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# THE NEW YORKER

FEBRUARY 27, 2017

7 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

21 THE TALK OF THE TOWN

*George Packer on Trump and the G.O.P.;  
Loretta Lynch comes home; ask the President;  
souped-up yoga; Julie Andrews and friends.*

ANNALS OF ENTERTAINMENT

**Michael Schulman** 26 Oscar Dearest  
*The Academy's diversity shakeup.*

SHOUTS & MURMURS

**Ian Frazier** 33 Why Mummies?

THE POLITICAL SCENE

**Vinson Cunningham** 34 The Protest Candidate  
*Keith Ellison's bid to chair the D.N.C.*

LETTER FROM WASHINGTON

**Nicholas Schmidle** 40 General Chaos  
*Michael Flynn and the White House.*

A REPORTER AT LARGE

**Lauren Collins** 52 The Children's Odyssey  
*Young refugees crossing continents alone.*

FICTION

**Lore Segal** 62 "Ladies' Lunch"

THE CRITICS

BOOKS

**Elizabeth Kolbert** 66 *Are we thinking straight?*  
71 Briefly Noted

THE ART WORLD

**Peter Schjeldahl** 72 *Works by Alexei Jawlensky and Vija Celmins.*

MUSICAL EVENTS

**Alex Ross** 74 *Kate Soper's "Ipsa Dixit."*

THE THEATRE

**Hilton Als** 76 *"Sunset Boulevard."*

POEMS

**Ada Limón** 39 "The Burying Beetle"  
**Charles Rafferty** 59 "The Problem with Sappho"

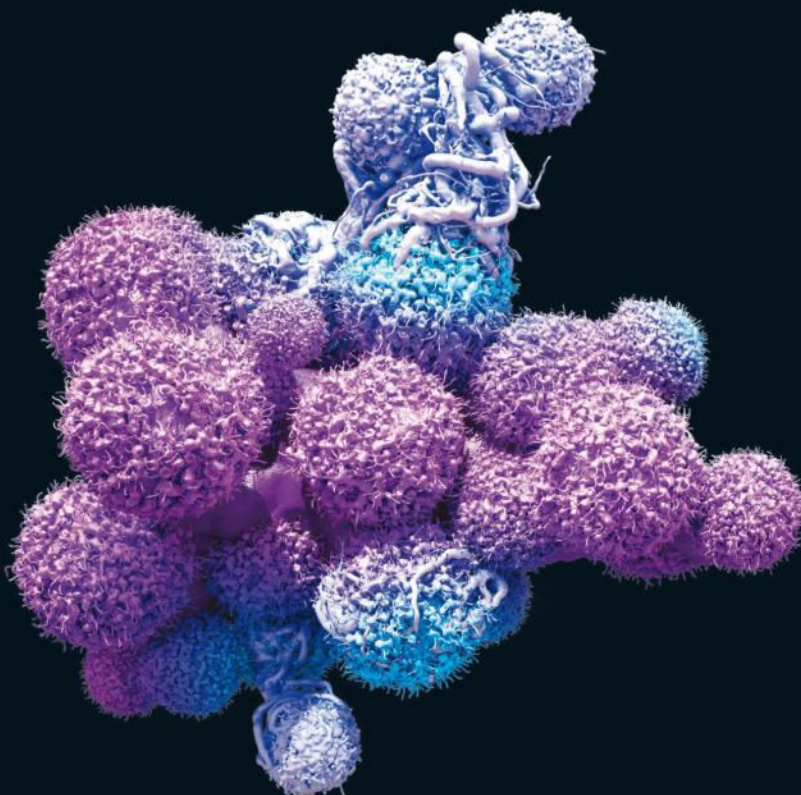
COVER

**Eric Drooker** "OscarsNotSoWhite"

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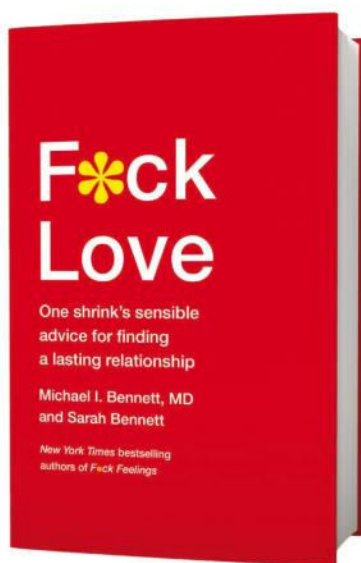
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## PODCAST

On this week's episode, Sissela Bok talks with Dorothy Wickenden about Donald Trump's habitual lying.



## VIDEO

The Atlanta Symphony double-bassist who defied expectations for a Southern woman of her generation.

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# THE MAIL

## THE NUCLEAR-WINTER DEBATE

Jill Lepore's article about the history of climate science and nuclear-winter theory is important, but her story is incomplete ("Autumn of the Atom," January 30th). Although Lepore states that the nuclear-winter debate has "long since been forgotten," research done in the past ten years, using modern climate models, has shown that the theory of nuclear winter—which says that smoke from fires started by nuclear detonation will block sunlight, causing the Earth to become drastically colder—was correct. Lepore also refers to Stephen Schneider's alternate theory of nuclear "autumn," from the nineteen-eighties, as if it refuted the nuclear-winter theory. But it failed to take into account the Earth's stratosphere, was never published in a scientific journal, and was certainly not accepted by the scientific community. It was, however, used by supporters of nuclear weapons to try to discredit nuclear winter.

Despite the over-all decrease in Russia and the U.S.'s nuclear arsenals, the two countries still have the capability to produce a nuclear winter: a nuclear war that used less than one per cent of the current global arsenal would cause a climate change unprecedented in recorded human history. Let us hope that this summer's U.N. negotiations to ban nuclear weapons will make it clear that a nation threatening retaliation or a first strike would be acting as a suicide bomber.  
*Alan Robock, Rutgers University  
New Brunswick, N.J.*

Lepore has done history and science, your readers, and my late husband, Carl Sagan, a great disservice. Her article's central thesis demeans Carl's scientific acumen and his character, wrongly asserting that, in his "grandiosity," he harmed the environmental movement by advancing an exaggerated theory of the long-term consequences of nuclear war.

From Lepore's account, readers would conclude that Carl's interest in the greenhouse effect on Venus was something

that he picked up from a bright grad student. In fact, five years earlier, Carl had published his own dissertation, viewed as the beginning of our modern understanding of Venus, which included his groundbreaking greenhouse model.

Lepore also gives the impression that the theory of nuclear winter has been debunked. If anything, more recent scientific research indicates that Carl and his colleagues were conservative in their estimates. Tellingly, she makes no reference to the findings—in peer-reviewed, refereed publications—that fully support, and expand on, the models created by Carl and the other nuclear-winter scientists.

Carl is also faulted for "partisanship," in part for declining an invitation to dine with the Reagans in the White House—a choice that I made, in response to the El Mozote massacre and other crimes in Central America for which I believed Reagan bore some responsibility. Does Lepore find those public figures and celebrities who refuse to be co-opted by the Trump White House to be partisan? Or is that an unwillingness to lend your cachet to policies that you abhor?

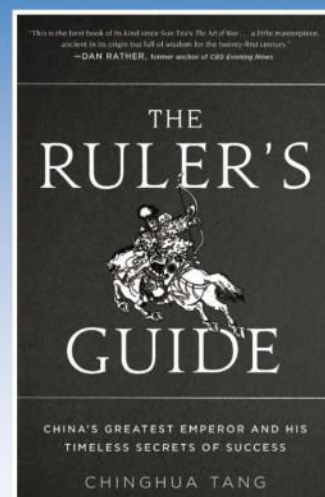
According to Lepore, Sagan "made some poor decisions" and "undermined environmental science." She leaves the reader to wonder what those bad decisions were. Fighting for the reduction of tens of thousands of nuclear weapons? Sounding the alarm on global warming decades before others started paying attention to it? Mounting the world's most successful campaign for public scientific literacy? Attracting multitudes to science and reason? Turning the camera on Voyager 1, which was out by Neptune, to point homeward, to make us see our true circumstances in the vastness? What better decisions have other people made?

*Ann Druyan  
Ithaca, N.Y.*

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

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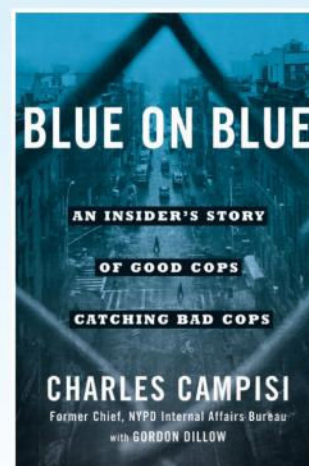
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— Charles Isherwood, *The New York Times*

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— Adam Green, *VOGUE*

## "AN IMPORTANT AND SERIOUSLY DELIGHTFUL ADDITION TO THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY MUSICAL."

Original, sensitive, provocative, and endearing, **Dear Evan Hansen** arrived on Broadway with 'the next big thing' written all over it — and deservedly so. The show is superb."

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'Historic' is an adjective I've rarely used to describe a performance, but a review that does not invoke it for **Ben Platt's** incandescent turn would be doing it less than justice. He will have you laughing, and at other times choking back tears, in sheer wonderment. You'll recognize this kid from somewhere in your life — and yes, perhaps somewhere in yourself."

— Peter Marks, *The Washington Post*

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Smartly crafted, emotionally open-hearted and ideally cast, it has been embraced by millennials—yet its appeal is universal. Whatever your age, you'll watch **Dear Evan Hansen** with the shock of recognition, and be touched by its honesty."

— Terry Teachout, *THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*



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FEBRUARY 22 – 28, 2017

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



**John McCracken** (1934-2011) is considered a Minimalist, but his high-gloss objects (such as “Rhythm,” from 2008, pictured mid-installation) eschew the movement’s industrial ethos: they look machine-made but were laboriously fashioned by hand. The American artist once described his otherworldly œuvre, which splits the difference between painting and sculpture, as “the kind of work that could have been brought here by a U.F.O.” McCracken is the subject of a show at the Zwirner gallery, opening Feb. 24.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIC HELGAS

## ART

## MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

## New Museum

“Raymond Pettibon: A Pen of All Work”

The American artist has intrigued and befuddled a growing audience since the late nineteen-seventies, when he emerged, in Hermosa Beach, California, as a bookish surfer who made flyers and album covers for the punk band Black Flag (his older brother Greg Ginn was the founder and guitarist) and a flurry of zines. His fame took hold slowly, and it remains confined largely to fine-art circles. Seeing this show of some seven hundred creations, mostly drawings with text, is like being lost in a foreign but strangely familiar city, where polyphonic disembodied voices whisper, yell, or sputter wit and wisdom that you’re rarely sure that you heard quite right. The show’s title is from Byron’s “The Vision of Judgement,” in which the mediocre poet Robert Southey proposes to ghostwrite a memoir for Satan and, upon being rebuffed, extends the same offer to the archangel Michael. This befits Pettibon, who says that roughly a third of his texts are lifted, or rephrased, from cherished writers: a pantheon in which St. Augustine consorts with Henry James and Mickey Spillane. Pettibon loves baseball, with a mystic’s intensity; surfing, too. In a favorite motif, a tiny surfer rides a monstrous wave, as philosophical thoughts attend: “The sand and water to which we are reducible are as a rock to me” or “Don’t complicate the moral world.” Pettibon’s way with words, somewhat like the poetry of John Ashbery, instills a conviction of cogency untethered to understanding. *Through April 9.*

## Noguchi Museum

“Self-Interned, 1942: Noguchi in Poston War Relocation Center”

It’s tragically apt that this exhibition commemorates the signing of a racist and ill-conceived executive order: Roosevelt’s wartime edict that resulted in the mass internment of “people of Japanese ancestry.” Although Noguchi’s father was Japanese, the artist was exempt because he lived in New York, which was not designated, as was the entire West Coast, a “military area.” His relocation to an Arizona camp was voluntary—initially. Vitrines contain sobering documents from the sculptor’s archive; some of them outline his frustrated attempts to improve life for members of the displaced community through arts programming, while others record his own confounding detention in the desert. A selection of characteristically breathtaking art works from the period traces Noguchi’s move away from modernist figuration toward the austere, playful, biomorphic abstraction that became his signature. The wall-mounted, not yellow “Yellow Landscape,” from 1943, with its graceful blob base and charming elements (wood, string, a fishing sinker), is a fine example of the latter style. It’s also a rare overtly political statement, its title referring to the “yellow peril” of paranoid, anti-Japanese sentiment. As he wrote in a missive from Poston, lamenting his country’s descent into homegrown Fascism, “To be hybrid anticipates the future. This is America, the nation of all nationalities.” *Through Jan. 7, 2018.*

## SculptureCenter

“Congolese Plantation Workers Art League”

The Cercle d’Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise, or CATPC, is an ambitious, artist-led attempt to reverse the centuries-long flow of wealth out of Africa. Encouraging cacao and palm-oil harvesters to make large clay sculptures, the group sends 3-D scans of the pieces to Amsterdam, where they’re remade out of African chocolate and sold. Conceptually, the art and the politics don’t quite hang together. But some of the sculptures are genuinely terrific, especially Djonga Bismar’s “The Spirit of Palm Oil,” a springy, three-foot-high figure, and Mubuku Kimpala’s “Self Portrait Without Clothes,” an alluringly self-possessed nude. “The Art Collector,” a collaboration between Bismar and Jérémie Mabiala, looks at once sinister and naïve, perhaps suggesting how the European art market is perceived by these artists. *Through March 27.*

## GALLERIES—UPTOWN

## Carl Ostendarp

The paintings in this gravely hilarious show come in two varieties: monochrome quasi-abstracts and images of meaningless words. “Electric Funeral” is an abstract riff on landscape, in which a wiggly line divides a background of cloudy gray haze, applied in long strokes with a mop, from a denser, darker gray along the work’s bottom edge. The darker color might be a mountain range, but it’s too curvy; it also suggests a reclining figure in profile, but only just. In fact, the work’s ambiguity is so perfectly pitched that the image is harder to resolve the longer you look at it. “ECH!” is an example of the vaguely onomatopoeic words (other are “ARGH,” “GAK,” and “DING”), sublime absurdities that say nothing at all, very emphatically. *Through Feb. 25. (Dee, 2037 Fifth Ave. 212-924-7545.)*

## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

## “Divided States of America”

This raucous group show brightens the busy corridors of “The Center,” as the West Village queer-community hub is affectionately known. The curators Alison Gingeras, Stuart Comer, and Robb Leigh Davis, in their call for a unified resistance to Trumpist divisiveness, have assembled an intergenerational array of activist-minded work. One recurring theme is same-sex eroticism, seen in striking photographs by Lyle Ashton Harris, Collier Schorr, and Xavier Simmons; another is humor. Ryan McNamara’s sculpture “Toddlers Against Xenophobia,” from this year, is a slogan-bearing being made from lavender plaster-cast hands, and the irate artists known as Ridykeulous contribute a scatological bust of the President. Donald Moffett’s “Call the White House,” from 1990, is an iconic work of AIDS activism. The backlit, multicolored piece demands that viewers “tell Bush we’re not all dead yet” and lists the number for the White House comment line. Back then, someone would actually answer the phone. *Through March 31. (LGBT Community Center, 208 W. 13th St. 212-620-7310.)*

## Kader Attia

The French-Algerian artist, who lives in Paris and Berlin, presents a labyrinth of office cubicles in the now terribly pertinent installation “Reason’s Oxymorons,” from 2015. Each compact unit is outfitted with a desk, a chair, and one of eighteen video works, for which the artist interviewed African and European researchers, theorists, and clinicians about mental health and healing in the context of neocolonialism, civil war, and mass displacement. (A floor plan identifies broad topics, such as “Exile,” “Genocide,” “Language,” and “The Magical Sciences.”) Attia’s cross-cultural experts are, by turns, enlightening and inscrutable, delivering both heart-breaking information and cold analysis about their refugee patients or ethnographic studies. Watching them while seated at a nondescript desk, you become a kind of case worker yourself, tasked with assimilating the acute emotional consequences of our cresting geopolitical crises. *Through March 5. (Lehmann Maupin, 201 Chrystie St. 212-254-0054.)*

## Bea Fremderman

This modest but promising New York debut toggles between whimsy and despair. Dirt-smeared clothing serves as soil for sprouts, filling the small gallery with a pleasantly spring-like smell. But visually it conjures a murder scene off some back road. A life-size figure, which Fremderman made by wrapping her roommate in clear packing tape, slumps, hollow and transparent, in the middle of the floor; there’s an open plug on the back of its head, as if the air were being let out of an inflatable body. A man’s dress shoe hangs on the wall, with a hole cut in the toe—call it forensic Surrealism. *Through Feb. 26. (Shoot the Lobster, 138 Eldridge St. 212-560-0670.)*

## Ray Hamilton

The ballpoint-pen drawings of this self-taught artist, who was born in South Carolina and died in Brooklyn, in 1996, quiver with presence. Hamilton traced objects—a Fig Newtons box, a glass, his own hands—filling in the simple forms with dense networks of red, green, or blue. Sometimes he colored in so intently that the paper would warp, as in a drawing here of his shod feet. Hamilton grew up on a farm, and he also drew animals, with surprising delicacy, from memory, including a vivid trio of gray horses, embellished with watercolor, a red cat, and a blue mouse. *Through March 5. (Schuss, 34 Orchard St. 212-219-9918.)*

## Lynn Hershman Leeson

This selection of absorbing interactive and video works spans four decades in the career of the American artist, a feminist trailblazer who exploits new technologies in provocative ways. The interactive videodisk “Lorna,” from 1979-1982, displayed in a living-room-like set with leopard-print armchairs and teal walls, invites you to snoop through the apartment of an agoraphobe. The navigation is clunky by today’s standards, but the work endures as a seductive, discomfiting exploration of voyeuristic complicity. In “Venus of the Anthropocene,” completed this year, a white-wigged cyborg-mannequin with gold organs sits at a vanity, in a familiar scene of feminine self-inspection. Stand behind her, though, and you’ll find your own face frozen in the mirror, as stats display your gender, age, and mood, as determined by facial-analysis software. *Through March 12. (Donahue, 99 Bowery. 646-896-1368.)*





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# NIGHT LIFE

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



Sérgio Dias, Rita Lee, and Arnaldo Baptista gave Brazil its own brand of riveting psychedelic rock.

## Paradise Played

*Os Mutantes recast an oppressive regime in their technicolor image.*

IN 1968, WHEN the Brazilian band Os Mutantes performed the discordant “É Proibido Proibir” (“Prohibiting Is Prohibited”), with the singer Caetano Veloso, for an audience of conservative students at the Festival Internacional de Canção, in Rio, the crowd bristled, and many turned their backs. Veloso, as he recalls in his memoir, looked out and shouted, “God is loose!”

Two years after that pivotal concert, Os Mutantes were still concerned with higher powers. On “Ave, Lúcifer,” from the band’s third album, the members Arnaldo Baptista and Rita Lee consider whether Satan was just another one of Eden’s pleasures. “*Mas tragam Lúcifer pra mim/ Em uma bandeja pra mim,*” Lee sings, demanding that the serpent be brought to her on a tray. Her hypnotic description of the blasphemous scene lures listeners toward the final question: Why would God put Satan in the garden in the first place?

Through the tail end of the nineteen-sixties in Brazil, a cluster of bands, artists, poets, and filmmakers known as the Tropicália movement challenged the country’s growing military class with subversive art and experimentation. At its center was Os Mutantes, a sprawling psychedelic-rock band started by Sérgio Dias and his brother Baptista, and

fronted glamorously by the red-haired Lee. Barely out of their teens, and stoked by cyclical military coups, Pink Floyd, and DC Comics, the musicians melded American rock, British pop, and Brazilian bossa nova, ornamenting political messages as suavely as Harrison and Hendrix. As censorship spread throughout the country, authorities struggled to decipher the band’s politics through its intricate costumes and quirky, shifting arrangements of guitar, harpsichord, brass, and woodwinds.

As the decade turned, Brazilian arts buckled under the weight of suppression, and the Tropicália moment seemed to pass. Lee faced a bout of depression, while Dias and Baptista burrowed deeper into their prog-rock experiments. The group soon disbanded, but its albums became critical texts for provocateurs like David Byrne and Kurt Cobain, and have gained Holy Grail status with collectors—original pressings of early Mutantes records list for upward of a thousand dollars.

The band’s relevance with a new generation became apparent to Dias during a 2008 reunion; young fans had eagerly latched onto the material, forming the global audience that Dias had hoped to reach as a São Paulo teen-ager weaned on “Revolver.” The founding member performs vocals and guitar with a reimaged lineup, including a new lead vocalist, Esmeria Bulgari, at Webster Hall, on Feb. 27.

—Matthew Trammell

## Baby Dee

This Cleveland-born performance artist has waffled through several mediums in the course of a seventeen-year career; her instruments include piano, organ, accordion, and harp. She began as a harpist in Central Park, donning a bear costume—the idea came to her as a “fuzzy picture”—and she soon translated an enthusiasm for Gregorian chant and other religious musical forms into a gig as a church organist. A chance meeting with Antony Hegarty, now known as Anohni, led to harp work on Antony and the Johnsons’ self-titled debut album, from 1998, followed by a string of releases of her own. Her work is illuminating for its taut blend of sombre, monastic progressions and theatrical vocalizing reminiscent of downtown street performance, a whimsical twist on the secular hymns of Leonard Cohen. She performs on accordion for this engagement, and will be joined by the guitarist **Blake Norris**. (National Sawdust, 80 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 646-779-8455. Feb. 23.)

## The Internet

This self-taught bedroom-funk band scuttled into a void that few people realized existed. Sheepishly launched by the producer Matt Martin and the d.j. turned singer Sydney Bennett (known to Odd Future fans as Matt Martians and Syd tha Kyd), in 2011, the Internet put forward patchwork R. & B. that drew on traditional bubblegum themes and dusted off early-aughts-N.E.R.D. keyboard sounds. On “They Say,” a single about perseverance, Bennett offered what could be the lax band’s mission statement: “Just think, if things were perfect / would it be worth it, if even at all?” Since then, the duo has bloomed into a confident outfit, with the help of the drummer Christopher Smith, the bassist Patrick Paige II, and the guitarist Steve Lacy. During this return to New York, they’ll perform songs from their Grammy-nominated album, “Ego Death,” released in 2015, and from a pair of 2017 solo efforts, Martin’s “The Drum Chord Theory” and Bennett’s “Fin.” (Webster Hall, 125 E. 11th St. 212-353-1600. Feb. 23.)

## Japandroids

Authenticity in rock and roll is harder than ever to come by. This stripped-down guitar-and-drums Vancouver duo has built a respectable career cranking up the earnestness on their anthemic, punk-tinged classic rock. They offer a refreshing genuineness, with a marked loyalty to tradition and a sense of ambition that has made it possible for them to fill the sprawling, three-tiered venue Terminal 5. The band is at the outset of a lengthy tour supporting a new long-player, “Near to the Wild Heart of Life,” its first in five years. Not much has changed: all Japandroids albums have eight songs, constituting about thirty-five minutes of David Prowse’s propulsive, pound-the-pavement drumming and Brian King’s Springsteen-style riffs, capped by hoarse, tour-shredded vocals. (610 W. 56th St. 212-582-6600. Feb. 23.)

## Kehlani

It’s not unusual for musicians to wear their influences on their proverbial sleeves. But the R. & B. pop artist Kehlani has taken this a step further: she inked the iconic portrait that graces the cover of “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill” onto her





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left arm, and, just above it, the words “come as you are,” from the Nirvana song of that name. Born Kehlani Parrish, the seasoned, Grammy-nominated songwriter was once part of a group called PopLyfe, which made it to the upper echelons of “America’s Got Talent.” As a solo artist, she’s spoken about how music isn’t just a passion but also a tool for survival, telling the *Los Angeles Times* that her January album, the ebullient, infectious “SweetSexySavage,” was a form of rehabilitation following a fraught period of her life. At Play-Station Theatre, she’ll be treating listeners to a selection of woozy, soulful songs about healing, heartbreak, and, ultimately, happiness. (*Broadway* at 44th St. 800-745-3000. Feb. 22.)

### Little Simz

Everything about the London rapper Simbi Ajikawo, who goes by Little Simz, is seismic. To date, the twenty-two-year-old has released a whopping eleven albums, including a handful on her own record label, Age 101. Through a series of ambitious concept projects, she questions the nature of hierarchical institutions: the 2015 release “A Curious Tale of Trials + Persons” asked why “women cannot call themselves kings,” and her latest, “Stillness in Wonderland,” is a woozy, nuanced take on the Lewis Carroll classic. All of her songs showcase her talent for cheeky, self-referential wordplay: “My body’s achy but my mind’s awake / Shit, the flow is crazy, I should rhyme for change,” she boasts, on “Dead Body.” She joins the rap statesman **Common**, the psychedelic world-music singer **JoJo Abot**, and the roots-reggae singer **Paul Beaubrun** as a special guest for **Lauryn Hill**’s rescheduled “MLH Caravan: A Diaspora Calling!” tour stop. (*Radio City Music Hall, Sixth Ave.* at 50th St. 212-247-4777. Feb. 25.)

### Genesis P-Orridge

PS1 closes out its three-week series “Between 0 and 1,” which has focussed on the intersection of gender nonconformity, technology, and electronic music. Holding court on the final night is this English artist, born Neil Megson, an acclaimed avant-garde figure who, as the founder of the bands Throbbing Gristle and Psychic TV, helped popularize industrial music, in the mid-seventies. P-Orridge, who prefers the pronouns “s/he” and “h/er,” is unquestionably the right person for the job: for Valentine’s Day in 2003, s/he and h/er wife, Jacqueline Breyer, who died in 2007, embarked on a quest to share one identity, undergoing hundreds of thousands of dollars’ worth of plastic surgery to look like each other. P-Orridge will deliver a personal lecture, joined by performances from two defiant queer producers, **Elysia Crampton** and **Luwayne Glass**, who presents self-styled “nihilist queer revolt music” as **Dreamcrusher**. (*MOMA PS1, 2-25 Jackson Ave., Long Island City.* 718-784-2084. Feb. 26.)

## JAZZ AND STANDARDS

### Cyrus Chestnut Quartet

Chestnut’s piano has a tactile quality that assures you you’ve picked the right spot for the night. Mixing high spirits and soulful, deeply satisfying improvisation touched by gospel music and by the blues, Chestnut is a trusted stylist who has judiciously balanced mainstream and modernist leanings since he arrived on the scene, in the late nineteen-eighties. Here, he plays with the bassist **Buster Williams** and the drummer **Lenny White**, the same rhythm team that makes his recent album “Natural Essence” a treat; additional

support comes in the form of the noteworthy vibraphonist **Steve Nelson**. (*Birdland, 315 W. 44th St.* 212-581-3080. *Through Feb. 25.*)

### The Music of Dexter Gordon: A Celebration

Gordon enjoyed an unexpected late-career resurgence with his Oscar-nominated appearance in the 1986 film “Round Midnight,” but he first made his mark decades earlier, as the tenor saxophonist who best embodied Charlie Parker’s bebop message. Gordon’s music continued to evolve from there, with influential results, and this tribute will touch on various aspects of his illustrious catalogue, including work from his albums “Homecoming” and “Sophisticated Giant,” from the late nineteen-seventies. Leading the band—which includes the saxophonist **Abraham Burton**—on the first two nights will be Gordon’s confederate, the great hard-bop drummer **Louis Hayes**. (*Dizzy’s Club Coca-Cola, Broadway* at 60th St. 212-258-9595. Feb. 23-26.)

### Lee Konitz Quartet

The alto saxophonist Konitz selects his notes with surgical care, whether fingering his horn or scatting a melody. He is one of the last men standing from the classic-bebop era, though he never strictly conformed to the style. This most incisive player needs bandmates with open ears,

and he has them in the pianist **Florian Weber**, the bassist **Jeremy Stratton**, and the drummer **George Schuller**. (*Jazz at Kitano, 66 Park Ave.,* at 38th St. 212-885-7119. Feb. 24-25.)

### Jeremy Pelt and Jeb Patton

The quick-witted, high-energy trumpeter Pelt and the pianist Patton, best known for his work with the Heath Brothers, have found a comfort zone in the duet setting, with familiarity breeding invention. Much of Pelt’s recent work merges contemporary R. & B. with modern jazz, but for this intimate encounter the compatriots will most likely stick to the basics, with vigorous results. (*Mezzrow, 163 W. 10th St.* mezzrow.com. Feb. 23.)

### Henry Threadgill, Vijay Iyer, and Dafnis Prieto

The saxophonist Threadgill, the pianist Iyer, and the drummer Prieto, three progressive players, have much in common—not least, that each is deeply committed to advancing the state of present-day jazz, incorporating outside sources ranging from world music to classical. At seventy-three years old, Threadgill may be the nominal patriarch, but he’s sure to make his adventurous younger cohorts sweat. (*Jazz Gallery, 1160 Broadway,* at 27th St., Fifth fl. 646-494-3625. Feb. 22-23.)

# DANCE

### New York City Ballet

The final week of the season is heavy on Americana, from Balanchine’s gangster ballet “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue” (the finale of his 1936 show “On Your Toes”) to Jerome Robbins’s paean to New York traffic, “Glass Pieces,” and Christopher Wheeldon’s abstracted version of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical “Carousel.” One program combines works by Balanchine, Wheeldon, and Peter Martins. The other, devoted exclusively to Robbins, includes the rare “Moves,” a study inspired by experimental dance and performed in silence, punctuated only by the sounds of claps, taps, and the dancers’ breath. • Feb. 22 at 7:30, Feb. 24 at 8, and Feb. 26 at 3: “Carousel (A Dance),” “Thou Swell,” and “Slaughter on Tenth Avenue.” • Feb. 23 at 7:30 and Feb. 25 at 2 and 8: “Glass Pieces,” “Moves,” and “The Concert (or, The Perils of Everybody).” (*David H. Koch, Lincoln Center.* 212-496-0600.)

### Martha Graham Dance Company

This season’s theme, “Sacred and Profane,” is another catchall label for the ninety-one-year-old company’s recent habit of juxtaposing classics by its late founder with lesser, contemporary stabs at relevance. Among the premières, a riff on Graham’s 1941 comic dance “Punch and the Judy,” by the always smart Annie-B Parson (with text by Will Eno), sounds more promising than a take on Sufi mysticism by the gifted but sentimental Belgian choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui. Among the repertory pieces (two of which are distressingly excerpted), the standout is the first revival in more than a decade of “Primitive Mysteries” (1931): an intense, all-female ritual that shows Graham’s genius in its early, most severe form. (*Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave.,* at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Feb. 21-26.)

### Anna Azrieli

For her first show not shared with another choreographer, Azrieli is joined by the calmly engrossing dancer Eleanor Smith, the actor Massimiliano Balduzzi, and her own nine-year-old child, Ezra Azrieli Holzman, who has already gained a reputation as an unaffected show stealer. “Mirror Furor” works through repetition, its phrases gradually transforming as they are transferred among the four participants. (*The Chocolate Factory, 5-49 49th Ave., Long Island City.* 866-811-4111. Feb. 22-25.)

### Benjamin Kimitch

Go to the Web site of this young Japanese-American choreographer, and you’ll find an electronic scrapbook of religious iconography, much of it from the Buddhist murals of Dunhuang, China. In “Ko-bu,” a long solo that Kimitch choreographed for and with the dancer Julie McMillan, who performs here, he weaves such imagery into a meditation on grief, set to Charles Ives’s autumnal “Orchestral Set No. 3.” (*Danspace Project, St. Mark’s Church In-the-Bowery, Second Ave.* at 10th St. 866-811-4111. Feb. 23-25.)

### Harkness Dance Festival / New York Theatre Ballet

This petite ballet company specializes in the kind of quirky, chamber-sized works that are often neglected by the larger troupes. At the festival, they perform pieces by the mid-century British choreographer Antony Tudor—best known for his “Jardin aux Lilas”—and his protégé, Martha Clarke, whose works tend more toward dance theatre. The rarest work here is Tudor’s “Les Mains Gauches,” an allegory of love and death for two dancers, made in the fifties. Also seldom performed is Clarke’s “Nocturne,” set to Chopin, a soupy solo in which an aged dancer appears to remember her life on the stage. (*92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave.* at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Feb. 24-25.)



JESSICA LANGE

SUSAN SARANDON

# FEUD

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# CLASSICAL MUSIC

## OPERA

### Metropolitan Opera

Mary Zimmerman's new production of "**Rusalka**," Dvořák's version of "The Little Mermaid" story, takes the delicate water nymph of the title on a journey from a lush forest idyll to a hostile human world aflame with passions she doesn't understand. The sets and costumes conjure a fantasy of the eighteenth century, but the accumulation of eccentric details—like gowns in hot hues of red, orange, and yellow with menacing black patterns—makes it feel like a dream that's slowly turning into a nightmare. Kristine Opolais's Rusalka is a vibrant, headstrong creature, surrounded by an outstanding cast that includes Brandon Jovanovich, Katarina Dalayman, Jamie Barton (in a career-making performance as the witch, Ježibaba), and Eric Owens; the conductor, Mark Elder, keeps the orchestral sound lean and dramatically responsive. *Feb. 25 at 1.* • **Also playing:** The soprano Sonya Yoncheva donned Violetta's famous red cocktail dress in Willy Decker's deconstructed take on "**La Traviata**," in 2015, but after her stunning turn as Desdemona in a high-profile production of Verdi's "**Otello**," later the same year, there is heightened interest in her portrayal of the noble courtesan. Michael Fabiano and Thomas Hampson complete the trio of leads; Nicola Luisotti. *Feb. 24 at 7:30.* • Bellini's "**I Puritani**" is renowned primarily as a showcase for a gifted coloratura soprano, thanks to a breathtaking twenty-minute mad scene that comes smack-dab in the middle of the work. The soprano Diana Damrau, a house favorite, shares the stage with the tenor Javier Camarena, an assured bel-canto stylist. Also with Alexey Markov and Luca Pisaroni; Maurizio Benini. *Feb. 22 and Feb. 28 at 7:30 and Feb. 25 at 8.* • Richard Eyre's staging of "**Werther**," in which video segments and nineteenth-century-style costumes coexist, has a mellow, sostenuto quality appropriate for the most warmly lyrical of Massenet's operas. It returns to the Met with the Italian tenor Vittorio Grigolo—a dynamic young lover in the Met's recent production of "**Roméo et Juliette**"—as the work's moony, melancholic poet. Isabel Leonard, Anna Christy, David Bizic, and Maurizio Muraro fill out a promising cast; Edward Gardner. (Veronica Simeoni replaces Leonard in the first performance.) *Feb. 23 and Feb. 27 at 7:30. (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)*

### Opera Lafayette: "Léonore"

The libretto of Pierre Gaveaux and Jean-Nicolas Bouilly's opéra comique is much more famous than its music, having served as the basis for Beethoven's only opera, "**Fidelio**." The company continues its admirable work shining a light on obscure corners of the French repertoire by presenting the piece's modern première in a production by Oriol Tomas; Ryan Brown conducts. *Feb. 23 at 7:30. (Gerald W. Lynch Theater, John Jay College, 524 W. 59th St. 202-546-9332.)*

### Little Opera Theatre of New York: "Prince of Players"

The latest opera by the great veteran stage composer Carlisle Floyd ("**Susannah**") tells the story of Edward Kynaston, one of the last "boy players"

(a male actor who portrayed women onstage) in the history of British theatre. Philip Shneidman's production stars the baritone Michael Kelly as the Shakespearean standing at the crossroads of the theatrical conventions, as women took to the stage during the Restoration period; Richard Cordova conducts. *Feb. 23-24 at 7:30, Feb. 25 at 8, and Feb. 26 at 3. (Kaye Playhouse, Hunter College, Park Ave. at 68th St. 212-772-4448.)*

### Cantata Profana: "The Diary of One Who Disappeared"

In Janáček's sulfurous song cycle, a Gypsy girl beguiles an impressionable village boy—a setup that is irresistible to directors who like to stage its twenty-two sections as a mini-drama. The tenor William Ferguson is the piece's obsessive lover, Daniel Schlosberg plays piano, and Sara Holdren directs. Avery Amereau, who sings the alto part of the Gypsy, fills out the program with Bach's exquisite cantata "**Vergnügte Ruh, beliebte Seelenlust**," accompanied on period instruments. *Feb. 24 and Feb. 25 at 7:30. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. symphonyspace.org.)*

## ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

### New York Philharmonic

Now in his ninetieth-birthday season, Herbert Blomstedt, a former conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra and the San Francisco Symphony, remains a powerful interpreter of German and Nordic repertoire. His upcoming program at the Philharmonic is straightforward: it begins with Beethoven's ingenuous Eighth Symphony, and concludes with the titanic Seventh. *Feb. 22 at 7:30, Feb. 24 at 11 A.M., and Feb. 25 at 8.* • The fiftieth birthday of Alan Gilbert is not only a big Gen X moment for classical-music lovers but an important marker in Philharmonic history, as the orchestra will sail into next season under a new slate of staff leaders. But one night will be especially festive: this concert, in which Gilbert conducts the orchestra and performs as a solo violinist, joining such longtime friends of the Philharmonic as the pianist Yefim Bronfman, the violinist Joshua Bell, and the soprano Renée Fleming in music by Bach (the Concerto for Two Violins), Beethoven, Gershwin, Strauss ("**Morgen!**"), and others. *Feb. 23 at 7:30. (David Geffen Hall. 212-875-5656.)*

### Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra

The calmly radiant ensemble, self-governing since its inception, in 1842, travels to Carnegie Hall with a conductor it knows extremely well, the supremely gifted Franz Welser-Möst. Its three programs are fairly standard, offering a barrage of Austro-Hungarian classics (Schubert's Eighth and Ninth Symphonies, Brahms's First Piano Concerto, Bartók's "**Miraculous Mandarin**" Suite, and more) as well as the requisite contemporary work (the U.S. première of "**Time Recycling**," by René Staar). *Feb. 24-25 at 8 and Feb. 26 at 2. (carnegiehall.org.)*

### London Philharmonic Orchestra

Vladimir Jurowski, an intense and commanding young Russian maestro who has led this starry group since 2007, comes to David Geffen Hall with repertoire from Central and Eastern Europe.

His first concert—which features the heavily promoted young pianist Jan Lisecki and the soprano Sofia Fomina—includes Chopin's Piano Concerto No. 1 in E Minor and the Fourth Symphony by Mahler; the second is all Russian, offering music by Glinka, Prokofiev (the Violin Concerto No. 2 in G Minor, with the incendiary soloist Patricia Kopatchinskaja), and Rachmaninoff (the hard-edged Symphony No. 1 in D Minor). *Feb. 26 at 3 and Feb. 27 at 8. (212-721-6500.)*

## RECITALS

### Profeti Della Quinta

This jaunty, all-male vocal quintet from Israel puts on historically significant concerts, often with a touch of improvisation. It's therefore apt to find them performing at the Metropolitan Museum, where, along with some surprises, they present madrigal-style early music composed by two colleagues from the Gonzaga court of Mantua: Claudio Monteverdi, the father of opera, and Salomero Rossi, a master of Jewish-Italian stock, who set his music to Hebrew texts. *Feb. 23 at 7. (Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. 212-570-3949.)*

### AXIOM

Jeffrey Milarsky, an incisive and insightful conductor of contemporary scores, leads his topnotch student ensemble in works by three masters: Boulez's "**Dérive 1**," Hans Abrahamsen's "**Schnee**, Canons 1a & 1b," and, in honor of John Adams's seventieth-birthday year, the composer's flamboyant "**Grand Pianola Music**" (1982). *Feb. 23 at 7:30. (Peter Jay Sharp Theatre, Juilliard School. events.juilliard.edu.)*

### Jonathan Biss and the Brentano Quartet

Though still a young pianist, Biss is deeply interested in the music of composers near the end of the line. He teams up with the sterling American string quartet in a program that finds him performing crepuscular works by Schumann (the strange and beautiful "**Songs of the Dawn**") and his disciple Brahms (the Piano Pieces, Op. 118), while the Brentanos offer music by Gesualdo (a set of madrigals, arranged by Bruce Adolph) and Mozart (the Viola Quintet in E-Flat Major, with Hsin-Yun Huang). *Feb. 23 at 7:30. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800.)*

### Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

A youthful sampling of the Society's artists and friends—including the Finnish pianist Juho Pohjonen and the Schumann Quartet, from Germany—assemble to perform some of the ear-nest music that inspired Mendelssohn and received premières during his lifetime. To frame the quartet's performance of Mendelssohn's Fugue in E-Flat Major, Op. 81, No. 4, and his String Quartet in F Minor, Op. 80, the program offers some Bach (the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue in D Minor for keyboard) and two works by Schumann, including the rousing Piano Trio No. 1 in D Minor, Op. 63. *Feb. 26 at 5. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788.)*

### "Music Before 1800" Series: Ars Longa

In one of the most significant concerts of the season, this Baroque ensemble from Cuba stops in New York on its first-ever North American tour. Its singers and instrumentalists offer music native to their land, from their 2013 album, "**Gulumbá Gulumbé**"—works by Gaspar Fernández, Luis Gargallo, and various anonymous composers, deeply influenced by the languages, rhythms, and melodies of the African slaves brought to the island in the sixteenth century. *Feb. 26 at 4. (Corpus Christi Church, 529 W. 121st St. 212-666-9266.)*



# MOVIES

## NOW PLAYING

### A Cure for Wellness

The director Gore Verbinski inflates a story ready-made for a brisk Gothic shocker into a bloated, self-important mess. A fast-rising young New York investment banker named Lockhart (Dane DeHaan) is dispatched to a clinic in the Swiss Alps to see Pembroke (Harry Groener), a former colleague whose signature is needed on a merger agreement. But the spa turns out to be a Roach Motel for elderly plutocrats—they check in but they don't check out. Lockhart gets stuck there, too, and he soon suspects that the clinic's suave director, Heinrich Volmer (Jason Isaacs), is up to no good; a prepubescent girl named Hannah (Mia Goth), whom Volmer treats as his "special patient," is a dead giveaway. The clinic's therapies range from subtle gaslighting to blatant mutilation; Verbinski plays the creepy, creaky tale for class conflict and anti-corporate satire, but he makes every frame of the film look expensive. With colossal chambers filled with elaborately macabre pseudo-scientific devices and ironic pageantry celebrating horror with forced glee, the director takes extravagance for substance and gimmickry for style; the results are show-offy, tasteless, and empty.—*Richard Brody* (In wide release.)

### Fifty Shades Darker

The title is a lie, for starters. Once again, two white people fall for each other and go to bed: What could be paler than that? Since the first movie, little has changed. Anastasia Steele (Dakota Johnson) now works as an editor's assistant, but Christian Grey (Jamie Dornan) still wears the perplexed look of a man who can't decide what to do with his time, his spare billions, or his ratcheted ankle cuffs. If anything, their relationship this time around takes a discreet step backward, into old-style courtship, complete with dinner and a yacht. True, she expresses a weakness for vanilla sex, whereas his preference, one suspects, is for Chunky Monkey, but that's easily fixed. The director is James Foley, who used to make thrillers with a certain grip, like "At Close Range" (1986), but here, confronted with E. L. James's slab-like novel, he struggles to locate a plot. The heroine's boss (Eric Johnson) becomes a designated villain, and Kim Basinger plays the old flame who, long ago, taught Mr. Grey all the mysteries of the boudoir. But that's it for thrills, unless you count the nicely polished performance from a pair of love balls.—*Anthony Lane* (In wide release.)

### Get Out

Chris (Daniel Kaluuya), a twentysomething photographer in an unnamed city, is heading to the suburbs with his girlfriend, Rose (Allison Williams), to meet her parents—and she hasn't told them that Chris is black. From this premise, the writer and director Jordan Peele (of Key and Peele) develops a brilliantly satirical horror comedy that pierces the sensitive points of American race relations with surgical precision and destroys comforting illusions with radical ferocity. A pre-credit scene sets up the looming violence, though nothing seems further from the warm embrace with which Rose's parents, Dean (Bradley

Whitford), a neurosurgeon, and Missy (Catherine Keener), a psychiatrist, welcome Chris. Still, he is puzzled by the remote and ironic behavior of the family's help, Georgina (Betty Gabriel) and Walter (Marcus Henderson), who are black. A teeming party scene reveals prosperous white folks' genteel prejudices as well as hints that something deeper is amiss in their paradise—something like involuntary servitude—and Chris's best friend, Rod (Keith Stanfield), suspects trouble, even as ingenious dream sequences conjure Chris's own forebodings. Peele's perfectly tuned cast and deft camera work unleash his uproarious humor along with his political fury; with his first film, he's already an American Buñuel.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

### I Am Not Your Negro

The entire voice-over narration (spoken by Samuel L. Jackson) of Raoul Peck's incisive documentary is derived from the writings of James Baldwin, whose unfinished memoir and study of the lives of three slain civil-rights leaders—Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.—provides the movie's through line. Peck adds a generous selection of archival footage showing the heroes of Baldwin's project at work and detailing Baldwin's own intellectual activism at times of crisis. Moving from divisions within the civil-rights movement (including those separating Malcolm X from King) to its unities, Peck also spotlights Baldwin's analysis of the yet unbridged gap between the legal end of segregation and the practice of white supremacy. (Unredressed police killings of black Americans, as Peck shows, are a crucial and enduring result of that ideology.) The filmmaker cannily cites Baldwin's remarkable writings about movies to illustrate the author's overarching thesis, about the country's tragic failure of consciousness; Peck's references to current events reveal Baldwin's view of history and his prophetic visions to be painfully accurate.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

### John Wick: Chapter 2

As the title character, Keanu Reeves flings himself vigorously into the martial-arts gyrations and choreographed gunplay of this high-body-count thriller, but these maneuvers offer as slight a sense of physical presence as C.G.I. contrivances. This sequel features him, once again, as a retired hit man forced back into action—this time, he's compelled to travel to Rome to kill a Mob queen (Claudia Gerini), whose brother (Riccardo Scamarcio) covets her position. Wick scampers through the catcombs beneath her villa while blasting heads to a pulp. He tumbles down staircases while battling her bodyguard (Common); the two soon continue their fight in New York. The director, Chad Stahelski, revels in a contract-killer underworld that's hidden in plain sight (Manhattan's buskers, homeless, and rumpled passersby are in on the worldwide conspiracy), and he gives its bureaucracy an anachronistically picturesque back office filled with paraphernalia seemingly left over from a Wes Anderson shoot. But the paranoid jolts are played mainly for giggles, and a vast set piece in a mirrored museum exhibit unleashes showers of stage blood but hardly a drop of emotion.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)

### Land of Mine

At the end of the Second World War, Denmark has been liberated, but its western coast is a

minefield. Justice demands that the enemy, having planted the mines, should now be forced to unearth and deactivate them. Along one stretch of beach, that wretched task is assigned to a bunch of German prisoners, most of them scarcely more than kids. (The casualty rate is much as you would expect.) In charge of this group is a Danish sergeant, Carl Rasmussen (Roland Møller), whose vengeful brutality, at the start, yields to a more compassionate approach. Not every viewer will believe in that moral softening, or concur with the director, Martin Zandvliet, in his eagerness to present the German lads as innocuous victims. Nonetheless, it's impossible to deny the tension of the film or, thanks to the cinematographer, Camilla Hjelm, its frightening formal grace; we move from wide and tranquil vistas of dunes to closeups of nervous fingers, unscrewing fuses and scrabbling in the sand. In Danish.—*A.L.* (Reviewed in our issue of 2/13 & 20/17.) (In limited release.)

### The Lego Batman Movie

When does knowingness become just another shtick? That is the conundrum posed by Chris McKay's film, which clicks into place as a solid sequel to "The Lego Movie" (2014). This time, the action kicks off not with industrious good cheer but with a sly dig at the opening of every superhero saga—the black screen, the ominous score, and so forth. The hero in question is Batman (voiced again by Will Arnett), who hangs out in his lair with the courteous Alfred (Ralph Fiennes) but has no real friends; instead, he must make do with loyal enemies, such as the Joker (Zach Galifianakis), who promptly releases an entire plague of villains on a beleaguered Gotham. The filmmaker's plan is twofold: first, to cram the screen with pullulating detail, leaving us not just agog but agast at all the gags that we missed as they flew by; and, second, against expectation, to steer the plot away from cynicism and toward a brand of domestic innocence—family values, no less. The whole thing might almost be a nod to the Lego ethic of yore. Michael Cera plays Robin, Mariah Carey plays a mayor, and Siri plays a computer. Of course she does.—*A.L.* (In wide release.)

### A United Kingdom

A love story, but only just. In 1947, in London, and in defiance of the fog and the rain, a clerk named Ruth Williams (Rosamund Pike) meets Seretse Khama (David Oyelowo), who turns out to be the heir to a tribal throne in Bechuanaland. Without ado, they fall for each other and get married, to the indignant dismay of pretty much everyone, from the bride's father (Nicholas Lyndhurst) and the groom's royal uncle (Vusi Kunene) to a sizable wing of the British establishment. Things only get worse for the couple when they fly to his homeland, where Ruth finds herself disdained, for a while, by black and white women alike. Amma Asante's film, written by Guy Hibbert, has many themes piled on its plate, some of them far from digestible. We get large chunks of constitutional politics, plenty of stuff about Anglo-South African relations at the unsavory end of an empire, and a subplot about diamond mines. Oyelowo remains a commanding presence, especially in front of a crowd, but the movie affords him a fraction of the opportunity that "Selma" provided, and there are times when the romantic origins of the crisis all but vanish from sight. With Jack Davenport, as a Foreign Office cad.—*A.L.* (2/13 & 20/17) (In limited release.)

# THE THEATRE



Third Space stages Fassbinder's 1971 play "The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant," on which his movie is based, at the New Ohio Theatre.

## Cinema Scope

*The mysterious wanderings of Rainer Werner Fassbinder.*

IN THE EIGHTIES, there were many more gay bars in New York than there are now, and one of them—Uncle Charlie's, on Greenwich Avenue—was a very pleasant place to cool off during hot summer afternoons. One day, after leaving the bar, I was headed down Greenwich Avenue toward Christopher Street, when I spotted a figure standing on a corner. He was dressed all in leather, and the way he smoked—it was like watching someone ingest a delicious new kind of food. I paused. The man stared at me over his tinted glasses. I kept walking, and he started to follow me, and did for several blocks, until I panicked and ducked into a shop. This must have been in 1981, because Rainer Werner Fassbinder was dead the next year.

What impressed me on that long-ago afternoon was not only the man's leather—even leather queens wouldn't have dared to gear up so completely in that heat—but his doggedness when it came to checking

out and trying to make friends with men of color. (I saw him around town all weekend, trying to get a break with the brothers; New York was smaller then.) Men of color played a big role in Fassbinder's films. I didn't know who he was until I read his obituary in the *Village Voice*. I don't think I had seen any of his full-length films—let alone his two television series—before that exchange, or non-exchange, but once I did I found a whole queer world that had itself been queered by war, racism, sexism, and the old ways in which being German or European didn't work in the New World.

But Fassbinder, a native of Bavaria, didn't start out making films; he was turned down by the Berlin Film School when he applied, in 1966. So he joined Munich's Action Theatre and worked with actors, in addition to writing scripts and acting himself. Pretty soon, he was in charge of the whole thing, and the newly named Anti-Theatre featured some ten plays, almost all of which he either wrote or directed. One of them was "The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant," which is being mounted by Third Space, directed by Benjamin Viertel, at the New Ohio The-

atre (in previews, opening Feb. 23). A six-character piece for women, the play is a fascinating rococo experiment in power—the sadomasochism that, for Fassbinder, at least, defines most human interactions. (One longs to see what he would have made of "Remembrance of Things Past.")

In 1972, Fassbinder directed a film version of the play; in that world, the rest of the universe was closed off, and the ivory shag carpeting in the home of the fashion designer von Kant was the stage for great sensual pleasure, lies, and denial. Despite the fact that the script is more than forty years old, it retains its youthful questions and vigor. (Viertel is adding a new fifth act, with songs drawn from cast interviews and essays.) So it's more than appropriate that it's being put on by Third Space, a young company in a city that has always struggled to support its young companies. One wonders now what the theatrical landscape will look like in a world—taking the Fassbinder view—where art might be the first thing to go, along with love.

—Hilton Als

ILLUSTRATION BY CRISTINA DAURA



## OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

**Come from Away**

The Canadian duo Irene Sankoff and David Hein wrote this new musical, about a tiny Newfoundland town that was forced to accommodate thousands of stranded passengers on September 11, 2001. (*Schoenfeld*, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)

**The Glass Menagerie**

Sally Field plays the redoubtable Southern matriarch Amanda Wingfield in Sam Gold's revival of the Tennessee Williams drama, opposite Joe Mantello, as Tom. (*Belasco*, 111 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)

**How to Transcend a Happy Marriage**

Lincoln Center Theatre stages Sarah Ruhl's play, featuring Lena Hall, Brian Hutchison, and Marisa Tomei, in which two married couples take an interest in a polyamorous woman. (*Mitzi E. Newhouse*, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. Previews begin Feb. 23.)

**If I Forget**

The Roundabout presents Steven Levenson's play, directed by Daniel Sullivan, about a professor of Jewish studies who clashes with his sisters on their father's birthday. With Maria Dizzia, Kate Walsh, and Jeremy Shamos. (*Laura Pels*, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. Opens Feb. 22.)

**Joan of Arc: Into the Fire**

David Byrne and Alex Timbers follow up their Imelda Marcos disco musical, "Here Lies Love," with this rock-concert retelling of the rise of Joan of Arc (Jo Lampert). (*Public*, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. In previews.)

**Kid Victory**

Liesl Tommy directs a new musical by John Kander and Greg Pierce, in which a teen-ager returns to his Kansas home town after a mysterious yearlong absence. (*Vineyard*, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303. Opens Feb. 22.)

**The Light Years**

The Debate Society's latest piece, written by Hannah Bos and Paul Thureen and directed by Oliver Butler, is set at a theatrical spectacle at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. (*Playwrights Horizons*, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. In previews.)

**Linda**

In Penelope Skinner's play, directed by Lynne Meadow for Manhattan Theatre Club, a senior executive pitches a radical idea to change how women her age are viewed. (*City Center Stage I*, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. In previews. Opens Feb. 28.)

**The Moors**

Jen Silverman's play, a dark comic spin on Victorian novels, follows two sisters in the English countryside whose lives are upended by a governess and a hen; Mike Donahue directs for the Playwrights Realm ("The Wolves"). (*The Duke on 42nd Street*, 229 W. 42nd St. 646-223-3010. Previews begin Feb. 27.)

**The Outer Space**

Ethan Lipton wrote this musical, directed by Leigh Silverman and performed by Lipton and his three-person "orchestra," about a couple who

leave Earth in search of sustainable living in space. (*Joe's Pub*, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555. Previews begin Feb. 23.)

**The Penitent**

Neil Pepe directs a new play by David Mamet, in which a psychiatrist faces a professional and moral crisis when he refuses to testify on behalf of a patient in court. (*Atlantic Theatre Company*, 336 W. 20th St. 866-811-4111. In previews. Opens Feb. 27.)

**The Price**

Mark Ruffalo, Danny DeVito, Jessica Hecht, and Tony Shalhoub star in the Roundabout's revival of the 1968 Arthur Miller play, about a man who returns to his childhood home to sell off his parents' estate. (*American Airlines Theatre*, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300. In previews.)

**Significant Other**

Joshua Harmon's angsty comedy moves to Broadway, starring Gideon Glick as a gay New Yorker searching for a life partner as his female friends keep finding husbands. Trip Cullman directs. (*Booth*, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)

**The Skin of Our Teeth**

Theatre for a New Audience stages Thornton Wilder's 1942 comic allegory, which traces humankind from prehistory to twentieth-century New Jersey and beyond. Arin Arbus directs. (*Polonsky Shakespeare Center*, 262 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111. In previews. Opens Feb. 28.)

**Sunday in the Park with George**

Jake Gyllenhaal plays the pointillist master Georges Seurat and Annaleigh Ashford is his muse, in a limited run of the 1984 Stephen Sondheim and James Lapine musical. (*Hudson*, 139-141 W. 44th St. 855-801-5876. In previews. Opens Feb. 23.)

**Sundown, Yellow Moon**

WP Theatre and Ars Nova present Rachel Bonds's play, featuring songs by the indie duo the Bengsons and starring Lilli Cooper and Eboni Booth, as twins who return home to find their father in crisis. (*McGinn/Cazale*, 2162 Broadway, at 76th St. 866-811-4111. Previews begin Feb. 28.)

**Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street**

London's Tooting Arts Club transfers its version of the Stephen Sondheim musical thriller, staged in an immersive pie-shop environment where the audience is served pie and mash. (*Barrow Street Theatre*, 27 Barrow St. 212-352-3101. In previews.)

**The View UpStairs**

This new musical by Max Vernon, directed by Scott Ebersold, revisits the New Orleans gay bar that was the site of a deadly arson attack in 1973. (*Lynn Redgrave*, 45 Bleecker St. 866-811-4111. In previews. Opens Feb. 28.)

**Wakey, Wakey**

Michael Emerson ("Lost") and January LaVoy star in the latest existential comedy by Will Eno ("The Realistic Joneses"), directed by the playwright. (*Pershing Square Signature Center*, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. In previews. Opens Feb. 27.)

## NOW PLAYING

**Evening at the Talk House**

Ten years after the run of "Midnight in a Clearing with Moon and Stars," a not particularly successful play by Robert (Matthew Broderick), some members of the cast and crew have reunited in a once trendy clubhouse, where they bemoan the state of theatre and dish about other actors. The playwright Wallace Shawn uses the nebbishy rhythms of the creative class to disarm his audience (along with complimentary seltzer and candy), but the play has something more sinister in mind. Shawn himself plays a washed-up actor with bruises on his face, after a beating from some "friends." ("It was a short battering," he explains. "You know. Informal.") As it turns out, we're in a warped reality where theatre gossip sits catty-corner to drone warfare and covert ops. Without pressing the associative logic too hard, Shawn does what he does best: bridge the bourgeois with the barbaric. (*Pershing Square Signature Center*, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

**Fade**

In synopsis, Tanya Saracho's script sounds like a bracing parable of racial politics and betrayal: Lucia (Annie Dow), a privileged Mexican-born novelist, takes a job as the diversity hire on a hackish TV show about a Latina detective. In the course of many late nights at the office, she befriends Abel (Eddie Martinez), a janitor and fellow-Mexican, who eventually and reluctantly reveals to her his painful life story, which she steals for her first script. In practice, the play, and the relationship between its principals, feels too contrived to rise to the potential of the premise. Primary Stages' production has moments of sharp insight, but they are too heavily underlined, with both characters commenting on nearly everything the other does or says and seldom letting anything between them speak for itself. (*Cherry Lane*, 38 Commerce St. 866-811-4111.)

**Good Samaritans**

When Kevin (Kevin Hurley) enters the rehab facility where Rosemary (Rosemary Allen, a real-life nurse) works, he falls down. Then he pisses his pants. She hustles him into the bathroom and into his assigned bed. "Lights out, asshole," she says. So, of course, they fall in love. This is the bleak and tender world of the writer-director Richard Maxwell's 2004 play with music. A dozen years on—with Maxwell's pared-down, low-affect, non-actorly style a profound influence downtown—the work doesn't feel as radical as it once did. Still, there's unglamorous beauty in the no-nonsense set and lighting (by Stephanie Nelson), and real pathos in the gulf between the outsized emotions that the script demands (love, sexual passion, grief) and the actors' more modest abilities to convey them, as when Rosemary stands at a window and sings, with a pitchy, cracking voice, "I will try. It's hard, / But I will do my best." (*Abrons Arts Center*, 466 Grand St. 212-352-3101. Through Feb. 25.)

**Man from Nebraska**

The actor and writer Tracy Letts's play was first produced in 2003, and, while its subject—losing religious faith—is promising, the script feels like hackneyed William Inge, but without the sexiness and the insanity. Ken Carpentier (Reed Birney) is a nice middle-class guy

who goes to church with his wife, Nancy (the beautiful Annette O'Toole), and takes care of his mother, Cammie (Kathleen Peirce). But something is missing. He no longer believes in the life he was raised never to question. Eventually, Ken decamps to London, where he struggles to find his true self. There are lots of speed bumps along the way, but he meets a number of interesting people on the road to greater self-knowledge. The best of them is a barkeep named Tamyra, played by the young actress Nana Mensah, whose naturalness, wit, and authority inadvertently expose the drama's triteness. (*Second Stage*, 305 W. 43rd St. 212-246-4422.)

### The Object Lesson

Can you judge a life by its detritus? That's the cluttered question animating this astonishing solo play by Geoff Sobelle, an actor and occasional magician, whose work has been described as existential vaudeville. Part performance and part installation, the piece, directed by David Neumann, crams hundreds, maybe thousands, of cardboard boxes into the theatre. Each has a label ("Hot Wheels," "Faces to Forget," "Punctuation") and appropriate contents. Inappropriate contents, too: roots, tatty taxidermy. In a series of vignettes, Sobelle coaxes companionship, memory, and maybe even love from these massifs of stuff. If the last sequence is perhaps too on point, others, like a culinary demonstration and a misty reminiscence involving shared Chenin Blanc, are small marvels. Plus, there are a couple of phone conversations to rival the one Sobelle held in an earlier piece, "Elephant Room." This is work built on junk; treasure it. (*New York Theatre Workshop*, 79 E. 4th St. 212-460-5475.)

### Ring Twice for Miranda

Theatrical fiascos are actually hard to pull off. They cannot be merely mediocre—they must sit at the jaw-dropping intersection of ambitious intention and asinine implementation. While the title of Alan Hruska's new drama suggests nineteen-fifties noir, this inept show is actually a dystopian "Upstairs Downstairs." The titular character (Katie Kleiger) is a chambermaid who leaves her job with the tyrannical Sir (Graeme Malcolm) to go on the lam with the butler (George Merrick). Things don't quite turn out as expected and . . . oh, why bother? The plot makes little sense, interminable conversations meander to nowhere, and the acting ranges from barely adequate to laughably hammy. At times, Hruska and the director, Rick Lombardo, seem to reach for Beckettian absurdism, but, no, that's just bumbling storytelling. The show is certainly sui generis, but that doesn't make it any good. (*City Center Stage II*, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

### The Town Hall Affair

The real star of the Wooster Group's seventy-minute-long piece about masculinity, myth-making, and seventies feminism is Kate Valk. As the social critic Jill Johnston, Valk inhabits Johnston's dancer's body with looseness and humor: she is free in all the right ways, while other cast members seem confined to a script they have yet to find their way in. Elizabeth LeCompte's production is based on D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus's 1979 documentary, "Town Bloody Hall," about a 1971 panel in which Norman Mailer debated his treatise on feminism, "The Prisoner of Sex," with luminaries

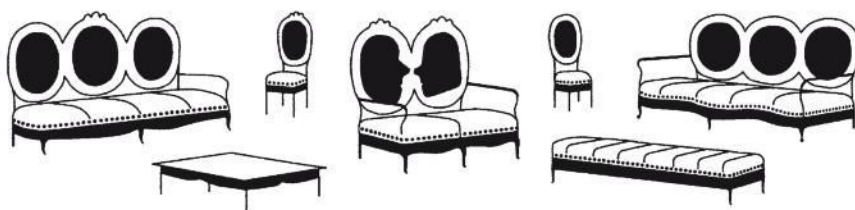
such as Johnston, Diana Trilling, and Germaine Greer. The show sags in the middle, and the actors' uncertainty contributes to the general malaise. But Valk sidesteps all that to find Johnston's understanding of how politics is a kind of theatre. (*The Performing Garage*, 33 Wooster St. [thewoostergroup.org](http://thewoostergroup.org).)

### ALSO NOTABLE

All the Fine Boys Pershing Square Signature Center. • A Bronx Tale Longacre. • Bull in a China

Shop Claire Tow. • Dear Evan Hansen Music Box. • Escaped Alone BAM Harvey Theatre. Through Feb. 26. • Everybody Pershing Square Signature Center. • In Transit Circle in the Square. • Jitney Samuel J. Friedman. • The Liar Classic Stage Company. Through Feb. 26. • Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812 Imperial. • On the Exhale Black Box, Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre. • The Present Ethel Barrymore. • The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart The Heath at the McKittrick Hotel. • Sunset Boulevard Palace. (Reviewed in this issue.) • Yen Lucille Lortel.

## ABOVE & BEYOND



### New York International Children's Film Festival

This annual festival, founded in 1997, is the largest film event for children and teens in the country, hosting shorts, features, Q. and A.s with directors, and national premières. Past installments have showcased stop-motion vignettes and deep dives into fifty years of French animation, as well as documentaries and experimental works aimed at younger audiences. (The festival-winning films are eligible for Academy Award consideration.) This year's highlights include a C.G.I. adaptation of Roald Dahl's "Revolution Rhymes" and the New York première of the Japanese romantic anime "Your Name," about a man and woman who find themselves sporadically switching bodies. (*Various locations*. [nyicff.org](http://nyicff.org). Feb. 24–March 19.)

### AFROPUNK: The Takeover

Harlem Stage, the Apollo Theatre, and AFROPUNK, the long-running music festival, join forces to produce a series of engaging live performances, screenings, talks, and comedy shows at various locations in Harlem, in observance of Black History Month. On Feb. 23, the program "Bearing Witness as Protest" will include a tour of two exhibitions at the Studio Museum, "The Window and the Breaking of the Window" and "Circa 1970," and a talk with the artists Oasa DuVerney and Chaédria LaBouvier. The following evening, the Maysles Documentary Center screens "The Talk," which captures intimate conversations between parents and children about police conduct, and interviews with the borough president and retired officer Eric Adams and the columnist Charles Blow. (*Various locations*. [afropunk.com](http://afropunk.com). Through Feb. 25.)

### AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

During this quiet week on the auction circuit, Phillips holds one of its occasional "New

Now" sales, specializing in recent works by rising and, in some cases, more established artists (Feb. 28). Offerings include a white-on-white textured canvas by the San Francisco-born Tauba Auerbach ("Slice V"), a field of bubbles by Yayoi Kusama ("The Galaxy"), and a playfully cartoonish portrait by the Briton Julian Opie ("At Home with Maria 1"). (450 Park Ave. 212-940-1200.)

### READINGS AND TALKS

#### Temple Emanu-El

It has been a decade since "An Inconvenient Truth" brought national attention to climate change. Today, the debate rattles on more dramatically than ever: rogue NASA experts tweet statistics anonymously, die-hard deniers cite conspiracy theories that place blame on globalization and rival economies, and environmentalism is used to sell Kia hybrids during the Super Bowl. The former Vice-President and longtime climate advocate Al Gore takes stock of the situation at this presentation, where he'll use the latest available data to examine our progress, gauge how much damage may have already been done, and propose possible solutions. (*Streicker Center*, 10 E. 66th St. [emanuelstreickernyc.org](http://emanuelstreickernyc.org). Feb. 22 at 7:30.)

#### KGB Bar

At "Night Terrors: Women in Horror," female authors share original works of modern fright. In April Grey's "Chasing the Trickster," a series of dark events lead to a doomed road trip; Kathleen Scheiner imagines a dietary virus that possesses its victim, Sabrina, like a demon, in "The Collectors"; and Lisa Mannetti's most recent novella, "The Box Jumper," provides a haunting alternative history of the magician Harry Houdini. (85 E. 4th St. 347-441-4481. Feb. 28 at 7.)



# FOOD & DRINK



## TABLES FOR TWO

### Aska

47 S. 5th St., Brooklyn (929-337-6792)

"EVERYTHING IN MODERATION, including moderation," it is sometimes said. At Aska, the recently reopened Williamsburg shrine to alchemical Nordic cuisine, the only real immoderation is the sheer amount of coyly inventive food. In place of the usual crescendo of fine-dining tasting menus—a few seafood skirmishes followed by revelatory red-meat battles—there is a procession of intricate tactical maneuvers, nineteen courses that span sea, field, and forest. Here is the lichen turned crouton; here, the squid turned tartlet. For a while, this gentle sleight of hand is fun. Then, all at once, it is wearying.

Fredrik Berselius, the restaurant's Michelin-starred Swedish chef, opened the original Aska in 2012, after surviving the kitchens of Corton and Per Se. At the old location, a mile north, the fare was equally well cooked, but was heartier and more affordable. There was also the welcome contrast of the informal setting, an atrium that served as a lounge for freelancers by day and an electro-music hot spot late at night. The new dining room is nearly unlit, and the round tables are heavy, immense, and draped in black tablecloths. The vibe is best described as hipster funeral.

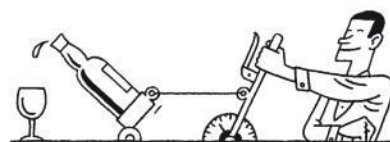
Some dishes stand out against the gloaming. Take the seaweed known as bladderwrack, which when Googled

brings up images of tablets meant to cure indigestion, but here was served in its long, tendrilled natural form—quick-fried into a chip, and kissed with blue-mussel cream. A bakery's worth of bread and cultured butters nearly earned its place as a stand-alone second course, thanks especially to the Manitoba, a high-protein mini-loaf made yeasty by an infusion of I.P.A. And kudos to whoever figured out how to compress kohlrabi so that it becomes as firm and juicy as a water chestnut, and then draw out its flavor with cucumber dust.

Yet the kitchen's attempts at drama tend to repeat themselves. Cannibalism seems a central theme: king crab swam in king-crab consommé, and a skate wing sat in skate-wing sauce. A pile of incinerated lamb heart, served over a pad of rendered lamb fat, was something of a choking hazard (*aska* means "ash" in Swedish). Thankfully, a pig's-blood pancake was heavy enough not to merit an additional bloodbath, but a birch-wood ice cream took its sylvan motif to extremes, studded with mushrooms that were variously candied, dehydrated, or meringued. At that point, the table was littered with near-empty wine glasses, the remnants of a pairing menu that featured "low-intervention natural wines" almost to exclusion. With these fingerprinted trophies to immoderate moderation, a toast was made, to the end of a long, harmless war. (*Tasting menus, \$175–\$250.*)

—Daniel Wenger

## BAR TAB



### Super Power

722 Nostrand Ave., Brooklyn (718-484-0020)

On whom or on what can we blame the night of vomiting that followed one patron's evening at Super Power, a festive tiki bar in Crown Heights, nestled between a construction site and a dingy lounge named Secrets? Was it the fault of shirtless Tom Selleck, whose portrait rests high on a shelf above the bar, the mischievous arch of his brows and the dense forest of his chest hair a siren call to world-weary New Yorkers? Could we blame the bartender, whose Jimmy Buffett vibe and red Hawaiian shirt belied the fury of his mixology? It could have been thanks to the Jonn the Beachcomber, slurpy and delicious, with three types of rum, allspice, grenadine, pineapple, lime, and crushed ice in a goblet the size of a fishbowl, topped with fruit salad and studded with heart-shaped straws. Or maybe it was the Painkiller, a creamy coconut slushy made murky by rum, pineapple juice, and a dusting of nutmeg—a frozen eggnog for the tropics. Actually, the culprit was likely the Slow Reveal, which encourages anything but: a syrupy accelerant in a bisected brass pineapple, the round belly of the bottom half balanced on the stiff fronds of the top half. Visiting Super Power, with the gentle glow of a blowfish lamp, the fogged windows dripping hypnotically with condensation, and the humid, coconut-scented air, was exactly like being on a cruise, but everyone was wearing wool. Surely, in such an environment, one cannot be judged too harshly for surrendering to the good vibes and the easy living, for embracing a little too enthusiastically the infectious spirit of the tiki. —McKenna Stayner



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## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT OFFICIAL DUTIES

SECTION 4 OF the Twenty-fifth Amendment to the Constitution allows for the removal of a President who can no longer discharge his duties but is unable or unwilling to say so. It empowers the Vice-President, along with “a majority of either the principal officers of the executive departments or of such other body as Congress may by law provide,” to declare the President unfit and to install the Vice-President as Acting President. Section 4 has never been invoked. In 1987, when Ronald Reagan appointed Howard Baker to be his new chief of staff, the members of the outgoing chief’s team warned their replacements that Reagan’s mental ineptitude might require them to attempt the removal of the President under Section 4. Baker and his staff, at their first official meeting with Reagan, watched him carefully for signs of incapacity—but the President, apparently cheered by the arrival of newcomers, was alert and lively, and he served out the rest of his second term.

After a month in office, Donald Trump has already proved himself unable to discharge his duties. The disability isn’t laziness or inattention. It expresses itself in paranoid rants, non-stop feuds carried out in public, and impulsive acts that can only damage his government and himself. Last week, at a White House press conference, the President behaved like the unhinged leader of an unstable and barely democratic republic. He rambled for nearly an hour and a half, on script and off; he flung insults at reporters; he announced that he was having fun; and he congratulated himself so many times and in such preposterous terms (“this Administration is running like a fine-tuned machine”) that the White House press corps could only stare in amazement. The gaudy gold drapery of the East Room contributed to the impression that at any moment Trump might declare himself

President for Life, and a flunky would appear from behind the curtain to pin the Medal of National Greatness on his suit jacket, while, backstage, officials and generals discussed his overthrow. Trump experienced such a deep need to get back on top by lashing out that he apparently overrode the objections of his advisers, felt much better afterward, then prepared to go to Florida to sustain his high at the first rally of his reelection campaign.

While the White House isolates itself in power struggles, the Administration is in nearly open revolt. Career diplomats are signing statements of dissent or leaving the State Department, while key posts remain unfilled. Officials at the Environmental Protection Agency fought to stop Scott Pruitt, Trump’s pro-industry nominee, from taking over as their new boss. And other government officials, after weeks of hearing Trump belittle their agencies, are feeding the press information about Russian involvement with his campaign.

Foreign leaders, depending on their orientation, are watching this spectacle with disbelieving alarm or with calculating interest. Allies such as Prime Ministers Justin Trudeau, of Canada, and Shinzo Abe, of Japan, flatter the President in order to avoid the fate of Australia’s Malcolm Turnbull, whom Trump first berated and then hung up on during their get-to-know-you phone call. Vladimir Putin is already testing Trump, by sending Russian fighter jets to buzz a U.S. Navy ship. Xi Jinping is positioning China to fill the void in the Pacific Rim which will be left by Trump’s policy of America First. Pragmatists in Iran are trying to judge whether the new American government can be counted on to act rationally—exactly what U.S. officials always wondered about the fractured leadership of the Islamic Republic.

It won’t get better. The notion that, at some point, Trump would start behaving



“Presidential” was always a fantasy that has the truth backward: the pressure of the Presidency is making him worse. He’s insulated by sycophants and by family members, and he can still ride a long way on his popular following. Though the surge of civic opposition, the independence of the courts, and the reinvigoration of the press are heartening, the only real leverage over Trump lies in the hands of Republicans. But Section 4 won’t be invoked. Vice-President Mike Pence is not going to face the truth in the private back room of a Washington restaurant with Secretaries Betsy DeVos, Ben Carson, and Wilbur Ross, or in the offices of Speaker of the House Paul Ryan and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell. Republican leaders have opted instead for unconstrained power.

They need Trump to pass their agenda of rewriting the tax code in favor of the rich and of gutting regulations that protect the public and the planet—an agenda that a majority of Americans never supported—so they are looking the other way. Even the prospect of Russian influence over our elections and our government leaves these American patriots unmoved. Senator John Cornyn, of Texas, the Republican whip, made it plain: Trump can go on being Trump “as long as we’re able to get things done.” Senator Rand

Paul, of Kentucky, explained, “We’ll never even get started with doing the things we need to do, like repealing Obamacare, if we’re spending our whole time having Republicans investigate Republicans.”

The growing Russian scandal will challenge the willingness of the Party to hold the President accountable. So far, the situation is not encouraging. The heads of the key House and Senate committees are partisans who are doing as little as possible to expose corruption and possible treason in the White House. The few critical Republican voices—Senators John McCain, Lindsey Graham, and Susan Collins, and Representative Mark Sanford—are ineffective. Perhaps Party leaders are privately searching their souls; perhaps, as with the old Bolshevik Rubashov, in Arthur Koestler’s “Darkness at Noon,” ideology and power have rendered them incapable of independent moral judgment. Whatever the case, history won’t be kind to them.

An authoritarian and erratic leader, a chaotic Presidency, a supine legislature, a resistant permanent bureaucracy, street demonstrations, fear abroad: this is what illiberal regimes look like. If Trump were more rational and more competent, he might have a chance of destroying our democracy.

—George Packer

## THE BENCH TIPPED SCALES



WHEN LORETTA LYNCH started work as an Assistant United States Attorney in Brooklyn, in the early nineteen-nineties, Peter Norling, her first supervisor, had some reservations. “I was concerned that she’s very soft-spoken,” he recalled, “but then, on about her second or third day on the job, I walked by her office and I overheard her conversation with a defense attorney. She was saying, ‘I think we’ve said all we have to say to one another,’ and she hangs up the phone. And I said to myself, ‘Lack of spine will not be a problem for Loretta.’”

Norling, who remains a prosecutor in the office, was reminiscing the other night at a raucous dinner for about three hundred alums of the U.S. Attorney’s office. Lynch, who is fifty-seven, worked her way into the top job in the Brooklyn office, serving two terms as U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of New York, until Barack Obama brought her on as Attorney

General, in 2015, making her the eighty-third person and the first African-American woman in the post. “Thank you for welcoming me home,” Lynch told the group. Born and raised in North Carolina, Lynch still projects the steely gentility that Norling identified decades earlier. There was a reflective quality to her talk, too, not just because her tenure in Washington was cut off after only twenty-one months but because new management appears poised to take the Justice Department in such a different direction. “People have to feel connected to our justice system or there is no justice,” she said. “We see that disconnect growing and growing.”

Lynch’s priorities as Attorney General already look like remnants from a distant era. Lynch’s Justice Department filed a lawsuit to invalidate North Carolina’s “bathroom law,” and in a speech at the time she said to the transgender community that “we see you; we stand with you; and we will do everything we can to protect you going forward.” (Under Jeff Sessions, her successor, the department is retreating from such cases.) Lynch told the group that this crusade grew out of her experiences in Brooklyn. “We are the only Cabinet agency named after an ideal,” she said. “That’s why it was im-

portant to speak out on the L.G.B.T.Q. issue. We were defending vulnerable victims, people who didn’t have anyone to speak up for them. We took that idea from Brooklyn to Washington to make it real, and it came from all of you.” Likewise, Lynch and her predecessor Eric Holder responded to the events in Ferguson by trying to smooth relations between police and the African-American community. (President Trump has already signed an executive order aimed at curbing violence against the police, and both he and Sessions have embraced the Blue Lives Matter cause.) “We thought it was important to listen to both sides when it came to police and community relations,” she said. “We tried to broker peace in the streets, see the world as they did at their level, and listen to everyone with a stake in the community.” Not all Lynch’s memories of her time in Washington were fond, though. “Testifying before Congress was absolutely lovely,” she said, with a wry grin. “It made me wistful for my days in Brooklyn in interview rooms, talking to murderers and getting honest answers.”

Still, this was not a night to dwell on disappointments but, rather, to celebrate a local girl who made good. No Eastern District event would be



complete without a few shots at the office's rival federal prosecutors in Manhattan's Southern District of New York. "We had a few S.D.N.Y. alums in Washington," Lynch said, "but we converted them." And notwithstanding her Southern roots, Lynch brought some New York swagger to the capital. "We had bagel contests between Washington and New York," featuring Gotham's H&H. "You can guess who won," she said. Still, Lynch recalled that few moments were more memorable than her first week in her new office. "I got a big bouquet of flowers, and the card said they were from Aretha Franklin," Lynch recalled. "That was pretty cool."

—Jeffrey Toobin

## THE WAYWARD PRESS EMBEDDED



THE EAST ROOM, with its chandeliers and gold damask drapes, is the largest room in the White House; it might also be, to use a word favored by the President, the most elegant. Last Thursday, President Trump invited the White House press corps to assemble there so that he could debase them, while relying on them to air said debasement on live television—the mass-media equivalent of the schoolyard move known as “Why are you hitting yourself?”

The event was to begin at noon. At 11:50 A.M., the press corps stood outside the West Wing in the cold. Normally, a seating plan for an East Room press conference is drawn up well in advance. This conference, organized on a Presidential whim, would be a free-for-all. A few correspondents tried to elbow their way toward the front of the pack.

“O.K., guys, nice and orderly,” a press aide said.

“We’ll get orderly when *you’re* orderly,” one reporter muttered.

In the East Room, correspondents fanned out across a dozen or so rows of seats: the Huffington Post near the front, Newsmax in the middle, NPR near the back. Several White House

staffers lined up against a wall. Omarosa Manigault, a former reality-show villain and now a communications staffer, glared at reporters while whispering to a colleague; she covered her mouth with a notepad, trying to prevent leaks via lip-reading. Boris Epshteyn, a former investment banker who once moderated a panel promoting American investment in Moscow, is now an aide; he paced the length of the wall, arms crossed.

Jim Acosta, CNN’s White House correspondent, walked toward the front of the room and stood on a small wooden riser facing a camera. He spoke remotely to the CNN anchor Jake Tapper, whom he could hear through an earpiece, but who was inaudible to everyone else in the room.

“That’s right, Jake,” Acosta said. “I sure hope this is not fake news.” The reporters in the room laughed; the White House staffers did not. When his TV appearance was over, he stepped off the riser, and the room sank into a tense silence.

“Jim’s trying to get on ‘S.N.L.’,” Epshteyn said.

“Did that work?” Acosta asked him.

“Nope,” Epshteyn said, stone-faced.

The President arrived twenty minutes late, spent less than a minute discussing the ostensible subject of the press conference—his new pick for Secretary of Labor—and then got down to business. “We have to talk to find out what’s going on, because the press, honestly, is out of control,” he said, adding, “Russia is fake news.”

Jonathan Karl, of ABC News, asked

about the Trump campaign’s contact with Russian officials: “Is it fake news or are these real leaks?”

“The leaks are absolutely real,” Trump said. “The news is fake, because so much of the news is fake.”

A few minutes later, Trump said, “I want to find a friendly reporter.” Jake Turx, from an Orthodox Jewish publication called *Ami*, asked how the government would deal with hate crimes against Jews. Jared Kushner, in the center of the front row, sat upright, his gelled hair gleaming in the lights.

“Not a simple question, not a fair question,” the President said. “Sit down.”

The next question was about DACA, a program that grants documentation to some young immigrants. “We’re gonna show great heart,” the President said. Stephen Bannon, sitting to Kushner’s left, rubbed his face.

April Ryan, of the American Urban Radio Networks, asked a question.

“That was very professional and very good,” the President said, as if to a child.

Ryan, who has been a White House correspondent for twenty years, said, “I’m very professional.” She followed up, asking whether Trump would meet with the Congressional Black Caucus.

“Are they friends of yours?” Trump said.

“I’m just a reporter,” Ryan, who is African-American, said.

The press corps was escorted back to the briefing room, where they exchanged shell-shocked smiles. “Did he literally say the words ‘Russia is fake



JOEDATOR

*“But I want a career, a family, and a cracker.”*

news’?” one reporter asked another.

A correspondent who had covered Latin American dictatorships said, “Who’s the banana republic now?” Another reporter kept repeating the word “surreal.”

Several people asked Turx for his contact information. He bent down and pointed to his yarmulke, which was emblazoned with his Twitter handle. “My feelings for the President are of respect and appreciation,” Turx said. “I don’t blame him for being defensive.”

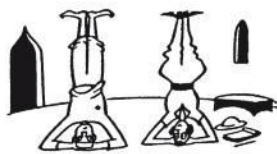
When Ryan walked in, several reporters glanced at her sympathetically. “Do you know every black person in the country, April?” one asked.

“April, I have a black friend in Cleveland—could you send him a message for me?” another said.

Ryan shook her head and smiled. “I mean, I can’t even,” she said, and left it at that.

—Andrew Marantz

## PERSPIRATION DEPT. GETTING IT OUT



THE FIRST THING the exercise impresario Taryn Toomey did after she leased the third floor of 22 Park Place, a former construction office, last November, was to pour concrete over the scuffed floorboards and scatter hundreds of bits of smashed crystals on top. Black onyx, hematite, and black tourmaline, to “draw energy out,” and transparent quartz, rose quartz, and amethyst, for “clearing, love, and processing.” Then she covered them up with new oak planks. “I so strongly believe in the power of intention,” she said, tugging at the sleeves of her black bodysuit. “Whether or not it works, it’s there.”

One morning last month, forty of Toomey’s acolytes flocked to the studio for its inaugural edition of the Class, a yoga-cardio-strength workout that Toomey, who is thirty-eight, began offering in 2011. On yoga mats, in expensive athletic apparel—one of the students, the supermodel Christy Turlington, wore hot-pink Nikes—they

did everything Toomey’s deep, raspy voice commanded: squats, hip bridges, jumping jacks.

“Whatever the fuck you need to do, you do!” she told the class, as a drum-beat pounded through speakers. “If you need to run and scream, if you need to stand and hold your space, whatever you need to do—*four, three, two, one.*” On “one,” all the women (and one man) screamed and pitter-pattered their feet so hard the sound system almost toppled over. During leg lifts, Toomey urged, “Go ahead, get fucking angry! This is not about being polite, this is not about being pretty, this is about feeling.” Someone yelped. One exercise involved thumping one’s body the way Matthew McConaughey did in “The Wolf of Wall Street.”

“Do not deny yourself your strength because you’re hooked into some bullshit story,” Toomey bellowed. “Allow yourself to clear the depths of you.” A woman in a blue sports bra roared.

Depths cleared, there was juice to be had. “Did you survive that?” Turlington asked a fellow-student, draping a grapefruit-scented towel around her neck. “It has been a difficult several months. Something like this, it restores hope and faith.”

Near a display of thousand-dollar necklaces (designed by Toomey; also crystal), the fashion designer Mara Hoffman wrapped a sweatshirt around her head like a turban. “I come when I need to weep, sweat, pee my pants, and get shit out,” she said. “I like to freely scream. I always leave with a really good idea.”

Jennifer Aniston spent five days in Ojai with Toomey and a group of Class devotees last fall. “It’s like, ‘You’ll laugh! You’ll cry!’” she said. “Like the ad from ‘Cats’ or something.”

As staffers sanitized mats with little spray bottles of tea-tree oil and vinegar, Toomey perched on a meditation pillow holding a cup of coffee. A former account executive for Christian Dior (she specialized in women’s shoes and handbags), she took a monthlong leave in 2007 to learn how to teach yoga, and she never went back. While in Peru with her yoga teacher, Toomey met Mama Kia (full name: Kia Ingenlath), a Florida woman who moved to South America and opened a retreat center

and home for needy children. “I never sat down and studied with her,” Toomey said. “It was learning by osmosis. It left such a mark on my emotional, energetic system.”

Three years later, in New York, Toomey became overcome with grief when she learned that Mama Kia had died. She added more vigorous moves to her yoga practice. “I needed much more fire,” she said. “I needed much more sound.” From the basement of her Tribeca apartment, she began teaching her souped-up hybrid workout, spouting whatever self-help mantras came to mind. She began renting space at dance studios in Manhattan and Los Angeles, where one teacher has a voice that sounds uncannily like hers.

“I don’t know if that’s from screaming so much or they happen to have that similar voice,” Aniston, who often takes the Class in L.A., said. She mimicked a pitchman: “You, too, can have a Taryn Toomey gravelly, rusty, sexy voice!”

At the Class’s new Manhattan space, opaque shades cover the windows, casting a mauve glow. “I want it to



Taryn Toomey

feel like a womb,” Toomey said. Mama Kia’s ashes sit in an urn. Classes, once donation-based, now cost thirty-five dollars each. Since the election, Toomey said, students seem especially eager to stamp their feet and scream.

“We’re being pulled into these lower vibrations of feeling, like, ‘What’s going to happen?’” she said. “That’s when you



get really steady and you focus. It's O.K. to feel angry and destabilized. It's reality."

The phone in her lap buzzed. It was a text from the building's superintendent, asking her to call. Toomey grimaced. "God, I wonder if it's all the jumping." Even crystals have their limitations.

—Sheila Marikar

## DEPT. OF FELT LUCKY



LISA HENSON AND Emma Walton Hamilton met only recently, but they have something rare in common: each has a parent who likely held a deep, enchanted place in your childhood. Henson, who is fifty-six, is the oldest daughter of Jim Henson, the creator of "Sesame Street" and the Muppets; she is now the C.E.O. of the Jim Henson Company. Walton Hamilton, who is fifty-four, is the oldest daughter of Julie Andrews, with whom she has written more than thirty children's books.

"We met by Skype," Walton Hamilton said the other day, sitting next to Henson in director's chairs. They were at a sound stage on Long Island, on the set of "Julie's Greenroom," a Netflix series that premieres on March 17th; both women are executive producers. The show, aimed at preschoolers, stars Andrews and a small band of puppets, who meet backstage at a theatre to learn about the performing arts. Each episode, Andrews welcomes a special guest to teach her Greenies, as she calls them, about a different discipline, including singing (Josh Groban), songwriting (Sara Bareilles), the makeup of an orchestra (Joshua Bell), and clowning (Bill Irwin). "We have a list of fifty topics we want to do, everything from hip-hop dancing to tap," Henson said.

"Mime. African drumming," Walton Hamilton added.

Onstage, Andrews, who wore a lavender sweater, sat in an armchair surrounded by puppet kids. The set was raised on a scaffold, with a breakaway

floor to make room for puppeteers, who were arranged below in a Twister tangle. A sign overhead read "Are We Lucky, Or What?"—an Andrews motto. "It's something that she has said for as long as I can remember," Walton Hamilton said. "Sitting outside having a barbecue or something, she'll go, 'Are we lucky, or what?' It can actually be under the worst circumstances—we'll be in the middle of a thunderstorm and the power will go out." (Hold the schnitzel with noodles.)

Today's guest star: Alec Baldwin, teaching acting. The two performers rehearsed their scene. "Alec? You're early, love!" Andrews said as Baldwin burst through the greenroom doors, wearing a gray T-shirt. She turned to her puppet gang and said warmly, "This is our stupendous guest and a very good friend, one of the world's great actors, Mr. Alec Baldwin." A puppet duck quacked in his face.

"No harm, no fowl," Baldwin replied.

A few feet back, Henson and Walton Hamilton watched on a monitor. "Mom has a long-standing relationship with the Henson Company," Walton Hamilton said, as anyone who remembers Andrews singing "The Lonely Goatherd" on "The Muppet Show" can attest. Walton Hamilton grew up in London, Switzerland, New York, and Los Angeles. Her father is the stage designer Tony Walton, Andrews's husband before Blake Edwards; her godmother is Carol Burnett, another guest star on "Julie's Greenroom."

"I think your childhood was perhaps a little more cosmopolitan than mine," Henson, who was brought up in Greenwich, Connecticut, said.

"It wasn't very cosmopolitan," Walton Hamilton countered, "because my mom was very protective of us and very careful to make sure that we had good bedtimes and cartoon breakfasts."

"When I was in elementary school, if anybody found out that my father was a puppeteer they just felt sorry for me," Henson recalled. "They were thinking church puppets."

"But the difference is you carry the Henson name," Walton Hamilton said. "I was able to hide a lot behind 'Walton,' and found that to be quite useful. People would look at me differently or expect things."

"Did they expect you to be able to sing?"

"Exactly."

Both women broke away from the family racket before rejoining the fold. Walton Hamilton moved to Sag Harbor in 1991 and founded a theatre with her husband, which they ran to-



Julie Andrews

gether for seventeen years. Henson, determined to prove herself "edgier than the Muppets," became the first female president of the *Harvard Lampoon*, then moved to Hollywood and became the president of Columbia Pictures. "To be honest, I'm a little jealous of Julie and Emma getting to work together at this stage of life," Henson said. (Jim Henson died in 1990.)

Henson had asked a company archivist to write up a time line of Andrews's collaborations with her father. It resurrected memories for both daughters. 1973: The special "Julie on Sesame Street" airs. Walton Hamilton was ten. "I have a picture of me sitting on the step of a brownstone stoop with my mom and all the Muppets around us," she recalled. "And Perry Como, for some reason." 1975: The Muppets tape the special "Julie: My Favorite Things." "The timing was such that we had to cancel a ski trip in Vermont," Henson recalled. To make up for it, Andrews lent the Hensons her ski house in Gstaad, Switzerland. Lisa was fourteen.

"Let us know if you'd like to go skiing again," Walton Hamilton told her.

—Michael Schulman

# OSCAR DEAREST

*The Academy's diversity campaign is rattling some egos.*

BY MICHAEL SCHULMAN



*In response to #OscarsSoWhite, some members were shifted to “emeritus status.”*

THE ACADEMY of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences occupies a squat nineteen-seventies building on Wilshire Boulevard, surrounded by car dealerships. On January 14th of last year, Cheryl Boone Isaacs, the Academy’s president, arrived at 2:30 A.M., several hours before she was to announce the eighty-eighth annual Oscar nominations at a press conference. Boone Isaacs, a soft-spoken woman in her sixties, with bangs and chunky glasses, has held her post since 2013. She’d arrived early to get camera-ready and to practice saying the names; the previous year, she had accidentally caused an Internet sensation when she referred to the cinematographer Dick Pope as “Dick Poop.”

The Academy’s first black president and third female president (after Bette

Davis and Fay Kanin), Boone Isaacs has presided over a tumultuous era. In 2015, all the acting nominees were white, and the civil-rights drama “Selma” received no nods for its cast or for its director, Ava DuVernay. In response, an activist named April Reign tweeted, “#OscarsSoWhite they asked to touch my hair,” launching a hashtag movement that laid Hollywood’s diversity problems at the Academy’s feet. Boone Isaacs was desperately hoping to avoid a repeat in 2016. As she sat having her makeup done, a staff member gravely handed her the packet containing the list of names. Not only were the acting nominees again all white, but “Straight Outta Compton,” about the gangsta-rap group N.W.A., was noticed only for the work of its white

screenwriters, and the “Rocky” sequel “Creed,” which had a black director and star, received a single nomination—for Sylvester Stallone.

Just before 5 A.M., Boone Isaacs took the elevator down to the Academy’s in-house movie theatre, which has a plush red curtain framed by two jumbo statuettes. She and the actor John Krasinski read the names to a crowd of bleary-eyed reporters. A lifelong public-relations professional, she kept her tone upbeat, but, as she told me later, “I just knew it was going to be tough from a P.R. standpoint.” It was. April Reign immediately revived her hashtag, which went viral. Jada Pinkett Smith, whose husband, Will Smith, failed to receive a nomination for “Concussion,” announced on Facebook that she would boycott the ceremony. Spike Lee also vowed to boycott, writing, on Instagram, “40 White Actors In 2 Years And No Flava At All. We Can’t Act?! WTF!!” The following week, at the King Legacy Awards, where Boone Isaacs received the Rosa Parks Humanitarian Award, the actor David Oyelowo (who played Martin Luther King, Jr., in “Selma”) interrupted his prepared remarks to say, “The Academy has a problem.”

That same day, Boone Isaacs released a statement saying that she was “heartbroken and frustrated about the lack of inclusion” and promised “big changes.” Diversity had been feverishly discussed within the Academy since at least 2012, when the Los Angeles *Times* reported that the nearly six-thousand-person membership was ninety-four per cent white and seventy-seven per cent male, with a median age of sixty-two. (New members need two letters of sponsorship to get in; the annual three-hundred-and-fifty-dollar dues provide admittance to free screenings, which members are expected to attend so that they can make nominations and vote for the awards.) In late 2015, Boone Isaacs announced an initiative called A2020, which had the goal of making the Academy twice as diverse by the end of the decade. When the #OscarsSoWhite fiasco started spinning out of control, she decided to fast-track the project. “It became apparent that doing business as usual wasn’t going to be enough,” she said.

On January 21st, the board of governors met for an emergency session in the Academy’s seventh-floor conference room. The



board is made up of three representatives from each of the organization's seventeen branches. "It's just like being a member of the P.T.A.," a screenwriter told me—if your P.T.A. included Tom Hanks and Annette Bening. The board unanimously approved a plan to diversify the voting body quickly by aggressively recruiting new members while shifting others to "emeritus status." Voting rights would be granted only to members who had been active in the industry in the previous ten years, with the exception of those with credits spanning three decades and anyone who had ever been nominated for an Oscar. In other words, if you had two acting credits in the Eisenhower era, start packing for the ice floe.

News of the plan was met with praise, including from Ava DuVernay, who tweeted, "Shame is a helluva motivator." But a backlash soon emerged. Since the Academy had not released a list of who would be demoted, old-timers looked at their IMDb pages and panicked. In the days following the announcement, the *Hollywood Reporter* published a series of guest columns by irate Academy veterans: the director Stephen Verona ("The Lords of Flatbush," 1974) was "flabbergasted and then outraged"; the producer David Kirkpatrick ("Reds," 1981; "Terms of Endearment," 1983) accused the Academy of "exchanging purported racism with ageism"; Patricia Resnick, who wrote the feminist classic "9 to 5" (1980), complained about potentially being "booted into 'emeritus' status and replaced by younger members" as a sop to help the Academy deal with its "publicity nightmare." Resnick believed that the Academy was taking the heat for a problem endemic to the whole industry. "I'd really like to see them use their muscle to push the studios to include more diverse voices," she told me.

AS ANYONE WHO has seen "Sunset Boulevard" knows, no anxiety is as pervasive in Hollywood as the fear of obsolescence. "A lot of us felt blindsided," the visual-effects artist John Van Vliet told me. In the seventies, Van Vliet was drafted out of film school by Industrial Light & Magic, where he worked on "The Empire Strikes Back" and "Raiders of the Lost Ark." Now sixty-two and semi-retired, he said, "Once you get into your fifties, you're pretty disposable." Van

Vliet was in the middle of reviewing DVD screeners before casting his Oscar votes, a process he estimated would take a hundred and twenty hours. "The Academy is essentially asking us to give them three weeks of labor, and then they're going to take our results, put them into a ceremony, and sell it," he said, referring to the seventy-five million dollars that the organization earns from the television broadcast. "Then they're turning around and kicking us in the teeth."

Like Hollywood's best sagas—"Star Wars," "The Godfather"—the Oscars often play out as a drama of generational conflict. Daniel Smith-Rowsey, a film historian, has referred to the latest shakeup as "the third purge," following two previous industry-wide talent overhauls. The first occurred in the twenties, as the rise of talkies swept scores of mugging mustache-twirlers and big-eyed ingénues to the sidelines. This shift coincided with the founding of the Academy, in 1927, by Louis B. Mayer, the head of M-G-M, who hoped to preempt the unionization of studio craftsmen by concocting an organization that could mediate labor disputes. The bestowing of "awards of merit" was an afterthought, and in May, 1929, at the Hollywood Roosevelt Hotel, the Academy's first president, Douglas Fairbanks, dispensed the trophies in fifteen minutes. That year, for the only time, there was a prize for title writing. "The Jazz Singer," the silent era's dinosaur-killing asteroid, was given a special prize, as it seemed unfair to put it in competition with the silents. By the next year, the Best Picture contenders were all talkies.

The second purge came in the late sixties, as the studio system was grappling with its own decline and the rise of a youth culture with which it seemed hopelessly out of touch. A generation of stars—the Bing Crosbys and Doris Days—suddenly seemed square and quaint, displaced by a new crop of "ethnic" talents like Al Pacino, Dustin Hoffman, and Barbra Streisand, while sword-and-sandal epics gave way to New Hollywood hits like "Easy Rider" and "The Graduate." In 1967, Robert Evans, the thirty-seven-year-old head of Paramount, said, "The strongest period in Hollywood history was in the thirties, when most of the creative people were young. The trouble is that most of them are still around making movies."

The Academy president, Gregory Peck—hardly an avatar of the counter-culture—knew that to stay relevant the Academy would have to bring in more Eve Harringtons and weed out the Margo Channings. In 1970, the year that "Midnight Cowboy" won Best Picture, he sent a letter to members informing them that those who had been "professionally inactive" would be made nonvoting "associates," the euphemistic precursor to "emeritus." Out went the director of "Invasion of the Animal People" (1959) and the producer of "Bud Abbott and Lou Costello in Hollywood" (1945), who wrote back cursing the Academy's "blatant arrogance." In came voguish young stars like Candice Bergen, who had written to Peck offering to recruit fresh talent and griping that "most members are anachronisms clogging the works of an incredibly facile mechanism called motion pictures." Soon, she and Peck sponsored Dennis Hopper for membership. He got kicked out two years later for nonpayment of dues.

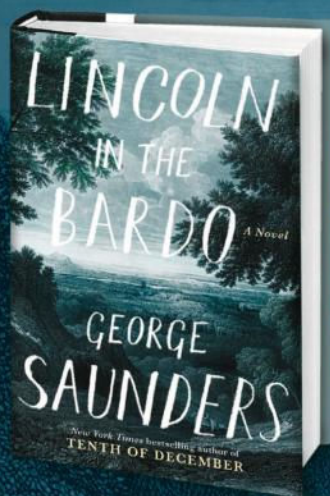
TODAY, HOLLYWOOD is again trying to appeal to a fractured, anxious country, polarized not by hippies but by identity politics. I asked Boone Isaacs if her initiative did constitute a third purge. "There was *never* an idea of a large purge," she said. It was a rainy Thursday, and we were at Spago, the Beverly Hills power-lunch spot. "This is a big industry in a small town," she said. "Look around the restaurant. See how diverse it is?" There was one other black patron.

She had just returned from a film festival in Dubai, part of an effort to recruit foreign filmmakers to the Academy. She told me that she has always been attracted to what she calls "the international concept." Born in Springfield, Massachusetts, the youngest daughter of a postal worker, she spent her junior year of college in Copenhagen. At twenty-one, she became a stewardess for Pan Am. She was one of two black women in a class of about thirty. "I had my favorite route, which was to Tokyo, to Hong Kong, to Sydney, to either Fiji or Tahiti, to Hawaii, and then home," she recalled.

She went into the film business because of her older brother, Ashley, who joined United Artists in the sixties and did marketing for "West Side Story." By the late seventies, he was the president

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of distribution and marketing at 20th Century Fox, the highest-ranking black executive in Hollywood. Cheryl followed him to Los Angeles, but, she said, “we decided he wasn’t going to help me.” When people saw her résumé, they assumed she was Pat Boone’s daughter.

In 1977, she was hired to work the press junket for “Close Encounters of the Third Kind.” She had no black co-workers. “I said to myself, ‘I’m just going to put my head down and work, and I’ll look up in ten years and see where I am.’” In the eighties, she joined Paramount, eventually rising to executive vice-president of worldwide publicity and working on “Forrest Gump” and “Braveheart.” The studio was then run by pioneering female executives like Sherry Lansing, but Boone Isaacs was often the only black person in the room. “I thought I should have been promoted a little faster a couple of times,” she said, but “you didn’t really spend a lot of time talking about the obvious.”

By the time she was elected president of the Academy, a role for which she receives no pay, she was uniquely positioned to tackle the issue of “inclusion.” She told me, “When I first got this gig, people would say to me, ‘You must be overwhelmed.’ I thought, Have you ever used those words with a man?” As a black woman, she said, “I’m always, half-jokingly, saying, ‘I can’t get angry,’” but the barrage of grievances about diversity had clearly irked her.

Throughout the spring of 2016, Academy librarians worked overtime scrutinizing older members’ credits, as the board of governors fielded frantic calls from members asking if they were marked for demotion. When the board held its elections last summer, a handful of candidates ran on an anti-reform platform, among them the composer William Goldstein, who railed against the Academy’s response to “false accusations of implied racism.” They all lost, and Boone Isaacs was reelected—indicating that her critics were louder than they were numerous.

In June, the Academy released a list of six hundred and eighty-three new members—a record number; forty-six per cent of them were female and forty-one per cent were nonwhite, representing fifty-nine different countries. They

included the actors John Boyega, America Ferrera, Ice Cube, Idris Elba, Daniel Dae Kim, and Gabrielle Union; the directors Ryan Coogler (“Creed”), Marjane Satrapi, and the Wachowski siblings; and three Wayans brothers, Damon, Marlon, and Keenen. “I think they were just, like, ‘Man, there are six thousand members. We’ve got to put at least two Wayanses in!’” Marlon told me. “You want diversity, just go to the Wayans tribe.” As if to rebut charges of ageism, the oldest inductee was the ninety-one-year-old Mexican actor Ignacio López Tarso.

The “purge” ended up affecting less than one per cent of the membership, or about seventy people. The Academy promised that their names would not be disclosed, so that studios would keep sending them screeners. (The Academy, like *Skull and Bones*, keeps its membership list secret, so studios cobble together spreadsheets of likely Oscar voters.) Few of the emeritus members came forward publicly. I visited one of them, the screenwriter Robert Bassing, at his house, south of La Brea.

Bassing came to Hollywood in 1945, to work as a story analyst for Columbia Pictures. Later, he and his wife, Eileen, co-wrote a screenplay based on her novel “Home Before Dark,” about a woman returning from a mental institution. The movie, starring Jean Simmons, was released in 1958, the year that Bassing was inducted into the Academy. “For about a year, I was the hottest writer in Hollywood,” he recalled. But none of his other screenplays got produced. Eileen died in 1977, and Bassing turned to ghostwriting and public relations. “I got lucky,” he said. “Then I got unlucky.”

In July, Bassing received a letter from the Academy asking for an updated list of credits and informing him brightly that he might “qualify for emeritus status.” Then, in October, he got a second letter: “As of today,” it said, he was converted to “emeritus (non-voting) status.”

Boone Isaacs had told me that the mini-purge had been misunderstood, that it had nothing to do with racial diversity. “It’s more about relevance,” she said—a retrofitted rationale that had done little to quell the outrage. Hearing this explanation, Bassing said, “That’s not nice to say to a ninety-two-year-old person.” He fiddled with his hearing-aid



battery. “Because I already know that. I mean, when you’re ninety you’re not relevant. Yes?”

Mother Dolores Hart, who is seventy-eight and the Academy’s only nun, was also shifted to emeritus status. She was inducted in 1960, three years after her film debut, in “Loving You,” opposite Elvis Presley, and three years before she forsook Hollywood for the veil. When I visited her, at the Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Connecticut, she had been dutifully watching her screeners on a laptop during *Lectio Divina*, the time for “holy reading.” She said she loved “Hacksaw Ridge,” the gory Mel Gibson war drama. When she got the letter from the Academy telling her that this would be her last year as a voting member, she was disappointed. “I’m not going to go down screaming,” she said. “But I think if they cut off too much of the elder community, they’re going to clip the *wisdom* dimension of the Academy.”



THE DIVERSITY ISSUE opened up a now familiar dynamic in American life: as marginalized groups attain more influence, others feel resentful. But, much like Presidential politics, the Oscar race is not as simple as voters checking a box; behind the scenes, it is driven by a vast, self-perpetuating machinery. Where Washington has pollsters and K Street lobbyists, awards season has a cottage industry of hired strategists, prognosticators, and bloggers. Politicians kiss babies and eat pork chops on a stick at the Iowa State Fair; Oscar contenders pick at passed sashimi and answer identical questions about their “process.”

“People in the Academy do not vote for people they don’t like,” one self-described “candidate-whisperer” told me. Of the celebrity-petting-zoo events that studios arrange to promote their movies, he said, “You go in there lubricated by the talent and then you get fucked over by the charm.” Some actors (Tom Hanks, Denzel Washington) are known to be charismatic on cue; others (Michael Fassbender, Rooney Mara) can’t hide their distaste for electioneering. Whether campaigning is even effective

is an open question. In 2010, when Mo’Nique was nominated in the Best Supporting Actress category for “Precious,” she refused to glad-hand the press and voters at awards-season parties. She won anyway, and said, in her acceptance speech, “I would like to thank the Academy for showing that it can be about the performance and not the politics.” (Later, when her career seemed to stall, she claimed that the industry “blackballed” her for not playing by the rules.) The next year, Melissa Leo (“The Fighter”), annoyed that, as a fifty-year-old woman, she had not been offered any magazine covers, went rogue and paid to place her own “vanity ads” in the trades. She, too, won.

Awards strategists insist that their main job is simply getting voters to see the movie, preferably on a big screen. The Academy’s weighted voting system is complicated—one strategist I met for lunch stacked twenty packets of Sweet’N Low on the table in an attempt to demonstrate how it worked—but, basically, it’s better to have a small, intense base of support than a wider, more tepid one. Voters prefer to watch movies in their living rooms, so you have to lure them out of the house—hence the barrage of screenings attached to luncheons and Q and A.s with stars.

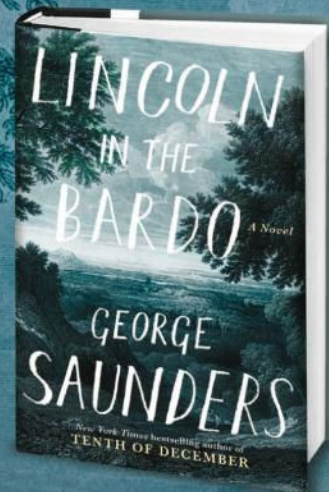
One Wednesday night in January, Nicole Kidman wafted into the Monkey Bar, in New York, wearing a sleek Louis Vuitton dress with a Peter Pan collar. She was accompanied by an eight-year-old Indian boy in a suit: Sunny Pawar, her co-star in the drama “Lion.” The event was a dinner following a screening, co-hosted by UNICEF and organized by Peggy Siegal, known for her swanky promotional functions targeting cultural “tastemakers.”

For Academy voters, awards season is a roving party that begins before Thanksgiving and extends well past New Year’s. Earlier that day, Paramount had held a luncheon at the Rainbow Room toasting Amy Adams and Martin Scorsese, while Kenneth Lonergan and Casey Affleck, the director and the star of “Manchester by the Sea,” appeared at a tea at “21.”

At the Monkey Bar, a production

“A luminous feat of generosity and humanism.”

—COLSON WHITEHEAD,  
*The New York Times Book Review*



“MONUMENTAL.”

—NPR

“INGENIOUS. . . Saunders—well on his way to becoming a twenty-first century Twain—crafts an American patchwork of love and loss.”

—VOGUE

“Profound, funny and vital.”

—CHICAGO TRIBUNE

designer who was part of the Academy's new class scanned the crowd. "I see the same faces over and over again at these things," he said. "Like, there's Tina Louise."

Louise, who joined the Academy not long after "Gilligan's Island" ended (she had played Sappho of Lesbos in a 1960 flick called "The Warrior Empress"), sat in a corner booth. She'd just been to a luncheon for Warren Beatty. "I've seen everything," she said. "I'm very impressed with 'Fences.' And 'La La Land.' And 'Moonlight.'" She thought for a moment. "And 'Lion.' Nicole was great. I will nominate her." She declined to weigh in on the diversity fracas.

The room filled up with more voters, including the veteran actresses Lois Smith and Rutanya Alda, who sat near the night-life columnist Michael Musto. "Tomorrow afternoon is a tea for 'The Eagle Huntress,'" Musto said. "It's one of the fifteen short-listed documentaries. That's how specific this gets." After a sea-bass dinner, the cast sat on stools and answered questions. Kidman talked about the thrill of meeting her character's real-life counterpart, an Australian woman who adopted an Indian child. Pawar, through a translator, said that his favorite things about the United States were the Statue of Liberty and Disneyland.

In a booth toward the back, the film's executive producer, Harvey Weinstein, craned his head around to watch. While Oscar campaigning dates back to Mary Pickford (she invited the judges to tea at Pickfair), no one has pursued it with the vigor, ingenuity, and ruthlessness of Weinstein, who, with his brother Bob, ran Miramax from 1979 to 2005. From its Tribeca headquarters, Miramax waged a kind of guerrilla war against the studios, which turned into a full-on arms race after Disney acquired the company, in 1993. The next year, Miramax released "Pulp Fiction," which won the Palme d'Or at Cannes and became the first independent film to make more than a hundred million dollars. In 1995, it lost the Best Picture Oscar to "Forrest Gump," directed by Robert Zemeckis. That night, at Miramax's after-party, at Chasen's,

Weinstein told the *Observer* that he wanted to go to Zemeckis's lawn and "get medieval."

To boost his unconventional slate of films, Weinstein turned Oscar campaigning into its own form of stagecraft. For "Il Postino," the Italian-language film about Pablo Neruda, he mounted poetry readings with Hugh Grant and Julia



Roberts. For "The English Patient," which won Best Picture in 1997, he staged a sold-out evening at New York's Town Hall, with the novelist Michael Ondaatje reading alongside the film's director, Anthony Minghella. Other methods were less

high-minded: tales circulate of browbeating phone calls to Academy voters and sabotage campaigns against competing movies—tales Weinstein denies.

The Miramax insurgency peaked in 1998, the year that "Shakespeare in Love" was pitted against "Saving Private Ryan"—a contest recalled by both sides as if it were the Spanish Civil War. DreamWorks released the Spielberg war epic in July, and it spent months as the presumptive Best Picture front-runner. When "Shakespeare in Love" came out, in December, Miramax spent an estimated ten million to fifteen million dollars on ads. And things got ugly. Terry Press, who was the head of marketing at DreamWorks, told me, "I started to get calls from journalists who wanted me to know that Harvey had hired a squad of publicists to start a whisper campaign that the only exceptional thing about 'Ryan' was the first fifteen minutes."

Miramax people deny any meddling, and say that "Shakespeare" won Best Picture because Academy voters loved it. (Actors, who make up the Academy's largest branch, tend to like movies about actors, an advantage enjoyed this year by "La La Land.") There were counter-smears, mutterings that Marc Norman and Tom Stoppard's screenplay for "Shakespeare in Love" had lifted from other projects—claims that were later repeated in two lawsuits, which were both settled. But the film's big win was a mixed bag for Miramax, whose public image had been transformed from

renegade to bully. More consequentially, Oscar campaigning had become its own meta story. "The entire Academy process is over-bloated," a Fox executive lamented in the *Times* the morning after the ceremony. "It's like the process of trying to win an election. It's no longer about the material or the merit."

The studios now had their backs up. "There was a boomerang effect," Marcy Granata, then Miramax's head of publicity, said. "After that, it really became about a 'playbook.'" In 2001, DreamWorks staged a weeklong "road show" for "Gladiator" at a theatre in Century City, with the filmmakers appearing in a nightly Q. and A. The film won Best Picture. Earlier Oscar campaigns had mostly been run by in-house publicists. Now studios increasingly hired freelance strategists to work on everything from advertising to the ground game. One of them was Cheryl Boone Isaacs, who was hired to promote "The Artist" and "The King's Speech," both Weinstein Best Picture winners, and both the kind of old-fashioned prestige film that her diversity push might undercut.

**I**N 2009, AFTER "The Dark Knight," Christopher Nolan's Batman movie, failed to get a Best Picture nomination, the Academy expanded the number of potential Best Picture nominees from five to ten. Having a hit superhero movie in the mix would have helped ratings for the telecast, and three-quarters of the Academy's revenue comes from the TV rights, which help fund its library, its educational programs, and the creation of an Academy museum. (The orb-shaped Renzo Piano building, scheduled to open next year, is under construction on L.A.'s Miracle Mile.)

Inevitably, widening the Best Picture category doubled the size of the campaign racket. Many top strategists are Miramax alumni, most prominently Cynthia Swartz, in New York, and Lisa Taback, in L.A.—"the queens of East and West," as one awards consultant put it. "Spotlight" vs. "The Revenant" was Taback vs. Swartz. This year's matchup is "La La Land" (Taback) vs. "Moonlight" (Swartz), though Taback is also consulting on "Moonlight," and Swartz on "Fences." Strategies from the so-called Weinstein playbook are evident: Lionsgate flew Damien Chazelle, the young



director of “La La Land,” to Paris in December to appear alongside veterans of Jacques Demy musicals, to play up his highbrow influences, while August Wilson’s widow has joined the Q. & A. circuit for “Fences.”

Weinstein, who no longer has Disney’s money to throw around, has recently been leaning toward what might be called humanitarian campaigns or, less charitably, P.R. stunts. In 2014, he arranged for the woman who inspired “Philomena” to meet with senators to discuss adoption policy. (She also had a well-publicized meeting with the Pope.) For “The Imitation Game,” he lobbied Parliament to pardon Britons who were charged under the same anti-gay law as Alan Turing. “Now, all the cynics out there might look and say, that was a neat idea to try to pardon 49,000 lives during Oscar season,” Weinstein wrote in a column for the trade Web site Deadline. Last November, with immigration issues in the news, Sunny Pawar had trouble getting a visa to attend the New York premiere of “Lion”—a red-tape hurdle that Weinstein turned into a headline-grabbing cause célèbre.

The Academy has had to police the increasingly aggressive campaign scene. It’s against the rules to ask for votes explicitly, so strategists tiptoe around the topic: “Did you get the screener?” In 2010, Nicolas Chartier, a producer of “The Hurt Locker,” sent a mass e-mail asking Academy members to vote for his movie and “not the \$500-million film,” meaning “Avatar.” He was banned from attending the ceremony, where “The Hurt Locker” won Best Picture. Often, a negative campaign stunt will inspire a new rule. In 2004, DreamWorks placed an ad quoting critics who said that Shohreh Aghdashloo, of “House of Sand and Fog,” “should win” Best Supporting Actress over Renée Zellweger, of Miramax’s “Cold Mountain.” Zellweger won anyway, and the Academy now forbids ads that cast “a derogatory light on a competing film.”

In 2002, someone who wanted to hurt the chances of “A Beautiful Mind” hyped anti-Semitic remarks made by its subject, the schizophrenic mathematician John Nash, in 1967. Nash went on “60 Minutes” to explain that he was hearing voices at the time. In executives’

offices, any rap against a movie or an actor—cost overruns for “The Revenant,” sexual-harassment allegations against Casey Affleck—is attributed to a Machiavellian rival working the grapevine or manipulating a journalist. “You just whisper it to the right person at the New York Times,” one producer explained. “You say, ‘This is what everybody’s saying.’”

It’s unclear what the financial rewards are. In 2009, the box-office receipts for “Slumdog Millionaire” shot past a hundred million dollars after it got ten Oscar nominations, but “Frost/Nixon,” which got five nominations, barely squeaked past twenty-five million. The cost of Oscar campaigns can run up to fifteen million dollars, with strategists collecting five-figure bonuses for nominations and wins—enough, in all, to wipe out potential revenue gains. To reduce campaigning now would require unilateral disarmament, but studios are unlikely to stop spending. And what for? “Ego and bragging rights,” Terry Press told me. “It’s a town built on a rock-solid foundation of insecurity.”

**D**ESPITE THE ACADEMY’S push for diversification, actors of a certain age still represent a key voting bloc that strategists must court. When Leonardo DiCaprio starred in “The Aviator,” he dropped in on the Motion

Picture & Television Fund retirement home, in Woodland Hills. Each winter, Oscar hopefuls pick up small but significant “honorary awards” at film festivals in Santa Barbara and Palm Springs, campaign stops akin to Hillary Clinton’s stumping at Boca Raton senior communities.

One recent morning in Montecito, Tab Hunter stood beneath a eucalyptus tree and hosed off his muddy fourteen-year-old mare, Harlow, the namesake of the nineteen-thirties star. “She’s a good mare, but she looks like a pig!” Hunter, eighty-five and still brightly handsome, said. When he was discovered, at fourteen, he was working as a stable boy near Griffith Park. Nicknamed the Sigh Guy, he was cast as soldiers and surfers and other icons of wholesome nineteen-fifties masculinity. Warner Bros., where he and James Dean were among the last contract players ever signed, sent him on photo-op “dates” with starlets like Debbie Reynolds, even as he carried on a clandestine affair with Anthony Perkins. He didn’t come out until 2005.

Hunter fed Harlow and drove us to an Italian restaurant, where we sat outside with his partner of thirty-five years, the producer Allan Glaser. The first time Hunter went to the Oscars was in 1956, as Natalie Wood’s date. “There was a style about it that I loved,” he



*“I’ve got Ivanka Trump shoes here, Ivanka Trump shoes.”*

recalled. “Nowadays, people have to be ‘I am who I am, and if you don’t like me the way I am, that’s too bad!’ Bob Hope was brilliant. Now they can’t get an m.c. for the damn thing that’s any good.”

Hunter became an Academy member in 1974, after the Gregory Peck purge, even though he was decidedly non-edgy. “Anybody who had an image like Tab had—the all-American marine, anything like that—there was a backlash,” Glaser said. For a while, Hunter got by on dinner theatre, before having an unlikely comeback spoofing himself in nineteen-eighties camp comedies like “Polyester” and “Lust in the Dust.”

Hunter hadn’t been demoted in the 2016 purge, but, Glaser said, “initially Tab did think that the Academy might boot him out.” He had recently been invited to a screening of Martin Scorsese’s “Silence,” including lunch with Andrew Garfield. At home, he’d been working through a drawerful of screeners, from “Sully” (which he loved) to the Swiss animated film “My Life as a Zucchini.”

Hunter told me that when he heard about the Academy’s response to #OscarsSoWhite, “I said two words: ‘Bull. Shit.’” (At the time, he told the *Hollywood Reporter*, “It’s a thinly veiled ploy to kick out older white contributors, the backbone of the industry.”)

“The thing that gets me,” Glaser added, “is the whole thing started because of Jada Pinkett. I mean, who is she? She’s not a movie star. When she said, ‘Oscars so white, I’m not going,’ I said, ‘O.K., that’s fine.’”

Hunter nodded. “In my book, it was an overreaction,” he said. “If there’s no role for a Chinaman, there’s no role for a Chinaman!”

AWARDS SEASON stretches over more months than anyone has the energy for. “It’s sort of like that line in ‘Elf,’” an awards consultant named Tony Angellotti told me. “‘We just had a very successful Christmas! Let’s start preparations for next Christmas!’” Film festivals get the ball rolling. At Sundance in January of last year, #OscarsSoWhite was still trending when Fox Searchlight paid \$17.5 million for “Birth of a Nation,” Nate Parker’s slave-rebellion drama. The film instantly became a front-runner, one that looked as if it

could assuage the Academy’s race problem. But the movie’s chances crumbled spectacularly when it was revealed that Parker had been charged with raping a classmate in college. (He was acquitted, but his accuser later killed herself.) The movie bombed. It was followed by a number of quieter films about black lives, notably “Moonlight,” a coming-of-age story about a boy in the Miami projects, which premiered at Telluride in September and received eight Oscar nominations.

After the festivals, the action moves to ancillary groups, such as the National Board of Review and the Screen Actors Guild, each with its own black-tie awards gala. All told, the combined electorate numbers in the tens of thousands. The Golden Globes are akin to the Iowa straw poll, a dubious contest with outsized influence. Its voting body, the often-mocked Hollywood Foreign Press Association, is made up of about ninety entertainment journalists and junketeers from other countries, who expect a measure of wooing. This year, the producers of “Loving,” a film about the Supreme Court case that ended anti-miscegenation laws, sent H.F.P.A. members wedding cakes topped with interracial bride-and-groom figurines. (The movie got two nominations.)

As the Globes ceremony let out, late on January 8th, stars crisscrossed the lobby of the Beverly Hilton, scattering to after-parties like airline passengers racing between terminals. For the nominees, it was the end of a long weekend of mandatory party-hopping, including stops at the BAFTA tea at the Four Seasons (Emma Stone, Ryan Gosling) and the Paramount pre-party at the Chateau Marmont (Meryl Streep, Denzel Washington).

Near the bar, I met a black television writer named Tash Gray, who had no interest in handicapping the awards. “I don’t follow the Oscar race, because they don’t usually give awards to people that look like me,” she said. “The Globes are a little more inclusive.” She spun around and pointed at “Moonlight”’s Mahershala Ali, a favorite for Best Supporting Actor (and a member of the Academy’s new class), being trailed by a small entourage. He looked tired.

“It’s all a blur,” Ali told me. “There was a stretch there where I hadn’t slept more than three hours a night.”

Strategists divide awards season into “Phase I” and “Phase II”: before and after the Oscar nominations. With sixteen days left in Phase I, the narratives were falling into place: “La La Land” was the escapist fantasy the country sorely needed. Viola Davis, of “Fences,” was an “it’s her turn” shoo-in, especially after Paramount decided to run her in the Supporting Actress category. “Moonlight” was the progressive art-house underdog, “Manchester by the Sea” the bleak film-festival darling. And “Hidden Figures” was the late-breaking hit that could beat “Rogue One” at the box office and expose racism at the same time.

Early on January 24th, Boone Isaacs’s staff greeted her with knowing smiles. The Academy had decided to ditch the traditional early-morning press conference and unveil the nominations via a streaming video montage featuring Brie Larson and Jennifer Hudson. “La La Land” got even more love than anticipated: fourteen nominations, tying the record with “All About Eve” (1950) and “Titanic” (1997). “Lion,” the Weinstein picture, got six nominations. And, for the first time in Oscar history, all four acting categories included black nominees. “It was a very good morning,” Boone Isaacs told me, sounding relieved.

But she emphasized, spinning a bit, that her goal in changing the membership was never to change what got nominated. “Voting is personal,” she told me. “I have no influence over that.” And the envelopes are not yet open: the results on Sunday may set off another round of soul-searching. Even wins don’t necessarily point to sustained progress; the Best Picture Oscar in 2014 went to “12 Years a Slave,” followed by two years of #OscarsSoWhite. Boone Isaacs had seen moments of “inclusion” come and go in Hollywood. In the eighties and nineties, the success of “Do the Right Thing” and “Boyz n the Hood” suggested that viewers were eager to watch more diverse movies. But then the window closed. “It’s just how the wheel moves,” she said.

Soon enough, this year’s nominations produced their own controversy, since they included no female directors or cinematographers. “At some point, we won’t be discussing all of this,” Boone Isaacs said. “We’ll actually be past it. Can you imagine?” ♦



# WHY MUMMIES?

BY IAN FRAZIER

NOWADAYS, WHEN I tell prospective employers to consider mummies, the other undead temp option, I am met with blank stares. How is it that in just a few short years we've forgotten about our old reliable standbys, the mummies? Simple: We live in the golden age of zombies.

I often remind personnel directors at competitive companies that mummies work eighty per cent cheaper than zombies. Mummies are also slightly more articulate, and they are easier to deal with if they become enraged. If a mummy starts to chase you, merely pull on a loose end of one of his bandages and spin him like a top, unwinding him until he collapses in a pile of bones. Unlike zombies, ninety-seven per cent of mummies are not unionized, and some have even been known to threaten union organizers with bloody butcher knives.

Antigrowth forces sometimes fault us for leasing out mummies to serve as the operators of giant construction cranes. But all our mummies are legally bonded and receive up to two days of refresher training every third year, as is required by law. Mummies are allowed to work more than eight hours in a single shift. And here's another dollar saver: they are not eligible for overtime pay, because of laws involving forfeiture of certain privileges resulting from having escaped (in many cases) from state-funded universities or museums.

Public-safety advocates have cited isolated incidents in which a mummy became upset while operating a giant construction crane. Remember, these operators are the mummified remains of the same people who built the pyramids. We think they know a little bit about building things!

It is true that once or twice a giant construction crane has got away from the mummy who was operating it. I'm sure we've all seen the videos, and the reports from the hospitals and the

morgues, and the sensationalized pictures of the crushed orphanage (the one that was crushed in both incidents, last year and the previous year). Apparently, a Great Dane has been implicated in the event, along with a group of meddling teen-agers who were investigating mysterious noises in a haunted mansion and somehow opened the sarcophagus in which the mummy in question, Amenhotep, was resting



after a long shift working the giant construction crane. Experts cited lack of sleep as a cause of the accident, and neither the mummy nor our firm was convicted of the main charges, though he was sentenced to perform thirty hours of community service. (While performing his community service, Amenhotep did briefly chase a local TV reporter with a bloody butcher knife.)

Now, regarding the other incident: First, you must remember how hard it is to operate the controls of a giant construction crane when one's embalmed hands are swathed in ancient linen wrappings impregnated with tar-based mummifying substances. The mummy's fine motor skills are impaired, and this leads to frustration on the part of the mummy, who, after all, was only human. A mummy in this situation is liable to "act out," making muffled groaning noises and moving about er-

atically. The crane then begins to swing wildly, smashing into neighboring skyscrapers. This upsets the mummy further, and he groans more loudly. So far, however, no real damage has been done.

In the incident I'm referring to, the more serious problems began when the mummy took a bloody butcher knife and began to attack the controls of the giant construction crane. The bloody butcher knife is often a mummy's default response, and sometimes we must work around it, inconvenient (and occasionally dangerous) as it may be. All our mummies know the rule "Use words, not bloody butcher knives," because we drum it into them as part of the training. But in panic situations it's not always foolproof. Every thought leaves the mummies' brains, which probably aren't in their skulls anyway, having been removed and mummified separately and put in amphorae.

All this may seem to outweigh the arguments for why you should hire one of the mummies represented by our firm. But remember: mummies rarely feed on human flesh, while zombies stuff themselves with it. So why is there all this buzz about zombies? (And we don't mean the swarms of bluebottle flies attracted by their putrefaction.) More is going on here than meets the eye falling out of its socket and dangling by the optic nerve. Look no farther than K Street, in Washington, D.C., and the multimillion-dollar lobbying firms that are clustered there. Better yet, ask Ms. Jane Austen, who featured zombies in all her exquisitely wrought nineteenth-century comedies of manners. Research has revealed that supporters of mummies begged her time and again to give a mummy even a tiny role in "Pride and Prejudice and Zombies," but she refused. Now it is known that Ms. Jane Austen was in the pocket of the zombie lobby up to her eyebrows.

Savvy businesspeople understand that dirt-cheap mummies mean bigger paydays for our neighbors and for our communities. Even if you are a job creator who has been bitten and turned into a zombie yourself, that's O.K., as long as you remain on the other side of the electrified steel barricade. We will be happy to provide the mummy or mummies who are right for you. ♦

# THE PROTEST CANDIDATE

*Is Keith Ellison's D.N.C. run uniting Democrats, or deepening their divisions?*

BY VINSON CUNNINGHAM



“HERE’S THE INTERESTING thing about Islam,” Keith Ellison, the Minnesota congressman currently running for the chairmanship of the Democratic National Committee, said. It was a sunny, gelid afternoon just after Christmas. “The Prophet Muhammad—peace and blessings be upon him—his father dies before he’s ever born. His mother dies before he’s six. He’s handed over to a foster mom who’s so poor, the stories say, her breasts are not full enough to feed him. So he grows up as this quintessential orphan, and only later, at the age of forty, does he start to get this revelation. And the revelation is to stand up against the constituted powers that

are enslaving people—that are, you know, cheating people, trying to trick people into believing that they should give over their money to appease a god that’s just an inanimate object. And those authorities came down hard on him! And his first converts were people who were enslaved, children, women—a few of them *were* wealthy business folks, but the earliest companions of the Prophet Muhammad were people who needed justice. I found that story to be inspiring, and important to my own thinking and development.”

Ellison, fifty-three, is stocky, with a wide, square head, pinkish-brown skin, and wavy, close-cropped hair. We were

sitting at the back of a dimly lit restaurant in St. Paul, and he was wearing a red-and-black checked flannel shirt and faded bluejeans. He had spent most of the day calling members of the D.N.C., and would do more of the same after the meal. The D.N.C. consists of four hundred and forty-seven unelected Party functionaries—state Party chairs, obscure assemblypersons, former big shots—each possessed of his or her own local concerns. The vote for the chairmanship will take place on February 25th, in Atlanta, and so Ellison is usually on the phone, agreeing, promising, making moans of understanding. If he wins the race, he will resign his seat in the House, and continue to spend much of his time this way.

Ellison is the first Muslim to be elected to the U.S. Congress, and I had asked about his religion, and its bearing on his conception of politics, because I couldn’t quite figure out how someone with his background—he came to politics through the roar of student activism: protests, marches, rallies—would be happy in the role he was so strenuously seeking. Like many a Christian politician before him, Ellison had found a way to apply the particulars of his faith to certain timeless American themes—justice, equality, the ability to transcend the circumstances of one’s birth. But he had also managed to sketch the sometimes pious self-image of the party he hopes to lead: sure, a few wealthy donors here or there, but largely a coalition of the vulnerable and the cast aside, arrayed against the powers that be.

The Democrats’ calamitous defeat in last year’s elections—not only losing the Presidency but remaining in a rut in both chambers of Congress and ceding further ground to Republicans in state houses, governors’ mansions, and mayors’ offices around the country—deepened a well of intra-Party bitterness that had become evident long before Election Day. In December, 2015, Bernie Sanders and the former Maryland governor Martin O’Malley, who were both running for President, accused the D.N.C. and its chair, the Florida congresswoman Debbie Wasserman-Schultz, of favoring Hillary Clinton. During the primaries, the D.N.C. established a joint fund-raising vehicle with the Clinton campaign,

*Ellison is favored by many progressives, who have spearheaded opposition to Trump.*

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/AP (MAN)



an arrangement that is usually delayed until a presumptive nominee has emerged. And it was later revealed, in e-mails allegedly stolen by Russian hackers and disseminated by WikiLeaks, that Donna Brazile, who now serves as the D.N.C.'s acting chair, had shared with the Clinton campaign questions from an upcoming debate on CNN—Brazile's employer at the time.

Ellison is co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus, the putative left-wing answer to the brinksmen of the Freedom Caucus on the right, and he was an early and fervent supporter of Sanders's Presidential campaign. Like Sanders, he consistently opposed the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a trade deal sought by the Obama White House in its final two years which was attacked by populists in both parties. (President Donald Trump recently withdrew the U.S. from the T.P.P.) Ellison announced his candidacy for the D.N.C. chairmanship six days after the Presidential election. Sanders and Senator Elizabeth Warren, of Massachusetts, predictably endorsed him—but so did establishment figures, such as Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, and his predecessor, Harry Reid. One of the early objectives of Schumer's leadership has been to placate the increasingly powerful Sanders, whom he made a member of his leadership team, and Schumer has said that he endorsed Ellison because Sanders recommended him. This may have been a canny bit of political maneuvering, but it also indicated to Sanders's supporters that the populist wing of the Democratic Party was poised to lead the opposition against Trump.

The race for the chair has often echoed the acrimony and confusion of the Presidential primaries. Ten candidates are competing for the job, though few have a national profile. Ellison's chief rival, Thomas E. Perez, was formerly Barack Obama's Labor Secretary. Perez has consolidated support from much of the Democratic establishment, and increasingly appears to have seized the role of front-runner. Pete Buttigieg, the young mayor of South Bend, Indiana, has positioned himself as a compromise candidate, saying, of the 2016 Democratic primary race, "I don't know why we'd want to live through it a second time." All the candidates agree that the

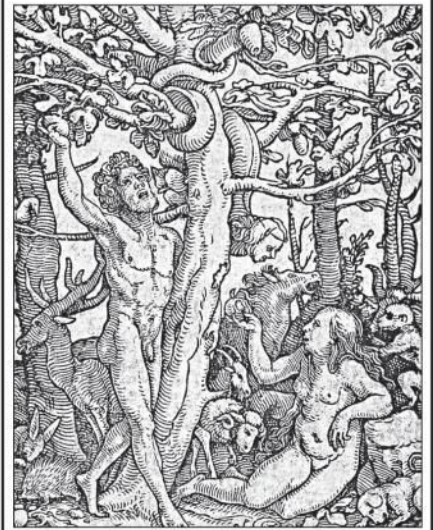
D.N.C. is a shambles. Raymond Buckley, the Party's chair in New Hampshire, and another hopeful, declared, at a Party forum in Baltimore, "For the last eight years, I've been a vice-chair, and I don't know what the hell is going on in this party any more than any of you."

Meanwhile, the turmoil of Trump's first month as President has alternately panicked and emboldened the Democratic base. The activist surge on the left, most spectacularly demonstrated at the Women's March, in Washington, D.C., and in other major cities, and during protests at nearly a dozen airports after the executive order to temporarily ban people from seven majority-Muslim countries, has stoked a conviction that the Party must be more forceful in combatting Trump. Democrats in the Senate have been conspicuously more strident in their opposition to his Cabinet nominees in the days since the airport protests. The rhetoric of the marches has seeped into the D.N.C. race as well, though to less certain effect. There seems to be a mismatch in expectations between the lofty hopes of the marchers and the more mundane work that awaits on South Capitol Street, where the D.N.C. is headquartered. Even with the Trump Presidency in disarray, there is no guarantee that the Democrats will make a strong comeback in the mid-term elections of 2018 and the Presidential race in 2020—the real, albeit less glamorous, job of the D.N.C. in the years to come.

Ellison gained an advantage in the race by announcing his candidacy early, in November, but he has faced several obstacles in the months since: recurring questions about his more radical past; a palpable if rarely articulated uneasiness about his faith; and, perhaps most perplexing, the shadow of Bernie Sanders, whose support accounts for both the initial strength of Ellison's run and the intensity of the opposition that has gathered against him.

ELLISON WAS BORN in Detroit, one of five boys in a middle-class family. His father, Leonard, was a psychiatrist, and his mother, Clida, a social worker. When he enrolled at Wayne State University, in 1981, campus activists were protesting apartheid. Ellison had read the novel "Cry, the Beloved

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Country” in high school; soon he was a leading campus petitioner on behalf of divestment from the South African government. He studied economics and wrote for the college newspaper. At the time, Warith Deen Mohammed was a prominent political figure. He had taken over the Nation of Islam after the death of his father, Elijah Muhammad, and had steered its membership away from racial separatism and toward mainstream Sunni Islam, changing the organization’s name to the American Society of Muslims. Under his influence, Ellison, who had been a mostly non-observant Catholic, converted, at the age of nineteen.

In 1987, Ellison married Kim Dore, whom he’d met in high school—they divorced in 2012—and enrolled at the University of Minnesota’s law school, where, along with other students of color, he protested against the lack of diversity in the school’s faculty and staff. On a walk around campus, he and Kim noticed a scrawl of racist graffiti on a pedestrian bridge. Ellison contacted the law school’s black students and the university’s Progressive Students Association and organized an effort to paint over the graffiti. One student was arrested on painting day, and Ellison called the local newspapers to let them know what had hap-

pened. In 1989, following an incident in Minneapolis, Ellison organized protests against police brutality. After graduation, he took a job at a law firm, then became the executive director of the Legal Rights Center in Minneapolis.

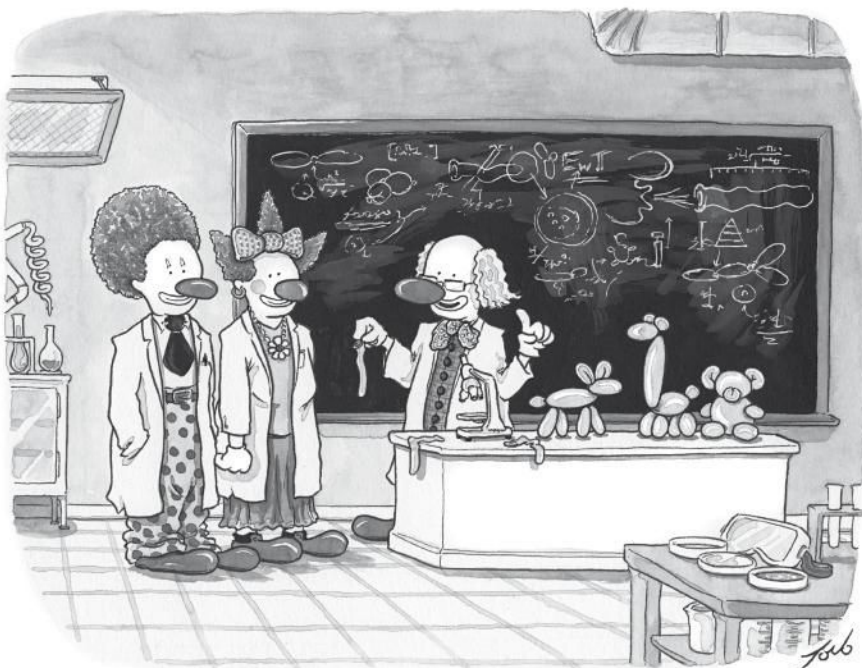
In the summer of 1993, Ellison met Paul Wellstone, the Minnesota senator who died in a plane crash in 2002. Wellstone is a key figure in Minnesota’s long liberal tradition; while I was there, everyone I spoke to invoked him. “He really changed my idea of what a politician could be,” Ellison said, his face brightening. “‘Cause he was a very unpolitical politician, right? I mean, this guy would come down to community events, he was present—he really kind of set the template for what most Minnesota politicians want to be.” Wellstone believed that political change depended on good policy, grass-roots organizing, and electoral victories. “You need all three,” Ellison said. “At the end of the day, if all we ever had was Bloody Sunday, and the Edmund Pettus Bridge, but we weren’t talking about the Voting Rights Act, people’s lives would not have changed much.”

Ellison ran for the state legislature in 1998, and lost, but in 2002 he ran again and won, just weeks after Wellstone’s death. In 2006, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives.

In that election, his district, which is nearly two-thirds white, had the lowest turnout in the state; in Ellison’s recent reelection, it had the highest. The work of organizing, Ellison told me, “isn’t just about winning elections. It’s about building community. It’s a way for neighbors to talk about stuff, when neighbors don’t usually talk.” Ellison is not a policy wonk; he talks about such imperatives as “raising the minimum wage, putting money into the schools, staving off environmental disaster” in long, rolling clusters, and often ends by declaiming the point of the whole thing: “Just improving the quality of people’s lives!”

He frequently uses the word “solidarity,” attempting to eschew the debates over identity politics that have proliferated since the Presidential election. In a widely read *Times* Op-Ed, the liberal political theorist Mark Lilla wrote that Hillary Clinton tended, especially when discussing domestic affairs, to “slip into the rhetoric of diversity, calling out explicitly to African-American, Latino, L.G.B.T. and women voters at every stop.” By presenting the image of America as a collection of categories, Lilla argued, Democrats had encouraged working-class whites to do the same, and to vote as a bloc for Trump. Former Vice-President Joe Biden made a similar point both during and after the campaign, saying that the Democrats had not shown white working-class voters “enough respect.” Conversely, Sally Boynton Brown, one of the candidates for the chairmanship, who is white, made headlines when she said, at a Party forum, that the D.N.C. needs to teach volunteers “how to be sensitive and how to shut their mouths if they are white.”

Ellison offers an idealistic synthesis, drawing on Wellstone’s approach—which bears some resemblance to Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Beloved Community, a semi-utopian vision that insisted on the inextricability of economic justice, civil rights, and antiwar sentiment. Ellison’s advantage in promulgating this sixties-descended, peace-and-love brand of liberalism is, perhaps, the matter of his own identity: no one is likely to accuse a black Muslim who fought his first political battles over apartheid and police brutality of shunting the



*“The basic building blocks of life are identical in all species.”*



concerns of minorities to the margins.

"You and me are black," Ellison said to me. "You may or may not agree with me on this, but I think that when black people get in a closed room together we kind of think that we've probably got it harder than anybody else. We think, maybe Native Americans got it hard, maybe Latinos got it hard, but we figure white folks all got it made in the shade, you know. But, as it happens, that ain't true. It happens that everybody's got problems. They're not that different, and what we really need is human solidarity."

**S**HORTLY AFTER ELLISON announced his candidacy, in mid-November, Fox News published an article on its Web site with the headline "Who Is Keith Ellison? Left-Wing Congressman with Past Ties to Nation of Islam Wants DNC Job." Other conservative outlets ran pieces with similar insinuations, and, on December 1st, CNN published a detailed report on writings, mainly from Ellison's law-school years, in which he defended the demagogic Louis Farrakhan, who broke with Warith Deen Muhammad's reform movement in the late seventies and reclaimed the "Nation of Islam" designation for his own newly separatist group. Ellison never joined the Nation of Islam, but he was known in Minnesota, even during his early state-legislative campaigns, for his friendly relationship with it. He adopted the sorts of monikers that people associate with the Nation: Keith X. Ellison, Keith Ellison-Muhammad. "Minister Farrakhan is a role model for black youth," he wrote in an op-ed for *Insight News*. "He is not an anti-Semite." When Nils Hasselmo, the president of the University of Minnesota at the time, criticized a student group's decision to invite Stokely Carmichael to campus, citing Carmichael's bizarre assertion that Zionists had aided Nazism during the Second World War, Ellison wrote that Hasselmo had taken offense at the assertion "without offering any factual refutation of it."

Youthful zeal doesn't quite suffice as an explanation—Ellison was in his late twenties when many of the writings in question were published. It's true that, in the early nineties, the Na-

tion of Islam was near the center of black activist politics; Ellison often reminds reporters that Barack Obama attended Farrakhan's Million Man March. And Ellison's friendliness toward the Nation might have been as pragmatic as it was heartfelt; for all his idealism, he is clearly ambitious, and, even today, many black activists tend to leaven their criticisms of Farrakhan with nods to his efforts on behalf of black equality.

In 2006, when opponents of Ellison's congressional campaign called attention to his writings, he distanced himself from the Nation and renounced Farrakhan as an anti-Semite and a bigot. He told me that he'd thought it was a settled matter, and seemed perhaps naïvely surprised that it had become an issue for him again. Hours after the CNN story ran, the Anti-Defamation League released a statement saying that the old writings were "disqualifying" in the D.N.C. race, and the Democratic mega-donor Haim Saban called Ellison "an anti-Semite and anti-Israel individual."

"It's almost as if there's this intangible resistance to Keith, from what I read in the media," Steven Belton, the head of the Minneapolis Urban League, and a friend of Ellison's, told me. In November, Jonathan Weisman, the *Times*' deputy editor in Washington, tweeted, "Defeated Dems could've tapped Rust Belt populist to head party. Instead, black, Muslim progressive from Minneapolis?" In a *Washington Post* column that appeared in December, Garrison Keillor suggested that a "black Muslim Congressman" had as much chance of connecting with "disaffected workers in Youngstown and Pittsburgh" as a ballet dancer or a Buddhist monk.

Less than two weeks after Saban's comments, Tom Perez announced his candidacy for the D.N.C. chair. Perez, like Ellison, was a civil-rights lawyer. He was Labor Secretary in Maryland, and, before serving in Obama's Cabinet, worked under former Attorney General Eric Holder. Onstage, he has a twitchy energy, punctuating his speech with noticeable pauses. His entry into the race turned it into a proxy battle, with Ellison representing the left-leaning Sanders-Warren wing of the Party and Perez serving as

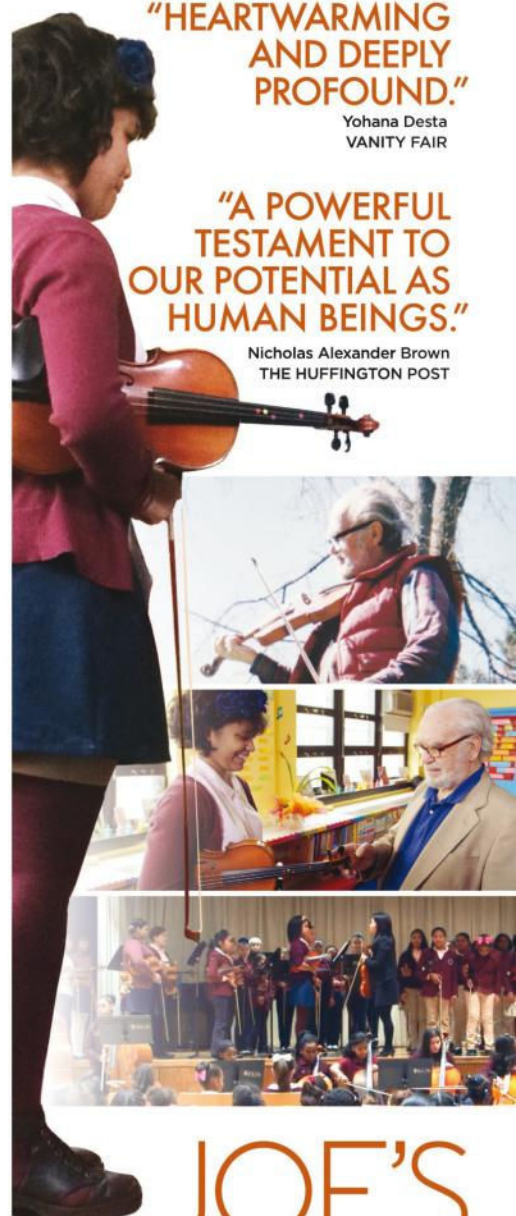
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On December 16th, during a press conference, Obama declined to endorse a candidate outright but spoke at length about Perez, whom he called “wicked smart.” Since then, Perez has been endorsed by a series of apparent Obama surrogates, most notably Holder and Biden. But Perez bristles at the suggestion that he is the favored candidate of the Democratic establishment. “I’ve always believed that, rather than focussing on labels that aren’t accurate, and labels that are, frankly, loaded terms, it’s important to focus on facts, and focus on a person’s actions that really define his values,” he told me.

There are superficial similarities between Ellison and Obama, two black Democrats in their mid-fifties who talk a lot about organizing. On a deeper level, though, there are stark differences between them. Obama held the title of organizer only briefly, between his time at Harvard Law and his election to the Illinois state legislature; Ellison spent nearly two decades at the heart of Minnesota’s activist culture before reaching Washington. When Obama was elected, there was speculation about what might come to constitute a New Black Politics, led by such figures as Obama, Cory Booker, Deval Patrick, and Artur Davis—largely polished men with Ivy League pedigrees. More recently, Obama has named Kamala Harris as a potentially powerful future Democratic leader. Ellison has a plainer persona; when he’s not wearing jeans, he dons boxy suits. Obama is convinced of the power of institutions to organize and preserve American ways of life. Ellison prefers a bullhorn and a wilderness of painted signs.

When I met with Ellison after Christmas, I asked him if Obama’s apparent preference for Perez was due to policy differences—perhaps Ellison’s outspoken opposition to the T.P.P. had irked the President. (Perez supported it.) Ellison said that what he heard when he listened to the press conference was: “Everybody running is a friend of mine, and I’m not getting involved.” He told me that he couldn’t support the T.P.P., because it

was like NAFTA, and “NAFTA hurt Minnesota.” Ellison called on Obama, early last year, to curb the aggressive deportations carried out under his Administration. “On the deportation stuff, I’ve got families coming to me telling me they’re being split up—so I can’t support all those deportations,” Ellison told me. He added, “Those are really the only two issues, I think, where we split. But I think the President is a fair man. I think he’ll stay with what he said, which is that he won’t be involved in the D.N.C. race.”

Several people I spoke to, however, described an Obama acutely interested in its outcome. In the fall, Obama and Holder announced a new project aimed at retaking state legislatures so that Democrats can reverse the effects of Republican gerrymandering—and the former President feels an obligation to place the Party, which he’d expected to turn over to Hillary Clinton, in trusted hands. Ellison’s connection to Sanders is worrisome for many of those in Obama’s orbit, as well as Clinton’s, and Sanders hasn’t helped ease their concern during the D.N.C. race. When Biden endorsed Perez—“He knows how to explain why our party’s core beliefs matter to the immigrant family in Arizona and the coal miner in West Virginia”—Sanders quickly issued an acerbic reply: “The question is simple: Do we stay with a failed status-quo approach or do we go forward with a fundamental restructuring of the Democratic Party?”



ON A WEDNESDAY evening in January, two days before Trump’s swearing-in, Ellison and his opponents came together in Washington for a debate. The city bore the physical marks of the impending Inauguration: tall, metallic black gates traced a border around the Capitol; vast panes of white plastic flooring covered the half-bald grass of the National Mall. Crowds of pilgrims from around the country, their numbers dotted with bright-red “Make America Great Again” caps, flowed through Union Station and posed for pictures near the foot of the Washington Monument. The forum, sponsored

by the Huffington Post, was held at George Washington University. College kids walked down E Street in packs of four and five, talking loudly about “fascism” and “that man.”

Inside the auditorium, the audience was made up of journalists, nicely dressed student-government types, and official Democrats. Howard Dean couldn’t walk two steps without being approached by an admirer. He served, perhaps, as a totem of what a new chair should aim to accomplish. Dean assumed the D.N.C. chairmanship in 2005, pledging a “Fifty State Strategy” to contest elections across the country. This put him at odds with Rahm Emanuel, then the leader of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, who wanted to focus on a few targeted swing seats. In 2006, Democrats retook both houses of Congress.

A President has wide latitude in selecting the leadership of his own party committee, and during the past eight years Obama’s designated D.N.C. chairs—Tim Kaine, the recently defeated Vice-Presidential candidate, and then Wasserman-Schultz—have largely been figureheads, echoing the White House’s message and cooperating with senatorial and congressional campaign committees to contest important elections. In that time, Democrats have lost more than nine hundred state and federal seats. After amassing a remarkable army of supporters and volunteers during his first run for the Presidency, Obama directed their energies toward Organizing for America, an operation focussed primarily on Presidential initiatives. At the D.N.C. forums, that move has repeatedly been blamed for sapping the grass-roots energy that might have made the difference in local contests. Ellison declines to blame Obama, though, at least explicitly. “It wasn’t an individual failure,” he said. “It was a collective one. But, I will tell you, in my district we didn’t do that. In my district, we stuck with the grass roots.”

At the debate, each of the hopefuls praised Dean and spoke earnestly of organizing. All of them promise to pursue a bottom-up, nationwide strategy, like Dean’s. Ellison’s reformist tendencies have, amid so much amity, quietly receded. Earlier in the month, he had



## THE BURYING BEETLE

I like to imagine even the plants want attention, so I weed for four hours straight, assuring the tomatoes feel July's hot breath on the neck, the Japanese maple can stretch, the sweet potatoes, spider plants, the Asiatic lilies can flourish in this place we've dared to say we "own." Each nicked spindle of morning glory or kudzu or purslane or yellow rocket (*Barbarea vulgaris*, for Christ's sake), and I find myself missing everyone I know. I don't know why. First come the piles of nutsedge and creeper and then an ache that fills the skin like the *Cercospora* blight that's killing the blue skyrocket juniper slowly from the inside out. Sure, I know what it is to be lonely, but today's special is a physical need to be touched by someone decent, a pulsing palm to the back. My man is in South Africa still, and people just keep dying even when I try to pretend they're not. The crown vetch and the curly dock are almost eliminated as I survey the neatness of my work. I don't feel I deserve this time, or the small plot of earth I get to mold into someplace livable. I lost God awhile ago. And I don't want to pray, but I can picture the plants deepening right now into the soil, wanting to live, so I lie down among them, in my ripped pink tank top, filthy and covered in sweat, among red burying beetles and dirt that's been turned and turned like a problem in the mind.

—Ada Limón

pledged to ban lobbyist donations to the committee, but on this night he said, "We're going to have a democratic process on how we arrive at funding the Democratic Party. We absolutely need money, and if anybody wants to get rid of any money we're getting I want to talk to you about how we're going to replace it."

The next day, I accompanied Ellison to a protest against Trump's nomination of Betsy DeVos as the Secretary of Education. The rally had been convened by the American Federation of Teachers, and was held outside the Anne Beers Elementary School, in Anacostia, a predominantly black neighborhood in southeast D.C. When

I asked Ellison whether he'd miss this kind of direct action, he didn't seem ready to relinquish his role on the streets, as a kind of outsider. "Well, now Trump's in power," Ellison said. "So the D.N.C. should be leading the resistance to that. And I don't think that there's any inherent magic in occupying the outsider status. I think that Democrats, and people with compassion, people who love tolerance and inclusion, we ought to get comfortable in power."

Ellison had a cold, which was getting worse, and before he could join the throng he had to get another D.N.C. member off the phone. "I think you're totally right," he said between

coughs. The speeches began, and Ellison moved to the top of a staircase, where a narrow lectern stood. As Randi Weingarten, the A.F.T.'s president, spoke, Ellison looked giddy, immeasurably happier than he had been on-stage the night before. When it was his turn to talk, he grabbed the mike, bounded past the lectern, and stood close to the crowd. He described support for charter schools and vouchers as a reaction to the attempt to integrate public schools. "Don't think for a minute that this plan that they're trying to pretty up and pass on doesn't have a lot to do with those ugly plans in the fifties and sixties," he said.

Soon Ellison would head back home to Minneapolis—he had joined more than sixty other Democratic representatives, led by John Lewis, the iconic Georgia civil-rights leader, in boycotting the Inauguration. Obama, Clinton, and Schumer would be there, but, for many on the left, not attending had become an important symbolic gesture of opposition. A few weeks later, Betsy DeVos was confirmed by the Senate. The Democrats, even with two Republicans joining them, simply didn't have the votes.

On Valentine's Day, Perez's campaign announced that a hundred and eighty D.N.C. members had committed to voting for him, just forty-four shy of the total needed to win. Ellison questioned the number, and characterized the announcement itself as underhanded, calling it an attempt to put "a finger on the scale." The shadow of the 2016 primaries, and the endless argument about superdelegates, loomed again.

It seems likely that the race will not be settled on the first ballot, and everyone I spoke to said that there was surely horse trading to come. The day after Perez shared that whip count, he and Ellison had dinner together at Café Dupont, in Washington. A reporter at the bar spotted them, and posted a photograph of the pair on Twitter. An hour later, Ellison and Perez offered a joint statement, keeping it under a hundred and forty characters: "Tom and Keith are friends and grabbed dinner together to discuss how to move the Democratic Party forward if either of them wins." ♦

## GENERAL CHAOS

*What Michael Flynn's downfall reveals about the Trump White House.*

BY NICHOLAS SCHMIDLE

TWO DAYS BEFORE the Inauguration of Donald Trump as the forty-fifth President of the United States, Michael Flynn, a retired lieutenant general and former intelligence officer, sat down in a Washington restaurant. On the tablecloth, he placed a leather-bound folder and two phones, which flashed with text messages and incoming calls. A gaunt, stern-looking man with hooded eyes and a Roman nose, Flynn is sharp in both manner and language. He had been one of Trump's earliest supporters, a vociferous booster on television, on Twitter, and, most memorably, from the stage of the Republican National Convention. Strident views and a penchant for conspiracy theories often embroiled him in controversy—in a hacked e-mail from last summer, former Secretary of State Colin Powell called him “right-wing nutty”—but Trump rewarded Flynn's loyalty by making him his national-security adviser. Now, after months of unrelenting scrutiny, Flynn seemed to believe that he could find a measure of obscurity in the West Wing, steps away from Trump and the Oval Office. “I want to go back to having an out-of-sight role,” he told me.

That ambition proved illusory. Three weeks into his job, the Washington *Post* revealed that Flynn, while he was still a private citizen and Barack Obama was still President, had discussed American sanctions against Russia with Sergey Kislyak, the Russian Ambassador in Washington. The conversations were possibly illegal. Flynn and Kislyak's communications, by phone and text, occurred on the same day the Obama Administration announced the expulsion of thirty-five Russian diplomats in retaliation for Russia's efforts to swing the election in Trump's favor. Flynn had previously denied talking about sanctions with

the Ambassador. At the restaurant, he said that he didn't think there was anything untoward about the call: “I've had a relationship with him since my days at the D.I.A.”—the Defense Intelligence Agency, which Flynn directed from 2012 to 2014. But, in a classic Washington spectacle of action followed by coverup followed by collapse, Flynn soon started backpedaling, saying, through a spokesman, that he “couldn't be certain that the topic [of sanctions] never came up.”

He compounded his predicament by making the same denial to Vice-President Mike Pence, who repeated it on television. Flynn later apologized to Pence. But by then his transgressions had been made public. In a White House characterized by chaos and conflict—a Byzantine court led by a reality-television star, family members, and a circle of ideologues and loyalists—Flynn was finished.

The episode created countless concerns, about the President's truthfulness, competence, temperament, and associations. How much did Trump know and when did he know it?

John McCain, a Republican and the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said that the fiasco was a “troubling indication of the dysfunction of the current national-security apparatus” and raised “further questions” about the Trump Administration's intentions regarding Vladimir Putin's Russia.

In one of several recent conversations, Flynn told me, “We have to figure out how to work with Russia instead of making it an enemy. We have so many problems that we were handed on a plate from this President”—meaning Obama. He lifted a bread plate and waved it. He characterized the negative attention on him as part of a larger conspiracy against Trump. “I'm a target to get at Trump to delegitimize the election,” he said. The

press had him “damn near all wrong.” Reporters were just chasing after wild theories, while neglecting to consider his career as a decorated Army officer. “You don't just sprinkle magic dust on someone, and, *poof*, they become a three-star general,” he said.

But, even before Flynn's rapid fall, his closest military colleagues had been struggling to make sense of what had happened to the talented and grounded general they once knew. “Mike is arguably one of the finest leaders the Army has ever produced,” James (Spider) Marks, a retired major general, told me. And yet, watching the first night of the Republican National Convention, last July, Marks was taken aback when his old friend appeared onscreen.

“Wake up, America!” Flynn said, his jaw set and his hands gripping the sides of the lectern. The United States was in peril: “Our very existence is threatened.” The moment demanded a President with “guts,” he declared, not a “weak, spineless” one who “believes *she* is above the law.”

In the early two-thousands, Marks was Flynn's commanding officer at the Army's intelligence academy, in Fort Huachuca, Arizona; one of his daughters went to school with one of Flynn's sons. Marks regarded Flynn as “smart, humble, and funny.” What he saw on TV was something else: “That's a vitriolic side of Mike that I never knew.”

When, twenty minutes into the speech, Flynn mentioned Hillary Clinton, the Convention audience responded with chants of “Lock her up!” Flynn nodded, leading the chant: “That's right—lock her up.” He went on, “Damn right. . . . And you know why we're saying that? We're saying that because, if I, a guy who knows this business, if I did a tenth—a tenth—of what she did, I would be in jail today.”

Marks's thirty-five-year-old daughter,





*"I like to think that I helped get Donald Trump elected President," Flynn said. "Maybe I helped a little, maybe a lot."*



*"I said, 'Fetch Chardonnay,' not 'Riesling.'"*

who was watching with him, turned to her father and said, "Dad, General Flynn is scaring me."

TRUMP, IN HIS inaugural address, presented a dire image of the country—a nation suffering from poverty and blight, overextended abroad, and neglectful of its own citizens. He pledged to end the "carnage" by putting "America first"—echoing the isolationist creed of the nineteen-thirties.

The beginning of Trump's Presidency remained true to his campaign: even when it came to the highly sensitive issues of national security, Trump and his aides acted with ideological ferocity and a heedless sense of procedure that alarmed many inside the government. The Trump Administration's early days have invited comparison to the most unnerving political moments in memory, particularly Richard Nixon's behavior during the Watergate scandal.

On January 27th, a week after taking office, Trump issued an executive

order suspending all refugee admissions and temporarily banning entry to citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries. His chief political strategist, Stephen Bannon, reportedly oversaw the crafting of the order, along with Stephen Miller, the White House's senior policy adviser. (Miller disputes this.) Flynn raised some concerns about how the order might affect relationships with allies, but those were ignored. James Mattis, the Secretary of Defense, and General Joseph Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, received little notice of the order.

The next day, Trump signed another executive order, reorganizing the National Security Council. He promoted Bannon, a former investment banker and chairman of the far-right Web site Breitbart News, to a permanent seat on the "principals committee." Elevating a political adviser to national-security policymaking marked a radical departure from the practice of recent Administrations.

By this point, the Justice Department had informed Trump officials of concerns about Flynn's conversations with the Russian Ambassador and his public accounting of them. The acting Attorney General, Sally Yates, a hold-over from the Obama Administration, told the White House that she worried Flynn might be vulnerable to blackmail by Russian agents, the *Washington Post* reported. Yet Flynn remained an important player in national-security matters. "He was always in the room, and on every call," one Administration official told me.

Each morning, Flynn attended Trump's intelligence briefing—the President's Daily Brief. Bannon joined occasionally, as did Mike Pompeo, the director of the C.I.A., and Reince Priebus, the White House chief of staff. Flynn conferred with senior intelligence officials on how to best tailor the briefing for Trump. Presidents are particular about how they receive information, Michael Morell, a former acting C.I.A. director, who prepared and delivered the President's Daily Brief to several Presidents, told me. George H. W. Bush preferred text on a half page, in a single column, limited to four or five pages; the briefer read fifteen to twenty pages aloud to George W. Bush, who preferred more material and liked to discuss it with the briefer; Barack Obama studied the material alone, over breakfast. Trump's briefings were being shaped to address macroeconomics, trade, and "alliances," Flynn told me, in a telephone conversation earlier this month. "The P.D.B. is not always about just your enemies."

Congress created the National Security Council in 1947, in the hope of establishing a more orderly process for coordinating foreign and defense policy. Six years later, Dwight Eisenhower decided that the council needed a chief and named the first national-security adviser—a former soldier and banker, Robert Cutler. The position evolved into one of enormous importance. McGeorge Bundy, who served under John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson, regarded himself as a "traffic cop"—controlling access to the President. Under Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger dramatically expanded the role, often meeting directly with



the Soviet Ambassador, and bypassing the State Department.

The temptations of power nearly overwhelmed Ronald Reagan's Presidency, in what became known as the Iran-Contra affair, when national-security staffers were discovered to be running covert actions involving Iran and Central America. The scandal prompted some to call for the national-security adviser to become a Senate-confirmed position. Heading off these demands, George H. W. Bush chose a retired general, Brent Scowcroft, who had held the job under Gerald Ford, to return to the role, confident that Scowcroft would respect the lines between intelligence work, military operations, and policymaking. "He will be an honest broker," Bush said.

Since then, according to Stephen Hadley, George W. Bush's second-term national-security adviser, the "honest broker" has become the model for Republican and Democratic Administrations alike. That meant overseeing a process that is "fair and transparent, where each member of the council can get his views to the President," Hadley said. In late November, Hadley met with Flynn, who was seeking advice, at Trump Tower. Hadley left the meeting optimistic that Flynn meant to act as a facilitator in the traditional way.

But Flynn's challenge—and now, potentially, his successor's—was unique, as Bannon had seemingly moved to set up a kind of "parallel, shadow" national-security staff for his own purposes, one council staffer told me. Bannon, who had no direct experience in policymaking, seized a central role on issues dear to Trump. For example, during the campaign Trump had railed against NATO members for not paying their full freight, which unnerved diplomats and politicians throughout Europe. On February 5th, according to the staffer, Bannon sent questions to the N.S.C. staff, requesting a breakdown of contributions to NATO from individual members since 1949. Many of the rank-and-file staffers were alarmed, not just because the questions seemed designed to impugn NATO's legitimacy but because they represented a breach of protocol by tasking N.S.C. staffers with political duties. "Those were Flynn's people, not political operatives," the staffer said.

Flynn came into the White House wanting to streamline the bureaucracy of the N.S.C., which is staffed mostly by career civil servants from the State Department, the Pentagon, and intelligence agencies, believing that it moved too ponderously under Obama. But Flynn, in a contest for power with Bannon, soon seemed to realize that the traditional setup could help him build influence in the White House. "It was dawning on him that the process privileged him," the N.S.C. staffer said. Others in the White House treated the customary protocols as impediments. "We are moving big and we are moving fast," Bannon said, according to the *Times*.

Before Flynn's troubles mounted, I asked him whether it was appropriate for Bannon to have a permanent seat on the N.S.C. He paused. "Well, I mean, that decision's been made," he said. Besides, didn't other political advisers enjoy similar access? He brought up Valerie Jarrett, a senior adviser to Obama. Jarrett did not have a seat on the National Security Council, I said. "She didn't? How about, like, Axelrod? He was Clinton, right?" (David Axelrod, who was Obama's chief strategist, sometimes sat in on N.S.C. meetings but did not participate in policymaking discussions.) Look, Flynn said, "the President shapes the team that he needs to be able to do the job that he has to do. So that's kind of where we are on that one."

Flynn grew up in a large Irish-American household, in Middletown, Rhode Island. He was one of nine children. His father was a soldier, a veteran of the Second World War and Korea, who retired as a sergeant first class in the Army; his mother, a high-school valedictorian, worked at a secretarial school and was heavily involved in Democratic politics, before going back to school to get undergraduate and law degrees. A headstrong teen-ager, Flynn skateboarded in drained swimming pools and surfed through hurricanes and winter storms. "Mike was a charger," Sid Abruzzi, a surf-shop owner in nearby Newport, who knew Flynn as a teen-ager, said.

In 1981, after graduating from the University of Rhode Island, Flynn joined

the Army. He qualified as an intelligence officer, and got orders to join the 82nd Airborne Division, a paratrooper unit in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. In 1983, Flynn deployed to Grenada, as part of the American invasion force. He set up a listening post on a cliffside to intercept Cuban radio transmissions. One day, spotting two American soldiers being swept out to sea, Flynn leaped off the cliff—"about a forty-foot jump into the swirling waters," he recalls, in his book, *"The Field of Fight"*—and rescued the men.

He won a rapid series of promotions. In 1994, he helped plan operations in support of the American invasion of Haiti. After that, he rotated to Fort Polk, Louisiana, the site of an Army base for urban-combat and special-operations training. In 2004, he deployed to Iraq with the Joint Special Operations Command, an elite counterterrorism unit composed of operators from the Delta Force, Rangers, SEAL Team Six, and others. Its culture is unusual in the military: rank is respected but not revered; sergeants challenge colonels, and colonels challenge generals. Flynn, then a colonel, in charge of the command's intelligence collection and analysis, had ambitions for expanding the reach of special operations. He considered the command's operators expert killers—"the best spear fishermen in the world." But, in order to quell the insurgency spreading in Iraq, they would have to become "net fishermen," taking down terrorist networks, he said, in a 2015 interview.

Flynn encouraged his men to think more like detectives as they hunted Al Qaeda militants; he brought F.B.I. agents in to instruct operators in how to collect and preserve evidence. A former Ranger recalled storming a house, flex-cuffing the tenants, then staying for several hours, risking exposure, while he and his teammates searched behind walls and under mattresses for a single thumb drive—which they found, eventually, in a pipe beneath the kitchen sink. Intelligence operatives would gather information by hacking militants' computers, intercepting their phone calls, and surveilling them with drones. "We were able to mass so much information against individuals we captured that at some point they realized

it was no use lying to us anymore,” Flynn says, in “Twilight Warriors: The Soldiers, Spies, and Special Agents Who Are Revolutionizing the American Way of War,” by James Kitfield.

On the afternoon of April 8, 2006, American soldiers helicoptered into Yusufiyah, a town outside Baghdad. They raided a suspected Al Qaeda safe house and detained twelve middle-aged men, who were taken to Balad Air Base, the site of the command’s Iraq headquarters, for questioning. Flynn observed some of the interviews. Over weeks of interrogation, the prisoners repeatedly denied knowing anything about Al Qaeda or its leader in

Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Finally, two interrogators confronted one of the prisoners about a trip to Amman, Jordan, just before the devastating hotel bombings the previous year. The prisoner started talking, and divulged the identity of Zarqawi’s spiritual adviser and where to find him. Drones tracked the adviser for weeks. One day, the man came out of his house and got into a silver sedan. After two vehicle switches, he pulled into a compound in Hibhib, thirty miles north of Baghdad. A few minutes after the adviser arrived, another man emerged briefly from the house. He matched the description of Zarqawi.

As Flynn and his boss, General Stanley McChrystal, JSOC’s commander, watched on a video feed, an F-16 dropped two bombs on the house. A Delta Force squad quickly arrived at the scene and seized Zarqawi, who died soon afterward. Back at Balad, Flynn and McChrystal inspected the corpse, laid out on a tarp, confirming that it was Zarqawi.

**I**N 2008, FLYNN got a new assignment, at the Pentagon, as the senior intelligence officer reporting to the Joint Chiefs of Staff. It was an awkward fit. Flynn, now a major general, was unfamiliar with ordinary Pentagon decorum and sometimes struggled to summon the diplomacy required for the job. Intelligence officers are often irascible figures. “We are trained to be contrar-

ians,” Marks, the retired major general, who was the senior intelligence officer during the invasion of Iraq, said. “I’m the only guy in the room who gets paid to tell you that you’re not as handsome or as smart as you think you are. I’m the one who looks the boss in the eye and says, ‘Your plan is all fucked up.’”

In November, 2008, Obama won the Presidency, having pledged to draw

down troops in Iraq and shift military resources back to Afghanistan. He chose McChrystal to lead American forces in Afghanistan. McChrystal asked his friend Flynn to become his director of intelligence. Their collaboration in Iraq had severely crippled Al Qaeda. In Af-

ghanistan, though, the terrain was less familiar, and their mission quite different, with a much greater emphasis on winning “hearts and minds.” Still, Flynn was thrilled to be heading to the battlefield again. According to a friend, when she asked Flynn whether he’d regret missing an almost certain promotion in Washington, he replied, “Are you kidding me? I get to go back to the shit with Stan.”

He landed in Afghanistan in June, 2009. His office was a windowless converted shipping container, and during long days he took briefings and pored over classified assessments. Flynn often ate his meals in the chow hall and chatted with subordinates. “I have no recollection of any other general officers doing that,” Toni Gidwani, an intelligence analyst who worked with Flynn in Afghanistan, told me. Flynn was intense, but he was also funny and “called bullshit when he saw it,” according to Vikram Singh, who is now at the Center for American Progress, and at the time was advising Richard Holbrooke, Obama’s chief envoy to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Flynn’s directives, however, could at times be difficult to follow. His talent for absorbing information could race ahead of his analytical abilities. “He is not a linear thinker,” an intelligence analyst who served on multiple assignments with Flynn said. Stephen Biddle, a defense-policy fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, re-

counted late-night meetings in Flynn’s container: “His ideas and assessments kept moving around.” Max Boot, a civilian adviser in Afghanistan at the time, told me that Flynn got “jerked around by the data”—he would contend that the Taliban were nearly defeated and then, with no less conviction, argue that the militant group was stronger than ever.

Part of the challenge was the shortage of reliable intelligence in Afghanistan. Flynn considered some of the C.I.A.’s activities counterproductive. When Ahmed Wali Karzai, the brother of President Hamid Karzai and a suspected drug trafficker, was revealed as a longtime C.I.A. asset, Flynn voiced his displeasure with the agency, telling the *Times*, “If we are going to conduct a population-centric strategy in Afghanistan, and we are perceived as backing thugs, then we are just undermining ourselves.”

Flynn dispatched a Marine Corps first lieutenant to travel around the country interviewing marines, soldiers, and civilian partners about their intelligence needs. The lieutenant, Matthew Pottinger, had been a Beijing correspondent for the *Wall Street Journal* before enlisting as an intelligence officer in the Marines. Throughout the autumn of 2009, Pottinger crisscrossed the country. What he heard was dispiriting. An operations officer told him that his knowledge of what was happening in villages was “no more than fingernail deep.” The Americans were ignorant of local power brokers, religious practices, and economics. Pottinger, Flynn, and a senior official from the Defense Intelligence Agency compiled their observations, along with recommendations for changes, into a damning report.

In late December, Flynn e-mailed the report to dozens of colleagues at the Pentagon, the White House, and the C.I.A. The response was underwhelming; most didn’t even bother to reply. Pottinger suggested finding a publisher outside the government, and Flynn agreed. On January 4, 2010, the Center for a New American Security, a progressive think tank, released “Fixing Intel: A Blueprint for Making Intelligence Relevant in Afghanistan.” Reviews outside the military were





laudatory, but senior Pentagon and C.I.A. officials were angered by Flynn's decision to go public. "I was very concerned about an intelligence officer openly criticizing our intelligence community," former C.I.A. director Leon Panetta told me. Flynn and Pottinger understood that they might be fired.

Defense Secretary Robert Gates delivered a judgment of the report that saved them. He called it "exactly the type of candid, critical self-assessment" that the military needed. "Fixing Intel" consolidated Flynn's exalted status in the intelligence community. In 2012, *Defense News* ranked him seventeenth on its "100 Most Influential" list, heralding the report as something that "might have ended his career" but which, instead, "accelerated it."

THREE MONTHS AFTER "Fixing Intel" was published, McChrystal and some members of his staff flew to Paris to strengthen support for the war among French officials. Flynn stayed behind in Afghanistan. A *Rolling Stone* reporter who had been spending time with McChrystal joined him on the trip and heard him and his staff speaking derisively about the political leadership in Washington, and witnessed them getting drunk one night at an Irish pub.

In mid-June, 2010, the magazine piece, "The Runaway General," appeared. McChrystal was quoted calling Vice-President Joe Biden "short-sighted" for his opposition to the surge in Afghanistan; one aide mocked Biden as "Bite Me"; and another aide dismissed Jim Jones, Obama's first national-security adviser, as a "clown." Obama fired McChrystal the day after publication. Flynn chafed at the decision. "It's hard to see someone you know have to go through that," a close associate of Flynn's told me. "You don't heal from that overnight."

Flynn prepared to leave Afghanistan, as McChrystal's successor, David Petraeus, brought in his own staff. Before Flynn departed, he stopped by the Joint Intelligence Operations Center to say goodbye. Speaking to dozens of analysts, Flynn delivered a forty-five-minute lesson, covering some of the bloodiest engagements in American history: the Battle of Antietam, in 1862, when twenty-three

thousand people were killed or wounded in a single day; Operation Torch, in 1942, when several hundred soldiers died establishing beachheads in North Africa as part of the Allied invasion. "His point was that no one in Washington can ever appreciate what is happening on the battlefield, and that there aren't as many Americans dying now as before," the intelligence analyst who worked with Flynn said. "But it was confusing, and these would be the same kind of discussions you'd have with him about the nature of the insurgency—you'd leave his office and spend an hour trying to figure out what he was trying to say."

Back in Washington, Flynn was assigned to the office of James Clapper, the director of national intelligence. Flynn's success in Iraq and Afghanistan made him popular in foreign-policy circles. In April, 2011, he attended a luncheon at the Army and Navy Club, a members-only hotel and restaurant two blocks from the White House. About two dozen guests sat in a private room, around a long table. Iran was a major focus of the conversation, according to one of the event's hosts, Mary Beth Long, a former C.I.A. case officer and a senior Pentagon official during the George W. Bush Administration.

The attendees included a neoconservative historian named Michael Ledeen, who was then a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a Washington think tank. Ledeen had been

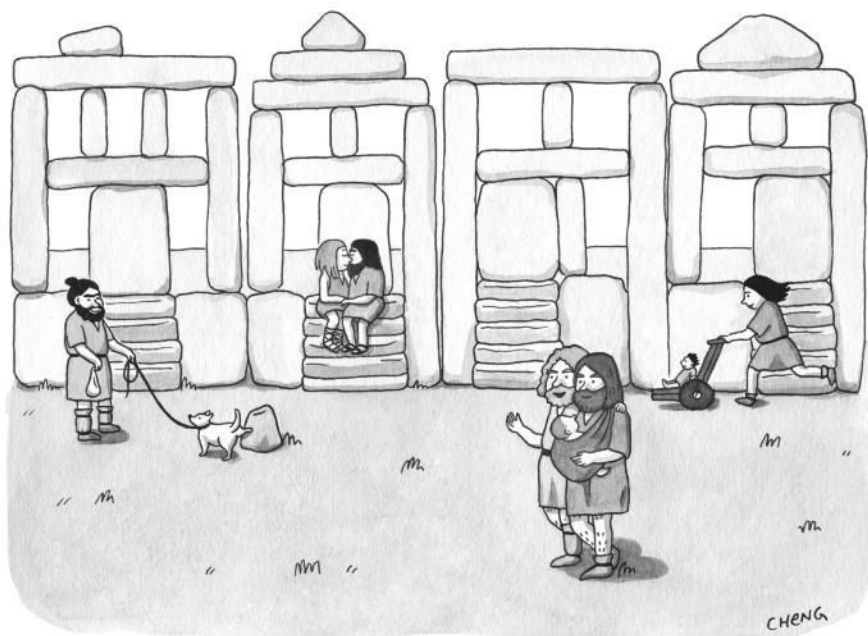
obsessed with Iran for decades. In the mid-eighties, as a consultant to Reagan's National Security Council, he played a central role in the Iran-Contra affair—introducing Oliver North, Reagan's counterterrorism adviser, to Manucher Ghorbanifar, an Iranian arms dealer. Ledeen's hope had been to stir up dissent inside Iran through Ghorbanifar's network of influential contacts, according to the Presidential commission that investigated the affair. (Ledeen disputes this.) Instead, Ghorbanifar wound up as the middleman in the sale of weapons to Iran, in exchange for Tehran's assistance in freeing American hostages held by Iranian-backed Islamists in Lebanon. But Ledeen's zeal for regime change in Iran remained undiminished. After the U.S. invasion of Iraq, he called for American forces to press on, into Iran. "As Ronald Reagan once said, 'America is too great a country to settle for small dreams,'" he wrote, in 2002. Iraq was a distraction; Iran was "the real war."

Flynn, too, increasingly viewed Iran as a great menace. In Iraq, he had seen scores of young Americans killed by sophisticated armor-piercing explosives, supplied to Shiite militias by the Quds Force, an elite unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. Flynn and Ledeen became close friends; in their shared view of the world, Ledeen supplied an intellectual and historical perspective, Flynn a tactical one. "I've spent my professional life studying evil,"



*"I feel like everybody's podcasting and nobody's podlistening."*

## BROWNSTONEHENGE



Ledeen told me. Flynn said, in a recent speech, “I’ve sat down with really, really evil people”—he cited Al Qaeda, the Taliban, Russians, Chinese generals—“and all I want to do is punch the guy in the nose.”

A month after the luncheon, a team of Navy SEALs raided a compound in Abbotabad, Pakistan, and killed Osama bin Laden. Flynn was critical of the limitations placed on intelligence work after the raid. Analysts had spent several weeks going through the hard drives and phones seized in the raid looking for “targeting data”—clues on the whereabouts of other terrorists—and leads on imminent threats. But Flynn and others advocated going deeper, with the hope of learning more about Al Qaeda’s finances and backers and organizational structure. A team returned to the materials and uncovered documents that seemed to point to a closer relationship between Al Qaeda and Iran than was previously understood. In one memorandum, a lieutenant asks bin Laden for permission to send an associate planning attacks in Europe into Iran for “around three months” to “train the brothers.” Flynn saw such references as evidence of Iran’s duplicity, in supporting Shiite and Sunni extrem-

ists alike. It seemed validation of Ledeen’s views on Iran. (Others in the intelligence community, including Panetta, the C.I.A. director at the time of the raid, were dubious about a close relationship between Al Qaeda and Iran.)

James Mattis, the Marine general in charge of U.S. Central Command, whose responsibilities included the Middle East and Central Asia, had been pushing for more aggressive action against Iran. In the summer of 2011, Mattis, who is now the Secretary of Defense, wanted to launch a rocket assault on an Iranian power plant in retaliation for the killing of six American soldiers by Iranian rockets in Baghdad. But the Obama Administration was hoping to get out of the Middle East, not risk starting another war there. Flynn felt that the Administration was being naïve, and that no one seemed to care about what he insisted was the collusion between Al Qaeda and Iran. “He was incensed,” an analyst who worked with Flynn at the time said. “He saw this as truth suppression.”

**I**N APRIL, 2012, Obama nominated Flynn to be the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency. Within the intelligence community, the agency was considered a backwater. “It’s the bas-

tard child,” Mary Beth Long, the former C.I.A. officer, said. The agency, whose headquarters are in southwest Washington, produced reports on topics like Middle Eastern weapons deals, changes of command in China, and troop movements on the Korean peninsula—essential work for assessing foreign military capabilities but hardly exciting.

To invigorate the D.I.A., Flynn wanted to break down the barriers between collectors and analysts; enhance the stable of clandestine case officers who operated overseas, like their C.I.A. counterparts; and reorganize the agency on the basis of geography. The goal was to transform the D.I.A. into a more agile organization.

Flynn’s ideas were informed by his experience in helping to overhaul Jsoc. But it was unclear whether they would work at the D.I.A., with seventeen thousand employees. “Jsoc has a small, tight-knit group of folks making real-time tactical decisions that must be executed *tonight*,” a senior military intelligence official told me. “A big organization like the D.I.A. just can’t respond that quickly.”

Peter Shelby, a retired marine and former D.I.A. official, told me he assumed that Flynn would be methodical in his approach: spend a few months at headquarters; learn how the organization worked; cultivate respected agency veterans; and then introduce changes. Instead, Shelby said, “Flynn came in and threw a bomb to explode the whole place, and then just let the dust settle.”

Employees started to complain. Many sought reassignment with other agencies. “Morale was in the toilet,” Shelby said. “To higher-level observers, Flynn looked like this bold leader, willing to make changes in the face of opposition. But, the further down you went, the more negative impact there was, because it was complete chaos.”

Moreover, Flynn could be sloppy with numbers and details—misstatements that his staffers derided as “Flynn facts.” His habit of chasing hunches also exasperated some staff members. In September, 2012, after the terrorist attack on the U.S. consulate and annex in Benghazi, Flynn urged an investigation into an Iran connection; his insistence that Iran was involved “stunned”



subordinates, according to the *Times*. (Flynn denies that he asked for a probe.) An intelligence analyst who worked with Flynn during this period told me that his iconoclasm sometimes went too far. “By nature, Flynn takes a contrarian approach to even the most simple analytic issues,” the analyst said. “After Benghazi, I remember him using the phrase ‘black swan’ a lot. What’s a ‘black swan’? He was looking for the random event that nobody could predict. Look, you certainly have to keep your eye on the ball for that, but there’s a reason why it’s a *black swan*. You shouldn’t dedicate a ton of time to that.”

In 2013, Flynn arranged a trip to Moscow to speak to a group of officers from the G.R.U., Russia’s intelligence agency, about leadership development. His decision to go was a controversial one. Flynn believed that there were opportunities to find common ground with Russia. But Steven Hall, the C.I.A.’s chief of Russia operations at the time, was skeptical. “He wanted to build a relationship with his counterparts in the G.R.U., which seemed, at best, quaint and naïve,” Hall told me. “Every time we have tried to have some sort of meaningful cooperation with the Russians, it’s almost always been manipulated and turned back against us.”

Several months after Flynn returned from his Moscow trip, he hoped to reciprocate by inviting several senior G.R.U. officers to the United States. Clapper, the director of national intelligence, cautioned him against it. Russia had recently annexed Crimea, and Russian special-forces operatives were fomenting a violent clash between rebels and Ukrainian troops in eastern Ukraine.

By then, Flynn had become a target of scorn for many inside the department. His deputy, David Shedd, became one of his harshest critics, and did little to hide his disdain. “I was walking by the front office once and heard David Shedd say, ‘I’m going to save the agency from the director,’” Simone Ledeen, who works in counter-threat finance at a multinational bank, said. Ledeen had worked for Flynn in Afghanistan, at the office for the director of national intelligence, and in the D.I.A., doing threat-assessment research. (She

is also Michael Ledeen’s daughter.)

Normally, a D.I.A. director serves for three or more years, but, in late 2013, Clapper and Michael Vickers, the Under-Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, were concerned about the tumult inside the agency and told Flynn that his tenure would last just two years. Flynn unsuccessfully tried to extend his term when his successor’s nomination was delayed. Shedd later became the acting director.

On August 7, 2014, at a ceremony in the atrium of the D.I.A.’s headquarters, Flynn retired from the military, after thirty-three years. His wife and two sons attended, as did Michael Ledeen. The senior military intelligence official, who was present, told me that Flynn was obviously bitter: “He was loading up, and he was not going to go quietly.”

Flynn, who was fifty-five, began fashioning a post-military life. He started his own business, the Flynn Intel Group, which offered clients a range of private intelligence and security services. He did some freelance consulting and also worked with SBD Advisors, a strategic consulting firm whose roster included the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Admiral Michael Mullen; former chief of the Special Operations Command Admiral Eric Olson; and other retired military officers. In January, 2015, Flynn signed with Leading Authorities, a speakers’ bureau, which promoted his expertise in leadership, cybersecurity, and terrorism.

Flynn began developing a public profile as a decorated former general with experience in fighting Islamic extremism. A month later, he made an appearance on “Charlie Rose.” He spoke at length about the threat posed by the Islamic State, which had been executing hostages and rapidly acquiring territory in northern Iraq and Syria. But America faced bigger foes than ISIS, he said. “Iran has killed more Americans than Al Qaeda has through state sponsors, through its terrorist network, called Hezbollah.”

This was a puzzling assertion. “Hezbollah has killed more Americans than Al Qaeda?” Rose asked.

Flynn began a count, starting with

Hezbollah’s 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Beirut that killed two hundred and eighty-three people. He cited other instances, but his math made little sense, and the numbers fell far short of the nearly three thousand killed by Al Qaeda’s attacks on 9/11.

Rose moved on, but a friend who had accompanied Flynn to the studio pulled him aside after the taping and questioned his Iran claim. One of Rose’s producers offered to fact-check the segment, but he waved off the suggestion. Another friend who’d come to the taping suggested contacting an expert from the intelligence community. That wouldn’t be necessary, Flynn said—he would just call Michael Ledeen.

Flynn and Ledeen’s relationship soon became a professional collaboration. Flynn asked Ledeen to help him write a book. Flynn wanted to position himself as a sage counsellor for the upcoming Presidential campaign. Ledeen had written more than a dozen books, including five on Iran. They were often polemical works, with titles such as “The War Against the Terror Masters” and “The Iranian Time Bomb,” and were filled with sweeping statements like “Islamic fundamentalism, of which the ideology of the Iranian regime is a textbook case, draws much of its inspiration from Mussolini, Hitler, and Stalin.”

In April, 2015, Flynn accepted an invitation to spend a week at Dartmouth. Daniel Benjamin, a former State Department counterterrorism chief who now directed the school’s international-affairs center, had come to know Flynn in Afghanistan. He considered him friendly and engaging, and thought students and faculty would appreciate his insights and his unconventionality. He set up class visits, dinner discussions, and a talk, which Flynn titled “World Without Order.”

Benjamin told me that he quickly realized during the visit that Flynn’s “easygoing pragmatism” had given way to some “very hard-edged ideas,” particularly on Iran. Flynn voiced contempt toward Iran’s leaders (“They are liars”) and said that they had “no right” to participate in negotiations with the United States over their nuclear

program. (The Iran nuclear deal was signed in July, 2015.)

"I've encountered plenty of military officers who were deeply upset by the role that Iranian-backed militias played in Iraq, but Flynn's animosity was off the charts," Benjamin said. Flynn expressed similarly harsh views of Islam in general, describing the faith as a political ideology, and not a religion. Benjamin, who, in 2002, co-wrote a book, "The Age of Sacred Terror," about the ideological war that America faced against radical Islam, deemed Flynn's comments "pointlessly pejorative" and thought they would serve only to inflame extremists. He began discouraging Dartmouth's administrators and faculty from attending the events.

On Fox News, NBC's "Meet the Press," CNN, and elsewhere, Flynn became increasingly critical of the Obama Administration. He lashed out at the Iran nuclear deal, the Administration's ISIS strategy, and its approach to radical Islam generally. Several Republican hopefuls preparing to run against Hillary Clinton asked for his advice. Carly Fiorina, the former Hewlett-Packard chief executive, brought Flynn on as an informal adviser for her Presidential bid. She told me that she found him refreshing. "He is a very down-to-earth, approachable guy," she said. She was also impressed by his candor. Flynn, she said, "doesn't pull punches."

In August, 2015, Flynn went to New York to meet Trump for the first time. They were scheduled to talk for thirty minutes; the conversation lasted ninety. Flynn was deeply impressed. "I knew he was going to be the President of the United States," he told me.

Two months later, Flynn appeared on RT, the English-language Russian television channel, formerly known as Russia Today. The outlet was widely regarded as a propaganda arm of the Kremlin, even before a recent U.S. intelligence report on Russian hacking and the Presidential election said that the channel had become an important part of a "Kremlin-directed campaign to undermine faith in the US Government." Flynn discussed the civil war in Syria, where Russian jets were flying bombing sorties in support of President Bashar al-Assad's regime. He contrasted Putin's resolve with what he de-

scribed as Obama's dithering in the region: "There's no coherence or no clarity to the strategy."

IN EARLY NOVEMBER, 2015, a D.C.-based representative of RT contacted Flynn's speakers' bureau and invited him to Moscow for the channel's tenth-anniversary celebration. The fee was approximately forty thousand dollars, according to a source familiar with the



arrangement. This trip was considerably more fraught than the one he had made as D.I.A. director. On December 1st, RT issued a press release announcing Flynn's participation. In e-mails, Simone Ledeen urged her former boss, and family friend, to reconsider. "I begged him, 'Please, sir: don't do this. It's not just you. You're a retired three-star general. It's the Army. It's all of the people who have been with you, all of these analysts known as 'Flynn's people.' Don't do this to them. Don't do this to yourself.'"

Flynn assured his critics that he knew what he was doing. "Know my values and beliefs are mine & won't change because I'm on a different piece of geography," he tweeted. Before the trip, Flynn received a classified counterespionage briefing at D.I.A. headquarters. Hall, the former C.I.A. chief of Russia operations, told me, "Whatever personal electronic device you carry with you into Russia *will* be compromised."

Flynn stayed at a hotel near Red Square. The RT gala featured speakers and panel discussions during the day and a dinner at night. That morning, Sophie Shevardnadze, an RT correspondent, interviewed Flynn. From the stage, he confessed to feeling as if he were behind enemy lines. "I'm sort of in the lair," he said.

A Russian jet had recently been shot down near the Syrian border by a Turkish plane, and Shevardnadze asked Flynn how Russia should respond. "Are

we not to react? What does Turkey expect?" she asked. Circumspect, Flynn said, "I don't know what Turkey expects. I don't know what Russia expects."

Flynn also seemed to go out of his way to tweak the Russian government and its partners in Damascus and Tehran. "Let's face it, come on, is Assad the future of Syria, given the way the situation has unfolded?" Flynn said. He added that Assad's allies in Iran were making things worse in Syria and elsewhere. "Iran exports a lot of terrorism," he declared.

Flynn was seated at the head table for dinner that evening. Putin sat to his left. Cyril Svoboda, the former foreign minister of the Czech Republic, sat to Flynn's right. I called Svoboda, who speaks fluent English and Russian, and who translated a brief exchange between the two men, and asked what they discussed. "It was very, very short," Svoboda said. "*Kak vashi dela?*" "*Shto novovo?*" "*Khorosho.*" ("How are you?" "What's new?" "Good.")

After dinner, Putin went onstage and congratulated RT on its success. The Russian government wasn't perfect, he said, so he appreciated RT for its presentation of "various points of view." After Putin concluded his remarks, Flynn, joining other diners, stood and applauded.

Last year, Flynn talked to Dana Priest, of the *Washington Post*, about the trip. When Priest asked why he would go on RT, a state-run channel, Flynn replied, "Well, what's CNN?"

"Well, it's not run by the state," Priest said. "You're rolling your eyes."

"Well, what's MSNBC?" Flynn said. "I mean, come on . . . what's Al Jazeera?"

BY EARLY 2016, Flynn was enthusiastic about Trump. "He picked the right horse and he picked it early," the close Flynn associate told me. Flynn's Twitter feed, which had once been full of sunset photos and surf reports, turned increasingly reactionary, particularly on immigration and Islam. "Fear of Muslims is RATIONAL," he posted, last February. Not long afterward, he retweeted a picture apparently showing refugees tromping across the European countryside with text that read, "Historians will look back in amazement that the



West destroyed its own civilization.”

In July, his book with Ledeen, “The Field of Fight: How We Can Win the Global War Against Radical Islam and Its Allies,” came out. After Trump tweeted an endorsement, the book made the *Times* best-seller list. Although Ledeen’s name appears (in small type) on the cover, “The Field of Fight” is written in the first person and presented in Flynn’s voice. But I ran the book through software that allowed me to compare it to the text of Ledeen’s previous books and articles. Dozens of matches turned up. The similarities suggested just how much Ledeen’s long-standing obsessions had melded into Flynn’s. Although an ISIS flag is pictured on the front cover, “The Field of Fight” is, in many ways, a call to action against Iran. “Every day we see evidence of Iranian espionage in the United States,” Flynn writes. “It is hard to imagine that there are no Hezbollah terrorist groups inside this country. If they could blow up buildings in Buenos Aires, they can surely do the same here.”

During the summer of 2016, the Trump campaign floated Flynn, a lifelong Democrat, as a Vice-Presidential candidate. After the Republican Convention, Flynn became a regular presence at Trump campaign events, sometimes accompanied by his older son, Michael, Jr. Flynn had been absent for long stretches of Michael, Jr.’s, teenage years and early adulthood—he reportedly missed his wedding while deployed in Iraq. Flynn made Michael, Jr., his chief of staff.

In part through his son, Flynn began flirting with an online community of conspiracy theorists and white nationalists who referred to themselves as the “alt-right.” The neo-Nazis among them called Trump the “God Emperor.” On Twitter, Flynn frequently tagged Mike Cernovich, an alt-right activist, in tweets, and encouraged others to follow his feed. Michael, Jr., promoted stories from Alex Jones, the right-wing radio host who believes that the 9/11 attacks, and the 2012 school shooting in Sandy Hook, were inside jobs. A little more than a year ago, Michael, Jr., tweeted @billclinton, “You’re a Rapist.”

Flynn’s own views seemed to be tilting increasingly toward the fringe. He,

as Trump has, publicly insinuated that Obama was a secret Muslim, and not a true American. “I’m not going to sit here and say he’s Islamic,” Flynn said of Obama, during remarks last year before the American Congress for Truth, an anti-Muslim group. But Obama “didn’t grow up an American kid,” Flynn said, adding that the President’s values were “totally different than mine.”

Flynn also stoked fear about Muslims and, in a tweet that used the hashtag #NeverHillary, shared an anti-Semitic comment that read, in part, “Not anymore, Jews. Not anymore.” (He subsequently deleted the tweet, calling it “a mistake.”) “I’m not perfect. I’m not a very good social-media person,” he told me in one of our conversations. Stanley McChrystal and Mike Mullen, the former chairman of the Joint Chiefs, both contacted Flynn and tried, unsuccessfully, to get him to tone it down.

Flynn predicted a Trump win, but he was making contingency plans. He began reorienting his firm, the Flynn Intel Group, so that it would be able to compete for lobbying clients after the election. The firm arranged to work with Sphere Consulting, a public-relations and lobbying business in Washington.

In August of last year, a Turkish businessman with close ties to the government of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan hired Flynn Intel Group on a lobbying con-

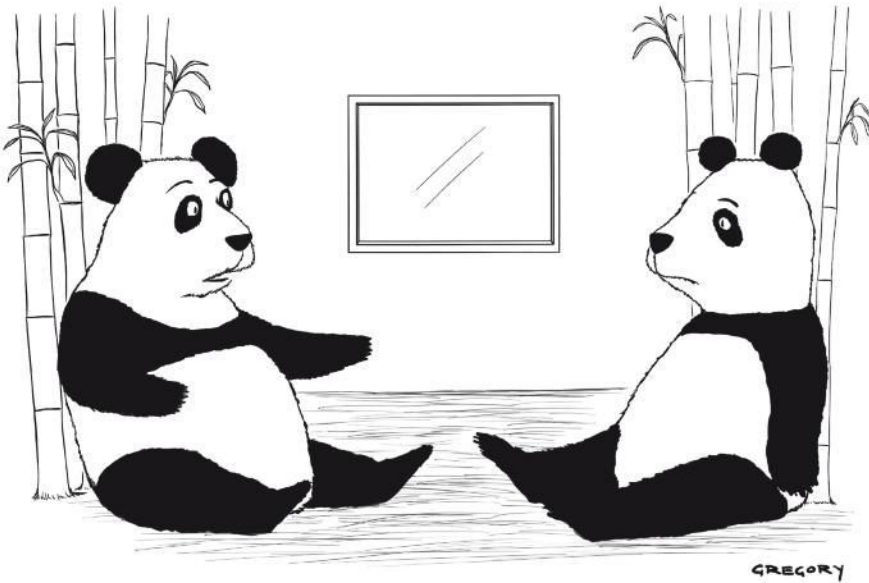
tract to help promote the view that Turkey’s business climate was a positive one. This was a challenging task, given that Erdoğan had survived a coup attempt just the month before, and was, in retaliation, rounding up anyone considered insufficiently faithful to his regime. Flynn had previously been critical of Erdoğan, whom he viewed as an Islamist threat. He put those concerns aside now as he vouched for Erdoğan’s government, writing an op-ed for *The Hill* that heralded Turkey as “our strongest ally” against ISIS.

Flynn remembered Election Night fondly, a moment of triumph. “I like to think that I helped get Donald Trump elected President,” he told me. “Maybe I helped a little, maybe a lot.” One of Trump’s first major decisions was to appoint Flynn his national-security adviser, calling him “an invaluable asset to me and my Administration.” Flynn told me, “Service was something our family was always encouraged to do.” He went on, “I made some mistakes, but I’m still serving. It’s like being a priest, you know. I’ve been called to serve.”

AFTER THE ELECTION, Flynn spent his days at Trump Tower, down the hall from Bannon and Reince Priebus. “My sched is so tight, literally from sunrise to well past sunset,” Flynn wrote



*“I said, I wonder what it means,’ not ‘Tell me what it means.’”*



*"Look, until there's a Tinder for pandas, we have to meet the old-fashioned way: being locked in a room together by scientists."*

me, in a text message. He was "consumed with reading."

The team he assembled drew heavily from his former military colleagues, but the qualifications of others were less apparent. K. T. McFarland, until recently a Fox News analyst, became his deputy. Flynn's son, Michael, Jr., did a brief stint on the transition, before he was dismissed, after continuing to push on Twitter the fake-news story about Hillary Clinton's role in a child-sex-trafficking ring in a pizzeria in northwest Washington, D.C.

Michael Ledeen volunteered to help Flynn by examining Obama's executive orders on foreign policy, particularly on Iran, recommending "which ones should be cancelled, which ones should be expanded, and so on." Ledeen considered the moment an auspicious one. "I've been agitating for thirty years to go after Iran," he said. "Now all of a sudden we've got a national-security adviser, a Secretary of Defense, and the head of the C.I.A. who all agree."

Like Trump, Flynn stewed over what was said, and written, about him. Much of it was unfavorable. A scathing *Times* editorial called his appointment "alarming," saying that he "would encourage Mr. Trump's worst impulses." The editorial went on, "A core theme of Mr. Trump's campaign was making Amer-

ica safer. With this appointment, he is doing the opposite."

When we met at the restaurant before the Inauguration, Flynn was guarded. "What's the purpose of this thing?" he asked me. He had previously questioned whether I would "rehash all this stuff about me being anti-Semitic and pro-Russia and an Islamophobe."

Flynn told me he prided himself as a strategist. I asked about his strategy for combatting ISIS. He said that Obama had "too narrowly defined" efforts to defeat the enemy. Part of the Trump Administration's military strategy should include "fighting these guys on the battlefield," he told me.

ALTHOUGH BANNON'S CLOUT seemingly grew by the day, Flynn's imprint on national-security policy was unmistakable. Traditionally, the measure of a national-security adviser's effectiveness has been defined by his relationship with the President. That may well have enabled Flynn to hold on to his job as long as he did; Trump's loyalty is well known. (When I asked Flynn if he regarded himself as the "honest broker," he said that model was a "misnomer" with Trump. "The honest broker? It's Donald Trump.")

Nine days into the new Adminis-

tration, Iran test-fired a ballistic missile from a remote base in the desert. Flynn regarded the test as a violation of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2231, covering the agreement on Iran's nuclear program. (In fact, the resolution does not prohibit Iran from firing missiles but, rather, calls upon Iran "not to undertake any activity related to ballistic missiles designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons.")

Flynn's team drafted a strongly worded warning that criticized the Obama Administration for "fail[ing] to respond adequately to Tehran's malign actions." The White House sent a draft to the Pentagon for review. According to a senior military official, staffers in the Defense Secretary's office recommended softening some of the language and removing the condemnations of the Obama Administration. Their suggestions were ignored.

Three days after the missile test, Sean Spicer, the White House press secretary, interrupted his daily briefing and invited Flynn to the lectern. The *Times* had just published a story describing Flynn's influence as waning, and he seemed intent on proving otherwise. Trump had encouraged him to read the statement himself, Flynn later told me. The President "felt a strong message needed to be put out," he said, as if he could dispel rumors of White House turmoil by threatening war overseas.

Flynn scolded Iran for its "destabilizing behavior across the entire Middle East" and declared, "As of today, we are officially putting Iran on notice." I spoke to Flynn a few days later. I asked him what he meant by "on notice." He replied, "We have a standard, set by sanctions that have been put in place, that we expect they will meet." I asked if he thought there were ways to modify Iran's behavior short of regime change.

"You'll have to ask Khomeini," he said. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the cleric who led the Islamic Revolution, died in 1989. Did Flynn mean Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has led the country since then?

"Come on," Flynn said. "That's my Irish brogue." He declined to specify how Iran might be punished, because he didn't want to "telegraph" military



action. “One thing I learned as a lieutenant in the Army is that the best plan is the one that gives you the most options at the last possible minute,” he said.

Military officials have been drawing up retaliatory options, including warplanes, drones, troops, and cyberattacks. “Planning is trying to keep up with the rhetoric,” one senior defense official told me.

THE END FOR Flynn came rather abruptly. He had spent the week-end with the President and the Prime Minister of Japan at Mar-a-Lago, Trump’s resort in Palm Beach, Florida, where they had used a table in an open dining area as an impromptu—and unsecured—situation room after a ballistic missile test by North Korea. But, back in Washington on Monday afternoon, there was confusion about Flynn’s standing. During a television interview, Kellyanne Conway, a senior White House adviser, said that Flynn enjoyed Trump’s “full confidence.” Then, within the hour, Spicer said that Trump was “evaluating the situation.” Flynn went about his duties as usual that afternoon, participating in foreign-policy discussions in the Oval Office, an Administration official told me.

But, that evening, another *Post* article appeared online, this time about the Justice Department’s blackmail fears. Soon afterward, Trump asked for Flynn’s resignation. The news broke just before eleven.

Since the election, Flynn had been “read in” to dozens of “special access programs,” the country’s most highly classified intelligence operations. By protocol, he would have spent his final moments in the White House being “read out” of each program, a process that involves signing multiple confidentiality forms. At around 11:30 P.M., he walked out of the White House and called his wife.

At that hour, the roads were empty and Flynn drove, alone, to his home, in Old Town Alexandria. He barely slept that night. On Tuesday, a government representative came to his home to collect his phones, badges, and keys. He spent the next few days with his wife, taking long walks, “reflecting and capturing his thoughts,” the close as-

sociate told me. As Washington, just across the Potomac River, convulsed, Flynn was going through his own “range of emotional swings,” the associate said.

Last Wednesday, at a midday press conference, Trump, who Spicer said earlier had lost trust in Flynn, now praised him (“a fine person”), blamed the media for his ouster (“The press should be ashamed of themselves”), and attributed Flynn’s resignation not to potentially criminal contacts with the Russian Ambassador but to “illegal” leaks.

There were reports of investigations on an array of fronts: an F.B.I.-led inquiry into Flynn’s communications with the Russian Ambassador; an Army-led one into payments that Flynn might have received from the Russian government when he went to Moscow in 2015; and calls for probes from members of the Senate and House intelligence committees.

Flynn has been consulting with a lawyer. It is illegal for unauthorized private citizens to conduct diplomacy with foreign governments, but such a violation would be difficult to prosecute. When, soon after Flynn became national-security adviser, F.B.I. agents questioned him, he denied discussing sanctions with Kislyak, the *Post* reported. If he lied to the F.B.I., he could be vulnerable to felony charges.

Russian officials deny any improper contact with Flynn or anyone else in Trump’s circle. The predominant view in the state media and among Russian analysts is that the Flynn affair, coupled with the American intelligence report on the hack of the Democratic National Committee, is likely to limit Trump’s ability to make some of the major changes in U.S.-Russia policy that he was hinting at throughout the campaign.

Last week, Adam Schiff, the ranking Democrat on the House intelligence committee, along with House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, requested a briefing from the director of national intelligence on Flynn’s contacts with Russian officials, including unredacted transcripts of conversations.

Schiff expressed concern to me about evidence preservation; the Administration had already shown its capacity for deceit. After all, he said, Trump had known “for weeks” that Flynn was lying. “The fact that they were O.K. with that tells you a lot about their comfort level misleading the public.”

A former C.I.A. official raised similar concerns about how long Flynn was allowed to stay in his job. “We’ve now got a guy briefed on our most closely guarded secrets about a whole host of issues—including Russia—who has been canned,” the official said. “We don’t have something from the movies where you can put an eraser on someone’s head and it all goes away. We’ve got to rely on Mike Flynn to keep those secrets, just as we rely on others who’ve been given access to classified information when they leave those positions.”

White House officials portrayed Flynn as having had his conversations with the Russian Ambassador on his own. But Schiff and others are doubtful. Schiff said he thought that it would be “extraordinary” if Flynn was “some kind of free agent, entering into discussions with the Russians about undermining President Obama’s sanctions against Russia for its interference in our elections to help elect Donald Trump.” (During a news conference last Thursday, Trump said that Flynn had done nothing wrong in his discussions with the Russian envoy. “I didn’t direct him,” Trump said, “but I would have directed him if he didn’t do it.”)

Some of Flynn’s former military colleagues, even those from whom he’s drifted apart in recent years, told me they were skeptical that Flynn would have conducted shadow diplomacy on his own. Despite his reputation as an agitator, he was, in the end, a soldier who followed orders, they said.

“This story is bigger than Mike Flynn,” the senior military intelligence official said. “Who told Mike to go do this? I think somebody said, ‘Mike, you’ve got some contacts. Let them know it’s gonna be all right.’ Mike’s a soldier. He did not go rogue.” ♦

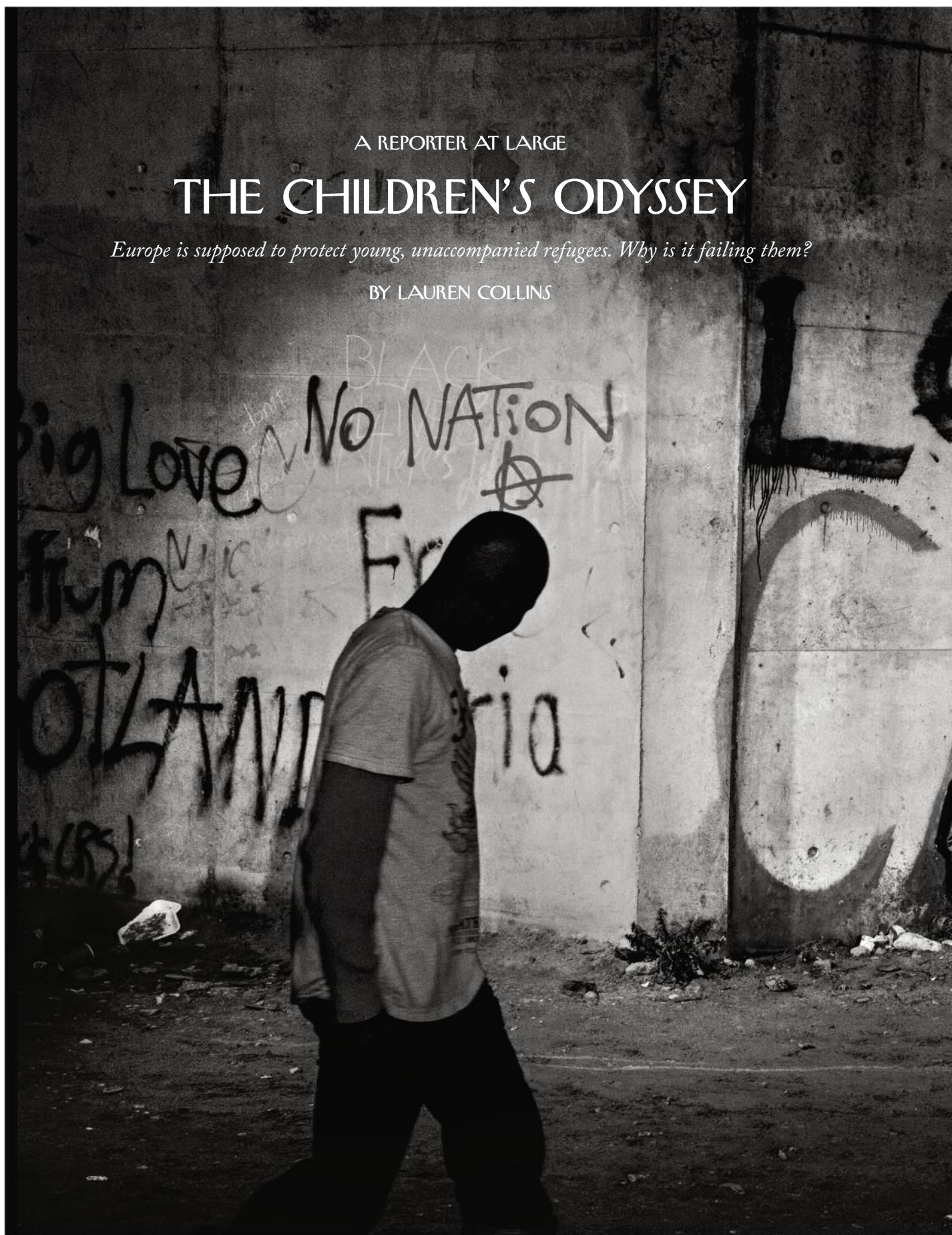


A REPORTER AT LARGE

# THE CHILDREN'S ODYSSEY

*Europe is supposed to protect young, unaccompanied refugees. Why is it failing them?*

BY LAUREN COLLINS



*The entrance to the Jungle, a refugee camp in Calais, France, which lacked running water and was plagued by rats. More than a*





*hundred thousand minors, most of them from Syria and Afghanistan, have travelled alone across continents in search of asylum.*

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX MAJOLI

WASIL AWOKE TO the sound of a knife ripping through nylon. Although he was only twelve years old, he was living alone in a small tent at a refugee camp in Calais, France, known as the Jungle. Men entered his tent; he couldn't tell how many. A pair of hands gripped his throat. He shouted. It was raining, and the clatter of the drops muffled his cries, so he shouted louder. At last, people from neighboring tents came running, and the assailants disappeared.

Wasil had left his mother and younger siblings in Kunduz, Afghanistan, ten months earlier, in December, 2015. His father, an interpreter for NATO forces, had fled the country after receiving death threats from the Taliban. Later, Wasil, as the eldest son, became the Taliban's surrogate target. Wasil was close to his mother, but she decided to send him away as the situation became increasingly dangerous. Her brother lived in England, and she hoped that Wasil could join him there. To get to Calais, Wasil had travelled almost four thousand miles, across much of Asia and Europe, by himself. Along the way, he had survived for ten days in a forest with only two bottles of water, two biscuits, and a packet of dates to sustain him. Before leaving home, he hadn't even known how to prepare a meal.

Wasil was stunned by the conditions of the Jungle. The camp, a forty-acre assemblage of tents, situated on a vast windswept sandlot that had formerly served as a landfill, didn't seem fit for human habitation. "I did not come here for luxury," Wasil told me, in excellent English, which he had learned from his father. "But I can't believe this is happening in Europe." A chemical plant loomed nearby. There was no running water, and when it rained the refugees' tents filled with mud and the camp's rudimentary roads became impassable.

The Jungle had one thing to recommend it: its proximity to the thirty-mile-long Channel Tunnel, which connects France and England at the Strait of Dover. Thousands of refugees and migrants from all over the world congregated at the camp, amid rats and burning trash, with the sole objective of making it, whether by truck, train, or ferry, onto British soil. On one of Wasil's first days at the camp, he called his mother on his cell phone.

"Are you safe?" she asked. "I was saying to her, 'I'm in a good condition, I am too safe. I'm going to school and learning French. . . . I can touch the water that one side is here and the other side is England,'" Wasil recalled. "I'm not telling her the real situation."

The morning after Wasil was attacked, he returned his tent to the charity organization that had given it to him. Whether the assailants had sought to rob him or to hurt him, he was too frightened to continue sleeping in the Jungle. A volunteer took him to the police, who found him a bed at a government-run center for vulnerable youth about four miles west of Calais. There was little to do there, and no one spoke Dari, Wasil's language, so each morning he walked two and a half hours to the Jungle in order to spend the day in the company of the hundreds of other unaccompanied minors at the camp. His friends were a band of fellow-Afghan boys who clung together with a staunchness that was directly proportional to their lack of parental protection. Wasil's best friend was a boy named Rohullah. They drifted around the camp, trying to pick up bits of news or hearsay that might aid their quest to get to England. Each night, as dusk fell, Wasil made the trip back to the youth center. "I walk slowly," he said. "I'm thinking of the others"—children who had made it to the United Kingdom—"and I'm disappointed. I'm hoping that maybe one day I will be like them and go to college safely." Occasionally, he snapped a selfie: a boy in a cast-off woman's windbreaker, wandering through a deserted suburban landscape as the sky darkens.

Wasil is a kind, scrupulous kid, with intelligent eyes and a mop of black hair. He wants to be a doctor. "My best subject is biology and my second is chemistry," he said. His favorite soccer team is Real Madrid, and his favorite player is Cristiano Ronaldo. "I love him," he said. "His style, appearance, actions, attitude, and the way he is making a goal, some of his technical movings." He adores the movie "Troy," Wolfgang Petersen's 2004 Greek epic. He can quote Achilles nearly word for word, in the hero's address to his men: "My brothers of the sword! I would rather fight beside you than any army of thousands! Let no man forget how menacing we are—we are lions!"

In the weeks after the attack, the mus-

cles in Wasil's throat ached where he had been choked. He began having stomach problems, and his feet were shredded and blistered. He couldn't reach his mother. "Kunduz has become very dangerous," he said. "I called her number, but it was dead."

AMONG THE 1.3 million people who sought asylum in Europe in 2015 were nearly a hundred thousand unaccompanied children. Most were from Afghanistan and Syria. Thirteen per cent were younger than fourteen years old. The data for 2016 are incomplete, but the situation is comparable. Experts estimate that for every child who claims asylum one enters Europe without seeking legal protection. (The number of unaccompanied minors attempting to enter the United States, most of them from Central America, has also increased dramatically in recent years. President Trump's executive order on immigration, in addition to barring refugees, targets asylum seekers, many of whom are unaccompanied children.) At an age at which most kids need supervision to complete their homework, these children cross continents alone.

The process of starting over in Europe is supposed to be fairly straightforward. Under the Dublin III Treaty, refugees must apply for asylum in the first European Union country they enter. However, an unaccompanied minor with a close relative elsewhere in Europe has a right to pursue asylum there. In addition, in May, the U.K. Parliament passed an amendment—sponsored by the Labour peer Alfred Dubs, who was evacuated from Czechoslovakia as part of the Kindertransport, in 1939—stipulating that the government accept an unspecified number of unaccompanied refugee children from other countries in Europe. Last spring, the Dubs plan enjoyed widespread support. Even the *Daily Mail*, which is often virulently anti-immigrant, affirmed, "We believe that the plight of these unaccompanied children now in Europe—hundreds of them on our very doorstep in the Channel ports of France—has become so harrowing that we simply cannot turn our backs." The Minister for Security and Immigration declared, "We have a moral duty to help."

But political infighting among the European states, which by accidents of



geography have been unequally burdened by the refugee crisis, has led to a breakdown of the process. Few refugees and migrants can envision settling in overstretched Italy and Greece, where almost all of them make their first entry into Europe. (The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees distinguishes between “refugees,” people who face a direct threat of persecution or death, and “migrants,” but the difference is not always clear-cut.) The governments of border countries have often been happy to wave the newcomers on. The goal, for the majority of refugees, is to reach one of a group of countries in northern Europe, where unemployment is lower and social support can be more generous. If, in theory, securing a viable future is about making it to Europe, in practice it is about making it across Europe. Unaccompanied minors, navigating unfamiliar terrain in a vacuum of authority, are especially vulnerable travellers. Sarah Crowe, a spokesperson for UNICEF, has said, “There is an assumption that everything is under control when they arrive on the European shores, but it’s actually just the beginning of a new phase of their journey.”

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which all E.U. member states are signatories, mandates that the “best interests” of children govern every aspect of their treatment. Once they arrive in Europe, they have a right to medical care, psychological counselling, and legal aid, but many of them aren’t getting any of those services. They have a right to education, but often they aren’t getting that, either. “The problem is that E.U. law does not supply any real, clear explanation of how ‘best interests’ should be implemented,” Helen Stalford, who studies European children’s rights at the University of Liverpool, said. “When it comes down to the practical application, there are so many different actors that they’re not necessarily doing this in a way that is transparent, consistent, or rigorous.” As a result, refugee children are sleeping on sidewalks and in traffic medians. They are stuck in unofficial settlements like the Jungle, whose conditions have been described as “dreadful” (the British Red Cross), “deplorable” (Save the Children), “totally inappropriate” (the European Council on Refugees and Exiles), and “diabolical” (Doctors of the World), or in holding centers such as Amygda-

leza, in Greece, where, according to Human Rights Watch, “the detention of children in crowded and unsanitary conditions, without appropriate sleeping or hygiene arrangements, sometimes together with adults and without privacy, constitutes inhumane and degrading treatment.” The children at such places confront a number of dangers: vermin, feces-contaminated water, bullying, petty crime, violence, sexual abuse, and diseases ranging from scabies to tuberculosis.

According to Europol, the law-enforcement agency of the E.U., more than ten thousand migrant and refugee children have gone missing in Europe since 2014. They are obvious prey for human-trafficking groups, who exploit them for sex and slavery. A team of Italian doctors examining unaccompanied children found that fifty per cent of them suffered from sexually transmitted diseases. According to a report by Refugees Deeply, in one Athens park the going rate for a sexual encounter with an Afghan teen-ager is between five and ten euros.

Unaccompanied minors are the de-facto vanguard of the greatest migration since the Second World War—its innovators and its guinea pigs. As the journalist Patrick Kingsley observes, in his new book, “The New Odyssey: The Story of the Twenty-First-Century Refugee Crisis,” “It takes young, mobile risk-takers to trailblaze a new route.” Minors have some of the best chances of making it where they want to go but some

of the worst experiences getting there. Homeless and parentless, they live on the extreme edge of the refugee experience.

AFGHANISTAN HAD BEEN in turmoil for most of Wasil’s life. He thought that his birth date was March, 2004—two and a half years after the U.S. invasion—but the age of many Afghans is an estimate. His family, members of the Tajik ethnic group, the country’s second largest, lived in a sparsely populated village on the outskirts of Kunduz. His parents had a small house with a garden: sunflowers, pink and red roses, a watermelon plant. There was electricity and a computer, but no refrigerator, indoor toilet, television, or radio. Wasil’s favorite foods were his mother’s *qabili palaw*, a rice dish with raisins and lamb, and her *mantoo*, beef dumplings. For many years, his happiest times were Fridays, when he and his father would walk around the village after prayers.

Wasil said that, after his father was forced to leave Afghanistan, he was playing outside one day when a man put a handkerchief over his mouth and dragged him away. In a photograph that his captors sent to his family, Wasil is in a room with walls that appear to be made of mud. He is on his knees. Two men, their faces obscured by scarves, hold machine guns to his head. The kidnappers demanded that Wasil’s father give himself up in return for his son’s release.

Wasil’s mother later told him that he had been gone for about a month when government forces raided the compound



“Please, Daddy, just one more conspiracy theory.”



*"I guarantee we can find them cheaper online."*

where he was being held. After he returned to Kunduz, she called a smuggler. She didn't have a way to contact her brother, but she sent Wasil on anyway, trusting that he would find his uncle once he reached England. Contrary to common assumption, the parents of unaccompanied minors are often among the most proactive and protective, the PTA parents of war zones. "We are dealing with push factors rather than pull factors—of war, terrorism, extreme poverty, and others," Roberta Metsola, a member of the European Parliament's Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice, and Home Affairs, has testified. "When we have identified and interviewed the parents of such children, they have told us, 'If your house is on fire, you leave, and, if you cannot leave, at least you try to save one of your children.'"

The smuggler, whom Wasil's mother had paid thirty-five hundred afghanis—around fifty dollars—for the initial leg of the trip, took him to Kabul, where they met up with a group of about twenty-five other migrants and set off for Iran. Across the border, in Jiroft, they were ambushed by thieves. "They started shooting," Wasil remembered. "People were really helping me, because in some places where you had to run very fast I couldn't, and they were taking my hand and pulling me with them."

They walked for "nights and nights" in the desert of Iran, then took a fifty-hour bus ride to Urmia, a city famed for its otherworldly salt lake. Wasil travelled through Turkey, and a new smuggler dropped him and some other boys off in Bulgaria, to continue overland, by themselves, hacking their way through the backwoods, on a route that has been described by refugees as "the pathway to hell itself." Wasil had brought only rudimentary provisions, and when he finished those he ate wild plums for four days. At one point, he was so hungry, thirsty, and tired that he lay down on the side of the road. A very tall young girl appeared, as in a fairy tale, and took him to a cottage that she shared with her grandmother, where he spent the night. He walked hundreds of miles through Serbia, navigating by the offline G.P.S. on his phone, which he used as little as possible so that the battery wouldn't die. He worried about wild animals, "especially the lion and the tiger." Crossing a river, he forgot to lift his backpack out of the water. Sodden, it weighed him down and he almost went under.

From Croatia, he tried to cross into Slovenia on foot, but the border police arrested him. "It was nice in the jail, but I was crying, because I got bored," Wasil told me. He was released after a week.

In Italy, he spent a month squatting in a derelict train station. "It was not good," he said. "There were boys selling weed, and I didn't want to sleep near them."

Wasil reached France in the summer of 2016, and walked for three days to Nice. He paid a euro and a half for a bus ticket to Cannes, and, when he got there, he jumped onto a train—going in the wrong direction. He recalled, "When I got out from the train, I saw outside, and I said, 'Oh, my God, it's Nice again.'" Continuing his dystopian Grand Tour, he pushed on to Paris, where he caught a train to Calais, disembarking near the town hall, a neo-Flemish building with an imposing bell tower. He called the building "the palace of the boss of Calais." He remembered, "I saw a golden sculpture and four big clocks, and I ask, ask, ask, 'Where is the Jungle?'" He got directions and walked to the camp. His unyielding goal, from there, was to make it to England. He fantasized about seeing Big Ben. "The place that I love is the London Eye," he told me. "I have researched it on Google."

**D**ISPLACED PEOPLE STARTED showing up in Calais in 1994, the year that the Channel Tunnel opened. By 1999, hundreds of Afghans, Iranians, and Iraqi Kurds had installed themselves in the town's parks and gardens, waiting for a chance to wedge into the undercarriage of a train or stow away in an eighteen-wheeler bound for England. They wanted to reach the U.K. for a variety of reasons: they had family networks there; they spoke English; Britain had a reputation as an easier place than France to gain asylum or to disappear into the underground economy.

In 1999, the French government, faced with an increasingly dire situation, asked the Red Cross to open an "emergency center" in a former factory in Sangatte, six miles west of Calais. Sangatte quickly became notorious—during six months in 2001, the tunnel authority intercepted more than eighteen thousand people trying to sneak into Britain—and a point of diplomatic contention. Britain accused France of failing to police its borders; France accused Britain of shirking responsibility for the crisis.

In 2002, Britain succeeded in pressuring France into closing Sangatte, but migrants and refugees kept coming.



They took shelter in Second World War bunkers, and then in the woodlands surrounding Sangatte, calling the settlement *dzangal*, the Pashto word for “forest.” The French government demolished that first Jungle in 2009. The migrants simply regrouped. In early 2015, the new Jungle appeared, in an industrial zone near the Calais port. By October, it had more than six thousand inhabitants.

In some ways, the Jungle was well organized; you could buy three naan for a euro at one of its makeshift restaurants, get a haircut, or worship in a church or a mosque constructed from plywood and tarps. But no amount of human ingenuity could lessen the atmosphere of extreme anxiety. None of the residents had a simple past, a stable present, or a solid idea of what the immediate or long-term future might bring. The traumas that they had experienced in their home countries were compounded by the stress of finding their way out of a no man’s land. Almost everyone knew someone who had died trying to get to England. At least thirty-three people were killed in 2015 and 2016. A twenty-three-year-old Syrian named Eyas was electrocuted when he attempted to climb on top of a freight train. An Eritrean baby named Samir died an hour after his birth. His twenty-year-old mother had gone into premature labor after falling from a truck.

France considered the Jungle to be not an official refugee camp but an informal settlement, a designation that prevented major N.G.O.s from operating there. The state provided minimal services, so whoever showed up and stuck around became an important source of aid in the camp. One volunteer I met, Liz Clegg, was running a center for women and children—it was the most reliable place in the Jungle to find, among other things, diapers and face cream—out of a sky-blue school bus that the actress Juliet Stevenson had bought on eBay and then donated. Clegg, a wiry fifty-one-year-old former firefighter from England, has lived on the road since she was seventeen. In the summer of 2015, she attended the Glastonbury music festival. Appalled by the “fuckload” of stuff that people had left behind, she filled her trailer with cast-off tents and sleeping bags and drove straight to the Jungle, intending to donate them. “I’d seen in a Sunday magazine that they needed

camping equipment, and Calais’s, what, three hours away?” she recalled. “You couldn’t not do it.” She ended up staying.

Most volunteers left the Jungle at night for safety, but Clegg was there full time, serving as a nurse, bodyguard, counsellor, and surrogate mother to the camp’s hundreds of unaccompanied children, almost all of them boys. At one point, she lived in a shack with half a dozen kids. “We had to sleep with knives,” she told me. One of her initiatives, supported by a grassroots group called Help Refugees, had been to give the children cell phones, topped up with credit and with emergency numbers keyed in. In April, 2016, her daughter, a fellow-volunteer, received a text from a seven-year-old Afghan boy named Ahmed. “I ned halp darivar no stap car no oksijan in the car,” it read. Ahmed was trapped in the back of a refrigerated truck that had made it through the tunnel. “No signal iam in the cantenar,” he continued. Clegg and her daughter sent word to the British police, who pulled the truck over and rescued Ahmed and fourteen other stowaways before they suffocated.

One afternoon last June, Clegg, in jeans and sandals, was making the rounds of the camp. She briskly navigated a maze of muddy alleys before arriving at a group of old camping caravans. These were the Jungle’s version of deluxe accommodations, donated by aid groups, with much fanfare, to house unaccompanied minors. The donors had good intentions, but it was hard to believe that anyone could celebrate stuffing a bunch of parentless preadolescents into repainted trailers. Inside one, a frying pan with the congealed remnants of a chicken meal sat on the stove. Peanut shells and cigarette butts littered a sticky floor. A group of mostly older boys from Logar Province, near Kabul, sat on a mattress covered in a fleece blanket, smoking.

“How are you?” Clegg said to one of them, making room for herself on the mattress. “You look tired.”

The boy could barely raise an answer.

“I’ve got posh cigarettes,” Clegg said, passing around a pack of Marlboros as an alternative to the acrid homemade “Jungle cigarettes” sold in the camp.

The Jungle had its own dialect, and the boys supplemented their native languages with a mixture of phrases that they’d picked up. “Kid” was “bambino.”

“Over” was “finish.” At one point, someone teased Zirat, a ten-year-old with bruises covering his arms, who was wearing a black floral scarf, about his fashion sense. “*Vaffanculo!*” he cursed back. Most of the boys’ conversation revolved around “trying”: setting out from the camp at night in order to try to hop a ride to England. The peer pressure was intense. Someone told the ultimate cautionary tale, about a boy who had chickened out of trying on what turned out to be a lucky night. All his friends had made it to England, and he was left alone in the Jungle.

For the boys, the U.K. was a brand name whose desirability transcended any relationship between value and cost. This was partly a result of marketing by smugglers, who profited from the popularity of a difficult-to-access destination. (In September, French prosecutors convicted two smugglers who—packing their human cargo amid onions, to avoid carbon-dioxide detection—were earning three hundred and ninety thousand dollars a month.) The boys’ allegiance was no less passionate for being unrequited. “U.K.!” they declared to anyone who asked, like fans representing a soccer club. They could have walked out of the Jungle at that very moment, surrendered to the French authorities, and claimed asylum in France. Any one of them in theory could have had a hot shower that night. But, once you had declared that the U.K. was your destination, anything else felt like failure. Who was going to come this far and give up with the finish line in sight?

About an hour earlier, traffic had jammed on the six-lane highway adjacent to the Jungle. This happened a few times a week. Sometimes the trucks stopped because of congestion or breakdowns; other times, smugglers or residents of the Jungle deliberately threw things onto the road, hoping to get into a vehicle during the blockage. That day, hundreds of refugees had sprinted across a field and scrambled up an embankment, some succeeding in clearing a ten-foot-high chain-link fence that lined the road. The police, who regularly patrolled the camp in riot gear, had fired tear gas to hold them back.

It happened to be the day of the Brexit vote, but, perversely, Jungle wisdom had it that it might be a good time to try, since the political situation was unsettled. “U.K. border is good now,” one

of the boys said, ashing his cigarette into an empty kidney-bean can. The boys could be naïve—Mohammed, a Damascus teen-ager I met, wore his clothes for weeks and then switched them out at a charity distribution center, not knowing how to wash them—but they were proud of the street smarts they'd honed. They read the news, or had friends who did. They were resourceful, and plugged into society even as they were excluded from it.

When Clegg left the caravan, Zirat followed, trailing at her heels until she arrived at a small yard behind the school bus. While Clegg dressed a gash on another boy's leg, Zirat amused himself by karate-chopping the door to a storage shed. "*Pow!*" he yelled, and his previous worldliness changed to boyish giddiness at the infliction of violence on an inanimate object. He soon bashed in the door, and brought out a child-size pink Mini Cooper convertible that someone had donated. Raising it above his head, he slammed it into the dirt.

WASIL ARRIVED AT the Jungle with only the clothes he was wearing, a few changes of underwear, and five books. In Serbia, he'd got sick and seen a doctor, who had given him an illustrated Ladybird edition of "*The Princess and the Frog*," along with a Penguin Readers paperback of "*The Cay*," Theodore Taylor's 1969 young-adult novel about a boy who loses his mother in a torpedo attack and washes up on a desert island. In a Slovenian jail, he'd picked up an educational text called "*Islam and Muslims*." Some German journalists had contributed a heavily highlighted "*Animal Farm*" and an ancient copy of "*West Side Story*." The Google Drive on his cell phone, to which he'd uploaded the hostage picture that he hoped would underpin his asylum claim, was his most precious possession, the twenty-first-century version of a diamond sewn into a hem.

One afternoon in October, Wasil swiped at his phone to bring up a BBC story about a recent Taliban offensive in Kunduz. "I'm sure they've set fire to my house," he said. He'd found one of his cousins on Facebook, and, through him, managed to contact his uncle. "We are ready to do anything," his uncle told him. "If you want to live with us, you can, or if you need help financially."

Wasil was sitting in the Kids' Café, a kind of rec room, and one of the Jungle's safer spaces. It was unheated, and the floor was strewn with broken glass, but adults weren't allowed, and there was free food and intermittent Wi-Fi. Wasil had calligraphed a line of Persian script, which hung on the wall. He hadn't had a haircut since Italy, and, although it was cold, he was wearing slip-on shoes, shorts, and a Shetland sweater.

The room was filled with adolescent boys, but roughhousing was minimal. They seemed to have little energy for anything other than obsessing over their next moves. Across Europe, countries were tightening their borders. France's President, François Hollande—citing humanitarian concerns, but also facing pressure from right-wing politicians—had vowed that the government would demolish the Jungle by the end of the year.

The boys agonized over whether to believe Britain's promise that it would accept its share of unaccompanied minors. The consensus in the U.K. that something had to be done to help refugees, particularly children, had fallen apart after the Nice attack and the conflation, in its wake, of terrorists and refugees. In July, a seventeen-year-old Afghan asylum seeker had attacked people with an axe on a train in Germany, and a twenty-one-year-old Syrian refugee had killed a pregnant woman with a machete, further souring public opinion. By early October, Britain had accepted only a hundred and forty children under Dublin III; not a single



child had been admitted under the Dubs plan. The imminent destruction of the Jungle made the situation urgent. "I so hope that maybe, if God is willing, in this coming week the Home Office will give an answer for me," Wasil told me. When I asked him what he would do if the Jungle was shut down, he said, "I have no idea."

Wasil's moods fluctuated. He filled his phone with screenshots of light-hearted distractions ("*Five Signs That Someone Likes You*") and elevating

quotes ("Nothing is impossible, the word itself says 'I'm possible!'"—Audrey Hepburn), but it could be hard to remain optimistic. The search log of his English-Dari dictionary app read like a diary, toggling back and forth between ambition and despair: "rumor," "shielding," "reminisce," "minuscule," "cynical," "sock," "advocacy," "settled," "incredulous," "republish," "vampire," "apprentice," "rat," "moan," "madam," "phew," "matureness," "mature," "grownup," "awesome." He wasn't sure whether leaving home had been worth it. "I wish I hadn't done it, but I'm happy that I'm a little bit safer here than I was in Afghanistan," he said.

Finally, on October 17th, a bus appeared at the Jungle. The British government had agreed to accept a handful of the children eligible under Dublin III in anticipation of the demolition of the camp. Wasil was not among the chosen children, who were put on the bus and driven to a U.K. Home Office bureau in South London, where a pack of photographers awaited them. The children would be vetted on British soil, and, if their claims were deemed credible, they would be united with their family members. No one had communicated this to the children or to their relatives. One sixteen-year-old boy hadn't seen his uncle, a chef in London, for seven years. The two were allowed to hug for thirty seconds before the boy was hustled into a van. "I was so excited and happy to see him and now I am disappointed," the chef said. In the *Observer*, one source explained the suddenness of the maneuver, and the chaotic way it was implemented, by saying, "Politically, the Home Office did not want this to happen, so it didn't do anything. Therefore as the camp comes to closure it's a panic—all the work you should have done over three to six months you do over three to six hours."

Any remaining good will toward the newly arrived minors dissipated quickly. On their first day in England, the *Daily Mail* welcomed "the youngsters, who are understood to come from war-torn countries," and published an accompanying spread of photos. The next day, a headline in the paper read, "MATURE BEYOND THEIR YEARS: MORE FEARS OVER REAL AGE OF 'CHILD MIGRANTS' COMING FROM CALAIS AS FACIAL RECOGNITION ANALYSIS SHOWS ONE MAY BE AS OLD AS THIRTY-EIGHT." The paper, suspicious of "one



## THE PROBLEM WITH SAPPHO

Only one complete poem remains. The rest of it is berries left in the bramble after a visit from midday starlings. For years I couldn't understand how this redaction moved anyone to tears. She was a dampness in the matchbook. But the world is patient. Eventually the diamond travels from the mantle to the finger of the woman you love. Eventually the light from an exploded star arrives to confirm the emperor's power. It's clear now that a very old bruise can tell us how hard someone was punched. The detective solves a murder with the help of a single hair. Archeologists find a molar and build a face to fit.

—Charles Rafferty

migrant in particular, wearing a blue hoodie with stubble on his chin," had enlisted Microsoft's How Old Do I Look? program to suggest that he was lying. Before long, papers were reporting that the sixteen-year-old with the chef uncle "had a beard in his LinkedIn photo," had attended a university, and was actually twenty-two. (The university said that it had no record of his ever having been enrolled there.) "Home office staff are either blind as a bat or have a hidden agenda . . . these are MEN!" a *Daily Mail* Web commenter wrote, garnering more than three thousand likes.

It can be difficult to determine refugees' ages. Their stories are often impossible to verify, and many have lost their papers in transit or never had them to begin with. (Only six per cent of births were recorded in Afghanistan in 2003.) Age-assessment practices differ widely across Europe. Sweden inspects unaccompanied refugees' teeth and knee joints. In some parts of Germany, refugees can be forced to submit to a medical examination. ("The development of the outer genitals corresponds to a mean age of 14.9 years," one report read. "The development of the pubic hair corresponds to a mean age of 15.2.") Such methods are discouraged in the U.K., which relies on "holistic" assessments, considering the appearance, behavior, and background of the person in question. But all these methods have a significant margin of error and fail to account for racial biases, not to mention the toll that living in a shantytown might take on one's skin-care regimen. According to a British researcher, children's ages have been disputed based on details

such as the use of an expensive hair gel.

Undoubtedly, some of the refugees were over eighteen. Just as some children wanted to pass for young adults, to preserve their independence, some young adults wanted to pass for children, to avail themselves of certain benefits. In the Jungle, it was easy to procure a fraudulent document. Even so, the fixation on the refugees' ages was a strange bit of thinking—"As though we've given refugees a sympathy egg-timer, and the grains run out at 18," Rosamund Urwin wrote in the *Evening Standard*. Was a person who had been on the planet for six thousand five hundred and seventy days somehow less deserving of human decency than a person who had been here for six thousand five hundred and sixty-nine?

Like many boys in the Jungle, Wasil had given his details to various aid groups, which were advocating on his behalf. But the system was opaque. It was unclear whether the British government was taking children on a first-come-first-served basis, or giving special weight to certain circumstances. (At the time, the Home Office refused my request to define its criteria.) Getting picked often seemed merely a matter of being in the right place at the right time.

On his phone, Wasil showed me a British newspaper article about a thirteen-year-old Afghan refugee whom the singer Lily Allen had met on a charity visit to the Jungle. Allen, moved to tears, had apologized to him "on behalf of my country." The remark had provoked controversy. "This is my friend," Wasil said. "The one that Lily cried for." The Home Office had plucked the boy out of the Jungle and put him on one

of the first buses to England. "Why don't they bring me . . . ?????" Wasil wrote to me later, on the messaging app Viber.

THE LAST DAYS of the Jungle had a frenzied feeling. One afternoon, Wasil and some other boys watched as a squad of about twenty-five French riot police, wielding batons and shields, marched up to the Kids' Café. They had already shut down many of the camp's businesses in preparation for the demolition. The officers summoned the Kids' Café's supervisor outside and handed him a letter. A crowd had gathered, and someone read aloud, paraphrasing from the French, "You are ordered to leave the premises of this building within forty-eight hours."

The adults in the camp knew that, one way or another, they needed to move on. More than three thousand of them chose to register in France. They were shown a map of the country, given a choice between two regions, and put on buses to their destinations. The fate of the unaccompanied minors remained unresolved. The French and British governments, as the Labour M.P. Stella Creasy told me, were "playing a game of chicken with these children's lives." After days of chaos, it emerged that the children who didn't want to be homeless once the camp was torn down needed to sign up at "the containers"—several hundred fenced-in shipping units that had served as accommodations for families. But the registration was disorganized, and officials relied on facial examinations to sort the applicants, excluding about a third of those who identified themselves as minors. Liz Clegg was working twenty-hour days, trying to complete a head count of all the unaccompanied children to present to the Home Office. Other organizations, both British and French, were making their own lists. Some children, their trust in the authorities frayed, left the camp with smugglers. Wasil elected to stay. "They are pushing and the line is long," he wrote me one day, as he waited for five hours to register at the containers.

The bulldozers rolled in on the morning of October 25th. "It is unacceptable for the demolitions to begin while there are still children in the camp," a spokeswoman for UNICEF U.K. said. The clearance proceeded calmly,

and the Jungle was gone by the end of the day, the containers remaining as a last vestige of the camp. The standoff over the unaccompanied children continued to escalate. President Hollande called the British Prime Minister, Theresa May, to demand that the U.K. accept them all; May refused to accept any of them without conducting preliminary background checks on French soil.

Fifteen hundred kids were packed into the containers, with little food or drinking water, living in conditions that the *Independent* described as “like *Lord of the Flies*.” Wasil was still walking back and forth from the youth home. “In this few days, I become like a mad,” he wrote to me, five days after the Jungle’s demolition. He continued:

i scared so much because of that i cant do any thing well and tention is too much even sometimes my nose is bleeding...please if u can tell to the lord Dubs or any one else if they can do anything about my process...there is no news and the situation is becoming worse and worse

Two nights later, a fight broke out between more than a hundred Eritrean Christian teen-agers and Afghan Muslim teen-agers. Riot police fired tear gas at a group of unaccompanied minors parading through the remains of the camp, carrying sticks and shouting.

Then, at dawn on November 2nd, thirty-eight buses arrived to transport the minors from the containers to a network of eighty-five temporary-accommodation centers across France. The minors had no say in where they were sent. Wasil, because he was at the youth home, nearly missed the evacuation. As his bus pulled out of the Jungle, he had no idea where he was headed.

“I’m from U.K. Immigration,” a uniformed man standing at the front of the bus said, as it hurtled down the highway. “This project has gone very well. You’re on this bus to a temporary location where we will process your applications to go to England.” There were about twenty boys on the bus, and each had been given a bracelet, but Wasil didn’t know any of them. “What will happen is, after today we’ll review your applications quickly,” the man said. “You will hear sometime very, very soon.”

He went on, “I don’t want you to be anxious. You are taking a big step to come to England, and I’m very proud to be a part of it. Do you like football? When you come to England, you must all support Man United.”

Wasil spent most of the fifteen-hour ride staring out the window. Occasionally, he leafed through his books, includ-

ing “Real Life Monsters: Creatures of the Rain Forest,” a picture book that he’d picked up during the destruction of the Jungle. The cover featured a bizarre-looking South American insect called the ball-bearing treehopper.

THE BUS TOOK Wasil to Talence, a suburb of Bordeaux. He and the other boys became the sole tenants of a squat, peach-colored pebble-dash building on a quiet street, with a faded red awning—a recently closed hotel. On a Saturday morning in November, when I visited Wasil, about a dozen boys were in the hotel’s former dining room. An empty bottle of Blue Curaçao, sitting on the bar, testified to the swiftness of the establishment’s conversion. A copper bed warmer hung on the wall. The boys, barefoot, were drinking Coke or tea and listening to Afghan music, drawing on their hands, or playing with their phones. Wasil had finally had a haircut, giving him a boy-band look. He was running a sort of Genius Bar from one end of a heavy wooden table, looking up information on the Geek Squad Web site and calling the customer-service lines of a U.K. cell-phone company to help another boy coordinate his SIM card with the hotel’s A.P.N.

In several towns across France, residents had protested the arrival of the children. “We don’t want them!” hundreds of people yelled at a march led by the far-right Front National in the party’s heartland of the Var. The F.N.’s Marine Le Pen, a leading candidate in the Presidential race, was running on an anti-immigration platform, saying, “If there’s a place in France that symbolizes the collapse of the state, it’s Calais.”

But the boys hadn’t encountered any problems in Talence, other than on the first day, when volunteers had served them mussels. “They were sea animals that were cooked,” Wasil said. “But Afghan boys have said that it would not be lawful for us to eat them.” Wasil, like many of the boys, still wore his bracelet from the bus, as though it were a talisman that might guarantee his entry to the U.K. He was heartened to have heard from his uncle that the Home Office had called. An official came and interviewed people, but weeks passed, and no one was transferred from Talence.

After nearly a month in the juvenile centers, boys across France were becoming





restless. Despite transfers here and there, the situation was largely stagnant. At one center, forty-four children ran away before being persuaded to return. “The haphazard way the Home Office has dealt with these children is nothing less than emotional and psychological abuse,” Liz Clegg told a reporter. “Confusion, mixed messages, and a sickening waiting game.” She was living in Birmingham, where she had opened a drop-in club for unaccompanied minors. Several kids she knew from the Jungle had walked out of the juvenile centers. One boy had sent her a picture of his new home: the floor of a forest somewhere in freezing northern France.

In one juvenile center, in Burgundy, a seventeen-year-old Sudanese boy named Samir died of a heart attack. In another, Denko Sissoko, a young Malian, jumped out of an eighth-story window. The local prosecutor called the death a suicide, but authorities had recently raised doubts about Sissoko’s age, and, according to his friends, he was scared that police were coming to evict him. In an open letter to the center’s administrator, his housemates wrote, “The wait is unbearable, we’re suffering, we don’t sleep, we’re always thinking you’re going to make us leave.” At a march in his honor, one of them carried a sign with a picture of an X-ray of a hand on which were written the words “Too Old for Child Welfare, Too Young to Die.”

**I**N LATE NOVEMBER, Wasil’s phone started going straight to voice mail. The daily Viber messages abruptly stopped. At first, I assumed that he had run out of phone credit or lost his charger, which had happened before. But the silence continued.

Journalists aren’t supposed to intervene in events they’re covering; people aren’t supposed to ignore children in need. In late October, when the transfers from the Jungle started, I wrote to Lord Dubs, whom I had met earlier, about Wasil. Even though Wasil’s story was in many ways typical for an unaccompanied minor, I felt it would be wrong, knowing that he was in physical danger, not to try to help him get on a bus. Lord Dubs confirmed that Wasil was on a list of eligible children being maintained by Safe Passage, an organization that provides aid to unaccompanied children, and that he’d see what

he could do, adding, “But I fear the chaos in Calais will make it difficult.” I also appealed to the Home Office, whose representative told me that he couldn’t comment on individual cases. After Wasil fell out of touch, I wrote again.

On a wet morning in mid-January, I went to see Abdul Hamidi, Wasil’s uncle, in Southampton. Hamidi’s apartment occupies the upper floor of a red brick building on a mixed-use street of real-estate agents and fish-and-chips shops. In the living room, two brown leather couches were arranged in front of a television. Saboor, Hamidi’s eldest son, brought me a chocolate croissant and a mug of sugary tea, and then, rubbing sleep from his eyes, excused himself. Eventually, his father appeared: a gentle man with fine features, wearing a green windbreaker and gray striped trousers. His daughter Rayhana, who is studying to be a nurse, interpreted for us. Hamidi had come to the U.K. from Afghanistan in 2000, and his wife and six children had followed in stages, the last of them arriving in 2007. “We’re all British citizens now,” Hamidi said. In Kabul, he had been a history and geography teacher. In Southampton, he delivers pizzas on a motorbike. “Rubbish job,” he said, apologetically.

Hamidi was perplexed as to Wasil’s whereabouts. He said he had received a call in November from an administrator at the juvenile center in France, informing him that Wasil was about to be transferred to the U.K. The Home Office had called again. Apparently, there were questions about Wasil’s familial ties to the Hamidis. Rayhana said, “They asked for proof that relation is genuine, but what proof do you give them? We’ve been living in the U.K. for a long time now.” The last time they had seen Wasil, they said, was at Saboor’s wedding, in Kabul, in 2015. Like Wasil, they didn’t know if his father was alive, or how to reach his mother.

The family had heard from Wasil only once in the month and a half since his transfer to the U.K. Hamidi had received a call from an unknown number, and heard Wasil’s voice. “He said, ‘We’re in a room, and there’s a camera, and we’re not allowed to make phone calls,’” Hamidi said. “He told me, ‘I have no idea where

I am, and I can’t go outside. I’m so upset.’” The family had a room picked out for Wasil, but they were discouraged by his unexplained, indefinite detention. “This is the first time I’ve seen this,” Hamidi said. “Why would they do that to a child?”

When I contacted the authorities in France, they said that Wasil had been sent to the U.K. on November 24th. The Home Office declined to comment on his application, but said, “We are committed to reuniting children with their families under the Dublin process, but it is essential that we carry out the proper safeguarding and security checks, working closely with local authorities and social workers.” According to Safe Passage, his permanent placement is still being vetted by the Home Office. Even as one of the children from the Jungle taken in by the U.K., Wasil faces an uncertain future. Many of the minors will likely be refused asylum but permitted to stay in the country until they turn seventeen and a half, when they must appeal the denial or face deportation. Without parental support, they often struggle to secure good legal representation and to supply the clear, linear stories that authorities demand in immigration hearings.

Unaccompanied minors continue to arrive in Europe in droves, but the U.K. is moving to keep them out. On February 8th, the Home Office announced that it was shutting down the Dubs plan, saying that it “encourages” children to become refugees in Europe. “Will we choose to follow Trump,” Lord Dubs wrote in response, “or to honor our tradition of generosity, compassion and courage?” In northern France, camps are forming again. Rohullah, Wasil’s best friend, is living in one.

In November, when I went to see Wasil in Talence, we took the tram to Bordeaux and visited the city’s cathedral, where, in 1137, Louis VII married the thirteen-year-old Eleanor of Aquitaine. It was the first time Wasil had seen anything like the cathedral. “It’s so beautiful!” he said, and then grabbed my phone and stretched out his arm for a selfie. I wonder now if he was trying to preserve the feeling of being in a place of safety. In the picture, his hair is cowlicky, and there’s peach fuzz on his upper lip. Arches soar behind him. ♦



*Ladies' Lunch*

LORE SEGAL



TOMINE



IT MATTERED THAT Lotte's apartment was commodious. Lotte liked to boast that when she lay in bed and looked past the two closest water towers, past the architectural follies and oddities few people notice on Manhattan's rooftops, she saw all the way to the Empire State Building. On the velvet sofa in Lotte's living room, from which she could observe the Hudson River traffic as far as the George Washington Bridge, the caregiver sat watching television.

"Get rid of her," Lotte said.

Samson dropped his voice, as if this might make his mother lower hers. "As soon as we find you a replacement."

"And I'll get rid of *her*," Lotte said.

Sam said, "We'll go on interviewing till we find you the right one."

"Who will let me eat my bread and butter?"

"Mom," Sam said, "bread turns into sugar, as you know very well."

"And don't care," Lotte said.

"If she lets you eat bread for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, she'll get fired."

"Good," said Lotte.

"SARAH," SAM SAID to the caregiver, "I'll take my mother to her ladies' lunch if you'll pick her up at three-thirty?"

"That O.K. with you?" Sarah asked Lotte.

"No," said Lotte.

"LADIES' LUNCH" is pronounced in quotation marks. The five women have grown old coming together, every other month or so for the last thirty or more years, around one another's table. Ruth, Bridget, Farah, Lotte, and Bessie are longtime New Yorkers; their origins in California, County Mayo, Tehran, Vienna, and the Bronx might have grounded them but do not in these days often surface.

Ruth was a retired lawyer. She said, "I've forgotten, of course, who it was said that there are four or five people in the world to whom we tell things, and that's us. Something happens and I think, I'll tell the next ladies' lunch."

"True! It's true," Lotte said. "When I suddenly sat on my rear on the side-

walk outside my front door, I was looking forward to telling you."

Lotte had turned out to need a hip replacement. Dr. Goodman, the surgeon, was a furry man like a character in an Ed Koren cartoon, only jollier. He had promised Lotte, "From here on it's all good."

"I'm eighty-two years old," Lotte had said.

Goodman told her, "I'm on my way to the ninety-second birthday of a patient whose knees I replaced eleven years ago."

Bessie said, "And I told you, from my poor Colin's experience, that the recovery is not so much like Goodman's cheery projection." These days, it depended on the state of Colin's health and Colin's mood whether Bessie was able to take the train in from Old Rockingham.

TODAY'S LUNCH WAS at Bridget's, so she got to set the agenda: "'How to Prevent the Inevitable.' I mean any of the scenarios we would rather die than live in." Bridget was a writer who still spent mornings at her computer.

Farah, a recently retired doctor, said, "The old problem of shuffling off this mortal coil."

"Of shuffling off," Lotte said.

"And it was you who said you wanted to see it all, to see what would happen to the end," Farah reminded Lotte.

"I wasn't counting on the twenty-four-hour caregiver or the heart-healthy diet," said Lotte. "You doctors need to do a study of the correlation between salt-free food and depression."

"Your Sarah seems pleasant enough," Ruth said. "What's wrong with her?"

"That she's in my living room," Lotte said, "watching television; that she's in my kitchen eating her lunch, which she does standing up; that she's in my spare room asleep, and in my bathroom whenever I want to go in."

Ruth asked Lotte what Sarah did for her. "Do you need a caregiver to help you dress?"

"No," Lotte said.

"You need a caregiver to help you shower?"

"No," Lotte said.

"Get your meals?"

"God, *no!*"

"So what do you need help with?"

"The caregiver," Lotte said.

"Go away," she said to Sarah, who had come to take her home. The four friends' mouths dropped to see their friend raise her arm at the caregiver and slap the air.

THEY WERE of an age when they worried if one of them did not answer her telephone.

Bessie, Lotte's oldest friend, had known Sam since he was a baby. She called him from Connecticut. "Why doesn't the caregiver pick up Lotte's phone?"

"She's gone. There was just too much abuse."

"You're kidding me! What? That nice Sarah? You're talking elder abuse?"

"More like caregiver abuse," Sam said.

"Like what?"

"Like Mom would change the channel Sarah was watching on the TV. She'd come into the kitchen and pack away the food Sarah was preparing for her lunch, and turn on the light when Sarah was asleep. It was getting bizarre. I'm here waiting with her for the new woman."

BESSIE E-MAILED the friends in New York to look in on Lotte.

Bridget went to see Lotte. Bridget, Lotte, and Shareen, the new caregiver, sat looking out on Riverside Drive. Lotte said, "Shareen drives in from New Jersey. Shareen has a five-year-old who brushes his own teeth. Shareen told him that if he doesn't brush, a roach will grow in his mouth."

Bessie phoned Lotte. "How is the new caregiver?"

"Intrusive," said Lotte.

When Farah called Lotte, it was Sam who picked up the phone. "Shareen is gone. Mom locked her—I can't make out if it was into or out of the bathroom, but it wasn't that. Shareen did not want to have to manhandle Mom to stop her eating sugar by the spoonfuls."

"Lotte is angry," Farah said. "After making your own decisions your life long, it must be hell having someone tell you what you can eat and

when to shower and what to wear."

"Because her own decisions are not tenable," Sam said. "Greg is coming in from Chicago." Gregor was Lotte's younger son. "We're going to check out this nice assisted-living home. It sounds really nice. Upscale."

"Sam? You're moving Lotte out of her apartment?"

"To a nice home in the country."

"A home in the country. You discussed this move with Lotte?"

"Yes."

"And she has agreed?"

"Well, yes, she has. In a way," Sam said. "She said next year, maybe. Listen. Mom cannot deal with the round-the-clock caregivers. And believe me that she does not, does *not*, want to move in with Diana and me."

BRIDGET PHONED SAM. "So, what's this place you want to move Lotte into?"

"Called Three Trees. It's in the Hudson Valley," Sam told her. "My brother will help me move Mom in, and move the stuff she's fond of—the famous velvet sofa."

"And she will have an apartment of her own?"

"A bedsitter, neat and convenient, with her own bathroom and a breakfast nook."

"Her own nook," Bridget said. "What's outside the window?"

"The Hudson River view, unfortunately, is on the other side of the building. Trees. There's a little parking lot and lots of green. Listen. We know Mom would prefer Manhattan—which would have been a hell of a lot more convenient for Diana and me to visit her—but who can afford something nice in the city?"

Bridget said, "It's that none of us drives these days. How are we going to visit?"

"One of the advantages is that there will always be people around."

"Does Lotte think this is an advantage?"

Sam said, "I have never been in a situation where there hasn't been somebody to talk with."

"I have," said Bridget.

"And I would know she's getting three proper meals."

God. Poor Lotte, thought Bridget.

And poor Sam. "You're not a happy camper," she said to him, wondering what the phrase came from.

RUTH, AN OLD ACTIVIST, had an idea. She said, "I'll talk to Sam."

"Have you closed on the Hudson Valley place?" she asked him.

"Greg and I are going up on Thursday."

Ruth said, "Will you give us a couple of days to figure something out?"

"Believe me, there is nothing to ... Yes, sure. O.K. But I need to get Mom and her stuff moved before Greg leaves for Chicago."

Ruth said, "Could Lotte live alone if—"

"Absolutely not."

"Sam, wait. Could Lotte live alone if the four of us—the three of us if Bessie can't come in—take turns checking on Lotte, to see what she needs and if anything is wrong?"

"Mom would put sugar on her bread and butter."

"Sounds delicious," Ruth said.

"She would never change her clothes."

"Probably not."

"She would have one shower a week. She would not shower."

"Sam! So what!"

"Not on my watch," Sam said. "Things need to be done right."

"No, they don't. Why do they need to be right?"

"When Mom messed up her medicines, Greg and I had to rush her to Emergency. She might have died."

"Yes. She might. Your mother might have died in her own bed, in sight of the Empire State Building and the George Washington Bridge. No, but Sam, we will go up and check on her. Let's try it—a couple of days."

"What if she falls down again?"

"She falls down. Sam, I'll sleep over there tonight."

Ruth slept over at Lotte's, and Lotte fell going from her bed to the bathroom. Ruth called Sam, and Sam and Gregor came and took Lotte to Emergency.

SAMSON AND GREGOR moved their mother, the sofa, and whatever else out of Lotte's ample apartment could



*"Now when I go abroad I tell everyone I'm a Canadian goose."*



be made to fit, into the bedsitter in the Hudson Valley. Greg flew back to Chicago.

WHEN THE LADIES' LUNCH met in Farah's apartment, the agenda was Lotte's rescue. Farah had a plan.

They brought each other up to date.

Lotte had phoned Ruth from Three Trees. Ruth said, "I didn't recognize her voice. I mean, I knew that it was Lotte, but her voice sounded different, strangled, a new, strange voice."

"Lotte is furious," Bessie said.

"Yes, I know that voice," Bridget said. "Lotte called me. She remembered my sitting with her and Shareen. She wanted me to get Shareen's phone number. Shareen drives a car. Lotte wants Shareen to come and pick her up at Three Trees and drive her home to the apartment. Which is not going to happen."

"Lotte called me," reported Farah. "She wants us—her and me—to rent a car together. I told her I haven't renewed my license. I doubt if I could pass the eye test. Not a problem, Lotte said. She would drive."

"Does she even have a license?"

"Lotte hasn't driven in ten years."

Bessie said, "Sam called me and he was fit to be tied. Wanted to know if I had something to do with Lotte buying a car. Buying a car! Me? I have never actually bought a car in my life. Lotte believes that she has bought a car and keeps calling this dealer to send her the keys."

Bessie had called Lotte and asked her, "What's this about a car?" Lotte said, "It's down there in the parking lot." "What kind of a car is this?" Bessie had asked her, and Lotte said, "I'm waiting till they send me the virtual key."

FARAH'S PLAN: Farah had an eighteen-year-old grandson, Hami. He would have his license as soon as he passed his test. "He'll drive us to Three Trees, and we will bring Lotte back."

"Better be soon," Bessie said. "Sam is putting Lotte's apartment on the market."

"The test is this Monday."

But Hami failed his test.

BRIDGET PHONED LOTTE at Three Trees. "How's it going?"

"Not good."

"How is the food?"

"Salt free."

"Judging from your voice, you're getting a little bit used to being there?"

"Can you come and get me and take me back to my apartment?"

"Lotte, we just really wouldn't know how. For the moment, might it be a good idea to accommodate yourself?"

"Yes. But I need to go home," Lotte said.

"Have you found anyone to talk to?"

"Yes. Alana. She sits next to me in the dining room. Alana has three children and five grandchildren, the oldest nineteen, the twins age thirteen, and a nine- and a five-year-old. Would you like me to tell you what their names are?"

"Not really."

"Would you like me to tell you where each of them goes to school?"

"Lotte..."

"Minnie Mansfield has a grandson. His name is Joel, and Joel has a friend whose name is Sam, like my Sam. Shall I tell you which colleges Sam and which colleges Joel are considering going to?"

"Lotte..."

"Minnie's sister's granddaughter," said Lotte, "is thinking of taking a gap year before she goes to Williams."

"Lotte..."

Lotte said, "I have not told Alana or Minnie that I've died. I thought awhile before telling Sam, but he was fine. He was really very good about it, my poor Sam."

"You mean that you feel as if..." Bridget hesitated between saying "as if you have died" and "as if you are dead."

Lotte said, "No. I *am* dead. If I saw Dr. Goodman—or any doctor—he would look down my throat and see the four yellow spots dead people have. When you write the story, the question is whether, now that I am dead, I can die again, a second time, or is this what it is from here on."

"Lotte, you want me to write your story?"

"You've already written how I got rid of Sarah and Shareen, and the roach in Shareen's five-year-old's mouth, and about Sam and Greg putting me here in the boonies."

"Lotte," Bridget said, "we're mobilizing ourselves. We're trying to fig-

ure out how to come and visit you."

"Good! Oh, oh, good, good!" Lotte said. She wanted them to give her enough lead time so she could arrange a ladies' lunch in the Three Trees dining room. "Then I'll tell you how I lay down on my sofa—this was last Friday—just to take a nap, and when I woke up I knew that I was going to die, and I died."

SAM HAS TAKEN time off twice this month to go and visit his mother. He feels that she is settling in. "When she says that she has died she means died to the old New York life in order to pass into the new life at Three Trees."

"That's what you think she means?" Bessie asks him.

"What else could she mean?"

Bessie is silent a moment. She says, "Lotte has stopped calling me."

"I know," Sam says. "She doesn't call me, and she doesn't return Diana's calls."

"She doesn't pick up her phone."

"I know," Sam says.

BESSIE IS PRETTY MUCH stuck in Old Rockingham. Colin seems to be on the decline. Poor Bridget didn't make it to the last ladies' lunch, because she had one of her frequent debilitating headaches, but she wants to come along if Ruth and Farah figure out how to go and visit Lotte.

The idea to hitch a ride with Sam when he drives up to Three Trees gets screwed up because Lotte does not return Farah's call. "And then I guess I forgot to call her," Ruth says. "In any case, there wouldn't have really been time to change my doctor's appointment."

HAMI HAS GOT his license and has driven his new secondhand car to his first semester at Purchase.

FARAH AND BRIDGET still mean to figure out some way to go up and see Lotte, maybe in the spring, when the weather is nicer. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM/PODCAST

Lore Segal reads her story in this week's episode of "The Writer's Voice."

# THE CRITICS



BOOKS

## THAT'S WHAT YOU THINK

*Why reason and evidence won't change our minds.*

BY ELIZABETH KOLBERT

IN 1975, RESEARCHERS at Stanford invited a group of undergraduates to take part in a study about suicide. They were presented with pairs of suicide notes. In each pair, one note had been composed by a random individual, the other by a person who had subsequently taken his own life. The students were then asked to distinguish between the genuine notes and the fake ones.

Some students discovered that they had a genius for the task. Out of twenty-five pairs of notes, they correctly identified the real one twenty-four times. Others discovered that they were hopeless. They identified the real note in only ten instances.

As is often the case with psychological studies, the whole setup was a put-on. Though half the notes were indeed genuine—they'd been obtained from the Los Angeles County coroner's office—the scores were fictitious. The students who'd been told they were almost always right were, on average, no more discerning than those who had been told they were mostly wrong.

In the second phase of the study, the deception was revealed. The students were told that the real point of the experiment was to gauge their responses to *thinking* they were right or wrong. (This, it turned out, was also a deception.) Finally, the students were asked to estimate how many suicide notes they had actually categorized correctly, and how many they thought an average student would get right. At this point, something curious happened. The students in the high-score group said that they thought they had, in fact, done quite well—significantly better than the average student—even though,

as they'd just been told, they had zero grounds for believing this. Conversely, those who'd been assigned to the low-score group said that they thought they had done significantly worse than the average student—a conclusion that was equally unfounded.

"Once formed," the researchers observed dryly, "impressions are remarkably perseverant."

A few years later, a new set of Stanford students was recruited for a related study. The students were handed packets of information about a pair of firefighters, Frank K. and George H. Frank's bio noted that, among other things, he had a baby daughter and he liked to scuba dive. George had a small son and played golf. The packets also included the men's responses on what the researchers called the Risky-Conservative Choice Test. According to one version of the packet, Frank was a successful firefighter who, on the test, almost always went with the safest option. In the other version, Frank also chose the safest option, but he was a lousy firefighter who'd been put "on report" by his supervisors several times. Once again, midway through the study, the students were informed that they'd been misled, and that the information they'd received was entirely fictitious. The students were then asked to describe their own beliefs. What sort of attitude toward risk did they think a successful firefighter would have? The students who'd received the first packet thought that he would avoid it. The students in the second group thought he'd embrace it.

Even after the evidence "for their beliefs has been totally refuted, people

fail to make appropriate revisions in those beliefs," the researchers noted. In this case, the failure was "particularly impressive," since two data points would never have been enough information to generalize from.

The Stanford studies became famous. Coming from a group of academics in the nineteen-seventies, the contention that people can't think straight was shocking. It isn't any longer. Thousands of subsequent experiments have confirmed (and elaborated on) this finding. As everyone who's followed the research—or even occasionally picked up a copy of *Psychology Today*—knows, any graduate student with a clipboard can demonstrate that reasonable-seeming people are often totally irrational. Rarely has this insight seemed more relevant than it does right now. Still, an essential puzzle remains: How did we come to be this way?

IN A NEW book, "The Enigma of Reason" (Harvard), the cognitive scientists Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber take a stab at answering this question. Mercier, who works at a French research institute in Lyon, and Sperber, now based at the Central European University, in Budapest, point out that reason is an evolved trait, like bipedalism or three-color vision. It emerged on the savannas of Africa, and has to be understood in that context.

Stripped of a lot of what might be called cognitive-science-ese, Mercier and Sperber's argument runs, more or less, as follows: Humans' biggest advantage over other species is our ability to cooperate. Cooperation is difficult to

ABOVE: BRIAN REA





*The vaunted human capacity for reason may have more to do with winning arguments than with thinking straight.*



establish and almost as difficult to sustain. For any individual, freeloading is always the best course of action. Reason developed not to enable us to solve abstract, logical problems or even to help us draw conclusions from unfamiliar data; rather, it developed to resolve the problems posed by living in collaborative groups.

“Reason is an adaptation to the hypersocial niche humans have evolved for themselves,” Mercier and Sperber write. Habits of mind that seem weird or goofy or just plain dumb from an “intellectualist” point of view prove shrewd when seen from a social “interactionist” perspective.

Consider what’s become known as “confirmation bias,” the tendency people have to embrace information that supports their beliefs and reject information that contradicts them. Of the many forms of faulty thinking that have been identified, confirmation bias is among the best catalogued; it’s the subject of entire textbooks’ worth of experiments. One of the most famous of these was conducted, again, at Stanford. For this experiment, researchers rounded up a group of students who had opposing opinions about capital punishment. Half the students were in favor of it and thought that it deterred

crime; the other half were against it and thought that it had no effect on crime.

The students were asked to respond to two studies. One provided data in support of the deterrence argument, and the other provided data that called it into question. Both studies—you guessed it—were made up, and had been designed to present what were, objectively speaking, equally compelling statistics. The students who had originally supported capital punishment rated the pro-deterrence data highly credible and the anti-deterrence data unconvincing; the students who’d originally opposed capital punishment did the reverse. At the end of the experiment, the students were asked once again about their views. Those who’d started out pro-capital punishment were now even more in favor of it; those who’d opposed it were even more hostile.

If reason is designed to generate sound judgments, then it’s hard to conceive of a more serious design flaw than confirmation bias. Imagine, Mercier and Sperber suggest, a mouse that thinks the way we do. Such a mouse, “bent on confirming its belief that there are no cats around,” would soon be dinner. To the extent that confirmation bias leads people to dismiss evidence

of new or underappreciated threats—the human equivalent of the cat around the corner—it’s a trait that should have been selected against. The fact that both we and it survive, Mercier and Sperber argue, proves that it must have some adaptive function, and that function, they maintain, is related to our “hypersociability.”

Mercier and Sperber prefer the term “myside bias.” Humans, they point out, aren’t randomly credulous. Presented with someone else’s argument, we’re quite adept at spotting the weaknesses. Almost invariably, the positions we’re blind about are our own.

A recent experiment performed by Mercier and some European colleagues neatly demonstrates this asymmetry. Participants were asked to answer a series of simple reasoning problems. They were then asked to explain their responses, and were given a chance to modify them if they identified mistakes. The majority were satisfied with their original choices; fewer than fifteen per cent changed their minds in step two.

In step three, participants were shown one of the same problems, along with their answer and the answer of another participant, who’d come to a different conclusion. Once again, they were given the chance to change their responses. But a trick had been played: the answers presented to them as someone else’s were actually their own, and vice versa. About half the participants realized what was going on. Among the other half, suddenly people became a lot more critical. Nearly sixty per cent now rejected the responses that they’d earlier been satisfied with.

This lopsidedness, according to Mercier and Sperber, reflects the task that reason evolved to perform, which is to prevent us from getting screwed by the other members of our group. Living in small bands of hunter-gatherers, our ancestors were primarily concerned with their social standing, and with making sure that they weren’t the ones risking their lives on the hunt while others loafed around in the cave. There was little advantage in reasoning clearly, while much was to be gained from winning arguments.

Among the many, many issues our forebears didn’t worry about were the deterrent effects of capital punishment



*“Thanks again for coming—I usually find these office parties rather awkward.”*



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and the ideal attributes of a firefighter. Nor did they have to contend with fabricated studies, or fake news, or Twitter. It's no wonder, then, that today reason often seems to fail us. As Mercier and Sperber write, "This is one of many cases in which the environment changed too quickly for natural selection to catch up."

STEVEN SLOMAN, a professor at Brown, and Philip Fernbach, a professor at the University of Colorado, are also cognitive scientists. They, too, believe sociability is the key to how the human mind functions or, perhaps more pertinently, malfunctions. They begin their book, "The Knowledge Illusion: Why We Never Think Alone" (Riverhead), with a look at toilets.

Virtually everyone in the United States, and indeed throughout the developed world, is familiar with toilets. A typical flush toilet has a ceramic bowl filled with water. When the handle is depressed, or the button pushed, the water—and everything that's been deposited in it—gets sucked into a pipe and from there into the sewage system. But how does this actually happen?

In a study conducted at Yale, graduate students were asked to rate their understanding of everyday devices, including toilets, zippers, and cylinder locks. They were then asked to write detailed, step-by-step explanations of how the devices work, and to rate their understanding again. Apparently, the effort revealed to the students their own ignorance, because their self-assessments dropped. (Toilets, it turns out, are more complicated than they appear.)

Sloman and Fernbach see this effect, which they call the "illusion of explanatory depth," just about everywhere. People believe that they know way more than they actually do. What allows us to persist in this belief is other people. In the case of my toilet, someone else designed it so that I can operate it easily. This is something humans are very good at. We've been relying on one another's expertise ever since we figured out how to hunt together, which was probably a key development in our evolutionary history. So well do we collaborate, Sloman and Fernbach argue, that we can hardly tell where our own

understanding ends and others' begins.

"One implication of the naturalness with which we divide cognitive labor," they write, is that there's "no sharp boundary between one person's ideas and knowledge" and "those of other members" of the group.

This borderlessness, or, if you prefer, confusion, is also crucial to what we consider progress. As people invented new tools for new ways of living, they simultaneously created new realms of ignorance; if everyone had insisted on, say, mastering the principles of metalworking before picking up a knife, the Bronze Age wouldn't have amounted to much. When it comes to new technologies, incomplete understanding is empowering.

Where it gets us into trouble, according to Sloman and Fernbach, is in the political domain. It's one thing for me to flush a toilet without knowing how it operates, and another for me to favor (or oppose) an immigration ban without knowing what I'm talking about. Sloman and Fernbach cite a survey conducted in 2014, not long after Russia annexed the Ukrainian territory of Crimea. Respondents were asked how they thought the U.S. should react, and also whether they could identify Ukraine on a map. The farther off base they were about the geography, the more likely they were to favor military intervention. (Respondents were so unsure of Ukraine's location that the median guess was wrong by eighteen hundred miles, roughly the distance from Kiev to Madrid.)

Surveys on many other issues have yielded similarly dismaying results. "As a rule, strong feelings about issues do not emerge from deep understanding," Sloman and Fernbach write. And here our dependence on other minds reinforces the problem. If your position on, say, the Affordable Care Act is baseless and I rely on it, then my opinion is also baseless. When I talk to Tom and he decides he agrees with me, his opinion is also baseless, but now that the three of us concur we feel that much more smug about our views. If we all now dismiss as unconvincing any information that contradicts our opinion, you get, well, the Trump Administration.

"This is how a community of knowl-

edge can become dangerous," Sloman and Fernbach observe. The two have performed their own version of the toilet experiment, substituting public policy for household gadgets. In a study conducted in 2012, they asked people for their stance on questions like: Should there be a single-payer health-care system? Or merit-based pay for teachers? Participants were asked to rate their positions depending on how strongly they agreed or disagreed with the proposals. Next, they were instructed to explain, in as much detail as they could, the impacts of implementing each one. Most people at this point ran into trouble. Asked once again to rate their views, they ratcheted down the intensity, so that they either agreed or disagreed less vehemently.

Sloman and Fernbach see in this result a little candle for a dark world. If we—or our friends or the pundits on CNN—spent less time pontificating and more trying to work through the implications of policy proposals, we'd realize how clueless we are and moderate our views. This, they write, "may be the only form of thinking that will shatter the illusion of explanatory depth and change people's attitudes."

ONE WAY TO look at science is as a system that corrects for people's natural inclinations. In a well-run laboratory, there's no room for myside bias; the results have to be reproducible in other laboratories, by researchers who have no motive to confirm them. And this, it could be argued, is why the system has proved so successful. At any given moment, a field may be dominated by squabbles, but, in the end, the methodology prevails. Science moves forward, even as we remain stuck in place.

In "Denying to the Grave: Why We Ignore the Facts That Will Save Us" (Oxford), Jack Gorman, a psychiatrist, and his daughter, Sara Gorman, a public-health specialist, probe the gap between what science tells us and what we tell ourselves. Their concern is with those persistent beliefs which are not just demonstrably false but also potentially deadly, like the conviction that vaccines are hazardous. Of course, what's hazardous is *not* being vaccinated; that's why vaccines were created



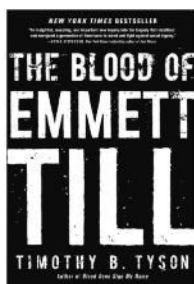
in the first place. “Immunization is one of the triumphs of modern medicine,” the Gormans note. But no matter how many scientific studies conclude that vaccines are safe, and that there’s no link between immunizations and autism, anti-vaxxers remain unmoved. (They can now count on their side—sort of—Donald Trump, who has said that, although he and his wife had their son, Barron, vaccinated, they refused to do so on the timetable recommended by pediatricians.)

The Gormans, too, argue that ways of thinking that now seem self-destructive must at some point have been adaptive. And they, too, dedicate many pages to confirmation bias, which, they claim, has a physiological component. They cite research suggesting that people experience genuine pleasure—a rush of dopamine—when processing information that supports their beliefs. “It feels good to ‘stick to our guns’ even if we are wrong,” they observe.

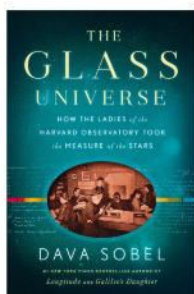
The Gormans don’t just want to catalogue the ways we go wrong; they want to correct for them. There must be some way, they maintain, to convince people that vaccines are good for kids, and handguns are dangerous. (Another widespread but statistically insupportable belief they’d like to discredit is that owning a gun makes you safer.) But here they encounter the very problems they have enumerated. Providing people with accurate information doesn’t seem to help; they simply discount it. Appealing to their emotions may work better, but doing so is obviously antithetical to the goal of promoting sound science. “The challenge that remains,” they write toward the end of their book, “is to figure out how to address the tendencies that lead to false scientific belief.”

“The Enigma of Reason,” “The Knowledge Illusion,” and “Denying to the Grave” were all written before the November election. And yet they anticipate Kellyanne Conway and the rise of “alternative facts.” These days, it can feel as if the entire country has been given over to a vast psychological experiment being run either by no one or by Steve Bannon. Rational agents would be able to think their way to a solution. But, on this matter, the literature is not reassuring. ♦

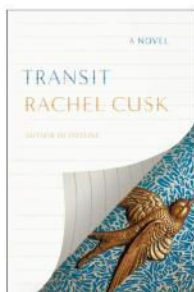
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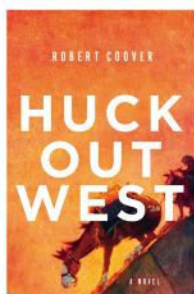
**The Blood of Emmett Till**, by Timothy B. Tyson (Simon & Schuster). This history of the lynching, in Mississippi in 1955, of Till, a black fourteen-year-old, contains a shocking revelation: the white woman who claimed that he flirted with her and grabbed her, after which her family members killed him, now says that there was no physical assault. For Tyson, this confession reveals the workings of a racial caste system that insured the murderers would be acquitted, and which, even decades later, makes it possible for young black men to be killed with impunity. Journalists and civil-rights advocates identified several eyewitnesses to the murder, both black and white, but intimidation silenced many. An exception was the dramatic testimony of Till’s uncle Reverend Moses Wright, from whose house Till was kidnapped.



**The Glass Universe**, by Dava Sobel (Viking). Starting in the late nineteenth century, a series of female researchers at Harvard laid many of the foundations of modern astrophysics. This group portrait of stargazers, mathematicians, theorists, and the benefactresses who supported them shows that, in so doing, they revolutionized the place of women in science. One researcher, after a meeting on stellar classification at which she was the only woman, wrote, “Since I have done almost all the world’s work in this one branch, it was necessary for me to do most of the talking.” Sobel mixes discussions of the most abstruse topics with telling glimpses of her subjects’ lives, in the process showing how scientific and social progress often go hand in hand.



**Transit**, by Rachel Cusk (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). In this sequel to Cusk’s remarkable novel “Outline,” Faye, a writer and teacher, is glimpsed through conversations—with ex-boyfriends, real-estate agents, construction workers, family members, hairstylists. Revealing more by the way she elicits other people’s stories than by what she says about her own life, she can seem like a passive conduit for the perceptions of others. But, as she renovates a decrepit London apartment and deals with two malevolent neighbors, she begins to exert a will of her own—“like an artist filling in the sketched-out form.” The book is a reflection on fear and change, and, though Cusk’s skill is always evident, the narrative feels inevitable and natural, profound and familiar.



**Huck Out West**, by Robert Coover (Norton). More than a hundred and thirty years after Mark Twain’s classic appeared, Coover, a titan of postmodernism, imagines the violent adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer during and after the Civil War. Tom’s taste for trouble has developed into something nastier; he rushes eagerly to see a mass Indian hanging. Huck is less bloodthirsty. “All this killing, it’s too many for me” is his response to Tom’s endorsement of rapacious westward expansion. Despite a purposefully tortured time line, which presents challenges for the reader, Coover’s update is a surprisingly faithful attempt to capture the troubled psychology (and “mizzerbul” spelling) of the original characters, during a dark era of American history.

## NEW LIVES

*Shows of work by Alexei Jawlensky and Vija Celmins.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL



Jawlensky's "Woman's Head" (1913): a modernist zeal that was easy to savor.

WHEN I WAS young, and new to modern art, I doted on the Expressionist heads and faces by the Russian-born artist Alexei Jawlensky, which he painted in thick layers of clamorous color, and wondered why a bigger deal wasn't made of them. A flavorsome retrospective of the artist, at the Neue Galerie, renews that appeal. Jawlensky was associated with a group of painters that included, most notably, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee, and Franz Marc, who met in Munich around the turn of the twentieth century. Jawlensky was more a follower than an innovator, having had a relatively late start as an artist. He was an

eighteen-year-old military cadet in Moscow, committed to a career in the tsar's army and completely ignorant of art, when he was thunderstruck by the paintings in an All-Russian Exhibition of Industry and Art. He later referred to the moment as "a case of Saul becoming Paul," and said that, since then, "art has been my ideal, my holy of holies." An air of catch-up marks his derivations, from such styles as Henri Matisse's Fauvism and Kandinsky's proto-abstraction. I think now that what excited me about Jawlensky's heads and faces was the glamour of a second-hand modernist zeal that was easy to identify with and to savor.

With similar-looking works by Matisse or Kandinsky, I was daunted by a sense that something more, and beyond me, was going on.

Women nurtured Jawlensky's lucky development. The son of a military officer, he was born in 1864 in Torzhok, northwest of Moscow. After his epiphany, he finished his military duties while studying art in St. Petersburg. There he met a rich painter four years older than he was, Marianne von Werefkin, who gave up her own artistic ambition to support his. The couple moved to Munich in 1896. In 1902, Jawlensky fathered a boy with Werefkin's maid, Helene Nesnakomoff. He married Nesnakomoff twenty years later, after finally breaking off with Werefkin. Meanwhile, in 1916, he had met another wealthy painter, Emmy Esther Scheyer, who soon devoted herself to promoting his work in the United States, especially on the West Coast. In Seattle, in 1939, she helped the young composer John Cage, an enthusiast for Jawlensky's work, organize a show, and she let him buy a small painting for twenty-five dollars, with a one-dollar down payment. In a catalogue essay, the Neue Galerie show's curator, Vivian Endicott Barnett, details the great success that Jawlensky's art enjoyed, at more substantial prices, with American collectors—perhaps for reasons akin to my own initial infatuation. Here was something at once rousing far-out and reassuringly accessible, throbbing with what could be fancied Russian soul.

The spirituality was credible enough, though I eventually came to regard Jawlensky's passion as being more about art than as being fully engaged in it: poignant rather than powerful. But the show ends with the kicker of a room of small, even tiny, paintings, unfamiliar to me, of an abstracted face. A black stripe serves for the nose, horizontal bands for the eyes and mouth. The nose and eyes present as a cruciform, against grounds of vertical strokes in thinned colors that glow like stained glass.

Jawlensky made about a thousand of these paintings, titled "Meditations," between 1934 and 1937, in Wiesbaden. The Third Reich had banned exhibi-



tions of his work as “degenerate,” and he was crippled with severe arthritis, which obliged him to use both hands to wield a brush. The pictures meld his innate talents, chiefly for color, with a yearning for transcendence, which had come across as forced or sentimental in earlier work. (His family background was Russian Orthodox, but I can’t grasp what he thought he was communicating, between 1917 and 1933, after his Expressionist period, in series of “Mystical Heads,” “Saviour’s Faces,” and “Abstract Heads,” which veer between decorative preciousness and cartoony flapdoodle.) Isolated and in pain, Jawlensky worked from his spiritual core, with a hard joy. He was incapacitated for the last three years before he died, in 1941. Endicott Barnett has given twelve “Meditations” and a few late, lovely floral still-lifes a chapel-like installation, with piped-in classical music, which seems to me superfluous. I’d like to see a show of “Meditations”—the more, the better—lined up on bare white walls in silence. The cumulative effect might well stun.

**T**HE MOST BEAUTIFUL and most bracing show in town is of paintings, prints, drawings, and painted sculptures by Vija Celmins, at the Matthew Marks Gallery. It is also a rare event, the first solo show in nearly seven years of work by an artist, now seventy-eight, who is not only esteemed but cherished in the art world, as a paragon of aesthetic rigor, poetic sapience, and brusque, funny personal charm.

Her compact paintings, done in oils, invite sustained, closeup attention. Some, of night skies, embed white dots, for stars, in glazes of a dense black, with subliminal admixtures of, Celmins recently told me, ultramarine, raw umber, and ochre. Others are “negatives” of the sky motif, with black and yellow marks speckling off-white grounds. “My linoleum paintings,” she called them, jokingly, nailing a resemblance that dissolves with more than a cursory glance. Other works bring a new painterly liberty to her signature realist imagery, commonly done in pencil or woodcut, of choppy seas in which every wavelet can seem to have

sat for its portrait. The painted sculptures, of small stones and antique blackboards that bear traces of use, are exceedingly hard to distinguish from the items they mimic, and with which they are paired in the show. They evince meditative dedication.

Celmins was born in 1938 in Latvia, and endured wartime terrors and dislocations, which eventually led her to a refugee camp in Germany. In 1948, a religious charity brought her and her family to Indianapolis. Not knowing any English, she immersed herself in drawing. While attending a local art school, in 1962, she won a fellowship to a summer art program at Yale, where she met the painters Brice Marden, David Novros, and Chuck Close. In Los Angeles, where she earned an M.F.A. from U.C.L.A. in 1965, she painted objects in her studio—a space heater, a lamp, a hot plate—and developed a prescient mode of photo-realism, often using blurry black-and-whites of warplanes, recalling her harrowed childhood, and NASA moonscapes. The subtle grays of Velázquez and the rapt quietness of still-lifes by Giorgio Morandi strongly influenced her. She moved to New York in 1980 and has lived here since. Having been briefly married once, she lives alone now, but with the ready company of as many devoted friends as she makes time for. This show is her first in Chelsea. She rejected wooings from leading dealers, remaining loyal to the low-profile uptown David McKee Gallery, until it closed, in 2015.

“The making is the meaning—to look and record as thoroughly as possible,” Celmins said, about her labor-intensive stones and blackboards. Those works stand at the extreme of a consecrated self-abnegation that governs all her art. The spell of making persists in her images of skies and seas, unbounded subjects that she samples from photographs. “You live the details,” she told me. When looking at a Celmins picture, I can never decide whether to take it in as a supremely elegant object or to gaze into it with free-falling imagination. I am off balance while transfixed. That effect constitutes the basis—the bedrock—of her gift. ♦

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BY ALEX ROSS

Soper is introducing Aristotle's Poetics, and the opening movement consists largely of an adaptation of that text, spoken and sung. This seems like an unpromising beginning for an evening's entertainment, but Soper and a trio of fellow-musicians—a flutist, a violinist, and a percussionist—succeed at once in animating the material. After the ini-

A collage featuring a woman in a black dress singing, surrounded by smaller images of musicians and large, colorful geometric shapes (red, blue, green) and scattered letters.

"Ipsa Dixit" includes two other movements based on Aristotle—"Rhetoric" and "Metaphysics"—as well as settings of Plato, Sophocles, Guido d'Arezzo, Pietro Bembo, Freud, Wittgenstein, Robert Duncan, Lydia Davis, Michael Drayton, Jenny Holzer, and

Later in the movement, the instrumentalists perform their tasks with increasing halfheartedness—"as if losing interest in the music," the score says. Eventually, they wander offstage. Soper



waves her bell at them in frustration. Before the percussionist leaves, he fails to produce the sound that matches her gesture. She is in the middle of explaining the concept of anagnorisis, the point in a tragedy at which the protagonist arrives at a momentous recognition. What Soper recognizes, in her guise as master-lecturer, is that she needs the other musicians to bring her ideas to life. They return for a richly ornamented setting, in a luminous atonal idiom, of the “O generations of men” chorus from Sophocles’ “Oedipus the King.” What seems at first a brainy jest acquires emotional depth, and becomes pure music.

**“I**PSA DIXIT”—the title is Latin for “She herself said,” and alludes to “ipse dixit,” the legal term for a claim without proof—is an awesomely wide-ranging intellectual journey whose myriad subtleties register only with repeated viewings. (I’ve been watching a video of the work’s world première, which took place in December, at EMPAC, in Troy, New York.) The second movement, a duet for voice and flute, employs Lydia Davis’s brief texts “Go Away,” “Head, Heart,” and “Getting to Know Your Body,” which enter more personal territory. Soper shows how language can wound by varying her enunciation of the words “go away”—in the text, a phrase angrily spoken by a man to a woman. The flutist reinforces the sense of psychological vulnerability with a nervous, breathy welter of sounds, including her own vocalizations. “Ipsa Dixit,” which was directed by Ashley Tata, is instrumental as well as vocal theatre, and the members of the trio—Erin Lesser, flute; Josh Modney, violin; and Ian Antonio, percussion—are multitasking virtuosos.

When Soper returns to Aristotle for “Rhetoric,” more is at stake. The philosopher is now addressing language’s power to influence others, for good or evil. The music drives ahead, with insistent rhythms and operatic high notes. Soper’s reading of Aristotle emphasizes contemporary challenges: “How can we persuade if the subject is complex and, as is so often the case, our listeners incapable of following a long chain of reasoning?” Next comes a duet for voice and percussion, based on Plato’s *Crito*, in which Socrates, condemned to be ex-

ecuted, leads a rebellious friend to accept the outcome that society demands. The Socratic dialogue takes musical shape as Soper joins in on percussion, playing the marimba and damping cymbals to stop them from ringing. “But speak if you have anything to say,” she says at the end. A quiet stroke of the gong indicates sad assent.

In the penultimate movement, “Metaphysics,” Soper arrives at the portentous question “What is the nature of being?” Happily, her impishness does not desert her. Amid an analysis of the distinction between matter and form, she disassembles instruments mid-performance, detaching the body of the flute from the head piece and removing the rim of a drum; the ensemble goes on making music from the remnants. Instruments, or pieces of them, are then handed around: the violinist blows into part of the flute; the soprano strums the violin; the violinist bows a crotale; the percussionist thumps the violin with a soft mallet. In one glorious moment, Soper and Modney play the violin simultaneously. This ballet of musical objects not only illustrates Aristotle’s notion of a fundamental form outside the empirical realm—as matter decays, the spirit persists—but also celebrates the sonic diversity of avant-garde composition. Laughter gives way to wonder as a cosmic coda makes audible Aristotle’s ideal of self-sufficient contemplation.

The closing movement, “Cipher,” is a kaleidoscope of fragments that mixes cultures, disciplines, and centuries. The first section is titled “Jenny Holzer feat. Ludwig Wittgenstein.” The evident motto of the piece, which Soper sings in Latin, is provided by the medieval music theorist Guido d’Arezzo: “Everything that can be spoken can be written, and everything that can be written can be spoken can be sung.” You have the impression, in “Ipsa Dixit,” that everything *has* been written, spoken, and sung—that a universal musical theorem has been demonstrated. Yet Soper is too canny about art’s foibles and limits to deliver a triumphant Q.E.D. Ghostly, twelve-tonish figures in the final bars feel uncertain, provisional, questing. A twenty-first-century masterpiece could end no other way. ♦



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## MAD ABOUT THE BOY

*The art of drag in "Sunset Boulevard."*

BY HILTON ALS



D RAG IS AS old as Xenophon's fear of women, but in our transgender, anti-binary age transvestism onstage can seem quaint, a relic from a shameful past when gay people adhered to certain patriarchal assumptions about what made a man and what made a woman. Although the work of such sui-generis theatre artists as Charles Ludlam—who was inspired, in part, by Hollywood archetypes and penny dreadfuls, stories in which sexuality was performed with ridiculous, automatic vigor—was hugely important in the nineteen-sixties, it doesn't necessarily play well anymore. Gender politics has moved on from that kind of arch rad-

icalism. As the options for drag performance have dwindled—and I'm referring here not to the kind of sleek crossover machinery you see on the TV program "RuPaul's Drag Race," say, but to the funky, crooked-wig, runs-in-the-stockings aesthetic that made Jackie Curtis such an unforgettable star—current drag luminaries, including Murray Hill and Lady Bunny, have fought back with work that emphasizes the anarchism of drag, how it confuses the line between what's "natural" in show business and what's too loud or "wrong." (Last year, Lady Bunny wrote and staged "Trans-Jester," a funny, rude, and smart piece about the trivialization of

drag by the gender thought police.)

And yet there must be room onstage for drag and its off-center presentation, or else we'll end up with a theatre of conformity—the kind, for instance, that didn't question the cross-dressing in two Shakespeare productions staged by the Globe's troupe of all-male players, starring Mark Rylance, on Broadway in 2013. Why was that? First, the shows were "high end" and thus immune, as Kabuki stars often are, to the criticism that usually greets drag: those actors were making art, not sending it up. But it's the mistakes and the imperfections that make drag interesting, because they reveal the performers' authenticity and vulnerability: if the drag star can't put the pieces together without effort, why not let the effort show through the pancake makeup and the feathers?

Glenn Close is an actual woman, but Norma Desmond, the character she plays in Andrew Lloyd Webber's 1993 musical adaptation of the 1950 film "Sunset Boulevard" (at the Palace, directed by Lonny Price, with book and lyrics by Don Black and Christopher Hampton, respectively), is a construct composed, sometimes deliberately, sometimes not, from drag, or drag impulses. (Though this is, of course, commercial show business—the production's bid for respectability is built into the clocklike precision with which it has been put together.) When we meet Norma, she is fifty, a creature from another age: she's a former movie star who made it in the silent-film era, when audiences fell for a star's face, not her voice. After someone remarks, early in the show, that Norma used to be big, she draws herself up to her full height and, digging deep vocally, says, "I am big. It's the pictures that got small."

Now—it's the nineteen-fifties—she lives in a kind of mausoleum on Sunset Boulevard, in the part of Los Angeles where grand, gloomy homes with palm trees and wide lawns are the norm. But in this twilight world "normal" is a specious concept. And that's just one of the lessons that Joe Gillis (Michael Xavier) learns pretty quickly after he arrives on Norma's property. Sunset Boulevard wasn't Joe's intended destination—he's on the run from creditors who want to repossess his car—but when he pulls into Norma's drive she and her

*Glenn Close's Norma Desmond is a creature from another age.*



manservant, Max (Fred Johanson), assume that he was sent by the funeral home to cart away Norma's late great love. The fact that her love was a chimpanzee does nothing to diminish the solemnity or the grief she feels as she approaches the catafalque where the ape is laid out and sings her first big number, "No More Wars":

No more wars to fight  
White flags fly tonight  
You are out of danger now  
Battlefield is still.

Webber doesn't write music that one can sing without "soaring," and Close does what's required to put the song over, while the orchestra does the rest. The violins and horns swell to heighten the dramatic effect, but the sound of it doesn't stay in your head; it's just a din that requires the artist to belt—which Close, Xavier, and Johanson do handily, though you have to keep reminding yourself what they're singing about with such urgency. (In any case, the audience is more interested in the musical's camp factor than in the seriousness of the score, if it has any.) And would Norma really use war metaphors to express her grief? The chimp was no doughboy, and one doubts very much that Norma ever opens a newspaper unless someone has told her she's mentioned in it.

After Joe reveals that he's not an undertaker but a writer, Norma, who is still wise to the ways of Hollywood, hires him to rewrite a script about Salome that she's been working on. (Norma is rich, and she knows that writers can be had on the cheap.) No matter that the Salome Norma wants to play is sixteen years old: Norma believes

in herself, even if Hollywood doesn't.

Wearing a turban, scarves, and florid gowns in black, white, and shades of gold, her eyes obscured by sunglasses, and her lips painted a murderous red (the costuming is by Tracy Christensen), Close looks the way Charles Ludlam may have looked when he played Norma Desmond, in Ronald Tavel's "Screen Test." Indeed, twenty or thirty minutes into the show, you find yourself thinking less about Close's genuine commitment to the part—this is her second go-round as Norma on Broadway; the first was in 1994—than about all the variations of Norma Desmond you've seen over the years, from Carol Burnett's classic spoof to those drag parties downtown decades ago.

I never really warmed to the movie that the musical is based on, just as I haven't warmed to the musical: its atmosphere is at once messy and banal; its relentless pop façade and the constant drama of its music preclude intimacy and distance us from feeling, while encouraging a kind of aggressive contempt. None of the characters are truly big, let alone human, even as they play big. Billy Wilder, the movie's director and co-screenwriter, intended to skewer Hollywood and its disposable culture, but there's something else at work in the film, too: the pride that Wilder felt about his position in the industry's hierarchy, in that closed world that coddled its own madness. If Wilder had been a true moralist, he would have turned the camera away from the overreaching drag queen that Norma becomes as she falls in love with Joe and attempts to buy his love by making him over in a way that has to do not with

who he is but with her idealized vision of a man of the nineteen-twenties. Instead, Wilder could have shown us how male ideas of beauty and youth have driven Norma crazy, how she is catering to the only thing she knows—what a man likes, or is supposed to like. But the men in her life, including the one who could really see her and thus validate her existence, her beloved director Cecil B. DeMille, have moved on, thus breaking her spirit, if not her dreams.

Onstage, it takes a long time for Norma to express her masculine rage—which, in this tale, takes the form of murder. She turns against Joe's female friend first. (It's much easier to hate your own kind than it is to dismantle the system that makes you hate your own kind.) Sitting by the phone, Norma calls Betty Schaefer (Siobhan Dillon), a young woman who believes in Joe as a writer. Desperate and greedy for information, Norma over-enunciates, her words taut with sarcasm and hauteur. (You can hear how her voice would have sounded "old" to audiences who had adjusted, by then, to the Actors Studio's mumbling naturalism.) Betty, of course, is Norma's foil: her innocent earnestness springs from a well of purity that has yet to be corrupted. This is the only instance of heart in the show, a scene of real physical pain and confusion, and Close plays it to the hilt, but not hysterically, because she has something to hold on to as an actress, a reprieve from the endless mugging and grandstanding, which we know is just another form of self-loathing, dressed up in drag and played to the balcony, where the "boys" sit worshipping every man-generated blow to the heart, every mascara-stained moment. ♦

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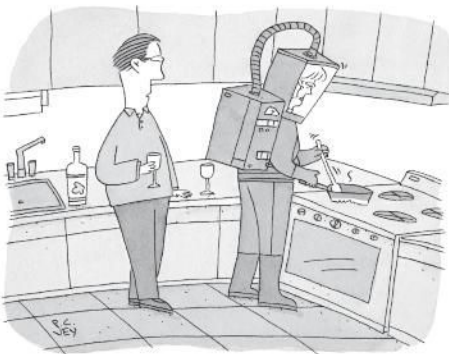
*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Benjamin Schwartz, must be received by Sunday, February 26th. The finalists in the February 6th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 13th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ..... ”

### THE FINALISTS



*“Is that a new outfit?”*  
Mike Staff, Marlton, N.J.

*“We had meth on Tuesday.”*  
Colin Michel, Los Angeles, Calif.

*“Are you sure the recipe said mustard gas?”*  
Tracy Crow, Columbus, Ohio

### THE WINNING CAPTION

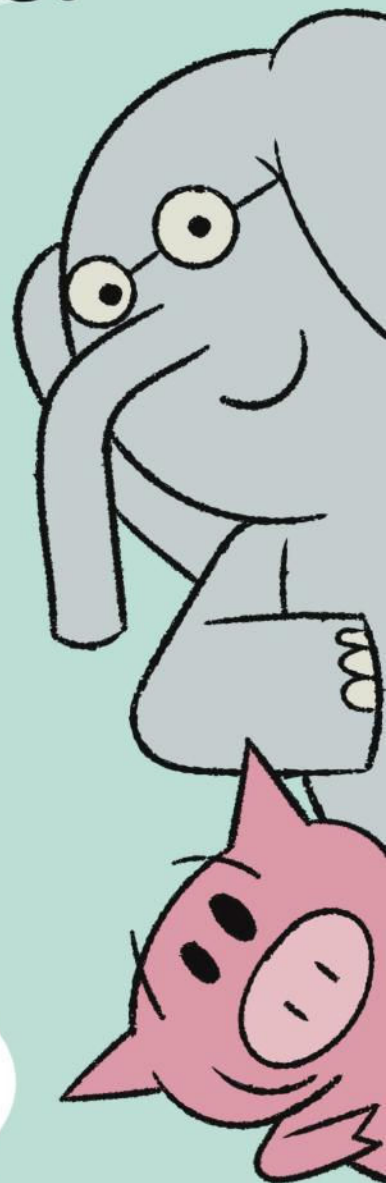
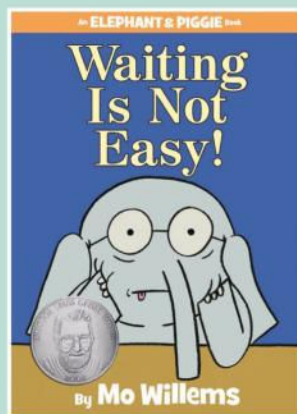
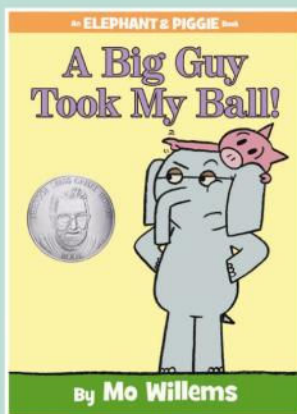
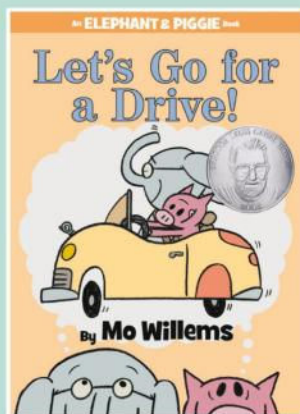
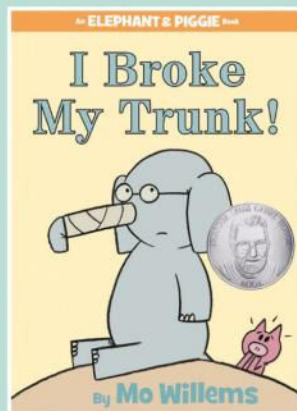
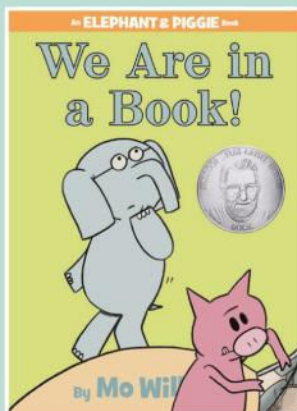
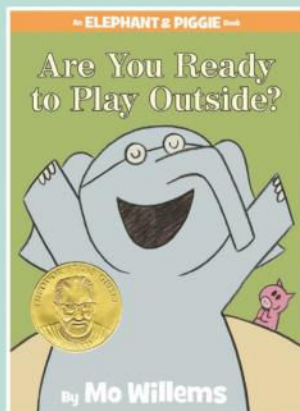


*“You were with Ringling Brothers? I was  
with Lehman Brothers.”*  
Tom Evans, Evergreen, Colo.



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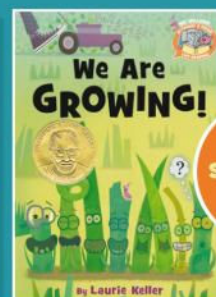
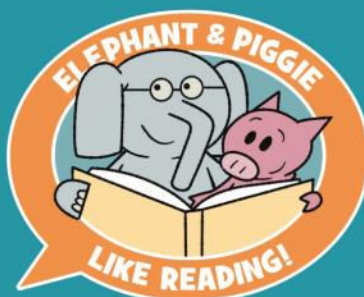
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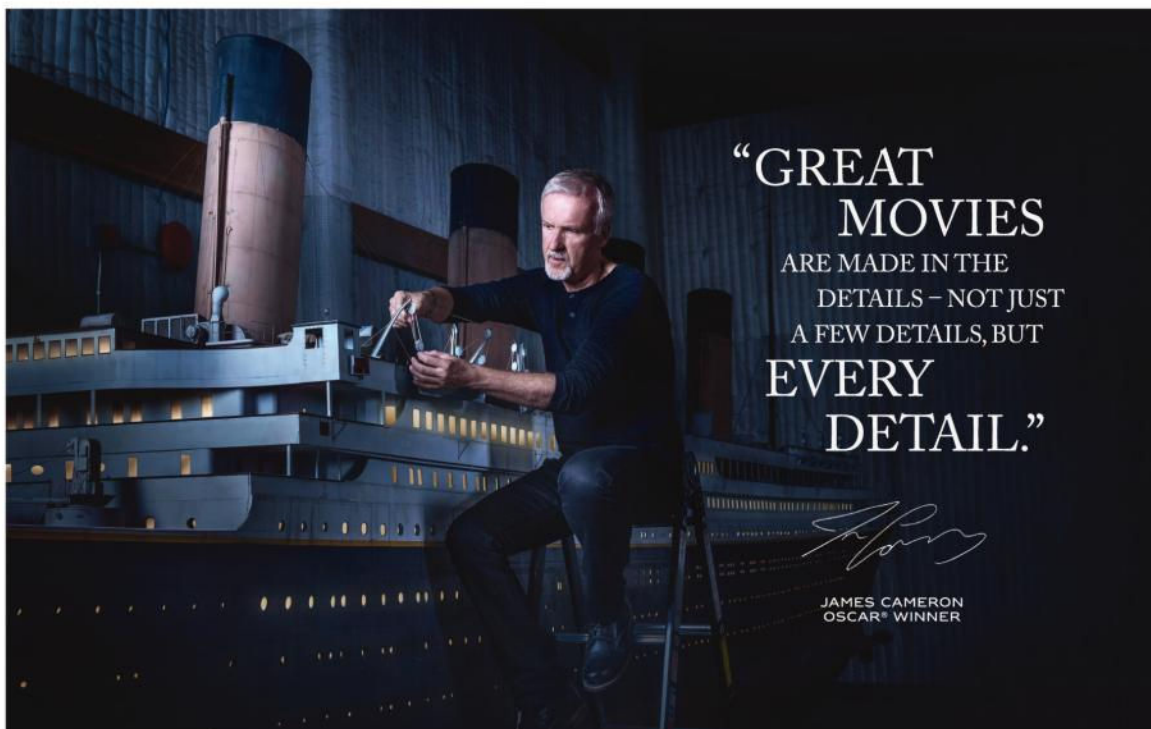
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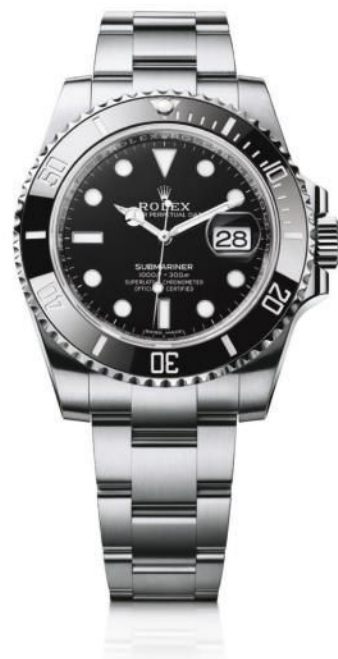


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