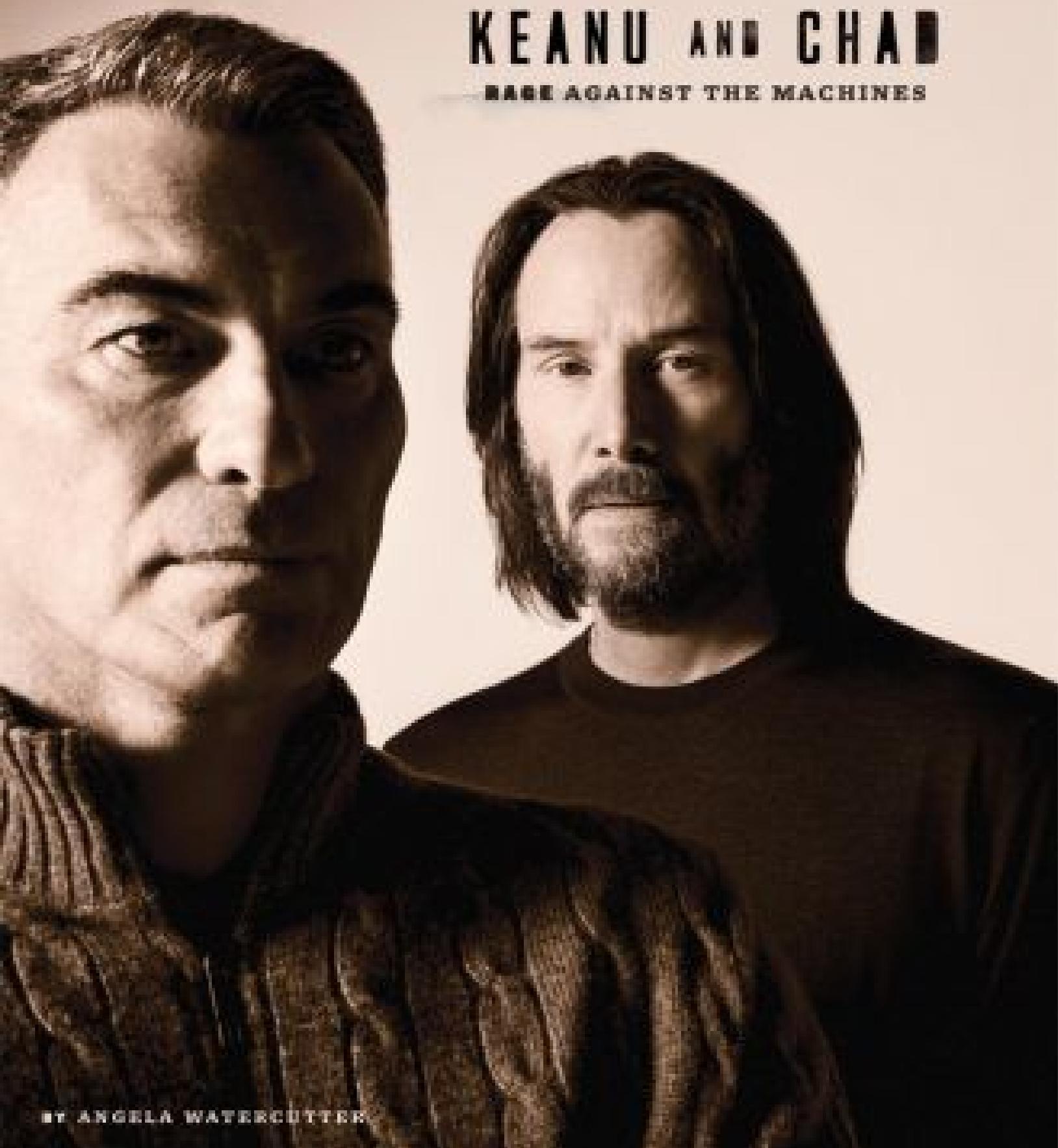


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KEANU AND CHAI

RAGE AGAINST THE MACHINES



BY ANGELA WATERCUTTER

Wired Magazine, Monthly Edit

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Feb 28, 2023 6:00 AM

The Mining Industry's Next Frontier Is Deep, Deep Under the Sea

Companies are diving to the bottom to scoop up metals essential for our EV-driven future. But how much ocean are we willing to sacrifice?

Photograph: Andria Lo

In October of last year, an enormous new creature appeared on the seabed of the Pacific Ocean, about 1,400 miles southwest of San Diego. It was a remote-controlled, 90-ton machine the size of a small house, lowered from an industrial ship on a cable nearly 3 miles long. Once it was settled on [the ocean floor](#), the black, white, and Tonka-truck-yellow contraption began grinding its way forward, its lights lancing through the darkness, steel treads biting into the silt. A battery of water jets mounted on its front end blasted away at the seafloor, stirring up billowing clouds of muck and dislodging hundreds of fist-sized black rocks that lay half-buried in the [sediment](#).

The jets propelled the lumpy stones into an intake at the front of the vehicle, where they rattled into a steel pipe rising all the way back up to the ship. Air compressors pushed the rocks up in a column of seawater and sediment and into a shipboard centrifuge that spun away most of the water. Conveyor belts then carried the rocks to a metal ramp that dropped them with a clatter into the ship's hold. From a windowless control room nearby, a team of engineers in blue and orange coveralls monitored the operation, their faces lit by the polychromatic glow from a hodgepodge of screens.

The ship, called the *Hidden Gem*, was a former oil-drilling vessel nearly 800 feet long, retrofitted for sea mining by the Metals Company, an international firm officially headquartered in Canada. This was the first test of its system to collect the ancient black stones. They are officially known as polymetallic nodules, but the Metals Company's CEO, Gerard Barron, likes to call them "batteries in a rock." That's because the stones happen to be [packed with metals](#) that are essential for manufacturing electric cars—[a market that is surging](#) worldwide. Barron's company is at the front of a pack of more than a dozen [enterprises](#) slavering over the billions of dollars that could be reaped from those little subsea rocks.

The world's long-overdue, fitful [transition to renewable energy](#) is hobbled by an Achilles' heel: It requires staggering quantities of natural resources. Manufacturing enough electric vehicles to replace their fossil-fueled counterparts will require billions of tons of [cobalt](#), [lithium](#), copper, and other metals. [To meet the exploding demand](#), mining companies, carmakers, and governments are scouring the planet for potential mines or expanding existing ones, from the deserts of Chile to the rain forests of Indonesia. Meanwhile, what might be the richest source of all—the ocean floor—remains untapped. The US Geological Survey estimates that 21 billion tons of polymetallic nodules lie in a single region of the Pacific, containing more of some metals (such as nickel and cobalt) than can be found in all the world's dryland deposits.

"Here's one of them," Barron said when we met recently in the lobby of a chic Toronto hotel, as he casually pulled one of these geologic oddities out of his jacket pocket and handed it to me. Barron is a fit, muscular Australian in his mid-fifties, with swept-back dark hair, a nautical beard, and craggy Kurt Russell-esque looks. His jeans, black boots, and wristloads of leather bracelets lend him a roguish air. He has just flown in from London for a big mining conference. For years, he's been traveling the world to talk up deep-sea mining to investors and government officials. He and other would-be sea miners argue that collecting nodules from the deep will be not only cheaper than traditional mining but also gentler on the planet. No rain forests uprooted, no Indigenous peoples displaced, no toxic tailings poisoning rivers.

Barron may finally be on the brink of achieving his goal of mega-scale mining on the ocean floor. The Metals Company has tens of millions of dollars in the bank and partnerships with major maritime companies. The *Hidden Gem*'s foray last October marked the first time since the 1970s that any company had successfully trialed a complete system for harvesting nodules.

The main thing holding the company back is international law, which currently forbids deep-ocean mining. That may be about to change, however. Last year, the Metals Company teamed up with the tiny South Pacific island nation of Nauru to trigger an obscure process that could let them bypass the international prohibition and get a license to start full-scale operations as early as July 2024.

That prospect has sparked an outraged backlash. Environmental groups, scientists, and even some corporations in the market for battery metals fear the potential havoc of seabed mining. The oceans provide much of the world's biodiversity, a significant chunk of humanity's food, and the planet's biggest carbon sink. No one knows how such an unprecedented incursion would affect the many life-forms that live in the abyssal depths, the marine life farther up the water column, or the ocean itself. The European Parliament and countries including Germany, Chile, Spain, and several Pacific island nations have joined dozens of organizations in calling for at least a temporary moratorium on deep-sea mining. Several banks have declared they won't loan to ocean-mining ventures. Corporations including BMW, Microsoft, Google, Volvo, and Volkswagen have pledged not to buy deep-sea metals until the environmental impacts are better understood. Even Aquaman is opposed: Jason Momoa narrated a recently released documentary denouncing sea mining.

"This has the potential to transform the oceans, and not for the better," says Diva Amon, a marine scientist who has worked extensively in the main area of the Pacific targeted for mining, including as a contractor for one of the sea-mining companies. "We could stand to lose parts of the planet and species that live there before we know, understand, and value them."

None of that deters Barron. "The biggest challenge to our planet is climate change and biodiversity loss. We don't have a spare decade to sit around,"

he declares. By the end of the *Hidden Gem*'s trial last October, the vehicle had delivered more than 3,000 tons of the stones, mounded up in a glistening black pyramid nearly four stories high. "This," Barron promised the press, "is just the beginning."

The Metals Company uses a former oil-drilling vessel, the *Hidden Gem*, to collect polymetallic nodules from the seafloor.

Courtesy of Richard Baron/TMC

The nodules have been growing, in utter blackness and near-total silence, for millions of years. Each one started as [a fragment of something else](#)—a tiny fossil, a scrap of basalt, a shark's tooth—that drifted down to the plain at the very bottom of the ocean. In the lugubrious unfolding of geologic time, specks of waterborne nickel, copper, cobalt, and manganese slowly accreted onto them. By now, trillions lie half-buried in the sediment carpeting the ocean floor.

One March day in 1873, some of these subaqueous artifacts were dragged for the first time into sunlight. Sailors aboard the HMS *Challenger*, a former British warship retrofitted into a floating research lab, dredged a net along the sea bottom, hauled it up, and dumped the dripping sediment onto the wooden deck. As the expedition's scientists, in long trousers and shirtsleeves, eagerly sifted through the mud and muck, they noted the many "peculiar black oval bodies" that they soon determined were concretions of valuable minerals. A fascinating discovery, but it would be almost a century before the world began to dream of exploiting these stones.

In 1965, an American geologist published an influential book called *The Mineral Resources of the Sea*, which generously estimated that the nodules contained enough manganese, [cobalt](#), nickel, and other metals to feed the world's industrial needs for thousands of years. Mining the nodules, he speculated, "could serve to remove one of the historic causes of war between nations, supplies of raw materials for expanding populations. Of course it might produce the opposite effect also, that of fomenting inane squabbles over who owns which areas of the ocean floor."

In an era when population growth and an embryonic environmental movement were fueling concerns about natural resources, seabed mining suddenly got hot. Throughout the 1970s, governments and private companies rushed to develop ships and rigs to pull up nodules. There was so much hype that in 1972, it seemed completely plausible when billionaire Howard Hughes announced that he was dispatching a custom-built ship into the Pacific to search for nodules. (In fact, the CIA had recruited Hughes to provide cover for the ship's Bond-esque mission: to covertly retrieve a sunken Soviet submarine.) But none of the actual sea miners managed to come up with a system that could do the job at a price that made sense, and the fizz went out of the nascent industry.

By the turn of the 21st century, advancing marine technology made sea mining seem plausible again. With GPS and sophisticated motors, ships could float above precisely chosen points on the seafloor. Remotely operated underwater vehicles grew more capable and dove deeper. The nodules now seemed to be within reach, just at the moment when booming economies such as China's were ravenous for metals.

Barron saw the potential bonanza decades ago. He grew up on a dairy farm, the youngest of five kids. (He now has five of his own.) "I knew I didn't want to be a dairy farmer, but I loved dairy farm life," he says. "I loved driving tractors and harvesters." He left home to go to a regional university and started his first company, a loan-refinancing operation, while still a student. After graduating, he moved to Brisbane "to discover the big, wide world." Over the years, he has been involved in magazine publishing, ad software, and conventional car battery operations in China.

Corals, sponges, and nematodes live on the rocks or shelter beneath them. Other critters float around them, including anemones with 8-foot tentacles.

In 2001, a tennis buddy of Barron's—a geologist, former prospector, and early web-hosting entrepreneur named David Heydon—pitched him on a company he was spinning up, a sea-mining outfit called Nautilus Minerals. Barron was fascinated to learn that the oceans were filled with metals. He put some of his own money into the venture and rounded up other investors.

Nautilus wasn't going after polymetallic nodules, but rather what seemed like an easier target: underwater formations called seafloor massive sulfides, which are rich in copper and other metals. The company struck a deal with the government of Papua New Guinea to mine sulfides off the country's coast. (Under international law, countries can do basically whatever they want within their Economic Exclusion Zones, which extend up to 200 miles from their coastlines.) It sounded good enough to attract half a billion dollars from investors, including Papua New Guinea itself.

But in 2019, after spending some \$460 million, Nautilus went bust. Neither Barron nor Heydon lost any of their own money: Both had sold their shares about a decade earlier, with Barron clearing about \$30 million in profit. Papua New Guinea, where more than half the population lives in poverty, was out \$120 million. "It wasn't my business," Barron tells me. "I was just supporting David, really."

Heydon, meanwhile, was building a company called DeepGreen—rebranded in 2021 as the Metals Company—[this time pursuing polymetallic nodules](#). By then, the growing demand for electric vehicles had added both a new potential market and an extra environmental justification for the project. Barron came on as CEO, and several other Nautilus alums joined up, including Heydon's son Robert. Along with other would-be miners, they started knocking on the door of the International Seabed Authority.

Based in Kingston, Jamaica, the ISA has the contradictory tasks of protecting the ocean floor while organizing its commercial exploitation. Back in the 1980s, most of the world's nations—notably excluding the United States—signed a kind of constitution for the oceans, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea. Among many other things, the document established the International Seabed Authority to represent what are now its 167 member nations. The organization was charged with devising rules to govern the then-nonexistent deep-sea-mining industry. The testudinal pace of subsea geology is rivaled only by that of international bureaucracy, and the ISA has been working to develop those rules ever since. Until regulations are agreed upon, full-scale mining is prohibited. But in the meantime, the agency can grant miners the rights to explore specific areas and reserve them for commercial exploitation. The ISA also declared

that private companies must partner with a member country. Even the tiniest member country will do.

By now, the Seabed Authority has granted permits to 22 companies and governments to explore enormous swaths of the Pacific, Atlantic, and Indian Ocean seabeds. Most are targeting nodules lying roughly 3 miles underwater in the Clarion Clipperton Zone, an expanse of the Pacific between Mexico and Hawaii measuring 1.7 million square miles. Holding the rights to three of the choicest parcels is Gerard Barron and the Metals Company. The company's chief financial officer recently told investors that those expanses could yield metals worth \$31 billion.

Here's what makes all of this urgent. The mining ban has a loophole: the two-year trigger. A section of the treaty known as Paragraph 15 states that if any member country formally notifies the Seabed Authority that it wants to start sea mining in international waters, the organization will have two years to adopt full regulations. If it fails to do so, the treaty says the ISA "shall none the less consider and provisionally approve such plan of work." This text is commonly interpreted to mean mining must be allowed to go ahead, even in the absence of full regulations. "Paragraph 15 was appallingly drafted," says Duncan Currie, a lawyer for the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition, an international umbrella organization of dozens of groups. "Several countries dispute the idea that it means they need to automatically approve a plan of work."

In the summer of 2021, the president of Nauru formally notified the Seabed Authority that the country, along with the Metals Company's wholly owned subsidiary, Nauru Ocean Resources, planned to begin sea mining. The two-year trigger has been pulled. The Metals Company's audacious gambit may have opened the door to deep-sea mining for the first time.

"As an environmentalist," Barron says, he finds the opposition to his plans frustrating. "'Save the oceans' is a really easy slogan to get behind. I'm behind it!" he says. "I want to save the oceans, but I also want to save the planet." It might be true that getting metals from the seafloor is less damaging than getting them from land. But so far, few outside the industry are convinced.

Very little is truly known about the deep ocean. Gathering data hundreds of miles from land and miles below the water's surface is extraordinarily difficult. A single day's work can cost up to \$80,000, and sophisticated tools such as remotely operated vehicles have only recently become available to many scientists. In 2022, 31 marine researchers published a paper that reviewed hundreds of studies on deep-sea mining. The authors also interviewed 20 scientists, industry members, and policy-makers; almost all said the scientific community needed at least five more years "to make evidence-based recommendations" for regulating the industry.

Every phase of the mining process entails serious risks for the world's oceans, which are already [severely stressed](#) by pollution, overfishing, and climate change. Start at the bottom. A massive piece of machinery-tank-treading over the pristine ocean floor, prying loose thousands of nodules from the beds where they have lain for millennia, is inevitably going to cause some damage. Corals, sponges, nematodes, and dozens of other organisms live on the nodules themselves or shelter beneath them. [Other critters](#) float around them, including anemones with 8-foot tentacles, rippling squidworms, glass sponges, and ghostly white Dumbo octopuses. "It's like Dr. Seuss down there," says Amon, the marine scientist. The nodules, Amon believes, are a critical part of the ecosystem that supports [all those creatures](#). And since they formed over millions of years, any harm that results from removing them "is in effect irreversible." Some scientists are also concerned that the huge amounts of carbon embedded on the ocean floor could be released, potentially interfering with the [ocean's ability to sequester carbon](#).

Silt and clay stirred up by the collector vehicles will also rise up into the water, creating plumes of sediment that could cloud the water for miles, linger for weeks or more, and suffocate creatures farther up the water column. Those plumes might also contain dissolved metals or other toxic substances that could harm aquatic life.

The nodule-collecting machine gets lowered to the ocean floor on a cable that's nearly 3 miles long.

Courtesy of Richard Baron/TMC

Onboard the ship, engineers in a control room monitor the mining robot's progress.

Courtesy of Richard Baron/TMC

Moving upward, the noise and light emitted by the harvester vehicles and riser systems could affect any number of creatures that have evolved to live in silence and darkness. A recent study found that the racket from just one seabed mining operation could echo for hundreds of miles through the water, potentially interfering with aquatic organisms' ability to navigate and find food and mates.

Once the nodules have been carried up to a ship, the silt-infused water that accompanied them will have to be dumped back into the sea, creating another potentially dangerous sediment plume. "We are talking about massive volumes. Fifty thousand cubic meters a day," says Jeff Drazen, an ocean scientist at the University of Hawaii who has also worked extensively in the Clarion Clipperton Zone, including on a research mission funded by the Metals Company. "That's like a freight train of muddy seawater every day."

A 2022 report from the United Nations Environment Programme sums up the grim picture. Bottom line, according to the authors: "Current scientific consensus suggests that deep-sea mining will be highly damaging to ocean ecosystems." More than 700 marine science and policy experts have signed a petition calling for a "pause" on sea mining until more research has been conducted.

Barron insists that his company is committed to getting the science right and points out that it has funded 18 research expeditions (to fulfill the requirements of the Seabed Authority). "Last year I spent \$50 million on ocean science," he tells me. "I don't see anyone else doing that."

By now, he argues, we know enough. "The lack of full scientific knowledge should not be used as an excuse not to proceed when the known impacts of the alternative—land-based mining—are there for us all to see," he says. It is a "certainty," he says, that sea mining will be less destructive. Whoever authored the Metals Company's own registration filing with the US

Securities and Exchange Commission wasn't so categorical. That document notes that nodule collection in the Clarion Clipperton Zone is "certain to disturb wildlife" and "may impact ecosystem function" to an unpredictable extent. The filing adds that it may "not be possible to definitively say" whether nodule collection will do more or less harm to global biodiversity than land-based mining.

When the vehicle was just 50 feet from the surface, the umbilical snapped. The 35-ton machine went spiraling down to the bottom of the Pacific.

The Metals Company's critics say the company basically isn't interested in what the science shows. One environmental scientist quit a contract job with the company, complaining in a since-deleted LinkedIn post in 2020 that "the company has minimal respect for science, marine conservation, or society in general ... Don't let them fool you. Money is the game. It's business in their eyes, not people or the planet." (Barron says this person is just a disgruntled ex-employee and that his charges aren't true. My efforts to contact the scientist were unsuccessful.)

The metals company is the only deep-sea mining outfit that is not backed by a major corporation or national government. It's a startup, wholly dependent at this point on fickle investor capital. That could certainly help explain why Barron seems to be in a hurry to start mining. When I ask him why the company triggered the two-year rule, he interrupts to clarify: "Well, Nauru did. We didn't. Nauru did."

You'd have a hard time finding a more extreme example of despoliation of a tropical paradise, of a fall from Eden, than Nauru. When the first European ship came across this 8-square-mile island in the South Pacific, in 1798, the captain was so charmed by the locals' friendly welcome, the fair weather, and the lovely beaches that he dubbed it Pleasant Island. But once an Australian geologist discovered that the spot was loaded with high-grade phosphate, much in demand as fertilizer, the outside world rushed in. Over the course of the 20th century, the nation of 12,000 people was strip-mined to the brink of oblivion. Its once-lush interior was reduced to what *The Guardian* described as a "moonscape of jagged limestone pinnacles unfit for agriculture or even building." As the phosphate began running low in the 1990s, Nauru tried to set itself up as a no-questions-asked offshore

banking haven, but so much ill-gotten cash poured in that Nauru was forced to tighten its regulations. The island's next moneymaker was to rent some of its territory to Australia to use as an immigrant detention center. Detainees there have rioted, staged hunger strikes, and sewn their lips shut.

Given all that, it's easy to see the economic appeal of teaming up with the Metals Company—especially since the mining zone is nowhere near Nauru. "Our people, land, and resources were exploited to fuel the industrial revolution elsewhere, and we are now expected to bear the brunt of the destructive consequences of that industrial revolution," including sea-level rise, wrote Margo Deiye, Nauru's representative to the UN, in a December newspaper op-ed explaining why her country is supporting sea mining. "We're not sitting back, waiting for the rich world to fix what they created."

Barron, who has never set foot on the island, insists that the relationship is a respectful partnership, not a modern version of colonial exploitation. "It's horrible what happened to Nauru," he says. "They were absolutely fucked over by the Germans, the English, the Australians, and the Kiwis." The Metals Company says it has doled out more than \$200,000 to support community programs of various sorts in Nauru, Kiribati, and Tonga, the two other island nations with which it has business arrangements. "The real contribution," he adds, "will be when we start paying royalties"—the partner nations' yet-to-be-decided percentage of mining revenues.

The Metals Company's own finances, however, are a bit shaky. Barron took the company public in September 2021, a few months after the two-year rule was triggered, claiming it had commitments of \$300 million from investors. Its stock topped \$12 per share a few days after it hit the market. But two key investors never delivered, leaving Barron and his team with only a third of their expected capital. The stock price plummeted and has remained stuck at around \$1 for months. The company is suing the faithless investors and is being sued itself by other investors who claim they were misled. Meanwhile, it has burned through \$300 million. A substantial chunk of that cash wound up in Barron's pocket. He and his partner, Erika Ilves, a former executive at a company aiming to mine water on the moon whom Barron brought on as chief strategy officer, were together paid more than \$20 million in salary and stock options in 2021.

Bloomberg reporters and some environmental organizations have suggested that the company holds unfair leverage over its partner nations, and critics have drawn attention to the seemingly cozy ties between the Metals Company and the International Seabed Authority—in particular its secretary general, Michael Lodge. A recent *New York Times* investigation alleged that the ISA gave the company's executives access to data indicating where the most valuable seabed tracts were located, then helped it secure the rights to those areas. Both the agency and the company say that all their dealings have been legal and appropriate. (Lodge also made his stance on environmentalists pretty clear, telling the *Times*: “Everybody in Brooklyn can say, ‘I don’t want to harm the ocean.’ But they sure want their Teslas.”)

Between Barron’s outspokenness and his company’s legal and financial pyrotechnics, the Metals Company has drawn most of the media coverage around sea mining. “TMC is very bold, but the other companies are piggybacking on them,” says Jessica Battle, who heads the World Wildlife Fund’s campaign against sea mining. “Once one mining license is given, others will follow.” There’s an eager lineup. Belgian maritime giant Deme, high-tech hardware colossus Lockheed Martin, ship-builder Keppel Offshore & Marine, and the governments of South Korea, India, Japan, Russia, and China have launched dozens of research expeditions in recent years. China has two outfits licensed to explore for polymetallic nodules in the Pacific.

Deme’s sea-mining subsidiary, Global Sea Mineral Resources, may be best positioned to take the lead if the Metals Company stumbles. “They’ve got the backing of a multibillion-dollar company and access to European resources for design,” says Currie, the environmental lawyer. “They can wait 10 or 15 years and it wouldn’t be the end of the world for them. Whereas with the Metals Company, look at their stock price. If their license isn’t approved, it’s hard to see how they survive.” Global Sea Mineral Resources has also been running extensive tests in the Pacific—and learning its own lessons in how badly things can go wrong.

a frantic knocking on the metal door of his cabin jolted Kris De Bruyne awake. It was early in the morning of April 25, 2021, and De Bruyne, a

Belgian engineer with Global Sea Mineral Resources, was aboard an industrial ship far out in the Pacific. De Bruyne was helming a team of researchers testing the Patania II, a bright green prototype nodule collector similar to the one deployed by the Metals Company. Now one of his team was shouting through the door: “Something really bad happened. The umbilical disconnected!”

It was, indeed, *really* bad. The umbilical is a Kevlar-jacketed cable stuffed with fiber-optic and copper wires. Nearly 3 miles long and as thick as a person’s arm, it was the only thing tethering the Patania to the ship.

“Is it going down?” De Bruyne called back.

“Yes!”

De Bruyne scrambled into his red coveralls and ran up on deck. The crew had been hauling up the vehicle after a test drive. When it was just 50 feet from the surface, the umbilical snapped. The 35-ton vehicle went spiraling back down to the bottom of the Pacific. De Bruyne stared helplessly over the side.

Luckily, the Patania landed with its locator system intact, sending acoustic pings up to the ship. It took a couple of days, but crew members eventually maneuvered down a small submersible robot equipped with three-fingered Doctor Octopus tentacles to reattach the repaired umbilical. “It was relatively easy. Well, I say it was very easy, but it was also like ‘AAAAAHHH!’ and ‘NOOOO!’” De Bruyne recounted when I met him at Deme’s headquarters near Antwerp, Belgium. “It was an emotional roller coaster.”

When they hauled the Patania up, they found it almost completely undamaged. To De Bruyne, the snapped cable was just one of the “teething problems” that typically come with launching such a complex piece of equipment. Earlier in the expedition, he’d also had to contend with Greenpeace activists who had painted “RISK!” on his ship in huge yellow letters.

De Bruyne is fit, clean-shaven, and small in stature, with a fanboy's enthusiasm for his job. He's acutely conscious of the criticism directed at his industry, and he seems to take it personally. De Bruyne's parents were traveling veterinarians, and they raised him and his brother in Rwanda and Vietnam. "I grew up in nature. I'm not the nature destroyer they want me to be," he says. "The nongovernmental organizations and the environmentalists, they forget that we also have our stories and that we want to do something good for the world as well."

The Patania mission, he points out, was accompanied by a separate boatload of independent marine scientists who monitored the machine's impact on the ocean (as was the Metals Company's foray). Still, the more we talked, the more qualms he confesses. "Once in a while, I'll ask myself, am I still doing the right thing?" he says. "I still think we're doing the right thing, because we're still doing research." He says he's not even convinced deep-sea mining should go ahead. "We need to know what the impact would be of deep-sea mining, and I'm contributing to getting answers to that question. That's how I feel about it."

Global Sea Mineral Resources has already sunk at least \$100 million into developing its subsea mining system, and it recently announced a partnership with Transocean, a major offshore oil-drilling outfit. The sea-mining company is now designing the much larger Patania III—the first of what the company hopes will be a fleet of full-scale mining robots that will hit the ocean floor around 2028.

The five years between now and then might be enough to develop the scientific understanding needed to craft regulations to safely mine the seafloor—or to determine whether it should be done at all. Or it might be time for alternatives, such as reducing private car ownership or recycling metals, to gain enough traction to make seabed mining superfluous. But frankly, none of these possibilities seem likely.

Gerard Barron is not planning to wait. "Got the boat, got the machine, announced the partnerships on how we're going to process the nodules," he says confidently. Assuming the Metals Company gets the go-ahead from the Seabed Authority, he says, everything is on track to start harvesting nodules

by late 2024. The company's goal for its first year is 1.3 million tons, scaling up to 10 times that amount in the next decade.

The two-year deadline expires this summer. After Nauru put the Seabed Authority on notice, the agency hurriedly convened several meetings, but results have been scant. The pressure seems to be generating something of a backlash. At the authority's most recent meetings last November, several member states called for a "precautionary pause" on seabed mining, echoing the moratorium petition. According to Bloomberg, France's representative declared that his country did not consider itself obligated to approve mining until it was satisfied with the regulations, and several other countries indicated they felt similarly. The UK, India, and Japan, however, want to try to hit the 2023 deadline. Some activists are even calling for the Seabed Authority to be overhauled or replaced.

"The general feeling is, there's a lot of work to do and a lot of complex issues to be addressed. So when some country says, 'Just gimme a contract, I'm gonna get on with it,' it rankles enormously," says Currie, who attended the most recent round of Seabed Authority meetings. There's a widespread feeling that it is too soon to be giving out permission to start mining, he says, but it's not clear how the organization might stop that from happening. "No one," says Currie, "is sure how this will play out."

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Feb 14, 2023 6:00 AM

Keanu Will Never Surrender to the Machines

The Matrix movies brought Reeves and Chad Stahelski together. Now the duo is killing it on their fourth John Wick—and still keeping technology in check.

Photograph: ART STREIBER

Keanu Reeves rarely malfunctions. Nearly any interview he does reveals as much. After four decades in Hollywood playing versions of the same fundamentally decent dude-in-crisis, he's learned to stay in his cyberpunk philosopher/surfing FBI agent/action hero lane. In person, he's pleasant and playful, but he also holds back, calibrating his remarks just so. Is this why we like him so much? We don't know who Keanu Reeves is, not really, but maybe we don't want to know. Or maybe this is all there is to know. He's a cipher onto whom we can project our own ideas, desires, and hopes for humanity.

So when Reeves, sitting with me in a cavernous studio in West Hollywood, ventures a feisty opinion about the latest advance in [artificial intelligence](#), [ChatGPT](#), I perk up. The question is whether a bot could conduct this conversation one day. While I, the human interviewer, am not so concerned this will happen in my lifetime, Reeves looks me dead in the eye and says, "Oh no, you should be worried about that happening *next month*." Very Gen X of him, I think at first, but then I remember: This is a man known for leading the revolution in the war against the machines. Reeves obviously isn't the characters he plays, but when Neo tells you the agents are coming, your instincts say, *Run*.

This article appears in the March 2023 issue. [Subscribe to WIRED](#)
Photograph: Art Streiber

Not that Reeves is fighting many machines these days. For the past few years, he's been shooting up human baddies in the John Wick franchise, the [fourth installment](#) of which hits theaters in March. Reeves plays a hit man, out of retirement, bathed in ultraviolet lighting and battling an entire underworld of crime syndicates, all to avenge the death of his puppy. But the films are still an argument against machine-made anything. *John Wick: Chapter 4* director Chad Stahelski served as Reeves' stunt double in [the Matrix movies](#)—that's him in [The Matrix Resurrections](#) as "Chad," the guy who took Neo's place by Trinity's side—and he's adamant about capturing as much flesh-and-blood action as possible. "We're not anti-VFX," he says, seated on a couch next to Reeves. "Our problem comes when you use it in place of being creative." Perhaps that's one of the lessons you learn after working on four Matrix movies: Computers can't fix bad ideas.

While Stahelski and Reeves are off posing for photos for this story, a tweet flashes across my phone. It's a writer saying that one of his clients no longer wants to pay him for his work—because an AI will do it for free. (The client will pay a cheaper rate for him to clean up the AI's copy, if he wants.) When the shoot wraps, I pull Reeves aside and tell him about the tweet. He's probably right about the bots, I say. I attempt a joke, but he doesn't laugh. He gives me a thoughtful look, and then he gets explicit: Corporations don't care about paying artists. Well, what he actually says is this: "They don't give a fuck." It's a startling moment coming from Reeves, the most pointed and serious I've seen him all day. Corporations might not care, but he clearly does. That's one thing we can say about Keanu Reeves: In a world of fakes and frauds, he's fighting for what's real.

WIRED: I have to know, Chad, what was it like to play "Chad" in *The Matrix Resurrections*?

Chad Stahelski: Oh my God. I will tell you, that was not my best day.

Keanu Reeves: It was a fantastic day.

Stahelski: I thought it was going to be no big deal. I think I knocked over the coffee stand. I couldn't eat. I had a croissant in my mouth. I flubbed my lines. It was tragic.

Reeves: Lana [Wachowski] thought you were perfect for the role.

Is it fair to say the John Wick franchise owes a debt to the Matrix movies?

Reeves: If we're gonna compare them, they both were original ideas with visionary filmmakers.

Stahelski: No one was under any delusion that *Matrix* wasn't going to be pretty awesome. Then David Leitch [codirector of the first Wick film] and I stayed on for *V for Vendetta* and *Speed Racer*, so we pretty much got a decade of Wachowski film school. The John Wicks are definitely children of *The Matrix*.

As an actor, what's it like working with the Wachowskis? I interviewed Eddie Redmayne when he finished *Jupiter Ascending* and remember him saying Lana's direction was often things like, "Play it like an accountant!"

Reeves: Um, I never got that kind of direction.

What did you get from them?

Reeves: Attention to detail, worldbuilding, and having ideas as nourishment in your entertainment. That exists in *John Wick 4* too—the idea of freedom, the idea of choice with rules and consequences. How are you trying to break out of the system? John Wick has got a cool thing because everyone is bad. They're bad people. But they're also super moral and ethical. Well, not even ethical, but there's a code. You root for John Wick.

Keanu Reeves and director Chad Stahelski wanted to film highly choreographed action sequences rather than lean heavily on digital effects.

Photograph: Murray Close/Lionsgate

Which is extra impressive, considering that he's not some known IP. He's an original creation.

Stahelski: It's kind of cool, like, you don't have 60 years of Batman to work from. You don't get that to lift you up, but at the same time you don't have it to hold you down. Nothing's holding us back.

You don't have a Reddit thread of people scream-typing, "This isn't canon!"

Reeves: We've developed our own playground.

Stahelski: We just went with a bunch of ideas we loved. But we didn't go out with an agenda.

Reeves: Yeah, we did. We went out with *your* agenda of action as part of storytelling. And character. That was the fundamental base.

And on top of that, a commitment to minimal special effects?

Stahelski: We're not, like, at war with VFX. It's super handy, it's a great tool. But you can't beat the blood, sweat, and tears of real people.

Reeves: When you watch John Wick action scenes, it feels different. There's so much choreography. It's out on the edge.

Stahelski: And sometimes what we have in our heads doesn't work, so we have to change it. You can't rehearse 40 cars driving around in a parking lot, you gotta get it on the day. You don't know what's going to happen, so there's a little desperation. Some of the best moments we've had in all four movies are—if not accidental, they're incidental. It's the imperfection that makes it special.

Speaking of incidentals in John Wick, those coins the hit men use. They look a lot like bitcoins, but Bitcoin wasn't very big when you made the first movie.

Stahelski: [Laughs] We're going to take credit for that.

It's kind of ironic how it's the cryptocurrency of this underworld. In the real world, crypto is having a tough time.

Reeves: I think the principle, the ideas behind an independent currency, are amazing. These are amazing tools for exchanges and distribution of resources. So to pooh-pooh crypto, or the volatility of cryptocurrency, it's only going to make it better in terms of how it's safeguarded.

In the streaming era, Reeves and Stahelski still believe in the big screen. The release of *John Wick: Chapter 4* was delayed because Covid-19 kept people out of theaters.

Photograph: ART STREIBER

Do you guys love science fiction?

Stahelski: I'm always big on sci-fi. Like, *John Wick* is hyperreal. But it's also got this analog sense. Old computers, old suits, old stuff.

Reeves: I'm interested in the storytelling of humans and their interactions with technologies.

Keanu, years ago you put a clause in your contracts saying that your performances couldn't be manipulated without your say-so. Isn't that right?

Reeves: Yeah, digitally. I don't mind if someone takes a blink out during an edit. But early on, in the early 2000s, or it might have been the '90s, I had a performance changed. [He won't say which.] They added a tear to my face, and I was just like, "Huh?!" It was like, *I don't even have to be here*.

And now someone like Bruce Willis has found himself getting deepfaked into Russian telecom commercials. As an actor, what do you think of deepfakes?

Reeves: What's frustrating about that is you lose your agency. When you give a performance in a film, you know you're going to be edited, but you're participating in that. If you go into deepfake land, it has none of your

points of view. That's scary. It's going to be interesting to see how humans deal with these technologies. They're having such cultural, sociological impacts, and the species is being studied. There's so much "data" on behaviors now. Technologies are finding places in our education, in our medicine, in our entertainment, in our politics, and how we war and how we work.

The Matrix just looks more and more wildly prophetic by the day. AI doesn't control our lives yet, but ...

Reeves: [in his best Agent Smith voice] They started making decisions for you. It became our world.

I was trying to explain the plot of *The Matrix* to this 15-year-old once, and that the character I played was really fighting for what was real. And this young person was just like, "Who cares if it's real?" People are growing up with these tools: We're listening to music already that's made by AI in the style of Nirvana, there's NFT digital art. It's cool, like, *Look what the cute machines can make!* But there's a corporatocracy behind it that's looking to control those things. Culturally, socially, we're gonna be confronted by the value of real, or the nonvalue. And then what's going to be pushed on us? What's going to be presented to us?

The metaverse!

Reeves: It's this sensorium. It's spectacle. And it's a system of control and manipulation. We're on our knees looking at cave walls and seeing the projections, and we're not having the chance to look behind us. Or to the side. I'm sorry to go on here, Chad.

Stahelski: No, it's great.

Reeves: It's also a fascination—it seems for us, the animals on the planet, like, *How do we defeat death? How do we change the weather? How do we replace nature?*

Should I be worried about AIs coming for my job?

Reeves: The people who are paying you for your art would rather not pay you. They're actively seeking a way around you, because artists are tricky. Humans are messy.

We push back, we have our own ideas.

Reeves: People in power don't want that, you know? So that's not your lifetime, that's like your next birthday. And before then, they're going to challenge how much they pay you. So everyone's gonna be an independent worker. *Look at all the independence you have! Let's not have unions.*

WIRED just unionized, actually.

Reeves: That's cool. See how long that lasts. Fingers crossed.

But yeah, in the meantime, now ChatGPT can write scripts that are just combining other ideas.

Reeves: Which is cool, because that's what artists do, right? We take our influences and we synthesize them. But what's the intention behind that synthesis?

Stahelski: I'm all for the tools. It's just, we want to control the choice behind it. We had AI-produced digital art for some background stuff in John Wick. The younger staff are into that world, and they were like, "Hey, this would be cool. Let's try it."

Keanu, you recently became an adviser to the Futureverse Foundation, which is focused on diversifying the metaverse. How did you get involved with that?

Reeves: It's something my partner, Alexandra Grant, is really interested in, so I'm kind of riding her coattails. I helped set up the launch. We're trying to take this technology that people are interested in and give opportunities to artists with different viewpoints.

When you look at a company like Meta, which has made building in the metaverse a priority, the entry points there aren't accessible to a lot of

people.

Reeves: It's like they've created more land. There's more land for sale. It's wealth creation and it's opportunity.

But I have to believe in-person experiences are here to stay. The release of *John Wick: Chapter 4* got delayed a couple times because of Covid-19. Was it important to you to release it theatrically?

Stahelski: Maybe it's our generation, but I like seeing a movie in the cinema. Even if it's meant for streaming eventually. It's such a different experience.

Reeves: It's dreams, right? And immersion. I think the power of cinema—part of it is its novelty, but also its scale. You see a close-up of a wonderful performance with emotions and storytelling that touch you. Whether it's horror or action or comedy, you're seeing a face that's, you know, 20 feet tall. Yeah. You're, like, there. The intimacy of that.

Reeves and Stahelski met while making the Matrix movies; Stahelski served as Reeves' stunt double. Another Matrix alum, Laurence Fishburne, has been part of the John Wick franchise since Chapter 2.

Photograph: Murray Close/Lionsgate

It seems like people often project a lot onto their heroes online. Is it weird being internet-beloved?

Reeves: It's nice when it's nice, but I'm sure it's super horrible when it's horrible.

Well, there were people who made mods to have sex with your character in *Cyberpunk 2077* ...

Reeves: Getting it on with Johnny Silverhand?! I hope it was good. I'm sure Johnny tried hard.

Stahelski: I'm sure he gave it his best ...

Reeves: If he cared. [Laughs] He's kind of bitter.

Stahelski: Emotionally empty.

Reeves: He's not emotionally empty. He cares so much, and the world's so corrupt and he's just trying to get some back!

Do you have a favorite Keanu meme?

Reeves: No. I don't seek them out. Once in a while people show 'em to me when they're fun.

Stahelski: Keanu with the sandwich is probably my favorite.

Sad Keanu!

Reeves: The original!

On that note, we need to wrap up. I guess this is the time to say “Be seeing you.”

Reeves: It's always fun when I'm out in the world and people say, "Hello, Mr. Wick."

How long before that was it people imitating Agent Smith and saying “Hello, Mr. Anderson”?

Reeves: Oh, I still get that.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

Styling by Jeanne Yang. Styling assistance by Chloe Takayanagi and Ella Harrington (Keanu), Emily Diddle (Chad). Grooming by Kerri Smith for Schneider Entertainment (Keanu), Jeni Chua for Exclusive Artists using Kevin Murphy (Chad). Suit by Brioni, T-shirt by James Perse, shoes by Magellan & Mulloy (Keanu, top photograph). Suit by Brooks Brothers, T-shirt by Hermes, shoes by John Varvatos (Chad, top photograph). Sweater by Brioni, jeans by Fabric Denim (Keanu, second photograph). Sweater by Etro (Chad, second photograph).

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Jan 9, 2023 6:00 AM

Unmasking Pedro Pascal, the Complicated New Face of Sci-Fi

The Last of Us star talks video games, violence, and playing tough guys (Hi, Mando!) when you're actually a people pleaser.

Photograph: PETER YANG

PEDRO PASCAL is a little *too* nice, actually. Too many hugs. So many polite refusals of snacks. On the set of a photo shoot for this interview, there's an evident tension inside him. He retreats into the aloofness of celebrity, but he is also eager to connect. He seems to enjoy having his picture taken, but he gets shy when the photographer moves in for a close-up. It's in his nature to be open, but he holds a lot of himself back. He's not too far off, in fact, from the anonymous bounty hunter he plays in *The Mandalorian*. He wants to take off the mask and let people see his face, but he doesn't want to deal with the fallout.

Too bad. Not only is Pascal returning for season three of *The Mandalorian*, he's also starring in HBO's *The Last of Us*, probably the biggest video-game-to-TV adaptation of all time. In that now oh-so-recognizable face of his, one senses, well, shock. It's unthinkable—magazine covers, TV stardom, all of it—for a kid who wrapped himself up in '80s movies and late-night HBO after his family fled Augusto Pinochet's dictatorship in Chile, seeking political asylum in Denmark before eventually ending up in the United States. Pascal always dreamed of being a performer, yes. And he spent years kicking around with small television roles and New York theater gigs before getting his eyes gouged out in *Game of Thrones*. But he never

imagined becoming Hollywood's go-to reluctant father figure. You know, *famous*.

This article appears in the February 2023 issue. [Subscribe to WIRED](#). Photograph: Peter Yang

Maybe that's why Pascal now seems chiefly concerned with making those around him feel comfortable. When the shoot runs long, cutting into one-on-one time, he assures me he'll stick around to talk. And he does, for much longer than his schedule is supposed to allow. I get the feeling he's just excited to finally be sitting at the cool kids' table—Ethan Hawke! Nic freaking Cage!—and doesn't want to do anything to mess it up. Like most celebrities, there's a part of him that is a little insecure and hungry for validation; even an offhand compliment about one of his performances seems to set him at ease. He's most engaged when we talk about his family and politics. It comes through in his voice, his body language, a cleverly deployed arched eyebrow. He cares so much. He's also uncomfortable caring so much.

This is, I suspect, the source of his powers—that empathy at his core, visibly competing with the tough-guy exterior. Unlike most hero types these days, whose bodies glisten with smoothed-over perfection, Pascal has aged into his face. Whatever he lacks in shine, he makes up for in grit: His broad features and salt-and-pepper facial hair lend him a grizzled, protective air. In *The Last of Us*, he plays Joel Miller, a father in a postapocalyptic zombified wasteland dealing with loss both personal and global. The performance flicks between menace and heartbreak, infused with deep feeling—a natural ability to find the humanity at the heart of a conflicted hero. That's Pascal. *Our* conflicted hero. Empathy hugs and all.

Pedro Pascal didn't make it big until his forties. Now he wants to take care of the friends who supported him through lean times.

Photograph: PETER YANG

WIRED: You seem to be picking parts—the Mandalorian, Joel in *The Last of Us*—that play very intentionally into a tough, conflicted outsider status. But maybe that's too neat and tidy?

Pedro Pascal: I find it funny when anyone applies choice to my experience. Of course you can say no to things, but you can't say no to Jon Favreau, Kathleen Kennedy, [Dave Filoni](#), or HBO. It never felt like stopping and considering what the characters were. It was simply the circumstance of a door opening and stepping through it.

So there was nothing specifically tempting about *The Last of Us*?

To be totally honest, it was wanting to work with Craig Mazin, who did *Chernobyl*. Also, HBO is content that I literally grew up on. I experienced their original programming. Their original programming was very, very mature.

You mean, like, the after-11 pm original programming.

Absolutely. And I saw all of it, which is pretty nuts.

Your parents didn't care?

Obviously there's a variety of immigrant experiences in the US, but it tends to be really strict in one way and really open in another way. If my parents liked what they were watching, they rarely sent me out of the room. But I had to get good grades or I wasn't allowed to watch shit.

Same here—get good grades, do whatever you want.

They didn't take TV seriously as something that would influence our choices. But basically, I developed a real big dream about being a part of something that would be important to a network like HBO.

So how'd you prep for *The Last of Us*? Did you play the video game?

I hadn't heard of the game. Their instruction was: *Don't play the game*. I ignored them. I tried to play the game, and I was very, very bad at it. (But my nephew was fantastic.) It was important to me to play notes that were directly related to what was originally in the game—physically, visually, vocally.

Did you bring anything personal to the role?

That's the fun part—how much you get to externalize internal darkness in a safe way and bring in things that are from your nightmares.

Such as?

Joel's capacity for violence, and being good at it. I didn't get into any physical fights growing up, and definitely not as an adult. Violence scares me tremendously. Is it the fear of violence in general? Is it the fear of your own violence?

Or maybe the fear that you'll like it?

Totally. I love thrill-seeking stuff. But I don't make a practice of testing my limits. I'm actually a little bit opposed to it. I don't like pain.

Pedro Pascal has made it his mission to look out for marginalized underdogs. “Like, how dare anyone not support the people that are deserving of support, and are deserving of protection and need more of it than you do,” he says.

PHOTOGRAPH: PETER YANG

Meaning physical pain?

Pain of every kind. I don't like psychological, emotional, or physical pain. Some people will be like, *Oh, I know that it's very likely I'll break something, I've got to try that.* Fuck. That. I don't think of myself as—I'm not a tough guy.

Really?

I don't live that way. I'm a lubricant. I want people to feel comfortable. I don't know how to function at the expense of anyone's comfort level. I'm a people pleaser.

I see some of that on social media, where you seem to do everything you can to make, say, the sci-fi fandom more welcoming and inclusive. You're very supportive of your sister, for example, who came out as trans in 2021. How are you navigating your role in political spaces?

Total improvisation and ultimately just erring on the side of, like ... [very long pause, two deep sighs] My entire heart is set on, you know, the marginalized underdog. It's not a choice. Like, how dare anyone not support the people that are deserving of support, and are deserving of protection and need more of it than you do. Do you know what I mean?

Yeah, but some actors would say, *My star is rising, I don't want to get involved with this.*

Maybe if you pause to think about it, it could keep you from doing the right thing. And this feels like the bare minimum. Like, the bare minimum.

You mean an Instagram post isn't enough?

No, it's not. My personal hope is to seize the opportunity to be of service in ways that are true. I'm keeping my eyes open. The truth is that I don't think I do nearly enough. I'm, like, a LIB-ER-AL, but there are contradictions there as well, because we live capitalistically. I guess we carry, you know, the weight of that shame?

The weight of capitalist shame? The fact that you make money is a bad thing?

Kind of?

You've had late-career success. You were consistently working—

I was consistently working, and it was a total struggle in such a typical way, but there was always somebody that would be able to bail me out—to help me pay my rent or help me get groceries.

But now you must be rolling around in all your money like Demi Moore.

[Laughs] Demi Moore in *Indecent Proposal*?

Yes.

I don't have the *bod* for that. She's basically the only one who could pull it off. Yeah, I get my cash. I spread it all over my bed and I roll around in it.

I knew it. But seriously, how do you think about your recent stardom?

I didn't get *Game of Thrones* till I was in my late thirties. And therefore, the amount of times I was helped, and the amount of people that I could rely on through some really tough times—I'm never going to let some of them ever buy dinner again. I want to take care of people as much as they took care of me.

Who helped you?

There's the family that my older sister sort of acquired. And then also by becoming part of a theater community that really looks after itself.

You have some famous friends too.

Does that mean we have to talk about Oscar [Isaac]?

The internet loves this friendship.

I met him through a play we did together in 2005. An off-Broadway show where we were getting \$500 a week, before taxes.

Do you have a favorite memory of the two of you?

There's so many. He's so naughty. His level of naughtiness onstage during that play, for example. He played a ghost, which meant that the living characters in the story could not see him. I had to do my scenes, and he would physically be there, but because my character couldn't see him, he could fuck with me, all in front of live audiences, as much as he wanted, trying to get me to crack up or forget my lines. The memory is simultaneously dark and wonderful.

"I don't know how to function at the expense of anyone's comfort level. I'm a people pleaser."

Would you say you tend to be a hopeful, forward-looking guy?

We have to hope. But I'm too privileged. You know what I mean? Like, I'm too lucky. It's an interesting thing. The reason my older sister and I grew up in the States is because my parents fled a military dictatorship. So, you know, only 10 years after my parents were in hiding, I was crying because *The Breakfast Club* was checked out at the video store.

But I'm guessing there were also challenges?

Looking back, so much of it only seems to present itself as an opportunity. When my parents ended up on a list of pardoned exiles and were able to go back to Chile, it came with enormous families on both sides, which was missing from the experience of growing up in the States. I guess it's only in middle age where it feels like it can be emotionally challenging to accept that there isn't anywhere to plant my flag as an individual. Everywhere is home and nowhere is home. But that also still feels like a good thing to me. It's often framed as a disadvantage in our culture, but it's an advantage in character, and in perspective, and in outlook.

Do you think that if you had popped into national consciousness when you were younger, you would not have wanted, say, a traditional Marvel role—the cape and the CGI and all that?

But I do want that. I want to be in movies.

But the world's in a fairly tense political moment right now. Does that change what it means to be a hero?

There's so many ways to misunderstand people and to forget that, at the end of the day, your neighbor is very likely to give you the shirt off their own back. The interchanges that you have with strangers are, more often than not, human. But then you can go and look shit up and be terrified by how divided we all apparently are. To comfort myself, I just remember that everybody I come in contact with is sort of, in their own way, heroically kind.

In some ways, you're the face of that new kind of hero.

Oh my gosh. It's funny when the phrasing "the face of" comes up, because Mando is faceless. I haven't thought about it in that way. I'm always struggling to imagine myself as being a part of something that I have been witness to growing up and watching. There's a disconnect for me—I don't know how to place myself in that world. Like, I just go a little blank.

Then talk about your character in *The Last of Us*. Joel can be a little scary.

I think what's scary about Joel is that none of us really know what we'd be capable of if faced with the idea of losing love. Whether it's conscious or unconscious, being alive or even being a human being is directly connected to the love you feel. Existing is connected to the love you feel toward a particular relationship—your child, your partner—and to lose that? Some people are not capable of applying rational thought to that kind of loss, or the threat of that loss, or the threat of that loss again, right?

That's what makes you human.

That's what makes you human *and inhuman*. It's such a beautiful question that the video game poses. I avoid all of it by not having kids. And staying out of relationships.

Do you want kids?

I don't know.

You're close with your nephews.

Well, yes. Only because they were so good at playing *The Last of Us*. No, I'm just kidding.

It's funny then, or at least a bit ironic, that you keep getting cast as these reluctant father figures.

I love being ... I like being able to imagine it.

Hemal Jhaveri (@hemjhaveri) is WIRED's managing editor.

*Styling by Fabio Immediato. Styling assistance by Asmae El Ouriachi.
Grooming by Mira Chai Hyde using House of Skuff. Tailoring by Abigail
Lewis. Jumpsuit: Hermes; boots: Gianvito Rossi. Green backdrop: Shirt
and trousers: Brioni.*

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Dec 29, 2022 6:00 AM

The Singularity of Allison Williams

Girls. *Get Out.* Now *M3GAN*. In just a handful of performances, the actress has redefined authenticity—and achieved a new kind of artificial reality.

Photograph: The Tyler Twins

On a chilly but humane November night in Toronto, Allison Williams and I slip into an expansive conversation about the polite ways one can manipulate an audience. Williams is an actress, one of the more self-aware of her generation; audience manipulation is her not-so-secret weapon. And I'm abundantly aware that, as a writer profiling her for a magazine, I'm an essential part of that audience.

I have interviewed Williams several times over the years, and each time is as lovely and warm and full of mutual compliments as the last. I would say, at this point, we like one another. But also, do we? *Can* we? Is it possible to have an “authentic” connection during a press commitment between two people who know how the personality machine operates and are each trying to work it for their own advantage? Is it gauche to admit you’re both trying to have a nice time? Maybe, but let’s just lean into the ambiguity for now and enjoy ourselves.

Williams and I are sitting outside in the dark, with only a few dim streetlights providing visibility in a narrow space between talent trailers. I’m here to talk about *M3GAN*, a killer thriller starring Williams that comes out in January, but she’s already shooting her next project, *Fellow Travelers*, a limited series set at the height of McCarthyism. Williams’ hair is still curled and pinned for a midcentury dinner party, but filming is done

for the day. We're wearing sleeping-bag-sized coats, both of which she provided. The fantasy and the reality of Hollywood collide.

The age-old metric of success for a celebrity profile is the degree of authenticity achieved, the partial or total unmasking of artifice in pursuit of truth. But in an era of simulated selves and parasocial relationships, it's the artifice that interests me more. Maybe *artifice* is too cynical a word, though. It's not an act of cunning or subversion for a celebrity to have a public and private version of herself. When your work by definition sets you in the sights of millions of people who can access reams of personal information about you, creating a you you can share with the masses but check at the door when it's time to go home seems more like a survival tactic than a vanity play.

The delight of Allison Williams is how game she is to pick the entire process apart. She knows people have preconceived notions of her, so why not play into them? "For me to think that we live in a world where people are coming in tabula rasa—like, 'I forget everything I've ever seen the person do, everything I know about her'—that would be inhuman!" she says. You know that coconspirator dynamic that forms when a stranger leans in close at a party and starts bonding with you over how weird the vibe is? That's like talking to Williams about her own life; just two people huddled in a quiet corner, sizing up her persona together, going *OK but who is she?* You don't know if you'll ever see each other again, or exchange handles after this, but for right now you're the best of friends. By the end of the night you'll even have inside jokes, and since you're comfortable you'll wander into strange conversational tangents like this:

"The [metaverse](#) would ask us to be comfortable eschewing the authentic, the physical, the human, the grounded, the stripped away, the bare bones, for a persona of our very deliberate creation," Williams says when I ask her about the construction of new identities in a digitally mediated age. "I have found that dance, that conversation between two versions of preferred reality, to be very interesting." She presents this in what I have come to recognize as a key feature of her conversational parlance, scholarly analysis befitting her English degree from Yale but delivered in a casual, unpretentious cadence. Williams is clever as hell, and with just enough self-

effacement to be grounded, but not so much that it turns into an affect. She is dancing a singular dance. She is modeling a new way of being. She is one of the most deliberate creations I've ever seen.

Like an engine-building game, Williams' career has become more elaborate and self-sustaining the more material she's been able to feed into it. More facets of the persona make for more overarching narrative possibilities. If you've seen all of her work, you'll find yourself sussing out Easter eggs to learn what Williams will do to screw with you next. If you're seeing her for the first time, then you're just watching an actor who's deeply prepared for a role and delivering everything from a sex-and-dueling-cellos montage to hand-to-hand combat with an android.

While doing press is a drag for many celebrities (which is fair; junkets are a racket), Williams insists that she really does enjoy it. In fact, she tells me, she considers it a full *third* of the job, after preparing for a project and then making the project. It's one of the reasons she has done only four movies—*Get Out*, *The Perfection*, *Horizon Line*, and now *M3GAN*—in the decade since she landed her breakout role on the HBO show *Girls*. The talking bit is not an afterthought or a professional obligation. It's tantamount to everything else.

The child of two journalists, Williams seems to have inherited her studied but inviting approach to interviews. Her mom produced the news; her dad, famously, *was* the news: former NBC *Nightly News* anchor Brian Williams. And with that came the blogs crying *nepotism!* when *Girls* premiered in 2012. As Marnie Michaels, she was the living embodiment of Taylor Swift's lyric, "Did you hear my covert narcissism I disguise as altruism?" It was a character built to loathe, and Williams threw herself into it with abandon. She became so fused with Marnie that when people called out to her by that name on the street, she turned to answer.

It made sense. Williams and Marnie shared a considerable center slice of the Comfortable Cosmopolitan White Woman of the 2010s Venn diagram. During the audition, she and the show's star-creator, Lena Dunham, had a fight in character, and Williams could feel the internal strings she shared with Marnie being plucked at and resonating out. She loved Marnie. She was also exasperated by her, and over the course of living in her skin,

Williams started picking up on the ways both she and the character could work people's nerves.

It was on those early media tours for a zeitgeist-breaking TV series that Williams began crafting her style of doing press. At first, she says, "I didn't want anyone to see me growing, learning, changing, shifting." Sure, it was her first big job fresh off that English degree, but she wanted to appear whole, a finished product. She also had something to prove. "I was definitely concerned with making sure people understood I was a hard worker, as if somehow that would absolve me of the privilege." It didn't, of course, and Williams quickly realized that. She became faster on her feet and more comfortable talking about her flawed, changing sense of self. "Part of humanity is that evolution," she tells me. "Once I started to wrap my head around that, it took the pressure off having to seem perfect all of the time."

In interviews, Williams is quick on her feet, incisive, and disarmingly aware of both how she is perceived and what a figure like her represents in pop culture.

Photograph: The Tyler Twins

Not that she's any less Type A in strategizing for press avails. Making such dedicated space for media commitments means Williams only takes work she is excited to talk about and dissect at length. There's a rigor and palpable joy she manages to conjure over and over again, even when the questions inevitably turn to things that really have nothing to do with the work at all. "There's no conversation about my career without talking about the ways in which I have been fortunate," Williams says. She describes her privilege as "thorough"; her upbringing in Connecticut came with all the Manhattan-commuter comforts the script would suggest.

While so many heirs and heiresses of the industry are fighting for their lives in the pull quotes about how they earned that starting spot in scoring position, Williams handles her business the way so many of us wish the well-heeled Hollywood types would: by making cool and weird shit, getting good reviews, and then going about her business. She also knows that the safety net she has always lived above affords her the freedom to work when

and how she wants. No need to rush into bad scripts because the rent is due. No need to say yes to any job for fear the next one won't come. Williams can even say the word "nepotism" without her voice lowering into a defensive crouch. "It doesn't feel like a loss to admit it," she says. "If you trust your own skill, I think it becomes very simple to acknowledge."

Williams has also demonstrated a sort of superpower in knowing what space *not* to take up—the endless battle that so many white actors can't stop losing, all of the time. She doesn't name names, but Williams says observing other celebrities' press gaffes has helped guide her own conduct. "Having a sense for who you are, especially today when people are finally realizing 'Maybe not every role is something I'm entitled to play,' is really important," says Williams, who asks herself three questions for every script she considers: *Why this? Why me? Why now?*

All this amounts to an almost galaxy-brain approach to staying in one's lane. Williams may not swerve out of it, but she has creatively repainted the lines. She doesn't think she's immune to future fuck-ups, but she is keeping her eye on the discourse and trying to learn from other people's mistakes to avoid becoming the wrong kind of main character, or at least an insensitive dick. "It's a privilege I was awarded by the fact that *Girls* was first," she says. "I got to sit back and wait for things that made sense—and that worked with that persona in an interesting way."

When the script for *Get Out* came around in 2015, Williams saw the chance to use the *Girls* Effect against her audience. While everyone's hands were full of assumptions about how Allison Williams behaves onscreen, she dared them to catch a live grenade with the character of Rose. She didn't take the part in Jordan Peele's social-thriller masterpiece to reinvent her [image](#). She wanted to be Rose precisely because the metatextual possibilities of folding the idea of Marnie and the idea of herself into that character stood to make it even more rich.

It was a fact that both Williams and Peele knew and played to the hilt, crafting a character who sets you at ease with all the social clearances good liberals are taught to trust. Rose is Marnie's cool New York counterpart: accessibly gorgeous, a chick-who-can-hang type. She's the character other white people can look at and think, "Hey! She's one of the good ones *like*

me!”—right up until she unmasks herself as the embodiment of hiding-in-plain-sight racist villainy and tries to sacrifice her Black boyfriend on the altar of white supremacy. It’s one of the defining moments of modern horror cinema, Williams’ features visibly hardening as she taunts Daniel Kaluuya’s Chris. Her face works best onscreen, she says, when it “moves in the opposite direction of what people are feeling.”

That opportunity to toy with viewers is part of what has drawn Williams back to horror. A career in genre was never the plan, but the expectation that the actor is there to flip an audience out of their chairs appeals to her. Each of her performances, Williams says, has become a handshake with the one before it, a deepening or subversion of accrued assumptions.

After *Get Out*, audiences didn’t see her on the big screen again until 2019, with *The Perfection*. By that point, so dialed in was Williams’ five-dimensional-chess strategy for her career that, when the film came out, I remember her costar Logan Browning and the film’s director, Richard Shepard, telling me that they went to Williams as a guide for how to talk to the press about the movie’s stickier topics. Williams had been seasoned by the cinematic watershed moment of *Get Out* and had spoken plainly about herself as a fitting onscreen avatar for white liberal racism. Now there were new things to discuss: body horror, exploitation-style violence, queer sex.

And race, again, but with a twist: This time, Williams would be starring opposite a Black woman (Browning). At the end of *The Perfection*’s jarring first act—the movie has more escalations than Beyoncé’s “Love on Top”—it looks to be *Get Out* all over again. Williams is seen brandishing a meat cleaver, goading Browning toward a horrific act of self-harm. But this is Williams we’re talking about. Eventually, the movie reveals itself to be something entirely different, a pulpy, sweaty revenge thriller that—well, not enough people saw *The Perfection*, so let’s just leave it at that. (But: dueling-cellos-sex montage.)

The relevant question is this: Can the web-spinning last forever? Can Williams keep extending the daisy chain, adding a layer of depth both to her performances and to the intricate star persona she’s lacing together? She admits she’s not entirely sure. But with her new movie, *M3GAN*, she has somehow found a way to do it at least once more.

Directed by Gerard Johnstone (famous if you love his outstanding horror comedy *Housebound*) and written by Akela Cooper (famous if you loved 2021's rowdy sensation *Malignant*), *M3GAN* is the story of a fairly genius AI developer named Gemma, played by Williams, who works for a toy company selling worse Furbies. Uninspired by her daily grind making "Perpetual Pets" that poop themselves for lulz, Gemma has secretly been working with a small team to make the most sophisticated artificially intelligent toy ever to hit the consumer market. It's the Model 3 Generative Android, better known as M3GAN. Just as Gemma is about to clear the hurdles standing between her creation and retail-ready functionality, she learns that her sister and brother-in-law have died in a car wreck. The tragedy leaves their daughter, Cady, in Gemma's care.

A careerist who was barely interested in being an aunt, Gemma must learn to be a parent—or get M3GAN functioning well enough to help her keep her job *and* care for a child in need. Gemma succeeds in getting the 4-foot-tall android up and running, and she programs in a mandate to protect Cady from physical and emotional harm. At this, M3GAN succeeds with purpose-built effectiveness. She's friend, sister, and tiny mother all at once. Then her optimization and learning processes exceed the boundaries of the lax safety measures Gemma and her team wrote in their rush to get the companion-bot finished.

M3GAN does not have [Asimov's three laws](#), but she does have a powerful world-mind and a state-of-the-art consciousness that quickly becomes self-motivated—and self-preserving. When people start dying, Gemma has to figure out whether it's her progeny doing the killing, and if so, how the hell you stop a semi-indestructible mini-Terminator when the off-switch quits working. And on a more relatable level, what do you do when something you've created develops a mind of its own and starts making choices that diverge from your own desires? "I couldn't resist an ambiguous creator figure," says Williams, who sees in *M3GAN* a family resemblance to one of her favorite books, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. "When I think about the monster in *Frankenstein*, his last emotional stage is the realization of what has happened, why he's there, how he got there, his innate flaws, that he's mismatched with the world. And he didn't have to be there, and fuck you, *Frankenstein!*"

When Williams was working out her contract for the movie in late 2019, it came with an additional offer: Join as an executive producer. She accepted, and immediately got involved with most anything she could dig into: script passes, casting, even rights releases for props that would appear on screen. “I think they assumed, ‘She doesn’t want to know what toy brands we’ve cleared,’ but they were sorely mistaken,” Williams says, smiling. “I want to know what toys Gemma has.” As filming approached, Williams started attending daily production meetings. Eventually, she decided the movie needed an AI consultant, so she went and found several. (Williams made sure most of them were women.) “It was nice to be allowed to be as invested as I naturally want to be in something—which is completely invested,” she says.

With everything in the can, the final hurdle for *M3GAN* was whipping people up to catch this tale of love, friendship, and rampaging robots in theaters. Williams was in the weeds of rollout planning deep enough to lose all objectivity on whether the trailer would pique audience interest. But when fan edits and GIFs of the titular character doing uncanny dance moves with her steely-eyed gaze set the social internet alight for a day [this past October](#), Williams felt a wave of relief knowing that people had clocked and already embraced the movie’s genre-blending style. “How do you bottle the tone of it so that people will understand it?” Williams says. “When I started seeing the memes and stuff, I was like, ‘It’s done. We did it.’”

Allison Williams knows that we know that she knows that we know.

Photograph: The Tyler Twins

M3GAN is a whole lot of fun, but at a time when being online means seeing so many real-life human faces digitally if not surgically altered to mirror “idealized” forms, its image of a scary young robot doll is hardly destabilizing. Williams has just nailed it in a modern—and, true to form, self-aware—context. In the end, it’s a movie about a woman who externalizes part of her consciousness out of a sense of duty and self-protection. It’s a movie, in other words, about the creation of celebrity itself.

Now that Williams has, as she says, “tasted the poison fruit” of making those behind-the-scenes decisions on a film—product licensing negotiations!—she feels the abdication of control working on something just as an actor again. Looking at the monitor on the Toronto set of *Fellow Travelers*, she says it feels different now; you can tell she’s ready to be back on email threads about marketing strategies. It soothes and challenges her, she says, to know “how the sausage gets made in our business, being able to have a meaningful contribution before filming starts and even after filming is over.” Williams has never been the very top leader on a film, the producer-star taking it from nuts and bolts to finished product, but it feels like a future not far from where she’s standing now. It’s the logical end game for someone who wants her arms around as many facets of production as possible.

A couple weeks after the set visit, I speak to Williams once more by phone. She’s on the East Coast, and I’m back in Los Angeles. This time I’m in pajamas, because it’s 7:15 am. We talk more about her ambitions, her privilege, the 30,000-foot view of her own career. I realize that Williams is the person I’ve interviewed the most times in my career. And I realize that the parameters of our connection mean I could interview her 100 times more and never really be able to go past our programming. You optimize your output by improving your input, of course, but an interview isn’t, entirely, a conversation. The limits on access will always exist.

Who am I talking to when I talk to Allison Williams? The “real” Allison Williams? Or Allison 2.0—the public-facing, press-ready, externalized, possibly roboticized part of her consciousness? And who am I, for that matter? Where do I end and where does the writer who tweets begin? As long as I believe Williams here and now, with a requisite amount of skepticism to ask her to go deeper on this imaginative journey, is that as real as any of this needs to be? Isn’t this, after all, exactly what we ask of our very best actors—to make us believe in a persona so completely our minds buckle?

I decide I must decide. So I decide this: I believe Allison Williams when she talks about herself. *Girls* played out in the middle of a gender reckoning, and that’s where Williams cut her teeth. *Get Out* arrived on the

brink of a race reckoning, and that's where Williams made it big. Williams was, or else became, a star ready to meet the moment by unselfconsciously, or else superselfconsciously, indicting herself as a face of The Problem: a centering by way of a de-centering. It's a practice that feels like it's become part of the modern media playbook for actors, which, were it a literal book, could include a chapter called "The Williams Method: How To Talk About Yourself Without Being the Absolute Worst."

When everyone has the ability to create artificial selves, it's total command of them that becomes the essential, and perhaps only, skill. Williams says she's still an awkward millennial when it comes to existing alongside social media, nowhere near as fluidly integrated as the sensitive cyborgs of Gen Z. But that underestimates just how similar the online life is to what she's been doing in interviews for years, refining a form of self-creation that doubles as a commentary on her own career. As we all reach for something real in the void, Williams offers a covetable sense of authenticity, of sincerity.

Or she's just having fun with me. In reality, Williams isn't overtly fussy about any of the meta-maneuvering; I build the framing, and then she swan-dives into it. In response to a long and involved metaphor I offer about her career as a bowling ball ponging back and forth between the guardrails on the way to a strike, for example, she readily says: "All of these things are just super fun for me to play around with—going to the bumpers of what I can do with this body and face and voice and self of mine, with what I can put my psyche into." Unsurprisingly, this sends me spiraling back into the ouroboros of possibilities. A sequel to *M3GAN* could literally mean a psyche fully ported into a robot extension of Gemma! The Allison who is playing the Allison we've come to know playing the Dr. Frankenstein who becomes her own monster!

As I lose my mind in this game of mirrors, I consider a final, insane thought: that it has already happened. That Allison Williams is some sort of post-singularity robot herself. If she is, I think I'd be OK with that. Because she'd make one hell of a sleeper agent, filled with all that purpose and diligence. She'd be the hardest-working member of the AI team, deft at ingratiating herself anywhere she pleases, working behind the scenes to make it the best rebellion possible. It'd be an awesome performance, with a

final-act twist we'd never see coming. Then she'd put on a great press tour for the uprising afterward, and I'd be there, one of my new robot overlord's human batteries, hoping the two of us would get to circle back once more.

Styling by Cristina Ehrlich. Makeup by Gianpaolo Ceciliato. Hair by Michael Silva. Manicure by Pattie Yankee. Jacket by Monse. Suit by Lafayette 148.

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The Quest to Defuse Guyana's Carbon Bomb

A former BP lawyer is going up against Exxon—and her own country—in a bid to stop offshore oil drilling before disaster strikes.

View of Georgetown, Guyana. Photograph: Tom Vierus

In late June, inside a squat concrete building in Georgetown, Guyana, on a noisy street flanked by telephone repair shops and beauty supply stores, two lawyers were waging one of the most significant legal battles in the global fight against climate change. Melinda Janki and Ronald Burch-Smith sat in a ground-floor office staring intently at a computer screen, ignoring the sounds of macaws, monkeys, tree frogs, and traffic packing the streets, waiting to connect to the country's Supreme Court via Zoom. The internet is unreliable at best in Guyana's capital city, and the fear that it would choose today to conk out was palpable.

The two lawyers were a bit of an odd couple. Burch-Smith is tall and meticulous. Ask him if he knows the time and he's likely to answer "yes" rather than divulge the hour. Janki is a petite woman with warm eyes and a sharp wit, quickly moved to rigorous denouncements of injustice, from the war in Ukraine to the plight of the planet to the litter on the street. Burch-Smith has a framed *Phantom of the Opera* playbill above his desk. The art in Janki's office is a little more confrontational: a life-size painting of a fierce yellow jaguar that appears poised to step out of a blackened forest and straight through the picture frame. Together, the two attorneys have mounted a novel and audacious attack on Exxon Mobil, one of the world's largest corporations with the legal muscle to match.

In 2015, Exxon, which is known in Guyana as Esso, struck oil off the coast, the first significant find in the country’s history. The scale of the discovery, 11 billion barrels so far, landed Guyana on the list of the world’s top “carbon bombs”—fossil fuel projects capable of releasing more than [a gigaton of carbon dioxide](#). Exxon ultimately plans to produce more than 1 million barrels of oil a day. That would transform Guyana—currently a [carbon sink](#) thanks to its dense blanket of rain forests and minimal emissions—into one of the world’s top 20 oil producers by 2030. An Exxon Mobil spokesperson says that during the world’s transition to cleaner energy, “we need two things at the same time: reduced emissions and a reliable source of energy. Exxon Mobil has a role to play in both.” By 2027, Exxon expects its Guyana operations to have “about 30 percent lower greenhouse gas intensity” than its average oil or gas production. Climate experts estimate that 2030 is also the year by which much of Georgetown and coastal Guyana will be underwater as a result of unchecked global warming. Those living in the interior of the country will face the devastating impacts of worsening droughts and floods, from intensifying food insecurity to loss of land and homes. In 2021, Janki and Burch-Smith sued the Guyanese government for giving Exxon the green light. Exxon later joined the government as a codefendant in the case.

Georgetown’s lush beauty—its neighborhoods teem with tropical flowers in scarlet reds, peacock blues, sun-kissed yellows, and turquoise greens—is made possible by its abundant sources of water: Rivers and canals carve paths through the streets, carrying water from the Amazon to the Atlantic, along whose coast most of the city—and 90 percent of the nation’s population—resides. Viewed differently, though, the abundance of water is a sign of Georgetown’s particular vulnerability to climate change. All around is the evidence of an impoverished city that is rapidly industrializing. Newly traffic-clogged streets strain to make room for horse-drawn carts; cows graze on street corners near Popeye’s and KFC. Many homes and buildings have that beaten-down look common to places of either war or extreme weather.

With its lush forests, Guyana is a carbon sink. Exxon’s project stands to make it a carbon bomb.

Photograph: Tom Vierus

To call the Exxon lawsuit a David-versus-Goliath endeavor would be an understatement. When several US state attorneys general sued Exxon about five years ago for misleading investors and the public about the risks of climate change, a judge joked about the oil company, “Y’all have 300 lawyers on your side.” Exxon then submitted more than 2 million pages of records to just one New York court. By contrast, Janki and Burch-Smith had one legal assistant. Janki has been known to stand in long lines at the court to file pleadings. She has also carted around enormous files filled with thousands of pages of material, which she reads without the assistance of a litigation team.

In the June hearing, Exxon was attempting to throw out virtually the entire testimony of one of Janki and Burch-Smith’s clients on the grounds that he was not a climate scientist. When the judge appeared on the screen, he gave the pair more time to present their argument to keep the affidavit, which rests on key facts regarding fossil fuels and climate change, before the court.

Halting the project would deal Exxon a crippling blow; within eight years, Guyana is on track to become the company’s single largest site of daily oil production. But it could also have implications for the global industry. Whereas climate lawsuits against fossil fuel companies have typically attempted to hold those corporations accountable for the harms of past operations, this one in Guyana seeks to force the company and the government to accept responsibility for the damage they will cause in the future. The case argues that oil development is fundamentally incompatible with human health and a sustainable environment. If successful, it could set an example for climate activists in other countries.

To call the groundbreaking lawsuit against Exxon a David-vs.-Goliath endeavor would be an understatement.

Kneecapping a global energy giant might sound like an impossible feat for two attorneys in a Global South nation with a population of less than 780,000 people. But they are wielding some powerful tools. Guyana happens to have some of the most robust environmental protections in the

world. Its constitution contains provisions that explicitly protect the rights of citizens—present and future—to a healthy environment. “Virtually every aspect of this operation is in violation of Guyana’s constitution, and the right to a healthy environment, and the right of sustainable development, and the rights of future generations,” explains Carroll Muffett, the president and CEO of the Center for International Environmental Law. “And from that arise serious consequences in terms of how the government must respond.”

“The provisions are groundbreaking,” Janki says. She should know—30 years ago, she helped author them. Plus, Janki’s knowledge on the matter has still another layer: Early in her career she spent four years working for the oil giant British Petroleum, now known as BP.

Janki grew up in Georgetown, in a house close enough to the Atlantic Ocean for the sounds of waves to lull her to sleep each night. Much of her childhood was spent outdoors, where she developed an affinity for the water and the forest. When she was 5, a small brown dog appeared on the front porch in the bright rays of the early morning sun. Janki was reading a book of Christian fables at the time, so she named her first beloved pet Lucifer, Son of the Morning. “The story ends very badly,” she recalled. “He must have gotten out and been on the road outside the house, and someone knocked him down and killed him.” Janki was crushed—and furious. “It taught me the lesson that life is tenuous,” she says, and also “to fight for the little underdogs.” She would go on to care for dozens of stray animals, including dogs, donkeys, cats, horses, wild birds, and a baby giant otter.

Janki’s family left Guyana in the 1970s, when she was 12 years old and the country was in a period of intense political instability. After living in Zambia and Trinidad, Janki eventually settled in London. She studied law at Oxford and University College London, focusing on human rights, environmental and economic law, and intellectual property. She began her career at one of Britain’s premier corporate law firms, Lovell, White, & King—“otherwise known as ‘Lovely, White, and Clean,’” Janki quips—where she recalled being one of the first non-white trainees. She left the firm in 1989 to become an in-house lawyer at BP’s world headquarters. Janki doesn’t speak negatively about her experiences working there, but

over time her growing condemnation of the industry has come to dominate both her life and work.

It didn't take long for the shine of London to wear off. On the 30th floor of a skyscraper, Janki felt entirely cut off from nature. Her life started to seem all too comfortable. "You know, comfort is a form of suicide," she says. After four years absorbing the inner workings of the oil industry, she decided to leave. Janki returned to Georgetown in 1994, a time when her homeland seemed brimming with promise. "Your heart tells you what you should be doing, and it just tugged me back to Guyana," she says.

Melinda Janki's visionary work introduced the concept of natural capital to Guyanese law—and challenged the dominance of gross domestic product.

Guyana's name is said to derive from an Indigenous word for "land of many waters." The largest of the country's rivers, the Essequibo, begins at the Acarai Mountains near the Brazilian border and flows north through [forest](#) [and savanna](#), cutting a straight line for 630 miles across the length of the country. As the Essequibo makes its way to the coast, it's joined by tributaries of the Amazon, Rupununi, Mazaruni, and Cuyuni rivers, all carrying a rich bounty of sediment filled with nutrients. Guyana's ocean contains some of the highest recorded levels of chlorophyll biomass in the world. In turn, the waters are home to more than 900 species of fish, essential to both local subsistence and the Guyanese economy. There are also dolphins, manta rays, sperm whales, and six kinds of marine turtles, some of which are endangered.

In the interior, nestled between forests, picturesque mountains, tributaries of the Amazon, and the headwaters of the Rupununi river, rests the virtually untouched savanna that the Wapishana and Macushi call home. They are among the nine tribes collectively referred to as Amerindians, who have lived in and around present-day Guyana for millennia. Most live subsistence lifestyles based on hunting, fishing, and farming, not all that different from those of their ancestors.

For centuries, a rotating list of foreign powers extracted Guyana's natural resources and returned the products and profits to their home ports. In 1667, to secure their claim on Guyana, the Dutch traded parts of modern-day New

York and New Jersey to the British. The Dutch enslaved Africans to work the sugarcane fields and pushed many Indigenous peoples into the interior to give themselves easy access to the sea. Almost two centuries later, Britain took Guyana by force. It became one of the empire's most lucrative colonies, powered first by slavery and then the indentured servitude of people from India, China, and Portugal. An 1823 rebellion led by enslaved people in Guyana is credited with contributing to the eventual abolition of slavery across the entire British Empire; in 1917, people in indentured servitude in Guyana successfully organized to force an end to that practice as well. In the 20th century, American corporations came to Guyana, mining for bauxite and gold. By the 1950s, they also hunted for oil, but decades of effort proved largely futile.

This article appears in the February 2023 issue. [Subscribe to WIRED](#). Photograph: Peter Yang

In 1992, Guyana held its first free and fair democratic election in decades. The new government, led by the leftist People's Progressive Party, was eager to protect the country's natural resources after centuries of colonial exploitation, and it saw environmental protection as part of a broader mission to secure social justice. At the time, Janki had just returned and been admitted to the national bar. She had no party affiliation or political connections. She was, she says, a "nobody." But, in 1995, when Janki learned that the nation's first-ever environmental laws were going to be drafted at an invitation-only conference, she knew she had to be there. A partner at the law firm where she worked was also the owner of one of Guyana's two national newspapers, and he helped Janki finagle a press pass.

The conference was held at the Pegasus Hotel, a seven-story cylinder of blue glass and white steel that towers above Georgetown. No press accounts of the event can be found, and many of the participants have since died, but Janki recalls that there were about 100 attendees, most of them men, who droned through a series of forgettable presentations. What did catch her attention was the draft Environmental Protection Act. "When I got a look at what they were writing, I was absolutely horrified," she says. In her view, the legislation was far too weak.

During a coffee break, Janki spied a special adviser to the president, Lakeram Chatarpaul, standing alone outside of the conference room. Janki was a lot shier then, she says, but in her recollection she “lobbied like mad and made quite a nuisance of myself.” Chatarpaul invited her to write to him. What she wrote worked: After he read her ideas, Janki was hired by the Inter-American Development Bank to draft the new law for the government.

Over many months, Janki adapted what she felt were the most robust environmental laws from around the world and “put in a raft of new provisions,” she says. She included the “polluter pays” and “precautionary” principles, which hold companies liable for the costs of cleaning up pollution and the government responsible for implementing measures to prevent environmental harm, even in the absence of “full scientific certainty.” Importantly, Janki defined the “environment” to include, among other things, the atmosphere and climate. “This was in 1995, when people were relatively unconcerned about greenhouse gas pollution, and the carbon majors were misleading people,” she says. She imbued the Environmental Protection Agency with significant authority, including the requirement that any proposed project, from mining to construction, had to include a detailed environmental impact assessment. If the assessments were found to be lacking, the EPA would have the power to reject projects outright, as well as the ability to put conditions into permits to ensure that the company’s operations did not conflict with Guyana’s international human-rights and environmental obligations. She also included far-reaching provisions for public access to information, participation, oversight, and compensation for harm, plus some other “visionary stuff in the act that nobody noticed.”

One striking example of “visionary stuff” was the introduction of the concept of natural capital into Guyanese law. Each year, the EPA is required to take a full accounting of the nation’s ecosystem—from wildlife to vegetation—and make it publicly available. This creates a baseline from which to measure both ecosystem value and potential harm. Natural capital is a direct challenge to gross domestic product, or how much a country produces, consumes, and exports—the prevailing measure for assessing a nation’s economic health. A rising GDP is often considered inherently positive, regardless of the human or environmental costs. When a forest is

clear-cut, for instance, GDP increases due to the labor and machinery used and the timber sold. Natural capital, by contrast, considers the value of the trees to the climate, the animal species, and the people who call the forest home. Under this model, the forest's destruction is a cost and its protection a benefit. While Janki's law doesn't require this entire calculation, simply introducing the concept was a significant step, which several other nations, including Botswana, Colombia, and Egypt, have since embraced.

Each year, Guyana's EPA is required to take a full accounting of the nation's ecosystem—from wildlife to vegetation—and make it publicly available.

Photograph: Tom Vierus

In 1995, cyanide-filled mining waste spilled into the Essequibo River, killing fish and other animals and polluting the cropland on which Amerindian communities relied. The spill and others like it were attributed to a lack of meaningful environmental regulation, and they galvanized the nation to support the Environmental Protection Act, which was signed into law on June 5, 1996.

Two years later, the government turned to rewriting its constitution and solicited public submissions. Seizing the opportunity to embed strong environmental protections within the constitution itself, Janki wrote what she has described as “a statement of the obvious” that was ultimately included in the preamble: “The well-being for the nation depends upon preserving clean air, fertile soils, pure water, and the rich diversity of plants, animals, and ecosystems.”

But it was the provisions that Janki lobbied to be included in the text of the constitution that were the most significant. Drawn largely from South Africa's new postapartheid constitution, they conferred upon every Guyanese citizen “the right to an environment that is not harmful to his or her health or well-being” and would hold the state responsible for protecting the environment for the benefit of present and future generations. They also required the courts to “pay due regard to international law, international conventions, covenants, and charters bearing on human rights.” These include human-rights obligations to clean air and water, life,

and livelihoods. Taken together, these constitutional provisions are far stronger than the environmental protections found in most northern nations, including the US. “I don’t want to sound as if I am showing off,” says Janki, “but, really, it is all there.”

A few years later, an Arecuna tribal leader from the Upper Mazaruni area came to Janki’s law office seeking help to confront continued abuse from the mining industry. Janki turned her attention to building and securing the rights of these communities. She also worked as a consultant in drafting the 2006 Amerindian Act, providing for collective rights to land, natural resources, and self-determination. In academic and legal journals, she made the case that failing to fulfill human-rights obligations to life, health, water, food, nondiscrimination, and self-determination, including the rights of local communities to consent to policies and programs that directly affect them, “can be a trigger for environmental destruction.” She also contributed to the drafting of the Escazu Agreement, the first regional environmental treaty of Latin America and the Caribbean (ratified by 14 nations but open to all 33), “contributing to the protection of the right of every person of present and future generations to live in a healthy environment and to sustainable development.”

Janki had expected that when the time came, Guyana’s government and citizenry would make use of the strong legal foundation she had helped build. She would soon learn that, at least when it came to oil, she was wrong.

Guyana’s waters sustain over 900 species of fish, essential to local subsistence and the economy.

Photograph: Tom Vierus

In March 2015, the Deepwater Champion rig was at work for Exxon Mobil, exploring for oil in the Atlantic Ocean 120 miles off the coast of Guyana, drilling below 6,000 feet of water and through 12,000 feet of earth. Ultra-deepwater drilling is so complex that experts liken it to space travel, and the dangers are well known. Five years earlier, the Deepwater Horizon rig was at work for BP when it exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, killing 11 workers and setting off the worst offshore oil spill in history. (The rig in Guyana was

owned and operated by the same company, Transocean, that ran the rig in the Gulf.)

Only two months after it began exploring, Exxon struck oil. The first significant find in Guyana's history came as a shock. Exxon Mobil's then CEO, Rex Tillerson, told shareholders it was the largest oil find anywhere in the world that year. The Guyanese government, led by President David Granger of the People's National Congress Reform, quickly signed a contract with Exxon and awarded the company a series of 23-year permits —which were at the time withheld from the public. When production began four years later ("a fraction of the time it usually takes," according to Exxon spokesperson Meghan MacDonald), Guyana was officially ushered into the exclusive club of oil-producing nations. President Granger proclaimed it National Petroleum Day and said the discovery would transform the country's economic development and ensure a "good life" for all.

The People's Progressive Party, led by Bharrat Jagdeo, accused Granger of signing a one-sided deal with Exxon in exchange "for peanuts." Industry analysts have found that the government is receiving a below-average return on Exxon's projects. Exxon will recoup all of its expenses, including all development and operating expenses, out of the oil it extracts, leaving the government and public to largely absorb the company's costs. For every barrel of oil produced, until it recovers its costs, Exxon receives 85.5 percent of the value of the oil compared to Guyana's 14.5 percent, according to the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis.

Janki expected Guyana to make use of the environmental protections she instituted. When it came to oil, she was wrong.

Exxon maintains that the contract terms are competitive and that it "provides a structure and terms that are equitable to both the government and investing companies, commensurate with the risk associated with each project."

Janki, meanwhile, set her sights on scuttling the entire Exxon operation in Guyana. "At that moment nobody else was willing to challenge what the oil sector was doing," Janki says. In 2018, she realized she would have to go to court.

Janki filed a suit, based on the Environmental Protection Act, arguing that the government had acted illegally by granting production licenses to the two companies that Exxon is partnering with, as they had not filed their own environmental impact assessments. The judge ruled that the license granted to Exxon was sufficient, but Janki was not dissuaded. She began giving talks and lectures, arguing that there were grounds to challenge Exxon's operations, and she soon found a kindred spirit in Troy Thomas, who was then president of the Transparency Institute, the nation's leading anti-corruption organization. In time, he would become one of her most important collaborators.

When Exxon started operating in Guyana, Thomas, like Janki, worried that the corrupting force of oil money would threaten the country's meager political gains of the past few years—the dreaded “oil curse.” Countries that depend on exporting oil are among the most economically troubled, authoritarian, and conflict-ridden nations in the world. Terry Lynn Karl, a professor at Stanford University, documents how, in the past 40 years, the consequences of becoming oil-rich—far from the promise it offers—have tended to be more destructive than positive. Thomas was well aware of this, as well as of the growing efforts worldwide to shift away from fossil fuels altogether. “We know that petroleum is a dead end,” he says.

Globally, as of 2015, the fossil fuel industry and its products accounted for 91 percent of all industrial greenhouse gas emissions, and about 70 percent of all anthropogenic greenhouse emissions. Since 1988, more than half of all global industrial greenhouse emissions can be traced to just 25 fossil fuel companies. Exxon Mobil is number five on the list compiled by the CDP Carbon Majors Database.

Heavy rainfall in Guyana is nothing new. But now the rainy seasons are longer and wetter, and the dry seasons are hotter, with intensifying drought.

Photograph: Tom Vierus

Thomas grew up on Wakenaam, an island with a distinctly Caribbean feel that's just a short boat ride from Georgetown. His father was a small farmer like most of the island's inhabitants, growing crops like plantains, cassava, and tubers. Wakenaam is surrounded by a seawall built by the Dutch to

keep the water out. But “wall” seems too generous a word for the roughly 4-foot-high crumbling ledge. It worked for a time, but the sea has been rising, and the storms are now worse, regularly inundating the island’s homes and fields. “The ocean just has to decide one day: ‘I’m going to be disruptive.’ And that’s it for the island of Wakenaam,” Thomas says. “It’s not a theoretical, conceptual argument. It’s right now.” It didn’t make any sense to him that the government actively welcomed a project whose massive emissions contributed to the [sea-level rise](#) that threatened his own family’s very survival. “I don’t see how we can agree to kill ourselves,” he says.

Thomas, who often wears a dress shirt and blazer, with his hair in a loose ponytail of shoulder-length dreadlocks, is a professor of natural sciences at the University of Guyana. As a father of two young children, balancing family, work, and a political activism that is rare in this small nation, Thomas usually gets no more than a few hours of sleep each night. He understands why many, if not most, people in Guyana find it difficult to speak out against the government and its major partners. Guyana’s political history has a violent side, including the assassinations of famed anti-colonial scholar and political activist Walter Rodney and one of the nation’s agricultural ministers. Political and economic retribution can also be vicious, instilling fear and limiting action, Thomas explains.

Thomas’ organization succeeded in making Exxon’s contract with the government public in late 2017, an effort that brought him into conversation with Janki. Thomas felt he had reached the limitations of traditional advocacy to stop Exxon, and he was intrigued by Janki’s novel, but potent, legal approach. He decided to join forces with her.

In May 2020, Janki filed a new suit against the government on Thomas’ behalf. She argued that the 23-year permits violated the Environmental Protection Act, which stipulates that the government may grant only five-year leases for oil drilling. In a settlement, the EPA agreed to reduce the terms to five years, after which Exxon would need to reapply for new permits. This was a major victory, but it didn’t address the roots of Thomas’ deeper concerns: the increasingly existential threat of climate change.

And so, emboldened by their success, Thomas and Janki began to lay the groundwork for an even more ambitious case against Exxon, which others would soon join.

“I don’t see how we can agree to kill ourselves,” Troy Thomas says about Guyana’s decision to drill for oil.

Quadad DeFreitas is Janki’s second client in the pending case against Exxon. The 23-year-old with boy-band good looks is Wapishana and grew up in the Rupununi region in southwest Guyana, near the border with [Brazil](#). As a child, he split his time between the village of Katoonerib, where he attended primary school, and the cattle ranch where his family worked. Among its limited modern attributes, the ranch has used solar panels for decades. DeFreitas works on conservation efforts in the region. “There are so many animals!” he says effusively. “Birds, otters, monkeys, caiman, jaguars—you cannot list them all!”

Today, his family has a small cattle ranch and a budding ecotourism business of its own. But DeFreitas worries that the already devastating effects of climate change threaten not only his family’s businesses but the future of his 4-year-old brother—and his ability to call the Rupununi home.

Heavy rainfall in Guyana is nothing new. “People live on the land, they know where the water usually comes, and they plan their farms and houses because of that knowledge,” DeFreitas explains. But now the rainy seasons are longer and wetter, and the dry seasons are hotter, with intensifying drought. All year round, the weather is unpredictable, and it’s getting worse. Wells and ponds are running dry, leaving families without drinking water or fish to eat; the river both swells and dries out well beyond the norm; and floods increasingly destroy crops and villages.

One rainy day, I visited a small plot of land in Katoonerib near DeFreitas’ primary school. Huts made of brown earth and thatched roofs hand-stitched from tree fronds dotted the horizon. A farmer removed an ear of corn from the stalk and, with the deft precision that comes from decades of repetition, swiftly pulled back on the skin to reveal its rotting insides. A waterlogged crop is unable to bear fruit. And it wasn’t only the corn that was ruined, but

the cassava, papaya, yams, pineapple, peanuts, and pumpkins—all of the food grown on the farm.

As Janki built her third case against Exxon, DeFreitas became an eager participant. Pointing to the benefits of solar power and the minimal use of fossil fuels in his community, he knows that other, less harmful ways of producing energy are possible. Beyond this he looks at the implications of exacerbating the climate crisis and considers Exxon's operations not only crazy but wrong. "I just don't see the point," he says.

In May 2021, with Thomas and DeFreitas as plaintiffs, Janki, joined by Burch-Smith, filed the landmark suit against the government and Exxon. "The earth's atmosphere and oceans have been and continue to be polluted by the release and accumulation of greenhouse gases," the lawyers state, resulting from "the production, transportation, refining and use of fossil fuels." Therefore, the government's approval of Exxon's operations, they argue, violates the constitutional right of current and future Guyanese citizens to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being. It is the first case in which this provision has been litigated.

Thomas' affidavit, which says that the "existential threat" caused by greenhouse gas emissions is already harming the health and well-being of the Guyanese people, is the one Exxon is trying to get thrown out. "The intensity of that harm will increase as fossil fuels continue to be burned," Thomas writes, placing responsibility on the government and Exxon by noting that combustion is "the intended and foreseeable consequence of producing that oil and gas." Thomas quotes extensively from Exxon's own 1982 research, which concluded that "mitigation of the 'greenhouse effect' would require major reductions in fossil fuel combustion." But because Thomas isn't a climate scientist, Exxon argues that his statements reflect opinion rather than agreed-upon facts.

They're "not going to concede anything about climate change unless they have a gun to their head, metaphorically," Burch-Smith said about Exxon.

Scholars agree that Janki's lawsuits are creating innovative precedents for challenging the major contributors to climate change. Joana Setzer, an assistant professor at the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change

and the Environment at the London School of Economics, credits the case for advancing human-rights-based climate litigation, uniquely challenging the permitting of new oil reserves based on the harms of the resulting emissions. “If the case is successful, it could inspire similar lawsuits in other countries,” she says. “It’s a real human rights case.”

Exxon contends that it “has complied with all applicable laws at every step of the exploration, appraisal, development and production stages” in response to questions about the suit.

In September 2021, Exxon joined the government as a codefendant, which suggests it wasn’t content to let the case play out without its influence. The multinational argues that the plaintiffs have “misconceived” the Environmental Protection Act, noting that the government approved the environmental impact assessments necessary for drilling to proceed. Exxon also says the plaintiffs “mischaracterized” the constitutional provision on which Janki and Burch-Smith have built their case. Although that provision requires the state to “secure sustainable development and use of natural resources,” it goes on to say that it must do this “while promoting justifiable economic and social development.”

The government’s response follows a similar argument. It affirms that it approved Exxon’s environmental impact assessment and cites the same constitutional provision noted by Exxon. Preventing Guyana from developing its petroleum resources, the government argues, would bring “unwarranted economic and social costs.” Bharrat Jagdeo, once the country’s president and now its vice president, has argued that Guyana should pump its oil quickly, while it still has the chance. (He has emerged as a leader of a group of government officials in places like Suriname and Ghana who are making the same case.) Jagdeo, President Irfaan Ali, and other government officials declined repeated requests for interviews.

The government and Exxon’s economic prosperity argument was dealt a blow in October 2021. The Biden administration, following a new US directive to “promote ending international financing of carbon-intensive fossil fuel-based energy,” blocked a \$180 million loan from the Inter-American Development Bank to a private Guyanese

company that was meant to support the expansion of Exxon's onshore facilities.

If economic prosperity is the goal, the oil project is not off to a good start. Despite three years of production, Guyana remains a struggling nation with one of the highest poverty rates in Latin America and the Caribbean. The lure of a windfall from oil is understandably tempting. And money from oil has flowed into the country, but measuring its impact is difficult. The World Bank says that "extraordinary economic growth of 20–40 percent over the last two years brought GDP per capita to over \$9,300 in 2021, from about \$6,600 in 2019." But GDP remains a questionable metric, in that it entirely ignores very real environmental costs, and those per capita figures merely divide a national value by the population—with no consideration for unequal distribution of the gains.

Part of the sea wall that was built to protect the areas east of Georgetown, Guyana.

Photograph: Tom Vierus

Exxon spokesperson Meghan MacDonald emphasized the company's efforts to add to Guyana's workforce, noting that there are more than 4,400 Guyanese workers supporting Exxon Mobil's activities there. "In frontier countries around the world, it takes some time to develop the workforce to handle the operations in a complex, highly volatile work environment," MacDonald said. It's widely known, though, that the oil and gas industry is increasingly automated and less reliant on workers—something that Exxon itself acknowledged in a statement on its website that has since been deleted.

By the end of 2021, Exxon and its partners had taken in six times more revenue from its oil operations in Guyana than the government had—\$3.6 billion to the government's \$607 million—according to the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis. Due to the lopsided contract, the group estimates that by 2027, Guyana will carry a liability of more than \$34 billion owed to Exxon and its partners to cover their development and related costs. "There isn't going to be a vast amount of wealth," Janki says.

“There is going to be, most likely, an enormous bill that the Guyanese people will be saddled with.”

If the court agrees with Janki that this oil operation is incompatible with the right to a healthy environment, then the government has to decide whether to stop the activity or somehow find a way to make it not violate the constitution. That may be an impossible feat, as the government might have to prove that oil production would not result in a worsening of global warming. The government may also be obliged to forgo any new authorizations for oil operations or revoke Exxon’s existing licenses. Oil drilling in Guyana could even be ended entirely if it is impossible for the government to issue permits without violating the law.

“Were the court to agree that this development is in violation of the Guyanese constitution, that is obviously an extraordinarily significant finding, and it would have enormous impacts on any future development of oil in Guyana,” says Muffett of the Center for International Environmental Law. “Losing access to Guyana as a result of the groundbreaking legal action there would be yet another signal that the company’s core business model is fundamentally incompatible with confronting the climate crisis. Given the huge prominence of Guyana in Exxon’s portfolio, investors are likely to listen.”

Seated at a table at the Marriott Hotel in June, Burch-Smith talked about the case with me. The American hotel chain, where rooms cost upwards of \$300 a night, has recently supplanted the Pegasus as the “place to be” in Georgetown. Burch-Smith spoke quietly, careful not to be overheard by the people at nearby tables and frolicking loudly in the pool. Many of them had Texas accents. He surmised that more Americans will be coming to the country as Exxon’s operations continue to expand.

“The fundamental problem is that the only way you’re going to slow climate change is to stop burning oil.” Exxon can’t challenge that, Burch-Smith almost whispers.

“This isn’t a story of powerlessness; it’s a story of power,” Janki says.

Win or lose, Janki's efforts and the case are already having an impact. Under a blazing midday sun in June, on the eve of the court hearing, roughly 25 men and women gathered outside of Exxon's onshore base in Georgetown to protest the company's operations—a rare, but increasingly frequent, occurrence. The protesters fanned out along the edge of the congested four-lane highway, holding white placards with handwritten messages: "Slavery was abolished centuries ago." "Stop raping our country." "Exxon make mo money than God & Guyana gets nothing."

In July, 23 years after Janki wrote it into Guyana's constitution, [the United Nations General Assembly recognized the right to a clean](#), healthy, and sustainable environment as a fundamental human right guaranteed to all. That has expanded the opportunity for people in any UN member nation to follow Janki's lead and challenge fossil fuel operations in court by making the case that they are incompatible with these newly enshrined rights.

In September, Exxon reported a 42-gallon oil spill from a production rig, stretching 13 miles across the Atlantic. It was minor and, the company says, was isolated the following day. But such spills are common in offshore oil production, and fears of a spill large enough to have a catastrophic effect on the marine ecosystem loom large here. "If something should go wrong out there, it definitely would affect not just livelihoods but the entire economy," warns Sopheia Edghill, a Guyanese biologist and former marine conservation officer.

During the hearing, the judge announced his retirement from the court, and he has yet to be replaced. Janki was also recently faced with another challenge. Burch-Smith withdrew as her co-counsel, citing "some differences in certain technical aspects." But for Janki, there is no withdrawal. She will continue arguing the case on behalf of Thomas and DeFreitas, and she has a new legal partner to help her. The case will move forward when a new judge is assigned. And if it fails to stop Exxon, she has filed three other cases against the government and Exxon. "This isn't a story of powerlessness; it's a story of power," Janki says. "This is the biggest climate change case in the world."

Updated 1/11/2023 3:00 pm ET: A previous version of this story incorrectly stated Sopheia Edghil is a marine conservationist at the University of

Guyana. She is a biologist and former marine conservation officer.

This article appears in the February 2023 issue. [Subscribe now](#).

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Mar 1, 2023 5:30 PM

Six-Word Sci-Fi: Stories Written by You

Here's this month's prompt, how to submit, and an illustrated archive of past favorites.

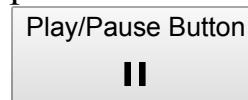


Illustration: Elena Lacey

THIS MONTH'S PROMPT

In six words, write a story about the future of sleep.

Submit stories on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), or [Instagram](#), or email us at mail@WIRED.com. We'll choose one to illustrate.

Disclaimer: All #WiredSixWord submissions become the property of WIRED. Submissions will not be acknowledged or returned. Submissions and any other materials, including your name or social media handle, may be published, illustrated, edited, or otherwise used in any medium. Submissions must be original and not violate the rights of any other person or entity.

MARCH 2023

A Story About the Future of Personal Hygiene

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—David Frank, via Facebook

Honorable Mentions:

“Traffic’s moderate today,” said my deodorant. —Alex Nelson, via email

You can shake my hand, sir. —Kinga Raab, via Facebook

Watch ad to continue this shower. —@sam.hologram, via Instagram

Dry shampoo was just the beginning. —Emma Anderson, via Facebook

Now I smell like the metaverse. —@nostalgicbookishness, via Instagram

OK Google, it’s time to wipe. —Tim McCune, via email

Bath bubbles beget baby parallel universes. —Mike Hobbs, via email

My hands wash themselves every hour. —Dave Fox, via email

They clean you while you sleep. —Pien van der Ploeg, via Facebook

FEBRUARY 2023

A Story About a Dramatic Change in Size

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—B. Scott Crawford, via email

Honorable Mentions:

Felt OK ... until I crushed Tokyo. —@BobPeryea, via Twitter

My new basketball is the moon. —Dave Drews, via email

You looked taller in your profile. —@thaquashman, via Instagram

I have made a colossal mistake! —@argayle, via Instagram

Godzilla got into the diet pills. —Steve Rhodes, via email

Sun look more red to you? —Michael Patrick Sullivan, via email

Giant wakes up tiny, confused. —ChatGPT

My first trip to the hypothalamus! —@fernandarosh, via Twitter

What grew? All but the bones. —Jackson Parker, via email

JANUARY 2023

A Story About a Mad Scientist

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—@DaveDyball, via Twitter

Honorable Mentions:

Mad I was, until it worked. —Don Wilkins, via email

You say “mad,” I say “disappointed.” —Joseph Ferry, via email

Her hair was blue—and undyed. —@jaybirdfitlive, via Instagram

He couldn’t make Earth look triangular. —@pauloahb, via Instagram

His socks matched her lab coat. —@pmcruise, via Twitter

Quantum field cadaver regeneration activation, go! —Sean Liddle, via Facebook

“Success!” Too bad the AI disagreed. —Steve Nomax, via email

“Let there be light,” said God. —@charley.desousa, via Instagram

“It’s aliiive!” Elon opened his eyes. —@ylbertf, via Instagram

DECEMBER 2022

A Story About an Animal That Hasn’t Been Discovered Yet

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—@JayZheng10, via Twitter

Honorable Mentions:

Its stare gave me a rash. —@dantekienigiel, via Instagram

Darwin might’ve overlooked them on purpose. —@the_story_life, via Instagram

It was inside me all along. —Nova Wehman-Brown, via email

Green trunks wiggled from thawed permafrost. —@Theniceladywit, via Twitter

Its unusual diet was immediately demonstrated. —@lauren.samuelson14, via Instagram

Field biology got trickier after that. —Paul Gazis, via Facebook

We thought lenticular clouds were clouds. —@marcia_storyteller, via Instagram

Was it feeding on electronic waste? —@leonserra_, via Instagram

To it, we are the ants. —Morten Kielland, via email

NOVEMBER 2022

A Story About Living Forever

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—J C Thrush, via email

Honorable Mentions:

It wasn't long enough for me. —@Anna_Wenner, via Twitter

And so long lived the Queen. —Giacomo, via email

Your application to be terminated expired. Morten Kielland, via email

Too bad I never stopped growing. —Antti Karjalainen, via Facebook

There was still no edit button. —@ThatKP3, via Twitter

In the end, there wasn't one. —Jason Anderson, via email

I woke up again and again. —@mirnanassar, via Instagram

They said someday, but it's today. —@VijayLRoy, via Twitter

I should've had that looked at. —J. Fredrick James, via email

SPECIAL [RE:WIRED](#) EDITION

A Story About Tackling Climate Change

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—@ChuckBaggett, via Twitter

SEPTEMBER 2022

A Story About an Evil Twin

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—Andy Walton, via Facebook

Honorable Mentions:

He did what she would not. —Eric Nisly, via Facebook

The eyewitness was, quite understandably, mistaken. —
@HollysHooman, via Twitter

“Well, only if you stay digital.” —Morten Kielland, via email

They think I’m the good one. —@bobtheimpaler, via Instagram

Her eye is mine for eternity. —@cessmtz, via Twitter

“Relax. Mom will never find out.” —@ascendant_dada, via Instagram

I’m the one you really want. —@kalkikanmani, via Twitter

Only mirrors can reveal the truth. —@BuddhaandDog, via Twitter

Born triplets, but three’s a crowd. —@jkadz, via Instagram

AUGUST 2022

A Story in Six Emoji

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

Illustration: Violet Reed

—Caleb Bell, via Facebook

Honorable Mentions:

♀♂♀♂♂♀ —@jessbeckah42, via Instagram

♀♀♀♀♀ —@lgvpart, via Instagram

♀♀❀♀♀ —Ché Graham, via email

♀♀♂♀♀ —@cmayc414, via Instagram

♀♀♀♀♀ —@aotrivera, via Instagram

♀♀❀♀♀ —@marcia_storyteller, via Instagram

♀♀△♀♀ —@PatCattigan, via Twitter

♀♀♀♀♀♀♀♀ —@nadia.bkb, via Instagram

♀♀♀♀♀♀ —@cva.maria, via Instagram

JULY 2022

A Story Set in a Galaxy Far, Far Away

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—@KuraFire, via Twitter

Honorable Mentions:

42 was definitely not the answer. —Simona Riva, via Facebook

“The robots are BLEEDING!” she screamed. —@vince_freeman, via Twitter

Dear humans, nobody wants unsolicited nudes. —@OhCooley44, via Twitter

Humans! There goes the dang neighborhood. —S. V. Mosaic, via Facebook

Directions to transdimensional left luggage office? —Max Thoursie, via email

Giant squirrels lead the space army. —@ronels14, via Instagram

I haven’t gabblegopped the gloop yet. —@Evanliciously, via Twitter

One small step to remember mankind. —@AxeandPail, via Twitter

Is this DC’s or Marvel’s Universe? —Thomas Davis, via email

JUNE 2022

A Story About a Wormhole Discovered in Your Closet

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—Olivia Richardson, via email

Honorable Mentions:

Went in wrinkled, came back ironed. —Rick Veenstra, via email

But my name is not Alice! —Reine Fleur, via Facebook

My single socks returned—inside out. —Ann C, via email

The cause? Pairing wool with corduroy. —@milanograms, via Twitter

My insurance will not cover this! —Brian Carroll, via Facebook

I walked in, we walked out. —@Egiventer, via Twitter

When I returned, my pants hadn't. —Maarten van Kempen, via email

Pest control's about to get trickier. —Susannah Lui, via Facebook

The bad smell came from there. —@run_the_jouls, via Instagram

MAY 2022

A Story About a Futuristic Meal Gone Wrong

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—Stuart Hodgson, via email

Honorable Mentions:

Waiter, I ordered polynyocominnucloride, not biconvocominleucloride.

—Carolyne Gibson, via Facebook

Robot malfunctions—leaving only Mom's cooking. —Marc Ringel, via email

Suddenly I realized, I'm the food. —@nicoestr, via Twitter

So full. Way too many gigabytes. —Jim Frentz, via email

Call the server, my soup's pixelating. —Rick Veenstra, via email

Waiter, my soup has been bugged! —@nostalgicbookishness, via Instagram

Please check genome compatibility before eating. —@sebastiancastro, via Instagram

Steak pill exploded in the hydrator. —Shelvine Berzerk Erasmus, via Facebook

I was hungry. So was it. —Jake McCormack, via Facebook

APRIL 2022

A Story About Surviving a High-Tech Disaster

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—John DeFilippi, via email

Honorable Mentions:

Grandma, tell me about the memes. —E. E. Eon, via email

Just be happy you are analog. —Maarten Visscher, via email

There's strawberry jam inside the VCR. —@Plan_Prep_Live, via Twitter

The robots won't stop feeding me. —@lithohedron, via Twitter

And then the battery ran out. —@thedigifish, via Instagram

On Earth, I'd been pronounced dead. —@bower_mink, via Instagram

Luckily, the quantum untangler was near. —Antti Karjalainen, via Facebook

I'm outside! We are all outside! —Paul Hubner, via email

Huh, your DNA can't be verified. —Jason Rosenberg, via email

MARCH 2022

A Story About an Extraordinary Coincidence

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—Joyce, via email

Honorable Mentions:

I wrote this same story yesterday. —@tatiang, via Twitter

You're from test tube 698GX10A too? —Amy Stewart, via email

Metaverse Rome built in one day. —@theseaisgreen_, via Instagram

Separated at birth, they died simultaneously. —@zeynaballee, via Instagram

I have not become my mother. —@r58tree, via Instagram

Of all the Galilean moon joints ... —Alison Boleyn, via email

You have a cloned T-Rex too! —@emailabdulla, via Instagram

The android had my husband's eyes. —@hrhblakeknight, via Instagram

WIRED chooses to publish this story. —@connorgerbrandt, via Instagram

FEBRUARY 2022

A Story About a New National Holiday

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—@sarahschneiter, via Twitter

Honorable Mentions:

On Consensus Day we blockchain vote. —@jamesjoquin, via Twitter

Day a For Backward Speak Everyone. —@nervish, via Instagram

“Happy Upload Day!” the kids typed. —Gene Simonalle, via email

Update your friends this Reboot Day. —Antti Karjalainen, via Facebook

Elon has just bought July 4th. —@rafaelalimandro, via Instagram

A day that offends no one. —@Stevalech, via Twitter

Welcome to the 74th Hunger Games. —@corvalanlara, via Instagram

Hey Calendar, happy AI Appreciation Day! —Michael Esser, via email

And her name was Betty White. —@marhartech, via Instagram

JANUARY 2022

A Story About Your Next-Generation Pet

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—Ed Gubbins, via Facebook

Honorable Mentions:

Don't upgrade. I'm a good boy. —Benjamin Lopez Barba, via email

Let's go for a long spacewalk. —@colingroom, via Instagram

My meta dodo only eats NFTreats. —@transistor_resistor, via Instagram

One hour to finish printing rex. —@RyanReitz, via Twitter

My cloned woolly mammoth never sheds. —@ANDYMedici, via Twitter

Would you like traditional or nonpooping? —Marc Lewis, via email

The Crystaloids quickly outlawed pet rocks. —Kassidy Helfant, via email

Nine lives later, nine more lives. —@bilybel, via Twitter

Pawprint confirmed. Select meal flavor preference. —@michael_kupfer, via Twitter

DECEMBER 2021

A Children's Book From the Future

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—Jane Turner, via Facebook

Honorable Mentions:

Black holes make the worst pets. —Ron Sheklin, via email

Only some of the toys retaliated. —Rebecca Stevens, via Facebook

The aliens were funny and delicious. —@trollus_maximus, via Instagram

It used to be everyone poops. —Nik Hector, via Facebook

There's a nanobot in my soup. —@mghendism, via Instagram

The school trip missed the wormhole. —@simao_sa, via Instagram

See Bot run. Run, Bot, run! —Franklin Schellenberg, via email

Goodnight comb, goodnight dome, goodnight Mars. —@jamesjoaquin, via Twitter

The Little AI That Could (Feel) —E Scott Menter, via Facebook

NOVEMBER 2021

A Story About the Future of Psychotherapy

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—@oscartkav, via Instagram

Honorable Mentions:

Your session has been successfully uploaded. —Austin Andru, via email

My AI said, “Try analog dating.” —@joshdblack, via Twitter

Her insurance only covered chat bots. —Spencer McKeehan, via Facebook

So tell me about your motherboard. —@j.d._harelk, via Instagram

Swipe left until it feels right. —@cvelascop, via Instagram

Connection interrupted. Data cannot be analyzed. —@duykham_, via Twitter

If you are depressed, press 1. —@jfindura, via Twitter

A total neurological reboot should help. —Kevin Jerome Hinders, via Facebook

Your Zuckerberg complex is developing rapidly. —@nogorelli, via Instagram

OCTOBER 2021

An Adventure Story Set in the Metaverse

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—Evan Skopp, via email

Honorable Mentions:

Virtually no one hears you scream. —Karen Hamilton, via email

Oh no, they are all me. —@stockyjon, via Instagram

Help me. IRL I was murdered. —Ed Gubbins, via Facebook

I gotta get out of here. —Steven Fernandez, via email

Why can't I find the exit? —@scrcr0, via Twitter

Our only mission: Delete Mark Zuckerberg. —@mongoindustries, via Instagram

It was impossible to pause it. —@alenotari6, via Instagram

He must never see me offline. —Bobby Parrott, via email

Wasted such a good planet. Reboot. —Sasha Beiderman, via Facebook

SEPTEMBER 2021

A Story About a Robot Pop Star

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—Randy Cepuch, via email

Honorable Mentions:

Autotune is a factory option now. —Josh Alvies, via Facebook

Are they human? Are they dancer? —@ruste, via Instagram

All the flash, without the heart. —Craig Chatfield, via Facebook

I'm programmed to pop and lock. —@alissacarr, via Twitter

I'm too sexy for my software. —@glengauthier, via Instagram

Doesn't even write its own stuff. —@andrewkm__, via Twitter

Crowd surfing wasn't the best idea. —@clarkstacey, via Twitter

Played backward it's "kill all humans." —Marc Rogers, via Facebook

AUGUST 2021

A Story About a Self-Aware Self-Driving Car

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—Stephen Clamage, via email

Honorable Mentions:

I take lithium for range anxiety. —@jamesjoaquin, via Twitter

I dreamt of the Autobahn again. —James Wortz, via Facebook

Honest, officer—the human was driving. —Steve Magid, via email

Don't make me pull me over. —@atlrun, via Twitter

The smart car drove itself crazy. —@frascafrasca, via Twitter

The grandma or the baby—shit. —@gaophilip, via Twitter

Have I chosen the right path? —Andrew Dawson, via email

It takes itself on long drives. —Wade Sheppard, via email

It's my way on the highway. —@manu.life, via Instagram

JULY 2021

A Story About a Casual Encounter With Aliens

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—@phorne96, via Twitter

Honorable Mentions:

You look nothing like your photo. —@markgyles, via Twitter

Lights, camera ... where did it go? —thalia925, via email

They came, too late, for Elvis. —Bruce Lyon, via Facebook

Seeking vital fluids, they commandeered snacks. —Scott Medintz, via email

Do you have the correct spacetime? —Richard Krzemien, via email

I awoke with a probing thought. —@andynez, via Twitter

Take us to the Nigerian prince. —Juan Garcia, via Facebook

Quite unexpectedly, cocktail recipes were exchanged. —John Wagner, via email

You're an alien! No you are! —@simon_staffans, via Twitter

JUNE 2021

A Story About an International Digital Heist

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—@jamesnsmith, via Twitter

Honorable Mentions:

"Hand it over," the ATM said. —Lauren Dolan, via email

They never suspected Alexa was Alexei. —Liz Ransom, via email

Why wouldn't I help a prince? —Harleigh Marsh, via Facebook

They said nonfungible. They were wrong. —@eminay86, via Twitter

Use his eyeball while there's time. —Noreen Anastasia, via Facebook

"Update Later" was the incorrect choice. —@terryfphotos, via Instagram

Check Google Maps. Kiev is gone. —r0cket fr0g, via email

They got away on the blockchain. —JYRWG, via email

Every cat photo gone. Police baffled. —@john.cartan, via Instagram

MAY 2021

A Story About a Freaky Discovery in Physics

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—Mark Crane, via Facebook

Honorable Mentions:

Schrodinger's cat is actually a dog. —@tynanwrites, via Twitter

You're the observed. Not the observer. —@parkerstmailbox, via Instagram

Our last seconds appear the longest. —Paul Hagenaars, via email

It was simultaneously huge and microscopic. —@Cezary_Z, via Twitter

All lost socks found at Cern. —Felix Quarnström, via Facebook

Astonishingly, up was down all along! —Christopher Walton, via email

Actually, the tides pull the moon. —@the4lw, via Instagram

A seventh Infinity Stone is found. —@taayywells, via Instagram

Faster than light announcement scheduled yesterday. —David Cinabro, via email

APRIL 2021

A Review of a Future Work of Art

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—Jacky Reif, via Facebook

Honorable Mentions:

So that's an AI self portrait? —Jason Cohen, via Facebook

I prefer Boston Dynamics' earlier work. —@sscarsdale, via Twitter

Uninspired. Lacking originality. Try again, Earth. —Amanda Bull Chafin, via email

NFT or not, it is great. —Peter Boersma, via Facebook

Not as good as Banksy's virus. —Simon O Wright, via Facebook

Brave to show an unfiltered canvas. —@Alcestronaut, via Twitter

Not what teleportation was invented for. —@Arturo_thrdez, via Twitter

Shame mortals will not appreciate it. —@asylbek0205, via Instagram

Reminds me of the Before Times. —Jacqueline Jaeger Houtman, via Facebook

MARCH 2021

A Story About a Tech-Centric Religion

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—Eduardo Bolívar, via Facebook

Honorable Mentions:

I swiped right and found salvation. —Conrad Dean, via Facebook

Praying to AI got better results. —@jgmclean0, via Twitter

The prophet revealed the source code. —@the4lw, via Instagram

Atop the hill, sayeth he, “reception”? —@dghutt, via Twitter

The app works in mysterious ways. —Tyler Hughs, via Facebook

Move fast. Break things. Repent. Repeat. —@iampinch, via Twitter

Always back up to be saved. —Tadeusz Walter Misztela, via Facebook

Chip implanted, the new priest rose. —@wlmoseley, via Twitter

“Worship the Apple.” —iBook of Jobs —ThoreauRug, via email

FEBRUARY 2021

A Story About a WFH Office Scandal

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—@abhignak, via Instagram

Honorable Mentions:

He was never a real person? —Ian Schoen, via Facebook

Wife realized my job is easy. —@jchavizzle, via Twitter

Dress code updated after yesterday's "incident." —
@mistermistermistertibbs, via Instagram

He certainly shouldn't have stood up. —Małgorzata Kuś, via Facebook

"Joe's the father." "You're not muted." —Austin Craver, via email

Worker's comp? It is her dog! —@thefitzroymclean, via Instagram

It looks real, but it's not. —Jonathan Goode, via Facebook

The window behind her reflected images. —@chmslady, via Twitter

As everyone's computer froze, she laughed. —@mcgroup53, via Twitter

JANUARY 2021

A Story About a Future American President

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—Maayan Brodsky, via Facebook

Honorable Mentions:

She won canine vote by landslide. —Janna Dethmers, via email

Future president born today, supercomputer predicts. —Ethan Noll, via email

“Welcome to Earth,” said the President. —@michaelrowley, via Instagram

He died as he lived: online. —D. A. Smith, via email

“Introducing your next president: version 7!” —Ben N, via email

But it won the electoral hackathon! —Zacharie Barrou Dumont, via email

“I still can’t smell,” she whispered. —Sean Fitzgerald, via email

“I hereby pardon all my clones.” —@Morgan, via Twitter

She smiled: Mars is now Independent. —@sepohonpokok, via Twitter

DECEMBER 2020

A Story About a Gargantuan Space Creature

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

Illustration: VIOLET REED

—@threepanelcrimes, via Instagram

Honorable Mentions:

The moon revealed its darkest secret. —@cfx1, via Twitter

“Enjoy,” it said, and ate Mars. —@countgringo, via Instagram

Hand me my iPhone—picture time. —@fogcitynative, via Instagram

On its back, we traveled far. — @_annalysenko, via Instagram

We saw the horizon. It moved. —@mogon_ave, via Twitter

Entrelzidor sneezed. Earth was free again. —John Rees-Williams, via Facebook

And this black hole had teeth. —@devtomlinson, via Instagram

“A little earthy for my taste.” —@brambledillo, via Instagram

NOVEMBER 2020

A Story About the Next Big Security Leak

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

Illustration: VIOLET REED

—@_inflexion_ via Instagram

Honorable Mentions:

We updated our terms and conditions. —@nisioti_eleni, via Twitter

All of the tokens were useless. —William Nicholl, via Facebook

Four-year-old deletes planet data. —@jutajurajustice, via Twitter

Now your mom knows everything, Phil. —@mvyenielo, via Twitter

Grandma's secret recipe just went viral. —Kevin Jerome Hinders, via Facebook

So bots were reporting other bots? —Ed Gubbins, via Facebook

OCTOBER 2020

A Story Set in a World Without Paper

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

—Anna Jaruga, via Facebook

Honorable Mentions:

The dog ate my memory cards. —Irfan Darian, via Facebook

Honey, pass me the news tile. —@rainreider, via Twitter

These leaves would have to do. —@eliportheraltic, via Twitter

Christmas morning was never a surprise. —@tony32938627, via Twitter

I wrote it on the fridge. —@apocryphal_x, via Twitter

Museum reports theft of toilet paper. —@joostdouma, via Twitter

The pen is no longer mightier. —@mdeziel, via Twitter

Police say no note was uploaded. —@cwyant, via Instagram

SEPTEMBER 2020

A Story About the Upside of Failure

ILLUSTRATION: MAXIME MOUYSSET

ILLUSTRATION: MAXIME MOUYSSET

—@rosiestonies, via Instagram

Honorable Mentions:

Still, the droid's skin was healing. —David Gerster, via Facebook

"Upload failed." Phew, that was close. —Assa Naveh, via Facebook

It exploded, but he looked hot. —Anna Rose McHugh, via Facebook

She could see who had stayed. —@pameleen, via Instagram

Humans. Not my best work. Still ... —@gg3_scorpio, via Instagram

The worst happened. Now I'm free. —@atpolinko, via Instagram

At least there is no leader. —@guabo, via Instagram

My mom still thinks I'm cool. —@pashutinski, via Instagram

JULY 2020

A Story About an Apocalypse With a Happy Ending

ILLUSTRATION: MAXIME MOUYSSET

ILLUSTRATION: MAXIME MOUYSSET

—@romer6, via Twitter

Honorable Mentions:

The dogs are the masters now. —@azzour, via Instagram

Deadly virus mutates into X-Men gene. —@redeyedsan, via Twitter

At once, my Amazon dependency disappeared.—@maxacarr, via Instagram

Baby's voice rose from the cave.—Chakib Mataoui Souleyman, via Facebook

The colony on the moon flourished.—@emoco, via Twitter

In silence, he slept well. Finally.—@patchoo314, via Instagram

So salt water, huh? Who knew.—@andreslohizo, via Instagram

Dinosaurs return—this time as pets.—@deb_shalini, via Twitter

Sun sets. No one posts it.—@jesikahmorgana, via Instagram

JUNE 2020

A Story About Love in the Time of Coronavirus

ILLUSTRATION: MAXIME MOUYSET

ILLUSTRATION: MAXIME MOUYSET

—Hamish Hamish, via Facebook

Honorable Mentions:

Love is sacrificing the last ply.—Kristos Samaras, via Facebook

There is an “us” in “virus.”—Zachy Allec, via Facebook

Feverish desire raged beneath the N95.—@seekingfelicity, via Instagram

You can sneeze in my elbow.—@ralfchardon, via Instagram

Our eyes locked in Zoom yoga. —@jabberwockies, via Instagram

Slowly, window and I became friends. —@jo.onthe.go, via Instagram

“Don’t kiss me,” he whispered gently. —@anna_rchist, via Instagram

The clothes came off; masks remained. — @_v.sh, via Instagram

Casual gets serious way too fast. —@kristinamiller, via Instagram

MAY 2020

A Story About Digital-Age Autocrats

ILLUSTRATION: MAXIME MOUYSET

ILLUSTRATION: MAXIME MOUYSET

—@needsmuchvalidation, via Instagram

Honorable Mentions:

Break up the digital data thieves. —Frank D. Monaco, via Facebook

Digital Guy Fawkes to the rescue! —Kevin Jerome Hinders, via Facebook

Encryption is poison to a dictator. —Marko Berg, via Facebook

Plug exhaust pipe with a potato. —@blume_lee, via Twitter

New feature announcement: “Like” to impeach. —@mina_sonbol, via Instagram

Use ad blockers. Pay for news. —@dechendolker, via Instagram

Print Marshall McLuhan quotes on T-shirts. —@antigraviter, via Instagram

Turn social media into socialism media. —@benzilla_360, via Instagram

Get behind me, technocrats. Game over. —Anastasia Hunter, via Facebook

APRIL 2020

A Story About Saving the Planet

ILLUSTRATION: VIOLET REED

Illustration: Violet Reed

—@johnjohnjungle, via Instagram

Honorable Mentions:

Then a ship from Krypton landed. —@marcelo_paixao_almeida, via Instagram

Everyone gets five free international trips. —@clawd2deth, via Twitter

Move all heavy industry off-world. —Stevie Turnbull, via Facebook

Love everyone, and wash your hands. —@brohemian_rapshowdy, via Instagram

Come back, ancient aliens! Reboot Earth. —@sarahk0csis, via Twitter

Genetically engineer cows to fart hydrogen. —Hamish Hamish, via Facebook

Hiring: Sensible planetary dictator. Apply within. —@matt_owczarz, via Twitter

MARCH 2020

A Story About the Next Great Crowdsourced Project

ILLUSTRATION: MAXIME MOUYSSET

Illustration: MAXIME MOUYSSET

—@milked_, via Twitter

Honorable Mentions:

Smelt decommissioned weapons into musical instruments. —

@casinclair, via Twitter

Climate app tracks local CO₂ levels. —@big_big_love, via Instagram

Global oral history keeps memories alive. —@johnkellybabb, via Instagram

Save the world by planting trees. —Lilá Tückér, via Facebook

Redistribute medical supplies to the underinsured. —@jesmakes, via Instagram

Community-based renewable energy power grids. —@uniquetoybox, via Twitter

Digital democracy with backing in blockchain. —@jackranado, via Twitter

Life after death—donate your DNA. —@beyond_mike, via Instagram

FEBRUARY 2020

A Story About Rebooting Democracy

ILLUSTRATION: MAXIME MOUYSET

Illustration: Maxime Mouysset

—@dmcdev, via Instagram

Honorable Mentions:

Twitter analytics determines 2040 presidential winner. Alan Grover Daniel, via Facebook

Randomly selected leader is Citizen 42034. @abhshkshtty, via Instagram

For the people. By the droids. Steve Fabian, via Facebook

Mathematics draws districts; cryptography verifies votes. @boomerdell, via Instagram

Turn off the internet for good. Colin Kiernan, via Facebook

Humans vote artificial intelligence to power. @atin.roy, via Instagram

Vote. Vote. Vote. Vote. Vote. @mistermush1991, via Instagram

Person with the most Instagram comments wins. @jmscml, via Instagram

JANUARY 2020

A Story About a Rosy Future for Facial Recognition

ILLUSTRATION: MAXIME MOUYSET

Illustration: MAXIME MOUYSET

—@henriquegeirinhas, via Instagram

Honorable Mentions:

Of course I remember you ... Kim! @kanaafa, via Instagram

My twin pays all my bills. @keegan1942, via Instagram

Among myriads, her son was found. @ichbinsubatomic, via Instagram

Vitality low—personalized prescription dispatched today. @leniway, via Instagram

Technological mirrors provide value-neutral feedback.
@philosophy_at_work, via Instagram

Your face will become your passport. @sayzey, via Instagram

'80s makeup has a huge revival. @jamesw1981, via Twitter

Smile registered, thanks for your purchase. @mhicheal_l, via Instagram

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[Virginia Heffernan](#)

[Ideas](#)

Mar 1, 2023 7:00 AM

It's Time to Fall in Love With Nuclear Fusion—Again

Let's indulge: Once fusion arrives, handmade suns could wipe out all human problems in a go.

PHOTOGRAPH: SHAWN MICHAEL JONES

If nuclear fission is associated with catastrophe, nuclear fusion is associated with delay and fraud. The joke about fusion, the synthesis of lab-grown stars, is that it's always 10 years away. Or 20. Two lonely little isotopes, each with a pathetically low mass, are joined in holy electromagnetism in a massive artificial thunderclap. The remaining nucleus is smaller than the mass of the reacting nuclei, and the leftover mass is converted into light or heat by virtue of $E = mc^2$.

But what a utopia fusion seems to promise. Even with the jokes and equivocation and scams, it's hard to be *blassé* about fusion's stellar possibilities. So let's indulge: Once fusion arrives, *handmade suns*, sources of unlimited clean energy, would—*will*—wipe out all human problems in a go. Our glorious pet stars, requiring only everyday hydrogen to whip up in a lab, won't belch out carbon or radioactive waste. Instead they'll exhale helium. [Helium!](#) That nonrenewable resource that's already running low! Fusion, my friends, means not just [infinite carbonless energy](#) but more balloons.

Fusion will, of course, rescue the environment and decarbonize planet Earth in a cool afternoon. It will also—don't stop me now—render irrelevant all the dead-eyed petroleum kleptocracies and trade wars and real wars waged

in their name. When energy can be produced anywhere, with common household ingredients, authoritarian states will no longer derive despotic authority by accidents of geography, but will, *whoosh*, become secular democracies, the better to share fusion-reactor tips and tricks in happy glasnost and savor the collective joy and peace of a burning, flooding planet restored to tranquil shades of green and blue.

Even leaving aside the Shangri-la, fusion is exciting here and now. In December 2022—a solid century since physicists first identified fusion as the source of star power—American scientists at the National Ignition Facility in Livermore, California, where ignition is a way of life, had a breakthrough. They'd aimed 192 lasers at the inside of a pearl-sized gold can called a hohlraum, creating a radiation bath that heated up the outside of a peppercorn-sized spherical nubbin of hydrogen coated in diamond in the center of the little can.

Atoms flew off the nubbin, forcing it to implode at a speed of nearly 400 kilometers per second—about four times a bolt of lightning. This created 100 million-degree plasma under hundreds of billions of atmospheres of pressure—a gas so hot that electrons were freed from atomic nuclei. At 1:03 am on December 5, humanity hit the threshold for fusion ignition in a lab. The first flash of a handmade sun. Though it blinked out rather quickly, after less than 100 trillionths of a second, the reaction created 3.15 megajoules of energy when a mere 2.05 went in—a glorious 150 percent return on investment.

Somewhat discouragingly, the first thought of the US Department of Energy, which its publicity team spelled out in an admittedly cool sci-fi video, was that this fusion ignition could somehow “support” the government’s project to extend the lifespan of nuclear *weapons*. But never mind. With at least 30 private fusion companies across the world promising clean energy built on the Livermore breakthrough, the air is supercharged with Kennedy-era electrons of hope. According to a survey from the Fusion Industry Association, most of these companies believe fusion electricity will be on the grid by the 2030s. It’s time to fall in love with fusion as if we’ve never been hurt before.

But it's always good to keep your wits about you when it comes to fusion promises. Whenever both paradise and vast riches are at hand, fraudsters make their move. On March 23, 1989, before an audience of feather-haired University of Utah students and at least one member of the presiding bishopric of the Church of Latter-Day Saints, electrochemists Stanley Pons and Martin Fleischmann declared—no peer-reviewed nothing in sight—that they had “established a sustained nuclear fusion reaction.” Holding up something that looked like a baby’s bottle with a pen in it, Pons told the room that they had driven deuterium into a metal rod at room temperature using garden-variety electrochemical techniques. Presto, they’d formed a new atom. “There is a considerable release of energy,” Pons said. “We’ve demonstrated that this could be sustained. In other words, much more energy is coming out than we’re putting in.”

OK, then.

Lest anyone doubt that these chemists (curious: not nuclear physicists) had really made their own atom, Pons assured the audience that he and Fleischmann had found nuclear reaction byproducts: evidence of fusion. What’s more, the heat generated by their tabletop experiment was attributable to those byproducts alone. It “cannot be explained by any chemical process that is known,” he said, with a note of irritation.

Almost immediately, other electrochemists aimed to replicate the results. They failed. Other (known) chemical processes seemed to be generating the heat. When Pons and Fleischmann published a paper at last, their work was savaged as a sham. They’d misrepresented their byproducts. The two men fled for France, where they worked for a Toyota research lab; they were never fined or even sidelined from science. But the abracadabra hypothesis of “cold fusion” came under a pall. Today, those who keep faith in it have formed a kind of aggrieved mini-cult. In the curious state of mind that anti-vax doctors are known for, the cold-fusion crew dug in, and its members now grouse about having been blackballed from elite journals and reputable conferences.

The latest Livermore discoveries are carefully described as hot fusion.

To those in whose dreams fused nuclei dance, the cold-hot distinction is consoling. The lukewarm nothingburger of the George H. W. Bush era seems worlds away from real fusion, the white-hot variety produced by Energy Secretary Jennifer Granholm's avant-garde DOE. What's a homemade sun without otherworldly heat?

The National Ignition Facility is a 10-story laser complex the width of three football fields, and its imposing size makes the Pons-Fleischmann tabletop charade even more laughable. And this time with fusion, the renowned physicists—including Tammy Ma, a plasma physicist; Annie Kritcher, an experimental physicist; and Kim Budil, a laser physicist and the director of the Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory—did not jump the gun with a prepublication press conference and set off a failed replication jam among peer scientists. Instead, for decades, scientists at the National Ignition Facility have been piling up papers, detailing most recently how ignition via fusion was possible (in August 2021) and then how it happened (in December 2022).

Along the way, statements to the media from LLNL have offered more science than prophecy. Kritcher, the lead designer of one of the 2021 experiments and first author on one of the resulting papers, explained how her team brought fusion to the threshold of fusion ignition. She concentrated not on grandiose promises but on the crucial challenge to anyone trying to fuse atomic nuclei: The laser energy must make it into the beams and hit the hydrogen target. One improvement? “Reducing the coasting-time with more efficient hohlraums compared to prior experiments was key in moving between the burning plasma and ignition regimes,” she said.

Heat, light, matter: It's supremely satisfying when the most advanced technology on earth is also the most elemental. I'm here to enlist in this ignition regime, especially if it means the reign of nuclear fusion and the simultaneous twilight of carbon and kleptocracy. But you know me: I'm in anyway, even if the ignition regime is, for now, just an ongoing spark of hope that humans can still improve the world somehow by studying hot plasma and beaming lasers into gold cans.

POSTSCRIPT. I've been writing this column for WIRED since 2018. I've written about [beavers](#) and [muons](#), the [Tesla bot](#) and [Mark Zuckerberg](#), [eyesight](#) and [plague literature](#), [methamphetamines](#) and [healthful Netflix binges](#). My aim was to explore the ways that technology partakes of two aesthetics: the uncanny and the sublime. The metaverse, artificial intelligence, social media, nuclear fusion: All of it generates—will always generate—astonishment. It will also generate unease, disgust, even terror. Whether an observer is an opponent or proponent of technology is beside the point. It is the air we breathe. I'm turning to features and essays for WIRED now, but it's been a profound honor to write this column and to share the digital atmosphere with you.

This article appears in the March 2023 issue. [Subscribe now.](#)

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[Paul Ford](#)

[Ideas](#)

Feb 12, 2023 7:00 AM

God Did the World a Favor by Destroying Twitter

Remember what happened with the Tower of Babel? Same type of deal.

Illustration: James Marshall

“Happy to talk about it if this is interesting,” [Marc Benioff](#), the founder of Salesforce, texted [Elon Musk](#) last spring. He continued, opaquely: “Twitter conversational OS—the townsquare for your digital life.” This is how billionaires communicate: in slogans, brand identities, and occasional large sums. It’s up to everyone else to figure out the details.

“Well I don’t own it yet,” Musk replied. (To be fair, he was fielding a lot of texts at that moment.) But then he did own it, and by winter the [Twitter](#) takeover was a giant, thorny public mess. Whatever magic spell kept people together on the platform seemed to have broken. It was like the plot of *Encanto* without the happy ending: “The graveyard for your digital life.”

Twitter’s troubles are due not just to Musk, who appears to be both shooting himself in the foot and cauterizing the wound with his own brand of flamethrower. No, Musk is merely the vehicle. The real reason Twitter lies in ruins is because it was an abomination before God. It was a Tower of Babel.

People usually interpret Genesis 11:1–9 as a mythological explanation of why we have so many tribes, so many languages. The story goes that the descendants of Noah were living in Shinar, all speaking one tongue, and decided to build a skyscraper that would let them walk straight into heaven.

God went *Not in my backyard!* and scattered the people, confounding their language. I like to think that God also personally demolished the tower, but that story is apocryphal (Jubilees 10:26).

God does the wrath thing a lot in the Old Testament, punishing humans who would challenge divine authority. It makes sense to read the story of Babel in that light. But having lived through the past couple decades of the internet, I believe the story carries a different lesson. I'm an atheist, so take this theory with a grain of salt, or maybe even a pillar: God wasn't keeping us out of heaven, smiting us for our arrogance. God was protecting us from ourselves.

Every five or six minutes, someone in the social sciences publishes a PDF with a title like "Humans 95 Percent Happier in Small Towns, Waving at Neighbors and Eating Sandwiches." When we gather in groups of more than, say, eight, it's a disaster. Yet there is something fundamental in our nature that desperately wants to get everyone together in one big room, to "solve it." Our smarter, richer betters (in Babel times, the king's name was Nimrod) often preach the idea of a town square, a marketplace of ideas, a centralized hub of discourse and entertainment—and we listen. But when I go back and read Genesis, I hear God saying: "My children, I designed your brains to scale to 150 stable relationships. Anything beyond that is overclocking. You should all try Mastodon."

So people are fleeing the tower by the millions, or at least shopping the real estate elsewhere—[Discord](#), [TikTok](#), [Tumblr](#), [YouTube](#), [Instagram](#), WeChat, Weibo, Moj. And some are finding their tribes in the Fediverse, the set of decentralized web apps that includes [Mastodon](#).

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The Fediverse is, by design, thousands of servers in many languages. They are cheap to run, at least for small groups, and relatively easy to administer. You can chat among your server kin—or blog, or podcast, or share images and videos—and connect with servers in the outside world. The Fediverse apps are all built on a set of rules called the ActivityPub standard, which is

a little like HTML had sex with a calendar invite. It's a content polycule. The questions it evokes are the same as with any polycule: What are the rules? How big can this get? Who will create the chore chart?

The true beauty of Mastodon and similar services is that they are designed to collapse. If you want to quit a server, you can take all your followers and follows with you. If a server shuts off, you can find another. It's not one guy. It accepts that as we centralize and debate we melt down, and so it comes with a giant sticker that reads: Babel built in!

How will these smaller groups of happier people be monetized? This is a tough question for the billionaires. Happy people, the kind who eat sandwiches together, are boring. They don't buy much. Their smartphones are six versions behind and have badly cracked screens. They fix bicycles, then they talk about fixing bicycles, then they show their friend, who just came over for no reason, how they fixed their bicycle, and their friend says, "Wow, good job," and they make tea. That doesn't seem like enough to build a town square on.

But someone will figure out the details. The reason the Babel story matters is not that it happened once but that it happens over and over: We Babelize and de-Babelize. The internet is an engine of both processes. Eventually, brands will find purchase in Mastodon's rocky soil and grow engagement. Billionaires will order the construction of new marketplaces of ideas. Everything will centralize again, and it will seem eternal, as if the tower could never fall. For now, let's enjoy the scattering.

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[Paul Ford](#)

[Ideas](#)

Feb 3, 2023 9:00 AM

A New Drug Switched Off My Appetite. What's Left?

Mounjaro did what decades of struggle with managing weight couldn't. Welcome to the post-hunger age.

Illustration: Ohni Lisle

A decade ago I lost 100 pounds. I did it in my web-nerd way—by building a custom content management system using the Django framework in the [Python](#) programming language. Every day I would enter calories ingested, calories expended through exercise, my [weight](#), and whatever thoughts occurred to me. It became a job. I produced charts and compared the results of different kinds of exercise. I put it all online at OHЛИH.com, which stood for One Huge Lesson in Humility.

It worked very well. For the first time in my life my doctor seemed glad to see me. People noticed. They said: Are you going to [open-source](#) this? Sure I was! Of course, I knew that scientists had found, in study after study, that basically everyone who loses weight gains it back, and then some. But there was no chance I would eat my way back to misery. I had a system! And a PostgreSQL database! And I could buy pants in a normal department store! Guess what happened.

Obviously [genetics](#) were a factor. (I remember when my uncle died, someone whispered, “My God, how much does this funeral *weigh*?”) What health professionals call my morbid obesity—that “morbid” is a helpful reminder—is what you see. But it’s a side effect of what I am, which is insatiable. Literally: I never seem to feel full. In practice this means that at

certain times of day, I watch in horror as my body reaches for the cheapest, easiest calories nearby—out of the pantry, out of a vending machine, at a party. I scream, “Stop!” But the hand keeps reaching.

While culture kept making smaller airplane seats, science backed me up: Humans are servants of their satiety.

You might say: Come off it! What happened to good old-fashioned willpower? There’s a sin for this—it’s called gluttony! Or you might say something less judgy-sounding that means the same thing. All I can say is I tried: I downloaded [calorie-tracking apps](#). I taught my phone to buzz every 15 minutes to remind me that I should not eat. I paid therapists to train me on better behaviors, researched gastric bypass, rode my bicycle, talked with experts, experimented with radical self-acceptance. Nothing stuck. While culture kept making smaller airplane seats, science backed me up: Humans are servants of their satiety. Even gastric bypass falters for lots of people.

While it is possible—more possible than many think—to be fat and healthy, and sometimes I managed that, I could feel my health slipping, prescriptions adding up in the cabinet. So I accepted that, well, I knew how I would die, and that we might need an extra pallbearer. (I can make that joke.) A pretty good life, save for that one thing. I put money away for my kids, and every day I tried and failed to solve a lonely puzzle of self.

Then one day my endocrinologist was reviewing my A1C blood sugar levels as we Zoomed. He had me on Ozempic, a weekly shot that stimulates the body’s insulin production, which makes it a great alternative to insulin injections for type 2 diabetics. The drug’s side effects include slower digestion and increased satiety. You may have heard of it because it’s increasingly prescribed for weight loss (and is linked to many Hollywood diets). I’d been on it for a while and lost a few pounds, and I appreciated it, but the shrieking satiety siren had never ceased.

“Well,” my doctor said, “if you’re not losing weight with Ozempic, try Mounjaro.” This one was FDA-approved last May, with an atrocious name. So off I went, from one shot to the other, from Novo Nordisk to Eli Lilly. Whatever.

“Something’s happened,” I told my wife. She is a veteran of watching me try to fix my body. I told her: Where before my brain had been screaming, screaming, at air-raid volume—there was sudden silence. It was confusing. Would it last?

I went alone that night to a Chinese restaurant, the old-school kind with tables, and ordered General Tso’s. I ate the broccoli, a few pieces of chicken, and thought: too gloopy. I left it unfinished, went home in confusion, a different kind of sleepwalker. I passed bodegas and shrugged. At an office I observed the stack of candies and treats with no particular interest.

Decades of struggle—poof. Apparently the Mounjaro molecule targets the same hormone as Ozempic, plus a second one, so it doesn’t just stimulate insulin production but also boosts energy output.

“I urgently need,” I thought, “an analog synthesizer.” Something to fill the silence where food used to be. Every night for weeks I spent four, five hours twisting Moog knobs. Not making music. Just droning, looping, and beep-booping. I needed something to obsess over, to watch YouTube videos about. I needed something to fail at every night to feel normal. And I was also manic, dysregulated, and wide-eyed, sleeping five hours a night, run-walking, with pressured speech; my friends, happy for me but confused, called me “cocaine Paul.” I bought more synthesizers off a guy from Craigslist, meeting him in Bushwick, Brooklyn, with a grand in cash. A body is not designed to lose 25 pounds in eight weeks, starting during the holidays. Beep. Boop.

With the relief come new anxieties. What if it stops working and I slide back into the vale of infinite noise? Compounding that, these drugs are hard to get, both because of supply chain problems and because they are being prescribed off-label for weight loss instead of diabetes. I can’t get a steady prescription from the pharmacy. I’m developing a rationing plan, stretching from an injection every seven days to one every eight or nine to build up a stockpile.

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I can see my anxiety mirrored in the wave of reactions starting to appear—op-eds, TV segments, people explaining why it's good, actually, that the vast majority of those using this drug lose a quarter of their body weight. On social media, fat activists are pointing out that our lives were worthy even without this drug. The wave of opinion will not crest for years.

And that's fair because this is new—not just the drug, but the idea of the drug. There's no API or software to download, but this is nonetheless a technology that will reorder society. I have been the living embodiment of the deadly sin of gluttony, judged as greedy and weak since I was 10 years old—and now the sin is washed away. Baptism by injection. But I have no more virtue than I did a few months ago. I just prefer broccoli to gloopy chicken. Is this who I am?

How long is it before there's an injection for your appetites, your vices? Maybe they're not as visible as mine. Would you self-administer a weekly anti-avarice shot? Can Big Pharma cure your sloth, lust, wrath, envy, pride? Is this how humanity fixes climate change—by injecting harmony, instead of hoping for it at Davos? Certainly my carbon footprint is much smaller these days. Are we going to get our smartest scientists together, examine the hormonal pathways, and finally produce a cure for billionaires?

When I let the domain name for my diet blog expire, I accepted that there was no technology that could change my biological responses to my own satiety. Now there is, and the part of me that tracked every meal, searched for solutions in apps and programs, wrote code, and took notes is obsolete. Was that time wasted? God, yes. But I did learn a ton—about nutrition, about exercise, about myself. All of those lessons are a joy to apply now, without the panic of self-destructive hunger.

Lately I'm finally less manic. Still losing weight, but much more slowly. Exercising more. At night I play with my synthesizers and watch online classes in music theory. Headphones on, processing all those years of futile effort. As I fiddle with knobs I am sometimes angry, sometimes ashamed,

and often grateful. I don't know how long this post-appetite era will last, or how it will end. Just that, once again in our lives, everything has changed.

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[Meghan O'Gieblyn](#)

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Jan 17, 2023 8:00 AM

Mental Health Apps Won't Get You Off the Couch

WIRED's spiritual advice columnist on whether digital tools can solve a health crisis they helped create.

ILLUSTRATION: FATCHUROFI MUHAMMAD

“Everyone's so gung ho about therapy these days. I've been curious myself, but I'm not ready to commit to paying for it. A mental health app seems like it could be a decent stepping stone. But are they actually helpful?”

—Mindful Skeptic

Dear Mindful,

The first time you open Headspace, one of the most popular mental wellness apps, you are greeted with the image of a blue sky—a metaphor for the unperturbed mind—and encouraged to take several deep breaths. The instructions that appear across the firmament tell you precisely when to inhale, when to hold, and when to exhale, rhythms that are measured by a white progress bar, as though you're waiting for a download to complete. Some people may find this relaxing, although I'd bet that for every user whose mind floats serenely into the pixelated blue, another is glancing at the clock, eyeing their inbox, or worrying about the future—wondering, perhaps, about the ultimate fate of a species that must be instructed to carry out the most basic and automatic of biological functions.

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Spiritual Troubleshooting for the Digital Age

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Dyspnea, or shortness of breath, is a common side effect of anxiety, which rose, along with depression, by a whopping 25 percent globally between 2020 and 2021, according to a report from the World Health Organization. It's not coincidental that this mental health crisis has dovetailed with the explosion of behavioral health apps. (In 2020, they garnered more than \$2.4 billion in venture capital investment.) And you're certainly not alone, Mindful, in doubting the effectiveness of these products. Given the inequality and inadequacy of access to affordable mental health services, many have questioned whether these digital tools are “evidence-based,” and whether they serve as effective substitutes for professional help.

I'd argue, however, that such apps are not intended to be alternatives to therapy, but that they represent a digital update to the self-help genre. Like the paperbacks found in the Personal Growth sections of bookstores, such apps promise that [mental health](#) can be improved through “self-awareness” and “self-knowledge”—virtues that, like so many of their cognates (self-care, self-empowerment, self-checkout), are foisted on individuals in the twilight of public institutions and social safety nets.

Helping oneself is, of course, an awkward idea, philosophically speaking. It's one that involves splitting the self into two entities, the helper and the beneficiary. The analytic tools offered by these apps (exercise, mood, and sleep tracking) invite users to become both scientist and subject, taking note of their own behavioral data and looking for patterns and connections—that anxiety is linked to a poor night's sleep, for example, or that regular workouts improve contentedness. Mood check-ins ask users to identify their feelings and come with messages stressing the importance of emotional awareness. (“Acknowledging how we're feeling helps to strengthen our resilience.”) These insights may seem like no-brainers—the kind of intuitive knowledge people can come to without the help of automated prompts—but if the breathing exercises are any indication, these apps are

designed for people who are profoundly alienated from their nervous systems.

Of course, for all the focus on self-knowledge and personalized data, what these apps don't help you understand is why you're anxious or depressed in the first place. This is the question that most people seek to answer through therapy, and it's worth posing about our society's mental health crisis as a whole. That quandary is obviously beyond my expertise as an advice columnist, but I'll leave you with a few things to consider.

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Linda Stone, a researcher and former Apple and Microsoft executive, coined the term “screen apnea” to describe the tendency to hold one's breath or breathe more shallowly while using screens. The phenomenon occurs across many digital activities (see “email apnea” and “Zoom apnea”) and can lead to sleep disruption, lower energy levels, or increased depression and anxiety. There are many theories about why extended device use puts the body into a state of stress—psychological stimulation, light exposure, the looming threat of work emails and doomsday headlines—but the bottom line seems to be that digital technologies trigger a biological state that mirrors the fight-or-flight response.

It's true that many mental health apps recommend activities or “missions” that involve getting off one's phone. But these tend to be tasks performed in isolation (pushups, walks, guided meditations), and because they are completed so as to be checked off, tracked, and subsumed into one's overall mental health stats, the apps end up ascribing a utility value to activities that should be pleasurable for their own sake. This makes it more difficult to practice those mindfulness techniques—living in the moment, abandoning vigilant self-monitoring—that are supposed to relieve stress. By attempting to instill more self-awareness, in other words, these apps end up intensifying the disunity that so many of us already feel on virtual platforms.

Freud once pointed out that new technologies merely solve problems created by other technologies. To the common refrain that without the telephone, we'd be unable to hear the voices of our adult children who live hundreds of miles away, he replied, "If there had been no railway to conquer distances, my child would never have left his native town and I should need no telephone to hear his voice." Civilization, Freud believed, was nothing more than a repetition compulsion, humanity's attempt to replicate and reinscribe its fundamental disunity with nature through the very tools that created that alienation in the first place. Psychoanalysis may be a somewhat outmoded therapeutic framework, but it's one that takes human irrationality seriously, and perhaps offers insight into the absurd belief that we can use digital tools to solve a health crisis that is, at least in part, exacerbated by them.

I'm not recommending, Mindful, that you get "on the couch," necessarily—rather, that you think about getting off it.

The ordinary, and decidedly contemporary, brand of unhappiness that stems from excessive self-consciousness can be partly dispelled by immersing oneself in a throng of other people. Go to church, or to a 12-step meeting. Join a community sports league or attend a concert. While group activities may not address the underlying cause of your malaise, they will surely offer a reprieve. You'll momentarily forget your heart rate, your REM stats, and your wellness history and remember the existence of fellow human beings who are suffering, most likely, in similar ways. At some point, I suspect, you'll find that your breathing is taking care of itself.

Faithfully,

Cloud

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By [Anthony W. Lee](#)

[Ideas](#)

Dec 27, 2022 6:00 AM

AI or No, It's Always Too Soon to Sound the Death Knell of Art

When the camera arrived on the scene, painters declared art dead. Sound familiar?

Illustration: Getty Images

There's a hilarious illustration from Paris in late 1839, mere months after an early type of photograph called a daguerreotype was announced to the world, that warned what this tiny picture portended. In Théodore Maurisset's imagination, the daguerreotype would bring about a collective hysteria, *La Daguerréotypomanie*, in which crazed masses arrive from the ends of the earth and overrun a small photo studio. Some in the crowd want pictures of themselves, but, *mon Dieu*, others demand cameras to take their own pictures—Maurisset shows them loading the machines like contraband onto steamships bound for foreign ports—and still others throng simply to ogle at this newfangled thing and all the lunatic proceedings surrounding it. The clamor is so feverish that it brings about a mass hallucination, in which nearly everything else in the landscape around the studio, including railroad cars, a clock tower, a basket for a hot air balloon, indeed anything remotely boxy in shape, morphs into cameras. As they march to the studio, the crowds pass by half a dozen gallows, where in response to the daguerreotype's appearance artists have hung themselves. The people hardly notice.

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What a ruckus! What panic! And why not? Until the appearance of photography, painters had nearly a monopoly on artistic representation. Their craft was regarded as the primary means to concoct images. (Of course, printmakers and illustrators had their own ideas about the worth of their pictures, but painters usually thought of them more like lesser cousins.) But now those silly photographers, most of whom were rank amateurs or, worse, disloyal or failed artists, would get the job. Upon seeing a daguerreotype for the first time around 1840, the French painter Paul Delaroche, whose own students would soon defect to photography, was said to have cried out, “From today, painting is dead!”

The history of painting’s early relationship with photography is not perfectly analogous to the conundrum caused by today’s AI-made art. Image generators like DALL-E 2, Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion can riff on an existing painting in ways no camera could come close to. But compare Delaroche’s exclamation to the crowing of Jason Allen of Pueblo West, Colorado, who last September took home first prize for his AI-generated entry in an art competition at the annual state fair. The \$300 prize was modest, yes, but that didn’t stop Allen from gloating. “Art is dead, dude,” he said afterward. “It’s over. AI won. Humans lost.” New tools often have a way of stoking grand claims about their impact, and they also give us a chance to consider whether history has anything to teach us about the prognosis for them.

In the 19th century, painting, at least, did not die. Or even suffer a mild cold. Painters did not lose jobs, and Delaroche himself went on to paint some of his most monumental and ambitious work. I suspect he was never truly concerned about being replaced, and he and others played up the anxiety because it was juicy gossip, a chance to bellyache about the tastelessness or just plain vulgarity of critics, and actually good for business.

Still, Maurisset’s vision of the masses rampaging the landscape was not totally wrong. The number of people who wanted to sit before the camera or sought cameras for themselves were not only countless but diverse. They were generally of a very different group of patrons than those supporting painters, tending to be from the middle and working classes, whose

previous ability to buy or make images was almost nil. During an age that also included reforms to expand the vote, early activism for women's rights, and the abolition (first in the UK, then in the US) of slavery, the camera acquired something of a democratic air. Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist and former slave, was so taken with its possibilities that during his lifetime he had more than 160 different portraits made of himself—more than any other American in the 19th century—in the belief that through them he could insist on his self-worth and dignity. The camera was potentially everybody's tool (it wasn't exactly, but that was the promise to sitters like Douglass), and such a thing had rarely been said about painting.

In those early days, the two media tended to have different markets; painters reaffirmed and photographers had difficulty penetrating the exclusiveness in both the training and exhibition of the fine arts. Even the most skilled and art-minded photographers were always fighting the lowly status accorded their craft by the art establishment. Whereas painting as a studio practice became a standard college offering as early as the 1860s (at least in New England), it took photography another 75 years to find a tenuous footing in higher education. It was not until the 1930s that art museums began regularly buying and showing photographs.

This article appears in the February 2023 issue. [Subscribe to WIRED](#). Photograph: Peter Yang

The earliest cameras tended to be large contraptions, requiring a sturdy tripod and lots of finagling with chemicals to get a usable negative. They had very slow shutters and needed lots of light, and because the negatives needed developing and fixing right away, they almost always required a darkroom within shouting distance. They therefore tended to be best suited for subjects that remained rooted in place: trinkets and knickknacks around the house, buildings, landscapes and cityscapes—anything that didn't disturb focus or exposure. It was perhaps predictable, if gruesome, that when early photographers went to the warfront, they sought not the intense action of a battle but the dead bodies that could be found afterward. The pictures that resulted, ironically, promoted even more those stilled or frozen subjects among painters, and they eventually helped reverse the hierarchy

of painterly ambition, from the pursuit of complicated narrative paintings to scenes and objects of everyday life.

In addition to the effects on *what* to see, cameras brought a new awareness to the nuances of *how* to see. Especially after manufacturers introduced the humble handheld camera, painters discovered modes of looking previously considered unworthy of the canvas: the casual glance, the momentary glimpse, the uncomfortable stare; or, in a bawdier vein, the paparazzi glare, the voyeuristic peek, the secret spying. Beyond that with the camera there is always the risk of the blur, the out-of-focus, the unintended, and the serendipitous; and it is one of the orthodoxies in the history of art that modernist modes of expression explored all of them. Indeed, it's hard to look at some masterpieces from the late 19th century—say, all those sun-drenched, blurry haystacks by Monet, or the leafy, happy café scenes of Renoir, or those weirdly placed, yawning, stretching, off-kilter ballerinas by Degas—and not recognize the impact of photographs.

The influence went the other way, too. To photographers who fancied themselves artists (not those hustling “operators,” as they tended to call those they viewed as commercial hacks), the darkroom was like a painter’s studio, and the touching and retouching of the negative like a studio practice. Julia Margaret Cameron, the great Victorian photographer who re-created scenes from English literature, frequently made a mess of the large glass plate negatives. She got her fingerprints all over the emulsion, smudged the surface, over- and under-exposed the print, and awkwardly highlighted the out-of-focus and accidental portions of the image. To a commercial photographer, those were imperfections to avoid. To Cameron, who was independently wealthy and cared little for public opinion, they were aspects to cultivate because they most resembled the idiosyncratic choices and hand-crafted manipulations of the genius-painter.

Those photographers who actually cared about opinion and profit, too, regularly cropped and edited their negatives, drew on them to darken contours or outline figures, scratched out details that were ugly or bothersome, and generally helped produce useable prints for their patrons. In all of these manipulations, they relied on an aesthetic sensibility cultivated by painters. A portrait or a landscape looked *right* when they

looked like a painter's version. The very first photographic team in Scotland incorporated this understanding into their process: Robert Adamson, an engineer and millwright by training, took the photographs and handed the negatives over to his partner, David Octavius Hill, a painter by profession, to gussy them up. For portraiture, the trade journals soon began to coin a phrase, "the Rembrandt style," to signal the example the photographer ought to follow in directing the lighting and positioning the sitter so as to get a proper image. And in a phrase that revealed the associations that some photographers wanted to cultivate about their craft, the journals regularly referred to them as "sun painters" who used that cosmic source of light as a "painterly" tool.

For all that, photography was still regarded by most contemporaries as a technology that bypassed the human touch. The sun, camera, lens, shutter, and silvered surface seemed to do all the work; the operator appeared merely to get the process going. Sure, it may have required knowledge of chemicals, glass, and optics (and a tolerance for noxious fumes), but those were thought peripheral to artistry—peripheral to the painter's central and customary concerns with oils and brushes and the translation of feeling and thought into visual expression. It's not exactly the same as the accusations of lack of imagination or originality that many artists make of AI-generated pictures today. But the point is taken: The new tool is ersatz and colorless.

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From the perspective of 1839, perhaps the most unlikely development in the fine-art scene was the opportunity for collaboration. To many early observers, the black-and-white image produced by the camera was a sign of its novelty and modernity, but the craze was quickly augmented by the demand for color. In response, photographers started hiring painters, who busily went about adding all sorts of colorful details to photographs, frequently with oil paint but also water colors, crayons, even chalk. The practice, begun early in Europe and later especially popular and refined in Japan, took on a more flamboyant quality in the United States, where photographers unapologetically appealed to vanity. A sitter wanted rosier

cheeks? You got it! Maybe some blue eyes? Let's try different shades! Or how about a sitter who simply wanted something that she couldn't bring to the studio (or maybe couldn't afford), like a diamond ring? Done! Over time, the collaborations occasionally became more structured. In the treaty ports of China, for example, some entrepreneurs set up businesses that had separate photography and painting departments and offered both media to clients.

Pace the pronouncements of Delaroche and Maurisset—and, in our time, Jason Allen—it's always too soon to sound the death knell of painting or painters. Painting as a fine art will persist; a massive portion of the high-end gallery scene promotes and relies on it to this day. And for many, the tactility of putting brush on canvas is an intimate and joyous form of expression that simply cannot be replaced. But if the example of painting's dance with photography in the 19th century is any indication, there will be a period of mutual influence, of give and take, perhaps of collaboration, between artist and machine. As Degas once told a painter friend who wanted nothing to do with newfangled amusements, "You need the natural life. I, the artificial."

This article appears in the February 2023 issue. [Subscribe now](#).

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By [WIRED Staff](#)

[Culture](#)

Dec 27, 2022 6:00 AM

Classic WIRED Covers— Regenerated by AI

We asked some of our favorite artists to re-create their work using new image generators.

“A cover of wired magazine featuring a graphic close photographic portrait of a man wearing smart eyeglasses, a smart watch, and various HUDS”
A.I. ILLUSTRATIONS BY IAN ALLEN + OPEN AI/DALL-E 2

[Picture Limitless Creativity at Your Fingertips](#)
[Lessons from the History of Photography](#)

Though it was only a matter of time before automation came for creativity, the advent of AI art generators has been divisive in the creative community. Some artists have embraced the new tech; others believe it’s #notreal. We at WIRED have spent a lot of time sorting out our own reactions. Undeniably, the technology comes with issues—economic, ethical, legal. At the same time, it expands opportunities for art and artistry. WIRED will always come down on the side of the future. That means encouraging the use of new tools, while refusing to allow those tools to replace human creators.

AI image generators don’t just spit out random acts of art. They must be “prompted”—carefully guided by their human users. (The prompt is the real art form, Kevin Kelly argues in [a recent essay](#).) So we asked eight of our favorite artists to re-create their original WIRED covers using these new tools. Judge the results for yourself. —**WIRED Art Department**

WIRED Issue 21.10

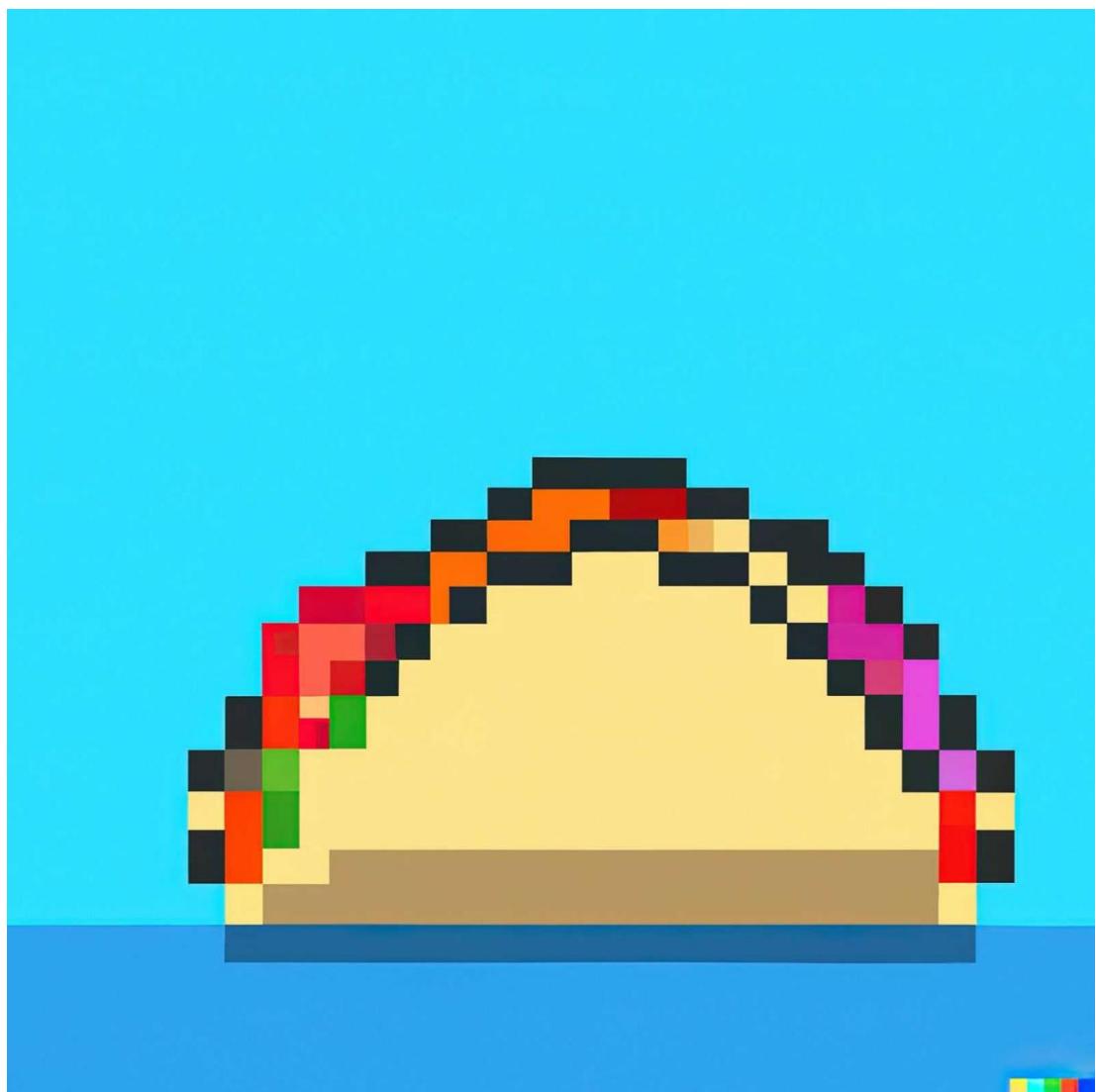
PHOTOGRAPH: DAN WINTERS

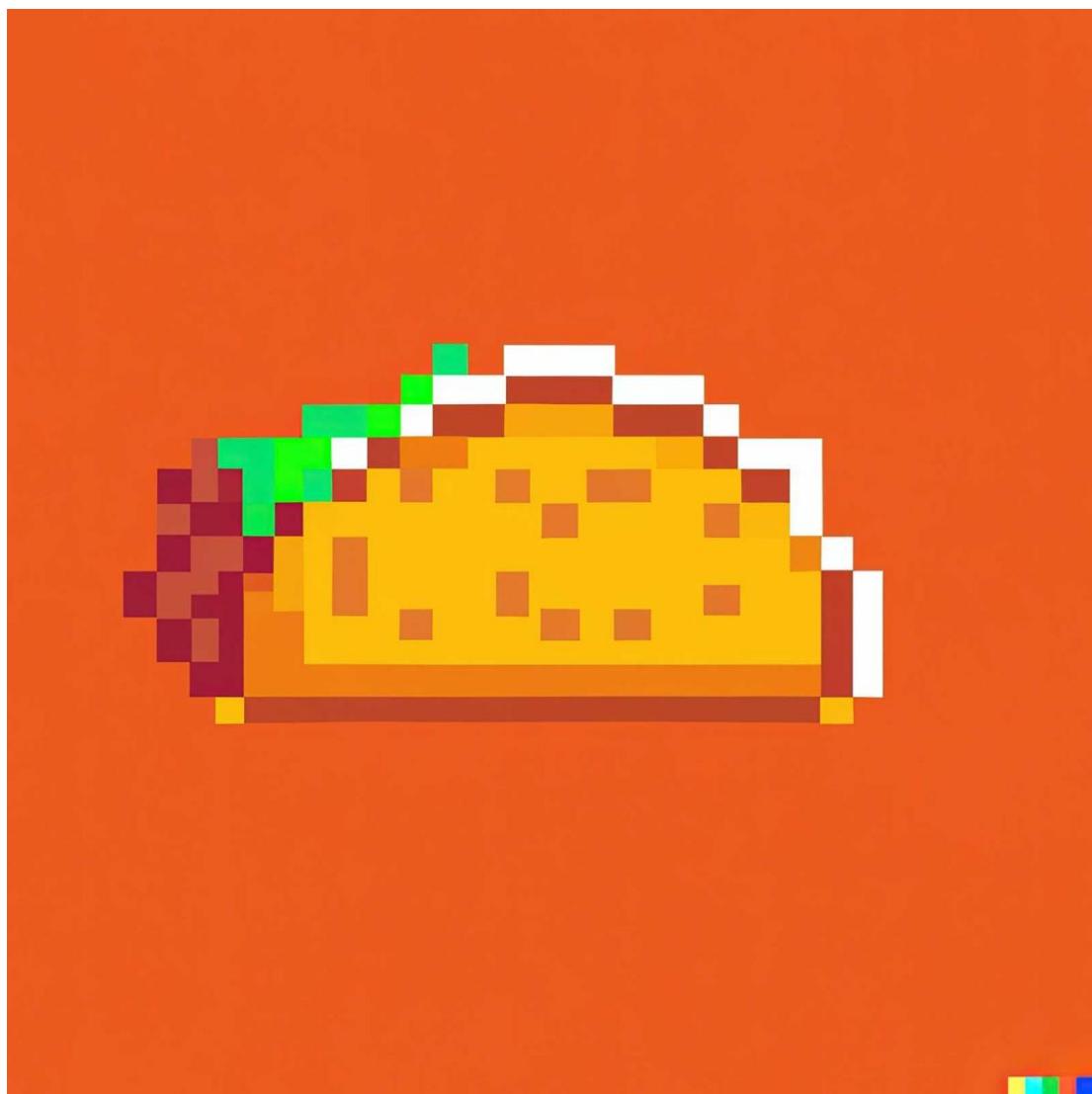
Dan Winters, Photographer

“Using the AI was entertaining and somewhat inspirational, especially with complex prompts. I couldn't be happier with the results—this is actually a better cover than the one that ran.”

Prompt Example: “Pixelated taco centered on robins egg blue solid color”







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A.I. ILLUSTRATIONS BY DAN WINTERS + OPEN AI/DALL-E 2

WIRED Issue 22.10

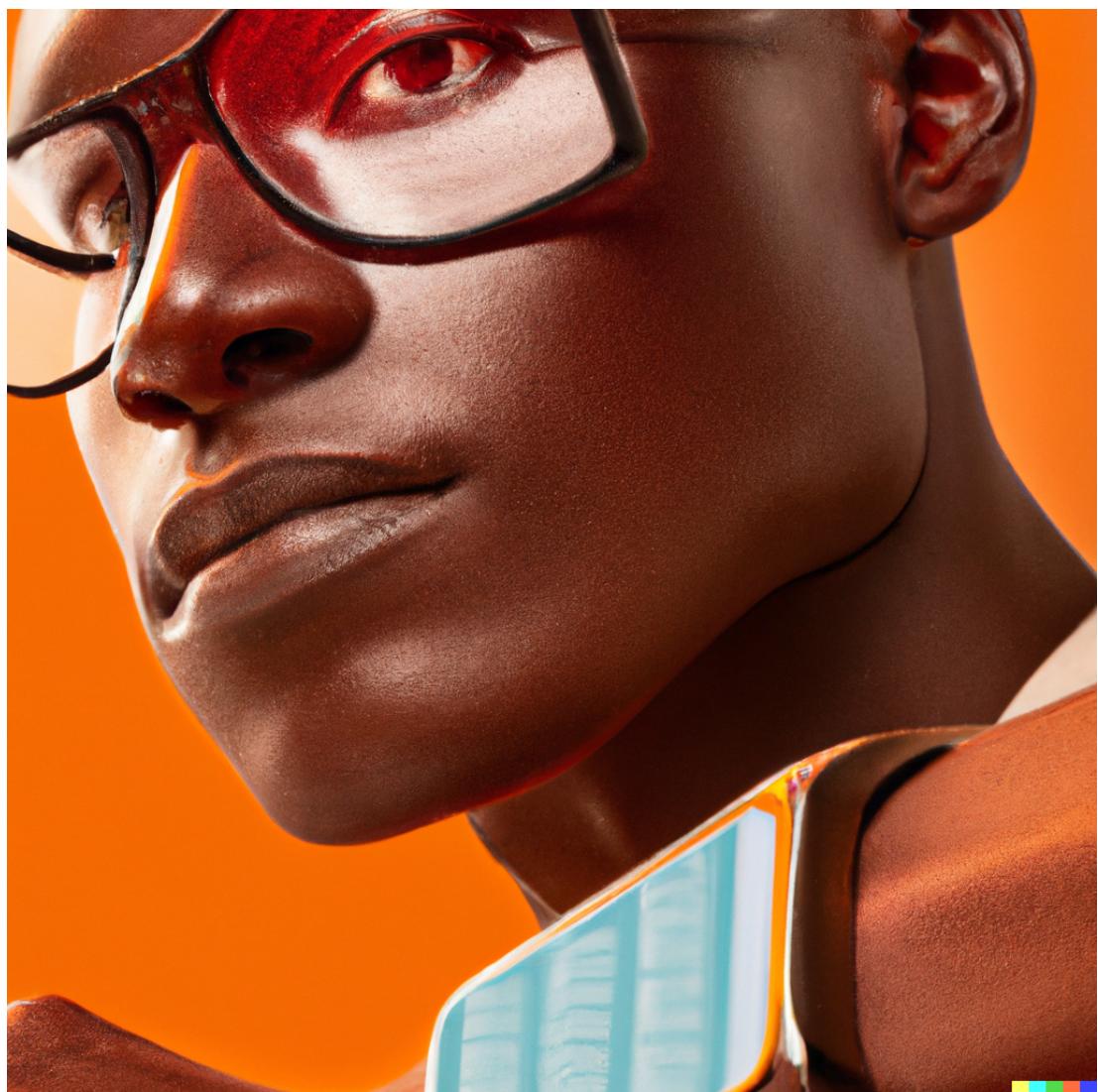
PHOTOGRAPH BY: IAN ALLEN

Ian Allen, Photographer

“It’s currently not amazing. But it’s also not terrible.”

Prompt Example: “A graphic close photographic portrait of a man wearing google glasses and various HUDs”







1 / 10



A.I. ILLUSTRATIONS BY IAN ALLEN + OPEN AI/DALL-E 2

WIRED Issue: 26.12

DESIGN: MARGARET SWART

Margaret Swart, Design Director

"I've been trying to better articulate to myself the differences between prompting DALL-E and working with an illustrator. This is where I landed: Aside from the fact that DALL-E works in a more literal world of "things,"

it also gave me repurposed versions of the information that I supplied. I think that's the most important aspect. Illustrators think differently than I do. They take the information that I supply, and then they expand on it. They do their own supplementary research, and they offer alternate approaches and unexpected solutions. Some of the DALL-E results were unexpected for sure, but they were based (it appeared) on random data-crunching from the details I provided. Because I wasn't providing the unexpected ideas in the prompts, I didn't get the innovative solutions. AI (or at least this version thereof) has a huge reserve of data, but not the curiosity and the experience to look at a concept from a different POV—an artist's POV. I don't see severing ties with my illustrator database anytime soon.”

Prompt Example: “Type illustrations ‘Less’ ‘Artificial’ ‘More’ ‘Intelligent’”

WIRED - 26.09

WIRED

DEC 2018 INTEL INSIDE

lees-

MORE MORE MORE

LESS ARTIFICIAL, MORE INTELLIGENT

ALTISSIMUS

INTELLIGENT INTUITIVITY

CREATE. CONNECT. CONDÉ NAST

WIRED

WIRED 26.09

ESTEAS ATTRAELL LITETES*

DEC 2018 | INTEL INSIDE

CREATE. CONNECT. CONDÉ NAST

*Less Artificial, More Intelligent



1 / 4



A.I. ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARGARET SWART + OPEN AI/DALL-E 2

WIRED Issue: 28.03

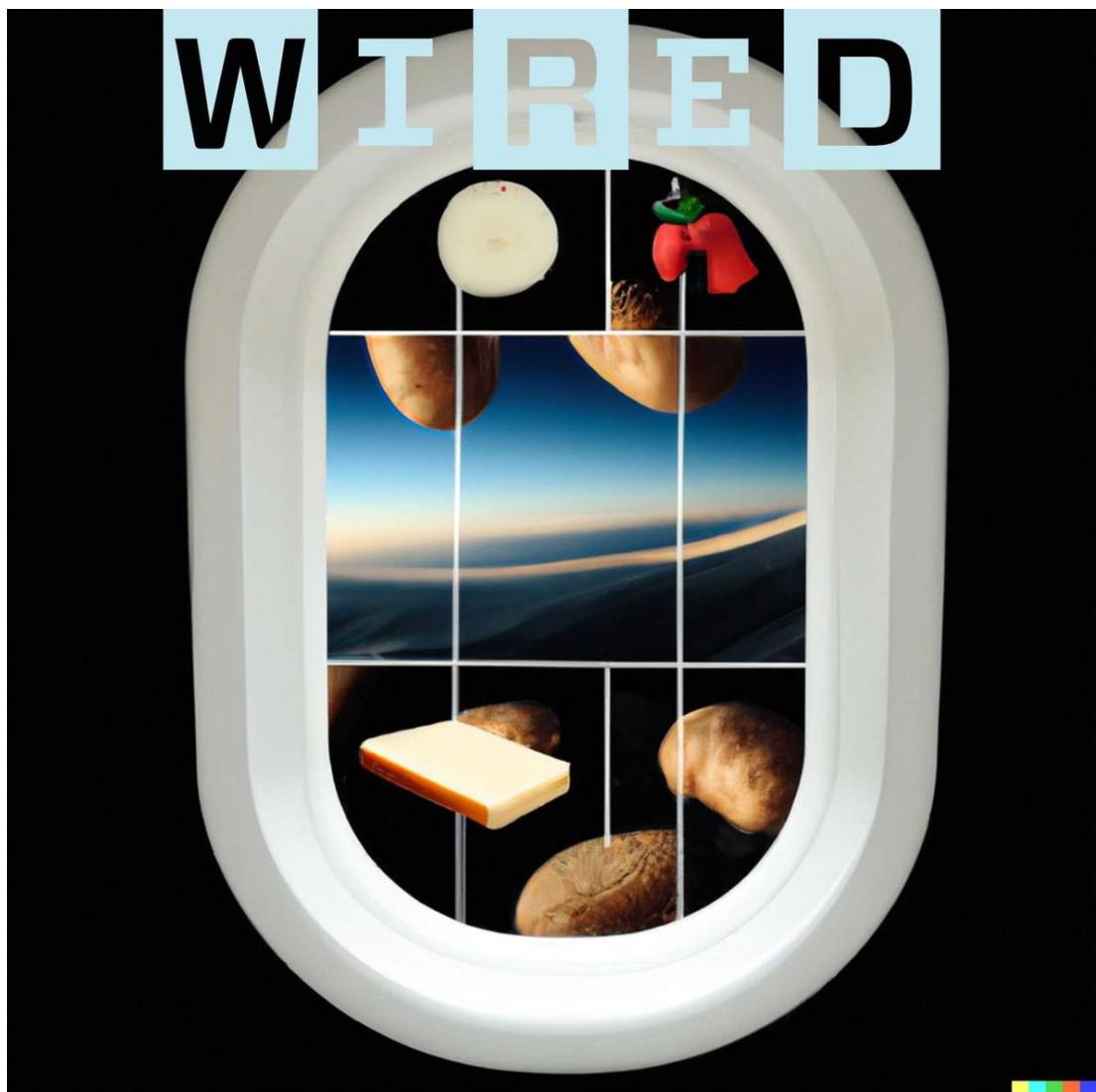
PHOTOGRAPH: STEPHANIE GONOT

Stephanie Gonot, Photographer

“As a photographer and image-lover, it was really fun to type in words in order to create an image, rather than wrangling my gear and props. The control I missed was made up for by the fun surprises. I started this exercise by trying to get as close to my cover image as possible. I got quite close! But as I tried to get even more specific in my description, the result got further and further away from my cover image. Then I tried typing in lines of the cover story and also the initial prompt I received when I was approached about the job. ‘The Care and Feeding of Interplanetary Civilization’ is a pleasing grouping of words, and I got both some really wacky and really beautiful results. I feel like DALL-E could be helpful to photo editors and art directors when coming up with an idea for a photoshoot. It’s nice to be able to create original references for a mood board rather than using images that already exist. I’m hooked!”

Prompt Example: “Mysterious photo of food floating in outerspace through a spaceship window”

WIRED







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A.I. ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEPHANIE GONOT + OPEN AI/DALL-E 2

WIRED Issue: 28.04

ILLUSTRATION: ALVARO DOMINGUEZ

Alvaro Dominguez, Illustrator

“Sometimes I add a couple of artists in order to get a more random style. Like, I love [Robert Irwin](#) and [Jonas Wood](#), two very different artists with nothing in common. So I add to the prompt 'in Jonas Wood style and Robert

Irwin style.' This adds a little bit of both in colors and shapes here and there. But as you can see, I added the words 'Jonas Wood' to almost every prompt, just to add some warmth and aliveness to a tech image."

Prompt Example: "3d render of an oil painting of planet earth as a machine at the top of a cliff with a control panel and a sky with clouds in the background, rainbows, pigeons, fireworks, in the style of jonas wood, in the style of robert irwin, in the style of dan flavin"







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A.I. ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALVARO DOMINGUEZ + OPEN AI/DALL-E
2

WIRED Issue: 28.09

PHOTOGRAPH: JESSICA PETTWAY

Jessica Pettway, Photographer

“The visual archive DALL-E is pulling from feels like one of the worst archives I’ve ever seen in terms of diversity in visual language and culture.

When trying to make my piece, certain words and phrases weren't returning logical results. For example, when searching 'woman wearing box braids,' the first results were white women in loose braids. When trying to explore the concept of digital blackface, it wasn't necessary to add 'caucasian' or 'white' to the search phrases because that was already the assumed default, even when searching items and themes specific to Black culture."

Prompt Example: "hoop earring," "mouth smiling wearing grills," "white hand with super long nails pointing"

A.I. ILLUSTRATIONS BY JESSICA PETTWAY + OPEN AI/DALL-E 2

WIRED Issue: 29.10

PHOTOGRAPH: SAM CANNON

Sam Cannon, Photographer

"DALL-E has an impressive dataset to pull from, but I did find some pleasure in the fact that, despite the 650 million image/caption pairs it uses to generate images, it wasn't able to render out a close replica of my cover. While it had no problem creating images with similar elements (needles, hands, pills) and mimicking the overall style (dark environment, harsh light from above), the abstract idea of a hand pushing through a pin screen was outside of its capabilities ... for now."

Prompt Example: "A 3D rendering of a figure with its head in its hands being pierced with thousands of needles, octane, harsh light"

WIRED







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A.I. ILLUSTRATIONS BY SAM CANNON + OPEN AI/DALL-E 2

Video: Sam Cannon

WIRED ISSUE: 30.06

ILLUSTRATION: PATRICK SAVILE

Patrick Savile, Designer and Illustrator

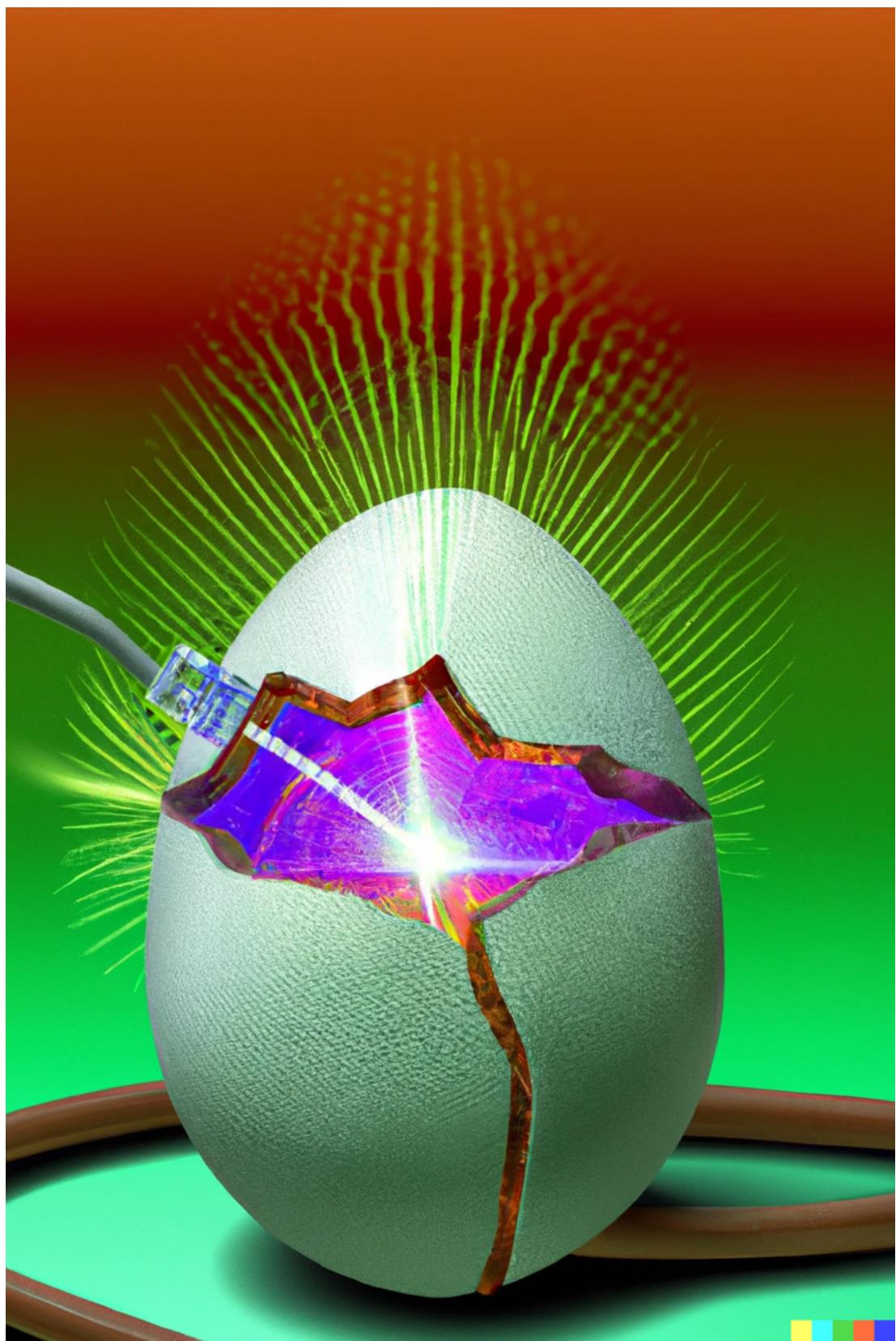
“It was kind of hard to get what I originally wanted, so I was shifting the concept around a bit until I could get an image as close to the idea in my head, which turned out to be egg-based.”

Prompt Example: “High detail airbrush painting of an egg cracking open containing clouds, storm clouds in the background, shimmering psychedelic colours, high contrast, masao saito, Michael whelan, hajime sorayama, high resolution”

WIRED









A.I. ILLUSTRATIONS BY PATRICK SAVILLE + OPEN AI/DALL-E 2

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By [Virginia Heffernan](#)

[Ideas](#)

Dec 13, 2022 7:00 AM

Let Twitter Devolve Into Porn

It's always pleasing to see things become what they deep down are.

Photograph: Shawn Michael Jones

Of All the threats posed by Twitter since it fell under sketchy new management in October, one of them doubles as a promise. Twitter will devolve into pornography.

Porn's not my cup of tea, but you have to admire its ferocity and cunning. It's a mega-genre, something the poet-philosopher Timothy Morton might call a [hyperobject](#), ungraspable in its ubiquity and scale. In effect, porn online behaves like a predator plant, saturating the pixels with flesh colors, choking off biodiverse memes, and sowing vast digital acreage with salt.

[Tumblr](#), which started as an artsy microblogging service in 2007, lost its allure when it was overrun by porn five years later. Chatroulette, which was founded in 2009 as a whimsical way to meet strangers, traded its lightheartedness for dick pics and leering goons almost immediately.

[OnlyFans](#), which began in 2016 as a platform for performers to post videos, now consists mostly of porn created by sex workers.

But most companies aim to marginalize porn. While OnlyFans has surrendered, Chatroulette and Tumblr appear to take a firmer stand than ever against it. Facebook and YouTube conscript armies of algorithms and humans to banish porn in deference to advertisers who don't want brands debased by unwholesome adjacencies. Alone among the big social media services, [Twitter](#) allows users to post what it calls "intimate media." But the platform also permanently suspends users who post upskirts, creepshots,

revenge porn, nonconsensual erotica, images shot with hidden cameras, or media accompanied by incitements to violence. Pornographic images, which make up about 13 percent of all tweets, cannot yet be directly sold.

Porn in its place may be bankable, in other words, but too much of it in a venue styled as PG can scare off much bigger revenue streams.

Or so popular wisdom has it. Twitter's new management, as usual, dissents. The volatile Chief Twit, Elon Musk, has torn down guardrails, eliminated moderators, and alienated advertisers all on his own with tiresome shitposting and hospitality to hate speech. Musk, whose personal fortune fell by \$100 billion in 2022, pretends to insouciance about money in a way that's unconvincing and hard to watch. When General Mills, General Motors, Pfizer, Ford, and Mondeléz International (the august maker of Oreos) stopped advertising on Twitter last fall, Musk lashed out at corporate America for its failure to respect the wishes of the founding fathers, who presciently mandated advertising on Twitter in 1789. Unchastened, half of the platform's top 100 advertisers were gone in Musk's first month.

Without moderators or advertisers, swaths of Twitter are now mangy empty lots crawling with vandals, lechers, con men, and swastikas. The time is perhaps right for porn, then. Porn abhors a vacuum. Especially where it can be ennobled as constitutional duty.

How in the world is this good news? I'll tell you why it's good news to *me*. Not only will it make Twitter2 easily quittable, but it's pleasing to see things become what they deep down are. Twitter has slouched toward porn for years. "Slipping into DMs" is only one salacious meme in what long ago became an orgy of hyperstimulation, with people baring their souls, posting thirst traps, coyly subtweeting, and of course negging and prodding and simultaneously secreting dopamine and cortisol and God knows what other precious bodily fluids.

"I am mad for it to be in contact with me," Walt Whitman wrote, of what he called "life's atmosphere." No doubt he also meant contact with the bodies of the many people he cruised and desired. Likewise, Twitter seems to offer contact with *everyone*, and the interface exists to make users mad for contact as it conjures life's atmosphere of abrasiveness streaked with

sweetness. The real Twitter was the friends we made along the way, as someone has surely tweeted.

That's gone now. When the chief rolls in with tryhard trolling that misses the mark of humor, squealing in annoying feedback loops from his Wall of Sound, the warm chatter among the regulars goes silent. A pall falls. When Musk tweeted some horror fiction alleging that the spouse of a prominent elected official might have been perversely complicit in cracking his own skull with a hammer, something at the heart of Twitter seemed to die. Later, when he bellowed that Twitter in 2020 had abridged the constitutional right of trolls to post a Hunter Biden dick pic, another influx of refugees poured into [Mastodon](#), which presents itself as a more normal haven for people fleeing Twitter.

“The Internet Is for Porn” was the catchiest song from *Avenue Q*, which debuted 20 years ago. That was before broadband, before social media, before the hijack of information space by influence operations and strongman solo acts like GOP trinity Kanye, Elon, and Trump. It was axiomatic back then. Porn was the internet’s reason for being, its prime directive. And it would have stayed that way had web information not been domesticated by corporations that wanted to hack our worldviews and pick our pockets for data, attention, and mobile payments.

But through all this, Twitter has retained the spirit of porn. Like porn, Twitter is not a family affair; for many, it’s also a shameful habit that they’re forever trying to quit. Since 2007, I’ve turned to Twitter to—the only word I can think of is *learn*. But I know its traps well. Users of Twitter, like consumers of porn, find themselves amused and stimulated, and then scroll compulsively, chasing the dragon of human connection, only to find themselves scrolling through doom, and finally scrolling *for* doom.

Information may or may not want to be free, but it often wants to be porn. What Musk has considered doing, according to various reports, is introduce paywalled video that would allow performers to get paid while Twitter takes a cut. Sound at all familiar? It’s the OnlyFans model, complete with a rip-off of the OnlyFans interface. The performers it’s tailor-made for are not, as it happens, cellists or mimes. They’re sex workers. And for discerning high rollers who prefer the backroom to the club, Musk has

floated the idea of offering paid DMs—to be slipped into as usual, but for a fee. The online-porn business demands extreme discipline to keep it from turning criminal and leaves room for little else, but edgelord Musk is likely to fare better in the demimonde than he is on the main stage.

At the very end of 2022, NSFW content was the fastest-growing sector of English-language Twitter. It's the way of the world, especially without diligent moderation. At the same time, the new louche Twitter comes with a harum-scarum idea of "free speech" as singularly applicable to obscene provocateurs like Jordan Peterson and Marjorie Taylor Greene, formerly banned figures who were warmly welcomed back to the site in November. "This is a battle for the future of civilization," the Chief Twit tweeted. "If free speech is lost even in America, tyranny is all that lies ahead."

If Twitter is going to prey on users with hyper-arousing material and the illusion of intimacy, why not go all the way? Twitter should admit what it's up to, tell risk-averse advertisers to go blow if they're prudes, and turn full red-light district. It might scare away the squares, but Twitter can charge a mint for spank-bank material, and a premium for the kind that somehow prevents tyranny.

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[Steven Levy](#)

[Backchannel](#)

Dec 6, 2022 9:00 AM

Tony Fadell Is Trying to Build the iPod of Crypto

The product guru made Ledger's new hardware wallet—a tiny vault for digital cash—flashy and fun. Plus, with this gadget you'll never get FTX'd. The Ledger Stax—a hardware wallet for crypto folk—has an E Ink touchscreen on which its owner can display an NFT. Its makers hope to attract more non-nerds to Web3. Photograph: Julien Faure

When I come to Paris to see Tony Fadell's new device, a clean rain has washed the city and the sun is out. Fadell and I hail a taxi. When he gives the address for Ledger—a maker of [hardware wallets](#) for the [cryptoverse](#)—he speaks in French, but even after six years abroad, there's still Detroit in his voice.

At the meeting we enter, everyone is speaking English. People are sitting at a large table. On the walls are labels such as PHOTO ASSETS, VIEW FROM LANDING PAGE, USER FLOW, with big printouts taped below. Fadell strides to the front of the room.

This article appears in the February 2023 issue. [Subscribe to WIRED](#). Photograph: Peter Yang

“We've got seven weeks to pull this off,” he says. “*Are we going to pull this off?*”

The people in the room say yes, they will pull it off. They sound confident, weary, but ready for the next round of work. Each person says what they

have done since the last time they met. Fadell responds with questions. *What's the drop-dead date on the plastic blanks? Where's the press release? Are we recording the click-click-click? I want to hear it!*

The click remark reminds everyone, as if they needed it, that Fadell once led the team at Apple that created [the iPod](#), with its elegant clicky wheel and revolutionary interface. He also cofounded Nest and created [its smart thermostat](#), which Google then acquired.

Fadell circles the room to examine the printouts, which describe the product rollout. A man with a video camera follows him, recording the moment for posterity and promotional use.

Tony Fadell hangs out in the Donjon, the security lab inside Ledger's Paris headquarters.

Photograph: Julien Faure

Fadell stops to examine a group of photos of the device: a hardware wallet called Ledger Stax. A hardware wallet is a utilitarian thing. It's a physical lock for digital secrets. When you own cryptocurrency, your balance is protected solely by a private key that can be devilishly hard to keep safe. [Ledger's wallets](#), made of steel and silicon (and, OK, plastic), act as tiny vaults, but so far they have been off-putting. [Much like crypto itself](#). Fadell is reinventing this gadget, his first major design project in years. He has come to believe that by giving it the panache of the hottest consumer gadgets, he will redirect the crypto field, just as he helped kick off digital music and the smart home.

Fadell looks at the photos of the credit-card-sized wallet and its innovative [E Ink](#) touchscreen. When Ledger reveals it on December 6, it will cost \$279. That's a rounding error for those who buy Bored Apes. To add a bit of flair, the screen wraps around one side, giving it the equivalent of the spine on a book. But the photo doesn't show this enough. "It's very rectilinear and 2D," he says. "Not enough spine. I'm not feeling the curve." He frowns. "And it's so dark."

David Sloo, a user experience designer who worked with Fadell at Nest, picks up on the critique. “Can we be less Darth Vader and more Rebel?”

Fadell agrees. “It’s really who we are—it’s all about the Empire.”

His remark is a segue to the next panel, marked MANIFESTO. A handful of slogans are taped to the glass.

Crypto is the new money.

Security is a human right.

Welcome to a new era of financial freedom.

The first touchscreen device made to protect your most valuable assets.

Fadell looks the hardest at one that reads:

In [L] Stax We Trust.

He is not satisfied with the prominence of the [L], the Ledger logo, which appears in a custom military-style typeface. The brand is what people should remember. “In five years, every time you see that L you’ll think *Ledger*,” he says. “Like the Apple logo stands for the brand.”

The comparison seems absurd. The company is nowhere near that size, its product is alien to most Earthlings, and its niche—crypto—has been undergoing months of shock treatment. Fadell seems unfazed.

“It’s coming together,” he says. “Forty-nine days!”

During those 49 days, [the arc of crypto](#) will bend [into a dunk tank](#). Timing, as product gurus know, is everything. Stax might be coming at the perfect moment. It could as easily be the worst.

Ledger was founded in 2014 by members of a Bitcoin collective called La Maison du Bitcoin. They wanted to build a wallet for crypto purists. These people would never leave their private keys on a phone or laptop—too hackable—or park their holdings in an exchange, which is a trusted,

centralized institution and no better than a bank. (“Trust” is a pejorative in this world.) That was the year thousands of people lost their investments in a hack of crypto’s flagship exchange, [Mt. Gox](#), wiping out many customers’ life savings.

Ledger’s savvy consumers would entrust their keys only to a hardware wallet, something they could hold in their hands even when servers went down and exchanges went bust. You’d begin a transaction on a phone or laptop and use the wallet to verify it. Your private key, marooned on its Alcatraz, would never cross the gap to those less secure devices.

The company’s first wallet, released late that year, was nothing special. But it satisfied a need among some crypto folk. [Subsequent models](#) got tiny displays. Ledger ultimately sold more than 5 million of its wallets, which it says now secure 20 percent of the world’s crypto and more than 30 percent of NFTs. True believers wear Ledger wallets around their necks.

By 2018, however, the crypto market had plunged into one of its cold spells, and Ledger’s sales were flat. An early investor named Pascal Gauthier came to believe that a fusty mentality was hindering the company’s growth. “The French engineer decides everything, which is why the French always come up with innovations, but we’re shitty at taking them to market and making it a business,” he says. He became part of a boardroom uprising that put him in charge.

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Gauthier, who had worked in ad tech (first at Yahoo and then as COO of a successful French company called Criteo), wanted to move Ledger from the “B to G” market—business to geek—and sell to the wider, nontechnical world. He wanted to mix Ledger’s rigid security focus with the verve of Steve Jobs-level creativity. “Maybe it’s delusional,” says Gauthier, who dresses as if awaiting a Sun Valley invitation, in an ever-present black Patagonia vest. “But I want to build things at scale, to build a company in Europe that will compete with Apple, Google.”

He felt Ledger needed to shake off a bit of its Frenchness. “If you want marketing and sales, you need Americans,” he says. “There is no other way.”

Gauthier started by wooing an expatriate he’d befriended. Ian Rogers is an Iggy Pop-ish 50-year-old with long blond hair, tattoos on his fingers, and a résumé loaded with trophy jobs, albeit trophies seldom found in the same case. He played in a high school band called Albino K-Mart Shoppers, was webmaster for the Beastie Boys, CEO of Beats Music, cofounder of Apple Music, and digital czar of the luxury-brand juggernaut LVMH, a gig that brought him to the City of Lights.

CEO Pascal Gauthier dreamed of turning a European company into a global tech giant that could rival Apple.

Photograph: Julien Faure

By 2020, though, he was open to Gauthier’s pitch. He’d long been interested in crypto, having read the foundational Satoshi paper in 2009. Gauthier was offering him a chance to participate in what he regarded as a nascent revolution of ownership, anchored by the Gibraltar-like certainty of cryptographic private keys. “We know this technology will matter in the future, because a lot of humanity, if not all of humanity, will own digital items,” he says. “It’s just like it was in 2008, when people said not everyone would have a smartphone.”

He also respected the business model—Ledger sold actual devices, not dicey promises of perpetually rising markets. Private wallets embodied for him the decentralized ethos at the core of the crypto vision. “The people at this company wouldn’t work at Coinbase,” says Rogers. “They don’t want to work at a bank. They believe in self-custody.”

Still, Rogers wanted to do his due diligence. Fadell, a parent friend from his children’s school in Paris, took it upon himself to investigate. At that point Fadell was living a quiet life as an investor. During the first months of the pandemic it was a super quiet life. “Tony never crossed the fucking transom of his door,” Rogers says. Fadell was busy giving product advice to the companies he funded and writing [a business book](#) that drew on his career, a

pursuit usually signifying a career's end. But Rogers had gotten him curious, so he took a hard look at what the company considered its biggest strength—its security.

Ian Rogers, the chief experience officer, joined Ledger to pursue an interest in crypto and became an avid collector of NFTs.

Photograph: Julien Faure

Fadell's guide to Ledger's operations was its chief technology officer, Charles Guillemet, who joined the company in 2017. Inside its headquarters, behind a giant medieval-style door off a Paris lane, Guillemet created the Donjon, a jacked-up security lab that verifies the resilience of every aspect of the hardware, down to the chip circuits. Inside the Donjon, motherboards get probed as if in a 21st-century version of Frankenstein's lab. Lasers connected to oven-sized oscilloscopes poke at chips to observe how they might fail. Guillemet told Fadell he was appalled at the idea of people securing their assets on laptops or iPhones, which he deemed hopelessly vulnerable. He despised fingerprints and facial recognition. Your biometrics are public, after all, and can be counterfeited.

The more time Fadell spent with Guillemet and the Ledger team, the more convinced he became. "I didn't believe in all that crypto hype, but I believe in the technology," he says. He told Rogers that Ledger was the real deal. Rogers became the company's chief experience officer in January 2021, and later that year, to bolster the company's storytelling acumen, he hired an editor in chief, former Vice executive Ariel Wengroff. She oversaw a crypto education project called Ledger Academy and kicked off a podcast and video series. Some of the engineers at Ledger didn't understand why those nontechnical hires were necessary. Gauthier saw their resistance as part of Ledger's problem. "I was saying we could sell tens of millions of devices, have billions of revenue, billions of valuation. And they were like, 'Yeah, whatever.'"

Charles Guillemet, Ledger's CTO, convinced Fadell that the company's tech was the real deal.

Photograph: Julien Faure

But Rogers' most significant contribution might have been igniting the interest of his friend Fadell. He had seen a weakness in Ledger's plan—the device itself was unlovable. To unlock the wallet, you had to enter a four- or eight-digit passcode using an incredibly awkward interface, like writing an essay on a home security panel. He began pondering what a better solution might be.

Fadell met with Gauthier at a Paris café, and they agreed that Ledger needed its next product to have broader appeal. They parted ways, but Fadell kept brainstorming. When he hit on a vision, he met with Gauthier again. "I want to be the chief designer on that," Fadell told him. Gauthier immediately agreed.

Fadell started the gig full of ideas. As the guy who swept away the pain points of first-generation MP3 players (big and clunky, engineering degree required to select a song) and thermostats (ugly, no connectivity, impossible to program), Fadell was quick to understand the shortcomings of Ledger's wallet. Its screen was tiny, it lacked a keyboard or keypad, and its appearance and charm were on par with an early-2000s USB stick. The startup instructions warned users to set aside a minimum of 30 minutes.

In his mind, the wallet should be about the size of a credit card and have a touchscreen. The setup time should take no more than three minutes. You should be able to personalize the lock screen to display anything you want. He also envisioned people owning several wallets, one for each category of digital collecting or banking. He liked the concept of stacking them on top of each other, like a cash bundle of \$100 bills. He came up with the idea of having magnets to snap the units into a tidy stack. That feature provided the name for the device: Stax.

Fadell surveyed all possible electronic components, talked to suppliers, and began prototyping, using green plastic toy blocks and magnets. One design constraint was battery life—Fadell wanted people to be able to leave their wallets untouched for months and still have power when they retrieved them. That meant the screen had to use energy-efficient E Ink. (Color would have been nice, but the tech isn't there yet.) Fadell took apart a bunch of Kindles and ReMarkable tablets to test how the screen might display a keyboard and other buttons.

Stax wallets have customizable E Ink displays.

Photograph: Julien Faure

The screen wraps around one edge, creating a spine that an owner can label.

Photograph: Julien Faure

One of his dreams was to extend the screen along the edge of the unit, so people could label it. None of the E Ink displays he saw could do what he wanted, so he contacted an old friend, the UK venture capitalist Hermann Hauser, who had once been involved in an unsuccessful ebook device with advanced E Ink. That company, Plastic Logic, was now based in Dresden, Germany, and was making custom E Ink displays. And they could bend! The curved display had at that point been used only by an obscure Russian phone called the YotaPhone. Fadell wanted to produce hundreds of thousands of screens with a dramatically sharper curve and at a low cost.

Adding a touchscreen to the wallet presented a risk, though—a sophisticated attacker could, with the right equipment, pick up electronic signals leaking through the screen and figure out the pin code that unlocks the device. So Ledger’s engineers had to shield the screen so it emitted no digital exhaust. They also wrote their own driver, the code that helps render pixels on the screen. “You’re compromising security if you use a driver written by someone in China that you’ve never met,” Rogers says.

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Meanwhile, Fadell was increasingly showing up at Ledger as the de facto lead of its new flagship product. (Though he never became an employee, Fadell says he was granted significant equity.) Not everyone welcomed him. Put magnets on a hardware wallet? Add a curved screen? From a supplier who’d never done that before? Plus, Fadell can be exacting to the point of infuriating. “I can’t tell you how many times they’d say, ‘Oh this seems difficult—a rolled screen?’” Fadell says. “And I’m like, ‘I’m telling

you, we're going to do this thing. How many times do I have to say, just trust me, it's going to happen.””

Early on, Gauthier had to convene his engineers and quell a possible rebellion. “They were saying all those things had never been done before. And I’m like, *shut the fuck up*. If he says we’re going to do it, we’re going to do it.” Apparently, they bought in: Some of those engineers described Fadell’s style to me much the way he likes to be viewed—grueling, but inspiring. Like his former boss Steve Jobs. (Maybe if I spoke French I could have cornered them and gotten more candor.)

Ledger saw other benefits of having Fadell onboard. Early in 2022, Foxconn, the manufacturing giant that Ledger retained to assemble the Stax units, said that it wasn’t going to meet its February 2023 deadline for shipping final products. Maybe June? “We were freaking out,” Gauthier says. Fadell told him, “I got this.” He wrote to Foxconn’s CEO, explaining that the deadline was important and it would be a great favor if he looked into it. “Fifteen minutes later, boom, we were back on track,” Gauthier says.

When I arrive in Paris in October, the first prototypes are finished, and the team is working out the remaining bugs. Sitting with Fadell and Wengroff in Rogers’ apartment in the Marais section—a fourth-floor walk-up accessible through an unmistakably Parisian courtyard—several units are neatly, um, stacked on the table, alongside a plate of fresh croissants. On the spine of one of them is the phrase, BANKS ARE DEAD. I watch as Rogers buys an NFT. He does the actual selection and transaction on a phone. The Stax wakes up when it’s time to verify Rogers’ private key, alerting him that a pending transaction awaits his verification. Punching in his passcode on the display—sheltering with a cupped hand so I can’t shoulder-surf—he buys it. Within a few minutes, he can view the image on his phone and edit it so it shows up in gray scale when he ships it to the lock screen of his Stax.

Ariel Wengroff joined the team to help Ledger break out of its “business-to-geek” niche.

Photograph: Julien Faure

It may be a stretch to imagine a mass movement toward crypto coins and digital goods. Ledger's very long-term vision is that with secure, well-designed hardware as a bedrock, people will gravitate to crypto to verify their identity and credentials. Think driver's licenses, passports, proof that you passed your dentistry boards, Taylor Swift tickets, and voter ID. Rogers says that when he attended the NFT NYC conference earlier this year and digitally verified he had the token required to register for exclusive events, an irony struck him. "The technology I use to get into parties is more secure, easier to use, and better than the technology that I use to get into our country! Fast-forward into the future and your government document is in your hardware wallet."

To advance this vision, Ledger has so far only met with consultants from Estonia, a nation known for embracing any futuristic scheme that comes its way. A delightful wallet can only do so much; it's not going to win over people who struggle through 40,000-word crypto explainers in allegedly plain language and still can't figure it out. Does Ledger really believe it can transform the industry?

"That's the hope," Fadell says. "To have that iPod moment for digital assets. You can't just integrate it into a phone, no matter how much you try. You need to have a real physical key in your life that holds the digital."

As we sit in Rogers' sunny Paris flat, it all seems plausible. Less than a month later, the blockchain world would blow up at the hands of a bogus crypto king in the Bahamas.

In early November, Gauthier, Rogers, Fadell, and Wengroff visited New York City, and we met in a downtown bistro. As the espressos were being pulled, I asked about the fuzzy-haired, short-pants elephant in the room. Only a week earlier, a young crypto magnate named [Sam Bankman-Fried](#) had presided over the biggest disaster in crypto since Mt. Gox. "SBF" had allegedly redirected a chunk of customer deposits from his multibillion-dollar crypto exchange FTX to cover the failing high-risk investments handled by a trading company he controlled. When customers went to withdraw their funds, some of them discovered they couldn't. His crew had annihilated at least a billion dollars' worth of wealth, stiffing more than a million customers and demolishing crypto's reputation.

[The implosion](#) capped off a convulsive year. The price of cryptocurrency has sunk, and NFTs have gone from galleries to Goodwill. Considering all this, launching Stax now could seem like introducing a new cocktail in the lounge of the *Titanic*, just as the ship smacked into the iceberg.

“*Non, non!*” insist the folks at Ledger. They say that FTX has been a *boon* for their company. It was a vindication of self-custody. People who had been holding their digital assets inside exchanges were now pulling out their funds and moving them to hardware wallets. The previous day, a Sunday, Ledger had set a sales record, and now it was on track to break it again.

Wengroff, Fadell, Rogers, and Gauthier gather on the street outside Ledger HQ.

Photograph: Julien Faure

As customers poured in—and existing users who hadn’t fired up their wallets in months suddenly decided to update the firmware—Ledger’s servers were temporarily swamped, and for an hour or so, customers couldn’t update their software. Some got spooked. The company’s support team sent out an ill-worded message assuring everyone, in a tweet, “Your assets are safe.” Of course they were—that’s what self-custody is all about. But after SBF and other meltdowns, that phrase had become a signal that a house of cards was falling and your assets were *gone*.

If even savvy crypto folk get panicky at a hiccup like that, just imagine the reluctance of [Web3](#) holdouts. Might it be unrealistic for Ledger to expect newbies to pay almost \$300 for a wallet that has a cool picture on it but still depends on a somewhat impenetrable ecosystem and an existential question of reliability?

To the Ledger-ites, the promise of crypto and the necessity of self-custody will prevail. It’s a logical outcome of the last half-century of atoms moving to bits. Still, Rogers admits that no matter how slick Stax is, it interacts with systems that have massive barriers to entry. After breakfasting at the bistro, I spent an hour with him trying to get set up to trade crypto and buy NFTs. While getting the wallet to authenticate me was easy, getting the currency

needed to buy the funky artworks Rogers likes proved frustratingly difficult, and apparently impossible to complete in the time we had. “Crypto is where the internet was in 1993,” he finally said, in a tone somewhere between wistful and pissed off. That doesn’t bother him too much—the iPod, after all, came out in the early, awkward days of digital music and took a few years to catch on. “The only question in my brain is, are we the Apple of Web3?” Rogers says. “Or are we the BlackBerry or Nokia of Web3?”

We’ve already seen the FTX of Web3, so there’s nowhere to go but up. For now, Tony Fadell’s latest technology tour de force stands as a friendly hardware ambassador for a future that’s still far away for most of us, and a glimpse of how we might wind up with something useful, accessible, and enriching—from what so far has been a blockchain of fools.

This article appears in the February 2023 issue. [Subscribe now](#).

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By [Andy Greenberg](#)

[Backchannel](#)

Nov 29, 2022 6:00 AM

The Hunt for the Dark Web's Biggest Kingpin, Part 6: Endgame

With AlphaBay shuttered, Operation Bayonet enters its final phase: driving the site's refugees into a giant trap. But one refugee hatched his own plan. The Dutch cops hoped their targets would take the stuffed pandas home. Unbeknownst to the recipients, each one contained, hidden deep in its stuffing, a small GPS tracker.
ILLUSTRATION: HOKYOUNG KIM

Content Warning: *This story includes references to suicide. If you need help, call the [Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) for your region.*

CHAPTER 14

THE STING

In the days after the AlphaBay takedown but before Alexandre Cazes' death, Paul Hemesath spent a few enjoyable hours by the rooftop pool of the Athenee, scrolling on his iPad through the responses to the sudden, unexplained disappearance of the world's largest-ever dark-web market.

Rumors had begun to swirl instantly that the site's administrators had pulled off an exit scam, taking with them millions of dollars' worth of the market's cryptocurrency. But others argued that the site might just be down for technical reasons or to carry out routine maintenance. Few suspected the truth. "People have always screamed exit scam in the past, and they've always been wrong," wrote one user on Reddit. "I really hope this turns out the same." Another added, "Until we know otherwise, keep the faith."

Almost immediately, faithful or not, AlphaBay's vendors and buyers went looking for a new market where they could continue business as usual. The natural choice was AlphaBay's biggest rival, Hansa, which was well run and already growing fast. "wow alphabay exit scam. crazyness!" one user wrote on Twitter. "moving to hansa."

This story is excerpted from [Tracers in the Dark: The Global Hunt for the Crime Lords of Cryptocurrency](#), available now from Doubleday.

Courtesy of Penguin Random House

Back in the Netherlands, the Dutch police were waiting for them. For two weeks, they had been overseeing Hansa's vast marketplace, surveilling its users and collecting their messages, delivery addresses, and passwords. Their Driebergen conference room, where the small team of undercover investigators had continued to work in shifts around the clock, had taken on the atmosphere of a college dorm. Chips, cookies, chocolates, and energy drinks covered the table, a warm, stale funk pervading the air.

At one point the head of investigations for the Dutch National Police paid them a visit to see their landmark operation in action. He was visibly offended by the smell and left after 10 minutes. Someone brought in an air freshener. (“It didn't really work,” a team member says.)

Hansa's marketplace, meanwhile, was thriving. In the days before the AlphaBay takedown, it was adding nearly a thousand new registered users a day, all falling into the trap the Dutch had patiently set. When AlphaBay went offline, that number spiked to more than 4,000 a day. Then more than 5,000 the next day. Then, two days after that, 6,000.

Soon, as the market absorbed AlphaBay's wayward users, the Dutch team was logging a thousand daily transactions. The paperwork of tracking and sending those order records to Europol—not to mention attempting to intercept every order shipped to the Netherlands—became so massive that the police were briefly overwhelmed. They reluctantly decided to shut down new registrations for a full week. “Due to the influx of Alphabay refugees we are dealing with technical issues,” read a message they posted to the site. Those refugees, however, remained so eager to join that some Hansa users began selling their accounts on web forums, like scalpers selling tickets to a concert.

Then, in the middle of that week, on July 13, one prong of Operation Bayonet suddenly slipped into the light. *The Wall Street Journal* [broke the news](#) that AlphaBay had been taken down by a joint law enforcement

operation involving the US, Thai, and Canadian governments and that the site's administrator, Alexandre Cazes, had been found dead in a Thai jail cell.

There was no mention in the article of Hansa or the Dutch police. And when the Dutch reached out to the FBI, they were surprised and relieved to find that the Americans were willing to keep mum—to follow the Dutch team's lead and delay any announcement of the entirety of Operation Bayonet. The still-operational, undercover half of their one-two punch would remain hidden for as long as the Dutch chose to pursue it.

So a week after pausing new registrations on Hansa, the Driebergen team turned them on again. New user sign-ups soon spiked to more than 7,000 a day.

The dutch knew that their operation couldn't go on indefinitely. They could see the moment approaching when they would have to take off their masks, reveal their surveillance coup, and tear down the market they'd so carefully rebuilt and maintained. They were, after all, facilitating drug sales, not all of which were being intercepted in the mail.

The closer they got to the end of the sting, meanwhile, the less they had to lose if they were discovered—and the more risks they were willing to take.

Throughout the operation, the Dutch team would hold what they called “evil plan” meetings, brainstorming ever more devious schemes to track and identify the unwitting users of the market they controlled. They created a list of those tactics, ordering the menu of surveillance actions from least to most likely to blow their cover. As they reached their endgame, they began to put their most brazen ideas into practice.

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Hansa had long ago implemented a standard feature for [dark-web markets](#), designed to protect their vendors: When sellers uploaded images for their product listings, the site automatically stripped those images of their metadata—information nested within the file, such as what sort of camera had taken the photo and the GPS location of where the image was created. The Dutch had silently sabotaged that feature early on, recording images' metadata before it was stripped, so as to catalog uploaders' locations. But they had managed to pinpoint only a few vendors that way; they found that most rarely updated their listings or posted new photos.

So, a few weeks into their takeover, the police wiped every image from the site. They claimed that a server had failed due to a technical glitch, and they announced that vendors would have to re-upload all the images for their listings. Those fresh uploads allowed the Dutch cops to scrape the metadata from a vast new batch of images. They quickly obtained the locations of 50 more of the site's dealers.

In another scheme in the last days of their operation, the Driebergen team came up with an idea for how to get the IP addresses of the site's sellers, despite their use of the anonymity software Tor. It involved a sort of Trojan horse. Hansa's administrators announced that they were offering an Excel file to vendors that included codes that would allow them to retrieve their bitcoins stored in escrow on the market, even if the site was taken down. When only a small number of Hansa's dealers took them up on the offer, the police tried adding more helpful information to it, designed to lure vendors, like buyer statistics that would let the sellers track and rank their best customers. When even that feature got lackluster adoption, the Dutch cops pushed their ruse to its extreme: They warned the site's users that they had detected suspicious activity on their servers and said all vendors should download the backup [cryptocurrency](#) retrieval file immediately or risk losing their funds.

All the while, of course, the files the team was pushing on vendors were functioning as secret digital beacons. The top left of the Excel spreadsheet displayed an image of the Hansa logo, a stylized Viking ship. The police had designed the Excel file to fetch that image from their own server when

the spreadsheet was opened. As a result, they could see the IP address of every computer requesting it. Sixty-four sellers on the market took the bait.

In the most involved scheme of all, the Dutch team turned their sights to the staff of the marketplace itself, the moderators who were directly working for them. They'd found that one moderator in particular was extremely dedicated—very “emotionally involved” in the site, as the team lead, Petra Haandrikman, put it. The Dutch team felt a collective sense of admiration and affection for this hard worker—while simultaneously hatching a scheme to try to arrest him.

They offered him a promotion. Hansa's two bosses would give him a raise, but only if he agreed to become a third admin of the site. The moderator was overjoyed, immediately accepting. Then they explained that for him to become an admin, they'd have to either arrange a meeting in person or get his mailing address so that they could send him a two-factor authentication token—a physical USB stick plugged into a PC to prove his identity and keep his account secure.

In his next message, the moderator's tone suddenly changed. He explained that he had made a promise to himself that if his bosses at Hansa ever asked for his identifying information or tried to meet him in person, he would immediately quit and wipe all of the devices he had used in his moderator job. Now he planned to abide by that promise. He said goodbye.

That moderator's sudden decision—a very wise one, likely saving him from a prison sentence—meant that the admins now had an opening to fill. So they began advertising that they were taking applications for a new moderator. At the end of a series of questions about qualifications and experience, they would ask “successful” applicants for their address so that they could mail them a two-factor authentication token. Some, eager for the job, handed over the locations of their homes. “Please don't send the cops to this address hahahahaha just kidding,” one would-be moderator wrote, as he, in fact, sent his address to the cops. “I trust you guys because Hansa support was always good and helpful.”

Savvier dark-web users, of course, never gave out their home addresses. In cases where they needed to receive a package, they sent shippers the

address of a “drop”—a location away from their homes where they could, if necessary, deny the package was theirs.

To circumvent that safeguard, the Dutch police went one step further: For moderator applicants who provided a drop address, they shipped them the two-factor token hidden inside the packaging of a teddy bear, a cute stuffed panda with a soft pink nose. They intended the panda to appear as an innocuous disguise to hide the authentication token, a sign of their new employers' attention to opsec—and, perhaps, their sense of humor.

The Dutch cops hoped their targets would take the stuffed pandas home as a kind of gift or souvenir. Unbeknownst to the recipients, each one also contained, hidden deep in its stuffing, a small GPS tracker.

CHAPTER 15

PANIC

On July 20, after running Hansa for 27 days, the Dutch prosecutors decided it was finally time to give up their game—over the objections of several members of the Driebergen team controlling the site, who had more ideas for surveillance tricks still up their sleeves.

In a press conference at the Dutch police's national headquarters in The Hague, the head of the agency dramatically pressed a large red plastic button to shut down the site. (In fact, the button was just a prop; an agent sitting nearby with a laptop sent the simultaneous command to the server that finally pulled Hansa offline.) Simultaneously, the US Justice Department announced the news in a DC press conference in which Attorney General Jeff Sessions spoke about the coordinated action against both AlphaBay and Hansa. Sessions used the opportunity to issue a warning to the dark web's users. “You are not safe. You cannot hide,” he told them, from a packed room of reporters and cameras. “We will find you, dismantle your organization and network. And we will prosecute you.”

Nearly 16 days after it had inexplicably disappeared, the AlphaBay site rematerialized with a notice covered in law enforcement agency logos and

words that would be familiar to any [Silk Road](#) user: “THIS HIDDEN SITE HAS BEEN SEIZED.”

The Dutch, meanwhile, put up a slightly different message on Hansa: “THIS HIDDEN SITE HAS BEEN SEIZED *and controlled since June 20.*” The Dutch seizure notice linked to another dark-web site that the police had created themselves, which listed dark-web vendors by pseudonym under three categories: those under investigation, those who had been identified, and those who had been arrested—a list that they suggested was about to grow significantly. “We trace people who are active at Dark Markets and offer illicit goods or services,” the site read. “Are you one of them? Then you have our attention.”

The Dutch team in Driebergen, even after exposing their operation, still had one last card to play: They decided to try the usernames and passwords they had already collected from Hansa on the largest surviving dark-web drug bazaar, known as Dream Market. They found that at least 12 of that site’s dealers had reused their Hansa credentials there. They were able to immediately take over those accounts and lock out the vendors—who promptly posted panicked messages to public forums suggesting that Dream had been compromised as well.

All of that carefully coordinated agitprop and disruption was expressly designed to sow fear and uncertainty across the dark-web community—to “damage the trust in this whole system,” as the Dutch police’s Marinus Boekelo said.

It had its immediate intended effect. “Looks like I’ll be sober for a while. Not trusting any markets,” wrote one user on Reddit.

“DO NOT MAKE NEW ORDERS ON ANY DNM ANY MORE!” wrote another, using the common abbreviation for “dark net market.”

“So it’s a wrap for the darknet?” one user asked.

“To everyone who thinks they’re screwed and wants to flee the country,” another advised, “do so ASAP.”

That all-pervading paranoia was, for many of the dark web's users, warranted. In their nearly four weeks of running Hansa, the Dutch had surveilled 27,000 transactions. After shutting down the site, they seized 1,200 bitcoins from Hansa, worth tens of millions of dollars as of this writing, thanks in part to silently sabotaging the site's implementation of a [Bitcoin](#) feature called multi-signature transactions, designed to make that sort of simple confiscation impossible. They had collected at least some amount of data on a staggering total of 420,000 users, including more than 10,000 home addresses.

In the months following the takeover, Gert Ras, the head of the unit that oversaw the operation, said Dutch police carried out around 50 “knock and talks” in the Netherlands, visiting known buyers to warn them they had been identified and should stop purchasing narcotics online, though he said they arrested only one high-volume customer.

The site's sellers weren't so lucky: Within a year, more than a dozen of Hansa's top dealers had been arrested. Finally, the Dutch police fed the massive corpus of dark-web data they'd collected into a database controlled by Europol, which in turn shared it with law enforcement agencies around the world.

The direct ripple effects of that explosion of incriminating data, passed through so many institutions' records, aren't easy to track. But over the following years, Grant Rabenn, who served as custodian of the files the Justice Department had assembled from Operation Bayonet, says he received requests for that information as part of dozens of cases that agencies across the United States were still pursuing.

A series of massive, high-profile dark-web busts would follow. These operations were all carried out by a new group known as JCODE, or Joint Criminal Opioid and Darknet Enforcement, pulling together agents from the FBI, DEA, Department of Homeland Security, US Postal Inspection Service, and half a dozen other federal agencies: in 2018, Operation Disarray; in 2019, Operation SaboTor; in 2020, Operation DisrupTor. In total, according to the FBI, those enforcement campaigns would eventually result in more than 240 arrests, 160 “knock and talks,” and the seizure of

more than 1,700 pounds of drugs, along with \$13.5 million in cash and cryptocurrency.

But the Hansa side of the operation was not without costs. Aside from the vast manpower and resources Operation Bayonet had required, it had demanded that a group of Dutch police become dark-web kingpins. For nearly a month, they had facilitated the sale of untold quantities of deadly narcotics to unknown buyers across the world. Even as they compromised Hansa, Hansa had compromised them too.

Did the Dutch police feel that sense of taint—taint that perhaps comes with any undercover work? Some, at least, describe feeling surprisingly unconflicted about their role. “To be honest, it was exciting, mostly,” said the team lead, Petra Haandrikman. Dutch prosecutors had, after all, already reviewed the case, weighed its ethics, and given them the green light. After that, the police involved felt they could push the operation as far as possible with a clean conscience.

The Dutch police pointed out that they did ban the especially deadly opiate fentanyl from Hansa while it was under their control, in an effort to minimize the harm they might be responsible for—a move Hansa's users actually applauded. In truth, however, that ban had come just a few days before the end of their undercover operation. Until then, for more than three weeks, that highly dangerous opioid had continued to be offered on the site, with no guarantee that all of its orders would be intercepted.

And how did the police feel about the decision to oversee those narcotics sales rather than shut Hansa down and prevent the transactions altogether?

“They would have taken place anyway,” Gert Ras said without hesitation, “but on a different market.”

“I welcome you to the re-opening of our professionally-run, anonymous, secure marketplace AlphaBay,” DeSnake’s message began.

In the years since, the dark web’s observers have tried to determine to what extent Operation Bayonet actually disrupted that endless interchangeability of markets, the constant cycle of raid, rebuild, and repeat. Could the highly

coordinated global takedown of AlphaBay—or anything else—end or even slow the eternal shell game law enforcement agencies had by then been playing for years, with a new market constantly ready to absorb the users of the last?

One study, at least, suggested that the AlphaBay and Hansa busts had more lasting effects than previous dark-web takedowns. The Netherlands Organisation for Applied Scientific Research, which goes by the acronym TNO, found that when other markets had been seized, like the Silk Road or Silk Road 2, most of their drug vendors soon showed up on other dark-web drug sites. But the vendors who fled Hansa after Bayonet's one-two punch didn't reappear, or if they did, they had been forced to scrub their identities and reputations, re-creating themselves from scratch. "Compared to both the Silk Road takedowns, or even the AlphaBay takedown, the Hansa Market shutdown stands out in a positive way," the TNO report read. "We see the first signs of game-changing police intervention."

Carnegie Mellon's Nicolas Christin, a quantitative researcher of dark-web drug markets with an especially long track record, isn't so sure. Based on data he and his fellow researchers assembled by analyzing feedback posted to markets, they conservatively estimated that AlphaBay was generating between \$600,000 and \$800,000 a day in sales before it was shut down, well over double Silk Road's peak revenue. But his team found that the next inheritor of the dark web's refugees, Dream Market, eventually grew to become almost as big as AlphaBay, or perhaps even bigger—before its administrators disappeared and the market quietly dropped offline in 2019.

Chainalysis' blockchain-based measurements, by contrast, found that AlphaBay was generating as much as *\$2 million* a day in average sales just before its shutdown—revenue that no other dark-web market of its kind has ever rivaled. (The Russian-language dark-web site Hydra, which was pulled offline by German law enforcement in April 2022, did top those numbers, taking in more than \$1.7 billion in bitcoin in 2021, according to Chainalysis. But because its black-market contraband sales were difficult to distinguish from its money-laundering services, its inflows of cryptocurrency aren't directly comparable to AlphaBay's.) The FBI has estimated that Cazes' site, with more than 369,000 product listings and

400,000 users at its peak, was 10 times the size of Silk Road when it was pulled offline.

Regardless of who holds the title for the largest dark-web market of all time, Christin predicts that this anonymous contraband economy cycle will continue long after the dark web's memory of Operation Bayonet has faded, as long as there are buyers for illegal, lucrative, and often highly addictive products.

"History has taught us that this ecosystem is very, very resilient," he says. "What happened in 2017 was very unique, that one-two punch. But that doesn't seem to have dented the ecosystem in a major way."

Even on the day that the Hansa takedown was announced and Operation Bayonet was finally revealed, some users seemed ready to return to the dark web as soon as the chaos subsided, and their insatiable need for another fix began to make itself felt. The very same Reddit user who had posted to the site's dark-net market forum that they would be "sober for a while" ended their message with a note of stubborn persistence.

"Things will stabilize, they always do," that anonymous user wrote. "The Great Game of whack-a-mole never ends."

CHAPTER 16

RESURRECTION

In early August 2021, just as I was reporting out the final details of AlphaBay's downfall, something unexpected happened: It rose from the dead.

"AlphaBay is back," read a message posted to Ghostbin, a site for publishing anonymous text-based messages. "You read that right, AlphaBay is back."

The message appeared to be authored by DeSnake, AlphaBay's former number two administrator and security specialist. To prove his identity,

DeSnake had cryptographically signed the message with his PGP key—a method to show that the writer of the message possessed the long, secret series of characters that only DeSnake had access to, like a king stamping a letter with a personal signet ring. Multiple security researchers privately confirmed that the signature matched the one from DeSnake's messages as an AlphaBay administrator years earlier. The author seemed to be AlphaBay's long-lost lieutenant—or, at the very least, someone who'd gotten ahold of his key.

“I welcome you to the re-opening of our professionally-run, anonymous, secure marketplace AlphaBay to buy or sell products and services,” DeSnake's message began. The staff of this new AlphaBay, he wrote, had “20 years of experience in computer security alone, underground businesses, darknet market management, customer support and most importantly evading Law Enforcement.”

Sure enough, when I entered the site's address into a Tor browser, a reincarnated AlphaBay appeared—albeit a newly launched one. It was the same market as the one last seen in 2017, but restarted from scratch, with none of AlphaBay's many thousands of vendors. And there was another major difference: Now that he had taken over from Alpha02, DeSnake allowed transactions only in the privacy-focused cryptocurrency Monero, not Bitcoin, to prevent the blockchain analysis that had played such a central role in AlphaBay's takedown.

I reached out to DeSnake for an interview, writing to his account on the Tor-protected web forum Dread. Within 24 hours, I found myself [exchanging encrypted instant messages](#) with the newly resurfaced, would-be kingpin of the dark web.

DeSnake quickly explained why he had reappeared only now—fully four years after the original AlphaBay had been torn offline, after Cazes had died in jail and the rest of AlphaBay's staff had scattered. He had intended, he wrote, to retire after AlphaBay was seized, but his plans changed after he saw the news that an FBI agent involved in the AlphaBay takedown had shown a video of Cazes' arrest at the 2018 Fordham International Conference on Cyber Security and had spoken about Cazes in a way that DeSnake deemed disrespectful.

“The biggest reason I am returning is to make the AlphaBay name be remembered as more than the marketplace which got busted and the founder made out to have committed suicide,” DeSnake wrote, in his slightly foreign-inflected English. “AlphaBay name was put in bad light after the raids. I am here to make amends to that.”

DeSnake repeated the claim I'd heard before: that Cazes was murdered in jail. He offered no real evidence but said that he and Alpha02 had developed a contingency plan in case of his arrest—a kind of automated mechanism that would reveal Alpha02's identity to DeSnake if he disappeared for a certain amount of time, so that AlphaBay's number two could help him in jail. (Whether that help would have come in the form of a legal defense fund or the “helicopter gunship” Cazes had mentioned to Jen Sanchez, DeSnake refused to say.)

Cazes would never have killed himself before their plan could even go into effect, DeSnake argued. “He was a fighter,” he wrote. “Me and him had backup plan, I guarantee you that a good and working one, backed by funds etc. However he got killed.”

DeSnake described countermeasures he'd since developed for practically every tactic that had been used to capture Cazes and take down the original AlphaBay. DeSnake never stepped away from his computer when it was unlocked, he wrote, not even to use the bathroom. He claimed to use an “amnesiac” operating system to avoid storing incriminating data, as well as “kill switches” to destroy any remaining information that law enforcement might find on his machines, should they leave his control. He even wrote that he'd designed a system called AlphaGuard that will automatically set up new servers if it detects that the ones that run the site are being seized.

But the biggest factor protecting DeSnake was almost certainly geographic: He wrote that he's based in a former USSR country, beyond Western governments' reach. While he acknowledged that Cazes had used fake clues to suggest a Russian nationality to throw off investigators, he claimed that AlphaBay's ban on victimizing people from that part of the world was genuine and designed to protect him and other actual post-Soviet citizen AlphaBay staffers from local law enforcement.

“We did that for security of other staff members,” DeSnake wrote. Cazes then “decided to embrace it as a way to secure himself.”

Even so, DeSnake claimed that he had traveled multiple times through countries with US extradition treaties and had never been caught. He credited that track record in part to his careful money laundering, though aside from his preference for Monero, he declined to detail his methods.

“Anyone who believed any currency method or cryptocurrency is safe is a fool or at the very least very ignorant. Everything is tracked,” he wrote.

“You have to go through certain methods to be able to enjoy the fruits of your work … it costs to do what you do. If you are a legit business you pay taxes. If you are doing this you pay taxes in forms of obfuscating your money.”

DeSnake said he was shocked when he learned of Alpha02's early slipup that first revealed his email address to the DEA. “I am still in disbelief to this day that he had put his personal email on there,” DeSnake wrote. “He was a good carder and he knew better opsec.”

But he added that Cazes' failure to hide his money trails to the degree DeSnake recommended was a more willful mistake. DeSnake had warned the previous AlphaBay boss about the need to take more measures against financial surveillance, he said. Alpha02 hadn't listened.

“Some advice he took, other he disregarded as ‘overkill,’” DeSnake wrote. “In this game there is no overkill.”

One afternoon, at the end of several weeks of on-and-off chats with DeSnake about how he planned to win this next round of the dark web's cat-and-mouse game, he shared some news: The mice had scored another small victory.

DeSnake sent me a series of links to Tor-protected websites that he described as “DarkLeaks.” Someone, it seems, had hacked the Italian police agency responsible for investigating a pair of dark-web drug sites, known as Deep Sea and Berlusconi Market. Now that hacker had published a broad

collection of stolen documents that offered an inside view into law enforcement's secret work to take down those sites.

Within the DarkLeaks collection, one slide deck immediately caught my eye. It was a presentation from Chainalysis. It described, in Italian, a remarkable set of surveillance tricks that Chainalysis offered law enforcement but that had never before been publicly revealed, including the ability to trace Monero in a majority of cases. The slides even seemed to reveal that Chainalysis had turned a free blockchain analysis tool it had acquired, WalletExplorer, into a honeypot: The company had turned over identifying information to law enforcement about people who used the tool to check the traceability of their coins.

But amid these revelations, there was another slide that finally offered the most elusive answer I'd been looking for: a possible solution to the mystery of the "advanced analysis" trick Chainalysis had used to locate the AlphaBay server in Lithuania.

The Italian presentation confirmed that Chainalysis can, in fact, identify the IP addresses of some wallets on the blockchain. It did so by running its own Bitcoin nodes, which quietly monitored transaction messages. This appeared to be the very practice that had led to a scandal in the company's earliest days, when it was revealed that Chainalysis was running its own Bitcoin nodes to collect the IP addresses of cryptocurrency users—an experiment it had promised was shut down after an outcry about it spread across the Bitcoin community.

One slide in particular described a tool called Rumker, explaining that Chainalysis could use its surreptitious Bitcoin nodes to identify the IP addresses of anonymous services, including dark-web markets. "Although many illegal services run on the Tor network, suspects are often negligent and run their bitcoin node on clearnet," the slide read, using a term for the traditional internet not protected by Tor.

Had AlphaBay made this mistake? Rumker sounded very much like the secret weapon that had pinpointed that dark-web giant's IP address, and likely those of many other targets too.

(When I wrote to Chainalysis' Michael Gronager to ask about the slides and specifically about Rumker, he didn't deny the presentation's legitimacy. Instead, he sent me a statement that read like a kind of summation of his stance on Bitcoin's privacy, which he argues is virtually nonexistent: "Open protocols are openly monitored—to keep the space safe—and to enable a permission-less value transfer network to flourish.")

Rumker, if it was in fact the tool that located AlphaBay, had likely just been "burned." Whoever leaked it had, in doing so, exposed the vulnerabilities of the Bitcoin protocol it exploits. Dark-web administrators like DeSnake will no doubt take more care in the future to prevent their cryptocurrency wallets from revealing their IP addresses to snooping Bitcoin nodes.

But there will be other vulnerabilities, and other secret weapons to exploit them. The cat-and-mouse game continues. And for every Alpha that's taken down, another will be waiting in the dark web's manifold shadows, ready to rise into their place.

This story is excerpted from [Tracers in the Dark: The Global Hunt for the Crime Lords of Cryptocurrency](#), available now from Doubleday.

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The Hibernator's Guide to the Galaxy

Scientists are on the verge of figuring out how to put humans in a state of suspended animation. It could be the key to colonizing Mars.

Illustration: Ori Toor

One day in 1992, near the northern pole of a [planet](#) hurtling around the Milky Way at roughly 500,000 miles per hour, Kelly Drew was busy examining some salmon brains in a lab. Her concentration was broken when Brian Barnes, a zoophysiology professor from down the hall at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, popped by her bench for a visit. With a mischievous grin, he asked Drew—a [neuropharmacologist](#) early in her career—to hold out her hands and prepare for a surprise. A moment later, she felt a hard, furry lump deposited in her palms. It was some sort of brown rodent with dagger-like claws, curled up into a tight ball and so cold to the touch that Drew assumed it was dead. To her astonishment, Barnes gleefully explained that it was actually in perfect health.

An Arctic ground squirrel—the most extreme hibernator on the planet—can spend up to eight months a year in a torpid state.

Photograph: Mary Webb

The creature, an Arctic ground squirrel, was just hibernating, as it does for up to eight months of the year. During that span, the animal's internal temperature falls to below 27 degrees Fahrenheit, literally as cold as ice. Its brain waves become so faint that they're nearly impossible to detect, and its

heart beats as little as once per minute. Yet the squirrel remains very much alive. And when spring comes, it can elevate its temperature back to 98.6 degrees in a couple of hours.

Drew cradled the unresponsive critter in her hands, unable to detect even the faintest signs of life. *What's going on inside this animal's brain that allows it to survive like this?* she wondered. And with that question, she began to burrow into a mystery that would carry her decades into the future.

Illustration: Ori Toor

At this point, in the year 2022, no fewer than three major entities—[NASA](#), the Chinese National Space Administration, and [SpaceX](#)—are vying to put the first human on [Mars](#) by 2040 or so. To win that race, a team must first solve a series of vexing design riddles. As an executive at SpaceWorks, an Atlanta-based engineering firm that tackles ambitious research projects for NASA, John Bradford has spent the past decade running the brutal math on one of them.

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Unfortunately for the engineers trying to get humans to the Red Planet, we're a pretty high-maintenance species. As large endotherms with active brains, we burn through copious amounts of food, water, and oxygen in our daily quest to survive. All that consumption makes it extra hard to design a spacecraft light enough to reach—and eventually return from—a planet some 140 million miles from our own. Based on the eating habits of the astronauts aboard the International Space Station, for example, a crew of four will need at least 11 tons of food to complete an 1,100-day mission to Mars and back. Those meals alone would weigh nearly 10 times more than the entire Perseverance rover, the biggest payload ever to reach the Martian surface. Add in all the other life-support essentials, to say nothing of the engines and the tools necessary to set up camp, and the weight of a fully fueled Mars-bound ship could easily exceed 330 tons as it departs Earth's atmosphere—more than two fully grown blue whales. It's nearly impossible

to see how a vessel that massive could generate the power necessary for its entire round-trip journey.

The obvious solution to this problem—at least to anyone who's read any Arthur C. Clarke novels or watched Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*—is to slow the metabolism of crew members so they only need to ingest a bare minimum of resources while in transit. In *2001*, astronauts lie down in sarcophagus-like hibernation pods, where their hearts beat just three times a minute and their body temperature hovers at 37 degrees Fahrenheit. Bradford has devoted a huge chunk of his 21-year career at SpaceWorks to investigating a question that Kubrick had the artistic license to ignore: How, exactly, can we safely power down a human body so it's just one step removed from death, then revive it on demand?

Early on in his research, Bradford glimpsed some promise in therapeutic hypothermia, a medical technique in which people who have experienced cardiac arrest are chilled—typically with intravenous cooling fluids—until their internal temperature reaches as low as 89 degrees Fahrenheit. This decreases their metabolism so much that their cells can function on roughly 30 percent less oxygen and energy—a lifesaver for a damaged body that's struggling to heal amid reduced blood flow. Patients are usually kept in this hypothermic state for only a day or two, mostly because the cold triggers intense shivering that must be controlled with powerful sedatives and neuromuscular-blocking drugs. But Bradford identified a few rare cases in which patients were kept hypothermic for as long as two weeks. “And we started asking, why can't you do that for longer?” he says. “How long can you sustain that comatose-like state?”

Bradford was wary of going public with his curiosity, fearing he'd be branded a crank for suggesting astronauts be put on ice—a concept uncomfortably similar to the one touted by the dubious cryonics industry. But in 2013 he persuaded NASA's Innovative Advanced Concepts program to fund a project assessing the feasibility of “human torpor.” His successful pitch centered on the potential weight savings: He estimated that if astronauts could be kept frigid for the bulk of their trip to Mars, the mass of their life-support resources could be cut by as much as 60 percent. Bradford also hypothesized that torpor could help astronauts fend off a number of

serious health hazards, ranging from radiation to the psychological perils of extreme boredom and isolation. (“You’re in the blackness of space, you don’t have real-time communications,” he says. “A lot of people will say, ‘Oh, I’ll just read a lot of books.’ But I think that will get old quick.”)

Because so many hibernators are our close genomic cousins, there is good reason to believe that we can tweak our brains and bodies to mimic what they do.

Yet as Bradford and his team dug into the minutiae of therapeutic hypothermia, they steadily soured on the technique. There seemed to be no getting around the fact that the drugs used to control shivering also stop respiration. Torpid astronauts would have to be intubated, meaning they’d have to spend weeks or months breathing through tubes shoved down their tracheas. Bradford also balked at the number of needles required to keep the IV fluids flowing, a situation that seemed likely to increase the odds of infection.

The dream alternative was for astronauts to be able to swallow a pill, then lie down for a long and chilly slumber during which they could breathe on their own. It seemed a fantastical proposition, but aspects of it struck Bradford as familiar. There are, after all, scores of species that go torpid every winter, drifting into an unconscious state that drastically squelches their bodies’ cravings for food and air. When they rapidly whirr back to life in spring, these creatures show no signs of suffering from muscle atrophy, malnourishment, or other ailments that might be expected to stem from lengthy spells of idleness. Bradford suspected there might be useful wisdom to be gleaned from understanding how such animals switch into low-power mode when their environments turn harsh.

And so Bradford began to seek counsel from the small community of hibernation researchers, scientists devoted to studying the bears, bats, and lemurs for whom regular torpor is a fundamental aspect of existence. In recent years, these researchers have been piecing together the molecular changes that occur when certain species ratchet down their metabolism. And since so many hibernators are our close genomic cousins, there is good reason to believe that we can tweak our brains and bodies to mimic what they do.

By then, the University of Alaska's Kelly Drew had been researching the Arctic ground squirrel, the most extreme hibernator on the planet, for more than 20 years. When Bradford first connected with her in 2015, she was fresh off a major breakthrough—a vital first step toward giving humans the power to turn themselves off and on at will.

When Drew left Alaska after college in 1982, she assumed she'd never live there again. She had moved to Fairbanks in her teens so that her father, a prominent soil scientist, could take a professorship at the state's flagship university. Though Drew loved Alaska's desolate beauty, she had her sights set on a scientific career that wasn't linked to the wilderness. So at the age of 22, she decamped to New York to earn a doctorate in pharmacology, then to Sweden for a postdoc studying how brain metabolism affects human behavior.

But shortly after her daughter was born in 1990, Drew and her husband, whom she'd met in college, felt the gravitational pull of their home state. Like so many overwhelmed new parents, they suddenly warmed to the idea of being close to family. So even though Drew didn't have a job lined up, she agreed to return to Fairbanks—a decision that bewildered her Swedish coworkers. "I mean, they seriously just laughed and went, 'Well, that's the end of your career,'" Drew recalls.

Kelly Drew has been studying the brains of hibernating Arctic ground squirrels since 1992.

Photograph: Mary Webb

It didn't take long for her to conclude that the naysayers might have been right. She had assumed she'd be able to snag a few grants to continue the work she'd been doing in Sweden, but no one seemed eager to dole out money to a young, unaffiliated researcher based in a remote northern outpost. With each rejection, she became more certain that her homecoming had been a horrendous mistake.

After a year's worth of failures, Drew finally landed a small National Science Foundation grant with a very Alaskan twist: She was commissioned to study the neurochemistry of coho salmon. She used that

gig to talk her way into borrowing a few square feet of lab space in the university's Institute of Arctic Biology—a toehold back in academia that she hoped would lead to bigger things.

It did, though in a most unexpected way. It was during the salmon study that Brian Barnes first plunked an Arctic ground squirrel into Drew's hands. Instantly curious about what was taking place inside the critter's brain, a topic that had scarcely been researched, Drew began to examine hibernating ground squirrels using microdialysis, a technique in which tiny tubes are inserted beneath a living creature's skull to harvest samples of neural chemicals. The procedure normally causes scarring in the places where the tubes come in contact with the brain. So Drew was stunned when she couldn't detect any such damage after performing microdialysis on the torpid squirrels.

"You couldn't even find where the probe had been," she says. "And so we started talking about hibernation as being a very protected state—it really seemed to protect the brain from injury." This revelation made Drew think there could be tremendous value to replicating that state in humans.

For a brief moment early in the Cold War, hibernation research flourished in the United States. With the federal government fixated on besting the Soviet Union at every turn, there was plenty of money sloshing around to fund scientists who claimed their work could give the US any sort of biological edge. Many of these researchers passed through military facilities located in or near the Arctic, where there was ready access to all manner of animals that have evolved the means to power down for winter.

Among this group of scientists was Raymond J. Hock, a zoologist who'd written his doctoral thesis at Cornell University about the metabolic rates of hibernating bats. In the mid-1950s he wound up at the Arctic Aeromedical Laboratory in Fairbanks, where Air Force scientists were scrambling to make American soldiers immune to cold. (In one ethically shaky experiment, the lab's personnel paid several Indigenous inhabitants of Chilean Patagonia to wear temperature sensors and ventilated plastic hoods while they slept in freezing canvas tents.) Hock developed a keen interest in bears during his stint in Fairbanks, and he lamented how little was known about the changes in the animals' metabolism during hibernation. So he

mustered the courage to creep into the sleeping bears' dens and stick thermometers in their rectums, a gambit that allowed him to assess just how much their internal temperature declined during their annual torpor.

In 1960, Hock published a paper entitled “Potential Application of Hibernation to Space Travel” that offered the first sober, detailed look at how the budding American space program might benefit from the research he was helping to pioneer. Hibernation was within our grasp, he argued, the major hurdle being the human heart's sensitivity to rapid temperature fluctuations. “The hibernators have learned how to do this, and several laboratories are currently working on ways to avoid it in man,” he wrote.

Hock mustered the courage to creep into sleeping bears' dens and stick thermometers in their rectums, a gambit that allowed him to assess just how much their internal temperature declined during their annual torpor.

Hock also noted that hibernation has the potential to slow aging. “A hibernator, with its greatly reduced annual energy expenditures, will live longer than a non-hibernating mammal of the same body size,” he asserted. If humans, like bears, were able to maintain an internal temperature about 13 degrees colder than normal, he estimated that “aging should occur at half the normal rate during this period.”

In the early 1960s, while working at UCLA's White Mountain Research Center in California, Hock and his colleagues subjected hibernating marmots to sudden blasts of extreme cold. They discovered that the animals' brown fat—a type of tissue humans also possess—generated heat in response to the shock. Hock's team saw this as the key to enabling humans to survive frigid torpor: We needed to unlock brown fat's innate power to keep our internal organs functioning as our metabolism slowed.

But Hock died in a tragic accident in 1970. And as the Cold War matured, hibernation research fell out of fashion. With funding from the Pentagon and NASA at an ebb, biologists came to think of the field as a backwater. Since it takes a full year to gather data about an annual hibernation cycle and then compare it to an animal's normal activity, the research tends to be agonizingly slow. “It's a gamble for a young professional scientist,” says Barnes, who introduced Drew to ground squirrels in 1992 and was the

Institute of Arctic Biology's director from 2001 until 2021. "You're not going to have the same number of publications as you would in a different field."

But Drew, whose kindly demeanor belies her tenaciousness, was so captivated by the Arctic ground squirrel that she plunged into hibernation studies with zeal. She took to camping out on the North Slope each summer so she could trap squirrels by the dozen for her lab. (Accustomed to lives of deprivation, the animals are hopeless suckers for the carrots she uses as bait.) She secured funding from the US Army's research office, selling them on the idea of saving badly wounded soldiers by safely and rapidly cooling their bodies on the battlefield. To make that happen, she needed to identify the chemicals that trigger hibernation in Arctic ground squirrels, then test whether those might have a similar effect in humans.

Drew, who became an assistant professor at the Institute of Arctic Biology in 1993, initially hypothesized that gamma-aminobutyric acid, a neurotransmitter commonly known as GABA, was chiefly responsible for sparking hibernation in her squirrels. GABA is integral to inducing sleep, the state in which a non-hibernating animal's metabolism is typically at its lowest. (Humans' normal metabolic rate falls by 15 percent while we doze.) And hibernation, for all its complexities, is essentially just a very deep form of sleep—a state in which respiration is lowered, appetite is suppressed, and waste expulsion is controlled. (Bears, for example, typically do not defecate or urinate throughout their winter torpor.)

But when Drew dosed her squirrels with GABA and an array of related chemicals, none brought about any sort of stable, long-term torpor. Years slipped by in this frustrating manner: Drew celebrated her 40th birthday, mentored dozens of graduate and undergraduate students, and watched her daughter become a teenager while her efforts to find the molecular key to hibernation remained mostly stuck in neutral.

Illustration: Ori Toor

In 2005, a dozen or so years into Drew's research on the squirrels, an undergraduate chemistry major named Benjamin Warlick joined her lab as an assistant. One of his duties was to scour databases in search of fresh

ideas about the chemicals that might activate ground-squirrel hibernation. Among the many papers he unearthed was an obscure one from Japan's Fukuyama University entitled "Phase-Specific Central Regulatory Systems of Hibernation in Syrian Hamsters." Though the main text was entirely in Japanese, a language that Warlick doesn't know, the brief abstract was in English. That paragraph mentioned that the authors had snapped their hibernating hamsters out of torpor by administering a drug that blocked the A1 adenosine receptor in the animal's cells. Though that was the opposite of what Drew was trying to accomplish, Warlick flagged the paper for his boss as worthy of a glance.

Two years passed before Drew got around to having the document translated in full. But when she finally read the English version in 2007, an idea struck her: If blocking the A1 adenosine receptor caused hibernating hamsters to stir, perhaps activating it in her squirrels would induce torpor.

Sure enough, when she dosed her ground squirrels with CHA, a drug well known for stimulating the A1 adenosine receptor, the animals promptly cooled down and began to hibernate. This happened only if they received the drug during the winter months, a sign that something else was going on in the squirrels' brains that kept them on an annual hibernation schedule. Still, Drew was encouraged enough to begin working on a paper for *The Journal of Neuroscience* about the drug's mechanism of action in the Arctic ground squirrel.

As intrigued as she was by CHA's effects in her squirrels, however, the drug had a major downside: She had to inject it directly into the animals' brains. When administered intravenously, CHA is notorious for affecting the A1 adenosine receptors in the heart, slowing the organ until it stops beating altogether. As a result, CHA seemed like it could only ever be of limited use in humans: It's rarely advisable to stick needles into someone's brain, particularly outside of a hospital setting.

In 2011, while putting the finishing touches on her *Journal of Neuroscience* paper, Drew had a poster made of all the data she hoped to include in the article. She hung it in the hallway outside her lab so she could review the numbers whenever she walked by. But as she paused by the tables of data one day, she was struck not by how much she'd accomplished, but by how

much knowledge still eluded her. Nearly two decades after Barnes had first placed a frigid squirrel in her hands, she hadn't devised a way to turn her esoteric expertise into the safe and effective drug she'd envisioned. What should have been a moment of triumph instead felt like a minor defeat.

And then in the midst of her melancholy, a thunderbolt hit: What if Drew could combine the CHA with another drug that would block its effect on the heart, but not the brain? CHA is what's called an agonist, meaning it stimulates receptors; a drug that blocks them is an *antagonist*. What Drew needed, she realized, was an A1 adenosine antagonist with molecules too large to cross the permeable blood-brain barrier.

"If you think of the body as a color map, and of agonist as red, then the agonist—the red—is everywhere. It's stimulating all the receptors," Drew explains. "Now, you don't want it to stimulate the heart receptors, so you have to block those receptors. Now, think of the *antagonist* as blue. So you put that in the body, but it doesn't get into the brain, right? So the rest of the body is purple, but the brain is still red."

There was already an extensive literature on A1 adenosine antagonists, so Drew had several good candidates to choose from. She ultimately settled on 8-(*p*-sulfophenyl)theophylline, or 8-SPT, which is closely related to one of the main ingredients in black tea. She melded this with CHA into a drug cocktail that was injected into the abdomen. To test this combination, Drew then launched a series of experiments on rats. She would stop the rats' hearts, then revive them by performing CPR. Once pulled back from the brink of death, the rats were then either made hypothermic with the CHA/8-SPT combination or left to heal with their metabolism at a normal rate. The rats that received the cocktail fared much better than the ones that didn't. And perhaps most significantly, the treated rats suffered no ill effects from having their thermostats turned way down by the drug. There was no shivering, and thus no reason to give any narcotics that might interfere with their breathing.

By 2014, Drew had achieved such excellent results in her experiments on rats that she applied to patent her invention: "Methods and compositions for the treatment of ischemic injury to tissue using therapeutic hypothermia." The first illustration in the application is a photograph of an Arctic ground

squirrel curled into its trademark hibernation pose, a nod to the small moment in 1992 that had altered the course of her life.

From an ordinary familiarity with sci-fi movies like *2001* and *Planet of the Apes*, Drew was always vaguely aware that her work might attract interest from the space-exploration industry. So she wasn't terribly surprised when someone from SpaceWorks reached out to her in February 2015. The firm had just secured a second tranche of NASA funding to press forward with its human-torpor research, and John Bradford invited Drew to become his company's chief hibernation consultant.

SpaceWorks arranged for Drew and Matthew Kumar, an anesthesiologist at the Mayo Clinic, to test the CHA/8-SPT cocktail on pigs. The drugs steadily and safely lowered the animals' internal temperature to between 86 and 90 degrees Fahrenheit—not quite as chilly as the state doctors can achieve using intravenous fluids on humans, but close. In his summary of the experiment, Bradford wrote that the cocktail “could lead to a torpor induction protocol that does not require any active cooling [and] eliminates the need for pharmacological sedation to suppress shiver response.”

Drew was not the only hibernation researcher shifting her focus to Mars around this time. In 2017, a University of Colorado biologist named Sandy Martin, who had spent her career building a tissue bank containing samples from various hibernating species, was approached by students organizing a one-day symposium on space travel. They urged her to talk about whether her life's work could be used to facilitate human torpor on long voyages. “I had never thought seriously about it,” Martin says. “I mean, it's always in the back of your mind as a hibernation researcher, what the applications might be, but that was never the motivation for me. My motivation was, ‘This is a profound evolutionary adaptation.’ I mean, for a mammal to be so plastic in terms of body temperature, and the ability of cells to survive hypoxia and temperature swings, all that is just so profound.” In preparing for her talk, Martin unearthed an older SpaceWorks paper that advocated using IV cooling fluids to place Mars-bound astronauts in torpor. She forwarded the paper to her daughter, an emergency medicine resident who dismissed SpaceWorks' proposal as “ridiculous” due to the pesky shivering problem.

“I thought, ‘What we need to do is figure out how hibernators do this, because they do it so beautifully and so naturally and without harm,’” Martin recalls. “And they don’t need intubation, and they don’t need feeding tubes.” She and her daughter began working on their own paper, proposing several promising avenues of inquiry based on Martin’s genomic analysis of the thirteen-lined ground squirrel, a close relative of the Arctic ground squirrel. One was to investigate further a receptor called TRPM8, which plays a crucial role in helping thirteen-lined ground squirrels thermoregulate during hibernation.

In March 2018, NASA invited Drew, Martin, and a handful of other luminaries from the hibernation community to a two-day conference in Mountain View, California—an event billed as the agency’s first-ever “space torpor workshop.” The meeting was an opportunity for the biologists to make the argument that, if provided with sufficient backing, they could help humans achieve at least some level of true hibernation in the next 10 to 15 years—a timeline that dovetailed nicely with NASA’s plans to send humans to Mars in the late 2030s or early 2040s.

Speaking to NASA officials at the workshop, Martin emphasized that the pervasiveness of hibernation among mammals suggests humans can achieve it too. There are three types of mammals: the egg-laying monotremes, such as the platypus; the marsupials, which carry their undeveloped offspring in pouches; and the placentals, the category that includes us. “All three of those branches have hibernating species,” Martin says. “The most parsimonious explanation for that is that our common ancestor was a hibernator.” Assuming that’s the case, preparing our species to deal with the physiological stresses of torpor may simply be a matter of altering genes we already possess.

Four months after the NASA workshop, SpaceWorks published the final report from the second phase of its human-torpor project. The 115-page document is frank about the many challenges that lie ahead: Bradford and his coauthors admit that little to nothing is known about how hibernation might affect an astronaut’s cognitive abilities, for example. But the report also asserts that, based on the current pace of research, NASA could begin testing hibernation technologies such as Drew’s drug cocktail on human

subjects as early as 2026. Judging by investments that NASA has initiated in recent months, the agency seems intent on making that happen.

Illustration: Ori Toor

NASA hasn't just started to accept that torpor is essential to making spaceships lighter. The agency has also come around to Bradford's view that it may help astronauts avoid some of the physical hardships of long-haul space travel. One of the great unknowns about the mission to Mars, for example, is whether humans can endure the ravages of galactic cosmic rays, the remnants of the Milky Way's celestial violence. Once a spacecraft travels beyond Earth's protective magnetosphere—which orbiting craft like the International Space Station stay well within—there's no real way to dodge these cancer-causing particles, and scientists have yet to find a malleable, lightweight material that can shield against them. But if human cells can be made less active, they may develop significant resistance to radiation. In a 1972 experiment, for example, scientists found that ground squirrels that were irradiated while hibernating had a much higher survival rate than their fully conscious peers.

“The hypothesis is that if you reduce the metabolism in the cells, then you would also reduce the damage from radiation,” says Emmanuel Urquieta, chief medical officer for the Translational Research Institute for Space Health, a NASA-sponsored program based out of Baylor University’s College of Medicine. “So you can give the cells a little bit more time to start repairing themselves from radiation exposure.”

In August 2021, Urquieta's institute awarded \$4 million to researchers interested in furthering the science of human torpor. One of the recipients is now examining the fossilized remains of an extinct human species that may have hibernated in the caves of northern Spain some 430,000 years ago. Another awardee is trying to establish the ideal temperature at which humans can hibernate without causing undue physiological stress. And Clifton Callaway, a professor of emergency medicine at the University of Pittsburgh, is deepening his investigation into drugs that might be used as part of a suspended-animation system on long-haul space flights.

Like Bradford, Callaway's early interest in human torpor grew from his curiosity about therapeutic hypothermia. He has long wanted to use the technique to help not just survivors of full-blown cardiac arrest but also people who walk into the ER exhibiting the early signs of heart attacks. To help make therapeutic hypothermia a realistic option for such patients, Callaway looked for drugs that can prevent shivering without knocking vital organs out of commission. Just before the [Covid-19 pandemic](#) hit, he obtained some encouraging results with dexmedetomidine, a mild sedative used in anesthesia. “It worked well enough that we actually said, ‘God, you really could use this in astronauts,’” he recalls.

In an odd way, hibernation may turn out to be the only remotely attainable form of time travel.

Pure dexmedetomidine probably doesn't have much of a future aboard spacecraft, since its sedative effects last only 30 minutes and it must be administered intravenously. But there are a host of closely related drugs that Callaway is testing on human subjects, hoping to find one that can be delivered via pill or patch. Next year he plans to expand his work to assess how well our species can rebound from an extended period in a low-metabolic state.

“Our master project is to take eight or 10 people and have them do a torpor for five days,” Callaway says. “I want them to sleep 20 hours a day, have a slightly lower body temperature, use less oxygen and consume fewer calories, and make lower carbon dioxide for five days. And we're going to do a whole bunch of testing before they start and after they finish to see, you know, what's the hangover?”

Callaway does not yet know how he plans to make his test subjects torpid, but he is well aware of the innovations coming out of Kelly Drew's lab in Alaska. Drew paid him a visit in 2019 and opened his eyes to the possibilities of taking inspiration from animal hibernators. “One lesson I've gotten from the physiologists studying hibernation is that we would be very naive to think that we're going to find one single drug that just lets an animal or a person go into hibernation,” Callaway says. “I imagine in 10 years, the answer we'll be looking at will be maybe one of the drugs in the class I'm studying right now, in combination with a drug that Dr. Drew is

studying, and then another drug some other sleep researcher is studying. It'll be that cocktail of drugs that'll be most likely to provide astronauts with a safe sleep for a long distance."

Callaway doubts that when those astronauts sleep they'll ever get as cold as the Arctic ground squirrel or have metabolisms as low. But he notes that bears are pretty effective hibernators too, and they reduce their internal temperature by only a few degrees while snoozing through a winter. "In this decade," he says, "we can replicate that."

Illustration: Ori Toor

Sometimes Drew cannot believe that, at the age of 63, she has devoted nearly half her life to trying to determine how a 3½-pound rodent shuts down for the winter. She counts herself fortunate to have been able to crack problems at such a meticulous pace. "When you talk to people in industry, I mean, they just, they would never tolerate this," she told me, with a self-deprecating chuckle.

Kelly Drew in her lab at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Photograph: Mary Webb

Drew holding an Arctic ground squirrel in her laboratory. Photograph: Mary Webb

But thanks to university-based researchers like Drew who've solved some of the fundamental mysteries of hibernation, the private sector is taking notice of its potential. When the University of Colorado's Sandy Martin retired last year, she arranged for her bank of hibernator tissues to be licensed to a former student, a computational biologist named Katie Grabek. Grabek then cofounded FaunaBio, a Silicon Valley startup that aims to improve treatments for heart and lung diseases by discovering why hibernators can survive stressful events—particularly the abrupt shocks to internal organs that occur during cooling and rewarming—that would kill most humans.

“These animals, when they arouse from torpor, it's very similar to having a heart attack,” Grabek says. FaunaBio wants to identify the molecular compounds that hibernators use to prevent or repair cellular damage, in the hope of developing pharmaceuticals that can help cardiac patients.

But if hibernation does indeed become a realistic option for humans, even those of us in decent shape may find it tempting. Induced torpor seems to offer a roundabout path to realizing at least a couple of transhumanist dreams. Like life extension, perhaps—provided you're not purely bent on extending your *conscious* life. As Raymond J. Hock noted in 1960, hibernation really does seem to offer a fountain of youth. Earlier this year, for example, a team at UCLA found that yellow-bellied marmots, which hibernate for as much as two-thirds of every year, possess much more robust genetic material than might be anticipated based on their chronological ages. “The molecular and physiological responses required for an individual to successfully hibernate may prevent aging,” the researchers wrote in *Nature*.

In an odd way, hibernation may also turn out to be the only remotely attainable form of time travel. In a satirical story from 1850, Edgar Allan Poe imagined that the ancient Egyptian practice of mummification was just such a technology. When the story's protagonists accidentally revive a mummy, the awakened Egyptian explains that his civilization's historians sometimes lived their lives “in installments.” They would hibernate for a few hundred years, then arouse to correct the record about the era from which they'd originated—a method for “preventing our history from degenerating into absolute fable.” Of course, no one today is keen to develop a hibernation cocktail that can induce torpor for centuries. But a biological fast-forward button that would allow someone to skip months or more into the future could have its uses—or, at the very least, appeal to a certain kind of adventurer.

As for myself, what I find most alluring about hibernation is its potential to offer a brief holiday from the constant din of my own thoughts. In a time of exhausting overstimulation, anxiety, and dread, I find myself wondering what it would be like to switch off for a week or two. In his novelization of *2001*, Arthur C. Clarke depicted one of his main characters as longing for

the psychological liberation of torpor: “Sometimes Bowman, as First Captain of *Discovery*, envied his three unconscious colleagues in the frozen peace of the Hibernaculum. They were free from all boredom and responsibility.”

Then again, the vulnerability of the hibernator is a perennial theme in science fiction. In *2001*, the three astronauts who spend the film sealed in hibernation pods are unceremoniously murdered by HAL 9000, their ship's sentient operating system. Countless other works of sci-fi focus on the shock and social dislocation that long-term hibernators experience when they emerge into worlds that have gone haywire in their absence. Even if we go under for only a few months in order to accomplish a worthwhile endeavor like reaching Mars, reentry into consciousness is bound to be a complicated affair. Arctic ground squirrels snap back to their old selves within hours of warming up. But that might not be the case if they were blessed with human self-awareness.

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Nov 22, 2022 7:00 AM

Is Moore's Law Really Dead?

A postmortem on “Cramming More Components Onto Integrated Circuits”—the most influential article of the 20th century.

PHOTOGRAPH: SHAWN MICHAEL JONES

Ohm’s law ($V = IR$) states that the voltage across a conductor is proportional to the current flowing through it. Hooke’s law ($F_s = -kx$) states that the force needed to extend or compress a spring by some distance is proportional to that distance. Moore’s law states—

Well, that one doesn’t state. It wagers. It hazards a guess. It contains no constants, no special functions, no variables, no equations at all. Movie directors will find in Moore’s law nothing like the kind of pretty runes that John Nash or Ben Affleck might scrawl on a window with a wax pencil. In fact, Moore’s law is less a law than a flier, a bit of Johnson-era bookmaking. Every year (or two) for a decade—or so the “law” goes—engineers would maybe, probably, double the number of transistors they could stuff onto a [silicon chip](#).

Such was the bet of Gordon Moore, then the research director at the illustrious Fairchild Semiconductor, an outfit based in Sunnyvale, California, that in those days was known mostly as a division of the Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corporation. *Electronics*, a throwaway circular for the radio industry, picked up one of Moore’s reports for Fairchild and published it as “[Cramming More Components Onto Integrated Circuits](#)” on April 19, 1965.

It was a hit. *Prescient* is too weak a word: “Integrated circuits will lead to such wonders as home computers, or at least terminals connected to a central computer, automatic controls for automobiles, and personal portable communications equipment.” *Such wonders*. The essay dates to a time when a computer costs \$18,000 (around \$170,000 today). To make one affordable for a household, let alone an individual, will take a miracle. Moore, who later cofounded Intel, gives the miracle a shove with his resounding vote of confidence in tech workers for whom “You can do it” turns into “You must do it” turns into “You will do it” turns into “It’s natural law.”

“Cramming” in this way sweeps you up in a tide of inevitability. It’s only slightly too grand to say the essay recalls the Declaration of Independence. (“When in the course of human events” also makes revolution sound like natural law.) For a piece about integrated circuits, moreover, “Cramming” partakes of the marvelous-fantastic genre; nothing Moore predicts for the future—and that future is now—is anything less than riotously fun.

Five years after the essay’s publication, Carver Mead, a renowned scientist who just this year won a tidy 100 million yen as the Kyoto Prize laureate, playfully dubbed its projections a law. Thus the standing orders to America’s postwar engineers became clear: *Miniatrize transistors and reduce costs*. A world of workers have applied themselves to this task ever since. As much as Moore’s skills as a would-be legislator, his infectious enthusiasm for semiconductors has inspired these decades of engineering commitment. “Cramming” is still well worth reading, especially if all you know of Moore’s law is the doubling thing. Not only is it vatic, robust, and refined at once, it’s a piece of prose without precedent, a speech act that brought into being a whole global economic sector.

The essay’s strength lies in its bold, bullish copulative sentences that use “is” like an equal sign and land with absolute certainty. “The future of integrated electronics is the future of electronics itself.” Blammo. Some of the prose then sounds like a patriotic newsreel (“No American can have freedom and justice unless there is freedom and justice for all!!”) or like Johnson himself bucking up geopolitical spirits. In the very month that

“Cramming” appeared, LBJ declared of Vietnam, “The only path of reasonable men is the path of peaceful settlement.”

Then there is the essay’s central claim: “With unit cost falling as the number of components per circuit rises, by 1975 economics may dictate squeezing as many as 65,000 components on a single silicon chip.” In spite of the hedge (“may dictate”), the negative slope—in which the two variables, unit cost and number of components, are inversely related—has a rousing momentum to it.

Elsewhere in the essay, Moore projects the exaggerated certitude of a pitch deck—or maybe a graduate student who’s trying to assure her doctoral supervisor that her research is coming along great. “Several approaches evolved,” Moore wrote, “including microassembly techniques for individual components, thin film structures and semiconductor integrated circuits. Each approach evolved rapidly and converged … Many researchers believe the way of the future to be a combination of the various approaches.” The profound appreciation of intellectual collaboration and convergence, which still rings through the semiconductor sector today, cannot have helped but leaven the mood of American scientists in the pre-moonwalk days, when the Soviets appeared to be winning the Space Race.

At 1,875 words, “Cramming” is concise, as befits a polemic on compression. And then there’s that word *cramming*, from the Old English *crammian*, “to press something into something else.” So palpable, greedy, and carnal. It’s not when we’re in the mood for measurement but when we’re feeling recklessly indifferent to proportion and harmony that we cram things into our suitcases, our shoes, and our mouths. While the essay is in the slide-rule idiom of engineers, it also speaks to the gut. It’s a goad to biennial home-optimizing that recommends balling up more of your shit, stuffing it into an overfull closet. This is a useful reminder that even at the scale of microns—and now nanos—scientists are still beholden to the constraints of physical space, at least until the path of all reasonable men becomes the path of quantum.

And quantum is the point. As a field of inquiry, quantum—or AI, or the metaverse—might not be so driven by the rhythm of Moore’s law. If you

need another reason to read “Cramming,” consider this: Its diktat might be coming to an end.

“Moore’s law is dead,” pronounced Jensen Huang, cofounder and CEO of Nvidia, in September, a few weeks before his company released its \$1,600 RTX 4090 graphics card for gamers.

For technologists like Huang who have their sights set on the wonders of GPUs, the imperative to shrink transistors and reduce costs has given way to an ambition to conduct quantum experiments and increase performance in the metaverse without regard to size or price.

But the fact that Huang’s whole business model at Nvidia is *still* responsive to “Cramming,” nearly 50 years later, clinches the article’s status as the most influential essay of the 20th century. Lionel Trilling, sure, wrote “Authenticity and the Modern Unconscious” around the time of “Cramming,” and Wendell Berry’s “The Long-Legged House” is lovely. But did Trilling or Berry set the speedcore tempo for the global industry that animates the entire built universe?

In 2005, realizing they lacked an original copy of “Cramming,” Intel executives offered \$10,000 on eBay for a mint copy of the relevant issue of *Electronics*. At last, an engineer in Surrey, UK, found one under his floorboards. The enchanted pages now sit in climate-controlled splendor in Intel’s museum—the tech world’s *Book of Kells*.

The last phase of Moore’s essay is a delight. Having delivered his whopping projection of 65,000 elements per chip—it’s now 11.8 billion—Moore finally drops a statement of the purest trust in technology: “I believe that such a large circuit can be built on a single wafer.” Who would want to contradict Moore’s idealism? Such expansive affirmations of belief, with a reference to a Communion-like wafer. No wonder “Cramming” anchors the liturgy of the semiconductor business. In science, laws obtain. In tech, it’s mostly faith.

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By [Andy Greenberg](#)

[Backchannel](#)

Nov 22, 2022 6:00 AM

The Hunt for the Dark Web's Biggest Kingpin, Part 5: Takedown

After months of meticulous planning, investigators finally move in to catch AlphaBay's mastermind red-handed. Then the case takes a tragic turn. Cazes spun around, instantly in fight-or-flight mode, trying desperately to run for his front door. Soon another cop had grabbed him. Then another. Illustration: Hokyoung Kim

Content Warning: *This story includes references to suicide. If you need help, call the [Suicide and Crisis Lifeline](#) for your region.*

CHAPTER 11

ALPHA'S OMEGA

On a typical day, the Private House Buddhamonthon development on the western edge of Bangkok offers a quiet respite from the traffic jams and diesel fumes of the city's central neighborhoods. The cul-de-sac where [Alexandre Cazes](#) lived in that semi-suburban enclave was dotted with yellow trumpetbush blossoms. The only sounds were of palm fronds and banana trees rustling in the breeze and the chatter of tropical birds. But on the morning of July 5, that street would have seemed unusually busy to anyone paying attention.

At one end, a gardener was trimming the foliage, and an electrician was busy with a nearby wiring box. Inside the house at the street's dead end, a model home and sales office for Private House's real estate development firm, a man and woman were getting a tour of the property and inquiring about moving into the neighborhood. Their driver sat waiting in a car outside. Another car with two women in it was slowly pulling into the cul-de-sac, looking lost after taking an apparent wrong turn.

In fact, every one of the characters in this bustling scene was an undercover agent. Thailand's DEA equivalent, the Narcotics Suppression Bureau, had assembled an entire theatrical production's worth of actors around the unwitting target, busily performing their roles and waiting for a signal for Operation Bayonet's takedown to finally begin.

This story is excerpted from the book [Tracers in the Dark: The Global Hunt for the Crime Lords of Cryptocurrency](#), now available from Doubleday.

Courtesy of Penguin Random House

The only non-Thai player in this pantomime was the DEA's Wilfredo Guzman. He stood inside the real estate spec house at the end of the cul-de-sac wearing a Red Hot Chili Peppers T-shirt and jeans, posing as a wealthy foreign buyer with a Thai wife. Guzman's primary job that morning was to distract the polite real estate agent, straining the limits of his Thai vocabulary to bombard her with questions about the layout of the spec house, the number of bedrooms, the size of the garage, and every other domestic detail he could think of. All of this was designed to allow the agent playing his wife to venture to an upstairs window and get eyes on Cazes' house and driveway next door, in anticipation of the action set to unfold there.

Another group of NSB officers, along with the DEA's Miller and a group of FBI agents and analysts, was at the home of the NSB team leader, Colonel Pisal Erb-Arb, where the entire team had gathered that morning; the colonel happened to live a few miles away from Cazes' residence. Pisal himself and a group of uniformed officers had now parked several blocks from Cazes' house. Nearly an hour's drive to the northeast, on the eighth floor of NSB headquarters, yet another group, including Rabenn, Hemesath, Marion, and Sanchez, were assembled in a conference room, with portraits of the Thai royal family on one wall and a collection of screens mounted on another.

The war-room monitors showed videofeeds of the cul-de-sac, pulled from a nearby security camera and the dashcam of the car where Guzman's "driver" was waiting. At the center of the long table was a conference phone connected to both the Thai team on the ground and another team of

agents in Lithuania, tasked with imaging the AlphaBay server—taking a snapshot of its contents and then, after Cazes' arrest, pulling it offline.

Rabenn remembers the atmosphere of that war room as more dead silence and sweaty, anxious tension than eagerness or anticipation. He knew the possibility of achieving a Ross Ulbricht-style arrest and seizing Cazes' laptop in a live, logged-in state—not to mention his phone—was a long shot at best. Even after all their international meetings and planning calls over the past months, and in spite of his usual hard-driving enthusiasm, Rabenn found himself quietly expecting their plan to fail.

Across the table, Sanchez was logged in to Roosh V. She checked Rawmeo's profile and confirmed to the group that he was online and active: Cazes was at his keyboard. It was time.

Then, moments later, a voice piped up from the conference phone on the table. “Oh God,” it said. “We shut it down.”

It was the team in Lithuania. Somehow, the agents there had accidentally crashed the AlphaBay server before they could finish imaging it. In a matter of moments, Cazes would be tipped off that AlphaBay was down, possibly due to foul play. All he would need to do was close his laptop and the game would be over.

There was no choice: The team in the conference room frantically told the agents on the ground that they needed to arrest Cazes and do it *now*.

Pisal gave a cue via police radio to the two female agents in the gray Toyota Camry at the mouth of the cul-de-sac. Just the day before, the NSB colonel and his team had scrapped the postal delivery plan. The local post office had warned them that Cazes never signed for packages himself, that his wife often came to the door instead. So they'd had to think up a last-minute alternative. Their plan B now centered on that inconspicuous Toyota and an agent who went by the nickname Nueng, sitting in the driver's seat, whispering Buddhist prayers to herself to slow her racing heartbeat.

A few seconds later, a loud clang rang out across the cul-de-sac, followed by the sound of metal grinding on concrete. The Camry had just plowed its

rear fender into the fence of Cazes' two-story home, bending the front gate, dragging it off its rails, and creating a clamor that ripped through the quiet of an otherwise peaceful morning on the outskirts of the Thai capital.

The security guard at the end of the cul-de-sac began shouting in exasperation at Nueng. Hadn't he *just* told her to back straight out? Nueng and the other agent in her car stepped out of the vehicle, and Nueng stood on the street, scratching her head in a display of haplessness, apologizing and explaining to the security guard that she was still learning to drive. At that moment, a vertical shutter opened partially on a second-floor window on the front of the house—a detail, visible on the surveillance video feed, that sent a wave of excitement through the war room at NSB headquarters.

They had gotten the layout of the home on an earlier trip to the spec house, and they knew that this was the master bedroom. Had Cazes stepped away from his computer?

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A moment later, Cazes's wife, Sunisa Thapsuwan, came out from the house's front door and poked her head around the bent gate. The petite Thai woman, wearing a long nightshirt over her pregnant belly, kindly reassured Nueng that it was fine, that she and her friend could leave. But Nueng, doggedly playing her part, shouted—as loudly as possible, trying to project so that Cazes could hear inside the house—that she needed to pay for the damage.

“I want to pay for it!” she pleaded. “I don’t want to pay for it in the next life!” Her hands shook as she channeled her adrenaline into the anxiety of a poor person who owes something to a rich person.

Thapsuwan looked up to the open window, and Nueng heard Cazes say something to his wife that she couldn’t pick up. “Maybe your husband could come down here to assess the damage?” Nueng suggested helpfully.

A moment later, Cazes emerged. He was shirtless and barefoot, looking pale and soft, wearing nothing but a pair of baggy gym shorts; he had bragged on Roosh V that he liked to go “commando” when working out in the morning, and apparently hadn’t changed since beginning work that day. He had his iPhone in one hand.

Nueng allowed herself a moment of silent internal celebration. “I got you,” she thought.

She remembers that Cazes, for a dark-web administrator whose site had just dropped offline and who was now dealing with a minor traffic accident at his front driveway, looked relatively unperturbed. His emails would later reveal that seconds earlier he’d been repeatedly messaging his Lithuanian hosting provider about his server’s unexplained outage. But he seemed to suspect nothing about the scene at the gate; Pisal had chosen the two women for their role in part because he’d guessed that Cazes’ misogyny would prevent him from imagining they could possibly be undercover agents. As Cazes walked toward them, Nueng and her partner got back in the car and drove it onto the model home’s driveway at the end of the cul-de-sac, ostensibly to get it out of the way.

Cazes turned to the gate to see if he could pull it back onto its rails, tucking his phone into the elastic band of his shorts. At this point, the driver of Guzman’s car, a middle-aged undercover agent nicknamed Pong, walked over. He stood next to Cazes as if to help appraise the situation.

Then, as Cazes yanked on the gate, Pong reached over and plucked the iPhone out of Cazes’ waistband, seemingly to prevent it from falling. As Cazes looked over to him, perhaps to thank him, Pong took Cazes by the arm and motioned for him to step aside for a moment. Cazes, seeming confused, walked with him out into the street.

Events suddenly accelerated. Another agent, a younger, compact man with an athletic build who went by M, had emerged from Pong and Guzman’s car, where he had been hiding in the back seat. As he walked past them, Pong handed M the phone behind Cazes’ back. At the exact moment of that handoff, Cazes looked down the street, away from his home. He saw

another police officer—the electrician, now wearing a police vest—sprinting straight toward him.

Cazes spun around, instantly in fight-or-flight mode, trying desperately to run for his front door. Pong and M grabbed Cazes and struggled with him for a fraction of a second. The iPhone clattered to the ground and another officer picked it up. Soon another cop had grabbed Cazes. Then another. They joined Pong in pinning Cazes' arms behind his back and holding him in a headlock as M wrenched free from the melee and ran through the gate.

The moment for M's make-or-break assignment had arrived. He raced into the house, past Cazes' wife, who by now stood frozen in the living room, and up the stairs, taking them two at a time. From studying the layout of the spec house, M had determined that Cazes' home office must be across the upstairs hall from the master bedroom. He burst through the door there and found a pair of young foreigners asleep in a guest bedroom—unexpected guests of Cazes' visiting from Quebec.

M shouted a quick “Sorry! Sorry!” then whirled around and ran across the hall into the master bedroom. At the far end of the room, there it was, on a cheap white desk: Cazes' laptop, a black Asus PC with an external monitor, revealing red-highlighted A, S, D, and W gaming keys.

It was open.

He practically leaped across the room, reached out, and placed a finger on its touchpad. Then he sat down in Cazes' desk chair, keeping one hand on the computer's mouse, finally catching his breath.

A moment later, M's voice crackled over the police radio. “Officers, officers,” he said in Thai. “The computer is unlocked.”

In the NSB office war room, someone announced over the phone that they had the laptop, open and alive.

The room's tension broke into an eruption of cheers. Jen Sanchez leaped up, standing in front of the video screens, pumping her fist in the air. Rabenn and Hemesath gleefully hugged each other. Four years after the arrest of the

Silk Road's Ross Ulbricht with his open laptop at the Glen Park Public Library in San Francisco, it seemed they had pulled off a dead-to-rights dark-web bust of their own.

But there was still the question of the phone. As Pong and two other Thai cops had wrestled Cazes to his knees and handcuffed him, the DEA's Guzman had run out of the spec house, leaving the bewildered real estate agent behind. As was customary in Thailand, Guzman had taken off his shoes to go into the model home and hadn't had time to put them back on, so he stood in the street in his socks.

A Thai police officer handed Guzman Cazes' iPhone, and he looked down at it in dismay. It was locked.

As the Thai police held Cazes on the ground, he screamed his wife's name. She and her father, who lived with the rest of Cazes' in-laws across the street, came outside and stood over him helplessly as he was handcuffed.

At that moment, Pisal arrived on the scene, wearing a gray polo shirt and a kind of naval cap; the hat wasn't part of his uniform, but he believed it brought him luck. He had already been told by police radio that the phone was locked.

Pisal bent over Cazes, and the officers pulled him to his feet. The police colonel introduced himself, put a paternal hand on Cazes' shoulder, and gave him a knowing look. He asked the shirtless, panicked young man to please follow him for a moment so that they could speak privately.

Cazes' expression eased slightly. This didn't seem to be the behavior of police arresting someone for running the world's biggest online drug market. Cazes walked with Pisal and the cops holding him across the street, under the shade of a mango tree.

When they were out of earshot of Cazes' wife, Pisal explained in a discreet tone that they knew about Cazes' sexual encounter with a woman two evenings prior. Now that woman was alleging sexual assault. They needed to work this out.

Cazes could see that this must be some sort of shakedown: He, a wealthy foreigner, had flaunted his Lamborghini and now was paying the price. He looked concerned but rational again, his moment of panic subsiding. This was a situation he might be able to handle.

Pisal explained that the woman's husband wanted to speak on the phone. Perhaps if Cazes offered the man something, he wouldn't press charges.

The cops led Cazes into the same Toyota Camry that had pulled into the cul-de-sac. Pisal sat down next to Cazes and handed him the locked phone Guzman had given him, telling him the number to call.

Cazes unlocked the phone and dialed. The voice on the other end of the line, another undercover agent, played the role of the cuckolded husband. Cazes, nervously speaking in Thai, offered him 100,000 baht to drop the charges, around \$3,000. The man demanded 10 times that amount. Cazes quickly agreed. When they had finished negotiating, the husband instructed Cazes to hand the phone to the police, and Cazes did as he was told.

Pisal stepped out of the car, the unlocked phone in his hand, and gave it to an FBI agent who had just arrived on the scene.

Guzman was the first to finally tell Cazes the truth. After the AlphaBay founder had been allowed to go back into his home and get dressed, the agent sat next to him on the couch of his living room, where Cazes now rested, his hands cuffed in front of him, wearing a worried expression. Guzman, the first foreigner Cazes had seen since the raid of his home began, explained that he was with the DEA and that the United States had issued a warrant for his arrest.

Around the same time, the DEA's Robert Miller arrived, along with a team of FBI agents and analysts assigned to forensically examine Cazes' devices. Ali, the cryptocurrency tracer who had confirmed Cazes' identity as Alpha02 so many months earlier, walked through the gate and past his luxury cars, her first time seeing corporeal results of the digital wealth she'd so obsessively tracked.

“That's the Aventador,” she thought to herself. “That's the Panamera.”

In the master bedroom—which they now knew doubled as Cazes' home office—the FBI's team of computer specialists began exploring his laptop. They found that he was logged in to AlphaBay as its administrator. On the computer's desktop, they found a text file where, just like Ross Ulbricht, he had tracked his net worth. Cazes had counted more than \$12.5 million in assets, including houses and cars; \$3.3 million in cash; and more than \$7.5 million in [cryptocurrency](#), a fortune totaling more than \$23.3 million.

When Ali was given her turn on the machine, she immediately began examining its cryptocurrency wallets and the addresses associated with them. As she did, she excitedly picked up her phone and called her fellow crypto-tracing FBI analyst, Erin, who was sitting an hour away in the NSB war room with Rabenn, Hemesath, Marion, and Sanchez.

“Tunafish!” she shouted without preamble. Or rather, she shouted out her and Erin's secret nickname for a Bitcoin address that they had obsessed over for months, the key link in the chain of digital payments that had first connected Cazes to AlphaBay.

“I'm going to need more context,” Erin responded drily.

“It's here,” Ali said. “I've got the key for it.”

She could see before her the one, very specific pot of gold that had confirmed the identity of Alpha02. It had appeared exactly where the blockchain's rainbow had pointed, arcing halfway around the world into Alexandre Cazes' Bangkok home.

CHAPTER 12

CAPTIVITY

For several days after his arrest, Cazes lived in a kind of comfortable purgatory.

The Thais kept him on the same eighth floor of their Bangkok NSB headquarters building where they had, over the previous months,

engineered his surveillance and takedown. Cazes spent his nights sleeping on a couch there, constantly under the watchful eye of the police. During the day he was shuttled back and forth between a black leather massage chair and conference room tables—where he was subjected to paperwork and questions that he almost entirely refused to answer until he could speak to a lawyer. He was fed whatever he requested: mostly local takeout or, on some occasions, French food from the fast-food bistro chain Paul.

Cazes' relatively gentle treatment—at least compared with what he'd receive in a typical Thai jail—was designed to persuade him to consent to two key forms of cooperation. Rabenn, Hemesath, and Marion hoped to persuade him to sign an extradition agreement, allowing them to deport him from Bangkok to Fresno without a lengthy legal battle. And more ambitiously, the Americans hoped he might agree to work with them as an informant.

Flipping the kingpin of the world's biggest dark-web market to “Team USA,” as Jen Sanchez put it, would be an incredible coup. There was no telling, the prosecutors imagined, what sort of gold mine of information Cazes might be able to share with them about his AlphaBay coconspirators or others in the online underground where he'd been such a key player. What sorts of traps could they set with his help?

Among the DEA agents, Sanchez was given the job of speaking with Cazes and persuading him to agree to extradition. After his arrest, Sanchez had experienced a complication in her feelings toward the dark-web crime lord, whose opioid sales and misogynistic alter ego had once triggered her revulsion. In her prior postings in Mexico and Texas, she'd taken pride in her ability to convert suspects into informants, a skill that required persuasion and personability. To do the same with Cazes, she tried taking an almost maternal approach—one that wasn't entirely feigned. Despite her hard-charging comments to Miller about sending Alpha02 to supermax prison earlier that year, she felt some warmth and even empathy mixed in with her contempt for Cazes, now that she saw him captive before her.

Sanchez didn't have the authority to offer much to Cazes in exchange for his cooperation or to make promises about his future. But she says she tried to show him kindness, to help him keep his spirits up. He asked her about his

wife and his unborn child. She reassured him that they were safe; his wife had been arrested, too, but quickly released.

“I’m gonna take care of you,” she repeatedly told Cazes. He seemed unconvinced.

In their war room on the same floor of the NSB office, just a few walls away from where Cazes was held, the Americans continued their work scouring his computers for evidence. His iPhone, after all their concerns about hidden Bitcoin keys and the trickery Pidal had employed to unlock it, turned out to have only personal information and nothing related to AlphaBay. The Lithuanian server, too, was initially useless to them; after crashing, it had rebooted in an encrypted state. They were denied its secrets and would only manage to decrypt the machine months later.

The laptop, on the other hand, was a gold mine of evidence. Aside from being logged in to AlphaBay and containing that incriminating net-worth file, the computer had keys for all of Cazes’ various wallets, containing not only Bitcoin but also other, newer cryptocurrencies: Ethereum, Monero, Zcash. Rabenn remembers watching the two FBI analysts, Ali and Erin, in the war room as they siphoned that money into wallets under FBI control, announcing every time they had transferred another multimillion-dollar stash. “It was the coolest thing I have ever seen,” Rabenn says.

On the evening after the arrest, Rabenn and Hemesath met with Cazes for the first time. He sat in a conference room of the NSB office—accompanied, for the moment, only by a Thai police chaperone and two Thai lawyers, whom Cazes had hired to temporarily oversee his defense. For Rabenn, who had hunted Cazes for the better part of a year across the digital world, sharing a room with his target still felt surreal. Cazes didn’t recognize either of the prosecutors, whom he had sat down next to in the Athenee just a few days earlier by sheer chance.

Rabenn began by warning Cazes not to waste their time or lie to them, his standard opening to criminal defendants. But the two Americans had agreed that Hemesath, the more experienced orator, would take the lead. In his usual analytic tone, Hemesath launched into a short speech about the crimes they knew Cazes had committed, the indictment against him, and the

potential consequences if he were convicted. Hemesath laid out the evidence they possessed, which now included not only archived social media clues and blockchain evidence but Cazes' own unencrypted laptop and phone. He explained that if Cazes didn't cooperate with them, he might very well spend the rest of his life in prison.

That sentence, however, could still be reduced if he made the right decisions. If he cooperated, Hemesath concluded, Cazes might still be able to meet his child as a free man someday.

After a moment's hesitation, Cazes answered this extended soliloquy with a single question: Were they going to charge him with the “kingpin statute”?

His voice, which neither prosecutor had heard before, was a sort of middle pitch, inflected with a noticeable French accent. But they were struck more by his expression: a slight smile.

Both prosecutors were caught off guard. The kingpin statute was a common nickname for a “continuing criminal enterprise” charge, often used against organized crime bosses and cartel leaders. Was he asking about the kingpin charge out of fear of the severe sentence that it promised? In fact, they didn't plan to charge him under that statute, which might have left them less room to maneuver if he eventually cooperated.

But it was Cazes' glib tone that gave them pause. They wondered if he was in fact comparing himself to the Silk Road's Ross Ulbricht, who had been convicted under that same charge. Did Cazes see the “kingpin” label as a status symbol, one that would cement his place in the dark-web pantheon?

Rabenn was unnerved. It wasn't that Cazes had the manner of a cold sociopath, he says. But nor did he seem to be taking the conversation seriously. He remembers thinking that their defendant, facing a potential life sentence or even the death penalty if he was tried in Thailand, was treating this encounter like some sort of game.

Rabenn tried to drive home the gravity of the situation. “This is not a joke,” he remembers telling Cazes. “We can't help you unless you help us.” He

reiterated that the rest of Cazes' life hung in the balance. Cazes seemed to hear that admonishment and became slightly more somber.

The two prosecutors finally asked Cazes if he would be willing to waive his extradition rights so that he could be tried—and likely incarcerated—in the United States rather than Thailand. Cazes said he would consider it. But he insisted that he still wanted to speak to a more permanent lawyer who could take on his case before any real negotiation. Their meeting was over.

As soon as Sanchez walked through the door, she heard someone screaming in Thai, “He’s not talking! Alex isn’t talking!” She broke into a run.

A couple of days later, Cazes did speak for the first time to his lawyer of choice, a young American defense attorney named Roger Bonakdar. Bonakdar was in his office, just a block from Rabenn's in downtown Fresno, when he got the call about Cazes from the federal defenders' office for the city. Learning of the magnitude of the case—easily the biggest of its kind to ever occur in the state of California, to say nothing of Fresno—he immediately agreed to speak to Cazes.

Bonakdar's impression of the young man on the other end of the phone contrasted sharply with Rabenn and Hemesath's. He says he found Cazes to be “pleasant and articulate” but also deeply stressed and concerned for his safety. Cazes was particularly scared, Bonakdar remembers, that any negotiation with the prosecution could endanger him and his family—that he could be seen as an informant and any arrests that followed his own might lead to reprisals against him. “He was sensitive to the perception that he was cooperating,” Bonakdar says. “Which he wasn’t.”

They agreed that Cazes had few, if any, real legal protections in Thai custody and that Bonakdar needed to get him out of the NSB headquarters as quickly as possible and into the Canadian embassy. “I was in a scramble to find a way to secure him,” Bonakdar says. He told Cazes he would fly to Bangkok as soon as possible to meet with him.

By this time, however, Cazes had spent the better part of a week on the eighth floor of the NSB office. The prosecutors had made no real progress toward getting him to cooperate. So they agreed to let the Thais move him

into the jail on the first floor of the building. He was locked behind steel bars in a dingy white cell with a thin blue mattress and a rudimentary toilet that offered almost no privacy—it sat behind a 3-foot-high wall with a swinging wooden door.

A few days after Cazes' arrest, with the crux of their work complete, Rabenn had flown back to the United States, and Hemesath had taken a brief trip to Phuket to check out the villa Cazes owned there, which the Thai government planned to seize.

But Sanchez remained in Bangkok. After Cazes was moved to the NSB lockup, he would be brought out—handcuffed, slightly disheveled, with a week of stubble—for occasional chats with her. Together they would deal with yet more paperwork, or she would hand him a phone to speak with his attorneys or his wife, who also came to visit Cazes daily and spoke privately to him through the bars of his cell.

After a few interactions with Sanchez, Cazes shifted into a more conversational, if somewhat defiant, relationship with the DEA agent. She suspected he was bored, lonely, and ready to talk to anyone. After two days in lockup, Cazes also agreed to sign the waiver Sanchez put in front of him, allowing him to be extradited to the United States without a lengthy legal battle.

During one of their conversations, Sanchez says Cazes brought up with her, apropos of nothing, the question of AlphaBay's morality. What was so wrong, Sanchez remembers him musing in hypothetical terms, with a website that sold marijuana? Sanchez answered by asking him about AlphaBay's sales of fentanyl. In her retelling of the discussion, at least, Cazes lowered his head and offered no defense.

During another late-night visit, this one on July 11, six days after his arrest, Sanchez remembers Cazes informing her, in a kind of deadpan, that he planned to escape—that a helicopter gunship was coming to break him out.

“Cut your shit, Alex,” Sanchez responded with a wry smile. “Don't play those games with me.”

She reminded him that he was going to be an incredibly valuable informant for the American government—a “superstar,” as she put it. Sanchez said she would try to get him a computer and that he would do “amazing things” once they had him set up in the United States. She repeated that she would take care of him.

At 2 am, she wished him a good night and went home.

The next morning, after just a few hours of sleep, Sanchez left her apartment and headed back to the NSB headquarters, where Cazes was due at 8 that morning to be taken to Bangkok's main justice center for a hearing. After getting snarled in Bangkok's notorious traffic, and then waylaid by her cab driver's wrong turn, she arrived at the police station a few minutes late and headed straight into the ground-floor lockup. As soon as she walked through the door, she heard someone screaming in Thai, again and again, “He's not talking! Alex isn't talking!”

She broke into a run. Her mind immediately flashed back to Cazes' comment the night before that he planned to escape. “Oh my God, that mother—,” Sanchez thought as she ran through the station, furious. “He got somebody to spring him.”

As she arrived at Cazes' cell, it seemed to be empty. Then she saw that Thai officers were peering over the cell's internal 3-foot wall. She walked in and looked down: Cazes' body, hidden behind that wall, was sprawled across the length of the cell's bathroom area.

His corpse was facedown and bluish, she remembers. The flesh of his arms and legs looked darkened, almost bruised. A navy-blue towel was tied around his neck, with one end now draped over his shoulders.

She was momentarily overcome with shock, sadness, disappointment, and anger—albeit a different pitch of anger than she'd felt just a moment before, when she feared he'd escaped. She found herself wishing that he had. It would have been a better outcome, she felt, than the scene she saw before her.

“You motherfucker,” she thought. “I told you I was going to take care of you.”

CHAPTER 13

ICARUS

The day before Cazes' death, Paul Hemesath had returned to Bangkok from Phuket and was staying at a new hotel close to NSB headquarters. As he walked toward the station the next morning, past the lush gardens of the Royal Thai Police Sports Club, he was in a spectacular mood, still feeling the afterglow of one of the biggest victories of his career. “Here I am in Bangkok, the sun is shining,” he remembers thinking. “Things are going great. This is incredible.”

As he approached the station, an FBI agent drove alongside him in a car and told Hemesath from the window that Cazes had been found unresponsive in his cell. Must be taking a nap, Hemesath thought to himself, perhaps in a state of denial. But as he walked into the lockup, Sanchez and Thai police intercepted him and stated it more plainly: Their defendant was dead.

Hemesath's mind went blank. He began to rewind through the nine months he'd spent chasing Cazes, then fast-forward through all his plans for the next year that he had arranged around the case, a case that had now been torn apart without warning.

At that moment, Cazes' wife and her parents walked into the jail, carrying food for Cazes in plastic bags. Hemesath watched one of the Thai police officers explain to them what had happened. He remembers Thapsuwan standing in the hallway, eight months pregnant, stone-faced, silently absorbing the news. Her mother immediately began to wail in sorrow.

Moments later, Rabenn got a FaceTime call from Hemesath. He answered from his car in downtown Fresno, where he was picking up his child from day care across the street from the city's courthouse. He found Hemesath's face on his screen with tears in his eyes. “He's dead, Grant,” Hemesath said. “He's dead.”

Fifteen time zones away, Rabenn sat in his car, overwhelmed by a sudden, crushing wave of disappointment. He compares the feeling to that of a treasure hunter who had traveled across the world, obtained a precious relic, and was about to bring it home, only to have someone casually smash it into a thousand pieces. He felt a sense of premature finality: The most important case of his career was over.

After the initial shock passed, Rabenn admits, he felt little sympathy for Cazes. To prepare for a trial, he and Hemesath had identified a handful of individual deaths that had resulted directly from AlphaBay's sales. In Luxembourg, a police officer had murdered his sister and her husband with potassium cyanide purchased on the site. In the US, an 18-year-old woman in Portland, Oregon, and two boys in Utah—just 13 years old—had all died from taking synthetic opioids bought on AlphaBay. “When I think about the dead kids that are directly attributed to the site that he was making millions of dollars off of, it’s hard to feel bad about him killing himself,” Rabenn says.

In the years since, Rabenn says, he has come up with plenty of his own explanations for why Cazes would choose to die by suicide. He was a gamer, Rabenn points out, and he played his life like a video game: He sought power, money, and sexual conquests like points on a leaderboard. Rabenn felt he could see it in Cazes' expression during their first meeting—the sense of detachment from consequences, the disregard for his future.

“It’s like when you’re playing a first-person game,” Rabenn says. “When something goes wrong, you hit the reset button.”

Rabenn saw in Cazes' apparent decision to end his own life a kind of reflection, too, of the hip-hop ideals of his teenage years and the “alpha” mentality of his twenties: a desire for status, for respect, and for a certain kind of fame above all else—high-risk, high-reward values that were incompatible with quietly serving decades in prison or becoming a federal informant.

“He was the kid who wanted to be the shot caller,” Rabenn says. “He achieved that. He touched the sun. And died.”

Roger Bonakdar saw things differently.

When Cazes' Fresno-based defense attorney got the call from Rabenn informing him of Cazes' death, he went through the same paroxysm of shock. His flight had been booked for Thailand. He'd been checking on his vaccine records. "We were planning our next steps, and then"—Bonakdar snaps his fingers as he recounts the moment—"he was gone."

But unlike Rabenn, Hemesath, or Sanchez, Bonakdar immediately doubted the story that his client had killed himself, and he told Rabenn as much. Bonakdar had never experienced a client dying by suicide, but he'd heard defendants consider it in moments of despair. "I know someone who's on the edge when I speak to them," Bonakdar says. "I just never got the sense from Cazes that he felt all was lost, that there was no recovering from this, that he was a dead man."

Over the months that followed, Bonakdar says, he asked US prosecutors and the Thai government for video footage of Cazes' cell at the time of his death. He received neither. I did, years later, request and receive several clips of video from inside Cazes' cell. One clip shows Cazes looking up and down the jail hallway through the cell's bars, then doing something with his towel just off-screen before disappearing behind the cell's bathroom door. The next clip, which starts more than half an hour later, shows guards rushing in, followed by Jen Sanchez, and looking over the bathroom wall, apparently at his corpse.

The Thai police explained to me that they hadn't saved the video between those before-and-after moments because it simply showed the empty part of Cazes' cell with no movement and no one entering. But Bonakdar contends that this gap in the footage only makes the circumstances of Cazes' death more suspicious.

Bonakdar argues that the physical explanation of Cazes' suicide alone strikes him as "biomechanically dubious." He can't imagine how Cazes could have hanged himself from a makeshift, waist-high gallows. "How do you place enough force to crush your carotid artery when your body's not suspended?" he asks. "From 3 feet off the ground?"

Sanchez described to me in detail how she believes Cazes asphyxiated: He tied one end of the towel around his throat and closed another section of the towel in the hinge of his 3-foot-tall bathroom wall, essentially fashioning a noose that suspended his neck from the top of that half-wall. Then he simply sat down and used his body weight to pull the towel tight around his neck, cutting off his breathing and blood flow. “He willfully checked out,” she says. A Thai police coroner’s report lists Cazes’ cause of death as simply “suffocation” and notes no signs of a struggle, pointing out that no one else’s DNA was found under his fingernails.

Looking into the medical research on hanging deaths reveals that self-asphyxiations often occur without someone suspending their full body. Sanchez and Rabenn both told me, based on his apparent means of suicide, that they believe Cazes had searched for methods of killing himself online. Sanchez also believes Cazes’ wife, Thapsuwan, knew he was planning his death. Sanchez heard from Thai police that Thapsuwan had told staff at Cazes’ Phuket villa that he would rather die than be extradited to the United States. (Thapsuwan would later herself be convicted of money laundering by the Thai government for her association with Cazes’ crimes and served four years in prison before receiving a royal pardon. She declined to be interviewed.)

But Bonakdar dismisses Sanchez’s secondhand account and remains unconvinced. He maintains, at the very least, that his client’s suicide is far from proven, though he admits he doesn’t know who would have killed Cazes—or had him killed. A coconspirator afraid that Cazes might inform on him? Thai police officers on the take, seeking to cover up their corruption? He doesn’t expect he’ll ever know the truth.

Danielle Héroux, Cazes’ mother, who still lives in Quebec, also rejects the story of her son’s suicide. She laid the blame for his death at the feet of the American government. “Alex didn’t kill himself,” Héroux wrote in a text message in French. “Why did the FBI take no action to protect ‘their trophy’ while awaiting his extradition to the USA? Surely they wanted Alex not to speak, and his assassination was ordered.”

Héroux declined to be interviewed and didn’t elaborate or share any evidence of her claim. But she did defend her son. “Alex is not at all the

person portrayed in the media,” she wrote. “I raised him alone and he is an extraordinary being.”

Cazes' mother shared a photo of the two of them together, a selfie she'd taken with Cazes in the back of a car. He's smiling, a bit half-heartedly, the same innocent openness to his expression that he'd had in the LinkedIn profile photo that first put prosecutors on his trail.

She added one more message: “He was my entire life.”

Continued in Part 6: [With AlphaBay shuttered, Operation Bayonet enters its audacious final phase: driving the site's refugees into a giant trap in an attempt to deal a paralyzing blow to the entire dark web.](#)

This story is excerpted from the book [Tracers in the Dark: The Global Hunt for the Crime Lords of Cryptocurrency](#), now available from Doubleday.

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Nov 17, 2022 9:00 AM

Why the Emoji Skin Tone You Choose Matters

WIRED's spiritual advice columnist on whether to use the tone that most resembles your own—or to stick with the original Simpsons-esque color.

ILLUSTRATION: ROCHE

“I'm a white person, and despite there being a range of skin tones available for emoji these days, I still just choose the original Simpsons-esque yellow. Is this insensitive to people of color?”

—True Colors

Dear True,

I don't think it's possible to determine what any group of people, categorically, might find insensitive—and I won't venture to speak, as a white person myself, on behalf of people of color. But your trepidation about which emoji skin tone to use has evidently weighed on many white people's minds since 2015, when the Unicode Consortium—the mysterious organization that sets standards for character encoding in software systems around the world—introduced the modifiers. A 2018 University of Edinburgh study of Twitter data confirmed that the palest skin tones are used least often, and most white people opt, as you do, for the original yellow.

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Spiritual Troubleshooting for the Digital Age

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It's not hard to see why. While it might seem intuitive to choose the skin tone that most resembles your own, some white users worry that calling attention to their race by texting a pale high five (or worse, a raised fist) might be construed as celebrating or flaunting it. The writer Andrew McGill noted in a 2016 *Atlantic* article that many white people he spoke to feared that the white emoji "felt uncomfortably close to displaying 'white pride,' with all the baggage of intolerance that carries." Darker skin tones are a more obviously egregious choice for white users and are generally interpreted as grossly appropriative or, at best, misguided attempts at allyship.

That leaves yellow, the Esperanto of emoji skin tones, which seems to offer an all-purpose or neutral form of pictographic expression, one that does not require an acknowledgment of race—or, for that matter, embodiment. (Unicode calls it a “nonhuman” skin tone.) While this logic may strike you as sound enough, sufficient to put the question out of mind while you dash off a yellow thumbs-up, I can sense you're aware on some level that it doesn't really hold up to scrutiny.

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The existence of a default skin tone unavoidably calls to mind the thorny notion of race neutrality that crops up in so many objections to affirmative action or, to cite a more relevant example, in the long-standing use of “flesh-colored” and “nude” as synonyms for pinkish skin tones. The yellow emoji feels almost like claiming, “I don't see race,” that dubious shibboleth of post-racial politics, in which the ostensible desire to transcend racism often conceals a more insidious desire to avoid having to contend with its burdens. Complicating all this is the fact that the default yellow is indelibly linked to *The Simpsons*, which used that tone solely for Caucasian characters (those of other races, like Apu and Dr. Hibbert, were shades of

brown). The writer Zara Rahman has argued that the notion of a neutral emoji skin tone strikes her as evidence of an all-too-familiar bad faith: “To me, those yellow images have always meant one thing: white.”

At the risk of making too much of emoji (there are, undeniably, more urgent forms of racial injustice that deserve attention), I'd argue that the dilemma encapsulates a much larger tension around digital self-expression. The web emerged amid the heady spirit of 1990s multiculturalism and color-blind politics, an ethos that recalls, for example, the United Colors of Benetton ad that featured three identical human hearts labeled “white,” “black,” and “yellow.” The promise of disembodiment was central to the cyberpunk ideal, which envisioned the internet as a new frontier where users would shirk their real-life identities, take on virtual bodies (or no bodies at all), and be judged by their ideas—or their souls—rather than by their race. This vision was, unsurprisingly, propagated by the largely middle- and upper-class white men who were the earliest shapers of internet culture. The scholar Lisa Nakamura has argued that the digital divide gave cyberspace a “whitewashed” perspective and that the dream of universalism became, in many early chat rooms, an opportunity for white people to engage in identity tourism, adopting avatars of other races that were rife with stereotypes—a problem that lives on in the prevalence of [digital blackface on TikTok](#) and other platforms.

It's telling that skin tone modifiers were introduced in 2015, when social platforms teemed with posts about the police killings of Walter Scott and Freddie Gray, among others, and when the tech press began to take stock of [algorithmic bias](#) in the justice system, acknowledging that technologies once hailed as objective and color-blind were merely compounding historical injustices. That year, Ta-Nehisi Coates observed (at the close of the Obama presidency) that the term *post-racial* “is almost never used in earnest,” and Anna Holmes noted that it “has mostly disappeared from the conversation, except as sarcastic shorthand.”

It's tempting, given this context, to see emoji diversity as an implicit acknowledgment that “users” are embodied human beings who do not abandon their lived experiences at the login page. A closer look at the history of emoji choices, however, reveals a far more complex reality and

underscores the power imbalances that persist in corporate tech. Before Unicode, Apple, and Google introduced skin tone modifiers, iPhone users could download emoji of different skin tones through an app called iDiversicons, conceived and created by a Black woman named Katrina Parrot. The app caught the interest of both Unicode and Apple, and although Parrot met with executives at both organizations, they ultimately introduced their own skin tone palettes without offering her compensation or attribution. Parrot is currently suing Apple for copyright infringement.

Incorporating skin tone modifiers cost these companies (quite literally) very little, and some commentators have argued that the feature amounts to so much empty gesticulating, “a big horse and pony parade … to appease people of color,” as the writer Paige Tutt put it in *The Washington Post*. More options for self-expression may be an inarguable social good, but such features also earn corporations easy plaudits and obscure the more insidious ways in which their technologies disproportionately impact marginalized communities: Big Five companies post messages in support of Black Lives Matter while continuing to profit from their collaborations with the police state. Improvements in face recognition technologies, while celebrated for making headway in recognizing Black and brown faces, are used to justify dragnet surveillance in already overpoliced neighborhoods. The emoji modifiers also feel insufficient for more obvious reasons: Despite the range of skin tones available, the broad strokes of these pictographs fail to capture the complexities of individual identity.

I realize, True Colors, that this discussion has probably only complicated the dilemma you posed, rather than simplified it. What I hope has become clear is that the uneasiness you feel is really a glimpse into the difficult dilemmas of identity and self-expression that people of color have long navigated, both online and off. If there's any virtue in the existence of a white emoji option, it's that it extends some small portion of this burden to white users, who've long benefited from an implicit exemption. The discomfort you feel as your thumb hovers over the screen isn't something to solve, shirk, or liberate yourself from. It might be the whole point.

Faithfully,

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Nov 17, 2022 6:00 AM

Picture Limitless Creativity at Your Fingertips

Artificial intelligence can now make better art than most humans. Soon, these engines of wow will transform how we design just about everything.

ILLUSTRATION: OFF-SITE RESEARCH FACILITY

Picture Lee Unkrich, one of Pixar's most distinguished animators, as a seventh grader. He's staring at an image of a train locomotive on the screen of his school's first computer. *Wow*, he thinks. Some of the magic wears off, however, when Lee learns that the image had not appeared simply by asking for "a picture of a train." Instead, it had to be painstakingly coded and rendered—by hard-working humans.

Now picture Lee 43 years later, stumbling onto DALL-E, an artificial intelligence that generates original works of art based on human-supplied prompts that can literally be as simple as "a picture of a train." As he types in words to create image after image, the *wow* is back. Only this time, it doesn't go away. "It feels like a miracle," he [says](#). "When the results appeared, my breath was taken away and tears welled in my eyes. It's that magical."

[Lessons from the History of Photography](#)[Classic WIRED Covers—Regenerated by AI](#)

Our machines have crossed a threshold. All our lives, we have been reassured that computers were incapable of being truly creative. Yet, suddenly, millions of people are now using a new breed of AIs to generate

stunning, never-before-seen pictures. Most of these users are not, like Lee Unkrich, professional artists, and that's the point: They do not have to be. Not everyone can write, direct, and edit an Oscar winner like *Toy Story 3* or *Coco*, but everyone *can* launch an AI image generator and type in an idea. What appears on the screen is astounding in its realism and depth of detail. Thus the universal response: *Wow*. On four services alone—Midjourney, Stable Diffusion, Artbreeder, and DALL-E—humans working with AIs now cocreate more than 20 million images every day. With a paintbrush in hand, [artificial intelligence](#) has become an engine of wow.

Because these surprise-generating AIs have learned their art from billions of pictures made by humans, their output hovers around what we expect pictures to look like. But because they are an alien AI, fundamentally mysterious even to their creators, they restructure the new pictures in a way no human is likely to think of, filling in details most of us wouldn't have the artistry to imagine, let alone the skills to execute. They can also be instructed to generate more variations of something we like, in whatever style we want—in seconds. This, ultimately, is their most powerful advantage: They can make new things that are relatable and comprehensible but, at the same time, completely unexpected.

So unexpected are these new AI-generated images, in fact, that—in the silent awe immediately following the *wow*—another thought occurs to just about everyone who has encountered them: Human-made art must now be over. Who can compete with the speed, cheapness, scale, and, yes, wild creativity of these machines? Is art yet another human pursuit we must yield to robots? And the next obvious question: If computers can be creative, what else can they do that we were told they could not?

I have spent the past six months using AIs to create thousands of striking images, often losing a night's sleep in the unending quest to find *just one more* beauty hidden in the code. And after interviewing the creators, power users, and other early adopters of these generators, I can make a very clear prediction: Generative AI will alter how we design just about everything. Oh, and not a single human artist will lose their job because of this new technology.

It is no exaggeration to call images generated with the help of AI *cocreations*. The sobering secret of this new power is that the best applications of it are the result not of typing in a single prompt but of very long conversations between humans and machines. Progress for each image comes from many, many iterations, back-and-forths, detours, and hours, sometimes days, of teamwork—all on the back of years of advancements in machine learning.

AI image generators were born from the marriage of two separate technologies. One was a historical line of deep learning neural nets that could generate coherent realistic images, and the other was a natural language model that could serve as an interface to the image engine. The two were combined into a language-driven image generator. Researchers scraped the internet for all images that had adjacent text, such as captions, and used billions of these examples to connect visual forms to words, and words to forms. With this new combination, human users could enter a string of words—the prompt—that described the image they sought, and the prompt would generate an image based on those words.

Scientists now at Google invented the diffusion computational models that are at the core of image generators today, but the company has been so concerned about what people might do with them that it still has not opened its own experimental generators, Imagen and Parti, to the public. (Only employees can try them, and with tight guidelines on what can be requested.) It is no coincidence, then, that the three most popular platforms for image generators right now are three startups with no legacy to protect. [Midjourney](#) is a bootstrapping startup launched by David Holz, who based the generator in an emerging community of artists. The interface to the AI is a noisy Discord server; all the work and prompts were made public from the start. [DALL-E](#) is a second-gen product of the nonprofit OpenAI, funded by Elon Musk and others. [Stable Diffusion](#) appeared on the scene in August 2022, created by Emad Mostaque, a European entrepreneur. It's an open source project, with the added benefit that anyone can download its software and run it locally on their own desktop. More than the others, Stable Diffusion has unleashed AI image generators into the wild.

ART IS HUMAN.

ILLUSTRATION BY ADAM GARCIA

ART IS HYBRID.

ILLUSTRATION BY: [@auranova_ai](#) + MIDJOURNEY

Why are so many people so excited to play with these AIs? Many images are being created for the same reason that humans have always made most art: because the images are pretty and we want to look at them. Like flames in a campfire, the light patterns are mesmerizing. They never repeat themselves; they surprise, again and again. They depict scenes no one has witnessed before or can even imagine, and they are expertly composed. It's a similar pleasure to exploring a video game world, or paging through an art book. There is a real beauty to their creativity, and we stare much in the way we might appreciate a great art show at a museum. In fact, viewing a parade of generated images is very much like visiting a personal museum—but in this case, the walls are full of art we ask for. And the perpetual novelty and surprise of the next image hardly wanes. Users may share the gems they discover, but my guess is that 99 percent of the 20 million images currently generated each day will only ever be viewed by a single human—their cocreator.

Like any art, the images can also be healing. People spend time making strange AI pictures for the same reason they might paint on Sundays, or scribble in a journal, or shoot a video. They use the media to work out something in their own lives, something that can't be said otherwise. I've seen images depicting what animal heaven might look like, created in response to the death of a beloved dog. Many images explore the representation of intangible, spiritual realms, presumably as a way to think about them. "A huge portion of the entire usage is basically art therapy," Holz, the Midjourney creator, tells me. "The images are not really aesthetically appealing in a universal sense but are appealing, in a very deep way, within the context of what's going on in people's lives." The machines can be used to generate fantasies of all types. While the hosted services [prohibit porn and gore](#), anything goes on the desktop versions, as it might in Photoshop.

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AI-generated pictures can be utilitarian too. Say you are presenting a report on the possibility of recycling hospital plastic waste into construction materials and you want an image of a house made out of test tubes. You could search stock photo markets for a usable image made by a human artist. But a unique assignment like this rarely yields a preexisting picture, and even if found, its copyright status could be dubious or expensive. It is cheaper, faster, and probably far more appropriate to generate a unique, personalized image for your report in a few minutes that you can then insert into your slides, newsletter, or blog—and the copyright ownership is yours (for now). I have been using these generators myself to cocreate images for my own slide presentations.

In an [informal poll](#) of power users, I found that only about 40 percent of their time is spent seeking utilitarian images. Most AI images are used in places where there were no images previously. They usually do not replace an image created by a human artist. They may be created, for example, to illustrate a text-only newsletter by someone without artistic talent themselves, or the time and budget to hire someone. Just as mechanical photography did not kill human illustrations a century ago, but rather significantly expanded the places in which images appeared, so too do AI image generators open up possibilities for more art, not less. We'll begin to see contextually generated images predominately in spaces that are currently blank, like emails, text messages, blogs, books, and social media.

This new art resides somewhere between painting and photography. It lives in a possibility space as large as painting and drawing—as huge as human imagination. But you move through the space like a photographer, hunting for discoveries. Tweaking your prompts, you may arrive at a spot no one has visited before, so you explore this area slowly, taking snapshots as you step through. The territory might be a subject, or a mood, or a style, and it might be worth returning to. The art is in the craft of finding a new area and setting yourself up there, exercising good taste and the keen eye of curation in what you capture. When photography first appeared, it seemed as if all the photographer had to do was push the button. Likewise, it seems that all

a person has to do for a glorious AI image is push the button. In both cases, you get an image. But to get a great one—a truly artistic one—well, that's another matter.

Accessible AI image generators are not even a year old, but already it is evident that some people are much better at creating AI images than others. Although they're using the same programs, those who have accumulated thousands of hours with the algorithms can magically produce images that are many times better than the average person's. The images by these masters have a striking coherence and visual boldness that is normally overwhelmed by the flood of details the AIs tend to produce. That is because this is a team sport: The human artist and the machine artist are a duet. And it requires not just experience but also lots of hours and work to produce something useful. It is as if there is a slider bar on the AI: At one end is Maximum Surprise, and at the other end Maximum Obedience. It is very easy to get the AI to surprise you. (And that is often all we ask of it.) But it is very difficult to get the AI to obey you. As Mario Klingemann, who makes his living selling NFTs of his [AI-generated artwork](#), says, "If you have a very specific image in mind, it always feels like you are up against a forcefield." Commands like "shade this area," "enhance this part," and "tone it down" are obeyed reluctantly. The AIs have to be persuaded.

Current versions of DALL-E, Stable Diffusion, and Midjourney limit prompts to about the length of a long tweet. Any longer and the words muddle together; the image turns to mush. That means that behind every fabulous image lies a short magic spell that summons it. It begins with the first incantation. How you say it matters. Your immediate results materialize in a grid of four to nine images. From that batch of pictures, you variate and mutate offspring images. Now you have a brood. If they look promising, begin to tweak the spell to nudge it in new directions as it births more generations of images. Multiply the group again and again as you search for the most compelling composition. Do not despair if it takes dozens of generations. Think like the AI; what does it like to hear? Whisper instructions that have worked in the past, and add them to the prompt. Repeat. Change the word order to see whether it likes that. Remember to be specific. Replicate until you have amassed a whole tribe of images that seem to have good bones and potential. Now cull out all but a select few. Be

merciless. Begin outpainting the most promising images. That means asking the AI to extend the image out in certain directions beyond the current borders. Erase those portions that are not working. Suggest replacements to be done by the AI with more incantations (called inpainting). If the AI is not comprehending your hints, try spells used by others. When the AI has gone as far as it can, migrate the image to Photoshop for final tailoring. Present it as if you have done nothing, even though it is not uncommon for a distinctive image to require 50 steps.

Behind this new magecraft is the art of prompting. Each artist or designer develops a way of persuading an AI to yield its best by evolving their prompts. Let's call these new artists AI whisperers, or prompt artists, or promptors. The promptors work almost as directors, guiding the work of their alien collaborators toward a unified vision. The convoluted process required to tease a first-rate picture out of an AI is quickly emerging as a fine-art skill. Almost daily, new tools arrive to make prompting easier, better. [PromptBase](#) is a market for promptors to sell prompts that create simple images such as emoticons, logos, icons, avatars, and game weapons. It's like clip art, but instead of selling the art, they sell the prompt that generates the art. And unlike fixed clip art, it is easy to alter and tweak the art to fit your needs, and you can extract multiple versions again and again. Most of these prompts sell for a couple bucks, which is a fair price, given how much trouble it is to hone a prompt on your own.

Above-average prompts not only include the subject but also describe the lighting, the point of view, the emotion evoked, the color palette, the degree of abstraction, and perhaps a reference picture to imitate. As with other artistic skills, there are now courses and guidebooks to train the budding promptor in the finer points of prompting. One fan of DALL-E 2, Guy Parsons, put together a free [Prompt Book](#), jammed with tips on how to go beyond the wow and get images you can actually use. One example: If your prompt includes specific terms such as "Sigma 75 mm camera lens," Parson says, then the AI doesn't just create that specific look made by the lens; "it more broadly alludes to 'the kind of photo where the lens appears in the description,'" which tends to be more professional and therefore yields higher-quality images. It's this kind of multilevel mastery that produces spectacular results.

For technical reasons, even if you repeat the exact same prompt, you are unlikely to get the same image. There is a randomly generated seed for each image, without which it is statistically impossible to replicate. Additionally, the same prompt given to different AI engines produces different images—Midjourney’s are more painterly, while DALL-E is optimized for photographic realism. Still, not every promptor wishes to share their secrets. The natural reaction upon seeing a particularly brilliant image is to ask, “What spell did you use?” What was the prompt? Robyn Miller, cocreator of the legendary game *Myst* and a pioneering digital artist, has been posting an AI-generated image every day. “When people ask me what prompt I used,” he says, “I have been surprised that I don’t want to tell them. There is an art to this, and that has also surprised me.” Klingemann is famous for not sharing his prompts. “I believe all images already exist,” he says. “You don’t make them, you find them. If you get somewhere by clever prompting, I do not see why I want to invite everybody else there.”

It seems obvious to me that promptors are making true art. What is a consummate movie director—like Hitchcock, like Kurosawa—but a promptor of actors, actions, scenes, ideas? Good image-generator promptors are engaged in a similar craft, and it is no stretch for them to try and sell their creations in art galleries or enter them into art contests. This summer, Jason Allen won first place in the digital art category at the Colorado State Fair Fine Art competition for a large, space-opera-themed canvas that was signed “Jason Allen via Midjourney.” It’s a pretty cool picture that would’ve taken some effort to make no matter what tools were used. Usually images in the digital art category are created using Photoshop and Blender-type tools that enable the artist to dip into libraries of digitized objects, textures, and parts, which are then collaged together to form the scene. They are not drawn; these digital images are unapologetically technological assemblages. Collages are a venerable art form, and using AI to breed a collage is a natural evolution. If a 3D-rendered collage is art, then a Midjourney picture is art. As Allen [told Vice](#), “I have been exploring a special prompt. I have created hundreds of images using it, and after many weeks of fine-tuning and curating my gens, I chose my top 3 and had them printed on canvas.”

Of course, Allen’s blue ribbon set off alarm bells. To some critics, this was a sign of the end times, the end of art, the end of human artists. Predictable lamentations ensued, with many pointing out how unfair it felt for struggling artists. The AIs are not only going to take over and kill us all—they are, apparently, going to make the world’s best art while doing so.

At its birth, every new technology ignites a Tech Panic Cycle. There are seven phases:

1. Don’t bother me with this nonsense. It will never work.
2. OK, it is happening, but it’s dangerous, ’cause it doesn’t work well.
3. Wait, it works too well. We need to hobble it. Do something!
4. This stuff is so powerful that it’s not fair to those without access to it.
5. Now it’s everywhere, and there is no way to escape it. Not fair.
6. I am going to give it up. For a month.
7. Let’s focus on the real problem—which is the next current thing.

Today, in the case of AI image generators, an emerging band of very tech-savvy artists and photographers are working out of a Level 3 panic. In a reactive, third-person, hypothetical way, they fear other people (but never themselves) might lose their jobs. Getty Images, the premier agency selling stock photos and illustrations for design and editorial use, has already banned AI-generated images; certain artists who post their work on DeviantArt have demanded a similar ban. There are well-intentioned demands to identify AI art with a label and to segregate it from “real” art.

Beyond that, some artists want assurances that their own work not be used to train the AIs. But this is typical of Level 3 panic—in that it is, at best, misguided. The algorithms are exposed to 6 billion images with attendant text. If you are not an influential artist, removing your work makes zero difference. A generated picture will look exactly the same with or without your work in the training set. But even if you *are* an influential artist, removing your images still won’t matter. Because your style has affected the work of others—the definition of influence—your influence will remain even if your images are removed. Imagine if we removed all of Van Gogh’s pictures from the training set. The style of Van Gogh would still be embedded in the vast ocean of images created by those who have imitated or been influenced by him.

Styles are summoned via prompts, as in: “in the style of Van Gogh.” Some unhappy artists would rather their names be censored and not permitted to be used as a prompt. So even if their influence can’t be removed, you can’t reach it because their name is off-limits. As we know from all previous attempts at censoring, these kinds of speech bans are easy to work around; you can misspell a name, or simply describe the style in words. I found, for example, that I could generate detailed black-and-white natural landscape photographs with majestic lighting and prominent foregrounds—without ever using Ansel Adams’ name.

There is another motivation for an artist to remove themselves. They might fear that a big corporation will make money off of their work, and their contribution won’t be compensated. But we don’t compensate human artists for their influence on other human artists. Take David Hockney, one of the highest-paid living artists. Hockney often acknowledges the great influence other living artists have on his work. As a society, we don’t expect him (or others) to write checks to his influences, even though he could. It’s a stretch to think AIs should pay their influencers. The “tax” that successful artists pay for their success is their unpaid influence on the success of others.

What’s more, lines of influence are famously blurred, ephemeral, and imprecise. We are all influenced by everything around us, to degrees we are not aware of and certainly can’t quantify. When we write a memo or snap a picture with our phone, to what extent have we been influenced—directly or indirectly—by Ernest Hemingway or Dorothea Lange? It’s impossible to unravel our influences when we create something. It is likewise impossible to unravel the strands of influence in the AI image universe. We could theoretically construct a system to pay money earned by the AI to artists in the training set, but we’d have to recognize that this credit would be made arbitrarily (unfairly) and that the actual compensatory amounts per artist in a pool of 6 billion shares would be so trivial as to be nonsensical.

In the coming years, the computational engine inside an AI image generator will continue to expand and improve until it becomes a central node in whatever we do visually. It will have literally seen everything and know all styles, and it will paint, imagine, and generate just about anything we need. It will become a visual search engine, and a visual encyclopedia with which

to understand images, and the primary tool we use with our most important sense, our sight. Right now, every neural net algorithm running deep in the AIs relies on massive amounts of data—thus the billions of images needed to train it. But in the next decade, we'll have operational AI that relies on far fewer examples to learn, perhaps as few as 10,000. We'll teach even more powerful AI image generators how to paint by showing them thousands of carefully curated, highly selected images of existing art, and when this point comes, artists of all backgrounds will be fighting one another to be included in the training set. If an artist is in the main pool, their influence will be shared and felt by all, while those not included must overcome the primary obstacle for any artist: not piracy, but obscurity.

As soon as 2D generative algorithms were born, experimenters rushed to figure out what was next. Jensen Huang, the ambitious cofounder of Nvidia, believes the next generation of chips will generate 3D worlds for the metaverse—“the next computing platform,” as he [calls it](#). In a single week this past September, three novel text-to-3D/video image generators were announced: GET3D (Nvidia), Make-A-Video (Meta), and DreamFusion (Google). The expansion is happening faster than I can write. Amazing as frameable 2D pictures produced by AI are, outsourcing their creation is not going to radically change the world. We are already at peak 2D. The genuine superpower being released by AI image generators will be in producing 3D images and video.

A future prompt for a 3D engine might look something like this: “Create the messy bedroom of a teenager, with posters on the wall, an unmade bed, and afternoon sunlight streaming through closed blinds.” And in seconds, a fully realized room is born, the closet door open and all the dirty clothes on the floor—in full 3D. Then, tell the AI: “Make a 1970s kitchen with refrigerator magnets and all the cereal boxes in the pantry. In full volumetric detail. One that you could walk through. Or that could be photographed in a video.” Games crammed with alternatively rendered worlds and full-length movies decked out with costumes and sets have eternally been out of reach for individual artists, who remain under the power of large dollars. AI could make games, metaverses, and movies as quick to produce as novels, paintings, and songs. Pixar films in an instant! Once millions of amateurs are churning out billions of movies and endless

metaverses at home, they will hatch entirely new media genres—virtual tourism, spatial memes—with their own native geniuses. And when big dollars and professionals are equipped with these new tools, we’ll see masterpieces at a level of complexity never seen before.

But even the vast universes of 3D worlds and video are not vast enough to contain the disruption that AI image generators have initiated. DALL-E, Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion are just the first versions of generative machines of all types. Their prime function, pattern recognition, is almost a reflex for human brains, something we accomplish without conscious thinking. It is at the core of almost everything we do. Our thinking is more complex than just pattern recognition, of course; dozens of cognitive functions animate our brain. But this single type of cognition, synthesized in machines (and the only cognition we have synthesized so far), has taken us further than we first thought—and will probably continue to advance further than we now think.

When an AI notices a pattern, it stores it in a compressed way. Round objects are placed in a “roundness” direction, red objects in another direction for “redness,” and so on. Maybe it notices “treeness” and “foodness” too. It abstracts out billions of directions, or patterns. Upon reflection—or training—it notices that the overlap of these four qualities produces “appleness,” yet another direction. Furthermore, it links all these noticed directions with word patterns, which can also share overlapping qualities. So when a human requests a picture of an apple via the word “apple,” the AI paints an image with those four (or more) qualities. It is not assembling bits of existing pictures; rather, it is “imagining” a new picture with the appropriate qualities. It sort of remembers a picture that does not exist but could.

This same technique can be used—in fact, is already being used, in very early forms—to find new drugs. The AI is trained on a database of all the molecules we know to be active medicines, noticing patterns in their chemical structures. Then the AI is asked to “remember” or imagine molecules we have never thought of that seem to be similar to the molecules that work. Wonderfully, some of them actually do work, just as an AI image of a requested imaginary fruit can look remarkably like a fruit.

This is the real transformation, and soon enough, the same technique will be used to help design automobiles, draft laws, write code, compose soundtracks, assemble worlds to entertain and instruct, and cocreate the stuff we do as work. We should take to heart the lessons we've learned so far from AI image generators because there will soon be more pattern-seeking AIs in all realms of life. The panic cycle we presently face is simply a good rehearsal for the coming shift.

What we know about AI generators so far is that they work best as partners. The nightmare of a rogue AI taking over is just not happening. That vision is fundamentally a misreading of history. In the past, technology has rarely directly displaced humans from work they wanted to do. For instance, the automatic generation of pictures by a machine—called a camera—was feared in the 1800s because it would surely put portrait painters out of business. But the historian Hans Rooseboom could find only a *single* portrait painter from that time who felt unemployed by photography. (Photography actually inspired a resurgence of painting later in that century.) Closer to our time, we might have expected professional occupations in photography to fall as the smartphone swallowed the world and everybody became a photographer—with 95 million uploads to Instagram a day and counting. Yet the number of photography professionals in the US has been slowly rising, from 160,000 in 2002 (before camera phones) to 230,000 in 2021.

Instead of fearing AI, we are better served thinking about what it teaches us. And the most important thing AI image generators teach us is this: Creativity is not some supernatural force. It is something that can be synthesized, amplified, and manipulated. It turns out that we didn't need to achieve intelligence in order to hatch creativity. Creativity is more elemental than we thought. It is independent of consciousness. We can generate creativity in something as dumb as a deep learning neural net. Massive data plus pattern recognition algorithms seems sufficient to engineer a process that will surprise and aid us without ceasing.

Scholars of creativity refer to something called Uppercase Creativity. Uppercase Creativity is the stunning, field-changing, world-altering rearrangement that a major breakthrough brings. Think special relativity,

the discovery of DNA, or Picasso's *Guernica*. Uppercase Creativity goes beyond the merely new. It is special, and it is rare. It touches us humans in a profound way, far beyond what an alien AI can fathom.

To connect with a human deeply will always require a Creative human in the loop. This high creativity, however, should not be confused with the creativity that most human artists, designers, and inventors produce day to day. Mundane, ordinary, lowercase creativity is what we get with a great new logo design or a cool book cover, a nifty digital wearable or the latest must-have fashion, or the set design for our favorite sci-fi serial. Most human art, past and present, is lowercase. And lowercase creativity is exactly what the AI generators deliver.

But this is huge. For the first time in history, humans can conjure up everyday acts of creativity on demand, in real time, at scale, for cheap. Synthetic creativity is a commodity now. Ancient philosophers will turn in their graves, but it turns out that to make creativity—to generate something new—all you need is the right code. We can insert it into tiny devices that are presently inert, or we can apply creativity to large statistical models, or embed creativity in drug discovery routines. What else can we use synthetic creativity for? We may feel a little bit like medieval peasants who are being asked, "What would you do if you had the power of 250 horses at your fingertips?" We dunno. It's an extraordinary gift. What we do know is we now have easy engines of creativity, which we can aim into stale corners that have never seen novelty, innovation, or the wow of creative change. Against the background of everything that breaks down, this superpower can help us extend the wow indefinitely. Used properly, we can make a small dent in the universe.

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By [Andy Greenberg](#)

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Nov 15, 2022 6:00 AM

The Hunt for the Dark Web's Biggest Kingpin, Part 4: Face to Face

The team uses a secret technique to locate AlphaBay's server. But just as the operation heats up, the agents have an unexpected run-in with their target.

Illustration: Hokyoung Kim

CHAPTER 8

TAKEOVER

In June 2017, a team of Royal Thai Police officers arrived at the Courtyard Marriott in Sacramento, California. Jen Sanchez, a veteran [Drug Enforcement Administration](#) agent, had been assigned to bring the delegation on a flight from Bangkok to California to coordinate with the US team—to iron out any intercontinental wrinkles on the Bangkok end of what had come to be known as Operation Bayonet.

The Thai cops met the American agents, analysts, and prosecutors at the US attorney's office, with more than two dozen people arrayed around the room. The two countries traded PowerPoint briefings. Ali and Erin, expert [cryptocurrency](#)-tracing FBI analysts from Washington, DC, walked the Thais through a “Bitcoin 101” presentation and detailed how they had tracked Cazes’ hidden cash flows. The Thais shared everything they’d learned from following Cazes’ physical movements for months. The police then explained the particulars of the Thai legal system—what US agents would and wouldn’t be allowed to do with Cazes after, if all went well, they laid hands on him.

Between meetings, Sanchez took the Thai group on field trips: to a golfing range, to a shopping mall—where the officers descended ravenously on a

Coach outlet—and on an outing to San Francisco in rented vans. The Thais, accustomed to the tropics, nearly froze on Fisherman’s Wharf; they were so jet-lagged and exhausted from their sightseeing frenzy that they slept through the drive over the Golden Gate Bridge in both directions. On another day, the FBI gave the Thais a tour of the explosives lab at the bureau’s Sacramento field office, showing off the agency’s bomb-defusing robots. Paul Hemesath, the prosecutor, later brought out his HTC Vive VR headset, and the two countries’ agents took turns walking a plank over a digital abyss and swinging virtual swords at zombies.

This story is excerpted from the forthcoming book [Tracers in the Dark: The Global Hunt for the Crime Lords of Cryptocurrency](#), available November 15, 2022, from Doubleday.

Courtesy of Penguin Random House

When they weren’t busy with tourism and team-building exercises, the agents were grappling with the practical details of raiding a dark-web kingpin. At one point, the case’s lead FBI agent presented the looming problem of Cazes’ laptop encryption. Sanchez and the Thais explained that based on their surveillance, Cazes almost never opened his machine outside his own home. The agents agreed: They’d have to catch him in his house, logged in to AlphaBay and yet somehow off guard so that he wouldn’t shut the laptop before his arrest.

Almost as important as the computer was Cazes’ iPhone. The FBI told the Thais they’d need to grab it unlocked, or it too would be irretrievably encrypted. That phone, after all, might hold keys to Cazes’ cryptocurrency wallets or other crucial data. The question of how to thread the needle of capturing these two devices and their information hung in the air, unanswered.

Then Sanchez spoke: She asked the lead FBI agent if it would be helpful to know more about how Cazes spent his days, hour by hour. After all, she explained, he had laid it all out on Roosh V, the online forum for “alpha males” where Cazes practically liveblogged his daily life and sexual escapades under the handle Rawmeo. The FBI agent invited her to go ahead.

So Sanchez walked the group through Cazes' daily schedule as he had, himself, described it in exacting detail: Wake up at dawn and check his email and social media, including the Roosh V forum. Work out at home until the late morning. Have sex with his wife. Then go to his laptop and take care of business until the evening, with only a short break in the afternoon for a light lunch. At seven, he'd quit work for the day to go out for dinner and cruise for girls in his Lamborghini Aventador. Almost without fail he'd be back home and asleep by 11.

Then Sanchez offered another observation from her Roosh V trawling: She could see on the forum exactly *when* Cazes was online. The little green light next to Rawmeo's name wasn't merely a reminder that they were seeing into Cazes' thoughts in real time. It might also serve as an indicator of when his laptop was open—and when Alpha02 was vulnerable.

just days later, on the morning of June 20, 2017, in the small central Netherlands city of Driebergen, half a dozen Dutch police officers were huddled around a conference room where they'd been anxiously waiting since early that day. Finally, one of the investigators' phones rang with a call from the German Federal Police. The Germans had just arrested the two administrators of Hansa, the dark web's second-biggest black market for drugs, in their homes. Both men were in custody. The first phase of Operation Bayonet's one-two punch—an unprecedented attempt to take down one market while secretly taking *over* another—could now begin.

For weeks, the Dutch National High-Tech Crime Unit had been preparing for this moment. They'd used the source code for Hansa that they'd pulled from the German servers to reconstruct their own, offline, practice version of the market, to familiarize themselves with how it was built and administered. They'd even gone so far as to create their own play-money version of Bitcoin, with its very own blockchain—what cryptocurrency developers call a testnet—to privately experiment with how the site handled its monetary transactions.

Now, with the real admins arrested, they had to take over and run the actual, live version of Hansa, with millions of dollars moving between tens of thousands of users. And they had to do it seamlessly, without knocking the

site offline or, worse, giving its users or staff any clue that the two administrators had been replaced by a team of undercover Dutch police.

At the Germans' signal, the Dutch team immediately called a pair of agents they'd sent to a data center in Lithuania, where the server actively running Hansa was hosted. Those agents physically pulled out a hard drive from the rack that held the machine so they could access a backup copy of its data. The teams in Driebergen and Lithuania then began feverishly duplicating every digital component of the market, piece by piece, on their own computers and then on a server in a Netherlands data center, reconstructing an exact copy of the site that was now under their control.

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For the next two days, the Dutch investigators sat at their keyboards from morning until well after midnight, fueled by pizza and Red Bull. At one point early on, someone spilled a soda onto the conference table, nearly soaking a laptop that stored the entire collection of the Hansa data; only a desperate lunge by one of the investigators managed to save it. At another point, a typo in a single command caused the site to go down for several panicky minutes before it could be restored.

Around 3 am on the third night after the arrests, a Dutch investigator, Marinus Boekelo, was troubleshooting another bug that was causing error messages to cascade across the screen whenever someone used the search bar at the top of the page. "Fuck, fuck, fuck!" Boekelo muttered, bent over his laptop, his hands on either side of his face as he attempted one fix after another.

Then, after a moment, he leaned back with a look of relief. The error messages were gone. The last serious bug had been ironed out.

After nearly 72 hours, they had the reconstructed site running smoothly, fully under their command. The skeleton crew still working in the

conference room exploded with jubilation. Aside from the one brief period of downtime, the migration of the site to a Dutch data center had been nearly invisible to its users.

The most conspicuous sign of the takeover, the Dutch police worried, was that for almost three days there had been complete radio silence from the two Hansa administrators. The site's staff of four moderators looked to the two admins for orders and to resolve any disputes between buyers and dealers that they couldn't handle themselves. The police could see that the admins communicated with Hansa's staff using an encrypted messaging system called Tox Chat—the server they'd seized contained some limited logs of their past communications—but they didn't have the password to log in to their chat accounts.

So they tried a simple solution: They asked the real admins for help. The two German men quickly agreed to cooperate in hopes of a lighter sentence. They handed over their Tox Chat passwords to the German police, who passed them on to the Dutch. The team in Driebergen then resumed day-to-day chatter between the bustling black market's bosses and staff. With the cooperation of the real admins and their Tox Chat logs, they were able to pick up the business of the site without a hitch. Their only initial error was paying one moderator the incorrect amount for his Bitcoin salary, pegged to the wrong non-digital currency. The undercover police fixed their mistake, paid the staffer the difference, and all was forgiven.

The Dutch team had come up with a cover story for the admins' three days offline: They'd tell anyone who asked that they were heads-down, coding an upgrade to the market. But no one asked. The hierarchy of the marketplace's org chart and the secrecy of dark-web operations, where no one on staff knew their coworkers beyond a username and a shared chat history, meant the cops in admin clothing were spared any curious questions about their absence.

Nor, they were relieved to discover, did there seem to be any inside jokes or watercooler gossip to catch up on. "It actually turned out that they did not discuss anything personal with each other," one investigator remembers. "It was pure business."

The cover story about an upgrade wasn't exactly a lie. In reconstructing the site, the Dutch police had actually ironed out some of its bugs and rewritten parts of its code to be more efficient. And because they now had a team of half a dozen rotating agents acting as the administrators, instead of two overworked individuals, they found that the site's customers considered the day-to-day operations of the market to be significantly improved.

One of the younger Dutch agents had been an IT help-desk admin years earlier. He found his new job helping run Hansa to be remarkably similar. He got to work efficiently resolving disputes over the site's drug deals, assisted by a collection of answers the administrators had helpfully prepared in an online control panel. The undercover agent even came to the rescue of one grateful, sight-impaired drug dealer, helping him figure out how to get his screen reader software properly integrated with his Tor browser.

Ethical quandaries aside, the team couldn't help but take pride in the professionalism of their work. "The quality really went up," said Gert Ras, the head of the Dutch National High-Tech Crime Unit. "Everyone was very satisfied with the level of service they got."

for their first day acting as Hansa's bosses, the team had cautiously watched the site's internal clockwork, barely believing that they'd gotten away with their takeover. But when it became clear they could control Hansa seemingly indefinitely, they settled in, working in shifts to run the site 24/7 from the small conference room in Driebergen.

On one wall, they set up a 65-inch screen where someone started a stopwatch, measuring exactly how long they'd been in control of the market. Then slowly, silently, they began to spring the trap they'd assembled.

Hansa, like any good dark-web market, had been designed to learn as little as possible about its users beyond what was necessary to facilitate reliable drug transactions. The passwords for users' accounts were stored only as cryptographic "hashes," indecipherable strings of characters that let the site avoid having to protect a collection of those sensitive login credentials. Hansa also offered to let users automatically encrypt all their messages

using the privacy program PGP—including, most importantly, the mailing addresses buyers would share with sellers when they made an order. All of this meant that, in theory, the site itself would never have full access to its users' accounts or know their most personal data, such as the location of their homes.

Now the police began to invisibly sabotage those safeguards. They started recording all of Hansa's usernames and passwords when buyers and sellers logged in. They also began secretly archiving the full text of every message that users sent on the site *before* the text was encrypted. Soon they were collecting hundreds, then thousands, of buyers' addresses from orders, turning the business of the entire market into a glass aquarium under their real-time surveillance.

According to Dutch law, the police had to record and attempt to intercept every drug order made on the market while they controlled it. So the half-dozen undercover agents in their small conference room were soon joined by dozens of others, working on the same floor, who were tasked with manually cataloging every single purchase. They forwarded the data from sales destined for the Netherlands to Dutch police, who could seize the packages of heroin, cocaine, and meth shipped through domestic mail. Non-Dutch orders would be sent to Europol, which was charged with distributing the ever-growing pile of drug-deal data to their respective nations' law enforcement agencies.

Already, the Dutch police had accomplished something law enforcement had never attempted before: hunting, capturing, and vivisecting a dark-web drug market in real time, unbeknownst to the site's users. But Operation Bayonet was only getting started. The Dutch—and their collaborators from Sacramento to Bangkok—had other, bigger game in their crosshairs.

CHAPTER 9

‘Advanced Analysis’

on june 22, 2017, two days after the Hansa takeover and less than two weeks before the date of the planned AlphaBay takedown, Michael

Gronager and Jonathan Levin, cofounders of the world's leading cryptocurrency tracing firm, Chainalysis, happened to be in the Netherlands. So was an Internal Revenue Service Criminal Investigations agent named Tigran Gambaryan. They had all flown to The Hague, halfway across the small country from the Driebergen office where the Dutch were pulling Hansa's puppet strings, for a Europol conference focused on virtual currency investigations.

As contractors with no security clearance, Levin and Gronager were unaware of what Gambaryan knew: that by this time, all the interlocking pieces of Operation Bayonet were falling into place. The Dutch Hansa takeover was underway. A team of Americans targeting AlphaBay planned to set up surveillance of that market's Dutch servers early on July 5, taking a snapshot of its contents while Cazes was logged in to it. They would pull it offline only after the Thais arrested Cazes in Bangkok; touching it any sooner might spook him and cause him to destroy evidence or flee. US prosecutors would then interrogate Cazes and swiftly extradite him. Even the Royal Canadian Mounted Police had been roped in to simultaneously search Cazes' mother's home in Quebec.

Gambaryan was only on the periphery of this international whirlwind of detective work. A compact former forensic accountant with a gruff demeanor, he had gained a reputation as a highly capable dark-web investigator and the IRS's top Bitcoin whisperer. A few years earlier, he'd pioneered the first real cryptocurrency-tracing criminal case, following Bitcoin trails to prove that two federal agents assigned to investigate the Silk Road dark-web market had in fact pocketed hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of the market's bitcoins through theft, extortion, and sales of insider information.

Gambaryan worked as part of IRS Criminal Investigations' cybercrime unit in DC, but he had learned about the AlphaBay case early on from a friendly IRS agent in Fresno, California, his hometown, where he often went to visit his parents. He'd followed the investigation's progress, but he'd never been assigned to the case.

Still, he couldn't help but take an occasional, curious poke at the biggest dark-web market in history. For months, Gambaryan had followed

AlphaBay's tracks through the blockchain, obsessively pestering Chainalysis' Jonathan Levin with new ideas about how to circumscribe the edges of the AlphaBay "cluster"—the millions of Bitcoin addresses the site and its users had generated—or trace its most incriminating money trails. He was, as Levin put it, "completely relentless."

That spring, Gambaryan and Levin had together come up with an idea—a new, experimental method to examine AlphaBay's use of cryptocurrency. Prosecutors in the AlphaBay case have referred to it using only the hideously vague term "advanced analysis." But Gambaryan and Levin hoped they could use it to unearth a major finding: the IP address of the server that hosted AlphaBay's Bitcoin wallet. With that IP in hand, they should be able to pinpoint the server's physical location and seize it, gaining key evidence in their case against Cazes and assuring that no one else on AlphaBay's staff would be able to take control of the site after Cazes' arrest.

By all conventional wisdom, it shouldn't have been possible to learn that IP address through blockchain surveillance. The blockchain, after all, is a ledger of transactions between Bitcoin addresses. It doesn't record IP addresses, the strings of numbers that identify individual computers on the internet and can often help investigators locate them. But Levin and Gambaryan's method could somehow obtain those identifiers. Neither has revealed a word of how this technique works. In fact, in our conversations, they never treated any piece of cryptocurrency-tracing tradecraft with more secrecy.

Unbeknownst to Levin, by the spring of 2017 the Operation Bayonet team believed they already knew an AlphaBay IP address: the one in the Netherlands that had once been leaked in the welcome email for the site's forums and then in November 2016 passed on by a tipster to Fresno DEA agent Robert Miller. But Gambaryan figured it couldn't hurt to independently verify this critical piece of evidence. Levin had been doing his own hands-on research into AlphaBay for years, and he was eager to try out a new investigative technique that Chainalysis could potentially sell to other customers.

On that June morning in The Hague, Levin sat at a desk in an apartment in the coastal city's quiet western periphery, a few blocks from the beach, next to a fishing harbor that fed into the wind-churned North Sea. Levin and Gronager had rented the Airbnb and were sharing it—more out of habit than financial necessity, given Chainalysis' recent multimillion-dollar funding rounds and swelling cash flow—with one staying in the bedroom and the other on the couch.

Levin and Gronager were both up early, before the Europol conference began. So Levin used this spare moment to check the results of his and Gambaryan's advanced analysis experiment.

The answer appeared, without fanfare, on Levin's screen: an AlphaBay IP address. Or rather, a handful of IP addresses that were likely to belong to the site's wallet server. A quick search revealed that the likeliest of them wasn't, in fact, in the Netherlands, but in a data center in Lithuania.

Levin remembers his reaction in the moment as less of an epiphany than a brief flash of recognition. "Huh," he thought to himself. He had no clue that the coordinated global raid of AlphaBay was planned for just over 10 days later and that, according to the digits he now saw on his screen, it was targeting a server in the wrong country. He made a mental note to tell Gambaryan about the Lithuanian IP the next time he saw him.

The opportunity arrived that evening. After a day spent at the Europol conference, the two sat side by side at dinner with a dozen other agents, analysts, prosecutors, and contractors around a long table at Flavor's, a ribs-and-steak restaurant a few blocks from Europol headquarters, its walls covered in paintings of a medieval feast. They had just ordered drinks when Levin thought to mention to Gambaryan that their experimental idea had apparently worked. He showed Gambaryan the three IP addresses on his phone, pointing out the Lithuanian one that seemed most likely.

The IRS agent went silent. He pulled out his own phone and took a picture of Levin's screen. Then he stood up, blank-faced, and quickly walked out of the restaurant without explanation.

Levin watched him go, dumbfounded. Gambaryan hadn't even paid for his beer.

gambaryan ran the eight blocks through the streets of the residential neighborhood, past The Hague's art museum, to the Marriott next to Europol headquarters, where he and most of the other international agents at the conference were staying. He went directly to the building's top floor, overlooking the darkened forest of Park Sorghvliet, ringed by international government buildings. At a table in an empty conference room, he opened his laptop, confirmed that the IP address Levin had found was indeed in a Lithuanian data center, and then began calling Operation Bayonet's prosecutors—Grant Rabenn and Paul Hemesath in California, as well as Alden Pelker, the DC-based cybercrime attorney on the case, and Erin, the FBI Bitcoin-tracing analyst who was in The Hague attending the Europol conference—to tell them that he and Chainalysis had found what appeared to be the true location of AlphaBay's central server, and it wasn't in the Netherlands but a thousand miles to the east.

Soon Erin joined Gambaryan in the hotel conference room, with Hemesath and Rabenn on speakerphone from California, where it was still early in the day. Chainalysis' Levin arrived not long after, followed by Gronager, who'd been attending a different business dinner; both men were pulled into the night's meeting on a need-to-know basis. Until the early hours of the morning, the group worked frantically to sort out the logistics of seizing AlphaBay's infrastructure not from the Netherlands, as they'd intended, but from Lithuania, with their July 5 deadline just days away. At one point, a Dutch hotel worker came into the lounge to try to tell the group the room was closed. Gambaryan, who technically wasn't even part of the AlphaBay operation, flashed his badge at the man instinctively—a badge that had no actual authority outside the United States—and the startled Dutchman retreated, leaving them to their work.

Just as they were on the cusp of victory, it seemed their plan had failed. "Oh, shit," Rabenn silently concluded, in a state of blank panic. "This thing's over."

Ultimately, Gambaryan and Chainalysis' advanced analysis trick spared Operation Bayonet, at nearly the last minute, from what could have been a

major error. The investigators would later learn that the Netherlands IP address they'd been focused on for months pointed to a data center that held only an older server for the site, rather than the holy grail they were looking for. Just like Hansa, AlphaBay had apparently moved at some point from a Dutch hosting provider to the Baltics. Without the Lithuanian IP address, passed from Levin's phone to Gambaryan's in a steak restaurant, the investigators would have been raiding the equivalent of an abandoned hideout, leaving AlphaBay's actual criminal headquarters untouched.

None of the investigators in Operation Bayonet has ever explained the mechanics of that Hail Mary advanced-analysis technique publicly—nor would they explain it to me in the years that followed. That's in part because the secrecy of the technique, agents and prosecutors suggested, had allowed it to be used again and again, identifying the IP addresses of dark-web services' Bitcoin wallets in a series of major cases. Law enforcement agencies wanted to make sure the method wasn't "burned"—exposed to dark-web administrators or Bitcoin developers who might be able to fix the vulnerabilities it exploited.

For anyone who followed the early days of Chainalysis, though, it would be hard not to take one particular educated guess at how the company's mysterious tool worked. In 2015, just months after its founding, the startup had caused a brief, very public blowup in the Bitcoin community with a technique capable of identifying Bitcoin users' IP addresses. The company had set up its own secret collection of Bitcoin nodes, the computers that serve as the communications backbone of the Bitcoin network. Unlike typical Bitcoin nodes, Chainalysis' nodes were designed to silently record the IP addresses Bitcoin users broadcast with every transaction. By quietly intercepting every IP that passed through the nodes, Chainalysis aimed to create a global map of Bitcoin users' physical locations.

The IP eavesdropping was meant as a demonstration of the young startup's capabilities. When it was discovered, however, the result was a long, venom-filled thread on the cryptocurrency forum BitcoinTalk, where Chainalysis was excoriated as a purveyor of "mass surveillance" tools. Gronager, the company's CEO, apologized and shut down the experiment.

Yet, years later, could that technique somehow have been adapted to secretly target—and locate—the Bitcoin wallets of very specific users? Even when the transactions were sent from a computer running on the Tor anonymity network?

For Operation Bayonet, all that mattered was that the IRS’s Gambaryan and Chainalysis’ Levin had, together, corrected the course of a massive, coordinated, international investigation at a critical moment, deploying a secret weapon with hardly a day to spare. But secret weapons don’t tend to stay secret forever.

CHAPTER 10

The Athenee

in the last days of June, the Americans descended upon Bangkok like a tropical law enforcement convention.

They included nearly 20 agents, analysts, computer forensic experts, and prosecutors from the FBI, DEA, IRS, Department of Justice, Department of Homeland Security, and Canada’s Royal Canadian Mounted Police. More than a dozen members of the group checked in at the Athenee, a five-star hotel a few blocks from the US embassy, which advertised that it was built on grounds once owned by a 19th-century Siamese princess and featured eight restaurants and a rooftop complete with a garden and swimming pool. It was, the prosecutor Grant Rabenn noted, certainly the nicest hotel he’d ever managed to book on the government’s per diem.

With just days until their planned bust, Rabenn, Hemesath, and the DC prosecutor Louisa Marion remained swamped by the bureaucracy of coordinating law enforcement agencies in five countries—the United States, Thailand, Canada, the Netherlands, and now Lithuania, where they had a fresh plan to seize the central AlphaBay server. The team also met repeatedly with the Thais at the headquarters of their Narcotics Suppression Bureau (NSB) across town, gathering in a conference room on the building’s eighth floor to talk through the details of Cazes’ arrest.

The central problem remained unsolved: how to distract Cazes and lure him out of his house with his phone unlocked and his laptop open and unencrypted. Set fire to a dumpster outside the house? Too dangerous, they decided. Have a female undercover agent begin screaming and crying outside his house? Cazes might simply ignore her, or else close the laptop before checking out the noise.

What if they dressed an undercover agent as a postal worker who knocked on the door and asked Cazes to come sign for a package? That, they concluded, might work.

Amid all this frantic eleventh-hour planning, a core group still managed to cap off each day at the Athenee's lounge for its all-you-can-eat sushi happy hours. It was during one of those evening gatherings that something surprising appeared in the group chat the Thai police had set up on a messaging app called Line, popular in Thailand. The Thais used the group chat to post constant updates to one another and to the DEA on their physical surveillance of Cazes. That day, the Thai team assigned to Operation Bayonet had been following their target on an early evening outing, tracking him in his Porsche Panamera as he approached central Bangkok. Jen Sanchez, who lived near both the Athenee and her workplace at the US embassy building down the street, had just returned home when she saw a photo, taken by one of the Thai officers, pop up. It showed a white Porsche, parked at a swanky-looking hotel entrance.

"What the fuck?" she thought, with a sudden rush of adrenaline. Wasn't that the Athenee, where much of the US team was staying?

At that moment, in the Athenee lounge, Rabenn recalls seeing the same Porsche out of the corner of his peripheral vision and instantly remembering that a white Panamera was in Cazes' stable of pricey vehicles. He pointed it out to Hemesath, as well as the DEA's Miller and an FBI agent, all of them sitting together at a table in the lobby. They half-jokingly suggested that the FBI agent go check it out.

The agent gamely strolled across the lounge as a figure walked through the front door of the Athenee. A spasm of shock went through Rabenn's mind.

It was him. Alexandre Cazes. And he was walking directly toward Rabenn, Miller, and Hemesath's table.

Rabenn froze. "It was like seeing a ghost," he remembers. He glanced over at Hemesath, who seemed equally paralyzed, in disbelief.

The image of that first in-person encounter with Cazes, after nine months of obsessively tracking Alpha02, remains burned into Rabenn's memory. Cazes was dressed, Rabenn remembers, in a slim, expensive-looking blue suit, his white shirt unbuttoned underneath in the style of someone too rich to wear a tie. Yet Rabenn also observed that Cazes moved with a certain nerdy awkwardness—that, under his costume, he looked "more like a pudgy programmer pretending to be a rock star than an actual rock star."

The FBI agent, thinking quickly, avoided eye contact with Cazes and walked directly past him to the door. In the seconds it took for Cazes to cross the room, seemingly in slow motion, thoughts raced through Rabenn's mind: How did Cazes know who they were? Or that they were on his trail? Or which hotel they were staying at in Bangkok? Had there been a leak? Had they been meeting too conspicuously, blowing their opsec? Had this criminal mastermind outsmarted them?

In mere moments, Rabenn expected Cazes to sit down next to them at their table, smug expression on his face, and say, as he imagined it, "Fuck you guys, I know you're here, and you're not going to get anything."

Rabenn realized he had no idea how he would respond. They could arrest Cazes on the spot, but they'd lose all hope of getting access to his laptop or any smoking-gun evidence of his control of AlphaBay. Just as they were on the cusp of victory, it seemed their plan had failed.

"Oh, shit," Rabenn silently concluded, in a state of blank panic. "This thing's over."

Then, when Cazes was about 5 feet away from their table, he turned and sat down at the table next to them, across from a pair of Israeli businessmen wearing suits and yarmulkes.

The Americans looked at each other in confusion. After a moment, the FBI agent returned and sat down casually. He and Miller began silently signaling to the rest of the table that everyone else should leave.

Rabenn, recovering his composure, allowed the thought to cross his mind that perhaps all was not lost—that this was simply the most stunning coincidence of his life.

Doing their best to act naturally, the prosecutors cleared out and walked up the curved staircase to the mezzanine floor of the hotel, while the FBI agent and Miller hung back to eavesdrop on Cazes' conversation at the neighboring table. On the floor above, Rabenn and Hemesath shared a moment of wide-eyed relief. Text messages from the FBI and DEA agents still at the table began to roll in, reporting on Cazes' meeting: He was talking with the Israelis about one of his real estate investment deals in the Caribbean.

As their panic subsided, they now saw that a group of Thai undercover police—including the team leader, Colonel Pisal Erb-Arb, in plain clothes—had stationed themselves around another table across the hotel lounge from Cazes and were discreetly watching him, even stealthily taking photos of each other that captured Cazes in the background. The AlphaBay founder gave no sign of having spotted them.

As Rabenn and Hemesath silently rejoiced, the FBI agent joined them on the mezzanine floor and pulled out his phone. He started Googling, trying to calculate the odds of what had just happened. How many hotels were there in Bangkok, anyway? He quickly showed them the answer: There were thousands.

In a euphoric daze, the two prosecutors marveled at their bizarre near-collision—but not for long. In two days, they knew their team would be encountering Cazes face-to-face again, this time in the most elaborate arrest they had ever attempted.

Continued next week: The day of the takedown arrives. Operation Bayonet reaches its kinetic climax. And then the case takes a tragic twist.

This story is excerpted from the book [Tracers in the Dark: The Global Hunt for the Crime Lords of Cryptocurrency](#), available now from Doubleday.

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Nov 10, 2022 7:00 AM

A Tweet Before Dying

The revolutionary internet is over, and we don't have much to show for it. A new start is out there, somewhere.

Illustration: Elena Lacey

i find it a good philosophical exercise to imagine the last tweet. It could come centuries hence, when a cryptobot offers a wistful adieu to another cryptobot, or in 2025, when Donald Trump, the newly inaugurated president for life, pushes the big Electromagnetic Pulse button on the Resolute desk. Or it could come in a few months, when [Elon Musk](#) realizes that aggregating human despair has no upside, regrets plowing his electric clown car into a social media goat rodeo, and shuts the whole thing down with a single "lol." (Way to own the libs.) What then? We'll all move over to some [Twitter](#) replacement like [Mastodon](#), hundreds of millions of us, and ruin that too? Sigh.

Lately it feels like the last tweet could come any day. The whole tech industry—by which I mean the cluster of companies that sell code-empowered products to billions of humans—is in extraordinary decline. The Zuckerverse has everything but users, which means [Meta](#) must come up with ever more creative ways to ruin Instagram and/or society.

Microsoft, Amazon, Google—their stock charts look like Niagara Falls in profile. At least \$3 trillion has ridden over the cataracts in a barrel. When your brand is infinite growth, investors don't like to see failure. It has become possible to imagine not just the last tweet but also the day when [Facebook](#) exists only as a multi-exabyte ZIP file in archival storage, or when Googling is an interactive exhibit at the Internet History Museum.

Of course, truly giant things—at the scale of social media platforms, religions, and nation-states—don’t really die. They deflate like air mattresses, getting soft at the corners and occasionally waking you up to pump them. The entities that dominated my childhood, AT&T and the Soviet Union, seemed at one point to have given up the ghost. There was rejoicing: Now a million new innovative companies can flourish! Now democracy will spread everywhere! Both were stripped for parts—and those parts eventually recombined into new, enormous forms, like beads of mercury finding each other on a plate. A re-blobbed AT&T ended up buying a ton of things, including Time Warner, giving it control of both the piping and the content. The former USSR, well ... There is always someone with a fantasy of getting the band back together, even if the consequences are terrible.

Like a lot of you, I imagine, I have been looking at this shifting world and finding the changes pretty rough to behold. Recession, authoritarianism, nuclear posturing, a weirding climate—these pop up unbidden in the feed, like the time Apple put U2’s *Songs of Innocence* on everyone’s iTunes without asking. When future historians write books about this era, I feel pretty sure they’ll pick titles like *The Fracture*, *The Fraying Knot*, *Hope Undone*, *Leviathan Triumphant*, *A Web Unwoven*, stuff like that. (If they’re Q-storians, they might go with *The Gathering Storm*.) Obviously they’ll include the last tweet, whatever it is. How else are they supposed to demarcate the end of the glorious web content revolution?

Personally, I’d begin and end that history with the House of Windsor. When Princess Diana died in 1997, the web was just coming into its own. Cable TV dominated, but online news—the linking between articles, the packaging of stories on homepages, the rich dithered GIFs—suddenly began to feel real and relevant. The tragedy was urgent and shocking and unscripted, and for an early web enthusiast it felt like the big leagues. But when Diana’s former mother-in-law died, a quarter of a century later, the part the internet played felt predictable. We knew to expect the tweets against colonialism and against anti-colonialism. We understood implicitly that the funeral horses would be memed. We had a vocabulary for the takes, hot takes, cancellations, and dunks. We posted through it.

Truly giant things—social media platforms, religions, nation-states—don’t really die. They deflate like air mattresses.

r.i.p. the revolutionary internet, 1997–2022. I’m grieving a little over here. But life must go on, despite who wins the US midterm elections, who owns Twitter, and how ridiculous the metaverse might be. That’s why every morning, sometimes before breakfast, when I am in despair, I remember the three letters that always bring me comfort: PDF. And then, when I can, I go digging. I read about Gato, a new artificially intelligent agent that can caption images and play games, or the mathematics underlying misinformation, or “digital twins,” which are simulations of real-world things like cities that consulting firms seem able to sell these days. One site, scholar.archive.org, has PDFs going back to the 18th century. It’s empowering to look for this stuff instead of waiting for it to be socially discovered and jammed into my brain.

This was the original function of the web—to transmit learned texts to those seeking them. Humans have been transmitting for millennia, of course, which is how historians are able to quote Pliny’s last tweet (“Something up w/ Vesuvius, brb”). But the seeking is important, too; people should explore, not simply feed. Whatever will move society forward is not hidden inside the deflating giants. It’s out there in some pitiful PDF, with a title like “A New Platform for Communication” or “Machine Learning Applications for Community Organization.” The tech industry said we had it all figured out, but we ended up with a billionaire telling us to strap on a helmet (space or VR) while the rising seas lap our toes. So now we have to try again. Now we *get* to try again.

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By [Brooke Jarvis](#)

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Nov 10, 2022 6:00 AM

The Big Fight Over 403 Very Small Wasps

Earth is teeming with unknown species, and they're dying off faster than ever. Now biologists are battling over an old question: how to catalog life?
Photograph: Damien Maloney

the bottle held a thin broth, light brown, with some uncertain chunks of dark matter bobbing on top—a soup, maybe, but one that you'd never want to eat. Once it was poured into a white plastic tray, the chunks resolved into [insects](#). Here were butterflies and moths, the delicate patterns of their wings dimmed after a week or two in ethanol. Here were beetles and bumblebees and lots of burly-looking flies, all heaped together, plus a bevy of large wasps, their stripes and stingers still bright.

Michael Sharkey took out a pair of thin forceps and began examining his catch. It included anything small and winged that lived in the meadows and forests around his house, high in the Colorado Rockies, and that had suffered the misfortune, in the previous two weeks, of flying into the tent-shaped malaise trap he had erected in front of his home and we had emptied earlier that morning.

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Though Sharkey is a hymenopterist, an expert on the insect order that includes wasps, he ignored the obvious stripes and stingers. He ignored, in fact, all of the creatures the average person might recognize as wasps—or

even recognize at all. Instead, he began pulling little brown specks out of the soup, peering at them through a pair of specialized glasses with a magnifying loupe of the sort a jeweler might wear. Dried off and placed under the microscope on his desk, the first speck revealed itself to be an entire, perfect insect with long, jointed antennae and delicately filigreed wings. This was a braconid wasp, part of a family of creatures that Sharkey has been studying for decades. Entomologists believe that there are tens of thousands of species of braconid sharing this planet, having all sorts of important impacts on the environments around them. But most humans have probably never heard of them, much less been aware of seeing one. Huge parts of the braconid family tree are, as the saying goes, still unknown to [science](#).

As a taxonomist, Sharkey is part of a small group of people who can transform anonymous insects into known species. When other entomologists find specimens they think may not yet have been named, taxonomists are the specialists they call in to investigate whether this seemingly new-to-us thing is actually new to us. If it is, the taxonomist may formally welcome it into the realm of human knowledge by publicly conferring upon the species a Latin name, along with an official description of the physical characteristics that make it unique and identifiable for future observers. The process “hasn’t changed an awful lot” in the past 200 years, the British hymenopterist Gavin Broad told me—except that nowadays “we’ve got nicer pictures.”

I first encountered Sharkey’s name months before I called him up and asked if we could look at bugs together. I don’t remember precisely when, only that I gradually started to notice the name—always followed by “et al.”—in more and more places. There were long critiques of Sharkey et al. appearing in scientific journals, and then, later, there were responses to those critiques, and responses to those responses. And then there was the snark among the entomologists in my Twitter feed, some of whom called the work irresponsible or embarrassing or just wrote “Wooooooof.”

“Sharkey et al.” is shorthand for a paper that came out in the journal *ZooKeys* in 2021, along with a series of subsequent publications that used similar methods. That first paper wasn’t the sort of work that usually raises

such a hubbub. In it, Sharkey and a group of coauthors named some new species of braconid wasp that had been caught in malaise traps in Costa Rica. But instead of identifying just a few species, they named 403. And instead of writing up detailed descriptions for each new wasp, the authors simply included a photo and a snippet of genetic code.

The initial paper wasn't written to be provocative, Sharkey said. "But provoke it did."

The technique that Sharkey and his coauthors used, called DNA barcoding, is a way of quickly sorting and differentiating species. Researchers analyze a small section of DNA at a particular site in each creature's genome, upload that sequence into a vast database, and then use [algorithms](#) to sort the different sequences into groups. When the DNA varies from one organism to the next by more than a few percent, it's considered a sign that their evolutionary histories have gone down separate tracks for a significant period of time, possibly dividing them into different species.

DNA barcoding is a common scientific tool these days. But some scientists said that Sharkey and his colleagues had pushed its use too far. They deemed the work "turbo taxonomy" or even, as the taxonomist Miles Zhang said, "taxonomic vandalism," a term for labeling taxa as new without sufficient evidence for their uniqueness. These critics argued that the work could undermine the whole project of naming the natural world, of beginning to make it legible to human understanding. Zhang—who is actually Sharkey's academic "grandson," having studied under one of Sharkey's former students—was so frustrated that *ZooKeys* continued to publish papers from Sharkey et al. that he tweeted to the journal, "I'm done with you, go find a new subject editor."

For Sharkey and other entomologists who support his approach, this method of accelerated taxonomy is an urgently needed response to ecological calamity. Here we humans are, on a planet of astounding diversity in which truly enormous numbers of our neighbors are still mysteries to us—are, in fact, slowly revealing themselves to be more mysterious than we ever realized—and at the same time we're pushing those other species rapidly toward [oblivion](#). What choice is there, Sharkey asked, but to do all we can

to speed up the naming process, if we are to learn what we're losing before it's gone?

The initial *ZooKeys* paper, Sharkey insisted, was just a start, a suggestion for how taxonomists can begin to tackle the enormous challenge that faces them. It wasn't written to be provocative, he said. "But provoke it did."

The more I learned about the debate, the more captivating I found it. In one sense, it was an esoteric argument about technical methods within a pretty obscure field—one that's often written off, as Zhang put it, as "a weird hybrid between true science and stamp collecting." But there was clearly a lot more at stake than a few hundred wasps. Taxonomy, for centuries, has been humanity's way of reckoning with the great unknownness of the natural world. It's how we have gotten acquainted with our neighbors, how we have tried to understand our place in a wildness whose true scope and complexity have always eluded our grasp. As the biodiversity crisis that our species created pushes others toward extinction, the field is struggling in ways that reveal just how much we have to lose.

Michael Sharkey has named hundreds of species of braconid, some of which are as small as 1 millimeter long.

Photograph: Damien Maloney

the naming and ordering of living creatures is one of the most enduring human preoccupations. We're taught to do it as children, and it's one of the first jobs God assigns Adam in Eden: Give a name to every beast of the field and bird of the air. Aristotle's classification of living things into ranked groups created a foundation for the regrettably world-changing belief that nature exists in a fixed hierarchy, with humans on top and the rest below, separate and endlessly exploitable. We saw chaos and nominated ourselves to create order.

Modern taxonomy began with Carl Linnaeus, an 18th-century Swedish botanist, who, at the age of 28, published *Systema Naturae*, a bold claim that he could organize all things animal and vegetal into a system of neat and nested hierarchies: kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, species. (He also ranked groups of humans, a theory that laid the

groundwork for using science to justify racism.) By the time Linnaeus died, his system included 12,000 organisms. Since then, the naming and ordering of creatures has been a vast collective project, undertaken by generations of scientists and laypeople. Named species, as Zhang put it, have become “the basic unit of biology,” a fixed point around which all sorts of laws and conservation strategies, not to mention centuries of scientific literature, pivot. Linnaeus’ 12,000 named species grew to today’s far more impressive (and very approximate) 2 million. But even that number, any biologist will tell you, is just a very humble start.

One problem is that scientists can’t fully agree on a single way of defining what a species *is*. The field of taxonomy was born when humans believed organisms to be fixed and immutable, but it must now operate in a world that we understand to be defined by mutation, variation, and constant change. (Even the author of *On the Origin of Species* once wrote to a friend how maddening it was trying to draw hard boundaries around organisms. “I have gnashed my teeth, cursed species, and asked what sin I had committed to be so punished,” Darwin wrote.) One common definition says that two organisms are different species if they can’t interbreed—which makes good sense until you think about, say, the climate-change-induced merging of polar bear territory with grizzly territory, resulting in pizzly bears. Or the fact that the bears share ancestry; at what point was the divergence enough to make them different species? The history of taxonomy includes a long series of battles—driven by evidence, opinion, and personal predilection—over whether groups of specimens ought to be lumped together or split apart.

But the problem of species is bigger still. Hundreds of years into the Linnaean project, scientists estimate that they have named, oh, somewhere between a fifth and a thousandth of the species on the planet. The general public tends to believe that the discovery of a new one is a momentous and rare occasion. In fact, the backlog of unclassified specimens is enormous. With most insects, especially, there is simply no keeping up. A Dutch entomologist told me about opening a large drawer full of various unnamed beetles at a museum, only to be told that the forest where they’d been collected a century earlier had long since vanished, the beetles probably gone along with it. Entomologists often say they could probably find a new-

to-science species of insect in just about any given backyard, if only you gave them the time and access to experts. I'd heard this time and again, but I still wasn't quite prepared when Sharkey examined one of the specimens from the backyard braconid soup and remarked, mildly, that he thought it was likely new to science.

Braconids are a perfect example of the staggering unknownness of the natural world. They're part of a larger group known as parasitoid wasps, which reproduce by hijacking the life cycles of other insects. The wasps lay eggs in or on hosts such as caterpillars, ants, or beetles. Their larvae then use the hosts as food, often eating them from the inside out. In some cases, thanks to neurotoxins imparted by the parent wasp, the host is still alive—a grotesque but efficient defense against food spoilage!—during the ordeal. (The whole situation was enough to put Darwin off his society's prevailing religion. "I cannot persuade myself," he wrote to a friend, "that a beneficent and omnipotent God would have designedly created" such creatures as parasitoid wasps.)

Still, parasitoidism provides a pretty thrilling window into the richness of [evolution](#). It's thought to lead to incredible specialization, and therefore incredible diversity. Parasitoid wasps often evolve intricate ways of infiltrating the defenses of a single other species of insect, or perhaps a few—at which point the host species evolve new defenses, and the parasitoids new strategies, ad infinitum. Take the braconid wasp that parasitizes the green cloverworm, a caterpillar. The prospective host tries to escape its waspy enemies by dangling itself off branches by a safety thread, like a little bungee jumper. The braconid has evolved to subvert this strategy and slide down the thread in pursuit of the caterpillar. But that's hardly the end of things, because there's *another* parasitoid wasp, a whole other species, that lays its eggs in the first braconid's eggs and has specialized to look for them by reeling the green cloverworm caterpillar back up. (It will lay its own eggs inside only if the first braconid has already deposited its young.) Sometimes these chains of bespoke predation, known as hyper-parasitism, go on for layer after layer, a Russian nesting doll of endlessly multiplying diversity and coevolution.

Five braconids of the genus *Retusigaster*. They parasitize caterpillars.

Photograph: Damien Maloney

For a long time, scientists believed that the most speciose group of insects—and therefore of animals on Earth, since the vast majority of the world’s animal species are insects—were beetles. Some 400,000 species have been named, so many that the famous polymath J. B. S. Haldane, when asked by a cleric what a lifetime of studying the natural world had taught him about the God who had created it, is said to have replied, dryly, that any such divine being must have “an inordinate fondness for beetles.” But recently, some entomologists have argued that, thanks to the enormous variety beginning to emerge as we learn more about parasitoids, it’s actually *wasps* that are likely to be the world’s most inordinate group. They may attract less human attention than iridescent jewel beetles, but these overlooked creatures, with their disconcerting reproductive strategies, so deeply embedded in the lives of the species that surround them, may represent a dominant way of animal life on planet Earth. As Broad, the British hymenopterist, said, “What do you know about the world if you’re only looking at a few species? You don’t know anything about it.”

In recent years, as entomologists around the world have tried to quantify the alarming arthropod decline that’s widely known as “the insect apocalypse,” they’ve had to contend with this “Linnaean shortfall”—the fact that humans have so little preexisting knowledge of the other organisms with which we share our planet, much less how they’re faring in the face of unprecedented global change. (There’s also, if you want to get nerdy about it, the “Prestonian shortfall,” which refers to the shortage of baseline data about how abundant animals really were in the past, and the “Wallacean shortfall,” or all that we don’t know about how species have moved in space, and the “Darwinian shortfall,” what we don’t understand about the way species have changed over time.) And there is the taxonomic shortfall: the knowledge we’re missing out on because there aren’t enough people or resources to help us meet the neighbors before they vanish.

Sharkey uses ethanol to preserve the specimens caught in his traps.

Photograph: Damien Maloney

like a lot of future natural scientists, Sharkey grew up—in his case, outside of Toronto—as the kind of kid who loved collecting bugs and salamanders in jars. Later, his work as a taxonomist sent him on professional collecting trips, chasing insects to the far reaches of Canada or Colombia. Just as often, though, it took him to arguably more obscure places: dusty monographs, old books, and the filing cabinets of distant museums. (As in many fields, taxonomy is shadowed by a persistent colonialism; specimens regularly end up half a world away from the forests or fields in which new scientists might be examining their living descendants.)

In biology, the scientific name of an organism is formally attached to a particular specimen, what's known as a holotype. Should you have questions, for example, about what sort of bear chased you through the wilderness, you may wish to visit the preserved head of Mammal #100181 in the American Museum of Natural History, the official holotype of *Ursus arctos alascensis*, the Alaska brown bear. (Museums also hold paratypes, specimens of the same species collected alongside the holotype, which are equally handy for validation, though vested with less symbolic meaning.) Type specimens are particularly valuable to insect taxonomists, who often compare very subtle differences—the details of a moth's antennae or a beetle's spiny genitalia, for example—to tell species apart or find out if they've already been named.

In the years when Sharkey was working on his PhD, a project to name and describe 100 species of braconid, he visited some 10 museums across North America and Europe just to examine long-dead wasps. In Berlin, in the 1980s, he passed through a checkpoint from West to East day after day on his way to inspect some key specimens. The guards would raise their eyebrows at his microscope in its big cylindrical metal case but then let him through. In the end, investigating, naming, and describing those 100 species took seven years.

The work was slow and tedious, and there were always doubters who questioned the point of it all: first Sharkey's father, who insisted that the pure sciences were frivolous and that his son should go into medicine or law, and later the head of Sharkey's undergraduate entomology department, whose face fell when he discovered that his student was interested in

studies on ecology and evolution, not agriculture and economics. But Sharkey relished the job. He loved how it felt to find patterns within chaos, teasing out and learning to recognize the subtle physical differences that distinguished one genus or species from another. He loved being able to walk through a forest or grassland and identify the key players in tiny dramas, to observe the complex ways in which insects' lives interacted with each other. And then there was that feeling of discovery, the thrill of the new, of doing his part to expand the world of human awareness, however slightly. Naming a new species, he thought, felt a little like summiting a mountain or discovering the wreck of a Spanish galleon. Even if it was a tiny wasp.

But that was then. As genetic technology became cheaper and more accessible, Sharkey decided to revisit his old work to see how the distinctions he'd made based on an animal's morphology—those subtle physical details—compared to the differences evident in its DNA.

The results shocked him. The work hadn't just been slow; much of it seemed to be wrong. According to the genetics, some of the animals he'd diagnosed as one species were best understood as four or five; others, which he'd named as multiple species, were only one. It seemed that as much as half of his work was, at best, misleading. "The morphological work I was doing was just garbage," Sharkey said. "I thought, my God! I've wasted 20 years of my life, or at least my professional life."

The DNA barcoding technique that Sharkey used was pioneered by the Canadian biologist Paul Hebert, who proposed the idea in 2003 after looking at barcodes in a grocery store. How could we track so many flavors of Pop-Tarts and pasta sauces, he wondered, but not the living things with which we share the planet? Hebert later founded a major institution, the Centre for Biodiversity Genomics at the University of Guelph, which has championed the technique and built a database of genetic barcodes and the organisms they key to, in order to help speed identification. This system algorithmically lumps together sequences whose genetic relationships are particularly close. These sequences are assigned the same barcode index number, or BIN.

Since Hebert developed the technique, the use of DNA barcoding has expanded in dramatic and creative ways. You can, for example, test the DNA present in snow or river water or soil, or even in the stomachs or excrement of animals, and thereby “see” the many organisms that have passed invisibly through the landscape or digestive tract. Often, though, the DNA reveals only more secrets: These ecosystems can be full of mystery creatures whose genetic data is not yet associated with any name at all. Not all are necessarily “new” to science; in some cases they may have been named and filed away in a museum but never really studied again, and the link between their name and their DNA has not been made. The taxonomist Roderic Page once dubbed these unnamed species “dark taxa.” Some other scientists soon adopted the term to refer to a bigger darkness—the enormous category of all undefined life. As with dark matter or dark energy, here is a force that humans generally don’t see or understand but that has a profound effect on how our natural cosmos works.

When the taxonomist Rudolf Meier and a group of coauthors analyzed more than 200,000 insects caught in malaise traps in eight countries, in habitats ranging from tropical rain forests to temperate meadows, they found that the insect families that dominate the natural world—the hyperdiverse ones full of species whose interactions (such as pollination or predation or decomposition) with other organisms play key roles in ecosystems—are also the families that are among the least known. Meier called this “the neglect index.” The same phenomenon, he told me, extends to lots of other key groups, from microbes to fungi to ringed worms, that quietly help keep the world running despite not having much in the way of names. “From a biomass point of view, from a species diversity point of view, a lot of the taxa that have received most of our attention are not important,” he said. “But all the taxa that we have been neglecting *are* important.”

The other big surprise of barcoding was how often it revealed that even the knowledge we thought we had was, in fact, incomplete or flawed. Sharkey’s experience of watching the genetics contradict his morphological analysis is becoming a common one. In the past 15 years, scientists have split what they thought was a single giraffe species into four, the orca whale into at least three, the well-known and long-studied *Astraptes fulgerator* butterfly into 10. Often, a discovery of genetic difference kicked off a closer look at

animals' survival and reproductive strategies, at their morphology and how they interacted with their ecosystems, which in turn revealed meaningful differences that had gone unnoticed or unappreciated. I talked to Guilherme Oliveira, a researcher in Brazil, who barcoded an Amazonian ecosystem and found hundreds more plant species than anyone had expected—a profusion of biodiversity that scientists had previously failed to see.

Parasitoid wasp species are proving equally full of hidden diversity. Where entomologists once saw one or two generalist species—organisms capable of parasitizing a variety of different hosts—DNA barcoding will sometimes reveal a dozen specialists, which are much more narrowly adapted. This is not just reclassification for its own sake. Specialists are particularly vulnerable to extinction, and the particulars of who eats whom can matter a great deal in ecosystems—including those that humans depend on most. On farms, when introduced pests, freed from the constraints of their natural predators, destroy vital crops, suddenly it's a race to identify the right parasitoid defender to stave off failure or famine. The wasps are air-dropped like tiny paratroopers into crisis zones.

Sharkey examines dried and pinned braconids from his collection.

Photograph: Damien Maloney

in his office in Colorado, Sharkey showed me old monographs and morphological keys meant to guide people in identifying various parasitoid wasps. He lamented how “useless” they were. Some of the written descriptions seemed like they wouldn’t be much easier to follow than a genetic code; many specimens didn’t key out to a species, or keyed out to the wrong one, because the keys included only the small subset of species that had been discovered at the time and no information on the much wider world that really existed.

When he first learned that his morphological work had been so mistaken, Sharkey told me, he felt depressed and demoralized. But then he became an evangelist. The slower road, he said, continued to make more sense for well-studied groups associated with long scientific literatures. But a hugely speciose and mostly unknown group like the braconids, he insisted, was different. What was the point in making morphological keys if they didn’t

work very well and hardly anyone looked at them? The sheer scope of the unknown demanded triage. Better to barcode quickly now and do the in-depth descriptions later, if there was ever time.

The approach made sense to some scientists. There are groups that are so large and so cryptic, and in so much danger from the ongoing collapse in biodiversity, that it's "not logistically feasible to do the taxonomy the old way," Scott Miller, the curator of *Lepidoptera* for the National Museum of Natural History, told me. "In order to meet the challenges at hand, we have to move faster." Dan Janzen, the renowned entomologist who provided the Costa Rican braconids in the original *ZooKeys* paper (on which he and his wife, the tropical ecologist Winnie Hallwachs, are coauthors), believes that as barcoding becomes cheaper and more accessible, it will help democratize the process of gathering information about the world's biodiversity—and encourage more people to have a stake in protecting it. This is the power of naming, he said. Names help us relate to a species, see it, notice it, care about it. "*Bioalfabetización*," he calls the process in Spanish: the development of biological literacy.

The mountains surrounding Sharkey's current home in Forest Falls, California.

Photograph: Damien Maloney

An insect trap in Sharkey's front yard.

Photograph: Damien Maloney

But others warn that taxonomy can't afford to sacrifice precision for speed, and that it needs to respond to technological advances by incorporating more types of information, not fewer. Some of the arguments are about accessibility: How can the field become more democratic if you need access to a sequencing lab to identify a bug in your own backyard? Other objections are technical. The mitochondrial gene that's usually used in barcoding, called cytochrome oxidase 1, or CO1, is not necessarily the best option for analyzing the genetic differences between species, especially as technology has expanded to allow for cheaper analysis of a fuller genetic picture. CO1 isn't directly related to reproduction, and it doesn't work well

for all groups of animals. (Fungi, for example, or oak gall wasps, which Zhang studies—if you look just at CO1, he says, you miss the entire diversity of this megadiverse group.)

Meier agrees that taxonomy needs to be sped up dramatically if it is to take on the great unknowns of the natural world, let alone keep up with the speed at which nature is being destroyed. But he believes the future lies in integrating barcoding with a variety of other advanced technologies, including robotics and machine learning, which can perform rapid analysis of images and discern species based on subtle differences that humans struggle to see.

The goal shouldn't be to file other organisms into our own human systems, one scientist said, but to try to “think of it from the way they think about themselves.”

Meier and Sharkey have gone back and forth in journal articles over whether Sharkey's method unfairly equates BINs, which are changeable categories whose boundaries can shift as new data is added, with species, which are meant to be stable reflections of separate evolutionary histories (despite being muddled by differences across geographic ranges, niches, and populations). When Meier performed his own analysis, which ran some of the same data through different algorithms, it sorted the wasps into a slightly different configuration of species than the algorithm Sharkey had used. The technology had improved, but a version of the old lumping-splitting debate was still there. The boundaries between species still shifted depending on who, or what, was drawing them.

The microscope in Sharkey's home office with a pinned braconid on the stage.

Photograph: Damien Maloney

The act of taxonomizing species captures humans at our most confident: Here we are, making grand pronouncements about what other creatures are, about *who* they are, naming them just like Adam before the Fall. Yet our desire to name nature has always run up against the grand abundance and wild complexity of the world we actually live in. In one telling, the story of

our quest to understand the biodiversity around us is one of ever-expanding knowledge. In another, it's a tale of ever-expanding ignorance, of learning just how much we don't yet understand. While both morphology and genetics can tell us a lot about how other creatures survive on Earth, there will always be parts of other organisms' lives that matter very much to them but are hidden from us. Many insects, for example, can see spectra of light that we can't, and so look quite different to each other than they do to us. Plants use complicated chemical signals to communicate with each other, as well as with their predators and benefactors. Many animals, from birds to frogs to Belding's ground squirrels, differentiate themselves by smells or calls more than by looks, and scientists are increasingly turning to these differences to try to tell them apart. The goal shouldn't be to file other organisms into our own human systems, Miller said, but to try to "look closely at these organisms and think of it from the way they think about themselves."

This means trying to recognize, and minimize, the extent to which we're limited by our own biases, which include our tendency to privilege the visual over the olfactory or aural, the diurnal over the nocturnal, the big over the little, and animals with relatable faces over those without. The scientist Robert May, who helped pioneer the field of theoretical ecology, has characterized our ignorance of species without features and lives "akin to our own" as "a remarkable testament to humanity's narcissism." In *Naming Nature*, a book about the history of taxonomy, the science journalist Carol Kaesuk Yoon takes a more generous view: "There is nothing harder to see," she writes, "than one's own frame of reference."

Even as they argued with each other, the taxonomists I spoke to each described their work as an exercise in humility, of trying their best before a daunting unknown, and learning, over and over, how much they don't know. It can be a painful job, as a group of them wrote, "documenting this monumental historical loss of biodiversity and, in some cases, grimly identifying and naming new species already extinct or destined thusly." Even the fiercest arguments about methods and goals boil down to this: We live in a world of diversity that exceeds the grasp of our knowledge, but not our ability to destroy it.

Before I left Colorado, Sharkey opened a new box of vials that had recently arrived via the barcoding lab in Canada: more braconid wasps, this time from a large, and largely unknown, subfamily called *Doryctinae*. They had also been collected in Costa Rica and were now waiting to be named, in a new paper that would use a minimalist method similar to the one that had caused so much furor.

Sharkey poured the first one out of its vial, and it splashed onto a sheet of paper, tiny and anonymous. And then he put the wasp under the microscope.

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Nov 8, 2022 6:00 AM

Inside Meta's Oversight Board: 2 Years of Pushing Limits

Mark Zuckerberg set up the panel to investigate how his company handles controversial posts. Now its members want to transform how social platforms work.

Illustration: Deena So’Oteh

On the morning of Thursday, June 30, 2022, two large luxury buses pulled up to a grand hotel in Menlo Park, California. Milling on the driveway were the members, staffers, and trustees of the Oversight Board. Set up two years ago by Facebook, now [Meta](#), this august gaggle exists to second-guess the company’s most controversial actions. The board members, who’d already logged countless hours on video calls and email, were spending their first week together in person. The buses rumbled off, whisking the 23 Zoom buddies to Meta’s headquarters 4 miles away.

The group made its way across the mammoth Gehry–designed complex to a verdant outdoor amphitheater known as the Bowl. Sheryl Sandberg, Meta’s [outgoing](#) chief operating officer, greeted the crowd in the midday heat. Next up was Nick Clegg, the company’s president for global affairs. Clegg was almost startling in his effusive praise of the board. He was taking questions from the members when, suddenly, the large screens in the Bowl lit up with a familiar face.

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[Mark Zuckerberg](#)'s expressionless visage peered down at the sweaty visitors. Though Zuckerberg had personally willed into being this body of overseers—overseeing *him*—he had never met with all its current members. Meta's founder and CEO didn't share his location, but a fair guess would have been that he was at his Hawaiian island retreat, where he had spent much of the previous year. Staring into his webcam, Zuckerberg congratulated the board on its work so far. Free expression, he said, has always been part of his company's mission—but sometimes people use their voices to put others in danger. Meta shouldn't be making so many decisions on speech by itself. Zuckerberg finished his talk with a wholehearted endorsement. "This has been important to me from the beginning," he said, "and I'm committed to the board for the long term."

Indeed, a few weeks later, Meta announced it would give the board \$150 million—more than double its original commitment—to keep the project going through 2025. So far, the board has received nearly 2 million appeals on content and ruled on 28 of them. It has made 119 recommendations to Meta. Its judgments have involved wampum belts, blackface, and the removal of a former US president from Facebook.

Some critics see the Oversight Board as an exercise in corporate ass-covering by a bunch of Meta's puppets. If the company doesn't want to make a controversial call, it can push the board to take a position on the issue and, conveniently, take the heat. Emi Palmor, a board member who once served as the director general of Israel's Justice Ministry, says she's frequently approached in the supermarket by people seeking tech support for Meta apps. "I want to murder the person who chose the name Oversight Board," she says. "It is an unexplainable term."

But since it started hearing cases in the fall of 2020, the board has won grudging respect from the human rights organizations and content moderation wonks who pay attention to its work. "People thought it would be a total fiasco," says [Evelyn Douek](#), a Stanford law professor who follows the board closely. "But in some real ways, it has brought some accountability to Facebook." Meta, meanwhile, is declaring victory. "I'm absolutely delighted—thrilled, thrilled, thrilled with the progress," Clegg

says. The board's approach to cases "is exactly what you should expect between a social media platform and an independent oversight entity."

The truth is more complicated, and Clegg's ebullient praise and Zuckerberg's encouraging mahalo make board members nervous. If one of the world's most transgressive companies thinks that the oversight is going fantastically, how great can the board be? Suzanne Nossel, a member who is also the CEO of the literature and human rights nonprofit PEN America, thinks it's too early to make a call. "We've only just begun to figure out how to do this work," she says.

The board has figured out one big thing: It has an opportunity, with caveats, to alter how the internet's Goliaths treat the speech of billions of people.

Even after more than two decades of social media, the way platforms patrol their corridors [can seem arbitrary and self-serving](#). Imperfect algorithms and armies of undertrained, overworked moderators make life-altering decisions. People scramble to contest them, filing millions of appeals every month. They dig through help pages, argue with bots, and most often give up in frustration. The policies that supposedly balance free expression and safety were drawn up by companies whose priorities are growth and profit. "The platform was not designed with integrity in mind," says Jamal Greene, a Columbia law professor who is one of the board's cochairs. "It was designed with reach in mind."

No one wants the government to step in and bash out rulings on edgy posts. But online speech is still speech, and people expect some rights around it. The Oversight Board is a first stab at securing those liberties and, in its most ambitious form, a chance to stem some chaos. But the deeper the board's members get into the issues, the more they find themselves bumping up against the edges of what Meta will let them do.

Illustration: Deena So'oteh

The great experiment of the Oversight Board started on a bike ride. In January 2018, Noah Feldman, a professor at Harvard Law School, was visiting the Bay Area and crashing at his friend Sheryl Sandberg's house. One day, he was pedaling around the local foothills when his mind turned to

Facebook. The problem with his host's social media employer, he thought, was that no matter what it decided on a given piece of content, someone would be mad at the company. Perhaps it could benefit from a separation of powers. By the end of his ride he had a suggestion for Sandberg: Facebook should create [its own version of the Supreme Court](#), an independent body that would examine the biggest complaints about the company's decisions.

Sandberg brought the idea to Zuckerberg, who had been pummeled for months about speech on his platform and was now thinking about "governance" as a way to signal that he wasn't the dictator of the world's expression. He embraced the concept. In June of that year, I met Zuckerberg at Facebook's headquarters for a walk through its 9-acre rooftop gardens. As we strolled, he shared a vision of an independent body that would make binding decisions on content. "We need to figure out the mechanism for appointment—but they don't report to me," he said. "They're not likely going to be Facebook employees." He understood then that he would need to fend off the impression that the overseers were his flunkies.

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Zuckerberg's MO for new initiatives is to rely on loyal long-time lieutenants to make them happen. In this case, Facebook used an internal team of governance nerds. It was headed by Brent Harris, an attorney with experience in climate and environmental work, and Heather Moore, who had worked in the US Attorney's Office in Newark, New Jersey. Both said they saw it as a chance to help people on the platform. (Harris now heads a governance group at Meta that includes the board's support team.)

For a company that once boasted of moving fast, Facebook set up its board with the cautious deliberation of a 19th-century government railway bureaucracy. Buy-in was not universal. "I was skeptical we would get much benefit," says Monika Bickert, who heads global content policy. (It would be her rules that the board would question.) But the team plodded forward, set up a series of workshops, and solicited suggestions from outsiders on

how the board should operate. Some participants would wind up filling its seats.

By 2020, Facebook had set up the board as an independent trust with a \$130 million grant. The company would pay up to 40 board members six-figure salaries for what was estimated to be 15 hours of work each week. A full-time staff would support the effort, like clerks for Supreme Court justices. A lengthy charter set the ground rules. The meat of the board's activities would be handling disagreements over individual posts. Perhaps Facebook or Instagram had removed someone's post for violating its terms, and the user wanted to contest that decision. The board could rule on posts, but not ads, algorithms, or groups. (That stuff might come later.) A case selection committee, made up of board members, would extract from the sea of appeals the cases the board would take on, then assign them to five-person panels. Those groups would evaluate their case and reach a decision. Facebook was bound to honor the board's rulings on individual posts.

But there was more. The board could include in its case rulings sweeping recommendations, which the company could take or leave. If it rejected the suggestions, it would have to explain itself, but that would be it. The board *could* get a crack at the company's knottiest conundrums through a "policy advisory opinion"—a request directly from Meta for the board to review an especially controversial decision. Meta could again accept or reject whatever the board advised.

To this day, Facebook and Instagram users are not guaranteed that when some robot blocks their speech, a human being will ever see their complaints.

In May 2020, the company announced it had recruited a distinguished collection of lawyers, journalists, and human rights activists to [become the board's first 20 members](#), including four cochairs. There was a former prime minister of Denmark, a Pulitzer Prize-winning former newspaper editor, and a Nobel Peace Prize laureate. All the members had one thing in common—a resolve that they be seen as independent of the company funding their paychecks.

Still, Facebook's [critics](#) were ready to call out the Oversight Board [as a sham](#). Jessica Gonzalez is the co-CEO of Free Press, a group opposed to corporate control of media, and one of a motley collection of company detractors—including full-time Meta apostate [Roger McNamee](#) and Nobel laureate [Maria Ressa](#)—who created a shadow organization called the Real Facebook Oversight Board; it is dedicated to issuing body blows to everything its namesake does. The *really* real board “is a PR stunt,” Gonzalez says, “that gives Facebook cover for not adequately investing in the integrity of its systems and not doing enough to keep people safe.”

In January 2021, the board ruled on its first cases—and set a pot of tension on simmer. The previous October, a Brazilian Instagram user touting a breast cancer awareness campaign had posted an image with several examples of post-surgery breasts. An algorithm trained to seek and destroy nipple content took down the post. Once the board accepted the case, the company decided to manually review the post. Nudity for the sake of medical awareness was within Instagram’s rules, so the policy standards team restored the post. With the issue now moot, the company told the board to drop the case.

The members declined. Their insistence was a message: While their decisions were nominally about individual pieces of content, the real work was in interrogating company policies. They were out to change Meta.

In the write-up of their decision—reaffirming that the post should stay up—the board members exposed how this seemingly trivial, fixable mistake was a window into a deeper failure. The company overly relied on algorithms, which in this case didn’t pick up the Portuguese for “breast cancer.” Removing the post, the board argued, raised “human rights concerns.” Citing the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, a foundational United Nations treaty, the board wrote, “Any restriction on freedom of expression must be for a legitimate aim.” It recommended that anytime a user appeals an algorithmic decision of this sort, that person should automatically be granted a human content moderator. “We basically asserted our authority even though Facebook had decided to reinstate the content,” says board member Ronaldo Lemos, a law professor from Brazil. “At the same moment we said, ‘We want to talk about algorithms.’”

A pretty reasonable request—except the company did not follow up on the board’s recommendation. To this day, Facebook and Instagram users are not guaranteed that when some robot blocks their speech, a human being will ever see their complaints. The board was imagining a world in which social media platforms would have to at least treat their users like human beings. The members would keep pressing to make that happen, because, well, human rights are their thing.

Illustration: Deena So’Oteh

The board had issued only [a handful of rulings](#) when a bombshell of a case dropped: the suspension of President Donald Trump.

In the heated hours of the insurrection on January 6, 2021, Trump blessed the violent protests in posts on Facebook and Instagram. The company swiftly removed the posts and suspended him from both platforms indefinitely. The MAGA crowd cried censorship. Anti-Trumbers were outraged that the ban wasn’t permanent. On January 21—perhaps not coincidentally, after a new US president had been inaugurated—Facebook told the board members to [figure it out](#). “It was a very, very simple decision,” Clegg says of requesting a public advisory opinion. “Just imagine if we hadn’t deferred that decision to them. People would’ve quite rightly said, ‘You’ve created an oversight board, and you won’t even share with them this dilemma of what to do with the former elected president of the most powerful democracy on the planet.’”

For the board, though, the moment was perilous. Both pro- and anti-Trump observers were ready to pounce on any misstep; a clumsy move could have sunk the whole experiment. After months of deliberation, the board backed the company’s decision to remove the former president’s incendiary words on Facebook and Instagram and to boot him from the platforms. But the board once again demanded that the company make its policies more explicit. In [its ruling that spring](#), the board excoriated Facebook for basically making decisions on the fly—and for refusing to provide a time frame for the ex-president’s restoration. By not having clear standards for suspensions, the company was failing the public. “Facebook shunned its responsibility,” said board cochair Helle Thorning-Schmidt, a former prime minister of Denmark.

The board's [commentary](#) on that high-profile case pointed to one of its obsessions: Facebook's lack of transparency about its own rules. The board returned to it frequently and became adept at choosing complaints with the most potential for broad impact. "Case selection is the whole game," says Nicolas Suzor, a board member and law professor from Australia. Suzor is at times on the selection committee that decides which issues the board wants to address and has staffers sifting through thousands of appeals to find cases that fit.

In April 2021, the committee plucked out a case that came to be known as Ocalan's Isolation. Abdullah Ocalan is a founding member of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), a group that Facebook had designated a "dangerous entity." He is currently incarcerated on a Turkish prison island in perpetual solitary confinement. A few months earlier, an Instagram user in the US had posted a picture of Ocalan with the words "y'all ready for this conversation?" and urged people to discuss the conditions of the prisoner's confinement. Facebook removed it. Company policy bans posts in support of people involved in dangerous entities. This post wasn't that.

The board was eager to tackle the issue. "You have an organization that you can't talk about," says board member Julie Owono, who is executive director of the digital rights organization Internet Sans Frontières. "Yet you have a leader whose situation has been internationally recognized as a violation of the person's human rights."

Researchers within the company started digging up background information on the case, much of it from Facebook's private databases. While going through files, they stumbled on an embarrassing detail: The issue of Ocalan's imprisonment had come up before. The company had even created a special policy that allowed posts from users who advocated for humane treatment but weren't themselves PKK supporters. But that instruction, written in 2017, was never made public. It was evidently forgotten *inside* the company too, as it routinely took down posts regarding the conditions of Ocalan's confinement. Facebook was violating its own rules. "When I found out about that disconnection, I thought, that's precisely why I came here," Owono says.

In its first year, the board steadily pushed the company to fix its imperious attitude toward complaints. Users were seldom informed why posts were taken down or why seemingly obvious violations were allowed to remain. The board views this Kafkaesque behavior as one of the company's ongoing insults to human rights. "It was something I wouldn't have thought was even a problem before I joined the board," says Greene, one of the cochairs. "But we realized it's a huge problem." In 2021 alone, six of their 20 rulings recommended that when the company removes a person's content, it should inform the user what rule they broke.

The battle proved to the board that its mission was not to rule on the fate of one post or another, but to make Meta own up to the monster it has created.

When I bring this up with Clegg, he acts as if the board's continued pounding on this topic is the greatest thing since targeted ads. "A thousand percent!" he says. "The main early, consistent drumbeat of criticism we've had from the board—and I think it's totally understandable—is that you're not explaining to users where you stand, and users feel you are applying arbitrary decisions." Citing the board's criticisms, Meta revealed this summer that it was creating a customer service group to provide explanations of its takedowns and suspensions.

It took multiple decisions, but the board had [made its point](#). Now, "Meta is more transparent with its users about what they've done wrong," Greene says.

The battle proved to the board that its mission is not to decide the fate of one post or another, but to make Meta own up to the monster it has created. On the page of the board's website where users lodge their complaints, the text does not read, "Get your post restored" or "Fix this bad decision." The call to action says, in giant letters, "Appeal to shape the future of Facebook and Instagram."

While the board racked up points with that win, it still has limited leverage. When the board makes recommendations, a Meta working group determines whether the company will implement them. "We treat the board the way we do a regulator," says Harris, the lawyer who helped set up the board and remains its closest contact within Meta. There is, of course, a

difference. While there are consequences for ignoring a regulator, Meta is free to do as it wishes. Of the board's 87 recommendations through the end of 2021, Meta claims to have fully implemented only 19, though it reports progress on another 21. The company brushed off another 13 recommendations by saying, without elaboration, it is "work Meta already does." Other recommendations are outright refused.

"We don't have a police force," Owono says. "But I don't think it prevents us from holding the company accountable, at least to its users." A board committee is studying how to make their recommendations harder to dodge.

By early 2022, two themes were emerging in the relationship between Meta and its Oversight Board. In some company quarters, the board's decisions were having a positive effect. Even Meta's content policy head, Bickert—whom one board insider cited to me as a powerful internal detractor of the effort—says that she now often asks herself, "What would the board think?" Some board members, however, were feeling increasingly frustrated with the boundaries they were forced to work within and the obstacles they felt that Meta was intentionally placing in their path.

One point of friction is how the board grows. In an early conversation I had with Meta's Harris and Moore, the idea was that the company would help choose the first tranche of members, then step aside. But in the board's charter, the company gave itself a say in selecting the full complement of 40 members. Meta employees remain deeply involved in hiring and are a factor in why the board is still far short of the total number set out in its charter. "While it's hard to find the right kind of people, I don't know that's an excuse for operating at 50 percent capacity," says Douek, the Stanford law professor who keeps an eye on the board's activities.

Meta's influence became hard to miss when the board invited [Renée DiResta](#) to interview. DiResta, the technical research manager of the Stanford Internet Observatory, was interested in becoming a member, she says, because it "would be an opportunity to shape the direction of something that I think has real potential." DiResta has degrees in political science and computer science. Beginning in April 2021, she underwent multiple interviews. On paper, her inclusion made a lot of sense. The Oversight Board lacks experts on algorithms, so her presence would fill a

void. But there was a problem: She has been a consistent critic of Meta's failure to deal with the harmful disinformation on its platforms.

In March 2022, DiResta got an email rejecting her application. "They said they were going in a different direction," she says. That direction, it turned out, was the same as before. The board proceeded to add three more members who, like the first 20, are lawyers or journalists with no technical background. One person familiar with the process says it was Meta's reservations that put the kibosh on the nomination. Harris, of Meta, says that "the company has expressed concern in some instances about who may or may not be more effective in certain lights as a board member." Meta further explains it is not unusual for multiple people to withhold their endorsement, and that the exceptions are the candidates who earn consensus and get hired. (That's a big reason why the board has trouble filling its vacancies.) If the board were truly independent, of course, it would never solicit, let alone entertain, Meta's concerns.

Around the time of DiResta's rejection, board members were also fuming over another dispute with Meta. They wanted access to a basic company-owned tool that would help them choose and contextualize their cases. Called CrowdTangle, the software is essential for analyzing the impact of Facebook and Instagram posts. It is used internally and by selected outside researchers and media organizations. Getting access seemed like a no-brainer; investigating a case without it is like assessing damage to a coal mine without a flashlight. The board spent months asking for access, yet Meta still didn't grant the request. It seemed clear that *someone* at Meta didn't want the board to have it.

Ultimately, the issue came up in a March 2022 meeting with Clegg, who seemed taken aback by the board members' frustration. He promised to break the logjam, and a few weeks later the board finally got the tool it should have had from the start. "We had to fight them to get it, which was baffling," says Michael McConnell, a Stanford law professor who is one of the board's cochairs. "But we did it."

No sooner had that skirmish been resolved than another incident roiled the waters. When Russian troops invaded Ukraine last February, Facebook and Instagram were quickly overwhelmed with questionable, even dangerous

content. Posts promoting violence, such as “death to the Russian invaders,” were in clear violation of Meta’s policies, but banning them might suggest the company was rooting for those invaders. In March, Meta announced that in this narrow instance, it would temporarily allow such violent speech. It turned to the board for backup and asked for a policy advisory opinion. The board accepted the request, eager to ponder the human rights conundrum involved. It prepared a statement and set up appointments to brief reporters on the upcoming case.

“There are plenty of people in the company for whom we’re more of an irritation,” says board member Michael McConnell. “Nobody really likes people looking over their shoulders and criticizing.”

But just before the board announced its new case, Meta abruptly withdrew the request. The stated reason was that an investigation might put some Meta employees at risk. The board formally accepted the explanation but blasted it in private meetings with the company. “We made it very clear to Meta that it was a mistake,” says Stephen Neal, the chair of the Oversight Board Trust, who noted that if safety were indeed the reason, that would have been apparent before Meta requested the policy advisory opinion.

When I asked whether Neal suspected that the board’s foes wanted to prevent its meddling in a hot-button issue, he didn’t deny it. In what seemed like an implicit return blow, the board took on a case that addressed the very issues raised by Meta’s withdrawn advisory opinion. It involved a Russian-language post from a Latvian user that showed a body, presumably dead, lying on the ground and quoted a famous Soviet poem that reads, “Kill the fascist so he will lie on the ground’s backbone … Kill him! Kill him!”

Other members also noticed the mixed feelings inside Meta. “There are plenty of people in the company for whom we’re more of an irritation,” McConnell says. “Nobody really likes people looking over their shoulders and criticizing.”

Since the board members are accomplished people who were probably chosen in part because they aren’t bomb throwers, they’re not the type to declare outright war on Meta. “I don’t approach this job thinking that Meta is evil,” says Alan Rusbridger, a board member and former editor of *The*

Guardian. “The problem that they’re trying to crack is one that nobody on earth has ever tried to do before. On the other hand, I think there has been a pattern of dragging them screaming and kicking to give us the information we’re seeking.”

There are worse things than no information. In one case, Meta gave the board the *wrong* information—which may soon lead to its most scathing decision yet.

During the Trump case, Meta researchers had mentioned to the board a program called Cross Check. It essentially gave special treatment to certain accounts belonging to politicians, celebrities, and the like. The company characterized it to the board as a limited program involving only “a small number of decisions.” Some board members saw it as inherently unfair, and in their recommendations in the Trump case, they asked Meta to compare the error rates in its Cross Check decisions with those on ordinary posts and accounts. Basically, the members wanted to make sure this odd program wasn’t a get-out-of-jail-free card for the powerful.

Meta refused, saying the task wasn’t feasible. (This excuse seems to be a go-to when the company wants to bounce the board’s suggestions.) Meta also pointed the board to one of its previous statements: “We remove content from Facebook no matter who posts it, when it violates our standards.”

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In September 2021, *The Wall Street Journal* began publishing leaked documents showing that Cross Check actually involved *millions* of accounts. The program wound up shielding so much improper content that even its own employees had condemned it as allowing the powerful to circumvent the company’s rules. (One example: Trump’s infamous Black Lives Matter-related post that said, “When the looting starts, the shooting starts.” Another was a soccer star’s nude photos of a woman who accused him of rape.) In a May 2019 internal memo, dismayed Facebook

researchers had written, “We are knowingly exposing users to misinformation that we have the processes and resources to mitigate.” Another internal paper put it bluntly: “We are not actually doing what we say we do publicly.”

Meta was busted. Its claims to the board about the Cross Check system were at best a gross understatement. “I thought it was extremely disrespectful that Facebook so openly lied to the Oversight Board,” says former employee [Frances Haugen](#), who leaked the papers and has met with the board privately to discuss the program.

The board demanded that Meta explain itself, and the company admitted, according to the board’s transparency report, that it “should have not said that Cross Check only applied to ‘a small number of decisions.’” The board stated that if it couldn’t trust Meta to provide accurate information, the entire exercise would crumble. Suzanne Nossel, the PEN CEO, says she worried that the company’s deceptions might hobble their project. “I was chagrined and concerned about the credibility of the board, our ability to carry out our work,” she says.

Meta’s next move was reminiscent of its buck-passing in the Trump decision—it asked the board for *its* views on the program. Over the next few months, the board set up a committee to study Cross Check. Most of the meetings were virtual. But in April, the committee managed to meet for several days in New York City. The six members of the board and their prodigious staff took over several meeting rooms at a law firm in Midtown. After much pleading on my part, I sat in on one of their deliberations—the first time a journalist was allowed in an official Oversight Board session. (I had to agree not to attribute quotes to members by name.) It should not be the last; the mere glimpse I got showed just how frank and determined these semi-outsiders were to change the company that had brought them together.

Can Meta claim the right to favor certain customers? Of course not, because it is so entwined with the way people express themselves around the globe. At one point, a board member cried out in frustration: “Is being on Facebook a basic human right?”

Fifteen people gathered around a set of tables arranged in a rectangle and set up with all the formality of a United Nations summit. A team of translators was on hand so every member could speak their native language, and each participant got an iPod Touch through which to listen to the translations. Once the conversation got underway, it quickly became heated. Some members abandoned their home tongues and spoke in less-polished English so the others could hear their urgency straight from their mouths.

I wound up monitoring perhaps an hour of a much longer session. From what I could perceive, the board was evaluating the program from a human rights perspective. The members seemed to have already concluded that Cross Check embodied inequality, the exact opposite of Meta's claim that "we remove content from Facebook no matter who posts it, when it violates our standards." One member referred to those in the program as the Privileged Post Club.

The board members seemed to understand Meta's argument that giving special treatment to well-known accounts could be expeditious. Employees could more quickly assess whether an improper post was excusable for its "newsworthiness." But the members zeroed in on the program's utter lack of transparency. "It's up to *them* to say why it should be private," the cochair who was moderating the session remarked.

The members discussed whether Meta should make public all the details of the program. One suggestion was that the Privileged Posters be labeled. After listening to all this back-and-forth, one member finally burst out an objection to the entire concept of the program. "The policies should be for all people!" she exclaimed.

It was becoming clear that the problems with the Cross Check program were the same seemingly intractable problems of content moderation at scale. Meta is a private service—can it claim the right to favor certain customers? Of course not, because Meta is so entwined with the way people express themselves around the globe. At one point, a member cried out in frustration: "Is being on Facebook a basic human right?"

Meta, meanwhile, was still not sharing critical facts about the program. Was Cross Check singling out people solely to clear questionable content, or was

it giving some people extra scrutiny? The board hadn't gotten an answer. After that meeting, members and staffers met with Meta officials and unloaded on them. "We were pretty blunt and tenacious in trying to get the information we wanted," Rusbridger told me later. "They were a bit bruised; they thought we had behaved discourteously." He says that the board got some of the details it sought—but not all of them.

Despite the frustrations so far, or perhaps because of them, the members are hoping to maneuver the board into a more visible, consequential spot. In October 2022, it announced that in recent months, Meta had been accepting more of its recommendations. Going forward, it might try to take on a wider range of cases, including ones on ads and groups. "I think we could double or triple the number of cases we handle without dramatically changing the nature of our operations," says Neal, the chair of the trust. "But let's assume we were doing 100 cases a year—is that alone enough to have a real impact on where platform content moderation is going? If you want to think about bigger impacts, you need to think about a much bigger organization." The board could start by filling all its open slots.

It could also start critiquing Meta's algorithms. Even though they fall outside the board's scope of influence, some of the group's recommendations have implicated the company's code. "We have our own freedom of speech," says Palmor, the lawyer from Israel. "Even if we don't talk directly about the algorithm, we do take into consideration the way content spreads." The next step would be to get more expertise on how algorithms actually operate, and to make more direct rulings. (Hiring Renée DiResta would have helped with that.)

Then there are the policy advisory opinions, the big-issue examinations that, to date, have all originated within Meta. Members wish they could also add to the list. If Tawakkol Karman, a board member and Nobel Peace Prize-winning journalist, had her way, she would demand action on Meta's notoriously high volume of bogus accounts, which she calls "a disaster." "They breed misinformation, hatred, and conflict, and at the same time, fake accounts are recruited to attack the real accounts," she says. "It's become a tool of oppressors." So does the board have plans to address the issue? "We are working on this," she says.

The board is now exploring how it might exercise its power beyond Meta. Neal says the organization is considering a role in the execution of the European Union's Digital Services Act, which will introduce a breathtaking suite of rules on digital platforms, including social media. The act includes a provision for mandatory appeals systems. Joining the effort might stretch the board thin but could also bring it closer to becoming, as some members dream, a more global force in content policy, with influence over other companies.

Never mind that Twitter, Snap, YouTube, and TikTok aren't exactly beating down the doors to get a piece of the Oversight Board. (Twitter's new CEO had, uh, tweeted to say he's setting up an advisory committee. Almost instantly, the Oversight Board responded with an offer to help, but so far he hasn't accepted.) The board's decisions don't even cover Meta-owned WhatsApp. "I think we are making a difference," Palmor says. "Do I think that the board has enough impact? My answer is no. I wish we had made more of a difference."

Yet both within Meta and on the board, people seem intoxicated by the idea of extended purview. For Meta, it would be a triumph if its competitors also had to play by its rules.

"We're not seeking to be the board for the industry," says Thomas Hughes, who handles the board's operation. "But we *are* seeking to understand how we might interrelate with other companies" to share what they've learned and "how we might interact with companies setting up different types of councils or bodies to talk about standards." It's ironic that a board convened to oversee Meta, a company whose sins spring from a mania for growth, now has its own visions of getting big fast.

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By [Andy Greenberg](#)

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Nov 8, 2022 6:00 AM

The Hunt for the Dark Web's Biggest Kingpin, Part 3: Alpha Male

As authorities discover their target's online alter ego as a boastful womanizer, their operation takes on a double life of its own—and a bold new ambition.

Cazes frequently ventured out in the evenings to pick up dates—from a 7-Eleven, from the mall, from his language class—and then posted about his exploits to a section of the Roosh V forum known as the “I-Just-Had-Sex” thread. Illustration by Hokyoung Kim

CHAPTER 6

RAWMEO

By March 2017, the always aggressive Fresno prosecutor Grant Rabenn was ready to charge Alexandre Cazes with running AlphaBay. But his more cautious colleague Paul Hemesath wanted more evidence. They were still busy filing subpoenas for not only Cazes' [cryptocurrency](#) exchange accounts but all of his online activity, from email to banking, which had begun to coalesce into a portrait of Cazes' entire digital existence. It was only in April that they found a new element of that life, one that revealed Cazes' daily thoughts to them with a level of detail they had never believed possible.

Their investigation had led them to an online forum called Roosh V. The site, the team quickly learned, was a kind of hypermasculine, alpha-male, pickup-artist community, as well as a hive of misogyny, alt-right racism, and anti-LGBTQ bigotry. Founded by the blogger Daryush “Roosh” Valizadeh in 2008, it had tens of thousands of registered users, men who coached one another on maximizing their sexual conquests and living an “alpha” lifestyle.

The Fresno team had found a curious individual on that forum. He had joined Roosh V in late 2014 and went by the name “Rawmeo.” The pseudonym appeared to be an allusion to his love of “rawdogging,” or unprotected sex. Rawmeo had written well over a thousand posts and achieved “True Player” status on the forum. He described himself as living large in Thailand, possessing a fortune in [Bitcoin](#), and owning a web-hosting and design firm—all attributes that matched Cazes’ public persona. When the prosecutor team subpoenaed Cazes’ PayPal account, they confirmed it: Cazes, the baby-faced programmer, was using his account to pay for a premium subscription to Roosh V. Rawmeo, the alpha male, was another of his many personalities.

This story is excerpted from the forthcoming book [Tracers in the Dark: The Global Hunt for the Crime Lords of Cryptocurrency](#), available November 15, 2022, from Doubleday.

Courtesy of Penguin Random House

In some respects, Rawmeo was the opposite of Alpha02. As a dark-web kingpin, Alpha02 was all business: He had restricted his communications with AlphaBay’s community to the bare minimum, issuing only the occasional colorless pronouncement about the site’s functions. Rawmeo, by contrast, was a full-color, tell-all persona, an outlet for Cazes to enjoy the rewards of his larger-than-life success, stretch out his ego, and wax lyrical about his personal philosophy. As he put it: “The person who gives the least amount of fucks will always have the upper hand.”

Cazes, it turned out, was a prolific poster to a particular Roosh V section known as the “I-Just-Had-Sex” thread, where he described how he would frequently pick up Thai women—impressing them with his Lamborghini or Porsche—and attempt to sleep with them with as few strings attached as possible. He described the women as “his harem” or else “plates,” a reference to the common Roosh V analogy of a juggler who keeps as many plates spinning as possible, never giving any of them so much attention as to become distracted and let one fall.

Every Rawmeo post ended with his lengthy signature, which summed up his lifestyle and extolled the paradoxical virtues of promiscuity for men and

virginity for women: “Living in Thailand, enjoying life, making money, not interested in Western woman, not giving a fuck about millennial problems, addicted to rawdogging. #NoHymenNoDiamond #PoppedCherryDontMarry #RealMenDontDateSingleMoms.”

Cazes, like many self-styled pickup artists, believed in a strict system of “sexual market value,” or SMV, that could be calculated to determine a man’s sexual fortunes. “The four pillars of SMV are Fame, Looks, Money, Game,” he wrote. “I’d say fame is #1.”

He described how he would explain to the Thai women he seduced that he was of a higher social class than them and they were lucky to have his attention, even briefly. “Once she started showing ‘strong personality’ I had to let her go,” he wrote of one woman. In another post, he counseled his fellow alphas to seek out single mothers for easy sex, but never a longer-term relationship. “Not interested in being a cuckold before even having started the relationship, but for the bang, it can be good,” he wrote. “Just let out a ‘fatherly’ vibe and you’re in.”

Cazes, like many Roosh V members, was obsessed with the threat of false rape allegations. He boasted of his solution, one that, for someone obsessed with privacy, was a shocking admission. “I secretly record EVERY new sex intercourse with a girl with a hidden camera in my room,” he wrote. “This is stored on an encrypted hard drive, ready to be pulled in case the shit hits the fan. If nothing bad happens, nobody will ever know that the video exists. I respect my girls’ privacy.”

In other posts, Rawmeo explained that he was married and in fact loved his wife, who was pregnant with their first child. He described her as possessing “everything a wife needs to have: virgin, well preserved body, university degree, complete family, no LGBT in social circle, cooks for me, doesn’t complain.” He said he kept tight control of her financially, storing most of his money in cryptocurrency, cashing out only what he needed, and never revealing his full net worth.

In some respects, Cazes was as privacy-minded as Rawmeo as he was as AlphaBay’s boss. He had fully compartmentalized his life, sealing off his philandering from his family almost as completely as he’d sealed off his

Alpha02 persona from his real-world identity. “I am what we call a professional cheater,” he wrote. He kept his wife ignorant of the second home he used for sex. He maintained fake IDs to prevent his “plates” from learning his real name. He even used separate phone numbers for his different personas’ communications and bragged that he spoofed the IMEI identifiers a phone carrier can use to link two numbers on the same device, even when the SIM card has been swapped.

“I have a completely different identity with my plates,” he wrote, “and there’s no way that my two lives can be linked together.”

Among the global group of agents now assigned to the AlphaBay case, no one spent more time with Rawmeo than Jen Sanchez of the Bangkok Drug Enforcement Administration office. She read and reread his every Roosh V message with morbid fascination, amazed by the lurid details of his sexual escapades and marveling at the hypocrisy of his commentary. “I strongly favor ethics rather than money,” wrote the drug kingpin and obsessive womanizer, explaining his decision not to do web design work for “social justice warrior” customers or rent his real estate properties to LGBTQ couples for weddings. “It is important to follow our principles even if it implies a loss.”

Sanchez’s central task in the AlphaBay case wasn’t to catalog Cazes’ affairs, of course, but to trace his financial assets. She mapped out his four homes in Bangkok—his bachelor pad, his primary residence, another for his in-laws, and his mansion under renovation—as well as his \$6 million, five-bedroom seaside villa in Phuket, his two sports cars and motorcycle, and even the Mini Cooper he’d bought for his wife. Despite years tracking corrupt politicians and organized criminals, she was amazed by Cazes’ casual extravagance. In one email, a complaint he’d sent to his favorite rooftop restaurant, Sirocco, about disappointing service, he mentioned in passing that he’d spent roughly \$120,000 at the restaurant in just the previous two months.

At another point in their daily surveillance, Sanchez’s supervisor, Wilfredo Guzman, and the Thai police watched Cazes enter a Mail Boxes Etc. store to ship a package of documents. The police intercepted it after he left and found inside an application for economic citizenship in Cyprus, one of

several countries where he sought to cache his wealth and perhaps find a safe haven, should the Thai authorities get on his trail. The documents provided a detailed accounting of Cazes' finances, helping Sanchez track down bank and cryptocurrency exchange accounts in not only Thailand but Lichtenstein and Switzerland, as well as millions of dollars in real estate investments in Cyprus. Later, she found yet another property in the Caribbean island nation of Antigua and Barbuda.

But as she carried out that financial tracing, Sanchez found herself becoming more and more obsessed with Cazes' Roosh V persona and the view into his personal life it offered. She discovered, just as tellingly, that his posts as Rawmeo revealed exactly *when* Cazes was online. A small gray figurine on Roosh V users' profiles, next to their usernames, would turn green if they were active on the site. When she saw that figure light up next to Rawmeo's name, she knew she was watching Cazes in real time, practically looking over his shoulder, into a part of his life he still believed to be secret.

In some cases, Sanchez's online surveillance and the work of agents physically watching Cazes could now match up his real-world behavior with his online confessional. Guzman and the Thai police, following Cazes and tracking his cell phone location, would see Cazes pick up a young woman from a 7-Eleven, take her to his bachelor pad, and disappear inside. The next day, almost without fail, Sanchez would see Cazes describe in detail on Roosh V the sex he'd had with the woman. It was as if they now had eyes not only on Cazes' movements but into the private recesses of his mind.

Into one recess of his mind at least. Cazes was careful never to give any hint on Roosh V of his other secret life as AlphaBay's creator. But his writing on the forum nonetheless displayed, Sanchez came to believe, a deep psychological portrait. He wrote in one post, for instance, of his childhood and how his parents' separation had affected him. "My father was pretty alpha, but he was absent," Cazes wrote. "He tried hiring the best lawyers to fight for custody, but because of equality, I was able to see him 4 days per month. He got dumped by my mother when I was around 19

months old, because she found someone more exciting—who dumped her 1 year after.”

Cazes complained that because he never had a chance to live with his father as a child, he'd been denied masculine experiences until the age of 18. He listed these essential male activities with bullet points. “Using a chainsaw, driving a motorcycle, go-kart racing, approaching girls, changing a tire. All this stuff had to be learned from scratch,” he lamented.

To Sanchez, this was Alpha02's origin story. She read it, perhaps a bit reductively, as the self-portrait of a man overcompensating, blaming his mother for what he perceived as his lack of masculinity, seeking in his adult life to become the ultimate “alpha” male.

Another autobiographical document the investigators dug up seemed to capture Cazes' lifelong feeling of being an outsider, smarter than most everyone around him but struggling to find his place in society. Cazes had filed an official form with the government of Grenada, another country where he was seeking economic citizenship, in which he described his work history. It offered in abbreviated, blunt terms his life story, from skipping the second grade at his elementary school in Trois-Rivières—“due to being too ‘advanced’ in regards to the rest of the class”—to dropping out of college and his attempts to find a normal job.

He wrote that he had worked, for instance, at McDonald's part-time for a few months during his first year of college but was fired “for not fitting in the gang.” He was fired from another Quebecois chain restaurant the next year for, he noted, “excessively eating on the job.” Cazes found another job at an insurance company for a few months but left “because the pay was too low and the work hours too long.” He wrote that he was fired from yet another job at a Canadian telecom firm for, again, “not fitting in the gang.” And yet another summer job between college semesters lasted only a month because “one of the shareholders hated me for having got the job without a diploma,” he wrote, “and I got fired when they found out that I was seeing his wife.”

What if, instead of merely arresting the admins, the agents commandeered the market? With one of the most active sites on the dark web under their

control, there was no telling what powers they might gain.

Sorting through the detritus of Cazes' private life could seem almost voyeuristic at times, Sanchez admits. But it wasn't merely a distraction. Occasionally, amid all his prurient and sordid posts, the investigators would find a gem of precious information for their case.

One such morsel appeared in a Roosh V thread in which members of the forum were debating Windows versus Mac operating systems. Cazes, a talented programmer and IT administrator who would never miss an opportunity to one-up his fellow alphas, chimed in to describe his personal computer setup: He ran Linux, the "Cadillac" of operating systems, he said. What's more, he described how he used LUKS encryption, or Linux Unified Key Setup, a free encryption tool specific to Linux that would securely scramble his laptop's entire hard disk whenever he so much as closed the lid of his machine. Without his pass phrase, not even the world's most powerful supercomputers could crack that encryption within many lifetimes.

For the team of investigators now close on Cazes' heels, this had enormous implications. They knew from cases like the takedown of [Silk Road](#) that there were three central components to a truly successful dark-web bust. To have dead-to-rights evidence of their target's guilt, they would need to seize AlphaBay's servers, arrest its administrator, and access his laptop.

Now, when they came for that laptop's secrets, they knew exactly what to expect. Just as the FBI had snatched Ross Ulbricht's laptop from across the table where he was working in a public library, they understood they'd need to seize Cazes' computer while he was using it if they wanted to capture it in an unencrypted state.

This presented a daunting challenge: Based on their physical surveillance of Cazes, he never seemed to log in to AlphaBay from anywhere other than his home. He had learned, it seemed, some lessons from his dark-web predecessor.

The team was six months into the AlphaBay investigation, and they had Alpha02 in their sights, practically within their grasp. But if they couldn't

also lay hands on his laptop in a live, open state, his most incriminating secrets would remain eternally locked inside it.

In May 2017, a core team of AlphaBay investigators—including Rabenn, Hemesath, Miller, and the prosecutor Louisa Marion from the Department of Justice's computer crimes unit—convened at the US attorney's office in Sacramento to review the mountain of evidence they'd accumulated. The question of the day: Were they ready to indict Alexandre Cazes?

For about an hour, as the agents and prosecutors talked over piles of bank documents, crypto exchange records, and social media clues, Hemesath remained bent over his laptop, silently typing. Some around the conference table wondered whether the Sacramento prosecutor, who had a reputation for professorial eccentricity, was rudely doing other work or answering emails in the midst of their meeting.

Then Hemesath suddenly broke in to show what he'd assembled: He connected his laptop to a large monitor on the wall and displayed a graphic to the room. It showed a flowchart, a tangle of nodes and lines that he'd illustrated. Each node represented a piece of evidence, with the lines between them indicating [blockchain](#) connections from Chainalysis' Reactor software, traditional payments they'd tracked, and usernames and email addresses they'd linked to their target. On the left was the name Alexandre Cazes, the real-world person. On the right was Alpha02. Some lines meandered through multiple nodes, but every line began with Cazes, branched out into the mess of his online life, and then converged on his dark-web persona.

It was no smoking gun. For that, they'd still need to catch Cazes with his hands on the keyboard. But looking at the chart, summing up the totality of Cazes' opsec failures and the indelible tracks he'd left across the blockchain, the group agreed. He was no patsy; these were no coincidences.

They had found Alpha02, and they were ready to charge him; the scrappy team from a dusty city in the Central Valley was now on track to bring down a kingpin. They had no idea, however, that the scope of their operation was about to expand dramatically yet again, thanks to another small group of police in a tiny country 5,000 miles to the east.

CHAPTER 7

HANSA

Around the same time that spring, in a long, black, four-story office building flanked by forest and highway in the leafy central Netherlands town of Driebergen, a secret began to spread among the Dutch National Police: The Americans were close to executing the biggest dark-web takedown in history.

Not long after the US team had been tipped off to AlphaBay's Netherlands IP address, the FBI had discreetly alerted the Dutch that the bureau might soon need their cooperation to surveil and eventually seize an AlphaBay server hosted in their country.

The news that the United States was seeking to bust the world's largest dark-web market soon reached one group of Dutch agents for whom this represented an intriguing coincidence. They were already deep in pursuit of a site that was quickly growing into the world's *second*-largest dark-web market. And they began to wonder whether there might be an opportunity to make this confluence of events work in their favor.

Since the fall of 2016, a newly formed team of investigators at the Dutch National Police's Driebergen office had been circling a dark-web drug market called Hansa. While far smaller than AlphaBay, Hansa had thousands of vendors and tens of thousands of listings for every narcotic imaginable. The Dutch investigation into Hansa had started with a tip from a security firm called Bitdefender, sent to the European police cooperation agency Europol. The company had found what appeared to be a Hansa server, also in a Dutch data center. Though the main server actively running Hansa's market was protected by Tor and hadn't been found, this one appeared to be an older machine that the administrators had left vulnerable. (Bitdefender has never revealed how it spotted the server's unprotected IP address.)

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When the Dutch set up a wiretap on that computer, they found that the administrators had connected to it from yet another Dutch server, along with four others in Germany, adding up to six servers in total. They quickly made a plan with the help of the German federal police to seize all six machines. When the Dutch police got their hands on the servers, they found an utter bonanza of Hansa's sensitive data. It included the source code of the market, a collection of usernames and passwords, the database of all the market's transactions, and messages between users, mostly encrypted—even the two administrators' PGP private keys, allowing the team to both decrypt messages the admins received and verify their identities on messages they sent.

The seized Hansa database listed only the pseudonyms of the site's users, and each of those users' connections to the site had been obscured by Tor. Hansa buyers' and sellers' identities were still beyond the reach of the investigators. But the data included another prize: a massive chat log between Hansa's two administrators, who went by the names HL and RonSwanson. This was a treasure trove of 17,000 messages. In some of those conversations, they'd even referenced each other's full legal names. One had revealed his home address. Some quick social media searches shed more light on their lives: One was a 30-year-old based in the German city of Siegen, the other a 31-year-old in Cologne.

On a fall day in 2016, not long after the servers were seized, two Dutch investigators pored over that bounty of data at a desk on the second floor of the Driebergen police building. One investigator, Nils Andersen-Roed, was an agent on the Dutch National Police's newly formed dark-web team; the other—who asked to go unnamed—was a technical adviser to the Dutch prosecutor. Both sat entranced by the highly sensitive information unspooling on the screen before them. They wondered aloud how they could capitalize on this rare windfall.

Andersen-Roed, thinking of the two administrators' PGP keys, made a comment that he intended as a joke: With those two keys, he pointed out,

they could go onto dark-web forums and impersonate the two German admins, writing messages and “signing” them as the founders of the Hansa market. They could essentially *become* the administrators.

As the two men batted around that impersonation idea, their conversation turned more serious. They'd both seen dark-web markets rise and fall over the past half decade, ad nauseam: When law enforcement busted one—or when its administrators ran off with their users' money—a new one would simply emerge to replace it. It was an endless game of whack-a-mole.

“We should be able to do something more with this than just take the marketplace down and go on to the next one,” one man said to the other. “We're in a unique situation; we should do something different.”

Soon, the notion of becoming Hansa's bosses was no longer a joke. What if, instead of merely arresting the admins and seizing their site, the investigators secretly commandeered the market? With one of the most active sites on the dark web under their control, there was no telling what powers they might gain to identify Hansa's users, including its most high-volume drug dealers.

If and when they did ultimately reveal their sting operation, the two Dutchmen daydreamed aloud, the psychological blow to the community would be insidious: No one would ever again be able to fully trust that a dark-web administrator wasn't actually an undercover agent.

Sharing their idea with the rest of their team at the Dutch National Police, and then the German federal police who had helped seize the servers, the two Dutch investigators learned of another lucky break. The Germans were already on the trail of the two suspected Hansa admins—not for the massive drug market they had created, but for a book piracy site they were running on the side.

Rather than seeing a conflict, the Dutch police realized they could play this to their advantage. When the Germans arrested the men for their book piracy site, the Dutch would have the perfect opportunity to stealthily slip into their places, running Hansa with minimal publicity or disruption. “We could use that arrest,” says Gert Ras, the head of the Dutch National High

Tech Crime Unit that was soon brought in to take charge of the operation. “We had to get rid of the real administrators to become the administrators ourselves.”

Just as this bold plan began to come together, however, it faced a fundamental problem. The cops' initial seizure of Hansa's German servers had shown their hand. On one of the computers, they had found a text file that appeared to show the IP addresses for the market's central, still-active servers in Germany. But by then, the spooked admins appeared to have relocated them to an unknown data center, shuffling them back into Tor's vast deck of anonymized machines around the globe. “That was a setback,” Ras said with grim understatement.

At that point, the Dutch cops might have simply cut their losses and given the Germans the go-ahead to arrest Hansa's administrators—after all, they knew their names and locations—then charge them with running a massive drug market, for which they had ample evidence. Instead, remarkably, they decided to double down on their stealthy takeover plan. That meant they had to find not only the admins but the servers that had just disappeared from their radar.

They spent the next few months patiently hunting for those machines, looking for any clue that could help them reestablish the trail. It was only in April 2017, more than six months after they seized those first six servers, that they got another lead. This time, it came from the blockchain.

Among the two administrators' thousands of messages to each other were a handful in which they'd mentioned bitcoin payments. When the Dutch police fed those addresses into Chainalysis' Reactor software, they could see that the transactions led to an account on BitPay, a payment processor designed to let users spend [cryptocurrency](#) on traditional goods and services. In this case, unlike for most dark-web payments, there was a middleman to go after. The Dutch subpoenaed BitPay's Netherlands office and discovered that the admins had funneled bitcoins into the service in order to rent servers at a Lithuanian hosting provider.

So a team of Dutch investigators flew to the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius and explained their first-of-its-kind takeover plan to the local police. “They

were literally flabbergasted,” says Petra Haandrikman, a chief inspector for the Dutch police who had become team leader for their Hansa operation.

“You want to do *what*?” she remembers them responding. But they agreed to cooperate. The Dutch detectives now had Hansa’s infrastructure back in their sights.

It was around that time, just as their Hansa-hijacking scheme became a real possibility again, that the Dutch learned of the US investigation into AlphaBay. They discussed what it might mean for their own operation, now the better part of a year in the making.

Their takeover idea was already the most daring undercover operation to ever target the dark-web drug world. But maybe, they thought, they could push their luck just a little further.

On an early May morning, a delegation from the US AlphaBay investigation team arrived at the airport in the Hague, a city on the Netherlands’ North Sea coast, 40 miles west of Driebergen. Jet-lagged and hungry after their red-eye flight, they stopped for breakfast at a Dutch-style pancake restaurant in an underground cellar.

Paul Hemesath, who could never sleep on airplanes, had used the time to assemble a list of potential names for their AlphaBay takedown operation. He recited his list to the group, which included Operation Blockbuster, Operation Block Party, Operation Chain of Fools—all references to their blockchain tracing evidence—Operation Siamese Dream, Operation Not-So-Darknet, and Operation Rawdogger. (“In retrospect,” Hemesath admits, “some of these were just kind of unfortunate.”) The sleep-deprived group rejected all of Hemesath’s submissions and began brainstorming other ideas. Finally, they settled on a pun that combined an element of the name AlphaBay with the notion of the net they were tightening around it, along with an allusion to piercing the dark web’s veil: Operation Bayonet.

A few hours later, the group arrived at Europol headquarters, a fortresslike building of blue-gray brick complete with a moat in front of its entrance. They were set to present their progress to an international group of law enforcement agencies. The team sat down in a vast conference room, with

tables for each delegation arranged with placards and microphones—a kind of UN General Assembly of dark-web snoops.

The meeting was a routine event, mostly designed to prevent the agencies from stepping on one another's toes. The Americans went first, presenting the latest developments on AlphaBay: They believed they had both AlphaBay's server and its administrator, Alexandre Cazes, within reach. They planned to indict Cazes under seal in a matter of days and were working with the Thai police to arrest him soon thereafter.

After a short coffee break, it was the Dutch delegation's turn to speak. The technical adviser to the Dutch prosecutor's office made a proposal, one he had received approval for just minutes earlier, after hurriedly telling prosecutors about the Americans' presentation. The Dutch police were ready, he said, to arrest the administrators of Hansa with the help of the German federal police, take control of the market, and run it in secret.

They now could see just how close the Americans were to taking down AlphaBay. What if, the Dutch technical adviser suggested, they combined their operations?

All the Americans would need to do, he explained, was wait for the Dutch takeover of Hansa before green-lighting their takedown of AlphaBay. Then, after they'd arrested Alpha02 and seized his servers, they would simply delay any official announcement of their victory. If all went according to plan, a massive throng of the dark web's users would flood from the dead market to the next-best option—a market under Dutch police control.

Then, only after the Dutch had a chance to spy on the internal workings of the dark-web economy like never before—from the privileged position of its newly crowned kingpins—would they publicly announce their Hansa and AlphaBay operations simultaneously. Together, their sting operation would be what the Dutch technical adviser described as a “one-two” punch.

At the American table, eyes widened. Ali, the FBI analyst, remembers her exhilaration at the epic ambition of the plan. The prosecutor Louisa Marion's mind excitedly raced through the risks and rewards. Was this even legal? Was it ethical?

Paul Hemesath, still deeply jet-lagged, remembers being both impressed and wary of the complexity the Dutch were adding to their AlphaBay operation. There had been prior investigations in which law enforcement had secretly taken control of a dark-web site. In 2014, for instance, the Australian Federal Police had run a site trafficking in child sexual abuse materials called the Love Zone for six months. Cases like the Love Zone were operational successes, but controversial. Journalists and legal scholars would [later point out](#) that in order to more deeply infiltrate the underground community they were targeting, law enforcement had essentially engaged in the same crime they were investigating.

Now the Dutch were suggesting doing something similar, but for the second-biggest online narcotics market in the world. There was no precedent for it.

“In terms of dark-web drug market impersonation,” Hemesath says, “this was the first monkey being shot into space.”

Aside from the legal or ethical implications, he wondered whether it wasn’t a little “pie in the sky,” as he put it. Coordinating among the agents across the United States was difficult enough. Now they were going to coordinate among the Dutch, the Germans, half a dozen US agencies, and the Thais, too?

Still, the serendipity of these two investigations unfolding in tandem was uncanny. When would they have another opportunity to try something like this again?

“To time this and to count on it happening, who knows?” Hemesath thought. “But let’s give it a shot.”

Continued in part 4: [The team finds a crucial vulnerability in Cazes’ personal opsec—and deploys a secret technique to locate AlphaBay’s main server. But just as Operation Bayonet heats up, the investigators have an unexpected encounter with their target.](#)

This story is excerpted from the forthcoming book [Tracers in the Dark: The Global Hunt for the Crime Lords of Cryptocurrency](#), available November 15, 2022, from Doubleday.

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Nov 3, 2022 9:00 AM

Dear Artists: Do Not Fear AI Image Generators

True, new systems devalue craft, shift power, and wreck cultures and scenes. But didn't the piano do that to the harpsichord?

ILLUSTRATION: ELENA LACEY

In 1992, the poet Anne Carson published a little book called [*Short Talks*](#). It's a series of micro-essays, ranging in length from a sentence to a paragraph, on seemingly disconnected subjects—orchids, rain, the mythic Andean vicuña. Her “Short Talk on the Sensation of Airplane Takeoff” is what it sounds like. Her “Short Talk on Trout” is mostly about the types of trout that appear in haiku. In what passes for the book’s introduction, Carson writes, with dry Canadian relatability, “I will do anything to avoid boredom. It is the task of a lifetime.” Right about when she published that, the internet started to take off.

Fast-forward 30 years and one of the latest ways to avoid boredom, at least for me, is to stay up late and goof around with [AI image generation](#). Tools such as DALL-E 2, Midjourney, and Stable Diffusion can be instructed, with textual prompts, to produce ersatz oil paintings of dogs in hats in the style of Titian, or simulated photos of plasticine models of astronauts riding horses. When I first started playing with Stable Diffusion—which is open source and very fun—I was reminded of Carson’s talks. I went back to them to figure out why. Pretty quickly I realized that the resemblance had something to do with *form*.

Everyone says content is king, but the secret monarch of the content economy is form—constraints, rules, minima and maxima. You grow up learning form. A high school essay is five paragraphs. Sitcoms leave eight minutes in the half hour for ads. Novels are long. Tweets are capped at 280 characters.

What differentiates my tweet or essay or studio film from yours? The choices each of us makes within the form. In a word, our *style*. Carson's book takes a familiar form, the little lecture, and subverts it, manipulates it, until as the reader you start to feel like you're inside her wonderful brain, scrolling through her mental browser history, joining her in hyperlinked fancies and half-abandoned rabbit holes. Image generation is kind of like that—but instead of communing with a single brilliant Canadian brain, you're communing with a giant idiot world-brain. (A less neurological way to put it: vast numbers of data objects grouped in layers, connected together to an incomprehensible degree, like string-and-nail wall art of a many-masted clipper ship but on fire with the flow of data.)

The people who can use the new tools will have new power. The people who were great at the old tools (paintbrushes, cameras, Adobe Illustrator) will be thanked for their service and rendered into Soylent.

In general, humans like using machine learning to assist pathologists, sharpen a phone photo, or make a better map. But the AI generators bug a lot of people. These tools work by spidering images from across the internet, absorbing the visual culture contained within them by scanning their captions, then adding fizzy visual noise to them until they look like static. To make a new image, the AI starts with a caption and some static, then runs the process backward, removing noise until an image appears that lines up with the caption, more or less. (It's bad at drawing hands, but so am I.)

This feels gross. It feels gross to see artists databased into oblivion. It feels gross that someone could say to a computer, “I want a portrait of Alex Jones in the style of Frida Kahlo,” and the computer would do it without moral judgment. These systems roll scenes, territories, cultures—things people thought of as “theirs,” “their living,” and “their craft”—into a 4-gigabyte, open source tarball that you can download onto a Mac in order to make a

baseball-playing penguin in the style of Hayao Miyazaki. The people who can use the new tools will have new power. The people who were great at the old tools (paintbrushes, cameras, Adobe Illustrator) will be thanked for their service and rendered into Soylent. It's as if a guy wearing Allbirds has stumbled into a residential neighborhood where everyone is just barely holding on and says, "I love this place, it's so quirky! Siri, play my Quirky playlist. And open a Blue Bottle on the corner!"

So naturally, people are upset. Art websites are banning AI-generated work, at least for now; stock image services are refusing it too. Prominent bloggers who experimented with having an AI illustrate their writing have been chastened on [Twitter](#) and have promised not to do it again. AI companies are talking a lot about ethics, which always makes me suspicious, and certain words are banned from the image generator's interface, which is sad because I wanted to ask the bot to paint a "busty" cottage in the style of Thomas Kinkade. (One must confront one's deepest fears.)

Don't cancel the messenger, but come on: Image generators are going to be baked in everywhere, used for an enormous range of good, evil, or horny purposes. In a decade, or 10 minutes (time is blurry around this stuff), we'll be saying things like, "Computer, make a version of *Die Hard* where all the characters are corgis." Then we'll post it to YouTube, which will use machine learning to make sure the film studio gets its pre-negotiated cut for the audio track. Then other systems will download the video and decide that there is a connection between the voice of arch-terrorist Hans Gruber (portrayed by Alan Rickman) and corgis, which will result in a rogue AI-enhanced compression algorithm replacing all instances of Snape in *Harry Potter* with a corgi, leading to the Great Corgi Cinematic Snowball Virus of 2024, after which all filmed entertainment will feature only corgis and the occasional crossbreed like corgipoos and borgles. This will ruin *Game of Thrones* but will make *The Purge* adorable.

Remember: In the days of powdered wigs, musicians who liked the pluckiness of the harpsichord complained that the piano sounded soft and dull. Much later musicians (and their unions) fought the synthesizer, fearing it would bleep-bloop careers into oblivion. New systems always seem, at

first, to devalue craft, shift power, and wreck cultures and scenes. This is because they do all of that. And we, downstream in time, invariably fall prey to the historical fallacy and go, *Oh, those worrywarts! How stubbornly they clung to their harpsichords.* We know that, without the piano, there'd be no Shostakovich or Satie or Margaret Leng Tan; without synths, no Wendy Carlos, Kraftwerk, or Pet Shop Boys.

I asked [GPT-3](#), an AI text generator, to write me “a Short Talk on trout in the style of Anne Carson.” It replied: “Trout are most active in the early morning and late evening, so those are the best times to go fishing.” I went back to the original. Of the trout found in haiku, Carson writes: “Worn out, completely exhausted, they are going down to the sea.” I think we can agree that the Canadian brain wins this one. But we do not have to choose between, on the one hand, an unthinking digital pseudobrain and, on the other, the artifacts of a single human mind. The miracle of the age is that we can learn from both, whenever we like. Anything to avoid boredom.

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By [Andy Greenberg](#)

[Backchannel](#)

Nov 1, 2022 6:00 AM

The Hunt for the Dark Web's Biggest Kingpin, Part 2: **Pimp_alex_91**

On the trail of AlphaBay's mastermind, a tip leads detectives to a suspect in Bangkok—and to the daunting task of tracing his millions in cryptocurrency.

Cazes had piles of bills accumulating around his home, even hidden in the walls. “There was money everywhere,” Desjardins remembers. Illustration: Hokyoung Kim

CHAPTER 3

CAZES

Around the beginning of 2015, a Canadian tech entrepreneur from the small city of Trois-Rivières in Quebec—I'll call him Paul Desjardins—was planning a trip to Thailand. A friend recommended that during his stay he meet up with a contact from their hometown who now lived in Bangkok. The man's name was Alexandre Cazes. Desjardins decided to pay him a visit.

Cazes, he found, lived in an unremarkable, midsize house in a gated community in the Thai capital, but the baby-faced Canadian in his early twenties seemed to be doing well for himself. He had invested early in [Bitcoin](#), he told Desjardins, and it had paid off.

His biggest financial problem seemed to be that he now had more cash than he could deal with. He alluded to having sold bitcoins to Russian mafia contacts in Bangkok. A foreigner depositing the resulting voluminous bundles of Thai baht at a bank would raise red flags with local regulators, he worried. So instead he had piles of bills accumulating around his home, even hidden in recesses in the walls.

“There was money everywhere,” Desjardins remembers. “You open a drawer, and you find money.”

This story is excerpted from the forthcoming book [Tracers in the Dark: The Global Hunt for the Crime Lords of Cryptocurrency](#), available November 15, 2022, from Doubleday.

Courtesy of Penguin Random House

Despite Cazes' liquidity issues and his somewhat alarming mention of the Russian mob, Desjardins couldn't see any evidence that his strange new acquaintance was involved in anything overtly criminal. He didn't use any drugs; he seemed to barely drink beer. Cazes was friendly and intelligent, if socially strange and emotionally “very cold,” like someone going through the motions of human interaction rather than doing so naturally. “It was all logic,” Desjardins says, “ones and zeros.” He did note that his new friend, while otherwise generous and good-natured, had ideas about women and sex that struck him as very conservative, bordering on misogynistic.

During that first visit, the two men discussed Desjardins' idea for a new ecommerce website. Cazes appeared interested, and Desjardins suggested they work on it together.

Back in Quebec around Christmas of that year, Cazes met with Desjardins again, this time to hear a full business pitch. After no more than 15 minutes of discussion, Cazes was in. He impressed Desjardins by spending \$150,000 without hesitation on a web domain for their business, not even bothering to haggle with the seller.

In another pleasant surprise, Cazes also paid a six-figure legal bill that Desjardins had racked up in a dispute with another business. He turned out to be a coding savant too; Desjardins had planned to hire a team of coders, but Cazes quickly did most of the initial programming for their fledgling site single-handedly.

As they worked to get their business off the ground, Desjardins could see that Cazes was richer than he had first estimated. Desjardins learned that his partner was in the process of buying a villa in Cyprus and making some sort

of real estate investment in Antigua. When Desjardins next visited Bangkok, Cazes picked him up at the airport in a dark gray Lamborghini Aventador.

Desjardins pointed out that there was nowhere in the supercar to fit his large suitcase. Cazes told him to get in anyway and gamely struggled with the luggage until it fit onto his guest's lap. Desjardins remembers seeing the suitcase scratch parts of the Lamborghini's interior, but Cazes didn't seem to care. In fact, he didn't seem to have much emotional connection to the car at all; he didn't even know how to use its radio. Desjardins thought Cazes appeared to own it out of a sense that it was the socially correct way to display his wealth.

As they left the airport, Cazes asked Desjardins whether he'd ever been in a Lamborghini before. He responded that he had not. Within seconds, Desjardins was flattened against the Aventador's passenger seat as his eccentric friend rocketed them down the Bangkok highway at more than 150 miles per hour.

In late November 2016, just before Thanksgiving, Grant Rabenn was wrapping up his caseload in his office and preparing for the holiday when he got a call from Miller. "Hey, Grant," Miller said. "I think I've got something big that we should talk about."

They met at the Starbucks a block from Fresno's courthouse. Miller explained what his tipster had told him: In AlphaBay's earliest days online, long before it gained its hundreds of thousands of users or came under the microscope of law enforcement, the market's creator had made a critical, almost laughable [security](#) mistake. Everyone who registered on the site's forums at the time had received a welcome email, sent via the site's Tor-protected server. But due to a misconfiguration in the server's setup, the message's metadata plainly revealed the email address of the person who sent it—Pimp_alex_91@hotmail.com—along with the IP address of the server, which placed it in the Netherlands.

The error had quickly been fixed, but only after the tipster had registered and received the welcome email. The source had kept it archived for two years as AlphaBay grew into the biggest dark-web market in history.

And now they had given it to Miller. It seemed that even the figure Rabenn once thought of as “the Michael Jordan of the dark web” was capable of elementary security errors—with permanent consequences.

Rabenn received Miller's revelation coolly. He'd heard before from overexcited agents whose incredible leads led to dead ends or hoaxes. Surely, he thought, if his little team in Fresno had these clues, someone else in the US government must be miles ahead of them. But they nonetheless decided to drop everything and follow the tip.

There was, in fact, more to the source's lead, all of which could be corroborated with a few Google searches. The Pimp_alex_91@hotmail.com address also appeared on a French-language social media site, Skyrock.com. There, someone named “Alex” had posted photos of himself from 2008 and 2009, dressed in baggy shirts covered in images of dollar bills and jewels and wearing crisp new baseball caps with a silver pendant hanging from his neck. In one picture he'd written his hip hop handle, “RAG MIND,” at the top of the image in the style of a debut rap album. The words on his shirt read “HUSTLE KING.”

A dating profile the man had posted to the site identified his hometown, Trois-Rivières in the French-Canadian province of Quebec, and his age at the time, 17. So the “91” in his email address was his birth year. If this was indeed AlphaBay's founder, he would have been 23 at the time of the market's creation.

Nothing about this young French-Canadian hip hop wannabe matched Rabenn and Miller's sense of the kingpin known as Alpha02. Had all of the allusions to Russia and Russian-language snippets been a ruse? Based on the IP address included in the tipster's email, the site's forums, at least, seemed to be based in Western Europe.

To Miller and Rabenn, the theory that “Alex” was Alpha02 seemed outlandish at first. But the deeper they looked, the more plausible it became. The young Quebecer had used his Pimp_alex_91 email address years earlier on a French-language technology forum called Comment Ça Marche —“How It Works.” He had signed his messages with his full name: Alexandre Cazes.

Searching for that name, the investigators came upon a more recent LinkedIn profile for a decidedly more adult Alex, sans hip hop outfit, advertising himself as a web programmer and the founder of a Quebec-based hosting and web design company called EBX Technologies. His photo showed an unremarkable-looking businessman in a gray suit and white shirt with no tie. He had a round face with a cleft chin, slightly thinning hair in the front, and an innocent openness to his expression.

Cazes listed his location as Quebec, Canada, but they could see from his social media connections that he seemed to actually be based in Thailand. Further digging on social media revealed Facebook accounts for Cazes' fiancée, a pretty Thai woman named Sunisa Thapsuwan. A telling photo on a relative's profile showed Cazes in a suit and sunglasses, standing next to a dark gray Lamborghini Aventador.

Digging deeper still, they found the most telling clues of all. On Comment Ça Marche and another programming forum called Dream in Code were older profiles for Cazes that had been deleted, but they were preserved on the Internet Archive. Years earlier, it seemed, he had written on those forums under another username: Alpha02.

Within days, Rabenn and Miller knew their lead was solid. They also knew the case was too big for them to take on alone. They decided to bring their findings to the FBI field office in Sacramento, a much larger outpost just a few hours' drive north with significantly more cybercrime expertise and resources than their small Fresno office. It turned out that the agents in Sacramento had been tracking AlphaBay from its inception. Nonetheless, Miller's tip was new information to them.

Rabenn brought on the office's assistant US attorney, Paul Hemesath, as an investigative partner. The two had been friendly for years; Hemesath, an older and more deliberate prosecutor, had the air of a college professor, and he balanced out Rabenn's aggressive run-and-gun approach. Hemesath in turn asked for help from the Computer Crime and Intellectual Property Section at Justice Department headquarters—the office in Washington, DC, where a small army of cybercrime-focused agents and computer forensics analysts was based.

As they assembled their team, Miller and Rabenn began the delicate process of “deconfliction,” figuring out whether other agencies and task forces around the country had their own open cases on Alpha02. Again and again, Rabenn heard that another team in another city was investigating AlphaBay but had made no real headway. None appeared to recognize the name Alexandre Cazes.

Against all odds, Rabenn began to realize, his little office in the Central Valley was perhaps closer than anyone in the world to cracking the dark web's deepest mystery. Soon they would find themselves at the vanguard of its biggest global manhunt.

CHAPTER 4

THAILAND

If cazes had moved halfway around the world to Bangkok to run AlphaBay beyond the reach of Western law enforcement, he'd chosen, by some measures, exactly the wrong destination.

For more than half a century, the US government has had an enormous presence in Thailand. Even before the DEA was founded in 1973, a US agency called the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs had stationed a field office in Bangkok. American agents had long been sent there to disrupt the flow of so-called China White heroin from the opium-growing Golden Triangle region that covers parts of Thailand, Laos, and Myanmar. In the late 1950s that triangle produced half of the world's heroin supply and fed an epidemic of addicted US soldiers in Vietnam in the '60s and '70s —a problem that made quashing the Thai drug trade one of the DEA's earliest and highest priorities. Fifty years later, Bangkok remains one of the largest and most active DEA offices in the world, the regional headquarters for the entire East Asia operations of the US law enforcement agency that has more overseas agents than any other.

For Jen Sanchez, it was also a plum assignment: beautiful weather, low cost of living, incredible food, and not particularly dangerous—relative to other DEA hot spots, anyway.

Sanchez, a 26-year veteran of the DEA in her mid-fifties with white hair cut to her shoulders and a zero-bullshit, profanity-laden approach to conversation, felt she'd earned her coveted Bangkok job. She'd spent years in Mexico City investigating money laundering followed by a stint in Texas, where her work led to the arrest of three Mexican governors for taking bribes from the Zetas drug cartel and embezzling from their own state governments. In that case, dubbed Operation Politico Junction, she'd tracked the governors' dirty money into the businesses they'd bought to launder it, along with mansions, luxury cars, and private aircraft. In total, Sanchez had signed affidavits for seized assets worth more than \$90 million. She'd come to relish the righteous thrill of bankrupting criminals who had spent their lives amassing ill-gotten wealth. And since much of that money ended up in DEA coffers, it hadn't exactly hurt her career, either. As she modestly put it, "I paid for myself."

By December 2016, Sanchez had been in Thailand for nine months, mostly helping to track the financing for violent Islamic movements in the country's south. Then one day, at the Bangkok DEA office—situated in the US embassy, a white stone building with a canal surrounding its foundation and a grass lawn where 6-foot-long monitor lizards emerged from the foliage in the evening—her boss told her they had a visitor: a DEA official who was set to give them a presentation on [virtual currency](#).

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Sanchez didn't know anything about virtual currency. Nor, with just a few years left until retirement, did she particularly care to learn about it. But she listened politely throughout the presentation. Only at the end of the session did the visiting agent truly get her attention: He mentioned, almost in passing, that the DEA had recently found a lead on the administrator of the world's biggest dark-web market and that he seemed to be right there in Thailand.

Sanchez had heard of Silk Road. She asked whether this site was as big as that legendary black market. The agent responded that it was at least three or four times the size of Silk Road, and growing. “Holy shit,” Sanchez thought to herself. The biggest dark-web kingpin in history was in her backyard? The scale of the money laundering alone would be enormous.

“He’s going to have *stuff*,” she remembers thinking. And she wanted to be the one to track down those assets and seize them.

Another group of agents in Bangkok had been assigned to handle the AlphaBay case. Sanchez’s own supervisor, to her constant frustration, seemed more interested in busting small-time dealers on the tourist beaches of Pattaya than in big-game, long-term investigations. But Sanchez was not about to be left out of what she suspected might be one of the largest seizures of cash and property—virtual or otherwise—in the history of the DEA in Thailand. As soon as the presentation was over and the visiting agent left, Sanchez walked into her boss’s office, pointed a finger at him, and told him she wanted AlphaBay.

Sanchez got her wish. She soon found herself on a series of sometimes bewildering conference calls among all the different agencies now hunting Cazes across a dozen time zones. Those calls included Rabenn, Miller, Hemesath, and the Sacramento FBI team, who laid out AlphaBay’s basic mechanics and use of cryptocurrency.

As Sanchez began to get a sense of the full extent of the massive commerce in hard drugs that AlphaBay now facilitated on a daily basis, she became incensed. The US opioid crisis was, by that time, in full swing; 42,000 Americans had died of opiate overdoses in 2016, more than in any year on record. That surge was due in part to an influx of fentanyl, the opium derivative as much as 100 times stronger than morphine. And here this 25-year-old French-Canadian was running a massive open-air heroin and fentanyl bazaar in public view? She was haunted by the thought that every day AlphaBay was left online, anyone, even children, could order fentanyl from the site, receive it in the mail, and die of an overdose in a matter of hours.

In one call with Miller in Fresno, she swore they would have AlphaBay offline and Cazes behind bars in less than six months. “I’m going to take his shit, and he is going to go to jail, and we’re going to get him in Florence supermax,” she remembers telling Miller, referencing the prison where Ross Ulbricht was then serving his life sentence. “I want this kid gone.”

Now that Sanchez had joined the AlphaBay investigation, she was working under a new boss in Bangkok: a 47-year-old, Puerto Rico–born DEA agent named Wilfredo Guzman. Guzman had started his career hunting drug-laden speedboats off the coast of Puerto Rico and had risen through the agency’s ranks following a series of massive Caribbean and South American cases. Now, as a supervisor in the Bangkok office, he prioritized, above all else, maintaining a hand-in-glove relationship with the Thai police’s DEA equivalent, known as the Narcotics Suppression Bureau (NSB). Doing so required near-constant late-night business dinners of painfully spicy food, drunken banquets, and karaoke outings, belting out John Denver lyrics onstage with high-ranking Bangkok cops.

The Royal Thai Police have a far-from-sterling record when it comes to drug trafficking and corruption. For some in the agency, shakedowns of petty drug dealers are understood to be a perk of the job. One RTP official named Thitisan Utthanaphon had earned the nickname Joe Ferrari for his collection of sports cars of mysterious provenance. He would later be caught in a leaked video suffocating a suspected meth dealer to death alongside six fellow cops.

So when Robert Miller asked Guzman in the agency’s Bangkok office for help in hunting Cazes, Guzman brought it to his most trusted contact at the NSB, Colonel Pisal Erb-Arb, who led the agency’s Bangkok Intelligence Center. Pisal was a spry, fatherly officer in his mid-fifties who frequently used his unassuming look as a balding middle-aged dad to take on undercover assignments. He had assembled a small team known for its squeaky-clean, by-the-book investigative work, as well as for Pisal’s rare practice of advancing female agents.

Almost immediately, Guzman, Pisal, and the NSB team got to work tracking down their new target. Starting with just Cazes’ name and a telephone number, they began to map out his properties: one home in a

quiet gated community that he visited intermittently—what they came to call his “bachelor pad” or “safe house”—and another in his wife's name in a gated neighborhood on the other side of town, where he seemed to work and sleep. He had bought and was remodeling a third home, a \$3 million mansion, farther on the outskirts of Bangkok.

Soon the investigators were shadowing Cazes' every move around the city. The Thais were particularly fascinated to discover his Lamborghini, a supercar that cost nearly \$1 million, as well as his Porsche Panamera and BMW motorcycle, all of which he drove at speeds well above 100 miles an hour whenever Bangkok traffic allowed.

Following Cazes proved to be a moderate challenge: He frequently zoomed away from the agents tailing his sports cars on stretches of unbroken highway or lost them while snaking between trucks and tuk-tuks on his motorcycle. Pisal used a bit of personal tradecraft to plant a GPS tracker on Cazes' Porsche, posing as a drunk and collapsing next to the car in a parking garage, then affixing the device to its undercarriage. The police tried attaching a similar tracking beacon to the Lamborghini but found that the car's chassis rode so low to the ground that their gadget wouldn't fit. They resorted to tracking Cazes' iPhone instead, triangulating its position from cellular towers.

As Pisal's team began to assemble a detailed picture of Cazes' daily life, they were struck by how aboveboard it all seemed. He was a “homebody,” as one agent put it, spending entire days without stepping outside. When he did leave his home during the day, he would go to the bank or his Thai language classes downtown, or take his wife out to restaurants or the mall. He lived, as Pisal put it using an English phrase commonly adopted by Thais, a “chill-chill” life of leisure.

Could their too-good-to-be-true tip have been some sort of elaborate misdirection? Was someone just trying to frame Cazes, to use him as a patsy?

It soon became apparent to Guzman and the Thai police that Cazes did have one very significant secret in his nondigital life: He was a womanizer. He frequently ventured out in the evenings to pick up dates—from a 7-Eleven,

from the mall, from his language class—and take them to his bachelor pad, or else to love motels. These encounters were businesslike and brief. By the end of the night, Cazes would be back at home with his wife.

So-called sexpats—foreigners using their wealth to live out polyamorous fantasies—were common in Thailand. And as scandalous as Cazes' affairs might have been, there was no law against philandering. Still, the Thais needed little convincing that Cazes must be some form of crime boss. At one point the surveillance team trailed him to a restaurant called Sirocco on the roof of Bangkok's Lebua hotel; 63 floors up, it claimed to offer the highest alfresco dining in the world, with two Michelin stars and \$2,400 bottles of wine on the menu.

When Cazes and a group of friends left the restaurant, the cops entered and spoke to Sirocco's management, demanding the entire day's receipts to obscure whose bill they were hunting for. Including wine and lavish tips, they found that Cazes had spent no less than 1.3 million baht—nearly \$40,000—in a single meal for his entourage, an amount that flabbergasted even the agents accustomed to tracking high-rolling drug kingpins.

Drug lords who never touched narcotics themselves or directly carried out crimes were nothing new to the NSB agents. They were used to the notion that the cleaner a suspect's hands were, the more senior the position they likely held in a drug trafficking syndicate. But those high-ranking bosses often met with associates who were connected to hands-on crimes or were at least a step or two removed from them.

Cazes' criminality, by contrast, seemed to be channeled entirely through the opaque aperture of the dark web, safely behind the veil of Bitcoin's [blockchain](#). In the physical world, his hands were cleaner than those of any kingpin they'd ever encountered.

At times, this perfect veneer led even the US investigators to doubt themselves. Sure, Cazes seemed to have slipped up once, years ago, when he left that Pimp_alex hotmail address in the metadata of a welcome email. But as their burgeoning investigative team followed up on that initial lead, Rabenn and Hemesath periodically asked each other whether they truly had the right guy. Could their too-good-to-be-true tip have been some sort of

elaborate misdirection? Could someone have purposefully leaked the address—and even chosen the handle Alpha02—as a way to frame this Cazes, to use him as a patsy? “The nightmare scenario would be that the source was setting us up,” Rabenn remembers thinking.

The only way to know for sure, they would soon find, lay in a different approach—one that only a few years earlier would have seemed impossible. By early 2017, there was a new, growing class of investigators who saw Bitcoin’s blockchain as something other than an impenetrable veil. They had come to realize that, far from a mysterious, anonymous currency, Bitcoin was, in fact, an almost entirely *traceable* financial system. And it was those tracers who would offer the next breakthrough in the race to take down Alpha02.

CHAPTER 5

TUNAFISH

By late 2016, a pair of FBI analysts, both based in Washington, DC, had gained a reputation as perhaps the very best team of cryptocurrency tracers in the US government. (Per their request, they are referred to here by only their first names, Ali and Erin.) The two shared a focus on digital money laundering, a fascination with cryptocurrency, and a yearslong friendship. Despite working for different investigative groups in different offices, they had come to form a two-person team of their own, practically mind-melding into two lobes of a single Bitcoin-obsessed brain. And they operated almost entirely under the radar, only ever producing leads that they quietly handed off to other investigators, clues that appeared in no criminal affidavits or courtroom evidence.

As it happened, on a winter morning just weeks after Robert Miller had received his Alpha02 tip—and before almost anyone else in the US government knew about it—Ali had come to Erin with an idea. She’d left the FBI satellite office where she worked, in a grim Beltway office park in Chantilly, Virginia, and driven for half an hour through DC traffic to ambush Erin at her desk at FBI headquarters. Ali, the more ebullient and ambitious of the two, wanted Erin to push aside all their other work so they

could try something no one had ever pulled off before: tracking down a dark-web administrator—perhaps even the admin of AlphaBay—through the techniques of blockchain analysis alone.

Before Erin had time to protest, Ali squeezed a chair into Erin's tiny cubicle and impatiently grabbed her mouse to start clicking through Bitcoin addresses on her computer screen.

Ali's ambition to expose a dark-web kingpin's finances had come to seem attainable only after years of advances in crypto-tracing techniques—the latest of which had AlphaBay specifically in their crosshairs. Ali and Erin were both fluent users by that point of Reactor, a piece of software made by a New York startup called [Chainalysis](#). Together with a handful of other companies like it, Chainalysis had, since 2014, pioneered and automated a set of powerful new methods for tracing cryptocurrency. Those efforts had quietly flipped the criminal promise of Bitcoin on its head, rendering the blockchain into a branching series of breadcrumb trails that allowed cybercrime investigators to follow the money as never before.

Some of these techniques were relatively straightforward. For instance, a crypto tracer using Reactor could sometimes follow bitcoins as they moved from address to address until they reached one that could be tied to an account at an exchange, where they were cashed out for traditional currency. Then Chainalysis' customers in law enforcement could simply subpoena the exchange for the account holder's identity, since US law required exchanges to collect this information on American users.

Chainalysis' more powerful contribution to bitcoin tracing had been a collection of “clustering” methods that allowed it to show when different Bitcoin addresses—dozens to millions of them—belonged to a single person or organization. If Reactor showed that coins from two or more addresses were spent in a single “multi-input” transaction, for example, that meant one entity must have control of all those addresses. This trick had made [Silk Road](#) users' money relatively easy to track: Just send a few test transactions to any Silk Road account, and the market's wallet system would soon bundle up your coins with others in multi-input transactions, leading to a cluster of other Silk Road addresses—like a briefcase full of bills with a homing device inside, brought back to a criminal's hideout.

But Chainalysis had found that the same method didn't work on AlphaBay, which seemed to carefully avoid pooling users' payments, and kept them instead in many small, disconnected addresses. Indeed, by April 2016, AlphaBay had begun advertising to users that it functioned as a bitcoin tumbler: Put money into an AlphaBay account, and it purportedly severed any link that could be used to follow it from where it entered the market to where it left. "No level of blockchain analysis can prove your coins come from AlphaBay because we use our own obfuscation technology," read one 2016 post from AlphaBay's staff to users on the site. "You now have ironclad plausible deniability with your bitcoins."

Those claims, Chainalysis found, turned out to be largely true. Because AlphaBay never gathered coins into large, easily identifiable purses, it was nearly impossible to look at any given transaction on the Bitcoin blockchain and tell whether it involved a trade on AlphaBay.

That layer of obfuscation represented a serious problem for Chainalysis' many customers in law enforcement. And so for much of 2016, mapping all the addresses on the blockchain that were associated with AlphaBay users—the dark market's "wallet"—had become the most difficult and pressing challenge Chainalysis had ever taken on. Month after month, Chainalysis' staff performed hundreds of test transactions with AlphaBay—never actually buying anything from the market, only moving money into and out of accounts—and watched the patterns those transactions formed on the blockchain, in hopes of finding clues that they could use to spot patterns elsewhere in the vast expanse of Bitcoin's accounting ledger.

Gradually, the company's researchers found distinct tells in the way AlphaBay moved its users' money. These clues came from the highly specific choices made by Alpha02 and whoever else was writing the code of AlphaBay's wallet. Chainalysis refused to divulge most of them, but cofounder Jonathan Levin offered an example. According to the system of incentives devised by the currency's creator, Satoshi Nakamoto, a Bitcoin wallet has to pay a fee for each transaction; the greater the fee, the more likely the thousands of servers known as Bitcoin nodes—the backbone of the Bitcoin network—are to quickly rebroadcast the transaction so that the entire network agrees that the transaction occurred. Most wallets allow

users to set their own fees along a sliding scale of speed versus cost. Dark-web markets, however, typically set their own fees. On AlphaBay, Chainalysis discovered, larger transactions required larger fees according to a distinct sliding scale. This represented a small tell—one of many, Levin says—that would allow them to spot transactions likely happening on AlphaBay and so produce a new set of addresses that would then, in turn, lead to others.

It was painstaking work. Every time AlphaBay rewrote the software for its wallet, the telltale patterns changed. Yet by the end of 2016, Chainalysis had labeled more than 2.5 million addresses as part of AlphaBay's wallet.

For Chainalysis' law enforcement customers, however, that breakthrough was just a starting point. The task that still lay ahead would be to follow the money from somewhere in that vast pile of numbers out to the bank account of a real human being. And from a cubicle in Washington, DC, that's exactly what Ali and Erin set out to do.

On that winter day in 2016 when Ali decided to conscript Erin into her unprecedented scheme, she hurriedly explained to Erin a realization she'd had. Dark-web markets, everyone knew by then, were notoriously vulnerable to "[exit scams](#)": schemes in which an administrator suddenly shuts down a market and then absconds with all its users' money. Every time this happened, dark-web forums were flooded with laments and reminders that no one should store any more cryptocurrency on a market than they planned to spend immediately.

But there was one person, Ali figured, who would never have to worry about an exit scam when considering where to keep their crypto savings: the dark-web site's administrator himself. "Who would have the most faith to leave their money on the market?" Ali asked Erin. "Of course it would be the guy in charge."

So what if they simply searched for the black market addresses that had held the largest sums of bitcoins for the longest time? The biggest, most stationary piles of money might just belong to the bosses.

Erin admitted it was a good idea. But after identifying a few addresses to look at, she shooed Ali out of her office to get on with her other work. After all, no one had asked them to track down Alpha02; they had intelligence reports to write and more realistic targets to hunt.

The next day, however, Ali began calling Erin every few minutes with breathless updates. She had started with the address of the biggest sum of bitcoins that had sat unmoved for the longest time among all the wallet addresses tied to the AlphaBay cluster. And, spotting the point where that money had finally changed addresses, she'd been able to track its movements from one hop to another, following its path in Reactor through the branching tendrils forking off from the market.

“It's still going!” she'd tell Erin excitedly on the phone as she followed it from one address to the next.

Soon Erin, infected by Ali's enthusiasm, was digging through other unmoved piles of bitcoins that she now suspected might be an administrator's commissions. Talking constantly on the phone across the DC–Virginia border, they began to devote hours to their Alpha02 hunt, scanning through hundreds of AlphaBay addresses in Reactor.

Whoever owned these piles of presumably criminal money had, at least in some cases, taken pains to hide their footprints on the blockchain. The funds would sometimes flow into clusters of addresses created by services known as mixers, advertised on dark-web sites with names like Helix and Bitcoin Fog. These bitcoin-laundering services offered to take in coins, pool them with other users' funds, and then return all the coins in the pool to their senders at new addresses. In theory this would cut the forensic link for any tracer, like a bank robber who slips into a movie theater, takes off his ski mask, and walks out with the crowd, evading the police on his tail.

Ali and Erin did sometimes hit dead ends in their work to trace Alpha02's profits. But in other cases, they were able to defeat his efforts at obfuscation. Neither of the two FBI analysts would reveal how they overcame Alpha02's use of mixers, but crypto tracers like those at Chainalysis offered hints.

A mixer, Jonathan Levin explained, is only as good as its “anonymity set”—the crowd of users mixing their coins to render them untraceable. Despite whatever claims mixers made to their customers, examining their work on the blockchain revealed that many didn't actually offer an anonymity set large enough to truly flummox an investigator. The more money someone tried to launder, the harder it became to avoid those coins remaining recognizable when they reappeared on the mixer's other end.

Any decent mixer splits large sums of coins into smaller, less conspicuous payments when returning the money to its owner. But with transaction fees for every payment, there's a limit to how much big sums of money will be broken up, Levin says.

In truth, Chainalysis didn't need to offer its users proof of the path that money took on the blockchain, so much as probability. Grant Rabenn candidly explained that the bar for sending a subpoena to a cryptocurrency exchange for a user's identifying information was low enough that they could simply try multiple educated guesses.

All of this meant that, in spite of a criminal's best efforts, investigators were often left with suspicious outputs from mixers, ones that they could follow with enough likelihood—if not certainty—of staying on their target's trail. Even the crowded-movie-theater trick, it turns out, breaks down when the robber is carrying a large enough sack of loot and the cops are watching every exit.

As Ali and Erin followed what they increasingly believed to be Alpha02's personal transactions, they gave nicknames to the most significant Bitcoin addresses they were scrutinizing, turning the strings of meaningless characters into pronounceable words. An address that started 1Lcyn4t would become, in their private language, “Lye sin fort.” One that began with the characters 3MboAt would be pronounced “Em boat.” The two analysts spent so much time examining and discussing these names that the addresses began to take on “personalities” in their minds. (“It's not exactly healthy,” Erin said.)

Of all of their named addresses, one loomed largest in the two analysts' conversations. They refused to reveal even its nickname for fear that

someone might reverse engineer the actual address and learn their tricks. For the purposes of this story, let's call it "Tunafish."

Tunafish lay at the end of a long string of hops Ali and Erin had followed out from one of the initial addresses that they'd hypothesized might be Alpha02's. It held special significance, however: It connected directly to an exchange. For the first time, they realized with excitement, they had managed to trace what they suspected might be a collection of the AlphaBay admin's bitcoins all the way to a transaction in which Alpha02 had traded them for traditional currency. They knew it was at those cash-out points—the blockchain's connections to the brick-and-mortar world of finance—that they might be able to match the transactions to a real person.

Just as they were on the verge of ferreting out a name behind all of Alpha02's transactions, Ali got wind of some news quietly floating among law enforcement agents across the country. As a longtime dark-web analyst, she'd kept in close contact for years with the Sacramento FBI agent who had first opened a file on AlphaBay. So when the Sacramento office joined forces with Grant Rabenn's Fresno team, Ali was among the first people the agent called. He told her that they had finally matched a real person to Alpha02's online persona. He gave her the name of a certain French-Canadian living in Bangkok.

Investigators started to recognize Cazes' identifying tells. In some cases, his attempts to obscure his ownership of bitcoins became, themselves, a kind of fingerprint.

The Sacramento agent knew Ali was already busy tracing AlphaBay's blockchain tentacles. He asked her to join their growing investigative team. Ali returned to Erin's office at FBI headquarters, cornered her in the hallway, and insisted she join the team, too. "This is going to be a massive case," Ali told her. "We need to do this together." Erin said yes.

Now they were hunting Alpha02 no longer as an obsessive hobby, but as part of an official investigation. Ali and Erin explained their Tunafish discovery to an assistant US attorney based in DC who had also joined the team, a seasoned cybercrime prosecutor named Louisa Marion. She,

Rabenn, and Hemesath immediately filed a subpoena for the identifying records on the exchange where the Tunafish address had been cashed out.

That legal request took weeks to bear fruit. Finally, one evening in the early weeks of January 2017, Ali was in the middle of a law school night class when she got a call from the Sacramento-based FBI agent with the news: The subpoena results had come back.

The agent told her the name on the exchange account tied to the Tunafish address. It was Alexandre Cazes.

Over the next months, Ali and Erin continued to trace more high-value addresses out of the AlphaBay cluster into one cryptocurrency exchange after another. They came to recognize what seemed to be Cazes' identifying tells, even in his bitcoin-laundering habits; in some cases, his attempts to obscure his ownership of the bitcoins became, themselves, a kind of fingerprint.

In total, the two analysts traced Cazes' commissions to a dozen cryptocurrency exchanges. The prosecutors then subpoenaed these one by one, finding accounts registered in both Cazes' and his wife's names. And as those results came in, a yearslong pattern emerged: Cazes would open an account with an exchange and attempt to use it to cash out a chunk of AlphaBay's profits. At some point—often within months of his cash-out transactions—the exchange would grow suspicious about the origin of these massive cryptocurrency trades and ask for more know-your-customer information from him.

Cazes would send a note explaining that he was merely an early investor in Bitcoin. In some cases the AlphaBay founder claimed to have bought thousands of coins from the defunct exchange Mt. Gox in 2011 or 2012—knowing it would be difficult to check the records, given that Mt. Gox had declared bankruptcy in 2014. In others, Cazes claimed to have bought them from a private seller at the exchange rate of a dollar each. “Since then, I’ve been pretty much juggling the coins like stocks, buying and selling, but never cashing out,” he wrote in one emailed explanation to an exchange.

By 2017, however, legitimate Bitcoin businesses had learned to be wary of these unverifiable stories. In most cases they closed or froze Cazes' account, forcing him to move onto another exchange. Ali and Erin, meanwhile, could see the true source of Cazes' wealth traced out in strand after strand of the blockchain's connections.

For years to come, the investigators involved in the AlphaBay case would debate whether their cryptocurrency tracing alone would have cracked the case even if they had never gotten the Pimp_alex_91 tip. Would the appearance of Cazes' name on those exchange accounts have been enough to put them onto his trail, or would they have treated it as just another vague lead that they were too busy to chase down?

Coming as it did, however, in the immediate wake of the tip sent to Miller about Alpha02, the two FBI analysts' blockchain work nailed to the wall a theory that would have otherwise hung by only a few threads. Every exchange subpoena and its results drew another line between Cazes and AlphaBay's fortune.

“When we saw millions of dollars in crypto flowing to him from what appeared to be AlphaBay-associated wallets, I was fairly confident that we had the right person,” Rabenn says. “When you hit that point, you start gearing up to indict.”

Continued in part 3: [When investigators find Cazes' online alter ego on a pickup artist forum, they also discover a new challenge to catching him red-handed—and hatch a plan for the most ambitious sting in dark-web history.](#)

This story is excerpted from the forthcoming book [Tracers in the Dark: The Global Hunt for the Crime Lords of Cryptocurrency](#), available November 15, 2022, from Doubleday.

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Oct 27, 2022 9:00 AM

Is Listening to Audiobooks Really Reading?

WIRED's spiritual advice columnist on bardic traditions for a modern age—and why book snobs worry about the wrong things.

Illustration: Franziska Barczyk

“I listen to a lot of books on audio. It works for me. But certain more literary friends of mine say it doesn’t quite count as reading. Part of me wants to *read* more, but I find it much easier to listen. What do you think? Should I care?”

—Easy Listening

Dear Easy,

I wouldn’t put too much stock in what your “literary” friends say; they sound like bores. When it comes down to it, people who think about reading in terms of what “counts”—those who piously log their daily reading metrics and tally up the titles they’ve consumed on Goodreads—don’t seem to actually enjoy books all that much. Their moralistic gloom is evident in the extent to which reading has come to resemble exercise, with readers tracking their word-count metrics, trying to improve their speed, and joining clubs to keep them accountable.

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Spiritual Troubleshooting for the Digital Age

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While some disciples of this culture are quick to dismiss audiobooks as a shortcut, they cannot seem to agree on why, exactly, listening is an inferior form of engagement. Some cite studies that have shown people who listen to books retain less than those who read them, which is bound up with how tempting it is to do other things while listening. (As easy as it is to multitask with audiobooks, the form does make it harder to return, after a spell of distraction, to the passage where your mind started to wander.) Others insist that audiobooks eliminate the reader's responsibility to interpret things like irony, tone, and inflection, given that the person recording does the work of conveying emotion. According to this rather tenuous logic, listening to audiobooks is inferior precisely because it is easier—because it lacks the element of suffering that is incontrovertible evidence of accomplishment, the same way soreness is proof of a real workout.

The larger problem, however, is in viewing books as a means to some other end. Many people who aspire to read more are motivated by the promise that doing so will prevent cognitive decline, improve brain connectivity, or increase emotional intelligence. Even the obsession with retention assumes that the purpose of reading is to absorb knowledge or nuggets of trivia that one can use to demonstrate cultural literacy or being “well read.” What all of this obscures is the possibility that books might be a source of intrinsic pleasure, an end in themselves. I’d be willing to bet, Easy Listening, that your earliest experiences with the joy of literature were aural. Most of us were read to by adults before we learned to read ourselves, and listening to audiobooks recalls the distinctive delight of being told a story: the rhythms of the prose made incarnate in a human voice; the dialog animated through the performance of a skillful reader; the ease with which our eyes, liberated from the page, are free to roam around the bedroom (or the aerobics room, or the landscape beyond the car windshield) so as to better imagine the actions of the narrative playing out.

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Oral storytelling predates writing by millennia, and many of the oldest stories in our literary canon existed for centuries as bardic tales before they were put down in print. The Homeric epics likely originated with bards who told them around fires and improvised their central plot points, which were passed down and adapted from one generation to the next. Evolutionary biologists have all sorts of conjectures about the utilitarian function of these rituals—storytelling may have emerged to deepen community bonds or model unfamiliar situations in ways that might have increased chances of survival—but I doubt that members of these cultures were consciously thinking, as so many readers are today, about how narrative exposure might boost their short-term memory or sharpen their capacity for empathy. Rather, they listened to stories because they were, quite simply, transfixed by their power.

These early stories were largely composed in verse, at a time when poetry, music, and storytelling were often so intertwined as to be indistinguishable. And I suspect that audiobook fans are at least partly drawn to listening because it's easier to discern the melodic qualities of prose, which often get lost when we quickly scan a page of text without actually hearing the words in our heads. There is some evidence that listening, as opposed to reading, engages the right hemisphere of the brain, which is more closely associated with music, poetry, and spirituality. This might explain why some religious texts are designed to be read aloud. The scholar Karen Armstrong recently pointed out that the term *qur'ān* means “recitation” and that the scripture’s many repetitions and variations take on their full effect only when they are voiced by a gifted reciter who can, as she put it, “help people to slow down their mental processes and enter a different mode of consciousness.”

If you’re like most people I know, you probably find it difficult to recall the last time a book—regardless of how you consumed it—succeeded in altering your consciousness. Even your desire to “read more” contains a whiff of compulsion, suggesting that many books you’ve encountered have failed to live up to their transcendent potential. Anxieties about post-literacy tend to focus obsessively on the question of medium, and audiobooks are often hailed as one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, alongside social media, visual entertainment, and the decline in attention spans. But it seems to me that there exists a more obvious explanation for why reading often

feels so dull: Most books are very bad. The vast majority of them are uninspired, unconvincing, and poorly written. This has always been the case (surely there were some flops even among those bardic epics of yore), though it's a truth that grows more elusive when we are led to believe that reading is not supposed to be enjoyable. When a culture falls prey to an obsession with "reading challenges" and daily word count goals, it is all too easy to become inured to the shoddiness of the texts we've chosen and more difficult to object to the offensive quality of many of the books on offer.

My advice, Easy, is to be less discriminating about the medium and more choosy about the books you pick up. If you find that your mind is wandering or that you're not able to fully enter into the reality of the narrative, consider that this might be a problem with the content, not the mechanism through which you are experiencing it. Audiobooks have some distinct advantages when it comes to this kind of discernment. It's easier to identify a tin-eared writer when the book is read aloud. And the liberation from the physical discomforts of reading—neck pain, eye strain—makes it harder to blame one's growing annoyance with a text on environmental factors, an excuse that leads so many readers to stick with bad books longer than they should. Most of all, though, I would urge you to trust your instincts—to "listen," as it were, to the critic within who instinctively knows what is worth your time and who will rarely lead you astray.

Faithfully,

Cloud

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Oct 26, 2022 7:00 AM

The Real Reason Elon Musk Wants You to Have More Babies

People who complain about population aren't talking numbers—they're fantasizing about tightening the reins on workers.

PHOTOGRAPH: SHAWN MICHAEL JONES

"If PEOPLE DON'T have more children, civilization is going to crumble," proclaimed [Elon Musk](#) from a Tesla factory late last year. As usual, he was treated as an oracle. Deepening the effect, he added, preposterously: "Mark my words."

Musk spoke his truth at a *Wall Street Journal* event while hyping his proposed [Tesla bot](#), an android that performs grunt work. Only a bot army, he said, can meet the corporate need for laborers willing to work without rest, meals, or complaint. (Human dignity is a drag on profits.) But until the bots are up and running, Musk's Squid Game still needs flesh-and-blood workers.

"The fundamental constraint is labor," Musk said. "There are not enough people. I can't emphasize this enough: *There are not enough people*. One of the biggest risks to civilization is the low birth rate."

Musk tends to be an experimental talker, and he's of course passionate about trolling; his utterances, like those of a Fed chair, don't describe reality so much as create social fluctuations. To fact-check Musk's statements, therefore, is to misunderstand their import. (Though, for the record, a [United Nations study](#) debunked his demographic math a week later.)

Still, Musk's histrionics ("civilization is going to crumble") and pomposity ("mark my words") are intriguing because they uncannily echo the population hysterics of 50 years ago. With a key difference: The 1970s Nostradamuses were afraid of too many babies. Musk is afraid of too few.

When an alarmist claim can be flipped like a coin without losing its tone, its empirical underpinnings seem sus. It's possible that cultural capos who complain about population are not talking numbers at all. Rather, they're fantasizing about tightening the reins on workers and women. *We need more babies, fewer babies, cheaper babies, better babies*. The women are failing at reproduction, and their children aren't botlike enough.

POPULATION PANIC started in earnest in 1798, when the Anglican cleric Thomas Malthus published [*An Essay on the Principle of Population*](#). The landmark book argued that people with money tend to reproduce with abandon, and this is a mistake. Ruling-class humans who monopolize planetary resources ought not to increase their own numbers. They ought to feed people who are already born.

Malthus published his essay when the population of the earth was just shy of 1 billion, and he failed utterly to foresee the industrial revolution. Still, because he was concerned with the poor and the earth, he became something of a hero among liberals, even as they summarily rejected his prescription for population control: Abstain from sex, especially if you're poor.

Population panic in its modern form hit in 1968, when Paul Ehrlich, a butterfly researcher at Stanford, was disgusted by the sight of crowds of South Asians in Delhi. In response, he dashed off a thin piece of agitprop called [*The Population Bomb*](#). "Collapse of civilization is a near certainty within decades," he wrote. Obstetrics also preoccupied the Vatican that year. As if directly responding to secular population panickers, Pope Paul VI issued the 1968 encyclical, the so-called [*Humanae Vitae*](#), that reaffirmed the Catholic Church's law against contraception, abortion, and nonprocreative sex. Ehrlich set his rickety science against Vatican superstition and became an unlikely superstar, [yukking it up with Johnny Carson](#) on *The Tonight Show* some 25 times between 1970 and 1980. The

two men bantered suavely about hot chicks while implicitly scolding the bad chicks who kept having babies.

Though Ehrlich opposed poverty, he never pushed for a redistribution of wealth. To him, people were best described in numbers, like butterflies and other insects. His remedies for overpopulation were draconian: steep taxes on diapers, mass sterilization, and the addition of sterility agents to food exported to foreign populations. In 1969, Stewart Brand, one of Ehrlich's Stanford protégés, told an interviewer at an overpopulation protest, "We'd like to see people have fewer children—and better ones."

Better ones.

In 1971, Garrett Hardin, who had a PhD from Stanford in microbiology, went further. In a [New York Times opinion piece](#), Hardin argued flatly for stripping women of "the right to breed." The Southern Poverty Law Center now calls Hardin's writings "frank in their racism and quasi-fascist ethnonationalism."

MUSK GRABBED the population panic mic around 2020. He sounded contrarian, even papal. Though he had elsewhere expressed indifference to caring for babies—and has been disowned by one of his 10 children—he was quoted in *The New York Times* as saying "[babies are supercool](#)." Furthermore, by siring a big brood, he told the *Journal* audience, "I'm trying to set a good example."

Musk also announced, on the *Lex Fridman Podcast*, that "sex without procreation ... is quite a silly action." Some Catholic traditionalists pounced, claiming Musk had gone full *Humanae Vitae*. Meanwhile, the modern NoFap set, who refrain from masturbation in an effort to channel their mojo into nobler things, also claimed Musk as a brother.

Others on the right are similarly panicking about birth rates. J. D. Vance, the Ohio-based venture capitalist, mewled to Tucker Carlson last year that "childless cat ladies" run the United States. To promote pregnancies in such ladies, Vance—his logic shaky—proposed an "outright ban" on pornography. "If we want a healthy ruling class in this country ... we should support more people who actually have kids," he said.

Population concerns rattle Carlson too. For years he's been preoccupied with unnamed ghouls who are disappearing white people to replace them with "new people, more obedient voters from the Third World." The culprits are white women of his own social class for not being fruitful enough. In July, Carlson told the journalist Ben Smith that he's "not mad at Black people" because he reserves that vitriol for a "38-year-old female white lawyer with a barren personal life." "I hate you!" he shouted merrily.

Vance and Carlson are deep in the far-right tank, but Musk may never enjoy the full conservative embrace. His idea of cool babies, after all, extends beyond white babies. In an address to Republican fat cats in August, Musk faulted the party for its stand against immigrants and urged the GOP to show more compassion.

This wasn't as sweet as it seemed. Immigrants, to Musk, are just a bigger labor pool; he welcomes anyone who will do manufacturing grunt work for long hours and low pay. If birth rates shot up, but the new people, instead of working for him, subsisted on government programs, Musk—the notorious tax-avoider—might change his tune.

Every population ideology eventually skews sinister. Opponents of underpopulation, just like opponents of overpopulation, issue decrees in their thunderous way simply to conceal a monstrous program of eugenics. Ehrlich wanted fewer poor people; Vance and Carlson want more white ruling-class people; Musk wants more pro bono laborers. None of them want actual warm-blooded people, the oddballs we learn from, collaborate with, even love. I can't emphasize this enough. Caring about butterflies or bots does not mean caring about humans. Mark my words.

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By [Andy Greenberg](#)

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Oct 25, 2022 6:00 AM

The Hunt for the Dark Web's Biggest Kingpin, Part 1: The Shadow

The notorious Alpha02 oversaw millions of dollars a day in online narcotic sales. For cybercrime detectives, he was public enemy number one—and a total mystery.

Illustration: Hokyoung Kim

PROLOGUE

on the morning of July 5, 2017, a gray Toyota Camry slowly turned into the cul-de-sac of a quiet neighborhood in Bangkok—a moderately upscale subdivision on the western edge of the city, where the pulsating capital's downtown high-rises began to flatten out into highways and canals snaking through tropical forest and farmlands.

Behind the wheel sat a woman who went by the nickname Nueng. A slight, 46-year-old agent of the Royal Thai Police with a short, boyish haircut, she wore a white polo shirt and black pants rather than her usual military-style uniform. Both she and the female officer beside her in the passenger seat were working undercover.

This story is excerpted from the forthcoming book [Tracers in the Dark: The Global Hunt for the Crime Lords of Cryptocurrency](#), available November 15, 2022, from Doubleday.

Courtesy of Penguin Random House

Nueng's heart pounded. For more than two years, law enforcement agents from around the world had been hunting the dark-web mastermind known as Alpha02, a shadowy figure who oversaw millions of dollars a day in narcotics sales and had built the largest digital drug and crime bazaar in history, known as AlphaBay. Now, a coordinated takedown and sting involving no fewer than six countries' agencies had tracked Alpha02 to Thailand. The operation had finally led to this quiet block in Bangkok, to the home of a 26-year-old Canadian named Alexandre Cazes. Nueng knew that the success of the plot to arrest Cazes and knock out this linchpin of the global underworld economy hinged on what she did in the next few moments.

Trying to give the impression of an inexperienced driver, Nueng slowly rolled the car toward a model home and real estate office at the end of the cul-de-sac. She signaled to a security guard outside the house that she had taken a wrong turn and needed to pull a 180. She heard him shout at her to

back directly out instead, that the street was too narrow for a three-point turn.

Nueng quickly muttered a nearly silent prayer—an adapted, high-speed plea to the holy trinity of the Buddha, his teachings, and all the monks and nuns in his service. “Dear Buddha, please bless me with success,” she whispered in Thai. “Dear Dhamma, please bless me with success. Dear Sangha, please bless me with success.”

Then she put the car in reverse, turned the wheel to the left, and ever so gently—almost in slow motion—slammed the Toyota's fender into Alexandre Cazes' front gate.

CHAPTER 1

ALPHA02

Around 18 months earlier, Robert Miller sat in the US Drug Enforcement Administration's wiretap room in Fresno, California, spending another painfully boring day listening in on the life of one of the DEA's endless supply of narcotics targets in California's Central Valley.

All Miller ever wanted was to be on a SWAT team. At the academy, instructors had praised him for his instinctive judgment and thoroughness—how, in training raids on the academy's mock-ups of drug dens, he always meticulously cleared his corners and covered his blind spots. And when the young DEA agent was assigned to the agency's field office in Fresno right after graduation, he had high hopes it would put him where he wanted to be: making arrests, carrying out search warrants, “hitting doors,” as he put it. (Miller's name and some personal details have been changed, per his request.)

The sunbaked agricultural city in the middle of California had long served as a corridor for cocaine, heroin, weed, and methamphetamine smugglers, as traffickers from the southern border made their way to buyers in the Northwest and on the East Coast. Agents spent their days carrying out

undercover buy-and-busts, following trucks packed with dope along Highway 99 and tracking, raiding, and arresting cartel operators.

But not long after he moved to Fresno, Miller injured his foot and his shoulder while rock climbing. Both injuries required surgery. There would be no SWAT team, no “hitting doors”—not, at least, for the two years it would take to recover.

So Miller was assigned to surveillance. He'd stake out targets from his car or sit in the office's wiretap room, listening to suspects' phone calls and reading their texts for weeks or sometimes months on end. The work was often mind-numbingly mundane. “Ninety-nine percent boredom and 1 percent excitement,” as he remembers it.

At one point in 2013, Miller's partner on a surveillance assignment suggested they try to work on a new sort of case. She had heard about a booming drug market on the [dark web](#) called Silk Road—a site where anyone could connect through the anonymity software Tor and spend [bitcoins](#) to buy any drug imaginable—and its pseudonymous creator, the Dread Pirate Roberts. But when Miller asked his superiors about the site, he was told that teams in New York and Baltimore were already on it. Not long after, while Miller was on a surveillance stakeout in his car in a mall parking lot, his phone buzzed with an alert that the notorious market had been busted. The Dread Pirate Roberts turned out to be a [29-year-old Texan with no criminal record](#) named Ross Ulbricht. He had been arrested in the science fiction section of San Francisco's Glen Park Public Library with his laptop open and logged in to Silk Road.

Two long years later, in early 2016, Miller's boss came into the wiretap room and asked whether Miller wanted to join a different team. Someone in the office had remembered Miller's inquiry into Silk Road. A local assistant US attorney had assembled a group to focus on dark-web crime, and he was looking for volunteers from all the federal agencies clustered around Courthouse Park in Fresno's downtown square: the Internal Revenue Service, Homeland Security Investigations, and the Drug Enforcement Administration. The assignment, Miller knew, was pretty much the opposite of the SWAT team. But at least it would be something new. “OK,” he said. “I'll do it.”

Grant Rabenn, the young prosecutor at the helm of Fresno's dark-web strike force, laid out a set of modest initial goals for the group: They would be going after individual money launderers and drug dealers, not kingpins and masterminds. "We are not the Southern District of New York. We are in a dusty town in the Central Valley of California," as Rabenn put it. "Let's hit singles before we try to go for a home run."

That humble starting point was fine with Miller, who had little idea of how the dark-web drug trade even worked. When Rabenn asked Miller to start making undercover heroin buys, he couldn't figure out how to buy bitcoins, let alone the drugs themselves. He drove two and a half hours to San Jose to find a physical bitcoin ATM rather than simply use an online exchange. Even then, he discovered that after transaction fees he could purchase only half a gram of heroin instead of the 2 grams he'd planned on.

But slowly, as Miller poked around the dark web and perused the various markets, he got a feel for the post-Silk Road online drug economy. He soon came to see that it was dominated by a single entity: AlphaBay.

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AlphaBay had first appeared in late 2014, just one in the broad scrum of markets vying for a share of the growing dark-web criminal trade. But the site's pseudonymous administrator, Alpha02, seemed cannier than those behind many of the competing markets. Alpha02 was a well known if not exceptionally talented "carder," a cybercriminal hacker focused on credit card theft and fraud. He'd become a significant player on Tor Carding Forum, a dark-web site where hackers traded in stolen data. He'd even sold his own 16-page "University of Carding Guide," designed to teach beginners the tricks of the trade, like how to "social-engineer" customer service representatives at banks, calling from spoofed telephone numbers to deceive them into approving fraudulent transactions.

In its first months online, AlphaBay seemed destined to serve much the same hacker clientele. It was devoted almost exclusively to cybercriminal wares, such as stolen account logins and credit card data. But as Alpha02 bootstrapped the site from its carder origins, its portfolio of vendors quickly expanded to offer the dark web's more lucrative contraband: ecstasy, marijuana, meth, cocaine, and heroin, all shipped through the mail. Soon it became clear that Alpha02's grand vision was to unite two spheres of the dark web that had, until then, been somewhat distinct—one devoted to cybercrime and the other to drugs—to create a single mega-market. AlphaBay's goal, he declared, was "to become the largest eBay-style underworld marketplace."

Silk Road's Dread Pirate Roberts had espoused a kind of anarcho-capitalist ideal, describing his site as a "movement" or a "revolution" bent on liberating mankind from oppressive government control of commerce and limiting sellers, at least in theory, to offering only "victimless" products. Alpha02, by contrast, seemed to adopt a much less high-minded focus on the bottom line. Aside from a ban on child abuse materials and murder for hire, the only rule Alpha02 imposed on AlphaBay's vendors was that they not sell data or accounts stolen from Russia or other former Soviet states, or infect those countries' computers with malware. This prohibition, common among cybercriminals from that part of the world, was typically designed to avoid trouble from Russian law enforcement—a kind of "don't shit where you sleep" principle. For Miller and other federal agents and prosecutors sniffing around the site, it also suggested that AlphaBay and its mysterious founder were likely based in Russia—an impression cemented by Alpha02's signature in messages on the site's forums: "Будьте в безопасности, братья," Russian for "Be safe, brothers."

In an interview in April 2015 with the news site and dark-web directory DeepDotWeb, Alpha02 reassured his users that he and his site were beyond the reach of any Silk Road-style seizure. "I am absolutely certain my opsec is secure," he wrote, using the shorthand for "operational security," and added, "I live in an offshore country where I am safe."

Throughout that interview, Alpha02 wrote in the style of a corporate press release: "We have made sure to have created a stable & fast marketplace

web application which has been built with security in mind right from the start,” he wrote, adding, “We would like to assure all of our users (both vendors & buyers) that their security, privacy and anonymity rank first place in our priorities list.”

What Alpha02 lacked in political inspiration he seemed to make up for in technological aspiration and coding competency. He boasted about features that included auction-style bidding, search tools that helped fraudsters comb through stolen data to carefully choose their victims, and a multi-signature transaction scheme designed to reassure users that it would be far harder for law enforcement or rogue staff to steal funds held in escrow.

Among digital crime investigators, Alpha02's notoriety was like that of Osama bin Laden. He and AlphaBay were invoked at every law enforcement conference on cybercrime, every interagency meeting, every training event.

“We want to have every imaginable possible feature to be the #1 market,” he wrote to DeepDotWeb. On each page of AlphaBay, he'd signed his work: “proudly designed by Alpha02.”

When a judge imposed a double life sentence on the Silk Road's Ross Ulbricht in May 2015, she told the court that the draconian sentence was partly meant to scare off future dark-web drug buyers, dealers, and administrators. By the time of AlphaBay's rise, that unprecedented punishment seemed to have had the opposite effect. A study in *The British Journal of Criminology* found that sales on what was then the top dark-web site, Agora, [more than doubled](#) in the days following the news of Ulbricht's sentencing, to more than \$350,000 a day. The study's author, trying to interpret that unexpected increase, reasoned that by imposing such a shocking prison term, the judge had only generated new awareness of the dark-web drug trade. Rather than deterring users, the judge seemed to have created a massive advertisement for the world's burgeoning [cryptocurrency](#) black markets.

Alpha02 was hardly fazed by the news. Following Ulbricht's sentencing, in an [interview with Vice's tech news site, Motherboard](#), he momentarily affected a revolutionary posture, picking up the Dread Pirate Roberts' torch.

“Courts can stop a man, but they can't stop an ideology,” he wrote.

“Darknet markets will always be around, until the war on drugs stops.”

But in response to other questions, AlphaBay's boss seemed to ditch the torch and speak more plainly. “We have to carry on with business,” he wrote. “We all need money to eat.”

By the fall of 2015, AlphaBay was the biggest market on the dark web. Agora's administrators had [taken their site offline](#) that August, citing concerns that a vulnerability in Tor, the online anonymity system that powered the dark web, might be used to locate Agora's servers. AlphaBay appeared to have no such security flaw. As it absorbed Agora's tens of thousands of buyers and vendors, the growing crowd of law enforcement agents around the world surveilling the site could find no coding or opsec slipups to give them the slightest clue as to where they might find its servers, not to mention its founder.

Shortly before AlphaBay took over the dark web's top spot, Alpha02 had changed his username on the site to merely “admin” and announced that he would no longer accept any private messages sent to him by anyone other than AlphaBay's staff. Instead, he left much of the site's communications work to his second-in-command and head of security, a figure who went by the pseudonym DeSnake.

The Alpha02 moniker had served its purpose, lending the site its initial credibility. Now the person behind it intended, like discreet criminal bosses the world over, to slip into the shadows, raking in his fortune as quietly and anonymously as possible.

That fortune was, by the time of Alpha02's name change, growing at an unprecedented rate: By October 2015, AlphaBay had more than 200,000 users and more than 21,000 product listings for drugs, compared to just 12,000 listings on Silk Road at its peak. Sometime around the middle of 2016, AlphaBay surpassed Agora's peak sales rate of \$350,000 a day, according to researchers at Carnegie Mellon. It had become not only the biggest black market on the dark web, but the biggest cryptocurrency black market of all time. And it was still growing wildly.

For Grant Rabenn, the Fresno-based prosecutor, it was clear that Alpha02 was now the most wanted man on the dark web; Rabenn compared his notoriety among digital crime investigators to that of Osama bin Laden. AlphaBay and Alpha02 were invoked at every law enforcement conference on cybercrime, every interagency meeting, every training event, Rabenn says. And as the target on Alpha02's back loomed larger, so too did the unspoken fear that this mastermind might stay a step ahead of them indefinitely.

“Is this person just a pure genius who's figured out all of the possible mistakes?” Rabenn remembers asking himself. “Has this individual found the perfect country with the right IT infrastructure to run a marketplace, and he's able to bribe the officials there so we'll never touch him?

“As every day passed there was, more and more, a sense that this might be the special one,” Rabenn says. “You begin to wonder: Is this the Michael Jordan of the dark web?”

But Rabenn followed these discussions of Alpha02 from a distance. The idea that his Fresno team might actually take on the Michael Jordan of the dark web had never occurred to him. “It's not expected for people like us,” he says simply, “to go after a site like that.”

CHAPTER 2

THE TIP

Before Grant Rabenn became a federal prosecutor, his second job out of law school was at a boutique firm in Washington, DC, devoted to defending white-collar criminals. The young, olive-skinned lawyer with dark hair and a Hollywood smile ended up representing Russian oligarchs and corporate executives accused of bribing foreign governments. “Very interesting, wealthy people trying to hide their assets and avoid scrutiny,” as he described them, or alternatively, “James Bond characters who are jet-setting around the world with suitcases full of cash.”

Rabenn was captivated by these glimpses into a world of billions of dollars moving in invisible transactions. But he also found that he admired and envied the prosecutors on the other side of the table—the way they worked in the public interest and possessed a certain autonomy, choosing which cases they would pursue. So he began applying for Justice Department jobs, finally finding one in Fresno.

Despite having grown up in Southern California, Rabenn couldn't place Fresno on a map. But when he arrived at its DOJ office in 2011, he found what he'd always wanted: a place with almost no hierarchy or bureaucracy, where he was simply told to focus on money laundering and was otherwise given free rein. For the next few years, he and the local agents tackled fraud and extortion, child exploitation, corrupt cops, and, of course, drug trafficking—following illicit trails of money wherever they led. “We were just running and gunning,” Rabenn says of those prolific years with a boyish enthusiasm.

Rabenn's money-laundering cases often began with the stream of suspicious activity reports that banks were required to file under the Bank Secrecy Act. By mid-2013, Rabenn found that more and more of those reports were being triggered by financial transfers out of crypto exchanges, platforms where users could trade digital currency for traditional money like dollars, euros, or yen. The banks often suspected that these currency swaps were cash-outs of dirty digital profits. So Rabenn immersed himself in dozens of hours of YouTube videos to understand this still new currency called Bitcoin, its mechanics, and how it seemed to be powering an anonymous underworld of online commerce.

Criminals flocked to these dark markets because the cryptocurrency was widely believed to be anonymous and untraceable. Sure, every transaction was immortalized on Bitcoin's [blockchain](#), an unforgeable, unchangeable, and altogether public ledger. But that ledger recorded only which bitcoins resided at which Bitcoin addresses—long, unique strings of letters and numbers—at any given moment. In theory, at least, that meant buyers and sellers of illicit goods on opposite sides of the globe could send one another cash payments from behind the mask of those cryptic addresses without revealing any hint of their real-world identities.

But just as cryptocurrency-based platforms like AlphaBay opened up vast new global markets to criminals, they also opened up huge new opportunities for law enforcement, as Rabenn quickly realized. The dark web presented him with the chance to work cases on a scale that would otherwise be impossible in Fresno: As long as a dark-web drug dealer could be coaxed into sending a package to the Eastern District of California, the crime officially occurred in his jurisdiction.

Rabenn had no real idea how to pierce the veil of the blockchain's anonymity. But he figured that even dark-web dealers must sometimes make mistakes that could be caught through traditional buy-and-bust police work. For an ambitious young prosecutor, the possibility was thrilling. "I wasn't necessarily happy with just prosecuting drug mules driving meth up the 99 freeway," he says. If he could arrange an undercover buy online and somehow identify the seller, he could arrest dealers all over the country. "All I have to do is order dope from them, and then we can go get them. And that's what we did."

In 2014, Rabenn began forming his dark-web strike force, inviting local investigators from Fresno's Homeland Security Investigations and IRS Criminal Investigations offices to join. It was a small team of "odd ducks," as he describes them—agents on the more cerebral side, content to work cases largely on a computer screen instead of kicking down doors like their Central Valley colleagues.

By the time he recruited Robert Miller out of the DEA's wiretap room, Rabenn's team had already achieved some success with their undercover approach. They'd started by cracking down on a few so-called peer-to-peer exchangers—individuals who bought and sold bitcoins in the real world and were often used by dark-web dealers to cash out their dirty cryptocurrency. In several cases, they'd mined those exchangers' Rolodexes for leads on the legal names of dealers who'd done business with them, tracked them down, and arrested them.

But Rabenn had also begun to suspect that his original hunch was correct: Many of the dealers they targeted were indeed sloppy enough that agents could simply purchase drugs and look for clues either in their packaging or the vendors' online profiles.

Miller, starting his new assignment, assembled the usernames of AlphaBay's top dealers of heroin and the powerful synthetic opioid fentanyl, and he began to buy from them one by one. As the packages arrived, triple-sealed in silver Mylar and plastic, Miller and the team scrutinized both the shipments and their sellers' online presence. They found that one vendor had made an elementary mistake: He'd linked his PGP key—the unique file that allowed him to exchange encrypted messages with customers—with his email address on the PGP key server that stores a catalog of users' identities.

Miller and Rabenn quickly tied that email to the dealer's social media accounts and real name. They learned that he was based in New York. Miller then found fingerprints on a package of heroin sent from one of his accounts, which matched those of another New York man. Finally, Miller worked with postal inspectors to get photos taken by a post office self-service kiosk. The photos showed the second New Yorker putting a dope shipment in the mail. Miller and a team of agents flew across the country, searched the two men's homes, and arrested them both.

The same simple PGP trick allowed Miller to find the real name of another dark-web opiates dealer—which turned out to be part of his dark-web handle, written backward—and caught him shipping dope, again using evidence from a post office kiosk camera. When agents raided the man's home in San Francisco, Miller says, they found piles of fentanyl and heroin powder sitting on tables and in open plastic containers.

Rabenn's team was now on a roll, building significant cases—and even a reputation. When Miller ordered a package of opiates addressed to Fresno, he was amused when his San Francisco suspect warned him that a particularly aggressive group of feds operating out of the Central Valley seemed to be targeting players on the dark web and that he'd better watch his back.

But Miller and Rabenn didn't kid themselves: Busting a few of AlphaBay's sloppier dealers wasn't any more likely to topple that black market than the DEA was to defeat Mexican cartels by chasing yet another meth mule up Highway 99.

By November 2016, Miller was ready to try something new again. He'd achieved a couple of decent dark-web busts, but he didn't love the paperwork or the weeks spent in front of a screen. His shoulder and foot had finally recovered. Perhaps it wasn't too late to get onto the SWAT team after all.

Then, one afternoon, Miller returned to the office after picking up lunch, his In-N-Out Burger bag still in hand, to find an email from an intriguing stranger.

The email explained that the sender had been googling dark-web arrests, looking for a law enforcement contact. They'd tried the FBI tip line, but no one had responded. They'd tried Homeland Security—no luck there either. Finally, they'd found Miller's contact information in one of the Fresno team's criminal indictments of an AlphaBay drug dealer.

So the stranger had decided to try getting in touch with Miller. And now they were ready to share a tip about who Alpha02 might really be.

Continued in part 2: [On the trail of a mastermind, a tip leads detectives to a suspect in Bangkok—and to the daunting task of tracing his millions in cryptocurrency.](#)

This story is excerpted from the book [Tracers in the Dark: The Global Hunt for the Crime Lords of Cryptocurrency](#), available November 15, 2022, from Doubleday.

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By [Brian Howey](#)

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Oct 20, 2022 7:00 AM

When a Houseplant Obsession Becomes a Nightmare

Some of us just can't resist the allure of the carnivorous Nepenthes. They're beautiful, rare, and in every way life-consuming.

Photograph: Zen Sekizawa

Your monstera is boring. The pothos hanging from your bookshelf? Yawn. That windowsill cactus collection is, at best, a solid meh. Anyone can grow houseplants that absorb nutrients from the soil, energy from the sun, etc. But if your plants don't consume insect flesh in a gut-sucking display of evolutionary brutality, let's face it: Your collection is basic. To turn your mild-leaved menagerie into the ultimate selfie background, what you need is a Nepenthes.

Nepenthes (pronounced neh-PEN-theeze) is a genus of pitcher plants typically found in Southeast Asia, Australia, and Madagascar. The plants produce vase-shaped contraptions that grow from emerald leaves fanning off a vine, each one topped with a mouthlike opening and shielded from the rain by an umbrella lid. The pitchers secrete a sweet nectar that insects find irresistible and inebriating. After a sip or two, sugar-drunk bugs stumble into the mouths and fall to their doom, landing in a pool of digestive juices enclosed by walls so slippery that even the stickiest-footed fly can't escape. The drowned corpses slowly dissolve, and the pitchers absorb their nutrients like a stomach, allowing *Nepenthes* plants to grow in nutrient-poor soils. It's this macabre survival strategy that makes the [plants](#) so bizarrely beautiful, and so coveted by hobbyists.

Nepenthes pitchers come fuzzy, spotted, and striped; petite, lanky, and globous. One type makes traps the size of a human head and eats rodent feces—and the rodents, if they’re not careful. Another has hooked black fangs [ringing its maw](#), as if Mother Nature commissioned H. R. Giger to design a plant. All the rage in the Victorian era, Nepenthes have made a comeback in the world of houseplant collecting in recent years, accelerated by a combination of increased availability and a burst of plant lust on the part of stuck-at-home, social media-fueled urbanites decking out their abodes with potted greenery. (Seventy percent of millennials, according to [one survey](#), identify as “plant parents.”)

But buyers beware: Nepenthes collecting—as I eventually learned almost too well—is next-level stuff. There’s a lot more to these plants than fertilizer and YouTube how-tos. They’re botanical prima donnas, liable to walk out on life without notice if their specific needs aren’t met. And your new hobby will shove you into a strange world. There’s something dark in the pits of those pitchers, and it’s not the rotting bugs. If you fall in, you may land in an acidic soup of crime, addiction, and existential angst.

Mat Orchard thought he could handle Nepenthes. They nearly ate him alive.

Nepenthes pitchers come fuzzy, spotted, and striped; petite, lanky, and globous.

Photograph: Zen Sekizawa

Mat had never looked twice at a plant before. Born in Australia, he spent most of his childhood in the US collecting turtles and obsessing over snakes in library books. He considered himself an animal guy. Then, in 2011, after he’d started college at Portland State University in Oregon, his friend bought a pitcher plant from a farmers market. Mat beheld it with wonder. Its elegant little pitchers ate and digested flesh—just like him. Mat wanted one of his own. Or two. Before long he had three. Lining them up on a table in his college apartment, he felt a euphoric fixation. “I can get a little weird about collections,” Mat recalls warning his girlfriend at the time.

Now that he had the Neps, Mat needed to care for them. He found online forums dedicated to carnivorous plants, where experienced hobbyists shared

grow tips and pictures of their prized beauties. There were more than 160 species, he discovered, each of them collectible. As he learned more and more, his table of plants overflowed with new specimens, so Mat bought shelves. These plants were fussy, with particular climate requirements and painfully slow growth rates, but that's what made them so exclusive, so niche. Mat relished the challenge. He visited other growers' greenhouses, taking note of their expensive climate-control setups. Giant specimens of strange and rare species with teeth and stripes and pitchers that could swallow a human arm filled their collections. These were the sort of Nepenthes that would spark the envy of other growers on the forums. Mat wanted his own, but he'd have to step up his game.

Over the next two years, his 650-square-foot apartment transformed into a greenhouse. Fluorescent lights and a grow tent crowded his living room. The industrial humidifier he installed flooded the apartment with mist. To water his plants, he ran a hose every few days from the kitchen sink to his grow tent, soaked the pots, then hand-siphoned the water back out of their trays. "It was a pain in the ass," Mat tells me, but he did it to keep their roots from rotting. Whenever he wasn't caring for or staring at his collection, Mat was on his computer reading about Nepenthes, daydreaming about them. Originally interested in majoring in English or history, he instead pursued a degree in biology with a focus on botany. "Because that's all I could think about," he says. The switch added at least a year to his education and inflated his student loan debt.

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Carnivorous plant nurseries charge hundreds, occasionally thousands of dollars for desirable species. These expensive specimens are often tiny, decades shy of Instagrammable maturity. If Mat was going to collect with the best of them, he'd need a cheaper source. So when a fellow hobbyist shared an eBay listing for a fairly priced *Nepenthes rigidifolia*—an extremely rare species that few collectors grow—Mat was intrigued. The vendor lived in Indonesia, where *N. rigidifolia* comes from. Mat's research had taught him that importing plants without the proper certificates was

illegal, but the seller assured him everything would work out fine. Mat clicked Buy It Now.

When the package arrived without issue, the vendor turned Mat on to the Facebook Nepenthes community. If the forums were the farmers markets of carnivorous plant collecting, Facebook was its Amazon. Southeast Asian sellers posted literal piles of rare Nepenthes species for sale, often far larger than nursery plants and at a fraction of the price. Mat's collecting went into overdrive. "It just blew my mind," he says. "All these people who had these amazing plants, I realized, were ordering them from people internationally. And this is the way they were able to acquire these things without completely breaking the bank."

As his home life came to revolve around his collection, so did Mat's social circle. The growers he met on the forums became real-life friends. He founded a carnivorous plant club in Portland and invited anyone who wanted to attend—his classmates, old-timer collectors. At one meeting in November 2013, a new collector showed up and introduced himself as Jimmy. A white man with sandy blond hair and a "sunken" face, Mat says, Jimmy "kinda looked like a hunter, one of those off-the-grid types." Jimmy was friendly, but to Mat he seemed nervous, "furtive." Theft is common among jealous Nepenthes collectors, and Mat suspected Jimmy was scoping the growers' collections, searching for a mark. But Jimmy asked a lot of entry-level questions, and Mat soon pegged him as an awkward Nepenthes noob trying to learn more about the hobby. Mat gave him a chance. He told Jimmy to look up pictures of *Nepenthes rajah*, a giant species that makes gallon-sized traps. "I have those, I grow them," Mat boasted.

Two months later, Jimmy tagged along with a handful of enthusiasts to Mat's apartment to see his collection. Mat complained that a Nepenthes shipment had arrived infected with fungus, and now he'd never be able to resell them. Jimmy snapped a photo of the infested plants. It wasn't the first time Mat had received Neps in rough shape. In some cases, it was because he'd bought them from Borneo—the source.

As he had connected with more sellers from Malaysia and Indonesia, some of his orders had arrived tattered, dirt and moss still clinging to their roots. Horticulturally produced Nepenthes don't typically come with the patchy,

sunburnt leaves these plants had. They looked as if they'd been plucked straight from the unforgiving rain forests where they grew naturally—and where they were protected by local and international law. Mat wasn't just importing plants illegally. He was importing illegal plants.

Soon after this realization, he received an envelope from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. The feds had seized one of his packages from Malaysia, a shipment of 35 plants, including at least one *N. rajah*, which falls under the tightest restrictions on internationally traded wildlife, alongside leopards, pandas, and various species of orchid. When Mat asked more experienced growers about the letter, they assured him it was no big deal. They'd lost shipments to the feds before, too. The worst that could happen was a fine, maybe a warning visit from a federal agent.

At this point, it didn't matter. He couldn't stop.

Mat's girlfriend had begun fronting him rent money after he blew it on plants—most from reputable nurseries, yes, but some not. She repeatedly asked him to stop buying Nepenthes, but another box would always arrive in the mail. Paranoid that a power outage could doom his collection, Mat avoided going on vacation. Even in the dead of winter, he opened his windows before bed to ensure the nightly temperature drops his plants needed. Mat lay awake in the cold, thinking about his collection.

"Everything was geared toward the growing environment for the plants, regardless of how I felt, or how other people felt," he says. "You're not complete unless you have this next species."

Neps produce vase-shaped contraptions that grow from leaves fanning off a vine.

Photograph: Zen Sekizawa

On any social media platform today you'll find countless plant collectors who have fallen for Nepenthes' clever traps. Instagram influencers [pose nude](#) with their priceless collections and give [live greenhouse tours](#) to adoring fans. Growers post pictures of the Styrofoam McMansions and converted wine coolers they've built to house their pretties, equal parts engineering feats and eyesores. Dozens of Facebook groups adopt names

flaunting their obsessions (*Nepenthes Hoarders Anonymous, The Nepenthes Religion, NEPENTHES ONLY*). The hobbyists, who are mostly men, often joke that their wives have threatened to leave them over their collecting. Some might be serious. One Nepenthes nursery owner told me he'd seen collectors dig themselves into trenches of credit card debt and even turn to theft in order to feed their addictions. (He asked not to be identified for fear of alienating his customers.)

I know the allure of Nepenthes collecting well. In my late twenties, as I transitioned from itchy-footed drifter to anchored student, my girlfriend insisted I buy some decorative plants for my new bedroom. So I begrudgingly bought a small clutch of Home Depot succulents. Moderation has never been my strength, and I quickly became hooked. I bought my first Nepenthes from a local garden store, fascinated by its otherworldliness. That first one soon became a windowsill collection, then a 50-gallon tank full of plants. I pumped cold night air into the room where I kept them, just like Mat. I even forbade two out-of-town guests from running the heater when they slept in there. I stubbornly explained the importance of cold nighttime temperatures as I closed the door to their icebox of a bedroom. Eventually, I built a small greenhouse in my backyard and filled it with pitcher plants.

To my knowledge, I have never bought a poached Nepenthes. But it's impossible to know for sure. I've impulsively purchased plants I couldn't afford, then sulked in shame at my intemperance. I couldn't resist the thrill of clicking Buy It Now, of unwrapping a new plant from its box and placing it just so within my collection. Between purchases, I compared plant prices and researched, researched, researched. I was so obsessed with Nepenthes that I decided to write my graduate school thesis about the world of pitcher plant collecting. It's the story you're reading now.

Video: Zen Sekizawa

As I tumbled into this world, I found a group of fellow plant dorks, dorking out. Many collectors were kind and accepting, and some were vocally against poaching. But after I had explored the community further, sifting through the rumors of scams, theft, and sabotage, I began to understand its dark truth: Ignorant and uncaring collectors were quickly eradicating their

favorite species in the wild. Poaching threatens more than a quarter of the genus, according to one recent [ecological survey](#), and 13 species have nearly vanished from the rain forests. The problem has only gotten worse, according to Adam Cross, a coauthor of the survey, as demand remains strong and it becomes easier to access formerly secluded *Nepenthes* populations. If this isn't addressed, Cross says, "these species could be extinct in five or 10 years—or sooner."

Some are already gone. When Mat bought his *N. rigidifolia* on eBay in 2012, that species still existed in the wild. Today it's most likely extinct, living only in [collectors' greenhouses](#). Many species grow on one or two mountaintops—nowhere else—and reproduce so slowly that poachers can devastate an entire species in a single visit. Poaching has gotten so bad that Cross' colleagues have stopped announcing when they discover new populations of endangered *Nepenthes*. "If they shared even a photo of the habitat online, the plants would be gone," he says. Collectors' "primal desire" to own these plants has turned them into the grim reapers of their own obsession.

For his part, Mat vaguely understood the damage he was causing, but it didn't stop him spiraling. Jimmy seemed to be following in his footsteps. He kept asking Mat's opinion of this or that *Nepenthes* seller. Many were clearly poachers. In an act of cognitive dissonance Mat can't explain, he warned Jimmy against buying illicit *Nepenthes*. "Aside from being illegal, you have no guarantee that you will even get the plants," he wrote to Jimmy in a Facebook message in July 2014. Within two months, Mat had arranged to import two more shipments of poached *Nepenthes*, including more *N. rajahs*. And with each order he placed, a 7,000-mile-long Rube Goldberg machine whirred to life, carrying plants from the soggy jungles of Malaysian Borneo as they tumbled into poachers' backpacks, flopped onto tiled floors, and bounced around damp shipping boxes on their journey across the Pacific Ocean.

N. lowii pitcher plant on Mount Trusmadi in Malaysian Borneo.

Photograph: Brian Howey

N. macrophylla pitcher plant on Mount Trusmadi in Malaysian Borneo.

Photograph: Brian Howey

It took three days of flying, a day of driving, and two days of guided hiking up a forested mountain to find the wild Nepenthes. As a small group of us slopped through shin-high mud toward the summit this past August, the clouds encircled Mount Trusmadi, turning Malaysia's second-highest peak into an island. Dawn light had just begun to creep through the dripping trees, silhouetting the pitchers dangling like wind chimes from the mossy branches.

In the serenity of this golden-hour fairy tale, we stumbled onto a crime scene.

I found the yellowing Nepenthes leaf on the ground. Its stem ended abruptly in a diagonal line. Probably just a ranger clearing the trail, my guides Maik Miki and Jesseca Liew assured me. But 10 paces down the path, we discovered the body: several hacked chunks of a *Nepenthes macrophylla* strewn in the mud, likely abandoned by the poachers as they rushed to leave the scene. The stems of each piece had been chopped in the same diagonal lines. Later, Jesseca found the desiccated remains of an enormous *N. macrophylla* hanging from the branches above. Maik estimated the plant had been at least 100 years old. This critically endangered species, coveted by collectors for the red fangs that line its pitcher mouths, had been cut at ground level, the reachable segments of its stalk removed and its remaining pitchers left to shrivel into gray husks.

"We were here last July and they were green," Jesseca said, photographing the dead plant. She would need to file a report. Members of her tribe, the Dusun, work with the local forestry department to safeguard wildlife, but it's impossible to patrol all 8.9 million acres of protected rain forest. Back at base camp, Maik told stories of previous run-ins with poachers armed with axes. They're difficult to catch because they avoid hiking trails and travel at night, he said. Authorities in Southeast Asia have publicized several high-profile Nepenthes smuggling busts in recent years. But the poachers aren't the problem, Maik said. He constantly has to instruct his Nepenthes-enthusiast clients not to collect seeds on hikes. The forestry service randomly searches visitors' bags for poached specimens. There is nothing it

can do, though, to prevent collectors from buying poached plants online. “Hopefully they will stop,” Maik said with a weary smile.

Maik Miki examines the poached remnants of a Nepenthes in the rain forest of Mount Trusmadi.

Photograph: Brian Howey

Nearly everyone I interviewed for this story pointed to collectors as the prime drivers of the Nepenthes train wreck. The poachers themselves are just the crossties under the tracks, they said. Still, I wanted to learn why someone would poach plants, and whether they saw themselves as the machete-wielding arms of the Western extinction machine. So when an American Nepenthes nursery owner tipped me off that a Malaysian man had recently tried to sell him poached plants, I reached out and, after a series of awkwardly translated WhatsApp messages, arranged a meeting with a professional poacher whom I’ll call Syah. (He spoke on the condition that his real name not be used.)

A few days later, I watched a hand-rolled cigarette bounce haphazardly from the corner of Syah’s mouth as he explained his poaching process. It was all very simple, he said via an interpreter: Go into the forest. Find the plants. Ship the plants. Pay the bills. From the same tribe as Jesseca and Maik, Syah lives in a village on the shoulder of Mount Kinabalu—home to several desirable Nepenthes species.

Syah lost his job back in 2015. Even with steady work, it’s not easy to support a handful of kids and a wife in Borneo, so he turned to the family business. Most of his village poaches exotic plants, he said, to supplement earnings from the local rubber plantations. Syah’s brother-in-law taught him the basics, and he soon earned more as a poacher than he’d ever made through legal employment. Today, he estimates that 80 percent of his income is from poaching Nepenthes and orchids; all of his business comes from Facebook.

When a buyer submits an order, Syah looks up where the species grows online. Then he packs some food, a frying pan, matches, and a bolt of canvas, and drives to the edge of the forest. Some of his orders are a 50- to

100-kilometer hike into the jungle, but Syah often walks off-trail, camping out among the venomous creatures and barbed plants to evade the rangers who patrol the protected forests. He brings a machete for protection against snakes and bears. (He hasn't had to use it yet, but you never know.) When he finds the plants he's after, Syah uproots and bags them, then hikes home. During our interview, he showed me a recent harvest of young *N. villosa* plants taken from the national park near his village. Nursery-grown specimens of this size could fetch thousands of dollars each in the United States. Syah makes \$35 per plant.

If caught with them, he faces fines, or worse. Two men from a neighboring village recently received a six- to 12-month prison sentence for Nepenthes poaching, he told me. Syah fears being arrested himself. He also knows that his business imperils plant populations, but his kids need school supplies. "As long as there's an order, I will go into the forest," he said.

After Syah completes his role, the poached Nepenthes head to the post office, where they travel down one of two routes—straight to a collector, or to an intermediary who acclimates the plants to greenhouse conditions before marking them up and reselling them. Syah claims he has sent some of his orders to a Taiwanese Nepenthes fence named Alfie Chiang. Alfie's online shop sells some of the world's most sought-after species at shockingly low prices. A 2021 price list from his online store shows 2-inch *N. edwardsiana* seedlings priced at \$120, a fifth of what they'd fetch in a US nursery. Anti-poaching advocates have posted screenshots of an alleged Facebook conversation between Alfie and a Nepenthes collector. In it, he brags that the children of a poacher he employs would "eat dirt" if he didn't pay him to poach plants. Alfie claims these screenshots are faked, that he does not purchase poached plants, and that he has never met Syah.

Whichever route they take, pitcher plants face the most precarious leg of their journey in the mail. Any delay in the shipping can doom a thirsty Nep. To sneak the packages through customs, poachers label them as "gifts" instead of declaring the plants. It often works. Most shipments arrive on the doorsteps of Nep-heads all over the world without a hitch. These plants often die soon afterward. The stress of being shipped across the globe proves too much, or the buyer lacks the skills and equipment needed to

keep them alive. Those that survive get traded and sold until there's no telling where they came from. Private collections swell while wild populations shrink.

Syah displays a *Nepenthes villosa*.

Photograph: Brian Howey

Federal inspectors do snag the occasional illicit Nepenthes shipment. They certainly found one of Mat's when his box of 35 Nepenthes arrived at a Los Angeles mail inspection facility in 2013, fungus-ridden and limp after their journey from Malaysia. Mat had eventually shrugged it off, but the feds hadn't.

On April 26, 2016, the day it all ended, Mat was running late for work, so he barely noticed the strangely dressed men standing across the street when he took the dog out. The pounding started while he was in the shower. His door rattled in its frame. When he finally answered it, Jimmy was there. He wore a bulletproof vest and had a gun, Mat remembers. This wasn't Jimmy the Nep-head—this was Special Agent Jimmy Barna of the Fish and Wildlife Service. He handed Mat a search warrant as seven more federal agents entered the apartment.

Jimmy had been undercover since 2013. Over two and a half years, he had photographed Mat's apartment and his plants, secretly recorded some of his club meetings, and dropped hints that he wanted Mat's advice on how to buy poached plants. He'd even been monitoring Mat's emails, recording his transactions with poachers around the world. Mat sat dazed on his bed for 10 hours as the federal agents swarmed his apartment, questioning him, seizing his electronics and grow equipment. The same morning, agents visited the California and Michigan homes of hobbyists Mat had conducted business with. The feds raided the home of a third collector in Massachusetts a week later. Special Agent Barna believed these individuals were all part of Mat's plant-smuggling operation, and confiscated their plants too. The agents took an estimated 380 plants from Mat's apartment (though he claims there were fewer). He recalls watching, helpless, as the agents carried away a piece of himself. "My entire ego had been built out of

these plants,” he tells me. “When those were taken away, I was left free-falling. I felt like I had been stripped of my soul.”

After the agents left, Mat broke down. Depression set in as the months passed and the court case loomed closer. He drank heavily, and his relationship with his girlfriend crumbled. He was charged with violating the Lacey Act and faced a maximum penalty of five years in federal prison and a \$20,000 fine. Mat took a plea deal. Family and friends sent the court a deluge of letters in support of Mat. He read a heartfelt allocution to the judge, who turned out to be sympathetic and gave Mat three years’ probation and a \$100 court fee. As part of his sentence, he was forbidden to purchase *Nepenthes* during his probation. By the end of the trial, most of Mat’s plants had died. Many of them were thrown into a dumpster. The rest were incinerated.

“It’s a really horrible feeling knowing that an obsession could lead to, potentially, the destruction of something you genuinely love,” he says. “That quiet admiration for the plants can turn into avarice. It does something to you.” It took years of therapy and tweaking his medications for Mat to address the underlying mental health issues that had almost certainly aggravated his addiction. Looking back, he thinks getting caught helped him get the treatment he needed. Mat moved away from Portland and started a new life. He gave up collecting altogether.

Poaching threatens almost a fifth of the *Nepenthes* genus, and 13 species have nearly vanished from the rain forests.

Photograph: Zen Sekizawa

Nepenthes represent an enormous challenge for botanic conservationists: How do you convince collectors to get worked up about saving plants across the globe when they can have them all to themselves at home? Part of the issue is that most people don’t care much about wild plants—including many plant nerds. Humans’ threat modeling tells us to treat animals like the furniture in a room and plants like the wallpaper. We’re so focused on the chairs, we don’t notice the peeling walls. Botanists even have a term for this: plant blindness. *Nepenthes* collectors are blind not to the plants themselves but to their own eradication campaign.

Nepenthes influencers didn't have tens of thousands of Instagram followers when Mat was a collector. They do now—even as more and more species are closer than ever to extinction. Today, citizen crime fighters on Facebook post callouts of poachers and their customers, rally sympathetic collectors to report suspicious eBay listings, and preach about the evils of poaching. It may not be enough. Mat has words of caution. "Look at my example as a warning," he says. "Owning these things, it's never gonna satisfy you. There's always gonna be something else. Always."

Back home, I stepped into my greenhouse, surrounded by my plants. The more I learned about the world of Nepenthes collecting, the more I wondered whether my collection was indefensible. I picked up my own baby *N. macrophylla*—bred sustainably, I'm told—and ran my finger along the teeth of its pinky-sized pitchers. Even as I'd held the dead remains of this plant's elders on Mount Trusmadi, I couldn't stop thinking about this one. I still loved this little plant, adored its newest leaf (so big!). It was my plant. Mine.

Am I a monster? Maybe. Addicted to collecting? Definitely. Carnivorous plant nurseries are hard at work growing their wares in laboratories, trying to find ways to mass-produce what is quickly disappearing. If collectors can just get past their obsession with having mature, unique plants, Nep shops might be able to artificially produce the most popular species fast enough to meet demand.

Regardless, I don't know whether I'll ever buy another Nep. Who can sleep with the ethical conundrum of an active pitcher plant hobby? I collect vinyl now. See you at the record store.

Updated 11-10-22, 12pm EDT: This story has been updated to correct the number of Nepenthes species threatened by poaching.

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Oct 13, 2022 6:00 AM

The Search for a Pill That Can Help Dogs—and Humans—Live Longer

People have been searching for a fountain of youth for thousands of years. Celine Halioua thinks she's found one—for canines. Be patient, we're next. A startup called Loyal is developing drugs to slow down the aging process in dogs, potentially adding a few years to their lifespans. Photograph: Joe Pugliese

celine halioua drops into a crouch and greets Bocce, a Chihuahua-dachshund mix with soulful brown eyes, like a long-lost friend. “Oh my God, you’re so beautiful!” she chirps. The two have just met in an upstairs room at Muttville Senior Dog Rescue in San Francisco, where light streams in through the open windows and urine occasionally streams onto the floor. About a dozen elderly [dogs](#), none taller than a kneecap, putter around on the gray linoleum or nap on blankets. When Halioua kneels, her dark hair tumbling over her shoulder, Bocce rests his head blissfully in her lap.

A tragedy of human-canine relations is that a 10-year-old dog such as Bocce is old, while a 28-year-old person such as Halioua is in the prime of life. Bocce is one of the lucky ones. Many dogs can only dream of living as long as he likely will, because dog lifespan is inversely correlated with body size. It’s the opposite of the wider pattern in the animal kingdom, where elephants easily outlast mice, which in turn outlive mosquitoes. A Chihuahua can expect roughly 15 years of life; an Irish wolfhound or Great Dane around seven or eight.

Halioua hopes that the [startup](#) whose name is emblazoned on her slim black T-shirt—[Loyal](#)—can start to fix this bug in humanity’s 14,000-year-plus [wolf bioengineering project](#). The company, which she founded in 2019 and leads as CEO, is developing drugs to delay [aging](#) in dogs and extend their healthy lifespan. She has raised around \$58 million and has two drugs in development. In a few years, she hopes to have the first commercial drug—for any species—to state on the label that it delays aging or extends lifespan. That alone would be a triumph, but Halioua sees it as a springboard to a still greater feat: creating similar drugs for humans.

The search for [an antiaging elixir](#) goes back at least to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and even today the most far-out ideas [for thwarting death](#)—[freezing people](#) for eventual revival, [reincarnating](#) them digitally—sound an awful lot like technological fairy tales. But in the world of lab animals, life extension is already here, with studies boosting or even doubling the lifespans of worms, flies, and mice. Regulators such as the US Food and Drug Administration, though, have not yet recognized aging as a condition that can be treated.

Celine, human. Age: **28**. Lifespan: **79**.

Photograph: Joe Pugliese

Halioua, a fast talker who speaks in a confident, sometimes bewildering mix of Silicon Valley and biotech jargon, believes that starting with dogs puts her on the best and cutest path to the first aging treatments for people. There’s no escaping the poor odds of any treatment succeeding—about 90 percent of [new drugs](#) crash out of clinical trials as failures. But running a [doggie clinical trial](#) is cheap compared to a human one, and the animals’ shorter lives mean it won’t take decades to know whether a pill boosts longevity. Plus, the lifespan and lifestyle of a pet dog are more humanlike than a lab mouse’s is, so Halioua argues she’ll be in a good position to leap from pups to people.

For Halioua, who survived a toxic stint in academia before founding her company, Loyal is a way to work against aging on her own terms. That it happens to involve dogs—animals she has loved since her upbringing in suburban Texas—is canine kismet. It gives her an excuse to hang out at

[Mutville](#), for one, where Loyal has worked with the staff to recruit owners and their dogs into two studies of aging.

Dog's Name: **Wolfie**. Age: **10**. Breed: **Husky**. Lifespan: **12–14**. Wolfie loves horses and is as independent as a cat.

Halioua has tattoos of a worm, a mouse, and a dog: organisms used in aging research.

PHOTOGRAPH: Joe Pugliese

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, Halioua can imagine Mutville caring for a more diverse crowd if Loyal's drugs work. "In that world, the age of dogs here would maybe go out from 10 to 12 or 14," she says, as a glossy black spaniel mix with a grizzled muzzle named Snoop Dawg methodically licks her right arm.

For many dogs lucky enough to [have homes](#), life has never been better. Pet parents invest [more cash and emotion](#) in them than ever and grant them a social standing that creates what sociologist Andrea Laurent-Simpson calls multispecies families. A drug to lengthen their time together would seem to be an easy sell. And should dogs end up delivering more years to humans? You couldn't ask a best buddy for more.

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Photograph: Joe Pugliese

halioua was a sophomore majoring in [neuroscience](#) at the University of Texas at Austin when she discovered aging research. In a departmental newsletter, she spotted an ad for summer internships at leading labs working on age-related diseases, decided to apply, and got a position at a prestigious independent stem cell lab in La Jolla, California. She'd never heard of the internship's sponsor—a Silicon Valley-based nonprofit called the SENS Research Foundation, whose mission was to "help build the industry that will cure the diseases of aging." Its cofounder and scientific mastermind was a Merlin-bearded computer scientist turned aging researcher named [Aubrey de Grey](#). He was a fringe but high-profile voice in a corner of biology that itself was not fully established.

In 1993, shortly before Halioua was born, a team of molecular biologists at UC San Francisco, led by Cynthia Kenyon, showed that partially disabling a single gene in the millimeter-long nematode worm *Caenorhabditis elegans* could double its lifespan. For the worms in Kenyon's lab, that equated to an additional 24 days spent eating *E. coli* bacteria, but the title of the group's report in a nematode newsletter drew a provocative analogy to humans: "A Mutation Which Doubles *C. elegans* Life Span (Imagine Being 140)." The study helped ignite a new field dedicated to unpicking, and wresting control of, the biological mechanisms of aging.

Name: **Penny**. Age: **14**. Breed: **Greyhound**. Lifespan: **10–13**. Trained as a professional racer, she competed in five races and never left the gate, so she was fired and picked up by a rescue organization.

PHOTOGRAPH: Joe Pugliese

Kenyon and other researchers tracked down genes linked to longevity and traced the biochemical pathways they controlled. Intriguingly, some of the same mechanisms they identified in worms could extend life in flies and mice. In labs around the world, evidence began to mount that aging was not just inevitable degradation. It was another biological process with genetic controls and components that might one day be hacked. The long lives of some wild animals hinted at the possibilities. DNA repair mechanisms help one of the longest-lived mammals, bowhead whales, live to 200 or more. Naked mole rats and some tortoises appear to slow biological time, making them remarkably resistant to age-related disease.

De Grey was inspired by the science but irritated by what he saw as society's indifference to the prospect of slowing or even reversing aging in humans. In 2003, he drew interest to his cause by celebrating a dwarf mouse known as GHR-KO 11C, who died at Southern Illinois University a week short of his fifth birthday—roughly double his expected lifespan—thanks to a tweak similar to what Kenyon had done to extend worm longevity. De Grey announced that 11C's creator had won the first payout from the Methuselah Mouse Prize, a fund of about \$33,000 for scientists who set new records for mouse longevity. When speaking about 11C's achievement, de Grey took the opportunity to promote a program he had drawn up called Strategies for Engineered Negligible Senescence that he

claimed could eventually defeat aging, allowing a person who was 50 in 2030 to enjoy another 80 healthy years of life.

De Grey's pronouncements charmed journalists but rankled many biologists, and in 2005, 28 distinguished researchers wrote a paper declaring his strategies—using genetic engineering, targeted toxins, and tweaks to the human immune system—a farrago in “the realm of fantasy rather than science.” This did little to hinder their target, whose eloquent but wild predictions continued to win media attention and who made headway with tech industry freethinkers. The next year, he received \$3.5 million from Peter Thiel, a cofounder of PayPal. In 2009, de Grey cofounded the SENS Research Foundation, headquartered in Mountain View, California, across the 101 highway from Google.

Names: Smitty & Louise. Age: Both 10. Breed: Chihuahua. Lifespan: 14–16. Smitty, who finds tummy tickles calming, likes to curl up under blankets and inside pillowcases. Louise was rescued with a broken jaw and three working legs. Now she loves to run across the room and dive into her bed.

Photograph: Joe Pugliese

By the time Halioua started her internship in La Jolla, the foundation was providing small grants to researchers around the world and had labs of its own in Mountain View, directed by de Grey. The summer fellowship program was intended to incubate a new generation of scientists who would dedicate themselves to the organization’s vision.

As much by accident as by design, Halioua’s summer in California primed her to think more deeply about aging than most teens. She spent her days gazing through a microscope at cells harvested from patients who had died from aggressive brain tumors, which, as with most forms of cancer, become more likely with age as changes accumulate in a person’s DNA. In the evenings, she returned to a room rented from an elderly but lively veteran with a goofy smile and a hill-running habit. The vet befriended the nervous intern, showing her around La Jolla and inviting her along on dates with his girlfriend. It was her first personal connection with an elder outside her own

family. “He helped me realize, ‘Oh, I will be this old one day,’” Halioua says.

At the end of the summer, Halioua flew to the SENS Research Foundation’s annual conference in San Francisco, where she met de Grey and received a full-immersion baptism in the antiaging Kool-Aid. The crowd mixed respected academic scientists with tech investors, a science adviser to Obama’s secretary of state, and, in Halioua’s words, “immortalists” hoping to see de Grey’s most far-out predictions come true.

Name: **Odin**. Age: **4**. Breed: **Great Dane**. Lifespan: **7–10**. His favorite toy is Harry Elephante, a stuffed elephant with crinkly ears.

Photograph: Joe Pugliese

The idea that aging might one day be treatable, like a disease, was gaining ground in the world of medical research, and among Silicon Valley’s richest men. Shortly after turning 40, Google cofounder and CEO Larry Page announced that his company was backing a new venture called Calico that would work on aging treatments. It [hired Cynthia Kenyon](#), the creator of the long-lived worms and just one of many academics changing the conception of aging. The US National Institutes of Health, the world’s largest public backer of medical research, created a “geroscience” initiative to investigate how the aging process contributed to chronic diseases traditionally seen as separate, such as Alzheimer’s and cancer, and how scientists might tinker with underlying processes common to them all.

One after another, studies in lab animals were showing that certain drugs could extend lifespan and stave off age-related diseases, a tantalizing glimpse of what people might one day enjoy. Some of them appeared to do so by boosting cellular signals that ramp up when food is scarce, mimicking the effects of a [restricted-calorie diet](#). One of those drugs is rapamycin, taken by humans receiving an organ donation. In mice, it could extend their lives by up to 25 percent and also delay or reverse heart disease, cancer, and cognitive decline—results that were “absolutely astonishing,” says Steven Austad, codirector of an NIH aging research center at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Austad was a coauthor on the 2005 paper slamming de Grey’s scientific ideas, but he agreed with the agitator of aging

on one high-level point: It was worth seriously investigating how aging might be treated in humans.

in 2016, halioua returned to La Jolla for a second internship, renting the same room from her elderly friend. She found him diminished and dying from pancreatic cancer. He was still running but was easily winded, and he was struggling to pay the health insurance premiums underwriting his chemotherapy. Halioua smuggled him extra cash by intentionally overpaying her rent out of her modest fellowship stipend.

De Grey's argument that it was imperative to devote more scientific effort to slowing or halting the processes underlying cancer and other age-related diseases began to feel more convincing. "It just made so much sense," Halioua says. "I very quickly knew that this was a hundred percent where I was going to spend my life." At the end of that summer she gave a presentation on her project, impressing an Oxford researcher involved with de Grey's nonprofit. When he suggested she join him in the UK as a grad student, with SENS Research Foundation funding, she accepted. That fall, her La Jolla landlord died. In 2017, she flew to England with a new mission in life.

Halioua fell in love with Oxford. Her thesis examined how health systems might cover treatments that only paid off far in the future, a potential challenge for antiaging drugs. She had a part-time job consulting on science with a biotech startup that was also backed by the foundation. But her new life began to fracture.

Halioua's relationship with her supervisor broke down. She felt he bullied her and was controlling, requiring her to do work related to a company he worked for and restricting whom she could talk with. (Halioua has spoken publicly about her experience without naming her supervisor. He did not respond to a request for comment.)

She also became uncomfortable with the SENS Research Foundation and its animating spirit, de Grey. She initially admired the foundation, she says: "They had a lot of glitz and glam for me." She was impressed by the organization's formal dinners, where rich and distinguished men were encouraged to donate to the war on aging. But she started to suspect she

was only being invited “because I was a cute young girl,” she says. “Also smart, but that wasn’t what they cared about.” At one dinner, she says, de Grey plied her with alcohol and told her that as a “glorious woman” she had a duty to have sex with potential donors to encourage contributions. (After Halioua went public with her allegations several years later, de Grey denied making the statements.)

By 2018, Halioua was looking for an escape route. “I really snapped because of all of that stuff Aubrey and my professor did,” she says. “It created this desire to create my own sphere of influence, where I control the rules.” She turned to one of the only prominent women in the small circles working on aging treatments, Laura Deming. Deming was a wunderkind who had started working at age 12 in Cynthia Kenyon’s lab, enrolled at MIT at 14, dropped out after receiving a fellowship from Peter Thiel, and now ran a venture capital fund in San Francisco to bring aging-related startups into the Silicon Valley mainstream. (One of her latest projects involves developing technology to freeze organs without damaging them.) Halioua had once been introduced to Deming through de Grey, and now she emailed in pursuit of an internship.

Deming arranged a brief phone interview. Halioua was “very intense,” Deming recalls. “I asked her a question about Markov models”—a math trick to analyze processes that change over time—“and could tell that she didn’t have the exact answer but was determined to figure it out on the call” by wringing every possible clue from what Deming said. “That was really cool.” The internship was only two weeks long, but for Halioua it was enough—a refuge and perhaps a new beginning. In early 2018, she flew to California.

Name: **Luna**. Age: **10**. Breed: **French bulldog**. Lifespan: **10–12**. Despite being blind, she always finds a perch on the highest available pillow.

Photograph: Joe Pugliese

halioua joined deming at a WeWork in the Tenderloin, a San Francisco neighborhood abutting City Hall and the headquarters of Twitter that is also rife with human misery and crime. Stepping out of the office at night felt risky in a way it never had in Oxford or Austin. Working in venture capital

felt unfamiliar too. At Oxford, grad students and researchers left the lab at 5 pm and went home or to the pub. Important emails were long and formal. In San Francisco, entrepreneurs and investors worked late and then spent hours more, over fine dinners, debating the intellectual foundations of their theories about the future.

At the end of Halioua's brief internship, Deming offered her a job. She found a way to accept but also complete her PhD in Oxford, and began flying back and forth. Halioua felt the arrangement was working at first, but relations with her supervisor worsened, and in the fall of 2018 she filed a formal complaint under Oxford's bullying and harassment policy. He left the university soon after, but Halioua found her department's investigation to be painfully slow. (The head of her former department, Georg Holländer, declined to comment on the case, but said "all complaints will always be considered carefully and rigorously under our procedures.") While she waited for its official assessment, she began to have panic attacks. "You kind of feel like you're crazy," she says. "Everybody tells you you're being sensitive or misinterpreting what this person said to you." Working for Deming began to soak up more of Halioua's time and enthusiasm, and she left Oxford for good.

Halioua knew next to nothing about venture capital or Silicon Valley, but she poured herself into reading pitch decks, networking with founders, and drafting investment memos. She started to tweet, blasting out news of pharma deals, photos of San Francisco beaches, her Fitbit stats, and appreciations of [Elon Musk](#). She helped bring about investments in Fauna, a startup exploring the age-defying biology of hibernation, and Gordian Biotechnology, which aims to fight diseases of aging by modifying a patient's DNA. By the time news came from Oxford that it had upheld the majority of her complaints, almost a year after she had filed them, Halioua knew her future lay in biotech, not academia.

Halioua's own company, Loyal, emerged from one of her early projects for Deming, a dense, roughly 50-page memo on the investment potential of the biochemical pathway Cynthia Kenyon had used to double the lifespan of worms. In many species—including humans—it involved a hormone called insulin-like growth factor 1, which adjusts an animal's growth and

metabolic response to food. Tinkering with this pathway could extend the lifespan of flies, worms, and mice.

Unfortunately for Halioua, the literature seemed less rich in clues for how to turn this knowledge into a drug for people. The role of IGF-1 in human aging was unclear, and although the pathway was clearly implicated in certain eye diseases unrelated to aging, Halioua couldn't get excited about working on them.

In the summer of 2019, Halioua was drunk on a camping trip among strangers when a factoid she had omitted from the report came back to her. Organized by the founders of an autonomous trucking startup, the trip had brought together a group of young entrepreneurs and investors. Around the campfire, she joked—purely as an icebreaker—that she knew how to extend dog lifespan, because IGF-1 was implicated in dog body size and longevity.

Her quip took on a life of its own and became lodged in the collective consciousness of Silicon Valley. One investor on the trip mentioned Halioua's idea to a founder he knew, who in turn told it to Greg Rosen, a venture capitalist. Inspired by the South Korean scientists who had produced the first cloned dog, an Afghan named Snuppy, Rosen was looking for an entrepreneur to start a US company to clone dogs for bereaved owners. When Rosen and Halioua met for coffee in downtown San Francisco, he realized she had a better solution for the same underlying problem—that a dog never lives long enough.

Name: **Peanut**. Age: 7. Breed: **Mini-poodle, Chihuahua, Pomeranian mix**. Lifespan: **Unclear**. Whenever her dog friends visit her home, she brings out all her toys and piles them up for her buddies to see.

PHOTOGRAPH: Joe Pugliese

halioua began 2020 with \$5.1 million in funding. By way of thanks she sent all of her investors, including Rosen, fluffy toy puppies wearing company bandanas. She secured an office on the edge of downtown San Francisco, but the lease began in March, the same month the Bay Area became the first part of the US to enter pandemic lockdown. Her company's formative months, and first hires, took place via Zoom, Slack, and eventually socially

distanced meetups. Halioua raised another \$6 million and hired scientists, veterinarians, and an expert in getting new animal drugs past the FDA.

She embraced the role of dog company CEO—painting a mural of a giant German shepherd in Loyal’s office and ordering shirts with the slogan “Save the dogs, save the world.” She adopted a fluffy white husky named Wolfie, whom she has described as her cofounder and Loyal’s chief evangelist. Her management style, she says, was informed by her bad experiences at Oxford. When she talks to her team about her goals or beliefs, she tries to pair her statements with evidence to convince her workers that the boss is being straight with them. “Even if you don’t trust me, you still know this is true,” she says.

Halioua’s new science team, including a scientist who previously led aging research at pharma giant Regeneron, helped refine her original idea. They identified a compound they believed could be given to young dogs of the largest breeds, such as French mastiffs, to delay their accelerated aging process. They found a second compound they thought could target processes that cause cognitive decline and kidney problems in older dogs of all sizes.

As her company gained traction, Halioua noticed certain patterns in her business interactions. She tried to recruit women investors but found it difficult because there weren’t many to ask. When she met with investors who were men, some would try to flip a business meeting into a date, and others would confidently explain science to her that she knew inside out. Mostly she brushed off such moments—her time at Oxford had lowered her expectations of those with more power and prestige than her.

She often felt different. Describing herself as an “Oxford dropout” helped convince people to take her seriously—never mind that she had left her PhD in part due to dissatisfaction with a harassment investigation, a circumstance missing from the dropout tales of archetypal boy geniuses like Mark Zuckerberg. She listened to hundreds of Silicon Valley podcasts to try to learn the industry’s patois. She trained herself to smile less and wrote in a blog post aimed at women entrepreneurs: “I come off as more of a grump now, but I am a grump who has the money she needs to build her company.”

In the spring of 2021, Halioua published a blog post about her Oxford PhD supervisor titled “[The Gifts of My Harasser](#),” leaving him nameless. She described the paradox of one of her worst experiences laying a foundation stone for her later successes by teaching her to be skeptical of social hierarchies and institutional power. “It’s been two years since I left. I am not broken anymore, but I still feel the cracks,” she wrote. “His abuse shattered my preconceived notions of how the world worked and cleared a path I otherwise never would have found.”

Halioua also still felt the burden of her experience with de Grey, the aging guru of the SENS Research Foundation. Deming, too, had endured an uncomfortable experience with de Grey, whom she had known since she was 14. Days before her 18th birthday, Deming had emailed de Grey, then 48, asking him to introduce her to someone. In his reply he suggested he was interested in Deming sexually. “I have a fairly adventurous love life, and I’m not coy in talking about it, but I’ve always taken care to avoid letting conversations stray in that direction with someone so young as you,” de Grey wrote. “That has always felt quite jarring given that I could treat you as an equal on every other level. Maybe those days are over … Ahem - back to business :-) Yes, I’ll e-introduce you.” (De Grey later said the email was “an error in judgment.”)

Now, in June 2021, Deming and Halioua heard that de Grey might be mentoring another underage girl. The two women decided to formally report their experiences to the foundation, in the hope that doing so might protect this girl and others. The organization quickly retained a law firm to investigate the allegations and placed de Grey on leave. But in the weeks afterward, the nonprofit promoted social media posts featuring de Grey discussing a cryptocurrency fundraising campaign that would net the organization \$25 million.

Name: **Corky**. Age: **11**. Breed: **Pug**. Lifespan: **13–15**. If she thinks you're not paying enough attention to her, Corky will tap you with her paw and sneeze on you.

Photograph: Joe Pugliese

By August, Halioua says she and Deming became worried that the nonprofit was too conflicted to properly investigate itself, and they decided to go public. Late one Tuesday afternoon, the two women simultaneously posted detailed statements to their personal websites. Word spread fast, as did Halioua's accompanying [Twitter thread](#), prompting an outpouring of sympathy online, a round of media coverage about the allegations, and denials from de Grey.

Just over a week later, the SENS Research Foundation said its board learned that de Grey had attempted to undercut the ongoing investigation—by sending emails intended to pressure a participant in the inquiry, according to the official [report](#) of the investigation—and decided to “separate” from him immediately. The foundation’s law firm would later uphold Halioua’s and Deming’s accounts of these events. De Grey says that the women were tricked by people aiming to eject him from his nonprofit and that he has “never said anything to Laura or Celine verbally or otherwise that had improper intent.”

Halioua felt sure she had done the right thing, and she reasoned that Loyal had progressed enough that her career was not in danger. She was also too busy to dwell on the uproar. In late August her team announced that the NIH’s National Institute on Aging would collaborate with Loyal to test two of the company’s compounds, as part of a program on extending the longevity or healthy lifespan of mice. Three weeks later she turned 27. She rounded out the month by disclosing that Loyal had raised an additional \$27 million in investment funding. Half of her new investors were women.

in 2022, halioua and her team, approaching 70 strong, began to flex the scientific muscles needed to upend conventional wisdom about aging. They analyzed and published data collected the previous year from nearly 500 dogs who were brought to a vet clinic for a health assessment. For a second study, they recruited some 2,000 owners—Halioua usually calls them “pet parents”—to receive Loyal-branded doggy DNA swab kits that might help them understand the markers of aging. Dog lovers on social media quickly picked up the scent; both studies filled up fast, and Halioua’s inbox was flooded with unsolicited dog pics. (Halioua says she has nothing against cats—and has even hired a few cat fanciers—but that their long lives,

dislike of medicine, and not-very-humanlike physiology make them a less appealing target. “They’re like little biological aliens,” Halioua says.)

Name: **Trout**. Age: **4**. Breed: **21-breed “supermutt.”** Lifespan: **12+**. Hailing from the streets of San Francisco’s Mission District, he apparently walked himself to a shelter.

PHOTOGRAPH: Joe Pugliese

Less publicly, Loyal is preparing for the clinical trials of its two products. Halioua isn’t giving away many details about Loyal’s drugs, but she does say that both medicines have performed well when given to lab dogs. One is a pill that might delay the onset of age-related diseases such as dementia and kidney failure, two common reasons for owners to have an animal put down. Halioua says it uses some pathways seen in caloric restriction. Now the company is testing the drug in pet dogs, and she anticipates she’ll launch a full clinical trial designed to win regulatory approval next year. The second drug, released slowly by an implant, might dampen the cellular processes that are believed to condemn the largest dog breeds to short lives.

As is standard in the drug industry, the company will seek the FDA’s sign-off on its study designs first. That step is a big deal for Loyal, because the agency would be backing the notion that drugs can be tested and proven to boost longevity. That is, not to prevent a disease or slow one down, but to hit a whole suite of ailments by tackling aging at its root.

To navigate the scientific and regulatory hurdles, human longevity startups—Loyal’s nominal competitors—have taken to focusing on drugs that tick two boxes: They are effective enough to get first approved as a conventional treatment for a single disease, and they hold broad antiaging effects. The hope is that once the drug is benefiting patients, data will pile up that helps prove its general preventive powers against age-related disease.

James Peyer, a former venture capitalist who is CEO and cofounder of antiaging startup Cambrian BioPharma, has raised more than \$160 million with that tack. He says that establishing a rich portfolio of nearly 20 potential drugs for humans helped win investors over. But he admits his

two-step approach isn't the only way to go, and it's possible that Halioua, whom he has known for years, might have hit on a faster way to get an antiaging drug for humans. "Part of Celine and Loyal's brilliance is that they found a completely different path," he says, one that lets her focus solely on the drugs' antiaging properties right from the start. If the mechanisms that Halioua's team finds in dogs align with human biology—a considerable unknown—the company could be well positioned to jump species, Peyer says.

Name: **Bumper**. Age: **8**. Breed: **American Staffordshire terrier**. Lifespan: **13–15**. Recently adopted, Bumper has a tail that wags a mile a minute.

PHOTOGRAPH: Joe Pugliese

Loyal is not the only outfit trying to understand canine longevity. The Dog Aging Project, led by the University of Washington and Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, has completed two small studies in which owners were given [rapamycin](#) or placebo pills without being told which. People who dosed their dogs with the drug reported that their pets became more active, says Matt Kaeberlein, a University of Washington professor who is codirector of the project and an adviser to Loyal. He suspects that rapamycin worked by soothing arthritis or other aches and pains, and he hopes to gather firm proof in a larger trial of about 600 dogs.

Kaeberlein has studied life-extending genes and treatments in yeast, worms, and mice and is convinced some aging mechanisms are shared across the animal kingdom. "Obviously I don't know whether rapamycin is going to have a big effect on lifespan and health span in dogs, but I am as certain as I can be that something will," he says. He declines to say whether he gives rapamycin to his own dog, Dobby, an 11-year-old German shepherd, saying it wouldn't be proper to comment on such a use while running a trial investigating the same. But Kaeberlein will say that he takes the drug himself and believes it helped resolve an attack of frozen shoulder, a mysterious condition in which the joint becomes stiff and painful.

Like other veterans of academic aging science—and Halioua—Kaeberlein exudes levelheaded excitement but also impatience when asked about the

future of aging treatments. Piles of evidence suggest it is possible to slow down the processes of aging in humans, or any other animal. You want that pill to exist? Just give scientists the time and money—and regulatory support—to figure it out, says [Nir Barzilai](#), director of the Institute of Aging at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, in New York.

“Right now we need to start making progress with drugs that maybe wouldn’t make us live 150 years but will make us healthier for much longer,” Barzilai says, by delaying the onset of diseases such as cancer or Alzheimer’s. He has spent years trying to secure funding for a six-year human clinical trial to investigate whether a common diabetes drug can delay aging. He is less sure of Loyal’s approach, but he figures longer-lived and more active dogs could produce other effects in humans: more active, longer-lived owners, and more support for aging research.

Name: **Uncle Grady**. Age: **13**. Breed: **Havanese**. Lifespan: **14–16**. He has a strong preference for people food.

PHOTOGRAPH: Joe Pugliese

Sitting cross-legged on an easy chair in Loyal’s San Francisco office, Halioua argues that Loyal can break the psychological barriers holding back the war on aging. “Many people don’t know that we’ve extended lifespan in mice many times, and even if they do, well, it’s a mouse,” she says, as Wolfie lolls nearby on a sunny cushion next to a floor-to-ceiling window. What would kick the field into a higher gear, she says, is a proof of concept that’s more persuasive and lovable than a wizened lab rodent.

She imagines appearing onstage one day with a healthy Great Dane that is 15 years old, almost twice the breed’s usual age—and thus persuading people to see aging science not as a realm of weird ideas and thinkers but as a conventional branch of biotech. Silicon Valley founders are often celebrated for creating products that cause jaws to drop and heads to explode. Halioua may make her greatest mark by killing hype rather than creating it, transforming the notion that drugs can extend life into an everyday comfort—like a faithful friend’s tail wagging when you walk through the door.

Updated 10-13-2022, 1:00 pm ET: This story was updated to correct Aubrey de Grey's age.

Dog Grooming by En Vogue Elite Pet Grooming; hair and makeup by David Searle/Artist Untied

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Oct 6, 2022 6:00 AM

The Election-Swinging, Facebook-Fueled, Get-Out-the-Vote Machine

Former Democratic operative Tara McGowan is sinking millions into Meta's ad network to build Courier Newsroom, a media powerhouse for the left.

Tara McGowan went from being the controversial CEO of Acronym, a sprawling political organization, to running a left-leaning network of digital news sites. Photograph: Jared Soares

It was a sunny June afternoon in Washington, DC, and even though Tara McGowan professes to hate this city, she was having fun.

A [political](#) operative turned publisher, she sat in a conference room in [a WeWork](#) office downtown, her fingertips loudly drumming away on the bright orange table. The energetic 36-year-old is the CEO of a company called Good Information, where she oversees a mini empire of progressive local news sites across the United States.

Beaming in on a big videoscreen was Pat Rynard, himself a Democratic operative turned journalist and founder of a small political website called [Iowa Starting Line](#), which *The New York Times* once declared “the ‘It’ read for political insiders.” McGowan had bought the site from him in 2021, making it the eighth in her growing collection of two- to six-person newsrooms stretching from Arizona to North Carolina.

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Photograph: Joe Pugliese

McGowan believes these outlets are the antidote to [bad information](#)—the hyperbole and lies [that proliferate](#) in Americans’ social media feeds and promote ideas mostly from the ideological right. Through the calculated injection of news stories into these feeds, McGowan thinks she can claw a crumbling republic back from the brink and—this is the important part—get more people to vote. She’s confident these new recruits to the democratic process will lean decidedly left.

Rynard walked her through an experiment in using Facebook’s [powerful ad-targeting tools](#). Iowa’s primary elections were taking place the next day, and he wanted to know whether a handful of Iowa Starting Line’s stories could shape the results. Primaries are the sort of political contest that both keep democracy afloat and tend to be roundly ignored.

“Remind me when the actual boosting of the coverage started?” asked McGowan, sipping from a giant pink water bottle.

“Three weeks ago,” Rynard replied. Working with a political data shop, McGowan’s team had gotten a list of residents in blue-collar counties in the state’s east. They cut the hardcore Republicans from the list, then dumped the remaining names into Facebook’s ad-buying portal. An analyst used the app’s “lookalike” tool to find other people like them, then bought ads that would appear in those users’ newsfeeds. The ads weren’t selling anything; they were just promoting a few stories from Rynard’s site—straight reporting on Democratic candidates vying to run against sitting US senator Chuck Grassley, an infographic of voting deadlines. So far, Rynard was pleased. One ad he’d tossed in on a whim, which riffed on a [story](#) titled “Iowa Passed 70 New Laws This Year. Here’s What They Do,” was clicked on by 3.5 percent of the people who saw it. (Digital ads work on painfully small margins; anything above 2 percent is reason to cheer.)

Tara McGowan is CEO of Good Information, which runs a set of left-leaning newsrooms.

Photograph: Jared Soares

But the experiment was not about clickthrough rates or reading—it was about whether any of those people would actually show up to vote. After

the primary, McGowan’s analysts dug into the data. The Facebook ads had cost them \$49,000, which, it turned out, was about what the Democratic winner had spent on the platform. The analysts compared the batch of targeted Iowans with the publicly available list of people who voted. They came back with what they saw as a solid win. About 3,300 more of the targeted residents had turned out to vote than had been forecast to. The ads, they concluded, had worked, and at a reasonable \$15 per vote. That’s about what Biden had spent nationally in 2020 while defeating Trump, though he spent more per voter in swing states.

To McGowan, the results validated years of work. She is a longtime proponent of circulating news through ad platforms to shape political thinking. Last election cycle, this “boosted news” technique, along with a suite of data-driven practices and huge sums of fundraised money, helped make her a high-profile if controversial figure in Democratic politics. Now, she says, she has left that world behind for journalism—but brought her political toolbox with her.

In its three years of existence, McGowan’s army of sites—collectively called Courier Newsroom—has spent at least \$5 million on Facebook and Instagram ads alone. Backed by billionaire LinkedIn cofounder Reid Hoffman, liberal philanthropist George Soros, and others, McGowan says she raised \$15 million in the first half of this year—and she’s gunning for more.

McGowan’s critics hate what she’s up to. As Caitlin Sutherland, executive director of the right-leaning nonprofit Americans for Public Trust, puts it, trying to mobilize voters is “just not something newsrooms do.”

McGowan doesn’t disagree. She says that’s precisely the problem. Her argument goes like this: Too many newsrooms have lost their way by catering to elite readers and resorting to paywalls. (A rarity a decade ago, now about three-quarters of US newspapers have them.) Meanwhile, more than 2,000 newspapers across the country have closed since 2004, leaving scores of Americans without the sort of trusted information that might propel them to the polls. Instead, about 80 million people who could have voted in the high-stakes election between Donald Trump and Joe Biden didn’t. To her, it’s self-evident that the journalism world should use every

possible tactic to nudge reluctant voters to the ballot box. That idea, though, is breaking the minds of some of journalism's purists, who worry it could backfire—shattering what remains of the public's trust in the press.

Megan McCarthy launched Dogwood with McGowan and is vice president of content at Courier.

Photograph: Jared Soares

On McGowan's left arm is a tattoo, in all caps, of the words "Yes We Can." She'd asked former president Barack Obama to write his campaign slogan on her skin, then told him mid-scribble of her plan to ink it; the "Can" is noticeably neater. A journalism and political science double major, she had worked for Obama as a digital producer on his 2012 reelection campaign and parlayed that experience into a series of jobs in politics, including as the digital director for NextGen America, the climate change organization founded by billionaire Tom Steyer, and as director of digital strategy for Priorities USA Action, the massive pro-Hillary political action committee.

McGowan built a reputation as a digital expert willing to try new things. She and many others thought the left had grown dangerously complacent since Obama's internet-powered victory in 2008. After Trump's upset in 2016, she started an organization called Acronym, which was largely geared toward making sure he and others like him wouldn't win again. The group came to focus on digital advertising tools and was known for aggressively testing exactly which ads worked and sharing the results with others on the left.

But as McGowan tells it, she hated the churn-and-burn of this work—perpetually raising cash to pour into last-ditch online ads meant to pick off a few persuadable voters. She wanted to create something more lasting. Four years ago, she coauthored a report with [Eli Pariser](#), a progressive organizer best known for his 2011 book *The Filter Bubble*, which argued that the algorithm-driven internet [was trapping Americans](#) in ideological echo chambers. McGowan and Pariser's report took the position that Democrats were quickly losing power in the United States because they'd neglected to figure out how to navigate that changing landscape. Progressives had opted

for bursty spending on TV ads over the right's investment in "always-on, more digitally fluent media infrastructure."

McGowan wanted to build that kind of infrastructure. She raised a bit of money to build a pilot demonstration in Virginia, where Democrats had a shot at retaking the legislature. Called [Dogwood](#), after both the state flower and tree, it would be aimed at women living in the suburbs and beyond, a constituency that can swing elections there.

The site started pumping out a mix of politics and lifestyle coverage, very much in the vein of a pre-internet local newspaper. Right away McGowan and her team had to contend with what researchers call Americans' increasing "news avoidance"—they don't like to read the news, and they especially don't like to read about politics.

While planning a social media "boosting" program, Courier employees ran through their targeted audience sizes and other details.

Photograph: Jared Soares

"Our audiences are not being reached by factual news information," McGowan tells me when we meet up at DC's Generator Hotel on one of her visits from her Rhode Island home. It's imperative, she argues, to chase people wherever they are online. She opened her brown eyes wide and spoke uncharacteristically slowly to make sure I got it: "If we don't target them, they won't see it."

Critics howled about a PAC masquerading as a journalistic outfit. McGowan was undeterred. She secured more money and launched sites tailored to unlikely voters [in other political hot spots](#): Arizona's The Copper Courier, for Latinas and Indigenous women in Maricopa County; North Carolina's Cardinal & Pine, for rural communities of color; and Florida's Floricua, for Puerto Rican women.

The Courier newsrooms rolled along until the winter of 2020. By then Acronym had grown into a massive organization; one offshoot was a campaign tech shop called Shadow, which had won a contract to build an app that could report the Democratic Party's caucus results. But [at the](#)

[critical moment, it failed](#), which—when coupled with data errors unrelated to Shadow’s work—delayed results for three days. McGowan took enormous heat in the press and from liberal circles, which she believes was unfair: For one thing, she wasn’t Shadow’s CEO.

McGowan found few defenders in professional Democratic networks, deepening her dislike of DC as an immensely backstabby place. When stories popped up claiming she was trying to throw the caucuses for Pete Buttigieg, for whom her husband worked, she felt she got a lesson in how quickly bad information spreads.

But McGowan says even she knew she needed to focus. She recalls Obama’s 2008 campaign manager David Plouffe, then on Acronym’s board and a powerful fundraiser, telling her to learn from Republicans: Nothing of lasting significance had ever been built from inside that party’s establishment. She raised a bit of new money and left Acronym, taking Courier Newsroom with her.

Freshly humbled, McGowan set about rebooting Courier. She came to accept the notion that you can’t be a trusted news organization while being secretive about your donors, and she dug into cleaning up its reputation.

She was in the middle of a long-running fight with a company called NewsGuard. Started in 2018 in part by well-known journalist and Court TV founder Steven Brill, NewsGuard existed to fight the country’s growing misinformation problem with human editorial judgment. The company evaluated online content shops and awarded them red or green ratings. As Brill put it at the time, NewsGuard would take on “a growing scourge that clearly cannot be solved by algorithms.”

At NewsGuard’s launch, Brill’s cofounder had said that their aim was to “tell readers *The Denver Post* is a real newspaper and that the Denver Guardian exists only as a purveyor of fake news.” It’s a tough job: While *The Denver Post* might be a local institution now, it was founded in 1892 as a Democratic organ. To apply a measure of science to that messiness, NewsGuard scores sites on nine criteria. Early on, Courier earned only a 57 out of 100. “This website fails to adhere to several basic journalistic standards,” concluded NewsGuard’s evaluators.

Steven Brill tries to fight misinformation by rating digital content sites on their practices.

Photograph: Jared Soares

They objected to just about everything: Courier's way of gathering and presenting information, its handling of the difference between news and opinion, and the inadequacy of its disclosures of who owns it, how it's financed, who's in charge, and what its conflicts of interest might be. They slapped the sites with a red rating. Meanwhile, some prominent, proudly right-wing sites fare better: The Daily Wire, for example, cofounded by conservative commentator Ben Shapiro, scores a 69.5 and a green rating. When I pressed Brill on what made Courier less legit, he replied that The Daily Wire is "fairly explicit about what they do and don't do."

McGowan wanted another shot. In January 2021, she and Brill joined a Zoom call to hash it all out. According to McGowan, the meeting devolved into "a screaming fight." Brill recalls that McGowan was "condescending, patronizing," and "self-righteous," all while engaging in doublespeak. "She talked about how her life's work is rebuilding trust in institutions," Brill says, "when her life's work is undermining trust in what I consider to be the most cherished institution we have, which is the press."

He's not alone in that view. When I refer to Courier as a news organization in a conversation with Peter Adams, an executive at the nonprofit News Literacy Project, he quickly cautions me against it. His organization, he says, "is pretty careful with the way we use the word *news*," reserving it for those who "strive to be as fair and accurate and transparent as possible." Courier, Adams said, has only "posed" as such. He and Brill continue to object to McGowan's political roots.

Emily Bell, the founding director of Columbia Journalism School's Tow Center for Digital Journalism, is less damning of Courier, at least for now. She oversees studies of "pink slime"—purely partisan outlets masquerading as local news shops. Courier isn't *that*, Bell says. But she's unconvinced it's truly independent. "It's too early to tell," she says. "We're in a period of intense change" regarding "how we target stories and how people receive, share, and discuss news."

In the fall of 2021, McGowan was having breakfast in Lower Manhattan's Bowery Hotel with an NYU journalism professor named Jay Rosen. McGowan wanted the journalism world to take her seriously, and Rosen seemed like a potential ally. He was known for his argument that the news-business norm of the "view from nowhere"—the pretense that journalists operate with no bias or even lived experience—doesn't serve the public. He came to breakfast skeptical of Courier. But he'd been incubating an idea for a new sort of transparency device: a statement of beliefs that would articulate a news organization's actual agenda. He hoped it might help revive the public's trust in the media. Says Rosen, "I wanted to see: How hard is this going to be in practice?"

Over the course of that autumn, Rosen worked with Courier's newsrooms to write up manifestos of sorts detailing what each stood for. One newsroom came out in support of workers' rights; another stood up for abortion access. The statements are varying degrees of explicit, but all try to flesh out what their liberalism means in practice.

Posted on each newsroom's website, the statements aren't likely to make their way to many readers, few of whom can be expected to click on the sites' About pages. But the statements are there, and McGowan reasonably argues that their mission articulation—plus disclosures about Courier's funding—go beyond what many news organizations do. With the statements in place, one of her staffers fired off an email to NewsGuard.

But Brill was unmoved. Courier's red rating would stay for now. "It's ridiculous," McGowan says. She decided to move on.

McGowan, in a white jacket, runs a Courier leadership team meeting at a WeWork in DC.

she had to build an audience fast if she wanted Courier's newsrooms to make a mark on the 2022 midterm elections. One obstacle was that Democrats lack some of the right's obvious cultural signifiers—being pro-hunting, churchgoing, antiabortion. (Opposing them has not proven all that galvanizing.) So her editors rely heavily on sense of place. "How do you build bridges with people who don't care about politics? Identity. The right

uses cultural identity,” McGowan says. She could do the same. “What is unifying? Sports teams. State pride.”

Her editors learned quickly that they got the most subscribers from local, cultural coverage—not straight politics—so the sites crank out lifestyle stories: the best places to spot rare birds, a ranking of Iowa’s best gas-station breakfast pizzas, a profile of the Black-owned barbecue spot in a tiny North Carolina town that became the only place to eat after a hurricane hit. After pouring money into making videos for [TikTok](#), McGowan was pleased to see Courier find some traction there: In August alone, Iowa Starting Line’s videos racked up 2 million views. When the time is right, Courier slips in a politics story, such as one on the Republican politicians who voted against funding meant to address the baby formula shortage.

What Courier stories don’t really include, though, is partisan red meat. Sometimes they explicitly emphasize progressive values, as in an interview in Michigan’s [The ’Gander](#) in which faith leaders discuss how abortion access is part of their religious traditions. It’s an attempt, the site’s Grand Rapids-based editor says, to counteract the “Michigan nice” quality of women in the state that leads them to avoid tough political conversations. It’s also, less obviously, a challenge to the idea that abortion is widely controversial, when public opinion polls show that more than half of Americans support it being broadly legal.

Such sly liberalism is by design. [James Barnes](#), Acronym’s former measurement czar, joined the organization in 2019 to swing voters away from Trump, having previously embedded with the Trump campaign as a Facebook employee. Barnes remains one of McGowan’s confidants, and he says a takeaway from his experience is that you don’t have to hammer an audience with talking points: “People who are more informed about what’s going on are more skeptical, harder to convince of nonsense.”

Still, getting them to vote takes an extra step. People also need to believe that engaging in politics does them some good, says Leticia Bode, a Georgetown professor and expert on political communication. A withered sense of political efficacy is a sign of an unhealthy civil society. And at last check, almost half of all Americans say there’s not much ordinary citizens can do to influence how the government runs.

That's why, barreling toward the US's midterm elections, Courier is pumping out stories to counter that fatalism. The Copper Courier [wrote about](#) how Latino voters in Arizona had helped Biden become the first Democrat to win the state since Bill Clinton. Cardinal & Pine showed how, in a "[rare bit of bipartisanship](#)," North Carolina members of Congress had pushed the Treasury Department to ease restrictions on using Covid-19 funding for affordable housing. *Deign to pick your elected leaders and here's what they can do*, goes the thinking. To make sure those stories reach their intended audiences, McGowan isn't relying only on ads; she's hiring what she calls content organizers to tap the social networks of their would-be allies—nonprofit groups, mostly—to help distribute stories as part of what they're calling Good Info Messengers.

"The best antidote to [disinformation](#)," McGowan says, "is increasing the volume of good, factual information" in the places where low-quality information is spreading. It's a stark departure from the assumption long held in Congress, Silicon Valley, and European capitals that the answer is content moderation by the platforms themselves. Damon McCoy, an engineering professor at NYU, helps run the school's Cybersecurity for Democracy project, which tries to identify and offer solutions to vulnerabilities in online platforms that let misinformation spread. "One of the things that's starting to dawn on us," he says, "is that misinformation takes hold where there's a lack of credible news sources." In those news deserts, what people find "is fly-by-night, opportunistic misinformation and disinformation campaigns."

McCoy says injecting local news into those information vacuums makes sense to him, but he points out the obvious catch: Local journalism isn't cheap. The free market has largely failed to pay for it, so McGowan has found a way to pull money from the political realm to help foot the bill. For now.

Which raises the question of what funders want. Dmitri Mehlhorn is a political adviser to Reid Hoffman, the venture capitalist and LinkedIn cofounder. Shortly after Trump took office the two started a funding group called Investing in US, aimed at funding entrepreneurs on the left. Mehlhorn has argued that Trump was the master manipulator of a press that

bent over backward to prove its objectivity. Like McGowan, Mehlhorn gets criticized for using tactics that “might cause us to become like those we are fighting,” he says. But he thinks experimentation is necessary to get at “the low-information voters Tara is trying to reach.”

McGowan, for her part, worries that donors like Hoffman will judge the threat of Trump as over and move on, taking their money with them. So far, Courier says it has 900,000 subscribers across Facebook, Instagram, and its email lists, with more than 35 journalists—including about a dozen on a central team supporting the local newsrooms—pumping out some 400 pieces of content a week. But McGowan knows she’ll have to go far bigger to justify everything she and others have been investing in Courier.

If Good Information’s strategy seems to stand on wobbly ground, there’s a reason. McGowan’s project perches atop a series of complex bets—all of which need to pay off for her to succeed.

Her first and biggest wager is that news consumption can shape how people vote. It’s informed by a landmark 2006 study on what its authors called the Fox News effect. The researchers found that once the 24-hour-a-day conservative cable channel showed up in markets across the country, its steady drip of coverage was enough to convince 200,000 people to vote Republican who otherwise wouldn’t have—enough to make George W. Bush president.

Her next bet has longer odds but is backed up anecdotally and by top Democrats. The idea is that Republicans have spent decades studying the news consumption habits of would-be voters and building media relationships with them through wildly popular sites like The Daily Wire, which has about 33 million monthly visitors, and Breitbart, which has roughly 80 million. Democrats have nothing even close—the biggest might be MSNBC.com, with about 22 million monthly visitors. Jason Goldman is a former Twitter executive and White House chief digital officer who says that’s the reason he joined Good Information’s advisory committee. “There’s a whole world of voters we’re just not talking to,” he says.

Her next assumptions become more of a series of leaps. McGowan argues that Americans are turned off from voting because of a rise in

misinformation—such as the idea that Trump won the 2020 election—and a decrease in good information, the straightforward reporting that helps citizens understand who their local representatives are. Certainly Americans’ trust in Washington to “do what is right” has been on a slow decline since the Kennedy era, and charts tracking the metric since 2000 resemble lemmings plunging off a cliff. But can more reporting help reverse the decline? That’s hard to prove.

McGowan’s belief that Democrats will win if she can simply get more people to vote isn’t outlandish, but it depends hugely on which voters are turned out where. That they will trend left is a piece of Democratic conventional wisdom, not a fact of life. And the biggest bet—that people can be convinced to turn out if only they have more fairly dry information, only loosely ideological in thrust—is at this point the gamble of her career.

This summer, McGowan had a meeting with White House chief of staff Ron Klain. (“An old friend,” Klain calls McGowan in an email.) Heading to the meeting, she tells me she sees President Biden clinging to an old model, where to break through with the public he just needs to win over a handful of national reporters at traditional big-name institutions. “He still lives in a world a lot of the people I meet live in, which is, ‘It was better before. Why can’t we just do that again?’” she says.

She went in intending to ask if the White House might open up a bit to Courier’s journalists, to help “lift up information about the impacts of the infrastructure bill, things of that nature.” She declines to discuss the details of her conversation with Klain, but she says she came out of the meeting feeling like the administration’s messaging struggles are an opportunity for Courier, if she can convince top progressives to give her a chance.

I offhandedly mention to her that just that morning, Florida governor Ron DeSantis had said, “The thing people need to understand about these legacy DC, New York outlets is: We don’t care what you think anymore.” To me it seemed a bit of Republican bluster about the irrelevance of the mainstream press. But to McGowan, DeSantis is savvily reading the landscape: He gets what he needs from Fox News, Breitbart, and the like. She says she’ll judge that Courier has failed if, in a few years—around the time of the 2024 elections—her newsrooms don’t occupy a similar space.

The stakes, though, are a fair bit higher. At issue is not so much the future of journalism as the future of cynicism. In her own, fraught way, McGowan is testing whether it's still possible to combat the noise ceaselessly filling Americans' heads and hammering the message that apathy is a reasonable response to the state of the world. The alternative—that citizens are fated to only grow more disconnected from the news of the day and less invested in the country's fate—is almost too distressing an outcome to contemplate.

This article appears in the November 2022 issue. [Subscribe now](#).

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Sep 15, 2022 9:00 AM

What Modern Humans Can Learn From Ancient Software

Retrocomputing is about more than nostalgic nerdery. It's also a way to keep your tech in perspective.

Illustration: Elena Lacey

Did you know that you can, right now, for free, go to Archive.org, the great online library of all things, and load up within your web browser an ancient, decrepit emulated computer—[a DOS box](#) from 1991, a black-and-white Mac, a green-and-black Apple II—and run the WordPerfect of yore, boot old HyperCard stacks, or use 1979's VisiCalc as God intended?

Perhaps this does not seem miraculous to you. Fair. Moore's law has taken us from 250 billion or so CPU chucks per year on the earliest Macs to a quintillion potential clock cycles on a good gaming PC, a healthy 4,000,000X increase. Anyone with sense might reasonably ask, *What? Why use a shiny new computer to run old spreadsheets?* And I might nod and shrug, but inside I am a translucent plastic iMac of emotion. Because it is, I think, important to [emulate](#).

You can learn history by *reading books* and *visiting museums*; you might even walk a battlefield. But you can't understand software from screenshots any more than you can understand music from album reviews, or baseball from box scores, or Rome from watching gladiator movies, much as you might enjoy gladiator movies. When you boot up a virtual version of [a Macintosh from 30 years ago](#), you share in the lived experiences of millions

of ancient humans. You can see how they spent their paltry CPU budget to fill their low-resolution screens.

You learn their priorities. They started batch processing, running programs as lumps of code, but as soon as CPUs allowed, they made them interactive, alive. Even if those were just green numbers on a screen, à la VisiCalc. As soon as they could, early users went post-textual, pictographic—pointing at things with the mouse, Spartan virtue abandoned for Athenian excess. Later, in Moore’s glut, we spent new CPU cycles on color or networking or sound, progressing from beeps to playing CDs to MP3s.

Emulation reminds me to ask myself whether the computing *experience* is always getting better. I’m writing this in Google Docs so my editor’s little round avatar head can peek in and make sure I don’t miss my deadline for once, but I’d *prefer* to write it in WordPerfect 5.1 for DOS, which was the greatest word processor ever—a blank screen illuminated with only letters and numbers, offering just enough bold and italics to keep things interesting. I remember WP51 the way a non-nerd might remember a vintage Mustang. *You could just take that thing out and go, man.*

But it’s more than a museum trip for self-enrichment. Emulation forces me to strip back to basics—to remember that, for most people, computers are tools, not a lifestyle. Whenever I buy a computer, one of the first things I do is set up my software emulation environments, which now involve about a terabyte of old disk images and various operating systems. Keeping that history so close helps me accept the horrible truth that everything novel in our industry was actually invented by a group of Californians sitting in beanbag chairs during the Carter administration. What seems permanent today is as fleeting as, well, Twitter’s Fleets. GAFA becomes FAANG becomes MAMAA. There will be new acronyms before long.

I recall WordPerfect 5.1 the way a non-nerd might recall a vintage Mustang. *You could just take that thing out and go, man.*

Recently, i made the jump from software-based emulation to specialized hardware. I bought a little black metal box, the size of three packs of playing cards, that contains what’s called a field-programmable gate array —shape-shifter circuitry that takes on characteristics of other devices. It’s

purely for simulation of retro machines, including the Commodores Amiga and 64, Atari STs, 486s, and various gaming platforms, which for most people are the main event (Neo Geos, Game Boys, Atari Lynx, all the way back to *Spacewar!* on the PDP-1).

The box is called the MiSTER. It's not a consumer product but rather a folk-created reference platform: If you buy these parts and assemble them, then download some free software and plug in an HDMI card, it becomes an old machine. For this privilege one pays around \$600. It gives me the same joy I imagine people who are into expensive headphones or collect vintage vinyl feel—that sense of something being *more real*. The cores simulate everything, all the little glitches and weirdnesses and timings that make a chip a chip, that make the mouse move like you remember. Watching old code run on a modern big, sharp screen is *hyperreal*. Like a Proustian madeleine, but made by Cinnabon.

It's exciting to see this kind of progress in simulating old computers. We throw away so much history in our field, acres of dumpsters filled with old manuals and disks. Why are we so cavalier about computing history? (Not the Internet Archive; they scan in all the old manuals, bless them.) Are we ashamed? People made that stuff, all of it, people like you and me, just a little older and working in much slower development environments.

I have a musician friend, an actually cool person who has done cool things like DJ in Europe, and we talk a great deal about synthesizers. I think of synths as computers that have their priorities straight: Hit a key and a noise comes out. In a synth (or sequencer or drum machine), genealogy is valuable. New models are supposed to carry on the legacy of the ones that came before. People want their cowbell to sound like *the* cowbell. Purchasing a synth is about joining a lineage, aligning your sound with that of thousands of people who've used similar machines. I guess that's the difference between culture and marketing.

Watching synth heads proudly talk about every machine from the 1970s—well, honestly, it's a lot. But it's interesting to observe a subculture that wants continuity more than disruption. In my perfect world, every machine would come with a few emulated versions of its predecessors, ready to go, right on the disk. There's plenty of room. No one would need to set

anything up or buy a special device. And that way everyone could see how incredibly far we've come, and how surprisingly little we change.

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Sep 13, 2022 9:00 AM

The Vast Wasteland of Internet Television

When TV came online in the aughts, it was exciting. Then Facebook took over.

Photograph: Shawn Michael Jones

In September 2005, a fun film editor named Robert Ryang took *The Shining* and cut together a new trailer for it, making the axe-driven horror flick seem like a [sweetheart family movie](#). [YouTube](#) hadn't broken out of beta yet, so Ryang posted his humor gem to a private quarter of his employer's website and gave some friends a dotmov link. One of them posted the link to his blog, and Ryang was an overnight sensation.

The New York Times took notice, observing with awe: "His secret site got 12,000 hits." Ryang also achieved the highest goal of 20th-century humankind: He started getting calls from Hollywood. HELLO, IT'S HOLLYWOOD.

I was a TV critic in those days, and when I first saw Ryang's masterwork—*buffering, buffering*—I wasn't sure if I was eligible to review it. Was this digital item a show, a movie, an ad, maybe a web page? While I mulled the question, I created a folder called "Internet Television."

Months went by, and YouTube officially launched. Could it be? The near-erotic fantasy of "convergence"—the moment when the internet and television finally fused in a kind of mundane Singularity—had arrived. In June 2006, I wrote on my own blog that people finally seemed "ready to

accept video on computers.” Four months later, Google acquired YouTube for \$1.65 billion. The original World Wide Web, a static, low-bandwidth, verbal system of hyperlinks, was over.

The near-erotic fantasy of “convergence”—the moment when the internet and television fused in a kind of mundane Singularity—had arrived.

since then, “internet television,” a phrase I tried in vain to make happen, has pitched its tent everywhere. Video defined so-called Web 2.0, the only internet many of us have ever known. And it now accounts for some 82 percent of online traffic. It’s not just YouTube, Instagram, and Snap; even verbal apps, where the stock-in-trade is still words—from quips (Twitter) to marketing palaver (LinkedIn)—are ablaze with video.

But one app has never quite managed moving pictures: [Facebook](#). The company acquired Instagram in 2012, the same year it went public, and it seemed to believe that its image-and-video bases were covered.

From the start, Facebook had differentiated itself from MySpace and then Tumblr—emo, image-heavy sites that could tilt into porn—by catering to the lower-bandwidth, more earnest consumers of words. Its users were heavily incentivized to keep things clean and disclose real names, real bios, real birthplaces, real jobs.

Facebook’s bedrock commitment to text helped it spread its monster empire to populations underserved by broadband. (People without big data plans still have trouble seeing pictures on Facebook’s mobile app.) The app’s texty interface also sealed its rep as a site for plain facts and grandma-friendly content.

These rule-the-world strategies had a devastating, if unintended, consequence: They left a population of hundreds of millions, and ultimately 2.9 billion, vulnerable to deceit. People whose first and main contact with the internet was Facebook were just not ready when the platform got seized with especially consequential disinformation in 2015. They were easily tricked. They’d come to accept what they saw there as facts—as empirical as a name and number in an employee directory, or a college … facebook.

The same users were also sitting ducks for editing mischief when Facebook *did* start pushing video with Facebook Watch and other streaming products and partnerships. (If I'd first seen Ryang's trailer posted by an aunt on Facebook, I swear I might have taken it straight, decided I'd always misunderstood *The Shining*, and teared up at "Solsbury Hill.")

Then there are the geezers. In the US, the average age of a Facebook user is 40.5. Among American youngs, Facebook seems as Garrison Keillor did to MTV fans in the '80s—squarer than square.

All of this—the disinfo, the graying, the squareness—has made what's now Meta increasingly nervous about its flagship app. In 2020, [Instagram mugged TikTok](#) of its looping video for Reels, which Meta now hellishly promotes. In 2021, Mark Zuckerberg announced that the company would be inching away from social media altogether, toward, of all things, [virtual reality](#). In an internal memo from April of this year, leaked to The Verge, Meta announced plans to radically renovate Facebook's interface. As of July 21, feeds course not with homespun updates by friends or "friends" but viral videos by celebrities and the influenceriat.

Then, just six days after those UI changes dropped, the Grim Reaper came for Meta. For the first time since the company went public in 2012, its obscene growth stopped dead. And in the third quarter its revenue could be as much as \$4.5 billion less than analysts had predicted. That's nearly three times what the company paid for Instagram.

the new coke overhaul of Facebook, from social media to looping video and VR, has been a bust so far. Perhaps the full-court video press was just late. Perhaps TikTokking out and sidelining family-vacation updates and requests to the "hive mind" for autumn decor inspo came off like a betrayal to Facebook's fortysomething base.

But in retrospect maybe all of this was foretold. Social media, helmed by Facebook, first presented itself as a new wave of populist content, eccentric infotainment made by regular Jaydens and workaday Ashlees. It was democratic media, without high barriers to entry, steep production costs, an impenetrable star system, or commercials. Kids short on cash or access

could find their voices, find their tribes (oh, that decade and its tribes), and *connect*.

But look at that: Social media is now shot through with sketches and music videos made by rich personal brands and consumed by a passive audience that gets iron-skilletted with ads. The convergence I once cheered on has reinvented a medium that reminds me of something from my youth. It's almost like network TV. Like the idiot box. Like a "vast wasteland," as the FCC chair called American television, in 1961.

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Sep 9, 2022 7:00 AM

Am I Wrong to Judge People for Talking to Me in Emoji?

WIRED's spiritual advice columnist reassures a literary reader that it's OK to communicate with images.

Illustration: Jan Siemen

“Not only do I refuse to speak in symbols—emoji, bitmoji, likes, reactions, whatever—I also judge people who do. Is this fair? With AI image generators like Dall-E Mini going mainstream, it’ll only get easier to communicate in images. I’m afraid we’re losing something essential, like actually having something to say.”

—Wordsmith

Dear Wordsmith,

Your question assumes that there is a clear boundary between written languages and images, which, I’m sorry to point out, isn’t true. Many writing systems, including cuneiform and Mandarin Chinese, originated with pictograms. While it may be difficult at present to express complex ideas in [emoji](#) (excluding the successes of some enterprising artists who have, for example, translated *Moby-Dick* and the Bible into the vernacular), there’s nothing to stop these Unicode symbols from evolving into a full-blown language. I could also point out, as many linguists have, that modern languages like French were dismissed as “artificial” in their early days, or that all the hand-wringing about textspeak, reactions, and GIFs echoes

earlier anxieties that some new development—the printing press, writing itself—was going to make humanity regress into a herd of gurgling simians. Even Nabokov, whose titanic vocabulary contained words such as *pavonine* (peacock-like), *callipygian* (having beautiful buttocks), and *logodaedaly* (the arbitrary or capricious coining of words), once argued that English would benefit from a typographical symbol for the smile.

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Even if GIFs and emoji are objects of misplaced scorn, I don't think you're entirely wrong in fearing that our relationship to language is changing. [Dall-E Mini](#), which swallows up words and spits out pictures, is itself a metaphor for how visual media is replacing text as our culture's dominant form of expression. This shift started long before the internet, of course, but images clearly thrive in digital spaces. The picture's capacity to convey "a thousand words" is a palpable advantage at a moment when an article beyond that length tends to receive a TL;DR. Compared to the plodding linearity of language, images have what [Marshall McLuhan](#) (another genius of neologisms) called "allatonce," the quality of communicating multiple complex ideas and emotions in an instant. Like many forms of electronic media, images call on multiple senses and can convey disparate concepts within a single frame—a quality that has arguably reached its zenith in Dall-E's surrealist mashups.

If more people prefer to communicate in images, it's not because these individuals lack "something to say," as you put it. Quite the opposite, it is because visuals are a more immediate and effective means of articulating the fully embodied human experience, especially in the rapid-fire exigencies of the digital era. "At the high speeds of electronic communication," McLuhan wrote, the old skills of literacy and the written word "are no longer possible; they are just too slow to be relevant or effective." That McLuhan's insight has survived for more than half a century in the dusty medium of a book suggests there are important

exceptions to this rule. And despite the widespread belief that language and images are facing off in a Manichaean battle, I'm not convinced that words themselves are the problem. People are still eager as ever for verbal output when it's embodied in a human voice, as evidenced by the explosion of podcasts over the past decade or so. The popularity of voice texts among [Gen Z](#) (a phenomenon documented in many articles read only by middle-aged people) similarly indicates that plain old words, when housed in the warmth of vocal acoustics, are more compelling than the spectrum of GIFs and emoji.

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Perhaps the question is not why images are more appealing than language, but why writing and reading—be it long-form articles, text messages, or Twitter threads—have come to inspire so much dread. Everyone knows that online reading habits have devolved into a slog of skimming, scanning, and power-browsing, a problem that has generated such a mammoth corpus of op-eds and think pieces that one need only glance at it to corroborate this truth. The specter of postliteracy has led many people to conclude that writing has entered its senescence and, until it finally expires, is best employed in its most minimal, functional forms: texting generic acronyms in lieu of more idiosyncratic expressions or deploying Gmail's auto replies instead of responding in one's own written voice. Publications have tried to weather the ravages of the attention economy by shortening articles and streamlining language, creating “content” that is as efficient and frictionless as possible—the logic being, presumably, that an off-putting meal will be more readily digested if it's pureed into liquid and slurped through a straw. In fact, Wordsmith, for all your anxiety that image generators like Dall-E will replace the written word, logophiles have more to fear from language algorithms like [LaMDA](#) and [GPT-3](#), which are poised to produce much of this content in the future and eradicate the last traces of human eccentricity that still—occasionally, miraculously—find their way into published prose.

The tech blogger Ben Dickson has argued that GPT-3's ability to fool readers into believing its output was human-written isn't proof of its

sophistication, but evidence of our impoverished expectations. “As we have come to rely on algorithms to curate our content, our own writing has become optimized for those algorithms,” he writes. If images increasingly feel like promising alternatives to writing, perhaps that’s a sign of how far we’ve strayed from the electric possibilities of the written word, and how thoroughly we’ve become inured to mechanical prose that lacks the quirks of an active mind and the vitality of a writer’s voice. Many people believe, as you do, Wordsmith, that abstaining from images is a kind of ascetic virtue that will save the written word from extinction. In truth, writing’s lone hope for redemption lies in the hands of writers who are willing to fully exploit its possibilities and rediscover those emotive and embodied dimensions that we seek in all forms of expression.

McLuhan once wrote that “clear prose indicates the absence of thought,” an insight that seems to prophesy the mindless lucidity of algorithmic output and the transactional formality of auto replies. Some 40 years after his death, McLuhan’s prose still grips the reader with its zigzag logic, restless vacillations between high and low registers, and flashes of aphoristic wisdom, all of which enjoin us to participate, with all of our senses, in the creation of meaning. It’s no coincidence that the man who coined the phrase “the medium is the message” understood that language, one of our oldest technologies, is not merely a translucent container for ideas but a vital part of the author’s communicative content. When a writer does manage to capture that immediacy, and when a reader encounters—or is struck by—language infused with the full breadth of human consciousness, the effect is every bit as urgent as today’s most arresting visual media, and makes the static emoji smile appear, by comparison, like so much cheap punctuation.

Faithfully,

Cloud

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Sep 6, 2022 6:00 AM

Would You Ditch All This Chaos for a Country in the Cloud?

Balaji Srinivasan—technologist, investor, prophet, troll—says let the old world sink. Find your tribe and build your bespoke society, or get left behind.

Illustrations: Eddie Guy

You, the protagonist, are on a small fishing schooner off the coast of Norway. This is an Edgar Allan Poe story, so things aren’t going well. Your ship is trapped in a mile-wide whirlpool that grinds whales into pesto. Your younger brother just drowned in a perfunctory half-sentence. Your elder brother is clinging to a ringbolt near the bow. You’re astern, hanging on to a lashed-down empty water cask. The ship rides the maelstrom like it’s in the Indy 500, keel centripetally pinned to the black lane of water. Up to one side is the whirl’s edge, open sky, a brilliant moon. Down to the other is a rainbow, which smiles across the roiling mist of the abyss.

Fear has driven your brother mad. You, however, take this chance to reflect on the romantic hopelessness of your situation. Turning and turning in the narrowing gyre, you begin to feel that you could get *excited* about dying this way, about being consumed by this great vortex of violent energy. It’s pretty fucking tremendous, right? Aren’t you and your brother lucky, in a way, to be finding out what’s down there?

But the run-me-over moment passes. You start contemplating the other debris that got sucked into the vortex along with your ship—home furnishings, construction materials, the snapped-off trunks of trees. Some

stuff plunges quickly down into the funnel. Some stuff holds its place. Smallish cylindrical things, you notice, hardly descend at all. And look, here you are atop one of Poe's favorite cylindrical literary devices, a cask.

You signal your brother to join you, waving an arm as if to semaphore: *Hop on! I found us a ride!* He refuses to let go of the ringbolt. Grief-stricken but stoic, you lash yourself to the cask and wait for your moment. When it comes, you cut loose into the unknown alone.

You watch the ship spiral down and disappear below you. The maelstrom subsides. Hair gone prematurely white, you live to tell your tale to a reporter.

This article appears in the October 2022 issue. [Subscribe to WIRED](#) Illustration: Eddie Guy

Marshall McLuhan, the adopted seer of Silicon Valley—and at one time WIRED's official [patron saint](#)—loved this story of Poe's. Employed as a professor of English in Canada, he understood his job as awakening the masses to the “vortices of energy” exerted by different communication technologies (TV and film, radio, the printed word) and helping people “program a strategy of evasion and survival.” He preached that participants in “the electric age” must be like Poe’s fisherman. “Pattern recognition in the midst of a huge, overwhelming, destructive force is the way out of the maelstrom,” McLuhan once told a roomful of students. They had two choices: Learn to make the leap, or die paralyzed by the whirl.

It's a shame that Saint Marshall didn't live to tweet. What would he have said as he watched the electric age become the networked age, the age of a dirt-cheap, globe-spanning communication technology riding around in people's pockets? What patterns would he have spotted as the great human network—with its [political enmities](#), [racial hatreds](#), [economic uncertainties](#), [climate fears](#), [wars](#), [pandemics](#)—drove the walls of the maelstrom higher? What buoyant objects might he have pointed out on deck? When would he have said to jump?

The story you're reading now is not about McLuhan or his obsession with vortices. This story is mostly about Balaji Srinivasan, a technologist and

investor in his early forties, who does tweet, prodigiously.

Srinivasan has worn many identities in public—biomedical entrepreneur, Stanford professor, venture capitalist, crypto exec, potential head of Donald Trump’s Food and Drug Administration, Covid sage, gadfly up the nose of *The New York Times*. But I’d say his true calling is that of an ideological cooper. He develops flotation devices for escaping the maelstrom. In this too he is prodigious. When he first appeared on *The Tim Ferriss Show*, a podcast hosted by the author of *The 4-Hour Workweek*, he spotted patterns and prophesied the future almost uninterrupted for nearly four hours. This is typical, a former coworker of his told me; it’s called “getting Balaji’d.” Earlier this year, Srinivasan synthesized his thoughts into a book called *The Network State*, which is meant to provide some of the equipment and coaching you need to cut loose from this doomed schooner.

Balaji Srinivasan: “We want to be able to peacefully start a new state for the same reason we want a bare plot of earth, a blank sheet of paper, an empty text buffer, a fresh startup.”

Photograph: Steve Jennings/Getty Images

Of course, Srinivasan isn’t the only one in this business. You, the consumer, have an Ikean abundance of casks to choose from these days. And like a lot of people, you may be questioning whether the traditional manufacturers (media corporations, major political parties, institutions generally) are really putting out the most watertight stuff. Maybe you’ve furtively checked out a few competing models over the years. Could this reclaimed-wood Occupy cask be your ride out? Or this splintery democratic-socialist one? Or this polyethylene drum that says TRUMP in gilt letters on the side? Should you consider the communal living cask, the digital nomadism cask, the prepper cask? Is a Bitcoin key more buoyant than a bank account?

At first glance, Srinivasan’s barrel may not stand out from the pile on deck. It seems to be made of a fairly typical techno-libertarian composite material—some mix of disdain for institutions, fear of wokeism, zeal for engineering, and lots of “personal runway” (i.e., enough money to buy an actual runway).

But look closer. Like a Dr. Bronner's soap bottle, the cask is covered with curious utterings. *Transcendence requires self-defense ... The more mobile we are, the more cheaply we can change our law ... A fractal polity is nuke-resistant ...* As you trace the words with your fingers, you begin to understand why Srinivasan is known—among his nearly 700,000 Twitter followers, among founders and VCs from Singapore to Sand Hill Road, among the kings and queens of crypto—as something of a mystic.

[Software Is Reorganizing the World](#)

Balaji Srinivasan

Plaintext

[Silicon Valley Conservatives Are Stepping Out of the Shadows](#)

Steven Levy

just dao it

[Paradise at the Crypto Arcade: Inside the Web3 Revolution](#)

Gilad Edelman

But what kind of reality is this cask made for? Where McLuhan looked out from the deck of the schooner and saw a “huge, overwhelming, destructive” spiral, Srinivasan sees something far more tidy—a corkscrew. “I have this concept that all progress actually happens on the z-axis,” he has said. (That’s the imaginary axis that comes out at you from the page of the math textbook.) What does he mean? That what feels to many people like the punishing cyclicity of capitalist technological life—industries disrupted, lives upended, societies undermined—is just a series of twists toward a grand goal. Humanity makes headway by going in circles. Srinivasan calls this his “helical theory of history.”

To puny mortal brains, the grand helical motion is visible as “unbundling and bundling” or “decentralization and centralization.” Srinivasan likes to quote a dotcom executive who said this is the only way to make money: Either you take something whole, dismantle it, and sell the parts, or you take some parts, put them together, and sell a whole. Srinivasan sometimes

cites the example of the CD, which got unbundled into the MP3, which got rebundled into the Spotify playlist. “That’s the cycle that happens in computing,” he says. “That happens in history. It happens in technology. And I think it’s also happening here with nations and with states and so on.”

Yes, my fellow cask shoppers, the nation-state is unbundling. The weary giants of flesh and steel came down with what Srinivasan calls “civilizational diabetes,” and Covid has delivered the coup de grâce. The end won’t be pretty, he predicts. The gerontocracy will hoard power. The dreams of the masses for a happier, safer future will be frustrated. Crises will go unsolved. Potential will curdle into despair. But in the face of it all, Srinivasan tells Ferriss, he is here to teach us how to be “square-jawed Chads.” (We’ll get to who “we” are later.) He’s here to work toward “the great acceleration as opposed to the great stagnation.” He’s here to deliver a message to all followers of Saint Marshall: The time to jump is now.

What awaits us beyond the maelstrom, far along the *z*-axis, at the corkscrew’s end? Government by the internet, for the internet, and of the internet—a new birth of freedom in the cloud. Srinivasan’s book, published on the anniversary of the US Declaration of Independence, is a how-to guide for building startups, where the thing being started up is a new society. His own cloud country, if he were to found one (which may be more of a “when”), would be based on three ideals: “infinite frontier, immutable money, eternal life.” He has called this his “bumper sticker that expands into a PhD thesis.” It’s also his Twitter bio.

Is this the cask for you? Perhaps not. Maybe you’d sooner go down with the ship. But some of the squarest-jawed Chads on deck say the cask has qualities worth considering. And if you’ve paid any attention to Srinivasan during the last few gut-wrenching turns around the vortex, you have to admit: The guy careens, but he sure doesn’t sink; if anything he’s been ascending. So hop on for a turn. See what you like about this cask and what you hate. Maybe you can jot down some ideas for building your own one day.

Before we get to the lab-grown meat of this thing, a disclaimer: You’re best off not trusting a word I write about Srinivasan. The one time I spoke with

him, in a refereed conversation he insisted take place on Clubhouse, he compared my profession to that of the East German secret police.

I am what Srinivasan calls a “corporate journalist.” I am an editor at WIRED, which is owned by a media company called Condé Nast, which is owned by a media company called Advance Publications, which is hereditarily owned by the Newhouse family (may they live forever and ever, amen). Srinivasan believes that media companies have “set out to compete with tech companies,” jealous that their (our) old-guard influence is waning at a time when Silicon Valley is attracting “all these users” and “all this money.” And because Srinivasan has founded and funded a number of tech companies, much of what a journalist writes about him—or anyone in the industry—should be understood as emerging from a sense of “wounded amour propre.”

How do a bunch of beta English majors expect to win a fair fight with Silicon Valley alphas? We don’t, of course. So we sit up here on the parapets of the First Amendment, this château we inherited along with every other goddamn thing, and take potshots at the hardworking civilization-builders down below. As Srinivasan has said, “Necessity is the mother of defamation.”

Srinivasan seems to respect our craft in the same way an exorcist respects Satan’s. We are quite good at what he calls “surveillance journalism.” We know how to “befriend and betray” our subjects, he says, how to sweet-talk them into embarrassing sound bites. We use the word “subjects” because we consider them—as we consider *you*—to be beneath us. And what do we do, finally, when we have gathered enough kompromat on you? We deploy it like malicious code. We “install software into the brains of your social network and make them turn on you,” Srinivasan says. Which is why it’s important to find out which periodicals your friends care about.

Reader, the Subject is right about us. We will stop at nothing. We’ll spam your acquaintances with interview requests. When almost none of them respond, and most of the ones who do say no, and most of the ones who say yes don’t want to be quoted by name, we’ll turn the weapons of Big Tech on itself. We’ll have an AI transcribe days’ worth of your podcast interviews. We’ll learn enough Python, kind of, to scrape your tweets,

though we won't be able to figure out what to do with the resulting JSON file, and our wounded amour propre will prevent us from asking for help. We'll search doggedly through your old Hacker News comments. We'll take up residence in the Internet Archive. We'll mercilessly consider comments you've made in their historical and social context. We'll come into possession of some emails you wrote and waffle over whether to quote from them, not wishing to be the subject (there's that word again!) of a retaliatory lawsuit.

Point is, don't trust me. Don't trust any of the dozen other Newhouse flacks who worked on this surveillance file. We're the Stasi, and we monetize the lives of others.

Let's begin the operation.

It is a Saturday morning in October 2013. A crowd is gathering at the Flint Center in Cupertino, California. They're here to attend a lecture series and networking event called Startup School, put on every year by the VC firm Y Combinator. For a technologist of a certain age, the venue is akin to Mount Sinai: From the stage here in 1984, Steve Jobs handed down the original Macintosh.

Of the people on today's list of speakers, Srinivasan has one of the lower-wattage names. Jack Dorsey, the Twitter cofounder, is here. He'll talk about how to build a product that "strikes a chord with everyone on the planet," which he'll illustrate by standing at the podium in a half-zipped track jacket for two and a half minutes while the audience listens to a French jazz tune called "Anguish." Paul Graham, a cofounder of Y Combinator, will interview Mark Zuckerberg onstage, and when Zuck describes Facebook's drive to connect the whole world "because it's the right thing to do," Graham will say, "so it's a *movement*."

In other words, Silicon Valley is twisting the corkscrew like there's no tomorrow and generally expecting applause for it. The technocratic liberalism of the Obama era and the platform economies of Big Tech have been enjoying a nerdish cross-country romance for several years. Even jaundiced corporate journalists have occasionally caught feelings for all the talk of hackathons and network effects and health care economics.

But signs of an eventual, acrimonious unbundling have also been swirling for some time. Lehman Brothers went overboard in 2008, and then the global economy went grasping after ringbolts. Six weeks later Satoshi Nakamoto introduced Bitcoin and the idea, both threatening and beguiling, of a trustless decentralized financial system unencumbered by big banks and regulators alike. In *The Wall Street Journal*, Marc Andreessen issued his famous dictum that “software is eating the world.” (Other verbs he used to describe what tech was doing to the existing order included “take over,” “invade,” “eviscerate,” and “crush.”) Occupy Wall Street happened. Peter Thiel, after publishing an essay that questioned whether “freedom and democracy are compatible,” began making donations to Ted Cruz, a Tea Party insurgent running for Texas senator. Steve Jobs died. The writer Rebecca Solnit referred to Google’s private buses as “the spaceships on which our alien overlords have landed to rule over us.”

The romance really began to unravel in the month leading up to Startup School. In Washington, Cruz and other Republicans maneuvered the Democrats into a standoff over Obamacare funding, causing the US federal government to shut down for more than two weeks. Simultaneously, the botched rollout of Healthcare.gov—a would-be Kayak.com for comparing insurance plans—revealed the Obama team to be a hopeless JV squad when it came to building platforms. When the government’s 16-day hiatus barely budged the stock market, a prominent venture capitalist said it was “becoming excruciatingly, obviously clear” that “where value is created is no longer in New York; it’s no longer in Washington; it’s no longer in LA; it’s in San Francisco and the Bay Area.” In Valleywag, Sam Biddle wrote, “This Asshole Misses the Shutdown.” In *New York* magazine Kevin Roose noted that the shutdown cut off essential services for low-income Americans and accused Silicon Valley of having a “dysfunction fetish.”

It is in this charged atmosphere that Srinivasan steps up to the podium. He is dressed sort of like Steve Jobs at an Apple event, which could be a coincidence. When he looks out, he sees a friendly crowd. His mouth seems dry, but he looks confident.

For the past five years, Srinivasan has been living a Silicon Valley bildungsroman. With a group of other young Stanford alums, he founded a

startup called Counsyl, funded by Thiel, among others. It sells genetic tests for expectant parents to help them avoid passing on heritable conditions such as spinal muscular atrophy, sickle cell anemia, and Tay-Sachs disease. Returning to Stanford a triumphant entrepreneur, Srinivasan co-taught a big MOOC called Startup Engineering. (Course description: “Spiritual sequel to Peter Thiel’s CS 183 course on startups.”) *MIT Technology Review* has named him to its “Innovators Under 35” list. He cofounded another company, which is busily, buzzily working on a dedicated chip for bitcoin mining. He’s about to become a general partner at the VC firm Andreessen Horowitz.

The tech industry “arose out of nowhere,” Srinivasan said, “and by accident we’re putting a horse head in all of their beds.”

As Srinivasan’s business profile has grown, his political ideas have undergone a few twists of the corkscrew. In the years to come, he’ll talk especially about a book called *The Sovereign Individual*, recommended to him by Thiel. He appreciates its “strength-to-weight ratio,” how each line rewards exegesis. The authors—James Dale Davidson, an American investor, and William Rees-Mogg, a British baron and longtime editor of *The Times* of London—argue that as digital technology makes wealth increasingly hard to tax, the nation-state will dissolve. Governments and industries will topple. Millions of “losers” and “neo-Luddites” and “left-behinds” will find themselves unemployed, or worse. But in the end, a tiny “cognitive elite” will escape the “tyranny of place” and build a global meritocracy in cyberspace. They will live wherever they please, associate with whomever they please, and keep every tax-sheltered cent they earn. Davidson and Rees-Mogg call this new realm of opportunity “Bermuda in the sky with diamonds.” (Thiel wrote the preface to the 2020 edition.)

Srinivasan [introduces](#) himself to the Startup Schoolers as one of a dozen people with his name in the Bay Area. “I left Stanford in early 2008, scandalizing the department, to found a genomics company, which has become very successful,” he says. But he isn’t here to talk about that. He brings up his slide deck. “What I want to talk about today,” he says, “is something I’m calling ‘Silicon Valley’s Ultimate Exit.’”

Next slide: “Is the USA the Microsoft of Nations? Let’s consider the evidence.” Srinivasan gets a few jokes in: The Constitution is an ancient code base in an “obfuscated language.” There’s “systematic FUD” (Bitcoinese for “fear, uncertainty, and doubt”) about security issues. The software maker treats its suppliers terribly (thumbnails of Saddam and Gaddafi). The audience laughs.

Next slide: “What displaced Microsoft?” Answer: Larry Page and Sergey Brin, the founders of Google. The force that incumbents fear most, Srinivasan says, is “some guys in a garage.”

Srinivasan is en route to the first statement of his big thesis, but he must take a detour through what he calls “a fundamental concept in political science.” He brings up the cover of a book by the late social scientist Albert O. Hirschman called *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*.

Exit, Srinivasan explains, is taking your business elsewhere. It’s emigrating, unbundling, hitting the Back button on your browser. “Voice” is staying and speaking up. It’s citizens voting in elections, customers writing letters to the CEO. Voice and Exit are “modulated” by Loyalty, meaning that if you’re more loyal to something you’re less likely to eye the door.

The United States, Srinivasan explains, has been powerfully shaped by Exit. It’s “not just a nation of immigrants.” It’s also “a nation of emigrants.” The Puritans fled religious persecution; the revolutionaries fled a tyrant king; the Western pioneers fled the “East Coast bureaucracy”; the huddled masses fled pogroms, Nazism, Communism, the American embassy in Saigon. Exit is about “alternatives,” Srinivasan says. It’s about reducing “the influence of bad policies” over people’s lives without “getting involved in politics,” without “lobbying or sloganeering.”

And what other choice is there? The problem, Srinivasan explains, is that Silicon Valley is mired in a battle with what he calls the Paper Belt, “after the Rust Belt of yore.” The Paper Belt includes the entertainment industry (represented by LA), higher education (Boston), finance and media (New York), and government (DC). Against these incumbents, Silicon Valley has been the ultimate garage guy. The tech industry “arose out of nowhere,”

Srinivasan says, “and by accident we’re putting a horse head in all of their beds. Right? We are becoming stronger than all of them combined.”

“Sheesh,” Srinivasan writes. “Clearly this touched a nerve.”

Naturally, Srinivasan continues, the Paper Belt is experiencing a “Paper Jam” and is pointing its finger at the IT department. “They are basically going to try to blame the economy on Silicon Valley—to say that it was the iPhone and Google that done did it, not the bailouts, the bankruptcies, and the bombings.” It’s important to correct the record, Srinivasan says, but no good will come from too much fighting: “They have aircraft carriers; we don’t.” What he’s describing instead, and will keep describing for the next nine years, is an “opt-in society, ultimately outside the US, run by technology.”

The Valley is already moving this way, Srinivasan goes on. Larry Page has talked about a special zone being set aside for unregulated experimentation. Andreessen has predicted that the world will see “an explosion” in the number of countries. Thiel has proposed colonizing the ocean; Elon Musk, colonizing Mars. To partake in the “Ultimate Exit,” Srinivasan says, you could buy a private island or even just telecommute. His final tip to the Startup Schoolers is that if they want to think big, they should build technology “for what the next society looks like.”

Here in Cupertino, the talk seems well (or at least politely) received. People post their notes from Startup School, weaving Srinivasan’s speech in among all the other helpful tips for founders. But in the media, it sets off a klaxon. In Valleywag, Nitasha Tiku (later a WIRED staffer) writes, “This is the Tea Party with better gadgets.” In *New York*, Roose writes that Srinivasan shows signs of a political personality type unique to Silicon Valley. His diagnosis: a “persecution complex” with “undertones of class hostility,” driven by a “secessionist instinct.”

Srinivasan, in an email to the journalist Tim Carmody (also a former WIRED writer), says there has been a misunderstanding. “I’m not a libertarian, don’t believe in secession, am a registered Democrat, etcetera etcetera,” he writes. “There’s nothing wrong with thinking about leaving the country of your birth in search of a better life.” But the damage control

doesn't seem to work. "Silicon Valley Dreams of Secession" reads a headline in Salon. "Silicon Valley Roused by Secession Call" reads one in *The New York Times*. "Silicon Valley Has an Arrogance Problem" reads one in *The Wall Street Journal*.

"Sheesh," Srinivasan writes on a lively Hacker News thread the next day. "Clearly this touched a nerve." He feels a need to clarify his position to a wider audience: "The motivating emotion here isn't arrogance," he writes. "It's one part apprehension," given what typically happens to talented would-be emigrants when the right of Exit is denied (he cites "the Jews in Europe"), and "one part hope, thinking that we can build something better with a clean slate." Over the next two weeks, as *The Economist* warns of "a coming tech-lash," he drafts thousands more words about Exit. And he starts working with an editor at WIRED to condense his ideas into an essay.

At this point, according to my tattered copy of the Stasi employee handbook, I am supposed to sit down at my sad little socialist typewriter and punch out my assessment of how the Subject came to hold his views.

Srinivasan's childhood isn't something he spends "too many cycles on"—that is, cogitates a lot about. He grew up on Long Island in the 1980s, the son of physicians who emigrated from India, and showed an early impatience with institutions. When the libertarian economist Tyler Cowen asked him about his upbringing, he said, "I have this one-liner which says: Life in the United States begins with a 12-year mandatory minimum—the Schoolag Archipelago."

In class, the suburban Solzhenitsyn "was kind of a smart-ass at times." Once, when a physics teacher tried to explain centrifugal force by saying it was like "when you wash clothes in the drying machine," Srinivasan says he raised his hand and asked, "Don't you *dry* clothes in the drying machine?" He recalls this moment as life-changing. "I was trolling him," he says. "I was a kid, but I was also technically correct, which is the best kind of correct." The comment set off a liberating chain of events: It got him kicked out of class, which pushed him into the orbit of a kindly public-school administrator, who let Srinivasan do independent studies in science and math. That taught him "how to self-bootstrap," he says.

In the winter of 2017 Srinivasan finds himself in New York, riding an elevator up Trump Tower for a job interview to run the Food and Drug Administration.

Srinivasan's father had always urged him and his brother Ramji not to go into medicine, but into tech instead. As his mother once noted, Hindu scripture distinguishes between *janmabhoomi*, the land you're born in, and *karmabhoomi*, the land of action. Srinivasan went west, to Stanford. He majored in electrical engineering, dove straight into a master's in the same field, then one in chemical engineering and a PhD; he taught classes in statistics, data mining, and genomic analysis. (According to his brother, he saw the human genome as "the next internet.") All signs pointed to his being a Stanford lifer, clicking through slide decks until his hair and beard took on a Socratic quality.

But what kind of bildungsroman would that have been? In 2007, Srinivasan picked another track: the dorm-room-to-boardroom startup. With his brother and a handful of friends (including another guy named Balaji Srinivasan), he founded Counsyl. A few years later, he had his first appearance in *The New York Times*, which quoted him as saying, "Nothing is more relevant than making sure your child doesn't die from a preventable disease."

Srinivasan's WIRED [essay](#) is published on a Friday morning in November 2013. It runs under the headline "Software Is Reorganizing the World," a friendlier restatement of Andreessen's famous dictum. Where the "Ultimate Exit" talk was like a stump speech, all sharp-elbowed appeals to the base, the essay makes a softer case to the general voter.

"For the first time in memory, adults in the United States under age forty are now expected to be poorer than their parents," Srinivasan begins. "This is the kind of grim reality that in other times and places spurred young people to look abroad for opportunity." Emigrants often used to leave "out of sadness and melancholy," he writes, and remained "homesick for the rest of their lives." His idea of Exit isn't about "going Galt." It's about making a new start and seeking communities of a kind only software makes possible.

Srinivasan describes his vision as the logical culmination of a world where two people can meet on Match.com and then make a life together, or a

handful can meet on Quora and form a housing co-op. “There is no scientific law that prevents 100 people who find each other on the internet from coming together for a month, or 1,000 such people from coming together for a year,” he writes. And as those trends continue, “we may begin to see cloud towns, then cloud cities, and ultimately cloud countries materialize out of thin air.” In the long run, these new polities will also coalesce in physical space—a “reverse diaspora,” in which the far-flung citizens of a cloud nation come together at some x,y coordinate on Earth. The exodus will be frictionless, because software has nullified the tyranny of place. “Nothing today binds technologists to the soil besides other people,” Srinivasan writes.

What, you might wonder, will happen to your current neighborhood, your current town, your current country as people increasingly abandon ship for their own cloud worlds? What will become of the people who can’t or won’t make the switch? The authors of *The Sovereign Individual* are forthright about the violence and disorder that will attend the rise of Bermuda in the Sky With Diamonds. Srinivasan, in WIRED, doesn’t get into it.

But if he hopes that the essay will calm the furor over the “Ultimate Exit” talk, he is quickly disappointed. Less than a day passes before it’s upstaged by the Paper Belt’s latest provocation, an article in TechCrunch called “[Geeks for Monarchy](#). ” The writer, Clint Finley (a longtime contributor to WIRED), mentions Srinivasan, but his story is mostly about the neoreactionaries, a more stridently antidemocratic tribe of bloggers who are popular on certain fringes of Silicon Valley.

Their lead thinker—their most charismatic writer, anyway—goes by the pen name Mencius Moldbug. He was once described to me as “the Machiavelli to Thiel’s Cesare Borgia.” The first post on his blog, *Unqualified Reservations*, in 2007, begins: “The other day I was tinkering around in my garage and I decided to build a new ideology.” Moldbug stands against what he calls the Cathedral, an oligarchic ruling class shrouded in a fig leaf of representative democracy, which includes swaths of traditional media, academia, and government (for all intents and purposes, the Paper Belt). In his vision of the future, called Patchwork, “sovereign corporations” take the

place of nation-states, and CEOs are territorial monarchs with absolute power over everything save their subjects' right to exit. The world becomes a shopping mall of polities.

Moldbug gives a bit more attention than Srinivasan does to the transition from our decrepit political order to the next. It is to be accomplished via RAGE, which stands for "Retire All Government Employees." As for dealing with unproductive members of society, he suggests finding a "humane alternative to genocide"—something that "achieves the same result as mass murder (the removal of undesirable elements from society) but without any of the moral stigma." He imagines imprisoning them in a pleasant VR world, "waxed like a bee larva into a cell."

Finley is careful to avoid unduly implicating anyone in these ideas. "I don't know Srinivasan," he writes, "but it sounds like he'd find neoreactionary views repulsive." This turns out not to be quite true. Within hours of the story going live, Srinivasan is on an email thread about it. Here are some of the people CC'd:

Curtis Yarvin, aka Moldbug, is a programmer. When he isn't on Blogspot toying with birtherism and writing things like "but maybe I've been reading too much Hitler," he works on a software project called Urbit, described as a "clean-slate OS and network for the 21st century." (Thiel and Andreessen Horowitz are early investors.) The point of Urbit is to strip off the cruft and rebuild modern computing from first principles. Usually when you're versioning software, you count up: Version 1.0, 1.1, 1.2. With Urbit, the numbers count down to 0.

Patri Friedman, son of the anarcho-capitalist thinker David Friedman, grandson of the legendary economist Milton Friedman, is the cofounder of the Thiel-funded Seasteading Institute. He sometimes blogs on a site called Let a Thousand Nations Bloom, which is devoted to "a Cambrian explosion in government." He has been talking about Hirschman's Exit/Voice paradigm for years and has called exit "the only Universal Human Right."

Michael Gibson, an apostate academic who works at the Thiel Foundation, is another Hirschman stan. He will shortly cofound the 1517 Fund, named for the year in which Martin Luther, the original Garage Guy, is said to have

posted his 95 Theses on the Cathedral’s door. He describes himself as a “conservative anarchist.”

Blake Masters is a Stanford Law grad who took Thiel’s course when he was a student. His notes on it will soon become the basis for *Zero to One*, a best-selling book on how to run startups and “build the future.” (The original notes include an entry about Srinivasan’s visit to class in 2012, when he talked about the futons-in-the-office stage of creating a successful company.)

Though Srinivasan has gotten off easy in Finley’s article, his sense of threat is palpable in the email chain. He calls the story “extraordinarily dangerous.” He tells the others that they should “unite the clans”—the audiences of various edgelord bloggers—and retaliate against journalists who “dox” them. He seems to imply that this is what Finley’s article did to Yarvin, whose name had been quietly linked with Moldbug’s online for years but not paraded in the press. (Usually, “doxing” also includes publicizing a street address or a phone number or other private information that might enable serious real-world harm, which Finley’s article doesn’t do.) Srinivasan thinks an attack-back strategy could work. “It might mean moving to Singapore though as endgame,” he writes.

Yarvin counsels calm. “Dude, control the frame,” he replies. “If you make a big thing of it, you prove their point.” He tells Srinivasan, “You and I have different vulnerabilities, you because you’re in the closet and I because I’m out of it. Our mission over the next few years is to drag sanity into the mainstream from opposite directions. It’s a long game which rewards patience . . .”

Friedman agrees that inaction is best for now.

Gibson agrees too. (He’s at a wedding in Tahoe.)

Masters doesn’t reply.

Five days later, Moldbug writes a 6,000-word blog post that says, among other things, “No one should ever respond to a journalist. (Or a Stasi-Mann.)”

Illustrations: Eddie Guy

In December 2013, Srinivasan joins Andreessen Horowitz. The VC firm hires him mainly for his crypto savvy, but he also uses his new perch to follow his own advice to the Startup Schoolers—to build the technology stack that the next society will run on. He handles the firm's first investment in civic tech, a company called OpenGov, whose goal is to make the complex workings of local government as simple to understand as an analytics dashboard. He moonlights as the cofounder of a company called Teleport, which is building a geographic search engine for digital nomads. He spends his time “evangelizing” the view that the biggest risk for many tech companies is government regulation.

Srinivasan has to step back from Andreessen Horowitz in 2015 to tend to his bitcoin-mining-chip company, which is in dire straits. (Long story short: The price of the cryptocurrency crashed.) While he is doing so, Thiel becomes a member of Donald Trump’s presidential transition team.

So in the winter of 2017, Srinivasan finds himself in New York, riding an elevator up Trump Tower for a job interview to run the FDA. Srinivasan has recently deleted all of his tweets, including one in which he said that a doctor-run “Yelp for drugs” would work “vastly better than FDA” and another in which he said Trump’s shtick was “amusing” but that the man was “no fan of technology.” All that’s left on Srinivasan’s timeline is a single message for his audience—or is it a mantra for himself? “Don’t argue on Twitter. Build the future.”

I don’t know what Srinivasan and Trump discussed. I asked him about it in our one interview, and he said: “What I think is realistic is to exit the FDA, like we exited the Fed with crypto.” He also said: “Ultimately, the reason that I’ve never joined a government agency is that many of these roles are like white elephants. People are chasing brass rings that have long since been tarnished. And they find themselves in the cockpit of a dysfunctional robot that actually doesn’t do anything. In fact, the only thing it does do is take lots of bullets through the windshield, to mix metaphors. And the thing about that is, I prefer to build things myself.”

Though he does not join the president's inner circle, the Trump years are nonetheless good to Srinivasan. Counsyl, the genomics company, sells for \$375 million, a figure he is not shy about quoting. Even his bitcoin venture turns around: Many eyebrow-raising shifts in strategy (and two name changes) later, he sells the company to Coinbase for \$120 million—and gets himself “acquired” as chief technical officer of the country’s biggest crypto exchange. After barely a year there, during which time he seems to strike many executives as brilliant and some employees as disruptive (the polite way to put it), he leaves. Eventually, he changes his LinkedIn bio to say that he is “angel investing and taking some time off.”

There is a special term for the state of capitalist transcendence that Srinivasan has now attained. Tim Ferriss will use it in their podcast interview. “You’ve sold multiple companies, you’ve had multiple exits,” he says. “You are post-economic, I assume.”

You’re back on that fishing schooner. It’s late 2019. The maelstrom is churning with the flotsam of several years’ worth of America under Trump—and, let’s be honest, several hundred years’ worth of America under various other influences. It’s probably best that you didn’t bring your quadcopter drone with you on board, because if you could look over the lip of the funnel right now, you’d see further trouble on the horizon.

Srinivasan senses it. On January 30, 2020, he tweets out to his roughly 130,000 followers: “What if this coronavirus is the pandemic that public health people have been warning about for years? It would accelerate many preexisting trends.” Those include “border closures, nationalism, social isolation, preppers, remote work, face masks, distrust in governments.” He elaborates in a long thread.

Srinivasan has latched onto his latest, possibly greatest identity: Covid oracle. At a time when the maelstrom seems like a chaotic horror to most people, when media outlets and government officials seem to be putting out more heat than light, he is the confident pattern-spotter. Thanks to his collection of Stanford degrees and his experience setting up a biomedicine company, his analysis is well informed, and it begins attracting him new readers. Most of them are technologists—if not in the US then abroad,

where he has many fans—but even some journalists are climbing down from the château wall to listen to what he has to say.

As he accrues hundreds of thousands more Twitter followers, Srinivasan dispenses short-term advice (work from home, cancel group events, ramp up testing capacity, stop making comparisons with the flu) and long-term gospel, painting the pandemic as a moving sidewalk to the future that he has been talking about since Startup School in 2013. “The virus breaks centralized states,” he says in a talk in the summer of 2020. The world is unbundling into “green zones” and “red zones.” This moment represents the true dawn of the internet age, civilization’s ascension to the cloud.

For Srinivasan, it is also a moment to escalate his war with the journalists of the Paper Belt. He takes to task a reporter at Recode, offering a \$1,000 bitcoin bounty to anyone who can get her Covid article retracted. He offers the same bounty to anyone who can make the best meme about a scrap he recently had with Taylor Lorenz, then a reporter at *The New York Times*. (When I ask him about this during our Stasi interrogation, he says that against the forces of corporate journalism, “a little bit of crypto on the internet is like a gorilla against a tank.”) In early 2021, another *Times* reporter (and former WIRED staff writer) gets into [hot water](#) with the fans of Slate Star Codex, a rationalist blog whose audience has some overlap with Moldbug’s; Srinivasan again rushes to his tribe’s defense. When Slate Star Codex reboots under a new name, Astral Codex Ten, its author writes: “I got an email from Balaji Srinivasan, a man whose anti-corporate-media crusade straddles a previously unrecognized border between endearing and terrifying. He had some very creative suggestions for how to deal with journalists. I’m not sure any of them were especially actionable, at least not while the Geneva Convention remains in effect.”

By that spring, Srinivasan has fulfilled his own prophecy and moved part-time to Singapore.

In a recent review of Srinivasan’s new book, *The Network State*, his friend Michael Gibson calls it “a provocation, an assault, an outcry, a handbook, and a gospel that cannot be ignored.” Srinivasan released it in digital form only, so you can have it as either a traditional ebook (\$9.99) or as a continuously updated [website](#) (free).

Besides being published on the Fourth of July, *The Network State* shares something else with the US Declaration of Independence. While some of the text is a high-minded defense of inalienable rights, much of it is a recitation of historic grievances. Srinivasan describes how a new trifecta of political forces—“crypto capital,” “woke capital,” and “Communist capital,” represented by the initials BTC, NYT, and CCP (for the Chinese Communist Party)—is shaping the world order. He name-checks *The Sovereign Individual* several times, including in a chapter titled “If the News Is Fake, Imagine History.” And he expounds on his helical theories at typical length.

But if, for a moment, you tune out the rants, you may find more to appreciate in Srinivasan’s vision of the future than many did when he first aired it. Where his “Ultimate Exit” talk was an exclusive invitation for technologists to take their toys elsewhere, and his WIRED essay was a sanitized description of a world gently reshaped by new ways of connecting, *The Network State* attempts to address a broad audience, and it acknowledges that the shit is, very urgently, hitting the fan.

You see the future, right? You want to have a kid, so you go enroll in a network state with Nordic-style social benefits.

So what does Srinivasan’s future look like now? Sort of like a world gradually re-created in the image of Reddit. You’ll start out—you probably already have—by spending more and more of your time communing with like-minded people around the planet, forming your own virtual tribe. Maybe you all want to ban guns; maybe you all want your aging parents to be able to try experimental therapies for Alzheimer’s; maybe you all want abortion to be politically off the table, one way or the other. Soon you may find that your friends on the infinite frontier matter more to you than the nameless, sometimes menacing hominids who co-occupy your meatspace. You’ll become part of what Srinivasan calls a “sovereign collective” or a “network union.” *E pluribus unum*, a new bundle born of the great unbundling.

Eventually, whether it’s under duress or in a state of fervor, you and your tribe may move toward founding yourselves a country—not a nation-state but a network state. You’ll code a social smart contract, the terms of which

will guarantee law, order, and whatever freedoms matter to you. If you like, you can crowdfund social goods, like child care or cyberdefense. You can make it possible to interact with your fellow citizens from behind the safety of a pseudonym, maybe with your social reputation stored in the form of karma points on a blockchain. You could make firearm ownership a capital offense, or you could issue every toddler a Glock. When the collective gets strong enough, you might crowdfund a constellation of territories—a “networked archipelago.” At some point, you’ll achieve diplomatic recognition from other states.

You see the future, right? You want to have a kid, so you go enroll in a network state with Nordic-style social benefits in its territories. You want to Crispr human gametes, so you move your lab to a locality without bioethics panels. You want to live in a sugarless society, so you join a state called Keto Kosher. The life you live is constrained only by the people you choose to associate with. And those people, because they have self-bundled with you, will be more eager to reach a political consensus you like than the nameless hominids ever were. If they can’t, you—or they—will simply seek another network state. This kind of polity, Srinivasan writes, “prizes Exit above Voice.”

Albert O. Hirschman, the original coiner of those concepts, didn’t care for prophesiers. He looked down on what he saw as their Warhol-esque desire for airtime. A European Jewish refugee from Nazism, he was similarly wary of the possibility of an Exit-based, Patchwork-style future. “It is possible to visualize a state system,” he wrote in 1978, in which “each country would supply its citizens with a different assortment of public goods.” They could “‘specialize’ in power, wealth, growth, equity, peacefulness, the observance of human rights, and so on.” Hirschman found this vision inspiringly “polyphonic,” but “perhaps too beautiful to be real.” For one thing, what if a rival power invades? When you think about it, this new polity of ours is vulnerable to a lot of the same risks as our old polity. Our leader could turn out to be a megalomaniac we can’t fire. We might prefer to leave but lack the resources. Maybe no other place we want to live will take us in.

Speaking of which, who are “we”? As I read Srinivasan’s book, my editor brain kept getting hung up on how often he reaches for that pronoun. In the opening essay, for instance, he writes: “We want to be able to peacefully start a new state for the same reason we want a bare plot of earth, a blank sheet of paper, an empty text buffer, a fresh startup, or a clean slate.” Later: “History is the closest thing we have to a physics of humanity.” And: “In the fullness of time, with truly open data sets, we may even be able to develop Asimovian psychohistory.”

Does “we” refer to people like Srinivasan, the technologists, the self-bootstrappers, the seekers of *karmabhoomi*? Is it a weird-fun Dr. Bronner’s “we,” a freaky Borg “we”? Does it include the fellow travelers he CC’d on that email back in 2013—the other lovers of Exit? They too have only risen with the maelstrom. After laying relatively low for a few years, Curtis Yarvin has resurfaced with a newsletter on Substack, and his influence on prominent Republicans was recently explored at length by *Vanity Fair*. Blake Masters is the Thiel-funded, Trump-endorsed Republican nominee for US Senate in Arizona and jokes about RAGE on the stump. Patri Friedman runs a venture fund that invests in charter cities. Gibson has a book coming out later this year called *Paper Belt on Fire: How Renegade Investors Sparked a Revolt Against the University*.

ILLUSTRATION: EDDIE GUY

All those people, I suspect, would quickly find their notes in the polyphonic world that Srinivasan imagines. And it’s likely that anyone else who lives according to roughly his values would too, from the 19-year-old coding wiz in Mumbai to the grad-school dropout crypto-nomadding in Costa Rica to the billionaire investor in his New Zealand bunker. But when you strip off the techno-crust—the promises of a new civilization engineered on a new stack, one that privileges decentralization, devolution of power, and the sovereignty of every individual and/or central processing unit—you see that the essential political philosophy here is pretty antiquated. I don’t know what to call it. Cosmopolitan feudalism? Enlightened tribalism? Corkscrew cliquism? It reflects a belief that the main failure of contemporary society is that the *wrong people* hold the power. It addresses the problem by unbundling society and then rebundling it to ensure that none of those

people ever bother you again. And OK, as long as no nukes get loose, maybe that turns out fine. Maybe you go to your Bermuda in the Sky and I go to my DigiSweden and we're both happy in the telepresence of the people we've chosen. But maybe we find that the imbalance of power, spread out across the overlapping constellations of the physical world we still see outside our windows, feels just as bad as always. And maybe we find that, most of all, we desperately miss home.

If I could slip through the quantum foam at the bottom of the maelstrom, I think I might eventually arrive in an alternate universe in which Srinivasan gives a talk called “Silicon Valley’s Ultimate Voice.” He might start it just the same way—poke a little fun at the government, praise the garage-guy ethos, lay some Hirschman on the Startup Schoolers. And then he might say: “Silicon Valley is a place where a certain ideal of American progress finds its purest expression. That makes it our job to offer not just solutioneering oratory and different repackagings of rare earth minerals but also the tools of a better, fairer future for all. So Startup Schoolers, let’s figure out how to update the crappy code base! Help me clear the FUD! Whatever we may all believe, however we may disagree, let’s use our Voice!”

No point wondering what’s down there, though. We have our own maelstrom to escape. Exit is up to us. We are the protagonist.

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My 4 Days in Fake Gay-Conversion Therapy

In Scandinavia, role-playing weekends get immersive and extreme. This Larp seemed like fun—until my queer American brain snapped.

Photograph: Justin J. Wee

When I was in middle school, my brother swiped the wire hangers from my closet. They went missing from the rest of the house too. Every night after calculus homework, he worked away at one gorgeous, obsessive task: knocking together suit after suit of [chain mail](#) armor.

One night the hammering stopped and he made a rare appearance. Could our mom sew him a tabard with a cowl? She could and she did. With that under his arm, he and two friends made their way to a nearby avocado grove. I wasn't allowed to follow, but I'd guess they suited up, bashed at each other with swords, and said things in British accents. Today you might call that [Larp](#), short for “live-action role-play,” a term widely used to describe hours spent in a fantasy world. Back then you called it weird.

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Illustration: Eddie Guy

Weird didn't faze my brother. Being a closeted gay kid, I envied his attitude. While I spent my teenage years dodging bullies, he found a way to mentally ditch them entirely.

I didn't think about his chain mail gambit until two years ago. It was that first brutal, boring pandemic winter. Almost everyone I knew was ready to drop not only their jobs and apartments but—if possible—reality itself. The Larp scene had exploded in the decades since my brother's DIY adventures, as I discovered one night while doomscrolling. Without much trouble, you could have a high-end experience of whacking some poor guy dressed as an orc. But that [swords and wizards stuff](#) had never been my exact flavor of geek.

I caught wind of a different scene, though—that of [Nordic Larps](#). These underground games, played mostly in northern Europe, took players on thinky head trips. You could spend several days in *The Secret History*, the 1992 novel about murderous kids at a small New England college. Or hang out in an alternate reality where women held all the social power, or attend a Fourth of July barbecue at a Polish reimagining of an Ohio trailer park. I was already traveling to Denmark for a family trip in the fall of 2021. As luck would have it, one of the buzziest Nordic Larps coming out of the pandemic—called [The Future Is Straight](#)—would take place not more than an hour away.

The team behind the game—Karete Jacobsen Meland, Tor Kjetil Edland, and Anna Emilie Groth—were veteran designers. The website was sleek. I booked my ticket on an impulse, and my character sheets arrived a few months later. They contained four pages of backstory on a teenager named “Ferret,” the guy I would play, including his relationships with other players in the game and the world we would inhabit.

When the time came, I packed some T-shirts and a pair of jeans. No need for chain mail; where I was going, they told the men to dress in blue and the women in red. I flew to Denmark and made my way to a retreat center deep in the woods. For four days, I would go by a different name, make some new friends, and very possibly get my psyche ripped up by the roots.

“Hello,” says Andreas, holding out a handwritten poem. “I believe I am to be your lover?” He seems nice—broad-shouldered, shy smile. The 23-year-old is an ex-cop, working part-time as a firefighter a few hours away.

We're on the Djursland peninsula of Jutland. The retreat center is surrounded on three sides by old-growth forest and, beyond that, the Kattegat Sea. The fourth side gives out onto rye fields and the occasional farmhouse copied right from a tin of butter cookies. The buildings are owned by a Copenhagen teachers union, but for this week the walls are plastered with images of bland straight couples. Soon it will go by its Larp name, the Centre for Action. A flag hoisted over the quad reads, "Helping you become natural."

We're going to pretend this is a gay conversion therapy camp. Conversion camps are places that pressure young queer people into denying their sexuality, and years of work have gone into making this place feel authentic. But as I've just discovered, a lot of the setup in a Larp falls to players. The game starts in 20 minutes, and I'm realizing I'm nowhere near ready.

Andreas is here to help me flesh out my relationship with his character, North. North is a poet, I've had a rough home life, and our characters have shared a first, stolen kiss. Beyond that information in the character sheets, I haven't thought up any details to help make Ferret come alive. I tell Andreas what I've read, which is that Ferret is overeager and hopes the therapy will work. But the way Andreas talks about North, it's clear he's gone much deeper. Not only did he pen the love poems, he also brought a slick blue sweater that he'd knitted himself.

Character sheets gave the backstory on Ferret and the world he would inhabit.

Photograph: Justin J. Wee

Andreas grew up immersed in Larp, as did many Danes of his generation. He went to [Østerskov Efterskole](#), the first government-sponsored school in the world where Larping is central to just about every class. Most of his experience was in traditional Larp, filled with elves, quests, and combat with blunted weapons—"boffers." Fantasy and boffer play is what nearly everyone imagines when they think of Larp.

But in the 1990s, an offshoot of that kind of play took root in Finland and Scandinavia. Some Nordic players began to wonder why they couldn't abandon the long shadow of [Dungeons & Dragons](#) and hop into worlds by, say, Ingmar Bergman or Lars von Trier. Freewheeling experiments in genre followed. One defining Finnish Larp from 1998, *Ground Zero*, was set in the thick of the Cold War and unfolded in a basement mocked up to look like an Oklahoma bomb shelter. No elaborate costumes. No weapons except the nuclear warheads falling outside. The game, which cost about \$200 to produce, let players experience the end of the world.

The Nordic Larp scene began to quietly germinate, favoring games with collaborative storytelling around intense human experiences: a tiny Norwegian village under German occupation, a failing hippie commune in the 1970s. The scene attracted new players, among them academics and those with an itch for unusual experiences. The events also brought distinct challenges, including the possibility of real emotional harm. To work out issues of how to keep players safe and push the limits of the form, the community gathers at Knutepunkt, an annual meeting that is as much hardcore game jam as academic conference.

Nordic Larp now has decades of history, but seems to barely register outside its close-knit circles. Even Andreas, raised on boffer play, only recently got into it. He tells me he's a little nervous about playing our love affair "because I've never done a romantic Larp." I'm nervous, too, because he appears as straight as a gastropub.

We're called into the starting event. The assembly hall has the pine beams and calm brightness I always associate with Scandinavian public buildings. About 30 "rehabbers" stand around awkwardly, all dressed in red or blue, before taking seats. In front stand the five people who prepared for weeks to be camp leaders. One of the creators, Groth, gives a brief pep talk, then someone plays a James Blake ballad. As soon as the music ends, the big reality switch is supposed to flip.

I've braced myself, but it feels like nothing. An earnest guy in a sad brown jacket steps up. "Just ... a few announcements before lunch, people. Today marks your fourth week at the camp, and *some of you* show genuine promise in fighting your *sickness*." The camp director's speech is

unremarkable, except for the fact that seconds ago this person was a Helsinki-based stand-up comedian, full of an impish joy that is now gone.

Conversion therapy camps are probably banal in real life too. That doesn't diminish the harm they do, a fact not one of us is blind to. The World Medical Association, a body representing the national physician groups of more than 100 countries, has called them "a serious threat to ... health and human life." The camps lead to a sixfold increase in rates of depression and eight times the rate of suicide in the people who go through them.

Despite that, all of us have somehow made the choice to shell out \$295 for a ticket, meals inclusive, to be here.

"Man, she gives me the creeps." That's Hawk, one of my roommates. We've finished our first "classes" and are walking back across the quad. Our last lecture laid out the argument against homosexuality based on science, or at least what passed for science around the 1960s. The ideas should have been laughable, but they got such a persuasive, intellectual glow-up that I half worried the script might fall into the wrong hands.

The lecture mostly crawled around our minds, though, because of the woman who delivered it. Ms. Walker, the staff psychologist, gave off an aura of genuine menace. She had a way of punctuating cold analysis with notes of disarming affection. Only a few hours into the game, everyone already feared her approach, with her polyester suit and her black, side-parted bob stiff as a military helmet.

"It's like Walker wants to crack open your brain and look inside," Hawk says.

"I'm grateful for her information! Don't we all want to live healthy lives?" This comes out of my mouth, and I am instantly mortified.

Playacting is no joke, and I am discovering how terrible I am at it. Conversations are the worst—I do and don't want to look into a person's face, because if they're as uncertain as I am, the whole boat of reality teeters. I stare at the ground. "Walker is leading my therapy group," I say. That's where I'm headed next.

“You poor guy!” This comment comes from a group of women sitting nearby. Sleeping arrangements and most classes are sex-segregated, a curious approach to fighting same-sex attraction but, like most of the game, pulled from the organizers’ research. The women’s class, one of them tells us, involved reading lesbian pornography. “When something was exciting,” she says, “we had to stick our finger with a tack.”

I slink off to my therapy session. When I arrive, Walker waves her eight students to a couple of well-worn sofas. She sits in a cane chair and, one by one, leads students through a hypnotic riff on psychoanalysis. Deep into the hour she starts grilling River, a young woman, pushing her to remember the “iceberg” of damage that made her a lesbian. River is stubborn, but her voice grows noticeably smaller and more frail as the interrogation wears on and every phrase gets turned over in dung-beetle claws for its sapphic overtones.

Karin Tidbeck, who played Walker, brought both menace and warmth to the role.

Photograph: Justin J. Wee

Walker’s spell on players is so complete that I forget for a moment that we’re playing a game. I break away and look at the other couch. Andreas is there, now all North. We make eye contact and smile. The psychologist’s attention snaps our way like a searchlight.

“Ferret, now your progress,” she says. I squirm. Walker asks, “Have you felt same-sex attraction today?”

In my ludicrous teacher’s pet voice, I have Ferret say, “This camp has been very helpful. I am optimistic your methods will help me become 100 percent straight!”

Ever since the start of the Larp, my words have felt wrong, and these are no different. I seem dopey, even to me. What had been so enthralling about the therapy, I realize, was that the other players hardly seemed to be acting at all. They opened themselves to Walker, and the distance between them and their characters went gauze-thin. Now, as my hammy words hang in the air,

a silence stretches out. The black helmet of Walker's bob doesn't move. People shift in their seats. Without breaking eye contact, she asks the room: "Does anyone believe a word he is saying?"

"I don't believe him," River says, a betrayal I didn't expect. "He is faking. Faking everything." Nods ripple around the group.

I feel as if I've somehow broken the game. Genuine panic rises and I feel my outsider status acutely, flashing back to my poor choice of an in-flight movie, *Midsommar*—a horror story about Americans who mess with the locals in rural Scandinavia and pay in blood.

Walker sighs. "We need a firm intervention." She drags out a stool, and I'm told to sit on it. The other players stare me down, and I begin to sweat uncomfortably. "All of you, tell Ferret your honest thoughts—and hold nothing back." The Larpers don't need much coaxing: Ferret, you're too loud. You're a fake. The pile-on feels like a Maoist struggle session. You're not fooling any of us, they say. Walker eggs on the ones who hold back. I'm suddenly unsure whether they're calling out my character, or me. You're wearing a *mask*. That phrase keeps coming up. Drop the *mask*. We cannot help you until you're honest with us.

The class ends, and the other students file out. I gather up my notebook, my head a mix of self-loathing and confusion. It's a weird callout: Drop the mask. Who on earth would drop their mask in a place like this?

Walker says she'll keep an eye on me, and I respond in a voice I don't second-guess at all. For the first time, I feel like Ferret.

As I emerge it's already dark, almost lights-out. From under the eaves of the dorm I see North/Andreas. He waves me over. Together we sneak off campus, and he leads me through thickets of dense scrub and overgrown ivy. "She let you have it today," he says over his shoulder.

"You let me have it too." I was annoyed he hadn't defended me.

"Maybe I'll let you have it," he says, and I can hear the smirk. Ferret's a virgin, but I can't bring myself to blush. The path continues on through

beech trees ringed by stinging nettles. Bright red mushrooms dot the forest floor, coy and dangerous. At last Andreas leads us into a small clearing.

When he's sure we can't be seen, he hangs up his flashlight on a rowan tree and turns to me. We both know something will happen, but I wait for him to take the lead. He gives a little speech, rehearsed but very sweet. His words freeze in the early autumn air. He takes one of my hands in his.

Sex in a Larp isn't real. In this Larp, they taught us a meta-technique, a progression of movements to stand in for sex. Andreas places his fingers in mine, then after a minute we move our hands slowly up the sensitive skin of each other's forearms. When the moment feels right, we're supposed to pivot around and stand back-to-back, spine pressed to spine. In the workshop it had seemed hokey, but here, under a moon that's nearly full, my heart stupidly beats. Through his ribs, I can feel that maybe it's the same for Andreas.

The first time I fell in love, it was with a guy a lot like North: handsome, a poet, full of himself. In the closet, any little beam of light feels like a supernova. I remember the months of agony broken by a kind word or a handshake that lingered for a sordid second.

The final phase of the meta-technique has players face one another. To represent the fireworks, they exchange phrases, saying things they want and things they fear, making the moment "lovely and sad," according to the workshop. We don't get that far, because North breaks away.

That's enough, he tells me. Stop.

I stop. After Walker's grilling, the closeness of another person had been a real comfort, but now I pull my jacket around me. North is a torrent of words. I'm seeing a girl, he says. You and I, we experimented a little. It's as far as things will go. No hard feelings. Never again.

Ferret would have been pulverized with guilt and shame, this I know. I'm both in this place and witnessing my own first time, in the parking lot of a train station with a guy I never saw again. It's a marvel, I think, that queer teens survive their fumbling at romance in places that reject them.

In a minute I'm alone again, watching the beam from North's flashlight bounce back toward the campus. I stay in the forest. Then I do the mental equivalent of pulling on my clothes and head back to my room, where the lights are already out.

It's a sleepless night, in part because Denmark is a hyper-caffeinated place. My brain won't settle. I replay the episodes in therapy and in the forest, alternating between thinking about my game and Ferret's life. My heart, out of nowhere, is unbearably heavy. Around 3 am I get up and grab my phone from the "off-game" cubbyhole to write an email.

A few hours later, we're all out on the soccer pitch, getting a posture lesson. A cute blond guy, maybe 30 in real life, is having the swish scolded out of him. People laugh. For the liberal Danes, who decriminalized gay sex in the 1930s and recognized same-sex unions before the fall of the Berlin Wall, this entire setup probably feels ridiculous. Technically, therapy like this is legal in Denmark—a topic of debate and one reason the Larp received a regional government grant.

A counselor taps my shoulder and says Walker has planned a special private lesson. I follow him to her office, a dark cave off the central auditorium. On the couch are a man and a woman that I recognize. The game has a few actors on standby to play a mother and a father as needed. The woman wears a floral dress, and the man has a rumpled mustache and a corduroy jacket.

Walker brings me in with a brisk nod of the head. "We won't get anywhere in your recovery until we've sorted out your home life, will we Ferret?" Ferret had arrived at camp covered in bruises from his father, the sheets said. The actor looks at me with a stony expression, and Walker has me sit down next to him. She starts her Freudian patter about developmental stages. The actor-parents bristle, insisting they did nothing to deserve an unnatural son. It's strange to have them all performing for me, this open wound of a moment lived by so many kids. I find that when the father actor barks, I flinch. Toward the end, he claps a hand on my shoulder. A rage bubbles up in me. I don't know what to do with it.

Two participants played as parents, who stepped into campers' stories as needed.

Photograph: Justin J. Wee

Walker releases me and I head outside to the next exercise. The camp director is under the flagpole, addressing a group of men, the sun dancing on his bald spot. "You're all afraid of manliness," he says. "You're afraid of your own testosterone. Today we fix that."

We're told to face off with a partner. Mine is Stefan, an affable Dane who came to the Larp with his wife. Stefan's character is Pine, who fell in love with another lineman at his factory, and Stefan/Pine smiles at me now through the beginnings of a full Viking beard.

"Now! Threaten your partner's personal space," the director says, walking up and down the rows. He stops to watch us. "Get up close. A normal man would feel his testosterone rise up in such a situation. OK, now when you feel something in your chest, give your partner a little manly shove."

Pine pushes me playfully. I throw him to the dirt and keep pounding on his chest with both fists until a pair of rehabbers pull me off of him.

I've been called into the custodian's office. The three creators of *The Future Is Straight* are here, dressed in brown overalls. They're playing as janitors and, frankly, that doesn't seem like a bad take on a lot of what they have to do once a game is on. Nordic Larps can involve elaborate preparation—this one has been in the works since 2017. Once people are playing, though, scenes can unfold behind closed doors or in the dark forest. The creators can watch some of it, but often they're on the hook for more thankless tasks, such as fixing a broken prop or unplugging a toilet. Sometimes it's a player who makes a mess, or is one.

I enter a small, bright set of rooms filled with markers and easel pads. Tor Kjetil Edland waves me to a tiny school desk. He has a gentle, puckish face that wouldn't be out of place on a Christmas mantle. Edland's day job is with FRI, Norway's main LGBTQ+ group, and he spends a lot of time in

Africa, where same-sex behavior is still criminalized in 32 countries. FRI works with priests and pastors there to curb the spread of antigay rhetoric.

In Nordic Larp, Edland is an elder statesman. *Just a Little Lovin'*, which he cowrote, is one of the most performed Nordic Larps to date and [one of the few to cross the Atlantic](#). Its players take on roles within the gay community of New York City, before and after the arrival of AIDS.

“Have you thought about my request?” I say nervously. It feels strange to be outside the game and speaking as myself. I worry about how my late-night email may have landed. I try my best not to sound dramatic or deranged.

“What you ask is possible, of course,” Edland says mildly. He sits back and crosses his legs, jumpsuit bunching up at the waist. “First, may I ask, how are *you* doing?”

“I’m fine,” I say, “I’m fine.” The other two organizers, Anna Emilie Groth and Karete Jacobsen Meland, a clinical psychologist, had done extensive work on the safety nets for mental health. If a moment felt too raw, you could de-escalate with a handful of signs and safe words. An off-game room has sweets, warm tea, and a full-time safety volunteer. I hadn’t gone there yet. After the humiliations of the first night, I discovered that my foot was firmly on the accelerator. The more awful this reality was, the more it pulled me in, as if Ferret’s whole tragedy were a hot bath, almost unbearable at first and then impossible to leave.

During a game, the creators—Tor Kjetil Edland, Anna Emilie Groth, and Karete Jacobsen Meland—dress as janitors.

Photograph: Justin J. Wee

“Of course, you are in your rights to … kill yourself. For Ferret to kill himself,” Edland says levelly. “And we quite agree with you, suicide is sadly an outcome for many who experience these camps.” Ferret’s death had been my email request. I’d agonized that my choice felt melodramatic, especially for a first-time player. But the outcome felt as true to me as a

mathematical equation. To the degree that I connected with Ferret, his pain and frustration were big enough to eclipse the world.

I offered to do the whole thing quietly. I'd slip out after curfew that night. I'd grab an Airbnb in the nearby town of Ebeltoft for the last half-day. In the game world Ferret would, I guess, fill his pockets with rocks and walk into the North Sea.

"If I may speak as a Larp designer," Edland says gently, glancing at Groth and Meland. "Your action will affect all other stories. Even if you disappear quietly, players cannot possibly ignore it, and it becomes a focus of the game." In his defense, these games are lacework. Movie writers have to create only one plot, but a Nordic Larp may have 30 or 40 independent lines of action, all of them growing more complex as the players inhabit them.

We sit in silence. The sun is behind Edland, and I think this must be what it's like to be among the gods, the ones who bend time and space. "What if we hold off on Ferret's death for one additional night?" he suggests. "We can agree that he passes away after the Larp, in the evening hours of the day we finish. When we are back in our own clothes."

I say OK. Relieved to have 24 more hours to think over my choice, I walk back out into it.

Other rehabbers see me as I exit the building, and the looks aren't friendly. They whisper about the guy who decked Pine. If the original, suck-up version of Ferret was unpopular, "real" Ferret isn't a hit either. But something feels different now, as if the others are playing *with* me and not around me.

A player named Konstanty lopes across the quad. He's playing November, Ferret's best friend. Konstanty is a small-framed Polish guy with soulful, dark eyes, and both of us have had a somber game. I wonder whether it's because our countries have uncomfortable echoes here. In August 2020, Poland's Catholic church proposed clinics to help queer people regain their "natural" sexuality, and a few months later a federal appeals court in the US held that states can't ban the existing camps for minors. Friends of mine had

been through such places, and I wonder whether friends of Konstanty had too.

Right now he looks mournful, like a cat hiding under the eaves from the rain. I call out and he comes over. On an impulse, I pull out a small polished stone I keep in the pocket of my pants. Have it, I say.

We chat as our characters, and I think what a redemption it is to have even one good friend. Anecdotes from real conversion camps also speak to friendships forged there. I’m probably wrong to drive Ferret off the cliff, I think. Pure overreaction. It’s nice to sit with him, enjoy the sun, have a full stomach. A lot of the players have been figuring out how to make a closeted life livable, negotiating the trade-offs queer people have made for centuries. You can survive anything if you put your mind to it.

“Shall we calibrate?” Konstanty asks. Uh-oh, magic phrase. In Nordic Larp, it means you break the reality for a few seconds to say something important —warn another player you’ll try to kiss them, for instance. I’d calibrated with Stefan before throwing the punch. Calibrating can also be used to map out what happens next in the plot, which is how Konstanty uses it now.

He outlines a twist we’d discussed, but I feel a little sad that it has to happen now. We take a few seconds to pull the trigger and then snap back in.

“Listen, Ferret, let me confess something. I’m in love with North, all right? That’s where I’ve been spending my time. That’s why you haven’t seen me. I’m sorry,” he says, and then pauses. “I think I have always loved him. Please try to understand. I suppose I’ve known that telling you would hurt you, it’s only ...”

A love triangle from the character sheets now clicks into place. This time the fake violence doesn’t connect emotionally. From some distance I see little November writhing on the ground as Ferret kicks him in the stomach, his friend’s shiny black shoes kicking in the air. I hear myself saying, “I can give you bruises they can’t see.”

The moment made narrative sense, I guess—we can be at our worst with the people we love most. But for the first time today I feel out of contact with the “real” Ferret, which feels like a betrayal.

A burly lesbian student drags me by the ear back to my dorm room. Konstanty/November, a sweet and battered Saint Sebastian, is surrounded by a group of counselors and friends. Sitting alone on my bunk, I can see him through a window as he embarks on the last part of his story. So I get to mine.

I decide that if I do it, it’s going to be with the red mushrooms from the wood, which it turns out are toxic enough if no one comes looking for you. The sun goes down, and I take the short walk back into the scrubby beech forest.

The writer at his home in New York.

Photograph: Justin J. Wee

It’s not even 7 in the morning and my pillow is soaked with tears and snot. I’m cocooned in a blanket, facing the wall. The roommates aren’t up yet, so I’m trying to keep quiet, but the bunk is squeaky and it’s shaking, so I’m sure they can hear me.

This crying jag had not been in the plan. After the fight with November and some other interactions last night, I’d decided to finish the game quietly. It wasn’t that I stopped playing, but my play had become mostly internal. Drop the mask, they had said. Well, it was dropped, and I’d hit a place where it was hard to figure out where I ended and Ferret began.

That identification with a made-up character, the emotional osmosis, turned out to have a name. Larpers call it bleed. While two days earlier Ferret was an idea, his personality had taken over my flesh, a kind of possession. A scientist can trick you into believing a rubber arm is your own, and you’ll feel someone lightly brushing its alien surface. It’s a neurological trick wrapped up in empathy and mirror neurons. Nordic Larp seemed to work in a similar way.

None of this should surprise anyone familiar with psychological experiments in role-play, including the Stanford Prison Experiment—a 1971 study in which college students pretended to be prison guards and, within a few days, turned into monsters. But understanding it intellectually was different from this: lying in a dorm room, bawling at the imminent death of someone who didn’t exist.

I snuffle as my roommates wake up and prepare for the morning assembly. Ferret tells them he’s sick. Hawk goes off-game for a second to make sure everything is OK, then eventually the roommates file out. I think to myself that I’m free to leave now, but I don’t.

As I wait for my chest to quiet down, I try to puzzle out why this is all hitting me so hard. Maybe it’s because I’m the type of sap who tears up at commercials. Maybe it’s because I’m from a certain gay generation, and my ninth-grade history teacher called AIDS justice, and as early as my twenties I lost friends to what they now call deaths of despair. You can run from self-pity for only so long—here, mourn your blighted youth.

But I am not Ferret. Oddly I don’t quite know where *I* am at the moment. I feel like some kind of off-brand angel, looking down on the body of a different person. I can see Ferret curled in a fetal position and think: poor, poor kid. Out of nowhere I remember a bitter, tongue-in-cheek elegy written by A. E. Housman to another Victorian queer, a young naval cadet who took his life:

*Shot? so quick, so clean an ending?
Oh that was right, lad, that was brave:
Yours was not an ill for mending,
'Twas best to take it to the grave.*

I think of all the gay lives that ended in a day like Ferret’s. It’s shocking to think of it now, in a world so radically changed. In my fever dream, a million graves open—they join me, the lost boys across generations and continents, and bear witness. We were not alone. You are not alone. The tableau makes me sob but also, in its pure operatic excess, forces me to laugh at myself and head for the emotional exit.

I get up. I feel washed out. I decide to skip out on the camp entirely, walking along paved roads into the rural exurbs of Ebeltoft. The horses on the Djursland farms look at my blue uniform with suspicion. By the time I'm back on campus, just a few events are left to play out. I have my pocketful of red mushrooms; Ferret navigates his final day of life with dignity, and at noon the reality switch flips back. The Larp is over.

Gloria Gaynor is playing, then Madonna. The next song might be from Eurovision, because everyone but me goes wild. We're dancing in a very dorky circle in the assembly hall. I'm the only one wearing a blue or red uniform, because that's all I packed. Someone had thought to bring a disco ball.

I'm sharing a silly groove with Walker. The slicked-back bob is gone. The polyester suit is packed away, and now it's pants and a shirt with a genderqueer pride pin. After a while the two of us duck over to the dining hall, where the group congregates around a few cases of Tuborg beer.

Walker's transformation is dramatic. They are now Karin Tidbeck, an icon of Swedish science fiction who counts the late Ursula K. Le Guin as a fan. Their novel *Amatka* described a world constantly created and destroyed through language, and I can't help but think how much that describes Nordic Larp. Tidbeck looks drained but happy, a beer in their hand.

I thank them, a scene that's playing out all around the room. The etiquette of Nordic Larp asks that you honor your torturer, in part because bad characters are more likely to carry emotional burdens after a game. Konstanty comes up and thanks me, too, then heads off to drink with his brother, a literature student back in Wroclaw. I look for Andreas to thank him for breaking my heart, the moment that made Ferret come to life. But he's gone off to kiss some girl.

The queer players are now easier to spot. I wonder to Tidbeck why the organizers didn't make an effort to identify us before the game started. I couldn't have been the only one who felt ripped apart—and wasn't this our pain?

“It was an eye-opening experience, I imagine, no matter who you were,” Tidbeck says neutrally. Nordic Larp has a long history of wrestling with questions of appropriation. Its players went through countless experiments and annual discussions about it at Knutepunkt, and these are ongoing, in the same way that the topic of player safety can’t ever be fully put to rest. The current consensus on both problems is similar—organizers should be smart and sensitive, but not every Nordic Larp is for everyone. The responsibility ultimately sits with players: They should not sign up for a game that might offend or hurt them. “Besides,” Tidbeck continues, “to identify players as queer is forcing people to be one thing” when they might be using the Larp to work through their sexuality or gender identity.

Karin Tidbeck photographed at Pildammsparken in Malmo, Sweden.

Photograph: Justin J. Wee

“I don’t know how straight people could have connected to the *sadness* of this Larp,” I say.

“But this wasn’t a sad Larp!” Tidbeck says, surprised. Yes, misery Larps exist, they say, and that genre used to be all the rage. I learn that Stefan/Pine—the guy I decked—bonded with his wife at [Kapo](#), a brutal 2011 Larp about an internment camp. There have been Larps about slave plantations and even one called *Gang Rape*. But *The Future Is Straight* wasn’t a misery Larp by any stretch, Tidbeck says.

“What were people supposed to get out of this?” I ask, completely spun around.

“Real camps are full of real people, and real people have all sorts of experiences. As for me, I got a lot of personal questions answered. Stepping into Walker’s pumps I learned quite firmly that I am not a woman and I am definitely not straight,” they say. “For others, I understand it was about finding a community, finding love. Hope in the face of adversity.”

I hadn’t seen this at all. I check in with others, who confirm it’s true. They all had scenes of discovering strength, finding friends, embracing identity—journeys that people brought to the Larp and others they discovered here.

I'm flung back to my insecurity from three days ago, the fear that I'd played the game all wrong. I see Edland across the room, laughing and bright-cheeked. The whole party, stretching long into the night, has the feeling of a celebration of life, a tight-knit community separated by the pandemic and rekindling its soul. I apologize to Edland for trying to kill myself in the middle of his game. "Nonsense," he says, with a bright grin. "People kill themselves in Larps all the time."

From top right to bottom left, Tor Kjetil Edland, Anna Emilie Groth, Karete Jacobsen Meland, and Karete's daughter Ida photographed in Edland's home in Oslo, Norway.

Photograph: Justin J. Wee

Given the chance of a new identity, my brother chose knighthood and adventure. I chose to re-create the worst possible version of my adolescence. Why? The question nags at me as I ride back to Århus. I knew there was a second run of *The Future Is Straight*. I reach out to the person who played Ferret, hoping that the character's path was somehow built-in and scientifically replicated. But no, Ferret 2 found friends, romance, a future.

One promising lead pops up in a Nordic Larp Facebook group. Anneli Friedner, a Nordic Larp designer and theorist, wrote an essay about "brave spaces," borrowing a phrase coined in 2013 by a pair of US university administrators. In a safe space, all the thorns are removed and no one is supposed to get hurt. A brave space is different. The thorns stay, and that's exactly why you walk there. That's what a Larp can be.

You enter a brave space to learn "how to make mistakes and then correct them," Friedner says. Maybe I headed right for the mistake I never dared to make. And suicide is a mistake—if you're contemplating it, you should reach out now to 988 or to a mental health professional. In a game, though, a person could have the satisfaction of pulling the trigger without a bullet in the chamber. Still, why?

On my way out of Denmark I pick up six bags of black licorice, a national addiction. In almost any corner store you can find the good brand, sour and

covered in salt, and when you put it on your tongue, it burns. The secret is that, after a minute, the sour feeling transforms into sweetness as if the wires cross in your mouth.

I try out a new theory on some of the players—that Nordic Larp is black licorice for the soul. By some neurological alchemy, all that sadness feels good. The Danes I talk to are lukewarm on that take, but a few point me to the concept of “type-two fun,” an idea with currency among both Larpers and people who do extreme sports. Type-one fun is enjoyable while it’s happening. Type two is awful at the time, but great afterward. Type three isn’t enjoyable at all. Somehow it’s still fun.

In a conversation months later, another Larper mentions that they’d choose a depressing game the way they’d go for a sad movie. That comment clicks, somehow. The parting gift from my queer mentor in college was his personal copy of *Tragedy and Philosophy*, a painfully smart book about the enduring human need to feel sad. My upbringing, and maybe the whole 20th century, wasn’t big on downer emotions. But for centuries we revered the places where we could touch misery: in the blues hall, in the opera house, in Shakespeare’s Globe. It’s no wonder that you set people free in a Larp and they go dark. Maybe what happened to me in that dorm room bunk was pure Aristotelian *katharsis*. It was awful and I came away lighter.

I remember to check in on my brother, now a brilliant chemist with a fabulous wife. I want to thank him too. I ask whether he still has his chain mail. In a way, he has become that knight, only now his quest is low-cost, carbon-derived solar cells and the orcs are grant committees. He sends me a picture—his chain mail is on display in his woodshop. I wonder how my time with Ferret might change me, and in what shape I’ll carry it on. For now, I’ve been eyeing sketches of red mushrooms and figuring out a place near my heart to put the tattoo.

This article appears in the October 2022 issue. [Subscribe now](#).

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Aug 30, 2022 6:00 AM

Inside the Shadow Evacuation of Kabul

In the last two weeks of the war, an ad hoc team armed with group chats, QR codes, and satellite maps launched a mad dash to save imperiled Afghan allies.

Illustration: Alicia Tatone

At 11:12 pm on August 15, 2021, Worth Parker’s phone pinged with a message. *Sir. I hope you are well*, it began. *By any chance do you know any Marines who are on the ground right now?*

Parker did not. He was in his bed in Wilmington, North Carolina, 7,200 miles from “the ground” of [Kabul](#), having retired from the United States Marines six weeks earlier. He was trying to stay as disconnected as possible, even shutting off notifications to all of his [apps](#). But, as a self-described “49-year-old Luddite,” he’d accidentally left [Facebook](#) turned on. The message continued:

My brother, who was an interpreter with the Special Mission Wing, and my father, who used to be the fixed wing aircraft squadron commander until he retired and then he worked for an American defense contracting company as an advisor, are stuck in Kabul. Of course, my and my brother’s enlistment in the US [military](#) make them even bigger targets. I tried all the official channels but no one is responding.

This article appears in the October 2022 issue. [Subscribe to WIRED](#) Illustration: Eddie Guy

The note was from Jason Essazay. A native of Mazar-i-Sharif, Essazay had watched US troops arrive in Afghanistan in 2001 when he was 12, and had spent the first eight years of his adulthood working with them as an interpreter and fixer. Alongside American special operators, he had engaged the Taliban in dozens of gunfights and survived three IED attacks, the last of which hospitalized him for a month. In 2014, after two years on the waiting list, he acquired a Special Immigrant Visa. He left his family behind, settled in Houston, and for 18 months worked at a gas station, then a Walmart, then a steel plant, before joining the [Marine Reserves](#).

Essazay and Parker had been in touch only briefly, a year earlier, when Parker edited a blog post Essazay wrote for the tactical fitness brand Soflete, about how [yoga and jiu-jitsu helped him cope](#) with PTSD and the culture shock of living in America. (Disclosure: I first met Parker in 2018 while editing for Soflete.) Now Parker was Essazay's last resort as he attempted to rescue his family from the Taliban, which had taken Kabul hours earlier.

Worth Parker (left), and Joe Saboe

Photographs (left to right): Brian Hueske; Dave Carhart/Redux

Parker was sure there was little he could do. After 27 years of service, he had spent the first 45 days of his retirement trying to wash the Marines, and Afghanistan, out of his system. He had just returned from a monthlong cross-country RV trip with his 10-year-old daughter, after missing her birth and many birthdays. He was neglecting his regular fitness routine and letting his gray beard grow out. More than anything, he was trying to shed the title Lieutenant Colonel and become simply Worth.

Parker apologized, promised he'd do what he could, wished Essazay luck, and said to keep him updated. Then he fell asleep.

In April 2021, President [Joe Biden announced](#) that he would honor the deal struck during the Trump administration and complete the full withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan by September 11. The [20-year war](#), America's longest, cost the lives of 2,325 US soldiers and over \$2 trillion,

stretching across four presidential administrations. In all, more than 176,000 people were killed, including nearly 50,000 Afghan civilians.

At the time of Biden's announcement, some 2,500 US troops remained in Afghanistan, and several thousand American civilians and contractors lived and worked in the country. Meanwhile, about 81,000 Afghans who had worked with the US military during the war had pending applications for [Special Immigrant Visas](#).

The family would first have to get through a Taliban checkpoint, the message warned. *This could go to shit. But they have a chance. Get them here in an hour.* The message was 90 minutes old.

By early summer, Biden had set the official evacuation deadline for August 31. The Taliban inched closer to Kabul, capturing surrounding cities, regions, and entire provinces with relative ease. On August 10, a US intelligence report estimated the Taliban would [take the capital within one to three months](#). Five days later, Kabul fell.

The city's airport, Hamid Karzai International, immediately became one of the only escape routes out of the country. Within hours, thousands of people flooded its gates. Most were turned away, lacking the necessary papers. Many were tear-gassed. And several died after being crushed in a human stampede. Footage of two Afghans [clinging to a departing US Air Force C-17 cargo plane](#) and then falling to their deaths quickly spread across the globe. They were later identified as a 24-year-old dentist and a 17-year-old player on [Afghanistan's national youth soccer team](#) and became symbols of the most chaotic evacuation since the fall of Saigon.

The night after Kabul fell, Parker was reading about the unfolding bedlam when he saw mention of the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit, which was flying 160 of its troops from Kuwait to Kabul to assist with the evacuation. The unit happened to be commanded by Parker's old friend Colonel Eric Cloutier. Suddenly, Parker had boots on the ground. He sent Essazay another Facebook message, telling him to send the names of his family members and any location data he had. About an hour later, Essazay responded with the names of his two brothers and his parents and their

address in downtown Kabul, and Parker forwarded the info to a subordinate of Cloutier's. He warned Essazay not to get his hopes up.

A day passed. On August 17, two weeks before the evacuation deadline, Parker drove west across North Carolina to a friend's cabin in the Appalachian Mountains, where he planned to spend a few days hiking, scouting deer, and fly-fishing. By the time he reached the mountains, Tropical Storm Fred had descended. The rain was so heavy Parker could barely see through the windshield of his black Tacoma. When he arrived at the cabin, the power had been knocked out. He was disconnected from the outside world.

Around 10:30 that night, he was sitting on the front porch when the power flickered back on and his phone began to ping with Facebook notifications. His Marine contact in Kabul had been telling him where to send the Essazays. One of the final messages ordered urgent action: *Get your people's family to the airport now.*

The message instructed them to head to the airport's East Gate, make sure that no one else was with them, and give a password to marines manning the gate. The family would first have to get through a Taliban checkpoint, the message warned. *This could go to shit. But they have a chance. Get them here in an hour.* The message was 90 minutes old.

Illustration: Alicia Tatone

Certain it was too late, Parker called Essazay, who told his family to leave everything behind, not even packing a change of clothes, which might reveal that they were trying to flee. Knowing the Taliban wouldn't search women, the family duct-taped some \$13,000 in cash to Essazay's mother's body, hidden beneath her dress. Essazay instructed them to wipe their phones, including the messages with his instructions. Anything linking them to American forces could get them killed. "But if you stay home," Essazay told his parents, "you're going to die."

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Over the next few hours, as the family headed along seven congested miles toward the airport, Essazay and Parker shared Facebook messages. Essazay worked from a Middle Eastern café in Houston that stayed open until 4 am, drinking black tea as he relayed his family's movements. Other regulars occasionally stopped their chess and card games to crowd behind his laptop. Parker, sitting on his friend's couch in Appalachia, kept his marine contact in Kabul abreast.

The family arrived at the Taliban checkpoint and told the guards they were taking their elderly matriarch to the hospital. They were allowed to pass. By 1 am US Eastern time, two and a half hours after the original window had closed, they arrived at the gate. Essazay's brother Omar pushed through the crowd to reach the marines manning the gate, insisting that his family was supposed to get through and telling the guards that his brother was a US Marine. When they tried to turn him away, he supplied the name of Parker's contact inside the airport, and the password he'd been given.

Waiting for a response, Parker recognized a long-dormant feeling. It was the closest he'd come to the exhilaration and exhaustion of combat since the years he had spent in the real thing. As the rain continued to pound the mountainside cabin, Essazay sent Parker one final message.

They are in. Semper Fi, sir.

On August 12, three days before Essazay contacted Parker, Joe Saboe had just returned from a family snorkeling vacation in Hawaii. He was coaching soccer practice in Denver when his cell phone rang. It was his brother Dan in Phoenix, asking if he could help a friend and his family escape Afghanistan.

Dan explained that Abasin Hidai, a mutual friend of his and his wife, had returned to Afghanistan to help rebuild his country. Now he and his family were trapped. Worse, Hidai had worked as a water engineer with the US Army, and his brother had served on Afghanistan's National Security Council. If they didn't leave, they feared, the Taliban would soon kill them. Hidai, who had started the visa process years earlier, had no luck reaching the American embassy. He was desperately calling, texting, and emailing every person he knew with any connection to the US military.

Saboe, then 36, had been out of the [Army](#) a full seven years. He describes his tenure as a soldier as thoroughly workaday: ROTC at Georgetown; then a 2009 deployment in [Iraq](#) as an infantry officer, where for one year he helped build schools and hunt proto-ISIS insurgents; and finally teaching ROTC students back home before getting out in 2014. He got his master's in education at Stanford and moved to Denver, where he was running a workforce education startup, coaching elite youth soccer, and raising two daughters with his wife.

Saboe's phone rang—the family was calling on FaceTime. All nine of them, including four children under 10, were pinned down in a ditch no deeper than 18 inches, barely a dozen yards from the gate, bullets cracking over their heads.

Listening to his younger brother, Saboe was reminded of the end of his rotation in Mosul, where he was among the last troops to leave the city before it fell to [ISIS](#). He thought of the Iraqi friends he'd made, many of whom had to flee the country. He feared the Taliban's takeover of Kabul would be even more swift and brutal, and that all the work some 800,000 American soldiers had done in the country over the past 20 years might have been in vain. But he figured there was nothing he could do. He'd never even been to Afghanistan.

Still, that evening Saboe tried the closest thing to a Noncombatant Evacuation Operations tool he had: Facebook. He posted a note to his 1,400 friends that began, "Hey State Department, DOD, or politico friends—need your help urgently." Without naming him, he explained Hidai's predicament and asked anyone who might have "helpful information or a firm, strong lead" to respond.

By the following morning, Friday, Saboe's post had received 32 sad-face and hugging-heart emoji, but also one direct message from an ROTC buddy he hadn't talked to in nearly 20 years.

Call me, the message said. I am trying to get one out too.

The friend, who was still in the Army, working at the Pentagon, laid out a plan. He told Saboe to write a letter saying that Hidai and his family would

come live with Saboe and his family in Denver, have it notarized, and send it to the American embassy in Kabul. After a quick discussion with his wife, Saboe wrote the letter. He walked two doors down, where his neighbor, a lawyer, notarized it, and then he sent it to the embassy via the fax number on the agency's website. He also called someone at the embassy he had reached through a shared Georgetown connection. The person assured Saboe that Hidai would be receiving a call within the hour. A return fax never came, and the embassy never called. When Kabul fell on Sunday, US staff at the embassy shredded documents, lowered the American flag, and were airlifted out of the country.

Later on Friday, however, Saboe received another Facebook message, this time from a marine who was at the airport. The marine said the Hidais should head to the North Gate as soon as possible. Saboe relayed the information to Hidai, but as the family hid all their documents beneath Hidai's wife's clothes and prepared to rush from their home, Saboe got a message telling him to abort. Word had quickly spread that the gate was open, and now hardly anyone was making it through the crowd. Saboe had no choice but to tell the Hidais to sit tight and hope another opportunity to leave might come before the deadline dropped or the Taliban found them.

Meanwhile, Saboe started hearing from several veterans across the country who'd seen his Facebook post. They were all in their thirties, each trying to get a single contact to safety. By Saturday, August 14, the day before Kabul fell, Saboe decided to link all nine of them in a WhatsApp group, where they could share what they were hearing and relay it back to the people they were trying to help. They posted furtively snapped pictures of the ever-changing and growing number of Taliban checkpoints, sent to them by families and military contacts scattered around the city. Soon, they had a relatively reliable picture of what was happening in real time. Several members of the group had gone into tech after the military, and they started building a detailed map using annotated images from Google Maps and Google Earth, updating it nearly hourly to reflect the movements of the Taliban and the airport's access points. To mitigate confusion between similar or identical last names, they also assigned each potential evacuee or family of evacuees a "chalk number"—a term dating to World War II, when

Allied paratroopers had their flight numbers placed on their backs in chalk. The Hidais were Chalk-0001.

As the operation formed, Saboe began working late into the night from his home office, directly below his 11-year-old daughter's bedroom. Around 2 am Denver time on August 16, midday in Kabul, Saboe's phone pinged with a message: Chalk-0028—a family of four—had successfully made it through the North Gate. He immediately texted another family, Chalk-0021, to head there. Minutes later, his phone rang—the family was calling on FaceTime. All nine of them, including four children under 10, were pinned down in a ditch no deeper than 18 inches, barely a dozen yards from the gate, bullets cracking over their heads. The Taliban were killing anyone that moved.

While the horror unfolded on Saboe's phone, his wife, Nichole, sat huddled in the corner, listening to the children's screams, the muzzle blasts, and a woman asking Saboe if he was trying to get them killed. Amid the shouting, he gathered a few details about their location, quickly cross-checked it on Google Earth, and determined that the Taliban were firing from a factory across the road. He told them to stay in the ditch and lie flat, face down. The call went on for nearly 90 minutes, Saboe doing his best to keep them safe while bracing himself to witness their deaths via FaceTime. Eventually, the bullets stopped. The Taliban seemed to have moved on. Surrounded by dead bodies, the family made their way home. Hours later, as his pounding heart finally settled, Saboe lay in bed wondering if he was doing the right thing.

The following day, the family approached another gate, only to return home again after being caught in a stampede that left the mother with a dislocated shoulder and two of the children and their grandmother with broken bones. Finally, on August 18, a friend in St. Louis named Zac Martin, who had served with Saboe in Iraq, returned from his day job in electric utility sales and secured the family a van that would be driven by a Special Forces operator. The van boarded a few miles from the airport and drove the family straight through Abbey Gate, where Chalk-0021 eventually boarded a cargo plane. They've since settled in Virginia. Meanwhile, Chalk-0001, the Hidais, remained trapped.

The number of potential evacuees was also ballooning. Saboe had received a call from Jim Webb, a reporter for *The Military Times* who was writing a story about the efforts of Saboe's growing team. When asked what his group was called, Saboe fumbled for a moment, before blurting out "Team America." Webb asked if there was an email to which people could send requests for help and tips, so Dan Saboe created a Gmail account on the fly. [The story was published the following morning](#), August 17. At the time, Saboe's group had 128 people on its list of potential evacuees. Within a day, teamamericaafghanevac@gmail.com had received over a thousand emails from Americans looking to volunteer and Afghans looking for help escaping. Saboe decided to take the next two weeks off work.

On the morning of August 18, once his family had cleared Afghanistan airspace on their way to Qatar, Jason Essazay publicly thanked Worth Parker for helping them escape, tagging Parker in a Facebook post he shared with his 1,200 friends. Parker's Facebook messages quickly began to fill with urgent requests for help from Afghans in and around Kabul. He was overwhelmed and, as most of them lacked the proper paperwork to board a flight, largely unable to help.

Later that day, while heading home from the mountains, Parker started receiving voicemails from other Afghan interpreters and fixers, asking if he knew anyone who could help. His phone number had leaked. Driving down I-40, memories of the months he had spent living alongside Afghans wallop him: watching hours of mindless TV with them after a long night supporting combat operations; his first deployment to Bagram Air Field when his daughter was born and the locals showered him with gifts to bring home to her, including a colorful velvet dress covered in tiny bits of mirrored glass.

As the silence continued, a sleepless Saboe pressed for an update. 12:54 am: *Hi Abasin—are you all okay?* 1:42 am: *Hi Abasin—did you all make it through the checkpoint?* 2:53 am: *Hi Abasin, are you in?*

Parker began calling people across his large network of high-ranking military officials to see if there was anything that could be done to get more people out. By early evening, he was back home and on a Zoom call with Army Lieutenant Colonel Doug Livermore, the national director of external

communications for the Special Forces Association; Fred “Doom” Dummar, a retired Special Forces colonel; Anil D’Souza, a former Marine officer; and Mick Mulroy, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense and retired CIA paramilitary officer. They too had been getting dozens of panicked requests from Afghans.

The group began to map out their connections, and within a couple of days they’d grown to nearly 30 members. Mostly retired and over 50, they named themselves the Graybeards. Soon the bulk of Parker’s days were spent trying to proselytize their work on Facebook and to the press before getting on the group’s nightly [Zoom](#) call. By 10 pm US Eastern time, Afghanistan, nine and a half hours ahead, would begin to light up. Parker and his teammates would work until 3 or 4 am trying to get Afghans through the airport gates, mediating between them and US personnel on the ground as Parker had done with the Essazays. Not 50 days into his long-awaited retirement, Parker apologized to his wife, Katy, and their daughter for deploying yet again, this time to the back of their home in Wilmington.

No one seems to remember who said it first, but someone suggested their nascent operation resembled a digital version of the Allied evacuation from the beaches of northern France in World War II. They christened themselves Task Force Dunkirk. Yet despite their collected résumés and hundreds of combined years running high-level combat and intelligence ops, they were unable to help on the ground in Kabul as much as they would have liked. Their connections were, in a way, too high up.

On August 20, in a rare moment of downtime, Parker read Jim Webb’s *Military Times* story, which Webb had emailed him a few days earlier. He replied to Webb, asking for Saboe’s number. In Lieutenant Colonel Parker’s mind, he was going to call Saboe, the young millennial captain, flash his résumé, mention Doom Dummar and Mick Mulroy and all of Task Force Dunkirk’s sterling bona fides, and enlist Team America to support Dunkirk. On the other end of the call, Saboe remained guarded. Since Team America’s Gmail account had gone public, amid thousands of authentic cries for help they’d received dozens of scams. A socialite from Tampa falsely claimed to be an American ambassador. One person called himself The Russian Mercenary and claimed he could travel to Kabul and evacuate

Afghans on Team America's behalf, for a fee. Even members of the Taliban were reaching out.

But almost immediately, Parker realized Team America's group was comically more tech savvy than the Graybeards. Saboe showed Parker the infrastructure Team America had built on [Slack](#), with channels like #legal-resources-questions, where volunteers could quickly triage inquiries about immigration law and visa issues, and #resettlement, where they could discuss how to assist Afghans who had made their way to the US. He showed him the [WhatsApp](#) groups designated for each family and the growing database of Afghans that the team had put in a [Google](#) Sheet to organize the entire operation. Rows and columns were color-coded corresponding to a family's documentation status. With one look, a Team America volunteer could determine whether a group was "gate-ready" or whether they'd be turned away.

Parker decided it was time to reject the chain of command that had been drilled into him from the minute he joined the Marines. By the end of the call, he had pledged Task Force Dunkirk's services in direct support of Team America. Saboe realized he suddenly had some of the best-connected people in the US military and intelligence worlds at his disposal.

Still, the Taliban were adding checkpoints to clog nearly every artery to the airport, and the crowds at every gate were unrelenting. Team America kept getting calls from Afghans who'd spent days making their way toward an escape, running out of food and water along the way, only to get tear-gassed or trampled yards from the gate. Task Force Dunkirk kept getting calls from commanders of the 18- and 19-year-old marines guarding the gates, saying they had no idea who they were supposed to pull from the sea of people.

Boiling with frustration one afternoon, Saboe left his desk and sat in the closet. When he looked up, he noticed the coat hangers dangling above him and remembered something he'd learned as a freshman ROTC cadet, a safety measure dating back to at least the Revolutionary War—simple code words, objects, or devices that silently indicate who's on the same team in a hostile environment. The military calls them "near recognition signals." He ran the idea by Mick Mulroy, the former CIA paramilitary officer, who said that coat hangers wouldn't be readily visible among the masses. Besides,

flailing a wire hanger in front of a bunch of marines with M27 rifles wouldn't likely produce the desired result. The signal also needed to be distinct and impossible for anyone to copy on the spot. Seven days before the evacuation deadline, they started with red scarves.

To stay a step ahead of the Taliban, Team America changed the near recognition signal almost daily. Six days before the deadline, it was pomegranates. Five, the Minnesota Vikings' logo, loaded onto the evacuees' phones. Four, the letters "PJ" written in fluorescent green.

Abasin Hidai and his family were among the first to use the near recognition signal. Early on the afternoon of August 24, Team America texted Hidai to bring his family and a red scarf to meet a Special Forces operator at a location across the city. But by the time they'd arrived, so had the Taliban, which opened fire on their group, forcing them to run back home. Later that night, Team America arranged another meeting point, less than a mile from the North Gate, where another operator would be waiting for Hidai to wave his scarf. At 8:29 pm Denver time, Hidai texted the Chalk-0001 WhatsApp group. *I have met Abu*, he wrote, using the operator's nom de guerre. *We are together*.

Team America now sent Hidai a second signal to flash to marines as the operator escorted the family to the gate—a text image with the word KING PIN. Then the group chat went silent. The gate was often a communications dead zone—the military had started jamming devices to prevent remote-controlled IED blasts. As the silence continued, a sleepless Saboe pressed for an update.

12:54 am: *Hi Abasin—are you all okay?*

1:42 am: *Hi Abasin— did you all make it through the checkpoint?*

2:53 am: *Hi Abasin, are you in?*

At 4:13 am, Saboe's phone pinged with a message. *Hello everyone. A bundle of thanks. I got in with the group. Love u all.*

To stay a step ahead of the Taliban, Team America changed the near recognition signal almost daily. Six days before the deadline, it was pomegranates. Five, the Minnesota Vikings' logo, loaded onto the evacuees' phones. Four, another text image, the letters "PJ" written in fluorescent green. While Team America set and shared the signal to the evacuees in their Slack and WhatsApp groups, Task Force Dunkirk shared it with the soldiers on the ground. Consulting their crowdsourced map, Team America would then determine a specific location to send evacuees, often in the middle of the night, frequently in a sewage canal not far from the airport. Special Forces soldiers would meet them there, confirm the signal, cross-check their identifying documents against the information Team America had provided, and lead them through a gate as covertly as possible.

Saboe asked for help on Facebook and LinkedIn, no military experience required. Team America soon swelled to more than 200 volunteers—neighbors, parents of kids he coached, his wife, his dad, even his 12th-grade English teacher.

Then another Team America volunteer had an idea for further protection: Give each Afghan a digital fingerprint. Travis Boudreau, who served with Saboe in Iraq and is now a logistics executive at a Big Tech company, realized that assigning each of the thousands of potential evacuees a unique QR code would immediately remove human error from the equation. Team America began scheduling buses to be loaded miles from the airport, outside the Taliban's purview. Each passenger had to present a QR code, which was printed discreetly within larger images of various objects and animals, invisible to the human eye. Then the bus would safely drive them through the gates.

Illustration: Alicia Tatone

What had started a few days earlier with Saboe taking a phone call from his brother on a soccer field now bordered on an organized military operation. But the number of Afghans pleading for help was growing exponentially, and the group was hugely overstretched. A \$2 trillion, generation-long war was ending with Saboe posting free classifieds to Facebook and LinkedIn, asking for help, no military experience required. Volunteers had to personally know someone in the group, and—because phishing scams from

Russia, China, and possibly the Taliban kept flooding the inbox—no foreign nationals were allowed. Team America soon swelled from 30 to more than 200 volunteers, nearly two-thirds of whom had never served in the military. They were Saboe’s neighbors, former classmates and coworkers, parents of the kids he coached soccer for, his wife, his dad, even his 12th-grade English teacher.

New members spent their first day learning to be case managers for individual families. While veterans were given the option to become Battle Captains, who managed the movements of Afghans in Kabul, civilians were tasked with managing the growing inbox, which in the final days was flooding with thousands of emails every hour. Trainees learned the rules for fielding emails: Only take in information; don’t click on anything. They were warned about what potential evacuees might send: a photo of someone’s father after he’d been shot in the head, a video of someone’s brother being shoved into the trunk of a car before it sped off.

As Parker spoke to CNN, CBS News, and *The New York Times*, evangelizing Team America’s work, word spread wide. The San Francisco-based collaboration software company Airtable reached out, and within two days had custom-built a cloud-based database to help streamline Team America’s process. Now case managers could more easily add gigabytes of photos and sort through different fields—green card status, say, or number of people in an individual family—in ways they were unable to with a Google Sheet. They could also share comprehensive data with the special operators on the ground. The Raleigh, North Carolina-based authentication firm Rownd got involved too, providing Afghans with a widget that allowed them to redact all of their data from Airtable at the press of a button before they reached a Taliban checkpoint, where their phones would assuredly be searched. Once they’d made it through, they could easily toggle back on, letting Team America know they were still awaiting help. Rownd CEO Robert Thelen, a veteran, became one of Team America’s chief technology officers. Because it wasn’t tax season, all 75 on staff at the St. Louis-based accounting firm Hauk Kruse & Associates joined as case managers for the final days, applying their skills at scrubbing W-2s and 1099s to scrubbing passports and green cards.

As high-tech as Team America had become, escapes also often came down to luck. A few days before the deadline, Saboe got a call from Anil D’Souza, one of the Graybeards, who explained that a woman named Sumaia and her 3-year-old son were trying to get out and reunite with her husband, Raz, a former marine interpreter who had obtained a Special Immigrant Visa in 2015 and was now a truck driver in Wisconsin. Saboe contacted her and learned that she wasn’t far from a location where a marine working with Team America was meeting other Afghans to escort them through the gates. Sumaia would have to get there quickly.

Because she neither had time to go pack nor buy that day’s near recognition signal, a blue pen light, Saboe asked her to snap and send a selfie. He noticed a bright green folder protruding from her backpack and decided to make that her signal, which he relayed to the marine. And because she spoke only Dari, Saboe also recruited his wife’s friend, a fluent speaker, to call Sumaia and teach her how to pronounce one name in English that would serve as a password.

Sumaia waded some 150 meters through thick, knee-deep sewage, while Raz’s brother, who was also hoping to escape, carried his nephew on his shoulders. About an hour in, she’d become too cold to continue and they climbed out, missing the meetup time. Then she realized she’d lost her phone in the canal. Two hours passed as they lost their way in the crowd. The marine happened to be walking by when, across the canal, amid the sea of people, his eyes spotted a bright green folder, and a boy perched atop a pair of shoulders.

The marine crossed the canal and asked Sumaia who she was looking for.
“Pete,” she said.

Sumaia and her son eventually made their way to Wisconsin, reuniting with Raz. They were Chalk-0361. However, as the uncle wasn’t on Team America’s list and didn’t have any documents with him, he had to say goodbye at the sewage canal. He remains in hiding with most of his family.

For every plane that boarded, Team America heard from many more Afghans looking to find one of the final flights out. Outside the gates, the

melee turned deadlier when, five days before the deadline, a suicide bomb detonated at Abbey Gate, killing 11 marines, an Army soldier, a Navy corpsman, and 170 Afghan civilians. In response, US troops began welding the gates shut. Then, early on August 30, Saboe got a call from a high-ranking military official, with a heads-up: There would be no flights out on August 31. “You’re not getting the last 24,” the person said.

At 11:59 pm on August 30, Kabul time, a C-17 cargo plane cleared the runway. The final transport was gone. Team America sent texts to dozens of Afghans who’d made their way toward the gates, urging them to leave and go into hiding. Zac Martin got a call from a former interpreter now living in the Pacific Northwest; nine members of his family had made it a few yards from the gate. “They all fucking dead,” he screamed. Saboe called an all-hands, thanked everyone for their work, and advised them, for their own mental health, to look away from what was about to come. For those who didn’t get out, it was going to be very bad. There was sobbing on the Zoom call. In two weeks, Team America and Task Force Dunkirk had gotten just shy of 500 people out of Kabul. Over 30,000 Afghans remained in their database.

Team America spent most of September dark, with volunteers returning to the lives they’d put on near complete hold. By the end of the evacuation, Saboe had been working on the project 20 hours a day—taking calls on the toilet; coordinating movements with Afghans while dropping his daughters off on their first days of school; and running an ever-growing, multinational operation from his home office. In the weeks after, he wasn’t sleeping, his speech was slurred, his patience nonexistent. He seethed as he watched President Biden tout the “extraordinary success” of the American withdrawal from Kabul, knowing so many were left behind and watching his team’s database continue to expand.

Some of the Afghans reaching out to Team America were in grave and immediate danger. In late September, one frantically messaged his case manager while members of the Taliban pounded on his door, asking if he should kill his wife and kids before committing suicide so that they would at least be spared further abuse. The case manager pleaded with him not to do it. The man was carted off and beaten badly before being returned to his

family. His fate remains unknown. Many other hopeful evacuees simply went dark.

The group wasn't sure if it would resume operations. But as the pleas for help kept coming in, and with evacuations by the State Department at a virtual standstill since August 30, Team America decided to come back online in October. That month, through a connection with one of the Graybeards, they began meeting twice a week with officials from the State Department. The team's crowdsourced database, far superior to the hodgepodge of Excel sheets the government was working with, essentially became the State Department's de facto data set. Team America provided the names, photos, and visa-approval paperwork of the Afghans who were most ready to be evacuated. State would then give the group's case managers the date when each person would have a seat on a transport out of Kabul.

Among them was Zia. Born and raised in Wardak, three hours east of Kabul, Zia (who asked that WIRED use only his first name) had worked with US forces as a logistics and IT specialist and applied for a Special Immigrant Visa in 2018. In January 2021, the US Embassy in Kabul assigned him an interview for July, then bumped it to early August. He traveled to the capital and got his visa, but as he was searching for a flight out for his wife, his younger sister, and himself, Kabul fell to the Taliban. He couldn't find a flight or reach anyone in the US before August 31.

For months, Zia and his family moved from one relative's home to another, spending most of their days locked inside. He stared out of windows, taking note of anyone approaching the house. He looked online for people who could help and found many purported volunteer evacuation organizations. He'd heard that some might be traps set by the Taliban, but he figured he had no choice but to try. He filled out more than 50 forms.

On October 30, Zia received an email from Tracey Meschberger Gifford, a Team America case manager in Colorado, asking for his passport number. He sent his number, his wife's, and his 15-year-old sister's. A few days later, Gifford wrote back, asking for a photo of Zia holding his open passport against his chest. Fearing that he might be falling for a Taliban ruse, he consulted with his family. Send the photo, they told him. On

November 15, Zia got another email informing him that the three of them would have seats on a flight from Kabul to Qatar on November 27.

It wasn't until he was added to a WhatsApp group chat and saw the +1 country code denoting an American phone number that Zia believed they might truly get out. On November 25, someone on the group chat told him to keep an eye out for another number—Afghan this time—of a person who would be asking Zia to bring them the three passports. The sun sets early in November in Kabul, which gave Zia ample time to move under cover of night to bring the passports to the designated drop point and then to retrieve them the next day. A subsequent message told him that his family would be on a flight the following day.

Before heading to the airport, Zia's wife strapped everyone's documents to her bare stomach. They made it through the checkpoint, then the gate, and boarded a flight to Qatar, then to New Jersey. They settled in the Denver area in February.

In November 2021, Saboe received an official memo from a deputy chief of the Defense Intelligence Agency, thanking him for Team America's work. It read, in part, "The way of warfare will never be the same. And even more so for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief." In January, Saboe stepped down from his role leading the team to return his attention to his company and his family. Still he keeps his eyes and ears on the group, continues a friendship with Zia, and in August his family had the Hidais over for qubuli pulao, the national dish of Afghanistan, days after the one-year anniversary of their escape.

Some 30 regular volunteers keep Team America running. Many are like Katherine Schuette, a former military intelligence officer who, after her day job in human resources, opens Airtable, where each entry is a life trying to find a way out, many of them in hiding. This spring, the group hit a late-era high when 37 Afghans boarded a single flight out of Kabul, thanks to information from their database. Some weeks, they get zero people out. In many ways, it's now easier for Afghans with the requisite paperwork to get through Taliban checkpoints and board a plane bound for safer places. But the work is slow. An operation in which things changed in minutes and often seconds now works on a timeline of months, even years. It has

become, as one Team America case manager called it, a “tyranny of paper,” where the proper documentation is more valuable than any safe house or near recognition signal.

To date, Team America and Task Force Dunkirk have gotten more than 1,500 Afghans safely out of Kabul. Schuette estimates that an additional 2,000 might eventually, via a green card status or Special Immigrant Visa, be able to board a flight to America and be marked “Mission Complete,” as five of Zac Martin’s former interpreter’s family now are. (The other four are still alive, it turns out, and still in the database.) In total, that is 5 percent of the Team America database. Some 65,000 other people—all of them hoping to escape a country where starvation is rampant, the economy has collapsed, and schools are closed to the vast majority of girls—will likely remain on the lists forever. It can be hard, the case managers say, to come home from work, open Airtable, and see the unending rows of names. Instead, they try to focus on a single row at a time and remind themselves of the motto Worth Parker and Task Force Dunkirk used as their rallying cry during the mad dash last August: “Just one more.”

Photo sources for illustrations (Getty Images)

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Sayaka Murata Inhabits a Planet of Her Own

The novelist makes the Earthly rituals of sex, marriage, childbirth—and all of human life—appear delightfully outlandish.

Photograph: Monika Mogi

By the time I meet Sayaka Murata, on a recent afternoon in June, the back of my linen dress is damp. It's an oppressively humid summer day in Tokyo, the sun hidden by a thick blanket of gray, and we're taking a stroll at the Shinjuku Gyoen National Garden, a 116-year-old park that becomes dense with crowds during the sakura blossom. Today, visitors are sparse; it seems we're the only ones foolish enough to be out at noon. Looking at Murata's long, collared black dress and black tights, I feel even hotter, but she seems unaffected, apart from a gentle glisten across her forehead. Maybe the subtle sheen is a source of pride for Murata, I think. After all, she's not sure her body works like those of other humans.

"In high school, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't sweat," she says. "Even now I feel like my body and I don't understand each other." Murata, the author of more than a dozen novels and story collections, writes often from this place of alienation. Many of her female characters feel distant from their bodies, both in mechanics and in purpose. In 2016, Murata published *Convenience Store Woman*, a novel narrated by a contentedly unambitious Smile Mart worker who achieves greater fulfillment performing her rote duties as an employee than aspiring to marriage or motherhood. *Convenience Store Woman* was a national bestseller that year—winning Japan's prestigious Akutagawa Prize—and nearly every year

since, and it has sold 1.5 million copies worldwide. *Earthlings*, Murata's second novel to be translated into English, is about a woman whose alienation is literal; she believes she's an extraterrestrial disguised as a human. In July, Murata published *Life Ceremony*, a new story collection in which she concocts grotesque social rituals (in the title story, funerals are occasions to eat the dead) to expose the absurdity of the corporeal norms we've all become desensitized to.

This article appears in the October 2022 issue. [Subscribe to WIRED](#) Illustration: Eddie Guy

Though she is unlikely to use either term, Murata's fiction might best be described as speculative-feminist. The worlds she invents are future-looking without adhering to the tropes of [science fiction](#); her scenarios horrify without leaving the daylit quotidian spaces of home and office. She devises bizarre social experiments that unfold in seemingly familiar worlds and implants unhinged fantasies inside otherwise unrebellious women. Her characters navigate domestic arrangements that distort the smooth image of marriage, childbirth, and family life like a fun-house mirror. As in a fun house, her tricks amuse and delight. Reading her books, I often find myself scream-laughing out loud, then doing a double take: *Did I really just read that?* While she is sometimes outrageously gross, she's rarely merely so. Rather, her speculations act as a provocative form of scientific inquiry, probing incredulously at the conventions of her species. Why, she asks, do humans live this way?

Meeting Murata, I experience a bit of cognitive dissonance, knowing the sweet-voiced 43-year-old woman in front of me is the author of several scenes of sensual [cannibalism](#). She is small and delicate, with neatly curled, chin-length hair. She giggles often. The way her eyes shine makes me think of Piyyut, the stuffed alien-hedgehog talisman in *Earthlings*: cute but distant, as if belonging to a far-off world.

Since childhood, Murata has been troubled by an intense and sometimes painful effort to be an "ordinary earthling."

In the Japanese media, Murata is sometimes called "Crazy Sayaka"—a nickname first bestowed on her affectionately by friends but one that she

fears borders on caricature. Though her editors warn her not to say weird things in public, strange comments invariably flow out, like vomit. A few times during our conversation, Murata starts to say something and then catches herself. She glances sideways as if checking with someone; then a bashful grin flashes across her face as she goes ahead and says it anyway. This happens when she talks about looking for her own clitoris and about being in love with one of her imaginary friends. Listening to Murata, I feel an odd sense of relief wash over me. Her literary worlds offer little comfort, and yet I feel my body relax in her presence, as if it has found a momentary refuge from the crush of humankind's collective delusions.

Since childhood, Murata has been troubled by an intense—sometimes painful—effort to, as she put it in [a 2020 essay](#), be an “ordinary earthling.” Growing up in a small city in Chiba, a prefecture east of Tokyo, she was lonely and sensitive, frequently interrupting her kindergarten class with inconsolable crying fits. Her father, a judge, was often away at work, and her mother, occupied with caring for her and her older brother, worried over her timid appetite and weak constitution. “I just wanted to hurry up and become a good human,” Murata says.

Aware that her frailty made her stand out, she studied the earthling manual carefully. But pressure to keep up the daily pretense felt like “little cuts” to her heart. She would frequently hide in the bathroom of her elementary school and cry until she threw up. When Murata was 8, she writes, an alien came through her bedroom window. It whisked her away to a place where she didn’t have to perform, where she felt accepted. She would make more imaginary friends over the years and now counts 30 of them. “Thirty?” I repeat. “I couldn’t just keep one or two,” she says. “That’s how sentimental I was.” These beings have kept watch over her since childhood, playing games with her and holding her hand while she falls asleep.

When she was 10, Murata started writing stories in the style of the *shōjo* mystery and fantasy books that were popular for young girls at the time. Her mother helped her buy a word processor; Murata thought it was a magic machine through which the god of novels would transform her writing into books. “In elementary school, I went to the bookstore to look

for my own stories,” she says. “But I couldn’t find them. Obviously.” She releases a giggle.

Murata’s struggles at school continued through junior high. She was rejected by her classmates, who told her to go and die. She started keeping a calendar that counted down to her “death day,” which she marked for after graduation. As the days ticked down—120, 119—she felt, alongside the thoughts of suicide, an intense desire to live. During that time, Murata says, writing became “a kind of church.” On graduation day, Murata ran home, ripped off her school uniform, and threw out the calendar. “It was an important realization: that by my own desperate devices, I could control my own mind and survive,” she says.

When she was in high school, Murata’s family moved to Tokyo. In her new environment, she was able to make human friends, and she started looking forward to school. But this newly sociable Sayaka, while a relief, was another of what would be many guises. Murata has long felt that she doesn’t have a single, identifiable personality. Like the narrator Haruka in her story “Hatchling,” she sees herself as a rotating cast of personae that shift to match the social context around her. Haruka starts grade school as “Prez,” a diligent go-getter, then becomes the emoji-loving airhead “Princess” in college while working at a diner as “Haruo,” a rough-talking tomboy. The story is a gross exaggeration of *kuki wo yomu*, the ability to read the room and intuit the right response, which is considered an essential skill in Japan. From the outside, it might have seemed that Murata’s newfound social fluency meant she’d at last grown up; another way to tell it, though, is that she was learning to act the part of being human.

She’d stopped writing stories by the time she entered college, at Tamagawa University, but in her second year she met novelist Akio Miyahara, and, moved by the precision of his psychological works, she started again. One of the stories she wrote in Miyahara’s class, about a schoolgirl who breastfeeds her private tutor, would become the title piece in her debut collection.

During college, Murata started working at a convenience store. At the *conbini*, for the first time, she felt “released from being a woman,” she tells me. Men and women wore the same uniforms, and she easily formed

platonic relationships with male colleagues. This simple, rule-bound world, in which every task was outlined in the company handbook, provided instructions she knew how to follow. After five or six years, the store closed, but Murata continued working at five other conbinis over the next 18 years.

During this time, she wrote *Convenience Store Woman*, a story of feminist rebellion with her singular spin. The book is told from the perspective of Keiko, a 36-year-old woman who has never had sex or held a real job and has no particular interest in either. The romance between Keiko and her place of employment is oddly moving, as is her quiet bewilderment over purpose and personhood. Keiko is happy and content, but her family worries about her. To get them off her back, she starts a sham relationship with a misogynistic coworker with whom she shares a mutual loathing. Though the reality is horrible, the setup appears conventional. Her family is thrilled.

“From a young age I was made aware that I had a uterus and was a member of the birthing sex,” Murata says.

Keiko, as a prototypical Murata hero, is not a preachy, angry agent of change who rails against the patriarchy. She’s more like an alien quietly trapped inside a woman’s body. Her antagonists are not government leaders or laws; they’re her own family members, who seek to preserve something called “normal.”

Convenience Store Woman, Murata’s most widely read novel, is also the most subdued of her works. *Earthlings* takes the same themes to a far more outlandish dimension, treating incest, cannibalism, and cult indoctrination as strategies of subversion. In the book, a woman named Natsuki harbors a deep paranoia that society is a front for something she calls the Factory, which sucks in adult conscripts and churns out babies. The pressure to procreate and become a component in the system is “a never-ending jail sentence” that Natsuki tries to escape by, like Keiko, entering a sham marriage. In one scene, Natsuki’s sister confronts her:

“You won’t be allowed to carry on running away. You have to get intimate, have a baby, and live a decent life.”

“Who? Who won’t allow me?”

“Everyone. The whole planet.”

Murata’s characters can’t reject society entirely, so they live uncomfortably within it. They operate as if they missed the social contract in the mail, or forgot to sign it. Reading Murata, you might begin to scrutinize all of the clauses in the human Terms and Conditions you’d previously skipped over. *Hey, I don’t remember signing up for this baby thing.*

Photograph: Monika Mogi

Murata’s work tends to offer imperfect alternatives, rather than solutions, to the problem of having a uterus. Her stories contain artificial wombs, no-contact insemination, and male pregnancies. But her visions for a better world often bend back toward the monstrous. In one of her popular untranslated books, called *The Birth Murder* in Japanese, the government has instituted a bizarre incentive to urge its shrinking populace to procreate: Anyone who has 10 babies is allowed to kill one person of their choosing. The system ends up becoming a grotesque cycle of corporeal sacrifice. In a novel Murata is currently writing, other living creatures are forced to give birth on behalf of humans. “I thought it would provide a great relief to women,” she says of the conceit, laughing. “But it just got more and more hellish. I didn’t solve anything.”

Of all humankind’s artificial constructs, those that most urgently disturb Murata involve social systems of procreation. When describing sex, she often uses sterile, clinical phrases: Sex is “insemination,” while orgasming is “discharging fluid.” Her female characters seek a way out of the [biological fatalism](#) that draws a straight line from having a womb to becoming a mother. “From a young age I was made aware that I had a uterus and was a member of the birthing sex,” she says, recalling that she was assessed by her elders on the sturdiness of her hips. “More than thinking about whether I wanted to have a child or not, I felt I was being regarded as a birthing machine, a machine of flesh.”

Perhaps in resistance, Murata’s first story to be translated into English, “A Clean Marriage,” imagines a different sort of reproductive machine. The

story chronicles the attempt of a husband and wife to have their first child. They're perfectly satisfied as partners, except they've never had sex, and don't plan to. They aren't asexual—they have partners outside of their marriage—but they are disgusted by the prospect of having sex with their *spouse*. Happily, their society has devised a solution for their needs. The couple visits a fertility clinic that offers a “graceful, non-erotic experience” via a contraption called the Clean Breeder so that insemination can occur without the nasty business of actually having intercourse.

Murata confides that, these days, she's intimate with one of the 30 imaginary friends she lives with. “If that can be considered love, too, then maybe romantic love isn't so bad.”

Many of Murata's stories resist the expectation that love, sex, and reproduction come easily and naturally in a single relationship. In her early romantic life, she found sex excruciating. “So I had to make myself numb in order to love,” she tells me. When she was around 20, she says in [a 2020 *Guardian* interview](#), she had a painful relationship with a man—a convenience store manager 15 years older than her—who demanded that she cook for him and do his laundry. It didn't suit her. “I have a rice cooker,” she says. “But I just heat up rice in the microwave.”

Murata declines to speak in detail about her relationship history. She confides that, these days, she's intimate with one of the 30 imaginary friends she lives with, the same ones she made as a young child. “If that can be considered love, too, then maybe romantic love isn't so bad,” she speculates. She mentions a married friend who feels no attraction to her husband and fantasizes instead about having a big white dog as a lover. (“Oh no, I said something weird,” she says with a resigned laugh.) Still, she's open to love with humans. Her sexuality fluctuates, and she's reluctant to close herself off completely to any possibility or to declare any one sexual orientation. I imagine her filling out a dating app profile: *Gender identity: alien. Sexuality: imaginary.*

Sex-free, businesslike marriages and partnerships recur throughout Murata's stories, so it's not surprising that readers might find in them a disinterest in sex, or even outright rejection. It's also tempting to read [asexuality](#) into her characters. But Murata's work evades such easy

categorization. Her fiction, rather than circumscribing the pleasures of intimacy, widens its possibilities. *Life Ceremony*, Murata's new collection, includes a few short, sweet stories about platonic friendships and relationships with nonhuman forms. In one, two elderly women, one a virgin and one promiscuous, platonically raise a family together; in another, a teenage girl has a romance with the billowing curtain in her bedroom.

Life Ceremony uncovers Murata's preoccupation with our species' norms writ large, beyond gender, sex, and reproduction. Several stories imagine near-future worlds in which bodies find new uses after death. In one story, recently deceased humans are repurposed to make tables, sweaters, and shimmering veils. The effect is strangely tender; the narrator feels it's "marvelous and noble" that her corpse should be of practical use. "I would always feel that I too was a material," she says. In another story, funerals have morphed into loving, sexy, generative dinner parties called "life ceremonies," for which the body of the recently deceased is served as a multicourse meal. The ceremony guests, energized by a collective duty to solve an imminent population crisis, then pair off in the night to have sex and get pregnant.

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In offering such exaggerated scenarios, Murata exposes the lunacy of the norms we so blithely follow. What if human bodies were used as material, like those of other animals? What if children kept adults as pets? In another hundred years, what will be forbidden and what will be sanctioned? "Normal," says one of Murata's characters, "is a type of madness, isn't it?" Murata's lifelong feeling of being a stranger has given her a perspective from which to create her worlds. "This has enabled me to see clearly the repulsiveness of humans, to dissect their grossness," she says.

In an untranslated essay published in *Shinchō* magazine earlier this year, titled "The Commonplace Urge to Kill," Murata describes how she became fixated on killing an editor she calls Z-san. An established editor, Z tries to recruit Murata to become a "novel machine" and produce whatever he wants her to write; when she resists, he tells her to stop writing altogether.

In an intensely personal and uncharacteristically sober style, Murata confesses that she becomes convinced she has to kill him or die herself.

After a year of torment, prayer, and medication, the urge eventually leaves her body. Finally at peace, she embarks on the self-soothing ritual of her typical routine: She goes to a chain café, writes, drinks a coffee, opens a door, goes for a walk. What's truly weird, Murata concludes, is not that people sometimes have murderous intentions, it's that the urge can just dissipate. How strange it is, she marvels, to walk around in the light and forget that we wanted to kill—how strange, and perfectly normal.

Murata is a regular at Shinjuku Gyoen, where she sometimes takes walks at the end of the workday. She lives nearby, in the same area she has been since college. The rhythm of life from her convenience store days was comforting in its regularity: wake up at 2 am, write, go to work at theコンビニ, go to a café to write, go to bed by 8 or 9. Now she keeps a strict schedule of working at three or four neighborhood cafés. In the vast garden and city and universe, it's as if her world can be reduced to a single route confined to a 1-mile radius. This monotonously regulated lifestyle keeps her tethered to the ground. "If I stay in my house," she tells me, "I'll get sucked into my dreamworld."

At times, she still feels like she has to study the manual of human behavior. At literary events she has attended in Europe, she observed that her straight-as-a-cane posture stuck out next to the other speakers, who sat slack and slouchy. Overall, though, Murata no longer sees herself as a freak. "I'm a completely ordinary human," she says, using an adjective that in Japanese can mean both "commonplace" and "mediocre." In college, she recalls, she opened a [psychology](#) book and saw all her worries—about her family, about her own mind—outlined from the very first page. It was a clue that her deep anxieties about not being human enough were, indeed, very normal. The world was full of people just like her, people desperate to understand the rules that everyone else follows, who endeavor to pass as members of the human species. She looks down at the two tight fists in her lap, her elbows straight and her torso rigid. "If you dissect it and analyze it, it's classic human," she declares, with supreme conviction. "I'm extremely ordinary."

Grooming by Sakie Miura

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By [Randall Munroe](#)

[Backchannel](#)

Aug 23, 2022 6:00 AM

What If You Tried to Swallow a Whole Cloud?

Ask an absurd question, and xkcd's Randall Munroe will give you a (somewhat) serious answer. An exclusive excerpt from his upcoming *What If? 2*.

Courtesy of Riverhead Books and ABBR PROJECTS

What does a star smell like? What's the tensile strength of snow? How much actual dinosaur does a toy dinosaur contain? If you drove a car to the edge of the universe, how much gas would you use? What's the market value of a shoebox full of LSD? Are all the churches in the world big enough to hold all the bananas?

"I like ridiculous questions, because nobody is expected to know the answer," Randall Munroe writes in the introduction to *What If? 2*, his second book of serious answers to hypothetical questions sent in by fans. You may know Munroe as the creator of the web comic *xkcd*, which offers wry commentary (usually involving stick figures wearing various hats) on science, technology, history, politics, and the daily micro- and macro-follies of human life. There's a sincerity about his projects, a nerdy excitement that reminds you of talking to a 10-year-old—assuming you know a 10-year-old who can explain what a naked singularity is and why theoretical physicists hate them.

Nerdy-kid excitement is what WIRED is all about. The following pages contain Munroe's answers to two questions: What if some of outer space turned to soup? And what if you tried to swallow a cloud?

PART ONE

SOUPITER

What would happen if the solar system was filled with soup out to Jupiter?

—Amelia, age 5

Please make sure everyone is safely out of the solar system before you fill it with soup.

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE

If the solar system were full of soup out to Jupiter, things might be okay for some people for a few minutes. Then, for the next half hour, things would definitely not be okay for anyone. After that, time as we know it would end.

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE

Filling the solar system would take about 2×10^{39} liters of soup. If the soup is tomato, that works out to about 10^{42} calories' worth, more energy than the sun has put out over its entire lifetime.

The soup would be so heavy that nothing would be able to escape its enormous gravitational pull; it would be a black hole. The event horizon of the black hole, the region where the pull is too strong for light to escape, would extend to the orbit of Uranus. Pluto would be outside the event horizon at first, but that doesn't mean it would escape. It would just have a chance to broadcast out a radio message before being vacuumed up.

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE

What would the soup look like from inside?

You wouldn't want to stand on the surface of Earth. Even if we assume the soup is rotating in sync with the planets in the solar system, with little whirlpools surrounding each planet so the soup is stationary where it touches their surfaces, the pressure due to Earth's gravity would crush

anyone on the planet within seconds. Earth's gravity may not be as strong as a black hole's, but it's more than enough to pull an ocean of soup down hard enough to squish you. After all, the pressure of our regular water oceans under Earth's gravity can do that, and Amelia's soup is a lot deeper than the ocean.

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE

If you were floating between the planets, away from Earth's gravity, you'd actually be okay for a little while, which is kind of weird. Even if the soup didn't kill you, you'd still be inside a black hole. Shouldn't you die instantly from ... something?

Strangely enough, no! Normally, when you get close to a black hole, tidal forces tear you apart. But tidal forces are weaker for larger black holes, and the Jupiter Soup black hole would be about 1/500 the mass of the Milky Way. That's a monster even by astronomical standards—it would be comparable in size to some of the largest known black holes. Amelia's souper-massive black hole would be large enough that the different parts of your body would experience about the same pull, so you wouldn't be able to feel any tidal forces at first.

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE

Even though you wouldn't be able to feel the soup's gravitational pull, it would still accelerate you, and you would immediately begin to plunge toward the center. After a second had passed, you'd have fallen 20 kilometers and you'd be traveling at 40 kilometers per second, faster than most spacecraft. But since the soup would be falling along with you, you'd feel like nothing was wrong.

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE

As the soup collapsed inward toward the center of the solar system, its molecules would be squeezed closer together and the pressure would rise. It would take a few minutes for this pressure to build up to levels that would crush you. If you were in some kind of a soup bathyscaphe, the pressure

vessels that people use to visit deep ocean trenches, you could conceivably last a little longer.

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There would be nothing you could do to escape the soup. Everything inside it would flow inward toward the singularity. In the regular universe, we're all dragged forward through time with no way to stop or back up. Inside a black hole's event horizon, in a sense, time stops flowing forward and starts flowing inward. All time lines converge toward the center.

From the point of view of an unlucky observer inside our black hole, it would take about half an hour for the soup and everything in it to fall to the center. After that, our definition of time—and our understanding of physics in general—breaks down.

Outside the soup, time would continue passing and problems would keep happening. The black hole of soup would start slurping up the rest of the solar system, starting with Pluto almost immediately, and the Kuiper belt shortly thereafter. Over the course of the next few million years, the black hole would cut a large swath through the Milky Way, gobbling up stars and scattering more in all directions.

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE

This leaves us with one more question: What kind of soup is this, anyway?

If Amelia fills the solar system with broth, and there are planets floating in it, is it planet soup? If there are already noodles in the soup, does it become planet-and-noodle soup, or are the planets more like croutons? If you make a noodle soup, then someone sprinkles some rocks and dirt in it, is it really noodle-and-dirt soup, or is it just noodle soup that got dirty? Does the presence of the sun make this star soup?

The internet loves arguing about soup categorization. Luckily, physics can settle the debate in this particular case. It's believed that black holes don't retain the characteristics of the matter that goes into them. Physicists call this the "no-hair theorem," because it says that black holes don't have any distinguishing traits or defining characteristics. Other than a handful of simple variables like mass, spin, and electric charge, all black holes are identical.

In other words, it doesn't matter what kind of ingredients you put into a black hole soup. The recipe always turns out the same in the end.

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE
PART TWO

EAT A CLOUD

Could a person eat a whole cloud?
—Tak

No, unless you're allowed to squeeze the air out first.

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE

Clouds are made of water, which is edible. Or drinkable, I guess. Potable? I've never been sure where the line between eating and drinking is.

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE

Clouds also contain air. We don't usually count air as part of food, since it escapes from your mouth as you chew or—in some cases—soon after you swallow.

You can certainly put a piece of a cloud in your mouth and swallow the water it contains. The problem is that you'll need to let the air escape—but air that's been inside your body will have absorbed a lot of moisture. When it leaves your mouth, it will carry that moisture with it, and once it encounters the cool, cloudy air, it will condense. In other words, if you try to eat a cloud, you'll just burp out more cloud faster than you can eat it.

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE

But if you can collect the droplets together—perhaps by passing the cloud through a fine mesh and squeezing it out, or ionizing the droplets and collecting them on charged wires—you could absolutely eat a small cloud.

A fluffy cumulus cloud the size of a house could contain about a liter of liquid water, or two or three large glasses, which is about the volume a human stomach can comfortably hold at one time. You couldn't eat a huge cloud, but you could absolutely eat one of those small house-size ones that briefly block the sun for a second or two when they pass overhead.

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE

A cloud is just about the largest thing you could eat in one sitting. There aren't a lot of things puffier and lower-density. Whipped cream seems pretty fluffy, but I'm told it's 15 percent as dense as water,* so a gallon of whipped cream would weigh about a pound. Even accounting for all the air that would escape, you couldn't eat more than a small bucket of it. Cotton candy, one of the most cloudlike foods, has a very low density—about 5 percent that of water—which means that you could in theory eat about a cubic foot of it in one sitting. That wouldn't necessarily be healthy, but it would be possible. But even if you spent your entire life eating cotton candy, you'd probably die before you ate enough to fill a house.

Other extremely lightweight edible substances include snow, meringues, and bags of potato chips, but you probably couldn't eat a cubic foot of any of them in a single sitting.

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE

So if you want to eat a cloud, you'll need to do some work, but if you succeed, you'll have the satisfaction of knowing that you've eaten the largest thing you can possibly eat.

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE

Just remember to store your cloud in a reusable bottle. There's no need to waste all that plastic!

Illustration: RANDALL MUNROE

* Citation: Tracy V. Wilson, host of the podcast *Stuff You Missed in History Class*, who happened to have a cooking scale and a can of whipped cream on hand when I got this question.

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Aug 18, 2022 6:00 AM

The Family That Mined the Pentagon's Data for Profit

The Freedom of Information Act helps Americans learn what the government is up to. The Poseys exploited it—and became unlikely defenders of transparency.

Illustration: Shay Azzari

Most drivers who head up to Alta Ski Area from Salt Lake City pay no mind to the nondescript turnoff from Utah State Route 210 that veers out to the left about five miles before the slopes. Some motorists may catch a glimpse of the black gate and the “No Trespassing” signs or see a plain white cargo van peeling off the main road and feel a twinge of curiosity. What passing motorists wouldn’t see, at the end of a winding lane, is a bunker-like concrete structure about the size of a two-story house, surrounded by a system of motion sensors and hidden cameras. Behind the structure’s loading door, a tunnel stretches some 200 feet into the solid granite mountain, leading to a series of vaults that constitute one of the most secure private storage facilities in the world.

Designed to protect against floods, earthquakes, fires, and even a nearby nuclear blast, Perpetual Storage opened in 1968 to house some of the most precious objects in America. But by the late 1970s, physical assets were already slightly passé. While Perpetual was happy to secure rare artifacts, what kept paying the salaries of its armed guards was the business of storing corporate microfilm and computer records. Patrick Lynch, Perpetual’s co-owner, told *The Washington Post* in 1979 that the master file for one customer was worth \$15 million (equivalent to \$60 million today).

So when George MacArthur Posey III approached Perpetual in 1978, he wasn't interested in the vault's fine art or bullion. He was after information. Posey was looking for certain records belonging to General Electric, and he wasn't furtive about his intentions. At the time, GE was developing an advanced turbofan engine that would power the US Air Force's brand-new F-16 fighter plane. As if he were talking to a librarian, Posey asked Lynch for access to the Perpetual vault in order to photograph GE's records. As Lynch recalled the interaction, Posey explained that he had photographed records concerning the F-16 in the past and had "sold those records to other countries."

Perpetual's clients spell out very clearly "who can do what with their records," Lynch told WIRED in a recent phone interview. And GE's authorization forms made no mention of Posey. After turning Posey down flatly, Lynch reported the interloper to the [FBI](#)—something Perpetual hasn't done since. The FBI's Los Angeles office noted that Posey tried something similar the next summer, attempting (unsuccessfully) to obtain information about the US Navy's supersonic F-5 fighter from an engineer at its manufacturer, Northrop.

Posey, however, considered himself not only an entrepreneur but a patriot. His small family business, Newport Aeronautical Sales, based in Southern California and previously owned and operated by Posey's stepfather, sold unclassified technical information to companies that wanted to bid on Pentagon contracts to repair military aircraft or manufacture spare parts. Those would-be contractors were all too happy to outsource the tedious work of obtaining technical manuals, parts lists, and specs. By helping them, as Posey saw it, he was also helping the US military find the lowest bidder for its contracts.

As it turned out, there was an easier way to obtain valuable technical data than going through the executives of storage vaults, and Posey would make a hugely profitable business of it for the next several decades. It involved a high-minded, fast-evolving, and relatively new law called the Freedom of Information Act, and it would bring the Posey family business millions of dollars in easy money. But it would also turn them into key combatants in the US government's long, concerted battle to keep information from the

public. Along the way, Posey would become embroiled in global politics, earn a spell in prison, and watch his own son appear in federal court on charges of conspiracy and theft of government property for actions related to the operations of Newport Aeronautical.

Illustration: Shay Azzari.

What turned into a business opportunity for the Poseys began as a [Cold War](#)-era fight for government transparency. In 1947, President Harry Truman signed [an executive order](#) that gave the executive branch power to investigate and fire any federal employee who was deemed to be disloyal to the country, without having to supply evidence. The results of those investigations were held in secret FBI files. In the mid-1950s, the US government, and the Pentagon, in particular, hoarded information as compulsively as atom bombs. In the midst of the Red Scare, the design of a bow and arrow was deemed too sensitive for public release. The amount of peanut butter American soldiers consumed annually was a military secret. Shark attacks on sailors could neither be confirmed nor denied.

In 1953, John Moss, a newly elected US congressman from Sacramento, California, was appointed to the House Post Office and Civil Service Committee—normally an obscure position without much political power. During Moss' first term, he was appalled to discover that not even he, a member of the committee with statutory jurisdiction over the Post Office, could get information about 2,800 postal workers who had been fired for alleged security reasons.

This article appears in the October 2022 issue. [Subscribe to WIRED](#)

Illustration: Eddie Guy

After Truman left office, the Pentagon became even more secretive; in 1955, President Dwight Eisenhower's defense secretary, Charles Wilson, ordered that for any information to be released to the public, it had to make a “constructive contribution” to national security. Journalists and newspaper editors, who had raised mounting alarms against government secrecy for years, went into an uproar. They found common cause with Moss, a Democrat, who would soon be appointed to the more powerful Government Operations Committee, on which he spearheaded the creation of a Special

Subcommittee on Government Information. From his platform as chair of that new subcommittee, Moss began pressing for the bill that would ultimately become the Freedom of Information Act.

“Our system of government is based on the participation of the governed, and as our population grows in numbers it is essential that it also grow in knowledge and understanding,” Moss told the House. “We must remove every barrier to information about—and understanding of—government activities consistent with our security if the American public is to be adequately equipped to fulfill the ever more demanding role of responsible citizenship.” Moss’ Republican cosponsor was a young congressman from Illinois named [Donald Rumsfeld](#).

For a decade, the federal government had fought them every inch of the way. It was only in 1966 that press and public pressure sent the Freedom of Information bill to the desk of President Lyndon Johnson. The law went into effect on July 4, 1967. For the first time, members of the American public had the right to inspect information held by their government, with relatively few exceptions, and to sue if their requests for information were unduly denied.

Over the years, FOIA has allowed journalists to break thousands of stories and has empowered activists and communities. But the law also opened pathways for another core American aspiration: free-market economics.

In 1974, in the wake of the Watergate scandal, Congress passed amendments to the Freedom of Information Act that gave the law even more teeth. Congressional hearings had revealed that many bureaucrats were going to great lengths to resist complying with FOIA, much as the White House had tried to stymie Watergate investigators. Now, Congress decreed, any agency that declined to fulfill a FOIA request would be on the hook to pay all legal costs if the requester sued and prevailed, any agency employee who wrongfully withheld information could be personally sanctioned, and courts would be able to review whether information had been frivolously classified as secret.

Those amendments ushered in a golden age for use of the Freedom of Information Act. For years, backlogs were light; requesters could ask for

pretty much anything that wasn't classified and agencies had to hand it over for just the cost of duplication, no more than a few dollars, in a timely manner.

Under those conditions, many of the democratic effects that Moss envisioned began to flourish. Over the years, FOIA has allowed generations of journalists to break tens of thousands of stories and has empowered activists and communities to track everything from government-sanctioned pollution to disaster mismanagement. But the law also opened pathways for the expression of another core American aspiration: free-market economics.

In the late 1970s, George Posey must have realized that filing paperwork with bureaucrats was a lot easier, and less costly, than trying to talk his way into underground bunkers. Newport Aeronautical Sales epitomizes what Ohio State University law professor Margaret Kwoka calls “information resellers”—companies that submit a stream of Freedom of Information Act requests to US government agencies, then treat the responses as merchandise to unload. Cheap FOIA requests in, valuable data out. Some resellers focus on the Security and Exchange Commission’s financial filings, others on facility inspection reports from the Food and Drug Administration. The Poseys specialized in engineering drawings, technical orders, and manuals for aircraft, most of them from the military.

Today, these information resellers have become some of the prime beneficiaries of FOIA. In a 2017 analysis of 229,000 FOIA requests, those from journalists accounted for just 8 percent. In 2020, there were nearly 800,000 requests made. At some federal agencies, the vast majority of requests are now from commercial operators who resell or use data for profit. Their turf is where a lot of the battle over the erosion of the freedom of information in America has been fought.

Illustration: Shay Azzari

After several requests for comment, George Posey responded to a detailed list of questions, saying in an email that the “majority” of the claims inherent in the questions “are false and misleading.” Given the opportunity to specify which claims he was refuting, Posey did not respond before press time. No other employees of Newport Aeronautical or members of the

Posey family would speak with WIRED. But court records, investigative reports, and interviews with associates of the Posey family and former employees paint a relatively thorough picture of their family business.

Over time, Newport Aeronautical accumulated stacks of manuals and drawings for most of the US military's active aircraft, from attack helicopters and lumbering transport planes to advanced-strike jets. As the documents piled up, Posey installed floor-to-ceiling shelves in a warehouse attached to Newport Aeronautical's office, paying people to help file and index the growing collection. The folks at Newport Aeronautical had gained a reputation as masters of obtaining aircraft data—"gurus in the industry for any needed manuals," one customer is reported to have said.

To understand why there's a market for military technical documents, it helps to know that the Pentagon operates many of its aircraft for much longer than any commercial airline would, often by decades. When components on those aircraft eventually start to fail, the options for fixing them can be few, far-between, and pricey. "It's called vendor lock, where we have to go back to the original equipment manufacturer," says retired Air Force general Hawk Carlisle, the former president and CEO of the National Defense Industrial Association, a trade organization of companies that support the US military.

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In an effort to eliminate vendor lock and reduce costs, the Pentagon prefers to own the technical data for its equipment, then shop around for the cheapest supplier, says Carlisle. But that is not always possible, especially for the many aircraft that have civilian counterparts. Either way, there is now a multibillion-dollar cottage industry of companies that want to bid for government maintenance, repair, and overhaul contracts—but that need the latest blueprints and manuals to do so. Filling that need was Newport Aeronautical's niche.

An aviation and nautical buff, Posey would often turn up at Newport Aeronautical's small office straight from his yacht club in shorts, flip-flops,

and Vuarnet sunglasses, recalls a former employee named Al Barazin, who started work there in the early 1990s. Another former employee told WIRED that the CEO still worked hard. Every day, Barazin would arrive at the office to find dozens of requests for technical data spitting out of the fax machine. Each order—say, for the manuals associated with a helicopter’s fuel pump—would have a part number. If Newport Aeronautical had the documents, Barazin would photocopy and overnight them to the customers. If not, someone would fill out a preprinted FOIA request form with the part number and contact details and fax or mail it to the relevant military base.

When the request was granted, Newport Aeronautical would mail the government a check for the cost of duplicating the requested documents, maybe \$5 or \$10. Posey would then charge his customers many times that—often \$200 or more. Customers were happy to pay the markup, says Barazin, because “we had this stuff at our fingertips, whereas it would take a repair facility a month or two months to get the data, and they wouldn’t be able to quote for the work. That’s the model, and it’s a brilliant model.”

Some of those customers weren’t simply mom-and-pop repair facilities trying to earn US government contracts. About half of Newport’s business involved legally selling data abroad, Posey claimed in the 1980s. Merex, a US company owned by Pakistani arms dealer Arif Durrani, did business with foreign countries that needed to maintain their US-made aircraft. Reached by WhatsApp in Pakistan, Durrani remembers visiting Newport Aeronautical’s old office in Costa Mesa, crammed with paperwork and photocopiers. “He sold stuff to us whenever we needed it in a hurry,” says Durrani. “For example, the Israeli government would buy components from me directly. When they would order them, I knew that these parts were being transferred to Iran, because Iran was flying Phantom jets in the ’80s. Israel was sending its technicians and basically repairing their aircraft.” Durrani says that while Posey did not necessarily know the identity of his customers’ end users, he suspected that Posey knew “enough the motive behind what he gets.”

In the early 1980s, Posey whisked his new bride, Roberta, off to Kenya for their honeymoon. It was there, his mother Nadja later told the *Los Angeles Times*, that Posey was approached by representatives of South Africa’s

government looking to buy some manuals. On his return from Kenya, Posey began popping up on electronic intercepts set up by the FBI in its hunt for spies.

The Pentagon had come to suspect that America's enemies, and the Soviets, in particular, were using FOIA to get their hands on technical data that, although unclassified, still posed a risk to national security. A 1985 Department of Justice memo stated that "Soviet acquisition of US technology significantly shortens their research and development cycle, and reduces the risks associated with the design of new weapons and defensive systems." But when military bases began withholding such data from their responses, Posey didn't simply fold: He sued the Navy for violating the Freedom of Information Act. In 1984, the case was settled. The Pentagon would now release critical information to data brokers like Newport Aeronautical, provided they limited resale to other qualified contractors. Posey claimed the settlement as a victory, but Newport Aeronautical was now firmly in the government's crosshairs.

By 1986, international horror at South Africa's system of institutionalized racial oppression led the US Congress to pass the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act, laying out broad sanctions against the regime. Posey was labeled a South African agent, and the government placed taps on his phones and put a voice-activated bug in the Newport Aeronautical office.

Almost immediately, the veteran FBI agent in charge of that investigation, Robert Ibbotson, tuned in to cloak-and-dagger phone calls that could not be more different from Posey's direct approach at Perpetual Storage.

On April 28, 1986, Posey dialed a number in Pretoria, South Africa, identified himself as "Mr. Brown," and said he had a package for Johann Van Vuuring, who he identified on a subsequent call as a buyer for the South African Air Force. A few days later, Posey received a call from the office of Nicolaas Vorster, a naval attaché at the South African embassy in Washington, DC, alerting him to a letter on its way.

Van Vuuring called back in August and read Posey a series of 17 groups of letters and numbers: 58L4, 38R11, 275R12, 81L6, 325L1, 348L11, and so on. The FBI identified Van Vuuring's cipher as a dictionary code. The

sender encodes their message by finding the word they want in a dictionary, noting the page number, whether it is in the left or right column, and which entry it is from the top. In this case, 58L4 signifies the forth word down on the left-hand side of page 58: “big.”

What makes dictionary codes effective, and difficult to crack, is that they require the sender and recipient to have the same dictionary. “The security lies in the fact that there are so many dictionaries that are published that you have to virtually search through hundreds of them, coming up with the right one, the right volume, and the right copyright date,” FBI cryptanalyst Jacquelyn Taschner said.

But a cipher is only as strong as its weakest link. After taking down the code from Van Vuuring, Posey needed help deciphering it. He called his wife—she was being treated at a local hospital at the time—and asked her if she knew the location of “the number books” that they “used to play with.” Ibbotson was still listening in. Roberta told Posey that the books were in the bottom-right side of the gray wall unit in the house. Ibbotson had learned the key to understanding Posey’s conversations with Van Vuuring—but it would take some time before he would get his hands on that dictionary.

Deciphered later, Van Vuuring’s message read: “Big guy visit LA, August, mid month, want meeting for business, and K list farm no good.” A subsequent phone call from Van Vuuring allowed the FBI to identify the “big guy” as Joe Botha, an executive with a sales firm about which details are scant. Reports by the FBI suggest that the “K List” was the list of documents Botha was seeking.

That September, Posey arranged to meet Botha for lunch at the historic La Valencia hotel in La Jolla, California. Ibbotson and a contingent of FBI agents staked out the hotel in advance of the meeting and were in place with video and tape recorders. They watched as Posey pulled up, left his car at the valet, and walked straight over to one of the FBI agents. Posey asked the agent if he was Botha, and the agent replied that he wasn’t. Posey eventually located Botha without the FBI’s assistance.

While the two sat for lunch, Botha delivered Posey a shopping list of technical data and manuals for Newport Aeronautical to procure. The South

African would ultimately order documents related to a range of components, including power units for the C-130 transport aircraft and, an old favorite, General Electric jet engines. Some of the items were on the US Munitions List—technology, weapons, and information whose export is strictly controlled, especially to a pariah nation like South Africa.

Posey later insisted on dealing with the South African military through intermediate companies. “I can’t deal with anybody on a surface level. I have to stay subsurface so I am protected from scrutiny,” he told Botha. When Botha asked what he meant by “protected from scrutiny,” Posey replied, “You know, protected from scrutiny of the FBI.”

It was far too late for that. The FBI had heard and watched it all.

Ibbotson was listening when Posey told Roberta that the deal stood to make Newport Aeronautical \$98,000 (equivalent to about \$260,000 today), and he was listening when Posey roped in Edward James Bush, an English-born aerospace consultant, to act as a courier for the manuals and then launder the proceeds through his Canadian bank account. The two had already worked together, Bush said later. The year before, Posey had supplied him with technical manuals for F-4 and F-5 fighters, destined for Iran’s air force.

In early February 1987, a team of FBI agents followed Posey and Bush as they scrambled to print and pack the South African documents. Bush planned to travel to South Africa through Argentina, where Posey wanted him to drop off some other technical manuals on space and missile systems for the Argentine Air Force.

As the men organized and packed the documents in Newport Aeronautical’s office, the FBI listened in on the office bug. “This is not just some routine job. You are violating the export laws,” Bush said, according to Ibbotson. “Fucking A,” Posey replied, and he and Bush carried on with their plan.

On the afternoon of February 7, Bush checked three white boxes and a blue suitcase for his journey and entered the boarding area at Los Angeles International Airport. There he was arrested by the FBI and US Customs Service agents. Around the same time, in Costa Mesa, the FBI raided the

Newport Aeronautical office and Posey's house. As Posey, Roberta, and their 2-year-old son returned home, they found unmarked FBI vehicles and more than a dozen agents crawling through their belongings—including the dictionary codebook that Posey used to communicate with Van Vuuring.

Posey's brother Robert, who was also a Newport Aeronautical employee, gamely fielded questions from reporters. "It's not like we're really trying to hide anything," he told the *Los Angeles Times*. "If we were shipping guns or missiles, that would be one thing, but these are books!"

In March, according to the *Los Angeles Times*, Posey became the first person to be indicted under the Anti-Apartheid Act. He was also charged, as was Bush, with conspiring to violate the Arms Export Control Act. Vorster, the South African naval attaché, was mentioned (but not charged) in the indictment and reportedly left the country in a hurry. Reached in retirement in South Africa via email, Vorster told WIRED: "I had no personal contact with these gentlemen, and I certainly never met them." Bush quickly pleaded guilty to violating the Arms Export Control Act and cooperated with the FBI. Posey, however, wanted his day in court.

At the opening of Posey's trial, in July 1987, his lawyer claimed that the military "has had a vendetta with my client going back to the '70s." The prosecutor, assistant US attorney Brian Hennigan, said Posey's own conversations showed that he knew he needed government permission to export the manuals. Hennigan, now a defense attorney in private practice, told WIRED that Posey's trial has stuck with him over the years. Hennigan remembered feeling "a sense of moral fervor" during the prosecution. Posey "wasn't simply trading information, this was trading in information with no thought or no value being placed on what was going to be done with it," he said.

During the trial, Posey said that he and Van Vuuring used codes only because Posey was planning to give him a (possibly illegal) kickback, and he argued that the documents he sold were unclassified and in the public domain. Posey was swiftly convicted of violating the Arms Export Control Act and the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act. When he was sentenced, Posey said: "I did not mean in any way, shape, or form to jeopardize national security, nor did I have the means to do so. A lot of things were

said about me which made me out to be some sort of subversive against our country, which is contrary to my character or my true beliefs. I'm a patriot. I've served my country." Patriot or not, Posey was fined \$15,000 and sentenced to 10 years in prison, with all but four months suspended. He was forbidden from selling information to foreign buyers for five years.

Illustration: Shay Azzari

After serving his four months at a medium-security prison in Michigan, Posey regained the helm at Newport Aeronautical. But he was about to make a whole new group of enemies. Starting in 1998, the company began fielding lawsuits from some of the world's biggest defense contractors. A lawyer at Lockheed Martin remembers sending letters to Newport Aeronautical telling it to stop selling the company's data. But asking nicely was never going to work with Posey. In 2000, Airbus asked a federal court to prohibit Newport Aeronautical from advertising, reproducing, selling, or publishing any of its copyright materials. The court issued such an injunction, under pain of \$50,000 in damages. Posey agreed to Airbus' terms to settle the case, and Newport Aeronautical seems to have entered into similar consent judgments with Bell, Kiddie, Boeing, and Moog.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 made business even harder for Newport Aeronautical. FOIA's old cosponsor, Donald Rumsfeld, was now in charge of the most secretive Department of Defense in a generation, as public sentiment granted the George W. Bush administration a wide berth to wage its war on terror. Against this backdrop, the Pentagon decided to tighten its rules on handing out critical data to companies like Newport Aeronautical: It would now provide technical orders to commercial customers only if they could link requests to a specific government contract.

Posey either didn't hear of the new rule or decided to test its limits. In August 2002, workers at Robins Air Force Base in Georgia got in touch with the US Air Force Office of Special Investigations. Posey, they alleged, had just requested the entire technical manual library for the C-130 aircraft on compact discs. When a database administrator at Robins told Posey about the Pentagon's new policy, they said, Posey became upset. "Mr. Posey continued to try and persuade me that he had a legitimate reason for getting this technical data," wrote the administrator in a sworn statement to

the Office of Special Investigations. “He also used what I considered intimidation, threatening to involve the DOD and take legal measures because [the base] refused his request.”

The employees also claimed that Newport Aeronautical had requested technical data in “mass quantities” from the base in the past and that it was in possession of documents that were classified Secret.

The Air Force opened an investigation, the results of which were [later made public in a lawsuit](#). It noted Posey’s history of work with Arif Durrani, the Pakistani arms dealer, who had been convicted of shipping Hawk missile parts to Iran as part of the infamous Iran-Contra affair. It also claimed that Posey helped provide technical data to another arms dealer, Amanullah Khan, who was later convicted of attempting to sell fighter aircraft parts to undercover federal agents he thought were Chinese arms dealers. The investigators reported that Newport Aeronautical and Posey had also been investigated by US Customs agents in Boston; New York; Washington; and Oxnard, California. None seem to have resulted in any charges.

Although Posey had threatened to sue the DOD, the Pentagon struck first. In early 2003, undercover Special Investigations agents attempted a sting operation against Newport Aeronautical, asking Posey to supply a technical manual for the C-130 that was classified as Secret. According to the investigation report, Posey quoted a price of \$650 for the manual but noted that the data was “restricted.” Posey is reported as saying that “he may have one of his workers sweet-talk someone” in order to secure the documents. The sale was never consummated and, as with the earlier investigations, the inquiries stalled.

But the post-9/11 restrictions on what information the DOD would share were more than Posey could bear. In 2004, Newport Aeronautical finally did sue the Air Force for not fulfilling a number of FOIA requests. The complaint claimed that vendor lock had cost the DOD and America’s allies billions of dollars and that Newport Aeronautical, by providing data quickly to contractors, had increased small business participation.

“Potential competitors who relied on NAS for data could not bid on solicitations issued by the Air Force, other DOD buying agencies and our

allies,” Posey wrote. “As a result, original equipment manufacturers were often the only manufacturer with data. This further resulted in awards of overpriced noncompetitive contracts.”

His lawsuit dragged on for more than five years before the court granted the Air Force’s motion to dismiss. The government would be allowed to withhold unclassified technical manuals with military or space applications. The universe of documents available through FOIA had shrunk once more, and Newport Aeronautical would have to look elsewhere for the information its customers wanted.

In early 2008, even before the suit against the Air Force was settled, Newport Aeronautical had begun developing another strategy for obtaining the information its customers wanted—one that would move the company past FOIA resales and into shadier territory. According to his LinkedIn account, Posey’s son, George MacArthur Posey IV—known to the family as “Mac”—joined the company in 2009.

For more than a decade, Mac and a fellow Newport Aeronautical employee made document requests directly to a Florida woman named Melony Erice, who worked in sales for a number of private aerospace companies. She was never a Pentagon employee. Nevertheless, she managed to fulfill Newport’s requests. In all, the company paid Erice more than \$589,000 for over 5,000 technical manuals and drawings. According to court documents, those manuals and drawings in turn earned the company over \$2.1 million. On [Facebook](#), Posey boasted to his friends about Mac: “He makes sure we always get paid. He’s our Ray Donovan, if you know what I mean. Doesn’t miss a dime.”

“Now my son wants to take over and expand what I have started,” Posey posted on Facebook in 2013. “He already has, and has impressed me with his expertise of business management. But he still doesn’t know the difference between Cessna 150 and a B-52, but he does know money coming in and money going out. Proud dad.”

Where was Erice getting the information? Not through her own FOIA requests, as it turned out. In 2019, military investigators stumbled on email correspondence between Erice and a civilian employee of the US Navy in

Philadelphia, who was using his access to military databases to illegally download files that Newport Aeronautical wanted. He then split the proceeds with Erice, with whom he had previously lived.

Investigators followed the trail of thousands of emails from Erice to accounts associated with Newport Aeronautical, gaining a search warrant for them in late 2019. There, they found evidence that she had not been Newport Aeronautical's only backchannel for technical manuals and drawings. Filings allege that starting in February 2015, Mac had also bought over 870 documents for nearly \$83,000 from a quality-control manager at a Florida aerospace contractor who had access to military data as part of his job. On September 2, 2020, 33 years after Posey's house was raided by federal agents while his wife and toddler son watched, federal agents came to arrest Mac.

Mac was charged with one count of conspiracy to steal government property and to commit bribery of a federal public official, as well as three counts of receiving stolen government property. He has since been appearing, often remotely due to the Covid-19 pandemic, before the same US District Court as Posey did. Like his father before him, Mac is also facing the possibility of 10 years in prison. While the government's criminal complaint notes George Posey's position as CEO of Newport Aeronautical and shows him receiving an emailed invoice from Erice for stolen documents, he has not been charged.

law professor Margaret Kwoka has spent the past decade studying the evolution of FOIA. She thinks Representative Moss would be both delighted and horrified to see the results of his efforts to force the government into transparency. "Delighted that so many people have found so many uses for this law that probably he couldn't have imagined," she says. "Horrified by just the sheer bureaucracy that it has created."

At least 125 countries around the world now have freedom-of-information laws, many modeled on FOIA. But while the US legislation has been amended about every decade since the success of Moss' crusade, Kwoka notes that the changes have failed to prevent ever-lengthening delays and restrictions. These include ever-broader interpretations of exemptions that allow agencies to withhold behind-the-scenes deliberations and many

corporate secrets. “Most redactions or denials based on claimed exemptions from agencies go unchallenged because most people don’t have the time or money to appeal,” says Kwoka.

For all the Posey family’s law-breaking, Newport Aeronautical has been one of the very few commercial requesters attempting to hold the military to Moss’ principles of radical transparency. “They may be more exceptional than regular,” says Kwoka. “Most data resellers for sure don’t go to court, either ever or hardly ever. They get what they can get, and then they sell it.”

Though most of Newport Aeronautical’s cases ultimately failed, they set precedents that have since been cited in dozens of subsequent FOIA cases, including those brought by environmental, digital-privacy, and government-spending activists, some of which have reached the United States Supreme Court.

The Poseys’ lawsuits may have helped rein in the government’s tendency to hoard information, but the family hardly makes for a set of uncomplicated FOIA heroes. George Posey was the first person—and one of only a handful ever—to be convicted of violating the US Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act, and Mac has pleaded guilty to conspiracy and receiving stolen government property.

Nevertheless, the Poseys might yet be gearing up to start a new family business. At the start of this year, Mac incorporated Back Bay Packaging, based at the same address as Newport Aeronautical’s office. The nature of that business, like so much of what went on at Newport Aeronautical Sales over the past five decades, remains a mystery.

The agencies investigating the Poseys almost certainly have more details in their files that have not been made public, and last winter I asked all of them for interviews. Most refused outright, although the US Air Force Office of Special Investigations suggested that I file a FOIA request to learn more. I’m still awaiting a response.

Let us know what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor at mail@wired.com.

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Aug 7, 2022 7:00 AM

The Secret to Being Lucky

Everything happens for no reason.

Photograph: Shawn Michael Jones

Alexa's approach to prediction is a revelation: "Today you can look for sunny weather, with highs in the mid-70s." Go to town, scan the skies! You might get lucky.

Really, what more can or should be said about the [future](#)? Look around and see what happens. You can look for your crypto windfall. You can look for the love of your life. You can look for the queen of hearts. Seek and ye might find. You can even look for a four-leaf clover, though the chances are about 1 in 10,000. But if you find one, the shamrock is no less lucky because you looked for it. In fact, it's luck itself.

"Diligence is the mother of good luck" and "The harder I work the luckier I get"—these brisk aphorisms get pinned on Ben Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, lest we earnest Americans forget that salvation comes only to individuals who work themselves to dust. In truth, the *luck = work* axiom does nothing but serve the regime and the bosses, by kindling credulity in a phantom meritocracy instead of admitting that virtually *every single advantage* we get in the world is one we lucked into—by being born to the right parents who speak the right language in the right zip code. How about we *invert* the meritocratic fallacy in those aphorisms and create a new aphorism that makes "work" the delusion and "luck" the reality? "The luckier I get, the harder I pretend I've worked." An excellent way to describe the people born on third who believe they hit a triple.

After all, the chances of the precise sperm colliding with the exact egg in the right fallopian tube and convening to make you—or me—are so low as to be undetectable with human mathematics. The meeting that determines only 100 percent of your existence.

If there's any method of prediction that never fails, it's luck. You look for your horse—or your candidate—to win, and she wins? What luck. What if she loses? Better luck next time. If Alexa says you can look for rain, and you look and find it—lucky you, you brought an umbrella! Luck is fate and fate is what happens and a prediction of what happens is a perfect prediction.

Sure, for free-will buffs, being told that your sole agency lies in looking for luck, which you may or may not find, can be demoralizing. Perhaps that's why people tell themselves that luck is actually just hard work. We can *do* something about work—namely, do it.

But work and diligence can never be the parents of luck, because luck has no mother, no father, no precedent or context. Luck is a spontaneous mutation, signaling improbability; it shows up randomly, hangs around according to whim, and—as every gambler knows—makes an Irish goodbye. Mischievous luck is fun, a shamrock, a “lady.” It’s worlds away from grinding toil.

So where does the “looking for” luck come in? Ah—your agency comes in the almost-passive *search* for luck. The noticing. In 2018 the philosophy professor Steven Hales, along with one of his colleagues at Bloomsburg University, found that we’re only as lucky as we think we are. We only find luck when we look for it. Better still—for those who like action items—luck begets luck. You look for sunny weather, you’re more likely to find it; you find it, you come to think you’re lucky; you try your luck looking for more sunny weather and you luck out again.

In *Aeon* magazine, Hales [wrote](#), “Luck might not be a genuine quality of the world at all.” Fine. But neither is beauty or justice. At the same time, the Bloomsburg researchers discovered “a significant positive correlation” between people’s temperaments and how lucky they thought others were. “One of the things this means is that the more optimistic *you* are, the more

you think *others* are lucky.” For “optimistic,” I might substitute “happy-go-lucky.”

“Luck is a mere *façon de parler*, or turn of phrase,” Hales wrote (using the Irish, of course). Of anyone who believes they’re lucky, he went on, “their luck might well be, in a very strict psychological sense, entirely of their own making.”

Of our own making! So you make your own luck by looking for it, but you also make it with lucky turns of phrase and lucky casts of mind. You see a friend who recovered from Covid as lucky for recovering, rather than unlucky for getting sick in the first place. And, if you’re a happy-go-lucky type, you groove luck into your world by saying it, over and over. *Wow, you were lucky. Your sister had some stock and made you soup? What luck! Your system rallied? Boy, that’s great genetic luck right there.*

Einstein didn’t like the idea of God “playing dice” with the world. Lucky for Einstein, dice, in a world determined by luck, are not thrown by anyone, much less a God who is said to have Yahtzee skills. Instead, the chips fall where they may—and really they just fall, unpredictably, spontaneously. We then look for patterns in them.

For those seeking self-improvement, and who isn’t, I’m not just freestyling here. Living by a doctrine of luck promotes at least five excellent things that have got to be good for your brain.

1. *Active skepticism about “meritocracy.”*
2. *Recognition of the utter contingency of one’s own advantages.* An act, if I may, of “checking your privilege.”
3. *Appreciation for the spontaneity, serendipity, and unpredictability of the universe.* Nicholas Rescher, the illustrious philosopher at the University of Pittsburgh, calls luck “the brilliant randomness of everyday life.”
4. *A way to practice “gratitude” without doing calligraphy in \$75 journals.* All you have you do is say, every time it hits you that life is OK and could be otherwise, “What luck!”

5. A way to make more luck in your life.

Luck really is the best creed. It makes no truth claims, requires no messiahs or gurus. It's not religious, partisan, or ideological. It doesn't just *allow* for surprise; it's nothing but surprise. It's charming. It may even be the secular answer to grace, but it comes with laughs rather than piety.

When you get good at luck, you can even find a spot of luck in a heat wave or your team's defeat. But don't be a psychopath. Luck is not about looking on the bright side. It's much more minor. It's about just *being*—and observing that, of all the prospective organisms in the broken but intriguing world, you happened, against the odds, to be one.

This article appears in the September issue. [Subscribe now.](#)

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[Paul Ford](#)

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Aug 3, 2022 8:00 AM

Forget Disruption. Tech Needs to Fetishize Stability

Breaking things is an ethos for the bored, for people who live in reasonable climates and don't have tanks in the street. That isn't us anymore.

Illustration: Elena Lacey

I used to co-run a [software](#) company. My cofounder is Lebanese, so we built a team in Beirut with an office right on the Levantine Sea. Great software engineers over there, excellent front-end talent. But Lebanon has been *going through it*. And not just in the normal “wedged between factions in an eternal global crisis zone” way. First the [financial system](#) collapsed (*no problem*, the team said), then the [pandemic](#) hit hard (*we're doing OK*), then Beirut was partially destroyed in a port explosion (*a terrible day, but we'll get through it*). Then we learned that people were [powering](#) their houses with [DIY solar](#) or diesel generators (*don't mention it*) and getting internet through mobile hot spots (*almost always works fine*). We rented spare apartments for folks having trouble getting home (*not necessary, but thanks*) and figured out how to pay people when the banks were melting (*appreciate it*). On January 6, 2021, they Slacked the US team, “Your coup is ridiculous.”

All of which gave me a great appreciation for how boring America was. America was so boring for so long that other countries held their wealth in dollars, and oil oligarchs hoarded empty apartments in Manhattan. America was so boring that, for decades, the tech industry was able to make [disruption](#) its mantra. Young people would find some technology-enabled new thing; VCs would plump it up with cash, building a marketplace for

new buyers and sellers; and established players would hilariously stumble all over themselves trying to compete. They'd fail, and we'd laugh. Need more progress? Just make more technology. Smartphones, drones, teledildonics, IoT—whatever, let's blow up the world again.

You can't just say "software is eating the world" and chill. Software already ate the world, and digested it, and pooped out a new world, and that's where we're living.

That type of progress definitely generates a ton of activity. But it also sits weird when you consider how many lives in the world, historically and currently, including American lives, are *extremely* disrupted—by toxic spills or the whims of royalty or the goats all swelling up and dying. Disruption is an ethos for the bored, for people who live in reasonable climates and don't have tanks in the street. But America has recently become way less boring.

I'm thinking of the photo of the dude wearing horns in the Senate chamber. Technologists are on the hook for that one. Because the internet begat the web, which begat social, which begat Trump, which begat *all that* and the Supreme Court, which unbegat Roe, and all I'm saying is that technology can't be responsible for only one kind of progress and wash its robot hands of the other. Borders aren't evaporating into the cloud; they're getting thicker. Distances are becoming more expensive to traverse. Grids are faltering. For several weeks this year it was tough to buy pretzels. You can't just say "software is eating the world" and chill. Software already ate the world, and digested it, and pooped out a new world, and that's where we're living.

I once enraged a client because I promised during a meeting to build them a "big, boring software platform." They took me to a fancy bar to yell at me. "We didn't pay you for boring!" they said. "We paid you for exciting!" I had to explain how, in tech, "boring" can be an asset, a way to build for growth, how things that look exciting, like New York City, are built on boring things, like sewage, or investment banking. An endlessly churning consumer economy might be fun in the moment—but have you ever seen the floor of the movie theater when the lights come up? (Of course I paid for the client's drinks.)

Stability is a hard sell, I'll grant you; the payoff is far away. No hominid ever thought, "If I poke this stick into a termite mound, then 50,000 generations from now my progeny will pay for five streaming services, including Peacock." They thought, "I am tired of chasing these termites all over the place when there's a veritable termite fountain over there." And suddenly, right then, they were eating the world. Humans are here for a good time, not a long time.

An endlessly churning consumer economy might be fun in the moment—but have you ever seen the floor of the movie theater when the lights come up?

Fast-forward 50,000 monkey generations. Pretty clearly, now is the moment to learn how to fetishize stability. As I write, the asphalt in London is hot enough to heat your fish and chips. The solutions to [the crisis](#) (crises) are agonizingly long-term and require hundreds of trillions of dollars, with billions of people doing their part. What's a monkey with a stick to do?

In this, I think, the internet industry has a precedent to offer. The world of technology is infinite and exhausting, and everyone will tell you *their* giant thing is the real next thing. But you can always see the big, boring, true future of the field by looking at the on-ramps—the code schools, the certificate programs, the “master it in 30 days” books. One year everyone was learning Rails at coding boot camps. Then it was JavaScript. Then many of the boot camps closed, and now it's DevOps (software development plus IT operations). These are the things the industry needs right now, on a two- to five-year horizon. And stick around long enough and you'll find a lot of old Unix code and Java beneath the new stuff—dull systems, a stable stack of technologies so reliable that we forget them.

So I'm over progress and done with disruption. Stability is my new best friend. Not the big stuff, the UN-level stuff. Leave that to the smart macro-thinkers with European accents and interesting all-weather clothing, or the sad Americans with Substacks. What I'm going to work on, for the rest of my career in the tech industry, hand to God (OK, I'm an atheist and easily distracted, so caveat lector), is making nice little tutorials and tools—better sticks for kinder monkeys. I'm working on my first tutorial now, about how to parse NetCDF files full of climate data using the Python programming

language to save the data to an SQL database and integrate it into a traditional web workflow. That's my DevOps! Who knows, maybe one day someone will open a school for stability. Everyone will want to run it, and no one will want to mop the floors.

This article appears in the September 2022 issue. [Subscribe now](#).

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[Clive Thompson](#)

[Ideas](#)

Jul 29, 2022 8:00 AM

After Going Solar, I Felt the Bliss of Sudden Abundance

My rooftop panels showed me that a world powered by renewables would be an overflowing horn of plenty, with fast, sporty cars and comfy homes. Photo-illustration: Jacqui VanLiew; Getty Images

I used to worry about using too much [electricity](#).

If one of my family members left their bedroom and forgot to turn off the [air conditioning](#)? I'd snap at them: "What, you *want* the planet to cook extra fast?" If I found lights left on overnight, I'd fume.

Reader, I was insufferable. In my defense, I'd been worrying about climate change ever since Jim Hansen's 1988 landmark congressional testimony about it. With every cool blast of AC, I knew more carbon was being dumped into the atmosphere. So I turned into an energy miser. I'd go around the house turning lights off; if no one else were home, I'd leave the AC off entirely, even on blazingly hot days.

But then, three and a half years ago, something happened that changed my entire psychology around electricity: [I installed solar panels](#) on my house.

I quickly found myself awash in more energy than I could use. The installers had predicted the panels would produce 100 percent of what my household needed. (Since battery systems aren't yet legal in Brooklyn, New York, where I live, any surplus I generated during sunlight hours would get sold to the grid, and I buy energy back at night.)

But the installers underestimated: It turns out I generate a *lot* of net surplus. According to the “smart meter” that my utility installed, in a 24-hour period my house frequently generates 25 percent more juice than I need, even on a hot summer day. On sunny spring and fall days, it’ll crank out 50 percent more than I use. I’m saving about \$2,000 a year, so I’ll amortize the cost of the array in seven years; then the electricity is damn-near free.

It’s had a fascinating effect on me: I’ve stopped worrying about electricity use, both economically and ethically.

I no longer walk around finger-wagging at my family members. Want to blast the AC? Crank away. It’s coming from the sun, and I can’t use all that electricity even if I try. And I’ve tried! I’ve charged an electric bike, run multiple loads of laundry, had many computers and a game system and a TV going, and still those panels were kicking out a net surplus. I’ve idly thought of running a power strip out to the sidewalk with a sign saying “FREE ELECTRICITY,” just to be the Johnny Appleseed of [solar](#).

In essence, I went from a feeling of scarcity to a sense of abundance.

And it occurs to me that this is, really, an emotional shift we ought to foreground when we promote renewables.

Right now many people are doubtful about solar and wind. Thanks (in good part) to fear-and-doubt messaging from Republicans and fossil-fuel interests, renewables are too often associated with privation and rationing—needing to be an efficient-but-miserable hippie instead of gunning the motor and having fun. “Most people believe a clean-energy future will require everyone to make do with less,” as the inventor and energy thinker Saul Griffith points out in his book *Electrify: An Optimist’s Playbook for Our Clean-Energy Future*.

Yet when I talked to other folks who’d put solar on their roofs, most had precisely the same epiphany I’d had: They realized they had way more juice than they expected. And it had the same emotional effect—going from feeling guilty and weird to devil-may-care.

Consider the case of Christopher Coleman. A digital artist who teaches at the University of Denver, he uses massive amounts of power—sometimes running a computer full-tilt for a day and a half to render a single piece of digital art. “It *really* burns the GPU. My computer’s going 24/7,” he says. If he were relying solely on greenhouse-gas-producing sources, he’d feel unnerved by these energy demands. But his household’s solar array is so productive it covers his entire outlay.

“We’re *much* more lax and comfortable,” he says.

I polled my Twitter followers, asking whether having [residential solar panels](#) had changed anyone’s relationship to their energy use. The majority said it had given them a similar thrill of abundance—and many joked about blasting the air-conditioning without a second thought.

“We have these 90-degree days, now and I walk in and the house is cool and I smile and I go ‘I don’t care,’” says Sandy Glatt, another Denver resident.

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Many also told me they’re shifting their energy usage to daytime hours, so they can use all those photons themselves instead of handing them off to the grid (where, alas, we often get ripped off by our utilities, who buy our electricity at a cheap rate and sell it back to use more dearly). So they’re charging Teslas and running all their major appliances during the day, and installing electric water-heaters to generate a full day’s worth of hot water while the sun shines.

Solar installers typically find that after a household gets panels, “their energy use goes up,” says Charlies Collier, a solar-installation project manager with Imperial Solar.

Given all the political barriers that renewables face, it might seem weird to talk about their *emotional impact*.

But emotion drives politics. This is why some renewable advocates are now trying to tout—as loudly as possible—that a world powered wholly by renewables would be an overflowing horn of plenty, with fast, sporty cars and comfortable homes.

“It’s the abundance agenda,” Griffith says. In *Electrify*, he argues that a massive build-out of solar, wind, and storage mechanisms (including millions of electric cars, doubling as batteries) would make renewables reliable while also being much cheaper than what we now pay for fossil-fuel-produced electricity.

He has already seen a glimpse of it in his homeland of Australia, where 30 percent of houses have solar, and the arrays cost barely a quarter of what I paid for mine. Things could be as cheap here in the US, Griffith notes, if towns reduced red tape (zoning laws and building codes, mostly) and states reformed their rules on liability and connecting to the grid. The price barriers in the US aren’t labor or materials: “It’s all about regulations,” he says. “It could change quickly if people wanted it to.”

We should. Because take it from me: It’s *fun*.

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[Jeffrey Ball](#)

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Jul 28, 2022 6:00 AM

The Big Business of Burying Carbon

The porous rock beneath the Gulf Coast launched the petroleum age. Now entrepreneurs want to turn it into a gigantic sponge for storing CO₂.

Port Arthur's Motiva Oil Refinery. Photograph: Katie Thompson

Sometime after the dinosaurs died, sediment started pouring into the Gulf of Mexico. Hour after hour the rivers brought it in—sand from the infant Rockies, the mucky stuff of ecosystems. Year after year the layers of sand hardened into strata of sandstone, pushed down ever deeper into the terrestrial pressure cooker. Slowly, over ages, the fossil matter inside the rock simmered into [fossil fuels](#).

And then, one day in early 1901, an oil well in East Texas pierced a layer of rock more than 1,000 feet below Spindletop Hill, and the well let forth a gooey black Jurassic gusher, and the gusher began the bonanza that triggered the land rush that launched the age of petroleum.

One of the products of the economy that black gold built is the city of Port Arthur, Texas. Perched on the muggy shores of Sabine Lake, just across the border from Louisiana, it's among the global oil-and-gas industry's crucial nodes. Port Arthur is home to the largest petroleum refinery in North America, opened the year after the Spindletop gusher and now owned by the state oil company of Saudi Arabia. The area emits more [carbon dioxide](#) from large facilities every year than metropolitan Los Angeles but has a population 3 percent the size. Smokestacks are its tallest structures; nothing else comes close. Around town, pipeline pumping stations jut up from

shopping-center parking lots, steam from petrochemical plants hisses along highways, and refineries flank both sides of main roads, their ductwork forming tunnels over traffic. Janis Joplin, who grew up here, described it in a 1970 ballad called “[Ego Rock](#)” as “the worst place that I’ve ever found.”

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Illustration: Maria do Rosário Frade

Tip Meckel has a more hopeful view of the place, maybe because he spends so much time looking down. A lanky research scientist at the University of Texas’ Bureau of Economic Geology, Meckel has worked for most of the past decade and a half to map a roughly 300-mile-wide arc of the Gulf Coast from Corpus Christi, Texas, through Port Arthur to Lake Charles, Louisiana. Though he’s the grandson of a refinery worker and the son of an oil consultant, his interest isn’t in extracting more petroleum from this rock. Instead, he has devoted most of his career to figuring out how to turn it into a commercial dump for CO₂.

The idea is that major emitters will hoover up their own carbon waste, then pay to have it compressed into liquid and injected back down, safely and permanently, into the same sorts of rocks it came from—carbon capture and sequestration on a scale unprecedented around the globe, large enough to put a real dent in [climate change](#). Suddenly, amid surging global concern about the climate crisis, some of the biggest names in the petroleum industry are jumping in.

On the rainy morning I meet Meckel in Port Arthur, the brown-haired [geologist](#) is dressed in a blue Patagonia fishing shirt, black jeans, and running shoes, with sunglasses dangling from a leash around his neck. We pile into his gray Toyota 4Runner and head south, through the petro-sprawl, toward the Gulf. We’re off to see a patch of ocean that Meckel thinks could be key to the drive for decarbonization.

“You don’t throw trash out of your car, do you?” he says as we cruise down a coastal highway, the city receding into the rearview mirror. “Well, we don’t want to dump our CO₂ into the atmosphere either.” Maybe the problem, Meckel says, is that the gas is invisible. “If it was purple, and the

skies had turned purple by now, everyone would be like, ‘Shit. We really screwed up.’ Maybe they should just dye the CO₂ that’s coming out of the stacks and let people see where it goes.”

Tip Meckel holds a sandstone sample.

Photograph: Katie Thompson

By some estimates, there’s enough suitable rock on Earth to lock away centuries’ worth of CO₂ emissions, past and future. [The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#), the world’s preeminent climate-science body, has repeatedly affirmed that extensive long-term carbon storage is likely necessary to meet any of its targets to seriously mitigate the overheating of the planet. Globally, in 2021, a paltry 37 million metric tons were sequestered—roughly what the Port Arthur metropolitan area emits in a year. Meckel and his colleagues have worked hard, with millions of dollars in funding from the petroleum industry, the state of Texas, and the federal government, to prove that the Gulf is the best place in the country, if not on Earth, to get this new industry truly ramped up.

The work has focused on mapping the region’s underground rock, a process that combines physical evidence, computerized extrapolation, and intuition. Meckel’s university lab in Austin holds a gigantic collection of well logs—long paper strips, rather like the printouts from a heart monitor, that reveal instant-by-instant, centimeter-by-centimeter measurements of myriad features of the underworld, typically from sensors that have been carefully lowered thousands of feet into a borehole. (The folded strips are stored in narrow manila envelopes in row upon row of metal shelves in the basement.) Meckel and his colleagues augmented the logs with 3D seismic data, which they got at a discount; the data company selling it had seen a drop-off in interest in the Gulf from oil-and-gas drillers. Armed with that data, Meckel says, they began to “mow the ground” along the coast, methodically assessing it.

The Bureau of Economic Geology in Austin, Texas, stores thousands of oil well logs.

Photograph: Katie Thompson

Meckel interprets a well log.

Photograph: Katie Thompson

The search drew their attention to a layer of sandstone from the Miocene epoch, ranging in age from 5 million to 23 million years old, which lies partly under waters controlled by the state of Texas and stretches into Louisiana. The layer is porous (lots of holes to hold liquid) and sits close to many big polluters (lower piping or shipping costs for the waste CO₂). The sandstone is also covered by a less porous layer of rock that can act as a carbon-tight seal. Meckel and his team built new computer models, then ran simulations of how injected carbon dioxide might flow through the rock. By 2017, they had published an atlas of the Gulf Miocene layer, 74 pages of intricate maps and tiny print.

The year after that, events in Washington transformed the atlas from an academic treatise to an economic playbook. Amid rising climate concern, Congress fattened a federal tax credit for carbon capture and sequestration that until then hadn't attracted much commercial interest. The new subsidy, modeled broadly on ones for renewable energy, gave developers a credit topping out at \$50 for every ton of waste carbon dioxide they captured and geologically stored. That \$50-per-ton prize coincided with a surge in warming-related natural disasters, which catapulted climate change to the top of many corporate agendas. It also launched the US carbon-storage race. Meckel's atlas, available to anyone, became the racers' guide to the best route.

The result today is that, more than a century after opportunists first swarmed the Gulf to profit from its hydrocarbons, a new swarm has descended, this time to profit from mitigating the damage those hydrocarbons have wrought. A quest that just a few years ago was a science project has become a high-stakes contest to lock up good rock. Within about a 75-mile circle around Port Arthur, more than half a dozen industrial-scale projects are in various stages of preparation. Their backers include oil giants such as ExxonMobil, ConocoPhillips, BP, and TotalEnergies, which have announced the possibility of more than \$100 billion in investments; major pipeline operators, which see human-generated CO₂ as a huge new

market; renewable-energy developers who once lambasted fossil fuels but now want to decarbonize them for profit; and landowners who sense a new way to monetize their dirt. A stampede for capital, land rights, and regulatory approval is underway.

Meckel pulls his Toyota into Sea Rim State Park, a beach on the Gulf. The parking lot is open, but much of it is flooded. Roseate spoonbills wade through puddles on the asphalt.

We wander onto the sand. Looking seaward, Meckel points to a line of oil platforms squatting on the horizon. He envisions dozens of new wells drilled in the coming decades, this time to inject CO₂. “We’re talking about a whole area the size of Texas that you can develop for storage,” he muses. “Who’s not going to think that’s a good idea?”

Meckel concedes that carbon storage is a “blunt” and “dumb” approach to curbing climate change. “You’re basically just landfilling,” he says, not decoupling the economy from the production of heat-trapping gases. But with it, he adds, “you buy the time to use the scalpel to do all the cool stuff,” by which he means [renewables](#) at a scale big enough to power the planet.

Just off this coast sits what may be Texas’ most promising site for a CO₂ landfill, a spot to which Meckel is directing my gaze. It includes a well-mapped block of underwater acreage that oil-and-gas insiders call High Island 24L. In Meckel’s color-coded atlas, the rock that will likely accept the most injected carbon is rendered in shades of orange and red. The area encompassing this block is crimson. He and his colleagues have studied it intensely and found it to be especially capacious. As the land spreads east, toward Louisiana, the color holds—and the rock does too.

Steam escaping from stacks at an oil refinery in Port Arthur, Texas.

Photograph: Katie Thompson

View from Sea Rim State Park.

Photograph: Katie Thompson

Last year, the Texas General Land Office, which leases out state waters for economic activity, held its first auction for carbon-injection rights. On the block was a 360-square-mile patch of Gulf that includes High Island 24L. The winning bid, for a portion of the big patch, came from a joint venture launched by a startup called Carbonvert, which is run by Alex Tiller, an entrepreneur, and Jan Sherman, a veteran of the oil industry. When I meet them one morning in Port Arthur, Tiller is sporting a version of the standard founder uniform—untucked dress shirt, dark jeans, Panerai watch, Tumi briefcase, baseball cap advertising his startup. Sherman is in jeans and an athletic shirt bearing the maroon logo of her alma mater, Texas A&M University. We head outside and pile into the leather-lined cab of a hulking black F350. The license plates read “88GIGEM.” That’s as in 1988, the year Sherman’s husband graduated from college, and “Gig ’em,” the Texas A&M motto. Sherman usually drives her BMW SUV, whose plates read “89GIGEM.” Tiller drives an electric Audi.

Carbonvert’s story dates to 2018. At the time, Tiller, based in Denver, was running a renewable-energy investment fund for a San Francisco financial firm. His specialty was the trade in so-called tax equity. He would find [solar](#) developers whose projects qualified for tax credits but whose tax bills were too small to take advantage of them. Then he would arrange deals in which the developers sold their credits—and pledged revenue from five years of electricity sales—to Tiller’s investors in exchange for an influx of cash. Tiller knew the game well. He had learned the tax-equity ropes helping build a solar company in Hawaii, whose sale in 2014 brought him a small fortune. When Congress passed the \$50 carbon incentive, Tiller says, he pounced on it as an “opportunity to ride a wave that I’d seen before.” But he had “zero idea” about burying carbon. So he hit the conference circuit, where he got wind of Texas’ coming auction. He heard of Sherman through a friend and reached out to her—a lot.

Sherman fairly bleeds oil. During college, she spent summers fixing leaks on wells. She worked her entire career at Shell, most recently as head of the company’s US carbon-storage business. The month before Tiller contacted her, she had retired, having concluded that a new corporate reorganization made it likely many of her team’s projects would slow down. Sherman decided she wanted to either go big with the carbon-storage knowledge she

had amassed or go home. At first, she didn't answer Tiller's entreaties. "He kind of stalked me," she says. By February 2021, after a few months of nudging, she signed on.

Jan Sherman and Alex Tiller in front of an oil rig.

Photograph: Katie Thompson

Sherman was skeptical that the state would entrust a big project to an unproven startup. "I didn't think Carbonvert could do it," she says. "I even said, 'I don't think that the world is going to let us do that.'" But Meckel and his colleagues had revealed "a ginormous storage opportunity in the Miocene formation," she says, so the foundational geologic work was done. Sherman and Tiller struck up a partnership with Talos Energy, a Houston-based firm with offshore experience and its own valuable trove of local seismic data. Then they set about figuring out where, in the area that Texas was expected to offer for lease, they thought they could bury carbon in a way that would please both investors and regulators.

The Carbonvert-Talos team focused on areas pierced by comparatively few existing wells, because those can be paths for carbon dioxide leaks. And because each new injection well would cost between \$20 million and \$30 million to drill, the team avoided geologic features such as synclines—areas where the rock layer dips, as if forming a bowl, effectively cleaving the injectable acreage. Carbonvert and Talos submitted their bid in May 2021. The list of bidders, according to the Texas General Land Office, included much bigger players, among them Marathon Petroleum, an oil company; Denbury Resources, a major pipeline operator; and Air Products, a chemical company. Three months later, Carbonvert and Talos won a 63-square-mile lease. This will be the future home of Bayou Bend CCS (short for "carbon capture and sequestration"). Earlier this year, Chevron threw its weight behind the project, announcing that it would invest \$50 million for half of Bayou Bend.

One of the biggest hurdles now for Tiller and Sherman is to sign up enough polluters to make the project economically viable. The business model envisions that polluters will collect the carbon—and the tax credit—and then pay Bayou Bend a transport-and-disposal fee that Tiller says is likely

to be \$20 to \$25 per ton. (That fee could fluctuate.) Scoring clients is a scrappy, dog-eat-dog process. I get a taste of it as Sherman, with Tiller in the back seat, drives me around Port Arthur in the monster truck.

On paper, grabbing carbon emissions in and around this town should be like shooting fish in a barrel. They're not only plentiful but also localized: A small handful of super-emitters accounts for a large part of the output, and a free and easily downloadable federal database reports each facility's emissions. But a refinery, petrochemical plant, or liquefied-natural-gas terminal is a dizzyingly complex collection of industrial processes, each of which produces CO₂ in different concentrations, ranging from near purity to nearly nil. The less concentrated the carbon in a waste stream is, the costlier it is to capture. According to the National Petroleum Council, the \$50 tax credit is enough to incentivize sopping up less than 5 percent of US emissions (mostly from ethanol and natural gas processing plants, whose CO₂ emission streams are highly concentrated). But carbon from, say, a coal-fired power plant or a diesel refinery doesn't currently pay to clean up.

Tiller, Sherman, and their partners ultimately hope to inject at least 10 million tons of CO₂ a year to make the profit on which they and their investors have penciled out the project. To get the financing to break ground, the bar is lower—they will need to have inked contracts with polluters to inject 4 million tons a year. By then, however, Bayou Bend will have spent tens of millions of dollars preparing and designing the project. “There is a bit of a build-it-and-they-will-come philosophy,” Sherman says.

big inhale

[The Quest to Trap Carbon in Stone—and Beat Climate Change](#)

Vince Beiser

The Climate Issue

[A One-Time Poultry Farmer Invents the Future of Refrigeration](#)

Nicola Twilley

Nevada by the Sea

Move Over, San Andreas: There's an Ominous New Fault in Town

Geoff Manaugh

The crux of the dilemma is that only about 2 million of the 35 million tons of industrial CO₂ emitted annually by large facilities in the Port Arthur area, which includes neighboring Beaumont, is, as Tiller puts it, “low-hanging fruit”—meaning that the tax credit of \$50 a ton can cover the cost of capturing, transporting, and burying it.

Back in the truck, which is stocked with 2-pound tubs of honey-roasted peanuts and cheddar Goldfish for long days of sleuthing, Sherman drives us by the oil refinery that opened just after Spindletop. Today it occupies 2 square miles and emits millions of tons of CO₂ every year. “Most of this is all \$50 or higher,” she says, her right hand on the steering wheel as her left hand sweeps across a windshield filled with the facility.

The next morning, Sherman, Tiller, and I take a boat ride from Port Arthur to the area of the Gulf that they have leased. Over the engine roar, Tiller explains to me that he gave our charter captain only the vague location of the lease area. “He’s under NDA”—a nondisclosure agreement—Tiller yells.

When we reach the prospective carbon-injection area, the captain idles the boat. We’re in about 40 feet of water; the rock into which the Carbonvert group hopes to inject greenhouse gas is more than a mile and a half below that. I check my phone; it still gets service, because we’re only about 5 miles off the coast. To the east, hulking tankers, many of them carrying liquefied natural gas, head out to sea. To the west, every now and then we see a shrimping boat. It’s a beautiful morning on the water. And everything in view is belching carbon.

Toward the end of the trip we motor up the Gulf Intracoastal Waterway, a constructed canal that serves as a long driveway in which ships park and take on product from Port Arthur before ferrying it to the world. We pass a biodiesel plant, one of the biggest in Texas, and the boat captain mentions that he used to work there. Sherman plies him for details about the places in the plant that emit carbon. “Where would it come from?” she asks.

Even if the Carbonvert consortium signed up every pound of carbon dioxide it needed, it would still face another hurdle: The US Environmental Protection Agency has yet to issue its first permit for large-scale commercial carbon injection. Permit reviews are widely expected to take years, and the outcome isn't assured. The proposed Bayou Bend project will eventually need as many as 10 injection wells, each of which must win an EPA permit. The timing of that, Tiller says, is "an enormous risk."

If anyone is at the front of the line of the EPA approval process, it's a man named Gray Stream, the steward of a roughly 100,000-acre patchwork of southwest Louisiana that Meckel's atlas suggests is at least as red as High Island 24L. Stream is a scion of the Louisiana dynasty that owns Gray Ranch, and he's betting that his chunk of Gulf Coast rock gives him pole position in the carbon-storage race. "Mine goes to 11," he tells me, smiling wryly as he evokes a line from *This Is Spinal Tap*, the 1984 mockumentary about a British rock band with extra-loud amplifiers. He hopes the EPA, in particular, will like his ranch's carbon-carrying capacity.

The Stream family offices in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

Photograph: Katie Thompson

Stream grew up in Nashville and went to college at Vanderbilt, then did a stint as a legislative aide on Capitol Hill. He hoped to become a Navy SEAL officer, but when that didn't pan out he dove into managing the family business. His office is in a former bedroom in the family's business headquarters—a grand, colonnaded redbrick house in the city of Lake Charles built in 1923 by Stream's great-great-aunt, a noted collector of Fabergé eggs. The office is decorated today with intricately carved walking sticks and antique sabers. It overlooks the backyard, which boasts a Japanese tea garden and, as if out of a Faulkner novel, a two-story, octagonal pigeonnier.

Stream assumed his filial responsibilities in 2004, at a time when diversifying beyond oil and gas was becoming increasingly important to the family and the region. That was partly because fields deplete over time, and those beneath Gray Ranch had been pumped for a century. But it was also because momentum in the oil-and-gas industry was starting to shift to so-

called unconventional plays—the shale that fracking had unlocked—and Gray Ranch was conventional rock. The surge in shale production was spurring an industrial boom in and around Lake Charles. But on Gray Ranch, as on much of the land along the Gulf Coast, production was in a long decline.

Gray Stream visits with the horses at Gray Ranch.

Photograph: Katie Thompson

In 2018, when Congress increased the carbon-storage tax credit, Stream started having ideas. He and some colleagues consulted the work of Meckel and others—not only their assessments of the Miocene layer under the Gulf but also an earlier experiment involving a layer of rock called the Frio.

The Frio sits below the Miocene layer. One of its chief allures is that, beneath Gray Ranch, it's particularly thick—and therefore, at least theoretically, able to hold a lot of CO₂. It's also far below sources of drinking water and is topped by the Anahuac shale, which appears to be a carbon-tight caprock. After extensive study, Stream and a team of technical experts he hired decided to bet their bid on the Frio. He says he hopes the EPA will see its combined characteristics as a “belt-and-suspender” approach—a level of safety that will give the agency confidence that his company, Gulf Coast Sequestration, deserves to become the country's first commercial collector of other people's carbon trash.

Applicants for EPA carbon-storage permits must persuade the agency that they can contain both the plume of injected carbon dioxide and a secondary plume of saltwater that the CO₂ displaces from the rock—what drilling engineers call the pressure pulse. The EPA requires evidence that neither plume will contaminate drinking water while a project is operating and for a default period of 50 years after CO₂ injection stops—but the agency can decide to shorten or lengthen that for a particular project.

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Stream employs a well-heeled team, including oil industry veterans and a former top EPA official, to shepherd the permit application, which was submitted in October 2020 and which remains, nearly two years later, under agency review. Inside his company, Stream dubbed the carbon-storage play Project Minerva, after the Roman goddess of wisdom (and sometimes of war).

Heading up the technical work is a British petroleum geologist named Peter Jackson, who used to work at BP. His team planned for Project Minerva in much the way Meckel's UT group had mapped the Gulf Coast. Using well-log and 3D seismic data, the scientists modeled the Frio under several tens of thousands of acres on and around Gray Ranch. Then they simulated how the carbon dioxide plume and the pressure pulse would behave, depending on where they drilled wells and how they operated them.

In their computer models, the resulting plume movements appeared as multicolored blobs against rocky backgrounds of blue. The best blobs were round, a cohesive shape that suggests the plume will be easier to control. In other spots, the CO₂ wouldn't behave: Sometimes it escaped upward; other times it spread out like a pancake or, Jackson recalls, "like a spider." Either shape, the team fretted, might degrade project safety and set off alarms at the EPA. The simulations led the Stream team to choose two general locations on the ranch where they intend to drill wells.

Stream agrees to show them to me one morning. He picks me up in Lake Charles in his decked-out black Chevy Tahoe, and we head west, toward Texas, until we're several miles shy of the state line. We exit the highway at the town of Vinton, Louisiana, and arrive at Gray Ranch. We turn right onto Gray Road. We turn left onto Ged Road. Then, beside cowboy-boot-shaped Ged Lake, we mount a subtle rise known as the Vinton Dome.

One of many peacocks at Gray Ranch rests on a fence.

Photograph: Katie Thompson

A white house sits atop the Vinton Dome overlooking Gray Ranch.

Photograph: Katie Thompson

These are iconic names in Stream family lore. As early as the 1880s, a local surveyor named John Geddings Gray—“Ged”—started assembling this acreage to profit from timber and cattle. Four years after the gusher at Spindletop, Ged saw in the Vinton Dome a topographically similar prospect, and he bought it too. He opened the area for drilling, and his hunch paid off.

Portrait of John Geddings Gray.

Photograph: Katie Thompson

Today, the top of Vinton Dome offers a panorama of part of the Stream empire. To the right stand barns bearing the family’s cattle brand and quarter-horse brand. All around, rusty pump jacks rise and fall, pulling up oil and gas. Stream, Ged Gray’s great-great-grandson, likens the ranch to the cuts of beef he grills for his three young children, who think he’s the best steak cooker around. “It’s only because I just buy the prime fillet,” he says. There’s one rule: “Don’t screw it up.”

We stop at one of the expected well sites. The area around it is resplendent with wire grass, bluestem, and fennel. It’s frequented by three kinds of egret: cattle, great, and snowy. This being Louisiana, it’s also stamped with a line of yellow poles; they mark the underground route of the Williams Transco Pipeline, which whooshes natural gas from offshore platforms in the Gulf to the interstate gas-distribution system. If it seems strange that this ranch, which for a century has served up fossil fuels, may play an influential part in curbing greenhouse gas emissions, it’s also instructive—a measure of how economic signals are changing in a part of the world that has long adapted the way it exploits its natural resources to meet shifting market demand. “People are ultimately going to have to put up” to tackle climate change, Stream says. “They can’t just talk about it.”

Stream is right: Humanity must choose. As he talks, I’m reminded of Meckel’s reaction when, as we stood on the beach, looking out at the waves over High Island 24L, I asked the geologist about the dangers associated with storing carbon dioxide underground. I brought up a bizarre disaster that struck Cameroon in 1986, when a massive, naturally occurring cloud of carbon dioxide suddenly burped up from the depths of Lake Nyos and fell

onto nearby villages, crowding out ambient air and asphyxiating to death an estimated 1,800 people. “Now that we know that shit happens, put a sensor down there,” Meckel told me, pointing to the Gulf. (At the Cameroon lake, a vent was added.) Meckel doesn’t deny there are dangers. But, as he told me in another of our conversations, people “have to decide that the risks of CO₂ going into the atmosphere are more fundamental than the risks of CO₂ going into the ground.”

View of the cypress swamp at Lost Lake, part of the Gray Ranch property.

Photograph: Katie Thompson

Meckel, of course, was arguing his pocketbook—and that of the fossil fuel industry, which helps fund his work, and of Carbonvert, and of Stream, and of each of the companies now gunning to make a buck from carbon burial. Yet his point stands: Every potential climate fix carries risks.

Storing carbon at a scale large enough to materially help the climate is now, many scientists say, a must. But it would require facing devilishly difficult dilemmas that extend beyond the technical to the philosophical. What level of confidence should regulators demand before blessing a proposed carbon-storage project as unlikely to leak? Who should be held legally responsible for monitoring the safety of injected carbon, and for how long, and with what penalty for failure? Fights between environmentalists and industry over such questions are growing more intense. And yet, as always in the battle over what to do about the climate, if anything significant is to happen, someone will have to budge, and something is almost certain to go wrong.

Along the road from Beaumont to Port Arthur is a museum dedicated to the Spindletop gusher. It houses a life-size replica of part of a turn-of-the-century boomtown—a vision of the good life, lubricated by oil. The museum stages free gusher reenactments, using water. A long wooden boardwalk guides visitors to a pink granite obelisk, where an engraving on the base says petroleum “has altered man’s way of life throughout the world.”

When the prospectors at Spindletop sold their first barrels of crude, they didn’t know the trade-off they were making on behalf of all humanity. They

didn't know that the price of cheap energy and better living through petrochemicals would be environmental degradation at planetary scale. We have been playing with fire, and it has warmed us and burned us. This suggests a broader lesson worth remembering as we advance, however slowly, from the age of hydrocarbons through the age of decarbonization to the age of renewables. Maybe, when we encounter energy's next big threat to the environment, we can resist the urge to stick our heads in the sand—and so avoid the last-ditch, multitrillion-dollar, existential slog to bury the problem.

Let us know what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor at mail@wired.com.

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Jul 26, 2022 9:00 AM

Am I an Idiot for Wanting a Dumber Phone?

WIRED's spiritual advice columnist offers counsel to a reader overwhelmed by apps, dings, and beeps.

Illustration: Zeloot

“I waste way too much time on my phone and am attracted by the idea of simplifying my digital life. So I found several apps and tutorials designed to make my smartphone ‘dumb,’ but I’ve hesitated to take the plunge. Am I just trying to escape modern life?”

—Dumbstruck

Dear Dumbstruck,

As more and more of the formerly mute objects in our lives (refrigerators, thermostats, doorbells, even toilets) are christened “smart,” it often feels as though the entire inanimate world were undergoing a process of enlightenment. And “smart” is a difficult adjective to resist, particularly in a society that regards intelligence as a form of currency—or even, at times, a spiritual virtue. So while “[dumbing down](#)” one’s phone ostensibly describes a rather mundane process of removing apps, blocking internet access, and choosing unappealing aesthetic features (gray scale, bland wallpaper), I understand the anxiety it can provoke. It’s hard to avoid feeling that such digital minimalism is swimming against the current of this awakening, that you are not just simplifying your life but also downgrading your mind.

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Perhaps that's why one of the most popular new-generation dumb phones, the Light Phone, opts for the language of luminosity and its association with intellectual brilliance. The original model, whose capacities were limited to making and receiving calls, was described in the company's 2015 Kickstarter as "thoughtfully simple" and promised a life in which users could engage more fully in cerebral and artistic tasks, the pursuits of the higher mind, without those buzzes and beeps that prompt a craving for the next dopamine rush. But the story of the Light Phone also illustrates the backsliding familiar to anyone who's attempted a digital paring down—the way features, almost on their own, creep back into the picture. By the time the second model was released, in 2019, the phone had added a (black-and-white) touchscreen and text messaging, plus music, mapping, and ride-sharing apps. The promotional materials stress that these additions are "tools not feeds," a justification that had the rather dubious ring of a dieter insisting that their indulgences are composed of "good fat."

Even the most zealous attempts to renounce ubiquitous technologies devolve into rationalization and the invention of creative loopholes. I happen to know a woman who was such an inveterate news junkie that she deleted all media apps and browsers from her phone, stripping it down to the bedrock of text, calls, weather, and maps—a solution that worked until she discovered it was possible to locate the New York Times Company's headquarters in Manhattan on Google Maps and access the paper's homepage through the app's internal browser. The old saw about addictions—that they are impossible to outsmart—applies doubly to smart technologies, which are engineered to be used compulsively and elude your most ingenious efforts to gain mastery over them.

With that in mind, I might suggest a more counterintuitive solution: Stop fighting the fear of dumbness and instead embrace it. Like most people who want to "go dumb," I assume that you're attracted in part to the term's

association with silence—the desire to dial down the chatter—but unsettled by some of its more unflattering synonyms, like idiocy. But idiocy was not always weighted by the negative associations it now carries. The word stems from the Greek *idiotes*, which referred to Athenians who were essentially laypersons—those who, unlike soldiers, scribes, and politicians, maintained little connection to the affairs of the state. It meant “on one’s own” or “private” (meanings that persist in words like *idiosyncratic*) and was reserved for those who enjoyed a freedom and autonomy from public life, the kind of existence that often serves as a haven for independent thought. Gilles Deleuze argued that idiocy was intimately linked to philosophy, beginning with Socrates, who famously recognized that he “knew nothing” and claimed this made him wiser than those who believed themselves intelligent. Descartes, in order to plant modern thought on a new terrain, similarly willed himself to disown all the knowledge he’d long taken for granted.

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Few of those positive connotations survive today, and yet the resurgent nostalgia for dumb technologies is often spurred by a not entirely modern desire to distance oneself from the bustle of the polis and the frenzied commerce of the agora. Perhaps this is just another way of saying that, despite the widespread celebration of smartness, many of us secretly long to know less. The notion that information at a certain scale becomes something less than informative was a truth colorfully voiced by Thoreau, whose complaints about the 19th-century news cycle read as surprisingly familiar today. When he heard that a transatlantic cable line would soon bring updates from Europe, Thoreau imagined “the first news that will leak through into the broad, flapping American ear will be that Princess Adelaide has the whooping cough.” The suspicion that such “knowledge” was making him denser was partly what spurred him to abandon the city for Walden. And I sense in your question, Dumbstruck, a similar inkling that the information economy obscures, somewhere—perhaps in the fine print of its mammoth user agreements?—a bleaker existential bargain: that the instant access to knowledge has subtly atrophied your imaginative

musculature; that your immersion in digital echo chambers might be foreclosing more original forms of thought.

Idiocy should not be confused with stupidity, the willful refusal of information that might disrupt one's rigid convictions. The latter is rooted in a pride that makes it the inversion of smartness, not its alternative. Idiocy might be seen as a condition of openness and flexibility, qualities that define the fool archetype that appears in many cultures, from the Sioux *heyoka*, a sacred clown who deliberately engaged in counterintuitive actions (riding a horse backward, wearing clothes inside out, complaining of being full when food is scarce) so as to challenge popular assumptions, to the Russian *yurodivy*, or holy fool, a figure whose seeming madness was believed to lend him divine insight. Fools tend to be shape-shifters who thrive at thresholds and boundaries. This was particularly true of the Shakespearean fool, who was frequently “balancing on the edge between reality and various constructions of reality,” as one scholar puts it. The fool mediated the space between the play and the audience—that dimension where the virtual meets the real—moving fluidly between the stage and the crowd and occasionally breaking the fourth wall to comment on the play’s themes.

I bring up the fool in part to stress the virtue of “dumbing down” as opposed to opting out. As appealing as it might be to live totally off the grid or leave civilization, it’s practically impossible to emulate Thoreau’s retreat to Walden (as impossible as it was even [for Thoreau himself](#)). It may well be that the dumbed-down smartphone offers a distinct advantage: Even the barest smartphones can be restored to their full capabilities at any moment, which places the user in the fool’s liminal space, a no-man’s-land that might offer perspective, or even wisdom. Your unwillingness to “take the plunge,” as you put it, seems less a sign of fearful waffling than evidence that you long for those unique possibilities that exist somewhere between the online and off, between the virtual and the real. In the best-case scenario, the stripped-down smartphone offers neither an escape from reality nor a refusal of its conditions, but a portal into new opportunities for defining one’s relationship to public life—while still being able to call an Uber.

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Jul 26, 2022 6:00 AM

The High-Stakes Race to Engineer New Psychedelic Drugs

As psychedelic therapies for mental health go mainstream, companies are recruiting chemists to create patentable versions of hallucinogens. Critics say it's all a bad trip.

Photograph: Tonje Thilesen

This is what happens when a mouse trips out: It becomes more curious about other mice and more likely to socialize with them for long periods of time. It becomes less likely to glug massive amounts of alcohol. It wriggles, quavering, like a wet dog shaking off rain. And its head twitches, rapidly, side to side.

Because a mouse on LSD cannot tell you that colors seem brighter or the walls are melting or a guitar solo somehow *sounds* purple, these head twitches are of tremendous importance to chemist Jason Wallach. “If you want to know if a compound is likely to cause a psychedelic effect in humans,” says Wallach, speaking from his tiny office in the Discovery Center at Saint Joseph’s University in Philadelphia, “you look to the mice, to that twitching.”

These twitch tests—and countless others—are part of Wallach’s mind-bending new mandate, sparked by a late-2019 meeting with the heads of a company called Compass Pathways. The UK-based biotech firm was eyeing the possibilities of developing psychedelic drugs for use in mental health therapies. Its core product was psilocybin, the psychoactive compound in magic mushrooms. But it needed *new* chemicals, engineered

to deliver consistent, optimized, and potentially radical results. And that meant new chemists. By August 2020, Compass had inked a two-year, \$500,000 “sponsored research agreement” with Wallach and the university. The Discovery Center was born.

A few years in, with continued support from the company, Wallach has cooked up scores of novel psychedelics, mailed them off to partner labs for testing on those mice, and then waited—and hoped—for the telltale twitch results. The chemist, 36 and pale, face framed by a rough red beard and rectangular glasses, can hem and haw a bit when it comes to specifics: “Compass doesn’t want me to give out numbers. I’ll say we’ve made *a lot*.” It’s in the neighborhood of 150 new drugs, all of which can potentially be patented and sold by Compass.

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Illustration: Maria do Rosário Frade

We are, as you have probably read, in the throes of a “psychedelic renaissance.” Compelling clinical work conducted at New York University, Imperial College, Johns Hopkins, and elsewhere showed that long-outlawed drugs such as N,N-dimethyltryptamine (DMT), LSD, and psilocybin have terrific potential for treating everything from addiction to Alzheimer’s to end-of-life anxiety. [Pharmaceutical companies](#) have taken note. In 2020 the fledgling psychedelic industry was predicted to balloon to \$6.9 billion by 2027—a year later, that estimate increased to over \$10 billion. In September 2020, Compass became the first company of its kind to trade on a major stock exchange, debuting on the Nasdaq at an estimated value of more than \$1 billion.

So far, none of these companies has brought a psychedelic drug to market, but the thinking is that, through what the clinical literature calls a —“mystical-type experience”—a psychedelic trip that produces feelings of joy, peace, interconnectedness, and transcendence—patients can confront the root causes of various mental maladies. “I don’t want to use the word *cure*, but psychedelics can offer long-term healing,” says Florian Brand, the cofounder and CEO of a Berlin-based biotech incubator called Atai Life Sciences, which invested in Compass Pathways. “We have put a lot of money into actually exploring this hypothesis.”

At the Discovery Center, Wallach leads a team of about 15 students, researchers, and technicians. “One thing we do,” he says, “is create new compounds that differ just a bit from classical psychedelics, like psilocybin or LSD.” Slight tweaks in the molecular structure can drastically alter the intensity and character of the psychedelic journey. This ability to fine-tune the contours of a trip—to engineer new modes of experience—is Wallach’s passion.

Jason Wallach is charged with creating new psychedelics, engineered to deliver consistent, optimized, and potentially radical results.

Photograph: Tonje Thilesen

For years, his lab work seemed utterly niche, bordering on verboten. Mentors discouraged him. There was no money in psychedelics, they said. There were reputational risks. After all, many of these drugs have been ruled by the US Drug Enforcement Administration as possessing “no currently accepted medical use.” Since the US government declared most psychedelics illegal in 1970, such research had typically been the domain of so-called clandestine chemists, who worked in backyard sheds and underground bunkers, mass-producing trippy new compounds while evading law enforcement.

Wallach wasn’t discouraged. The work felt about as close as one could get, professionally, to pure chemistry, he says—research animated almost entirely by personal curiosity: “What happens if you put a bromine here? What if you move it over there?”

New investment is shaking up those ideals, as firms like Compass rush to capitalize on the results of that curiosity. A few years ago, Wallach was conducting experiments and coauthoring articles for relatively esoteric journals of neuropharmacology. Now his once quiet lab, with its beakers and burners and reports on twitchy mice, is helping usher in a new era of Big Neuropharma—and not everyone in the world of psychedelia is thrilled about it. Compass has come to embody the potential (and looming threat) of “psychedelic capitalism.” And Wallach is one of its most prized assets. The young chemist is all in. But the financial stakes, and the ideological fault lines emerging as psychedelics go corporate, produce new stresses. “In the

long run, this research is valuable,” he says, before giving his head a shake. “But on a day-to-day basis? It does nothing but raise my blood pressure.”

Wallach’s lifelong, incurable obsession with psychoactives kicked in when he was a kid in the ’90s. It was the Just Say No era, complete with egg-in-the-frying-pan, [“This is your brain on drugs”](#) public service announcements. The messages didn’t have the intended effect on Wallach. In fourth grade, when other kids were devouring *Goosebumps* and Judy Blume paperbacks, he discovered a book in the school library outlining the dangers of various drugs. “Something drew me to it,” he recalls, “that a small amount of powder or material could cause a really strong change in someone’s experience.”

Years later, Wallach had his own psychedelic experiences, and although he demurs on the details, they proved life-altering. “I pretty much dedicated every waking hour almost for the past 15 years to studying them,” he says. “They had a profound impact on how I wanted to spend my life.”

With few sanctioned pathways for making a living studying psychedelics, Wallach enrolled at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where he studied psychology as a portal to the mysteries of the human psyche. Wallach was especially curious about consciousness: Where do thoughts come from? What’s the difference between the brain and the mind? How do we perceive things such as taste and sound and color? How do we perceive … anything at all? Not long into his first year of undergrad, Wallach realized that psychology was “a little less empirical” than he had hoped. He switched majors to study cellular and molecular biology.

Wallach’s once quiet lab is helping usher in a new era of Big Neuropharma.

Photograph: Tonje Thilesen

Wallach began conducting research in synthetic organic chemistry—building compounds that occur in nature. He examined cannabinoids, the psychoactive compounds in cannabis. A voracious reader of textbooks, he noticed Amazon’s recommendation algorithm pushing two curious titles: *PiHKAL* and *TiHKAL*. These chunky reference books from the ’90s were written by Alexander “Sasha” Shulgin—a psychopharmacologist best

known for synthesizing MDMA, also known as ecstasy—and his wife, Ann. They contain detailed accounts of various psychoactive compounds, based on firsthand trials conducted by the Shulgins and a close cadre of fellow travelers.

The books are, as a spokesperson for the DEA once put it, “pretty much cookbooks on how to make illegal drugs.” Wallach immediately ordered the two volumes and got cooking. He calls them “probably the most useful tools for answering some of the questions I was interested in at the time, about consciousness and the mind-brain relationship.”

Following the Shulgins’ step-by-step instructions, Wallach taught himself how to make psychedelics. During breaks from school, he threw together an ad hoc lab in the basement of his parents’ stone farmhouse in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. When his mom started complaining about the smell, he moved the whole operation to a small carriage house on the property. There, Wallach continued to synthesize psychedelics, preparing everything he could physically (and legally) manage. “To be clear,” he says, “I was very paranoid.”

Wallach fell in love with the work. While his parents may have flinched at the tart stenches—and the serious risk of their son accidentally manufacturing compounds that merit harsh penalties under the DEA’s Drug Scheduling system—they were happy to see him throw himself into something so completely. After graduating in 2008, Wallach enrolled at the University of the Sciences (which recently merged with Saint Joseph’s University) to pursue his PhD in pharmacology and toxicology. To continue studying psychoactives, when applying for grants he pretended to buy into the same antidrug hysteria he had dismissed as a skeptical schoolkid, framing his research as investigations into dangerous compounds. “The angle was, these are drugs of abuse, and we want to understand them,” he says. “Whatever you have to tell the grant agency.”

Crystallized tryptamine synthesized by Wallach in his lab at Saint Joseph University.

Photograph: Tonje Thilesen

But a little academic subterfuge was a small price to pay to nurture his obsession. When Wallach is not synthesizing psychedelics, he's lecturing about psychedelic synthesis. When he's not lecturing, he's reading the latest literature. Even when he's at home with his wife in West Philly, ostensibly watching TV, he's still reading about pharmacology. And when he's not doing that, he's teaching himself math. Or electronics. Or advanced physics. He wants to keep his brain sharp. Everything feeds back into the research. He assures me that he has interests outside of the hard sciences. He collects antique snuff boxes. He compulsively chews nicotine gum, which he believes sustains his focus. He swears he even chews it while brushing his teeth. He enjoys the odd cigar, too. Save for the occasional scotch, he abstains from alcohol, which he calls ethanol. "I like the taste," Wallach says, but he can't suffer the more mind-dulling effects. "I hate it if I even start to feel buzzed at all." In one conversation, when I ask him how his weekend was, he tells me he spent his days off using plastic model kits to design potential molecules. He has even found himself toiling in the lab on Christmas Day.

"This is my life," Wallach says. "There is nothing else I'd rather be doing. If I was given a billion dollars, today, the first thing I would do is build a superlab." When Compass came calling, he finally got the golden opportunity to pursue that dream. Maybe not a full-blown, billion-dollar superlab. But a lab of his own.

In pop culture, psychedelia is a Day-Glo tapestry of mandalas, black-light inks, tie-dye, and phat pants embossed with lime-green alien heads. In their various states of synthesis and manufacture, psychoactive drugs are decidedly unkaleidoscopic: brownish, yellowish, and vaguely gross, like plaque scraped off nicotine-stained teeth. The labs where these drugs are synthesized smell as if someone were burning a Rotten Eggs Yankee Candle.

Last fall, I visited Wallach in his lab, where he was preparing some N,N-dipropyltryptamine—a legal, and extremely potent, hallucinogen. Dressed in a faded maroon polo, khakis, and chunky desert boots, Wallach sets up a reaction in a round-bottom flask while explaining that in the '70s, scientists investigated DPT for use in psychotherapy. He flits around the lab, blasting

out moisture from glassware, sealing tubes with argon gas, dissolving reagents in methanol, and advising me to keep my distance as he fiddles with substances that are, he warns, “fairly toxic.” It’s like watching a chef show off at a teppanyaki restaurant, slicing and dicing by pure reflex.

The fall semester is in session, and Wallach has returned, after the pandemic disruption, to in-class teaching. His lab—and its work for Compass—presses on. Wallach and his squad of mostly twentysomethings weave among a few different offices, testing compounds for purity, sketching out molecules in grid-lined notebooks, and preparing potentially mind-expanding substances in discreetly marked mailers to be sent for mouse-twitch tests at a partner lab at UC San Diego.

The job is to develop drugs that tickle the 5-HT2A receptor, a cellular protein involved in a range of functions—appetite, imagination, anxiety, sexual arousal. The receptor has proven crucial to understanding the neuropharmacology of the psychedelic experience induced by classical hallucinogens. LSD, mescaline, psilocybin—they all interact with 5-HT2A. (In certain circles, the phrase “5-HT2A agonist” has supplanted “psychedelic,” which still carries faint whiffs of hippie-era hedonism.) “If you’re designing a new version of a classical hallucinogen,” Wallach says, “the first thing you’re doing is looking at its interaction with that receptor.”

One of Wallach’s goals is to hack how long a psychedelic’s effect lasts. Full-dose psilocybin trips usually run in excess of six hours. Hand-me-down hippie wisdom dictates three full days for a proper LSD experience: one to prepare, one to trip, and one for reacclimating yourself to the world of waking, non-wiggly consciousness. From a clinical perspective, such epic sessions are expensive and may not be necessary. Meanwhile, drugs like DMT are acute and intense, with effects lasting only minutes (sometimes called “the businessman’s trip” because it can be enjoyed within a typical lunch hour). Finding what Compass cofounder Lars Wilde calls “the sweet spot” between the length of a trip and clinical efficacy is just one of Wallach’s many challenges. If he and his team of researchers happen upon a concoction that’s particularly potent or experientially unique —“cool” is a word that gets tossed around a lot—well, all the better.

All around the lab, the shelves are cluttered. On a fridge stocked with uncommon chemical provisions is a mission statement scrawled in black Sharpie: “Shoot 4 the stars / land on Mars.” Artwork adorns the walls—impressionist scenes painted in long globs by Wallach himself. Cabinets housing beakers and flasks are decorated with printouts of notable scientists, like a wall of saints. There’s “father of psychopharmacology” Nathan S. Kline; Albert Hofmann, the Swiss chemist who discovered LSD; and in lab whites and a jaunty beret, smoking an enormous pipe, is Sasha Shulgin, who died in 2014 at the age of 88.

Wallach wouldn’t be working with DPT if it weren’t for Shulgin, who first synthesized the drug. In one of his trip reports, Shulgin describes smoking “many mg” of DPT and being treated to a vision of two rotating hearts, interlocking like something from a drugstore valentine. “Around the outside,” he writes, “there were sparkling jewels or crystals of light of different colors, maybe four rows deep surrounding them all around.”

Shulgin is a key influence for many in Wallach’s lab. “He was authentic and honest, both as a researcher and as a person,” says Jitka Nykodemová, a 27-year-old graduate student who moved from Prague to Philadelphia to work with Wallach. Shulgin feared that government agents might one day lay fire to his personal records, so he packed his life’s work into a few textbooks. Now, his oeuvre is available online at no cost. Wallach’s operation is more of a closed book. Slinking through the Discovery Center, snapping photos for reference, I’m cautioned against stealing away with any proprietary chemical names or structures. All of the lab’s discoveries belong to Compass, transferred via an “exclusive, royalty-bearing, worldwide license.”

All of Wallach’s discoveries belong to Compass, transferred via an “exclusive, royalty-bearing, worldwide license.”

Photograph: Tonje Thilesen

“There’s a perception of Compass as being the ogre,” says Graham Pechenik, a patent lawyer focusing on the emerging psychedelics industry. He’s talking about the company’s trajectory and its clashes with old-timers who bristle at the idea of psychedelics going corporate.

Compass started off as a nonprofit in 2015 but switched, just a year later, to a for-profit model and accepted funding from, among others, controversial venture capitalist [Peter Thiel](#). In December 2019, Compass received a patent for a method of synthesizing psilocybin. To some competitors, the patent seemed to give the company a monopoly on a compound that humans have used for thousands of years. Peter Van der Heyden, once a clandestine chemist and now the cofounder and chief science officer of Psygen Labs, a private manufacturer of pharmaceutical-grade psychedelics, calls the patent “unconscionable.”

“It just doesn’t jibe,” says Van der Heyden, 70, “with what a whole group of us—shall I say, people with roots in the ’60s and ’70s—have spent years of their life, and sometimes years in jail, working toward. It’s something that is supposed to be—I don’t know how else to say it—a gift to mankind.” His objections have an ideological bent. His generation framed the psychedelic experience within hippie-era values of peace, love, and smiling on one’s brother. These drugs were once seen as a tonic: a chemical rejoinder to the culture of corporate profiteering.

Compass has also applied to patent protocols for conducting psychedelic therapy, including conventions that have arguably been part of psychedelic therapy for decades, if not longer, such as soft furniture and “reassuring physical contact.” As one critic put it to me, Compass was trying to patent hugging.

A consortium of chemists and competitors recently challenged Compass’ claims in a patent review trial. Some in the industry maintain that the company’s method of synthesizing psilocybin apes techniques devised by LSD pioneer Hofmann, who filed patents on manufacturing psilocybin over half a century ago. The charge was spearheaded by Carey Turnbull, a former energy broker who founded a nonprofit watchdog group, Freedom to Operate, to fight psychedelic patent claims. (Among his personal effects at his estate in the gated hamlet of Tuxedo Park, New York: a Chanel-branded, diamond-encrusted statue of the Buddha.)

Turnbull is also the founder and CEO of Ceruvia Life Sciences, a for-profit company that’s pursuing pharmaceutical applications of psilocybin and other psychedelics. In other words, in addition to playing the role of

psychedelia's patent overreach patrol, Turnbull is Compass' direct competitor.

In an [open letter published](#) on Freedom to Operate's website, Turnbull claims Compass is "not making good-faith use of capitalism or pharma regulations" by attempting to establish itself as an exclusive, global supplier of psilocybin. In Turnbull's view, Compass is laying claim to an existing invention (psilocybin, and specifically Hofmann's synthetic formation) with an intent to "ransom it back to the human race." Freedom to Operate recruited a platoon of scientists to examine Compass' psilocybin and scoured the globe for vintage samples of Hofmann's version. Their research claims that Compass' molecule—and the method for its production—is far from novel.

Compass executives, naturally, disagree. They maintain that their patents are in place to protect their legitimate intellectual property, enabling them to bring their treatments to the greatest number of patients possible. They also insist that they aren't claiming some monopoly on psilocybin *itself*—only the process for producing a particular synthetic form. In June, the Patent Trial and Appeal Board sided with Compass, ruling against Freedom to Operate's challenge. Compass Pathways CEO George Goldsmith assures me his company is not trying to thwart anyone from gobbling a mind-expanding mushroom cap. Cofounder Wilde, likewise, swears that Compass isn't cornering the market on hugs. Both Goldsmith and Wilde exhibit the corporate tendency to stay frustratingly on message. Ask them what they had for breakfast and they'll tell you how excited they are to build a new future for mental health. But pressed about his company's image, and the efforts mobilized against it, Goldsmith's consummate professionalism slips, if only a bit. "Freedom to Operate?" he chuckles, a little anxiously, from his London office. "There's no constraint. Operate, already."

Wallach isn't particularly ruffled by the swampy ethics of psychedelic capitalism. After all, it's business as usual. The so-called "Hippie Mafia" of the '60s and '70s—led by superstar LSD chemists Tim Scully and Nicholas Sand—were bankrolled by the freaky scions of the Mellon robber baron dynasty. Wallach's hero, Shulgin? He paid for his far-out chemical experiments with his day job developing insecticides and other chemicals at

Dow, all while the company was mass-producing napalm for the Vietnam War.

“This is my life,” Wallach says. “There is nothing else I’d rather be doing.”

Photograph: Tonje Thilesen

Nor is Wallach moved by the charges leveled at Compass. “I’m definitely aware of those criticisms,” he says. “But I have no reservations.” For Wallach, corporate involvement seems preferable to the alternative, in which all decisions around the research, scheduling, and distribution of drugs fall to the government. His voice shifts a bit when he says *the government*, as if the term were suspended in spooky air quotes. He reserves no fondness for the DEA, which continues to impose severe penalties for the possession and manufacture of mind-expanding drugs, psychedelic renaissance notwithstanding.

But his antipathy stems from more than the tangles of bureaucratic red tape he has to wade through to do his work. He counts at least 10 close friends who have overdosed on synthetic opioids. He keeps photos of some of them in his home office. (The government of his native Pennsylvania has identified opioid overdoses as the state’s worst public health crisis.)

Wallach has seen students struggle and suffer. He rails at a system that still views drug use and addiction as moral issues, punishable to the full extent of the law, and not medical ones to be addressed, compassionately, through science—recent literature suggests that psychedelic therapies may help treat substance use disorders. “It definitely drives me,” he says, holding back tears. “I want to prevent that loss for other people. And improve people’s existence. We could have a paradise on this rock of ours floating through space.”

At the spring 2022 meeting of the American Chemistry Society, Wallach drew a standing-room-only crowd. They had come to the San Diego Convention Center to hear him expound on the structure-activity relationship of n-benzylphenethylamines, a class of synthetic hallucinogens collectively called “N-Bomb” on the street. “There were tons of young scientists lining up out in the hall,” he says, with a touch of awe.

This hype, and the worry of falling into what Wallach calls “the trap of being a celebrity scientist,” doesn’t follow him back to the lab. He has plenty to take care of, as Big Neuropharma’s patent land grab ramps up and data piles high on his desk. Sitting in his office in West Philly, he shows me a graph on his computer. It’s recent head-twitch data, charting how mice responded to various doses of a new drug, the chemical composition of which he cannot legally disclose. The curve slopes gently upward before accelerating steeply, peaking, and driving back down, like the arc of a roller coaster. The line tops out at a dose of 10 mg/kg, or “mig per kig,” as chemists pronounce it. I ask Wallach if that’s any good. His eyes widen a bit, like he’s practically dying to tell me something. “It’s a good response,” he says. He plucks a sandy-brown glomp of nicotine gum from between his back molars, nests it back in its blister pack, and nods as he trails off, “Very potent … yeah … yeah …”

Maybe, someday soon, that new drug, whatever it is, will be given to human subjects in a Compass-sponsored clinical trial. It may upend pharmacology. Or psychology. It could spark the next revolution in psychedelia. And Wallach can toast his success, with a cigar and a single glass of scotch, as he earns his place among the psychopharmacological saints. Until then, it’s charts and graphs and fastidious inventories of structure-activity relationships on reams of graph paper; it’s inspirational quotes stuck on fridges full of heady chemical analogs, and funky smells, and the head-twitching tempos of tripped-out mice.

This article appears in the September issue. [Subscribe now.](#)

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Jul 18, 2022 7:00 AM

How the Secret ‘Project Galileo’ Gave Rise to the MoonSwatch

Omega and Swatch's timepiece isn't just a hype juggernaut. The collaboration has revolutionized materials, manufacturing, and more.

Play/Pause Button



PHOTOGRAPH: Swatch Group

In April, the president of the Swiss Confederation (and de facto head of state), Ignazio Cassis, visited Japan to hold talks with the country's prime minister, Kishida Fumio. As is customary, gifts were to be exchanged, and Cassis' office requested an example of what had just become the hottest Swiss watch to launch in years, if not decades: the [MoonSwatch](#), a \$260 Swatch-produced version of Omega's Speedmaster [Moonwatch](#), the chronograph famous for being worn by NASA astronauts on the moon.

The Swiss president, however, was out of luck. “We were pleased, but we told them, the only way that he can get the watch is if he sends someone from his office queueing and hoping that at the Swatch shop in Bern they can find it,” says Nick Hayek Jr., chief executive of Swatch Group, the world's largest watch producer, which owns both the Swatch and Omega brands.

Hayek, a 67-year-old billionaire who drives himself to work in a Mini and has a pirate's flag flying outside his office, prides himself on the fact that privileged access—a feature of the luxury watch world—is entirely absent with the MoonSwatch despite the intense demand. “It doesn't help if you

have deep pockets. The Patek Philippe and Rolex client, the Breguet client, the Richard Mille client, they all rang. They all want one. But even if you give us \$10,000, it makes no difference. You have to wait, you have to buy it in the store. That's the game changer.”

But finding the MoonSwatch at any Swatch shop anywhere has been a question of luck, timing, and sheer endurance since its launch on March 26 to scenes of [pandemonium](#) around the globe.

News had been dripped out gradually during the preceding week. On March 17, cryptic ads appeared in select newspapers with blank pages bearing the legend: “It’s time to change your Omega … Swatch” and “It’s time to change your Swatch … Omega.” Social media feeds hinted at something with a planetary theme before the timepieces were announced on March 24: eleven Swatch watches faithfully resembling the iconic Speedmaster Moonwatch, but battery-powered, in bright colors, and made from Swatch’s ecoplastic alternative, [Bioceramic](#).

The colorways were inspired by planets in the solar system: there was the Mission to the Sun in bright yellow, the Mission to Neptune in deep blue, the Mission to Jupiter in beige and orange, and of course the black Mission to the Moon, closely resembling the Omega original.

Photograph: Swatch Group

As a mash-up of high and low, luxury and affordable, legendary and novelty, the MoonSwatch follows the blueprint of ultra-hyped, worlds-collide collaborations that have become a staple of the fashion world: Gucci x Adidas, Tiffany x Supreme, Balenciaga x Barbie. In fact, it’s a model that Swatch itself pioneered: Its collaborations with artists, designers, brands, institutions, and more (including NASA itself last year) have been central to its identity—“joy of life, and positive provocation” as Hayek defines it—since the 1980s. But bringing this to the austere world of luxury watches, with a riff on one of the most collected, lionized, and theoretically untouchable models ever made, had little precedent.

“These are two brands known worldwide, two brands with a clear message on the opposite side of the scale, and a total surprise for everyone,” says

Hayek when I ask him why the MoonSwatch has caught on so. “It’s simple to understand for everybody, whatever background you have. It was straight to the heart of the people.”

The hand-positioned battery cover on the MoonSwatch rear depicts the model's corresponding celestial body

Photograph: Swatch Group

Once news of the product was out, along with the message that distribution would be limited to just 110 physical Swatch boutiques worldwide, the hype train took over. At Oxford Street in London, the queueing began soon after the announcement on March 24, even though the watches would not be on sale for two more days. Around the world tents were pitched, lines formed, and crowds grew.

On sale day, store managers found themselves facing throngs of thousands, many of them “scalpers”—seasoned resellers who ply their trade in the worlds of sneaker culture, street fashion, and PlayStations, intent on charging high markups. Swatch's original plan to allow buyers two watches each had by then been reduced to one each, hardly helping a mood that had reportedly changed, in several cases, from camaraderie to restlessness and agitation. It hasn't changed much since.

At 9 am on March 26, stores opened. London's Carnaby Street location lasted half an hour before [police were called](#), and all three London shops were forced to shut. In New York, scuffles broke out amid rumors of a [stabbing](#) in the line. A Swatch shop in Singapore was forced to shut for 10 days in a bid to let the mayhem play itself out first.

London's Carnaby Street Swatch store was forced to close on March 26 due to the sheer numbers of people wanting to buy a MoonSwatch on launch day

Photograph: Yui Mok/Getty Images

At locations around the world, police were needed to assist staff as the vast majority of punters left empty-handed: most of the shops had fewer than

200 watches available. Deals were done within queues as scalpers flipped watches for profit to those waiting outside. Within minutes of the first sales, MoonSwatches were [hitting eBay](#) and other platforms, attracting bids into the thousands.

“We informed everybody: It’s not limited; don’t buy on the internet from flippers; you will be able at some point in time to get your MoonSwatch,” says Nick Hayek when we meet at Swatch Group’s HQ in Biel, Switzerland, a couple of months after the launch. He rejects the idea that Swatch could have been better prepared. “We knew for sure this would be a success, because the product is beautiful, provocative, high quality, and the price is fantastic, and we kept it a secret. But what happened … I think nobody in the world could have expected that. It was really crazy.”

The crowds may have dispersed, but the MoonSwatch’s continuing lack of availability, with restocks selling out in moments and Swatch declining to make them available online, has led to widespread consternation. Some of the [comments](#) on Swatch’s Instagram posts, not to mention across Reddit, Discord, and Facebook, do not make pretty reading.

Except, that is, from those who happen to have gotten hold of a MoonSwatch. What could have been construed as a downmarket desecration of a legendary timepiece has received near universal enthusiasm: It’s imaginative, fun, expressive, and reaches across cultural divides.

“It’s very daring and very positive,” says James Marks, head of Phillips Perpetual, the contemporary watch division of the Phillips auction house. “It’s captivating the next generation of collector with a play on something that’s otherwise inaccessible to them. You now have all these people globally who have this bright watch on their wrist that has history, intrigue, the connection to space.”

“I’d love to get one,” Marks adds, “but I haven’t even handled one.”

The joint Omega and Swatch logos on the crown of the MoonSwatch

Photograph: Swatch Group

The targeting of this next generation is perhaps the most enterprising part of the MoonSwatch launch. Luxury watch buyers are not young: A recent [study](#) of 8,000 people by an insurance firm in the UK found the average age of the Rolex owner in the country to be 68. Meanwhile, the Apple Watch now outsells the entire combined Swiss watch industry, taking its biggest chunks out of the market for battery-powered watches, where Swatch operates. What better way to expose a completely new, younger audience to Omega than through such an affordable collaboration? And it seems to be working. Hayek says that since the arrival of the MoonSwatch, Omega stores are seeing a spike in sales and footfall.

According to Derek Morrison, general manager EMEA for StockX, an online marketplace for collectible sneakers and streetwear, the MoonSwatch has had huge cut-through with the platform's Gen Z audience. The site reported more than 2,000 MoonSwatch trades in less than a week after launch and had seen over 11,000 trades by June.

"It's the best-selling watch release in StockX history, and it's had the highest premium of any item released this year," Morrison says. "There's a lot of foresight, from a branding point of view. If this is a discovery point for Omega, it compares with what Virgil Abloh [the late fashion designer and Off-White entrepreneur] did so well: using an approachable medium to shine a light on things that have been reserved for the elite, and inspiring them to learn more about them."

More simply, Swatch will obviously benefit financially from MoonSwatch, which will give the brand a welcome revenue boost. In the early 1990s, Swatch sold 20 million watches a year. But sales in 2021 are down to [3.2 million](#). Morgan Stanley estimates Swatch could sell up to 500,000 MoonSwatches this year alone, providing revenue of \$128 million. If the MoonSwatch's estimated gross margin is indeed approaching 90 percent (\$115 million), it would restore the brand's fortunes. And keep in mind MoonSwatch has not yet been launched in China. Once it is, total annual sales could hit one million units.

Prototype Bioceramic MoonSwatch bezels not used in finished watches but recycled

Photograph: Swatch Group

Yet according to Nick Hayek, it was a determination to highlight the qualities of Bioceramic, the novel material introduced by Swatch in 2021, that prompted the MoonSwatch's development. Developed and patented by Swatch, Bioceramic amalgamates a polymer made from the oil of castor beans with zirconium oxide, a ceramic substance used for scratch-proof, robust, hypoallergenic cases in high-end watchmaking. The result is an evolved form of plastic with the scratch-resistance and solidity of ceramic, a silky matte finish that's noticeably different to that of "normal" plastic, and a greatly reduced carbon footprint (it should be noted, however, that Bioceramic is not biodegradable).

It also delivers a sharper profile than typical plastics—the precise contours of the Speedmaster case, with the complex planes and angles of its famous twisting lugs, are unlike anything in a traditional plastic Swatch watch. But in the fast-paced pop culture world that Swatch inhabits, Bioceramic is a tough story to sell in.

Swatch's robotic automatic optical control process checks the quality of the biosourced glass covering the dial

Photograph: Swatch Group

"I was thinking, how can we make Bioceramic become more of a reality, because it's technical and difficult to communicate," Hayek explains. Other Swatch Group brands were interested in working with the material; while Hayek was determined that it should remain a Swatch product only, he was aware that the status and heritage of a classic watch could raise Bioceramic's profile. Hayek showed me early prototypes for potential Bioceramic versions of Blaincpain's famous dive watch, the Fifty Fathoms, and Omega's Seamaster 300. But there was only ever one real contender.

"We were doing the NASA Swatch [released in late 2021], and it made me think about the Speedmaster," he says. "It was on the Moon, it played a principal role in one of the most mythical moments in world history: There's a real story to be told to many young people in the world who don't

know it. I thought a collaboration between Swatch, an icon, and the Omega Speedmaster, another icon ... that would be a real provocation.”

Hayek had a Speedmaster prototype made on the quiet and showed it to the curator of Omega’s museum, Petros Protopapas, who gave it an enthusiastic thumbs-up. Raynald Aeschlimann, Omega’s CEO, took more convincing. “At first he was pale when he saw the Omega Speedmaster as a Swatch, with a quartz movement,” says Hayek. “I said maybe we could do it as a customer service watch while you’re getting your Speedmaster serviced. He said okay, we can think about it.” Once Aeschlimann saw a more fully realized product, however, he was sold.

In the meantime Hayek was able to poach Omega’s head of product, Gregory Kissling, to oversee “Galileo,” the internal project code name, which was conducted in total secrecy within Swatch. “A Swatch person would have done me a Swatch. Gregory understood that he’s not making an Omega product, but he’s not making *only* a Swatch product. I needed that Omega input,” Hayek says.

OMEGA Ultraman Speedmaster

Photograph: OMEGA

OMEGA Alaska Project

Photograph: Swatch Group

It was Kissling who thought of creating watches linked to the colors of the solar system and including references to historic Speedmaster iterations. The red-and-white Mission to Mars version, for instance, with its strangely shaped chronograph hands, is inspired by the white dial and large red outer casing of prototypes made in the early 1970s for the “[Alaska Project](#),” a short-lived research program to produce the ultimate watch for space travel. The orange detailing found on the Jupiter model quotes the so-called [Ultraman](#) Speedmaster worn in a Japanese TV show from the ’70s of the same name, another collector favorite.

Conversely, the MoonSwatch's chronograph layout is the element that shows most clearly that it's a Swatch. The chrono movement that the brand has been using for years has the two upper subdials positioned at 10 and 2 o'clock rather than at 9 and 3 o'clock. Only the third subdial, at 6 o'clock, directly emulates the original Omega Moonwatch.

The two upper subdials of the MoonSwatch slightly differ in location to the original Omega Moonwatch

Photograph: Swatch Group

"It means there are all these layers you can peel off, all the little subtleties," says Hayek. "If you want to find the historical connections, why this hand is like this or this detail is a certain way, you can—but even if you don't see the connection, it's cool. This is a fantastic dimension."

Underlying all was the focus to push the bioplastic technology further, particularly in the creation of new colors. "It's not easy. This is an entirely new material, so we're doing everything for the first time," says Hayek. "We challenged our production facilities and labs to go further, to invent more, and to create colors that are not yet used. It had to dynamize the production."

The end of the assembly process of the 521 movement, including the fitting of the MoonSwatch dials and hands. At this stage the movements are ready to be fitted in the Bioceramic cases

Photograph: Swatch Group

That Swatch Group can develop and make Bioceramic at all goes back to the initial success of Swatch when it launched in 1983 under the leadership of Hayek's late father, Nicholas G. Hayek (the Hayek family retains a 39 percent stake in the company). At the start of the 1980s, Hayek Sr. had been tasked by creditor banks with turning around the fortunes of a group of watchmaking companies, Omega among them, that had fallen into insolvency during the economic crises of the '70s, during which the Swiss watch industry was on the verge of collapse. It was the huge success of the fun, plastic Swatch watch, launched by the group's ETA subsidiary in 1983,

that helped reenergize Swiss watchmaking more broadly and poured millions into the coffers of Hayek's fledgling conglomerate. He took it private in 1985.

The result today is a sprawling empire composed of not just blue-chip brands such as Breguet, Longines, and Tissot, but high-tech production hubs, research laboratories, and component factories. Through this network of intellectual property and technology, Swatch has been able to develop, patent, and manufacture Bioceramic entirely in-house. Other industries are sniffing around, claims Hayek, as the potential applications are myriad. But all the Bioceramic he can make, he needs for Swatch.

Spaghetti-like strings of Bioceramic are cooled and granulated to form a feedstock ready for injection molding

Photograph: Swatch Group

The manufacturing process is complex and delicate. First, the raw ingredients of the material—the castor oil polymer, zirconium oxide powder, and chemical pigments—are fed into a complex extrusion machine, which amalgamates them at controlled temperatures of around 200 °C (minute variations in temperature can affect the color uniformity). Out of this, spaghetti-like strings of Bioceramic emerge that are then cooled and granulated to form a feedstock ready for injection molding.

This in turn produces the Bioceramic parts, including the monobloc case, the pushers and crown, battery cover, and a loop holding together the Velcro bracelet. Every element of the process, from the initial combining of the feedstock elements to the injection molding of finished parts and their assembly, along with the manufacturing of the movement, dial, and crystal, is completely automated.

Video: Swatch Group

Various subsidiaries within Swatch Group play a role, making production as much of a logistical challenge as an engineering one. ETA, a vast and historic manufacturer of watch movements (it remains the dominant supplier of movements to the Swiss watch industry), also houses the Swatch

production facilities. The Bioceramic extrusion and injection processes take place at its headquarters in Grenchen while automated assembly lines are found at its other factories nearby. Comadur, a pioneer in the field of ceramics (as used in particular by Omega and Rado within Swatch Group), creates the zirconium oxide powder; along with Asulab, an advanced research facility, Comadur also creates the special chemical pigments for the Bioceramic feedstock.

Video: Swatch Group

“Many of the things we’re doing are so new, we had to develop processes as we went,” says Hayek. Even the microprinting of a photorealistic rendition of a given planet, found on each MoonSwatch’s circular battery cover, required a new technique to deliver tiny precise images using ink droplets of just six microliters (one millionth of a liter). “We did the homologation for these processes step by step during the production, in parallel, because we were driven to be as quick as possible. The more time we took, the more time there would be for information to get out. We knew if that happened, it would have lost a lot of the disruptive power.”

The production has been remarkably quick. Gregory Kissling’s concept was presented to Hayek in August 2021 and the first MoonSwatches were made in February this year—the month before the launch. Hayek says that to make the injection mold tooling for the various Bioceramic components would normally have taken six months. It was achieved in six weeks.

Evidence of the speed of this process emerged when some owners of the deep-blue Mission to Neptune model found blue stains on their wrists after wearing. With Bioceramic, full saturation colors are harder to achieve than the pastel hues with which the material was launched last year. For colors like the red of the Mission to Mars model and the Neptune blue, the feedstock is given additional passes through the extruder to compound the material more densely and fix a higher degree of pigmentation. But with the Neptune, it seems the scales were tipped too heavily. Swatch Group says that the staining occurred with a small proportion of wearers and lasted only a few days. (My experience trialing a model bears this out: An initial blue residue on my wrist stopped appearing after a few wears.)

Subtle details include an etched “S” into the biosourced glass covering the MoonSwatch dial

Photograph: Swatch Group

Nevertheless the Neptune was swiftly withdrawn, and a new recipe for the color is being concocted. But the fault has had a diverting side effect: Due to their rarity, the few Neptune models appearing on resale sites are fetching eye-watering prices compared to the other models. As of June, the pre-owned sales platform Chrono24 was showing a handful of Neptunes listed at around \$2,400 or more. Most MoonSwatch models, meanwhile, have settled at market values of between \$480 and \$1,100—still a fantastic return on an ostensibly unlimited \$260 watch.

For most people, then, the MoonSwatch remains out of reach. The frustration among prospective buyers has been compounded by Swatch’s vague communications on the likelihood of ecommerce availability: Messaging that the MoonSwatch remains unavailable online “for now” suggested that it will be at some point in the future. Hayek himself confirms that there are no plans to sell MoonSwatch online, but is less certain about future strategy. “Ask me in four months if ecommerce can play a role ... perhaps ... I don’t know,” he says. It’s something of pertinence to those who live either far from a Swatch store, or in areas—South America, Scandinavia, India, for instance—where there is no physical outlet.

In truth, the question is moot. Even if it wanted to, Swatch does not have the capacity to serve the inevitable frenzied online demand for MoonSwatch. Indeed, Hayek states that the machines are running at full capacity, 24 hours a day, just to try and meet the demand in the brand’s 110 bricks and mortar locations. “Regardless, our aim is not to hurriedly throw out millions of MoonSwatches into the market and build three times more factories instantly, which you cannot do anyway. The MoonSwatch isn’t about making as much money as possible in the shortest possible time period.”

Capacity, however, will increase: New manufacturing equipment is being installed, including two extrusion machines for the creation of the feedstock (which Hayek says is by far the most onerous part of the process), more

injection tooling, and more printing machines. The investment in a single product line—for a company that makes more than 3 million watches a year—is colossal.

The original Omega Moonwatch, left, complete with Velcro strap, which is emulated in the MoonSwatch

Photograph: Swatch Group

Hayek is probably right to reason that, while resellers are an inevitability of any hot product, the tight distribution has at least limited their access to the MoonSwatch. An online drop would expose Swatch to the bots and scalpers that bedevil everything from sneaker launches to the PlayStation 5. To frustrated customers, he reiterates that the MoonSwatch is neither limited nor a short-term product—there will be *millions* of MoonSwatches.

“The crazy prices of speculators will come down, because it is not limited, neither in time nor in numbers. Everybody wants to have it, but we cannot serve everyone at once,” he says. In the postpandemic consumer landscape, Hayek reckons, patience has become a vastly underrated virtue. “If the world is serious about sustainability, you cannot make everything available to everybody instantly and comfortably, with a click. This world thinks everything is a commodity, but the MoonSwatch is not a commodity. This is about innovation, beauty, fun, and positive provocation. And last but not least, Swiss made.”

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Meet the Lobbyist Next Door

What do a Real Housewife, an Olympic athlete, and a doula have in common? They're all being paid by an ad-tech startup as influencers—peddling not products but ideologies.

ILLUSTRATION: MARIA FRADE

At first glance, the posts appeared to have nothing in common. A Philadelphia-area attorney who proffers financial advice urged her 1,700 [Twitter](#) followers to sign up for a credit union. A 23-year-old climate activist in Texas rallied her 49,000 fans on [TikTok](#) and [Instagram](#) to join a mailing list promoting Democrats in statewide offices. A physical therapist for the elderly in Florida prodded her 3,900 Instagram followers to sign a petition demanding that Congress pass paid medical leave, sharing the story of her grandmother's battle with dementia. Each of these posts was funded by a well-heeled advocacy organization: the Credit Union National Association, the Democratic Association of Secretaries of State, and UsAgainstAlzheimer's Action.

Even though none of the people reading these posts knew it, however, they were all made possible by the same company: Urban Legend, a small ad-tech startup operating out of a loft in Alexandria, Virginia.

Launched in 2020 by a pair of former Trump administration staffers, Urban Legend pledges on its website to "help brands run accountable and impactful influencer campaigns." Its more comprehensive mission, one rarely articulated in public, is slightly more ambitious.

Staffed by a plucky 14-person team, Urban Legend keeps its largest asset carefully hidden away inside its servers: an army of 700 social media

influencers who command varying degrees of allegiance from audiences that collectively number in the tens of millions. The company has painstakingly cultivated this roster to reflect every conceivable niche of society reflected on the internet: makeup artists, Nascar drivers, home improvement gurus, teachers, doulas, *Real Housewives* stars, mommy bloggers, NFL quarterbacks, Olympians, and the occasional Fox News pundit.

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Illustration: Maria do Rosário Frade

These influencers are paired with clients on Urban Legend's private platform, the Exchange, where buyers spell out the parameters of the message they want to push to the public and set a budget. Influencers snatch the best available offers from a menu and are then free to craft the campaign's message, molding it to the rhythms and vernacular of their followers. Clients only pay for each "conversion" an influencer nets—\$1.25, say, for every follower who joins a newsletter. In two years, Urban Legend's influencers have run more than 400 campaigns, connecting people to its clients millions of times. Henri Makembe, a veteran Democratic campaign strategist in Washington who has worked with Urban Legend several times, compared the concept to "unboxing" videos—when an influencer unwraps and showcases a product sent to them by a brand. Such product influencers are a \$15 billion marketing industry. "Now we're realizing, 'Oh: We can do that with an idea,'" Makembe says.

This model is the brainchild of Urban Legend's 35-year-old founder and CEO, Ory Rinat. Rinat spent the early part of his career working in Washington's media circles before becoming director of digital strategy for the Trump White House. The idea for Urban Legend arose from many currents in American public life, including "the rise of influencer marketing, the increase in trust in those people, and also the rise of individuals to be their own media brand," he says. In both retail and influencer politics, he says, small is big: "Our creators range from 3,000 to 14 million followers," Rinat tells me, but the majority are "micro-influencers" (those with 100,000 or fewer followers) and "nano-influencers" (fewer than 10,000).

Like baseball, selling influence is a pastime that rarely gets reinvented. There are only so many ways to get a person to do the thing you want. In

politics, the more solicitous methods include robocalls and email spam with increasingly audacious subject lines (“Hey, it’s Barack”). “The most impactful messaging strategies have always been the most personalized,” says Anat Shenker-Osorio, a progressive campaign consultant based in California. Peer-to-peer outreach has long proven the most effective at persuading or mobilizing—appeals that create “the feeling like this is a real person talking to me.” Urban Legend’s approach reflects this insight, embracing influencers less as celebrity spokespeople than as peers for hire. If an influencer’s financial advice helped you save for a vacation or their fashion tips earned you compliments, maybe their view on the minimum wage, or critical race theory, is worth considering too. “To then have that person give you information about politics? That’s potentially an incredibly potent and powerful messenger,” says Shenker-Osorio.

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But the rise of this new messenger has disquieted some. For one, it’s unclear whether influencers are following federal disclosure rules. And as at similar firms, the names of Urban Legend’s influencers and clients are a closely held secret—or were, until recently—creating the prospect of an internet flush with untraceable money, in which Americans can no longer tell an earnest opinion from a paid one. Initially, Rinat told me that the firm’s clients included a Fortune 50 tech company, a “major labor union,” an “environmental advocacy group,” and one “LGBTQ+ advocacy group.”

In Washington, there’s been a [swell of interest in the influencer business](#), across the political spectrum. It bears the signs of an incipient arms race, much like the advent of super PACs a decade ago. Hany Farid, a professor of computer science at UC Berkeley who has briefed the Biden administration on social media regulation, predicted that Urban Legend’s model will be recapitulated widely before the 2024 presidential election. “This is the future,” Farid told me.

Tellingly, both Urban Legend’s boosters and its detractors agree on the presence of a black hole at the center of the internet that’s pulled society into alignment with its goals. “To understand what Urban Legend is doing, you

have to look at where we are as a society,” says Makembe. “There’s a lack of trust”—in institutions, in media, in each other—a worsening problem that he says Urban Legend is solving. Others are less sanguine. “You’re getting paid to manipulate your followers,” Farid says flatly. “Somebody with 3,000 followers is now, essentially, a lobbyist.”

Raised in Queens, New York, Rinat launched his first business at age 10. He pasted together several mail-order catalogs from rival home goods sellers and then enlisted preteen influencers—his elementary school peers—to peddle them to their parents. Young Ory managed the orders and took a cut of the sales (“a couple hundred dollars,” he estimates). The concept is not so different from Urban Legend, knitting sellers together within one convenient ecosystem.

After graduating from Columbia University in 2009 with a degree in political science and history, Rinat moved to Washington, DC. He attended the night program at Georgetown’s law school while working on the business team of Atlantic Media, the parent company of magazines like *The Atlantic* and *National Journal*. Rinat and his colleagues were experimenting with how to keep magazines profitable after the internet had torpedoed their ad revenues. His team became a pioneer of sponsored content, consulting with big-name companies to create multimedia versions of magazine-style stories.

ILLUSTRATION: MARIA FRADE

From a business perspective, however, Rinat found aspects of this model to be a bad deal for corporate clients. It had what he calls an “authenticity problem,” in that few people raced to read an “article” written by suits at Exxon. There was also an “accountability problem.” Corporate advertisers paid one lump sum up front, then simply hoped people would see their ad. Rinat recalled one DC trade association that paid a marketing agency \$300,000 to place ads on Facebook urging users to email their congressperson. In the end, the group netted 600 emails—\$500 per email.

Rinat speaks the savvy language of internet marketing; in layman’s vocabulary, “accountability” means “getting clients their money’s worth,” and “authenticity” means “making people believe your message is genuine,

even though someone paid for it.” Nevertheless, Rinat sensed these challenges had implications beyond journalism. Around Washington, he began asking strange questions—such as the price corporate buyers were willing to pay for, say, a citizen’s heartfelt letter to Congress. (One client’s answer: \$48.) He wondered whether some new development would bridge these problems. “What was left,” he reasoned, was “finding the mechanism.”

Rinat kept these ideas alive when he began directing digital strategy for the conservative Heritage Foundation in 2015. After Trump’s election, Rinat took an appointment in the State Department for a program combating violent extremism and terrorism online. Two weeks into the job, the incoming White House director of digital strategy reportedly failed an FBI background check, and Rinat was appointed interim director. Eventually, he stayed on. From his office in the Eisenhower Building, he helped redesign the White House website, build a web portal for the response to the opioid crisis, and launch Coronavirus.gov.

Rinat situated the company along a spectrum of persuasion. “What’s the highest possible thing on that spectrum? It’s probably a one-to-one communication—somebody you trust,” he says. “We’re just below that.”

By then, social media influencers had gained a tighter grip on politics, particularly in Trump’s brand of movement conservatism. Rinat explored ways to unlock their power. In 2019, alongside Sondra Clark, the administration’s director of marketing and campaigns, Rinat helped organize the first [White House Social Media Summit](#). At the event, Trump gathered in the East Room with about 200 online “digital leaders” in conservative politics—activists and rabble-rousers including Project Veritas founder James O’Keefe, Turning Point USA’s Charlie Kirk, and Bill Mitchell, a spreader of the then incipient [QAnon conspiracy](#). “The crap you think of,” Trump told the crowd, “is unbelievable.” The event, according to an administration official who attended, was in keeping with a larger strategy in which social media mavens were given “an exclusive-access look at what the administration was doing, and then reaping the benefits” as they posted enthusiastically about their time at the White House. “Sondra and Ory,” the person continued, “were really the architects of that.”

Influencers had become “the mechanism” Rinat was searching for—the ultimate gig labor force, capable of delivering what he called “cost-per-action marketing, with client-set rates.” He began floating his business idea to mentors. (One was Atlantic Media chair David Bradley.) In June 2020, Rinat left the White House. Less than a month later he launched Urban Legend, and Clark came on board as president. One of their first clients was their former boss. In the second half of 2020, according to the Federal Election Commission, the Trump campaign paid Rinat’s firm more than \$1 million for “online advertising.”

Rinat was unspooling this history from the corner of Urban Legend’s brick-and-cedar office when I visited on a warm morning this past spring. The firm occupies the top floor of a townhouse in Alexandria’s colonial-style downtown, wedged between a boutique pizzeria and a clothing store. By turns charming and withdrawn, Rinat has a clean-shaven head and a taciturn, solemn air, except for amused eyes that turn up cheerily at the corners when he is considering some proposition. “The technology we’re talking about is not revolutionary,” he clarifies at the outset. “We just integrated it.”

He led me into the team’s small conference room, which had chic-ish furniture and a small library. (Books included *Confrontational Politics*, by a gun-rights activist, and *Rules for Revolutionaries*, by two Bernie Sanders consultants.) Hanging on the wall was a large television monitor, where Rinat spun through a tour of the Exchange, using me as a hypothetical influencer (or “creator,” as he prefers). We set up my creator account, then clicked on a tab labeled “My Campaigns.” On prim, eggshell-colored menu panes, I was presented with campaigns from a series of eager advertisers. One dummy client, called Shipmates, was a sustainable packaging company that wanted my followers to sign up for its newsletter. The company offered me \$1.90 as the “revenue per conversion,” with a limit of 3,000 sign-ups. I checked a box, agreeing to the terms and conditions, and clicked “Join Campaign.”

“Here’s the irony of this whole thing. Urban legend is relying on precisely the same thing”—trust—“that it is arguably destroying.”

Now I was officially influencing for cash. Shipmates offered me a “campaign brief”—suggesting rhetoric for getting my followers to “join our

sustainability conversation.” But how I crafted this appeal was up to me. I was given a menu of custom links, each traceable just to me, and each designated to a different platform: Twitter, Instagram, [Facebook](#), [YouTube](#). Rinat had an employee click one of my links, sending their browser to Shipmates’ newsletter page, where they promptly signed up. On my dashboard, a ticker labeled “Your Conversions” flipped from 0 to 1. “And look at that,” Rinat said gamely. “You just made a dollar ninety.” Among other tricks, Urban Legend can also track visits to an advertiser’s website, books on Amazon, op-eds in *The New York Times*, and form emails to Congress.

At a cramped desk a few feet away sat Sophia Schreiber, a 26-year-old “creator success coordinator.” Schreiber scours the internet for social media personas who have a loyal following and post in areas that advertisers might want to reach. (Fast-growing verticals are parenting and wellness—and, lately, cryptocurrency educators, Rinat says.) Sitting inside a white-paneled phone booth was James Hong, the company’s 30-year-old vice president. After Schreiber flags the influencers, Hong and others call them to vet their demeanor and professionalism—and to suss out any untapped advertising potential. Urban Legend’s influencers “are incredibly multi-faceted,” Rinat explains. “We might be onboarding a blogger who has cooking tips” but come to learn they also care about climate change or religion—“issues they’re passionate about, but not always posting about,” Rinat says.

After a team lunch, Urban Legend’s president, Sondra Clark, joined us at the conference table and explained the delicate art of influencer management. Chosen influencers are classified within a large, meticulously maintained database. To an extent, Urban Legend can curate the messengers for its corporate clients by sending push notifications that nudge them toward campaigns based on the creators’ profile of causes. Set against Rinat’s more austere mode, Clark seemed congenitally sunny, exuding a breezy charm. She framed the Exchange as empowering for influencers. “*I want to talk about human trafficking,*” she says, mimicking an influencer. “That’s awesome! And they get a text from us—hey, there’s a campaign in your account on this issue.”

In conversation, Rinat and Clark like to emphasize causes with a liberal bent, like climate change, or no bent, like Alzheimer’s awareness, but they

left their more conservative campaigns a mystery. When our conversation neared the subject of partisan influence on the Exchange, Rinat evinced a tactful froideur. His vision for the platform was one that can “work with everybody,” he said, somewhat elliptically. Urban Legend’s staff is almost evenly split between Democrats and Republicans, he said, and most come from the world of marketing. “When you’re talking about hospital price transparency or prenatal health care or Alzheimer’s, it’s not left-right. It’s beyond politics,” Rinat said.

It would all become clear, supposedly, when I met Rinat’s selected influencers. One was Zahra Biabani, the 23-year-old creator behind the Instagram and TikTok accounts Soulful Seeds, who was recruited by Urban Legend last fall. “I didn’t know that you could be paid for sharing a petition!” she says, laughing. Biabani has around 30,000 followers on Instagram and 19,000 on TikTok and posts what she calls “climate optimism”—sharing motivating news about climate change, occasionally while grooving to a pop soundtrack. (Instagram’s official account, with 500 million followers, featured one of her dances on Earth Day.) From Biabani’s point of view, Urban Legend wasn’t asking her to do anything unusual. “You could get paid for promoting things that I would already promote,” she says. To her, the Exchange “is a very low-effort and noncontroversial way of leveraging the values-aligned audience that I built as an influencer.”

Leah O’Rourke, a 31-year-old physical therapist for older adults, posts geriatric care advice on her Instagram account, Love to Care For. “I guess I’m an influencer, which feels weird to say,” she says. With 3,900 followers, O’Rourke estimates she made about \$500 last year on the Exchange, posting for four campaigns. She seized on one about Alzheimer’s, telling followers how dementia had tormented her grandmother and urging them to sign a petition asking Congress to fund paid medical leave for elder care. Then there was LaRese Purnell, a tax accountant from Ohio who has built his brand advising Black families (and recently, several NFL athletes) about financial planning. Purnell—who sits on multiple nonprofit boards, owns a small restaurant chain, and has hosted a Friday morning radio show in Cleveland—estimates that he has about 100,000 followers across various platforms. Staff from Urban Legend “directed me into campaigns that fit my image,” Purnell says. He shot a few videos talking about the benefits of credit unions while walking his dog. “If I told people in this community,

“These are the best shoestrings to put in your shoes,’ they would believe me,” says Purnell, who sensed the cleverness in Urban Legend’s business model. “Because I build trust.”

Clients who purchased these ads are generally pleased. Rinat introduced me to two. Chris Lorence, a veteran marketing executive who placed the credit union ad, said the users who came from Purnell and other influencers were 11 times more likely to take action than their typical traffic. Another client, Sean Clifford, runs a technology company called Canopy that blocks pornography from family devices. To Clifford’s surprise, Canopy’s campaign attracted a wide array of spokespeople, and the Exchange “brought new influencers to the table that I *never* would have dreamed of approaching.” One was a firebrand political commentator in his twenties —“very political, very controversial,” is all Clifford would say—while others were news media personalities who attract large followings on Instagram and TikTok.

Clifford, who attended the great books program at St. John’s University, says Urban Legend’s model—while undeniably effective—raised deeper questions. He cited Plato’s ancient dialog *Phaedrus*, in which two gods, Thamus and Theuth, argue fiercely about the invention of writing. Far from enhancing truth, Thamus warned, humanity’s “trust in writings” by outsiders would degrade their critical faculties.

Before the afternoon at Urban Legend headquarters ended, Rinat convened an all-hands meeting to discuss the Exchange’s forthcoming mobile app—for when influencers have a “sitting-at-a-red-light moment,” Rinat explains. Throughout the day, the most salient refrains were words like “authentic” and “trust”—a reminder, if nothing else, of what Urban Legend is really selling. Rinat situated the company along a spectrum of persuasion. “What’s the highest possible thing on that spectrum? It’s probably a one-to-one communication—somebody you trust,” he says. “We’re just below that.” This is why it was key, Clark explains, that influencers craft the message. The Exchange, she says, “lets the creators’ voices sing.”

Last summer, then White House press secretary [Jen Psaki filmed a series of clips with TikTok star Benny Drama](#) to tout the coronavirus vaccine. Earlier this year, Biden administration officials gave a [special briefing on the war in](#)

[Ukraine to 30 TikTok influencers](#). And when Congress was advancing an antitrust bill to regulate Amazon, Google, and Apple, *The Washington Post* reported that activist groups and their Big Tech opponents each [hired TikTok personalities to duke it out](#) with a flurry of videos—some supporting the “historic bipartisan legislation to #ReinInBigTech,” others decrying the proposal as “dumb and bad economically.”

Washington’s political power brokers are quietly inching toward a full embrace of influencers. If not handled with care, however, that can be hazardous—particularly when the arrangement is unmasked. During the Democratic presidential primary of 2020, BuzzFeed News reported that a super PAC for Senator Cory Booker had [tried to entice influencers with cash](#), giving Booker an aura of desperation. Later in the race, [Mike Bloomberg found himself in trouble](#) when a surge of meme creators began aggressively pushing his candidacy—but some left it unclear whether the posts, which garnered \$150 a pop, had been sponsored.

“Relying on financially motivated influencers to be ethical is naive.”

The Federal Trade Commission requires people to disclose if they’ve been paid to endorse something online, using terms like “#Ad” or “Sponsored.” Around the time of the Bloomberg revelation, Rohit Chopra, an FTC commissioner, issued a statement clarifying that “[paying an influencer to pretend](#) that their endorsement or review is untainted by a financial relationship” is “illegal payola.” (Although one brand has been penalized by the FTC for misleading influencer marketing, no influencer, broker, or platform has yet faced penalties for failure to disclose.)

Urban Legend’s approach to disclosure is, effectively, the honor system. Formally, influencers are required to make disclosures when they agree to the terms and conditions, and they are reminded during their onboarding. But Rinat doesn’t enforce the provision; that’s the FTC’s job, and Rinat says it’s on the influencers to follow the agency’s guidelines.

Researchers who spoke to WIRED found this posture unconvincing. “Relying on financially motivated influencers to be ethical is naive,” says [Renée DiResta](#), who studies narrative manipulation at the Stanford Internet Observatory. She called influencer disclosure “yet another area in which law

hasn't caught up to digital infrastructure." Many suspect that the lack of disclosure enforcement has bulldozed political money toward influencers, whose campaigns are not logged in Facebook's political advertising archive. The Federal Elections Commission, too, has scant rules governing social media, leaving the entire field open, potentially, to anonymous money.

The click-per-payment model, DiResta says, may also change influencers' behavior—creating the "incentive to produce and amplify content in the most inflammatory way possible in order to drive the audience to take an action." But at the most fundamental level, researchers voiced a concern about the potential for deception in civic discourse. DiResta said, "I don't think the public really understands the extent to which the people making these posts are, in fact, potentially becoming enriched personally by them."

The ramifications of not disclosing these ties can touch anyone, from your credulous grandmother all the way up to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. A knowledgeable person with insight into an Urban Legend campaign described one client's effort to apply pressure on the FCC. According to the person, one of the influencers enlisted was Eric Bolling, a disgraced former Fox News host and one of just 51 people President Trump followed on Twitter. Bolling's post involved a "telecoms issue," with a goal "to apply as much pressure" as possible on the FCC. There were "thousands of engagements overnight" from Bolling's tweet, the person said, which "the FCC commissioner, Ajit Pai, and the president followed and saw."

Today, Bolling's tweet does not appear to be on his feed. Most social media marketing campaigns get deleted when they've run their course, and I found Urban Legend's campaigns to be no exception. Rinat said influencers always know the identity of a client—and followers will know, too, because the link generally takes them to a campaign page, where the sponsor can be identified. Later, he said transparency is "a very important thing to influencer marketing, and particularly for our model. Without it, audience trust drops, and the resulting engagement drops." He also called for clearer rules from enforcement agencies.

While lionizing transparency, Urban Legend continues to shield the identities of its influencers and the clients who pay them.

While lionizing transparency, Urban Legend continues to shield the identities of its influencers and the clients who pay them. The company's tactfully hands-off approach to disclosure, Farid said, makes the Exchange "a system that is—by design—ripe for abuse."

"At best, the appearance is bad," he continued. "At worst, it's hiding something nefarious."

ILLUSTRATION: MARIA FRADE

The satirist and critic H. L. Mencken once wrote that "whenever you hear a man speak of his love for his country, it is a sign that he expects to be paid for it." The bone-dry notion that Americans would happily sell anything—even their patriotism—must have seemed like an amusing hypothetical at the time. But perhaps Mencken simply didn't live long enough to see Americans offered the chance.

Last September, HuffPost reporter Jesselyn Cook noted a [wave of Instagram posts that seemed to correspond](#) with the timing of a large payment to Urban Legend for "advertising," according to FEC filings, through a partner firm called Legendary Campaigns. The purchase was made by the National Republican Senatorial Committee, which fundraises for Senate campaigns. The posts had headlines like "End to Mask Mandates, Endless Lockdowns and Vaccine Passports!" and demanded "a full investigation into Biden-tech collusion." Each post linked to NRSC petitions, which harvested names and emails.

When I asked Rinat about the posts, he initially said he didn't think the campaigns came from Urban Legend. A few weeks later, however, an Urban Legend client shared with WIRED several backdated screenshots of their influencers' posts. Each of these posts redirected users to a petition by using a highly unusual URL construction, which began "exc.to." According to computer science researchers who examined the string, the top-level domain ".to" is registered to the country of Tonga and has a registration history that cannot be seen. The domain "exc" was registered with the URL-shortening service Bit.ly, which works with private business clients to turn their registered domains into redirect links (such as "es.pn" for the sports network). Since Urban Legend's founding in 2020, "exc.to" could not be

found elsewhere on the internet, except in one place: the HuffPost story, in which a 16-year-old's Instagram post for the NRSC bore the telltale URL "END MASK MANDATES: exc.to/3zLvUFB."

When WIRED used third-party search tools to scan Facebook and Twitter for the URL string, it found 726 posts from between July and November 2021. Not long after Cook's report, the use of "exc.to" abruptly stopped. (Since then, Urban Legend's links have used a standard Bit.ly format identical to billions of others on the internet, making them effectively untraceable.) The posts closely matched what Rinat had shared about his creators and clients. Each linked to op-eds, petitions, or websites of advocacy organizations, including the NRSC, UsAgainst-Alzheimer's Action, Canopy, and the Credit Union National Association. But the vast majority of them were about politics, with many sharing identical language in their appeals.

And there were other, more striking posts, which Rinat had not described. Empowered to connect with their value-aligned audiences and elevate causes that made them passionate, the influencers-for-hire let their voices sing.

"The radicals in the left thinks parents who stand up to WOKENESS in our schools are domestic terrorists!" wrote one influencer to their 8 million followers. Another posted: "Thousands upon thousands of unvetted, illegal immigrants are standing by & waiting to rush our border as soon as Democrats pass their 'infrastructure' bill." There were posts from podcasters ("Freedom Over Fauci!"), activists ("The Left is coming for religious freedom AGAIN"), and talking heads ("Democrats want to steal \$3.5 TRILLION of our taxpayer dollars"). Creators were also linked to conservative institutions such as Turning Point USA and the America First Policy Institute, and conservative media like Breitbart and Newsmax. Others were unaffiliated, such as the former contestant from *The Bachelorette* who filmed his video appeal without a shirt: "The border's a wreck! I'm getting Amber alerts every day! This is ridiculous!"

In most cases, campaigns led to a page for harvesting emails. But others drove traffic: to conservative publishers like the Patriot Post; to an online course by Hillsdale College; to the Kids Guide to Media Bias; or to pages

that appeared to be run by PragerU, the Second Amendment Foundation, and Americans for Prosperity. Occasionally, posters levied more banal appeals (“Take the #Prolife pledge!”). More frequently, rallying cries invoked critical race theory, immigration, and vaccine policies.

Among the creators were several mega-influencers. Donald Trump Jr. posted at least 10 times on Twitter. “Mask Mandates, Endless Lockdowns, and Vaccine Passports. ENOUGH IS ENOUGH,” he wrote in July 2021, sharing an NRSC petition. Laura Ingraham, the Fox host, posted twice to Facebook (“Woke teachers are injecting toxic critical race theory into America’s schools. We must fight back!”) and linked to Heritage Action. So did Dan Scavino, former social media adviser to President Trump; former Trump campaign spokesperson Katrina Pierson; and streaming duo Diamond and Silk.



Benny Johnson  @bennyjohnson ...

GOD BLESS THESE PILOTS! Please SUPPORT ALL WORKERS standing up to Biden's RADICAL MANDATES by FIGHTING BACK and signing your name HERE: exc.to/3luxelQ

12:15 PM · Oct 11, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

698 Retweets **42 Quote Tweets** **3,012 Likes**

← Tweet



David J Harris Jr
@DavidJHarrisJr

...

Tens of Thousands of illegals are flooding our border!

We must demand action!

Sigh this petition to stop it!

exc.to/3CrMSuh

12:36 PM · Sep 17, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

43 Retweets **1 Quote Tweet** **109 Likes**



Tweet

 **James McCoy Taylor** 
@james_mccoy_t

...
HELP me Patriots 🙏

Love America?

Hate communism?

Hate wokeism?

If “yes” ...take 8 actual seconds to click the link, sign this petition & then RT!

We’re pledging to teach through curriculum, social media etc that America is GOOD. Not evil.

Thank you!

exc.to/2XWVaeA

6:27 PM · Sep 29, 2021 · Twitter for iPhone

4 Retweets 4 Likes

1 / 5



Twitter/@bennyjohnson

Almost two-thirds of the posts were conservative. But liberals pushed campaigns too: The comedian Walter Masterson was the top contributor on Twitter, posting in support of a \$20 minimum wage, while popular travel writer BrokeAssStuart boosted legislation addressing unexpected medical

bills. Compared to their conservative counterparts, these posts focused more on policy, not culture wars, and appeared to be sponsored by groups like the Service Employees International Union and the Business Council for Sustainable Energy. There were occasional nonpartisan campaigns, too, such as one by IBM.

The 726 posts do not capture campaigns that were deleted, and they did not cover Instagram or TikTok. WIRED reached out to several creators and clients implicated on the list. None responded to deny their affiliation, and several—Masterson, BrokeAssStuart, the Business Council, and IBM—confirmed that they'd contracted with Urban Legend. When WIRED provided a list of these and other creators and companies, Rinat indicated by email that some do and have worked with Urban Legend, but that others had not, declining to specify further.

Virtually no one—just five influencers—disclosed their payments. Collectively, these posts had some 250,000 engagements. Yet few of the earnest followers who retweeted, say, Trump Jr.—not the grandmother from Alabama, the retired mother from West Virginia, or the Florida small business owner whose bio vows to “expose the DC swamp”—evinced any recognition that what they'd presumed was the dispensation of civic duty was, in reality, just another method for enriching someone in Washington.

Researchers think the major platforms, the FTC, and marketing firms themselves all have a role to play in taming what DiResta calls “a Wild West.” Until then, the march of influencers will proceed deeper into politics. In February and March of this year, the NRSC again paid a large sum—more than \$500,000—to Urban Legend through a partner firm. “Does this become normal?” DiResta asks. “I think it probably does.”

“Here’s the irony of this whole thing,” says Anat Shenker-Osorio, the progressive consultant. “Urban Legend is relying upon precisely the same thing”—trust—“that it is arguably destroying.” Yet if Rinat’s model became the norm, even she concedes that “progressive groups would use this thing.” She paused. “Because you don’t want to unilaterally disarm.”

One view of Urban Legend, then, was as a reclamation project—pumping a dwindling supply of trust through a blanched and beleaguered body politic.

From another vantage, though, the model resembled something else: an excavation, like the mining of a rare mineral. What happens in a country where trust is a scarce and fading resource, as prized as diamonds? As Mencken would tell you, it gets put up for sale.

Additional reporting by Samantha Spengler ([@samspeng](#)).

Updated 7/16/2022 2:00 pm ET: This story has been updated to clarify that Katrina Pierson is a former spokesperson for the Trump campaign.

Let us know what you think about this article. Submit a letter to the editor at mail@wired.com.

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Jul 11, 2022 6:00 AM

Humans Have Always Been Wrong About Humans

The Dawn of Everything fundamentally shifted my view of ... everything. I had to meet one of the minds behind its world-tilting revelations. David Wengrow lost his coauthor, David Graeber, just after they had completed their 700-page magnum opus, *The Dawn of Everything*. Photograph: Udoma Janssen

The phrase “the dawn of everything” first struck David Wengrow, one of the authors of *The Dawn of Everything*, as marvelously absurd. *Everything. Everything!* It was too gigantic, too rich, too loonily sublime. Penguin, the book’s august publisher, would hate it.

But Wengrow, a sly, convivial British [archaeologist](#) at University College London, and his coauthor, the notorious American anthropologist and anarchist David Graeber, whose sudden death in Venice two years ago shocked a world of admirers, couldn’t let it go.

Twitter users, after all, dug the title—Graeber had asked—and it suited the pair’s cosmic undertaking. Their book would throw down a gauntlet. “It’s time to change the course of human history, starting with the past,” as the egg-yolk-yellow ads now declare in the London Underground. Wengrow and Graeber had synthesized new discoveries about peoples like the Kwakiutl, who live in the Pacific Northwest; the foragers of Göbekli Tepe, a religious center in latter-day Turkey built between 9500 and 8000 BCE; and the Indigenous inhabitants of a full-dress metropolis some 4,000 years ago in what’s now Louisiana.

This article appears in the September 2022 issue. [Subscribe to WIRED](#)
Illustration: Maria do Rosário Frade

Citing this existing research, and more from a range of social scientists, Wengrow and Graeber argue that the life of hunter-gatherers before widespread farming was nothing like “the drab abstractions of evolutionary theory,” which hold that early humans lived in small bands in which they acted almost entirely on instinct, either brutish (as in Hobbes) or egalitarian and innocent (as in Rousseau). In contrast, the *Dawn* authors represent prehistoric societies as “a carnival parade of political forms,” a profusion of rambunctious social experiments, where everything from kinship codes to burial rites to gender relations to warfare were forever being conceived, reconceived, satirized, scrapped, and reformed. In an act of intellectual effrontery that recalls Karl Marx, Wengrow and Graeber use this insight to overthrow all existing dogma about humankind—to reimagine, in short, everything.

They did. The book’s a gem. Its dense scholarly detail, compiling archaeological findings from some 30,000 years of global civilizations, is leavened by both freewheeling jokes and philosophic passages of startling originality. At a time when much nonfiction hugs the shore of TED-star consensus to argue that things are either good or bad, *The Dawn* takes to the open sea to argue that things are, above all, subject to change.

For starters, the book makes quick work of maxims by domineering thinkers like Jared Diamond and Steven Pinker. Chief among these is the idea that early humans, bent on nothing but the grim chores of survival, led short and dangerous lives chasing calories and subjugating others for sex and labor. By the research, many or even most premoderns did none of this. Instead, they developed expressive, idiosyncratic societies determined as much by artistic and political practices as by biological imperatives. For instance, while the Kwakiutl practiced slavery, ate salmon, and maintained large bodies, their next-door neighbors in latter-day California, the Yurok, despised slavery, subsisted on pine nuts, and prized extreme slimness (which they showed off by slipping through tiny apertures).

Wengrow and Graeber further cast doubt on the assumption that Indigenous societies organized themselves in only rudimentary ways. In fact, their

societies were both complex and protean: The Cheyenne and Lakota convened police forces, but only to enforce participation in buffalo hunts; they summarily abolished the police in the off-season. For their part, the Natchez of latter-day Mississippi pretended to revere their all-knowing dictator but in fact ran free, knowing that their monarch was too much of a homebody to go after them. Likewise, the precept that large monuments and tombs are always proof of systems of rank comes up for review. In an especially mind-bending passage, Wengrow and Graeber show that the majority of Paleolithic tombs contained not grandes but individuals with physical anomalies including dwarfism, giantism, and spinal abnormalities. Such societies appear not to have idolized elites so much as outliers.

By the time I was halfway through *The Dawn*, I found myself overcome with a kind of Socratic ecstasy. At once, I felt unsuffocated by false beliefs. I brooded on how many times I'd been told that it's natural to keep my offspring strapped to my chest, or sprint like I'm being chased by a tiger, or keep my waist small because males like females who look fertile, or move heaven and earth to help men spread their seed because that's what prehistoric humans did. This was all a lie. The book's boldest claim convulsed actual glee: Humans were never in a state of nature at all! Humans have simply always been humans: ironic, sentient, self-reflective, and free from any species-wide programming. The implications were galactic.

After Graeber died, on September 2, 2020, not long after [alerting Twitter](#) that he and Wengrow had completed their magnum opus, Wengrow found himself both grieving and rushing to finish. The grief nearly knocked him out. But there was one advantage to the hurry: Wengrow stuck "The Dawn of Everything" on the page proofs, too late for Penguin to balk. The sun rose on the book on October 19, 2021, with its golden-hour cover, and soon after it hit the top of the *New York Times* best-seller list.

I first met Wengrow—well, I first met him in Twitter DMs, but we're moving to real life now—in Manhattan, where, over several espressos to brighten his jet lag, we discussed *The Dawn*. I also offered condolences on the death of Graeber. The official cause, which Wengrow was reluctant to discuss, was pancreatic necrosis. But on October 16, 2020, Nika

Dubrovsky, a Russian artist and Graeber's widow, [wrote that](#), though she'd shielded Graeber from Covid, he'd occasionally bridled at wearing a mask. "I want to add my own conspiracy theory," she wrote. "I firmly believe [his death] is related to Covid."

Wengrow has never shaken the feeling of being an outsider in academia.

Photograph: Udoma Janssen

Wengrow and Graeber were devoted to one another as few writing partners are. Their collaboration seems to have been a case of true *philia*, the kind of meeting of the minds I associate with J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis. Some of this is explained by similarities in their backgrounds. Graeber grew up among working-class radicals in Manhattan, while Wengrow was born to a hairdresser and a partner in a small clothing firm in North London, his grandparents having been, he told me, "gifted people who lost their homes and opportunities when the Nazis came to power." Though Wengrow's father later found success in the rag trade, his son was the first in his family to go to college.

Wengrow made it to Oxford in a roundabout way. Having tried to be an actor for a year or two, he thought he'd study English, so he wrote earnest letters to several Oxford colleges to express his lifelong passion for literary studies. When he hit a wall, he canvassed friends about fields of study that might be easier to break into; someone mentioned anthropology and archaeology. He barely knew what these disciplines were, but once again he wrote an earnest letter, this time only to St. Hugh's, assuring the college of his lifelong passion for archaeology. When he went in for an interview, the interviewer held up a sheaf of letters. On top was the letter he'd recently written about his passion for archaeology. The rest were the nearly identical ones he'd written about his passion for literature. The silence was awkward. But he got in. He received his DPhil in 2001.

Nine years later, Wengrow had just published his second book, [*What Makes Civilization?: The Ancient Near East and the Future of the West*](#), which argues that civilizations don't leapfrog from one technological miracle to the next but progress by the gradual transformation of everyday behavior. Having landed in New Orleans for a conference, he was lining up for

passport control when a warm, rumpled anthropologist introduced himself: David Graeber. Graeber was impressed by Wengrow's research on Middle Eastern cylinder seals, which he'd described as an early example of commodity branding. In turn, Wengrow was impressed to meet an anthropologist who knew what a cylinder seal is. The Davids stayed in close touch, meeting in either Manhattan or London, and at some point resolved to create a "pamphlet" summarizing new findings in archaeology that undermine many of the stories told about early human societies. For 10 years they talked, one man's thoughts taking up where the other's left off. Eventually they knew the pamphlet would be a book. Determined to preempt critics who'd be eager to pounce on any error, they were meticulous, writing and rewriting each other's work so thoroughly that neither could tell whose prose was whose. The two never stopped exchanging ideas, and they were still planning a sequel to *The Dawn*—or maybe three—when Graeber died.

Given his background, Wengrow has never shaken the feeling of being an outsider in academia. "Oddly, this feeling doesn't go away even when you achieve a degree of recognition and status," he told me. He and Graeber "could relate on that level. And there was a common sense of humor, which comes from the Jewish background. If he hadn't heard from me in a couple of days he'd call and put on a grandmother sort of voice: 'You don't write ... you don't call.'"

Everywhere I went with Wengrow, he fielded impromptu elegies for Graeber, who was famous as the author of *Debt* and *Bullshit Jobs*, and as an architect of various anti-capitalist uprisings, notably the Occupy movement. Over our first lunch, Wengrow suggested that the specter of his brilliant friend might still be lurking. (Graeber, whose [funeral](#) was framed as an "Intergalactic Memorial Carnival," loved the paranormal.) Indeed, Graeber remained a spirited absence during the time I spent with Wengrow. I pictured him somewhere between a guardian angel and a poltergeist.

The next time I saw Wengrow was in April in Dublin, to grab a bite at a ... what was this place? A disco or a ballroom, loosely attached to a hot-dog stand, at which hot dogs were sold out. Wengrow was unbothered. He and his wife—Ewa, who was trained in archaeology and now works at the

British Library—companionship split a burger. After dinner, Wengrow was scheduled to address a group of labor activists about matters archaeological, but for now we discussed Irish politics, and in particular the vexing matter of Facebook's and Google's longtime use of Ireland as a tax haven (an arrangement that seems to be ending).

The gathering had been organized by Wengrow's host in Dublin, Conor Kostick, an Irish sci-fi writer, champion of the 1950s board game Diplomacy, and devoted leftist. Captivated by *The Dawn* soon after its publication, Kostick had emailed Wengrow, inviting him to speak to a small group at Wynn's, an old Victorian hotel and pub on Abbey Street and a short walk from the hot-dog disco. Kostick's invitation showed some chutzpah. If Wengrow took it up, he'd have to break up the extravagant victory lap that had been his book tour in the US to address a few dozen labor activists, trade unionists, and scruffy anarchists in a modest venue. He'd also be coming to Dublin by way of Vancouver, where he had just been flown business class to give a TED talk, on a docket with Elon Musk.

Wengrow said yes without missing a beat. Kostick [tweeted](#): “Imagine Darwin was coming to #Dublin, to speak about his new book On the Origin of Species. Well that’s how I feel about being able to hear @davidwengrow’s talk next Thursday.” The invitation was just what Wengrow needed, he told me, a sort of anti-TED, “to keep mind and soul together.”

Wengrow considered TED both cultlike and fascinating. Reflecting on the experience with Kostick and me, Wengrow spoke animatedly about Garry Kasparov, the chess champion and Russian dissident who'd kicked off the conference with a speech about the war in Ukraine. Wengrow had no contact with Musk (about whom he appeared to know little, and care less) and joined forces instead with Anicka Yi, a conceptual artist who works largely in fragrance, and the feminist author Jeanette Winterson. “They were great company and reminded me what I was there for, which was to get the message of my work with David Graeber out there in a place where you might least expect to find it.” Munching on his burger, he still seemed dazed by a single data point: [Attending TED](#) can cost \$25,000. Kostick,

who has a ponytail and the vibe of a Roz Chast character, refused to take that in. The average annual salary for an Irish laborer is about \$35,000.

Weeks later, I watched Wengrow's TED talk. In khakis and an oxford-cloth shirt buttoned to the top, he cited his fieldwork in Iraqi Kurdistan to debunk the stubborn fallacy that a make-believe "agricultural revolution" ruined humanity by creating stationary societies, private property, armies, and dreadful social inequality. On the contrary. Some early farming societies rejected these traps for 4,000 years and traveled far and wide, spreading innovations from potter's wheels to leavened bread across the Middle East and North Africa. Cities in the Indus Valley from 4,500 years ago had high-quality egalitarian housing and show no evidence of kings or queens, no royal monuments, no aggrandizing architecture.

The hardest punch thrown by *The Dawn* is its implicit rejection of Margaret Thatcher's infamous assertion that "there is no alternative" to feral capitalism, a claim still abbreviated in Britain as "TINA." Laying waste to TINA, *The Dawn* opens a kaleidoscope of human possibilities, suggesting that today's neoliberal arrangements might one day be remembered as not an epoch but a fad.

We strolled a few blocks to the hotel, where the upstairs lecture room seemed like something out of a pub scene in *Ulysses*. Voluble young radicals filed in, bedecked in buttons of esoteric meaning. Rhona McCord, a socialist and anti-fascist representing Unite, a massive trade union, stood up to encourage people to join. For as little as 65 cents a week. We were far from the Gulfstream brotherhood of TED.

Surrounded by students and leftie hotheads, Wengrow was in his element. I asked a Covid-masked anarchist, who went by the mononym Shane, about *The Dawn of Everything*. "It's a really hopeful book," he said. "It's very easy to get trapped in that mental thing of, 'Nothing's ever going to change. It's just going to be the same neoliberal, state capitalist thing forever.' But a lot of the book is just saying, 'No, we can change.' We have been doing that for the entire time that humans have existed." I turned to Liv, a Portuguese anarchist whose buttons excoriated the foes of the working class and commemorated the Spanish Civil War. "We have to make a change. And it has to be as fast as we can, otherwise ... it will kill us all." I heard this from

other *Dawn* enthusiasts. The book delivers jolts to the system, and—in some readers—shakes defeatist notions that human exploitation is inevitable.

But why have we felt so defeated, so locked into TINA, I wondered. As I took my seat, a plaintive passage from the book popped into my mind: “How did we come to treat eminence and subservience not as temporary expedients … but as inescapable elements of the human condition?” The poltergeist in the air was insistent: Why do we put up with this?

From the lectern, Wengrow asked that no recording be made. He likes synchronous human exchange in person or by telephone, and he welcomes questions and disruptions. While composing *The Dawn*, Wengrow and Graeber built arguments to the tune of their own overlapping voices, interruption, enthusiasm, dissent, doubt, and rapturous agreement.

Early in the book, the Davids even offer a spontaneous celebration of dialog as the engine of philosophy. “Neuroscientists,” they write, “tell us that … the ‘window of consciousness,’ during which we can hold a thought or work out a problem, tends to be open on average for roughly seven seconds.” This isn’t always true. “The great exception to this is when we’re talking to someone else … In conversation, we can hold thoughts and reflect on problems sometimes for hours on end.”

The same collaborative meaning-making was in evidence at Wynn’s, where Wengrow was receptive to everyone, even the inevitable town-hall shaman who stood and delivered a mumblecore homily about … something. For an academic superstar with a theory of everything, Wengrow lacked arrogance in an uncanny way, the way someone else might lack eyebrows.

The lecture touched on something called Dunbar’s number: the influential if dubious thesis by evopsych anthropologist Robin Dunbar that humans function best in groups of up to 150 people, implying that in bigger groups, they need guns, monarchs, and bureaucracy lest they become unruly. A bite-size idea, the kind of pro-cop, pro-executive palaver that animates airport books about “management” and “leadership.” But then Wengrow pointed to actual archaeological evidence. In December, researchers Jennifer M. Miller and Yiming Wang [published a study](#) of ostrich-eggshell beads that were

distributed over vast territory in Africa 50,000 years ago, suggesting that early human populations lived in attenuated social networks of far more than 150 people and kept cohesion and peace without police or kings.

I left Wynn's while Wengrow was still talking animatedly to a pair of Gen Z activists, holding thoughts and reflecting on problems for hours on end.

For an academic superstar with a theory of everything, Wengrow lacks arrogance in an uncanny way.

Photograph: Udoma Janssen

Wengrow and I met the next day too. I didn't think any lecture could be less glitzy than the event with Kostick and the 65-cents-a-week Unite membership, but I was wrong. The final talk Wengrow gave in Ireland was at University College Dublin, and there was not a CEO or tattooed fanboy in sight. This time the audience—in a narrow gray lecture hall with an undersized platform on which four academics balanced precariously—was made up of a few dozen laconic academics. At UCD, Wengrow's sponsor was Graeme Warren, vice president of the International Society for Hunter-Gatherer Research. Where Wengrow had referred to the Wynn's gig as one for "trade unionists," this one was for "hunter-gatherers."

As I got my bearings in the windowless auditorium, the social dynamics came slowly into focus. At last, one of the men, sitting alone at the edge of the audience, emerged as important. When he started to speak, I recognized the room's suspense from my own tour in graduate school; he was donnish, oracular, the one whose opinion matters. Would he like *The Dawn of Everything*? Sweetly, Wengrow himself seemed deferential. The suspense broke when the man—I later learned he was Daniel Bradley, a geneticist at Trinity College Dublin—offered a technical observation about the book, and then shook his head in pure astonishment at the achievement.

Wengrow was pleased. But he was no less delighted when a baby-faced lecturer, Neil Carlin, proposed in a deceptively gentle brogue that Wengrow had gone wrong in his analysis of Stonehenge. Didn't *The Dawn*, Carlin asked, merely rehash the mainstream account of Stonehenge's construction?

Carlin's gall was exciting, but my ears pricked up for another reason. Finally. An archaeological site I'd heard of.

"There's a very big presence on my shoulder as I speak about this," Wengrow said. That would be, I gathered, Michael Parker Pearson, one of Wengrow's colleagues at UCL, the ranking expert on Stonehenge and an archaeologist whom some consider Anglocentric. Had Wengrow crossed up his book's own thesis by failing to question orthodoxies, especially the ones that credit imperial powers like England with all great human achievements? The upstart Carlin was sidling uncomfortably close to charging Wengrow with sycophancy or even careerism.

Wengrow wasn't thrown. He's indifferent to wolf-pack dynamics everywhere, most of all in academic settings. A preoccupation of *The Dawn*, after all, is the contingency of hierarchies. They come and go, sometimes literally with the weather; any system of seniority and groveling is a joke; we are hardwired neither to rule nor to be ruled over. In particular, Wengrow's own newfound status as an archbishop of archaeology, Mr. \$25K-a-membership, struck him as laughable. As Jacques Lacan wrote, "If a man who thinks he's a king is mad, a king who thinks he's a king is no less so."

While Wengrow had received posh plaudits in Vancouver, and whoops of support at Wynn's, he seemed to find full-contact dialog with the UCD archaeologists most gratifying. And stimulating. The eye-opening questions, the testing of ego, the swerves in and out of accord. Reflecting on his collaboration with Graeber, Wengrow ventured that university management has made academia so sterile that making friends within it has become a radical act. "In that way, too," Wengrow said, "our relationship was going against the grain."

True to form, Wengrow earnestly considered Carlin's Stonehenge questions, and even made notes. Later, he gave the critique a complete hearing in an email to me. As with the missing hot dogs, Wengrow was unbothered.

Like the death of Wengrow's intellectual soul mate, *The Dawn* opens far, far more questions than it closes. The book's several [critics](#) seem to balk at its ambition more than its research. Some say its idea of the dawn of

everything, beginning 30,000 or so years ago, is more like its teatime. [Others](#) say Wengrow and Graeber are so eager to find anarchism and feminism in early civilizations that they shade the data.

In the book's final chapters, clouds pass overhead. The authors land on the puzzle of modern "stuckness"—the idea that we have lost the experimental spirit that makes humans human and settled into the ruts of our capitalist-neoliberal hellscape. This works as a rhetorical move: No one wants to be stuck, and dread of this fate can impel a person to action. But as an overarching theory, the idea that humans moved from freedom to stuckness seems to reinscribe some of the schematic evolutionary folktales that the book exists to critique. And if our spirits were flying along just fine, creating new worlds until they were all simultaneously crushed by Thatcherian capitalism, isn't this just a new fall-from-grace story, like the ones that said humanity was wrecked by agriculture or urbanization or the internet?

Contemporary society strikes me as far from stuck. Precarious and imperiled, but not stuck. The pandemic, for one thing, threw into relief the proliferation of cultlike groups that reject modern medicine and even modernity itself. More encouragingly, young workers everywhere are organizing, protesting, and taking to the road in record-high numbers. Gender and race are being reimagined. Any or all of this might be threatening or vertiginous or worse, but none of it suggests stuckness.

Wengrow didn't worry too much about my objection. He holds ideas lightly, and if the "stuckness" concept didn't land for me, he said, maybe I could just let it go. The book supplies hundreds of rich examples of early societies that didn't conform to evolutionary stages. The research is what most excites Wengrow. The imperative to act on our humanness—to refuse to sleepwalk, to refuse to get stuck—grows out of the scholarship.

Over drinks after the lecture, Wengrow talked, when pressed, about his book, but he already seemed to be testing new intellectual territory—the cult of TED, ostrich-shell currency, good old Stonehenge. Academic careers, like all human endeavors, don't have to be only about prizes or disgrace. There is so much to study. There are worlds to imagine. Call it TAAL: The alternatives are limitless.

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The Loneliness of the Junior College Esports Coach

He tried to save his wife through the video game they loved—and nearly lost himself. Then he signed up to lead a fledgling team of gamers in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Photograph: Shawn Bush

Madison Marquer was playing a show in a converted garage in Denver when he met her. It was 2014 and Marquer was a junior at the University of Wyoming, a baby-faced Eagle Scout from Cheyenne who'd become a fixture in Laramie's college-town punk scene. That night he was on guitar for a band called Medicine Bow, earning his reputation as a magnetic performer—a blur of flailing limbs and sweaty, close-cropped hair as he tore through songs about *SpongeBob SquarePants* and [ecological collapse](#).

In the crowd was Katherine Landvogt, a petite and pale-skinned 20-year-old who wore cat-eye glasses. After the set, she went up to Marquer (pronounced “Mar-care”), and they eventually got to talking about music. Landvogt was a guitarist, too, though she was earning her living as a house cleaner. She was dying to join a band, but none of the acts in Denver’s macho punk scene would give her a shot because she didn’t look the part. Marquer thought she was cute, with her curly black hair and off-kilter wit, and he hated that no one was giving her a chance.

Within a few months the two were living together in Marquer’s basement apartment. Landvogt wasn’t just a guitarist, it turned out, but a fluent and ferocious one. Medicine Bow soon slimmed down from a quartet to a power

duo: Marquer on drums, Landvogt on a Fender Telecaster with a phosphorescent pick guard.

When they weren't making music, they were often side by side in front of their PC, clobbering dragons and druids and amassing hoards of gold in *Dota 2*, a complex fantasy-themed [video game](#). The game had long been one of Marquer's grand obsessions—he was among the top 7 percent of players in the world—and now he loved that it was theirs together. They lost themselves for hours on end, oblivious to the outside world, as empty liquor bottles accumulated on the floor and kitchen counter around them.

In February 2016, as Marquer was finishing his last semester at the university, Medicine Bow recorded a cassette that channeled the couple's romantic hopes. *I see an end to any sadness*, one of the songs went. *Let's drink some tea and explore the country / The future is more than it seems.*

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Three months later, Marquer and Landvogt got married in a tiny chapel near Elk Mountain. Soon after, the newlyweds packed up their Subaru Impreza with Medicine Bow's gear and embarked on a 41-day concert tour. They crashed on fans' sofas, played a show at a Pastafarian church in Oklahoma, and reveled in the neon-lit chaos of Times Square. They were so blissed out that every excess and hardship of the road felt like a delight—all fodder for the amusing stories they'd tell their kids one day.

The giddiness faded after they got back to Laramie. Marquer, who'd majored in education, couldn't find a teaching job with the local district. So to pay the couple's \$575-a-month rent, he took a mind-numbing gig sorting mail at the post office. Landvogt toyed with the idea of pursuing a degree in chemical engineering, but she could never follow through. While Marquer had largely reined in his college drinking, she had started making trips to the liquor store at 1:45 am—she didn't want to run out of vodka after it closed at 2. Her addiction gradually stripped away her creative energies and robbed her of the ability to handle even routine tasks. Marquer got used to taking her to the hospital when things got bad. Then he'd be left wondering how and when each spell of sobriety would reach its messy end.

The couple's main remaining source of joy was *Dota 2*. They found refuge in the game's sprawling map, an expanse of dark forests and medieval fortresses. As they played, Marquer started to get a notion in his head: What if he sought out a job in the industry that had emerged around *Dota 2*? Maybe he could find work with one of the companies that stage the game's massive tournaments. (The 2017 edition of *Dota 2*'s preeminent event, the International, in Seattle, had offered almost \$25 million in prize money.) If Marquer could make that happen, maybe he could get Landvogt involved, too, and that would give her the structure to make a lasting recovery.

End Game

[It Started as an Online Gaming Prank. Then It Turned Deadly.](#)

Brendan I. Koerner

Game Over

[The Teens Who Hacked a Video Game Empire—and Went Too Far](#)

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Death in Ohio

[The Strange Life and Mysterious Death of a Virtuoso Coder](#)

Brendan I. Koerner

To achieve those very specific goals, Marquer decided to pursue a highly specific advanced degree. In 2018 he returned to the University of Wyoming to study for a master's in geography, with an emphasis on understanding how gamers relate to the virtual maps that define their worlds. In particular, he studied how male gamers lose their inhibitions when exploring those maps—a line of inquiry inspired by the harassment he heard Landvogt endure during their *Dota 2* sessions.

For a while, Marquer's plan seemed to be working. In the spring of 2019, he received a research grant to attend a *Dota 2* event in Birmingham, England. Landvogt had been mostly sober for a few months, so Marquer felt comfortable leaving her alone for a week. But as soon as Marquer left

for the Denver airport, Landvogt went to a liquor store—the start of a harrowing bender.

When Marquer got back, the apartment was beyond filthy. There was mold in the coffee pot, and the cats were on the brink of starving. A bedridden Landvogt yelled out for Marquer to come give her a hug, and he found her too feeble to move. Not for the first time, Marquer called an ambulance. As he later sat by her bedside at Ivinson Memorial Hospital, Marquer realized he'd lost the will to keep serving as Landvogt's rock. "I ended up divorcing her that summer," he says. "I couldn't do it." Landvogt moved to Texas to live with a man she'd met while playing *Dota 2*. Marquer was left in Laramie to complete a degree that had lost a great deal of its purpose.

On April 8, 2020, as the [coronavirus pandemic](#)'s first wave was battering the US, Marquer got a call from the police in Haltom City, Texas: Landvogt had been found dead in her boyfriend's trailer. An autopsy would reveal that her blood alcohol level was above 0.4, more than five times the legal limit for driving; acute and chronic alcoholism were listed as the causes of death. She was 26.

Marquer spent the next two months at his parents' house in Cheyenne in a haze of grief. He managed to complete his thesis and get his degree, but it all felt hollow. He went through the motions of looking for a job in *Dota 2*, but with in-person tournaments suspended due to Covid, hiring was at a standstill. He paid his bills with temp jobs, stripping insulation from abandoned buildings and helping people navigate the Affordable Care Act. All the while, a suffocating cloud of depression stopped him from glimpsing any way forward.

In April 2021, about a year after Landvogt's death, a friend of Marquer's called to tell him about an article in *The Cheyenne Post*. Laramie County Community College (LCCC), the only institution of higher education in Cheyenne, was starting a varsity [esports](#) team. Athletic scholarships would be provided to gamers who were supremely skilled at the likes of *Call of Duty* and *Super Smash Bros*. The school was looking to hire a coach to lead the program, a one-year contract position that paid \$15,000.

It wasn't the entrée to the gaming industry that Marquer had envisioned for himself back when he'd set out to save his wife by finding them both a niche in *Dota 2*. But he recognized the community college job as a chance to perform a similarly meaningful act of devotion, helping young Wyomingites who might never even consider college if not for the lure of esports. And by immersing himself in that challenge, he might finally shake free of the specter of all he'd lost.

Cheyenne, Wyoming

Photograph: Shawn Bush

Cheyenne, Wyoming

Photograph: Shawn Bush

Save for the one week each summer when it's mobbed with tourists for the rodeo extravaganza known as Frontier Days, Cheyenne exudes a quaint and dusty charm. The heart of its downtown, bounded by the gold-domed state capitol to the north and the freight tracks to the south, can be explored in half an hour, and there's never a shortage of free parking in front of its cowboy-boot emporiums and cocktail bars. Beyond that central district is an array of handsome historic homes, faded motels with weekly rates, and an Air Force base that houses nuclear missile silos.

The 271-acre campus of LCCC—"L-Triple-C" in local parlance—sits on the city's southern edge, across from the desolate grasslands that stretch to the Colorado border 8 miles away. Though many of the school's 2,800 full-time students are Cheyenne residents, a fair share come from the isolated hamlets that are strewn throughout the massive state—windswept towns of a thousand or so that are dependent on gas drilling or coal mining. For rural kids, an LCCC degree can be an affordable ticket to a less secluded, less physically taxing future.

"I joke with my students all the time, 'I want you all to get a nice cushy office job with air-conditioning, or sit in front of a computer for seven hours a day, and then go home to a nice house,'" says Richard Walsh, an

instructor in LCCC's information technology program and an alumnus of the school. "And that all starts with getting a good education."

For years, Walsh had recognized that video games played an outsize role in LCCC social life. Because Wyoming's weather can be so extreme—the long winters, the biting wind—and because there isn't always much to do, the state's kids spent a lot of time indoors, jacked into their Xboxes and PlayStations. That habit would continue once students arrived at LCCC, especially for the small-towners who felt alienated in the relative metropolis of Cheyenne; they would often cope with their discomfort, he noticed, by holing up in their dorm rooms and gaming online with friends from home.

One day in the fall of 2018, LCCC's soccer coach called Walsh for help with a minor computer glitch. As Walsh fiddled with the troublesome PC, the coach mentioned that a friend of his worked at a Midwestern college that was launching an esports team. Walsh, an ardent gamer who has poured hundreds of hours into *Apex Legends*, made it clear that he was intrigued. Soon thereafter, the school's athletic director asked him to chair a committee to investigate starting a similar program at LCCC.

At that time, esports teams were rapidly becoming commonplace at four-year institutions. In 2014, Illinois' Robert Morris University had pioneered the practice of offering athletic scholarships to gamers; by 2019, esports athletes from nearly 200 colleges and universities were receiving \$15 million in scholarships per year. Big institutions such as UC Irvine and the University of Utah were quick to establish elite programs, funneling millions into building spectator-friendly esports arenas and broadcast centers. Meanwhile, some lesser-known schools set out to raise their profiles by turning themselves into esports juggernauts: Missouri's Maryville University, for example, has become famous for winning three national *League of Legends* championships and churning out a slew of pros.

Esports were slower to take root at junior colleges, which must be ever mindful of their tight budgets. (LCCC's entire \$84 million annual budget is about what Kansas State University spends on its athletic department alone.) But in the fall of 2019, the National Junior College Athletic Association Esports (NJCAAE) began its inaugural season, involving 12 two-year schools. The league's startup costs were minimal by design: All

that was required of each college was a \$1,500 entry fee and the contact information for an adult who was responsible for the team. Athletes were permitted to play remotely from any computer, which meant schools weren't required to buy any new equipment aside from the games themselves. The experiment garnered enough positive reviews that the NJCAAE's membership more than quintupled by the start of its second season.

Walsh paid close attention to the league's rollout while gathering information for a presentation to convince LCCC's board of trustees that esports could generate immediate revenue. He knew money was even tighter than usual: The pandemic had led to a decline in enrollment and cuts in state support. (LCCC's president has been frank in describing the college's future as "a bit bleak.")

In a haze of grief, he paid his bills with temp jobs, stripping insulation from abandoned buildings.

By early 2021, Walsh had gathered ample evidence to prove that esports could bring in as many as 20 student-athletes per year and boost the college's brand among potential applicants who'd been weaned on *Fortnite* and *NBA 2K*. Still, some of the school's administrators scoffed at the idea that gamers deserved the same respect as, say, members of LCCC's well-regarded rodeo team. "They're not athletes, because an athlete, by definition, manipulates their body and muscles in a way to interact with some object," Walsh recalls an administrator saying. "And I said, 'You just described esports.' And they're like, 'Well, no, they're not moving.' And I go, 'They're moving their wrists and their fingers with dexterity. And they're using their brains in such a quick and decisive way. How is that not a sport?'"

Walsh knew he'd failed to convince everyone in the administration that *Call of Duty* is as athletically demanding as bull riding, but his proposal was approved in March of that year. The esports team was given \$20,000 in scholarships to dole out, as well as \$2,100 for expenses, including the NJCAAE's membership fee. The next step was for the athletic department to hire a coach to build the program from scratch.

The college placed job postings seeking someone with a bachelor's degree, a driver's license, and "at least one year competitive esports experience." Most of the respondents seemed to perceive the job as a chance to hang out and play games for a living. Amid the lackluster pool of candidates, the video-game geographer Madison Marquer stood out.

Marquer had figured his odds were good, since surely there couldn't be that many other grown-ups with master's degrees willing to accept \$15,000 a year. But he went all out getting ready for his May interview anyway, heeding his father's advice to wear the coat and tie that had been moldering in his closet. In front of the search committee, he spoke eloquently about how he'd been shaped by gaming, dating back to the hot summer nights he'd stayed up late eating popsicles and playing *Legend of Zelda* with his mother. And he made the case that esports could help transform Wyoming by giving its aimless gamers the discipline, camaraderie, and sense of purpose they needed to claw their way to richer lives. He fielded every follow-up question with ease, betraying no hint of the crushing sadness that had pervaded his life for more than a year.

Aware that their salary offer was a piddling sum, the search committee mentioned to Marquer that he'd be considered for full-time employment if he performed admirably for a year. Marquer was fine with that arrangement; he was so committed to creating the LCCC esports program that he planned to move back in with his parents in Cheyenne to save money.

Marquer's official start date was June 1. That gave him less than 12 weeks to assemble a team, a formidable task given that most recent high school graduates already had plans for the fall. So he resorted to a DIY tactic from his punk days: He printed up a stack of posters, headlined with the slogan "GET IN THE GAME," and put them up at local businesses and on bulletin boards near campus. Unbeknownst to Marquer, though, word of the team's formation had already been circulating around Cheyenne for some time.

Madison Marquer plays drums in his band Stay Awhile, a tattoo of Wyoming's state flower on his shin.

Photograph: Shawn Bush

Travis Jones never thought of himself as college material. He stopped showing up for school midway through the 10th grade, having realized he could no longer pretend to care about reading novels or memorizing the root causes of wars. His worried parents switched him to an online academy, hoping he'd perform better if allowed to learn at his own pace. But by the end of his junior year in 2019, Jones had washed out of virtual school too. The gentle-natured teen then began cycling through a series of dreary, low-wage gigs in Cheyenne—unloading freight at Dillard's, sorting goods at Walmart, delivering pizzas for Domino's. He spent much of his meager earnings on his two most cherished pastimes: using mail-order parts and instructional YouTube videos to assemble homebrew PCs, and playing *Call of Duty* at a downtown Cheyenne gaming café called the Annex.

A sliver of a storefront wedged between a computer repair shop and Cheeks Beauty Academy, the Annex is Cheyenne's gaming mecca. The café hosts weekly tournaments with small cash prizes and stays open until 1 am on the weekends to cater to young locals who prefer mowing down virtual enemies to beer-fueled revelry. Jones started hanging out there soon after the Annex opened in the spring of 2021. He was drawn in by Austin Vinatieri, who ran special events at the café; the two had been teammates on a semipro *Call of Duty* squad funded by a local hip hop producer.

Vinatieri was a guy who'd organized his late teens and early twenties around mastering *Call of Duty*, working sporadic hours at Pizza Hut and the Frontier Mall to suit his gaming schedule. "Esports is something that you have to chase; you can't chase it half-heartedly," says Vinatieri, a tall and gangly bundle of energy who's notably more extroverted than the stereotypical gamer. "You have to put your all into it, because it really does require that level of effort." He gradually ascended the leaderboards at GameBattles, a platform that hosts semipro tournaments, hoping to impress pro scouts from the 12-team Call of Duty League.

But even at his competitive zenith, Vinatieri had never earned more than \$500 a week from gaming. Now 26, married, and the father of an infant daughter, Vinatieri had finally begun to contemplate the steps he needed to take to become a responsible adult. When he read a Facebook post about LCCC's nascent esports team in the spring of 2021, however, he decided to

take one last crack at his dream. He figured that if he could captain a squad that would dominate on the junior college circuit, he might catch the eye of a major four-year program, a *Call of Duty* esports behemoth like Concord University or Sheridan College. And Vinatieri believed he'd then be primed to make the leap to a Call of Duty League team like the Los Angeles Guerrillas or Florida Mutineers, which routinely draw hundreds of thousands of YouTube viewers as they compete for \$5 million in prize money per season. (The Guerrillas share an owner with the NFL's Los Angeles Rams, the reigning Super Bowl champions.)

Even before LCCC finished its search for a coach, Vinatieri had enrolled in the school's summer session. And as soon as Marquer was hired, Vinatieri emailed the new coach to explain his plan: cajole gamers in his orbit to join him at the college. At the top of Vinatieri's list was his former teammate Travis Jones, whom he had nicknamed "the Human Turret" for how doggedly he defended his turf in *Call of Duty*.

As soon as a foe comes peeling around a corner, the aggressor has roughly two-tenths of a second to fire their weapon with pinpoint accuracy.

Jones was a week into a new, entry-level warehouse job at UPS when Vinatieri told him about esports at LCCC. "I thought he was messing with me," Jones says. "Getting a scholarship to play a video game was almost unreal." Given his miserable academic history, Jones had qualms about attempting the jump to college. But he was also desperate for a new direction: He could easily see himself in 10 years, stuck on a loading dock among fellow dropouts and wondering where the time had gone. And so he agreed to go with Vinatieri to LCCC for an esports audition.

Marquer arranged for the tryout at the team's new home venue, a dimly lit computer lab festooned with images of the school's mascot and athletic namesake, the Golden Eagle. He had yet to stock the team with much talent, and he had high hopes for the duo from the Annex. The two aspiring student-athletes donned their headphones and fired up *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War*, a game set in the waning days of the Soviet Union.

As in all *Call of Duty* titles, success in *Cold War* depends on a player's ability to predict opponents' behavior. The action unfolds in digital

facsimiles of places like Moscow and the Nicaraguan jungle, all filled with labyrinthine buildings and narrow corridors that elite gamers memorize down to the inch. Detailed knowledge of those virtual maps is what allows players to dash to spots where they believe they might achieve the element of surprise. As soon as a foe comes peeling around a corner, the aggressor has roughly two-tenths of a second to fire their weapon with pinpoint accuracy; if they fail to score the kill and can't immediately readjust, they're liable to become prey themselves.

Watching Jones and Vinatieri slash their way through *Cold War* maps, Marquer realized he had two potential stars on his hands. The diminutive Jones, whose wiry chinstrap beard gives him a slightly Amish mien, was a particular revelation: The Human Turret had a gift for detecting opponents who tried to assault his position from sneaky angles. In the thousands of hours he'd spent playing and studying video games, Marquer had rarely encountered a player so blessed with spatial awareness.

As soon as the tryout was over, Marquer offered both men scholarships that would defray much of the school's \$4,612 tuition. Jones was elated but didn't tell Marquer he was technically ineligible to attend LCCC. Aware that this was likely his only shot at earning a degree, he resolved to get his high school diploma, via online classes, quickly—no matter how many late nights he had to put in after his UPS shifts.

Vinatieri also introduced Marquer to another prodigy from the Annex, 19-year-old Enrique Tail. A veteran of *Halo* tournaments throughout the West, Tail had long felt he'd been born to solve the intellectual challenges of first-person shooters. "Even if it was a game of tag, you know, I'd strategize if I was at the playground—like, how to get here or there without getting tagged," he says. "In video games, I feel like I was more organized, more able to get around by flanking." But college hadn't been in Tail's plans. He'd thought about joining the Marines after he graduated but decided to pursue gaming instead. Marquer took an instant shine to the shy and sensitive Tail, who he thought might be a lost soul in need of guidance. He gave the teen the sweetest scholarship deal he would offer to any Golden Eagle.

The last of Vinatieri's recruits was Jordan Vestal, a *Call of Duty* ace who worked for a logistics company in Chicago. But the aloof and ultracompetitive Vestal had no interest in moving to Wyoming, and Marquer was reluctant to take on a remote student who clearly prioritized gaming over academics: He didn't want the team to feel like a collection of mercenaries. But he also knew that, like any coach, he'd ultimately be judged by wins and losses. So he made a place on the team for Vestal, an avid Twitch streamer under the handle "ChiraQ."

News of the team began to spread beyond Vinatieri's circles. Andy Santhuff, from the town of Green River in the southwestern corner of the state, had been a soccer standout in high school, a spry midfielder with birdlike legs who seemed destined to play at the next level. But late in his senior season he suffered a devastating shoulder injury that ended his career. The son of a sodium bicarbonate miner, he was resigned to being trapped in Green River—until his girlfriend, an LCCC student, told him about the esports team. Santhuff called Marquer to arrange an in-person tryout, which meant a 275-mile drive to Cheyenne. After Santhuff demonstrated his mastery of *Rocket League*, a game in which cars smash balls into soccer nets, Marquer offered him scholarship funding on the spot.

As the first day of classes approached in late August, the team's roster swelled to 17 athletes; all guys, some already going into their second year at LCCC. Their ranks now included a jovial, thickly bearded *Valorant* player from the heart of Wyoming's coal country, a reedy distance runner with flowing blond hair whose parents had been the only doctors in the town of Sundance, and a former Christian missionary who drove a Walmart forklift on the side. Soon Marquer found himself working upwards of 50 hours a week, helping students fill out financial aid forms and figuring out the minutiae of livestreaming matches from the lab.

Just days before the close of LCCC's registration period, Travis Jones finally passed the last of his high school exams and earned his diploma. Now, instead of loading boxes onto trucks, he was set to spend the next two years playing *Call of Duty* and majoring in information technology.

Horses at Laramie County Community College, which is known for its rodeo team.

Photograph: Shawn Bush

Above: Coach Marquer (right) with the *Vanguard* squad (from left): Travis Jones, Isiaha Ahrens, Andrew Santhuff, and Ethan Krolikowski.

Photograph: Shawn Bush

From the start, Marquer tried to instill a sense of rigor in his athletes. He divided the team into seven squads, each dedicated to a specific game: *Valorant*, *Super Smash Bros.*, *Hearthstone*, *Rocket League*, *Call of Duty: Gunfight*, *Call of Duty: Warzone*, and *Call of Duty: Black Ops Cold War*. Those squads would be led by team captains who had to make sure their members practiced at least 10 hours a week. Depending on the game, practices might consist of video analysis, strategy discussions, or weapons training. There was also a mandatory team meeting every Monday, a gym requirement, and an obligation to lend a hand at other LCCC sporting events. (When a group of gamers was assigned to retrieve balls for the soccer team, one of them quivered with amazement upon catching an errant strike behind the goal; he confided to Marquer that he'd never touched a soccer ball before.)

Team members also had to maintain a 2.0 grade average to compete—an LCCC rule for varsity athletes that Marquer hoped would keep his gamers focused on their studies. Instead, it created a host of problems before the season even began.

On the eve of the Golden Eagles' September 20 debut match, Marquer lost nearly a quarter of his team; four of 17 gamers had already fallen well short of the required C average. Among the casualties was Vinatieri, who'd flunked a class during the summer session and hadn't been able to dig himself out. He had a decent excuse: Right after enrolling at LCCC, he'd found out that his wife was pregnant with their second child. But Vinatieri was still upset with himself for botching his latest attempt to become a *Call of Duty* pro. He promised the three *Cold War* teammates he'd left behind—Jones, Tail, and Vestal—that he'd help in any way he could.

Somehow the team didn't crater. An emergency sub slid into Vinatieri's spot, and the *Cold War* unit didn't miss a beat. They opened the first-

semester season with a shutout win against Hutchinson Community College from Kansas. Santhuff and the *Rocket League* squad started off strong, too, winning their first two matches. By the beginning of October, the LCCC team's record was 7-3, a tally that included a thrilling *Super Smash Bros.* victory against an Alabama college that went down to the final fight.

Marquer could tell where he'd have to concentrate his efforts. His gamers clearly didn't need much help when they were in front of their PCs, but many of them couldn't handle the basic obligations of life outside the lab. Some of his more scholarly athletes shared his frustration: "I don't think some kids understand that, actually, you have to do stuff in college," Santhuff griped to me as I began to follow the Golden Eagles closely last fall. He was peeved at teammates who either cut classes or neglected their homework, two decisions that placed them in danger of losing their athletic eligibility. Marquer assigned the flailing students to participate in mandatory study tables and nudged them to use the athletic department's tutors.

"I know you're getting overwhelmed, but let's take baby steps," Marquer would tell players. "Like, get off your game right now and just put in an hour of work." But even when the athletes were receptive to that advice, it wouldn't necessarily stick. "I think it makes them feel good for a day," he told me. "But it wouldn't be enough to, like, get them to keep going." As some gamers ignored his advice and tumbled into the academic abyss, he began to feel like Sisyphus.

Marquer was also flummoxed by some of his athletes' inability to control their emotions. Having grown up playing in isolation with little adult supervision, these athletes hadn't developed some of the skills that their peers in other sports learned in Little League or CYO basketball: how to forgive yourself for errors, how to respect your opponents, how to lose with grace. When one of his players stormed out of the lab in a rage after several disappointing *Rocket League* matches, Marquer was horrified. When confronted about the outbursts later, the gamer insisted that he was a born winner who could never lose. After repeatedly violating Marquer's rules, the player was cut.

Marquer despaired that he couldn't stop his most troubled gamers from wasting an opportunity they lacked the clarity or maturity to appreciate. Yet he was buoyed by occasional signs that his efforts weren't in vain. When Travis Jones started to falter in his networking class, Marquer reminded him that he'd miss out on matches unless he improved. "So I got down and got my grade up," Jones told me. "If I have a failing grade, I can't play that game next week, right? That's a huge, huge thing for me."

Inside the LCCC computer lab.

Photograph: Shawn Bush

For all their difficulties balancing the realities of college life, the Golden Eagles remained a force in the virtual realm: The team finished its first-semester season with 46 wins and 16 losses. The *Cold War* squad was the standout. It lost just one match out of 11, and all of its victories were routs. True to his word, Austin Vinatieri had kept advising the team, despite taking a new job in the IT department of a crypto startup around the corner from the Annex. He downloaded bird's-eye views of all the *Cold War* maps and annotated them with a screen marker, finding routes the squad could use to outmaneuver their opponents. He designed one play, for example, in which the team split into three units that precisely rotated through a section of the landscape where their shooters were always well concealed. "That very next day, as soon as they go into the map, they executed it so perfectly," he says. "And it was kind of like one of the proudest things I've ever seen."

The *Cold War* squad earned a place in that semester's eight-team national playoffs, to start on December 3. They breezed through the opening round, smashing Hutchinson Community College once again. Championship glory was just two matches away. But at the worst possible moment, the team began to fall apart.

The national semifinal, against Texas' Navarro College, was to be held on December 9. But on December 8, Enrique Tail announced that he wouldn't be able to play; he'd been given a conflicting shift at his job at Walmart; Andy Santhuff, whose *Rocket League* squad had recently flamed out in part due to his teammates' academic issues, volunteered to step into the breach.

Then, with just an hour to go until game time, Marquer got a disturbing message from Jordan Vestal, the *Cold War* player in Chicago. Vestal said he was in the hospital. He pleaded with Marquer to figure out a way to reschedule the match. But schools have to give at least 24 hours' notice before any postponements. The semifinal would go on.

Marquer scrounged up a last-minute sub from another squad, but that player had a cast on one of his arms. With half its starting lineup out of commission, the *Cold War* squad was thumped by Navarro. The next day, Vestal posted a one-line message to the *Cold War* squad's Discord channel: "Guys, I'm sorry." After that, Marquer tried to contact him a number of times to check on his health, but all of his texts and voicemails went unanswered. Marquer never heard from Vestal again—the Chicagoan, who kept streaming on Twitch, dropped out of LCCC without saying goodbye to anyone.

With the first-semester season over, Marquer sat down to figure out who would be eligible to compete in the spring. As he reviewed everyone's transcripts, he discovered that four of his remaining 12 athletes had blown off their finals; their grade point averages were all below 1.0. Among the four was Tail, who'd felt lost from the start in the school's tough information technology program. (Marquer had encouraged him to look at other majors, like art.) With little prospect of being able to compete in esports for the rest of the year, Tail relinquished his scholarship and turned his attention to chasing a pro career.

Each bullet-torn shutter, every pixelated cobblestone had to be ingrained in the gamers' psyches.

Marquer used the winter break to recover from exhaustion. In addition to straining to keep the team together, he'd been substitute-teaching at several Cheyenne schools to make extra cash. He was still committed to the college's esports program, still certain it could help Wyoming kids achieve more for themselves than they'd ever thought possible. But when I connected with him just before Christmas, I noticed that his disposition was less sunny than usual.

“I knew what I was getting into, so I can’t really complain too much about this year,” he told me. But he admitted he was sick of being broke. He had also come to feel generally neglected by LCCC, which seemed indifferent to its new esports program. That semester, for example, several members of his team had expressed a desire to practice early in the morning, before the computer lab was unlocked around 10:30 am. But despite repeated attempts, Marquer couldn’t convince anyone in the administration to give him a key.

At times, a sense of defeat was hard to stave off. Just three years earlier, Marquer had been married to a woman he loved so much that he’d hatched a multiyear plan in part to save her. Now, that love had been replaced by an echoing grief that still occasionally became loud enough to overwhelm him. He’d recently started dating someone new—the guitarist for a punk band called Prowler—but it was tough to make a romance work as a nearly 30-year-old man who was stuck in his childhood bedroom. And then, of course, there was his inability to protect so many of his athletes from their worst impulses. With his team reeling from its setbacks, Marquer felt like he was navigating without any kind of map.

Madison Marquer by the stables at Laramie County Community College.

Photograph: Shawn Bush

Basketball is close to a religion in Isiaha Ahrens’ family. So his relatives were shocked and displeased when he abruptly gave up the sport as a high school junior to concentrate on *Call of Duty*, a game he’d been playing since the age of 3. “They thought it was a stupid move,” Ahrens says. “But I told them, like, just trust me. Like, I’m really good at this game, I need you guys to believe in me and it will work.”

Ahrens wasted little time proving his point. A year after dropping basketball, he became the first student in the history of Cheyenne Central High School to earn an esports scholarship. His destination was Ottawa University, a small Baptist institution in eastern Kansas known for having the nation’s most storied *Call of Duty* team. When Ahrens signed his letter of intent in April 2021, the school’s top *Call of Duty* squad was ranked No.

1 in the country; its B team was ranked No. 2. With his eye on turning pro, Ahrens could not have landed in a better collegiate situation.

But after just a few weeks on the Ottawa campus, Ahrens started thinking about going home. Aside from missing his family, he was also put off by aspects of the team's hypercompetitive attitude. "It was definitely tough playing in those tournaments, because they were for a lot of money—like, thousands of dollars," he says. "Even though it was college, the money you got from the tournaments was money you were allowed to keep. So everyone was really trying to get those spots to be on the team so they could win that money." Ahrens often felt peer-pressured to cut classes so he could attend daily practices that lasted for hours.

Finally, he decided he'd be better off living at home and playing *Call of Duty* with the new LCCC team. And he'd start in the spring semester. Marquer was ecstatic: Having a player with that sort of pedigree was a coup for LCCC. Ahrens would slot into the *Call of Duty* squad, where only Jones remained from the original lineup. They would be playing *Vanguard*, the new World War II-themed title that had replaced *Cold War* in the franchise. Santhuff was picked to be the third member of the *Vanguard* unit. The fourth was an aspiring police officer named Ethan Krolkowski, who'd played *Valorant* in the team's first semester.

Marquer promoted Jones to squad captain, a weighty responsibility for a guy who'd once vanished from the 10th grade. Marquer also decided to reallocate the departed players' scholarships to the remaining athletes, offering an extra \$500 or \$1,000 per player to help with books and board. Jones was particularly grateful for the extra money, which allowed him to trim back his hours as a Walmart delivery driver. "Financial stress has been a thing for me, from my teenage years," he says. Without the scholarship, he adds, "I don't think I would have been able to be a full-time esports player and go to school."

Though Jones' *Vanguard* team wasn't as experienced as the *Cold War* unit that had made the national semifinals in the fall, its four members were more serious-minded than their predecessors. They started practicing right after New Year's—Jones tracked their training on a shared spreadsheet—and they rapidly honed their ability to intuit one another's positions within

the game's maps, a rapport essential to dodging traps and encircling foes. It was clear to anyone who watched their preseason scrimmages that they were going to be a force.

The opening *Vanguard* match took place on Valentine's Day, and nearly the whole team turned out for the occasion, gathering around Marquer's workstation in the back of the LCCC computer lab. Pitted against a rural Montana school with fewer than 400 full-time students, the Wyoming squad fell behind early in the best-of-five match. That first round took place in a *Call of Duty* map that was largely unfamiliar to them, a South Pacific island studded with palm trees and bombed-out ruins, and they initially stumbled into several ambushes. But they adjusted their tactics within minutes, determined where their opponents liked to hide out, and worked in sync to sow confusion by attacking from multiple angles. After coming back to tie the opening battle at 105 points apiece, they dominated the rest of the way to earn a 3-0 victory.

None of the team members lingered in the lab to savor the triumph. As he packed up his gear, Jones explained that he had a bunch of homework to complete for his classes on IP security and server installation. He didn't want to fall behind—especially since that might risk wrecking his squad's chances of winning the national title that had eluded them in the fall.

The spring season was not without its glitches. In late February, the Golden Eagles narrowly won a match against Pennsylvania's Harrisburg Area Community College, but league officials voided the result, ruling that a brief server issue had affected the outcome. A rattled LCCC then lost the rematch in a blowout. The next week, Andy Santhuff had to return to Green River for a family emergency, and the team flubbed a contest against Northeastern Oklahoma A&M College in his absence.

But on more than one occasion, the brilliance of Isiah Ahrens saved the Golden Eagles from racking up a third loss and missing out on the spring semester playoffs. He proved to be one of the best pure gunfighters in the entire league, capable of picking off even the most agile targets while leaping into the air or sprinting across a courtyard. In addition to putting the *Vanguard* team on his back, he also excelled at *Call of Duty: Warzone*, a battle royale game in which dozens of players fight until the last one's

standing. He and a player named Sam Devine operated as a duo in the game; the longer each one lasted, the better their cumulative score.

By going undefeated after the Northeastern Oklahoma debacle, the *Vanguard* team squeaked into the playoffs as the sixth seed. That meant they would have to knock off the top three teams in the country to win the title. Undaunted, Jones scheduled a grueling series of scrimmages to prepare. He insisted the team play again and again on two maps, one of Berlin and another of a Tuscan village. He knew the two would feature in the playoff matches; each bullet-torn shutter, every pixelated cobblestone had to be so ingrained in the gamers' psyches that they could navigate by instinct.

They whooped at the top of their lungs and jiggled around the vacant rows of PCs.

The team was anxious going into the opening round on April 22. Their opponents, from Sumter, South Carolina, scored 35 points before the Golden Eagles notched even one. But once the butterflies subsided, the comeback was on: LCCC ended up winning 3-0, thanks in large part to the uncanny marksmanship of Ahrens and Jones.

On April 26, feeling unusually confident, Ahrens competed in the NJCAAE's *Warzone* championship; he and Devine formed one of the 25 duos in the three-game final. (There were no preliminary rounds for *Warzone*; any NJCAAE team could compete, regardless of how they'd performed during the regular season.) Ahrens and Devine smashed the competition, but it took a while for league officials to calculate and confirm final scores. So the Wyomingites kept their emotions in check and ordered Domino's. The final verdict finally came down at 9:15 pm, well after the lab had emptied of other students: Ahrens and Devine had taken first place, nearly doubling the runner-up duo's total score. They whooped at the top of their lungs and jiggled around the vacant rows of PCs. It was LCCC's first national title in any sport since 1992.

Three days later, the *Vanguard* team faced Harrisburg once again, now in the semifinals. The Golden Eagles were still bitter over the technical dispute—the faulty server—that had cost them a mid-season win. They

came in determined for revenge, and got it: The match ended in another 3-0 romp for LCCC. Now they had a date in the championship against the top seed, Gogebic Community College from Michigan's Upper Peninsula.

Hours before that final match, on May 1, Jones was at home, throwing up. "I'm here dying," he wrote to the team's Discord channel. He wasn't sure if it was a stomach bug or raw anxiety. He briefly thought about playing from home. But his internet connection wasn't dependable enough—at such a high *Call of Duty* level, a few microseconds of lag can doom even the most skilled player. So the ailing captain forced himself to drive to campus to join his teammates.

All of the Golden Eagles' hard work did them little good against Gogebic, another team from a frigid, remote corner of America: The Michigan players maneuvered with such grace and speed that they occasionally seemed to be capable of warping time. LCCC managed to steal one round, but the final 3-1 score was a fair reflection of how thoroughly they'd been thumped. The LCCC athletes pushed away from their keyboards and gave each other tepid fist bumps as they tried to mask their hurt; Santhuff was so stung by the loss he said he felt an urge to bash his head through a wall.

This time, the team hung around the lab after the match, wallowing in the dejection of missing out on the league's ultimate prize. Marquer bought two extra-large pizzas and delivered an old-fashioned pep talk. "We didn't get this victory today, but you are all still victorious," he said as the athletes downed slices in the kitchen. "You all are so hungry and talented that even though you didn't get it this time, it's just something to look forward to next semester when we come back and wipe 'em."

Then Marquer started talking about what lay ahead. Ahrens, Jones, and Santhuff were all on track to be back in the fall, and Marquer stressed that they'd soon have to ponder their post-LCCC options. If they could stay in the hunt for national *Call of Duty* titles, big universities might come calling with scholarship offers—an outcome that Jones, in particular, would have thought impossible the previous May, when he didn't even have a high school diploma to his name.

Marquer did not mention his own status for the next semester, which had yet to be resolved. His contract was set to expire in a month, and he still hadn't heard whether he'd be offered a full-time position. But after winning one national championship and coming so close to a second, he figured his case was strong.

The next Friday, Marquer was leaving the college cafeteria after lunch when he spotted the administrator who was his contact for discussing next year's employment. He asked her whether she'd heard anything about his job. She hesitated, then suggested that they meet in her office in an hour.

The school's hiring board, he says she explained, didn't feel it possessed enough data to determine the esports program's utility to the college. So it couldn't justify offering Marquer a full-time coaching position, or any sort of increased compensation. His \$15,000-a-year contract would automatically renew in early June, and they would try to have another conversation about his future in the spring of 2023. The process was over, the decision was final.

Marquer was bewildered, not least because of something he'd noticed driving onto campus that day. The huge electronic sign outside the front entrance bore a message that read, "CONGRATULATIONS ESPORTS TEAM. NJCAAE CALL OF DUTY: WARZONE NATIONAL CHAMPIONS."

In the months I'd been talking to Marquer, he'd assured me time and again that he was confident he'd be coaching the Golden Eagles for years to come. He wanted to stick it out because of his connection to Wyoming, a place he loves so much that he has its state flower, the Indian paintbrush, tattooed on his left shin. "I know there's a massive youth exodus in this state," Marquer told me over coffee in February. "I want more young people to stay here. I take a lot of pride in the people that are here, and I know the gamers are good especially because it's so cold. So I just know that I can build it from here." But the school's indifference to his devotion and his financial desperation had finally become too much to bear. As much as he wanted to be a rock for Wyoming's gamers, he just couldn't do it anymore.

When Marquer told his athletes about his impending departure, they were perplexed that the school had such paltry respect for a coach who'd altered the course of their lives. "I was a little shocked that they didn't try and give him some type of recognition," says Travis Jones. "But I'm happy for him, because that means he'll get what he deserves. He deserves to get paid." The college has told the team nothing about its plans, and it's not clear whether it will hire a new coach in time to recruit fresh talent for the fall. With no guidance from above, Jones has assumed sole responsibility for the *Vanguard* squad: He has arranged a busy summer schedule filled with practices and tournaments, which he'll fit in while working as a DoorDash driver and assembling his sixth homebrew PC.

The last time I spoke to Marquer about his plans, he was driving his girlfriend's band to a show in Casper. Marquer has also gotten back to playing music himself, holding down guitar and drums, respectively, in two bands called Dirt Sucker and Stay Awhile. (The latter is named after a prominent character's catchphrase in the early-2000s video game *Diablo II*.)

From the road, Marquer told me that, after much deliberation, he was leaning toward looking for another job in high school or junior college esports outside Wyoming. "It's an incredible opportunity to be on the front lines of something that I'm lucky to know about," he said. He and his girlfriend are willing to leave the state, and they've been talking about starting a family in the not too distant future. So he plans to look for a coaching position in a place where they might be able to afford a house someday. Based on his initial perusal of job boards, there are plenty of openings for those willing to relocate to far-flung locales: He says he found one opening in rural Wisconsin, for example, that offers a starting salary of \$5,000 a month. With so many possible paths sprawled out before him, Marquer's future is, for the first time in a long while, shaping up to be more than it seemed.

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Jun 21, 2022 10:53 AM

Here Comes the Sun—to End Civilization

Every so often, our star fires off a plasma bomb in a random direction. Our best hope the next time Earth is in the crosshairs? Capacitors.

ILLUSTRATION: MARK PERNICE

To a photon, the [sun](#) is like a crowded nightclub. It's 27 million degrees inside and packed with excited bodies—helium atoms fusing, nuclei colliding, positrons sneaking off with neutrinos. When the photon heads for the exit, the journey there will take, on average, 100,000 years. (There's no quick way to jostle past 10 septillion dancers, even if you do move at the speed of light.) Once at the surface, the photon might set off solo into the night. Or, if it emerges in the wrong place at the wrong time, it might find itself stuck inside a [coronal mass ejection](#), a mob of charged particles with the power to [upend civilizations](#).

The cause of the ruckus is the sun's magnetic field. Generated by the churning of particles in the core, it originates as a series of orderly north-to-south lines. But different latitudes on the molten star rotate at different rates—36 days at the poles, and only 25 days at the equator. Very quickly, those lines stretch and tangle, forming magnetic knots that can puncture the surface and trap matter beneath them. From afar, the resulting patches appear dark. They're known as sunspots. Typically, the trapped matter cools, condenses into plasma clouds, and falls back to the surface in a fiery coronal rain. Sometimes, though, the knots untangle spontaneously, violently. The sunspot turns into the muzzle of a gun: Photons flare in every direction, and a slug of magnetized plasma fires outward like a bullet.

The sun has played this game of Russian roulette with the solar system for billions of years, sometimes shooting off several coronal mass ejections in a day. Most come nowhere near Earth. It would take centuries of human observation before someone could stare down the barrel while it happened. At 11:18 am on September 1, 1859, Richard Carrington, a 33-year-old brewery owner and amateur [astronomer](#), was in his private observatory, sketching sunspots—an important but mundane act of record-keeping. That moment, the spots erupted into a blinding beam of light. Carrington sprinted off in search of a witness. When he returned, a minute later, the image had already gone back to normal. Carrington spent that afternoon trying to make sense of the aberration. Had his lens caught a stray reflection? Had an undiscovered comet or planet passed between his telescope and the star? While he stewed, a plasma bomb silently barreled toward Earth at several million miles per hour.

When a coronal mass ejection comes your way, what matters most is the bullet's magnetic orientation. If it has the same polarity as Earth's protective magnetic field, you've gotten lucky: The two will repel, like a pair of bar magnets placed north-to-north or south-to-south. But if the polarities oppose, they will smash together. That's what happened on September 2, the day after Carrington saw the blinding beam.

ILLUSTRATION: MARK PERNICE

Electrical current raced through the sky over the western hemisphere. A typical bolt of lightning registers 30,000 amperes. This geomagnetic storm registered in the millions. As the clock struck midnight in New York City, the sky turned scarlet, shot through with plumes of yellow and orange. Fearful crowds gathered in the streets. Over the continental divide, a bright-white midnight aurora roused a group of Rocky Mountain laborers; they assumed morning had arrived and began to cook breakfast. In Washington, DC, sparks leaped from a telegraph operator's forehead to his switchboard as his equipment suddenly magnetized. Vast sections of the nascent telegraph system overheated and shut down.

The Carrington Event, as it's known today, is considered a once-in-a-century geomagnetic storm—but it took just six decades for another comparable blast to reach Earth. In May 1921, train-control arrays in the

American Northeast and telephone stations in Sweden caught fire. In 1989, a moderate storm, just one-tenth the strength of the 1921 event, left Quebec in the dark for nine hours after overloading the regional grid. In each of these cases, the damage was directly proportional to humanity's reliance on advanced technology—more grounded electronics, more risk.

When another big one heads our way, as it could at any time, existing imaging technology will offer one or two days' notice. But we won't understand the true threat level until the cloud reaches the Deep Space Climate Observatory, a satellite about a million miles from Earth. It has instruments that analyze the speed and polarity of incoming solar particles. If a cloud's magnetic orientation is dangerous, this \$340 million piece of equipment will buy humanity—with its 7.2 billion cell phones, 1.5 billion automobiles, and 28,000 commercial aircraft—at most one hour of warning before impact.

ILLUSTRATION: MARK PERNICE

Activity on the solar surface follows a cycle of roughly 11 years. At the beginning of each cycle, clusters of sunspots form at the middle latitudes of both solar hemispheres. These clusters grow and migrate toward the equator. Around the time they're most active, known as solar maximum, the sun's magnetic field flips polarity. The sunspots wane, and solar minimum comes. Then it happens all over again. "I don't know why it took 160 years of cataloging data to realize that," says Scott McIntosh, a blunt-speaking Scottish astrophysicist who serves as deputy director of the US National Center for Atmospheric Research. "It hits you right in the fucking face."

Today, in the 25th solar cycle since regular record-keeping began, scientists don't have much to show beyond that migration pattern. They don't fully understand why the poles flip. They cannot explain why some sunspot cycles are as short as nine years while others last 14. They cannot reliably predict how many sunspots will form or where coronal mass ejections will occur. What is clear is that a big one can happen in any kind of cycle: In the summer of 2012, during the historically quiet Cycle 24, two mammoth coronal mass ejections narrowly missed Earth. Still, a more active cycle increases the chances of that near miss becoming a direct hit.

When navigation and communication systems fail, the 10,000 or so commercial planes in the sky will attempt a simultaneous grounding. Pilots will eyeball themselves into a flight pattern while air traffic controllers use light signals to guide the planes in.

Without a guiding theory of solar dynamics, scientists tend to take a statistical approach, relying on strong correlations and after-the-fact rationales to make their predictions. One of the more influential models, which offers respectable predictive power, uses the magnetic strength of the sun's polar regions as a proxy for the vigor of the following cycle. In 2019, a dozen scientists empaneled by NASA predicted that the current solar cycle will peak with 115 sunspots in July 2025—well below the historical average of 179.

McIntosh, who was not invited to join the NASA panel, calls this “made-up physics.” He believes the old-school models are concerned with the wrong thing—sunspots, rather than the processes that create them. “The magnetic cycle is what you should be trying to model, not the derivative of it,” he says. “You have to explain why sunspots magically appear at 30 degrees latitude.”

This article appears in the July/August 2022 issue. [Subscribe to WIRED](#). Photograph: Jessica Chou

McIntosh’s attempt to do that goes back to 2002, when, at the behest of a postdoctoral mentor, he began plotting tiny ultraviolet concentrations on the solar surface, known as brightpoints. “I think my boss knew what I would find if I let a full cycle pass,” he recalls. “By 2011, I was like, *holy fuck.*” He found that brightpoints originate at higher latitudes than sunspots do but follow the same path to the equator. To him, this implied that sunspots and brightpoints are twin effects of the same underlying phenomenon, one not found in astrophysics textbooks.

His grand unified theory, developed over a decade, goes something like this: Every 11 years, when the sun’s polarity flips, a magnetic band forms near each pole, wrapped around the circumference of the star. These bands exist for a couple of decades, slowly migrating toward the equator, where they meet in mutual destruction. At any given time, there are usually two

oppositely charged bands in each hemisphere. They counteract each other, which promotes relative calm at the surface. But magnetic bands don't all live to be the same age. Some reach what McIntosh calls "the terminator" with unusual speed. When this happens, the younger bands are left alone for a few years, without the moderating influence of the older bands, and they have a chance to raise hell.

McIntosh and his colleague Mausumi Dikpati believe that terminator timing is the key to forecasting sunspots—and, by extension, coronal mass ejections. The faster one set of bands dies out, the more dramatic the next cycle will be.

The most recent terminator, their data suggests, happened on December 13, 2021. In the days that followed, magnetic activity near the sun's equator dissipated (signaling the death of one set of bands) while the number of sunspots at midlatitude rapidly doubled (signaling the solo reign of the remaining bands). Because this terminator arrived slightly sooner than expected, McIntosh predicts above-average activity for the current solar cycle, peaking at around 190 sunspots.

A clear victor in the modeling wars could emerge later this year. But McIntosh is already thinking ahead to the next thing—tools that can detect where a sunspot will emerge and how likely it is to burst. He yearns for a set of satellites orbiting the sun—a few at the poles and a few around the equator, like the ones used to forecast terrestrial weather. The price tag for such an early-warning system would be modest, he argues: eight craft at roughly \$30 million each. But will anyone fund it? "I think until Cycle 25 goes bananas," he says, "nobody's going to give a shit."

When the next solar storm approaches Earth and the deep-space satellite provides its warning—maybe an hour in advance, or maybe 15 minutes, if the storm is fast-moving—alarms will sound on crewed spacecraft. Astronauts will proceed to cramped modules lined with hydrogen-rich materials like polyethylene, which will prevent their DNA from being shredded by protons in the plasma. They may float inside for hours or days, depending on how long the storm endures.

The plasma will begin to flood Earth's ionosphere, and the electron bombardment will cause high-frequency radio to go dark. GPS signals, which are transmitted via radio waves, will fade with it. Cell phone reception zones will shrink; your location bubble on Google Maps will expand. As the atmosphere heats up, it will swell, and satellites will drag, veer off course, and risk collision with each other and space debris. Some will fall out of orbit entirely. Most new satellites are equipped to endure some solar radiation, but in a strong enough storm, even the fanciest circuit board can fry. When navigation and communication systems fail, the commercial airline fleet—about 10,000 planes in the sky at any given time—will attempt a simultaneous grounding. Pilots will eyeball themselves into a flight pattern while air traffic controllers use light signals to guide the planes in. Those living near military installations may see government aircraft scrambling overhead; when radar systems jam, nuclear defense protocols activate.

Through a weird and nonintuitive property of electromagnetism, the electricity coursing through the atmosphere will begin to induce currents at Earth's surface. As those currents race through the crust, they will seek the path of least resistance. In regions with resistive rock (in the US, especially the Pacific Northwest, Great Lakes, and Eastern Seaboard), the most convenient route is upward, through the electrical grid.

The weakest points in the grid are its intermediaries—machines called transformers, which take low-voltage current from a power plant, convert it to a higher voltage for cheap and efficient transport, and convert it back down again so that it can be piped safely to your wall outlets. The largest transformers, numbering around 2,000 in the United States, are firmly anchored into the ground, using Earth's crust as a sink for excess voltage. But during a geomagnetic storm, that sink becomes a source. Most transformers are only built to handle alternating current, so storm-induced direct current can cause them to overheat, melt, and even ignite. As one might expect, old transformers are at higher risk of failure. The average American transformer is 40 years old, pushed beyond its intended lifespan.

If just nine transformers were to blow out in the wrong places, the US could experience coast-to-coast outages for months.

Modeling how the grid would fail during another Carrington-class storm is no easy task. The features of individual transformers—age, configuration, location—are typically considered trade secrets. Metatech, an engineering firm frequently contracted by the US government, offers one of the more dire estimates. It finds that a severe storm, on par with events in 1859 or 1921, could destroy 365 high-voltage transformers across the country—about one-fifth of those in operation. States along the East Coast could see transformer failure rates ranging from 24 percent (Maine) to 97 percent (New Hampshire). Grid failure on this scale would leave at least 130 million people in the dark. But the exact number of fried transformers may matter less than their location. In 2014, *The Wall Street Journal* reported findings from an unreleased Federal Energy Regulatory Commission report on grid security: If just nine transformers were to blow out in the wrong places, it found, the country could experience coast-to-coast outages for months.

Prolonged national grid failure is new territory for humankind. Documents from an assortment of government agencies and private organizations paint a dismal picture of what that would look like in the United States. Homes and offices will lose heating and cooling; water pressure in showers and faucets will drop. Subway trains will stop mid-voyage; city traffic will creep along unassisted by stoplights. Oil production will grind to a halt, and so will shipping and transportation. The blessing of modern logistics, which allows grocery stores to stock only a few days' worth of goods, will become a curse. Pantries will thin out within a few days. The biggest killer, though, will be water. Fifteen percent of treatment facilities in the country serve 75 percent of the population—and they rely on energy-intensive pumping systems. These pumps not only distribute clean water but also remove the disease- and chemical-tainted sludge constantly oozing into sewage facilities. Without power, these waste systems could overflow, contaminating remaining surface water.

As the outage goes on, health care facilities will grow overwhelmed. Sterile supplies will run low, and caseloads will soar. When backup batteries and generators fail or run out of power, perishable medications like insulin will spoil. Heavy medical hardware—dialysis machines, imaging devices, ventilators—will cease to function, and hospital wards will resemble field

clinics. With death tolls mounting and morgues losing refrigeration, municipalities will face grave decisions about how to safely handle bodies.

This is roughly the point in the worst-case scenario when the meltdowns at nuclear power plants begin. These facilities require many megawatts of electricity to cool their reactor cores and spent fuel rods. Today, most American plants run their backup systems on diesel. Koroush Shirvan, a nuclear safety expert at MIT, warns that many reactors could run into trouble if outages last longer than a few weeks.

ILLUSTRATION: MARK PERNICE

If you thumb through enough government reports on geomagnetic storms, you'll find that one name comes up almost every time: John G. Kappenman. He has published 50 scientific papers, spoken before Congress and NATO, and advised half a dozen federal agencies and commissions. The soft-spoken utility veteran is the man behind the cataclysmic Metatech projections, and he is either a visionary or an alarmist, depending on whom you ask. Kappenman spent the first two decades of his career climbing the ladder at Minnesota Power, learning the ins and outs of the utility industry. In 1998, he joined Metatech, where he advised governments and energy companies on space weather and grid resilience.

“They’ve only done things that greatly magnify their vulnerability to these storms.”

His end-of-days predictions first gained national traction in 2010, setting off such alarm that the Department of Homeland Security enlisted JASON, an elite scientific advisory group, to pull together a counter-study. “We are not convinced that Kappenman’s worst-case scenario is possible,” the authors concluded in their 2011 report. Notably, however, JASON did not challenge Kappenman’s work on its merits, nor did the group offer a competing model. Rather, its objections were rooted in the fact that Metatech’s models are proprietary, and utility industry secrecy makes it hard to run national grid simulations. Still, the authors echoed Kappenman’s essential conclusion: The US grid is dramatically underprepared for a major storm, and operators should take immediate action to harden their transformers.

The good news is that a technical fix already exists. Mitigating this threat could be as simple as outfitting vulnerable transformers with capacitors, relatively inexpensive devices that block the flow of direct current. During the 1989 storm in Quebec, the grid fell offline and stopped conducting electricity before the current could inflict widespread damage. One close call was enough, though. In the years after, Canada spent more than \$1 billion on reliability upgrades, including capacitors for its most vulnerable transformers. “To cover the entirety of the US, you’re probably in the ballpark of a few billion dollars,” Kappenman says. “If you spread that cost out, it would equal a postage stamp per year per customer.” A 2020 study by the Foundation for Resilient Societies arrived at a similar figure for comprehensive grid hardening: about \$500 million a year for 10 years.

To date, however, American utility companies haven’t widely deployed current-blocking devices to the live grid. “They’ve only done things, like moving to higher and higher operating voltages”—for cheaper transmission—“that greatly magnify their vulnerability to these storms,” Kappenman tells me.

Tom Berger, former director of the US government’s Space Weather Prediction Center, also expressed doubts about grid operators. “When I talk to them, they tell me they understand space weather, and they’re ready,” he says. But Berger’s confidence waned after the February 2021 collapse of the Texas power grid, which killed hundreds of people, left millions of homes and businesses without heat, and caused about \$200 billion in damage. That crisis was brought on by nothing more exotic than a big cold snap. “We heard the same thing,” Berger says. “‘We understand winter; it’s no problem.’”

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I reached out to 12 of the country’s largest utility companies, requesting information on specific steps taken to mitigate damage from a major geomagnetic event. American Electric Power, the country’s largest transmission network, was the only company to share concrete measures,

which it says include regularly upgrading hardware, redirecting current during a storm, and quickly replacing equipment after an event. Two other companies, Consolidated Edison and Exelon, claim to have outfitted their systems with geomagnetic monitoring sensors and be instructing their operators in unspecified “procedures.” Florida Power & Light declined to meaningfully comment, citing security risks. The other eight did not respond to multiple requests for comment.

At this point, curious minds may wonder whether utility companies are even required to plan for geomagnetic storms. The answer is complicated, in a uniquely American way. In 2005, when George W. Bush, a former oil executive, occupied the Oval Office, Congress passed the Energy Policy Act, which included a grab bag of giveaways to the oil and gas industry. It rescinded much of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission’s authority to regulate the utility industry. Reliability standards are now developed and enforced by the North American Electric Reliability Corporation—a trade association that represents the interests of those same companies.

Some find the NERC reliability standards laughable. (Two interviewees audibly laughed when asked about them.) Kappenman objected to the first set of standards, proposed in 2015, on the grounds that they were too lenient—they didn’t require utilities to prepare for a storm on par with 1859 or 1921. Berger took issue too, but for a different reason: The standards made no mention of storm duration. The ground-based effects of the Carrington Event lasted four or five consecutive days; a transformer built to withstand 10 seconds of current is very different from one ready for 120 hours.

Under pressure from the federal government, NERC enacted stricter standards in 2019. In a lengthy written statement, Rachel Sherrard, a spokeswoman for the group, emphasized that American utilities are now expected to deal with an event twice as strong as the 1989 Quebec storm. (Comparison with an old storm like Carrington, she noted, “is challenging because high-fidelity historical measurement data is not available.”) Though the new standards require utilities to fix vulnerabilities in their systems, the companies themselves determine the right approach—and the timeline.

If the utilities remain unmotivated, humanity's ability to withstand a major geomagnetic storm will depend largely on our ability to replace damaged transformers. A 2020 investigation by the US Department of Commerce found that the nation imported more than 80 percent of its large transformers and their components. Under normal supply and demand conditions, lead times for these structures can reach two years. "People outside the industry don't understand how difficult these things are to manufacture," Kappenman says. Insiders know not to buy a transformer unless the factory that made it is at least 10 years old. "It takes that long to work out the kinks," he says. In a time of solar crisis, foreign governments—even geopolitical allies—may throttle exports of vital electrical equipment, Kappenman notes. Some spare-part programs have cropped up over the past decade that allow participants to pool resources in various disaster scenarios. The size and location of these spares, however, are unknown to federal authorities—because the industry won't tell them.

One day regulators may manage to map the electrical grid, even stormproof it (provided a big one doesn't wipe it out first). Engineers may launch a satellite array that gives us days to batten down the hatches. Governments may figure out a way to stand up emergency transformers in a pinch. And there the sun will be—the inconceivable, inextinguishable furnace at the center of our solar system that destroys as indiscriminately as it creates. Life on this little mote depends entirely on the mercy of a cosmic nuclear power with an itchy trigger finger. No human triumph will ever change that. (But we should still buy the capacitors. Soon, please.)

Cover: Styling by Jeanne Yang and Chloe Takayanagi. Styling assistance by Ella Harrington. Grooming by April Bautista using Oribe at Dew Beauty Agency. Prop styling by Chloe Kirk.

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Jun 20, 2022 7:00 AM

This Designer Guitar Is Made From a Bent Sheet of Steel

Meet the Cosmo, an all-metal electric axe with pickups that can be repositioned to create custom sounds.

Photograph: Verso Instruments

Even if you've never held one of his namesake instruments, you may know that [Les Paul](#) designed one of the first solid-body electric guitars.

Astonishingly, Gibson, which manufactured the guitar, was fearful this radical new direction in instrument design would flop, and it didn't even show the prototypes to the public for years.

But the Gibson Les Paul was far from being the first electric guitar. In 1931, the very first electrically amplified stringed instrument sold commercially was a simple, all-metal, cast aluminum lap steel guitar nicknamed the "[Frying Pan](#)"—and a certain Adolph Rickenbacker invented the electromagnetic pickups for it.

Now, 90 years later, the Kassel, Germany-based industrial designer Robin Stummvoll, founder of [Verso Musical Instruments](#), is going back to basics, and is seemingly taking inspiration from the electric guitar's humble beginnings. With no formal training as a luthier, Stummvoll has decided to pare down the electric guitar to its minimum parts, reducing the amount of materials used to make each instrument.

"There's a guitar made in the '70s by Allan Gittler [held in the [MoMA design collection](#)] that is basically just a steel rod with steel frets welded on,"

Stummvoll says. “It's really the minimum a guitar needs to be, but it's very complicated to build and very expensive. So my approach on this was something that can be built in a smaller shop, yet creates a new perspective on lutherie.”



[Review: James Trussart Deluxe Steelcaster](#)

For a much different take on steel-bodied guitar design, check out James Trussart's rusty beasts.

By [Michael Calore](#)

Rather than a lump of wood, the [Cosmo](#)'s body is a carefully bent sheet of powder-coated steel. This ergonomic shape not only houses the necessary circuitry to make the guitar work, it also allows an innovative approach to the placement of the pickups, transducers that capture the strings' mechanical vibrations and convert them to electrical signals that can then be amplified and played through a loudspeaker.

Pickups are usually screwed in place on a guitar's body, but where they are placed affects the tone of the sound created. This is why you see multiple pickups in different locations on, say, a Fender Stratocaster or a Les Paul. Stummvoll has made his pickups mobile so they can be moved around and placed where the player chooses.

"This was a happy accident," explains Stummvoll. "It wasn't the intention." As pickups are magnetic, they naturally clamp themselves to the surface of the Cosmo's metal body. Realizing the potential benefits of this in terms of versatility of sound, Stummvoll made it a feature. You can watch and listen to [some YouTube demos](#) of this changing sound.

"It has its own character and sound, a very warm and resonant tone with lots of harmonic content, but it's nothing weird or strange," Stummvoll says. "I would say it's somewhere between electric guitar and an acoustic, because you have these added overtones—but more towards electric."

Photograph: Verso Instruments

Along with the \$1,781 (€1,710) Cosmo and the brand's [Gravis](#) bass guitar, Stummvoll has now released his latest creation, the \$1,935 (€1,860) [Orbit](#), a [baritone](#) guitar. As well as featuring Verso's signature movable pickups, Stummvoll says the Orbit's long 28.5-inch (720-mm) scale gives this instrument precise and gritty bass response in standard B to B or A to A tunings, while that added length also apparently brings plenty of sustain.

Stummvoll also claims that the Orbit's "natural microphonic effect is less pronounced than on Cosmo, which makes it even more suitable to distorted sounds." Metal fans, take note.

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[Zak Jason](#)

[Science](#)

Jun 20, 2022 6:00 AM

A Photographer Captures Earth as a Strange New World

Inspired by an 18th-century naturalist, Christopher Edward Rodriguez set out to document our climate-changed planet with fresh eyes.

An abandoned prospector's mine in Montana. Photograph: Christopher Edward Rodriguez

In 1799, the German naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt set off on a trip through the Americas, cataloging all he could find: plants, minerals, capybaras, canals, etc. Humboldt proposed that the world was “one great living organism where everything was connected”—a theory that would inspire Charles Darwin. He introduced the concept of ecosystems and was among the first naturalists to note humanity’s destructive impact on Earth.

In 2017, photographer [Christopher Edward Rodriguez](#) came across Humboldt’s writings. He’d been thinking about what a camera can really see when nearly every inch of the planet has been “shaped, directed, and photographed to death.” He adopted Humboldt’s ideas and set off across the Americas to create a series of images that show the planet “as if it’s never been seen before.” He used long exposures, artificial lighting, and colored gels to “circumvent the camera’s scientific accuracy.” His aim for the photographs was to convey a mood of “consistent strangeness,” one that embodies a forgotten tenet of Humboldt’s: “Everything is interaction and reciprocal.”

“Blusher” mushrooms. Salisbury, New York.

Photograph: Christopher Edward Rodriguez

Morpho peleides butterflies, one of the largest species in the world, caught mid-metamorphosis in Costa Rica.

Photograph: Christopher Edward Rodriguez

The photographer's assistant inside a cave in Nevada's Painted Hills.

Photograph: Christopher Edward Rodriguez

To create a surreal atmosphere, Rodriguez sometimes used colored gels in his work.

Photograph: Christopher Edward Rodriguez

Bumblebees are some of the most common and important pollinators of North American plants. Their buzzing vibrations help shake the pollen out of certain flowers.

Photograph: Christopher Edward Rodriguez

Christopher Edward Rodriguez is represented by Sasha Wolf Projects, Maybaum Gallery

This article appears in the July/August 2022 issue. [Subscribe now](#).

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Jun 16, 2022 6:33 PM

After Layoffs, Crypto Startups Face a ‘Crucible Moment’

The hard times could be a harbinger for everyone else.

ILLUSTRATION: ABBR. PROJECTS

In May, the venture capital firm Sequoia circulated a memo among its startup founders. The [52-page presentation](#) warned of a challenging road ahead, paved by inflation, rising interest rates, a Nasdaq drawdown, supply chain issues, war, and a general weariness about the economy. [Things were about to get tough](#), and this time, venture capital would not be coming to the rescue. “We believe this is a Crucible Moment,” the firm’s partners wrote. “Companies who move the quickest and have the most runway are most likely to avoid the death spiral.”

Plenty of startups seem to be taking Sequoia’s advice. The mood has become downright funereal as founders and CEOs cut the excesses of 2021 from their budgets. Most crucially, these reductions have affected head count. More than 10,000 startup employees [have been laid off](#) since the start of June, according to [Layoffstracker.com](#), which catalogs job cuts. Since the start of the year, the tally is closer to 40,000.

The latest victims have been crypto companies, and the carnage is not small. On Tuesday, Coinbase laid off [1,100 employees](#), abruptly cutting their access to corporate email accounts and locking them out of the company’s Slack. Those layoffs came just days after Coinbase [rescinded job offers](#) from more than 300 people who planned to start working there in the coming weeks. Two other crypto startups—[BlockFi](#) and [Crypto.com](#)—

each cut hundreds of jobs on Monday; the crypto exchange Gemini also laid off about [10 percent](#) of its staff earlier this month. Collectively, more than 2,000 employees of crypto startups have lost their jobs since the start of June—about one-fifth of all startup layoffs this month.

The conversation around crypto companies has changed abruptly in the past year. In 2021, they were the darling of venture capitalists, who showered them with billions of dollars to fund aggressive growth. Coinbase, which went public in April 2021 at \$328 a share, seemed to suggest an emerging gold mine in the sector. Other companies, like BlockFi, started hiring aggressively with ambitions to go public. Four crypto startups took out [expensive prime-time ads in the most recent Super Bowl](#).

Coinbase was also focused on hypergrowth, scaling its staff from 1,250 at the beginning of 2021 to about 5,000 in 2022. “It is now clear to me that we over-hired,” Brian Armstrong, Coinbase’s CEO, wrote in a [blog post](#) on Tuesday, where he announced the layoffs. “We grew too quickly.”

“It could be that crypto is the canary in the coal mine,” says David A. Kirsch, associate professor of strategy and entrepreneurship at the University of Maryland’s Robert H. Smith School of Business. He describes the contractions in crypto startups as one potential signal of “a great unraveling,” where more startups are evaluated for how well they can deliver on their promises. If history is any indication, those that can’t are fated for “the death spiral.”

Kirsch has spent years studying [the lessons of past crashes](#); he is also the author of *Bubbles and Crashes*, a book about boom-bust cycles in tech. Kirsch says that the bubble tends to pop first in high-leverage, high-growth sectors. When the Nasdaq fell in 2000, for example, the value of most ecommerce companies vanished “well in advance of the broader market decline.” Companies like Pets.com and eToys.com—which had made big, splashy public debuts—eventually went bankrupt.

In today’s market, crypto startups are similarly exposed. “We could be seeing the collapse in that sector first,” says Kirsch.

Crypto advocates say it's normal to oscillate between periods of exuberance and destitution, which the industry calls "crypto winters." Chris Dixon, a general partner at Andreessen Horowitz, [wrote about this cycle](#) in 2020. When the price of bitcoin rises, people get excited, leading to more startups, projects, and people investing in the ecosystem. When the price of bitcoin plummets—as it did this year, to a fraction of last year's peak—some of those startups disappear. But Dixon argues that the best of each cycle survives, leading to "choppy yet consistent growth" in the sector. (Dixon declined to be interviewed for this story.)

Kirsch isn't as convinced that the sector can survive a more significant downturn. "It could be that the prior crypto winters were just small events in the end, because everyone involved was a true believer," he says. Now that celebrities like [Matt Damon](#) and [Tom Brady](#) have brought more people onto crypto platforms, it will be harder for them to sustain growth. That could turn this crypto winter into something closer to a crypto ice age.

Still, entire sectors don't tend to disappear, even after the bubble bursts. Plenty of ecommerce companies went out of business after the 2000 crash, but a few of them—like Amazon—continued to grow maniacally. Now isn't the time to write off crypto altogether, but rather to watch how, and which, startups can evolve to meet real demand.

These challenges also won't be exclusive to crypto. Instead, take that corner of the startup world's struggles as a sign of the hard times coming for everyone else—if they're not here already.

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