

PRICE \$8.99

FEB. 6, 2017

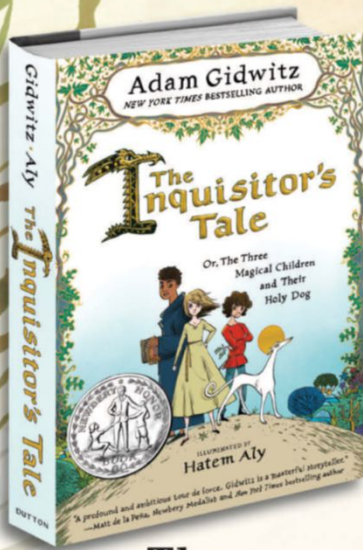
THE NEW YORKER



Abigail Gray Swartz

Words matter.

Celebrate the power of books.



The Inquisitor's Tale

By Adam Gidwitz

A 2017 Newbery Honor Book

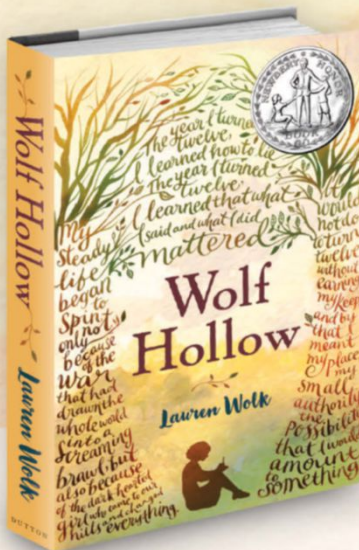
The New York Times
Notable Children's Books of 2016

The Wall Street Journal
Top 10 Children's Books of 2016

The Washington Post
Best Children's Books of 2016

"[A] sparkling medieval adventure."

—*The Wall Street Journal*



Wolf Hollow

By Lauren Wolk

A 2017 Newbery Honor Book

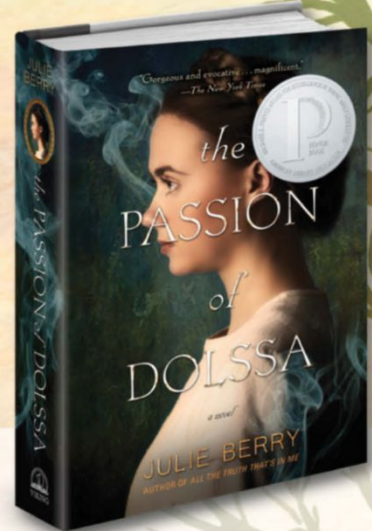
NPR's
Best Books of 2016

The Wall Street Journal
Top 10 Children's Books of 2016

Entertainment Weekly
Best Middle Grade Books of 2016

"Confronts injustice and doesn't flinch."

—*People*



The Passion of Dolssa

By Julie Berry

A 2017 Printz Honor Book

The New York Times
Notable Children's Books of 2016

New York Public Library's
Best Books for Teens

Bustle's
Best YA Books of 2016

"A stunning work of historical fiction."

—*The Boston Globe*



Look for these award-winning novels wherever books are sold.

THE NEW YORKER

FEBRUARY 6, 2017

- 4 **GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN**
- 15 **THE TALK OF THE TOWN**
Steve Coll on Trump's war against information; DeploraBall; lumberjacks; liberals take stock; James Surowiecki on conflicts of interest.
- LETTER FROM CHARLESTON
- Jelani Cobb** 20 Prodigy of Hate
The trial of Dylann Roof.
- SHOUTS & MURMURS
- Paul Rudnick** 27 Melania's Diary 1/21/2017
- LIFE AND LETTERS
- Rivka Galchen** 28 Fail Funnier
Why young readers love Mo Willems.
- A REPORTER AT LARGE
- Luke Mogelson** 34 The Avengers of Mosul
An Iraqi SWAT team heads into the battle.
- FICTION**
- David Gilbert** 60 "Underground"
- THE CRITICS**
- POP MUSIC**
- Carrie Battan** 70 *Sampha's "Process" and Migos' "Culture."*
- BOOKS**
- Alexandra Schwartz** 73 *Katie Kitamura's "A Separation."*
75 Briefly Noted
- THE ART WORLD**
- Peter Schjeldahl** 76 *The Whitney revisits the nineteen-eighties.*
- ON TELEVISION**
- Emily Nussbaum** 78 *"The Good Place."*
- THE CURRENT CINEMA**
- Anthony Lane** 80 *"Gold," "Dark Night."*
- POEMS**
- Charles Simic** 53 "The Infinite"
Tess Gallagher 67 "Cloud-Path"
- COVER**
- Abigail Gray Swartz** "The March"

DRAWINGS *Jeremy Nguyen, William Haefeli, Drew Dernavich, Farley Katz, Alice Cheng, Roz Chast, Liana Finck, Zachary Kanin, P. C. Vey*
SPOTS *Philippe Petit-Roulet*

Use your
downtime
wisely.



Swipe through—and share—a nearly limitless supply of *New Yorker* cartoons, with The New Yorker Today app.

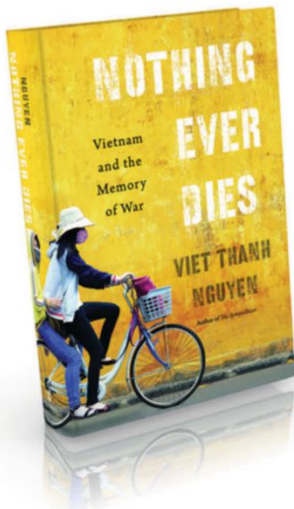
newyorker.com/go/today

THE
NEW YORKER
TODAY

Available on iPad
and iPhone



CONTRIBUTORS



Nothing Ever Dies

Vietnam and the Memory of War

Viet Thanh Nguyen

National Book Critics Circle Award
2016 Finalist

National Book Award, 2016 Finalist

A Kirkus Reviews Best Nonfiction
Book of the Year

"[Nguyen] produces close readings of the novels, films, monuments, and prisons that form 'the identity of war' in Vietnam, 'a face with carefully drawn features, familiar at a glance to the nation's people.'"

—New Yorker

"An account of humanity at its darkest, a realm of war, memory, identity and pain that ventures from the jungles of Vietnam to the killing fields of Cambodia."

—Jeffrey Fleishman,
Los Angeles Times

"In his unusually thoughtful consideration of war, self-deception and forgiveness, Viet Thanh Nguyen penetrates deeply into memories of the Vietnamese war... [An] important book."

—Jonathan Mirsky, *Literary Review*

\$27.95 cloth | www.harvard.edu


Harvard
University
Press

Luke Mogelson (*The Avengers of Mosul*, p. 34) has written for the magazine since 2013. He is the author of the short-story collection "These Heroic, Happy Dead."

Tess Gallagher (*Poem*, p. 67) is the author of twelve poetry collections, including "Midnight Lantern: New and Selected Poems" and the forthcoming "Is, Is Not."

Jelani Cobb (*Prodigy of Hate*, p. 20), who has been a staff writer since 2015, teaches in the journalism program at Columbia University.

Alexandra Schwartz (*Books*, p. 73) is a staff writer.

Paul Rudnick (*Shouts & Murmurs*, p. 27) is the author of "It's All Your Fault," which was published last year.

Abigail Gray Swartz (*Cover*) has contributed illustrations to the *Times*, *Lenny Letter*, and *Taproot*. She is working on a feminist coloring book for adults and kids.

Rivka Galchen (*Fail Funnier*, p. 28) has published three books, including "Little Labors," which came out last May.

Steve Coll (*Comment*, p. 15), a staff writer, is the dean of the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia.

Carrie Battan (*Pop Music*, p. 70) has contributed to the magazine since 2015. She has also written for *GQ*, *New York*, and *Bloomberg Businessweek*.

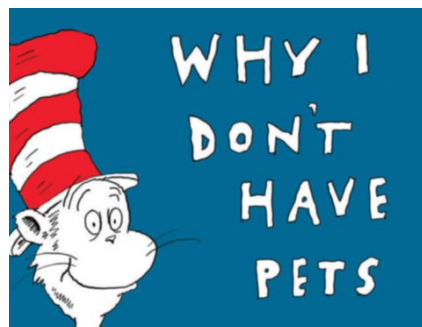
David Gilbert (*Fiction*, p. 60) is the author of the novels "The Normals" and "& Sons."

Anthony Lane (*The Current Cinema*, p. 80) has been a film critic for *The New Yorker* since 1993. He is the author of "Nobody's Perfect," a collection of his writings for the magazine.

Reeves Wiedeman (*The Talk of the Town*, p. 17) is a contributing editor for *New Yorker*. He has written for *newyorker.com* since 2009 and for the magazine since 2010.

NEWYORKER.COM

Everything in the magazine, and more.



DAILY SHOUTS

Liana Finck imagines Dr. Seuss books for today, including "Horton Hears About the War in Syria."



THE OSCARS

Michael Schulman, Richard Brody, and other *New Yorker* writers on this year's Academy Awards.

SUBSCRIBERS: Get access to our magazine app for tablets and smartphones at the App Store, Amazon.com, or Google Play. (Access varies by location and device.)

THE MAIL

PAYING DOCTORS TO CARE

Atul Gawande, in his article on the importance of primary care, frames the shift from rescue medicine to lifelong incremental care as a decision that will save both lives and money, but he doesn't fully address the unpalatable choices required to effect this transformation. ("Tell Me Where It Hurts," January 23rd). In order to fund more primary care and preventive services, our society could increase the percentage of G.D.P. devoted to health care at the expense of other social goods, such as education and infrastructure. Alternatively, we could ration expensive rescue endeavors and spend the savings on incremental care. Rather than expending a "mountain of resources," as Gawande says, to separate conjoined twins, or on costly neonatal surgeries like the one that benefitted Gawande's son, we could devote those funds to less glamorous, more cost-effective treatments. Any sensible health-care economist would likely support rationing—up to the moment that his or her own child requires a heroic, high-cost operation.

Jacob M. Appel, M.D.
Assistant Professor of Psychiatry
Mount Sinai School of Medicine
New York City

President Trump and Congress would be wise to read Gawande's article, which articulates a solution for our embattled and dysfunctional health-care system that applies equally well to America's infrastructure woes and virtually all other major political issues, including foreign affairs. When Gawande compares the collapse of the Silver Bridge over the Ohio River, in 1967, to a life-threatening ruptured spleen requiring emergency surgery, he is pointing out the nation's insatiable appetite for sensationalism over quiet, reflective progress. Primary-care medicine is the key to reducing medical emergencies and costs. But it is not favored by medical students who graduate with debt in the hundred-to-two-hundred-thousand-

dollar range and face the choice of a specialty that pays four or five hundred thousand dollars a year versus primary care, which pays less than half that. Only primary-care physicians can work incrementally with patients who have chronic illnesses, and reduce the impact of obesity, tobacco addiction, and substance-abuse problems. Those of us wielding flashy scalpels under bright lights sense a heroic thread in our work when, in fact, it resides in the quiet toil of our nation's primary-care doctors, who are the real heroes.

David W. Page, M.D.
Professor of Surgery
Tufts University School of Medicine
Springfield, Mass.

Bravo for pointing out the shortcomings of the medical system, and how the dissolution of the Affordable Care Act will undermine health care for millions of people in this country. But this survey of the problem with health care only scratches the surface. Medicine is not a predictive science; it is, at best, post-dictive based on biology, which is a descriptive science. Gawande's analogy between medicine and bridges, both of which would benefit from more incremental care, is flawed, since the failures of bridges are highly predictable but those of medicine are not. The ability of primary-care physicians to follow a patient over time is effective because the patient's medical condition is being compared with her or his individual past. Recognizing that predicting illnesses is currently impossible, we'll need to continue guessing at diagnoses.

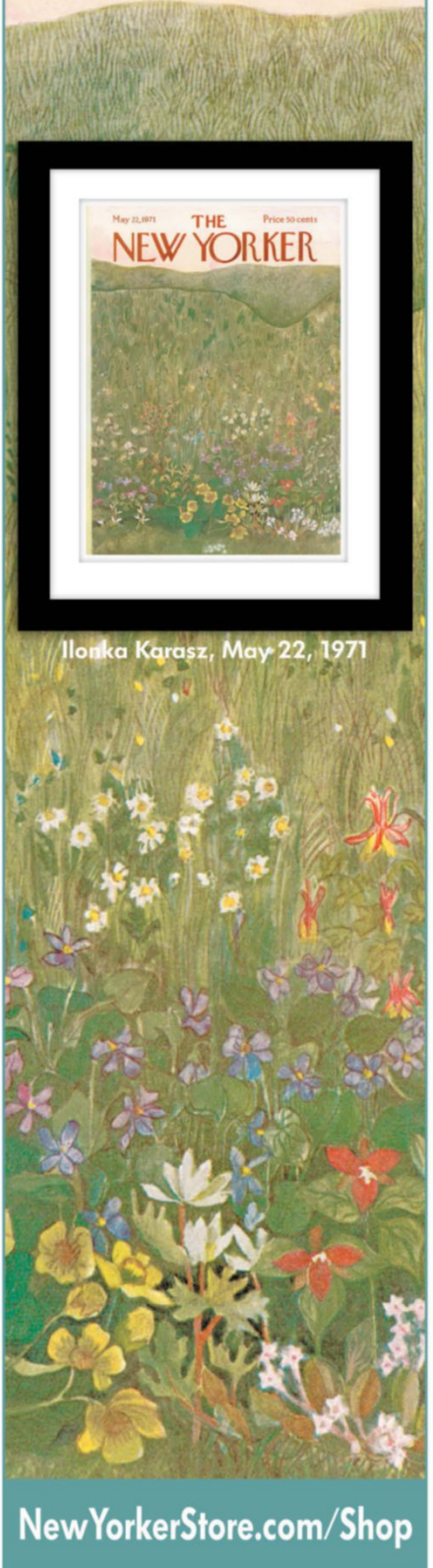
John S. Torday, M.Sc.
Professor of Pediatrics, Obstetrics, and
Evolutionary Medicine
Harbor-U.C.L.A. Medical Center
Torrance, Calif.

•
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.

ADVERTISEMENT

New Yorker Cover Prints

Find the one you love:
NewYorkerStore.com





FEBRUARY 1 – 7, 2017

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



Dvořák's 1901 opera, "**Rusalka**," didn't arrive at the Met until 1993, but it soon became a major vehicle for the burgeoning career of the soprano Renée Fleming. Now this tender piece (beloved for its aria "Song to the Moon") features another star in the making, Kristine Opolais, who has long made the title role part of her repertory. The new production is by Mary Zimmerman, whose radical interpretations of such comfy classics as "La Sonnambula" and "Lucia di Lammermoor" caused much controversy in the early Peter Gelb era.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRIAN VU

CLASSICAL MUSIC

OPERA

Metropolitan Opera

The theatre director Mary Zimmerman—known for her adaptations of literary works like Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—was an early favorite of Peter Gelb's administration, but her three stagings of bel-canto operas for the company were at times awkward and stylistically indistinct. For her first new Met production in seven years, she directs Dvořák's fantastical "*Rusalka*," an opera whose roots in fairy tales and folklore may provide a better match for her sensibilities. She has a first-rate cast at her disposal, with Kristine Opolais, Jamie Barton, Katarina Dalayman, Brandon Jovanovich, and Eric Owens in the lead roles; Mark Elder conducts. *Feb. 2 at 8 and Feb. 6 at 7:30.* • **Also playing:** Bartlett Sher's first production for the Met, a fleet-footed and sun-soaked "*Il Barbiere di Siviglia*," remains one of his best. Three distinctive singers—Pretty Yende, Peter Mattei, and Dmitry Korchak—head up the cast as Rossini's lovable rapsallions; Maurizio Benini. *Feb. 1 at 7:30 and Feb. 4 at 8.* • The French mezzo-soprano Clémentine Margaine, making her Met debut, takes on the fiery Gypsy of Bizet's "*Carmen*" in Richard Eyre's tightly conceived production, which evokes the period of the Spanish Civil War with cinematic sweep. She leads a fine cast that also includes Marcelo Álvarez (Don José), Maria Agresta (Micaëla), and Kyle Ketelsen; Asher Fisch. (Janai Brugger replaces Agresta in the first performance.) *Feb. 3 at 8 and Feb. 7 at 7:30.* • The Met is going all in on Michael Mayer's flamboyant production of "*Rigoletto*," which is set in a Las Vegas casino: the company has revived it almost every season since its premiere, in 2013. Stephen Costello, Željko Lučić, and Olga Peretyatko—all wonderfully effective in the lead roles—reprise their portrayals from previous seasons; Pier Giorgio Morandi. *Feb. 4 at 1.* (*Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.*)

Mannes School of Music: "Dust"

Robert Ashley's experimental work from 1998, about a group of homeless people on the margins of society, unfolds on the margins of opera itself, with the performers speaking or singing the scripted and improvised dialogue over a whirring texture of musical effects. Joan La Barbara and Tom Hamilton, two close collaborators of Ashley's, have assisted with the Mannes/New School production, which is directed by William Gustafson. *Feb. 2-3 at 8 and Feb. 4 at 3 and 8.* (*Stiefel Hall, Mannes School of Music, 55 W. 13th St. ticketcentral.com.*)

Ted Hearne's "Sounds from the Bench"

Hearne doesn't shy away from thorny social and political issues in his work, and this forty-minute choral piece, commissioned by the expert and adventurous Philadelphia chamber choir the Crossing, is a riveting vivisection of the concept of corporate personhood. It blends the serene beauty of medieval vocal polyphony with jabs of percussion and electric guitar, as the choir sings lines from Supreme Court cases and ventriloquism manuals. The program also includes three other Hearne pieces, "Privilege," "Ripple," and "Consent." *Feb. 3 at 7.* (*National Sawdust, 80 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. nationalsawdust.org.*)

ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

New York Philharmonic

"Beloved Friend: Tchaikovsky and His World," a three-week festival, is the brainchild of Semyon Bychkov, a distinguished conductor who has been devoted to the composer's music for decades. He and the Philharmonic are roaming through a selection of favorite works, with some surprises thrown in. This week brings the "Manfred Symphony," an infrequently performed, multi-movement Byronic tone poem that was given its U.S. premiere by the Philharmonic in 1886; it's preceded by the ever-popular Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-Flat Minor, performed (in a new critical edition) by Kirill Gerstein, an exceptionally self-assured young virtuoso. *Feb. 2 and Feb. 7 at 7:30, Feb. 3 at 11 A.M., and Feb. 4 at 8.* (*David Geffen Hall. For tickets and a full schedule of concerts, see nyphil.org.*)

Kremerata Baltica

In his seventieth year, the violinist Gidon Kremer remains a galvanizing force. He comes to the 92nd Street Y with his chamber orchestra of brilliant young Baltic musicians to present a concert that offers two major surprises, the Chamber Symphony No. 4 by the twentieth-century Russian master Mieczysław Weinberg and a performance of an arrangement of Mussorgsky's "Pictures at an Exhibition" that's accompanied by visuals by the contemporary Russian artist and social critic Maxim Kantor. Music by Tchaikovsky (the "Sérénade Mélancolique"), Valentin Silvestrov, and Arvo Pärt ("Fratres") is also featured. *Feb. 2 at 8.* (*Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500.*)

"La Serenissima: Music and Arts from the Venetian Republic"

At a time when America is having trouble dealing with diversity, it might be refreshing to examine a place and a period—the thousand years of the Venetian Republic—in which jostling voices were synthesized into a dazzling whole. Carnegie Hall's winter festival does just that, with concerts starting this week. On Friday, the legendary gambist Jordi Savall and his prized collaborators (the instrumentalists of Hesperion XXI and Le Concert des Nations and the singers of La Capella Reial de Catalunya) join guest musicians expert in Byzantine and Middle Eastern traditions to perform a vast range of works by masters both anonymous and renowned. On Tuesday, the Venice Baroque Orchestra—whose style of relaxed elegance mirrors that of the city after which it's named—joins the essential New York choral ensemble TENET to perform Vivaldi's oratorio "Juditha Triumphans." *Feb. 3 at 7:30; Feb. 7 at 7.* (*For tickets and a full schedule of events, see carnegiehall.org.*)

Orpheus Chamber Orchestra

Two-thirds of the conductorless chamber orchestra's latest program is deeply traditional: a performance of the Tchaikovsky Violin Concerto that features the winning soloist Vadim Gluzman—who plays a Stradivarius once owned by Leopold Auer, the concerto's original dedicatee—and a rendition of Mendelssohn's Symphony No. 3, "Scotch." The ensemble also continues its decades-long advocacy of exceptional new music with the New York premiere of "End Stages," a reflection on mortality by the American composer Michael Hersch. *Feb. 4 at 7.* (*Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.*)

Budapest Festival Orchestra

The always vibrant conductor Iván Fischer and his superb ensemble come to Lincoln Center this week to make Beethoven their own. Their first concert (featuring the eminent pianist Richard Goode) offers the First and Fifth Symphonies as well as the deeply contemplative Fourth Piano Concerto. The second and final concert presents the Symphonies Nos. 8 and 9 ("Choral," with a quartet of vocal soloists and the Concert Chorus of New York). *Feb. 5 at 3; Feb. 6 at 8.* (*David Geffen Hall. 212-721-6500.*)

RECITALS

Tessa Lark

Roman Rabinovich accompanies the up-and-coming violinist, a winner of the Naumburg International Violin Competition, in an appealingly broad selection of works by Schubert, Lutosławski ("Partita"), Michael Torke (the world premiere of "Spoon Bread"), Brahms (the Sonata No. 3 in D Minor for Violin and Piano), and Lark herself. *Feb. 2 at 7:30.* (*Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.*)

Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center

With a heady program intended to spark connections between historical social revolts, the Swiss-American pianist Gilles Vonsattel appears solo in a Society recital. Along with some familiar Beethoven (the Six Bagatelles, Op. 126, and the "Les Adieux" Sonata), he tackles challenging works by Dussek, Janáček (the imposing "Sonata 1.X.1905"), Liszt ("Funérailles"), and the American maverick Frederic Rzewski (the "Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues"). *Feb. 2 at 7:30.* (*Rose Studio, Rose Bldg.*) • The Shanghai Quartet, admired for its palpable enthusiasm and refulgent sound, offers a program that matches classics by Haydn and Dvořák (the Quartet in A-Flat Major, Op. 105) with novelties, via Frank Bridge's "Novelletten" and Krzysztof Penderecki's String Quartet No. 3, "Leaves of an Unwritten Diary" (2008), an accessible work that the quartet commissioned from the avant-garde master. *Feb. 7 at 7:30.* (*Alice Tully Hall.*) (212-875-5788.)

Kate Soper's "Ipsa Dixit"

Soper, the acclaimed young composer-vocalist, pi-quantly blends language, music, and drama; her latest creation (inspired by the Latin maxim that refers to a statement made true by virtue of the speaker's authority alone) meditates on texts by Aristotle, Plato, Freud, and Lydia Davis. She's joined by trusted collaborators from the Wet Ink Ensemble. *Feb. 3-4 at 7:30.* (*Dixon Place, 161A Chrystie St. dixonplace.org.*)

Alice Coote and Julius Drake

The exciting mezzo-soprano and the superlative collaborative pianist present a song cycle that is typically the domain of tenors and baritones: Schubert's "Winterreise," an archetypal work of the Romantic era in which self-reflection is brought on by heartbreak and sustained across twenty-four songs. *Feb. 4 at 7:30.* (*Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.*)

Juilliard String Quartet

The lauded ensemble—now with a new cellist, Astrid Schween—continues its longtime programming arc, combining classics from the Germanic tradition (Mendelssohn's Quartet in A Minor, Op. 13, and Beethoven's Quartet in B-Flat Major, Op. 130, with the "Grosse Fuge") with challenging new works by leading contemporary voices (the New York premiere of Mario Davidovsky's String Quartet No. 6, "Fragments"). *Feb. 6 at 7:30.* (*Alice Tully Hall. events.juilliard.edu.*)

THE THEATRE



Club King

Stormé DeLarverie was a pioneer in the art of gender-based performance.

WHEN I FIRST started hanging out in downtown clubs—Area, in Tribeca, before it was Tribeca; MK, in the Flatiron district; Save the Robots, in the East Village—I would trail behind people I’d fallen in love with by sight. I didn’t know Teri Toye, one of the first transgender models—she was the late designer Stephen Sprouse’s muse—but I was taken with her blond cool, which was like a light in those dark clubs. The beauty and style of the late filmmaker Bobbie Dereck-

tor, with his brave mixing of male and female looks and behavior, filled me with a yearning to be above it all, too. Another person I followed was Stormé DeLarverie. Everyone knew Stormé, especially if they went to the Cubby Hole, which later became Henrietta Hudson, where she was the bouncer, the *éminence grise*, and someone you in general didn’t want to fuck with.

Stormé started out as a performer in the nineteen-sixties, when the mixed-race New Orleans native was the m.c. at Club 82, a venue for female impersonators in the East Village. Stormé was the only “man” on-

stage. She dressed in suits and tuxedos and was very elegant with the girls. It was Stormé’s job to introduce the acts, get the girls onstage and off, and serve as an escort to the performers who required a man. She was known as the Lady Who Appears to Be a Gentleman, and was billed as such in Diane Arbus’s amazing, sexy, and authoritative portraits of her. As I got to know Stormé a little, I loved hearing her impressions of Arbus (she was one of the more charming people on the planet, Stormé said). Stormé had a slow walk—like a cowboy in the old movies, but black. She had a super-firm handshake, and a way of taking you in without making you feel judged, unless she judged that you were an asshole, and then she had no time for you at all. All her life, ladies of one gender or another amused her, and brought out the boy in her. I loved watching her comb her Afro, and how her skin would get ever so slightly pink when she was in the presence of a girl she fancied. Sometimes I wished it were me.

In 1987, the filmmaker Michelle Parkerson made a film about the artist, “Stormé: The Lady of the Jewel Box,” which screens on Feb. 7, as part of the exciting series “One Way or Another: Black Women’s Cinema, 1970-1991” (at BAM Cinématek, Feb. 3-23). In the twenty-one-minute film, Parkerson frames Stormé (who died in 2014) with a loving eye, because why would you be critical of an actual loving human phenomenon, one who lived in the world, always, on her own terms? Back in the day, Stormé was the sexiest man I ever met, and what is sex appeal but another quality you can’t name, and shouldn’t name, especially if you don’t want to be fixed by sexual or racial categories? Stormé was herself, which is to say a male self who knew the deal: life will try to limit you if you give in and let it.

—Hilton Als

ILLUSTRATION BY OLIMPIA ZAGNOLI

OPENINGS AND 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. Previews begin Feb. 7.*)

If I Forget

The Roundabout stages Steven Levenson's play, directed by Daniel Sullivan, in which a professor of Jewish studies 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. Previews begin Feb. 2.*)

Kid Victory

Liesl Tommy directs a new musical by John Kander and Greg Pierce, in which a teen-ager returns to his Kansas town after a mysterious yearlong absence. (*Vineyard, 108 E. 15th St. 212-353-0303. 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. Previews begin Feb. 7.*)

The Object Lesson

Geoff Sobelle created this installation theatre piece, which transforms the space into a cluttered storage facility where audience members can roam and explore. David Neumann directs. (*New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-460-5475. In previews.*)

Sunset Boulevard

Glenn Close returns to the role of Norma Desmond in the 1993 Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, based on Billy Wilder's classic portrait of Hollywood desuetude. Lonny Price directs. (*Palace, Seventh Ave. at 47th St. 877-250-2929. Previews begin Feb. 2.*)

The Town Hall Affair

The Wooster Group revisits a 1971 debate over feminism which erupted among Germaine Greer, Norman Mailer, and other thinkers at New York's Town Hall. Elizabeth LeCompte directs a cast including Scott Shepherd, Kate Valk, and Maura Tierney. (*The Performing Garage, 33 Wooster St. thewoostergroup.org. Opens Feb. 4.*)

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. Previews begin Feb. 7.*)

NOW PLAYING

The Beauty Queen of Leenane

In the Druid production of Martin McDonagh's 1996 play, Mag Folan (Marie Mullen) shares a cottage with her forty-year-old single daughter, Maureen (Aisling O'Sullivan). The two women spend their days tearing at their bonds, but they wouldn't know who they were without their mutual hatred and dependence. One day, Maureen meets Pato (Marty Rea), a handsome, agreeable man who works construction in London. Pato's attention allows Maureen to reckon with her body in a different way,

in that stultifying atmosphere. Rea and O'Sullivan play it all so beautifully, but the director, Garry Hynes (a real talent, who also directed the 1998 Broadway staging), seems more interested in the story's high points—its surefire entertainments—than in the putrid plantings growing through the kitchen's cracks. What we're left with is a measure of fun and wholesomeness, when the laughter should have had us choking back vomit. (Reviewed in our issue of 1/30/17.) (*BAM Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Through Feb. 5.*)

The Liar

After "The School for Lies" and "The Heir Apparent," David Ives returns with a new "transplantation," as he puts it, of an old French play. Corneille's 1643 story is a standard comedy of errors, rife with mistaken identities, randy lords, and saucy ladies. The titular character is a pathological fabulist (Christian Conn) saddled with a truth-telling servant (Carson Elrod). The point, however, isn't so much the plot as Ives's facility with verse—the show delivers a barrage of inspired rhymes, some of them delighting in anachronisms. ("Find an asbestos tux and button it well, / Because I'll only marry you in Hell," our con man is told by his feisty flame.) They dazzle so much that you may overlook the relatively sluggish pace set by characters that often just stand there and orate, drunk on their own fizzy wordplay. (*Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 866-811-4111.*)


Orange Julius

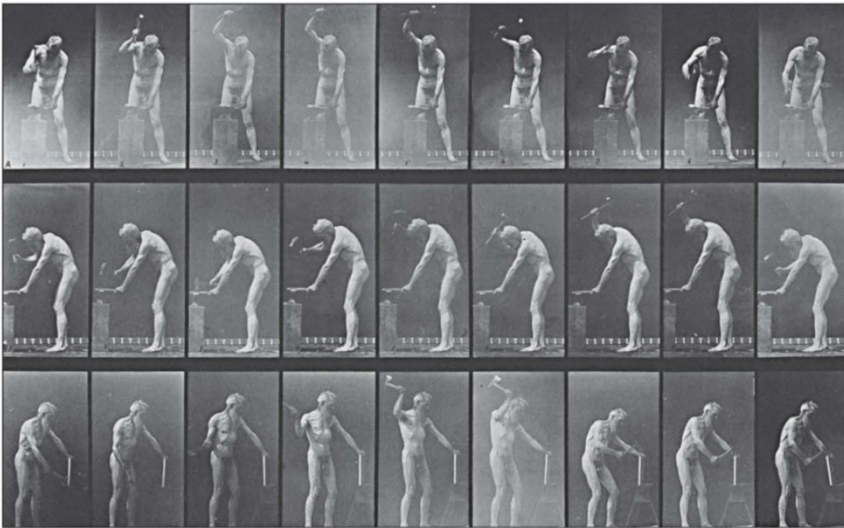
In Basil Kreimendahl's assured and affecting memory play, Julius (Stephen Payne), a Viet-

nam veteran exposed to Agent Orange, is dying of cancer. This final illness invites Nut (Jess Barbagallo), his transgender son, to parse their knotty relationship. If the title, a misstep, suggests a frothy mall concoction, this is a serious show, not a sudsy one. On a set that resembles a dingy suburban garage, the director, Dustin Wills, smartly stages the play's lunges from recollection to confession to imagined wartime scenes, liberally borrowed from eighties films. Barbagallo ("O, Earth") movingly suggests a desire for connection made impossible by dynamics of gender and family, as when Nut lets the litany of questions left unasked evolve into a quietly penitent chant: "Then I could've asked. Then I could've asked. Then I could've asked." (*Rattlestick, 224 Waverly Pl. 212-627-2556.*)

The Oregon Trail

Over the past ten years or so, Bekah Brunstetter has established herself as a sympathetic, keen-eyed chronicler of a flailing American middle class, stuck in tough jobs and straining to make sense of life. Here she turns her attention to Jane (Liba Vaynberg), whom we first meet as a geeky 1997 middle-schooler determined to finish the computer game *The Oregon Trail*, in which a pioneer family heads west in a wagon. The play then fast-forwards to Jane at thirty, overeducated, underemployed, and mired in depression. Swiftly directed by Geordie Broadwater, the show toggles between our world and the frontier, contrasting the aimless modern Jane with her 1848 avatar (Emily Louise Perkins), who doesn't have the luxury of wallowing on a couch. Brunstetter clearly has affection





Eadweard Muybridge, selection of 50 collotype plates from *Animal Locomotion*, 1887.
Estimate \$30,000 to \$45,000.

Icons & Images: Photographs & Photobooks
FEBRUARY 14
Specialist: Daile Kaplan • dkaplan@swanngalleries.com

Preview: Feb 9 to 11, 12-5; Feb 13, 12-5; Feb 14, 10-12
104 East 25th St, New York, NY 10010 • tel 212 254 4710
SWANNGALLERIES.COM

for her characters, watching them struggle to grow up against very different odds. (*McGinn/Cazale*, 2162 Broadway, at 76th St. 866-811-4111.)

[Porto]

The setting of Kate Benson's piece is a "serious" neighborhood bar, the kind with Edison lamps, a tin ceiling, foie gras, and a preposterously arrogant bartender (Noel Joseph Allain). The protagonist (Julia Sirna-Frest) is referred to as Porto, and she really doesn't mean to drink alone there as often as she does. We learn all this—and much else, including a detailed recipe for sausage—by way of an invisible, omniscient, and wonderfully effective and immersive narrator (voiced beautifully by Benson), who offers a sharp-witted portrait of a woman paralyzed on her bar stool by book-fueled ethical concerns. It all culminates in an uproarious imagined debate between Gloria Steinem and Simone de Beauvoir over how Porto should treat her one-night stand the morning after. (*The Bushwick Starr*, 207 Starr St., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111. Through Feb. 4.)

Tell Hector I Miss Him

Between the stone walls of a Spanish fort in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, twelve characters roil with desire: for sex, rum, cocaine, and marijuana (sometimes laced with Vicodin), but most of all for—you guessed it—love. Paola Lázaro's debut play is a sprawling, often bawdy ensemble piece that frequently shifts among its many interwoven plots and functions best as an actors' showcase. (The cast includes two fine performers from "Orange Is the New Black," Selenis Leyva and Dascha Polanco.) Not all of its stories feel equally necessary—least of all an odd tale of a young woman who pretends to be a cat—and their dramatic peaks tend to get a tad overwrought, but there are enough juicy twists and big laughs to keep it humming. (*Atlantic Stage 2*, at 330 W. 16th St. 866-811-4111.)

Yours Unfaithfully

Behind the round spectacles and comically perched hat of the English character actor Miles Malleon churned the mind of an acute playwright and screenwriter. The Mint's artistic director, Jonathan Bank, has uncovered this probing comedy of Malleon's, from 1933, never before produced, and is directing its world premiere. At the center is a couple (Elisabeth Gray and Max von Essen) struggling to live up to their ideal conception of an open marriage. But the play also explores the complicated bonds between friends, between old lovers, between the pious and the irreligious, and between father and son. The splendid cast of five inhabits the characters with passion and grace. In bringing neglected works to light, the Mint performs a neat trick: modern audiences experience what it must have been like to see a play in another era, when careful listening was expected—and rewarded. (*Beckett*, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200.)

ALSO NOTABLE

Dear Evan Hansen Music Box. • **Evening at the Talk House** Pershing Square Signature Center. • **Everybody** Pershing Square Signature Center. • **Fade** Cherry Lane. • **Jitney** Samuel J. Friedman. • **Made in China** 59E59. • **Man from Nebraska** Second Stage. • **Mope** Ensemble Studio Theatre. • **Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812** Imperial. • **The Present** Ethel Barrymore. • **The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart** The Heath at the McKittrick Hotel. • **The Tempest** St. Ann's Warehouse. • **Yen** Lucille Lortel.

NIGHT LIFE

ROCK AND POP

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

Cloud Nothings

"Life Without Sound" is the newest offering from Dylan Baldi and his band of Ohio alt-punks, released last week on Carpark Records, a label with many acts as close to crossover as their scene can stomach. Baldi doesn't seem to be reaching too far: throughout the album, he sounds quite satisfied with its quick-strummed riffs and ripping fills (the drummer Jayson Gerycz may be the band's best asset). But the front man shakes awake on "Modern Act," a standout single that pulls off a solid mantra for the bored and bummed: "I want a life, that's all I need lately / I am alive, but all alone." (*Webster Hall*, 125 E. 11th St. 212-353-1600. Feb. 1.)

Don Giovanni Label Showcase

The New Jersey-based independent record label Don Giovanni began the way many underground labels do: the co-founders, Zach Gajewski and Joseph Steinhart, were seeking a way to release a seven-inch record by their own band, in addition to records their friends were making. In the label's nearly fifteen years of existence, that sensibility hasn't changed much. Indeed, Don Giovanni is anchored by the founders' pre-natural sense of where the most immediate voices in punk rock are brewing, and have made it their mission to champion intrepid groups such as Downtown Boys and Alice Bag. The label showcases a selection of its fierce talent over two nights at Brooklyn's Knitting Factory, where the roster includes the rising groups Aye Nako, Screaming Females, Mal Blum, and the recent label signees Lee Bains III & the Glory Fires. (*361 Metropolitan Ave.*, Brooklyn. *knitting-factory.com*. Feb. 2-3.)

Sister Nancy

On "Bam Bam," the 1993 single that made this Jamaican dancehall singer recognizable to bashment regulars worldwide, the analog and the digital meet in perfect gridlock: soft bursts of horn give way to Nancy's childlike voice, drenched with reverb as if it were bouncing through dawn across an open-air festival. The song is a prophetic boast, and became a summer staple, recently lifted by Kanye West for "Famous." Nancy appears at The Nice Up, a dancehall party hosted by Boiler Room, with sets from **Kranium**, **Jillionaire**, and more. (*The DL*, 95 Delancey St. *boiler-room.tv/session/the-nice-up*. Feb. 2.)

Wiki

This Upper West Side native stepped out from his Ratking trio to deliver a solo recording, "Lil Me," at the tail end of 2015. Throughout the record, Wiki assesses the city's constant regeneration, and is just as schizophrenic as any New Yorker with a conscience. The nasal-voiced twenty-three-year-old adores and abhors his city in equal measure, considering the "old blocks" he grew up on while wandering past the "new kids" who now share his sidewalks. Terse, frost-

bitten beats drag inventive new rhythms from grime and noise influences, and Wiki's thick, buoyant cadence keeps the subject matter from getting too heavy. The rapper, modest in stature, is a ball of rage in concert, prone to whacking his own head with his microphone mid-verse. (*Brooklyn Bazaar*, 150 Greenpoint Ave., Brooklyn. *bkbazaar.com*. Feb. 3.)

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

Ambrose Akinmusire Quartet

If all he brought to the table were his poised and daring trumpet playing, Akinmusire would surely have turned heads, but his two Blue Note albums—"When the Heart Emerges Glistening," from 2011, and "The Imagined Savior Is Far Easier to Paint," from 2014—made it obvious that virtuosity was only one of the winning cards he could play. A shrewd composer, Akinmusire was also a politically aware conceptualist who wove deft social commentary into his post-bop tapestry, by way of guest vocalists and spoken-word passages. Where he's earlier employed saxophone and guitar as instrumental foils, in his wiry quartet he's now also flanked by the pianist **Sam Harris**. (*Village Vanguard*, 178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. 212-255-4037. Feb. 5.)

Monty Alexander

Versatility defines the artistry of the pianist Alexander, and his sixty-year résumé confirms his uncanny ability to assert his voice in diverse settings. This mini retrospective offers just a sliver of his multifarious experiences, but each is choice: a glance at the 1969 album "That's The Way It Is," which featured a young Alexander alongside the co-leaders Milt Jackson and Ray Brown; a revisit to a stirring 1977 live date with Jackson and Dizzy Gillespie; and a loving reworking of the reggae sounds that originated during the pianist's youth at Studio One, the legendary recording studio in Alexander's native Jamaica. (*Jazz Standard*, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. Feb. 1-4.)

David Berkman

For both this engagement and his current album, "Old Friends and New Friends," the long-respected pianist, composer, and author David Berkman doesn't stint on the woodwind power: joining him are three of today's most engaging saxophone stylists, **Adam Kolker**, **Dayna Stephens**, and **Billy Drewes**, who, between them, will be playing seven different wind instruments. The sets will sample work from the album and newly minted originals. (*Smoke*, 2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts. 212-864-6662. Feb. 3-5.)

Andy Statman

Statman's musical split identity may not make much sense on paper, but a stirring passion unites and clarifies it all. On mandolin, Statman—an Orthodox Jew—can hold his own with contemporary bluegrass greats; on clarinet, he embraces both klezmer and free jazz at their ecstatic best. The Queens-born, Brooklyn-based Statman leads a trio with his equally resourceful cohorts, **Jim Whitney**, on bass, and **Larry Eagle**, on drums. (*Barbès*, 376 9th St., Brooklyn. 347-422-0248. Feb. 1.)

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

Met Breuer

“Marisa Merz: The Sky Is a Great Space”

Merz is the least known and, perhaps not incidentally, the only female member of Arte Povera, a movement shepherded into existence, in 1967, as Italy’s ambitious riposte to American Pop and minimalism. About a dozen artists participated, creating large, often sprawling abstract sculptures in humble materials—dirt, rocks, tree branches, used clothes, rope, burlap, industrial detritus—putatively to counter the sterility of consumer culture, but also, more practically, to master the capacious exhibition spaces that were becoming an international norm. Merz was routinely identified as the wife and, since 2003, the widow of Arte Povera’s leading figure, Mario Merz, and for years her own work was seldom exhibited and afforded only glancing consideration. Here she emerges as the liveliest artist in a movement that was often marred by intellectual and poetic pretensions. Merz is still at work, in her home town of Turin, at ninety-one. That’s a late age for a debut retrospective, but an occasion that might have seemed a revisionist historical footnote turns out to be more like the best saved for last. The show opens with immense hanging sculptures of clustered ductlike forms in shiny aluminum sheeting, made with shears and staples. Cutout swaths loop and overlap, like snakeskin scales, to gorgeous, looming, somewhat sinister effect. Merz refuses to call herself or her art feminist; she even banished the word from the title of one of several fine essays in the show’s catalogue. But her very independence makes her an ideal avatar for feminist analysis. She pushed against limits in ways that revealed what and where the limits were, and she turned the friction to shrewd and stirring account. *Through May 7.*

New Museum

“A.K. Burns: Shabby but Thriving”

The white carpeting of Burns’s installation was dirty on Day One: the artist had stationed leaking bags of soil around the museum’s fifth floor. A battered couch, stripped of its cushioning and glowing like a spaceship, faces the show’s centerpiece, “Living Room,” a nonnarrative, two-channel video set in a fecund postapocalyptic present and starring an ensemble cast of children and queer artists. It was shot in a prewar building on the Bowery which the museum maintains for its artists-in-residence; Burns treats its interior structure as an analogue for a human being. Upstairs, the kids (in the collective role of the psyche) blur boundaries, dressed in prints that match the sofa’s upholstery, while mimicking insects or fish. The adults struggle down stairways (intestines), schlepping garbage bags and furniture scraps. The finale is a party in a dank basement (the uterus), where dancers perform wearing headlamps and T-shirts emblazoned with fragmented slogans: “No,” “Her,” “Or Bust.” Burns’s exhibition arrives as many of us are urgently considering the fate of both bodies and the body politic; she has generously provided a punching bag for those who would like to take out some of their frustrations. On Feb. 5, Burns has planned two sessions with lawyers and activists, to help attendees prepare for the resistance. *Through April 23.*

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

Ivan Morley

The Burbank-born artist has a fascination with the frontier days of Los Angeles, as described in Horace Bell’s 1877 memoir, “Reminiscences of a Ranger.” In one anecdote, a former slave makes his fortune shipping cats from L.A. to rat-plagued San Francisco. Elements of this story and others appear and reappear in Morley’s elaborate embroideries on canvas and in his laborious paintings on panel and on tooled leather (a material that conjures thoughts of cowboys and gunslingers). But the images are surrounded by so many psychedelic blotches of color—notably, an explosive pattern of bilious pinks and greens—that the tenuously figurative results look more like expressionist odes to the process of memory than references to a bygone, rough-and-ready Wild West. *Through Feb. 18. (Bortolami, 520 W. 20th St. 212-727-2050.)*

Deana Lawson / Judy Linn / Paul Mpagi Sepuya

The surprise element in this clean, spacious, and intellectually dense show of works by three photographers is the medium itself. Although Lawson, Linn, and Sepuya couldn’t be less alike stylistically, they share a fascination with the camera’s ability to record the literal while simultaneously emphasizing the strange. Linn’s poetic evocations of everyday life—a house on a slant, a dog with the personality of a Gabor sister—are the stars of the show. Sepuya and Lawson create much more self-conscious atmospheres using props, in studio settings. In those enclosed environments, the artists each explore issues relating to race and sex without providing any answers. They’re interested in the mystery of being—and in enhancing it. *Through Feb. 18. (Sikkema Jenkins, 530 W. 22nd St. 212-929-2262.)*

GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

Hannah Black

The show’s title, “Soc or Barb,” nods to Rosa Luxemburg’s antiwar declaration from 1916: “Bourgeois society stands at the crossroads, either transition to Socialism or regression into Barbarism.” The young Manchester-born, Berlin-based artist responds with a fragmented, allegorical installation. A throng of lumpy sculptural figures—aliens, barbarians, or, perhaps, both—wear infinity symbols on T-shirts, while a video titled “New Dawn” plays on a trio of monitors. As day breaks on another planet and morning’s pink light slowly creeps into the frame, we try to connect the dots of the accompanying sound collage: personal conversations, philosophical texts, a fascist British marching song, a Céline Dion ballad. It’s an inventory of metaphorical dawns, from the New Soviet man to far-right “new orders” to a new romance. But Black’s installation also subverts such grand pretenses, presenting an endless loop of sunrises, witnessed by a barbarian horde. *Through Feb. 19. (Bodega, 167 Rivington St. bodega-us.org.)*

Kate Gilmore and Karen Heagle

After the election, these two longtime friends decided to exhibit Heagle’s paintings of vultures and other birds of prey (a series she began after the 2008 financial crisis) alongside three lipstick-red cubes, enamel on steel, by Gilmore, who is best known for her performance-based videos. The paintings, many adorned with gold and copper leaf, provide a suitably ritual context for “Beat,” a two-hour event, conceived by Gilmore, which begins every Saturday and Sunday at four: three women rhythmically pound on the cubes for two hours, using combat boots and brass knuckles. As of press time, they had only succeeded in chipping away small bits of enamel; Gilmore herself spent a solid week attacking a fourth cube with a sledgehammer (now on view in an adjacent room). The fact that it, too, remains largely intact is a sobering reminder that dismantling powerful structures is no easy feat. *Through Feb. 19. (On Stellar Rays, 213 Bowery, at Rivington St. 212-598-3012.)*

Matt Keegan

In this suite of charmingly self-effacing collaborations, Keegan excels at letting his materials—whether powder-coated steel or members of his own family—speak for themselves. He spent a few days in the gallery with the composer and artist Sergei Tcherepnin, gently banging on pieces of wall-mounted steel and recording the results; a few simple wires transformed the sculptures into speakers emitting their own clanking soundtrack. (Despite their resemblance to construction-paper cutouts, the objects’ large size and dark colors lend them a surprising dignity.) In his two-channel video “Generation,” Keegan shares such gems as his precocious nephew’s endearingly tongue-tied definition of love, his mother’s strangely heart-breaking declaration that she doesn’t fear clouds, and his divorced father’s advice on sex: “Never miss an opportunity.” *Through Feb. 12. (Participant, Inc., 253 E. Houston St. 212-254-4334.)*

“Compassionate Protocols”

Chance connections, artistic and erotic, are the rules of the game in this group show curated by the artists Moyra Davey and Jason Simon. It is the second show the pair has organized inspired by the French writer and photographer Hervé Guibert, whose portraits of his Parisian lovers from the nineteen-seventies and eighties are the show’s main attraction. Other standouts include Chris Currier’s closeup picture of a kiss between two stubble-cheeked men and William E. Jones’s pairing of a Mallarmé poem with images generated by filtering sections of its text through a search engine. At times, tragedy seeps into the romance: a photograph taken by Simon, in 1990, memorializes two of his friends who, like Guibert, died of AIDS. *Through Feb. 19. (Callicoon, 49 Delancey St. 212-219-0326.)*

“The Love Object”

In this appealingly raw group exhibition, curated by Tom Brewer, love is a series of failures: wrong turns, acts of bravado, near-misses. Zoe Barcza’s creepy red painting reproduces a still from Stanley Kubrick’s film “Eyes Wide Shut.” In Georgia Wall’s transfixing video, the artist dances in her underwear as pop lyrics by the Cranberries and lines from Roland Barthes’s “A Lover’s Discourse” scroll down the screen. Heji Shin’s photograph of a still bloody newborn, Hanna Liden’s absurdist picture of pine boughs, and the odd, winning sculptures of both Allison Branham and Martine Syms suggest that love may simply transcend comprehension. *Through Feb. 18. (Team, 83 Grand St. 212-279-9219.)*

MOVIES

OPENING

The Comedian Robert De Niro stars in this comic drama, as a elderly comedian who tries to revive his career. Directed by Taylor Hackford; co-starring Leslie Mann, Danny DeVito, and Edie Falco. *Opening Feb. 3. (In limited release.)* • **Dark Night** Reviewed this week in *The Current Cinema. Opening Feb. 3. (In limited release.)* • **I Am Not Your Negro** Reviewed in *Now Playing. Opening Feb. 3. (In limited release.)* • **Journey to the West 2** Tsui Hark directed this fantasy sequel, about a Buddhist monk who leads a band of demon-hunters. Written by Stephen Chow. *Opening Feb. 3. (In limited release.)*

NOW PLAYING

Anatahan

In his last film, from 1953, based on the true story of Japanese sailors shipwrecked on a tiny Pacific island during the Second World War, Josef von Sternberg sparked erotic conflagrations to match those of his earlier work with Marlene Dietrich. The dozen seamen who are struggling to survive in the jungle outpost stumble upon a hut occupied by a man and a woman who've fled Japanese society. The woman, named Keiko, becomes the communal object of lust; aware of her power, she sets her pursuers against each other and satisfies her own desires while watching the veneer of civilization yield to an atavistic spectacle of death. When the war ends, the lost crew members refuse to believe it; prolonging their isolation and stoking it with martial vanity, they sink ever deeper into a monstrous state of nature. Filming in a Kyoto studio, Sternberg slashes the screen with Expressionist tangles of foliage and menacing shadows of rough-hewn latticework. They evoke the warped furies that social refinements and aesthetic delights—the manners and finery that Sternberg's earlier heroines flaunted—both repress and embody. In English and Japanese.—*Richard Brody (Metrograph; Feb. 3-9.)*

Hidden Figures

A crucial episode of the nineteen-sixties, centered on both the space race and the civil-rights struggle, comes to light in this energetic and impassioned drama. It's the story of three black women from Virginia who, soon after Sputnik shocked the world, are hired by NASA, where they do indispensable work in a segregated workplace. Mary Jackson (Janelle Monáe), endowed with engineering talent, has been kept out of the profession by racial barriers; Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer) heads the office of "computers," or gifted mathematicians, but can't be promoted, owing to her race; and the most gifted of calculators, Katherine Johnson (Taraji P. Henson), is recruited for the main NASA rocket-science center, where, as the only black employee, she endures relentless insults and indignities. Working from a nonfiction book by Margot Lee Shetterly, the director, Theodore Melfi (who co-wrote the script with Allison Schroeder), evokes the women's professional conflicts while filling in the vitality of their intimate lives; the film also highlights, in illuminating detail, the baked-in

assumptions of everyday racism which, regardless of changes in law, ring infuriatingly true today. With Kevin Costner, as Katherine's principled boss; Mahershala Ali, as her suitor; and Glen Powell, as John Glenn, a hero in space and on the ground.—*R.B. (In limited 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 ones 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 also 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.)*

Illusions

In this thirty-four-minute featurette, from 1982, Julie Dash ingeniously revives classic-Hollywood themes and styles in order to subject them to a sharp historical critique. It's set in the fictitious National Studios, during the Second World War, where a black woman executive, Mignon Dupree (Lonette McKee), is passing as white. She's being harassed by a newly hired producer, a white Army lieutenant, while seeking to become a producer herself, in the hope of telling stories in which ordinary people—including members of ethnic minorities—will recognize their own experiences. With images filmed (by Ahmed El Maanouni) in a silky, high-contrast black-and-white, Dash infuses the visual repertory of musicals and melodramas with modernist inflections—most powerfully, in a scene of vast symbolic impact, set in a sound studio. There, engineers are dubbing the voice of a black singer, Esther Jeter (Rosanne Katon), onto the image of a white actress. Dash blends intimate portraiture with echoing reflections and multiple exposures that capture Hollywood's harrowing game of multiple and hidden identities.—*R.B. (BAM Cinematek; Feb. 5-6.)*

The King of Comedy

Rupert Pupkin (Robert De Niro) can't get started. He's a thirty-four-year-old who dreams of a standup slot on the late-night talk show hosted by Jerry Langford (Jerry Lewis). Living and practicing in the basement of his mother's New Jersey house, Rupert works as a messenger and boasts of his future glory to anyone who'll listen. When his efforts to get Jerry's attention fail, he teams up with the ferocious Masha (San-

dra Bernhard), another of Jerry's stalkers, and they take matters into their own hands. This plot sparks Martin Scorsese's cruelly lucid, agonizingly sympathetic riff, from 1982, on the immature idiot and the public artist whose lives are equally warped by fame. The isolated Rupert is as much of a slick glad-hander as any Las Vegas headliner, and Jerry, oppressed by a media machine of his own making, is forced into pristine isolation. Scorsese infuses this tale with the passionate energy of New York street life and wonder at the powerful workings of show business and studio craft. Yet his main subject is the ineffable factor of genius, which Jerry has, Rupert lacks, and no desire or effort can replace. It suggests the director's own terrified there-but-for-the-grace-of-God self-portrait.—*R.B. (Museum of the Moving Image; Feb. 3 and Feb. 5.)*

Manchester by the Sea

Kenneth Lonergan's new film is carefully constructed, compellingly acted, and often hard to watch. The hero—if you can apply the word to someone so defiantly unheroic—is a janitor, Lee Chandler (Casey Affleck), who is summoned from Boston up the coast of Massachusetts after the death of his brother Joe (Kyle Chandler). This is the definition of a winter's tale, and the ground is frozen too hard for the body to be buried. Piece by piece, in a succession of flashbacks, the shape of Lee's past becomes apparent; he was married to Randi (Michelle Williams), who still lives locally, and something terrible tore them apart. Joe, too, had an ex-wife, now an ex-drinker (Gretchen Mol), and their teen-age son, Patrick—the most resilient character in the movie, smartly played by Lucas Hedges—is alarmed to learn that Lee is to be his legal guardian. What comes as a surprise, amid a welter of sorrow, is the harsh comedy that colors much of the dialogue, and the near-farical frequency with which things go wrong. Far-reaching tragedy adjoins simple human error: such is the territory that Lonergan so skillfully maps out.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 11/28/16.) (In wide release.)*

The Salesman

To those who saw Asghar Farhadi's earlier movies, like "About Elly" (2009) or the Oscar-winning "A Separation" (2011), his new work will come as something of a surprise. Set in modern-day Tehran, it begins with a stage set, for a production of "Death of a Salesman," in which Willy and Linda Loman are played by another married couple—Emad Etesami (Shahab Hosseini) and his wife, Rana (Taraneh Alidoosti). Only lightly, however, does Farhadi touch on their life in the theatre; most of the action unfolds elsewhere, as they are forced to move from their unstable apartment into temporary accommodations. There, Rana is surprised by an intruder and apparently attacked, leaving her fearful and her husband bent on revenge. For a while, as Emad tries to track down the culprit, the movie becomes a low-key thriller, halting and desperate, only to shift registers again, in the final half hour, during which the truth—more pitiful than anyone was prepared for—comes out. At such times, in Farhadi's expert hands, you feel your certainties crumble and your sympathies sway, and you wish Arthur Miller were alive to watch the result. In Farsi.—*A.L. (1/30/17) (In limited release.)*

Split

The latest M. Night Shyamalan film stars James McAvoy as just about everybody. He plays a man

with twenty-three personalities, and you can wager that, had the movie provided sufficient time and space, he would have been happy to parade them all. In the event, we have to make do with a handful: Patricia, Barry, Kevin, and nine-year-old Hedwig. As a bonus, there is also the Beast, who, with his bulging veins, represents more than a morphing of the mind. One day, this divided being kidnaps three teen-age girls (Haley Lu Richardson, Jessica Sula, and Anya Taylor-Joy) and keeps them locked in a basement. (For anyone versed in “The Sixth Sense,” the director’s haunting exploration of grief, this part of the plot, as creaky as an old exploitation flick, will feel like a backward step.) We also follow Barry, with some of his other selves in attendance, as he consults a therapist (Betty Buckley), although the film remains perilously cloistered; would it not have been fun to see him—all of him—try his luck in the wider world? Devotees of the Shyamalan twist will be reassured by the ending, though ordinary viewers may well be left simply bemused.—*A.L.* (1/30/17) (In wide release.)

Stations of the Elevated

The documentary filmmaker Manfred Kirchheimer’s New York street poem, from 1981, begins with a painterly, sun-dappled celebration of graffiti on subway trains. But the film’s range of subjects and ideas quickly expands to probe the exhilaration of city life. The accidental magic of reflections and shadows meshes with the pure forms of architecture and the overlooked artistry of advertisements to conjure a feeling of unrelenting sensory adventure. Shots of abandoned buildings, turned into playgrounds by neighborhood kids, evoke the care and thought that went into their construction, lending the ambient degradation an extra layer of tragedy. Music by Charles Mingus melds with the urban racket to provide rhythmic counterpoint to Kirchheimer’s incisive editing. In his vision, the aesthetic and the utilitarian fuse in a riot of abstract figures and incidental symbols; a shadow on a red brick building of a person leaning on the railing of an overhead subway station evokes the craggy grandeur of Rodin’s “The Thinker.”—*R.B.* (MOMA; Feb. 3 and Feb. 7.)

Toni Erdmann

Maren Ade’s new film is a German comedy, two hours and forty minutes long, and much of it is set in Bucharest. These are unusual credentials, but the result has been received with rapture since it showed at Cannes. What it grapples with, after all, is matters of universal anxiety: the bonds, or lack of them, between parent and child, and the ways in which the modern world—in particular, the world of business—can compress the spirit. Sandra Hüller plays Ines, who works as a smoother of deals in the oil industry; her father is Winfried (Peter Simonischek), a shambling hulk who thinks that wearing false buckteeth is amusing, and who tracks her to Romania in a bid to disrupt her life and, perhaps, to alleviate its ills. His method involves assuming a new identity (hence the title) and invading the space where his daughter makes her deals. We get, among other things, sexual humiliation involving *petits fours*, and a party that takes an unexpected turn. If the film has a fault, it lies with Ade’s reliance on embarrassment as a weapon of attack. For a generation reared on “The Office,” that may not be a problem. In German.—*A.L.* (In limited release.)

DANCE



Carolyn Lucas and Lisa Schmidt, of Trisha Brown Dance Company, in “Glacial Decoy,” in 1984.

When Worlds Collide

Paris Opera Ballet performs a work by Trisha Brown.

SOME YEARS AGO, Trisha Brown began suffering small strokes. In time, she found it increasingly difficult to rehearse her works. She retired as the head of her dance company in 2013, and since then part of the troupe’s business, overseen by the associate artistic directors Carolyn Lucas and Diane Madden, has been to set her work on other companies. A few years ago, Lucas, with Lisa Kraus, one of Brown’s early dancers, restaged Brown’s “Glacial Decoy” (1979) for the Paris Opera Ballet. I asked Kraus how the rehearsals went. “What I told them to do,” she answered, “was exactly the opposite of what their training told them to do. So we did a lot of undoing.”

French ballet students are instructed to hold their backs straight, their buttocks in, and their arms and legs and shoulders and heads in carefully modelled positions that have been elaborated by dancing masters, and recorded in rule books, for more than two centuries. By contrast, Trisha Brown’s dancers were taught by her to walk down walls, twirl down poles, semaphore to one another across rooftops, and, quite often, fling their limbs around like bags of wet laundry.

The rehearsals in Paris were recorded by the film director Marie-Hélène Rebois, and together with archival footage of the piece’s original performances—in which Brown dances, thrillingly, among the others—they form the backbone of “In the Steps of Trisha Brown,” an eighty-minute movie that will be shown on Feb. 7 at the Dance on Camera Festival (Feb. 3-7), co-presented by Dance Films Association and the Film Society of Lincoln Center, at the Walter Reade Theatre. (There will be a Q.&A. with Kraus and Lucas after the show.) Some of the film is quietly funny. At one point, Kraus says to these elegant young women, “You might want to play with softening your knees a little and seeing if you get a bit of a ride with it.” The dancers listen respectfully. A few of them were probably saying, in their hearts, “Wanna bet?”

But the result, unveiled at the Paris Opera in 2013, is beautiful. “Glacial Decoy” was the first work that Brown made for a proscenium stage, and she plays with this arrangement. The dancers move back and forth across the rear of the stage, pulling in more dancers from the wings, then dropping others back off. It’s as if there were a chain of dancers encircling the whole world, and we were seeing just a small segment of it.

—Joan Acocella

New York City Ballet

This is the week to see what's new at City Ballet. The company's prolific choreographer-in-residence, Justin Peck, debuts his newest piece, "The Times Are Racing." (The title comes from an album by the indie rocker Dan Deacon.) It's a bit of an anomaly for Peck, a ballet danced in sneakers, to pop music, using elements of soft-shoe and street dance. Pontus Lidberg's "The Shimmering Asphalt," in contrast, is set to a score commissioned from the post-minimalist David Lang, a lyrical chamber work full of soaring legato passages for cello and violin. Lidberg's style is spare and fluid, with a tendency toward long, smooth phrases and soulful encounters. • Feb. 1-2 at 7:30 and Feb. 4 at 8: "Fearful Symmetries," "The Shimmering Asphalt," and "The Times Are Racing." • Feb. 3 at 8: "Scènes de Ballet," "The Cage," "Eight Easy Pieces," "Scherzo Fantastique," and "Stravinsky Violin Concerto." • Feb. 4 at 2 and Feb. 5 at 3: "Allegro Brillante," "Swan Lake," and "The Four Temperaments." (*David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-496-0600. Through Feb. 26.*)

Complexions Contemporary Ballet

The latest aesthetic justification advanced by the choreographer Dwight Rhoden for the senseless, slam-bang spectacles that he inflicts upon his always attractive and hyper-flexible dancers is that he is a collage artist. The first entry in his "Collage Series" is an electronica piece with a title that could serve for much of his work: "Gutter Glitter." Also debuting is "Star Dust," the first installment of a David Bowie tribute ballet. (*Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Feb. 1-5.*)

Batsheva Dance Company

Ohad Naharin's "Last Work" may not be his final opus, but it is tinged with strong intimations of mortality. Futility and endurance are in play, too. One of its dancers runs on a treadmill throughout the entire work, which lasts just over an hour. Combined with a score that includes Romanian lullabies, Naharin's choreography, with its customarily frank inhibition and strange beauty, becomes more tender than usual. But by the end it also explodes, festooned with flags and sticky tape and unruly political connotations. (*BAM Howard Gilman Opera House, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Feb. 1-4.*)

Douglas Dunn + Dancers

The veteran choreographer is a trickster, with an impish, agile mind that revels in paradoxes. His latest creation, "Antipodes," engages with opposites, entangling his usual crew of dancers in clever and contradictory patterns, aided by the set design of Mimi Gross and an original score by Steven Taylor. (*Danspace Project, St. Mark's Church In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 866-811-4111. Feb. 2-4.*)

Richard Alston Dance Company

The company of this beguiling, tastefully musical British choreographer returns to Montclair State University's "Peak Performances" series with accompaniment by the Shanghai Quartet and Repast Baroque Ensemble. "Chacony," a world premiere, pairs music by Benjamin Britten with music by one of his heroes, Henry Purcell. "An Italian Madrid" draws both its score and its story of courtly romance from the sojourn of the composer Domenico Scarlatti in Spain. The Portuguese princess for whom Scarlatti wrote sonatas is played, in an inspired bit of casting, by

the beautiful Kathak dancer Vidya Patel. (*Alexander Kasser Theatre, 1 Normal Ave., Montclair, N.J. 973-656-5112. Feb. 2-5.*)

Dance on Camera Festival

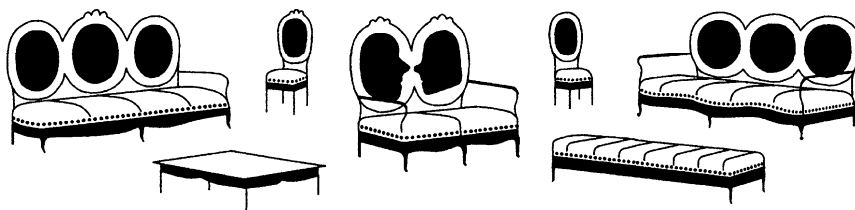
As the venerable film festival, co-presented by Dance Films Association and the Film Society of Lincoln Center, enters its forty-fifth year, it continues to show a mix of historical films, experimental dance shorts, and intimate portraits. One of the highlights is a new documentary on the Brazilian-born Marcelo Gomes, a longtime member of American Ballet Theatre known for his warmth, musicality, and exemplary partnering (as seen in "Anatomy of a Male Ballet Dancer"). (Gomes will appear on opening night.) And there will be a bit of glam in the form of "Justin Timberlake & the Tennessee Kids," a new Jonathan

Demme film that captures the well-oiled machine behind a Timberlake concert. (*Film Society of Lincoln Center, Walter Reade Theatre. 212-875-5610. Feb. 3-7.*)

"Dances by Very Young Choreographers"

The modern-dance instructor Ellen Robbins encourages kids—some as young as five—to let out their inner choreographer. Instead of technique, her classes focus on storytelling, expression, and the translation of ideas into movement. The kids develop their ideas, choose music, and consult on the lighting and costumes. Twice a year, they show their work at New York Live Arts. The program on the evening of Feb. 4 is devoted to pieces by alumni who have gone on to dance and choreograph in college and beyond. (*219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Feb. 4-5.*)

ABOVE & BEYOND

**"Art of Food"**

New York-Presbyterian Hospital and the local newspaper *Our Town* present a "quintessential New York evening," during which Upper East Side chefs prepare and serve dishes based on famous works of art curated by Sotheby's. The concept leans on the presence of food in enduring works of art—soup cans, fruit bowls, feasts—and reverses the flow of inspiration, with chefs from 1633, Crave Fishbar, Magnolia Bakery, Shake Shack, and other restaurants creating original menu items, accompanied by live music courtesy of Metro Strings. A portion of the event's proceeds will be donated to City Harvest. (*Sotheby's, 1334 York Ave. artoffoodny.com. Feb. 4 at 7:30.*)

Winter Village

Bryant Park, lowered and landscaped in 1992 to discourage crime and welcome midtown strollers, will host various winter-themed stations and activities surrounding its famous ice rink; attendees can take classes that include curling, Frozen Fingers Juggling, and Frozen Toes Yoga. One of the quirkiest evenings calls for big hair, Members Only jackets, and acid-washed jeans: SK80s Night turns the rink into an homage to the eighties, with prop-stuffed photo booths and a d.j. playing period hits throughout the session. Admission to skate is free. (*42nd St. at Sixth Ave. wintervillage.org. Through Feb. 4.*)

READINGS AND TALKS

Word Bookstore

This week, Word conjures D.C. in the nineteen-eighties, where punks shouted themselves hoarse to carve out a new strain of rock music that spoke to their disenfranchisement. In a new oral-history

book, "Spoke," Scott Crawford, the documentarian behind "Salad Days," collects firsthand accounts and rare imagery from punk history. He is joined by the photographers Jim Saah, Cynthia Connolly, and Lucian Perkins, among others, to talk about this scrapbook of young bands with manic energy and loud thoughts. (*126 Franklin St., Brooklyn. wordbookstores.com. Feb. 2 at 7.*)

Community Bookstore

A group of authors mulling over the craft of memoir writing includes Leigh Stein, the author of "Land of Enchantment," a chronicling of a troubled relationship with a tragic end; Jason Diamond, whose book "Searching for John Hughes" playfully recounts his youth as a Hughes fanatic; Mira Ptacin, the author of "Poor Your Soul," which describes complications and wrenching choices faced during a pregnancy; and Poro-chista Khakpour, who examines a lifetime of chronic illness due to late-stage Lyme disease in "Sick." (*143 Seventh Ave., Brooklyn. communitybookstore.net. Feb. 2 at 7.*)

92nd Street Y

As Hollywood glamour and political engagement chipped away at nineteen-fifties conservatism, Patricia Bosworth worked as an actress on Broadway and in films, rubbing shoulders with Audrey Hepburn, Marilyn Monroe, and Lee Strasberg. When she turned to journalism, in the mid-sixties, Bosworth had long been immersed in the cultural movements that were defining the era, and had seen behind the curtain—as had the CBS correspondent Lesley Stahl, the author Erica Jong, and the film critic Rex Reed, who join her for "The Hidden 1950s," a discussion of sex and art, then and now. (*Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 92y.org. Feb. 2 at 8.*)

FOOD & DRINK



TABLES FOR TWO

Sexy Taco/Dirty Cash

161 Malcolm X Blvd. (212-280-4700)

OVER THE PAST sixteen years, Brian Washington-Palmer has overseen the evolution of this corner of Malcolm X Boulevard, at 118th Street. First was Native, his long-standing and much beloved Caribbean-cum-Mediterranean spot. That was followed by La Bodega 47 Social Club, a trendy lounge that served about a hundred and fifty different types of rum. Then, after a renovation in 2015, Washington-Palmer announced that his restaurant would now serve “authentic San Francisco street food right in the heart of Harlem.” He rechristened it, too: “Sexy Taco” indicates that Northern Californian “street food” basically means Mexican; “Dirty Cash,” it seems, is a reference to some of the illicit business depicted in Claude McKay’s 1928 novel, “Home to Harlem.”

The new establishment reflects La Bodega’s lounge vibe, with high bar tables and a playlist that melds salsa and trip-hop. The décor is dominated by two giant pictures of scantily clad women. On the south wall, the subject, in a tight white shift, fiddles with a pink cocktail and gazes suggestively over her left shoulder. The suggestion is worthwhile: delicious frozen margaritas are served in three flavors from ice machines behind the bar and can be spiked with extra tequila for two dollars. “I’d go with the guava,” a

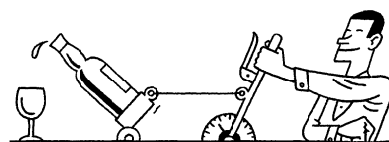
waiter counseled. “Even though mango’s my favorite fruit.”

In the other picture, on the north wall, the woman is in hot shorts, cocktail in hand, straddling a giant taco. Her head is tossed back in wild abandon, laughter frozen on her lips. It’s unclear which of the many tacos on the menu she sits astride, but the best of them is the *asado negro*. They come in pairs, overflowing with juicy Venezuelan-style braised lamb and sumac-cumin *crema*. A close second are the I’m Not a Jerk shrimp tacos, whose mild spiciness is offset by the sweetness of grilled pineapple salsa. Don’t be seduced, however, by the ground-beef-and-Rice-A-Roni-filled Sexy Ta-cow, which lacks flavor.

Washington-Palmer’s assumption is that diners want their food quick, easy, and with a sense of humor. At Sexy Taco, the formula often works, but there are some notable missteps, including a very dry pressed burrito. On a recent Monday evening, a millennial sporting a black studded nose ring swiped at her iPhone in her right hand and browsed with a fork in her left at a shapeless mass of sour cream, salsa, guacamole, and cheese. The dish turned out to be the Nekkit Nachos, a selection of toppings over rice or salad in place of chips. The blank expression on her face suggested that they’re best ordered fully clothed. After all, what is sexiness without a bit of covering—or a lot of fried tortillas? (*Entrées \$8–\$16.*)

—Nicolas Niarchos

BAR TAB



Duff’s Brooklyn

168 Marcy Ave., Brooklyn (718-599-2092)

On a recent Saturday night, at half past midnight, Jimmy Duff pulled up in a hearse to the heavy-metal bar that bears his name. (“Honk if you love dying and being dead,” a bumper sticker on the rear window instructed.) Duff describes his style outside of work as “very casual to borderline homeless,” but here he was in full regalia: leather top hat, large silver cross pendant, half-sleeve tattoos on display. Ask him what his idea of earthly happiness is and he’ll invite you to look around: Slayer on the jukebox, walls and ceiling garlanded in surrealist art and medieval weaponry, a mass of sombrely clad headbangers shrouded in red light. “A lot of these people are outsiders, and they found a home here,” Duff said. “Look at Moses.” He gestured toward a stony-faced man with a dark beard in full bloom. “Guy looks like a serial killer, just calmly waiting in line to use the can.” For three dollars, the uninitiated can spin Duff’s Wheel of Misfortune. A number of the prizes (e.g., a shot of green “Jesus Juice,” a dog biscuit) are not worth the wager. Perhaps the least gratifying among them—being locked in a small cage for fifteen minutes—has mercifully been discontinued; it was a fire hazard, a bartender explained. Recently, as a television screened a montage of vintage porn, two couples debated what decade it was from. A near-consensus emerged that it was definitely the eighties, though a woman in a silk-and-velvet corset made a strong case for the nineties, based on criteria unsuitable for print. Duff, who had curated it, confirmed that she was right. With daylight approaching, he said his good-byes. He would have liked to stay, but he had to walk his dog, a four-pound Chihuahua named Bella.—David Kortava



*infuse well-being
into every day*

There's living. And there's loving life. We're here to help with the second one. Our intriguing blends of herbs and botanicals support energy, stamina, focus, and overall well-being. Cup after cup, day after day, life is good.



*how good can
you feel?*



THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT INFO WARS

LAST MONDAY, according to the *Times*, President Donald Trump, meeting in the White House with congressional leaders, told a story about voting fraud that he had supposedly heard from Bernhard Langer, the German professional golfer. (Langer soon issued a statement repudiating Trump's account.) Throughout the week, the President repeated his calumny that he lost the popular vote only because millions of "illegals" voted for Hillary Clinton. Trump's obsession with this subject may arise from his pathological need to tally every score in his own favor, but he surely knows that his propaganda also advances the Republican Party's efforts to extend barriers to legitimate voting by Latinos and African-Americans, through voter-I.D. requirements and other state laws. Diverse studies have turned up no evidence of significant fraud in recent elections. On Wednesday, Trump nonetheless vowed to sign an executive order commissioning a federal investigation.

The major news organizations are still reckoning with how to report on the President's lies. Many newspapers and networks now forthrightly point out false statements by Trump and his spokespeople. Such fact checking is essential, but it is also a task of the President's making, one full of traps. Trump and his aides provoke conflict with the media to fire up supporters and renew the narrative of a people's champion at war with the bicoastal establishment.

One might wish that the solemn responsibility of leading a nuclear-armed world power would steer a successful seventy-year-old man away from routinely telling whoppers, yet it is hardly surprising that Trump has not changed since taking the oath of office. He has a long record as salesman, provocateur, self-promoter, and self-worshipper. His eruptions on Twitter and on live TV damage American democracy and credibility, but there are even more worrying aspects of the disinformation

emanating from and around the Administration. During the campaign, Trump's advisers mobilized in their service a phalanx of information warriors, including commentators on Fox News and digital upstarts such as Breitbart News, whose offerings included partisan and extremist content. Alongside them worked looser, less visible online networks of racists, anti-Semites, and nationalists. A question now is how Trump's image shapers, led by Stephen Bannon, the former Breitbart head who is the White House senior counsellor, intend to adapt that strategy—which included the promotion of big lies about President Obama's birth and Secretary Clinton's health—as policy, embedded across federal agencies.

Bannon has encouraged Trump's aggressive attacks on the press, even as the President seeks the media's attention and approval. Last week, in an interview with the *Times*, Bannon jokingly described himself as Darth Vader, and said that the media should "keep its mouth shut and just listen for a while." He added that traditional news organizations have "no power" and "zero integrity, zero intelligence." He apparently foresees a permanent campaign, energized by televised rallies and daily tweets, so that the President may evolve into a kind of digital-age Mussolini Lite.

Journalists are accustomed to being attacked, and the Administration's insults have served only to motivate many of them. But Bannon's methodology may be more effective in intimidating civil servants. The particular anxiety in Washington last week was that the White House might ally with climate-change deniers and hard-line ideologues in the Republican-led Congress to suppress federal science and medical research, stir up hate campaigns against immigrants and minorities, or sideline intelligence analysts who report inconvenient facts.

These fears may prove overblown, but Trump's first week has offered scant reassurance. On Inauguration Day, the



Environmental Protection Agency suspended all activity on its Twitter account, which had been posting about the Clean Air Act, water quality, and how to keep one's home safe from radon and carbon monoxide. The next day, after the National Park Service retweeted an accurate post about the size of the Inaugural crowd, the President called the director of the service to ask why its staff had shared the item—surely the most gratuitous case of Presidential intimidation of the career bureaucracy since the Nixon Administration.

When the White House changes hands from one party to another, it is routine for the new team to adjust what information government agencies and Web sites put out about public policy. In the months ahead, it will be necessary to distinguish between cases where Trump's appointees are merely reframing policy communication, as their predecessors have done, and cases of improper interference with career employees, scientists, and whistle-blowers. The Supreme Court has upheld the right of federal employees to speak out on public issues as private individuals, and there are robust laws protecting whistle-blowers in the government workforce. Last week, the Office of Special Counsel, an independent agency empowered by Congress, issued a statement reminding the new Administration of the "statutory right to blow the whistle"—a right that can override other government policies.

Still, since the Second World War, as Presidents of both parties have shaped the executive branch's public communications, they have enjoyed great latitude. After the George W. Bush Administration suppressed climate-research findings by career scientists, the Obama Administration enacted new scientific-integrity policies. Trump could overturn them. During the Obama Administration, some federal agencies allowed their scientists to identify where they worked while debating freely on social media. The Trump Administration could withdraw those permissions.

It may be a weak basis for hope, but the prospects for transparent government and sound taxpayer-funded science could depend in part on Trump's volatility. The President has not worked for long with his most important Cabinet members or advisers, including Bannon. His political fortunes are tied to those of Republican leaders in Congress, but the trust between them is tenuous. In the ways of Washington, these sorts of unstable relationships can yield a gusher of media leaks. Last week, a remarkable flow of government e-mails and draft executive orders made their way to news outlets. That is according to constitutional design. When the Founders enacted the First Amendment, they could not have imagined the personage of Donald Trump, but they did have tyrants in mind.

—Steve Coll

DEPT. OF HOOPLA BELLE



ON THE AFTERNOON before Inauguration Day, Cassandra Fairbanks was in her living room, in Silver Spring, Maryland, putting the final touches on her outfit: a Stars-and-Stripes manicure, a strapless red ball gown, a rifle-casing pendant, and a poncho—"in case the protesters decide to throw paint on me," she said. Fairbanks was one of the organizers of the DeploraBall, a party for the ultra-nationalists and Twitter trolls who, as they put it, "memed Donald Trump into the White House." Protesters had threatened to disrupt the event, at the National Press Club, and had listed Fairbanks, a pro-Trump journalist and social-media demi-celebrity, as one of several "high-value targets."

Fairbanks took a sip from a canned Starbucks latte, her hand trembling. "I'm either overcaffeinated or just nervous," she said. Her two-month-old puppy—Wiki, short for WikiLeaks—paddled around, occasionally peeing on a towel.

An Uber arrived, and Fairbanks

stepped in carefully, holding up her dress.

"What're we up to today?" the driver asked.

"Going to a ball," Fairbanks said.

Fairbanks, who is thirty-one, sees herself as a civil libertarian. "I care more about free speech, including for Chelsea Manning and Julian Assange, than almost any other issue," she said. When she began freelancing, she wrote for leftist clickbait sites like U.S. Uncut and Addicting Info. "Talk about fake news," she said. "That was the fakesh*t I've ever seen. They would put headlines on my pieces that they knew were bullshit, and tell me, 'Don't worry, we're just giving your story some juice.'"

For the first half of 2016, she supported Bernie Sanders; when he dropped out, she was conflicted. "I couldn't possibly support Hillary, I knew that," she said. She considered Jill Stein, but concluded that Stein didn't have enough charisma to win. ("No one wants to elect their weird yoga teacher who smells like cat urine.") So she turned to Trump. "I was still working for these sites that were saying terrible things about him, but when I listened for myself I thought, His message makes sense." She appreciated Trump's opposition to political correctness, and his willingness, after the Orlando shootings, to focus on terrorism instead of on gun con-

trol. "I started saying a few pro-Trump things on Twitter, and people absolutely lost their shit," she said. "I got called a literal Nazi so many times, I eventually went, Fuck it, I'll just go all in." She now writes for Sputnik, a news site funded by the Russian government.

Fairbanks was dropped off at a luxury condo building on K Street. On a roof deck, she met up with Gavin McInnes, another of the DeploraBall's V.I.P. guests. McInnes, a forty-six-year-old with a waxed mustache, co-founded Vice Media in the nineteen-nineties, then left the company as his politics shifted right. He recently formed the Proud Boys, a "pro-Western fraternal organization" for men who "refuse to apologize for creating the modern world." On the roof, McInnes drank Budweiser with about a dozen Proud Boys, most of them a decade or two his junior. "I find it strange," a Proud Boy from North Carolina said. "It's O.K. to be a nationalist, and it's O.K. to have pride in yourself. But you put either of those concepts together with being white, and suddenly you're an insane Nazi bigot."

McInnes put on reading glasses and picked up a copy of "The Death of the West," the 2001 book by Pat Buchanan. The Proud Boys gathered around him. "The West did not invent slavery, but it

alone abolished slavery,” he read. “The time for apologies is past.”

The group left the building and walked quickly toward the Press Club. McInnes, at the front of the pack, rubbed his palms together. “Get in formation!” he said. “Ladies on the inside, for protection!” Fairbanks, wearing heels, hurried to stay in the middle of the scrum.

In front of the Press Club were several dozen police officers and several hundred protesters. One of the protesters, wearing a black mask, crossed McInnes’s path; McInnes grabbed him by the shoulder, turned him around, and punched him in the face. “What the fuck?” the protester shouted. “Fuck you, fascist!” A few police officers rushed to arrest the protester, while other officers escorted the Proud Boys inside.

“We made it!” Fairbanks said. “Thank you for protecting me.”

“Don’t mention it, m’lady,” McInnes said.

She checked her poncho, affixed two pins to her dress (Comet Ping Pong and Pepe the Frog), and made her way upstairs to the bar. McInnes stopped to talk to several reporters, each time heightening the story of his scuffle with the protester. “I think that when I punched him my fist went into his mouth, and his teeth scraped me on the way out,” he said. “Now I might get loser AIDS.”

—Andrew Marantz

CULTURAL EXCHANGE DEPT. IF I HAD AN AXE



AMONG THE PRESCRIPTIONS that have been offered to heal the country’s post-election wounds is the notion that Americans in red and blue states should do a better job of understanding one another. Trump supporters in Oshkosh might benefit from attending a block party in Bed-Stuy. And the eighty per cent of New Yorkers who backed Hillary Clinton could try spending a day on a soon-to-be-automated assembly line, or learn to chop their own firewood.

“We’ll do the axe throwing here,” Brett McLeod, an emissary from Trump country—his upstate-New York county went

for Trump by seven points—said the other night, in Brooklyn, as he prepared to give a demonstration on the finer points of being a lumberjack. McLeod, who is thirty-six and wore a sandy goatee beneath a camouflage baseball cap, is a retired Timbersports professional. “I wasn’t a great log roller, but I could make up for it with my underhand chop,” McLeod said, of his time on the competitive lumberjacking circuit. His career ended a few years ago, on the speed climb, an event that requires clambering up and down a sixty-foot tree, and which takes McLeod about as long as it takes Usain Bolt to run a hundred metres. “My rope got hung up on a piece of bark, slammed me into the tree and knocked me unconscious, and I fell about fifty feet,” McLeod said. “The only way I knew I wasn’t dead was when I heard a lady in the audience yell, ‘I think he’s dead.’”

McLeod is now a professor at Paul Smith’s College, in the Adirondacks, where crosscut saws are accorded the same attention Juilliard devotes to the viola. In addition to undergraduate courses like Timber Harvesting and Watershed Management, the college offers summer camps that appeal primarily to preppers and “seventeen-year-old boys who want to learn to throw an axe,” McLeod said. He had come to Brooklyn to broaden the school’s reach, and had teamed up with Paula Pou and Caitlin Barrett, two branding experts, who had attended one of the summer camps and got hooked on the life style. (Barrett: “You do not know how hard an eye can roll until you’re the only person from Brooklyn at a North Carolina blacksmith school.”) The women were now planning a camp aimed at the urban demographic, which meant plenty of axe throwing, but also birch-basket weaving and brewing tea with Adirondack plants. Campers would forgo the standard dorm accommodations in favor of “a really cool Mongolian yurt.”

Forty people showed up at Gotham Archery, in Gowanus, for McLeod’s woodsman demonstration, many of them in lumbersexual chic. “I’ve been wearing the same thing since kindergarten”—plaid shirt, Carharts—“so this is the first time I’ve been in style,” he said. Pou and Barrett had invited several distributors of lumberjack-adjacent products, including Garrett Riffle, who owns a company

that sells switchel. “It’s a not so hippie kombucha,” McLeod said, of the New England farmer’s drink. Riffle co-founded the company in 2012, in Vermont, but business didn’t take off until he moved to Bushwick. He now sells a Cayenne Switchel Cleanse.

McLeod began with a vocabulary lesson. “Wood ‘chopping’ is not this,” he said, swinging the axe overhead and then down at a log propped up on its end. “That’s splitting.” To demonstrate the difference, he placed a log of eastern white pine horizontally in a metal stand, stood on top of it, and pointed the axe at a green target that had been spray-



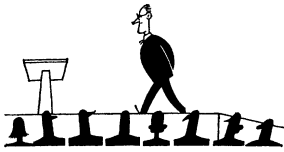
painted on the wood inches from each of his big toes. “Normally, you’d be wearing some sort of chain mail under here, but we’re gonna go naked,” McLeod said, before taking another overhead swing. “That was pretty good in terms of power, but not so good in terms of accuracy—I was thinking too much about my toes.” A nervous staff member from the archery range brought over a packet of QuikClot. McLeod reared back again, then made seventeen chops in twenty seconds, letting out a violent huff with each swing. “It’s a good workout,” he said. “Very therapeutic.”

Pou and Barrett think so, too; in addition to the summer camp, they hope to open a gym for people interested in an axe-centric exercise routine. (They demurred when a man at the demonstration suggested opening the gym on Friday nights and letting people drink beer while throwing axes.) Asked about wood chopping’s potential as a first date, McLeod glanced at a couple—collared shirt and tight black jeans for

him, polka-dot blouse and three-inch heels for her—who were shooting arrows at the archery range. “Maybe for the right type of person feeling a little goth?” he said. “But it might weird someone out.”

—Reeves Wiedeman

THE PEOPLE UNITED FIRED UP



AFTER THE FULMINATIONS on the Capitol steps from the pouting boy with the toys, the helicopter escape by the grownups, the jubilant resistance by millions of marching women (and men), and, finally, the long (or short) rides home, as dusk fell on Sunday a sane, soft-spoken man addressed a gathering. “It’s very good of all of you to come,” said Allan Miller, a co-founder of Symphony Space, at Ninety-fifth Street and Broadway, in one of the least Trump-friendly of Zip Codes. “I think we all have something to say.” The occasion: “Open Mic at Symphony Space.” Subtitle: “Pathways to Effectiveness in a New Political Climate, How to Stay Positive in an Uncertain Time.” Sub-theme: The Upper West Side will always be with us.

Standing before the stage at the Leonard Nimoy Thalia Theatre, in the Symphony Space basement, Miller continued, “We may all be disappointed, outraged, worried, even fearful, but I hope we will not descend into violent rhetoric. I will exercise my duty as your host to help pre-

vent that. Rather than a demonstration or a rally, let’s make this meeting a reaffirmation, even a rededication.”

He needn’t have worried. The next two hours would amount to a rhetorical neck massage—from, among others, a klezmer violinist, a scientist, a jazz vocalist, a family therapist, a fifth-grade teacher, and a city councilwoman—with occasional self-recrimination.

“This election was a wakeup call,” John Di Bartolo, a lecturer in applied physics at N.Y.U., said. “I realize this is in part my fault. I have been an armchair liberal my entire life, and allowed others to fight for my rights. I took too much for granted, and now we all stand to lose a great deal of what we never thought we’d have to worry about. For me, this will change. I pledge to be more active and vocal. I pledge to protest when I see an injustice. I pledge to let my representatives know that I’m displeased with policies that promote the Trump agenda, and pleased with actions that block it. As a lecturer of physics, I’m particularly dismayed at the demise of the fact. I pledge to insist that my representatives follow the science.”

“Hear, hear!” came a voice from the audience.

Gregory Generet, the jazz vocalist, amplified: “Unfortunately, what happened happened. But there is always a reason. Perhaps we needed a wakeup to the fact that we all need to be more involved. I learned this twenty years ago, when I became the block-association president for my section of West Harlem, Hamilton Terrace.” He quoted Langston Hughes: “Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed— / Let it

be that great strong land of love / Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme.”

Wisdom and sentiment flowed in alternating currents. “My wife, Margaret, and I get up every weekday morning to listen to Amy Goodman on ‘Democracy Now,’ on WBAL,” Christian Beels, the family therapist, said. “We feel part of the larger conversation because of the many voices from all over the world that speak and debate during that hour. A friend of ours, a psychologist, gives a practical course in talking with people who disagree with you. And what am I doing? I’m addressing what I think is the main source of my worry, my anxiety—the fact that no one has presented a believable model for the new economy.”

Mayra Fernandez, from Inwood, said, “Eight years ago, I came to Symphony Space with my fifth-grade class from P.S. 75 to watch a live streaming of Barack Obama’s inauguration, and what a joyous occasion that was. When we ran our Presidential mock election this past November, we were in synch with the Upper West Side—eighty-nine per cent for Hillary. On November 9th, many of my students were devastated, some shell-shocked and afraid. They wanted to know many things: What will happen to undocumented immigrants? What about the earth heating up? What about health care? Most importantly, they asked, ‘What are we going to do?’ I spoke to them about Richard Nixon, and the protests of that era. They learned that even a President can be forced to leave office, even if it takes a while.”

Seating himself at a Steinway grand at center stage, the pianist and composer Jed Distler announced that he would be playing part of Frederic Rzewski’s variation on “The People United Will Never Be Defeated!,” a protest song by Sergio Ortega made famous in the wake of the 1973 assassination of Salvador Allende, the President of Chile. “Repeat after me,” Distler said, as he launched into a molto-fortissimo performance: “THE PEOPLE! UNITED! WILL NEVER BE DEFEATED!” When he finished, he said, “With the National Endowment for the Arts being threatened . . . the arts are so fucking important! I don’t usually yell, but I am pissed!”

“Anybody who says ‘fuck’ in this theatre obviously has the last word,” Allan Miller said. “Thank you for being here.”

—Mark Singer



*“Remember when real men had masculine names like Ug and Gog?
Nowadays, they’re all named Florg and Smurg.”*

THE FINANCIAL PAGE
THE CORRUPTION CONUNDRUM

NO AMERICAN PRESIDENT has ever had such huge conflicts of interest as Donald Trump. Ever since his election, Democrats and the press have hammered him for it. Trump will use the Presidency to enrich himself, they've said, and foreign governments will curry favor by offering his companies handouts. They've pointed to the hundreds of millions that Trump owes to foreign banks and the ways in which his business interests could shape his regulatory decisions. Just last week, the group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington sued Trump for violating the Constitution's emoluments clause, which bars federal officials from receiving any "present" or "emolument" from a foreign state. Trump has shrugged it all off, refusing to divest himself of his businesses and handing them over to his sons instead. He evidently thinks that his supporters won't care. If history is any indication, he's almost certainly right.

The phenomenon of politicians who maintain popularity despite being corrupt is more common than you'd imagine: think of Silvio Berlusconi, in Italy. In the U.S., the most interesting recent example was the Ohio congressman James Traficant, who served nine terms, from 1985 to 2002. The heart of Traficant's district was Youngstown, once known as Steeltown, U.S.A. His supporters had a lot in common with the white working-class voters who helped elect Trump, and Traficant himself was in many ways a Trump precursor. He was a populist and a fierce opponent of free trade; he even used the slogan "America First." He was a media hound, whose outlandish behavior and stream-of-consciousness rants made him a TV favorite. He was vulgar: he talked about kicking people in the crotch and called the I.R.S. "political prostitutes" (later apologizing to "hookers" for the insult).

Traficant was also crooked. Before running for Congress, while working as a sheriff, he was indicted on racketeering charges for taking bribes from the Mob. Traficant mounted his own defense in court and beat the rap, despite a signed confession and tapes on which he talked openly about taking money. In 2002, while still in Congress, he was convicted of bribery, racketeering, and tax evasion. Nevertheless, he won reelection term after term, by margins of as much as sixty per cent. (It took expulsion by Congress to end his career.) Voters understood that Traficant was not a saint, but they saw him as one of their own. They believed he was looking out for their interests, and they liked his refusal to conform to the standards of the Washington elite. All those things mat-

tered far more than whether he was getting a little money on the side. As Sherry Lee Linkon and John Russo wrote in their history "Steeltown, U.S.A.," these voters harbored a belief "that individuals and groups that challenged and even violated traditional rules were the community's best hope."

Likewise, Trump's base, as the pollster Stanley Greenberg has written, believes that "politics has been corrupted and government has failed." It's not that they approve of self-dealing per se—a poll during the campaign found that ninety-nine per cent of Trump supporters cited corruption as a key issue of concern. But they're less bothered by individual instances than by the sense that the whole system is rigged to favor élites. Trump's apparent willingness to blow up the system matters far more to them than the possibility that he might feather his nest along the way. When a focus group of Trump voters with whom CNN meets regularly was asked about his potential conflicts of interest, their response was "Who cares?" These voters may not understand the full extent of the issues. But the example of Traficant suggests that Trump's conflicts of interest won't much dent his popularity. In fact, seventy-three per cent of Republicans told a Politico/Morning Consult survey that Trump's business interests would help him do a better job.

Furthermore, though voters claim that they worry about corruption, a lot depends on context. Partisanship plays a big role: Republicans cared a lot about the Clinton Foundation but gave Trump a pass. Besides, issues that the press and government reformers take very seriously often matter less to ordinary voters. A recent study of Berlusconi supporters found that the constant barrage of scandals simply increased their tolerance for corruption. The political scientist Arnold Heidenheimer draws a distinction between "black corruption"—things that just about everyone thinks are unacceptable, like outright bribery—and "gray corruption," which appalls élites but elicits only shrugs from ordinary voters. Absent a clear quid pro quo, conflict of interest seems like a classic example of gray corruption.

That doesn't mean that ethics watchdogs should stop going after Trump. But his opponents would be unwise to place too much hope in the process. Traficant remained popular because voters felt he represented their interests, and because he was able to get them their share of pork-barrel money. As one Youngstown native said in the recent documentary "Traficant," "He was a crook. But he was our crook." Likewise, with Trump, the real question is whether he'll be able to deliver the goods that his supporters expect, so that they continue to believe he's on their side. Voters sent Trump to Washington to shake things up. Saying that he isn't playing by the rules only affirms their faith that he's the right guy for the job.

—James Surowiecki

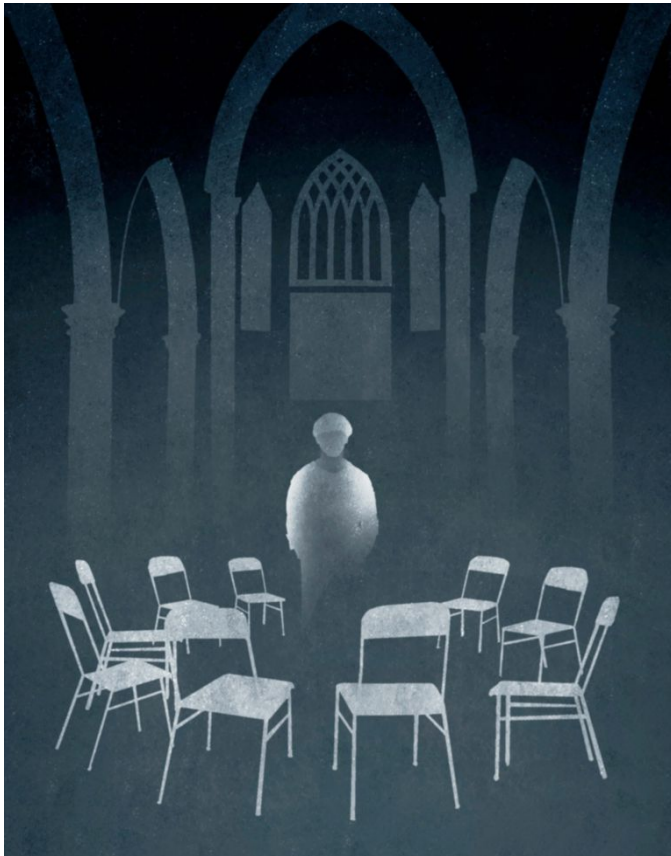


LETTER FROM CHARLESTON

PRODIGY OF HATE

The trial of Dylann Roof.

BY JELANI COBB



EARLY ON THE morning of December 7th, a dozen officers from the Department of Homeland Security were stationed outside the federal courthouse at 85 Broad Street, in Charleston, South Carolina. It was warm out, and the officers looked both relaxed and alert, talking among themselves as they kept watch. The federal building is a bunker, all right angles and gray concrete, completed in 1987. Across the street stands the county courthouse, designed by James Hoban, the architect of the White House, and diagonally opposite is the city hall, built in 1801. The federal building would mar what the American Planning Association calls one of the nation's "great streets," except that it is hidden by a red brick antebellum structure that faces the

street—an architectural sleight of hand that says much about the reasons that the Homeland Security officers were on Broad Street that day.

The federal trial of Dylann Roof was commencing, eighteen months after he shot and killed nine African-American congregants at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, during evening Bible study, a crime he had confessed to on video in horrific detail and without remorse. The authorities were concerned that Roof, who repeatedly stated that he had committed the murders as a call to action for persecuted whites, had become a cause célèbre for white nationalists. That movement had been exiled to the political fringes after the murders, but it had regained

some visibility during the Presidential campaign.

Two days earlier, a jury had deadlocked in the trial of Michael Slager, a North Charleston police officer charged with murder in the death of Walter Scott, an unarmed fifty-year-old black man, whom Slager had shot in the back as he ran from a traffic stop. When the judge declared a mistrial, Scott's mother invoked God's will toward justice, and the state's governor, Nikki Haley, cautioned patience until the state could retry the officer. Now some feared that, despite the confession and the overwhelming forensic evidence, something similar might occur in the Roof trial.

Judge Richard Gergel was presiding. He is an avuncular silver-haired man with a reputation for efficiency and a liberal bent; in 2014, he issued a ruling that same-sex couples have the right to marry in South Carolina, and he was responsible for installing a portrait of Jonathan Jasper Wright, the state's first black Supreme Court justice, in the Court building. The courtroom was solemn as Roof entered, wearing a gray-and-black striped prison jumpsuit. He is now twenty-two, but, with his blond hair in a fresh bowl cut, he appeared younger. He is small to the point of fragility, and his frame swam in the jumpsuit. He was charged with thirty-three felony counts; twelve of them were hate crimes, and eighteen others, including firearm and religious-obstruction charges, were punishable by death.

The family members of the victims, their supporters, the church's new pastor, Eric Manning, and other clergy filled the benches on the right side of the courtroom. Roof's mother and his paternal grandparents sat in the second row on the left. Many people had assumed that Roof was a representative of the disenfranchised white population whose narrative of loss had come to play an unexpectedly central role in the election. Roof dropped out of high school after repeating ninth grade and then dropped out of an online alternative school before later earning his G.E.D., but he did not grow up in poverty. His grandfather is a prominent real-estate attorney in Columbia. His father, who attended the trial sporadically, is a building contractor and owned several properties around the state. At the time of the shooting,

"I realize these people are not criminal," Roof said of the dead. "They're in church."

Roof lived with his mother in a spacious home in Lexington, across the Congaree River from Columbia.

He had chosen to drive two hours to Charleston to commit his crime, he told the police, because the city is “historic.” Mother Emanuel, as the church is known, traces its roots to 1816. It was a center of clandestine anti-slavery activity and, in 1822, when city officials discovered that congregants were planning a slave revolt, they burned the church to the ground. The current building was erected in 1891, on Calhoun Street, named for Vice-President John C. Calhoun, the intellectual progenitor of secession. The Calhoun monument, a column eighty feet high, topped by a statue of the statesman, is half a block away. The monument and the church, which came to play a central role in the Southern civil-rights movement, stand like a statement and its rebuttal. Roof had drawn up a list of half a dozen churches before settling on Mother Emanuel. “I realize these people are not criminal,” he said. “They’re in church.” He chose them, he explained, because killing a black drug dealer would not have generated the same attention.

THE LEAD PROSECUTOR was Jay Richardson, an Assistant U.S. Attorney, based in Columbia. He is a small dark-haired man who speaks in a commanding tone. Roof’s mother sank down on the bench as he delivered his opening statement, which contained details of the crime that had previously been withheld from the press. At a certain point, she slumped over. It seemed for a moment that she had fainted, but she was taken to a hospital, and it was later learned that she had suffered a heart attack. She survived, but did not return for the remainder of the trial.

Richardson reported that Roof pulled into the church parking lot and sat in his car for some time, “contemplating,” before going inside. He had loaded eight clips of hollow-point ammunition for his Glock .45 semiautomatic handgun, because, Richardson implied, he wanted to have eighty-eight bullets; the number is white-nationalist code for “Heil Hitler.”

The most well known of Roof’s victims was Emanuel’s pastor, the Reverend Clementa Pinckney, who also served

in the South Carolina State Senate. (He became a member of the state House of Representatives in 1996, when he was twenty-three, the youngest African-American ever elected to the state’s legislature.) Pinckney welcomed the newcomer, gave him a Bible, and offered him a chair next to him in the circle where the twelve attendees of the study group sat. Roof’s motive was “retaliation for perceived offenses” against the white race, Richardson said. “He also talked about ‘the call to arms,’ the hope that his attack would agitate others, worsen race relations, increase racial tensions that would lead to a race war.”

Four months before the shooting, the Equal Justice Initiative issued a report on the history of lynching in the United States after Reconstruction. There were a hundred and eighty-four lynchings in South Carolina. The last occurred in 1947, when a mob beat, stabbed, and shot to death Willie Earle, a twenty-four-year-old black man who had been accused of murdering a white cabdriver from Greenville. Strom Thurmond, who was then the governor, pushed for those responsible to be brought to trial, perhaps worried that the incident would undercut efforts to recast the state’s brutish image. Thirty-one white men were charged; all were acquitted. Richardson, in his opening, seemed to suggest that lynching had not ceased in South Carolina; it had just been on a sixty-eight-year hiatus. Later in the trial, he made that connection explicit, charging that Roof was guilty of “a modern-day lynching.”

Few people in Charleston’s legal community expressed interest in handling the defense, so the court appointed David Bruck to represent Roof. Bruck is originally from Montreal but attended law school in South Carolina and worked there for more than twenty years, both as a public defender and in private practice. He now teaches law in Virginia, at Washington and Lee University, where he also directs a death-penalty defense clinic; he almost exclusively takes on cases that involve the death penalty, which he views as both unjust and racist in its application. In 1983, he wrote a groundbreaking article for *The New Republic*, in which he argued that the imposition of capital punishment, a practice that reinforced the value of the lives

of white victims over those of black ones, was as troubling as violent crime itself.

In 2015, Bruck served on the defense for Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, during his federal trial for the Boston Marathon bombing. He had previously represented Susan Smith, a white South Carolina woman who, in 1994, drowned her two young sons in a lake and blamed the act on a fictional black carjacker. (Tsarnaev was sentenced to death; Smith was given a life sentence.) His thinking appears to be that if the lives of defendants charged with heinous crimes can be spared, so could the lives of those charged with lesser crimes. If the bar is raised high enough, the death penalty might never be applied.

Bruck’s relationship with Roof had been difficult almost from the outset. The defense called for a competency assessment and moved to have Roof declared mentally unfit, which he vigorously resisted. Roof asked Judge Gergel to be allowed to represent himself, which he did, during the jury selection, then asked to have counsel reinstated for the guilt phase of the trial, but not for the penalty phase. That ultimately led to a second competency hearing between the two phases.

In the opening statement for the defense, Bruck, who seems almost congenitally soft-spoken, addressed the jury in such low tones that some family members had to lean forward in their seats in order to hear him. “The story that Mr. Richardson just finished telling you really did occur,” he said, referring to the prosecutor’s graphic recounting of the murders. Everyone, himself included, Bruck said, expected that the verdict “will be guilty.” The jurors may have been wondering why there even was a trial, he said. Roof had offered to plead guilty in exchange for a life sentence but the Justice Department had not allowed it. Many people in Charleston thought that Loretta Lynch, the U.S. Attorney General, should have spared the families—and the city—the ordeal of a trial, but she ruled that the hate-crime elements of the case warranted the harshest sentence at the government’s disposal. The federal hate-crime statute that covers racially motivated crime, however, does not carry the death penalty, which accounts for some of the additional charges. The trial, with its

attendant expense and emotional trauma, Bruck intimidated, was purely a function of the government's desire to pursue the death penalty.

SHORTLY AFTER ONE o'clock, Richardson called the first witness: Felicia Sanders, a longtime member of Emanuel. She escaped harm that night, only to witness the death of her son, Tywanza, a twenty-six-year-old poet, barber, and musician, who had planned to start graduate school in the fall. Felicia Sanders is fifty-nine, with deep-brown skin and shoulder-length brown hair, and that day she wore a floral-patterned dress with a purple cardigan. She owned—and, until the shooting, had operated—a local salon, where her son had grown up amid a hive of conversation, jokes, and gossip. She speaks with a pronounced Charleston accent, and when Richardson asked her if she was married she looked at her husband, sitting in the front row, and answered “Yes” so wearily that the courtroom erupted into laughter.

Then Richardson asked her about Roof's behavior in the church. “Most of the time, he hung his head down just the way he's doing right now,” she said. Tywanza was an avid social-media user, and he uploaded a video of himself at the church to Snapchat. Roof can be seen in the background, sitting in the Bible circle. “He was there for forty-five minutes to an hour,” Sanders continued. “We stood up and shut our eyes to say a prayer.” When she heard the first shots, she assumed that the noise stemmed from a problem with a new elevator that was being installed, but then she looked at the defendant. “I screamed, ‘He has a gun!’” she said. “By then, he had already shot Reverend Pinckney.”

Roof began firing randomly. At one point, he paused to ask Polly Sheppard, a seventy-two-year-old retired nurse, if he had shot her yet. “My son rised up to get the attention off Miss Polly, even though he had already got shot,” Sanders told the jury. “He stood up and said, ‘Why are you doing this?’” She continued, “The defendant, over there with his head hanging down, refusing to look at me right now, told my son,

‘I have to do this, because you're raping our women and y'all taking over the world.’” She added, “That's when he put about five bullets in my son.” Sanders lay on the floor, shielding her eleven-year-old granddaughter, holding the girl so tightly that she worried that she might smother her.

She went on, “I said, ‘Tywanza, please lay down.’ He said, ‘I gotta get to Aunt Susie.’” Susie Jackson, who was eighty-seven, was the family matriarch, Tywanza's great-aunt on his father's side. She had been shot, but Tywanza managed to crawl over to her, and reached out to touch her hair, before he died. Sanders began to sob as she recalled her son's final moments. She'd had a difficult pregnancy with him—the doctors warned that she might miscarry—and she had always thought of his birth as a testament to faith. She had come to think of his death in similar terms. Sanders told the court, “I watched my son come into this world and I watched my son leave this world.”

The family members sat quietly throughout most of the trial, but Sanders's words left several of them weeping. The sign-language interpreters who relayed the proceedings to Gary Washington, whose mother, Ethel Lance, was among the dead, were crying. The courtroom sketch artist and many of the journalists present paused to wipe away tears. Judge Gergel called a short recess.

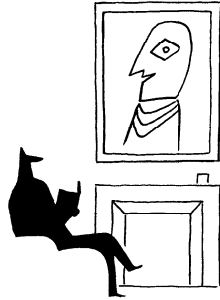
When the court reconvened, Bruck, during his cross-examination of Sanders, asked if Roof had said anything as he left the church. “Yes,” she replied. “He said he was going to kill himself, and I was counting on that. He's evil. There's no place on earth for him except the pit of Hell.”

DYLANN ROOF, IN writings found during a search of his prison cell, imagined himself the last stalwart of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. He wrote that “segregation was not a bad thing. It was mostly defensive.” (When investigators asked where he got his information, he said, “It's all there on the Internet.”) He had found the Council of Conservative Citizens Web site, which descended from the old White

Citizens Councils.) The Civil War began in Charleston. The Ordinance of Secession was signed in Institute Hall, on Meeting Street, in December, 1860; the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, in the harbor, a few months later. The reaction of many Charlestonians to the extraordinary moment, at a bond hearing the day after Roof's arrest, when, one by one, family members stood and forgave him, was an outgrowth of the city's relationship to that past. Forgiveness was not just an example of how to metabolize hatred directed at you, or just a demonstration of Christian faith, though it was both of those things. It stood for a broader redemption, an exoneration from history itself.

One afternoon during the trial, I visited the Confederate Museum, in Market Hall, on Meeting Street. The hall was built in 1841, and served as the headquarters of a market where, the museum's Web site states, “fruits, meats, vegetables, and fish were sold—no slaves.” In 1899, the Daughters of the Confederacy opened the museum in a large room on the second floor. Glass cases display Confederate uniforms, swords, volumes of the military registries of the Confederate States of America, and aged histories of the conflict. Chunks of shrapnel from the Union's assault on the city rest on shelves. A South Carolina secession flag dominates the center of the room.

One of the docents, a red-haired woman in her forties, introduced herself as Jill. She wore an orange Clemson University sweater, in honor of its football team, which had clinched the national championship the night before. I told her that I was in town for the Roof trial, and she said, “He's just a crazy nut,” adding that the jury shouldn't need to deliberate long before passing a death sentence. Another docent, Barbara, who belongs to a Methodist church near Emanuel, said that she'd been deeply moved by the victims' families: “I was blown away by their faith. It was completely unshakable.” When I asked the two women if it was possible to interpret Roof's motives as an extension of the Confederate cause, they both demurred. “We can't control how crazy racists use the symbols,” Jill said. “What he's doing



PROSTATE CANCER?

Know the facts about
Winthrop **NY**CyberKnife.™

- CyberKnife® is as effective as surgery, but with no cutting or pain.
- The biggest advance in prostate cancer treatment in a decade.
- Lower risk of side effects compared to other treatments.
- No incontinence, less risk of impotence.
- Only real-time motion tracking radiation. Attacks tumor, protects healthy tissue.
- Treatment takes just five brief visits in one week.
- Winthrop has the most prostate cancer CyberKnife experience in the country.
- The ONLY CyberKnife center in both Manhattan and Long Island.

WINTHROP
NYCyberKnife™

Manhattan's one and only CyberKnife® Center.

150 Amsterdam (at 66th St.) • 1.866.WINTHROP • winthrop.org/NYCyberKnife

Your Health Means Everything.®



isn't connected to anything to do with our heritage," Barbara added. A man visiting the museum agreed, saying that Roof did not understand the Confederacy and had merely retrofitted it to his terrible world view.

During the recent battles over the appropriateness of flying the Confederate flag from public buildings, some Southerners rallied around the phrase "heritage, not hate." At the museum, it occurred to me that this act of distancing was what Roof most fiercely rejected. Charleston today is a testament to the successful paring of hate from heritage. Herb Frazier, a black journalist who grew up in the city and has attended Emanuel since childhood, told me that black Charlestonians have always hated the Calhoun monument. "He looks down with this scowl on his face," he said. Then, in 1999, Charleston's Holocaust Memorial was erected just fifty feet from the base of Calhoun's column. That proximity suggests either a wishful denial of Calhoun's legacy or a level of irony not typically found among municipal planners.

Last year, Frazier collaborated with Marjory Wentworth, South Carolina's poet laureate, and Bernard Powers, a professor of history at the College of Charleston, on "We Are Charleston," a book that puts the church murders in the context of the city's racial history and records the responses to it. A week after the shooting, following a vote in the legislature, Governor Haley called for the removal of the Confederate flag that had flown at the State House since 1961, an act that was widely praised. But Wentworth pointed out that the decision was at least partly pragmatic. "We've been boycotted ever since it went up," she said. "You don't read much about that. There were a lot of business leaders that wanted it down." It was a recognition not altogether distinct from the one that Strom Thurmond may have reached sixty-eight years earlier: that racism, at least in its most overt forms, is bad for business.

But for Roof and the fraternity that he sought out on Web sites like Stormfront, where he operated under the user name LilAryan, this paring was a contradictory undertaking. What is the point, he seemed to reason, of com-

memorating the Confederacy if you ignore the reason that it existed in the first place?

THE SECOND DAY of the trial began with a debate between the defense and the prosecution about the velocity with which Roof's soul might arrive in Hell. Bruck had filed a motion for a mistrial, arguing that the jury might construe Sanders's statement that "there's no place on earth for him" as a plea for the death penalty. Richardson objected. "She was not commenting on the punishment," he said, but rather on where Roof would have gone if he killed himself. He added, "That is also where he's going if he dies of natural causes or the state does it."

For many people in Charleston, being asked to decide whether Roof should be executed amounted to what older Southern blacks refer to as being "put in a trickbag": a circumstance in which there are no good options and one must reconcile with the bad ones. It had been noted that the family members and the congregation were averse to having Roof put to death, but they were not unanimous in their views. Eric Manning, the pastor, told me that the A.M.E. church opposes the death penalty: "We are called to be the light of the world, so life is sacred." Carey Grady, a senior pastor at Reid Chapel A.M.E. Church, in Columbia, had known Pinckney from childhood. The two friends kept in touch regularly, and often texted. Grady showed me the message he sent Pinckney when he first heard about the shooting. "I know you're getting dozens of calls right now," it says. "You and the Emanuel Church family are in our prayers." Pinckney, Grady said, almost to himself, "never replied." The criminal-justice system was unfair to African-Americans, Grady told me, then added, "I hate to say it, but, if the system is unjust, the most just thing to happen in that system is for Roof to get the death penalty, because otherwise you make the statement that black lives really don't matter."

Malcolm Graham is the youngest brother of Cynthia Hurd, one of the victims. She had worked for more than thirty years as a librarian for the public and the university systems. Graham, a former state senator from North Car-

olina, recently ran for Congress—something that his sister had encouraged him to do. He concurred with Grady: why have the death penalty if it wasn't used in this instance? Sharon Risher's mother, Ethel Lance, was a lifelong member of the church. She died that night, too, but Risher thought it preferable that Roof live out every day of his natural life in full knowledge of what he had done. Rose Simmons's father, Daniel, an assistant pastor at the church, was shot when he ran to help Clementa Pinckney; he died in the hospital a few hours later. Simmons told me that her own views were irrelevant, because Roof had "sentenced himself to death by his actions."

Those moral calculations, as with everything else associated with the case, were refracted through the lens of race. In a statewide poll, two-thirds of African-Americans favored sentencing Roof to life in prison, while sixty-four per cent of whites believed that the death penalty was warranted. That result mirrored the general division between blacks and whites on the issue of capital punishment, which is driven, at least in part, by the fact that it has disproportionately been used against black defendants. It had to be said that excising Roof's presence from the world would change little about black Charlestonians' perspective on what happened at the church that night. Their white counterparts, meanwhile, were eager to reject Roof's overtures to them. Joe Riley, the city's mayor at the time, emphasized that the suspect was not from Charleston, a point that Riley's successor, John Tecklenburg, reiterated, as did other whites with whom I discussed the trial. If race offered a reluctant commonality between Roof and white Charleston, geography provided at least a literal distancing.

Then, there was the fact that, during the past forty years, eighty-one per cent of those given the death sentence in South Carolina had been convicted of killing white victims. A death sentence for Roof would add a patina of fairness to a practice steeped in the racial disparities of the criminal-justice system. A life sentence, on the other hand, would seem to suggest that, whatever the opaque mathematics of race, a black life is worth less than one-ninth of a white one.

For David Bruck, Roof's case represented another chance to address the unjust imposition of the death penalty. At certain moments in the trial, though, his belief that he could diminish a racist practice by saving the life of a white supremacist appeared idealistic to a fault. During his cross-examination of Joseph Hamski, the F.B.I.'s lead investigator in the case, Bruck asked, "What became of Denmark Vesey?" Vesey, a slave who had bought his freedom and become a carpenter, was the lead plotter of the 1822 revolt at the church. "He was hung," Hamski replied. Bruck was suggesting that the death penalty is irrevocably tainted by racism, but he had seemed to equate Vesey, a man who was prepared to kill for the cause of black freedom, with Roof, a man who had killed because he thought that blacks were too free. The families murmured uneasily at the comparison.

THE ABSTRACT MORALITY of the sentencing contrasted with the concrete particulars of the crime, which were presented on the second day of the trial. Brittany Burke, who had served as an agent with the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division, testified that seventy-four shell casings had been recovered from the scene, and that fifty-four bullets had been removed from the nine bodies. Clementa Pinckney was shot three times; Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, a dynamic young preacher at the church, was shot five times. DePayne Middleton-Doctor, a minister and an admissions coordinator at a local learning center, was shot eight times; Cynthia Hurd, six times. Tywanza Sanders was shot four times; Ethel Lance, seven; Myra Thompson, who had received her preaching certificate that evening and was excited about leading Bible study for the first time, eight times. Daniel Simmons was shot four times. Susie Jackson, the oldest of the victims, was shot eleven times.

Judge Gergel had suggested that the family members give strong consideration to whether they would return to the courtroom after the morning recess. The prosecution was going to walk the jury through the shooting, with photographs of the crime scene, and there was no shame in wanting to avoid that spectacle. But the families returned,

escorted by two court-appointed advocates, who were there to offer support. The photographs showed a spacious room, with a small altar and several round tables and chairs, as if in preparation for a reception. A bulletin board read, in large red letters, "2015 Congrats Grads!" A Bible rested undisturbed on one of the tables, but most of the furniture was riddled with gunfire. The dead lay in an obscene array about the room. Many in the courtroom wept, again, at that sight.

I watched Roof during the prosecution's presentation, and it seemed possible that he had not fully realized the extent of his actions prior to that moment. In his confession, when the police officers asked him how many people he had shot, he said, "If I was gonna guess, five," and he appeared surprised to learn that he had actually killed nine. But, in the courtroom, he sat impassively—as he did throughout the trial—his response to the atrocities as inscrutable as his capacity to have committed them in the first place.

On December 15th, when it was time for Bruck to present his closing argument, he stood facing the jury with his hands clasped behind his back. He

described Roof as "really a boy, who gives his whole life over to a belief that there is raging in our society a fight to the death between black people and white people that is being concealed and covered up by some sort of vast conspiracy." Bruck added, "He doesn't seem to think that anybody but him really understands this."

Bruck pointed out that Roof had no escape plan. He used seven clips of ammunition during the attack, but kept the eighth with him as he departed, planning, as he said in the church and also during his confession, to kill himself if escape proved impossible. When he was arrested, the day after the shooting, in Shelby, North Carolina, he had been driving toward Nashville. When the police asked him why, he replied, "Why not? I've never been to Nashville." Because Roof had refused to have his mental-health history discussed, Bruck was left to portray him as an alienated young man, not fully capable of distinguishing between the real world and the hyperbolic paranoid clamor that he found on the Internet.

Bruck's emphasis on Roof's age wasn't entirely lost on the court. Andy Savage, the lawyer who represented



"I'm talking about the original YouTube video. Not the remake."

several of the families in a separate lawsuit against the federal government, for allowing Roof to purchase a firearm despite a drug arrest—and who had also, incidentally, represented Officer Michael Slager in his trial—told me that the families initially suspected that Roof hadn't acted alone. "That changed after watching the confession," Savage said. Roof was not the product of sinister manipulation: his biggest complaint was his inability to find like-minded patriots—he dismissed other white nationalists as being all talk. He was, instead, a prodigy of hate.

The jurors withdrew just after one o'clock. That afternoon, Roof was convicted of all thirty-three charges. Felicia Sanders nodded silently each time Judge Gergel uttered the word "guilty."

THE COURT RECESSED until the new year, when the penalty phase of the trial started. Roof was representing himself again, and, as his defense sat nearby, he offered a disjointed opening statement, in which he told the jurors that he would not lie to them, reiterating that "there was nothing wrong with me psychologically," and asked them to ignore everything that they had previously heard from the defense. He spoke for barely three minutes. He called no witnesses and offered no evidence.

During the next few days, Richardson called twenty-three witnesses to attest to the character of the victims and to the impact of their deaths. The first of them, Jennifer Pinckney, the widow of the pastor, spoke for nearly three hours about the life they had shared since meeting as college students. Anthony Thompson talked about the strength of the bond between him and his wife, Myra; he sighed as he looked at their wedding photograph, still awed by her beauty. "She was the one I prayed for," he told the court. At Judge Gergel's prodding, Richardson had the subsequent witnesses testify for shorter periods. But nearly all of them brought photographs of their loved ones, each of which had to be approved by the defense, which, in this case, was the defendant. The testimonies became a surreal procession, in which Roof became privy to the personal achievements and inti-

mate family moments of the deceased. Killing the nine people was one crime. Being allowed to posthumously get to know them seemed an altogether different one.

On the afternoon of January 10th, the prosecution rested, and Roof made a brief closing statement, in which he said, "I felt like I had to do it. I still feel like I had to do it." The jurors withdrew to deliberate. They did not, in fact, need long. When the court reconvened, just three hours later, they recommended the death penalty for Roof. Gergel thanked the jurors for their service and dismissed them. The next day, he allowed those family members who had not yet had a chance to deliver their statements to address the court; most of the jurors returned to hear them. Gary Washington, through his sign-language interpreters, told of a sense of foreboding that had hung over him on the day of the shooting, and how he had anxiously tried to reach his mother that night. The news of her death hit him so hard that he had to be hospitalized. "You don't know anything about us," he said to Roof. "You don't know anything about who we are."

Cynthia Hurd's brother Melvin Graham, a retired laboratory technician, also spoke. He is taller and thinner than Malcolm Graham, but he has the same features and the same note of sadness in his eyes. In the tone of a man who had marshalled the entirety of his will toward self-control, Melvin told Roof, "You tried to kill my sister, but you failed." Instead, Roof had immortalized her. As a librarian, she had helped generations of students and readers, and her death had spurred an outpouring of recognition for that work: "the Cynthia Graham Hurd Fellowship, University of South Carolina; the Cynthia Graham Hurd St. Andrews Regional Library, Charleston, South Carolina; the Cynthia Graham Hurd Memorial Scholarship, College of Charleston." Graham named nearly a dozen such tributes. "And that's just what I could remember off the top of my head," he said. The stories served to remind the court of what had been lost, but they also must have reassured Roof that these were indeed the type of blameless, decent people

whom he said he had set out to hurt.

Judge Gergel then turned to the final sentencing. "This trial has produced no winners, only losers," he said. "This proceeding cannot give the families what they truly want, the return of their loved ones." He sentenced Roof to death eighteen times, and handed down an additional fifteen life sentences, for the hate crimes and other charges. It took Gergel ten minutes to read the entire sentence. Roof then stood and requested new counsel to handle an appeal. When Gergel asked him on what basis he was making the request, Roof smirked and said of Bruck, "I just don't trust him." The request was denied.

The State of South Carolina is also due to try Roof, but that trial has been postponed indefinitely. Last summer, Scarlett Wilson, the local State Solicitor, balked at the federal trial's taking precedence over the state prosecution, noting that the federal government hadn't carried out an execution since 2003. The fate of Dylann Roof will likely wind through thickets of legal appeals and an equally onerous state trial before it is ultimately resolved.

THE DAY AFTER the sentencing, I flew to San Francisco. As I checked into a hotel, I made small talk with the bellman, Aaron Thames, an African-American in his early forties. I asked if he was a native of the Bay Area, and he replied, "No, I'm originally from Charleston, South Carolina." When I told him that I'd just come from the Roof trial, he looked stricken. He said, "My family knew Reverend Pinckney and Cynthia Hurd since I was a child. Miss Cynthia is one of my mother's oldest friends, and when we would visit the library she would always have books set aside for me and my brother to read."

I had flown almost as far from South Carolina as I could get without leaving the continental United States, but had encountered the consequences of Roof's crime in the transparent grief of the first person I'd spoken with in a new city. The immensity of the pain that Roof has inflicted upon Charleston is not contained by geography. It conforms perfectly to the contours of the nation that produced him. ♦

MELANIA'S DIARY 1/21/2017

BY PAUL RUDNICK

DEAR DIARY, I have just returned from the Women's March, and I'm feeling much better. Of course, I was in disguise: I'd removed the formfitting powder-blue Ralph Lauren bolero I'd worn over my Inauguration dress and added a down vest, Uggs, and one of those fun pink knitted hats that everyone was wearing. I had such a good time chanting "Keep your tiny hands off my reproductive rights!" and "Free Melania!" No one recognized me, although when one lady commented on the resemblance, I replied, "No, Melania is much younger and more wistfully melancholy."

The Inauguration wasn't easy for me. Mostly, I pretended that Donald was an elderly real-estate broker showing me homes in the D.C. area. While Donald was being sworn in, Ivanka kept whispering in my ear, "If Tiffany says one more word, I'm going to tell her that I'm not allowed to talk to goyim on Shabbos."

After the ceremony, I clutched at President Obama and whispered, urgently, "Please take me home with you. I can help Sasha with her college applications and make you laugh by imitating the noises Donald makes whenever someone tries to touch him." Barack gently removed my fingers from his sleeve and murmured, "But you are home, Melania. Deal with it."

As Donald and I walked the parade route, I tried to distract him from all of the empty bleachers by saying, "Look how many trees showed up!" There were several violent protesters, who I assumed were objecting to Donald ranting about "American carnage" in his speech. But I don't think they realized that American Carnage is the name of Donald's newest aftershave, which combines top notes of Bengay and Purell with a heady rush of Metamucil, the digestive powder that Donald also uses as a bronzer.

I wasn't sure if I was going to sur-

vive all of the balls we had to attend, which reminded me of the mixers I'd gone to as a teen-ager in Slovenia, filled with snoring retired men in uniforms, older women in gowns they'd stitched from tractor covers, and a few young girls like me, hoping for better lives. I remember daydreaming through my Modelling Theory course at university, wondering if there really were soaring



skyscrapers in America, with branches of Starbucks in the lobbies. I would marvel at the photographs of Republican wives that I saw in magazines, with their handsome bowl haircuts, sturdy forearms, and handbags brimming with those miniature airplane bottles of gin.

That night, when Donald and I finally returned to the White House, he turned to me and asked if, as a way to mark the specialness of the occasion, I would like to make love. For a moment, my heart leapt, and I wondered if Donald was about to surprise me with a visit from Vanko, my long-ago Slovenian boyfriend. But this was not the case, so I changed into a negligee and performed my wifely duties, meaning that while Donald tweeted I used a new app that Photoshops Donald's head onto the slim, young body

of Jared Kushner and makes him do the chicken dance.

The next morning, I wandered around my new home, where I will be spending at least two long days each year. Donald had already started to hang the oil paintings of his many golf courses, along with that wonderful framed photo of his sons Eric and Donald, Jr., from the week they attended the murder trial of the Menéndez brothers. As I wondered if I'd ever feel at ease in these grand hallways, I ran into Kellyanne Conway, whose wisdom is always a comfort.

"Oh, Kellyanne," I began, as I admired her cheery smile and gleaming hair. (Donald is quite jealous of Kellyanne's hair, and he once asked me, "Is it true that her hair stylist is Rumpelstiltskin?")

"What's wrong, Melania?" Kellyanne asked, putting her arm around me, as she always does, and pinching my waistline.

"I'm just trying to decide how I can best serve America as the new First Lady," I said.

"Oh, honey, hasn't your husband taught you anything?" Kellyanne replied. "You don't ever need to think about it. It's like when I go on CNN, and they try to confront me with facts. I just smile and say random words, and I keep repeating them until, finally, whoever I'm talking to just gives up." She added, "And, remember, your cause is going to be cyberbullying."

"You mean fighting cyberbullying, right?" I asked.

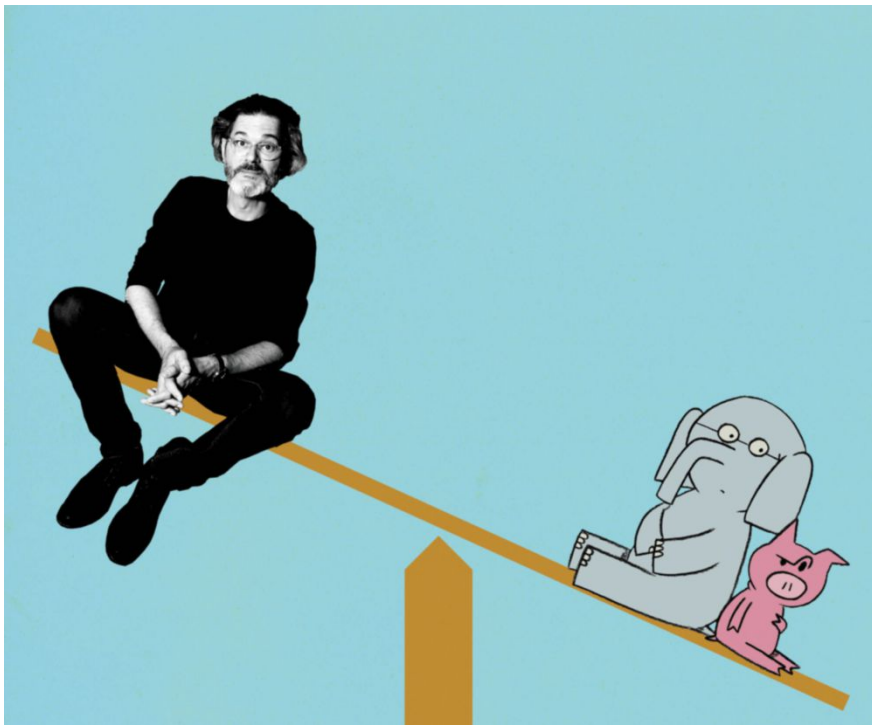
"Sure, why not," Kellyanne said. "But I'd steer clear of Sean Spicer. As your husband keeps saying, that hydrant is gonna blow." Then she brought up the Tiffany gift box that I'd given Michelle Obama on Inauguration Day. "What was in that box?" Kellyanne demanded. I smiled in my alluringly mysterious way, which makes people wonder if I have wads of cash duct-taped to my body at all times, in case I need to flee the country.

"It was just a gracious parting gift," I said. I will never reveal the box's true contents, except in the pages of this secret diary: it was a framed photo of me modelling swimwear in a JCPenney catalogue, on which I'd written my cell-phone number and the words "Please come to visit. And never leave." ♦

FAIL FUNNIER

How Mo Willems teaches young readers to confront problems.

BY RIVKA GALCHEN

*Willems says that when you find yourself in the wrong story you can leave.*

A LITTLE MORE THAN a decade ago, the children's-book author and illustrator Mo Willems had an idea for a new series. "I was thinking about P. D. Eastman's 'Go, Dog. Go!,' which was something I loved as a kid," he told me recently. That classic has a running gag in which a girl dog says to a boy dog, "Do you like my hat?," and the boy dog, in different settings and in response to different hats, repeatedly says, "No." "Even as a seven-year-old kid, I knew that she should be saying, 'Well, screw you! Do you know how hard I worked on this hat? How much money this hat cost? Why should I even be trying to please you?'" In the Eastman book, the dogs part amicably, with a simple "Good-by!" "I wanted to do the dog scene again and again," Willems said. "I wanted those dogs to have it out—to have a conflict and then find a way to resolve it, to bring the friendship back into balance."

Willems considers Eastman to be "part

of the 'Mad Men' era of children's books," along with Dr. Seuss. (Eastman served under Theodor Geisel in the Army; later, his books were published by the Dr. Seuss imprint, at Random House.) Willems admires those writers' books, but notes that "they're not about interiority or emotions. That's just not what interested those guys." Instead of imitating what he loved about "Go, Dog. Go!," Willems wanted to write what was missing. His duo consisted of an anxious male elephant named Gerald and a sunny female pig named Piggie—"technically, a friendship between an African and a European," he said. Gerald and Piggie appear against a plain white background, so that the reader's attention is on the expressiveness of their relative postures, the tilt of their ears, of their eyebrows. "I wanted every adventure to be them reestablishing their friendship, not just having fun, because that's a different thing from friendship." Willems recalled a

formative creative partnership: "We'd be shouting at each other over decisions all morning, then go have a great time together at lunch. That was what I wanted."

Willems's publisher was not immediately encouraging. The books were intended as early readers, aimed at children who are just beginning to read; such books are written with a limited vocabulary and many repeated phrases. Early readers don't tend to sell. The ones we tend to remember from childhood are not new but classics like "Go, Dog. Go!" Also, Willems's first two proposed titles were "Today I Will Fly!," in which Piggie does not fly, and "My Friend Is Sad.," in which, Willems was reminded, the word "sad" appears—problematic from a marketing standpoint. "I compromised by taking the punctuation out after 'sad' so that the sadness wouldn't feel so terminal," Willems said. The publisher took a chance on the new characters. The Elephant and Piggie series launched in 2007; it ended, in 2016, with "The Thank You Book," the twenty-fifth installment. The books have sold many millions of copies. In the past thirteen years, Willems has written and illustrated some fifty books, more than half of which have appeared on the *Times* best-seller list, often for months at a time. His recurring characters are as familiar to today's children as the Cat in the Hat is to adults.

Last September, when I first met Willems, I had my three-year-old daughter with me. Willems, who is forty-eight, was wearing orange combat boots, black jeans, a black button-up shirt, and a dark floral blazer. He appeared to be about seven feet tall (though emotionless measurement says he is six feet two). My daughter has memorized much of Willems's oeuvre, an achievement that doesn't greatly distinguish her from her peers. When Willems waved at her, she began to cry. "I understand," he said. "It's a big disappointment. The first of many."

What sets Willems's books apart from most other children's books is that they are very funny. Like many funny things, they don't sound as funny in summary, though perhaps you can imagine why "Naked Mole Rat Gets Dressed" is a really good idea. Willems's humor depends on word choice, on timing, on getting repetitions just right. (So do Beckett plays: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness.") Leonardo the Terrible Monster

doesn't just scare a kid named Sam; he scares "the tuna salad out of him." Gerald and Piggie don't just discover that they're in a book; they discover that the book ends. ("The book ends?! / Yes. All books end. / WHEN WILL THE BOOK END?! / I will look. / Page 57.") Willems's humor is often ludic: the near-surreal "I Will Take a Nap!" fits in several pages of chanting variants of "I'm a floating turnip head!" The classic shaggy-dog structure of "I Broke My Trunk!" centers on Gerald telling a long heroic story that involves him balancing on his trunk first just Hippo . . . and then also Rhino . . . and then also Hippo's big sister, playing a grand piano. Gerald, in running to tell this fantastic story to Piggie, trips and falls, breaking his trunk.

Willems's books remind me of the short plays of David Ives, crossed with the Muppets and those old Land Shark skits from "Saturday Night Live," in which the person in the goofy foam shark costume pretends to deliver flowers, or candy, and then chomps on the heads of unsuspecting victims. You laugh even though it's a running gag and you know it's coming; there's fear and even violence (sort of), but everyone survives it, enjoys it. "The challenge for me is that my goal is to be funny, but within the constraint of using only about forty to fifty words," Willems told me. "That's why I say that early readers are hard writers—writing them isn't easy." They have to be short and immediately engaging, but they can't rely on punch lines. "I sometimes joke that I write for functional illiterates," Willems added. "Because these stories aren't meant to be read once—they're meant to be read a thousand times. In that way, they're more like a song than like the score for a film. You don't listen to 'A Boy Named Sue' for the ending."

The kids' books I remember from my childhood were for the most part not particularly funny. Instead, they were distinguished by being especially imaginative or touching or beautiful or rhyming. "Jumanji" or "Corduroy" or "The Snowy Day" or "Oh, the Places You'll Go." Willems's books often consist merely of cartoon characters speaking in word bubbles. His friend Norton Juster, who wrote "The Phantom Tollbooth," likes to tease him, saying, "I wish I couldn't draw the way you can't draw, and couldn't write the way that you can't write." One can

"read" Willems's stories not just through the words but through the shifting shapes and space, through the changing type sizes. He said, "I try and make the emotional dynamic between the characters readable just from their silhouettes." The animator Tom Warburton, his longtime friend and occasional collaborator, told me, "I know parents who think, These books are so easy to make, there's so few words, the drawings are simple, I could do that. People have no idea how much work goes into achieving simplicity."

WILLEMS WAS BROUGHT up in New Orleans, the only child of a ceramicist father and a mother who was a corporate attorney and an honorary consul to the Dutch Embassy. His parents grew up in the Netherlands, during the Second World War, a period when his mother sometimes went hungry. After Willems was born, his father worked in hotels while his wife went to college and law school. She became very successful. Willems's parents weren't against his having a career in the arts, as so many parents (understandably) are; they were just against his being a failure. "I remember them telling me, 'If you end up on the street, we'll just walk past you, we won't help,'" Willems said. His parents deny saying this, and Willems is estranged from them.

In the fourth grade, Willems was cast in a minor part in the school play, and had just one line. "I was furious," he said. "I remember, I said to myself, 'Next time, I'm going to have the lead.' So I went out and got involved in community theatre right away." In the eighth grade, he was Li'l Abner. Willems was naturally ambitious: at the age of five, a fan of "Peanuts," he wrote to Charles Schulz, asking if he could have his job when he died. (Schulz didn't write back.) By the time Willems was sixteen, he was writing a comic strip for a local real-estate magazine. The strip was called "Surrealty." "I took whatever creative work I could," he said. "I was never into being precious—I was into just making stuff." Willems attended New York University, and when he graduated his parents gave him a year-long trip around the world. He drew a cartoon to commemorate each of the three hundred and sixty-five days.

Last fall, the New-York Historical Society put on an exhibit called "The

Art and Whimsy of Mo Willems." "My basic feeling is that childhood sucks," Willems said, when I met him there. "I didn't like my childhood." He recalled an art teacher who tore up his cartoons in class. "I want my work to be a counter to that." On display at the show was a still from an animated short film that he made as an undergraduate, "The Man Who Yelled." In the film, a Willems-like man in a coffee shop hears an amazing yell; he becomes the yeller's manager; both profit from performances of the yell; the yelling man is then pursued by a man with a knife; but when the yeller yells the pursuer is startled, and his knife flies up and impales him. The film may not be for kids, but in a sense it has a happy ending: the yeller survives.

"I was into triangles then," Willems said of the still, which was drawn with acute angles and no curves. "I hated the roundness and fullness of Disney animation, and I didn't know why you would want these round, dimensional characters, these imitations of life, who are basically the roommates of reality. I wanted something flat, and unreal." Willems said that he didn't really start drawing circles until he felt that he could draw a circle that was a kind of triangle. The visual style of his books remains flat, a quietly assertive, not-our-world aesthetic, circles and all.

Willems said, "I understood that the only way to get to make an animated film was to have already made an animated film," and so he parlayed his student film into work doing interstitials—bits in between shows—and short films for Nickelodeon. The films were called "The Off-Beats" and they enabled him to get a twenty-two-minute Valentine's Day special made, in part because, he said, "I knew you couldn't do a full-length show unless you had already done a full-length show." He used the special to get a regular animated series on the Cartoon Network, "Sheep in the Big City," which ran for two seasons. At around the same time, he worked for "Sesame Street," writing sketches as part of a team that won six Emmys for Outstanding Writing in a Children's Series.

Through his mid-twenties, Willems performed standup comedy, wrote for television, drew comics, rode a motorcycle through the streets of New York, rolled his own cigarettes, and had a girlfriend

with whom he spoke French. Many young men in such circumstances would feel triumphant. But Amy Donaldson, a friend from Willems's childhood, told me, "He was maybe twenty-five years old, and we were in a café late at night, and he was telling me that he was totally washed up, that he had failed, that it was over for him."

Willems's books reveal a preoccupation with failure, even an alliance with it. In "Elephants Cannot Dance," they can't; in "Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!," Pigeon, despite all his pleading and cajoling, never does. Willems told me, "At 'Sesame Street,' they would give us these workshops about the importance of failure, but then in our skits all the characters had to be great at what they did, everything had to work out. That drove me crazy." One of his most memorable sketches on "Sesame Street" was about a Muppet, Rosita, who wants to play the guitar; she isn't very good, even by the end of the episode. Many artists talk about the importance of failure, but Willems seems particularly able to hold on to the conviction of it. He is a distinctly kind, mature, and thoughtful person to spend time with, and there was only one anecdote that he told me twice. It was about a feeling he had recently while walking his dog, a kind of warm humming feeling starting in his abdomen, which, he said, he had never had before. Was it happiness? I asked. He said no. He'd felt happiness before. This was something different. He said he thought that, for the first time ever, he was feeling success.

The feeling would appear to be transient. When I asked him if it felt strange to no longer be writing Elephant and Piggie books—I was still working on a way to break the news to my daughter, who had been using the Other Titles endpaper as a field of dreams—he said, "Well, at least now I have my obituary." Shortly afterward, he said, unprompted, "I think 'What are you working on next?' is the *worst* question. It's such a bad question. I hate that question. Everyone asks that question. I want to say, 'Isn't this good enough for you?'"

I laughed. Maybe the question was

just standard journalese, I floated, and not personal.

"No," he said. "It's just a really bad question."

WHEN WILLEMS WAS twenty-seven, he and his father made a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, in Spain. His father wanted to take a horse-drawn wagon, as would have been done in the past. Setting out from southern Holland, his father rented a wagon, which came with a horse named Norton and—Willems swears—a dog called Fukkije. Willems met him in France. "The carriage weighed something like five thousand pounds, but there were clowns painted on the side," he said. "So even when we were sinking into the mud of a field or nearly falling off a bridge, locals were handing us their children to take pictures." This was not the first major journey Willems and his father had taken together: when Willems was fifteen, they walked from Golfe-Juan to Paris, following the route of Napoleon's return from Elba; when he was seventeen, they kayaked the Rhine from the Bodensee to Nijmegen.

Willems said, "When our carriage finally broke down, we sent back the horse and dog and bought bicycles." When they had had enough of the bicycles, they left them by the side of the road and walked the last few hundred kilometres. "Every day it rained," Willems said. "All we were eating was *sopa de pescado*." By the last day of the pilgrimage, Willems felt so sick that he took a bus the rest of the way. Once at Santiago, Willems met his girlfriend, Cher, at the airport, and at dinner that night he asked her to marry him. She agreed. (They married in 1997.) "I said to myself, 'If I can handle this trip with my dad, I can handle marriage,'" Willems told me. He likes to say of his book "Goldilocks and the Three Dinosaurs" that his insight was that when you find yourself in the wrong story—Goldilocks finally realizes that she is in a house occupied by dinosaurs—you can leave.

In 1999, Mo and Cher rented a place in Oxford, England, for a month; his goal was to write a great children's book. During that time, Willems wrote and illustrated five books, none of which were published.

"I'm not going to tell you what they were about," he said to me.

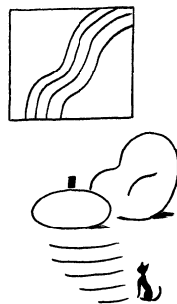
"Really?"

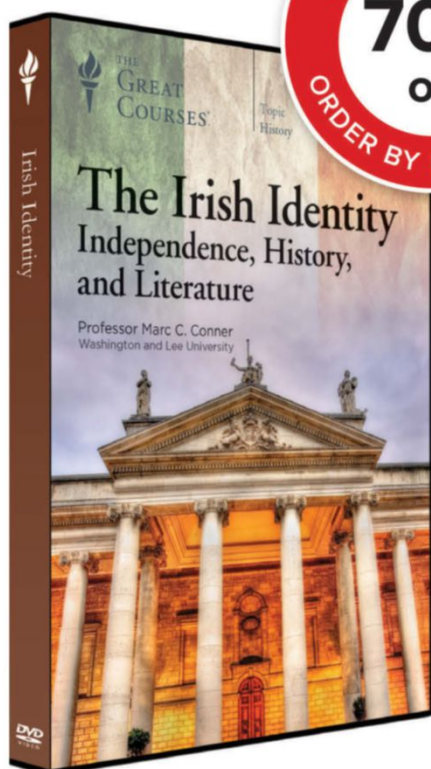
"They were what I thought kids wanted—that's why they failed. You don't give people what they want. You give them what they don't yet know they want."

That Christmas, Willems did what he had done for each of the previous five years: he put together a sketchbook of cartoons and other entertainments, which he sent to friends and work associates, as a sort of holiday card. This sketchbook was about a pigeon that wants to drive a bus.

When the Willemses returned to New York, Cher began working as an assistant librarian at a school on the Upper East Side. She read the pigeon sketchbook to the kids there. (The pigeon petitions the reader directly—alternately with charm, with rage, with desperation, with bargaining—to let him do the thing that he never gets to do.) They loved it. "Cher said to me, 'I think this is a kids' book,'" Willems told me. "I said, 'No, definitely not.'" But his agent, Marcia Wernick, eventually shopped it around. For two years, he said, "it was turned down everywhere. But the editors did say, again and again, that it was 'unusual.'" (Wernick has saved some of the rejections, which include comments like "We've got a great character, but what does he do besides give quips?" and "I'd really like to see that pigeon drive the bus.") "Finally, there was an editor who agreed that it was unusual, but she thought that was a good thing." Alessandra Balzer, who acquired the book for Hyperion, now runs her own imprint, Balzer & Bray. "I loved it immediately," she told me. "I loved the direct address to the kids, I loved the humor." She bought it for what she describes as a "modest sum."

Balzer felt that the book needed to be formatted differently, in part because it looked more like a cartoon than most illustrated children's books of the time did. She had it printed on uncoated paper, omitted a dust jacket, gave it a lower price than that of similar titles, and later used Pigeon as a recurring character to advertise other children's books. Willems began the story on the endpapers, rather than after the title page. In 2004, the book won a Caldecott Honor, which is rarely awarded to an author's first work. (A year later, Willems's first book about Knuffle





What Was the Irish Renaissance?

Many political and cultural events sent shockwaves through the Irish world in the 19th and early 20th centuries as Ireland gradually shook off the shackles of British rule. Alongside a long and painful political process arose one of the greatest flourishings of literature in modern times. The Irish Revival that occurred around the turn of the 20th century fused and elevated aesthetic and civic ambitions, fueling a cultural climate of masterful artistic creation and resolute political self-determination reminiscent of the Italian Renaissance.

Delve into this remarkable period with **The Irish Identity: Independence, History, and Literature**. Over the course of 36 enthralling lectures, Professor Marc Conner of Washington and Lee University reveals the complex story of the Irish Renaissance through an exploration of its intriguing history and remarkable literature. The Irish Revival is a powerful period, and this course brings this riveting history to life.

Offer expires 02/16/17

THEGREATCOURSES.COM/9NYR
1-800-832-2412

The Irish Identity: Independence, History, and Literature

Taught by Professor Marc C. Conner
WASHINGTON AND LEE UNIVERSITY

LECTURE TITLES

1. Roots of Irish Identity: Celts to Monks
2. Gaelic Ireland's Fall: Vikings to Cromwell
3. The Penal Laws and Protestant Ascendancy
4. Ireland at the Turn of the 19th Century
5. Daniel O'Connell and the Great Famine
6. The Celtic Revival
7. Shaw and Wilde: Irish Wit, London Stage
8. W. B. Yeats and the Irish Renaissance
9. Yeats in the 1890s
10. Lady Gregory: The Woman behind the Revival
11. J. M. Synge and the Aran Islands
12. James Joyce: Emerging Genius of Dublin
13. Joyce's *Dubliners*: Anatomy of a City
14. The Abbey Theatre
15. Lady Gregory as the People's Playwright
16. Early Plays of J. M. Synge
17. Synge's *Playboy of the Western World*
18. The Dublin Lockout and World War I
19. The 1916 Easter Rising
20. Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*
21. Joyce's *Portrait* as Modernist Narrative
22. Yeats as the Great 20th-Century Poet
23. Michael Collins and the War of Independence
24. The Irish Civil War
25. *Ulysses*: A Greek Epic in an Irish World
26. Three Episodes from *Ulysses*
27. Molly Bloom: Joyce's Voice of Love
28. Sean O'Casey's Dublin Trilogy
29. Life and Legacy of Lady Gregory
30. Yeats: The Tower Poems and Beyond
31. Blasket Island Storytellers
32. *Finnegans Wake*: Joyce's Final Epic
33. Patrick Kavanagh: After the Renaissance
34. Modern Ireland in Paint and Glass
35. De Valera's Ireland: The 1930s
36. Seamus Heaney's Poetry of Remembrance

**The Irish Identity: Independence,
History, and Literature**

Course no. 8740 | 36 lectures (30 minutes/lecture)

SAVE UP TO \$270

DVD ~~\$384.95~~ **NOW \$114.95**

CD ~~\$284.95~~ **NOW \$84.95**

+\$15 Shipping, Processing, and Lifetime Satisfaction Guarantee

Priority Code: 139958

For over 25 years, The Great Courses has brought the world's foremost educators to millions who want to go deeper into the subjects that matter most. No exams. No homework. Just a world of knowledge available anytime, anywhere. Download or stream to your laptop or PC, or use our free apps for iPad, iPhone, Android, Kindle Fire, or Roku. Over 600 courses available at www.TheGreatCourses.com.

Bunny, a beloved stuffed animal left at a laundromat, also won a Caldecott.) “Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!” sold well, and then better, and then even better. (There are now six Pigeon books, and Pigeon continues to make cameo appearances in all of Willems’s books.)

“All my other characters, I basically know where they came from,” Willems said. “But Pigeon—he arrived complete. He just arrived as himself. Formally, I knew what I wanted to do with the book—I wanted it to be like a mood ring, that the background color shifted on every page—but the visual controlling idea, the formal idea, for a book is different from the central idea.” He added, “Honestly, I don’t think I could write another Pigeon book now.”

“Why?”

“He’s a monster! His wants are unbounded, he finds everything unjust, everything against him, he’s moody, he’s selfish. Of course, I identify with that—we all have some of that—but I’m glad that I can’t imagine writing him now. I’m happy to be less him. I’ve mellowed out. I’m merely pessimistic.”

I asked Cher what had made her think that the Pigeon story could be a kids’ book. She paused, then said, of her work at the time, “There were two classrooms, the same size, the same kinds of kids in terms of age, background. Every day with their lunch, the children got a cookie that came in a cellophane wrapper. In one of the classrooms, the teacher would come around with scissors and snip the cellophane off each cookie wrapper. In the other classroom, the teacher said, ‘Absolutely do not touch those wrappers, do not help the children open them. These kids are motivated, they can open these cookies themselves.’ Sometimes there was a lot of struggle. The cookies might be pulverized by the time they were opened. But they were opened, each one of them. I knew kids could desire, fail, be angry, thrive. I knew that this was territory that made sense for them. Those Pigeon emotions made sense to them—that told me something.”

My daughter has a stuffed Pigeon that, if squeezed, calls out, in Willems’s voice, “Let me drive the bus!” It’s sort of spooky. Sometimes she rolls over it in her sleep, triggering the mechanism, and the voice seems to channel her

dream life. Many parents have told me that they find Pigeon too angry or too snarky or too adult. And Pigeon *is* angry and snarky. Years ago, many grownups were similarly skeptical of the tantrums of Max, in Maurice Sendak’s “Where the Wild Things Are.” The children of those grownups are now grownups who name their children Max.

IN 2008, WILLEMS and Cher and their daughter, Trixie, who is now fifteen, moved to Northampton, Massachusetts. Northampton is in the Pioneer Valley, an area that was once home to Sojourner Truth, Sonic Youth, and utopian abolitionist communities. Eric Carle, who wrote “The Very Hungry Caterpillar,” lives there, as do Norton Juster and dozens of other cartoonists and children’s-book authors and illustrators. The Willemses live in a rambling Victorian painted autumnal yellow; they have a pétanque court in the yard and a vegetable garden, alongside an acre of undeveloped woods. Cher has a pottery studio and a kiln in the basement. Willems works in a spacious and sunny converted attic.

“It’s like the classic New York dream of finding another room,” he said. “When we got this house, there was a wall here, and we thought, I wonder what’s behind there, and here it is.” Willems works alone, which is unusual for an author/illustrator at his level; most people would have someone helping with scanning or coloring. He likes to be in control of each part of the process. His studio is orderly, with a drafting table, a scanner, date stamps, and a computer by the window. His corkboard has family photos on it and a note from a reader—“I like you book s. I like them because you are all workt up ovr nuten.” Thumbtacked onto it is a notecard that reads, simply, “funny.”

Past the drafting table and the computer area is a hallway lined with wooden filing drawers, each one detailed with a red, blue, or yellow stripe, and labeled with the titles of Willems’s books. “This is where I have the art and page proofs from each book,” he said. The primary colors of the filing drawers surprised me; neither his books nor his clothes nor his demeanor has a primary-color feel to it. “Yeah, these colors are here to remind me to be happy,” Willems said. I sometimes felt that everything I heard

him say was at once a joke and not a joke, or that the joke he was making was that he wasn’t joking.

We opened a drawer and looked at a sketch, in blue pencil, from “I Really Like Slop!,” one of the later books in the Elephant and Piggie series. In the course of the books, Gerald and Piggie changed somewhat in appearance, and by the time of “Slop!” Gerald’s ears had grown larger and begun to sag. Piggie’s ears had grown as well. Their personalities also began to shift: in the beginning, Gerald was either sad or anxious or discouraging, but he eventually developed some emotional resilience, which gave Piggie some space to be less than perennially sunny. Willems’s friends and family say that he is Gerald, and that Piggie represents his friends, his daughter, his wife—all the people around him who say that maybe things are better than they seem.

The color palette of the books also changed. It became brighter, and the dark outlines of the characters gained contrast. “It happened around mid-series,” Willems said. “I would never have used the colors I used in ‘Slop!’ earlier in the series.” Eating the slop makes Gerald turn purple, then lime green, then orange, then bright yellow with purple polka dots. When he started the series, Willems said, “I just wasn’t ready.”

Mounted on a wall at the back of the workspace was a Calder-like sculpture of a metal circle hovering beneath a metal bracket, and looped onto a metal triangle with a rope. Willems said that it was one of his “magnet doodles.” He took up metalwork after Cher suggested that he needed a non-remunerative hobby; soon he had made a grill for the back yard, a window guard for his daughter’s room in the shape of a large metal snake, and a car-size red metal elephant that lives at the Eric Carle Museum of Picture Book Art, in Amherst. Willems’s magnet doodle recalled the magic of science shows from childhood, but I’d never seen anything quite like it. “I used to feel that when I turned the lights out it collapsed,” he said.

RECENTLY, I ATTENDED the launch of Willems’s most recent book, “Nanette’s Baguette,” which is about a frog named Nanette, who tries to bring home a baguette; when she fails, she wonders

if she should run away to Tibet. The event was at the Eric Carle Museum. Carle got his start in advertising, where he was “discovered” through his artwork for a Chlor-Trimeton ad. The Carle Museum’s building was designed by Norton Juster’s architectural firm, and, at its opening, Carle and Juster flipped pancakes for visitors. In the main hall, there’s a sculpture by Leo Lionni, who did not become a picture-book maker until he was fifty, after years working as the art director of *Fortune*. Willems’s description of earlier generations of picture-book artists as belonging to the “Mad Men” era was manifest.

I used to have a patchwork theory about the makers of children’s literature: that they were not so much people who spent a lot of time with kids as people who were still kids themselves. Among the evidence was that Beatrix Potter had no children, Maurice Sendak had no children, Margaret Wise Brown had no children, Tove Jansson had no children, and Dr. Seuss had no children. Even Willems began writing for children before he had a child. But what makes these adults so in touch with the distinct color and scale of the emotions of children?

I now have a new theory: Tove Jansson began her Moomin series during the Nazi occupation of Finland; Paddington Bear was modelled on the Jewish refugee children turning up alone in London train stations. Arnold Lobel, the creator of the Frog and Toad books, came out to his children as gay and died relatively young, from AIDS. I wonder if the truer unity among children’s-book authors is sublimated outrage at the adult world. If they’re going to serve someone, it’s going to be children.

In the book-signing line, I met a young boy who showed me a twelve-page cartoon booklet he had drawn. He and his family had travelled from New Brunswick, Canada, to attend the event. The booklet was titled “When Potatoes Come to Life.” In one panel, a potato gets skinned. “He looks shy about not having his skin on,” I said. The boy corrected me: “No, he’s not shy, he’s *embarrassed*.” Another kid in line, named Jaden, told me that he had written fifty-six comic books; his most recent one was about his lunchbox, named Marvel.

The signing had a system: there were



“We’re close to being reliant solely on renewable sources of outrage.”

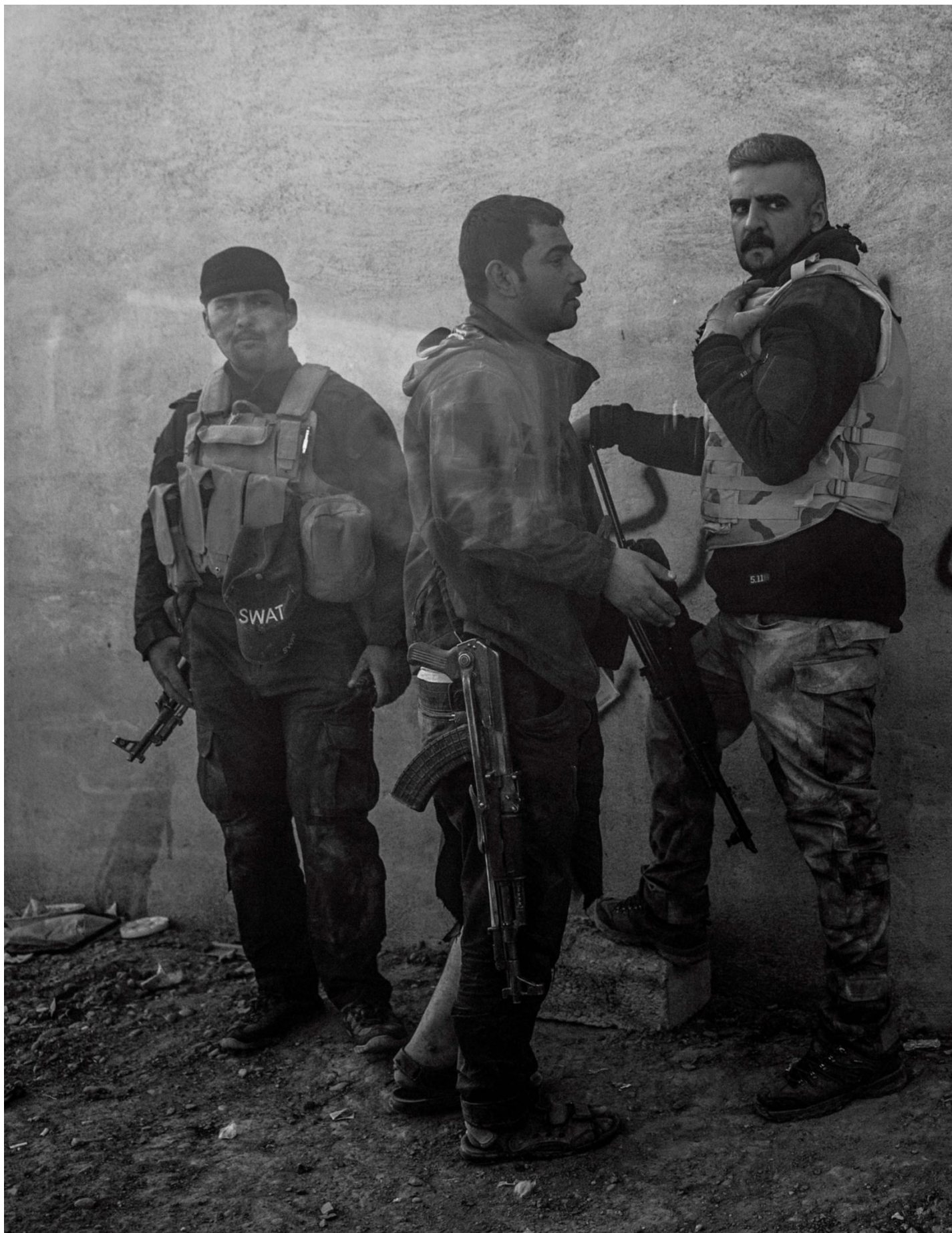
six color-coded groups of tickets, each associated with a time slot, with eighty tickets for each time slot. A young girl approached Willems’s table clutching a Knuffle Bunny stuffed animal and looking slightly terrified. “I only bite every fifth customer,” he said. “And you’re, let’s see—one, two, three, four—you’re safe.” She had seven books with her. Most children approached the table with a similarly substantial pile. Willems has developed the ability to ink a piggie or a pigeon or a dinosaur into a book while not looking down at the page, so that he can look at and speak with the child who is there to see him. He doesn’t write children’s names in the books; it takes away from the actual time to engage, he feels, and puts the emphasis on having a souvenir.

Two pairs of fathers and sons approached. One boy, with a nudge from his father, said, “I wanted to tell you that I’m dyslexic, and, when I was learning to read, your books were the first ones I could read.” Willems hears this often, from children and also from teachers and librarians. The humor of the books motivates kids, but perhaps more important is the way that you can “read” the characters through their positions and expressions. When Azerbaijanis wanted to teach Latin script, a publisher translated Willems’s work into Azeri. “They watch soap operas in Turkish, and read news in Russian, and they wanted to introduce the Roman alphabet to their people,” Willems said. The publisher flew him over, wined and dined him, and, having heard that he liked jazz, had a local musician—“Kenny W,” Willems

joked—play saxophone too close to him.

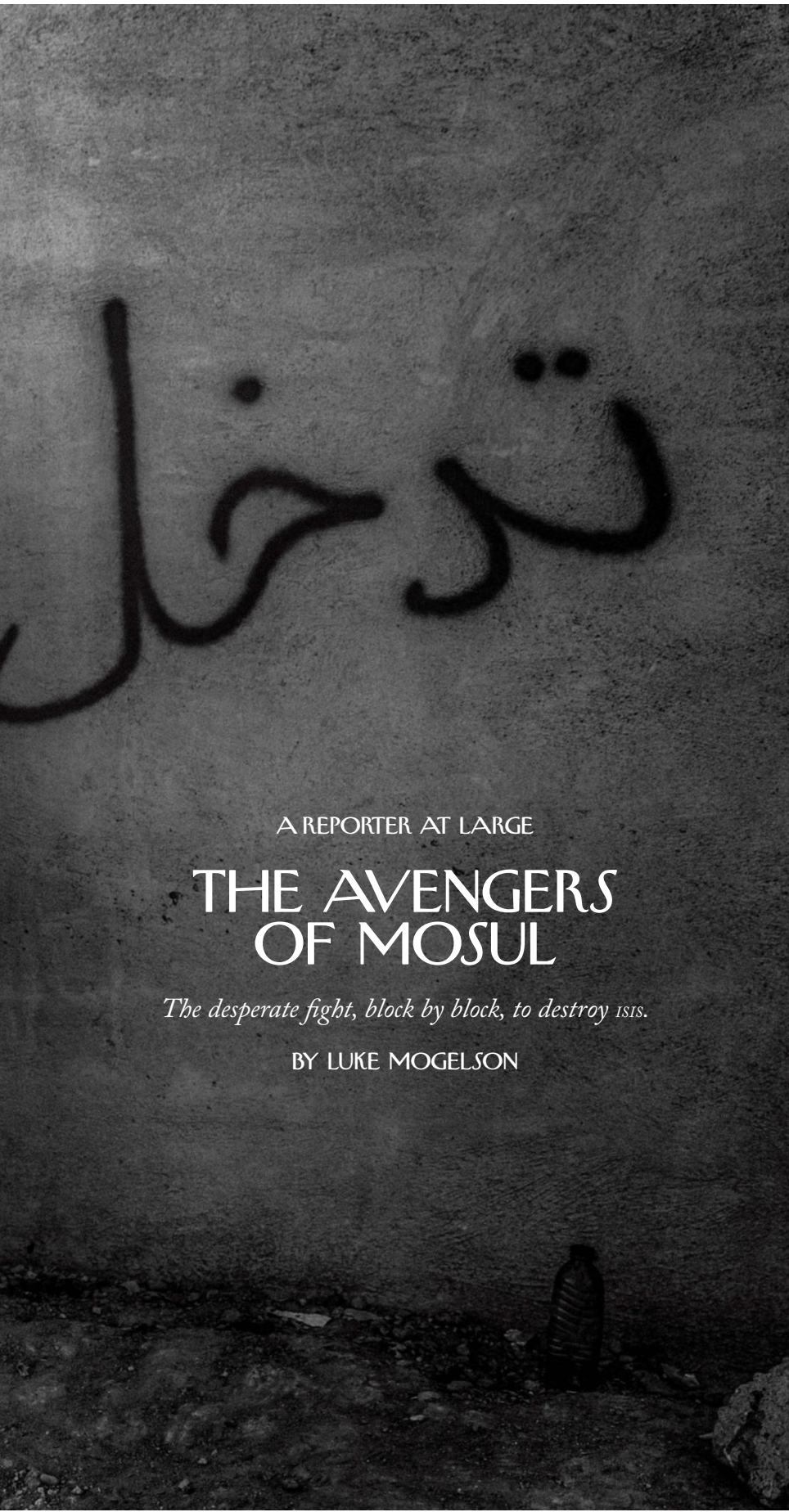
The fathers and sons had travelled from Hartford to meet Willems; Sean, the dyslexic son, said that the first book he read to his dad was “We Are in a Book!” Willems mostly jokes with kids, but he also often says to them—if they ask him when he started publishing, or how many books he’s written, or where he gets his ideas—“Are you a writer, too?” or “Do you also draw?” I saw just one response to this, among kids of all ages: solemn nodding.

At a Mo Willems reading, you are likely to find a very full auditorium of small people and the larger people who care for them. Willems walks onstage like a man who knows how to walk onstage: “Hi, I’m Mo Willems, and I’m . . . a balloon salesman.” The children shout, “No!” “I’m Mo Willems, and I’m a . . . corporate attorney specializing in tax affairs.” No! Willems onstage is all big gestures and hats, a different character from the adult you encounter offstage. If you are moved, as I am, when adults set aside their dignity in order to make kids happy, you will find these readings very affecting. Willems is a ham: his ego is absent, his audience’s happiness is all. After he reads, the kids ask questions. Then it often ends like this: Willems says, “Any librarians or teachers in the audience today? Raise your hands. Higher. Higher.” He pauses. Looks out. “Now back and forth a little bit, to try and get my attention.” The first time I saw this, I was waiting for him to suggest that we all clap. But that’s not how jokes work. Willems just says, “Well, now you see how it feels.” ♦



Major Mezher Sadoon (right), the deputy commander of a SWAT team, in a village outside Mosul. Every team member either had

PHOTOGRAPHS BY VICTOR J. BLUE



A REPORTER AT LARGE

THE AVENGERS OF MOSUL

The desperate fight, block by block, to destroy ISIS.

BY LUKE MOGELSON

been wounded by ISIS or had lost a loved one to terrorism. They wanted revenge.

I. UP THE TIGRIS

WHEN THE CAMPAIGN to expel the Islamic State from Mosul began, on October 17th, the Nineveh Province SWAT team was deployed far from the action, in the village of Kharbardan. For weeks, the elite police unit, made up almost entirely of native sons of Mosul, had been patrolling a bulldozed trench that divided bleak and vacant enemy-held plains from bleak and vacant government-held plains. The men, needing a headquarters, had commandeered an abandoned mud-mortar house whose primary charm was its location: the building next door had been obliterated by an air strike, and the remains of half a dozen Islamic State fighters—charred torsos, limbs, and heads—still littered the rubble.

The SWAT-team members huddled around a lieutenant with a radio, listening to news of the offensive. The Kurdish Army, or peshmerga, was advancing toward Mosul from the north; various divisions of the Iraqi military were preparing a push from the south. More than a hundred thousand soldiers, policemen, and government-sanctioned-militia members were expected to participate in the fight to liberate Mosul, the second-largest city in Iraq. It had been occupied since June, 2014, and was now home to about six thousand militants from the Islamic State, or ISIS. The SWAT-team members were desperate to join the battle. They called relatives in Mosul, chain-smoked cigarettes, and excoriated the war planners, from Baghdad, who seemed to have forgotten them. Major Mezher Sadoon, the deputy commander, urged patience: the campaign would unfold in stages. At forty-six, he had a flattop and a paintbrush mustache that were equal parts black and gray. He had been shot in the face in Mosul, in 2004, and since then his jaw had been held together by four metal pins. The deformed bone caused his speech to slur—subtly when he spoke at a normal pace and volume (rare), and severely when he was angry or excited (often). Many villages surrounding Mosul had to be cleared before forces could retake the city, Mezher told his men. Holding out his hands, he added, “When you kill a

chicken, first you have to boil it. Then you have to pluck it. Only after that do you get to butcher it.”

Few of the policemen seemed reassured by the analogy. They were hungry, and they’d been waiting to butcher this chicken for a long time. The SWAT team was created in 2008 and, in conjunction with U.S. Special Forces, conducted raids in Mosul to arrest high-value terrorism suspects. After the American withdrawal from the country, in 2011, the unit hunted down insurgents on its own.

In early 2014, ISIS attacked the Iraqi cities of Ramadi and Falluja. Then, riding out of Syria in pickup trucks mounted with machine guns, the militants stormed Mosul.

They had aspired merely to secure a couple of the city’s western neighborhoods, but they quickly reached the Tigris River, which snakes south through the middle of Mosul. Along the way, they overran several military bases, seizing the heavy weapons, armored vehicles, and ammunition depots inside them. The SWAT team, which at the time was based at a compound near the Mosul airport, consisted of roughly eighty men, only half of whom were on duty. As ISIS surged through the city, the commander of the SWAT team, Lieutenant Colonel Rayyan Abdelrazzak, consolidated his troops in the Mosul Hotel, a ten-story terraced building on the western bank of the Tigris. The SWAT team held the position for four days, while the thirty thousand Army soldiers stationed in Mosul—nearly all of whom came from elsewhere in Iraq—ditched their weapons and fled. On the fifth day, a water tanker loaded with explosives detonated outside the hotel, killing three SWAT-team members and wounding twenty-five. Rayyan and the survivors retreated to the airport compound.

A detention facility next to the compound contained approximately nine hundred convicted terrorists, many of whom had been apprehended by the SWAT team. With the fall of Mosul imminent, Rayyan’s men loaded two hundred and fifty-six of the inmates into vans and spirited them out of the city. The captives they had to leave behind were freed by ISIS the next day. A week

later, so were the two hundred and fifty-six, when the town to which Rayyan had transferred them also fell to ISIS.

In the areas it controls, ISIS typically offers Iraqi security forces a kind of amnesty by means of an Islamic procedure called *torwa*, in which one repents and pledges allegiance to the Caliphate. But the SWAT team was not eligible for *torwa*. “We had killed too many of them,” Rayyan told me. Some members of the force who had not been at the Mosul Hotel escaped to Kurdistan, but, among those who failed to make it out of the city, twenty-six were rounded up and executed.

Eventually, the chief of police for Nineveh Province, whose capital is Mosul, reconstituted his forces at a spartan base north of the city. Rayyan brought the remnants of the SWAT team there, and began enlisting new volunteers. Aside from martial aptitude, there were two principal requirements for recruits: they had to have been wounded by ISIS or its Islamist precursors—either physically, by bullets and blasts, or psychologically, by the death of a loved one—and they had to crave revenge. “I had the idea that a unit like that would work in a real way,” Rayyan told me. If the implication was that other units’ commitment to the destruction of ISIS was less than sincere, Rayyan’s understanding of the distinction was personal. In 2005, his older brother Safwan had been gunned down by terrorists, and two of his fiancée’s brothers had been murdered. His father’s house had been blown up. He’d been shot in the leg and the chest and the hip. At his engagement party, gunmen had tried to shoot him a fourth time, and wounded his sister instead. More recently, ISIS suicide bombers had killed his brother Neshwan, a police officer, and abducted his brother Salwan, who had remained in Mosul. Rayyan didn’t know if Salwan was alive or dead.

For two years after Mosul fell, the front lines around the city remained relatively static, as the Iraqi military regrouped and clawed back ISIS-held territory closer to Baghdad. This past summer, Iraqi forces began reclaiming the mostly rural lands to the east and

south of Mosul, laying the groundwork for an invasion. The SWAT team helped clear five villages. Then, to the unit’s frustration, it was sent out to Kharbardan, in a dust-bowl district of minimal strategic consequence. A few days after the campaign to liberate Mosul began, one officer, Lieutenant Thamer Najem, deserted his post when he learned that the Army was attempting to clear ISIS from the village where his mother and cousins lived. Thamer returned two days later with a story that confirmed each man’s worst anxiety. Four of his cousins had killed an ISIS fighter when they saw Iraqi infantry and tanks approaching. But the Army had stopped short of entering the village, and Thamer’s relatives were slaughtered.

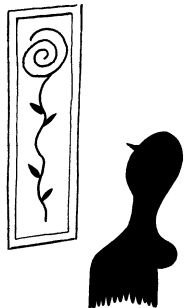
In Kharbardan, policeman after policeman explained to my interpreter and me why he had joined the SWAT team and why he wanted revenge. Hadi Nabil, a low-key corporal, said that his wife, Abeer, died in 2013, when Al Qaeda assassins came looking for him at his home. Their daughter, Khalida, was ten days old. The gunmen shot Abeer dead and wounded Hadi in the shoulder. After the funeral, Hadi, in keeping with Iraqi custom, married Abeer’s sister, Iman, who agreed to raise Khalida.

When ISIS invaded Mosul, Hadi, then a regular policeman, holed up with the SWAT members in the hotel, where he was wounded in the water-tanker blast. He fled the city with Rayyan’s men, and hadn’t seen his wife or his daughter since. In 2015, an ISIS court forced Iman to divorce Hadi. Militants subsequently tracked down Hadi’s brother, who belonged to a resistance cell, and abducted him.

One day in Kharbardan, a young man with a black scarf wrapped around his head approached me bashfully and proposed that we talk someplace where no one else could hear. His name was Bashar Hamood; until now, he’d deliberately seemed to avoid me. We climbed onto the roof. A guard was posted there, and when he saw us he asked Bashar, “Did you show him the video?”

“Not yet.”

Bashar told me that his older brother, Salem, had been an intelligence officer in Mosul and had fled to Kurdistan when the city fell. A few months later, a Kurdish intelligence agency publicly accused



Salem of being an ISIS sympathizer, and deported him from Kurdish territory. Bashar was shocked, and on March 17, 2015, he contacted Salem on Facebook, insisting that he explain himself. Salem revealed that his expulsion from Kurdistan was a ploy—he had returned to Mosul to conduct a clandestine operation. Bashar and Salem had another brother, Kahtan, who'd been killed by Islamists in 2006. Bashar pleaded with Salem to return to Kurdistan, but Salem refused. "I'm here to get revenge for Kahtan," he wrote. Bashar sent another message, and could see that Salem's account was still online. But Salem didn't respond. "It seems that this whole conversation was being read by ISIS," Bashar said. For five days, Bashar heard no news about Salem. Then a friend in Mosul sent word: Salem had been taken to an ISIS court and condemned to die.

On the roof, Bashar got out his phone and, averting his eyes, showed me a video. He had put the phone on mute. "I'm sorry, I can't listen," he said. Later, my interpreter and I watched the video again, with sound. It opens with red and white Arabic script on a black background, which says, "Another slaughter by the crusader coalition against a Muslim family in Ghabat"—a neighborhood in northern Mosul. "God will avenge us." The video shows men clearing debris and extracting mangled corpses, some of children. Eventually, Salem appears onscreen, in an orange jumpsuit, beside the black flag of ISIS. Like Bashar, he has a long face and heavy-lidded eyes. He confesses to providing Iraqi intelligence officers with G.P.S. coordinates for ISIS targets, including the location of the strike in Ghabat. He speaks with unsettling composure, but his mouth is dry, and at several points he pauses and makes an effort to swallow. "I have advice for anyone who wants to do this kind of work," he says. "Give up."

The video cuts to more red text—the word "vengeance"—and then shows Salem, outdoors, kneeling amid slabs of concrete before a militant holding a sword. The video transitions to slow motion as the militant beheads Salem.

I asked Bashar why he kept the video on his phone. "The Prophet tells us it's forbidden to kill prisoners of war," Bashar replied. "If I catch someone from

ISIS, I know I'll remember the Prophet's words and fear God's punishment. But if I watch this video my heart will become like boiling water, and, even if it's forbidden by my religion, I'll have the strength to kill him."

LATER THAT DAY, I was standing outside the house with Basam Attallah, a captain with a round, open face and a neck so short that his signature desert scarf usually obscured it. Basam said he had not informed his family in Mosul that he was on the SWAT team. "The day before yesterday, one of my cousins called me," Basam said. "I told him I'm working in Kurdistan, in a store. It's better that way. If someone accidentally says something, if one of the children hears it and repeats it, they could be in danger."

As we spoke, a Humvee raced up the dirt road that led from the trench and skidded to a stop in front of us. A young policeman, sobbing violently, tumbled out and collapsed into Basam's arms. "Sir!" he cried. "They have my wife and kids!"

Basam brought the man, Ahmed Saad, to a bench, where Major Mezher and others were smoking a hookah. Ahmed told Mezher that ISIS fighters had shown up at his in-laws' house, in Mosul, and taken away his wife, his son, and his daughter. Ahmed's mother had called his brother, Saef, who was also

on the SWAT team, and Saef had relayed the news to Ahmed.

On a typical day, even a minor annoyance could provoke Mezher to throw a nearby object—a water bottle, a chair, a glowing hookah coal—at a subordinate, and more than once I'd seen him shoot his Kalashnikov a few inches to the right or left of some terrified offender. These outbursts were reliably preceded by a deep furrowing of the brow, such as he was affecting now.

He glowered at Saef, who was loitering at a cautious remove. "Why did you tell him?" Mezher shouted at him. "Come here!" Saef stepped closer, uncertainly, and Mezher spat on him. Turning to Ahmed, Mezher said, "If they call you and tell you that they took your wife, tell them you don't care. Tell them you divorced her three years ago."

Ahmed had stopped crying. The men had offered him the hookah, and he stared at the ground, smoking.

"Do you know who it was?" Mezher asked.

"Probably the barber," Ahmed said. "He called me not long ago and said, 'If you think you're a state, why don't you come to Mosul?'"

"We're coming."

For a while, no one spoke. Then Hadi said, "They took my wife to the court and divorced her from me."

"We're not doing any more operations



"Check it out, bro—this pneumatic tube pipes us from the frat to Wall Street."



Captain Basam Attallah shoots at a cache of ISIS explosives, a hundred feet away, discovered while clearing a village near Mosul. “If you go

down here,” Mezher declared. “From now on, all our missions will be toward our families.”

Ahmed looked up. “When are they going to give us another mission?”

Mezher had no answer. But the next day the SWAT team was ordered to head west, to the Tigris River, and begin following it north toward Mosul.

AT THE TIGRIS, THE SWAT TEAM WAS to meet up with the Ninety-first Brigade of the Iraqi Army’s 16th Division. Together, they would clear half a dozen villages on the river’s eastern bank while the Federal Police—a national

paramilitary force—advanced, in tandem, on the river’s opposite bank. The broader goal was to approach Mosul from three sides: while the peshmerga, moving from Kurdistan, established a front north of the city, the Iraqi military would attempt to penetrate from the east and the south. That would leave western Mosul open to the desert that led to Syria. There were two reasons for this strategy. First, the historic neighborhoods west of the Tigris presented a greater tactical challenge than the east side. Describing western Mosul, Colonel Brett Sylvia, the commander of the American-led Task Force Strike, which

advises and assists the Iraqi military, told me, “It is much more dense, in terms of the urban terrain. There is a larger civilian population on that side, and it has been home to some of the more strongly held ISIS areas.” Second, surrounding Mosul entirely would invite the militants to fight to the death; better to leave open a corridor to Syria, lure them into the desert, and kill them there.

Thirty-five members of the SWAT team left at sunrise, in seven armored Humvees. There wasn’t room for the entire unit. Many members of the team were related, and, because of the risk of improvised explosive devices, or I.E.D.s,



toward death, death retreats," he said.

Mezher prohibited any two family members from riding in the same Humvee.

I crammed into Mezher's vehicle, sharing a seat with a corporal in a black balaclava. We were wedged in amid ammo boxes, ammo belts, and the feet of another policeman, who stood in the turret behind a Dushka, a Russian heavy machine gun. The SWAT team rendezvoused with the 16th Division on a dirt road winding through neglected wheat fields. Behind us, the sky was obscured by an eerie miasma: black smoke gushing from oil fields that ISIS had set alight when it quit the area, in August. The convoy proceeded haltingly, often pausing for engi-

neers to detonate mines or for soldiers to conduct reconnaissance in lonely farming settlements where the exteriors of houses were draped with white bedsheets and pillowcases—flags of peace. Outside a village called Salahiya, the tanks and armored personnel carriers of the 16th Division suddenly came to a halt. The SWAT team continued into town on its own.

One Humvee was ahead of ours, and it paused upon reaching the first narrow street. Mezher erupted.

"Go, you cowards!" he screamed into his radio, slamming the windshield with his palm. He turned to his driver. "Go!"

"Where, sir?"

"Forward! Forward!"

We accelerated into the lead, hurtling down alleys and whipping around corners. I was impressed that the driver could steer at all. The bulletproof windshield, cracked by past rounds, looked like battered ice, and a large photograph of a recently killed SWAT-team member obstructed much of the view.

The gunner fired into random buildings, and something exploded behind us, but the snipers and ambushes that we braced for never came. Salahiya was deserted.

Mezher told the driver to park on a low rise in the center of town, where the rest of the unit joined us. Colonel Rayyan stepped out of a vehicle and greeted Mezher. While Mezher directed some men to kindle hookah coals, Rayyan directed others to scale a nearby water tower and raise an Iraqi flag.

Normally, Mezher and Rayyan alternated leadership every ten days; while one was in charge, the other rested in Kurdistan. On the rare occasions that the two commanders were together, the stark contrast between their personalities was evident. Mezher was flamboyant and erratic, Rayyan subdued and self-possessed. Whereas Mezher disdained the trappings of rank—he wore his major's patch only for meetings with superiors—Rayyan kept his uniform pressed and his pockets stocked with gold-colored ballpoint pens. Unlike Mezher, he maintained a personal protection detail, consisting of the unit's two tallest members. (They flanked him whenever he was stationary, underscoring his under-average height.) Rayyan's quiet poise often made him seem aloof, and his authority was defined by a ceremonial distance between himself and

his subordinates. Mezher—sometimes frighteningly, sometimes exhilaratingly—was contemptuous of decorum. He preferred the men's companionship to their deference.

Both leaders were revered. But it was Mezher whom the younger members of the unit emulated. They were loud like him, profane like him, and, like him, they seemed to find solace from their private traumas in a dark and graphic form of humor. Once, Mezher told me, "Rayyan is the only one of us who isn't crazy." This hadn't sounded like praise.

If Mezher had a protégé, it was Captain Basam Attallah, who, more than any other officer, was venerated by the men for his daring as a policeman in Mosul before 2014. For his efforts, Al Qaeda had tried to kill him; it failed, and killed his brother instead. Shortly after we arrived in Salahiya, Basam set off on foot to pursue a tip about an ISIS-owned pickup truck that was supposedly loaded with I.E.D.s. He found the truck in a carport attached to a concrete house, its bed covered with canvas. As Basam cavalierly peeked underneath, I was reminded of some dubious wisdom he had once dispensed: "If you go toward death, death retreats." He returned from the truck smiling. The tip was accurate.

I followed Basam and half a dozen others as they climbed onto the roof of a two-story building a hundred feet away. With a clear vantage on the truck, Basam took aim with a machine gun. The second burst found its mark, and the explosion it produced was so immense that it not only levelled the concrete house and several surrounding structures; it also set off an I.E.D. buried up the road. The blast wave knocked me off my feet. Flying debris darkened the sky, and, after a seemingly long interlude, whole cinder blocks began crashing onto the roof.

Several of us were bruised and bleeding. Blood flowed brightly down one fighter's face and dripped off his chin. Basam, an open gash on his cheek, was ecstatic.

"Very good!" he cried, in English.

THERE WERE MANY civilians in the next village we entered, Tal al-Shaer, but there was no need to liberate them: all the militants, they told the SWAT team, had fled the previous day,



crossing the Tigris in skiffs. Mezher grumbled that someone must have warned them; I surmised that he meant someone from the Army or the Federal Police. Most of the SWAT-team members viewed Iraq's national armed forces with lingering unease, if not distrust. After the U.S. disbanded Saddam Hussein's military, in 2003, it spent twenty-six billion dollars training and equipping a new one. By the time ISIS showed up in Mosul, the city was being protected by a zealously sectarian Shiite force overseen by Nouri al-Maliki, Iraq's zealously sectarian Shiite Prime Minister. Although the SWAT team included Shia, Turkmen, Kurdish, Christian, and Yazidi members, it reflected the demographics of Mosul and was therefore, like ISIS, predominantly Sunni Arab. (Mezher and Rayyan are both observant Sunnis.) "The relationship between the Army and the Nineveh Police was terrible," Captain Basam told me. "We were from Mosul. They were all from Baghdad and the south. They didn't allow us to go to any of the areas they controlled." Many former residents of Mosul told me that one reason Shiite forces abandoned the city so readily in 2014 was that they feared reprisal from emboldened Sunni civil-

ians for their abuses as much as they feared ISIS.

After ISIS overtook Mosul, the U.S. began sending more trainers, weapons, and matériel to the Iraqi government—more than a billion dollars' worth, and counting—in order to rebuild its military. Maliki's successor, Haider al-Abadi, is a Shiite who belongs to Maliki's political party, but he has reinstated many professional commanders whom Maliki had replaced with Shiite hard-liners, and has tolerated recruitment efforts that aim at diversifying the Army.

In 2015, the reinvigorated Iraqi military liberated Ramadi and Falluja. Credit for these victories, however, went less to Iraq's Army than to a special-operations force popularly known as the Golden Division, whose chain of command is independent of the Ministry of Defense. Trained by Green Berets and armed with American weapons, the Golden Division has spearheaded every major engagement with ISIS in Iraq outside of Kurdistan. It was widely expected to take the lead in the Mosul assault as well. While the SWAT team was in Tal al-Shaer, thousands of Golden Division soldiers were massed north and east of Mosul.

The roles of other groups likely to

participate in the offensive were murkier. Over the past two years, Sunni tribesmen, Christian fighters, Kurdish revolutionaries, Yazidi genocide survivors, and displaced civilians have all acquired weapons and funding, from various foreign and domestic sponsors. Although most of these outfits are modest in size, the Popular Mobilization Units, a confederation of Shiite militias, total more than a hundred thousand men. Partly backed by Iran, the P.M.U. had proved to be both effective and unscrupulous, its battlefield victories inevitably attended by allegations of war crimes perpetrated against Sunni civilians. Virtually all the Sunni leaders from Mosul opposed P.M.U. involvement in the offensive. In July, however, the Iraqi government gave its approval for the P.M.U. to join the battle, and the U.S. supported the decision.

The fragile coalition depended on the hope that internal disputes would remain minimal as long as the various factions were united against ISIS. But would that unity endure once Mosul was liberated? No political arrangement had been made for the governance of the city after the defeat of ISIS, and some Iraqis seemed keen to exploit any future power vacuum. In 2014, Atheel al-Nujaifi, a former governor of Nineveh Province, established a base north of Mosul and began organizing a militia of former city residents. Nujaifi is an ally of Turkish leaders, who have never forgotten that Mosul once belonged to the Ottoman Empire, and when I visited the base in 2015 I found six Turkish soldiers training Nujaifi's men. Today, Turkey has more than six hundred soldiers in northern Iraq. The Iraqi government has demanded that Turkey recall its troops, to no avail. A week before the Mosul campaign began, Prime Minister Abadi insisted that Turkey would not meddle in the offensive; the President of Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, responded publicly that it would indeed. "You are not my equal," Erdoğan told Abadi.

The leaders of both the P.M.U. and the Kurdish peshmerga pledged that their forces would not enter Mosul proper, and the regular Army and the Golden Division were slated to deploy elsewhere once the city was secure. The Nineveh Police and the SWAT team would remain in Mosul after its liberation, to manage whatever troubles

might follow. When I asked Colonel Rayyan if he worried about having to fight an insurgency all over again, he said, "There have always been bad people in Mosul. In the nineties, we had Mafia types kidnapping and killing people, stealing from people. After the U.S. Army came, they called themselves mujahideen, jihadists. Now they call themselves ISIS. But they are just criminals. They have always just been criminals."

Rayyan's reply, though it avoided answering my question, was revealing of how the SWAT-team members viewed ISIS—or, at least, the ISIS militants in Mosul. For them, the Mosul offensive was merely the continuation of a war that they had been fighting most of their lives. When the men referred to older terrorist groups that had wounded them or killed their relatives—Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia, Jaesh al-Mujahideen, or obscurer offshoots—they always called them Daesh, the Arabic term for ISIS, even though ISIS, in most cases, did not yet exist.

As we scavenged for blankets in abandoned homes on the outskirts of Tal al-Shaeer, the village crackled with celebratory gunfire. In the morning, I found Mezher and Basam smoking a hookah near a campfire. Rayyan, his pistol holstered on his thigh, was performing calisthenics. Several shepherds passed by, leisurely guiding their flocks toward a grassy hill.

An hour or so later, an explosion came from that direction; a brown plume mushroomed above the hill. The shepherds had triggered a mine, we learned, and two of them were dead.

That afternoon, Rayyan and I visited a local elder. When we left the elder's house, all the villagers outside had scarves tied around their faces. The air stung our throats and our eyes—not severely, but like a whiff of tear gas carried on a breeze. Across the river, ISIS militants, retreating ahead of the Federal Police, had set a sulfur factory on fire.

II. ENTERING THE CITY

OVER THE NEXT few days, Iraqi forces tightened their noose around Mosul. In the north, the peshmerga made inroads in Bashiqa, a large town with a Kurdish majority; in the south,

the Federal Police continued moving up the Tigris; in the east, the Golden Division reached a Mosul suburb called Gogjali; and, in the west, the P.M.U. occupied the desert between Mosul and Syria, closing the corridor that had provided ISIS with an alternative to fighting to the death.

On October 24th, the Iraqi Army secured Hamdaniya, a Christian town some twenty miles away from Mosul. The Nineveh Police moved its headquarters there, and the SWAT team took over a gutted elementary school. Down the street stood an ancient church. ISIS had knocked the cross off its dome; someone had recently replaced it with two nailed-together boards held upright by stones. The city was decimated. The brigade that had liberated Hamdaniya belonged to the 9th Division, a mechanized unit equipped with assault tanks and armored personnel carriers. When the 9th Division cleared territory, it left a devastating footprint. American F-16s had added to the damage.

By November, the 9th Division had captured a village less than a mile from Intisar, the first urban neighborhood on Mosul's southeastern edge. The SWAT team was directed to an adjacent neighborhood called Shaymaa. While the 9th Division attempted to enter Intisar, the SWAT team would gain a foothold in Shaymaa and block any ISIS fighters coming from that direction.

I was in Kurdistan when the team received the order, and by the time I returned to the SWAT headquarters all the Humvees had gone to the front. I caught a ride in a truck bringing food and water to an aid station that had been set up outside Shaymaa by the 9th Division. Next door, three SWAT-team members were prepping ammunition in a half-constructed house. Explosions and gunfire sounded up ahead, occasionally shaking the air and the earth. After an hour or so, two battered Humvees arrived with the first injured man, a young sergeant.

The man labored to breathe. He'd been in the turret of a Humvee, firing the Dushka, when the gun overheated

or was hit by an enemy round; the barrel had split open, and a shard had punctured his chest. A 9th Division medic applied a seal over the wound.

Rayyan was off duty. Mezher stood over the sergeant, muttering reassurances. He looked troubled. This was what he and his men had been waiting for—but whatever was happening up the road seemed to have rattled his confidence. While SWAT-team members replaced the broken Dushka barrel on the sergeant's Humvee, Mezher wandered off alone.

"Did you see how many shells were falling over there?" one of the SWAT-team members said.

A Humvee belonging to an infantry unit that was working with the 9th Division parked outside the aid station and unloaded a soldier whose left arm was open to the bone. His face was raw with burns; he was unconscious, and snorting loudly through his nose.

A soldier asked, "Why don't we just destroy all the houses and kill everyone in them?"

"There are a lot of civilians," another said.

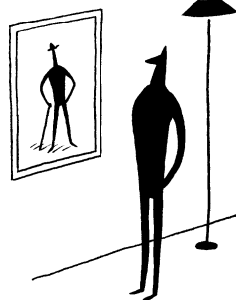
"They're all with ISIS."

"Come on, that's not true. They have no choice."

More soldiers arrived, holding a scarf to the back of someone's bleeding head. Another Humvee delivered a man whose face was wrapped in oozing gauze.

After the sergeant was evacuated, Mezher told his men, "We need to go back." I asked to accompany them. "Tomorrow," Mezher said. Then they drove off toward the smoke and noise.

I stayed at the half-constructed house for the next three days. Two more wounded SWAT-team members were brought to the aid station, along with many Iraqi Army soldiers. The head medic, Naseem Qasim, a thirty-three-year-old major with a master's degree in microbiology, had served with the 9th Division throughout the liberations of Ramadi and Falluja, where he'd been shot in the hip. He spoke excellent English, and worked with calm efficiency, often while smoking a cigarette, the ash falling on his patients. His job was



mainly to provide sufficient emergency care for casualties to survive the two-hour drive to a public hospital in Erbil. Naseem had no anesthetics. "They don't need them," he told me. "They're strong." He wasn't referring only to the fighters. At one point, an ambulance arrived with an elderly woman whose home had been shelled. Her son had been killed; her leg and several bones in her hand were fractured. As Naseem struggled

after one was hit by a mortar, or maybe a recoilless rifle, they turned back.

I asked the commander what had happened to the SWAT-team members. "I don't know," he said.

Three days later, a Humvee appeared at the aid station carrying Basam, who was ill from exhaustion but otherwise unscathed; Thamer, the lieutenant who'd gone AWOL when his mother's village was liberated, was with him. After

roof in Salahiya, wore a new bandage on a new head wound. He gave me a thumbs-up.

I was surprised to see a small-framed warrant officer named Ali Names hobbling around the house. The survivor of multiple bombings, he had more than forty pieces of shrapnel embedded in his body. He was one of several SWAT-team members whom Colonel Rayyan usually kept away from the front lines,



Lieutenant Colonel Rayyan Abdelrazzak was eerily composed in battle. "Rayyan is the only one of us who isn't crazy," Mezher said.

to set a broken finger, she did not make a sound.

The battle in Shaymaa was proving difficult. An armored personnel carrier, or A.P.C., brought six badly wounded soldiers to the aid station at once. Their commander told me that they had come under intense fire from the first houses they came to in Shaymaa. When the commander told the crew of another A.P.C. in his unit to attack the houses, they refused the order, saying that it was too dangerous. Over the radio, Captain Basam volunteered to take members of the SWAT team there. The SWAT team's Humvees were immediately surrounded. Two A.P.C.s attempted a rescue, but,

Thamer placed Basam in the care of Naseem, he headed back to Shaymaa, and I went along.

The SWAT team had taken three buildings on the outskirts of the neighborhood; Major Mezher and most of the team were in a large, decoratively tiled house. After Thamer parked outside, we ran from the Humvee through a hole sledgehammered into one of the walls. Inside, men rushed up and down a spiral staircase, bearing ammo, weapons, and orders. Nearly all of them were limping or coughing or wearing bloody dressings. Still, they were in remarkably high spirits. Loay Fathy, the policeman whose head had been wounded on the

because they suffered from particularly traumatic injuries. Ali's wife, son, and daughter were still in Mosul, and he was haunted by a premonition that he would never see them again. "I'm worried that ISIS will kill all the relatives of the SWAT before they're defeated," he had told me. "So far, they've let the women and children live. But I imagine it every day. I dream about it at night. They want to burn our hearts."

Mezher had converted the master bedroom into a makeshift operations center. I found him sitting on the edge of the bed, casually flipping a hand grenade around his finger.

"Welcome to Mosul," he said.

After catching me up—they'd lost two of their seven Humvees, one to a suicide car and one to a mortar—Mezher held out the I.D. card of a militant they had killed. Not just killed: they had poured gasoline over his corpse and set it on fire. The remains lay on the ground outside, beside a Humvee belonging to the Iraqi Army, which had been destroyed by ISIS artillery. "Five soldiers were inside," Mezher said of the Humvee. "All of them died."

We heard shouting, and Mezher rushed outside, through the hole in the wall. Several SWAT-team members were studying the sky. There was a high-pitched buzz, like a distant chainsaw.

"There!" one of them yelled.

Moving slowly below the clouds was a white four-rotor surveillance drone, deployed by ISIS to reconnoitre the SWAT team's position. Everyone tried to shoot it down, but it was out of range. After hovering briefly, it flew off.

Hadi Nabil, the corporal whose wife had been forced by ISIS to divorce him, was among those shooting at the drone. He told me that he had been driving the Humvee that was blown up by the suicide car. His hair, face, and uniform were still caked with dust from the blast. He spoke feverishly, and I attributed his excitement to an understandable survivor's high. It wasn't that. The previous day, Iman and Khalida, his wife and daughter, had made their way to Shaymaa, with Iman's brother. Hadi told me they intended to cross the SWAT team's front line that day or the next.

"They're less than a kilometre from here," Hadi said.

He offered to take me to the next SWAT-team position, a few hundred feet away, where we'd have a better view of Shaymaa. We ran behind a berm, which Army bulldozers had created the previous day, to a house pocked with bullet holes. In the living room, amid scattered debris and hundreds of spent casings, policemen were toasting stale bread over a propane flame. One of them was Mohammad Ahmed, a perpetually grinning twenty-seven-year-old with the build of a featherweight boxer. Everybody in the SWAT team called him Dumbuk—an Iraqi word for a traditional drum—though no one would tell me why. His five-year-old son's name was tattooed on

his biceps. On one of his forearms, in Arabic, was the declaration "If I didn't fear God, I would worship my mother." Dumbuk's son and mother, along with his wife, father, and three-year-old daughter, were trapped inside Mosul. When the offensive began, Dumbuk had arranged for his family to move to Hamam al-Alil, an ISIS-held town south of the city, which Dumbuk hoped would be quickly liberated. But, as the Federal Police, following the Tigris, neared Hamam al-Alil, the militants there had retreated to Mosul, forcing hundreds of civilians, including Dumbuk's family, to accompany their convoy as human shields.

Dumbuk told me that his uncle and some cousins lived in Shaymaa. You could see their street, he said, from the sniper position on the second floor.

Upstairs, we found First Lieutenant Omar Ibrahim hunched below a shattered window. An oblong hole gaped in the cinder-block wall behind him, where a rocket-propelled grenade had exploded the day before. Omar was one of the only men in the unit whom I'd never heard raise his voice—he rarely spoke at all—and he recounted the grenade incident with sangfroid.

"They're very close," he said.

Peeking over the windowsill, we could glimpse dense blocks of identical-looking houses with water tanks on their roofs, the domes and minarets of mosques scattered here and there. One of the houses belonged to Dumbuk's uncle and cousins; another held Hadi's wife and daughter. ISIS and the men's loved ones were in the same place, but ISIS was too close and their loved ones were too far away.

That night, gunmen attacking the SWAT team's line approached so near that we could hear them crying "Allahu Akbar!" Bullets whistled overhead; red tracers arced and disappeared. In the morning, rounds smacked against the walls of the house occupied by Mezher, and a mortar rattled the windows. To the east, two enormous blasts preceded two enormous plumes. When I saw Hadi, he was still in a good mood. "Last night, I talked to my wife on the phone," he told me. "I'll get them out today."

The incoming fire showed no sign of abating—and weren't the fighters on our side shooting everything that moved

on theirs? How did Hadi intend to retrieve Iman and Khalida safely?

"We have a sign," he said. "They're not going to come with a white flag. They'll have a black flag. That's how we'll know it's them."

The plan sounded risky, but Hadi was confident. "They'll cross over today," he repeated.

It wasn't to be. Two hours later, Mezher yelled at everyone to start packing.

"New mission," he said. "We're leaving."

ISIS HAD SHOWN unexpected tenacity in its defense of Intisar, the neighborhood next to Shaymaa, and the 9th Division had asked the SWAT team to help it capture several blocks. Mezher and his lieutenants were unenthusiastic about the assignment. Their experience in Shaymaa had forced them to acknowledge that they were organized and equipped for arresting individual terrorists, not for entrenched urban combat. The unit was small and lacked logistical support: there was no one to bring them food, water, ammunition, or extra weapons, let alone reinforcements. They didn't have their own medics, intelligence officers, mechanics, engineers, or bomb technicians. They had no mortar or artillery teams (or any contact with units that did have them). No one on the SWAT team was authorized to request air support. None of the American advisers embedded with the various military divisions seemed to know that the unit existed. It had no ambulance, which meant that it had to sacrifice a fighting vehicle to transport casualties. The SWAT team's Humvees were useless against suicide attacks. The men had no helmets, and most of them wore flak jackets that lacked bulletproof plates.

In a dusty area just outside Intisar, Mezher gathered the team. "What can I do?" he said, waving toward the machine-gun fire, mortar blasts, and air strikes on the city's edge. "They want to fuck your sisters." The men chuckled. "Take all the extra stuff you brought here out of the Humvees," Mezher told them. "We're leaving everything here. The water, the food, the generators. I want to try to go into this place with only ammunition. Any of you who brought your panties and bras, get rid of them. Why are we here, to fight or

to do something else?” No one was laughing anymore. “Let’s go,” he said.

Once again, there weren’t enough seats in the Humvees, and several men had to stay behind. I followed them down a nearby alley, where Major Naseem had set up a new aid station in a small one-story house with an enclosed patio. Stretchers were lined up in the front room. The fake-gold pages of a Koran, draped with a garland of plastic roses, were mounted on the wall, above bags of saline hanging from protruding screws.

We had not been there very long when a SWAT Humvee arrived with two injured men. As soon as the unit entered Intisar, the men told me, it had been shelled. Ali, the man with more than forty pieces of shrapnel in his body, had also been hit. Apparently, his legs had been so badly mangled that an ambulance was bypassing the aid station and taking him directly to Erbil.

WE SPENT THE night on the floor of an abandoned house, and in the morning a Humvee came to fetch two of the policemen there, leaving only one behind with me. Not long afterward, we heard an explosion, and went to the roof. A brown cloud rose over Intisar. Bullets whizzed by us and we climbed back down. I went to the aid station, and found Major Naseem wrapping the left arm of Corporal Bilal, a forty-year-old member of the SWAT team. The explosion that we’d seen was a suicide truck detonating. Bilal had been kneeling behind a wall, holding his rifle above his head and shooting at the truck, when it blew up. His hand was nearly severed. Naseem took him outside to an ambulance and called out, “Is there someone to go with him?”

Nobody replied.

A SWAT Humvee drove up and parked behind the ambulance. Its rear hatch had been blown off, and its roof and hood were covered with debris. Several medics and two SWAT-team members hauled out a blanket with someone inside it. Hadi, the corporal attempting to retrieve his wife and daughter, emerged from the driver’s seat of the Humvee and stumbled after the others into the aid station. He was covered in dirt. His eyes were red and leaking profusely.

“My eyes!” he cried. “Can you check my eyes?”

Naseem and the medics laid the blanket down on a stretcher. Inside was Jawad Mustafa, one of the SWAT team’s ethnic Turkmen, a popular sergeant with a penchant for tomfoolery. (Once, in Hamdaniya, he’d entertained us by striking coquettish poses in a purple wig that he’d found somewhere.) Jawad wasn’t breathing. The medics strapped a bag valve on his face and started squeezing air into his lungs.

“Fuck them!” a SWAT-team member yelled. “Shit on their religion!”

Naseem and other medics began performing CPR on Jawad. Hadi paced around the room, shouting at no one in particular. “The Army is betraying us! They’re selling us out! The suicide vehicle passed their tanks and came straight to us. They have tanks! They have heavy weapons! Why didn’t they shoot at it?”

When someone tried to talk to Hadi, he gestured toward his ears. “I can’t hear anything.”

The medics began removing Jawad’s clothes with trauma shears. “He doesn’t have any wounds,” one of them said. Jawad’s left leg slipped off the stretcher and hung limply until someone put it back.

Hadi stormed onto the patio. “What are we supposed to do?” he asked a group of soldiers. “We can’t even stick our heads out with their snipers. They have every weapon—mortars, everything. What do we have? Rifles and machine guns.”

Inside, another SWAT-team member was talking to a medic. “One more hour and we’ll all get killed here,” he said. “Tell us what we should do.”

The medics had stopped doing CPR. Naseem checked Jawad’s heartbeat with a stethoscope, then closed his eyelids.

Hadi lay down on a stretcher to have his eyes flushed. I returned to the patio, where Lieutenant Thamer was sitting on a ratty couch, smoking. The cigarette had burned down to the filter; Thamer seemed to have forgotten it. A policeman walked over and told him that Jawad was dead.

“I can’t hear you,” Thamer said.

The policeman leaned down and spoke directly in his ear. Thamer moaned. Jawad’s body was put in a bag and

placed on the patio, by Thamer’s feet. Thamer looked as if he wanted to move away from it but was too tired to get up. More SWAT-team members had arrived. I spotted Bashar, the policeman who’d saved the video of his brother Salem’s beheading. Blood stained his ammo vest. When Thamer told him that the body bag contained Jawad, Bashar wept silently. A policeman unzipped the bag and removed a silver bracelet from Jawad’s wrist. He handed the bracelet to Bashar, who fastened it on his own wrist.

Another Humvee arrived, and a second dead SWAT-team member was carried out. The corpse, set down beside Jawad, was coated in gray dust. I recognized him as a young man with whom I’d stayed up talking in the abandoned house the previous night. He’d scrolled through his phone, showing me pictures of his father and brother, both of whom were in an ISIS prison in Mosul. He feared for his mother, he’d told me, now that she was alone.

Bashar sat down and covered his eyes with his scarf. No one spoke. Mortars, tank cannons, air strikes, small arms, and high-calibre machine guns continued sounding up the road. After a few minutes, Bashar said, “We need to go back.”

On the road outside, a procession of civilians was arriving from Intisar. Soldiers herded them toward a nearby madrassa, where the men sat on the floor while an informant with a scarf covering his face looked for militants among them. When we left the aid station, we found a member of the SWAT team, Adnan Abdallah, yelling at an old man with a gray beard and a white kaffiyeh. Adnan had just identified the man’s son, Ahmed, as an ISIS militant, and soldiers from the 9th Division had taken Ahmed away. For years, Adnan and Ahmed had been neighbors in Zumar, a village outside Mosul. According to Adnan, Ahmed had joined ISIS the day the group arrived in Zumar.

Adnan, a scraggy twenty-seven-year-old with a black handlebar mustache, volunteered for the SWAT team on the same day as Bashar, whom he considered his brother. (Their fathers were brothers, and their mothers were sisters.) When they signed up, Bashar told me, they “both swore to avenge Salem.”

“You’re the father of that son of a dog!” Adnan shouted at Ahmed’s father. He was with a younger woman, in a blue hijab, and a small boy who clutched the woman’s leg. “I know all his sons!” Adnan told some nearby soldiers. “They’re all ISIS.”

“Calm down,” a soldier said.

The old man had abandoned his family in Zumar long ago and remarried. The woman in the blue hijab was his daughter from his second wife. “You left thirty years ago!” Adnan yelled. “Now you want to vouch for your son?”

“Of course. He’s my son. I know I left them. But I have to speak the truth.”

“He was on the wrong side,” a soldier said.

This statement seemed to make the old man realize the danger he was in. “His mother raised him, not me,” he said.

The soldiers who had been questioning Ahmed returned with him and pushed him through the metal gate of a compound across from the aid station. Adnan and several other SWAT-team members followed them inside. Ahmed was shoved to the ground. He was a small, wide-eyed man with shoulder-length hair, in a faux-leather jacket and a yellow collared shirt. The bridge of his nose was bleeding. He had wet himself.

Adnan, leaning down inches from Ahmed’s face, demanded to know the whereabouts of one of Ahmed’s friends from Zumar, a man named Alawi. Adnan believed that Alawi worked for the Amniya, an ISIS security agency responsible for rooting out spies, dissidents, and resistance fighters—men like Bashar’s brother Salem. “Look at me, Ahmed,” Adnan said. “Where is Alawi?”

“He’s still in Intisar. Adnan, I have nothing to do with him!”

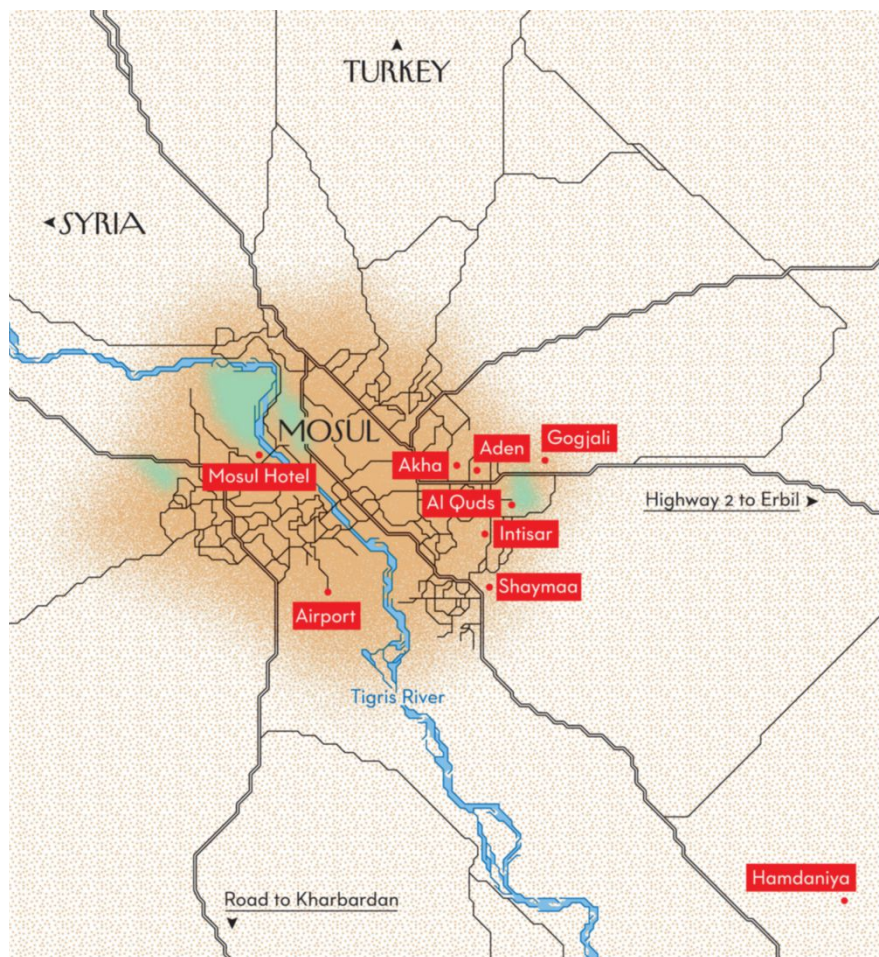
Adnan wagged his finger. “All of you guys are ISIS.”

“Just listen,” Ahmed said. “Let me explain.”

A young soldier in a patrol cap kicked him in the ribs, grabbed a fistful of his hair, and pushed his face down. Another soldier cinched a scarf around his wrists.

Lieutenant Thamer had entered the compound. He put his foot on Ahmed’s ear, pinning his head to the concrete.

“I have nothing to do with ISIS!”



“Shut the fuck up,” the soldier in the patrol cap said, whacking the muzzle of his rifle against Ahmed’s skull.

“Fuck all of you who sold Mosul like pimps,” Thamer said, stepping down harder.

The soldier in the cap hit Ahmed twice more with his rifle. Blood was pooling on the concrete. “Shut up, shut up,” he told Ahmed, although Ahmed had stopped talking. The soldier raised his boot and stomped twice on Ahmed’s head. More blood pooled on the concrete.

Thamer sighed and walked away.

Another soldier crouched down to take a picture with his phone. The soldier in the cap twisted his boot back and forth, as if putting out a cigarette.

Finally, they raised Ahmed to a sitting position. “Why are you doing this?” he said, disoriented. They had emptied his jacket pockets and a string of yellow prayer beads and a lighter lay on the ground.

Bashar stepped forward. “Ahmed, who is working in Intisar for the Amniya? Where is Alawi?”

“He *was* working with them. But he quit.”

“Ahmed, I swear to God, I’m going to kill you.”

“Brother, I’m bad—but I’m not ISIS. I swear to God.”

“You don’t have a God.”

Several men started hitting Ahmed: with their fists, their boots, their rifles. One of them was the medic who’d been doing chest compressions on Jawad. He was still wearing white latex gloves; they were stained with iodine and blood.

“Who else escaped with the civilians?” Bashar said.

“Only my brother. He got here before me.”

Bashar addressed the soldiers. “All these mortars they’re fucking us with are because these traitors are giving them our coordinates.”

The gate burst open and Ahmed’s brother Mohammad was dragged in. He was freshly shaved and wore blue sweatpants and a gray sweatshirt. A soldier in a scarf punched Mohammad several times in the head. The medic



A young man named Ahmed, suspected of being an ISIS militant, is beaten and interrogated after being picked up by members of

kneed him in the stomach. A young tank crewman in black coveralls whipped his face with a cut length of garden hose folded in half.

“Enough!” an older soldier said. He held a notebook, and although its cover was pink and decorated with roses and rainbows, it lent him an air of administrative prudence. He directed the soldiers to escort Ahmed and Mohammad through the compound to an open stairwell. Squatting in the shadowy recess, the brothers looked like children hiding in a cubbyhole. Bashar pulled aside the man with the notebook and said, “Ahmed was in and out of jail his whole life. He was a thief. Bring

me a Koran to swear on. He’s ISIS.”

The man wrote down Bashar’s name.

Two soldiers blindfolded Mohammad and pushed him to the ground. A third soldier stepped on his skull. “If you make a noise, I’ll fuck your mother,” he said.

Bashar returned to Ahmed. “You and Alawi—you’re best friends.”

“Alawi is ISIS, but I’m not! I’ll put shit in Alawi’s mouth!”

“I’m going to explain something to you,” Bashar said, with chilling composure. He was the only man I had not seen touch either Ahmed or Mohammad. It occurred to me that Bashar possessed the same uncanny self-command

that Salem had shown in his execution video. “If Adnan had joined ISIS, I would have, too,” he said softly, as if to a child. “When Adnan joined the SWAT, I joined the SWAT. How many times did you and Alawi go to jail together? You were never apart! And now he’s ISIS and you’re a prophet?”

When the man with the notebook asked Bashar to leave the soldiers alone with the brothers, Bashar didn’t protest. Walking toward the gate, he turned around with a last word for Ahmed. “You’re lucky the Army caught you and not us,” he said. “I wish I had seen you in Intisar.”

We left the compound in time to



the SWAT team.

watch Ahmed and Mohammad's father blending into a new stream of refugees moving toward the madrassa.

"Don't forget about this man!" Bashar called to the other civilians. "His sons are ISIS."

The old man pretended not to hear, and kept walking.

THAT AFTERNOON, in Intisar, the SWAT team was attacked by another suicide vehicle. Someone reported on the radio that the blast had destroyed another Humvee, and had killed Omar Ibrahim, the laconic first lieutenant.

Shortly thereafter, two SWAT-team Humvees filled with wounded fighters

appeared in the village with the aid station. Major Mezher climbed out of one of them with a bandage wrapped around his head. Later, he told me, "They fucked us." According to Mezher, the 9th Division had directed them to an untenable area, out ahead of its tanks, and had then refused to back them up. "I was calling them for help on the radio," he said. "They never answered. Then I called the commander at the operations center. He told me, 'Don't worry, I'm sending you support.' He never sent anything."

Mezher had returned from the front to ask the 9th Division either for additional Humvees or for permission to withdraw from Intisar. He marched directly to the building where a temporary headquarters had been established, and emerged some minutes later. He was pulling everybody out.

While Mezher went back to the front, to extricate the rest of the team, my interpreter and I squeezed into a Humvee that was headed to the half-constructed house outside Shaymaa.

We weren't at the house long before another Humvee arrived behind us. The driver was Hadi, the corporal intent on retrieving his wife. He was still caked in dirt, and his eyes were still bloodshot. A lieutenant climbed out, collapsed, and screamed at his men to empty the vehicle, so that Hadi could retrieve more people. While the men tossed ammo and weapons onto the ground, one of them asked Hadi about Lieutenant Omar.

"While we were trying to reach him, they shot our Humvee with an R.P.G.," Hadi said. "It caught on fire—I had to abandon it there. Someone else is trying to get him now."

"Go back!" the lieutenant screamed. "Hurry!"

Hadi headed off. The lieutenant lay in the dirt, motionless, a blank expression on his face. When somebody asked him if he was O.K., he did not respond.

I remembered him from Kharbar-dan. One night, at a house that had a television, I'd stayed up with all the SWAT lieutenants watching a Kuwaiti soap opera about a wealthy businessman and his four wives. During one of the commercial breaks—the only time we were able to speak, so absorbed were the lieutenants by the businessman's domestic

tribulations—they told me that they had made a pact. If any officer was killed in Mosul, the others would do everything that they could to recover his body for his family to bury.

Eventually, a Humvee belonging to the regular police showed up. Omar was inside—alive. After the suicide vehicle exploded, he had been knocked unconscious and buried beneath debris; everyone had assumed that he was dead. Two men draped his arms around their shoulders and helped him over to the lieutenant who had collapsed. Omar, smiling sheepishly, lay down next to him. The lieutenant handed him a cigarette.

We drove back to Hamdaniya, the liberated Christian town. It was dark by the time we got there. Outside the gutted elementary school, men patched up with bloody bandages staggered through the headlights, limping painfully from blast-torqued backs and knees. Stunned, they recounted to one another what had happened, repeating it over and over, trying to understand it.

Colonel Rayyan was there. He observed his devastated unit with stoic detachment. His phone kept ringing: the tone was the theme song from the movie "Halloween." I saw Dumbuk, who had shrapnel in his face. Hadi arrived with his Humvee, filled with more battered men. A pickup truck was found to take people to the hospital.

Mezher was among the last to return from the front, and when he did he walked past Rayyan without a word, disappearing into the house that the officers had taken.

Of the forty-odd men who'd been in Intisar, twenty-two had been seriously injured and two killed. Nearly everyone else was hurt to some degree. Four of the SWAT team's seven Humvees had been destroyed and abandoned on the battlefield. Two others were out of commission. Later that night, I met Rayyan in the house where he was staying, by himself. His eyes downcast, his voice almost a whisper, he said, "They defeated us."

When I went to visit Mezher, the light in his room was off. He was lying on a narrow bed, beneath the covers, wide awake. At the 9th Division headquarters, he told me, the Army had

denied his request to pull out of Intisar. “I gave the order anyway,” he said, and smiled darkly. “During Saddam’s time, they would have executed me.” Mezher said that many of his men had been forced to retreat thirty blocks from Intisar on foot, taking cover behind his slow-moving Humvee and returning fire as they walked.

“These ISIS fighters have been very well trained,” he said. “They shoot three bullets at us, and we shoot a hundred. If they launch an R.P.G. and miss, they won’t miss the second. Their snipers made rabbits out of us. We couldn’t even poke our heads out. In war, you have to be honest with yourself. We broke down. I was really fucked up. And no one from the Army was supporting us.” He added, “There are too many civilians. Because of us, a lot of civilians died. In the first suicide attack, I think one whole family was killed, even the children.”

Mezher’s bluster was gone: he spoke quietly and mournfully. He made no mention of revenge, although, I had recently learned, it was as much a motivating force for him as for any other member of the unit. Before joining the SWAT team, he had been a police investigator in Mosul. In one year alone, thirteen men from his unit were gunned down on the street or in their homes. His four closest friends were murdered. In 2004, when he was shot in the face, Mezher recognized the gunman: Mohammad Jamil, a terrorist whom Mezher had been pursuing in connection with a bank robbery. Mohammad had escaped to Syria. Mezher spent months in the hospital, his tongue sewn to the bottom of his mouth so that he wouldn’t choke on it. For the first six weeks, he had to breathe through a stoma in his throat and receive nutrients—orange juice and mashed bananas mixed with milk—through a feeding tube in his nose. After two surgeries, his jaw remained wired shut for seven months, and during that time he ate only soup, which dribbled down his shirt. He could not satisfy his hunger. He became emaciated. Throughout his recovery, he never stopped thinking about Mohammad Jamil. In 2011, after the American with-

drawal, an informant told the police that Mohammad had returned to Mosul. Mezher hunted him obsessively but never found him. As far as Mezher knew, he was still in the city, fighting with ISIS. “Even now, when I sleep, he comes to me in my dreams,” Mezher had told me. “If I was offered all the money in the world, I would rather have Mohammad. He never leaves my mind.”

As we sat in the dark room, Mohammad Jamil could not have felt more beside the point. “We should be doing raids—attacking, then coming back,” Mezher said. “On the front line, we don’t even have an extra vehicle to bring ammunition.” He paused. “The SWAT is not ready to fight inside Mosul.”

The next day, outside the school, members of the SWAT team began repairing its three surviving Humvees. I saw Hadi, sleeves rolled up, arms grease-stained to the elbows. When I asked about his family, he told me that, after the SWAT team moved to Intisar, Iman and Khalida had followed the unit there, on the other side of the line. “They were a couple of houses away,” he said. “But then we left again.”

That evening, in a living room lined with suede-upholstered couches, I sat with Colonel Rayyan, watching a flat-screen television. There was little news from Mosul. A Saudi Arabian channel was taking its audience on a C.G.I. tour of the United States Capitol. It was November 8th—Election Day. In the morning, the results were still coming in. One or two policemen grinned incredulously, shook their heads, and said, “Trump?” But, for the most part, their attention was elsewhere. The other shift was beginning to arrive, and the SWAT-team members who’d been on duty were about to enjoy a week off before returning to the war.

III. A RESPITE FROM BATTLE

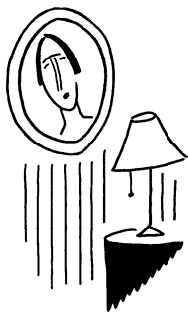
A FEW DAYS AFTER the shift change, I met Hadi for dinner at a kebab restaurant in Erbil, where he was staying with relatives. Wearing a striped button-down and new jeans, his mustache and hair freshly groomed, he was

hard to recognize. Two other policemen from the SWAT team joined us: Souhel Najem and Ous Ghanem. They were both in their mid-twenties and from the Khadra neighborhood, in Mosul. On off weeks, they shared a hotel room in the Qaysari Bazaar, downtown. After dinner, we headed to the bazaar, which hugs the foot of Erbil’s ancient citadel and is bordered by a park with illuminated fountains, where young Kurds, of both sexes, promenaded at night. Souhel and Ous’s room was modest: windowless, with a broken dresser and twin beds. The walls were dirty, the ceiling fan precarious, but it cost less than nine dollars per person per night.

As we sat on the beds, Souhel and Ous said that they spent as little money as possible during off weeks. Like most of the SWAT team, they sent the bulk of their salaries—about a thousand dollars a month—to relatives in Mosul. When ISIS first occupied the city, it had been easy to wire money to residents through official cash-transfer offices. One of the surprising aspects of ISIS’s governance of Mosul has been its interest in presiding over a sustainable economy. Until ISIS opened a front against the Kurds, in August, 2014, people could come and go relatively freely. Before the peshmerga severed the main route to Syria, ISIS trucked in commercial goods from Raqqa and sold them to shop owners at wholesale prices. But, as ISIS grew increasingly paranoid about civilian resistance, it began monitoring the cash-transfer offices. Most of the SWAT team then switched to a *hawala* system, in which they paid someone in Baghdad or Erbil with an associate in Mosul, who relayed the money to the recipient.

With no money to spend, Souhel and Ous said, their days in Erbil were uneventful. “Sometimes, in the afternoon, we drink,” Souhel said. “In the hotel room. It’s cheaper.”

They talked about what they would do when they got back to Mosul, and what they cherished and missed most about it. For a month, I’d been listening to the SWAT-team members anxiously pine for their city, extolling its parks, night life, architecture, history, and food: Mosul dolma (ground beef and rice wrapped in grape leaves) and Mosul baja (boiled sheep’s head and



feet). They all seemed to identify more as residents of Mosul than as citizens of Iraq. Colonel Rayyan, whose great-great-grandfather was born in Mosul, had told me, "Mosul is the most beautiful city in the world. Rivers, forests, markets. Tradition. Education. Some of the oldest churches in the world are in Mosul, and the oldest mosques." With the enthusiasm of someone eager to communicate the splendor of his home town to an outsider, he'd added, "We even have Jewish neighborhoods—although there aren't any Jews anymore."

The men's love for their city had only intensified in exile. Few of them spoke Kurdish, or had friends in Kurdistan. I suspected that Souhel and Ous, sequestered in their dingy hotel room, spent most of their time off recalling their interrupted lives in Mosul.

When I asked about women, there was an awkward pause. Neither of them was married, and I realized that they must have thought I wanted to know if they hired prostitutes, as many men in Erbil do. They clearly did not.

"Most of the younger guys in the SWAT are single," Hadi explained, breaking the silence. "For the past two years, there hasn't been any opportunity."

"I already know who I want to marry," Souhel said. "She was my neighbor in Mosul, and she's still there. I've been in love with her for five years. Her name is Tamara."

Did Tamara know that he loved her?

"She knows—she's waiting for me," Souhel said. "I haven't been able to talk to her in six months."

Souhel had some good news to share, however: his father and siblings had escaped Mosul a few days ago. They were staying in a camp for internally displaced people, or I.D.P.s, in a village called Hassan Sham. Souhel and Ous had already visited them once, and they were planning to return in the morning. They invited me to come along.

Hassan Sham was about twenty miles east of Mosul, in the "disputed territories" of Nineveh Province—lands to which the governments of both Kurdistan and Iraq lay claim. Before its liberation by the peshmerga, in 2014, Hassan Sham had been a mostly Arab village, with few Kurds. Now it was ruined and unpopulated. One of the ques-

tions hovering over the Mosul campaign is what will become of places like Hassan Sham, which ISIS took from the Iraqi Army, and the peshmerga took from ISIS. Will the Arab population be allowed to return? Will the Iraqi Army attempt to remove the peshmerga from the disputed territories by force? The Kurds, who in the past two years have vastly expanded the amount of land that they control, seem uneager to relinquish any of it. Although the camp in Hassan Sham—a vast grid of white tents enclosed by cyclone fencing—was paid for by the United Nations' refugee agency, it is overseen by the Barzani Charity Foundation, a nonprofit created by Masrour Barzani, a son of the President of Kurdistan and the chief of Kurdish intelligence. The camp's entrance was guarded by peshmerga soldiers and Kurdish agents.

Vendors had parked their trucks along the fence. They were selling bread and produce to people on the other side. The I.D.P.s passed money through gaps in the fence, and the vendors threw the purchased items over. The previ-

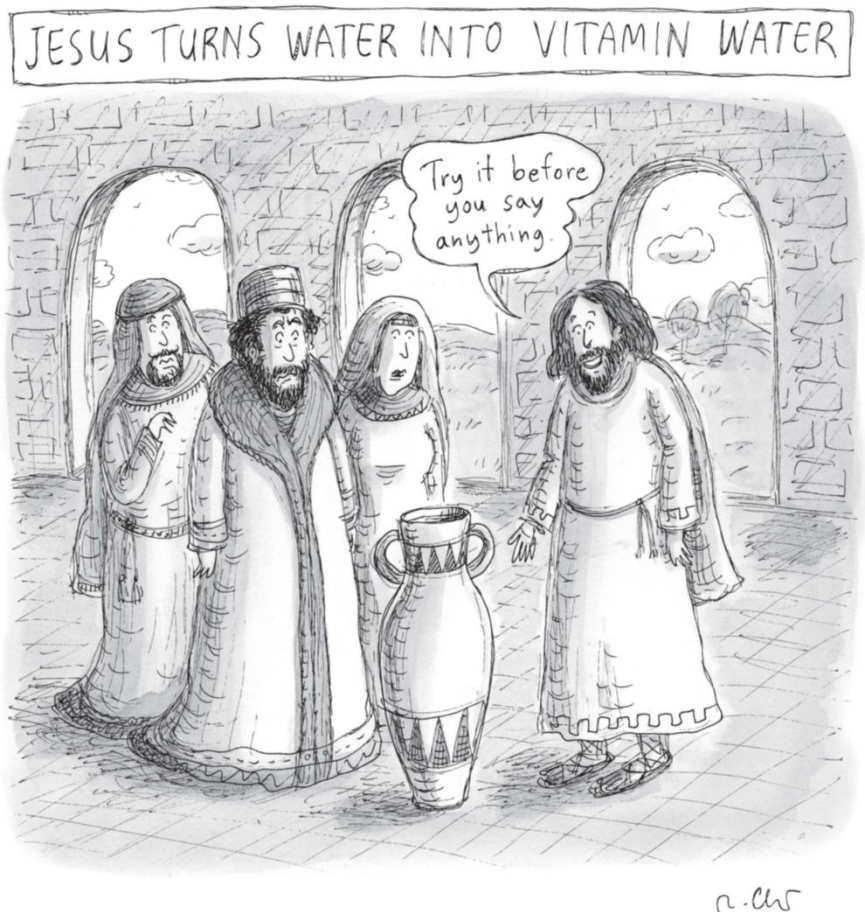
ous week, thousands of civilians had flocked to Hassan Sham, most of them from the eastern neighborhoods of Mosul that the Golden Division had been attacking. Nearly fifty thousand Iraqis had been displaced since the offensive started, and the U.N.'s refugee agency, anticipating more than a million I.D.P.s, was scrambling to set up new camps. The agency, which relies on Western donors, had raised only about half of the roughly two hundred million dollars it claimed that it needed to address the crisis.

I followed Souhel and Ous through the rows of tents until we reached one with a solar-powered lantern hanging near the flap. Souhel's cousin Hussein Abbas ushered us in. We sat on thin camp-issued cushions (which also served as beds), and were soon joined by Souhel's seven-year-old brother, Marwan, and his three-year-old sister, Tamara.

"Tamara?" I asked Souhel.

He smiled. "My mother let me name her."

When ISIS came to Mosul, Souhel



had been off duty at his parents' house. His mother and father had told him that he needed to help the SWAT team, and so he had walked two miles to the Mosul Hotel, where he joined Colonel Rayyan. After the SWAT team evacuated Mosul, Souhel went to Kurdistan, where he got in a fight with a Kurdish man who had disparaged the unit for having run away from ISIS. (This was a sensitive subject for all of the SWAT members. In Kharbardan, Lieutenant Thamer had described the SWAT team's participation in the Mosul campaign as a form of redemption—a "passport" that would allow it to return home with honor.)

After the fight, Souhel was arrested and sentenced to a month in jail. His mother, who had not heard from him since he'd left for the Mosul Hotel, assumed that he had been killed. She died—from nerves and grief, according to Souhel—before he was released.

The health of Souhel's father had deteriorated as well. He was in the neighboring tent, bedridden and unable to receive visitors. As the children played with Souhel's phone, his brother Redwan, who was twenty-two, ducked into the tent. The previous day, Souhel had boasted about Redwan, who'd excelled in high school and intended to become a dentist. He'd been a senior when ISIS came and prevented him from graduating. Souhel told me, "ISIS took him many times because they knew I was in the SWAT. I thought for sure they were going to kill him."

I asked Redwan what happened when ISIS took him. "They blindfolded me and beat me with a pipe," he said.

Before we left, I asked Hussein, Souhel's cousin, if he planned to return to Mosul if it was liberated. I assumed that he was as impatient to go home as the SWAT-team members were. But Hussein said that he had no interest in going back. "We can never live there the way we did before," he said. "People who were our neighbors for thirteen years joined ISIS and mistreated us."

Ous, who until now had been staring mutely at his hands—each of which was tattooed with the name of a brother still in Mosul—looked up. "But those

people won't be there after all this is over," he said.

"I don't want it anymore," Hussein said. "Everything in Mosul is finished."

THE NEXT DAY, I visited Corporal Bilal, who had arrived at the aid station outside Intisar with a partially severed hand. Bilal was at a private acute-care hospital in Erbil. The Army ambulance had evacuated him and left him in the lobby of a public hospital. Public health care in Iraq and Kurdistan is notoriously poor, and after several hours Bilal still had not been admitted. Only skin held his hand to his wrist—and much of the tissue was turning dark. Bilal's brother Ahmed arrived from the Kurdish city of Suleimaniya, and took Bilal to the private hospital, where doctors immediately performed surgery, connecting some of the arteries in his wrist, to forestall necrosis.

I found Bilal in an electrically reclining bed. The air in the room smelled mildly of rot. His left hand was splinted and bandaged; long metal pins protruded from it. His thumb, his ring finger, and his little finger were black. I asked the obvious question. When would the fingers be amputated?

"They were supposed to do it three days ago," Bilal said. "The problem is, I don't have the money because our salaries are late."

I'd heard the same complaint from other SWAT-team members. Nobody had been paid for two months. Some blamed the politicians in Baghdad; some blamed the commanders in Hamdaniya. Everyone blamed corruption.

Downstairs, I found the hospital's chief administrator, who told me, "The fingers need to be removed today. The doctor said it must be done as soon as possible. But the patient has to pay what he owes first."

Bilal owed the equivalent of five thousand dollars. His brother Ahmed was a breadmaker—he had nothing to give. A third brother, a soldier, had been killed in Mosul. In Suleimaniya, Bilal had a wife and five children who depended on his salary. He still hadn't told them that he was hurt. Normally, when a SWAT-team member was severely injured, the rest of the unit contributed part of their salaries to cover medical expenses and assist his family. (Twice,

I'd seen them fill a cardboard box with cash for this purpose.) But no one had money to spare.

The next afternoon, Bilal's doctor agreed to perform the surgery, with an understanding that Bilal would pay a discounted amount at a future date. The black fingers were amputated successfully. By then, however, the necrosis had spread, and another operation was required to remove the entire hand.

IV. URBAN COMBAT

WHILE I WAS in Erbil, the SWAT team acquired four new Humvees—and a new mission. Having forsworn working again with the 9th Division, the unit was deployed north of Intisar, to support the advance led by the Golden Division. The previous week, the Golden Division had succeeded in clearing the eastern district of Gogjali. Highway 2, a four-lane thoroughfare, bisected the district; a small cemetery bordered the highway to the south, separating Gogjali from a neighborhood called Al Quds, which was still under ISIS control. While the Golden Division conducted operations north of the highway, the SWAT team would prevent ISIS fighters from crossing the cemetery into Gogjali.

To reach the SWAT team's new positions, my interpreter and I drove down Highway 2 until we reached a berm that had been heaped across the lanes, and then turned left onto an unpaved road with a decapitated corpse lying in the middle of it. Stray dogs picked at the body; children played nearby. The unpaved road paralleled the cemetery, which lay behind a row of houses. At the end of the row, a perpendicular alley offered a sight line to the brown field of tombstones and, beyond it, the buildings in Al Quds. The SWAT team was in a house on the other side of the alley. A day earlier, a team member had been shot by a sniper while driving across it. We arrived without incident and were greeted by Mohammad Masood, an ample-gutted major whose left arm was ridged with scar tissue from an ambush in Mosul in 2006. Mohammad had turned thirty-nine the day the SWAT team left Kharbardan to follow the Tigris north. This was also the anniversary of the death of his younger brother,

a policeman, who was killed in 2005.

I was surprised to discover that Mohammad was in charge, which meant that a rumor I'd heard from Hadi and others was true. After the debacle in Intisar, Major Mezher had been forced to leave the unit. I'd dismissed the story as anxious gossip. It was too hard to imagine the SWAT team without Mezher, and it was still harder to imagine Mezher without the SWAT team.

behind a low concrete wall with several small holes that had been made with a pry bar and a mallet. While one man fired a machine gun through a hole, another used a short periscope to determine where the rounds were hitting.

The snipers eventually quit for the night, but they resumed with gusto in the morning. The SWAT-team members who were not stationed on the roof went to the road behind the house. Bullets

“diaper,” derived from the time a bomb hidden in one blew up on him, dotting his head with scars—produced a firecracker from his ammo pouch and tossed it into the alley. Everybody laughed.

“My sister’s house is on the other side of the cemetery,” Haytham told me. “I call her and she gives us information. She says the snipers shooting at us are Russian. Their base is in a building that used to be a billiard hall.



Major Mohammad Masood and another team member rest on a roof after fighting ISIS soldiers in the Al Quds neighborhood.

Mohammad did not appear especially gratified by his promotion. He recalled telling Mezher, “If you come back, the position is yours. I’m just holding it for you.”

Mohammad explained that the SWAT team had occupied several houses along the eastern border of the cemetery, and said that so far the biggest problem had been snipers. Some days earlier, the team had killed a militant who’d been discovered in a house a few blocks away, and who had shot one of them during the encounter.

As if on cue, bullets cracked outside, and Mohammad hurried up a staircase to the roof. Three policemen crouched

zinged up the alley leading to the cemetery. Every now and then, the men backed a Humvee into the alley and aimed a few bursts from the Dushka at Al Quds; they also launched grenades from a turret-mounted MK19. The moment the Humvee pulled back behind cover, more bullets hit the house and the houses around it. They kicked up dirt and slapped against walls. They pierced an empty fuel tanker. They shook the branches of a tree and cut down leaves. They ricocheted off power-line poles, ringing them like bells.

During a lull, a SWAT-team member named Haytham Khalil—whose nickname, Hafadha, the Arabic word for

You can see the roof of her house from our roof. When she hangs laundry on the roof, you can see the clothes.”

The family of another SWAT-team member, Walid Sabri, had arrived in Gogjali a few days earlier, after fleeing eastern Mosul. Not wanting to send his relatives—eleven of them, including his wife and his five-year-old daughter, Baida—to an I.D.P. camp, Walid had installed them in an empty house two blocks away. The SWAT team was giving them whatever food could be spared.

Haytham made a comment that caused everyone to laugh, and Walid to blush. My interpreter shook his head.

It seemed that Walid and his wife

were separated, and, in accordance with Islamic law, he was forbidden to sleep with her until they'd been officially remarried. In 2014, as the Iraqi military was abandoning Mosul, Walid had told his wife that they needed to flee. She wanted to stay, and the argument that ensued culminated in Walid's pronouncing the words "I divorce you" and leaving by himself. The decision was prudent: ISIS executed Walid's brother a couple of months later. Now Walid and his wife wished to reconcile, and they were free to do so—only a third declaration of divorce is irrevocable—but they needed an imam, and until they found one Walid had to spend his nights with the SWAT team.

At one point during the deluge of sniper fire from the cemetery, a small girl with pigtails, in a pink sweater, appeared on the road. As she walked toward the SWAT team's house, the policemen started yelling.

"No, no! Get back!"

It was Baida. On the far side of the alley—the one we couldn't cross because bullets were continuously snapping up it—the girl stopped and regarded us uncertainly.

"Turn around! Run!"

Walid called his wife, who emerged from a house a hundred metres away. She yelled at Baida to come back to her, and at last the girl turned and ran toward her mother, pigtails swinging.

ONE NIGHT, WHILE I was talking with Major Mohammad in one of the houses by the cemetery, a lieutenant showed up with two brothers whom an informant had accused of belonging to ISIS. The lieutenant had taken them from their parents' house, in Gogjali. Mohammad told me to wait in the next room. As he shut the door, I glimpsed the two men on their knees, their hands behind their backs and their heads bowed.

A few minutes later, a SWAT-team member brought the informant to the room I was in and sat him on a couch across from me. A black ski mask concealed his face, but I recognized his clothes. He was a young boy who lived with his grandfather on the road the SWAT team had occupied. They were among the few civilians who had not left Gogjali when the Golden Divi-

sion pushed through. "If I die here or die someplace else, what's the difference?" the grandfather, whose three sons had been killed by ISIS, told me. The SWAT team had hired the boy to help out with menial chores: removing trash, buying eggs and bread. I'd been touched by how enamored of the men the boy had become, and how eager he was to please them.

The SWAT-team members had asked me not to speak to their informant, and it was unclear whether the boy had accused the two brothers of having been complicit in the deaths of his father and his uncles. He was upset—that much was obvious. When the door opened and Mohammad summoned him, the boy ripped off the ski mask, perhaps out of a desire to confront the brothers openly, perhaps out of a desire to impress the SWAT team.

I couldn't hear what was happening in the other room, and, by the time Mohammad invited me to join him there again, the brothers, the boy, and the lieutenant were all gone.

"We let them go," Mohammad said. "They're clean. That kid was just making up stories."

The lieutenant returned an hour or so later. He said that he had brought the men back to their house and apologized to their parents for the false alarm. The SWAT team had decided to release them after consulting two lists compiled by Iraqi intelligence services, each containing the names of ISIS fighters and sympathizers in Mosul. "We have another contact who has very accurate information," the lieutenant added. "We always check the names with him, too." Although the lieutenant admitted that the lists could not be expected to include the name of everyone affiliated with ISIS, he said that they were comprehensive enough to function as a standard for determining guilt or innocence.

I was skeptical. Given the bitter history of the SWAT-team members, it seemed unlikely that their concern over unfairly condemning an innocent man would eclipse their concern over mistakenly releasing a guilty one. But the lieutenant told me a story that better explained his circumspection. In 2005, American soldiers had rappelled from a helicopter into a compound next to

his house and taken away his neighbor. "He was just a mechanic," the lieutenant said. "He changed tires. But some family that had problems with his family had told the Americans he was a terrorist. They kept him in prison for ten or twelve months. That happened all the time in Mosul."

The lieutenant repeated the common assessment that many Iraqis had been radicalized in American detention centers, and that Al Qaeda and other extremist groups had successfully recruited within the prisons. (Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the founder of ISIS, met some of the future leaders of his organization while in American custody, in 2004, at Camp Bucca and at Abu Ghraib.) The SWAT team, the lieutenant told me, would not make the same mistake. "We need to be clear," he said. "If they're not on the lists, we should let them go. And if they're ISIS we should kill them."

BEFORE THE OFFENSIVE began, Iraqi planes dropped leaflets over Mosul, exhorting the more than one million people still living there not to flee. The logic was that fighting in the city, and minimizing civilian casualties, would be easier with Iraqis contained in their houses than with a chaotic exodus in the streets. As the military continued to encounter stiff resistance in Mosul, some commanders—wanting more liberty to use heavy weapons, artillery, and air strikes—publicly questioned that logic. Colonel Sylvia, the Task Force Strike commander, told me, "The Prime Minister made a decision to tell the people of Mosul to stay in place, and we've supported that decision." He went on, "There's some criticism on both sides of this. If you take too many people out, you have a humanitarian crisis. If you leave them in, there's collateral damage."

A prodigious amount of ordnance has already been deployed in Mosul. During the past three months, the international coalition, fielding a nine-country armada that includes Australian F-18s, British Typhoons, Italian C-27Js, and American F-16s, Raptors, and B-52s, has launched more than ten thousand munitions. Meanwhile, U.S. Army soldiers have supported Iraqi and Kurdish troops with

THE INFINITE

The infinite yawns and keeps yawning.
Is it sleepy?
Does it miss Pythagoras?
The sails on Columbus's three ships?
Does the sound of the surf remind it of itself?
Does it ever sit over a glass of wine
and philosophize?
Does it peek into mirrors at night?
Does it have a suitcase full of souvenirs
stashed away somewhere?
Does it like to lie in a hammock with the wind
whispering sweet nothings in its ear?
Does it enter empty churches and light a single
candle on the altar?
Does it see us as a couple of fireflies
playing hide-and-seek in a graveyard?
Does it find us good to eat?

—Charles Simic

howitzers, mortars, and other long-range weapons.

At the same time, ISIS has developed what the organization Conflict Armament Research, or CAR, described in a recent report as a “centrally controlled industrial production system,” for manufacturing rockets and mortars. CAR estimates that, in the months before the Mosul offensive, ISIS made tens of thousands of uniform rounds, either by welding and machining scavenged pipe or by melting down scrap metal in foundries. Huge quantities of explosives and propellants are also thought to have been imported through “a robust supply chain extending from Turkey, through Syria, to Mosul.” In Hamdaniya, the SWAT team had seized more than two hundred homemade munitions, along with American anti-tank rockets known, during the Korean War, as super-bazookas.

All this firepower had impelled tens of thousands of civilians to leave the city, despite the Prime Minister's directive. Every day I was in Gogjali, hundreds of dirty, hungry, sleep-deprived civilians wandered up Highway 2. A few dragged wheeled suitcases, but most hauled whatever belongings they'd chosen to salvage in shopping bags or in rice sacks converted into backpacks. Many were injured. During the week

and a half that I spent there, I never saw anybody from the government or any international organization providing food or water.

The SWAT-team members periodically helped herd I.D.P.s onto buses or direct them toward the camps, but for the most part they focussed on holding the line along the cemetery. The Golden Division was fighting to clear Aden, a neighborhood west of Gogjali and north of Highway 2. The advance had been costly, and it was agreed that the SWAT team would assume responsibility for Aden while the Golden Division regrouped. When the Golden Division was ready, it would sweep down toward Aden from the north, pinching the militants between its forces and the SWAT team.

While the Golden Division was fighting in Aden, a coalition air strike targeting a suicide car there destroyed the house of Mahmoud Uthman, a senior warrant officer and, at forty-one, among the oldest members of the SWAT team. Mahmoud had served in the Army under Saddam Hussein, and had been a policeman in Mosul since 2005. A thick scar linked his sternum to his navel, from a laparotomy he underwent after being shot five times, in Aden, in 2011, an attack that had also cost him a kidney.

Mahmoud told me that his parents had lived across from him in Aden, and that their house, too, had been hit by the coalition air strike. They had not been seriously harmed, and were now staying at the house of Mahmoud's younger brother, Ahmed, which was also in Aden.

Ahmed was dead. ISIS had executed him, in 2015, for his resistance activities in Mosul. “Before ISIS, he drove a minibus,” Mahmoud told me. “He took kids to school and brought them home.” Ahmed had decided to rebel against ISIS about a month after it captured the city. He was appalled when it began demolishing holy sites that it deemed heretical, especially an ancient Islamic shrine that was said to entomb the Biblical figure Jonah (who appears in the Koran as well as in the Old Testament). Ahmed organized a cell of sixteen volunteers to assassinate ISIS militants. Mahmoud recalled that when Ahmed revealed his actions, over the phone, he had tried to discourage him: “I told him, ‘You're a civilian. You don't need to risk your life.’ He said, ‘I'm not going to let them destroy my city.’”

Ahmed asked Mahmoud if anyone on the SWAT team was in contact with the Americans. He wished to pass along coordinates for ISIS bases inside Mosul. Mahmoud gave Ahmed's phone number to an officer on the SWAT team named Lieutenant Basam Mohammad. Ahmed and Basam began to collaborate. Basam arranged for money to be sent to Ahmed and for the government to buy him a car—a maroon Opel Vectra, which Ahmed and the other members of his cell used to drive around Mosul, recording ISIS positions with a camcorder. In a phone interview, Brigadier General Matthew Isler, the deputy commander of the coalition's air campaign, told me, “There's an active resistance movement in Mosul. These are ordinary people, and we absolutely don't encourage them to get in harm's way. But there are brave Iraqis of all types doing everything they can to liberate their land. That human network directly feeds the Iraqi Air Force's targeting enterprise. We work side by side with the Iraqis, and the intel that they get is really good.”

It was during such an operation that one man in Ahmed's cell was caught

and, in captivity, gave up the identities of his comrades, including Ahmed, who subsequently was detained as well.

“There’s a video,” Mahmoud told me. “But I can’t watch it.”

Like the video showing the beheading of Bashar’s brother Salem, it opens with footage of the aftermath of an air strike. Several men, among them Ahmed, confess to working with Lieutenant Basam. “I was hired by Lieutenant Basam, who works with my brother Mahmoud, in the SWAT,” Ahmed says. The video cuts to ISIS fighters placing four men inside a maroon Opel Vectra. Ahmed is not among them, but Mahmoud told me that one of them belonged to his resistance cell. The wrists of each man are zip-tied to a grab handle. A militant launches an R.P.G. into the dirt beneath the engine, and the Opel is engulfed in flames.

Ahmed is then shown inside a small cage, along with two of Lieutenant Basam’s uncles and one of his cousins. A crane submerges the cage in an emerald-green swimming pool. Underwater cameras capture the men drowning. The final sequence in the video shows rope being looped around the necks of seven more men connected to Lieutenant Basam, including his father. The rope is an explosive; when it detonates, the men are simultaneously decapitated.

Since ISIS released the video, Lieutenant Basam had left the SWAT team to work with the command center overseeing the Mosul offensive. He later told me, “This is my duty. The price of our job is the danger we put our families in.”

In Gogjali, I asked Mahmoud when Ahmed had been executed. He took out his wallet and handed me a scrap of paper. In blue pen, he had written, May 19, 2015. 7:53 P.M.

Mahmoud told me that six members of his family remained in Aden: his parents, and Ahmed’s wife and three children. Although nearly all their neighbors had fled the fighting there, they had decided to stay until Mahmoud and the SWAT team arrived.

THE TEAM LEFT for Aden in the afternoon, filling the Humvees with blankets, propane tanks, hookahs, cooking pots, weapons, fuel, and ammunition. Hadi, who normally rejoiced at

the prospect of action, was in a grim mood. When I asked whether he was nervous about the mission, he shook his head dismissively. Then he explained that he had recently spoken to his wife on the phone. She and her brother were tired of following the SWAT team from place to place, waiting for Hadi to figure out a way to retrieve them. They had argued. Finally, Hadi had told her to remain where she was; eventually, the Army would liberate the entire area.

A colonel from the Golden Division led the SWAT team westward, through wrecked and crowded blocks, deeper into Mosul. The streets became narrower, the houses smaller and closer together. Our route was necessarily circuitous. Many roads were riddled by deep craters, which U.S. warplanes had created to impede suicide cars. Charred Golden Division vehicles blocked other streets. Heavy weapons and air strikes sounded nearby, but it was hard to tell exactly where the front line lay, if there was one.

Whenever the colonel stopped at a position that he wished the SWAT team to take over, you sensed how completely the Golden Division soldiers had habituated themselves to the pressures of urban combat. The way they moved and drove and spoke—their visible fatigue spiked with animal alertness—signalled an instinctive grasp of the environment. The SWAT-team members, by contrast, looked overwhelmed, disoriented.

The colonel brought us to a street in Aden where Golden Division soldiers were crouching behind walls and incoming rounds buzzed from multiple directions. Hadi, Thamer, and a dozen other men scuttled into an empty house. It was getting dark. Mohammad’s radio worked only intermittently. There hadn’t been enough Humvees to move everyone from Gogjali, and Mohammad decided to return to the cemetery and come back with the other men in the morning. I went with him.

The next day, when we returned to the house where we’d left Hadi and Thamer, it was evident that they had passed a difficult night. They told Mohammad that they’d been fighting since we left them, and they were convinced that the SWAT team did not possess the manpower, or the firepower, to hold



A SWAT-team member is treated by Iraqi Army

Aden if the Golden Division withdrew as planned. They feared a repeat of Intisar. Although they were still seventeen men short from that battle, their most urgent concern was their lack of ammunition. The policemen had been shocked to witness how many rounds the Golden Division expended during the night just to keep the militants at bay. And because all the Golden Division’s weapons were American (M4s, M249s, 50-cals), and all the SWAT team’s were Russian (Kalashnikovs, PKMs, Dushkas), the policemen could not borrow bullets from the Golden Division. “Some of them came over here, and



medics, at an aid station in a village east of Mosul, after a suicide car exploded, killing two of his comrades.

when they saw what we're fighting with they just laughed," someone told Mohammad. "They said, 'What the fuck is this? If this is all you have, they'll come and take you by your shirt.'"

"How much ammunition do we have?" Major Mohammad asked a lieutenant.

"Even if you brought ten thousand rounds, you'll have to get more," Hadi told him.

The lieutenant reported that the SWAT team had five hundred machine-gun bullets.

Hadi laughed incredulously.

"The Golden Division isn't going to leave this place," Mohammad told the

men. "They'll be right behind us. Why are you afraid?"

"Sir, we're not afraid," Hadi said. "We just want ammunition. Look at our magazines."

"I'm going to the armory now. I'm going to bring all the ammunition that's inside."

A tall, skinny policeman shook his head. "They're betraying us again. I'm not going to sacrifice myself."

Mohammad seized him by his uniform and jerked him like a rag doll. "You're not going to sacrifice yourself? What are we doing here? What am I doing here?"

The men all began to argue. "Listen to me, brothers!" Mohammad said. "I already talked to Colonel Rayyan on the phone. He's bringing more guys."

"If we get into trouble, who is going to support us?" Hadi said.

"Let them come!" Mohammad shouted. "We have grenades. What's wrong with you guys?"

"Who here has a grenade?" Hadi asked.

Someone nodded at a tree in the yard. "We have oranges."

"How many guys do we have right now?" Lieutenant Thamer asked.

"Let's say forty," Mohammad said.



"Let me touch them for you, son."

"And how many houses do we have to take?"

"Eight."

A few minutes later, Mohammad went to talk to the Golden Division colonel, who was out on the street. My interpreter and I tried to drift within earshot. We heard the colonel say, "You need to take fourteen houses."

Hadi and the other policemen had gathered on the street as well, insisting that they'd been given another suicide mission. Suddenly, Mohammad dropped his radio on the asphalt. "We are not retreating!" he yelled, his face red. "If today is my day to die, I'm going to die here! Any of the lieutenants who want to die with me, come to this side!"

Thamer, stepping over the radio, said, "Come on."

"Anyone who doesn't want to fight, go stand over there," Mohammad shouted. "I don't want any cowards." He waved his sidearm in the air. "Anyone who doesn't want to stay, I'll shoot him right here!" He fired a bullet in the sky. "Who's a coward?"

"Sir, we don't have any cowards," Hadi said.

But Mohammad was raging. "Where is the old SWAT? After everything we've done? No one was fucking ISIS like us!

And now, here, at the end, you want to quit? Shame on us!"

The scolding was effective. No one was going to be caught on the wrong side of that radio. As the men divided themselves into teams, preparing to move to the houses, the Golden Division colonel pulled Mohammad aside.

"We'll be right behind you."

"I don't care," Mohammad snapped. "We're not afraid."

In an apparent compromise, the plan was now to occupy ten houses. I spotted Mahmoud Uthman writing down how many rounds would be allotted to each position. I asked him whether his parents and Ahmed's wife and children were near us.

He pointed up the street. "Just around the corner."

AS PROMISED, Colonel Rayyan arrived later that afternoon, with more men and ammunition. His cool presence had a mollifying effect on the men, and over the next two days he did what Major Mohammad could not: he scrapped the positions that the Golden Division had assigned to the SWAT team and organized a defense of Aden that was better suited to the unit's small size and limited resources. Ultimately, the policemen took five houses along a street

that extended north until it linked with a contiguous front manned by the Army's 16th Division. The houses stood on the western side of the street; beyond them lay a mud clearing with a creek running through it. Opposite the clearing was Akha, the neighborhood that the Golden Division planned to attack once it had convalesced.

The SWAT-team members established gunners' nests on the roofs of the houses and broke sniper holes into the cinder-block walls. They immediately came under fire from Akha. Air strikes shook the foundations; artillery, launched from behind and in front of us, whistled overhead. In Aden, mortars, not snipers, posed the gravest threat. On the second day, a shell landed near an elementary school that Captain Basam had occupied; two SWAT-team members were injured and required evacuation. One of them was Loay Fathy, who, after the controlled detonation in Salahiya and the suicide car in Shaymaa, had suffered his third serious head wound in just over a month.

That afternoon, an ISIS drone circled above us, and, minutes later, another mortar landed a block beyond the house that Rayyan and I were in. Rayyan went to have a look, and reported that a man on the street had been killed. The man's young son had been maimed. "I don't think he's going to survive," Rayyan's driver told me.

Incredibly brave, or incredibly death-obsessed, ISIS gunmen ignored the F-16s in the skies and attacked the SWAT line from the very edge of Akha, sometimes even venturing into the mud clearing. A few days after we arrived in Aden, Rayyan sent Hadi to bring more food and ammunition to the school where Captain Basam was, and I went along. The school was a large two-story building that jutted into the clearing—and therefore was exposed on three sides. We had to duck low while climbing an exterior staircase. A corridor ran the length of the second floor, ending at an open doorframe that gave onto a landing. A bedsheet had been hung from the frame, but you still had to hew to the corridor walls, because the snipers in Akha sometimes shot through the sheet. We found Basam, the only officer there, in a classroom, with eight enlisted men. While Basam inspected his

resupply, I chatted with a young policeman named Hamadah, who was cleaning the lenses on a pair of antique binoculars. He had been injured by a car bomb in Mosul in 2008. A scar spanned his face, crossing his nose, and the area around his left cheek was peculiarly concave, like a dented mask.

"They're a hundred and fifty metres away from here," Hamadah said. "All the houses over there have sniper holes."

Souhel, the policeman I'd met in Erbil, was also at the school, and I followed him to the landing. We crawled on our stomachs, under the bedsheet. Outside, two machine guns were propped, on bipods, in front of small holes in a waist-high wall. The floor was covered with spent ammunition. Peering through a hole, I could see the houses across the clearing and, behind them, the yellow dome of a mosque. Souhel drew my attention to a house with a corrugated-tin roof and several square windows missing their panes.

"There are three ISIS in there," he said.

Soon, we saw someone flit by a window. Hamadah joined us, with his binoculars. He watched through one hole while Souhel fired the machine gun through the other. Several minutes went by with no response. Then a mortar landed close enough to move the entire school. I crawled back to the classroom. Another mortar landed even closer. A third exploded so thunderously that we thought, mistakenly, that it had hit the building.

People were screaming. I followed Basam downstairs and outside. A crater gaped in the street; a metal cistern raised on stilts was spewing water. The screams came from a house around the corner. We pushed through a gate and found a man in a tracksuit lying in the driveway. Before we could attend to him, a woman came out and yelled that more seriously wounded people were inside. She led us into the living room, where an older, shirtless man sat on a couch. Blood smeared his torso and was splattered all over his pants. People were holding sopping red cotton pads to both sides of his face. He was having trouble breathing. When he saw us, he pitched forward, as if to say something. Instead of words, blood spilled from his mouth.

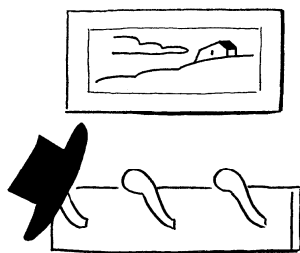
A young boy lay at the man's feet. He was also shirtless and bleeding heavily from wounds on his torso and his legs.

It was a challenge to focus. The living room was crowded with screaming relatives and neighbors. While we worked on the boy, a woman began shaking my shoulder and shouting in my ear. I had to push her away. My interpreter later told me what she'd been saying: "Don't let my son die!"

Basam carried the boy outside, to Hadi's Humvee. We turned our attention to the old man. Absurdly, a woman was suturing a gash on his face with a needle and thread. It looked as if she'd dipped her hands in a bucket of red paint. I cut the thread and tried to shoo her off. A minute later, while attending to the wounds on the man's legs, I looked up and saw that she was stitching him again.

We soon ran out of bandages. Members of the SWAT team helped the man into the Humvee. The boy was in the back, beside the man from the driveway, who had a broken leg. Hadi climbed behind the wheel and headed toward Gogjali, where the 16th Division kept its ambulances.

Soon after we returned to the second floor of the school, an air strike from a coalition jet produced a tremendous blast across the clearing. Our satisfaction was short-lived. An imam called through the loudspeakers mounted



on the mosque with the yellow dome. "God protect Mosul!" he cried. "God destroy the unbelievers! God destroy the apostates!"

Several more mortars landed around the school. It was time to leave. A lieutenant from another position had stopped outside, on his way to the house that Colonel Rayyan occupied, and Basam suggested that we go with him. The lieutenant blinked slowly, resisting sleep each time he closed his eyelids,

and he grinned in a punchy way, as if drugged. With incongruous formality, he explained to me that he hadn't slept in two days. "Last night, they came so close," he said. "We killed one with a grenade."

While we were getting into the Humvee, we saw something surreal: a woman carrying a bag of groceries up the street. She walked to the front door of a damaged building directly opposite the school. When Captain Basam tried to tell her that she shouldn't be there, we discovered that the woman was deaf and mute. Basam pointed at the crater in the street and made an exploding gesture with his fingers. The woman responded with her own hand signals, which seemed to mean: This is my house. Where else can I go? Whatever will happen will happen.

MOST OF THE civilians in Aden had already moved to the camps. There were simply too many mortars. One afternoon, I accompanied Colonel Rayyan to another SWAT-team position, which was next door to a house that had been shelled a few days earlier. A man, his wife, and their five daughters had been living in the house; the mortar had killed the man. His bloody kaffiyeh still lay in the gutter outside. Rayyan agreed to bring the widow and her daughters to the camp in Hassan Sham. They emerged from the house in black abayas and hijabs, towing luggage and weeping. As SWAT-team members ushered them toward Rayyan's Humvee—they had to sprint across an alley exposed to snipers—one of the daughters dropped to her knees and kissed the ground.

The Golden Division launched its attack on Akha the next day. All week, the temperature had been dropping—it was about forty degrees—and now it had begun to rain. From the roofs of the houses along the line, the SWAT team shot everything it had into Akha. Iraqi Army helicopters buzzed above, launching rockets across the clearing. I was on a roof with two SWAT-team members when one of them noticed a car—presumably, a suicide vehicle—driving toward the Golden Division's line. Rayyan called it in. As night descended, mortars continued to land around us.

At ten o'clock, while I was in a house

midway down the line, a terrific explosion sounded near the elementary school. A melee broke out. It was pitch-black outside and impossible to discern who was shooting where. The combat sounded extremely chaotic and quite near.

An hour or so later, the noise died down, and Colonel Rayyan returned to the house. He was in high spirits. ISIS, he told us, had attacked Basam's

Rayyan took a Humvee back to Hamdaniya, to meet with the leadership of the Nineveh Police and collect more ammunition, I caught a ride out of Mosul with him.

A few days later, from Erbil, I called Souhel to see how things were going. He told me that, shortly after I left Aden, three ISIS fighters had crossed beneath the mud clearing in a tunnel that the SWAT team had not noticed. The tun-

cover Dunya's portrait. He'd fallen in love with the daughter of an Army colonel, in Baghdad, and they were engaged.

When Hussein was shot, his older brother, Marwan, was down on the street, with Rayyan and the rest of the team. Marwan ran toward the house and was shot himself. Marwan survived his wounds. Hussein did not.

Souhel said that, after Hussein died, the SWAT team bombarded the house



Inhabitants of Mosul were instructed to stay inside, because ISIS snipers often shoot at civilians attempting to flee the city.

position, in an apparent bid to draw elements of the Golden Division away from Akha.

"We handled it ourselves," one of Rayyan's bodyguards declared. He was clearly pleased that the SWAT team had not had to call on the Golden Division for support.

The next morning was still cold and rainy, but everyone, even Rayyan, was in a celebratory mood. Akha had been liberated.

For the first time since arriving in Aden, five days earlier, the SWAT team could exhale. Released from the fear of ambush, the men loitered on the street, smoked cigarettes, drank tea. When

nel led to a house behind the unit's line. The policemen had surrounded the house, and an hours-long firefight had ensued. Dumbuk was shot in the leg and the arm. Eventually, a group of SWAT-team members reached the roof of the ISIS-held house. One of them, Hussein Ali, was shot there.

I remembered a story that Hussein, a shy and affable man in his early twenties, had told me. After his first girlfriend, Dunya, broke up with him, he'd had her portrait tattooed on his arm. "For revenge," Hussein had said, rolling up his sleeve and revealing an elaborately detailed image. Recently, though, he'd begun saving money for a new tattoo, to

relentlessly until two in the morning, killing all three militants inside. Then the policemen chained the corpses to the backs of their Humvees and dragged them through the streets of Aden.

DUMBUK WAS TAKEN to the hospital in Erbil, where doctors removed the bullet in his thigh (the bullet that hit his arm had travelled clear through), sold him a pair of crutches and a bag of medicine, and discharged him. His parents and siblings were all still in Mosul. But his relatives from Shaymaa—the aunt and uncle and five cousins whose neighborhood we'd been able to see from Lieutenant Omar's sniper

position—had made it out of the city safely, and were living in a camp near a village called Khazer, just up the road from the Hassan Sham camp. Souhel told me that Dumbuk was staying with them while he recuperated.

I visited the camp in Khazer a couple of days later. It was almost identical to the one in Hassan Sham, except triple the size, with thirty-five thousand residents. (The Kurdish government was rushing to construct a new camp nearby, Khazer 2, which would absorb six thousand more people.) Dumbuk's uncle Mohanad and several of his cousins met me near the main gate and apologized for the fact that their tent was at the back of the camp. It took a while to walk there. Recent rains had turned the bulldozed paths between the rows of tents to mud. Outside the toilets and next to the water stations, teen-agers hawked refugee provisions: flip-flops, flashlights, cigarettes.

Inside Mohanad's tent, we found Dumbuk reclining on a cushion, his arm in a sling and his injured leg extended. As usual, he greeted us with laughter and dirty jokes. While his cousins served tea and candy, we talked about Hussein. I asked about Hussein's fiancée, in Baghdad, and Dumbuk told me, "They were supposed to get married this Thursday. The unit already bought everything for the wedding."

Dumbuk's aunt prepared lunch. She did not have a lot to work with; Mohanad explained that whenever charities delivered food or other aid at the camp they always unloaded their trucks at the first row of tents inside the gate. Nevertheless, it was an impressive spread: rice, beans, radishes, tomatoes, and scallions. As we ate, Dumbuk told me that as soon as his leg and arm healed he planned to rejoin the SWAT team. He was happy to see his relatives, but he missed the front line.

Before I left, I told Dumbuk that I had to ask one last time: How had he come to be nicknamed after a drum?

Dumbuk demurred again, saying only, "I've been called that since I was a kid."

"I can tell you," Mohanad said.

Dumbuk grinned, shook his head, and looked away.

"When he was a boy, the bigger children always used to beat him up,"

Mohanad said. "Dumbuk was small, and so they used to pick on him all the time. But, no matter how much they kicked and punched him, he never cried. He would just laugh at them. Once, his mother and I were talking. She said, 'He's like a drum. You keep hitting him and he never breaks.'"

IN LATE DECEMBER, Iraqi security forces suspended operations in Mosul for two weeks. Commanders characterized the adjournment as a "refit" period, during which vehicles could be repaired and ammunition resupplied. The Iraqi military protects casualty figures like state secrets, but it seems probable that the pause in fighting was necessitated, in part, by the large number of dead and wounded. Earlier in the month, the U.N. released a statement announcing that nearly two thousand coalition fighters had been killed in November alone. After the Iraqi military disputed the claim, the U.N. acknowledged that the number was "largely unverified." Whatever the toll may be, the only people I've spoken to who have not expressed alarm about the military's casualty rates are people who are comfortably removed from Mosul.

The U.N. has stood by an estimate of civilian casualties in Mosul in November: nearly a thousand, killed by coalition bombardments, by suicide cars, and by ISIS snipers, who deliberately target them as they flee toward government forces. There is a dire shortage of food and water, and ISIS increasingly conscripts civilians to serve as human shields, executing those who don't comply.

Late one night in early January, Hadi, who was deployed with the unit, received a phone call from Iman. She and his daughter, Khalida, had made it out of Mosul with a group of civilians, and were now in Hamdaniya. Hadi drove there the next morning. At first, Khalida didn't recognize him. "She had seen pictures of me—old pictures, in Mosul," Hadi said. "She was a bit confused. It took some time." After Khalida realized who he was, Hadi said, "I felt finally at ease. I felt finally rested."

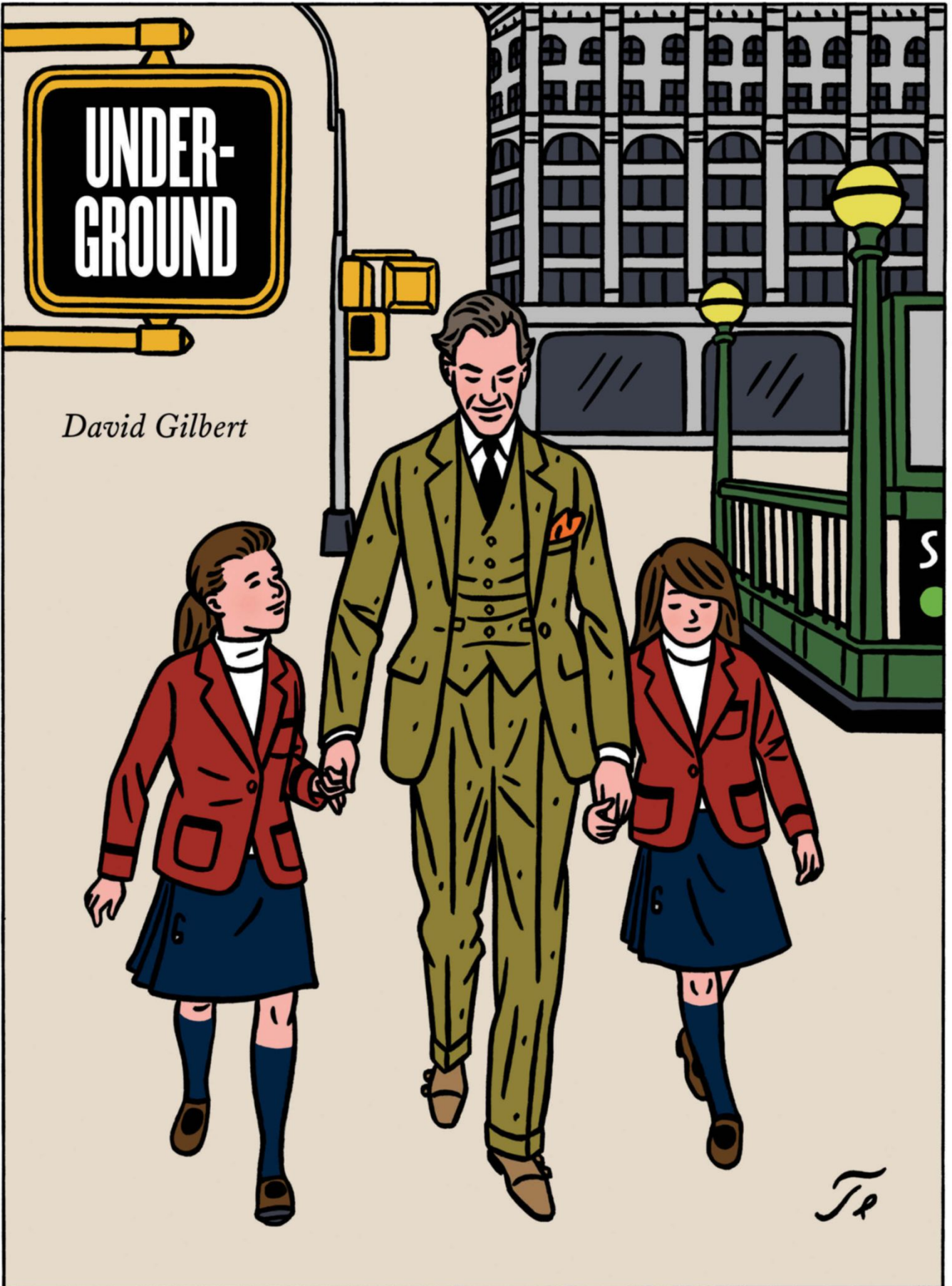
On January 8th, after the offensive resumed, the Golden Division reached the Tigris River. Two weeks later, eastern Mosul was declared to be liberated,

although sleeper cells may remain. What happens next is uncertain. Coalition jets, aiming at undermining ISIS reinforcement capabilities, have disabled all five bridges connecting the two halves of the city. Confronted with an isolated western Mosul, some foresee an interminable siege, reminiscent of the one in Aleppo, where, for years, the Queiq River divided rebel and regime neighborhoods. Others are more optimistic. Colonel Sylvia, the American commander, said of ISIS, "They have been throwing resources at this eastern fight. They're retaining plenty of capability in the west, but the defeat in the east will lead to a precipitous fall of morale." The SWAT team is currently stationed by the Tigris, and Colonel Rayyan is eager to cross it. "The western side will be easier," he predicted. "Now they're encircled, and they lost a lot of soldiers on the eastern front." Time will tell.

In December, I went down to Qayyarah, about forty miles south of Mosul. Major Mezher, after leaving the SWAT team, had assumed command of a new police unit there. It was his first day on the job, and I found him in an old administrative building, unpacking his bag. I watched as he brought out his uniforms and peeled the SWAT-team patches from their sleeves. While we spoke, Adnan called him to say hello; the previous night, Mezher had been out in Erbil with other members of the SWAT team. "We're a family," Mezher often said. He didn't have any civilian friends. "Civilians don't understand me, and I don't understand them," he had told me in Kharbardan. "The only people I trust are my own men, these men around me."

Now, in Qayyarah, he yelled into the hall, for a third time, for someone to bring him a hookah. He seemed embarrassed. "They don't know me yet," he explained.

Nearby oil fields, which ISIS set alight last summer, were still burning. The air in Qayyarah was dark. A sickly film coated everything. When my driver and I left Mezher and were on our way out of town, we crossed an intersection with a giant flag on a tall pole. I asked the driver to stop, and I turned around to check the flag again. Yes, it was black. Almost. You had to look hard to make out the Iraqi colors showing through. ♦



David Gilbert

ON WENT HIS sharpest three-piece, the Saxony tweed, followed by the double monk straps, in burnished caramel, which Michael knew would trigger a coo from dear old Mom. Her stylish son. So handsome. A throwback from her side of the family, those oh-so-attractive Pfeiffers, with their thick manes and their broad shoulders and their clear complexions, none of the men standing below six feet one. No doubt she would comment on how he was graying—for the past few years, this had been a regular topic of conversation—and then tell him how distinguished he looked. Like Cary Grant. Or, no, George Clooney—yes, yes, yes, George Clooney, she would amend, as if George Clooney made all the difference. And Michael would smile the smile he had perfected in boarding school, around the time that a tuxedo was first introduced into his wardrobe and he had insisted on learning how to tie a bow tie rather than using a cheap clip-on, like his older brother and his father. Those amateurs. Mr. Collins, his Latin teacher, had taught him, and after an hour of practice Michael had the knot mastered along with a boner-size bruise on his backside. “Remember, nothing genuine ever comes easily,” Mr. Collins told him, adjusting, then readjusting, those silky lobes, “especially in a world populated by fakes and fakers.” That Christmas, Michael had performed this small sartorial feat for his mother and, as expected, she had practically exploded—“Well, look at you, Mr. Bond, Mr. James Bond!”—after which she had brushed some dandruff from his jacket, ridding him of his father’s inheritance. Those seborrheic Salters.

Michael, dressed and combed, marched into the living area of his loft and gave Jeremy his fiercest boys’-catalogue pose: all tilt and akimbo, pure tween sassafras. But Jeremy was preoccupied with his phone, in other words sprawled on the couch, near-naked, composing a late-morning selfie for his tens of thousands of followers. Michael altered his angle of entry by crossing his arms and arching his back—boom, business meets recess—but Jeremy remained within the purview of his touch screen, his right hand stretching up and rotating as though changing a hard-to-

reach light bulb. “Um, hello,” Michael said finally, his Fauntleroy floundering. “One sec.”

A dozen microscopic expressions crossed Jeremy’s face.

An exultation in stop-motion.

Michael broke character and went over and grabbed from the coffee table the box of Cheerios, the spoon and bowl, the sweaty carton of milk; came back from the kitchen area and retrieved the half-dozen overboard rings of honey-nut oats, a few of them adrift on the dhurrie, and with a paper towel wiped clear the lingering chalk outlines of milk. Jeremy could be a bit of a walking crime scene. Clothes thrown everywhere. Wet towels draped over chairs. Here and there the evidence of fruit-eating by way of stem, pit, and core. Michael would have to buy more cereal. And orange juice, the no-pulp kind.

Jeremy ended his photo session with a moue.

“You know, I could just take your picture,” Michael told him from the sink.

“Then it wouldn’t be a selfie.”

“God forbid.”

Picture posted, Jeremy turned onto his side, his body smooth and muscular, as if he moved through water rather than air. “The selfie isn’t about me, stupid. It’s more a communal thing, the form insinuating a kind of longing.” Jeremy had gone to Cornell, which had been his third choice and so far his greatest disappointment in life.

“But most of those people are total strangers,” Michael said.

“There are no more strangers.”

And he was only half-joking.

“O.K.,” Michael said. “Good to know.” He stood there, nodding, slotting back into the register of a clueless middle-aged man, his earlier pose forgotten. Every passing second seemed a gentle yet firm reprimand, a tick of you, you, you, with Michael slackly agreeing to the sentiment. Straight ahead, through large casement windows, came that expansive view of downtown Manhattan, what the real-estate agent had called the money shot: building upon building, in stacks and layers, die-cut against blue. It was like living in a life-size diorama. Everything vanished toward that nasty piece of negative space known as the Freedom

Tower, with its harem of fresh construction, which Michael would always regard as brand new and ridiculous—the ridiculous name, the ridiculous height, the ridiculous symbolism. So paranoid. So desperate for meaning. Might as well be a giant hypodermic. Michael stopped nodding. The day ahead started to take oppressive shape in his chest. He tried to smell the roses and blow out the candles, like his father during his final years, but neither flower nor flame helped. Maybe he should take a Klonopin before leaving. Or quickly masturbate in front of Jeremy, who was always game, nursing his balls and giving him a cheer when he finished. That sometimes helped. But those swan dives invariably ended in belly flops. Really, he should just go.

“This couch sucks,” Jeremy said.

“Huh?”

“This couch, it totally sucks.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Most certainly does.” Jeremy tossed about like an antsy boy. “Torturous.”

“It is a quantifiably great couch,” Michael said.

“Well, my body says otherwise.” Jeremy raised his legs into the air, then reached up and touched his toes, his stomach turning into windswept sand. “Now I know where yoga mats go to die,” he said.

Michael grinned, glad for his humor and lightness. Because Jeremy was clever. And cute. Enthusiastically optimistic, like a walking advertisement for all that Michael had lost. Pain-free mornings. Low-grade gravity. Pills for recreation instead of life support. Jeremy worked in social-media P.R., though his actual job was a mystery beyond posting photographs of himself in various scenes and situations, going to parties and openings, a butcher shop, even. Michael had met him a month earlier, on Grindr, expecting nothing from his “hello there” message—always expecting nothing, and feeling lecherous and gross and in over his head, forty-seven years old but only two years clear of the proverbial closet, which nowadays seemed as antiquated as an armoire. But Jeremy, God bless him, had answered with “hello handsome.” Always a glitchy thrill. The promise of easy sex mixed with the fantasy of maybe something more. That was seven dates ago, which made him

Michael's most serious boyfriend. Whenever Jeremy visited, he would immediately drop his coat and shoulder bag and go straight for the tub—cast iron, claw-foot—where he'd soak for an hour with a stack of magazines. Michael bought bath salts and bath oils, a bath pillow. He invested in thicker towels. One of those special trays for reading. *Architectural Digest*. He liked surprising Jeremy with these small things.

"I was wondering," Jeremy said.

"Yes?" Michael always hoped these ellipses might lead to bed.

"You know my friend Connor?"

"Don't think so."

"Tall Connor. Skinny Connor. That Connor."

"O.K."

"Anyway"—Jeremy scooted to a sitting position, which enabled him to butterfly-stretch his inner thighs—"he's invited us to dinner tonight, and it should be fun, a good crowd, and I think we should go."

"I have my girls."

"Since when?"

"Since most every other Friday."

Jeremy picked up his phone and began knitting the screen. "That's too bad."

"I mean, I could try to change. Last second, but—"

"Oh, God, please don't," Jeremy said. "I get it." He glanced up and dispatched an efficient yet lovely smile, its effortlessness almost crushing. "Seriously, I get it," he said again, now planting his feet on the floor. "I just wanted to do something fun together, and I think you deserve to have some fun, like, some real fun, that's all."

Michael winced, more stung than soothed, knowing he had disappointed Jeremy, had disappointed yet another person in his life, so many of these disappointed people nested within him, rattling around whenever he moved, his own pea-shaped self in the smallest hollow. There was no winning. "I'm sorry," he said.

"Oh, shit, I'll survive." Jeremy got up from the couch.

Michael looked on with a mixture of awe and hunger, and maybe sadness, too, as if he were somehow un-

deserving of the sight. Jeremy rolled his shoulders and loosened his neck, a final calisthenic before diving into the day, after which he stared back at Michael and placed his hands over his pecs. A joke of demureness. Though the gesture always reminded Michael of Jamie Lee Curtis in "Trading Places."

He was twelve when he saw the movie with his older brother, and that scene where she removes her tacky wig and her cheap hooker dress, exposing her cropped hair and her—oh, my God—and then cups her hands over her breasts and turns away from the mirror and confronts the camera, unabashed, that scene, that

moment, that brazen glimpse of the person underneath, was like a revelation. "Nice fucking tits," his brother muttered.

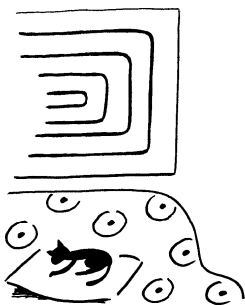
MICHAEL DESCENDED INTO the station at Union Square, the subway always a source of pleasure, and pride—he had grown up in the city during a time when no sane person dared travel underground, when the borders of a particular neighborhood were defined by the limits of a five-dollar cab fare. Down in these depths, Michael experienced a gritty rush beyond his parents' know-how, as well as a certain level of efficiency, economic and practical, not normally associated with his name—oh, and the humanity, too, all that humanity pressed together: man and woman, young and old, black and white, rich and poor, though even the rich in New York considered themselves poor.

Near the stairs for the N and the R trains, a woman played "Space Oddity" on the handsaw, the sound so curvy and strange as to be momentarily enchanting before slipping into the plain old weird. She was a regular, every so often taking the improvised stage and busking for money and for that even greater New York commodity: attention. Michael knew her. Just as he knew the guitar god, the opera singer, the pan flutist, the jug band; and down the concourse the born-again, the break-dancers, the Hare Krishnas; and everywhere the cops, their faces changing though their eyes remained constant, suspicious yet bored.

The rest was transience, people moving through the static, like Michael, heading uptown with exaggerated purpose.

On the platform, as he waited for the 6 train, which would arrive in six minutes, the sign read, he took advantage of the Internet connection beneath Fourteenth Street, always a pleasant surprise, to check his e-mail—nothing yet about any buyers for his "Bride" poster—and then to glance at Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, though glance was too strong a word, more like power scroll, which often ended on Grindr. Like now. Here were all the nearby available men, most of them nameless, designated only by a radius. Two hundred and twelve feet. Three hundred and three feet. The thrill of this fuckable radar. And there was nothing to stop him, no guilt, no shame, no possibility for scandal. He was in the clear. A new man. Honest and alive. The profile pictures sometimes told stories beyond the person's control, the bathrooms, the gyms, the shirt raised, the terrible lighting, as did the breakdown of personality into traits and preferences and codes. It was all so businesslike. And while Michael appreciated the physical remove of this version of cruising, hunting for someone who might change the quality of your day, the search could also leave him feeling undeniably heartbroken.

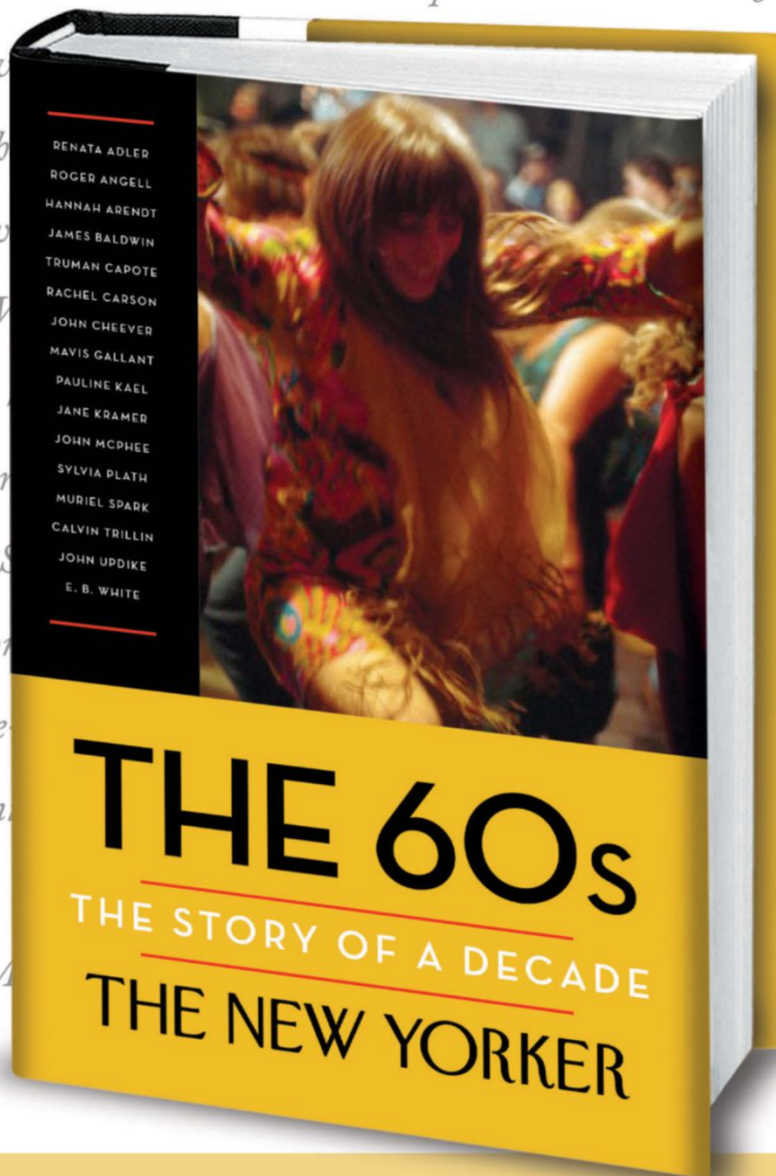
THE TRAIN CAR was standing room only, so Michael went to the front end and leaned against the interstitial door. He shut down Grindr in favor of shoulder-friendly solitaire, but most of his attention, particularly during the initial lurch forward, was focussed on whether any of his fellow-passengers were hidden threats. Old-timey muggers had been replaced by suicide bombers. Michael scanned for backpacks and bulky coats. He wondered if anyone recognized the seriousness of his gaze, if they imagined, as he did, a snub-nosed pistol strapped to his ankle, him yelling "Down! Down! Down!" as he tried to get a decent shot before the terrorist detonated his death vest. Michael the hero. This everyday fantasy was likely hardwired into his brain from seeing too many movies as a boy. The same with his habit of doing count-downs when rooting around for his wallet or his keys. Laughable, really. These



Advertisement

HISTORY IN REAL TIME AS TOLD BY THE NEW YORKER

*U-2 Spy Plane • Bay of Pigs • Civil-Rights Movement • Summer of Love
Martin Luther King, Jr. • Bob Dylan • Woodstock • Dwight Macdonald
John Updike • Vietnam War • Free-Speech Movement • J.F.K. • E. B.
White • Envoys • Truman
Capote • John F. Kennedy • Muriel Spark
James Baldwin • The Beatles
Apollo 11 • V. S. Naipaul • Viggy • Allen
Ginsberg • & Garfunkel
John Cheever • Pauline Kael
1969 World Series • Sylvia Plath
Portnoy's Complaint • Cuban Missile
Crisis • Free • Desegregation
Environment • Second-Wave
Feminism • Joan Baez
Free-Love Movement • Rachel Carson*



WITH NEW PERSPECTIVES FROM
Malcolm Gladwell, Adam Gopnik, Jennifer Egan, Kelefa Sanneh, and many more.

A RANDOM  HOUSE HARDCOVER AND eBook

knee-jerk daydreams. But just last month he had given up his seat to a girl, maybe six years old—the train was packed, and Michael was tapping on his phone, appearing busy so that he might avoid the pressing eye contact, when he spotted the girl, double-clutching her mother’s arm, trying to remain calm among all these nerve-racking adults. She was near tears, though no one noticed except Michael—yes, Michael noticed, and he stood up and offered her his seat, whereupon she sort of collapsed into a relieved smile and hugged him right there in the middle of the train, her small arms wrapping around him, squeezing hard, before sitting down. People murmured their approval, so darling, the brief conjunction of goodness on this goddam nightmare ride. And Michael came close to crying himself, the wave crashing just short of his eyes. It was almost too much for being exactly what he wanted. And really he shouldn’t have been sitting at all.

THE RESTAURANT WAS populated primarily by women, the median age fifty-three, though everyone shopped at the same stores and went to the same cosmetic surgeons, so they were simi-

larly shiny and spackled, stuck on the same expression of mistaken wonder. Six of them were wearing fur vests; ten of them were in open-knit sweaters. Imagine a hundred sisters having lunch together, their parents the Upper East Side. Michael walked in and knew these women, knew how to enchant them, knew the proper nouns to cast into conversations, legitimately knew two of them: Mrs. Dean over there, and then, in the far corner, Mom, Mrs. Salter, Mary, the handsome unrepentant sister, her lack of Botox a knotted cord to whip the others with. She was sitting alone, hunting and pecking on her phone, her index finger bouncing as though on a small black trampoline.

“Hello, hello,” Michael said.

“Oh, there you are.” Mom removed her glasses and surveyed him, which Michael obliged by extending his hands along the rail of his intended chair and pitching forward, like an actor playing a waiter playing a son, the trinity of solicitousness. “Don’t you look nice,” she said.

“Thanks.” Michael sat down, applying napkin to lap.

“You got a haircut.”

As expected, she had noticed.

“Looks good. Very sharp.”

“And I like the jacket,” Michael offered in return.

“Ralph.”

“Very nice.”

“On sale.”

“Even nicer.”

Mom took in the room, unshackled now that she had a tablemate, her son, no less, his pleasant appearance trumping all other deficiencies, like his lack of a real job and his divorce, his spendthrift ways—“I’m worried about you,” as she often told him on the phone, though in person she was comforted by his grooming. His homosexuality was another matter. It seemed, well, embarrassing at his age, like suddenly changing careers, and, even worse, a missed opportunity, since she would have loved to have had a gay son twenty, thirty years ago, when such a thing might have counted for something. “How about this place?” she said, which she always said when they came here for lunch, taking in all the ladies and the rare uncommitted man.

“Yep, quite a scene,” Michael agreed.

“Still the place to be,” she said, with her normal mix of self-congratulation and scorn.

“Suppose so.”

“A younger crowd.”

“Maybe young by your definition.”

Mom smiled, her lips rupturing like stitches. “You’re not so young anymore.”

“True.”

“Almost fifty,” she said. “Hard to believe.”

“I did cocaine in the bathroom here once, decades ago.”

“Stop.”

“Seriously.”

“You’re awful.”

“With Peter,” Michael added.

“Oh, Peter,” Mom said, with polished sadness. “He did like to have his fun.”

“That he did.”

“I wrote a condolence letter to Jessie. I do hope she got it.”

“I’m sure she did. She’s only on Eighty-third Street, not Timbuktu.”

“Well, I hope so, because it was a good letter. I mentioned that time Peter came to the country house, when he was maybe six, seven years old, and he told me he could swim, remember that, and he just jumped into the pool, in



Kanin

“Honey, do you remember if I already sent Skinny Frank a fish in the mail?”

the deep end, no less, and sank like a stone, right to the bottom, him looking up at me, as calm as could be, hello Mrs. Salter, and I had to dive in, remember, and save him. Ruined my not so cheap watch."

Michael nodded, though he remembered only her telling of the story.

"Such reckless confidence. I put all that in the letter."

"Uh-huh." Michael opened up the menu, in need of some distraction and a sense of purpose beyond recalling all the letters and notes he never wrote, though he did have a terrific collection of stationery, thanks to the woman across from him. Every Christmas brought a new box from Crane's, embossed with his monogram, as though he were a man of great correspondence. These gifts had started when he was ten, small cards with a cartoon image of a movie clapboard, his name marked as the director. Michael. Those were the days when he wanted to be called Mike, Mike Salter, which was closer to Steve—never Steven—Austin, man barely alive. Of course, he was forced to use this new stationery for thank-you notes, the labor overwhelming whatever crappy present he had received. And his mother always insisted on more details. "You have to sound like you mean it," she would tell him. He really should write Jessie, he thought as he perused the assortment of pizzas and the signature cheeseburger with black truffle and Brie, all very tempting, though Michael would likely settle on a kale salad and have a staring contest with the bread.

"You see Peggy Dean over there?" Mom asked.

"Yes. I waved."

"You know Stewart Dean is sick. Very sick."

"I didn't know that."

"Yes, terrible. Pancreatic cancer."

"Christ, that's awful."

"Horrendous. I put them in touch with Aaron—you remember Aaron," she said, referring to the nurse who had helped with his father's demise, Aaron who knew the correct way to handle a fragile man, lifting him from his chair to the walker or the wheelchair, checking his oxygen levels, comparing the slightest change in body temperature against broader, more cat-

astrophic implications. Thank God for Aaron, mother and father had both proclaimed. "I've already booked him in advance for me," Mom said.

"Please."

"Seriously, when it's my time, I want Aaron."

"Can he do hair and makeup as well?"

Mom laughed, but she laughed easily for him.

"Well, it's not happening anytime soon," Michael said. And that was the truth. She had sturdy Presbyterian genes, a large cross-generational swath of friends, two dogs she cherished, a vibrant book group, a passion for gardening, and a yearning for travel. Before their conversation could progress toward lunch and money—maybe a loan or an advance on his inheritance, something to help with the rent, the child support, the zeros in his bank account fast approaching a solitary zero, Mom his eternal backstop—before Michael could start playing the old game of please feel sorry for me, the waiter arrived, not with the promise of taking their order but with Michael's older brother in tow, Henry, squat and flushed, bald, who grabbed the free chair like a wrestler grabbing a pair of shoulders.

"Sorry I'm late."

"You made it," Mom said.

"Couldn't find a parking space. Had to use a garage. God knows what that'll cost."

Michael managed an accommodating smile. "Didn't know you were joining us."

"In the city for a meeting," Henry said.

"So nice you're here." Mom touched the table near his hand.

"Traffic was awful. Waze screwed me."

Henry was wearing his standard uniform of tan khakis, white oxford, red tie, blue blazer, the over-all fit simultaneously too loose and too snug, which gave the impression that his head was slowly being born from his clothes. Michael almost had to look away, the sight seeming too intimate.

"Lunch with my two boys," Mom said.

"This place certainly does a booming business," Henry said.

"You see Peggy Dean?" she asked.

"I did. I said hi."

"You know Stewart Dean is dying."

"I heard it was treatable," Henry said. "That's what Bill Dean said."

"It's pancreatic."

"I know, but Bill said it was treatable."

"I'm sure they're trying everything. In any case, I gave them Aaron's name."

"Oh, O.K."

"Aaron can still be a big help."

"Yeah, Aaron's great."

"I swear," Michael said, "Dad's last words were 'Where's Aaron?'"

His brother stared at him with that old look of extreme dislike.

"I'm joking, obviously."

"Not one of your best," Henry said.

"Though your father really did love Aaron," Mom added.

The waiter came over and asked about drinks, but Mom and Henry both agreed on ordering, speed always the key, so the waiter waited, pen twitching like a seismograph needle as these Salters scanned the menu, Michael stepping forward with a kale salad, please, which received a healthy sigh from Mom, who was debating between chicken paillard and salmon, and then deciding on fettuccine and an iced tea, while Henry challenged the merits of a thirty-dollar cheeseburger, the waiter describing the subtle combination of dry-aged rib eye and brisket and strip steak, Brie cheese, black truffle, a brioche bun, Henry finally relenting, substituting Cheddar for Brie, and a Diet Coke with no ice. Michael handed his menu to the waiter, feeling in natural cahoots with the man, the two of them forced to serve this family.

"So," Mom said, relieved that the ordering portion of the meal was over.

Henry leaned over the table, his posture reminiscent of their father's, though more fearsome in its bequeathed sanctimony, like some kind of gargoyle. "How's the poster business?" he asked Michael.

"O.K.," Michael said. "Might be some interest in my 'Bride of Frankenstein.'"

"And how much would that set someone back?"

"I'd take two hundred and fifty thousand."

"Dollars?"

"Yep."

"For a poster?"

"It's incredibly rare and in triple-mint condition."

"Triple mint, huh? Well, never mind, then."

"It's very desirable in certain circles." And also quite beautiful, you fucking jerk, but Michael held back on saying this, as he held back on saying so many things, all for the sake of being pleasant.

"I can only imagine those, um, circles," Henry said, grinning.

Michael nodded slantwise, self-deprecation his only defense.

"And what'd you pay for the thing?" Henry asked.

"For the one sheet?"

"Yeah, how much?"

"Around seventy thousand," Michael said, though the actual sum was much higher.

"Not bad."

"Oh, that reminds me," Mom said, happy to join in. "I had the Chagall appraised."

"And?"

A pause for dramatics. "One point four million," she said.

"Wow. Very nice."

"I know. Think your father paid a hundred thousand for it."

"Go, Dad."

"Really quite amazing," she said.

Michael refrained from telling them his opinion of Chagall and of that painting in particular, which hung in the living room of his parents' apartment. It was one of the artist's whimsical wedding scenes, with newlyweds perched atop a flying cow, the Eiffel Tower in one corner, a shtetl in the other, a violin-playing chicken smiling upon the happy couple. The colors were gaudy, the arrangement of figures too crowded, the visual effect like the first nauseous signs of a migraine. It had been a tenth-anniversary present from Robert to Mary, and so carried a gesture of love, an implication Michael could never square, especially when witnessing their long history of silences, how they lived their lives in parallel and never seemed to approach buoyancy, except, perhaps, during Dad's illness, when Mom tended to him as if his daily survival were another landscaping project, as well executed as the pergola in Connecticut. When Michael was nine and more responsive to the

fairy-tale charms of Chagall, his mother confessed her distaste for the painting. "Not my favorite by a long shot," she told him. "It clashes with everything and just overwhelms the room. But don't tell your father."

"Of course, I'm not ever selling it," Mom said to her boys.

"Of course not," Henry said.

The conversation turned to kids, to summer plans, to other people's problems, and while Michael participated, adding here and there stories about Maude and Hannah and their most recent obsessions, scoring laughs from Mom and a few reluctant chuckles from Henry, still, he could feel himself slipping into bystander mode, as though listening through a door, safe yet ill at ease, the life on the other side mysteriously articulated. Really he just hoped to get through the meal and his brother's inevitable criticism of the overpriced cheeseburger, his mother's desperation to nail down Memorial Day weekend and, after that, July 4th, the Montana guest ranch in August, her treat, all these things, all these nice things—"Should we go somewhere for Christmas?"—with Michael following along because he had no other options, considering his hazy finances and his inability to decide anything solid for himself, so he gave this woman his full backing, and after lunch he gave her one of his patented Michael hugs on Madison—"You look so good," she told him—and to Henry, who was rushing to his meeting in midtown, he gave a quick wave goodbye.

THE MIDDLE-SCHOOL MOTHERS of Nightingale waited outside on the street, in roving bands of three and four, most of them discussing the weekend ahead, the travel teams, the dash to the country barring birthday parties, all of them armed with phones, which they shunned but continued to worry with their fingers, like large river stones. The nannies had no qualms; their heads remained lowered, focussed on screens, as if reading Scripture. Michael stayed in their outer orbit. He was one of four dads waiting, the other three similarly preoccupied, their presence noteworthy enough to be beyond technological reproach. Together, they had the look of paternal rock stars, though on occasion

the light shifted and these men took on the aura of junkies. Michael ran his fingers through his hair. The afternoon high of seventy-three was warm enough to unstitch a few loose strands of sweat and make him lament the Saxony tweed. He unbuttoned his jacket, then, on second thought, rebuttoned his jacket, after which he unbuttoned his jacket again. He knew a handful of the mothers, women streamlined and organized, so capable, whose husbands he had been forced to socialize with, at restaurants and cocktail parties, fathers who intimidated him, who were so professional, who played golf and tennis, who adopted New York as their home town rather than being trapped here by birth. Michael wondered if they ever talked about him. These people had all disappeared so quickly, fading into the barest of recognitions, as though their friendliness was just a misunderstanding.

Michael checked his phone. There were no new e-mails of note, and while he was tempted to search through Grindr he refrained in this setting. Instead, feeling sad and wanting to feel sadder, he thumbed through his text history with Peter, which had become an artifact of last words, date- and time-stamped.

Tuesday, November 3rd

8:43am Michael: How you doing today?

9:34am Michael: Up for a visit?

9:46am Michael: I'm around if you need me.

Sometimes Michael found himself jealous of the cancer. All the attention, all the sympathy. No explanations needed. No excuses. People forced to love you, to be considerate and kind. Of course, he realized this was absurd, outrageous, even. His oldest friend. His best friend, as silly as the term sounded post-childhood. My best friend, Peter. Dead six months.

2:30pm Michael: Any better or stupid question?

2:57pm Michael: I might come by and see you. That okay?

3:49pm Michael: Thinking of you.

4:22pm Michael: I might need some of your morphine.

4:28pm Peter: All mine.

4:30pm Michael: Hey, that got your attention! You never did share well.

4:42pm Michael: Not true. You were always a tremendous sharer. Coming by in an hour. Got the green light from Jessie. Hide the morphine.

CLOUD-PATH

With steps freshened
by wearing a man's cast-off shoes,
I follow the rain-rutted road
as far as the fishing boats
turned upside down
on the soggy bank, their oars
secured elsewhere to provide
against thieves.

Mottled light through
waterside trees over the bows
and sterns means trading
fish for birds.

I take up the invisible oars
put by for just this
occasion: a banishing
scald of sun blotted inexactly
by a succession of windblown clouds
able to lift the entire flotilla.

A bird
flies through me. Then
a fish.

—Tess Gallagher

Michael was pretty sure that Peter knew how to swim, that he had just been joking on the day he sank to the bottom of their pool, pretending to drown, or not even pretending, just sinking down, untethered from what stood above.

9:57pm Michael: I just want to say I love you, pal. Not to get maudlin. I wish you weren't going through what you're going through, but at least you're surrounded by people who love you.

This sweep through Peter was interrupted by a text from Caitlin.

Friday, May 26
3:31pm Caitlin: Where are you?

The question still had its kick, like he was in trouble.

3:32pm Michael: At school, waiting for the girls. Why?

3:32pm Caitlin: Never mind, I see you.

And then he saw her, coming from the west. She weaved through the other mothers, smiling and saying a

few words in passing, Caitlin, sunny and sweet, catching his eye and giving him that old conspiratorial squint, the two of them still able to bond over the dubious appeal of these high-strung parents. Except that her performance always seemed more confident and less soul-crushing than his. She was also in love, with a screenwriter, no less.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," Michael said. "I thought I was picking up."

"You are—I just have their weekend bags."

"Oh, great."

She handed him two small duffels.

"You're all dressed up," she said.

"Had lunch with my mother."

She nodded. "And how is she?"

"Fine, you know, the same."

"Uh-huh."

Standing there, Michael started feeling shy, maybe even scared, as though exposed and in need of burrowing.

Caitlin looked at the school door. "I should go before the girls come out."

"You can stay."

"No, just complicates things. At some point we need to talk about summer camp."

"Yeah, sure."

"A check is due."

"O.K."

"Well," Caitlin said, rubbing her hands, those old nerves, "have a nice weekend."

"Same to you."

Nowadays their goodbyes had the texture of a failed first date fifteen years in the making. Caitlin headed back toward Fifth. "Oh," she said, turning around, "they had pizza two nights ago, so maybe no pizza. And they had hamburgers last night."

"O.K., good to know."

GIRL AFTER GIRL popped through the large front doors, the parents outside pressing closer, their faces giving every girl a bright smile just in case this girl, or this girl, or this girl morphed into their particular girl. Maude and Hannah finally appeared, Maude taller, Hannah skinnier, their twinhood one of the few things they had in common, as if for those nine months in the womb they had negotiated personality traits and physical attributes, had divided between them their lot in life. Michael waved from beyond the scrum; the girls spotted him and came over.

"Hello, hello." Michael gave them his best cheerful squeeze.

"Daddy!" Hannah said.

"Hey, Dad," Maude said.

They started walking east, toward the subway on Eighty-sixth Street.

"So, the eternal question—how was school?"

"Fine," Maude said.

"Do you have a snack?" Hannah asked.

"We're having dinner soonish," Michael said.

"What're we having?"

"Not sure yet. Maybe order in."

"I have a lot of homework," Maude told him.

"It's only Friday."

"I know, I just have a lot of homework, that's all."

"O.K."

"Can we get a snack?" Hannah asked.

"Not right now. How about when we get to my place?"

"Mom usually has a snack for us."

"Maybe we can get some ice cream downtown," Michael countered.

"That's not exactly a healthy snack," Maude said.

"Ice cream's fine," Hannah said. "Ice cream's awesome."

"You know it's not fine," Maude said.

"But it's the beginning of the weekend. We should celebrate."

"That's a stupid reason," Maude said.

"We don't need a reason for ice cream, right, Dad?"

"We'll figure something out," Michael said, already feeling exhausted, and then feeling low for already feeling exhausted, for wishing he were alone again and without responsibility, the weekend ahead mined with the inevitable failures of his brand of fatherhood. Love, in all forms, had turned into a kind of regret. All the things he could have done, the life he could have led, yet here he was, on the corner of Ninety-second and Madison, a self-made buffoon.

"You O.K., Dad?" Maude asked.

"Yeah, fine. Let's make this light."

THE PLATFORM FOR the express was packed with people, many of them teen-agers laughing and yelling, celebrating their freedom as well as the power of their numbers. Michael took Maude and Hannah by the hand and expertly guided them through this throng, toward the less populated front of the platform, which would position them for the speediest exit from the Fourteenth Street station, just three stops away. This knowledge pleased him.

According to the sign, the 5 train was coming in seven minutes.

"Why can't we take an Uber?" Hannah said.

"This'll be faster." And cheaper, Michael thought.

"But so many people."

"Shouldn't be too crowded," he said. "Bet we even get a seat."

From down the platform, near the stairs, a different flavor of screaming rose above the adolescent rambunc-

tiousness, screaming that was pitched with throat-scraping fury: "Get the fuck out of my way! God-damned motherfucking people! Yeah, fuck you!" Michael, along with everyone else, glanced in the direction of this growing scene. People were backing up against the platform wall, creating as much room as possible between themselves and the screaming, though a few of the bolder teen-agers heckled by shouting "Hello, Dad," and "Someone's feeling cranky."

"You all think this is fucking funny! Not fucking funny! Not a fucking joke."

Maude and Hannah gripped Michael harder.

"Don't worry," Michael said. "Just a homeless person."

"Why is he mad?" Hannah asked.

"Because he's homeless, duh," Maude said.

"Out of my fucking way! God damn it, fucking move!"

The screaming was getting closer, now revealed as a largish man dressed in a nomadic assortment of salvaged clothes, including a heavy overcoat, which seemed cruel considering the weather. Occasionally, the man stopped and berated a random person—"You think I'm crazy? But I was a child once. So fuck you, I'm allowed to be angry"—then the man moved on, waving his arms, his fists fighting against the rage yet also seeming intrigued by the rage's undeniable effect on people.

There was hardly any space on the platform for him and his oversized anger, so he was forced to walk along the yellow edge. Michael could see his face clearly now. It was mottled with grime and beard, eyes silvery and bright, as though minted from years of searching the ground for loose change. "I swear, if someone fucking touches me I'll explode!" At which point the man reeled around, perhaps anticipating this touch coming from behind, which further compromised his already compromised balance, making him stumble to the edge, almost over the edge, arms flailing, an endless beat of near-acrobatic struggle before he finally succumbed to gravity

and fell backward into the well of the tracks. He hit the bottom hard. His gasp was multiplied by the witnesses on the platform, the shock quickly followed by panic, both general and specific: people yelling the obvious, that a person had fallen on the tracks, right there, the homeless guy, on the tracks; people cursing as if only "fuck" and "shit" and various combinations of those words could sum up the situation; people rushing for the stairs, unprepared to be present for the potential tragedy and innately understanding the coming commuter hell; people invoking Jesus Christ and the prayers associated with His name; people narrating every detail and in some cases filming the scene with their phones; people commanding unseen people in authority; people imploring the man on the tracks to get up and move, just get up and move; people at the far end of the platform leaning into the tunnel and waving their arms in a desperate semaphore of Halt! and Cease!, though no train was coming, at least not for another four minutes.

"What's going to happen, Dad?" Maude asked, her voice trying for calm.

"Dad?" Hannah said.

"It's going to be O.K.," Michael finally answered. "Just stay here."

Michael positioned the girls against the platform wall and then pushed through the crowd to where the man had fallen. People were gathered along the edge, some kneeling and reaching down as if this mortal gap could be traversed by desire alone. The dazed man, sprawled on his back, was a strange human presence down among the litter and the puddles, recasting the ordinary into the extraordinary, horrific yet almost holy. He practically glowed on those tracks.

"Come on, buddy, get up!" someone shouted.

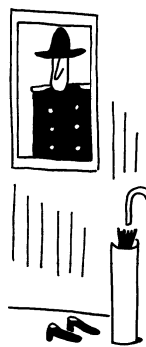
"Fuck you!" the man shouted back, not moving.

There was still no evidence of the train in the tunnel.

"C'mon!"

"Fuck you! And fuck you!"

Beyond all the residual excitement, no one was doing anything, everyone waiting around for someone else, anyone else, to step forward. Michael



started to wonder if perhaps he was the one who was supposed to do something, him, Michael Salter, his pulse starting to quicken around this vague implication, molding his insides into a smaller, braver person who might take over the larger controls. Michael tested the scenario by going over to the platform's edge, where he crouched, then eased into sitting, like the strong silent type, dangling his legs over the side, daring the drop, and then just dropping, like that, ta-da but without the applause. The distance down hardly seemed a distance at all, though the change of perspective was peculiar. The uneven intimacy of the tracks. The people transformed into a hundred shoes. The weird kind of non-floating floating.

"Watch the third rail," from above.
 "Try to drag him over here."

Michael carefully stepped toward the man. "We need to get you up," he said, surprised by his tone.

"Fuck you."

Michael reached down but the man batted his hands away.

"We can do this," Michael insisted in full baritone.

"Get the fuck away from me."

"I'm trying to help."

"Don't want your fucking help."

Michael squatted and tried slipping his hands under the man's armpits. Maybe he could lift him up in a burst of unexpected strength, as in those inspirational stories that had fascinated him since childhood, the definition of love and caring, of people under duress being able to lift cars, always cars, never a large homeless person who fought all contact. Oh, and the stench.

"Don't touch me, cocksucker!"

The man was breathing hard, almost hyperventilating.

"This is not a good place to linger," Michael said.

"Fuck you and your truth. I'm not moving. I'm comfortable."

Michael, sweating hard now, stood up, baffled as to his next move.

Like the first time he had to change a tire, a total—

From behind, a shout of "Train!," the shout echoing along the platform.

Michael turned and was again fascinated, however briefly, by the change



"Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, let me present the alternative facts of the case."

• •

of perspective down here, to see those distant lights in the tunnel, without lines or borders, growing larger, coming head on, sharpening, splitting the world in half, then in half again. Michael nodded as if some unanswerable question had been asked.

"There is. A. No. 5. Downtown express. To Flatbush Avenue. Approaching the station. Please step away from the platform edge" came over the loudspeaker.

A slight push of cool, stale air.

A clicking sound along the third rail, like a steel cable being whacked.

Michael turned back toward the man.

"O.K., it's time," he said, not quite frightened yet.

"Fuck you and your time."

The blast of the horn. Again and again.

The vibrating screech of metal on metal.

All these piercing sensations, in curious fragments.

Like those eleventh-hour pleas from the platform.

"Forget him!"

"Better move, dude!"

"Please just stop, please!"

"Come on!"

Screaming and crying, fingers pushing into ears.

Michael leaned in close to the man. "We need to—"

"Go fuck yourself."

The air pushed into a ghostly breeze. There was the question of what he was doing down here. And with his daughters so close—what might they see? The utter destruction of the Saxony tweed. But at least he was doing something, something bigger than himself and full of possible meaning, courageous—right, this was courageous, rather than stupid, a sign that he was special, or, at a minimum, useful. Michael reached down just as the man reached up and grabbed him by the shoulders, pulling him down, pinning him hard to his chest. Perhaps as a buffer against those splintering wheels. Michael could feel the man's resigned horror, the hopeless struggle. "We belong dead," the man muttered. Or Michael might have muttered it. Hard to tell with all the noise, the train braking and stopping with eight feet to spare, the two of them frozen mid-grip, eyes closed, waiting for things that would never come. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

David Gilbert on his story, "Underground."

THE CRITICS



POP MUSIC

ON THE BACK OF A BREEZE

Sampha's velvety debut album.

BY CARRIE BATTAN

WHEN SAMPHA SISAY appeared on late-night television for the first time, in 2013, he was—like many others at the time—an accessory to Drake, who was promoting an album on “Late Night with Jimmy Fallon.” Seated at a tiny keyboard, Sisay played the plaintive melody of “Too Much,” in which Drake lays bare the kinds of struggles—over finances, illness, thwarted ambitions—that most superstars would keep under wraps. Drake has made his name by toggling between rapped verses and emotionally sung hooks, but for this song he deployed Sisay, a Londoner who goes by Sampha, as a kind of sentimental counterweight. “Money got my whole family going backwards,” Drake rapped forcefully into the camera, and Sampha delivered the chorus from the wings, just above a whisper: “Don’t think about it too much, too much, too much.” He was a restraining force, urging Drake not to venture any deeper into his turmoil.

Earlier this month, Sampha performed on “The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon,” this time by himself. The keyboard had been replaced by a glossy upright piano, and Sampha’s silhouette, backlit in burnt orange, looked imposing and artful. Performing “(No One Knows Me) Like the Piano,” a ballad with gospel overtones from his debut solo album, “Process,” he accentuated the gentle melody with careful Stevie Wonderian sways and head cocks. Sampha’s mother died of cancer last year, and the tragedy permeates his new album without swallowing it whole. On “Fallon,” there was no sidekick to urge Sampha to resist the depths of his own thoughts. “They said it’s her time, no tears in sight,” he sang. “I kept the feelings close.”

For the past half decade, Sampha’s voice has echoed through the corridors of popular music. After a string of songs with a fellow-Londoner, the electronic artist SBTRKT, who introduced his music to Drake, Sampha became a sought-after collaborator for both independent-minded peers and the sorts of mainstream musicians who aspire to high art. He has become a quietly familiar presence, owing to his work with Kanye West, Jessie Ware, Frank Ocean, Beyoncé, and her sister Solange Knowles. His voice, a velvety soprano, is both soothing and capable of lending emotional gravitas to a song. Sampha can tread so lightly that he’ll sometimes make his way onto a track without receiving proper credit. He appeared on “Mine,” a song from Beyoncé’s self-titled album, from 2013, but his name did not appear in the liner notes.

This is the kind of minor slight that could rile another artist, but Sampha’s ethos is centered on modesty and humility. Like his friends in the xx, a sense of quiet is crucial to his project. (“I have to talk quieter because I feel like I’m yelling next to Sampha,” the radio host Ebro Darden said during an interview last year.) You could call it the second coming of the Quiet Storm, the R. & B. movement named for Smokey Robinson’s 1975 album. Like that cohort, Sampha uses R. & B. and soul as an expression of the personal and the cerebral rather than the sensual—“songs carried on the back of a breeze,” as Robinson once described his aesthetic.

On “Process”—which follows two sketchbook-like EPs—Sampha reconciles his timidity with a hunger for expression. He pushes his voice to the forefront, with more urgency, more punch,

and less reverb than on his earlier work. And yet he also shrouds himself carefully. “Process” deals with his mother’s death, but it’s more impressionistic meditation than raw dirge. It’s as if he were presenting death as it would be experienced in a dream state, a place where memory greets loss in a psychedelic jumble, tangled with flashes of angels, Heaven, and spiritual release. “You’re free/You’re free enough to find your feet/You’re also free enough to hide from me,” he chants on “Take Me Inside.” Sampha nearly always prefers free association and metaphor to literal-mindedness: “Flying high above all your memories/I have a bird’s-eye view,” he sings on “Incomplete Kisses,” a song that draws grief plainly.

“Process” shows keen awareness of the promises and the hazards of the digital era. Sampha has little formal training, and he prefers to write and record at home. Because the Internet provides such easy access to any style and era of music, he, like many of his peers, has happily tossed aside preconceived genre constraints. Sampha’s work is a bit gospel, a bit R. & B. There’s some classic soul, made to feel modern with synthesizers; there’s experimental electronica, made to feel classic through the use of analog instruments and quiet piano interludes. But he is not often concerned with creating a tangible framework or song structure so much as with evoking a vibe. The future of independent music is a place where drums and choruses are deeply out of fashion.

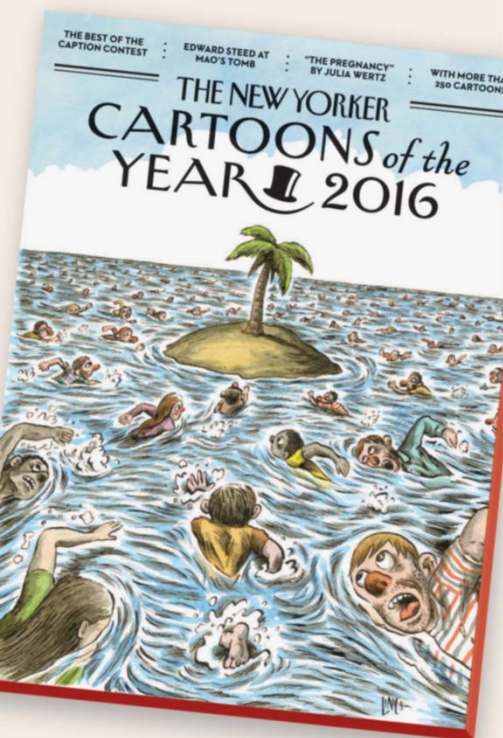
There’s a fine line between freedom and aimlessness, however; each day, hundreds of songs are released that toe that line. Some of them have come from Sampha, whose first two EPs felt like rough drafts, airy wisps of melody. On

ABOVE: BRIAN REA



Sampha, like Smokey Robinson, uses R. & B. as an expression of the personal and the cerebral rather than the sensual.

Humor—
it's a lifesaver.



Grab hold of two hundred and fifty of our best single-panel cartoons from 2016, as well as delightful features from Edward Steed, Julia Wertz, Liana Finck, and Roz Chast, to keep you afloat.

On newsstands now
or online at
newyorker.com/go/cartoons2016.

THE
NEW YORKER

"Process," he has edged away from that sensibility. When he set out to record the album, he begrudgingly yielded to convention, hiring musicians to join him during his recording sessions, which took place in legitimate studios. These sessions resulted in an album that leans on ambience but has backbone and songwriting heft. Sampha is at his best on "Under," a song heavy on hi-hats and bass drum, with a slinky chorus that channels Sade at her peak. Despite the title of his new album, these songs are inching away from process and toward finished product.

ATLANTA RAP IS crowded with youthful innovators and traditionalists alike, small-time insurgents and big-league legacies. Migos, a trio of twentysomethings from Lawrenceville, Georgia, have recently graduated to genuine big-league status by way of an insurgent No. 1 hit. That would be "Bad and Boujee," a calm snarl of a single with a pair of opening words—"raindrops, drop-top"—that seem nonsensical. But nonsense is catnip for the meme machine, which closed in on "Bad and Boujee" with glee. By late December, social-media feeds were filled with images captioned with variations on the opening line. (It turns out that nearly anything can rhyme with "raindrops, drop-top," including Hillary's laptop and "staaahp.") In recent years, the *Billboard* Hot 100 chart has broadened to include a greater number of sources, among them digital streams and social-media mentions. When "Bad and Boujee" topped the chart, in January, it usurped Rae Sremmurd's "Black Beatles"—which had claimed the top slot in part because it provided the soundtrack for another popular meme, the Mannequin Challenge. To the type of person for whom the curious and often inscrutable hits horse race is entertainment, this was tremendously fun to witness.

Not quite as much fun as listening to "Bad and Boujee," though. To characterize this track as one that successfully gamed the charts undermines the sly power of the song and the evolution that Migos have undergone since they made their initial splash, a few years ago. Early on, the trio—made up of Quavo, Offset, and Takeoff—found a signature style that enabled them to stand out among Atlanta's variety of aesthetics.

They rapped in a quick-fire triplet—three notes a beat—that was eventually christened the "Migos flow" and borrowed by imitators. They tempered their street-rap sensibilities with screwball lyrical flourishes in the vein of Gucci Mane, and they also turned repetition into its own art form, yelling the names of cultural symbols so many times in a row that familiar proper nouns began to take on new meaning: "Hannah Montana, Hannah Montana, Hannah Montana, Hannah Montana, Hannah Montana," goes one song named for Miley Cyrus's famous Nickelodeon character, a term that doubles as drug slang. "Versace, Versace, Versace, Versace, Versace," goes another. Was this talent or craftiness? Did the distinction really matter?

This flow, like a viral Internet phenomenon, can quickly wear thin. But, on their new album, "Culture," Migos have retreated from their pummeling trademark. Everything here slows to a self-assured ooze, lines drawn out and accented with irreverent takes on ad-libbed parentheticals. On "Call Casting," Offset raps, "All my bitches from an app—app! / Instagram and the Snap—Snap." (Quavo, the most charismatic and elastic of the trio, has long been hailed as Migos' breakout star, but "Culture" shines a light on all three.) Whereas "Yung Rich Nation," Migos' debut, from 2015, showed some first-album anxiety, on this record Migos are in control—calm, unhurried, slinking around the beat instead of manhandling it. No longer are they so fixated on narrating their own success—in fact, they seem a bit desensitized to the trappings of fame, reorienting themselves to the street and its familiar touchstones. The follow-up to "Bad and Boujee" is a single called "T Shirt," another piece of drug slang. On the hook, Quavo offers reassurance that Migos haven't wavered from their initial premise. "Seventeen-five, same color T-shirt," he says coolly, talking about buying a kilogram of cocaine. The song is full of esoteric references and off-kilter improvising. "Real mob ties—mob / Real frog eyes—frog / Real whole pies—whoa / All time high—high," he raps. It creeps along stealthily, Quavo singing behind a fog of reverb. There's something eerie and sphinxlike about it. In other words, it's a hit. ♦

COLD HEART

Katie Kitamura's war on affect.

BY ALEXANDRA SCHWARTZ



THE NARRATOR OF Katie Kitamura's third novel, "A Separation" (Riverhead), is a literary translator, a job that appeals to her because of its "potential for passivity." She could just as well have been a medium, she says. Now that she's in the exposed position of telling her own story rather than someone else's, she takes a certain refuge in reticence. She doesn't disclose her name. Even the book's title, with its meek indefinite article, broadcasts a reluctance to set much store by what she has to say; a more robust ego would surely have opted for the possessive punch of "My Separation." (Karl Ove Knausgaard is thanked in Kitamura's acknowledgments as an early reader.) The narrator's husband, Christopher, informs her that such

reserve comes off as arrogance. Doesn't she know that people think she's a snob? Apparently not: "Our marriage was formed by the things Christopher knew and the things I did not." She, meanwhile, insists that Christopher is as charming as they come, though "once you perceived the patches where it had worn through, it was hard to see the charm—hard to see the man himself, if you were in any way wary of charisma—entirely whole again." That's what he means by arrogance. She understands more than she likes to let on.

The novel opens in London, where husband and wife are living apart, after five years of a marriage marked by Christopher's serial infidelities. He's clever (Cambridge) and rich (family

money), a dilettantish author who has published one book, an amateur cultural study of music, and is procrastinating on another, about mourning rituals. The same impulse to delay extends to divorce. Over the phone, Christopher tells his wife that he doesn't feel like dealing with the legal proceedings just yet. Oddly, he makes her promise to keep their breakup a secret.

This demand, issued without explanation, establishes the novel's beguiling, murky atmosphere and sets its plot in motion. A month later, Christopher's mother, Isabella, calls to ask where her son is; his cell phone has been going straight to voice mail. The narrator is forced to admit that she doesn't know. On the "battleground" of family, imperious, imposing Isabella has long been a "formidable adversary, someone I had reason to fear," and here she launches a subtle strike. Christopher, Isabella says, told her that he and his wife were going to Greece for his research. She calls back to say that she's found his hotel, in the Mani Peninsula, and, while she hasn't spoken to him, she can sense that all is not well. She's already arranged for her daughter-in-law to fly down the next day.

The narrator agrees to go. The trip will push her to formalize the separation, though this part of the mission must remain covert: "If Isabella knew that she had purchased a plane ticket in order for me to ask her son for a divorce, I suppose she would have killed me, actually slain me then and there. Such a thing was not impossible." Listen to how this bit of hyperbole contrasts with the tone that coats it, lacquered to a smooth, hard sheen. Beneath the crust of this rigorously poised persona, Kitamura seems to be saying, emotional magma bubbles hot.

Such a temperament would serve our narrator well in a thriller, and when she gets to Greece it starts to look as if she might be in one. The hotel, grand and luxurious, is weirdly empty of guests. Christopher isn't there, the concierge reports—he's gone travelling for a few days, and has left his belongings in suspicious disarray. Then there are portents, enough of them to fill a tarot deck: a pack of stray dogs, an abandoned church, a fresco of saints with the faces rubbed off, a young married couple romping ostentatiously on a

Novels like "A Separation" pose a question: How much self should a woman have?

backlit balcony, a professional funeral weeper who treats the narrator to a private performance of exquisitely manufactured grief. The hills are literally burning with fires set by vengeful locals locked in vendettas. The narrator can't go for a swim in the ocean without being followed to the shore and warned that she might drown.

KITAMURA IS A writer with a visionary, visual imagination—she's an art critic, too—and a bold symbolist streak. The mood she likes best is menace. Her debut, "The Longshot" (2009), dealt with men's mixed martial arts, a world that appealed to her, she has said, for being inherently dramatic without needing much narrative padding. She wanted the book to be "as simple and as reduced as possible," like a fight. (Its subject matter and clipped sentences led the novelist Tom McCarthy to call her a female Hemingway; in fact, she was reading a lot of James Ellroy at the time.) "Gone to the Forest," Kitamura's second novel, is also artfully reduced, but differently. Set in an invented colonial country on the verge of native rebellion, it's explicitly allegorical, a fable of societal upheaval lighted with flashes of gorgeous, lurid imagery, like something out of Henri Rousseau. That novel drew comparisons to the work of J. M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer (by Salman Rushdie, no less), but its moral coding is blunter. It ends in a cascade of violence as rebels ransack white villages, slicing the dead open and leaving them to rot with their genitalia stuffed in their mouths. A way of life has been destroyed in one fell swoop. You are not sorry to see it go.

Psychology wasn't a big concern for Kitamura in "Gone to the Forest." The savage, dominant settler; his feeble, submissive son; the brutalized woman determined to survive in a harsh man's world—these are stock types, and the point is to watch, with queasy fascination, how Kitamura arranges for the tide of history to wash them all away. She does keep a close third person trained on the settler's simple son, but the proximity works by opening up an ironic gap between his occluded perspective and the reader's open, roving one.

In "A Separation," Kitamura has made consciousness her territory. The book is all mind, and an observant,

taut, astringent mind it is, though there is something almost unhinged about so much rationality in the face of such duress. Under the bizarre circumstances at the hotel, the narrator appears almost pathologically sane. "The progress of a relationship, for good or bad, can always be described through the accumulation or the disbanding of rights," she thinks, sounding less like a jilted wife than like a contract lawyer. For comfort, she tells herself that, at her age, "romantic passions have grown weak, and the heart obeys reason." (She seems to be in her thirties.) In fact, she's started a new relationship, with Yvan, a journalist who happens to be a college acquaintance of Christopher's. From their phone conversations, it's clear that he adores her. She likes him, too, but she doesn't want to lose her head. Love has a way of being disappointed, and that "led to the worst sensations—jealousy, rage, self-loathing—to all these lesser states."

As is so often the case in adultery-themed novels, there is a strong echo here of "Anna Karenina," but, unusually, it is Alexei Karenin, not Anna, whom our narrator resembles. "I look upon jealousy as an insulting and humiliating feeling, and I would never allow myself to be guided by it," Karenin tells his wife, when he has just begun to suspect her of betrayal. That Karenin would approach love and marriage like the statesman he is, suppressing painful emotion as a point of policy, is a tragic joke, one that scans as typically male. Tolstoy proves him wrong. Karenin does come to be guided by jealousy; he grows bloated and rigid with it, confusing his personal distress with moral rectitude. It makes him cruel. It is Anna whose florid, overheated jealousy, fed on fantasies of Vronsky's infidelity, dooms her to the womanish "lesser states" that Kitamura's narrator so dreads.

The equation of emotionality with female weakness pervades Kitamura's novel. It is the narrator's obsession, a fate to avoid above all else. Hence the introduction of her foil, Maria, a young clerk at the hotel whom she correctly suspects of having had an affair with Christopher during his stay. Maria is voluble, shamelessly melodramatic, the heroine of her own private opera. She enjoys making a scene. On the narrator's third day at the

hotel, the concierge calls up to her room to tell her that Christopher has been spotted in a nearby town, with a woman. (In this novel of chronic avoidance, the phone is the preferred medium of communication.) Maria is crying about it, the concierge says.

Provocation though it is, Maria's weeping is sincere. She genuinely cares for Christopher. The narrator tries to size her up as he might have:

As I continued observing her, I could see that although she was not pretty—her features were too heavy to be described in such conventional terms, they were very expressive, which was generally not considered appealing in a woman's face (hence the mania for treatments like Botox, for face creams that promised to freeze the features into youthful immobility; it was more than the mere pursuit of youth, it arose out of a universal aversion to a woman's propensity to be expressive, to be *too much*)—she was alluring, undoubtedly so.

The pimpish assessment goes on—Maria, her "physical opposite," has the kind of "practical" body men like; Maria has a "carnal" walk—until the narrator, priding herself on her "dispassionate eye," imagines the seduction itself. Later, she treats Maria to a dinner at which she silently eats salad and pasta while the younger woman gorges on lobster and steak and gushes at length about Christopher. The narrator admires her stridency and pities her naïveté. Maria, she thinks, doesn't see that she's fallen for a cad.

Absence is the novel's great motif, the subject of its ruminative investigation. The word is used so often that it becomes a kind of totem. On page after page, we hear that Christopher was all surface, no substance, a vain, vanished man. "As always I returned to the absence that was at the heart of my experience of him," the narrator tells us, long after we need reminding, and yet there he is, haunting her still. How, Kitamura is asking, can a person be bound to someone who isn't really there, and how can she ever truly get free?

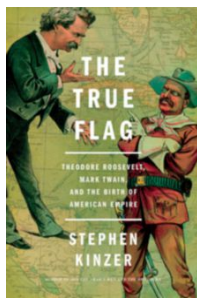
These are stirring questions, pointing toward a deep, buried sorrow and regret, and yet the novel itself seems as repulsed by such emotions as its narrator is. If the *too much* woman is a cliché of femininity, so is the affectless, Botoxed one, and that is what its narrator increasingly comes to resemble: a woman who seals herself into a posture of bleak, chic passivity to avoid the risk of pain,

of humiliation, of disappointment until she, too, begins to seem more pose than person. At a certain point, it becomes clear that Christopher is gone for good; there will be no confrontation between husband and wife, and here the narrative tension begins to eddy in pools of circular thought. She is resolute even in her private restraint. “I did not believe my grief had any claims to make of its own,” she says. It’s a kind of false modesty of the soul. Her grief does have claims—if only she would make them.

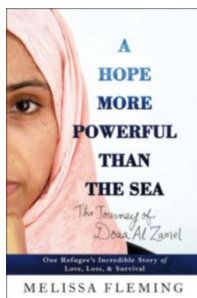
Passive female narrators have figured in a number of recent novels written by women; Zadie Smith’s “Swing Time” and Rachel Cusk’s “Outline” come immediately to mind. So do the novels of Renata Adler, first published in the seventies and eighties but reissued, to much literary fanfare, in 2013. In different ways, and to different purposes, these books, like Kitamura’s, give rise to the same question: How much self should a woman have? The best formulation of it that I know is a story by Lydia Davis, one paragraph long, called “New Year’s Resolution.” The speaker, beginning her year in a Zen mood, has resolved “to learn to see myself as nothing.” But, she wonders, isn’t this humility really an act of arrogance, since it is, after all, aspirational? Besides, “how does a person learn to see herself as nothing when she has already had so much trouble learning to see herself as something in the first place?”

This quandary applies to fiction, too. The whole mysterious game is to take the word and make it, briefly, flesh. A character has to appear if her disappearance is going to matter. “You have been a negative nothing, now you want to be a positive nothing,” the speaker in Davis’s story says. That effect, the positive nothing, is what Kitamura is going for, and sometimes she succeeds. My favorite character in the book is Yvan, who never appears in person. Like a woman in a Dorothy Parker story, he waits by the phone for his lover’s call; but it doesn’t drive him nuts or make him pathetic. He gently suggests that his girlfriend do something: forget Christopher, return to London, live. “I felt, rather than heard, the explosion of Yvan’s happiness,” the narrator says, when she tells him she may finally be coming home. I found his quiet, happy hope touching. It will probably get crushed, but good on him for taking the chance. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED



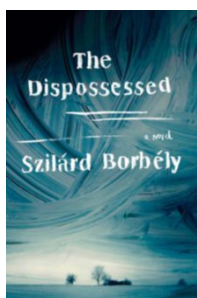
The True Flag, by Stephen Kinzer (Henry Holt). In just four years at the turn of the twentieth century, the United States invaded and established de-facto control over Cuba, Guam, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines. “Never in history has a nation leaped so suddenly to overseas empire,” Kinzer writes in a well-researched account, which also gestures toward subsequent U.S. interventions. The most vocal expansionist was Theodore Roosevelt, for whom hegemony was an end in itself. He was opposed by the Anti-Imperialist League and Mark Twain, who saw in his imperial designs a betrayal of America’s founding principles. “It was impossible to save the Great Republic,” Twain lamented. “Lust of conquest had long ago done its work.”



A Hope More Powerful Than the Sea, by Melissa Fleming (Flatiron). Written by an official in the U.N.’s refugee agency, this deeply affecting book recounts the story of a young Syrian, Doaa al Zamel. In 2011, as a shy, stubborn fifteen-year-old, she demonstrated against the regime; after fleeing to Egypt, she stitched bags in a burlap factory, hoping to get to Europe. In September, 2014, she was pulled from the Mediterranean, parched and delirious, with two small children clasped to her chest. She’d been afloat for four days, after a boat smuggling her to Europe sank, killing five hundred other passengers, including her fiancé. Fleming brings a moral urgency to the narrative. Doaa is now safe in Sweden, but Fleming pointedly asks, “Why is there no massive resettlement program for Syrians—the victims of the worst war of our times?”



The Midnight Cool, by Lydia Peelle (Harper). Peelle’s funeral debut novel, set in Tennessee as America prepares to enter the First World War, is a drama about the speciousness of the American dream and the costs of self-invention. When a pair of horse-trading grifters make a bad deal on a beautiful but savage mare, despite cryptic warnings from the seller’s captivating daughter, Catherine, they find themselves stranded in a small town gripped by patriotic fervor. While one recovers from injury, the other takes advantage of the wartime demand for mules, hoping to earn enough to become Catherine’s suitor. The novel relies too heavily on dramatic irony, but it resists trite resolution. We may write our own stories, it suggests, but we can’t predict our endings.



The Dispossessed, by Szilárd Borbély, translated from the Hungarian by Otilie Mulzet (Harper Perennial). This novel, by a celebrated Hungarian poet who committed suicide in 2014, at the age of fifty, depicts the world of his childhood: a poor, remote village near the Romanian border, where inflexible Communist diktats meet the ancient brutalities of peasant life. Nothing much happens, but daily chatter contains echoes of the past: forced assimilation of Romanians, the Holocaust. The narrator, a young boy whose family is shunned—it was once wealthy and is suspected of being Jewish—endures beatings, hunger, and taunts with the fatalism of someone who has never known anything else.

FRESH PAINT

The nineteen-eighties revisited.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

*Chilled suggestiveness: David Salle's "Sextant in Dogtown" (1987).*

STARTING IN THE late nineteen-seventies, young American artists plunged, pell-mell, into making figurative paintings. That seemed ridiculously backward by the lights of the time's reigning vanguards of flinty post-minimalism, cagey conceptualism, and chaste abstraction. The affront was part of the appeal. As with contemporaneous punk music, sheer nerve rocketed impudent twentysomethings to stardom on New York's downtown scene. The powerful excitement of that moment has been languishing in a blind spot of recent art history, but "Fast Forward: Painting from the 1980s," at the Whitney, a show of works by thirty-seven artists from the museum's collection, comes to the rescue. Some of the names are famous: Julian Schnabel, David Salle, Eric Fischl, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring. Others, less widely renowned, are solidly established: Susan Rothenberg, Elizabeth Murray, Terry Winters, Carroll Dunham. But even the relatively ob-

scure—including such sleeper heroes as Leon Golub, Robert Colescott, Mary Heilmann, and Moira Dryer—enhance the show's sense of timely revaluing. What the moment meant, what happened to eclipse it, and how its legacy might nourish the present are questions sharply posed.

Partly, there's the tonic shock of encountering again, in person, works that are traduced by reproduction, which muffles their keynotes of material, touch, and scale. I am no great fan of Schnabel, the era's bombast-in-chief, born in Brooklyn and raised in Brownsville, Texas. But his "Hope" (1982), in oils on midnight-blue velvet, more than nine feet tall and thirteen feet wide, gave me reminiscent joy. He was the ice-breaking heavyweight of neo-expressionism in New York. Sketchy images of two figures, a skull, and what might be plants are incidental to the novelty of a medium associated with kitsch. The resistance and the give of velvet to an energetic brush, causing

clumps and yielding skids of paint, suggest the bliss of a musician exploring the virtues of a new instrument. Schnabel saved the picture from a risk of overall sludge with eruptions of reds, oranges, and neon-bright greens. The possibilities for expression that he introduced in the process didn't develop much in his later work. Schnabel's only real subject—apart from his fine work as a movie director—has been his own willfulness. Back then, though, he was an inescapable force for change.

Salle, an Oklahoman schooled at the avant-gardist hotbed of CalArts, in Valencia, California, likewise hit on a sensationally innovative aesthetic, whose promise also stalled, in arbitrary permutations. A large painting of his in the show, "Sextant in Dogtown" (1987), belongs to a late phase of his best work, which usually involves borrowed images rendered in secondhand techniques of schematic design and opaque-projector-aided copying. Here, three abutted panels present grisaille images, clearly from photographs, of a woman awkwardly posing in a bra, with and without panties. (Offensive? Sure, and plainly on purpose, but smoothly at one with Salle's attitude toward all his subjects.) A small inset panel pictures a dead bird. Above them, in acrid colors, are images of antique clown dolls and a cartoon of a top-hatted seafarer wielding a sextant. I was an enthusiast, early on, of Salle's chilled suggestiveness of feelings imperfectly remembered and experiences vainly anticipated—his "icy melancholy," as Janet Malcolm called it in this magazine. It seemed to me a distillation of the poetic powers that are essential to painting. It still does, but with less of the emotional jolt that distinguished his début.

Fischl, from Long Island, by way of Arizona, and a CalArts classmate of Salle's, is a painterly storyteller, whose initial tales stung as dramatizations of psychological and social disarray. His bravura paint-handling has the simultaneously agonized and exhilarated tenor of someone spilling secrets long suffered in silence. His painting in the show—"A Visit To/A Visit From/The Island" (1983)—is unusually political, for him, but consistent in spirit. A diptych, it pairs a scene of an anxious, androgynous teen-ager in a long T-shirt

amid callously naked grownups, at what may be a luxurious beach resort, with a nightmarish vision, likely derived from photographs of Haitian refugees, of a storm-lashed shore, where people struggle, lament, and lie drowned. Poisoned privilege meets appalled conscience. A slow, small disaster, to a young soul, and a rapid, very large one, to human existence, are related in a manner that demands and defeats resolution. “Irony” is too weak a word for it. Like many a meteoric fiction writer, Fischl used up his strongest stories early on, even as he became a more skillful painter. But he was always strikingly, even helplessly, sincere.

In a coup of installation, the Fischl confronts, across a room, “White Squad I” (1982), by Leon Golub, a terrific painter whose long career—he died at eighty-two, in 2004—earned him scant reward, owing to his insistent political content. On a vast, unstretched canvas, against a solid ground of Pompeian red, three louche soldiers from a Latin American death squad joke around, over two corpses. The picture’s scalding effect owes partly to its violent technique, with the paint scraped down to the canvas, but chiefly to a felt identification with the murderers’ grotesque jollity. Golub wanted to imagine for himself, and to make us acknowledge, the personhood of tyranny’s agents. His stubborn integrity made him an artist’s artist of special standing, revered by younger painters whose more ingratiating work has made them more successful than he was. Similarly unyielding was Nancy Spero, Golub’s wife, whose fiercely feminist graphic art, which features ancient-seeming archetypes of female suffering and rebellion, is represented in the show by one of sixteen small works grouped salon style on a wall.

Salutes to the rough glories of the period’s downtown scene begin with wallpaper, by Keith Haring, printed with linear webs made in his sprightly style. Mounted on that are a cartoony phantasmagoria by Kenny Scharf and a vigorously scribbled composition by Basquiat, who seems overqualified, in both originality and formal mastery, for the juxtaposition. (Basquiat mightily influenced the scene early on with his graffiti art, tagged “Samo,” but his

talent quickly elevated him to global esteem.) A canvas, by Martin Wong, of a rusted security gate on a boarded-up storefront memorializes fear and squalor on the eve of gentrification. Julia Wachtel provides a lively lampoon of Salle: a diptych of two African tribal sculptures teamed with a nebbishy creature, likely copied from a joke greeting card, who sheds a tear while hoisting an immense daisy.

A beautiful abstraction by Ross Bleckner, of wandering blurred lights aglow in a wax-infused black ground, elegizes the decade’s overwhelming catastrophe of AIDS, which decimated the city’s cultural circles. Strong works by Susan Rothenberg and Terry Winters—schematic horse shapes in her case, botanical ones in his—evinced the careful evolution of painters who entered the eighties with loyalty to the rigor of the New York abstract artists of the fifties. Robert Colescott’s “The Three Graces: Art, Sex and Death” (1981) friskily symbolizes the love life of the artist, who had as much as anticipated the new figuration. A lyrical rendering of a fingerprint, by Moira Dryer; a blue-and-white abstraction that’s as fresh as a sea breeze, by Mary Heilmann; and a stencilled word painting, by Christopher Wool, epitomize the dénouement of the period.

Collectors, famished by the low-calorie fare of the seventies’ avant-garde, adored the sensuous, cheeky, and grand efflorescence in the painting of the eighties. But, by the end of the decade, a boom market in the work flagged, and commercial fashion swung from hot pictures to cool objects—by, for the prime example, Jeff Koons. The next generation of leading artists took up themes of multiculturalism and identity politics, with audience-oriented sculptural and photographic installations. What was abandoned is the forte of painting as the medium of creative solitude: the individual artist engaging the individual viewer with stroke-by-stroke intimacy and nuanced eloquence. It’s harder now than it was then to stand out from the crowds that are marshalled by our politics and shepherded by much of our culture. But the will to do so always scans for chances to break out. This show preserves hints of what such moments can be like. ♦

LIMITED-EDITION T-SHIRTS

Take a page out of Eustace Tilley’s stylebook with exclusive shirts featuring our signature typeface.



Shop now at modthread.com
Multiple styles available.

THE
NEW YORKER

ON TELEVISION

I LOVE LUCIFER

"The Good Place" reinvents itself.

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM



I WAS DROPPED INTO a cave, and you were my flashlight,” Eleanor Shellstrop, a bad person, says to Chidi Anagonye, her tutor in morality.

This Platonic declaration of love shows up in the finale of the sitcom “The Good Place,” but it winds up illuminating everything around it. The NBC comedy, which was created by Michael Schur, debuted in September, then went on hiatus just before the election, returning in January—when it ran a mere four more episodes, thirteen total, a rarity for network television. The finale aired the night before Trump’s Inauguration. Many fans, including me, were looking forward to a bit of escapist counterprogramming, something frothy and full of silly puns, in line with the first nine episodes. In-

stead, what we got was the rare season finale that could legitimately be described as a game-changer, vaulting the show from a daffy screwball comedy to something darker, much stranger, and uncomfortably appropriate for our apocalyptic era. Take that, “Westworld.”

The first show that Schur created, “Parks and Recreation,” also on NBC, had its own first-season game-changer: it pivoted from mocking the small-town liberal bureaucrat Leslie Knope (Amy Poehler) to embracing her as a utopian idealist. Pawnee, Indiana, where Knope helped run the Parks Department, was a depressed, dysfunctional city just south of the Rust Belt. The press was toxic, the representatives corrupt. But Knope and her team kept trying to fix it anyway, because

they shared some basic values: honesty, hard work, and a sweet faith in community. In the show’s finale, in 2015, Knope—whose tribulations eerily presaged those of Hillary Clinton, down to a hacking scandal—was headed to the White House, her steely sunshine having warmed her friends’ lives, from her libertarian boss to her cynical millennial intern. It was a valentine to the squeaky wheel.

That was then; this is now. “The Good Place” introduced itself as very much a follow-up to “Parks and Recreation,” only more surreal and high-concept. The first episode is about a selfish American jerk, Eleanor (the elfin charmer Kristen Bell), who dies and goes to Heaven, owing to a bureaucratic error. There she is given a soul mate, Chidi (William Jackson Harper), a Senegal-raised moral philosopher. When Chidi discovers that Eleanor is an interloper, he makes an ethical leap, agreeing to help her become a better person, tutoring her with T.M. Scanlon’s “What We Owe to Each Other.” These secret lessons pay off, and the show evolves into a charming, if chaotic, romantic farce, in which Eleanor and Chidi—plus another stealth bad person, a wannabe d.j. from Florida named Jason Mendoza, and his own wrong soul mate, Tahani, a celeb-butante-philanthropist—slam doors and trade partners, all the while exploring questions of what goodness really means.

“The Good Place” kept complicating the physics of its absurdist premise: there was a “Bad Place,” too, full of partying devils, a wonky artificial intelligence named Janet, and endless jokes tweaking the heavenly cul-de-sac’s progressive-conformist, frozen-yogurt-heavy vision of the good life. (“Fuck” is censored to “fork”; arson lowers your virtue rating, but so does paying to see the Red Hot Chili Peppers.) Overseeing it all was Michael, an adorably flustered angel-architect played by Ted Danson; like Leslie Knope, he was a small-town bureaucrat who adored humanity and was desperate to make his flawed community perfect. “You know the way you feel when you see a picture of two otters holding hands? That’s how you’re going to feel every day,” he promises the newly dead during orientation.

After watching nine episodes, I wrote a first draft of this column based on the notion that the show, with its air of flex-

The show, like “Parks and Recreation” before it, reflects its political era.

ible optimism, its undercurrent of uplift, was a nifty dialectical exploration of the nature of decency, a comedy that combined fart jokes with moral depth. Then I watched the finale. After the credits rolled, I had to have a drink. While I don't like to read the minds of showrunners—or, rather, I love to, but it's presumptuous—I suspect that Schur is in a very bad mood these days. If “Parks” was a liberal fantasia, “The Good Place” is a dystopian mindfork: it's a comedy about the quest to be moral even when the truth gets bent, bullies thrive, and sadism triumphs.

So, spoilers. In the final episode, we learn that it was no bureaucratic mistake that sent Eleanor to Heaven. In fact, she's not in Heaven at all. She's in *Hell*—which is something that Eleanor realizes, in a flash of insight, as the characters bicker, having been forced as a group to choose two of them to be banished to the Bad Place. Michael is no angel, either. He's a low-ranking devil, a corporate Hell architect out on his first big assignment, overseeing a prankish experimental torture cul-de-sac. The malicious chuckle that Danson unfurls when Eleanor figures it out is both terrifying and hilarious, like a clap of thunder on a sunny day. “Oh, God!” he growls, dropping the mask. “You ruin everything, you know that?”

Michael's goal is to get his charges to torture one another so that he can watch, mainly for kicks—he's a reality-TV producer, essentially. That's why the soul mates are mismatched; that's why the vain, needy Tahani is there in the first place. (Possibly, that's why there's so much frozen yogurt.) As in “The Truman Show,” every resident other than the central quartet has been playacting. These characters are not locked in a good system gone wrong. They're locked in an evil system gone accidentally right.

Worse, now that his experiment has crashed, Michael plans to erase the ensemble's memories and reboot. The second season—presuming the show is renewed (my mouth to God's ear)—will start the same scheme from scratch. Michael will make his afterlife Sims suffer, no matter how many rounds it takes.

SCHUR HAS TOLD reporters that he based “The Good Place” in part on “Lost,” and, early on, it was easy to imagine that he simply meant “sprinkled with amusing flashbacks that deepen the character-

izations.” Instead, he had a bigger puzzle-box narrative in mind, one that plays on the viewer's delusions as well as those of the characters. Everyone loves an ensemble full of potential soul mates; a lot of the appeal of “Parks and Recreation” was watching lovers pair up, two by two. It was easy to luxuriate in the gentrified fantasy of the Good Place itself, a kind of gated community for the virtuous. There was something warped about the details—would Heaven really be so mall-like, so blandly Whole Foods?—but it was easy to shrug off the discomfort as the growing pains of a new sitcom. This lent a double whammy to the reveal, since it forced us to grieve for our own naïveté. We were suckers, too.

When the switch flipped, the premise deepened. Most notably, it became clear that Eleanor was the show's perverse hero—it was her inability to fake politeness, her crude candor, that enabled her to hack Hell. By confessing her flaws, and begging Chidi to help her change, she undermined Michael's plan. On earth, Eleanor might have been a selfish loner, but in Hell she was an existential rebel, the woman who found a way to get kinder in a system designed to make her mean.

The standout performance of the show is that of William Jackson Harper, as Chidi, a perpetually vexed scholar who, it turns out, hurt the people who loved him, because he was too indecisive to follow through on anything. But in Hell he, too, makes a choice. Behind his thick glasses, Harper has a perfect slow burn, playing the bespectacled Cary Grant to Bell's bratty Katharine Hepburn. He makes her better; she makes him freer. Even after we learn that they're both marked for the Bad Place, it's impossible to believe they deserve it.

When Eleanor tells Chidi that he's her flashlight, it's genuinely romantic—a love inseparable from goodness itself. And, in a clever turn, their relationship is the one scrap that's left when the season ends. Just before Eleanor's mind gets erased, she hides a note, in an attempt to retain some shred of her memory, as if she weren't in a sitcom at all but in a dark, twisty film like “Memento.” When she wakes up—with a new soul mate—she discovers the note and reads it out loud: “Find Chidi.” It's a flashlight that she's handed herself, a promise to us that, even deep inside a dystopia, you can find a love story. ♦

Face your addiction from a place of strength.
 McLean Signature Recovery Programs
 Fernside, Princeton, MA
 Borden Cottage, Camden, ME **NEW**
 800.906.9531 | signaturerecovery.org



McLean HOSPITAL
 HARVARD MEDICAL SCHOOL AFFILIATE


Canoe Canada's Arctic

Fly-in canoe trips on the remote tundra rivers of North America's last great wilderness. Herds of caribou, muskoxen, white wolves, moose and grizzlies. Wildlife biologist guide. Operating since 1974.

CANOE ARCTIC INC.
 Box 130, Fort Smith, NT X0E 0P0, Canada (867) 872-2308
www.canoearctic.com



THE CASHMERE WATCHCAP
 4 layers of 6ply cashmere at your ears.
 Warm and Soft like nothing else.
 SCARVES, HATS, SOCKS, MITTENS, ETC.
 HAND-BUILT
 26 COLORS, USA. **575.776.8287**
 109 East Palace Ave, Santa Fe, NM
www.golightlycashmere.com



ADVERTISEMENT



IT'S RAINING CATS AND DOGS

Even the most torrential downpour hasn't got a chance against George Booth's irascible cats and dogs. A beautifully made, collapsible umbrella, featuring a steel-reinforced blackshaft, fibreglass-reinforced ribs, and a 43" canopy.

\$49.95

To order please visit
newyorkerstore.com

SHINY THINGS

"Gold" and "Dark Night."

BY ANTHONY LANE

THE KINSHIP BETWEEN cinema and gold is a long and lustrous one. Both are bedded deep in the history of California. Both give rise to tales of near-insanity, of alliances formed and broken, and of schemes to get rich quick that last, unfulfilled, for years. The inability to tell the real thing—a nugget or a hit—from the fool's variety is per-

petual, and the thought of a lucky strike feeds every other craving, as if the quest were more important than the find. Hence the opening shots of "The Gold Rush" (1925), with an endless line of hopefuls trudging up a snowy pass, or the well-chewed wisdom of Walter Huston in "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre" (1948), overheard by Bogart in a Tampico flophouse. "An ounce of gold, Mister, is worth what it is because of the human labor that went into the findin' and the gettin' of it," the old man says. "No other explanation, Mister. Gold itself ain't good for nothin', except making jewelry with and gold teeth." The speech is all the better for being rattled off at speed, and the upshot for Huston was an Oscar

for Best Supporting Actor. What else would the industry bestow as a prize but a figure covered in gold? And so to "Gold," a new and plainly titled movie, not to be confused with "Gold" (1974), which centered on a South African mine and required Roger Moore, for the first and only time in his career, to dig deep. The star of the latest "Gold"

erals saga, gets going in 1988. Kenny is pretty much wrung dry, and so is Washoe, the mining company based in Reno, Nevada, that he inherited from his father (Craig T. Nelson). The corporate office is a bar, and Kenny is laughed away when he applies to a bank for funding. The only person who believes in him is Kay (Bryce Dallas Howard), his girlfriend, although love doesn't stop him from pawning her gold watch. In a last toss of the dice, he flies to Indonesia to meet with a handsome geologist, Michael Acosta (Edgar Ramírez), who claims that gold lurks beneath the jungle. The two guys travel upriver, build a camp, have samples drilled, and discover an eighth of an ounce of gold in every ton of rock. Bingo! That doesn't sound like much to me, more like finding a joke in a Theodore Dreiser novel, but apparently it's wonderful news.

The rest of "Gold" obeys a wave pattern, as the hero's fortunes soar and dip, only to rise again. Investors flock to Washoe, which is listed on the New York Stock Exchange; Kenny welcomes Kay to a suite at the Waldorf bedecked with yellow roses; he rebuffs an offer of three hundred million dollars for a controlling stake, because he doesn't want to see his name removed from the letterhead; and, the next thing you know, he is lying drunk beneath a pay phone outside a cheap motel. Still to come is a deal with President Suharto, of Indonesia, and his playboy son, plus a fur-patting encounter with a tiger, not to mention Kenny's acceptance of the Golden Pickaxe from the Gold Prospectors Association of America, before a late twist—familiar to anybody who followed the real Bre-X scandal—yanks the rug from under our feet. But what sort of rug, to be honest, was there in the first place? No one could accuse Stephen Gaghan, who directed the movie, or Patrick Massett and John Zinman, who wrote it, of skimping on plot, but so sketchy and so rushed is the flux of incidents—including a sudden flash-forward, halfway through, to an F.B.I. interrogation—that you feel weirdly uninvolved, and ever more unsurprised by the lurches of fate.

None of this is the fault of McConaughey, who plunges into the fray. Sensing the power shortage in the surrounding



Matthew McConaughey plays a driven prospector in Stephen Gaghan's movie.

is Matthew McConaughey, who has already blessed our screens with "Sahara" (2005) and "Fool's Gold" (2008), both of which found him hunting for long-lost booty. How to account for his attraction to precious metals? I always reckoned that nothing else could match his refulgent tan, although my theory slumps at the sight of Kenny Wells, McConaughey's character in "Gold," who is pale and sweaty, with a paunch the size of a medicine ball and a hairline that has long since sounded the retreat. At one point, he wears only an Iron Maiden T-shirt and a pair of damp and saggy underpants. Kenny is not bronzed and godlike. He's a wreck.

After a brief prelude, the story, which is loosely founded on the Bre-X Min-

drama, he compensates by cranking up his performance—extending those long seductive vowels and adding plenty of generous hand signals, as if Kenny had moved into mining after a spell as a traffic cop. Yet I still prefer the single scene in “The Wolf of Wall Street” where McConaughey, playing a banker, drums a fist on his chest in a restaurant and chants the mantras of wealth creation: a silverback in a suit. That memory of him is impossible to erase, whereas Kenny, for all his gusto, and despite the accuracy of his diagnosis (“When everybody’s getting rich, nobody gives a fuck about the truth”), somehow recedes as the movie draws to a close. Gaghan dilutes where Scorsese compressed and distilled.

And what of Ramírez? He was so coolly determined as Carlos the Jackal, in the 2010 bio-pic about the terrorist, that it’s alarming to see how muted an impact he makes here, not least because the fellow he plays, Acosta, holds more in store than Kenny does. To be fair, though, it’s Ramírez who dares to drop a hint about the bond between the two adventurers. Watch Acosta cradling his sick partner, who has struggled through a bout of malaria, or taking a moment too long to fix Kenny’s bow tie before a formal dinner. There’s a fondness here that reaches beyond the professional, and you wait for Gaghan to nudge it a touch further. No chance.

By far the most timid performer in “Gold” is gold. We barely get a glimpse of the damned stuff. Local people pan for it on the banks of the Indonesian river, but there’s nothing to match the wickedly gilded corpse that confronts Sean Connery in “Goldfinger” (1964),

or the paradisiacal episode, in Nicolas Roeg’s “Eureka” (1983)—an extraordinary movie, now half-forgotten—when Gene Hackman, as a lone prospector, tumbles into a cave and comes up glittering, encrusted with all that he desires. What interests Gaghan, by contrast, is the mere idea of gold: the madness that infects both markets and men whenever the auric stink is in the air. The film that results is at once panicky and abstruse, and we are left with little more than the delirious shine of McConaughey’s eyes and the preacherly rapture in his voice. Listen to him, embarking on his mission to the jungle. “I had a dream,” he declares. “I felt I was being called.” Amen.

YOU WILL NOT get the most out of “Dark Night” unless you grasp the gloomy pun behind the title, and the story behind the pun. In July, 2012, in Aurora, Colorado, James Holmes entered a movie theatre that was showing “The Dark Knight Rises” and opened fire. Twelve people were killed and seventy wounded. That event is the source for this new film, directed by Tim Sutton, which follows several characters—including a green-eyed gunman (Robert Jumper)—over a single day, in Florida, and ends as they converge on a mall, where something called “Dark Night” is being screened. One of the last things we see is the gunman, approaching with a large bag and a purposeful smile, and slipping through a security door to begin his terrible task. Most of the folk we have spent time with, we now realize, will die at his hands.

The cinematographer is Héléne Louvart, who filmed Wim Wenders’s

“Pina” (2011), and what she brings forth, in unerring style, is a suburban land in a trance. The first time we meet the killer, he is walking his dog, their progress tracked by a patient traveling shot. Clouds fill our vision, with lonely street lamps jutting in at the foot of the frame; they give off a faint buzz, in rivalry with the natural chirr of insects. Kids fill the blankness of the hours with vaping, video games, swimming, and skateboarding. A young slacker (Aaron Purvis) is interviewed with his mother. Asked if he has a best friend, he replies, “Yeah, over the Internet, but that’s about it.” Older women talk about breast and brain surgery. At a veterans’ meeting, one man admits that “I don’t like being around other people.” As Sutton doubtless intends, we start to wonder if we are watching a documentary.

Anyone who knows the films of Larry Clark, or Gus Van Sant’s “Elephant” (2003), about the slaughter at Columbine High School, will recognize the numb, narcotic mood that drifts across “Dark Night.” As one character says, “Humans are not real. They think they’re real, and it’s just, you know, just a bunch of bullshit.” Maybe so, but there are serious risks in the movie’s approach. Under its compelling influence, we are lured into feeling that these various lives, marked by vacuity and frustration, are in some way destined to end at the point of a gun—that the murderer and his victims co-exist on a continuum of despair. Try telling that to the people of Aurora. ♦

NEWYORKER.COM

Richard Brody blogs about movies.

THE NEW YORKER IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF ADVANCE MAGAZINE PUBLISHERS INC. COPYRIGHT ©2017 CONDÉ NAST. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

VOLUME XCII, NO. 48, February 6, 2017. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for five combined issues: February 13 & 20, June 5 & 12, July 10 & 17, August 7 & 14, and December 18 & 25) by Condé Nast, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Elizabeth Hughes, publisher, chief revenue officer; Risa Aronson, associate publisher advertising; James Guilfoyle, director of finance and business operations; Fabio Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast: S. I. Newhouse, Jr., chairman emeritus; Robert A. Sauerberg, Jr., president & chief executive officer; David E. Geithner, chief financial officer; James M. Norton, chief business officer, president of revenue. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO THE NEW YORKER, P.O. Box 37684, Boone, IA 50037 0684. FOR SUBSCRIPTIONS, ADDRESS CHANGES, ADJUSTMENTS, OR BACK ISSUE INQUIRIES: Please write to The New Yorker, P.O. Box 37684, Boone, IA 50037 0684, call (800) 825-2510, or e-mail subscriptions@newyorker.com. Please give both new and old addresses as printed on most recent label. Subscribers: If the Post Office alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within one year. If during your subscription term or up to one year after the magazine becomes undeliverable, you are ever dissatisfied with your subscription, let us know. You will receive a full refund on all unmailed issues. First copy of new subscription will be mailed within four weeks after receipt of order. For advertising inquiries, please call Risa Aronson at (212) 286-4068. For submission guidelines, please refer to our Web site, www.newyorker.com. Address all editorial, business, and production correspondence to The New Yorker, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. For cover reprints, please call (800) 897-8666, or e-mail covers@cartoonbank.com. For permissions and reprint requests, please call (212) 630-5656 or fax requests to (212) 630-5883. No part of this periodical may be reproduced without the consent of The New Yorker. The New Yorker’s name and logo, and the various titles and headings herein, are trademarks of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. Visit us online at www.newyorker.com. To subscribe to other Condé Nast magazines, visit www.condenast.com. Occasionally, we make our subscriber list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services that we believe would interest our readers. If you do not want to receive these offers and/or information, please advise us at P.O. Box 37684, Boone, IA 50037 0684 or call (800) 825-2510.

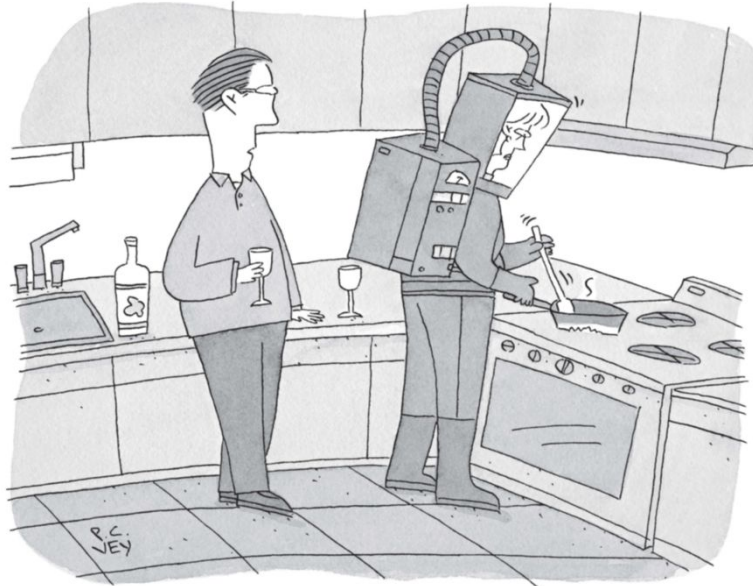
THE NEW YORKER IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RETURN OR LOSS OF, OR FOR DAMAGE OR ANY OTHER INJURY TO, UNSOLICITED MANUSCRIPTS, UNSOLICITED ART WORK (INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, DRAWINGS, PHOTOGRAPHS, AND TRANSPARENCIES), OR ANY OTHER UNSOLICITED MATERIALS. THOSE SUBMITTING MANUSCRIPTS, PHOTOGRAPHS, ART WORK, OR OTHER MATERIALS FOR CONSIDERATION SHOULD NOT SEND ORIGINALS, UNLESS SPECIFICALLY REQUESTED TO DO SO BY THE NEW YORKER IN WRITING.



CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by P. C. Vey, must be received by Sunday, February 5th. The finalists in the January 23rd contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 27th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“ ”

THE FINALISTS



“You were with Ringling Brothers? I was with Lehman Brothers.”

Tom Evans, Evergreen, Colo.

“Shouldn't you be at your confirmation hearing?”

Rick Goss, Bethesda, Md.

“Sorry—none of our hours are happy anymore.”

Mark Strout, Belmont, Mass.

THE WINNING CAPTION



“Long time no sea.”

Carlos Brooks, Los Angeles, Calif.

SWEDISH DESIGN WITH A GREEN SOUL

ADORABLE FLORALS

Inventing patterns that are intriguingly similar, all in soft, related shades, that's my latest design innovation. Find inspiration in my Spring Collection with its Nordic hues, exuberant designs, colorful essentials and accessories. All in nature's own sustainable materials for the world's colorful women.

Greetings,

Gudrun



ECO-COTTON IN SOFT
AND GENTLE HUES
"Sånglärka" cardigan
\$110 and tunic \$68

SHOP ONLINE!

www.gudrunsjoden.com

*Gudrun
Sjödén*

Stockholm | Est. 1976

Store New York: Gudrun Sjödén Store | 50 GREENE STREET New York, NY 10013 | Tel: 212-219-2510
Customer service: Tel: 1-877-574-1486 | customerservice@gudrunsjoden.com

“CAN WE MAKE PEACE WITH ENEMIES?
OSLO GIVES US HOPE.”

DAILY NEWS

OSLO

A new play by
J. T. ROGERS

Directed by
BARTLETT SHER



BROADWAY PREVIEWS BEGIN MARCH 23

LINCOLN CENTER THEATER

150 W. 65TH ST. · TELECHARGE.COM · 212-239-6200 · LCT.ORG

OFFICIAL AIRLINE
American Airlines

Special thanks to The Harold and Mimi Steinberg Charitable Trust for supporting new American plays at LCT.

SPONSORED BY



Photo by Mark Seliger