a full-wall mirror, jotting down lyrics and working through some changes. "I've been writing like crazy," he told me. "I'm a few songs short of LP four." This song was currently called "I'm Gonna Make Some Weird Decisions." He said, "It's about depression—the evolving methodology of co-existing with it." He took it from the top, while I sat on a couch with a tumbler of tequila: Misty, play for me. The bridge consisted of lines he'd cribbed from think pieces about him—a weird decision, too.

Later that evening, stuffed with spaghetti, Tillman stood on a small platform in front of the d.j. deck and began to strum: "Oh, pour me another drink/And punch me in the face / You can call me Nancy." By now, the lanai was teeming with young Hollywood hipsters, amid a hubbub of fervid greetings, dilated pupils, and blunt smoke. This was not a folk-rock crowd, or an atmosphere for acute lyrical or harmonic consideration. It wasn't worship, either. Beyond the ring of listeners up close, the din kept up, as people tuned in for a moment or two, and then, perhaps in disbelief that such a party, in Hollywood, in 2017, had been taken over by a white guy with an acoustic guitar, began to feel free to ignore him. An undiscerning witness might mistake him for the folkie on the stairs in "Animal House," singing "I Gave My Love a Cherry." Save for a few snide interstitial remarks—"Hello, Coachella"; "Is everyone networking successfully?"—Tillman gamely played his best-known songs, but at a slightly



*"Come, join me for a few moments of mindful indolence!"*

slower tempo, as though testing his ability to play through inattention.

In the following weeks, I saw him perform other gigs before thousands: a smoldering dusk set at Coachella, his voice and visage beaming out from immense speaker stacks and video screens to acres of attentive ears and eyes; a lush two-hour extravaganza at the Kings Theatre, in Brooklyn, where, in front of a cavalcade of Ed Steed's ghouls he thrashed and swooned through his bangers, and then, during the encore, with something like total sincerity, delivered the last few songs from "Pure Comedy"—delicate, subtle pieces, the ones with a few beans of hope—to a hushed and enraptured crowd. A review afterward called him "the best rock star of his generation." ♦

At the Roosevelt, though, he wasn't much more than a "minor fascination," as he refers to himself in "Leaving LA." After a drizzle of applause, he made his way through the crowd, back to the patio outside his room, where Emma was waiting. "That's what you call a partial debasement," he said. "It's kind of poetic that, the week I have a Top 10 record, I have to go back to my beginning of playing a party with no one paying attention." A small party-within-the-party sprang up in his room, but it wasn't long before Tillman felt a kind of depression coming on and began to gather his things. He invited everyone to stay as long as they wanted, and he and Emma headed out to their Jaguars and up into the hills. ♦

# POWER BROKERS

*Africa's solar boom is changing life beyond the grid.*

BY BILL MCKIBBEN

The cacao-farming community of Daban, in Ghana, is seven degrees north of the equator, and it's always hot. In May, I met with several elders there to talk about the electricity that had come to the town a few months earlier, when an American startup installed a solar microgrid nearby. Daban could now safely store the vaccine for yellow fever; residents could charge their cell phones at home rather than walking to a bigger town to do it. As we talked, one of the old men handed me a small plastic bag of water, the kind street vendors sell across West Africa—you just bite off a corner and drink. The water was ice-cold and refreshing, but it took me an embarrassingly long moment to understand the pleasure with which he offered it: cold water was now available in this hot place. There was enough power to run a couple of refrigerators, and so *coldness* was, for the first time, a possibility.

I'd come to Daban to learn about the boom in solar power in sub-Saharan Africa. The spread of cell phones in the region has made it possible for residents to pay daily or weekly bills using mobile money, and now the hope is that, just as cell phones bypassed the network of telephone lines, solar panels will enable many rural consumers to bypass the electric grid. From Ghana, I travelled to Ivory Coast, and then to Tanzania, and along the way I encountered a variety of new solar ventures, most of them American-led. Some, such as Ghana's Black Star Energy, which had electrified Daban, install solar microgrids, small-scale versions of the giant grid Americans are familiar with. Others, such as Off-Grid Electric, in Tanzania and Ivory Coast, market home-based solar systems that run on a panel installed on each individual house. These home-based systems can't produce enough current for a fridge,

but they can supply each home with a few lights, a mobile-phone charger, and, if the household can afford it, a small, super-efficient flat-screen TV.

In another farming town, in Ivory Coast, I talked to a man named Abou Traoré, who put his television out in a courtyard most nights, so that neighbors could come by to watch. He said that they tuned in for soccer matches—the village tilts Liverpool, but has a large pocket of Manchester United supporters. What else did he watch? Traoré considered. "I like the National Geographic channel," he replied—that is, the broadcast arm of the institution that became famous showing Westerners pictures of remote parts of Africa.

There are about as many people living without electricity today as there were when Thomas Edison lit his first light bulb. More than half are in sub-Saharan Africa. Europe and the Americas are almost fully electrified, and Asia is quickly catching up, but the absolute number of Africans without power remains steady. A World Bank report, released in May, predicted that, given current trends, there could still be half a billion people in sub-Saharan Africa without power by 2040. Even those with electricity can't rely on it: the report noted that in Tanzania power outages were so common in 2013 that they cost businesses fifteen per cent of their annual sales. Ghanaians call their flickering power *dum/sor*, or "off/on." Vivian Tsadzi, a businesswoman who lives not far from the Akosombo Dam, which provides about a third of the nation's power, said that most of the time "it's *dum dum dum dum*." The dam's head of hydropower generation, Kwesi Amoako, who retired last year, told me that he is proud of the structure, which created the world's largest man-made lake. But

there isn't an easy way to increase the country's hydropower capacity, and drought, caused by climate change, has made the system inconsistent, meaning that Ghana will have to look elsewhere for electricity. "I've always had the feeling that one of the main thrusts should be domestic solar," Amoako said. "And I think we should put the off-grid stuff first, because the consumer wants it so badly."

Electrifying Africa is one of the largest development challenges on earth. Until recently, most people assumed that the continent would electrify in the same manner as the rest of the globe. "The belief was, you'd eventually build the U.S. grid here," Xavier Helgesen, the American co-founder and C.E.O. of Off-Grid Electric, told me. "But the U.S. is the richest country on earth, and it wasn't fully electrified until the nineteen-forties, and that was in an era of cheap copper for wires, cheap timber for poles, cheap coal, and cheap capital. None of that is so cheap anymore, at least not over here."

Solar electricity, on the other hand, has become inexpensive, in part because the price of solar panels has fallen at the same time that the efficiency of light bulbs and appliances has dramatically increased. In 2009, a single compact fluorescent bulb and a lead-acid battery cost about forty dollars; now, using L.E.D. bulbs and lithium-ion batteries, you can get four times as much light for the same price. In 2009, a radio, a mobile-phone charger, and a solar system big enough to provide four hours of light and television a day would have cost a Kenyan a thousand dollars; now it's three hundred and fifty dollars.

President Trump has derided renewable energy as "really just an expensive way of making the tree huggers feel good about themselves." But many Western entrepreneurs see solar power in Africa as a chance to reach a large



*In eighteen months, entrepreneurs brought electricity to hundreds of thousands of people in places that the grid failed to reach.*



*"I do want a threesome, just not with you."*

•      •

market and make a substantial profit. This is a nascent industry, which, at the moment, represents a small percentage of the electrification in the region, and is mostly in rural areas. There's plenty of uncertainty about its future, and no guarantee that it will spread at the pace of cell phones. Still, in the past eighteen months, these businesses have brought electricity to hundreds of thousands of consumers—many of them in places that the grid failed to reach, despite a hundred-year head start. Funding, much of it from private investors based in Silicon Valley or Europe, is flowing into this sector—more than two hundred million dollars in venture capital last year, up from nineteen million in 2013—and companies are rapidly expanding their operations with the new money. M-Kopa, an American startup that launched in Kenya, in 2011, now has half a million pay-as-you-go solar customers; d.light, a competitor with offices in California, Kenya, China, and India, says that it is adding eight hundred new households a day. Nicole Poindexter, the founder and C.E.O. of Black Star, told me that every million dollars the company raises in venture capital delivers power to seven

thousand people. She expects Black Star to be profitable within the next three years.

Like many of the American entrepreneurs I met in Africa, Poindexter has a background in finance. A graduate of Harvard Business School, she worked as a derivatives trader before leading business development at Opower, a software platform for utilities customers that was acquired by Oracle last year. (Unlike many of these entrepreneurs, who tend to skew white and male, Poindexter is African-American.) She decided to start the company in 2015, after she began to learn about energy poverty. She recalled watching TV coverage of the Ebola epidemic in Liberia. "There was a lot of coughing in the background, and I was thinking, That's someone with Ebola," she said. "But it wasn't. It was from the smoke in the room from the fire." Last year, in the Ghanaian community of Kofihui-krom, one of the first towns that Black Star served, the company erected twenty-two solar panels. Today, the local clinic no longer has to deliver babies by flashlight. The town chief, Nana Kwaku Appiah, said that he was so excited that he initially left his lights on

inside all night. "Our relatives from the city used to not come here to visit," he said. "Now they do."

When I visited the Tanzanian headquarters of Off-Grid Electric, in the city of Arusha, the atmosphere was reminiscent of Palo Alto or Mountain View, with standing desks and glassed-in conference rooms for impromptu meetings. Erick Donasian, the company's head of service in Tanzania, grew up in a powerless house three miles from the office and joined the company in 2013; he said that, along with his enthusiasm for the company's goals, one attraction of working there is that it is far less formal than many Tanzanian businesses, where "you have to tuck your shirt in, which I hate the most." Off-Grid's Silicon Valley influence was clearest in the T-shirt Helgesen wore. It read "Make something people want," and sported the logo for Y Combinator, Silicon Valley's most famous incubator, where Helgesen's wife had recently developed a bartering app.

Helgesen, who is thirty-eight years old and lanky, with hair that he regularly brushes out of his eyes, grew up in Silver Bay, Minnesota, a small town on the shore of Lake Superior. At fourteen, he came up with the idea of leasing the municipal mini-golf course for a summer, and tripled revenues by offering season passes and putting on special promotions for visiting hockey teams. As a sophomore at Notre Dame, in 1999, he set up a Web site that posted the college's freshman register online, so that, as he put it, "you'd actually know who that cute girl you saw in anthro class was." Helgesen started similar sites at other colleges, but, he told me, "I wasn't as good a programmer as Zuckerberg. Even if I'd gotten it completely right, it would have been more Friendster than Facebook." His first major company, Better World Books, founded in 2002, took the model of charity used-book drives and moved it online. It's now one of the biggest sellers of used books on Amazon, and has helped raise twenty-five million dollars for literacy organizations, including Books for Africa.

Helgesen made his first trip to Tanzania in 2006, to visit recipients of Better World's funding and to go on safari. "I was staying at a fancy lodge near

Kilimanjaro, and I remember thinking, How do things really work around here?" Helgesen said. He paid a local man to take him to the nearest village. "I was peppering him with questions: 'Do young people go to the city?' 'How much does coffee sell for?' The experience, he said, "flipped my mind-set from 'People in Africa are poor and they need our help and our donated books' to 'This is what an emerging economy looks like. This is young people, this is entrepreneurialism, this is where growth will be.'" During a second trip to Africa, he went scuba diving in Lake Malawi ("to see the cichlid fish, which keep their babies in their mouths"), and was invited to dinner by his scuba instructor. "It was a decent-sized town, maybe twenty thousand people, but absolutely no electricity," Helgesen said. "It was all narrow alleys—they were bustling, but they were pitch-black."

In 2010, Helgesen won a Skoll Scholarship to Oxford, for M.B.A. students seeking "entrepreneurial solutions for urgent social and environmental challenges," and spent the year researching the renewables market. He found two like-minded business partners, and, in 2012, they set up shop in Arusha. At first, they planned to build solar microgrids to power cell-phone towers and sell the excess electricity to locals, but, Helgesen said, "it became clear that that was a pretty expensive way to go." So they visited customers in their homes to ask them what they wanted. "Those conversations were the smartest thing we ever did," Helgesen said. "I remember this one customer, she had a baby, and she would keep the kerosene lamp on low all night, as a night-light. It was costing thirty dollars a month in kerosene. And I was, like, Wow, for thirty dollars a month I could do a lot better."

Helgesen decided to "start with the customer, and the price point they could pay, and build the business behind that." Matt Schiller, the thirty-two-year-old vice-president of business operations, said that, in some ways, it is an easy sell. "If we talk to a hundred customers, not one says, 'I'd rather have kerosene,'" he told me. "Not one says, 'I'd like the warm glow of the kerosene lights.' In fact, when we were designing the L.E.D.s, we focus-grouped lights. And the engineers assumed they'd

want a warmer light, because that's what they were used to. But, no, they picked the bluest, hardest light you can imagine. That's modernity. That's clean."

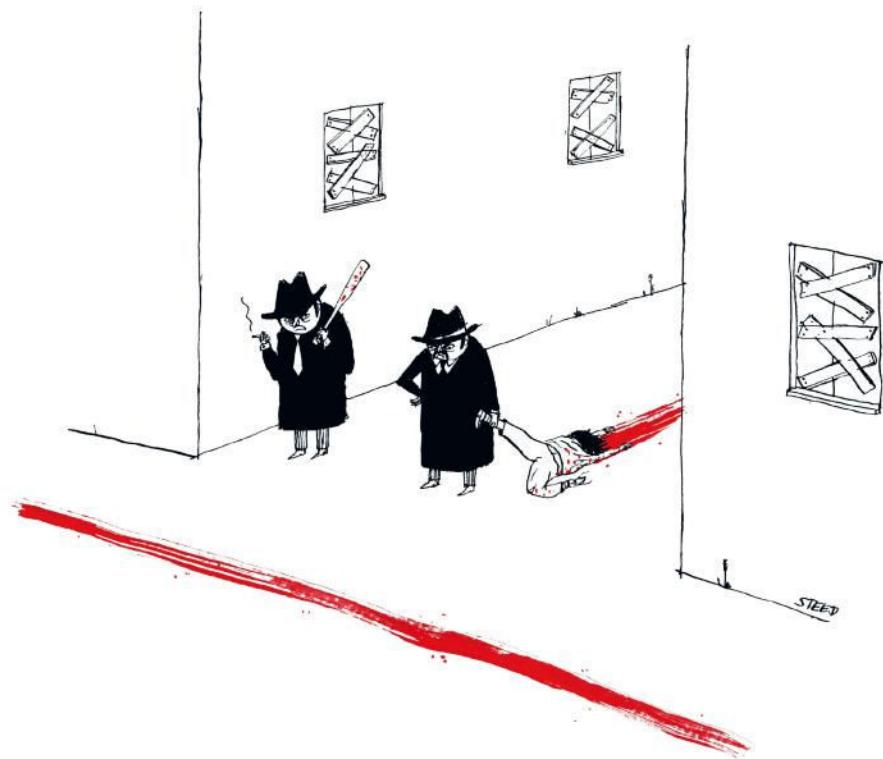
There were solar panels in sub-Saharan Africa before companies like Off-Grid arrived, but customers generally had to pay for them up front, a forbidding prospect for many. "Cost is important to the customer at the bottom, but risk is even more important," Helgesen told me. "A bad decision when you're that poor can mean your kids don't eat or go to school, which is why people tend to be conservative. And which is why kerosene was winning. There was no risk. You could buy it a tiny bit at a time."

Off-Grid, like several of its competitors, finances the panels, so that people can pay the same small monthly amounts they were paying for kerosene. Customers in Tanzania put down about thirteen dollars to buy Off-Grid's cheapest starter kit: a panel, a battery, a few L.E.D. lights, a phone charger, and a radio. Then they pay about eight dollars a month for three years, after which they own the products outright. The most popular system adds a few more lights and a flat-screen TV, for a higher down payment and about twice the monthly price. Customers

pay their bill by phone; if they don't pay, the system stops working, and after a while it is repossessed. That scenario, it turns out, is uncommon: less than two per cent of the loans in Tanzania have gone bad.

**D**espite Off-Grid's Silicon Valley vibe, it faces challenges unfamiliar to software companies. Aidan Leonard, Off-Grid's Arusha-based general counsel, told me that the company "requires a lot of people walking around selling things and installing things and fixing things. There's a lot of hardware—someone's got a physical box in their house, and a panel on the roof, and they have to pay for it on a monthly basis." Poindexter, of Black Star, put the problem more bluntly. "We're a utility company," she told me, and utilities are a difficult business.

In America, utilities are burdened with infrastructure, such as the endless poles and wires that come down in storms. Off-Grid doesn't have to worry about poles, and the wires only run a few feet, from panel to battery to appliance. Still, the company is working with technology that is brand-new and needs to be made cheaply in order to be affordable. When solar energy first came to Africa, it was expensive



*"Admit it, we're lost."*

and unreliable. Arne Jacobson, a professor of environmental-resources engineering at Humboldt State University, in California, is a couple of decades older than most of the entrepreneurs I met in Africa. He got his doctorate studying the first generation of home solar in Kenya, in the late nineteen-nineties. “In Kenya, I was trying to understand the quality of the panels that had started to flood the market,” he said. Much of the technology had “big troubles. Chinese panels, panels from the U.K., all this low-quality junk coming in. Later, L.E.D.s that failed in hours or days instead of lasting thousands of hours, as they should. People’s first experiences were often really bad.”

Jacobson has spent his career in renewable energy; he helped build the world’s first street-legal hydrogen-fuel-cell vehicle, in 1998. He now runs Humboldt’s Schatz Energy Research Center. (“You want to know why a lot of early solar research happened in Humboldt?” he asked me. “Because there were a lot of back-to-the-land types here, and they had cash because they were growing dope.”) After seeing the unpredictability of solar tech-

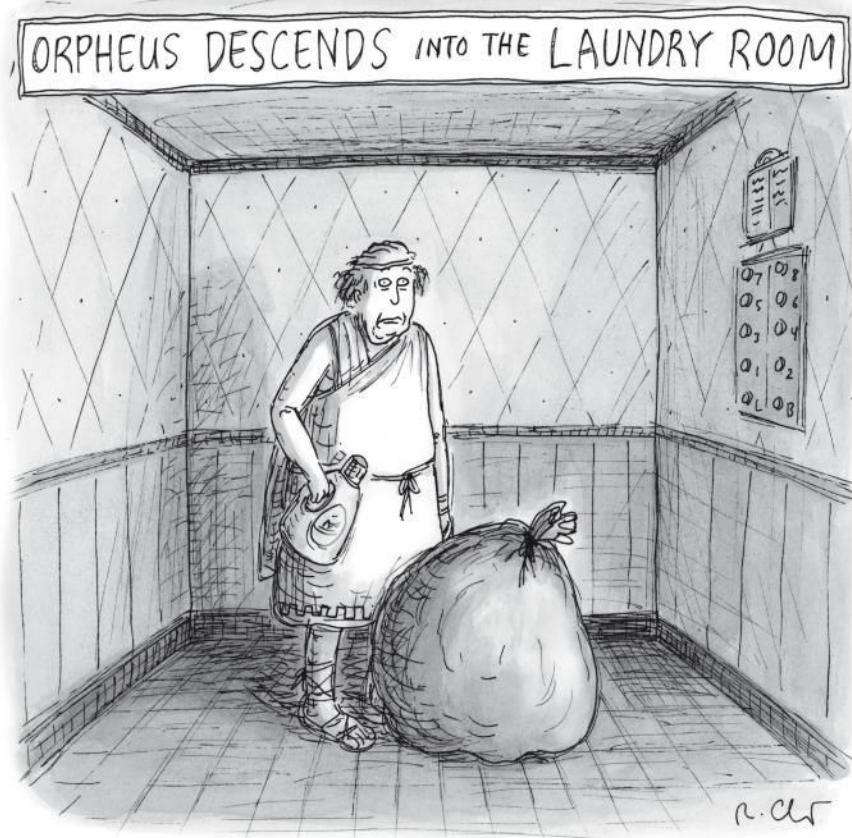
nology, he created, in 2007, what he calls a “de facto consumer-protection bureau for this nascent industry.” The program, Lighting Global, which is run under the umbrella of the World Bank Group, tests and certifies panels, bulbs, and appliances to make sure that they work as promised. Jacobson credits this innovation with making investors more willing to put their money into companies such as Off-Grid, which has now raised more than fifty-five million dollars. His main testing lab is in Shenzhen, China, near most of the solar-panel manufacturers. He also has facilities in Nairobi, New Delhi, and Addis Ababa, and some of the work is still done in the basement of his building at Humboldt, where there’s an “integrating sphere” for measuring light output from a bulb, and a machine that switches radios on and off to see if they’ll eventually break.

Because many of Off-Grid’s potential customers have experience with bad products, or know someone who has, the company takes extra steps to build trust with its clients. After an Off-Grid installer shows up on his mo-

torbike, he opens the product carton with great solemnity; in an Ivorian village, I watched along with seventeen neighbors, who nodded as the young man held up each component, one by one. He then climbed onto the roof of the house, nailed on a solar panel about the size of a placemat, and used a crowbar to lift up the corrugated-tin roof to run the wire inside. He screwed the battery box to the cement-block wall and walked the customer through the process of switching lights on and off several times, something the man had never done before. The company also offers a service guarantee: as long as customers are making their payments, they can call a number on the box and a repairman will arrive within three days. These LightRiders, as the company calls them, are trained to troubleshoot small problems. They travel by motorcycle, and if they can’t make repairs easily they replace the system with a new one and haul the old unit back to headquarters.

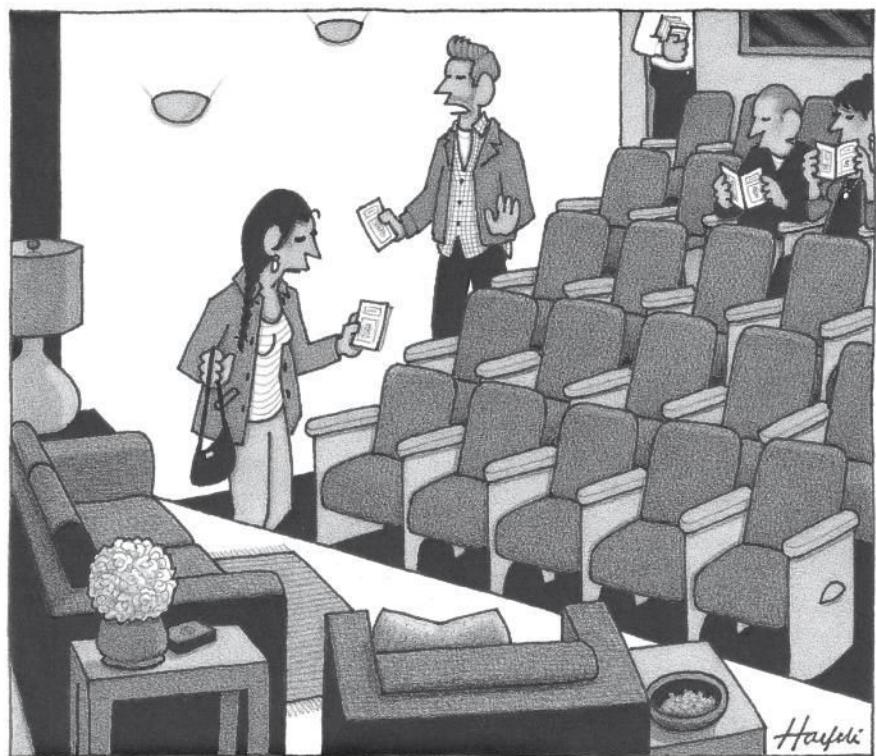
This sales-and-installation system presents some engineering challenges. When the company expanded into Ivory Coast, last year, it had to redesign its packaging to fit on the smaller motorcycles used there. It also runs into problems coordinating coverage across a vast area where most houses don’t have conventional addresses. “We had to build our own internal software to make it possible,” Kim Schreiber, who runs Off-Grid’s marketing operations in Africa, said. “We optimize, via G.P.S. coordinates, the best routes for our riders to take. The LightRider turns on his phone every morning, and he has a list of his tasks for the day, so he knows what parts to take with him.”

Solar companies also contend with the complexity of the mobile-payment systems. In Ghana, where many customers don’t use mobile money, Pindexter’s Black Star team instead sells scratch cards from kiosks, which give customers a code they need to enter on their meter box to top up their account. Off-Grid delivers these codes over the phone, but the company still needs a call center, manned by fifteen people, to help customers with the mechanics of paying. Nena Sanderson, who runs Off-Grid’s Tanzanian operation,



showed me the steps entailed in paying a bill through a ubiquitous mobile-money system called M-Pesa. There are ten screens, and the process ends with the input of a sixteen-digit code. "And I have a smartphone," she said. "Now, imagine a feature phone, and imagine you may not know how to read, and the screen is a lot smaller, and it's probably scratched up. Mobile money is a great enabler, but it's not frictionless." One of Off-Grid's competitors, PEGAfrica, has printed the whole sequence on a wristband, which it gives to customers.

Because one of the biggest obstacles to the growth of solar power in the region is the lack of available cash, many of these companies are essentially banks as well as utilities, providing loans to customers who may have no credit history. That can make it hard to figure out what to charge people. "What you see in this space is at least eight to ten decent-sized pay-as-you-go solar companies, all trying to parse through what the actual end price to the customer really is," Peter Bladin, who spent many years in leadership roles at Microsoft and now invests in several of these firms, told me. Bladin first started studying distributed solar—solar electricity produced near where it is used—in Bangladesh, where the Nobel Prize winner Muhammad Yunus used his Grameen microcredit network to finance and distribute panels and batteries. Lacking that established financial architecture, companies in sub-Saharan Africa are constantly experimenting with different plans: Off-Grid began by offering ten-year leases, but found that customers wanted to own their systems more quickly, and so the payments are now spread out over three years. PEGAfrica customers buy their system in twelve months, but the company gives them hospitalization insurance as a bonus. Black Star is a true utility: the customers in the communities where it builds microgrids will always pay bills, but the charges start at only two dollars a month. (The business model depends on customers steadily increasing the amount of energy they buy, as they move from powering televisions to powering small businesses.) Companies like Burro—a Ghanaian outfit launched by Whit Alexander, the Seattle entrepreneur who



*"I don't want to sit so close to the stage that the actors can see my eyes glaze over."*

• • •

founded Cranium games—sell lamps and chargers and panels outright, saving customers credit fees but limiting the number of people who can afford the products.

This uncertainty about the most practical financial model reflects the fact that in sub-Saharan Africa there is a great deal of economic diversity, both between countries and within them. One morning, I found myself walking down a line of houses in the Arushan suburb of Morombo. At the first house, a two-room cinder-block structure with a broken piece of mirror on one wall, a woman talked with me as we sat on the floor. The home represented a big step up for her, she said—she and her husband had rented a place for years, until they were able to buy this plot of land and build this house. She had a solar lantern the size of a hockey puck in her courtyard, soaking up rays. (Aid groups have distributed more than a million of these little lamps across the continent.) She assured me that she planned to get a larger solar system soon, but, for many

of Africa's poorest people, buying a lantern is the only possible step toward electrification.

Next door, a twenty-six-year-old student named Nehemiah Klimba shared a more solidly built house with his mother. It had a corrugated-iron roof on a truss that let hot air escape, and we sat on a sofa. Klimba said that, as soon as he finished paying off the windows, he was going to electrify. He and his mother were already spending fifteen dollars a month on kerosene and another four dollars charging their cell phones at a local store, so they knew they'd be able to afford the twenty dollars a month for a solar system with a TV.

One door down was the fanciest house I'd seen in weeks. It belonged to a soldier who worked as a U.N. peacekeeper, and the floors were made of polished stone. There was an Off-Grid solar system on the roof, but it was providing only backup power. The owner had paid a hefty fee to connect to the local electric grid, so he faced none of the limitations of a battery replenished by the sun. In his living room, he had

a huge TV and speakers; a stainless-steel Samsung refrigerator gleamed in the kitchen.

**T**his is how the solar revolution happens—one hot sales meeting at a time,” Off-Grid’s Kim Schreiber whispered to me as we watched one of the company’s salesmen, an Ivorian named Seko Serge Lewis, at work. We were visiting the village of Grand Zatry with Off-Grid’s Ivory Coast sales director, Max-Marc Fossouo. A couple of dogs tussled nearby; a motorbike rolled past with six people on board. In the courtyard next to us, a woman was doing the day’s laundry in a bucket with a washboard. Her husband listened to the sales pitch from Lewis, who was showing him pictures on his cell phone of other customers in the village.

“That’s to build up trust,” Fossouo said. He’d been providing a play-by-play throughout the hour-long sales call. “This customer is on a big fence,” he said. “He’s stuck in the trust place. And I’m pretty sure the decision-maker is over there washing the clothes anyway.” Fossouo was born in Cameroon and went to school in Paris. In his twenties, he spent seven summers in the U.S., selling books for Southwestern Publishing, a Nashville-based titan of door-to-door marketing. (Rick Perry is another company alum; so is Kenneth Starr.) “I did L.A. for years,” he told me. “Hi, my name is Max. I’m a crazy college student from France, and I’m helping families with their kids’ education. I’ve been talking to your neighbors A, B, and C, and I’d like to talk to you. Do you have a place where I can come in and sit down?” All selling, he said, is the same: “It starts with a person understanding they have a problem. Someone might live in the dark but not understand that it’s a problem. So you have to show them. And then you have to create a sense of urgency to spend the money to solve the problem now.”

The man turned down Lewis’s pitch. He was worried that he wouldn’t be able to make the monthly payments in the lean stretch before the next cacao harvest. “That’s crap,” Fossouo whispered, pointing again to the man’s wife. “He loves this woman, he can move the world for her.” When we went to the

## WALTER

taught the accordion  
out of a small emporium  
on the lower east side  
we went to his shop  
to buy an accordion for jack

walter steered us away  
from the fancier instruments  
keeping our purchase modest

i hired the main squeeze orchestra  
(walter’s all-girl accordion band)  
to play at my fancy event  
walter was tickled when he got his picture taken  
with tom hanks

when jack practiced downstairs  
i wouldn’t dance  
exactly but loosened to the sound

in an accordion air flows across  
steel rods while fingers  
manipulate right and left  
manuals on a chromatic  
buttonboard

dynamics are determined with air not keys  
now in the silence  
i feel the squeeze

—Laurie Eustis

next house, Fossouo took over. This prospect was a farmer and schoolteacher, and they talked in his classroom, which had a few low desks with shards of slate on top. Fossouo had the man catalogue everything that he was spending on energy: money for kerosene, flashlight batteries, even the gas for the scooter that he borrowed when he needed to charge his phone. Then Fossouo showed him what he had to offer: a radio and four lights, each with a dimmer switch. “Where would you put the lamp?” he asked. “In front of the door? Of course! And the big light in the middle of the room, so when you have a party everyone could see. Now, tell me, if you went to the market to buy all of this, how much would it cost?” Fossouo tried angle after angle. “You have to think big here,” he said. “When I talked to your chief, he said, ‘Don’t think small.’ If your kid

could see the news on TV, he might say, ‘I, too, could be President.’”

“This is great,” the man said. “I know you’re trying to help us. I just don’t have the money. Life is hard, things are expensive. Sometimes we’re hungry.”

Fossouo nodded. “What if I gave you a way to pay for it?” he asked. “So the dollar wouldn’t even come from your pocket? If you get a system, people will pay you to charge their phones. Or, if you had a TV, you could charge people to come watch the football games.”

“I couldn’t charge a person for coming in to watch a game,” the man said. “We’re all one big family. If someone is wealthy enough to have a TV, everyone is welcome to it.”

The hour ended without a sale, but Fossouo wasn’t worried. “It takes two or three approaches on average,” he said. “You always have to leave the

person in a good place, where he loves you stopping by. This guy wants to finish building his house right now—his house is heavy on him—but it won't be long." As we talked, the first prospect came over, asking for a leaflet and a phone number. His wife, he said, was very interested.

The arrival of electricity is hard for today's Westerners to imagine. Light means differences in sleeping and eating patterns and an increased sense of safety. I talked with one Tanzanian near Arusha who had traded in a kerosene lamp for five Off-Grid bulbs, including a security light outside his door that went on automatically when it got dark. "Crime is here," he said, "but also dangerous animals. Especially snakes. So it's good to have lights." Everywhere I went, I met parents who said that their children could study at night. "You can feel the effects with their grades now at school," one Ivorian father said. Several town chiefs told me that they hoped to get classroom computers, and one planned to mechanize the well so that townspeople would no longer need to pump water by hand. Farmers in West Africa were getting daily weather reports from Farmerline, a Ghanaian information service that uses G.P.S. to customize the forecasts. "If a farmer puts fertilizer on the field and then it rains, he loses the fertilizer—it washes away," Alloysius Attah, a young Ghanaian entrepreneur who co-founded the service, told me. "And the farmers say they can't tell the rain anymore. My auntie could read the clouds, the birds flying by, but the usual rainfall pattern has shifted."

"Our killer app is definitely the television," Off-Grid's Schreiber said. "If the twenty-four-inch is out of stock, lots of people won't buy." Wandering through newly electrified towns, I saw teen-agers watching action movies. Black Star's Poindexter told me, "There was a kid in town that I liked, Samuel, and when I came back after the power was turned on his arm was in a cast. He'd watched a karate show on TV, and he and his friends were playing it, and he broke his arm. I was horrified—I was, like, society is not prepared for this. And then I remembered that I did the same thing after I watched 'Popeye' as a kid. I ran right into the

hedge and had to get twenty stitches. That's kids and TV."

In Daban, after I asked what the most popular program was, everyone began laughing and nodding. "Kumkum?" people shouted. "Kumkum Bhagya," an Indian soap opera set in a marriage hall and loosely based on Jane Austen's "Sense and Sensibility," airs every night from seven-thirty to eight-thirty, during which time village life comes to a standstill. "All the chiefs have advocated for everyone to watch, because it's about how relationships are built," the local chief, Nana Oti Awere, said. Of course, the changes brought about by electrification will affect local communities in unpredictable ways that will play out over many years. One mother I spoke to explained that the TV "keeps the children at home at night, instead of roaming around." The Ivorian farmer who told me about the effects on his children's grades went on to say, "In the old time, you had to go outside and talk. Now my neighbor has his TV, I have my TV, and we stay inside."

A decade ago, most experts would have predicted that foreign aid, rather than venture capital, would play a central role in bringing power to sub-Saharan Africa. Off-Grid Elec-

tric has been funded by sources including Tesla and Paul Allen's venture fund, Vulcan. Allen, one of the world's richest men, is worth twenty billion dollars, or roughly half of the G.D.P. of Tanzania, a country of almost fifty-four million people. Should he be able to make yet more money off the electrification of African huts? There's more than a whiff of colonialism about the rush of Westerners and Western money into Africa. As Attah, the young Ghanaian who helped found Farmerline, put it, "There are a lot of Ivy Leaguers coming to Africa to say, 'I can solve this problem, snap, snap, snap.' They're doing good work, but little investment goes to community leaders who are doing the same work on the ground."

The Westerners I spoke to, though they pledged to hire more local executives, didn't think that the drive to help was incompatible with the desire to make money. As Poindexter put it, "There is a level of responsibility that I feel, and that I think any appropriate investor needs to have, about extraction versus contribution. I am not willing to be an extractive capitalist here, but I think that capitalism has an extremely important role to play in these communities." Helgesen—who, despite his



*"I just want to say that I appreciate the way you're blamed for everything."*

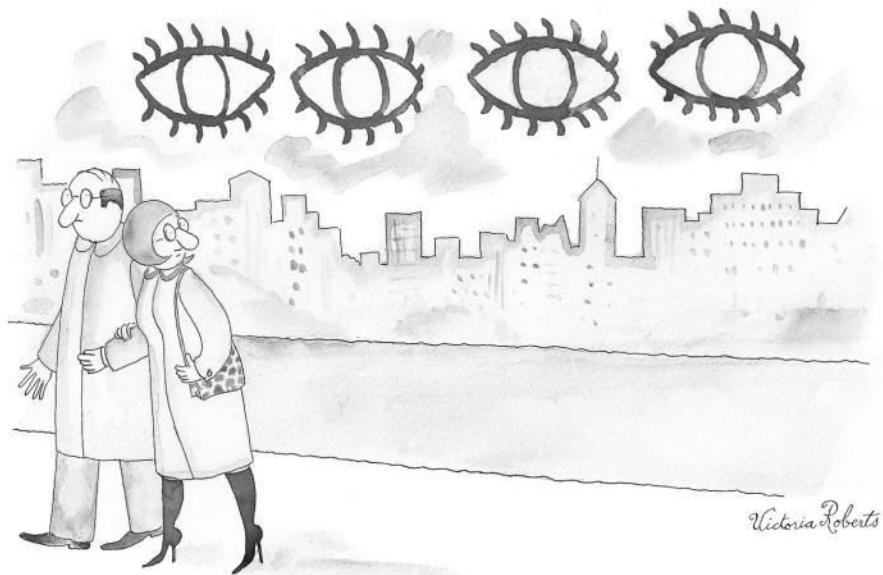
occasional oblivious tech-dudishness, spends most of his time in very remote places trying to provide power—is unapologetic about his company’s funding sources. Billionaires, he says, have the capital to make companies grow fast enough to matter. “Paul Allen didn’t invest because he thought it was the easiest way to make more money,” Helgesen said. “I got an awful lot of ‘no’s along the way from people who wanted easier money.” In any event, it’s not clear that other sources of funding are available, at least from the U.S.: Trump, pulling out of the Paris climate accord earlier this month, said that the country would not meet its pledge to help poor nations develop renewable energy, dismissing the plan as “yet another scheme to redistribute wealth out of the United States through the so-called Green Climate Fund—nice name.”

Even when aid agencies are well funded, they haven’t always delivered. Over the last decade, a strong critique of aid, ranging from William Easterly’s “The White Man’s Burden” to Dambisa Moyo’s “Dead Aid,” has laid much of the blame for Africa’s continued underdevelopment on the weaknesses of sweeping programs planned from afar. Still, aid agencies and global-development banks have a useful role to play in the energy transition. It will be years before it makes financial sense for solar companies to expand to the most re-

mote and challenging regions of the continent. As new companies launch, they will need an infusion of what Helgesen calls “ultra-high-risk capital.” Private investors will supply it, he says, “but they want forty per cent of your company in return, which makes it hard to raise capital later on, because you’ve already sold off such a big chunk.” Some aid agencies have funded private ventures in the early stages, to help them get off the ground or reach new geographic areas. U.S.A.I.D. gave Off-Grid five million dollars toward its early costs, and, over the past few years, a Dutch development agency has given the company several hundred thousand euros as it has extended into the impoverished lakes region of Tanzania, where it otherwise wouldn’t have been profitable to go. Currency risks pose another problem: Poindexter told me that when she builds a Ghanaian microgrid she has invested in an asset with a twenty-year life span in a country where inflation is highly unpredictable. “We just had an election in the U.S. with huge consequences for policy,” she said. “But over here every election is potentially like that.” And, like anywhere in the world, national governments can make things easier by establishing clear policies. Rwanda’s leaders, for instance, specified the regions in which the rapidly developing country planned to extend its grid, thereby delineating where solar would be needed most.

“African leaders used to think solar was being pushed on them,” Clare Sirowski, who works on renewable energy with the U.S. Trade and Development Agency in Accra, said. “But now they all want solar. It’s a confluence of things. Mostly, it’s getting cheaper. And governments were tuned in to it by the Paris accord.” Ananth Chikkatur, who runs a U.S.A.I.D. project in the city, had just returned from taking thirteen high-ranking Ghanaians on a trip to study solar power in California. “Renewable energy should not be considered an alternative technology,” he said. “It’s becoming a conventional technology now.” Rwanda is not the only nation expanding its grid, and many countries are turning to large solar farms to generate power. Burkina Faso, for instance, has plans for solar arrays across its desert regions.

Distributed generation, however, is especially essential in rural areas, and it is growing fast—maybe, according to some observers, too fast. The investor Peter Bladin told me that the push for quick returns on investment could lead some companies to try to “squeeze more out of poor households” and warned about “mission drift, trying to make money off the backs of the poor in a dubious way.” Earlier this year, three principals from the impact-investment firm Ceniarth, which had put money into Off-Grid and similar companies, said that it was backing out of the industry for the time being. In an open letter, they wrote that the hype of venture capitalists and the lack of government regulation “puts consumers at risk and places a great deal of responsibility on vendors to self-police.” The gush of money, they cautioned, “may be too much, too fast for a sector that still has not fully solved core business model issues and may struggle under the high growth expectations and misaligned incentives of many venture capitalists.” Helgesen, unsurprisingly, disagreed with their analysis of investor over-exuberance. “It’s like looking at a Palm Pilot and saying, ‘This is not so great,’ ” he said. “Or even an iPhone 1. The iPhone 1 was a necessary step to the iPhone 7. People who have raised real money have not raised it on the premise that we’ll be selling the same stuff in ten years.” But he wasn’t waiting for the



*“I don’t know what that is, either—it could be the Olsen twins.”*

technology to mature. "We have to think about the future, and we have to sell something people want today," he said.

Most customers I met had little interest in the fact that their power came from the sun, or that it was environmentally friendly. Since these communities weren't using power previously, their solar panels fight climate change only in the sense that they decrease pressure to build power plants that consume fossil fuel. But some observers hope that the experience in Africa—which today has more off-the-grid solar homes than the U.S.—could help drive transformation elsewhere. Already, a few dozen American cities have pledged to become one-hundred-per-cent renewable. (Pittsburgh did so the day after Trump held up its theoretically beleaguered citizens as a reason for leaving the climate accord.) The U.S. has already sunk a fortune into building its electric grid, and it may seem far-fetched to think that users will disconnect from it entirely. But, as Helgesen told me, "As batteries get better, it's going to be a lot more realistic for people to stop depending on their utility." He thinks that, in an ideal world, technological change could lead to cultural change. "The average American has no concept of electrical constraint," he said. "If we accept some modest restrictions on our power availability, we can go off-grid very quickly."

For many people in the countries I visited, solar power is creating a new hope: for electric fans. When I was there, Off-Grid Electric was expanding from the relatively cool highlands around Mt. Kilimanjaro to the scorching, humid lowlands of West Africa, and in every village we visited the message was the same: The TV is great, the light bulb is great, but can I please have a fan? Many homes are poorly ventilated; windows are expensive, and can attract burglars. Fans, however, draw a comparatively large amount of current, threatening to quickly drain the battery that a solar panel has spent the day filling. And, unlike light bulbs or televisions, fans have moving parts that easily break. "Our customers tend to make heavy use of their equipment," Off-Grid's Schreiber said. Still, she

promised one village after another that fans were coming soon.

Shea Hughes, Off-Grid's product manager, is one of the employees charged with delivering on that promise. Hughes told me that he hopes to someday make Off-Grid's product powerful enough to perform industrial tasks: pumping water for irrigation, milling cacao, and so on. "I'm confident solar is capable of doing that," he said. "You just add more panels and you get to the power requirements you need. And as the price drops, well . . ." He had recently been to a consumer-electronics fair in China. "I was amazed to see the prices," he said.

For the moment, though, a workable fan would be nice. "We'd always thought a fan would take too much

power for the current systems we're selling," Hughes said. "But the people in Ivory Coast were so insistent that we went back and looked at it." Because of the emerging market for super-efficient appliances, in the U.S. and elsewhere, some manufacturers had a product that, as long as you kept it set to medium, drew only eight and a half watts. (The standard incandescent light bulb that hung in American hallways for generations drew sixty.) "We've told the manufacturer to eliminate the high-speed option," Hughes said. "Now medium is high. And in our tests people are satisfied with the air speed. But they say the battery tends to run out at 3 or 4 A.M., and they typically sleep till 6 A.M. So it's not perfect, but it's getting there." ♦

## Planned Service Changes

2

The 2 train is going back to school to pursue a career in massage therapy.

F

The F train has accepted a position at another subway system. We wish it luck in future endeavors.

L

The L train is taking three years off to find itself.





**T**he Brahms?" she said. "Shall we struggle through the Brahms?"

The boy, whose first lesson with Miss Nightingale this was, said nothing. But, gazing at the silent metronome, he smiled a little, as if the silence pleased him. Then his fingers touched the piano keys and, when the first notes sounded, Miss Nightingale knew that she was in the presence of genius.

**N**ow in her early fifties, slender, soft-spoken, a quiet beauty continuing to distinguish her features, Miss Elizabeth Nightingale considered that she was fortunate in her life. She had inherited a house upon the death of her father and managed without skimping on what she earned as a piano teacher. She had known the passion of love.

She might have married, but circumstances had not permitted that: for sixteen years, she had instead been visited by a man she believed would one day free himself from a wife he was indifferent to. That hadn't happened and, when the love affair fell apart, there had been painful regret on Miss Nightingale's side, but, since then, she had borne her lover no ill will, for, after all, there was the memory of a happiness.

Miss Nightingale's father, a chocolatier, being widowed at the time of her birth, had brought his daughter up on his own. They became companions and remained so until his death, although he'd never been aware of the love affair that had been conducted for so long during his daily absences from the house. That love and her father's devotion were recollections that cheered Miss Nightingale's current solitude and somehow gave a shape to her life. But the excitement she experienced when her new pupil played for her belonged to the present, was fresh and new and intense: never before had she sensed genius in a child.

"Just a little fast." She made her comment when the piece she had suggested came to an end. "And remember the pianissimo." She touched the music with the point of her pencil, indicating where she meant.

The boy did not respond, but smiled as he had before. His dark hair, not cut too short, was in a fringe. The skin of his face was delicate, unblemished, as

pale as paper. There was a badge on the breast pocket of his blazer, a long-beaked bird feeding its young. The blazer was navy blue, the badge red, all of it rather ugly, in Miss Nightingale's opinion.

"You'll practice it just a little slower, won't you?" she said.

She watched the boy reaching for the sheet on the music prop, standing up to do so. He dropped it into his music case.

"Friday again?" she said, standing up herself. "Same time?"

With an eagerness that might have been purely polite but which she sensed was not, he nodded. His shyness was a pleasure, quite unlike the endless rattling on of her more tiresome pupils. He'd had several music teachers before, his mother had said, rattling on herself, so fast that it was hard to understand why he'd been moved from one to another. In a professional way, Miss Nightingale had inquired about that, but nothing had been forthcoming.

She led the way from the room and handed the boy his cap from the hall-stand ledge, the same emblem of a bird on it. She stood for a moment by the open door, watching him close the gate behind him. His short trousers made her wonder if he was cold, his knees seeming vulnerable and fragile above gray woollen socks, the blue and red of his blazer and his cap repeated on the border. He waved, and she waved back.

No other child was due that evening, and Miss Nightingale was glad of that. She tidied her sitting room, reclaiming it after the week's visitors, her own again until ten o'clock on Monday morning, when fat Francine Mopewh came. Piano and sofa and arm-chairs crowded what space the room offered. Staffordshire figures of soldiers paraded on either side of a carriage clock on the mantelpiece. Pot lids and the framed trays of chocolate molds her father had collected decorated the walls, among watercolors and photographs. Daffodils in vases were on the sofa table and on the corner shelf near the door.

When she had tidied, Miss Nightingale poured herself a glass of sherry. She would say nothing to the mother if the mother telephoned to ask how the boy was getting on. It was a secret to share with no one except the boy himself, to be taken for granted be-

tween them, not gone on about. The mother was a foolish kind of woman.

When Miss Nightingale had sat a little longer, she turned on the electric fire, for the April evening was chilly now. Warmly, happily, it seemed that years of encouragement and instruction—offered for the most part to children without talent or interest—had at last been rewarded. Within this small boy, so modest in his manner, there were symphonies unwritten, suites and concertos and oratorios. She could tell; she didn't even have to think.

While darkness gathered, and when her second glass of sherry had been sipped away almost to nothing, Miss Nightingale sat for a few minutes longer. All her life, she often thought, was in this room, where her father had cosseted her in infancy, where he had seen her through the storms of adolescence, to which every evening he had brought back from his kitchens another chocolate he had invented for her. It was here that her lover had pressed himself upon her and whispered that she was beautiful, swearing that he could not live without her. And now, in this same room, a marvel had occurred.

She felt her way through the gloom to the light switch by the door. Enriched with echoes and with memories, the room would surely also be affected by this afternoon. How could it be the same?

But when Miss Nightingale turned on the light nothing had altered. It was only when she was drawing the curtains that she noticed there was a difference. The little snuffbox with someone else's coat of arms on it was missing from the window table.

**T**he next Friday, a porcelain swan went, and then the pot lid with a scene from "Great Expectations" on it, and then an earring she'd taken out because the clasp was faulty. A scarf, too delicate to be of use to a boy, was no longer on its hall-stand peg when she looked for it one Saturday morning. Two of her Staffordshire soldiers went.

She didn't know how he did it. She watched, and saw nothing. She said nothing, either, and so unaffected was the boy himself by what was happening, so unperturbed by his own behavior, that she began to wonder if she

could be mistaken, if it could be one of her less attractive pupils who was light-fingered, or even if she had only just noticed what might have been taken from her over a period of time. But none of this made sense, and her flimsy excuses all fell apart. The rose-petal paperweight was there when he began to play his Chopin preludes. It was gone when she returned from seeing him out.

She wasn't a teacher when she was with him, because there was so little for her to teach, and yet she knew that he valued her presence, that her being an audience of one meant more to him than the comments she contributed. Could it be, she even wondered, that before he left he helped himself to what he thought of as a fee for his performance? Such childish fantasies were not unusual: she had herself been given to make-believe and pretending. But that, too, she dismissed, sensing it not to be true.

At night she lay awake, her distress and her bewilderment afterward mercilessly feeding vivid dreams. In them, the boy was unhappy and she wanted to comfort him, to make him talk to her when he had finished playing his pieces. In endless repetition, she tried to say that once upon a time she had taken a chocolate from her father's special box, but she couldn't; and when, awake again, she lay there in the dark

she found herself prey to thoughts she'd never had before. She wondered if her father had been all that he had seemed, wondered if the man she had admired and loved for sixteen years had made use of her affections. Had her father's chocolates been a way of buying good behavior? Had his devotion later been an inducement to remain with him in his house, a selfishness dressed up? Had the man who'd deceived his wife deceived his mistress, too, since deception was a part of him, lies scattered through the passion that there was?

In the dark she pushed all that away, not knowing where it came from, or why it seemed to belong with what was happening now, but always it came back, as if a truth she did not understand were casting its light over shadows that had beguiled her once. Was theft nothing much, the objects taken so small, and plenty left behind? If she spoke, her pupil would not come again, even if she said at once that she forgave so slight a misdemeanor. Knowing so little, at least she was certain of that, and often did not look to see what was no longer there.

The spring of that year gave way to summer, a heat wave of parched days that went on until the rains of October. All that time, on Friday afternoons, the doorbell rang and he was there, the same silent boy who left his cap

on the hall-stand ledge, who sat down at her piano and took her with him into paradise.

Miss Nightingale's other pupils came and went also, but among them only the boy never requested a different day, a different time. No note was ever brought by him, no excuse ever trotted out, no nuisance unrecognized for what it was. Dull Graham talked about his pets to delay his unpracticed piece. Diana wept. Corin's finger hurt. Angela gave up. Then, smoothly in the run of time, another Friday came to take its place as the halcyon afternoon at the center of Miss Nightingale's life. Yet each time after the boy left there was mockery in the music that faintly lingered.

The seasons changed again, and then again, until, one day, the boy did not return. He had outgrown these music lessons and his school and now was somewhere else.

For Miss Nightingale, his absence brought calm; and, as time accumulated, its passing further quieted her unease. If a lonely father had been a calculating man, it mattered less now than it had when the thought was raw. If a beloved lover had belittled love, it mattered less in that same soothing retrospect. She had been the victim, too, of the boy, who had shown off to her his other skill. She had been the victim of herself, of her careless credulity, of wanting to believe what seemed to be. All that, she sensed, was true. Yet something still nagged. It seemed a right, almost, that she should understand a little more.

Long afterward, the boy came back—coarser, taller, rougher in ungainly adolescence. He did not come to return her property, but walked straight in and sat down and played for her. The mystery there was in the music was in his smile when he finished, while he sat waiting for her approval. And, looking at him, Miss Nightingale realized what she had not before: that mystery was a marvel in itself. She had no rights in this. She had sought too much in trying to understand how human frailty connected with love or with the beauty that the gifted brought. There was a balance struck: it was enough. ♦



*"That one, too. They all look like big bags of money."*

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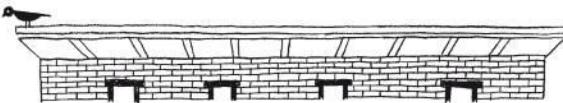


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# THE CRITICS



POP MUSIC

## APPROACHING AUTHENTICITY

*Lorde learns how messy adulthood can be.*

BY CARRIE BATTAN

In the past decade, the path from defiant outsider to success as an insider has grown astonishingly short. Although politics provides the most glaring current example of this phenomenon, pop music may have been a forerunner. In that arena, nobody has exposed our outsider fetishism as clearly as Lorde. The precocious New Zealand singer and songwriter, who was born Ella Yelich-O'Connor, emerged in 2013, when she was sixteen, with a fully formed sound and perspective that, ostensibly, stood in stark contrast to the musical landscape around her. She was positioned as an antidote to a pop world obsessed with flash and glamour, someone who insisted on stripping away artifice and cutting to the heart of the collective teen-age experience. On her impressive and understated full-length débüt, "Pure Heroine," she managed to sound both jaded and heartfelt. "I'm kind of over gettin' told to throw my hands up in the air," she sings, on "Team."

"Pure Heroine," which was produced without the large array of helpers that is typical for pop releases these days, tapped into a disillusionment—as well as a deep yearning for something fresh—in the hearts of pop audiences. Lorde became the first female artist to have a million-selling débüt album since Adele. The record's big single, "Royals," spent nine weeks at No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart and won a Grammy for song of the year. That song, a cool finger-snappy anthem, was meant as an indictment of the garish, oversaturated life style advertised by Lorde's competitors on

mainstream radio: "Jet planes, islands, tigers on a gold leash / We don't care / We aren't caught up in your love affair." In an irony that was surely not lost on Lorde, "Royals" was played heavily on pop and hip-hop radio stations through 2013, in rotation with songs celebrating all the glitz that it condemned. Rebellion has a funny way of landing artists in the circles they set out to escape.

It's difficult to say whether Lorde initiated a sea change or merely fore-saw one, but the pop scene—particularly for women—has altered radically since "Pure Heroine" was released. It is almost unrecognizable from the sugary-sweet, overtly sexual realm of the early aughts. Most notably, white women are grappling with the dominance of hip-hop and electronic dance music. Lady Gaga has largely abandoned her outlandish costumes and club-ready dance hits for nostalgia and schmaltz. Miley Cyrus has shed the lascivious, hip-hop-loving character she played on her album "Bangerz," from 2013, transforming into a soft and mellow pop-country singer concerned more with dipping her toes in the sand than with popping bottles. Katy Perry continues to make party music, but in her latest turn she has tried, fitfully, to inject her image with political awareness. Taylor Swift, who managed to successfully graduate from country songstress to mainstream icon—and the most popular woman in the world—now stares down into the ravine of cultural irrelevance, after bumping up against the limits of her musical po-

tential. When it was rumored that her next album would venture into hip-hop and R. & B., the Internet emitted a collective groan.

The female stars who have gained traction are those who have innovated, often by sharpening their edges. Lana Del Rey, once perceived as a music-industry hallucination—a mystery figure who emerged from the ether and muddied the line between prefab and authentic—has stuck around, penetrating the mainstream with her blend of downcast, narcotized pop and old-Hollywood glamour laced with tragedy. Selena Gomez has transcended her Disney origins, embracing her demons in a series of brooding and smart, spacious-sounding collaborations with electronic d.j.s, along with a single that samples Talking Heads. (In one promotional image, she wears a hospital bracelet that reads "Fall Risk.") Meanwhile, upstarts like Tove Lo and Halsey have emerged in the realm of digital streaming, releasing big hits tempered with smoky self-laceration and angst. ("I gotta stay high all the time / To keep you off my mind," from Tove Lo's "Habits," was one of the biggest choruses of 2014.) Fans now clamor for smoldering "authenticity," whether real or manufactured. Everyone has chased Lorde, the patron saint of this movement, toward the fringes.

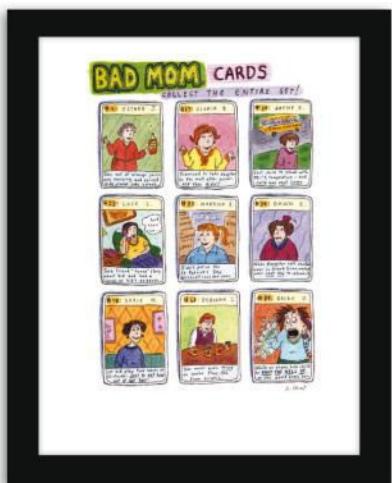
On "Pure Heroine," Lorde presented herself as an old soul—she was not even of legal age and yet was already world-weary, disenchanted by the flood of images she'd consumed



*Lorde used to play the role of a teen-ager who watched from a balcony. Now she's tiptoeing down into the party.*



Kim Warp, December 15, 2008



Roz Chast, February 26, 1996



Liza Donnelly, April 26, 2010

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as a child of the Internet. Her sound, developed with the former pop-punk musician Joel Little, suited the attitude. The songs were slight but polished, restrained but melodically and structurally advanced. They were also genre-agnostic at a time when the Internet was beginning to dramatically erode genre boundaries. The album—built on top of spare, frosty programmed drumbeats and breathy hooks—tantalized listeners of all stripes. Lorde played a teen-ager who couldn't really join the party; instead, she watched from a distant balcony, powerless to resist her own tendency toward introspection. There was a sense that she'd already figured everything out, and was waiting for the rest of us to catch up.

**O**n her new record, "Melodrama," Lorde has moved on from disillusionment to something more sincere, exploring a chaotic range of emotions and textures. As she creeps toward adulthood, she is learning that maturity is messier than teen-age remove, and these songs reflect a grander turmoil than that experienced by a sixteen-year-old who is sick of it all. She has supplemented Little with the producer Jack Antonoff—the front man of the band Bleachers and a go-to producer for artists looking for a dash of eighties synth-pop grandeur—and the pulse of her sound has quickened. Written after a breakup with a long-time boyfriend, the album bursts with the sort of catharsis that Lorde might have previously eschewed. "Baby really hurt me," she sings on "Liability." "The truth is I am a toy that people enjoy/Til all of the tricks don't work anymore/And then they are bored of me."

Musically, Lorde has stretched herself as well. The world of "Melodrama" is less self-contained than the one painted on her first album, and she plays around with her style, albeit still within some carefully constructed limits. (You will never find Lorde experimenting with the watered-down African and Caribbean influences that have infiltrated pop radio.) She's an able balladeer, offering up a kind of campy sentimentality that shows flashes of Elton John, Freddie Mer-

cury, and Kate Bush. On "Writer in the Dark," she wears the vengeful-songwriter crown previously claimed by Swift, who, even when her heart had been broken, could always get the last laugh in her lyrics. "Bet you rue the day you kissed a writer in the dark," Lorde sings. "Now she's going to play and sing and lock you in her heart." The album peaks on its ambitious electro-pop songs, which find Lorde tiptoeing down into the party.

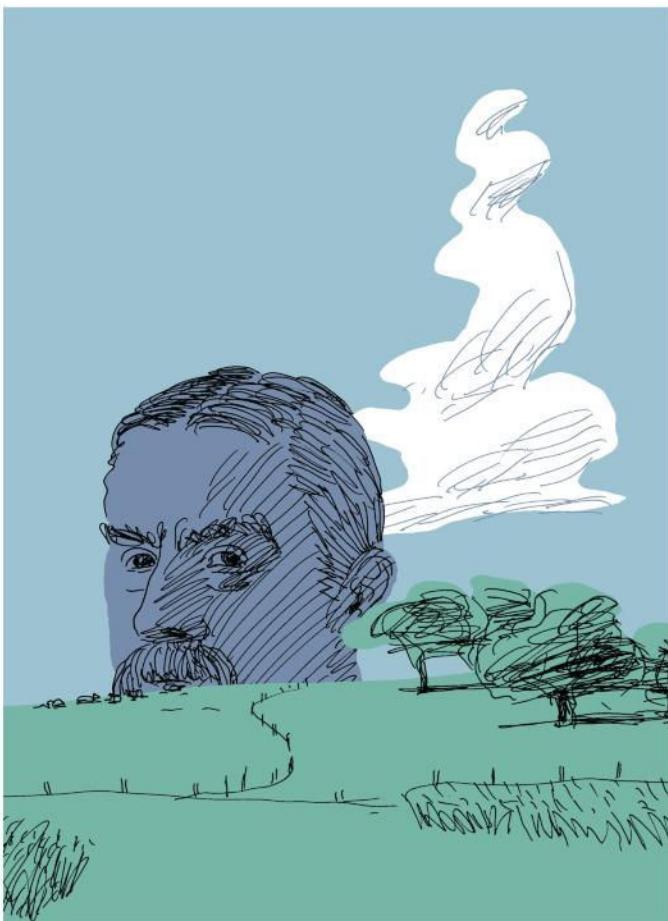
Most artists, in any medium, are loath to say that they represent an entire generation, but Lorde has always been comfortable speaking on behalf of her demographic. On "Pure Heroine," she favored "we" over "I": "We'll never be royals"; "We got the glow in our mouths, white teeth teens are out"; "We're so happy, even when we're smiling out of fear." On "Melodrama," Lorde feels torn between "we" and "I"—she is contending both with her turbulent interior experience and the collective consciousness of her peers. One moment she is lamenting a lost love, the next she's returning to her old refrains, as on "Perfect Places," in which she grumbles that she hates the weather and the headlines, and she wants to blow her brains out "to the radio." On "Homemade Dynamite," a lush anthem that swells and shrinks with electronic flourishes that wouldn't sound out of place among Justin Bieber's run of dance singles from 2015 and 2016, she inches closer to achieving the hedonistic exhale that pop music has always promised. "Our rules / Our dreams / We're blind / Blowin' shit up with homemade d-d-d-dynamite," she squeals. But, even at her most emotionally loose, she retains her placidity and self-awareness.

After a while, the record feels less like a subversion of pop tropes than like a hyperintelligent narration of them. "I know this story by heart/Jack and Jill get fucked up and get possessive when they get dark," Lorde confesses on "Sober," a song that is perhaps about a drug comedown; it's also about the experience of being too lucid to ever really feel drunk. Once an outsider comfortable exploring the superego of pop, she's now inside it, grasping for the keys to its id. ♦

# THE LAND OF LOST CONTENT

*How a poet captivated a country.*

BY CHARLES MCGRATH



In person, A. E. Housman was so shy and furtive that Max Beerbohm once compared him to “an absconding cashier.” For such a crabbed and elusive figure, though, he continues to draw a surprising amount of attention: books, articles, musical tributes, even a Broadway play, Tom Stoppard’s “The Invention of Love.” Academics know him the way he is mostly depicted in that play—as a formidable classicist, probably the greatest of his generation. But the real source of his fame is a single small volume of poetry, “A Shropshire Lad,” which has never been out of print since it was published, in 1896. Somehow, these sixty-three short lyrics,

celebrating youth, loss, and early death, became for generations of readers the perfect evocation not merely of what it feels like to be adolescent and a little emotional but of what it means to be English. We don’t have anything remotely like it in American lit. Some of Emily Dickinson’s brief lyrics come closest—tonally, and in their mastery of the short, compressed line—but she has never quite attained Housman’s popularity, and the landscape she wrote about, the one inside her own head, could hardly be said to have created a sense of national identity. “He is a strange phenomenon,” Ted Hughes said of Housman, “but to my mind the

*Readers have long found in “A Shropshire Lad” what they wanted to find.*

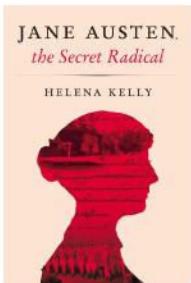
ILLUSTRATION BY GUIDO SCARABOTTOLO

most perfect expression of something deeply English and a whole mood of English history.”

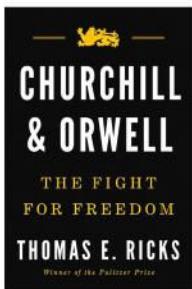
Peter Parker’s new book, “Housman Country: Into the Heart of England” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)—which helpfully includes the text of “A Shropshire Lad” in an appendix—is partly a brisk, sensible biography of Housman and partly a study in poetic reputation. It traces the way Housman’s singular vision seized hold of the English imagination, inspiring not just a literary following but a generation of composers, like George Butterworth and Ralph Vaughan Williams, who sought to do musically what Housman had done with verse: to create a new and authentically English kind of song. Parker, the author of very good biographies of J. R. Ackerley and Christopher Isherwood, casts a wide net here, and eventually it unravels in a skein of loose ends and Housmanian magpie-pickings. Parker lists just about all the many authors who ever snatched a title from Housman, for example. He also points out that not only is there an American rock band (formerly Army of Strippers) now called Housman’s Athletes but that the British rocker Morrissey used to quote Housman often and a grateful fan once wrote, “I thought his poems would be drivel about babies and flowers, but it’s really good stuff about suicide.” Parker doesn’t entirely succeed in explaining the great mystery of Housman—why it’s these rueful, corpse-strewn poems and not, say, the heartier ones of John Masefield which continue to resonate within the English soul. But he leaves no doubt about Housman’s lingering attraction. You could conclude from his book that when many people pulled the lever to vote for Brexit they were imagining a return to Shropshire.

To judge from Parker’s account, there were a number of different Housmans, and how you felt about him depended on which one you happened to meet. He was an adventurous eater and a lover of good wine. He liked dirty stories and flying in airplanes. At high table at his Cambridge college, he could be clubbable and amusing, and might even bend your ear about how much he liked the jazz-age novels of Anita Loos. But he could also be rude, aloof,

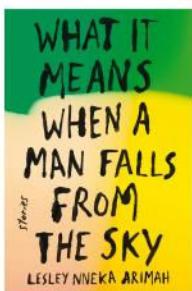
## BRIEFLY NOTED



**Jane Austen, the Secret Radical**, by *Helena Kelly* (*Knopf*). Do we read Jane Austen's novels as she intended? In this riveting literary-biographical study, the answer is a resounding no. Arguing that Austen wrote under "totalitarian" conditions and was obliged to veil her political messages, Kelly performs an interpretive coup that is dazzling, dizzying, and, occasionally, dubious. "Pride and Prejudice" is a parable of the French Revolution, with Darcy a member of the out-of-touch nobility and Lizzie a radical "constructed to be a conservative's nightmare"; "Mansfield Park" is a referendum on the Church of England and its ties to slavery. Kelly is relentless in pursuing her arguments: no passing detail goes unexamined, and, to her, every word of Austen might be encoded. Whether or not you agree with Kelly's conclusions, you won't read Austen the same way again.



**Churchill and Orwell**, by *Thomas E. Ricks* (*Penguin*). In this biography of two disparate lives, Ricks finds some common themes: absent fathers, formative years on the front lines, a commitment to "seeking the facts," and an obsession with the role of language in politics. Churchill and Orwell, dissenters on the right and the left, were attuned early to totalitarian threats, and spent their prime years fighting upper-class consensus in the twilight of the British imperium. Ricks is an engaging, if repetitive, guide, and his book doubles as a deft study of wartime society—a chapter on the Battle of Britain, which parses Churchill's leadership and Orwell's firsthand observations, shows how the Blitz eroded English class hierarchies.



**What It Means When a Man Falls from the Sky**, by *Lesley Nneka Arimah* (*Riverhead*). In this début collection of stories, a woman comes back from the dead, to the consternation of her daughter, and a Nigerian man reluctantly turns over custody of his teen-age daughter to his wife, who lives in the U.S., only to watch, via weekly Skype calls, as the girl becomes a shell of herself. These stories explore all manner of parental care, paying special attention to the arcane expectations of femininity and motherhood from the U.S. to Nigeria, along with the relationship between mother and daughter. "For a brief span of years," a narrator says of her daughter, "she will be perfect: old enough to capture men's lust, young enough to rouse women's sympathy."



**Encircling**, by *Carl Frode Tiller*, translated from the Norwegian by *Barbara J. Haveland* (*Graywolf*). When David, a thirty-something man living in a coastal city in Norway, develops amnesia, people from his past are asked to write letters describing who he is, or was. His estranged stepfather, who is dying, responds, as do two friends from David's adolescence who once competed for his affection. Their missives—cruel, tender, perturbing—are sketches of life in the provincial town where Tiller grew up. What makes this novel, the first of a trilogy, extraordinary is the suspense: like the best mystery novels, it transforms the reader into an obsessive gumshoe—though, in this volume, at least, David's identity is a question with no definitive answer.

brooding, and difficult. He suffered fools not at all, and was unable to tolerate a compliment. Willa Cather, who so admired his poetry that she made a pilgrimage to meet its author, found him "gaunt and gray, and embittered." The whole encounter, she said, gave her "a fit of dark depression." As Housman's obituary in the *London Times* put it, "In his attitude to life, there seemed something baffled and even shrinking, as though he feared criticism and emotion alike more than he relished experience.... He valued confidence, but held back from intimate relations, and seemed to prefer isolation to giving himself away."

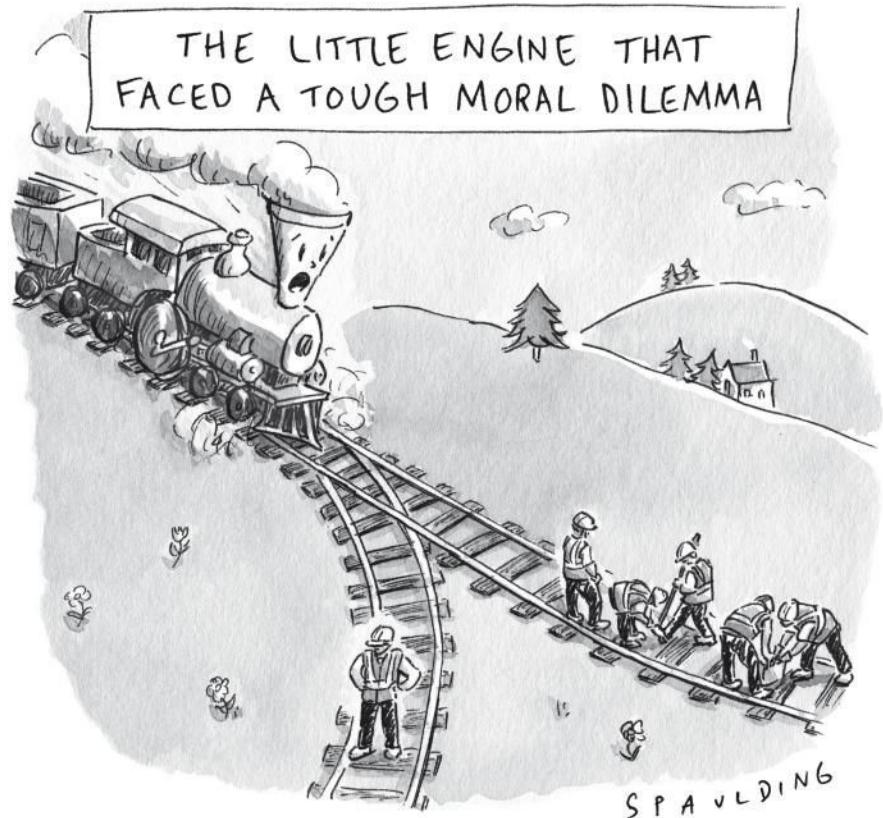
There was Housman the poet, who actually wrote very little, and Housman the classical scholar, who spent most of his time poring over ancient texts and whose greatest pleasure seemed to come from writing caustic put-downs of other scholars. About an editor of Persius and Juvenal: "Mr. Owen's innovations, so far as I can see, have only one merit, which certainly, in view of their character, is a merit of some magnitude: they are few." He sometimes composed these insults in advance, leaving blanks for names he could later plug in. Housman was not a translator or a classical historian. He specialized in the dry-as-dust business of textual criticism, determining the correct version of a classical text by comparing different manuscripts and judging which variant was the most likely—whether in a certain line of Propertius it should be "et" or "aut," and deciding where the commas belonged in Catullus. His life's work was a five-volume edition of Manilius, an astrologer poet, who even Housman conceded was third-rate—"facile and frivolous," he said, remarkable mostly for "doing sums in verse."

How to square these two, the poet and the pedant, has preoccupied commentators for decades. Edmund Wilson once suggested that what made Housman so adept at textual criticism was his ability to think like a poet, not only like a scholar, and that his fetish for accuracy stemmed from a real passion for his texts. But Wilson also pointed out that in Housman's choice of Manilius there seems an element of perversity and self-mortification, and that his scholarship sometimes radiated not so much

love for literature as hatred for his rivals. The poems in "A Shropshire Lad" are not completely disconnected from Housman's scholarly work—among other things, they owe something to Horace, Housman's favorite Latin poet, in particular to Horace's way of weighting apparently inconsequential words—but they seem to have welled up from another part of him, a spring of emotion that he couldn't, or didn't want to, repress. Poetry, he once said, was for him a "morbid secretion," as the pearl is for the oyster.

Housman never lived in Shropshire, nor even spent much time there. He was born in Worcestershire in 1859, the eldest of seven children. His father was a Dickensian figure—a jolly, heavy-drinking lawyer, often broke and given to investing in harebrained schemes. His mother, to whom he was very close, died when Housman was twelve, an experience that turned him into a lifelong atheist. At school, he was an exceptionally gifted student of Latin and Greek, and easily won a classics scholarship to St. John's College, Oxford, where he sailed through his first set of exams and then spectacularly botched the second. It's possible that he was rattled by the news that his father had become seriously ill. It's also possible that he took his success for granted and didn't study hard enough. The young Housman was a know-it-all, who refused to have anything to do with his tutor after hearing the man mispronounce a Greek word, and even took a dim view of Benjamin Jowett, the famous master of Balliol and the greatest Greek scholar of the day.

But the more likely cause of Housman's failure was that he had become emotionally undone over an unrequited yearning for his roommate, Moses Jackson. Jackson was athletic and good-looking, bright enough, but something of a philistine, according to one acquaintance, "quite unliterary and outspoken in his want of any such interest." Apparently, he had no clue about Housman's feelings for him. After Oxford, the two men roomed together in London, where they both had jobs at the Patent Office, and where Housman spent every evening at the British Museum, studying on his own, heroically and penitentially, and writing papers



that eventually redeemed him as a classicist, landing him professorships first at University College, London, and then at Cambridge. But in 1885 there was a blowup between him and Jackson. Parker speculates that Housman made some sort of declaration and was rejected. Stoppard imagines that it's Jackson who forces the issue, worried perhaps by the recent passage of a law against acts of "gross indecency" between men. In the play, Jackson is slow to figure things out but finally says, in effect, "You're not sweet on me, are you?"

Whatever happened, Housman moved out, and Jackson soon married and settled in Karachi. Years later, Housman's younger brother, Laurence, a novelist and playwright, also gay but much more open about it, suggested that on the rebound Housman found solace in the arms of Jackson's younger brother, Adalbert. But Laurence was in his nineties then, and this may have been wishful thinking. Despite later rumors about Parisian rent boys and a Venetian gondolier, there's no sure evidence that Housman ever slept with anyone, and there's little reason to doubt that Moses Jackson was his only real love. The two men stayed distantly

in touch, with Housman becoming a godfather to one of Jackson's children and lending Jackson a large sum of money when he retired to British Columbia and tried, unsuccessfully, to make it as a farmer there. Housman, after finally overcoming his Oxford failure and achieving distinction as an academic, wrote to Jackson, "I would much rather have followed you round the world and blacked your boots."

More than half of "A Shropshire Lad" was written during a charged five-month period in 1895, when Housman seems to have been missing Jackson acutely. Readers with advanced gaydar, like Oscar Wilde and E. M. Forster, early on detected a note of suppressed homosexual desire in the book, especially in poems like the one that begins:

Look not in my eyes, for fear  
They mirror true the sight I see,  
And there you find your face too clear  
And love it and be lost like me.

The young Forster even wrote Housman a fan letter, and years later, after dining with him at his Cambridge college and hearing Housman say "with

a twinkle" that he sometimes went to Paris to be with "unrespectable company," ventured up the staircase to Housman's rooms. He slipped his card under the door, but there was no reply.

Parker says that many early readers of Poem No. 44, addressed to a young man who has killed himself rather than face a life of "disgrace and scorn," would have known that it referred to the well-publicized case of Henry Maclean, a young soldier who shot himself in a London hotel, apparently out of homosexual shame. And he makes the provocative suggestion—which could equally well be applied to other Housman poems, including the strange one that recommends plucking out your eye and cutting off your hand or foot if it offends you—that not every line need be taken at face value and the whole thing might be meant angrily or ironically:

Oh you had forethought, you could reason,  
And saw your road and where it led,  
And early wise and brave in season  
Put the pistol to your head.

But one reason "A Shropshire Lad" has been so successful is that readers find there what they want to find. In 1929, a financial expert hired by Housman's publisher declared that "A Shropshire Lad" was the "filthiest book I have ever read: all about rogering girls under hedges." During the First World War, British soldiers carried copies in the breast pockets of their tunics, believing the author to be a kindred spirit and a war poet—though Housman knew little about war and soldiering. His main credential was his sense that life passes too quickly and death is always standing by, or, as one of his most famous poems has it:

Here dead we lie because we did not choose  
To live and shame the land from which we  
sprung  
Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose,  
But young men think it is, and we were  
young.

After the war, "A Shropshire Lad" travelled in the breast pockets of the generation who had taken up rambling and rediscovering the English countryside, even though—aside from a few place names, like Bredon Hill and Wenlock Edge, evidently chosen more for euphony than for anything else—it's not much of a geographic guide. The

landscape of "A Shropshire Lad" is an all-purpose landscape, not a particular one, and, far from being the unspoiled countryside imagined by Brexiteers, it's a place mostly of unhappy love and early death. Long past rogering each other, if they ever got that far, most of the Shropshire lads and lasses are already in their graves. Even the poems ostensibly celebrating seasonal rebirth, like the one beginning "Loveliest of trees, the cherry now / Is hung with bloom along the bough," contain within them, like a canker, a note of foreboding, and wind up sounding like laments.

Housman's morbidness so bothered Ezra Pound that he wrote a famous parody:

O woe, woe.  
People are born and die  
We also shall be dead pretty soon.  
Therefore let us act as if we were  
dead already.

What Pound missed was Housman's music, which so lent itself to composers—the intensity of his tone and the tautness and compactness of his expression. Parker sees Housman's habit of plainness and terseness as manifestations of English traits that amount to a sort of polite national understatement: modesty, restraint, stiff-upper-lipness. Housman is tight-lipped, certainly, but that doesn't account for the feeling you sometimes get that the poems are so repressed they ought to bear warning signs like those found on tanker trucks: "Caution: Contents Under Pressure."

Housman insisted that the task of poetry was "to transfuse emotion—not to transmit thought"; it was to make your throat clench and your hair stand on end. The emotion his own poetry most often elicits is that of overwhelming sadness. Parker sees him, quite rightly, as belonging to the long tradition of English melancholia, but despite the sometimes old-fashioned ways in which it is framed—the lads and lasses, the ploughed fields, the shimmering weirs—Housman's melancholy is a more angsty, modern version, untethered from any religious or artistic consolation. He's less like Keats, say, than like Hardy, his near-contemporary, whose bleakness, both personal and poetic, at times outdoes even Housman's. (Hardy once wrote

to Rider Haggard, after the death of Haggard's ten-year-old son, "To be candid I think the death of a child is never really to be regretted, when one reflects on what he has escaped.")

Some of Housman's brand of sadness also carries over into the poetry of Philip Larkin, who was an admirer, especially in poems like "Cut Grass" and "The Trees," which borrow the characteristic Housman form of short lines in just a few stanzas. In some ways, even Larkin's life mirrors Housman's: the small output of poems fastidiously worked over, the seemingly dull career as an academic librarian, the solitary bachelor flat (though we now know, of course, that he wasn't nearly as lonely and sex-starved as he pretended). It's not hard to imagine the two of them huddled over a couple of pints and taking great pleasure in reminding each other of all the ways in which the world is going to hell.

Loss, weariness, diminishment, the sense of a golden age long gone—you could make a case that for the past hundred and twenty years or so this has been the authentic, dominant note of Englishness in poetry, more than a wistful, Brexit yearning for a pastoral countryside. Part of Housman's charm, even now, is the way he makes that sadness sound and feel so sweet:

Into my heart an air that kills  
From yon far country blows:  
What are those blue remembered hills  
What spires, what farms are those?

That is the land of lost content.  
I see it shining plain,  
The happy highways where I went  
And cannot come again.

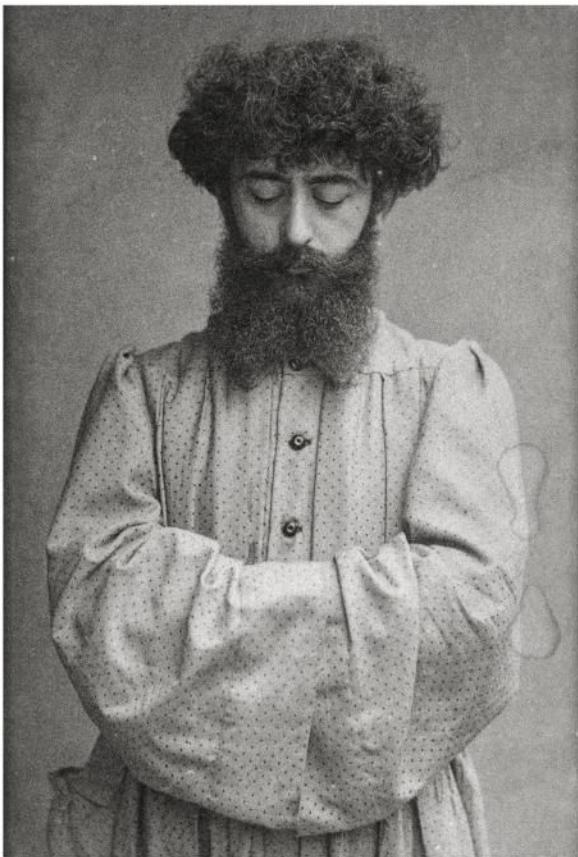
But that sweetness, verging on sentimentality, is also Housman's limitation: the lads and lasses slumbering under the grass, never growing old or sick or worrying about how to find a job. Sadness in Housman is a one-size-fits-all emotion, not one rooted in particulars. It puddles up automatically. And reading "A Shropshire Lad" you can find yourself becoming narcotized against feelings that are deeper and more complicated. That may be the real secret of the book's enduring popularity, the way it substitutes for a feeling of genuine loss the almost pleasant pain of nostalgia. ♦

A CRITIC AT LARGE

# THE MAGUS OF PARIS

*Joséphin Péladan and the occult roots of modernism.*

BY ALEX ROSS



In the Paris of the early eighteen-nineties, at the height of the Decadence, the man of the moment was the novelist, art critic, and would-be guru Joséphin Péladan, who named himself Le Sâr, after the ancient Akkadian word for “king.” He went about in a flowing white cloak, an azure jacket, a lace ruff, and an Astrakhan hat, which, in conjunction with his bushy head of hair and double-pointed beard, gave him the aspect of a Middle Eastern potentate. He was in the midst of writing a twenty-one-volume cycle of novels, titled “La Décadence Latine,” which follows the fantastical adventures of various enchanters, adepts, femmes fatales, androgynes, and other enemies of the ordinary. His bibliography also includes literary tracts, explications of Wagnerian mythology, and a self-help tome

called “How One Becomes a Magus.” He let it be known that he had completed the syllabus. He informed Félix Faure, the President of the Republic, that he had the gift of “seeing and hearing at the greatest distances, useful in controlling enemy councils and suppressing espionage.” He began one lecture by saying, “People of Nîmes, I have only to pronounce a certain formula for the earth to open and swallow you all.” In 1890, he established the Order of the Catholic Rose + Croix of the Temple and the Grail, one of a number of end-of-century sects that purported to revive lost arts of magic. The peak of his fame arrived in 1892, when he launched an annual art exhibition called the Salon de la Rose + Croix, which embraced the Symbolist movement, with an emphasis on its more eldritch guises. Thou-

sands of visitors passed through, uncertain whether they were witnessing a colossal breakthrough or a monumental joke.

The spell wore off quickly. At the time of Péladan’s death, in 1918, he was already seen as an absurd relic of a receding age. He is now known mainly to scholars of Symbolism, connoisseurs of the occult, and devotees of the music of Erik Satie. (I first encountered Péladan in connection with Satie’s unearthly 1891 score “Le Fils des Étoiles,” or “The Son of the Stars”; it was written for Péladan’s play of that title, which is set in Chaldea in 3500 B.C.) His contemporary Joris-Karl Huysmans remains a cult figure—“Against the Grain,” Huysmans’s 1884 novel, is still read as a primer of the Decadent aesthetic—but none of Péladan’s novels have been translated into English. So when an exhibition entitled “Mystical Symbolism: The Salon de la Rose + Croix in Paris, 1892–1897” opens at the Guggenheim Museum, on June 30th, most visitors will be entering unknown territory. The show occupies one of the tower galleries, in rooms painted oxblood red, with furniture of midnight-blue velvet. On the walls, the Holy Grail glows, demonic angels hover, women radiate saintliness or lust. The dark kitsch of the fin de siècle beckons.

For all the faded creepiness, the moment is worth revisiting, because mystics like Péladan prepared the ground for the modernist revolution of the early twentieth century. John Bramble, in his 2015 book, “Modernism and the Occult,” writes that the Salon de la Rose + Croix was the “first attempt at a (semi-) internationalist ‘religion of modern art’”—an aesthetic order with Péladan as high priest. In the years that followed, radical artistic thinking and obscure spiritual strivings intersected in everything from Kandinsky’s abstractions to Eliot’s “The Waste Land” and the atonal music of Schoenberg. In Yeats’s “The Second Coming,” the “rough beast” that slouches toward Bethlehem, half man and half lion, is no metaphor. Classic accounts of modernism tended to repress such influences, often out of intellectual discomfort. In recent decades, though, fin-de-siècle mysticism has returned to scholarly vogue. In 1917, Max Weber said that the rationalization of

Western society had brought about the “disenchantment of the world.” Péladan, and those who took up his mantle, wished to enchant it once again.

The occult mania that crested in the decades before the First World War had been intensifying throughout the nineteenth century. Its manifestations included Theosophy, Spiritism, Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, Martinism, and Kabbalism—elaborations of arcane rituals that had been cast aside in a secular, materialist age. Re-inventions or fabrications of medieval sects proliferated: the Knights Templar, the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (the habitat of Yeats), and various Rosicrucian orders. Péladan belonged to the Rosicrucians, who, following sixteenth-century tracts of dubious authenticity, believed in alchemy, necromancy, and other dark arts. The more élite these groups became, the more they were prone to furious doctrinal disputes. In 1887, a feud broke out in Paris between Stanislas de Guaïta, of the Kabbalistic Order of the Rose + Croix, and Joseph Boullan, a defrocked priest who was rumored to have sacrificed his own child during a Black Mass. When Boullan died, in 1893, Huysmans accused Guaïta and Péladan of having killed him with black magic. In Huysmans’s 1891 novel, “*Là-bas*,” a character observes, “From exalted mysticism to raging Satanism is but a step.”

Péladan was born in Lyon, in 1858, into a family steeped in esoteric tendencies. His father, Louis-Adrien, was a conservative Catholic writer who tried to start a Cult of the Wound of the Left Shoulder of Our Saviour Jesus Christ. Péladan’s older brother, Adrien, was the author of a medical text proposing that the brain subsists on unused sperm that takes the form of vital fluid. When Adrien died prematurely, of accidental strichnine poisoning, his brother perpetuated his ideas, suggesting that the intellect can thrive only when the sexual impulse is suppressed. The political views of the Péladans were thoroughly reactionary; they disdained democracy and called

for the restoration of the monarchy. Péladan differed from many other occultists in insisting that his Rosicrucian rhetoric was an extension of authentic Catholic doctrine, which Church institutions had neglected.

He made his name first as an art critic, railing against naturalism and Impressionism, both of which he considered banal. “I believe in the Ideal, in Tradition, in Hierarchy,” he declared. His model artist was Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, who rendered neoclassical subjects in a self-consciously archaic style, flattening perspectives and whitening colors. “What he paints has neither place nor time,” Péladan wrote. “It is from everywhere and always.” Yet he also had a taste for lurid, graphic imagery: the eerily glittering *Salomé* pictures of Gustave Moreau, the diabolical caricatures of Félicien Rops. Péladan singled out for praise Rops’s “*Les Sataniques*,” a series of etchings depicting visibly aroused demons penetrating and killing women. Péladan’s pendulum swings between piety and depravity were characteristic of his milieu, although in his case the oscillation was particularly extreme.

Rops provided frontispieces for several of the “*Décadence Latine*” novels, which began appearing in 1884. “The Victory of the Husband,” from 1889, is typical of the cycle, alternating between the lascivious and the ludicrous. The novel recounts the love of Izel and Adar: she, the adopted daughter of a wealthy Avignon priest; he, a young genius who defies the stupidity of



the age. They are married, and honeymoon at the Wagner festival in Bayreuth. (Péladan had gone there in 1888, and was overwhelmed.) At a performance of “*Tristan und Isolde*,” Izel and Adar cannot restrain themselves and begin making love—a feat that will impress anyone who has endured Bayreuth’s hard-backed seats. “Tristan! Isolde!” the lovers cry onstage. “Adar! Izel!” the lovers murmur in the audience, possibly to the irritation of their neighbors. But they clash on the question of “*Parsifal*,” Wagner’s final opera. For Izel, it is too “chaste, sweet, and calm”; for Adar, it opens the door

to a new mystic consciousness, to the realm of the Holy Grail. He goes to study with a sinister Nuremberg sorcerer named Doctor Sextental, and drifts away from his bride. Sextental, sensing an opportunity, projects himself astrally into Izel’s chambers, in the form of an incubus. The initiate defeats this incursion, but marital strife persists. Adar must renounce his powers—“I resign the august pentacle of the macrocosm”—to regain Izel’s love.

That tale is tame next to “*The Androgyne*” and “*The Gynander*,” both from 1891, in which Péladan delves into the world of same-sex love. The first depicts the coming-of-age of a feminine boy who seems destined to be gay—male classmates vie for him—but who escapes those desires by engaging in bouts of mutual exhibitionism with a mannish maiden. In the second novel, another androgyne, Tamuz, explores the lesbian underworld. He converts dozens of “gynanders”—Péladan’s preferred term for lesbians—to heterosexuality after he magically generates replicas of himself. As an orchestra plays Wagner, the women fall to worshipping a giant phallus. Even as gender roles are subverted, the dominance of the male is maintained: like so many male artists of his day, Péladan was profoundly misogynist. “Man puppet of woman, woman puppet of the devil” was one of his most widely quoted slogans.

In any other society, such material would have been unpublishable, but Péladan sparked little outrage in an environment that had assimilated Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Huysmans. Among impressionable youth, he had an appeal somewhat comparable to that of H. P. Lovecraft. Writers as various as Paul Valéry, André Gide, André Breton, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline read him with fascination, as did Le Corbusier. Verlaine generously summarized him as a “man of considerable talent, eloquent, often profound...bizarre but of great distinction.” Max Nordau, in his 1892 book, “*Degeneration*,” a mocking survey of fin-de-siècle culture, shows a soft spot for Péladan, declaring that “the conscious factor in him knows that [mysticism] is all nonsense, but it finds artistic pleasure in it, and permits the

unconscious life to do as it pleases." This is probably as strong a defense of Péladan's writing as can be mounted.

The catalogue for the Guggenheim's "Mystical Symbolism" show, which was curated by Vivien Greene, spends little time on Péladan's literary career, focussing instead on his activities as an impresario. In the lead essay, Greene argues that Péladan's flamboyant manifestos and mixed-media happenings anticipated avant-garde trends of the following century—notably, the "conception of the exhibition venue as a space for multidisciplinary performance and as an immersive aesthetic environment." The Salons de la Rose + Croix, which unfolded in various galleries and halls around Paris, were designed less to present a coherent group of artists than to demonstrate art's ability to transform the daily world. What Péladan took from Wagner, above all, was the idea that art could assume the functions of religion. "The artist is a priest, a king, a magus," he proclaimed.

Péladan complicated his task by freighting the salons with often nonsensical regulations. He forbade history paintings, still-lifes, seascapes, "all humorous things," and "all representations of contemporary life, private or public." (Lest anyone miss the ban on naturalism, one poster for the salons showed a Perseus-like hero holding up the severed head of Zola.) Female artists were ostensibly excluded, "following Magical law," although at least five women exhibited under pseudonyms—among them the poet and novelist Judith Gautier, who contributed a relief sculpture entitled "Kundry, Rose of Hell." Furthermore, Péladan alienated several leading figures, including Puvis de Chavannes, by prematurely announcing their participation.

Still, a number of significant Symbolists joined Péladan's solemn circus, because many of his principles accorded with their own. Back in the mid-eighteen-eighties, the Greek-born poet Jean Moréas, who coined the term Symbolism, had renounced the depiction of concrete phenomena; Symbolist writers, he declared, gestured instead toward a primordial Idea, which could be conjured by "pure sounds," "densely convoluted sentences," and "knowingly orga-

nized disorder." Michelle Facos and Thor Mednick, in their recent anthology "The Symbolist Roots of Modern Art," observe that the Symbolists undermined conventional modes of representation in an effort to "access the divine directly."

The most renowned member of the Rose + Croix group was the Belgian painter Fernand Khnopff, whom Péladan hailed as "the great argument of my thesis, in defense of the ideal." Khnopff was an artist of exacting technique who emulated the severity of the old Flemish masters and the cool sensualism of the Pre-Raphaelites. In the eighties, he fell under Péladan's sway and gravitated toward Symbolist fantasy. His best-known work, "The Caresses," is inspired by Péladan's play "Oedipus and the Sphinx": a lithe, androgynous lad snuggles with a creature who has a Pre-Raphaelite head and a cheetah's body. The Sphinx clearly is in control, yet her domination is gentle: femme-fatale imagery is edging into a more nuanced mode.

The Guggenheim is displaying Khnopff's "I Lock My Door Upon Myself," which takes its title from Christina Rossetti's poem "Who Shall Deliver Me?" A pale, auburn-haired woman gazes fixedly at the viewer, surrounded by a proto-Surrealist array of objects: stalks of orange daylilies in the foreground; an arrow resting on a draped table; a bust of Hypnos on a shelf; a window giving a view of a black-shrouded figure on an empty street—an image that could itself be mistaken for a painting. At first glance, the work gives a feeling of confinement: the woman appears to be trapped in the artist's cluster of symbols. But Khnopff seems more sympathetic to his female subject than is usually the case in Symbolist art. This cryptic space may be a room of her own, a private world of the imagination.

Péladan also deserves credit for giving early attention to the great Swiss painter Ferdinand Hodler. "The Disappointed Souls," a Hodler canvas included in the Guggenheim show, is a study in male dejection: five weathered, barefoot men stare downward, two with their heads buried in their hands, the middle one with his emaciated upper body exposed. The hieratic manner and pale color scheme recall Puvis de Chavannes, yet the imagery



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Peter Steiner, June 14, 1999

## New Yorker Cartoon Prints

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*"One more thing—can you find out why I'm sad all the time?"*

is rougher and starker, hinting at the interior desolation of Expressionism.

Perhaps the ultimate Rose + Croix painter is another Belgian, Jean Delville, who shared the diseased opulence of Péladan's aesthetic. A drawing titled "The Idol of Perversity" offers a narrow-eyed Medusa-like woman with a snake writhing out of her breasts. In "The Death of Orpheus," the musician's severed head rests on his lyre, floating down a greenish river in which the twinkling of stars is reflected. When I first saw this canvas, on a visit to the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, in Brussels, it sent me into an uncomfortable trance: the serenity of the painted surface pulled me in as the horror of the subject pushed me away. Precisely because so much Symbolist art seems dated at first glance, it retains its capacity to shock.

Music was integral to the multimedia conception of the Rose + Croix, although several performances that Péladan planned in conjunction with the inaugural salon ran into difficulties. The opening ceremonies were to have included a Solemn Mass of the Holy Spirit, at St.-Germain l'Auxerrois, with excerpts from "Parsifal" on the organ. Wary clerics withheld permission, on the ground that Wagner was Protestant. A later Wag-

ner concert fell victim to a fracas between Péladan and his former financial supporter, Antoine de La Rochefoucauld. While an orchestra was playing the "Siegfried Idyll," an ally of Péladan's, ineffectively disguised by a fake beard, shouted that La Rochefoucauld was "a felon, a coward, a thief." The heckler was ejected, causing a glass door to shatter and the musicians to fall silent.

Péladan's collaboration with Satie, who was then in his twenties, was rooted in the bohemia of Montmartre, where both men cut vivid profiles. Satie was best known as a pianist at the Chat Noir and the Auberge de Clou cabarets; in 1888, he composed his trio of pensive dancing "Gymnopédies." He heralded a new simplicity—music "without sauerkraut"—in defiance of Wagnerian grandeur. He was also an incorrigible ironist who festooned his scores with unperformable instructions. ("Arm yourself with clairvoyance," "Open your head.") Such exquisite pranks seem far removed from the dark-velvet world of Péladan, yet Satie, too, shared in the mystical preoccupations of his generation. His unadorned sonic textures, often based on Greek modes and Gregorian chant, can have the quality of cryptic icons.

The play "Le Fils des Étoiles," which elicited Satie's most striking Rosicru-

cian score, follows a young shepherd-poet as he is initiated as a magus. The prelude to Act I begins with an astonishing sequence of six-note chords, consisting of stacked intervals of the fourth, with a tritone thrown in for good measure. Although these chords are built on a simple chantlike melody, they are essentially atonal. Satie's score, written more than fifteen years in advance of Schoenberg's first atonal works, subsequently reverts to a more conventional language, but the fabric of harmony has been rent. This time, the composer gives no sign that he is joking: the opening is marked "white and motionless."

After the first salon, Satie broke with Péladan and, in the schismatic fashion of the day, established a private cult, the Metropolitan Church of the Art of Jésus Conducteur, from whose pulpit he issued edicts and anathemas in an apparent parody of Péladan's style. ("I must raise My hand to overthrow the oppressors of the Church and the Art.") The reasons for the split are unknown; perhaps Satie's score for "Le Fils des Étoiles" was too peculiar even for Péladan's recalcitrant taste, or, possibly, Satie decided that his reputation would be better served if he suspended ties with such a controversial figure. Whatever Satie's calculations, he soon sank back into obscurity; only in the second decade of the twentieth century would Maurice Ravel spark a Satie revival by hailing him as a model of anti-Romantic style.

In the mid-twentieth century, Satie's music mesmerized John Cage, who saw it as a challenge not merely to extant harmony but to the very idea of musical form. Cage took a special liking to a short, gnomic, harmonically directionless 1893 piece called "Vexations," at the beginning of which Satie wrote, "To play this motif eight hundred forty times in a row, it would be advisable to prepare oneself beforehand, in the deepest silence, through serious immobilities." In 1963, Cage took that instruction at face value, organizing an epic performance in which a rotating team of pianists repeated "Vexations" for nearly nineteen hours. Because "Vexations" belongs to Satie's Rosicrucian period, the Guggenheim will stage its own daylong marathon, in September. Having attended a "Vexations" event some years back, I can advise prospective

listeners that they may experience hallucinations of the Sphinx before the performance is done.

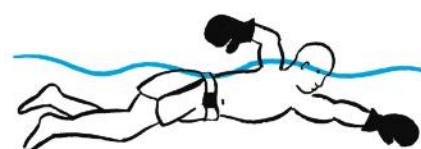
Before Péladan vanished from cultural memory, he received a couple of respectful nods from rising giants of modernism. In 1906, Ezra Pound embraced Péladan's idea that the medieval troubadour tradition was a repository of hermetic wisdom. And in 1910 Vasily Kandinsky cited Péladan in his manifesto "On the Spiritual in Art": "The artist is a king, as Péladan says, not only because he has great power, but also because his responsibility is great." That sentence, oddly prophetic of the "Spider-Man" comic books, is evidence of occultism's lingering reverberations. Kenneth Silver expands on the connection in a thought-provoking essay in the "Mystical Symbolism" catalogue, entitled "Afterlife: The Important and Sometimes Embarrassing Links between Occultism and the Development of Abstract Art, ca. 1909-13." The word "embarrassing" is taken from the art theorist Rosalind Krauss, who wrote, in 1979, that "now we find it indescribably embarrassing to mention art and spirit in the same sentence." Yet in the early twentieth century Kandinsky, Pound, and other modernists absorbed what Silver calls "an amalgam of spiritual sources—Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, kabbalistic, alchemical, and just plain wacky." Assuming the pose of a sorcerer or guru emboldened more than a few artists and writers in their quest to explode tradition and create a new order.

Péladan had little direct impact on early modernism: instead, the dominant force was Theosophy, the half-visionary, half-spurious movement that Helena Blavatsky and others launched in New York in 1875. Blavatsky devoured Rosicrucian texts and related Christian esoterica, and combined their ideas with influences from the East. She notoriously claimed to be communicating with eternal Indian Masters. Such hocus-pocus did not prevent the likes of Kandinsky from appreciating the vigor of Theosophy's assault on materialism in the name of higher truth. Kandinsky's controlled explosions of color bear a striking resemblance to images that appear in "Thought-Forms," a standard Theosophical text. His paintings can be viewed as opaque

sacred emblems, conduits of spiritual revolution. Silver sees similar tendencies in the work of Marcel Duchamp, Kazimir Malevich, Hilma af Klint, and Piet Mondrian. "I got everything from the 'Secret Doctrine' (Blavatsky)," Mondrian wrote, in 1918.

Although Yeats is the exemplary case among occult-oriented modernist writers, T. S. Eliot also deserves a glance. After Eliot converted to Anglo-Catholicism, in the late twenties, he chastised Yeats for having resorted to a "highly sophisticated lower mythology" of supernatural lore. Yet "The Waste Land" begins with a clutter of Decadent elements: quotations from "Tristan und Isolde," allusions to Verlaine and Mallarmé, chatter about tarot cards and séances, intimations of vegetation cults. The poem ends with an Easternized version of a Grail Quest, culminating in a final chant of "shantib shantib shantib." Latter-day readings of the poem tend to see Eliot's intent as satirical, but, as Leon Surette has suggested, the poem has the feeling of an initiation ritual, in the course of which the poet attains mastery of all religious traditions.

Fin-de-siècle spiritualism also had a radicalizing effect on music: "Le Fils des Étoiles" was only the beginning. In the first decade of the century, Alexander Scriabin reached the border of atonality under the influence of Theosophy; he devised an ear-burning, six-note "mystic



chord" that voices a hitherto ineffable divine presence. Jean Delville supplied an image of a sun deity for the cover of Scriabin's sumptuously dissonant score "Prometheus, Poem of Fire." As for Schoenberg, he was immersed in mystical texts at the time of his atonal leap: in terminology reminiscent of Péladan, he explained that whereas conventional major and minor chords resembled the opposition of the two genders his new chords could be compared to androgynous angels. Even the cool intellect of Igor Stra-

vinsky was touched by theurgic energies: the neo-pagan scenario of "The Rite of Spring" was co-created by the Russian Symbolist painter Nicholas Roerich, who went on to have a spectacularly strange career as a Theosophical sage.

In the wake of two catastrophic world wars, mysticism lost its lustre. The ecstatic liturgies of the fin de siècle rang false, and a rite of objectivity took hold. The supernatural was all but expunged from modernism's origin story: the great Irish-literature scholar Richard Ellmann insisted that Yeats employed arcane symbols "for their artistic, not their occult, utility." In the narrative that so many of us learned in school, the upheavals of the modernist epoch were, above all, formal developments, autonomous events within each discipline. Clement Greenberg spoke of painting's "progressive surrender to the resistance of its medium"; Theodor W. Adorno, of the "inherent tendency of the musical material." Such sober formulas fail to capture the roiling transcendental longings of a Kandinsky or a Schoenberg.

Hence the disreputable allure of Péladan, who dared to speak aloud what usually remains implicit in the aesthetic sphere: belief in the artist's alchemical power, in the godlike nature of creation, in the oracular quality of genius. (Think of how often prewar Expressionism is said to have anticipated the horrors to come, as if artists were clairvoyant.) The question we want to ask a figure like Péladan is whether or not he meant what he said—whether, in essence, he was a lunatic or a charlatan. Robert Duncan wrote a poem about the relationship between Satie and the "silly old man" Péladan, in which he imagines the composer asking:

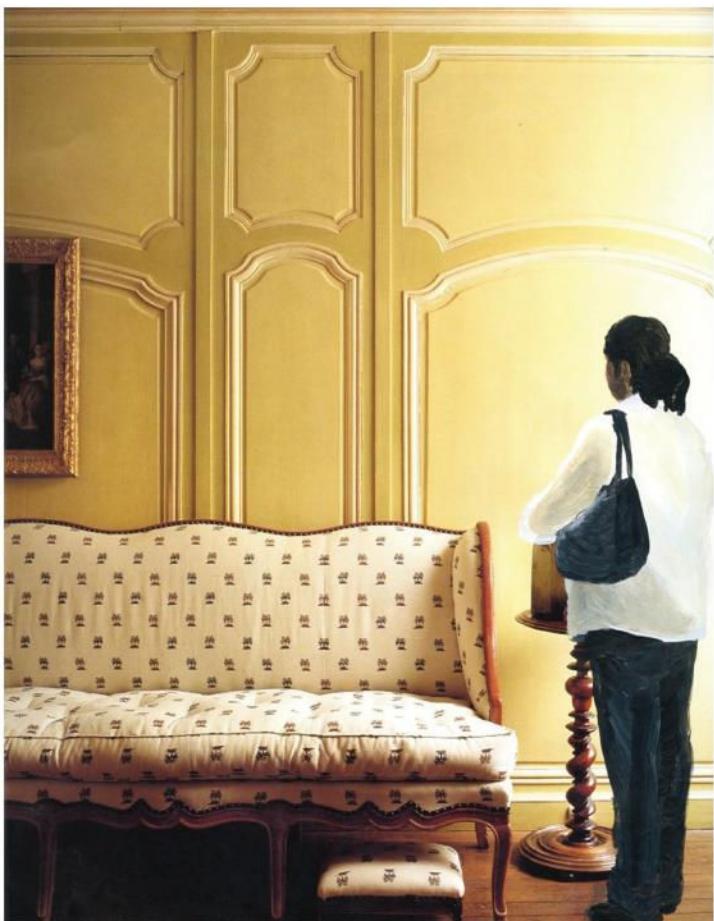
Is there a place for such posing  
to be contain'd? for even  
fakes of God to touch  
some youthful trembling at the edge of God?

Such questions presuppose a clean line of demarcation between the real and the fake, and in matters of the spirit that line can never be fixed. In a sublimely daft portrait by Delville, Péladan hovers before us in priestly white garb, his eyes rolled back, his index finger pointing heavenward. He is the failed prophet of a nonexistent faith. Nonetheless, his conviction is unnerving. Entire religions, entire empires, have been founded on much less. ♦

# HOME AND AWAY

*Latin-American artists explore themes of belonging and displacement.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



**H**ome—So Different, So Appealing” is a big, keen show, at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, of works made since 1957 by forty-two mostly topnotch Latino and Latin-American artists, spanning styles from Pop to Conceptual. It tells many stories and is a story in itself. The Getty Foundation contributed funds for it, as part of a push, called “Pacific Standard Time: LA/LA,” to highlight Latino and Latin-American art in and for Southern California. The worthiness of the aim—politic, if not political—is one thing, boding more rectitude than rapture. But another is the tour de force that the show’s curators have brought off by

putting multifarious works—paintings, sculpture, photographs, videos, installations—in orbit around a primordial idea: home, where you hang your hat, if you have one, and where the heart is or, for some grim reason, fails to be. The theme befits impressions of place—half a dozen Latin-American countries and, in the United States, various sites of diaspora, chiefly from Mexico, Puerto Rico, and Cuba—and facts of displacement: the immigrant kind, so Troublous today, and the optional kind that we term “cosmopolitan.” Willful modernity has always amounted to finding, or inventing, a home in nomadic rootlessness. Museums symbolize that vaporous destination.

“*Maria Waiting for Her Check*” (2013), by Ramiro Gomez.

The show’s title borrows from “Just what is it that makes today’s homes so different, so appealing?” (1956), a collage by the English artist Richard Hamilton, deemed by some historians to be the first iconic instance of Pop art. The work pictures a bodybuilder wielding a giant Tootsie Pop in a living room packed with flashy consumer goods. It is sarcastic, in a word, about postwar U.S. culture—unlike U.S. Pop art, which tilts toward the celebratory. The LACMA curators have picked up on Hamilton’s pique by starting with a piece by the Colombian Miguel Ángel Rojas which spells out Hamilton’s title on a wall with little disks punched out of coca leaves. This is pretty heavy-handed—cocaine and its depredations being major U.S. imports from south of our borders, see. Beating up on “the American Dream,” which is now ebbing everywhere, lacks the frisson that it once had. But the sally proves to be only one bass note in the show’s concerto. Another artist, Miguel Ángel Ríos, who was born in Argentina, attains a pitch even more dire, but less aloof, in his video “The Ghost of Modernity (Lixiviados)” (2012). Shacks made of wood and rusty corrugated metal fall from the sky, banging down onto barren landfill soil. Vultures flap loudly overhead. A large, pristine plexiglass cube appears to drift, a few feet off the ground, among the shacks: the titular ghost, plainly, which haunts the world’s innumerable shantytowns with utopian longings but can do nothing to relieve their squalor. The video’s elegance graces without softening its adamant despair.

Even upbeat works in the show may scald a bit. “Polyptych of Buenos Aires” (2014/16), by a pair of artists (Juliana Laffitte and Miguel Mendenha) who go by the name Mondongo, re-creates at full size the stupendous “Ghent Altarpiece” (1432) of Hubert and Jan van Eyck but substitutes vigorously painted scenes of an impoverished neighborhood in the Argentine capital for the sacred figures of the Northern Renaissance touchstone. You are invited to walk on an outdoor piece, set in a lawn, by the Cuban-American María Elena González, “Magic Carpet/Home” (2003/17)—a black, undulating rubber surface that resembles asphalt and has the floor plan of a public-housing apartment painted on it. The superimposition of those cramped quarters on a structure that’s fun, amid a setting of

grassy luxuriance and architectural splendor, is laconically unsettling. Also conflating the humbly domestic and the grandly public is the Puerto Rico-based team of Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla. In their video, "Under Discussion" (2005), a man is seen cruising around the island of Vieques, which served as a bombing range for the U.S. Navy until protests put an end to that function in 2003. His craft is an upside-down dining-room table.

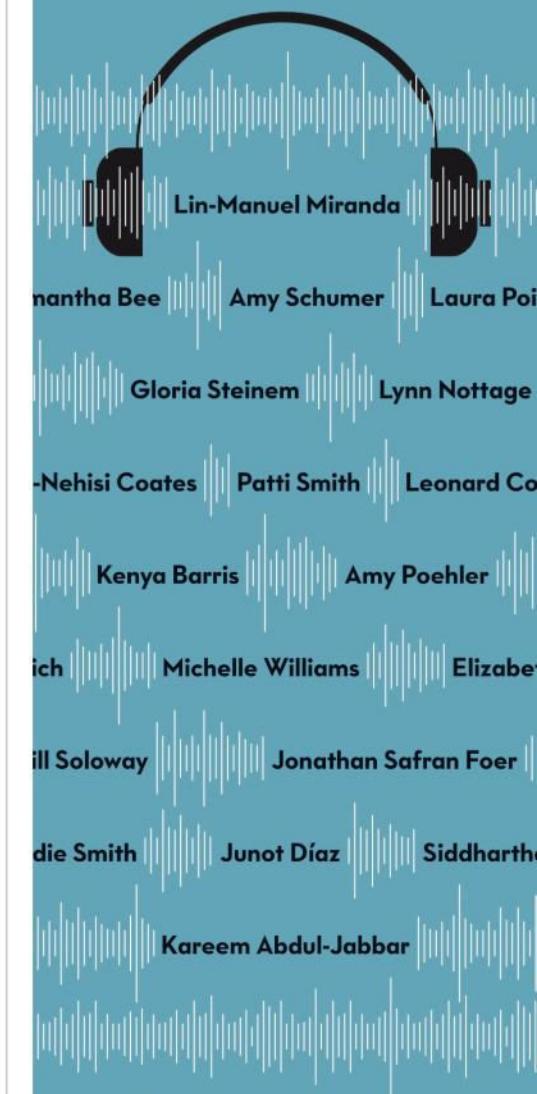
"Home" is a type of contemporary show that dates to 1993 and the game-changing Whitney Biennial of that year, in New York: an aggressive celebration of multiculturalism and identity politics in work that was long on installational spectacle and short on traditional mediums. At the time, I deplored the event for politicizing aesthetics. Now I see that it had to happen, for urgent social reasons, and that it energized a then pepless art world. The Los Angeles artist Daniel Joseph Martinez was a chief provocateur in the Biennial, producing buttons, which were handed out to visitors, that read "I can't imagine ever wanting to be white." (Incendiary then, the jape seems fairly mild in today's crossfire of sulfurous political incitements.) Martinez is back at LACMA, unbowed, with the oddly titled "the west bank is missing: i am not dead, am i": two huge, wheel-shaped aluminum structures, each with eleven facets that frame, in vacuum-formed plastic relief, contours of plans for Israeli West Bank settlement homes and for houses in Irvine, California. What is Martinez saying with these things—and is it troll bait? At any rate, they're handsome.

"Badge of Honor" (1994), a dazzling installation by the Puerto Rico-born Philadelphian Pepón Osorio, might have been a standout in the 1993 Biennial, had it been made a year earlier. Thirty-eight feet wide by twelve feet high and deep, the work pairs the glamorous fantasia of a teen-age boy's bedroom with a stark prison cell. In facing video projections—separated by a wall—a young man conducts a strained conversation with his father, who has been jailed for an unspecified crime. (Osorio had met youths in Newark for whom having a father behind bars was a "badge of honor.") Again, as with Angel Ríos's "The Ghost of Modernity (Lixiviados)," hopelessness is given

a baroque and even an antic spin. The ambivalent effect points up an irony endemic to museum presentations of politically refractory art: whatever discontent the artists express is cushioned by their inclusion in—say it—élite institutional culture. This takes nothing away from anyone's sincerity, but it seems worth noting at a moment when, in the United States and elsewhere, the most potent form of political insurgency is populism.

Central to the show's concept is a famous work by the late New Yorker Gordon Matta-Clark, a son of the Chilean painter Roberto Matta: "Splitting" (1974), the documented sawing in half, from top to bottom, of a banal two-story house in New Jersey. The act is metaphorically rich to an almost absurd degree, resonant with domestic disasters that include abandonment and divorce. Thematically less apt but exceptionally moving is one of the Cuban-American Félix González-Torres's installations of electrical cords studded with fifteen-watt light bulbs, made in the nineties. Why do those works often all but bring tears to my eyes? Apart from their beauty, it is likely their frequent association with the dimmed fates and wan hopes of the victims of the AIDS epidemic—which took his life, in 1996, at the age of thirty-eight. At LACMA, hundreds of bulbs glow along twelve cords that hang from the ceiling and bunch up on the floor.

The show's youngest artist, Ramiro Gomez, is also among the most affecting. Born in California in 1986, to Mexican undocumented-immigrant parents who have since become U.S. citizens, Gomez worked for a time as a live-in nanny in West Hollywood. The experience may explain not only the subject matter but also the persuasiveness of his eleven small pictures, all from 2013, which feature images of Latino domestic servants in posh homes. At first glance, the works suggest photographs, but they are actually delicate acrylic paintings on pages taken from upscale shelter magazines. Fiction blended with fact generates truths of life as it is lived and felt—or, perhaps, numbly not felt—by so many who labor in the penumbra of wealth. Gomez commands a Vermeer-esque, held-breath aura of transfigured ordinariness. He brings "Home" into alignment with a social order in which fissures of class, becoming chasms, begin to seem normal. ♦



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# COCKEYED OPTIMISTS

*What women want on “I Love Dick.”*

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM



“Is she any good?” Dick, a sculptor, asks. He’s talking about Chris, a filmmaker, who is sitting right next to him at the table. But he asks the question *around* her, of Chris’s husband, a Holocaust scholar named Sylvère, who is a fellow at an arts institute run by Dick. “Unfortunately,” Dick explains to Sylvère, as the two men lock eyes, “most films made by women aren’t. That. Good.”

Stung, Chris spits out a list of prominent female directors—Chantal Akerman, Jane Campion—as clips of their films appear on the screen, like P.T.S.D. flashbacks of cinema history. Then she stumbles into the

restaurant bathroom, knock-kneed with sexual arousal, and stares in the mirror. It’s the show’s primal scene. For Chris, Dick’s judgment works as a “neg,” the titillating insult that a pickup artist uses to seduce a “10.” But in the art world the polarities are reversed. It’s Dick who is out of Chris’s league: he’s famous, she’s a failure; he’s a cowboy icon, she’s a perimenopausal nobody whom everyone keeps referring to as “the Holocaust wife.” His contempt arouses not just a crush but an act of revenge: Chris will turn Dick into her muse, whether he likes it or not.

“I Love Dick,” on Amazon, is a

*The series feels like molecular gastronomy: ambitious, but not entirely meal-like.*

feminist cringe-comedy and, like its horny antiheroine, it’s a train wreck, freely mashing together theory and practice. It’s sometimes beautiful but also, not infrequently, repulsive, a narcissistic spectacle framed as a liberating vision quest. Like the heroine of “Broadcast News,” it manages to repel the person it’s trying to seduce.

The show is Jill Soloway’s follow-up to “Transparent,” which is a warmer and more accessible story about narcissists, one that was inspired by her family. “I Love Dick” has an outside source: it’s an adaptation of the celebrated semi-autobiographical novel by the artist Chris Kraus, which was composed of letters to a real-life media scholar. In the book, Kraus stalks Dick, harassing him with intellectual valentines (from herself and Sylvère), flaunting her kinkiest imaginings as banners of feminist creativity. Joyfully rude, the book burns boundary violations as fuel. It’s funny, too. At its high points, the show, like its source, has a brassy, bratty wit. It’s pissy and offbeat, and there’s something lovable in its willingness to look silly, using the physical bravado of Kathryn Hahn, as Chris, and Griffin Dunne, who lends a welcome vulnerability to the role of Sylvère. But the series also feels like molecular gastronomy: it’s an ambitious transformation of the ingredients, producing something that’s not entirely meal-like. I enjoyed it more the second time I tasted it. But that’s not satisfaction.

In Soloway’s adaptation, Dick (Kevin Bacon) is based on the minimalist artist Donald Judd: his aesthetic is a straight line and an isolated brick. Instead of following the book’s road trip, the show takes place in Marfa, Texas, an art-world enclave that Sylvère characterizes, succinctly, as “both dumpy and hip.” Soloway has added a clique of new characters, multicultural millennials who observe these middle-aged white people with disdainful amusement. There’s the butch playwright Devon (Roberta Colindrez), the icy porn scholar Toby (India Menuez), and a quietly decent curator named Paula (Lily Mojekwu). Early sequences paint a cunning—and not unrealistic—portrait of a community of cheerful, amoral scaven-

gers, justifying every theft with theory. When Devon discovers Chris's desperate, dirty letters to Dick, she decides that they're *her* material, the makings of a new play. "I want to be a female monster," she and her friends purr, in chorus, at once mocking and riffing off Chris's purple fantasies. Chris steals Dick's essence, Devon steals Chris's essence, and that's just the way the ball bounces. May the best artist win.

But the show's primary focus, like the book's, is the sex triangle of Chris, Dick, and Sylvère, a pungent, anxious black comedy of degradation that can feel like being hugged too tightly by a sweaty stranger, or like being stuck on a bus next to a couple negotiating polyamory. First, Chris revives her sex life with Sylvère by introducing some Dick-centric role play to the bedroom. Then she launches a mutual artistic project, as they revel in her letters. Finally, step by step, she violates every rule they've established, determined to enact a bruising fantasy—of her, Dick, and Sylvère—that she regards as politically justified. Maybe it's Chris's interest in Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty; maybe she simply refuses to cheat without making that choice seem profound. Either way, the show treats the results as an exalted statement, as if fetishizing Dick were liberation for *all* women, not just Chris. "We're raised to be invisible!" she gripes. "I mean *visible*. Looked at! It's a wonder that any woman can think of herself as an artist."

One of the weirdest parts of "I Love Dick" is how seriously it takes the same ideological constructs that "Transparent" so frequently, and with knowing and nuance, makes fun of. It's not that "Transparent" isn't designed to "topple the patriarchy" (which is Soloway's motto; the name of her production company is Topple). But, when the Pfeffermans use that kind of jargon to justify their behavior, there's always someone around to puncture their grandiosity. (Often, it's the Kathryn Hahn character, Rabbi Raquel.) Provocative as it is, "Transparent" has a native humility; its specificity, its focus on a tiny cabal of talky Los Angeles Jews, lends it depth. In "I Love Dick," we're planted in an even narrower place, deep inside Chris's head—a hothouse

environment, much like Marfa. And yet her troubles are presented as cosmic. In later episodes, especially, the show develops a creepy tendency to conflate Chris's legitimate grievances—her fury about how male desire is celebrated and female desire ignored—with the notion that she's a patriarchy-toppling disruptor. By the time she's nearly assaulting the object of her affection, demanding something akin to Erica Jong's "zipless fuck" (which amounts to fantasy sex so perfect that the other person's needs can be ignored), the pressure to keep rooting for her feels unbearable.

The truth is that a character like the TV Chris is not an iconoclast, not anymore, and certainly not on television. On the small screen—do we still call it that?—there's a growing sorority who are unafraid to look ugly or horny, a comic tradition launched by "Girls" but that now includes great shows such as "Crazy Ex-Girlfriend," "Chewing Gum," "Broad City," "You're the Worst," and "Fleabag." Many of their protagonists are stalkers; plenty make comic hay from humiliation, jokes about their periods, and so on. They've created a sturdy slapstick of feminine thirst. Several of these shows turn basement into a tool of liberation—in a comedy that you control, the freedom to let your characters be the butt of the joke is a form of power. Just as the addict antihero has been a male wedge into ambitious TV, the slattern antiheroine has been a female wedge. For that role to seem less than revolutionary? That's progress.

It's also progress for a series like "I Love Dick" to be a misfire without that being a big deal, or a message about whether women are funny, or the economic key to all future shows about or for them. The situation seems rougher in the film world: the worst thing about the otherwise dazzling "Wonder Woman" movie, and "Hidden Figures" before it, was the pressure they were under to solve the problems of both Hollywood and every ten-year-old girl on earth. (For decades, I've been getting group e-mails demanding that I see one movie or another, because if I don't the green light will go off for good.) On TV, with

more venues and slightly more variety, it's possible to make granular judgments, to get the oxygen burst of being able to experience women as people—which was the goal all along.

Where "I Love Dick" does thrive is at its shaggy edges, particularly in its most singular episode, the fifth, "A Short History of Weird Girls," which was co-written by Heidi Schreck and the playwright Annie Baker (and directed by Soloway). Nearly musical, the episode is a quartet of childhood backstories of the female characters, pinpointing the origins of their sexual feelings and their creative drive, which is to say, their relationship to Dick. Together, the stories make a case for the way that female desire—and ambition—gets distorted by masculine models, then finds an original shape to get around it. Devon mimics Dick; Toby opposes him; Chris seduces him; Paula wants to impress him—and also to expand, to unfold, his view of art, so that he can see her, too. As abstract as that sounds, each woman feels like a person, not like a symbol, and the sort of character a whole new television show might form around. It's a trick that "I Love Dick" approaches but can't pull off, because its craving to be visionary keeps soaking through.

"A Short History" makes a decent case for "the female gaze," a cinema-studies concept to which I've long been a conscientious objector: the notion that the camera lens, which has been trained to ogle and dominate, can change, in female hands, launching a radical new aesthetic. It's an insight that has become blunt from overuse, particularly with its essentialist hint that women share one eye: a vision that is circular, mucky, menstrual, intimate, wise. Is the stylized pink-and-aqua "Jane the Virgin" the female gaze? (Probably, yes, and you should watch it.) Or "RuPaul's Drag Race"? "The Bachelor," a sexist series that women gobble like candy, or "Law & Order: S.V.U."? How about "The Americans" or "The Leftovers," intimate experiments made by men? Or "The Handmaid's Tale," with its tricky blend of torture and uplift? Variety is valuable not because we need to love everything but because it offers strange things a place to live. Give me a debate over a manifesto any day. ♦

# ACROSS THE DIVIDE

*"The Beguiled" and "The Big Sick."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

If you are set on remaking a Clint Eastwood movie, then *"The Beguiled"* is a pretty weird one to choose. It's a claustrophobic curiosity from 1971—the third of his five collaborations with the director Don Siegel. (Next up, the same year, was *"Dirty Harry."*) The setting is a mansion in the South, during the Civil War, and the hero, who even by Siegel's

Laurence), as she wanders the woods picking mushrooms. A solicitous child, she helps him back to her school—a palatial joint in Virginia, fronted with Ionic columns, but barely inhabited in these depleted times. In charge is Martha Farnsworth (Nicole Kidman), assisted by Edwina (Kirsten Dunst), who teaches neat handwriting, the correct conjugation of



In Sofia Coppola's movie, a Union soldier takes refuge in a Southern girls' school.

standards comes across as grimly anti-heroic, is a wounded Union soldier who gets taken in and tended by the head-mistress and pupils of the Farnsworth Seminary for Young Ladies. Let's just say that the tending does not go according to plan. The over-all effect is lurid, nasty, and naggingly memorable, not least for the splendor of Eastwood's leonine coiffure.

And that is the tale that Sofia Coppola, whose last feature was *"The Bling Ring"* (2013), has decided to tell anew; for her pains, she was named Best Director at the Cannes Film Festival, in May. *"The Beguiled,"* in its refurbished form, stars Colin Farrell as the soldier, Corporal John McBurney, who is found by one of the younger girls, Amy (Oona

*être*, and other skills vital to her pupils' survival. There are precisely five of them: Amy, Alicia (Elle Fanning), Marie (Adison Riecke), Emily (Emma Howard), and Jane (Angourie Rice, who made such an impact as Ryan Gosling's daughter in *"The Nice Guys."*)

Isn't there someone missing? In the 1971 film, there is also a slave, Hallie (Mae Mercer), with whom McBurney seeks common cause, saying, "You and I ought to be friends. We're both kind of prisoners here." The dynamic between them is as fraught and as fruitful as anything in the story, so why has Coppola got rid of her? Might any racial friction abrade the smoothness of the style? Hallie has to wash the patient's rank and filthy body when he is first brought to the school,

whereas in the new movie it is Martha who grants herself that task. Cue lots of lingering, non-smelly closeups of the moist sponge traversing his chest, then down, and down, and wavering at the Mason-Dixon Line of his waistband. Heavens, Miss Martha, don't cross that border! There ain't no knowing *what* goes on down there.

Such is the teasing tastefulness in which this movie is drenched. There is barely a graceless frame in the whole affair. Siegel began his film with period photographs, displaying the fatigue and the ruination of the war; Coppola starts with sun rays slanting through moss-hung trees, and the child, with her basket of mushrooms, could be Little Red Riding Hood. The mood is taut but otherworldly, as in a fairy tale, and, aside from a few soldiers who stop at the gates and curls of smoke in the distance, the war feels like an irrelevance—no more than an excuse, really, to plant the fox in the henhouse. And look at the hens: a clutch of immaculately posed figures in cream and white, like a group portrait by Sargent, sitting down to dine as if supping at a ball, and illuminating the rooms, or the ravishing curve of a staircase, with a haze of candle flame. Siegel's girls go barefoot, hoeing and digging alongside Hallie so that they can eat. Coppola's seem to subsist without effort, as if an invisible staff were meeting their well-bred needs. Who, pray, is ironing the array of silken gowns in which the blushing Edwina appears?

The blushes arise because she has fallen for McBurney, and because he returns her love, or so she blithely believes. In fact, he is a varmint, strewing his charms on all sides, and at one point, when he is healed enough to join the company for dinner, the camera proceeds along the table and notes that every female personage is aflutter at his presence. How should we read this? *"The Beguiled"* is, as you would hope, pruned of the misogyny that blighted its predecessor, which viewed the residents of the seminary as hysterics, prudes, or vamps, but we still get the disheartening impression that they have been pining for a man to come along, as if they had nothing better to do. If, in the second half of the film, they exact a macabre revenge on this Yankee, it is not in the defense of Southern honor but purely because

at least three of them, awake after dark, were competing for his favor, and the competition turned sour.

"The Beguiled" runs for ninety-four minutes, and even those feel like a stretch. As with Coppola's début, "The Virgin Suicides" (1999), character is swallowed up in mood. Elle Fanning is too ethereal to be a flirt; Nicole Kidman, drifting past and asking, "Would you care for a digestif, Corporal?", lacks the matriarchal vim that Geraldine Page unleashed for Siegel; and, as for Colin Farrell, somebody appears to have bled him of all menace. Certainly, there is nothing here to match the crisp definition of Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson, who, in "Lost in Translation" (2003), stood out so clearly, and with such a funky need for one another, against the jet-lagged atmosphere. That remains Coppola's finest hour, and, by her standards, the new work is amazingly unhip—touched with a gruesomeness that makes you giggle ("Go to the smokehouse and get me the saw, now"), yet too indolent to summon the energy for camp. In studying *Homo impeditus*, the blocked or hobbled man, she aligns herself with "Rear Window" (1954) and "Misery" (1990), but those movies compensated with the wit of their imaginative roaming. "The Beguiled," by comparison, is little more than a claustrophile's dream. If your cage is gilded enough, why bother to flee?

As titles go, "The Big Sick" is both a turnoff and a spoiler. You know at once that someone's health, in the course of the movie, is going to collapse. The someone turns out to be Emily (Zoe Kazan), a student who goes to the hospital with such a serious infection that

she is put into an induced coma. Word of her suffering reaches her ex-boyfriend Kumail (Kumail Nanjiani), who hastens to visit her and, as the days crawl by, begins to reflect on how ex he wants to be.

The welcome—if surprising—news, given this gloomy backdrop, is that "The Big Sick," directed by Michael Showalter, is a romantic comedy. Deft and appealing, it was written by Nanjiani and his wife, Emily V. Gordon, and lightly modelled on the shape of their own relationship, in the early days. (Gordon was once in a coma, like Emily.) Kumail is a standup comedian, as Nanjiani is, and earns a living as an Uber driver; by a pleasing irony, when Emily summons the nearest Uber after first having sex with Kumail, it is his phone that lights up, in the bed beside her. He couldn't be nearer.

If Nanjiani cuts a likable figure, on-stage and off, it's because he never pleads to be liked. His punch lines are not punched at all but flicked as casually as cigarette butts. Listen to Kumail, in a club, guiding his audience through the career options that the scion of a Pakistani family, like his, is expected to pursue: in descending order, "doctor, engineer, lawyer, ISIS, comedian." The shyness of the delivery is a testament to his modesty but also a clever ploy; you find yourself leaning forward to catch his mild murmur, and it even wins over Emily's parents, Beth (Holly Hunter) and Terry (Ray Romano), after they show up at the hospital. Initially chilly, they soon defrost and start to hang out with Kumail, and Beth winds up picking a fight with an anti-Muslim heckler during one of his routines.

Although "The Big Sick" breaks new

ground as it delves into cultural conflicts, there are patches of the drama that give you pause. When Kumail reveals that he will probably have to enter into an arranged marriage, for instance, Emily erupts in shock—"My God, I'm so stupid!"—and you wonder, How sheltered can she be? So confident is the film of its liberal credentials, and of the reflexive good will of an audience who shares them, that it gradually loses sight of why anyone could ever think otherwise. The assumption on which the romance rests is that, in order to be with a white woman, Kumail must risk being cut off from his parents, and should dump the religious traditions in which he was raised (even if he no longer believes in them); and also that such a sacrifice, in the end, is no big deal. "Why did you bring me here if you wanted me not to have an American life?" he asks his parents, in exasperation. Well, that depends on what you mean by "American"—spurred to sally forth into the world and to make something new of yourself, or, on the other hand, enjoined to root deep in the values of your community? Both decrees have endured.

What stays with me most, from Showalter's film, is the roster of young Muslim women who are invited to Kumail's family's house, by his mother, as prospective wives. One of them, Khadija (Vella Lovell), who seems funny and perfect, pauses on the sidewalk and tells him, in a tired voice, that she just wants to be in a relationship and to relax at last. She, too, is an American, and it's her story, as much as Emily's, that I want to hear. ♦

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VOLUME XCIII, NO. 18, June 26, 2017. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for five combined issues: February 13 & 20, June 5 & 12, July 10 & 17, August 7 & 14, and December 18 & 25) by Condé Nast, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Elizabeth Hughes, chief business officer; Risa Aronson, vice-president, revenue; James Guilfoyle, executive director of finance and business operations; Fabio Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast: S. I. Newhouse, Jr., chairman emeritus; Robert A. Sauerberg, Jr., president & chief executive officer; David E. Geithner, chief financial officer; James M. Norton, chief business officer, president of revenue. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by P. C. Vey, must be received by Sunday, June 25th. The finalists in the June 5th & 12th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the July 10th & 17th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



"

"

### THE FINALISTS



*"Put it down slowly—the mothers are very protective of their young."*  
Nicholas Pigg, Okemos, Mich.

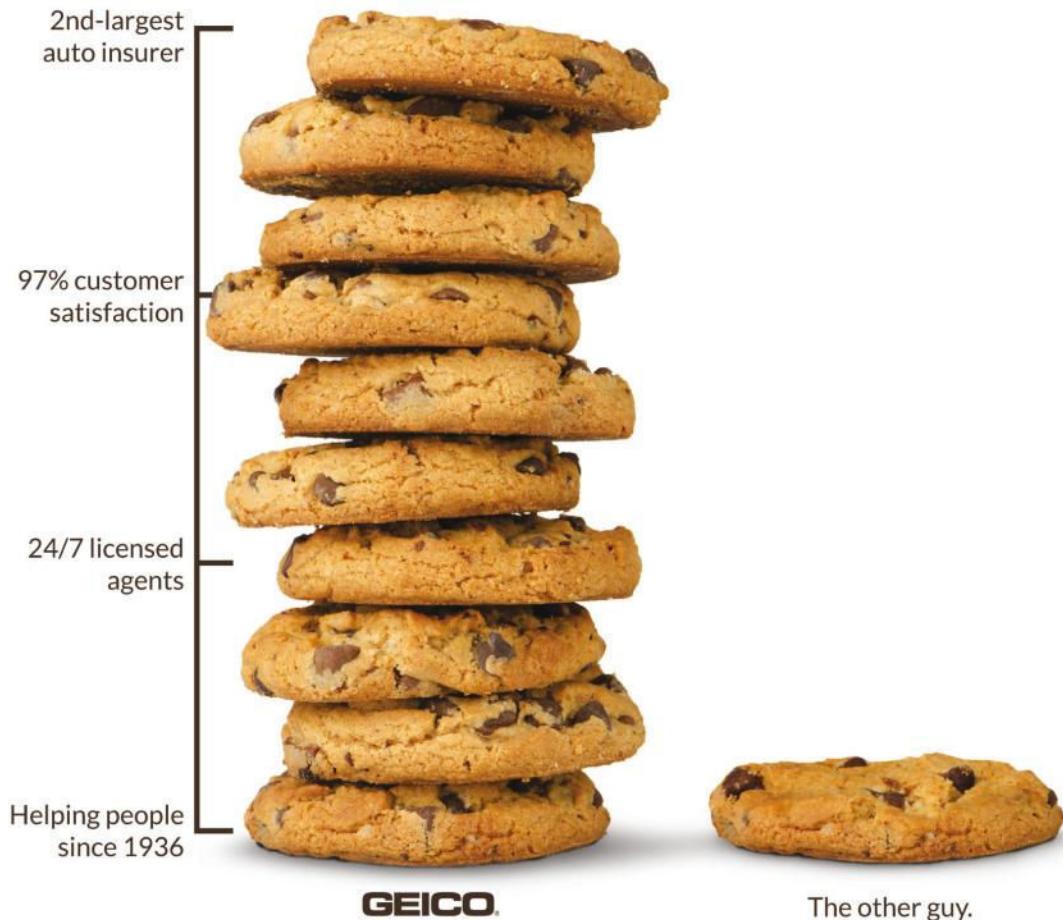
*"I blame inflation."*  
Adam Raby, Chicago, Ill.

*"It cuts down on the yelling and splashing."*  
Mike Goode, Canton, N.C.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*"Shall I keep reading?"*  
Porter Abbott, Northport, Mich.



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