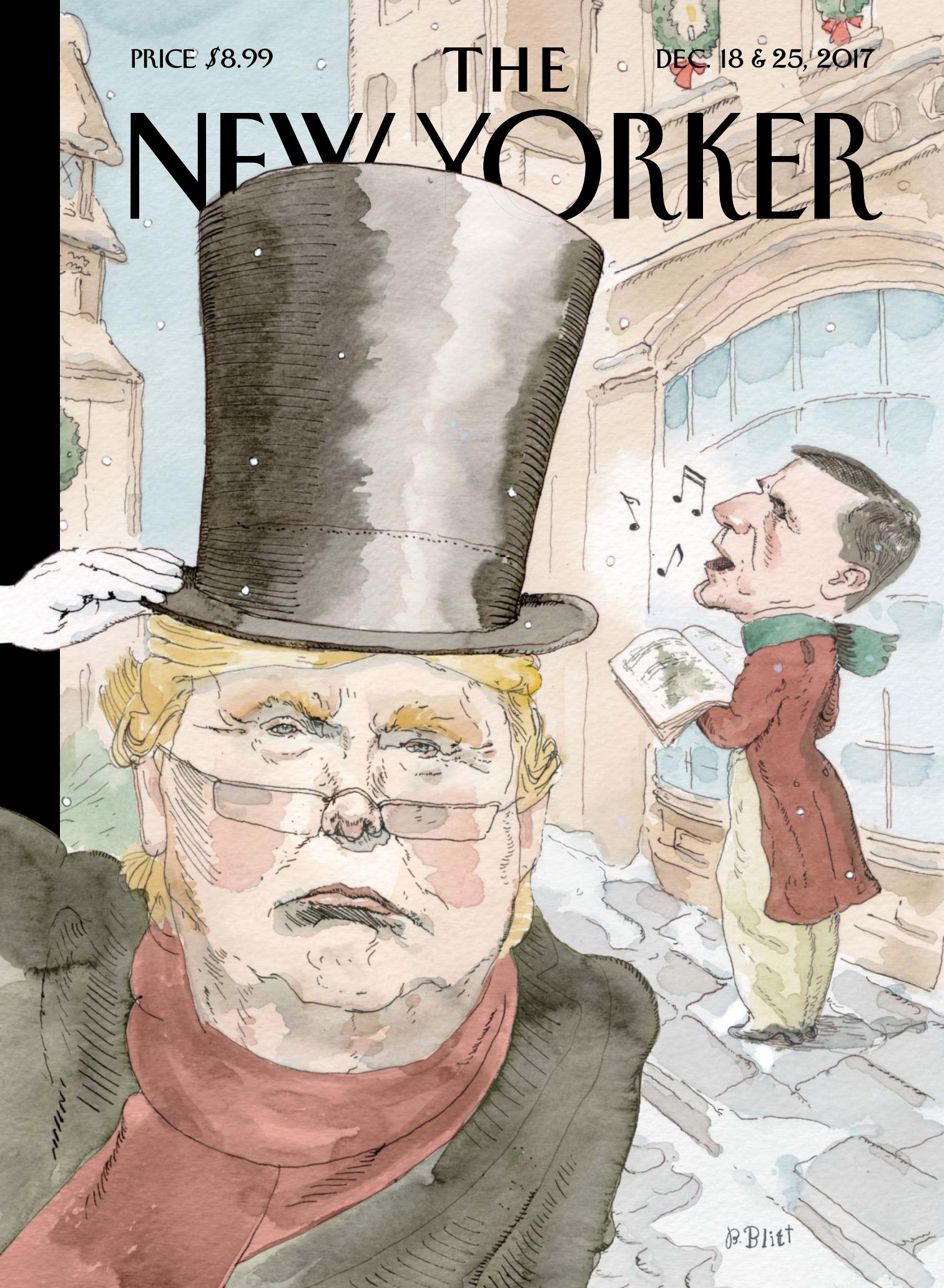


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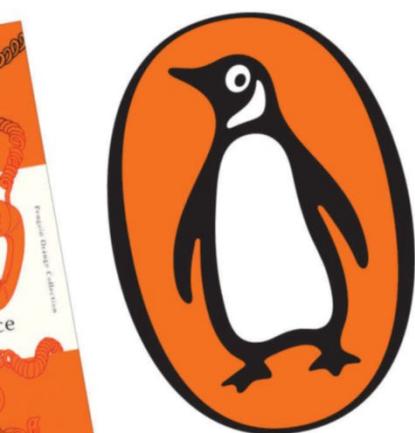
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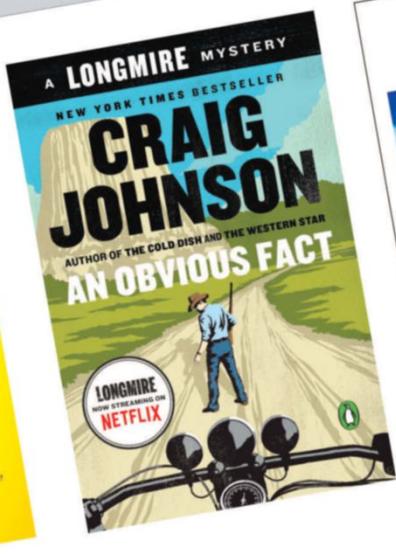
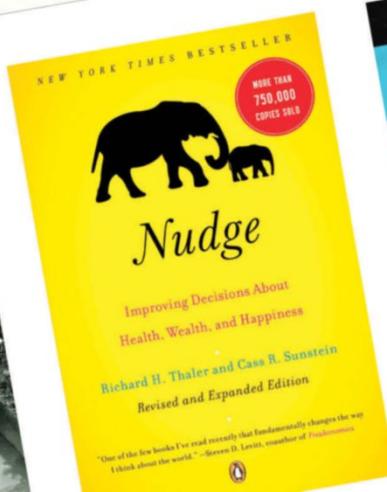
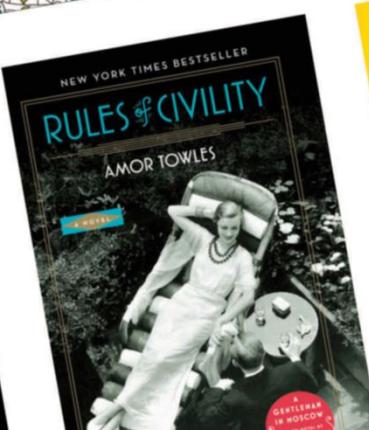
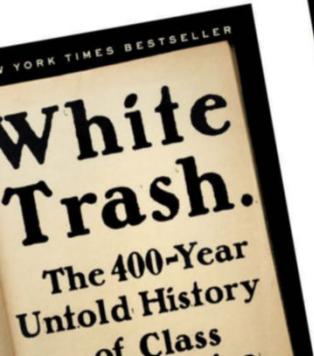
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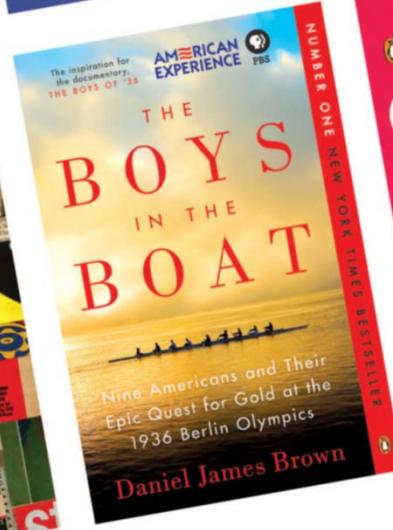
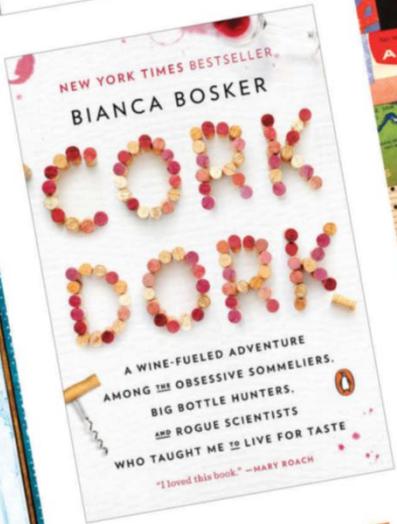
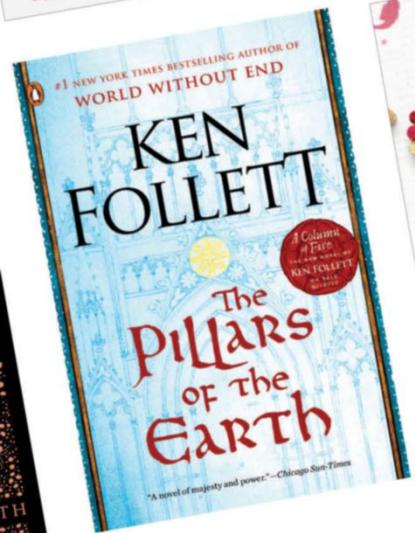
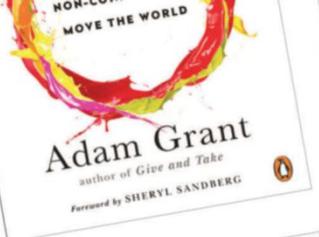
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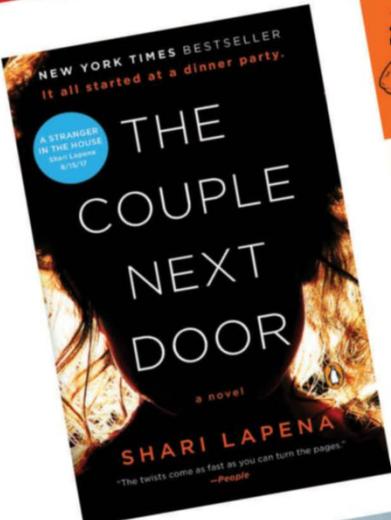
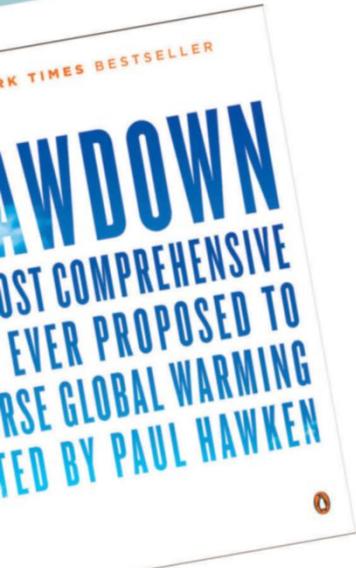
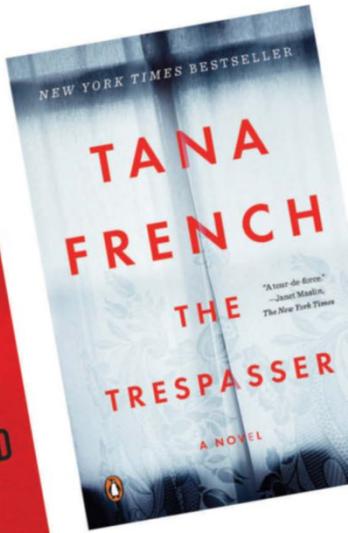
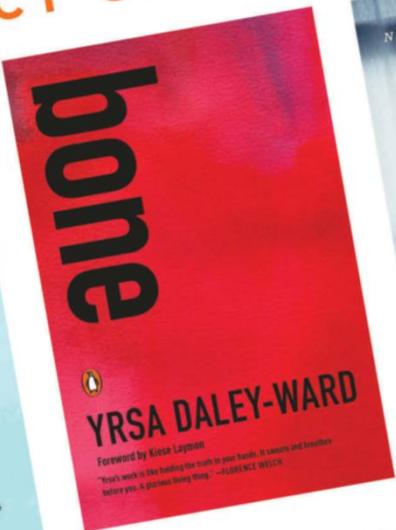
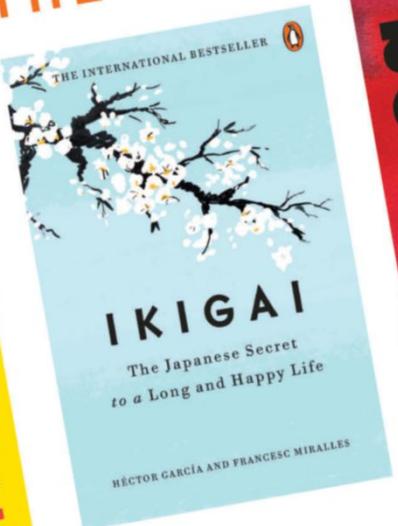
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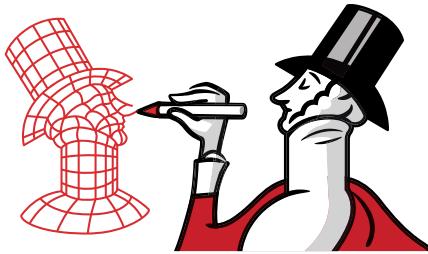


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Cindy Adams,
NEW YORK POST



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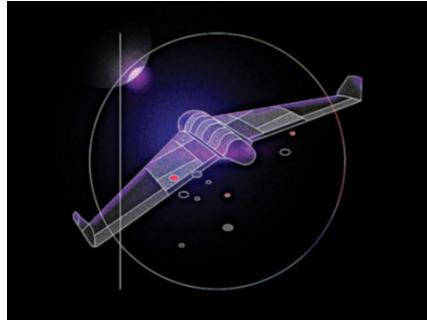
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SHOWCASE

Edible drones, artificial wombs, and other ideas with a big influence on science, culture, and the way we live.

PODCAST

Zadie Smith reads "The Lazy River," her short story from this week's issue.

DAILY SHOUTS

Molly Roth's comic illustrates the things you can only confess to your ex post-breakup.

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THE MAIL

JOCKEYS AND THEIR HORSES

John Seabrook's article on the jockeys Ira and Jose Ortiz ignores an important aspect of horse racing—the horse ("Top Jocks," December 4th). Jockeys may "accept the hazards of racing as part of the job that both the animal and the rider were born to do." However, this assumes that humans get to decide the purpose of another creature's life—in this case, entertainment. Racehorses are routinely drugged and whipped, and often suffer, as Seabrook writes, "catastrophic breakdowns." When the entertainment value is gone, a horse no longer matters, as when the horse Jose rides, Submit, breaks her leg and is euthanized on the racetrack. This anthropocentric attitude results in actions like President Trump's attempt to overturn the ban on big-game trophies. And it's the kind of thinking that's led to our current ecological crisis.

Lisa Rosenthal
St. Petersburg, Fla.

EUROPE'S NEW NATIONALISTS

Admirers of Renaud Camus, such as the European nationalists described in Thomas Chatterton Williams's article on the French far right, may think that they have found an idol in Vladimir Putin, or a model in post-Soviet republics, but they overlook Central Asia's long history of diversity ("You Will Not Replace Us," December 4th). Russia is far from ethnically homogeneous; throughout history, hundreds of ethnic groups have lived there. Some post-Soviet republics have strong ethnic identities, but this is largely due to an aggressive campaign in the nineteen-twenties and thirties to create separate republics within the Soviet Union, each based on a singular ethnicity. This campaign, called *korenizatsiya*, involved standardizing languages, establishing new educational programs, and drawing new borders. But to create an unchanging version of a culture that neatly fits into a political border is to discount parts of the narrative. The fluid nature of culture, ethnicity, and politics evades orderly classification. France is not ex-

empt from this reality. Even without taking into account the effects of migration, any efforts to simplify a culture to a single entity are going to be at best incomplete and at worst seriously damaging.

Corby Johnson
Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan

Camus laments that "the great replacement is very simple. You have one people, and in the space of a generation you have a different people." In doing so, he laments the essential human condition since we first walked upright, developed language, and, as a people, spread across the face of the earth. Yes, it is true that every generation replaces the previous one. That is the way of the world. Each generation necessarily reinvents its culture, history, and sense of community. The people of my generation are not the people of my parents' time. Camus, and all of us, will most certainly be replaced. *Plus ça change.*

Richard W. Poeton
Bennington, Vt.

FIGHT THE POWER

The concept of a "community policeman," which Alexis Okeowo describes in her piece on a Mexican town that created a citizens' police force to fight drug crime, is unusual in the West, but such groups are a last resort for many people in countries where the rule of law is lacking ("The People's Police," November 27th). In my home country, Indonesia, many towns organize their own groups of citizen police, like the watchmen who make rounds from nightfall until dawn. They are typically members of the community who are assigned shifts on a daily or weekly basis. It's not an ideal system, but, in remote places where resources for law enforcement are absent, such measures are crucial.

Budi Akmal Djafar
New York City

The money that can be made in the illegal drug trade in other countries drives corruption on a level that is unimaginable in the United States. The national conversation on opioid abuse often

ignores the devastating effects this epidemic has on the places that provide those drugs. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, deaths from heroin overdoses in the U.S. have sharply increased since 2011. But our own public-health crisis continues to fuel a crisis in Mexico that is orders of magnitude worse.

Sarah Richart
Los Angeles, Calif.

MONUMENTAL DECISIONS

In his piece on the recent push to remove Confederate monuments in Richmond, Virginia, Benjamin Wallace-Wells describes both pro-monument and anti-monument activists ("Battle Scars," December 4th). But there is a middle ground: Richmond could create a National Slave Memorial. A proposal for a slave memorial has been languishing in Congress since 2003, and, if legislators ever advance it, the most popular idea seems to be to place the memorial on the National Mall, in Washington, D.C. That would be a mistake. Just as Germany's Holocaust Memorial is in Berlin, so must America's recognition of its own despicable chapter in history be placed in a former capital of the Confederacy. The creation of a National Slave Memorial in Richmond could justify the preservation of these monuments by rendering them components within a wider historic context. Turn Richmond's Monument Avenue into a two-mile-long outdoor museum of American self-examination and redress. If well conceived, such a site would convey an aesthetic meaning precisely opposite to the monuments' original intent. Rather than symbolizing racist defiance, they would stand for the defiance of racism.

Gray Basnight
New York City

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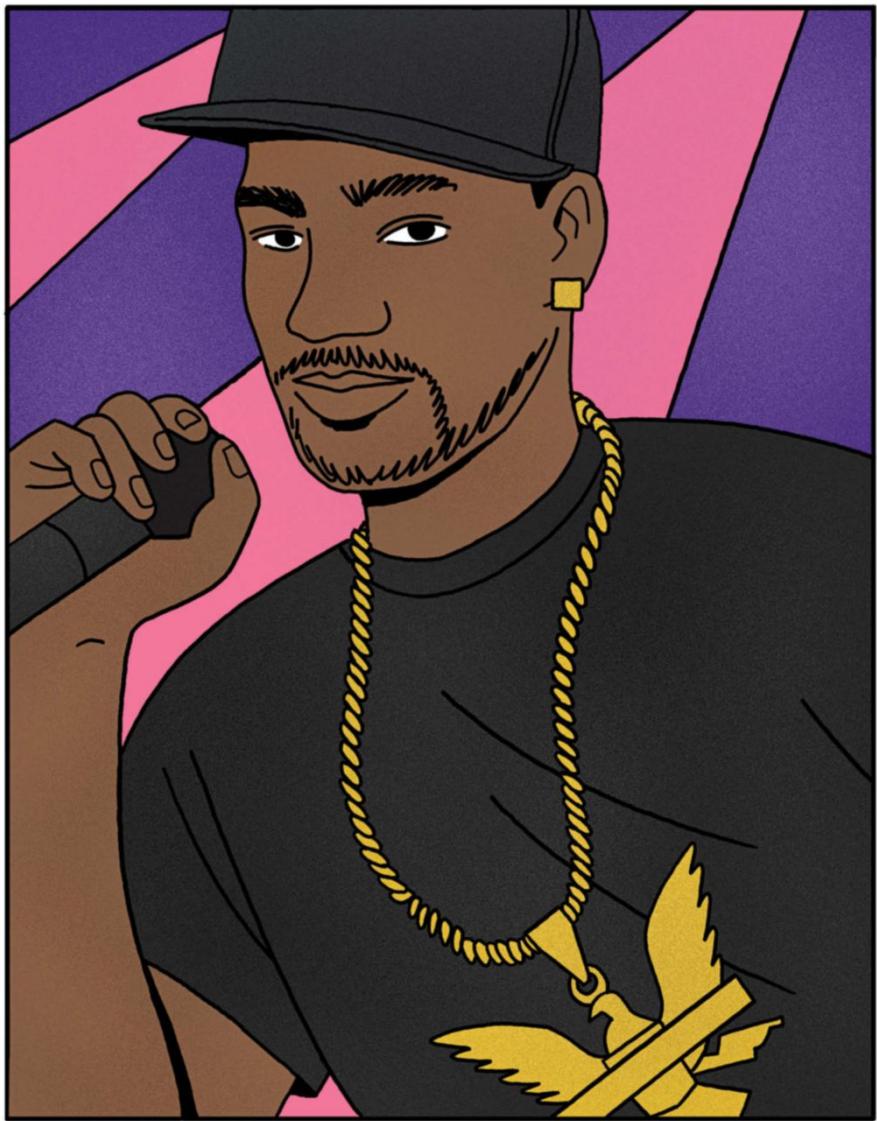
GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



In the nineteen-sixties, Alice Gray, an entomologist at the **American Museum of Natural History** and an origami whiz, decorated a three-foot-tall tree in her office with folded-paper insects for the holidays. A tradition was born. Since 1972, the museum's official tree—now in the Astor Turret, on the fourth floor—has displayed an increasingly elaborate paper menagerie. Just as Santa's workshop has elves, the museum relies on volunteers from OrigamiUSA. (The nimble hands of one are pictured above.) Through Jan. 7.

PHOTOGRAPH BY JASON FULFORD

NIGHT LIFE



Know by Now

A Harlem darling stages a flashy comeback, once again.

The piano man is, rightfully, one of the most revered figures in pop music. Out-sized musicians like Elton John, Billy Joel, and Randy Newman have contributed standards to the canon comprising little more than a few Steinway chords and a male voice that's capable of calm confidence and gutting vulnerability within the same phrase.

For diehard fans of the rapper Cam'ron, "He Tried to Play Me" shares the same shelf space. Released in 2006, the song came as little surprise from a

rapper who'd sampled Journey and Cyndi Lauper with eager ease. Over full-palmed piano melodies, Cam'ron ambles through detailed scenes with characters from his childhood in Harlem—college students fallen from grace, thugs in wheelchairs, addict grandmothers—with a love of internal rhyme and whimsy that lightens their weight. "It's real here, real near, you feel fear, a meal's rare / They don't cry—if they do cry, homeboy, it's a steel tear."

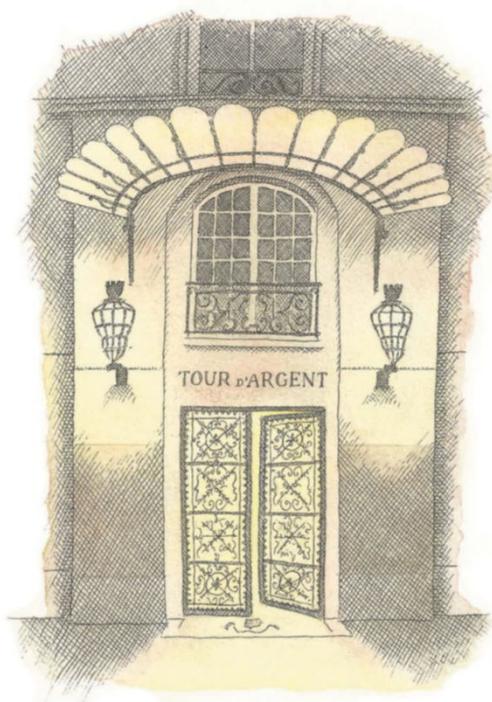
When he was young, in the mid-nineties, Cam'ron held music at arm's length, juggling a basketball scholarship and various hustles as his neighborhood friends Mase and Big L successfully pursued recording careers. But he found his

voice through other artists, ghostwriting hits for major-label acts and eventually earning the admiration of the Notorious B.I.G., who offered him a record deal. In 1998, Cam'ron's first single, "Horse & Carriage," introduced his winking, raunchy lilt to crossover radio; the song featured Mase, who was a year into platinum fame himself.

"Sports, Drugs & Entertainment," from his second album, showed Cam'ron's taste for sweeping, cinematic samples, which he later honed into an iconic sound with his budding rap crew, the Diplomats. Beyond his Dr. Seuss-style cadences, Cam'ron seized ears with the boldness of his arrangements; the twinkling vibraphones of "Oh Boy" and the Sunday-morning keys of "Hey Ma" made rap radio sound softer, more eccentric and self-aware. (On "Killa Cam," from the 2004 album "Purple Haze," he enlisted an opera singer named Steven Santiago to belt his name like a prayer toward the east. Their live performance of the duet at the Apollo Theatre remains a surreal moment of flip-phone-era history.)

Cam'ron is the kind of cult figure that keeps on giving. An entrepreneurial impulse, sparked by a frustrating deal with Epic Records and subsequent tutelage under Jay-Z's mentor Dame Dash, has produced full-length films, sneaker collaborations with Reebok, and even a script for an HBO-style sitcom in the vein of "Curb Your Enthusiasm." His latest mixtape, "The Program," was released in November; it retains the rapper's trademark bliss, but is missing some of his venturesomeness. Still, the children's choir singing Bill Withers on the track "Lean" is classic Cam, and a recent war of words with his old friend Mase has brought out his more mischievous side once again. He's got his band back together, reuniting the Diplomats at a recent New York concert sponsored by Spotify, and has embarked on a short tour, which includes a stop at Irving Plaza on Dec. 22. Cam'ron usually makes quick work of his well-known hits live, so expect a set invested more in the present, with plenty of moments worth talking about the next morning.

—Matthew Trammell



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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.

Lydia Ainsworth

It's not uncommon for musicians to take cues from visual art, but for this Canadian beat-maker, cellist, and vocalist the connection runs particularly deep. Her mother was a set designer on the bygone Muppets program "Fraggle Rock," and her grandmother was a painter by trade. Ainsworth, who studied film composition, has brought an appreciation for the abstract into the musical realm, where she crafts mighty compositions that fuse electronic pop with string arrangements and darker, more ambient tones, especially on her Juno Award-nominated 2014 débüt, "Right from Real." On her second album, "Darling of the Afterglow," Ainsworth reflects on the expansiveness of the mind, particularly on the shadowy cut "The Road." As she explained on NPR, "I wondered, What if you could create a state in which your sensations and memories live on forever? What would that sound like?" (*Music Hall of Williamsburg*, 66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 718-486-5400. Dec. 12-13.)

Kai Alcé

It's hard to overstate just how much the Music Institute, a short-lived after-hours joint in late-eighties downtown Detroit, still resonates within the city. The club that gave techno music a foothold in the community (and then the world) undoubtedly also elevated the profiles of burgeoning local luminaries, including Kai Alcé, a multifaceted d.j. who cut his teeth at the Institute as a teen-ager. Since then, Alcé has taken his talents to Atlanta, where he's been instrumental in building the city's electronic footprint, particularly with his production company, NDATL. All the while, Alcé has never lost the curiosity that got him into music in the first place: his mixes are a wondrous blend of house, funk, and hip-hop, living and breathing together. Revellers can move and groove to a stirring set at Output; he'll be performing along with the d.j.s **Carlos Mena**, **Felix da Housecat**, and **Sydney Blu**. (74 Wythe Ave., Brooklyn. output-club.com. Dec. 22.)

Playboi Carti

This Atlanta rapper, born Jordan Carter, trafficks in slurred flows that land frictionlessly on the ears of club rats and mall loafers alike. "Broke Boi," his breakout song, has been streamed more than twenty-two million times since it was released, in 2015; each play accounts for three minutes of mindless fun. Carti came to attention as part of Awful Records, a loose collective of Atlanta bohemians who have self-released dozens of mixtapes. On the strength of a handful of songs and of his riotous performances, he was soon tugged into the circle of the Harlem rapper A\$AP Rocky. Bellowing bass, wiry synthesizers, and slack-jawed ad-libs characterize Carti's style, captured most purely on his street hit "Magnolia"; he performs here ahead of the equally buzzy **Lil Uzi Vert**. (*Terminal 5*, 610 W. 56th St. terminal5nyc.com. Dec. 17-18.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

Grass Is Green

Like the old saying that gave this experimental Boston rock band its name, the group's music doesn't bring hope as much as a hard truth: contentment is forever just out of reach. On its débüt album, "Vacation Vinny," the band bristles with jagged edges in the tradition of noise rockers like Polvo and the post-hardcore outfit Unwound. The brilliance lies in how Grass Is Green's dynamic time signatures mirror the complexity of the feelings described in the lyrics: alive one moment, confused the next. The band is joined by **Ovlov** and **Anna Altman** at a performance coinciding with the birthday of Dan Goldin, the owner of its label, Exploding in Sound. (*Sunnyvale*, 1031 Grand St., Brooklyn. 347-987-3971. Dec. 22.)

LCD Soundsystem

LCD Soundsystem has long mixed electronics, disco beats, and jagged post-punk guitars with the mastermind James Murphy's sung-spoken vocals. The group first made a splash in 2002, with "Losing My Edge," a single that gave a wry, self-effacing voice to a nation of indie hipsters. Three critically revered, Zeitgeist-baiting albums later, Murphy (who also heads the label DFA) had become a highly touted producer, and the band had earned a reputation as an explosive live act. LCD's breakup, in 2011, came with an elaborate Madison Square Garden concert and all the corresponding ceremony, which made last year's reunion a cause for celebration. The band's announcement of a residency at Brooklyn Steel overloaded ticket sites earlier this year; it returns for a third stand. (319 Frost St., Brooklyn. 888-929-7849. Dec. 14-15, Dec. 17-19, and Dec. 21-23.)

Shamir

"Ever since I was eight, I was attached to the mike, wanted a guitar before I wanted a bike," the twenty-three-year-old Shamir Bailey rapped on his first minor hit, "On the Regular," about the musical aspirations he had growing up in Las Vegas. A sprightly vocalist with a septum piercing and a tangle of hair, Bailey is the latest in a string of young artists melding rap's quick-tongued boasts with the saccharine escapism of pop. After a year spent knocking around industry circles in Los Angeles, Bailey relocated to Philadelphia—he'd come close to quitting, citing the culture shock of seeing the pop machine firsthand. Instead, Bailey stitched together "Revelations," a hazy lo-fi screed released in November that couldn't be further from his earlier work. (*Elsewhere*, 599 Johnson Ave., Brooklyn. elsewherebrooklyn.com. Dec. 14.)

Yo La Tengo

Fans of this longtime indie outfit are in for an auditory treat: this month, the band renews its beloved Hanukkah shows. The tradition, which started in 2001, took a hiatus in 2012, following the closure of Maxwell's, Yo La Tengo's preferred Hoboken venue. Now, five years later, the band's idea of spreading merriment and light to its audience remains the same: a revolving cadre of surprise guests from the musical and comedy worlds is expected, as is a raucous time. Spry as ever, Yo La Tengo will perform for eight consecutive nights at the Bowery Ballroom. (6 Delancey St. 212-260-4700. Dec. 12-19.)

Gary Bartz

Although the alto saxophone is Bartz's main instrument, he has looked to one of the supreme titans of the tenor saxophone, John Coltrane, as a main influence for the better part of his six-decade career. (Bartz, taking after his unofficial mentor, also plays the soprano saxophone.) This tribute to Coltrane includes the guitarist **Paul Bollenback** and the drummer **Lenny White**. (*Smoke*, 2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts. 212-864-6662. Dec. 14-17.)

Hayes Greenfield

Greenfield, with his alto saxophone and a host of effects at the ready—and with the assistance of the drummers **Austin Vaughn** and **Vinnie Sperrazza**—can redecorate a room in a sonic rainbow of musical colors. If touch points of the jazz tradition abound, so do traces of countless other disparate genres and forms; unpredictability is assured. (*Troost*, 1011 Manhattan Ave., Brooklyn. 347-889-6761. Dec. 18-20.)

Sherman Irby: A New Christmas Story

Irby, a saxophone mainstay of the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra, has been adding to the Christmas-music repertoire with original tunes, but he balances his holiday show with time-honored favorites. His Yuletide associates include the trombonist **Steve Turre** and the vocalist **Camille Thurman**. (*Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola*, Broadway at 60th St. 212-258-9595. Dec. 20-24.)

Ken Peplowski / Frank Kimbrough Duo

You could try to classify the clarinetist Peplowski or the pianist Kimbrough, but why waste your time? They are both wide-ranging virtuosos who between them have the majority of jazz's history at their disposal. Peplowski and Kimbrough may not usually run in the same musical circles, but a duo encounter should offer an uncommon blend of knowledge and know-how. (*Jazz at Kitano*, 66 Park Ave., at 38th St. 212-885-7119. Dec. 15-16.)

Spanish Harlem Orchestra

Is there a more immediate pleasure than experiencing a top-notch Latin big band, complete with a contingent of churning percussionists and front men who dance as well as they sing, turning on the collective heat? The Spanish Harlem Orchestra has been doing it right for going on two decades, balancing spontaneous exaltation with greased-wheel precision. (*Jazz Standard*, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. Dec. 21-23.)

"Storyville Stomp: The Last Night in Storyville"

Fabled as a wide-open entertainment center in New Orleans and celebrated for its no-holds-barred attitude, Storyville was closed by city authorities a hundred years ago. To commemorate this ignominious date, the lower level of Symphony Space will be altered into a lawful approximation of the Southern hot spot. A host of committed performers of traditional jazz and blues, including **Jon-Erik Kellso's Mahogany Hall Pleasure Society Jazz Band**, **Queen Esther**, **Blind Boy Paxton**, and **Dennis Lichtman's Hottet**, will spread the joy. (*Broadway* at 95th St. 212-864-5400. Dec. 16.)

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DANCE



"Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia" plays at BAM's Howard Gilman Opera House Dec. 15-16.

Rest in Peace

A Cambodian show memorializes the victims of the Khmer Rouge.

"Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia," which will be presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music Dec. 15-16, is a show in remembrance of the people—approximately one quarter of Cambodia's population—who were murdered by the Khmer Rouge, a Communist insurgency, in the nineteen-seventies. Given the magnitude of the slaughter, the show is modest. As its composer, Him Sophy, has explained, "Bangsokol is a traditional ceremony in Buddhist reli-

gion. . . . People offer food, fruit, and other needs, and pray to their ancestors and wish for people who've already passed away to rest in peace and calm. Meanwhile, the ritual of Bangsokol also prays for living people to be healthy, happy, and have good lives."

In the seventies, the Cambodians did not have good lives. The country's king, Sihanouk, was ousted, and Pol Pot, a Communist revolutionary, aimed to restore Cambodia to its agrarian and, as he saw it, ethnically pure origins. He and his cohort then killed about two million people, with special focus on anyone with foreign connections, for-

eign blood, or intellectual pretensions.

The country is dotted with what remains of the Khmer Rouge's so-called killing fields, where the soldiers carried out group assassinations. To save ammunition, they often used bamboo spears instead of bullets. Babies were eliminated by bashing their heads against tree trunks. The bodies were dumped into mass graves. Still today, after a heavy rainfall, bones and clothes will surface in the mud, and officers will have to be notified to come and collect them.

Of particular interest to the Khmer Rouge was art, or the elimination thereof. It is said that the party, in its quest for purity and its distrust of sophistication, killed ninety per cent of the country's artists. For this reason, among others, "Bangsokol" is a bouquet of the arts. Film, music, movement, poetry: the makers of the show apparently couldn't bear to leave anything out. Sophy's score uses Cambodian music, including some centuries-old instruments and chants, together with Western strings. In the film footage, edited by Rithy Panh—who, like Sophy, is a survivor of the genocide—we see bomb blasts and desiccated corpses alongside beautiful Cambodian dancers, with their temple-like headdresses.

The show is not only a tribute to Cambodian culture but an attempt to revive it. Because of the slaughter, sixty per cent of today's Cambodians are under thirty years old. They know little

about the genocide, and for the time being that is perhaps just as well, since so many modern Cambodians are the descendants either of the Khmer Rouge assassins or of the people they tried to kill. If they knew which side they were on, they might want to take revenge. Panh told a journalist that no one in the country wants to see the films he has collected from the period. They want to put the whole thing behind them. "But in ten years," he says, "they will be interested." At which point "Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia" will be waiting for them.

—Joan Acocella

New York City Ballet / "The Nutcracker"

As a young dancer in St. Petersburg in the nineteen-tens, George Balanchine performed the lead in the Harlequins' "Hoop Dance" in the Mariinsky Ballet's "Nutcracker." By all accounts, he was rather proud of his performance, and when he created his own "Nutcracker" for the New York City Ballet, in 1954, he included the dance verbatim in the second act and renamed it "Candy Cane." With its double hoop jumps, it is still one of the most beloved sections of the ballet, performed by one adult dancer and eight children from the school. This merging of past and present, adult prowess and youthful flair, has helped to insure the production's enduring appeal for more than sixty years. (*David H. Koch, Lincoln Center*, 212-721-6500. Dec. 13-17, Dec. 19-24, and Dec. 26. Through Dec. 31.)

Trisha Brown Dance Company

Even before Brown died, in March, after a slow retirement forced by illness, the future of her company, and the top-shelf choreography it preserves, appeared precarious. But the troupe seems to be bouncing back, touring busily and presenting more than the greatest hits. This program focusses on a less celebrated period in Brown's work, from 2000 to 2009. The music is disparate: the Latin-tinged jazz of Dave Douglas in "Groove and Countermove," the Baroque opera of Rameau in "L'Amour au Théâtre." What's consistent is Brown's wit and invention. (*Joyce Theatre*, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Dec. 12-17.)

Kota Yamazaki / Fluid hug-hug

Yamazaki is hostile to cultural or stylistic distinctions. He wants to blur them, break them down. And so, while "Darkness Odyssey Part 2: I or Hallucination" incorporates customs of the blind Japanese female musicians known as *goze*, these are sure to be mixed up with fragments of many other traditions. Yamazaki likes to cast distinctive dancers—this time, it's Julian Barnett, Raja Feather Kelly, Joanna Kotze, and Mina Nishimura—and allow their differences to flourish. (*Baryshnikov Arts Center*, 450 W. 37th St. 866-811-4111. Dec. 13-15.)

"Tesseract"

This show, which combines live video capture, 3-D film, and dance, doubles as a Merce Cunningham reunion of sorts. The filmmaker Charles Atlas, who returns to filming dance after a ten-year hiatus, was a frequent and innovative Cunningham collaborator. And Silas Riener and Rashawn Mitchell were two of the most striking performers in the final iteration of the company. Together they have produced a work in which Atlas's camera practically becomes a dancer in its own right, creating new visual passageways through the choreography and augmenting the world in which the dancers exist. (*BAM Harvey Theatre*, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Dec. 13-16.)

zoe | juniper

The Seattle-based team of the choreographer Zoe Scofield and the video artist Juniper Shuey combines dance and visual art with uncommon sophistication. The strongest element in their piece "Clear and Sweet," though, is a sound: Sacred Harp singers belting out four-part hymns. The rough-hewn voices are a little at odds with the chic design and are sometimes overwhelmed by the grunge in Evan Anderson's score, but they give the blindfolded dancers and their memoirish chatter as much spiritual heft as they can carry. (*New York Live Arts*, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Dec. 13-16.)

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre

Amid the programs presented during the third and fourth weeks of the City Center season, the

most promising débüt is a revival. Created for Urban Bush Women in 1988, Jawole Willa Jo Zollar's "Shelter" is a wake-up call about homelessness, in several senses. It's rougher and rawer than much of the Ailey repertory, and the company's women perform it with astonishing force. Talley Beatty's ensemble piece "Stack-Up," also being revived, was made only five years earlier but seems much more dated. Its jazz-dance portrayal of street life, complete with an anti-drug message, is as cringe-inducing as its miscomprehension of hip-hop. (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Dec. 13-17 and Dec. 19-24. Through Dec. 31.)

Wesley Chavis / Cori Olinghouse

"DoublePlus," the Gibney Dance series that allows established choreographers to shine a light on their lesser-known colleagues, continues, with a program selected by Dean Moss. Chavis, a visual artist and vocalist, draws upon his attempts to love for "Ku In Tuo Muah," which plays with the physical and intangible aspects of breath. Olinghouse, a former member of the Trisha Brown company with an experimental approach to clowning, presents "Grandma," an improvisational parody of television and the kind of consumerism represented by Cheez Whiz and Spam. (*Gibney Dance: Agnes Varis Performing Arts Center*, 280 Broadway. 646-837-6809. Dec. 14-16.)

"Isamu Noguchi's Dance Collaborations"

Though Isamu Noguchi is best known for his collaborations with the American modern-dance pioneer Martha Graham, she was not the only dance-maker he worked with. In 1932, for example, he created sets and costumes for the American avant-garde dancer and choreographer Ruth Page. In the dance called "Expanding Universe," Noguchi dressed Page in a sack dress, transforming her into a piece of moving sculpture. The solo, which hasn't been seen for decades, will be performed by the former Martha Graham dancer Jennifer Conley, in a re-creation by the Ruth Page expert Joellen Meglin, alongside three early Graham works. Afterward, Dakin Hart, a Noguchi scholar, and Meglin will hold a discussion. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Dec. 15.)

State Ballet of Russia / "The Nutcracker"

The touring troupe, based in Moscow, brings its traditional version of "The Nutcracker" to the Schimmel Center. Expect well-trained dancers—no children—and recorded music. (*Pace University*, 3 Spruce St. 212-346-1715. Dec. 15.)

New York Theatre Ballet / "The Nutcracker"

Short and sweet, this is the perfect "Nutcracker" for the under-six set. The production, a miniature version of the story, is only an hour long, performed in front of an ingenious set piece that transforms itself over the course of the evening. (*Florence Gould Hall*, 55 E. 59th St. 800-982-2787. Dec. 15-17.)

Dorrance Dance

With "Myelination," which débuted at Fall for Dance in 2015 and returned to the festival in an expanded form this year, Michelle Dorrance extends her idea of a tap ensemble as a kind of indie band, smudging the line between dancer and musician. Oddball bodies let elbows and knees go wild as feet make punctilious, intricate contemporary music. For "Until the Real Thing Comes Along," a shorter première set to music by Fats Waller, Dorrance is joined by some stylish guest-star ladies, including Melinda Sullivan. The irresistible energy of this troupe fills the Joyce Theatre with as much unusual, unfeigned spirit as one could desire from a holiday show. (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Dec. 19-23 and Dec. 26. Through Dec. 31.)



IS THE ROBOT CONNECTED?

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HERMÈS' LITTLE THEATER OF GIFTS



H.FR/THEPOETSDREAM-US
IN THE ROLE OF THE ROBOT, A SELECTION OF LEATHER
ACCESSORIES OF CHAÎNE D'ANCRE PUNK JEWELRY

WHAT IS THE PUNK UP TO?

FIND THE ANSWER AT
HERMÈS' LITTLE THEATER OF GIFTS



H.FR/THEPOETSDREAM-US
IN THE ROLE OF THE PUNK, A SELECTION
OF CHAÎNE D'ANCRE PUNK JEWELRY

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

Metropolitan Museum

“David Hockney”

This ravishing survey of Hockney's six-decade career is unlikely to make a bigger splash in New York than it did earlier this year in London, where almost half a million people lined up to see it at the Tate Britain. (The Met and the Tate co-organized the show with the Centre Pompidou, in Paris.) Still, it arrives as a revelation, a retort to all the avant-gardist eye-rollers who dismiss the eighty-year-old British artist as, at best, a guilty pleasure. The retrospective unfolds across eight rooms—each so cohesive it's a show of its own—as a bracing reminder that beauty and ideas aren't mutually exclusive and that great art is always, in some sense, conceptual. From the outset, we encounter an artist whose profound intelligence about picture-making is matched by his passion for color—and for passion itself. While he was still a student, at the Royal College of Art, in the early nineteen-sixties, Hockney began making explicitly homoerotic work, at a time when acts of queer love were against the law. In these paintings, we see the artist move beyond the gestural abstraction that was de rigueur in the era, and explore the figuration he would continue to hone to jewel-toned perfection. A post-graduation trip to L.A., in 1963, was also a homecoming, as Hockney found his métier in the city's sun-dappled swimming pools (which feature in his most famous works) and the beefcakes who lounged in and around them. The show slackens a bit when it lingers on landscapes from the nineties, but a cycle of views of a cerulean-blue terrace in the last room is a joy-soaked tour de force. *Through Feb. 25.*

Museum of Modern Art

“Stephen Shore”

This immersive and staggeringly charming retrospective is devoted to one of the best American photographers of the past half century. Shore has peers—Joel Meyerowitz, Joel Sternfeld, Richard Misrach, and, especially, William Eggleston—in a generation that, in the nineteen-seventies, stormed to eminence with color film, which art photographers had long disdained. His best-known series, “American Surfaces” and “Uncommon Places,” are both from the seventies and were mostly made in rugged Western states. The pictures in these series share a quality of surprise: appearances surely unappreciated if even really noticed by anyone before—in rural Arizona, a phone booth next to a tall cactus, on which a crude sign (“GARAGE”) is mounted, and, on a small-city street in Wisconsin, a movie marquee's neon wanly aglow at twilight. A search for fresh astonishments has kept Shore peripatetic, on productive sojourns in Mexico, Scotland, Italy, Ukraine, and Israel. He has remained a vestigial Romantic, stopping in space and time to frame views that exert a peculiar tug on him. This framing is resolutely formalist: subjects firmly composed laterally, from edge to edge, and in depth. There's never a “background.” The most distant element is as considered as the nearest. But only when looking for it are you conscious of Shore's formal discipline, because it is as fluent as a language learned from birth. His best pictures at once arouse feelings and leave us alone

to make what we will of them. He delivers truths, whether hard or easy, with something very like mercy. *Through May 28.*

Brooklyn Museum

“Roots of ‘The Dinner Party’: History in the Making”

Judy Chicago's “The Dinner Party,” from 1974–79, a monument of the American feminist art movement—and an example of the second wave's triumphs and blind spots—found a permanent home at the museum ten years ago. This show commemorates the acquisition with a fascinating behind-the-scenes look at the project's genesis, and the community effort behind its realization. It took a small army of volunteers—accomplished craftspeople, self-styled scholars of suppressed history, and novice embroiderers among them—to create the thirty-nine place settings on the triangular table, representing a pantheon of female figures from “Primordial Goddess” to Georgia O'Keeffe. (An additional nine hundred and ninety-nine names of notable women are written in gold script on the glazed floor tiles.) In preparatory works—sketches, designs, and test plates—we see the artist refine her technique and develop the signature “central core” imagery of her semi-abstract ceramics—or, as she has jokingly referred to the plates, “vagina china.” Indeed, Chicago deserves the last laugh. For years, “The Dinner Party” was an object of outrage and ridicule, perhaps even more than one of curiosity and reverence, but it endures as a stunningly ambitious experiment. *Through March 4.*

New Museum

“Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon”

Works by forty-two mostly L.G.B.T.Q.-identified artists (who range in age from twenty-seven to sixty-seven), artist teams, and collectives tend to be elegant and ingratiating, temperate, or even a little boring—though not unpleasantly so. (A little boredom may come as a welcome relief to our lately adrenaline-overdosed body politic.) One rare example of an aggressive affront is a series of fantastically nasty small works by the reliably dazzling Los Angeles-born, Berlin-based, biracial, transgender artist and performer Vaginal Davis: abstract reliefs that suggest mangled faces, viscera, and genitalia, painted in a blood-red mixture of substances, including nail polish. The happiest surprise is a trend in painting that takes inspiration from ideas of indeterminate sexuality for revived formal invention. Two painters who stand out are Tschabalala Self and Christina Quarles, who rhyme ambiguous imagery of gyrating bodies with pictorial techniques that recall Picasso, Gorky, and de Kooning. Whether intentionally or not, they effectively return to an old well that suddenly yields fresh water. *Through Jan. 21.*

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Neil Jenney

The distinction between Jenney's two long-running series titled “Good Paintings” and “Bad Paintings” might be a matter of density, judging by the examples anchoring this tantalizing roundup of old and new work. “Moms and Kids” (1969) is “bad,” with a spare network of loose green strokes; by contrast, “Ozarkia” (2014), in which a mossy branch lies



WHAT DOES THE MAGICIAN MEAN?

FIND THE ANSWER AT HERMÈS' LITTLE THEATER OF GIFTS



H.FR/THEPOETSDREAM-US
IN THE ROLE OF THE MAGICIAN, A SELECTION OF SILK TWILL SCARVES

across a brook, bristles with “good” detail. Both series exhibit the same confident hand, though, and the more salient difference might be in how they each relate to meaning. The swing set and seesaw in “Moms and Kids” lay the sentimentality of childhood on thick. But Jenney revels in ambiguity in the recent “good” painting “Modern Africa,” in which sand is seen drifting across two low sets of stairs. *Through Dec. 22.* (Gagosian, 821 Park Ave., at 75th St. 212-796-1228.)

“Kinetics of Violence: Alexander Calder and Cady Noland”

If contemporary art is a love story, then Cady Noland is the one who got away. In the nineteen-eighties and nineties, the New York-based sculptor commanded the same critical respect (and attracted the same swooning critics) as her peers Robert Gober and Christopher Wool, thanks to her gimlet-eyed take on America’s tarnished myths of itself, from the gun violence of the Old West to the glamorization of criminals like Charles Manson. Then, at the height of her career—with works in major museum collections including MOMA and the Guggenheim—she walked away. So it is a coup, to say the least, that Noland has agreed to work with the thoughtful curator Sandra Antelo-Suarez on this exhibition, contributing a metal gate, outfitted with equestrian gear and rounds of ammunition, from

1989, and a stockade draped with an American flag, with holes excised (for a head, hands, and feet), made in 1993-94. Antelo-Suarez also makes a persuasive, if theatrical, case for Calder as a political artist, exhibiting, for the first time outside the artist’s Connecticut studio, a hulking red-and-black stabile from 1972, the same year he took out a two-page spread in the *Times* demanding the impeachment of Nixon. Perhaps the Calder Foundation will consider doing the same with regard to our forty-fifth President. *Through Dec. 22.* (*Venus Over Manhattan*, 980 Madison Ave., at 76th St. 212-980-0700.)

studio is a recurring theme here.) Among the inventive short films on view is one, from 1978, in which the artist is shown drawing in a room by herself—a dramatization of her artistic process and a comment on the limited freedom afforded even in a private space under the Ceausescu regime. *Through Dec. 23.* (Hauser & Wirth, 548 W. 22nd St. 212-977-7160.)

Katharina Fritsch

In her first show in New York in nearly a decade, the German artist continues to refine her signature style, toying with color and scale to uncanny effect. Among the seven sculptures are a deep-blue strawberry the size of a small boulder; a half-yellow, half-orange egg standing four feet high; and a purple spinning wheel, which, at more than seven feet tall, would dwarf any Rumpelstiltskin. Since the sculptures are not all enlarged to the same scale—there is also a nine-foot-tall chartreuse cowrie shell and a five-foot-wide snow-white skull—they resist the theatricality of mere props but, rather, seem to have assumed the proportions appropriate to their symbolic qualities. *Through Dec. 22.* (Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 212-243-0200.)

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Geta Brătescu

The Romanian artist, who is ninety-one, adopts the ancient Greek fabulist Aesop as an anti-totalitarian symbol and an artistic persona, equating whimsical experimentation with a disruption of order. This career-spanning show, titled “The Leaps of Aesop,” is dominated, at first glance, by elegant works on paper, including collaged abstractions reminiscent of Calder and Lygia Pape. But Brătescu’s elastic œuvre also includes fascinating conceptual works, such as a proposal, from 1974, for the placement of strong magnets in public places, meant to transform the city into an “ongoing studio.” (The unorthodox

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

Andy Hope 1930

In what used to be Eva Hesse’s attic studio, and is now a gallery named after the Robert Moses highway project that would have destroyed the neighborhood in which it is located, four silicone brains sit in fish tanks on the floor. They’re thinking about Hegel’s “Phenomenology of the Spirit,” a section of which is busily typing itself on a nearby MacBook. They’re thinking about the shape that dominates the lacquer, oil, and acrylic paintings of Hope 1930, a German artist, who was born Andreas Hofer. (The shape is reminiscent of a male torso, but is actually the silhouette of a rolling garbage can.) They’re also thinking about the flat hierarchy of images in the Internet age, in which “Star Trek” and Francis Picabia—both sources here—have an interchangeable cultural value. *Through Dec. 17.* (Lomex, 134 Bowery. 917-667-8541.)

Lucy Kim, Rachel LaBine, Isabel Yellin / Mira Schor

The visual rhythm of this artfully installed three-person show is established by variation in scale. LaBine’s little oil paintings, some no bigger than index cards, compress still-lifes and Martian landscapes into quasi abstractions. Kim places body casts (of a plastic surgeon, a trainer, and a geneticist) into frames, then douses them with colorful paint, to heighten the flattening. Yellin’s sculptures are also distorted figures: stuffed leatherette forms, which hang from the ceiling by chains and suggest headless aliens. In a separate installation, Schor, a painter and a feminist semiotician, presents glossy new canvases in a timely register of outrage and gloom. *Through Jan. 7.* (Lyles & King, 106 Forsyth St. 646-484-5478.)

Jack Pierson

Thirteen grainy color photographs from 1990—of red roses in bloom, blurry peaches, beautiful young men, and a Lucille Ball impersonator—are collectively titled “Angel Youth.” Pierson is best known for his poetic word sculptures, composed of mismatched letters salvaged from signs. His photos have a found quality, too, embracing generic, often sentimental subjects. “In every dream home a heartache” is a wide shot of a long-legged woman lounging on a raft in a pool, wearing dark glasses; between her and a large house in the background is a green lawn, marred by a dry patch of yellow. The picture is a balancing act of acid wit and melancholy. *Through Dec. 23.* (MacCarone, 98 Morton St. 212-431-4977.)



The Belgian Surrealist René Magritte was a world-famous painter. But his photographs weren’t discovered until the mid-seventies, about ten years after his death. The Silverstein gallery exhibits a selection, including “Le Rendez-Vous, Georgette Magritte, Bruxelles,” from 1938, through Jan. 27.

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The velvety-voiced American mezzo-soprano Susan Graham is accustomed to high tragedy on the opera stage, but she has taken full advantage of the two operettas in the Met's rotation—Strauss's "Die Fledermaus" and Lehár's "The Merry Widow"—to cut loose a little bit. As Lehár's wealthy and worldly-wise Hanna Glawari, she'll hold court among a gaggle of preening Parisian suitors and fend off designs on her fortune from a motley cast of characters (played by Paul Groves, Thomas Allen, and David Portillo); Ward Stare conducts. *Dec. 14 and Dec. 20 at 7:30 and Dec. 16 and Dec. 23 at 8.* • In the run-up to the holidays, the Met is larding its schedule with sweet and delightful fare. In addition to "The Merry Widow" and the family-friendly "Magic Flute," which played earlier this month, the company is also performing its English-language version of Humperdinck's fairy-tale opera "**Hansel and Gretel**," in Richard Jones's wonderfully twisted production, suitable for all ages. Lisette Oropesa and Maureen McKay are the show's misbehaved siblings, and the powerhouse mezzo-soprano Dolora Zajick makes a cameo appearance as their mother, Gertrude; Donald Runnicles. *Dec. 18 and Dec. 26 at 7:30 and Dec. 22 at 8.* • **Also playing:** Richard Eyre's production of Mozart's whirling comedy "**Le Nozze di Figaro**" provides a dark, shimmering backdrop for the grownup shenanigans going down at the Almaviva estate. For the first half of the run, Harry Bicket conducts an ensemble cast that includes Rachel Willis-Sørensen, Christiane Karg, Luca Pisaroni, and Adam Plachetka. *Dec. 15 at 8, Dec. 19 at 7:30, and Dec. 23 at 1.* • The final performance of David McVicar's new production of Bellini's "**Norma**" features two of the house's younger belcanto standouts, Angela Meade and Jamie Barton, in the leading roles. Joseph Calleja continues his

sterling support as Pollione, the male center of this ancient Druid love triangle; Joseph Colaneri. *Dec. 16 at 1.* (*Metropolitan Opera House*. 212-362-6000.)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

"Messiah"

The **New York Philharmonic** has never been a hotbed of period performance, but its annual traversal of Handel's "entertainment" on sacred themes is nonetheless a force to be reckoned with. The conductor this year is the eminent Baroque authority Andrew Manze; the vocal soloists are the excellent Joélle Harvey, Jennifer Johnson Cano, Ben Bliss, and Andrew Foster-Williams, backed by the Westminster Symphonic Choir. *Dec. 12-14 and Dec. 16 at 7:30 and Dec. 15 at 11 A.M.* (*David Geffen Hall*. 212-875-5656.) • Over the past several years, Julian Wachner and the **Choir and Baroque Orchestra of Trinity Church Wall Street** have presented "Messiah" performances that are both historically informed and infectiously enthusiastic. (They certainly have pedigree: a church musician associated with Trinity organized the New World première of the work, in 1770.) *Dec. 15-16 at 7:30 and Dec. 17 at 3.* (*Broadway at Wall St.* trinitywallstreet.org.) • The **Oratorio Society of New York**, a storied avocational choir under the sure direction of Kent Tritle, offers the kind of big and robust "Messiah" common in ages past. (The group has performed the piece annually since 1874.) The vocal soloists include the Met soprano Kathryn Lewek and the exciting bass-baritone Dashon Burton. *Dec. 18 at 8.* (*Carnegie Hall*. 212-247-7800.) • Among Tritle's other responsibilities is the leadership of **Musica Sacra**, one of the city's premier professional choirs for more than fifty years. Expect a lean and firmly elegant interpretation; Lewek again leads the solo crew, which also includes Samantha Hankey, Joshua Blue, and Adam Lau. *Dec. 21 at 7:30.* (*Carnegie Hall*. 212-247-7800.)

St. Thomas Church: "A Ceremony of Carols"

The boys of the renowned Anglican church choir offer this concert annually as a miniature follow-up to the grand "Messiah" concerts earlier in the month; it's always centered on Britten's winsome masterpiece for harp and treble voices. Bridget Kibbey performs the honors this year, and contributes solo works by Bach, Britten, and Kati Agócs ("Love Is Come Again"). *Dec. 14 at 5:30.* (*Fifth Ave.* at 53rd St. saintthomaschurch.org.)

BAM: "Bangsokol: A Requiem for Cambodia"

The composer Him Sophy and the filmmaker Rithy Panh—each a survivor of the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia—collaborate in what amounts to a memorial rite in symphonic form. Andrew Cyr conducts the Metropolis Ensemble, the Taipei Philharmonic Chamber Choir, and traditional Khmer musicians, accompanied by archival film footage and impressionistic contemporary imagery. *Dec. 15-16 at 7:30.* (*Brooklyn Academy of Music*, 30 Lafayette Ave. bam.org.)

Guggenheim Museum Holiday Concert

George Steel, late of Miller Theatre and New York City Opera, continues his stewardship of the museum's annual concert, an outgrowth of its "Works & Process" series. Steel conducts the singers of his Vox Vocal Ensemble in a broad slate of works by Philip Glass, Meredith Monk ("Panda Chant II"), John Corigliano, and Nico Muhly (a world première) along with old favorites by Britten and Mel Tormé and a selection of carols. *Dec. 17-18 at 7.* (1071 Fifth Ave. guggenheim.org.)

Voices of Ascension

Dennis Keene's superb chorus offers its annual Candlelight Christmas Concert in the decorous Episcopal church at which it is based. On the program this year are Renaissance motets by Byrd and Sweelinck, music from the Russian Orthodox tradition, and some joyfully secular entertainments: operatic arias by Strauss and Verdi (sung by Liv Redpath, of the L.A. Opera) and Baroque music for trumpet (with Kevin Cobb of the American Brass Quintet). *Dec. 19-20 at 8.* (*Church of the Ascension, Fifth Ave.* at 10th St. voicesofascension.org.)

New York String Orchestra

The long-running holiday convocation of young virtuosos on strings, winds, and brass continues at Carnegie Hall under the direction of Jaime Laredo. Laredo, on violin and viola, is also out front in the first of two concerts, joining Pamela Frank in double concertos by Vivaldi and Mozart (the Sinfonia Concertante, K. 364); Haydn's Symphony No. 103 ("Drumroll") wraps up the evening. *Dec. 24 at 7.* (212-247-7800.)

RECITALS

Marilyn Nonken

Recently relocated to a rough-hewn industrial space near the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Spectrum continues to host a steady stream of vital events featuring both established and emerging artists. Nonken, a stellar pianist and a tireless advocate for contemporary composers, here offers premières by Joshua Hey and Ingrid Arauco, alongside works by Christopher Trapani, Richard Carrick, and Michael Levinas. *Dec. 15 at 7.* (70 Flushing Ave., Brooklyn. spectrumpnyc.com.)

Miller Theatre: "Carnival of the Animals"

In an enchanting family-oriented production newly updated this season, two well-established delights—the



Several early electronic works by the New York avant-garde icon Joan La Barbara, seen here in a 1986 performance, will be presented in surround-sound playback at the New School on Dec. 17.

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elegantly playful music of Saint-Saëns and the whimsical poetry of Ogden Nash—are brought to life by the director Lake Simons and her deft troupe of puppeteers. Dec. 16 at 2 and 5. (*Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. millertheatre.com.*)

"Music Before 1800" Series: Constantinople

The soprano Suzie LeBlanc headlines this Canadian ensemble, the next guest in the prestigious series at Corpus Christi Church; madrigals by Monteverdi, Barbara Strozzi, and others are featured, with the sounds of setar and percussion adding an exotic touch to the instrumental timbre. Dec. 17 at 4. (529 W. 121st St. 212-666-9266.)

"Sparks & Wiry Cries" Series:

"The Book of Dreams: Chapter Sand"

A clutch of prime musical-theatrical talents—the composer David T. Little, the Met baritone and sound artist David Adam Moore, and the impresario Beth Morrison—have come together to create this “electroacoustic song cycle,” based on the surrealistic verses of Sonja Kretfing; Vita Tzykun directs. Dec. 17 at 4. (*National Sawdust, 80 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. nationalsawdust.org.*)

"The Early Immersive Music of Joan La Barbara"

Though her prowess as a trailblazing vocalist is more widely known and admired, Joan La Barbara has been no less bold in her pursuits as a composer. A newly issued Blu-ray audio disk, on the Mode label, restores to circulation several ambitious electronic works La Barbara recorded between 1976 and 1981; this playback event, presented by Harvestworks, will allow listeners to experience the immersive surround-sound configurations that La Barbara intended. Dec. 17 at 5. (*Glass Box Performance Space, the New School, 55 W. 13th St. harvestworks.org. No tickets required.*)

"Stonfest" at the New School

The Stone, John Zorn's storefront venue on the Lower East Side, is no more, but its spirit still thrives at the New School. The university's Tishman Auditorium will be a far more accommodating space for avant-garde exploits; its year-end mini-festival features such attractions as a solo cello concert by Jay Campbell, sets with the pianists Craig Taborn and Vicky Chow and the trumpeter Peter Evans, and a performance of Zorn's “Cobra” (by the guitarist Matt Hollenberg and the drummer Tim Keiper, among others). Dec. 17-19 at 7. (63 Fifth Ave. [eventbrite.com](#).)

Jamie Barton

The young American mezzo-soprano has prepared a recital for Zankel Hall that is as distinctive as her capacious, ear-catching voice. It opens with an eclectic set of songs by four female composers, moves on to Haydn's probing dramatic cantata “Arianna a Naxos” and a world première by Iain Bell, and closes with two famously ravishing odes to female muses (Duparc's “Phidylé” and Strauss's “Cäcilie”); Kathleen Kelly is at the piano. Dec. 18 at 7:30. (212-247-7800.)

Bargemusic: Christmas Eve

Since Christmas Eve falls on a Sunday this year, the floating chamber-music series is doubling up on Yuletide cheer. Each recital offers music by Bach. First, Julian Schwarz and Marika Bournaki (on cello and piano) perform the Sonatas for Viola da Gamba and Keyboard Nos. 1-3 (BWV 1027-29); later, the pianist Jeewon Park plays the Goldberg Variations. Dec. 24 at 5 and 7. (*Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. For tickets and complete listings, visit [bargemusic.org](#).*)

THE THEATRE



The “SpongeBob SquarePants” musical has songs by Cyndi Lauper, the Flaming Lips, and more.

Under the Sea

The “SpongeBob SquarePants” musical is actually good.

In heavy times, we can all use a little nonsense. (The good kind.) Who better to offer respite from the angry orange man who lives in the White House than a happy-go-lucky sponge who lives in a pineapple on the ocean floor? Launched in 1999 by Stephen Hillenburg, a former marine biologist whose interest in aquatic life was uniquely unbridled, the Nickelodeon cartoon “SpongeBob SquarePants” introduced the world to a community known as Bikini Bottom, populated by scheming plankton, entrepreneurial crabs, and (least explicably) a karate-trained Texan squirrel in an astronaut suit. Needless to say, it became a multibillion-dollar franchise.

The phenomenon has now reached Broadway, in a musical extravaganza at the Palace, whose boards were once trod by Judy Garland and Harry Belafonte. And why not? SpongeBob is every inch an icon, though his dreams are humble. “You’re just a simple sponge, boy. And yet somehow you don’t seem to absorb very much,” Mr. Krabs (Brian Ray Norris), his boss at the Krusty Krab, tells him. But our hero (Ethan Slater, in his sponge-worthy Broadway débüt) yearns to prove himself, and finally gets the

chance when a volcano threatens underwater doom. Here’s where the real twist comes: the show is very good. This is largely thanks to Tina Landau, its conceiver and director, who fills the stage with visual wit, from giant Rube Goldberg machines that spit out bouncy boulders to David Zinn’s relentlessly clever costumes and sets, festooned with tinsel, neon, and bubbles. Sonically, the show is full of invention, with a live Foley artist who deploys gurgles and squeaks. An all-star roster of artists supplied original songs, among them Steven Tyler, the Flaming Lips, John Legend, Cyndi Lauper, and Sara Bareilles—but the standout is “I’m Not a Loser,” by They Might Be Giants, an eleven-o’clock tap number for one Squidward Q. Tentacles (Gavin Lee, using all four legs) and a chorus of sea anemones.

For a property so giddily absurd, “SpongeBob” has been co-opted to serve various political agendas over the years; SpongeBob’s sexual orientation has been a topic of evangelical fascination. Kyle Jarrow’s jaunty script hints, without preaching, at issues of racial prejudice, environmentalism, and government corruption. But it’s Patrick Star (Danny Skinner), SpongeBob’s starfish sidekick, who voices the salient question of our age: “Is mayonnaise an instrument?”

—Michael Schulman

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

Elf the Musical

This musical version of the 2003 Will Ferrell movie, about one of Santa's happy helpers lost in jaded Manhattan, returns. The late humorist Thomas Meehan wrote the book with Bob Martin, and the score is by Matthew Sklar and Chad Beguelin. (*Theatre at Madison Square Garden, Seventh Ave. at 32nd St. 800-745-3000. Opens Dec. 13.*)

Farinelli and the King

Mark Rylance stars in the Shakespeare's Globe production of Claire van Kampen's play with music, in which the depressed King Philippe V of Spain is soothed by the beautiful voice of a castrato. (*Belasco, 111 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. In previews. Opens Dec. 17.*)

Hindle Wakes

The Mint revives Stanley Houghton's play from 1912, in which a young man engaged to be married has a weekend fling with a woman who works at his father's mill. (*Clurman, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. Previews begin Dec. 23.*)

John Lithgow: Stories by Heart

The actor performs a one-man storytelling evening, re-creating tales by Ring Lardner and P. G. Wodehouse. Daniel Sullivan directs the Roundabout production. (*American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300. Previews begin Dec. 21.*)

Mankind

Robert O'Hara ("Bootycandy") wrote and directs this dystopian comedy, about a male couple (Anson Mount and Bobby Moreno) dealing with pregnancy in a world where women have gone extinct. (*Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Previews begin Dec. 15.*)

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein

Ensemble for the Romantic Century presents Eve Wolf's adaptation, directed by Donald T. Sanders and starring and choreographed by Robert Fairchild ("An American in Paris"). (*Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Previews begin Dec. 21.*)

Twelfth Night

Fiasco Theatre, known for its D.I.Y. version of "Into the Woods," stages the Shakespeare comedy, directed by Noah Brody and Ben Steinfeld. (*Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 866-811-4111. In previews. Opens Dec. 14.*)

NOW PLAYING

Describe the Night

The sprawling script for this imaginative three-hour shaggy-dog story, by Rajiv Joseph ("Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo"), takes several true episodes from Soviet and post-Soviet history—the affair between the author Isaac Babel and the wife of Stalin's secret-police chief; the 2010 plane crash in Smolensk, Russia, that killed much of the Polish government; the rise of Vladimir Putin—and links and elaborates on them in wild ways, never letting a potential coincidence go to waste. In other words, this approach might reek of murky-minded conspiracy-mongering, but Joseph's playful treatment exemplifies his omnivorous ear for historical echoes and his fascination with the

line between fictions and lies. Directed by Giovanna Sardelli, the production shifts nimbly among many registers, but the stagecraft doesn't always keep up with Joseph's fantastical vision. (*Atlantic Theatre Company, 336 W. 20th St. 866-811-4111. Through Dec. 24.*)

Downtown Race Riot

This New Group production, directed by Scott Elliott, has so many forced theatrics in it that it's almost a parody of an American kitchen-sink drama. It's 1976, and Mary (Chloë Sevigny), a junkie mother, lives in a small flat with her son, Jimmy (David Levi, so much better than what's going on around him), and a predictably bratty daughter, Joyce (Sadie Scott). Joyce is in love with a black friend of Jimmy's, whom Jimmy may love, too. Anyway, a race riot is about to go down in Washington Square Park, and in the meantime Mary's apartment explodes with all sorts of issues, including why she's such a bad but loving mother. Seth Zvi Rosenfeld's script is packed to the gills with clichés that you can't believe he took seriously, until you listen to the actors trying to recite them with great import. (*Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. Through Dec. 23.*)

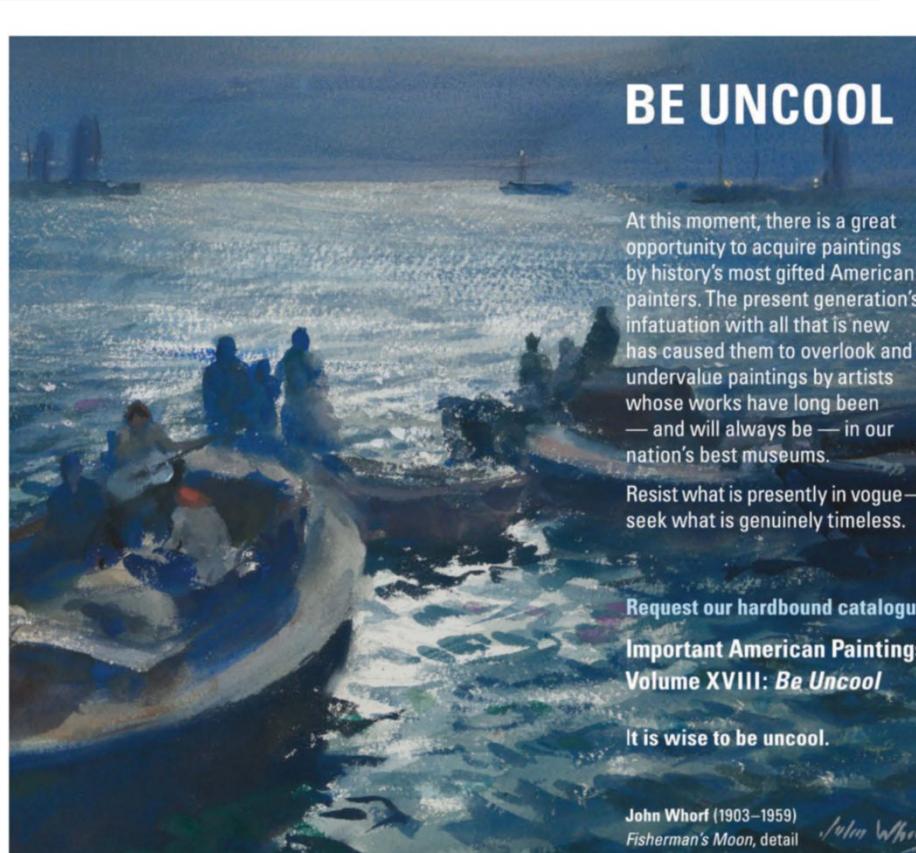
Glass Guignol: The Brother and Sister Play

After nearly half a century as a peripatetic theatre company, Mabou Mines has settled into its own permanent home, in the East Village. For its inaugural production in the new

space, Lee Breuer (a founding director) and Maude Mitchell adapt motifs and dialogue from works by Tennessee Williams and Mary Shelley and drape them in the unhinged luridness of Grand Guignol. Bizarrely, it succeeds. In the title roles, Greg Mehrten and Mitchell deliver deliciously manic performances, aided by a score that spans gigue to tango. A gorilla in chains and a tutu makes an appearance, as does a ghost sporting erotic menswear. There are wall-to-ceiling projections of cockroaches, and a life-size puppet Jesus fettered in Christmas lights. "The play's subject is panic," the brother says, in a moment of fourth-wall-defying candor. "And panic is the style of the play." (*Mabou Mines, First Ave. at 9th St. 866-811-4111. Through Dec. 23.*)

Hundred Days

The Bengsons, Abigail and Shaun, call themselves a family band—husband and wife, not brother and sister, they hasten to clarify—and here they tell the story of their love in the form of a narrative rock show, directed by Anne Kauffman, that is somehow both winningly self-deprecatory and dangerously close to overwrought. The storytelling has several defects: the details sometimes go vague at key junctures, and the central crisis of the play—the notion that Shaun might have only a hundred days to live—feels like a cheat. But their songs and their backing band (cello, accordion, keyboard, drums) are excellent. Sonya Tayeh's understated choreography meshes beautifully with Andrew Hungford's inventive lighting. And,



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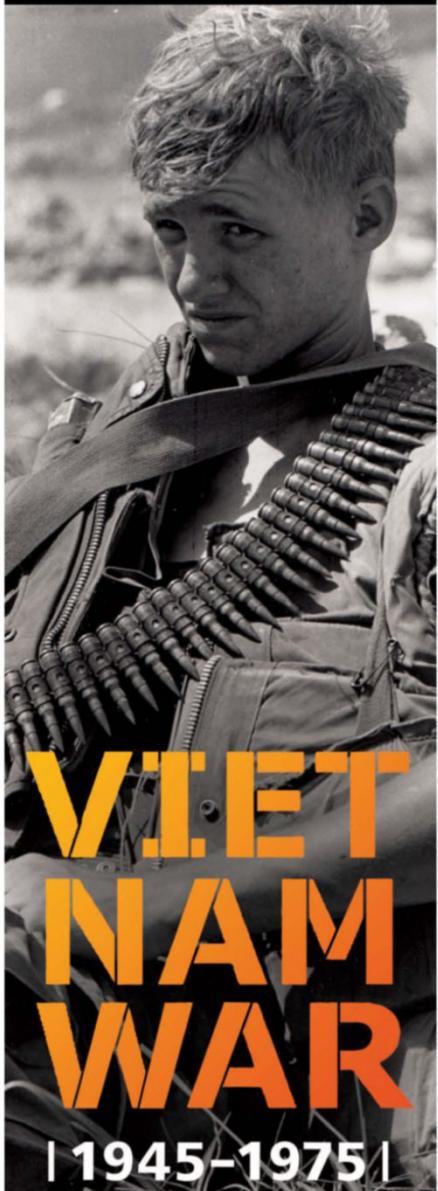
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John Whorf (1903–1959)
Fisherman's Moon, detail

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THE THEATRE

though Abigail's voice can do superhuman things, she uses that power prudently, like a secret weapon. (*New York Theatre Workshop*, 79 E. 4th St. 212-460-5475.)

It's a Wonderful Life

The gospel according to the 1946 Frank Capra film has become one of the most beloved tales of the season. This brisk revival (it runs just seventy minutes), directed by Charlotte Moore, is brimming with heart and wit and good cheer. Anthony E. Palermo's clever adaptation reimagines the story as a radio play, with six accomplished actors handling some thirty roles; one of the players, Rory Duffy, also serves as a dexterous sound-effects artist. All the major scenes are there, occasionally interrupted by satirical commercial breaks. (The one for Lucky Strike is especially funny.) Aaron Gaines gives a nice hard edge to George Bailey, and Dewey Cadell shines in the plum parts of Clarence and Mr. Potter. The actors' voice work is uniformly fine: you could close your eyes and enjoy the evening as a radio broadcast. (*Irish Repertory*, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)

Junk

Ayad Akhtar ("Disgraced") is a playwright who seems the most energized when he has big issues to dive into, and what could be juicier than Wall Street greed and maleficence? The year is 1985, and Judy Chen (a superb Teresa Avia Lim) is a business journalist covering new financial strategies that are redefining the idea of capital in America. Robert Merkin (Steven Pasquale) embodies those changes: sleek as a shark, he's the head of an L.A.-based bank that's been very aggressive about hostile takeovers. Merkin lives in a world where guilt is a burden and loyalty is an inconvenience: money is, as Chen says, "the thing." Directed by Doug Hughes, this slick production of a thin play features twenty-three actors, so there's not a lot of room for character development. But, in a way, that doesn't matter: sometimes it's fun just to sit there and get off on the testosterone and the swiftness of the action, like most of the play's guys do. (*Vivian Beaumont*, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200.)

Meteor Shower

At eighty intermissionless minutes, this intelligent and surprising work about marital life and modern-day repression, by the writer and performer Steve Martin, moves at a fast clip, providing many laughs and "Aha!" moments along the way. The plot centers on two couples—or are they?—who get together to drink a little wine and watch a celestial event in Ojai, California. Trouble ensues as social decorum gives way to the id. The director, Jerry Zaks ("Hello, Dolly!"), cares about his actors, and he appears to have done a great job making them all feel cared for, from the comedians Amy Schumer and Keegan-Michael Key—in their Broadway debuts—to the stage pros Jeremy Shamos and Laura Benanti, who's never been sexier or funnier. (*Booth*, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.)

Once on This Island

A calypso fairy tale just this side of treachery, Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty's 1990 musical tells the story of Ti Moune (the big-voiced newcomer Hailey Kilgore), a peasant girl whose island, in the French Antilles, is divided by skin color and class. When a boy (Isaac Powell) crashes his car in her village, she nurses him

back to health. He turns out to be an aristocrat, but can Ti Moune's love conquer all? Michael Arden's warm, handcrafted revival doesn't overplay the Disney clichés—the musical, based on Rosa Guy's novel "My Love, My Love," repurposes the "Little Mermaid" myth—but instead frames the action as a tale told to a little girl (Emerson Davis) in a hurricane-blasted Caribbean slum. The show may share its ingénue's lovelorn heart, but its biggest moment belongs to Alex Newell, who scales vocal heights as the draggy Goddess of the Earth. (*Circle in the Square*, 235 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

Springsteen on Broadway

In his new solo show, Bruce Springsteen cribbs from his memoir, "Born to Run," to take us on what lesser artists would call "a journey." The words come tumbling out, starting with his poor upbringing—how he was desperate to leave home but ended up, as we all do, in one way or another, back where he started. "Now I live ten minutes away from where I grew up," he says, somewhat ruefully, in one of many amusing disclosures. Springsteen isn't humor-challenged, exactly—he's too self-aware not to know when to make fun of himself—but he's a romantic, and romantic feeling guides this intimate spectacle. His commitment to his subject matter makes the show a kind of sermon, one that he has written in order to understand not only himself but what goes into the making of a self. (Reviewed in our issue of 10/30/17.) (*Walter Kerr*, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

The Wolves

Since its New York première, with the tiny Playwrights Realm company last fall, Sarah DeLappe's play about teen girls on an indoor soccer team has been on quite a voyage: an encore run, acknowledgment as a Pulitzer Prize finalist, and now a transfer to Lincoln Center Theatre. You might say "The Wolves" has gone to Nationals. DeLappe and the director, Lila Neugebauer, have an uncanny grasp of the girls' ambitions, fears, and desires (often so intricately melded as to be indistinguishable). Despite being identified only by their jersey numbers, the players, portrayed by actresses who brilliantly capture teen-age mannerisms, quickly acquire endearing personalities and individual voices. DeLappe applies a delicate touch to such tricky subjects as body anxiety, the complicated nature of female friendships, the formation of identity, and even mortality. Life is never far from the pitch for these Wolves. (*Mitzi E. Newhouse*, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200.)

ALSO NOTABLE

The Band's Visit Ethel Barrymore. • **Bright Colors and Bold Patterns** SoHo Playhouse. • **The Children** Samuel J. Friedman. • **The Dead, 1904** American Irish Historical Society. • **Harry Clarke Vineyard**. Through Dec. 23. • **The Home Place** Irish Repertory. Through Dec. 17. • **The Last Match** Laura Pels. Through Dec. 23. • **Latin History for Morons** Studio 54. • **M. Butterfly** Cort. • **The Parisian Woman** Hudson. • **Peter Pan** The Duke on 42nd Street. Through Dec. 23. • **Pride and Prejudice** Cherry Lane. • **A Room in India** Park Avenue Armory. Through Dec. 20. • **School Girls; or, The African Mean Girls Play** Lucille Lortel. • **Shadows Acorn**. • **20th Century Blues** Pershing Square Signature Center. • **The Winter's Tale** Public. Through Dec. 17.

MOVIES

OPENING

Downsizing Alexander Payne directed this science-fiction comedy, about a near future in which people have the option of being shrunk in order to inhabit environmentally friendly micro-communities. Starring Matt Damon, Hong Chau, and Christoph Waltz. *Opening Dec. 22. (In wide release.)* • **Phantom Thread** Paul Thomas Anderson directed this drama, set in London in the nineteen-fifties, about a fashion designer (Daniel Day-Lewis) whose new model (Vicky Krieps) comes into conflict with his sister and business partner (Lesley Manville). *Opening Dec. 25. (In limited release.)* • **The Post** Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. *Opening Dec. 22. (In limited release.)* • **The Rape of Recy Taylor** Reviewed in Now Playing. *Opening Dec. 15. (In limited release.)* • **Star Wars: The Last Jedi** The franchise's latest installment, written and directed by Rian Johnson, stars Mark Hamill, Adam Driver, Daisy Ridley, John Boyega, Oscar Isaac, Lupita Nyong'o, and, in her last role, the late Carrie Fisher. *Opening Dec. 15. (In wide release.)*

NOW PLAYING

Bigger Than Life

In Nicholas Ray's extravagant, wide-screen, Technicolor melodrama, from 1956, the horror of middle-class decency is surpassed only by the terror of the abyss that lies beyond it. That's what Ed Avery (James Mason), a small-town English teacher and a devoted family man, learns when he's stricken with a severe blood disease and treated with the "wonder drug" cortisone. When he's careless about his dosage, he suffers the medicine's main side effect: psychosis, which, in his case, takes the form of overdrive. Bursting with energy, discontent, and fury, Ed turns on his students, neighbors, and friends—and, ultimately, his family, in one of the most fearlessly histrionic scenes ever filmed. Mason's gift for cold-eyed madness is heightened by Ray's exuberantly lurid approach. He films Ed's jaundiced world view with cocked angles and shock cuts and invokes the clash of slovenly good cheer and tyrannical order with a palette that sets decorous neutral tones against the acid colors of corrosive passion and the eerie fluorescence of the little purple bottle at the heart of it all. Based on a 1955 article in this magazine by Berton Roueche.—Richard Brody (*Film Society of Lincoln Center, Dec. 21 and Dec. 24.*)

Call Me by Your Name

The new film by Luca Guadagnino is set in the summer of 1983. Professor Perlman (Michael Stuhlbarg) lives with his wife (Amira Casar) and their seventeen-year-old son, Elio (Timothée Chalamet), in a secluded Italian house—a private Eden, where the fruit ripens within reach, ready for the plucking. The family is Jewish, cultivated, and polyglot; the whole movie spills over with languages, books, and strains of music. (The ideal viewer, probably, would be André Gide.) Into this enchanted place comes an American called Oliver (Armie Hammer),

who is to be Perlman's research assistant; you half expect the intruder to be a serpent, but instead he deepens the enchantment. Though the story, adapted by James Ivory from André Aciman's novel, tells primarily of the love between Elio and Oliver, Guadagnino somehow conjures a free-floating rapture, of which all the characters partake. Even a statue, dredged from a lake, seems to share in the bliss. What could have been too rich or too glutinous is leavened by wit and, later on, by a wintry sorrow. How the film could have thrived with actors other than Chalamet and Hammer is hard to imagine.—Anthony Lane (*Reviewed in our issue of 12/4/17.*) (*In limited release.*)

Cleopatra

Joseph L. Mankiewicz's colossal four-hour-long spectacle, from 1963, is a personal artistic project of the highest order. It's also a heartbreaking melodrama that runs on the chemistry between Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. Mankiewicz presents the queen as a self-possessed political strategist and a literal diva who claims to be the goddess Isis and enjoys every minute of her veneration. Taylor plays the role with an uninhibited imperiousness, as when she turns Cleopatra's entrance into Rome, aboard a giant rolling sphinx, into the ultimate red-carpet photo op. Mankiewicz—who directed the 1953 film of "Julius Caesar"—here offers a brilliantly ironic revision of Shakespeare, showing Burton, as Antony, only mouthing the famous funeral oration, drowned out by a crowd that won't lend him their ears. The director's analytical intellectualism—with an emphasis on the diplomatic maneuvers of empire-building, the tactical complexity of ancient warfare, and the psychological pressure of romance on the levers of power—is heated by the erotic passion of Antony and Cleopatra and the intense bond between Taylor and Burton, which is as entrancing onscreen as it was in life.—R.B. (*Film Forum, Dec. 17, and streaming.*)

Darkest Hour

How badly we need another Winston Churchill film is open to question. Nonetheless, Joe Wright's contribution to the genre is welcome, largely because of Gary Oldman in the leading role. He seems an unlikely choice, yet the lightness of his performance marks it out from other attempts; this Churchill, oddly quick on his feet, with a hasty huff and puff in his voice instead of a low, slow growl, suggests a man in a hurry to fight. None too soon, for we are in the late spring of 1940, with the German war machine in full cry and Britain adrift until Churchill, to the alarm of many contemporaries, takes charge. Wright has a curious weakness for the overhead shot, be it of the House of Commons or of a landscape cratered by bombs, and the musical score sounds too plush by half. But Oldman is braced by his supporting cast. Kristin Scott Thomas, as Clementine Churchill, is witty as well as stalwart; Neville Chamberlain, as played by Ronald Pickup, has never looked graver or more aghast. Best of all is Stephen Dillane, as Lord Halifax, whom Churchill called the Holy Fox: cadaverous, principled, desperate for peace, and wrong.—A.L. (*In limited release.*)

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The Disaster Artist

In this comedy directed by and starring James Franco, based on the true story of the production of the cult movie "The Room" (2003), Franco displays a wicked joy in portraying the enigmatic Tommy Wiseau, its director, star, producer, and financier—and the accidental butt of cinematic history's joke. Relying on a script based on a memoir by Greg Sestero, Wiseau's friend, sidekick, and co-star in "The Room," Franco brings a special verve to scenes of the fictionalized Tommy working with—and against—his cast and crew (in particular, the justly skeptical and sarcastic production manager, played by Seth Rogen). The movie sticks with Greg's perspective; he is played by Dave Franco (James's brother) as a bland and struggling young actor who yearns for stable normalcy but is pulled into the chaotic vortex of Tommy's generosity, vanity, obliviousness, and domineering energy. Yet the comedy, for all its scenes of giddy wonder, never gets past Tommy's mask of mystery; avoiding speculation and investigation, it stays on the surface of his public and private shtick, leaving little more than a trail of amusing anecdotes.—R.B. (*In limited release.*)

Freud: The Secret Passion

In this 1962 bio-pic, John Huston lucidly conjures the revolution that occurred in the drawing rooms and medical offices of fin-de-siècle Vienna. The profound script—which Huston commissioned from Jean-Paul Sartre, who insisted on remaining uncredited after its revision by Charles Kaufman and Wolfgang Reinhardt—brings to life the discovery of such psychological concepts as unconscious desires, the interpretation of dreams, the free-association method, transference, and, of course, the Freudian slip, but reserves the greatest drama for the notion of childhood sexuality and the Oedipus complex. Montgomery Clift burns with a fierce intelligence as the young practitioner with a titanic imagination, and Susannah York, as Cecily Koertner, his most troubling neurotic, movingly conveys the tormenting price of self-knowledge. While in different hands (Orson Welles's, for instance) these radical themes could have inspired more hallucinatory, probing, and inward images, Huston nonetheless evokes an apt sense of wonder, admiration, and awe.—R.B. (*Metrograph*, Dec. 14.)

I, Tonya

This comedic drama, directed by Craig Gillespie, offers a detailed, empathetic view of Tonya Harding, the real-life Olympic figure skater who, in 1994, was involved in a plot to injure her main rival, Nancy Kerrigan. (The script, by Steven Rogers, is partly based on his interview with Harding.) In the filmmakers' version of the story, Tonya, as a child, is bullied and beaten by her mother (Allison Janney), who's depicted as a brutally judgmental waitress with big dreams for her daughter—and the adult Tonya (played by Margot Robbie), a bold and gifted athlete, escapes her mother's clutches by marrying Jeff Gillooly (Sebastian Stan), who also beats her. Though Tonya rises brilliantly through the sport's competitive ranks, the skating establishment holds her gaudy taste, rough manners, and rude family against her. That endemic class discrimination and the ensuing bad publicity are the backdrop for Jeff's scheme to harm Kerrigan—and for the beleaguered and abused Tonya's inability to oppose it. The heart of the movie is its recognition of Tonya's dependence on peo-

ple and institutions that have betrayed her. But Gillespie's empathy is mixed with condescension; much of the movie's bluff comedy mocks the tone and the actions of Tonya and her milieu. With Paul Walter Hauser, as Jeff's delusional partner in crime.—R.B. (*In limited release.*)

Lady Bird

As writer and director, Greta Gerwig infuses this comedic coming-of-age drama with verbal virtuosity, gestural idiosyncrasy, and emotional vitality. The loosely autobiographical tale is set mainly in Gerwig's home town of Sacramento, in the 2002-03 academic year, and centered on Christine McPherson (Saoirse Ronan), self-dubbed Lady Bird, a senior at a Catholic high school whose plan to escape to an Eastern college is threatened by her grades and her parents' finances. Lady Bird's father (Tracy Letts), with whom she shares a hearty complicity, is about to lose his job; her mother (Laurie Metcalf), with whom she argues bitterly, is a nurse who works double shifts to keep the family afloat. Literary and willful, Lady Bird joins the school's musical-theatre troupe, with results ranging from the antic to the romantic. Afflicted with real-estate envy, she infiltrates the world of rich kids and risks losing true friends; she dates a Francophile rocker (Timothée Chalamet) whose walk on the wild side is comfortably financed. Meanwhile, her relationship with her mother deteriorates. Deftly juggling characters and story lines, Gerwig provokes aching laughs with gentle touches (Metcalf's etched diction nearly steals the show), but her direction remains self-effacing until late in the film, when several sharply conceived scenes suggest reserves of observational and symbolic energy.—R.B. (*In limited release.*)

The Mascot

The animation pioneer Ladislaw Starewicz's weird, lumpy cross between "Toy Story" and "Petrovka" is so ingeniously acted out by its puppet cast that it tickles you even when it makes you squirm. A group of toys—including a clown, an apache dancer, and a ballerina—break loose while being sent from their impoverished creator to a store. Only a stuffed puppy dog, the favorite of the artisan's child, arrives (intact) and is sold. But he falls from his new owner's car, ends up at a fearsome devil's masque, and goes face to face with a sneering Satan. The mix of warmth, wit, and terror is a kick for adults; it might wig out kids. Released in 1933.—Michael Sragow (*Anthology Film Archives*, Dec. 17.)

The Other Side of Hope

This spare, puckish, yet ruefully clear-eyed comedic drama, directed by Aki Kaurismäki, is centered on the fate of Khaled (Sherwan Haji), a young man from Aleppo who arrives clandestinely in Helsinki and applies for asylum there. Kaurismäki's calm and plain style is well suited to the step-by-step observation of the immigration system's oppressively officious approach to Khaled and his fellow-applicants. Khaled's story is told in parallel with that of a gruff, middle-aged salesman named Wikström (Sakari Kuosmanen), whose tale is a multilevel fantasy that starts with his brusque abandonment of his wife (Kaija Pakarinen) and continues on to his purchase of a restaurant after winning at high-stakes poker. When Khaled is denied asylum, he goes on the run. Wikström soon finds him hiding behind the restaurant's garbage cans, takes him in, gives him a job, and selflessly helps him find

his sister, Miriam (Niroz Haji), from whom he was separated in transit. Meanwhile, the ubiquitous presence of violent neo-Nazis tempers the good feelings. Running gags about odd-ball twists in the restaurant business serve little purpose but don't detract from the movie's essential quasi-documentary power. In English, Finnish, and Arabic.—R.B. (*In limited release.*)

The Rape of Recy Taylor

In 1944, Recy Taylor, a black woman, was raped by six white men in her home town of Abbeville, Alabama. Those men faced no charges, but Taylor and her family took great risks to reach out to the N.A.A.C.P., and the organization's investigator, Rosa Parks, turned the unredressed attack into a national issue. The director Nancy Buirski's documentary about this crucial but underrecognized historical moment reconstructs the details of the attack, the legalistic sham of an all-white system, the intrepid ingenuity of Parks and her colleagues—and the area's unresolved tensions over the case, even now. It features extraordinary interviews with Taylor's sister, Alma Daniels; her brother, Robert Corbitt; and, briefly, Taylor herself, who is ninety-seven. (Buirski also interviews relatives of the attackers.) But newly shot impressionistic imagery, an overinsistent score, an excess of scholarly commentary (however insightful), and editorial tricks of dramatic reconstruction undercut the sacred power of Taylor's and her family's testimony. Nonetheless, the movie is essential viewing, not least for its emphasis on the crucial role of women in the civil-rights movement; it includes a letter by Parks, about her struggle, as a teen-ager, to fend off a white man's sexual aggression, that's an exemplary political and literary work.—R.B. (*In limited release.*)

The Shape of Water

When it comes to many-layered tales, Guillermo del Toro is no novice. But even the fantastic beasts of "Pan's Labyrinth" (2006), stalking against the backdrop of the Spanish Civil War, could not prepare us for the wild jostling of genres in his latest film, which is set at the peak of the Cold War. Sally Hawkins plays Elisa, who is lovelorn, unabashed, and mute. She lives alone, next door to a commercial artist named Giles (Richard Jenkins), and works as a cleaner, alongside her friend Zelda (Octavia Spencer), at a scientific facility. There she finds an unlikely beau: a scaly creature (Doug Jones) who has been brought from the Amazon to Baltimore, where, it is hoped, he may be of use against the Russians. Elisa teaches him sign language and hatches plans to spring him from captivity. Given the presence of musical numbers, dance sequences, and foreign spies, plus a surprising frankness about sexual bliss, you would expect the movie to fall apart, yet it all hangs together, held tight by the urgency of the characters' feelings and the easy force of the magic. With Michael Stuhlbarg, as a sympathetic soul in a white coat, and Michael Shannon, as the candy-crunching villain.—A.L. (12/11/17) (*In wide release.*)

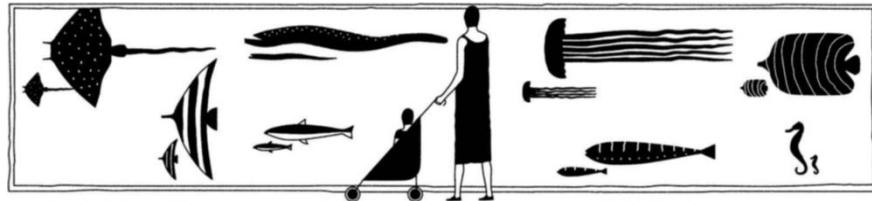
Within Our Gates

Oscar Micheaux's bold, forceful melodrama, from 1919—the oldest surviving feature by a black American director—unfolds the vast political dimensions of intimate romantic crises. Evelyn Preer stars as Sylvia Landry, a young black woman in a Northern town, who suffers a broken

engagement. She heads home to the South and becomes a teacher in an underfinanced school; travelling to Boston to do fund-raising, she meets an ardent doctor (Charles D. Lucas) and a white philanthropist (Mrs. Evelyn), who help with the cause. With a brisk and sharp-edged style, Micheaux sketches a wide view of black society, depicting an engineer with an international career, a private eye with influential friends, a predatory gangster, devoted educators—and the harrowing ambient violence of Jim Crow, which he shows unsparingly and grue-

somely. Along with his revulsion at the hateful rhetoric and murderous tyranny of Southern whites, Micheaux displays a special satirical disgust for a black preacher who offers his parishioners Heaven as a reward for their unquestioning submissiveness. Micheaux's narrative manner is as daring as his subject matter, with flashbacks and interpolations amplifying the story; a remarkable twist regarding Sylvia's identity, slipped in at the end, opens up a nearly hallucinatory historical vortex. *Silent.*—R.B. (*Film Society of Lincoln Center, Dec. 21, and streaming.*)

ABOVE & BEYOND



Latke Festival

This annual tasting event, now in its ninth year, returns to Brooklyn on its quest to crown the city's premier potato pancake. More than twenty restaurants, including Veselka, Kulushkat, and Shelsky's, put their best food forward, reimagining the Hanukkah staple in sweet and savory variations—eggplant, mushrooms, braised short rib, duck, and something called a Pumpkin Spice Latke have all been fair game at past competitions. Celebrity chefs and critics will choose a winner, and guests can vote for a People's Choice; ticket proceeds benefit the Sylvia Center, a nonprofit that offers youth-oriented cooking and agricultural programs to promote health awareness and combat childhood obesity. (*Brooklyn Museum, 200 Eastern Parkway, Brooklyn. latkefestival.com. Dec. 18 at 6.*)

Make Music Winter

Hundreds of revellers fill the streets for carols by headlamp and roadside jams at this parade, held on the winter solstice. In recent years, attendees have stormed City Hall Park with kalimbas, chimes, and handbells; held a B.Y.O.P. (bring your own percussion) Afrobeat drum line in Washington Square Park; and marched along to a free app, designed by the composers Lainie Fefferman, Jascha Narveson, and Cameron Britt, that synchronized twinkles, strums, and splashes with their steps for a surreal stroll down the High Line. This year, the artist Tom Peyton will distribute ninety-six bells, color-coded to represent individual notes, and conductors will orchestrate a procession through the East Village, waving flags of corresponding shades. (*Various locations. make-musicny.org. Dec. 21.*)

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

The season comes to a close, as usual, with a series of auctions devoted to design. After a general sale featuring such curiosities as a

bronze chair that incorporates a reproduction of a crocodile (by the French designer Claude Lalanne), **Sotheby's** reverts to the more conventional charms of Tiffany glass (Dec. 13). A week later, the house holds sales of Judaica and Israeli art, including an illuminated medieval Hebrew bible from Spain and several modernist landscapes by Mordecai Ardon (Dec. 20). (*York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.*) • On Dec. 12-13, **Christie's** empties out its cupboards for one of its periodic "Interiors" sales of decorative items and furnishings. Then, on Dec. 14, it presents a more select group of works: resplendent Tiffany lamps, an Art Deco daybed by Émile-Jacques Ruhlmann, a bright-red lacquer chest by Piero Fornasetti. (*20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.*) • A sale of illustrations at **Swann** (Dec. 14) is particularly rich in items related to the theatre, such as a costume sketch for the High Priestess of Dagon, from a 1981 production of Saint-Saëns's opera "Samson et Dalila" (by Carrie Robbins), and a Jazz Age set design for the 1927 musical "Manhattan Mary" (by William Oden Waller). (*104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.*)

READINGS AND TALKS

92nd Street Y

As Hollywood's blankets of power are tugged away, new stories, perspectives, and voices have proved magnetic to A-listers who've evolved beyond the summer blockbuster. Angelina Jolie—famous for "Girl, Interrupted" and "Tomb Raider," better in "Hackers" and "Mr. and Mrs. Smith"—tackles the story of Loung Ung, who was forced into combat training as a child under the Khmer Rouge in nineteen-seventies Cambodia. "First They Killed My Father," co-produced and co-written by Jolie, is the Netflix feature film based on Ung's memoir of the same name; the duo appear here in conversation, before a screening of the film. (*1395 Lexington Ave. 212-415-5500. Dec. 14 at 7:15.*)

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FOOD & DRINK



TABLES FOR TWO

Tsion Café

763 St. Nicholas Ave., at W. 148th St.
(212-234-2070)

History percolates just about everywhere in Harlem. At 148th and St. Nicholas, there's a long basement that used to be home to Jimmy's Chicken Shack, a joint frequented by jazz musicians, where Charlie Parker and Malcolm X once worked. These days, the hen-shaped sign that hung above the door is gone, replaced by an image of a smiling angel, more suitable for a place that's now named for the center of a holy land: Tsion Café.

Beejhy Barhany, Tsion's co-owner, can usually be found behind the counter of this Sugar Hill restaurant. Her smile belies her journey. When she was a child, she and her family, who are part of a deep-rooted community of Ethiopian Jews called Beta Israelis, left East Africa on foot to get to Israel. When they arrived, they faced discrimination because they were black. Almost twenty years ago, Barhany decided to move to America, because she appreciated its diversity, and in 2014 she opened Tsion, transforming the Chicken Shack into a beautiful art-filled nook lined with blue banquets which leads to a sunny backyard.

The excellent food at Tsion reflects Barhany's wanderings. There are traditional Ethiopian dishes, including a

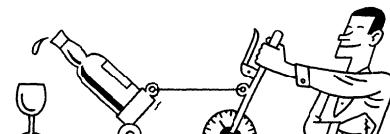
delicious version of *tibs* in which soft filet mignon is sautéed and served over a fluffy pancake of injera bread. From her Middle Eastern days, there's *mala-wach*, a type of flaky pancake, which comes with spicy *awaze* sauce or drenched in honey and dusted with coconut flakes.

Tsion is at its most interesting when different cultures that Barhany has experienced come together in her dishes. Both the Addis Eggs (spicy scrambled eggs with onions and jalapeños) and the Tsion Eggs (scrambled eggs with smoked salmon) are folded into pockets of injera that serve as perfect vehicles for moving food from plate to mouth, and for mopping up any remains. For those who don't like injera, a chicken *tibs* can be ordered with tomato-infused *jollof* rice, from West Africa. To drink, have the tart ginger tea, cold in the summer and steaming hot in winter.

True to the building's roots, there's still lots of music here. Much of it is jazz—the most popular nights feature the Grammy Award-winning tenor saxophonist Wayne Escoffery—but Tsion has also hosted open mikes for poets and singers as well as for indie and folk acts. In the corner is a small library, with works by the likes of W. E. B. Du Bois. Barhany says it's a way of giving back, and honoring the history of this long basement on St. Nick. (*Dishes \$11.25-\$32.*)

—Nicolas Niarchos

BAR TAB



Caveat

21A Clinton St. (212-228-2100)

Down a flight of black-painted stairs in an unremarkable building on the Lower East Side, Caveat is a bar-cum-edutainment space that aims to cater to the discerning nerd. The cavernous basement, decorated with ribbed dark wood and wallpaper printed with esoteric, vaguely scientific symbols, has an array of circular tables, gathered in clusters, as if at a cabaret. But what takes place on the broad stage is a nightly enticement of the intellect. A "Pregame Your Brain" happy hour offers the chance to learn about subjects like famous female scientists; the more musically inclined can take in an "improvised 'hip-hopera'" in the style of "Hamilton," by the group North Coast, which seeks to "quench the people's thirst for historical raps." For those more conventionally thirsty, a modest array of beer and wine, targeted toward the thoughtful drinker, is offered at reasonable prices: Lindemans framboise, sharp and tangy, makes any panel discussion a shade bubblier; cabernet and sauvignon blanc, from South Africa and the Loire Valley, are mellow and smooth. One wall is lined with a small but eclectic collection of books for sale, from memoir to scientific tome; they are surrounded by card-catalogue drawers and plush leather armchairs, as if taken directly from a professor's parlor. At a recent event, the journalist Atossa Abrahamian described accompanying a Luxembourgian delegation to an asteroid-mining company's headquarters and listening to a sales pitch on legal loopholes. At one point, her fellow-panelist Denton Ebel, a geologist with a focus on meteorites, asked if anyone in the audience could explain the Outer Space Treaty of 1967. So many hands shot up there were hardly any left to clasp cold beers.—Talia Lavin

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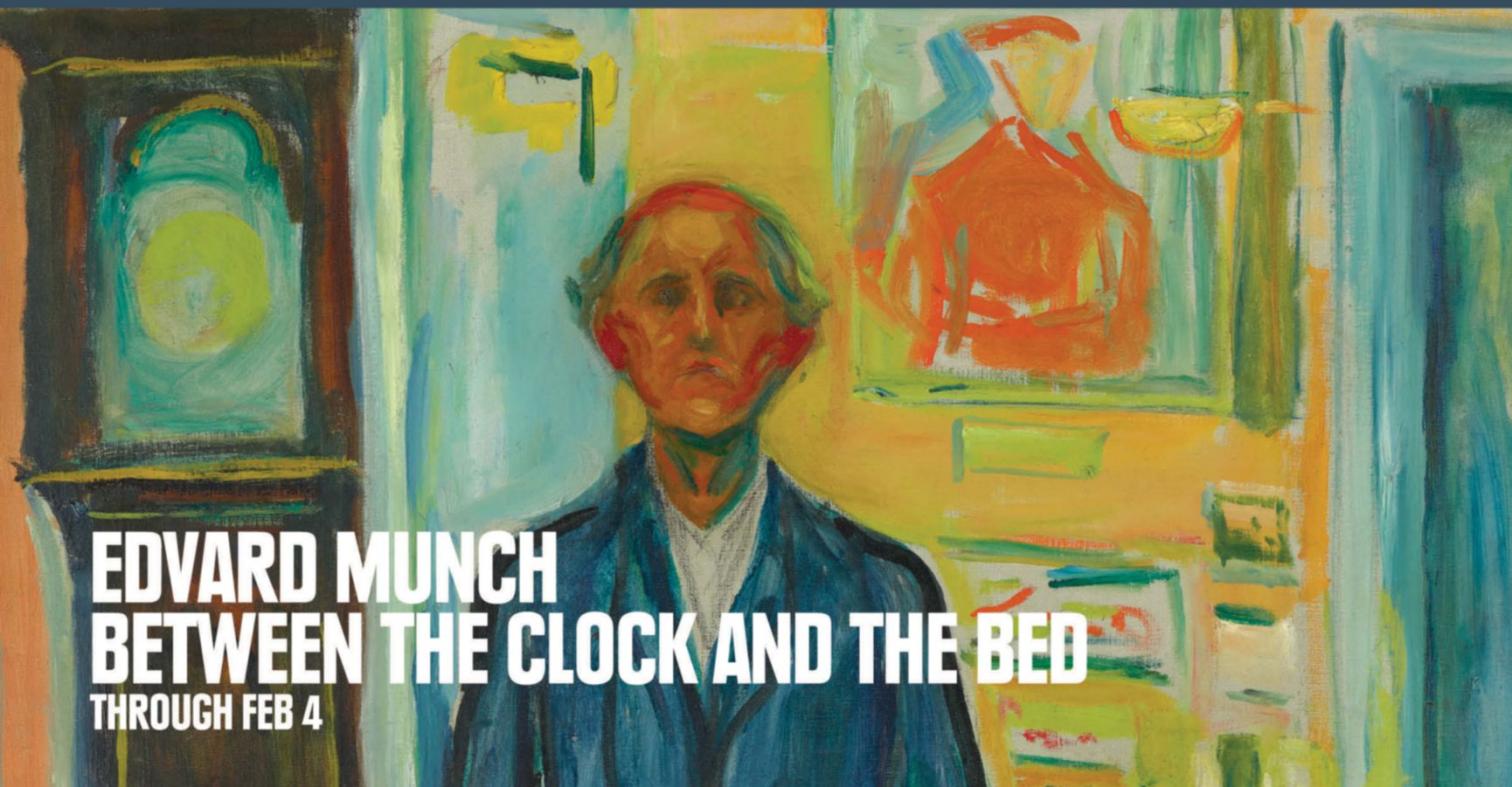
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Edvard Munch, *Self-Portrait between the Clock and the Bed* (detail), 1940–43. Munch Museum, Oslo. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York. Photo © Munch Museum.



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT

HOW LOW WILL THEY GO?

When Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House spokeswoman, was explaining last week why President Trump had chosen to endorse Roy Moore in this week's special election for the U.S. Senate, in Alabama, she made the decision sound natural—and perhaps, in the current political moment, it was. Moore may be facing multiple allegations that he preyed on teen-age girls (he has denied "sexual misconduct"), but Trump, Sanders said, sees him as "a person that supports his agenda." That prompted a reporter to wonder how much of an agenda they shared. Does Donald Trump, he asked, "agree with Roy Moore that Muslims should not be allowed to serve in Congress?" "I haven't asked him about a past statement from Roy Moore," Sanders said. Her answer just about summarizes the nihilism of Trump's Washington, where, when questioned whether the President would ban a religious group from Capitol Hill, his spokeswoman won't say for sure without checking.

In less than a year in office, Trump has led the G.O.P. into situations and alliances so degraded that the Party may never fully recover, even as he watches an investigation into Russia's possible interference in the 2016 election, led by Special Counsel Robert Mueller, move ever closer to his immediate circle. Last week, Donald Trump, Jr., refused to answer questions before the House Intelligence Committee about his conversations with his

father, and a plea deal that Mueller struck with Michael Flynn, the former national-security adviser, indicates that Trump's son-in-law, Jared Kushner, may be under scrutiny, too. Mueller may also have turned his attention to records related to Trump's finances. Last Monday, the day that Trump endorsed Moore, Axios reported that one of the President's lawyers, echoing Richard Nixon, had suggested that what might count as obstruction of justice for others would not in Trump's case—because if the President does it, it isn't really a crime. But each day dawns with a possibility that Trump will disgrace the Presidency more than he already has, whether he is insulting Native Americans or mangling relationships with our most trusted allies.

It would be inaccurate, though, to say that the President has acted alone, or without the coöperation of his party.

There have been a few eloquent protests from members of Congress who are retiring or seem to think that they have nothing left to lose politically. After the *Washington Post* first published reports of Moore's predation, several Republicans denounced him, and the Republican National Committee pulled out of a joint fund-raising agreement with him. But, last week, when Trump let the R.N.C. know that he was supporting Moore, it began pouring money into his campaign. "The President says jump and the RNC jumps," a Party official told the *Wall Street Journal*.

The Senate Majority Leader, Mitch McConnell, for his part, backed away from his own previous condemnation of Moore, saying on "Face the Nation," "The people of Alabama are going to decide a week from Tuesday who they want to send to the Senate. It's really up to them." There had been talk that McConnell and his colleagues might help mount a write-in candidacy, or take some other measure to block Moore. Polls showing that Moore still had a good chance of beating the Democratic challenger, Doug Jones, apparently persuaded McConnell to rethink his position. (On Wednesday, however, he joined calls for Senator Al Franken, Democrat of Minnesota, to resign, which Franken said he would do.)

McConnell's acquiescence is all the more striking since he has become a useful symbol of the Party establishment that Moore professes to oppose. Last Tuesday, at a rally in Fairhope, Alabama, which Steve Bannon, the



President's former chief strategist, also attended, Moore told the crowd that he knew that Trump was "trying so hard" to do everything he had promised during the campaign—end Obama-care, tear up NAFTA, build the wall. He was just being held back by the likes of McConnell.

Yet Moore, for all his talk of independence, was also selling himself as a party-line voter. What made the special election special, he said, was that "we're going to see if the people of Alabama will support the President." (He warned his audience that Jones is not only a Democrat but had been "a Barack Obama delegate.") If his project in Washington would be loyalty to Trump, that would make him, by current standards, a fairly typical Republican. Indeed, one of Moore's priorities, in addition to getting Americans to "go back to God," is the tax bill that McConnell is struggling to pass. Trump had

framed his own support for Moore in terms that McConnell would appreciate, tweeting, "We need his vote on stopping crime, illegal immigration, Border Wall, Military, Pro Life, V.A., Judges 2nd Amendment and more." But what does it mean to "need" Roy Moore's vote?

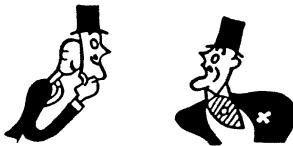
It's possible, given the formalities of each process, that the winner of the Alabama race will be seated in the Senate before a vote on the final version of the tax bill is taken. If Doug Jones manages to win, the speed with which a final bill would be pushed through, to avoid having him vote on it, might stun even Washington. With or without Moore, however, the bill is an extraordinarily sloppy and reckless concoction: its benefits are concentrated at the top, and it casually sabotages the health-insurance system. The cost will be in untreated illnesses and unpayable medical bills. In the tally of amorality, for McConnell to

accept being mocked by Moore on the campaign trail, and then have lunch with him on Capitol Hill before the roll call, may be nothing more than a rounding error.

At the rally in Fairhope, Moore reminisced that, when Trump was elected, it was as if "a big weight had been taken off my shoulders," and asked if others had felt, as he did, "like we had another chance." The Republicans have a fifty-two-seat majority, meaning that Moore's presence would be helpful but, in terms of control of the chamber, not decisive. What would they tolerate in order to secure the fifty-first vote? Put another way, if the Party is willing to give its money and its credibility to protect a candidate accused of molesting teen-agers, what might it talk itself into doing to protect the President? Robert Mueller may be interested in the answer.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

LIP-SYNCH DEPT. HIGH NOTES



Iestyn Davies, the British countertenor, is spending a season as a New Yorker. Throughout the fall, he appeared at the Metropolitan Opera, in "The Exterminating Angel," a thrilling adaptation by Thomas Adès of the film by Luis Buñuel, about an élite dinner party that becomes an inescapable nightmare. This month, he makes his Broadway débüt in "Farinelli and the King," a play by Claire van Kampen, about the relationship, in the eighteenth century, between King Philip V of Spain and Carlo Broschi, the most famous castrato of his day, known as Farinelli. Davies plays the part of Farinelli's singing voice, and hovers onstage behind Sam Crane, the actor who plays the rest of him. "I don't know what it's like for the audience," Davies said the other day. "At first, they are a bit confused—'Hang on, who's this?'—and then very quickly it becomes clear that we're the same person. That's what theatre is about—you suspend your disbelief."

Davies—who is thirty-eight but has the boyish looks of the chorister he once was—spoke in the library of the Hispanic Society of America, at Broadway and 155th Street. "I've never been this far uptown," Davies said. "Not even to the Apollo. I want to go to the Apollo."

The museum is closed for renovations, but it had opened its doors so that Patrick Lenaghan, the curator of prints and photographs, could meet with Davies in order to show him what traces of the music-loving Spanish king—played on Broadway by Mark Rylance, who is married to van Kampen—persist in the unlikely environs of Washington Heights. Philip V, Lenaghan explained, was the first Bourbon monarch of Spain—imported from France as a dashing young man when the previous king, Charles II, died without an heir. "We have a portrait that shows how god-awful ugly Charles was—the result of massive Habsburg inbreeding," Lenaghan said.

He turned the pages of a large leather-bound catalogue of Spain's monarchs, up to and including Philip V, made during his reign to illustrate his claim to the throne. Another book showed the young king on a charger rampant, curls flowing and cape blowing—Davies nodded approvingly—and

included an engraving showing his swearing-in at the Church of San Jerónimo el Real, in Madrid, attended by hordes of Castilian nobility. "There's someone wearing glasses," Davies observed, with pleasure. "I always like it when I find the one person with glasses. In York, where I live, there's fourteenth-century stained glass, and in one image a man has glasses."

In the play, Farinelli provides a kind of music therapy for the King, who suffered from severe depression. Lenaghan showed another manuscript, with a delicately colored image of Philip and his wife, Elizabeth Farnese, who, in 1737, imported Farinelli to Madrid from London, hoping that his singing might help the monarch. "Something was wrong with him," Lenaghan said. "They don't know if he was bipolar, or manic-depressive. The period term is 'melancholy,' or 'vapors.'" Farinelli spent the better part of two decades in Spain, outliving Philip and also serving his successor, Ferdinand VI. He performed privately for the King and his family almost every day.

"In my experience, it's much easier to sing for four thousand people than for one person," Davies said. "So Farinelli, when he went to sing for the King, it wasn't so much 'He's a king, he's going

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to behead me if I sing badly.' It must have been much more personal." Davies admitted that some singers have an easier time than others, and recalled a friend with whom he once attended a bachelor party. "He drunkenly walked into a bar in Bournemouth and sang to this table of women, and wouldn't shut up," Davies recalled. "He's a tenor, of course."

Having sung as a boy in the choir of St. John's College, Cambridge, Davies let his singing career lapse in his early teens—his voice dropped; he discovered girls—before becoming aware of his countertenor capacities. Farinelli's voice never dropped: he was castrated before puberty, which resulted in a voice that was extraordinarily high, clear, and powerful. Playing a castrato requires a leap of imagination, or empathy—the practice of castration was, thankfully, discontinued in the nineteenth century, and the true sound of Farinelli's voice can only be guessed at. (Scratchy recordings endure of just one castrato, Alessandro Moreschi, who was born a century and a half after Farinelli.)

Lenaghan brought out one more engraving from the court of Philip V. "My costume is almost identical!" Davies said, and puzzled over the knot in the King's cravat—it was tied differently from the way in which Davies had been tying his. Or maybe it was simply askew? Davies snapped a picture on his iPhone to show Rylance. "I would like to stay and stare at these things all day," Davies said. "Seeing old things in New York is really nice. That's the one thing I miss being here. I haven't seen a *really* old building. I haven't been able to touch something that's been there for a really long time."

—Rebecca Mead

ON AND OFF THE AVENUE SHIRTTAILS



As New Yorkers stumble, marioonetlike, through the middle passage of life, many keep a lookout for indications of their own increasing crankiness. They shudder at warning

signs of the unfathomable new. To wit: in the past month, the number of UNTUCKit stores in Manhattan has gone from one to four.

Eager to understand the cultural significance of a shirt whose shortened, curved shirttails are meant to be worn untucked, a visitor stopped in at the UNTUCKit store on Prince Street. He told a young salesman that a friend had recommended the brand's shirts, and added, "I wasn't sure what the appropriate emotional response was. I mean, is that like saying 'You look good in blue,' or more like 'You should wear



dress shields?'" The salesman trilled, "Absolutely!," which did not settle the matter.

Minutes later, the visitor, having tried on a light-blue UNTUCKit dress shirt, found himself gazing at his midsection in one of the store's tall mirrors, while two salespeople looked on. He expressed his concern that the shirt made him look "five years younger, but ten pounds heavier." He went on, "A headline on the UNTUCKit Web site reads 'Compliment your holiday waistline.' So I think we're trafficking in flab-oufage here, no?"

The chattier of the salespeople reassured him, "It's just the look now." The visitor wondered whether a shirt that's designed to be worn untucked promotes the idea that a shirt is just a human-shaped napkin that can be thrown in the wash.

Chatty interjected, "All our shirts are machine-wash, drip-dry."

Still harboring questions, the visitor went up to the chain's Flatiron shop. "Were people tripping over their shirt-tails previously?" he asked a salesperson named Stephanie.

"It is what it is," she replied.

Warming to the philosophical cast of the discussion, the visitor brought up the waist-level flounce that adorns some women's clothing. Adopting an expression midpoint on the smile-grimace continuum, he asked, "Is UNTUCKit the male peplum?"

Stephanie weighed in with a quick no on the peplum question, pointing out that a button-down shirt emphasizes its wearer's rectangularity, while a peplum renders a torso bell-shaped.

"You're right," the visitor conceded. "UNTUCKit is less male peplum and more gringo guayabera."

The visitor finally found some clarity when he arrived at the UNTUCKit branch in the financial district, with the help of a calm, knowing saleswoman. The visitor told her, "I'm a longtime tucker-inner, so I'm not sure if I'm ready for this. I sometimes suck my stomach in when I'm around attractive young people."

The saleswoman counselled, "I think you're ready."

"Part of my reluctance is that the name of your company rhymes with a popular expression," the visitor confided. "A popular expression signalling a collapse of will."

The saleswoman smiled. "But we're not there yet," she said. She stationed the visitor in a dressing room and brought him a variety of UNTUCKit shirts, including a forest-green flannel that looked striking when he tried it on. Even so, he told her that he needed time before spending ninety dollars on a garment that had been the source of so much introspection.

The next day, the visitor returned to the store, disappointed not to find the helpful saleswoman. Recounting his UNTUCKit peregrinations, the visitor told a new salesman, "I've had to deal with some uncomfortable truths."

"Well, welcome back," the salesman said.

At the checkout counter, the visitor pointed to his green-flannel purchase and asked what the little triangle of



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Soledad O'Brien, Co-Founder and Chairman, PowHERful Foundation; Journalist/Producer

Pictured with Scholars (standing left to right): Vanesa Cruz; Ariana Quiñones; Tassion Minor; Rochelle Ballantyne



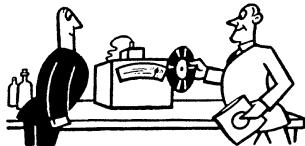
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cloth stitched to the left front shirtpail was. The clerk explained that it was the UNTUCKit logo. The visitor replied, "It reminds me of the toggle pull on an airplane life jacket." Pull it, and it might save your life. But not before inflating your midsection to twice its normal size.

—Henry Alford

THE MUSICAL LIFE LATE GREAT



"I don't know a single peer of mine who has sold as few records as I have and still continues to do what they want to do," Joe Henry, the singer-songwriter and producer, said recently. What does Joe Henry want to do? Make records of his own. How does he get to do it? By producing records for others. (There are other things he likes to do. For example, a few years ago he co-wrote, with his brother, a book about Richard Pryor. But that has nothing to do with making records.)

Henry was taking a turn through midtown the other day, a victory lap of a kind, to mark the recent release of his album "Thrum," his fourteenth, and the completion, two days earlier, in Nashville, of one for the Milk Carton Kids. He wanted to see the Louise Bourgeois exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art. His wife, Melanie Ciccone, who is Madonna's sister, is a textile artist, and this exhibit featured some relevant work.

In the late eighties, Melanie and Joe had an apartment in Carroll Gardens—"before anyone lived in Brooklyn," he said—and would meet every Thursday night in Manhattan for dinner. Thursdays were also pay-what-you-want at MOMA. (For a not-yet-anyone, that means pay-zero.) "I made it a point to come here before dinner and wander around for a couple of hours with a notebook and read titles," he said. Last year, he came out of a Diane Arbus exhibit there with a long list of them. "I haven't been able to do anything with them yet," he said. "A title for me is a

point of entry. It has to be spring-loaded. It's not an idea for a song. I don't have any memory of ever having an *idea* for a song. I just know that, if I begin writing, a song will happen." He stopped before a large drawing. The card beside it read "Are You in Orbit?"

"That's a good one," he said.

Henry, who is fifty-seven, now lives in Los Angeles. For a while, he and his wife owned the Garfield House, in South Pasadena, where President James Garfield's widow, Lucretia, lived out her years. Henry is a loquacious dispenser of anecdotes and aesthetic ruminations, which he chalks up to his Southern provenance. (He's prone to statements like "The only reason I'd want to be President would be to have Eudora Welty read 'Petrified Man' at my inaugural.") His father was an executive engineer for Chevrolet. "If you were a lifer, you sort of snaked your way to Detroit," Henry said. Charlotte, Atlanta, Ohio (a classmate there was Jeffrey Dahmer: "I rode the school bus with him, went to his house once"), and then Rochester, Michigan. "That's where I got to know my wife's family. Her older sister and I were in the theatre department in high school. I was cast as her son in a play about the night Thoreau spent in jail."

He used to not talk about his connection to the elder Ciccone, but, once Madonna recorded a few songs they'd co-written, he felt he could. "I absolutely love her ferociously," he said. "The day Elvis Presley died, which is her birthday, I remember her saying that she felt his spirit pass through her. It struck me as an arrogant statement. Now I'd be hard pressed to disprove it."

Amid his early struggles to sell records, he was fortunate, in 1990, to come under the tutelage of T Bone Burnett, who initiated him into the production game. This led him to interview for a gig with the preacher and soul singer Solomon Burke. "I had breakfast with him in an old-school deli in the Valley," Henry said. "He's in a booth. Four hundred pounds of man. He's on some strict diet—salad, lox—but I order pork chops and eggs. He says, 'Dr. Henry, are you gonna have biscuits with that?' And I say, 'If they have biscuits, I will have them.' And he says, 'You're hired.'"



Joe Henry

The album won a Grammy. Henry would go on to produce Burke's last recording.

This got Henry into a weird inadvertent subcategory, that of producing great and soon-to-be-late artists' final records—"though they didn't know it at the time." There followed valedictions from Jimmy Scott, Mose Allison, and, most notably, Allen Toussaint.

"My mother said to me once, 'Are you worried that people are going to start calling you the Undertaker?'" He'd recently been working on an album with Joan Baez. "When we started that, my bassist whispered, 'Does she know?'"

From the museum, he headed down Fifth Avenue, to browse the wares at the JJ Hat Center, a hundred-year-old shop. "Rodney Crowell said to me one day, 'Son, a hat is not a toy.' He was edifying me. I wear a hat because I'm a ginger and a Celt in Southern California."

—Nick Paumgarten

INK HOSTING



Fans of the pick-a-thing genre of nonfiction know that the narrower the noun the better the book. This season, joining treatises on cod, coal, and kitchen utensils, there is a new work that one British critic called "the

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"It's right there in the e-mail, John—knife fight."

• •

definitive cultural history of an indefinable subject": "The Ghost," by Susan Owens. It examines ghoulish art and literature, from a fifteenth-century rood screen depicting a pair of fashionably dressed skeletons to the Christmas Eve cameo of Marley's ghost to the "everyday apparitions" of Muriel Spark. Its cover is black, with some white swirly things that might just be the wind. On Amazon recently, it was the No. 1 best-seller in "Ghosts & Poltergeists."

On a "suitably misty and spooky" evening—her publishers had sent out an e-mail rejoicing at the weather—Owens was celebrating the book's publication in the vaulted cloister of St. Bartholomew the Great, one of the oldest churches in London. (Not to be confused with St. Bartholomew the Less, it was the site of the fourth wedding in "Four Weddings and a Funeral.") As book parties go, this one was pretty atmospheric. There were tiger lilies and candles, and a plaque that read "To recall Helen Mary Ballard who died of wounds on March 31st 1941 as a result of enemy action at sea." Owens, a former curator of

paintings at the Victoria and Albert Museum, has a gray chignon and dark eyes. She was wearing a scarlet crushed-velvet blazer and the type of leather ankle boots you might encounter in an albumen silver print, one of which, "Georgiana Houghton, Tommy Guppy and a Spirit" (1872), she discusses as an example of the Victorian vogue for photographs of mediums. Owens was elated to have just discovered that St. Bartholomew the Great is supposedly haunted by the painter William Hogarth, who was baptized there in 1697 and is said to roam the premises wearing a cocked hat. When asked if she'd ever seen a ghost, she replied, "I think once, at a cottage in the North of England. I was lent it by a friend, and it belonged to an old relation, who was dying at the time, and really wanted to be there. The moment we opened the door, we felt just a wall of hostility." Upstairs, she said, someone had blacked out the bathroom mirror. She didn't leave, because she had promised to oversee the installation of a washing machine.

It was a believing crowd:
"As an adolescent, I was in the War

Cloister at Winchester. In the autumn term, it was always cold, and there was a sort of light fog, and I was late for class, and there was some figure that must have been a shadow. But it was monklike, and there are no monks around there."

"A very distant relative of mine murdered a girl on Bodmin Moor, and the rumor was that she walked there on the fourteenth of every April."

"A friend of my father lived in one of the oldest inhabited houses in England. He died, and, during the funeral reception, someone took a photograph in the room in which he liked to sit. When it was developed, there was a clear picture of him."

"There was a strange smell, almost sickeningly sweet. Like tea rose—too sweet, too intense. You know when you get flowers that are slightly off?"

Owens told a ghost story from John Aubrey ("Anno 1670, not far from Cyrencester, was an Apparition"), and even her publisher confessed to having once felt a nonthreatening presence in an old farmhouse in Cornwall, in 1974. But the eeriest stories of the night came from a guest named Sarah Rendall, who grew up at Knole House, a mansion that her family, the Sackvilles, acquired in 1603.

"In the maids' quarters, there was a marble wash table, and I remember summer afternoon light, and the china jumping up and down in this marble thing," she said. "The noise was horrific. On another occasion, I went to sleep and had a nightmare. When I awoke, I saw this absolutely beautiful white hand. It took my hair band off and put it on the pillow."

Her husband, Simon Rendall, had his own story, passed on to him by his mother. It involved brass candlesticks and a woman in a black hat adorned with cherries. As the urban campfire wound down, it occurred to an agreeably freaked-out partygoer that "ghosting" was perhaps the wrong word for cutting off communication with someone without explanation or warning. Ghosts, like the dead, are always with us. Hogarth, it turned out, had died of a ruptured artery two hundred and fifty-three years earlier, exactly to the day. *Wooo!*

—Lauren Collins

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ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

STREET SENSE

How Coach K guides Atlanta's hip-hop stars.

BY KELEFA SANNEH

Seven hundred turkeys, two rappers, and an intermediate number of onlookers had assembled in the parking lot of a Kroger supermarket on Cleveland Avenue, on the scrappy south side of Atlanta. The rappers were Quavo and Takeoff, two of the three members of Migos, the dominant hip-hop group of the moment—known for exuberant, off-kilter tracks, like “Bad and Boujee,”

that seem to consist of nothing but interjections. It was the Friday before Thanksgiving, and the two were standing in the back of a U-Haul truck, facing a growing crowd of people who wanted turkeys or pictures or both. Takeoff grabbed a carton and opened it. “We shipping them boxes out,” he barked—Migos can turn just about any handful of words into a memorable refrain.

The turkey supply had already begun to dwindle when one of the event’s organizers arrived, pulling up in an elegant but inconspicuous Range Rover. His name is Kevin Lee, but everyone calls him Coach K, and, in the world of hip-hop, he may be better known than the Duke basketball impresario from whom he took his nickname. In the aughts, Lee managed two of the city’s most important rappers—Young Jeezy and then, a few years later, Gucci Mane—undaunted by the fact that the men had engaged in a bitter and apparently bloody feud. Nowadays, he is both a manager and a record executive, guiding the careers of Migos and a clutch of other young hip-hop stars, including Lil Yachty, who is twenty and calls himself the King of the Youth. Lee is forty-six, an age that offers some advantages of its own. “With this gray beard, I’m a O.G.,” he says. “When I say something, they listen—like, ‘Oh, the O.G. must have been through it.’” But he prides himself on being open to whatever musical mania is currently seizing the young people who tend to be his clients, and his customers. “When I visit my friends, I sit with their kids, and we talk about music,” he says. “And my friends be like, ‘How the hell do you understand that shit?’ I’m like, ‘This is what I love, and this is what I do.’”

Lee is a former college basketball player, and he walks with a strut that turns out, on closer inspection, to be a limp, the lingering effect of an incident that ended his athletic career. He says that he was visiting some friends, who happened to be drug dealers, when they were raided—not by the police but by rivals with shotguns, who strafed Lee’s leg so thoroughly that he spent a year relearning how to walk. He is, in person, every bit as watchful as one might expect a hip-hop godfather to be, but a good deal friendlier. In Atlanta, his adopted home town, he seems to know and like everyone he comes across.

When Lee turned into the parking lot, he was met at once by an acquaintance who was, like countless young people in the city, an aspiring musician. “I D.M.d you a song,” she said. “Now I caught you in real life.

I'ma keep D.M.'ing you until you get tired of me." Lee responded with a warm but noncommittal smile, and asked where he should put his car—the crowd was filling up all of the closest parking spaces. She laughed and gestured toward a tow-away zone in front of the supermarket. "This Cleveland Ave.," she said. "You ain't got to park right."

The location of the turkey give-away had been moved twice that afternoon, from a school to a day-care center to this parking lot, because no one was eager to contend with the crowds that would be sure to come. Between the popularity of Migos and the popularity of free turkeys, no advance notice was required, and, if some unsuspecting shoppers were surprised to be offered a turkey, none of them seemed particularly shocked by the sight of Quavo and Takeoff holding court in a U-Haul. Atlanta is the hip-hop capital of the world, which means that it is full of worldwide stars who are also—and perhaps primarily—neighborhood guys. Quavo, who is twenty-six, grew up in Gwinnett County, northeast of the city, with Takeoff, who is twenty-three, and who is Quavo's nephew. The third member, Offset, is twenty-five, and he is Quavo's cousin, although he may be better known, these days, as the fiancé of Cardi B, who this year became the first reality-television star to find a place on hip-hop's A-list. Her show was "Love & Hip Hop: New York," on VH1; her breakthrough hit was "Bodak Yellow," which owned the summer. Offset's proposal was made, and accepted, onstage during a concert in October. Their wedding hasn't yet been scheduled. "Everybody's calling about it," Lee says. "I think maybe we should shoot a movie, put it out on Valentine's Day. I mean, 'Girls Trip' just did thirty million in one weekend."

Offset never made it to the Kroger parking lot, but none of the attendees were complaining, especially not the ones staggering away beneath the weight of their free turkeys. Lee waded into the crowd and greeted his business partner, Pierre Thomas, known as Pee, who is a decade younger, and noticeably more cautious around

people he doesn't know. Thomas is relatively new to the music industry, having evidently been successful in his first career, which he declines to discuss. "He come from the streets," Lee says, by way of explaining why neither of them will explain more. Unlike Lee, who grew up in Indianapolis, Thomas is from Atlanta, and, when the two began working with Migos, Thomas's local reputation was a great asset—he was known to the proprietors of the city's clubs as a generous patron, and an unusually well-connected one. "It all came together," Lee says. "My skills, his credibility."

Lee and Thomas launched their company in 2013. Its name, Quality Control, reflects the different sensibilities of its founders: Thomas wanted something starting with "Q," to honor a friend of his who had been shot to death; Lee was inspired by a tag on the pocket of his designer jeans. For a time, their base of operations was a small, freestanding brick building up the street from the Kroger, which they turned into a bunker-like music studio. "Bricked up all the windows, because the music game dangerous," Thomas says. The studio was in a residential area, and some of the neighbors resented the constant traffic and the occasional altercations; not long after a bullet shattered the window of a nearby house, Quality Control was forced to move. The company's new headquarters is a purpose-built suite of offices and recording studios, tucked into an industrial corner of a burgeoning neighborhood near midtown. Lee drove there after the giveaway, which he judged a success, not least because it reflected the same unpolished quality that he prizes in music. A friend called, and Lee described what had happened, sounding exuberant. "We did it in the hood, man," he said.

In the course of Lee's career, and in some significant part because of it, Atlanta has gone from being a regional music hub to hip-hop's cultural home, the city that sets the musical agenda for the rest of the country. But, compared with Nashville, which hosts both the lucrative country-music industry and a thriving country-tourism industry, Atlanta is much

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less corporate. The hip-hop scene remains stubbornly decentralized; there is a profusion of great rappers and producers, but little in the way of major institutions, unless you count the city's strip clubs, as you probably should. The big companies remain, for the most part, in New York and Los Angeles. "There are no labels here—no major labels," Lee says. With Quality Control, he is trying to change that. The company has a full-time staff of eight, and operates as a joint venture with the Capitol Music Group, which is part of Universal; the label's artists include Stefflon Don, a British vocalist who recently scored her first Top Ten U.K. hit. Lee and Thomas also run a management firm, Solid Foundation, which represents clients such as Trippie Redd, a rising hip-hop star. The firm is also aiming to move its clients into television and film—Lee sees no reason that Lil Yachty should not have his own sitcom.

The goal, for Lee, is not just to build a company but to help build up Atlanta, a city that has transfixed him ever since he first began visiting, in the nineties. One afternoon, he took a call from Ryan Glover, a longtime friend and local entertainment executive. (Glover was formerly the president of Bounce TV, a network targeting African-Americans, which was recently acquired by E. W. Scripps, the media conglomerate.) They reminisced about the old days, and Lee recalled the excitement of arriving in the city for the first time. "I remember coming down here and thinking, These brothers driving Benzes? Off of music? I'm coming to Atlanta!" They talked about supporting a friend named Keisha, who turned out to be Keisha Lance Bottoms, who was running for mayor. Bottoms, like the previous five mayors of Atlanta, is African-American; in this and other ways, she fits Lee's vision of the city as a place where black people can become successful without becoming anomalous. "There's no feeling like when I'm coming back to Atlanta, I'm in that airport and I see all those black people with jobs," he says. "When I travel to Phoenix or to Chicago, or even Indianapolis or Cleveland,

Orlando—when you walk into those airports, it's a few of us. But when you come to Atlanta it's like, Whoa!"

In a way, Indianapolis, where Lee grew up, was also a music city: the site of a pressing plant, operated by RCA Records, which was one of the world's largest record manufacturers, until it shut down, thirty years ago. Lee's mother and grandmother both worked there, which meant that he had the best music collection in the neighborhood; he remembers hearing an eight-track recording of "King Tim III (Personality Jock)," a 1979 B-side by the Fatback Band that is generally regarded as the first hip-hop record ever released.

His mother had a friend in Harlem, and sometimes brought Lee, her only child, along to visit; there, he learned all he could about hip-hop, which still seemed like a peculiar subculture. As he grew older, his tastes broadened further. At seventeen, he and his friends began driving to Chicago, three hours away, and bribing doormen in order to get into the night clubs where a danceable new style called house music was being forged. House music remains Lee's genre of choice, despite his career; more than one streetwise rapper has been shocked, on entering Lee's car, to encounter some dreamy club classic from the eighties—say, "Mystery of Love," by Mr. Fingers. Even after he moved to Atlanta, Lee found that local house clubs provided a pleasant respite from the hip-hop scene, where he was starting to build his reputation. "That was *Kev-in's* world," he says. "And then *Coach* would go to the Bounce, in Bankhead"—a legendary night club, in a legendarily rough-and-tumble neighborhood—"and fuck with the drug dealers."

Although his mother had a steady job, Lee grew up in a neighborhood he describes as a "ghetto." He was a gifted enough athlete to get a scholarship to Saint Augustine's, a historically black college in Raleigh, North Carolina. He was a decent basketball player, and a better than decent party promoter, helping to organize "two-to-sixes," late-night, locked-door events that drew revellers from throughout

the region. After college, he returned to Indianapolis, where he tried and failed to start a record company; then he made his way to Atlanta, where he worked as a special-ed teacher. He reconnected with a childhood friend, Alan Henderson, who played for the Atlanta Hawks, and they formed a label called Hindu Entertainment, which was an education—although not, for Henderson, a cheap one. For a while, Lee managed a hard-working local hip-hop provocateur named Pastor Troy, and then, in a studio, he met a charismatic rapper from a small town called Hawkinsville, who named himself Lil J, at first, and then Young Jeezy.

In the early aughts, Atlanta hip-hop, long defined by the exuberance of OutKast, and by a string of delectable party records, was growing slower and meaner, following the lead of an emerging star, T.I., who declared, in 2001, that he rapped "for the niggas and the j's in the trap." The j's were junkies, and the trap was one of the tumbledown houses that often served, in Atlanta, as dealers' headquarters. ("Trap" became a verb, too: trapping was what trappers did in the trap.) It was the dawn of what came to be known as "trap music," a term that Lee doesn't embrace: to him, this was simply the latest iteration of Atlanta hip-hop—characterized, as hip-hop often has been, by lyrics that presented a stylized version of street life. This was the world that Young Jeezy, too, chronicled in his rhymes. He favored tracks full of grand, gothic keyboard lines, and he made his words memorable by using fewer of them, drawing out his raspy syllables, or taking a few beats off for added emphasis.

As Young Jeezy rose to prominence in Atlanta, he established a high-profile alliance with the Black Mafia Family, which was both a hip-hop crew and, more consequentially, a criminal enterprise that used Atlanta as the hub of a multistate cocaine-distribution network. The group's leader, Demetrius (Big Meech) Flenory, appeared alongside Jeezy in his first video, which was filmed during the weekend-long birthday party of a top B.M.F. leader, who rented a Miami

Beach hotel for the occasion. “It was very helpful,” Lee says now; the relationship made Jeezy’s rhymes more believable. “If you was in the city at that time, and you went out and you seen B.M.F., the shit Jeezy was talking about really was happening—it was like a fuckin’ movie.” Lee says that Flenory, in order to outdo all the little big guys who were throwing money around in night clubs, once hired a helicopter to drop thirty thousand dollars on the crowd outside Birthday Bash, an annual hip-hop concert.

Although B.M.F. had a record label, Jeezy was never signed to it, and Lee says that he always kept Jeezy’s business affairs separate from his social life. (Jeezy’s alliance with the crew eventually frayed, leading to a flurry of resentful interviews and rhymes; virtually all the B.M.F. leadership, including Flenory, wound up in federal prison.) But Jeezy’s association with B.M.F. had a mixed effect on his early musical career. “Radio wouldn’t fuck

with us,” Lee says—stations didn’t want to be seen to be endorsing B.M.F. or its activities. As a form of grassroots promotion, Lee connected Jeezy with a neighbor of his, DJ Drama, who was known for putting together unlicensed CD compilations of recent hits; they were called mixtapes, after their cassette-only predecessors. In 2004 and 2005, DJ Drama and Young Jeezy released “Tha Streets Iz Watchin” and “Trap or Die,” a pair of mixtapes that were really unofficial albums, full of tracks you couldn’t get anywhere else. (To promote “Trap or Die,” Lee took out radio ads that declared a national holiday: “All traps closed today.”) The mixtapes were hailed as underground classics, and hundreds of thousands, or even millions, of them were given away or sold, contributing to the success, in 2005, of Young Jeezy’s major-label débüt—and contributing, too, to the rise of the mixtape as arguably hip-hop’s most important format. Many of Young Jeezy’s fans found that

they preferred his tapes to his official albums; some even grew to love DJ Drama’s tendency to interrupt the music with full-throated salutations, known as “drops”:

For all the niggas in the streets! All the niggas in the hood! I don’t care if you’re in the A-town or your town—it’s how we get down! Young Jeezy! DJ the fuck Drama! Shout to Coach K!

It was Jeezy who encouraged Lee to rename himself Coach K, because of the way he cajoled and nitpicked Jeezy in the studio. And it was Jeezy who ended the first phase of Lee’s career when, in 2008, he fired him, for reasons neither man will discuss. This was a disorienting experience for Lee, whose professional identity had for years been entirely subsumed in Jeezy’s. He bought a night club, worked with some local rappers, and was eventually recruited to manage an old friend who had become the most revered rapper in the city: Gucci Mane, an astonishingly



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productive and imaginative performer, whose tales of the trap were at once more vivid and more surreal than anyone else's. Earlier in his career, Gucci Mane had feuded with Young Jeezy, and the feud seemed to culminate in a homicide, in which an associate of Jeezy's was shot and killed, and Gucci Mane was arrested for murder. (Gucci Mane's lawyer argued that he had shot the man in self-defense, and the charge was dropped.) Somehow, Lee had guided Jeezy through this dispute without being drawn into it, and, starting in 2009, he spent two years managing Gucci Mane, who released a steady stream of mix-tapes even as he darted in and out of jail and rehabilitation programs, fighting an addiction to lean, a liquid-opiate cocktail. Todd Moscowitz was the C.E.O. of Warner Bros., Gucci Mane's label, and he recalls that Lee was a steady presence during an unsteady time. "He's really good at keeping the process moving, and not getting caught up in the nonsense," Moscowitz says. "Every day, if I couldn't find Gooch, I could find Coach." Gucci Mane eventually demonstrated, to Lee's satisfaction, that he was unmanageable, but their friendship endured. Gucci Mane is now free, professedly sober, and more popular than ever. This summer, Lee and Thomas attended Gucci Mane's wedding. Thomas brought matching diamond necklaces for the bride and groom.

Thomas, like many of the rappers he knows, often talks about hip-hop as an alternative to "the streets"—a way to make money without having to sell drugs. He says that he grew up hard on the west side of Atlanta, the child of drug-addicted parents who sometimes sent him next door, with a pot, to ask the neighbors for hot water for a bath. By twelve, he had become the most reliable person in the house, and so he went to work, building both a rap sheet—he first went to prison at fourteen—and, one surmises, a fortune. During a recent interview for a hip-hop podcast, he was discussing the high cost of launching a new performer when he started to reminisce: "Do you

know what I had to do to get my first half a million dollars?" He paused. "I can't even tell you—but it wasn't easy."

Once Thomas had some money, he bought a few buildings and a day-care center, all of which he viewed, quite accurately, as safer investments than music. He got to know Gucci Mane through the Atlanta demimonde, and got to know Lee through Gucci Mane, but he was skeptical when Lee asked him to co-found a record label and to sign Migos: three kids who recorded their music in a grimy basement hideout they called their "bando," which is a rough synonym for "trap" (it refers to an abandoned house, temporarily commandeered by dealers), and which was also the name of one of

their first singles. Like many of the best rappers who have emerged from Atlanta in the past decade, Migos were spotted early on by Gucci Mane. Thomas, in order to sign the group, had to call Gucci Mane, in jail, to get his blessing, which he gave. Thomas stuffed a duffelbag with cash and showed it to the three Migos, as a way of demonstrating how much money he and Lee were willing to invest in the group's career.

Migos' music was trap burlesque—they exaggerated and recombined the genre's essential elements, like irreverent little brothers rummaging through their big brothers' closets. Lee and Thomas ferried them to appearances at the city's strip clubs, taking care to leave some cash behind, but the reaction was lukewarm, until Migos released a hit called "Versace," in 2013. It was mistaken by some listeners for a novelty song, because its composition is so extreme: the members repeat the titular word nearly two hundred times, hammering the name until it sounds like nonsense syllables, and then hammering some more.

Even though I own the business, I like to have my hands in everything." This was Lee's stated explanation for why, early one afternoon, he was driving to a UPS store to pick up packages. The unstated ex-

planation was more convincing: he was expecting a pair of Adidas Yeezy Boosts, the intentionally scarce sneakers designed by Kanye West. Thomas has a weakness for refractive adornment, but Lee's main vices are European designer clothes and ostentatious sneakers, which are constantly arriving at the Quality Control offices, courtesy of various people who like him, or owe him a favor. Lee and Thomas are a complementary pair: Thomas is willing and eager to stay out late, keeping an eye on the local clubs, while Lee likes to be up by eight, so that he can swim some laps before he starts his day. He is also a practicing vegan, though he doesn't practice every day.

Lee is aware that he might never have built a label if there hadn't been someone willing to gamble a duffelbag on an unproved group like Migos. Hip-hop in Atlanta may be an alternative to the streets, but, over the years, it has also been enabled by the streets, which have functioned as an informal, risk-tolerant source of venture capital. In Lee's view, this helps explain why Atlanta's hip-hop scene hasn't been swallowed up by the mainstream music industry. "The money came from out the black market—it came from out the streets—to build the shit," he says. "You've got to do it on your own."

After the success of "Versace," Lee and Thomas grew, rather like their clients, irrationally exuberant. "When I seen it happen, I started having all these bright ideas," Thomas said, one afternoon, cruising through the city in an uncharacteristically low-profile Mercedes-Maybach. (In fact, he was leaving the Gucci store, with a full trunk, and on his way to pick up his Rolls-Royce, which, after an unhappy attempt at customization, was having its original rims restored.) "I was just signing: You want some money, and you can rap? Come on, I got this studio." Quality Control struck a deal with an upstart New York label called 300 Entertainment, which released, in 2015, "Yung Rich Nation," an album that was promoted as Migos' proper débüt, after a series of warmup mix-tapes. The album was a disappointment, entering the *Billboard* chart at



No. 17 and launching not a single track onto the Hot 100. Afterward, Lee and Thomas waged a long legal battle to separate from 300; around the time, in late 2016, when the parties reached an agreement, Migos released "Bad and Boujee," a song so infectious that it single-handedly reversed Q.C.'s fortunes. Fans made memes out of the track's mystifying opening lines, which might have described getting high in a stolen car, if they described anything at all: "Raindrops/Drop top/Smoking on cookie in a hotbox." The track, which was a No. 1 hit, made Migos not just popular but fun to root for. Donald Glover cast Quavo in his TV show, "Atlanta," on FX, and then, when the show won a Golden Globe, he thanked the group, in his acceptance speech, for making "Bad and Boujee." Backstage, he added, brightly, "I think they're awesome—I think they're the Beatles."

After trying and failing, early on, to juggle almost a dozen different acts, Lee and Thomas have pared down Quality Control. With its new corporate partner, Capitol Records, Q.C. is under the umbrella of a brand that they would like to think of as an antecedent: Motown. Migos were nominated for a pair of Grammy Awards; their next album is due out sometime early next year. One of their songs, in particular, sounds to Lee like a surefire hit. During a meeting at Quality Control, he paused the discussion to take a call from a well-known producer who had worked on the song, to whom he offered his highest praise. "We got one, man," Lee said.

On a whiteboard in the office of Tamika Howard, the general manager, notes are written in three colors, for the label's three primary acts: Migos, an emerging Atlanta rapper named Lil Baby, and Lil Yachty, Quality Control's other big success story. Lee found Yachty online, prompted by a friend who told him that a local teen-age oddball was doing great numbers on SoundCloud, the music-sharing platform. Yachty rapped or sang in a playful, spaced-out falsetto; he was dark-skinned, with hair that was dyed red, braided, and beaded. Lee liked him immediately; Thomas needed to drive

around for a while, listening to Yachty's tracks, before deciding that he liked him, too. "He's not a street cat," Lee says, of Yachty. "But, in the streaming world and online, his credibility was real—he was authentic." Yachty grew up in the suburbs, and it turned out that Lee knew his father, a photographer, from the music scene, and had gone to college with his mother. Later, after Yachty joined Q.C., he confessed that he had once sent Lee a message on Instagram, and had never heard back. Lee checked his in-box and found the message, which was a lot like the innumerable hopeful messages he receives every day:

I'm Yachty man I'm 18 and i rap. But I got the image and the sound boss! What 80% of the "game" is missing. All I need is that correct "push" ya know? . . . I have a lot of potential boss. And I know your the guy to help me prosper.

It has been less than two years, and Yachty's résumé already includes two big hits, although both were scene-stealing guest appearances on songs by other people: "Broccoli," by

D.R.A.M. (No. 5), and "iSpy," by KYLE (No. 4). His début album, "Teenage Emotions," which came out earlier this year, was less successful. "I got something to prove right now," Yachty told Lee. "I gotta have fire on fire on fire on fire." But Lee says that Yachty shouldn't worry about old-fashioned hits, because his big and loyal online audience doesn't worry about them, either. His projects include a whimsical, nautical-themed clothing line with Nautica and a television deal for a series that neither Yachty nor Lee is yet prepared to discuss. And, when Yachty arrived at the Q.C. studios on a recent night, he certainly looked like a star: he was wearing a powder-blue sweatshirt by Marino Infantry, a hip-hop-influenced skateboarding company; bright-yellow University of Michigan basketball shorts; and a multicolored pendant of Bart Simpson with red braids, which doubled as a tribute to Gucci Mane, whose own Bart Simpson pendant, from a decade ago, is widely recognized as one of the most audacious pieces of jewelry in



"He's out of the woods and resting comfortably in a sunlit glade that's abounding with wildflowers and awash in birdsong."

hip-hop history, and therefore one of the best.

Yachty sat down at the control board, opened his Gmail account on the giant screen, and started playing some songs for Lee. “I talk kinda reckless on this one,” he said, bashfully, and then his voice filled the room, rapping in great detail about an energetic evening he hoped to enjoy with a female friend.

Lee and Yachty were engaged in a months-long debate about which songs should appear on Yachty’s next mixtape, and, when Yachty called up one of Lee’s favorites, Lee leaned forward on his couch. “*This is the hardest shit,*” he said.

Yachty just shrugged. “It might be Top Ten—not Top Five,” he said.

Yachty is deferential around Lee, but Lee, rather touchingly, finds ways to be deferential to Yachty, too. He wanted to know Yachty’s opinion of a rapper he was thinking about signing. And he was intrigued when Yachty said that he had been earning some extra income on Twitch, the site designed to allow users to stream themselves playing video games. “I made fifteen hundred dollars last night,” Yachty said.

Lee didn’t seem too impressed—he tried to explain a venture related to Bitcoin that could, if it succeeded, bring in some real money. At which point, it was Yachty’s turn to be unimpressed.

“Someone donated me five dollars for farting,” he said. “And two niggas paid me five hundred dollars to follow them, and I did it. Then I did fifty-dollar listening sessions: criticizing niggas’ songs on SoundCloud. I listened to songs all night! They said, ‘Why are we giving donations to someone who’s already rich?’ I said, ‘I don’t know!’”

Lee knows that, in order to build Q.C. into the kind of Atlanta powerhouse he envisions, he and Thomas will need to find a way to do less managing on behalf of more clients. Tripie Redd, a Solid Foundation client, is eighteen, and is one of the leading exponents of a dark, grunge-influenced variant of hip-hop that has thrived on SoundCloud. (Another of those figures is Lil Peep, who was found dead last

month; police suspect a Xanax overdose.) Lee can’t help but notice that trap music has been partially displaced by a style that is softer and possibly sicker but no less compelling: “It went from talking about selling drugs to ‘How many drugs did you use?’” In this way, as in so many others, Gucci Mane is a pivotal figure—a trap icon whose music also offers a haphazard portrait of addiction and, more recently, recovery. Lil Baby, Q.C.’s emerging star, may be undertaking a similar journey: where once he casually discussed his lean addiction, now he says that he is drug-free. Whatever is happening in hip-hop, Lee is motivated not to change it but to keep up with it. Nick Love used to work for Lee, in the Young Jeezy era; now he manages the Coalition DJs, an influential crew that helps set the soundtrack at local strip clubs. He says that Lee taught him the importance of flexibility. “When the sound changes, you’ve got to know that the sound’s changing,” Love says. “You’ve got to know where the wave is going and either be ahead of it or at least be willing to ride it.”

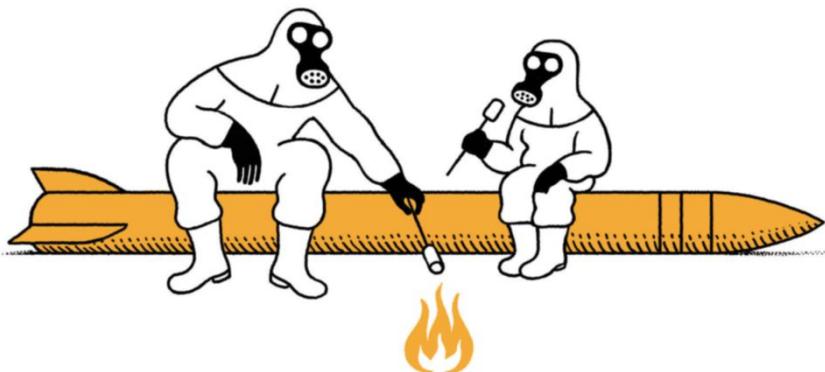
This is precisely the kind of thing that an unsentimental music mogul might say, but Lee’s career has been guided by the abiding conviction that, in hip-hop, the most exciting sounds often spring from the most exacting circumstances—and that, despite all that has changed in the decades since he first arrived in Atlanta, the streets still matter most. Lil Baby, who is twenty-two, started rapping in February, at the urging of Thomas and Lee. They knew him as a street guy who liked to shoot dice with their artists, and they felt certain that his charisma would be as appreciable in verse as it is in prose. “The twang in his voice, the dialect—he still has this real Southern dialect,” Lee says. Part of the key to Lee’s success is that he has just enough distance from Atlanta’s hip-hop scene to clearly perceive the glee and the melancholy that make the music so powerful. This combination is distinctively bluesy in spirit, and sometimes in sound, too. Lil Baby’s current single is “My Dawg,” a half-sung statement of purpose. There’s a lovely moment in the chorus when

the tough talk falls away, and Lil Baby makes a tender promise that seems to have escaped from a different song, and maybe from a different decade: “I’m on my way, I’m going fast, I’m coming home to getcha.” Steve Barnett, the chairman and C.E.O. of Capitol Music Group, says that Lee and Thomas have succeeded in part because of their connection to their city. “I hope they never move to L.A.,” he says. “You don’t want to see them in a house in Beverly Hills. You want them to be in the center of the culture, in Atlanta.”

Lee recently flew to New York to spend a few days shepherding Stefflon Don, the British vocalist, to media outlets and radio stations; a number of the people they met seemed more impressed by Lee’s willingness to vouch for her than by the fact that her single—a lilting, Afro-Jamaican love song, featuring French Montana, called “Hurtin’ Me”—had made it to No. 7 on the U.K. pop chart. (Her British manager is, like a lot of people in the music industry, an old friend of Lee’s; he arranged for Lee to steer her career in the U.S.) During a radio interview, when Stefflon Don was flummoxed by a question about reggae history, Lee grabbed a pair of headphones and sat down next to her, to try to explain. The host said, “The boss is here!” A few days later, Lee was in Los Angeles, with Migos, and then in New Orleans, where he has spent many of his Sundays this fall: his nephew, Alvin Kamara, is a running back for the New Orleans Saints, and perhaps the most exciting rookie in the N.F.L.; he is also the first client in Lee and Thomas’s new sports-management business.

All the while, Lee fielded calls, as he does every day, from friends and would-be friends who were sure that they had identified Atlanta’s next star. One afternoon, as he drove through the city, it was a distant relative, with a pitch that did not sound especially promising. “They got some Internet presence,” the guy said. “And the music is something different.”

Lee was neither enthusiastic nor dismissive. “I mean, there’s a lot of artists out there,” he said. “Send me some music.” ♦



I'M A PROUD NUCLEAR-MISSILE OWNER

BY TEDDY WAYNE

Some hothead in North Korea starts testing his nuclear missiles every day of the week and twice on Sunday, and suddenly people are demanding a ban on these “weapons of mass destruction,” saying that only the military needs that kind of power, and that civilians can get by with regular old missiles. According to the anti-nukes mob, anyone with the temerity to possess just one short-range ballistic nuclear missile for self-defense must, ipso facto, be a violent evildoer.

Well, I’m a proud nuclear-missile owner, and I’d like to put in my two cents—assuming this is still America, and that they haven’t replaced the dollar with the Chinese yuan, too.

My most treasured childhood memories are of deer hunting with my father using nuclear missiles. Dad and I would pack sandwiches and drinks (Bud for him, Coke for me), head out to the woods, hide in the foliage in our camouflage hazmat suits, load up a Minuteman III in the launch vehicle, calibrate the angle and the initial velocity, set a timer to detonate it, take cover in our steel-encased underground bunker, then come out seventy-two hours later and pick up all the carcasses in the blast area. And I’ll tell you what: those hours in the bunker, just goofing off and waiting for the dispersal of the nuclear fallout, were the best we ever spent.

Now my own six-year-old boy spends

hours poring over the ads for mass spectrometers and composite Pu-Oy pits in *Missiles and Isotopes Monthly*. I’ve started bringing him out to the nuclear test range, and when I see his eyes light up with wonder, and also with irradiated luminosity from the mushroom clouds reflecting off his goggles, I think about my old man, who inexplicably died at thirty-seven, from four dozen neon-green tumors. How are fathers and sons supposed to bond without nuclear missiles? You eliminate them, pal, and you may as well get rid of baseball and mumbling during holidays about how business has been picking up lately.

By the way, nuclear missiles aren’t just for the guys. Whenever my wife goes out alone, I make sure she stashes her nuclear missile—a cute little ten-kiloton surface-to-air number she calls Sammie—in her purse. She’s converted all her friends, and now they have monthly get-togethers where they drink wine and trade missile-cleaning pointers and whatnot. Last time, they all knitted warhead-tip cozies that say “Gone Fission” for their husbands. Great group of gals.

Yes, nuclear missiles do carry a risk of death. You know what also carries a risk of death? Chewing gum. Grow up.

Remember, nuclear missiles are already out there; if they can no longer be purchased legally, they’ll just be sold on the black market. And, if I’m at the park or a football game, or in an open-carry

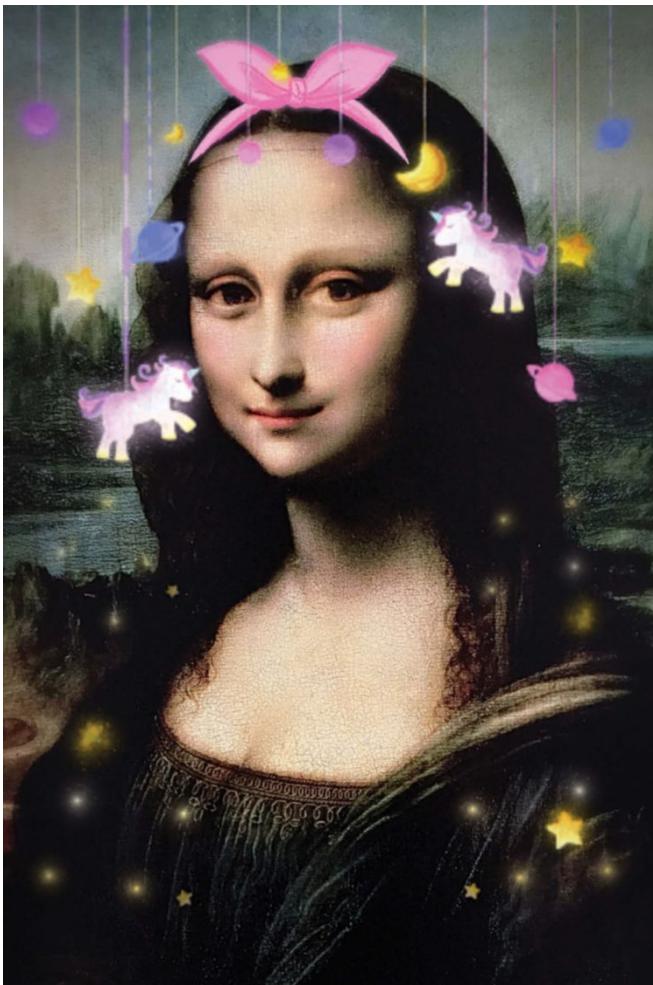
college seminar on nineteenth-century American poetry, I want to make sure I have my ICBM on me, just in case some nut job’s packing thermonuclear heat and takes issue with my stance on Emily Dickinson’s use of slant rhyme.

If they outlaw our nuclear missiles, what’s next—our beakers of hydrochloric acid? Our vials of bubonic plague? Our test tubes of hydrochloric acid laced with bubonic plague? It’s a slippery slope to tyranny, my friends, and the Founding Fathers knew that the best defense against despotism was for every home to have its own well-stocked nuclear-missile silo. And—before you start trotting out made-up “statistics” about how nuclear missiles are more likely to be used on a relative than on an intruder—yes, we store our arsenal on a shelf out of the kiddies’ reach, and of course we’re teaching them responsible nuclear-missile protocol, requiring two-person key-turning simultaneity, choosing a launch code with at least six letters and numbers plus a special character, and keeping the safety on when they play Kennedys and Khrushchevs.

Look, I’m in favor of a few common-sense restrictions. Mental-health screening, so that a madman with a military and a tacky branding empire can’t get hold of them, is a sound idea, just so long as it doesn’t prevent law-abiding citizens from buying a vintage SSM-N-8 Regulus at a nuclear-missile show or picking up some uranium-235 and a centrifuge on a milk-and-bread run to Walmart.

I’ve been a member of the National Nuclear Missile Association ever since I was eligible, at eighteen hours old. It’s true that we make occasional donations to certain lawmakers, but it doesn’t affect their policies. As clear-thinking officials who care more about being on the right side of history than about their reelection prospects, they all recognize that the possibility of dying in a nuclear holocaust is the price we pay for freedom—and they know that the way for us to protect ourselves is not to make nuclear missiles illegal but to minimize the target area by “getting small” through dieting and flexibility exercises.

Remember: nuclear missiles don’t kill people. Nuclear bombs have killed people. Get your facts straight before you launch a reckless attack. ♦



ANNALS OF TECHNOLOGY

BEAUTY IS JUSTICE

Meitu's apps are remaking China's rising generation, one face at a time.

BY JIAYANG FAN

HoneyCC likes to say that she scarcely remembers the last time someone called her by her given name, Lin Chu-chu. She took her online name from a 2003 movie starring Jessica Alba, about an aspiring hip-hop dancer and choreographer named Honey who catches her break after a music-video director sees a clip of her performing. Something similar happened for HoneyCC, who also trained in hip-hop dance, as well as in jazz and Chinese folk styles, and was equally determined to be discovered.

After an injury cut short her danc-

ing career, a few years ago, she and some friends set up an advertising business. Many of her clients were social-media companies, and her work for them led to an observation about the sector's development: first there was the text-based service Weibo, the largest social-media network in China at the time; then people started posting images. "But a single picture can only say so much," she told me recently. "To really communicate a message, you need a video."

Today, HoneyCC, who is twenty-seven, is one of the biggest stars on

the video-sharing platform Meipai. Launched in 2014, it is now the most popular platform of its kind in China, with nearly eight billion views per month. In her videos, which last anywhere from fifteen seconds to five minutes, she lip-synchs to sentimental ballads, dances to hip-hop, stages mini sketches, undergoes beauty treatments, and lolls seductively in bed. Petite, with a delicately tapering face, she can play the ingénue, the diva, or the girl next door, and costume changes come at dizzying speed. "Sometimes I look like something out of a dream," Honey said, flashing a smile of dazzling bleached teeth. "Other times I look like a mental patient. But a pretty mental patient."

HoneyCC understands the charm that comes from undercutting perfection. Romantic walks with wholesome-looking young men are upended by pratfalls. Behind-the-scenes takes, in which she talks to the camera with her mouth full, foster a sense of casual intimacy. In a sketch at a go-kart track, she struggles to remove her helmet; when her head emerges, makeup is smeared all over her face.

HoneyCC has millions of followers, and receives more offers for product-placement deals than she can accommodate (her advertisers include Givenchy, Chanel, and H.P.). She runs successful e-commerce stores that sell cosmetics and clothing and she recently launched her own makeup brand, What's Up HoneyCC. When she posted a five-minute video of herself dancing and twerking in a pair of skinny jeans, she sold some thirty thousand pairs. She is a millionaire many times over.

I first met HoneyCC, in May, in Xiamen, a port city on the Taiwan Strait. We were at the headquarters of Meipai's parent company, Meitu, Inc. Its first product, in 2008, was a photo-editing app, also named Meitu ("beautiful picture," in Chinese), which young people seized upon as a means of enhancing their selfies. The company now has a battery of apps, with names like BeautyPlus, BeautyCam, and SelfieCity, which smooth out skin, exaggerate features, brighten eyes.

The apps are installed on more than a billion phones—mostly in China and the rest of Asia, but also increasingly in the West, where Meitu seeks to expand its presence. The company sells a range

of smartphones, too, designed to take particularly flattering selfies: the front-facing selfie cameras have more powerful sensors and processors than those on regular phones, and beautifying apps start working their magic the moment a picture has been taken. Phone sales accounted for ninety-three per cent of Meitu's revenue last year, and the company is now valued at six billion dollars. Its I.P.O., a year ago, was the largest Internet-company offering that the Hong Kong stock exchange had seen in nearly a decade.

Worldwide, Meitu's apps generate some six billion photos a month, and it has been estimated that more than half the selfies uploaded on Chinese social media have been edited using Meitu's products. HoneyCC told me that it is considered a solecism to share a photo of yourself that you haven't doctored. "Selfies are part of Chinese culture now, and so is Meitu-editing selfies," she said. In nine years, the company—whose motto is "To make the world a more beautiful place"—has almost literally transformed the face of China. There's a name for this new kind of face, perfected by the Meitu apps, which you now see everywhere: *wang hong lian* ("Internet-celebrity face").

Internet celebrities themselves—the name *wang hong* means "Internet red"—are newly ubiquitous in China. The most famous of them rival the country's biggest pop singers, and outrank most TV and movie stars, in recognition and earnings. Meitu takes a cut of what Meipai users make with their videos—as much as thirty per cent in some instances, although no executives and few stars will discuss the exact figures. The biggest names, like HoneyCC, become brand ambassadors. When she and I met, she was about to go to a rehearsal for a conference being held in a few days' time to mark Meipai's third anniversary—a round of parties, networking sessions, and workshops for *wang hong* and *wang hong* wannabes. HoneyCC and her peers would be sharing secrets of their success, while others took notes on how to join their ranks, or perhaps even supplant them. "The market is competitive and growing more so," she said; fans constantly demand more variety, more polish, more beauty. "You must feed them and encourage them and figure out what they like,

even before they do," she went on. "It's a mad rush when the eyes are on you, but there's no guarantee they'll stay there."

Over the entrance to Meitu's headquarters, the company's name is written in slanted pink letters. The path toward it is flanked by human-size figures, resembling Teletubbies, coated in bright, glossy paint. An employee explained that they represented aspects of the company's operations, such as marketing, product management, and programming.

The building's interior evoked a giant Hello Kitty store. The walls were painted Jordan-almond shades—the color scheme changes every few months—and there were stuffed animals and bobblehead dolls on the desks. Conference rooms were named for aspirational spring-break locations: Hawaii, Bora-Bora, Fiji. (The average age of the employees is twenty-seven.) Stylishly clad men and women pecked at computers that were covered in garish stickers, like high-school lockers.

Chen Xiaojie, a twenty-seven-year-old with caramel-colored contact lenses and waist-length hair, gave me a demonstration of Meitu's most popular apps, on her Meitu M8 phone. Holding the device at arm's length, she tucked in her chin ("so the face comes out smaller"), snapped a photo of us, and handed me the result. My complexion looked smoother, my eyes bigger and rounder. I asked if I had been "P"-ed—the Chinese shorthand for Photoshopping. Chen said that the phone had automatically "upgraded" me. "Only when you enjoy taking selfies will you have the confidence to take more," she explained. "And only when you look pretty will you enjoy taking selfies and 'P'-ing the photo. It's all very logical, you see."

Next, using the BeautyPlus app, she showed me how to select a "beauty level" from 1 to 7—a progressive scale of paleness and freckle deletion. Then we could smooth out, tone, slim, and contour our faces, whiten our teeth, resize our irises, cinch our waists, and add a few inches in height. We could apply a filter—"celestial," "voodoo," "edge," and "vibes" are some of the options. A recently added filter called "personality" attempts to counteract a foreseeable consequence of the technology: the more that people doctor their selfies, the more everyone ends up looking the same. Like everything else in the

app, the personalities available—"boho," "mystique," and so on—are preset.

Chen opened up the BeautyCam app and the words "Beauty Is Justice!" flashed up on the screen. The interface was laid out like Candy Land, with a winding path of rabbits, rainbows, and unicorns. Then came MakeupPlus, which not only applies foundation, lipstick, blush, eyeshadow, and mascara, but can also dye your hair, shape your brows, and change your eye color. Meitu has recently started partnerships with a number of cosmetics brands, including Sephora, Lancôme, and Bobbi Brown; users can test products on their selfies and then be redirected to the brands' Web sites to place their orders.

I asked a number of Chinese friends how long it takes them to edit a photo before posting it on social media. The answer for most of them was about forty minutes per face; a selfie taken with a friend would take well over an hour. The work requires several apps, each of which has particular strengths. No one I asked would consider posting or sending a photo that hadn't been improved.

When I met Meitu's chairman, Cai Wensheng, later that day, he confirmed that editing your pictures had become a matter of ordinary courtesy. "In the same way that you would point out to your friend if her shirt was misbuttoned, or if her pants were unzipped, you should have the decency to Meitu her face if you are going to share it with your friends," he said. He took enormous pride in the fact that "Meitu" had entered the Chinese lexicon as a verb.

Cai is forty-seven and grew up in a peasant family on the rural outskirts of Quanzhou, fifty miles up the coast from Xiamen. He said he owed his success to China's transformation "from a country where uniformity was absolute and the entire populace wore two colors—black and navy—to now, when you can wear absolutely anything." The power of appearances first became clear to him at school, in the mid-eighties, when he noticed how much attention a particular girl received because she was the only pupil who owned a bra. He soon found that there was money to be made selling cosmetics on the sidewalk—"Owning a tube of lipstick was an untold luxury"—and dropped out of school after ninth grade to pursue business ventures.

Cai co-founded Meitu with another entrepreneurial Quanzhou native, Wu Xinhong. The initial plan was to build a simplified Photoshop for what Cai called *lao bai xing*. (The phrase means, roughly, “just plain folks,” and Cai constantly applied it to himself.) Once user data started coming in, they saw that their app was overwhelmingly used by young women for selfie enhancement. “The demand was there even though no one knew it,” he said. He realized that the market for online beautification was his for the taking.

Wu told me that user data remained central to the company’s strategy. “It tells us, in real time, what we need to know,” he said. In the beginning, people tended to favor a Japanese anime look, with huge eyes and pale skin. Now people have shifted to what he described as “Euro-American wave,” a tacit acknowledgment of the fact that the apps have a way of making people look more Western—for instance, by replacing single eyelids, which are typical, though not universal, among East Asians, with a double eyelid fold. There is even a new filter on BeautyPlus called “mixed blood,” used to achieve a Eurasian appearance. Earlier this year, there was a spate of outrage on social media after international users pointed out that increasing beauty levels in the app invariably resulted in a lightening of skin color.

The Meitu executives I spoke with were careful to dispel the implication that their apps influenced people’s preconceptions about what is attractive. “The Chinese notion of beauty has been ingrained and uncontroversial for a long time,” the chief technology officer said. “Big eyes, double eyelids, white skin, high nose bridge, pointed chin.” (This view is historically debatable, but widely held in China.) Wu even implied that Meitu was democratizing beauty, making it into something you could work at rather than a matter of genetic luck. “*Lao bai xing* get to aspire to something more beautiful than anything they have ever known,” Wu said. “That’s an achievement.”

One afternoon in Xiamen, on the seventh floor of a residential high-rise, Deng Lanfei, a Meipai star with three million followers, was hunched, as if famine-stricken, over a cup of instant noodles. Next to her, hungrily

eying the noodles, was a young man named Fu Yufeng (a million followers). Both were wearing white shirts and red ties, giving them the appearance of car-rental clerks. A makeshift paper sign behind them—“EARN A MILLION ADVERTISING COMPANY”—suggested that they worked at an ad agency so unsuccessful that its employees were nearing starvation.

I had come to a tiny film set, at the headquarters of Zi Yu Zi Le (“self-entertainment, self-enjoyment”), a company that shoots videos for Meipai and a few other platforms. The pair on set really were creating an ad (for a new brand of bottled spring water), but, as in many Meipai videos, there was a playful layer of self-reference. Deng’s business manager, Yang Xiaohong, handed me a copy of the script. On the brink of death, the two workers agree to play rock, paper, scissors for the last cup of noodles. But just then a call comes in from the spring-water company, which wants to commission a commercial capitalizing on Deng’s popularity. “Wait,” I whispered to Yang. “Deng is supposed to be playing herself?” Yang smiled, and said, “Deng is both playing herself and not herself.”

The acting was exaggerated, as in a “Saturday Night Live” skit, and amateurish. Deng’s bangs kept obscuring closeups of her face, and Fu couldn’t decide whether resting his left arm or his right on the table better conveyed “maximum desperation.” Take after take ended with Deng dissolving into giggles. I flipped ahead in the script. Deng had only about fifteen lines, but it seemed possible that the scene would never be finished.

Yang assured me that the casualness of the acting and the modest production values were an asset. “On social media, traditional ads are no longer effective, because everyone knows they’re just a put-on,” she said. “But if an online influencer can embed a product in scenes that are basically her life, her followers respond: they feel that using what she’s using will bring them closer to her.”

The production company was set up two years ago, with the help of a four-million-yuan investment from Meipai, and is run by a man named Yan Chi, who is also HoneyCC’s boyfriend. When I spoke to him, he’d just returned from

Silicon Valley, where he’d talked to people at YouTube and Google about his effort to expand the company by recruiting new stars from major cities all over China. He said that his biggest challenge was the regionalism of Chinese taste. “It makes it exceedingly difficult to produce hit content,” he told me. In English-speaking online culture, videos can go viral across many different countries. China was different, he said: “It’s everything from exposure to the outside world and average education level to sophistication and spending power. In a single country, people are living realms apart.”

A little later, a group of men arrived who looked as if they’d stepped out of a K-pop video—Meipai stars from all over China who were in town for the anniversary conference. Yan poured tea and answered their questions about increasing their fan base. A quarter of Meipai’s uploaders are men, and their videos tend toward comedy. A twenty-four-year-old with a degree in chemistry mentioned his breakout hit, a skit about how different the reactions to snow are in southern China, compared with in the north. I wondered if the news was ever a good source for comic material, but when I asked there was silence, punctuated by nervous laughter.

“If you want to build an audience, especially a young one, you should probably avoid politics,” one man said, eventually. “If you say something controversial, you’ll get shut down. If you’re repeating what’s on the news, well, then, what’s the point?”

“It’s not only about the censors,” someone else added. “Politics is also just not that interesting to our fans. They are teen-agers and want to be amused by stuff actually relevant to their lives.”

It became clear, though, that most of the stars approved of President Xi Jinping’s tough stance toward Western powers. “The way to succeed is to listen to the Party and follow the government,” one man said. Beyond that, they took no interest in politics and thought of China’s development as a generational evolution. People born in the nineteen-seventies, one star explained, still bear traces of the collectivist mind-set of the days before Communism was tempered by market reforms. “They only know what it’s like to please the group,

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and don't really have a sense of self," he said. The one-child policy meant that people born in the eighties are a bit more self-centered, and subsequent generations are even more so. Today's teenagers, he said, "want to stand out and be individuals—to be like everyone else is just uncool."

Wen Hua, the author of "Buying Beauty," a study of Chinese aesthetic standards and consumerism, confirmed that this appetite for individualism is a new phenomenon in a society that has long prized conformity. "The arrival of Meitu and plastic surgery can seem an opportunity to take ownership of yourself and your body," she said. "But is it real individuality?" She saw the fanatical pursuit of beauty not as a genuine expression of independence but as a reaction to social and economic pressures. Whereas older Chinese grew up with the so-called Iron Rice Bowl (*tie fan wan*), the security of a life lived entirely in government employment, today's young people, Wen pointed out, have no safety net and also face an economy that produces many more college graduates than it does jobs for those with a degree. What's more, the growth of service industries has put a premium on self-presentation. The Iron Rice Bowl has been replaced by what's sometimes known as the Rice Bowl of Youth (*qing chun fan*)—low-level but decent-paying jobs in fields like public relations and sales, for which youth and good

looks are considered core qualifications. The new emphasis on appearance, she said, was at the root of Meitu's success: "Meitu is in the business of manufacturing a desire for perfection, so that you feel its gaze everywhere and find yourself conforming to—and confirming—its standards."

I spoke to Wu Guanjun, a political theorist at a university in Shanghai who also teaches at N.Y.U.'s campus there, and he pointed out that the young not only face a dysfunctional job market but also are bombarded with images of media stars and of the *fuerdai*, China's first generation of trust-fund kids. Seeing no connection between hard work and reward, young people increasingly opt for the escapism of celebrity culture. Wu views Meitu as the epitome of this trend. "It fills the emptiness because it provides distraction and stimulation," he told me, and mentioned that, these days, the only way he can get his students to concentrate in class is by dropping references to the latest celebrities.

I asked Wu if this was any different from Kardashian-era America, and he said that pop culture in the West, having had longer to develop, is more varied. In China, he felt, it is still possible for celebrity worship to capture the entire culture. "Some of my students regard it as the defining feature of their existence, the thing that gives their life meaning when everything else seems out of their control," he said. "To par-

ticipate in this culture is to verify your existence." He recalled a student who spent vast amounts of time pining for a particular celebrity. One day, in a lottery, she won a ticket to see him in person. After agonizing for some time, she decided not to go. "I knew she wouldn't go," Wu said. "For her, this celebrity might as well have been a deity. You don't want to come face-to-face with your god, because it's frightening to think that you might see a pimple on his chin."

From Xiamen, I travelled to Chengdu, which has emerged as a leading center of plastic surgery, to visit Xichan hospital, the largest cosmetic-surgery provider in Sichuan Province. It was founded twelve years ago by Zhang Yixiang, a Sichuan native who originally trained in public health but then realized the profit potential of cosmetic surgery. "I had a doctor friend who told me that the surgeries cost a hundred yuan each but that clients were happy to pay two thousand or more," he said. "I knew then it was going to be a growing market."

Ninety-eight per cent of Xichan's patients are women, most of them between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five. Nose jobs and blepharoplasties (which create the double eyelid crease) are the most popular procedures. Zhang said that in the early days, most clients were seeking to hide a scar or a physical deformity; now, he said, "more often than not, it's very attractive women who are chasing perfection."

A woman in her early thirties named Xu Xueyi gave me a tour of the premises, which looked like a Versailles-themed Vegas hotel—eight floors of ornate rooms and gilded corridors, shops and spas. A profusion of synthetic flowers, marble, and sparkling chandeliers served to distract from the procedures taking place out of sight. You might be having your jawbone sawed down, in order to give your face a dainty oval shape, but, just across the hallway, you could treat yourself to a jade-inlaid gold necklace, get a perm or a manicure, or pick up some body-slimming lingerie.

"We do everything here to make you happy and satisfied," Xu said brightly, as she led me through a V.I.P. suite with a Jacuzzi. Bandaged women in striped robes passed by, guided by nurses who



waved at Xu. The nurses were all notably good-looking, and Xu confided that she'd had several procedures. "I injected my chin with filler to make it pointier but didn't like it, so I dissolved it two weeks later."

Xu took me to one of the hospital's senior surgeons, Li Bin, a man of fifty who spoke with scholarly placidity. "In the past, in conservative China, we used to prioritize a person's interior to the exclusion of all else," Li told me. "But, in today's competitive world, your appearance is an asset that you want to maximize." He mentioned that it is normal for a job applicant's résumé to include a head shot, and, indeed, plastic-surgery patients in China are often more interested in the professional benefits of good looks than in romantic ones. The procedures are viewed as a simple investment that will yield material dividends.

Since the rise of Meitu, a different kind of client has become more common: young, impressionable women who bring pictures of their idols to his office and ask to be given this or that feature. He smiled and shook his head. "Expectations are higher than ever, and it's hard to get through to clients about the recovery period and the risk of unforeseen results," he said. "To change the shape of a face requires cutting into the jawbone"—a procedure that Western doctors are reluctant to perform except in cases of medical need, because of a significant risk of fatal complications—"but on Meitu the transformation is instant and completely controllable."

In the afternoon, I met a loyal customer of the hospital named Li Yan. She was thirty and had had more procedures than she could remember, starting in college: double-eyelid creation, eye-corner-opening, nose job, chin implant, lips injected to resemble "parted flower petals." Almost every feature of her face had been done a few times, but she still felt as if she were a rough draft, in the process of revision. "I don't think my nose bridge is quite high enough, and the tip doesn't have the slight upturned arch I want," she said.

I asked Li, who works as an administrative assistant in a regional bank, how she managed to afford all the surgery. "It's how I spend most of my money,"

she told me, adding that, over the years, boyfriends had also chipped in. She said with satisfaction that no one who'd known her at school would recognize her now and that she'd destroyed every picture she could find of herself before the surgeries began. "The beauty of photos taken before the digital age is, if you destroy it, it's gone for good."

Li was devoted to Meitu, and used the apps to preview surgeries she was considering. Surgery and Meitu, she believed, "clarify each other." Recently, she'd been approached by a *wang hong* recruiting agency about developing an online presence, but she worried that the livelihood would be too unstable, and, besides, she couldn't really sing or dance or act. The recruiter had said that she wouldn't need any skills, but she still wasn't convinced. "I could never be as beautiful as a *wang hong*," she told me, laughing.

"You should consider getting some work done, too," Li said at one point. It was a comment I'd been hearing with disconcerting frequency as I hung around *wang hong* in China. One of the hospital's doctors, Li Jun, said she would give me a consultation, but I'd have to wait till the evening; although it was a Sunday, her schedule was packed.

Our session lasted half an hour, during which the chalk pen she used to draw on my face was almost never at rest. By the end, my face resembled a military map in the late stages of a long battle. She began with structural problems. My jaw was too square, my cheekbones too broad, and my eyelids too droopy. My nose bowed outward—a "camel hump"—and I had a weak chin. After the half-dozen or so procedures that it would take to ameliorate these flaws, we could move on to smaller things, which could be dealt with by a combination of Botox (for my shrunken forehead, my jaw muscles, and the creeping crow's-feet around my eyes) and filler (for my temples, the pouches under my eyes, my nasal folds, and my upper lip). The cost would be more than thirty thousand dollars. "There are still other things that could be done," she said, as I stared at my chalked-up face in the mirror, but she was careful to manage

expectations. It was clear that no amount of intervention could transform my face into that of a *wang hong*.

I arrived back in Xiamen in time for Meipai's anniversary conference, which took place in a sleek hotel near Meitu's headquarters. Around four hundred Meipai stars from all over the country were there. The youngest was four and the oldest seventy-two, but the majority ranged in age from late teens to mid-twenties.

A screen in the auditorium displayed photos of Justin Bieber and other global megastars who'd got their start online, while Meitu staffers explained to the young hopefuls what the future might hold if they kept up their assiduous posting. Neon-colored slide shows about e-commerce and the monetization potential of celebrity flashed by, but I soon realized that the audience wasn't paying much attention. "At an event like this, it's all about rubbing shoulders with stars who have more influence," a man named Mark explained. Mark was a rarity: a Caucasian *wang hong*. He was South African, and had moved to China nine years earlier, in his mid-teens, when his father got a job there. With a mop of red hair, he looked like Prince Harry, but lankier. "It's about breaking into the stars' circles and maybe sharing a photo of you posing with a *wang hong* who has double or even ten times your fan base."

All day, the room hummed with nervous tension, and even the friendliest interactions carried a competitive edge. *Wang hong* discussed the difficulty of getting a hair appointment, as everyone was piling into the same few salons, and how two-hour makeup sessions had required them to skip breakfast. A woman with wheat-colored hair and a lacy white sheath dress, who went by the screen name StylistMimi, told me that she thought of herself as a late starter, having only been on Meipai for a year. With fewer than four hundred thousand followers, she was anxious to make up for lost time. Another, named Liu Zhanzhan, warned that there was currently an oversaturation of *wang hong* "incubators"—talent scouts like



the one who had approached Li Yan. "They promise you everything, but you sign a contract and you are basically sold to them for six, seven, eight years," she said. "They manage hundreds of people, and, at the end of the day, how many actually make it?"

StylistMimi excused herself in order to live-stream, holding up her phone to give her followers a panorama of the room and narrating the proceedings in a syrupy voice. Live streaming, on Meipai or on a variety of other platforms, such as Kuaishou and Huajiao—has emerged as an important revenue source for *wang hong*. As Mimi broadcast to her fans, a real-time log of cash donations and other gifts appeared at the bottom of her screen, in the form of icons of gold coins and flower bouquets. Those who donated got to ask questions, and one fan wondered what big-name celebrities Mimi could spot. "Do you see HoneyCC three rows ahead?" Mimi whispered, angling her phone toward the star. "I saw her from a distance but didn't get a closeup. In real life, she looks just O.K."

An unforeseen complication of meeting so many *wang hong* at once was that it was hard to keep them all straight. They tended to bear only an impressionistic resemblance to their Meitu-improved profile pictures. But anytime I took out my iPhone 6 to take a selfie with someone, I was rebuffed. People would suspiciously ask what kind of camera it was before walking away with expressions ranging from offense to pity. "I can't allow you to take a picture of me with that camera—it'll be too ugly," a woman from Chongqing told me. I assured her that I was not a *wang hong* and would not be posting it, and we reached a compromise: she would take a selfie of us on her Meitu phone, edit her face, and then send the photo to me.

"A regular camera can't capture the whole of a person," a young man with shaggy bleached-blond hair and brilliant blue contact lenses told me, as he showed off his editing skills. "It has no way of expressing the entirety of your beauty." He was nineteen, from Nanjing, and called himself Abner, a name he said he'd chosen because it sounded "seductively exotic." His Meipai career took off a year ago, after a short video he posted made the daily "hot list." The

video was "the narcissistic kind," he said: "I don't speak at all but just look beautiful." This turned out to be his favored mode.

Abner's following on Meipai is modest, a mere hundred and forty thousand people; he is more into live streaming, which demands much less in terms of scripting and production design. But live streaming has its hazards. "You're compelled to constantly stream or else your fans forget you," he complained, adding that he regularly spends eight-hour stretches at his computer. To fill the time, he said, "I put on makeup, or, if my makeup is already done, I sing karaoke, but I don't have a good voice."

I asked if a lot of men use makeup. "Increasingly, yes," Abner answered. "But of course not everyone does as elaborate a job as me. My situation is a bit special because of all my plastic surgery." He'd begun reshaping his face when he was fifteen, having become fascinated by the way he could change his face with Meitu's apps. "They opened up this world where I could literally invent what I looked like," he said.

Over the years, using money earned from a part-time job, he had steadily raised the bridge of his nose. He'd undergone double-eyelid surgery, and then he had the outer corners of his eyes extended—a procedure known as lateral canthoplasty. Abner told me that he would have done the inner corners, too, but his doctor had told him he had no extra skin there to cut. In all, he'd had

was chiefly inspired by Korean models he follows on Instagram. Instagram is blocked in China, but he uses a V.P.N. connection to get past this, the same way that other people access sites like the New York Times and Twitter. He'd even live-streamed from Seoul recently, while attending a friend's birthday party, but the whole thing had been a fiasco. He'd been completely unaware of a recent diplomatic standoff between China and South Korea over the latter's deployment of an advanced American missile system known as THAAD, as a defense measure against North Korea. For months, Chinese TV had been saying that the arrangement was a threat to Chinese security and calling for boycotts of Korean goods. None of this had filtered down to Abner, who was startled by a sudden onslaught of hostile comments from followers calling him a traitor to his country. "I don't watch the news, and politics is the most boring thing I can think of," he said. "Before leaving for Korea, I didn't even know about that stupid missile. I told my fans I booked the tickets months earlier, and, besides, the weather was perfect for outside photography."

Abner was studying finance in college, but said, "I don't go to classes much, though I try to show up for the tests. I'll probably collect the degree, even if it's completely pointless." The idea of working in an office struck him as ludicrous, and he expressed contempt for the way his parents, who run a small cell-phone store, thought of nothing but work and constantly fretted about money. "What my parents don't get is that being a *wang hong* is much more practical than any office profession," he went on. "The truth is that in China going to school is useless. The things my professors drone on and on about—can they actually help me make money? The best-case scenario is you'll just be a lowly cog in a corporation owned by rich people and run by their children."



half a dozen procedures on his eyes, and, just a week before the conference, had completed a third remodelling of his nose. "The stitches aren't even out, and I'm not supposed to travel," he said, showing me bruising between his nostrils. "But I don't care. I'm here to meet fellow *wang hong*, take group selfies, and grow my fan numbers."

By now, Abner said, his live-streaming income had paid for his surgeries several times over. He told me that his look

That evening, Meitu's stars trooped out to the hotel courtyard for a party. Palm trees surrounding a kidney-shaped pool were hung with lights, and people drifted around tables where cocktails, champagne, and seafood kebabs were being served. Except for the guardian of the four-year-old *wang hong*, who splashed

around in the water, not a single adult was in the pool. Although the women's bathroom was thronged with bikini-clad *wang hong* examining themselves in a full-length mirror, one of them explained that swimming was out of the question: there were so many selfies to be taken and edited, and almost everyone was live-streaming the event to their fans.

Nearby, drinking beers, were two young men who didn't look like *wang hong*. They turned out to be equity analysts at a Shanghai-based firm that helps investors identify opportunities in China's Internet and media sectors. "There's more money floating around at this party than any investor-relations conference we've ever attended," one of them said. His name was Robert, and he was from Texas. His colleague, who was Chinese and went by the name JC, said that the lavishness of the event was Meitu's way of marketing itself to its stars: "Meitu needs its *wang hong* to promote it as a top brand."

On a stage near the pool, the evening's entertainment began. A Korean-Chinese boy band launched into a Backstreet Boys-style number, to happy screams from the audience. Next up was a man in shades who rapped about his journey to Xiamen from Shenyang. HoneyCC danced with a few friends near the stage, and a crowd flocked around her, phones aloft as they streamed the spectacle to their followers. Every gesture of greeting and intimacy was also a pose for a selfie, and people were too busy live-streaming to make conversation. "Take the party out of your phones," the d.j. repeatedly pleaded, but his exhortations were themselves filmed and disseminated to millions of viewers.

I caught sight of an older woman, perhaps in her seventies, standing and watching the young dancers with an expression of rapt, unfiltered joy. Her face was creased and leathery, but her mouth, agape with wonder, gave her a childlike look. She was the only person there who wasn't holding a cell phone, and she was dressed plainly. Two security guards went up to her and asked what she was doing there. She said that she was the wife of a janitor at the hotel, had heard the music, and wondered what was going on. "Granny, you have to leave," one of the guards said. She nodded but didn't move, and it wasn't until the men each



"It's always painful to learn the truth about Santa."

took one of her arms and tried to propel her to the exit that she began walking, her head still turned toward the music and her smile unchanged. As the guards succeeded in ejecting her, I realized that she was the most beautiful person at the party.

Meitu employees like to describe the company's products as "an ecosystem of beauty," but ecosystems are inherently diverse, whereas Meitu and the trends it epitomizes seem to be moving China in the direction of homogeneity. A generation of Chinese, while clamorously asserting forms of individualism that would have been unthinkable for their parents and grandparents, is also enacting a ghastly convergence. Their selfies are becoming more and more similar, and so are their faces. Through the lens of a Meitu camera, the world is flawless, but flawlessness isn't the same as beauty, and the freedom to perfect your selfie does not necessarily yield a liberated sense of self.

Over by the stage, Abner was half-heartedly trying on various glow-in-the-dark accessories that Meitu had provided, taking a selfie with each new look. "I still don't know why my video from this morning hasn't gone viral," he said sulkily and wandered off.

I took out my phone and scrolled through his videos. Abner's eyes were large and imploring, his complexion so pale that, when he happened to pose in front of a white wall, the face he had so painstakingly sculpted melted into the background and became almost invisible. In one video, a single wisp of hair had been artfully primed to keep falling in his eye. He would brush it away with his arm. He was wearing a ruffled shirt too big for his skinny frame, and the over-all effect somehow called to mind the Little Prince. In another, he played languorously with a piece of cheesecake but never quite took a bite.

Below each video came the comments and donations of his teen-aged fans. (He had told me that the best time to earn money was around the Chinese New Year, when kids were flush with cash given to them by their families; he could easily clear six thousand dollars a week.) The bottom of his screen was a blizzard of hearts and stars and money bags. But one adoring girl wrote a longer, more earnest message: "Him. He was my first *wang hong* idol. I never thought it was possible to love a person so much. He was really my first. Stylish, majestic, with ethereal beauty. Truly, can anyone be so perfect?" ♦



A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE POETRY OF SYSTEMS

For Ophelia Dahl and Partners in Health, the time to fix global health care is in between crises.

BY ARIEL LEVY

In many ways, life in Great Missenden was idyllic, bucolic, sweet. The author Roald Dahl and the movie star Patricia Neal called their cottage there, in the rolling English countryside of Buckinghamshire, Gipsy House, because they'd parked a bright-blue caravan in the garden for their four children to play in, and because there was a freewheeling spirit to the place. A dozen people might show up for dinner on any given night; Neal would frequently be on her way to the United States to shoot a film; Dahl wrote his famous children's books in a little hut—his "nest"—at the edge of the garden, surrounded by the roses and rhododendrons he liked to tend. "It was a very unmanufactured garden—very cobbled together, not unlike the house," Ophelia Dahl, the second-youngest of the siblings, recalled recently. "I remember Dad in the garden all the time. In the summer, he'd be standing there in the evening with a whiskey-and-soda. I remember sipping it, and saying, 'Oh, God, this is a horrible taste!' He told me, 'I don't drink it for the taste. I drink it for the nice whizzly feeling it gives you.'"

There was a small orchard on the property, and Dahl taught Ophelia to drive there when she was only eleven years old. Like Dahl's child hero in "Danny, the Champion of the World"—who lived with his widowed father in a Gypsy caravan, and started driving when he was nine—Ophelia was a brave and competent child, who soon took to driving around the village. "I often chose my friends for their moms, these warm, interesting moms, and I would drive over to these people's houses, and, even if my friend wasn't there, I'd stop in for a cup of tea and a chat." The next day, she'd drive to another house, making her rounds.

There was the palpable world of country roads and cocktails in the garden, and the fantastic world of stories that sprang from her father's "delicious imagination." But there was also a silent world of grief, a world that could not be seen or spoken of. The first great sadness had come in 1960, when the family was visiting Manhattan and a taxicab hit the carriage in which Neal and Dahl's four-month-old son, Theo, was being wheeled by his nanny along Madison Avenue. The carriage flew forty feet, and the baby's skull shattered when he landed. He underwent multiple surgeries, and a tube was implanted to drain fluid from his brain into his heart, but it kept getting blocked. At the height of Theo's suffering, his father contacted Stanley Wade, a toy-maker he knew who specialized in crafting engines for model airplanes with tiny hydraulic pumps. Together with Kenneth Till, a pediatric neurosurgeon who cared for Theo, they created the Dahl-Wade-Till shunt, which was used on almost three thousand children around the world, and cost a third as much as its predecessor, because the inventors declined to profit from it. Theo required nine craniotomies, but he lived.

Two years after Theo's accident, when Dahl was in the midst of writing a story he later called "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," his seven-year-old daughter, Olivia, contracted measles. Within four days, she was dead. "There was just this sense that my father's heart had been fully broken," Ophelia, who was born a year and a half after Olivia's death, said. Neal grieved openly and outwardly. Dahl, on the other hand, "went to bed for something like a month, and then got up, but he couldn't talk about it. My mother said he just never talked about it again."

More misfortune followed. When Ophelia was nine months old, Neal suffered a burst cerebral aneurysm and fell into a coma. She came out of it, but it took months for her to learn how to walk and talk again. "I have very strong memories growing up, of knowing immediately—as soon as I became conscious—that she had been ill, that she wasn't like other mothers," Ophelia said. "She would trip and fall regularly. I was on high alert most of my childhood."

But, if her mother fell, Ophelia could help her up. The other, deeper sorrows persisted, and there was nothing she could do about them. "I feel, in some ways, I was born into the echo of something that had happened at another time," Ophelia, who is fifty-three, and has icy pale skin and green eyes and her mother's delicate features, said. "There were clearly ramifications, but I hadn't been there." There were relics around Gipsy House of the losses: a trunk in Dahl and Neal's room that contained Olivia's clothes and toys; a prototype of the Dahl-Wade-Till shunt in a frame, hanging on the wall. "Funny old thing—looked like the inside of a watch," Ophelia recalled. "He never talked about it with us. But my father never talked about his accomplishments. He did none of that boring stuff that people who look back on an accomplished life do."

Recently, Ophelia Dahl was in Rwanda, speaking to a group of graduate students at the University of Global Health Equity, which was opened in 2015 by Partners in Health, an aid organization that Dahl co-founded when she was very young. "For the first time in a lecture like that, I included my father as an example of the suggestion that you can transcend your training. Don't do this thing where you say, 'Well, I don't know that that can be done.' You have



Stubborn inventiveness defines Dahl's approach. "You push," she said. "You push, push, push."



"I can get out most of the stains, but some will remain to remind you of what a slob you are."

• •

to keep pushing. You don't say, 'I'm sorry, I'm not an inventor, I'm a writer.' I think it's connected to feeling entitled in the right way: 'Fuck it. I'm not going to stand for that.' You push. You push, push, push."

In the final version of "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," Willy Wonka exhorts Grandpa Joe, "You mustn't despair! Nothing is impossible!" On the Partners in Health Web site, the organization's stated purpose is to bring the benefits of modern medical science to some of the poorest people in the world. (The group operates in Haiti, Peru, Mexico, Siberia, the Navajo Nation, Sierra Leone, Malawi, Lesotho, and Liberia, in addition to Rwanda.) But Partners in Health also aspires to do something more amorphous, more imaginative, and more improbable: "to serve as an antidote to despair."

There are, as people often say in Sierra Leone, "many challenges" at the government clinic in Kangama, near the country's eastern border. It is situated many hours' drive from the nearest town, on a rocky and frequently flooded dirt road through the bush, and few patients can afford a car or a motorcycle or even

the fuel to power one. It is also difficult to reach by phone: there are no landlines in the area, so in order to make or receive calls a member of the clinic's staff has to walk a mile to "the point"—a spot where there is intermittent cell-phone service. "It is often very frustrating," Fodei Daboh, a tall young man who is the community health program manager, explained to Ophelia Dahl on an afternoon in October when she visited. Calls always seem to drop just when a plan—to get an ambulance, say—is on the verge of completion. There are shortages of medication in the clinic dispensary, and basic supplies often run out. On that day, there was a large jug of water by the front door, next to two posters touting the benefits of handwashing. There was not, however, any soap.

What the Kangama clinic has plenty of is bathrooms: nine of them, built with aid money donated during the Ebola crisis of 2014. "The intent was good, but the lack of coordination was horrifying," Regan Marsh, a former medical director of Partners in Health Sierra Leone, who had joined Dahl for the visit, said. They had seen this kind of thing all over the world. Development organizations will donate something

finite, even if it's redundant, rather than something essential but ongoing; thus, a community might receive a bathroom, a handwashing sign, or a thousand packets of oral-rehydration salts, instead of salaries for trained nurses, or, say, electricity. "There are endless examples of bigger interventions—like a hospital—in the middle of nowhere, and it falls apart because it hasn't been built within a community of trained people, or with the normal pipeline for overhead and upkeep," Dahl said. If a hospital is erected, but there is no running water or sewage system—to say nothing of diagnostic equipment or personnel who can operate it—it is as useless as a bucket of water without soap. Consequently, Partners in Health often helps supply things that fall outside a medical-aid organization's typical purview, such as bridges and satellite dishes and gasoline. "These things need to be done in order for people to have a reasonable chance of being healthy," Dahl said, "and not being . . . dead."

When P.I.H. became involved with the Kangama clinic, a year and a half ago, there was no power at the facility. One of the basic functions of this sort of clinic is to care for women as they give birth, but if a woman went into labor at night she would have to deliver by flashlight. During the rainy season, someone had to hold an umbrella over the proceedings, because the ceiling leaked. There is electricity now, and the ceiling has been patched, but there is still no doctor on staff. In fact, there are only about a hundred and fifty Sierra Leonean doctors in the entire country—which helps explain why it is the most dangerous place in the world to be pregnant. One out of every seventeen women in Sierra Leone will die during a pregnancy, a delivery, or its aftermath. In the United States, the rate is one in thirty-eight hundred; in Finland and Italy, it's one in twenty thousand.

P.I.H. first came to West Africa in 2014, at the invitation of the governments of Liberia and Sierra Leone, during the height of the Ebola epidemic. Emergency intervention is distinctly not P.I.H.'s project; in contrast with organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières, which specialize in addressing intense crises, P.I.H. works to remake entire health-care systems, by collaborating

with local governments. Its commitments are long-term and large in scale. (One board member told me, “M.S.F. is sex. P.I.H. is love.”) P.I.H. has been in Rwanda for twelve years, and in Haiti for more than thirty.

In Sierra Leone, Dahl and her colleagues were convinced that many people were dying of Ebola for the same reason that they were dying in childbirth: the lack of a functional health-care system. “Ebola was the canary in the coal mine,” Joia Mukherjee, the chief medical officer of P.I.H., told me. “What you’ve got to look at are the dangerous conditions in the mine.” Sierra Leone is still reeling from a decade-long civil war, and evidence of it is everywhere: the charred skeletons of homes, schools, and hospitals throughout the countryside; the omnipresence of people whose limbs were systematically amputated by the rebels of the Revolutionary United Front; the lack of basic infrastructure. There are twenty public hospitals in Sierra Leone, and less than half have running water. One Sierra Leonean doctor, T. B. Kamara, co-authored a study in 2010 comparing surgical care in his country with what was available in the United States during the Civil War. It concluded that the nineteenth-century U.S. facilities had been “equivalent and in many ways superior.” Dahl told me, “Ebola was ‘acute on chronic.’ That’s what they call it when someone has smoker’s lung, and then suddenly something precipitous happens, like pneumonia. It happens with systems themselves.”

Dahl, who was the executive director of P.I.H. during the Ebola crisis and is now the chair of the board, had secured financial commitments from the Office of U.S. Foreign Disaster Assistance and from the British Department for International Development. P.I.H. workers began by establishing emergency-treatment centers, and moved to shore up major public hospitals. Then they began training and paying community health workers, which is usually P.I.H.’s first priority when it goes into a country. Local people are employed to visit sick neighbors and administer medications, take note of symptoms, and accompany patients to seek treatment at a nearby clinic. Ninety-six per cent of P.I.H. employees are residents of the communities where they work.

That afternoon in Kangama, Dahl made the rounds with Sahr Christian Allieu, a community health worker who visits seven patients three times a week. The first, a pregnant woman who had recently been given a diagnosis of H.I.V., lived in a small settlement in the bush, and on the way there they walked past children outside their homes, pounding grain in wooden mortars as tall as they were, and past women balancing stacks of cassava leaves on their heads. When they arrived, the patient was wearing a white tank top stretched taut over her big belly and a vibrant red cloth knotted just below it. “How de body?” Dahl asked, using the local greeting. The woman put her hand on her stomach and said that she was feeling healthy, but that, with a fifteen-year-old, a five-year-old, and aging parents, she had “a lot of people to take care of.” She invited Dahl into her house, a three-room structure of mud bricks under a corrugated-tin roof, where she lived with twelve family members. “Imagine how wet it is sleeping on the floor during the rainy season,” Dahl said, outside. “In Haiti, they have a saying about these sorts of houses: they fool the sun but not the rain.”

A few minutes’ walk through the bush, the next patient, who also had H.I.V., was gaunt and exhausted, with sunken eyes. She worried about how she would survive, she said. Her husband had abandoned her and their three children—including a baby she was still breastfeeding—when he found out that she had the disease. They were staying with her brother and eleven other people in a small house with no electricity or running water. She had been taking antiretroviral medication that her community health worker brought her, and her appetite was returning, but that only meant she was hungry; her brother had had difficulty feeding his extended family even before he took her in. “I don’t know how to thank God enough for the medications,” she said. “I wouldn’t be alive without them. That gives me some hope.” But even as she said this she stared at the floor, looking despondent. Dahl, visibly shaken, talked to Allieu afterward

about getting her some food assistance. The medicine would do no good if the woman starved to death.

When Dahl was eighteen, she decided to volunteer in Haiti with a nonprofit that provided eye care to the poor. “My father told me, ‘Go do something worthwhile, and have an adventure—see a different part of the world.’” It was a good time to leave Great Missenden, as her parents were on the verge of a painful and public divorce. For a cosseted teen-ager, arriving in Port-au-Prince proved to be transformational. “It was a fundamental sort of messing about with your own internal system,” Dahl said. “Everything was different—that’s what garbage smells like, that’s what illness smells like, that’s what children begging look like.” Most people encounter poverty and then relegate the knowledge of others’ misery to the periphery of their mind. Dahl had a different experience. “To have seen this and to not do anything, I knew wasn’t an option. I would never sleep well again. The rest of my life I’d then be feeling like, ‘Look at the house we’re living in.’”

But she had no idea what effective action might entail. “I went to these outreach clinics in Haiti, and I was writing home, like, ‘Dear Dad, today I saw ...’ And you *would* see things! I didn’t lie; I didn’t say, ‘Oh, I scrubbed in on some surgery.’ The implication, though, was that I was doing important things—because you want to believe that.”

In a town called Mirebalais, in Haiti’s Central Plateau, she met another volunteer, an American named Paul Farmer, who had recently graduated from Duke with a degree in medical anthropology. Their upbringings were starkly different: Farmer was raised, with five siblings, in a bus in a Florida campground. (They joked that Farmer had grown up looking for diners where kids eat free, while Dahl went to places where kids eat Brie.) But they had the same yearning to improve the lives of the poor. “I knew I wanted to be a doctor,” Farmer said. “And I convinced her that she should be a doctor, too—which is something I wouldn’t do



as a more mature person, but I was a twenty-three-year-old idiot." Dahl didn't see it that way. "It's weird to use the word 'mentor,' because he also became my boyfriend," she said. "But he was really pretty visionary. Paul said, 'I know how to get there.' And I said, 'Well, I'm coming with you, babe.'

Dahl returned to England to take her A-levels, and Farmer enrolled at Harvard Medical School, but they would reconvene in Haiti, where Farmer continued to volunteer: he often flew there on Thursday nights after he finished classes for the week, and then returned to Cambridge on Monday mornings. The people he worked with had been flooded out of their farmland when a hydroelectric dam was built—water refugees, they called themselves—and were living in a squatter settlement called Cange, where they covered their shacks with banana leaves because they could not afford tin. Most families were afflicted with some kind of illness, in addition to malnutrition. Farmer was outraged that health policymakers did not see these people as worthy of the same standard of treatment as the wealthy. The prevailing idea was that prevention is better than cure—that aid should be focussed on vaccination and education, and that poor people should make do with what they had. "Already the field was polluted by health economists," Farmer said. "When you hear things like 'cost effective' or 'appropriate technology,' they don't come from the patients. Nobody says, 'Hey, I'd really like you to build a cost-effective health-care facility in my squatter settlement.'" It seemed to him that his patients were being penalized by the global-health intelligentsia for being impoverished because of circumstances beyond their control.

Dahl studied science, thinking that she, too, would go to medical school, which delighted her father, who thought of himself as a "frustrated doctor." She joined Farmer in Haiti during summer breaks, and they stayed with Fritz Lafontant, a radical priest who had built the first school in the area. Together, they took a census in Cange, to find out how people lived and what was killing them. "We'd go off every morning at eight and walk for four or five hours on these little paths," Dahl said. "Usually,

there'd be a kid, and they'd run off and find an adult in the field, and we would explain what we were doing. They would open their door and make sure you were in the shade and often offer you some corn or a coconut. No one had fewer than six kids. Everyone had a dirt floor."

Stupid deaths, as the residents of Cange called them, were the norm; children died from diarrheal diseases, because there was no clean drinking water. "We started taking a little felt-tip pen to write a number on the doors so we could start a medical record and come back," Dahl said. With Lafontant, they began to build a health-care system from the ground up. "Years later," Farmer recalled, "I was at Roald's seventieth-birthday party, and he said to me, 'You guys like working in Haiti because you like being big fish in a small pond.' I took umbrage, but he was probably right. And there's a good reason—you can make a big difference in a place where there isn't much."

Dahl raised some money from her parents' friends in London, and bought scales for weighing malnourished infants. Farmer began training locals to recognize the symptoms of TB, malaria, and typhoid. These recruits were the first of many community health workers Farmer and Dahl relied on in remote areas; the Haitians called them *accompagnateurs*. Farmer also taught them to administer medication, a fair amount of which he finagled from Harvard and smuggled over in his suitcase. Crucially, Lafontant worked with an American church group to hire engineers to pipe water from the dammed river into a communal spigot. Almost immediately, the incidence of typhoid decreased. It reminded Dahl of the famous story of John Snow, the doctor in nineteenth-century London who traced a cholera outbreak to a particular pump on Broad Street by conducting a door-to-door census. After Snow persuaded the city council to remove the pump's handle, people stopped dying, thus dispelling the idea that they'd got sick because they were poor and wretched and breathing "bad air."

In Boston, Farmer had befriended a retired construction magnate and Second World War veteran named Tom White, and he brought him to Haiti to see how people were living. White began

donating money for such necessities as concrete floors and tin roofs, and ended up financing the construction of a clinic. "I was twenty at that point—I didn't even have an undergraduate degree," Dahl said. "Paul was a medical student. But we all sort of rolled up our sleeves and did whatever there was to do. We were planting trees on the hillside to try and stop the erosion. We were writing to people, long letters asking for money; driving to Port-au-Prince to pick up tons of things, like cough medicine and bar soap." When the clinic opened, with three examining rooms staffed by Farmer and several Haitian doctors, patients poured in from all over the country—travelling on foot for days to reach them, sometimes carrying sick loved ones on their backs, sleeping outside while they waited their turn for care. "That's how few the options were," Dahl said. "It was tiny, but we left all this rebar sticking out the top because we knew that we would need to build more. The rebar sticking out felt like a beautiful thing, because it said, 'We know this isn't enough, not nearly—but it's what we can do right now.'"

In Cange, Dahl realized that there were ways besides being a doctor to improve the health of the poor. This was reassuring, because she had found that she was interested in science only up to a point. "I loved thinking about life cycles, or mosquitoes and how they're connected to these tropical diseases and how a parasite goes through the liver of a sheep before it's recirculated," she said. "I mean, that stuff—that's literature. That's the poetry of systems." Literature, ultimately, is what Dahl decided to study, at Wellesley College. In Boston, she and Farmer got an apartment together. "We would talk and talk and talk about what it was we were doing," Dahl said. They believed passionately that their aid work was about "redistributive justice," as Farmer put it to Tracy Kidder, who wrote a biography of him. Many development professionals advocated a doctrine of self-reliance, typified by the slogan "African solutions to African problems"—which Dahl and Farmer felt ignored the West's role in creating those problems. "In the affluent world, history gets erased," he told me. "Erasing history is unfair to some people, and it's fine for others. At med school, nobody even talked about these

things." He sighed. "I hope I wasn't uppity and sanctimonious to my classmates, but I probably was."

At Harvard, Farmer met Jim Yong Kim, a young man from a family of South Korean immigrants, who, like him, was pursuing a Ph.D. in anthropology along with a medical degree. With Dahl they formed a trio. "We all read liberation theology together, and Ophelia was sort of a keeper of the faith," Kim, who is now the president of the World Bank, recalled. They were particularly taken with the Peruvian philosopher and priest Gustavo Gutiérrez's conception of a "preferential option for the poor." Because God favors the poor and the powerless, Gutiérrez argued, Christianity should focus on the injustices visited upon the destitute. To Dahl, Farmer, and Kim, it seemed clear that this doctrine applied to health care, too. "The thing about looking for some grand theory, like Marxism or whatever 'ism,' is that a lot of those sort of peter out or are eventually discredited," Farmer said. "It was hard for me to see how you could discredit an injunction to serve poor people preferentially. You don't have to be an epidemiologist to realize that infectious diseases make their own preferential option for the poor—they afflict them more, and worse."

Dahl, Kim, and Farmer drew up a mission statement for what they called "the Project." They would work toward providing health care that prioritized poor people's needs, rather than the cheapest or the easiest intervention. "You don't say, 'When I'm in Boston, I have this one set of standards, and when I'm in Haiti or Rwanda I'm just going to lower the shit out of them,'" Dahl said. Tom White, who had by then decided to systematically divest himself of his wealth, donated a million dollars of seed money. "We were not going to

be a regular self-congratulatory do-gooder organization," Kim said. "We were going to grapple with deep questions of responsibility. Ophelia was the one who could explain to all the people coming around why our approach was different." Dahl had a knack for disarming defensive people and for convincing donors that the world's most fortunate people had a moral obligation to investigate—and compensate

"Namely your unwavering commitment to the poor, your limitless schedule and your massive compassion for others." Farmer didn't speak to Dahl for nine months. Then they ran into each other at a restaurant in Cambridge. "I looked up and I saw him," Dahl recalled, "and there was this recognition—just knowing that you've always known each other, and that we understood why we had to be apart, but hoped not to be apart again."

"I'm still working with all the people I met then who are alive—because they're willing to be involved!" Farmer told me. "The qualities you most need to do this are solidarity and empathy. Those are rare. Ophelia was, and is, exquisitely sensitive to other people's suffering—she gets physically anguished about it. And that's a wonderful thing to have."

In 2013, Partners in Health opened a two-hundred-thousand-square-foot, three-hundred-bed teaching hospital in Haiti—the largest solar-powered hospital in the world. It is in Mirebalais, where Farmer and Dahl first met.



Dahl (bottom) with her parents, Roald Dahl and Patricia Neal.

for—the suffering that underlies their comfort. "If we can't connect our own good fortune with the misfortune of others, then we've missed the boat completely," she often said.

But, soon after the organization came into being, Dahl and Farmer's romance fell apart. In 1989, she sent a letter explaining why she would not marry him. "You pointed out to me once, during an emotional argument, that the qualities I love in you—that drew me to you—also cause me to resent you," she wrote.

The economist William Easterly divides development agencies into two philosophically distinct groups: planners and searchers. In his 2006 book "The White Man's Burden: Why the West's Efforts to Aid the Rest Have Done So Much Ill and So Little Good," he writes that the planner "thinks of poverty as a technical engineering problem" that can be solved with enough money, intelligence, ingenuity, and data. Searchers, by contrast, "are just on the lookout for favorable opportunities to solve problems—any problem, no matter how big or small." The searcher sees that Cange needs a water spigot, or that Kangama needs an ambulance, and starts working to help obtain it. She

may hope that eventually the strategy—and the money—will emerge to provide the entire region or nation or continent with water and ambulances. But she doesn't wait for it.

Especially in the early years, Dahl said, "we adopted this stance that we're not the experts—you tell us how we can accompany you." But, as the clinic in Cange was overwhelmed by demand, it became clear that it was not enough to conduct a neighborhood census: they needed to partner with governments, so that the work they did could be coordinated and sustainable. "If you believe health care is a right, then you have to work with governments, because they are the only group that can confer rights," Dahl said. "Ninety-nine per cent of people, the first thing they ask is, 'What about corruption?' It's an easy nugget to grab on to. There's nothing to be done. Let's sleep now, free from worry." Though P.I.H. won't collaborate with a government that is dictatorial or hopelessly dysfunctional, it expects to have to work around patronage systems. "It's not that we're crazy bleeding hearts that just choose not to see any of this stuff," Dahl continued. "It's just that we don't let it be a showstopper. Imagine if we shut things down whenever there was corruption in the United States: 'Sorry, now you can't have any health care.'" This reasoning reminded her of another common accusation: that white, Western people doing aid work in poor countries are practicing a kind of latter-day colonialism. "It's often used as a not very eloquent excuse to do nothing," she said. "It brings out the worst in one. You feel like saying, 'So what are *you* doing?'"

In 2014, a Sierra Leonean doctor name Bailor Barrie persuaded the country's President to write a letter to P.I.H., asking the group to come to West Africa. Ebola was spreading rapidly, and Barrie knew firsthand how ill-equipped the health-care system was, even before the burgeoning crisis. In 2006, he'd started a clinic in Kono District, to serve the thousands of amputees in the region. Kono, the most diamond-rich area in Sierra Leone, was the base of the rebel army, and thus the region hardest hit by the war. "When I moved to Kono, we went

SHEBA

All that beauty never got me much; strangers laying claim to what they think they recognize, every smile a promise, and most the kind you hope they won't keep. Beauty's an old dog that's too faithful, that sticks with you despite the curses and the kicks. They say it's a mask, but it's the opposite in fact; it reveals what's inside, and everybody wants that sweet cream at the center of a chocolate éclair. What am I now but an old broad with glitter at her temples, scattered in her hair, yet I can't stretch on the bus without staking a claim. All that beauty never got me much but trouble, and a taste for trouble, a folded note, a couple of drinks at the bar.

—Anna Scotti

to the government hospital and there was nothing—no beds, patients were lying on the floor, no doctors, only volunteer nurses," Barrie, a round man of thirty-eight, told me. He started volunteering at the hospital, seeing patients every morning; he'd work the rest of the day at his clinic, Well Body, and sleep there at night.

He had read about the success that Partners in Health had with community health workers achieving early diagnosis and treatment of H.I.V. in remote places, and so he obtained training materials from Joia Mukherjee. "I thought the P.I.H. model in Rwanda and Haiti was great, so we wanted to replicate it." In 2013, he moved to Boston, on a Fulbright Fellowship, to pursue a master's degree in global health at Harvard. "I went back to Sierra Leone to do my research," Barrie said. "And then Ebola struck."

P.I.H. agreed to come to Sierra Leone partly because it was an opportunity to partner with a functional government on a dysfunctional health-care system, and partly because it had an invaluable accomplice in Bailor Barrie. Barrie had wanted to be a doctor since he was six years old, but there was no medical school in Sierra Leone then, and going abroad to get an education was out of the question: his father was a village tailor who earned less than a cent a day. In 1988, the country's first medical school opened, in Freetown, and, when Barrie took the entrance exam, he got the highest marks in the country. He moved to Freetown, and, in 1996, he started school.

But his plan was derailed by the war. When classes began, his mother had recently been captured by the rebels. "We thought she was dead—we had a ceremony and everything," he said. The rebels forced her to work as a cook and a porter, but when she got an infection they left her behind to die. She was found during Barrie's first year of medical school and reunited with her family, but the following year the rebels shot his father, who died soon after. The year after that, they staged a coup in Freetown, and Barrie soon fled to a refugee camp in Guinea, where he remained for eight months. When he heard that the medical school had reopened, he returned, but then had to flee again when the rebels invaded, in a strike they called Operation No Living Thing. It took eight years of stopping and starting before Barrie graduated.

One humid morning in October, Barrie accompanied Dahl and Regan Marsh, the former medical director, on a visit to Well Body. A man named Mani Kanda opened the gate to greet them. His right arm had been amputated at the elbow, and hadn't healed properly. Asked if he had pain in his arm, he said, "Yes—in my good arm, because it does all the work."

Since the Ebola treatment centers closed and P.I.H. has been focussed on the slower task of over-all system building, the organization has been partnering with Barrie at Well Body to create a model clinic for maternal health. Dozens of mothers with babies strapped to their backs waited to have the children weighed and checked.

Dressed in the bright oranges, purples, and blues of traditional fabrics, the women were a blaze of color, except for a few wearing black Islamic robes. (The population of Sierra Leone is divided between Christians and Muslims, who are markedly unconcerned by their differences. They intermarry and attend one another's religious services; Christian families send children to Islamic schools.)

In an open-air pavilion, a group of about fifty pregnant women stood listening to a clinical assistant in green scrubs and Crocs. "If you are sick, don't do country medicine, don't take herbs," she told them in Krio, the country's most common language. "If you don't feel well, come here, where we measure our medicine. Don't go to the mommy who is your neighbor. If you come here, nothing bad will happen to you." Many of the women had had negative experiences, Barrie explained. "There is a lack of trust. In the past, at the government hospital, the clinical staff was yelling at patients. They were always angry, because they never got paid."

The government of Sierra Leone, hoping to reduce the grim levels of maternal mortality, passed a law fining traditional birth attendants who were caught delivering babies in homes. But many women are reluctant to deliver at a clinic or a hospital. "When you go to the clinic for the first time and you don't receive good care, you think, Next time, you know what? I'll go to the traditional healer," Barrie said. "If I pay the small money I have to get to the hospital and they don't have the drugs and I've used my money to pay transport, next time I'll go to the traditional birth attendant who delivered a lot of the babies in the village."

"And if there are no tools and no nurses at the hospital," Dahl added, "the birth attendants may have as much experience as the staff." Well Body employs traditional birth attendants from neighboring communities as support staff. "Women trust the T.B.A.s," Barrie continued. "If they see them here, they feel they can tell them their problems." In the maternity ward, two T.B.A.s in scrubs stood next to an effervescent young nurse from Freetown named N'damba Mansaray. Dahl asked the attendants what they'd

learned to do differently from their training. One attendant explained that she used to take women who were having prolonged labor out into the bush, to give them privacy from the men in their family while they delivered, and that she had cut umbilical cords with razors that weren't sterilized. Asked if there was anything they'd taught the staff at the clinic, the two women grew shy. "They help with the language barrier, and they know how to talk to the patients," Mansaray said. "And I have learned Kono music from them, to sing for my patients when they are in pain!" She started singing, and the other women joined in. Together, they made a sound so enveloping that it was easy to imagine how it might comfort you and transport you during the most frightening moments of a birth. "It means, 'With God, all things are possible,'" Mansaray said.

Once women decide to seek treatment, two major obstacles contribute

to maternal mortality. The first is the time it takes to reach a medical facility. Adjacent to the clinic, P.I.H. built an airy room with mosquito nets over the beds, where women in high-risk groups can stay as their due date approaches. On that day, a teen-age girl and a woman with a spinal abnormality that could make delivery dangerous sat chatting on the stoop, while a cook, an old man in a rain slicker, made groundnut stew over a charcoal fire for their lunch.

The second obstacle is the delay while the staff of a facility makes a decision about treatment—usually whether to perform a Cesarean section—and implements it. "In the United States, decision to incision is about fifteen minutes," Marsh said. "In Sierra Leone, it is not uncommon for a woman to arrive at ten at night and have to wait for a nurse until ten in the morning." One of the first things that P.I.H. did at the hospital to which



"I thought you turned location services off."

Well Body refers difficult cases—after fixing the electricity to keep the lights on overnight—was to set up a twenty-four-hour rotation for staff.

In the clinic, Jonathan Lascher, the executive director of P.I.H. Sierra Leone, joined the group. A thirty-four-year-old Peace Corps veteran from up-state New York, he is a wiry, energetic man, who has gone prematurely “P.I.H. gray” in his hair and beard. “These things are solvable,” he said. “We don’t need Elon Musk to design some cool new innovation for us.” The leading cause of maternal death in Sierra Leone is hemorrhage, which in Western hospitals can be addressed by routine procedures. In America, depictions of the Ebola epidemic often featured startling images of bleeding victims. In fact, most patients did not display hemorrhagic symptoms. The majority of Sierra Leonean women who die in childbirth, however, simply bleed to death.

As a young woman, Dahl imagined that she’d have four children. She ended up having one, at the age of forty-three. “Things don’t go absolutely as planned—and I am in a relationship with a woman, so there’s no accidental pregnancy,” Dahl told a interviewer for PBS several years ago. “Then you feel enormously lucky to be able to go to that kind of trouble to have a child.” Dahl’s partner of nineteen years, Lisa Frantzis, is a senior vice-president at Advanced Energy Economy, an organization that promotes policies to expand clean-power technologies. They live in a stately town house in Cambridge, and one warm afternoon this fall their ten-year-old son, Luke, was climbing a tree in the back yard while Dahl filled a bowl with organic raspberries in the kitchen. She was a little tired, because she’d been out late the previous evening, having dinner with two hedge-fund donors at a nearby restaurant, where she’d helped them select several good bottles of wine. “I’m a sybarite at heart,” she said, popping a berry in her mouth. She took the fruit onto the porch. “Ophelia, can we go to the hardware store later?” her son yelled from the tree. “I need to get a crank.”

“You live with a crank,” she said. He went back to climbing.

When Dahl was helping to found P.I.H., she sometimes explained its mission by saying that its members would treat patients like their own family—that each case deserved the dogged inventiveness a mother would marshal to save her child’s life. “Being visionary isn’t just something you’re born with,” Dahl told me. “We can all do it for our own children.”

In the early nineties, P.I.H. began hearing about a vexing group of tuberculosis sufferers in Lima, Peru. At the time, the Peruvians were thought to have the best tuberculosis program in the world. “They were the darling of the global TB community,” Jim Kim told me. They had dramatically improved cure rates using a protocol called “directly observed therapy” to administer antibiotics. But the patients that P.I.H. was hearing about never got better, no matter how many times they were treated. Their illness was known as multidrug-resistant TB, or MDR-TB.

P.I.H. wanted to start treating the disease, using “second-line” antibiotics, which were more expensive and difficult to procure. Peruvian authorities said that P.I.H. would be expelled from the country if it attempted to do so. Peru was adhering to the recommendations of the World Health Organization, the arm of the United Nations that sets global policy, which had concluded that MDR-TB ought to be left to “run its course,” because it was too difficult to treat. “But ‘Let it burn itself out’ and ‘It’s not as virulent as regular TB’ are just dishonest arguments,” Farmer said. “Honest would be ‘These people are not as important as we are, so let them die.’”

The daughter of an official at the Ministry of Health in Lima became sick, and the man asked if Farmer would treat her with second-line antibiotics. He agreed, and the child got well. “The only reason that we weren’t kicked out of the country is because that Ministry of Health official *whispered* to Paul, ‘Will you treat her?’” Dahl recalled. “He had helped to make that policy: ‘It wasn’t worth it to try and treat.’ But then your own child gets it? And then gets well?”

Tom White, who died in 2011, was again willing to finance a P.I.H. experiment. He paid as much as thirty-five

SHOWCASE

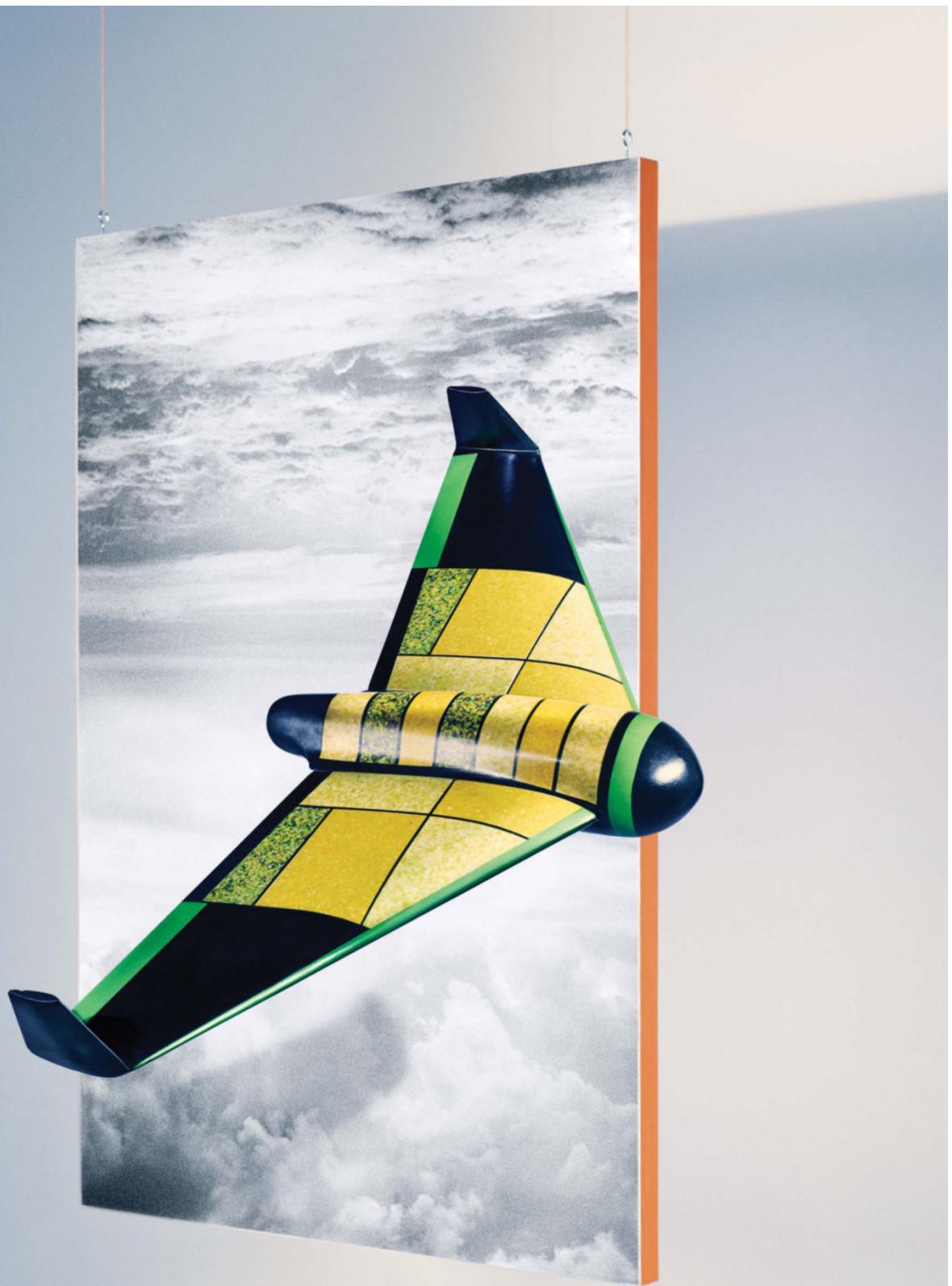
FOOD FLIER

A few years ago, a Royal Air Force wing commander visited the British aeronautics engineer Nigel Gifford, to discuss the idea of dropping aid from the sky to besieged civilians in Syria. Airdrops are extremely rare in urban environments; beyond the political obstacles, there are the logistical difficulties of landing giant pallets in small areas of a city. Even successful drops can endanger civilians. “While unpacking one and a half metric tons of food, you make yourself a very nice sniper target,” Gifford, a seventy-one-year-old former soldier, told me. “So I said to the commander, ‘I wouldn’t do it like that. I would build the aircraft out of food.’”

Now he has done so. The Pouncer, a hundred-and-forty-five-pound edible glider, with a ten-foot wingspan, is designed to be released from a cargo plane as far as sixty miles from its target. The fuselage is packed with grains; the Pouncer’s entire menu is customizable to cultural tastes and sensitivities. According to Gifford, in a complex humanitarian emergency—such as an earthquake in a mountainous area, with many villages but no usable roads—a plane could carry several hundred Pouncers, each programmed with different landing coordinates. The Pouncer has no engine, but its navigation system can adjust the wings to guide it to within twenty-three feet of its target.

The frame has some wooden components, but Gifford intends eventually to replace them with food. “Some parts can be made with a hard-baked, flour-based material that can be soaked in water and added to a meal,” he said. “My wife doesn’t like this, but I wander the supermarket aisles, playing with food, testing for tensile strength.” Dried, vacuum-packed meats show promise as landing gear.

—Ben Taub



thousand dollars a patient for the drugs, which were administered to people in their homes by community health workers. Eighty-three per cent of the patients who took part in the experiment were cured. "So we won that argument," Kim continued. "But then it was: Even if you can do it, the meds cost too much." It occurred to Kim that nobody had bothered to check whether the drugs were off patent. They were. P.I.H. coordinated with several other organizations to get generic versions manufactured in China and India: suddenly, MDR-TB could be treated for ten per cent of the cost.

While P.I.H. was working on tuberculosis in Lima, it was also securing a partnership with Harvard Medical School, where Kim and Farmer had become professors. "We were changing from a grassroots group," Dahl said. "Our evidence had been anecdotal, but if you have academics who are part of the Harvard system woven into P.I.H., then you have the research to substantiate it and say 'It's possible to treat MDR-TB—therefore it must be done.'" Harvard and P.I.H. received a forty-four-million-dollar grant from the Gates Foundation to treat MDR-TB in Peru. "It was one of our first major inflection points as an organization," Dahl said.

In 2002, the World Health Organization amended its policy to acknowledge that MDR-TB should be treated. "I was actually sitting in the room at the W.H.O.," Kim said. "I sent a note around to our colleagues that said, 'Today the world changed.'" (Farmer sees it differently. "Jim is always thinking the world changes because a policy shifts, but I'm around these people who are saying, 'My mother coughed up blood,'" he said. "There are a hundred thousand new cases a year just in China!')

Dahl took over as executive director of P.I.H. in 2001, working out of a room at Harvard Medical School with

eight employees and an annual budget of twelve million dollars. As the group's initiatives grew more ambitious, she had to decide whether to make use of public-sector funding. "It was a wrenching decision," she recalled. For years, P.I.H. had argued that the United States had helped keep impoverished postcolonial nations from advancing, by making loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund contingent on such "structural adjustments" as diverting funds from public health and education to infrastructure. "To then turn around and take the money from the U.S. government felt tricky for us,"

money to revitalize the public sector, because that's where people get care," Joia Mukherjee, the chief medical officer, recalled. "We didn't say, 'To hell with the rules,'" Dahl was quick to interject. "You can go to jail if you spend government money improperly. But we knew if we were going to do this successfully we were going to have to expand the definition of what they meant." Dahl was questioned at one point about using PEPFAR money to drill a well in Haiti. "We said, 'How will they swallow their pills if they don't have any clean water?'" The line item was approved. "Our Haitian colleagues had a term for what we were doing,"

Dahl went on. "*Chwal batay*. It means Trojan horse." Contained within their plan for treating H.I.V. was a plan to treat everything.

"Over thirty years, we may have changed, or gone to new countries, decided that we were going to work with governments—but if you really adhere to our mission, it means that more and more things have to fit on our platform," Dahl said. "This is why we're involved in training, and starting universities, and capacity-building in all kinds of ways." During the fifteen years that Dahl was executive director, P.I.H.'s revenue increased tenfold. "We have often had to fight this idea that P.I.H. is gold-plated," she continued. "You're the Cadillac,' people would say. We're really not. What we're fighting for is spending something like a hundred dollars per person on health. In Boston, it's probably ten thousand dollars!"

In Dahl's kitchen, with its gleaming granite countertops, was a wrought-iron sign that she had salvaged from Gipsy House—a relic of Great Missenden. "I know what it is to have a lovely life," she said. "I know what it is to be able to take Luke to a really good hospital. But, more than that, I know what it is to luxuriate: to plant a tree and assume we'll be able to see it every year. I don't want to not be



Dahl and N'damba Mansaray at a clinic in Kono, Sierra Leone.

Dahl said. "But this is just as AIDS was ravaging Haiti. The physicians there said, 'When you hear the knocking on your door of patients with this disease, which is all we hear, all day . . .' I felt sort of ashamed. Like, oh, my God—what was I thinking?" P.I.H. accepted initial funding of \$2.8 million from the Global Fund and \$3.9 million from the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) under George W. Bush. "But we negotiated to get the money from the C.D.C., rather than through the State Department," Dahl said, and laughed.

Dahl and her co-workers came up with a broad interpretation of what it meant to treat AIDS. "We made a strategic decision—we're going to use that

able to do that, but I don't think it's possible to do without knowing about all the inequity." She shook her head. "The idea that we live in somehow different worlds calms us all: First World, Second World, Third World. It's all one world."

Rising from the low skyline of Koidu, the capital of Kono District, is what appears to be a mountain with its top sheared off but is actually the pile of rubble that has accumulated around Sierra Leone's largest diamond mine. The wealth that has been extracted from it fuelled the civil war, and also paid for the mercenary group Executive Outcomes to help reclaim the land from rebels; the mine now enriches an Israeli businessman named Beny Steinmetz, who was reported by *Forbes* in 2017 to have a net worth of \$1.1 billion. Locals in Koidu have managed to find a way to make money from the mine, though: at all hours of the day, the tower of rubble is crawling with human beings who are mostly too poor to afford shoes, hauling rocks down in empty gas cans or one by one, then cracking them by hand to make gravel that they can sell for pennies. The rubble is its own economy, its own tiny, merciless system.

One evening at dusk, Dahl walked around the mine, past families sorting the gravel they'd made into piles of different-sized stones. She was struck—again—by how it is always the poorest people, with the least access to care, who are the most exposed to injury and illness. "If we got in line together, there's no question about who is always first in that line," she said. She remembered the time she spent at a treatment center during the Ebola epidemic, and what it felt like to know that if she got infected she would be airlifted to one of the best hospitals in the world, while the Africans around her would likely die.

William Easterly, the economist, pointed to a fundamental difficulty with P.I.H.'s approach. "If you've said, 'There's a right to health care,' you haven't said whose obligation it is to provide it," he told me. "From an economist's point of view, that's kind of fatal. That is the major flaw of positive rights: Who is to blame if they're

not met?" A moral imperative is not the same as a financial solution. Regan Marsh, who spent four weeks wearing spacesuit-like protective gear to treat Ebola patients, said that, as P.I.H. was getting involved in Sierra Leone, Dahl handled government agencies with trepidation: "Ophelia was sitting with people saying, 'O.K., we will do this, but we are not a disaster-relief program. We will come only if you say that you are going to stay.' Everyone said, 'Yes, yes, we will be your partner to put a health system in here.' And then, as soon as Ebola appeared to be stabilized, the money evaporated." Dahl told me that you could "hear the sucking sound" as aid was pulled out of West Africa in the wake of the disease. "But, without an effective health-care system, it's a matter of time before it resurfaces."

It was crucial, Dahl said, that during crises people could count on organizations like Médecins Sans Frontières—"I mean, thank God for M.S.F."—to set up self-contained triage units. But it was frustratingly difficult to persuade donors that long-term solutions are as necessary as emergency intervention. M.S.F. receives more than a billion dollars a year from donors, whereas P.I.H. takes in about seventy million. (Both organizations have four-star ratings, the highest, from Charity Navigator.) P.I.H. Sierra Leone started with an annual budget of seventeen million dollars, which has declined to five million, as donations have trailed off. "I wish we had more money," Dahl said. "The idea that we're constrained because we can't find enough money, and not because we've failed to adapt.... But that's what money forces you to do: make a series of terrible tradeoffs."

P.I.H. has had to pull out of one of the two hospitals it supported during Ebola. Koidu Government Hospital, where it has remained, is now the best in Sierra Leone. But, as Dahl put it, "the bar is so incredibly fucking low"—the hospital still doesn't have an intensive-care unit. In Kangama, they're seeing modest gains, which they'd like to extend to four other clinics in the district, but there are thirteen other districts where they can't afford to start reifying systems. Like the first clinic in Cange, built with rebar stick-

ing out, it is not nearly enough; it is what they can do right now.

The next morning, at the Shine On Guesthouse, Dahl was still thinking over the problem, as she had breakfast with Regan Marsh and Jonathan Lascher. "That systems piece gets the hell in the way for people," she said. "People go to sleep when we talk about systems. They switch off! 'Oh, that's too complicated.' When it involves money and companies, it can always be done. Think about the airline industry—which really got going after the Second World War! Can you imagine how complicated it is to run a passenger air system across this world? None of this stuff, if it's related to profits of companies, is too complicated."

I pointed out that the lack of a profit motive is precisely why many people doubt that social justice is even possible. Dahl looked crestfallen. She was silent for a moment and then said, "So that's it?"

"We are never going to convince everyone you *should* care," Lascher said. "But this is why I think it's important that we have people like Paul and Ophelia, who've been doing this for thirty-plus years, who have not shifted their belief that we should continue to push back against that narrative: 'Appropriate technology,' 'African solutions for African problems.' All of the things that have failed poor people over and over again. We have people who believe they can change the system by just doing it, by saying, 'It doesn't matter if you believe that a cholera vaccine is a waste of money. We're going to do it because it's the right thing to do.' And then the World Health Organization—and everybody else—will change their minds."

Thirty years of experience has not made persevering any easier for Dahl. "This work feels more crushing and sadder to me than it's ever felt—you see all the ways in which you've failed to do certain things, even though there's incremental progress," she said. "I am unfailingly optimistic, though. I think to not be optimistic is just about the most privileged thing you can be. If you can be pessimistic, you are basically deciding that there's no hope for a whole group of people who can't afford to think that way." ♦



PROFILES

THE NUMBERS KING

Algorithms made Jim Simons a Wall Street billionaire. His new research center helps scientists mine data for the common good.

BY D. T. MAX

A visit to a scientific-research center usually begins at a star professor's laboratory that is abuzz with a dozen postdocs collaborating on various experiments. But when I recently toured the Flatiron Institute, which formally opened in September, in lower Manhattan, I was taken straight to a computer room. The only sound came from a surranging climate-control system. I was surrounded by rows of black metal cages outfitted, from floor to ceiling, with black metal shelves filled with black server nodes: boxes with small, twinkling lights and protruding multi-colored wires. Tags dangled from some of the wires, notes that the tech staff had written to themselves. I realized that I'd seen a facility like this only in movies. Nick Carriero, one of the directors of what the institute calls its "scientific-computing core," walked me around the space. He pointed to a cage with empty shelves. "We're waiting for the quantum-physics people to start showing up," he said.

The Flatiron Institute, which is in an eleven-story fin-de-siècle building on the corner of Twenty-first Street and Fifth Avenue, is devoted exclusively to computational science—the development and application of algorithms to analyze enormous caches of scientific data. In recent decades, university researchers have become adept at collecting digital information: trillions of base pairs from sequenced human genomes; light measurements from billions of stars. But, because few of these scientists are professional coders, they have often analyzed their hauls with jury-rigged code that has been farmed out to graduate students. The institute's aim is to help provide top researchers across the scientific spectrum with bespoke algorithms

that can detect even the faintest tune in the digital cacophony.

I first visited the Flatiron Institute in June. Although the official opening was still a few months away, the lobby was complete. It had that old-but-new look of expensively renovated interiors; every scratch in the building's history had been polished away. Near the entrance hangs a Chagall-like painting, "Eve and the Creation of the Universe," by Aviva Green. Green's son happened to be spending the year at the institute, as a fellow in astrophysics. "Every day, he walks into the lobby and sees his mother's picture," Jim Simons, the institute's founder, told me.

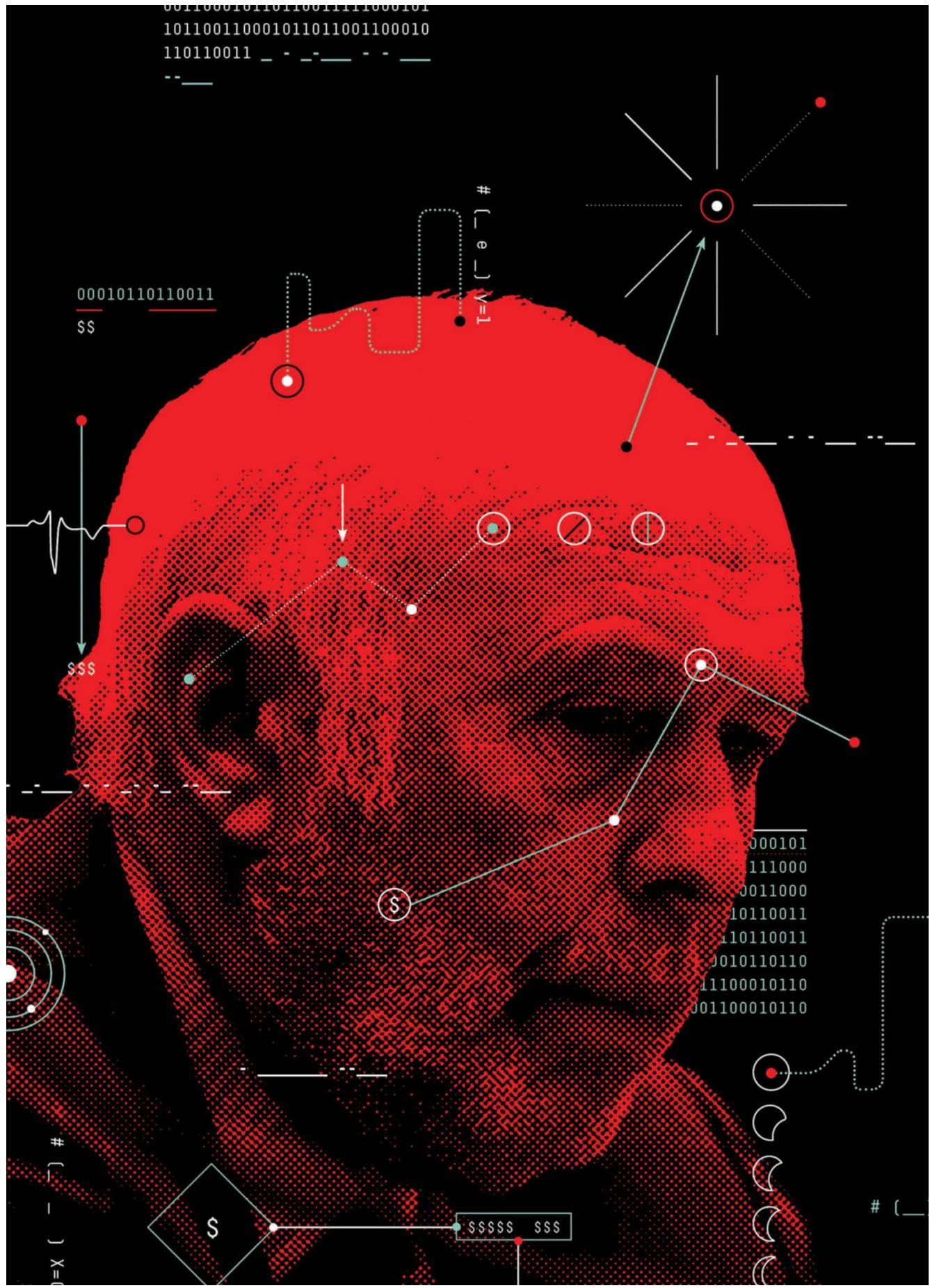
Simons, a noted mathematician, is also the founder of Renaissance Technologies, one of the world's largest hedge funds. His income last year was \$1.6 billion, the highest in the hedge-fund industry. You might assume that he had to show up every day at Renaissance in order to make that kind of money, but Simons, who is seventy-nine, retired eight years ago from the firm, which he started in the late seventies. His Brobdingnagian compensation is a result of a substantial stake in the company. He told me that, although he has little to do with Renaissance's day-to-day activities, he occasionally offers ideas. He said, "I gave them one three months ago"—a suggestion for simplifying the historical data behind one of the firm's trading algorithms. Beyond saying that it didn't work, he wouldn't discuss the details—Renaissance's methods are proprietary and secret—but he did share with me the key to his investing success: he "never overrode the model." Once he settled on what should happen, he held tight until it did.

The Flatiron Institute can be seen as

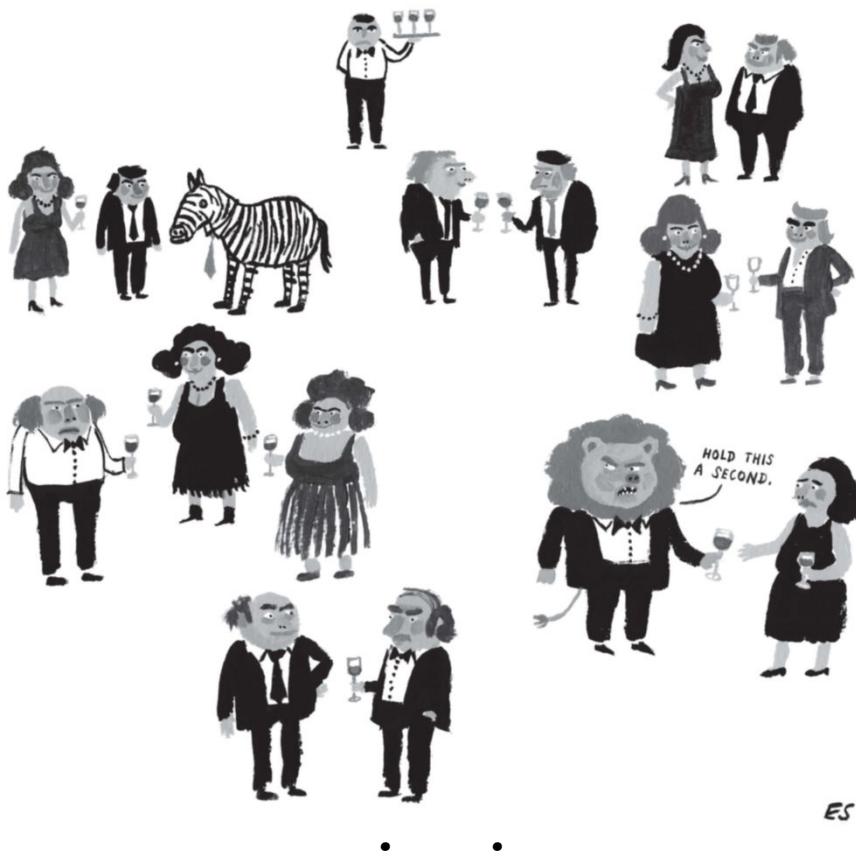
replicating the structure that Simons established at Renaissance, where he hired researchers to analyze large amounts of data about stocks and other financial instruments, in order to detect previously unseen patterns in their fluctuations. These discoveries gave Simons a conclusive edge. At the Flatiron, a nonprofit enterprise, the goal is to apply Renaissance's analytical strategies to projects dedicated to expanding knowledge and helping humanity. The institute has three active divisions—computational biology, computational astronomy, and computational quantum physics—and has plans to add a fourth.

Simons works out of a top-floor corner office across the street from the institute, in a building occupied by its administrative parent, the Simons Foundation. We sat down to talk there, in front of a huge painting of a lynx that has killed a hare—a metaphor, I assumed, for his approach to the markets. I was mistaken, Simons said: he liked it, and his wife, Marilyn, did not, so he had removed it from their mansion in East Setauket, on Long Island. (Marilyn, who has a Ph.D. in economics, runs the business side of the foundation, and the institute, from two floors below.) An Archimedes screw that he enjoyed fiddling with sat on a table next to a half-filled ashtray. Simons smokes constantly, even in enclosed conference rooms. He pointed out that, whatever the potential fine for doing so is, he can pay it.

Simons has an air of being both pleased with himself and ready to be pleased by others. He dresses in expensive cabana wear: delicate cotton shirts paired with chinos that are hiked high and held up by an Indian-bead belt. He grew up in the suburbs of Boston, and



Simons is donating billions of dollars to science. But much of his fortune, long stashed offshore, has never been taxed.



ES

speaks with the same light Massachusetts accent as Michael Bloomberg, with frequent pauses and imprecisions. He sometimes uses the words “et cetera” instead of finishing a thought, perhaps because he is abstracted, or because he has learned that the intricacies of his mind are not always interesting to others, or because, when you are as rich as Simons, people always wait for you to finish what you are saying.

On a wall, Simons had hung a framed slide from a presentation on the Chern-Simons theory. He helped develop the theory when he was in his early thirties, in collaboration with the famed mathematician Shiing-Shen Chern. The theory captures the subtle properties of three-dimensional spaces—for example, the shape that is left if you cut out a complicated knot. It became a building block of string theory, quantum computing, and condensed-matter physics. “I have to point out, none of these applications ever occurred to me,” he told me. “I do the math, they do the physics.”

High-level mathematics is a young person’s game—practitioners tend to do their best work before they are forty—but Simons continued to do ambitious

mathematics well into adulthood. In his sixties, after the death of his son Nick, who drowned in Bali in 2003, he returned to it. “When you’re really thinking hard about mathematics, you’re in your own world,” he said. “And you’re cushioned from other things.” (Simons lost another son, Paul, in a bike accident, in 1996.) During these years, Simons published a widely cited paper, “Axiomatic Characterization of Ordinary Differential Cohomology,” in the *Journal of Topology*. He told me about his most recent project: “The question is, does there exist a complex structure on the six-dimensional sphere? It’s a great problem, it’s very old, and no one knows the answer.” Marilyn told me she can tell that her husband is thinking about math when his eyes glaze over and he starts grinding his jaw.

Our discussion turned to the Flatiron Institute. Renaissance’s computer infrastructure, he said, had been a central part of its success. At universities, Simons said, coding tends to be an erratic process. He said of the graduate students and postdocs who handled such work, “Some of them are pretty good code writers, and some of them are not so good. But then they leave, and there’s

no one to maintain that code.” For the institute, he has hired two esteemed coders from academia: Carriero, who had led my tour, had been recruited from Yale, where he had developed the university’s high-performance computing capabilities for the life sciences; Ian Fisk had worked at CERN, the particle-physics laboratory outside Geneva. Simons offered them greater authority and high salaries. “They’re the best of the breed,” he said. Carriero and Fisk sometimes consult with their counterparts at Renaissance about technical matters.

Simons’s emphasis on what most of us think of as back-office functions is of a piece with the distinctive computational focus of the institute. The Flatiron doesn’t conduct any new experiments. Most of its fellows collaborate with universities that generate fresh data from “wet” labs—the ones with autoclaves and genetically engineered mice—and other facilities. The institute’s algorithms and computer models are meant to help its fellows uncover information hidden in data sets that have already been collected: inferring the location of new planets from the distorted space-time that surrounds them; identifying links to mutations among apparently functionless parts of chromosomes. As a result, the interior of the institute looks less like a lab than like an ordinary Flatiron-district office: casually dressed people sitting all day at desks, staring at screens, under high ceilings.

Simons has amassed the same processing capacity as would normally be present in the computer hub of a mid-sized research university: the equivalent of six thousand high-end laptops. This is powerful, but not ostentatiously so. And, as Carriero conceded, it “cannot be compared to the corporate-wide resources of an Amazon or a Google.” But, because there are far fewer people at the Flatiron Institute, each researcher has immediate access to tremendous computing power. Carriero said that, by supplying scientists with state-of-the-art “algorithms guidance” and “software guidance,” he can help them maintain a laserlike focus on advancing science.

Simons has placed a big bet on his hunch that basic science will yield to the same approach that made him rich. He has hired ninety-one fellows in the past two years, and expects to employ

more than two hundred, making the Flatiron almost as big as the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton, New Jersey. He is not worried about the cost. "I originally thought seventy-five million a year, but now I'm thinking it's probably going to be about eighty," he said. Given that *Forbes* estimates Simons's net worth to be \$18.5 billion, supporting the Flatiron Institute is, in financial terms, a lark. "Renaissance was a lot of fun," he told me. "And this is fun, too."

The Flatiron Institute is part of a trend in the sciences toward privately funded research. In the United States, basic science has traditionally been paid for by universities or by the government, but private institutes are often faster and more focussed, and the world is awash in new fortunes. Since the nineties, when Silicon Valley began minting billionaires, private institutes have sprung up across the country. In 1997, Larry Ellison, the co-founder of Oracle, launched the Ellison Medical Foundation, in the Bay Area, to study the biology of aging. Six years later, the Allen Institute for Brain Science, in Seattle, was founded by Paul Allen, the co-founder of Microsoft. In 2010, Eric Schmidt, Google's executive chairman, founded the Schmidt Ocean Institute, in Palo Alto.

These institutes have done much good, in part by providing alternatives to sclerotic systems: the Allen Institute has helped change how neuroscience is done, speeding it up with such tools as automated microscopy. But private foundations also have liabilities. Wealthy benefactors inevitably direct their funding toward their personal enthusiasms. "The fear with these billionaire donors is that they'll fund junky science, wasting money and time," David Callahan, the editor of the online magazine *Inside Philanthropy*, said. Foundations are not taxed, so much of the money that supports them is money that otherwise would have gone to the government. Scientific mega-donors answer to no one but themselves. Private institutes tend to have boards chosen by their founders, and are designed to further the founders' wishes, even beyond their deaths. Rob Reich, a professor of political science at Stanford University

and an expert on philanthropy, told me, "Private foundations are a plutocratic exercise of power that's unaccountable, nontransparent, donor-directed, and generously tax-subsidized. This seems like a very peculiar institutional and organizational form to champion in a democratic society."

Simons, who, according to *Forbes*, is the twenty-fifth-wealthiest person in America, could easily become the country's largest private funder of basic science. He pays for the institute through what he calls his "domestic nonprofit office," which has an endowment of nearly three billion dollars. He also maintains a much larger charitable entity in Bermuda, the Simons Foundation International. Simons mentioned this foundation to me in conversation, but it has no Web page or public presence. Details about the Bermuda entity were recently obtained by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, and became part of its Paradise Papers project. The investigation revealed that the Simons Foundation International has an estimated eight billion dollars in assets, none of it taxed. It also has a peculiar provenance: in the late seventies, just before Simons started Renaissance, a friend of his parents put a hundred thousand dollars into a trust for him. Simons said of the gift, with a shrug, "He liked me."

Simons intends to draw on the Bermuda fortune to fund his charitable projects as time wears on. "We're spending four hundred and fifty million a year," Simons said. "Gradually, the Simons Foundation International will take over much of the spending."

While I was meeting with him one day in November, the Paradise Papers story was breaking, and he was forced to respond to questions from two newspapers that had the scoop, the *Times* and the *Guardian*. He did not appreciate the papers' implication that he had selfishly avoided paying taxes, and suggested to me an alternate headline: "BRILLIANT MATHEMATICIAN MAKES BILLIONS AND GIVES IT ALL AWAY TO CHARITY." (The *Guardian* described offshore trusts as "ideal vehicles for concealing immense wealth.")

I asked him if he felt that he was taxed fairly. "I pay a hell of a lot of taxes," he said. "Do I think it's my share? Yes." He defended his Bermuda foundation as no different from any other asset. He said, "Suppose you started a company, and you went public and you never sold the shares, and these shares increased and increased in value. You would not be paying any taxes until you sold some of those shares. I wasn't benefitting from it until such time as I would take the money. I think that's a perfectly reasonable thing to do." What went unmentioned was the size of the Bermuda asset.

We also spoke about a recent Senate subcommittee investigation: Renaissance was accused of having used, in the aughts, unethical trading tricks that had lowered its capital-gains taxes by \$6.8 billion. (Renaissance has maintained that it operated within the law.) Simons, who had been the firm's C.E.O. during this period, told me that he hadn't particularly been trying to avoid paying corporate taxes; he'd mostly been trying to insulate the fund's investments from risk. He said of the company's accounting tactics, "It was a way to limit loss, and it was terrific, and also it gave us quite a lot of leverage." He added, "And when I heard it also would qualify us for long-term capital gains, I said, 'O.K., maybe, but that's not what I care about.'" Senator Ron Wyden, of Oregon, the ranking Democrat on the Finance Committee, told me, in an e-mail, "The law is very clear in this area. Renaissance Technologies abused a tax shelter and pocketed billions from it."



The capital-gains matter is now in arbitration, and I asked Simons how much his net worth could be affected. "Modestly," he said. Quickly, he amended his answer: "More than modestly. I mean, it would affect me."

Edward McCaffery, a law professor and a tax-policy expert at the University of Southern California, said, in an e-mail, "Democrats like Simons, Bill Gates, and Warren Buffett might end up giving away all or most of their wealth to charities of their choice, but they and their families still lead lives of great power and privilege, with little tax. And their charities reflect their

values, without necessarily helping ordinary—and taxpaying—citizens.” The taxes from an eight-billion-dollar fortune could fund a lot of schools.

Simons is far more apologetic about the money he makes than about the taxes he avoids paying. “I believe that the division of wealth we have in the United States has been skewed too much, and I think it would be better if it were less skewed,” he said. There was, however, at least one positive outcome to this unfairness. “I’m a beneficiary of all this, but, as for philanthropy and science, I think it’s a very good thing, plain and simple,” he said. “We can go for things that other people can’t.” With only a hint of defensiveness, he added, “Originally, all science was supported by philanthropy. Galileo had his patrons.”

Well, *qué más?*” Simons asked genially.

It was July, and some of the Flatiron Institute’s scientists were giving him progress reports on their activities. That day, it was the astrophysicists’ and the biologists’ turn; soon, the quantum physicists would come. (Their group is so new that its leader was still based in Paris.) The meetings took place, back to back, in a small conference room, with Simons praising and prodding and smoking. Three astronomers detailed their recent work on supernovas, gravitational waves, and dwarf galaxies. Simons peppered them with questions. “Does a black hole typically have a magnetic field?” he asked. (The material that surrounds a black hole generates one, he was told.) He was surprised to learn that astronomers cannot actually confirm the accuracy of their most complex models. Two different computer programs solving the same labyrinthine equation often come up with substantially different answers. Simons objected: “Well, if it’s the same physics in the first place, you’d think that the code would be implementing the laws of physics, and it’s not going to change from program to program!” For all of Simons’s interest in coding, he is not a programmer himself. He thinks algorithmically, but on a whiteboard.

“Ideally, yes,” one of the astronomers reassured him. “But in practice that is not the case.” Another scientist clar-

ified: “The underlying algorithms all are making simplifications. We’re never solving the fundamental equations—we’re always approximating them. And different approximations are made by different algorithms.” Simons, schooled in the ideal world of mathematics, was visibly agitated.

The astronomers filed out, and the biologists filed in. A Russian-born geneticist and computer scientist, Olga Troyanskaya, who is also a professor at Princeton, told Simons about an algorithm she was developing, which would predict the effects of specific mutations within a given cell. She hoped that the program would eventually suggest possibilities for medical treatments tailored to a patient’s DNA. Troyanskaya then went through a list of other projects, at whirlwind speed. She planned to mine the DNA of Neanderthals, to predict how their genes would have been expressed, and her group was also working on an algorithm that linked symptoms of autism to portions of the genome which do not encode proteins.

“So *this* is all you’ve done?” Simons joked.

The next to speak was Dmitri Chklovskii, a neuroscientist whom Simons recruited from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, where he specialized in connectomes, or networks of neurons. He described mapping the connectome of an Italian minnow, a parasite that hatches inside the eggs of other insects. Such studies of simple species can help uncover the complexities of how the human brain computes. Simons perked up when he heard the story of the minnows. “How long do they live?” he asked. When told only five days, he responded, “But five *good* days.”

An applied mathematician named Alex Barnett discussed several programs that the group had developed to analyze neuronal processes. One of the most promising, MountainSort, improves the parsing of brain-electrode recordings, in part by automating the interpretation of the data. The program can tell you, before a rat moves, whether it is thinking of turning right or left. The algorithm used in the program may provide insight into how the brain controls behavior. The institute has

made the software available, without cost, to other labs. Simons smiled when he heard that MountainSort was being adopted by important research groups. “That’s pretty good,” he said. (Chong Xie, a neural engineer at the University of Texas, e-mailed me to say that MountainSort was “by far the best spike-sorting tool we have tested,” and that the speed of data analysis had increased as much as a hundredfold.)

Part of the Flatiron’s brief is to release coding projects such as MountainSort as quickly as possible. Scholarship is similarly fast-paced: in just a few years, Flatiron researchers have authored, or co-authored, more than two hundred and eighty scientific papers. “They’re busy boys!” Simons wrote to me, in an e-mail. (Of the ninety-one fellows at the institute, twenty are women; seven of the nine group leaders are men.)

Marilyn Simons told me that her husband is an “information processor,” adding, “Whatever it is, he’ll chew it up.” Jim Simons told me that he’s more comfortable discussing astronomy than biology, because he understands the presentations better, but he seemed adept at following abstruse discussions in both fields. It was clear that he prefers application to theory, and exchanges that struck me as numbingly detailed often seemed to excite him the most. He and the astronomers spoke at length about how one might design software that could chart the orbits of a billion stars using the fewest possible lines of code. Talk of computer-language efficiency led to a discussion of the Hawaiian language, which makes do with far fewer letters than English.

According to Simons, his governing strategy is to hire brilliant, motivated people and then give them free rein. “Scientists don’t want to be told what to work on,” he said. But his role seemed closer to that of a newspaper editor or a sports coach, persuading, rousing, and sometimes cajoling his team to do better work. Simons has spent his career honing a particular algorithm: how to manage talented researchers in a way that feels both pleasant and creative. “I like to recruit,” he told me. “My management style has always been to find outstanding people and let them run with the ball.” At



GREETINGS, FRIENDS!

BY IAN FRAZIER

A nother Yuletide at the door:
The wreath left on it since before
The Christmas of two-oh-fifteen—
A goodly while ago, I mean—
Is up to date now once again.
And I can yet remember when
I hung it, in a better time
Well antecedent to this rhyme.
So come on in! The light is lit,
The dark still can't encompass it;
A vast supply of grateful gladness,
Above the current badness/madness,
Prompts us to spread good will promiscuous
And warmest greetings all Christmas-cuous!
So, dearest critics, wince away
As I shout-out, this holiday,
The Khizr Khans, that Gold Star clan,
And kind Pope Francis, holy man,
And Meryl Streep and S. E. Cupp—
May all find joy that fills them up!
For Mayor Rahm Emanuel
And Judge Gonzalo Curiel,
May this unskillful doggerel
Renew for them the annual
Season's felicitations!
And to our neighbor nations:
O Canada, I hope you know
The gem you have in your Trudeau;
And Mexico, I promise you
We're not all crazy, just a few.
While lambent beams celestial gleam
Across the continent in streams,
I raise a toast to both O'Donnells,
(Lawrence, Rosie), Mitch McConnell
(Fooled you! NOT!), Mika Brzezinski,
Whoopi Goldberg, Dan Lipinski,
Myeshia Johnson, Charles Lane,
Linc Chafee, and Meghan McCain.
Now I will do my Santa shtick
For Q.B. Colin Kaepernick,
And belt a couple carols with
Josh Norman and Za'Darius Smith.
Such strong good wishes do I bear
For Marshawn Lynch and Jylan Ware
And all the other N.F.L.-ers
(Kneeling, sitting, standing fellers)—
May Christmas bless them, every one!
(Each young enough to be my son.)
Look out! Your bard becomes verklempft.
So let me bring some treats to tempt
Ruth Bader Ginsburg, Joe McQuaid,

The venders who were never paid,
Lisa Belkin, Nikki Haley,
All those who take Xanax daily,
Serge Kovaleski, Penn Jillette,
Ms. Midler (the resplendent Bette),
Snoop Dogg, Chuck Todd, and Charles Blow,
Ruth Marcus and the Navajo.
I find myself in quite a hurry
To say I'm fond of Stephen Curry,
Jemele Hill, and Molly Sims,
Chuck Schumer, with his crazy whims,
Angela Merkel, truly great,
New Jersey, that outstanding state,
NATO, Nordstrom, NBC,
The E.P.A., and E.S.P.
By now the party's getting packed
With others who have been attacked
In Twitter blurts and suchlike places.
Here's Hillary, of course, whose face is
Welcome, as is that of Matt Bai
(Cannot get enough of that guy),
Theresa May, John Oliver,
Adam Schiff, and Katy Tur.
Give further props, while yet we linger,
To Juli Briskman and her finger,
The D.C. Post, the Al Smith dinner,
Alec Baldwin, Emmy winner,
The New Hampshire Union Leader,
Every still remaining reader,
Asylum seekers, Black Lives Matter,
Rep. Frederica Wilson, and her hatter.

Christmas has one thing about it:
C Despite the very worst who tout it,
They can't destroy it. Though they try,
It does outlast them by and by.
Angels flying ever higher,
Singing in the heav'nly choir
"Joy to the World" and "First Noël,"
Can the season's secrets tell:
Love one another, peace is near;
All people will be welcome here.
Thus, good friends, let hearts be merry!
Two-oh-eighteen might bring us very
Different luck than we've had lately—
Fates improving bigly, greatly,
Spirits to protect and guide us,
Inspiration strong inside us,
Clearer vision, wiser choices.
Hear our better angels' voices.

Renaissance, he said, he had sometimes worked on its algorithms (“There are zillions of them!”), and at the Flatiron Institute he occasionally made substantive suggestions. When Olga Troyanskaya began working on the connection between genes and autism symptoms, Simons proposed a tweak to the algorithm that she was developing, to help it map the information more efficiently. “It did,” he told me. Troyanskaya offered to list him as an author on the resulting paper, but Simons prefers to stay out of the spotlight. He politely declined.

For Simons, ideas and money have always been intertwined. His cousin Richard Lourie, a writer, told me a story about their grandfather, who ran a shoe factory: on payday, he let the two boys hold piles of cash “as high as our heads.” Lourie recalled, “We both loved it!” But, at other times, Simons could be so intensely withdrawn that Lourie worried that he was sick. “He would just say, ‘I was thinking,’ ” Lourie told me. In 1955, when Simons was seventeen, he enrolled at M.I.T. and fell in love with mathematics. He received his Ph.D. at U.C. Berkeley, when he was twenty-three. Soon, he was working at the federally funded Institute for Defense Analyses, in its élite cryptography group, which is based in Princeton. “Our job was to break other countries’ codes and to design our own,” Simons said. “I was lucky enough to do some very good mathematics while I was there, and I enjoyed coming up with an algorithm and seeing it tested on a computer. I couldn’t program to save my life, but I did solve a long-standing problem in the field.” (He

could not discuss that work, he said, because it remains highly classified.) He was fired from the I.D.A. in 1968, after telling a *Newsweek* reporter that he opposed the Vietnam War, and that until it was over he would work only on personal projects.

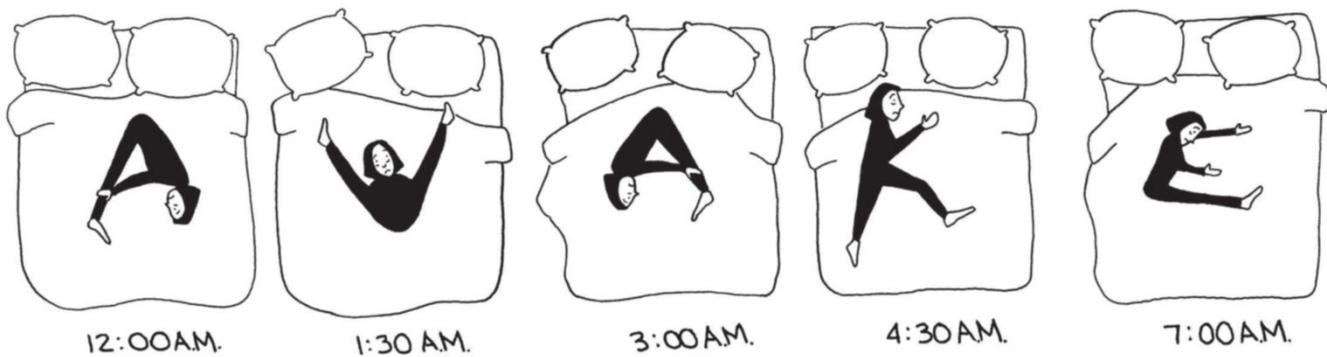
After his departure, Simons was named the head of the math department at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. His chairmanship coincided with the era of Nelson Rockefeller, the ambitious governor of New York, who wanted the school to be the “Berkeley of the East.” Under Simons, the department expanded and gained in prestige. “He already was a combination of ringleader and master of ceremonies and energizer,” Tony Phillips, a mathematician who worked with Simons, recalled. While Simons was at Stony Brook, he won the Veblen Prize, one of America’s top math honors, for work in differential geometry, the study of surfaces and their shapes in multiple dimensions. He also collaborated with Shiing-Shen Chern on the Chern-Simons theory. “Yeah, I was a good mathematician,” he said. “I wasn’t the greatest in the world, but I was pretty good.”

All along, Simons was thinking about how to become rich. While at Berkeley, he bought soybean futures and went to the exchange in San Francisco to watch them being traded. (“They went up!” he said. “And then they went back down.”) In the late seventies, not long after he won the Veblen Prize, Simons founded a small investment firm in an office park near Stony Brook. At the time, he felt stymied by a mathematical problem involving simplexes—a simplex is the polygon with the fewest

vertices in any given dimension—and he wanted a break. He tried his hand at currency trading, and then at commodities, but he didn’t enjoy the experience. It was the investing equivalent of wet-lab work. “It was fundamental trading, not systematic,” he said. “It was very gut-wrenching.” He felt that there must be a more statistical way to make money in the market. “I looked at the price charts and analyzed them, and they didn’t look random to me,” he says. “They looked *kind* of random, but not completely random. I felt there had to be some anomalies in this data which could be exploited.”

He hired another mathematician, whom he’d met at the I.D.A., and they began to create models that predicted the direction of currency prices. Simons told me that he staffed his “crazy hedge fund”—the company that became Renaissance Technologies—not with financiers but with physicists, astronomers, and mathematicians. He also invested heavily in computers and in the people who ran them. “If you’re going to analyze data, it really has to be *clean*,” he said. “Suppose it’s a series of stock prices. $31\frac{1}{4}$, $62\frac{1}{2}$. Wait, stocks don’t double in a day—so there’s an error in the data! There’s all kinds of ways to get bugs out of data, and it’s important, because they can really screw you up.”

He encouraged interaction and debate among the researchers. “Everything was collaboration at Renaissance, or a great deal of it,” he said. “It was a very open atmosphere.” Former colleagues agree that Simons was an exceptional manager. He understood what scientists enjoyed, and often arranged quirky bonding exercises: at one point,



MAGGIE L.

Renaissance employees competed to see who could ride a bicycle along a particular path at the slowest speed without falling over.

Renaissance has had an unprecedented run. *Bloomberg Markets*, in an article last year, called the firm's signature product, the Medallion Fund, "perhaps the world's greatest money-making machine." For nearly three decades, it has gone up by eighty per cent annually, on average, before fees. Renaissance's other, bigger funds have done less well. Simons said that this is a consequence of their size: large amounts of money cannot be traded as quickly, and longer-term trading makes algorithms less useful. "It's like the weather," he says—the nearer in, the higher the certainty.

Simons made his first million dollars by his early forties, his first billion by his sixties. "It was fun making the money," he said. At seventy-one, he retired, turning the fund's management over to two speech-recognition experts whom he'd brought on board in 1993, Peter Brown and Robert Mercer. Simons told me that "language is very predictive," and he foresaw that Brown and Mercer could apply their skills to the markets. In an e-mail, Brown, who is now Renaissance's C.E.O., said, "Jim's genius was in seeing the possibilities for quantitative trading long before others did and in setting up a company in which he provided outstanding scientists with the resources, environment, and incentives to produce." Brown also observed, "His role was more in setting the general direction of the company than in developing the technology."

One thing that Simons did not predict is that Mercer would become one of the most divisive figures in American politics. During the 2016 election cycle, Mercer, a far-right conservative, spent more than twenty million dollars, eventually throwing his weight behind the candidacy of Donald Trump. He is likely the single biggest donor to the alt-right, supplying millions of dollars to Breitbart, the incendiary Web site run by Steve Bannon. Simons described Mercer's current politics as a transformation that has surprised him. "I've talked to him a few times, but he is just very different from me, and I can't change him," Simons said. He added, "I like him."

In October, Simons, who is the non-executive chairman of Renaissance's board, encouraged Mercer to resign from his management position at the firm. Mercer did so. Simons said that the decision was practical, not political. Mercer's growing notoriety was "not so good for morale," he explained. "One of our very best people had just said he was quitting," he noted, and "another of the very best people seemed to be on the verge." Simons checked in with the firm's members recently, and he believes that he got the data he wanted: morale has improved. "I think I was right," he said.

Simons himself contributed twenty-six million dollars in the 2016 election cycle—to liberal causes. He told me that he has always been a Democrat, because of the Party's commitment to the poor. He sees no disconnect in paying the least possible in taxes while supporting a party that would like him to pay more. "I'm happy to be one of the rich folks, but I think government ought to do as much as it can to help ordinary folks get on with their lives," he said. As adept as he is in math, he said that he was mystified by the way rich Americans had mopped up so much wealth in recent decades. "I don't know exactly why such a skewing has occurred," he said. "I'm not an economist, and I haven't studied the question, but it doesn't feel right to me to have that kind of balance—or imbalance." After some reflection, he told me that he would support a rise in the top tax bracket. I could almost hear him running numbers in his head about his net worth. "A rise from forty per cent to fifty per cent would not be a tragedy," he said. "Depending on how the government spends the money."

Although Simons seems determined to give an enormous part of his fortune away, he is not embarrassed to spend lavishly. He has a forty-eight-million-dollar apartment overlooking Central Park, and he owns a sixty-five-million-dollar jet, which he rents to others when he's not using it. (Smoking is permitted on board.) He also has a two-hundred-and-twenty-foot yacht, called the Archimedes, which

he sometimes uses to take his old math friends to extraordinary places. He recently cruised through French Polynesia with two of his Stony Brook colleagues, Jeff Cheeger and Tony Phillips. "Jeff had a bee in his bonnet about Pontryagin classes," Phillips recalled, amused. "It became annoying. He kept wanting to talk about it." Simons told

me that he has done a lot of thinking on yacht trips himself, noting, "I once proved a nice theorem on the boat."



Jim and Marilyn Simons became major charitable donors in the nineteen-nineties, when they launched their foundation. They have funded a math center at Stony Brook, and a center for computer science at Berkeley. The foundation has also given grants—for autism research, for a giant telescope in Chile that will hunt for gravitational waves from the big bang—that are collectively worth two and a half billion dollars. But Simons's role in these projects was relatively limited, and when he retired he found himself spending most of his time managing his charitable assets and evaluating grant applications. During this period, his loved ones sensed that he was less happy. "He likes to work," Marilyn said. Lourie, his cousin, told me, "He would say that he had lots of projects, but no *one* project."

Simons says that he was fine, thank you: he was plenty busy, and wasn't looking for a new job. But he did want to heighten the foundation's impact on the sciences. In 2012, he and Marilyn convened an informal conference at the Buttermilk Falls Hotel, in upstate New York. Participants were asked to identify collaborative, goal-driven projects that were not being funded by other sources. This was a technique that he had often used: tapping the opinions of well-informed people and then making a decision with his gut. "Taste in science is very important," Simons told me. "To distinguish what's a good problem and what's a problem that no one's going to care about the answer to anyway—that's taste. And I think I have good taste."

Simons's intellectual reputation insured that he would have top minds at



"Behind one of these doors is a ferocious tiger. Behind the other is a beautiful lady. There might also be a tiger there, too. I buy so many tigers it's basically become a storage issue at this point."

the meeting. He's not "that billionaire guy," Cheeger said. "He's someone who's a legend in the math community." Chairing the conference was David Baltimore, the Nobel Prize winner and the former president of Caltech. The geneticist Eric Lander was also present, along with a variety of physicists, mathematicians, biologists, and astronomers.

For some participants, the gathering offered an opportunity to pitch ambitious projects to a potential patron. This represented a return to an old way of doing science. In the years before the Second World War, private institutions such as Rockefeller University, in Manhattan, and the Institute for Advanced Study, which was funded by the Bambergers' department-store heirs, came of age. But by the fifties the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and other governmental organizations were paying for the vast majority of scientific research in America. For half a century, the government remained the dominant funder. But in the early aughts federal support began to dwindle, and philanthropy came roaring back, led by Silicon Val-

ley billionaires. In 2015, for the first time since the Second World War, private money, including corporate contributions, provided most of the funding for basic-science research.

Governmental granting organizations, such as the National Science Foundation, tend to give money for incremental research. People with sustained track records are favored; the average age of scientists with a Ph.D. who receive their first grant from the National Institutes of Health is forty-three. Speculative projects are generally avoided. At Simons's gathering, the participants were encouraged to propose projects whose payoff might not be immediate. Baltimore proposed exploring immune-system engineering; an astronomer suggested investigating the dark-matter universe; a paleogeneticist made a case for mapping the human genome's evolution through time.

One scholar in attendance, Ingrid Daubechies, a math professor at Duke, had calculated what type of project Simons might find especially appealing. She knew how he had made his fortune, and she knew that the amount of

data in the science world had exploded. Maybe, Daubechies suggested at the meeting, the foundation should fund not new research but better mechanisms for interpreting existing data. A new research center could "prospect for interesting data sets where people intuit that there's more structure than can be gotten out now, but that aren't so complicated that it's hopeless."

Scientists, Simons knew, were drowning in data. New technologies like optogenetics—using light to activate cells in living tissue—had generated a flood of information about the human brain. Infrared imaging, gravitational-wave detection devices, and radio telescopes relayed a constant stream of data about the cosmos. Researchers often acquired hundreds of terabytes of data in a single experiment. Yet, despite this revolutionary development, Daubechies said, relatively little effort had been made to refine our methods of data computation.

Her proposal resonated with Simons. He returned to New York City, and kept mulling over the idea. "The more I thought about it, the more I liked it," he told me. "And Marilyn liked it." David Baltimore was not surprised when Simons chose Daubechies's project. "I'm a life scientist, but Jim's a mathematician," he said. Daubechies had suggested that the center be situated at Duke, but the Simonses had a different idea: to establish a center near their Manhattan foundation. They asked each other, "Why not do it in-house?"

Simons hopes that the Flatiron Institute will have the expansively creative atmosphere of Bell Labs, the storied offshoot of the telephone monopoly, whose heyday lasted from the mid-forties to the eighties. Researchers there were asked to follow their passions, and the result was eight Nobel Prizes and the invention of the transistor. Simons had a similarly idyllic experience at the Institute for Defense Analyses, where he spent half his time cracking codes and the other half pursuing his own mathematical interests. When setting up Renaissance, Simons told me, he made sure that, despite the extraordinary pressure, his firm was a pleasant and stimulating place to work, with frequent lectures and outings. Peter

Brown, Renaissance's C.E.O., recalled, "Working for Jim, you had the feeling that you had better produce, because he had pretty much removed every excuse for not producing."

Sharing had been an important part of Renaissance's culture. "Everyone knew what everyone else was doing," Simons said. "They could pitch in and say, 'Try that!'" He wants information to flow among groups at the Flatiron Institute, too, so there are plenty of chalkboards in the hallways, and communal areas—coffee nooks, turrets arranged in rows—where fellows can "sit around and schmooze." He observed, "An algorithm that's good for spike sorting—some version of it might conceivably be good for star sorting, or for looking at other things in another field." One day in June, I passed a chalkboard that was covered with an equation written by David Spergel, the head of the astronomy division. It demonstrated that the way a supernova explosion drives galactic winds also captures the behavior of the movement of waves in oceans and, by implication, the movement of fluids in cells.

When I visited the institute this fall, I saw many visualizations of information on computer screens, and they underscored the commonalities among the fellows' data sets. The visual interface of a biology algorithm displayed the balloon-like amino acids of a protein, but they could have been on an astronomer's computer: the image reminded me of planets being born. An elegant pinwheel, designed to map the links among genetic mutations, looked like an old-fashioned representation of a planetary system in orbit. The program allowed you to type in the name of a gene; it then ranked the diseases most closely associated with that gene. The project, which works through machine learning, draws on fifteen thousand gene samples from patients and from laboratory cultures. The hope is to expand the set to millions of gene samples.

I sat down with Christopher Hayward, a young astronomer who has a Ph.D. from Harvard. He was working on a simulation of a crucial cosmological moment, a billion years after the creation of the universe, when smaller galaxies were cohering into larger ones. He showed me a visualization depicting

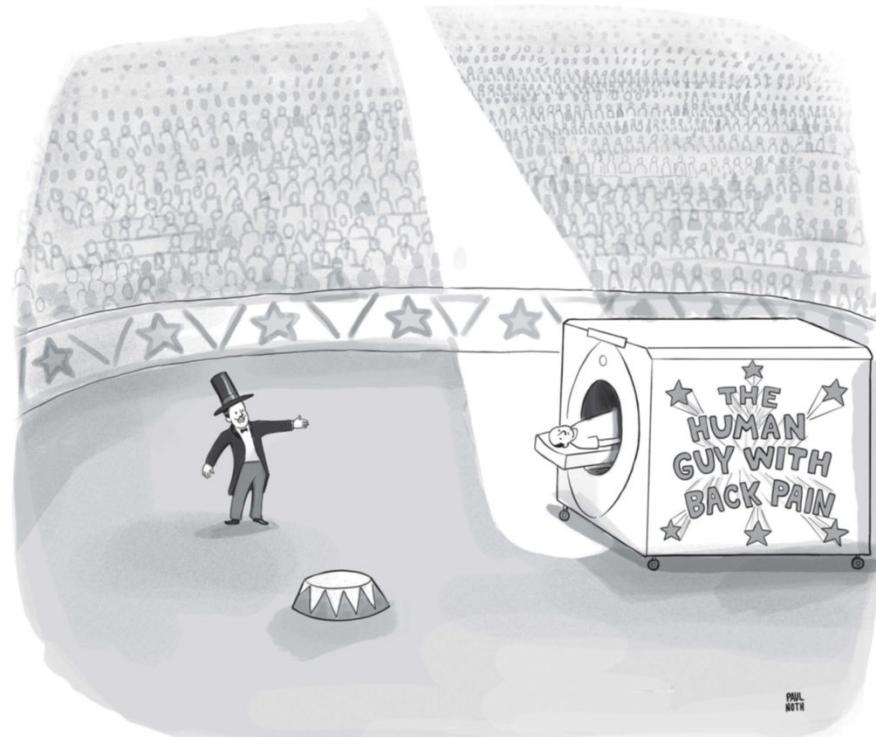
that moment, which included the kind of spinning gaseous orbs that are familiar from any planetarium. Then he clicked on the algorithm behind the visuals: a torrent of incomprehensible digits in the simple typeface of Linux code. The galaxy simulation, Hayward told me, had begun two months earlier, and would continue for another two months, as he and other researchers tried to understand the feedback loop between star formation and black-hole formation. "The unique thing provided by the Flatiron is that I can start a new simulation at any time and start immediately," he said. "Even at Harvard, you're normally waiting in a queue."

Simons told me that in 2013, shortly after the Buttermilk Falls conference, he decided to start a small "in-house group" to explore "the scientific analysis of data." He soon found someone who was "stunningly qualified" to lead the group: Leslie Greengard, who had been the head of the Courant Institute of Mathematical Sciences, at N.Y.U. Greengard had a medical degree, which he had never used, and he wanted to throw himself into problems in biology. How could he do that at a math institute? Simons made him a very attractive offer, and Greengard accepted it. He quickly assembled a group that in-

cluded a systems biologist, a genomics expert, a neuroscientist, and the two coders, Carriero and Fisk.

The group developed a series of software programs, including MountainSort, the program that automates the output from multielectrode recordings, and CaImAn, a machine-learning algorithm that detects the release of calcium in neurons. Simons was so happy with these results that he decided to proceed with the institute. To insure that he got top talent, he offered fellows a fifty-per-cent salary increase and the option to work only three days a week, which would help them maintain a connection to their home institutions, where lab work was done. Spergel, the astronomer, who has tenure at Princeton (and was the runner-up in its most recent selection of a president), immediately began recruiting applicants for a division of twenty people. He told prospects, "You get to shape the direction of computational astrophysics. You will be driving the field if you come here." Of the twelve offers he made to postdoctoral candidates, eight said yes. "We didn't even have a Web page yet!" he said.

In one of its opening gambits, the astronomy group has used high-powered statistical analyses to challenge existing models of the universe. A mapping



project of stars in the Milky Way detected a surprising number of twin stars. This finding suggests that, contrary to what many astronomers believe, dark matter is not made up largely of black holes, because the gravitational power of the black holes would have forced many of the twin stars apart.

When Simons needed to find a leader for the quantum-physics division, he took a similar “Ocean’s Eleven” approach. He held a workshop on the subject and closely observed the participants. One of them, a French physicist whom he had met several years earlier, particularly struck him. “When he opened his mouth to speak, everyone shut up to listen to what he had to say,” he said. “And I was very impressed by that.” The man was Antoine Georges, of the Collège de France. Simons was further excited when he learned of one of Georges’s projects: research into the properties of superconductive materials. Scientists have long dreamed of creating a superconductor that works at room temperature. This might not sound like a computational problem, but it is. Analyzing the electronic properties of materials, particularly synthesized ones, “can require hugely complex algorithms and much computing,” Simons explained. If this breakthrough could be achieved, many of the constraints of engineering would disappear: electricity could travel without loss, and trains that levitate instead of running on tracks would become commonplace. “It would be worth trillions and trillions of dollars in applications,” Simons said.

The Flatiron Institute, Simons likes to say, is “giving everything away,” but the claim sometimes seemed tentative, like an alcoholic pushing away a drink. “No, we’re not in it for the money,” he told me at one point. “Well, money can’t hurt. But, no, we’re *not* in it for the money.” Superconductivity, he admitted, aroused temptation. “If you understand enough about materials, you could possibly crack that problem *and* probably make a lot of money for the foundation,” he told me. Georges, for his part, seemed worried that Simons was overly focussed on an extremely difficult problem. “Such superconduc-

tivity is absolutely not something I want to promise,” Georges told me, explaining that he’d be happy if his computations helped scientists to create a better magnet. Before agreeing to move to the United States, he asked Simons to make a clear commitment to computational science. Simons had the Flatiron’s board pass a resolution guaranteeing to fund the institute for at least fifty years. Georges accepted the offer.

Flatiron Institute researchers don’t have to teach, and they don’t have to apply for grants, which can consume much of an academic’s time. Nearly all the institute’s senior hires come from universities, and most of these universities are nearby, leading to some resentment. “People feel we have so many resources that we’re going to take over the world,” Spergel said. In an e-mail, one competitor complained to Spergel that the Flatiron was “a 1000 pound gorilla,” adding that, of the people he had recently been trying to recruit, all of them had “an offer from you.” Another researcher pointed out that, as powerful as computational science has become, it still relies on the kind of experimental science that the institute does not fund. In an e-mail, the researcher noted, “The predictions from the computation can only ever be as good as the data that has been generated. (I think!)”

Simons’s willingness to pay more than the most élite academic institutions makes many people uncomfortable.

Ray Madoff, who runs the Boston College Law School Forum on Philanthropy and the Public Good, said, “It shows what a lot of people suspected, which is that the wealthy play by their own rules. The rich are running things, and we’re just visiting their world.” It wasn’t so long ago that private foundations could be

established only by an act of Congress, in part because they were considered so inimical to democracy. In 1913, Congress refused John D. Rockefeller’s request to establish his foundation. He had to go to the New York State Legislature for a charter instead.

Uros Seljak, who directs U.C. Berkeley’s department of astronomy and physics, warned that private foundations can

be capricious. “Yes, sure, they have a lot of money and they can put in a lot of money, but they can also take it away and put it somewhere else.” Tom Insel, who led the National Institute of Mental Health for more than a decade, expressed a different worry. “My concern is that the generosity of Jim Simons will let the rest of us off the hook,” he said. “Will we decide that science can be supported as a private endeavor, and forfeit our commitment to use taxpayer dollars for science? Will we forget that science is an investment, not a cost?”

The Simons Foundation has channelled hundreds of millions of dollars into autism research—seventy-five million dollars this year alone. It is no coincidence that the Simonses have a family member who is on the spectrum. And, despite the importance of the research, is it not possible that these millions would be better spent on a different syndrome, either because it affects even more people or because it might be more readily solved? Simons does not think so. He trusts his taste. “We’ve really transformed that field,” he said. Some of the work he has funded, he noted, “has employed a very mathematical approach to finding new genes.”

One afternoon this fall, the heads of the institute’s three divisions sat with Simons at a conference table near his office. All the participants were bald men with glasses, and the conversation was fast, lightly mocking, and remarkably well informed. You felt as though you were in the presence of exceptional minds. Simons looked in his element: he might have been back at Stony Brook or Renaissance.

The men had gathered, in part, to discuss adding a fourth division. Simons asked his lieutenants for suggestions. Spergel suggested computational epidemiology and public health. But was the field, Greengard asked, truly “Flatiron-ready”? Spergel countered that it was an area in which “some smart people could really have an impact.” Simons stepped in to say that, if they couldn’t find someone great to “honcho” a workshop on the topic, they should let it drop for now.

A second prospect was computational neuroscience. A prominent N.Y.U. researcher was already scheduled to make



a presentation at the institute in the winter, but Simons was doubtful. "Neuroscience is this huge field," he said. "I don't know if we can make an important dent in it or not. 'How the brain works' is arguably right up there with 'How is the universe formed?' as a difficult problem." This, too, was put aside.

Next came the geosciences. Simons lit up. He liked the complexity of the problems that needed to be solved. The institute could field-test the idea with a workshop, and it could include atmospheric science and ocean science, so that there was a connection to climate-change research. "My guess is there's room to do good work there," he said. The others cautioned that thousands of researchers were already working on climate change. Simons pushed back: "Well, if you added one person who was a real atmospheric guy, eh, that wouldn't hurt." The others assented. Simons was pleased, if unsurprised, to have got his way. For all his affability, he casts the deciding vote.

On November 3rd, a "bio-geoscientist" from Caltech, John Grotzinger, came to talk to the Simonses, two of the three division heads, the computing chiefs, and a few others. He commented on the difficulty that academia has in getting new telescopes built. "It's not just Caltech," he said. "It's everyone."

Simons mentioned the telescope that he had helped fund in Chile; it will cost him about forty million dollars. "We're putting up this big observatory in the Atacama Desert—it's going to be beautiful," he said. "We're going to study the cosmic microwave background."

"Wow," Grotzinger said.

Grotzinger, who was advising, not seeking a job, elegantly guided the group through the challenges of climate modelling. Many of the problems were familiar to the Flatiron staff. "Most of the data actually gets ignored," Grotzinger explained. And there was a problem of collaboration. He was a specialist in historical climate change—specifically, what had caused the great Permian extinction, during which virtually all species died. To properly assess this cataclysm, you had to understand both the rock record and the ocean's composition, but, Grotzinger said, "geologists don't have a history of interact-



R. CRIS

ing with physical oceanographers." He talked about how his best collaboration had resulted from having had lunch with an oceanographer, and how rare this was. Climate modelling, he said, was an intrinsically difficult problem made worse by the structural divisions of academia. "They will grope their way to a solution probably in the next fifty years," Grotzinger said. "But, if you had it all under one umbrella, I think it could result in a major breakthrough."

Simons and his team were interested. It seemed Flatiron-ready. The scientists asked Grotzinger how many fellows, and how much computing power, such a group would need. Grotzinger estimated that a division would need at least fifty researchers to be effective.

"I would include some programmers," Simons chimed in.

After the meeting, Simons said that

he hopes to have his fourth division in place by next September. I asked him: Why stop there? Why not eight units? Why not Simons University? He had the money, after all. But he insisted that four divisions was all he could handle, if he wanted both first-class work and a collaborative atmosphere. He added that he needed to manage it all, with his "light touch."

Simons understood that, whatever structure he set up, it ultimately needed to function well without his supervision. The foundation had signed a thirty-five-year lease on the institute's building, with an option to renew for fifteen more. As long as the tax laws didn't change dramatically, Simons's fortune could keep the institute going in perpetuity. But humans, he realized, were not machines. "I'm hoping this is going to last a hundred years," he told me. "But I won't see it." ♦



LETTER FROM TALLINN

THE DIGITAL REPUBLIC

Has a tiny post-Soviet nation solved the problems of twenty-first-century America?

BY NATHAN HELLER

Up the Estonian coast, a five-lane highway bends with the path of the sea, then breaks inland, leaving cars to follow a thin road toward the houses at the water's edge. There is a gated community here, but it is not the usual kind. The gate is low—a picket fence—as if to prevent the dunes from riding up into the street. The entrance is blocked by a railroad-crossing arm, not so much to keep out strangers as to make sure they come with intent. Beyond the gate, there is a schoolhouse, and a few homes line a narrow drive. From Tallinn, Estonia's capital, you arrive dazed: trees trace the highway, and the cars go fast, as if to get in front of something that no one can see.

Within this gated community lives a man, his family, and one vision of the future. Taavi Kotka, who spent four years as Estonia's chief information officer, is one of the leading public faces of a project known as e-Estonia: a coördinated governmental effort to transform the country from a state into a digital society.

E-Estonia is the most ambitious project in technological statecraft today, for it includes all members of the government, and alters citizens' daily lives. The normal services that government is involved with—legislation, voting, education, justice, health care, banking, taxes, policing, and so on—have been digitally linked across one platform, wiring up the nation. A lawn outside Kotka's large house was being trimmed by a small robot, wheeling itself forward and nibbling the grass.

"Everything here is robots," Kotka said. "Robots here, robots there." He sometimes felt that the lawnmower had

a soul. "At parties, it gets *close* to people," he explained.

A curious wind was sucking in a thick fog from the water, and Kotka led me inside. His study was cluttered, with a long table bearing a chessboard and a bowl of foil-wrapped wafer chocolates (a mark of hospitality at Estonian meetings). A four-masted model ship was perched near the window; in the corner was a pile of robot toys.

"We had to set a goal that resonates, large enough for the society to believe in," Kotka went on.

He is tall with thin blond hair that, kept shaggy, almost conceals its recession. He has the liberated confidence, tinged with irony, of a cardplayer who has won a lot of hands and can afford to lose some chips.

It was during Kotka's tenure that the e-Estonian goal reached its fruition. Today, citizens can vote from their laptops and challenge parking tickets from home. They do so through the "once only" policy, which dictates that no single piece of information should be entered twice. Instead of having to "prepare" a loan application, applicants have their data—income, debt, savings—pulled from elsewhere in the system. There's nothing to fill out in doctors' waiting rooms, because physicians can access their patients' medical histories. Estonia's system is keyed to a chip-I.D. card that reduces typically onerous, integrative processes—such as doing taxes—to quick work. "If a couple in love would like to marry, they still have to visit the government location and express their will," Andrus Kaarelon, a director at the Estonian Information Systems Authority, says. But, apart from transfers of physical property, such as

buying a house, all bureaucratic processes can be done online.

Estonia is a Baltic country of 1.3 million people and four million hectares, half of which is forest. Its government presents this digitization as a cost-saving efficiency and an equalizing force. Digitizing processes reportedly saves the state two per cent of its G.D.P. a year in salaries and expenses. Since that's the same amount it pays to meet the NATO threshold for protection (Estonia—which has a notably vexed relationship with Russia—has a comparatively small military), its former President Toomas Hendrik Ilves liked to joke that the country got its national security for free.

Other benefits have followed. "If everything is digital, and location-independent, you can run a borderless country," Kotka said. In 2014, the government launched a digital "residency" program, which allows logged-in foreigners to partake of some Estonian services, such as banking, as if they were living in the country. Other measures encourage international startups to put down virtual roots; Estonia has the lowest business-tax rates in the European Union, and has become known for liberal regulations around tech research. It is legal to test Level 3 driverless cars (in which a human driver can take control) on all Estonian roads, and the country is planning ahead for Level 5 (cars that take off on their own). "We believe that innovation happens anyway," Viljar Lubi, Estonia's deputy secretary for economic development, says. "If we close ourselves off, the innovation happens somewhere else."

"It makes it so that, if one country is not performing as well as another country, people are going to the one that is performing better—competitive

The Estonian government is so eager to take on big problems that many ambitious techies leave the private sector to join it.



governance is what I'm calling it," Tim Draper, a venture capitalist at the Silicon Valley firm Draper Fisher Jurvetson and one of Estonia's leading tech boosters, says. "We're about to go into a very interesting time where a lot of governments can become virtual."

Previously, Estonia's best-known industry was logging, but Skype was built there using mostly local engineers, and countless other startups have sprung from its soil. "It's not an offshore paradise, but you can capitalize a lot of money," Thomas Padovani, a Frenchman who co-founded the digital-ad startup Adcash in Estonia, explains. "And the administration is light, all the way." A light touch does not mean a restricted one, however, and the guiding influence of government is everywhere.

As an engineer, Kotka said, he found the challenge of helping to construct a digital nation too much to resist. "Imagine that it's your task to build the Golden Gate Bridge," he said excitedly. "You have to change the whole way of thinking about society." So far, Estonia is past halfway there.

One afternoon, I met a woman named Anna Piperal at the E-Estonia Showroom. Piperal is the "e-Estonia ambassador"; the showroom is a permanent exhibit on the glories of digitized Estonia, from Skype to Timbeter, an app designed to count big piles of logs. (Its founder told me that she'd struggled to win over the wary titans of Big Log, who preferred to count the inefficient way.) Piperal has blond hair and an air of brisk, Northern European professionalism. She pulled out her I.D. card; slid it into her laptop, which, like the walls of the room, was faced with blond wood; and typed in her secret code, one of two that went with her I.D. The other code issues her digital signature—a seal that, Estonians point out, is much harder to forge than a scribble.

"This PIN code just starts the whole decryption process," Piperal explained. "I'll start with my personal data from the population registry." She gestured toward a box on the screen. "It has my document numbers, my phone num-

ber, my e-mail account. Then there's real estate, the land registry." Elsewhere, a box included all of her employment information; another contained her traffic records and her car insurance. She pointed at the tax box. "I have no tax debts; otherwise, that would be there. And I'm finishing a master's at the Tallinn University of Technology, so here"—she pointed to the education

box—"I have my student information. If I buy a ticket, the system can verify, automatically, that I'm a student." She clicked into the education box, and a detailed view came up, listing her previous degrees.

"My cat is in the pet registry," Piperal said proudly, pointing again. "We are done with the vaccines."

Data aren't centrally held, thus reducing the chance of Equifax-level breaches. Instead, the government's data platform, X-Road, links individual servers through end-to-end encrypted pathways, letting information live locally. Your dentist's practice holds its own data; so does your high school and your bank. When a user requests a piece of information, it is delivered like a boat crossing a canal via locks.

Although X-Road is a government platform, it has become, owing to its ubiquity, the network that many major private firms build on, too. Finland, Estonia's neighbor to the north, recently began using X-Road, which means that certain data—for instance, prescriptions that you're able to pick up at a local pharmacy—can be linked between the nations. It is easy to imagine a novel internationalism taking shape in this form. Toomas Ilves, Estonia's former President and a longtime driver of its digitization efforts, is currently a distinguished visiting fellow at Stanford, and says he was shocked at how retrograde U.S. bureaucracy seems even in the heart of Silicon Valley. "It's like the nineteen-fifties—I had to provide an electrical bill to prove I live here!" he exclaimed. "You can get an iPhone X, but, if you have to register your car, forget it."

X-Road is appealing due to its rigorous filtering: Piperal's teachers can enter her grades, but they can't access her financial history, and even a file

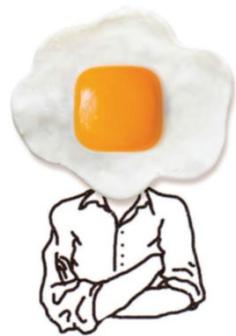
that's accessible to medical specialists can be sealed off from other doctors if Piperal doesn't want it seen.

"I'll show you a digital health record," she said, to explain. "A doctor from here"—a file from one clinic—"can see the research that this doctor"—she pointed to another—"does." She'd locked a third record, from a female-medicine practice, so that no other doctor would be able to see it. A tenet of the Estonian system is that an individual owns all information recorded about him or her. Every time a doctor (or a border guard, a police officer, a banker, or a minister) glances at any of Piperal's secure data online, that look is recorded and reported. Peeping at another person's secure data for no reason is a criminal offense. "In Estonia, we don't have Big Brother; we have Little Brother," a local told me. "You can tell him what to do and maybe also beat him up."

Business and land-registry information is considered public, so Piperal used the system to access the profile of an Estonian politician. "Let's see his land registry," she said, pulling up a list of properties. "You can see there are three land plots he has, and this one is located"—she clicked, and a satellite photograph of a sprawling beach house appeared—"on the sea."

The openness is startling. Finding the business interests of the rich and powerful—a hefty field of journalism in the United States—takes a moment's research, because every business connection or investment captured in any record in Estonia becomes searchable public information. (An online tool even lets citizens map webs of connection, follow-the-money style.) Traffic stops are illegal in the absence of a moving violation, because officers acquire records from a license-plate scan. Polling-place intimidation is a non-issue if people can vote—and then change their votes, up to the deadline—at home, online. And heat is taken off immigration because, in a borderless society, a resident need not even have visited Estonia in order to work and pay taxes under its dominion.

Soon after becoming the C.I.O., in 2013, Taavi Kotka was charged with an unlikely project: expanding Estonia's population. The motive was predominantly economic. "Countries are like



enterprises,” he said. “They want to increase the wealth of their own people.”

Tallinn, a harbor city with a population just over four hundred thousand, does not seem to be on a path toward outsized growth. Not far from the cobbled streets of the hilly Old Town is a business center, where boxy Soviet structures have been supplanted by stylish buildings of a Scandinavian cast. Otherwise, the capital seems pleasantly preserved in time. The coastal daylight is bright and thick, and, when a breeze comes off the Baltic, silver-birch leaves shimmer like chimes. “I came home to a great autumn/to a luminous landscape,” the Estonian poet Jaan Kaplinski wrote decades ago. This much has not changed.

Kotka, however, thought that it was possible to increase the population just by changing how you thought of what a population was. Consider music, he said. Twenty years ago, you bought a CD and played the album through. Now you listen track by track, on demand. “If countries are competing not only on physical talent moving to their country but also on how to get the best virtual talent *connected* to their country, it becomes a disruption like the one we have seen in the music industry,” he said. “And it’s basically a zero-cost project, because we already have this infrastructure for our own people.”

The program that resulted is called e-residency, and it permits citizens of another country to become residents of Estonia without ever visiting the place. An e-resident has no leg up at the customs desk, but the program allows individuals to tap into Estonia’s digital services from afar.

I applied for Estonian e-residency one recent morning at my apartment, and it took about ten minutes. The application cost a hundred euros, and the hardest part was finding a passport photograph to upload, for my card. After approval, I would pick up my credentials in person, like a passport, at the Estonian Consulate in New York.

This physical task proved to be the main stumbling block, Ott Vatter, the deputy director of e-residency, explained, because consulates were reluctant to expand their workload to include a new document. Mild xenophobia made some Estonians at home wary, too. “Inside

Estonia, the mentality is kind of ‘What is the gain, and where is the money?’” he said. The physical factor still imposes limitations—only thirty-eight consulates have agreed to issue documents, and they are distributed unevenly. (Estonia has only one embassy in all of Africa.) But the office has made special accommodations for several popular locations. Since there’s no Estonian consulate in San Francisco, the New York consulate flies personnel to California every three months to batch-process Silicon Valley applicants.

“I had a deal that I did with Funderbeam, in Estonia,” Tim Draper, who became Estonia’s second e-resident, told me. “We decided to use a ‘smart contract’—the first ever in a venture deal!” Smart contracts are encoded on a digital ledger and, notably, don’t require an outside administrative authority. It was an appealing prospect, and Draper, with his market investor’s gaze, recognized a new market for élite tech brainpower and capital. “I thought, Wow! Governments are going to have to compete with each other for us,” he said.

So far, twenty-eight thousand people have applied for e-residency, mostly from neighboring countries: Finland and

Russia. But Italy and Ukraine follow, and U.K. applications spiked during Brexit. (Many applicants are footloose entrepreneurs or solo vendors who want to be based in the E.U.) Because eighty-eight per cent of applicants are men, the United Nations has begun seeking applications for female entrepreneurs in India.

“There are so many companies in the world for whom working across borders is a big hassle and a source of expense,” Siim Sikkut, Estonia’s current C.I.O., says. Today, in Estonia, the weekly e-residency application rate exceeds the birth rate. “We tried to make more babies, but it’s not that easy,” he explained.

With so many businesses abroad, Estonia’s startup-ism hardly leaves an urban trace. I went to visit one of the places it does show: a co-working space, Lift99, in a complex called the Telliskivi Creative City. The Creative City, a former industrial park, is draped with trees and framed by buildings whose peeling exteriors have turned the yellows of a worn-out sponge. There are murals, outdoor sculptures, and bills for coming shows; the space is shaped by communalism and by the spirit of creative unrule. One art work consists of stacked logs labelled with Tallinn



You call this parity?

startups: Insly, Leapin, Photry, and something called 3D Creationist.

The office manager, Elina Kaarneem, greeted me near the entrance. "Please remove your shoes," she said. Lift99, which houses thirty-two companies and five freelancers, had industrial windows, with a two-floor open-plan workspace. Both levels also included smaller rooms named for techies who had done business with Estonia. There was a Zennström Room, after Niklas Zennström, the Swedish entrepreneur who co-founded Skype, in Tallinn. There was a Horowitz Room, for the venture capitalist Ben Horowitz, who has invested in Estonian tech. There was also a Tchaikovsky Room, because the composer had a summer house in Estonia and once said something nice about the place.

"This is not the usual co-working space, because we choose every human," Ragnar Sass, who founded Lift99, exclaimed in the Hemingway Room. Hemingway, too, once said something about Estonia; a version of his pronouncement—"No well-run yacht basin is complete without at least two Estonians"—had been spray-stencilled on the wall, along with his face.

The room was extremely small, with two cushioned benches facing each

other. Sass took one; I took the other. "Many times, a miracle can happen if you put talented people in one room," he said as I tried to keep my knees inside my space. Not far from the Hemingway Room, Barack Obama's face was also on a wall. Obama Rooms are booths for making cell-phone calls, following something he once said about Estonia. ("I should have called the Estonians when we were setting up our health-care Web site.") That had been stencilled on the wall as well.

Some of the companies at Lift99 are local startups, but others are international firms seeking an Estonian foothold. In something called the Draper Room, for Tim Draper, I met an Estonian engineer, Margus Maantua, who was launching the Tallinn branch of the German motion-control company Trinamic. Maantua shares the room with other companies, and, to avoid disturbing them, we went to the Iceland Room. (Iceland was the first country to recognize Estonian independence.) The seats around the table in the Iceland Room were swings.

I took a swing, and Maantua took another. He said, "I studied engineering and physics in Sweden, and then, seven years ago, I moved back to Estonia be-

cause so much is going on." He asked whether I wanted to talk with his boss, Michael Randt, at the Trinamic headquarters, in Hamburg, and I said that I did, so he opened his laptop and set up a conference call on Skype. Randt was sitting at a table, peering down at us as if we were a mug of coffee. Tallinn had a great talent pool, he said: "Software companies are absorbing a lot of this labor, but, when it comes to hardware, there are only a few companies around." He was an e-resident, so opening a Tallinn office was fast.

Maantua took me upstairs, where he had a laboratory space that looked like a janitor's closet. Between a water heater and two large air ducts, he had set up a desk with a 3-D printer and a robotic motion-control platform. I walked him back to Draper and looked up another startup, an Estonian company called Ööd, which makes one-room, two-hundred-square-foot huts that you can order prefab. The rooms have floor-to-ceiling windows of one-way glass, climate control, furniture, and lovely wood floors. They come in a truck and are dropped into the countryside.

"Sometimes you want something small, but you don't want to be in a tent," Kaspar Kägu, the head of Ööd sales, explained. "You want a shower in the morning and your coffee and a beautiful landscape. Fifty-two per cent of Estonia is covered by forestland, and we're rather introverted people, so we want to be—uh, *not* near everybody else." People of a more sociable disposition could scatter these box homes on their property, he explained, and rent them out on services like Airbnb.

"We like to go to nature—but comfortably," Andreas Tiik, who founded Ööd with his carpenter brother, Jaak, told me. The company had queued pre-orders from people in Silicon Valley, who also liked the idea, and was tweaking the design for local markets. "We're building a sauna in it," Kägu said.

In the U.S., it is generally assumed that private industry leads innovation. Many ambitious techies I met in Tallinn, though, were leaving industry to go work for the state. "If someone had asked me, three years ago, if I could imagine myself working for the government, I would have said, 'Fuck no,'" Ott Vatter, who had sold



his own business, told me. "But I decided that I could go to the U.S. at any point, and work in an average job at a private company. This is so much bigger."

The bigness is partly inherent in the government's appetite for large problems. In Tallinn's courtrooms, judges' benches are fitted with two monitors, for consulting information during the proceedings, and case files are assembled according to the once-only principle. The police make reports directly into the system; forensic specialists at the scene or in the lab do likewise. Lawyers log on—as do judges, prison wardens, plaintiffs, and defendants, each through his or her portal. The Estonian courts used to be notoriously backlogged, but that is no longer the case.

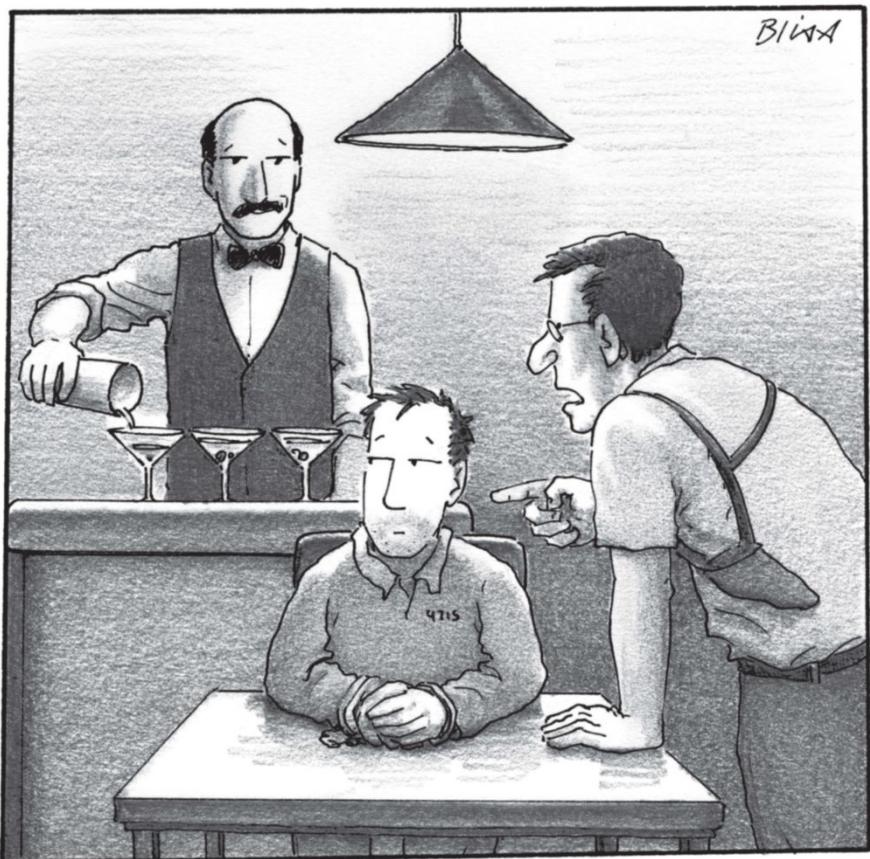
"No one was able to say whether we should increase the number of courts or increase the number of judges," Timo Mitt, a manager at Netgroup, which the government hired to build the architecture, told me. Digitizing both streamlined the process and helped identify points of delay. Instead of setting up prisoner transport to trial—fraught with security risks—Estonian courts can teleconference defendants into the courtroom from prison.

For doctors, a remote model has been of even greater use. One afternoon, I stopped at the North Estonia Medical Center, a hospital in the southwest of Tallinn, and met a doctor named Arkadi Popov in an alleyway where ambulances waited in line.

"Welcome to our world," Popov, who leads emergency medical care, said grandly, gesturing with pride toward the chariots of the sick and maimed. "Intensive care!"

In a garage where unused ambulances were parked, he took an iPad Mini from the pocket of his white coat, and opened an "e-ambulance" app, which Estonian paramedics began using in 2015. "This system had some childhood diseases," Popov said, tapping his screen. "But now I can say that it works well."

E-ambulance is keyed onto X-Road, and allows paramedics to access patients' medical records, meaning that the team that arrives for your chest pains will have access to your latest cardiology report and E.C.G. Since 2011, the hospital has also run a telemedicine system—doctoring at a distance—originally for three



"We have ways of making you talk."

islands off its coast. There were few medical experts on the islands, so the E.M.S. accepted volunteer paramedics. "Some of them are hotel administrators, some of them are teachers," Popov said. At a command center at the hospital in Tallinn, a doctor reads data remotely.

"On the screen, she or he can see all the data regarding the patient—physiological parameters, E.C.G.s," he said. "Pulse, blood pressure, temperature. In case of C.P.R., our doctor can see how deep the compression of the chest is, and can give feedback." The e-ambulance software also allows paramedics to pre-register a patient en route to the hospital, so that tests, treatments, and surgeries can be prepared for the patient's arrival.

To see what that process looks like, I changed into scrubs and a hairnet and visited the hospital's surgery ward. Rita Beljuskina, a nurse anesthetist, led me through a wide hallway lined with steel doors leading to the eighteen operating theatres. Screens above us showed eighteen columns, each marked out with

twenty-four hours. Surgeons book their patients into the queue, Beljuskina explained, along with urgency levels and any machinery or personnel they might need. An on-call anesthesiologist schedules them in order to optimize the theatres and the equipment.

"Let me show you how," Beljuskina said, and led me into a room filled with medical equipment and a computer in the corner. She logged on with her own I.D. If she were to glance at any patient's data, she explained, the access would be tagged to her name, and she would get a call inquiring why it was necessary. The system also scans for drug interactions, so if your otolaryngologist prescribes something that clashes with the pills your cardiologist told you to take, the computer will put up a red flag.

The putative grandfather of Estonia's digital platform is Tarvi Martens, an enigmatic systems architect who today oversees the country's digital-voting program from a stone building

NETFLIX

LIMIT YOUR RESULTS BY:

- JUST RELEASED
- SAD BUT NOT TOO SAD
- HAS MERYL STREEP
- KINDA NEW LIKE EVERYONE ELSE HAS BINGED IT AND I'M JUST A LITTLE BEHIND
- DOES NOT HAVE MERYL STREEP
- SO SCARY I CAN'T REMEMBER HOW SAD I AM
- AT LEAST ONE DOG
- ANIMATED
- VERY OLD I HATE PEOPLE IN MY GENERATION
- NO ONE MORE ATTRACTIVE THAN ME
- FUNNY ENOUGH I PEE A LITTLE BUT DON'T TELL ANYONE
- A LOT OF MURDER
- AT MINIMUM THREE WEEKS' WORTH OF BINGEING I AM DESPERATE FOR DISTRACTION
- SOMETHING THAT RESEMBLES MY LIFE ONLY WORSE
- NO ONE NAMED STEVE
- AT LEAST THREE DOGS
- OLD BUT NOT TOO OLD
- SOMETHING I CAN IGNORE

YOUR RESULTS ARE :



H.F.C.

in the center of Tallinn's Old Town. I went to visit him one morning, and was shown into a stateroom with a long conference table and French windows that looked out on the trees. Martens was standing at one window, with his back to me, commander style. For a few moments, he stayed that way; then he whirled around and addressed a timid greeting to the buttons of my shirt.

Martens was wearing a red flannel button-down, baggy jeans, black socks, and the sort of sandals that are sold at drugstores. He had gray stubble, and his hair was stuck down on his forehead in a manner that was somehow both rumpled and flat. This was the busiest time of the year, he said, with the fall election looming. He appeared

to run largely on caffeine and nicotine; when he put down a mug of hot coffee, his fingers shook.

For decades, he pointed out, digital technology has been one of Estonia's first recourses for public ailments. A state project in 1970 used computerized data matching to help singles find soul mates, "for the good of the people's economy." In 1997, the government began looking into newer forms of digital documents as a supplement.

"They were talking about chip-equipped bar codes or something," Martens told me, breaking into a nerdy snicker-giggle. "Totally ridiculous." He had been doing work in cybernetics and security as a private-sector contractor, and had an idea. When the cards were released, in 2002, Martens became con-

vinced that they should be both mandatory and cheap.

"Finland started two years earlier with an I.D. card, but it's still a sad story," he said. "Nobody uses it, because they put a hefty price tag on the card, and it's a voluntary document. We sold it for ten euros at first, and what happened? Banks and application providers would say, 'Why should I support this card? Nobody has it.' It was a dead end." In what may have been the seminal insight of twenty-first-century Estonia, Martens realized that whoever offered the most ubiquitous and secure platform would run the country's digital future—and that it should be an elected leadership, not profit-seeking Big Tech. "The only thing was to push this card to the people, without them knowing what to do with it, and then say, 'Now people have a card. Let's start some applications,'" he said.

The first "killer application" for the I.D.-card-based system was the one that Martens still works on: i-voting, or casting a secure ballot from your computer. Before the first i-voting period, in 2005, only five thousand people had used their card for anything. More than nine thousand cast an i-vote in that election, however—only two per cent of voters, but proof that online voting was attracting users—and the numbers rose from there. As of 2014, a third of all votes have been cast online.

That year, seven Western researchers published a study of the i-voting system which concluded that it had "serious architectural limitations and procedural gaps." Using an open-source edition of the voting software, the researchers approximated a version of the i-voting setup in their lab and found that it was possible to introduce malware. They were not convinced that the servers were entirely secure, either.

Martens insisted that the study was "ridiculous." The researchers, he said, gathered data with "a lot of assumptions," and misunderstood the safeguards in Estonia's system. You needed both the passwords and the hardware (the chip in your I.D. card or, in the newer "mobile I.D." system, the SIM card in your phone) to log in, blocking most paths of sabotage. Estonian trust was its own safeguard, too, he told me. Earlier this fall, when a Czech research

team found a vulnerability in the physical chips used in many I.D. cards, Siim Sikkut, the Estonian C.I.O., e-mailed me the finding. His office announced the vulnerability, and the cards were locked for a time. When Sikkut held a small press conference, reporters peppered him with questions: What did the government gain from disclosing the vulnerability? How disastrous *was* it?

Sikkut looked bemused. Many upgrades to phones and computers resolve vulnerabilities that have never even been publicly acknowledged, he said—and think how much data we entrust to those devices. (“There is no government that knows more about you than Google or Facebook,” Taavi Kotka says dryly.) In any case, the transparency seemed to yield a return; a poll conducted after the chip flaw was announced found that trust in the system had fallen by just three per cent.

From time to time, Russian military jets patrolling Estonia’s western border switch off their G.P.S. transponders and drift into the country’s airspace. What follows is as practiced as a pas de deux at the Bolshoi. NATO troops on the ground scramble an escort. Estonia calls up the Russian Ambassador to complain; Russia cites an obscure error. The dance lets both parties show that they’re alert, and have not forgotten the history of place.

Since the eleventh century, Estonian land has been conquered by Russia five times. Yet the country has always been an awkward child of empire, partly owing to its proximity to other powers (and their airwaves) and partly because the Estonian language, which belongs to the same distinct Uralic family as Hungarian and Finnish, is incomprehensible to everyone else. Plus, the greatest threat, these days, may not be physical at all. In 2007, a Russian cyberattack on Estonia sent everything from the banks to the media into chaos. Estonians today see it as the defining event of their recent history.

The chief outgrowth of the attack is the NATO Coöperative Cyber Defense Center of Excellence, a think tank and training facility. It’s on a military base that once housed the Soviet Army. You enter through a gatehouse with gray walls and a pane of mirrored one-way glass.

“Document, please!” the mirror boomed at me when I arrived one morning. I slid my passport through on a tray. The mirror was silent for two full minutes, and I backed into a plastic chair.

“You have to wait here!” the mirror boomed back.

Some minutes later, a friendly staffer appeared at the inner doorway and escorted me across a quadrangle trimmed with NATO-member flags and birch trees just fading to gold. Inside a gray stone building, another mirror instructed me to stow my goods and to don a badge. Upstairs, the center’s director, Merle Maigre, formerly the national-security adviser to the Estonian President, said that the center’s goal was to guide other NATO nations toward vigilance.

“This country is located—just where it is,” she said, when I asked about Russia. Since starting, in 2008, the center has done research on digital forensics, cyber-defense strategy, and similar topics. (It publishes the “Tallinn Manual 2.0 on the International Law Applicable to Cyber Operations” and organizes a yearly research conference.) But it is best known for its training simulations: an eight-hundred-person cyber “live-fire” exercise called Locked Shields was run this year alongside CYBRID, an exercise for defense ministers of the E.U. “This included aspects such as fake news and social media,” Maigre said.

Not all of Estonia’s digital leadership in the region is as openly rehearsed. Its experts have consulted on Georgia’s efforts to set up its own digital registry. Estonia is also building data partnerships with Finland, and trying to export its methods elsewhere across the E.U. “The vision is that I will go to Greece, to a doctor, and be able to get everything,” Toomas Ilves explains. Sandra Roosna, a member of Estonia’s E-Governance Academy and the author of the book

“eGovernance in Practice,” says, “I think we need to give the European Union two years to do cross-border transactions and to recognize each other digitally.” Even now, though, the Estonian platform has been adopted by nations as disparate as Moldova and Panama. “It’s very popular in countries that

want—and not all do—transparency against corruption,” Ilves says.

Beyond X-Road, the backbone of Estonia’s digital security is a blockchain technology called K.S.I. A blockchain is like the digital version of a scarf knitted by your grandmother. She uses one ball of yarn, and the result is continuous. Each stitch depends on the one just before it. It’s impossible to remove part of the fabric, or to substitute a swatch, without leaving some trace: a few telling knots, or a change in the knit.

In a blockchain system, too, every line is contingent on what came before it. Any breach of the weave leaves a trace, and trying to cover your tracks leaves a trace, too. “Our No. 1 marketing pitch is Mr. Snowden,” Martin Ruubel, the president of Guardtime, the Estonian company that developed K.S.I., told me. (The company’s biggest customer group is now the U.S. military.) Popular anxiety tends to focus on data security—who can see my information?—but bits of personal information are rarely truly compromising. The larger threat is data integrity: whether what looks secure has been changed. (It doesn’t really matter who knows what your blood type is, but if someone switches it in a confidential record your next trip to the emergency room could be lethal.) The average time until discovery of a data breach is two hundred and five days, which is a huge problem if there’s no stable point of reference. “In the Estonian system, you don’t have paper originals,” Ruubel said. “The question is: Do I know about this problem, and how quickly can I react?”

The blockchain makes every footprint immediately noticeable, regardless of the source. (Ruubel says that there is no possibility of a back door.) To guard secrets, K.S.I. is also able to protect information without “seeing” the information itself. But, to deal with a full-scale cyberattack, other safeguards now exist. Earlier this year, the Estonian government created a server closet in Luxembourg, with a backup of its systems. A “data embassy” like this one is built on the same body of



international law as a physical embassy, so that the servers and their data are Estonian “soil.” If Tallinn is compromised, whether digitally or physically, Estonia’s locus of control will shift to such mirror sites abroad.

“If Russia comes—not when—and if our systems shut down, we will have copies,” Piret Hirv, a ministerial adviser, told me. In the event of a sudden invasion, Estonia’s elected leaders might scatter as necessary. Then, from cars leaving the capital, from hotel rooms, from seat 3A at thirty thousand feet, they will open their laptops, log into Luxembourg, and—with digital signatures to execute orders and a suite of tamper-resistant services linking global citizens to their government—continue running their country, with no interruption, from the cloud.

The history of nationhood is a history of boundaries marked on land. When, in the fourteenth century, peace arrived after bloodshed among the peoples of Mexico’s eastern altiplano, the first task of the Tlaxcaltecs was to set the borders of their territory. In 1813, Ernst Moritz Arndt, a German nationalist poet before there was a Germany to be nationalistic about, embraced the idea of a “Vaterland” of shared history: “Which is the German’s fatherland? / So tell me now at last the land! — / As far’s the German’s accent rings / And hymns to God in heaven sings.”

Today, the old fatuities of the nation-state are showing signs of crisis. Formerly imperialist powers have withered into nationalism (as in Brexit) and separatism (Scotland, Catalonia). New powers, such as the Islamic State, have redefined nationhood by ideological acculturation. It is possible to imagine a future in which nationality is determined not so much by where you live as by what you log on to.

Estonia currently holds the presidency of the European Union Council—a bureaucratic role that mostly entails chairing meetings. (The presidency rotates every six months; in January, it will go to Bulgaria.) This meant that the autumn’s E.U. Digital Summit was held in Tallinn, a convergence of audience and expertise not lost on Estonia’s leaders. One September morning, a car pulled up in front of the Tallinn

Creative Hub, a former power station, and Kersti Kaljulaid, the President of Estonia, stepped out. She is the country’s first female President, and its youngest. Tall and lanky, with chestnut hair in a pixie cut, she wore an asymmetrical dress of Estonian blue and machine gray. Kaljulaid took office last fall, after Estonia’s Presidential election yielded no majority winner; parliamentary representatives of all parties plucked her out of deep government as a consensus candidate whom they could all support. She had previously been an E.U. auditor.

“I am President to a digital society,” she declared in her address. The leaders of Europe were arrayed in folding chairs, with Angela Merkel, in front, slumped wearily in a red leather jacket. “Simple people suffer in the hands of heavy bureaucracies,” Kaljulaid told them. “We must go for inclusiveness, not high end. And we must go for reliability, not complex.”

Kaljulaid urged the leaders to consider a transient population. Theresa May had told her people, after Brexit, “If you believe you’re a citizen of the world, you’re a citizen of nowhere.” With May in the audience, Kaljulaid staked out the opposite view. “Our citizens will be global soon,” she said. “We have to fly like bees from flower to flower to gather those taxes from citizens working in the morning in France, in the evening in the U.K., living half a year in Estonia and then going to Australia.” Citizens had to remain connected, she said, as the French President, Emmanuel Macron, began nodding vigorously and whispering to an associate. When Kaljulaid finished, Merkel came up to the podium.

“You’re so much further than we are,” she said. Later, the E.U. member states announced an agreement to work toward digital government and, as the Estonian Prime Minister put it in a statement, “rethink our entire labor market.”

Before leaving Tallinn, I booked a meeting with Marten Kaevats, Estonia’s national digital adviser. We arranged to meet at a café near the water, but it was closed for a private event. Kaevats looked unperturbed. “Let’s go somewhere beautiful!” he said. He led me to an enormous terraced concrete platform blotched with graffiti and weeds.

We climbed a staircase to the second level, as if to a Mayan plateau. Kaevats, who is in his thirties, wore black basketball sneakers, navy trousers, a pinstriped jacket from a different suit, and a white shirt, untucked. The fancy dress was for the digital summit. “I have to introduce the President of Estonia,” he said merrily, crabbing a hand through his strawberry-blond hair, which stuck out in several directions. “I don’t know what to say!” He fished a box of Marlboro Reds out of his pocket and tented into himself, twitching a lighter.

It was a cloudless morning. Rounded bits of gravel in the concrete caught a glare. The structure was bare and weather-beaten, and we sat on a ledge above a drop facing the harbor. The Soviets built this “Linnahall,” originally as a multipurpose venue for sailing-related sports of the Moscow Summer Olympics. It has fallen into disrepair, but there are plans for renovation soon.

For the past year, Kaevats’s main pursuit has been self-driving cars. “It basically embeds all the difficult questions of the digital age: privacy, data, safety—everything,” he said. It’s also an idea accessible to the man and woman (literally) in the street, whose involvement in regulatory standards he wants to encourage. “What’s difficult is the ethical and emotional side,” he said. “It’s about values. What do we want? Where are the borders? Where are the red lines? These cannot be decisions made only by specialists.”

To support that future, he has plumbed the past. Estonian folklore includes a creature known as the *kratt*: an assembly of random objects that the Devil will bring to life for you, in exchange for a drop of blood offered at the conjunction of five roads. The Devil gives the *kratt* a soul, making it the slave of its creator.

“Each and every Estonian, even children, understands this character,” Kaevats said. His office now speaks of *kratt* instead of robots and algorithms, and has been using the word to define a new, important nuance in Estonian law. “Basically, a *kratt* is a robot with representative rights,” he explained. “The idea that an algorithm can buy and sell services *on your behalf* is a conceptual upgrade.” In the U.S., where we lack such a distinction, it’s a matter of dispute

whether, for instance, Facebook is responsible for algorithmic sales to Russian forces of misinformation. #Kratt-Law—Estonia's digital shorthand for a new category of legal entity comprising A.I., algorithms, and robots—will make it possible to hold accountable whoever gave a drop of blood.

"In the U.S. recently, smart toasters and Teddy bears were used to attack Web sites," Kaevats said. "Toasters should not be making attacks!" He squatted and emptied a pocket onto the ledge: cigarettes, lighter, a phone. "Wherever there's a smart device, around it there are other smart devices," he said, arranging the items on the concrete. "This smart street light"—he stood his lighter up—"asks the self-driving car"—he scooted his phone past it—"Are you O.K.? Is everything O.K. with you?" The Marlboro box became a building whose appliances made checks of their own, scanning one another for physical and blockchain breaches. Such checks, device to device, have a distributed effect. To commandeer a self-driving car on a street, a saboteur would, in theory, also have to hack every street lamp and smart toaster that it passed. This "mesh network" of devices, Kaevats said, will roll out starting in 2018.

Is everything O.K. with you? It's hard to hear about Estonians' vision for the robots without thinking of the people they're blood-sworn to serve. I stayed with Kaevats on the Linnahall for more than an hour. He lit several cigarettes, and talked excitedly of "building a digital society." It struck me then how long it had been since anyone in America had spoken of society-building of any kind. It was as if, in the nineties, Estonia and the U.S. had approached a fork in the road to a digital future, and the U.S. had taken one path—personalization, anonymity, information privatization, and competitive efficiency—while Estonia had taken the other. Two decades on, these roads have led to distinct places, not just in digital culture but in public life as well.

Kaevats admitted that he didn't start out as a techie for the state. He used to be a protester, advocating cycling rights. It had been dispiriting work. "I felt as if I was constantly beating my head against a big concrete wall," he



"Then, after the humans harvest our noses, they liquefy them and drink the juice. They believe it gives them special powers, which they call 'antioxidants.'"

said. After eight years, he began to resent the person he'd become: angry, distrustful, and negative, with few victories to show.

"My friends and I made a conscious decision then to say 'Yes' and not 'No'—to be proactive rather than destructive," he explained. He started community organizing ("analog, not digital") and went to school for architecture, with an eye to structural change through urban planning. "I did that for ten years," Kaevats said. Then he found architecture, too, frustrating and slow. The more he learned of Estonia's digital endeavors, the more excited he became. And so he did what seemed the only thing to do: he joined his old foe, the government of Estonia.

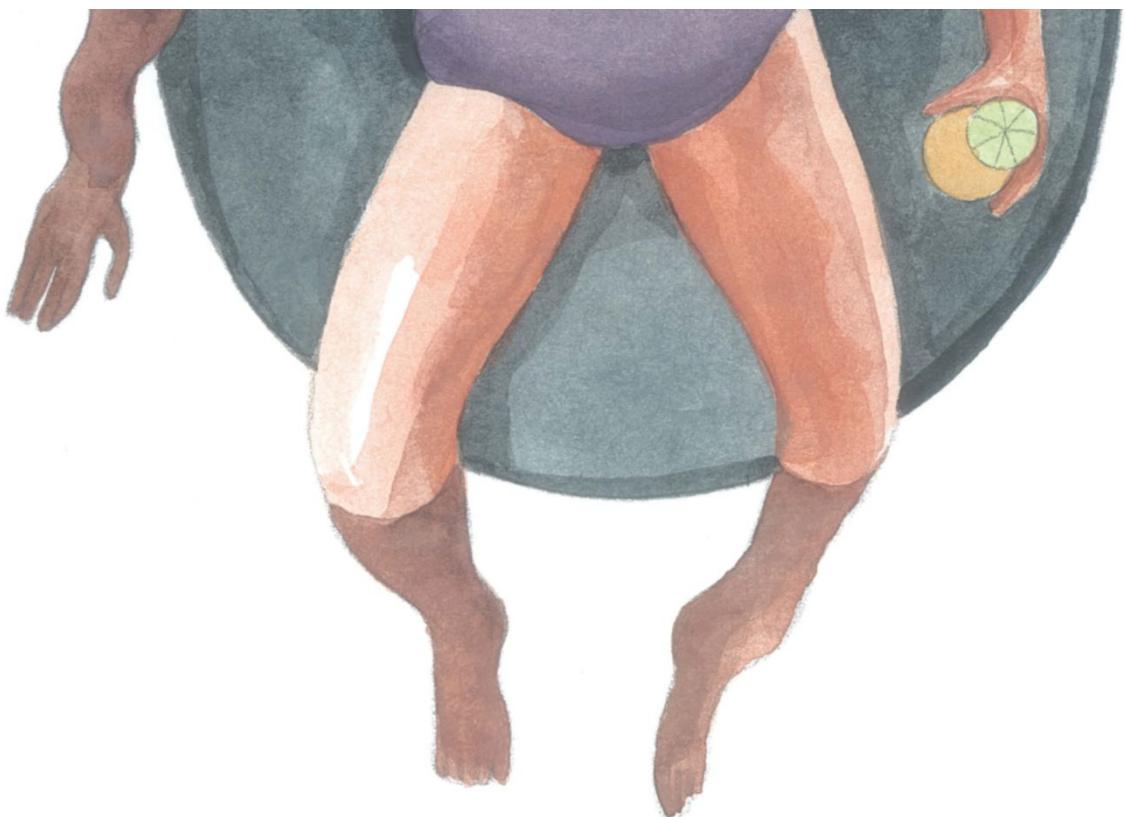
Kaevats told me it irked him that so many Westerners saw his country as a tech haven. He thought they were missing the point. "This enthusiasm and optimism around technology is like a value of its own," he complained. "This gadgetry that I've been ranting about? This is not *important*." He threw up his hands, scattering ash. "It's about the mind-set. It's about the culture. It's about the human relations—what it enables us to *do*."

Seagulls riding the surf breeze screeched. I asked Kaevats what he saw

when he looked at the U.S. Two things, he said. First, a technical mess. Data architecture was too centralized. Citizens didn't control their own data; it was sold, instead, by brokers. Basic security was lax. "For example, I can tell you my I.D. number—I don't fucking care," he said. "You have a Social Security number, which is, like, a big secret." He laughed. "This does not work!" The U.S. had backward notions of protection, he said, and the result was a bigger problem: a systemic loss of community and trust. "Snowden things and whatnot have done a lot of damage. But they have also proved that these fears are justified.

"To regain this trust takes quite a lot of time," he went on. "There also needs to be a vision from the political side. It needs to be there always—a policy, not politics. But the politicians need to live it, because, in today's world, everything will be public at some point."

We gazed out across the blinding sea. It was nearly midday, and the morning shadows were shrinking to islands at our feet. Kaevats studied his basketball sneakers for a moment, narrowed his eyes under his crown of spiky hair, and lifted his burning cigarette with a smile. "You need to constantly be who you are," he said. ♦



The Lazy River Zadie Smith



We're submerged, all of us. You, me, the children, our friends, their children, everybody else. Sometimes we get out: for lunch, to read or to tan, never for very long. Then we all climb back into the metaphor. The Lazy River is a circle, it is wet, it has an artificial current. Even if you don't move you will get somewhere and then return to wherever you started, and if we may speak of the depth of a metaphor, well, then, it is about three feet deep, excepting a brief stretch at which point it rises to six feet four. Here children scream—clinging to the walls or the nearest adult—until it is three feet deep once more. Round and round we go. All life is in here, flowing. Flowing!

Responses vary. Most of us float in the direction of the current, swimming a little, or walking, or treading water. Many employ some form of flotation device—rubber rings, tubes, rafts—placing these items strategically under their arms or necks or backsides, creating buoyancy, and thus rendering what is already almost effortless easier still. Life is struggle! But we are on vacation, from life and from struggle both. We are “going with the flow.” And having entered the Lazy River we must have a flotation device, even though we know, rationally, that the artificial current is buoyancy enough. Still, we want one. Branded floats, too-large floats, comically shaped floats. They are a novelty, a luxury: they fill the time. We will complete many revolutions before their charm wears off—and for a few lucky souls it never will. For the rest of us, the moment arrives when we come to see that the lifeguard was right: these devices are too large; they are awkward to manage, tiresome. The plain fact is that we will all be carried along by the Lazy River, at the same rate, under the same relentless Spanish sun, forever, until we are not.

Some take this principle of universal flow to an extreme. They play dead—head down, limbs limp, making no effort whatsoever—and in this manner discover that even a corpse goes round. A few people—less tattooed, often university educated—make a point of turning the other way, intent upon thrashing out a stroke against the current, never advancing, instead holding their place, if only for a moment, as the others float past. It's a pose: it can't last long. I heard one man with a fashionable haircut say

he could swim the whole length backward. I heard his hipster wife dare him to do it. They had time for such games, having no children. But when he turned and made the attempt he was swept away within the minute.

The Lazy River is a metaphor and at the same time a real body of artificial water, in an all-inclusive hotel, in Almería, somewhere in southern Spain. We do not leave the hotel (except to buy flotation devices). The plan is to beat our hotel at its own game. What you do is you do this: you drink so much alcohol that your accommodation is effectively free. (Only the most vulgar among us speak this plan aloud but we are all on board.) For in this hotel we are all British, we are en masse, we are unashamed. We enjoy one another's company. There is nobody French or German here to see us at the buffet, rejecting paella and swordfish in favor of sausages and chips, nor anyone to judge us as we lie on our loungers, turning from the concept of literature toward the reality of sudoku. One of our tribe, an older gentleman, has a portrait of Amy Winehouse on each shin, and we do not judge him, not at all, how could we? We do not have so many saints of Amy's calibre left to us; we cherish her. She was one of the few who expressed our pain without ridiculing or diminishing it. It is therefore fitting that in the evenings, during the brief spell in which we emerge from the Lazy River, we will, at karaoke hour, belt out her famous torch songs—full-throated, already drunk—content in the knowledge that later, much later, when all of this is over, these same beloved verses will be sung at our funerals.

But karaoke was last night; tonight we have a magician. He pulls rabbits from places, unexpected places. We go to sleep and dream of rabbits, wake up, reenter the Lazy River. You've heard of the circle of life? This is like that. Round and round we go. No, we have not seen the Moorish ruins. Nor will we be travelling into those bare, arid mountains. Not one soul among us has read the recent novel set right here, in Almería, nor do we have any intention of doing so. We will not be judged. The Lazy River is a non-judgment zone. This does not mean, however, that we are blind. For we, too,

saw the polytunnels—from the coach, on the way in from the airport—and we saw the Africans who work here, alone or in pairs, riding their bicycles in the merciless sun, moving between the polytunnels. Peering at them, I leaned my head against the shuddering glass of my window and, as in the fable of the burning bush, saw instead of the Africans a mirage. It was a vision of a little punnet of baby tomatoes, wrapped in plastic. Floating just outside my window, in the almost-desert, among the Moorish ruins. Familiar in aspect, it was as real to me as my own hand. And upon that punnet I saw a bar code, and just above that bar code was written PRODUCT OF SPAIN—ALMERÍA. The vision passed. It was of no use to me or anyone, at that moment, on our vacation. For who are we to—and who are you to—and who are they to ask us—and whosoever casts the first—

It's quite true that we, being British, could not point to the Lazy River on a map of Spain, but it is also true that we have no need to do so, for we leave the water only to buy flotation devices, as mentioned above. True, too, that most of us voted for Brexit and therefore cannot be sure if we will need a complicated visa to enter the Lazy River come next summer. This is something we will worry about next summer. Among us, there are a few souls from London, university educated and fond of things like metaphors and remaining in Europe and swimming against the current. Whenever this notable minority is not in the Lazy River, they warn their children off the endless chips and apply the highest-possible factor of sun cream. And even in water they like to maintain certain distinctions. They will not do the Macarena. They will not participate in the Zumba class. Some say they are joyless, others that they fear humiliation. But, to be fair, it is hard to dance in water. Either way, after eating—healthily—or buying a flotation device (unbranded), they will climb back into the metaphor with the rest, back into this watery Ouroboros, which, unlike the river of Heraclitus, is always the same no matter where you happen to step in it.

Yesterday the Lazy River was green. Nobody knows why. Theories abound. They

all involve urine. Either the color is the consequence of urine or is the color of the chemical put in to disguise the urine or is the reaction of urine to chlorine or some other unknown chemical agent. I don't doubt urine is involved. I have peed in there myself. But it is not the urine that we find so disturbing. No, the sad consequence of the green is that it concentrates the mind in a very unpleasant way upon the fundamental artificiality of the Lazy River. Suddenly what had seemed quite natural—floating slowly in an unending circle, while listening to the hit of the summer, which itself happens to be called "Slowly"—seems not only unnatural but surpassingly odd. Less like a holiday from life than like some kind of terrible metaphor for it. This feeling is not limited to the few fans of metaphor present. It is shared by all. If I had to compare it with something, it would be the shame that came over Adam and Eve as they looked at themselves and realized for the first time that they were naked in the eyes of others.

What is the solution to life? How can it be lived "well"? Opposite our loungers are two bosomy girls, sisters. They arrive very early each morning, and instead of the common plastic loungers used by the

rest of us they manage to nab one of the rare white four-poster beds that face the ocean. These sisters are eighteen and nineteen years old. Their outdoor bed sports gauzy white curtains on all four sides, to protect whoever lies upon it from the sun. But the sisters draw the curtains back, creating a stage, and lie out, perfecting their tans, often adjusting their bikini bottoms to check their progress, the thin line that separates brown stomach from pale groin. Blankly they gaze at their bare pubic mounds before lying back on the daybed.

The reason I bring them up is that in the context of the Lazy River they are unusually active. They spend more time on dry land than anyone else, principally taking pictures of each other on their phones. For the sisters, this business of photographs is a form of labor that fills each day to its limit, just as the Lazy River fills ours. It is an accounting of life that takes as long as life itself. "We both step and do not step in the same rivers. We are and are not." So said Heraclitus, and so say the sisters, as they move in and out of shot, catching the flow of things, framing themselves for a moment: as they are, and as they are not. Personally, I am moved by their industry. No one is paying them for their labor, yet this does not deter them. Like photog-

rappers' assistants at real photo shoots, first they prep the area, cleaning it, improving it, discussing the angle of the light, and, if necessary, they will even move the bed in order to crop from the shot anything unsightly: stray trash, old leaves, old people. Prepping the area takes some time. Because their phones have such depth of image, even a sweet wrapper many yards away must be removed. Then their props are gathered: pink flower petals, extravagant cocktails with photogenic umbrellas protruding from them, ice creams (to be photographed but not eaten), and, on one occasion, a book, held only for the duration of the photograph and—though perhaps only I noticed this—upside down. As they prep, each wears a heartbreaking pair of plain black spectacles. Once each girl is ready to pose, she hands her glasses to her sister. It is easy to say they make being young look like hard work, but wasn't it always hard work, even if the medium of its difficulty was different? At least they are making a project of their lives, a measurable project that can be liked or commented upon. What are we doing? Floating.

A three-minute stroll from the back door of the hotel is the boardwalk, where mild entertainments are offered in the evenings, should we need something to do in the few darkling hours in which the Lazy River is serviced, cleaned, and sterilized. One of these entertainments is, of course, the sea. But once you have entered the Lazy River, with all its pliability and ease, its sterilizing chlorine and swift yet manageable currents, it is very hard to accept the sea: its abundant salt, its marine life, those little islands of twisted plastic. Not to mention its overfished depths, ever-warming temperature, and infinite horizons, reminders of death itself. We pass it by. We walk the boardwalk instead, beyond the two ladies who plait hair, onward a few minutes more until we reach the trampolines. This is the longest distance we have walked since our vacation began. We do it "for the children." And now we strap our children into harnesses and watch them bounce up and down on the metaphor, up and down, up and down, as we sit, on a low wall, facing them and the sea, legs dangling, sipping at tumblers of vodka, brought from the hotel, wondering if



"I gave up my search for an honest man—now I'm trying to find a discontinued toner cartridge."

trampolines are not in the end a superior metaphor to lazy rivers. Life's certainly an up-and-down, up-and-down sort of affair, although for children the downs seem to come as a surprise—almost as a delight, being so outrageous, so difficult to believe—whereas for us, sitting on the wall, clutching our tumblers, it's the ups that have come to appear a little preposterous, hard to credit; they strike us as a cunning bit of misdirection, rarer than a blood-red moon.

Speaking of which, that night there was a blood-red moon. Don't look at me: southern Spain has the highest ratio of metaphor to reality of any place I've ever known. There everything is in everything else. And we all looked up at the blood-red moon—that bad-faith moon of 2017—and each man and woman among us understood in that moment that there is no vacation you can take from a year such as this. Still, it was beautiful. It bathed our bouncing children in its red light and set the sea on fire.

Then the time ran out. The children were enraged, not understanding yet about time running out, kicking and scratching us as we unstrapped them from their harnesses. But we did not fold, we did not give in; no, we held them close, and accepted their rage, took it into our bodies, all of it, as we accept all their silly tantrums, as a substitute for the true outrage, which of course they do not yet know, because we have not yet told them, because we are on holiday—to which end we have come to a hotel with a lazy river. In truth, there is never a good moment. One day they will open a paper or a Web page and read for themselves about the year—2050 or so, according to the prophets—when the time will run out. A year when they will be no older than we are now. Not everything goes round and round. Some things go up and—

On the way back to the hotel, we stop by the ladies who plait hair, one from Senegal and the other from the Gambia. With the moon as red as it is, casting its cinematic light, we can glimpse the coast of their continent across the water from our own, but they did not cross this particular stretch of ocean, because it is even more treacherous than the one between Libya and Lampedusa, by which route they came. Just looking

at them you can tell that they are both the type who could swim the Lazy River backward and all the way round. In fact, isn't this what they have done? One is called Mariatou, the other Cynthia. For ten euros they will plait hair in cane rows or Senegalese twists or high-ridged Dutch braids. In our party, three want their hair done; the ladies get to work. The men are in the polytunnels. The tomatoes are in the supermarket. The moon is in the sky. The Brits are leaving Europe. We are on a "getaway." We still believe in getaways. "It is hard in Spain," Mariatou says, in answer to our queries. "Very hard." "To live well?" Cynthia adds, pulling our daughter's hair, making her yelp. "Is not easy."

By the time we reach the gates of the hotel all is dark. A pair of identical twins, Rico and Rocco, in their twenties, with oily black curls and skinny white jeans—twin iPhones wedged in their tight pockets—have just finished their act and are packing up their boom box. "We come runner-up 'X Factor' Spain," they say, in answer to our queries. "We are Tunisia for birth but now we are Spain." We wish them well and good night, and divert our children's eyes from the obscene bulge of those iPhones, the existence of which we have decided not to reveal to them for many years, or at least until they are twelve. At the elevators, we separate from our friends and their children and ascend to our room, which is the same as their room and everybody's room, and put the children to bed and sit on the balcony with our laptops and our phones, where we look up his Twitter, as we have every night since January. Here and there, on other balconies, we spot other men and women on other loungers with other devices, engaged in much the same routine. Down below, the Lazy River runs, a neon blue, a crazy blue, a Facebook blue. In it stands a fully clothed man armed with a long mop—he is being held in place by another man, who grips him by the waist, so that the first man may angle his mop and position himself against the strong yet somniferous current and clean whatever scum we have left of ourselves off the sides. ♦

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Zadie Smith on Brexit.



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THE CRITICS



THE CURRENT CINEMA

PAPER CHASE

"The Post."

BY ANTHONY LANE

The new film by Steven Spielberg, “The Post,” begins in the jungle, shifts to Washington, and defies us to tell the difference. Courtrooms, boardrooms, nicely decorated drawing rooms, and newsrooms furnished with little more than telephones and smoke: they all feel cocked and combat-ready, and every deadline looms like an ambush. With Spielberg in command, almost nothing is allowed to soothe the tension. If a great white shark swam by, it would be told to move on.

“Who’s the longhair?” So one soldier says to another, as they prepare to head into a dark Vietnamese forest, in 1966. The guy with the frizz is Daniel Ellsberg (Matthew Rhys), who is employed by the RAND Corporation and embedded with U.S. troops. On the plane back to America, he is summoned by the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara (Bruce Greenwood), and asked, straight out, for his opinion on the war: “Are things better or worse?” Much the same, Ellsberg replies, and an exasperated McNamara agrees. But that is not what he tells the press, who have assembled on the tarmac to hear his views. “In every respect, we’re making progress,” he says. Greenwood has perfected the McNamara smile—long and curved, like a scythe.

The movie, written by Liz Hannah and Josh Singer, sprouts from this rift between the true state of affairs and the alternative facts that are presented to the public. As is common knowledge, it was Ellsberg’s conscience about the rift that led him to steal—or, if you prefer, to liberate—a hulking stash of incriminating documents, which came to

be called the Pentagon Papers. In case the knowledge isn’t *that* common, however, especially among younger viewers, the words “Top Secret—Sensitive” are visible on the files that Ellsberg plucks from a drawer one night. We also get a potted history of American involvement in Southeast Asia, from Truman to Johnson. Spielberg remains a sworn foe of narrative confusion, and, as for potting, nobody does it better.

Among the audience for “The Post” will be a faction that chafes at the title and believes, not without cause, that it should be “The Times.” One problem with any heist is what to do with the loot, and it was to Neil Sheehan—then a correspondent for the *Times*, and later the author of “A Bright Shining Lie” (1988), one of the indispensable books on Vietnam—that Ellsberg wisely went. His move was understandable, given the reach and the resources of the paper, but, in Spielberg’s film, it annoys the hell out of Ben Bradlee (Tom Hanks), the editor of the *Washington Post*, who, sniffing a scoop, fishes forty bucks from his wallet and tells an intern to catch a train to New York, with instructions to snoop around and work out where the smell is coming from. Sure enough, the *Times* breaks the news, casting grave aspersions upon governments old and new, while the *Post* is left to lead with a triumphant splash on the wedding of Tricia Nixon.

Hanks does a lot with Bradlee—more than you’d expect, given the twin obstacles that he has to surmount. The first is Bradlee himself, the unassailable star of his own life, which bore the shape and the shine of a golden-

age motion picture; how do you match that? The second is Jason Robards, who won an Oscar for his portrayal of Bradlee in “All the President’s Men” (1976), and showed a generation of men how to park their feet on a table. There was a time when only cowboys could do that, with a clink of spurs; now it was a Beltway Brahmin in a striped shirt. Robards also patented a kind of growling drawl—a grawl, so to speak—that Hanks is too smart to mimic. His Bradlee comes with a snap and a hint of a snarl, ditching the languor for the sake of impatience, and his trademark pose is a doughty crossing of the arms. One writer, who has requested two whole days to get a piece together, is briskly reminded that he is a reporter and not a novelist. Somebody else describes Bradlee as a pirate. Hence the gleeful—and, to be honest, very Hanksian—moment when, under siege from every angle, he ducks sideways and says to his assistant, “My God, the fun.”

The glee is not entirely shared by his boss, Katharine Graham (Meryl Streep), who, since her husband’s suicide, has been the sole proprietor of the *Post*, and whose default condition, for a while, appears to be one notch up from a tizzy. We first see her waking up, with a start, in a bed strewn with papers and books; entering a restaurant, she knocks over a chair; now and then, she has to take puffy little breaths, like a reluctant swimmer nervously herself at the pool’s edge. Not that you can blame her, for the water is infested with men. As a woman, even a wealthy one, she is all but alone in a hostile or, at best, a condescending world. The story



*Tom Hanks and Meryl Streep star as Ben Bradlee and Katharine Graham in Steven Spielberg's *Pentagon Papers* film.*

is set just as her newspaper is about to go public on the stock market, in a bid to raise capital, and there's a wonderful shot of a door swinging wide to admit her to the meeting at which the share price will be agreed. There, before her, is a thick male swarm, uniformly clad in dark suits. Politely, they part to make way for her, and yet, at some level, she is no more welcome here than she would be in the innermost chambers of the Vatican.

Streep, needless to say, is biding her time. No actress is more adept at pacing a performance, and everything in "The Post" gathers force and narrows to a point—to a closeup of Mrs. Graham, on the phone, under multiple pressures. What's happened is this: the Nixon Administration, in a show of undemocratic muscle not seen since the previous century, has brought an injunction against the *Times*, compelling it to halt publication of the Pentagon Papers; Bradlee, sensing his chance, has grabbed it with his customary flourish; one of his stalwarts, Ben Bagdikian (Bob Odenkirk), has met with Ellsberg and collared a hoard of classified material (around which his colleagues cluster, like the Goonies inspecting a treasure map); after a storm of editing, the pages are made up and ready to go; so what, pray, would Mrs. Graham care to do? Streep goes into a superbly controlled cadenza of ums, ers, and agonizing aahs. Suddenly, her face clears. "Let's publish," she says. Even then, we get a last-minute hitch. By feeding from the same source—Ellsberg—that the *Times* employed, the *Post* is risking contempt of court, and its lawyers, who fear reprisals from on high, advise severely against going to print. Board members, with a stock issue at stake, are no less fretful. "We can't let her do this," one of them says. Like hell they can't. Midnight strikes. The ditherer decides. The suits are trounced. The presses roll.

The scene is all the more rousing because of what Streep is wearing at the time. Mrs. Graham has, as usual, been hosting a party, and, this being 1971, she is clad in a gold semi-caftan number, as if the soirée were about to conclude with an Aztec sacrifice. The presiding genius here is Ann Roth, a

trusted costume designer for Spielberg; reportedly, on the set of the new film, he referred to her as "my co-director." Another regular is Janusz Kamiński, who has been Spielberg's cinematographer since "Schindler's List" (1993), and who gives us a jolt, on this occasion, by opting for lenses so wide that some of the compositions appear to stretch and bulge; as the camera scurries up a corridor, we could be watching an outtake from "The Shining." Such cramming and crowding of the frame is presumably designed to convey the frantic mood of the era: quite a contrast to the art of Gordon Willis, who filmed "All the President's Men" as if he were holding his breath, waiting and watching to see what, or who, might emerge from the quiet shadows. The sequence, early in that movie, depicting the break-in at the Watergate complex, in 1972, is mirrored in the closing minutes of "The Post." One coverup, we realize, will bleed into the next.

Nothing is more promisingly solid, to the moviegoer, than a major Spielberg production. You can foretell everything from the calibration of the craftsmanship to the heft of the cast, and "The Post" inarguably delivers. Streep and Hanks are backed by players as proficient as Tracy Letts, Sarah Paulson, and Michael Stuhlbarg, who is in everything right now, and whose Abe Rosenthal, in "The Post," seems to be closely modelled on Grandpa, in "The Munsters." As for authenticity, we are spirited back in style. Everything smacks of the nineteen-seventies, from the photocopier the size of a small car to the actual small car, a mint-green Fiat, in which Bradlee, just to be different, zips around D.C. Nostalgists for vanished technologies, meanwhile, will moan with delight at the recurring images of type being set by hand. (Call it hot-metal porn.) Most distant of all is the weirdly intimate pas de deux between those who dwell in power and those who must hold them to account; Mrs. Graham, a hobnobbler extraordinaire, drops round to see McNamara, one Sunday, even as her newspaper is gearing up to release information that will cut the ground from beneath him. It takes courage to stop the dance.

And yet, despite this authentic re-

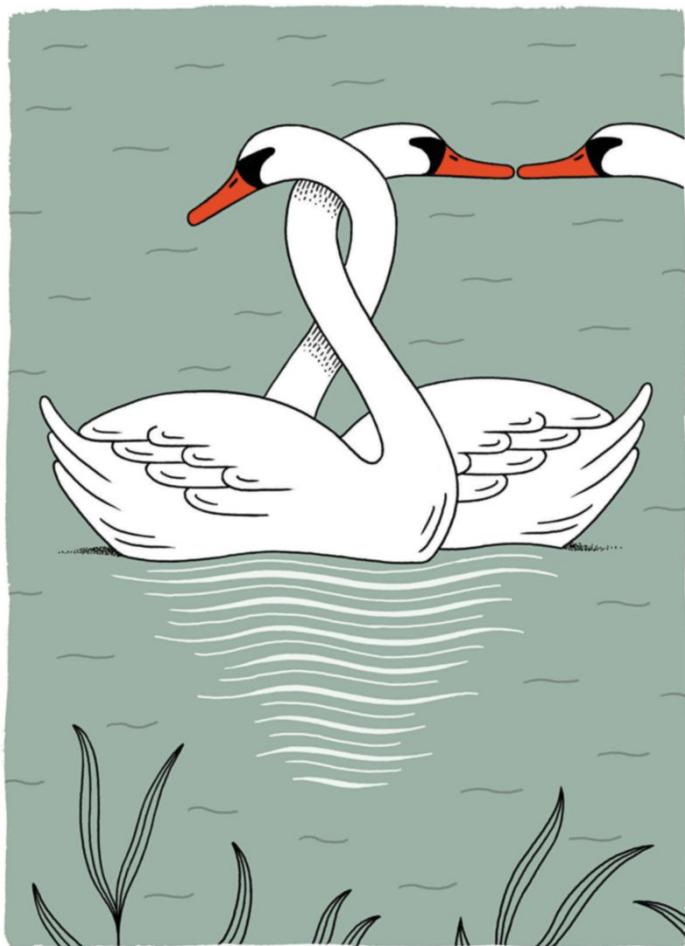
creation of the past, "The Post" is not a period movie. Instead, it is squarely addressed to the present day, striving for the urgency of a headline. The film is here to warn us of fresh threats to press freedom; to confirm that the battle between real news and fake news is not without precedent; and to raise a knowing titter, as Streep—"one of the most overrated actresses in Hollywood," according to Donald Trump—delivers the line "It's hard to say no to the President of the United States." The President in question is Lyndon Johnson, with whom Mrs. Graham was naturally on familiar terms, but we get the point.

If anything, we get the point too much. Unlike "Empire of the Sun" (1987) or "Catch Me If You Can" (2002), which left us with a tussle of competing feelings, Spielberg's latest work exults without a fleck of irony in its moral obligation—to lend dramatic form to the First Amendment. "The only way to protect the right to publish is to publish," Bradlee says, and Mrs. Graham even wheels out the rusty nostrum about journalism being the first draft of history. Of what used to be termed gutter journalism, or, indeed, of what goes on down at gutter level, we see no trace. (Imagine what history would be like if it grew out of "His Girl Friday" or "Ace in the Hole.") Nor is there more than a wisp of what McNamara defined as the fog of war; there is only the pack of lies that politicians tell, and the bright shining light that is beamed upon them by the press. Most people going to see "The Post," or lavishing it with awards, will, I suspect, feel heartened and flattered by the warmth with which it endorses their own convictions. Is that all we desire from a movie, though—that it should agree with us, and vice versa? How do you prevent its principles, well intentioned as they are, from staling into piety? When a film is bang on the moment, as "The Post" is determined to be, what will remain of its impact when the moment is past? Maybe Spielberg, Streep, and Hanks are possessed, like many of their compatriots, by a deeper dread. Maybe they think that the moment is here to stay. ♦

INFIDELES

A couples therapist gives adultery a chance.

BY ZOË HELLER



Not long ago, scientists discovered that swans, the beloved symbols of romantic and sexual fidelity, have some chronic philanderers among their number. (How swans had kept this from us for so long is a mystery.) Other species regarded as paragons of sexual constancy—prairie voles and shingle-back skinks—have also proved, on closer inspection, to be inconstant lovers. For the makers of anniversary greeting cards, and for anyone else seeking a precedent in nature for the great human experiment in monogamy, only a handful of mascots remain: black vultures, owl monkeys, California mice.

We deplore those who cheat on their partners, but we're cheating more than ever.

ton's wishful insistence that oral sex doesn't count. But, when it comes to interactive porn sessions, or sexting, or occasional snogs with attractive co-workers, one person's grievous betrayal is another's harmless hobby.

Notwithstanding the problems of definition and the vague statistics, the consensus among social scientists is that the incidence of infidelity has been rising in recent decades. This is mostly attributed to the fact that modern life has increased and democratized the opportunities for illicit sex. Women, whose adulterous options have historically been limited by domesticity and economic dependence, have entered the workforce and discovered new vistas of romantic temptation. (Men are still the more unfaithful sex, but their rates of infidelity appear to have remained steady over the past three decades, while, according to some estimates, female rates have risen by as much as forty per cent.) Senior citizens have had their sexual capacities indefinitely prolonged by Viagra and hip-replacement surgery. Even the timid and the socially maladroit have been given a leg up, courtesy of the online pander. Adultery may still be, as Anthony Burgess described it, the “most creative of sins,” but, thanks to Tinder et al., engineering a tryst requires significantly less ingenuity and craft now than at any other time in human history.

Surprisingly, perhaps, our increasingly licentious behavior has not been reflected in more tolerant public attitudes toward infidelity. While we've become considerably more relaxed about premarital sex, gay sex, and interracial sex, our disapproval of extramarital sex has been largely unaffected by our growing propensity to engage in it. We are eating forbidden apples more hungrily than ever, but we slap ourselves with every bite. According to a 2017 Gallup poll, Americans deplore adultery (which is still illegal in some two dozen states and still included among the crimes of “moral turpitude” that can justify denial of citizenship) at much higher rates than they do abortion, animal testing, or euthanasia.

The fact that a prohibition is often violated is not an argument, *per se*, for giving up on the prohibition. Humans kill one another with some frequency,

and we continue to believe that our laws against murder are a good idea. If we keep failing to meet our own standards, the solution, some would suggest, is simply to try harder. The couples therapist and relationship guru Esther Perel believes otherwise. In her new book, "The State of Affairs: Rethinking Infidelity" (Harper), she argues that we would be better off coming to a more compassionate accommodation of our unruly desires. Decades of administering to adulterers and their anguished spouses have convinced her that we need "a more nuanced and less judgmental conversation about infidelity," one that acknowledges that "the intricacies of love and desire don't yield to simple categorizations of good and bad, victim and culprit." Our judgmental attitude toward our transgressions does not make us any less likely to commit them, she argues—"infidelity has a tenacity that marriage can only envy"—and it keeps us from understanding why we transgress. The desire to stray is not evil but human.

Traditional couples therapy focuses on the defense and enforcement of the monogamous pact, and tends to side firmly and explicitly with the faithful spouse. He or she is often referred to as "the injured

party," while the straying partner is labelled "the perpetrator." The standard assumption is that an affair is a symptom either of marital dysfunction or of some pathology on the part of the perpetrator. (Sex addiction and fear of intimacy are the most common diagnoses, although lately a genetic predisposition to infidelity has been gaining traction.)

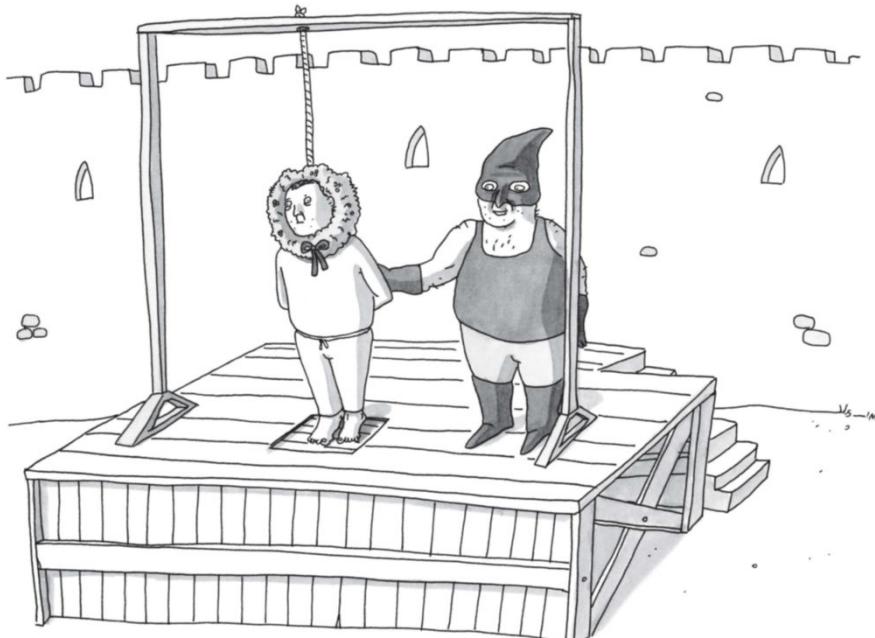
This approach, Perel believes, does little justice to the "multifaceted experience of infidelity." It demonizes adulterers, without pausing to explore their motives. It focusses on the traumatic effects of affairs, without acknowledging their "generative" possibilities. "To look at straying simply in terms of its ravages is not only reductionistic but also unhelpful," she writes. Affairs can be devastatingly painful for the ones betrayed, but they can also be invigorating for marriages. If couples could be persuaded to take a more sympathetic, less catastrophic view of infidelity, they would, she proposes, have a better chance of weathering its occasional occurrence. When people ask her if she is against or in favor of affairs, her standard response is "yes."

Perel, who is Belgian-born but practices in New York, is much sought after for her sophisticated, European-

flavored insights into love and desire, and she has made a specialty of challenging the puritanical orthodoxies of the American therapy industry. "Matting in Captivity" (2006), the book that brought her to public notice, was a sprightly disquisition on the anaphrodisiac effects of married life, in which she argued that the excessive value placed on communication and transparency in modern relationships tends to foster conjugal coziness at the expense of erotic vitality. Her suggestion that couples seeking to sustain their élan vital would do well to cultivate a little distance and mystery was not original, or particularly radical, but it inspired wariness and even hostility among some of her colleagues, who felt that she approached the solemn project of saving American marriages with insufficient reverence.

The new book, which expands on (and occasionally repeats) the ideas explored in the last, has met with similar objections. Perel has been accused of trivializing the scourge of infidelity and of promoting ideas that are fundamentally hostile to the institution of marriage. It's difficult, however, to find any real evidence for these charges. Perel is more sanguine than others about the capacity of a marriage to withstand adulterous lapses, but her belief in coupledom—her commitment to the idea of commitment—is never in doubt. Insofar as she stresses the importance of flexibility, patience, and even stoicism in long-term relationships, her book bears a distinctly traditional message.

Perel takes a very stern line on what she sees as the excessive sense of entitlement that contemporary couples bring to their relationships. Their outsized expectations of what marriage can and should provide—perpetual excitement, comfort, sexual bliss, intellectual stimulus, and so on—together with their callow, "consumerist" approach to romantic choices, leave them ill-equipped to cope with the inevitable frustrations and longueurs of the long haul. They are too quick to look elsewhere the moment that their "needs aren't being met," and too ready to despair the moment that the promise of sexual loyalty is broken. Those who show willingness to forgive



"Now smile—this one's for our Christmas card."

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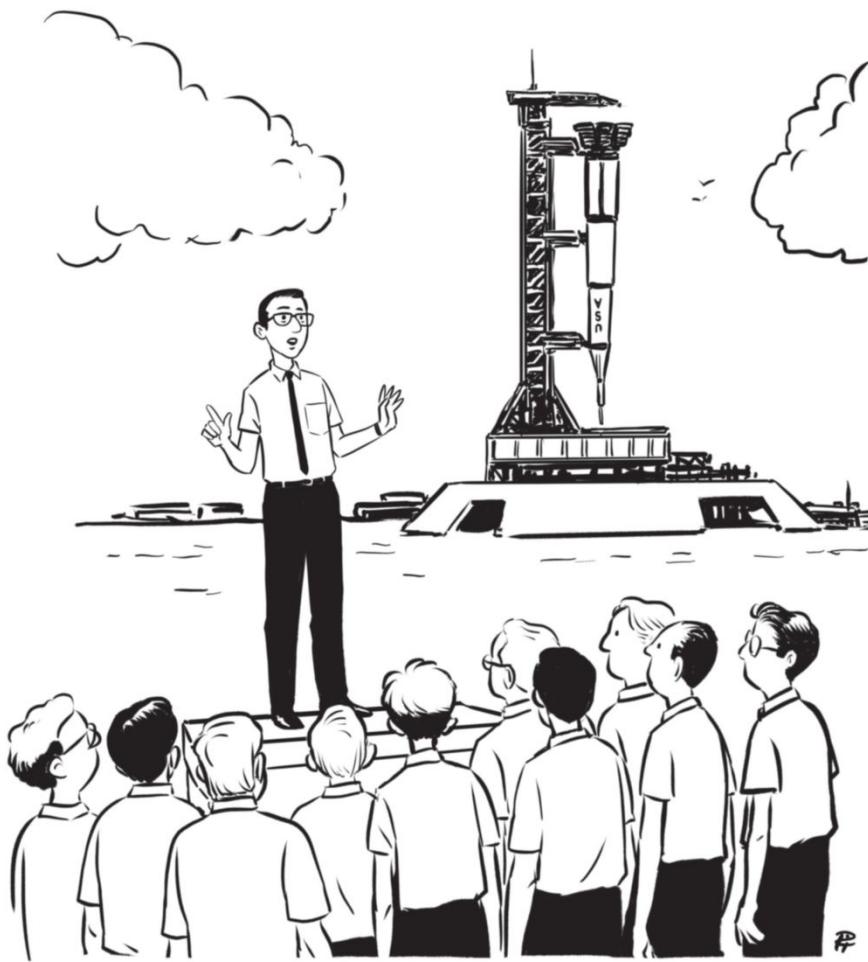
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"Now, we're not going to use the word 'blame.'"

• •

infidelity risk being chastised by friends and relatives for their lack of gumption. Women, Perel notes, are under particular pressure these days to leave cheating spouses as a mark of their feminist "self-respect."

One reason, of course, that crises of infidelity attract such vampiric interest is that they lift the peacetime ban on judging other couples' complex relations. For a moment, the wall of privacy around a marriage is breached and everyone gets to peer in and make assessments. The outrage and moral certainty expressed on such occasions can be comforting for the betrayed spouse, but they are largely "unhelpful," according to Perel. In order to come to any adult reckoning with an affair, the betrayed must avoid wallowing too long in the warm bath of righteousness. For a period immediately following the revelation, a cer-

tain amount of wild rage and sanctimony is permissible, but after that the rigorous work of exploring the meaning and motives of an affair must begin.

The scrupulous evenhandedness of Perel's approach is eminently reasonable in theory. She wants to redress a traditional bias against cheating spouses, to acknowledge "the point of view of both parties—what it did to one *and* what it meant to the other." In practice, it must be said, her method seems to demand heroic levels of forbearance on the part of faithful spouses. They are asked not only to forgo the presumption of their own moral superiority but to consider and empathize with what has been meaningful, liberating, or joyous about their partners' adulterous experiences. The affair that has caused them so much anguish may have been prompted by boredom or a longing

for sexual variety, or it may have been a bid for existential "growth, exploration, and transformation." (It's hard to imagine anyone being gladdened by the news that his or her spouse's adultery was an Odyssean quest for self-discovery.)

They are also asked to control their vengeful impulses, learning to "metabolize" their desire for vengeance "in a healthy manner." (A healthy act of vengeance is making your spouse send a check to your favorite charity, not sewing shrimp into the hems of his or her trousers.) They must resist the desire to "know everything" and avoid demanding details about the physical acts involved in their partners' betrayals. (They can ask "investigative questions" about feelings but not "detective questions" about hair color, sexual positions, or the size of genital organs.) Americans, Perel observes, are particularly inclined to believe that a process of forensic confession is a necessary forerunner to the restoration of trust, but "coming clean," she argues, is often more destructive than it is salutary, and "honesty requires careful calibration."

If you can gird yourself to comply with these guidelines, you have a chance, Perel claims, not only to save your relationship but to transform "the experience of infidelity into an enlarging emotional journey." Roused from sexual complacency by the threat of a third party, you may find that the sexual spark in your marriage has been reignited. "There is nothing like the eroticized gaze of the third to challenge our domesticated perceptions of each other," she writes. Now "the ongoing challenge" for you and your partner is to maintain the flame. Tips for doing so include arranging candlelit date nights at home and creating secret e-mail accounts for "private, X-rated conversations during meetings, playdates, and parent-teacher conferences."

It's not fair to pass judgment on such ideas. Other people's efforts to jazz up their flagging marital sex lives are bound to seem a bit grim on the page. Still, in the long list of difficult demands that Perel makes on the human spirit—not seeking revenge,

understanding your spouse's desire to feel "alive" with someone else, and so on—the labor of fending off sexual boredom and keeping domestic life "hot" may strike some as the most punishing and arduous of all.

Perel, who understands the wifing effect of the word "work" in the sexual context, prefers to talk about the need for playfulness and creativity, but the effort involved in the monogamous enterprise cannot be denied. Why is it that when old couples announce how long they have been married people always clap, as if the pair had completed a particularly grueling race or survived cancer? What is being applauded if not their endurance, their masochistic rigor? Home fires are apt to lose some of their ferocity in the long term, no matter how much creativity is expended on keeping them alight. Might it not be better to stop fetishizing sexual exclusivity as the sine qua non of happy relationships?

Perel is not unsympathetic to this thought, and, toward the end of her book, she devotes a brief chapter to various forms of consensual non-monogamy. She writes about couples who swing, couples who have chosen to be, in the term coined by the sex columnist Dan Savage, "monogamish," and couples who have expanded into "triads," "quads," or "polyamorous pods." (Those interested in a more comprehensive taxonomy of such arrangements may wish to consult "It's Called 'Polyamory,'" by Tamara Pincus and Rebecca Hiles, a book that provides definitions of, among other things, "designer relationships," "relationship anarchy," and the polyamorous "Z.") Perel praises the efforts of all these non-monogamists "to tackle the core existential paradoxes that every couple wrestles with—security and adventure, togetherness and autonomy, stability and novelty," and she is careful to remind the squeamish that many of these "romantic pluralists" succeed in maintaining rather higher standards of loyalty and honesty than do their monogamous counterparts.

She remains, however, appropriately skeptical about whether any relationship construct, no matter how cun-

ningly or thoughtfully devised, can offer permanent solutions to the dilemmas of romantic love. The polyamorist aspiration to replace sexual jealousy with "compersion" (a delight in one's partner's sexual delight with someone else) is just that: an aspiration. People often end up in open relationships out of a desire to propitiate restless lovers, rather than through any interest of their own—with predictably miserable results. And no amount of expanding or softening the boundaries of fidelity will ever outwit the human desire to transgress. The conventional bourgeois marriage invites adultery. The earnest polyamorous setup, in which every new lover is openly acknowledged and everyone's feelings are patiently discussed at Yalta-type summits, invites some more imaginative trespass: not using a condom, or introducing the lover to your parents. "In the realm of the erotic," Perel writes, "negotiated freedom is not nearly as enticing as stolen pleasures."

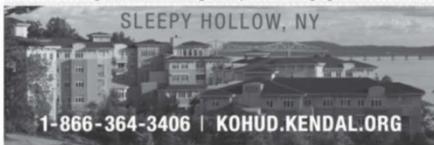
This—the impossibility of absolute romantic security—is the bracing moral at the center of Perel's book. There is no "affair proof" marriage, she warns, whatever the self-help industry tries to tell you. To love is to be vulnerable. Relationships can inspire varying degrees of trust, but trust is always, as the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips puts it, "a risk masquerading as a promise." To believe yourself to be the sole progenitor of your partner's desire, rather than merely its current recipient, is a folly. Elizabeth Hardwick, who stoically endured the countless infidelities of her husband, Robert Lowell, knew something about this. In her famous essay "Seduction and Betrayal," she described the terrible wisdom vouchsafed to the betrayed heroine of classic literature: she "is never under the illusion that love or sex confers rights upon human beings. She may of course begin with the hope, and romance would scarcely be possible otherwise; however, the truth hits her sharply, like vision or revelation when the time comes. Affections are not *things* and persons never can become possessions, matters of ownership. The desolate soul knows this immediately and only the trivial pretend that it can be otherwise." ♦

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How the doyen of Arabic poetry draws on—and explodes—its traditions.

BY ROBYN CRESWELL



In March, 2011, when civil protests broke out in cities and towns across Syria, the country's most famous poet, Adonis—who is in his eighties and has lived in exile since the mid-nineteen-fifties—hesitated to support the demonstrators. Although he had welcomed earlier uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, he flinched when Syria's turn came. In an editorial published in *al-Hayat*, a leading Arabic newspaper, in May, 2011, by which time more than a thousand protesters were dead and government tanks had shelled several towns, Adonis wrote, “I will never agree to participate in a demonstration that comes out of a mosque.” He portrayed the opposi-

tion as young naïfs, easily coöpted by canny Islamists who dreamed of establishing a religious authoritarianism that would be even worse than the Baathist regime of Bashar al-Assad.

Adonis’s assessment of the demonstrators echoed the rhetoric coming from the regime, and many readers were dismayed. For the past sixty years, he has tirelessly called for radical change in every sphere of Arab life, and he is the author of some of the most revolutionary poems in Arabic. Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, an eminent philosopher at the University of Damascus, was bewildered that Adonis, “the man of freedom, transformation, revolution, progress, and mo-

dernity,” should “disparage if not condemn the Syrian revolution from its outset.” But for Adonis the Syrian uprising was no revolution. In a recent interview in French (he has lived in Paris since the mid-nineteen-eighties), he claimed, “It is impossible, in a society like Arab society, to make a revolution unless it is founded on the principle of *laïcité*”—the French term for a stringent secularism. Long before the emergence of the Islamic State’s caliphate, Adonis warned that the alliance of theology with state power was the region’s most deep-rooted danger.

Adonis’s long poem “Concerto al-Quds,” published in Arabic in 2012 and now available in an English translation by Khaled Mattawa (Yale), is the poet’s secularist summa, a condemnation of monotheism couched in the form of a surrealist montage. Its subject is Jerusalem—al-Quds, in Arabic—the spiritual center for all three monotheistic faiths and the site of their most apocalyptic imaginings. In the Islamic tradition, Jerusalem was the first *qibla* (the direction faced in prayer), the starting point of the Prophet Muhammad’s trip to the heavens (*al-mi’raj*), and also the place where the archangel Israfil will blow his trumpet on the Day of Resurrection. In Judaism, the city is the site of the First and Second Temples, both destroyed, and the envisaged site of a third. In the Book of Revelation, John beholds a “new Jerusalem” descending from the heavens and hears a voice describing the life to come: “And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

The actual Jerusalem is rather different, of course—a city riven by sectarian conflict, coarsened by tourism, marred by the building of settlements and walls, and by the scars of occupation. This discrepancy between ideal and reality is the premise of Adonis’s poem, in which the heavenly archetype hovers like a mirage above the degraded modern city. The poem begins:

Up there, up above,
look at her dangling from the sky’s throat.
Look at her fenced with the eyelashes of
angels.

No one can walk toward her,

but a man can crawl on his forehead and shoulders,
perhaps even his navel.

Barefoot, knock on her door.
A prophet will open, and teach you how to
march, and how to bow.

Like many of Adonis's long poems, "Concerto al-Quds" is a bric-a-brac construction, stuffed with quotations from medieval sources—particularly Arab historians of Jerusalem—and also from religious texts and modern fiction. Verse alternates with prose, and, occasionally, the poem becomes a textual net, with fragments of phrases spaced over the page in the manner of Mallarmé (one of Adonis's chief influences). The musical allusion in the work's title suggests that the assembled citations are meant as background for the dissonant solos of the poet's own voice. While the orchestral parts sustain the celestial myth of Jerusalem, Adonis insists on its earthly history. He quotes a prophetic Hadith that says, "Whoever wants to see a spot of heaven, let him gaze at al-Quds," but his Jerusalem is "a divine cage," a wasteland of barbed wire and demolished homes, where "corpses and severed limbs" lie strewn atop the rubble. The poem isn't a lament for a lost paradise but an indictment of the idea that some places on earth are more holy than others.

Adonis, whose given name is 'Ali Ahmad Said Esber, was born in 1930, in the village of Qassabin, south of Latakia, in northwest Syria. His family is Alawite, but Adonis has never claimed a sectarian identity. As a teenager, he joined the Social Syrian Nationalist Party, which was a rival to the pan-Arab Baath Party, though the two shared a secularist ideology. The charismatic leader of the S.S.N.P., a Greek Orthodox Christian named Antun Sa'ada, called for the revival of what he termed "Greater Syria," a territory comprising Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. For Sa'ada and his followers, Syria was a Mediterranean nation. Arab Muslims were only the most recent stratum of a civilization with its foundations in Near Eastern myth. 'Ali Ahmad adopted the pen name Adonis in the late forties, after the Greek-

Phoenician vegetal deity of death and resurrection. He published a number of poems—virtuoso pieces of rhetoric, for a poet in his late teens—on the theme of Syrian national rebirth. The new name signalled Adonis's embrace of a layered, Mediterranean identity (the Greeks believed that Adonis was a son of the Assyrian king Theias) and his rejection of any narrowly Arab sense of belonging.

Adonis fled Syria for Lebanon in 1956. He had spent the previous year in prison—"a year of torture, a true hell," he later called it—after a S.S.N.P. militant assassinated a Syrian Army officer, leading to a roundup of Party members. In Beirut, Adonis did his best to slough off his political past and reinvent himself as an avant-garde poet. As he later wrote in a memoir of the period, Beirut was, for him, "a city of beginnings." In the decade following the Second World War, the Lebanese capital had emerged as the center of Arabic intellectual life, usurping the position previously held by Cairo. Lebanon was the banker of choice for the newly oil-rich Gulf States; tourists flocked to its deluxe hotels and bikini-crowded beaches; and, amid the rise of monolithic, one-party states, disaffected thinkers from across the region came to take advantage of its liberal censorship laws.

In 1957, Adonis helped establish the quarterly *Shi'r*, a flamboyantly cosmopolitan magazine, whose name was borrowed from the American magazine *Poetry*. *Shi'r* became a tribune for modernist poetry in Arabic. From his perch there, Adonis wrote manifestos in favor of the prose poem—a radical stance at the time, since almost all poetry in Arabic, from the pre-Islamic period onward, had been composed in fixed metres. *Shi'r* published Arabic translations of European poets, including W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot; Adonis himself translated works by Paul Claudel, Saint-John Perse, and Yves Bonnefoy.

It was during his early years in Beirut that Adonis turned away from nationalist-themed verse and began writing the poems that were to make him the most revered and controversial poet in the Middle East. His 1961 book, "Aghani Mihyar al-Dimashqi"

(translated into English, by Adnan Hadar and Michael Beard, as "Mihyar of Damascus: His Songs"), is widely regarded as his best. Mihyar, the hero of the collection, is a figure of mythic proportions, an exile who roams through a blighted landscape and trumpets a new creed—indeed, a creed of the New. Adonis's language casts a liturgical spell:

Here he comes from under the ruins
in the climate of new words,

offering his poems to grieving winds
unpolished but bewitching like brass.

He is a language glistening between the
masts,
he is the knight of strange words.

For some readers, Mihyar's alienation from his native environment—his strange words and his affinity for Mediterranean masts—reads as a provocation. Arab nationalists, in particular, accused Adonis and his *Shi'r* colleagues (several of whom were also ex-S.S.N.P.) of ignoring their own literary tradition. For such critics, anxious to safeguard the "unity" of Arabic culture, imported forms like the prose poem were the beachheads of a neo-imperialist invasion. It didn't help that Adonis and many of his colleagues came from minority backgrounds—precisely the communities that European powers historically sought out as allies. Nazik al-Malaika, a prominent Iraqi poet, called *Shi'r* a magazine "in Beirut in the Arabic language with a European spirit."

Adonis made it his mission to show his critics how little they knew of the heritage they claimed to defend. He spent the next dozen years immersed in the corpus of Arabic poetry, philosophy, and jurisprudence. The result was a pair of encyclopedic endeavors: the three-volume "Anthology of Arabic Poetry" (1964–68), which included poems from the sixth to the nineteenth centuries, and a four-volume work of historical criticism, "The Fixed and the Transformative" (1974). In both works, Adonis claimed to discover a "modernist" counter-heritage buried within the classical heritage itself. In the writings of Abbasid poets, Sufi sheikhs, Shiite divines, and Andalusian philosophers,



"No, you didn't hear the soft rustle of a sandwich wrapper!"

• •

he found a tradition of dissenters who thumbed their noses at the orthodoxy. Here was proof that there was no such thing as a unified tradition. Instead, there were many pasts within the past, and some that might be useful in the present.

In 1975, the outbreak of civil conflict in Lebanon put an end to Beirut's Belle Époque. The war pitted Muslim, Christian, and Druze communities against one another, and outside powers soon swooped in. The Lebanese capital became synonymous with violent fanaticism rather than with intellectual openness. Intellectuals who had sought refuge there now looked for new homes. In 1985, the year he left for Paris, Adonis published "The Book of Siege," a bitterly valedictory poem for his home of three decades. In its evocation of a city transformed by sectarian violence,

it foreshadows his later poem about Jerusalem:

Murder has changed the city's shape—
this stone
is a child's head—
and this smoke is exhaled from human lungs.
Each thing recites its exile.

Adonis's current assault on monotheism has a lot in common with his older campaign against Arab nationalism. The very idea of unity—of homogeneity—seems to repel him. For Adonis, monotheism's obsession with oneness leads inevitably to violence against people who hold different beliefs. It also leads to spiritual small-mindedness. "Concerto al-Quds" is full of questions, as if in rebuke of the certainties of dogma:

How can man, creator of meaning,
draw his destiny into one utterance?
How can his spirit
be poured into a wall?

The poem is also Adonis's most passionate statement on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. (This is a topic that, unlike most Arab intellectuals of his generation, he has generally avoided, though he has long made clear his contempt for the Palestinian leadership.) In a memorable passage, Adonis quotes an especially repellent verse of Leviticus on pagan nations—"You may even bequeath them to your sons after you, to receive as a possession; you can use them as permanent slaves"—and then, making the modern allegory clear, finds a riposte in a passage from Habakkuk: "Woe to him that builds a town with bloodshed, and establishes it on injustice!" Other sections of the poem recall the demolition, in 1967, of the Moroccan Quarter (torn down to enlarge the passageway to the Western Wall) and the ongoing tunnelling beneath the Arab neighborhood of Wadi Hilwa. For Adonis, this history of destruction and segregation is the shared legacy of all three monotheisms. Israel's history of illegal settlements and territorial exclusions is only the most recent example of the dangers of mixing religion and politics.

Like many modernist poets, Adonis borrows literary authority from the tradition he declares obsolete. The speaker of his Jerusalem poem is a latter-day prophet, a warner who knows that his catalogue of crimes will almost certainly be ignored. It is impossible to read "Concerto"—the relentlessly high pitch of its language, its emphatic repetitions and violent imagery—without recalling its Old Testament and Quranic models. There is no other modern Arab poet who so successfully conjures the grim beauty of the ancient works even while casting them in forms taken from the twentieth-century avant-garde. In part because written Arabic is a literary language, distinct from the various vernaculars spoken across the region, rhetorical grandeur is native to Arabic in a way that it is not to English. Mattawa's translation struggles to match Adonis's wildest flights, but their eloquence and anger do come through:

Ruin is still the daily bread of God's earth.
Will the prophecies also turn into a siege? Will
tunnels be burrowed into their words? Will
their visions splinter into missiles and bombs,
into volcanoes of gas and phosphor?

The “Concerto” can be a claustrophobic experience. By its end, Jerusalem acquires an infernal gloom that seems to allow no light in. The closest Adonis gets to suggesting an alternative to his monotheistic dystopia is at the beginning of the poem. Two pages in, we read:

But here's Imru-ulqais passing
through on his way to Byzantium!
Before his feet touch the threshold of Bait
al-Maqdis, he reads,
The blood shed on Mediterranean shores,
Since its beginnings, has spelled a
ravaged history. . . .

Leaving the scene, Imru-ulqais says,
“In the beginning was the word.
In the beginning of the word was ‘blood.’”

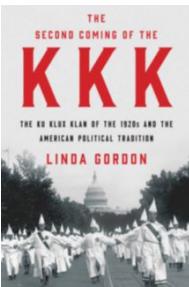
Imru-ulqais (more commonly transliterated as Imru’ al-Qays) was an Arabian polytheist prince of the sixth century, famous, in part, for his determination to avenge the killing of his father by a neighboring tribe. According to legend, the prince was so maddened by the need for retribution that he sought aid from the Christian emperor Justinian, ruler of Byzantium. For some Arabs, this has made the name Imru’ al-Qays a byword for collaboration with outside powers.

But the prince was also famous for his erotic poetry. Even by contemporary standards, some of it is pretty racy. In his best-known poem, for example, a *mu'allqa*, or “suspended ode,” the poet describes making love in a howdah with a woman nursing her baby: “When he cried behind her she turned half of herself to suckle, / but the other half, the one beneath me, stayed right where it was.” In Adonis’s poem, the prince is a figure of witness for the blood-soaked history we’re about to read. It is no wonder that Imru’ al-Qays is a polytheist, a cross-sectarian collaborator, and a love poet, only “passing through” Jerusalem. There is no room for him in the capital of monotheism, and he soon fades out of Adonis’s poem as well. But he lingers, perhaps as a representative of what might have been, and, therefore, of what might be again. The Prophet Muhammad is said to have called Imru’ al-Qays “the leader of the poets into hellfire.” It’s an epithet that Adonis might proudly take as his own. ♦

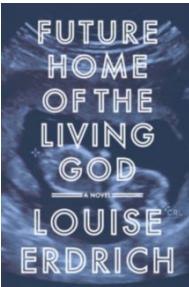


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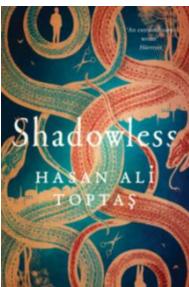
Lenin, by Victor Sebestyen (Pantheon). The Soviet Union’s first head of state appears, in this enthralling biography, as “a thoroughly modern political phenomenon—the kind of demagogue familiar to us in Western democracies.” Sebestyen’s Lenin is not a coolly rational mastermind but a whimsical opportunist, who promised his followers everything (“bread, peace and land”), bypassed his own dogmas as it suited him, and flew into “petulant rages over minor matters.” He scapegoated the vulnerable and evinced a particular animosity toward journalists, whom he lambasted for “sowing confusion by means of obviously defamatory distortion of the facts.” His speech was peppered with obscenities, and, ideology notwithstanding, he “enjoyed the pleasures of a country squire’s life.” He even had small, ugly hands.



The Second Coming of the KKK, by Linda Gordon (Liveright). This account of the Ku Klux Klan’s resurgence in the nineteen-twenties illuminates the surprising scope of the movement. Although it terrorized African-Americans in the South, its image elsewhere was more respectable. Members joined for status and to become better connected, and the Klan advocated temperance and sponsored family-friendly events. Still, it was vociferously anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, and anti-Catholic, and was also the first national organization to reject evolutionary theory. Its eventual downfall, Gordon argues, had less to do with any public revulsion at its racism than with scandals and corruption: in 1925, an alcoholic Grand Dragon in Indiana was convicted of second-degree murder, after the suicide of a woman whom he had abducted and raped.



Future Home of the Living God, by Louise Erdrich (HarperCollins). In this fast-paced novel, rapid and catastrophic changes to human reproduction make the survival of the race uncertain. In the search for “originals”—fetuses conceived before genes went haywire—women who are pregnant or of child-bearing age are detained, as “Womb Volunteers.” Erdrich imagines an America in which winter is a casualty of climate change, borders are sealed, men are “militantly insecure,” and women’s freedom is evaporating. The familiar dystopian milieu is made vivid by the narrative frame: a woman attempting to evade detention writes a letter to her unborn child and emerges a compelling “observer of the great mystery” unfolding around her.



Shadowless, by Hasan Ali Toptaş, translated from the Turkish by Maureen Freely and John Angliss (Bloomsbury). Appearing in English for the first time, this cult classic, published in 1995, addresses political disappearances in Turkey through a magical-realist lens. A small Anatolian village is thrown into confusion by the mysterious disappearances, sixteen years apart, of a barber and of a young girl. Scenes slip between past and present, reality and dream, first and third person. Streets tangle, homes shrink, flowers bleat, and the community can barely piece together a memory of either missing person. The result, though at times frustratingly elliptical, is a memorably phantasmagoric evocation of political and social disorientation.

TOO COOL?

The breeziness of Miguel.

BY HUA HSU



Sex, a cup of coffee the morning after, a quality bag of weed: as the thirty-two-year-old Los Angeles R. & B. singer Miguel puts it, in a single from 2014, it is the “simplethings” that make life worthwhile. Miguel has made a career out of finding creative ways to render small pleasures in sound. But, unlike many of his colleagues in the sex-anthem industry, there’s a quality to his freakiness that feels bounded, almost safe. There are limits to yearning for its own sake. He sings with a teasing and flirty confidence, yet there’s always a sense of calm and self-control. Where others treat sex as con-

quest, he plays the part of the dutiful full-service lover. Indeed, he somehow managed to make a song called “The Pussy Is Mine,” from “Kaleidoscope Dream” (2012), sound gentle and soulful, and not at all grabby.

There’s been a steady push and pull to Miguel’s career. When his début album, “All I Want Is You,” was released, in 2010, after a legal dispute between his record label and production company had kept it shelved for two years, it seemed reasonable to believe that he might never find the audience that his talents merited. The record was stylistically promiscuous, full of

The singer has always seemed untroubled, but that may no longer suffice.

R. & B. songs that borrowed from alternative rock and electronic music, all of it lunging for some kind of distant, post-genre future. “Kaleidoscope Dream” was a more grounded affair, as Miguel grew more literal about the earthiness of his desires. The album was driven by the single “Adorn,” which sounds like a slightly hurried take on Marvin Gaye’s “Sexual Healing,” shorn of Gaye’s neediness. His last album, “Wildheart,” from 2015, experimented with structure, trading in catchy hooks for lavish, psychedelic sounds.

“War & Leisure,” which came out earlier this month, initially feels like a return to economy. It is still exquisite and dreamy, full of swirling textures and crunchy guitars. But the songs are more direct than those on “Wildheart,” as if Miguel were translating slow jams from the nineteen-eighties into early-nineties grunge. “Criminal,” produced by Dave Sitek, of TV on the Radio, sounds like an indie-rock song that’s been taken apart and reassembled into something booming and majestic. “Sky Walker,” one of the best songs on the new album, is an enjoy-the-moment, poolside anthem featuring a slithery guest verse from the rapper Travis Scott. The song is built on a bass line that’s felt as much as heard—it conjures a tingly, full-body high. “Splish,” Miguel ad-libs every now and then. It’s breezy and fun, and he doesn’t have to try very hard to hit the occasional high note.

Maybe it’s possible to be too cool. In the past, Miguel has sung about his biracial upbringing, when he was “too proper for the black kids, too black for the Mexicans.” But he has always seemed like a peculiarly untroubled artist, too sensible to descend into existential dread. His music lacks that often romanticized sense of inner struggle that made artists like Gaye and Prince so conflicted about sin and salvation. These days, the bad man charts his own story line, in which love becomes yet another incitement for self-loathing, and sex is a pathology—a way to cope with insecurity, or to puncture a deep-down numbness. Some of my favorite songs this year, from young rappers like Lil Uzi Vert and Trippie Redd, have explored the moody extremes of heartbreak.

They make love sound like little more than a prelude to pain, every interaction merely a breach of trust waiting to happen.

Miguel seems to pursue the higher peaks of pleasure for their own sake, because sex is about generosity, about being present. "Let my love adorn you," he once sang. His songs are intimate without evincing vulnerability, perhaps because he so rarely loses his cool, or feels the need to wail or throw tantrums. But throughout "War & Leisure" Miguel wonders whether we can make an actual life out of moments of bliss. Like the Miguel fan, listening at home, who wonders if there's more to life than songs about great weed and even better sex, Miguel, too, begins wondering if it's healthy to stay in bed so long—if it's really possible to "celebrate every day like a birthday."

"There's a war on love, just look around you," he sings on "Banana Clip," an ecstatic throb of a song that initially feels like a pro-forma attempt to dramatize love as a battlefield. (For his part, Miguel confesses to being "trigger-happy.") But he admits, almost in passing, that there's "a lot of terror on my mind," as if it were something that can't be shaken. In the video for "Told You So," which borrows its funk pomp from mid-eighties Prince, Miguel dances by himself in an open field, shirt blowing in the breeze, while a rocket rises from the horizon. The video cuts between Miguel and images from protests and the nightly news. A song about love and liberation takes on another meaning: "Every

pleasure you taste has its price, babe," he sings, and you wonder what kind of commitment he's talking about.

The album isn't some grand political statement; it certainly holds more leisure than war. But in those glimmers and asides, such as when Miguel points at the "contrails in the sky," it captures something about life nowadays, when the pursuit of distraction feels particularly fraught. Lurking in these tender and erotic songs is the worry that love, even a transcendent love, is a retreat. On a strange song called "City of Angels," Miguel sounds as if he were singing through a bullhorn, while his vocals follow a heroic, ascendant guitar line. He imagines two lovers seeking out each other as their city falls, fighter jets in the sky. By the end of it, everyone has fled to Nevada: "I stayed behind to search for your smile/Hoping to find you in the rubble/Hoping that I could just hold you for a while."

These conflicting impulses run through "War & Leisure." Maybe simple things are all we have; maybe they no longer suffice. Last year, Miguel uploaded a song called "Come Through and Chill" to SoundCloud. Built on a frisky, traipsing guitar line, it was a nice tune about getting laid. A new version appears on "War & Leisure," featuring a guest verse by the pensive rapper J. Cole, who apologizes for not calling a woman back: "In case my lack of reply had you catchin' them feelins/Know that you been on my mind like Kaepernick

kneelin'/Or police killins'/Or Trump sayin' slick shit, manipulatin' poor white folks because they ignant."

The new album ends with "Now." Over flickers of electric guitar, Miguel addresses the "C.E.O. of the free world," pleading on behalf of the poor and the forgotten: brown farmworkers and black kids gunned down in the streets, from Standing Rock to New Orleans. Whether Miguel's burgeoning consciousness is just a momentary flourish or a new spark, it speaks to something inescapable about pop culture's present: when so many artists have grown outspoken, the ones who seem carefree and untroubled stand out. For Miguel, seeing the war outside is almost enough to cast doubt on leisure, the purpose of transcendent sex, and good drugs—even pop music itself. Maybe love is just a way of seeking meaning beyond yourself, to guide you toward a purpose slightly larger than yourself. In August, Miguel posted a video on Twitter, in which he sang a few lines from a song he'd recently liked: "Make America Great Again," an anti-fascist electro tune by the Russian punk group Pussy Riot. Soon afterward, he participated in a conversation, for *Flood*, with Nadya Tolokonnikova, a member of the group, in which they discussed making art in troubled times. His contribution, he concluded, was to make music that might "bring people together." In fact, that's what his music's always been about. But two is easy; maybe, for Miguel, three is as well. It's what comes next that will be the measure. ♦

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Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Carolita Johnson, must be received by Sunday, December 24th. The finalists in the December 4th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the January 8th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



"

"

THE FINALISTS



"He's not as bad as the last manager. That one was abominable."
Monica Fambrough, Marietta, Ga.

"He knows nothing about pants."
Kurt Simmons, Albuquerque, N.M.

"Don't worry. He won't last long."
Jane Richmond, Cleveland Heights, Ohio

THE WINNING CAPTION



"She left a note. No, I haven't read it yet."
Bob Surrette, Dennis Port, Mass.

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SINCE HAS QUITE
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YOU THINK OF
WHEN YOU THINK OF
SMARTPHONES.

BUT WE ARE
THE SMART BEHIND
EVERY PHONE YOU
CAN THINK OF.

Twenty years ago, Qualcomm connected the phone to the internet. And with that, we built the foundation that unleashed the mobile revolution. As time went by, we invented more and more things that made the smartphone indispensable. Things like blazing fast LTE connectivity, more accurate GPS locating and camera stabilization. The fact is, Qualcomm technology is foundational for every modern smartphone. And now, the company that changed everything with the smartphone, is going to change everything about everything else.

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Why you love your smartphone.