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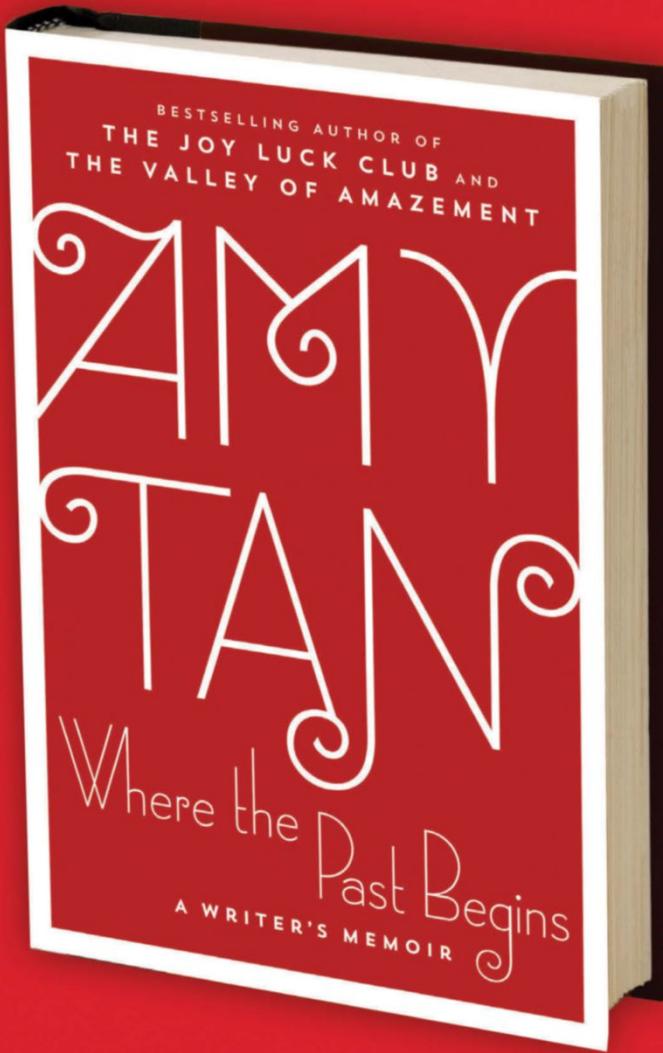
# THE NEW YORKER



AG

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— MARY KARR

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# THE NEW YORKER

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Issue 21, Autumn/Winter 2017

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# CONTRIBUTORS

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**Sophie Klahr** (*Poem*, p. 31) is the author of the poetry collection “Meet Me Here at Dawn.”

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## DAILY SHOUTS

A guide to dressing up as your favorite member of the Trump Administration for Halloween.



## VIDEO

The photographer Philip Montgomery on covering the opioid epidemic in Montgomery County, Ohio.

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# THE MAIL

## BEYOND THE BOUNDS

I've been sad for days since reading Ronan Farrow's story on Harvey Weinstein's decades of sexual abuse and assault ("Abuses of Power," October 23rd). My eighty-six-year-old mother has always said that every woman is forced to prostitute herself at some time in her life, and hearing that never fails to make me sick. And yet I know of so many women who have had bad experiences with people they work with, including myself and my daughter. I never told anyone what happened to me, but when women like the ones in Farrow's article tell their stories it helps everyone to speak up, especially those with lower incomes, who can't risk losing their jobs because of a boss who tries to force sex on them.

Connie Sundquist  
Tallahassee, Fla.

He was influential and well loved, a church elder. He was seen as smart, disciplined, and generous. He started grooming me when I was eight years old. He raped me for the first time when I was ten, and every weekend for four years. I saw how easy it was for him to hide what he was doing, and it later became clear that he had help. That's what makes the Harvey Weinstein sexual-assault allegations so horrible: it wasn't a secret. People knew that Weinstein was dangerous, but they turned away—they allowed it. My abuser was raping women before I was born. People knew and did nothing to protect the victims. When he got to me, no one believed he would "go that young." I was called a liar. I was told that it was my fault, because I should have said something sooner. I was called crazy.

These are the reasons we don't speak. When we finally do, we get asked, "Why now?" As if there's a time limit on trauma. I'm forty-four years old, and therapy didn't prepare me for what raising a daughter would trigger. Her tenth birthday was two weeks ago.

We talk about assault as if it were a new phenomenon, as if it weren't the people in positions of authority who are so often responsible: lawyers, judges, priests, teachers, police officers, doctors, C.E.O.s. Why do we act so shocked? The subject of sexual abuse is treated like global warming—we think that if we pretend it's not happening, then maybe it will go away.

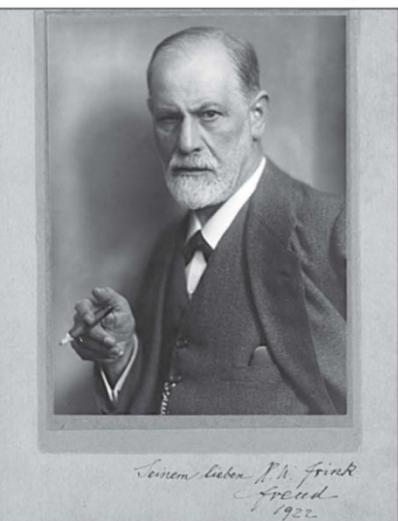
Natarsha Douglas  
Toronto, Ont.

Sexual harassment and assault is an issue that crosses all boundaries, political or otherwise. It's about predators in power who know that they are untouchable, and the people who enable them. My experience of sexual harassment, like that of so many other women, ranges from mild to extreme. When I worked in industrial-chemical sales, in the nineteen-eighties, a senior person at my company started pursuing me. He harassed and assaulted me, and on a work trip one night he even got the key to my hotel room without my permission. This behavior continued after I reported him, and I believe I was not the only woman subjected to his unwanted advances. When I refused to have an affair with him, he berated me and claimed that my work was suffering. I was assigned to a new sales territory, in an area known for its gang violence. He was willing to put my life in danger as punishment. I remember standing in a bathroom at the restaurant where he first made a pass at me, looking at myself in the mirror and trying to figure out how to rebuff this person without losing the job I loved. In the end I couldn't. After months of abuse, I quit.

Lesley Barton  
Punta Gorda, Fla.

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

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OCTOBER 25 – 31, 2017

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Metropolitan Opera audiences know the British composer Thomas Adès for “The Tempest,” a svelte Shakespeare adaptation that opened here in 2012. But in his acclaimed new opera, **“The Exterminating Angel”** (which premières on Oct. 26), inspired by the scabrous film by Luis Buñuel, he returns to the territory he marked out in his first opera, “Powder Her Face”: skewering the sexual and political assumptions of the upper class. The baritone David Adam Moore and the soprano Amanda Echalaz, above, are featured in the cast.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDRES SERRANO

# CLASSICAL MUSIC

## OPERA

### Metropolitan Opera

There is a coterie of contemporary composers—including John Adams and Philip Glass—who can say that the Met has performed more than one of their operas; their number now includes Thomas Adès. Five years after the company première of his opera “The Tempest,” Adès himself conducts the first New York performances of his pungent new stage work, “*The Exterminating Angel*,” after the film by Luis Buñuel. A first-rate ensemble cast—including Audrey Luna, Alice Coote, Iestyn Davies, Joseph Kaiser, and John Tomlinson—appears in a production by Tom Cairns, the librettist who adapted the film for the stage. *Oct. 26 at 8 and Oct. 30 at 7:30.* • Franco Zeffirelli’s luxe, over-the-top style defined the Met in the eighties and nineties, but now the famed Italian director has only one production—besides “*La Bohème*,” of course—left in the company’s repertoire, a traditionalist pageant of glittering chinoiserie that he devised for Puccini’s “*Turandot*,” thirty years ago. Oksana Dyka, Aleksandr Antonenko, and Maria Agresta star in the revival; the deft Carlo Rizzi conducts. *Oct. 25 and Oct. 31 at 7:30 and Oct. 28 at 8.* • The current revival of Zeffirelli’s crowd-pleasing production of “*La Bohème*” offers the house début of the soprano Angel Blue, a former Miss Hollywood and an Operalia finalist who has worked as a presenter for the BBC Proms. Her castmates include Brigitte Kele, Russell Thomas, and Lucas Meacham; Alexander Soddy. *Oct. 27 at 8.* • Bartlett Sher’s production of Offenbach’s “*Les Contes d’Hoffmann*” often feels disjointed in performance. But this season’s revival coalesces around Vittorio Grigolo’s thrilling turn in the title role, with each act emerging as a fever dream of frustrated longing. The bass Laurent Naouri, as the Four Villains, is a wonderfully arch antagonist; other standouts include Anita Hartig’s sensitively sung Antonia and Erin Morley’s dazzling Olympia. Offenbach was primarily a composer of operettas, and Johannes Debuss, appropriately, conducts with rhythms that dance and melodies that gently waft through the air. (This is the final performance.) *Oct. 28 at noon.* (*Metropolitan Opera House*. 212-362-6000.)

### Heartbeat Opera: “All the World’s a Drag!”

With its extravagant gowns, wigs, and stage makeup, opera operates at a close remove from drag, and the three-year-old company has turned that likeness into a good excuse for an annual Halloween show. This year, Heartbeat throws Shakespeare and his cross-dressing players into the equation, with a program of excerpts from “Roméo et Juliette,” “Otello,” “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,” and “West Side Story.” The chamber ensemble Cantata Profana accompanies a quartet of singers in a production directed by Ethan Heard. *Oct. 30 at 7:30 and Oct. 31 at 7:30 and 10.* (*National Sawdust*, 80 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. [nationalsawdust.org](http://nationalsawdust.org).)

## ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

### New York Philharmonic

With “Bernstein’s Philharmonic,” the orchestra that Lenny once ruled and loved is returning the favor, with an autumn festival that’s part of the music world’s season-long commemoration of the iconic

composer-conductor. The first of three consecutive subscription programs brings Alan Gilbert, until recently the Philharmonic’s music director, together with the violinist Joshua Bell and the mezzo-soprano Kelley O’Connor, in a celebration of two Leonard Bernstein masterworks, the “Serenade” and the Symphony No. 1, “Jeremiah”; “Boundless,” a Bernstein tribute by the young Dutch composer Joey Roukens, begins the concerts. *Oct. 25-26 and Oct. 31 at 7:30 and Oct. 27-28 at 8.* (*David Geffen Hall*. 212-875-5656.)

### Gerard Schwarz and the Juilliard Orchestra

This week, the conservatory’s flagship ensemble is led by Schwarz, a distinguished maestro and an all too lonely advocate for the masterpieces of the mid-century American symphonic school. The featured works are by three composers with close Juilliard ties: David Diamond (the Symphony No. 4), Jacob Druckman (the Viola Concerto, with Jordan Bak), and William Schuman (the Symphony No. 6). *Oct. 26 at 7:30.* (*Alice Tully Hall*. [events.juilliard.edu](http://events.juilliard.edu))

### St. Thomas Choir

Daniel Hyde, the director of the nation’s premier Anglican choir of men and boys, leads his forces in their first public concert of the season, an evening that embraces music both vocal and instrumental, and classic and contemporary: works by Arvo Pärt (“Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten”), John Rutter, and Vaughan Williams (including the oratorio “Dona Nobis Pacem”). With the Orchestra of St. Luke’s. *Oct. 26 at 7:30.* (*St. Thomas Church*, Fifth Ave. at 53rd St. [saintthomaschurch.org](http://saintthomaschurch.org).)

### Orpheus Chamber Orchestra

The beloved veteran pianist André Watts is the featured guest in the conductorless chamber orchestra’s latest concert, but the emphasis is otherwise on youth. His vehicle is the prodigy Mozart’s charming Piano Concerto No. 9 in E-Flat Major, “Jeunehomme”; the program concludes with the First Symphony by the young firebrand Beethoven, and opens with a New York première (“Asunder”) by the contemporary jazz-classical innovator Vijay Iyer. *Oct. 26 at 8.* (*Carnegie Hall*. 212-247-7800.)

## RECITALS

### Miller Theatre: Mahan Esfahani / Orlando Consort

Columbia University’s performance hub advocates just as vigorously for early music as it does for contemporary work. Esfahani, an acclaimed young Iranian-born harpsichordist, will perform Bach’s Goldberg Variations at Miller’s home venue; later in the week, the gentlemen singers of the Orlando Consort, longtime Miller favorites, will take to the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, near Times Square, to offer “Loire Valley in Song,” a showcase of enticing music by Binchois, Dufay, and other fifteenth-century masters. *Oct. 26 at 8; Oct. 28 at 8.* (*For tickets and venue information, visit [millertheatre.com](http://millertheatre.com).*)

### Bang on a Can: “Road Trip”

Celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of their revolutionary collective and all that it has wrought, the composers Michael Gordon, David Lang, and Julia Wolfe dispatch their versatile house band, the Bang on a Can All-Stars, on a virtual excursion sound-

tracked with fresh music. The program, directed by Michael Counts, incorporates scenic and production design by Deborah Johnson (who works under the name CandyStations). *Oct. 27-28 at 7:30.* (*BAM Howard Gilman Opera House*, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn. [bam.org](http://bam.org))

### Daniil Trifonov

This thrilling but thoughtful Russian pianist is boldly marking his own path within largely traditional guidelines. His upcoming Carnegie Hall program, “Hommage à Chopin,” expands the usual repertory choices (including the Franco-Polish master’s Piano Sonata No. 2) with works by Grieg, Tchaikovsky, Barber (the “Nocturne”), Rachmaninoff, and Mompou (Variations on a Theme of Chopin). *Oct. 28 at 8.* (212-247-7800.)

### George London Foundation Recital Series

The season-opening concert of the foundation’s recital series follows its usual formula, pairing two singers for a joint concert of crowd-pleasing repertoire. The soprano Leah Crocetto (performing Liszt’s operatic “Three Petrarch Sonnets” and songs by Rachmaninoff) and the baritone Zachary Nelson (offering selections from Schubert’s “Schwanengesang” and Vaughan Williams’s “Songs of Travel”) come together at the end of the program for duets from “Il Trovatore” and “Carousel”; Mark Markham accompanies them. *Oct. 29 at 4.* (*Morgan Library & Museum*, Madison Ave. at 36th St. [themorgan.org](http://themorgan.org))

### Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

An intriguing program places continental and American composers in a musical face-off. The categories are early-career string quartets (Charles Ives’s String Quartet No. 1 and Anton Webern’s surprisingly romantic “Langsamer Satz”) and dialogues on love (Johannes Brahms’s lilting “Liebeslieder Walzer” and Leonard Bernstein’s expansive “Arias and Barcarolles”), and the performers include Susanna Phillips, Tamara Mumford, Nicholas Phan, Nathan Gunn, and the Escher String Quartet. *Oct. 29 at 5.* (*Alice Tully Hall*. 212-875-5788.)

### Diamanda Galás

This prodigious vocalist and pianist, an artist of harrowing power, knows how to use a cathedral’s sanctified atmosphere and lingering echoes to haunting effect. These Brooklyn performances, presented by Le Poisson Rouge, come in the wake of Galás’s first new albums in almost a decade: “All the Way,” a collection of transmuted jazz, blues, and folk standards, and “At Saint Thomas the Apostle Harlem,” a live recording of what she terms “death songs.” *Oct. 29 and Oct. 31 at 8.* (*Murmrr Theatre*, 17 Eastern Pkwy., near Grand Army Plaza. [murmrr.com](http://murmrr.com))

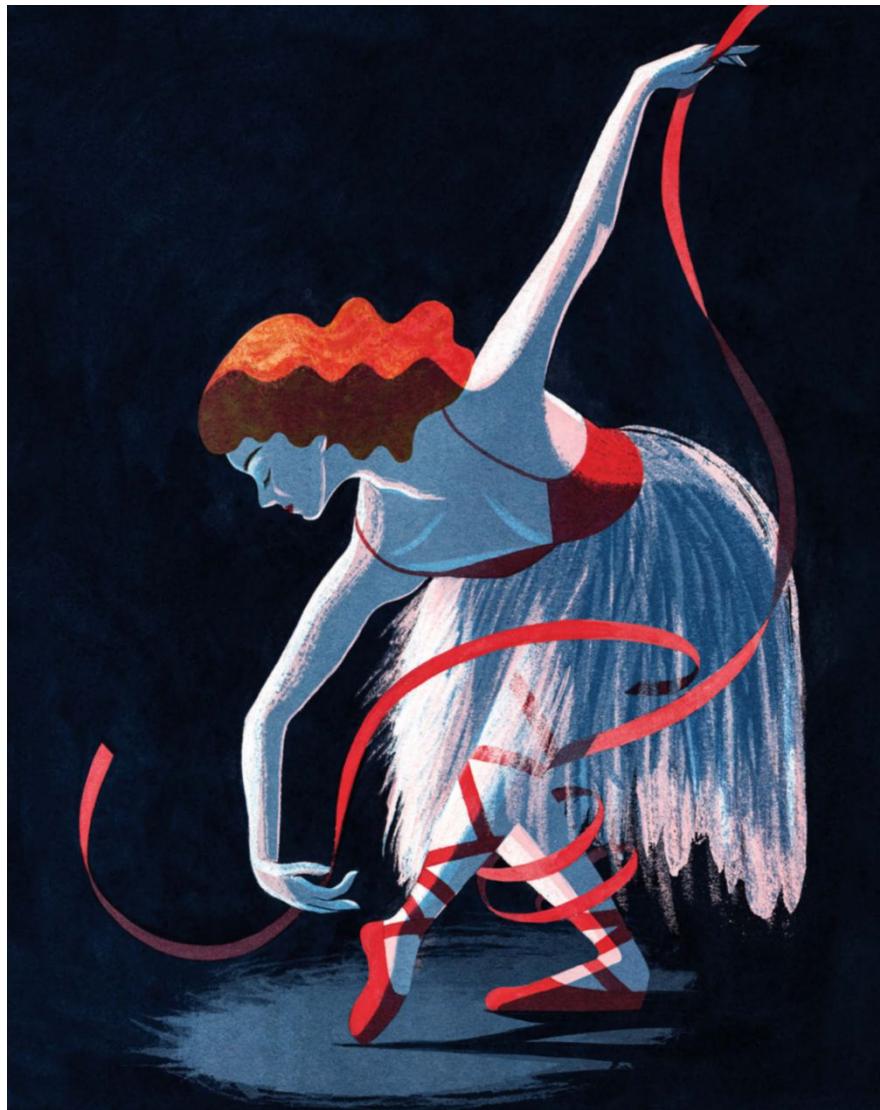
### Charmaine Lee and Conrad Tao: “Ceremony”

Tao, a pianist of sterling technique and refreshingly diverse interests, abandons his customary keyboard in favor of electronics for a collaborative exploration of tactile sound and space with Lee, an Australian improvising vocalist. Beforehand, Lee will improvise spontaneously with Nate Wooley, an estimable trumpeter and composer. *Oct. 30 at 8.* (*Roulette*, 509 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn. [roulette.org](http://roulette.org))

### White Light Festival: “Gazing at the Divine”

For decades now, the explosively colorful music of Olivier Messiaen, an ardent Roman Catholic, has been a touchstone of spirituality for largely secularized classical audiences. Steven Osborne, an admired Scottish pianist, offers the latest concert in this trend, an evening devoted entirely to a sprawling keyboard masterpiece, “Vingt Regards sur l’Enfant Jésus.” *Oct. 31 at 7:30.* (*Kaplan Penthouse*, Lincoln Center. [lincolncenter.org](http://lincolncenter.org))

# DANCE



## Footlights

Matthew Bourne choreographs a new version of "The Red Shoes."

The English choreographer Matthew Bourne is known for ballets that are based on popular tales or movies; that pulsate with crime and passion; that transpire on shifting planes of reality; that incorporate big, crazy dance parties and small, nastily observed manners; and that generally end with the boy's not getting the girl, or the boy. Now Bourne has done it again, God bless him!

His new ballet is "The Red Shoes" (at City Center, Oct. 26-Nov. 5), and the

story, basically, is that of the famous 1948 movie by Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger. Once again, we have a beautiful young ballet dancer, Victoria Page, torn between art, represented by her imperious Russian ballet director, Lermontov, and love, in the person of her composer boyfriend, Julian. At the end, unable to choose, she either falls or throws herself (people fight over this) in front of a train—an untidy way to die, but not as bad as what happens in the original Hans Christian Andersen story, in which the local executioner has to chop off the girl's feet so that she'll stop dancing.

In Bourne's ballet, the feet aren't

chopped off, and neither is anything else. This is Bourne's first ballet in four years, and he didn't hold back. The company that Vicky dances for is based on Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, and, as is not the case in the movie, we get versions of just about every kind of piece that the troupe performed: "Les Sylphides," "The Afternoon of a Faun," "Le Train Bleu" (the beach ballet). We get lots of other kinds of dance, too: a German Expressionist thing, a Fred-and-Ginger-ish routine, a hilariously bad music-hall number with poor Vicky in a bouncy satin costume that looks as though the dog slept on it. (She and Julian are banished to music hall when Lermontov discovers their romance.)

But we don't just get every kind of dance. We get every kind of everything: Cocteau drawings, a statue of Vicky's foot, a bunch of bare-chested guys blowing through what seems to be an Irish mist. The score is a collage of excerpts from early Bernard Herrmann movie scores. The stagecraft is wild. Powell and Pressburger had a beautiful set, ready-made: Monte Carlo. Bourne and his brilliant designer, Lez Brotherson, didn't have anything like that, so, as Bourne told the *Washington Post*, "We decided to do something almost the opposite, go stark, and almost shock the audience with the set." Walls move. Films float through. The proscenium swivels, giving you the ballets from the front and then—*swoosh!*—showing you the goings on backstage, with the dancers mopping their heads and kissing their boyfriends and giving their rivals poisonous looks.

Some of this is a little confusing. It would be a good idea to screen the Powell-Pressburger movie for yourself before you go to the show. At City Center, your leading lady, in a red wig worthy of Moira Shearer, the original Vicky, will be either Ashley Shaw, from the Bourne company, or, on alternate nights, Sara Mearns, of New York City Ballet. Mearns isn't my idea of an ingénue—Shaw is—but they are both wonderful.

—Joan Acocella

**American Ballet Theatre**

Week two of the company's short fall season includes Jessica Lang's pretty but innocuous "Her Notes," from last year, set to music by Fanny Mendelssohn Hensel, and Alexei Ratmansky's piercing meditation on Socratic dialogue, "Serenade After Plato's Symposium." There are older works as well, most notably Jerome Robbins's suite to Chopin, "Other Dances" (originally created for Mikhail Baryshnikov and Natalia Makarova), and Frederick Ashton's pristinely geometric "Symphonic Variations." • Oct. 24 at 7:30: "Her Notes," "Symphonic Variations," "Elegy" pas de deux, and "Thirteen Diversions." • Oct. 25 at 7:30: "Souvenir d'un Lieu Cher," "I Feel the Earth Move," and "Daphnis and Chloe." • Oct. 26 at 7:30: "Souvenir d'un Lieu Cher," "Other Dances," and "Daphnis and Chloe." • Oct. 27 at 7:30: "Songs of Bukovina," "Other Dances," "I Feel the Earth Move," and "Serenade After Plato's Symposium." • Oct. 28 at 2: "Her Notes," "Elegy" pas de deux, "I Feel the Earth Move," and "Thirteen Diversions." • Oct. 28 at 8: "Souvenir d'un Lieu Cher," "Elegy" pas de deux, "I Feel the Earth Move," and "Daphnis and Chloe." • Oct. 29 at 2: "Serenade After Plato's Symposium" and "Daphnis and Chloe." (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500.)

**BalletCollective**

The founder of this group, the young choreographer Troy Schumacher, is also a soloist at New York City Ballet. The inspiration for his newest work, "Translation," which takes place within an immersive projection installation, is the science-fiction writing of Ken Liu; the music is by the indie singer-songwriter Julianne Barwick. The season also includes a work by Gabrielle Lamb, BalletCollective's first guest choreographer. (N.Y.U. Skirball, 566 LaGuardia Pl. 212-998-4941. Oct. 25-27.)

**ODC/Dance**

A major institution in San Francisco dance for decades, this troupe is only now making its débüt at BAM. And although its artistic directors, Brenda Way and KT Nelson, have made hundreds of works, "boulders and bones" is only their second collaboration. The hour-long piece opens with time-lapse footage of the stacking and carving of stones for an outdoor sculpture by the landscape artist Andy Goldsworthy. The ensuing dance, with live accompaniment by the cellist Zoë Keating, aspires to a similarly monumental meditation on permanence and decay, with weight-sharing duets and dancers kicking up dust. (BAM Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Oct. 25-28.)

**Cynthia Oliver**

The stereotypes of black masculinity are all too familiar and narrow. In "Virago-Man Dem," Oliver wants to reveal a broader and more nuanced spectrum of possibilities. The work stars four African-American and Afro-Caribbean performers and draws on their life experiences, acknowledging some gender expectations and pushing against others. In front of projected images by the Afrofuturist visual-art collective Black Kirby, the dancers move beautifully. (BAM Fisher, 321 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Oct. 25-28.)

**Compagnie Maguy Marin**

After an absence of nearly a decade, the veteran French provocateur returns to New York, with "BiT." It's another of Marin's nothing-changes,

men-are-beasts pieces. This time, what goes on and on, until death, is the hand-in-hand folk dancing of the farandole, done to techno, up and down ramps. The tone is playful, until the lights dim and the unhappy simulated sex starts. Monks gang-rape what might be a corpse, but it's all less shocking than daft. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Oct. 25-29.)

**Simone Forti, Steve Paxton, and Yvonne Rainer**

Simone Forti, Steve Paxton, and Yvonne Rainer met, as students, in the early sixties. Before long, they were each enormously influential in the creation of what became known as post-modern dance. But it was only last year that they first performed together as a trio. "Tea for Three" is what they're calling this largely improvised evening, a meeting of three master improvisers with decades of experience both shared and not. (Danspace Project, St. Mark's Church In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 866-811-4111. Oct. 26-28.)

**White Light Festival / "Layla and Majnun"**

In the Middle East, the epic, and tragic, love story of Layla and Majnun is as ubiquitous as "Romeo and Juliet" is in the West. In 1908, it was turned into an opera by the Azerbaijani composer Uzeyir Hajibeyov, combining Western and Azerbaijani musical styles—Verdi-like choruses mixed with freestyle *mugham* singing. This staging, by the choreographer Mark Morris, is an abridged, sixty-minute version of that work, in which the two lead singers (Alim Qasimov, a huge star, and his daughter Fargana Qasimova) sit in the center of the stage while Morris's dancers depict the roles of the lovers at various stages of their lives, from their meeting, in grade school, to their death, from heartache. The musicians, who include Western and

Azerbaijani instrumentalists, are from the Silk Road Ensemble. (*Rose Theatre*, 60th St. at Broadway. 212-721-6500. Oct. 26-29.)

**"The Red Shoes" / Matthew Bourne**

The British choreographer Matthew Bourne, who previously adapted "Edward Scissorhands" into a ballet, has made a stage version of this tale of a dancer who must choose between love and art, based on the film from 1948. New York City Ballet's Sara Mearns will alternate with the long-time Bourne dancer Ashley Shaw in the role of the protagonist; American Ballet Theatre's Marcelo Gomes takes turns with Dominic North as the man whom she loves but must sacrifice for fame. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Oct. 26-29 and Oct. 31. Through Nov. 5.)

**Armitage Gone! Dance**

Inspired by the 1929 Walt Disney animated short "The Skeleton Dance," and by how surreal life in America can seem these days, the erstwhile punk ballerina Karole Armitage has created a Halloween show for adults and cool kids. With costumes by Peter Speliopoulos and Jon Can Coskunse, "Halloween Unleashed" has cats, bats, owls, witches, and, of course, skeletons. Armitage's hyper-flexible dancers move in screwball fashion to the sounds of punk, Wyclef Jean, and Marilyn Manson. (La Mama, 74A E. 4th St. 646-430-5374. Oct. 27-29.)

**Andrea Miller / Gallim Dance**

The first choreographer to serve as an artist-in-residence at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Miller inaugurates her one-year tenure with "Stone Skipping," a site-specific piece for one of the museum's most dramatic spaces, the Temple of Dendur. Her company of youthful daredevils is augmented by student dancers from Juilliard, and the viola quartet Firewood plays Phil Kline's score live. (Metropolitan Museum, Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949. Oct. 28-29.)

**ART****MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES****Met Breuer**

"Raghbir Singh: Modernism on the Ganges"

In April of 1999, a month before he died unexpectedly, of a heart attack, at the age of fifty-six, Singh gave his last lecture, at the International Center of Photography, in New York. By way of introduction, his friend and fellow-photographer Thomas Roma told the audience, "To call Raghbir Singh a photographer of India is to call Robert Frost a poet of New York, which is to say, it is a grossly inadequate description." As evidenced by this quietly magnificent show, Singh had an eye for the complex visual rhythms of life on the streets of his native country, which rivalled that of Henri Cartier-Bresson. Above all, though, Singh was a master of color, as the eighty-five small images on view make startlingly clear. Consider "Villagers Visiting Jodhpur Enjoying Ice Sweets, Rajasthan," from 1978. Five men hunker down in the dirt, staring straight at Singh's lens while holding orange popsicles—eruptions of color in the mostly white,

brown, and gray scene, amplified by a yellow turban and a turquoise shirt, which is echoed by a faded blue bench in the background. It's a succinct epic, a dual portrait of ancient ways and modernization. *Through Jan. 2.*

**Institute for the Study of the Ancient World**

"Restoring the Minoans: Elizabeth Price and Sir Arthur Evans"

The British archeologist Sir Arthur Evans began excavating at Knossos, in Crete, in 1900. Based on what he found, he "reconstituted" what he believed to be the labyrinthine palace that Daedalus built to house the Minotaur, employing hundreds of artisans to rebuild a lost world whose aesthetic bore a surprising resemblance to Art Deco. A beautiful large drawing by the Swiss draftsman Émile Gilliéron (made before 1914), one of some sixty Minoan and Evansian artifacts in this fascinating show, exemplifies the audacity, and also the imagination, of Evans's project. Gilliéron painted the surviving fragments of a fresco known as "the Lady in Red" in watercolor (part of a forearm, an exposed breast, and a scrap of dress) and drew around them, in pencil, the "reconstruction"

(a woman with an elaborate hair style, almond eyes, and stylized fingers). Evans was also a keeper of the Ashmolean Museum, at Oxford; when the 2012 Turner Prize-winning artist Elizabeth Price was invited to use materials from the Ashmolean and the Pitt Rivers to create a new piece, it was Evans's archive that caught her eye. In her two-channel video "A Restoration," on view here, Evans's quixotic construction of an ancient utopia becomes a dystopic metaphor for encyclopedic organizations of knowledge and human identity. *Through Jan. 7.*

#### **Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art**

"Barbara Hammer: Evidentiary Bodies" The American artist is best known for her groundbreaking films, which are joyful studies in female subjectivity and formal experimentation. A selection plays on a loop in this concise survey, notably "Dyketactics," from 1974, a now iconic slice-of-life snapshot set to a Moog-synthesized score, and several strikingly erotic Super-8 shorts. Also on view are archival materials, which convey a playful approach to art and activism, as well as early didactic and psychedelic works on paper. A grid of photographs documents performances that Hammer organized, including "Homage to Sappho" (1978), in which a group of women gathered outside the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and released balloons carrying slips of paper inscribed with lesbian artists' names. In the dreamlike "Pond and Waterfall" (1982), visitors are encouraged to remove a stethoscope from a hook on the wall and listen to their own heartbeat while watching Hammer's aquatic footage—a beautiful moment in a revelatory show. *Through Jan. 28.*

#### **GALLERIES—UPTOWN**

##### **Louise Bonnet**

Fetchingly grotesque paintings by the Swiss-born Los Angeles artist, in her first solo show

in New York, brazen a roll call of influences: definitely late Philip Guston, glancingly Peter Saul, and distantly the Picasso of beach-ball Surrealism. Bulbous female figures, often seaside, sport creamy folds of flesh, colossal feet, alert nipples, and noses so protuberant as to suggest carnal speech balloons. Helmetlike masses of hair conceal their faces (if they can be thought to have faces). A palette given to pleasant pinks and blues forestalls unease, but only somewhat. *Through Nov. 10.* (*Half Gallery*, 43 E. 78th St. 212-744-0151.)

##### **Paulo Nazareth**

The Brazilian artist, who is of African and indigenous descent, takes long-distance walks, including a three-year journey from Brazil to New York. This airy arrangement of found-object sculptures, small works on paper, and a projection of three videotaped performances is just a small portion of his ongoing project "Cadernos de África" ("African Notebooks"), based on a series of shorter walks in Africa and the Americas. Four elegant sculptures, displayed on pedestals of stacked wooden shipping pallets, command the gallery's floor. They pair rough-hewn building stones, which evoke ancient structures, with everyday items. In "Chinatown," a rock rests on a pair of red plastic supermarket bags; in "Nice," another rock smashes the toes of a pair of Nikes, a concise metaphor for displacement. *Through Nov. 11.* (*Mendes Wood DM*, 60 E. 66th St. 212-220-9943.)

#### **GALLERIES—CHELSEA**

##### **Mel Kendrick**

The New York sculptor's memorable black-and-white woodblock prints, which he made in the early nineties, suggest pages of closely set type—if those pages were nine feet tall and seventeen feet wide. The interplay of chalky woodgrain patterns and speckled blacks is enlivened by sharp white lines, notably in "10 Loops 3," in which two long, serrated shapes

descend against a dark background. Anchoring the half-dozen prints is Kendrick's jaggedly energetic "Black-Oil Sculpture No. 4," a popular construction darkened with lampblack—a dramatic drawing in three dimensions. *Through Nov. 4.* (*Nolan*, 527 W. 29th St. 212-925-6190.)

#### **GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN**

##### **Susan Cianciolo**

Once better known as a fashion designer famous for her grunge-era makeshift collections, Cianciolo now applies her exacting scavenger aesthetic to life-as-art environments and events. (During the recent Whitney Biennial, she took over the museum's restaurant for a three-day stint, dressing her waitstaff in patchwork couture.) She presents three "houses" here—a café, a library, and a prayer room—each mapped out by graceful wooden frames. At the opening, there were margaritas, quesadillas, and a women's meditation circle; the next day, visitors were sipping tea, eating homemade chocolates, and browsing the library. Furnished with doll-size tea sets, fabric collages, mismatched chairs, and children's art work, the semi-functional installation is an enchanting oasis, whose future programs include an afternoon fabric-painting and embroidery workshop (on Nov. 4; R.S.V.P. essential), and an evening talk about Hannah Höch's garden (on Nov. 16). *Through Dec. 3.* (*Donahue*, 99 Bowery. 646-896-1368.)

##### **Robert Moskowitz**

A star, four decades ago, of "new image" painting—formalist representation—Moskowitz persists, at his studios, in Nova Scotia and New York, with results that merit rediscovery after a long exile from fashion. New slim rectangular paintings, six and a half feet high or long, present crisp negative silhouettes—bright white latex against, and in balance with, midnight-black oil—that either suggest architectural masses or, with contours of the Empire State and Flatiron Buildings, declare them. All the shapes on the imposing, unframed canvases tilt, making a viewer feel nudged off balance. The style holds up as a turning point in painting history. *Through Dec. 3.* (*Schuss*, 34 Orchard St. 212-219-9918.)

#### **GALLERIES—BROOKLYN**

##### **Graham Collins**

A slender tower of corroding bronzed toothbrushes with one perpendicular phallic protrusion looks like a joke on Giacometti in particular, and on the self-important weight of art-historical references in general. Busy, abstract paintings sewn together from scraps of found canvases invoke Internet image searches and cottage artisans. Collins has also bronzed and soldered together Cheetos, Fritos, Funyuns, and Doritos into surprisingly elegant sculptures. But just because Collins's work is funny doesn't mean the Brooklyn-based painter is kidding. One six-foot-high, largely brown-and-black painting is a romantic mood study, its two identifiable pictorial elements a drooping white flower and a bit of sunlight breaking through storm clouds. Another, titled "Unmeltable Antebellum," makes an electric impression with tiny slivers of color. *Through Nov. 4.* (*Journal Gallery*, 106 N. 1st St. 718-218-7148.)



In 1999, Lauren Greenfield photographed a cheerleading rehearsal of the Sun City Poms, who ranged in age from sixty-three to eighty-one, in Arizona. The picture is on view in Greenfield's exhibition "Generation Wealth," at the International Center of Photography, through Jan. 7.

# NIGHT LIFE

## ROCK AND POP

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

### Beach Fossils

A few years back, a young North Carolinian named Dustin Payseur moved to Bushwick, got a job at Urban Outfitters, and started recording songs in his room. Since then, his group has grown into one of the more well known indie-rock acts of his generation, but he hasn't held the reins too tightly; for his latest album, "Somersault," he opened up the songwriting process to his bandmates. The result is narcotic, downbeat slacker anthems perfect for lazy car trips or bleary-eyed mornings. Just don't let those dulcet tones fool you into thinking that the band is a bunch of bookworms. (*Brooklyn Steel*, 319 Frost St., Brooklyn. 888-929-7849. Oct. 28.)

### Kim Ann Foxman

Foxman, a Hawaii-born artist and d.j., claims to sneeze when she's full, her version of synesthesia. "It's not too far off from that—crossing wires of the senses in a way," she explained to the dance-music outlet Thump. For the deep-club denizen, who runs an egalitarian record label out of an old firehouse, escapism is delivered with a straight face. Foxman has done work for fashion houses looking to sharpen their edge (she's scored dinners for Gucci and shilled for Adidas Stan Smith), but her hard style shines most brightly at her various residencies, which include stints at Berlin's Panorama Bar and Greenpoint's Good Room, where she returns this week, to dole out dizzying trance and stuttering Chicago house in celebration of the venue's third birthday. (98 Meserole Ave., Brooklyn. 718-349-2373. Oct. 28.)

### Grooms

Travis Johnson is one of the owners of Death by Audio, a guitar-effects-pedal manufacturer that also operated a much loved warehouse venue until it was taken over by Vice Media, in 2014. He's also the lead singer of this nervy rock group, one of the more imaginative outfits in New York at the moment, which just released its fifth record, "Exit Index," on Western Vinyl. To celebrate the album, Johnson designed a custom foot switch of the same name. The Exit Index pedal has four potentiometers to regulate sound, which Johnson named romance, fantasy, body, and blood—fair approximations of the new record's tones. (*Brooklyn Bazaar*, 150 Greenpoint Ave., Brooklyn. [bkbazaar.com](#). Oct. 25.)

### Honduras

These Brooklyn rockers dish out rattling punk that's easy to love: quick-hit, warmly juvenile guitar licks and jangling drums that stomp up from below. The lead singer, Patrick Phillips, performs with a nihilistic edge that updates the Sex Pistols, but if you ask the guitarist Tyson Moore about influences he cites originators like the Saints and Johnny Thunders and the Heartbreakers. The best moments of Honduras's début, "Rituals," drag Phillips's vocals out front, and fast: "Barricades" cracks open with eight counts of galloping snares, dives through some crashing waves of guitar, and then clears the room in time for Phillips to casually warn, "Don't look me in the eye." It's beach punk by city kids,

an age-old inversion lapped up by critics and fans alike, even if the band drove upstate to lay down the songs. Digging into the Halloween spirit, the group headlines "A NYC Horror Show," with **Alexander F, Fruit & Flowers**, and **Chorizo**. (*Mercury Lounge*, 217 E. Houston St. 212-260-4700. Oct. 27.)

### Japandroids

This stripped-down guitar-and-drums Vancouver duo has built a respectable career cranking up the earnestness on their anthemic, punk-tinged classic rock. They offer a refreshing genuineness, with a marked loyalty to tradition and a sense of ambition that has made it possible for them to fill the sprawling industrial venue Brooklyn Steel. The band recently wrapped a lengthy tour supporting its latest long-player (its first in five years), "Near to the Wild Heart of Life." Not much has changed: all Japandroids albums have eight songs, constituting about thirty-five minutes of David Prowse's propulsive, pound-the-pavement drumming and Brian King's Springsteen-style riffs, capped by hoarse, tour-shredded vocals. (*319 Frost St.*, Brooklyn. 888-929-7849. Oct. 26.)

### Lee (Scratch) Perry

In 1973, the reggae musician and producer Lee (Scratch) Perry built the Black Ark recording studios in the back yard of his house in Kingston, Jamaica. Perry worked there with Bob Marley and Junior Murvin, and also recorded his own instrumental dub albums, which, in their studio innovations, were as remarkable as the Wall of Sound hits that Phil Spector had released a decade earlier. Perry's use of billowing echoes, odd percussive sounds, and eclectic milking and vocalizing made albums like "Africa's Blood" and "Cloak & Dagger" into reggae classics and precious texts for generations of young producers and engineers. He mans Output with his Subatomic Sound System band. (*74 Wythe Ave.*, Brooklyn. [outputclub.com](#). Oct. 25.)

### Primus

One of the best factoids from "The Defiant Ones," HBO's recent documentary miniseries about Jimmy Iovine and Dr. Dre, is that Interscope Records' first two signees were Gerardo, the Latin-American rapper behind "Rico Suave," and this unwaveringly quirky San Francisco outfit. Primus rose to prominence in the early nineties, with a distinctive sound that injected an absurdist sensibility into funk-metal. The bizarre results, anchored by the deft bassist and lyricist Les Claypool, landed on the charts a handful of times, thanks to such ditties as "Jerry Was a Race Car Driver," "My Name Is Mud," and the endearingly provocative "Wynona's Big Brown Beaver." The ensuing decades found the members of the band splintering off; Claypool experimented with other groups, including Oysterhead (with Stewart Copeland, of the Police, and Trey Anastasio, of Phish), before Primus reunited and released "Green Naugahyde," in late 2011, its first new album in twelve years. (*Capitol Theatre*, 149 Westchester Ave., Port Chester. [thecapitoltheatre.com](#). Oct. 29. *Brooklyn Steel*, 319 Frost St., Brooklyn. 888-929-7849. Oct. 31.)

### Chris Riffle

Those looking for respite from the Sturm und Drang of city life shouldn't sleep on this young troubadour, one of the more sophisticated singer-songwriters

on the Lower East Side. Riffle's soft-focus slow jams are therapeutic in their spaciousness, creating an atmosphere that harkens back to his Washington State upbringing. But it's his elegant vocals—hushed and introspective, whispering gently dissolving melodies over muted arrangements of mellow indie-folk—that will grab you. This week, he performs on Allen Street with a trio that includes the upright bassist **Rob Jost**, who has played with Björk and Feist, and the talented producer **Jimi Zhivago**, a longtime collaborator. (*Rockwood Music Hall*, 185 Orchard St. 212-477-4155. Oct. 28.)

## JAZZ AND STANDARDS

### Jonny King

King, a multitalented pianist and the author of the valuable primer "What Jazz Is," has had an on-again, off-again career, thanks to his stint as a trial attorney, but it's worth attending to his trenchant post-bop playing now that he's in view again. He has unerring support from the bassist **Ira Coleman** and the drummer **Victor Lewis**. (*Mezzrow*, 163 W. 10th St. [mezzrow.com](#). Oct. 27-30.)

### Johnny O'Neal

O'Neal is a survivor, and he'd be the first person to tell you so. Obscurity and illness diverted his path for a good part of the past few decades, but this fine pianist and singer is a throwback to the long-gone days when performers had to know any song that was thrown at them, and then toss it off with authority. He has built a coterie of devoted listeners entranced by his old-school erudition. O'Neal celebrates the release of his album "In the Moment" in charge of an agreeably empathetic trio. (*Smoke*, 2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts. 212-864-9662. Oct. 27-29.)

### Terell Stafford Quintet

Hearing Stafford's work as a whirlwind trumpeter in decades past, with the bands of Bobby Watson and others, you could practically taste his promise. True to predictions, Stafford has developed into a distinguished bandleader and composer whose horn playing still startles with its verve and conviction. His quintet is bolstered by the pianist **Bruce Barth** and the saxophonist **Tim Warfield**. (*Village Vanguard*, 178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. 212-255-4037. Oct. 24-29.)

### Lew Tabackin Quartet: "Tribute to Zoot Sims"

There can never be too many tributes to the late Zoot Sims, a swinging and lyrical mainstream tenor saxophonist, whose influence may unfortunately be receding into the netherworld of musical history. Tabackin, himself a mighty tenor player, appreciates his own roots and will doff his cap to Sims, fronting a quartet that includes the pianist **Jeb Patton** and the bassist **Bill Crow**, a Sims collaborator. (*Jazz at Kitano*, 66 Park Ave., at 38th St. 212-885-7119. Oct. 28.)

### Yosvany Terry / Baptiste Trotignon

The recent influx of contemporary Cuban musicians onto the national jazz scene has transformed a phenomenon from a novelty into a near-commonplace occurrence. Terry, an inspired saxophonist energized by the musical traditions of his homeland, has been heard with his bass-playing brother Yúnior (who joins him here) and a host of inquisitive bandleaders, including Steve Coleman and Jason Lindner. He's teamed up with the French pianist Trotignon, with whom he recorded "Ancestral Memories," a deeply felt project that delves into the interlocking byways of Caribbean and French Louisiana culture. (*Jazz Standard*, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. Oct. 26-29.)

# MOVIES

## NOW PLAYING

### Blade Runner 2049

A sequel to Ridley Scott's masterwork of 1982. He returns as an executive producer, as does Hampton Fancher as a screenwriter, this time in collaboration with Michael Green. Harrison Ford, at his wryest, is also still in the frame, though whether his character is an immortal android or just an old growling guy remains a mystery. The new director is Denis Villeneuve, and the new hero is KD6-3.7 (Ryan Gosling), a blade runner—a replicant cop who is assigned to shut down any early-model replicants who remain. One job leads him on a lengthy quest, involving such minor matters as his own origins and the future of the human—and thus the inhuman—race. The resulting film is doom-struck, unruled, and dangerously close, at times, to the brink of the ponderous; the shock of the new, delivered by the first movie, is all but impossible to repeat. Jared Leto underwhelms in the role of the resident evil genius, but Dave Bautista, in wire-rimmed spectacles, is a potent hulk, and Ana de Armas is a dazzling virtual companion to K. There is pathos in that dazzle; it can be turned off at the press of a button.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 10/16/17.) (In wide release.)

### Félicité

The title character of Alain Gomis's pain-streaked, richly textured drama is a full-voiced and charismatic Afropop singer (played by Véro Tshanda Béya Mputu) who works in an alleyway night club in Kinshasa. Her fierce independence is put to the test when her son, Samo (Gaëtan Claudia), is hospitalized and in danger of losing his leg after a motorbike accident. Because of the Democratic Republic of the Congo's cash-on-the-barrelhead medical system, Félicité must scrape together a large advance payment in order for Samo to receive treatment, and she duns creditors, beseeches family and friends, and—in the most devastating scene—barges into the gated house of a local grande, whose help comes at a high price. Meanwhile, Félicité begins a fragile romance with Tabu (Papi Mpaka), a rowdy but resourceful night-club patron. The movie is a virtual documentary of city sights and moods, and also a bitter exposé of a country without a social safety net. Blue-toned dream sequences and classical-music interludes suggest counter-lives of idealistic aspirations, private and public. In Lingala and French.—*Richard Brody* (In limited release.)

### Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold

This documentary, directed by Didion's nephew Griffin Dunne, is more of a feast for fans of her writing than for fans of documentary filmmaking. Dunne chronologically weaves together Didion's life and work, starting with her Sacramento childhood and her débüt at *Vogue*, in the nineteen-fifties, and continuing with her career as a novelist and an essayist and her relationship with the writer John Gregory Dunne, the director's uncle, whom she married in 1964. (He died in 2003.) The movie is filled with evocative photographs and home movies from Didion's archive, and also historical clips and enthusiastic interviews with friends and associates. Didion speaks frankly but tersely with the filmmaker, and her gestures seem to sculpt the air with thoughts that she phrases precisely and de-

livers with a comedian's sense of timing, but the interviews aren't copious or probing; controversies and conflicts are averted. Instead, the film offers many voice-over excerpts from Didion's work; the result, though loving and celebratory, is closer to an official portrait than an illuminating biography.—R.B. (*Metropath* and *Netflix*.)

### The Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected)

Anybody hoping that Noah Baumbach might stretch his wings and make a movie about the Roman Empire or intergalactic warfare will have to wait. For now, he stays in his discomfort zone: messed-up modern families in New York. The patriarch of the Meyerowitzes is Harold (Dustin Hoffman), who aimed to be the great sculptor of his generation and missed, though you wouldn't know it from his manner—lordly, intemperate, and blisteringly quick to take offense. This has not made things easy for his sons, Matthew (Ben Stiller), who lives in Los Angeles and makes good money, and Danny (Adam Sandler), who does nothing much except fret, or for his desolate daughter, Jean (Elizabeth Marvel). Other characters are tossed into the mix: Harold's latest wife, the boozy Maureen (Emma Thompson), and his granddaughter, Eliza (Grace Van Patten), who, alone in the clan, seems lightened by hope and good sense. Baumbach not only finds time and room for these restless souls but makes us believe in them as they clash, make peace, and clash again. The movie is comically intimate with their lives, yet it covers a lot of ground. With Judd Hirsch, as Harold's rival of old.—A.L. (10/23/17) (In limited release and on *Netflix*.)

### Novitiate

There's a sharp historical angle built into Maggie Betts's schematic drama, which is centered on a seventeen-year-old girl named Cathleen (Margaret Qualley), who, in 1964, enters a convent as a postulant, the first step toward becoming a nun. Though raised without religion by her freethinking mother (Julianne Nicholson), Cathleen turned devout while attending parochial school, enthralled by the concept of "love and sacrifice." The strict convent rules are sternly applied by the Mother Superior (Melissa Leo), who, after Cathleen's arrival, receives new and liberalized orders, on the basis of the reformist Second Vatican Council, which threaten both her long-standing reign and the rigorous doctrinal discipline that Cathleen craves. Meanwhile, Cathleen's awakening desires threaten her religious obedience from within. Betts, who also wrote the script, films the young women of the convent with ardent attention, catching hints of skepticism and revolt in small yet unmistakable details. But she undercuts the characters' passion and transcendent devotion with audiovisual commonplaces, familiar acting styles, and a merely anecdotal narrative. With Rebecca Dayan, as a mysterious newcomer from another convent, and Denis O'Hare, as a tart-tongued archbishop.—R.B. (In limited release.)

### Only the Brave

This vigorous melodrama is based on the true story of the Granite Mountain Hotshots, an unheralded and underfunded local Arizona wildfire-fighting company that struggled, a decade ago, to gain recognition as a first-rank force. The action is centered on the company's wise and taciturn superintendent, Eric Marsh (Josh Brolin), whose fierce

devotion to the outfit masks his troubled past. The newest recruit, Brendan McDonough, a.k.a. Donut (Miles Teller), is a recovering drug user and a long-time slacker who, after the birth of his daughter, finds a newfound purpose in the hard and dangerous work. Meanwhile, Eric confronts unresolved issues with his wife, Amanda (Jennifer Connelly), a horse trainer who has also overcome personal trouble. Though the movie, based on an article in *GQ*, by Sean Flynn, offers fascinating insights into the practical exertions and bureaucratic complications of firefighting, it places much greater emphasis on the protagonists' personal lives. The depiction of heroic courage is stirring and the acting is uniformly hearty (Jeff Bridges shines as a crusty fire chief), but the trenchant dialogue (from a script by Ken Nolan and Eric Warren Singer) is delivered with familiar histrionics, and the drama is so tightly focused that it becomes an implausibly narrow vision of white working-class men keeping the country running. Directed by Joseph Kosinski; co-produced by Condé Nast Entertainment.—R.B. (In wide release.)

### The Sacrifice

Andrei Tarkovsky's last film, from 1986, is a grand, unworldly, even antiworldly religious vision. Alexander (Erland Josephson), a middle-aged critic, lives in a remote waterfront manor in rural Sweden with his frustrated wife, Adelaide (Susan Fleetwood), her grown daughter, Martha (Filippa Franzén), and their young son (Tommy Kjellqvist), called Little Man, who, after a minor operation, cannot speak. The action is set on Alexander's birthday. He receives presents and visits, but suddenly the house shakes with the thunder of military aircraft, and a television broadcast announces an imminent nuclear attack. The members of the household and their guests are on the verge of a collective breakdown as they face the end, but Alexander's friend Otto (Allan Edwall), a postman and retired history teacher, offers him a metaphysical bargain to save the world. The blend of midlife crisis and existential terror is reminiscent of the films of Ingmar Bergman, but Tarkovsky makes it a world of his own. His images have a transcendental glow and a hieratic poise; alternating between contemplative distance and moral confrontation, they assert, in the most radical sense, the high cost of living—the unbearable price of earthly delights. In Swedish.—R.B. (*Film Society of Lincoln Center*, *Quad Cinema*, and streaming.)

### Wonderstruck

Time and again, the new Todd Haynes film steps back and forth between the nineteen-twenties and 1977. Two separate tales are told, and we gradually understand how they converge. One, shot in needle-sharp black-and-white, stars Millicent Simmonds, as Rose, a deaf girl who flees Hoboken for Manhattan to track down a movie star—her idol, and more—who is appearing onstage. In the second story, a motherless kid named Ben (Oakes Fegley, who was excellent as the hero of "Pete's Dragon") somehow loses his hearing in a lightning strike, in Gunflint, Minnesota. He, too, takes off, to search for his long-lost father in New York. The screenplay is adapted by Brian Selznick (the author of "Hugo") from his own novel, and the result shows an unstinting attention to detail, and, in particular, to the recurring theme of speechlessness; Haynes even makes up his own silent movie, with the Griffith-like title "Daughter of the Storm." But the careful patterning of the narrative is achieved at the expense of dramatic verve, and it is left to Julianne Moore, who appears in both parts of the film, to suffuse it with life and warmth.—A.L. (10/23/17) (In limited release.)

# THE THEATRE



Steve Martin's new Broadway play combines marital friction with astronomical calamity.

## Supernova

*Keegan-Michael Key makes his Broadway début, in "Meteor Shower."*

Spare a thought, in these enraging times, for Luther, Barack Obama's "anger translator." As embodied by Keegan-Michael Key, on the Comedy Central sketch show "Key & Peele," Luther gave voice to the coolheaded President's inner fury over everything from the Tea Party ("Oh, don't even get me started on these motherfuckers") to birtherism ("I have a hot-diggy-doggy-mamasa-mamakusa birth certificate, you dumb-ass crackers!"). One imagines him spending the Trump years climbing up walls and foaming at the mouth.

Since "Key & Peele" ended, in 2015, Key and his comedy partner, Jordan Peele, have both gone on to formidable careers of their own. Peele wrote and directed the genre-busting satirical horror film "Get Out," while Key, who has an M.F.A. in drama from Penn State, has returned to his theatrical roots. "My girlfriend said one day, 'If you had no excuses about why you couldn't do something, what would you want to do?'" he recalled recently. "And I said, 'I would want to do Jason Bourne, and I would want to do Shakespeare.'" This past summer, he took care of the Shakespeare part, playing Horatio to Oscar Isaac's Hamlet—speaking of someone who could use an anger translator—in Sam Gold's experimen-

tal production, at the Public Theatre. Jason Bourne is still on the bucket list.

In the meantime, Key is making his Broadway début, in "Meteor Shower" (starting previews Nov. 1, at the Booth), a comedy by Steve Martin that combines marital friction with astronomical calamity. Key plays Gerald, a bombastic know-it-all whom he describes as "a bit of a vocal bull in a china shop." He stars alongside Amy Schumer, who also made her name in sketch comedy, as well as the theatrical ringers Laura Benanti and Jeremy Shamos. They play a pair of couples in Ojai, California, who get together and watch a celestial event, until their "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"-esque squabbling tilts into absurdist fantasy.

A veteran of Second City, Key has an improviser's gift for making things work on the spot. But Broadway offers something else: time for fine-tuning, here under the direction of Jerry Zaks ("Hello, Dolly!"). "There are moments where Jerry says things like 'Sweetheart, now say the line, then sit down, then turn your head'—which we don't have time to do on television," Key said. "In a play, you get to sculpt the moments. The moments are wrought. And that's probably the biggest difference, which is something that Amy and I both adore. We get more time to achieve the comedy. It's not microwaved comedy. It's nice, slow, baked-in-the-oven comedy."

—Michael Schulman

## Actually

In Anna Ziegler's play, directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz for Manhattan Theatre Club, two freshmen at Princeton meet at a party and wade into issues of sexual consent. (*City Center Stage II*, at 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. *Previews begin Oct. 31.*)

## The B-Side

The Wooster Group presents a theatrical interpretation of the 1965 blues album "Negro Folklore from Texas State Prisons," featuring Eric Berryman and directed by Kate Valk. (*The Performing Garage*, 33 Wooster St. [thewoostergroup.org](http://thewoostergroup.org). *Previews begin Oct. 25. Opens Oct. 27.*)

## Illyria

The Public Theatre tells its own story with this play, written and directed by Richard Nelson, about how the young Joe Papp (John Magaro) founded the New York Shakespeare Festival, in the nineteen-fifties. (425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. *In previews. Opens Oct. 30.*)

## Latin History for Morons

John Leguizamo's newest one-man show, in which he recounts his search for a Latin hero for his son's history project, moves to Broadway. Directed by Tony Taccone. (*Studio 54*, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-239-6200. *In previews.*)

## M. Butterfly

Clive Owen and Jin Ha star in Julie Taymor's revival of David Henry Hwang's Tony Award-winning drama, about the romance between a married French diplomat and a Chinese opera singer. (*Cort*, 138 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. *In previews. Opens Oct. 26.*)

## Marcel + The Art of Laughter

Theatre for a New Audience presents a double bill of comic one-acts, featuring the European slapstick performers (and original members of the London troupe Complicite) Jos Houben and Marcello Magni. (*Polonsky Shakespeare Center*, 262 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111. *Previews begin Oct. 27.*)

## People, Places & Things

Denise Gough reprises her Olivier-winning role in Duncan Macmillan's play, as an actress trying to get her life back together in rehab. (*St. Ann's Warehouse*, 45 Water St., Brooklyn. 718-254-8779. *Opens Oct. 25.*)

## Red Roses, Green Gold

This new musical uses the music and lyrics of Jerry Garcia and Robert Hunter to tell the story of a family of swindlers in the nineteen-twenties. (*Minetta Lane Theatre*, 18 Minetta Lane. 800-745-3000. *In previews. Opens Oct. 29.*)

## What We're Up Against

WP Theatre stages Theresa Rebeck's dark comedy about gender politics at an architecture firm, directed by Adrienne Campbell-Holt and featuring Skylar Astin and Krysta Rodriguez. (*McGinn/Cazale*, 2162 Broadway, at 76th St. 866-811-4111. *Previews begin Oct. 28.*)

## NOW PLAYING

### Animal Wisdom

Heather Christian, a prolific composer, pianist, and powerhouse vocalist originally from

Natchez, Mississippi, offers an intimate "re-quiem" for the ghosts in her life, particularly her grandmothers: both of them, as she puts it, "New Orleans Catholics who are also musicians who suffer migraines and talk to dead people." The manic monologue she uses to connect her songs sometimes verges on derangement and on the sort of self-indulgence that all art based on family history risks. But every moment is so deliberate and well orchestrated, and her four bandmates are so generous and attuned, and the music itself is so fierce and exhilarating that she can get away with whatever she wants. Andrew Schneider's lighting design is an equally expressive feat—including the long stretch of pitch-darkness during the show's climactic suite of songs. (*The Bushwick Starr*, 207 Starr St., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111.)

### **Lonely Planet**

Steven Dietz's 1994 two-hander, set in a map store (a what?) in the early eighties, receives a funny, feeling revival in this Keen Company production. Arnie Burton plays Jody, the owner-proprietor, and Matt McGrath is Carl, a customer who came in a few years earlier and never quite left. The two men are each dealing with anxiety and with the AIDS epidemic: Carl by filling the shop with chairs from the homes of friends who have died, and Jody by shutting down and holing up there. There are echoes of Beckett's Didi and Gogo, and, naturally, references to Ionesco, as the play reflects the unmoored, theatre-of-the-absurd reality of these characters in this time. Under the direction of Jonathan Silverstein, the actors find a heightened, buoyant conversational rhythm, finally creating a touching portrait of friendship. (*Clurman*, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

### **Off the Meter, On the Record**

The New York City taxi-driver and WBAI radio host John McDonagh is not a polished performer, but, in delivering this matter-of-fact memoir of his thirty-five years chasing fares, he's an unfailingly affable raconteur. His story has two distinct parts: in the first, better half, he explains how the city works from a cabbie's perspective, with an emphasis on the risks (becoming the unwitting "wheelman in a robbery" or getting sucked into "the Upper East Side medical vortex"). It's all fascinating stuff, so the second half, which has less to do with the hack life and more to do with McDonagh's attempts to break into television, is disappointing. The connections to cab driving become even more tenuous as McDonagh delves into his politics: Irish Republicans are good, American Republicans are bad. (*Irish Repertory*, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)

### **Squeamish**

After "Another Medea" (the title is a giveaway) and "Empanada Loca" (inspired by "Sweeney Todd," so you can guess what's in those crazy pastries), the writer-director Aaron Mark stays true to his inclinations with a third horror monologue. The story is told by Sharon (Alison Fraser), a psychotherapist, who sits in a black armchair, melding into the inky murk of a barely lit stage. Sharon is confiding in her own psychiatrist—and in us, of course—about her increasingly problematic addiction. Fraser's girlish, deceptively sweet voice has been put to great use in musicals like "The Secret Garden" and "First Daughter Suite," and here it adds a perverse twist to Mark's over-the-top hemoglobin grotesque. Alas, Sharon's tale is stretched so thin that you may exhale in

relief when it comes to an end, rather than gasp from the intended dread. (*Beckett*, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

### **Torch Song**

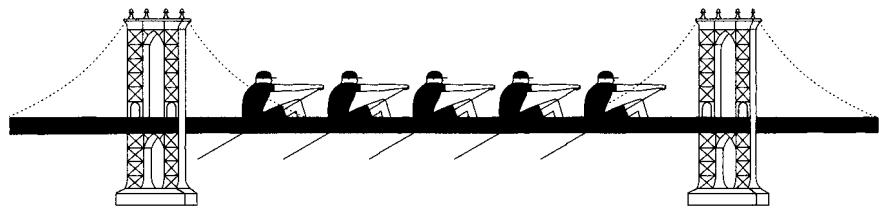
Harvey Fierstein, a great and storied member of the New York theatre scene since the early seventies, wrote and originally starred in this trilogy, winning the 1983 Tony Awards for Best Play and Best Actor. In Moisés Kaufman's revival, Michael Urie plays Arnold, a drag queen who falls in love with the emotionally unavailable Ed (Ward Horton). Despite marrying a woman named Laurel (Roxanna Hope Radja), Ed still longs for Arnold, who becomes a foster parent to a young gay kid named David (Jack DiFalco). Enter Ma (Mercedes Ruehl), a widow who resents Arnold for remaking his family in his own queer image. Standing tall—and made taller by a big wig—Ruehl dominates the production. While the talented Urie falls back on schtick to see him through, Ruehl mines her characterization

for all it's worth. The story may be dated, but it's a pioneering work, well handled by Kaufman. (*Second Stage*, 305 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

### **ALSO NOTABLE**

**After the Blast** Claire Tow. • **The Band's Visit** Ethel Barrymore. • **The Home Place** Irish Repertory. • **Jesus Hopped the "A" Train** Pershing Square Signature Center. • **Junk** Vivian Beaumont. • **The Last Match** Laura Pels. • **Mary Jane** New York Theatre Workshop. *Through Oct. 29.* • **Measure for Measure** Public. • **Oedipus el Rey** Public. • **Office Hour** Public. • **The Portuguese Kid** City Center Stage I. • **Prince of Broadway** Samuel J. Friedman. *Through Oct. 29.* • **Springsteen on Broadway** Walter Kerr. (Reviewed in this issue.) • **Strange Interlude** Irondequoit Center. • **Time and the Conways** American Airlines Theatre. • **Tiny Beautiful Things** Public. • **The Treasurer** Playwrights Horizons.

## **ABOVE & BEYOND**



### **Village Halloween Parade**

Everyone's invited—and costumes are a must—to march in this wild parade, one of the city's more exuberant traditions, now in its forty-fourth year. "It's a time for people in the most modern city in the world to come out and behave in a completely primitive way," Jeanne Fleming, the event's long-time director, told *The New Yorker* in 1989. This year's theme is "Cabinet of Curiosities: An Imaginary Menagerie," celebrating the transformative power of the hybrid: the wolfmen, Frankensteins, and Fiji Mermaids that have haunted and bewildered humans for centuries. The parade will feature more than fifty bands, hundreds of giant puppets, and thousands of New Yorkers letting out their inner monsters. (*Sixth Ave.*, heading north from Canal St. to 16th St. [halloween-nyc.com](http://halloween-nyc.com). Oct. 31 at 7.)

a private collection. One need not be a horticulturalist to admire the beauty of the illustrations tucked into books like Pierre-Joseph Redouté's "Les Roses" (1817-24), based on watercolor studies of the roses at Malmaison, Joséphine Bonaparte's redoubt, just outside Paris. (*York Ave.* at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) • This week (Oct. 25-29), the Javits Center will be filled with prints spanning a wide range of artistic periods, from Dürer to Tacita Dean (with an emphasis on contemporary and modern works), all part of the **International Fine Print Dealers Association's** yearly fair, now in its twenty-sixth edition. (*Park Ave.* at 67th St. [printfair.com](http://printfair.com).)

### **READINGS AND TALKS**

#### **92nd Street Y**

In the 1992 black comedy "Death Becomes Her," Madeline Ashton (played by Meryl Streep) seeks out a medical treatment that promises immortality as a means of one-upping an old Hollywood rival. It's a Halloween classic that foresaw today's reality: scientists across the world have dedicated significant resources to the study of "longevity genes," and have zeroed in on treatments and cures for terminal illnesses thought incurable before last decade. Max Gomez, an in-house medical correspondent for CBS with special focus on genomics and aging, speaks to a colleague, the anchor Maurice DuBois, about the impact that breakthrough cellular therapies are having on cancer, autoimmune diseases, organ replacement, heart disease, and aging itself. (*1395 Lexington Ave. 92y.org*. Oct. 25 at 7:15.)

### **AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES**

Antiquities come to **Christie's** on Oct. 25, in a sale that includes Egyptian funerary portraits, Greek amphorae decorated with sacrificial rams, and even a Roman bronze eagle (from the second or third century A.D.). One of the comeliest lots is a marble head of Livia, the wife of Augustus; the savvy Livia divorced her first husband in order to marry the future emperor, to whom she became a close and trusted adviser. A model of feminine propriety, she was depicted, as in this case, with idealized features, soberly dressed and coiffed, and without pompous jewelry. (*20 Rockefeller Plaza*, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) • If plants are your thing, then **Sotheby's** has you covered with its sale of botanical tomes (Oct. 26) from

# FOOD & DRINK



## TABLES FOR TWO

### Harry & Ida's Luncheonette

11 Park Pl. (917-409-0028)

By what alchemical process do things in the United States become frozen at specific temporal junctions? Who, for example, decided that diners up and down the country should remain locked somewhere in the nineteen-fifties? The luncheonette, a subspecies of diner, harkens back to the interwar period, to Dos Passos's "Manhattan Transfer" and men scarfing meaty sandwiches and pickles before loping off into the growing metropolis to find honest work. Several originals from this era remain; the best of them is probably the Lexington Candy Shop, which dates from 1925 and serves thick hamburgers and hot tuna melts to Upper East Siders in a hurry.

The newest opened several weeks ago, and already has a legion of regulars—or, at least, it thinks it does. "You're getting the Ida, right?" asked one of the cheeky servers at Harry & Ida's Luncheonette, which sits snugly in the southeastern corner of Tribeca. When the bewildered customer said that, no, he had not yet made up his mind, the server replied that she must have mistaken him for someone else. As recompense, she offered him a half slice of pastrami, steaming, with a speckled dollop of mustard, on a piece of parchment paper.

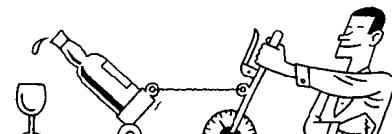
Harry & Ida's mother ship is a throw-

back smokehouse and grocery in Alphabet City, which opened in 2015. They're both named after the founders' great-grandparents—the proprietors of a now defunct Harlem deli—who came to this country from Hungary in the early twentieth century. The pastrami, hefty cut and intricately marbled, is something of a specialty, and is utterly delicious. It's coated in a pepper-heavy rub and smoked, then served at the luncheonette in sandwiches topped with buttermilk-fermented cucumber kraut and cracked rye berries, or as a "deluxe" protein that can be added to a lunch plate for an extra four dollars.

Pastrami aside, this is trendified luncheonette fare. (Smoked apricot chicken, anyone?) The sandwiches are all tasty. A vegetarian chopped liver, made with mushrooms and walnuts, spread with lemon-poppy marmalade, and seasoned with a sliced beet-pickled egg, manages freshness and heartiness at once. The lunch-plate options contain a dud or two—the hot-smoked maple salmon is frigid and disappointing. The décor reflects the establishment's clash of contemporary and iconic. Patrons sit at small, stylish marble tables under bright floral wallpaper, instead of along a counter. But, should you get too cozy, the air-conditioning is set to frostbite o'clock, reminding you that, like the luncheonette-goers of yore, you must soon be back at work. (*Plates and sandwiches, \$9.50 to \$17.45.*)

—Nicolas Niarchos

## BAR TAB



### Café Erzulie

894 Broadway, Brooklyn (718-450-3255)

Erzulie, the Haitian spirit of love and beauty, holds Thursdays sacred. After reading a longer list of her preferences, it may seem that the vodou goddess had a hand in more than just the name of this new café-cum-cocktail-lounge in Bushwick. Erzulie likes pink and light blue (the color of the floor tiles), sweet-smelling flowers and sparkling wine (provided in the form of the bubbly Kir de Jacmel), and small cakes (sticky buns are sold at the counter). The storefront is also home to Flowers by Leslie, a fifteen-year-old plant shop that was struggling to make rent. Instead of displacing it, the Erzulie owners preserved it as a business, and as a drink. Now patrons can browse the lilies and the basil for sale near the front on their way to grab a Flowers by Leslie cocktail, a pleasantly sour medley of vodka, mint, and St. Germain with crescents of cucumber. If they move farther along, to the back patio, they may chance on an event that would make Erzulie smile: on any given night, there might be Afrofuturist lecturers, a Jamaican lobster festival described as "Kingston meets Kennebunkport," or live jazz. One evening, a steel-drum player, backed by a snare and an electric bass, performed an instrumental cover of Sam Cooke's "Bring It on Home to Me." Around eleven, as the musicians started tapping out the notes to "Signed, Sealed, Delivered," a listener in red jeans and a blue button-down leapt up to become their vocalist, singing through the chorus about a dozen times. When the song finished, she twirled over to the band and asked if they knew her. They did not. "It's all good!" the mysterious singer said. "I'll see you next Thursday!" Was it the goddess herself? Perhaps. Thursday, after all, is her holy day.—Neima Jahromi



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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT LIMITS OF POWER

In 2015, in a hotel hallway in New York, the movie producer Harvey Weinstein insisted that an Italian model named Ambra Battilana Gutierrez come into his room. Gutierrez protested. The previous day, Weinstein had groped her aggressively, and she had returned to see him wearing an N.Y.P.D. wire. "Now you're embarrassing me," Weinstein says impatiently on the recording. Men who routinely humiliate women are easily embarrassed. When their targets assert even a sliver of personhood, it registers as a flustering, impermissible offense.

Since the story finally broke—first in the *Times* and then in a piece by Ronan Farrow, for this magazine—that Weinstein had buried decades of assault and harassment allegations, with the help of settlements and legal threats, more than fifty women have come forward to accuse him of similar acts. In Farrow's piece, three women allege that they were raped. (Weinstein has acknowledged misbehavior but denied allegations of non-consensual sex.) The once invulnerable producer has been fired from his own company and abandoned by members of his high-profile legal team; his wife is leaving him; the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences has rescinded his membership. The N.Y.P.D. has begun an investigation, and women will continue to come forward: the attorney Gloria Allred, who represents one of Weinstein's accusers, recently described receiving a "tsunami" of calls from women, many of them speaking through tears. Weinstein has been emba-

rassed again, this time comprehensively.

For years—for centuries—the economic, physical, and cultural subjugation of women has registered as something like white noise. Lately, it appears that we're starting to hear the tune. What had been a backdrop is now in the foreground; it has become a story with rotating protagonists which never seems to leave the news. In the past few years, women have accused Bill Cosby, Roger Ailes, Bill O'Reilly, and Donald Trump of serial sexual misconduct. Thanks to the advent of mainstream feminism, these women have been supported, to an unprecedented degree, by much of the media and the public. At the same time, political backlash insures hard limits for this support. Cosby's reputation was ruined, and Ailes and O'Reilly were pushed out of Fox News; Trump was elected President. The increasing narrative clarity about male power does not always translate to progress. For women, it feels, all

at once, shockingly possible, suddenly mandatory, and unusually frustrating to speak up.

We should pay attention to the dynamics that make this progress irregular: not all abusers meet with consequences, and not all women can attain firm ground. Men are still more often held to a standard of consistency than of morality. The liberal Weinstein, the moralizing Cosby, and the family-values-promoting Fox News men were disgraced, in part, because of their hypocrisy; men who never pretended to see women as equals or as worthy of respect can generally just keep on as they were. This is why, a month before the 2016 election, the "Access Hollywood" tape didn't sink Trump's candidacy: pussy-grabbing did not conflict with the image of a Presidential candidate who stalked his female opponent on the debate stage, and who once reportedly said of women, "You have to treat 'em like shit." Trump's former adviser Steve Bannon was charged in 1996 with spousal abuse, and that didn't pose much of a problem for him, either; anyone drawn to Bannon's brand of brutal dominance politics is perhaps unlikely to disown him for grabbing his wife's neck and pulling her into a car, as she alleged. (The case was later dismissed.)

Other forms of recourse may be possible: after Trump called his accusers liars, one of them, Summer Zervos, a former "Apprentice" contestant, sued him for defamation, with Allred's help. As part of that suit, Zervos's lawyers recently subpoenaed the Trump campaign for a wide range of documents relating to his treatment of women. But there are significant constituencies in America who are



not yet interested in holding men accountable for abusive behavior. And there are still huge swaths of women—the poor, the queer, the undocumented—who can't count on the security that feminism has conferred on its wealthier, whiter adherents, or trust that their victimization would even become news.

Nevertheless, the hunger for and possibility of solidarity among women beckons. In the past week, women have been posting their experiences of assault and harassment on social media with the hashtag #MeToo. We might listen to and lament the horrific stories being shared, and also wonder: Whom, exactly, are we reminding that women are treated as second class? Meanwhile, symbolic advancement often obscures real losses. The recent cultural gains of popular feminism were won just when male politicians were rolling back reproductive rights across the country. The overdue rush of sympathy for women's ordinary encum-

brances comes shortly after the Department of Education reversed Obama-era guidelines on college sexual-assault investigations, and Congress allowed the Children's Health Insurance Program to expire. On October 3rd, the House passed a ban on abortion after twenty weeks. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell has said that "virtually all" Republicans in the Senate support the legislation.

Being heard is one kind of power, and being free is another. We have undervalued women's speech for so long that we run the risk of overburdening it. Speech, right now, is just the flag that marks the battle. The gains won by women are limited to those who can demand them. Individual takedowns and #MeToo stories will likely affect the workings of circles that pay lip service to the cause of gender equality, but they do not yet threaten the structural impunity of powerful men as a group.

In 2014, after the death of Michael

Brown, in Ferguson, Missouri, the burgeoning Black Lives Matter movement helped make the long-festering problem of police violence against black Americans, already highly visible to a part of the population, an urgent matter for many who hadn't been forced to pay attention before. But the country as a whole divided along predictable lines, and progress on the issue is, three years later, difficult to discern. On one side, the moral weight is crushing, the energy vital and sincere. On the other side, there is disavowal and retrenchment. Between those poles are plenty of people who would rather we just talked about something else. This type of problem always narrows to an unavoidable point. The exploitation of power does not stop once we consolidate the narrative of exploitation. A genuine challenge to the hierarchy of power will have to come from those who have it.

—Jia Tolentino

## THE PICTURES CARTOON HARVEY



In the weeks since the revelations about Harvey Weinstein's sexual predations, stories about the former Miramax chief have placed him in numerous shower stalls, a town car, various hotel suites, and a restaurant kitchen. But no one expected to find him lurking in a children's cartoon. In 2005, Weinstein made a cameo appearance as himself in an animated feature film, starring Lindsay Lohan, called "My Scene Goes Hollywood." The movie, part of the Barbie franchise, was distributed by Miramax's family division and produced by Mattel, which was trying to lure back the tweens who were ditching their Barbies for a line of sexy competitor dolls called Bratz.

To keep up, Mattel produced an edgy line of dolls called My Scene. Barbie became a night-clubbing New York high schooler, with a multiethnic girl posse named after Manhattan locales: Madison, Chelsea, Delaney, Nolee (for Nolita). An animated Web series fol-

lowed, with echoes of "Sex and the City" and the Gossip Girl books. Parents watched uneasily as their eleven-year-olds grooved to the My Scene theme song: "We're going out tonight / This scene is outta sight!" After years of stagnation, Mattel's share price turned around.

"My Scene Goes Hollywood," which was released on DVD, was My Scene's cultural apotheosis. It's a friendship morality tale (Barbie and pals are cast as extras in a Lindsay Lohan movie; Madison falls for the caddish male lead, and ditches her friends). Weinstein shows up on set in the film-within-a-film. As the director yells "Cut," an imposing show-business dude—Weinstein—hovers with a proprietary air: sunglasses, dark suit, turtleneck, hands in pockets. The dude, in Weinstein's voice, says, "Picture looks great, Jim. I'm really excited about it." The My Scene girls, dressed in school uniforms, recognize him and squeal.

NOLEE (*gasp*): Talking to Jim—that's Harvey Weinstein!

CHELSEA: Who?

NOLEE: Don't you ever watch awards shows? He's, like, the biggest producer in Hollywood.

Cartoon Weinstein then approaches Madison. "Good job, young lady!" he says, placing a hand on her back.

"Thanks!" Madison responds.

Nolee groans: "Perfect. Now she'll have an even bigger head."

Many of the accounts of Weinstein's predatory behavior have cast him as an ogre-like beast among a raft of beauties. Last week, a parent of a former My Scene devotee found himself recalling the discomfort he felt about Weinstein's jarring appearance in the movie. He e-mailed the clip, which is on YouTube: "This scene creeped me out when my 7-year-old daughter watched this video incessantly in 2005." He wondered whether Weinstein's



Harvey Weinstein

cameo happened on his own initiative.

Reached by telephone, Nancy Bennett, one of the film's producers, said, "Oh, yes. I did that little movie once upon a time." Her career has included chapters at Lifetime, ABC, and Disney, where a thirteen-year-old Lindsay Lohan starred in a film Bennett helped produce, called "Life-Size," about a doll, played by Tyra Banks, who comes to life. The filmmakers had made a Tyra Banks doll as a prop.

"Lindsay was always, like, 'When do I get my doll?'" Bennett recalled. "Fast-forward a few years. Now I'm working at Mattel. We were looking to do things with the My Scene brand. We thought, Wouldn't it be cool and aspirational if the girls got to be in a movie starring Lindsay Lohan?"

Bennett mused about My Scene. "It was for girls who've grown out of princesses." The emphasis was on fashion ("The wardrobe on these girls was freaking awesome") and life style—"Girls would look at it and go, Oh my gosh, I want to go to that club!" The producers decided to ask Weinstein to do a cameo; Bennett said they thought it would be "fun and kitschy." Weinstein's cartoon avatar has a defined waist and a chiselled chin; the animators drew a generic Hollywood type. "Without—well, I won't say any more," Bennett said. "You want to be complimentary to everybody. This is Mattel. If I were doing 'Family Guy' with Seth MacFarlane, it would be different."

In retrospect, Lohan's presence in the film sets off alarm bells, too—after the Weinstein story broke, the actress posted an Instagram video, filmed in the bathroom of her Dubai residence, woefully defending the producer. Bennett insisted that Weinstein and Lohan never interacted during the My Scene project. "It had nothing to do with Barbie and Mattel," she said. "Leave Barbie out of it!" But she'd been unnerved by Lohan's defense: "It's, like, Say nothing. Shhh." She sighed. "There's a part of me, because I've known Lindsay for so long, I feel protective."

Bennett said she was horrified by the Weinstein revelations, and "mortified" that she'd put him in a Barbie film. Over the years, she continued, "I was more worried that Lindsay was

going to do something that people would associate with the brand. I never in a million years imagined it would be Harvey."

—Lizzie Widdicombe

## MOONLIGHTING GAME OVER



You've been named chairman of a major-party candidate's Presidential campaign. And it turns out that you can work for free, because, through a series of dubious transactions and nimble maneuvers, you're able to keep thirty or sixty million dollars peregrinating through various overseas bank accounts. Cool!

Or maybe you're the leader of one of the hundred and ninety-five countries in the world. Never mind how you landed that gig (free election? rigged election? dynastic inheritance? super-super-high I.Q.?), it comes with a jumbo helping of entitlement. Being human, before long you start to take the perks for granted, until one day up pops this thought: I need more. Conveniently, you've discovered a back door to your country's treasury, or a slick method for frictionless bribery, and . . . *moneymoneymoney!* There for the taking, which is nice, but also the source of an ancillary urgency: where to hide it. Opulent homes on many continents, each with a private zoo? Patek Philippe watches for every day of the month?

To guide you through the do's and don'ts, Jim Mintz and Irwin Chen have created Kleptocrat, a new free game available in the Apple App Store. Kleptocrat operates on the premise that the Player is a bad guy trying to launder ill-gotten riches while evading the Investigator, a relentless exemplar of all the anti-corruption killjoys out there. Mintz is the founder of the Mintz Group, an international private-investigation firm ("Clarity in a complex world"), many of whose clients are law firms pursuing civil cases, and Chen is a designer and an adjunct professor in interaction design at the New School. The hide-and-seek scenarios in Kleptocrat are extrapolated from the

behaviors of real kleptocrats around the world, including those laid out in *Where the Bribes Are*, a Mintz Group database. Rendered as a map of the world, the database depicts, to scale and in deepening shades of red, the bribe-susceptibility of industries within a given country, as well as details of successful prosecutions under the Foreign Corrupt Practices Act. "Our expertise boils down to following dirty money," Mintz said the other day, in a boardroom on lower Fifth Avenue. In 2015, *Where the Bribes Are* was nominated for an Honesty Oscar from the Accountability Lab, an international organization dedicated to curbing corruption in the developing world.

Mintz got his private investigator's license in 1980, a segue from investigative journalism. In the late seventies, he was part of a team in Washington, D.C., that somehow avoided blindness while piecing together shredded documents salvaged from a dumpster in the alley behind the office of a corrupt K Street lobbyist. Since 2007, he's taught investigative reporting at Columbia's School of Journalism. His habitual aversion to publicity was tested in the nineteen-nineties, when he wound up in the tabloids for suing Ivana Trump in a fee dispute, after she allegedly stiffed him for work he did during her divorce from Donald of the same last name.

The archetypal kleptocrat, Mintz says, "may be good at running a country or a business, but he's terrible at hiding money." One recent weekend, a reporter in late middle age spent several hours validating that dictum on his iPhone, playing Kleptocrat over and over without coming close to beating the Investigator.

Each game begins with a bribe (keeping a casino open in exchange for free chips; arranging a government contract "for the mobile phone company that just hired your 16-year-old daughter as a 'consultant'; a kickback on a contract to deliver defibrillators to Army hospitals). Hiding and laundering the money often requires a network of devious offshore lawyers ("expert in exotic island banks, sleazy accountants, pirate tax-havens, fake charities, backdated registrations"), corrupt military officers, well-connected mistresses, oblivious front men, or the occasional Liechtenstein foundation. Eventually, the money is meant to be

enjoyed—a private fleet of jets and helicopters; a Hong Kong shopping spree with sequentially numbered credit cards for each of your in-laws; a rare-game safari; Elvis Presley's starburst jumpsuit. The fun lasts as long as you can evade the Investigator—that is, until your buddy's coked-up girlfriend flips on you, or your wife's gym-rat cousins get clipped moving suitcases of cash through customs. You win if you accumulate a certain amount of swag before getting busted. In the event of the latter, it's game over and you, a prisoner of your ravenous avarice, tap Play and try again.

"Some people are sending us their badges showing that they've won eighteen times in a row, but I knew my demographic would be a bit challenged by it," Mintz, who is sixty-three, said. "The game developers we worked with told us that we had to strike a balance. We think it's real. Sometimes you get away with shit and sometimes you don't."

—Mark Singer

## DEPT. OF COLLABORATION MAN OF THE PEOPLE



On a recent Thursday, in a suite of dressing rooms at "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert," Bill Murray, the cellist Jan Vogler, the violinist Mira Wang, and the pianist Vanessa Perez were get-

ting ready to perform songs from an album they've just released, called "New Worlds." On the album and at concerts, Murray reads selections from Hemingway, Thurber, Whitman, Twain, and others; the musicians—all renowned international soloists—play everything from Foster to Gershwin to Shostakovich. Last Monday, at Carnegie Hall, Murray sang, danced, read, announced the score of the Yankees game, and chucked roses into the balconies from the stage. At "Late Night," things were shaggier: the band had been on the road. As the musicians napped, Murray darted around the dressing rooms, trying on outfits. He experimented with a gold velvet-brocade jacket, rhinestone earrings, a plaid vest, and a black cap bearing an insignia of a crossed golf club and fork, which he had finagled from Jack Nicklaus's Golden Bear Grill. "I had to work really hard to get one of these off the cooks in that place," Murray said.

Vogler, emerging from his nap, admired the hat. "It has a little bit between priest and fun," he said. He is German and speaks with an accent.

"It's a bit of a Greek Orthodox look," Murray said. "It says, 'It's O.K., I'm a priest—you can trust me.'" Later, he wore it on the air, as the group performed a medley from "West Side Story."

A production assistant, Jonah Meyerson, approached Murray tentatively. "We worked together on 'The Royal Tenenbaums?'" he said. "I was one of the kids?" Meyerson had played Uzi Tenenbaum, one of Ben Stiller's young tracksuit-wearing sons.

"Was that you? What a great time!" Murray said.

"In the hospital scene, like a suicide scene, you put me on your shoulders on a rolly chair," Meyerson said. "Wes Anderson started freaking out."

"That was close to being dangerous," Murray said, looking pleased. "Real upside-downy-fally stuff." Then he asked Meyerson for a favor. "Don't screw us up tonight," he said. "These classical people, this is their one shot."

Murray and Vogler met in an airport security line. "It was one of those mornings," Vogler said. "I was on tour in Germany. Somebody starts talking: 'Hey, how are you going to fit that cello in the overhead?'" It was Murray. They chatted, neither knowing who the other was. On the plane, Murray happened to be seated next to Vogler and his cello. "We became friends," Vogler said. "For two years, we had no thought of collaborating. It started as a fun project during a dinner at home." Vogler and Wang are married, and they live in New York with their children. "Bill was whistling and singing. I thought, Boy, he knows so many tunes! Pop music, I didn't know. I gave him a recording of Bach solo suites." Vogler put on a pair of spiked Louboutins. "I have always longed for a friend to cross arts," he said. "What really made me inspired was Bill singing as Baloo the bear," in a remake of "The Jungle Book." He'd told Murray, "I think we can do a show and go around the world."

Vogler says that the rise of the far right influenced the album's content. "We adored the visionaries who had these early ideas, like Mark Twain, that your heart can tell you the right thing even when your time is brutal to human rights," he said. "Or Bernstein—the Sondheim texts are incredibly clever. Industry boom in America / twelve in a room in America." The album traces the influences that European and American artists have had on one another. Vogler said, "And then we talk about how immigration is a new world. In our group, we have a Venezuelan, a Chinese, an East German, and an American of Irish descent. So you make the math."

He took his 1707 Stradivarius cello out of its case and began playing "Somewhere." A young woman came in and asked Vogler if he would be willing to do a shot of rum on the air with Murray



*"We want two pizzas, in small, nonconsecutive slices."*

and Colbert, when he joined them onstage. "Yes!" he said. On a monitor, Murray, in an Uncle Sam hat, was firing a T-shirt cannon into the crowd.

Later, in his dressing room, Murray reminisced about listening to Bernstein's radio programs for kids: "He sounded so official—he was New York, the guy leading the show. Hearing it now, you



Bill Murray and Jan Vogler

realize he was really a man of the people. He didn't leave anyone out. He knew that his music was going to live longer, and that it had to include everybody."

On "The Late Show" and at Carnegie Hall, the performance ended with Murray singing "I Feel Pretty," and then "America." The group closes the song with a Sondheim lyric that provokes raucous cheering. "Immigrant goes to America, / many hellos in America," Murray sings. "Nobody knows in America / Puerto Rico's *in* America."

—Sarah Larson

## THE PICTURES PERFORMANCE CAPTURE



Andy Serkis has played two of the most kinetically captivating creatures in recent film: the bounding ape Caesar, in the "Planet of the Apes" series, and the skulking hobbit Gollum, in the "Lord of the Rings" saga. Standing near Times Square the other day, digi-

tally unenhanced, he resembled any other tourist—an amiable, bearded fifty-three-year-old Brit with a camera hanging from his neck. But his fans weren't fooled. As soon as Serkis entered Gulliver's Gate, a miniature-world exhibit, the requests for selfies began.

"The digital masks I wear have not prevented me from being recognizable," Serkis said. "The Marvel generation have seen the behind-the-scenes footage of performance capture, and they get digital avatars." He bent to admire the HO-scale subway cars running below Grand Central Terminal, then pointed to the Empire State Building and said, "I've already been on top of that as King Kong, of course"—in the 2005 film. The exhibit's head of marketing trotted over, introduced himself, and said, "My entire model-making team is going bonkers! We'd love to scan you and put a tiny you in one of our exhibits!" Serkis bowed his head, consenting.

Serkis's new feature, "Breathe," is his first as a director. It's based on the life of Robin Cavendish (Andrew Garfield), who contracted polio and became paralyzed from the neck down, seemingly doomed to live out his days in a hospital bed. But his wife (Claire Foy) brought him home, and soon, with the help of an inventor friend, Robin devised the Cavendish chair, a cozy wheelchair/ventilator, and began to explore the world.

Serkis strolled through Europe and stopped to examine London—Big Ben, Tower Bridge, a Thames bordered by grass and trees. "There's a lot more greenery than I remember," he said. "Perhaps it's how British people imagine it will look after Brexit—a return to the good old days." That's also how "Breathe," set largely in the sixties and seventies, feels. The larksome film, shot on location in England's Chiltern Hills, is surprisingly reminiscent of another movie shot in the region: "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang."

He was drawn to the material because his business partner in the Imaginarium, his performance-capture studio in London, is Robin Cavendish's son, Jonathan. Another attraction, he said, "was the whole notion of physicality. Climbing is one of my hobbies, and my route into a character is physical: the weight placement, the gait, where they trap emotion in their body. I thought of Gollum as an addict, addicted to the ring. All the pain

was trapped in his throat, so that's why he spoke like a cat coughing up fur balls. I approached Caesar as a human in an ape's skin, and by the third movie I was wearing more and more weights on my arms and around my waist"—he began to stoop and labor—"to represent the burden he feels of trying to preserve his species."

"For 'Breathe,'" he went on, "we looked at home movies of Robin, and, being a rag doll from the chin down"—he bulged his eyes and stiffened—"he had to express everything with his face. Andrew was amazing at showing how Robin's laugh became extreme, his smile became enormously wide, and his eyes were almost trying to look around the corner, behind him."

Serkis poked his head into the model-making room, and several women with nose rings dropped their tiny paintbrushes. "It's my birthday today, so this is fucking incredible!" one said, as she placed a trembling hand around Serkis's shoulders for a photo. The actor murmured that the adulation probably stemmed from the fact that Peter Jackson, the director of the "Lord of the Rings" movies, "was one of the last filmmakers to use scale models. Now it's all digital."

When Serkis entered the scanning room, John Segalla, an energetic "navigator" in a navy lab coat, escorted him into the pod-shaped apparatus. "Keep your camera on—that'll be like your accessory," Segalla said. "Now place your feet in the center circle."

"I've actually been scanned before," Serkis said. He struck a heroic pose, peering down through his Leica, as if to document the Lilliputians below.

Segalla said, "I'm worried the camera strap will break when we make the figure," which would be made from gypsum polymer and be one-eighty-seventh the actor's size. "Let's shoot one more."

When they were both satisfied, Segalla asked, "Where would you like him to go?" The mini Serkis would be a kind of hidden Easter egg, a companion to the Yoda secreted near the airport.

"Can you put me on the Eiffel Tower?" Serkis said. "I actually climbed it to the second level, twenty-five years ago."

"We can put you underneath it," Segalla replied. He noticed Serkis's lack of expression. "All right, as high as we can!"

—Tad Friend

OUR LOCAL CORRESPONDENTS

# THE GHOST SCAM

*The Chinese immigrants whose life savings are spirited away.*

BY JIAYANG FAN



*Traditional beliefs and cultural isolation create perfect conditions for fraud.*

Wang Jing was so ashamed of what had happened to her that, for the first hour of our conversation, in June, at the Brooklyn District Attorney's office, she made no eye contact, as if doing so would break some spell and prevent her from finishing her story. She spoke haltingly in Mandarin, the only language we shared; she'd have been more comfortable in Cantonese or Taishanese, the dialect of the small city in Guangdong Province on whose rural outskirts she was born. But, more than that, she seemed unused to being listened to in any language. She asked me not to use her real name and had brought along her son, who is in his late twenties. He sat

impassive but watchful, accustomed, like many children of immigrants, to making sure that his mother wasn't taken advantage of.

Wang, who works as a health aide for elderly Chinese, is sixty-one and careworn, with drooping eyelids so thin that I could see the wine-colored veins that threaded through them. Since coming to the United States, thirty-two years ago, she has been outside New York just once, and the only places she has lived in are the Manhattan Chinatown and the Brooklyn one, in Bensonhurst.

One afternoon in late April of last year, she was leaving the Bensonhurst branch of Marshalls when an agitated woman in her early forties rushed up

to her. "I'm looking for a doctor called Xu," the woman said, in rapid-fire Cantonese. "It's urgent—for my daughter."

Wang had been to plenty of traditional Chinese-medicine practitioners in the neighborhood, but she'd never heard of a Dr. Xu. "He is very well known here," the woman went on. "I think he's my daughter's only hope." She said that the girl had begun her first menstrual bleeding two weeks earlier and nothing would staunch the flow. Friends spoke of Dr. Xu as a miracle worker, but no one knew where to find him.

A woman passing by overheard and interjected, "Are you talking about *the* Dr. Xu? He's a treasure. I have him to thank for my mother-in-law's incredible recovery." When the first woman asked for more details, the newcomer shrugged. "He's become a real recluse in recent years," she said. "I don't even know if he sees patients anymore."

Wang was curious. She'd had her own share of ailments. A decade ago, she had surgery to remove a tumor in one of her ovaries, and, a dozen or so years before that, her husband had suffered a back injury that left him unable to work. She became responsible for supporting their two young children. "I would tell the kids, 'Mama is not hungry today—you guys hurry up and eat,'" she told me. At the time, she made around a hundred and thirty dollars a week, at a garment factory on Grand Street, and the physical demands of the work had ravaged her body.

As Wang and her new acquaintances talked, it turned out that the woman who'd met Dr. Xu was from a village not far from where Wang had grown up. She introduced herself as Liu, asked about Wang's husband and children, and extended an open invitation to have tea at a bakery she owned with her husband. Wang was touched by her solicitude. It reminded her of life back in Taishan, where you'd constantly cross paths with acquaintances and there was a web of trust, woven over generations, from the reciprocal exchange of favors. If you had an unfamiliar problem, you'd seek out a *shu ren*, a "familiar person," to help. In the U.S., however, Chinese people shared less about themselves. "Everything is business," Wang said.

Wang was talking about her children when Liu called out to a woman with

large sunglasses and a backpack who was walking toward them. "We were just looking for your grandfather!" Liu exclaimed. Dr. Xu's granddaughter said that he had been very sick and had stopped taking patients. He now devoted himself to good deeds, in order to build Karma as his end approached.

Liu begged the granddaughter to make an exception, and she agreed to try to talk him round. "He will refuse your money," she warned, as she left. "If he agrees to see you, it will be strictly as friends."

"I've never had terribly good fortune," Wang told me. "It's always been endurance—life lived on a boiling kettle." But for the first time in a long while she felt as if her luck were turning. She had heard about doctors who had amazing powers, but she'd never encountered one. Now it seemed that she might get a free consultation.

The women waited on the street, and when the granddaughter returned her face had darkened. She addressed Wang by name, although Wang didn't recall having given her name. "It's about your unmarried son," the granddaughter said. Wang hadn't told her about her son, either. The granddaughter said that Dr. Xu had lit three sticks of incense at an altar, one for each woman. Liu's stick burned brightly, because of the good deed she had done by referring the others, but the other two sticks immediately blew out. The mother of the girl with menstrual problems was told that an offended spirit in the underworld was responsible. The news for Wang was even more dire: her son was in mortal danger. Because she had recently crossed a street in the exact spot where a pregnant woman had been killed two decades earlier, the spirit of the unborn child, a girl, had latched on to Wang, intent upon claiming her son for a husband. "My grandfather sees a great white tiger, a very ill omen," the woman warned. Wang asked if she couldn't just keep her son safe at home. The woman shook her head. "If the spirit wants him, she can make the most harmless actions fatal," she said. "Your son might choke on his next sip of water."

Wang was terrified. Everyone in China knew about *ming hun*, or ghost marriages. The mother of one of Wang's classmates had lost a son at a young

age and was plagued with ill health for years, until a local shaman found a suitable wife in the underworld, a girl in the village who had died in infancy. Now Wang listened, as Dr. Xu's granddaughter told her that, to avoid the curse, her valuables must be blessed immediately. She added a caveat: "You can't contact anyone. You will spook the spirit into taking action faster."

"It was my son's life," Wang told me. "How could I have taken a chance?" Liu accompanied Wang to her apartment, to fetch her valuables. "Everything will be O.K., sister," she said. She'd endured difficulties herself, she confided, and Dr. Xu had always seen her through them. "He doesn't take a cent," she said. "And, of course, no funny business with your valuables." She held up her hand to show Wang a gold band set with carved jade. "How else would I still have this ring?" As they reached Wang's apartment building, Liu offered a last admonition: "Just be careful. Dr. Xu's eyes are omnipresent. If you try to collect only a portion of your valuables, the blessings won't work and your son will remain in danger."

Like many immigrants, Wang had never had much use for banks. Her life savings—around a hundred and fifty thousand dollars—were hidden in a box and in other places around her bedroom. Not even her family knew how much was in it. She took the money and some wedding jewelry she almost never wore, put everything into plastic bags, and placed the bundle in a zippered shopping bag.

The granddaughter was waiting for them on the street corner where they'd met. She held out a large bag and told Wang to put her package inside. Then she spun Wang around and told her to join her palms together in prayer, bow, and recite a chant: "Peace and safety to my child, may the bodhisattva protect him." Wang vaguely remembers the granddaughter tracing her fingers through the air, as if drawing calligraphy, and at one point holding both hands up to the mute gray sky. But, almost as soon as the ceremony had begun, it was over. The bag was returned to Wang, along with two bottles of spring water. One was to be used to cook rice, and the other was for drinking: everyone in the family must take a sip. The bag should not be opened for forty-nine

days or the blessing would be undone.

Liu took Wang's hands. "It's fate that we met," she said, by way of farewell. As Wang walked home, she felt that the bag had become oddly lighter than she remembered. She broke into a run, clutching the bag, and tore it open as soon as she was home. Inside, all she found was boxes of cornstarch and laundry detergent. That evening, her son took her to the police.

**T**he first reports of what have become known as blessing scams appeared in the Chinese media around the turn of the century. In 2002, there were more than eight hundred incidents in Hong Kong, leading the police to establish a dedicated task force. Investigators determined that the suspects were middle-aged women, working in crews of three or four, and that almost all of them came from southern coastal provinces, whose proximity to the wealth of Hong Kong and Taiwan creates tempting opportunities for criminals. The scammers travelled first to Taiwan and other cities across Asia, and then to Chinese communities in the United States, Canada, and Australia. In the summer of 2012, in San Francisco, there were more than fifty incidents, which netted an estimated \$1.5 million in cash and goods. Nine people have since stood trial, and received prison sentences of up to four years. The prosecution said that the defendants were professionals who had been conning elderly Chinese women around the globe. The countries stamped on their passports included Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Brunei, and Cambodia.

In New York currently, there are around ten reported cases each year. Kevin Hui, a detective in the New York Police Department's organized-crime unit who worked on Wang's case, told me that, after a spike in the number of cases in 2012, he and his colleagues contacted police in Hong Kong in an effort to better understand the phenomenon. In 2014, after tracking the scammers intensively, the N.Y.P.D. lodged sealed indictments against a number of suspects, but, before arrests could be made, they all disappeared, presumably escaping to China. In early 2016, police managed to arrest three scammers, who took felony pleas and

served prison time. Hui said that his department was in the process of following two gangs at work in New York.

Policing blessing scams is made harder by the fact that victims are frequently too scared or humiliated to report the crime. Earlier this year, I spoke to the late Eddie Chiu, a Hong Kong native who for many years headed the Lin Sing Association, one of the oldest Chinatown community organizations, and often advised elderly victims who were reluctant to involve the authorities. Some feared that doing so would expose irregularities in their immigration or tax status. "They are also afraid of losing face," he said. "They are saving that money for their burial arrangements or to give to their grandchildren, but sometimes their own children don't even know about it." The victims worried that their children would berate them for being credulous and for having kept the money secret in the first place. "They are fearful and embarrassed," he said. "The scammers know it, and they exploit it."

In 2014, the vulnerability of such communities led Kenneth P. Thompson, Brooklyn's District Attorney at the time, to set up the Immigrant Fraud Unit. Its work has since been expanded by his successor, Eric Gonzalez. "One-third of the population here in Brooklyn are immigrants, and the Chinese community is the fastest-growing one," Gonzalez told me one afternoon in his office. Gonzalez, who is a second-generation Puerto Rican, spoke of witnessing the process of assimilation within his own family. "There are many factors at work—cultural barriers, social isolation—that make these immigrants easy targets."

In the months after Wang was defrauded, the police received reports of several similar incidents across the city, and they closed in on eight suspects. One day, Hui, driving through Chinatown while off duty, saw a group of scammers in action. He called for backup, and another officer filmed everything and then made arrests. Officers caught four of the eight people they'd been tracking.

As the police and prosecutors reviewed the evidence, it became clear that one of the scammers had been involved in a number of incidents. It was

the woman who had introduced herself to Wang as Liu. Her real name was Su Xuekun.

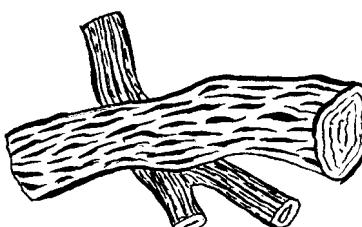
At the District Attorney's office, I met two prosecutors who had been assigned to the case—Kin Ng, who was born in Hong Kong and speaks Cantonese, and José Interiano, who is Honduran-American. They told me that although Su had been in the country for only a few months, she had been extremely active. Two months after defrauding Wang, Su—this time playing the part of the mother with the menstruating daughter—was part of a group that conned a fifty-four-year-old woman in Sunset Park out of nineteen thousand dollars. Su had also been implicated in operations in Manhattan and in Flushing, Queens, which netted more than four hundred thousand dollars. Ng told me, "We have video footage of her in the act, and lineup identification."

Su was indicted on four counts of grand larceny, relating to two separate incidents. Because there was more than one offense, prosecutors were able to indict her under a hate-crime statute and seek a stiffer sentence. It is rare for someone to be prosecuted for a hate crime against people of her own ethnicity, but Interiano said that he believed the case warranted it. "The term 'hate crime' is poorly worded," he said, and suggested that "bias crime" better

as he recalled, when he was a child, seeing his parents get swindled by a Chinese car salesman. "You speak the language, and you feel like you have an instant understanding and bond. Scammers prey upon that."

Interiano and Ng, like the police, think that the scammers were part of a well-organized crime ring. Different crews all used the same stories, and, whereas most Chinese immigrants depend on family connections to establish themselves, the suspects arrived knowing no one, but had no problem instantly finding accommodations and employment.

Interiano said that he didn't consider the victims to be unusually gullible. Rather, the scam was perfectly devised to take advantage of people who had few sources of information. The initial conversation with the victim was a way of harvesting personal information. Using a cell phone, the first two scammers could have the third listen in, or they could send texts of the pertinent points. The third scammer would then seem to have supernatural insight into the victim's life, making the warning about the family member in danger more credible. At every stage, the gang would hurry things along, to heighten panic. Interiano said, "By the time that the victim is given a way of solving all these problems, they just want to get out of it: 'O.K., fine, I'll do whatever it takes to save my family member.'"



represented the intent of the statute. "If you look at the statute itself, the word 'hate' is actually omitted. The fact is, all our victims shared several characteristics: they were all female, they were older, they were all Chinese."

All but one of the cases that the Immigrant Fraud Unit has handled involved perpetrators who share the ethnic background of their victims. Ng said, "It's only natural, whether it's the West Indian or the Latino or the East Asian community." He laughed

I met Su Xuekun on a bright December morning at Kings County Supreme Court. Her court-appointed lawyer, Morris Shamail, a gentle, harried man in his forties, greeted me on the benches outside the courtroom where she was being arraigned. He had seen his client only twice since her arrest, both times in court, and couldn't communicate with her unless a translator was present.

Su, handcuffed and wearing a khaki sweatshirt, was led into the courtroom. During the arraignment, she bowed and smiled deferentially at the judge, Danny Chun. Su pleaded not guilty, and, to Shamail's disappointment, Chun upheld the hate-crime charges.

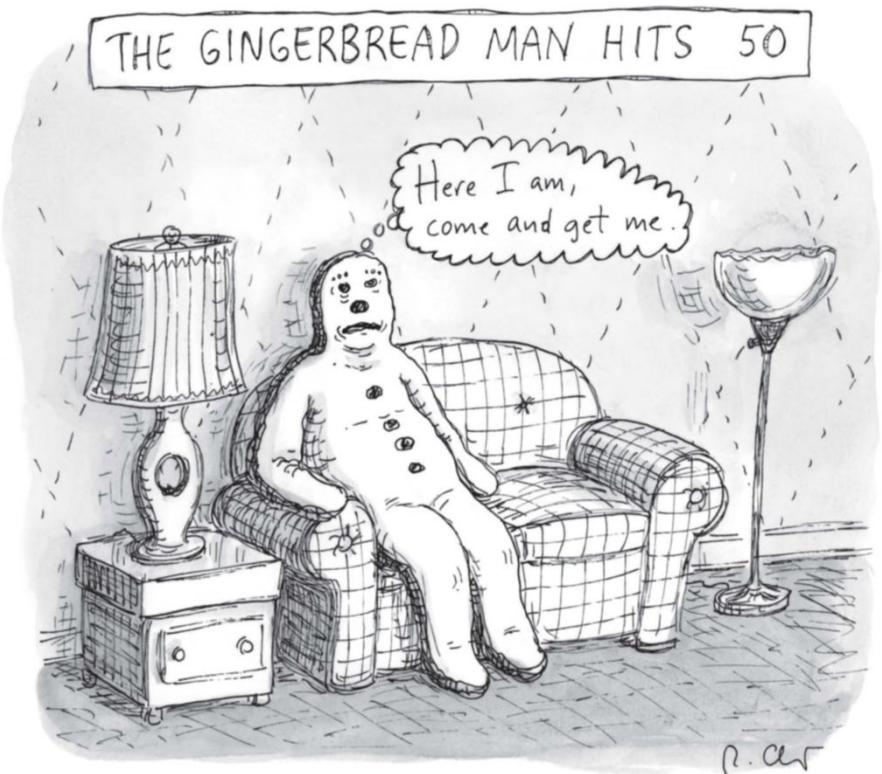
Afterward, Shamail took me downstairs to a visiting area where Su was

waiting for a van to take her back to Rikers Island. She was tanned, with thick brown hair that was frizzy and blond at the edges—the vestiges of a dye-and-perm job. We sat down to talk, separated by a plexiglass window. She apologized for her poor Mandarin and, whenever a word or a phrase eluded her, repeated the Cantonese equivalent to herself in increasingly agitated tones, sighing with frustration.

Su told me that she had grown up in the Guangdong countryside, and began working in the fields at the age of ten. She longed to move to the city, a place where she imagined she “would not be sharing the same bed with three other siblings.” She saw how hard her parents worked, and how the work would always leave you poor, “no matter how much sweat it wrung out of you.” Eventually, she made her way to a town, about a hundred and fifty miles down the coast from where Wang grew up, and got married. She and her husband had three teen-age children and both worked in her in-laws’ family business, a glove factory. She said that it had been nearly ten months since she had spoken to her family. She didn’t want people at home to know what had happened to her, or for her children to be ashamed.

Some nine months earlier, Su had travelled to Toronto on a tourist visa, her first time outside China. She’d recently discovered that her husband was having an affair with one of her colleagues, and felt that she had to get away. She also thought that, if she could find out about Western universities, her children might be able to study at one.

For a week, she stayed at a hostel in Toronto’s Chinatown. At a local bakery, she met a well-dressed, “rich-looking” woman, her hair in “a fancy, movie-star bun,” who turned out to be from her home province of Guangdong. The woman, who called herself Sister Ping—coincidentally, the name of a famous human trafficker—said that there would be better opportunities for Su’s children in America. She offered to help her get there, set her up with a cleaning job, and sort out her accommodations and her immigration status. It seemed that Su had stumbled on the ideal *shu ren*—the kind of familiar person you rarely en-



countered outside China. The arrangement was that Ping would charge three thousand dollars, which Su could pay once she was earning money. They drove in a station wagon from Toronto to New York, but the cleaning job didn’t materialize. “Sister Ping said that I owed her this sum and there was only one way to pay it back,” Su said.

She was evasive when I asked about the scam. “They just told us it would be O.K.,” she kept saying. I asked why she didn’t turn in Sister Ping in exchange for a lighter sentence, and she said that she didn’t know Ping’s true identity or those of the other accomplices. It seemed that no one—neither the victims nor the perpetrators—really knew one another. She went on, “I know, I know, it’s a terrible thing that I did to those aunties. I have elderly folks back at home, too, so I know their pain. I wish I could take it back.”

When I ran the details by Kevin Hui, of the N.Y.P.D., he said that the entire story was a fabrication, and that Su had arrived in Canada with a group of scammers. “We knew they were looking for hits,” he said. “It’s a crew. That’s what they do.” The D.A.’s office, likewise, doubted that any family Su had

in China would be ignorant of what she was doing.

Still, I wondered if Su’s fabrications might contain at least some fragments of truth. Shen Anqi, a legal scholar at Teesside University, in the U.K., who has made a study of female Chinese criminals, told me that the upbringing Su described was typical of the women she’d encountered. For her recent book, “Offending Women in Contemporary China,” Shen interviewed dozens of child-traffickers and leaders of prostitution rings. The vast majority of them were born in the countryside to large families—China’s one-child policy never penetrated the rural hinterland. With only poor education, which left them unqualified for anything beyond manual labor, they were confronted with China’s rapid social change, rising inequality, and burgeoning materialism. “The criminal market is easy to enter, requires no diploma, and provides a quick way for them to aspire to something much more than what they currently have,” she said. “I’m not justifying it, but the incentives are certainly there.”

Shen noted that criminals like Su tend to prey on people like themselves. “They know what it’s like to be

desperate and to fervently want something more through a quick fix, like a blessing,” she said. “It’s desperation chasing desperation.” It occurred to me that, when Su told Wang that they’d been fated to meet, she was right, although not in the sense that she intended. The country’s vertiginous change, incomprehensible to both, had sparked in each a kind of magical thinking, a frantic hope that life could be transformed by a lucky break, and it was this that had brought them together.

Su told me that she was almost relieved to have been caught: “I don’t have to lie anymore. The pressure’s off.” And, to an indigent Chinese immigrant, the facilities at Rikers didn’t seem such a hardship. “We live fifty women to a room,” she said. “There’s time and space to exercise. Life is orderly. The food is not bad at all.” There was one officer in particular, a white woman, who checked in on her regularly.

“In all my months here, the lady prison guard, she was the first real American I get to know who’s almost like a friend,” Su said. She raised her hand to brush a stray hair out of her eyes. On her middle finger, she wore a ring of gold and jade.

I became curious about the elements of the story that the scammers told Wang, and of the ritual that they performed. A little research revealed that they had been patched together from various strands of traditional Chinese belief. The white tiger has been a staple of Chinese astrology since antiquity; it represents a thirst for blood and is thought to bring mortal danger to infants and pregnant women. The forty-nine days that Wang was told to wait before opening the package echoed the forty-nine days that spirits of the recently dead must wait to be allocated their place in the afterlife—a belief that entered Chinese tradition, from India, in the fourth century B.C. The chant that she was told to recite was plausibly Buddhist, and the granddaughter’s gesture during the blessing, arms raised heavenward, evoked Daoist ritual.

When I asked Wang about the symbols, she was vague about their meaning and their origins. “The white tiger

is an ill omen—everyone knows this,” she said. The exact significance of the symbols was less clear to her than the fact that they *carried* significance. Jonathan H. X. Lee, an associate professor of Asian-American Studies at San Francisco State University, told me that this is common among contemporary Chinese. “It’s the ritual and symbol that have been passed down,” he said. “They carry import, even if their historical origins have been lost.” He said that this was due, in part, to the syncretism of Chinese belief—the way that the indigenous religion of prehistoric China gradually blended with later traditions.

Traditional Chinese religion revolved around veneration of the spirits of one’s ancestors. Daoism, which originated in China around the fourth century B.C., introduced practices of occult medicine and exorcism. Buddhism, which was brought to China by Indian missionaries around the first century A.D., added the idea of continuous rebirth and the retributive effects of Karma. Meanwhile, Confucianism’s emphasis on filial piety formalized ancestor worship as part of everyday life: ancestors who did not receive offerings of food and incense would become hungry and irritated in the netherworld. “Gods, ghosts, and ancestors are all connected in this world view,” Lee told me. “Gods are exceptional historical human beings or ancestors who have become deified. Hungry ghosts are ancestors who have not been properly venerated.” (Many Chinese communities annually celebrate the Hungry Ghost Festival, in order to feed and placate these disruptive spirits.)

In China, ghosts have been particularly integrated into social and administrative life. By the early twelfth century, Daoist exorcism rites used judicial language to interrogate and sentence troublesome ghosts. The founder of the Ming dynasty, the Hongwu emperor, issued a proclamation, in 1375, stipulating that “every county and village” must have an altar for appeasing wandering ghosts, and that there should be one for every hundred households. As late as 1896, in a town in Fujian, city bureaucrats presided over a ritual to drive out the hungry ghosts of people who had been killed while fight-

ing Japanese invaders in Manchuria.

In the early twentieth century, after the fall of the last imperial dynasty, traditional Chinese religion came under attack from patriotic intellectuals like Sun Yat-sen, who thought it had impeded the country’s progress toward modernity. Temples were demolished and statues smashed. In 1949, the Communists established an atheist state and sought to purge the country of its superstitious ways. “It is as if a raging tidal wave has swept away all the demons and ghosts,” Chairman Mao said in 1955. By this time, “ghost” had been repurposed as a word for any malign influence, especially a counter-revolutionary one.

Nonetheless, in rural areas private domestic rituals to venerate ancestors or ward off ghosts were often tolerated. And, in 1982, Deng Xiaoping’s liberal reforms permitted religious gatherings to take place again. “The idea was that it was just for old people, and, with time, it would die out,” Ian Johnson, the author of “The Souls of China,” a recent book on the resurgence of religious belief in the country, told me. Religion didn’t die out, but, as Johnson explained, the decades of prohibition had eroded most people’s understanding of spiritual traditions. “If you are of a certain generation and grew up in the Communist state, you don’t really know what real religion is in China,” he said.

Lee, however, cautioned against viewing Chinese religion as inherently vulnerable to blessing scams. He cited scandals involving Christian televangelists and mentioned a case, earlier this year, in which a Jamaican-American retiree was defrauded of her life savings by two people at a church in East Flatbush, one of whom had posed as a pastor. Ultimately, it seems, it was faith itself, rather than a specific cosmology, that made people susceptible to fraud.

I spoke to Barend Ter Haar, a scholar of Chinese religion at Oxford University, who made a further point: although, from a Western perspective, some of these religious practices might seem exotic, they often fulfill functions that are easily recognizable. Bereaved parents visiting a village shaman to arrange a ghost marriage for a deceased

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child might well experience a relief similar to that provided by grief counselling or psychoanalysis. Ter Haar told me, "The point is that it gives the sufferer a sense of agency and an explanation that can be empowering."

Early this year, Su returned to court a number of times, and astonished everyone by refusing to take a plea deal, of between two and a half and four years in prison, that the prosecutors were offering. Interiano, who was acting as counsel for the prosecution, wondered if she realized how slim her chances would be if she insisted on fighting her case. "We've got video recordings, pictures," he said. "This would be pretty close to a slam dunk."

Shamul was exasperated with his client. "This is the best deal she's going to get from the judge," he said. He speculated that Su thought she could get less jail time by driving a hard bargain. "Probably in prison she heard about other Chinese people in similar circumstances who got less time," he said, shrugging. "Rikers is a small place. All the Chinese people know each other and talk."

Talking to Su, I'd got the impression that she didn't fully understand the severity of her situation. It was as if the American judicial system were merely a nuisance that could be worked around, given enough perseverance. At one point, she said that, once her case was resolved, she wanted to return to the States to resume the college search for her children.

Finally, in mid-May, Judge Chun told Shamul, "If the defendant doesn't take the plea, her sentence will certainly go up. I will be withdrawing the offer after today." After consulting with an interpreter, Su took the deal, brows furrowed and eyes downcast. "Do you have anything to say?" the judge asked her. "I'm sorry," she said softly through the interpreter. "I won't do it again."

I went downstairs to talk to Su, in the visiting area. She looked tired, with faintly bloodshot eyes and hair hastily tied in a ponytail. I asked her why it had taken her so long to plead. She didn't answer, but massaged her throat and swallowed with some difficulty.

Eventually, she said that the prison doctor had diagnosed a thyroid condition that required surgery. She had hoped to return to China for the operation. I told her that when many rich Chinese people need surgery they pay to come to America. "I would be too scared," she said. "To be lying immobilized in a bed at a hospital deaf and mute, without knowing a single person?" She used Wang's term for a helpful contact: *shu ren*. Su was now experiencing the same immigrant loneliness that had made Wang susceptible to the scam.

On a warm Sunday morning in June, I met Wang and her son at a Cantonese restaurant in Bensonhurst. The spacious dining hall, a popular venue for Chinese wedding banquets, was bustling with families, strollers and walkers wedged against the tables. Wang's son asked me to act like a friend of the family rather than like a journalist, explaining that his mother had kept her loss secret from all her friends.

Steaming dim-sum carts rolled by, but Wang was anxious that we not order too much. "Enough, enough," she said, as soon as there were half a dozen items on the table. "We won't be able to finish it all." She turned to me and smiled. "The food here is authentic, not like in Manhattan, where they are just cheating the foreigners," she said.

I asked Wang how she had managed since losing her money, and she shook her head. She'd continued work as a health aide, but she hadn't increased her hours. "If you work more, you risk losing Medicaid benefits," she said. "And there are not many employment options for someone my age." She didn't mind the work, finding it almost leisurely compared with the twelve-hour shifts she had once endured in the garment factory.

She put down her chopsticks and reminisced about her early years in New York. She'd met her husband in Guangdong; he was already working in the U.S., but had returned to find a wife. "You don't know how poor China was then, especially in the countryside," she said. "America was this golden dream. Everyone wanted to go, but very few people could. That

I was to marry a man who could take me to America was a rare piece of good fortune, which everyone envied." She smiled wryly and said, "I had this sense that coming to the Beautiful Country"—the literal translation of "America" in Chinese—"was my blessing. I had no idea how I got so lucky."

Once she'd arrived, however, Wang learned that she would see her husband only once a week. "There weren't so many restaurant jobs back then, so he had to go out of state to work," she said. "There were no options. For men, it was the back kitchen of restaurants. For women, it was the garment factories." She'd hoped to learn English, but had never had the time. "Living and working around East Broadway, it wasn't so different from living in China. You heard no English and you spoke no English."

Her husband had advised her to avoid dwelling on her loss. "He tells me to think of myself as a newly arrived immigrant, fresh off the plane, with just the clothes on my back and without a cent in my pocket," she said. "But how can I erase thirty years?"

I asked if she had any kind of belief that would sustain her. She shook her head vigorously, and for the first time I saw anger in her face. "Nothing," she said. "I refuse to believe in anything anymore—no gods, no ghosts."

As the lunch crowd began to disperse, a family stopped by to say hello. Wang's face rearranged itself into a sunny smile, and she exchanged pleasantries. After her friends had gone, she told me that, even with her closest family, she no longer discussed what had happened; it unleashed too much pain. "But it sits, every second, like a cold stone in my chest, so much so that I can't breathe," she told me. Wang smoothed a wrinkle in the tablecloth and didn't look up. After some moments, she spoke again: "In the evenings sometimes, I take a walk. There is a park not too far from my home." She said that there was a particular bench, under a leafy oak, where she liked to sit. "I scream, just open my lungs and scream," she said, in a whisper. "People stare, but in the dark everyone is a stranger." ♦



## TRUMP I.Q. TEST

BY BROTI GUPTA AND REBECCA CAPLAN

Welcome to the TRUMP™ I.Q. Test. It's the hardest test in the entire world, and Barack Obama couldn't take it 'cuz he was too scared, and because you have to be American to take it. Please answer the questions below to the best of your ability or Lady ability.

1. Which of these five is unlike the other four?

- (a) Nazis
- (b) White supremacists
- (c) Very bad people
- (d) Very good people
- (e) Misunderstood Nazis

Answer: (c)

2. Unscramble this word: MAGA

- (a) GAMA
- (b) MAGA
- (c) AAGM
- (d) GAAM

Answer: (b). The A's were switched.

3. If Ivanka is 35 and Melania is 47, what is the oldest that a woman can be?

- (a) 40
- (b) 48
- (c) 35
- (d) 50

Answer: Would accept (b) or (d); there is no way to know yet.

4. Police brutality is to very good behavior as kneeling is to:

- (a) Very good behavior
- (b) Pretty bad behavior
- (c) Really great behavior
- (d) Spitting on a veteran's widow

Answer: (d)

5. Complete the lyric: "This land is my land \_\_\_\_\_"

- (a) "this land is your land."
- (b) "the monkey chased the weasel."
- (c) [A full 3 Doors Down song]
- (d) ":"

Answer: (d)

6. Obama golfing is to taxpayer fraud as Trump golfing is to:

- (a) Good for taxpayers
- (b) Good at golf
- (c) Donald Trump owns many golfs!
- (d) All of the above

Answer: (d)

7. Donald lost the popular vote by 3 million ballots. Hillary won the popular vote by 3 million ballots. How many votes did Donald win by if you don't count those people who voted illegally?

- (a) 1 bazillion
- (b) 69 million

(c) Wisconsin is technically the most populous state.

(d) Mexico shouldn't be allowed to vote.

Answer: Will accept (b), (c), or (d), but "bazillion" is not a number.

8. John McCain is to dumb captured idiot as Donald Trump is to:

- (a) Lazy (no)
- (b) Dumb (no)
- (c) Never captured!
- (d) THE FLAG!!!!!!

Answer: Donald Trump owns a lot of casinos.

9. One of the following sentences means approximately the same thing as "I have tremendous respect for women and the many roles they serve that are vital to the fabric of our society and our economy." Choose the one:

- (a) "And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything. Grab them by the pussy."
- (b) "A person who is very flat-chested is very hard to be a ten."
- (c) "You could see there was blood coming out of her eyes, blood coming out of her wherever."
- (d) "If Ivanka weren't my daughter, perhaps I'd be dating her."
- (e) All of the above

Answer: The locker room!

10. Nine years ago, a Kenyan illegal was elected President. One year ago, a very smart white (technically speaking) man was elected President. Who will be elected President in three years?

- (a) A white man
- (b) A white woman
- (c) A black woman
- (d) Ha, "elections"

Answer: (d), but (b) and (c) were very funny jokes.

11. Which of the following does not belong?

- (a) 1
- (b) 5
- (c) 9
- (d) Brown people

Answer: (d) ♦

ONWARD AND UPWARD WITH THE ARTS

## THINK BIG

*Laura Owens explores what painting can do.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



Owens in her studio in Los Angeles: "How do you keep things moving along?"

Serious but friendly, a woman who rarely jokes but readily laughs, the Los Angeles artist Laura Owens, forty-seven years old, was pleasantly dishevelled in mom attire: shirt, baggy shorts, sneakers, big glasses. "Don't be afraid to make mistakes," she said to the children in each of the five classes she spoke to on Career Day, in June, at her nine-year-old daughter Nova's public elementary school. She accompanied the advice with a PowerPoint slide of herself after fall-

ing from a low scaffold and being splattered with blue paint from a pail that had followed her down—a studio mishap, in 2013, that an assistant had paused to snap before helping her up. The next slide showed her paint-smudged face, smiling—no harm. The kids seemed fascinated but perplexed, as well they might have been. An essay could be written on the semantic distinctions, which Owens had just elided, between mistakes and accidents, and between accidents and

pratfalls. I recognized one of the turns of mind that characterize Owens's influential inventions of new things for the old medium of painting to do. I couldn't match it when a fifth-grade girl asked me, as a drop-in careerist, how to become a writer. I said that she was one already, if she was writing. With a thought to Owens, I added that she should carry a notebook around, so that people would see that she is a writer. Owens has grounded her life, since childhood, on being, and being regarded as, an artist. The Whitney Museum's description of an upcoming show of her work there as "a midcareer retrospective" seems superfluous for someone who has never not been in midcareer.

The first slide that she had shown the children was of a drawing she said she had made when she was a teen-ager. It will be included in the Whitney show. Dark and smudgy and heavily worked, it depicts a silhouetted figure in a jail cell, reaching forward through the bars, which cast long shadows, toward a dog dangling a key from its mouth. The dog appears uncooperative. She told me that the image may have come to her in a dream, which she has no wish to analyze. The second slide documented a civic-poster contest that she had won when she was fifteen—promoting a county foster-care program for children—in her home town of Norwalk, Ohio. Third, from four years later, came a painstaking pencil copy of a photograph of the Beatles. She demurred when I remarked on her evident early giftedness. "I don't believe there's such a thing as innate talent," she said. "It's about desires and passions that lead to a focus on certain things and seeing the world in a certain way."

For the retrospective, Owens and the Whitney curator Scott Rothkopf have created an astonishing catalogue, both epic and intimate: six hundred and sixty-three pages of reproduced works, critical essays, literary texts, photographs, clippings, memoirs by friends, journals, correspondence, exhibition plans, and ephemera. (Each of the eight thousand copies comes with a unique silk-screen cover, handmade in Owens's studio.) The first major item in the catalogue is a memoir by her mother, Carol Hendrickson, a public-health nurse, who recalls once having casually suggested to Owens, then a teen-ager, that she consider pursuing

commercial art or teaching art to children. Hendrickson writes that her daughter “was very upset with me, and tearful, and said, ‘Don’t you think you’ll ever see my art in a museum?’ And I thought, ‘An art museum? Wow! So I stopped short for a second and said, ‘Well, yes, of course I think that.’” In a journal that Owens kept in her early twenties, she wrote a fourteen-point list entitled “How to Be the Best Artist in the World.” Among the dictates: “Think big,” “Contradict yourself constantly,” “No Guilt,” “Do not be afraid of anything,” “Say very little,” and “Know that if you didn’t choose to be an artist— You would have certainly entertained world domination or mass murder or sainthood.”

Owens showed the children a slide of an effortful drawing from a life class that she had taken while still in high school. She followed it with mostly abstract works from her years at the Rhode Island School of Design, where she graduated with a bachelor’s degree in fine arts, in 1992, and at the California Institute of the Arts, where she earned a master’s, in 1994. At RISD, she said, “I was so happy to be among people who like to make things”; and, at CalArts, “I learned philosophies and ideas of art right now.” She displayed one work that wasn’t hers: “The Blue Window” (1911), by Matisse, a still-life set against a landscape. She said, “I love that because it is so very beautiful.” But mostly she stuck to themes of enterprise—“Send your poems out into the world,” she told a girl who said that she wrote poetry—and resilience. “When you make a mistake, see what’s good about it,” she said. “Mistakes are little windows into what is possible.” She told me that her most productive time for working has always been between ten at night and three in the morning, nowadays often after a multitasking day at her studio in Boyle Heights, just across the Hollywood Freeway from downtown—a low-income neighborhood where she also runs a celebrated art-and-performance space, 356 Mission Road, which has lately found itself a target of anti-gentrification protests. In the hours around midnight, she said, “I get down and focussed. Making mistakes, wiping them off. Really communing. At night, it’s a matter of hearing the work, after walking past it all day.”

Owens’s soft-spoken earnestness held the kids’ attention even when she flashed images of complicated abstractions, such as a series, “Pavement Karaoke” (2012), that congregates thick impasto, crisp grid designs, effulgent stains, silk-screen newsprint (from a nineteen-sixties underground paper, the *Berkeley Barb*), collaged gingham, and fragments of lava rock. But the figurative ones went over best. One, from 2004, was of a cartoonish, gangly horse that appears scrunched to fit onto the canvas. “How do you make horses?” a girl in a class of hearing-impaired first graders asked. Owens said, “I look at a lot of pictures of horses.” A teacher suggested a demonstration. On a large sheet of paper, Owens drew three rectangles. In one, she swiftly limned a more straightforward equine. In the others, she rendered a rudimentary mountain range and an owl. “See?” she said. “You can do anything!” The results looked simple and guileless in the way of art by children, but fluent and decisive. (Not easy for an adult to do.) A small boy lit up when, on the spot, the teacher taught him the binoculars-like hand sign for “owl.” A girl demanded a mermaid, which Owens drew beside the horse. The drawings stayed with the class when we left.

I first became aware of Owens in 1996, when one of her paintings in a SoHo group show invaded my sleep. The strongest young artists of that time, drilled in critical theory and wielding newer mediums, disdained painting as weak-minded and archaic. Most of the picture “Untitled” (1995), about six feet high by seven feet wide, is taken up by a few red diagonal lines on a pinkish ground. They indicate a floor seen in perspective—or half of one, because the lines converge toward the right edge of the canvas—topped by a triangular slice of mottled green wall spotted with some four dozen tiny abstract paintings-within-the-painting. (Artist friends of Owens had daubed in some of those, at her invitation.) A couple of nights after viewing the work, I dreamed that an annoying young man was pestering me to tell him if paintings by an old woman, perhaps his grandmother, were worth anything. To get rid of him, I gave them a glance.

They had an aura redolent of the Owens. I became so wildly enthusiastic that the guy backed away from me. I believe that his qualm crept in when I reviewed the group show for the *Village Voice*. I wrote that Owens’s work, although charismatic, was perhaps clever to a fault: “an advancing weather front of tacit quotation marks” and “not beautiful, but ‘about’ beauty.”

I wasn’t ready to accept that Owens had hit on a necessarily willful new direction—not exactly forward, but fruitfully sideways—for painting, my favorite art form. She knew the critical challenges, from Draconian avant-gardist CalArts, and was taking them head on, with crackling wit and a haunted heart. Was new art supposed to enforce awareness of its physical and institutional environs? Owens envisioned an exhibition space, such as the one that you stood in to view her picture. A painting about looking at paintings, from an alienated distance, this “Untitled” is itself a painting to be looked at, as closely as you like. The dinky abstractions, fictively remote, are smack on the surface. Funny, faintly melancholy, and fantastically intelligent, the work somewhat recalls the philosophical cartooning of Saul Steinberg, but vigorously brushed at a commanding scale. I think that there is a figure in the picture, albeit an invisible one. It’s the viewer: you, or, in my case, me. I came to see that what I had taken for arch skepticism was strategic sincerity.

Unusually for Owens, the painting was inspired by a specific work of a past artist—“Studio Interior” (circa 1882), a sumptuous piece by William Merritt Chase, in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art—while not much resembling it. She never imitates a style or, really, has one of her own. Rather, she has adopted craft techniques and teased out iconographic and formal ideas from whole fields and genres of the pictorial. Gestural and color-field abstraction, digital imaging, American folk art, Japanese landscape, children’s-book illustration, dropped shadows, greeting-card whimsy, clip art, wallpaper design, silk screen, tapestry, typography, stencils, recorded-sound elements, and mechanical moving parts (in one series

of paintings, shapes with hidden motors function like clock hands) take turns or combine. Slam-bang visual impact co-occurs with whispering subtlety. Owens's art imparts a sense, from first to last, of being in the middle of a process that doesn't evolve but that spreads, deltalike, from a mysterious headwater. However strenuous technically, her work is reliably feather-light in feeling, even at architectural scale. "Ambitious" seems both too heavy and too petty a word for her. Her drive seems impersonal: a daemon, which she hosts. Recently, I posed that notion to her. It seemed to strike her as over the top. She said, "I think about what is required of me."

Owens was a contrarian at RISD, chafing at male painting teachers who pushed latter-day variants of macho Abstract Expressionism and condescended to their female students. One of them suggested that the women in his class paint from life, encouraging abstraction among the men. Owens, painting abstractly, organized a club with other dissatisfied students to pursue a curriculum of their own. At CalArts, she imbibed intellectual rigor, including from the late conceptual artist and legendary teacher Michael Asher, who intended his site-specific, temporary works to undermine the conventions of art institutions. (One whole show of his consisted in removing a wall in a gallery to expose the business office.) He discounted painting. Yet Owens took to "using house paint and making a lot of big canvases," she told me, with "giant shapes and then small, concentrated moments of things," such as bits of still-life. You know at a glance that they are by Owens, not from their looks, which are miscellaneous, but from how they feel: vaguely familiar and acutely strange.

Owens took a keen interest in whatever her peers were up to, eschewing competitiveness. "It's debilitating to think that this person is above me and this person is below me. I want to be in a conversation with someone. Why can't I think I'm talking to my favor-

ite painters?" For example? By making a "painting for Cézanne to see," Owens said. What would she and Cézanne discuss? "Definitely paying attention to what each mark is doing." She said of Cézanne, "He is the god of paying-attention-ness." Owens's marks have a secondhand feel—indeed, with ghostly quotation marks, the echt Gen-X finger gesture—but they breathe liberty. ("You can do anything!") The effect has nothing to do with virtuosity. She said, "I don't like somebody fetishizing their skill level. Painting is one of the few mediums—I don't know, maybe cinematography is another—where the skill level can just take over and really seduce people. It's not that I don't appreciate pieces of art that are done well. But how do you keep things moving along?"

Owens told me of her first visit, when she was a young girl, to the superb Cleveland Museum of Art. She saw at a distance an immense color-field painting by Morris Louis and walked toward it. As she approached, "the painting got bigger and bigger and I got smaller and smaller." Add that memory to CalArts smarts and you have a take on Owens's first New York solo show, at Gavin Brown's Enterprise, in 1997, and her first in London, at Sadie Coles, the following year.

The former featured a vast painting of a blurry seascape with two curly "W" shapes, representing seagulls in flight, which appeared to cast shadows onto the sky behind them. A landscape at Coles was similarly large and customized for the space. (Owens has stayed stubbornly loyal to those two middle-range

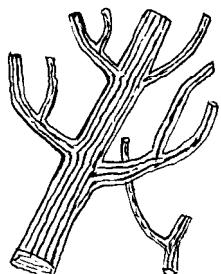
dealers, and to Galerie Gisela Captain, in Cologne, despite wooing from richer and more prestigious galleries.) The work at Coles was installed facing a window across a room that had a pillar in the middle. Owens painted a shadow of the pillar onto her canvas. Both paintings felt as much like places as like pictures, anticipating Owens's engulfing installations of recent years.

Critics were wary. Roberta Smith, in the *Times*, detected "cynicism" in the seagulls painting: "monochrome meets

kitsch." But, as with me, her initial resistance gave way as the seriousness of Owens's intentions sank in; Smith became one of the artist's most discerning observers. Meanwhile, certain artists caught Owens's drift immediately. Rachel Harrison, the daring and influential sculptor, recalled for me the Gavin Brown show, with its "thick paint and comical flat shadows": "I found it exceedingly deft formally, while demonstrating that although painting was pretty unfashionable at the time, it was still possible to throw a bomb."

Owens's idea of suiting paintings to sites, in a sort of conceptually self-conscious new baroque, has paid off in such dizzyingly complex recent works as a one-off installation, "Ten Paintings," last year at the Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts, in San Francisco. The paintings didn't exist yet, except in the potential form of concealed panels that shared a continuous surface of room-girdling handmade wallpaper: in effect, a single painting, more than fourteen feet high and more than a hundred and seventy-three feet long, executed in acrylic, oil, vinyl paint, silk-screen inks, charcoal, pastel, graphite, and sand. Non-repeating bitmap patterns, derived from a scanned piece of crumpled paper, underlay passages of newsprint reproductions, fugitive brushwork, a micro-graphic version of Picasso's "Guernica," and attached whatnots, including a watercolor of a sailing ship by Owens's grandfather, patterns of embroidery by her grandmother, and a drawing by her younger brother Lincoln, who is a chef in New Orleans. Prevailing blacks, whites, and pale blues, with purple accents, imposed a gently rhythmic unity. At intervals on the walls, phone numbers were printed, with invitations to text any question that a viewer might have. The nearest of eight concealed loudspeakers would deliver an answer in a male, female, or robotic voice, to spooky or daffy effect, from a computer that Owens, with technical help, had programmed to recognize a hundred key words. (Imagine an ultra-high-tech Magic 8 Ball.) To the query "Where are the paintings?", all the speakers replied, "Here!"

When the show closed—with no prospect, Owens said, of ever being



FROM "LIKE NEBRASKA"

He drinks like the faithful,  
the way they fold their hands  
In church, like two owls roosting in an elm.  
Karaoke night at the Don't Care Bar:  
A worker staggers, following the lyric  
To a lit-up song, and outside  
A stranger chews their ears off  
About *the Green Desert*: fields of soy and corn  
And soy and corn and soy,  
Devoid of flowers, and the bees going damn drunk  
with hunger.  
She leans into him like a stray cat against a fence.  
*A hundred species of insects*, the stranger tells them, *in a space where there should have been a thousand.*  
A truck leaving backfires.  
Beneath the only street light, a possum  
Practices its death.  
His hand at the small of her back,  
On the depthless roses painted  
On her old black dress.

—Sophie Klahr

repeated—the supports were cut out. I saw the results hanging at her studio, each nine feet high by seven feet wide, and terrific: arbitrary fragments of the wallpaper which, owing to the formalizing power of rectangles, feel discretely composed. Cropped, the installation's ambient energies become compressed dynamisms. The works' derivation makes them highly original aesthetic objects. On the model of Duchampian readymades, perhaps call them "made-alreadies": created by being revealed. In the studio, heaps of the surplus wallpaper, like outtakes on a cutting-room floor, awaited possible roles in works to come.

In a vertiginously hilly part of Echo Park, near Dodger Stadium, Owens shares a tidy two-story house, clinging to a steep slope, with her second husband, Sohrab Mohebbi—an Iranian-born writer and curator who works at Redcat, a CalArts-affiliated art center in downtown Los Angeles—and her two children, Nova and Henry (who is twelve), from her previous marriage, to the painter Edgar Bryan, who lives nearby. She told me by e-mail that when she moved to Los Angeles to attend CalArts, in 1992, she was put off by

how "dry" a place it is, the climate and architecture "so jarring." "But after two years I felt very differently. Felt easy and familiar." Oak, deodar, citron, and pepper trees and capricious gardens crowd up to the stairs and patios around Owens's house. A sleek building below contains a studio and room for guests.

I was invited for dinner one summer evening. Owens's mother—who moved from Ohio to Los Angeles eight years ago, and, last year, into a house next door with her second husband, Richard Hendrickson, a retired small-city-newspaper reporter and editor—brought salad. Pasta and sauce materialized amid the comings and goings and breezy chat, in the open kitchen, of Owens and of friends from her capacious circle of artists, musicians, writers, filmmakers, and other creative Angelenos. ("I would be nowhere without them," she told me.) Two or three times, the frenetic family dog, a rescue mutt named Molly, escaped the house and had to be recaptured. Downstairs, Henry and Nova took turns practicing the piano.

At twilight, we all took a walk—or a hike, what with the hills—a half mile or so to a park and back, in a sort of mood, at once energized and haphaz-

ard, that I now associate with Owens. In company, she is cordial and voluble—nice, in a word—but with what often seems a fraction of a mind that is occultly busy elsewhere. The first thing that you notice about her is her gaze, wide-eyed and fixed on you, as if you had dropped from the sky. It takes a moment to realize that you are not obliged to be commensurately interesting. She consumes so little social oxygen that people around her tend to get a bit high, laughing at anything. She submits to being interviewed as you might to being treated by a trusted dentist: it's endurable and over with soon enough. I found myself repeatedly apologizing to her for the imposition. She seemed not to hear. She was answering questions.

Owens's father died of complications following knee surgery this year, in July. He was a flamboyant attorney, who strutted around Norwalk in a Stetson. Her parents divorced when she was seventeen. She credits her father with having instilled in her a fervent liberalism, which has prompted her to engage in feminist causes and in campaigns for Democratic candidates, but which is only rarely and obliquely expressed in her art. Raised Catholic, she left the church in rebellion against its anti-abortion doctrine. I was startled when, in her car one day, as she drove us between gallery shows, her usual mildness gave way to flaming rage. We had seen a policeman hassle a young guy whose offense, it appeared, had been to cross a street so lackadaisically as to impede the cop's car for a few seconds. "That is so like them!" she said of uniformed authority. She told me a maxim imparted to her by her father: "Never tell the police anything."

But Owens adores rules, even, or perhaps especially, trivial ones. In an interview with one of her close friends, the novelist Rachel Kushner, in 2003, she described a summer job that she had had when she was seventeen: checking trucks hauling trash and garbage into a landfill. She recalled, "I had the power to say, in a logical and non-emotional way, 'You can't deliver that without a tarp over it.' People would get frustrated and respond, 'What do you mean? You want me to just pull out of here, put a tarp

on, and then come right back? I would look at them and say, 'Yes, that's what you'll have to do if you want to dump your trash—it's the law.' It had its appeal." An anarchic stickler: that's Owens.

Owens can be certain that her Echo Park house was built in 1942, because a renovation, in 2013, discovered paper stereotype plates (used to cast lead cylinders for printing) of the *Los Angeles Times* from that year. They had been employed as flashing beneath the shingled exterior. Transferred to silk screens in a complex procedure involving monoprint molds, the antique reports of distant war and of local events, and the commercial and classified ads, now do double duty as text and texture in some of Owens's paintings. The source and content of the plates both do and don't matter to her, it seems. What counts is their specificity, as things distinct from other things that are like them. "All art now is collage," she said to me, with reference not just to cutting and pasting but to the incorporation of methods and images with prior uses. "Heterogeneous

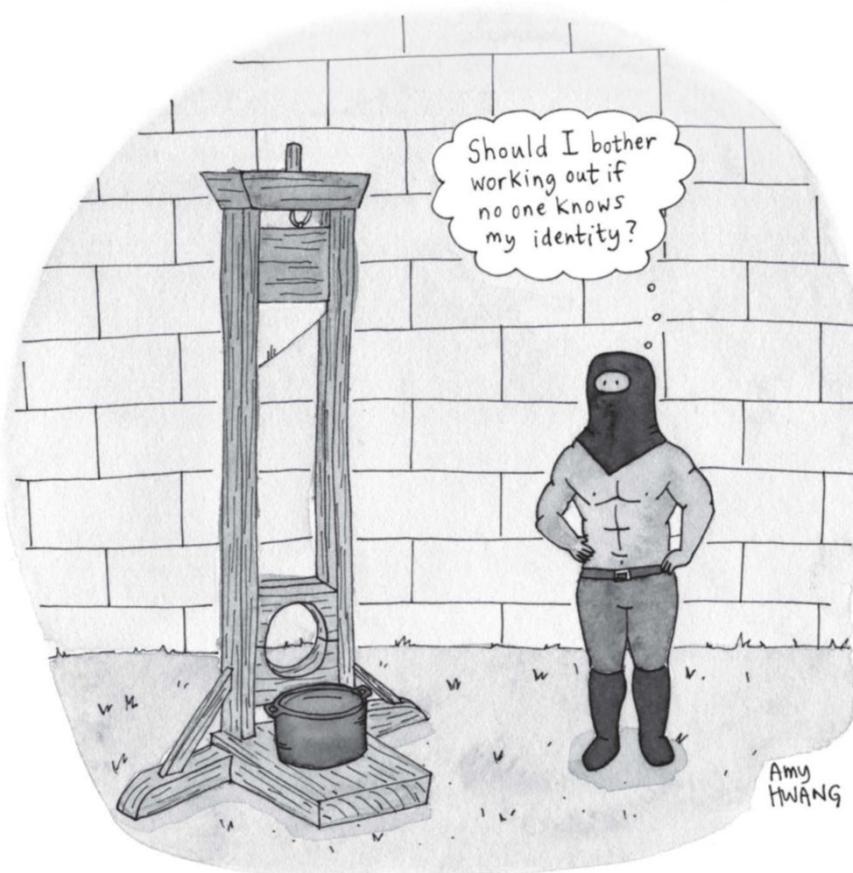
in form," she explained. "Against the different paradigm of the Gestalt object, like a Jackson Pollock painting—a single image that jolts you. Now art is all about being constructed out of relationships between parts."

"Say very little," Owens told herself in her early-nineties journal. And, in a way, she maintains that policy, even when going on at length about her art. Her public talks, delivered with an air of professional duty, tend to be remarkably boring. But get her on the subject of another artist and she brightens. She and I discussed by e-mail the country-music paragon Patsy Cline. I commented on Cline's way with the 1952 chestnut "You Belong to Me," rather a high-class number for a country girl: "Fly the ocean in a silver plane . . . Just remember till you're home again / You belong to me." Cline sings it with wondering respect for its decorum, such that the song is no longer about a fancy girl remonstrating with her fancy guy, but about Cline's imagining of what it's like to *be* such a girl, with such a guy. Owens commented, "She has a way of singing that feels like she is so relaxed and confi-

dent, that what she says, it could be anything and I'd believe she meant it but on an even deeper level than the words could convey." That's the very tenor of the borrowed images that Owens paints: not appropriations but vicarious embodiments.

In 2003, Owens became the youngest artist ever to be given a retrospective at Los Angeles's Museum of Contemporary Art. By that time, she had begun to gravitate from abstraction toward fanciful figurative imagery, loosely brushed. "I decided I needed to bring in the human figure, because it was something that I was leaving out, and to break the habit of working for sites. To push myself." In 2006, she returned to Ohio for a year. She helped her mother buy a new house with a four-car garage, which became her studio, and painted her baby Henry, Edenic landscapes, flowers, and wacky animals, such as the horse that she showed to the schoolchildren. The works often suggest to me the state of mind of a new mother too tired to think while too dedicated not to work. Owens confirmed the impression in an e-mail: "Being a mom and still making art involves absolutely opposite parts of your brain. One is really selfish and the other is absolutely selfless." The domestic turn in Owens's life and subject matter dismayed friends when she returned to L.A. "It was uncool. I was told by many people, 'Well, that's the end of your art career.'" How did that make her feel? "Angered," she said. I think that the gawky pictures were a way for Owens to reconnect with the soul of the girl who had tried to get just right the vision of a figure in jail and a sassy dog. She wasn't going to be embarrassed about it.

Owens was asked, in 2003, to contribute to a feature, in *Vogue*, of self-portraits of women artists. She says in the Whitney catalogue, "I said no several times because my work doesn't really deal with self-representation." Finally, she made an insouciant watercolor of herself, seen from the back, standing in a small boat and talking to the sun. A bird perches on a wave, and Owens's dog bobs past on a piece of driftwood. "I sent the image off to *Vogue* and Anna Wintour rejected it." Such occasional offenses to elegant



taste may explain a wobbliness in the market for Owens's paintings. Her works sell briskly to devoted collectors but less well on the investment-minded secondary market, which favors reliable product lines. Her peak at auction—three hundred and sixty thousand dollars, at Sotheby's, a year ago—is hardly peanuts, but it lags the millions for works by some of her contemporaries, all stylistically consistent and nearly all male. Even after two decades of growing fame and esteem, her art's values retard transposition into prices.

One day, I met with Owens in her main studio. Consumed by preparations for the Whitney show, she had no special work in progress. She was wearing an off-the-shoulder cashmere sweater, but over a white T-shirt that rather sabotaged the chic. As usual, her long brown hair was pulled up in a knot with no evident advice from a mirror. I watched while she and an assistant, David Berezin, huddled at a computer to color-correct pages for the Whitney catalogue—difficult by computer, she said. "Digital color shoots out. Real color is reflective." Getting the right blue for the sky in a photograph of Owens and a friend on an outing in Death Valley took most of a minute. Other assistants worked at other computers. Phone calls were frequent. Owens Skyped at one point, also about the catalogue, with Scott Rothkopf, in New York, in editorial detail so granular that I almost fell asleep. The studio is like a cross between a factory and a laboratory. One colossal space is equipped with worktables and contains leaning stacks of big, well-used silk screens on heavy metal frames. Another room, merely vast, is hung with unfinished paintings in what seemed a tentative simulacrum of a museum or gallery show. She said, "I want to see how they look with each other. What works, what doesn't." The mismatched paintings on the day of my visit felt like actors at an audition. If someone looked at me the way Owens was looking at them, I'd be scared. Crowded bookshelves, a couch, a large coffee table, chairs, and kitchen accessories furnish rough amenity.

The studio is in a building next door to 356 Mission Road, a two-story stuc-

coed-brick hulk, built in 1926, that was once a printing plant and then a piano warehouse. It sports a stately corner entrance on a dusty, all-but-untrafficked stretch of blocks, zoned for light industry, that are quiescent by day and deserted at night. It was vacant when Owens found it, in 2012, while in search of a space as a studio that could also house an exhibition—her first in L.A. since 2003—of works that she would make there. She rented it with support from her longtime dealer Gavin Brown and her friend Wendy Yao, the owner of an avant-gardish Chinatown bookstore, Ooga Booga. The show, "12 Paintings," installed on a dramatic scale with the austere immensity of the building's ground-floor space, proved to be more than the sum of its parts. The effect gave Owens the idea, in partnership with Brown and Yao, to make 356 Mission Road a *Kunsthalle*—a non-collecting museum for exhibitions, performances, community workshops (there's a weekly one in animation, for children), lectures, a branch of Ooga Booga, and fund-raisers for liberal causes (never for itself and never taking a commission). The venue has hosted hundreds of events. Subsisting on sales from shows and, whenever needed, on contributions from Owens, it amounts to a work of art in itself—and, lately, a bull's-eye for controversy.

A shadowy group, the Boyle Heights Alliance Against Artwashing and Displacement, has picketed and otherwise publicly opposed 356 Mission as a symbol of the increasing gentrification of the largely Latino neighborhood. This agonizes Owens. She wrote to me, "I have conducted myself and lived my life as an engaged citizen in my city and my various communities," and she has empathy for victims of displacements that are "tragic and very real." Last spring, she sought and got a meeting to discuss the situation with members of the activist group, who proved unbending. "Their single and inflexible demand is that we hand over the keys of the space to them and end 356. It is also very important to them that I 'leave graciously' by signing a document saying I agree with all their ideas and I have learned from them." Subsequently: "All of the staff and our friends have talked this over, asked

community members, done research and do not believe we have found any evidence this will result in the reversal of gentrification." It's a fact of experience that the appearance of artists and galleries in low-income areas reliably portends rising real-estate values, with dire consequences for many residents. What's rare in the case of 356, which owns no property and has no monetary investment in Boyle Heights, is the sensitivity of its leader, on the horns of an irremediable dilemma. An adage about the inevitable fate of good deeds springs to mind. So does an unlucky resonance of Owens's creative disposition.

"A painting seems to never not be art . . . even whether it is sitting on the shelf in the art-supply store or in the dumpster," Owens said in a symposium, earlier this year, at the Museum of Modern Art, on the heroically perverse French Dadaist Francis Picabia. (Why bother trying to win at a game that can't be lost?) Analogously, an art space can never not stand for art, whether up your street or on the moon. "Making mistakes is part of the work," Owens told the children at her daughter's school. Will 356 Mission turn out to have been a mistake for her? It will be an illuminating one, if so. Conceived in the hope of opening a window of social possibility, 356 may instead have hit a stone wall of political rancor.

Owens said to me, "I really believe in art, that art can do things that other things don't do. It's important to try, and fail, and to believe that things can do things." She is a genius of revelations, along the lines of that premise. She revealed twenty years ago, and has kept doing it, that what seemed a terminally exhausted state of painting could be a garden of unlimited, freshening delights. Now she confronts a larger imbroglio. Does art still, if it ever did, matter beyond the commercial and institutional bubbles of the art world? Can aesthetic pleasures have ethical payoffs, imparting lessons for life? Or does life overrule rationales for art altogether? These are not abstract questions for Owens. They spur her to propositions that, availing or not, solicit dead-honest responses of eye, mind, and heart. ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

# EMPIRE OF PAIN

*The Sackler family's ruthless promotion of opioids generated billions of dollars—and millions of addicts.*

BY PATRICK RADDEN KEEFE

The north wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a vast, airy enclosure featuring a banked wall of glass and the Temple of Dendur, a sandstone monument that was constructed beside the Nile two millennia ago and transported to the Met, brick by brick, as a gift from the Egyptian government. The space, which opened in 1978 and is known as the Sackler Wing, is also itself a monument, to one of America's great philanthropic dynasties. The Brooklyn-born brothers Arthur, Mortimer, and Raymond Sackler, all physicians, donated lavishly during their lifetimes to an astounding range of institutions, many of which today bear the family name: the Sackler Gallery, in Washington; the Sackler Museum, at Harvard; the Sackler Center for Arts Education, at the Guggenheim; the Sackler Wing at the Louvre; and Sackler institutes and facilities at Columbia, Oxford, and a dozen other universities. The Sacklers have endowed professorships and underwritten medical research. The art scholar Thomas Lawton once likened the eldest brother, Arthur, to "a modern Medici." Before Arthur's death, in 1987, he advised his children, "Leave the world a better place than when you entered it."

Mortimer died in 2010, and Raymond died earlier this year. The brothers bequeathed to their heirs a laudable tradition of benevolence, and an immense fortune with which to indulge it. Arthur's daughter Elizabeth is on the board of the Brooklyn Museum, where she endowed the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. Raymond's sons, Richard and Jonathan, established a professorship at Yale Cancer Center. "My father raised Jon and me to believe that philanthropy is an important part of how we should fill our lives," Richard has said. Marissa Sackler, the thirty-six-year-old daughter of Mortimer and his third wife, Theresa Rowling, founded Beespace, a

nonprofit "incubator" that supports organizations like the Malala Fund. Sackler recently told *W* that she finds the word "philanthropy" old-fashioned. She considers herself a "social entrepreneur."

When the Met was originally built, in 1880, one of its trustees, the lawyer Joseph Choate, gave a speech to Gilded Age industrialists who had gathered to celebrate its dedication, and, in a bid for their support, offered the sly observation that what philanthropy really buys is immortality: "Think of it, ye millionaires of many markets, what glory may yet be yours, if you only listen to our advice, to convert pork into porcelain, grain and produce into priceless pottery, the rude ores of commerce into sculptured marble." Through such transubstantiation, many fortunes have passed into enduring civic institutions. Over time, the origins of a clan's largesse are largely forgotten, and we recall only the philanthropic legacy, prompted by the name on the building. According to *Forbes*, the Sacklers are now one of America's richest families, with a collective net worth of thirteen billion dollars—more than the Rockefellers or the Mellons. The bulk of the Sacklers' fortune has been accumulated only in recent decades, yet the source of their wealth is to most people as obscure as that of the robber barons. While the Sacklers are interviewed regularly on the subject of their generosity, they almost never speak publicly about the family business, Purdue Pharma—a privately held company, based in Stamford, Connecticut, that developed the prescription painkiller OxyContin. Upon its release, in 1995, OxyContin was hailed as a medical breakthrough, a long-lasting narcotic that could help patients suffering from moderate to severe pain. The drug became a blockbuster, and has reportedly generated some thirty-five billion dollars in revenue for Purdue.

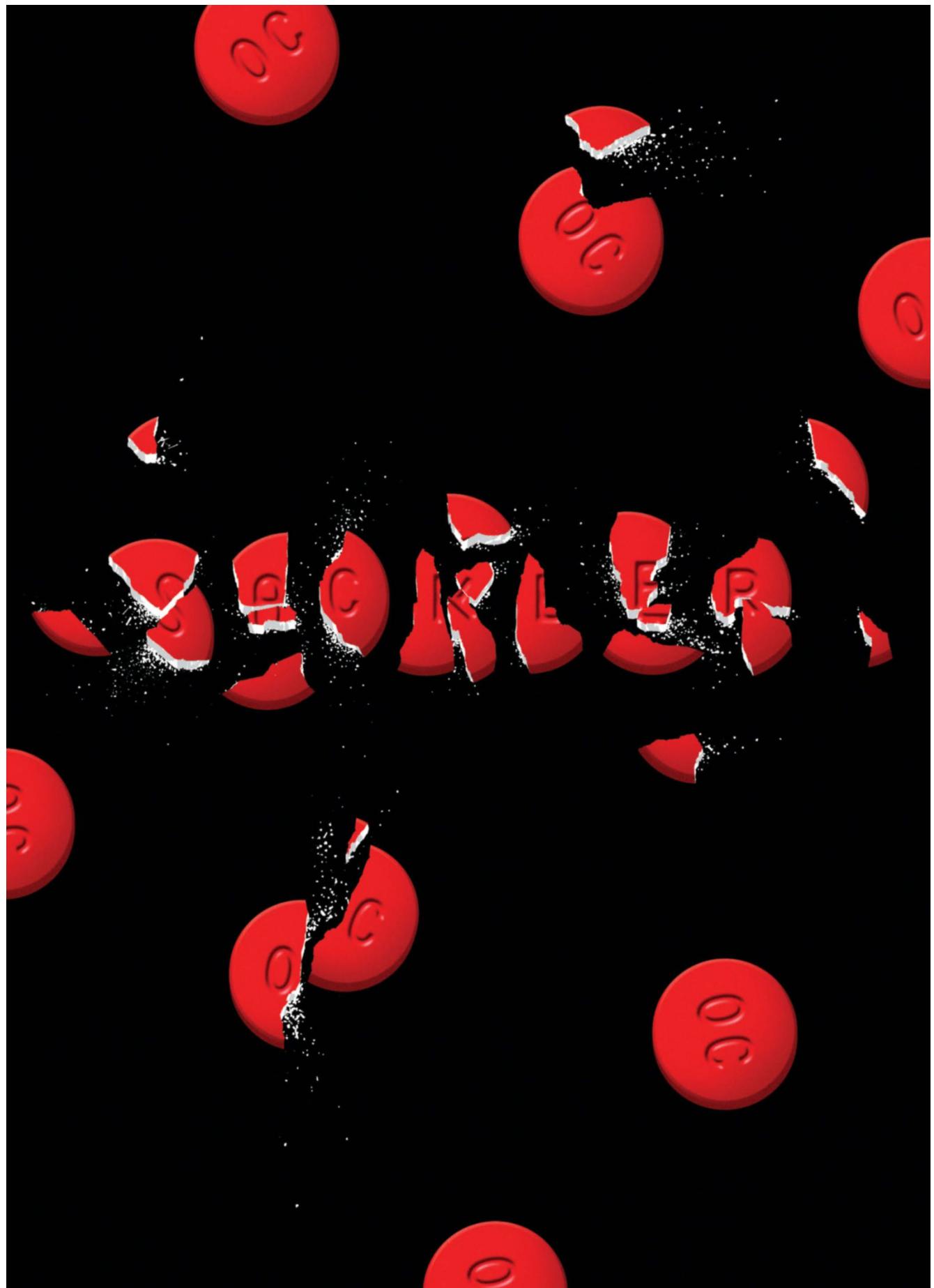
But OxyContin is a controversial drug. Its sole active ingredient is oxycodone, a

chemical cousin of heroin which is up to twice as powerful as morphine. In the past, doctors had been reluctant to prescribe strong opioids—as synthetic drugs derived from opium are known—except for acute cancer pain and end-of-life palliative care, because of a long-standing, and well-founded, fear about the addictive properties of these drugs. "Few drugs are as dangerous as the opioids," David Kessler, the former commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, told me.

Purdue launched OxyContin with a marketing campaign that attempted to counter this attitude and change the prescribing habits of doctors. The company funded research and paid doctors to make the case that concerns about opioid addiction were overblown, and that OxyContin could safely treat an ever-wider range of maladies. Sales representatives marketed OxyContin as a product "to start with and to stay with." Millions of patients found the drug to be a vital salve for excruciating pain. But many others grew so hooked on it that, between doses, they experienced debilitating withdrawal.

Since 1999, two hundred thousand Americans have died from overdoses related to OxyContin and other prescription opioids. Many addicts, finding prescription painkillers too expensive or too difficult to obtain, have turned to heroin. According to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, four out of five people who try heroin today started with prescription painkillers. The most recent figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention suggest that a hundred and forty-five Americans now die every day from opioid overdoses.

Andrew Kolodny, the co-director of the Opioid Policy Research Collaborative, at Brandeis University, has worked with hundreds of patients addicted to opioids. He told me that, though many fatal overdoses have resulted from opioids other than OxyContin, the crisis was initially precipitated by a shift in



*An addiction specialist said that the Sacklers' firm, Purdue Pharma, bears the "lion's share" of the blame for the opioid crisis.*

the culture of prescribing—a shift carefully engineered by Purdue. “If you look at the prescribing trends for all the different opioids, it’s in 1996 that prescribing really takes off,” Kolodny said. “It’s not a coincidence. That was the year Purdue launched a multifaceted campaign that misinformed the medical community about the risks.” When I asked Kolodny how much of the blame Purdue bears for the current public-health crisis, he responded, “The lion’s share.”

Although the Sackler name can be found on dozens of buildings, Purdue’s Web site scarcely mentions the family, and a list of the company’s board of directors fails to include eight family members, from three generations, who serve in that capacity. “I don’t know how many rooms in different parts of the world I’ve given talks in that were named after the Sacklers,” Allen Frances, the former chair of psychiatry at Duke University School of Medicine, told me. “Their name has been pushed forward as the epitome of good works and of the fruits of the capitalist system. But, when it comes down to it, they’ve earned this fortune at the expense of millions of people who are addicted. It’s shocking how they have gotten away with it.”

“Dr. Sackler considered himself and was considered to be the patriarch of the Sackler family,” a lawyer representing Arthur Sackler’s children once observed. Arthur was a gap-toothed, commanding polymath who trained under the Dutch psychoanalyst Johan H. W. van Ophuijsen, whom Sackler proudly described as “Freud’s favorite disciple.” Arthur and his brothers, the children of Jewish immigrants from Galicia and Poland, grew up in Brooklyn during the Depression. All three attended medical school, and worked together at the Creedmoor Psychiatric Center, in Queens, collectively publishing some hundred and fifty scholarly papers. Arthur became fascinated, he later explained, by the ways that “nature and disease can reveal their secrets.” The Sacklers were especially interested in the biological aspects of psychiatric disorders, and in pharmaceutical alternatives to mid-century methods such as electroshock therapy and psychoanalysis.

But the brothers made their fortunes

in commerce, rather than from medical practice. They shared an entrepreneurial bent. As a teen-ager, Mortimer became the advertising manager of his high-school newspaper, and after persuading Chesterfield to place a cigarette ad he got a five-dollar commission—a lot of money at a time when, he later said, “even doctors were selling apples in the streets.” In 1942, Arthur helped pay his medical-school tuition by taking a copywriting job at William Douglas McAdams, a small ad agency that specialized in the medical field. He proved so adept at this work that he eventually bought the agency—and revolutionized the industry. Until then, pharmaceutical companies had not availed themselves of Madison Avenue pizzazz and trickery. As both a doctor and an adman, Arthur displayed a Don Draper-style intuition for the alchemy of marketing. He recognized that selling new drugs requires a seduction of not just the patient but the doctor who writes the prescription.

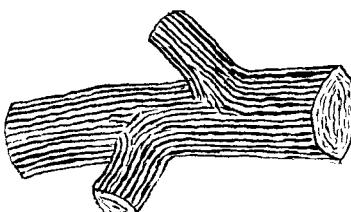
Sackler saw doctors as unimpeachable stewards of public health. “I would rather place myself and my family at the judgment and mercy of a fellow-physician than that of the state,” he liked to say. So in selling new drugs he devised campaigns that appealed directly to clinicians, placing splashy ads in medical journals and distributing literature to doctors’ offices. Seeing that physicians were most heavily influenced by their own peers, he enlisted prominent ones to endorse his

and promotion to pharmaceutical marketing.” Allen Frances put it differently: “Most of the questionable practices that propelled the pharmaceutical industry into the scourge it is today can be attributed to Arthur Sackler.”

Advertising has always entailed some degree of persuasive license, and Arthur’s techniques were sometimes blatantly deceptive. In the nineteen-fifties, he produced an ad for a new Pfizer antibiotic, Sigmamycin: an array of doctors’ business cards, alongside the words “More and more physicians find Sigmamycin the antibiotic therapy of choice.” It was the medical equivalent of putting Mickey Mantle on a box of Wheaties. In 1959, an investigative reporter for *The Saturday Review* tried to contact some of the doctors whose names were on the cards. They did not exist.

During the sixties, Arthur got rich marketing the tranquilizers Librium and Valium. One Librium ad depicted a young woman carrying an armload of books, and suggested that even the quotidian anxiety a college freshman feels upon leaving home might be best handled with tranquilizers. Such students “may be afflicted by a sense of lost identity,” the copy read, adding that university life presented “a whole new world . . . of anxiety.” The ad ran in a medical journal. Sackler promoted Valium for such a wide range of uses that, in 1965, a physician writing in the journal *Psychosomatics* asked, “When do we *not* use this drug?” One campaign encouraged doctors to prescribe Valium to people with no psychiatric symptoms whatsoever: “For this kind of patient—with no demonstrable pathology—consider the usefulness of Valium.” Roche, the maker of Valium, had conducted no studies of its addictive potential. Win Gerson, who worked with Sackler at the agency, told the journalist Sam Quinones years later that the Valium campaign was a great success, in part because the drug was so effective. “It kind of made junkies of people, but that drug worked,” Gerson said. By 1973, American doctors were writing more than a hundred million tranquilizer prescriptions a year, and countless patients became hooked. The Senate held hearings on what Edward Kennedy called “a nightmare of dependence and addiction.”

While running his advertising company, Arthur Sackler became a publisher,



products, and cited scientific studies (which were often underwritten by the pharmaceutical companies themselves). John Kallir, who worked under Sackler for ten years at McAdams, recalled, “Sackler’s ads had a very serious, clinical look—a physician talking to a physician. But it was advertising.” In 1997, Arthur was posthumously inducted into the Medical Advertising Hall of Fame, and a citation praised his achievement in “bringing the full power of advertising

starting a biweekly newspaper, the *Medical Tribune*, which eventually reached six hundred thousand physicians. He scoffed at suggestions that there was a conflict of interest between his roles as the head of a pharmaceutical-advertising company and the publisher of a periodical for doctors. But in 1959 it emerged that a company he owned, MD Publications, had paid the chief of the antibiotics division of the F.D.A., Henry Welch, nearly three hundred thousand dollars in exchange for Welch's help in promoting certain drugs. Sometimes, when Welch was giving a speech, he inserted a drug's advertising slogan into his remarks. (After the payments were discovered, he resigned.) When I asked John Kallir about the Welch scandal, he chuckled, and said, "He got co-opted by Artie."

In 1952, the Sackler brothers bought a small patent-medicine company, Purdue Frederick, which was based in Greenwich Village and made such unglamorous staples as laxatives and earwax remover. According to court documents, each brother would control a third of the company, but Arthur, who was occupied with his publishing and advertising ventures, would play a passive role. The journalist Barry Meier, in his 2003 book, "Pain Killer: A 'Wonder' Drug's Trail of Addiction and Death," remarks that Arthur treated his brothers "not as siblings but more like his progeny and understudies." Now Raymond and Mortimer, who became joint C.E.O.s, had a company of their own.

In the early sixties, Estes Kefauver, a Tennessee senator, chaired a subcommittee that looked into the pharmaceutical industry, which was growing rapidly. Kefauver, who had previously investigated the Mafia, was especially intrigued by the Sackler brothers. A memo prepared by Kefauver's staff noted, "The Sackler empire is a completely integrated operation in that it can devise a new drug in its drug development enterprise, have the drug clinically tested and secure favorable reports on the drug from the various hospitals with which they have connections, conceive the advertising approach and prepare the actual advertising copy with which to promote the drug, have the clinical articles as well as advertising copy published in their own medical journals, [and] prepare and plant articles in newspapers and magazines." In January, 1962, Arthur travelled to



*"Actually, it all makes me feel statistically average-sized and I resent the tone."*

Washington to testify before Kefauver's subcommittee. A panel of senators assailed him with pointed questions, but he was a formidable interlocutor—slippery, aloof, and impeccably prepared—and no senator landed a blow. At one point, Sackler caught Kefauver in an error and said, "If you personally had taken the training that a physician requires to get a degree, you would never have made that mistake." Quizzed about his promotion of a cholesterol drug that had many side effects, including hair loss, Sackler deadpanned, "I would prefer to have thin hair to thick coronaries."

As the Sacklers grew wealthy, they became patrons of the arts. In 1974, the brothers gave the Met three and a half million dollars, enabling the construction of the wing housing the Temple of Dendur. Mortimer used the space for a lavish birthday party. The cake was in the shape of the Great Sphinx, but its face had been replaced with Mortimer's.

In April, 1987, when Arthur Sackler was seventy-three, he demanded that his third wife, Gillian, account for all their household expenditures. He dictated a terse memo: "I am determined to take command of all situations for which I personally and my estate bear the ultimate obligation." A month later, he had a heart attack, and died. The family gath-

ered for a fond memorial service at the Met, but Arthur's children fought bitterly with Gillian, and sparred with Mortimer and Raymond, over the estate. They accused Gillian of trying to steal their inheritance, and of being "inspired variously by greed, malice, or vindictiveness toward her stepchildren." According to the minutes of a family meeting, Arthur's daughter Elizabeth suggested that he had hidden the true worth of some family investments, "because he didn't want Morty and Ray to think they were more valuable." A family lawyer told the children, "There were no absolutely white lilies here on either side."

Arthur's descendants still owned a third of Purdue Frederick, and Mortimer and Raymond were interested in buying the stake. The company, which had moved to Connecticut and would eventually change its name to Purdue Pharma, had made a great deal of money under their stewardship. But such riches were about to seem paltry. By the time the brothers made their bid, Purdue was already developing a new drug: OxyContin.

**H**umans have cultivated the opium poppy for five thousand years. The father of medicine, Hippocrates, recognized the therapeutic properties of the plant. But even in the ancient world

people understood that the benevolent powers of this narcotic were offset by the perils of addiction. In his 1996 book, “Opium: A History,” Martin Booth notes that, for the Romans, the poppy was a symbol of both sleep and death. During the nineteen-eighties, Raymond and Mortimer Sackler had a great success at Purdue with an innovative painkiller called MS Contin, a morphine pill with a patented “controlled release” formula: the drug dissolved gradually into the bloodstream over several hours. (“Contin” was short for “continuous.”) MS Contin became the biggest seller in Purdue’s history. But, by the late eighties, its patent was about to expire, and Purdue executives started looking for a drug to replace it.

One executive who was centrally involved in this effort was Raymond’s son Richard, an enigmatic, slightly awkward man who, in the family tradition, had trained as a doctor. Richard had joined Purdue in 1971 as an assistant to his father, and worked his way up. His name appears on numerous medical patents. In the summer of 1990, a Purdue scientist sent a memo to Richard

and several other colleagues, pointing out that MS Contin could “face such serious generic competition that other controlled-release opioids must be considered.” The memo described ongoing efforts to create a product containing oxycodone, an opioid that had been developed by German scientists in 1916.

Oxycodone, which was inexpensive to produce, was already used in other drugs, such as Percodan (in which it is blended with aspirin) and Percocet (in which it is blended with Tylenol). Purdue developed a pill of pure oxycodone, with a time-release formula similar to that of MS Contin. The company decided to produce doses as low as ten milligrams, but also jumbo pills—eighty milligrams and a hundred and sixty milligrams—whose potency far exceeded that of any prescription opioid on the market. As Barry Meier writes, in “Pain Killer,” “In terms of narcotic firepower, OxyContin was a nuclear weapon.”

Before releasing OxyContin, Purdue conducted focus groups with doctors and learned that the “biggest negative” that might prevent widespread use of

the drug was ingrained concern regarding the “abuse potential” of opioids. But, fortuitously, while the company was developing OxyContin, some physicians began arguing that American medicine should reexamine this bias. Highly regarded doctors, like Russell Portenoy, then a pain specialist at Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, in New York, spoke out about the problem of untreated chronic pain—and the wisdom of using opioids to treat it. “There is a growing literature showing that these drugs can be used for a long time, with few side effects,” Portenoy told the *Times*, in 1993. Describing opioids as a “gift from nature,” he said that they needed to be destigmatized. Portenoy, who received funding from Purdue, decried the reticence among clinicians to administer such narcotics for chronic pain, claiming that it was indicative of “opiophobia,” and suggesting that concerns about addiction and abuse amounted to a “medical myth.” In 1997, the American Academy of Pain Medicine and the American Pain Society published a statement regarding the use of opioids to treat chronic pain. The statement was written by a committee chaired by Dr. J. David Haddox, a paid speaker for Purdue.

Richard Sackler worked tirelessly to make OxyContin a blockbuster, telling colleagues how devoted he was to the drug’s success. The F.D.A. approved OxyContin in 1995, for use in treating moderate to severe pain. Purdue had conducted no clinical studies on how addictive or prone to abuse the drug might be. But the F.D.A., in an unusual step, approved a package insert for OxyContin which announced that the drug was *safer* than rival painkillers, because the patented delayed-absorption mechanism “is believed to reduce the abuse liability.” David Kessler, who ran the F.D.A. at the time, told me that he was “not involved in the approval.” The F.D.A. examiner who oversaw the process, Dr. Curtis Wright, left the agency shortly afterward. Within two years, he had taken a job at Purdue.

Mortimer, Raymond, and Richard Sackler launched OxyContin with one of the biggest pharmaceutical marketing campaigns in history, deploying many persuasive techniques pioneered by Arthur Steven May, who joined Purdue as



*“I’m not saying he’s perfect. I’m just saying deal with it.”*

an OxyContin sales representative in 1999, recalled, “At the time, we felt like we were doing a righteous thing.” He used to tell himself, “There’s millions of people in pain, and we have the solution.” (May is no longer working for Purdue.) The company assembled a sales force of as many as a thousand representatives and armed them with charts showing OxyContin’s benefits. May attended a three-week training session at Purdue’s headquarters. At a celebratory dinner following the training, he was seated at a table with Richard Sackler. “I was blown away,” he recalled. “My first impression of him was ‘This is the dude that made it happen. He has a company that his family owns. I want to *be* him one day.’”

A major thrust of the sales campaign was that OxyContin should be prescribed not merely for the kind of severe short-term pain associated with surgery or cancer but also for less acute, longer-lasting pain: arthritis, back pain, sports injuries, fibromyalgia. The number of conditions that OxyContin could treat seemed almost unlimited. According to internal documents, Purdue officials discovered that many doctors wrongly assumed that oxycodone was *less* potent than morphine—a misconception that the company exploited.

A 1995 memo sent to the launch team emphasized that the company did “not want to niche” OxyContin just for cancer pain. A primary objective in Purdue’s 2002 budget plan was to “broaden” the use of OxyContin for pain management. As May put it, “What Purdue did really well was target physicians, like general practitioners, who were not pain specialists.” In its internal literature, Purdue similarly spoke of reaching patients who were “opioid naïve.” Because OxyContin was so powerful and potentially addictive, David Kessler told me, from a public-health standpoint “the goal should have been to sell the least dose of the drug to the smallest number of patients.” But this approach was at odds with the competitive imperatives of a pharmaceutical company, he continued. So Purdue set out to do exactly the opposite.

Sales reps, May told me, received training in “overcoming objections” from clinicians. If a doctor inquired about addiction, May had a talking point ready. “The delivery system is believed to reduce the abuse liability of the drug,” he

recited to me, with a rueful laugh. “Those were the specific words. I can still remember, all these years later.” He went on, “I found out pretty fast that it wasn’t true.” In 2002, a sales manager from the company, William Gergely, told a state investigator in Florida that Purdue executives “told us to say things like it is ‘virtually’ non-addicting.”

May didn’t ask doctors simply to take his word on OxyContin; he presented them with studies and literature provided by other physicians. Purdue had a speakers’ bureau, and it paid several thousand clinicians to attend medical conferences and deliver presentations about the merits of the drug. Doctors were offered all-expenses-paid trips to pain-management seminars in places like Boca Raton. Such spending was worth the investment: internal Purdue records indicate that doctors who attended these seminars in 1996 wrote OxyContin prescriptions more than twice as often as those who didn’t. The company advertised in medical journals, sponsored Web sites about chronic pain, and distributed a dizzying variety of OxyContin swag: fishing hats, plush toys, luggage tags. Purdue also produced promotional videos featuring satisfied patients—like a construction worker who talked about how OxyContin had eased his chronic back pain, allowing him to return to work. The videos, which also included testimonials from pain specialists, were sent to tens of thousands of doctors. The marketing of OxyContin relied on an empirical circularity: the company convinced doctors of the drug’s safety with literature that had been produced by doctors who were paid, or funded, by the company.

David Juurlink, who runs the division of clinical pharmacology and toxicology at the University of Toronto, told me that OxyContin’s success can be attributed partly to the fact that so many doctors wanted to believe in the therapeutic benefits of opioids. “The primary goal of medical practice is the relief of suffering, and one of the most common types that doctors see is pain,” he said. “You’ve got a patient in pain, you’ve got a doctor who genuinely wants to help, and now suddenly you have an intervention that—we are told—is safe and effective.”

Keith Humphreys, a professor of psychiatry at Stanford, who served as a

drug-policy adviser to the Obama Administration, said, “That’s the real Greek tragedy of this—that so many well-meaning doctors got co-opted. The level of influence is just mind-boggling. Purdue gave money to continuing medical education, to state medical boards, to faux grassroots organizations.” According to training materials, Purdue instructed sales representatives to assure doctors—repeatedly and without evidence—that “fewer than one per cent” of patients who took OxyContin became addicted. (In 1999, a Purdue-funded study of patients who used OxyContin for headaches found that the addiction rate was thirteen per cent.)

Within five years of its introduction, OxyContin was generating a billion dollars a year. “There is no sign of it slowing down,” Richard Sackler told a team of company representatives in 2000. The sales force was heavily incentivized to push the drug. In a memo, a sales manager in Tennessee wrote, “\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$ It’s Bonus Time in the Neighborhood!” May, who was assigned to the Virginia area, was astonished to learn that especially skillful colleagues were earning hundreds of thousands of dollars in commissions. One year, May’s own sales were so brisk that Purdue rewarded him with a trip to Hawaii. As prescriptions multiplied, Purdue executives—and the Sackler family members on the company’s board—appeared happy to fund such blandishments. Internal budget plans described the company’s sales force as its “most valuable resource.” In 2001, Purdue Pharma paid forty million dollars in bonuses.

One day, May drove with a colleague to Lewisburg, a small city in West Virginia. They were there to visit a doctor who had been one of May’s top prescribers. When they arrived, the doctor was ashen. A relative had just died, she explained. The girl had overdosed on OxyContin.

Arthur and Mortimer Sackler each married three times, and Raymond married once. There are fifteen Sackler children in the second generation, most of whom have children of their own. The Sackler clan has pursued a variety of causes and interests. In 2011, Mortimer’s widow, Theresa, who sits on the board of Purdue, was awarded the Prince of

Wales Medal for Art Philanthropy. When the medal was conferred, Ian Dejardin, the Sackler Director of the Dulwich Picture Gallery, remarked, “It’s going to be difficult not to make her sound utterly saintly.” Theresa’s daughter, Sophie, is married to the English cricket player Jamie Dalrymple, and lives in a forty-million-dollar house in London. Raymond’s thirty-seven-year-old grandson, David Sackler, runs a family investment fund, and is the only member of the third generation who sits on Purdue’s board. The fact that Purdue is privately held is a major reason that the Sacklers’ connection to OxyContin has remained obscure. A publicly traded company makes periodic disclosures to its shareholders. But Purdue, Barry Meier writes, “was the Sackler family’s private domain.”

On occasion, press accounts about OxyContin note that profits from the drug flow to the Sacklers, but these stories tend to depict the family as a monolith. As with any large clan, however, there are fissures of discord. In the eighties, Mortimer sued his ex-wife Gertraud, claiming that she had illegally taken possession of an apartment that he owned on Fifth Avenue and had loaned it out to a contingent of models and photographers. None of Arthur’s descendants sit on the company’s board. At a courthouse in Long Island, in files stemming from the family fight over Arthur’s fortune, I came across a document indicating that, after a “protracted negotiation,” Arthur’s estate “sold its one third interest in Purdue” to Raymond and Mortimer.

“I have never owned any shares in Purdue,” Michael Sackler-Berner, a Brooklyn-based singer-songwriter who is a grandson of Arthur Sackler, told me, in an e-mail. “None of the descendants of Arthur M. Sackler have ever had anything to do with, or benefited from, the sale of OxyContin.” Sackler-Berner made no mention of Librium, Valium, or MS Contin, but he added, “Given the current controversy surrounding OxyContin, I appreciate your clarifying the matter.”

Even though Mortimer Sackler had a large stake in the company, he was only an occasional presence at the Connecticut headquarters. He renounced his U.S. citizenship in 1974, reportedly for tax reasons, and lived a flamboyant

life in Europe, shuttling among residences in England, the Swiss Alps, and Cap d’Antibes. (In 1999, Queen Elizabeth conferred an honorary knighthood on him, in recognition of his philanthropy.) Raymond Sackler, who lived in Connecticut, had a more modest temperament and came to his office at Purdue—where he was respectfully known as Dr. Raymond—every day. John Kallir, Arthur’s former advertising colleague, recalled, “Ray was quiet, reasonably honest, always married to the same woman. The least interesting of the three brothers.”

Almost immediately after OxyContin’s release, there were signs that people were abusing it in rural areas like Maine and Appalachia. If you ground the pills up and snorted them, or dissolved them in liquid and injected them, you could override the time-release mechanism and deliver a huge narcotic payload all at once. Perversely, users could learn about such methods by reading a warning label that came with each prescription, which said, “Taking broken, chewed or crushed OxyContin tablets could lead to the rapid release and absorption of a potentially toxic dose.” As more and more doctors prescribed OxyContin for an ever-greater range of symptoms, some patients began selling their pills on the black market, where the street price was a dollar a milligram. Doctors who were easily manipulated by their patients—or corrupted by the money in play—set up so-called pill mills, pain clinics that thrived on a wholesale business of issuing OxyContin prescriptions.

The company did not pull the drug from shelves, however, or acknowledge that it was addictive. Instead, Purdue insisted that the only problem was that recreational drug users were not taking OxyContin as directed. “Their rap has always been that a bunch of junkies ruined their product,” Keith Humphreys, the Stanford professor, said. In 2001, Michael Friedman, Purdue’s executive vice-president, testified before a congressional hearing convened to look into the alarming increase in opioid abuse. The marketing of OxyContin had been “conservative by any standard,” he maintained. “Virtually all of these reports involve people who are

abusing the medication, not patients with legitimate medical needs.”

In 2002, a twenty-nine-year-old woman from New Jersey, Jill Skolek, was prescribed OxyContin for a back injury. One night, after four months on the drug, she died in her sleep, from respiratory arrest, leaving behind a six-year-old son. Her mother, Marianne Skolek Perez, was a nurse. Distraught and bewildered, she became convinced that OxyContin was dangerous. Perez wrote to F.D.A. officials, urging them to append to OxyContin packaging a warning about the risk of addiction.

The following year, Perez attended a conference on addiction at Columbia University. A sandy-haired man named Robin Hogen, wearing a pinstriped suit and a bow tie, was there, too. He was a communications specialist for Purdue, and had launched a vigorous campaign to defend the drug, warning newspapers to be careful about their coverage. “We’re going to be watching them,” he had promised. He had also enlisted Rudolph Giuliani, the former mayor of New York, and his associate Bernard Kerik to preempt any government crackdown. “We have to be politically Machiavellian, often, to win the day,” Hogen once said. At the Columbia event, he was asked about Perez’s daughter. He cautioned that one should not read into the tragedy any liability on Purdue’s part. The real problem, he said, was Jill Skolek: “We think she abused drugs.” (Hogen subsequently apologized for his remark. He no longer works for Purdue.)

Another speaker at the event was Purdue’s senior medical adviser, J. David Haddox, who insisted that OxyContin was not addictive. He once likened the drug to a vegetable, saying, “If I gave you a stalk of celery and you ate that, it would be healthy. But if you put it in a blender and tried to shoot it into your veins, it would not be good.” When Haddox was walking out of the event, Perez, who is petite and rail thin, deliberately bumped into him. Caught off guard, Haddox staggered backward and fell, with a clatter, into a row of folding chairs. “It was one of those Kodak moments,” Perez recalled. “It was probably the wrong thing to do. But I loved it.”

Arthur Sackler once wrote that “all

health problems devolve upon the individual,” and it was Purdue’s position that OxyContin overdoses were a matter of individual responsibility, rather than the drug’s addictive properties. In addition to people like Hogen and Haddox, the company put forward several top executives to mount a defense, including Howard Udell, Purdue’s general counsel, who had been a longtime legal adviser to the Sacklers. Udell “was like Tom Hagen in ‘The Godfather,’” an attorney who dealt with him told me. “Very loyal to the family.” Udell was clearly aware, however, of the abuse potential of OxyContin. According to court documents, his own secretary became addicted to the drug, and was subsequently fired by Purdue.

By 2003, the Drug Enforcement Administration had found that Purdue’s “aggressive methods” had “very much exacerbated OxyContin’s widespread abuse.” Rogelio Guevara, a senior official at the D.E.A., concluded that Purdue had “deliberately minimized” the risks associated with the drug. But the company continued shifting the blame to drug abusers, creating a public-service announcement that showed a teen-ager raiding his parents’ medicine cabinet.

In a phone interview, Hogen told me that, for Purdue and the Sacklers, “there was a sense almost of betrayal—how could people put the availability of that product in jeopardy by abusing it for pleasure?” Hogen said that the company received many letters from grateful pain patients, thanking Purdue for “giving them their lives back.” Asked about his reticence to acknowledge that OxyContin might be addictive, Hogen said, “Today, addiction is broadly seen as a disease. Then, it was not. I think our understanding of addiction has grown enormously in the last fifteen years.”

People have known for thousands of years that opium derivatives are addictive, I said.

“You really need to talk to a clinician,” Hogen replied. “I’m not a doctor.”

J. David Haddox is a doctor. In 2001, he told an Associated Press reporter, “A lot of these people say, ‘Well, I was taking the medicine like my doctor told me to,’ and then they start taking more and more and more.” He added, “I don’t see where that’s my problem.” (Had-



*“Of all the wet cement, in all the towns, in all the world, she walks into mine.”*

dox, who still works for Purdue, declined to comment.)

The truth was that the dangers of OxyContin were intrinsic to the drug—and Purdue knew it. The time-release formula meant that, in principle, patients could safely ingest one giant dose every twelve hours. They could sleep through the night—a crucial improvement over conventional painkillers, such as morphine, which require more frequent dosing. One of Purdue’s initial advertising campaigns featured a photograph of two little dosage cups, one marked “8 A.M.” and the other “8 P.M.”, and the words “Remember, Effective Relief Just Takes Two.” But internal Purdue documents, which have emerged through litigation, show that even before the company received F.D.A. approval it was aware that not all patients who took OxyContin were achieving twelve-hour relief. A recent exposé by the *Los Angeles Times* revealed that the first patients to use OxyContin, in a study conducted by Purdue, were ninety women recovering from surgery in Puerto Rico. Roughly half the women required more medication before the twelve-hour mark. The study was never published. For Purdue, the business reason for obscuring such re-

sults was clear: the claim of twelve-hour relief was an invaluable marketing tool. But prescribing a pill on a twelve-hour schedule when, for many patients, it works for only eight is a recipe for withdrawal, addiction, and abuse. Notwithstanding Purdue’s claims, many people who were not drug abusers—and who took OxyContin exactly as their doctors instructed—began experiencing withdrawal symptoms between doses. In March, 2001, a Purdue employee e-mailed a supervisor, describing some internal data on withdrawal and wondering whether or not to write up the results, even though doing so would only “add to the current negative press.” The supervisor responded, “I would not write it up at this point.”

Doctors who prescribed OxyContin were beginning to report that patients were coming to them with symptoms of withdrawal (itching, nausea, the shakes) and asking for more medication. Haddox had an answer. In a 1989 paper, he had coined the term “pseudo-addiction.” As a pain-management pamphlet distributed by Purdue explained, pseudo-addiction “seems similar to addiction, but is due to unrelieved pain.” The pamphlet continued, “Misunderstanding of this phenomenon

may lead the clinician to inappropriately stigmatize the patient with the label ‘addict.’” Pseudo-addiction generally stopped once the pain was relieved—“often through an increase in opioid dose.”

“When you promote these very massive doses of opioids, the more of it that is out there the more abuse there will be,” David Kessler said. “It’s almost linear.” U.S. sales of OxyContin soon exceeded those of Viagra. Everywhere the drug spread, addiction followed. To Steven May, the sales representative in Virginia, it seemed as if the problems associated with OxyContin were metastasizing, “like a cancer.”

According to Robin Hogen, the members of the Sackler family “were unified in their shock that this was happening to a product they were very proud of.” The Sacklers did not have an arm’s-length relationship with Purdue, Hogen said: “This was an active family and an active board.” In 1999, Richard Sackler became Purdue’s president. As the head of a privately held company, however, he felt no pressure to be the public face of the business, and he never appeared at forums where people like Haddox defended Purdue. Indeed, though Sackler presided over the tremendously successful launch of OxyContin, he has never given an on-

the-record interview about the drug. “I’ve had a lot of experience with Purdue over the years, in different settings, but I’ve never even *seen* Richard Sackler,” the addiction specialist Andrew Kolodny, who is a frequent Purdue critic, told me. “I don’t think I’d know him if he was standing in front of me.”

Even after it became clear that OxyContin was being widely abused, Purdue refused to concede that it posed risks. Company leaders worried mainly that attempts to stem overdoses might deprive pain patients of access to the drug. “They said, ‘We need to make sure that these products are available for patients,’ ” Hogen said. “That was their sole focus.” According to Steven May, the sales force was instructed to ride out the controversy, ignore abuse reports, and “sell through it.” As late as 2003, the F.D.A. sent Purdue a warning letter about ads that “grossly overstate the safety profile of OxyContin by not referring in the body of the advertisements to serious, potentially fatal risks.”

In his congressional testimony, Michael Friedman, Richard Sackler’s deputy, said that Purdue first became aware of problems with OxyContin only in April, 2000, after a series of press reports about people abusing it recreationally in Maine. But Purdue didn’t need the me-

dia’s help to know that something was seriously off with the distribution of OxyContin. For years, it had maintained a contract with I.M.S., a little-known company, co-founded by Arthur Sackler, that furnished its clients with fine-grained information about the prescribing habits of individual doctors. Purdue’s sales representatives used the data to figure out which doctors to target.

Such data could also be used to track patterns of abuse. “They know *exactly* what people are prescribing,” Kolodny said. “They know when a doctor is running a pill mill.” At the 2001 hearing, James Greenwood, a Pennsylvania congressman, asked Friedman whether Purdue would take any action if, say, I.M.S. data revealed that a rural osteopath was writing thousands of prescriptions.

Friedman replied that it was not up to Purdue to assess “how well a physician practices medicine.”

“Why do you want that information, then?” Greenwood pressed, before answering his own question: “To see how successful your marketing techniques are.”

Greenwood then observed that, in a recent case involving a Pennsylvania doctor, Richard Paolino, who was wantonly overprescribing OxyContin, a local pharmacist had alerted the authorities.



"He looked at this data and he said, 'Holy God, there is some guy in Ben-salem called Paolino, and he's writing prescriptions out the wazoo,'" Greenwood said. "Now, he had that data and he blew the whistle. And you had that data. What did *you* do?"

Purdue had not alerted the authorities. Clinicians like Paolino were breaking the law—he was sentenced to a minimum of thirty years in prison. But overprescribing generated tremendous revenue for the company. According to four people I spoke with, at Purdue such prescribers were given a name that Las Vegas casinos reserve for their most prized gamblers: whales.

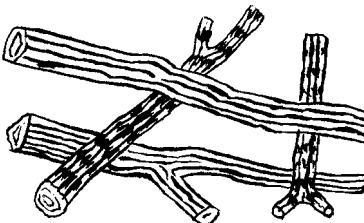
In July, 2001, Richard Blumenthal, who was then the attorney general of Connecticut, wrote to Richard Sackler. "I have been increasingly dismayed and alarmed about the problems and escalating abuse of OxyContin," he began, citing overdose deaths, addiction, pharmacy robberies, and "the astonishing growth in state funding" that was being used to pay for OxyContin prescriptions through Medicaid and Medicare. Blumenthal acknowledged that other prescription drugs were also abused. "But OxyContin is different," he wrote. "It is more powerful, more addictive, more widely sold, more illicitly available, and more publicized." He urged Purdue to "overhaul and reform" its marketing of OxyContin.

The Sacklers disregarded his recommendation, and so in 2004 Blumenthal filed a complaint against Purdue, on behalf of the State of Connecticut. It cited data indicating that a fifth of OxyContin prescriptions were now for dosing intervals shorter than twelve hours. In fact, Blumenthal obtained Purdue records indicating that company officials knew by 1998 that prescriptions for eight-hour intervals were becoming more and more frequent. In one document, a Purdue employee called the numbers "very scary."

Such alarm over off-label dosing may have been prompted less by concern about public health than by considerations of profit. If OxyContin was being widely prescribed at intervals of fewer than twelve hours, the company might lose its "two pills a day" marketplace advantage against cheaper alternatives, like

generic morphine, and insurers could start refusing to cover the costs. As early as 1997, some benefit plans had begun citing abuse of OxyContin as an excuse not to pay. In a 1997 e-mail, Richard Sackler urged colleagues to counter this resistance, warning that, for insurance companies, "addiction" may be a convenient way to just say "NO."

Purdue has been sued thousands of times over OxyContin since its release. (Steven May, the sales rep, initiated a



whistle-blower suit years after leaving the company; it was dismissed, on procedural grounds.) In 2002, Howard Udell said that the firm would defend itself "to the hilt." The next year, a New York trial lawyer named Paul Hanly assembled a lawsuit, signing up five thousand patients who said that they'd become addicted to OxyContin after receiving a doctor's prescription. In discovery, Hanly obtained thousands of documents. "They demonstrated that this company had set out to perpetrate a fraud on the entire medical community," he told me. "These pronouncements about how safe the drug was emanated from the marketing department, not the scientific department. It was pretty shocking. They just made this stuff up."

In 2006, Purdue settled with Hanly's clients, for seventy-five million dollars. Shortly afterward, the company pleaded guilty, in a case brought by federal prosecutors in Virginia, to criminal charges of misbranding, and acknowledged that Purdue had marketed OxyContin "with the intent to defraud or mislead." (Rudolph Giuliani had tried, on Purdue's behalf, to get the lead prosecutor to scuttle the case.) Michael Friedman, the executive vice-president, pleaded guilty to a criminal misdemeanor, as did Howard Udell and the company's chief medical officer, Paul Goldenheim.

Marianne Perez attended the sentencing, in Virginia. "I was on cloud nine," she recalled. She had been working with

the prosecution, and doing everything she could to inform the public about the dangers of OxyContin. Before the sentence was handed down, Perez delivered a victim-impact statement. "I want to know why the Sackler brothers have not been held accountable," she said. (Richard Sackler, despite his leadership role at Purdue, had not been charged.)

During a break in the proceedings, Perez looked over at Friedman, Goldenheim, and Udell, and told herself, "I could reach over, at ninety-eight pounds, and smack one of them." This time, she restrained herself. Instead, she told them, "You are sheer evil. You are bastards." The executives reddened, but said nothing. They all received probation, and were ordered, collectively, to pay nearly thirty-five million dollars in fines. Purdue agreed to pay an additional six hundred million. Given the billions of dollars that the Sacklers and Purdue had reaped from OxyContin, some observers felt that the company had got off easy. Arlen Specter, the Republican senator from Pennsylvania, remarked that such fines amounted to "expensive licenses for criminal misconduct."

Arthur Sackler wrote a regular column for the *Medical Tribune*, and one of his fixations was the unethical behavior of tobacco companies. In 1979, he critiqued the "weasel-worded warning" on cigarette packages as insufficient, arguing that the "hazard to health should be more specific." He also condemned newspapers and magazines for accepting "misleading" advertising about cigarettes, and contended that the publishers must "square with their own consciences their contribution to our national mortality."

In 1998, the tobacco industry, which had been sued by dozens of states, entered into the largest civil-litigation settlement in history, agreeing to pay two hundred and forty-six billion dollars. Tobacco and opioids are different in significant ways. The F.D.A. approved OxyContin as a medicine, and, whereas tobacco can kill you even when used as directed, Purdue would argue that this isn't the case with OxyContin. Mike Moore, who, as Mississippi's attorney general, played a key role in the tobacco litigation, noted another difference: the tobacco companies had more money to

spare than Purdue does. “To resolve the opioid problem, you’re going to need billions,” he said. “Treatment alone could be fifty billion dollars or more. And you need prevention and education programs on top of that.”

Moore is now working with Paul Hanly and other attorneys to bring a fresh wave of lawsuits against Purdue and other pharmaceutical companies. Ten states have filed suits, and private attorneys are working in partnership with dozens of cities and counties to bring others. Many public officials are furious at the makers of powerful painkillers. Prescriptions are expensive, and taxpayers often foot the bill, through programs like Medicaid. Then, as the ruinous consequences of opioid addiction take hold, the public must pay again—this time for emergency services, addiction treatment, and the like. Moore feels that the Sackler family, as the initial author and a prime beneficiary of the epidemic, should be publicly shamed. “I don’t call it Purdue. I call it the Sackler Company,” he said. “They are the main culprit. They duped the F.D.A., saying it lasted twelve hours. They lied about the addictive properties. And they did all this to grow the opioid market, to make it O.K. to jump in the water. Then some of these other companies, they saw that the water was warm, and they said, ‘O.K., we can jump in, too.’” There may be significant legal distinctions between a tobacco company and an opioid producer, but to Moore the ethical parallel is unmistakable: “They’re both profiting by killing people.”

One day in August, 2015, a plane landed in Louisville, Kentucky, and Richard Sackler stepped out, surrounded by attorneys. Eight years earlier, the State of Kentucky had sued Purdue, charging the company with deceptive marketing. Greg Stumbo, the state attorney general at the time, initiated the suit; the son of a cousin of his had fatally overdosed on OxyContin. Purdue fought the suit with its customary rigor, pushing to move the proceedings elsewhere, on the ground that the company could not get a fair trial in Pike County, Kentucky—the rural stretch of coal country where the state intended to try the case. In support of this motion, the company commissioned a demographic study of Pike County and submitted it to the court, as an il-

## LA MÉDITERRANÉE

In the midst of our lifelike life  
I come to this fork in your hand—  
stainless silver, of appreciable weight—

and I fully understand its pronginess,  
the bent of want, an expressive head  
and narrow neck spreading

like a delta out to three strict parallels.  
You, the children, me.  
At some point the waiter brought

your sea bass and the fork hovers over  
its seared arrangement of chain mail,  
its lips parted in surprise.

Against the stiff table linen  
and sunlight on the fork  
your skin is caramel and scuffed

a little whitely at the knuckles.  
A few veins give the skin  
its dark ridges and where each hair

lustration of potential bias in the jury pool. The report was revealing in ways that Purdue may not have intended: according to the filing, twenty-nine per cent of the county’s residents said that they or their family members knew someone who had died from using OxyContin. Seven out of ten respondents described OxyContin’s effect on their community as “devastating.”

A judge ruled that Purdue could not shift the venue for the trial, and so Richard Sackler flew to Louisville. He gave a deposition at a law firm. Four lawyers questioned him about his role in the development and the marketing of OxyContin. Tyler Thompson, the lead attorney, told me that Sackler’s demeanor during the session reminded him of Jeremy Irons’s portrayal of Claus von Bülow, the aristocrat accused of murdering his wife, in the 1990 bio-pic “Reversal of Fortune.” “A smirk and a so-what attitude—an absolute lack of remorse,” Thompson said. “It reminded me of these mining companies that come in here and do mountaintop removal, and leave a mess and just move on: It’s not my back yard, so I don’t care.” Mitchel Denham, a former litigator in the Ken-

tucky attorney general’s office, also attended the deposition. “It was surreal,” he recalled. “We were face to face with the guy whose company had helped to create the opioid epidemic.” Denham told me that, in preparing for trial, he discovered a photograph of the 1997 Pikeville High School football team. “Nearly half the players had died of overdoses, or were addicted,” he said. “It was going to be a pretty good visual.”

But Denham never presented the photograph to a jury, because before the case could go to trial Purdue settled, for twenty-four million dollars. This was a coup for the Sacklers. The settlement was more than Purdue’s original offer—half a million dollars—but still totally incommensurate with Pike County’s needs; Purdue admitted no liability; and, in settling, the company sealed from public view both Richard Sackler’s deposition and internal documents obtained through discovery. Purdue has sometimes claimed to have never “lost a case” related to OxyContin, but it’s more accurate to say that the company has never allowed a case to go to trial, often settling rather than litigating the culpability of the company—and the Sacklers—in

plants itself there is a small dent  
and crinkle in the flesh.  
If the situation is not stable

or sustainable,  
what I want to mention is  
if we did continue farther in—

into an atom of the flesh  
or the metallic fabric of the fork,  
the micro-weft of the tablecloth,

it would be more or less the same  
kind of utter emptiness—  
as at the heart of any restaurant

there is this dead eye  
of the sea bass on your plate,  
its aureole lens, its lightless pupil

sunk flush as a thumbtack holding  
the universe itself in place  
and I stare at it, and it stares back.

—Nick Laird

open court. “That’s the main reason these folks don’t go to trial,” Denham said. “Because all these documents could end up in the public record.” The Kentucky prosecutors were required to destroy millions of documents, or return them to Purdue. The medical-news Web site STAT subsequently sued to unseal Richard Sackler’s deposition. A state judge ruled in its favor, but Purdue appealed. I spent several months trying to obtain a copy of the deposition, but, because it remains under a protective order while Purdue appeals the matter, no lawyer would share it with me. Mike Moore said, “The idea that they’re fighting so hard to keep this deposition hidden should tell you something.”

Richard Sackler stepped down as Purdue’s president in 2003, but stayed on as co-chairman of the company’s board. After spending several years as an adjunct professor of genetics at Rockefeller University, he moved to Austin, Texas, in 2013. He lives in a modern hilltop mansion on the outskirts of the city, in an area favored by tech entrepreneurs. According to tax disclosures from his personal foundation, he has continued giving money to Yale, but his largest do-

nation in 2015 was a hundred-thousand-dollar gift to a neoconservative think tank, the Foundation for Defense of Democracies. Through a representative, Sackler declined to speak with me. I contacted a dozen other members of the Sackler family, but none of them would answer questions about OxyContin. Jo Sheldon, a London-based media adviser, called me, and said that she works with some of the Sacklers. (She would not identify which ones.) When I told her that I had questions for the Sacklers, she said that my inquiries would be better directed to Purdue. She said of the Sacklers, “Some of them are still quite involved in Purdue, but some have absolutely nothing to do with it,” apart from depositing checks.

Given the sometimes fractious nature of the Sackler family, it was striking that they were united in their silence on the subject of OxyContin. These were urbane, expensively educated, presumably well-informed people. Could they conceivably be unaware of the accumulated evidence about the tainted origins of their fortune? Did they simply put it out of mind? “Greed can get people to rationalize pretty bad behavior,” Andrew

Kolodny had told me. Someone who knows Mortimer, Jr., socially told me, “I think for him, most of the time, he’s just saying, ‘Wow, we’re really rich. It’s fucking cool. I don’t really want to think that much about the other side of things.’”

Paul Hanly, the lawyer, said that the Sacklers’ steadfast refusal to address the legacy of OxyContin may just be a legal tactic—and a shrewd one. “The more interviews you give, the more targets you create for lawyers like me, and for government investigators,” he said. I wondered whether philanthropy might represent, for at least some of the Sacklers, a form of atonement. But, when you consider the breadth of the family’s donations, one field is conspicuously lacking: addiction treatment, or any other measures that might serve to counter the opioid epidemic.

In August, 2010, Purdue quietly replaced OxyContin with a drug that was subtly different. The company had been granted patents for a reformulated version of OxyContin. If you crushed these new pills, they became not a fine, dissolvable powder but an unwieldy gummy substance. Purdue had received F.D.A. approval for the reformulation, in part, by touting the ostensible safety of the new product. The F.D.A. had approved a label, the first of its kind, that included a claim about the drug’s “abuse deterrent” properties.

In an interview, Craig Landau, Purdue’s C.E.O., told me, “A very large proportion of Purdue’s R. & D. efforts post-2001 was dedicated toward addressing the specific vulnerability of the original OxyContin product.” To a casual observer, it might have seemed that the makers of OxyContin, after years of obstructing efforts to curb the disastrous impacts of their painkiller, had finally seen the error of their ways. But Purdue was almost certainly motivated by another consideration: it needed to block competition from generic drugs. Arthur Sackler had often used the pages of the *Medical Tribune* to criticize generics. In 1985, the paper had published a story, “Schizophrenics ‘Wild’ on Weak Generic,” describing how “all hell broke loose” at a veterans’ hospital after the psychiatric unit switched from a brand-name antipsychotic to a generic. (According to the *Times*, the F.D.A. investigated and

found that the story was bogus, because “the generic had been introduced six months before the purported problems began.”) I spoke with a leading patent lawyer who frequently represents manufacturers of generic drugs, and she said that companies often make a minor tweak to a branded product shortly before the patent expires, in order to obtain a new patent and reset the clock on their exclusive right to produce the drug. The patent for the original OxyContin was set to expire in 2013.

Purdue had long denied that the original OxyContin was especially prone to abuse. But, upon receiving its patents for the reformulated drug, the company filed papers with the F.D.A., asking the agency to refuse to accept generic versions of the original formulation—because they were unsafe. The F.D.A., ever obliging, agreed, blocking any low-cost generic competition for Purdue. For more than a year, Purdue continued to sell the original formulation of OxyContin in Canada. According to a recent study, OxyContin sales in Windsor, Ontario—just across the border from Detroit—suddenly quadrupled, a clear indication that the pills were being purchased for the U.S. black market. Through I.M.S. tracking data, Purdue would have been able to monitor the Canadian surge, and to deduce the reason for it. (The company acknowledges that it was aware of the spike in sales, and maintains that it alerted authorities, but will not say when it did so.)

By the time Purdue reformulated OxyContin, the country was in the middle of a full-blown epidemic. Andrew Kolodny, the addiction specialist, told me that many older people remain addicted to the reformulated OxyContin, and continue to obtain the drug through prescriptions. These people purchase the drug legally, and swallow the pills whole, as instructed. “That’s Purdue’s market now,” Kolodny said. Younger people, who can less readily secure prescriptions for pain—and for whom OxyContin may be too expensive—have increasingly turned to black-market substitutes, including heroin. As Sam Quinones details in his 2015 book, “*Dreamland: The True Tale of America’s Opiate Epidemic*,” heroin dealers from Mexico fanned out across the U.S. to supply a burgeoning

market of people who had been primed by pill addiction. This is one dreadful paradox of the history of OxyContin: the original formulation created a generation addicted to pills; the reformulation, by forcing younger users off the drug, helped create a generation addicted to heroin. A recent paper by a team of economists, citing a dramatic uptick in heroin overdoses since 2010, is titled “How the Reformulation of OxyContin Ignited the Heroin Epidemic.” A survey of two hundred and forty-four people who entered treatment for OxyContin abuse after the reformulation found that a third had switched to other drugs. Seventy per cent of that group had turned to heroin.

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of Quinones’s investigation is the similarities he finds between the tactics of the unassuming, business-minded Mexican heroin peddlers, the so-called Xalisco boys, and the slick corporate sales force of Purdue. When the Xalisco boys arrived in a new town, they identified their market by seeking out the local methadone clinic. Purdue, using I.M.S. data, similarly targeted populations that were susceptible to its product. Mitchel Denham, the Kentucky lawyer, told me that Purdue pinpointed “communities where there is a lot of poverty and a lack of education and opportunity,” adding, “They were looking at numbers that showed these people have work-related injuries, they go to the doctor more often, they get treatment for pain.” The Xalisco boys offered potential customers free samples of their product. So did Purdue. When it first introduced OxyContin, the company created a program that encouraged doctors to issue coupons for a free initial prescription. By the time Purdue discontinued the program, four years later, thirty-four thousand coupons had been redeemed.

Purdue Pharma now acknowledges that there is an opioid crisis, but maintains that it has taken every available step to address it, from sponsoring “prescription monitoring” programs in some states to underwriting drug-abuse education. Craig Landau, the C.E.O., told me, “If the Holy Grail is a pain medicine that is safe and effective for patients with severe pain but carries no abuse risk, we haven’t found it yet.” He added that

the company has been trying to develop “non-opioid pain products.” Purdue likes to emphasize that there are many other powerful painkillers, and that OxyContin never had more than two per cent of the market for opioids. This is true in terms of the number of prescriptions. But most painkillers are prescribed for very short periods—following surgery, for instance—and in relatively small doses, whereas OxyContin’s sales have been driven by long-term, high-dose prescriptions. If one measured market share by the actual volume of narcotics administered, OxyContin’s would be considerably higher. Some doctors I spoke with estimated that it could be as high as thirty per cent.

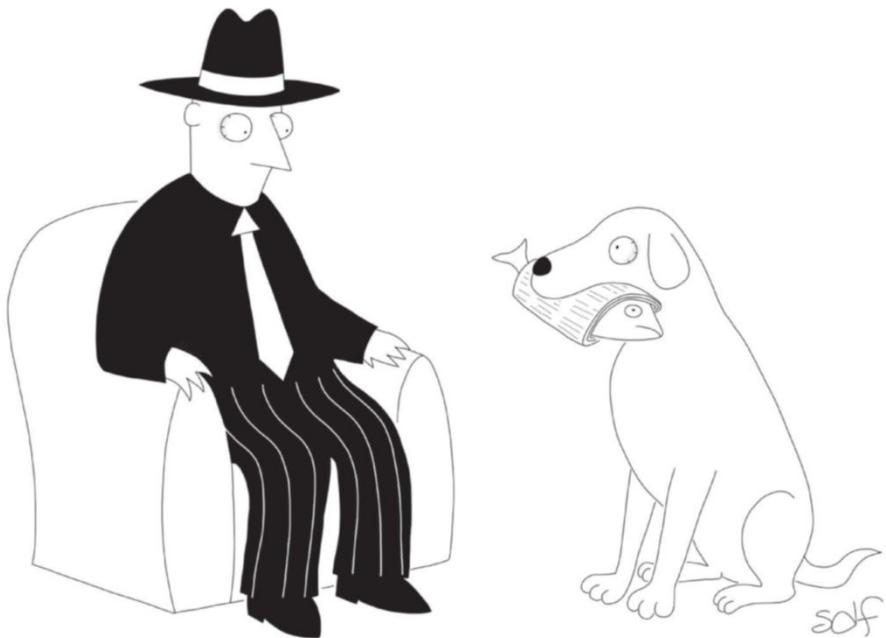
The United States accounts for roughly a third of the global market for opioid painkillers. But, as politicians and journalists have raised alarms over the addiction crisis, many American doctors have grown leery, again, of prescribing these drugs. In a statement, Purdue acknowledged that even patients “who take OxyContin in accordance with its F.D.A.-approved labeling instructions will likely develop physical dependence.” The company maintains that physical dependence is different from addiction, but Jane Ballantyne, the president of Physicians for Responsible Opioid Prescribing, said that, for patients, this can be a meaningless distinction: if they find themselves unable to stop taking a drug, for fear of crippling withdrawal, “at a certain point that might as well be addiction.” The drugstore chain CVS, which has been accused of profiteering from opioids, recently announced that it plans to limit prescriptions for powerful doses to one week’s worth, a change that could have a major impact on the abuse of these drugs. It may also be that OxyContin has achieved market saturation. In recent years, American clinicians have issued about a quarter of a billion opioid prescriptions annually. Last year, in Ohio, a state particularly hard hit by the epidemic, 2.3 million residents—roughly one in five people in the state—received a prescription for opioids. In 2012, the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* published a story about pain patients who had offered testimonials about the wonders of OxyContin in Purdue promotional videos. Johnny Sullivan, the construction worker

who had talked about OxyContin easing his back pain, became addicted to the drug. In 2008, while driving home from a hunting trip, he apparently blacked out; he flipped his truck, and died instantly. In a Purdue brochure, Sullivan is quoted as saying that OxyContin pills “don’t put me in a stupor or make me groggy.”

David Juurlink, the Toronto doctor, told me that opioids are problematic even for users who don’t succumb to addiction. “Opioids really do afford pain relief—initially,” he said. “But that relief tends to diminish over time. That’s, in part, why people increase the dose. They are chasing pain relief from a drug that has failed. I see all these people who are convinced they are one of the ‘legitimate’ pain patients. They’re on a massive dose of opioids, and they’re telling me they need this medication, which is clearly doing them *harm*. For many of them, the primary benefit of therapy, at this point, is not going into withdrawal.”

Even Russell Portenoy, the Purdue-funded doctor who advocated for wider long-term use of opioids, has reassessed his views. “Did I teach about pain management, specifically about opioid therapy, in a way that reflects misinformation?” he said to the *Wall Street Journal* in 2012. “I guess I did.” (In a statement, Portenoy told me that he has “refocussed” his approach to pain management, adding, “No funder has had any undue influence over my thinking.”)

In his defense, Portenoy has pointed out that, two decades ago, doctors did not know what they know now about opioids and addiction. The Sackler family and Purdue Pharma could have taken responsibility in a similar spirit: apologizing for their role in unleashing a national catastrophe while noting that, during the nineties, they had relied on a series of mistaken assumptions about the safety of OxyContin. But Purdue has continued to fight aggressively against any measures that might limit the distribution of OxyContin, in a way that calls to mind the gun lobby’s resistance to firearm regulations. Confronted with the prospect of modest, commonsense measures that might in any way impinge on the prescribing of painkillers, Purdue and its various allies have responded with alarm, suggesting that such steps will



deny law-abiding pain patients access to medicine they desperately need. Mark Sullivan, a psychiatrist at the University of Washington, distilled the argument of Purdue: “Our product isn’t dangerous—it’s *people* who are dangerous.”

Last year, the C.D.C., which formally declared an opioid epidemic in 2011, introduced the first set of guidelines to help reduce the prescribing of strong painkillers like OxyContin. “Opioids should not be considered first-line or routine therapy for chronic pain,” the guidelines said, recommending that doctors first consider “non-pharmacologic” approaches, such as physical therapy, and “non-opioid pharmacologic” treatments.

Purdue and other pharmaceutical companies have long funded ostensibly neutral nonprofit groups that advocate for pain patients. The C.D.C. guidelines were nonbinding, yet many of these organizations fought to prevent the agency from releasing them. This kind of obstruction is typical at both the state and the federal level. A recent series by the Associated Press and the Center for Public Integrity revealed that, after Purdue made its guilty plea, in 2007, it assembled an army of lobbyists to fight any legislative actions that might encroach on its business. Between 2006 and 2015, Purdue and other painkiller producers, along with their associated nonprofits, spent nearly nine hundred million dollars on lobbying and political contribu-

tions—eight times what the gun lobby spent during that period.

Since Purdue made it more difficult to grind OxyContin pills, prescriptions have reportedly plummeted by forty per cent. This suggests that nearly half of the original drug’s consumers may have been crushing it to get high. As David Juurlink pointed out to me, it is a misnomer to call the reformulation an “abuse deterrent.” It can still be abused—and is, widely, by people who become addicted by swallowing the pills, just as the bottle instructs. But Purdue, facing a shrinking market and rising opprobrium, has not given up the search for new users. In August, 2015, over objections from critics, the company received F.D.A. approval to market OxyContin to children as young as eleven.

**F**orbes estimates that the Sacklers continue to receive some seven hundred million dollars a year from the family companies, and, as the Sacklers are surely aware, the real future of OxyContin may be global. Many big companies, once their sales plateau in America, look abroad. After introducing OxyContin in the U.S., Purdue moved into Canada and England. At the University of Toronto, the company sponsored a class on pain management for medical and dental students. The instructor was a member of Purdue’s speakers’ bureau. Students received a

complimentary textbook, produced by Purdue, that described oxycodone as a “moderate” opioid. The course was discontinued after students and doctors criticized it; one of the critics was Rick Glazier, a physician at the university, whose son, Daniel, had fatally overdosed on OxyContin in 2009.

As OxyContin spread outside the U.S., the pattern of dysfunction repeated itself: to map the geographic distribution of the drug was also to map a rash of addiction, abuse, and death. But the Sackler family has only increased its efforts abroad, and is now pushing the drug, through a Purdue-related company called Mundipharma, into Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. Part of Purdue’s strategy from the beginning has been to create a market for OxyContin—to instill a perceived need by making bold claims about the existence of large numbers of people suffering from untreated chronic pain. As Purdue moves into countries like China and Brazil, where opioids may still retain the kind of stigma that the company so assiduously broke down in the United States, its marketing approach has not changed. According to a Los Angeles *Times* report from 2016—well after the Sacklers’ playbook for OxyContin had been repudiated by the medical establishment as possibly the main driver of the opioid epidemic—Mun-

dipharma commissioned studies showing that millions of people in these countries suffered from chronic pain. The company has organized junkets, and paid doctors to give presentations extolling OxyContin’s virtues. In fact, certain doctors who are currently flogging OxyContin abroad—“pain ambassadors,” they are called—used to be on Purdue’s payroll as advocates for the drug in the U.S.

The *Times* report described Joseph Pergolizzi, Jr.—a Florida doctor who runs a pain-management clinic and hawks a pain-relieving cream of his own invention on cable TV—giving paid talks in places like Brazil about the merits of OxyContin. In Mexico, Mundipharma has asserted that twenty-eight million people—a quarter of the population—suffer from chronic pain. In China, the company has distributed cartoon videos about using opioids for pain relief; other promotional literature cites the erroneous claim that rates of addiction are negligible. In a 2014 interview, Raman Singh, a Mundipharma executive, said, “Every single patient that is in emerging markets should have access to our medicines.” The term “opiophobia” has largely fallen into disuse in America, for obvious reasons. Mundipharma executives still use it abroad.

“It’s a parallel to what the tobacco

industry did,” Mike Moore told me. “They got caught in America, they saw their market share decline, so they export it to places with even fewer regulations than we have.” He added, “You know what’s going to happen. You’re going to see lots and lots of death.” In May, several members of Congress wrote to the World Health Organization, urging it to help stop the spread of OxyContin, and mentioning the Sackler family by name. “The international health community has a rare opportunity to see the future,” they wrote. “Do not allow Purdue to walk away from the tragedy they have inflicted on countless American families simply to find new markets and new victims elsewhere.” David Kessler, the former F.D.A. commissioner, believes that the destigmatization of opioids in the U.S. represents one of the “great mistakes” of modern medicine. When I asked for his thoughts on Mundipharma’s efforts to market OxyContin abroad, he said, “It gives me a sick feeling. It makes me ill.”

Earlier this year, Peter Salovey, the president of Yale, announced that the university will rename a residential college that was named for John C. Calhoun, because Calhoun’s “legacy as a white supremacist and a national leader who passionately promoted slavery as a ‘positive good’ fundamentally conflicts with Yale’s mission and values.” This move, which was not without its critics, was emblematic of a broader trend to look back skeptically at individuals who were venerated in earlier epochs, and ask how they should be judged by the moral standards of today. At Oxford, a Rhodes Scholar from South Africa recently led a campaign to take down a statue of Cecil Rhodes.

One great fortune—and reputation—that has evaded such scrutiny is that of the Sacklers, a family whose dubious business practices are not an artifact of previous centuries but an ongoing reality. If present statistics are any indication, in the time it likely took you to read this article six Americans have fatally overdosed on opioids. Yet Yale appears to be in no hurry to rename its Raymond and Beverly Sackler Institute for Biological, Physical and Engineering Sciences, or its Richard Sackler and Jonathan Sackler Professorship of Internal



*“No, you dismantle your nuclear arsenal first.”*

Medicine. Perhaps it's because the Sacklers, unlike the Calhoun family, still have a fortune to give away.

"It's amazing how they are left out of the debate about causation, but also about solutions," Allen Frances, the Duke psychiatrist, said of the Sacklers. "A truly philanthropic family, looking at the last twenty years, would say, 'You know, there's several million Americans who are addicted, directly or indirectly, because of us.' Real philanthropy would be to contribute money to taking care of them. At this point, adding their name to a building—it rings hollow. It's not philanthropy. It's just a glorification of the Sackler family." According to the American Society of Addiction Medicine, more than two and a half million Americans have an opioid-use disorder. Frances continued, "If the Sacklers wanted to clear their name, they could take a very substantial fraction of that fortune and create a mechanism for providing free treatment for everyone who's become addicted." Alfred Nobel, the inventor of dynamite, created the Nobel Peace Prize. In recent years, several philanthropic organizations run by the descendants of John D. Rockefeller have devoted resources to addressing climate change and critiquing the environmental record of the oil company he founded, now called ExxonMobil. Last year, Valerie Rockefeller Wayne told CBS, "Because the source of the family wealth is fossil fuels, we feel an enormous moral responsibility."

Mike Moore, the former Mississippi attorney general, believes that the Sacklers will feel no pressure to emulate this gesture until more of the public becomes aware that their fortune is derived from the opioid crisis. Moore recalled his initial settlement conference with tobacco-company C.E.O.s: "We asked them, 'What do you want?' And they said, 'We want to be able to go to cocktail parties and not have people come up and ask us why we're killing people.' That's an exact quote." Moore is puzzled that museums and universities are able to continue accepting money from the Sacklers without questions or controversy. He wondered, "What would happen if some of these foundations, medical schools, and hospitals started to say, 'How many babies have become addicted to opioids?'" An addicted baby is now born every half hour. In places like Huntington, West

Virginia, ten per cent of newborns are dependent on opioids. A district attorney in eastern Tennessee recently filed a lawsuit against Purdue, and other companies, on behalf of "Baby Doe"—an infant addict.

Purdue executives won't be able to settle every case against them, Moore believes. "There's going to be a jury somewhere, someplace, that's going to hit them with the largest judgment in the nation's history," he said. Paul Hanly noted that, in the face of a crippling judgment, Purdue may have to declare bankruptcy. "But I'm certainly not going to walk away if they do," he said. "At that point, I would start looking closely at individual liability on the part of the Sacklers."

Robin Hogen, the former Purdue communications executive, said, "I don't want to be portrayed as an apologist for what is clearly a public-health crisis. But I wanted to make sure you spoke to someone who had very high regard for the Sackler family. The Sacklers were first class in everything they did." I asked him what he would say to the doctors and the public-health officials who believe that the heirs of Raymond and Mortimer Sackler bear some moral responsibility for the epidemic. "I'm not a doctor," Hogen demurred. "I really can't comment."

The Sacklers have always excelled at the confidence game of marketing, and it struck me that the greatest trick they ever pulled was to write the family out of the history of the family business. I was reminded of Arthur Sackler's admonition that you should endeavor to leave the world a better place than it was when you came into it, and I wondered about the moral arithmetic of the Sacklers' deeds. But the family, through a Purdue representative, declined to comment.

I recently went to Amagansett, on Long Island, to meet a man I'll call Jeff. At a restaurant, he told me about his struggles with addiction. A decade ago, when he was a teen-ager, he started abusing opioids. They were "everywhere," he recalled. He particularly liked OxyContin, for the "clean high" it provided. After sucking the pill's red coating off, he

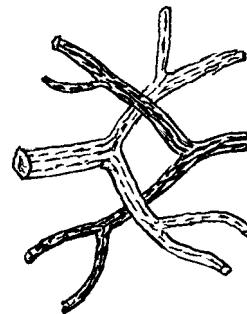
crushed the rest with the edge of a cigarette lighter, then snorted it. He didn't inject it. "When I was growing up, I always told myself, I'll never stick a needle in my arm," he said.

In a soft, unflinching tone, Jeff recounted the next decade of his life: he kept abusing painkillers, met a woman, fell in love, and introduced her to opioids. One day, his dealer was out of pills and said, "I'll sell you a bag of heroin for twenty bucks." Jeff was reluctant, but when withdrawal set in he acquiesced. At first, he and his girlfriend snorted heroin. "But you build up a tolerance, just like with the pills," he said, and eventually they started injecting it. They were high when they got married. Jeff's wife gave birth to a boy, who was addicted to opioids. "The doctors weaned him off with droplets of morphine," he said.

After a long stretch in rehab, Jeff has been sober for more than a year. His baby is healthy, and his wife is clean, too. Looking back, he said, he feels that an impulsive youthful decision to snort pills set him on a path from which he could not deviate. "It was all about the drug," he said. "I just created a hurricane of destruction."

We left the restaurant and strolled along a leafy side street flanked by grand houses. During the worst years of his addiction, Jeff worked as a tradesman in the area. I had asked him to show me a property that he had serviced, and we stopped outside a sprawling estate that was mostly hidden behind dense shrubbery. It was the home of Mortimer Sackler, Jr. Jeff, who knew about the family, appreciated the irony. "I couldn't tell you how many times I was on that property, sitting in a work truck, snorting a pill," he said.

We reached an ornamental wooden gate, beyond which was a yard dominated by a stately weeping willow. As I was admiring the tree, Jeff said that, for the people who maintained the grounds, it was "a pain in the ass." Whenever the wind picks up, he explained, branches break and scatter all over the lawn. "But the place has to be flawless," he said. "There can't be a leaf on the ground." So a crew comes by regularly, to clear away the mess. ♦

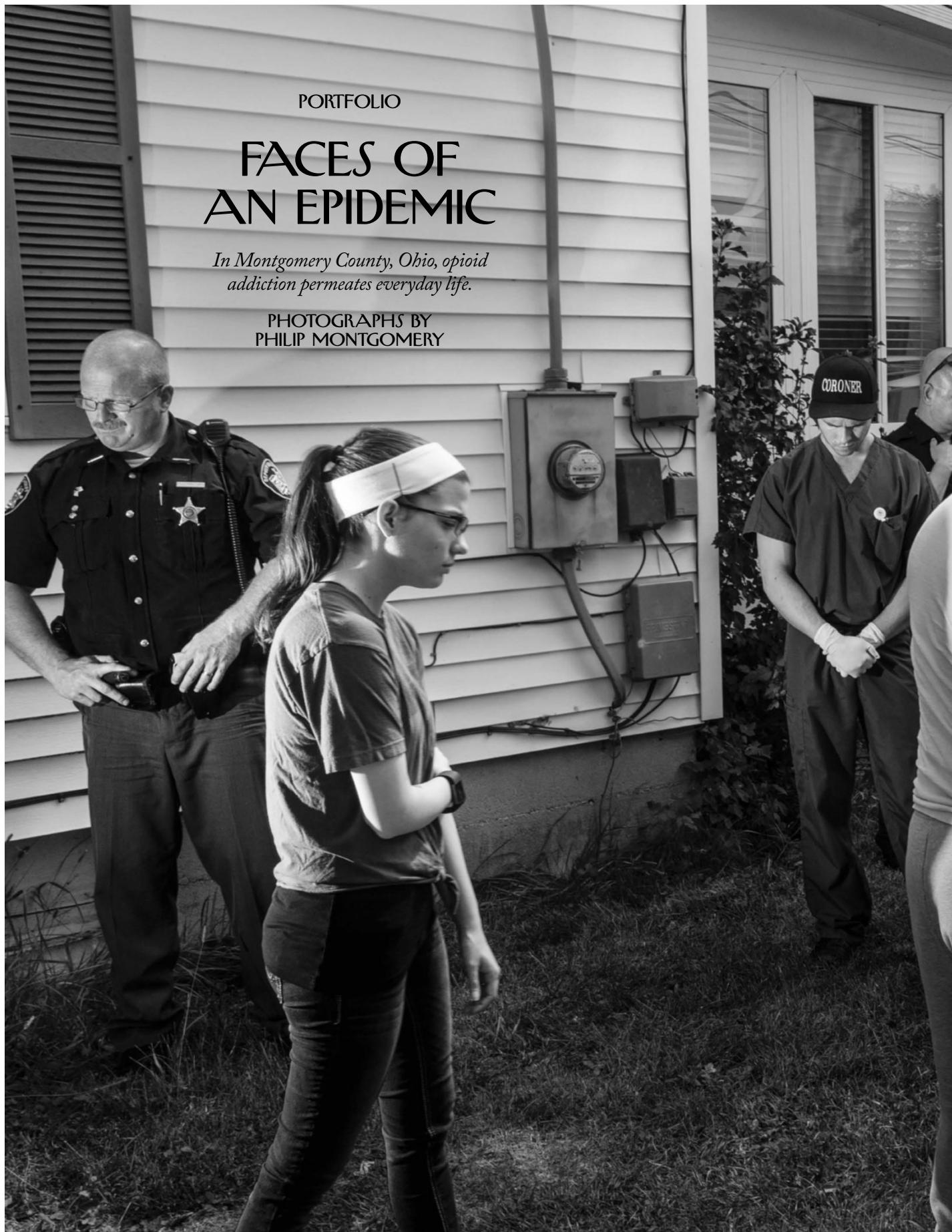


PORTRFOIO

# FACES OF AN EPIDEMIC

*In Montgomery County, Ohio, opioid addiction permeates everyday life.*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
PHILIP MONTGOMERY



*A family mourns the death of their son, Brian Malmsbury, who overdosed on heroin in the basement of their home. From left to*



*right: Brian's half sister, Brittany Neff; Brian's stepfather, Damian Neff; and Brian's mother, Patty Neff.*

**T**his week, President Trump plans to declare the opioid epidemic a national emergency. It's a welcome, but belated, response to a problem that has been growing inexorably for nearly two decades. For all the coverage the opioid epidemic has received, the reaction to it has been consistently muted. No group of activists quite as angry and eloquent as ACT UP has emerged to make the crisis an urgent priority. But opioids, in fact, now kill more than fifty thousand Americans a year, ten thousand more than AIDS did at the peak of that epidemic—more, too, than gun homicides and motor-vehicle accidents. Opioid overdoses are now the leading cause of death for Americans under the age of fifty.

Something about the nature of this epidemic delayed the sense of calamity. As the coroner of Montgomery County, Ohio, has said, it's a "mass-casualty event," but one played out in slow motion. First, in the nineteen-nineties, came mounting overdose deaths from prescription drugs such as OxyContin; then, around 2000, many users switched to heroin, a cheaper alternative; in the past few years, people increasingly have been dying from potent synthetic painkillers such as fentanyl and carfentanil. The quietness of the tragedy is also connected to the effects of opioids themselves: people hooked on them numb their pain, whatever its causes, rather than raging against it.

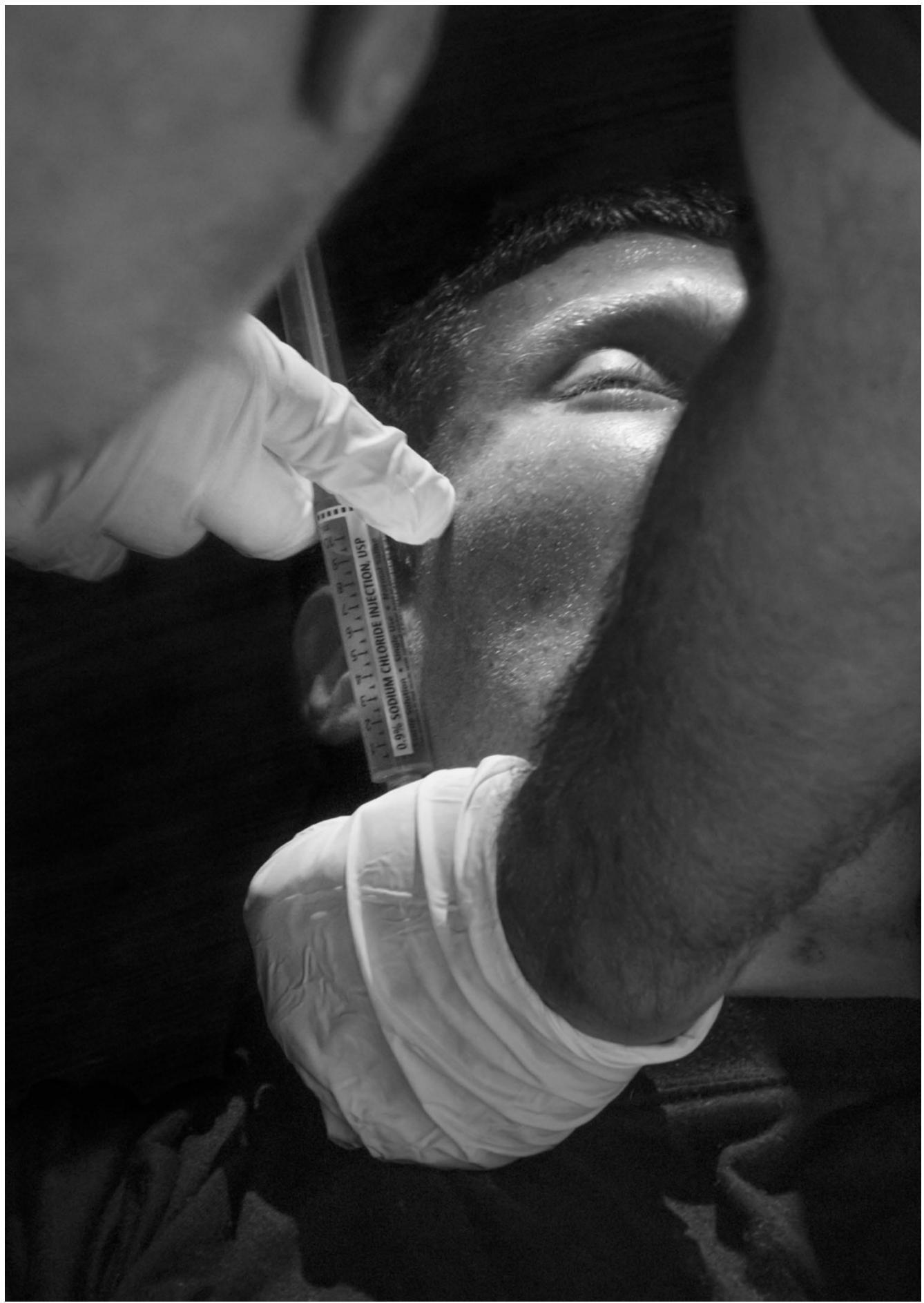
Yet in places hit hard by the epidemic—in Midwestern and New England towns where heroin used to seem like somebody else's problem—overdose deaths now permeate everyday life, and have become impossible to ignore. In Montgomery County, where most of the photographs on the following pages were taken, the number of drug-overdose deaths—the vast majority involv-

ing at least one opioid—has climbed from a hundred and twenty-seven, in 2010, to three hundred and forty-nine, in 2016. The trend shows no sign of abating, not least because the opioid that is now most commonly detected in postmortems is fentanyl, which is nearly forty times more potent than heroin. In January, 2017, alone, there were sixty-five overdose deaths in Montgomery County. At times, there has not been enough room at the morgue for all the bodies, and the county coroner has been obliged to rent space from local funeral homes.

Brian Malmsbury's death was an especially quiet one. He was thirty-three and had been living at home, in Miamisburg, Ohio, trying to get clean after years of addiction. His mother, Patty Neff, said that he often fantasized about becoming a long-distance truck driver—being out on the road, just him and his dog. But his history with drugs made that an unlikely path forward. He had dealt with depression for many years—"He'd always just been a sad kid," Patty told Philip Montgomery, the photographer who shot these images. On the afternoon that Brian died, he had been talking to his mother about meeting a friend, and she and his stepfather thought that he'd gone out. But he'd headed down to the basement, where he overdosed on heroin and died. His stepfather, Damian Neff, found him there a day and a half later. In recent years, Brian's girlfriend had died of an overdose, and so had his younger sister's boyfriend. "I didn't think it could get any closer to our family after it took those two," Patty Neff said. "And it does get closer. The boys would tell me every day about somebody they went to high school with who died that day. That whole generation's getting wiped out."

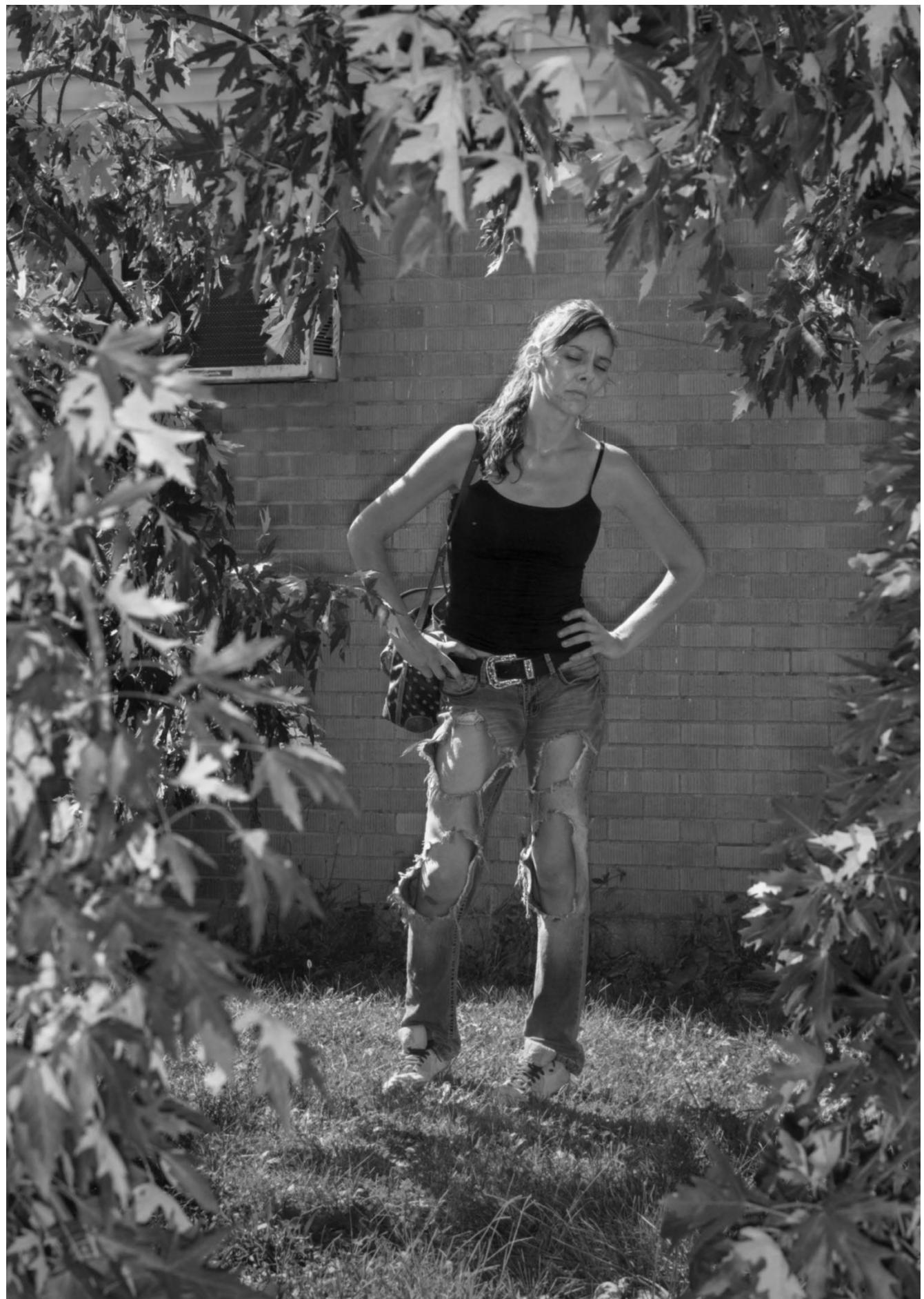
—Margaret Talbot

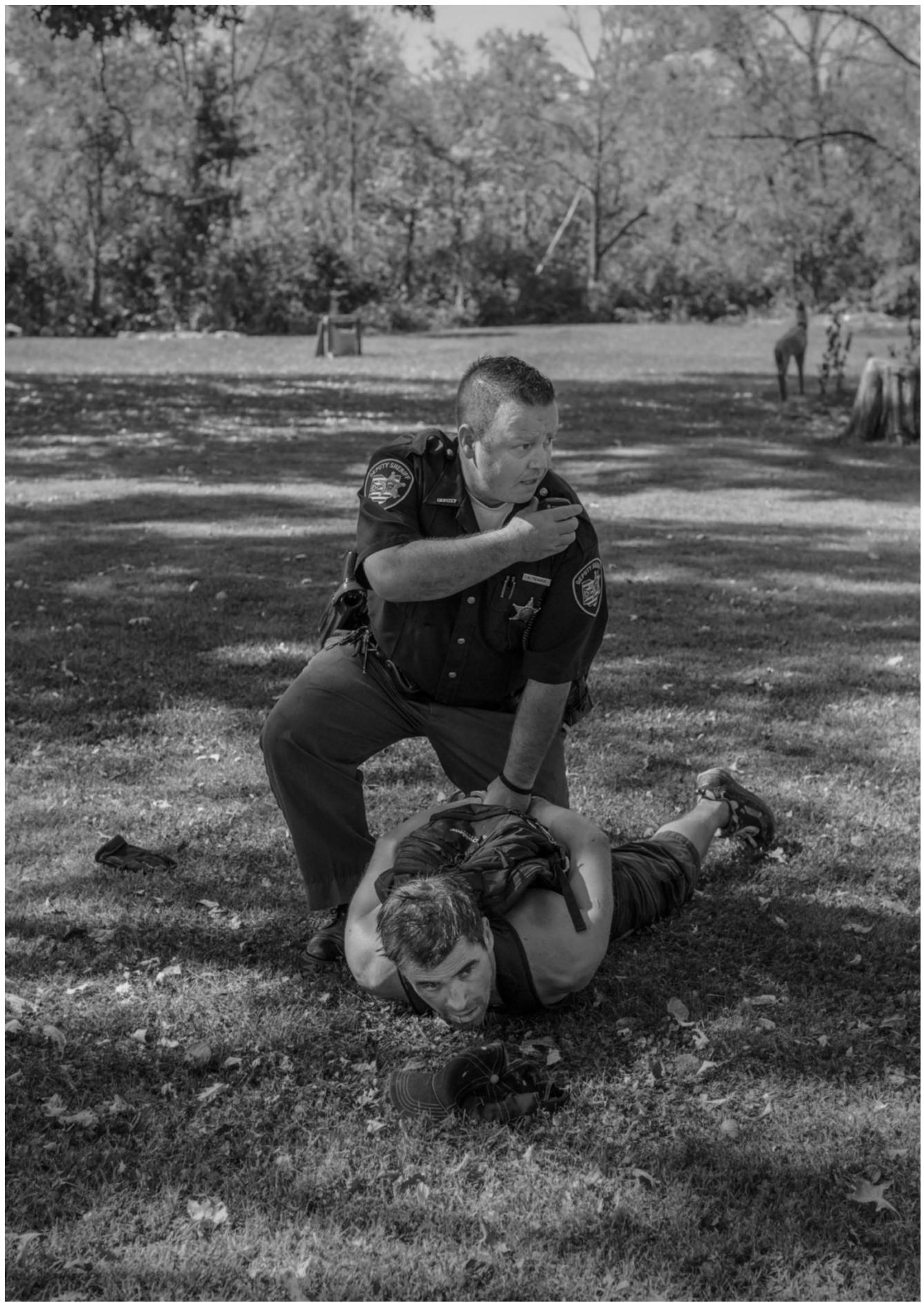
*Overdose victims are treated with Narcan, a medication that blocks the effects of opioids. After a dose of Narcan has been administered, first responders inject normal saline. Here, a young man is given saline after receiving twenty-two milligrams, or eleven hits, of Narcan.*





*Above: A sample of carfentanil, which is ten thousand times more potent than morphine. Its official use is for sedating large zoo animals; just two milligrams of the drug can tranquillize a two-thousand-pound elephant. Right: A homeless, heroin-addicted woman in Montgomery County. At the time the photograph was taken, she had been clean for nineteen days.*







*Left: In Drexel, Deputy Andy Teague arrests a man for possession of heroin and crystal methamphetamine.  
Above: In Hamilton, a town nestled in the southwestern corner of Ohio, addicts meet at a center run by Sojourner Recovery Services. Outpatient clients attend group therapy up to five times per week.*



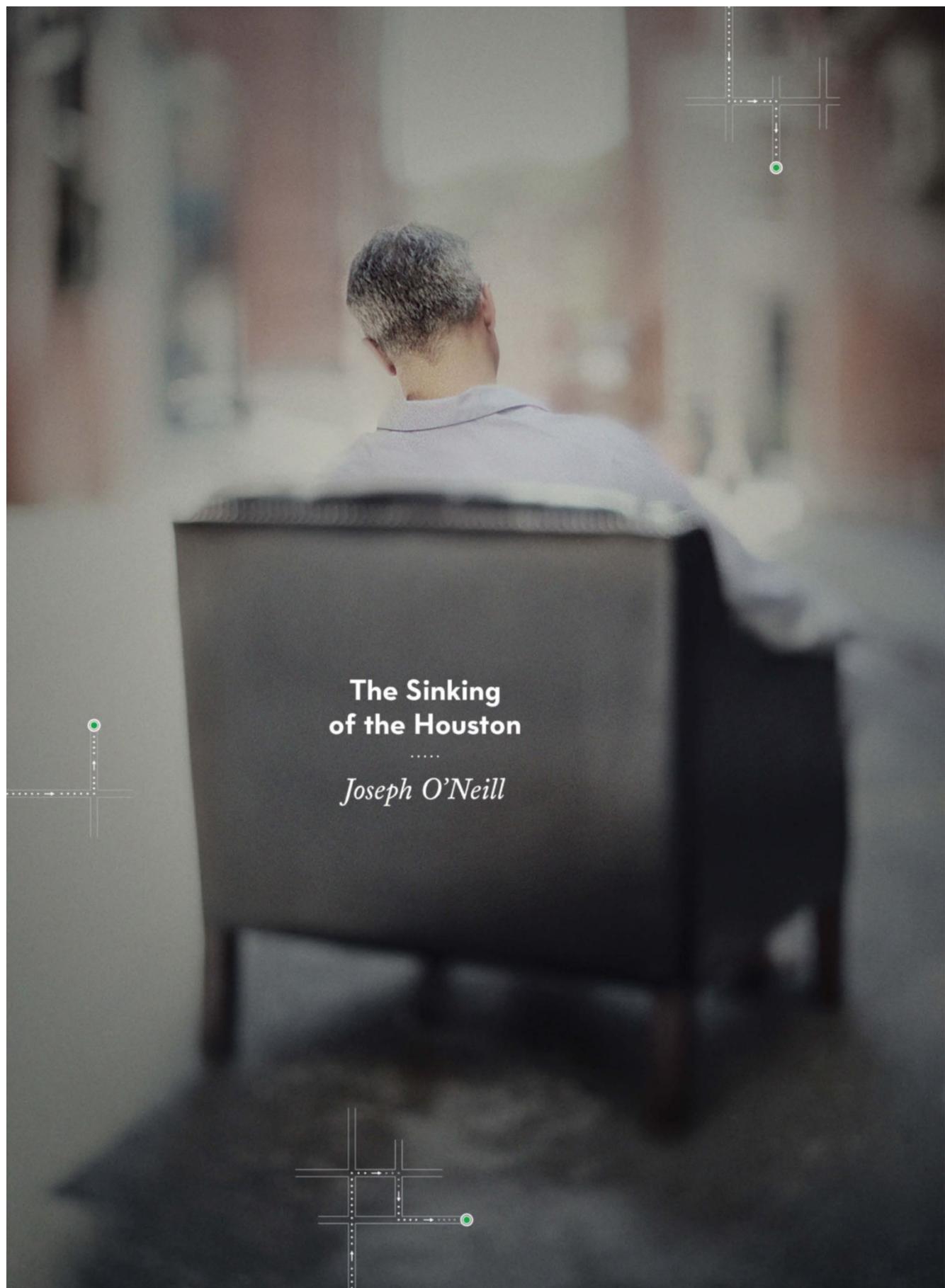
*The body of someone who has died from a suspected opioid overdose, housed at the Montgomery County morgue. The morgue has*



*been running out of room lately, and has begun renting refrigerated trailers for more space.*

The Sinking  
of the Houston

*Joseph O'Neill*



**W**hen I became a parent of young children I also became a purposeful and relentless opportunist of sleep. In fact, sleep functioned as that period's subtle denominator. I found myself capable of taking a nap just about anywhere, even when standing in a subway car or riding an escalator. I wasn't the only one. Out and about, I spotted drowsy or dozing people everywhere; and I realized that a kind of mechanized mass somnambulism is an essential component of modern life; and I gained a better understanding of the siesta and the snooze and the death wish.

Then the three boys grew big—grew from toddling alarmists into wayward urban doofuses neurologically un-equipped to perceive the risks incidental to their teen-age lives. Several nights a week I lie awake in bed until the front door has sighed shut behind every last one of them. Even then, even once they're all safely home, there are disquieting goings on. Objects are put in motion, to frightening sonic effect. A creaking cupboard hinge is an S.O.S. A spoon in a cereal bowl is a tocsin.

The key point is that I no longer have the ability to nap at will—to recover, in nickels of unconsciousness, a lost hypnotic legacy. A round-the-clock jitteriness prevails.

As a consequence, the concept of *peace and quiet* has assumed an italicized personal importance. Who can say, of course, what "peace and quiet" means? It certainly doesn't denote the experience produced by being by oneself. I can offer only a subjective definition: the state of affairs in which (1) one finds oneself at home; (2) there are people around whom one wants to have around, not least because it means that one doesn't have to worry about where else they might be; (3) one sits in one's armchair; and (4) the people around leave one alone.

The phenomenon of the Dad Chair needs no investigation here. I'll just state that there came a moment when the whole business of taking care of the guys—of their need to be woken up, clothed, fed, transported, coached, cleaned, bedded down, constantly kept safe and constantly captained—altered me. The alteration made me identify with the shipman, working in high and howling winds in the Bay of Biscay,

who dreams of the bathtubs of La Rochelle. This led me to buy a black leatherette armchair and to designate it as my haven. I have to say, it has worked out pretty well.

But of late the fifteen-year-old, the middle son, has taken to disturbing me. I'll be sitting there, doing stuff on my laptop, when he'll approach and pull off my noise-cancelling headphones.

"What is it?" I ask him.

"Have you heard of the Duvaliers?"

"What?"

"The Duvaliers. The dictators of Haiti."

"What about them?"

"There's two Duvaliers," he says. "There's the father and there's the son. Do you know that they used rape to punish their political opponents?"

"What?"

He says, "They—"

"I don't want to hear about it. I know all about the Duvaliers. They were horrible. I know all about it."

"But, Dad, I'll bet you don't know. There was one time—"

"Stop harassing me!" I shout. "Stop bothering me with this stuff! Leave me alone! I lived through it! I don't want to discuss it!"

He answers, in his mild way, "You didn't exactly live through it. You just heard about it."

I understand that my son is trying to get a precise sense of the world he is about to enter—the wide world. I understand that this can be a difficult process. I understand that it's a good thing that he comes to me with these questions, which do him nothing but credit, and that these are golden moments that must be savored. I understand all that.

Note that my fifteen-year-old is a distinct case but not a special one. His two brothers are the same. Each, in his own way, threatens the peace and the quiet.

"Where is East Timor?" this particular son asks me.

"Look it up," I say.

His voice has arrived from his bedroom, where he's lying in his bunk bed, in a T-shirt and tracksuit bottoms and skateboarding socks, reading his phone. Sometimes he'll come out of the bedroom and sit on the arm of my armchair and cast an eye over my screen while he talks. Which is exasperating. What I do online is my business.

He calls out, "Do you know who Charles Taylor is?"

I'm not answering that.

He comes out of the brothers' room, which is what we call the space in which the three boys are cooped up. "He was a guerrilla leader. In Liberia. He had an army made up of children."

"Stop right there," I say.

My son stops where he is, because he thinks I'm telling him that he should stop advancing toward me. From a distance of about three yards he says, "He made the children do some really bad things. Really, really bad things. He made them shoot their own parents. I think Taylor may have been the worst of them all."

I remove my reading glasses and look him in the eye. "*C'est la vie*," I tell him.

**I**n my book, this is an undervalued maxim. It is related to Stoicism—a too-neglected philosophy nowadays—and it's related, emotionally more than logically, to the idea of water under the bridge, which reminds us that the past cannot be rectified. This impossibility applies to the present, too. The present is necessarily beyond rectification. If you think about it, the very notion of rectification makes almost no sense. You could even contend that one's future is water under the bridge.

Anyhow, on a Sunday evening the fifteen-year-old, my second-born, my Secondo, comes home and announces that he's been mugged. I'm in my chair when this occurs. I inspect him, this kid who is nearly six feet tall and forces me onto my toes when I kiss him, which is something I often do, even though it can embarrass him a little.

He seems composed. But he also looks as if he's just been mugged.

"Are you hurt?" I say.

He shakes his head.

"Tell me what happened," I say.

He was skating with friends at L.E.S., the skate park under the Manhattan Bridge. Then three of them took a train into Brooklyn. They wanted to skate a spot where guys like Tyshawn Jones and Brandon Westgate and Alex Olson had recently filmed some tricks. They overshot their stop. That was when they ran into trouble.

"Which train is this?" I say.

"I don't know. Some train."

In the old days, this would have thrown

me, would have led me to wonder what kind of knucklehead doesn't know which train he's on. But I've been a father of boys for quite a while.

He likes tea, this son. I've been making him some while he's been talking. He takes the tea.

To repeat: there were three of them—my son plus his two friends. Three young males. They were sitting in the back corner of the subway car. The car was almost empty, it being a Sunday afternoon. There was this dude close by, sitting between the boys and the doors. The dude had a bag. The dude said to them, You want to buy a gun? He opened his bag and showed them the gun. The kids indicated that they didn't want to buy a gun. The dude told the kids to get their wallets out and put them in his bag. He spoke in a low, calm voice. The other passengers, the potential witnesses or interveners or heroes, were quite a ways down the car. They weren't aware of what was happening.

The kids did as they were told. Then the dude told them to show him their phones. They obeyed.

I ask my son for a description of the dude.

My son tells me that he was a black guy, older, maybe about thirty, hard to say how old, exactly. He wasn't fat or big or small. He wore a Yankees cap. He had tattoos on his forearms. These were gang markings or prison markings, my son

tells me, as if he or his friends would have a clue.

The criminal eyed the three phones. My son's phone was brand new; his was the one the criminal reached for. The criminal asked my son for his passcode. My son told him. The criminal entered the passcode and changed it. He didn't ask the other boys for their phones. The criminal told my son that he had all of his personal information now and knew where to find him. He said to the three boys, I never want to see you again, understand?

Here the train came to a stop. The criminal got out.

"He really knew what he was doing," I say.

"Yeah," my son says.

I say, "It would have been crazy to take any chances. You did the right thing."

"Yeah," my son says.

"Don't worry about your phone. We'll get you another one. We may even have insurance to cover that. But we'd need to report it."

"No cops," my son says; and this is when I see that the criminal has frightened him very much, and figures in his mind as a person of great powers.

"O.K.," I say. I give him a hug and a kiss. "You did well. You handled yourself well, son."

I don't call him "son" very often. It's a big word to say out loud. It's a word I hold back for special occasions.

I don't mention that I have already resolved to find this man and break his fucking legs.

This isn't a fantasy. My phone has an app that tracks my children's phones. Because children are entitled to privacy, I've never used the app before. But this is an exceptional situation.

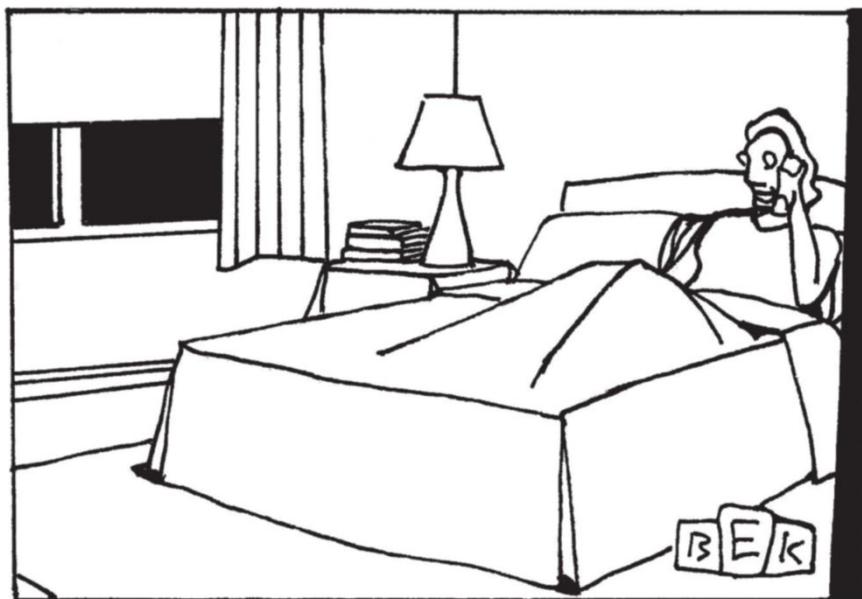
When I activate the phone tracker, a map of New York City appears. Three circles—one blue, one green, one orange—correspond to the phones' respective whereabouts. It's a thrilling scene, for some reason.

The stolen phone is the orange one. It's in Brooklyn, at the corner of Saratoga and Pitkin.

There's no question of going out there. That wouldn't be smart. I'm going to bide my time. I'm going to wait for the orange circle to come to my turf. My turf is the triangle made by Times Square and Penn Station and the Port Authority Bus Terminal. Everyone passes through here sooner or later, especially if they're up to no good.

What this means, in practice, is that I spend a lot of time in my chair grimly chortling at my phone. Orange Circle Guy, or O.C.G., thinks he's home free. He has no idea that I'm watching his every move. A lot of the day he's motionless in his Brownsville residence—I know exactly which Amboy Street apartment building he lives in—and typically it's not until the midafternoon that he stirs. He doesn't go very far. He just wanders here and there in his neighborhood, like a little doggie being taken out to make a No. 1 and a No. 2. Maybe he owns a doggie.

When he catches a subway train, his kinesis assumes a more suspenseful character. The orange circle disappears for a period of minutes and then reappears, usually in downtown Brooklyn or at Fulton Street station, in lower Manhattan. This loser is so predictable. Occasionally the circle vanishes at Saratoga Avenue station and remains undetectable for an hour or two, whereupon it rematerializes at Saratoga Avenue station. In other words, O.C.G. has never surfaced. He has been underground the whole time. From this fact, I deduce that these outings have a criminal character: he takes an outbound train in order to rob people on the return



*"I'm getting ready to celebrate the next chapter of the book I'm reading."*

journey to Brownsville. It's what he does.

Once, O.C.G. popped up at Penn Station. In a flash, I was out of the apartment. I was a mere block from my destination when I saw that he'd already boarded a train. (To Albany, it turned out.) That was a near-miss. But my day will come.

I can get so caught up in my stake-out that I let my guard down. The son in question says to me, "Do you know what vivisection is?"

"Vivisection?"

"Operating on live animals. As a scientific experiment."

I say, "I don't like where this is going."

"Have you heard of Unit 731?"

"Unit of what?" I say.

He tells me—and this is news to me—that, during the Second World War, the Japanese conducted lethal vivisectional experiments on hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children, most of them Chinese. This took place in a facility known as Unit 731. At the end of the war, the scientist-murderers were secretly granted immunity from prosecution, and even from exposure, by the United States. In exchange, the United States received sole possession of the results of the vivisections. Evidently the data was valuable in the field of biological warfare.

"Yeah," I say. "Not good."

"That actually happened," the boy says.

I say, "I don't know what to tell you."

Which isn't quite true. I know not to tell him, or remind him, that some of the children abducted and militarized by Charles Taylor reportedly learned not only to murder their parents but also to perform vivisections. On encountering a pregnant woman, they were known to bet on the gender of the unborn child and then, using a machete, to cut open the mother's womb in order to determine the winner of the bet.

There's a chance, of course, that O.C.G. might not be my guy. O.C.G. could be a purchaser of the phone. Given everything I've seen and studied, that strikes me as unlikely. No, the bitch has got himself a mint phone for his personal use—or so he thinks. Like every criminal, he has overlooked a detail. That kid he threatened and robbed? That kid is my son.

When the boys were little, we found ourselves in an airport lounge. We were



*"This person we're trying to poison—does he have any dietary restrictions?"*

delayed for a few hours. It was nighttime. Volatile colored lights moved in the dark of the windows, and the boys and I spent quite some time looking at them. After a while, the kids began horsing around. They were being boys—being juvenile male humans between the ages of three and six, to be zoological about it. A certain boisterousness and brou-haha characterized their activities. From my seat, I somnolently kept watch on them, breaking things up as needed and rounding up whichever one went astray.

A couple was seated nearby. The man turned to me and said, "Control your children."

Instantly I was a hundred per cent awake. I rose to my feet and went over to this man. I pointed my finger an inch or two from his nose. "I'm going to control you," I said.

We didn't hear from him after that.

Now, it's true that the guy must have been close to sixty. He posed no obvious physical threat. It was no big deal to put him in his place. But something deeper was going on, something beyond

calculations of relative physical strength. You don't mess with my children. Not when I'm around. I don't care who you are. You don't take one fucking step in their direction.

What I'm getting at is: I have latent paternal powers. It may be said—and in truth it is said, by a whispering imaginary skeptic—that there's no way a fifty-one-year-old man can take down a tattooed career criminal, a hoodlum Moriarty, twenty years his junior. To which I respond: Let's wait and see.

**M**y next-door neighbor is a gentle-man by the name of Eduardo. Over the years, he has kept himself to himself. It's said he's of Cuban origin. He communicates mainly by signifiers of good will. For example, sometimes he'll take delivery of a package for me and leave it outside my door. Eduardo's apartment shares plumbing with mine, and if there's a pipe blockage we liaise about turning taps on and off.

I once saw a limousine run him down. He was in the crosswalk—he's pushing

seventy and has a slow, hobbling gait—when the limo turned straight into him. I ran over and helped Eduardo get up. There was no sign of an injury. My neighbor, I understood, is hard as nails.

On a Friday morning in April, O.C.G. pops up at the Port Authority Bus Terminal. That's only five blocks away. That is squarely in my turf.

I jump to my feet, put on a baseball cap and sunglasses, and dash out. I encounter Eduardo at the elevator.

We smile at each other. When we exit the building, I hold open the door and wait for him to pass through. Then he speaks: "You play baseball?"

He's referring to the bat I'm holding. I'm going to a meeting, I tell him.

"I'll walk with you," he says. "That O.K.?"

"Sure," I say. I'm checking my phone. O.C.G. hasn't gone anywhere.

To repeat: Eduardo is a steady walker but a deliberate one. As his escort, I have no choice but to go at his speed. This is a first, I should say. We've never walked together before.

In a second first, Eduardo makes an important-sounding announcement. "Today is the anniversary of the Bay of Pigs."

"The Bay of Pigs? Huh." The Bay of Pigs, Bunker Hill, Bull Run, the bridge over the River Kwai—who cares, at this point? Who knows how to care?

"I was sixteen," Eduardo tells me. He tells me that he was among the troops on the Houston. His best friend there was named Garcilaso. Garcilaso was fifteen years old.

With that he has my ear, even as I keep an eye on my phone.

Eduardo relates that, after his family fled Cuba, he enrolled at Georgia Tech.

"Wait," I say. "You enrolled at sixteen?"

"Correct," Eduardo says. "At sixteen." He tells me that it was in Atlanta, at the Y.M.C.A., that he was recruited by the counter-revolutionaries. "Everybody else was going," he says. "So I thought, Why not? Let's go." He flew down to Miami to sign up with the C.I.A. After two weeks of training in the mountain jungles of Guatemala, Eduardo and Garcilaso boarded the Houston. They were given ancient Garand rifles. In the absence of helmets, they wore cowboy hats.

One morning, at dawn, Garcilaso and

Eduardo sneaked into the captain's quarters. "Garcilaso had heard there were M&M's in there," Eduardo told me. "We look around, and we find the M&M's. At that exact moment, we see the Cuban jets. Flying low, coming straight at us."

He laughs. He's been laughing softly the whole time.

I ask Eduardo if he and Garcilaso got to eat the M&M's. He tells me they did not.

It seems that this is the full extent of his anecdote. Only in response to my questioning does he disclose that the bombing sank the ship. Eduardo had to jump overboard, into the Bay of Pigs, and swim to shore.

"Anybody die?" I ask.

"Sure," Eduardo says.

We've reached the end of the block. "I'm headed uptown," I say.

Eduardo indicates that he's also headed that way. We set off.

In the morning rush, this bit of Eighth Avenue is barely manageable on foot. The problem is that an almost impenetrable pedestrian mass, discharged by buses from New Jersey and the Times Square subway exits, hurries south in a kind of stampede. The sense of a great flight—of crops put to the torch, of a ruined and shaken hinterland—is only heightened by trains booming underfoot, by the bleeping Klaxons of reversing box trucks, by the disorderly shoving of food carts between the stopped cars, and, above all, by the strangely focusless expressions worn by the oncoming commuters, who are seemingly devoid of ordinary consciousness. It all bodes ill. Either the barbarians are at the gates or we ourselves are the barbarians.

What I'd give for a green and silent lane. What I'd give for a woodland's leopard-skin light.

In short, Eduardo and I can go forward only in starts: we advance a few yards, wait for a gap in the crowd, and advance again. I notice that he's trying to tell me something.

"Say again?" I shout.

An ambulance siren is shrieking. Eduardo waits for the shriek to pass. "I'm going in there, to get a coffee," he says.

It feels natural to follow Eduardo—even though I'm averse to this particular deli, which I know to be a busy, cavernous, impersonal establishment

with an offhand staff. When Eduardo sits at the little countertop by the window, I join him but I don't get myself anything to drink. I listen when he tells me that a small group of them, a handful of the survivors of the sinking of the Houston, walked for a day and a night through the swamps. On the second day, they surrendered to Castro's forces and, en route to Havana, they ran into Che.

"Che Guevara?"

The prisoner-transport vehicle had come to an unexpected halt. Che Guevara and a woman comrade appeared. They examined the prisoners and conferred in French, so as not to be understood. Finally, Che said to Eduardo, Who are you, young man? Eduardo answered, Eduardo Sanchez de Cadenas. Che said, Are you a relation of Captain Cadenas? I have no idea, Eduardo said.

"I was relaxed," he tells me. "My attitude was, they were going to shoot us or they weren't."

The older prisoners were not so relaxed. Unlike Eduardo, they'd recognized Che. Shut up, kid, they said.

Nobody got shot. The truck drove on. Eduardo never saw Che Guevara again.

"What about your friend?" I ask. "What about Garcilaso?"

Eduardo shakes his head—or, rather, he moves his head in such a way that I don't know what he's signalling. I'm afraid to know.

Then Eduardo says, "Garcilaso was O.K.," and by God that's a very beautiful thing to hear.

For a minute or two, we watch the world go by.

"You want another coffee?" I say. "I'm getting myself one."

"I'm O.K.," Eduardo says. "You don't need to be anywhere?"

Do I need to be anywhere? What kind of question is that? Of course I need to be somewhere. There is no end to the places I need to be.

I buy myself a coffee. Then I regain my stool.

Tell me more, I want to say to Eduardo but do not say, because he seems ready to leave. Tell me about Garcilaso and about how things went well for him. ♦

# THE CRITICS



THE THEATRE

## THE RECKONING

*Bruce Springsteen's one-man show.*

BY HILTON ALS

“C<sub>h</sub>arisma” has its origin in a Greek word for a favor or a gift, and after seeing “Springsteen on Broadway,” Bruce Springsteen’s new solo show (at the Walter Kerr), I felt I understood the term more clearly. Or less complicatedly. For years before I saw this production—it’s a substantial one, about two hours, without intermission—I dragged my heels when it came to appreciating Spring-

steen’s gifts. In the eighties, for example, when I looked at that rabble-rouser’s tousled black hair, his bandanna, and his long face and prominent jaw, I saw nothing but danger signals; mostly, they had to do with race and class. First of all, he was from New Jersey, a state with a history of racial division, where some schools were segregated well into the forties. Then there was his accent, which sounded not

Northeastern but Midwestern, as if he found that particular tone more authentic or American. By cultivating that intonation, was he expressing nostalgia for the kind of broken-cowboy-turned-mechanic blue-collar whiteness that he celebrated in his butch persona, his arms raised in triumph from a workingman’s sleeveless denim jacket?

Like many songwriters, the now sixty-

*Springsteen isn’t humor-challenged, exactly, but he’s a romantic, and romantic feeling guides this intimate spectacle.*

eight-year-old Springsteen crafts legends from his own life story. From the start—on such early masterpieces as his 1975 breakout, “Born to Run,” or mid-career explorations like 1995’s “The Ghost of Tom Joad”—he has written narratives in which listeners can recognize themselves, or not. I couldn’t find myself in his epic odes to, presumably, young white men, with girls on the back of their motorcycles, racing through or away from suburban towns that couldn’t contain their grand hopes—hopes that became broken dreams, or just real life, with deadening factory work, kids on the lawn. I was suspicious, too, about the role of the saxophonist Clarence Clemons in Springsteen’s E Street Band. (Clemons played with Springsteen from 1972 until his death, in 2011.) Why was a fantastic black musician supporting a white star when there were black artists who could have benefited from his talent? Had Clemons sold out in order to be part of the Boss’s enormous commercial success? Was Springsteen using him to give himself some kind of legitimacy, as Elvis Presley did with Big Mama Thornton? Or was there genuine feeling between the two men?

My Springsteen problem, ultimately, was my problem with white masculinity in general: was it possible for straight white men to empathize with anything other than themselves, in the way that Joni Mitchell, say, could identify with that black crow, or Laura Nyro with all the inhabitants of her native New York, or Chaka Khan with the confusion and joy of a genderless world? Listening to those female powerhouses, I shut out the sound of Springsteen’s cars and electric guitars and het desire until 1993, when I saw the movie “Philadelphia.” One of the first mainstream pieces about AIDS, the film featured Springsteen’s phenomenal ballad “Streets of Philadelphia,” which added so much to the images of illness, hope, and death (and won the 1993 Academy Award for Best Original Song). In a simple arrangement, he sang:

I was bruised and battered, I couldn’t tell  
what I felt  
I was unrecognizable to myself  
Saw my reflection in a window and didn’t  
know my own face  
Oh brother are you gonna leave me  
wastin’ away

For those of us who didn’t abandon friends and lovers who were wasting

away, the song said everything we couldn’t and didn’t want to say: the pain was too great. Springsteen understood the AIDS patient’s fears and emotions. He wasn’t mimicking suffering for effect; he knew that in order for a song to work it had to be authentic, felt.

It was then that I began not only to listen to Springsteen but to see how limited my view of masculinity was. If a straight guy could understand what was, primarily, a gay male disease, why could I not understand him? Springsteen’s admiration for Clemons was real, and so was his understanding of the racial fear and prejudice in New Jersey—as his 2016 memoir, “Born to Run,” makes clear. Equal parts James Agee’s “Let Us Now Praise Famous Men” and Dylan Thomas’s “A Child’s Christmas in Wales,” the book is a kind of supplement to his songs. In writing, Springsteen tells us as much about himself as he knows, but the stillness of the page confines him in ways that a stage and lights and a loving audience do not. Performing releases his interiority and his knowledge of what masculinity is: a construct, but no less real because of that.

**A**t the Walter Kerr, Springsteen cribs from his book to take us on what lesser artists would call “a journey.” Walking out on a dark stage that holds a piano and not much else, Springsteen, in a black T-shirt, jeans, and boots, was, from the minute I saw him, just a guy on his way to work, a guy like one of us—even if that guy wasn’t exactly me. His posture isn’t the greatest, but he’s not a schlub: he’s solid, with a habit of walking with his head down, like a race-car driver looking for his keys. Men in the balcony started chanting “Bru-u-uce! Bru-u-uce!” as he stood in the dim light, bracing himself to tell his story. His voice was instantly recognizable: slow, rougher than the Nebraska-born Henry Fonda’s and not as high, but similarly distinctive. (Springsteen’s intonation worked brilliantly on the title track of his 1982 album “Nebraska,” in which, in another feat of ventriloquism that transmogrifies into empathy, he tells the story of the murderer Charles Starkweather.) The words came tumbling out, but at his own pace: his poor upbringing, how he was desperate to leave home, and 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 said, somewhat

ruefully, in one of many amusing self-disclosures that punctuate the show.

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. It’s impossible not to fall in love with his mother, a first-generation Italian-American, as Springsteen, seeing her from a child’s perspective, describes how she never missed a day of work in her fifty years as a legal secretary, and how he loved the sound her high heels made as she walked him down the hill to school—which he hated. As an adult, he told us, he tries to live up to her cheerfulness and commitment, and if there was a dry eye in the audience as he spoke, there wasn’t once he began to sing the 1982 song “My Father’s House,” a tribute to his Irish-Dutch father, who worked menial jobs—in a car factory, as a bus driver—and was crippled by depression:

My father’s house shines hard and bright  
It stands like a beacon calling me in the  
night  
Calling and calling so cold and alone  
Shining ‘cross this dark highway where our  
sins lie unatoned

As Springsteen, who was raised Catholic, sang, it became clear that his commitment to his subject matter was a kind of sermon—one that he had written in order to understand not only himself but what goes into the making of a self.

Toward the end of the show, Springsteen’s wife of twenty-six years, the singer Patti Scialfa, another Italian Jersey girl, joined him onstage for two numbers. Before we heard Scialfa’s crystal-clear soprano—she has an Emmylou Harris purity to her voice, but is more open-mouthed and blues-based—Springsteen, a family man still puzzling over what makes a family, talked about trust. He had lots of issues with it, he said, which meant that it had taken him a long time to find it, even with Scialfa. “In this life,” he added, “you make your choices, you take your stand, you awaken the youthful spell of immortality.” And there it was: the romantic’s faith that if you stick with something—with love, work, your parents, skeptical fans, an America that is failing itself with the wrong President—you will make it through, and perhaps what once seemed so daunting may just turn out to be something good. ♦

A CRITIC AT LARGE

# THE HAMMER

*How Martin Luther changed the world.*

BY JOAN ACOCELLA



**C**lang! Clang! Down the corridors of religious history we hear this sound: Martin Luther, an energetic thirty-three-year-old Augustinian friar, hammering his Ninety-five Theses to the doors of the Castle Church of Wittenberg, in Saxony, and thus, eventually, splitting the thousand-year-old Roman Catholic Church into two churches—one loyal to the Pope in Rome, the other protesting against the Pope's rule and soon, in fact, calling itself Protestant. This month marks the five-hundredth anniversary of Luther's famous action. Accordingly, a number of books have come out, reconsidering the man and his influence. They differ on many points, but something that most of them agree on is that the hammering episode, so satisfying sym-

bolically—loud, metallic, violent—never occurred. Not only were there no eyewitnesses; Luther himself, ordinarily an enthusiastic self-dramatizer, was vague on what had happened. He remembered drawing up a list of ninety-five theses around the date in question, but, as for what he did with it, all he was sure of was that he sent it to the local archbishop. Furthermore, the theses were not, as is often imagined, a set of non-negotiable demands about how the Church should reform itself in accordance with Brother Martin's standards. Rather, like all "theses" in those days, they were points to be thrashed out in public disputations, in the manner of the ecclesiastical scholars of the twelfth century or, for that matter, the debate clubs of tradition-

minded universities in our own time.

If the Ninety-five Theses sprouted a myth, that is no surprise. Luther was one of those figures who touched off something much larger than himself; namely, the Reformation—the sundering of the Church and a fundamental revision of its theology. Once he had divided the Church, it could not be healed. His reforms survived to breed other reforms, many of which he disapproved of. His church splintered and splintered. To tote up the Protestant denominations discussed in Alec Ryrie's new book, "Protestants" (Viking), is almost comical, there are so many of them. That means a lot of people, though. An eighth of the human race is now Protestant.

The Reformation, in turn, reshaped Europe. As German-speaking lands asserted their independence from Rome, other forces were unleashed. In the Knights' Revolt of 1522, and the Peasants' War, a couple of years later, minor gentry and impoverished agricultural workers saw Protestantism as a way of redressing social grievances. (More than eighty thousand poorly armed peasants were slaughtered when the latter rebellion failed.) Indeed, the horrific Thirty Years' War, in which, basically, Europe's Roman Catholics killed all the Protestants they could, and vice versa, can in some measure be laid at Luther's door. Although it did not begin until decades after his death, it arose in part because he had created no institutional structure to replace the one he walked away from.

Almost as soon as Luther started the Reformation, alternative Reformations arose in other localities. From town to town, preachers told the citizenry what it should no longer put up with, whereupon they stood a good chance of being shoved aside—indeed, strung up—by other preachers. Religious houses began to close down. Luther led the movement mostly by his writings. Meanwhile, he did what he thought was his main job in life, teaching the Bible at the University of Wittenberg. The Reformation wasn't led, exactly; it just spread, metastasized.

And that was because Europe was so ready for it. The relationship between the people and the rulers could hardly have been worse. Maximilian I, the Holy Roman Emperor, was dying—he brought his coffin with him wherever he travelled—but he was taking his time about

*Luther's reforms succeeded because of his energetic, charismatic personality.*

it. The presumptive heir, King Charles I of Spain, was looked upon with grave suspicion. He already had Spain and the Netherlands. Why did he need the Holy Roman Empire as well? Furthermore, he was young—only seventeen when Luther wrote the Ninety-five Theses. The biggest trouble, though, was money. The Church had incurred enormous expenses. It was warring with the Turks at the walls of Vienna. It had also started an ambitious building campaign, including the reconstruction of St. Peter's Basilica, in Rome. To pay for these ventures, it had borrowed huge sums from Europe's banks, and to repay the banks it was strangling the people with taxes.

It has often been said that, fundamentally, Luther gave us “modernity.” Among the recent studies, Eric Metaxas’s “Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World” (Viking) makes this claim in grandiose terms. “The quintessentially modern idea of the individual was as unthinkable before Luther as is color in a world of black and white,” he writes. “And the more recent ideas of pluralism, religious liberty, self-government, and liberty all entered history through the door that Luther opened.” The other books are more reserved. As they point out, Luther wanted no part of pluralism—even for the time, he was vehemently anti-Semitic—and not much part of individualism. People were to believe and act as their churches dictated.

The fact that Luther’s protest, rather than others that preceded it, brought about the Reformation is probably due in large measure to his outsized personality. He was a charismatic man, and maniacally energetic. Above all, he was intransigent. To oppose was his joy. And though at times he showed that hankering for martyrdom that we detect, with distaste, in the stories of certain religious figures, it seems that, most of the time, he just got out of bed in the morning and got on with his work. Among other things, he translated the New Testament from Greek into German in eleven weeks.

Luther was born in 1483 and grew up in Mansfeld, a small mining town in Saxony. His father started out as a miner but soon rose to become a master smelter, a specialist in separating valuable metal (in this case, copper) from

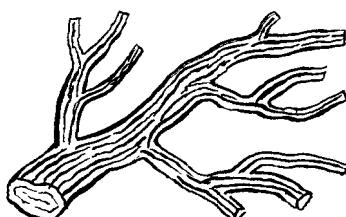
ore. The family was not poor. Archeologists have been at work in their basement. The Luthers ate suckling pig and owned drinking glasses. They had either seven or eight children, of whom five survived. The father wanted Martin, the eldest, to study law, in order to help him in his business, but Martin disliked law school and promptly had one of those experiences often undergone in the old days by young people who did not wish to take their parents’ career advice. Caught in a violent thunderstorm one day in 1505—he was twenty-one—he vowed to St. Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, that if he survived he would become a monk. He kept his promise, and was ordained two years later. In the heavily psychoanalytic nineteen-fifties, much was made of the idea that this flouting of his father’s wishes set the stage for his rebellion against the Holy Father in Rome. Such is the main point of Erik Erikson’s 1958 book, “Young Man Luther,” which became the basis of a famous play by John Osborne (filmed, in 1974, with Stacy Keach in the title role).

Today, psychoanalytic interpretations tend to be tittered at by Luther biographers. But the desire to find some great psychological source, or even a middle-sized one, for Luther’s great story is understandable, because, for many years, nothing much happened to him. This man who changed the world left his German-speaking lands only once in his life. (In 1510, he was part of a mission

one of the best of the new biographers, writes, in “Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet” (Random House), it was a mess of “muddy houses, unclean lanes.” At that time, however, the new ruler of Saxony, Frederick the Wise, was trying to make a real city of it. He built a castle and a church—the one on whose door the famous theses were supposedly nailed—and he hired an important artist, Lucas Cranach the Elder, as his court painter. Most important, he founded a university, and staffed it with able scholars, including Johann von Staupitz, the vicar-general of the Augustinian friars of the German-speaking territories. Staupitz had been Luther’s confessor at Erfurt, and when he found himself overworked at Wittenberg he summoned Luther, persuaded him to take a doctorate, and handed over many of his duties to him. Luther supervised everything from monasteries (eleven of them) to fish ponds, but most crucial was his succeeding Staupitz as the university’s professor of the Bible, a job that he took on at the age of twenty-eight and retained until his death. In this capacity, he lectured on Scripture, held disputations, and preached to the staff of the university.

He was apparently a galvanizing speaker, but during his first twelve years as a monk he published almost nothing. This was no doubt due in part to the responsibilities heaped on him at Wittenberg, but at this time, and for a long time, he also suffered what seems to have been a severe psychospiritual crisis. He called his problem his *Anfechtungen*—trials, tribulations—but this feels too slight a word to cover the afflictions he describes: cold sweats, nausea, constipation, crushing headaches, ringing in his ears, together with depression, anxiety, and a general feeling that, as he put it, the angel of Satan was beating him with his fists. Most painful, it seems, for this passionately religious young man was to discover his *anger* against God. Years later, commenting on his reading of Scripture as a young friar, Luther spoke of his rage at the description of God’s righteousness, and of his grief that, as he was certain, he would not be judged worthy: “I did not love, yes, I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners.”

There were good reasons for an intense young priest to feel disillusioned. One of the most bitterly resented abuses



sent to Rome to heal a rent in the Augustinian order. It failed.) Most of his youth was spent in dirty little towns where men worked long hours each day and then, at night, went to the tavern and got into fights. He described his university town, Erfurt, as consisting of “a whorehouse and a beerhouse.” Wittenberg, where he lived for the remainder of his life, was bigger—with two thousand inhabitants when he settled there—but not much better. As Lyndal Roper,

of the Church at that time was the so-called indulgences, a kind of late-medieval get-out-of-jail-free card used by the Church to make money. When a Christian purchased an indulgence from the Church, he obtained—for himself or whomever else he was trying to benefit—a reduction in the amount of time the person's soul had to spend in Purgatory, atoning for his sins, before ascending to Heaven. You might pay to have a special Mass said for the sinner or, less expensively, you could buy candles or new altar cloths for the church. But, in the most common transaction, the purchaser simply paid an agreed-upon amount of money and, in return, was given a document saying that the beneficiary—the name was written in on a printed form—was forgiven *x* amount of time in Purgatory. The more time off, the more it cost, but the indulgence-sellers promised that whatever you paid for you got.

Actually, they could change their minds about that. In 1515, the Church cancelled the exculpatory powers of already purchased indulgences for the next eight years. If you wanted that period covered, you had to buy a new indulgence. Realizing that this was hard on people—essentially, they had wasted their money—the Church declared that purchasers of the new indulgences did not have to make confession or even exhibit contrition. They just had to hand over the money and the thing was done, because this new issue was especially powerful. Johann Tetzel, a Dominican friar locally famous for his zeal in selling indulgences, is said to have boasted that one of the new ones could obtain remission from sin even for someone who had raped the Virgin Mary. (In the 1974 movie “Luther,” Tetzel is played with a wonderful, bug-eyed wickedness by Hugh Griffith.) Even by the standards of the very corrupt sixteenth-century Church, this was shocking.

In Luther’s mind, the indulgence trade seems to have crystallized the spiritual crisis he was experiencing. It brought him up against the absurdity of bargaining with God, jockeying for his favor—indeed, *paying* for his favor. Why had God given his only begotten son? And why had the son died on the cross? Because that’s how much God loved the world. And that alone, Luther now reasoned, was sufficient for a person to be

found “justified,” or worthy. From this thought, the Ninety-five Theses were born. Most of them were challenges to the sale of indulgences. And out of them came what would be the two guiding principles of Luther’s theology: *sola fide* and *sola scriptura*.

**S***ola fide* means “by faith alone”—faith, as opposed to good works, as the basis for salvation. This was not a new idea. St. Augustine, the founder of Luther’s monastic order, laid it out in the fourth century. Furthermore, it is not an idea that fits well with what we know of Luther. Pure faith, contemplation, white light: surely these are the gifts of the Asian religions, or of medieval Christianity, of St. Francis with his birds. As for Luther, with his rages and sweats, does he seem a good candidate? Eventually, however, he discovered (with lapses) that he could be released from those torments by the simple act of accepting God’s love for him. Lest it be thought that this stern man then concluded that we could stop worrying about our behavior and do whatever we wanted, he said that works *issue* from faith. In his words, “We can no more separate works from faith than heat and light from fire.” But he did believe that the world was irretrievably full of sin, and that repairing that situation was not the point of our moral lives. “Be a sinner, and let your sins be strong, but let your trust in Christ be stronger,” he wrote to a friend.

The second great principle, *sola scriptura*, or “by scripture alone,” was the belief that only the Bible could tell us the truth. Like *sola fide*, this was a rejection of what, to Luther, were the lies of the Church—symbolized most of all by the indulgence market. Indulgences brought you an abbreviation of your stay in Purgatory, but what was Purgatory? No such thing is mentioned in the Bible. Some people think that Dante made it up; others say Gregory the Great. In any case, Luther decided that *somebody* made it up.

Guided by those convictions, and fired by his new certainty of God’s love for him, Luther became radicalized. He preached, he disputed. Above all, he wrote pamphlets. He denounced not only the indulgence trade but all the other ways in which the Church made money off

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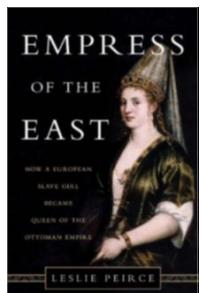
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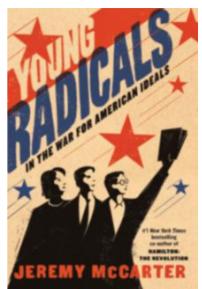
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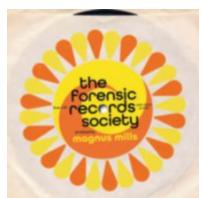
**Empress of the East**, by *Leslie Peirce* (*Basic*). This engaging biography reconsiders the legacy of the sixteenth-century Ottoman empress Roxelana. Kidnapped as a child by slave-traders in present-day Ukraine, she was sold into the harem of Süleyman I. As a royal concubine, she was expected to produce just one son with the sultan—to avoid bloody succession struggles between full brothers. But Süleyman freed and married Roxelana, and had five sons with her, a break from tradition that got her branded a witch and a seductress. Peirce persuasively recasts Roxelana as a pragmatist adept at navigating both palace politics and international relations, and as a pioneer who established a more powerful role for Ottoman women.



**Young Radicals**, by *Jeremy McCarter* (*Random House*). The work of five young activists anchors this intellectual history of the nineteen-teens: Walter Lippmann's stint as a government propagandist; the journalism of Max Eastman; John Reed's socialist writing; the idealist essays of Randolph Bourne; and the suffragist campaign of Alice Paul. McCarter's lively narrative ably captures the personal moments—Lippmann in Paris during the First World War, Reed's trips to Communist Moscow—that undergird movements and institutions. Still, as McCarter himself writes, "All five of these young radicals attended college, all were white, none were poor." Details such as Paul's neglect of black women's appeals for enfranchisement highlight the scant attention given to some of the group's contemporaries.



**The Seventh Function of Language**, by *Laurent Binet*, translated from the French by *Sam Taylor* (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). In 1980, the French theorist Roland Barthes died after being hit by a van, but in this mazy, boisterous novel, he is murdered because he possesses a document that holds the key to persuading anyone of anything. The ensuing investigation plunges a curmudgeonly detective and a young semiologist into the French intelligentsia's sordid affairs. Audacious fictions about real-life luminaries abound: Michel Foucault lectures while receiving a blow job in a bathhouse; Julia Kristeva conspires with Bulgarian assassins. Binet juxtaposes car chases with highbrow in-jokes and ruminations. The book is a love letter to the power of language—the most dangerous weapon is the tongue.



**The Forensic Records Society**, by *Magnus Mills* (*Bloomsbury*). This novel's eponymous society is founded by two vinyl junkies, in the hope of contacting the "like-minded," with a charter to listen to records "closely and in detail." A small posse gathers every Monday at a local pub; members bring three records each, but comments on the music are forbidden. The rules begin to irk participants, who form splinter groups (the Confessional Records Society, the Perceptive Records Society) with competing ideologies of consumption. The book thus becomes a study of political purism, in which the narrator doubts that "the challengers would ever find a better system." It's an observant, if simplistic, parable, given resonance by Mills's tight control of tone.

Christians: the endless pilgrimages, the yearly Masses for the dead, the cults of the saints. He questioned the sacraments. His arguments made sense to many people, notably Frederick the Wise. Frederick was pained that Saxony was widely considered a backwater. He now saw how much attention Luther brought to his state, and how much respect accrued to the university that he (Frederick) had founded at Wittenberg. He vowed to protect this troublemaker.

Things came to a head in 1520. By then, Luther had taken to calling the Church a brothel, and Pope Leo X the Antichrist. Leo gave Luther sixty days to appear in Rome and answer charges of heresy. Luther let the sixty days elapse; the Pope excommunicated him; Luther responded by publicly burning the papal order in the pit where one of Wittenberg's hospitals burned its used rags. Reformers had been executed for less, but Luther was by now a very popular man throughout Europe. The authorities knew they would have serious trouble if they killed him, and the Church gave him one more chance to recant, at the upcoming diet—or congregation of officers, sacred and secular—in the cathedral city of Worms in 1521. He went, and declared that he could not retract any of the charges he had made against the Church, because the Church could not show him, in Scripture, that any of them were false:

Since then your serene majesties and your lordships seek a simple answer, I will give it in this manner, plain and unvarnished: Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the scriptures or clear reason, for I do not trust in the Pope or in the councils alone, since it is well known that they often err and contradict themselves, I am bound to the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not retract anything.

The Pope often errs! Luther will decide what God wants! By consulting Scripture! No wonder that an institution wedded to the idea of its leader's infallibility was profoundly shaken by this declaration. Once the Diet of Worms came to an end, Luther headed for home, but he was "kidnapped" on the way, by a posse of knights sent by his protector, Frederick the Wise. The knights spirited him off to the Wartburg, a secluded castle in Eisenach, in order to give the authorities time to cool

off. Luther was annoyed by the delay, but he didn't waste time. That's when he translated the New Testament.

**D**uring his lifetime, Luther became probably the biggest celebrity in the German-speaking lands. When he travelled, people flocked to the high road to see his cart go by. This was due not just to his personal qualities and the importance of his cause but to timing. Luther was born only a few decades after the invention of printing, and though it took him a while to start writing, it was hard to stop him once he got going. Among the quincentennial books is an entire volume on his relationship to print, "Brand Luther" (Penguin), by the British historian Andrew Pettegree. Luther's collected writings come to a hundred and twenty volumes. In the first half of the sixteenth century, a third of all books published in German were written by him.

By producing them, he didn't just create the Reformation; he also created his country's vernacular, as Dante is said to have done with Italian. The majority of his writings were in Early New High German, a form of the language that was starting to gel in southern Germany at that time. Under his influence, it did gel.

The crucial text is his Bible: the New Testament, translated from the original Greek and published in 1523, followed by the Old Testament, in 1534, translated from the Hebrew. Had he not created Protestantism, this book would be the culminating achievement of Luther's life. It was not the first German translation of the Bible—indeed, it had eighteen predecessors—but it was unquestionably the most beautiful, graced with the same combination of exaltation and simplicity, but more so, as the King James Bible. (William Tyndale, whose English version of the Bible, for which he was executed, was more or less the basis of the King James, knew and admired Luther's translation.) Luther very consciously sought a fresh, vigorous idiom. For his Bible's vocabulary, he said, "we must ask the mother in the home, the children on the street," and, like other writers with such aims—William Blake, for example—he ended up with something songlike. He loved alliteration—"Der Herr ist mein Hirte" ("The Lord is my shepherd"); "Dein

*Stecken und Stab*" ("thy rod and thy staff")—and he loved repetition and forceful rhythms. This made his texts easy and pleasing to read aloud, at home, to the children. The books also featured a hundred and twenty-eight woodcut illustrations, all by one artist from the Cranach workshop, known to us only as Master MS. There they were, all those wondrous things—the Garden of Eden, Abraham and Isaac, Jacob wrestling with the angel—which modern people are used to seeing images of and which Luther's contemporaries were not. There were marginal glosses, as well as short prefaces for each book, which would have been useful for the children of the household and probably also for the family member reading to them.

These virtues, plus the fact that the Bible was probably, in many cases, the only book in the house, meant that it was widely used as a primer. More people learned to read, and the more they knew how to read the more they wanted to own this book, or give it to others. The three-thousand-copy first edition of the New Testament, though it was not cheap (it cost about as much as a calf), sold out immediately. As many as half a million Luther Bibles seem to have been printed by the mid-sixteenth century. In his discussions of *sola scriptura*, Luther had declared that all believers were priests: laypeople had as much right as the clergy to determine what Scripture meant. With his Bible, he gave German speakers the means to do so.

In honor of the five-hundredth anniversary, the excellent German art-book publisher Taschen has produced a facsimile with spectacular colored woodcuts. Pleasingly, the book historian Stephan Füssel, in the explanatory paperback that accompanies the two-volume facsimile, reports that in 2004, when a fire swept through the Duchess Anna Amalia Library, in Weimar, where this copy was housed, it was "rescued, undamaged, with not a second to lose, thanks to the courageous intervention of library director Dr. Michael Knoche." I hope that Dr. Knoche himself ran out with the two volumes in his arms. I don't know what the price of a calf is these days, but the price of this facsimile is sixty dollars. Anyone who wants to give himself a Luther quincentennial present should order it immediately. Mas-

ter MS's Garden of Eden is full of wonderful animals—a camel, a crocodile, a little toad—and in the towns everyone wears those black shoes like the ones in Brueghel paintings. The volumes lie flat on the table when you open them, and the letters are big and black and clear. Even if you don't understand German, you can sort of read them.

**A**mong the supposedly Biblical rules that Luther pointed out could not be found in the Bible was the requirement of priestly celibacy. Well before the Diet of Worms, Luther began advising priests to marry. He said that he would marry, too, if he did not expect, every day, to be executed for heresy. One wonders. But in 1525 he was called upon to help a group of twelve nuns who had just fled a Cistercian convent, an action that was related to his reforms. Part of his duty to these women, he felt, was to return them to their families or to find husbands for them. At the end, one was left, a twenty-six-year-old girl named Katharina von Bora, the daughter of a poor, albeit noble, country family. Luther didn't want her, he said—he found her "proud"—but she wanted him. She was the one who proposed. And though, as he told a friend, he felt no "burning" for her, he formed with her a marriage that is probably the happiest story in any account of his life.

One crucial factor was her skill in household management. The Luthers lived in the so-called Black Monastery, which had been Wittenberg's Augustinian monastery—that is, Luther's old home as a friar—before the place emptied out as a result of the reformer's actions. (One monk became a cobbler, another a baker, and so on.) It was a huge, filthy, comfortless place. Käthe, as Luther called her, made it livable, and not just for her immediate family. Between ten and twenty students lodged there, and the household took in many others as well: four children of Luther's dead sister Margarete, plus four more orphaned children from both sides of the family, plus a large family fleeing the plague. A friend of the reformer, writing to an acquaintance journeying to Wittenberg, warned him on no account to stay with the Luthers if he valued peace and quiet. The refectory table seated between thirty-five and fifty, and Käthe, having acquired a large market

garden and a considerable amount of livestock (pigs, goats), and now supervising a staff of up to ten employees (maids, a cook, a swineherd, et al.), fed them all. She also handled the family's finances, and at times had to economize carefully. Luther would accept no money for his writings, on which he could have profited hugely, and he would not allow students to pay to attend his lectures, as was the custom.

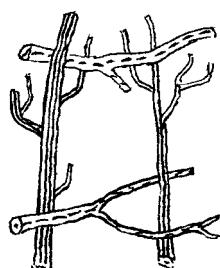
Luther appreciated the sheer increase in his physical comfort. When he writes to a friend, soon after his marriage, of what it is like to lie in a dry bed after years of sleeping on a pile of damp, mildewed straw, and when, elsewhere, he speaks of the surprise of turning over in bed and seeing a pair of pigtails on the pillow next to his, your heart softens toward this dyspeptic man. More important, he began to take women seriously. He objects, in a lecture, to coitus interruptus, the most common form of birth control at the time, on the ground that it is frustrating for women. When he was away from home, he wrote Käthe affectionate letters, with such salutations as "Most holy Frau Doctor" and "To the hands and feet of my dear housewife."

Among Käthe's virtues was fertility. Every year or so for eight years, she produced a child—six in all, of whom four survived to adulthood—and Luther loved these children. He even allowed them to play in his study while he was working. Of five-year-old Hans, his firstborn, he wrote, "When I'm writing or doing something else, my Hans sings a little tune for me. If he becomes too noisy and I rebuke him for it, he continues to sing but does it more privately and with a certain awe and uneasiness." That scene, which comes from "Martin Luther: Rebel in an Age of Upheaval" (Oxford), by the German historian Heinz Schilling, seems to me impossible to improve upon as a portrait of what it must have been like for Luther to have a little boy, and for a little boy to have Luther as a father. Luther was not a lenient parent—he used the whip when he felt he needed to, and poor Hans was sent to the university at the age of seven—but when, on his travels, the reformer passed through a town that was having a fair he liked to buy

presents for the children. In 1536, when he went to the Diet of Augsburg, another important convocation, he kept a picture of his favorite child, Magdalene, on the wall of his chamber. Magdalene died at thirteen. Schilling again produces a telling scene. Magdalene is nearing the end; Luther is holding her. He says he knows she would like to stay with her father, but, he adds, "Are you also glad to go to your father in heaven?" She died in his arms. How touching that he could find this common-sense way to comfort her, and also that he seems to feel that Heaven is right above their heads, with one father holding out a hand to take to himself the other's child.

One thing that Luther seems especially to have loved about his children was their corporeality—their fat, noisy little bodies. When Hans finally learned to bend his knees and relieve himself on the floor, Luther rejoiced, reporting to a friend that the child had "crapped in every corner of the room." I wonder who cleaned that up—not Luther, I would guess—but it is hard not to feel some of his pleasure. Sixteenth-century Germans were not, in the main, dainty of thought or speech. A representative of the Vatican once claimed that Luther was conceived when the Devil raped his mother in an outhouse. That

detail comes from Eric Metaxas's book, which is full of vulgar stories, not that one has to look far for vulgar stories in Luther's life. My favorite (reported in Erikson's book) is a comment that Luther made at the dinner table while in the grip of a depression. "I am like a ripe shit," he said, "and the world is a gigantic asshole. We will both probably let go of each other soon." It takes you a minute to realize that Luther is saying that he feels he is dying. And then you want to congratulate him on the sheer zest, the proto-surrealist nuttiness, of his metaphor. He may feel as though he's dying, but he's having a good time feeling it.



The group on which Luther expended his most notorious denunciations was not the Roman Catholic clergy but the Jews. His sentiments were widely shared. In the words of Heinz Schilling,

"Late medieval Christians generally hated and despised Jews." But Luther despised them dementedly, ecstatically. In his 1543 treatise "On the Ineffable Name and the Generations of Christ," he imagines the Devil stuffing the Jews' orifices with filth: "He stuffs and squirts them so full, that it overflows and swims out of every place, pure Devil's filth, yes, it tastes so good to their hearts, and they guzzle it like sows." Witness the death of Judas Iscariot, he adds: "When Judas Schariot hanged himself, so that his guts ripped, and as happens to those who are hanged, his bladder burst, then the Jews had their golden cans and silver bowls ready, to catch the Judas piss . . . and afterwards together they ate the shit." The Jews' synagogues should be burned down, he wrote; their houses should be destroyed. He did not recommend that they be killed, but he did say that Christians had no moral responsibilities to them, which amounts to much the same thing.

This is hair-raising, but what makes Luther's anti-Semitism most disturbing is not its extremity (which, by sounding so crazy, diminishes its power). It is the fact that the country of which he is a national hero did indeed, quite recently, exterminate six million Jews. Hence the formula "From Luther to Hitler," popularized by William Montgomery McGovern's 1941 book of that title—the notion that Luther laid the groundwork for the slaughter. Those who have wished to defend him have pointed out that his earlier writings, such as the 1523 pamphlet "That Jesus Christ Was Born a Jew," are much more conciliatory in tone. He seemed to regret that, as he put it, Christians had "dealt with the Jews as if they were dogs." But making excuses for Luther on the basis of his earlier, more temperate writings does not really work. As scholars have been able to show, Luther was gentler early on because he was hoping to persuade the Jews to convert. When they failed to do so, he unleashed his full fury, more violent now because he believed that the comparative mildness of his earlier writings may have been partly responsible for their refusal.

Luther's anti-Semitism would be a moral problem under any circumstances. People whom we admire often commit terrible sins, and we have no good way of explaining this to ourselves. But when

one adds the historical factor—that, in Luther's case, the judgment is being made five centuries after the event—we hit a brick wall. At the Nuremberg trials, in 1946, Julius Streicher, the founder and publisher of the Jew-baiting newspaper *Der Stürmer*, quoted Luther as the source of his beliefs and said that if he was going to be blamed Luther would have to be blamed as well. But, in the words of Thomas Kaufmann, a professor of church history at the University of Göttingen, "The Nuremberg judges sat in judgment over the mass murderers of the twentieth century, not over the delusions of a misguided sixteenth-century theology professor. . . . Another judge must judge Luther." How fortunate to be able to believe that such a judge will come, and have an answer.

Luther lived to what, in the sixteenth century, was an old age, sixty-two, but the years were not kind to him. Actually, he lived most of his life in turmoil. When he was young, there were the *Anfechtungen*. Then, once he issued the theses and began his movement, he had to struggle not just with the right, the Roman Church, but with the left—the *Schwärmer* (fanatics), as he called them, the people who felt that he hadn't gone far enough. He spent days and weeks in pamphlet wars over matters that, today, have to be patiently explained to us, they seem so remote. Did Communion involve transubstantiation, or was Jesus physically present from the start of the rite? Luther, a "Real Presence" man, said the latter. Should people be baptized soon after they are born, as Luther said, or when they are adults, as the Anabaptists claimed?

When Luther was young, he was good at friendship. He was frank and warm; he loved jokes; he wanted to have people and noise around him. (Hence the fifty-seat dinner table.) As he grew older, he changed. He found that he could easily discard friends, even old friends, even his once beloved confessor, Staupitz. People who had dealings with the movement found themselves going around him if they could, usually to his right-hand man, Philip Melanchthon. Always sharp-tongued, Luther now lost all restraint, writing in a treatise that Pope Paul III was a sodomite and a transvestite—no



PAUL  
NOTH

surprise, he added, when you considered that all popes, since the beginnings of the Church, were full of devils and vomited and farted and defecated devils. This starts to sound like his attacks on the Jews.

His health declined. He had dizzy spells, bleeding hemorrhoids, constipation, urine retention, gout, kidney stones. To balance his "humors," the surgeon made a hole, or "fontanelle," in a vein in his leg, and it was kept open. Whatever this did for his humors, it meant that he could no longer walk to the church or the university. He had to be taken in a cart. He suffered disabling depressions. "I have lost Christ completely," he wrote to Melanchthon. From a man of his temperament and convictions, this is a terrible statement.

In early 1546, he had to go to the town of his birth, Eisleben, to settle a dispute. It was January, and the roads were bad. Tellingly, he took all three of his sons with him. He said the trip might be the death of him, and he was right. He died in mid-February. Appropriately, in view of his devotion to the scatological, his corpse was given an enema,

in the hope that this would revive him. It didn't. After sermons in Eisleben, the coffin was driven back to Wittenberg, with an honor guard of forty-five men on horseback. Bells tolled in every village along the way. Luther was buried in the Castle Church, on whose door he was said to have nailed his theses.

Although his resting place evokes his most momentous act, it also highlights the intensely local nature of the life he led. The transformations he set in motion were incidental to his struggles, which remained irreducibly personal. His goal was not to usher in modernity but simply to make religion religious again. Heinz Schilling writes, "Just when the lustre of religion threatened to be outdone by the atheistic and political brilliance of the secularized Renaissance papacy, the Wittenberg monk defined humankind's relationship to God anew and gave back to religion its existential plausibility." Lyndal Roper thinks much the same. She quotes Luther saying that the Church's sacraments "are not fulfilled when they are taking place but when they are being believed." All he asked for was sincerity, but this made a great difference. ♦

# TREMORS

*The deep sounds of Ashley Fure's "The Force of Things."*

BY ALEX ROSS

**E**nveloping dread, ambient unease, a kind of sensuous foreboding: the music of the thirty-five-year-old American composer Ashley Fure addresses feelings that are all too familiar in early-twenty-first-century life. Fure's experimental music-theatre piece "The Force of Things," which was recently staged at Peak Performances, in Montclair, New Jersey, is in part a study in infrasound, or sounds below the range of human hearing. For most of the work's duration, twenty-four subwoofers, placed with their cones pointed upward, emit electronic tones that vibrate at a frequency of 10.67 hertz, or around ten oscillations per second. They are arrayed around the auditorium, with the audience seated in the middle. Human ears can't detect sounds much below twenty hertz, but you register their presence all the same. Urban legend holds that infrasound can cause people to vomit, become disoriented, or lose control of their bowels. Although scientific studies have failed to observe such effects, they have noted increased blood pressure, rapid eye movement, and other temporary physiological changes. The body is listening even when the ears tune out.

That tectonic rumble underpins an imposing musical construction, which maintains ritualistic intensity over a fifty-minute span. Fure calls it an "opera for objects," yet it is hardly an opera in the conventional sense. There are no words, nor is there a plot. There is, however, a powerful sense of purpose. In a program note, Fure says that she wishes to evoke "the mounting hum of ecological anxiety around us"—changes that are too slow and too vast to be im-

mediately grasped. Like the political theorist Jane Bennett, from whom the work's title is derived, Fure seeks to foster empathy for the nonhuman world that we have remade in our image.

"The Force of Things" is set in a dim, cavernous environment designed by the architect Adam Fure, the composer's



*In Fure's piece, performers apply bows to aircraft cables.*

brother, and lit by Nicholas Houfek. Ragged sculptural forms, made of silicone, paper, and plastic, dangle from the ceiling, resembling stalactites. Seven members of the International Contemporary Ensemble—the vocalists Lucy Dhegrae and Alice Teyssier; the saxophonist Ryan Muncy; the bassoonist Rebekah Heller; and the percussionists Levy Lorenzo, Dustin Donahue, and Ross Karre—circulate through the space, wearing ponchos

like garments. Much of the work is eerily spare and quiet, with instruments gravitating toward fragile sustained tones, shivery glissandos, and fractured timbres. The vocalists whisper and breathe into megaphones. When the piece builds to a roar, as it does several times, the impact is all the greater. Fure's formidable orchestral score "Bound to the Bow," which was heard at last year's New York Philharmonic Biennial, follows a similar structure: first stillness, then catastrophe.

At performances of "The Force of Things," listeners are encouraged to move around and explore what is essentially a live-action installation. The experience is like a reconnaissance mission into an auditory wilderness: the challenge is to figure out where sounds are coming from and how they are being made. Early on, I heard a brisk fluttering from the sculptures above me. My first thought was that a fan was blowing on them. I then realized that pieces of string extended upward from several of the subwoofers, and that vibrations were causing the strings to strike the material. A little later, I heard a soft, rapid tapping behind me: this emanated from a sheet of paper that Karre—who doubled as the work's producer—was holding a few inches away from a subwoofer. All manner of unearthly noises ensue when the performers apply their fingers and palms to the speaker cones. At the climax of the first part, the percussionists brush metal chimes against the subwoofers, triggering an apocalyptic jangle.

Tense silence descends again, and the musicians disperse to the far end of the auditorium, barely visible in the murk. New sounds arise—deep, droning tones. You discern that the performers are applying bows to aircraft cables that crisscross the space, supported by hemispheres of Styrofoam that function like the bridge on a stringed instrument. The players advance toward the middle of the room, their tones rising in pitch as they go. It's like being inside a gigantic surrealist cello. All this activity

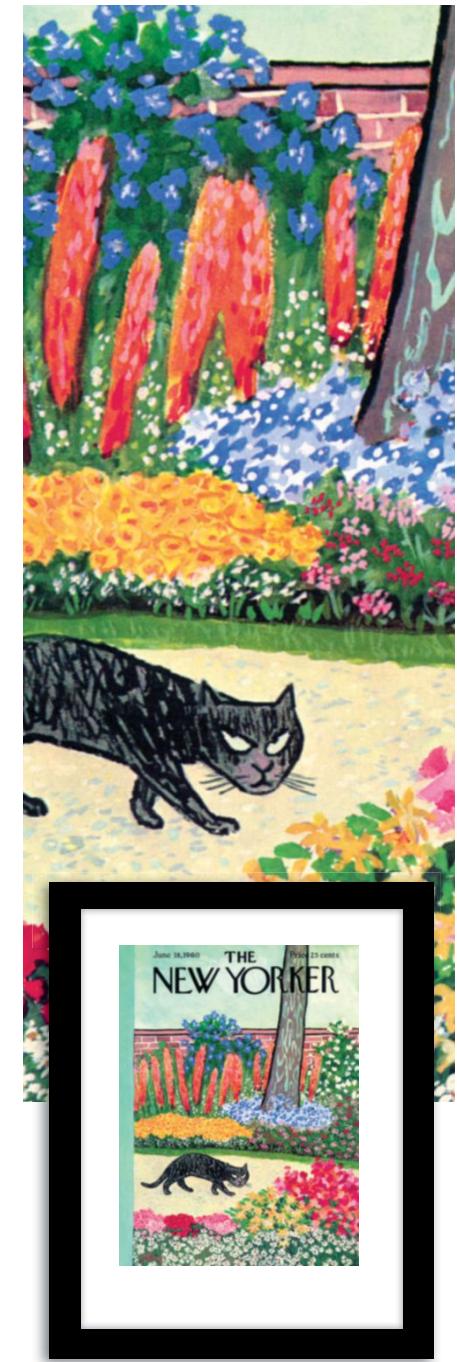
hits a frenzied climax, with the winds and the voices sustaining high pitches and the infrasound growing in volume. (So you surmise from the rumbling of your seat.) Then the barrage suddenly cuts off, and plastic sheets swoosh down from the ceiling. In a becalmed coda, the musicians manipulate vibrating strings with their hands: you can see the resulting waveforms, textbook diagrams come to life. The patterns also look like double helixes—sound and matter becoming organic.

Peak Performances, possibly the most adventurous presenter in the New York area, has devoted its entire season to “women innovators in the performing arts.” Gender does not play an explicit role in “The Force of Things,” although Fure’s emphasis on the idea of empathy implies an opposition to the masculine megalomania of certain modernist predecessors. Last year, when ICE performed a preliminary version of “The Force of Things” at the Summer Courses for New Music, in Darmstadt, Germany, Fure confronted her colleagues with grim statistics about that illustrious institution: from 1946 to 2014, ninety-three per cent of pieces programmed at Darmstadt were by male composers. The staggering originality of Fure’s latest work—and of music by Chaya Czernowin, Liza Lim, Clara Iannotta, Kate Soper, Linda Catlin Smith, and dozens of others—makes one think that mostly female seasons might have to become the norm.

For new-music fanatics in the New York region, the first weekend of October was problematically rich. While “The Force of Things” was running in Montclair, the Park Avenue Armory revived Pierre Boulez’s computer-enhanced showpiece “Répons,” and BAM offered Matthew Aucoin’s “Crossing,” a keenly imagined chamber opera about Walt Whitman. I also made it down to the Barnes Foundation, in Philadelphia, where the newly created Barnes Ensemble introduced Iannotta’s “dead wasps in the jam-jar (ii),” in which string players double as percussionists, eliciting sonic dreamscapes from thimbles, paper clips, electric-guitar strings, birdcalls, and wineglasses. Happily, attendance was strong at all these events, showing that risk-averse programming is not the only path forward in precarious times. ♦

The Armory’s version of “Répons,” which had its première in 1981 and underwent several revisions, was an audio-visual wonder. The Ensemble Intercontemporain, under the direction of the composer-conductor Matthias Pintscher, played the piece twice each night: listeners were seated on four sides, and after intermission they traded places with those directly opposite. On the periphery were six soloists—a harpist, a cimbalomist, two pianists, and two percussionists—who make a dramatic entrance in the work’s second section. Pierre Audi, the Armory’s artistic director, and the lighting designer Urs Schönebaum provided a coolly gorgeous setting. The chance to hear “Répons” twice, and from different perspectives, put a new light on a hyperdense score. When Boulez conducted it at Carnegie Hall, in 2003, some detail was lost in the resonant auditorium. The Armory is even more reverberant, but the audience was close enough that the sound had tactile impact. A colleague rightly identified a certain funkiness in the bleating brass and the pizzicato bass.

The Armory’s programming has become essential to New York life, although it too often indulges in bigness for bigness’s sake—the wow factor of filling the arena with water or bringing in a flock of sheep. What I liked about “Répons” was its visceral intimacy: Audi gestured toward the grandeur of the space, especially when Boulez’s satellite instrumental stations kicked in, but the musical foreground dominated the picture. Intimacy also distinguished Michel van der Aa’s high-tech opera “Blank Out,” which the Armory presented in late September. Tightly staged by the composer, it might as well have been in a small black-box theatre. Van der Aa is a master of many media: the production incorporated video projections of his own devising, and involved only one live performer, the luminous soprano Miah Persson. At the same time, its deft, fluid vocal writing conveyed a piercing story, of a mother who dies rescuing her boy from drowning. (The baritone Roderick Williams, on video, portrayed the boy as a grown man.) Rarely have modern techniques and ancient musical virtues coexisted more naturally. Van der Aa, like Fure, uses technology to get at something elemental: for him, the long reach of memory; for her, the irreversibility of change. ♦



William Steig, June 18, 1960

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# PLENTY MORE

*Viceland's visceral gastronomy.*

BY AMANDA PETRUSICH



*On Action Bronson's food shows, there is no chasm between high and low fare.*

The odd pleasure of watching people cook and eat on television seems to transcend generational boundaries. This year, Viceland, a new, millennial-focussed television network under the creative direction of Spike Jonze, has become an unlikely bastion of food-related programming. Some of its shows are expressly edifying. But many of them are renegade variations on the travel-and-chow-down theme, in which a tattooed chef (like Eddie Huang, the host of “Huang’s World,” or Frank Pinello, the host of “The Pizza Show”) goes to a far-flung locale, and ingests and ruminates for the camera.

The majority of these series began on Munchies, a Web site launched by Vice in 2014. The energy is masculine and

contrarian—a corrective, perhaps, to the self-seriousness of foodie culture, and to the cozy murmurs of chefs like Ina Garten and Martha Stewart. The best of the bunch is “F\*ck, That’s Delicious,” a travel show hosted by the rapper and bon vivant Action Bronson, which will begin filming its third season next year. (An accompanying book, “F\*ck, That’s Delicious: An Annotated Guide to Eating Well,” was released in September.)

Bronson has a scraggly, reddish beard and eyes the color of a glacier. He weighs around three hundred pounds, and is usually wearing an oversized Carhartt shirt, athletic shorts, and sneakers. Bronson and his squad of sauntering, mild-mannered colleagues—most often, his collaborator Big Body Bes; the cherubic,

winsome rapper Meyhem Lauren; and the lanky producer and d.j. the Alchemist—judge food exclusively on its visceral delights. Though Bronson has worked as a cook, and is familiar with the nuances and language of haute cuisine, he and his cronies refuse to acknowledge a chasm between high and low fare. At Conditori La Glace, a renowned pâtisserie in Copenhagen, the Alchemist describes a wedge of *sportskage*—a layer cake with whipped cream and crushed praline—as having “a cereal type of flavor.” (Lauren’s summation is more specific: “Teddy Grahams on steroids.”)

At a tasting, Bronson insists upon his own reading of a Georgian wine. “You can taste the wood,” he says to Sune Rosforth, a natural-wine specialist.

“There’s no wood in this,” Rosforth replies.

“But I can taste the wood.” Bronson pauses. “There’s no wood, but it’s reminiscent of wood.”

The cast members take most of their meals on the street or standing in a kitchen. Once, for no apparent reason, they dined in a parking lot adjacent to Peter Luger, the Brooklyn steak house. The thought of sitting down at a “tablescape”—a portmanteau favored by Sandra Lee, a Food Network star who arranges seasonally appropriate *objets* into tabletop meta-narratives on “Semi-Homemade Cooking with Sandra Lee”—begins to seem insane. Place settings, starched white linens, and tiny fish forks are irrelevant to a dining experience. Even a cloth napkin starts to feel quaint. For Bronson and his cohort, who grew up in cities, all food is street food.

Bronson’s most obvious predecessor is Anthony Bourdain, the writer and former chef, whose latest series, “Parts Unknown,” airs on CNN. Bourdain jets off to exotic or otherwise underexplored sites (Libya, Borneo, New Jersey), skulks about in a black leather jacket, pounds beers, and, as the show ends, delivers shrewd cultural commentary via voice-over. A low-boiling disdain for authority informs his monologues. He understands cuisine as part of a larger narrative about place, and is hungry for authentic, revelatory experiences. Yet this way of thinking becomes its own kind of trap, in which authenticity is inextricably (and confusingly) linked to disenfranchisement, and meals become polemics.

By contrast, Bronson's show suggests that to think of food as possessing any kind of cultural currency—to interpret it as a political choice—is to misunderstand appetite. Much of the humor hinges upon lampooning fussy, toadying conversations about cuisine. "Why are we eating food we don't like?" the Alchemist asks his friends, halfway through breakfast at a dim-sum restaurant in Queens, on a special, 420-themed episode. In the next scene, they leave.

To the casual viewer, it might seem that every episode of "F\*ck, That's Delicious" is 420-themed. Per stoner lore, the numbers four and twenty as shorthand for marijuana use originated with a group of high-school students in San Rafael, California: one day in 1971, at 4:20 P.M., they set out to find an abandoned cannabis field using a treasure map. (Whether they found any marijuana is unclear.) Bronson appears befuddled by the term. "420 is such a ridiculous fucking thing, is it not?" he asks. "What exactly is 420—what happened on that day, what happened at that time, on that day, does anyone know exactly what happened?"

He and the Alchemist are huddled outside. The Alchemist is often portrayed as the show's straight man, a rawboned dude who doesn't much care about food beyond its caloric utility. ("No one hates food like me," he jokes, during a meal in Barcelona.) He chews on a toothpick. "People get high," he says.

Marijuana is ubiquitous on the show. "Take this away," Bronson says, holding a blunt at the start of the 420 episode. He stares mournfully out a car window, and sighs. Ducks quack on a nearby river. His eyes close. "This is a very special 'F\*ck, That's Delicious' special," he announces, and cracks up. Later, at Fedoroff's Roast Pork, in Williamsburg, he helps the owner, Dave Fedoroff, prepare a mélange of chopped steak, long hots, fried onions, and cheese sauce, which they ladle atop a cardboard boat of French fries. "This is the best idea you could have probably thought of," someone concludes.

In Season 2, the crew travels to Italy, ostensibly to eat at Osteria Francescana, in Modena, which has three Michelin stars. ("Who the fuck is Michelin, to give a fucking star? What do they make, tires?" Bronson wonders in a later episode.) Bronson takes his lasagna out-

side and stands on the sidewalk. Afterward, he meets up with Mario Batali in Rome. Batali seems vaguely disappointed by Bronson's energy level. He has to pound repeatedly on the window of an S.U.V. to wake him up. "Is this how it rolls, normally?" Batali asks the camera. "This guy shows up stoned, and that's the TV show?"

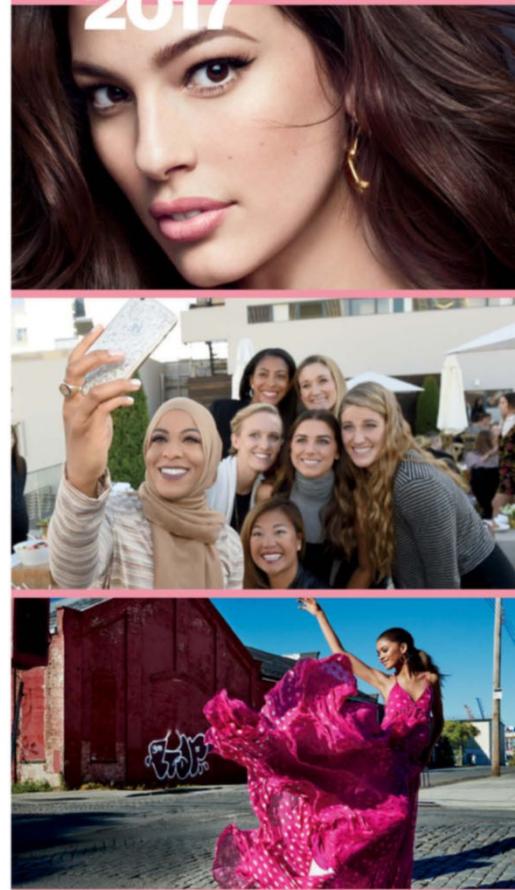
A second Viceland series starring Bronson, "The Untitled Action Bronson Show," premieres this week. The thirty-minute show—a kind of deranged "Emeril Live," in which Bronson cooks and muses in the Munchies test kitchen, alongside special guests—will air Monday through Thursday at 11:30 P.M.

I attended a recent taping in Brooklyn. The mood was chaotic but joyful, as if Bronson were hosting a rowdy dinner party. The cameras seemed nearly incidental. The Alchemist was there. A house band, the Special Victims Unit, played funk. The chef Billy Durney, of Hometown Bar-B-Que, a smokehouse in Red Hook, prepared chunks of beef brisket, which he served on slices of white bread, with chopped onion and pickle chips. The air was sweet with weed and barbecue sauce. Bronson appeared deeply pleased. "It tastes so good I have to step outside," he said, wandering off the set. A camera followed.

The Haitian-born rapper and musician Wyclef Jean arrived. He and Bronson shared a plate of seasoned mango, as Jean explained that mangoes are one of Haiti's biggest exports. "This is a decent mango," Bronson said. "But you can tell it's from Queens." Another natural-wine specialist, Isabelle Legeron—Bronson seems to favor raw and organic wines—handed out blindfolds and opened several bottles. They emptied quickly. By the end of the taping, Bronson was banging on a cowbell, still blindfolded, while Jean rolled around on the floor, barefoot, playing an electric guitar.

There was little separation between cast and crew, between on set and off set; the process of shooting the show appeared to be an essential component of the show itself. This sort of transparency is fundamental to Viceland's aesthetic and its ideological mission: no faking it. Wine is swallowed, never dribbled into a spittoon. Food is for enjoying. The only true sin is affectation. ♦

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# SACRIFICIAL VICTIMS

*"The Killing of a Sacred Deer" and "The Square."*

BY ANTHONY LANE

People who recoil from the films of Yorgos Lanthimos, such as “Dogtooth” (2009) and “The Lobster” (2015), find them chilly and heartless, and even some of his fans would tend to agree. As if to counter that charge, his latest work, “The Killing of a Sacred Deer,” begins with an actual heart—the human organ, pumping lustily in plain sight. A

tance, the choice of strap—and yet we feel like observers of a solemn rite. That feeling intensifies at the dinner table, where Steven is eating with his wife, Anna (Nicole Kidman), their teen-age daughter, Kim (Raffey Cassidy), and her younger brother, Bob (Sunny Suljic), who is told to sit up straight. They talk about haircuts (“We all have lovely



In Yorgos Lanthimos's film, Colin Farrell plays a surgeon facing a ghastly choice.

patient lies on the operating table, with an open chest cavity, while the surgeon, Steven Murphy (Colin Farrell), completes his task. Once his bloody scrubs have been removed, we get a proper look at him: a solid and steady figure, in a jacket and tie, with a full beard turning gray. Here is a man, we sense, whose life is under control. It would take a great deal to disconcert him.

The rest of the movie is filled by the great deal. Even the plainest deeds, or the most innocent exchanges, are freighted with inexplicable unease. As Steven and his colleague Matthew (Bill Camp) walk down a corridor, the camera faces them and pulls smoothly back, with a faintly processional air. They are discussing wristwatches—water resis-

hair,” Anna says), but, as before, the talk seems anything but small. Something larger is mustering, like a storm.

It arrives in the unlikely form of a sixteen-year-old named Martin (Barry Keoghan), whom Steven has befriended, or vice versa. They meet during off-hours, stroll beside a river, and sit in cafés. Martin shows up at the hospital where Steven works. You wonder if their rapport might be a furtive sexual pact, perhaps with an edge of blackmail, whereupon Steven invites Martin to his house. He is courteous, bringing gifts and beguiling both Anna and Kim. So what does he want, this lad with a face both guileless and vulpine? What does he portend? Soon enough, he provides the answer, speaking in a

rush: the family will be paralyzed, and then they will die. Steven’s only option, if he wishes to avert this reckoning, is to execute one of them. The choice of victim is up to him.

Cinema is not short of boyish youths who consider it their duty to explode the family unit from within. Alessandro, the brutish brother in Marco Bellocchio’s “Fists in the Pocket” (1965), claims to be “a volcano of ideas” and shoves his mother off a cliff, while the nameless visitor played by Terence Stamp in Pasolini’s “Theorem” (1968) seduces pretty much everyone, leaving his conquests in a state of ruin, catatonia, or ecstasy. Strong stuff, but the strength is clearly wielded against the satisfactions of the bourgeoisie and the edicts of the Catholic establishment, whereas Lanthimos, as a director, is not in the business of picking fights. He is calm and sibylline, prophesying plainly what will come to pass, and his inspiration, in the new film, is far more distant than Marx. If you seek to understand what ails Steven, the person to ask is Agamemnon.

He it was, according to legend, who entered a grove sacred to Artemis and slew a deer. (Hence the title of this movie.) The offended goddess bid the winds be still, thus becalming Agamemnon’s fleet as it prepared to sail for Troy. He was then instructed by a seer to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, and thereby to break the impasse. Ever politic, and bent on war, he did what he was told, although in one version of the story, laid forth by Euripides in his final play, “Iphigenia in Aulis,” the girl was spared as her father prepared to strike, and was replaced by—yet again—a deer. The story bears more than a passing resemblance to that of Abraham and Isaac, and the question is: How much of the myth survives, if only in fragments, in the movie? What tribute does Lanthimos pay to his compatriot, two and a half thousand years on?

Well, not a single deer strays into view, just as “The Lobster” was crustacean-free. No warships idle at anchor, and deities, likewise, are notably thin on the ground, although Martin, in Keoghan’s unnerving performance, has a touch of the wicked sprite. Meanwhile, Kim’s school principal reveals that she wrote an essay on Iphigenia, and the streak of moral cowardice that ran through the Greek general lingers in the cardiac

surgeon. Farrell is shifty and abrupt, and we learn of a grave mistake in Steven's past, though it scarcely warrants the vengeance that is about to be meted out. Above all, what Lanthimos inherits from Euripides—and what loads the film, and its modern setting, with intractable problems—is the ancient momentum of doom. Most parents today, for instance, would not hesitate to offer their own lives to save their children's, but that option never crosses Steven's mind, nor is there the slightest prospect that Martin's barbarous decree will be rescinded. Even Fritz Lang at his most fatalistic, in films like "Scarlet Street" (1945) and "Human Desire" (1954), allowed his heroes some freedom, if only the freedom to fall for the wrong dame, but Lanthimos's characters are in lockdown from the start.

Maybe this is no surprise. To be in any Lanthimos movie is to be semi-zombified. You don't have to gnaw on other people, but they barely react as you deliver morsels of awkward or outrageous information. "Our daughter started menstruating last week," Steven mentions to a colleague, at a gala dinner. "Can I take a closer look at your hands?" he is asked by Martin's mother (Alicia Silverstone). The camera angles are no less clinical: when Bob collapses at the foot of an escalator, proving that Martin's augury is coming true, we gaze down on the crisis from on high, like Harry Lime musing on the antlike Viennese from the perch of a Ferris wheel. Emotional displays are assessed as if they were symptoms of disease, and Nicole Kidman's natural hauteur has seldom been better deployed. Wait for the creepy scene in which, having asked, "General anes-

thetic?" Anna disports herself on the marital bed, pretending to be out cold and awaiting her husband's caress.

What this deadpan tone suggests, over time, is a deadness of the spirit, whether in the domestic arena or in the wider world. If "The Lobster" remains Lanthimos's most vital work, that's because it tempers the gloom with a mischievous play of wit. "The Killing of a Sacred Deer," by contrast, is stubbornly hard to enjoy; there are jokes, but they make few dents in the programmatic rigor of the plot. No one but Lanthimos could adhere so loyally to the classical model of the tragic, yet the result treads close to monotony, and even to a kind of sorrowful sadism—on the whole, I'd rather not watch children, numb below the waist, crawling helplessly downstairs or being hauled along by their hair. Strangest of all is the musical topping and tailing of the film: the "Jesus Christus" from Schubert's "Stabat Mater" in F minor at the beginning, and the mighty opening of Bach's "St. John Passion" at the end. Hang on, are we supposed to regard Steven as a loving God, giving up his child for the salvation of others? In that case, who the hell is Martin?

If your respect for humanity is not entirely crushed by "The Killing of a Sacred Deer," and you want to finish the job, try "The Square," which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes this year. The Swedish director Ruben Östlund, who made the earthshaking "Force Majeure" (2014), about an avalanche in the Alps, now shifts his attention closer to home. The tale unfolds in Stockholm, where a museum curator, Christian

(Claes Bang), maneuvers his exhibits to the forefront of modern art. In his red spectacles and his slimline suits, he cuts a smooth figure, and the movie is designed to deconstruct him. Near the start, he is relieved of his wallet and his phone; two hours later, he is clawing through bags of garbage in the rain.

The title refers to a work that is installed in the museum's courtyard: a small square, set amid the cobblestones, and intended as a sanctuary where all rights are to be respected. Needless to say, its mission is spoiled by the cretinous actions of Christian's media advisers. Other setbacks involve the cones of gravel that are carefully arrayed on a gallery floor and then accidentally vacuumed by one of the cleaners. Much of this is uncomfortable to behold, as is the joyless carnal encounter between the hero and a reporter (Elisabeth Moss), during which a condom is used in a tug of war. Östlund has mastered the business of making you squirm. But the milieu of conceptual art, upheld by wealthy donors, is not exactly the hardest of targets to hit, and any compassionate gestures toward the lower depths of society, with nicely composed shots of the homeless on the street, feel too flimsy to carry critical weight. The best reason to see "The Square" is the remarkable Terry Notary, last seen in "War for the Planet of the Apes." Here he plays a performance artist named Oleg, who brings simian havoc, way beyond his brief, to a glamorous event, roaring and thumping among the tuxedos and the gowns. If only he had done the same at Cannes. ♦

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Richard Brody blogs about movies.

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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

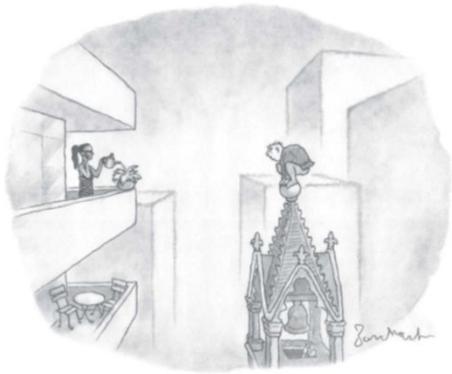
Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Tom Cheney, must be received by Sunday, October 29th. The finalists in the October 16th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the November 13th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



" " .....

### THE FINALISTS

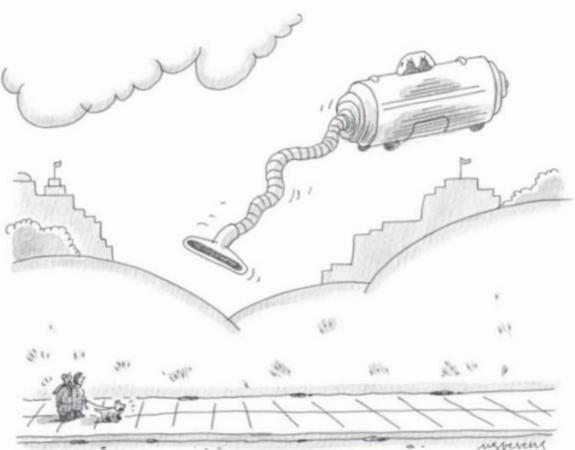


*"The apartment is nice, and I met my neighbor who also works at home."*  
John Campanella, Santa Barbara, Calif.

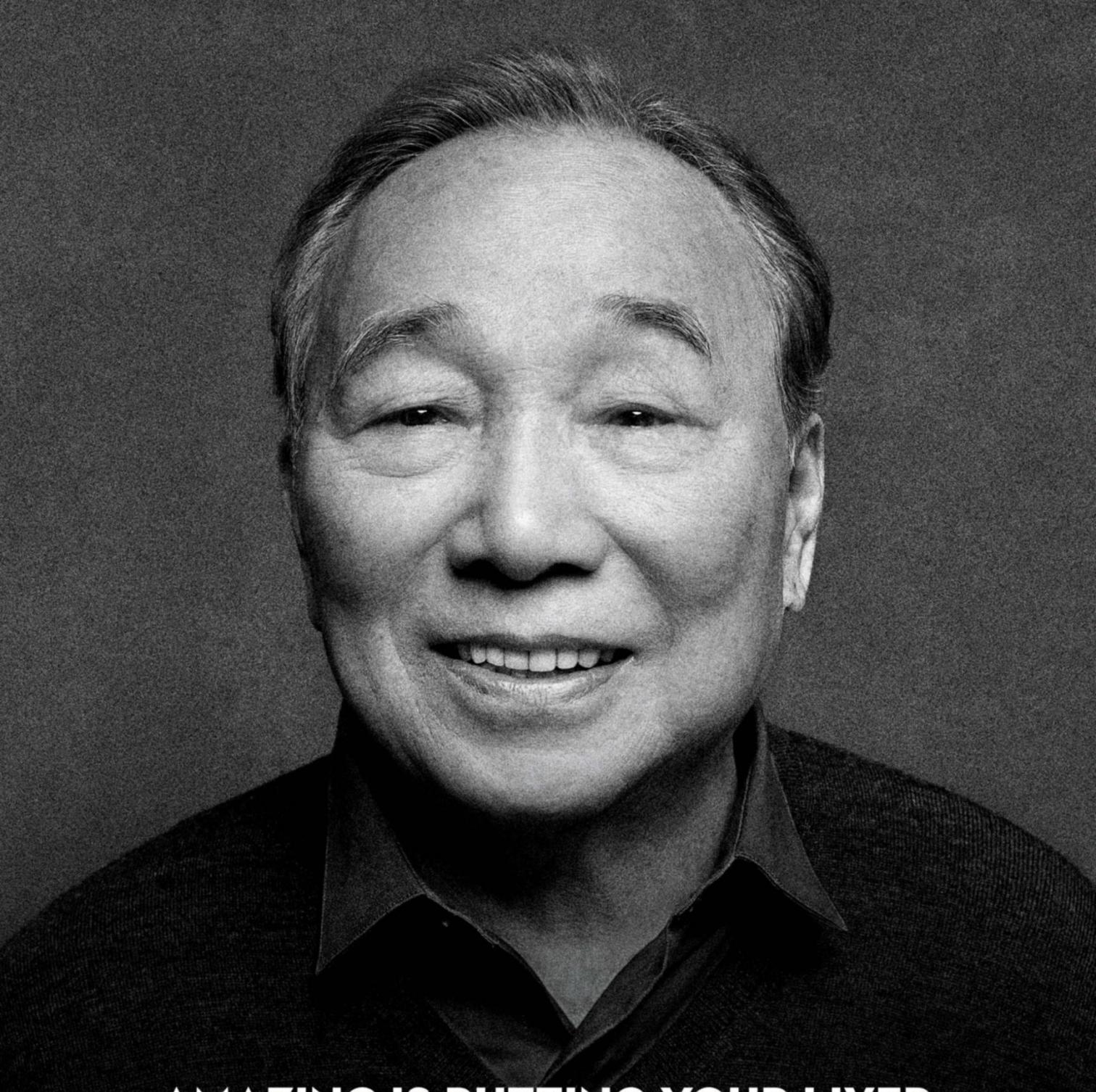
*"Believe it or not, the constant ringing isn't the worst part."*  
Greg Hahn, Brooklyn, N.Y.

*"Like I would date a guy from Notre Dame."*  
John Glenn, Tyler, Texas

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*"I have a feeling they are going to treat us like dirt."*  
Cary Silverstein, Scottsdale, Ariz.



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CAN CHANGE THE  
WORLD, WHAT CAN  
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Malala Yousafzai  
Co-founder of Malala Fund

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