



In *What's Your Problem?* he stops New Yorkers on the street and invites them into his roving "office" for some comedic talk therapy.

battle-tested jokes is about Roy Sullivan, a park ranger who set the world record for surviving the most lightning strikes: seven times, between 1942

10 years and recently began touring: *Harrison Greenbaum's What Just Happened?* It combines the rhythm of stand-up—a laugh every 10 or 20 seconds—with the suspense of a magic show, weaving in original tricks that connect to the jokes. The show bears out a conviction Greenbaum often preaches when he speaks at magic conventions: tricks, like stand-up jokes, should *start* with an idea. “Comedians come up with an idea first, and then figure out a funny way to say it,” he says. “In magic, a lot of people go out and buy a trick and just jam it into their act.” But if magic is an art form—and Greenbaum believes it is—then its practitioners, he says, should strive for originality and self-expression, should be willing to push the envelope in ways that feel political or personal. “When I give lectures on magic, I always encourage people to break stuff. Just break stuff and see what happens. You’ll figure out how to put it back together.” After all, it’s magic.

on joke structure. But it’s also the fact that his jokes—observational, narrative, sometimes playfully political—often arise, he says, from a feeling of love. “For a lot of comedians, the motivating emotion is anger, but for me it’s more like, ‘Isn’t this amazing? Isn’t this insane? Let me show you.’” One of his

and 1977. Greenbaum ambles around inside the joke for several minutes, building digressions, unearthing absurdities, detonating little moments of surprise, before finding his way back for the final flourish.

His favorite project right now is a comedy show he’s been developing for the past

“A Melodic Being”

Singer Ali Sethi finds his voice in classical Pakistani music.

by LYDIALYLE GIBSON

“THE DRUMS are calling out your name,” Ali Sethi ’06 exhorted the gyrating audience in Sanders Theatre, as he and his bandmates wound toward the climax of the night’s final number, a song with roots stretching back to the medieval period in what is now Pakistan. Some listeners were already on their feet, and a handful of students were dancing on stage. Behind Sethi, the tabla player’s fingers flew across the drums, pounding out a rhythm that was intricate, ecstatic, irresistible.

It was the headlining concert at Harvard’s ArtsFirst Festival last May, and the song, “Dama Dam Mast Qalandar,” is a South Asian favorite, with a melody composed in the 1960s and lyrics drawn from a thirteenth-century poem honoring the Sufi saint Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. The work is often performed at Qalandar’s shrine in southeastern Pakistan, where pilgrims commune with the divine by taking part in *dhamal*, a whirling, pounding, trancelike dance. Inside the song’s feverish rhythms, Sethi told the

audience, traditional boundaries among worshippers—class, caste, gender, geography—break down.

Something similar seems to happen with Sethi’s music: boundaries fall away—between past and present, earthly and transcendent, between art and religion and politics. “We are many and we are one,” he says. A singer classically trained in Pakistani traditional music, whose voice can shift from plaintive to raw to warmly intimate, Sethi (pronounced *say-tee*) has become a star in (and, increasingly, beyond) Pakistan. Since 2012, when he appeared on the soundtrack for the film *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (directed by Mira Nair ’79), he has toured internationally and become a regular presence on *Coke Studio*, Pakistan’s popular live-music television show. This past April he made his debut at Carnegie Hall as one of three soloists in *Where We Lost Our Shadows*, a multi-



Ali Sethi brings the Sanders Theatre crowd to its feet during a concert last spring. His Harvard mentor, Ali Asani (right, in suit and tie), joined him on stage.

media orchestral work co-created by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Du Yun, Ph.D. ’06, about human migration and the flight of refugees. And for the past several months, he has collaborated with Grammy-winning musician and producer Noah Georgeson on an album, to be released by summer 2020, that combines classical South Asian music with his own songwriting.

Born and raised in Lahore, Pakistan, he is the son of dissident journalists; his father has been jailed repeatedly, and in 2011 the family fled the country for more than a year after receiving death threats. Sethi

arrived at Harvard in September 2002, exactly a year after 9/11. “Everywhere I went, people were kind of cagey about Muslims,” he recalls. “Like, ‘Ooh, what do Muslims really believe?’” Even as he felt pressure to explain, a part of him was searching, too:

“There was this wanting to have a narrative that fit”—about his home and culture, and himself—“and not quite having recourse to one.”

He found it in a class on Islamic culture in contemporary societies, taught by profes-

sor of Indo-Muslim and Islamic religion and cultures Ali Asani. For the first time, Sethi learned about the role the arts had always played in Muslims’ understanding of their faith. He learned that Islam was not only politics and theology but what Asani called

Off the Shelf

Recent books with Harvard connections

Democracy and Imperialism: Irving Babbitt and Warlike Democracies, by William S. Smith (University of Michigan, \$70). Harvard, widely known as a liberal bastion, was not always and is not only so. Smith, managing director of Catholic University’s Center for the Study of Statesmanship, plumbs the *political* thought of Babbitt, Harvard’s long-serving comparative-literature scholar. In assessing “the ambiguity of imperialism in democracies”—and Babbitt’s link between that problem and his essential understanding that (in Smith’s phrase) “the quality most required for a successful political order is high moral character in leaders”—the author performs the dual service of rehabilitating an important idea undergirding genuinely conservative thought, and demonstrating its unmistakable application to twenty-first-century America.

The Curious World of Seaweed, by Josie Iselin ’84 (Heyday, \$35). The author-artist, who has made readers really *look* at beach stones and seashells, here goes to town on seaweeds and kelps. The helpful

texts, historical images, and her own riveting portraits of their beauty may help readers appreciate their biological importance, too.

The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble but Flawed Ideal, by Martha C. Nussbaum, Ph.D. ’75, RI ’81 (Harvard, \$27.95). It is a *long* way from philosophical discourse on Cicero, the Stoics, Adam Smith, and their successors to “America First” as a campaign-rally slogan. That makes the distinguished University of Chicago philosopher’s engagement with the ideas of world citizenship and universal human dignity—and their practical limits in a material life—timely and urgent, if not light reading.

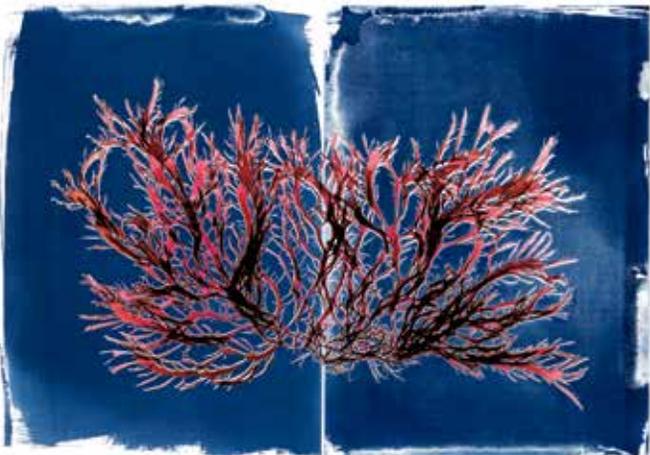
The Education of an Idealist, by Samantha Power, Lindh professor of the practice of global leadership and public policy and Zabel professor of practice in human rights (Dey Street Books, \$29.99). The human-rights scholar-activist (author of *A Problem from Hell*, on America and genocide, reviewed in September-October 2002) was schooled in diplomatic practicalities as National Security Council leader for multilateral affairs and human rights, and then as ambassador to the UN, in the Obama administration. Her memoir details that work (historians will hash out controversies like those arising from U.S. intervention in Libya), overlaid with her personal priorities (IVF and creating a family with husband Cass Sunstein, Walmsley University Professor, profiled in “The Legal Olympian,” January-February 2015). A useful reminder of the role of diplomacy—and of the challenges faced by those who conduct it.

Sublime seaweed: nature photographer Josie Iselin’s cyanotype of *Pikea californica*

Choosing College: How to Make Better Learning Decisions Throughout Your Life, by Michael B. Horn, M.B.A. ’06, and Bob Moesta (Jossey-Bass, \$25). An education strategist and innovation consultant of the Clayton Christensen “disruption” school (the professor provides a foreword), Horn and co-author Moesta offer a consultant-like approach to figuring out whether to go to college and if so, why, and then, how applicants might attend their “best school.” The book’s chief value may be its operating assumption that its readers are *not* confined to the tiny minority of 18-year-olds seeking admission to highly selective liberal-arts colleges and universities.

The Empowered University, by Freeman A. Hrabowski III, LL.D. ’10, Philip J. Rous, and Peter H. Henderson, M.P.P. ’84 (Johns Hopkins, \$34.95). The flip side of college choice is what choices colleges make. Here the president, provost, and senior advisor to the president of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, reflect on how they transformed a run-of-the-mill local institution into a nationally acclaimed powerhouse, distinguished for educating minority and disadvantaged students in STEM disciplines. The spirit of chapter 12, “Looking in the Mirror,” seems useful generally—for educators, but also for trustees, civic leaders, and others.

Dangerous Melodies: Classical Music in America from the Great War through the Cold War, by Jonathan Rosenberg, Ph.D. ’97 (W.W. Norton, \$39.95). The Juilliard-trained author, now a twentieth-century U.S. historian at Hunter and the Graduate Center of CUNY, has composed a breathtaking exploration of the intersection of international relations and classical music, from the patriotic dismissal of German music during World War I to the embrace of Shostakovich during the Nazi siege of Leningrad and the politics of Van Cliburn’s



CYANOTYPE BY JOSIE ISELIN

“heart-mind knowledge”: that before it was codified into scripture, the religion had begun as an aesthetic tradition that sought “to explain God through beauty.” The class unlocked something in Sethi.

He began to see the old folksongs he’d

grown up with in a new light—*ghazals* (love poems) and *qawwalis* (devotional songs) handed down by the Sufis, Islamic mystics whose practice emphasizes pluralism, tolerance, and an inward search for the divine. He’d heard them embedded in mov-

ies and advertisements and jingles on the radio—“just a part of our cultural DNA”—but they’d always seemed separate from religion, and lesser; now he understood they were neither.

He abandoned his planned economics fo-

apothosis in Moscow during the Cold War. Original, and bracingly written.

Cold Warriors: Writers Who Waged the Literary Cold War, by Duncan White, lecturer on history and literature (Custom House/Morrow, \$32.50). As sweeping in scope and ambition as *Dangerous Melodies*, but in the different medium of literature. As capitalism and communism vied for hearts and minds, and their spies engaged one another, friendships and enmities changed and metastasized, from George Orwell and Stephen Spender to Richard Wright, John le Carré, and Václav Havel: a worldwide engagement of politics and prose.

The Confounding Island, by Orlando Patterson, Cowles professor of sociology (Harvard, \$35). The preeminent sociologist (profiled in “The Caribbean Zola,” November-December 2014) here returns to “Jamaica and the postcolonial predicament”: the subtitle, and his birthplace. Democratic but mired in poverty, religious but plagued by violence, lifted up by its indigenous music, the Connecticut-sized island becomes a lens for Patterson to examine globalization, development, poverty, and postcolonial politics in ways that resonate far beyond a place whose inhabitants say (in creole), “We are little but so mighty.”

The Cigarette: A Political History, by Sarah Milov '07 (Harvard, \$35). The author, assistant professor of history at the University of Virginia (tobacco country!), rereads the narrative of smoking, from early farmer-government promotion of the habit and product, through the rise of activist citizen nonsmokers who waged a fight for clean air. It is more than tempting to draw analogies from this careful analysis of interest-group politics to such contemporary challenges as, say, controlling greenhouse-gas emissions to secure the larger atmosphere and the life it blankets on Earth—what she

Capturing the cosmos: a comet reported in 1527, from the Augsburg Book of Miracles, by an unknown artist

calls, in the context of her research, “the confidence to believe in a different future.”

The Age of Living Machines, by Susan Hockfield (W.W. Norton, \$26.95). MIT’s president emerita, a neuroscientist with many Harvard ties, is a clear guide to the emerging synthesis of biology and engineering, resulting in entirely new technologies, with promise for fighting cancer, feeding an ever-hungrier (and -hotter) world, and so on.

Cosmos: The Art and Science of the Universe, by Roberta J.M. Olson and Jay M. Pasachoff '63, Ph.D. '69 (Reaktion Books/University of Chicago, \$49.95). Wheaton College art historian emerita Olson and Williams College professor of astronomy Pasachoff join strengths felicitously in a large-format tour and celebration of images of the cosmos, from ancient and fine art through scientific illustrations to the (literally) out-of-this-world observations made by the Hubble Space Telescope and other modern instruments.

How the Brain Lost Its Mind, by Allan H. Ropper, professor of neurology, and Brian David Burrell (Penguin Random House, \$27). With medical constructs for understanding mental illness now very much contested (see “Misguided Mind Fixers,” May-June, page 73), the authors re-examine the nineteenth-century’s simultaneous experience of neurosyphilis (very much organic) and of epilepsy-like hysteria (with no bodily cause). The contending narratives of psychoanalysis and of psychopharmacology, they suggest, trace to

those earlier paradigms—and reformulating them might help in addressing mental ailments today.

Dispossessed, by Noell Stout, Ph.D. '08 (University of California, \$29.95 paper). The author, associate professor of anthropology at NYU, dug into the housing foreclosures that ravaged the Sacramento Valley (and much of the country) in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession. Loan servicers, call-center representatives, and homeowners themselves became enmeshed in a toxic bureaucracy, transforming a financial contract into a moral relationship that colors the lives and views of millions of Americans still. Her account of the “administrative violence” homeowners encountered, instead of debt relief, is an imaginative, informative use of anthropology.

All Blood Runs Red, by Phil Keith '68 and Tom Clavin (Hanover Square Press, \$27.99). A brisk life of Eugene Bullard, a slave’s son who made his way from Georgia to Europe; rose in boxing as the “Black Sparrow”; enlisted in the French Foreign Legion and became the first African-American fighter pilot during World War I; mastered the Paris club scene; served as an Allied spy in the next world war; and found his way back to the United States and the civil-rights movement.



COURTESY OF THE GEORGE ABRAMS COLLECTION



Sethi performs on *Coke Studio*, a popular live-music TV show in Pakistan that he says “gives young people something to hold onto” amid religious and political strife.

a transgender person,” Sethi says. “They’re all residents of Lahore, people who embody the multiple interpretations of this poetry and music.” Three days after the video was released on YouTube last February, an unexpected skirmish flared up between Pakistan and India, and the two countries seemed briefly on the verge of war. The video’s comment section flooded with listeners writing from each side of the border, preaching peace and togetherness, praising the song’s message of love. “It became kind of an anthem,” Sethi says. “It felt genuinely miraculous.”

A similar spirit animates a concert series that Sethi and Asani present together in cities around the world, “The Covenant of Love”—from a Quranic phrase describing God’s relationship with humanity. Sethi and his band perform songs by legendary Sufi poets, while Asani, seated onstage, explains their history and symbolism. This was the show Sethi brought to Sanders last spring, and before the musicians played “Dama Dam Mast Qalandar,” Asani told the audience about a 2017 suicide bombing at the shrine that killed 90 worshippers. “But the next day, people were back, dancing,” he said, a testament to poetry’s power to give courage and spiritual solace. And then he invited students to their own version of *dhamal*. “If the spirit moves you, just dance.”

COURTESY OF ALI SETHI AND COKE STUDIO

cus and began pursuing music and creative writing, concentrating in Sanskrit and Indian studies (and shortly after graduating, published a well-received, semi-autobiographical novel, *The Wish Maker*, about politics and family in Pakistan). He acquired a harmonium and during summers in Lahore began apprenticing under classical singers Ustad Naseeruddin Saami and Farida Khanum, embarking on the rigorous art of singing *ragas*, a complicated structure for melodic improvisation in which shifting notes can sound almost molten. “The music is never fixed,” he says. “A *raga* is almost like a melodic being. You have to breathe life into it, and every rendition, every performance, may be different.”

In traditional music, he has found room for musical experimentation and an avenue for his own “language of dissent.” Sufi songs, in particular, lend themselves to multiple interpretations; the same verses, Sethi says, may be read as the story of a love affair, or a heartbroken letter to an unjust society, or a dialogue with the divine. For centuries, Sufi poets have dealt with topics like gender identity, sexuality, cultural difference, and political strife. “The poems are so extremely inclusive,” he says. “And the appetite for Sufi music in Pakistan allows people like me to get away with a lot of potentially subversive stuff through the metaphors of Sufi poetry—these beautiful, deliberate ambiguities.”

“Chandni Raat,” a single from his forthcoming album, illustrates what he means.

Sung in Hindi, it takes its refrain from a *ghazal* by Saiffudin Saif: “This moonlit night has been a long time coming / The words I want to say have been a long time coming.” “The implication is of something half-veiled, half-visible,” says Sethi, who added his own lyrics gesturing toward an unspecified union, and set the song to a soft, slow melody adapted from two *ragas*. The music video shows a spectral, ruined train station and a collection of stranded passengers who gradually warm to each other across differences in age, religion, ethnicity, sexual identity, and walks of life. “There’s

Forgive, but Don’t Forget

...and don’t always forgive

by LINCOLN CAPLAN

THE FIRST PERSON President Donald Trump pardoned, in August 2017, was Sheriff Joe Arpaio. He was infamous for being brutal to undocumented immigrants and others in his shameful jails, and cheered on by neo-Nazis. The month before, a federal judge had found Arpaio guilty of criminal contempt, which carried a jail sentence of up to six months, for “flagrant disregard” of a court order. He had refused to stop harassing and arresting Latinos without any basis for suspicion

that they had committed a crime. In the 2016 elections, Arpaio lost his race for a seventh term in Maricopa County, Arizona, apparently because the county no longer wanted a sheriff who engaged in what the Justice Department called “unconstitutional policing.” But in the presidential election, Arpaio helped push the county and the state for Trump, who advanced his own anti-immigrant cru-

When Should Law Forgive?
by Martha Minow
(W.W. Norton, \$27.95)