

IN THIS WEEK'S ISSUE

The Desperate Fight, Block by Block, to Destroy ISIS

In the February 6, 2017, issue of *The New Yorker*, in "The Avengers of Mosul" (p. 34), **Luke Mogelson** reports from Iraq, where he spent two months embedded with the Nineveh Province SWAT team—an élite police unit made up almost entirely of native sons of Mosul—as they fight to liberate the city from six thousand ISIS militants. Aside from martial aptitude, there are two principal requirements for recruits: they have to have been wounded by ISIS or its Islamist precursors—either physically, by bullets and blasts, or psychically, by the death of a loved one—and they have to crave revenge. "I had the idea that a unit like that would work in a real way," Lieutenant Colonel Rayyan Abdelrazzak, commander of the SWAT team, told Mogelson. Rayyan and Major Mezher Sadoon, the deputy commander, alternate leadership every ten days. "Both leaders were revered. But it was Mezher whom the younger members of the unit emulated. They were loud like him, profane like him, and, like him, they seemed to find solace from their private traumas in a dark and graphic form of humor," Mogelson writes.

When the campaign to expel the Islamic State from Mosul began, on October 17, 2016, more than a hundred thousand soldiers, policemen, and government-sanctioned-militia members were expected to participate in the fight—and the SWAT-team members were desperate to join the battle. At the Tigris, the SWAT team was to meet up with the Ninety-first Brigade of the Iraqi Army's 16th Division. Together, they would clear half a dozen villages on the river's eastern bank while the Federal Police advanced, in tandem, on the river's opposite bank. Mogelson accompanied the SWAT team as Iraqi forces closed in on Mosul. ISIS had shown unexpected tenacity in its defense of Intisar, the first urban neighborhood on Mosul's southeastern edge, and the 9th Division asked the SWAT team to help it capture several blocks. But the SWAT team was small and lacked logistical support: there was no one to bring them food, water, ammunition, or extra weapons. They didn't have their own medics, intelligence officers, mechanics, engineers, or bomb technicians. Outside Intisar, Mezher told his team, "I want to try to go into this place with only ammunition. Any of you who brought your panties and bras, get rid of them. Why are we here, to fight or to do something else? Let's go." After Mezher returned from Intisar, with a bandage wrapped around his head, he told Mogelson, "They fucked us." According to Mezher, the 9th Division had directed them to an untenable area, out ahead of its tanks, and refused to back them up. Of the forty-odd men who'd been in Intisar, twenty-two had been seriously injured and two killed. "These ISIS fighters have been very well trained," Mezher said. "They shoot three bullets at us, and we shoot a hundred. If they launch an R.P.G. and miss, they won't miss the second. . . . In war, you have to be honest with yourself. We broke down." He continued, "The SWAT is not ready to fight inside Mosul." Following the debacle in Intisar, Major Mezher was forced to leave the unit.

After a respite, the SWAT team acquired a new mission. They were deployed north of Intisar, to support the advance led by the Golden Division, a special-operations force trained by Green Berets and armed with American weapons. While the Golden Division conducted operations north of Highway 2, the SWAT team would prevent ISIS fighters from crossing into Gogjali, a Mosul suburb. Mogelson writes, "Every day I was in Gogjali, hundreds of dirty, hungry, sleep-deprived civilians wandered up Highway 2.... Many were injured. During

the week and a half that I spent there, I never saw anybody from the government or any international organization providing first aid or food or water." When the team left Gogjali, a colonel from the Golden Division led the SWAT team westward, deeper into Mosul—they planned to attack the neighborhood of Akha. But some members of the SWAT team told Major Mohammad Masood, who was now in charge, that the team did not possess sufficient manpower or firepower, and feared a repeat of Intisar. Mohammad yelled, "Where is the old SWAT? After everything we've done? No one was fucking ISIS like us! And now, here, at the end, you want to quit? Shame on us!"The Golden Division launched its attack on Akha; by the next morning, Akha had been liberated. In late December, Iraqi security forces suspended operations in Mosul for two weeks. On January 8th, after the offensive resumed, the Golden Division reached the Tigris. Two weeks later, eastern Mosul was declared to be liberated, although sleeper cells may remain. "What happens next is uncertain," Mogelson writes. The SWAT team is currently stationed by the Tigris, and Colonel Rayyan is eager to cross it: "The western side will be easier. Now they're encircled, and they lost a lot of soldiers on the eastern front." Mogelson travelled to Qayyarah, south of Mosul, where Major Mezher, after leaving the SWAT team, had assumed command of a new police unit. "Civilians don't understand me, and I don't understand them," he told Mogelson. "The only people I trust are my own men, these men around me."



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The Trial of Dylann Roof

In "Prodigy of Hate" (p. 20), **Jelani Cobb** reports from Charleston, South Carolina, on the federal trial of Dylann Roof—the young man who shot and killed nine African-American congregants at the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in 2015—and considers the complex moral calculations regarding the death penalty. David Bruck, who represented Roof, almost exclusively takes on cases that involve the death penalty, which he views as both unjust and racist in its application. Bruck's thinking seems to be that if the life of a defendant charged with such heinous crimes could be spared, so could the lives of those charged with lesser crimes. "If the bar is raised high enough, the death penalty might never be applied," Cobb writes. Some family members of Roof's victims thought that he should live out every day of his natural life in full knowledge of what he had done. Others thought he deserved to die. Neither option was without problems: while a death sentence for Roof would add a patina of fairness to a practice steeped in the racial disparities of the criminal-justice system, a life sentence, on the other hand, would seem to suggest that a black life is worth less than one-ninth of a white one. Carey Grady, a senior pastor at Reid Chapel A.M.E. Church, in Columbia, who had known one of the victims, Clementa Pinckney, from childhood, tells Cobb, "I hate to say it, but, if the system is unjust, the most just thing to happen in that system is for Roof to get the death penalty, because otherwise you make the statement that black lives really don't matter." Cobb details the particulars of the trial, from the witness statements to Roof's death-penalty sentence. Judge Richard Gergel, who was presiding over the case, thanked the jurors for their service and said, "This trial has produced no winners, only losers. The community cannot have what it wants, the return of their loved ones, but they can have a measure of justice."

How Mo Willems Teaches Young Readers to Confront Problems

In "Fail Funnier" (p. 28), **Rivka Galchen** profiles Mo Willems—the writer and illustrator of some fifty children's books, more than half of which have appeared on the *Times* best-seller list—whose recurring characters explore friendship and failure, and are as familiar to today's children as the Cat in the Hat is to adults. Early-reader books—aimed at children who are just beginning to read—don't tend to sell, but Willems's books have sold many millions of copies. His beloved Elephant and Piggy series, which, after twenty-five installments, ended in 2016, featured an anxious male elephant named Gerald and a sunny female pig named Piggie. They appear against a plain white background, so that the reader's attention is on the "expressiveness of their relative postures, the tilt of their ears, of their eyebrows," Galchen writes. "I try and make the emotional dynamic between the characters readable just from their silhouettes," Willems says. At the launch of Willems's most recent book, "Nanette's Baguette," one boy told him, "I'm dyslexic, and, when I was learning to read, your books were the first ones I could read." Willems hears this often.

"What sets Willems's books apart from most other children's books," Galchen writes, "is that they are very funny." Willems says, "The challenge for me is that my goal is to be funny, but within the constraint of using only about forty to fifty words . . . I sometimes joke that I write for functional illiterates, because these stories aren't meant to be read once—they're meant to be read a thousand times." While many artists talk about the importance of failure, "Willems seems particularly able to hold on to the conviction of it," Galchen writes. In "Elephants Cannot Dance!," they can't; in "Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!," Pigeon, despite all his pleading and cajoling, never does. His books "reveal a preoccupation with failure, even an alliance with it," Galchen writes. When asked if it felt strange to no longer be writing Elephant and Piggie books, Willems said, "Well, at least now I have my obituary." He added, unprompted, "I think 'What are you working on next?' is the worst question. It's such a bad question. I hate that question. Everyone asks that question. I want to say, 'Isn't this good enough for you?'"

Plus: In Comment, Steve Coll writes about Donald Trump and his advisers' disparagement of the media, and considers how the nation's major news organizations will report on the Trump Administration (p. 15); in the Financial Page, James Surowiecki considers how Donald Trump's supporters will respond to his business conflicts of interest (p. 19); in Shouts & Murmurs, Paul Rudnick imagines Melania Trump's diary entry on January 21, 2017, the day after the Inauguration (p. 27); Carrie Battan listens to Sampha's début solo album, "Process," and a new album by the Migos, "Culture" (p. 70); Alexandra Schwartz reads "A Separation," a new novel by Katie Kitamura (p. 73); Peter Schjeldahl attends "Fast Forward: Painting from the 1980s," at the Whitney (p. 76); Emily Nussbaum reviews the NBC Comedy "The Good Place" (p. 78); Anthony Lane watches Stephen Gaghan's "Gold" and Tim Sutton's "Dark Night" (p. 80); poetry by Charles Simic (p. 53) and Tess Gallagher (p. 67); and new fiction by David Gilbert (p. 60).

Podcasts: David Remnick speaks with Ben Smith, the editor-in-chief of BuzzFeed, on the Web site's decision to publish an unverified intelligence report on Donald Trump's ties to Russia, and about how the media should cover the President; Dorothy Wickenden and James B. Stewart discuss Trump's populist campaign promise, his Cabinet picks, and his tax returns; Junot Díaz reads Edwidge Danticat's story "Seven," and discusses it with Deborah Treisman; and David Gilbert reads his story "Underground."

Digital Extras: Images from the front lines of Mosul; a slide show of art from the eighties; and **Richard Brody** comments on scenes from Kenji Mizoguchi's "The Story of the Last Chrysanthemum," from 1939.

The February 6, 2017, issue of *The New Yorker* goes on sale at newsstands beginning Monday, January 30.