LEXUS SAFETY SYSTEM+
How long did it take you to see the pedestrian? At Lexus, we’re constantly looking out for the driver. That’s why we create advancements—like Pedestrian Detection—that actively help you see things you might not notice at first. Better-informed drivers get us closer to our ultimate vision: a world without accidents. See more of our standard comprehensive safety system at lexus.com/safety. Experience driver-first innovation. Experience Amazing.

lexus.com/safety | #Lexus

Options shown. Illustration is for conceptual purposes only and is not an actual representation of Lexus Safety System. 1. The Pedestrian Detection System is designed to detect a pedestrian ahead of the vehicle, determine if impact is imminent and help reduce impact speed. It is not a substitute for safe and attentive driving. System effectiveness depends on many factors, such as speed, size and position of pedestrians and weather, light and road conditions. See Owner’s Manual for additional limitations and details. 2. Drivers are responsible for their own safe driving. Always pay attention to your surroundings and drive safely. System effectiveness is dependent on many factors including road, weather and vehicle conditions. See Owner’s Manual for additional limitations and details. ©2017 Lexus
GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Jill Lepore on our free-speech fumbles; a dinner party; butterfly effects; TV diversity; Sheelah Kolhatkar on private-equity perils.

LETTER FROM MEXICO CITY
Jon Lee Anderson
Boundary Issues
Anti-Trump backlash across the border.

SHOUTS & MURMURS
Ethan Kuperberg
Nuclear Mindfulness

AMERICAN CHRONICLES
Rachel Monroe
Something in the Air
The big business of essential oils.

PROFILES
Janet Malcolm
The Storyteller
Rachel Maddow’s expert world-building.

A REPORTER AT LARGE
Rachel Aviv
The Takeover
How senior citizens could be getting conned.

FICTION
Sarah Shun-lien Bynum
“Likes”

THE CRITICS
BOOKS
Dan Chiasson
Joni Mitchell’s openhearted genius.

A CRITIC AT LARGE
Kelefa Sanneh
Can we do better than diversity?

ON TELEVISION
Emily Nussbaum
Tig Notaro’s “One Mississippi.”

THE ART WORLD
Peter Schjeldahl
Gender’s new visual grammar.

THE CURRENT CINEMA
Anthony Lane
“The Florida Project,” “Our Souls at Night.”

POEMS
Tiana Clark
“Nashville”
Andrea Cohen
“Shiva”

COVER
Bruce Eric Kaplan
“Party Rentals”
Jon Lee Anderson (“Boundary Issues,” p. 24), a staff writer, began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 1998. He is the author of several books, including “The Fall of Baghdad.”

Rachel Monroe (“Something in the Air,” p. 32) has contributed to the *Guardian*, *New York*, and *Texas Monthly*.

Peter Schjeldahl (*The Art World*, p. 78), the magazine’s art critic, is the author of “Let’s See: Writings on Art from *The New Yorker*.”

Tiana Clark (*Poem*, p. 42) is the author of the chapbook “Equilibrium” and the forthcoming collection “I Can’t Talk About the Trees Without the Blood.”

Bruce Eric Kaplan (*Cover*) has contributed twelve covers and more than eight hundred and fifty cartoons to the magazine since 1991. His latest book is the memoir “I Was a Child.”

Jill Lepore (*Comment*, p. 17), a professor of history at Harvard, is writing a history of the United States.

Rachel Aviv (“The Takeover,” p. 48), a staff writer since 2013, won the 2015 Scripps Howard Award for “Your Son Is Deceased,” a story on police shootings, which appeared in *The New Yorker*.

Dan Chiasson (*Books*, p. 66), who teaches at Wellesley, has written reviews for the magazine since 2007. “Bicentennial” is his latest book of poems.


Ethan Kuperberg (*Shouts & Murmurs*, p. 31) is a filmmaker, television writer, and producer. He won a Peabody Award in 2015 for his work on the TV series “Transparent.”

Sarah Shun-lien Bynum (*Fiction*, p. 58) has published two works of fiction: “Madeleine Is Sleeping” and “Ms. Hempe Chronicles.”

Kelefa Sanneh (*A Critic at Large*, p. 71) has been a staff writer since 2008.

NEWYORKER.COM
Everything in the magazine, and more.

CULTURE DESK
Jia Tolentino, Doreen St. Felix, Sarah Larson, and others on the latest cultural events and news.

DAILY SHOUTS
Jeremy Nguyen illustrates a guide to the plants that can keep you company at work.

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.)
failure to fire up the Democratic base. During the primaries, Bernie Sanders not only excited this base but also expanded its numbers, all without playing into the hands of the plutocrats whose money Clinton eagerly accepted.

Howard Elterman
New York City

Although Remnick mentions Sanders’s strong dislike for Clinton, I don’t believe that the importance of his role in her defeat has been made clear enough. I can see his shadow looming behind her, almost as menacing as Trump during the debate in St. Louis. As the grandparent of millennials, I was aware that some of them had no enthusiasm for Clinton. As much as I urged them to prevent the disaster of a Trump victory, I am afraid that most of them and many of their friends didn’t vote in the Presidential election. I can’t blame them for responding to Bernie’s revolutionary appeal, but I wrote them an angry letter after the election. Then, of course, I tore it up and encouraged them to keep working for what they believe in—as we all must do.

Sayre Sheldon
Cambridge, Mass.

WEAR AND TEAR

In her piece on the designer Iris van Herpen, Rebecca Mead questions how a dress incorporating Japanese paper would be washed (“Transformer,” September 25th). One of the many delights of long-fibred Japanese papers is that they maintain their material integrity when immersed in water and cleaning solvents. It is a big reason why these wonderfully delicate and strong papers are often used in the conservation of textiles, works on paper and parchment, and other cultural artifacts.

Annlinn Kruger
Bar Harbor, Maine

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.
Gay life was lived entirely on the margins back when Harvey Fierstein wrote and starred in “Torch Song Trilogy,” about a drag queen searching for love and his own kind of family. The plays premièred at La Mama in the late seventies, then became a Broadway show and a movie, making Fierstein an unlikely ambassador to mainstream America. All these years later, they’re a period piece. A condensed version, called “Torch Song,” is in previews at Second Stage, starring the irrepressible charmer Michael Urie.
Best Coast
Well before the Times caught on to women in rock (its recent roundup of front women in bands like Speedy Ortiz and Downtown Boys roiled punk circles), Bethany Cosentino was sticking her tongue out at both gatekeepers and trend-seekers as the lead for this surf-punk outfit. The band formed in 2009, and by 2011 it had stolen the heart of young girls and boys alike; on “When I’m with You,” an early single, Cosentino’s handling of the rich refrain “I hate sleeping alone” was at once gorgeous and gritty. Best Coast has since swelled beyond the crusty hooks of its early work and is currently on tour with Paramore, but the band has slipped in some head-turning dates as well. (Rough Trade, 64 N. 9th St., Brooklyn. 718-486-5400. Oct. 9.)

Kid Cudi
Before the worlds of hip-hop and electronic music regularly intermingled with friction, this young rapper from Cleveland carved new space for himself with self-released singles and mixtapes that were atypical in both sound (melodic, sparse, downtrodden) and circumstance (Cudi was bolstered by music blogs and social media and uninterested in traditional music outlets). Cudi’s way around a phrase and his fearless, if unkempt, experimentation with dance music and, later, rap, earned him a cult of college-age fans and an appointment as the opening act for Kanye West during the Yeezus tour. On “Here come the horses to drag me to bed,” a 1990 cover of the Tricky song, “Here come the Tricky to fuck up my head,” Cudi raps, “I’m not preparing myself for that.” This summer, following a career that spans four decades, he announced his final set of live dates nationwide. Each show on the tour features city-specific backing groups of musicians who owe a debt to Johnston’s music; the New York band features members of the Cibo Matto and Beck quartets. (Official from an unlikely repertoire without panache—this fabulous foursome extracts inspiration and “Woodstock”—as well as apposite originals—“Lay Lady Lay,” “Up on Cripple Creek,” their guise as the collective Hudson ensemble.)

Climbing the mirrored stairways of the multi-tiered night-club bazaar, which seems all the more fitting with each listen, “Elanora,” makes it clear that thinking with your heart may not be so different from thinking with your head. He spins from open to close at this Gowanus nook. (Analog BKNY, 177 Second Ave., Gowanus nook. Oct. 6.)

NIGHT LIFE

ROCK AND POP

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

Daniel Johnston
The influence of Johnston’s pleasing lo-fi music has been far reaching ever since Kurt Cobain donned a shirt touting the singer-songwriter’s unfinished album, “Hi, How Are You?,” on the red carpet of the 1992 Video Music Awards. Johnston has long struggled with schizophrenia and an extreme, hallucinatory form of bipolar disorder that, he says, is in terrifying manic episodes. (In 1990, while flying in a two-seater plane piloted by his father, Johnston pulled the keys from the ignition and threw them out the window. His father managed to crash-land safely.) In spite of all this, he has continued to release albums of disarming emotional honesty, sung in his honest, bleating lisp. This summer, following a career that has spans four decades, he announced his final set of live dates nationwide. Each show on the tour features city-specific backing groups of musicians who owe a debt to Johnston’s music; the New York band features members of the Cibo Matto and Beck quartets. (Official from an unlikely repertoire without panache—this fabulous foursome extracts inspiration and “Woodstock”—as well as apposite originals—“Lay Lady Lay,” “Up on Cripple Creek,” their guise as the collective Hudson ensemble.)

JOEY ALEXANDER
He may be young, but he certainly respects his elders. At fourteen years old, the preternaturally gifted jazz pianist remains a wunderkind phenomenon—a tribute to Thelonious Monk will show whether he’s been keeping up with his homework. Alexander is joined by a rhythm team that can harness his youthful intensity: the bassist Charnett Moffett and the drummer Ulysses Owens. (Jazz Standard, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. Oct. 10.)

Jane Ira Bloom Quartet
With the Belle of Amherst as her muse, the soprano saxophonist and composer Jane Ira Bloom has fashioned a vibrant, wholly pretentious, double-disk project, “Wild Lines: Improvising Emily Dickinson,” which translates both the introspective and the visionary nature of the great poet into exultant modern jazz. The actor Deborah Rush will again join Bloom’s quartet, speaking Dickinson’s abiding words. (Jazz at Kitano, 66 Park Ave., at 38th St. 212-885-7119. Oct. 7.)

Hudson
The guitarist John Scofield, the drummer Jack DeJohnette, the keyboardist John Medeski, and the bassist Larry Grenadier, heavy hitters all, moswe a bit into classic-rock mode in their guise as the collective Hudson ensemble. Spinning its own meditations on such boomer fare as “Lay Lady Lay,” “Up on Cripple Creek,” and “Woodstock”—as well as apposite originals—this fabulous foursome extracts inspiration from an unlikely repertoire without panache, all the while the rhythm section of the late vocal legend Blossom Dearie, as revealed on Parrott’s enchanting album “Dear Blossom.” Her fleshed-out quartet includes the spirited vibraphonist Chuck Redd. (Dizzy’s Club Coca-Cola, Broadway at 60th St. 212-258-9955. Oct. 4.)

Nicki Parrott Quartet
Parrott, a formidable mainstream bassist and a singer of considerable charm, has found a sweet spot in the repertoire of torus stylistic influences, her long-time partner, with Adriana Thaw. This week, “Serpent Music,” announced his commitment to eclecticism and cemented his position as a major force in contemporary experimental and electronic circles. Last month, he returned with a new self-released album, “Experiencing the Deposit of Faith.” It sustains a gorgeous melancholy throughout twelve atmospheric, mostly instrumental tracks, but don’t take that as a suggestion to leave the earplugs at home; Tumor’s performances often take the form of eardrum-rupturing, confrontational noise music. (150 Greenpoint Ave., Brooklyn. bk-bazaar.com. Oct. 6.)

Yves Tumor
Climbing the mirrored stairways of the multi-tiered night-club bazaar, which seems all the more fitting with each listen, “Elanora,” makes it clear that thinking with your heart may not be so different from thinking with your head. He spins from open to close at this Gowanus nook. (Analog BKNY, 177 Second Ave., Gowanus nook. Oct. 6.)

Floating Points
All dance music is an experiment of sorts, as producers and beat-makers stir up sounds and samples in the hope of finding the perfect alchemy to make the masses bust a move (or at least bob their heads). Yet Sam Shepherd, the mastermind behind London’s heady Floating Points project, isn’t just a curious listener and a talented disk jockey: he flexes a Ph.D. in neuroscience, but has traded the laboratory for the d.j. booth. The quiet thrrob of his bubbling electronic music, most evident on his 2015 debut, “Wonderful,” makes it clear that thinking with your heart may not be so different from thinking with your head. He spins from open to close at this Gowanus nook. (Analog BKNY, 177 Second Ave., Brooklyn. 718-576-6040. Oct. 6.)
After the Blast
Zoe Kazan's play, featuring Cristin Milioti, follows a couple living underground in a postapocalyptic world where fertility is regulated. Lila Neugebauer directs, at LCT3. (Claire Tom, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-2600. Preview begins Oct. 7.)

The Band's Visit
David Yazbek and Itamar Moses's musical, about an Egyptian police orchestra stranded in the Israeli desert, moves to Broadway; Katrina Lenk and Tony Shalhoub reprise their roles in David Cromer's production, directed by IdoPress. (Ethel Barrow, 243 W. 47th St. 212-239-2600. Preview begins Oct. 7.)

The Home Place
Charlotte Moore directs Brian Friels's play, in which a Darwin-inspired doctor arrives in Donegal in 1878 to study the craniums of the indigenous Irish population in an attempt to prove their inferiority. (Irish Repertory, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737. In previews. Opens Oct. 10.)

Junk
Doug Hughes directs a new play by Ayad Akhtar (“Disgraced”), about a nineteen-eighties investment banker (Steven Pasquale) attempting a takeover of a manufacturing company. (Vivian Beaumont, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-2600. Preview begins Oct. 5.)

M. Butterfly
Clive Owen and Jin Ha star in Julie Taymor's revival of David Henry Hwang's Tony Award-winning drama, about the romance between a French diplomat and a Chinese opera singer. (Cort, 138 W. 46th St. 212-239-2600. Preview begins Oct. 7.)

Measure for Measure

Off the Meter, On the Record
The radio host John McDonagh wrote and performed this piece, drawn from his thirty-five years driving a New York City taxi. Directed by Ciarán O’Reilly. (Irish Repertory, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737. Preview begins Oct. 6.)

Springsteen on Broadway
The Boss performs solo with guitar and piano, tracing his life through songs and storytelling. ( Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)

Strange Interlude
Transport Group presents this reimagined version of Eugene O'Neill's nine-act drama, in which David Greenspan performs all the characters himself. (Irondale Center, 85 S. Oxford St., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111. Preview begins Oct. 6.)

Stuffed
The comedian Lisa Lampanelli wrote and acts in this play, first presented last fall, which brings together four women dealing with different food issues. Jackson Gay directs. (Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200. Preview begins Oct. 5.)

Time and the Conways
Elizabeth McGovern (“Downton Abbey”) stars in this Roundabout revival of J. B. Priestley's play, directed by Rebecca Taichman, which follows the ups and downs of a moneymed English family between 1919 and 1937. (American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300. In previews. Opens Oct. 10.)

Too Heavy for Your Pocket
Roundabout Underground stages Jiréh Breon Holder's play, about a young man in Nashville charged with performing as Rosalind. (Irondale Center, 85 S. Oxford St., Brooklyn. 866-811-4111.)

NOW PLAYING
As You Like It
Directed and designed by John Doyle, this production of Shakespeare's comedy feels conceptually incomplete; its Jazz Age milieu seems like an excuse for Stephen Schwartz's original songs (which are nice). The set is dominated by a dozen or so vaguely triangular lamps, which, aside from the dialogue, offer the show's only hint of the pastoral; weirdly, no visual distinction is made for the second-act shift to Arden. The staging, too, muddies the sense of setting, as actors often simply wait upstage until it's their turn to talk. Fortunately, Hannah Cabell does as much as she can to knock the production into focus, with a take-charge performance as Rosalind. And Ellen Burstyn is a fine Jaques, making the part feel so lived in it's too bad her time onstage is so brief in this abridgment. (Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. 866-811-4111.)

A Clockwork Orange
If you are unfamiliar with Anthony Burgess's 1962 novel or its 1971 movie adaptation, this stage version may completely befuddle you. Between the frequent use of Burgess's made-up language, Nadsat, and the actors' taking on several parts each (only Jonno Davies gets to focus on one, the sociopathic, Beethoven-loving teen-ager Alex DeLarge), the storytelling is muddled at best. The director, Alexandra Spencer-Jones, sets up a frenzied pace in which the buff all-male cast runs around attempting to look either dangerous or meek, depending on the role of the moment, while pop songs blare—"Relax," by Frankie Goes to Hollywood, is the focus group for JTM Entertainment, a Korean label trying to cross over to America; spectators are split up and introduced to its star acts. There's the girl group Special K, whose teen-age members undergo a rinse cycle of voice lessons, media training, and plastic surgery; a boy band, F8, squabbling about whether to Westernize their sound and the pop diva MwE (Ashley Park), fighting off an Eve Harrington-esque rival. Cleverly, the show blasts away its own cynicism with a sonic boom, in a ravelike finale that displays how, for K-pop's ever-expanding global audience, the product easily out-glimmers the means of production. (A.R.T./ New York Theatres, 502 W. 53rd St. 866-811-4111.)

The Red Letter Plays: Fucking A & In the Blood
Nearly twenty years ago, the playwright Suzan-Lori Parks created two works for the stage that remain masterpieces of the form, each inspired by “The Scarlet Letter.” Both, now in a joint revival, examine a woman’s dream of motherhood and the challenges of mothering without societal support or faith. In “Fucking A” (directed by Jo Bonney), Hester Smith (Christine Lahti), an abortionist, works and works to free her son, who was incarcerated as a boy; Hester’s “A”—for “Aborter”—has been branded on her chest. In “In the Blood” (directed by Sarah Benson), Hester La Negrita (Saycon Sengbloh) and her five children live under a bridge. She has no written language: the only letter she can write is “A.” Both women bend low or stand tall in a political climate in which the powerless are given an even rarer deal than they could have ever dreamed of, but when pushed to their limits, they show how pain wears on them, but also how they outwit life. (Reviewed in our issue of 10/2/17. (Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

The Treasurer
There’s a lot of potential in Max Posner’s alter-ego play, and it’s all on display. Posner transforms the multi-floor space into a candy-colored K-pop factory, equal parts Willy Wonka and “Blade Runner.” The audience, we’re told, is the focus group for JTM Entertainment, a Korean label trying to cross over to America; spectators are split up and introduced to its star acts. There’s the girl group Special K, whose teen-age members undergo a rinse cycle of voice lessons, media training, and plastic surgery; a boy band, F8, squabbling about whether to Westernize their sound and the pop diva MwE (Ashley Park), fighting off an Eve Harrington-esque rival. Cleverly, the show blasts away its own cynicism with a sonic boom, in a ravelike finale that displays how, for K-pop’s ever-expanding global audience, the product easily out-glimmers the means of production. (A.R.T./ New York Theatres, 502 W. 53rd St. 866-811-4111.)

Also Notable
NOW YOU CAN LOSE YOUR RECEIPTS EVEN FASTER.

TRAVEL AND EXPENSES ARE LIVE. Make the expense process painless for business and traveler alike. Concur’s live, intuitive expense reports practically file themselves. While giving businesses a live look at exactly where and how their money is being spent.

sap.com/livebusiness
The sculptures of Ruth Asawa upend art’s white-male hit parade.

The history of American art is getting a rewrite at the David Zwirner gallery on West Twentieth Street, in a transporting show of sculptures by the little-known Ruth Asawa: diaphanous wonders, crocheted out of wire, that appear to be floating in space. (They hang from the ceiling.) In her use of line as sculptural form, Asawa provides a crucial link between the mobile modernism of Alexander Calder and the gossamer Minimalism of Fred Sandback, whose yarn pieces similarly render distinctions between interior and exterior moot. She hit on her singular process in 1947, at the age of twenty-one, while on a visit to Mexico, where she saw baskets in the process of being made. That domestic association has led to her work being marginalized, as was the case with so many female artists of her generation.

The addition of Asawa to art’s overwhelmingly white-male hit parade comes at a critical time in our country, as the policies of the current Administration challenge the undeniable fact that the United States is a nation of immigrants. Asawa’s parents were farmers, who emigrated to rural California from Japan. (“Sculpture is like farming,” the artist once said. “If you just keep at it, you can get quite a lot done.”) Asawa loved to draw as a child, but she didn’t have much time between chores. She began to make art in earnest while living in internment camps in California and Arkansas, in 1942-43; she received pointers from several fellow-detainees, who were animators at Walt Disney. She went on to study at Black Mountain College, where her mentors included Josef Albers, R. Buckminster Fuller, and Merce Cunningham, then settled in San Francisco with her husband, the architect Albert Lanier. She raised six children, but never stopped making art, and it would be inaccurate to suggest that she languished in obscurity until now. A solo show in New York, in the fifties, was favorably reviewed in the Times; her work was included in the São Paolo Biennial in 1955; she is in major museum collections and has several prominent public projects in San Francisco.

Of course, history is written by the victors, and, too often these days, winning means money. In 2013, four months before Asawa died, at the age of eighty-seven, one of her sculptures sold at Christie’s for nearly 1.5 million dollars—quadrupling expectations. The Zwirner show was curated (and exquisitely installed) by Jonathan Laib, who established a relationship with the artist while he worked at the auction house; when he moved to the gallery, so did Asawa’s estate. Part of me wishes that a museum had mounted this museum-quality show, perhaps the Whitney or MOMA, two institutions that have sensitively contextualized Asawa’s work in recent group exhibitions. But such gripes melt away in the presence of an ethereal copper-and-iron-wire concatenation from 1954—seven interconnected orbs, two of which surround smaller spheres like translucent cocoons. It hangs in front of a window overlooking a garden, enmeshing nature and art. Asawa, whose muses included sunlight on a dragonfly’s wing, would surely approve.

—Andrea K. Scott
MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

**Metropolitan Museum**

“Rodin at the Met”

A team of Met curators led by Denise Allen has installed about fifty bronzes, plasters, terra-cottas, and carvings by Augustine Rodin, along with works by related artists, in the grand foyer of the museum’s galleries of nineteenth-century painting. (One room is filled with a chronological survey of his drawings.) The show marks the hundredth anniversary of the artist’s death, but no occasion is really needed. Rodin is always with us, the greatest sculptor of the nearly four centuries since Gian Lorenzo Bernini perfected and exalted the baroque. Matter made flesh and returned to matter, with clay cast in bronze: Rodin. (There are carvings in the show, too, but made by assistants whom he directed. He couldn’t feel stone.) You know he’s great even when you’re not in a mood for him. Are “The Thinker” and “The Kiss” kind of corny? Does the grandiosity of “Statue of Balzac” (for which there is a small study in the show) overbear? Sure. There’s a stubborn tinge of vulgarity about Rodin, inseparable from his strength. But roll your eyes as you may, your gaze is going to stop, again, and widen at the sight of one or another work of his. He—or his hand, as his mind’s executive—wrenched figurative sculpture from millennia of tradition and sent it tumbling into modernity. Through Jan. 15.

**Museum of Modern Art**

“Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait”

Louise Bourgeois is best known for spiders. Big ones like the twenty-two-foot-tall steel marvel from 1997, now installed in the museum’s atrium. It hovers protectively over a wire-mesh enclosure housing a mysterious assemblage of bone, gold, wood, silver, rubber, and glass; it’s draped with a large fragment of vintage tapestry. (The last material is the most telling: Bourgeois was born into a family of tapestry restorers in Paris in 1911.) The show’s executive—a vast figurative sculpture for the revelatory exhibition on the third floor, focussed on the artist’s prints and illustrated books. Bourgeois’s prints, though underrecognized, are the alpha and omega of her oeuvre, her first mature medium—and her last. She made about twelve hundred in her lifetime, most in the nineteen-seventies. The show is structured thematically and loosely chronologically, beginning with delicate, Surrealist-inflected, black-and-white engravings and etchings from the mid-forties, which conflate bodies and buildings, and culminating in an almost baroque. Matter made flesh and returned to matter, as if in a graceful act of supplication. Seen side by side, they form a gauzy curtain, setting the stage for three curious objects in the center of the room: makeshift ceramic vessels, which stand just over four feet tall. The unglazed sculptures are appealingly Seussian conglomerations of other handmade containers. Both series play on the gendered associations of her do-mestic materials. Bourgeois also takes on thorny issues of representation in an ongoing project with the tongue-in-cheek title “The Feminist Responsibility Project,” images of women from porn magazines, which she abstracts into inky shapes. Through Oct. 21. (Inglett, 522 W. 24th St. 212-647-9111.)

**Beverly Semmes**

In her transporting installation “Bow,” the mid-career New York-based artist lines the gallery with flowing dresses of sky-blue tulle. Pinned high on the walls, they fold from the waist, draping their absurdly long sleeves to the floor, as if in a graceful act of supplication. Seen side by side, they form a gauzy curtain, setting the stage for three curious objects in the center of the room: makeshift ceramic vessels, which stand just over four feet tall. The unglazed sculptures are appealingly Seussian conglomerations of other handmade containers. Both series play on the gendered associations of her do-mestic materials. Semmes also takes on thorny issues of representation in an ongoing project with the tongue-in-cheek title “The Feminist Responsibility Project,” images of women from porn magazines, which she abstracts into inky shapes. Through Oct. 21. (Inglett, 522 W. 24th St. 212-647-9111.)

**GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN**

**Colette**

The Tunisian-born artist, a pioneer of boundary-blurring tableaux vivants, was a flamboyant presence in downtown New York during the nineteen-eighties. She now spends most of her time in Berlin, so this nostalgic gathering of old and new work (dating from 1973 to 2017) is a welcome return to the city where she made her name. Documentation from past projects, including a large, cloth-wrapped photograph of the artist posing as a mermaid in an attic, alternates with more recent installations like “Beautiful Dreamer (Décapité),” a life-size photograph mounted on board with a candelabra in lieu of a head. The piece that may best encapsulate Colette’s elevation of life into art is a hand-lettered sign saying “Fuck Art: Let’s Dance,” which she made for the 1980 opening of the night club Danceteria. Through Oct. 15. (Algus, 132 Delancy St. 212-844-0074.)

**Vaginal Davis and Louise Nevelson**

Jean Naté perfume, Afro Sheen hair conditioner, nail polish, mascara, and eyebrow pencils are some of the materials that Davis, an artist and queer-punk legend, used to create the twenty-two delicate, semi-abstract portraits on view. Installed on tulle walls, they honor stars of stage and screen—from the performer, playwright, and civil-rights activist Ruby Dee to the porn actor Kitten Natividad. They surround Nevelson’s “Colonne II” (1959), a black-painted pillar made from found wood, installed in the center of the gallery. Nevelson’s piece recalls the monochrome geometry of a carved ebony Makonde sculpture, an elegant companion to Davis’s moving homage to black glamour. Through Oct. 22. (Invisible Exports, 89 Eldridge St. 212-226-5447.)

**GALLERIES—CHELSEA**

**Amanda Ross-Ho**

Last summer, around the time she lost the lease on her downtown-Los Angeles studio of nearly a decade, Ross-Ho found a collection of paper clock faces being unloaded by their manufacturer on eBay. These handleless invocations of disorientation and eternity became her work surfaces and scratch pads until this past August, which she spent in the gallery painstakingly reproducing them as four-and-a-half-foot-square paint-ings. One is covered with doodled cubes, masks of tragedy, and hasty ballpoint notes like “Avoid grinding over steaming pots”; in another, the clock face is simply painted red. Along with an installation of novelty-sized objects both store-bought and custom-made—giant wineglasses, minuscule bottles of Evian water—the work suggests a powerfully unnerving vision of time as a procession of banal decisions adding up to something irrevocable. Six sets of large powder-coated clock hands hanging on the front wall make a fitting addendum. Through Oct. 14. (Mitchell-Innes & Nash, 534 W. 26th St. 212-744-7400.)

**THE NEW YORKER, OCTOBER 9, 2017**
**MOVIES**

**NOW PLAYING**

**American Made**
A limp title for Doug Liman’s suspiciously cheerful new film. Tom Cruise plays Barry Seal—a real-life figure, although most of his adventures reek of the tall tale. Even the protagonist’s own voice-overs sound incredulous. In the late nineteen-seventies, we are told, Barry, a commercial airline pilot, is invited by a C.I.A. agent (Domhnall Gleeson) to become involved in the broiling politics of Central America. At first, Barry merely photographs troops on the ground, but then he branches out into drug running for a Colombian cartel and, for good measure, just книге (Bill Pullman), still and other needy souls. Any firm distinction between friend and foe soon dissolves, along with Barry’s patriotic conscience, and Liman and his screenwriter, Gary Spinelli, seem so enamored of the narrative chaos that the movie scarcely bothers to take a moral view; indeed, the hero’s main concern, shared by his wife, Lucy (Sarah Wright), is to find somewhere to stash the crazy money that he earns. Liman recaptures some of the swagger that marked his early films, like “Swingers” (1996) and “Go” (1999), and, as for Cruise, seldom has his smile been so forcefully tested.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 10/2/17.) (In wide release.)

**Battle of the Sexes**
Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton, who made “Little Miss Sunshine,” turn to the tennis court for this drama, set in the early nineteen-seventies. Emma Stone stars as Billie Jean King, in a championship with a half-dozen opponents to contend with. First, there’s unequal pay. The gods of tennis, the barefoot men, (Billie Jean); she loves him, but her heart belongs to her hairdresser, Marilyn (Andie MacDowell). When there’s a tournament in Cape Cod (Steve Carell), a fiftysomething former champion and full-time chauffeur, who, having beaten King’s rival Margaret Court (Jessica McNamee), invites by a C.I.A. agent (Domhnall Gleeson) to become involved in the broiling politics of Central America. At first, Barry merely photographs troops on the ground, but then he branches out into drug running for a Colombian cartel and, for good measure, just книге (Bill Pullman), still and other needy souls. Any firm distinction between friend and foe soon dissolves, along with Barry’s patriotic conscience, and Liman and his screenwriter, Gary Spinelli, seem so enamored of the narrative chaos that the movie scarcely bothers to take a moral view; indeed, the hero’s main concern, shared by his wife, Lucy (Sarah Wright), is to find somewhere to stash the crazy money that he earns. Liman recaptures some of the swagger that marked his early films, like “Swingers” (1996) and “Go” (1999), and, as for Cruise, seldom has his smile been so forcefully tested.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 10/2/17.) (In wide release.)

Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton, who made “Little Miss Sunshine,” turn to the tennis court for this drama, set in the early nineteen-seventies. Emma Stone stars as Billie Jean King, in a championship with a half-dozen opponents to contend with. First, there’s unequal pay. The gods of tennis, the barefoot men, (Billie Jean); she loves him, but her heart belongs to her hairdresser, Marilyn (Andie MacDowell). When there’s a tournament in Cape Cod (Steve Carell), a fiftysomething former champion and full-time chauffeur, who, having beaten King’s rival Margaret Court (Jessica McNamee), invites by a C.I.A. agent (Domhnall Gleeson) to become involved in the broiling politics of Central America. At first, Barry merely photographs troops on the ground, but then he branches out into drug running for a Colombian cartel and, for good measure, just книге (Bill Pullman), still and other needy souls. Any firm distinction between friend and foe soon dissolves, along with Barry’s patriotic conscience, and Liman and his screenwriter, Gary Spinelli, seem so enamored of the narrative chaos that the movie scarcely bothers to take a moral view; indeed, the hero’s main concern, shared by his wife, Lucy (Sarah Wright), is to find somewhere to stash the crazy money that he earns. Liman recaptures some of the swagger that marked his early films, like “Swingers” (1996) and “Go” (1999), and, as for Cruise, seldom has his smile been so forcefully tested.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 10/2/17.) (In wide release.)

**Battle of the Sexes**
Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton, who made “Little Miss Sunshine,” turn to the tennis court for this drama, set in the early nineteen-seventies. Emma Stone stars as Billie Jean King, in a championship with a half-dozen opponents to contend with. First, there’s unequal pay. The gods of tennis, the barefoot men, (Billie Jean); she loves him, but her heart belongs to her hairdresser, Marilyn (Andie MacDowell). When there’s a tournament in Cape Cod (Steve Carell), a fiftysomething former champion and full-time chauffeur, who, having beaten King’s rival Margaret Court (Jessica McNamee), invites by a C.I.A. agent (Domhnall Gleeson) to become involved in the broiling politics of Central America. At first, Barry merely photographs troops on the ground, but then he branches out into drug running for a Colombian cartel and, for good measure, just книге (Bill Pullman), still and other needy souls. Any firm distinction between friend and foe soon dissolves, along with Barry’s patriotic conscience, and Liman and his screenwriter, Gary Spinelli, seem so enamored of the narrative chaos that the movie scarcely bothers to take a moral view; indeed, the hero’s main concern, shared by his wife, Lucy (Sarah Wright), is to find somewhere to stash the crazy money that he earns. Liman recaptures some of the swagger that marked his early films, like “Swingers” (1996) and “Go” (1999), and, as for Cruise, seldom has his smile been so forcefully tested.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 10/2/17.) (In wide release.)

Valerie Faris and Jonathan Dayton, who made “Little Miss Sunshine,” turn to the tennis court for this drama, set in the early nineteen-seventies. Emma Stone stars as Billie Jean King, in a championship with a half-dozen opponents to contend with. First, there’s unequal pay. The gods of tennis, the barefoot men, (Billie Jean); she loves him, but her heart belongs to her hairdresser, Marilyn (Andie MacDowell). When there’s a tournament in Cape Cod (Steve Carell), a fiftysomething former champion and full-time chauffeur, who, having beaten King’s rival Margaret Court (Jessica McNamee), invites by a C.I.A. agent (Domhnall Gleeson) to become involved in the broiling politics of Central America. At first, Barry merely photographs troops on the ground, but then he branches out into drug running for a Colombian cartel and, for good measure, just книге (Bill Pullman), still and other needy souls. Any firm distinction between friend and foe soon dissolves, along with Barry’s patriotic conscience, and Liman and his screenwriter, Gary Spinelli, seem so enamored of the narrative chaos that the movie scarcely bothers to take a moral view; indeed, the hero’s main concern, shared by his wife, Lucy (Sarah Wright), is to find somewhere to stash the crazy money that he earns. Liman recaptures some of the swagger that marked his early films, like “Swingers” (1996) and “Go” (1999), and, as for Cruise, seldom has his smile been so forcefully tested.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 10/2/17.) (In wide release.)

**Home from the Hill**
Robert Mitchum brings swing and swagger to his tragic role as a Texas tycoon and tangled-up paterfamilias in Vincente Minnelli’s sprawling, anguished melodrama, from 1960. The grandee, Wade Hunnicutt, a businessman and rancher—and a serial philanderer with the movie’s star—Marlo Thomas, ismarried, bitterly and lovelessly, to Hannah (Eleanor Parker), who’s raising their son, Theron (George Hamilton), as a mama’s boy. Wade also has an illegitimate son, Rafe Copley (George Peppard), who lives on scraps in a shack on Wade’s property but is capable, sharp-witted, and openhearted. The drama pivots on the relationship between friend and foe soon dissolves, along with Barry’s patriotic conscience, and Liman and his screenwriter, Gary Spinelli, seem so enamored of the narrative chaos that the movie scarcely bothers to take a moral view; indeed, the hero’s main concern, shared by his wife, Lucy (Sarah Wright), is to find somewhere to stash the crazy money that he earns. Liman recaptures some of the swagger that marked his early films, like “Swingers” (1996) and “Go” (1999), and, as for Cruise, seldom has his smile been so forcefully tested.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 10/2/17.) (In wide release.)

Robert Mitchum brings swing and swagger to his tragic role as a Texas tycoon and tangled-up paterfamilias in Vincente Minnelli’s sprawling, anguished melodrama, from 1960. The grandee, Wade Hunnicutt, a businessman and rancher—and a serial philanderer with the movie’s star—Marlo Thomas, is married, bitterly and lovelessly, to Hannah (Eleanor Parker), who’s raising their son, Theron (George Hamilton), as a mama’s boy. Wade also has an illegitimate son, Rafe Copley (George Peppard), who lives on scraps in a shack on Wade’s property but is capable, sharp-witted, and openhearted. The drama pivots on the relationship between friend and foe soon dissolves, along with Barry’s patriotic conscience, and Liman and his screenwriter, Gary Spinelli, seem so enamored of the narrative chaos that the movie scarcely bothers to take a moral view; indeed, the hero’s main concern, shared by his wife, Lucy (Sarah Wright), is to find somewhere to stash the crazy money that he earns. Liman recaptures some of the swagger that marked his early films, like “Swingers” (1996) and “Go” (1999), and, as for Cruise, seldom has his smile been so forcefully tested.—Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 10/2/17.) (In wide release.)

**Lucky**
The late Harry Dean Stanton, in one of his last roles, infuses the slightest gesture and inflection with the weight ofgrave experience, but this maudlin drama mainly renders his grit and wisdom wholesome and cute. Stanton stars as Lucky, a cantankerous ninethy Second World War vet- eran living in a small town on the edge of a desert. Lucky whiles away his time in a fixed routine that starts with yoga at home and breakfast at a diner, moves on to crossword puzzles and TV shows, and ends in a bar among life-worn regulars. One of them, played by David Lynch, is grieving over the loss of his pet tortoise. It’s never clear what Lucky has done with his life, but, with the first sign of failing health, he grows reminiscent, dredging up old regrets in gruffly sentimental monologues. His elbows-out rounds of friendly joshing are filled with hardboiled argot, and they only hint at his troubled past as an argumentative and insubordinate cuss. Stanton and the entire cast (including James Dar- ren, Beth Grant, Barry Shabaka Henley, and Yvonne Huff) are delightful to watch, but they don’t stand a chance against the stings of the plot, directed by John Carroll Lynch.—R.B. (In limited release.)

**The Secret Child (L’Enfant Secret)**
This pocket melodrama, from 1979, directed by Philippe Garrel, catches the fleeting intimacies of a goat farmer whose traditional methods rise to philosophy. But the movie’s strongest inspirations arise when it becomes personal. JR’s blunt questions spark Varda’s frank confrontations with age, health, and death, as she revisits the sites and subjects of her art work from the nineteen-fifties as well as her own cinematic past—in particular, her longtime connection with the director Jean-Luc Godard, who’s a virtual presence throughout the film. Varda and JR gleeefully reanimate a famous scene from one of his films, then travel to Switzerland to visit him at his home. She illuminates the resulting drama with references to her own life story and the history of cinema. In French.—Rich- ard Brody (In limited release.)
DANCE

New York City Ballet
One of the programs this week is a trio of works by George Balanchine. In his particularly joyful 1957 piece “Square Dance,” Balanchine evoked the high spirits, rhythms, and formations of country dancing, but set them to the music of Vivaldi and Corelli. In 1976, he added an enigmatic male solo, and with it, a note of gravity. The result is one of his most perfect ballets. Another program, containing works by Justin Peck, Christopher Wheeldon, and Alexei Ratmansky, is also strong. “Polyphony,” by Wheeldon, is elegant and spare; “The Times Are Racing,” by Peck, reveals a young choreographer groping for relevance and meaning in confusing times; and Ratmansky’s “Odessa,” new last season, conjures a wild, slippery world fused with dark undertones of violence and loss. • Oct. 3 at 7:30, Oct. 7 at 2, and Oct. 8 at 3: “Liturgy,” “Polyphony,” “Odessa,” and “The Times Are Racing.” • Oct. 4 at 7:30: “The Chairman Dances,” “The Wind Still Brings,” “Composer’s Holiday,” “Not Our Fate,” and “Pulcinella Variations.” • Oct. 5 at 7:30 and Oct. 6 at 8: “Square Dance,” “La Valse,” and “Cortège Hongrois.” • Oct. 7 at 8 and Oct. 10 at 7:30: “The Red Violin,” “In Memory of . . .” and “Stravinsky Violin Concerto.” (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center, 212-721-6500. Through Oct. 15.)

Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company
“A Letter to My Nephew” is the title of a 2015 work by Jones now receiving its New York début, and the allusion to James Baldwin and Ta-Nehisi Coates is surely no accident; Jones sees himself in that line. The nephew, in his case, is Lance T. Briggs (also the subject of last year’s “Analogy/Lance”). A collage of images from Briggs’s life of voguing, violence, drugs, and illness, all set to a hip-hop and house-music score, mixes with topical notes added just for this run of shows. (BAM Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Oct. 4-7.)

Fall for Dance
One of the appealing aspects of this festival is its inclusive spirit; there seems to be something for just about everyone. (The opposite is also true; there will be at least one thing to hate on most programs.) The second of five programs opens with a fast-paced ballet from 2004 by Christopher Wheeldon, “Rush,” performed by dancers from Pennsylvania Ballet, and with an expert world-class octane tango show “Tango Fire,” by the Argentine choreographer German Cornejo. In program four, New York City Ballet’s Sara Mearns—a ballerina with an adventurous soul—collaborates with the hip-hop choreographer Honji Wang in a duet entitled “No. 1” (a world première). And program five features American Ballet Theatre’s star David Hallberg in a series of miniatures set to Benjamin Britten’s “Twelve Variations for Piano,” created for the festival by Mark Morris. See nytcitycenter.org for full programs. (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Oct. 3-7. Through Oct. 14.)

Twyla Tharp Dance
Tharp and her dancers return to the Joyce for the second year in a row. This time, the program consists of one new piece—a series of vignettes set to Bob Dylan songs (outtakes, perhaps, from her failed Broadway show)—and two works from the seventies. One of the latter, “The Raggedy Dances,” hasn’t been seen in almost half a century. The quintet, performed in Tharp’s characteristically loopy, casual style, proceeds fluidly from ragtime to Mozart and back. And “The Fugue,” one of Tharp’s first grand gestures, is a set of variations on a theme, inspired by the structure of Bach’s “Musical Offering”—except that here there’s no music but for the sound of the dancers’ feet smacking the ground. (157 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Oct. 3-8.)

Olivier Tarpaga
Tarpaga is an accomplished dancer, choreographer, and musician from Burkina Faso. In his “Declassified Memory Fragment,” he addresses and resists the culture of secrecy fomented by politics and power in Africa, offering a picture that’s by turns gently humorous, bitingly satirical, and tenderly poetic. Four other supple dancers accompany him onstage, as he joins the Dafra Kura Band playing his rippling compositions. (Harlem Stage, 150 Convent Ave., at 135th St. 212-281-9240. Oct. 4.)

Ballet du Nord / Germaine Acogny
Yet another “Rite of Spring”? Well, at least this interpretation of the done-to-death Stravinsky score features a powerful performer: the Senegalese matriarch of contemporary African dance, Germaine Acogny. The choreographer is Olivier Dubois, director of the Ballet du Nord, in France, and the title, “Mon Elue Noire (My Black Chosen One): Sacre #2,” along with recited text by Aimé Césaire, raises issues of colonialism, primitivism, and African womanhood, without much surprise or illumination. The seventy-three-year-old Acogny performs alone in a black box, trembling, laughing, screaming; then she disappears into a fog. (BAM Fisher, 321 Ashland Pl., Brooklyn. 718-636-4100. Oct. 4-7.)

Miro Maglione/New Chamber Ballet
Performances by Maglione’s troupe are intimate, classy affairs, graced by excellent live music. “Stray Bird,” a free program, is a tribute to Ursula Mamlok, a German-born composer who was long a fixture of the New York avant-garde and who died last year, at the age of ninety-three. Magloire and his fellow-choreographers Rebecca Walden and Mara Driscoll present pieces set to seven of Mamlok’s best-known works. The Menotta String Quartet is joined by four other expert musicians. (Ger- man Academy New York, 1014 Fifth Ave. Oct. 5-6.)

“Works & Process” / American Ballet Theatre
On the stage of the tiny theatre tucked beneath the Guggenheim, dancers from American Ballet Theatre give a farewell of their fall season, which includes new and recent works by Alexei Ratmansky and Benjamin Millepied, as well as pieces by Liam Scarlett and Christopher Wheeldon. (Fifth Ave. at 89th St. 212-423-3575. Oct. 8-9.)

BE UNCOOL

At this moment, there is a great opportunity to acquire paintings by history’s most gifted American painters. The present generation’s infatuation with all that is new has caused them to overlook and undervalue paintings by artists whose works have long been recognized — and will always be — in our nation’s best museums.

Request our hardbound catalogue

Important American Paintings Volume XVIII: Be Uncool

Making this request is undoubtedly uncool, but it is wise to be uncool.
The irreplaceable man of American classical music retains his relevance.

The Leonard Bernstein centennial arrives next August, and the classical-music world is unleashing an avalanche of events to commemorate the legendary Lenny. A calendar at the official Bernstein Web site records more than a thousand concerts between 2017 and 2019, touching all corners of the globe. On Oct. 21 alone, his music will be played in fourteen different places, including venues in Malaysia, Taiwan, and—the composer of the “Kaddish” Symphony would surely have savored this—Braunau, Austria, Hitler’s birthplace. In New York, Carnegie Hall kicks off the season with a gala featuring Yannick Nézet-Séguin and the Philadelphia Orchestra performing suites from “On the Waterfront” and “West Side Story” (Oct. 4). More than twenty-five years after his death, Bernstein looms over the American musical landscape like a departed god, making us wonder whether we will ever see his like again.

We probably won’t. If a perfect clone of the young Bernstein, with his debonair manner and Boston Brahmin accent, were to try to launch his “Omnibus” music-appreciation lectures on network television today, he would probably be shown the door before he got to the line “Three G’s and an E-flat.” Bernstein came of age in the period of the New Deal, with its federal arts programs, and he hit his zenith amid Cold War anxiety, when President Kennedy worried about a culture gap as well as a missile gap.

That world is long gone. Classical music still commands a large audience, but it must make its way outside the pop-culture limelight. In any case, contemporary composition is too diverse for a single celebrity to serve as its spokesperson. (Let’s recall that Bernstein was generally dismissive of the fifties and sixties avant-garde.) Rather than trying to emulate Bernstein’s mellifluous lectures to the masses, younger musicians today are more likely to take inspiration from his radical politics. His much mocked dabblings in “radical chic” were, in fact, an attempt to look beyond liberal platitudes and take on systemic racism.

As the man himself recedes, with all his messy charisma, his music is assuming a different profile. What is striking now is the precision and deftness of his technique, even when he is making extravagant gestures or staging dramatic collisions of genres, as in the gloriously chaotic theatrical oratorio “Mass.” One of his masterpieces is the Symphony No. 2, “The Age of Anxiety,” which the New York Philharmonic will perform as part of the “Bernstein’s Philharmonic” festival (Oct. 25-Nov. 14). Its materials range from apocalyptic twelve-note chords to Broadway-ready melodies, including a tune cut from “On the Town”; the ingenious knitting together of motifs makes the transitions seamless. The coolly lucid Stravinsky was always Bernstein’s chief idol, and nothing Bernstein wrote was unclear, even when his choices were gauche. This music seems destined to last because it thrives on its own inner tensions and conflicts. The abiding regret is that there is not more of it: Bernstein owed us more than four musicals and three operas.

—Alex Ross
Metropolitan Opera

If Sondra Radvanovsky comes to be remembered as one of the great interpreters of Bellini’s “Norma”—and she well may—it will be as much for her talents as a colleague as for her accomplishments as a soprano soloist. Not every vocal gambit pays off (as in the signature aria “Casta Diva”), but she paces herself wisely across the show’s long span, and when she is in the company of either Joseph Calleja (a sensitive Pollione, whose honeyed voice has gained some burnish in middle age) or Joyce DiDonato (a shining, steadfast Adalgisa), her fibrous voice is incandescent in its impact. David McVicar’s new production is cautious, but supportive of the drama; Carlo Rizzi keeps the orchestral forces well in hand. Oct. 7 at 1. • Offenbach’s “Les Contes d’Hoffmann” returns, with the exciting tenor Vittorio Grigolo in the title role of the poet haunted by his failed love affairs with a mermaid, a fairy, and a gypsy. Oct. 4 at 7:30 and Oct. 7 at 7. • Even though James Levine has stepped down as the company’s music director, he is still capable of inspiring the orchestra’s players to greatness, particularly in the operas of Wagner, Verdi, and Mozart. His first assignment of the season is Mozart’s “Die Zauberflöte,” presented in Julie Taymor’s fairy-tale staging. The ensemble cast includes Charles Castronovo, Markus Werba, Kathryn Lewek, Tobias Kehrer, and the composer himself conducts the Boston-Philharmonic Orchestra. Oct. 6 at 7:30, Oct. 7 at 3 and 8, and Oct. 8 at 8. (David Geffen Hall. 212-875-5656.)

New York Philharmonic

Having split its duties so far this season between classical concerts and “Star Wars” showings, the Philharmonic (conducted by the expert David Newman) now devotes itself completely to the universe that George Lucas made, offering back-to-back live-score accompaniment to the 1983 installment, “Return of the Jedi,” and “The Force Awakens,” from 2015. Oct. 4-5 at 7:30; Oct. 6-7 at 8. (David Geffen Hall. 212-875-5656.)

Carnegie Hall Opening Night: Philadelphia Orchestra

The outer pillars of Yannick Nézet-Séguin’s season-opening program, a celebration of Gothamitic extraverison, are both by Bernstein: the Symphonic Suite from the film score to “On the Waterfront” and the Symphonic Dances from “West Side Story.” In the center, however, will be a somewhat eccentric presentation of a piece beloved by Bernstein, Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue,” with the solo-piano part arranged for two pianos—one taken by the estimable Chick Corea, the other manned by Lang Lang (who is nursing a wounded left arm) and by his fourteen-year-old protégé, Maxim Lando. Oct. 7 at 7:30. (212-247-7800.)

Orpheus Chamber Orchestra

The charismatic Israeli cellist Mischa Maisky, not often heard in New York, is the special guest of the conductorless orchestra as it opens the season at the 92nd Street Y. His contribution is unique; he will take the solo role in a concerto-like arrangement of Schubert’s “Arpeggione” Sonata; Russian classics by Arensky (the Variations on a Theme by Tchaikovsky) and Tchaikovsky (the Serenade for Strings) surround it. Oct. 5 at 8. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500.)

The Knights with Nicholas Phan

The engaging young tenor, a specialist in the music of Britten, is the guest for the dynamic Brooklyn chamber orchestra’s season opener, which sets the composer’s dazzling “Les Illuminations” as the centerpiece of a program that also includes Fauré’s “Pavane” and Mendelssohn’s Symphony No. 4, “Italian”; Eric Jacobsen conducts. Oct. 5 at 8. (BRIC House, Fulton St. at Rockwell Pl., Brooklyn. bricartsmedia.org.)

Juilliard415: “The Genius of Monteverdi”

In a prelude to the Lincoln Center White Light Festival’s upcoming celebration of the first great composer of Italian opera, the Baroque magus William Christie guides not only the school’s period-instrument band but also a host of Juilliard singers and dancers in a program offering several smaller gems by Monteverdi (including “Lamento della Ninfa”) as well as instrumental works by Pa-rina and Castello. Oct. 5 at 7:30. (Peter Jay Sharp The-atre, Juilliard School. events.juilliard.edu.)

La'Arpeggiosa

This French early-music ensemble, headed by the lutenist Christina Pluhar, offers two concerts at Zankel Hall. In the first, Pluhar and her colleagues (including the singers Céline Scheen and Giuseppina Bridelli) explore music for voices and instruments by Luigi Rossi, a major operatic
composes of the seventeenth century; in the second, the group shows off its independent streak, delving not only into music by Cavalli, Cesti, Purcell, and Monteverdi but also into the rich treasury of Italian folk song, interpreted with improvisatory flair. Oct. 6-7 at 7:30. (212-247-7800.)

Park Avenue Armory: “Répons”
The composer and conductor Matthias Pintscher leads the matchless Ensemble Intercontemporain in one of the more ambitious and flamboyant works composed by its founder, Pierre Boulez. “Répons,” which surrounds audience and ensemble alike with six soloists and electronics, will be played twice during each concert, with audience members relocating to experience the work’s vertiginous swirls of sound from different vantage points. Oct. 6-7 at 8. (Park Ave. at 66th St. armoryonpark.org.)

New York Comic Con
This convention has grown from a geek refuge to an all but mandatory celebration of the best in upcoming television, film, books, and comics—well, it’s still a geek refuge, but now there are a lot more geeks. Fans and enthusiasts will enjoy unprecedented access to stars from series such as “Archer” and “Mythbusters”; panels and workshops with the directors, producers, and industry insiders who keep the entertainment machine churning; and appearances by Kevin Conroy, Neil deGrasse Tyson, Mark Hamill, Rosario Dawson, and many others. The annual display of inventive costumes promises to be more outlandish than ever with the return of the N.Y.C.C. Eastern Championships of Cosplay on Oct. 7, where elaborate props and inventive concepts reign and trademarks are an afterthought. (Javits Center, Madison Square Garden, the Hammerstein Ballroom, and Hudson Mercantile. newyorkcomiccon.com. Oct. 5-8.)

Little Red Lighthouse Festival
On the shore of the Hudson River sits Jeffrey’s Hook Light, known locally as the Little Red Lighthouse, a shining beacon of Washington Heights. Little Red began its life as a candlelit pole that hung over the Hudson to guide boat traffic, and changed locations several times before the current lighthouse was built, in 1880, in what became Fort Washington Park. In 1942, the lighthouse was immortalized in the children’s book “The Little Red Lighthouse and the Great Gray Bridge,” by Hildegard Swift, with imaginative illustrations by Lynd Ward. This week, Urban Park Rangers are giving free tours of Manhattan Island’s only remaining lighthouse; families can also enjoy fishing clinics, live music, food vendors, and readings of Swift’s classic story. (Fort Washington Park, W. 181st St. at Plaza Lafayette. 212-408-0219. Oct. 7 at noon.)

Baryshnikov Arts Center: “BAC Salon”
“Retrieve,” a work for cello and bass by the Bang on a Can founder and Pulitzer Prize winner Julia Wolfe, receives its New York première in the season opener of the center’s casual concert series. Varied, colorful chamber music by Telemann, Prokofiev, and Suzanne Farrin completes the program, performed by such artists as the boisterous James Austin Smith, the cellist Joshua Roman, and the bassist Lizzie Burns. Oct. 5-6 at 8. (Di-Menna Center for Classical Music, 450 W. 37th St. bacnyjc.org.)

Brooklyn Art Song Society: “Lo France I”
Michael Brofman’s doughty series launches its mostly French season with six classic cycles by two of the titans, Debussy (including “Ariettes Oubliées”) and Ravel (“Histoires Naturelles” and other works). The featured singers include the soprano Kristina Bachrach and the baritone Jesse Blumberg. Oct. 6 at 7:30. (Brooklyn Historical Society, 128 Pierrepont St. brooklynartsongsociety.org.)

Patricia Kopatchinskaja and Jay Campbell
Two young firebrands—the Moldovan violinist and the cellist of the JACK Quartet—occupy the Park Avenue Armory’s decorous Board of Officers room for two nights, offering a recital mixing duo classics by Ravel and Kodály with assorted works by Gibbons, Ligeti, Scelsi, Xenakis, and Jörg Widmann and a world première by Michael Hersch. Oct. 9-10 at 7:30. (Park Ave. at 66th St. armoryonpark.org.)

Drought Bookstore
The glamour of failing upward, or at least sideways, often makes for an intriguing personal narrative. The story of Cat Marnell might have been no more remarkable than that of other media interns who have risen to earn glossy bylines, were it not sullied, that of other media interns who have risen to earn glossy bylines, were it not sullied, by the personal narrative. The story of Cat Marnell, having penned his first novel, “The Lucky and back in “How to Murder Your Life,” in 2008, and has since honed an irreverent voice that aligns with the bold, comic noir style he has brought to more than a thousand book sleeves. He launches his new book with Debbie Millman, a celebrated designer and the host of the podcast “Design Matters.” (1133 Broadway. 212-759-2424. Oct. 4 at 6.)

Rizzoli Bookstore
Chip Kidd is a star of the insular world of book-cover design. The Knopf illustrator has produced covers for novels by the likes of Cormac McCarthy, John Updike, David Sedaris, Augusten Burroughs, Mary Roach, Oliver Sacks, and Haruki Murakami; in the nonfiction realm, he’s tackled the histories of Charles Schultz and Batman. Murakami contributes an essay to “Chip Kidd: Book Two,” the second volume of Kidd’s collected works, spanning from 2007 to the present year. Kidd has also moonlighted as a novelist, having penned his first novel, “The Cheese Monkeys,” in 2008, and has since penned an irreverent voice that aligns with the bold, comic noir style he has brought to more than a thousand book sleeves. He launches his new book with Debbie Millman, a celebrated designer and the host of the podcast “Design Matters.” (1133 Broadway. 212-759-2424. Oct. 4 at 6.)

Sotheby’s
The main attraction of Christie’s triple bill of photography sales on Oct. 10 is a sell-off of more than a hundred prints by the Museum of Modern Art; for the first time in over a decade, the museum is culling its collection in order to make way for new acquisitions. The auction contains several prize items, among them majestic landscapes by Ansel Adams, ghostly rayographs by Man Ray, and a portrait of Francis Bacon by Irving Penn. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) • Sotheby’s, too, is auctioning off photographs this week. The sale on Oct. 5 contains a large group of nineteenth-century daguerreotypes by Presidents John Quincy Adams that was recently discovered in another private collection. A sale of American art follows on Oct. 6. (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.) • Paintings and sculptures by African-American artists, mostly dating from the mid-twentieth century, go under the gavel at Sotheby’s (Oct. 5) that includes a striking wartime portrait, “War Worker” (1943), by Elizabeth Catlett, and a majestic, large-scale drawing by Charles White, “Take My Mother Home” (1957). (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.)
By now, most Americans recognize that Westernized basics like chop suey and General Tso’s are compromised simulacra of authentic Chinese food. And so, in recent years, cosmopolitan foodies have sought out everything from steamy Cantonese dim sum to smoked Peking duck to the mouth-numbing Sichuanese hot pot. “But what about Yunnan?” Simone Tong, the thirty-five-year-old Singaporean-Chinese chef and proprietor of Little Tong, asked. Her discoveries in the mountainous southwestern province were delicious enough to make her both laugh and cry.

Alas, she said, the astonishingly diverse culinary traditions of the region were “too numerous to fit into a single restaurant.” Instead of an exhaustive survey, Tong has created a loving and eclectic ode. Begin with the ghost chicken, traditionally made with black-skinned bantams that are slaughtered to mourn the dead by the ethnic minority Dai. Recently, at Little Tong, the chicken was hand-pulled, the skin was dispensed with, and mayonnaise was added to the dressing of pickled red onions, chili, and cilantro. The interpretation does not exactly resemble what the Dai had in mind, but the sweet-spicy kick, artfully subdued by the creamy mayo, is hard to resist, even by authenticity hard-liners.

Didn’t think the Chinese dabbled in cheese? Try the Dalí Street Taters, inspired by the popular goat-cheese-curd snack rubin, which has a texture similar to mozzarella’s. The main event here is the mixian, or rice noodle, which ranges from firm to bouncy to slippery, depending on its temperature. There are only four styles on the menu, and some try to accomplish too much. The ambitious mala dan dan mixian, for example, is an overwrought hybrid—the piquant pungency of ya cai, fermented mustard leaves native to Sichuan, overwhims both the mixian and the ground pork.

But the Grandma chicken mixian—inspired by Tong’s sojourn to Lijiang, where the young chef was served some of the greatest noodles of her life—is T.L.C. at its finest. Aromatic chicken broth with pickled beets and cauliflower, chicken confit, and sesame-garlic oil becomes even more comforting when a supple egg, marbled with Pu’er tea and soy sauce, is piled on top. On a recent Friday, two foodies in their thirties traced the map of Yunnan on their phones between bouts of slurping. When one of them wondered aloud why it had taken him so long to discover mixian, the congenial waitress, who had just arrived, delivered more tea eggs and a gentle, knowing smile, as if to say, “Don’t you know? The more you eat, the greater your ignorance grows.”

—Jiayang Fan

Fresh Kills
161 Grand St., Brooklyn (718-599-7888)

Fresh Kills gives an initial impression of austerity: the long, narrow room has walls of rich wood with visible knots and nails, a low swoop of a ceiling, booths with uncushioned seats, and, in the front, low little tables with curiously unmoving leather tablecloths. The name brings to mind the infamous landfill, lately being transformed into a city park, on Staten Island; at the end of the bar, a dour portrait of a man in a tricorne hat glowers at would-be revelers. But the vibrant menu, and the dizzying array of liquors—from Amaro CioCiaro to sweet vermouth—puts to rest any hint of asperity. On a recent Sunday, Williamsburg denizens sipped at citrusy cocktails chilled with fashionably sculpted blocks of ice; two women in draped gray blouses kept up a spirited stream of gossip, while, catercorner, an entire booth housed people staring at their phones. The Coral Cocktail (apricot liquor, white rum) offers a wedge of grapefruit and a complex sweetness with a bitter murmur low in the mix; the Spiced Ginger Bahia (house-made ginger syrup, lime) arrives with a smattering of cinnamon, and is best sipped slowly through a metal straw. There is plenty of pineapple and white, dark, and agricole rum on a menu that advises, “Place your trust in us, for we are more than qualified to satisfy.” As the night boozily progressed, a man in a black tee gesticulated a bit too hard, shattering his glass; Garo Yellin, a co-owner with a shaggy white beard and the chilled-out affect of a Grateful Dead fan, ambled over and told him to relax. Yellin recommended the Fix, with a choice of liquor plus lemon juice and sugar. It was as rich as cheesecake, sour and fine, with a single glacé cherry staining the ice purple; outside on Grand Street, the city sky, too, was a mauve dome of light.—Talia Lavin
Out Here

It's always been fun to be a little off course.

90 minute nonstop flights to island life

GoToBermuda.com
Ronald Reagan, fifty-five and as spruce as a groom, ran for governor of California in 1966. On the stump, he complained about undergraduate “malcontents,” and, as Election Day neared, he made a point of denouncing invitations issued by students at the University of California, Berkeley, to two speakers: Robert F. Kennedy, who was slated to talk about civil rights, and Stokely Carmichael, who had been asked by the Students for a Democratic Society to deliver the keynote address at a conference on Black Power. “We cannot have the university campus used as a base from which to foment riots,” Reagan warned. He urged Carmichael, at that time the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, to decline the invitation—a clever way to guarantee that Carmichael would accept.

“This is a student conference, as it should be, held on a campus,” Carmichael, twenty-five, lean and grave in a suit and tie, told a crowd of ten thousand on October 29th. Regulation of speech, he added, amounted to a struggle over “whether or not black people will have the right to use the words they want to use without white people giving their sanction.” Days later, Reagan won the election, and the conservative movement claimed its first major victory, fuelled by inciting opposition to the Free Speech Movement.

This September, a planned Free Speech Week at Berkeley flopped. Sponsored by a conservative student group, the event was the brainchild of Milo Yiannopoulos, who may have expected that the university would call it off. In February, the university cancelled a talk by him after protesters rioted and more than a hundred members of the faculty signed a letter, stating, “We support robust debate, but we cannot abide by harassment, slander, defamation, and hate speech.” In response, Donald Trump tweeted, “If U.C. Berkeley does not allow free speech and practices violence on innocent people with a different point of view—NO FEDERAL FUNDS?”

In the half century between the elections of Governor Reagan and President Trump, the left and the right would appear to have switched sides, the left fighting against free speech and the right fighting for it. This formulation isn’t entirely wrong. An unwillingness to engage with conservative thought, an aversion to debate, and a weakened commitment to free speech are among the failures of the left. Campus protesters have tried to silence not only alt-right gadflies but also serious if controversial scholars and policymakers. Last month, James B. Comey, the former F.B.I. director, was shouted down by students at Howard University. When he spoke about the importance of conversation, one protester called out, “White supremacy is not a debate!” Still, the idea that the left and the right have switched sides isn’t entirely correct, either. Comey was heckled, but, when he finished, the crowd gave him a standing ovation. The same day, Trump called for the firing of N.F.L. players who protest racial injustice by kneeling during the national anthem. And Yiannopoulos’s guide in matters of freedom of expression isn’t the First Amendment; it’s the hunger of the troll, eager to feast on the remains of liberalism.

The Free Speech Movement is the taproot of a tree with many branches. In 1964, Mario Savio, a twenty-one-year-old Berkeley philosophy major, spent the summer registering black voters in Mississippi. When he got back to Berkeley that fall, he led a fight against a policy that prohibited political speech on campus, arguing that a public university should be as open for political debate and assembly as a public square. The same right was at stake in both Mississippi and Berkeley, Savio said: “the right to participate as citizens in a democratic society.” After the police arrested nearly eight hundred protesters at a sit-in, the university acceded to the students’ demands. The principle of allowing political speech was afterward extended to
private universities. Without it, students wouldn't have been able to rally on campus for civil rights or against the war in Vietnam, or for or against anything else then or since.

Stokely Carmichael graduated from Howard University in 1964, with a degree in philosophy. He'd been a Freedom Rider; he'd registered voters; he'd been arrested half a dozen times. He also pioneered tactics and language later adopted by the Black Lives Matter movement. The month before he spoke at Berkeley, he was charged with inciting a riot for organizing a protest against police brutality after a white police officer in Atlanta shot a black man. Reagan, meanwhile, promised to crack down on Berkeley's "noisy, dissident minority." He talked about the issue constantly, much to the dismay of his campaign manager, who told him that it hadn't left a trace in the polls. "It's going to," Reagan promised. Even after he won the governorship, he didn't let up. "Free speech does not require furnishing a podium for the speaker," he said. "I don't think you should lend these people the prestige of our university campuses for the presentation of their views."

The N.F.L. protest has its origins in the dispute that followed. In September, 1967, black students at San Jose State College, led by a dashiki-wearing sociology professor and former San Jose discus thrower named Harry Edwards, filed a protest against racism on campus and threatened a mass sit-in on the gridiron during the home football opener. Fearing a riot, administrators called off the game—"the first time a football contest in America had been cancelled because of racial unrest," the Times reported. Reagan said that the cancellation was an "apace of lawbreakers" and that Edwards was "unfit to teach." Edwards, who declared Reagan "unfit to govern," began organizing a campaign for black athletes to protest at the 1968 Summer Olympics, in Mexico City. The two medal winners who raised clenched fists on the podium were from San Jose State's track-and-field team. Colin Kaepernick's bended-knee protest against police brutality and racial injustice draws inspiration from their gesture, but their protest came out of the Free Speech Movement.

What happened next is a tragedy of betrayals. During the seventies, the left's commitment to free speech began to unravel. The "no-platform movement"—the turn where the left started sounding like the right—was founded in 1974, by a British student group that banned any speaker "holding racist or fascist views." One influence was Herbert Marcuse, who argued that liberals' commitment to open debate was absurd, because free speech had become a form of oppression. Another influence, beginning in the eighties, was the field of trauma studies, which understood words as harm. By the nineties, more than three hundred and fifty American colleges and universities had adopted hate-speech codes, which were often used against the very people they were designed to protect. In less than two years under the University of Michigan's speech code, more than twenty white students accused black students of racist speech. Had such codes been in place in 1966, Carmichael's Berkeley speech would have violated them.

Restricting speech is like trying to waltz with a wolf. Every hate-speech code that has been challenged in court has been found unconstitutional. Some have been lifted, others disavowed. Nevertheless, a generation has come of age knowing nothing but the wolf. A new Brookings Institution study found that one out of two students believes that colleges should prohibit "certain speech or expression of viewpoints that are offensive or biased against certain groups of people."

N.F.L. players insist that a stadium is a public square in which they have a right to exercise free speech. Their fight will rage on. But this fight began on college campuses, and it needs to be won there. All speech is not equal. Some things are true; some things are not. Figuring out how to tell the difference is the work of the university, which rests on a commitment to freedom of inquiry, an unflinching search for truth, and the fearless unmasking of error. But the university has obligations, too, to freedom of speech, whose premise, however idealized, is that, in a battle between truth and error, truth, in an open field, will always win. If the commitment to these difficult freedoms has sometimes flagged—and it has—it has just as often been renewed. Free speech is not a week or a place. It is a long and strenuous argument, as maddening as the past and as painful as the truth.

—Jill Lepore

DEPT. OF HOOPLA
CHECK, PLEASE!

Thomas Adès's much talked-about new opera, "The Exterminating Angel," is based on the 1962 Luis Buñuel film of the same name, which is not a movie for people who like to eat and run. It's the story of a dinner party that never ends. After dining in a mansion, a group of rich, swankily dressed people discover that, for some mysterious reason, they are unable to leave. Attended by only a faithful butler, since all the other servants have fled, they remain there for days, penned in like sheep, growing nastier and more disheveled. They relieve themselves in a china cabinet, drink water from a pipe they have bashed in, and roast a lamb over a campfire of smashed-up furniture. In the end, one of them has a heart attack and two others quietly kill themselves.

On a recent Thursday evening, in anticipation of Adès's production, which opens at the Metropolitan Opera on October 26th, the Met threw a Buñuel-themed dinner party of its own. Twenty-four guests, many of whom had never seen the movie, were herded into the room that is normally the Gallery Met, an exhibition space. The guest list included a lot of art-world types, a few Met donors, the writers Edmund and Sylvia Morris, and the director Bartlett Sher, who had interpreted the instruction "fancy dress" to mean that he should wear a homburg hat, a leather overcoat, and a necklace of bloody knives. The thirty-three-year-old soprano Angel Blue, who makes her Met début this week, said she wasn't sure why she had been invited, unless it had something to do with her name. "Maybe I'm going to be exterminated," she said.

The doors were shut loudly, and the
THE BEST OF THE NEW YORKER, LIVE ON STAGE

Tickets on sale now.
NEWYORKER.COM/FESTIVAL #TNYFEST

SAT, OCT 7 | 1:00 P.M.
Atul Gawande
How coverage saves your life.

FRI, OCT 6 | 7:00 P.M.
Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie talks with David Remnick
Fiction and feminism.

SUN, OCT 8 | 4:30 P.M.
Barry Blitt talks with Françoise Mouly
Cover story.

SAT, OCT 7 | 1:00 P.M.
Ben Taub
Smugglers, jihadis, and spies: an urgent guide to fraught encounters.

FRI, OCT 6 | 7:00 P.M.
Mary Karr talks with Sherman Alexie
Life stories.

SAT, OCT 7 | 4:00 P.M.
Kevin Young talks with Paul Muldoon
The handoff.
guests filed into a square hemmed in by tables topped with marble intarsia by the Swiss artist Nicolas Party. The surfaces were inlaid with images of various foods but also bugs, worms, and at least one eyeball. On the walls opposite the guests, who all sat facing outward, were twelve images, also by Party, of a full-size man looking away and not wearing much except feathers or a snake, a papal hat or a grass ruff. The view was mostly bare backsides—or, rather, as the painter John Currin pointed out, the same bare backsidewith different accessories. Currin also said, “If you look at the thigh gap, there’s a notable omission.”

A butler—Massimiliano Gioni, the artistic director of the New Museum—announced the first course: scallops with roe, which were borne in on little Botticelli-like shells. The food was prepared, in a tent outside, by the chef Mads Refslund, a champion of Nordic cuisine who is famous for foraging and for cooking with stuff that other people throw away, and it grew more eccentric as the night wore on. Sweet corn with toasteding was clearing, and for the next few months the space will be open as an exhibition, “Dinner for 24 Sheep.” Visitors can come and go pretty much as they please.

White pumpkin with wheatgrass granita, yogurt, and crème fraîche. Peach with honey gelato and toasted buckwheat. When the last course was served, it was past eleven, or four hours after the evening had begun—not long in Butchuelian terms, but a mini-eternity on a weeknight in New York. The remaining guests trickled out, the dishes were cleared, and for the next few months the space will be open as an exhibition, “Dinner for 24 Sheep.” Visitors can come and go pretty much as they please.

—Charles McGrath

HERE TO THERE DEPT.
MONARCHS

There’s no place like an island, and a barrier island especially, for seasonal migrants. That’s certainly true of Fire Island. The thirty-two-mile-long sandbar off Long Island may be best known for little red wagons, houses on stilts, and gay beach parties, but it is also beloved by lepidopterists. Every September and October, the island’s dunes become a way station for tens of thousands of monarch butterflies, who stop there on their three–thousand-mile journey from Canada to a mountaintop in Michoacán, near Mexico City, where they go to reproduce and die.

Ellen Federico, who is known to locals as “the butterfly lady,” grew up across the water, in West Islip. She works as an event planner in Manhattan, but she spends her free time in a clapboard cottage that her father floated over to Fire Island on a barge in the seventies. The house, where she vacationed as a girl with her parents and her seven siblings, is one of the oldest in the beach community of Lonelyville. Federico, who is fifty-nine, is the island’s most authoritative witness to the gradual decline in the butterflies’ numbers.

“If I was small, the monarchs would swarm down the beach,” she said, one recent afternoon. She sat on her deck, surrounded by pots of milkweed, which the monarchs love. “You could run beneath them with a net and pull in a dozen. Not anymore.” Across America, falling monarch populations are usually blamed on climate change and on the use of herbicides that have eliminated the weeds they feed on. Federico likes to give milkweed seeds to her neighbors.

She inherited her love for monarchs from her father, who was known as Captain Bob. “He made his living from the sea—not just fishing but working charters, humming for bait,” she said. “You know in ‘Funny Girl,’ when Barbra Streisand sings ‘Don’t Rain on My Parade’ on that tugboat? My dad was piloting one of the camera boats.” Captain Bob was fascinated by navigation. “He used to sit here when the monarchs flew over and say, ‘Look at that. Aeronautical perfection.’”

Federico has befriended monarch experts around the world, and she likes to explain how the monarchs fly by gliding on warm air (“as far as a hundred miles a day!”) and navigate by the angle of the sun. She gently pulled a big monarch from a mesh cage with her hands. “These ones, the royal monarchs, we also call ‘4Gs.’ They’re the fourth generation—the three generations before this, they live just four to six weeks, like most butterflies. But these 4Gs live up to nine months—long enough to fly to Mexico to mate before sending their babies back north.”

Seven years ago, Federico launched an effort to tag and count the butterflies on Fire Island. Each fall, her squad of child volunteers stalks the island and affixes weightless stickers to monarchs’ wings. The stickers allow her to track the butterflies all the way to Michoacán.

“This one’s a boy,” a ten-year-old named Cora Reynolds explained, as she held out a monarch she’d netted on a butterfly bush. “You have to be careful, when you put the sticker on his wing, not to cover the pheromone spots.” She pointed to two black dots. “Or else he won’t get a girlfriend.” Reynolds applied the sticker and wrote down its number on a clipboard.

Federico treasures a 2016 photograph of Barack Obama signing an agreement with the leaders of Canada and Mexico to protect the monarchs’ migration. In February, she travelled to Michoacán, to see where her butterflies end up. She rode a mule up into the El Rosario biosphere reserve, with a guide and a bodyguard armed against drug cartels. “It was the most magical day of my life,” she said,
Citigold Client Centers. Your quiet corner across the far corners of the world.

Citigold® STAY GOLD™

GLOBAL TRAVEL BENEFITS

Seek wealth management guidance, or simply relax, at our Citigold Client Centers across the world, plus access a broad array of global banking services, including cash for eligible emergencies and no foreign exchange fees on Citigold® debit cards.

Explore more at citi.com/citigold

INVESTMENT AND INSURANCE PRODUCTS: NOT FDIC INSURED • NOT A BANK DEPOSIT • NOT INSURED BY ANY FEDERAL GOVERNMENT AGENCY • NO BANK GUARANTEE • MAY LOSE VALUE

Citibank will not charge you a foreign exchange fee for purchase or withdrawal transactions when you use your Citibank Card outside the U.S. and Puerto Rico. Limits, restrictions and fees may apply and vary by country. Not available in all countries.

As a Citigold client, you can receive banking services from Citibank, N.A. Member FDIC, along with financial planning and investment guidance from Citi Personal Wealth Management, a business of Citigroup Inc. offers investment products through Citigroup Global Markets Inc. (“CGMI”), member SIPC. Citigroup Life Agency LLC (“CLA”) offers insurance products in California. CLA does business as Citigroup Life Insurance Agency, LLC (license number 0G56746). Citigold Relationship Managers are employees of Citibank, N.A. and are employees and registered representatives of CGMI. Citibank, CGMI and CLA are affiliated companies under the common control of Citigroup Inc.

© 2017 Citigroup Inc. Citibank, N.A. with Arc Design and other marks used herein are service marks of Citigroup Inc. or its affiliates, used and registered throughout the world.
holding up a photograph and pointing to clouds of orange ringing high fir trees and to a sign, in the foreground, instructing visitors to maintain silence and to remain for a maximum of fifteen minutes. “I stayed for three hours,” she said. She was distressed to learn about a surge in illegal logging there. “Do you know why they’re cutting down the Oyamel firs my monarchs love?” she asked. “To plant more avocados for us fat-ass Americans to buy at Whole Foods.”

As Federico talked, several monarchs flitted about her garden. “This year’s been interesting, with these hurricanes in the Atlantic,” she said. “It’s been such a warm fall—they’re definitely heading south late. But the monarchs are flying. They know you can’t wall the wind.”

—Joshua Jelly-Schapiro

L.A. POSTCARD

INCLUSION

Two nights after the Emmy Awards, Keli Lee, the managing director of international content and talent at ABC Studios International, faced a dilemma. She had to choose between accepting an award in Hollywood for helping to cast people of color in major television roles—Sofía Vergara in “Modern Family,” Kerry Washington in “Scandal,” Viola Davis in “How to Get Away with Murder”—and flying to London to make a presentation to executives of the Walt Disney Company, which owns ABC.

Standing outside the beige ballroom of the Loews Hollywood Hotel, an hour before the Adcolor Awards ceremony, Lee smoothed her hair and said, “The hurricane cancelled the flight I was supposed to take tomorrow morning, so I’m flying out tonight.” She would have to head to LAX just as the ceremony was beginning.

“Oh, shit, which hurricane? Maria or Jose?” a man wearing a bow tie encrusted with tiny mirrors asked. He was Bing Chen, a former YouTube executive.

“Whatever one,” Lee said.

“There are so many now,” Chen said. He held up an iPhone to film her making an acceptance speech, to be played on a monitor while she was on her way to the airport. The Adcolor Awards commend diversity in media and advertising and give trophies to people more accustomed to conference rooms than to red carpets. In her remarks, Lee, who is forty-six, recalled emigrating from South Korea, assimilating with help from “Charlie’s Angels” and “The Love Boat,” and wondering why TV stars were mostly white when the people around her were not. When she finished recording, she was joined by Anjula Acharia, a talent manager and venture capitalist, who complimented her pink gown, which fastened at one shoulder with a bow of Oldenburgian proportions. “I’m going to change in the car,” Lee said. “I’ve done that a few times. I scare the drivers.”

Acharia and Lee walked a short red carpet. Nadja Bellan-White, an Ogilvy & Mather executive vice-president based in London, grabbed Lee’s elbow. “I hear you have to leave,” Bellan-White said. Like Lee, she was receiving a Legend Award that evening. (Earlier this year, as part of a conservation ad campaign, Bellan-White created a Tinder profile for the world’s only remaining male northern white rhinoceros, who has a low sperm count; more than two million people swiped right on him, raising a hundred thousand dollars for researching alternative reproduction methods.)

“Whatever one,” Lee said.

“I’m waiting for you to be Iger,” Chen said. Robert Iger, the Disney C.E.O. to whom Lee reports, is stepping down in 2019. “That’s not why I talk to you, by the way. I’m homies with you because I like you.”

—Sheila Marikar
On a recent afternoon, the Toys R Us big-box store in Coney Island, Brooklyn, was lively. The entrance was crowded with racks of Halloween costumes. There were aisles of Lego sets, bats and balls, Minions and Minecraft, Nerf guns, baby dolls, and fairy wands. Families were dragging their children through the store. The reassuringly typical scene belied the fact that the toy retailer had been in financial distress for months, and that many of its suppliers weren’t shipping their products to the stores, for fear that they wouldn’t be paid. On September 18th, a few days before my visit, Toys R Us, five billion dollars in debt, had filed for bankruptcy protection.

Some of the early postmortems in the press blamed the chain’s sorry state on Amazon and other online retailers, which have put undeniable pressure on Amazon and other online retailers, the press blamed the chain’s sorry state on bankruptcy protection. Five billion dollars in debt, had filed for bankruptcy protection.

Dozens of retailers have filed for bankruptcy protection since 2015, and, by one estimate, forty per cent of them had some private-equity ownership. Private-equity companies generally raise money from investors and then use that money to purchase faltering businesses, making changes that, ideally, improve financial performance, such as hiring new management, updating inventory systems, and closing less popular locations. Dollarama and Dollar General, for example, were seen as successful investments by Bain and K.K.R., respectively, in part because they bought the chains just before the financial crisis increased consumer demand for bargain shopping.

For a certain kind of midsized, past-its-prime retail company, private-equity ownership often plays out differently. In the case of Payless Shoes, for instance, the owners made hundreds of millions of dollars through fees and special dividend payments, even as the company, forced to borrow large sums to meet those obligations, failed.

A recent book, “Glass House: The 1% Economy and the Shattering of the All-American Town,” by the journalist Brian Alexander, does a remarkable job of illustrating what happens when such schemes go awry. Alexander charts the decline of Anchor Hocking, once the economic heart of Lancaster, Ohio. The company made glass tableware, jars, and bottles that were sold all over the world. Lancaster thrived. By the eighties, however, the company was struggling to compete with cheaper imported glass products. After a dizzying series of takeovers, Anchor Hocking was eventually purchased by two New York-based private-equity firms, which forced it to sell off its real-estate holdings, close plants, and fire workers. Some of these changes were the result of justifiable economic reasoning; others mainly delivered payments to the investors. Anchor Hocking filed for bankruptcy twice, most recently in 2015.

Anchor Hocking had long doubled as a kind of local government in Lancaster, helping finance parks and schools and ensuring the town a supply of stable, well-paying jobs. Once the private-equity firms came in, Alexander told me recently, “there was a generation-and-a-half erosion of the social contract in Lancaster.” As Anchor Hocking declined, so did people’s faith in everything around them. “This has lots of follow-on effects,” he went on. Lancaster is now blighted by unemployment and drug abuse. “I had a hard time finding anyone under age forty who believed in much of anything,” he said. “It wasn’t just this particular company. It was religion, the federal government, the state government, the media. Why should they? These people had been screwed.” The resulting disaffection emerged in the voting patterns of the 2016 election. Alexander recalled speaking to an Anchor Hocking worker on the morning of November 8th. She had voted for Trump, and sounded emotional. Alexander asked why she chose Trump, and there was a long pause. Then she said, “I just want it to be like it was.”

—Sheelah Kolhatkar
A few months ago, at Mexico City’s Auditorio Nacional, workers were cleaning up after a triumphant viewing of “L’Elisir d’Amore,” broadcast live from the Metropolitan Opera House. Outside, in the bright sunshine, Reforma Avenue was closed to traffic for a protest. Angry people gathered on the theatre steps, waving Mexican flags and hoisting effigies of Donald Trump, and then began marching toward El Ángel, a century-old monument to Mexican independence. One protester carried a placard that read “Mexico Deserves Respect.” Another held a poster of Trump with a Hitler mustache and the tagline “Twitler.” A local activist known as Juanito carried a large American flag bearing an unflattering image of Trump and the message “Enough! Gringo Racist, Full of Shit Trump, Son of Satan, You’re a Danger to the World.” Juanito said that he was prepared to take up arms against the American incursion, demonstrating his resolve by pointing out the scars of old bullet wounds.

Trump began his assault on Mexico almost as soon as he announced his candidacy for President. In a rambling speech at Trump Tower on June 16, 2015, he blamed Mexico for stealing American jobs, and for allowing its worst elements to cross the border: “They’re bringing drugs, they’re bringing crime, they’re rapists.” To solve the problem, he pledged, “I will build a great, great wall on our southern border. And I will have Mexico pay for that wall.” These ideas proved popular with Trump supporters, and rants about Mexico were soon a regular feature of his campaign events. As he sharpened his routine, Mexicans became not only rapists and drug dealers but also murderers. Trump promised to overhaul U.S. immigration policy and to deport “bad hombres” by the millions. At rallies, he asked, “Who’s going to pay for the wall?” and the crowds howled back, “Mexico!” If Mexico would not pay, he suggested, he might cancel visas for Mexicans and block migrants living in the U.S. from sending remittances back home.

In Mexico, Trump’s insults and threats have made him a figure of loathing. A poll in July found that eighty-eight per cent of Mexicans viewed him unfavorably. During the march, as protesters gathered at El Ángel to sing the national anthem, one group held up a large sign that said “Make America Hate Again.” Another brandished a Trump piñata, its mouth obscenely open in the manner of a sex doll. Yet the demonstration lacked the urgency that typifies politics in Mexico, where, last winter, rioters protesting gas prices set tires ablaze and sacked hundreds of shops. Along Reforma Avenue, pushcart vendors sold ice cream, and groups of friends posed for smiling selfies. As it turned out, most of the political left had skipped the event, perceiving it as a thinly disguised rally of support for the highly unpopular government of President Enrique Peña Nieto.

Since his election, in 2012, Peña Nieto has fumbled his way through a series of scandals. He campaigned on promises to curb crime and improve security; instead, during his time in office, more than ninety thousand Mexicans have fallen victim to homicide. His government has been lambasted for a lacklustre investigation into the disappearance and presumed mass murder of forty-three teacher trainees, a crime that involved state police and, allegedly, local politicians, the military, and a drug cartel. He supported a series of exceedingly corrupt state governors, including several who became fugitives from the law. His wife struck a deal with a government building contractor to buy

Mexican leaders feel pressured both to defy and to deal with the U.S. President.
a multimillion-dollar house on unusually favorable terms. In 2015, the notorious drug kingpin Joaquín (El Chapo) Guzmán tunneled his way out of a maximum-security prison, with evident official complicity. And, this summer, the Administration was accused of using spyware to target government critics.

On top of everything else, Peña Nieto made the calamitous decision, in August, 2016, to invite Trump to Mexico. On that visit, Trump, still a candidate, was treated with the pomp normally reserved for visiting heads of state. It was a victory for Trump, who seemed, at least to his supporters, suddenly Presidential. But, immediately after returning home, he humiliated his host by promising at a rally that he still planned to build the wall and to have Mexico pay for it.

The response in Mexico was furious. Enrique Krauze, a historian and magazine editor who is arguably the country’s most prominent public intellectual, wrote a column titled “Trump in Mexico: A Historic Error.” In it, he argued, “Peña Nieto should have asked for an apology for the repeated insults made against the Mexicans. . . . Not only did he not do that, he referred to Trump’s aggressions as ‘misunderstandings.’ . . . The only winner: Trump. There was just one loser: Peña Nieto. Or, better put, Peña Nieto and the Mexicans.” As Peña Nieto tried to defend his decision in interviews (“Could we have done things better? Maybe”), his approval rating plummeted, eventually reaching twelve per cent.

During Trump’s campaign, one of the chief objects of his disdain was the two-decade-old North American Free Trade Agreement, which he called “the worst trade deal maybe ever signed anywhere.” He blamed the treaty for sending manufacturing jobs to Mexico, and vowed to get Americans a better deal, or to scrap it entirely. This summer, the U.S., Canada, and Mexico began negotiations to overhaul NAFTA. Peña Nieto has little leverage, and any pushback against Trump carries the risk of losing the agreement entirely. But if he appears too cozy with Trump he risks losing support at home, and he cannot afford to lose much more. At the march, one protester’s sign chastised Peña Nieto as a vendepatria: a traitor willing to sell his own country. Another one, less decorous, said simply, “Peña, fuck your mother.”

The harshest insult that you hear from Peña Nieto’s critics is that he isn’t even running the country. In their view, the feckless President has left Mexico’s political direction mostly to his foreign secretary, Luis Videgaray. It was Videgaray who, last year, as finance secretary, persuaded Peña Nieto to invite Trump to Mexico. In the aftermath, Videgaray was forced out of office, but following Trump’s election he returned to favor and was appointed foreign secretary. He has been Mexico’s point man with the Trump White House ever since. His prominent role has earned him comparisons to Napoleon Bonaparte’s chief diplomat, Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand, who became notorious for his dubious loyalties. Still, he has remained Peña Nieto’s closest adviser. “He’s the puppet master,” a Western diplomat told me. Luis Miguel González, the influential editorial director of the financial newspaper El Economista, agreed. “Videgaray is Peña’s Svengali,” he said. “Since his return, Peña Nieto is a President in name only; the real power is Luis Videgaray.”

Not long ago, I visited Videgaray in his private office, situated in a two-story faux-Colonial villa in Mexico City’s Polanco neighborhood. The area is popular among the city’s affluent international class: landscaped shrubbery, high-end retail, security guards everywhere. In his office, Videgaray, an efficient-looking man of forty-nine, wearing a slim-fitting suit, directed a staff of brisk young men in similar suits. He has a peak of thinning hair, intelligent eyes, and a closely cropped beard. In conversation, he adopts a no-nonsense mien, occasionally allowing himself a brief smile. Videgaray, who earned a doctorate in economics from M.I.T. (his thesis: “The Fiscal Response to Oil Shocks”), has a reputation for nerdish brilliance, and also for arrogance. A U.S. official described him as “a guy who in meetings is always seen as the smartest guy in the room. Compare that with his boss, and you’ll see there’s not a lot of, shall we say, technical expertise there.”

Videgaray was a political obsessive from an early age. At seven, he watched a televised presentation by the ruling Partido Revolucionario Institucional and was inspired by the spectacle; as a grade-school student, he led a movement demanding additional recess. The PRI was a good bet for an ambitious young man. Founded in 1929, it ran Mexico virtually without competition for seven decades. When Videgaray got involved, in 1987, the Party’s politics were turning toward neoliberalism, and his economic expertise would prove valuable. Videgaray began working with Peña Nieto in 2005, as he was campaigning for governor of the State of Mexico, the country’s most populous and politically important region. After Peña Nieto won, Videgaray became his finance secretary, and he earned praise for vastly improving the state’s fiscal situation; among other things, he helped renegotiate eighty-seven per cent of the public debt. In 2012, he oversaw Peña Nieto’s Presidential campaign, and he was strikingly effective. (A worker on the rival campaign, quoted in the magazine Gatopardo, recalled that Videgaray was “feared and hated.”) In an election that has since been the subject of intense legal scrutiny, Videgaray helped lead Peña Nieto to victory. That year, Videgaray bought a villa in an exclusive golf community from the same contractor who had built Peña Nieto’s wife’s house. (He denied any wrongdoing, pointing out that he had arranged the purchase while he was out of government.)

Videgaray’s current influence has less to do with his financial or electoral acumen than with his friendship with Jared Kushner. The two met during Trump’s campaign, and they have worked closely behind the scenes to ease tensions between their bosses, like consiglieres for competing Mafia families. “Jared and Videgaray pretty much run Mexico policy,” the U.S. official told me earlier this year. “It’s all pretty much just between them. There’s not really any interagency relationships going on right now.” In the State Department, he explained, career diplomats were no longer kept informed: “U.S. officials sometimes learn the latest not from their own agencies but from their Mexican counterparts—especially Videgaray.”

A senior White House official told me that Kushner was introduced to Videgaray by a close friend, who said
an opportunity to “change the dialogue a little bit” between the U.S. and Mexico. Videgaray and Kushner met twice as they worked together to arrange Trump’s visit to Mexico. With local opinion strongly against Trump, the official said, the invitation was “very courageous,” but also “a brilliant act of foresight.” To avoid antagonistic press, they decided to hold the visit without announcing it in advance, and the Trump campaign was impressed by Videgaray’s organizational skill and by his circumspection. “There are a million ways they could have screwed us,” the official said. “Luis proved to be honorable.” As he and Kushner negotiated statements to be read at a joint press conference, they found common interests, the official told me. Videgaray pointed out that Mexico had its own concerns about migrants and drugs crossing its southern border; he agreed with Kushner that updating NAFTA’s provisions could be a “win-win” for their countries.

When Videgaray resigned, amid outrage over Trump’s visit, Trump tweeted, “Mexico has lost a brilliant finance minister and a wonderful man who I know is highly respected by President Peña Nieto.” In a follow-up tweet, he wrote, “With Luis, Mexico and the United States would have made wonderful deals together—where both Mexico and the US would have benefitted.” In Mexico, this only increased the perception that Videgaray was “Trump’s guy.” But he and Kushner continued to meet, and, in December, Kushner arranged for him to join Trump on the golf course—never mind that Videgaray does not play golf. (Videgaray denies this meeting.) His evidence of loyalty contributed to a close relationship, in which, the White House official said, direct access could “short-circuit long, protracted decisions.”

Videgaray, though, has often been made to remember that Trump campaigned on a promise of America First. Soon after the Inauguration, he and Mexico’s economy secretary, Ildefonso Guajardo, flew to Washington to meet their new counterparts. Not long after they landed, they learned that Trump had issued one of his first executive orders, calling for the construction of the border wall. Despite the insult, the officials decided to stay; Peña Nieto was due to join them the following week, and preparations needed to be made.

That day, Kushner took Videgaray to see Trump in the White House. Their goal, reportedly, was to persuade Trump to moderate a speech about the wall that he was intending to give in a few hours; they argued that it was “no way to begin” his relationship with Mexico. (Videgaray denies this.) Trump assented, and in his speech he included some language devised by Videgaray and Kushner, avoiding that “a strong and healthy economy in Mexico is very good for the United States.” The Mexicans hoped that they were making progress—but then, in a televised speech, Peña Nieto politely reiterated that Mexico would not pay for the wall.

The next morning, Videgaray was back at the White House, meeting with Administration aides, when, from across the hallway, Trump tweeted, “The U.S. has a 60 billion dollar trade deficit with Mexico. It has been a one-sided deal from the beginning of NAFTA with massive numbers of jobs and companies lost. If Mexico is unwilling to pay for the badly needed wall, then it would be better to cancel the upcoming meeting.” Videgaray immediately stopped the meeting and reached out to Peña Nieto, who soon responded with his own tweet, saying that he was cancelling his visit. Trump had been in office for six days, and he had already sent the U.S. relationship with Mexico into a tailspin.

In a press release intended to end the discord, the White House said that Trump and Peña Nieto had set aside their differences in an amicable telephone call. In fact, according to a transcript of their conversation published by the Washington Post, Trump repeatedly threatened to impose a border tax on Mexican goods, and even to engage in a trade war, in order to comply with his campaign promise to bring back American jobs. “I have been given as President tremendous taxation powers for trade and for other reasons—far greater than anybody understands,” Trump said. “I would love if you want to reinstitute the meetings between Luis and a staff that I will assemble in the United States. . . . They are dealmakers.” But, he added, “if we cannot work a deal, I want to tell you we are going to put a very substantial tax on the border.”

Trump then turned to the funding of the wall. “We are both in a little bit of a political bind, because I have to have Mexico pay for the wall—I have to,” he said. “I have been talking about it for a two-year period, and the reason I say they are going to pay for the wall is because Mexico has made a fortune out of the stupidity of U.S. trade representatives. They are beating us at trade and they are beating us at the border, and they are killing us with drugs. . . . If you are going to say that Mexico is not going to pay for the wall, then I do not want to meet with you guys anymore, because I cannot live with that.”

In February, Videgaray met in Mexico City with John Kelly, at the time the Secretary of Homeland Security, and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, whom he praised as “men of a great level.” He told me, “We had a work meeting, and I mean a real work meeting, making some positive steps. Then, when we were headed to our joint press conference, I was handed a telephone showing me that President Trump had said he was going to militarize” the deportations of Mexicans.

At the press conference, Kelly attempted to soothe concerns. “There will be no, repeat, no mass deportations—everything we do in D.H.S. will be done legally and according to human rights and the legal-justice system of the United States,” he said, adding, “There will be no use of military forces in immigration.” He added a conciliatory note: “Between the Mexican officials and the American officials, there’s a friendship and an air of cooperation that has to be seen to be believed.” Videgaray, grim-faced at the lectern, noted that it was a “complex moment” in the relationship between the two countries.

Trump’s outbursts, meant to force Mexican officials to work with him, seemed instead to increase the pressure on them to resist. “Mexico is demanding a strong position from us,” Videgaray said. “Many people feel it would be better if we broke with the government...
of the United States.” But was it worth destroying the economy to satisfy the national honor? “We have to keep ourselves focussed on our interests,” Videgaray said. “Beyond all the rhetoric, there are the interests.”

The Mexican observers who tell you that Videgaray is the current Administration’s puppet master will also tell you that the puppet master’s master is Carlos Salinas de Gortari, a pervasive and mysterious presence in Mexican politics. “If Mexico is a mathematical equation, no one knows the true value of the x of Salinas,” Luis Miguel González told me. Salinas was President from 1988 to 1994, and his term was both eventful and controversial. He is remembered for sponsoring the creation of NAFTA, and also for attracting a gaudy string of criminal accusations. His anointed successor, Luis Donaldo Colosio, was assassinated on the campaign trail, and a few months later Salina’s former brother-in-law, the PRI’s secretary-general, was murdered in Mexico City. Many Mexicans suspected Salinas of orchestrating the killings, but he was never charged; instead, after he left office, his brother, Raúl Salinas, was convicted of murder and sentenced to a long prison term.

Carlos Salinas fled the country, claiming that he and his family were being persecuted, and spent most of the next four years in Havana, Dublin, and London, before returning to Mexico in 1999. Now in his late sixties, Salinas is widely credited with helping mastermind Peña Nieto’s rise to power; his Administration also gave Videgaray a position in the finance ministry, a job that he has described as formative. Salinas is extremely wealthy and retains tremendous influence in the PRI, with his niece, Claudia Ruiz Massieu, serving as the secretary-general.

Salinas’s home in Mexico City is situated on a quiet street, in a closely guarded residential estate. He received me one morning in his library, a two-story room outfitted with oak bookshelves and an exquisitely embossed saddle on a mount—Salinas is a keen horseman. The walls were hung with photographs showing Salinas with an array of world leaders, including George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, Pope John Paul, and Fidel Castro.

Salinas told me that he viewed Trump as “an American throwback.” When I asked what he meant, he explained, “We’re finally able to see what the United States has always really been, a plutocracy and a military force with an ideological core.” The U.S., he went on, had never truly reconciled the two sides of the Civil War—those who favored slavery and those who opposed it. “Sure, the U.S. has always tried to present itself as a cradle of liberty,” he said. “But it has always been a fractured land, and that’s showing today in its attitudes toward Mexican immigrants.” Trump’s Presidency, he said, represented the concerns of white citizens afraid of being outnumbered by Latino immigrants—“a last-ditch effort by a European-American group to institute the regulatory changes necessary to allow them to hold on to power for another generation.”

Salinas and his allies, of course, are waging their own fight to hold on to power. The next Presidential election in Mexico is scheduled for July, 2018, and, despite the widespread contempt for Peña Nieto, the PRI still hopes to win. To a great extent, the outcome will depend on how the current government meets the challenge from Trump—and particularly on the handling of NAFTA.

American voters tend to assess NAFTA based on its effects on the job market during the past two decades. Mexicans, or at least those who oppose NAFTA, see it as a continuation of an oppressive relationship that dates back at least to the start of the Mexican-American War, in 1846. In that conflict, known locally as the United States Intervention in Mexico, a trumped-up border dispute in Texas ended with U.S. soldiers occupying the capital and forcing the government to sign over half of the country’s territory. After the Mexican Revolution began, in 1910, the U.S. Ambassador helped overthrow Mexico’s President, who was promptly assassinated, intensifying a bloody civil war. In 1914, when Mexican authorities briefly detained nine American sailors, Woodrow Wilson ordered the Marines to invade the port city of Veracruz, which they held for six months. In Mexico, these incidents can seem as relevant to the current negotiations as foreign-exchange markets do. “Mexicans live their history every day,”
among ordinary people there is mostly
and fun made of him, but I think that
you can find Trump piñatas and masks
for his secretary to bring him a news-
paper photograph of a bus bearing
an image of Trump and the message
Somos mexicanos y tu madre te mentamos.
(“We’re Mexicans, and we say fuck your
mother.”) Salinas laughed. “Popular
expressions such as these are welcome,
but the authorities must be contained
in their responses.”

In the NAFTA negotiations, he said,
“the key will be to know when to make
the leg hard, as soccer players say. The
thing we know about Trump is that he
always has to win. So we have to figure
out how to let him think he’s won, when
we are actually the winners. But we also
cannot appear to be losers in front of
the Mexican people.”

Ildefonso Guajardo, who helps lead
the NAFTA negotiations, spoke with
insouciance about working out agreeable
terms with the Americans. White
House officials had hinted that
they preferred renegotiating the trade
agreement to jettisoning it, and he said
that it was a relief to see some “level
heads” on the American side. But, after
some prodding, Guajardo echoed con-
cerns about the damage Trump had done
to Mexican-American relations. He
spoke of an N.F.L. exhibition game held
in Mexico City which had prompted a
heated debate over whether to play the
U.S. national anthem. In the end, Gua-
jardo said, the anthem had been played,
but the fact that the debate had even
taken place revealed a new animosity. I
asked Guajardo if he felt personally
offended by Trump, and he replied, “As
Mexico’s secretary of economy, I do not
have the luxury of being insulted. But
as a Mexican, yes, I am, deeply so.”

When I asked whether he would
seek redress for the ruined agricultural
sector, he demurred. Instead, he named
other areas where he saw possible break-
throughs: energy, telecommunications,
and e-commerce, all of which have
changed radically since the regulations
were drafted, in the early nineties. He
suggested that it was to Mexicans’ ad-
vantange to limit the scope of negotia-
tions. “If you put the patient on the op-
ating table without knowing exactly
what your intervention is going to be

partly as a result of this economic
interdependence, Mexico’s traditional
anti-Americanism had mostly died
down in recent years. But Trump’s
threats of deportations and taxes on re-
mittances have brought anxiety to mil-
ions of poor Mexicans who work in
the United States, and to the millions
more who depend on their earnings.
Enrique Krauze, the historian, said that
he was outraged by Trump’s fearmong-
ering. “At the level of popular culture,
you can find Trump piñatas and masks
and fun made of him, but I think that
among ordinary people there is mostly
perplexity and worry—and it’s obvious
why,” he said. “This completely unex-
pected aggression was a real shock. The
memory of the problems between Mex-
ico and the United States belonged
to the remote past—prehistoric! Above
all, because the U.S.-Mexico rela-
tionship has changed so much. Mex-
ico has Americanized in so many ways.
Everyone is travelling, consuming,
speaking English, listening to the same
music.” Krauze told me that Mexico’s
“low-key response” to Trump had
left him ashamed. “There is a very real
sense here that the United States is
ei gigante—the giant—which crushed
us several times and may do so again.”

Vicente Fox, who served as President
for the National Action Party, or
PAN, from 2000 to 2006, has been the
most outspoken of Mexico’s senior pol-
iticians—perhaps because Mexican Pres-
idents are limited to one term, and so
he has little to lose. In a recent video
satirically announcing that he would
run for President of the United States
in 2020, he derided Trump’s legislative
record. “Donald, you suck so much at
this job,” he said. “If they ever do a
M. Rushmore for shitty Presidents, it
will just be your bloated, orange head—
four times.” Among current Mexican
officials, almost everyone I met offered
commissions about Trump, and many
suggested that he was a bigot and a
dangerous, reckless man. One went so
far as to fantasize about the possibility
that “Trump might end up like J.F.K.”
But for most the guiding principle was
circumspection.

When I asked Salinas what strategy
he recommended, he said, “The problem
is, isn’t yet enough clarity coming
from his government to know how to
formulate a policy. For that reason, today
more than ever, it is necessary to recur to
the second most important of Plato’s vir-
tues: prudence. The first, of course, was
justice.” Salinas’s advice appeared to have
been adopted as policy. A PRI senator,
Marcela Guerra, told me that she had
been summoned to a private Party meet-
ing to discuss the Trump phenomenon.
“At the meeting,” she said, “Peña Nieto
asked us to have patience and prudence.”

Mexicans cherish the tradition of
Mexico bravo—the historical ideal of
their country as indomitable—and Sa-
linas seemed pained to let it go. “What
one would really like to tell Trump is
what the placentas say on the backs of
buses in Acapulco,” he said. He called
for his secretary to bring him a news-
paper photograph of a bus bearing
an image of Trump and the message
Somos mexicanos y tu madre te mentamos.
(“We’re Mexicans, and we say fuck your
mother.”) Salinas laughed. “Popular
expressions such as these are welcome,
but the authorities must be contained
in their responses.”

NAFTA went into effect on January 1,
1994, and was greeted by an armed
revolt: Zapatista fighters, their faces cov-
ered with bandannas and balaclavas,
seized a series of towns in Chiapas. The
Zapatista leader Subcomandante Mar-
cos called the trade alliance a death sen-
tence, arguing that it would destroy Mex-
ico’s rural economy, force dependency
on American imports, and increase the
disparity between rich and poor. Twenty-
three years later, Mexico’s economy has
been transformed, especially in the north,
and a new middle class has emerged.
But a number of the Zapatistas’ asser-
tions have been borne out. The agricul-
tural sector, centered in the mostly in-
digenous southern regions, has been
devastated. Towns and villages that re-
lied on the sale of produce have seen
their markets collapse, and many have
fallen into surging criminal economies
imposed by drug cartels. At the same
time, Mexico has become utterly de-
pendent on the U.S. for economic vi-
bility. Several people I spoke to pointed
out a particularly painful absurdity:
even as farming communities struggle,
the country imports corn from the U.S.
The prominent journalist Alejandro
Pérez Varela spoke bitterly of Mexico’s
reliance on the U.S.: “It’s made us one
of the most obese people on earth, be-
cause we are now mass consumers of
American junk food. It has created a
class of superwealthy, consisting of a
couple of dozen people who are closely
linked to political power. It’s created
fifty-three million very poor people for
whom the only solution is to emigrate,
en masse, to the United States and send
remittances home.”

Partly as a result of this economic
interdependence, Mexico’s traditional
anti-Americanism had mostly died
down in recent years. But Trump’s
threats of deportations and taxes on re-
mittances have brought anxiety to mil-
ions of poor Mexicans who work in
the United States, and to the millions
more who depend on their earnings.
Enrique Krauze, the historian, said that
he was outraged by Trump’s fearmong-
ering. “At the level of popular culture,
you can find Trump piñatas and masks
and fun made of him, but I think that
among ordinary people there is mostly
perplexity and worry—and it’s obvious
why,” he said. “This completely unex-
pected aggression was a real shock. The
memory of the problems between Mex-
ico and the United States belonged
to the remote past—prehistoric! Above
all, because the U.S.-Mexico rela-
tionship has changed so much. Mex-
ico has Americanized in so many ways.
Everyone is travelling, consuming,
speaking English, listening to the same
music.” Krauze told me that Mexico’s
“low-key response” to Trump had
left him ashamed. “There is a very real
sense here that the United States is
about, it can be a mess,” he said. “If it’s a free shot for anyone who wants to get their hands on this guy”—he laughed—“we will end up killing NAFTA.”

Videgaray was similarly restrained. When I asked how Mexico planned to proceed, he said, “When we get some good news, we should regard it as a small piece of good news, and when we get a tweet or a threat, we should consider it a small tweet or threat. We can’t allow our positions and actions to be overly influenced by what happens day to day. We have to be supremely patient.” The Mexicans’ greatest obstacle may be Trump’s unorthodox economic ideas. He is obsessed with the trade deficit, which last year, according to U.S. government figures, came to fifty-five billion dollars, out of a total trade relationship worth nearly six hundred billion. “Trump doesn’t stop talking about it,” the Western diplomat said. “He asks everyone [in the government] who has to do with Mexico about the deficit, and whether they’ve gotten it down.”

Gary Clyde Hufbauer, of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, told me, “Most of us in trade economics disregard deficit as a metric to measure the worth of a trade agreement. President Trump’s thinking is very simple, and comes from a concept called mercantilism,” a protectionist doctrine that has been assailed by economists since Adam Smith. “He is also a physiocrat, which means that services don’t count. The U.S. has a very large surplus globally in services. But, if you can’t see it and kick it, it doesn’t count for him.”

Mexican officials know that their negotiating position is not strong. José Antonio Meade, the finance secretary, met me in his grand office at the national palace, and presented a litany of statistics to demonstrate that NAFTA was as good for Americans as it was for Mexicans. “I hope we can get away from the noise, and that the Trump Administration can see that Mexico is not part of the problem but the solution,” he said. Trump seems unmoved; in a recent speech in Arizona, he said, “I think we’ll end up probably terminating NAFTA.”

Videgaray and his colleagues have only a couple of threats to make in response. One involves China. In a recent interview, promoted on the government’s Web site, he spoke of increasing trade with Asia, Latin America, and Europe, as part of an unprecedented effort to “expand our exports and the investment we receive from other latitudes.” This September, he and Peña Nieto travelled to China, looking for investment partners. The other threat is that Trump’s belligerence will encourage open revolt in Mexico—that, if the economy collapses, the mild-mannered protesters I saw on Reforma Avenue will give way to a new generation of post–Zapatista revolutionaries. When I spoke to Salinas, he said, “Trump has no idea of what a destabilized Mexico would be like. We don’t want that for Mexico, either. But this sorcerer’s apprentice can unleash forces that . . . he just has no idea.”

In the campaign for next year’s Presidential election, the current polling leader is a left-of-center populist named Andrés Manuel López Obrador. López Obrador, who was Mexico City’s head of government from 2000 to 2005, narrowly lost the 2006 Presidential election, and for months afterward he encouraged mass protests, centered on a tent city erected in the capital. He has re-emerged with a new party, the National Regeneration Movement, or MORENA, founded to dispel “the neoliberal model” and to seek “the democratic transformation of the state.” López Obrador’s rivals depict him as a demagogue who would create the same chaos in Mexico that Hugo Chávez did in Venezuela. Krauze, who once criticized him as a “tropical messiah,” told me that he regards him as an ideologue with authoritarian leanings. López Obrador is unusually law-abiding for a Mexican politician, but Krauze did not find that reassuring. “He is not corrupt—but ostentatiously so,” he said. “He has a saint’s complex, and that, I think, would be very dangerous.” López Obrador’s defenders claim that he has moved closer to the political center, pointing out that, in Mexico City, he teamed up with the communications magnate Carlos Slim on...
urban-regeneration schemes. A longtime adviser, Ricardo Monreal, told me, “He’s a different politician today. He’s been talking with the private sector and the military, and they’re fine with him.” Nevertheless, Peña Nieto’s government has used López Obrador’s ascent to stoke anxiety. Mexican officials have warned White House aides that Trump’s behavior could help make the forthcoming election a referendum on which candidate is the most anti-American. López Obrador, they suggest, would be bad not just for business but for security, too, allowing a new influx of “bad hombres.”

The Western diplomat recalled advising the U.S. Administration not to overreact; when John Kelly declared, last April, that a leftist government in Mexico would “not be good for America or for Mexico,” López Obrador’s poll ratings shot up. Monreal acknowledged that the standoff with Trump contributed to López Obrador’s new appeal. “While this government has been paralyzed in the face of the Trump challenge, vacillating and lukewarm, López Obrador is seen as a man with character, someone who can negotiate on behalf of Mexico,” he said. In June, López Obrador published a book titled “Listen, Trump,” in which he accuses the President of stirring up “Hispanophobia” and castigates Peña Nieto for failing to represent Mexico “with dignity.”

Luis Hernández Navarro, a columnist for the left-of-center daily La Jornada, argued that many of Mexico’s problems result directly from “the wholesale adoption of the American model by the country’s élites.” Yet the future of this complicated Mexican-American fusion has been thrown into doubt. “For twenty-five years we’ve been told we’re North Americans,” he said. “But now they’re saying, ‘No, actually, you’re not North Americans,” he said. “But now we’re here.”

Hernández hoped that Trump might turn out to be a blessing in disguise, obliging Mexicans to see the need for a “new national compact” that seeks renewal through greater economic sovereignty. López Obrador has picked up on some of these ideas in his Presidential campaign, but he has not gone far enough for Hernández, who intends to support a candidate backed by the Zapatistas and the National Indigenous Congress, a fifty-three-year-old indigenous woman named María de Jesús Patricio. Patricio, a traditional healer by profession, has called for Mexicans of all kinds to “join forces in order to destroy this system that is generally finishing us all off.”

As the NAFTA talks were getting under way this summer, Videgaray made amelioratory gestures. He looked for goods that Mexico imports from various countries which could be bought instead from U.S. producers. And, in a break with Mexico’s tradition of diplomatic nonintervention, he supported a regional initiative aimed at isolating Venezuela’s socialist government. In response, Venezuela’s foreign secretary blasted him as “vile” and accused him of subservience to the United States. (When I asked Videgaray about this, he gave a wry look and said, “The Venezuelans are colorful.”) In September, Mexico expelled the North Korean Ambassador after his country held nuclear tests. “It was a great way to show good will and solidarity,” the senior White House official said. “The President really appreciated it.”

Trump’s appreciation tends not to last, though, and analysts on both sides suggested that negotiations could be scrapped at any moment. “I think Trump is confident that Jared will deliver him a good result in the end—but if not he’s willing to go with the nuclear option,” Duncan Wood, the director of the Wilson Center’s Mexico Institute, told me. The Mexican negotiators’ best hope may be to use American concerns about chaos in Mexico to force an advantageous deal, which includes both security and the economy. But if they consent to separate agreements on the issues that are of greatest interest to the United States—narcotrafficking, money laundering, counterterrorism, and immigration—they may have no leverage left for trade.

The government’s critics say there is no leverage left, anyway. One of the country’s most redoubtable politicians, Porfirio Muñoz Ledo, formerly a president of the PRI, a secretary of labor, and an Ambassador to the E.U., told me bluntly, “Why is this government so weak? Because we have completely surrendered to the United States through NAFTA.”

Muñoz Ledo argued that Mexico should have more vehemently opposed Trump. In similar circumstances, he said, Nelson Mandela would have had the moral authority to speak out against a border wall. “Unfortunately,” he said with a grimace, “Mexico doesn’t have a Mandela. It only has a Peña Nieto.”

Whatever Videgaray can find to appease Trump probably won’t be enough, Marcelo Ebrard, a popular former Mexico City mayor, predicted. “Trump needs a victory, and he will not let this NAFTA opportunity slip by. I can’t see it going well for Mexico under any circumstances. But, no matter what happens, Videgaray is bound to come out afterward and put the best face on things. Like a man who has had a leg amputated during surgery, he’ll say, ‘It didn’t go so badly—we could have lost both legs!’”

In September, just after NAFTA negotiators met in Mexico City, I went back to see Videgaray at his office. He seemed relieved that, for the moment, relations between his country and the U.S. were going through normal channels—that the “interests” were being handled by qualified experts. “Jared Kushner remains a very important person in the relationship, and a very helpful and positive force,” he said. But, he added, there is now “a much more professional management style.” Videgaray had been visiting Washington and talking to legislators about the consequences for their constituents if NAFTA collapsed. “We’re getting tremendous support from both sides of the aisle,” he said. Senators from several agricultural states had signed a letter reminding negotiators that NAFTA had led to “tremendous growth in U.S. trade.” As Videgaray and his envoys dealt with U.S. institutions, rather than with Trump, things seemed less dire. “We went from panic to concern,” he told me.

But the institutions might not ultimately decide the outcome. “It may not matter what the negotiations come up with,” Wood told me. “It just matters if Donald Trump says it’s a great deal. That’s where the anxiety is coming from. Having worked in international relations for twenty years, I never thought we’d get to the point where one person could come along and blow everything up. But here we are.”
NUCLEAR MINDFULNESS

BY ETHAN KUPERBERG

Herewith, some mindfulness exercises for the thirty minutes between the launch of a nuclear ballistic missile and its detonation in your city:

Focus on Your Breath
No matter how you choose to spend the last thirty minutes of your life, one thing’s for certain—you’re going to be breathing while doing it. Slowly breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth, if you are not weeping. You can count your breaths if that helps you to relax, but it may increase tension if you find yourself counting down.

Break from Technology
It might be tempting to check social media to see how world leaders, comedians are interpreting the coming apocalypse. Or perhaps checking your e-mail has simply become a “break” activity for you. Practice putting down the phone; you may be surprised at how logging off allows you to “log in” to the terrifying and rapidly crumbling world around you.

Observation
Your immediate environment can be powerful beyond imagination if you just stop to take it in, or realize that it is going to end in what is now less than twenty minutes. Choose an object in view and take a moment to observe it closely. This could be the pattern on your rug, a roommate loading a gun, or even the increasingly bright night sky.

Physical Awareness
Lie down on a yoga mat and focus on the sensations in your body: your feet resting softly on the ground, the adrenaline coursing through your veins, the churning nausea in your stomach. Try to really listen to your body: if it wants to fall asleep or violently vomit, let it do so without judgment.

Listening Mindfulness
Close your eyes, breathe deeply, and allow yourself to focus on the auditory world around you. You may realize that you’re not just hearing the horns of angry drivers trying to exit the city and your neighbors loudly fucking on their front lawns—you are feeling these sounds as well. When we listen mindfully, we are able to experience a more heightened sense of sound—almost as if everyone around us were screaming.

Candle Meditation
Once the power grid goes out, you’re only a few minutes away from annihilation. Light a scented candle in your now darkened room, sit in a comfortable chair, and watch the candle. Notice the flame in its simplicity, and ponder the ironic fact that humanity has reached its demise using the same intelligence with which it mastered fire. Make sure to find a chair that helps you practice good posture.

Mentally Assign Blame to Jill Stein Voters
Sometimes feelings can be so overwhelming that we forget what they are: simply feelings, and nothing more. Focus on the feeling you get when you blame this wholly avoidable Armageddon on self-righteous morally superior morons who couldn’t see with any goddam perspective what was right in front of their fucking faces. Observe the feeling without judgment.

Cultivate Gratitude
Whether it’s a flower bed on a busy city sidewalk or just the heartbreakingly beautiful crying faces of your loved ones, it can be all too easy in our fast-paced society to take things for granted. Try to notice five things in your life that often go unappreciated. Or maybe just two or three, depending on ♦
SOMETHING IN THE AIR

Essential oils have become big business—but are they medicine or marketing?

BY RACHEL MONROE

Twenty years ago, Carla Cohen fell mysteriously ill. She couldn’t put her finger on what was wrong; it felt as though some conspiracy between her mind and her body were eroding her capacity to work. Cohen, who was an entertainment executive in Los Angeles, woke up every morning feeling weak and foggy-brained, with a low-grade fever. Her doctors couldn’t make a diagnosis, and suggested antidepressants. “I said, ‘I’m not depressed!’ They just told me to go home and rest.”

Disillusioned by Western medicine, Cohen began exploring other options. She studied with multiple healers and shamans; she read books with titles like “The Body Toxic” and pursued a massage-therapy license. As part of her training, she took a class on a massage technique called “raindrop therapy,” which incorporates essential oils—aromatic compounds made from plant material. At the time, essential oils were not well known, but Cohen was drawn to them right away. “From the very first moment with those oils, I noticed something was firing that hadn’t been firing,” she said. “I was deeply moved.”

Today, Cohen puts frankincense oil on her scalp every morning; when she feels a cold coming on, she downs an immune-system-boosting oil blend that includes clove, eucalyptus, and rosemary. On days when she has to negotiate a contract on behalf of an organization that she volunteers for, she uses nutmeg and spearmint to sharpen her focus. She earns the majority of her income working as a distributor for Young Living, a leading vendor of essential oils.

Cohen is middle-aged, with a friendly, open face framed by graying curls. Though her house, in Long Beach, is full of New Age trappings—a statue of Ganesh, huge hunks of crystal—she speaks with the quick clip of someone who once gave a lot of corporate presentations. As we sat at her kitchen table, a glass globe puffed out clouds of tangerine-scented vapor.

Cohen offered me a glass of water enhanced with a few drops of an essential-oil blend called Citrus Fresh. “It helps the body detox,” she said. “Not that you’re toxic.” The water was subtly tangy, like a La Croix without the fizz.

Cohen went into her treatment room and came back with a small vial labelled “Clarity.” She put a few drops in my left palm. “This is good for getting your mind clear,” she said. “Rub it clockwise three times. That activates the electrical properties in the oil, and aligns your DNA.” Following Cohen’s instructions, I cupped my hands around my nose and inhaled deeply. The smell was heavier than that of perfume, so minty that it was almost medicinal. Cohen looked at me expectantly. “I feel perkier,” I ventured.

At first, Cohen sold oils to friends and family; she also drummed up business at local yoga studios, and taught classes at a vintage-clothing store. Most of the people she met were unfamiliar with the product. “Oils were not on the radar,” she said. But, around seven years ago, when she signed up for a booth at a holistic health fair, she arrived to find someone else selling oils, too. She started seeing them mentioned in mainstream women’s magazines. Marie Claire advised rubbing a lavender-oil blend on your pulse points for sounder sleep; Elle suggested slathering your face with a frankincense-oil blend to keep your skin young.

More people seemed open to hearing about the medicinal applications of oils as well. “My parents were very much believers in the idea that the doctors were God and the government protects you,” Cohen said. Now, it seemed, people were realizing that typical sources of care weren’t infallible.
Essential oils have long been used to scent products and to flavor foods; Coca-Cola and Pepsi are among their major consumers. But these days, when people talk about essential oils, they’re likely referring to the little vials of liquid essence of lemon or tea tree that you can buy at grocery stores or yoga studios, or from a distributor like Carla Cohen.

Oils are touted as something between a perfume and a potion, a substance that can keep you smelling nice while also providing physical and psychological benefits. They are often stocked on the same shelves as herbal remedies such as echinacea and St.-John’s-wort; big-box stores sell aromatherapy diffusers as an alternative to synthetic-smelling products like Febreze. The model Miranda Kerr used oils to help her get over her breakup with Orlando Bloom. The pop star Kesha tweeted that she starts off every day by sniffing essential oils: “They make me feel so peaceful.” Gwyneth Paltrow is a fan, unsurprisingly, but so are RuPaul, Alanis Morissette, and a trainer for the New York Knicks.

Oils’ rising popularity is part of the contemporary appetite for wellness, an embrace of holistic healthy-living practices ranging from the low key (meditation) to the wacky (Brain Dust, a forty-dollar jar of adaptogenic herbs and mushrooms that promises to “align you with the cosmic flow for great achievement”). Wellness is often dismissed as frivolity, another way for wealthy white women to spend money and obsess about their bodies. But you’re just as likely to find essential oils in a small-town drugstore in the Midwest as in an organic market in L.A., and their appeal is often less about indulgence than about anxiety. “I am concerned about antibiotic resistance, emerging viruses, and the risks posed by chronic disease,” the herbalist Cat Ellis writes in her book “Prepper’s Natural Medicine: Life-Saving Herbs, Essential Oils and Natural Remedies for When There Is No Doctor.” For many consumers, essential oils represent a purer and more ancient form of medicine, one with Biblical overtones—all those scriptural references to anointing—and none of the baggage of the contemporary health-care system. (Wellness-focussed Web sites are more likely to cite oils’ centuries of use in Ayurvedic medicine.) Like homeschooling, beekeeping, and canning, the use of essential oils crosses the political spectrum and speaks to a common desire for increased self-sufficiency—or, more darkly, a fear of imminent institutional collapse. Many of the products available from Goop, Paltrow’s posh wellness emporium, are also for sale on Infowars, Alex Jones’s alt-right conspiracy-theory Web site.

Much of the oil sold in the United States comes from two companies based in Utah, Young Living and doTerra, both of which have claimed to be the largest seller of essential oils in the world. The two companies have more than three million customers apiece, and a billion dollars in annual sales. While there are cheaper oils—Walmart sells a kit of sixteen “therapeutic grade” essential oils for thirty dollars—Young Living and doTerra have built their brands on claims that they sell completely pure, naturally derived oils. “They have Skittles,” Kirk Jowers, a vice-president at doTerra, said. “We have the real fruit.”

In June, I attended Young Living’s “Fulfill Your Destiny” convention for distributors, held at Salt Lake City’s Salt Palace event center. The company, which was founded in 1994, has grown tenfold in the past decade, and the hallways were packed with good-natured, heavily fragrant people heading to workshops with names such as “Yoga: A Business Tool” and “Essential Care for Animals.” They wore T-shirts that said “Essential Oils, Heck yeah” and “There’s an oil for that” and “I’m silently assessing your oil needs.” Never have I sneezed so much; never have I been blessed so enthusiastically when I sneezed.

Young Living sells more than a hundred and fifty oils, and a section of the convention center featured samples of them. Some were familiar—oregano, eucalyptus—while others were proprietary blends meant to evoke different physical or spiritual states. Christmas Spirit “taps into the happiness, joy, and comfort associated with the holiday season”; Dragon Time promotes “feelings of stability and calm during cycles of moodiness.” It was early in the day, so I dabbed on a drop of Acceptance, and then some Highest Potential, for good measure.

In between sessions, Laura Warford, a stay-at-home mom with a drawl and a simmer of silver eyeshadow, told me that she had become involved in oils after her daughter, Emmy Grace, died from a heart defect when she was three days old. Warford came home from the hospital, her breasts still leaking milk, and tried to manage her grief while also taking care of her toddler son. Nights were the worst—she had a hard time falling asleep, and when she did she would wake up again minutes later with her mind racing. A friend recommended diffusing lavender oil. The effect was immediate: she felt calmer and was able to sleep through the night. Soon Warford began selling oils. She found a community of supportive friends through Young Living Facebook groups and shared her story with them. She got up every day by reminding herself that she was helping other people. “You can lose yourself outside of being Mommy,” she said. “I can be creative now. I can use my gifts that I didn’t even know I had before this. I can have adult conversations with people. I went from making zero dollars a month to over zero dollars a month. I got to come here because of Young Living’s paycheck. I bought my plane ticket and my convention pass with my money. That’s empowering. That feels good.”

Both Young Living and doTerra follow a multilevel-marketing model. Distributors often buy products at wholesale prices and sell them at a retail markup, but the real money comes from recruiting other distributors into your “downline,” and getting a commission on their sales. Young Living divides its sales force into a complex hierarchy stratified partly by sales volume, ranging from Distributor (the lowest level, comprising ninety-four per cent of members) to Royal Crown Diamond (less than one-tenth of one per cent).

“Young Living is freedom—spiritual freedom, relationship freedom, incredible financial freedom,” a Diamond-level distributor said at a Young Living panel. (Diamond-level distributors earn a median monthly income of thirty-two thousand dollars.) She told the audience...
Gary Young, the founder of Young Living, made his first appearance at the convention by riding into the arena on a sled pulled by a team of huskies. (Last year, he flew in on a zip line.) An annual highlight is the announcement of a new oil blend. This year’s concoction, Fulfill Your Destiny, was available to distributors for thirty-four dollars for five millilitres and included black pepper, blue spruce, and frankincense, “which opens up your pineal gland,” Young said from the stage.

Young is a tall, lean man in his late sixties with a handsome lined face and a penchant for cowboy hats. His origin story is a key part of Young Living lore: how he grew up in Idaho in a cabin with a dirt roof and no running water; how, in his early twenties, he was working as a logger when a tree fell on him, fracturing his skull, rupturing his spinal cord, and breaking nineteen of his bones; how, once he woke up from the coma, doctors told him that he would never walk again. After two suicide attempts, he decided to drink nothing but water and lemon juice. After two hundred and fifty-three days, he regained feeling in his toes. “That he walks today is a miracle that defies his medical prognosis,” according to his biography, “D. Gary Young: The World Leader in Essential Oils,” which was written by his wife and published by Young Living.

Young’s recovery spurred his immersion in alternative medicine. In 1982, he opened a health center in Spokane, Washington, that included birthing services. One of the babies he attempted to deliver, his own daughter, died after spending...
an hour underwater in a whirlpool bath. The death was ruled an accident, but the county coroner said that the baby would likely have lived if she had been delivered under conventional conditions. The following year, Young said in the presence of undercover detectives that he could detect cancer with a blood test; he was arrested for practicing medicine without a license and, according to the Spokane Spokesman-Review, pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor charge. Around the same time, Young opened a clinic in Tijuana. John Hurst, a reporter for the Los Angeles Times, submitted a blood sample, posing as a patient, and was told that it showed signs of aggressive cancer and liver dysfunction. A “health educator” suggested that Hurst undergo the clinic’s two-thousand-dollar-a-week detox program. When Hurst revealed that the blood sample had come from a cat—a healthy 7-year-old, 20-pound tabby cat named Boomer”—she replied that the cat was “not healthy” and “probably has leukemia.” (It did not.)

After meeting a French lavender distiller and grower at a Whole Life expo in California, Young became fascinated by the medicinal properties of essential oils. In the early nineties, he travelled to France to study distillation methods. He bought a hundred and sixty acres of farmland in Idaho and planted peppermint, tansy, and lavender. In 1994, he married his third wife, Mary, a trained opera singer and a businesswoman. The couple renovated a run-down building in River ton, Utah, to use as the headquarters of Young Living Essential Oils; Young mixed his Abundance oil blend into the paint he used on the walls.

In 2000, Young opened the Young Life Research Clinic, in Springville, Utah, which administered essential oils and other alternative therapies to patients with heart disease, depression, and cancer, among other conditions. The clinic employed a pediatrician named Sherman Johnson, who had recently had his medical license reinstated. About a decade earlier, Johnson had been investigated by the state medical board after a woman had died while he was treating her for cancer. According to the Salt Lake Tribune, after a nurse raised questions about the woman’s death, the body was exhumed. In a subsequent probe, it was determined that she had had multiple-personality disorder but not cancer; that Johnson had believed her story that she had been injected with cancer by a group of witches and gay doctors; and that she had died from an overdose of Demerol, administered by Johnson. Johnson pleaded guilty to manslaughter.

In 2005, the Young Life clinic settled a lawsuit with a patient who claimed that infusions of Vitamin C had caused renal failure, almost killing her. Young closed the Utah clinic and opened one in Ecuador.

As Young Living grew, former employees told me, reining in Young’s spending became an issue. At the company’s showcase farm, in Mona, Utah, Young built replicas of a Wild West town and a medieval castle. As “Sir Gary,” he hosted tournaments, in which he donned a suit of armor and competed in jousting events. He had plans drawn up for a two-hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar theme park, Mount Youngmore, which would feature jousting, a five-star hotel, and a mountain with Young’s face etched on it. (Young has denied this.) “It was just crazy what they were trying to build out there,” David Stirling, then Young Living’s chief operating officer, told me. Stirling said he was also alarmed by a video he saw of Young, whose only medical degree is a doctorate in naturopathy from an unaccredited school, performing gallbladder surgery and giving essential oils intravenously at the clinic in Ecuador. Stirling attempted to shift Young Living’s focus away from Young to the oils, but he met with resistance from Young—and also from many distributors, who felt a deep loyalty to Gary and Mary.

Young eventually fired Stirling, citing, among other reasons, the fact that Stirling kept Young out of the company magazine. (A spokesperson said he was let go for “performance reasons.”) “Satan exercised dominion over you to the point where you started thinking that you had knowledge and ability greater than anyone else, including me, the creator of the company,” Young wrote in an e-mail. Young declined to speak to me, but the spokesperson said, “Successful company founders are often cut from a different cloth than the rest of us, which is true of Gary Young and his pioneering cowboy spirit.”

In April, 2008, Stirling and several other former Young Living executives founded doTerra. Their goal was to make essential oils more appealing to a general audience. “At Young Living, we sold to a lot of Reiki masters,” Emily Wright, one of doTerra’s co-founders and Mary Young’s former personal assistant, said. “When we started doTerra, we really wanted to focus on mothers, to teach them to be empowered to take care of their families. We took essential oils out

“If I don’t come back for you, it’s because our friendship was one of circumstance.”
of this weird healers' niche and into the mainstream.”

At first, doTerra’s distributors, whom it refers to as Wellness Advocates, were largely concentrated in Utah. Several doTerra executives are Mormons, and the company’s connection to the Church was an advantage, because distributors could rely on its large number of stay-at-home mothers and its naturally networked communities. Utah has more multilevel-marketing companies per capita than any other state; direct sales are Utah’s second-biggest source of revenue, after tourism. The Mormon Church also has a long-standing mistrust of federal oversight, which has made Utah a friendly home for businesses that operate outside medical norms. Attempts to regulate these industries are often portrayed as threats to individual freedom. In the nineties, during a battle over the regulation of dietary supplements, vitamin advocates paid for a TV ad starring a bewildered, bathrobed Mel Gibson, accosted in his kitchen by a swat team for having a bottle of vitamins. More recently, parents have begun refusing in large numbers to vaccinate their children; in Utah County, the hub of the state’s alternative-health industry, forty-three per cent of kindergartners have not received their full suite of vaccinations.

doTerra positions itself as friendly and transparent, selling oils as something between a home remedy and a craft project. The company’s social-media posts encourage a D.I.Y. approach to health: “Rosemary supports healthy digestion and internal organ function. Next time you’re creating a pizza masterpiece, add a drop of Rosemary to gain these benefits!” One of its best-sellers is a kit called Family Essentials, which includes lavender (“take internally to reduce anxious feelings”) and lemon (“to clean tables, countertops, and other surfaces”). Where Young Living had emphasized oils’ mystic qualities, with talk of energy fields and harmonic frequencies, doTerra’s marketing made oils seem like a normal part of any family’s medicine cabinet. The company’s friendly tone and Pinterest-ready suggestions were soon the dominant mode for spreading the message about oils. Today, Young Living’s and doTerra’s social-media posts are virtually indistinguishable; both feature empowering slogans (“You are beautiful, inside and out”; “You’re like really pretty”), flower petals, and smiling babies.

By 2012, doTerra had pulled even with Young Living in terms of total revenue and number of distributors; a market-research group called doTerra “singularly responsible” for the industry’s rapid expansion. That year, Young Living sued doTerra for three hundred and fifty million dollars, alleging, among other things, that the company’s founders had stolen trade secrets and poached Young Living distributors. At the end of 2015, doTerra claimed that it had surpassed a billion dollars in sales; the following February, Young Living said that it had, too. The court case dragged on for five years, concluding with a civil jury trial this spring. On the second day of the trial, the smells of oils in the courtroom “gave me a bit of a headache and even a stomach ache,” the judge said.

“I hope we can keep down on the aromatherapy.” In June, a jury dismissed all charges against doTerra and its executives.

During the final week of the trial, I toured doTerra’s headquarters, in Pleasant Grove, Utah. An employee led me through an air-conditioned warehouse full of fifty-gallon barrels of oils with labels identifying their origins: frankincense from Oman; lavender from Bulgaria. Essential oils, which are made by steam-distilling or cold-pressing plant material, are incredibly resource-intensive to produce. It takes more than a million rose petals to make an ounce of rose oil, which doTerra says is good for the complexion. A single barrel of frankincense oil is worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. The rose oil is so valuable that it was locked in a separate area. As oils have become more popular, sourcing has become contentious. Frankincense, coveted both for its alleged ability to regenerate cells and for its Biblical prominence, is derived from the resin of trees that grow only in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Anjanette DeCarlo, an environmental scientist who specializes in frankincense, told me, “If the demand keeps up without proper controls, we risk causing an ecological crash of a rare and endangered ecosystem.” Young Living recently pleaded guilty to illegally trafficking in rosewood oil from Peru, which considers rosewood trees a threatened species.

Companies in the fragrance and food industries regularly supplement naturally derived oils with synthetic molecules, yielding cheaper products and greater consistency. “An oil that is synthetic in its chemistry won’t work the same way,” David Hill, an avuncular chiropractor who was formerly the director of Gary Young’s Utah clinic and is now doTerra’s chief medical officer, told me. Last year, a former Young Living distributor named Miles Jordens crowdfunded the funds to have several companies’ oils analyzed by an independent lab. He found that two of Young Living’s oils contained synthetic adulterants. “When you start to see the amount of plant material required to produce oils, and when you have millions of people ordering—I just question how the demand can be met without possibly cutting corners,” Jordens told me. A Young Living spokesperson said that the company tested its oils in
independent labs and found no evidence of adulteration.

Representatives of both doTerra and Young Living like to highlight the medical benefits of their products. "There are literally thousands of studies on the benefits of essential oils," Hill said. In fact, there have been very few large-scale, peer-reviewed studies of essential oils' use on humans, and their conclusions have been relatively modest. It appears that lavender may improve sleep quality and duration, and that peppermint may reduce symptoms of headache and irritable-bowel syndrome. Many more studies have looked at oils' impact on cell cultures in a lab, sometimes with encouraging results. Some oils have been shown to have antimicrobial effects, and to work synergistically with antibiotics. But the conclusions reached by scientists are beside the point for many consumers. "I'll use my wife as an example," Hill said. "She's not going to be able to tell you the first thing about chemistry. Put a research paper in front of her—zero interest. And that's probably how most people are. What's real to them is the experience they're having."

The Food and Drug Administration is charged with preventing sellers of alternative-health products from making unfounded medical claims. Without ample independent testing, companies can't assert that their products prevent, diagnose, treat, or cure disease. They get around this by relying on abstract words like "vitality" and "balance," and by talking in vague terms about general body systems or mild issues that don't rise to the level of disease. Young Living and doTerra have attorneys on staff to insure that product descriptions are within legal bounds.

It's much harder to police the millions of independent distributors. In September, 2014, the F.D.A. sent a sternly worded letter to doTerra, scolding the company for distributors' claims about oils and conditions including cancer, brain injury, autism, Alzheimer's disease, and A.D.H.D. The agency cited a tweet by a doTerra consultant using the handle Mrs. Skinny Medic that listed "oils that could help prevent your contracting the Ebola virus," and a Pinterest post by Wellness Empress that recommended peppermint oil for asthma, autism, bacterial infections, and brain injury. (Young Living received a similar letter.)

A few weeks later, federal agents appeared at doTerra's Utah headquarters, and began examining the company's files. "It's always fun when the F.D.A. shows up on your doorstep," Hill said. "And they walk into your office and say things like 'Dr. Hill, you are personally culpable for every single person using these oils.' These were scary moments." doTerra instituted a fifty-person compliance team to scour social-media posts, looking for noncompliant language, and hosted weekly conference calls, helping distributors translate their stories into acceptable language. "We have a whole team using very sophisticated software, whose whole job is to systematically go through and look for potential claims, like 'frankincense and cancer,' or 'doTerra lavender Ambien,'" Kirk Jowers, the doTerra vice-president, told me. "Anything suspect that goes up, we try to get it down within twenty-four hours, and we're very effective."

But although doTerra supplies educational materials to its Wellness Advocates, there are no requirements that they review or distribute them. "The multilevels have the whole aromatherapy community worried," Peter Holmes, the author of the textbook "Aromatica," told me. Both doTerra and Young Living encourage consumers to drink certain oils, a position that's controversial even among alternative-health practitioners. Holmes said that, while he is unaware of the practices of specific companies, "You hear about completely untrained housewives telling people to ingest up to fifty drops. That is sheer insanity. That is medically dangerous. It's a crazy situation."

This May, a doTerra representative named Lara held an Essential Oils 101 class at a barbecue restaurant in Waco, Texas. The wood-panelled room had paintings of trains on one wall and of hunting dogs on another. Lara, a bright-eyed woman in chunky jewelry, introduced herself as "the crazy oil lady." She was in the midst of a doTerra leadership-training program that brought her to a handful of states to lecture about oils. She told the dozen people assembled that she had become interested in oils a few years ago, when her three-year-old son started showing symptoms of autism after receiving the measles-mumps-rubella vaccine. "My pediatrician had no help for me," she said. But diffusing oils made her son "as calm as a kitten." After a few years of treatment with oils, she said, he is on track developmentally.

Lara distributed a handout that listed various ailments and their oil treatments: eucalyptus for bronchitis, lavender for third-degree burns, cypress for mononucleosis, rosemary for respiratory syncytial virus. Diffusion "kills microorganisms in the air which helps stop the spread of sickness," the pamphlet read. Oils "repair our bodies at a cellular level so when you are not sure which oils to use, don't be afraid to use several oils and the body will gain a myriad of benefits." Lara told the people in the room that doTerra had oils that were "very antiviral" and could knock out bronchitis in twenty-four hours. She shared essential-oil success stories—her migraines gone, her friend's rheumatoid arthritis reversing, a colleague's mother's cancer in remission. A blond woman at the back of the room raised her hand. "Cancer?" she said, sounding both skeptical and hopeful. She explained that her sister-in-law had recently been treated for breast cancer, and was taking a pill to prevent its recurrence, but the side effects were terrible. The blond woman was hoping for a more natural solution.

"There is an oil for that," Lara said cautiously. "There is some research. It is an option. It would not have those side effects."

A young man in an orange shirt identified himself as having autism and Tourette's syndrome. Lara passed him a vial of vetiver. He held the bottle up to his nose and inhaled deeply. "Am I supposed to get chills?" he said. "I'm getting chills."

I thought of a book I'd recently read, "The Chemistry of Essential Oils Made Simple: God's Love Manifest in Molecules." In it, David Stewart, an aromatherapist affiliated with Young Living, writes that essential oils have a divine intelligence and discernment that allows them to heal without harming, to provide our cells with exactly what we need and nothing we don't. "The molecules of a therapeutic grade essential oil form a harmonious, coherent, functional family designed and intended to serve us and heal us according to the highest will of their creator and our creator who is one and the same—God," Stewart writes. The idea could give anyone chills: a better kind of medicine, one that's pure and uncompromised, derived from nature, sold to you by a friend. A small bottle full of all the good things and none of the bad.
n Rachel Maddow’s office at the MSNBC studios, there is a rack on which hang about thirty elegant women’s jackets in various shades of black and gray. On almost every week night of the year, at around one minute to nine, Maddow yanks one of these jackets off its hanger, puts it on without looking into a mirror, and races to the studio from which she broadcasts her hour-long TV show, sitting at a sleek desk with a glass top. As soon as the show is over, she sheds the jacket and gets back into the sweater or T-shirt she was wearing before. She does not have to shed the lower half of her costume, the skirt and high heels that we don’t see because of the desk in front of them but naturally extrapolate from the stylish jacket. The skirt and heels, it turns out, are an illusion. Maddow never changed out of the baggy jeans and sneakers that are her offstage uniform and onstage private joke. Next, she removes her contact lenses and puts on horn-rimmed glasses that hide the blue eyes of the woman jeers at the coverage in the commercials merge into one delicious experience of TV. “The Rachel Maddow Show” is a piece of sleight of hand presented as a cable news show. It is TV entertainment at its finest. It permits liberals to enjoy themselves during what may be the most thoroughly unenjoyable time of their political lives.

Maddow’s artistry is most conspicuously displayed in the long monologue—sometimes as long as twenty-four minutes, uninterrupted by commercials—with which her show usually begins. The monologue of January 2, 2017, is an especially vivid example of Maddow’s extraordinary storytelling. Its donnée was a Times article of December 31, 2016, with the headline “TRUMP’S INDONESIA PROJECTS, STILL MOVING AHEAD, CREATE POTENTIAL CONFLICTS.” The story, by Richard C. Paddock, in Jakarta, and Eric Lipton, in Washington, was about the resorts and golf courses that Donald Trump is building in Indonesia and the cast of unsuitable or unsavory characters that have been helping him move the projects along. Among them are Hary Tanoe-sodibjo, Trump’s business partner, a billionaire with political ambitions that might put him into high office in Jakarta; Setya Novanto, the Speaker of the Indonesian House of Representatives, who had to resign when he was accused of trying to extort four billion dollars from an American mining company; and the billionaire investor Carl Icahn, a major shareholder in that mining company, who had recently been named an adviser to the Trump Administration on regulatory matters. It was one of those stories about Trump’s mired global business dealings which are themselves marked by Trump’s obscurantism, and which tend to mystify and confuse more than clarify—and ultimately to bore. They have too much information and too little.

In Maddow’s hands, the Times story became a lucid and enthralling set piece. “This story is amazing and it starts with copper,” Maddow said at the beginning of the monologue, looking happy. She had already told us that she was glad to be back from her vacation and wasn’t disheartened by the election. People had approached her “with concern in their eyes” and asked how she felt about the coming year. “I found myself . . . saying, ‘I’m really excited for 2017!’ I am! My job is to explain stuff—and, oh my God, is that a good job to have this year?”

Maddow then explained the properties of copper. She showed pictures of the Statue of Liberty, pennies, and wires. She talked about the “massive global appetite” for copper electrical wiring, and about a mining company called Freeport, based in Arizona, which is the world’s second-largest producer of copper. One of Freeport’s operations is in Indonesia, where it extracts gold from an American mining company “is the single biggest taxpayer for the whole country. . . . Of all the two hundred and sixty million people in Indonesia, its biggest tax payment
Maddow’s artistry is most conspicuous in her monologues, which can span as long as twenty-four uninterrupted minutes.
Why is she telling us this? Maddow anticipates the question. Her acute storyteller's instincts tell her that this is the moment to show her hand. Without any transition, she says, "In our Presidential election this past year, do you remember when Indonesia had a weird little cameo role?" Of course we don't remember anything of the sort. Maddow goes on, "It was in the Republican primary. It came up—it was so strange, so unexpected, not just inexplicable but unexplained. . . . It didn't ever make any sense—until now. I love it when a story doesn't make sense for a year and then all of a sudden it does." She is laughing, almost chortling. "It rarely happens when you get it so clearly."

The weird cameo role was played by the then not-yet-disgraced Speaker of the Indonesian House, Setya Novanto. Maddow showed a video of Trump at a press conference at Trump Tower which he had called to announce that he would sign a pledge he had originally refused to sign, promising to support the winning Republican candidate. (All the other Republican candidates had signed it.) At his side was a short, smiling Asian man. "Hey, what's this random Indonesian guy doing there?" Maddow says. The video goes on to show Trump with his arm around the guy's shoulders, saying, "Hey, ladies and gentlemen, this is an amazing man. He is, as you know"—as we know?—"Speaker of the House of Indonesia. He's here to see me. Setya Novanto, one of the most powerful men, and a great man, and his whole group is here to see me today, and we will do great things for the United States. Is that correct? Do they like me in Indonesia?" The Speaker says, "Yes." "That was such a random moment in the Presidential election, right?" Maddow says. "It was weird at the time, totally inexplicable. Well, now we get it."

What Maddow has prepared us to get with her geography lesson about copper and the mine in Indonesia is the scandal in which Setya Novanto got caught up, and by which Trump, because of his continuing business relationship with the amazing Indonesian, is tainted. "That mining company that operates a giant open-pit mine that's the largest gold mine in the world and you can see it from space,” Maddow says, showing a picture of the oversized crater again, and looking enormously pleased with herself, "one of their executives met in Indonesia with that same politician who we just saw with Donald Trump, and he secretly taped him trying to shake down the mining company for four billion dollars." Freeport's contract with the Indonesian government runs out in 2021; the company would like to extend it. "The guy who was standing there with Trump, who got introduced at that press conference, that politician was caught on tape telling the mining company that, yeah, he could get them an extension of their contract. In fact, he could get them a twenty-year extension of their contract . . . if they could provide him with a little something." We learn that the tape was played all over Indonesia, and that Setya Novanto was forced to resign as Speaker. In the end, though, he was reinstated, because the tape was ruled inadmissible as evidence.

As Maddow nears the end of her monologue, she mentions the Times story from which she got most of her material: "Donald Trump's new real-estate deals, that golf course he wants to build . . . the Indonesian resort deals that brought this politician to Trump Tower in the first place, the Trump Organization has just confirmed to the New York Times, those deals are on, those projects are moving forward." The reader who has been following my own lesson in comparative narratology will notice that Maddow has been sparing in her use of the Times narrative. Many characters that figure in the Times story are missing from Maddow's, most conspicuously Trump's Indonesian business partner Hary Tanoesoeddibjo. Apart from the not negligible problem of pronouncing his name, Maddow
understands the importance in storytelling of not telling the same story twice. The story of Donald Trump and Setya Novanto is enough. You don't need the additional story of Donald Trump and Hary Tanoesoedibjo to show that Trump's business dealings are problematic; nor do you need quotations from experts on ethics (the Times cites Karen Hobart Flynn, the president of Common Cause, and Richard W. Painter, a former White House ethics lawyer) to convince us that they are. By reducing the story to its mythic fundamentals, Maddow creates the illusion of completeness that novels and short stories create. We feel that this is the story as we listen to and watch her tell it.

As a kind of ominous confirming coda, Maddow holds up the appointment of Carl Icahn as an adviser on corporate regulations. (He has since resigned.) “This new key member of the federal government for whom they have invented a job . . . is the single largest shareholder in that mining company, whose mines in Indonesia you can see from space,” she says. “And now that company will presumably be in an excellent position to do whatever needs to be done to benefit whoever needs to be benefitted. . . . This is apparently what it’s going to be like now. Everybody’s got to pay attention now.”

Every so often, a show of Maddow’s fails to please. There was the notorious show of March 14th, when Maddow pitched two pages of Trump’s 2005 tax return that had come her way—“Breaking news”; “The world is getting its first look”—and yet perhaps unsurprisingly, did not embarrass Maddow. The bad press that she received from commentators and newscasters (there was a scathing piece in Slate by its television critic, Willa Paskin, titled “Rachel Maddow Turned a Scoop on Donald Trump’s Taxes Into a Cynical, Self-Defeating Spectacle”) did her no harm. Nothing seems to do anyone harm these days. Maddow’s ratings only rose. She saw no reason to apologize or explain. “I really have no regrets at all,” she said when I pressed her for an admission of miscalculation. “People were mad that it wasn’t more scandalous. But that’s not my fault. I did it right.”

This was not the case with the show of October 29, 2014, for which Maddow almost immediately saw reason to apologize. The show began with Maddow placing on her desk, one by one, a graduated set of ceramic kitchen canisters. “Here in our offices at 30 Rockefeller Center, in our office closet, actually, we have, sort of randomly, a really hideous complete set of kitchen canisters. They take up a lot of space, but I can’t get rid of them. We bought these hideous kitchen canisters when a producer on our staff stumbled upon them while out shopping and realized—photographic memory—that these were an exact match to one of the best campaign-ad props thus far in the twenty-first century. Look.” A picture then appeared onscreen, showing a woman sitting in front of a display of the same mushroom-ornamented canisters that live in the office closet at MSNBC. The woman was Sharron Angle, a Nevada Republican, who had tried to make a political comeback after an unsuccessful attempt to unseat Harry Reid in his Senate race in 2010. “It wasn’t so much that Harry Reid won that Senate race in 2010,” Maddow said. “It was that Sharron Angle lost that race, because Sharron Angle talked like this.” Maddow then showed a series of statements
made by Angle, under headings such as “2nd Amendment Remedies”:

I feel that the Second Amendment is the right to keep and bear arms for our citizenry. . . . This is for us when our government becomes tyrannical. . . . And you know, I’m hoping that we’re not getting to Second Amendment remedies. I hope the vote will be the cure for the Harry Reid problem.

“I sure hope the vote will be the cure for the Harry Reid problem,” Maddow said, with one of her nicest smiles. “Democrats had no business winning that Senate race in Nevada that year. But Sharron Angle threatening that if conservatives didn’t get the election results that they wanted they would start shooting in order to get the election results that they wanted—that was enough to spook people who might otherwise have supported her. . . . You just can’t run people like that for statewide office.” Angle had evidently learned her lesson, and in her new bid for office—for a House seat this time—she used the Mushroom Cannister Remedy to reassure voters and show that “there was nothing to be scared of when it comes to her.” They could see that she was just another nice, kitsch-loving Republican lady.

Not so Maddow’s next character, Joni Ernst, who was running for the Senate in Iowa and now “turns out to have a Sharron Angle problem. A piece of tape has emerged where Joni Ernst, like Sharron Angle before her, is threatening that she is ready to turn to armed violence against the government if she doesn’t get what she wants through the political process.” Maddow showed Ernst at a lectern, saying, “I have a beautiful little Smith & Wesson 9-millimetre, and it goes with me virtually everywhere. But I do believe in the right to carry, and I believe in the right to defend myself and my family, whether it’s from an intruder or whether it’s from the government, should they decide that my rights are no longer important.” (In the end, Ernst won her race, without having to shoot anyone.) Maddow closed the segment with: “I would say watch this space, but I know all you’re watching right now is these hideous kitchen cannisters.”

The next night, an unsmiling Maddow addressed her audience thus: “O.K., so last night I may have crossed the line. I went a little too far and said something that offended some of our viewers, and rightly so. It was not my intention to offend. So we’ve got a Department of Corrections segment coming up. Everybody who likes to watch this show because you like to yell at me while I’m on the screen, you will like this next thing that I’m going to have to do. Mea culpa on the way.” Sitting in front of a sign that read “DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS,” Maddow recapitulated her narrative of the page Joni Ernst took from Sharron Angle. “Tonight, I have a correction to make about that. I will tell you, though, that this correction has nothing to do with Joni Ernst.” In fact, the “correction” was not a correction at all. Maddow had made no factual errors. She had merely betrayed her youth. She had not lived long enough to know that you do not mock people’s things any more than you mock their weight or accent or sexual orientation. “Have nothing in your houses that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful,” William Morris wrote in his famous dictum. Morris knew very well what was hideous. But he knew enough about human nature to insert that inspired “believe.”

Maddow’s disparagement of the mushroom cannisters brought her a torrent of mail. She read aloud from it: “I was insulted that you referred to the cannisters as ugly, as I had bought that set many years ago. I wish I still had my cute, adorable cannisters.” “Hey, Rachel, my mother has a set, too—we could use a matching set.” “If hideous you mean the most awesome cannisters of all time

is hot chicken on sopping white bread with green pickle chips—sour to balance prismatic, flame-colored spice for white people. Or, rather, white people now curate hot chicken for $16 and two farm-to-table sides, or maybe they’ve hungered fried heat and grease from black food and milk—but didn’t want to drive to Jefferson Street or don’t know about the history of Jefferson Street or Hell’s Half Acre, north of downtown. Where freed slaves lived on the fringe of Union camps, built their own new country. Where its golden age brought the Silver Streak, a ballroom bringing Basie, Ellington, and Fitzgerald. First-run movies at the Ritz and no one had to climb to the balcony. 1968, black bodies going straight to the morgue. At the downtown library, a continuous loop flashes SNCC videos with black and white kids training for spit and circular cigarette burns as the video toggles from coaching to counters covered in pillars of salt and pie and soda—magma of the movement. On 1-65, there is a two-tone Confederate statue I flick off daily on my morning commute. Walking down Second Avenue, past neon honky-tonks playing bro-country and Cash and herds of squealing pink bachelorette parties—someone yelled Nigger-lover at my husband. Again. Walking down Second Avenue, I thought I heard someone yelling at the back of my husband. I turned around to find the voice and saw...
myself as someone who didn’t give a damn. Again. I turned around to find that it was I who lived inside the lovely word made flesh by white mouths masticating mashed sweet potatoes from my mother’s mother’s mother—Freelove was her name,
a slave from Warrior, North Carolina, with twelve children with names like Pansy, Viola, Oscar, Stella, and Toy—my grandmother. There is always a word I’m chasing inside and outside of my body, a word inside another word, scanning the O.E.D. for soot-covered roots: 1577, 1584, 1608 . . . Tracing my finger along the boomerang shape of the Niger River for my blood. 1856, 1866, 1889 . . . Who said it? A hyphen—crackles and bites, burns the body to a spray of white wisps, like when the hot comb, with its metal teeth, cut close to petroleum jelly edging the scalp—sizzling. Southern Babel, smoking the hive of epithets hung fat above bustling crowds like black-and-white lynching photographs, mute faces, red finger pointing up at my dead, some smiling, some with hats and ties—all business, as one needledlike lady is looking at the camera, as if looking through the camera, at me, in the way I am looking at my lover now—halcyon and constant. Once my mother-in-law said Watch your back, and I knew exactly what she meant. Again. I turned around to find I am the breath of Apollo panting at the back of Daphne’s wild hair, chasing words like arrows inside the knotted meat between my shoulder blades—four violent syllables stabbing my skin, enamored with pain.

I am kissing all the trees—searching the mob, mumbling to myself: Who said it? Who said it? Who said it?

—Tiana Clark

then you are correct.” More messages appeared on the screen: “HIDEOUS?? What ever do you mean?” “Those were my grandmas mushroom canisters! She had matching pots, s&p, spoon rest, napkin holder and a wall clock.” “I have been aesthetically swayed,” Maddow said, setting down the sheaf of letters. “Yes, I once believed that those mushroom canisters were hideous, in the context of threatening armed violence against government officials, à la Sharron Angle in Nevada and Joni Ernst in Iowa. I also do still kind of think they’re hideous here at my office. But in real life, on your shelf, on your kitchen counter, in the recesses of your childhood memories, the Merry Mushroom canisters your mom bought at Sears in the seven-
ties—which also happened to match your Merry Mushroom curtains—those mushroom canisters really aren’t hideous. They are lovely. So thank you for fact-checking me on this. I sincerely regret what I now believe is an error. I love your mushroom canisters and your kitchen—I love all of it.” She had been hugging the biggest cannister. Now she removed its lid and put it on her head. “Sorry.”

Maddow was born forty-four years ago in the small city of Hayward, in the San Francisco Bay Area, and grew up in neighboring Castro Valley. Her brother, David, now on the staff of a bioscience company, was born four years earlier. Her father, Robert, a lawyer, worked as the counsel for the local water company, and her mother, Elaine, had an administrative job in the school district and wrote for a community newspaper. “I had a middle-class, suburban upbringing,” Maddow told me. “I graduated from the local high school at seventeen and went to Stanford. I came out soon after I got to college, and that caused a rift—a temporary rift—with my family. It was very hard for them. My mom is very Catholic, and my dad saw how much it hurt my mom. But now my parents and I are close again. They couldn’t be more supportive. They’re very close to my partner.”

Maddow’s partner is Susan Mikula, a fifty-six-year-old artist, with whom she has lived for the past eighteen years. They met in a small town in Massachusetts, in the western part of the state, a few years after Maddow graduated from Stanford. She was writing her thesis for an advanced degree from Oxford, where she had studied as a Rhodes Scholar. (She had also received, as not many applicants do, a Marshall Scholarship.) “I wanted to be in an unhappy living situation to get the thesis done,” she said. She supported herself by doing odd jobs, and word of one of these jobs brought her to the door of Mikula, who was looking for someone to do yard work. When Mikula opened the door, a coup de foudre followed.

Maddow had been an athlete in high school. Her sports were volleyball, basketball, and swimming. In her senior year, she badly injured her shoulder playing volleyball and was faced with a difficult choice. “I was a good athlete,” she told me. “I wouldn’t say I was a great athlete, but I was good, and I was scouted by a number of schools for an athletic scholarship. When I hurt my shoulder, I had to decide whether to get it fixed so I could go on being an athlete, or not. To get it fixed meant surgery and rehabilitation and starting college a year late. I decided not to get the shoulder fixed—it works perfectly well in regular life—and to go to college right away. Stanford, which had the best teams in the country in my sports, would not have given me an athletic scholarship. When I hurt my shoulder, I had to decide whether to get it fixed so I could go on being an athlete, or not. To get it fixed meant surgery and rehabilitation and starting college a year late. I decided not to get the shoulder fixed—it works perfectly well in regular life—and to go to college right away. Stanford, which had the best teams in the country in my sports, would not have given me an athletic scholarship anyway.

“Around this time I was realizing I was gay. I was coming out to myself. And, having grown up in this conservative town in the Bay Area with my relatively conservative Catholic parents, I knew this was not a place I
wanted to be a gay person in. When I realized I was gay—it’s not that I hadn't had inklings—when it finally clicked into place, I was, like, ‘Oh! That’s it. That’s what I am!’ There was no ambiguity about it. It was an epiphany. It was the same thing when I met Susan. I know that people don’t believe in love at first sight. It was absolutely love at first sight. Bluebirds and comets and stars. It was absolutely a hundred per cent clear."

I asked Maddow if coming out to herself was preceded by feelings about a particular woman. She said, "No. It was much more an intellectual thing."

It was a thing that brought her into AIDS activism. The epidemic was then in its darkest period. Maddow worked in hospices and with organizations helping prisoners who had the disease. “We were taking this overwhelming, maddening, depressing, very sad thing that my community and my city were going through and figuring out what pieces of it we could bite off and fix, finding winnable fights in something that felt like a morass and was terrible,” she said. This work continued throughout college and graduate school and culminated in her doctoral thesis, on H.I.V. and AIDS reform in British and American prisons.

Maddow spoke of her detachment from what she calls “electoral politics” during the time of her AIDS activism. She recalled giving money to Harvey Gantt, who was running against Jesse Helms in the 1990 North Carolina Senate race, because of Helms’s homophobic position on AIDS. “That was the closest I came to having an electoral-politics impulse,” she said. “I didn’t have strong feelings about Republicans and Democrats. In some ways, I still don’t.”

“Even with what the Republican Party has become?” I asked.

“I’m very interested in the conservative movement and in what the Republican Party has become,” Maddow said. “I think I am a liberal. I believe that government is a manifestation of the social contract. It’s a way we ought to work together as our best selves to make things better for the least among us and improve society as a whole. But I’m almost more interested in the sociology of conservative and liberal styles, particularly of conservative styles. I think the conservative movement is fascinating and arcane. The dynamic between the conservative movement and the Republican Party—of which there is no parallel on the left—is a really interesting ongoing saga that has incredibly sharp turns in it. And the people who are inside this movement are often very bad observers of what is happening. Which is nice for me, because being definitely on the outside gives me a better perspective on it. I happened to have a fascination with crazy right-wing racist politics—and all of a sudden that’s relevant. It’s my moment.”

I think I am a liberal. Why the equivocation? It may derive from the restless politics of Maddow’s parents. “When I was growing up, both my parents were centrists. They were Reagan Democrats—Democrats who voted for Reagan,” she said. “But during the George W. Bush Administration my dad became a motivated liberal. Dick Cheney in particular made my dad into a liberal. My mom less so. But when Schwarzenegger was elected governor in California, in 2003, I remember her saying, ‘I feel like I don’t have a President, I don’t have a governor, and I don’t have a Pope.’”

Maddow’s entrance into broadcasting began as a lark. While she was writing her thesis and doing her odd jobs in western Massachusetts, she heard about an audition held by a local radio station for someone to announce the morning news. She got the job—unprepared. “I didn’t have a good idea of at least what is in contention for making the show that night. I had no notion about the various items followed. Maddow displayed a list of possible subjects for the show. An elliptical exchange about the possible stories. By the time of the meeting, Maddow had to react to it with practiced grace and humor.

The hour of the show is the culmination for Maddow of a workday that starts at around 12:30 P.M., when she acquaints herself with the day’s news. At two o’clock, she meets with her staff to decide on the topics for the show. An elliptical exchange about the possible stories. By the time of the meeting, Maddow has to react to it with practiced grace and humor.

When I went to observe Maddow doing her broadcast, at MSNBC’s headquarters, in Rockefeller Center, I didn’t know what to expect, but I was unprepared for the large, eerily silent studio, some of whose props I recognized from watching the show—the desk with the glass top, the garish views of Manhattan skyscrapers. At five minutes to nine, the studio was empty except for me and a young man who had come to bring me earphones. At four minutes to nine, a calm young woman appeared and adjusted the large cameras that faced the desk. At a few seconds before nine, Maddow rushed in and sat down at the desk. She performed her long opening segment. During commercials, she typed furiously on a small computer. Watching her performance at home can be an exhilarating experience. Watching it in the studio was a somewhat flat one. Maddow went through her paces, but they were paces. A few days later, I visited a room—a floor below the broadcasting studio, where seven people sit in front of futuristic-looking computers and carry out the work of illustrating Maddow’s commentary with photographs, videos, and writings. They all seem to know what they are doing, but they do not seem relaxed. Things can go wrong, and they sometimes do. The wrong illustration can appear, for example, and Maddow has to react to it with practiced grace and humor.

When I arrived ten minutes after the hour, dressed in jeans and a black sweater. She stood in front of the whiteboard, which displayed a list of possible subjects for the show. An elliptical exchange about the various items followed. Maddow would ask a question, and someone would answer. She was informing herself about the possible stories. By the time of the meeting, “I have a pretty good idea of at least what is in contention for making the show that night. I already have two or three ideas. But by the end of the meeting I’ve usually changed my mind,” she said. “It’s a grumpy meeting. A little testy.” I noticed none of this at the meeting I attended; I just found it hard to follow.
“Do you start writing your text after the meeting?” I asked.

“No. I start reading. I read far too long after the meeting. I know what will be in the show, but I haven’t read enough detail, and I don’t start writing until it’s too late.”

“What time do you start writing?”

“I should start writing at four-thirty. Sometimes I don’t start writing until six-thirty.”

I told her how impressed I was that she can write her substantial monologue in such a short time.

“It’s a bad process. It’s impressive in one way, but it’s—reckless. It kills my poor staff. They’re so supportive and constructive. But it’s too much to ask. They need to put in all the visual elements and do the fact-checking and get it into the teleprompter. It’s a produced thing and requires everybody to do everything fast. And it’s a broken process. If I could just get it done an hour earlier, I think I would put ten years back in the lives of all the people who work with me.”

I asked her why she didn’t start work earlier in the day.

Part of the problem, she told me, is that the news changes in the course of the day. But she has a more compelling reason for starting work at noon: “I’ve tried starting at nine. It’s not that I have anything so important going on in my life that I wouldn’t trade it to be better at my job, but it’s that you can only have your brain lit up for that long before it starts to break down and you stop making sense and stop being creative. What I don’t want to give up is the originality.”

She went on, “The thing that defines whether or not you’re good at this work is whether you have something to say when it’s time to say something. Because you’re going to have to say something when that light goes on. I could roll in at eight o’clock and have my producers tell me what to say and book seven people for me to chat with about the news. There are people who have made a very successful living doing that in this work. I just don’t want to do it that way. I want to have something to say that people don’t already know every single night, every single segment, and that makes it hard to get the process right, because that’s the only thing I care about.”

I asked her what she did in the morning hours, before she turned on the light switch for her brain. “I’ll go to the gym, or spend time with Susan, or sometimes, when the weather is nice, I’ll go fishing before I go to work. I try to do something that is definitely not work,” she said. The writing of her sobering book, “Drift: The Unmooring of American Military Power,” published in 2012, was another “not work” activity—as were her interviews with me. She would come to my apartment (she preferred this to meeting in the furnished sublet that she and Susan had had to move into after a fire in their own apartment destroyed most of the interior and many of their possessions) and we would talk for an hour or an hour and a half. Maddow has given many interviews, several dozen, and when I told her that I had read some of them she was curious about my reaction. I said that everyone said pretty much the same things about her personal life (as I expected to do myself). “Does that surprise you?” I asked.

“No, it is my sense as well,” she said. “I have a private life and a private me that is separate and apart from what is on television. I go on television and I do this thing and it’s real, it’s part of me, but it’s not all of me. The rest of me is my own. It’s not for everybody else. You sort of pick a slice of your life that you’re going to share as your non-TV persona and you give that to people—and they find it more or less interesting.”

Maddow has suffered from depression since childhood, and a few years ago she decided to allow this affliction a place in her non-TV persona by speaking about it in interviews. “It was a hard call,” she said. “Because it is nobody’s business. But it had been helpful to me to learn about the people who were surviving, were leading good lives, even though they were dealing with depression. So I felt it was a bit of a responsibility to pay that back.”

The depression comes in cycles. She doesn’t know how long a bout of depression will last—it can be one day or three weeks. She takes no medication, but expects that one day she will have to—“I will not have a choice.” But she dreads
the thought of “a change to the psyche.”

“Is there a manic side?” I asked.

“Yes, but much less than when I was young. That has flattened a bit.”

“Have you had psychotherapy?”

“No.”

“Are you afraid of changes to the psyche it might produce?”

“No. I’m just not interested. I’m happy to talk to you for this profile, because I’m interested in you and in this process. But, in general, talking about myself for an hour—it’s not something that I would pay for the privilege of. It just sounds like no fun.”

Maddow’s TV persona—the well-crafted character that appears on the nightly show—suggests experience in the theatre, but Maddow has had none. “I am a bad actor. I can be performative. But I can’t embody anyone else.” To keep herself in character, so to speak, Maddow marks up the text that she will read from a teleprompter with cues for gestures, pauses, smiles, laughs, frowns—all the body language that goes into her performance of the Rachel figure. “My scripts are like hieroglyphics,” she said. I asked her if I could see a page or two of these annotated texts. She consented, but then thought better of it.

“Does the name Ben Maddow mean anything to you?” Maddow asked during one of our early interviews. “Yes, it does,” I said. In the early eighties, I had read a brilliant book—an illustrated biography of the photographer Edward Weston—by a man of that name. The book gave no information about him to speak of, and I did not seek it out, though I was curious. In the eighties, curiosity about authors was less urgent, perhaps because the New Criticism was still a force to reckon with, or, probably, more to the point, because there was no Google to instantly gratify it. So, when Rachel Maddow became a household name, it didn’t summon the name of Weston’s biographer. But now that she uttered it, and said he was a distant relative about whom she knew very little, I hastened to press the keys that would tell me who he was. I learned that he died in 1992 and is largely remembered today as a left-wing Hollywood screenwriter, who wrote or collaborated on such classics as “The Asphalt Jungle,” “Intruder in the Dust,” and the documentary “Native Land,” and was blacklisted between 1952 and 1958. After graduating from Columbia, in 1930, he was unemployed for two years and finally found a job as a hospital orderly and then one as an investigator for a Roosevelt-era agency called the Emergency Relief Bureau. He found his calling, and learned his trade as a screenwriter, when he joined a fellow-travelling collective called Frontier Films to work on documentaries.

While studying at Columbia, Ben had been a protégé of the poet and critic Mark Van Doren, and began publishing poetry in little magazines. “My poetry was pretty dreadful, so exaggerated,” he told Pat McGilligan, the author of “Backstory 2: Interviews with Screenwriters of the 1940s and 1950s.” He adopted the nom de plume David Wolff because, as he told McGilligan, “I didn’t want the people at the Bureau to think that somehow I was uppity.” In 1940, his long poem “The City,” published in Poetry under the David Wolff pseudonym, was awarded one of the magazine’s major prizes, which later went to, among others, Robert Lowell, Ezra Pound, and W. S. Merwin. Allen Ginsberg said the poem influenced him in the writing of “Howl.” It is long forgotten. It may be one of the most dreadful poems ever written, worthy of inclusion in “The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse,” a collection that Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee published, in 1930, to universal delight. It is hard to choose a typical example among the poem’s twenty-seven stanzas. They all read sort of like this:

Black halloween! I walked with the crooked nun;
Heard the cruel father sob in the empty room;
and households dining together in daily hatred;
the posed hysteria, and the idiot calm; and those
whose love was poisoned with delay, I saw still smile,
—and felt in myself forever the anguish of understanding.

After six years on the blacklist and working “in the shadows,” as it was called, Maddow caved in and named
Activities Committee. McGilligan reports this reluctantly and sadly. As he had observed when interviewing Ben—and as I had inferred from the Weston biography—Ben was an exceptionally interesting and civilized man. Leafing through my copy of the biography, I am struck anew by its quality of mildly exasperated tenderness toward its subject.

Why am I telling you this? When I told Rachel of my fascination with Ben Maddow and of my feeling that by inserting him into a piece that was supposed to be about her I was imitating her forays into left field, she nodded in agreement. “It’s our form of exhibitionism,” she said. “Here’s what I’m interested in. Here’s what grabs me. I’ll pull you along on the same thread I followed. I think it works. As long as people are connected to you as the author, it works.” The thread I am pulling is attached to a “family secret” that Rachel casually revealed to me one morning. She said that Maddow—with its mild subliminal association of meadows in summer—is a fake name. Not faked by her or her parents but by a nineteenth-century Ellis Island official who bestowed it on a family of Russian Jewish immigrants named Medvyedov, derived from medved, the Russian word for “bear.” One of the few things Rachel has been told about her kinsman Ben is that he chose David Wolff as his pen name because he thought medved meant “wolf.”

Rachel’s paternal grandfather, Bernard, came, like Ben, from this renamed family. He grew up in New Jersey, and became a jeweller. Shortly before the Second World War, he married a woman from a Dutch Protestant family named Gertrude Smits. Rachel speculates that Gertrude’s parents were “not psyched about Trudy marrying a Jew,” so this became a subject that was not discussed in the family. It wasn’t exactly a family scandal, but it was close to a family secret that Grandfather was Jewish. Rachel’s father, Robert, was brought up as a Protestant. When he and the “very Catholic” Elaine were engaged, he agreed that their children would be brought up in her faith. He converted to Catholicism when Rachel was eight years old.

Maddow recalled that around ten years ago, when she and her brother were home for a holiday, her mother made a formal announcement: “You know, your grandfather was Jewish. And David and I were, like, ‘Yeah?’ My parents thought they were breaking news to us, but my brother and I had known Grandfather was Jewish for a very long time, though we didn’t know how we knew.” In 1938, when Bernard and Trudy married, anti-Semitism was still a fact of life in America, like soda fountains in drugstores. Words like “mishegaas” and “shpilkes,” which trip from Rachel’s tongue in her broadcasts, were never heard in Edward R. Murrow’s. The revelation that someone you didn’t know was Jewish was breaking news of a sort. Today, it is something that is apt to receive a “Yeah?” response. And yet, and yet. As Rachel spins her elaborate tales out of the threads the news provides, so I have spun my tale of the mysterious Ben Maddow and the covertly Jewish grandfather out of the threads she had offered in a forthcoming moment. The story remains unsatisfying. Ben Maddow remains hidden. My respect for Rachel’s powers of storytelling is only redoubled by my sense of the absurdity of attempting to imitate her. She is inimitable.

Maddow’s excitement about 2017 has died down. She is as disarmingly funny as ever, but sometimes the gaiety seems a little forced. Here and there she is magnificent. In a show on June 30th, which could be called “An Essay on Disgust,” she lashed out at Donald Trump as she had never done before. The occasion was Trump’s distasteful attack on two MSNBC commentators, Joe Scarborough and Mika Brzezinski. Maddow set up her argument by talking about the political tool of distraction. Typically, a politician who wants to divert attention from a subject he prefers the public not be overly interested in will introduce another subject that will act the way a glittering toy acts on a susceptible baby. But Trump, she said, “doesn’t just merely distract people, he disgusts people. He breaks the bounds of decency. Breaks the bounds of what people generally agree are the moral rules for engagement in public discourse.” The extremity of Trump’s offensiveness forces us to take the bait, to “weigh in as being opposed to this vile thing . . . . With a normal politician’s normal political distraction, almost all of us will just observe it, right? We’re either distracted by it or we’re not. This guy’s strategy, though, it is really different. It’s to sort of tap on the glass of your moral compass—‘Is this thing on? ’Try to make you feel implicated by your silence.” She went on to speak of the damage Trump does with his “nuclear version of a conventional political tactic.” She said, “The thing he damages is something he neither owns nor particularly values, in the abstract, at least. The thing he hurts is the Presidency and by extension the standing of the United States of America.”

Reading the text of the essay is a lesser experience than watching Maddow deliver it on the air. Its logic is a bit insecure, and it is repetitive. But during the broadcast you felt only the force of Maddow’s moral conviction. She is no longer a practicing Catholic, but she has a religious temperament. “I grew up in a believing Catholic home and that has stuck with me,” she told me. “I believe in God, and I probably consider myself Catholic. And I think that in the most basic sense we have to account for our lives once they are done. I don’t have a cartoonist’s picture of Heaven that governs my actions, but I do think you have to make a case for yourself.” This was part of her answer to a question I asked about a commencement speech that she gave at Smith College, in 2010, in which she characterized the saloon-smashing prohibitionist Carrie Nation as “an American huckster, just promoting herself,” who had done the country irreparable harm. She counselled the students to seek glory—the glory of making selfless ethical choices—not fame. That her own quest for glory has brought fame in its wake may be a paradox that occasionally strikes her, but does not put her into a state of high shpilkes.
THE TAKEOVER

Senior citizens are losing their assets and their autonomy to a hidden system.

BY RACHEL AVIV

For years, Rudy North woke up at 9 A.M. and read the Las Vegas Review-Journal while eating a piece of toast. Then he read a novel—he liked James Patterson and Clive Cussler—or, if he was feeling more ambitious, Freud. On scraps of paper and legal notepads, he jotted down thoughts sparked by his reading. “Deep below the rational part of our brain is an underground ocean where strange things swim,” he wrote on one notepad. On another, “Life: the longer it cooks, the better it tastes.”

Rennie, his wife of fifty-seven years, was slower to rise. She was recovering from lymphoma and suffered from neuropathy so severe that her legs felt like sausages. Each morning, she spent nearly an hour in the bathroom applying makeup and lotions, the same brands she’d used for forty years. She always emerged wearing pale-pink lipstick. Rudy, who was prone to grandiosity, emerged wearing pale-pink lipstick. Rudy, who was prone to grandiosity, liked to refer to her as “my amour.”

Rennie read romance novels. They had moved there in 2005, when Rennie read romance novels. They had moved there in 2005, when Rudy and Rennie had not undergone any cognitive assessments. They had never received a diagnosis of dementia. In addition to Freud, Rudy was working his way through Nietzsche and Plato. Rennie read romance novels.

Parks told the Norths that if they didn’t come willingly an ambulance would take them to the facility, a place she described as a “respite.” Still crying, Rennie put cosmetics and some clothes into a suitcase. She packed so quickly that she forgot her cell phone and Rudy’s hearing aid. After thirty-five minutes, Parks’s assistant led the Norths to her car. When a neighbor asked what was happening, Rudy told him, “We’ll just be gone for a little bit.” He was too proud to draw attention to their predicament. “Just think of it as a mini-vacation,” he told Rennie.

Senior citizens are losing their assets and their autonomy to a hidden system. They are being taken in by a system that claims to help, but instead steals their identity, their dignity, and their homes. The Norths are just one example of the many seniors who are being exploited by a system that is supposed to protect them.

The Norths’ daughter, Julie Belshe, came to visit later that afternoon. A fifty-three-year-old mother of three sons, she and her husband run a small business designing and constructing pools. She lived ten miles away and visited her parents nearly every day, often taking them to her youngest son’s football games. She was her parents’ only living child; her brother and sister had died.

The Norths are just one example of the many seniors who are being exploited by a system that is supposed to protect them. The Norths faced a predicament. “Just think of it as a mini-vacation,” he told Rennie.

The Norths’ daughter, Julie Belshe, came to visit later that afternoon. A fifty-three-year-old mother of three sons, she and her husband run a small business designing and constructing pools. She lived ten miles away and visited her parents nearly every day, often taking them to her youngest son’s football games. She was her parents’ only living child; her brother and sister had died.

She knocked on the front door several times and then tried to push the door open, but it was locked. She was surprised to see the kitchen window closed; her parents always left it slightly open. She drove to the Sun City Aliante clubhouse, where her parents sometimes drank coffee. When she couldn’t find them there, she thought that perhaps they had gone on an errand together—the farthest they usually drove was to

A REPORTER AT LARGE
After a stranger became their guardian, Rudy and Rennie North were moved to a nursing home and their property was sold.
Costco. But, when she returned to the house, it was still empty.

That weekend, she called her parents several times. She also called two hospitals to see if they had been in an accident. She called their landlord, too, and he agreed to visit the house. He reported that there were no signs of them. She told her husband, “I think someone kidnapped my parents.”

On the Tuesday after Labor Day, she drove to the house again and found a note taped to the door: “In case of emergency, contact guardian April Parks.” Belshe dialled the number. Parks, who had a brisk, girlish way of speaking, told Belshe that her parents had been taken to Lakeview Terrace, an assisted-living facility in Boulder City, nine miles from the Arizona border. She assured Belshe that the staff there would take care of all their needs.

“You can’t just walk into somebody’s home and take them!” Belshe told her. Parks responded calmly, “It’s legal. It’s legal.”

Guardianship derives from the state’s parens patriae power, its duty to act as a parent for those considered too vulnerable to care for themselves. “The King shall have the custody of the lands of natural fools, taking the profits of them without waste or destruction, and shall find them their necessaries,” reads the English statute De Prerogative Regis, from 1324. The law was imported to the colonies—guardianship is still controlled by state, not federal, law—and has remained largely intact for the past eight hundred years. It establishes a relationship between ward and guardian that is rooted in trust.

In the United States, a million and a half adults are under the care of guardians, either family members or professionals, who control some two hundred and seventy-three billion dollars in assets, according to an auditor for the guardianship fraud program in Palm Beach County. Little is known about the outcome of these arrangements, because states do not keep complete figures on guardianship cases—statutes vary widely—and, in most jurisdictions, the court records are sealed. A Government Accountability report from 2010 said, “We could not locate a single Web site, federal agency, state or local entity, or any other organization that compiles comprehensive information on this issue.” A study published this year by the American Bar Association found that “an unknown number of adults languish under guardianship” when they no longer need it, or never did. The authors wrote that “guardianship is generally ‘permanent, leaving no way out—‘until death do us part.’”

When the Norths were removed from their home, they joined nearly nine thousand adult wards in the Las Vegas Valley. In the past twenty years, the city has promoted itself as a retirement paradise. Attracted by the state’s low taxes and a dry, sunny climate, elderly people leave their families behind to resettle in newly constructed senior communities. “The whole town sparkled, pulling older people in with the prospect of the American Dream at a reasonable price,” a former real-estate agent named Terry Williams told me. Roughly thirty per cent of the people who move to Las Vegas are senior citizens, and the number of Nevadans older than eighty-five has risen by nearly eighty per cent in the past decade.

In Nevada, as in many states, anyone can become a guardian by taking a course, as long as he or she has not been convicted of a felony or recently declared bankruptcy. Elizabeth Brickfield, a Las Vegas lawyer who has worked in guardianship law for twenty years, said that about fifteen years ago, as the state’s elderly population swelled, “all these private guardians started arriving, and the docket exploded. The court became a factory.”

Pamela Teaster, the director of the Center for Gerontology at Virginia Tech and one of the few scholars in the country who study guardianship, told me that, though most guardians assume their duties for good reasons, the guardianship system is “a morass, a total mess.” She said, “It is unconscionable that we don’t have any data, when you think about the vast power given to a guardian. It is one of society’s most drastic interventions.”

After talking to Parks, Belshe drove forty miles to Lakeview Terrace, a complex of stucco buildings designed to look like a hacienda. She found her parents in a small room with a kitchenette and a window overlooking the parking lot. Rennie was in a wheelchair beside the bed, and Rudy was curled up on a love seat in the fetal position. There was no phone in the room.
Medical-alert buttons were strung around their necks. “They were like two lost children,” Belshe said.

She asked her parents who Parks was and where she could find the court order, but, she said, “they were overwhelmed and humiliated, and they didn’t know what was going on.” They had no idea how or why Parks had targeted them as wards. Belshe was struck by their passive acceptance. “It was like they had Stockholm syndrome or something,” she told me.

Belshe acknowledged that her parents needed a few hours of help each day, but she had never questioned their ability to live alone. “They always kept their house really nice and clean, like a museum,” she said. Although Rudy’s medical records showed that he occasionally had “staring spells,” all his medical-progress notes from 2013 described him as alert and oriented. He did most of the couple’s cooking and shopping, because Rennie, though lucid, was in so much pain that she rarely left the house. Belshe sometimes worried that her father inadvertently encouraged her mother to be docile: “She’s a very smart woman, though she sometimes acts like she’s not. I have to tell her, ‘That’s not cute, Mom.’ ”

When Belshe called Parks to ask for the court order, Parks told her that she was part of the “sandwich generation,” and that it would be too overwhelming for her to continue to care for her children and her parents at the same time. Parks billed her wards’ estates for each hour that she spent on their case; the court placed no limits on guardians’ fees, as long as they appeared “reasonable.” Later, when Belshe called again to express her anger, Parks charged the Norths twenty-four dollars for the eight-minute conversation. “I could not understand what the purpose of the call was other than she wanted me to know they had rights,” Parks wrote in a detailed invoice. “I terminated the phone call as soon as she expressed her anger, Parks charged the Norths twenty-four dollars for the eight-minute conversation. “I could not understand what the purpose of the call was other than she wanted me to know they had rights,” Parks wrote in a detailed invoice. “I terminated the phone call as soon as she expressed her anger.”

A month after removing the Norths from their house, Parks petitioned to make the guardianship permanent. She was represented by an attorney who was paid four hundred dollars an hour by the Norths’ estate. A hearing was held at Clark County Family Court.

The Clark County guardianship commissioner, a lawyer named Jon Norheim, has presided over nearly all the guardianship cases in the county since 2005. He works under the supervision of a judge, but his orders have the weight of a formal ruling. Norheim awarded a guardianship to Parks, on average, nearly once a week. She had up to a hundred wards at a time. “I love April Parks,” he said at one hearing, describing her and two other professional guardians, who frequently appeared in his courtroom, as “wonderful, good-hearted, social-worker types.”

Norheim’s court perpetuated a cold, unsentimental view of family relations: the ingredients for a good life seemed to have little to do with one’s children and siblings. He often dismissed the objections of relatives, telling them that his only concern was the best interest of the wards, which he seemed to view in a social vacuum. When siblings fought over who would be guardian, Norheim typically ordered a neutral professional to assume control, even when this isolated the wards from their families.

Rudy had assured Belshe that he would protest the guardianship, but, like most wards in the country, Rudy and Rennie were not represented by counsel. As Rudy stood before the commissioner, he convinced himself that guardianship offered him and Rennie a lifetime of care without being a burden to anyone they loved. He told Norheim, “The issue really is her longevity—what suits her.” Belshe, who sat in the courtroom, said, “I was shaking my head. No, no, no—don’t do that!” Rennie was silent.

Norheim ordered that the Norths become permanent wards of the court. “Chances are, I’ll probably never see you folks again; you’ll work everything out,” he said, laughing. “I very rarely see people after the initial time in court.” The hearing lasted ten minutes.

The following month, Even Tide Life Transitions, a company that Parks often hired, sold most of the Norths’ belongings. “The general condition of this inventory is good,” an appraiser wrote. Two lithographs by Renoir were priced at thirty-eight hundred dollars, and a glass cocktail table (“Client states that it is a Brancusi design”) was twelve hundred and fifty dollars. The Norths also had several pastel drawings by their son, Randy, who died in a motorcycle accident at the age of thirty-two, as well as Kachina dolls, a Bose radio, a Dyson vacuum cleaner, a Peruvian tapestry, a motion-step exerciser, a LeRoy Neiman sketch of a bar in Dublin, and two dozen pairs of Clarke shoes. According to Parks’s calculations, the Norths had roughly fifty thousand dollars. Parks transferred their savings, held at the Bank of America, to an account in her name.

Rennie repeatedly asked for her son’s drawings, and for the family photographs on her refrigerator. Rudy pined for his car, a midnight-blue 2010 Chrysler, which came to symbolize the life he had lost. He missed the routine interactions that driving had allowed him. “Everybody at the pharmacy was my buddy,” he said. Now he and Rennie felt like exiles. Rudy said, “They kept telling me, ‘Oh, you don’t have to worry: your car is fine, and this and that.’ ” A month later, he said, “They finally told me, ‘Actually, we sold your car.’ I said, ‘What in the hell did you sell it for?’ It was bought for less than eight thousand dollars, a price that Rudy considered insulting.

Rudy lingered in the dining room after eating breakfast each morning, chatting with other residents of Lakeview Terrace. He soon discovered that ten other wards of April Parks lived there. His next-door neighbor, Adolfo Gonzalez, a short, bald seventy-one-year-old who had worked as a maître d’ at the MGM Grand Las Vegas, had become Park’s ward at a hearing that lasted a minute and thirty-one seconds.

Gonzalez, who had roughly three hundred and fifty thousand dollars in assets, urged Rudy not to accept the nurse’s medications. “If you take the pills, they’ll make sure you don’t make it to court,” he said. Gonzalez had been prescribed the antipsychotic medications Risperdal and Depakote, which he hid in the side of his mouth without swallowing. He wanted to remain vigilant. He often spoke of a Salvador Dali painting that had been lost when Parks took over his life. Once, she charged him two hundred and ten dollars for a visit in which, according to her invoice, he expressed that “he feels like a prisoner.”

Rudy was so distressed by his conversations with Gonzalez that he asked to see a psychologist. “I thought maybe he’d
give me some sort of objective learning as to what I was going through," he said. "I wanted to ask basic questions, like 'What the hell is going on?'" Rudy didn't find the session illuminating, but he felt a little boost to his self-esteem when the psychologist asked that he return for a second appointment. "I guess he found me terribly charming," he told me.

Rudy liked to fantasize about an alternative life as a psychoanalyst, and he tried to befriended the wards who seemed especially hopeless. "Loneliness is a physical pain that hurts all over," he wrote in his notebook. He bought a pharmaceutical encyclopedia and advised the other wards about medications they'd been prescribed. He also ran for president of the residents, promising that under his leadership the kitchen would no longer advertise canned food as homemade. (He lost—he's not sure if anyone besides Rennie voted for him—but he did win a seat on the residents' council.)

He was particularly concerned about a ward of Parks's named Marlene Homer, a seventy-year-old woman who had been a professor. "Now she was almost hiding behind the pillars," Rudy said. "She was so obsequious. She was, like, 'Run me over. Run me over.'" She'd been a professor. "Now she was almost a seventy-year-old woman who had nothing to do with her past. She was, like, 'I can't explain.'" On a certificate sub-scribed, "I can and she can't." Neely wrote in his notebook. He bought a physical pain that hurts all over," he wrote. The rationale for the guardianship of Norbert Wilkening, who lived on the bottom floor of the facility, in the memory-care ward, for people with dementia ("the snake pit," Rudy called it), was also murky. Parks's office manager, who advertised himself as a "Qualified Dementia Care Specialist"—a credential acquired through video training sessions—had given Wilkening a "Mini-Mental State Examination," a list of eleven questions and tasks, including naming as many animals as possible in a minute. Wilkening had failed. His daughter, Amy, told me, "I didn't see anything that was happening to him other than a regular getting-older process, but when I was informed by all these people that he had all these problems I was, like, Well, maybe I'm just denying it. I'm not a professional." She said that Parks was "so highly touted. By herself, by the social workers, by the judge, by everyone that knew her."

At a hearing, when Amy complained to Norheim that Parks didn't have time for her father, he replied, "Yeah, she's an industry at this point." As Belshe spoke to more wards and their families, she began to realize that Lakeview Terrace was not the only place where wards were lodged, and that Parks was not the only guardian removing people from their homes for what appeared to be superficial reasons. Hundreds of cases followed the same pattern. It had become routine for guardians in Clark County to petition for temporary guardianship on an ex-parte basis. They told the court that they had to intervene immediately because the ward faced a medical emergency that was only vaguely described: he or she was demented or disoriented, and at risk of exploitation or abuse. The guardians attached a brief physician's certificate that contained minimal details and often stated that the ward was too incapacitated to attend a court hearing. Debra Bookout, an attorney at the Legal Aid Center of Southern Nevada, told me, "When a hospital or rehab facility needs to free up a bed, or when the patient is not paying his bills, some doctors get sloppy, and they will sign anything." A recent study conducted by Hunter College found that a quarter of guardianship petitions in New York were brought by nursing homes and hospitals, sometimes as a means of collecting on overdue bills.

It often took several days for relatives to realize what had happened. When they tried to contest the guardianship or become guardians themselves, they were dismissed as unsuitable, and disparaged in court records as being neglectful, or as drug addicts, gamblers, and exploiters. (Belshe was described by Parks as a "reported addict" who "has no contact with the proposed ward," an allegation that Belshe didn't see until it was too late to challenge.) Family who lived out of state were disqualified from serving as guardians, because the law prohibited the appointment of anyone who didn't live in Nevada.

Once the court approved the guardianship, the wards were often removed from their homes, which were eventually sold. Terry Williams, whose father's estate was taken over by strangers even though he'd named her the executor of his will, has spent years combing through guardianship, probate, and real-estate records in Clark County. "I kept researching, because I was so fascinated that these people could literally take over the lives and assets of people under color of law, in less than ten minutes, and nobody was asking questions," she told me. "These people spent their lives accumulating wealth and, in a blink of an eye, it was someone else's."

Williams has reviewed hundreds of
cases involving Jared Shafer, who is considered the godfather of guardians in Nevada. In the records room of the courthouse, she was afraid to say Shafer’s name out loud. In the course of his thirty-five-year career, Shafer has assumed control of more than three thousand wards and estates and trained a generation of guardians. In 1979, he became the county’s public administrator, handling the estates of people who had no relatives in Nevada, as well as the public guardian, serving wards when no family members or private guardians were available. In 2003, he left government and founded his own private guardianship and fiduciary business; he transferred the number of his government-issued phone to himself.

Williams took records from Shafer’s and other guardians’ cases to the Las Vegas police department several times. She tried to explain, she said, that “this is a racketeering operation that is fee-based. There’s no brown paper bag handed off in an alley. The payoff is the right to bill the estate.” The department repeatedly told her that it was a civil issue, and refused to take a report. In 2006, she submitted a typed statement, listing twenty-three statutes that she thought had been violated, but an officer wrote in the top right corner, “NOT A POLICE MATTER.” Adam Woodrum, an estate lawyer in Las Vegas, told me that he’s worked with several wards and their families who have brought their complaints to the police. “They can’t even get their foot in the door,” he said.

Acting as her own attorney, Williams filed a racketeering suit in federal court against Shafer and the lawyers who represented him. At a hearing before the United States District Court of Central California in 2009, she told the judge, “They are trumping up ways and means to deem people incompetent and take their assets.” The case was dismissed. “The scheme is ingenious,” she told me. “How do you come up with a crime that literally none of the victims can articulate without sounding like they’re nuts? The same insane allegations keep surfacing from people who don’t know each other.”

In 2002, in a petition to the Clark County District Court, a fifty-seven-year-old man complained that his mother had lost her constitutional rights because her kitchen was understocked and a few bills hadn’t been paid. The house they shared was then placed on the market. The son wrote, “If the only showing necessary to sell the home right out from under someone is that their ‘estate’ would benefit, then no house in Clark County is safe, nor any homeowner.” Under the guise of benevolent paternalism, guardians seemed to be creating a kind of capitalist dystopia: people’s quality of life was being destroyed in order to maximize their capital.

When Concetta Mormon, a wealthy woman who owned a Montessori school, became Shafer’s ward because she had aphasia, Shafer sold the school midyear, even though students were enrolled. At a hearing after the sale, Mormon’s daughter, Victoria Cloutier, constantly spoke out of turn. The judge, Robert Lueck, ordered that she be handcuffed and placed in a holding cell while the hearing continued. Two hours later, when Cloutier was allowed to return for the conclusion, the judge told her that she had thirty days in which to vacate her mother’s house. If she didn’t leave, she would be evicted and her belongings would be taken to Goodwill.

The opinions of wards were also disregarded. In 2010, Guadalupe Olvera, a ninety-year-old veteran of the Second World War, repeatedly asked that his daughter and not Shafer be appointed his guardian. “The ward is not to go to court,” Shafer instructed his assistants. When Olvera was finally permitted to attend a hearing, nearly a year after becoming a ward, he expressed his desire to live with his daughter in California, rather than under Shafer’s care. “Why is everybody against that?” he asked Norheim. “I don’t need that man.” Although Nevada’s guardianship law requires that courts favor relatives over professionals, Norheim continued the guardianship, saying, “The priority ship sailed.”

When Olvera’s daughter eventually defied the court’s orders and took her father to live at her seaside home in Northern California, Norheim’s supervisor, Judge Charles Hoskin, issued an arrest warrant for her “immediate arrest and incarceration” without bail. The warrant was for contempt of court, but Norheim said at least five times from the bench that she had “kidnapped”...
Olvera. At a hearing, Norheim acknowledged that he wasn’t able to send an officer across state lines to arrest the daughter. Shafer said, “Maybe I can.”

Shafer held so much sway in the courtroom that, in 2013, when an attorney complained that the bank account of a ward named Kristina Berger had “no money left and no records to explain where it went,” Shafer told Norheim, “Close the courtroom.” Norheim immediately complied. A dozen people in attendance were forced to leave.

One of Shafer’s former bookkeepers, Lisa Clifton, who was hired in 2012, told me that Shafer used to brag about his political connections, saying, “I wrote the laws.” In 1995, he persuaded the Nevada Senate Committee on Government Affairs to write a bill that allowed the county to receive interest on money that the public guardian invested. “This is what I want you to put in the statute, and I will tell you that you will get a rousing hand from a couple of judges who practice our probate,” he said. At another hearing, he asked the committee to write an amendment permitting public guardians to take control of people’s property in five days, without a court order. “This bill is not ‘Big Brother’ if you trust the person who is doing the job,” he said. (After a senator expressed concern that the law allowed “intervention into somebody’s life without establishing some sort of reason why you are doing it,” the committee declined to recommend it.)

Clifton observed that Shafer almost always took a cynical view of family members: they were never motivated by love or duty, only by avarice. “They just want the money”—that was his answer to everything,” she told me. “And I’m thinking to myself, Well, when family members die they pass it down to their children. Isn’t that just the normal progression of things?”

After a few months on the job, Clifton was asked to work as a guardian, substituting for an absent employee, though she had never been trained. Her first assignment was to supervise a visit with a man named Alvin Passer, who was dying in the memory-care unit of a nursing home. His partner of eight years, Olive Manoli, was permitted a brief visit to say goodbye. Her visits had been restricted by Shafer—his lawyer told the court that Passer became “agitated and sexually aggressive” in her presence—and she hadn’t seen Passer in months. In a futile attempt to persuade the court to allow her to be with him, Manoli had submitted a collection of love letters, as well as notes from ten people describing her desire to care for Passer for the rest of his life. “I was absolutely appalled,” Clifton said. “She was this very sweet lady, and I said, ‘Go in there and spend as much time with him as you want.’ Tears were rolling down her cheeks.”

The family seemed to have suffered a form of court-sanctioned gaslighting. Passer’s daughter, Joyce, a psychiatric nurse who specialized in geriatrics, had been abruptly removed as her father’s co-guardian, because she appeared “unwilling or (more likely) unable to conduct herself rationally in the Ward’s best interests,” according to motions filed by one of Shafer’s attorneys.

She and Manoli had begged Norheim not to appoint Shafer as guardian. “Sir, he’s abusive,” their lawyer said in court. “He’s as good as we got, and I trust him completely,” Norheim responded. Joyce Passer was so confused by the situation that, she said, “I thought I was crazy.” Then she received a call from a blocked number. It was Terry Williams, who did not reveal her identity. She had put together a list of a half-dozen family members who she felt were “ready to receive some kind of verbal support.” She told Passer, “Look, you are not nuts. This is real. Everything you are thinking is true. This has been going on for years.”

During Rennie North’s first year at Lakeview Terrace, she gained sixty pounds. Parks had switched the Norths’ insurance, for reasons she never explained, and Rennie began seeing new doctors, who prescribed Valium, Prozac, the sedative Temazepam, Oxycodeone, and Fentanyl. The doses steadily increased. Rudy, who had hip pain, was prescribed Oxycodeone and Valium. When he sat down to read, the sentences floated past his eyes or appeared in duplicate. “Ward seemed...
very tired and his eyes were glassy," Parks wrote in an invoice.

Belshe found it increasingly hard to communicate with her parents, who napped for much of the day. "They were being overmedicated to the point where they weren't really there," she said. The Norths' grandsons, who used to see them every week, rarely visited. "It was degrading for them to see us so degraded," Rudy said. Parks noticed that Rennie was acting helpless, and urged her to "try harder to be more motivated and not be so dependent on others." Rudy and Rennie began going to Sunday church services at the facility, even though they were Jewish. Rudy was heartened by what he heard in the pastor's message: "Don't give up. God will help you get out of here." He began telling people, "We are living the life of Job."

At the end of 2014, Lakeview Terrace hired a new director, Julie Liebo, who resisted Parks's orders that medical information about wards be kept from their families. Liebo told me, "The families were devastated that they couldn't know if the residents were in surgery or hear anything about their health. They didn't understand why they'd been taken out of the picture. They'd ask, 'Can you just tell me if she's alive?'" Liebo tried to comply with the rules, because she didn't want to violate medical-privacy laws; as guardian, Parks was entitled to choose what was disclosed. Once, though, Liebo took pity on the sister of an eighty-year-old ward named Dorothy Smith, who was mourning a dog that Parks had given away, and told her that Smith was stable. Liebo said that Parks, who was by then the secretary of the Nevada Guardianship Association, called her immediately. "She threatened my license and said she didn't have the authority or the jurisdiction to intervene.


BELSHE SHOWED UP AT 9 A.M. TO HELP HER PARENTS WITH THE MOVE, BUT WHEN SHE ARRIVED PARKS'S ASSISTANT, HEIDI KRAMER, TOLD HER THAT HER PARENTS HAD ALREADY LEFT. BELSHE "EMOTIONALLY CRASHED," AS LIEBO PUT IT. SHE YELLED THAT HER PARENTS HADN'T EVEN WAKEN UP UNTIL NINE OR LATER—WHAT WAS THE RUSH? IN AN INVOICE, KRramer wrote that Belshe "began to yell and scream, her behavior was out of control, she was taking pictures and yelling, 'April Parks is a thief.'" Kramer called the police. Liebo remembers that an officer "looked at Julie Belshe and told her she had no rights, and she didn't." Belshe cried as she drove to the Wentworth, a drug commonly used to treat schizophrenia. When Rudy asked her questions, Rennie said, "Their tongues hung out."

Shortly after her parents' move, Belshe called an editor of the Vegas Voice, a newspaper distributed to all the mailboxes in senior communities in Las Vegas. In recent months, the paper had published three columns warning readers about Clark County guardians, writing that they "have been lining their pockets at the expense of unwitting seniors for a very long time."

At Belshe's urging, the paper's political editor, Rana Goodman, visited the Norths, and published an article in the Voice, describing Rudy as "the most articulate, soft spoken person I have met in a very long time." She called Clark County's guardianship system a "(legal) elder abuse racket" and urged readers to sign a petition demanding that the Nevada legislature reform the laws. More than three thousand people signed.

Two months later, the Review-Journal ran an investigation, titled "Clark County's Private Guardians May Protect—Or Just Steal and Abuse," which described complaints against Shafer going back to the early eighties, when two of his employees were arrested for stealing from the estates of dead people. In May, 2015, a month after the article
appeared, when the Norths went to court
to discuss their finances local journalists
were in the courtroom and Norheim
seemed chastened. "I have grave concerns
about this case," he said. He noted that
Parks had sold the Norths’ belongings
without proper approval from his court.
Parks had been doing this routinely for
years, and, according to her, the court had
always accepted her accounting and her
fees. Her lawyer, Aileen Cohen, said, "Ev-
everything was done for the wards’ benefit,
to support the wards."

Norheim announced that he was sus-
pending Parks as the Norths’ guardian—
the first time she had been removed from
a case for misconduct.

"This is important," Rudy, who was
wearing a double-breasted suit, said in
court. "This is hope. I am coming here
and I have hope." He quoted the Bible,
Thomas Jefferson, and Euripides, until
Belshe finally touched his elbow and said,"Just sit down, Dad."

When Rudy apologized for being
"overzealous," Norheim told him, "This
is your life. This is your liberty. You have
every right to be here. You have every
right to be involved in this project."

After the hearing, Parks texted her
husband, "I am finished."

L
ast March, Parks and her lawyer,
along with her office manager and
her husband, were indicted for perjury
and theft, among other charges. The in-
dictment was narrowly focused on their
double billings and their sloppy account-
ing, but, in a detailed summary of the
investigation, Jaclyn O’Malley, who led the probe
for the Nevada Attorney Gen-
eral’s Office, made passing references to the “collusion of
hospital social workers and medical staff” who profited
from their connection to Parks. At Parks’s grand-jury trial, her
assistant testified that she and Parks went to hospitals and at-
torneys’ offices for the purpose of “build-
ing relationships to generate more cli-
ent leads.” Parks secured a contract with
six medical facilities whose staff agreed
to refer patients to her—an arrangement
that benefitted the facilities, since Parks
controlled the decisions of a large pool
of their potential consumers. Parks often
gave doctors blank certificates and told
them exactly what to write in order for
their patients to become her wards.

Parks and other private guardians ap-
peared to gravitate toward patients who
had considerable assets. O’Malley de-
dscribed a 2010 case in which Parks, after
receiving a tip from a social worker, began
“cold-calling” rehabilitation centers,
searching for a seventy-nine-year-old
woman, Patricia Smoak, who had nearly
seven hundred thousand dollars and no
children. Parks finally found her, but
Smoak’s physician wouldn’t sign a certifi-
cate of incapacity. "The doctor is not
playing ball," Parks wrote to her lawyer.
She quickly found a different doctor
to sign the certificate, and Norheim ap-
proved the guardianship. (Both Parks
and Norheim declined to speak with me.)

Steve Miller, a former member of the
Las Vegas City Council, said he assumed
that Shafer would be the next indict-
ment after Parks, who is scheduled to
go to trial next spring. "All of the dis-
reputable guardians were taking clues
from the Shafer example," he said. But,
as the months passed, "I started to think
that this has run its course locally. Only
federal intervention is going to give us
peace of mind."

Richard Black, who, after his father-
in-law was placed into guardianship,
became the director of a grassroots na-
tional organization, Americans Against
Abusive Probate Guardianship, said
that he considered the Parks indict-
ment "irrefutably shallow. It sent a
strong message of: We’re not going to
go after the real leaders of
this, only the easy people, the
ones who were arrogant and
stupid enough to get caught."

He works with victims in
dozens of what he calls "hot
spots,” places where guardian-
ship abuse is prevalent, often
because they attract retirees:
Palm Beach, Sarasota, Naples,
Albuquerque, San Antonio.

He said that the problems in
Clark County are not unusual. "The
only thing that is unique is that Clark
County is one of the few jurisdictions
that doesn’t seal its records, so we can
see what is going on."

Approximately ten per cent of peo-
ple older than sixty-five are thought to
be victims of "elder abuse”—a construct
that has yet to enter public conscious-
ness, as child abuse has—but such cases
are seldom prosecuted. People who are
frail or dying don’t make good witness-
es—a fact that Shafer once emphasized
at a 1990 U.S. congressional hearing on
crimes against the elderly, in which he
appeared as an expert at preventing ex-
plotation. “Seniors do not like to tes-
tify,” he said, adding that they were ei-
ther incapable or "mesmerized by the
person ripping them off." He said, “The
exploitation of seniors is becoming a
real cottage industry right now. This is
a good business. Seniors are unable to
fend for themselves.”

In the past two years, Nevada has
worked to reform its guardianship sys-

tem through a commission, appointed
by the Nevada Supreme Court, to study
failures in oversight. In 2018, the Ne-
vada legislature will enact a new law that
entitles all wards to be represented by
lawyers in court. But the state seems re-
luctant to reckon with the roots of the
problem, as well as with its legacy: a
generation of ill and elderly people who
were deprived of their autonomy, and
also of their families, in the final years
of their lives. Last spring, a man bought
a storage unit in Henderson, Nevada,
and discovered twenty-seven urns—the
remains of Clark County wards who
had never been buried.

In the wake of Parks’s indictment,
no judges have lost their jobs. Nor-
heim was transferred from guardian-
ship court to dependency court, where
he now oversees cases involving abused
and neglected children. Shafer is still
listed in the Clark County court sys-
tem as a trustee and as an administra-
tor in several open cases. He did not
respond to multiple e-mails and mes-
sages left with his bookkeeper, who
answered his office phone but would
not say whether he was still in prac-
tice. He did appear at one of the pub-
lic meetings for the commission ap-
pointed to analyze flaws in the guard-
ianship system. “What started all of
this was me,” he said. Then he criti-
cized local media coverage of the issue
and said that a television reporter,
whom he’d talked to briefly, didn’t know
the facts. “The system works,” Shafer
went on. “It’s not the guardians you
have to be aware of, it’s more family
members.” He wore a blue polo shirt,
untucked, and his head was shaved.
He looked aged, his arms dotted with sun spots, but he spoke confidently and casually. "The only person you folks should be thinking about when you change things is the ward. It's their money, it's their life, it's their time. The family members don't count."

Belshe is resigned to the fact that she will be supporting her parents for the rest of their lives. Parks spent all the Norths' money on fees—the hourly wages for her, her assistants, her lawyers, and the various contractors she hired—as well as on their monthly bills, which doubled under her guardianship. Belshe guesses that Parks—or whichever doctor or social worker referred her to the Norths—had assumed that her parents were wealthier than they actually were. Rudy often talked vaguely about deals he had once made in China. "He exaggerates, so he won't feel emasculated," Belshe said. "He wasn't such a big businessman, but he was a great dad."

The Norths now live in what used to be Belshe's home office; it has a window onto the living room which Belshe has covered with a tarp. Although the room is tiny, the Norths can fit most of their remaining belongings into it: a small lamp with teardrop crystals, a deflated love seat, and two paintings by their son. Belshe rescued the artwork, in 2013, after Caring Transitions placed the Norths' belongings in trash bags at the edge of their driveway. "My brother's paintings were folded and smelled," she said.

The Norths' bed takes up most of the room, and operates as their little planet. They rarely stray far from it. They lie in bed playing cards or sit against the headboard, reading or watching TV. Rudy's notebooks are increasingly focussed on mortality—"Death may be pleasurable"—and money. "Money monsters do well in this society," he wrote. "All great fortunes began with a crime." He creates lists of all the possessions he has lost, some of which he may be imagining: over time, Rennie's wardrobe has become increasingly elaborate and refined, as have their sets of China. He alternates between feeling that his belongings are nothing—a distraction from the pursuit of meaning—and everything. "It's an era- sure," he said. "They erase you from the face of the earth." He told me a few times that he was a distant cousin of Leon Trotsky, "intellect of the revolution," as he called him, and I wondered whether his newfound pride was connected to his conflicted feelings about the value of material objects.

A few months after the Norths were freed, Rudy talked on the phone with Adolfo Gonzalez, his neighbor from Lakeview Terrace, who, after a doctor found him competent, had also been discharged. He now lived in a house near the airport, and had been reunited with several of his pets. The two men congratulated each other. "We survived!" Rudy said. "We never thought we'd see each other on the other side." Three other wards from Lakeview Terrace had died.

Rennie has lost nearly all the weight she gained at Lakeview Terrace, mostly because Belshe and her husband won't let her lounge in her wheelchair or eat starchy foods. Now she uses a walker, which she makes self-deprecating jokes about. "This is fun—I can teach you!" she told me.

In July, Rennie slipped in the bathroom and spent a night in the hospital. Belshe didn't want anyone to know about her mother's fall, because, she said, "this is the kind of thing that gets you into guardianship." She told me, "I feel like these people are just waiting in the bushes."

Two days after the fall, Rennie was feeling better—she'd had thirteen stitches—but she was still agitated by a dream she had in the hospital. She wasn't even sure if she'd been asleep; she remembers talking, and her eyes were open. "You were loopedy-doopy," Scott Belshe, Julie's husband, told her. They were sitting on the couch in their living room.

"It was real," Rennie said.

"You dreamed it," Scott told her.

"Maybe I was hallucinating," she said. "I don't know—I was scared." She said that strangers were making decisions about her fate. She felt as if she were frozen: she couldn't influence what was happening. "I didn't know what to do," she told Scott. "I think I yelled for help. Help me." The worst part, she said, was that she couldn't find her family. "Honest to God, I thought you guys left me all alone."
likes

Sarah Shun-lien Bynum
The dad scrolled through his daughter’s Instagram account, looking for clues. The most recent post was a photograph of an ice-cream cone, extravagantly large, held up against a white wall by a disembodied hand. Peppermint stick, or strawberry. The mound was starting to melt, a trickle of it inching down the cone and drawing dangerously close to the thumb. His daughter’s.

The next photo was a closeup of a shopwindow. Inside the window glowed a pink neon sign spelling out the word “warm” in lowercase letters. The glowing word took up most of the frame: it was impossible to tell what sort of store it was.

Another closeup: an eraser-colored rose, its petals halfway unfurled.

A panorama: the sky at sunset.

A shot of her dog, Bob, curled up like a cinnamon bun on the pleated, peachy expanse of her bed.

And then an earlobe—was that what it was? Soft, rounded, partly in shadow.

He closed his eyes and put down the phone.

His daughter was nearly twelve, and difficult to talk to.

Normally she rode the bus home from school, but, now that she had to do physical therapy twice a week, he had been picking her up and taking her to the appointments. He felt responsible. These problems with her joints—runner’s knee, Achilles tendinitis—were undoubtedly a handicap she’d inherited from his gouty side of the family. In ballet class, she could no longer do pirouettes. The physical therapist recommended a series of exercises to do at home. Some, like the calf raises, were straightforward, but others had names such as Clam. Studying the printout, with its unhelpful black-and-white drawings, the dad asked, “You understand what all of this means?” Fire Hydrant. Dipping Bird. Short Bridge. Clock. His daughter didn’t glance up from her phone: “Uh-huh.” He stuck the paper on the radio, songs patchy with blanked-out words that she made a point of mouthing but didn’t say aloud. A billboard might prompt her to ask a question like “Why is she drinking out of a paper bag?” Sometimes, gazing at her phone, she would let out a low, triumphant hiss. Yessss! She’d got every answer right on the Kylie Jenner quiz. Received seventy-four likes on her ice-cream photo. Set a new personal record on her Snapchat streak with Talia. Other days her phone lay inert in her lap. Only last week she had asked, eyes brimming and fixed on the dashboard, “Dad, can I be homeschooled?” Undone, he’d answered, “Sure.”

After physical therapy, in the elevator heading down to the parking lot he gave her a squeeze and said, “You’re quite the conversationalist in there.” His daughter looked at him with alarm. Of course it hadn’t come out the way he’d wanted it to. “I’m glad,” he tried again, “that there’s an adult you enjoy talking to.” Which was true, although it sounded as if he meant the opposite. Even to his own ears he sounded sorry for himself. But his daughter, good for her, was not thinking about him or his feelings. She stared at the elevator doors. “You’re making me feel like I talk too much!” she whispered furiously, deep in her own embarrassment.

New Instagram post: a peeled-off pair of ballet tights, splayed on the white tiles of a bathroom floor.

Some days his daughter’s quietness in the car felt blank and mysterious; but some days it felt excruciatingly full, like an inflamed internal organ about to burst. On one such afternoon the dad said carefully, “I’m not going to look at you. I’m not going to say anything. I’m just going to keep my eyes on the road. I’m going to keep driving, and, when you’re ready, you say whatever you want.” After a moment of silence, she said, “I’m considering it.” And then, “Can I curse?” He nodded. She asked, “You won’t make any noises, or have any expressions at all on your face?” He nodded again. They drove for several more minutes. The effort was killing him. Also the dread. He wasn’t sure if he had the capacity to receive whatever feeling it was that she was full of. When they were only three blocks from the therapist’s office, she said to the windshield, “I have no friends.” As he eased into the parking lot, she said, “And don’t tell me, ‘But you were just at Annie’s house last Friday.’ I know that’s what you’re going to say. But you can’t make me feel better. People only hang out with me because there’s nobody else around. I’m not their friend.” She opened the car door slowly. “I’m their second choice.” She heaved her backpack off the floor while he stayed behind the wheel, noticing his breath and absorbing the punch in various parts of his body. Why hadn’t she cursed?

The physical therapist recommended a series of exercises to do at home. Some, like the calf raises, were straightforward, but others had names such as Clam. Studying the printout, with its unhelpful black-and-white drawings, the dad asked, “You understand what all of this means?” Fire Hydrant. Dipping Bird. Short Bridge. Clock. His daughter didn’t glance up from her phone: “Uh-huh.” He stuck the paper to the refrigerator with a magnet. It looked somewhat quaint there. All her handouts from school were now distributed digitally, for environmental reasons. “You know you’re supposed to be doing these every night?” No answer. Marooned on one side of the island, he wondered, not for the first time, if open concept was such a great thing after all. Was she in the kitchen talking with him, or was she in the family room, on the sofa with her...
phone? Unclear. Without untying the laces, she scraped off her sneakers, toe to heel. Two consecutive thunks. “Your progress depends on it. You know that, right?” Elegantly, she lifted her long legs up and out of sight. “Ivy?” She sank beneath the horizon of the sofa. “Hello?”

Guess what: her only homework was to watch TV. This was what his daughter announced when he picked her up from ballet class. In a series of texts, he and his wife agreed that they would order ramen and watch the Presidential debate as a family, and though it took them a while to get settled—the restaurant had sent only one spicy instead of two, and when they sat down on the sofa Bob kept jumping into their laps and had to be crated—once they finally organized themselves, with their drinks and their bowls and their napkins and their chopsticks, it felt warm and momentous being there together in front of the television. Dorothy muttered encouragement at the moderator. “Keep at him,” she said, bent over her noodles. “Keep the pressure on!”

As long as Dorothy was leaning forward, he could now and then steal a sideways glance at his daughter. She appeared to be paying attention, her eyes slightly widened and her bowl sitting neglected on the coffee table. Then suddenly she leaped off the sofa and ran upstairs.

“You all right?” he called. “Ivy?”

“It’s making me uncomfortable!” she yelled from the top of the staircase. He could picture her standing there, one foot raised, ready to flee. “Tell me when this part is over, O.K.?”

He wanted to share a commiserating look with Dorothy, but she was still watching the screen, seeing her little pendant back and forth on its chain. “So much for current events,” he said.

His daughter had a pretty collection of pens and pencils. A tiny roll of tape, a pink pocket stapler, and a packet of candy-colored paper clips. All these items lived inside a sleek gold pouch with a zipper, and were brought out into the open when she was doing her homework at the kitchen table. Her tapered fingers danced over them in search of the right highlighter. Her fingernails sparkled. Her school supplies sparkled. She had affixed very small fuzzy stickers in strategic places to her notebooks and binders. Watching her at work, he realized with pride that his daughter would have been one of those girls who intimidated him when he was that age.

When he was that age! A slight pricking, like sensation restoring itself to a numb hand. Was his old self considering a return? To his surprise, he had trouble recalling his thoughts and emotions from sixth grade. Surprising, because he remembered the fact of having felt things; it was the point at which his parents took to calling him Heathcliff.

There were a few standouts, to be sure—the memory of being lifted into the air and carried on a gurney, after he’d badly sprained his ankle on the basketball court, and noticing how far away the ceiling of the gym appeared, and the menacing pattern of the rafters—but, in terms of day-to-day twelve-year-old feelings, he had, strangely, lost access. And the access needed to be only temporary: all he wanted was a point of comparison. Was what she was going through normal? In the afternoons he held his breath, never knowing which girl was going to climb into the passenger seat: the happy one, braces flashing, asking if they could make a really quick stop at Baskin-Robbins; or the other one, the one in pain. Had he ever felt that way, too? If only he could remember. All that came to him were the first and last names, in no particular order, of every kid in his homeroom: Steven, of every kid in his homeroom: Steven, Burke, Tracy Mayson, Derek Wong, Billy Flanagan, Dawn Littlejohn, Josh Tokofsky, Luke Mandel, Rafi Moncho, Danielle Blood . . . And sometimes along with the names the faces would mate-rialize, like mug shots.

By nightfall his daughter seemed to have revived. She practiced her jazz turns on the slick floor of the kitchen; she winked and dimpled at her reflection in the sliding doors, as if for an audience stretching into the darkened back yard. The dad, rinsing dishes in the sink, had to keep dodging her left foot, which she kicked, without warning, high into the air. She always kicked on that side; it was naturally the more flexible of the two. To the dad, it would have made more sense to practice kicking on the less stretchy side. I am the best, she sang tunelessly, the best, the best, the best. You can’t beat me, no you can’t, so don’t even try, because I am the best. The song sounded as if it had been made up on the spot.

Later that week, the physical therapist came into the waiting room while his
SHIVA

Evenings we sit in the living room, together. Friday I take
my mother's slot (noon)
at the beauty salon. Ruth,
who for forty years washed
her hair, washes mine.

We're all in the desert
together. Your mother
liked the water cold,
Ruth says—news to me.

From a thousand
mouths, our dead assemble.

—Andrea Cohen

daughter was still whirring away on
the bicycle. For a moment, he thought
she was there to grab a magazine, but
then she perched on the chair beside
him and started speaking. "I'm wonder-
ing," she said, wearing her small,
formal smile, "if Ivy has been keeping
up with her exercises at home?" His
chest began to tingle, the Ivy-vise
squeezing. She wasn't improving. She
wasn't going to get a decent part in
"The Nutcracker." She'd have to spend
a second year in the angel corps, shuffling
across the stage in the Snowflake scene
while holding a battery-operated candle from Home Depot. He felt to-
tally defeated. "I think she has," he said.
"I've been telling her to." Then he
admitted, "But I really don't know."
To his shame, he heard himself add-
ing, somewhat sulkily, "Maybe you
should ask her."

Another not-great day at school. His
daughter buried her chin and mouth
into the folds of her scarf and stared
unseeing at the road, not bothering
to change the radio station. Election
coverage continued unchecked in the
background. Beyond the windshield,
a vapor trail bisected the blue sky.
Closer to the ground, block after block
of residential development streamed
past. As they merged onto the high-
way, she asked, "Do you think I cry
too much?" He sat with the question
for a handful of seconds and then in-
quired, evenly, "Who told you that?"
When she didn't answer, he asked, a
little less evenly, "Who said that bull-
shit to you?" Also, "When did it be-
come a crime to feel things?" She re-
treated deeper into her scarf. "Oh,
God, Dad. Forget I asked. It doesn't
matter," and he glanced down at the
insulated cup resting in the holder
between them. That fucking coffee!
He'd been suckerced by the promised
ease of "Drive-Thru" and ended up
arriving ten minutes late for pickup.
Only ten minutes, not even a quar-
ter of an hour, but long enough for
someone to have said something awful
to her. If that indeed was what had
happened. Who knew what really
went on in the cluster of low-slung
buildings that she disappeared into
and emerged from every day? He had
the urge to carry her far away from
them, as far as possible. The value of
peer interaction was definitely over-
stated. He could fill the tank, surprise
Dorothy at work, load the trunk with
nonperishable groceries and supplies,
and then it'd be just the three of them,
the open road. Not like free spirits,
exactly, more like refugees from the
zombie apocalypse, but, still, they'd
be together. Plus Bob. He'd almost
forgotten the dog.

New post: a cupcake, frosted to look
like the cute face of a pig.

In late October, unexpectedly, a stretch
of sunshine. First off, she'd been cast as
dragon dancer in the Chinese Tea scene,
and even though only the lower half of
her would be visible, she was coming
home from the rehearsals in high spir-
its. Which she attributed to teamwork,
telling him, "You see, it is like playing a
sport." And then, in the space of a few
days: an Evite to a disco-themed mur-
der-mystery party; an afternoon work-
ing with her partner on a social-studies
project that turned into a movie night
and a sleepover; a plan to go with three
girls from her Girl Scout troop to the
outlet mall. The dad stood on the front
walkway and watched her slide into the
back seat of the troop mother's mini-
van; as it pulled away from the curb, he
waved to the shadowy parent behind
the wheel. Their neighbor Marcia hap-
pened to be dragging in her trash cans.
He waved at her, too. "I can't believe
how big she's getting!" Marcia called.
"Tell me about it," he said. "Always run-
ing off somewhere. I can't keep up!"
He knew he sounded like an ass but he
couldn't help it. He floated up the walk-
way and in through the front door, and
finding Dorothy upstairs, shaking out
the bedcovers, he hugged her from be-
hind and made her topple over.

On Tuesday, the physical therapist
greeted them as usual. "Hi, Ivy," she
said through her little smile, as if he
were merely the hulking, nameless at-
tendant who travelled alongside the
patient. But today it didn't bother him,
because right away he saw that she had
done her duty and voted. He pointed
to the oblong sticker on the breast
pocket of her gray, grownup-looking
blouse, and then pointed to the same
sticker attached to his own chest. Ear-
erlier, he had debated whether he should
wait until after school and take his
daughter with him—it'd be something
that she could tell her daughter about,
had been his thinking—but then he remembered that she had therapy and during his lunch hour went ahead on his own to the polling station, which was in the cavernous basement of an Armenian church. After pointing to their matching stickers, he gave the physical therapist a grin and a thumbs-up. Uncharacteristically, she returned the gesture with open enthusiasm. Oh! Maybe he’d stumbled upon the best way to communicate with her—through hand signals. He swelled suddenly with positive feelings for her. This competent young woman, who was helping his daughter; those nice Armenian congregants who volunteered for long shifts at the polls; the sensible, civic-minded men and women who patiently waited with him, giving up their lunch hours as he had—he felt good about them. He felt good about humanity in general. Basic decency would prevail, and this exhausting, insane election season would soon be over, and by tomorrow he could commit his energies fully to planning the Thanksgiving menu and making sure that his daughter did her Fire Hydrants every night and got better.

New post: a black square. Not a photo of a black square but a photo of total blackness. As if the camera had misfired, or the film had been accidentally exposed.

The whole family had a hard time getting up the next morning. The dad felt as if he had been run over by a truck, a big shiny pickup truck that had come swerving out of the darkness and mowed him down, and now had backed up and was waiting for him, its engine revving. His daughter crouched by his pillow and asked, as she often did, “Do I have to go to school today?” Her eyes had turned narrow from crying, then swelling; her nightshirt had a silvery unicorn on it. They had let her stay up to watch the results with them, and even in the dim light she looked haggard. “No,” he said, placing the pillow over his head. “Go back to sleep.” It was what he intended to do. He had a very small window in which he could slip back into unconsciousness and then wake up in a world where the election hadn’t happened. He tried the trick he’d developed after the first of several basketball injuries, the trick where he would slow his breathing and lie perfectly still, and the throbbing in his ankle would cease, and he could fool himself into believing that he was strong and well before finally relaxing into sleep. He imagined himself in his old bedroom, on his narrow bed, wearing nothing but his Celtics shorts. He repeated to himself, Fit as a fiddle. Fit as a fiddle. But he was agonizingly awake. Dorothy’s body heat beside him was throwing him off. He pushed away the pillow and sighed, and was startled to see his daughter standing in the doorway, fully dressed, with her backpack on. “What are you doing?” he groaned. “Why aren’t you in bed?” She took a nervous step backward. “Daddy,” she said. “I thought you were joking.”

Life was a subject on which his daughter collected inspirational quotes. Her favorite—“Life always offers you a second chance. It’s called tomorrow”—served as the bio on her Instagram profile. If asked to describe herself, she invariably said either “fantabulous” or “optimistic.” Among the many items on the third draft of her Christmas list was something called a Happiness Planner, a daily journal designed, she explained, to create positive thinking and personal growth. Christmas was well over a month away, though nearly all the houses on the block already had their lights up.

On a cold morning, the dad sank into the driver’s seat, and in a fog he backed the car down the driveway and into the street before he became aware of a painted wooden sign on top of his dashboard. It was long and thin, with a black background and italicized gold lettering; the paint had been deliberately rubbed away from the sign’s edges to make it look like an heirloom that had once hung in an ancestor’s home—steam. Usually this sign hung on the wall above his daughter’s bed, for the most part unnoticed by him, but now, looking at it closely, he saw that its syn-tax was slightly garbled. It read, “Life is always offered a second chance. It’s called tomorrow.” Not as bad as what he’d seen in some instruction manuals, but still off, and annoyingly so, considering that the words were the whole point. He flipped over the sign to confirm his suspicions about where it had been manufactured. “Proudly made in Michigan, USA,” the sticker said. He didn’t know why he bothered feeling surprise anymore. He tossed the sign into the back seat, face down. It struck him as darkly symbolic, as so many things did these days. Personal “life” marching on, taking for itself all the tomorrows you’d squandered. And don’t get him started on Michigan. How did the unintelligible thing even end up on his dashboard? He’d have to remind Ivy to take it up to her room, or else it would remain in the back of his car for months.

“Do you realize how Snapchat works?” Dorothy asked him, her face lit up in the dark by her laptop. “That it just disappears? The photos they send each other? And that they can write captions on them? Then it all goes poof—like in five seconds it’s gone. So there’s no way of knowing what they’re receiving, or putting out there, what images and messages they’re being exposed to, there’s no way to monitor any of it, because it vanishes . . .” She clicked on her trackpad. “Hey. Do you know about this?” He rolled toward her and grunted. “Uh-huh.” With his mouthguard in, it wasn’t easy to enunciate. She reached over to the nightstand and then dropped the neoprene eye mask onto his face, saying, “I think I’m going to be up for a little while.” He heaved himself back onto his more comfortable side, the side with the good shoulder, and pulled the mask down over his eyes. Everything disappeared. There was something about being suddenly swaddled in darkness that made each of her clicks seem slightly louder than the one before, as if the source of the sound were coming, very slowly, closer.

The next morning, Dorothy returned from her run bearing a stack of newspapers in her arms, somewhat
THE NEW YORKER FESTIVAL
OCTOBER 6/7/8

PRESENTING SPONSOR

STARS OF THE SMALL SCREEN, LIVE ONSTAGE
Tickets on sale now.
NEWYORKER.COM/FESTIVAL #TNYFEST

RECENTLY ANNOUNCED!
FRI., OCT. 6 | 10:00 P.M.
Riz Ahmed talks with Alexis Okeowo
After "The Night Of."

FRI., OCT. 6 | 10:00 P.M.
Jerry Seinfeld talks with David Remnick
Yada, yada, yada.

SUN., OCT. 8 | 2:00 P.M.
Tracee Ellis Ross talks with Doreen St. Félix
Fabulous-ish.

FRI., OCT. 6 | 7:00 P.M.
Seth Meyers talks with Ariel Levy
The conscience of a comedian.

SAT., OCT. 7 | 10:00 P.M.
Kumail Nanjiani talks with Emma Allen
Big, sick humor.

SAT., OCT. 7 | 10:00 P.M.
Jon Hamm talks with Susan Morrison
Don and beyond.

SPONSORS

LAND ROVER
QUALCOMM
BERMUDA
Curb Your Enthusiasm
HBO
WordPress.com

ABOVE & BEYOND
tentatively, like she was carrying someone else's baby. She dropped it heavily onto the island. “Since when do we subscribe to the Guardian?” she asked. “And the New York Times?” The dad looked up from his phone in confusion. He did recall making a few late-night donations to the N.R.D.C. and the Southern Poverty Law Center, but he'd forgotten all about the newspapers. “You know there’s this thing called a digital subscription,” she remarked as she opened the refrigerator. He moved out of her way. “That’s what I did with the Washington Post,” he said, remembering now. “Because they don’t deliver outside the D.C. area.”

“In a week this place is going to look like a hoarder’s house,” Dorothy predicted. “Piles of newspaper everywhere.”

“I just think it’s important to model,” the dad said, looking meaningfully in the direction of the sofa. “Model where we get our information from.”

He half expected his daughter’s head to pop up like a groundhog’s at the mention of “model.” Kendall Jenner? Gigi Hadid? “No, not that kind of model,” he heard himself saying wearily over a laugh track.

Dorothy handed him a glass of juice. “Stop looking so pious,” she said. “I agree with you.”

New post: a hand holding a clear plastic Starbucks cup filled with a liquid the color of Pepto-Bismol. In it floated small chunks of something red.

“Do you think this is full of caffeine?” Dorothy asked, her screen tilted in his direction. Though they’d made a reservation, their table wasn’t ready. They stood wedged into the little area by the door where umbrellas would have gone if it had been raining. “Who knows what they actually put in their drinks.”

The door opened, the air was cold, and they squeezed closer together to let the new arrivals through. “Well, she gets points for consistency, I’ll give her that,” Dorothy murmured as she continued thumbing her phone. “She’s really thinking about her palette.”

“Her pallet?” That was how he heard it, pallet, like where Joan of Arc would have slept. “On her Instagram. It’s pink. Her palette is a mix of light pink and hot pink.”

He still didn’t understand what she was talking about. “With the occasional salmon accent thrown in.”

He blinked angrily. Dorothy had downloaded the app only a week ago. “What about the picture of Michelle Obama?” he asked. “She’s not pink.” “Her dress is.” His wife smiled at him.

At this point the hostess looked up from her station and signalled for them to approach. The noise of the restaurant rose up around them, and for a moment he felt enfolded by the warm lighting and the voices and the smell of food being thoughtfully prepared. But none of it gave him any pleasure.

As soon as they were seated, he ordered wine for them both and in a little bout of resentment told Dorothy that a pink palette struck him as depressingly clichéd. Ivy was just imitating what she saw other girls doing online. Carefully styled shots of doughnuts and videos of dissolving bath bombs. Groupthink, he said. She kept talking about her personal “style” and her “vibe” and her “aesthetic,” but nothing about it was actually hers. The photo of her hand holding the pink drink from Starbucks? He’d seen practically the same image posted a hundred times before.

His wife reached out and touched the arm of a passing server. “Can we get a new fork, please?” Accidentally he had knocked his off the table.

“I know you don’t like it when I talk about YouTubers, but can I tell you just this one thing? What makes Ashleigh Janine different from a lot of other YouTubers is that she’s really honest with her fans. She’ll come right out and say who’s sponsoring her. She doesn’t try to hide it or make it seem like it’s just a coincidence that she uses Simple and Clinique. She’ll say, ‘I’m so excited to be working with these brands.’ And also? She’s grateful. She says all the time how blessed she is. Because she knows it’s not usual for a twenty-three-year-old to be buying her first house. And have it be so big.”

“She’s buying a house?” “With a pool.” “Wow,” he said. “Her own pool.”

“But now it won’t stay in mint condition.”
“She’s already moved in. Tomorrow she’s going to Lowe’s to buy house-plants.”

“What’s Simple?” He knew what Clinique was.

“It’s a makeup remover. Like, cleansing facial wipes. They don’t use artificial perfumes or harsh chemicals, so it won’t upset your skin.”

“She bought a house by using cleansing wipes?”

“She has a lot of other sponsors, not just Simple. Plus she’s writing a Y.A. novel, so she gets money from that, too.”

He didn’t know how to continue the conversation. Accelerating, he made it through a yellow light.

“Dad?” his daughter said, after a minute or two. “When Ashleigh’s book comes out, can I get it?”

He must have looked ill-disposed—or maybe he just looked ill—because then she said jovially, “Come on! It’s reading.”

But could it really be called reading? Did it actually count as a book? Or was it just something AMAZING. Something to be SO EXCITED about. To be SO GRATEFUL for. I hope you guys enjoyed it! I had so much fun doing it, and, if you want me to do more things like this, make sure to give it a big thumbs-up and comment down below. And don’t forget to subscribe to my vlog channel—which just got, I can’t believe it, two million subscribers!—because there you can see all the behind-the-scenes! So, yeah, thank you for watching and I love you guys so so so much—

In fact, would it be going too far to call it TREMENDOUS? Something INCREDIBLE. A massive story. And very complex. Made by some really incredible people. Of such incredible talent. It will be a big win, there’s no question about it. And I can tell you why, because, number one, the enthusiasm. The enthusiasm for this, it is really tremendous—

Right before the impact, he heard his daughter gasp.

And, in the silence afterward, he felt her chest rising and falling rapidly against his outstretched arm.

New post: a bared collarbone with a seat-belt burn running diagonally across it. The welt shiny with ointment, and pink.

During the intermission of “The Nutcracker,” he was startled to see the physical therapist standing in line for the ladies’ room. She was holding a potted orchid from Trader Joe’s and wearing a velvet blazer. “You came!” he said, a little too loudly. He glanced around to see if maybe she had brought a date. She asked him, “Is this Ivy’s mom?”, and he remembered to introduce Dorothy, who promptly apologized for the length and over-all tedium of the production. “But I’m enjoying it,” the therapist protested. She complimented the girl who danced Arabian Coffee and also the Chinese dragon dancers, who had succeeded, the dad admitted, in bringing a sort of unruly street energy to the show. “Ivy was wonderful,” she said, and together he and Dorothy smiled. “Like you could really tell,” he said.

She looked at him seriously. “I would know those legs anywhere. Over-pronation of the feet, well-developed gastrocnemius. She was third from the back.” The confidence with which she said it moved him unexpectedly. He thought of all the time he had spent working with his daughter deep in the forest of equipment: two times a week, for nearly three months. Not only a licensed professional but an expert in her field. And here she was, on her day off—

It was the therapist who was smiling now. “Don’t look like that, Dave,” she said. “It’s not magic or anything. It’s just my job.” He began smiling, too, to show that he of course understood, but judging from the expression on her face, and on Dorothy’s, it was very possible that his eyes were also leaking a little. The likelihood made him smile even more; that and the fact that—well, what do you know?—she did remember his name, after all.

A week after the performance, he came home late from work, and when he pulled the rental car into the driveway he saw his daughter sitting at the dining-room table. She was framed photogenically by the room’s picture window. For a moment, he felt the vise in his chest tightening—Why was she alone on a Friday night? Why hadn’t Dorothy set up a sleepover for her? Why hadn’t anyone invited her to their house?—but as he climbed out of the car he saw that she appeared unperturbed and in fact rather happy, or at least happily occupied. She had her earbuds in and was making Christmas cards, the supplies spread in a glittering swath across the table.

When she spotted him outside, she immediately yanked out her earbuds, pushed back her chair, and hurled herself against the picture window, landing with a soft thud. Her cheek lay smashed against the glass, her arms were splayed, and while she still needed one leg to stand on, she’d lifted the other and pressed its bent shape to the window. What in the world. He had no idea what she was expressing, or rehearsing—but the gesture was undoubtedly directed at him. Out in the darkness he gave her a thumbs-up, but her eyes were limply shut. Not a muscle moved. It was all very realistic.

Was he witnessing the magic of dance? Of—what was it called when she was little?—creative movement? Somehow she had managed to convey through her body precisely what he’d been feeling since November: not crushed, not flattened, but flung, as if from an obliterating blast, against a hard, exposing surface. Spread, embarrassed, suspended, without the strength to open his eyes and survey the damage. He put down his computer bag and drew closer to the window. He tapped lightly on the pane but she didn’t flinch. Pressing his palm to hers, he wondered if she could feel his outline through the glass. He tried it with his other palm, and then his cheek. He raised and crooked his knee to match the angle of her leg. In sixth-grade theatre class he’d had to do mirror games, but actually this was easier, because now he got to choose his partner. What was hard was balancing on one foot. When he started to wobble, her silent laughter made the whole window shake.
THE CRITICS

BOOKS

TOUCHING SOULS

Joni Mitchell’s lessons in love.

BY DAN CHIASSON

In 1969, Cary Raditz, a recent graduate of the University of North Carolina, quit his job in advertising and headed to Europe to bum around with his girlfriend. They ended up in Matala, on the island of Crete, where they found a bunch of hippies living in a network of caves. Raditz soon decamped for Afghanistan in a VW bus; when he returned, his girlfriend had bailed, but there was word that a new girl was headed to Matala. Raditz didn’t know much about Joni Mitchell, but “there was buzz” among the hippies, and, soon enough, he found himself watching the sunset with one of the most extraordinary people alive. Raditz and Mitchell shared a cave for a couple of months, travelled around Greece together, and parted ways. That’s where you and I come in, because Mitchell wrote two songs, among her greatest works, about her “redneck on a Grecian isle”: “California” and “Carey.” I’ve been singing along to those songs, or trying to, since I was fifteen. I learned from them what you learn from all of Mitchell’s music, that love is a form of reciprocity, at times even a barter economy: “He gave me back my smile / but he kept my camera to sell.” Mitchell’s songs were the final, clinching trade.

Joni Mitchell’s gift was so enormous that it remade the social space around her. As David Yaffe’s new biography, “Reckless Daughter: A Portrait of Joni Mitchell” (Sarah Crichton Books), suggests, it is no small burden to possess such a gift. Mitchell was frank but weirdly self-invented, a kind of calligraphy of the moods; and her voice, which modulates from patter to rue to rhapsody in a single phrase. In concert, she sometimes trained her attention on a single listener in the front row, casting the stranger as the vivid “you” of a song who in real life may have been Sam Shepard, James Taylor, or Leonard Cohen. The best pop music is often preening and shamanic. Mitchell’s is almost always about what two articulate adults mean, or once meant, to each other.

Mitchell writes about emotional information: who controls it, and how it is squandered or hoarded, withheld or weaponized. This requires some reconnaissance, which for Mitchell involves falling in and out of love, over and over—not so much a research method as a form of self-surgery. Her songs report on those lessons, which are, in an instant, in performance, happily forgotten. She is always thinking about the ways in which calculation fails, as guile yields again and again to innocence. As she put it in “Song for Sharon”: “I can keep my cool at poker/But I’m a fool when love’s at stake.”

She was never a fool for longer than her art required, though, and she could be withering in interviews, about the lovers who misread her patient scrutiny of them for acquiescence. David Crosby, who produced Mitchell’s first record, would “trot me out” in front of his friends, she said, “and watch me blow their minds.” Crosby is the smooth operator in the first verses of “Cactus Tree”:

There’s a man who’s been out sailing In a decade full of dreams And he takes her to a schooner And he treats her like a queen Bearing beads from California With their amber stones and green

It sounds like a cross between a hippie valentine and an abduction scenario. As the tune progresses, one suitor after another makes his approach, but Mitchell’s refrain wards them off: “She’s so busy being free.”

That freedom was hard-won. Men often wanted Mitchell to be a wife, a muse, a siren, or a star. Instead, they got a genius, and one especially suited to deconstructing their fantasies of her. When David Geffen, her manager, implored her to write a hit, she came up with “You Turn Me On, I’m a Radio,” which mocks the request while heedlessly fulfilling it:

I come when you whistle When you’re loving and kind If you’ve got too many doubts If there’s no good reception for me Then tune me out, cause honey Who needs the static It hurts the head And you wind up cracking And the day goes dismal From “Breakfast Barney” To the sign-off prayer

The song checks all the boxes: it’s hummable, it’s accessible, it’s a love song—but it’s also a sabred refusal of all of the above. Mitchell was frank but weirdly Parnassian about male sexual appetite, which she saw as not so different, finally, from her own. When she resisted the advances of Warren Beatty and Jack Nicholson, it was partly because she recognized her own techniques in their vulpine attentions. (She always said that she preferred “the company of men.”) In “Coyote,” a song about her fling with Sam Shepard, Mitchell describes his roving eye: “He’s staring a hole in his scrambled eggs/He picks up my scent on his
Mitchell wanted to make a new kind of song, one in which conversation could flower, in mid-phrase, into music.
BRIEFLY NOTED

Chester B. Himes, by Lawrence P. Jackson (Norton). This biography of Himes—novelist, Ohio Penitentiary inmate, reformed Communist, and privileged child of the black middle class—maps his punishing road to success and the experiences that shaped his distinctive blunt perspectives on race, class, and sex. Jailed at nineteen, after a botched robbery, Himes found fame in 1934, with short stories about prison life. But his career faltered after his release, as publishers rejected his work for its violence, homosexual content, and unvarnished style. Himes was forced to take odd jobs, and was dogged by debt and drink. Not until he settled in Europe, in his forties, did he achieve stability, writing the hardboiled detective novels for which he is chiefly remembered.

Saving Charlotte, by Pia de Jong, translated from the Dutch by Pia de Jong and Landon Y. Jones (Norton). This compelling memoir by a Dutch novelist begins in 2000, when her daughter is born with congenital myeloid leukemia, a rare disease with a low rate of survival. De Jong and her husband decide against chemotherapy, which is likely to be both devastating and ineffective. "Parents always want to do everything for their children," an incredulous oncologist protests. "We do nothing," de Jong responds. "That can be a lot." De Jong movingly describes the work of nursing her daughter to health, and sketches the Amsterdam neighborhood—the brothel next door, the local crank, the kind old man who lives across the canal—that seems to cocoon the struggling family.

The Burning Girl, by Claire Messud (Norton). The friendship of two girls, Julia and Cassie, animates this slim, dreamlike novel, set in small-town Massachusetts. The pair met in nursery school, and Julia, the narrator, charts the fraying of their bond which occurs when stresses of class and circumstance emerge, in adolescence—"a world of adult consciousness, with all the strangeness that implies." Cassie is raised by a single mother, in a small house with a "careful skirt of lawn"; Julia, college-bound, lives in a big Victorian with a wrap-around porch. As they drift apart, Julia ponders how "each of us shapes our stories so they make sense of who we think we are." Messud plays, lightly, with familiar archetypes, deftly abstracting her tale so that it flares into myth.

Border Child, by Michel Stone (Nan A. Talese). In this novel, about the Latin-American immigrant experience, Héctor and Lilia, a Mexican couple, are separated from their infant daughter while crossing the border into the U.S. Four years later, after being deported, they receive a tip that could help them find her. Héctor journeys north to search, as Lilia, about to give birth, waits, confined to her bed. Stone tells the story through multiple perspectives, but the narrative cuts deepest with Lilia, who blames herself for the loss of their child, carrying "a crushing weight that I hold in my chest like a rough, cold millstone, because I can't take the hurt away from her, I can't unburden her."

He was born Roberta Joan Anderson in 1943. Like many pop musicians, she suffered a childhood of utter tedium, a bright star against the faint backdrop of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. On the airwaves, she heard "Mantovani, country and western, a lot of radio journalism," and, once a day for an hour, "The Hit Parade." A soulful girl, she watched the trains approach and depart, or pored over the Sears catalogue. (She called it "the book of dreams.") When Mitchell was eight, she contracted polio and was quarantined, for several months, in a hospital close to home. Her mother came to see her once, on Christmas; her father never did. Polio patients were told to keep perfectly still—it was believed that any movement might cause the disease to spread—so she spent the time alone and on her back. When she was released, her left hand was damaged (it would make conventional guitar playing difficult for her, and led her to experiment with her own, idiosyncratic tunings) and she had lost the speed in her legs. But, she said, she "came back a dancer."

It was painting that took her away from Saskatoon. It is practically a default for aspiring musicians to attend art schools—"holding pens for dropouts and rejects," as Yaffe puts it—and Mitchell soon enrolled in the Alberta College of Art and Design, in Calgary, paying the bills by working as a model at a department store. She taught herself to play the guitar by listening to a Pete Seeger instructional record, and played the ukulele in coffeehouses around the city. But performing was a "hobby"—she reserved her ambition for the canvas. Because she was, she said, "the only virgin in art school," she found an agreeable, square-jawed man, Brad MacMath, and became pregnant immediately. The child, a girl, was put in a foster home until Mitchell could care for her.

At twenty-two, Mitchell was poor, alone, and the mother of a daughter she felt she had abandoned. The swain who materialized had certain advantages: Chuck Mitchell was an American musician, well fingers/While he's watching the waitresses' legs. "The detail is crude and adolescent, but it's also very sexy; and Mitchell sings those lines to sound like a boast. Prowess is prowess.
connected in the Detroit folk scene, and, at first, willing to adopt her child. But after they married he reneged on his offer, and the child was given up. The marriage ended and the heartache was immortalized in “Little Green,” a song about her daughter. Mitchell is a “child with a child pretending”:

Weary of lies you’re sending home
So you sign all the papers in the family name
You’re sad and you’re sorry but you’re not ashamed, little green
Have a happy ending

The words are a slight nudge into oblivion, like a paper boat being launched into a swift current. The undertone of sadness in all of Mitchell’s music derives from that gesture, as does the impulse toward flight. (From that essential bind we get “River,” the song that, almost two thousand years late, made the Christmas season bearable.) Mitchell wrote “Little Green” in 1966, shortly after signing the surrender papers for her daughter. The song wasn’t released until five years later, on “Blue,” the album that made her a star.

Yaffe’s book is partly a study of what happens when a great artist, emerging as part of a scene, resists that scene’s assumptions and categories. The sixties had set a place for Joni Mitchell, but her essence was noncompliance. She would not fall in line behind fashionable causes; she deemed free love a “ruse for guys” and performed at Fort Bragg during Vietnam. The classic example involves Woodstock. Mitchell missed the festival: she was booked to appear on “The Dick Cavett Show,” her major American television debut, the next morning, and the reports of mud and throngs put her off. David Crosby and Stephen Stills, along with Grace Slick, leading Jefferson Airplane, were also on the broadcast. Mitchell looks more irritated at having to share the stage with them than disappointed to have missed out on doing so in a field of muck. Her song “Woodstock,” which became a hit for Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young, was written in her hotel room, watching the festival on TV. She intended the song to be a “dirge,” not the anthem that it became in others’ hands.

She got another chance at camaraderie in 1975, when she joined Bob Dylan’s cocaine-dusted Rolling Thunder Revue, partly to get to know “Bobby,” who acted, she said, like a “perverse little brat,” forgoing actual conversations for Delphic, leering remarks. Dylan's childishness is the subject of “Talk to Me,” a song on “Don Juan’s Reckless Daughter”:

We could talk about Martha
We could talk about landscapes
I’m not above gossip
But I’ll sit on a secret where honor is at stake!
Or we could talk about power
About Jesus and Hitler and Howard Hughes
Or Charlie Chaplin’s movies
Or Bergman’s Nordic blues
Please just talk to me
Any old theme you choose
Just come and talk to me
Mr. Mystery, talk to me

Mitchell’s deep strain of propriety comes out in these episodes: she said that she didn’t “know anyone” in the music business who acted with a “proper adult response” when he ran into an old friend. Her exasperation suggests an expectation of dignity that would have been familiar in the forties, in Saskatoon, and which saturates Mitchell’s music. She had a right to expect from “Mr. Mystery” the rudiments of a decent conversation. It didn’t need to shake the earth; it just needed to express, and answer, basic human longings.

Yaffe, who teaches at Syracuse, charts these encounters with a sure hand, and is a brilliant analyst of how Mitchell’s songs are made. But he leans a little heavily on quotations familiar to fans: many of his most revealing takes are culled from “Woman of Heart and Mind,” an excellent PBS “American Masters” documentary. He also seems to have let Mitchell get inside his head. In a strange preface, Yaffe describes interviewing Mitchell for a New York Times piece in 2007, going to her house, and talking through the night, but getting “bitched out” by Mitchell once the piece was published. Then silence from “Joni” until years later, when, through a back channel, he’s taken back into her good graces. At times, his book feels as if its main objective were for him to never again be rebuffed by the “strong, resilient, defiant” woman he admires, who looked “more beautiful than she did in the ads for Yves St. Laurent that were in all the magazines.” Add Mitchell’s biographer to the list of men she played like a paddleball.

The frisson with his subject was perhaps inevitable. The collaborator in
Mitchell always, in time, brings out the solo flier. It’s hard to think of a songwriter who has drawn so much from conversations but recorded so few duets. The pull of dialogue is countered by Mitchell’s strong solitariness, a tension that she works out in the lyrics of her songs. She sang with Chuck Mitchell early on, but they were “horribly unsuited” to each other as performers, and the aversion to sharing the stage with other singers was consistent throughout her career. On the live album “Miles of Aisles,” there is a spacious version of “You Turn Me On, I’m a Radio,” where a second, complementary voice appears to break in, weaving itself into the melody. Listen harder, though, and you realize that it’s a guitar, played to sound almost identical to Mitchell. It’s a commentary on her antipathy to others’ voices. The musicians she respects the most, Dylan and Leonard Cohen, are both notoriously limited singers, a fact that Mitchell reports frequently, and with evident joy.

Mitchell’s work often seems to be a repudiation of mere songwriting. Spoken stretches transfigure into melodies, which climb and play in the thermal; or her vocals gather steam only to break apart into stray phrases and verbal gestures. Her inspirations, she said, were the crooners of the pre-rock era, and Dylan, who could string lyrics together without the promise, or the threat, of an impending tune. (Dylan’s harmonic passages sometimes act as the only punctuation for his long musical sentences.) Mitchell had to make a new kind of song, in which conversation could flower, in mid-phrase, into music. Her tunes wander and veer; they manage their flower, in mid-phrase, into music. Her kind of song, in which conversation could solve a set of dramas that are inherent narrative, as subject waits for verb, verse for refrain, lover for lover, coast for coast. As Yaffe points out, Mitchell learned from painting how to yoke “past, present, and future” together in one image.

Mitchell is now seventy-three. She hasn’t performed in a decade, and her health has been in steady decline for some time. In 2015, she had a brain aneurysm, and she suffers from Morgellons, a condition that causes the sensation of parasites crawling under and around one’s skin. She began chain-smoking when she was nine; the strong middle range of her voice, which allowed her to alternate so flexibly between high and low, was partly created by her habit. You could argue that it was also unmade by it—long ago, she began losing octaves, until her entire soprano range was depleted.

Still, it’s hard to think of a string of records as consistently powerful, shape-shifting, and durable as Mitchell’s albums from the seventies, beginning with “Ladies of the Canyon,” in 1970, and concluding, in 1979, with “Mingus.” These works are divided between fantasies of invisibility and flight, a teen-ager’s classic choice of superpowers. I was one myself when I plucked “Blue” out of a pile of albums in my aunt’s bedroom and played what seemed a distillation of the adult dilemmas I had been overhearing, throughout my childhood. This was Vermont in the seventies, and people everywhere discussed depth and superficiality, fate, luck, and the fluctuations of the moods, all in a vocabulary that Joni Mitchell had helped devise. Newlyweds were chilling out from the convulsions of the sixties. They had gone indoors, or joined the PTA. Tense and tragic Vietnam veterans opened shops full of glassware. The New Age was starting up, and meditation was practiced in church basements. It was the last moment in American pop when the modulations of ordinary existence were studied with any seriousness, and refined in songs that made family life meaningful and profound. It seems almost absurd to praise Mitchell for her ambience, when her songs are among the most stunning ever written. But the ambience comes back even now, very vividly, when you put those records on. You feel what Mitchell felt about Woodstock: the urge to get back to the garden, fully aware that it can’t be, that it’s impossible and faintly annoying to think otherwise, but knowing also that people’s best intentions are always beautiful.
This summer, the *Times* reported that, under President Trump, the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice had acquired a new focus. The division, which was founded in 1957, during the fight over school integration, would now be going after colleges for discriminating against white applicants. The article cited an internal memo soliciting staff lawyers for “investigations and possible litigation related to intentional race-based discrimination in college and university admissions.” But the memo did not explicitly mention white students, and a spokesperson for the Justice Department charged that the story was inaccurate. She said that the request for lawyers related specifically to a complaint from 2015, when a number of groups charged that Harvard was discriminating against Asian-American students.

In one sense, Asian-Americans were overrepresented at Harvard: in 2013, they made up eighteen per cent of undergraduates, despite being only about five per cent of the country’s population. But at the California Institute of Technology, which does not employ racial preferences, Asian-Americans made up forty-three per cent of undergraduates—a figure that had increased by more than half over the previous two decades, while Harvard’s percentage had remained relatively flat. The plaintiffs used SAT scores and other data to argue that administrators had made it “far more difficult for Asian-Americans than for any other racial and ethnic group of students to gain admission to Harvard.” They claimed that Harvard, in its pursuit of racial parity, was not only rewarding black and Latino students but also penalizing Asian-American students—who were, after all, minorities, too.

The complaint against Harvard is fairly recent, but the issue is not: in 1981, the *Times* wondered whether an influx of Asian-American students at the University of California, Berkeley, was effectively “squeezing out others.” Who, exactly, was being squeezed out? The *Times* mentioned “blacks and Chicanos-Latinos,” implying that Asian-Americans were jeopardizing the university’s fragile affirmative-action system. But the anxiety over high-achieving Asian-Americans also evoked an older fear that the white majority was under threat. A century ago, a number of selective colleges grew concerned about the burgeoning cohort of Jewish students; some used a de-facto quota system to limit their numbers, and to protect access for non-Jewish whites. A. Lawrence Lowell, the president of Harvard, proposed capping the proportion of Jews at fifteen per cent, partly for their own good—more Jews, he argued, might further inflame “anti-Semitic feeling among the students.” Harvard’s Jewish-quota system began to fade away in the nineteen-thirties, under Lowell’s successor, and it now seems unthinkable.

In 2002, Gordon Gee, the chancellor of Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, told the *Wall Street Journal* that he planned to improve the school’s reputation by “targeting Jewish students” for recruitment. No doubt some enterprising chancellor, a few decades hence, will make a similar play for Asian-American students, viewing them not as a problem but as a potential solution.

The plaintiffs in the Harvard case argue that we will eventually consider the recent treatment of Asian-Americans just as shameful as we now consider the old Jewish quotas. And some of their supporters are sure that, one day, we will see the folly of all race-conscious admissions policies. (One of the legal architects of this case is Edward Blum, who has mounted a series of challenges designed to dismantle affirmative-action programs.) In this view, Asian-Americans are merely the latest victims of a college bureaucracy that victimizes everybody, by treating each applicant as a member of a racial group in need of either extra
assistance or extra scrutiny. The universities’ goal, inevitably, is diversity, a quality that just about everyone can love, not least because no one can define it. Diversity is often a comparative term: a college might strive to be as diverse as its community, or as its state, or as the country as a whole; often, in debates over diversity, the unspoken expectation is that the racial makeup of an institution should reflect the racial demographics of the nation. Colleges, especially the most selective ones, have become the chief setting for the country’s ongoing argument over whether we should take account of race and, if so, how.

This makes some sense. Colleges are transparent, at least compared with private corporations, and they are highly responsive to pressure from outsiders; because their student bodies turn over every few years, changes in policy have nearly instantaneous results. Of course, selective colleges are also, by definition, unusual. So there is something odd about the way that our debates over opportunity and discrimination have been so heavily influenced by the experiences of college students, who are essentially customers, rather than workers. (At top private institutions, where the majority of revenue comes not from tuition fees but from alumni and other donors, it might be more accurate to say that the students are the product.)

The doctrine of diversity, honed on college campuses, is today preached just as loudly in the workplace, where it tends to be practiced rather differently. Social scientists and historians have begun to investigate just how differently. In “The Enigma of Diversity,” the sociologist Ellen Berrey studies the divergent uses of “diversity,” which serves for some executives as an “aspirational ideal,” and not necessarily a transformative program. And David Goldberg, a scholar of African-American history, has written an engaging history of an institution that has proved singularly resistant to the rhetoric (and the reality) of diversity: the Fire Department of the City of New York, which a federal judge called, in 2011, “a stubborn bastion of white male privilege.” Goldberg’s new book, “Black Firefighters and the FDNY: The Struggle for Jobs, Justice, and Equality in New York City,” traces the shifting arguments made by the workers and the politicians who sought to transform an agency that was fiercely opposed to transformation. At one point, the head of the firefighters’ union suggested that a proposed reform amounted to “lowering standards in order to address the diversity issues.” Because the Fire Department is an arm of municipal government, this question is necessarily a political one, appropriately answered not by labor leaders but by the firefighters’ ultimate employers, the taxpayers. How diverse do we want our fire departments to be? And how much should we care?

The modern history of diversity began on June 28, 1978. That was the day the Supreme Court decided a case brought by Allan Bakke, a white military veteran who had applied to medical school at the University of California, Davis. The school had a special admissions process for students who were “economically and/or educationally disadvantaged,” which helped non-white students gain admission; Bakke, a strong candidate, had applied under the general admissions program, and had been rejected. The Court’s decision was not particularly decisive—there were six separate opinions. The Justices granted Bakke admission and generally outlawed racial quotas, while nevertheless giving admissions committees the right, in certain circumstances, to consider an applicant’s race. Writing for the Court, Justice Lewis F. Powell, Jr., found that “racial and ethnic distinctions of any sort” were “inherently suspect,” requiring “exact judicial examination.” But Powell also found that the school had a legitimate interest in fostering a campus “as diverse as this Nation of many peoples,” so that students might learn from one another. In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, affirmative action was presented as a form of redistribution in response for past discrimination: a transfer of opportunities from the dominant majority to the marginalized minority. But the ideology of diversity suggested that every group had something to learn, and something to gain; no trade-offs would be required.

As universities learned to reframe their affirmative-action programs as diversity programs, students learned to believe them. This notion of diversity has proved remarkably flexible, and therefore popular, especially in comparison with terms like “integration” or “racial parity,” which connote conflict, rather than harmony. Liberals have been particularly enthusiastic exponents of Powell’s diversity doctrine, but the ideal of diversity is generally nonpartisan. Last year, Reince Priebus, who was then the chair of the Republican National Committee, voiced his hope that Trump’s running mate would add “a degree of diversity.” Later, when it was reported that the final list of choices consisted entirely of white men, Priebus said that he was not disappointed. “There’s also something called ‘diversity of experience,’ too, that’s necessary,” he said. And at the Republican Convention a student leader rallied the crowd with a Powellian affirmation: “We are the party of youth and diversity. Not the Democrats!”

Even as the idea of diversity was conquering the country, some on the left were having second thoughts. In 2006, the literature professor Walter Benn Michaels published a brusque polemic, “The Trouble with Diversity,” which depicted the whole concept as profoundly conservative. Because diversity meant “the appreciation (rather than the elimination) of difference,” he argued, it was the ideology of “bosses and owners,” who could celebrate their own increasing “cultural diversity” while ignoring the economic inequality with which they were complicit. Ellen Berrey, the sociologist, found Michaels’s argument “simplistic,” and, in “The Enigma of Diversity,” she sets out to discover how this ideology functions, by spending time in the field. Three fields, in fact: a large (and, by agreement, anonymous) Fortune 500 corporation, a mixed-income neighborhood in Chicago, and a selective public university, the University of Michigan. All three realms were proudly and self-consciously diverse, although carefully so—Michigan had been sued over its affirmative-action program. Berrey’s smart and subtle book aims to show exactly how differently people and institutions use this malleable concept.

The neighborhood that Berrey studied is called Rogers Park, and when she did
her research it was roughly thirty-two per cent white, thirty per cent black, twenty-eight per cent Hispanic, and six per cent Asian—neither a rich enclave nor an isolated ghetto. One alderman referred to a controversial plan to offer subsidized housing to low-income residents as a way to “maintain diversity.” But when a representative from a pro-development organization responded that his organization “wants to diversify,” he was using the word to argue against the plan. “There’s already too much low-income housing there,” he said. Meanwhile, at the big corporation, the diversity-management program functioned mainly as a surreal exercise in internal branding, entirely separate from the legal department (which handled claims of discrimination). So-called diversity managers worked to foster an “inclusive” environment, but they seemed to spend much of their time “reiterating the good that would come from diversity,” as a way of justifying their own positions.

Even on campus, where the modern diversity doctrine was fashioned, Berrey found that the doctrine itself was hard to define. The prevailing wisdom seemed to be that “racial minorities” were “culturally distinct from but culturally equivalent to white people.” (The cultural differences were considered real enough to make diversity valuable but not real enough to explain, say, disparities in academic achievement.) At one point, Michigan’s admissions-office Web site pictured a welter of enthusiastic believings, including a student who declared, “Diversity is one of the issues I’m most passionate about.” In a book called “The Diversity Bargain,” another scholar, Natasha K. Warikoo, concludes that students at Harvard have fully internalized the logic of diversity as an engine of mutual profit. “Interaction with peers of color is a resource some white students feel entitled to—or sometimes wrongly deprived of,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold resource of color is a deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority students do not hold deprived,” she writes. “To many white students, minority studentsler Benn Michaels mocked the notion that we would all feel better about the ruling class if the ruling class were sufficiently diverse. Berrey takes it seriously. “There are widespread expectations,” she writes, “that major institutions will not be outright dominated only by white men. This was the expectation given voice by the judge who criticized the F.D.N.Y. as a ‘stubborn bastion of white male privilege,’ a phrase that surely would have puzzled the department’s founders. The F.D.N.Y.’s ethos predates its status as a department: in the mid-nineteenth century, volunteer fire companies reinforced the tribal politics of the city, and emerged as centers of political power. William (Boss) Tweed started his career as a volunteer firefighter on the Lower East Side, and his company’s emblem, a snarling tiger, eventually became the symbol of Tammany Hall, Tweed’s political organization. The department was professionalized in 1865, and many of its new jobs were effectively set aside for one minority group in particular: Irish-Americans. One historian, examining surnames, estimated that, by 1888, three-quarters of all New York firefighters may have been Irish-American. City jobs were often patronage positions, doled out by politicians to supportive constituencies, but black leaders had trouble winning their fair share. By 1930, “only 5 African Americans managed to secure firefighting positions,” Goldberg writes.

The person who helped change that
was Wesley Williams, a pioneering black firefighter who comes across in Goldberg's telling as a real-life superhero, ludicrously overqualified for the job. He was an accomplished amateur boxer and a lifelong scholar who placed thirteenth (out of twenty-seven hundred) on the department's written exam; his application included a letter of recommendation from former President Theodore Roosevelt, a family friend. Williams got the job, in 1919, and was assigned to an all-white firehouse on Broome Street, whereupon the entire company demanded a transfer. He survived fistfights in the basement and a vicious campaign of hazing: co-workers slashed his fire coat, crushed his helmet, dropped honey into the fire-engine gas tank. "The story they put out to the community," Williams recalled, "was that they 'would burn the nigger up,' and that I couldn't take smoke because my nostrils were too wide." Goldberg says that Williams was denied medals that he deserved, but, in 1927, he was promoted to lieutenant, which made him the first Negro officer in the history of the department. He also helped found the Vulcan Society, an advocacy group for black firefighters, which took its place alongside the Ner Tamid Society, for Jewish firefighters, the Steuben Association, for German-American firefighters, and the Columbia Association, for Italian-American firefighters.

Yet the number of black firefighters remained low—even when Mayor John Lindsay, in 1965, appointed a black man, Robert O. Lowery, as fire commissioner. The sociologist Roger Waldinger has argued that, as intra-European rivalries faded in New York, "the civil service became reconstituted as a protected enclave for white ethnics." The Vulcan Society tried to end policies of segregation but was often outmaneuvered: the department de-emphasized the physical test, at which black candidates performed well; the union helped suburban applicants by pushing for the repeal of the Lyons Law, which obliged city workers to live in the city. In 1973, blacks accounted for about a quarter of the city's residents but only about four per cent of all New York firefighters. That year, the Vulcan Society sued the F.D.N.Y. for racial discrimination, charging that white applicants were nearly three times more likely than black and Hispanic applicants to pass the entrance examination, and that the examination had little to do with the job requirements. (Goldberg also mentions a widespread though unproved suspicion that "certain test questions were leaked among networks of white applicants prior to the examination."") A judge ruled that the test was discriminatory, and imposed a twenty-five-per-cent-minority quota for new hires, which was thwarted by budget cuts; the cycle of lawsuits and delays continued for decades. Although African-Americans still make up about twenty-five per cent of all city residents, they account for less than seven per cent of city firefighters.

Why should we care about these numbers? Goldberg mentions what is essentially a diversity argument: in the nineteen-thirties, when the F.D.N.Y. was essentially all white, "the lack of Black uniformed service workers increased racial tensions in the city." During the protests and riots of the late sixties, white firefighters were sometimes attacked in black neighborhoods; Goldberg notes that "black firefighters suddenly became highly sought after for highly visible roles." (After the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1968, one black firefighter was dispatched to Brownsville, Brooklyn; he figured he was there "in case somebody wanted to take a shot.") Yet Goldberg's more persuasive argument is not that black firefighters help the F.D.N.Y. but, rather, that the F.D.N.Y. helps black firefighters. The job is, as many Vulcans noted, a chance to become "soldly middle-class"—more valuable, perhaps, than a place at a top university. And so a new version of the old spoils model might make some sense: the Vulcans, no less than the Columbians or the Steubens or the Ner Tamids, deserve their share.

The only problem with this spoils model is that, like the diversity model, it doesn't account for the most compelling part of the story. The cause of black firefighters would not seem nearly so urgent if they were merely one more underrepresented group seeking proportionality, rather than participants in a century-long fight against segregation and discrimination. Worse, both the spoils model and the diversity model would ask that all New York's institutions reflect the city's racial demographics, and in some cases this might actually restrict African-American opportunity. About a third of city employees are black, including sixty-three per cent of corrections officers. Should the African-American majority at the Department of Corrections be broken up? The logic of diversity, by itself, gives us no reason that it shouldn't.

In Goldberg's story, as in most stories about diversification, there comes a point at which the arguments switch sides. Minorities, having previously argued for color-blind treatment, come
to oppose those putatively color-blind policies which effectively disadvantage them. The majority, meanwhile, argues that compensatory policies amount to discrimination. In 2000, after it was discovered that a program designed for minority applicants had significantly benefitted white relatives of current firefighters, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani said that if the program had excluded them “you would have had a very serious reverse-discrimination case.” And, in 2012, the Queens Chronicle reported that white protesters had crashed an F.D.N.Y. test-prep class that the Vulcan Society had organized for black applicants; the protesters sang “We Shall Overcome” and shouted, “What would Martin Luther King do?”

Many supporters of affirmative action dismiss the idea of “reverse discrimination”—asserting, in effect, that a policy doesn’t count as discrimination if it harms a non-marginalized group. But the case of Asian-Americans in higher education proves that it is not always easy to determine which groups should be considered marginalized. The Supreme Court has ruled that “all legal restrictions which curtail the civil rights of a single group are immediately suspect,” and therefore deserve “rigid scrutiny.” Ironically, this famous formulation comes to us from Korematsu v. United States, a 1944 case in which the Court held that the government had the right to expel “all persons of Japanese ancestry” from western California; in this instance, the restriction survived the scrutiny. Korematsu linked the legal theory of racial discrimination to the specific experiences of the populations who would become known as Asian-American. The term was coined, in the sixties, by the historian Yuji Ichioka, who was something of a radical: he founded the Asian American Political Alliance, which declared itself an ally of “all non-white liberation movements,” and which demonstrated in support of Huey Newton, the Black Panther, when he was accused of killing a white police officer. (One alliance member held a sign that read “YELLOW PERIL SUPPORTS BLACK POWER.”)

In 1980, the U.S. census added a new category: “Asian and Pacific Islander,” a designation that could describe more than half the people on the planet. By then, many selective colleges had noticed that although some Asian ethnicities were underrepresented on campuses, Asian-Americans as a group were not—in fact, they were developing a reputation for academic excellence. Administrators sometimes responded by considering English-proficiency requirements, or by emphasizing extracurricular criteria, which allowed them to reject some academically strong Asian-American applicants.

Dana Takagi, a sociologist, studied the way that these debates unfolded in the nineteen-eighties, showing how claims of anti-Asian discrimination unsettled old political alliances. In 1989, after Berkeley’s chancellor apologized for policies that disadvantaged Asians, Dana Rohrabacher, a Republican congressman from Southern California, introduced a bill calling for a federal investigation into “restrictive quotas” and other policies harming Asian-American college applicants. The Organization for Chinese Americans initially supported the bill, as did Bob Matsui, a Democratic congressman from Northern California, but both eventually retracted their support, out of concern that the law would function as an attack on affirmative action. Their political calculation was probably correct. Takagi found that many Asian-American students thought of African-Americans and Latinos as allies, fellow-minorities—they were all “people of color,” as we would say today.

To a large extent, that alliance has held, and perhaps grown stronger, which helps explain why there has not been fiercer opposition to the various policies that effectively limited Asian-American matriculation at many selective institutions. In a brief response to the current complaint, Harvard noted that Asian-American admissions had recently ticked upward, and defended its right to “seek the educational benefits that come from a class that is diverse on multiple dimensions.” (Some institutions have also noted that Asian-Americans are underrepresented among athletes and alumni offspring, two populations often given preference.) The statement, written by the university’s general counsel, did not explicitly deny that the school discriminates against Asian-American applicants, asserting only that its practice of “considering race” is “fully compliant with the law.” From Harvard’s perspective, the charge might seem nonsensical: any admissions system that considers race and strives for rough proportionality must discriminate against some students and in favor of others. An Asian-American with high test scores may be less likely, on average, to gain admittance to an elite institution than a black or a Latino or a white applicant with those scores. But, then, an Asian-American high-school senior may be more likely to have high test scores in the first place. Under the diversity model, those two disparities might cancel each other out. There is something perverse about a notion of diversity that would require us to treat Asian-American excellence as a confounding variable to be (partially) corrected for, rather than a legacy to be celebrated.

It is possible that “diversity” will ultimately prove too weak a term to do all that is asked of it. Contemporary advocates sometimes emphasize, instead, “inclusion,” a less neutral concept, and one that gestures at the political agendas that inevitably shape these debates. (An institution’s policies might be described as “inclusive,” for instance, if they are designed to make certain marginalized groups feel welcome.) There are sound arguments, in any case, for desegregation, for programs to benefit the descendants of Africans who were enslaved in America, for new efforts to redress old injustices. But the win-win language of diversity can’t help us choose between various possible arrangements, except to imply that every group deserves its fair share—and no more than that. Berrey was right to describe the concept of diversity as “plastic and broadly appealing.” But we should think, too, about how this concept, precisely because of its seductive power, can lead us astray.
ON TELEVISION

SHOW AND TELL

The heartbreak comedy of “One Mississippi.”

BY EMILY NUSSBAUM

In an early episode of “One Mississippi,” the dark comedy that Tig Notaro co-created with Diablo Cody, Notaro, the show’s star, tugs her shirt off and turns away from a mirror. Then, just before the final credits, she undresses again. This time, she doesn’t turn away. Instead, she lets us look at her as she looks at herself, a wiry butch woman of around forty, wearing jeans, her chest scarred from a double mastectomy, her eyes glittering with something that can’t be reduced to amusement.

The moment felt like a thesis statement: it’s better to look directly at the damage. The semi-autobiographical “One Mississippi” mines what Notaro has described as her “worst year ever.” It’s about a cancer survivor, Tig Bavaro, who flies home to Bay St. Lucille, Mississippi, as her mother is dying, and then sticks around after the funeral, haunted by bad memories. Miraculously, the series goes down like a cocktail, crisp and sweet. It’s a romantic show as well as an angry one, sometimes successfully and sometimes less successfully absurdist, and authentically Southern in a way that is rare for television. It floats and it flows.

The series, which streams on Amazon, had the bad fortune to emerge when the TV schedule felt overstocked with “traumadies,” of varying quality, many of them about standup comics. The semi-autobiographical “One Mississippi” mines what Notaro has described as her “worst year ever.” It’s about a cancer survivor, Tig Bavaro, who flies home to Bay St. Lucille, Mississippi, as her mother is dying, and then sticks around after the funeral, haunted by bad memories. Miraculously, the series goes down like a cocktail, crisp and sweet. It’s a romantic show as well as an angry one, sometimes successfully and sometimes less successfully absurdist, and authentically Southern in a way that is rare for television. It floats and it flows.

The stories are deceptively small: Bill loses his cat; Remy flirts with a woman he made fun of in high school; Tig gets crowned Queen of the Mardi Gras, in her mother’s place; she enters into a slow-burn courtship with her seemingly straight producer, Kate (played by Notaro’s wife, Stephanie Allynne). In Season 2, Remy tries out religion and Bill meets his soul mate, an African-American woman (Sheryl Lee Ralph) who shares his thermostat obsession. A handful of fantasy sequences are hit or miss. But the show pulls off audacious characterizations. When an evolution-denying, homophobic, breast-milk-hustling single mom dive-bombs into Remy’s life, she’s outrageous, but not a cartoon—she may be a bigot, but she’s also a respite from Remy’s family of skeptics, able to see him, through generous eyes, as a catch.
The show is often at its best when exploring such unusual angles on intimacy, among them Tig’s taste for feminine seducers who are, not unlike her mother, prone to disappearing acts. In the first season, Tig is briefly enchanted by a Bea Arthur-obsessed newscaster who bats her eyes at her during Mardi Gras. When the woman ghosts on Tig in the middle of a crisis—ditching her at a Ferron concert, in what may be the most lesbian plot ever on television—one of Tig’s friends notes, wisely, “Anybody who has a wrist tattoo that says ‘Be Honest’ is trying to tell you something about themselves.”

One of the primary arcs of the first season was about Tig’s having been molested as a child by Bill’s father. This isn’t a secret: Remy knows it, Bill knows it, and Tig mentions it in the pilot, as she looks at family photos and shouts, goofily, to her younger self, “Look! You’re getting molested!” But only Tig wants to address what happened, often through what Bill calls her “smart aleck” jokes, her reflexive method for jimmying locked family doors.

Then, in the first season’s finale, with Bill’s encouragement, Tig visits her mother’s grave. Throughout, we’ve gotten flashbacks of Tig’s mom, a stylish iconoclast who carved a wild life from a staid one. The graveside scene becomes a remarkable, trippy fantasy sequence, a kind of slumber party, in which Tig and her mother (Rya Kihlstedt), who’s dressed in pajamas, trade stories about how they lost their virginity. Suddenly, other women buried nearby pop up to chime in. “Mine was a whole group of boys!” one young girl says, giggling and crawling out from behind her tombstone, trailing a blanket. “I got so much attention. That’s how I got here.” “It’s so wild when someone you feel safe with turns into a total monster, right?” a middle-aged woman remarks, laughing along. “Quiet down!” says Bill, who shows up wearing a robe, the dad enforcing bedtime. “Lights out!” “We want to talk,” Tig’s mom whines, wheeling as if she were his teenage daughter.

The scene makes your jaw drop—and it works because it takes for granted that stories like this are a common part of women’s lives. It makes the pathological ordinary. It also throws a curveball comedically, by putting the power of the “rape joke” into the hands of the victim. This has been a growing theme among female comedy writers: it shows up in “Inside Amy Schumer,” “Girls,” and “Unbreakable Kimmy Schmidt,” as well as in the sweet lesbian-marriage series “Take My Wife,” which includes a montag of comedians talking about having been raped.

The second season revisits these questions in a way that feels designed to shock on another level. The final two episodes feature a story line about a powerful male producer who has showered Tig with smarmy praise, impressed by the “dark material” in her radio show. During a pitch meeting with Kate, the producer unzips his pants and masturbates under the desk, his hands just out of sight. It’s a beautifully filmed sequence: his image blurs as Kate freezes, and the moment captures her panic and disorientation, her paralysis in the crisis. He behaves as if everything were normal. Later on, he insists that nothing happened.

The sequence seems to echo rumors that have circulated about Louis C.K.—even though Louis C.K., his frequent collaborator Blair Beard, and his manager, Dave Becky, are all executive producers of “One Mississippi,” their names in the credits. In recent interviews, Notaro has said that Louis, who had promoted her one-woman standup show on his Web site, did not participate in the writing of “One Mississippi”—and she has argued that he should address the rumors. Louis has responded, in interviews, that he doesn’t know why Notaro is bringing them up at all.

A TV review can’t investigate rumors; that’s a job for other forms of journalism. But these scenes are subversive, and effective, precisely because they use the master’s tools—“creative nonfiction,” streaked with surrealism—to point the camera in a different direction. On “One Mississippi,” the focus is not on the producer’s motives—his predation or pathos or, really, anything else about him. It’s on Kate, who, like Tig, has been through a lifetime of men who crossed the line of consent, then acted as if there were no line. There’s a different kind of assertion of power at work here. It’s a tricky story about telling tricky stories, and about how you make art from the ones you’ve been told not to tell.
SAFE SPACE

A show on gender soothes more than it unsettles.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

The four nouns in the title of a large group show at the New Museum, "Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon," go off like improvised explosive devices, boding civil strife. Not to worry. The works, by forty-two mostly L.G.B.T.Q.-identified artists, who range in age from twenty-seven to sixty-seven, artist teams, and collectives tend to be elegant and ingratiating, temperate, or even a little boring—though not unpleasantly so. (A little boredom may come as welcome relief to our lately adrenaline-overdosed body politic.) The pieces employ mediums familiar from the past couple of decades of shows of institutionally favored contemporary art—installations, text pieces, photography, a great many videos—but reveal an uptick in the fortunes of expressive painting and a corresponding sag in those of starchy Conceptualism. With few exceptions, "Trigger" requires no warnings. Its themes of fluid sexual identity don't fulminate at the margins of art-world convention. They evince establishment nonchalance. The show's provocative title turns out to function rather like the old vaudeville pistol that emits a little flag imprinted "Bang!"

I am not complaining! The prospect of broaching a probable minefield of group sensitivities—"Suicide mission," a young friend of mine remarked, mildly, when I told him that I would review the show—is apt to rattle anyone these days, let alone an old straight white male like me. But, once there, I found myself thrilling to rare examples of the aggressive affront that I had expected, such as a series of fantastically nasty small works by the reliably dazzling Los Angeles-born, Berlin-based, biracial, transgender artist and performer Vaginal Davis: abstract reliefs that suggest mangled faces, viscera, and genitalia, painted in a blood-red mixture of substances, including nail polish. Black artists account for most works in the show that pack punches. One is Mickalene Thomas, whose images on a bank of twelve video monitors address the classic motif of the odalisque, which is reënacted, at intervals, by Thomas in the nude, to a soundtrack of the actress Eartha Kitt recounting, with defiant buoyancy, a lifetime of racial insult and sexual abuse: "Me As Muse" (2016). The toils of racism in American society lend drama to anything that touches on them. Those of bias against sexual minorities logically should do so, too, but the show projects the art world as, yes, a safe space for the variously denominated. The question arises whether this heralds a reality or a utopia. The answer, at least within the cultural ambit of the New Museum, may be: both.

"Trigger" arrives on two tracks: the art and the attendant discourse. The head curator, Johanna Burton, convened a committee of academics to help plan the show. The chewy catalogue presents roundtable discussions that review the legacies of four previous exhibitions at the museum: "Extended Sensibilities: Homosexual Presence in Contemporary Art" (1982); "Difference: On Representation and Sexuality" (1984–85); "HOMO VIDEO: Where We Are Now" (1986–87); and "Bad Girls" (1994). Those shows kicked up controversies, documented in the catalogue, about who was representing whom. "Extended Sensibilities" struck some critics in the gay community, at the time, as too pre-cociously refined. "Bad Girls" took flak from serious-minded feminists as too friskily blithe. Use of the word "gender"—in lieu of "sex," "sexuality," or "sexual orientation"—wasn't prevalent yet. Indeed, as a tool and as a weapon, the term has served to sabotage thinking along traditional male/female lines—while inflicting collateral damage, which Burton's advisers disarmingly note, on clear thought along much of any lines at all. Burton declares, at the outset of the transcribed conversations, "a paralysis within discourse" regarding identity politics.

The black poet and theorist Fred Moten, a formidable presence in the discussions and a charismatic one in...
the show, goes farther, calling the roundtable “part of this general group of folks who used identity as a weapon, but the primary target of the weapon was identity. We used politics as a weapon, and the primary target was politics.” Moten proposes, as an alternative to “gender,” the word “blur.” He dismisses cogency as an aim for the show: “There’s a poetics of the mess, you know.” He says, “So, we came here to tear shit up, you know? Including ourselves. We came to fail.” Moten, fifty-five years old, performs in a video projection by a longtime female collaborator, Wu Tsang: “Girl Talk” (2015). Large and bearded, seen in a back yard sashaying in a wafting red caftan and crystal pendants, he sings, infectiously if not always intelligibly, about the pleasures of gossip. He is terrific. Cushions are provided for relaxed viewing. Highly recommended.

You will not soon forget another video that is also enhanced with comfortable seating: “Weed Killer” (2017), by the English-born Patrick Staff, in which an actor hauntingly recites passages from “The Summer of Her Baldness,” a 2004 memoir by the artist, curator, and scholar Catherine Lord, interspersed with neon-intense abstract imagery of hair and evil-looking shapes. The subjects include chemotherapy—“like mainlining weed killer” and enough “to make you crazy miserable, but not enough to put you out of your misery”—and depression, which may elicit support from friends until they succumb to “compassion fatigue.” (What do you do then? Like the actor in the video, go out and tend your garden.) Autobiography that is either personal or, as in Staff’s case, channelled informs much of the show’s strongest work, exploiting, for art’s sake, the odd angles on life of uncommon people.

The happiest surprise in “Trigger” is a trend in painting that takes inspiration from ideas of indeterminate sexuality for revived formal invention. Two painters who stand out are Tschabalala Self and Christina Quarles. Each rhymes ambiguous imagery of gyrating bodies with dynamics of disparate pictorial techniques. Self’s figures look wild but are made of assorted fabrics neatly stitched to her canvases. The wholes and parts of bodies in Quarles’s cheerfully orgiastic pictures entangle in alternating styles of line, stroke, stain, and smear. This may be just me, but both artists called to mind early nineteen-forties Arshile Gorky and Willem de Kooning, who fractured Picassoesque figuration on the way to physically engaging abstraction. I see Self and Quarles playing that process in reverse, adapting abstract aesthetics to carnal representation. Whether intentionally or not, they effectively return to an old well that suddenly yields fresh water. Styles fade into history when they use up their originating impulses. New motives may snap them back to vitality, albeit, here, to sophisticated rather than disruptive effect.

In general, the younger the artist in the show the more well behaved. For weaponized weirdness, consider the accomplished and influential elder Nayland Blake, who is fifty-seven. Blake’s sculptural work in many mediums has often reflected a fondness for a form of kink that involves dressing as an animal. The show features one such costume—a bear. Blake is scheduled to don it on certain days, and has promised to offer furry hugs to willing viewers. There’s an air of renegade yesteryear about this antic effrontery, from the era in which Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs of sadomasochistic gay practices fuelled a culture war that, in 1989, reached the floor of the U.S. Senate. Put simply, newer artists appear to feel little need to fight for their proclivities—an unexciting but surely positive development. “Gender” agitation cast itself as political, but perhaps most significantly it achieved a revolution in manners, instilling first tolerance, then acceptance, and, finally, respect for formerly repressed human natures. The ultimate stage is liberty for individuals to inhabit society without fear, unedited, as they are. Political dissension may persist, but one roundtable participant, Eric A. Stanley, a professor of gender and sexuality studies, hazards at least a potential last word: “It’s like, do we want to be right, or do we want to be free?”

("Autumn in New York"
Arthur Getz, October 19, 1968
newyorkerstore.com)
not since Derek Jarman gave us “Blue” (1993), which flooded the screen with a single hue for almost eighty minutes, has one color lorded it over a film with quite the impact that we find in “The Florida Project.” The color in question is mauve. The characters call it purple, but don’t picture some rich regal shade. This stuff is a blinder—a thump of eye-scalding violet that would have sent Matisse whimpering from the room. It’s a color that belongs, at best, on a stick of blueberry bubblegum, but it’s used by Bobby (Willem Dafoe), the manager of the Magic Castle motel, in Orlando, to coat his entire establishment—walls, doors, and even curbs. The paint job costs him twenty thousand dollars, and the result, one imagines, can be seen from space. Bobby’s a nice guy, and a model of patience, but, above all else, he’s a Mauvist.

You can’t blame him. Orlando is a Disney fiefdom, where a castle is nothing special, and so, if you spy a chance to make your place stand out, you grab it. The Magic Castle, near Seven Dwarfs Lane, is one of several prominent structures in the area: there’s also a stately pleasure dome called Orange World, a gift shop crowned with the head of a giant wizard, and the cone-shaped Twistee Treat. The last of these is a regular destination for Moonee (Brooklynn Prince), often with her friends Jancey (Valeria Cotto) and Scooty (Christopher Rivera). They have a craving for ice cream, no money to buy it, and a pocketful of scams with which to get it. “The doctor said we have asthma and we gotta eat ice cream right away,” Scooty says to a customer, who obligingly hands over cash. As for Moonee, her larks include starting a fire at an abandoned house and turning off the power at the motel. She is six years old.

“The Florida Project” is directed by Sean Baker, who caused a stir with “Tangerine” (2015), which was shot entirely on iPhones. The new film is more expansive, ranging far and wide in its emotional exploits, despite being sparsely plotted and geographically restricted to a few blocks. All sorts of lives, you feel, have washed up on the shores of the Magic Castle and come to rest, for want of another tide to bear them away. “A welfare slum motel” and “a gypsy project,” one woman calls it. She is there only by mistake, her dolt of a groom having booked it for their honeymoon instead of a hotel at Disney’s Magic Kingdom. To Moonee, however, the Castle is a kingdom, and we join her as she parades along its walkways, delighting in her queenly dominion, and showing Jancey and Scooty the homes of her subjects. “The man who lives in here gets arrested a lot,” she says. “The woman in here thinks she’s married to Jesus.”

Moonee lives in Room 323, with her mother, Halley (Bria Vinaite). Whoever the father was, he is neither spoken of nor seen, and Halley is her own woman: flamboyantly tattooed, snake-quick to strike back when riled, and resourceful enough to buy bottles of perfume wholesale and hawk them to tourists outside the classier joints. Her parenting is patchy, but she loves Moonee, and, like most of the folks in the film, they just about get by. Their diet consists of variations on a theme of junk: waffles, plain pizza (“Pepperoni costs money,” Halley says), and cans of soda—Moonee even gargles with the stuff, as if it were mouthwash. Some of the food is free: handouts from a diner, thanks to a friend who works there, or loaves from a van run by a church charity. These gestures matter, because, though you fret whenever the kids go near a road or a creek, “The Florida Project” takes care to fend off the melodramatic assumption that everyone out there—every adult who befriends a child, every landlord collecting rent—is bent on predation or threat. Not all loaners are sharks. A creepy old guy does loiter near the kids, outside the motel, but Bobby steers him away.

Given that avoidance of trouble, plus the abundance of children, you might suspect the film of being sweet and soft, like a Twistee Treat. Yet the texture of the story has a weathered toughness, exemplified in the figure of Dafoe. Early in his career, in “Platoon” (1986), he was the decent and idealistic sergeant, but he could easily have switched roles with Tom Berenger and played the murderous martinet, and that inherent double-ness lingers. Who but Dafoe could be cast both as Jesus and as the Green Giant?
Goblin? Bobby, in the new movie, is one of his gentlest characters, though even here we pick up traces of pain in his past, and one glorious shot of him, drawing on a cigarette and gazing out at the bruise-colored dusk, suggests a weariness to match that of the other residents. That is why he indulges Moonee, as she plays hide-and-seek in his office—not because she’s cute (Brooklyn Prince is too brazen for that) but because the rebel in her finds no reason, as yet, to be quashed by experience. Her time, like his, will come.

Such whirling high spirits are nothing new. When Moonee and her pals kick a plastic bag, or knock on a door with a drumming of both fists, you sense a superfluous energy that begs to be burned off; it harks back to the cocky sense a superfluous energy that begs to be burned off; it harks back to the cocky

One quiet evening, Louis Waters (Robert Redford), who lives alone in a small town in Colorado, receives a visit. His neighbor Addie Moore (Jane Fonda) drops by with an unusual proposition. “Would you be interested in coming to my house sometime to sleep with me?” she asks. Louis, whose idea of a wild night is to complete the top left-hand corner of the crossword, looks a little stunned. “It’s not about sex,” she hastens to add. The problem is loneliness, especially after dark; though not close friends, they are both widowed, and she’s wondering whether they might pool their solitudes, as it were, and find comfort. “Can I think about it?” Louis replies.

Such is the first—and, it turns out, the best—scene in “Our Souls at Night,” directed by Ritesh Batra. Addie’s request, spurred not only by insomnia but also by a dread of the big sleep, comes as a genuine shock in so cozy a setting. The rest of the film, however, is devoted to cushioning the blow. Louis strolls to her place with his pajamas and his toothbrush in a paper bag. The two of them drink, talk, go to bed, and repeat the process until, by and by, their practical need for each other blooms into something else. Even the scandalized chatter of the townspeople, who frown at this sinful setup, dies away.

It’s fifty years, no less, since Fonda and Redford’s fine romance in “Barefoot in the Park,” and, if they remain a perfect couple, it’s because they are so imperfectly matched: her forthrightness and her mental brio versus his more hesitant air. It’s as if he were turned in upon himself and wary of intruders. As actors of undiminished allure, they deserve the best, and “Our Souls at Night” left me with an austerely fantasy. If only Michael Haneke, say, had got hold of the screenplay; if only he had shorn it of its folkiness, its relaxing guitar score, and its subplot about Addie’s grumpy grandson (Iain Armitage), whom Louis persuades to lay down his iPhone in favor of toy trains and fishing. What a film we might have had—a rural American sequel to Haneke’s un- stinting “Amour” (2012). Also, when Louis and Addie finally make love, Haneke would have kept the camera running, alert to any tender awkwardness, whereas Batra discreetly cuts away.

We know what happens to our souls at night, in age, but our bodies need watching, too.◆

NEWYORKER.COM
Richard Brody blogs about movies.
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 Peter Kuper, must be received by Sunday, October 8th. The finalists in the September 25th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week’s contest, in the October 23rd 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**

“I shall offer you three settings.”
Edward Wilkinson, Venice, Calif.

“Make a different wish—you bagel is really stuck.”
Andrew Mattox, Woods Hole, Mass.

“Could you please rub the coffeepot? I need to talk to my wife.”
Jim Peregrin, Lexington, Ky.

**THE WINNING CAPTION**

“You should probably pass if they offer stock options.”
Michael Thomson, Montreal, Quebec
We do more organ transplants than any other hospital in the nation.

And it’s not nearly enough.

October 4th is Organ Donor Enrollment Day. And we can’t urge you enough to sign up as an organ donor. For every transplant we do, there are so many more we can’t do, simply because there aren’t enough hearts, kidneys, livers, and other organs available.

Enrolling to be an organ donor is easy. Just go to nyp.org/transplant and sign up. The more people who sign up, the more lives get saved – at NewYork-Presbyterian and transplant hospitals everywhere.

REGISTER TO BE AN ORGAN DONOR AT NYP.ORG/TRANSPLANT
ON A CLEAR DAY, YOU CAN SEE THE FUTURE.

The U.S. needs more renewable energy, a problem felt on Block Island, RI, where residents paid some of the highest electricity prices in the country while burning a million gallons of harmful diesel fuel each year.

Citi provided long-term financing to help Deepwater Wind build the first offshore wind farm in the U.S. – part of Citi’s $100 billion commitment to finance sustainable energy projects. The Block Island Wind Farm could help lower electric bills by up to 40 percent and reduce carbon emissions by 40,000 tons a year, ushering in a new era of American renewables.

For over 200 years, Citi’s job has been to believe in people and help make their ideas a reality.

citi.com/progressmakers