

# The New York Times Magazine

February 19, 2017

Obamacare

Will the Republicans really operate? By Robert Draper





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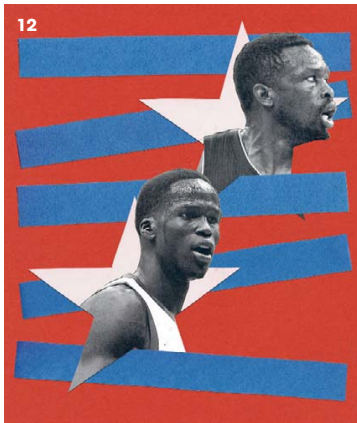
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# The New York Times Magazine

February 19, 2017

- 
- |    |                     |   |                                |
|----|---------------------|---|--------------------------------|
| 9  | <b>First Words</b>  | <b>Only Human</b> Scientists say we've entered the "Anthropocene" — the first geological epoch defined by human impact. But is the only remedy yet more interference? | <i>By Wesley Yang</i>          |
| 12 | <b>On Sports</b>    | <b>A Political Spectrum</b> Should professional athletes be allowed to use their status to talk about things more important than the games they play?                 | <i>By Jay Caspian Kang</i>     |
| 16 | <b>The Ethicist</b> | <b>Vitriol at Home</b> A wife is a Trump zealot. What's a liberal husband to do?  | <i>By Kwame Anthony Appiah</i> |
- 



- 
- |    |                                 |   |                                   |
|----|---------------------------------|---|-----------------------------------|
| 18 | <b>Letter of Recommendation</b> | <b>Presidential Biographies</b> These books don't tell you that everything is going to be O.K., but rather that nothing was ever really O.K. to begin with. | <i>By Alexis Coe</i>              |
| 20 | <b>Diagnosis</b>                | <b>Strange Behavior</b> Why was the 3-year-old so irritable, and what was wrong with her eye?   | <i>By Lisa Sanders, M.D.</i>      |
| 23 | <b>Lives</b>                    | <b>The Cat Named Morphine</b> Allaying suspicions on the Ukrainian front, with some unexpected assistance.  | <i>By Sandor Jaszberenyi</i>      |
| 24 | <b>Eat</b>                      | <b>In Praise of the Prune</b> A frangipane tart that showcases the pleasures of the dried fruit.  | <i>By Tejal Rao</i>               |
| 58 | <b>Talk</b>                     | <b>Marilyn Minter</b> The visual artist and professor finds art in the female form.   | <i>Interview by Jenna Wortham</i> |
- 

**Behind the Cover** Gail Bichler, design director: "We learned that it's tough to amass a large quantity of surgical implements in a short period of time if you're not a doctor, but we proceeded with this cover idea because it seemed to be the perfect metaphor for the threat to Obamacare at the hands of Republicans. We liked the menace and urgency the visual conveyed." Photo illustration by Craig Cutler for The New York Times. Prop styling by Noemi Bonazzi.

- |                       |                             |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| 6 Contributors        | 19 Tip                      |
| 7 The Thread          | 54 Puzzles                  |
| 15 Poem               | 56 Puzzles                  |
| 16 Judge John Hodgman | (Puzzle answers on Page 57) |

# The New York Times Magazine

February 19, 2017

- 
- |           |                                |  |                           |
|-----------|--------------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| <b>26</b> | <b>Going Solo</b>              | Dirty Projectors created one of indie rock's most indelible sounds, built around the collaboration of David Longstreth and Amber Coffman. Now he's reinventing the band without her. | <i>By Jonah Weiner</i>    |
| <b>32</b> | <b>The Obamacare Operation</b> | Republicans spent almost seven years waging a battle to repeal the Affordable Care Act. With President Trump, are they set up for victory, or for a new kind of disappointment?      | <i>By Robert Draper</i>   |
| <b>38</b> | <b>The Age of Rudeness</b>     | As the social contract frays, what does it mean to be polite?  | <i>By Rachel Cusk</i>     |
| <b>44</b> | <b>The Compost King</b>        | What happens to New Yorkers' food scraps after the city takes them? Soon a large fraction will wind up on Long Island, where Charles Vigliotti hopes to turn them into profit.       | <i>By Elizabeth Royte</i> |
- 




**'I'd like to say I had a vision of environmental responsibility, but I saw food composting as a business opportunity.'**

PAGE 44

A composting facility in Yaphank, N.Y. Photograph by Grant Cornett for The New York Times.



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Photographed by Kathy Ryan at *The New York Times* on Feb. 6, 2017, at 3:30 p.m.

## Rachel Cusk

*"The Age of Rudeness,"*  
Page 38

Rachel Cusk is the author of several novels, including "Outline," which was one of the *The Times*'s 10 Best Books of 2015, and most recently "Transit." She has published two memoirs, "A Life's Work: On Becoming a Mother" and "Aftermath: On Marriage and Separation." In 2015, her version of Euripides' "Medea" was staged at the Almeida Theatre in London. This week, Cusk considers the place of rudeness in the wake of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. "This is a fascinating time to examine the fabric of personal and public morality," she says, "and to study the connections and dissonances between who we are and who we say we are."

## Alexis Coe

*Letter of Recommendation,*  
Page 18

Alexis Coe is the author of "Alice+Freda Forever" and a host of the podcast "Presidents Are People Too!" She is writing a biography of George Washington.

## Robert Draper

*"The Obamacare Operation,"*  
Page 32

Robert Draper is a writer at large for the magazine. He last wrote about the formation of Hillary Clinton's political persona.

## Elizabeth Royte

*"The Compost King,"*  
Page 44

Elizabeth Royte is the author of "Bottlemania," "Garbage Land" and "The Tapir's Morning Bath." Her writing has appeared in *Harper's*, *National Geographic* and *Outside*.

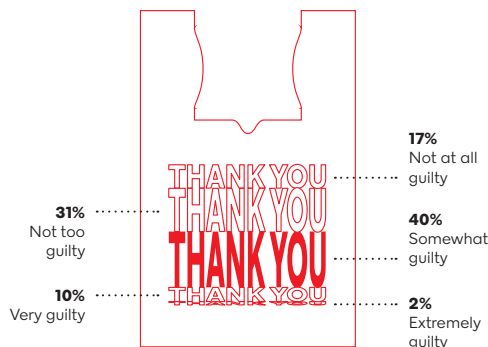
## Jonah Weiner

*"Going Solo,"*  
Page 26

Jonah Weiner is a contributing writer for the magazine and a contributing editor at *Rolling Stone*. He last wrote a Letter of Recommendation about the '90s cartoon "Pinky and the Brain."

## Dear Reader: How Guilty Do You Feel About Your Consumerism?

Every week the magazine publishes the results of a study conducted online in June by *The New York Times*'s research-and-analytics department, reflecting the opinions of 2,563 subscribers who chose to participate. This week's question: *How guilty do you feel about the environmental or social impact of your consumer behavior?*



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Readers respond to the 2.5.2017 issue.

# RE: RUSSELL WESTBROOK

Sam Anderson profiled the idiosyncratic star of the Oklahoma City Thunder.

**Russell Westbrook** is indeed as special as Sam Anderson describes him. I was especially taken with the contrast between his obsessive need for control and adherence to ritual and his behavior on the court. As Anderson writes, “You control the things you can control ... and outside that you fling yourself with wild abandon, every day, at every object that seems worthy of pursuit.” Reading the article, and watching Westbrook ply his craft, I am reminded of what Flaubert said: Be regular and orderly in your life, so that you may be violent and original in your work. Russell Westbrook is a perfect exemplar of this dictum. His work is basketball. He is violent and original in his pursuit of excellence. As they say, awesome.

Elmera Goldberg, New York

**Anderson’s article** was thick with inside-basketball info but thin on any revelations about the “mysteries” of Westbrook. While I recognize Westbrook’s extraordinary athleticism and in-some-ways-unmatched basketball skills, as well as his unique fashion sense, and we learned about his adherence to schedules and a special kind of quirkiness he embraces, I’m afraid we are left with more “mysteries” to unravel. In these days of increased activism among professional athletes about issues like police brutality, Trump’s election, etc., I was disappointed that Anderson apparently didn’t touch on any of those subjects. Perhaps he would

have been rebuffed, but that would have told us something.

Bill Berkowitz, Oakland, Calif.

**Anderson wrote an** incisive, entertaining, informative article about the elusive, obsessed superstar Westbrook, the Oklahoma City Thunder great who breaks records with his consistent, ferocious triple-doubles. The article by Sam Anderson itself was a triple-double.

Rick Edelstein, Los Angeles



# RE: FIRST WORDS

Beverly Gage wrote about opponents of the Trump agenda who gather under the banner of “resistance” — though it’s unclear exactly what that resistance might entail.

**My one quibble** with Beverly Gage’s take on the use of “resistance” as the tactic and rallying cry of those of us who oppose Trump is that she trivializes the motivations of resisters by saying that all we have in common is that we “really don’t like Donald Trump.”

I didn’t like Bill Clinton. I didn’t like George W. Bush. In neither case did I feel the need to resist that I feel with Trump. Neither of them was intent on destroying the very system that elected them. Neither of them elevated a man like Steve Bannon, with deep ties to racists, conspiracy nuts and fringe predictors of the apocalypse. Neither of them got their news from Alex Jones. Neither of them was in the same narcissism league as Trump. Trump presents unique dangers to us all. Resistance is a necessary first step.

Lee Russ, Bennington, Vt.

**Gage writes that** “if you’ve lost at the ballot box,” a liberal cause of resistance is difficult. Hillary Clinton and liberal issues



# THE STORY, ON TWITTER

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did not lose at the ballot box. Almost three million more votes for her were nullified by the way the United States counts votes in a presidential election. Mayors, state legislators and governors can be elected by, at minimum, a plurality of the popular vote. “One person, one vote” applies. This doesn’t work at the presidential level.

Trump is a minority president. I, for one, intend to work for a national popular vote requirement that states must allocate electoral votes to the winner of the popular (that is, the people’s) vote. When that compact is in place, Gage will not have the phrase “an ostensibly democratic system” to describe our great country.

Kathryn E. Allen, Columbia, Mo.

**I know plenty** of people — those who fear losing health insurance, others repelled by racism and so on — who would be keen to join the resistance movement were it not couched as “liberal” or “Democratic.” How about political pundits like Gage instead calling it “Americans Against Trump?”

Then perhaps the threat Donald Trump poses to our country as a thoroughly rotten leader will become just the impetus we need to bring Americans together again as the caring, thinking people we once were.

B. Elizabeth Mina, Oak Island, N.C.



# CORRECTION

An article on Feb. 12 about feminism misstated the month of a speech by Hillary Clinton in which she mentioned the Seneca Falls convention of 1848. The speech was made in June 2016, when she clinched the Democratic nomination for president. It was not made in July, when she formally accepted the nomination.

Send your thoughts to [magazine@nytimes.com](mailto:magazine@nytimes.com).

**‘Hillary Clinton and liberal issues did not lose at the ballot box.’**



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*Scientists say we've entered the 'Anthropocene' — the first geological epoch defined by human impact. But is the only remedy yet more interference? By Wesley Yang*

# Only Human

Perhaps you've noticed, amid the hot invective and dry mockery of daily events in your social-media feeds, reports of the glaciers melting at each pole. Arctic ice cover reached record lows this summer and fall, while in Antarctica, we saw the continuing enlargement of an already massive crack in the region's fourth-largest ice sheet, threatening its continued stability. The year 2016 was the hottest ever recorded, surpassing the previous record in 2015, which had in turn exceeded that of the previous hottest year ever recorded, 2014. Just as the world seemed poised to embark on a collective effort to wean itself off dependency on fossil fuels, its leading power elected as president a man who has claimed that global warming is a conspiracy invented by the Chinese and who went on to select as his secretary of state the chairman of Exxon Mobil. The choices they make will shape the future of all planetary life. ¶ Our inability to connect the day's ephemera with the geological time scale has summoned a striking neologism: the Anthropocene — the "Age of Man." Its meteoric rise is a case study in the stubbornness of the problem that the word was



designed to master. Coined by the atmospheric scientist Paul Crutzen around the year 2000, the word expressed his intuition that humanity had become tantamount to the great forces of nature and that our activities now shaped the state of the systems that regulate the conditions of life. Human-induced impact on the world had become so great, he believed, that we had pushed the planet into a whole new stage of the geological time scale, leaving behind the Holocene epoch, which began 10,000 to 12,000 years ago.

Crutzen and a group of like-minded scientists set about grounding his improvised conceit with empirical findings drawn from various earth sciences: We have dammed half of the world's large rivers, subdued nearly 40 percent of the world's landmass for agricultural use, invented plastics, smelted metals and spread other novel particles of our own devising throughout the world; according to some estimates, 95 percent of the vertebrate biomass on land consists of ourselves, our pets and livestock bred to our specifications and raised mostly in enormous industrialized monocultures. The concept of the Anthropocene is that, in the distant future, these changes will be legible in the record preserved in the earth: in ice cores, in sediment, in fossils, everywhere.

Last August, a working group within the International Commission on Stratigraphy issued a recommendation that the wider body formally designate the end of the Holocene epoch and declare the Anthropocene a reality. The question arose of whether these scientists were doing science at all or making a political statement. (After all, geological epochs are generally named millions of years after they end.) This leaves the effort to fix the meaning of the Anthropocene in stratigraphical terms still inconclusive.

It also leaves it feeling rather irrelevant. For in the meantime, the word has slipped free of its original intentions, diffusing rapidly throughout academia and slowly trickling into the consciousness of the mainstream press. Part of the Anthropocene's appeal was the sound of the word itself: portentous, stately, vaguely Latinate, imbued with a dark majesty. Another part of its appeal was its capaciousness — large enough to swallow the whole planet and everything that

lives on it. Crutzen wished to capture the imagination and frame the world in a word that would create urgency around the issue of climate change and other slow-building dangers accruing to the earth. But the risk was always that the word would capture the imagination all too well and become more like a summons to further heroic exertions to remake the world in our own image.

In Diane Ackerman's 2014 book, "The Human Age: The World Shaped by Us," the author declares herself "enormously hopeful" at the start of the Anthropocene. She goes on to chronicle, in a mood of excited ambivalence, the good and the bad: "a scary mass extinction of animals" and "alarming signs of climate change" but also a number of promising "revolutions" in sustainability, manufacturing, biomimicry and nanotechnology. The novelist Roy Scranton, in his short 2015 polemic, "Learning to Die in the Anthropocene," calls on us to abandon

**Part of the name's appeal was its capaciousness — large enough to swallow the whole planet and everything that lives on it.**

false hope in the "toxic, cannibalistic and self-destructive" system of carbon-based capitalism and to "learn to die not as individuals, but as a civilization." And Jedediah Purdy, author of the 2015 tract "After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene," contrives to see opportunity in the crisis. Though he acknowledges that humanity presently lacks the political institutions to act collectively on a global scale, he allows himself the hope that a new politics will arise that will be "democratic in the double sense of thoroughly politicizing nature's future and recognizing the imperative of political equality among the people who will together create that future." Whatever else our posterity may come to lack, it will not suffer from a dearth of grand invective or sonorous incantation.

While humanists have bent the Anthropocene to serve their own purposes, technologists have turned what began as a call for radical austerity into a renewed push





for significant technological advances. The Israeli writer and historian Yuval Harari's book "Homo Deus," published this month in the United States, makes the case that the 21st century will see an effort "to upgrade humans into Gods" who will take over biological evolution, replacing chance with intelligent design oriented around our desires. By merging with our technologies, humans could be released from the biases that plague our cognition, free to exercise the meticulous planning and invention required to save the planet from ourselves.

Harari's book is the closest thing we have to a single-volume account of the techno-futurist vision favored by our Silicon Valley elites — his work has been cited by Bill Gates and Mark Zuckerberg — and it is as uneasily poised at the juncture of standard history and science fiction, of sober analysis and mad prophecy, of nightmare and utopia, as we ourselves have come to be. The book's ruthless appropriation of the Anthropocene will almost certainly be regarded as an obscenity by those who first rallied around it, a celebration of the very hubris that brought us to the brink of destruction in the first place. Unwinding the damage we've done to the earth now represents a challenge so enormous that it forces us to dream about fantastical powers, to set about creating them and in the process either find our salvation or hasten our demise.

Right around the time that we confirmed that the sixth great extinction had already begun, scientists discovered Crispr, which is bacterial DNA that can be manipulated to edit genes and perhaps to bring back extinct species or to invent new forms of biological life. The Harvard biologist George Church is leading an attempt to transform an elephant's genome into that of a woolly mammoth, one of many such "de-extinction" projects. One purpose is to show that such feats are possible, to demonstrate that humanity can reverse a sentence as final as extinction. But the ultimate goal, Church has said, is to release the beasts into the permafrost, which they can save by trampling the shrubbery that would otherwise break it up in a warming climate — helping to preserve, at least for a while, the conditions that gave rise to humanity in the first place. ♦



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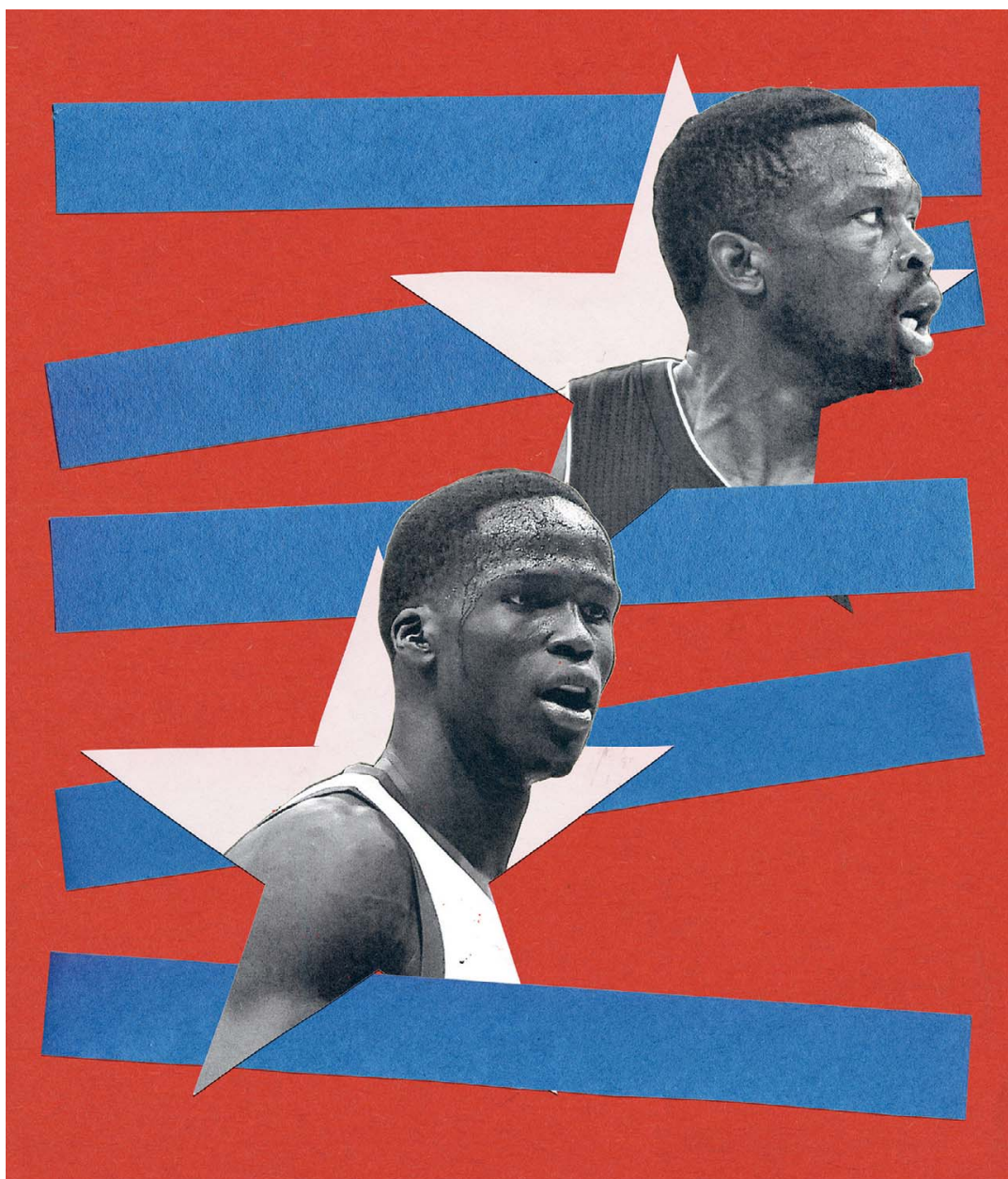
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# Should professional athletes be allowed to use their status to talk about things more important than the games they play?



For the past few months, the sports media has been embroiled in a fight over “stick to sports.” The phrase comes from a common online rebuke directed at sportswriters and pundits and players and coaches and anyone in the world of sports, really, who takes a political stance on anything that doesn’t occur on a field or a court or in a locker room or front office. The dividing line is predictable: Many jocks and traditionalists argue for a separation of church and state; many young fans say that sports, just like everything else, *is* politics. But as the sports media critic Bryan Curtis has pointed out in *The Ringer*, the debate is mostly moot now: Trump’s presidency, with its daily explosions, has made it impossible to cover pro sports, even in the simplest box-score ways, without detouring onto the White House lawn. This comes, in part, from the way basic sports coverage works. Reporters ask questions before and after every game, and when the only thing anyone wants to talk about is Trump, some of those questions will be about the president.

In the past, a paradoxical yet symbiotic relationship generally characterized whatever relationship existed between sports and politics. The big American leagues, especially the N.F.L. and Major League Baseball, gave every indication of wanting to distance themselves from partisan frictions. They typically prefer to honor troops, fly fighter jets over stadiums and hold moments of silence to honor the victims of tragedies. When they tackle overtly political issues, it’s through selective editing and legacy building. The settled politics of the past, where details can be kept few and the tone nostalgic, are fine. We know, for example, that Jackie Robinson broke baseball’s color line, stole home and wore 42 on his back. Muhammad Ali championed equality and said some funny stuff to Howard Cosell. Billie Jean King beat Bobby Riggs. Their lionization reassures us that the stands they took were good — and can now be consigned to bygone eras.

But the latest intrusion of political talk into sports — whether you deem it excessive or welcome — has had a drastic effect on coverage. It has brought with it a currency and immediacy that we haven’t seen since the ’60s and early ’70s, when athletes like Jim Brown, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar and Curt Flood openly talked about civil rights. The day the White House declared its immigration and travel ban in January,

Thon Maker: Stacy Revere/Getty Images; Luol Deng: Manuela Davies/Getty Images.





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# Navigate the uncertain waters of the migrant crisis.

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the Milwaukee Bucks played the Toronto Raptors in Canada, and there was some concern that the Bucks' rookie center, Thon Maker, would not be let back into the United States after the game: Maker is a citizen of Australia, but his family emigrated there from Sudan. The day after the game, Alex Lasry, a Bucks executive and the son of one of the team's owners, tweeted: "I appreciate all the fans' concerns and prayers for Thon. And today a Sudanese refugee who fled oppression and is an incredible young man will make his second N.B.A. start. I'm incredibly excited and proud of him. He's a symbol of what makes America great and all immigrants believe about America."

Maker was directly affected by Trump's policies (though he re-entered the United States without problem), and his

teammates, fellow players and coaches in the N.B.A. publicized their support. This was not surprising, given the N.B.A.'s wealth of international players and its cosmopolitan fan base; in recent years, the league has encouraged its stars to speak out on matters important to them. More unexpected was the Super Bowl's inability to avoid the fray. During this year's prime-time media day, usually a hollow parading of the players before the microphones and cameras, Tom Brady's continued refusal to talk about his presidential friend was big news. Brady had been ignoring these questions for almost a year and a half now, ever since reporters saw a red "Make America Great Again" hat in his locker, but he finally gave in. All he could muster was: "What's going on in the world? I haven't paid much attention. I'm just a positive person."

**Jay Caspian Kang**  
is a writer at large for  
the magazine.

Brady's ham-handed elisions were hardly surprising — he, perhaps more than any athlete since Tiger Woods, has doggedly confronted us with his right to never publicly say anything interesting to anyone. But the fact that his act hasn't quite kept the inquisitors at bay suggests that the days of Woods, Derek Jeter and Michael Jordan just grinning through any edgy conversation are over, at least for now. Athletes, especially famous ones, are less likely to be left to stand alone as ciphers of sporting excellence. Their images will be shaded by their politics, even if these have to be assigned to them. And as players continue to be asked about their political beliefs by reporters — especially as the international players in basketball and baseball are prompted to talk about immigration — they have an opportunity to give voice

Tom Brady: Bob Levey/Getty Images

to resistance. If they want a model, they should look toward the W.N.B.A., whose players have been exemplifying thoughtful political expression. Last summer, the W.N.B.A. fined several players for wearing black T-shirts in support of Black Lives Matter at pregame practices; following the next game after the fine was announced, some players refused to discuss basketball, instead using the postgame news conference to talk about police shootings. (The W.N.B.A. rescinded the fines soon after.) Last month, Breanna Stewart, the league's reigning Rookie of the Year, attended the airport protest at LAX.

Stephen Curry, arguably the world's most popular basketball player, may be following the W.N.B.A. lead. After the chief executive of Under Armour recently referred to Trump as a "great asset" for the country, Curry, whose endorsement deal with the company runs through 2024, said, "There is no amount of money, there is no platform I wouldn't jump off, if it wasn't in line with who I am." Perhaps more than any other N.B.A. star lately, Curry has tended to project a charming blandness, but in putting his sponsorships and money at risk — however improbable the prospect of his losing any — he went further than most outspoken athletes.

In the week following the Super Bowl, at least six Patriots players — including Martellus Bennett and Devin McCourty, who earlier in the season raised fists in solidarity with Colin Kaepernick's national-anthem protest — said they would not make the traditional victory visit to the White House. (Brady went to Washington after his first three championships, when George W. Bush was president, but skipped the fourth trip during the Obama presidency.) "I was a black man yesterday, and I'm going to be a black man tomorrow," Bennett tweeted in response to the predictable storm his announcement kicked up from the "stick to sports" crowd. "My wife and daughter are women today and will be women tomorrow." The Patriots absent from the White House photo op will be the most conspicuous part of what usually is a goofy, perfunctory moment in the N.F.L.'s off-season, and reporters will reach out to them for comment, which will provide another occasion for criticism.

Those athletes who do speak out might find a curiously receptive ear in the White House. Let's remember that Trump, perhaps even more than his

**'I was a black man yesterday, and I'm going to be a black man tomorrow.'**

basketball-obsessed predecessor, is a sports fan. He owned a team in the United States Football League (while almost single-handedly running the league into the ground); he hosted fights at his Atlantic City casinos; he tried to buy the Buffalo Bills; he brags about his friendship with Brady. Above all, he has shown a crippling

sensitivity to the opinions of his fellow celebrities. Professional sports usually provides a poor, inaccurate reflection of politics, but sometimes elements of that imagery — the machismo, the posturing, the adoration of stars — align exactly. Jocks, if nothing else, know how to get the president's attention. ♦

Poem Selected by Matthew Zapruder

*The most recent collection by Susan Firer, former poet laureate of the city of Milwaukee, is shadowed by the sudden loss of her husband, the poet and writer Jim Hazard. Yet the book is far from gloomy. Through instinctive, intuitive observation and juxtaposition, familiar objects are revealed to be alive with meaning. In this poem, the narrator tells us how she taped the word "glisten," which means sparkle or glitter, where she will see it in her everyday life — as if to remind her of possibility, and to preserve things so they can "live long in the winds of poems."*



## Repetition Works for the Moon

By Susan Firer

Hopscotch breath, the empire of skin,  
I am around me, even in threshold nights.  
Small little word "glisten," it's you  
I today Scotch-taped into my medicine cabinet.  
(Things live long in the winds of poems.)  
Did you know that the sun has a brother  
star, a sibling, a sibling star — sun's brother star?  
Are you like Napoleon? Do you, while bathing,  
make others read to you?  
"Galaxies pass through each other, like ghosts,"  
safeboxing our collective prequel. Pieces  
of me in the trees, make way  
for those moving on. Shiver.  
A stitch nearer god, I chase  
the Burger King crown  
blowing down the empty early  
morning's snowy street.

Matthew Zapruder is the author of four poetry collections and "Why Poetry," coming from Ecco. He teaches poetry at Saint Mary's College of California and is editor at large at Wave Books. Susan Firer is the author of six poetry collections, including "The Transit of Venus," published last year by the Backwaters Press.





# My Wife Is a Trump Zealot. What's a Liberal to Do?

*My wife and I have been married for more than 30 years. We have always had political differences — she leans right, while I lean left — but that has never prevented us from amicably discussing politics. However, all this changed during the recent presidential campaign, and particularly after the election of Donald Trump. She has become an ardent, nearly fanatical Trump supporter, reacting to any criticism of him, no matter how benign, with vitriol. She now says she “hates” all liberals, all Democrats and, particularly, Barack Obama.*

*I am weary — and frightened — of her diatribes and no longer bring up any Trump-related topic. But she frequently does. Is it ethical for me to remain silent when she goes off on “whining liberals” and “sore losers,” occasionally nodding, when that might be interpreted as assent?*

Name Withheld

**Marriage doesn't** depend on agreement, as James Carville and Mary Matalin would tell us, and few marriages would survive an insistence on complete like-mindedness. What seems unattractive in your wife's position is not so much her political opinions as her intolerance of those, including you, who don't share them. These people aren't just misguided, in her view; they are a category of person, and an odious one.

What that means for you is that, at least in the domain of politics, she does

not think you are worthy of respect — a sentiment that, given the weariness and fright you report, is plainly reciprocated. Marriage with someone for whom you have little respect is, no doubt, a common-enough circumstance. But it lacks something important. Clamming up when she holds forth means that you're moving in that direction.

It has been said that a liberal is someone who won't take his own side in an argument. Yet part of what's valuable in marital love is honesty about the things that matter. Among those things is that your wife regards people with views like yours as simply contemptible, when they are not. For both of your sakes, take your side. You didn't marry a vitriolic zealot, but now you find that you're sharing a home with one. Ethics, in the end, is about living a good life. In that sense, your wife's behavior poses an ethical challenge. Let her know.

*I have been seeing my boyfriend for two years and have known him for four. He was born in Saudi Arabia, attended college in the United States and has used the time away from his family to explore his own thoughts and beliefs. I have a great deal of respect for him, and I love him deeply.*

*My parents, brother and friends have all shared with me that he's a “keeper” and that I'm a lucky girl, which I agree with. My boyfriend is estranged from his family after 15 years in the United States. He chooses not to communicate with them often to avoid discussing his atheism. But he still worries he is a disappointment to them,*

*because of the pressure on him, as the oldest son, to be something he is not.*

*A few months ago, we attended a family member's memorial service, and we saw my father's brother and wife. I am not fond of my uncle and aunt. They hadn't met my boyfriend yet because I had chosen not to introduce him to them. When I introduced him to my aunt, she said, “I'm watching you.” We were both confused; I asked her what that meant. She replied, “He knows what I'm talking about,” and she walked away. We laughed it off as some kind of familial attempt to protect me from a broken heart.*

*A week later, I mentioned it on the phone to my dad. He paused, then told me he was hoping she wouldn't say anything. He said that he had gone to dinner with my aunt and uncle a year ago, and they began grilling him about my boyfriend. He said that they wanted to know what his citizenship status was. Upon learning he was not an American citizen, they went on a long rant about how he was playing me, that he was just trying to get a green card from me through marriage. My dad told me that he defended me and my boyfriend and asked that they keep their opinions to themselves.*

*I decided to opt out of holiday celebrations with those relatives because I couldn't imagine spending time in their home, let alone subjecting my boyfriend to their hate. Leading up to the holiday, my dad repeatedly told me I was making it hard on him, that I was putting him in a difficult position. I later found out that he lied to my aunt and told her I couldn't attend because I had to work.*



## Bonus Advice From Judge John Hodgman

Mary writes: My boyfriend and I are preparing for chip-and-dip-a-palooza for the Super Bowl and are debating whether Cheetos and Funyuns are chips. He says yes. I say no.

-----  
I regret I didn't see this in time to prevent whatever madness occurred at your party, but obviously the answer is no, for reasons both intrinsic and practical. Even if you were to end civilization by shoving these nonchips into dips, you would fail. You might drag a Cheeto through a salsa, but no way is a Funyun going to come out of any sour-cream-based dip intact. That said, I confess a perverse curiosity about carefully spreading onion dip on a Funyun. In fact, I order your boyfriend to do this and then eat it with a knife and fork as punishment. Because what he is doing is norm-violating gaslighting, and you should get far away from him.

To submit a query: Send an email to [ethicist@nytimes.com](mailto:ethicist@nytimes.com); or send mail to The Ethicist, The New York Times Magazine, 620 Eighth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10018. (Include a daytime phone number.)

*I'm worried that at future family gatherings, my dad will take his frustration with his sister-in-law out on me and my boyfriend. I'm also concerned that my boyfriend will consider ending our relationship to "protect" me. What course of action should I take for future interactions with this side of my family?*

Name Withheld, Michigan

**So your aunt** and uncle have concluded that a foreign national who is in a relationship with an American is simply looking for a green card, even though they know nothing else about him. This smacks of bigotry. Anti-Arab prejudice isn't uncommon in this country, as we've been reminded lately, and I'm sorry that it seems to be present in your family. If your father has a complaint, it's with his brother and sister-in-law. I'd tell your family, including your aunt and uncle, the truth: You love this man, and you won't be coming to family gatherings with your aunt and uncle unless they agree to be courteous to him. It's not much to ask.

*Is it wrong to read my child's diary? My daughter, 9, expresses her innermost thoughts, concerns, fears, hopes for her future, friend/school issues and self-reflections in a diary. I feel it is important to read it, so I can frame a guiding narrative to boost her confidence, assuage her fears, minimize and redirect negative habits, provide encouragement. Even though my intentions are pure, maybe it's wrong to invade her privacy. Is there an age range at which reading a diary is appropriate and an age when it becomes inappropriate?*

Theresa, New York

**The only reason** her diary opens a window onto her soul is that she doesn't know you're reading it. There's an element of deception here, then. Whatever the age is that you're planning to stop your snooping, she's going to be pretty mad when she finds out, and with reason. Children have survived to maturity for a couple of hundred thousand years without their parents invading their innermost thoughts. It can't be necessary. Leave her diary alone. ♦

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**Kwame Anthony Appiah** teaches philosophy at N.Y.U. He is the author of "Cosmopolitanism" and "The Honor Code: How Moral Revolutions Happen."

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# Presidential Biographies

By Alexis Coe



**Late last year** I started reading a biography of Chester A. Arthur. Quickly, I began to feel as if I'd wandered into the plot of a Philip K. Dick novel, or succumbed to an especially unnerving fever dream. The book, by Zachary Karabell, tells the story of a deeply unpopular and untrustworthy New Yorker who, against all odds, achieves the presidency. Arthur, a mutton-chopped emblem of the political-patronage culture of the day, was never even elected to the highest office.

His ascent was made possible by Charles J. Guiteau, the man who gunned down President James Garfield in a railroad station, thus promoting Arthur from the vice presidency.

To contemporaries, the situation seemed dire. Arthur's administration surely would be defined by unprecedented greed and corruption, full of woefully underqualified appointees lacking any experience in government. Even the most optimistic American could hardly

A sample from the author's collection of presidential biographies.

have imagined that Arthur's presidency would be a success.

But as I continued reading, I was astonished to discover that Arthur redeemed himself. He championed civil-service reform, hobbling the "spoils system" with which he had been so closely associated. He restored faith in the presidency, and faith in what the presidency can restore in its occupants. "No man ever entered the presidency so profoundly and widely distrusted as Chester Alan Arthur," wrote

the Gilded Age journalist Alexander K. McClure, “and no one ever retired ... more generally respected, alike by political friend and foe.”

I finished the biography in late 2016, but found myself still carrying it with me as Donald J. Trump prepared to take office. I wasn’t rereading it, not exactly. Sometimes, when my dog lingered by a particularly intriguing tree, I’d open it up to a passage I’d marked. Other times, it served as a base for my phone, as if it were in conversation with the disquieting tweets I scrolled through. And during those notably edgy moments in late January, I’d hold onto it tight, like a security blanket, or just want it nearby, so that I could occasionally tap on it like a talisman.

As an American historian, I’ve long relied on presidential biographies for edification and pleasure. If I’m using biographies to write a book or an essay, I have them propped up on a stand, next to my highlighters, pencils, Post-it Notes and paper clips. But now my work doubles as an antidepressant; these books are rife with the kind of horrors that led half of the country to believe, at any given time, that they were living out the end of the American experiment.

I now surround myself with presidential biographies the way I would tissues if I had the flu. There’s a stack of them next to my bed, a few by the front door and some more next to the couch. You’ll spot them on my windowsill and dining-room table, above the fridge and in my bathroom. They’re hidden around my car, and just this morning I remembered that I’d tucked a small published conference paper on George Washington’s nationalism into the interior pocket of my North Face puffy jacket. This obsession comes with a physical cost. The tomes make the straps of my bag dig painfully into my shoulder. Even the slenderest of biographies from the Arthur Schlesinger presidential series runs around 200 pages, and a Ron Chernow joint will push past 800.

There are other costs, too. Having found some solace in these countless moments of national resilience amid chaos, I find myself constantly pushing these biographies onto others, believing in their therapeutic powers, and replacing my own copies time and again. Calvin Coolidge had a major depressive episode and basically checked out, I texted a worried friend — but we survived, I added, asking for her address. F.D.R. was

#### Chester A. Arthur ...

- was known as the “Dude President.”
- had no vice president.
- sold 24 wagonloads of White House furniture in a yard sale.
- kept his kidney disease a secret; it killed him when he was just a year and a half out of office.

an aristocrat before he contracted polio, I told another over drinks, reluctantly sliding over a well-worn volume about how suffering transformed him. Ronald Reagan tried and failed to do away with the Energy and Education Departments, I told an acquaintance who teaches English.

I was lugging around a thick George H. W. Bush book a few months ago when I decided, on the walk to an event where I’d be speaking, against reading from the biography and instead to read a segment I’d written for my podcast, “Presidents Are People, Too!” The event’s hosts quickly cued up a recent photo of Bush and his wife, which shone behind me as I read a letter George wrote about Barbara in 1943. The audience howled at the line “she is so very young and so darn attractive.” But they might have laughed harder at the concerned email he wrote to his

eldest granddaughters when they were off on spring break, shortly after he came across what he called the “‘Wild College Women’ TV show.”

Presidential biographies don’t tell you that everything is going to be O.K., but rather that nothing was ever really O.K. to begin with. And yet, for hundreds of years, Americans have not only survived heartbreaking, backbreaking periods but also stood tall in them. My advice, for these divisive times, is to find the perspective that history gives us. The next time you feel anxious or incensed, or even if you feel hopeful and gratified, turn off the television. Close your laptop. Silence your phone. Go ahead and put it screen-side down for the rest of the evening. Instead, choose to hang out with the likes of President Chester A. Arthur: It’s good for your health. ♦

Tip By Jaime Lowe

## How to Discover a Species



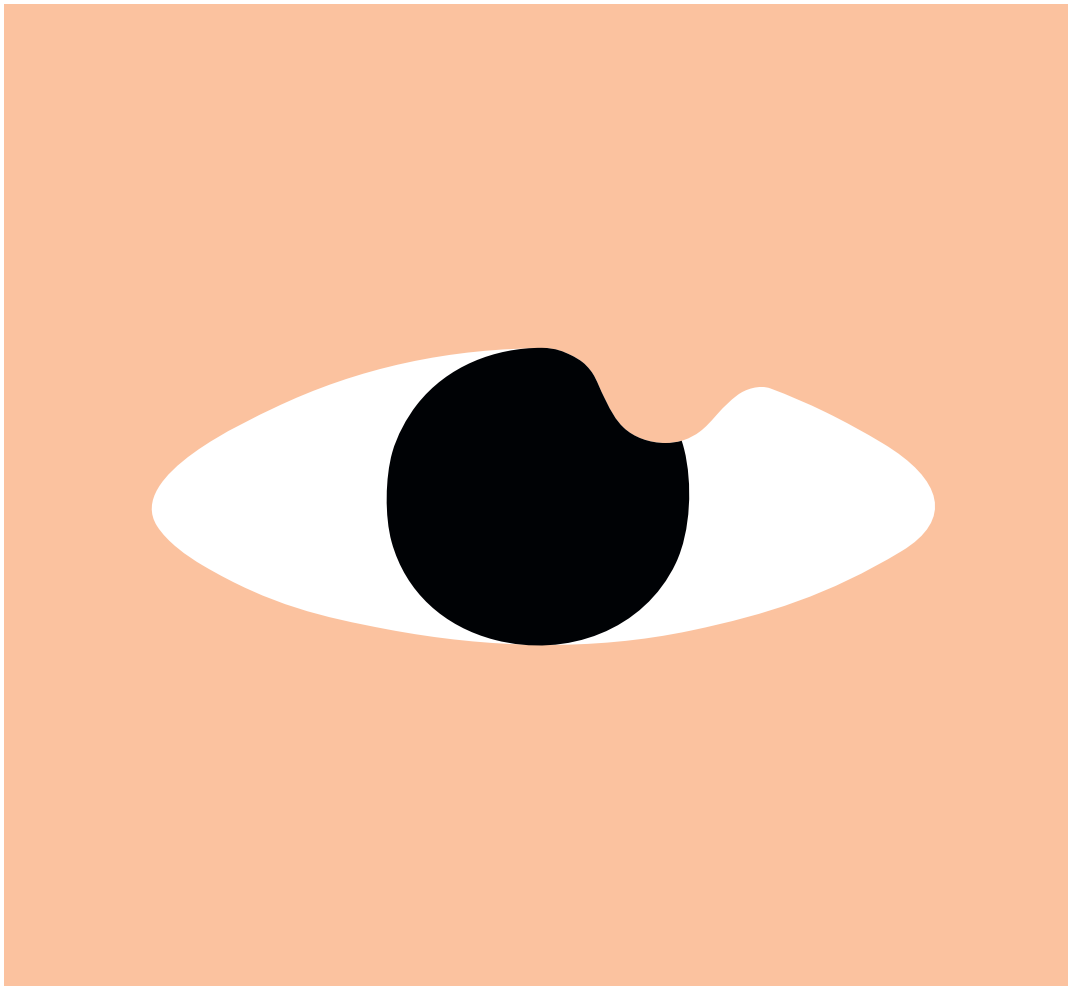
“Go to a place that is known to be poorly sampled — a place that not enough people have gone to actually collect things or a place that harbors a rich diversity of organisms,” says José C. E. Mendoza, curator of crabs at the Lee Kong Chian Natural History Museum in Singapore. “I go to tropical marine areas, like coral reefs or the deep sea — any place that has water.” Look in nooks; turn over rocks. Mendoza says that for him, “the best time to go is at night, when the crabs are usually more active.” Academic settings offer another kind of environment in which to go hunting. “A lot of new species are found in museum collections — samples that have remained unstudied and unsorted and no one knows what to call them until a person comes in to name them.”

Sort your samples into categories based on identifying characteristics like claws or reproductive structures. “You might look at teeth, the length of legs, the carapace,” Mendoza says. Compare these features with those of known species. Once you have what might be a new and undescribed species, go through the scientific literature rigorously and compare your specimen with those stored in museums to make sure it hasn’t already been identified.

When you are convinced you have discovered a new species, it’s time to come up with a name (a step that is formalized when you publish your discovery in a reputable scientific journal). This practice began with Carolus Linnaeus in the 18th century. “A new species is given a two-part scientific name — genus name and scientific epithet — following the established system of classification,” Mendoza says. He recently turned to the world of Harry Potter for a new crab species (*Harryplax severus*), and in naming others — there have been 30 or so — he has drawn inspiration from mentors and personal heroes like the Filipino nationalist and polymath José Rizal. “It’s really the only creative part of the process,” Mendoza says. “I named a species after my wife. It’s a really nice crab with a nice pattern and was really colorful — her name is *Xanthias joanneae*. I thought it was a very pretty crab, and I had just gotten married, and it was for her, after all her patience.” ♦



# Why was the 3-year-old so irritable, and what was wrong with her eye?



The 3-year-old girl was having a very bad day — a bad week, really. She'd been angry and irritable, screaming and kicking at her mother over nothing. Her mother was embarrassed by this unusual behavior, because her husband's sister, Amber Bard, was visiting. Bard, a third-year medical student at Michigan State, was staying in the guest room while working with a local medical practice in Grand Rapids so that she could spend a little time with her niece.

The behavior was strange, but the mother was more concerned about her child's left eye. A few days earlier it was red and bloodshot. It no longer was, but now the girl had little bumps near the eye.

The mother asked Bard whether she could look at the eye. "I'm a third-year medical student," Bard told her. "I know approximately nothing." But Bard was happy to try. She turned to the girl, who immediately averted her face. "Can you show me your eye?" she asked. The girl shouted: "No! No, no, no!" Eventually Bard was able to coax her into allowing her a quick look at the eye.

She saw a couple of tiny pimples along the lower lid, near the lashes, and a couple more just next to the eye. The eye itself wasn't red; the lid wasn't swollen. She couldn't see any discharge.



## Turning to the Computer

Once the child was in bed, Bard opened her laptop and turned to a database she'd been using for the past week when she started to see patients. Called VisualDx, it's one of a dozen or so programs known as decision-support software, designed to help doctors make a diagnosis. This one focuses mostly on skin findings.

Bard made a list of all the eye diseases she could think of. She looked up pink eye (conjunctivitis). The eyes on the screen were bloodshot and the lashes were crusty, unlike her niece's. She typed in blepharitis, an inflammatory infection of the eyelid. The pictures showed lids with red and swollen edges, again very different from her niece's. Nor did it look like a sty, which is an infection of the oil gland of the eye.



## A Clue in a Cold Sore?

The family had just come back from vacation in Michigan's Upper Peninsula. Could this be poison ivy or some other

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## CASE STUDY

# How advanced genomic testing helped Christine Bray fight cancer

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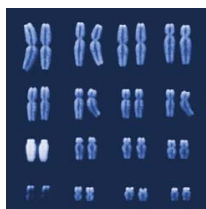
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"Dr. Chura had a grand vision in mind. His goal was to get me healthy again. He explained that genomic testing actually looks at the DNA of the cancer, and then based on what they find, they may be able to more effectively attack the cancer."

Dr. Justin Chura remarked, "With ovarian cancer, remissions tend to get shorter and shorter.

In Christine's case we found a genomic mutation we could exploit, and we've given her one of the longest remissions she's had.

"It's wonderful to have Christine where she is now, living a normal life with her family. Our treatments have improved her quality of life."

Christine said, "I used to be always in fear, waiting for the ball to drop again. Now I feel more hopeful. I love running around with my girls. I love being goofy with them. I love reading stories to them. I love our family doing things we've never been able to do before."

**No case is typical. You should not expect to experience these results.**



**Christine Bray**  
Virginia  
Metastatic ovarian cancer



**Justin Chura, MD**  
CTCA® in Philadelphia

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kind of contact dermatitis? She found pictures that looked similar to the girl's eye, but she wasn't rubbing it the way she would if it were itchy.

Earlier, the mother mentioned in passing that she herself had a cold sore on her lip earlier that month. It was gone now, but could the herpes virus — the cause of cold sores — have infected the skin on the child's face? Bard had never heard of anyone getting a cold sore on their eye. She searched an image database for "herpes virus" and "eye" and promptly found a picture showing a cluster of tiny clear blisters. That wasn't exactly what the girl had. The girl's looked more like pimples.

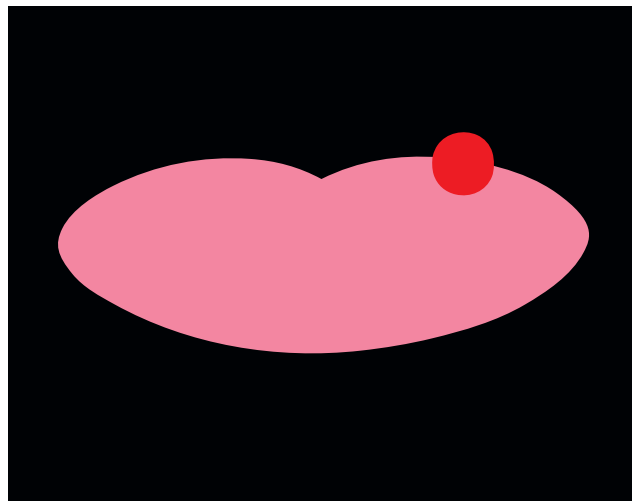
Still, as Bard read up on the virus that causes cold sores, herpes simplex 1, she began to worry. The virus can infect the eye, causing what's known as herpes keratitis, which if left untreated can cause permanent damage to the eye. It is the most common infectious cause of blindness in the United States and much of the rest of the world. While it is easiest to spread through direct contact between an open blister and the skin, herpes can be transmitted even when there is no sore visible.

↓

#### A Dangerous Kiss

Bard wasn't sure this was what the child had, and she was reluctant to suggest that her sister-in-law might have infected her child. At her office that day, she asked her colleagues whether they had ever seen herpes transmitted to the eye by a kiss. None had. It was theoretically possible but rare, she was told. But of all the diseases she saw online, this was the only one that carried real risk. After work, she explained her concern to her sister-in-law. If the infection is only on the eyelid, it's probably fine, but if the eye is affected, she'll need to be treated. The key symptoms to watch for were light sensitivity or watery eyes.

The mother decided to take the child to the pediatrician the next day, a Friday. At the office, the doctor listened carefully as the mother described the girl's eye and her recent behavior. She asked if they could be linked. Unlikely, the doctor told her. Then she examined the child. The eye itself looked fine, the doctor said, and her vision wasn't affected. The little sores around the eye seemed to be healing. There was no need for any testing or



**'Turn the light off, Mommy!' the young girl shrieked. 'It's hurting my eyes.'**

**Lisa Sanders, M.D.**  
is a contributing writer  
for the magazine  
and the author of "Every  
Patient Tells a Story:  
Medical Mysteries and  
the Art of Diagnosis."

treatment at this point, she said.

The mother asked about herpes. Could this be from my cold sore? That also seemed unlikely, the doctor replied. The mother asked if she could test the girl anyway. Bard had been so insistent that the child be tested that the mother was determined to push for it if she had to. But the doctor readily agreed to the test and quickly swabbed the center of each sore to send for a culture.

Both the mother and Bard were initially reassured by the pediatrician's lack of concern. But that changed over the weekend. First, the grandmother noticed that the girl's left eyelid seemed to droop when she smiled. Then, when the mother turned on a light by the bed one morning, the girl covered her eyes. "Turn the light off, Mommy!" she shrieked. "It's hurting my eyes."

↓

#### Unexpected Results

Early Monday morning, the pediatrician's office called. The child's eye was infected with herpes. She needed to see an ophthalmologist right away. The specialist examined the child's eye and found a tiny sore on the white part. She was immediately started on acyclovir, an antiviral medication effective in treating the herpes virus.

More than two-thirds of all the people on the planet test positive for antibodies to this herpes virus. It is far more

common than its close cousin, herpes simplex 2, which usually infects the genitals. Both diseases attack the nerves of the skin, causing a cluster of small, painful blisters that form, rupture and crust over before disappearing. After the lesion heals, no matter where it started, the virus travels up the nerve to hide in the spine or brain. There it can remain in a dormant state, causing neither pain nor infection. But for reasons that are not well understood, most people will have episodes in which the virus awakens and travels back down the nerve to the skin, where it develops into a lesion in more or less the same spot.

↓

#### Recurrence

It took another couple of weeks, but the little girl's eye healed. And the child went back to her usual, good-humored self. The mother assumed that her daughter's cranky, defiant behavior was a reaction to the infection. Her hypothesis was confirmed a few months later when the child began to act up again. A couple of days later, her mother noticed two tiny blisters next to her daughter's left eye. She immediately called the ophthalmologist and sent her photographs. The doctor restarted the girl on acyclovir and again the lesions cleared up. In a follow-up exam, the eye doctor confirmed that her vision was still undamaged. It's most likely, however, that she will have other recurrences in the future.

As for Bard, she is thrilled with her first diagnostic success, though she credits the decision-support software she used. In fact, a study published in 2011, and conducted at U.C.L.A.-Harbor Medical Center and University of Rochester Strong Memorial Hospital, showed that physicians using VisualDx were four times more likely to suggest the correct diagnosis for patients admitted to the hospital for serious infections than those who didn't use it. Without VisualDx, admitting physicians made diagnostic errors 28 percent of the time.

Despite such evidence of the effectiveness of diagnostic-support software, studies show that doctors rarely use it. The reasons given for the slow adoption are many and varied, but there is some evidence that younger doctors are embracing this technology more quickly than their older, grayer peers. ♦

# The Cat Named Morphine

Allaying suspicions on the Ukrainian front, with some unexpected assistance.

By Sandor Jaszberenyi

Several months ago, my editor sent me to the Ukrainian front lines to write an article about the volunteer medics working there. I have covered the Ukrainian conflict since the Maidan uprising in Kiev in 2013. I was in Crimea when the little green men appeared there, and I took photographs during the siege in Debaltseve. Over time, I heard a lot about the organizations that send doctors, medics and medicine to the eastern provinces to tend to the wounded in the war with Russian-backed separatists. I had lobbied to do photo reportage on these brave civilians, so when I finally got permission, I didn't delay in flying from Budapest to Kiev. My plan was to travel to Kostyantynivka by train and meet the volunteers at the rail station.

"They are a little bit paranoid," my fixer told me as he put me on the train, but he said it wouldn't be a problem. It took six hours to get to Kostyantynivka. With its concrete buildings and World War II monuments, the city looks as though you have returned to the 1950s. But the soldiers and armored carriers remind you that war is being waged only 25 miles away.

I got off the train carrying my green military duffel bag and my blue helmet. A woman named Katya was waiting for me, along with a 40-something Ukrainian brute by the name of Anatoly who was nearly 6-foot-6. Anatoly got behind the wheel of their jeep and immediately asked for my military press credentials. They both studied them carefully, then handed them back to me. Anatoly stared at me suspiciously as he started the engine.

"No photo," he said when he saw me taking out my camera. I did my best to explain that I was a photographer, but he did not understand a word. Katya was fluent in English, but she shared Anatoly's worries and told me not to take photographs, especially at the checkpoints.

"*Vata*," Anatoly said to Katya. I know only about 100 Russian-Ukrainian words, but I understood. It comes from the word for the cotton batting of old Soviet jackets. That's what the Ukrainians call the locals who support the separatists in Donetsk province. Some are even thought to be spies who give vital information to the enemy. Traitors. My press credentials were good, but the country's headlines had been full of journalist-related spying. I had no doubt that tall and heavy Anatoly thought I was a Russian spy.

We traveled in silence for half an hour before arriving at the camp. It was pretty much like every military camp I have seen in this conflict, except there was no artillery anywhere. In general, the volunteers are teamed with field medics from the Ukrainian military. Armed soldiers escort them because they are frequently attacked by separatists.

Katya brought me to the back of the encampment, where the mess hall stood, and introduced me to the leader of the volunteers, a woman of about 60, the oldest among the volunteers. She didn't like me, either. Not a single volunteer allowed me to take pictures. They gave me looks that burned into my skin. Mistrust was everywhere. I had planned to stay with these people for three days, so I began to feel very uncomfortable.

But as a sign of hospitality, they offered me food, and I accepted. It was a bowl of soup, and I sat on a wooden bench in the middle of the tent and began eating. Everyone was looking at me, waiting for me to do something suspicious.

I tried to focus on my soup, so I did not notice the young kitten that climbed up and was crawling toward me. My first thought was that it was hungry, but that wasn't the case. She pushed herself against my hand and started to purr.

**Name:**  
Sandor Jaszberenyi

**Age:** 36

**Location:**  
Eastern Ukraine

Jaszberenyi, a Hungarian writer and foreign correspondent, is the author of a short fiction collection, "*The Devil Is a Black Dog: Stories From the Middle East and Beyond*."

The Ukrainians laughed. Even Anatoly smiled when he saw this. "Her name is Morphine," Katya said. "She spots the good ones."

The approval of the cat washed away all their concerns. They relaxed and offered me cigarettes. Katya showed me around so I could take pictures. Anatoly invited me to drive a "Ukrainian Hummer," a Russian-style military jeep from the '70s, a real monster from the past.

In the evening, they took me to Avdiivka to take photos of the shelling and to ride with them in the ambulance. The job of the volunteer medics is to take the wounded soldiers or civilians to the hospital and to keep them alive on the way. It's dangerous work: Their vehicles are sometimes shot at as they drive.

That was last summer. A few weeks ago, the war in Ukraine started up again. The shelling was so intensive in Avdiivka that many had to be evacuated. I was able to reach Katya. She is in Kiev now. She said some of the group are still on the front. But she couldn't tell me about Anatoly, or what had become of Morphine the cat. ♦





# In Praise of the Prune

A frangipane tart that showcases the pleasures of the dried fruit.

**I like a good** prune. I mean, when it's soft and sweaty like a candy bar on a hot day. When it's a sinister Disney-villain shade of brownish purple, and it tastes of nothing but honey and caramel, what's not to like? It's the *word* that no one likes, the word that indicates, to so many Americans, constipated octogenarians praying on spoonfuls of paste.

I don't blame the California Prune Board for its rebranding efforts. In the early 2000s, it officially changed its name to the California Dried Plum Board, hoping to avoid the association entirely. "We thought maybe the stigma was too much of a challenge for us to overcome," Donn Zea, the board's director, told me. And "dried plum" was an accurate description: "It's a plum. It grows on a tree. We dry them."

Most of America's prune-producing plum trees grow in California, in the Sacramento Valley, not too far from where they were first planted in 1856. That's when Pierre Pellier came back to California from a trip to France with cuttings of *la petite pruneau d'Agen*, the plum tree requested by his brother Louis Pellier, who'd failed to make much money during the Gold Rush. The plants had been stuck in potatoes to keep them moist, ready to grow, and they thrived in what is now Silicon Valley.

Plums are harvested in August, when the fruit is soft enough, and laid out on wooden trays, where they're dehydrated for about 18 hours in tunnel dryers. In that time, the fruit's sugar and flavor are slowly, deeply concentrated, until it's an inky, wrinkled violet, left with only about 20 percent of its moisture. The fruit may be rehydrated industrially with steam, or at home in hot water or tea. It may be revived and plumped, juiced or processed, but there's no going back to what it was: It's a prune now, and it's delicious.

"Why don't Americans like prunes?" I asked around. But almost every person

I asked told me that this was the wrong question to be asking, or that they were the wrong person to be answering it, because they really did like prunes. And the more I investigated, the more prune lovers I found.

Jessica Koslow, the chef and owner of Sqirl in Los Angeles, told me she'd tasted hummus on a recent trip to Krakow, Poland, topped with smoked prunes that were almost meaty. And now she'd been smoking prunes herself, using the chopped fruit as a cookie mix-in. Liz Prueitt, the pastry chef and owner of San Francisco's Tartine Manufactory, was serving them warm, in a puddle of good whiskey, under softly whipped cream. On the bus, I spent a long time staring at the photo she posted of the dish on Instagram: The prunes were black and glossy. They made me want to rush back home and bake something.

In most parts of the world, including the small town east of Paris where I lived as a kid, prunes were never a punch line. Good prunes were considered a serious craft, a worthy, occasional expense, a perfectly conventional thing to love. They'd be simmered with game, whipped into a boozy mousse or slipped into baggies to eat as a snack. They'd disintegrate into a lamb tagine, or be sliced almost all the way open and filled with cold foie-gras terrine on New Year's Eve. But my favorite way to have prunes was in a tart full of frangipane, the sweet, buttery almond cream that goes very nearly chewy when it cools.

Plum trees generally bloom in March, and every tiny flower on their branches is a promise of fruit — a nice fat prune in the making. But last year, plum growers in California noticed weird weather around bloom season. And what with the thunderstorms, hail and high winds, a lot of bees decided they were better off staying inside where it was warm, putting off the work of pollinating the trees. The crop turned out to be just half the size of







what it was the year before, and one of the smallest recorded in a hundred years.

When I inquired about this, Zea assured me that it wasn't as devastating as it sounded, that there were plenty of prunes from the previous season and that we wouldn't be experiencing any kind of prune crisis. Still, I didn't want to waste any more time: I rushed home to bake something.

#### Frangipane-Prune Tart

Time: 1 hour

- 1 cup Earl Grey tea, hot
- 9 ounces (250 grams) prunes, pitted and halved
- 1½ cups (135 grams) sliced almonds, plus 1 tablespoon for garnish
- ¾ cup (165 grams) sugar
- ½ teaspoon salt
- 6 tablespoons (90 grams) butter
- 2 eggs
- 1 tablespoon brandy
- ½ teaspoon almond essence (optional)
- 1 9-inch parcooked tart shell (recipe online)
- 1 teaspoon icing sugar, for garnish

1. Preheat the oven to 375. In a bowl, pour the hot tea over the halved prunes, and let the fruit rehydrate while you make the almond filling.

2. Put almonds, sugar and salt in a food processor, and pulse just until ground (be careful not to overprocess, or the filling will become a hard paste). Add the butter, eggs, brandy and almond essence, if using, and pulse just until smooth.

3. Drain prunes well, pressing out any excess liquid with your hands, and place in the tart shell, more or less in an even layer. Spoon on the almond mixture, smoothing it with the back of the spoon, then sprinkle over remaining sliced almonds. Bake for 25-30 minutes, or until the top is a nice golden brown. Dust with icing sugar, and let cool before serving.

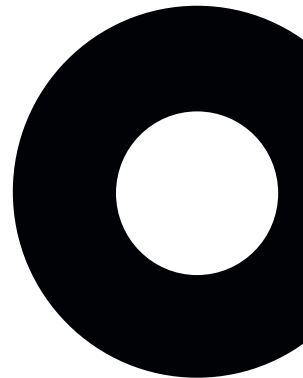
Yield: 12 slices. ♦



Dirty Projectors created one of indie rock's most indelible sounds, built around the collaboration of David Longstreth and Amber Coffman. Now, after their breakup, he's trying to reinvent the band without her.

# GOING SOL





Longstreth in his studio earlier this month.



# DAVID LONGSTRETH MAKES MUSIC

in a former cabinet-builder's workshop on the east side of Los Angeles, in an unlovely, industrial part of town. His studio sits beside a wide boulevard without nearby stop signs, red lights or crosswalks, so cars and trucks hurtle past day and night at terrifying speeds. One recent afternoon, Longstreth edged up to the curb, head swiveling. He wore an unkempt beard and scuffed desert boots that — after he spotted a narrow gap in traffic — transported him across the asphalt and into a bodega on the other side. There, he bought two gallon jugs of filtered water. He was planning a full night of recording and, he explained, “the tap water here is kind of jank.”

For the last decade and a half, Longstreth has been putting out music under the name Dirty Projectors, and it was here, beside the four-lane death gantlet, that he finished his first new LP in four years, out next week: a self-titled breakup album that he calls the most emotionally taxing thing he has made. His studio was cavernous, with gaping skylights and a battalion of movable soundproofing panels that Longstreth built D.I.Y.-style, using materials from Home Depot. These stood sentry around a drum kit, a piano and assorted microphones and amps. An iMac, loaded with ProTools production software, sat atop a Giotto monograph and a massive tome called “Recording the Beatles.” Leaned against a wall were framed portraits of Missy Elliott, Joni Mitchell and Beethoven — an unimpeachable holy trinity.

Longstreth, 35, draws from a wide range of references, and in between seven genre-jumbling Dirty Projectors albums he has put his fingerprints all over work by an impressive variety of artists. He teamed up with David Byrne to write a song and with Bjork to write several; he co-produced adventurous R.&B. with Solange Knowles; devised orchestral arrangements for Joanna Newsom; produced an album by the Tuareg rock guitarist Bombino; and, most recognizably, wrote the luminous bridge that Rihanna sings on “FourFiveSeconds,” a smash hit from 2015 that also features Kanye West and Paul McCartney. Speaking to an interviewer in 2012, Bjork praised Longstreth’s “almost psychic ability to write for other voices.”

A freight train rumbled past the studio on tracks abutting the building. Fiddling with the placement of two microphones, Longstreth seemed not to notice. Before long, I detected another, gentler source of noise pollution. A cricket had moved into the ceiling, and its intermittent chirping provided a hypnotic overhead beat. Longstreth moved to a worn old couch and, fooling around on an electric guitar, briefly improvised against it.

Longstreth has not yet made an LP of cricket duets, but you could almost imagine it. He is a playful conceptualist whose music moves in a handful of directions all at once. Dirty Projectors’ critical breakthrough was the album “Rise Above,” from 2007, in which Longstreth tried to recreate Black Flag’s 1981 punk landmark, “Damaged,” wholly from memory. The result — a covers record riddled with the flubs and inventions of forgetfulness — was a jumble of intricate syn-copations, vertiginous time changes and splintery guitar work. “Rise Above” was Longstreth’s fourth album, and his first to feature the singer and guitarist Amber Coffman, who joined the cast of musicians Longstreth relied upon to tour and record. Coffman became his girlfriend, and she proved crucial to the success of the band’s next album, “Bitte Orca,” which came out in 2009 and won Dirty Projectors a wave of new fans. Longstreth’s ideas about harmony, rhythm and arranging remained unconventional, but his songwriting grew brighter and more direct. Coffman’s voice, with its strong, clean phrasing, helped this music to pass, after a fashion, as a kind of alien pop.

At the couple’s apartment in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, domestic rituals bled into the creative process, and vice versa. When they watched Wim Wenders’s “Wings of Desire” together, Longstreth asked Coffman to write down dialogue that resonated with her. These jottings became lyrics for the band’s biggest single, “Stillness Is the Move,” in 2009, on which Coffman emulated the octave-somersaulting feats of R.&B. stars like Mariah Carey and Destiny’s Child. Accompanying her, Longstreth played a West African-tinged guitar riff that sounded like something colorful shattering. The song put Dirty Projectors at the forefront of the booming Brooklyn indie-rock scene, alongside simpatico acts like Vampire Weekend, Animal Collective and Grizzly Bear. These bands booked worldwide tours, landed prominent festival slots, licensed songs to ad campaigns and crossed over to mainstream audiences. Among Dirty Projectors’ converts was Jay Z, who sent a handwritten note asking them to join a festival he was organizing; the electronic-music star Diplo, who flew Coffman and Longstreth to Jamaica to work with him; and the French rockers Phoenix, who invited the band to open for them at Madison Square Garden.

In 2013, after a year of intense touring to support Dirty Projectors’ assured sixth album, “Swing Lo Magellan,” Longstreth and Coffman split. The album was not the commercial success Longstreth had hoped for. “You think an album’s gonna propel you forward, and then it doesn’t, at least not immediately,” says Brett Williams, the music manager who represents both Longstreth and Coffman. This shortfall, paired with the breakup, sent Longstreth into a depression. “I was super bummed,” he said. “The band and my relationship with Amber had become so

intertwined that, when we broke up, it felt like everything that had defined my life for a decade was suddenly gone.”

Gradually he began making music again “to try to work through what I was feeling.” The first song he released was the sparse, glitchy “Keep Your Name.” In writing the lyrics, he drew on a time-honored country-music convention: “It’s a divorce song,” Longstreth said. The opening line is “I don’t know why you abandoned me,” and he soon drops a knotty clue about fissures between him and Coffman: “What I want from art is truth — what you want is fame.” In building the vocals, meanwhile, Longstreth digitally lowered the pitch of his singing in a nod to DJ Screw, a Houston hip-hop innovator who wrung from this effect a narcotic quality that Longstreth was curious to explore in his song about heartbreak. The single, smoldering with recrimination, offered the first outward sign of turbulence within the group. Two weeks after its release, last fall, Coffman put out her own single, “All to Myself,” about finding solace in solitude. It emerged that she had an album of solo material due in 2017. Conjecture filled blog posts and comment sections. What was going on with Dirty Projectors? What did these dueling releases mean?

The answer was complicated. After their breakup, Longstreth and Coffman reached a détente solid enough that she asked him to produce her solo record. “It was a good thing for our friendship, to reverse the roles we’d played in Dirty Projectors, where everything had been in the service of my vision,” Longstreth said. “Here, I was in service of her ideas, trying to bring them out into the world. We were reinventing how we related to each other.” By the end of 2015, they’d more or less finished the album. In an act of symbolic accord, its last song shared musical motifs with the last song on Longstreth’s. Around this time, however, things soured again, and when I spoke with Longstreth in his studio, he said that, with some stray exceptions, he and Coffman hadn’t spoken in a year. “I want us to be close friends, and to work together again,” he said. But “things between us,” he noted unhappily, “have been better.” Now each of their projects was scheduled to come out within a couple of months of the other: They weren’t talking, but their music was in direct conversation.

**ON THE FLOOR** of Longstreth’s studio were 15 stacks of index cards. The topmost cards bore different inscriptions in black Sharpie: These were names of new songs in various stages of completion, with each stack containing Longstreth’s notes for a different song. “Uh, I guess you can look at those,” he said when he saw me standing over the stacks. He explained that this organizational system was one he used on “Dirty Projectors” too, but as to whether another album was underway, he demurred: “I’m just working through some numbers.”

An engineer named Robby Moncrieff commandeered the iMac, dialing up the ProTools session for a song currently called “Suck My Lifestyle.” It featured a riot of snares, bongos, tambourines, cabasas, high-hats and claps. Some of these instruments were acoustic; others, computer-generated. The acoustic sounds derived from recordings Longstreth made of the virtuoso percussionist Mauro Refosco, who backs Thom Yorke and Flea in the band Atoms for Peace. Longstreth had manipulated these recordings, sampling individual hits and rearranging them, with software, into wild new configurations. “It’s a way to use the dynamics and imperfections of his performance to make an impossible rhythm,” Longstreth said.

“Suck My Lifestyle” contained a place holder guitar riff that was, like the beat, a product of ample technological mediation. Longstreth had cut and pasted recordings of his own playing, then rearranged these snippets to compose a new riff. The ensuing melody behaved in unexpected ways — doubling back on itself, unfurling, stammering. As Moncrieff recorded him, Longstreth sat with an acoustic guitar and diligently replayed the digitized riff live, returning it to the realm of the analog: an oil painting of a Photoshop collage. Much of the music on “Dirty Projectors,” he told me, had come together in this way. Whereas fragmentation and reconciliation are major themes on any breakup album, Longstreth had made them compositional strategies too.

When I asked him to explain the tensions with Coffman, Longstreth declined, out of respect for her, he said, and to “keep certain personal things personal.” But many lyrics on “Dirty Projectors” grapple with the breakup, whether it’s lines in “Keep Your Name” about fame-chasing, or his seeming admission, on the slithering “Death Spiral,” that he “condescended relentlessly.” After I inquired into their romantic troubles, Longstreth said his desire was to “leave it to the music,” while reminding me that the album was a work of art, grounded in truth but subject to distortions. “Not a journal,” he said. (Coffman declined to speak to me for this article. Her publicist said, “Her focus right now is on her own music.”) For Longstreth, moreover, the three years it took to make the album had allowed its meaning to dilate. He initially wrote the second single, “Little Bubble,” to describe the sphere of happiness he and Coffman temporarily shared, but here in 2017 “bubble” had become a buzzword, referring to the supposedly cosseted perspective of “coastal elites,” and now the song’s poignant refrain — “we had our own little bubble, for a while” — sounded like a postelection elegy.

Longstreth hoped when he wrote “Dirty Projectors” for such added resonances to accrue, and in devising motifs that worked in the context of a breakup album but also brooked alternate interpretations, he was inspired in part by his exposure, while

## ‘I WATCHED HIM GO FROM... WHAT MOST PEOPLE WOULD CONSIDER DIFFICULT MUSIC TO BEING A PART OF RIHANNA AND SOLANGE SONGS.’

working on “FourFiveSeconds,” to the songwriting methods of Kanye West. (According to Longstreth, West initially envisioned that track as a solo, then added Rihanna.) In 2015 West asked Longstreth over to his L.A. home to toss around ideas. West routinely assembles motley creative brain trusts, and the brusque, Moroccan-born, Bronx rapper French Montana and the slick Canadian singer the Weeknd were there, too. This invitation led to another, to the Mexican seaside village of Punta Mita, where West rented a mansion belonging to the “Girls Gone Wild” impresario Joe Francis and transformed it into a songwriting headquarters for his album “The Life of Pablo.” Longstreth, a coffee geek who observes a precise pour-over ritual, brought along his own ceramic dripper and, as he self-mockingly put it, “Third Wave roasted beans,” which apparently entertained West’s wife, Kim Kardashian. “She asked me, ‘Are you making, like, a caramel macchiato?’” Longstreth recalled.

Other guests included Ezra Koenig of Vampire Weekend and the rappers Rhymefest and Big Sean. “Kanye has this discursive way of working, getting input from a range of people, that I thought was really cool,” Longstreth said. He

described a moment when West played a tape he’d made of Paul McCartney playing a Wurlitzer while West improvised a vocal, feeling his way through the music by making nonsense sounds. Amid this gibberish, “something he sang sounded sort of like ‘Memories can get you into trouble,’” Longstreth recalled. Struck by this phrase, he and Koenig went off to write a song exploring its potential meanings. “Like, maybe you’re with your girlfriend but thinking of your ex,” Longstreth explained. After Mexico, Longstreth kept in touch with Elon Rutberg, one of West’s main creative advisers, and solicited his feedback about “Dirty Projectors.” Of the “Memories” song, Longstreth added, “Kanye didn’t wind up using it, but it was good — maybe something will come of it down the line.”

**THE PATH THAT** Longstreth took to hanging out with Kanye West in Mexican mansions is improbable. He grew up on five acres of farmland in central Connecticut, where his parents moved from the Bay Area in the late ’70s. They levied a prohibition on video games and grew their own food. “They were into subsistence farming — ‘back to the land,’” he says. “They had a cow or two, sheep, goats, geese. They made their own cheese. We ate eggs from our chickens, who were my responsibility.”

His older brother, Jake, exposed him to “cool stuff,” David recalls, like “music and drawing. He showed me how to play the riff from Nirvana’s ‘Come as You Are.’” Through Nirvana, Jake, who is now a painter in Los Angeles, got into “other weirder, smaller bands from the late ’80s and ’90s West Coast underground,” Longstreth continued, “and from there, into the first generation of punk.” Their parents, he added, “were rock ‘n’ rollers in the ’60s, but they listened pretty widely: baroque music; titans of ’40s, ’50s, ’60s jazz; the ‘Big Chill’ soundtrack.” In 1999, when Jake left for college in Portland, Ore., David inherited his Tascam four-track recorder. With all these influences swimming through his head, he recalled, he “started making albums. My brother still has a suitcase with, like, 100 tapes we made as kids.”

Longstreth’s early recordings were rough by design: bare-boned, anti-virtuosic and even ugly. “I used to feel that musical knowledge and emotional truth-telling were antagonistic,” he said, invoking bedrock punk principles. “But I was too curious about chords and instruments and recording to stay locked in that mentality.” He enrolled at Yale, where he studied music, but was unhappy. “It was about training the next generation of global power elite,” Longstreth said of the campus culture. “It wasn’t about intellectual curiosity or mastery.” He dropped out and traveled to Portland, where Jake had enmeshed himself in the indie-rock demimonde, and (Continued on Page 57)



Longstreth and Coffman at the Sasquatch! Music Festival in Washington State in 2013.



Brian Lowery was continuously troubled by a persistent dry throat and cough. But a CT scan revealed something far more serious: a walnut sized mass at the base of his tongue. This prompted Brian's local ENT physician to call him even though it was a Saturday night. He said, "You're going to Mount Sinai. Someone will contact you shortly." Brian argued that surely he could receive quality medical attention at his local hospital, but Brian's

doctor insisted, "It's Mount Sinai – end of discussion!"

After being referred to the Mount Sinai Head and Neck Institute, the diagnosis was HPV (Human Papilloma Virus)-oral cancer. Doctors met with Brian and reassured him that they were confident on how they would approach his treatment. With its high percentage of success, doctors performed minimally invasive robotic surgery, a specialty at Mount Sinai, to remove his tumor.

# OU

## DOCTORS SAVED BRIAN

### IT'S A STORY

### NOW TELL YOUR



His post-surgery follow up at the Tisch Cancer Institute, a National Cancer Institute (NCI)-designated cancer center, was no different. Brian could not have asked for a more attentive and professional group. He knew that the care that he was being given was cutting edge and personalized. Brian opted for radiation treatments to further ensure a positive outcome, which allowed Brian to quickly return to his daily routine.

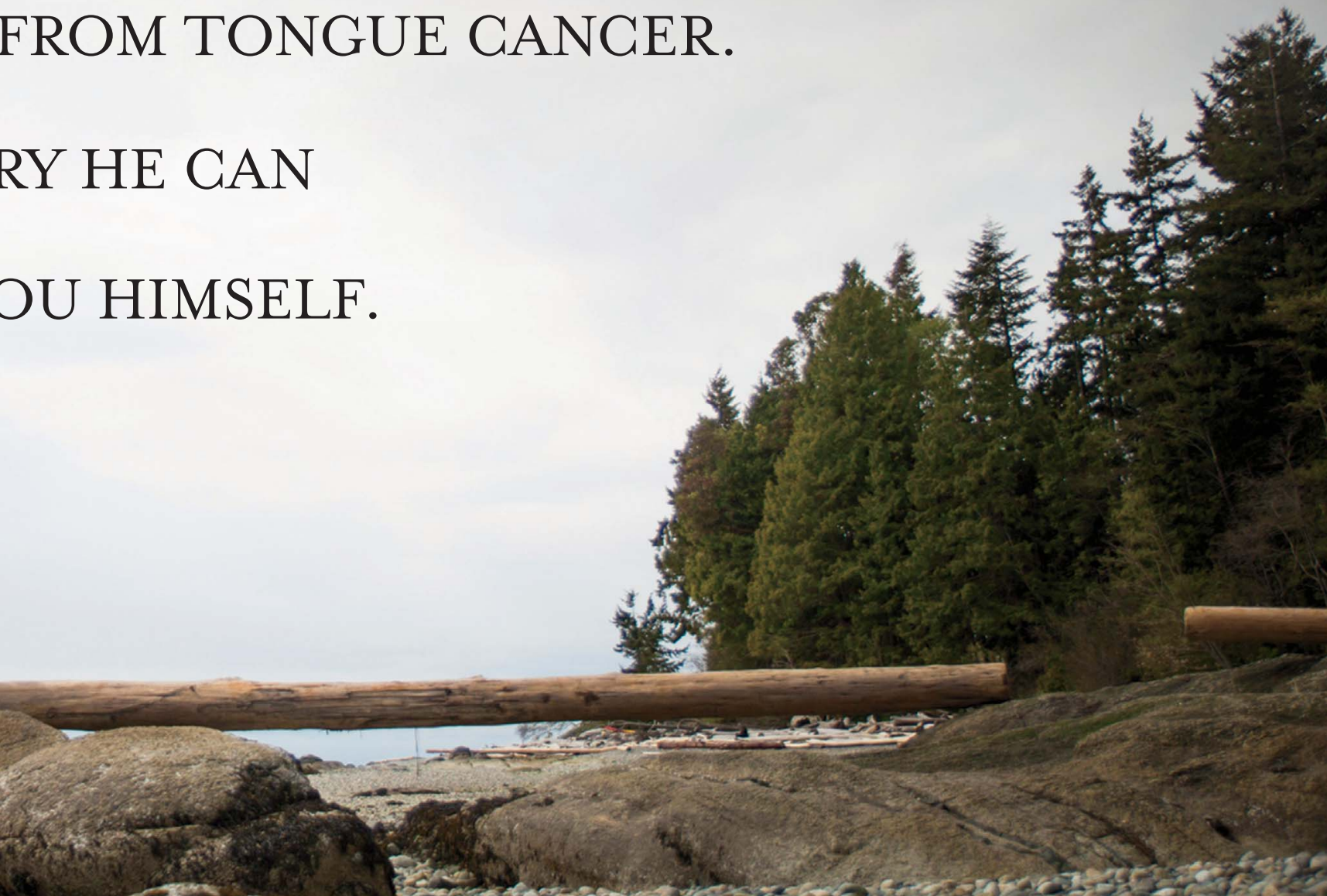
To make a long story short, Brian is now cancer-free. He's grateful to the doctors at the Mount Sinai Health System because now he can tell his side of the story — every single word of it. **For you. For life.**

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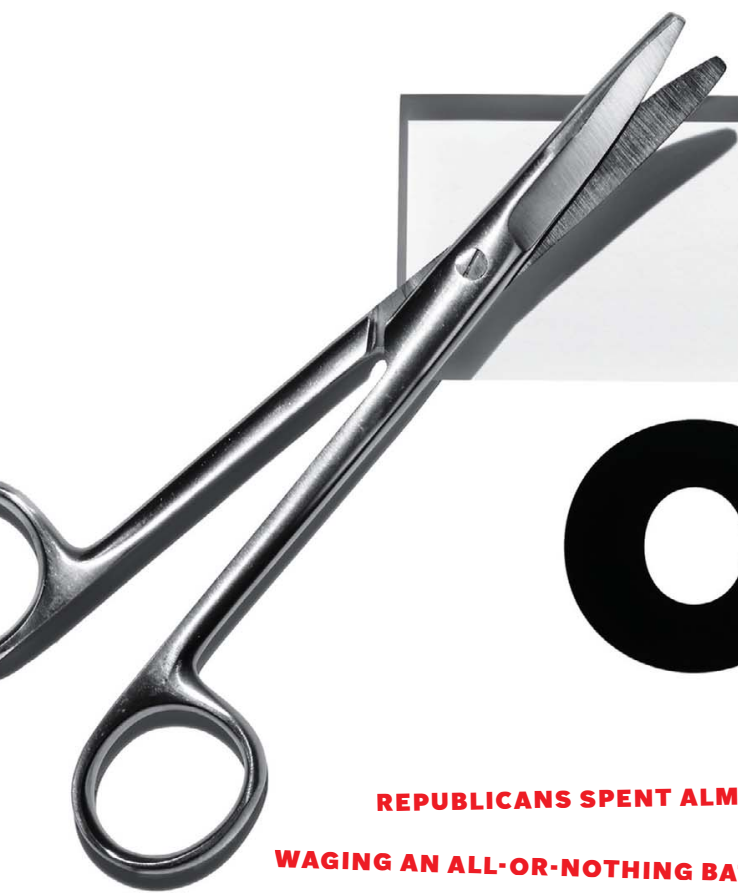
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**OPERA**

**REPUBLICANS SPENT ALMOST SEVEN YEARS**

**WAGING AN ALL-OR-NOTHING BATTLE TO REPEAL THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT.**

**WITH TRUMP IN THE WHITE HOUSE, HAVE THEY SET THEMSELVES UP FOR VICTORY, OR FOR A NEW**

# THE CARE ATION



**KIND OF DISAPPOINTMENT?**

**BY ROBERT DRAPER PHOTO ILLUSTRATIONS BY CRAIG CUTLER**





ix days after he was sworn in as America's 45th president, Donald J. Trump traveled to Philadelphia to address Republican lawmakers at their annual retreat. Standing behind a lectern emblazoned with the presidential seal, Trump predicted, "This Congress is going to be the busiest Congress we've had in decades." Being Trump, he could not resist ad-libbing a superlative: "Maybe ever. Maybe ever. Think of that."

The legislators responded with a curious silence — perhaps awed by the thought, perhaps also a bit unnerved. After years mired in doing nothingness, the Republican-controlled Congress had both the means and, Trump believed, the mandate to roll back Barack Obama's liberal legacy.

At the top of their hit list was Obama's monumental health care legislation, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. During the six and a half years since its passage, Republicans maintained a striking unanimity in their hatred of what they derisively called Obamacare. And over that same period, they became thoroughly united in the conviction that Trump expressed from the outset of his candidacy — namely, that he "would repeal and replace" the health care law "with something far better."

But in the months since Trump's victory, many of the lawmakers in attendance that day had become increasingly worried about how they would go about undoing the legislation. That same weekend in Philadelphia, Republican members of Congress were caught on tape fretting aloud about what the "something far better" to replace the law should be. Should they allow states to accept expanded Medicaid benefits, as Obamacare had done? Should they enter what Representative John Faso, a New York Republican, called the "political minefield" of defunding Planned Parenthood as part of the package? For that matter, should they really be rushing to repeal the A.C.A. before they had any idea of what would replace it? Looming over the gathering was a question that it was perhaps now too late to ask: Had Republicans become trapped by their pledge to do away with Obamacare?

A few days before the retreat, I met up with the man who, perhaps more than any other figure in the conservative movement, had maneuvered the party toward complete and unbending opposition to Obamacare: Michael Needham of the Heritage Foundation. Needham, 35, is the chief executive of Heritage Action for America, a feral cur of a lobbying organization established by the venerable conservative think tank in 2010 to (as its website puts it) "hold Congress accountable to conservative principles." Though other organizations — among them the Club for Growth and Americans for Tax Reform — have vigorously opposed Obamacare from its inception, Heritage Action has spent the last six years almost monomaniacally focused on demanding that legislators abolish the hated law. It scores them on what it deems critical votes and loudly condemns any and all apostasies. It names names and, when necessary to its ends, is happy to defy the Republican leadership. In violating Reagan's "11th Commandment" not to speak ill of others in his party, Needham has come to rival Ted Cruz as one of the least popular Republicans in Washington.

Needham would not seem an obvious choice for this distinction. Smooth-skinned and passively handsome in the manner of Mitt Romney, he grew up on Manhattan's Upper East Side. His youthful acquaintance with struggle was limited to being a Mets fan. After graduating from Williams College in 2004, Needham went straight to work for Heritage, where he was made its director of Asian studies, despite having never visited Asia. In 2007 he briefly left the think tank to become a policy aide for the presidential campaign of Rudolph W. Giuliani, the most liberal of the dozen or so Republican candidates in that cycle. By the time Obamacare was signed into law in March 2010, Needham had again temporarily left Heritage, attending Stanford Business School and dating a Democrat whom he would later marry. There was little in the cards to prefigure his imminent future as the self-designated — and at times deeply reviled — lead driver in the Obamacare demolition derby.

Like virtually every Republican in Washington, Needham was not especially enamored of Trump during the primaries. "Donald Trump's a clown," he said on "Fox News Sunday" just a month after Trump announced his candidacy — adding, with evident distaste, "This is a guy who believes in socialized medicine." Needham's preferences ran more to Bobby Jindal, and of course to Cruz, whom Needham reflexively referred to by his first name. Still, Needham and his adopted cause had emerged as unambiguous winners of the 2016 election. On the first day of his presidency, Trump signed an executive order to "seek the prompt repeal" of Obamacare.

Thus had Trump and Needham — two men who had never met — become allies. "I think

one of the big disagreements we've had with the party for a long time is that we think when you're trying to win an argument, it can only happen when you start them," the young C.E.O. said as he sat in his Capitol Hill office, looking somewhat fatigued from having spent the previous weekend toilet-training his child. "And this kind of maniacal focus on 'governing'" — his voice taking on a mocking tone — "when all governing means is a bill-signing to get good press, instead of laying out a vision of where you want to take the country, was one of the big divides we had."

But the long, and at times quixotic, struggle to repeal Obamacare in which Needham has been a lead combatant has more closely resembled a street fight than anything that could reasonably be termed an "argument." And though it may appear otherwise in a dawning age of Republican near-monopoly on government, the argument is today far from over. According to a January Fox News poll, Obama's signature program now enjoys a 50 percent approval rating. There is no guarantee that Republicans in the Senate will sign onto legislation that risks leaving millions of their constituents suddenly without health care coverage while alienating key donors — drug makers, insurance companies and doctor associations — who helped shape and support the law Trump now seeks to replace. "The joke around Washington," the former Democratic congressman Jim McDermott told me, "is that the Republicans are going to repeal Obamacare — and they'll replace it with the Affordable Care Act."

**THE BUILDING** that houses the Heritage Foundation, on Massachusetts Avenue near the Capitol, stands as an eight-story monument to plain-faced perversity. It was here, in 1989, that the intellectual framework was first developed for what would become the Affordable Care Act. And it is here where Needham has spent the last six years trying to exterminate what he sees as the Frankenstein's Monster that Heritage inadvertently set loose upon the land.

The basic architecture of the bill that would eventually become the A.C.A. was conceived in 1989 by the Heritage Foundation policy analyst Stuart Butler as a conservative alternative to government-managed health care. It was first put into practice in 2006 by Gov. Mitt Romney of Massachusetts, who devised his state's health care policy with the help of two other Heritage health care specialists, Bob Moffit and Ed Haislmaier. But for many decades, conservatives had resisted increasing the federal government's role in health care. That remained true in 2009, when the newly elected President Barack Obama undertook to pass legislation that would extend health care coverage to tens of millions of Americans.

What Obama and the Democratic-controlled Congress ultimately settled on was a framework

of health care exchanges — marketplaces where health insurance could be purchased, and had to be, if you weren't already covered. This was the so-called "individual mandate" first advocated (albeit in the context of a private-sector health care system) by Butler and later embraced by Romney.

Obama opposed the concept as a candidate, in favor of an unspecified plan that he claimed would lower costs. What many Democrats on the Hill — "probably more than half of our caucus," McDermott says — preferred was a single-payer

system, in which health care costs are borne not by insurers but instead by a single fund, typically originating from taxpayers, as Medicare does. But half of the Democratic caucus wasn't enough for a bill to pass the House, much less the Senate. When a congressional majority failed to materialize for a hybrid measure, known as the "public option," in which consumers would be allowed to choose among government-run insurance plans as well as private ones, Democrats were left with the individual mandate.

# YEARS OF UNSUCCESSFUL HOUSE VOTES TO OBAMACARE SERVED A PURPOSE: TO 'LOCK IN' OPPOSITION TO IT.

The final 2,700-page legislative package would aim to "increase the quality, availability and affordability of private and public health insurance to over 44 million uninsured Americans," as the administration put it. Applicants whose income was between 100 percent and 400 percent of the federal poverty line would be eligible for federally subsidized insurance. Those with incomes at or below 138 percent would now qualify for Medicaid in states that chose to participate in the program. Young people up to the age of 26 were permitted to stay on their parents' health insurance. Americans with pre-existing medical conditions could not be denied coverage. And a variety of other regulations, taxes, penalties and incentives would be set up to maximize participation on the part of insurers, recipients, physicians and health care centers.

Though the details of the Affordable Care Act, as the final bill came to be called, left plenty of room for disagreement, its fundamental reliance on taxpayer-subsidized health care overseen by the federal government was a concept anathema to most Republicans. In a 28-page memo written by the Republican pollster Frank Luntz in spring 2009, Republicans were urged to use the phrase "government takeover" when referring to the Democrats' health care package. Less heeded was another admonition in Luntz's memo: "It's not enough to just say what you're *against*. You have to tell them what you're *for*."

In the end, Republicans lacked the numbers necessary to block the bill. On March 21, 2010, the House finally passed on a party-line vote a version of the bill that was sure to be agreed to by the Democratic-controlled Senate. "We didn't give in to mistrust or to cynicism or to fear," Obama, announcing the bill's passage that night in the East Room of the White House, said. "Instead, we proved that we are still a people capable of doing big things and tackling our biggest challenges."

**THE DAY AFTER** Obama signed the bill into law, a four-term Republican backbencher from Iowa named Steve King drafted his own bill in the House to repeal it in its entirety. Since there was no hope of Speaker Nancy Pelosi's considering King's bill, he had decided to try a rarely successful legislative tactic known as a discharge petition — which, if it gathered signatures from 218 of the 435 House members, would force Pelosi to bring King's bill to the floor for an up-or-down vote.

A couple of days after King made his move, in mid-June 2010, the two newly minted leaders of Heritage Action — Needham, then 28, and the 32-year old chief operating officer, Tim



**REPEAL**



Chapman — met in the Capitol with Barry Jackson, chief of staff to John Boehner, the House minority leader at the time. Though Jackson today says that he has no recollection of their visit, Needham and Chapman both say they remember it clearly. After explaining the general mission of their new organization, the young conservatives brought up the recently passed Affordable Care Act. Heritage Action, they informed Jackson, intended to push House members to sign King's petition.

Jackson's response surprised Chapman and Needham. "He was very clear," Chapman recalls, "that if we pushed forward on it, we would probably not get all the Republicans on it, and it would be politically detrimental to a lot of Republicans to be on it. He said, 'I've seen all the ads the unions have prepared to run on this stuff. I don't know where he'd seen them. We let off on the gas. We said, 'We'll agree to disagree on this one.' It was the 'aha' moment for us: We just don't see the world the same way.'"

As both Chapman and Needham today concede, Jackson might also have had his own "aha" moment, recognizing them as impudent young jerks. Still, their aggression had the full blessing of Ed Feulner, then Heritage's president, who says fondly of Needham, "He reminded me of myself 40 years earlier." As for Heritage Action, he said: "We knew we'd be breaking some china."

Among Republican elected officials, the Heritage Foundation had long been regarded as a tweedy grandfather, revered but not feared. The think tank was proficient at spewing out white papers and keynote speeches. But because of its status as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, it could not devote a substantial part of its activities to taking positions on congressional votes or campaigning against political foes. Heritage sat by helplessly in 2003 while President George W. Bush, dismayed by conservative purists, promoted and then signed into law a new federal entitlement that used Medicare to extend prescription benefits to senior citizens. Two years later, Heritage could do nothing to rescue Bush's Social Security privatization measure from defeat. Now, with Heritage Action as a 501(c)(4) "social welfare organization," the foundation at last had its own squad in the fight. And in Needham, Feulner had a jut-jawed lieutenant whose job, as Feulner put it, would be "to run the flag up the flagpole and see who salutes."

Steve King's bill was Heritage Action's first flag. It had not occurred to Needham and Chapman to see things Barry Jackson's way — to consider that Republicans' taking an unambiguous stand to completely repeal Obamacare could cost them House seats five months later. Jackson's hesitancy to campaign on full repeal was in fact shared by many Republican leaders. One of them, Senator John Cornyn, the chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee, said of Obamacare in

May: "There is non-controversial stuff here, like the pre-existing conditions exclusion and those sorts of things. Now, we are not interested in repealing that. And that is frankly a distraction."

To Needham, there was only one way to look at the matter. "What's the point in having a conservative party if we're not going to fight a massive federal intervention in health care?" he told me. "It's one-sixth of our economy!"

**NEEDHAM AND CHAPMAN** knew there were risks in allying themselves with King, an inveterate bomb-thrower with a deep yearning for the spotlight. But King was also a tenacious conservative. On June 16, he introduced his discharge petition, and Heritage Action began sending out emails to the foundation's 661,000 members, urging them to pressure representatives on both sides of the aisle to sign it — ominously adding in a news release that "those who fail to support this effort are responsible for Obamacare." The petition soon picked up two highly influential signatories: Representative Tom Price of Georgia, an orthopedic surgeon who was chairman of the Republican Study Committee, the House's internal conservative think tank; and Representative Mike Pence of Indiana, a staunch conservative and personal hero of Needham's who refused to vote for Bush's Medicare bill in 2003.

A month later, Heritage Action turned up the heat on the 34 Democrats — most of them so-called conservative Blue Dogs — who voted against Obamacare in March but had yet to sign King's discharge petition. In a press statement, Needham declared, "I know their constituents, who will be attending town halls this August, are eager to hear why they do not support the repeal effort." In September, a single Democrat, Gene Taylor of Mississippi, added his signature. The tally reached 173, well short of what it would take for King's bill to make it to the House floor — much less to get it passed and then sent over to the Senate, where Republicans' appetite for abolishing Obamacare altogether was less acute than it was in the House.

But though the discharge petition had stalled, King and Heritage Action could justifiably declare a victory of principle and, eventually, an I-told-you-so. Overall, those who pledged fealty to repealing Obamacare fared better that November than those who didn't. As King told me recently: "The Barry Jacksons and the John Cornyns were clearly wrong. Look at what happened to the Blue Dogs in 2010. There were 53 of them when Obamacare passed. Now I don't

know if you can count three of them." King was exaggerating, but not by much — there are 18 members of Congress's Blue Dog Coalition today. "Pelosi made them walk the plank, and they fell like tenpins after that. Since then, I don't think there's been a freshman Republican who didn't run on the full repeal of Obamacare."

**BASHING OBAMACARE** instantly became a winning Republican message — an indictment of its polarizing namesake, of big-spending Democrats and of the boogeyman of creeping socialism all rolled into one. During the 2010 midterm election cycle, opponents of the A.C.A. spent \$108 million on ads pillorying it. As a reward to the 87 Republican freshmen whose victories had enabled the party to retake the House, Eric Cantor devoted part of his first day as the House majority leader to introducing H.R. 2, the "Repealing the Job-Killing Health Care Law Act." It would become the first of more than 50 bills that would pass the House over the ensuing four years designed to repeal, defund, restrict or delay implementation of Obamacare. None of them stood any chance of becoming a law — they were dead on arrival in the Democratic-controlled Senate. But to Heritage Action, they served a purpose: in the organization's parlance, to "lock in" members, to "orient" the Republican Party to conservative principles so that it would "do the right thing."

At times, however, what looked like the "right thing" was, from Needham's vantage, in fact the wrong thing. In April 2011, for example, a bill



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# WELL BEFORE MANY OF OBAMACARE'S PROVISIONS TOOK EFFECT, POLLS SHOWED THAT MOST AMERICANS DISAPPROVED OF IT.

dismantling part of Obamacare did clear the House and then the Senate, and was signed into law by President Obama without hesitation. It was a measure to eliminate the requirement that small companies submit 1099 forms for all transactions exceeding \$600, which essentially served as a tax to help pay for the program and which Heritage Action had condemned as “burdensome” and “onerous,” guaranteed to generate paperwork and high accounting fees.

But Heritage Action, because of its ironclad resistance to “partial repeal,” actually opposed the measure to get rid of the 1099 provision. Yes, it would help small businesses — but then those same small businesses would no longer care to be part of Heritage Action’s crusade. As Needham later told me, “We felt that when anything less than full repeal becomes acceptable, you open the door for every lobbyist in town to say: ‘Hey, while we’re working on full repeal, let’s fix the 1099 issue. Or let’s fix the franchise-restaurant issue’” — the popular shorthand for an A.C.A. provision requiring companies with 50 or more employees to provide health care to anyone working over 30 hours a week. “You eventually over time whittle off various constituencies that we want to keep as part of the full-repeal platform.” Partial repeal would be well and good if it got rid

of what Needham called a “vital organ” of the law: the individual mandate, say, or Medicaid expansion. But “those vital organs were never going to go down if repeal was defined by Washington’s lobbying class. It would be 1099s and these heavily lobbied issues, and then we’ll be stuck with Obamacare.”

In mid-2011, Heritage Action declared that it would “key vote,” or place greater emphasis on, bills it deemed especially relevant as litmus tests of members’ conservative bona fides. Needham also began issuing scorecards on how frequently members of Congress were voting down spending bills. The notion of a 20-something former Giuliani aide grading veteran lawmakers on their principles did not go over well. Representative Rob Wittman of Virginia was taken to task in a Heritage Action analysis for casting only four of a potential 11 votes to cut spending during a series of roll calls; he had to inform Chapman that he had missed those votes because his father had died. (Chapman did not change Wittman’s score but did explain the reason for Wittman’s absence on the Heritage Action website.)

Representative Geoff Davis of Kentucky, a onetime target of Heritage Action’s grading system, fumed to me about the organization’s absolutist browbeating, which came as Republican members were doing their best to thwart Obama’s agenda. “If I’m

trying to stop someone’s bleeding on the side of the road, I don’t need to also give them a lecture about how they need to do aerobics and lift weights three times a week,” he said. Echoing the opinion of many Republicans in Washington, Davis asserted that Needham’s operation was less about legislative results than its own fund-raising: “Very quickly, it became a conservative for-profit operation,” he said.

More than once, Chapman recalls, Republican leaders on the Hill called Feulner to say, “You’ve got to rein these guys in.” But Heritage Action had other defenders besides Feulner. The new Republican Study Committee chairman, Jim Jordan of Ohio, felt that Needham’s organization was instrumental in pushing the party rightward. Mick Mulvaney of South Carolina, a rising star in the Tea Party class of 2010, characterized Heritage Action’s messaging as “invaluable.” Even the complaints were tacit acknowledgments of the organization’s growing clout. As a 501(c)(4), Heritage Action was not obliged to disclose its finances, but it was known to have received millions, including \$500,000 from the Koch brothers. Rank-and-file-conservative House members pointed with pride to their high Heritage Action scores. Leadership aides saw no choice but to include Needham and Chapman in strategy meetings.

And Heritage Action’s relentless focus on its message — Obamacare is a disaster that must be repealed in full — was already taking its toll. Before the law had even gone fully into effect, polls consistently showed

(Continued on Page 50)



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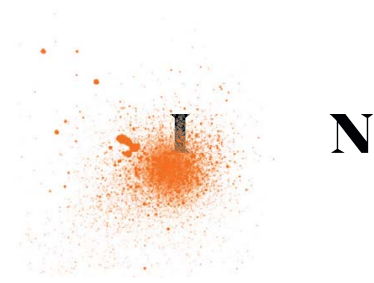
**R U D E N E S S**

*As the social contract frays, what does it mean to be polite?* **BY RACHEL CUSK** *Photo illustrations by Cristiana Couceiro*









a world as unmannerly as this one, how is it best to speak?

There's no need to be rude, I say to the man in the packed hall at passport control. There are people everywhere, and his job is to send them into the right queues. I have been watching him shout at them. I have watched the obsessive way he notices them, to pick on them. There's no need to be rude, I say.

His head jerks around.

You're rude, he counters. You're the one who's rude.

This is an airport, a place of transit. There are all sorts of people here, people of different ages, races and nationalities, people in myriad sets of circumstances. In this customs hall, there are so many different versions of living that it seems possible that no one version could ever be agreed on. Does it follow, then, that nothing that happens here really matters?

No, I'm not, I say.

You are, he says. You're being rude.

The man is wearing a uniform, though not a very impressive one: a white short-sleeved synthetic shirt, black synthetic trousers, a cheap tie with the airport's insignia on it. It is no different from the uniform a bus driver might wear, or someone at a car-rental desk, someone who lacks any meaningful authority while also being forced into constant interaction with members of the public, someone for whom the operation of character is both nothing and everything. He is angry. His face is red, and his expression is unpleasant. He looks at me — a woman of 48 traveling alone, a woman who doubtless exhibits some signs of the privileged life she has led — with loathing. Apparently it is I, not he, who has broken the social code. Apparently it was rude of me to accuse him of rudeness.

The social code remains unwritten, and it has always interested me how many problems this poses in the matter of ascertaining the truth. The truth often appears in the guise of a threat to the social code. It has this in common with rudeness. When people tell the truth, they can experience a feeling of release from pretense that is perhaps similar to the release of rudeness. It might follow that people can mistake truth for rudeness, and rudeness for truth. It may only be by examining the aftermath of each that it becomes possible to prove which was which.

The queue moves forward. I reach passport control, and I pass through it, and the man is left behind.

**In recounting this incident** afterward, I find myself running into difficulties. For instance, I find myself relying on the details of the man's physical ugliness to prove the badness of his character. Searching for a specific example of someone else's being upset or offended by him, the only person I can prove he offended was me. On another day, a perfectly polite man is probably to be found directing the crowds in the customs hall, assisting

the elderly, apologizing for the crush, helpfully explaining things to people whose English is uncertain: He would make a good story about individuality as the basis for all hope.

By telling this story, I am trying to substantiate my fear that discrimination and bullying are used against people trying to enter Britain, my country. There are many people who don't have this fear. To them, my story proves only one thing, which is that I once met a rude man in an airport. I might even have inadvertently made them pity him. I, the teller of this tale, would have to demonstrate that under the same circumstances, I would have behaved better. In the event, all I did was criticize him. I made him angrier; perhaps he took it out on the next person in the queue. To top it all off, I admit that he accuses me of precisely the same failing: rudeness. Anyone hearing the story will at this point stop thinking about the moral problem of rudeness and start thinking about me. I have damaged my own narrative authority: Might I be to blame after all? By including that detail — true though it is — I am giving the man a platform for his point of view. In most of my stories, I allow the truth to look after itself. In this one, I'm not sure that it can.

For all these reasons, the story doesn't work as it should. Why, then, if it proves nothing, is this a story I persist in telling? The answer: because I don't understand it. I don't understand it, and I feel that the thing I don't understand about it — indeed the mere fact of not understanding — is significant.

**Another day, another airport.** This time the situation is clearer: My country has recently voted to leave the European Union, and rudeness is rampant. People treat one another with a contempt that they do not trouble

to conceal. The people in uniforms — the airport officials — exercise their faux power with uncommon ugliness, while the rest of us look suspiciously at one another, not sure what to expect of this new, unscripted reality, wondering which side the other person is on. It is already being said that this situation has arisen out of hatred, but it seems to me that if that is true, then the hatred is of self.

**LIKE A NARCOTIC,  
RUDENESS OFFERS  
A SENSATION  
OF GLORIOUS  
RELEASE  
FROM JAILERS  
NO ONE  
ELSE CAN SEE.**

The uniformed woman at security bangs the gray plastic trays one after another onto the conveyor belt with a violence that seems to be a request for attention. At every opportunity, she makes it clear that she has relinquished self-control: Her nature has been let loose, like an animal from its cage. She abuses, without exception, every person who passes along her queue, while seeming not to address any single one of them: We are no longer individuals; we are a herd enduring the drover's lash, heads down and silent. She looks unhealthy, her face covered with sore-looking red spots, her shapeless white body almost writhing with its own anger, as though it wishes only to transgress its boundaries, to escape itself in an act of brutality.

The person in front of me in the queue is a well-groomed black woman. She is traveling with a child, a pretty girl with neatly plaited hair. She has put two large clear bags of cosmetics and creams in her tray, but this, apparently, is not allowed; she is permitted only a single bag. The uniformed woman halts the queue and slowly and deliberately holds up the two bags, looking fixedly at their owner.

What's this then? she says. What's this about?

The woman explains that because two of them are traveling, she has assumed that they are entitled to two bags. Her voice is quiet and polite. The little girl gazes ahead with wide, unblinking eyes.

You assumed wrong, the uniformed woman says. Her horrible relish for the situation is apparent. She has been waiting, it is clear, to fasten on someone and has found her victim.

You don't get away with that, she says, grimacing and shaking her head. Where do people like you get your ideas from?

The rest of us watch while she makes the woman unpack the bags and then decide which of her possessions are to be thrown away. They are mostly new and expensive-looking. In another situation, their scented femininity might have seemed to mock the ugliness of the woman superintending their destruction with folded arms and a jeering expression on her face. The other woman's slender, varnished fingers are shaking as she scrabbles with the various pots and jars. She keeps dropping things, her head bowed, her lower lip caught in her teeth. The uniformed woman's unrelenting commentary on these events is so unpleasant that I realize she is half-demented with what would seem to be the combination of power and powerlessness. No one intervenes. I do not inform her that there is no need to be rude. Instead, as I increasingly seem to in such situations these days, I wonder what Jesus would have done.

My traveling companion — a painter — is the politest person I know, but I have noticed that he does not often take up arms on another person's behalf. He dislikes conflict. When it is our turn in the queue, the uniformed woman stares at the bag he has placed in the tray. It contains his tubes of paint. They are crumpled and bespattered with use, and there are so many of them that the bag can't close at the top. She folds her arms.

What are those, she says.

They're paints, he replies.

You can't take those through, she says.

Why not, he asks pleasantly.

The bag has to close at the top, she says. That's why not.

But I need them to paint with, he says.

You can't take them through, she says.

He looks at her in silence. He is looking directly into her eyes. He stands completely quiet and still. The look goes on for a very long time. Her eyes are small and pale blue and impotent: I did not notice them until now. My friend neither blinks nor looks away, and the woman is forced to hold herself there as the seconds tick by, her small eyes open and straining. During those seconds, it seems as if layers of her are being removed: She is being simplified, put in order, by being looked at. He is giving her his full attention, and I watch the strange transformation occur. Finally he speaks.

What do you suggest I do, he says, very calmly.

Well, sir, she says, if you're traveling with this lady, she might have room in her bag.

Neither of them looks at me — they are still looking at each other.

Would that be acceptable? she says.

Yes, he says, I don't see why not.

I proffer my bag, and the woman herself transfers the paints from one bag to the other. Her hands labor to do it with care and exactitude: It takes her a long time. Finally she seals the bag and lays it gently back in the tray.

Is that all right, sir? she says.

Now that he has won this victory, I want him to use it to reprimand her, not just for her behavior toward the black woman in the queue but for all the wrongs her behavior represents; for the fact that it's safer to be him, and always has been. He does not reprimand her. He smiles at her politely.

Thank you very much, he says.

It would have been a shame to throw them away, wouldn't it? she says.

Yes, it would, he says. I appreciate your help.

I hope you enjoy your holiday, sir, she says.



**Society organizes itself** very efficiently to punish, silence or disown truth-tellers. Rudeness, on the other hand, is often welcomed in the manner of a false god. Later still, regret at the punishment of the truth-teller can build into powerful feelings of worship, whereas rudeness will be disowned.

Are people rude because they are unhappy? Is rudeness like nakedness, a state deserving the tact and mercy of the clothed? If we are polite to rude people, perhaps we give them back their dignity; yet the obsessiveness of the rude presents certain challenges to the proponents of civilized behavior. It is an act of disinhibition: Like a narcotic, it offers a sensation of glorious release from jailers no one else can see.

In the recollection of events, rudeness often has a role to play in the moral construction of a drama: It is the outward sign of an inward or unseen calamity. Rudeness itself is not the calamity. It is the harbinger, not the manifestation, of evil. In the Bible, Satan is not rude — he is usually rather charming — but the people who act in his service are. Jesus, on the other hand, often comes across as somewhat terse. Indeed, many of the people he encounters find him direct to the point of rudeness. The test, it is clear, is to tell rudeness from truth, and in the Bible that test is often failed. An unambiguous event — violence — is therefore required. The episode of the crucifixion is an orgy of rudeness whose villains are impossible to miss. The uncouth conduct of the Roman soldiers at the foot of the cross, for instance, can be seen in no other light: Anyone thinking that Jesus could have done a bit more to avoid his fate is offered this lasting example of humanity's incurable awfulness. They know not what they do, was Jesus' comment on his tormentors. Forgive them.

**In the United Kingdom**, the arguments rage over the rights and wrongs of the Brexit referendum result. I begin to think



this is what it must be like to be the child of divorcing parents. Before, there was one truth, one story, one reality; now there are two. Each side accuses the other, and amid the raised voices, the unappeasable points of view, the vitriol and distress, the obfuscation and exaggeration and blame, the only thing that is demonstrably clear is that one side is ruder than the other. It seems to me that even if you didn't know what they were arguing about, you would have to come to that conclusion.

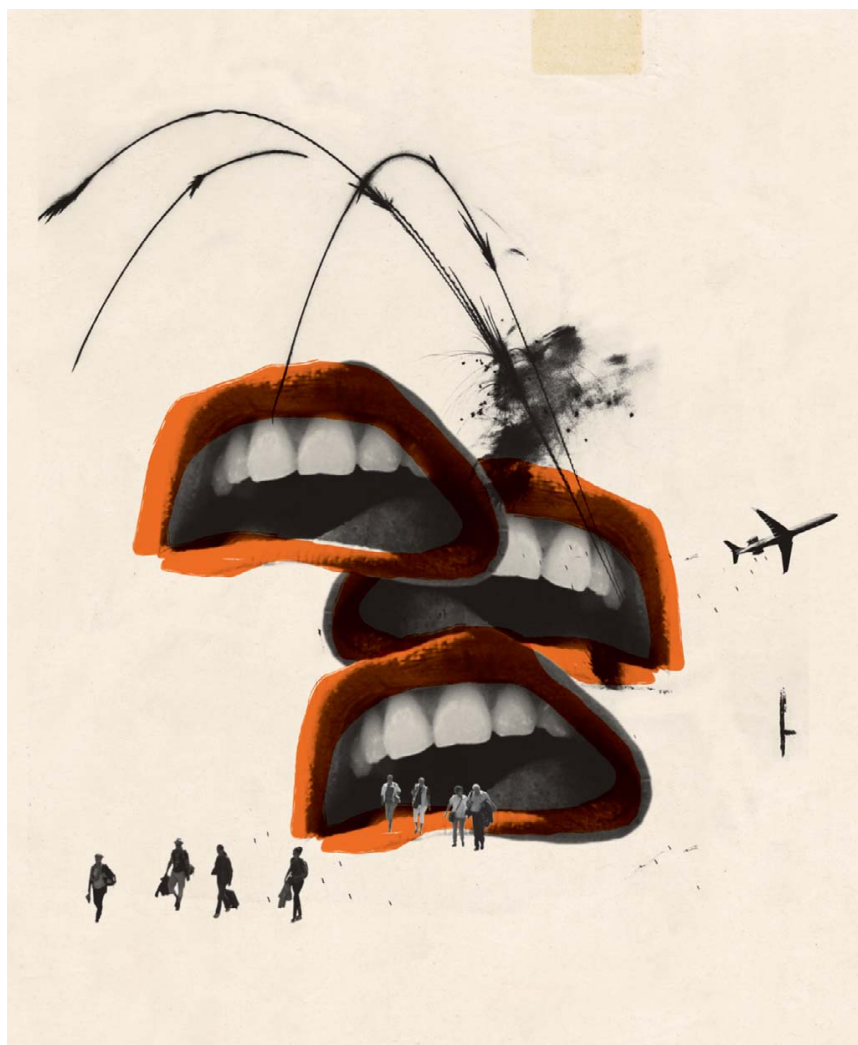
In the aftermath of their victory, the winners are markedly unmagnanimous. They brand those who voted the other way as a liberal elite, patronizing, self-interested, out of touch with real life. The liberal elite are characterized as bad losers, as though the vote were a football match. When they protest against or complain about the result and its consequences, they are immediately belittled and shouted down. In the weeks before the vote, the eventual victors' own handling of language resembled a small child's handling of an explosive device: They appeared to have no idea of its dangers or power. They used phrases like "We want our country back" and "Take back control" that were open to any and every interpretation. Now they complain that they have been misrepresented as racist, xenophobic, ignorant. They are keen to end the argument, to quit the field of language where only the headachy prospect of detailed analysis remains, to take their dubious verbal victory and run for the hills. They have a blunt phrase they use in the hope of its being the last word, and it is characteristically rude: "You lost. Get over it."

The liberal elite, meanwhile, have evolved a theory: It is their belief that many of the people who voted to leave the European Union now regret their decision. There is no more tenuous comfort than that which rests on the possibility of another's remorse. In psychoanalysis, events are reconstructed in the knowledge of their outcome: The therapeutic properties of narrative lie in its capacity to ascribe meaning to sufferings that at the time seemed to have no purpose. The liberal elite are in shock; they fall upon the notion of the victors' regret as a palliative for their mental distress, but because the referendum result is irreversible, this narrative must adopt the form of tragedy.

Unlike the victors, the losers are loquacious. They render the logic of their suffering with exactitude and skill, waxing to new expressive heights. The deluge of fine writing that follows the referendum contrasts strangely with the reticence that preceded it. The liberal elite are defending their reality, but too late. Some urge a show of tolerance and understanding; others talk about the various stages of grief; others still call for courage in standing up for the values of liberalism. These are fine performances, but it is unclear whom they are for. I have often noticed how people begin to narrate out loud when in the presence of mute creatures, a dog, say, or a baby: Who is the silent witness to this verbal outpouring?

Meanwhile, in the Essex town of Harlow, a Polish man is murdered in the street by a gang of white youths who apparently heard him speaking his native language.

**How can we ascertain** the moral status of rudeness? Children are the members of our society most often accused of being rude; they are also the most innocent. We teach children that it is rude to be honest, to say, "This tastes disgusting" or "That lady is fat." We also teach them that it is rude to disrespect our authority. We give them orders: We say, "Sit still" or "Go to your room." At a certain point, I got into the habit, when addressing my children, of asking myself whether I would speak in the same way to an adult and discovered that in nearly every case the answer



was no. At that time, I understood rudeness to be essentially a matter of verbal transgression: It could be defined within the morality of language, without needing to prove itself in a concrete act. A concrete act makes language irrelevant. Once words have been superseded by actions, the time for talking has passed. Rudeness, then, needs to serve as a barrier to action. It is what separates thought from deed; it is the moment when wrongdoing can be identified, in time to stop the wrong from having to occur. Does it follow, then, that a bigoted remark — however ugly to hear — is an important public interface between idea and action? Is rudeness a fundamental aspect of civilization's immunity, a kind of antibody that is mobilized by the contagious presence of evil?

In the United States, Hillary Clinton calls half the supporters of Donald Trump "a basket of deplorables." At first the remark impressed me. I approved of Clinton for her courage and honesty, while reflecting on her curious choice of words. "Basket of deplorables" almost sounded like a phrase from Dr. Seuss: It would be typical of him to put deplorables in a basket, for the moral amusement of his young readers. A sack or a box of deplorables wouldn't be the same thing at all, and a swamp of deplorables is too Dante-esque; but a basket is just the kind of zany, cheerful container that makes light of the deplorables while still putting them in their place. It quickly became clear, however, that as a public utterance, the phrase was malfunctioning. The basket began to speak, to distinguish itself: Inside it were a number of offended individuals. Clinton had made the mistake of being rude. The "basket of deplorables" wasn't Dr. Seuss after all. It was the snobbish language of the liberal elite, caught committing the elemental moral crime of negating individual human value. Yet Clinton's adversary

regularly committed this crime with impunity. Were Clinton's and Trump's two different kinds of rudeness?

In Britain, a man tweets that someone should "Jo Cox" Anna Soubry. The amorality of the English tongue: In the run-up to the referendum, Jo Cox, a member of Parliament, was shot and stabbed to death by a far-right nationalist; to "Jo Cox" someone is to murder a female member of Parliament who advocates remaining in the European Union. The man who posts the tweet is arrested. The police, it seems, are trying to get on top of our verbal problems. It has now become commonplace for proponents of liberal values to receive death threats. The death threat, I suppose, is the extreme of rudeness: It is the place where word finally has to be taken as deed, where civilization's immunity reaches the point of breakdown. "I could kill you," my mother often used to say to me, and I didn't know whether to believe her or not. It is true that I frequently fell foul of her and others through my habit of outspokenness. The sharpness of my phrases maddened her. I was quite capable of the basket-of-deplorables mistake, the confusion of cleverness with insult, the belief in language as an ultimate good, the serving of which was its own reward. No one could mind what you said if you said it with sufficient skill, could they? Later I came to believe that the good of language lay entirely in its relationship to truth. Language was a system through which right and wrong — truth and untruth — could be infallibly identified. Honesty, so long as it was absolute, was a means for individuals to understand all good and evil.

The liberal elite, as far as I am aware, do not make death threats. Is this because they have better manners? Do they in fact wish that their enemies were dead but would just never say so? And if they do wish it — albeit politely, in the manner of a white lie — is the sin somehow less cardinal for being courteous? The anti-liberals do not seem to find their own penchant for death threats problematic. In America, Trump even makes a veiled one against Clinton. We are told by the newspapers that Trump invited the Clintons to his wedding, that their daughters are good friends. Is this verbal violence, then, simply incompetence? Is it the verbal equivalent of someone who has not learned the piano sitting down and trying to play Rachmaninoff's Third?

The rudeness of these public figures gives pleasure and relief, it is clear, to their audiences. Perhaps what they experience is not the possibility of actual violence but a sort of intellectual unbuttoning, a freedom from the constraint of language. Perhaps they have lived lives in which they have been continually outplayed in the field of articulation, but of this new skill — rudeness — they find that they are the masters. My mother's death threats undoubtedly arose from her frustration with my own use of language. What I did not take into account when I spoke to her was the difference in our social positions. She was a housewife with little education and a rapidly retreating beauty, for whom life was a process of discovering that no greatness had been held in store for her. She did such things for me as cook and clean, while I was on my way to university and liberty. Yet to my mind, she had an extraordinary power, the power to blacken my mental outlook and ruin my prospect of life. When I spoke to her, I thought I was addressing a tyrant in whose overthrow my only weapons were words. But words were the very things that roused her to violence, because at her life's core, she had been separated from them. Her labor, her maternal identity, her status were all outside the language economy. Instead, she formulated a story of herself whose simplifications and lies infuriated me. I aimed to correct her with truth — perhaps I thought that if only I could insult her with sufficient accuracy, we would be reconciled — but she refused to be corrected, to be chastened. In the end, she won by being prepared to sacrifice the moral basis of language. She didn't care what she said, or rather, she exacted from words the licentious pleasures of misuse; in so doing, she took my weapon and broke it before my eyes. She made fun of me for the words I used, and I couldn't respond by threatening her with death. I couldn't say "I could kill you" because it wasn't true, and in language I had staked everything on telling the truth.

**If inequality is the basis** on which language breaks down, how is it best to speak?

In a clothes shop in London, I sift through the rails, looking for something to wear. The instant I came in, the assistant bounded up to me and recited what was obviously a set of phrases scripted by the management. I dislike being spoken to in this way, though I realize the assistant doesn't do so out of choice. I told her I was fine. I told her I would find her if I needed anything. But a few minutes later, she's back.

How's your day been so far? she says.

The truth? It's been a day of anxiety and self-criticism, of worry about children and money, and now to top it all off, I've made the mistake of coming here in the unfounded belief that it will make me look nicer, and that making myself look nicer will help.

It's been fine, I say.

There's a pause in which perhaps she is waiting for me to ask her about her own day in return, which I don't.

Are you looking for something special? she says.

Not really, I say.

So you're just browsing, she says.

There is a pause.

Did I tell you, she says, that we have other sizes downstairs?

You did, I say.

If you want something in another size, she says, you just have to ask me.

I will, I say.

I turn back to the rails and find that if anything, my delusion has been strengthened by this exchange, which has made me feel ugly and unlikable and in more need than ever of transformation. I take out a dress. It is blue. I look at it on its hanger.

Good choice, the assistant says. I love that dress. The color's amazing.

Immediately I put it back on the rail. I move away a little. After a while, I begin to forget about the assistant. I think about clothes, their strange promise, the way their problems so resemble the problems of love. I take out another dress, this one wine-colored and dramatic.

God, that would look amazing, the assistant says. Is it the right size?

According to the label, it is.

Yes, I say.

Shall I put it in the fitting room for you? she says. It's just easier, isn't it? Then you've got your hands free while you keep browsing.

**IF INEQUALITY  
IS THE BASIS ON  
WHICH LANGUAGE  
BREAKS DOWN,  
HOW IS IT BEST  
TO SPEAK?**

For the first time, I look at her. She has a broad face and a wide mouth with which she smiles continually, desperately. I wonder whether the width of her smile was a factor in her being given this job. She is older than I expected. Her face is lined, and despite her efforts, the mouth betrays some knowledge of sorrow.

Thank you very much, I say.

I give her the dress, and she goes away. I find that I no longer want to be in the shop. I don't want to try on the dress.

I don't want to take my clothes off or look at myself in a mirror. I consider quietly leaving while the assistant is gone, but the fact that I have caused the dress to be put in the fitting room is too significant. Perhaps it will be transformative after all. On my way there, I meet the assistant, who is on her way out. She widens her eyes and raises her hands in mock dismay.

I wasn't expecting you to be so quick! she exclaims. Didn't you find anything else you liked?

I'm in a bit of a hurry, I say.

God, I know exactly what you mean, she says. We're all in such a hurry. There just isn't time to stop, is there?

The fitting rooms are empty: There aren't any other customers. The assistant hovers behind me while I go into the cubicle where she has hung the dress. I wonder whether she will actually follow me

(Continued on Page 55)



# THE COMPOST KING

WHAT  
HAPPENS  
TO  
NEW YORKERS'  
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CHARLES  
VIGLIOTTI  
HOPES TO  
TURN  
THEM  
INTO PROFIT.

BY ELIZABETH  
ROYTE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
GRANT CORNETT

2/19/17









## ON AN OVERCAST

WINTER  
MORNING,  
CHARLES  
VIGLIOTTI,  
CHIEF  
EXECUTIVE  
OF  
AMERICAN  
ORGANIC  
ENERGY,

drove me to his 62-acre lot in rural Yaphank, N.Y., 60 miles east of Manhattan, to show me his vision of the future of alternative energy. He snaked his company Jeep around tall piles of wood chips, sandy loam and dead leaves. Then, with a sudden turn, we shot up the side of a 30-foot bluff of soil. At the top, we gazed down upon those many piles and breathed in the mildly sulfurous exhalations of a nearby dump. Vigliotti radiated enthusiasm. Within the next several months, he expected to break ground — “right there,” he said, thrusting his index finger toward a two-acre clearing — on a massive \$50 million anaerobic digester, a high-tech plant that would transform into clean energy a rich reserve that until recently has gone largely untapped: food waste.

This resource, Vigliotti knew, had a lot going for it. Like oil and coal, kitchen scraps can be converted into energy. But unlike oil and coal, which are expensive to dig out of the ground, food waste is something that cities will actually pay someone to haul away. Many innovative municipalities, in an effort to keep organic material out of dumps — where it generates methane, a greenhouse gas — already separate food from garbage and send it to old-fashioned compost facilities. There, workers pile the waste in linear heaps called windrows, mix it with leaves and grass clippings and let oxygen-dependent microbes transform the gunk into lovely dark fertilizer. But the more material you compost, the more space (and gas-guzzling bulldozers and windrow turners) you need to process it. It can get a little smelly, too, which is yet another reason New York City, which generates about one million tons of organic waste a year, will probably never host giant compost farms.

But anaerobic digestion, in which food is broken down by microbes inside tall, airtight silos, has a real shot at scaling near densely populated areas. The footprint of such plants is relatively small, and their odors are mechanically contained, if they are operated properly. Digesters do cost more to build and run than compost sites, but they more than make up for that by generating two separate revenue streams: fertilizer and biogas, which is chemically similar to natural gas and can be burned to make heat and electricity.

To hear Vigliotti explain it, the supply of feedstock for his anaerobic digester was unending, a veritable geyser of potential profit flowing from every part of the food chain: orphaned produce from wholesale markets, the crusty remains of all-you-can-eat buffets, fryer oil, kitchen grease and gloopy residential plate scrapings. All of this was simply waiting to be tapped by someone with the chutzpah and the capital to convert it into a product — renewable energy — for which there is unending demand. Vigliotti’s only real cost, not inconsiderable, was refining. And lawyers. “We face a staggering level of regulatory approval,” he told me.

In the crunchy-granola world of urban compost, populated by outdoorsy types in Carharts and work boots, Vigliotti stands out. He wears designer suits and a pinkie ring, slicks back his hair à la L.B.J. and commutes from his Oyster Bay home in a silver Porsche Panamera. The nephew of Vincent Vigliotti, an established Bronx trash carter, Charles spent the 1970s hanging off the back of a commercial garbage truck working the streets of Jackson Heights, Queens. “My uncle’s carting business and my carting business were completely separate,” Vigliotti told me, twice, the first time we met. (Later, I understood why: His uncle pleaded guilty in 1997 to charges of attempted racketeering, which stemmed from his participation in a Mafia-dominated cartel.)

Over the years, Vigliotti, who is 63, gradually evolved from a hauler of waste to a producer of fine fertilizers. And so he was well positioned when New York City contracted last year with six companies to transform the food waste it currently collects from the curbsides of almost a million residents. Four of those companies will send their scraps to traditional compost facilities. A fifth will truck its share to the Newtown Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant, operated by the New York City Department of Environmental Protection in north Brooklyn. There, chopped-up food will be stirred into giant tanks that already digest sewage, anaerobically, using microbes; the resulting biogas will be captured and used to power turbines on site or to heat nearby homes. Vigliotti’s contract, the

second-largest, allows him to annually shunt more than 23,000 tons of city food waste into his soon-to-be-built Yaphank plant, where it will mingle with 155,000 tons of scraps from two counties outside the city. When it is up and running, American Organic Energy will have the largest anaerobic digester east of the Mississippi. “I’d like to say I had a vision of environmental responsibility,” Vigliotti told me, with a wink, about the origins of his new endeavor. “But I saw food composting as a business opportunity.”

**THROUGHOUT THE MODERN** era of waste collection, New Yorkers, like other Americans, have been asked to pull all kinds of things from their kitchen trash cans for a supposedly higher purpose than burial at the dump. First it was paper, metal and plastic, then electronic goods and, in some places, textiles. Now we increasingly separate food waste. Sometimes we know where these recyclables will eventually alight — junk mail may be converted to printer paper, for example — but mostly we remain in the dark. There has always been an aura of mystery to these flows, in part because markets for recyclables continually change. For those who voluntarily set out food scraps for municipal collection — true believers, that is — the process provokes yet another layer of uncertainty. We assume our dregs are headed for a giant compost pile somewhere, but what happens to it next?

For a brief time, I could provide answers to such questions. As my own compost baron, I sorted and tipped my grapefruit rinds and eggshells into a front-yard composting bin; the resulting fertilizer fed my building’s crab-apple tree. But when I ran out of leaves to mix into the scraps, my “compost” grew extremely smelly. Odors, flies and quality control can bedevil even the most experienced food-waste recyclers, but I didn’t give up. Instead, a few years ago, I upgraded from a solo operation to something just a little bigger, joining the 200,000 other New Yorkers who weekly marched their organics to one of 74 drop-off sites — at farmers’ markets, subway stations, libraries — around New York City, collectively diverting 2.3 million pounds of food waste from the dump each year.

Lugging scraps to my farmers market was enormously satisfying. I liked returning my potato peels to the woman who grew my potatoes; I knew she’d make good use of them. The act also felt more immediately important than many other things I did to lessen my planetary impact, like driving less and line-drying more. When the Department of Sanitation’s curbside organics-collection program expanded to my Brooklyn neighborhood in 2015, I was grateful, but also a little wary. Placing my scraps on the curb in a securely





CHARLES VIGLIOTTI AT HIS COMPOST FACILITY IN YAPHANK, N.Y. PREVIOUS PHOTOGRAPH: SUPERMARKET FOOD WASTE AT THE YAPHANK FACILITY.

latched, hard-sided bin was certainly convenient, but my compost cycle was starting to spiral, from small-batch to medium to — well, I wasn't sure what. I had no idea where this centralized system deposited my scraps, or how — or if — they were transformed into something of value.

By 2018, the Department of Sanitation hopes to extend its curbside program — the largest residential-food-waste collection scheme in the country — citywide. But quantity doesn't always equal quality, and already there is evidence that

an industrial future may not match the integrity of the artisanal present. Longer supply chains mean burning more fuel to transport this resource, and recipients of scraps have little control over what New Yorkers throw into their bins. Because local composters, at urban farms, educate their suppliers, they don't need to remove plastic bags, twist-ties and other detritus from their feedstock. But the anonymity of industrial-scale operations means that such contaminants can easily slide through.

When New York's curbside program began several years ago, trucks trundled city scraps down the New Jersey Turnpike to the Peninsula Compost Company, a large facility in Wilmington, Del. But after Waste Management, the nation's largest solid-waste handler, bought a controlling interest in the plant six years ago, its compost quality declined — it contained too many shards of glass and pieces of plastic — and neighbors began to complain that the yard smelled like the bottom of a garbage pail. Environmental regulators forced Peninsula to shut down in 2014.

Since then, the city has been carting food waste to several local transfer stations, one of which I visited in Jamaica, Queens. Inside a dreary industrial shed at a private company called Regal Recycling, a team of workers in rubber boots and face masks combed through a 10-foot-tall pile of organic waste collected from various schools. Using long-handled hoes and their gloved fingers, the men painstakingly extracted plastic baggies, milk boxes, Capri Sun pouches, sporks and balls of aluminum foil. (As the volume of curbside organics climbs, Regal and other city transfer stations will install mechanical preprocessing equipment.)

Michael Reali, Regal's vice president, told me the city paid him about \$80 a ton to receive this material, and then he paid truckers to transport the waste upstate and a permitted composter \$35 per ton to receive it. Sometimes the load was clean, sometimes not. Reali pivoted away from the school waste and gestured toward a 20-foot mound shoved against the opposite wall. Collected from two fruit wholesalers, the pile was almost 100 percent mangoes and avocados, with very little extraneous material. (And it smelled great.) I was starting to understand that compost, like oil, has different grades. Pure commercial streams like this one were akin to West Texas light crude: clean and easy to process. School and residential streams were like tar sands: dirty and expensive to upgrade.

Reali's decontaminated table scraps eventually made their way to McEnroe Organic Farm, which stretches over 1,100-acres of rolling pastureland and cultivated fields in the mid-Hudson Valley. There I watched as front-end loaders mixed the food with locally sourced wood shavings and straw. The woody materials provided more carbon to complement the food's nitrogen



and bulk up the compost. Thoroughly mingled, the compost was then laid in rows and covered by a fleece blanket to cook; heat killed any pathogens and weed seeds. Twice a week for a month, workers remove the blankets and spider a mechanical windrow turner over the top, fluffing and mixing. After resting for several more months, the compost is fed into a screening machine. About 60 percent of McEnroe's 28,000 tons of finished material nourishes the farm, which raises organic vegetables, grains and pastured meat. The rest, selling for up to \$100 a cubic yard, helps balance its books.

The nation's industrialized compost operations bring in roughly \$3 billion annually; American firms bought \$21.2 billion of conventional fertilizers in 2016. I liked being part of this smaller economy, though. McEnroe's adorable Angus calves and grain-filled silos made it easy to imagine that my waste was circling virtuously, even as I blocked out the miserable labors of the transfer station downstate. The system worked, I liked to think. Compost could scale up; food could return to being food.

Then I got on the phone with Will Brinton, who runs the Woods End Laboratories in Mount Vernon, Me., and has spent his entire career studying the science of rot. Several years ago, Brinton began comparing the costs and benefits of composting food with those of anaerobically digesting it. He assumed that composting would come out on top. But, Brinton said, "I was horrified to see, at the end of the study, that we were investing more carbon in making compost than the compost returned to the earth." All those energy-sucking bulldozers and trucks and augers and screeners were taking their toll. Biogas created by anaerobically digesting corncobs and orange peels, in contrast, was carbon neutral. That's because the plant generates its own energy, and burning the fuel doesn't release new carbon into the atmosphere, as burning oil or coal does; it merely recycles the carbon already inside those scraps. Take the calculations a step further, by subtracting the methane that would have been generated by putting this food waste in landfills, and biofuel could be considered carbon negative.

In recognition of these facts, the Environmental Protection Agency now lists anaerobic digestion as preferable to composting when it comes to surplus food (of course, feeding surpluses to people, followed by animals, is even better). Even

the U.S. Composting Council, a trade group, acknowledges anaerobic digestion's beneficial role in producing energy.

**AT FIRST**, I didn't know what to make of Charles Vigliotti. You seldom hear the words "wealthy" and "composter" strung together. But as he explained his roundabout path to the energy sector, I began to sense Vigliotti's commitment to solving some serious environmental problems, even as he lined his silky pockets.

After city landfills began closing in the 1980s, Vigliotti found he was spending too much money directing waste out of state. He began to move

take in more volume and thus make more money.

Vigliotti initially composted his food scraps using a basic windrow technology similar to McEnroe's. That was fine for bakery waste and those won tons. But when he began accepting meat, fish, oils and road-killed deer, he ran into trouble: The site now produced eye-watering odors and attracted blankets of gulls. After a multiyear battle with angry locals, who supported organics recycling in theory but had little patience for its stinky reality, Vigliotti and other stakeholders devised a remedy. Instead of composting food in windrows, he would digest it in tanks. But in order to justify



THE YAPHANK COMPOST FACILITY.

away from the trash business and in 1991 established with his brother Arnold a compost company in Westbury, N.Y., that transforms Himalayas of landscape debris — grass clippings, leaves, wood chips — into millions of bags of lawn and garden products. Business was good, but Vigliotti remained restless. In 1999, he opened a compost site in Yaphank, where in 2008 he began dabbling in food waste, mixing scraps from a Whole Foods Market and a small-batch won-ton manufacturer into his formula for potting soils. At this point, Vigliotti wasn't thinking of food waste as a renewable energy source or a way to reduce the city's far-flung garbage footprint or greenhouse-gas emissions. It was simply a way to

the expense of building those tanks, Vigliotti would need to attract more food scraps. And if those came from households in addition to commercial establishments, he would need a lot of fancy equipment to screen out the sort of contaminants that bedeviled Reali's laborers in Queens and Waste Management's workers at Peninsula in Delaware.

And so the project grew. Today, American Organic Energy is supported by \$45 million in borrowed capital, plus grants from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (\$1.35 million) and Empire State Development (\$400,000).

Gazing down from that high bluff of soil in



Yaphank, Vigliotti laid out the mechanics of his new anaerobic operation. “The trucks are going to pull into a two-acre building and dump their load into a 10-foot-deep pit,” he explained. Air pressure inside would be lower than outside, so no odors would escape. Next, expensive German machinery would crush the cans and bottles that would inevitably ride in with the food; metals would be extracted and packages shredded, and with the addition of water, random plastic would float to the top of the tanks while glass and grit settled to the bottom. “We know we’re gonna get loads from supermarkets with unopened tuna cans and expired bacon packages,” Vigliotti said,

boroughs’ tsunami of residential food waste. (Nor do they particularly want to.)

Once isolated, Vigliotti’s organic material will move into six three-story tanks, where it will stew for 20 days, producing enough biogas to generate nearly 50 million kilowatt-hours of electricity a year. Twenty percent of the output will feed the plant’s electrical demand; PSE&G, a local electrical utility, will be able to buy the rest (unless American Organic Energy compresses its biogas to run trucks). Vigliotti won’t reveal his per-ton processing costs or his expected revenue, but he noted that selling the gas alone will bring in “seven figures,” even with the commodity’s price

Organic Energy will reuse the clean portion on site and sell the fraction that’s high in ammonium sulfate — a projected 912,500 gallons a year — as plant food (around \$20 for two and a half gallons, retail). “We’ll be targeting the affluent urban market with that,” Vigliotti said.

**EARLIER THIS YEAR**, Vigliotti received the last of his state permits, and he was hoping to break ground on his plant this spring. But he continued to talk up American Organic Energy to any civic group that would have him. I caught one of these presentations the previous year at a meeting of the Brooklyn Solid Waste Advisory Board,

which convened at Brooklyn Borough Hall. After walking the audience of laypeople and waste experts through his blueprints, he explained that digestion beats composting because it generates energy, and that digesting his way trumped digesting inside a wastewater-treatment plant because that plant’s back-end digestate contained sewage, plus traces of many other materials — including industrial waste and heavy metals — that go down city pipes. “You can’t market the end product!” he barked.

Nothing, it seemed, could stand in Vigliotti’s way. He was nearly levitating from his Italian loafers when he wrapped up his presentation with a sweeping offer. “If the city gives us a site in the boroughs,” he said, “we will build and operate a plant that handles 1,000 tons of food waste per day, and we will process it at rates lower than what anyone else is offering.” The room grew quiet. A thousand tons is the amount generated daily by all of the city’s institutional and commercial food establishments combined.

Was Vigliotti serious? “Absolutely,” he said. With his network of corporate partners, he dreamed of building beautifully managed, energy-producing digesters on smallish city plots across the nation. Here in New York, he added, his words tumbling ahead of his thoughts, “we could put together a proposal that would make everyone’s eyeballs and bells ring, and a bunch of carbon footprint stuff, compressed-natural-gas trucks. . . .” The crowd nodded, caught up in his enthusiasm for a food-waste-fueled clean-energy future. “Everyone here knows there is more material in this city than 10 facilities like ours could handle,” Vigliotti said, rather sternly. Then he packed up his schematic diagrams and headed for his Porsche. ♦



COMPOST MADE OF FOOD AND YARD WASTE AWAITING PACKAGING AND DISTRIBUTION.

“while residential food is going to be in a plastic bag with a soup can of broken glass in it — that’s the way Americans throw out their garbage.”

Vigliotti wasn’t bothered. “We are not changing human nature but building our plant to suit it,” he said. His philosophy was diametrically opposed to that of community composters, who insist that participants honor and defend the integrity of their organics, down to the removal of tiny stickers from lemons and limes. And for the most part, they do. But it was clear to me now that these artisanal operations — even if they do expand to schools, parks and other city-owned spaces with support from local government — will never be able to handle the

near a 10-year low because of the fracking boom.

But gas isn’t the only thing that American Organic Energy plans to sell. When the microbes are done feasting, Vigliotti continued, they’ll leave behind a watery digestate that machines will squeeze and separate into solids and liquids. Vigliotti will blend the solids with woody material — the stuff arrayed at our feet, of which he had an endless supply — and aerobically compost the mixture in windrows, then sell the resulting 40,000 tons per year of potting soil to regional garden centers through a deal with Scotts Miracle-Gro. Partnering with G.E. Water & Process Technologies, he will put the leftover liquids through a multistage filtering process, after which American



that most Americans disapproved of it. The A.C.A.'s unpopularity persisted despite a number of modifications meant to improve the program and thus quell discontent. As Kathleen Sebelius, the Health and Human Services secretary at the time, told me: "The notion from Day 1 was to make this work and listen carefully to the feedback, and to help dampen anxiety without gutting key provisions in the law. What made things difficult was that most of the law wasn't going to be implemented right away. There was this huge gap in time between designing the bill and actually having the benefits fully in place, which gave a lot of opportunity for the opposition to say, 'This will kill jobs, pestilence will come, vermin will fall from the sky' — and very little opportunity for us to say anything other than, 'Wait and see.'"

On this point, if nothing else, Sebelius and Needham could agree: The war on Obamacare would become far more difficult for opponents to wage once the actual benefits became available. New enrollees would begin receiving health care coverage on Jan. 1, 2014. It was a glum axiom among conservatives that once Americans were handed a new entitlement — Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, food stamps, unemployment insurance — they were loath to part with it. Moreover, once a gigantic program fully insinuates itself into the federal governing apparatus, disentangling it is a formidable task. "One of my political heroes in town is Don Rumsfeld," Feulner told me. "And one of Rumsfeld's rules is that you want to act as quickly and aggressively as you can, because every day someone in the bureaucracy is narrowing the options you'll have two days later. That's clearly what's happening with Obamacare. Every day the options for full repeal get fewer and fewer."

**On Sept. 24, 2013,** House Republicans, goaded by Heritage Action and Ted Cruz, drafted legislation in which they agreed to raise the debt ceiling if Obama agreed to a number of conditions, including delaying implementation of his health care law by one year. Senate Democrats objected, but House Republicans wouldn't budge. As a consequence, the United States Treasury warned it would soon default on its obligations, and on Oct. 1 the government began shutting down. A couple of days later, Tim Chapman met with several senior Republican staff members and members of conservative activist groups in a House conference room.

The shutdown was the crisis point Heritage Action had hoped for — that cherished moment when Republicans finally took a bold, principled stand. The public would express outrage that the president was willing to hold America's full faith and credit hostage over the much-disliked Obamacare. Democrats would go wobblingly

Republicans in both the House and the Senate would stand firm. In the end, Obama would cave. Or so Needham and Chapman hoped. "Kudos to leadership for doing the right thing," Chapman told the group. "Now let's prosecute this case!"

His enthusiasm was met with a wall of silence. The others in the room stared at him with a willing resentment. Finally, a tax-policy analyst at Americans for Tax Reform said to Chapman: "You've been saying the Republicans need to be brave. Well, we're doing that. We've shut the government down. But what does Heritage Action intend to do to put pressure on the Democrats? So far, the only money you've spent over the past few months has been a half-million dollars attacking Republicans."

Chapman went visibly red-faced. Only a couple of days into the shutdown, it was now occurring to the chief operating officer of Heritage Action that he and Needham had been abandoned by conservative leaders. Within days, the Republicans in the Senate buckled and, with the House Republican leaders in tow, signed a debt-ceiling deal with Obama that said almost nothing about health care. Congress was blamed by the public for causing the shutdown, and its approval ratings plummeted.

Throughout the shutdown, Needham insisted that the public would eventually reward Republicans for standing up to Obamacare. "Look," he told me at the time, "there's more Americans who are aware right now of the fact that we have one political party that owns Obamacare and was willing to go to the great lengths of shutting down the World War II Memorial in order to preserve it, and another party that tried to stop it. And Americans deserve that type of clarity."

This opinion was apparently not shared by Speaker Boehner. In December 2013, he told reporters that groups like Heritage Action had "lost all credibility." A month later, on the "Tonight" show, he called the government shutdown a "predictable disaster."

But the continuing intransigence of the repeal advocates was beginning to wear down the White House. Initially, Sebelius says, "we were more focused on the Republican attorneys general across the country who challenged the constitutionality of the law. Until that was resolved by the Supreme Court in June 2012, that was our focus. The congressional action was viewed more as sour grapes and not altogether realistic. Clearly the president wasn't going to sign anything that would strike down his brand-new law." By the time of the shutdown, though, the repealers appeared to have succeeded in getting inside the Obama administration's collective head. As Oct. 1, 2013 — the date HealthCare.gov was to be open for enrollments — approached, little time was available to subject the website to tests that could expose its shortcomings. But "the one thing that wasn't feasible, knowing how vehemently the Republicans were determined

to stop it at any cost, was moving the deadline," she said. "That would have mobilized the opposition to the point that we might never have been able to launch it at all."

And so the White House rolled out a deeply flawed website. By this time, the Republican critique of Obamacare was already becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy. The A.C.A. had been passed with only about one-tenth of the funding that it would need to be fully operational, with the expectation that the rest would be portioned out by Congress annually, through the appropriations process that funds discretionary government programs. From 2011 through 2014, as the House Republicans played round after round of fiscal brinkmanship, Obama reluctantly signed last-minute budget deals that continually shortchanged Obamacare.

"They did a very effective job making sure there would never be enough to fund implementation," Sebelius told me. "And they came after the budget over and over. Anything that looked like it could be used, they made sure was gone." That was especially the case, Sebelius said, when it came to educating the public about the program's benefits — funding that would have made a difference in the 19 states where governors and legislatures had refused to expand Medicaid and had no interest in promoting Obamacare. "Any effort to put in dollars for outreach on the federal level," she said, "were immediately stripped out."

**It's impossible to know** for sure how much of a role the hobbling of Obamacare played in the outcome of the 2014 midterm elections, in which the Republicans captured the Senate and expanded their majority in the House. But Republicans uniformly campaigned against the program, while Democrats found themselves at pains to demonstrate its virtues. As a bonus for Needham and Chapman, Eric Cantor, the House majority leader had been drubbed in the primary by a Tea Party-backed Republican. In September 2015, Boehner would step down as well.

A month after Boehner resigned, the House considered yet another bill targeting Obamacare. But this one was different from its predecessors. Sponsored by Representative Tom Price, who in just over a year would be Trump's pick as secretary of Health and Human Services, H.R. 3762 was a "reconciliation bill," a budgetary measure to defund the health care program that would, in accordance with Senate rules, require only 51 votes to pass in the upper chamber. That threshold was attainable, now that the Republicans had 54 Senate seats. The bigger hurdle was a more arcane one: To qualify for this lower passage threshold as a reconciliation bill, every item in the legislation had to be deemed a budgetary fix, rather than an extraneous provision, by the Senate parliamentarian. Accordingly, it did not include repealing the individual mandate and Medicaid expansion. Better to let the Senate legislative aides confer on those matters with

the parliamentarian, one staff member who helped write the bill told me.

That approach was not good enough for Needham and Chapman. Heritage Action announced its strong disapproval of the reconciliation bill, instructed members to vote it down and warned that the measure would be key-voted. Insisting that it was “universally acknowledged” that the repeal of the exchange subsidies and Medicaid expansion would qualify as reconcilable items, Heritage Action stated that it would be satisfied with nothing less.

The new speaker of the House, Paul Ryan, ignored Heritage Action. On Oct. 23, the reconciliation bill went to the House floor, where all but seven Republicans voted for it. Apoplectic, Needham termed the act a “charade” that “undermines the party’s longstanding position of full repeal.” He added, “We expect the Senate to do better.”

The Senate Republicans did. Their version of the bill included repeal of the individual mandate and Medicaid expansion. The parliamentarian ruled that both provisions were extraneous and did not therefore qualify in their present form for a simple-majority vote.

A watered-down version of the bill, which kept the individual mandate and Medicaid expansion but stripped away the ability to enforce either, then passed the Senate and was reapproved by the House. It was sent over to President Obama.

On Jan. 8, 2016, he vetoed it. Obama’s final defense of his namesake program would come almost exactly 10 months later, when he received President-elect Trump in the Oval Office and urged him not to eviscerate Obamacare.

Obama’s words, Trump said the following day to The Wall Street Journal, had made him reconsider abolishing the law in full. But 10 weeks later, as one of the very first acts of his presidency, Trump signed an executive order whose mission statement was the “prompt repeal” of Obamacare in its entirety.

**The Affordable Care Act’s** approval rating has rarely exceeded 50 percent. And over time, as it has strained under the multitude of compromises that were necessary for its passage, it has proved itself worthy of several of the criticisms aimed at it. Though for 80 percent of health care recipients (including those receiving health care from Medicare, Medicaid or their employers) annual rate increases are at historic lows, for the rest the story has been different. The premiums have been rising because of a variety of structural reasons, and because federal assistance to recipients to offset the costs has been in many cases inadequate. Or, as the health-policy analyst Robert Laszewski puts it, “They created a Cadillac with Chevrolet subsidies.” But it is also because unit costs have continued to soar — like the price of prescription drugs, thanks to the sweetheart deal that

the pharmaceutical industry cut with the Democrats in exchange for being an early supporter of the law. Some rural states like Alaska have seen very little competition among insurers — something that a public option might have addressed, had the insurance lobby not spent a fortune to defeat that provision. Of the 23 nonprofit insurance co-ops set up by the Affordable Care Act to compete in such areas, only a handful remain — probably at least in part because the co-ops received from Congress only \$2.4 billion of the \$6 billion originally appropriated to establish them.

To make Obamacare economically feasible for insurers, the program needed to attract a large pool of young and healthy recipients to offset the costs of providing care for the older and less healthy. That ratio has yet to prove satisfactory for many insurance companies — one of which, Aetna, announced last year that it would be abandoning the program in several states. (Aetna publicly blamed Obamacare, saying that it was losing money participating in the exchanges, but a federal judge ruled that Aetna’s real motive was to escape scrutiny for its possibly illegal merger with Humana, and court documents have shown that the company was making money in some states where it was claiming not to.)

Then again, it was always the industry’s expectation that the law would prove flawed in places, and that those shortcomings would be addressed

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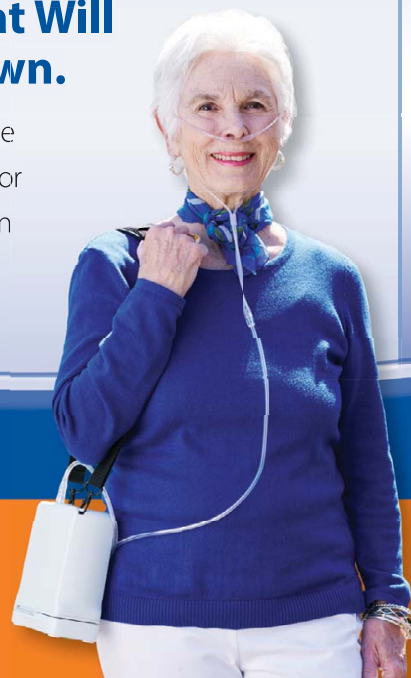
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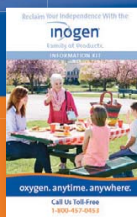
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legislatively. As Karen Ignagni, the lead lobbyist for the health-insurance industry during the formation and passage of Obamacare and now president and C.E.O. of Empire Health, tactfully puts it: “On the Affordable Care Act, there was a strong difference of opinion between Democrats and Republicans going back to the initial days of discussion. And so there was never a coming-together.”

In spite of all this, Obamacare has done far more good than its critics predicted it would. As of 2014, insurers cannot deny coverage to anyone based on their current health status — a meaningful protection for the 133 million Americans with chronic illnesses. Over 15 million poor or near-poor citizens are now receiving Medicaid benefits in the 31 states (as well as the District of Columbia) that have opted for this expansion. Another 3 million Americans under the age of 26 have been allowed to stay on their parents’ health care plans, thanks to the provision in the A.C.A. that Heritage Action warmly refers to as the “slacker mandate.” Meanwhile, during each month that Obamacare has been in existence, the private sector has grown. The bill has not proved to be the “job killer” apocalyptically described by its Republican opponents.

Now that the law is in place, trying to tinker with it in a measured fashion, deciding which parts to discard and which to keep, would be more complicated than simply determining what the public likes and what it doesn’t. As Jim McDermott says: “You can’t just reach in and pull out one thing. It’d be like a doctor doing surgery and saying, ‘Well, since you’re not using your spleen today, let’s take it out.’ It’s all wired together in a very complex way.”

That wiring represents, among other things, the compromises worked out with the various players in the health care ecosystem — doctors’ and nurses’ associations, hospital groups, insurers, drug companies — that enabled the passage of Obamacare in the first place. As Ignagni points out: “It was very unique that all of the different industries were willing to sit at the table and engage in problem-solving together. I don’t really recall any time when that has happened in our economy on any issue.” Collectively, those groups spent close to \$273 million on lobbying during the height of the Obamacare debate. They will surely spend a similar sum haranguing Congress to pass a replacement that favors them.

Many conservative remedies have been floated over the years and have been consolidated into Speaker Paul Ryan’s 37-page “A Better Way” summation: expanded health savings accounts, assorted tax credits and refunds, medical-liability reform, portability of insurance from one job to the next and the ability to purchase insurance across state lines. But the problem for Republicans is that Obamacare’s sweeping coverage has changed the paradigm. Of the 31 states that have opted for expanded Medicaid coverage, 16 have

Republican governors. None of these governors have expressed a desire to throw their states’ residents off the rolls. At the same time, the fitful and at times rhetorically muddled transition from the known (Obamacare) to the unknown (“something terrific”) has risked throwing the health care industry into turmoil. The aftershocks are likely to be not only economic but also political.

“If you take Obamacare as it looks right now,” says the policy analyst Robert Laszewski, a longtime critic of the legislation, about half of enrollees “don’t get a subsidy because their incomes are too high. They make \$90,000 or \$100,000 a year but are in the individual market. These tend to be Trump supporters. So if he further destabilizes this thing and there are 20-to-50-percent rate increases, he’ll be screwing his own people.”

**Last month, Representative** Steve King once again offered his full-repeal legislation, maintaining that in doing away with Obamacare, the country would immediately be “far better off,” even if nothing were done to replace it. To King and Heritage Action, failing to seize this moment of opportunity would constitute a grave betrayal. “It’s pretty clear that the conservative base is expecting Congress to do this,” Chapman told me. “If Congress goes back to the voters in 2018 and people are still enrolling in Obamacare, I think that’s going to be disastrous.” Speaking of the base, Chapman predicted, “They’re basically going to splinter off and create a third party.”

But it took more than the conservative base to elect Donald Trump, and it will take more than them to re-elect many Republican senators and representatives in 2018 and 2020. The rest of the public has begun a decided turn against King’s and Heritage Action’s position. The same Fox News poll last month that found Obamacare’s overall favorability to be 50 percent also found that only 23 percent of respondents favored fully repealing it — a new low since the law was signed nearly seven years ago.

After Trump remarked to The Washington Post on Jan. 15 that he planned to provide “insurance for everybody,” I thought I had better gauge Michael Needham’s reaction. Taken at face value, Trump did not sound much like a man hellbent on tilting health care policy rightward. “I’m concerned when I hear that kind of talk,” King had told me. “I don’t know how deeply he’s gone into the details.”

But Needham chuckled breezily when I brought up Trump’s statement. “I think right now there’s a lot of people who want to jump on words,” he said. “Everybody wants to ensure every American has access to high-quality health care. That is pretty clearly what Trump was saying. What’s the overused phrase? Trump supporters take him seriously, not literally.”

Nor did it seem to bother him that Republicans on the Hill were in a frenzy to develop a consensus for replacement legislation. Up to now, Needham reminded me, the goal had been to inculcate

in the party a ceaseless lust for Obamacare repeal. “For the last eight years,” he said, “it hasn’t made sense to litigate the nuance of, Do you use a tax credit or a tax deduction, or what are your views of block-granting?” The Republicans might not end up with a single gargantuan replacement bill, and maybe that was as it should be. “We’re probably in an age where smaller, humbler pieces of legislation are easier to get consensus around.”

This struck me as sensible and, at the same time, somewhat naïve. If, as in Heritage Action’s dream scenario, Obamacare were to be immediately vaporized, it would leave a yawning vacuum — and the first thing to fill it would be anxiety. Every gruesome case of once-insured families now left to die would be duly chronicled by the media. Legislators would panic — but, if recent history is any judge, their reaction would be tame compared with that of the man who now thoroughly owned the post-Obamacare landscape. Was it really so hard, I asked Needham, to imagine Trump faltering under the specter of bad press and equally bad approval ratings and hastily offering up a Trumpcare that bore a suspicious resemblance to Obamacare?

Needham paused for a moment before saying, in a vaguely amazed voice: “I’m a little surprised by the question. Right now, I don’t see much evidence of that playing out.” Trump’s vice president was Mike Pence, “my first hero when I came to Washington.” Tom Price, the nominee for Health and Human Services secretary, and Mick Mulvaney, whom Trump tapped to run the Office of Management and Budget, were longtime supporters of Heritage Action. The former senator Jim DeMint, Ed Feulner’s replacement as president of the Heritage Foundation, was helping to shape the selection of Trump’s prospective Supreme Court nominees. Trump’s team was loaded with Heritage staff members. All this counted for as much as whatever the new president himself thought. “Richard Viguerie, one of the icons of the conservative movement, said to me that what was great about Reagan was that when he walked into the room, you saw your friends and allies walking with him,” Needham told me.

It was a pleasing image, conveying undying fellowship. Yet even Reagan, fierce inveigher against socialized medicine that he was, did not make a dent in Medicare, the program he so loathed, during his two terms in office. Quite the contrary, in fact: He briefly expanded its benefits to include catastrophic care for the elderly before Congress struck down the measure less than a year after Reagan left office.

Now came the president whom Needham once accused of embracing socialized medicine. Maybe he would somehow turn out to be a more reliable friend to the conservative movement than Reagan had been. Or maybe Washington would prove, hardly for the first time, that even the best of friends will let you down. ♦

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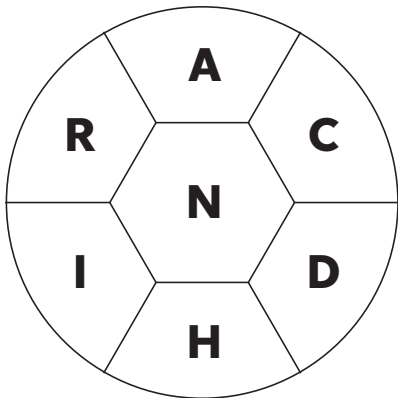


SPELLING BEE

By Frank Longo

How many common words of 5 or more letters can you spell using the letters in the hive? Every answer must use the center letter at least once. Letters may be reused in a word. At least one word will use all 7 letters. Proper names and hyphenated words are not allowed. Score 1 point for each answer, and 3 points for a word that uses all 7 letters.

Rating: 6 = good; 12 = excellent; 18 = genius



Our list of words, worth 25 points, appears with last week's answers.

DOUBLE OR NOTHING

By Patrick Berry

Each space in this crossword will contain either 2 letters or no letters. Words read across or down as usual, but may skip one or more spaces.

ACROSS

- 1. Most expansive 5. Auctioned-off vehicle, perhaps
- 6. Picnic crashers 7. Bring to the ground 8. Hitchcock film that spawned three sequels 9. Flies off the handle

DOWN

- 1. Surveillance setups 2. Black & \_\_\_\_ (power tool brand)
- 3. Sports trophy dubbed "The Holy Grail" (2 wds.)
- 4. Aimless attacks

|   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| 5 |   |   |   |
| 6 |   |   |   |
| 7 |   |   |   |
| 8 |   |   |   |
| 9 |   |   |   |

CAPSULES

By Wei-Hwa Huang

Place numbers in the grid so that each outlined region contains the numbers 1 to n, where n is the number of squares in the region. The same number can never touch itself, not even diagonally.

Ex.

|   |  |  |  |   |
|---|--|--|--|---|
|   |  |  |  |   |
|   |  |  |  |   |
| 4 |  |  |  | 1 |

 → 

|   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| 3 | 5 | 3 | 4 | 3 |
| 4 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 |

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
|   |   |   | 5 |   |   |   |
| 4 |   |   |   |   |   | 5 |
|   |   | 6 |   | 1 |   |   |
|   | 4 |   |   |   | 5 |   |
| 2 |   |   |   |   |   | 3 |
|   |   | 4 |   | 3 |   |   |
| 5 |   |   |   |   |   | 6 |

ACROSTIC

By Emily Cox & Henry Rathvon

Guess the words defined below and write them over their numbered dashes. Then transfer each letter to the correspondingly numbered square in the pattern. Black squares indicate word endings. The filled pattern will contain a quotation reading from left to right. The first letters of the guessed words will form an acrostic giving the author's name and the title of the work.

|     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |     |    |     |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |    |     |     |     |     |     |     |    |     |    |   |
|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|-----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|----|-----|----|---|
| 1   | Q   | 2   | J   | 3   | O   | 4   | H   |    | 5   | W   | 6   | R   | 7   | M   | 8   | G   | 9   | A   | 10  | S   |     | 11 | T   | 12  | L   | 13  | K   | 14  | U   | 15  | D  | 16  | B  | 17  | J   | 18  | X   | 19  | O   | 20 | V   | 21  | Q   | 22  | I   |     | 23 | E   | 24 | G |
| 25  | N   | 26  | A   | 27  | W   | 28  | F   | 29 | P   | 30  | R   |     | 31  | C   | 32  | B   | 33  | U   | 34  | H   |     | 35 | S   | 36  | Q   | 37  | X   |     | 38  | N   | 39 | M   | 40 | I   | 41  | D   | 42  | G   | 43  | J  | 44  | L   | 45  | P   | 46  | O   | 47 | E   | 48 | K |
|     | 49  | U   | 50  | V   | 51  | F   | 52  | A  | 53  | B   |     | 54  | H   | 55  | S   |     | 56  | C   | 57  | P   | 58  | I  | 59  | W   | 60  | T   |     | 61  | N   | 62  | X  | 63  | J  | 64  | V   | 65  | B   | 66  | D   | 67 | F   | 68  | E   | 69  | A   |     | 70 | L   |    |   |
| 71  | P   | 72  | R   |     | 73  | H   | 74  | K  | 75  | S   | 76  | M   | 77  | J   | 78  | X   | 79  | W   |     | 80  | I   |    | 81  | G   | 82  | Q   | 83  | T   |     | 84  | B  | 85  | D  | 86  | O   | 87  | H   | 88  | P   |    | 89  | K   | 90  | A   | 91  | C   | 92 | E   |    |   |
| 93  | M   | 94  | J   | 95  | X   | 96  | G   |    | 97  | N   | 98  | R   |     | 99  | W   | 100 | F   | 101 | S   | 102 | L   |    | 103 | H   | 104 | C   | 105 | Q   | 106 | V   |    | 107 | P  | 108 | K   | 109 | G   | 110 | B   |    | 111 | A   |     | 112 | R   | 113 | T  |     |    |   |
| 114 | N   | 115 | W   | 116 | U   | 117 | F   |    | 118 | X   | 119 | H   | 120 | I   | 121 | J   | 122 | C   | 123 | D   | 124 | P  |     | 125 | M   | 126 | A   | 127 | R   | 128 | B  | 129 | V  |     | 130 | U   | 131 | O   | 132 | N  |     | 133 | G   | 134 | I   | 135 | F  | 136 | H  |   |
|     | 137 | Q   | 138 | K   | 139 | W   | 140 | D  | 141 | E   | 142 | R   | 143 | A   |     | 144 | J   | 145 | G   |     | 146 | O  |     | 147 | X   | 148 | N   | 149 | B   | 150 | C  | 151 | U  | 152 | I   | 153 | M   | 154 | L   |    | 155 | D   | 156 | P   | 157 | K   |    |     |    |   |
| 158 | G   | 159 | O   |     | 160 | H   | 161 | E  |     | 162 | A   | 163 | R   | 164 | B   |     | 165 | C   | 166 | X   | 167 | N  | 168 | S   | 169 | V   | 170 | U   |     | 171 | W  | 172 | D  | 173 | M   |     | 174 | P   | 175 | F  | 176 | L   | 177 | E   | 178 | O   |    |     |    |   |

A. Invention described in the 1887 book "Unua Libro" (and the subject of this puzzle's quotation)

26 69 162 126 143 111 90 52 9

B. Quaint headwear with a large brim

53 65 110 84 32 149 128 16 164

C. Harbor vessel

91 122 150 165 56 104 31

D. Going-for-a-knockout blow

172 66 155 41 140 15 85 123

E. Prophet's book of seven visions

161 23 68 141 92 47 177

F. As a ballpark figure

51 175 100 67 28 135 117

G. Guard against disaster (2 wds.)

133 24 145 109 158 96 81 42 8

H. Where to find your zygoma

73 103 4 136 34 160 54 87 119

I. Cry of adoration or acclamation

58 134 40 80 22 120 152

J. Bad place for a fly, it's said

144 2 17 121 43 94 63 77

K. Hoops to jump through before action is taken (2 wds.)

74 89 48 157 13 138 108

L. Negotiate a trade agreement?

44 70 12 102 154 176

M. Chest protector (2 wds.)

93 39 125 7 76 153 173

N. Made more angry or intense

97 114 167 61 148 25 132 38

O. People and lingo of "Game of Thrones"

178 159 19 131 46 146 3 86

P. Intermediary agent (hyph.)

88 29 107 45 57 174 156 124 71

Q. Tongue of Galadriel in Middle-earth

82 1 105 21 137 36

R. Where four Alous played

6 163 98 30 127 142 112 72

S. Boreal ecosystem

55 168 10 75 101 35

T. Crewman fluent in Klingon

83 113 60 11

U. Wealth-flaunting

33 49 151 116 170 14 130

V. Genre named in a song by Toots and the Maytals

169 20 64 129 50 106

W. Out of one's mind, unbalanced

79 59 99 115 27 171 139 5

X. What Death Valley sits below (2 wds.)

18 37 62 95 78 118 166 147

## Rudeness

(Continued from Page 43)

in. I pull the curtain behind me and feel a sense of relief. My reflection in the mirror is glaring and strange. I have stood in such boxlike spaces before, alone with myself, and these moments seem connected to one another in a way I can't quite specify. It is as though life is a board game, and here is the starting point to which I keep finding myself unexpectedly returned. I take off my clothes. This suddenly seems like an extraordinary thing to do in an unfamiliar room in a street in central London. Through the gap in the curtain I can see into a dingy back room whose door has been left open. There are pipes running up the walls, a small fridge, a kettle, a box of tea bags. Someone has hung a coat on a hook. I realize that the theater of this shop is about to break down, and that the assistant's manner — her bad acting, her inability to disguise herself in her role — is partly to blame.

How is everything? she says.

I am standing there in my underwear, and her voice is so loud and close that I nearly jump out of my skin.

How's it going in there? How are you getting on?

I realize that she must be speaking to me.

I'm fine, I say.

How's the fit? she says. Do you need any other sizes?

I can hear the rustle of her clothes and the scraping sound of her nylon tights. She is standing right outside the curtain.

No, I say. Really, I'm fine.

Why don't you come out? she says. I can give you a second opinion.

Suddenly I am angry. I forget to feel sorry for her; I forget that she did not choose to say these things; I forget that she is perhaps in the wrong job. I feel trapped, humiliated, misunderstood. I feel that people always have a choice where language is concerned, that the moral and relational basis of our existence depends on that principle. I wish to tell her that there are those who have sacrificed themselves to defend it. If we stop speaking to one another as individuals, I want to say to her, if we allow language to become a tool of coercion, then we are lost.

No, I say. Actually, I don't want to come out.

There is a silence outside the curtain. Then I hear the rustling of her clothes as she starts to move away.

All right then, she says, in a voice that for the first time I can identify as hers. It is a flat voice, disaffected, a voice that expresses no surprise when things turn out badly.

I put my clothes back on and take the dress on its hanger and leave the cubicle. The assistant is standing with her back to me on the empty shop floor, her arms folded across her chest, looking out the window. She does not ask me how I got on or whether I liked the dress and intend to buy it. She does not offer to take the dress from me

and hang it back on its rail. She is offended, and she is very deliberately showing it. We are, then, equal at least in our lack of self-control. I hang up the dress myself.

It wasn't my day, I say to her, by way of an apology.

She gives a small start and utters a sound. She is trying to say something: She is searching, I see, for one of her scripted phrases in the effort to reassume her persona. Falteringly, she half-smiles, but her mouth is turned down at the corners like a clown's. I imagine her going home this evening, unhappy.

When I tell the story afterward, making myself both its villain and its butt, it goes like this: I, currently dismayed by the sudden ascent of rudeness in our world and wondering what it means, am betrayed into rudeness myself by a personal sensitivity to language that causes me to do the very thing I despise, which is fail to recognize another human's individuality. But the person I tell it to doesn't hear it that way at all. He hears it as a story about how annoying shop assistants are.

I hate it when they do that, he says. It was good you made an issue of it. Maybe she'll give feedback to the management, and they'll stop making people say all that stuff.

**What Jesus did** was sacrifice himself, use his body to translate word to deed, to make evil visible. While being crucified, he remained for the most part polite. He gave others much to regret. Their regret sustained 2,000 years of Christianity. Is regret, then, the most powerful emotion after all?

My mother and I don't speak to each other anymore, but I've been thinking about her lately. I've been thinking about facts, about how they get stronger and clearer, while points of view fade or change. The loss of the parent-child relationship is a fact. It is also a failure. It is regrettable. The last time my parents spoke to me, my father said something very rude. He said I was full of shit. He put the phone down straight away after he said it, and I have not heard from him again. For a long time afterward, I was profoundly disturbed by his words: For my father to speak to me of shit, and claim that I was full of it, seemed to remove my basis for existing. Yet he was half of me: It was, I realized, for that reason that he felt he could speak to me the way he did. I was his child; he forgot that I was as real as he. It could be said that one-half of our country has told the other it is full of shit, deliberately choosing those words because it knows that their object finds rudeness — the desecration of language — especially upsetting.

In Sophocles' play "Philoctetes," the man who suffers most is also the man with the most powerful weapon, an infallible bow that could be said to represent the concept of accuracy. The hardhearted Odysseus abandoned the wounded Philoctetes on an island, only to discover 10 years later that the Trojan War could not be won without Philoctetes' bow. He returns to the island determined to get

the bow by any means. For his part, Philoctetes has spent 10 years in almost unendurable pain: It is decreed that he cannot be healed other than by the physician Asclepius at Troy, yet he would rather die than help Odysseus by returning with him. Time has done nothing to break down the impasse: Philoctetes still can't forgive Odysseus; Odysseus still can't grasp the moral sensitivity of Philoctetes. It is for the third actor, Neoptolemus, a boy of pure heart, to resolve the standoff and bring an end to war and pain. Odysseus urges Neoptolemus to befriend Philoctetes in order to steal the bow, claiming it is for the greater good. Philoctetes, meanwhile, tells Neoptolemus the story of his dreadful sufferings and elicits his empathy and pity. In his dilemma, Neoptolemus realizes two things: that wrong is never justified by being carried out under orders, and that the bow is meaningless without Philoctetes himself. The moral power of individuality and the poetic power of suffering are the two indispensable components of truth. For his part, Neoptolemus might be said to represent the concept of good manners. In this drama, the expressive man and the rude man need each other, but without the man of manners, they will never be reconciled.

**"Make her stop!"** my daughters used to beg me when they were younger and one was doing something the other didn't like. In other words: Restore to me the primacy of my version; rid me of this challenge to the experience of being me. One might say that what they wanted was justice, impartiality — but impartiality, I usually discovered, was not easy to attain. There were always two sides to their stories, and I lacked the ability to turn them into one. I have prided myself on my willingness to object to injustices, to speak my mind when I thought I saw wrong being done. But perhaps all I was ever doing was trying to make it stop, trying to return the world to something I could bear to live in, without necessarily understanding it first.

It strikes me that good manners would be the thing to aim for in the current situation. I have made a resolution, which is to be more polite. I don't know what good it will do: This might be a dangerous time for politeness. It might involve sacrifices. It might involve turning the other cheek. A friend of mine says this is the beginning of the end of the global order: He says that in a couple of decades' time, we'll be eating rats and tulip bulbs, as people have done before in times of social collapse. I consider the role that good manners might play in the sphere of rat-eating, and it seems to me an important one. As one who has never been tested, who has never endured famine or war or extremism or even discrimination, and who therefore perhaps does not know whether she is true or false, brave or a coward, selfless or self-serving, righteous or misled, it would be good to have something to navigate by. ♦



# UH-OH!

By Bruce Haight

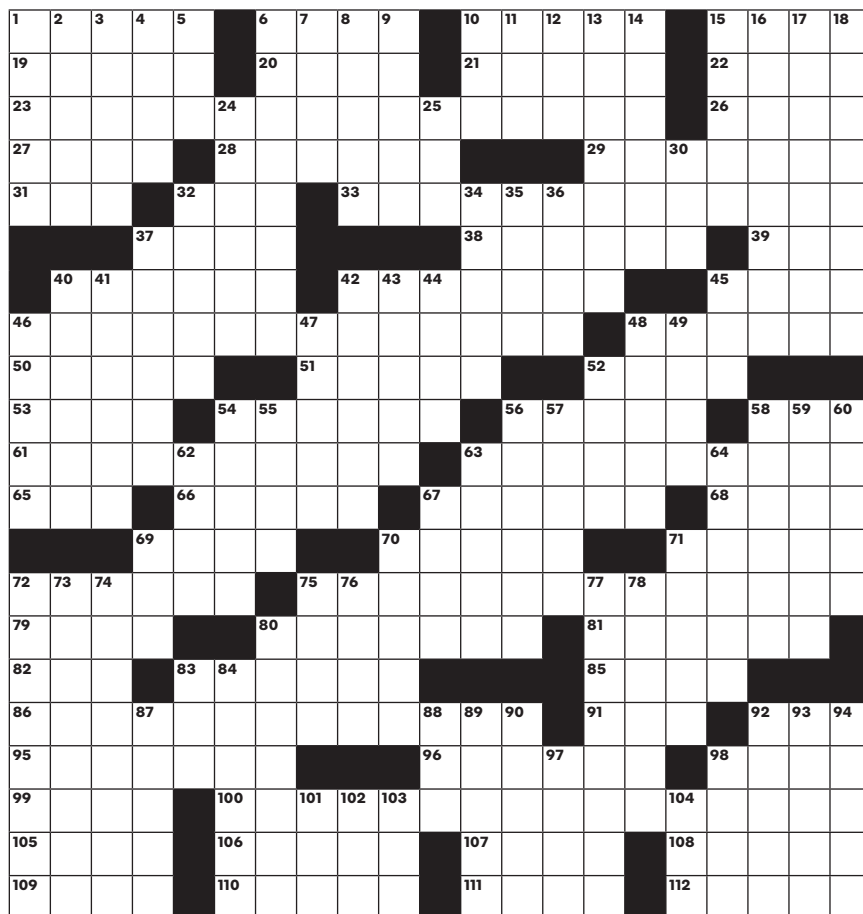
## ACROSS

- 1 Bloblike "Star Wars" character  
6 Give over  
10 Great shakes?  
15 Low rolls  
19 Auto feature  
20 Julia of Hollywood  
21 Ham-handed  
22 Enthrall  
23 Office for decoding messages?  
26 The average size of its stores is 300,000 square feet  
27 Had more than an inkling  
28 "Rats!"  
29 Bringing to mind  
31 "Indubitably!"  
32 Anxious condition, briefly  
33 What one might sit in at a Cheech & Chong movie?  
37 "Puppy Love" singer, 1960  
38 Election Day affirmation  
39 Oomph  
40 Hauled (away)  
42 WikiLeaks associates  
45 Inspiration  
46 Herder's mantra?
- 48 Virtual dog or cat, maybe  
50 Glaciate  
51 Fake news site, with "The"  
52 Sign on a jar at a bar  
53 Mass. neighbor  
54 In a pretentious manner  
56 Series opener  
58 Fall behind  
61 Quality-control problem at Oscar Mayer?  
63 Title of a book about Southern Reconstruction?  
65 Nav. rank  
66 Word before or after nothing  
67 Doohickeys  
68 Sword handle  
69 They may be decorated for the holidays  
70 Sauce  
71 Nickname for a Miami 12-time N.B.A. All-Star  
72 Goddess usually pictured with a helmet  
75 Two sights in a yacht's galley?

- 79 Prey for a heron or garter snake  
80 French pilgrimage site  
81 Stranger  
82 Off-road transport, informally  
83 \_\_\_ Johnson, a.k.a. The Rock  
85 Sound heard by an exam proctor, say  
86 Helpful things for killing time nowadays?  
91 Fraternity letter  
92 Number of French kings named Charles  
95 Catch's partner  
96 Prefix with therapy  
98 Draw  
99 "Sign me up!"  
100 Pigeon trainer, at times?  
105 Crook, e.g.  
106 Book of \_\_\_ (ancient Jewish text)  
107 "Who \_\_\_?"  
108 Kind of pad  
109 Past partners  
110 1988 Olympics site  
111 Studied  
112 Ancient manuscript

## DOWN

- 1 Of poor quality, in modern slang  
2 Set apart  
3 College in Lewiston, Me.  
4 Steep  
5 Big movie-theater chain  
6 Miniature lobster lookalikes  
7 Every

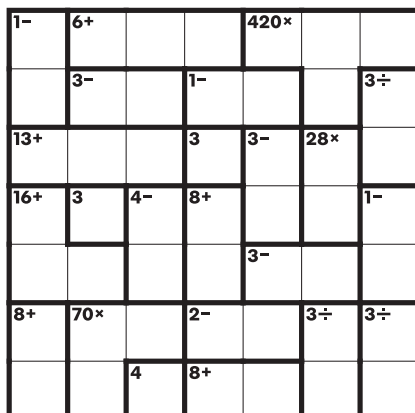
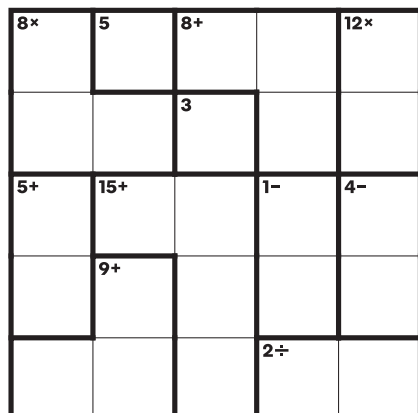


2/19/17

**Puzzles Online:** Today's puzzle and more than 9,000 past puzzles, [nytimes.com/crosswords](http://nytimes.com/crosswords) (\$39.95 a year). For the daily puzzle commentary: [nytimes.com/wordplay](http://nytimes.com/wordplay).

# KENKEN

Fill the grid with digits so as not to repeat a digit in any row or column, and so that the digits within each heavily outlined box will produce the target number shown, by using addition, subtraction, multiplication or division, as indicated in the box. A 5x5 grid will use the digits 1–5. A 7x7 grid will use 1–7.



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## Dirty Projectors

(Continued from Page 29)

where David began giving his own concerts at house parties.

After about a year, he returned to Yale to finish his degree. "It would not have been cool with my parents if I didn't," he explained. There, he assumed the name Dirty Projectors and made one of his best, and strangest, albums, "The Getty Address," which was a chamber-opera tracing the spiritual wanderings of a fictitious version of the Eagles' Don Henley. The libretto was a fanciful meditation on, among other things, entwined forms of imperialism, and in Longstreth's rendering Henley became a sort of soft-rock Oppenheimer, conflicted about his epochal hits and their role in the flattening of world culture. For the music, Longstreth "wrote and recorded arrangements for wind septet, women's choir and cello octet," according to accompanying text, then "digitally deconstructed" these sessions "and sang over the reconstituted parts." Songs alluded to Steve Reich, Justin Timberlake and, as Longstreth put it to me, "a kitschy, exoticist, American fantasy of what Chinese music sounds like." These collisions of era and idiom doubled, for him, as elaborate meta-musical arguments, but you didn't need to fully grasp these in order to appreciate the album's off-kilter beauty.

By the time Longstreth moved to Brooklyn, he was something of a minor legend in indie-rock circles: ascetic, eccentric and respected for it. Ezra Koenig told me that, in college, he passingly considered becoming a music critic, but the only review he ever wrote was an "embarrassing" rave, published in the online magazine *Dusted*, about Dirty Projectors' 2003 debut album. A couple of years later, Koenig befriended Longstreth and came aboard Dirty Projectors as a touring saxophonist and keyboardist — joining an ever-shifting group of musicians whose members also included the bassist Nat Baldwin, the drummer Brian McOmber and the singers Haley Dekle and Angel Deradoorian. When Longstreth moved to a place in Bedford-Stuyvesant, Koenig, then a schoolteacher, was among his roommates. "I remember him recording music in the middle of the night, when I had to be up at 7 a.m. for work," Koenig said.

The friendship survived, and Koenig was among Longstreth's sounding boards as he fine-tuned "Dirty Projectors" for release. "I watched him go from living in a windowless room, making what most people would call difficult music, to being a part of Rihanna and Solange songs," Koenig said. He added that, even as Longstreth's profile has risen, there has been a constancy to his music: "Compositionally, he does harmonic stuff no one else is doing. There's a thread that runs through all Dave's work, where the sensibility is unmistakably him."

**One morning**, I met Longstreth for breakfast burritos near the house in Highland Park that

he shares with his girlfriend, an artist liaison at an L.A. gallery. Afterward we walked to his cluttered Prius, where he retrieved "The Fractal Geometry of Nature," a book by the mathematician Benoit Mandelbrot featuring computer-drawn fractals. "This is a late Christmas present for my friend Zach Harris," Longstreth explained. "He's a painter, and his studio's just down the block. Do you want to pop in on him?"

Longstreth moved to California in 2014, and through his girlfriend and his brother, he gained entry into a circle of fine artists in town. He enjoyed visiting with Harris, he said, and trading ideas about work: "Zach has this whole cosmology behind everything he does." Lately they'd been discussing tantalizing geometries, like Fibonacci spirals and Mandelbrot sets, and these conversations inspired Longstreth's gift.

Harris welcomed Longstreth into his studio with a hug. He wore a mustache and paint-splattered white jeans. His work space, he explained, "used to be a grow house. I converted it three years ago, and we found all this weed still here. Some bullets too." A dozen or so paintings ringed the room, all very large. Many were covered and crisscrossed by carved pieces of wood that Harris had machined with a laser, then painted eye-popping colors. Between these lattices he'd inscribed legions of Bosch-like tiny figures engaged in odd, feverish interactions. I spied a roaring lion near a cluster of winged archers and, in a cheekier register, a parody of the "March of Progress" illustration that riffed on Nike's Jumpman logo. Longstreth inspected a painting up close, in which a woman and a devil were engaged in a contortive sex act. "Stories start suggesting themselves," Harris said, "and I follow them. I'm really into making these little universes you can get lost in."

The two seemed to regard each other as kindred spirits. "Dave and I talk a lot about structures that all art forms share," Harris went on. Longstreth nodded. "I love thinking of one medium as analogous to another, even if they aren't, quite," he replied. "Working on this new album, I'd lose focus on a song after a while, but thinking of it as if it were a painting allowed me to come at it again, in a new light." Harris waved a hand over one of his canvases. "There's a mock-Cubist thing here and an Egyptian thing here — in painting, you can take all these different visual languages and styles and put them together. There's a sense of that in Dave's songs, too. Traditions he's bringing together and synthesizing."

Longstreth appeared to blush at the sound of his friend describing his music with such care. "Maybe," he said, shrugging. He lingered a bit more, paging through the Mandelbrot book. "He figured out the math and ratios that generate this stuff," Longstreth said. "There are names for all of these." Before long, Longstreth said goodbye and made for his Prius, which he pointed toward his studio. It was nearly noon, and he had his own little universe to get lost in. ♦

## Answers to puzzles of 2.12.17

### DO THE SPLITS

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| L | I | B | I | D | O |   | M | I | L | E | A | G | E |   | S | O | F | A | R |
| P | H | O | N | I | C | S |   | O | R | A | N | G | E | S |   | A | Z | U | R |
| G | O | O | F | F | O | N | A | T | A | N | G | E | N | T |   | R | O | M | A |
| A | P | S | E |   | N | A | S | H |   | D | I | N | E |   | R | O | N | A | L |
|   |   |   |   |   | R | A | N | K | S |   | P | E | N | D |   | L | I | N | E |
| G | N | U |   | P | O | E | T | R | Y | R | E | A | D | I | N | G |   | C | P |
| L | A | N | K | E | R |   | E | L | S |   | O | A | S |   | T | H | R | U |   |
| A | F | F | I | X |   | E | L | M | O |   | R | A | W | R | E | C | R | U | I |
| S | T | U | D |   | B | R | A | I | N | W | A | V | E | S |   | H | O | M | E |
| S | A | N | D | B | L | A | S | T |   | E | V | E | L |   | C | L | O | U | D |
|   |   |   |   |   | D | I | E | T | S |   | A | B | E |   | C | O | O | P | S |
| C | H | E | E | R | S |   | M | A | L | E |   | G | O | O | S | E | S | T | E |
| L | A | D | L | E |   | L | A | B | O | R | P | A | R | T | Y |   | H | A | T |
| A | D | M | I | T | T | A | N | C | E |   | O | R | G | Y |   | F | I | C | H |
| M | E | A | T |   | A | P | E |   | N | U | B |   | S | I | P | H | O | N | S |
| S | S | N |   | J | U | S | T | I | C | E | F | O | R | A | L | L | E | S |   |
|   |   |   |   |   | D | I | A | N | E |   | G | A | T | S |   | A | T | O | S |
| P | E | A | N | U | T |   | D | E | B | T |   | S | N | A | G |   | A | B | B |
| E | A | T | E | N |   | F | A | T | A | L | A | T | T | R | A | C | T | I | O |
| A | V | E | R | T |   | E | V | I | L | E | Y | E |   | I | N | F | E | R | O |
| T | E | S | T | Y |   | D | A | T | A | S | E | T |   | S | O | D | D | E | N |

### KENKEN

|   |   |   |   |   |  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 5 | 3 | 2 | 4 |  | 4 | 7 | 6 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 5 |
| 2 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 3 |  | 3 | 5 | 4 | 7 | 1 | 6 | 2 |
| 4 | 2 | 5 | 3 | 1 |  | 6 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 7 | 4 | 1 |
| 3 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 5 |  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 6 | 5 | 7 | 4 |
| 5 | 3 | 4 | 1 | 2 |  | 2 | 1 | 5 | 4 | 6 | 3 | 7 |
|   |   |   |   |   |  | 5 | 6 | 7 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 3 |
|   |   |   |   |   |  | 7 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 5 | 6 |

### VOWELLESS CROSSWORD\*

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| B | R | K | L | N | B | R | D | G |   | B | B | R | T | H |
| T | H | N | W | R | K | T | M | S |   | T | S | S | P | T |
| L | N | C | L | N | C | N | T | R |   | C | H | V | L | R |
| B | S | K |   |   | S | G | R |   | S | H | W | L |   |   |
| L | H | S | P | S |   | S | L | D | M |   | C | T | C | H |
|   |   |   |   |   | C | H | S |   | Z | B | R |   | K | S |
| P | N | N | S | L | V | N | S | T | T | N |   | L | C | R |
| S | B | W |   | L | N | D |   | F | C | T |   | N | K | N |
| T | L | R |   | C | H | R | S | L | R | B | L | D | N | G |
| R | C | K | R |   | L | G | L |   | D | L | Z |   |   |   |
| M | K | N | G |   | L | S | Z | T |   | S | B | P | L | T |
|   |   |   |   |   | W | H | M | S |   | B | B | L |   | P |
| T | M | J | N | S |   | M | R | G | R | T | F | R | R | R |
| M | P | R | C | S |   | G | G | G | N | H | M | M | S | M |
| B | R | S | K | N |   | G | R | N | D | C | N | T | R | L |

### WHIRLPOOL

|   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| P | A | L | E | S | T |
| S | A | L | A | M | I |
| O | R | E | G | O | N |
| R | E | S | I | D | E |
| T | R | U | C | E | S |
| S | A | H | A | R | A |

### CAPSULES

|   |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 4 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 5 | 1 | 3 |
| 3 | 5 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 5 |
| 2 | 1 | 4 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 4 |
| 4 | 3 | 5 | 1 | 5 | 3 | 2 |
| 5 | 1 | 2 | 4 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| 2 | 4 | 3 | 1 | 3 | 5 | 2 |
| 3 | 1 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 1 | 3 |

## Answers to puzzle on Page 54

### SPELLING BEE

Arachnid (3 points). Also: Anarchic, arcadian, arcana, canard, cancan, candid, chain, china, cinch, circadian, crania, dinar, drain, handcar, harridan, indicia, nadir, niacin, radian, ranch, rancid, ricin. If you found other legitimate dictionary words in the beehive, feel free to include them in your score



# Marilyn Minter Finds Art In the Female Form

Interview by Jenna Wortham

**Your current retrospective, “Pretty/Dirty,” is part of a larger, continuing exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum called “A Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism.” Does feminism need to be reimagined?** It needs to be inclusionary. Well, it’s called intersectional, but I don’t like that word. I had to look up intersectional; anyone knows what inclusionary means. Feminism needs to include male feminists, it needs to include people of color.

**There is an entire wall of your paintings, which were commissioned and ultimately rejected by Playboy, of women’s pubic hair.** I’m trying to make a case for it because it’s not a terrible thing, it’s beautiful. Yesterday’s smut is today’s erotica. **What if you’re the reason that pubic hair makes a giant comeback in the next decade?** I wanted young girls to stop lasering, because laser is forever, you know. Do whatever you want for fashion, just don’t laser. I’ve been around. You’re going to be a baldy when you’re 80?

**Your aesthetic has been described as “off-glamour” and “off-beauty,” and your work plays with extremes and challenges what we believe to be the photographic truth. What is appealing about that to you?** Fashion is one of the engines of the culture. You see who your tribe is by the way they present themselves — and even if you’re someone who doesn’t care what you look like or you don’t put yourself together, that’s a tribe! So I thought, How do I make a metaphor for that? I want to contain two different ideas in the same image, so I had to make it sort of disgusting but absolutely, ravishingly beautiful.

**There’s an inherent duality of manufactured beauty: There’s the labor of**



**Age:** 68

**Occupation:** Artist

**Hometown:** Shreveport, La.

Minter is a visual artist and a professor at the School of Visual Arts. Her exhibit, “Pretty/Dirty,” is currently on view at the Brooklyn Museum.

**Her Top Five Planned Parenthoods to Donate To:**

1. Gulf Coast P.P.
2. Greater Ohio P.P.
3. Indiana and Kentucky P.P.
4. Southeast P.P.
5. New York City P.P.

construction, but there can also be an ugly side to the psychology of what we’re trying to do when we’re trying to transform ourselves. I love that there’s this big backlash where people aren’t wearing any makeup at all, like Alicia Keys. You could say all that makeup could be war paint. Why can’t we embrace them both? If that’s how you feel good! It’s hard to feel good in this world.

**What sort of artist catches your attention?** The artists that I’m interested in are the ones that make a picture of the times they live in. If you can listen to that inner voice, you’ll be fine. If you make your work from love, you’ll be fine. Just don’t try to fit in to the prevalent movement. If everybody’s doing video around you, then you should probably start painting. The eye always craves what it doesn’t see.

**Can you name a few?** Roxane Gay, Frank Ocean, Childish Gambino, Cindy Sherman, Lorna Simpson. I love Elena Ferrante. I think that she writes about competition better than anybody.

**You’ve been publicly sober for more than three decades. Does that help you with your creative work?** I’m much more connected to that inner voice. I get struck on the street sometimes. Just like the Greeks talked about it. Struck! Like, “Wow, that’s my next body of work.” This happened to me twice.

**In the 1980s and 1990s, your work was rejected by feminists for using images from pornography in ways they felt objectified the female body.** Yeah, well, there was a prescribed way of being feminist in those days. My side won.

**How are feminists receiving your work now?** Well, everybody loves those paintings now.

**Why do you think that is?** They’re rational. **Until recently, celebrities haven’t felt comfortable speaking out about political causes.** Celebrities have a hard time because the public grades them on a different curve. Artists have no problem, they’re fearless. What are they going to do, not buy our work? Boycott?

**I think it means a lot to younger artists, especially women, to see older women artists saying, “This is important, this is the priority.”** I’m not trying to be any kind of leader, ‘cause it’s not my generation. I don’t need an abortion, and I’m not going to get deported. It’s your generation. I just want to be with you. ♦

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