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What If You Could Do It All Over?

The uncanny allure of our unlived lives.

By [Joshua Rothman](#)

December 14, 2020



Once, in another life, I was a tech founder. It was the late nineties, when the Web was young, and everyone was trying to cash in on the dot-com boom. In college, two of my dorm mates and I discovered that we'd each started an Internet company in high school, and we merged them to form a single, teenage megacorp. For around six hundred dollars a month, we rented office space in the basement of a building in town. We made Web sites and software for an early dating service, an insurance-claims-processing firm, and an online store where customers could "bargain" with a cartoon avatar for overstock goods. I lived large, spending the money I made on tuition, food, and a stereo.

In 1999—our sophomore year—we hit it big. A company that wired mid-tier office buildings with high-speed Internet hired us to build a collaborative work environment for its customers: Slack, avant la lettre. It was a huge project, entrusted to a few college students through some combination of recklessness and charity. We were terrified that we'd taken on work we couldn't handle but also felt that we were on track to create something innovative. We blew through deadlines and budgets until the C-suite demanded a demo, which we built. Newly confident, we hired our friends, and used our corporate AmEx to expense a "business dinner" at Nobu. Unlike other kids, who were what—socializing?—I had a business card that said "Creative Director." After midnight, in our darkened office, I nestled my Aeron chair into my *IKEA* desk, queued up Nine Inch Nails in Winamp, scrolled code, peeped pixels, and entered the matrix. After my client work was done, I'd write short stories for my creative-writing workshops. Often, I slept on the office futon, waking to plunder the vending machine next to the loading dock, where a homeless man lived with his cart.

I liked this entrepreneurial existence—its ambition, its scrappy, near-future velocity. I thought I might move to San Francisco and work in [tech](#). I saw a path, an opening into life. But, as the dot-com bubble burst, our client's business was acquired by a firm that was acquired by another firm that didn't want what we'd made. Our invoices went unpaid. It was senior year—a fork in the road. We closed our business and moved out of the office. A few days before graduation, when I went to pay my tuition bill, a girl on the elevator struck up a conversation, then got off at her floor; on my ride down, she stepped on for a second time, and our conversation continued. We started dating, then went to graduate school in English together. We got married, I

became a journalist, and we had a son. I now have a life, a world, a story. I'm me, not him—whatever he might have turned out to be.

"The thought that I might have become someone else is so bland that dwelling on it sometimes seems fatuous," the literary scholar Andrew H. Miller writes, in "[On Not Being Someone Else: Tales of Our Unled Lives](#)" (Harvard). Still, phrased the right way, the thought has an insistent, uncanny magnetism. Miller's book is, among other things, a compendium of expressions of wonder over what might have been. Miller quotes Clifford Geertz, who, in "[The Interpretation of Cultures](#)," wrote that "one of the most significant facts about us may finally be that we all begin with the natural equipment to live a thousand kinds of life but end in the end having lived only one." He cites the critic William Empson: "There is more in the child than any man has been able to keep." We have unlived lives for all sorts of reasons: because we make choices; because society constrains us; because events force our hand; most of all, because we are singular individuals, becoming more so with time. "While growth realizes, it narrows," Miller writes. "Plural possibilities simmer down." This is painful, but it's an odd kind of pain—hypothetical, paradoxical. Even as we regret who we haven't become, we value who we are. We seem to find meaning in what's never happened. Our self-portraits use a lot of negative space.

For some people, imagining unlived lives is torture, even a gateway to crisis. Miller tells the story of Spencer Brydon, the protagonist of Henry James's tale "[The Jolly Corner](#)." As a young man, Brydon left America for Europe, where he "followed strange paths and worshiped strange gods," living as a playboy. Three decades later, he returns to New York, where he takes stock of his peers. Many of them are rich, powerful, or respected; they have built substantial lives. Brydon, who is single and only superficially accomplished, starts to wonder how he would have turned out if he'd stayed. Would he have become a successful businessman? Married his friend Alice, with whom he's reconnected? He begins to spend his nights prowling the hallways of his childhood home, convinced that the ghost of the man he might have been wanders there. Eventually, he meets a version of himself: an apparitional Brydon, with a forbidding face and two missing fingers, who strides forward in "a rage of personality." Watching him, Brydon faints. He wakes with his head cradled in Alice's lap, and realizes that he loves her: better this life than that one!

Most of us aren't haunted so acutely by the people we might have been. But, perhaps for a morning or a month, our lives can still thrum with the knowledge that it could have been otherwise. "You may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful wife," [David Byrne](#) sings, in the Talking Heads song "Once in a Lifetime." "And you may ask yourself, 'Well, how did I get here?'" Maybe you feel suddenly pushed around by your life, and wonder if you could have willed it into a different shape. Perhaps you suddenly remember, as [Hilary Mantel](#) did, that you have another self "filed in a drawer of your consciousness, like a short story that wouldn't work after the opening lines." Today, your life is irritating, like an ill-fitting garment; you can't forget it's there. "You may tell yourself, 'This is not my beautiful house. . . . This is not my beautiful wife,'" Byrne sings.

We may imagine specific unlived lives for ourselves, as artists, or teachers, or tech bros; I have a lawyer friend whose alternate self owns a bar in Red Hook. Or we may just be drawn to possibility itself, as in the poem "The Road Not Taken": when Robert Frost tells us that choosing one path over the other made "all the difference," it doesn't matter what the difference is. Carl Dennis's poem "The God Who Loves You" tries to make that difference concrete. Dennis poses a question to his protagonist, a middle-aged real-estate agent: "What would have happened / Had you gone to your second choice for college"? A different roommate, a different spouse, a different job: could it all have added up to "a life thirty points above the life you're living / On any scale of satisfaction"? Only "the god who loves you" knows for sure. It's an unsettling thought; Dennis suggests that we pity that all-knowing god, "pacing his cloudy bedroom, harassed by alternatives / You're spared by ignorance."

Swept up in our real lives, we quickly forget about the unreal ones. Still, there will be moments when, for good or for ill, we feel confronted by our unrealized possibilities; they may even, through their persistence, shape us. Practitioners of mindfulness tell us that we should look away, returning our gaze to the actual, the here and now. But we might have the opposite impulse, as Miller does. He wants us to wander in the hall of mirrors—to let our imagined selves "linger longer and say more." What can our unreal selves say about our real ones?

Their mere presence in our minds may reveal something about how we live: “Unled lives are a largely modern preoccupation,” Miller writes. It used to be that, for the most part, people lived the life their parents had, or the one that the fates decreed. Today, we try to chart our own courses. The difference is reflected in the stories we tell ourselves. In [the Iliad](#), Achilles chooses between two clearly defined fates, designed by the gods and foretold in advance: he can either fight and die at Troy or live a long, boring life. (In the end, he chooses to fight.) But the world in which we live isn’t so neatly organized. Achilles didn’t have to wonder if he should have been pre-med or pre-law; we make such decisions knowing that they might shape our lives.

Among secular people, the absence of an afterlife raises the stakes. In [“Missing Out: In Praise of the Unlived Life”](#), the psychologist Adam Phillips warns that “once the next life—the better life, the fuller life—has to be in this one, we have a considerable task on our hands.” Given just a single shot at existence, we owe it to ourselves to hit the mark; we must not just survive but thrive. It’s no wonder that for many of us “the story of our lives becomes the story of the lives we were prevented from living.”

It’s likely, Miller thinks, that capitalism, “with its isolation of individuals and its accelerating generation of choices and chances,” has increased the number of our unlived lives. “The elevation of choice as an absolute good, the experience of chance as a strange affront, the increasing number of exciting, stultifying decisions we must make, the review of the past to improve future outcomes”—all these “feed the people we’re not.” Advertisers sell us things by getting us to imagine better versions of ourselves, even though there’s only one life to live: it’s “*YOLO + FOMO*,” a friend tells Miller, summing up the situation nicely. The nature of work deepens the problem. “Unlike the agricultural and industrial societies that preceded it,” Miller writes, our “professional society” is “made up of specialized careers, ladders of achievement.” You make your choice, forgoing others: year by year, you “clamber up into your future,” thinking back on the ladders unclimbed.

Historic events generate unlived lives. Years from now, we may wonder where we would be if the coronavirus pandemic hadn’t shifted us onto new courses. Sometimes we can see another life opening out to one side, like a freeway exit. Miller recounts the sad history of Jack and Ennis, the cowboys

in Annie Proulx's story "[Brokeback Mountain](#)," who are in love but live in Wyoming in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, and so must hide it. They disagree about how to understand their predicament. Ennis has no "serious hard feelings," Proulx tells us. "Just a vague sense of getting short-changed." But Jack, Miller writes, "is haunted by the lives they might have led together, running a little ranch or living in Mexico, somewhere away from civilization and its systematic and personal violence." Jack tells Ennis, "We could a had a good life together, a fuckin real good life." The existence he has is spoiled by the one he doesn't.

It makes sense for Jack to dwell on how things might have turned out in a better world. And yet we can have the same kinds of thoughts even when we're basically happy with our lives. The philosopher Charles Taylor, who has written much about the history of selfhood, has a theory about why we can't just accept the way things are: he thinks that sometime toward the end of the eighteenth century two big trends in our self-understanding converged. We learned to think of ourselves as "deep" individuals, with hidden wellsprings of feeling and talent that we owed it to ourselves to find. At the same time, we came to see ourselves objectively—as somewhat interchangeable members of the same species and of a competitive mass society. Subjectivity and objectivity both grew more intense. We came to feel that our lives, pictured from the outside, failed to reflect the vibrancy within.

A whole art form—the novel—has been dedicated to exploring this dynamic. Novelists often show us people who, trapped by circumstances, struggle to live their "real" lives. Such a struggle can be Escher-like; a "real" life is one in which a person no longer yearns to find herself, and yet the work of finding oneself is itself a source of meaning. In Tolstoy's "[Anna Karenina](#)," Anna, caught in a boring marriage, destroys her life in an attempt to build a more passionate, authentic one with Count Vronsky. All the while, Levin, the novel's other hero, is so confused about how to live that he longs for the kind of boring, automatic life that Anna left behind. Part of the work of being a modern person seems to be dreaming of alternate lives in which you don't have to dream of alternate lives. We long to stop longing, but we also wring purpose from that desire.

An “unled” life sounds like one we might wish to lead—shoulda, coulda, woulda. But, while I’m conscious of my unlived lives, I don’t wish to have led one. In fact, as the father of a two-year-old, I find the prospect frightening. In “[Midlife: A Philosophical Guide](#),” the philosopher Kieran Setiya points out that, thanks to the “butterfly effect,” even minor alterations to our pasts would likely have major effects on our presents. If I’d done things just a little bit differently, my son might not exist. Perhaps, in a different life, I’d have a different wife and child. But I love these particular people; I don’t want alternative ones.



"Excuse me, sir. I think you have your cart in front of the horse!"
Cartoon by George Booth

I find it easier to imagine different lives for others. My mother grew up in Malaysia, then immigrated to America in the nineteen-seventies, as a college student. In her new country, she went to rock concerts, poetry readings, and

law school, becoming an attorney with a distinguished career and achieving the kind of life she'd imagined back home. Even so, she was never really happy; she and my father divorced, and she struggled with depression and loneliness. When I was a teen-ager, we visited Malaysia together. I was astonished to find that the island where she'd spent her childhood was a tropical paradise. Her many cousins and old friends were overjoyed to see her; eating the food, her face lit up. We spent a day with a high-school boyfriend of hers, who ran a small factory (it made refrigerator magnets, as I recall); globalization was transforming the country and raising the standard of living. Would my mother have found contentment if she'd forgone the immigrant struggle? Thinking that she might have, I didn't worry that, if she'd lived this alternate life, I wouldn't exist.

My mother was young when she moved across the world; once we're rooted in adulthood, even much smaller shifts can seem inconceivable. My lawyer friend, who has a wife and two children, hates his job and is always talking about leaving it so that he can pursue an entirely different profession, but he simply can't figure out how to make the switch. I feel for him. Having clambered up his ladder, he won't easily get down. But I also want to tell him what Jean-Paul Sartre said about the allure of imaginary lives:

A man commits himself and draws his own portrait, outside of which there is nothing. No doubt this thought may seem harsh. . . . But on the other hand, it helps people to understand that reality alone counts, and that dreams, expectations, and hopes only serve to define a man as a broken dream, aborted hopes, and futile expectations.

Sartre thought we should focus on what we have done and will do, rather than on what we might have done or could do. He pointed out that we often take too narrow a census of our actions. An artist, he maintains, is not to be "judged solely by his works of art, for a thousand other things also help to define him." We do more than we give ourselves credit for; our real lives are richer than we think. This is why, if you keep a diary, you may feel more satisfied with the life you live.

And yet you may still wonder at the particular shape of that life; all stories have turning points, and it's hard not to fixate on them. Sartre advanced those ideas in a lecture called "Existentialism Is a Humanism," which he

delivered in Paris in 1945, when he was only locally famous. On arriving at the venue, he discovered that he would have to push through a brawling crowd that had gathered in a sort of mini-riot. (“Probably some communists demonstrating against me,” he speculated, according to Annie Cohen-Solal’s [Sartre: A Life.](#)) He considered leaving the event but then decided to press on, spending fifteen minutes making his way to the front, receiving a few kicks and blows along the way. The lecture was a sensation and made Sartre an international superstar. That might not have happened if he’d decided, reasonably, to leave.

Like facets in a jewel, such moments seem to put our lives into prismatic relief. They make us feel the precariousness and the specificity of the way things are. In “[The Post-Birthday World](#),” [Lionel Shriver](#) builds a whole novel around this conceit: its chapters alternate between two time lines, one in which Irina, its protagonist, didn’t kiss her husband’s friend, and another in which she did. (In the first time line, she often thinks back on the moment of the almost-kiss—an instant when her happy life hung in the balance.) The same essential premise animates countless popular narratives, from rom-coms like “Sliding Doors” to sci-fi series like “Devs.” And yet the premise is irrational: in truth, our lives have infinite facets, and, for any given outcome, the turning points we isolate are necessary but not sufficient. The butterfly effect works in reverse: Sartre had to give his lecture, and my wife had to step into my elevator not just once but twice, and yet many other, unremembered things also had to happen—in fact, everything had to go a certain way.

Often, these stories serve a didactic purpose; they provoke thoughts that bind us to our lives. They suggest that we should be grateful for what’s actual—that we should sink deeper into the life we have, rather than dreaming of the lives we don’t. But my mother, being unhappy, and restless by nature, thought often of her unlived lives. Sometimes she seemed lost in them, or misled by them. She dreamed, in particular, of quitting her job and running a farm stand. And so, the summer after I graduated from college, she moved out of the D.C. suburbs and into a remote little house in the Virginia countryside, two hours away, near the Blue Ridge.

It was a second emigration. Her commute was punishing; unsettled and lonely, she grew isolated and drank too much. A few years later, she had a

profoundly disabling stroke. Little of the person she was remains. Today, she lives in a nursing home, where, strangely, she seems content. Not long after the stroke, I made one last visit to her house, to clear it out before it sold. I took a photo of her vegetable garden, gone to seed—the closest she ever came to living the life she'd pictured.

What we could have, should have, or would have done—these kinds of thoughts follow an if-then logic. But we're also drawn to alternative selves that hover on the edge of sense. Miller recounts how, when the musician Melissa Etheridge and her partner decided to have children, they faced a decision: for their sperm donor, they considered one of two friends, David Crosby or Brad Pitt. They chose Crosby. "My teen-agers now are, like, 'I could have had Brad Pitt,'" Etheridge later said. "'I could've been amazingly handsome.'" Miller shares a joke recorded by the philosopher Ted Cohen, about a man named Lev: "If I were the Czar, I would be richer than the Czar," Lev tells a friend. "How could that be?" the friend asks. "Well," Lev says, "if I were the Czar, on the side I would give Hebrew lessons." If I'm the Czar, or Brad Pitt's son, am I still me? The idea that I, myself, could also be someone else seems to exploit a loophole in language. The words make a sentence without making sense. And yet the senselessness of the wish to be someone else may be part of the wish. We want the world to be more porous and lambent than it is.

Miller quotes the poem "Veracruz," by George Stanley, in full. It opens by the sea in Mexico, where Stanley is walking on an esplanade. He thinks of how his father once walked on a similar esplanade in Cuba. Step by step, he imagines alternative lives for his father and for himself. What if his dad had moved to San Francisco and "married / not my mother, but her brother, whom he truly loved"? What if his father had transformed himself into a woman, and Stanley had been the child of his father and his uncle? Maybe he would have been born female, and "grown up in San Francisco as a girl, / a tall, serious girl." If all that had happened, then today, walking by the sea in Mexico, he might be able to meet a sailor, have an affair, and "give birth at last to my son—the boy / I love."

"Veracruz" reminds me of the people I know who believe in past lives, and of stories like the one [David Lynch](#) tells in "Twin Peaks," in which people seem to step between alternate lives without knowing it. Such stories satisfy

us deeply because they reconcile contrary ideas we have about ourselves and our souls. On the one hand, we understand that we could have turned out any number of ways; we know that we aren't the only possible versions of ourselves. But, on the other, we feel that there is some fundamental light within us—a filament that burns, with its own special character, from birth to death. We want to think that, whoever we might have been, we would have burned with the same light. At the end of "Veracruz," the poet comes home to the same son. It's as though my mother became a different kind of person, finding happiness in her garden while she could; and I, having moved to San Francisco, became a coder with a business plan and a head full of algorithms; and still, when our eyes met over Skype, we were us.

This vision seems impossible. As Sartre says, we are who we are. But isn't the negative space in a portrait part of that portrait? In the sense that our unlived lives have been imagined by us, and are part of us, they are real; to know what someone isn't—what she might have been, what she's dreamed of being—this is to know someone intimately. When we first meet people, we know them as they are, but, with time, we perceive the auras of possibility that surround them. Miller describes the emotion this experience evokes as "beauty and heartbreak together."

The novel I think of whenever I have this feeling is Virginia Woolf's "[To the Lighthouse](#)." Mrs. Ramsay, its central character, is the mother of eight children; the linchpin of her family, she is immersed in the practicalities of her crowded, communal life. Still, even as she attends to the particulars—the morning's excursion, the evening's dinner—she senses that they are only placeholders, or handles with which she can grasp something bigger. The details of life seem to her both worthy of attention and somehow arbitrary; the meaning of the whole feels tied up in its elusiveness. One night, she is sitting at dinner, surrounded by her children and her guests. She listens to her husband talking about poetry and philosophy; she watches her children whisper some private joke. (She can't know that two of them will die: a daughter in childbirth, a son in the First World War.) Then she softens her focus. "She looked at the window in which the candle flames burnt brighter now that the panes were black," Woolf writes, "and looking at that outside the voices came to her very strangely, as if they were voices at a service in a cathedral." In this inner quiet, lines of poetry sound:

And all the lives we ever lived and all the lives to be
Are full of trees and changing leaves.

Mrs. Ramsay isn't quite sure what these lines mean, and doesn't know if she invented them, has just heard them, or is remembering them. Still, Woolf writes, "like music, the words seemed to be spoken by her own voice, outside her self, saying quite easily and naturally what had been in her mind the whole evening while she said different things." We all dwell in the here and now; we all have actual selves, actual lives. But what are they? Selves and lives have penumbras and possibilities—that's what's unique about them. They are always changing, and so are always new; they refuse to stand still. We live in anticipation of their meaning, which will inevitably exceed what can be known or said. Much must be left unsaid, unseen, unlived. ♦

A Reporter at Large

- [Murder in Malta](#)

Murder in Malta

After a journalist was assassinated, her sons found clues in her unfinished work that cracked the case and brought down the government.

By [Ben Taub](#)

December 14, 2020



Daphne's sons worried about her. She was fifty-three and lived in an old stone farmhouse on the edge of Bidnija, a hilltop hamlet on the island of Malta. From the dining-room table, where Daphne wrote, she could see the morning sunlight glisten on the Mediterranean. But she hadn't been to the beach in four years. When she left the house, people spat at her, followed her, photographed her, and hurled insults and abuse. Once, when she was taking an afternoon walk in a nearby village, a former mayor gathered a mob and began chasing her. She took refuge in a monastery, where the villagers pounded on the heavy wooden doors. All over the island, there were people who were certain that they hated her but had never read a word she had written. They simply knew her as *is-sahhara tal-Bidnija*—the witch of Bidnija.

Beyond "this little rock," as Daphne referred to Malta, she was known for her reporting, which exposed malfeasance and hypocrisy within the governing class. She had come to think of the country as fractured by time, with all the worst elements of globalization grafted onto a population that was otherwise stuck in the past. "Malta is 17 miles by nine and flooded with cocaine, corruption, and filthy money," she wrote. Her blog, Running Commentary, laced deep investigations with withering taunts, and had an online readership as large as all of Malta's newspapers combined. In late 2016, Politico Europe included Daphne—along with George Soros, Recep Tayyip Erdoan, and Sadiq Khan—on its list of "people who are shaping, shaking and stirring Europe." She was "the blogging fury," the list read, "a one-woman [WikiLeaks](#), crusading against untransparency and corruption in Malta, an island nation famous for both."

But her subjects were her neighbors—the Prime Minister lived just down the hill. In recent years, he and his Cabinet had sought to smother her with libel lawsuits. People in his office used their work computers to post cruel gossip about her, accompanied by unflattering photographs. There was little serious effort to refute Daphne's reports—only to disdain her as an élitist, partisan fraud. (Her surname, Caruana Galizia, had become redundant—everyone knew her as Daphne.) "The greatest difficulties I encounter come from the fact that they have made me into what in effect is a national scapegoat," she once said.

On the afternoon of October 16, 2017, Daphne prepared a plate of tomatoes and mozzarella for Matthew, her eldest son. He was thirty-one, a computer scientist and a journalist himself. An expert on shell companies, he had shared a Pulitzer Prize for the [Panama Papers leak](#). He sometimes got so caught up in his work that he forgot to eat.

Daphne set down the plate and put on her shoes to go to the bank. Her husband, Peter, a lawyer, had left her a stack of blank checks with his signature. She could not access her own accounts: after she claimed that Malta's economy minister had visited a brothel while on an official mission to Germany, he persuaded a court to freeze her assets.

Across the valley, a man peered at the house. He watched Daphne climb into her car, and called his brother, who was waiting on a boat just offshore. When she was partway down the hill, the man on the boat sent a text message: "REL 1 = ON."

A local farmer heard a pop and a scream, and watched Daphne yank the emergency brake. Then the gas tank exploded, launching her car into a field. The boom resonated throughout Bidnija valley.

Matthew ran down the hill, barefoot, squinting in the afternoon sun. When he reached the fireball, he thought for a few seconds that the twisted chassis couldn't be that of his mother's car, because it was burning white, and hers was charcoal gray. But then Matthew saw the beginning of the license plate —QQZ—and circled the car, helpless, screaming, searching for his mother's silhouette, his skin as hot as he could stand it.

"I don't think she made it," Matthew told Paul, his youngest brother, an academic in London, in a phone call later that afternoon. Andrew, the middle brother, who was a Maltese diplomat, walked out of the foreign-ministry building and never returned. Paul took the first flight home. During the descent, he could frame the entire island within the window. Somewhere in that vista were the men who had ordered the hit. For the first time in a decade, all three brothers slept in their childhood bedrooms.

Supporters of the government posted memes with images of champagne flutes and witches burning at the stake, and made explosion sounds when

they saw Daphne's family in public. "This isn't like the troll factory in St. Petersburg," Paul told me. "These are real people. These were her neighbors."



Daphne's sons in the family's garden. When the boys were young, her critics tried to burn down the house. Photograph by Gaia Squarci for The New Yorker

Daphne's sons carried her coffin, then left the island to regroup. They suspected that their mother's murder had been arranged by someone who believed that, in Malta, it was less dangerous to assassinate a reporter than to let her complete her work. To kill to protect a secret—it was a crime as old as any. Somewhere in their mother's files, they thought, there must be a series of clues.

When Daphne was growing up in Malta, there was only one brand of chocolate, one brand of toothpaste, one brand of bluejeans. After attaining independence from the United Kingdom, in September, 1964—a month after she was born—the island suffered a post-colonial hangover, dominated by a repressive socialist Labour Party. For thousands of years, the island's language, culture, and architecture had been shaped by invasions from Europe, Africa, and the Middle East. Now, as the Maltese government distanced itself from the most recent colonial empire, it aligned with China, the Soviet Union, Libya, and North Korea.

"You couldn't talk about politics at school," Daphne's sister Corinne told Paul, after his mother's death. "A classmate would go back and report to their parents what you were saying. And then your parents got into trouble. Your property would be expropriated, for instance, or you'd be seen as an enemy of the state."

In the early eighties, Prime Minister Dom Mintoff, who had led the Labour Party for more than thirty years, announced that the country's Catholic schools would be shut down. Daphne and Corinne weren't religious, but they joined a protest across the harbor from the capital, Valletta. Daphne was arrested and strip-searched by the police. It bothered her that politicians spoke of themselves as public servants while demanding the kind of uncritical deference required by kings. When she was released from jail, she noted to her sister that the local newspapers were neglecting to cover the crisis.

Mintoff's party lost power in 1987. The new government opened up Malta's economy and applied to join the [European Union](#). Daphne soon started writing for the *Times of Malta*. At twenty-five, with three young sons, she became the country's first female columnist, and the first journalist to attach a name to her opinions. "And this thing was a double shock," Daphne told a

human-rights researcher, days before her death. “I used to have people actually telling me, ‘But does your husband write them for you? Does your father?’ ”

Daphne grew up reading British magazines; now she transposed their irreverence and humor to her considerably smaller island. Cocktail parties became uncomfortable and friendships frayed. But Daphne found it silly when people chided her for writing critically about relatives and neighbors. “We’re calling ourselves European,” she told them. “You can’t say, ‘Ah, you can write that in London, you can write it in Rome, but you can’t write it in Valletta.’ ”

In 1993, Daphne wrote a column calling for the resignation of the head of the armed forces, after it was reported that he had been helping his son, a prolific cocaine trafficker, avoid customs when entering the country. The first casualty of her column was her long-standing friendship with the trafficker’s brother. The second was one of her sources, who was stabbed in the back with a knife. The third was her front door, which was lit on fire. And the fourth was the truth, when Daphne told her young sons that she had started the fire herself, by forgetting to put out a candle. Paul was six years old, Andrew seven, Matthew eight. They spent the next two weeks at a farmhouse in Gozo, Malta’s tiny satellite island to the north, the children unaware why they were missing school.

The following year, the boys found the family dog dead on the doorstep. “She must have eaten snail poison,” Daphne told them. Only years later did it occur to Paul that poison didn’t account for a slit throat.

A referendum on joining the E.U. was scheduled for 2003, and in the run-up Daphne’s writing became more acerbic. She joined a campaign called Iva, which means “Yes” in Maltese. Its slogan was “For our children.”

One of the loudest voices in the “No” campaign was that of Joseph Muscat, an ambitious young member of the Labour Party’s media department who was the son of a fireworks salesman and lived in a village just down the hill from Bidnija. He dated the Party leader’s personal assistant, wrote derisive columns about the E.U., and hosted a Euroskeptic variety show called “Made in Brussels” on the Labour Party’s television channel.

Daphne had first encountered Muscat in 1998, when he published a book in which he fabricated her involvement in a criminal conspiracy. A drawing depicted the links between politicians and mafiosi as tentacles of an octopus, one of which bore Daphne's name. She sued for libel, and the judge ruled in her favor, noting that Muscat held "animus" toward her.

The animus became reciprocal. Malta's future would be shaped by two people who lived an olive grove apart. "There was this real sense that everything was hanging in the balance," Andrew recalled. The Labourites, seeking to appeal to Malta's less educated, non-Anglophone population, spoke of Daphne and the Europhiles as stuck-up globalists. Meanwhile, European governments fretted over what might happen if Labour returned to power. "They remembered Mintoff," Andrew said. "They worried about the risk of having this sort of Trojan horse in the European Union."

The Europhiles won, though by a slimmer margin than in any of the several other countries voting on E.U. membership that year. Daphne's sons were in their teens. "She thought, This is it—we're finally home," Paul told me. Andrew joined the Model European Parliament at school; Matthew's friends started studying and working on the Continent, as the stores in Valletta filled with new kinds of chocolates and trinkets and clothes. "The change is amazing, if you think about it—it's like physically joining a landmass," Paul said.

Daphne told her children that the threat of returning to systemic corruption was mitigated by supranational safeguards. "The draw was that we were joining a community of well-governed nations," Paul said. But the inverse was also true; just as the E.U. purported to serve as a buffer against institutional backsliding, it also acquired the defects of its newest member states.

Refugees and migrants started arriving in Malta by boat from North Africa. Daphne defended the E.U.'s asylum law, as her countrymen advocated sinking the boats at sea. The phrase "Daphne sucks black cock" appeared in spray paint on a wall in Bidnija. Then the arson attacks began—on a human-rights lawyer's car and on the cars of people who worked for a Jesuit refugee service. One of the Caruana Galizias' dogs disappeared. Another was shot. Paul, who was in high school, returned home late one night to find that a

group of men had tried to burn down the house. They had stacked Molotov cocktails in tires and set them alight against glass patio doors overlooking the valley.

Daphne's sons attended university in Malta, then moved away. Matthew developed news apps for the *Financial Times*, then followed a girlfriend to Costa Rica, where he built Web sites for investigative-reporting outlets. Andrew joined Malta's foreign service, and worked in embassies in Berlin and New Delhi. Paul moved to London and pursued a Ph.D. in economics.

Daphne's world grew smaller, madder, more constricting. In a country that was ninety-five per cent Catholic and hadn't legalized divorce, she wrote that she'd rather sip prosecco than go to church on Easter Sunday. "The harassment changes with technology," she noted, shortly before her death. Fewer ranting phone calls to the house, fewer envelopes filled with shit. An old man sent typewritten letters, which Daphne shared with the boys: "I used to tell them, 'Look, the crazy old man wrote again.' And eventually he must have died, because they stopped."

As the threats shifted online, devoted readers tried to help. A breeder of Neapolitan mastiffs gave her a new guard dog. But an aging bandit who lived nearby said that the dog was too easily won over with treats. "Signora, you need a goose," he advised.

One day in March, 2008, when Matthew was in Bidnija, Daphne decided to set up a blog. She had grown frustrated with the editorial constraints at the local paper, so Matthew helped her create a WordPress site. Her first post, "Zero Tolerance for Corruption," was a critique of the Labour Party leader which ran close to four thousand words. The post drew so much attention that the server crashed. Six days later, Malta held its general election. Labour lost.

★ WORLD'S MOST OBSCURE ★
CHRISTMAS SONGS

~featuring~

★ BONSAI
TANNENBAUM

★ OFF-WHITE
CHRISTMAS

★ SANTA'S
GOT SHINGLES

and

★ GRANNY'S
BÛCHE DE NOËL



R.C.

Later that year, Joseph Muscat ascended to the role of Labour leader—a move that placed him back in Daphne’s crosshairs. He had reacted to Malta’s E.U. accession by reversing his position and becoming one of the Labour Party’s representatives to the European Parliament. Daphne vilified him, for this and other fumbles, in an increasingly vituperative tone. In his first month as Labour leader, she described him as a “cocky shrimp” who was “already proving that his party has promoted him beyond his abilities.” He was, she wrote, a “quintessential empty vessel,” his voice a “nasal whine, which makes him sound like a twerp protesting that he’s been waiting too long in the queue at a nightclub for a vodka-cranberry juice.” Muscat’s supporters were “sub-literate,” his wife’s behavior like that of “the worst sort of vulgar, common and pushy person,” she wrote. “And his aides—oh dear, his aides—don’t really have that much going on upstairs.” The Labour Party portrayed her as a partisan hack. But her attacks were indiscriminate; she once dedicated a post to her sudden realization that Muscat’s opponent—whom she also despised—bore a “truly astonishing resemblance” to a beluga whale.

Muscat set about trying to modernize the Party platform by making it socially liberal and Eurocentric, and in the next few years he won over many of Malta’s youth. He campaigned in favor of bringing women into the workforce and legalizing divorce, and—after a divorce bill narrowly passed, in 2011—he voiced support for gay rights.

In 2013, Muscat ran for Prime Minister on a pledge to reduce energy costs by at least twenty-five per cent, through the construction of a new power station near the island’s southern harbor. Malta’s electricity came from heavy fuel oil. Muscat’s proposed station would run on liquid natural gas, which is cheaper and cleaner. At a campaign event, a woman who lived near the old power station told him that her husband had died of cancer, and that eight of her grandchildren were asthmatic. “She brought tears to my eyes,” Muscat told the press. “Under my watch, I will close this cancer-and-asthma factory. We have to save these people. I don’t want to hear of one child who gets sick.”

By then, Daphne’s blog was getting more than half a million visitors each day—more than the population of Malta. The night before the election, a homicide detective named Keith Arnaud was sent to arrest Daphne at home.

Under Maltese law, news outlets were prohibited from publishing election-related content within twenty-four hours of a vote, and Daphne had just mocked Muscat on her blog. Upon her release, she told reporters, “You don’t expect to be in an E.U. member state and have the police investigating and interrogating people for writing about politics on the Internet.”

The next morning, Labour won the election by the widest margin in post-colonial Maltese history, and Muscat became Prime Minister. He was thirty-nine.

In early 2016, Matthew was living in Berlin, working with the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists on an unprecedented data leak. Someone with access to the e-mail servers at Mossack Fonseca, a Panamanian legal firm, had turned over to reporters more than eleven million documents exposing the inner workings of the global offshore financial system. The resulting investigations of the documents, known as the Panama Papers, triggered protests and money-laundering inquiries on six continents. “This is how most money in the world is stored, and how it flows,” Matthew said. “Offshore banking, offshore shell companies, offshore accountancy firms. Underground rivers. When you see a bank branch on the side of the road, what you’re looking at is really just the hair on the top of the head.” Under Muscat’s leadership, Malta had become an epicenter of such activity, drawing in vast sums of foreign money while turning a blind eye to its provenance.

The I.C.I.J. partnered with more than a hundred journalists from eighty countries to sort through the information. But Matthew, who reviewed the files after he was hired to build the Web site for the project, advised the consortium against sharing documents with Maltese reporters. “I identified very early on that the managing director of the *Times of Malta* was in a criminal relationship with Keith Schembri,” Muscat’s chief of staff, he told me. “It was a classic kickback scheme.” Schembri, who owned a printing-and-paper company, overcharged the *Times* for services, and directed a portion of the profits to a shell company owned by the newspaper’s managing director. (The director, who resigned soon afterward, denies any wrongdoing.)

Matthew called his mother and told her that he had discovered in the data that Schembri had a shell company of his own. So did Muscat's energy minister, Konrad Mizzi, who was now in charge of the power-station project that had been central to the Labour Party's campaign. A Maltese accountant had begun setting up the companies in Panama five days after Muscat won.

Daphne had felt for years that the power station made no sense. The previous government had approved the construction of an undersea cable to Sicily, which now connected Malta directly to the European power grid. Muscat's power station, she thought, was superfluous, costly, and unreliable—and was likely set up as a kind of cover for distributing taxpayer funds to political allies and friends. “In Malta we take it for granted that people and businesses finance political parties so as to have their ‘stooge’ in government and get a return on their investment,” she had written a few months after the election. “Elsewhere, this is called corruption.”

Matthew asked his mother to remain quiet until April, when the I.C.I.J. planned to release the Panama Papers. But, in early February, after a tense encounter with Mizzi, the energy minister, she posted a cryptic note about members of the Labour Party wearing Panama hats. A leak turned into a flood of new tips. Then the dam began to break.

There were trusts in New Zealand, companies in the British Virgin Islands, projects in Montenegro, secret accounts in Shanghai and Dubai belonging to members of the Maltese élite. “It’s like a Russian doll—you open the one on top and there’s another one underneath,” Matthew told me.

A third shell company, Egrant, was established at the same time as those owned by the men in Muscat’s Cabinet. But the accountant had taken special care to hide the identity of Egrant’s owner. In the accountant’s e-mail correspondence with his Panamanian counterparts—in which Schembri and Mizzi are identified by name—he said that he could reveal the name of the person who owned Egrant only via an encrypted call.

“How unbelievably corrupt they are,” Daphne wrote. “And worse still, they were not tempted into corruption when they were already jaded in power, but actually got into power with the express purpose of being corrupt.” In a parliamentary declaration filed shortly after Mizzi took office, he had

overreported his Maltese bank balance by a quarter of a million euros, as if to preëmpt questions once the funds actually arrived. (Mizzi denies any financial misdeeds.)

With globalization, the country had become an attractive entry point to the European Union for dirty money. “If you allow a bank that’s operating as a laundromat to set up in Malta, it’s as good as setting it up in Germany or France,” Paul said. “Once illicit money crosses that border, that’s it—it’s in.” An Iranian bank owner apparently laundered funds and violated international sanctions through his branch in Valletta; Russian oligarchs bought Maltese passports, under an investment scheme launched by Muscat’s government. Muscat travelled to “citizenship seminars” in Beirut and Dubai to hawk passports.

In speeches, Muscat recited the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, which begins, “Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.” Daphne published her own version. “Henley, make me an instrument of your passport sales,” she wrote, referring to a global citizenship firm. “Where there is despair, let me profit from it; where there is darkness, let me give it a banking licence.”

The successive scandals had little effect on Muscat’s popularity. He stood by Schembri and Mizzi, and dismissed questions about the ownership of Egrant. When a local reporter asked Muscat if Malta’s reputation was being tarnished by the findings in the Panama Papers, he replied that, if anything, Malta’s reputation was being tarnished from Bidnija.

For almost a year, Daphne voiced her suspicions that Egrant belonged to Muscat. Then a whistle-blower from a bank told Daphne that Egrant belonged to Muscat’s wife, Michelle. Soon afterward, the whistle-blower fled to Greece. The lead investigator at Malta’s Financial Intelligence Analysis Unit told his bosses that he could find out who owned Egrant within seventy-two hours, if he was given access to the right tax returns, bank statements, and Labour Party files. The next morning, he was fired. Meanwhile, Malta’s attorney general discouraged the police from investigating any matters originating from the Panama Papers. (An independent review by a Maltese magistrate found no evidence linking the Muscats to Egrant—but was also unable to identify the owner.)

“One of the effects of Muscat kind of eating away at our institutions was that it sent people to my mother,” Paul said. Bureaucrats whose internal reports ought to have triggered police investigations saw them quashed instead. So they leaked to Daphne, transforming her from a columnist into the island’s most prolific investigative reporter. She didn’t always nail the details, but she was uniquely unafraid.

The Labour Party erected billboards with Daphne’s face on them. “People began to recognize me who had never recognized me before,” Daphne wrote. “They pulled down their car windows to shout abuse.” On the Party’s TV station, Glenn Bedingfield, a government official and a close friend of Muscat’s, hosted a show that regularly portrayed Daphne as a deranged, cackling witch, with a hooked nose and warts, taking swigs from a whiskey bottle as she typed up batty screeds. Bedingfield also started a blog, posting from the Office of the Prime Minister. He published photos of Daphne sent in by the public, making her life on the island intolerable. He wrote about her more than a thousand times. “It was like being in prison,” Paul said. “The last time she went to the beach, people took pictures of her and doctored the photos so that her thighs were larger, her arms were flabbier.” Daphne’s friends were harassed. When she found a café where people left her alone, it was raided by the police, under the guise of an audit. The officers smashed glasses and threw around furniture.



A memorial to Daphne, in front of a monument to Faith, Fortitude, and Civilization. Photograph by Gaia Squarci for The New Yorker

During the summer of 2017, Daphne’s son Andrew was abruptly recalled to Malta from his post in New Delhi. Around that time, he said, an increasing number of inquiries at the Embassy in New Delhi had been about buying Maltese passports. “It was humiliating—Malta was becoming an embarrassment,” he said.

Daphne saw Andrew’s removal as an act of retribution for her work. She stopped writing for two weeks. According to Paul, she nearly quit altogether. “The more frustrated she grew at the state of our country, the more beautiful our garden became, the more trees she planted,” Daphne’s husband, Peter, told E.U. officials. “Daphne created, in the words of one of my sons, a parallel world of beauty in a country that slipped further and further away from the European values and norms of behavior which she held so closely.”

Giovanni Bonello, a former Maltese judge who served on the European Court of Human Rights, predicted Daphne’s death. Later, when Paul asked him how he had known, Bonello replied that a constitutional system is only as strong as the people who implement its checks and balances. “There have always been abuses—it’s not as if the previous governments were immaculate,” he said. But now the weaknesses were being exploited “by people who don’t care about integrity.” Once impunity becomes the standard, he said, “the lone voice crying in the wilderness is standing out for assassination.”

Daphne wrote her final sentences minutes before the explosion: “There are crooks everywhere you look now. The situation is desperate.”

Days later, in Marsa, a shipyard slum southwest of Valletta, a thirty-eight-year-old taxi driver was panicking. He had just seen in the news that an F.B.I. team had flown into Malta, to help the police sift through the evidence connected with Daphne’s death.

Melvin Theuma held no animosity toward Daphne. He couldn’t understand English, and he’d never read anything she’d written. Their lives had intersected only once before: Daphne’s tires had been slashed near the Hilton at Portomaso, a private complex of luxury apartments, where Theuma had a reserved taxi spot. He saw her there, stranded, and offered her a lift home.

It is not easy to get a taxi spot at the Hilton, and in that way, at least, Theuma regarded himself as a lucky man. He grew up fatherless, watching the Marsa shipyard fall into disrepair, as money and development poured into other parts of the island. Boats rusted, and the population drifted away.

In his mid-twenties, Theuma took bets at Marsa's horse-racing track, where he befriended Yorgen Fenech, an oligarch's grandson, who was roughly the same age. Before long, Theuma was working as Fenech's personal driver.

A decade passed; Fenech launched several business ventures and became one of Malta's richest men. Theuma revered him. He cooked for Fenech and his friends at a farmhouse in the countryside, and shuttled around his wife and kids. In return, Theuma was awarded the taxi spot at the Hilton, and a glimpse into the life of a man who owned two yachts. As a schoolboy, Fenech had idolized Silvio Berlusconi, the Italian premier and television magnate. "It is not just his wealth and popularity that fascinates me, but his personality and charisma and the way he made it to the top," Fenech wrote, when he was twelve. Fenech knew Muscat well—they had a WhatsApp group chat with Schembri, Muscat's chief of staff. With Muscat's election, in 2013, Fenech became a key stakeholder in the power station.

One day, early in the spring of 2017, Fenech summoned Theuma to a restaurant in Portomaso, and asked if he knew how to get in touch with George the Chinese—the street name for George Degiorgio, who was known in Marsa as a hit man.

"I know him, but I'm not in touch with him," Theuma replied.

"Get his contact," Fenech said. "Get him to kill Daphne Caruana Galizia." He added that Daphne was going to publish damaging information about his uncle Raymond, who presided over the family business empire and whose name appeared in the Panama Papers more than fifty times.

Theuma called Degiorgio's brother Alfred, who had only one question: "Does this guy pay?"

The Degiorgio brothers wanted a hundred and fifty thousand euros. Fenech agreed, but then told Theuma to have the hit men stand down. Muscat was

up for reelection that June. It was as if Fenech thought it too risky to kill Daphne before another term was secured.

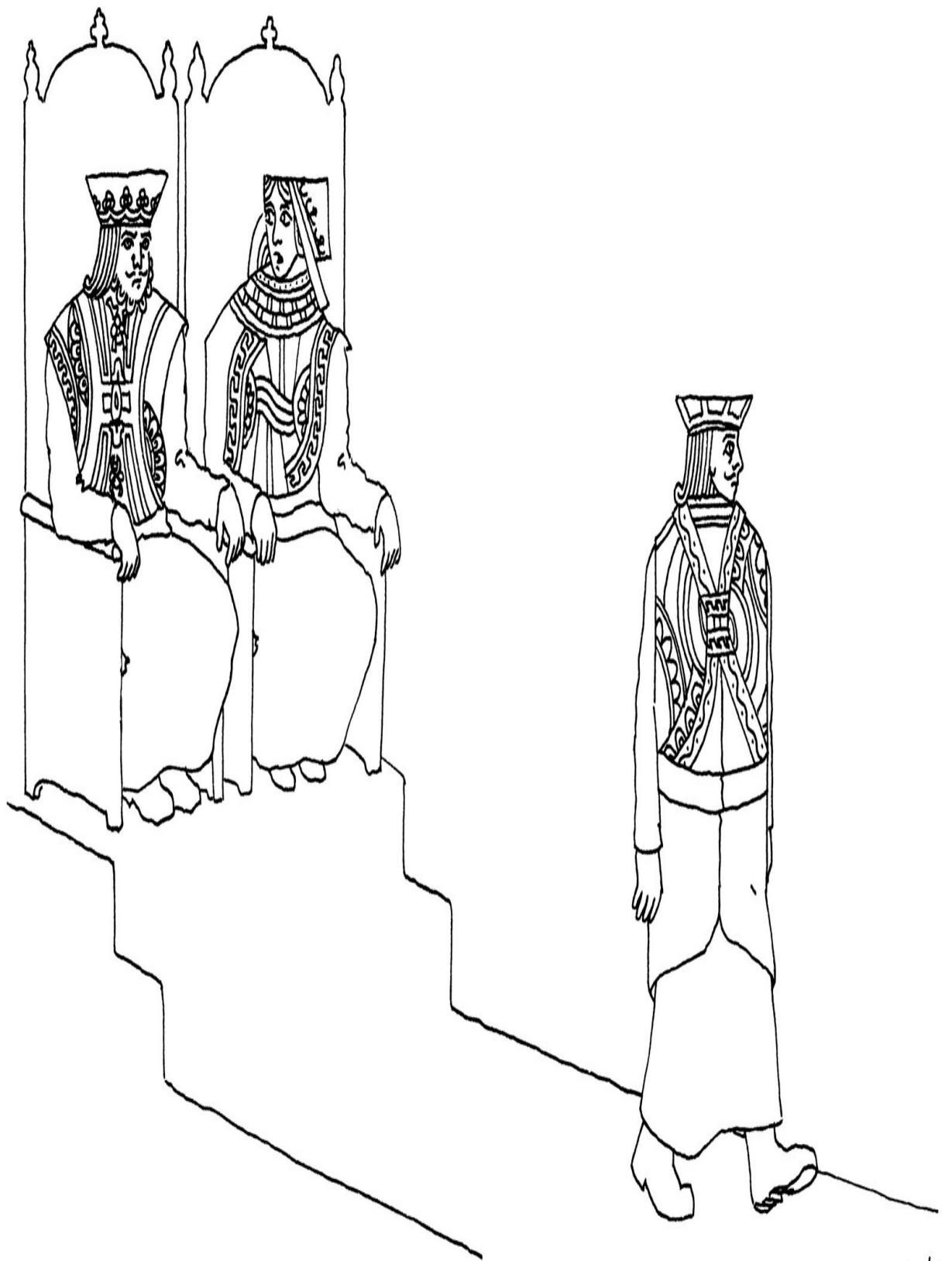
In May, Fenech told Theuma to go to the Office of the Prime Minister, where he was greeted by Schembri. After Schembri gave him a brief tour, they posed for a photograph together. Then Schembri called a subordinate and told him to talk to Theuma about a job.

The interview lasted two minutes. “I already have a job,” Theuma said. Nevertheless, he was put on the government payroll. “I never even went into work,” he later said. “I have no idea what my job was.” But Theuma was awestruck. He felt as if he had been welcomed into the center of state power. Muscat’s chief of staff had made him an espresso. No one mentioned Daphne or the pending contract with the Degiorgios, but Theuma interpreted the fake job as payment for his role as the middleman, and as assurance that the government had his back.

In June, Muscat won a second term. That night, Fenech called Theuma, drunk. The hit was back on, he said. “Move.”

The Degiorgio brothers trailed Daphne and her husband, and surveilled their house. They tried to establish her patterns of movement, but she mostly stayed at home. They bought a rifle and a scope, and set up sandbags to stabilize the weapon against a wall across the valley, where they had a clear view into her living room. But it was a long shot, and they decided on a car bomb instead.

As summer dragged on, Fenech urged Theuma to get the Degiorgios to hurry up, saying that he’d tied up every loose end on a deal—every one but Daphne. Theuma realized that Fenech wasn’t doing this to protect his uncle—he was doing it to protect himself. The Degiorgios killed her, with the help of an accomplice; Theuma handed them a hundred and fifty thousand euros in cash.



"What the hell is a jack?"

Hankin

Now, after learning that the F.B.I. was involved in the investigation, Theuma rushed to Malta's only skyscraper, where, on the twenty-first floor, he found Fenech meeting with an Azerbaijani oligarch who had a stake in Muscat's power station. "I'm scared," Theuma said. Fenech assured him that the Americans would play only a supporting role in the investigation—the Maltese police would handle the case.

The F.B.I. team easily identified the Degiorgios from cell-tower data. Although the Degiorgios had used burner phones, they had travelled to Bidnija with their personal phones, too, which pinged off the same towers.

Five weeks after the murder, Fenech called Theuma. "We have a big problem," he said. A source with total access to the investigation had passed along some information: the F.B.I. had found the detonating signal command, "REL 1 = ON."

Fenech told Theuma to notify the Degiorgios that they would be arrested, along with their accomplice. The brothers tossed their phones in the harbor and waited calmly for the raid. A week later, on December 4th, the Maltese Army and police stormed the Degiorgios' hideout—an abandoned dockside potato shed, with fish skeletons dangling from the ceiling. The brothers pleaded not guilty, and refused to answer any questions from the police.

Muscat touted the arrests as a major breakthrough in the pursuit of justice. Daphne's sons made it known that they considered them to be no more significant than finding a gun or a knife.

For the next several months, Muscat's staffers disseminated conspiracy theories about Daphne's family. Why did Matthew park the car outside the gate at night? they asked. Did he have a hand in the plot? The campaign escalated after the Caruana Galizias refused to give the Maltese police Daphne's laptop, which contained her correspondence with confidential sources. "Why do these people have something to hide?" Glenn Bedingfield wrote on his blog. "Is there interest simply in leaving this murder unsolved, so that they will be able to blame the Labour party?" Professionally printed banners, in English and Maltese, appeared on a highway and a busy overpass: "*WHY IS SOMEONE HIDING DAPHNE'S LAPTOP?*" Schembri

called up reporters and, after being granted anonymity, filled their newspapers with disinformation and lies. On social media, Muscat's officials used Daphne's final words as a coda to their insinuations about her family: "#thesituationisdesperate."

Daphne's sons rented an old house in the English countryside. The Committee to Protect Journalists subsidized the cost of security training for them, and Daphne's sister Corinne contributed, too. For several days, a group of former S.A.S. soldiers trained them in emergency first aid, defensive driving, surveillance detection, and how to search a car for bombs. "You feel like you need to do something—almost, in a way, not to think about what happened," Paul said. "So we started. And, really, from that day, we just never let up."

In the months before Daphne's death, a whistle-blower from Electrogas, the consortium behind Muscat's power-station project, had been relaying e-mails and other documents to her from the company, practically in real time. Matthew had helped his mother receive and sort through the files, "but I didn't know who the whistle-blower was," he told me. After the murder, Matthew tracked down the source, and brought to the U.K. a hard drive containing the leaked documents.

Reporters from the *Guardian* and Reuters visited the country house. Then Daphne's sons went to London to sort through their mother's investigative materials with a group of journalists whom they trusted more than the Maltese police. The lead was a French reporter named Laurent Richard, who had set up a nonprofit called Forbidden Stories, to complete the investigations of journalists who are imprisoned or killed on the job. For the past several years, his mission had been to counter the incentive underlying the crime—to show that, Richard wrote, "even if you succeed in stopping a single messenger, you will not stop the message." Forbidden Stories launched the Daphne Project, and forty-five reporters from eighteen publications in fifteen countries went to work.

"Because Malta is so endemically corrupt, you can't tell yourself that the police are going to be doing their best," Paul said. "You can't tell yourself that the magistrate is on it. Any moment you spend away, there is, on the other side, a force pushing against you."

Matthew and Andrew reached out to Bill Browder, an American financier and political activist who had successfully lobbied Congress for sanctions against the Russian government, after it detained and killed his friend and colleague Sergei Magnitsky. “Do at least three things a day to annoy them,” Browder advised. “There are three of you. It shouldn’t be hard.” He noted that, after the Russian journalists [Boris Nemtsov](#) and Anna Politkovskaya were murdered, the Council of Europe, the Continent’s main human-rights body, appointed a special rapporteur to scrutinize the Russian system.

Andrew used his diplomatic contacts to prepare for the council’s next session, in Strasbourg. “Obviously, it shouldn’t be the case that every family member of a murder victim should have to completely suspend their lives simply to make sure that a process works as it should,” Paul said. The work took a toll on his health. “My wife was looking at me like a ghost,” he continued. “My father was in a panic. None of his sons were working.” Each time Paul visited his brothers, who had moved into a former orphanage in Saint-Malo, “Matthew was always in the same clothes,” he said.

On the train to Strasbourg, Paul drafted a motion to appoint a special rapporteur for Malta, while Matthew consulted a lawyer over the phone. “My brothers and I aren’t an N.G.O.—we’d never done anything like this before,” Matthew said. “I went from programming Java to this.”

They had one afternoon to collect signatures from council members for the motion. “We were like tobacco-company lobbyists—knocking on doors, one after the other, going around to every member state, talking about institutional failings in Malta,” Paul said. “By the end of the day, because we handed out so many papers, we just didn’t know how many signatures we had.”

The brothers all slept in one hotel room. That night, they got a message saying that their motion had received more signatures than any in the council’s history. It was the first time that any country besides Russia had been assigned a special rapporteur.

“The rule of law in Malta is seriously undermined by the extreme weakness of its system of checks and balances,” the rapporteur later noted. He added that corrupt officials “enjoy impunity, under the personal protection of Prime

Minister Muscat,” and called on Malta, under threat of sanctions, to establish an independent public inquiry into the circumstances leading up to Daphne’s death. “If Malta cannot or will not correct its weaknesses, European institutions must intervene.”

Muscat had sued Daphne for writing that his wife was the owner of the Egrant shell company. Now he refused to drop the case. In accordance with Maltese law, the liabilities for that lawsuit and forty-seven others were transferred to her heirs. The family faced potential responsibility for nearly half a million euros, for cases in which the sources were confidential and the main witness was dead.

The sons established a charitable foundation to raise money for their legal defense and to train local journalists in investigative techniques. Paul signed a contract to write a biography of his mother, with all proceeds going to the foundation.

In March, 2018, Matthew returned to Malta and printed three questions on an enormous banner: “Why aren’t Keith Schembri and Konrad Mizzi in prison, Police Commissioner? Why isn’t your wife being investigated by the police, Joseph Muscat? Who paid for Daphne Caruana Galizia to be blown up after she asked these questions?” He hung it outside a second-story apartment that his family owns on Old Bakery Street, in the heart of Valletta’s tourist district. The local planning authority tore it down—an act that Matthew reported to the police as theft. He printed and hung another banner, with an additional line: “This is our second banner—our first got stolen.”



Daphne Caruana Galizia. Photograph by Pippa Zammit Cutajar

In a piazza across from the courthouse, activists made a memorial to Daphne with candles and flowers and photographs. Each night, for the next several hundred nights, the justice minister ordered its removal; each morning, the activists built it anew.

The lead homicide investigator was Keith Arnaud—the man who had arrested Daphne on the eve of the 2013 election. He and his colleague, Inspector Kurt Zahra, were unfamiliar with the intricacies of money laundering, politics, and corruption. They investigated gang incidents, domestic violence—normal murders. An old man in Gozo smacked his wife with a fish; she fell down the stairs and died, and he cooked and ate the murder weapon. In the four years before Daphne’s assassination, there were five car bombings on the island, all of which remained unsolved. But those victims had been involved in fuel smuggling, and the prevailing attitude among Malta’s élites was that it wasn’t so bad if the criminals just killed one another. Besides, with the Degiorgio brothers in custody, the bombings had stopped.

Malta has a four-hundred-year history of overlooking murder when convenient. In 1607, Caravaggio sought refuge in Valletta, after beating a man to death in Rome; the Knights of Malta welcomed and knighted him, in return for a few paintings—two of which now hang in Valletta’s biggest cathedral.

Arnaud and Zahra would look for evidence; what was done with it was beyond their control. The Degiorgios needed money for a lawyer. In early 2018, Arnaud and Zahra noticed that a series of random visitors were showing up at the jail with cash. It seemed that they were all part of a chain of intermediaries, each of whom knew only who had given him the envelope, and whom to give it to next. The last man in the chain had no idea where the money was from—only that he had to get a receipt.

Before long, the Degiorgios had hired one of the most expensive lawyers in the country. Arnaud and Zahra listened to the brothers’ phone calls and discovered that, when they talked with their brother Mario, there was often another man in the room; after some pleasantries, Mario would pass him the phone.

The police set up surveillance outside Mario's home. One day, a white taxi pulled up, and a slightly pudgy man in his late thirties went inside. After a phone call with the brothers in jail, the man climbed back into the taxi. The cops followed the taxi to the Hilton at Portomaso, where the man, Melvin Theuma, met with his boss, Yorgen Fenech.

A few weeks later, Joseph Muscat signed off on wiretap requests for Theuma and Fenech, which only he, as Prime Minister, could authorize. Fenech found out almost immediately, and informed Theuma that they had to start communicating through encrypted apps. Once, Theuma told a friend over an open line that he was upset with Fenech. Hours later, Fenech scolded him for his carelessness; Fenech was even getting updates on Theuma's wiretapped calls. He forced Theuma to call the friend back and say, for the wiretaps, that the spat concerned a taxi spot at the Hilton.

Theuma felt deeply exposed. Fenech was close to the deputy police commissioner, Silvio Valletta, who was overseeing the murder investigation. Valletta was a regular guest at Fenech's country house, where Theuma once barbecued for them. After Theuma was identified as the middleman, Fenech took Valletta as his guest to soccer matches in England and Ukraine.

To Theuma, Fenech wasn't just close to power—he was power. Whatever Theuma learned about the police investigation was filtered through his boss. He began to see himself as a loose end, a mosquito waiting to be squashed.

Theuma drafted a new will. He started recording his meetings with Fenech, with his mobile phone on airplane mode and hidden in his sock. During one conversation, Theuma learned that, although Schembri appeared to be directing the coverup, he probably hadn't known about the murder until afterward. "When I told Schembri, he went cold," Fenech said. According to Fenech, Schembri replied, "You should have come to me before you did what you did."

Theuma started drinking heavily and taking antidepressants. Schembri dispatched one of Muscat's bodyguards, a former member of the intelligence service named Kenneth Camilleri, to check on Theuma. By way of encouragement, Camilleri told Theuma to pass along to the hit men that they

would soon be granted bail, plus a million euros each. But Theuma only grew more paranoid.

In early 2019, Fenech attended a small party for Muscat's forty-fifth birthday, at a hunting lodge in the Maltese countryside. Fenech gave Muscat three bottles of Château Pétrus, one from Muscat's birth year and two from that of his twin daughters. Then, according to Fenech, Muscat privately told him to be careful—Theuma was unravelling, and speaking loosely on the phone.

Through the dark Web, Fenech tried to buy cyanide and a pistol with a silencer, but neither transaction went through. In November, 2019, more than two years after Daphne's murder, police officers surrounded Theuma's car. He had been warned, weeks earlier, that the police were going to charge him with money laundering, for his role in an underground lottery, and then question him about the murder once he was in custody. He'd arranged to bribe an officer to bury the case. Now, in a panic, he noticed that the crooked cop wasn't there.

Theuma grabbed an ice-cream box from the car. He insisted on taking it with him to the station, and said that he needed to open it in front of Inspector Arnaud. In the interrogation room, Arnaud watched him pry open the box, sobbing, and empty it. It contained the photograph of Theuma standing next to Schembri at the Prime Minister's office, a pile of flash drives with his secret recordings of Fenech, and a handwritten note:

I Melvin Theuma am providing this information that I was the middleman in the case concerning Ms. Caruana Galizia. I am relaying this proof so that you will know who hired me and paid for the bomb. I am doing this because I realized that these two people, Yurgen Fenech and Keith Schembri il-Kasco, were working to get rid of me as well. So I prepared this proof so that if I am eliminated you will know the entire story.

The journalists working with Daphne's files found that the contracts underlying Muscat's power station made little sense, except as a way of taking public money and distributing it to shareholders. "They were just

robbing everyone,” Matthew told me. “It was ‘Let’s just stick a tap in this giant barrel of liquid money that is Malta, and just drain it.’ ”

Azerbaijan’s state oil company was cut in on the deal, leaving Juliette Garside, an investigative reporter at the *Guardian*, with the impression that the Azerbaijanis were laundering money and setting aside kickbacks for Maltese officials. Other stakeholders, like Fenech, took “success fees” in the millions, for milestones as meaningless as passing a contract from one entity to the next. “Even when you look at the company itself, it’s just a shell,” Matthew said. “They have maybe four staff. Four people? We’re talking about a power station here—a country’s main source of power.”

Daphne hadn’t nailed down the full scale of corruption, but she had got close. “I have discovered that this clique is using a company called 17 Black, which is incorporated in the United Arab Emirates,” she wrote. The company was set up with the primary purpose of transferring about two million euros to Schembri’s and Mizzi’s Panamanian shell companies. But, she continued, “the ultimate beneficial ownership of 17 Black is concealed.”

Now Stephen Grey, of Reuters, discovered that the owner of 17 Black was Yorgen Fenech. “He was the éminence grise,” Matthew told me. “We could see in the leaked e-mails that this guy was controlling everything. Every time a problem came up, the other directors and managers would tell him, ‘Yorgen, we need you to contact a minister.’ They all deferred to him, for everything.



"There's one home in this area within your price range, but it has a mouse."

“You have to look at how serendipitous the whole situation is,” Matthew added. Unconnected leaks, from different years and continents, contained independent fragments of the over-all scheme. “Imagine how much we didn’t find out, all the stuff that hasn’t been leaked. Mossack Fonseca isn’t even the biggest law firm in Panama!”

Matthew has continued to investigate shell companies and financial crime, and is campaigning for the dissolution of Electrogas, the company behind the power station. “People seem to think of businesses as a kind of force of nature,” he told me. “What can we do to, for example, make sure that Electrogas does not continue to profit off murder and corruption? Almost nothing. The company is a monopoly.” He gestured to a lamp in the corner. “Every second that that lamp is on, it’s money being sent to Yorgen Fenech, his family,” and the project’s other shareholders. “Am I expected to continue doing this for the rest of my life? Continue paying money to the people whose corruption led directly to my mother’s murder?” (Electrogas denies allegations of corruption.)

By the beginning of 2017, Electrogas had burned through a six-hundred-million-euro loan from the Maltese state. “Everyone was looking at these things in isolation, except my mum,” Matthew said. Had Daphne been able to complete her work, “they wouldn’t have been able to get a new guarantee. The European Union would have raised all these questions about the legality of it. They badly needed a new deal by the end of the year, to refinance the loan. So what did they do? Murder my mother, and then, literally weeks afterward, they signed a new deal.”

One night, before Theuma’s arrest was made public, Muscat called Schembri to discuss Fenech. Then Schembri called Fenech, well after midnight. They spoke for about twenty minutes. After the call, Schembri disposed of his phone. Fenech grabbed twenty-one *SIM* cards and seven thousand euros in cash, and boarded one of his yachts. He set off in the direction of Sicily, but was intercepted by Malta’s armed forces and placed under house arrest.

Fenech had long suffered from anxiety, and had recently spent time at his doctor’s house in Gozo, where he mixed sedatives and cocaine and passed out mumbling. Now he had a panic attack, and the doctor set off for

Fenech's house in Portomaso, with an Ativan prescription. Before he arrived, the doctor received a call from Schembri, who told him to come first to his house, where Schembri handed him a wad of papers to deliver to Fenech. When the doctor reached Portomaso, he tried to hand the papers to one of Fenech's lawyers, but Fenech snatched them away, fuming. As the doctor left, he heard Fenech mutter, "If I go down, they're all going down with me."

The papers from Schembri contained an elaborate, typewritten backstory, intended to frame another government minister for Daphne's murder. The document ran for more than four pages and showed intimate knowledge of nearly every aspect of the investigation, down to the contents of Theuma's secret recordings. The script would have cast plausible deniability over otherwise incontrovertible evidence—except that it was discovered by the police, and both Fenech and his doctor later testified to its provenance. (Schembri denies writing the document, and pretty much everything else.) By that point, Fenech had edited Schembri's script, crossing out some phrases and substituting his own.

For the first several minutes of Fenech's police interrogation, he sat in sullen silence, his arms crossed. He had asked for a pardon; Muscat had rejected it. Then Zahra asked about the murder of Daphne, and Fenech spoke. "What I have to say, for sure, for sure, is that everything started with Mr. Keith Schembri," he said. He wore thick, black-framed glasses and a black turtleneck, and spoke in a gruff voice. "And there is another person who knows that Keith Schembri ordered this killing," he added.

"And who is this other person?" Zahra asked.

"The Prime Minister, Joseph Muscat."

Muscat denies any involvement in the coverup. On the day of Fenech's arrest, thousands of people marched to Parliament, shouting Daphne's final words: "The situation is desperate." They chanted that their leaders were corrupt, that they were assassins, that they were a mafia. It was as if Daphne's death had proved what her columns had only alleged. "For the first time, everyone understood that this was a state-sponsored assassination," Paul told me.

Paul had returned to Malta the night before; now he and his brothers joined the protesters in besieging Parliament. “The plan was to wait for ministers to leave Parliament, and pelt them with eggs and coins, and shout at them,” Andrew recalled. “But then someone came running to the crowd and said, ‘They’re escaping from the back!’ ” Politicians scurried into a former moat surrounding the fortress of Valletta and hid beneath a bridge as their constituents called them “rats” and “cowards” and tried to spit on them. “Think about what that does to a public, to see your governing class reduced to this,” Paul said.

Paul was making a podcast about his mother’s murder, and had arrived in Valletta with a producer. “It’s the first sense of real hope and justice that I’ve felt in two years—and that feels good—but there’s a part of me that’s angrier than I have ever been,” he said. “They sued her. They continued suing us after she died. They kept denying it. They kept accusing us of defaming them. They said that Matthew had a hand in her assassination. They said we were crazy. They said we were totally wrong. They said *we’re* corrupt. And to see them now, one by one, fall and rat on each other—it just, more than anything, makes me angry.”

Darkness fell. A ship’s anchor hit the seafloor and knocked the cable that brings electricity from Sicily. For the first time, Muscat’s new power station was required to power the whole country. Shop lights and street lamps flickered, then went out.

As the protests continued, Muscat convened his Cabinet for an emergency briefing from Inspector Arnaud. It lasted until three o’clock in the morning. “Every now and then, we’d see a minister in the window, drawing the curtains to see if we were still there,” Paul said. Then Muscat emerged, and the crowd erupted in boos. A volley of eggs splattered against his bodyguards as they hurried him into a car and out of Valletta. “It was one of these moments, I think, where a country sees their leader appearing very weak, and you know that they will never return from that moment,” Paul said.

Schembri resigned. Hours later, he was arrested. Then Konrad Mizzi resigned. Finally, Muscat did, too.

The contents of Fenech's phone have led to several new criminal investigations. (Fenech now denies any involvement in the murder, and his lawyers describe him as a victim of Schembri's and Theuma's deceit.) According to someone close to the inquiries, the contents of the phone, if released, would "bring the country to its knees."

One of Matthew's earliest memories is of his mother in the garden, handing him some pots and telling him to fill them with soil. He now lives in the family home with his girlfriend, Gabriella, and his father, and in their spare time he and Gabriella maintain Daphne's garden. When he moved back, in October, 2018, the garden was a mess. "A lot of things had died," he said. "There were weeds everywhere."

In the past two years, they have planted some five hundred carob, Aleppo pine, Italian pine, olive, and oak trees. There are myrtle, pomegranate, almond, and banana trees, Mediterranean fan palms, and more than four hundred types of baobab.

Behind the house, near Matthew's childhood bedroom, stands a mock-orange tree, knotted and gnarled, with an enormous vertical scar in the base and holes tracing the insides of the branches. When the group of men tried to burn down the house, about fifteen years ago, fire and fuel spilled off the patio, and flames climbed up the tree, which was only a sapling at the time. In the next few years, the sapling died, slowly, but as it did a new tree grew around it. What had caught fire is now completely gone. But you can still see the shape of it, cast in what has grown in its place. ♦

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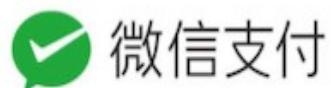
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Above & Beyond

- [The High-Wattage Holiday Lights of Dyker Heights](#)

[December 21, 2020 Issue](#)

The High-Wattage Holiday Lights of Dyker Heights

Since the mid-nineteen-eighties, the residents of the Brooklyn neighborhood have been turning their homes into dazzling displays between Thanksgiving and the New Year.

December 14, 2020



Photograph by Dave Krugman for *The New Yorker*

The tree at Rockefeller Center may have its own prime-time special, but for seasonal spectacle it's hard to compete with the lights of **Dyker Heights** (pictured). Since the mid-nineteen-eighties, the residents of this Brooklyn neighborhood have been turning their homes into high-wattage displays between Thanksgiving and the New Year. (The event has become so synonymous with Christmas in New York City that it's the theme of a holiday window at Saks Fifth Avenue this year.) Optimal viewing is between dusk and 9 *P.M.*

Annals of Medicine

- [When a Virus Is the Cure](#)

When a Virus Is the Cure

As bacteria grow more resistant to antibiotics, bacteriophage therapy is making a comeback.

By [Nicola Twilley](#)

December 14, 2020



Some years before Joseph Bunevacz came to America, and decades before he got sick, he taught the [Beatles](#) how to ski. Or so he told me when I visited him at his home, on the arid northeastern slopes of the mountains that separate Los Angeles from the Mojave Desert, to learn more about an experimental medical treatment that he was hoping to receive for a strange and persistent infection in his blood. His wife, Filomena, took me through his medical history, consulting a stack of yellow legal pads in which, for the past five years, she has recorded countless tests and treatments. Yet Bunevacz, a bright-eyed seventy-nine-year-old with a shock of white hair, wearing an official Hungarian Olympic tracksuit, just wanted to tell wild, improbable stories about his younger years.

Born in Hungary in 1941, he trained as an athlete in his teens, as a way, he said, of escaping Communism. Short and not particularly muscular, he opted for dinghy sailing, reasoning that a lack of homegrown competition (Hungary has no coast, after all) might enable him to qualify for the national team, compete overseas, and then defect to the West. In 1960, after a respectable performance at a regatta on Lake Chiemsee, in Germany, his plan succeeded. He ended up in Munich, working in a department store and selling newspapers in the evenings. One night a year or two later, as he tells it, he heard music—catchy, melodious, altogether irresistible—drifting out of a club. The band was performing again the following night, so he came back early and struck up a conversation with the four young Liverpudlians. He took them to a ski resort nearby, he told me, and it quickly emerged that winter sports were not yet part of their repertoire. “You don’t believe me!” he exclaimed. (He wasn’t wrong.)

A love of music, Bunevacz said, brought him to America before the sixties were over. After hearing the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson perform in a Munich church, he moved to Detroit, and then travelled around the country working in hotels—in the kitchen, then behind the desk, and, eventually, as a manager at the Sheraton in Waikiki, at the time the world’s largest. There, he told me, he met the crooner Al Martino and the jazz pianist Oscar Peterson. He reminisced about later travels with the Hungarian National Olympic Committee, and lectured me on the best way to make strudel, smoked Hungarian sausage, and the fruit brandy *pálinka*.

Whenever Bunevacz paused for breath, Filomena, a retired nurse, filled me in on the dates of his various scans, his handful of colonoscopies, his gall-bladder operation, his bile-duct stent, the surgical removal of his upper colon, and his trips to urgent care. “Do you know how many blood cultures they have done on this man?” she said. “When I was a nurse, the patients who were this sick—they died.”

Despite his irrepressible good humor, Bunevacz is, indeed, very unwell. His case is also something of a medical mystery. His symptoms—fever, nausea, abdominal pain, and diarrhea—are easily explained: he is being poisoned by *E. coli* bacteria in his bloodstream. But it’s not clear what has been causing the infection to recur. When I saw him, Bunevacz had been going to his local emergency clinic every month, in order to receive huge doses of [antibiotics](#), but after each treatment ended the infection would return. For years, doctors from across the country have scanned him, probed him, and sliced him open to inspect or remove the tissue in which they suspect the *E. coli* may lurk. Nothing has made the slightest difference.

“Honestly, I would have thought he would have died from this a year ago,” Emily Blodget, his infectious-disease consultant at the University of Southern California’s Keck Hospital, told me. Bunevacz is an optimist by nature, but the cost—financial as well as personal—of the procedures, along with the recurring fevers and pain, not to mention the side effects of the antibiotics, have begun to seem overwhelming. “I would try anything,” he said, in a rare moment of seriousness.

Late last year, the Bunevaczes’ daughter came up with a new suggestion: an emergency treatment, not yet approved by the [F.D.A.](#), that had saved the life of a man in San Diego. “She called and said, ‘Mom, you have to get Dad to do phage therapy,’ ” Filomena told me. “P-H-A-G-E,” Bunevacz clarified, nodding. So Filomena asked Blodget whether he might be a candidate for this mysterious new medicine.

Phages, or bacteriophages, are viruses that infect only bacteria. Each kingdom of life—plants, animals, bacteria, and so on—has its own distinct complement of viruses. Animal and plant viruses have always received most of our scientific attention, because they pose a direct threat to our health, and that of our livestock and crops. The well-being of bacteria has,

understandably, been of less concern, yet the battle between viruses and bacteria is brutal: scientists estimate that phages cause a trillion trillion infections per second, destroying half the world's bacteria every forty-eight hours. As we are now all too aware, animal-specific viruses can mutate enough to infect a different animal species. But they will not attack bacteria, and bacteriophage viruses are similarly harmless to animals, humans included. Phage therapy operates on the principle that the enemy of our enemy could be our friend. If Bunevacz's doctors could find a virus that infected his particular strain of *E. coli*, it might succeed where antibiotics had failed.

"I'd heard of it," Blodget said, when I asked her how she'd responded to Filomena's question about phage therapy. "But in the past it was thought of as kind of fringe." Recently, though, she'd seen reports describing patients whose long-standing, sometimes life-threatening bacterial infections had been eradicated by phage. Last year, a paper published in *Nature Medicine* documented the role of phages in saving the life of a teen-age cystic-fibrosis patient in the U.K., who was stricken with a bacterial infection after a double lung transplant. Another case study described how phages helped save a Minnesota man's leg, which had become infected after knee surgery.

In the past five years, phage research has accelerated, with a proliferation of publications, conferences, and pharmaceutical-company investment. This enthusiasm reflects the ever-growing threat of [antibiotic-resistant bacteria](#) and a dearth of new antibiotics available to fight them. In 2016, the United Nations pronounced antibiotic resistance "the greatest and most urgent global risk." Without reliable antibiotics, even relatively routine surgery—Cesarean sections, hernia repair, appendix or tonsil removal—could be deadly. One analysis published in a leading British medical journal estimated that, without antibiotics, one in seven people undergoing routine hip-replacement surgery might die from a drug-resistant infection. Already, some seven hundred thousand people die each year as a direct result of drug-resistant infections, a number that is predicted to rise to ten million by 2050.



"Do you ever think about all the tabs you left open?"

The bacteria plaguing Bunevacz haven't yet developed resistance to the full range of antibiotics, but Blodget told me that they inevitably would. Soon after Thanksgiving last year, he was identified as a viable candidate for the therapy, and Blodget told him that she thought it was worth a try. "I said, I don't think it's going to hurt, and it can possibly help," she recalled. "I mean, at this point, there's nothing else to do."

The explanation for Blodget's initial hesitance can be found in phage therapy's complicated history. Although it is still considered an experimental treatment in the U.S., phages have been used to treat and prevent bacterial infections since their discovery, more than a century ago. For many American doctors, the obvious next question is: If they actually work, wouldn't we know by now?

Part of the problem with phages is that they were discovered almost too early—far in advance of the technology and scientific understanding required to use them effectively. In 1915, a British bacteriologist named Frederick Twort reported the existence of an infectious agent capable of killing bacteria, but he didn't pursue the finding. It was left to a French-Canadian scientist, Félix d'Hérelle, to name and describe phages, in 1917. Unfortunately, d'Hérelle was an autodidact working as a volunteer at the Institut Pasteur, in Paris. What's more, he recklessly claimed that phages were the basis of the human immune response, in direct opposition to the Nobel Prize-winning research of the institute's Brussels director, Jules Bordet, who had demonstrated that immunity was based on antibodies. D'Hérelle, with a lack of restraint that was apparently characteristic, described his superior's work as laden with "monstrosities." Bordet responded by championing Twort's prior observation of phages; as a result, the credit for the discovery remains controversial.

D'Hérelle realized that bacteriophages congregated wherever bacteria did, and that a particularly fruitful source was effluvia from sick humans. He would mix fetid water with meat bouillon, wait until any bacteria had fed and multiplied, then pass the murky soup through a porcelain filter fine enough to remove the bacteria and leave the phages. He then evaluated the filtered dregs by pouring them into a test tube filled with the target bacterium. The results were promising. After "proving" the safety of phages

by feeding them to himself, his young family, and some of his colleagues, d'Hérelle went on to inject them into the swollen lymph nodes of four people who had bubonic plague, effecting a seemingly miraculous cure. Phages were briefly all the rage: in 1925, Sinclair Lewis used them to tackle a fictional outbreak in his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, "Arrowsmith."

Still, Bordet and his admirers in the research establishment remained firmly opposed to the treatment, and many scientists considered the promise of phage therapy to be, at best, oversold—a perception that was not helped by d'Hérelle's own rhetoric when he travelled to India at the behest of the British government, pouring phages into wells and promising an end to cholera. At this time, no one had seen a phage. An *E. coli* bacterium, two-thousandths of a millimetre long, is almost as small as the shortest wavelengths of light visible to the human eye under magnification, whereas the phages that attack it are a tenth of that size, or a hundred times smaller than the smallest thing we can see. Only with the invention of the scanning electron microscope, in 1937, did phages become visible, but because the first images were published in Nazi Germany it was years before British and American scientists saw them. Even today, most scientists "see" a phage only by the destruction it has wreaked on bacteria in a petri dish—clear, glassy zones of death scattered across a soupy, yellowish microbial lawn.

In the thirties, d'Hérelle, who was sympathetic to Communist ideals, was invited by Stalin to help establish a center for phage-therapy research in Tbilisi, in the Soviet republic of Georgia. During the Second World War, Soviet and German military medics carried vials of phages as part of their field kits, to prevent infection of wounds and burns. That connection with America's adversaries made phages seem ideologically suspect to many in the West: as the medical historian William Summers has written, phage therapy acquired a "Soviet taint" in the postwar period, becoming "scientifically unsound because it was politically unsound."

Still, as late as 1961, phage therapy had some American adherents, including Elizabeth Taylor, who received a dose of staph bacteriophage when she developed near-fatal pneumonia during the filming of "Cleopatra" and needed an emergency tracheotomy. By then, however, phage therapy had been superseded by penicillin, which had become widely available in the West after the war and quickly established itself as the preferred treatment

for bacterial infections. Doctors in Eastern Europe continued to prescribe phages—delivered both topically and orally in powders, sprays, and syrups—but their counterparts on the other side of the Iron Curtain had, for the most part, barely even heard of them. Phages were still studied—Francis Crick and James Watson, two of the discoverers of the double-helix structure of DNA, both conducted phage research—but they were not part of modern medicine in Western Europe and the United States.

The rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria was predicted by Alexander Fleming, the Scottish bacteriologist who discovered penicillin. In 1945, just seventeen years after his accidental breakthrough, he warned, “There is the danger that the ignorant man may easily under-dose himself, and by exposing his microbes to nonlethal quantities of the drug, make them resistant.” As early as 1947, penicillin-resistant staphylococcus bacteria were found in hospitals in England, but few heeded Fleming’s warning. Antibiotics were systematically overused and abused (including as a growth aid in factory-farmed livestock), giving rise to a microbiological arms race, in which bacteria mutated new forms of resistance and scientists raced to develop powerful new classes of antibiotic. To make matters worse, fears of antibiotic resistance have, in recent decades, created a perverse incentive in medical research: new antibiotics, to remain effective, must be used sparingly, as so-called antibiotics of last resort. As a result, it is almost impossible to recoup the cost of developing them. No significant new antibiotics have been introduced since the nineteen-eighties, and, in 2001, the World Health Organization issued an urgent call to action to tackle antibiotic resistance. Phages were ready for their renaissance.

In November, 2015, Steffanie Strathdee, an infectious-disease epidemiologist at the U.C. San Diego School of Medicine, went on a vacation to Egypt with her husband, Tom Patterson, a professor of psychiatry. After visiting the pyramids, Patterson, sixty-eight at the time, became violently sick with what they at first assumed was food poisoning. But Egyptian doctors gave him a diagnosis of acute pancreatitis, and he was medevaced to Frankfurt, where tests revealed that he also had an abscess infected with a deadly, drug-resistant strain of *Acinetobacter baumannii*. Doctors tested his infection against fifteen powerful antibiotics, but only three had even a slight effect. Another air ambulance brought Patterson home to San Diego, where, within weeks, his infection evolved immunity to

those three antibiotics, too. Patterson's organs had begun to fail—first his heart and his lungs, and soon, it seemed, his kidneys—and he went into a coma. By the third week of February, 2016, his doctor, Robert Schooley, warned Strathdee that they were out of options.

Searching the biomedical literature for alternative treatments, Strathdee found a reference to phage therapy. She and Schooley, a human virologist by training, started contacting phage researchers around the world to see if any of them had a virus that might kill Patterson's bug. They received phages originally isolated from sewage plants, Texas dirt, and lagoons of swine and cattle manure; colleagues then grew them in bulk and purified the resulting solution. Schooley received special approval from the F.D.A. to inject some phages into the plastic tubing draining fluid from Patterson's abdominal cavity, near where the infection had originated, and to pump others directly into a vein. Three days later, Patterson emerged from his coma; after a few months, he was discharged, his infection entirely eradicated.

As Patterson underwent months of physical therapy and rehabilitation, Strathdee and Schooley began publicizing his case, describing it in a scientific paper, giving talks, and providing expert testimony to the National Institutes of Health. In July, 2018, they founded the first phage-therapy center in North America, the Center for Innovative Phage Applications and Therapeutics (*IPATH*), at U.C. San Diego, and began to build a library of phages. Patterson and Strathdee published a joint memoir about his miraculous recovery, and, as word started to spread, e-mails, calls, and Facebook messages began to flood in from people desperately hoping that phages could help their loved ones, too. It was Patterson's case that Joseph Bunevacz's daughter had heard about, and late last year Strathdee promised to take me along on her next phage-trapping expedition, as part of a national search to identify a phage that could kill Bunevacz's pernicious *E. coli*.

Finding phages is not in itself particularly challenging: they are by far the most abundant biological entities on earth. According to one estimate, there are ten million trillion trillion phages, which is more than every other organism, including bacteria, combined. The average teaspoon of seawater holds five times more phages than there are people in Rio de Janeiro; for every grain of sand in the world, there are a trillion phages. But the best

place to find phage that will kill drug-resistant bacteria is where people or animals have shed them—in other words, sewage.

The timing of a successful phage hunt in Southern California is thus strongly correlated with rainfall: during a severe storm, sewage-laced runoff pours straight into the ocean at a rate of millions of gallons a minute, leading health departments to close beaches and ban swimming and surfing for days. A year ago, after a brief downpour, I drove to Carlsbad, just north of San Diego, to meet Strathdee and Patterson for a day of phage hunting. First, though, we stopped for lunch at their favorite Mexican restaurant, a hole-in-the-wall called Juanita's, a few blocks from the beach. "This taco was the first solid food I had back when I got out of the hospital in 2016," Patterson said. "Didn't stay down for long." Patterson, now seventy-three, is lanky and youthful, all relaxed grin, Hawaiian shirt, and Southern California chill; Strathdee is Canadian by birth, and talks so fast that she frequently runs out of breath. Over carnitas, Patterson began describing the hallucinogenic experience of being in a coma. "I *was* a snake," he explained. "And that's not easy for people to grasp." A man in the next booth leaned over and asked, "Are you Tom?" He'd seen Patterson and Strathdee speak at a local community college a few months before, and was curious whether phage therapy might one day help his daughter, who suffers from cystic fibrosis. "Tom's the face of phage now," Strathdee said. "Someone had to be."

We drove ten minutes up the coast to a brackish wetland called Batiquitos Lagoon. Patterson parked just off I-5, which bisects the lagoon, and, with semis rumbling in the background, prepared to take a postprandial nap. Strathdee handed me a lunch cooler containing her phage-hunting kit and set off at a brisk pace toward the water. The path had turned to mud in the previous day's rain, but above us the sky was bright blue, streaked with the wispiest of clouds, and the air smelled briny, with a strong sulfuric tang. As the freeway's roar softened in the distance, I heard a frog croak, and we passed a large Leucadia Wastewater District truck, equipped with a cylindrical holding tank and a complicated set of pipes and pumps. Strathdee was delighted. "That's the hydro-cleaning truck," she said. "The sewage outflow must be blocked."

For the next hour, I followed Strathdee as she dove into bulrushes and squelched through puddles, her acid-washed jeggings and swirl-patterned

hoodie providing the opposite of camouflage. We filled vials with dubious brown liquid from the end of a rusted pipe, from water that had a coyote turd floating in it, and from the rotting, shrimp-scented swampy edges of the slough. We labelled each sample with a date and a number and dropped them in ziplock bags in the cooler. Then she and Patterson drove home, and I took our spoils to U.C. San Diego, to meet Hedieh Attai, a postdoctoral researcher. Attai joined the *IPATH* team to work on a new clinical trial of phage therapy that Robert Schooley is preparing to launch, and she spends most of her time refining a technique for measuring bacteria levels in sputum samples coughed up by patients with chest infections. “But we’re always looking for phages to build up our library,” she said cheerfully, as I handed her the cooler.

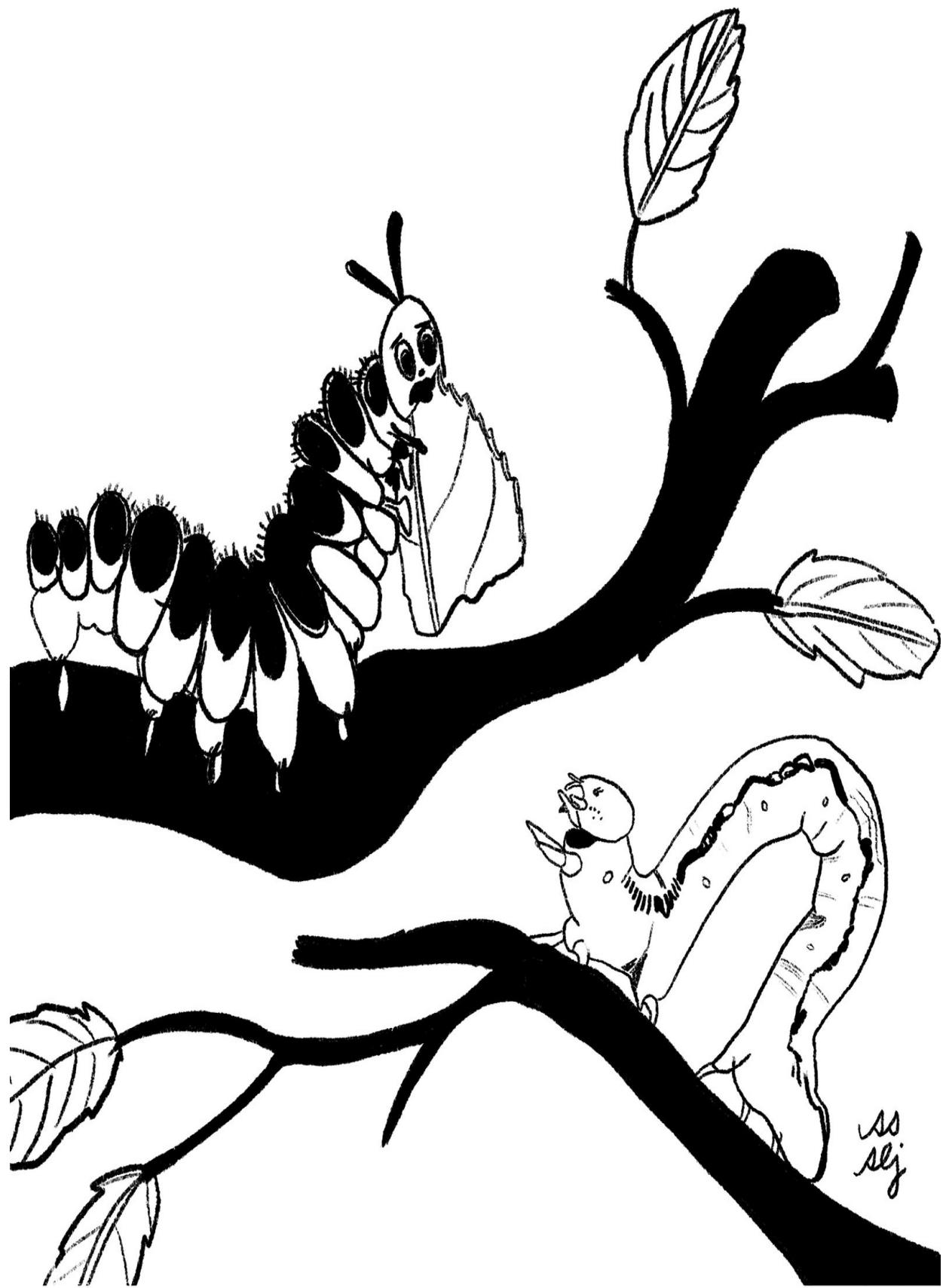
Attai keeps a freezer of *E. coli*, *Enterococcus*, and *Pseudomonas*—three of the six pathogens that together cause most hospital-acquired infections. To see if Strathdee and I had found anything useful, she would pit the unknown phages in our sludge samples against these heavyweights of the bacterial world. Wearing a lab coat, goggles, and gloves, she put a dish of nutrient-rich jelly on a turntable and then, in a process that resembled coating a frying pan with oil, swirled it to distribute a layer of pathogenic *E. coli*. Elsewhere, our samples were sucked through a filter with pores small enough to remove any bacteria, leaving only the phages. The previously murky liquid came out crystal clear—it looked good enough to drink. “I can’t let you do that,” Attai said, with a nervous laugh. She did, however, let me draw the phage samples into a syringe and squirt a series of identical droplets onto the bacterial film.

If none of the phages we’d found were capable of attacking these particular bacteria, the pathogenic microbes would continue growing undisturbed. But, if the liquid contained a single phage that was a match for this particular host, that phage would bind to the bacterial cell membrane and insert its genome into the fluid-filled interior. Once inside an *E. coli* cell, the phage would take over, mimicking and exploiting the bacterium’s own signalling pathways in order to force the cell’s protein-manufacturing machinery to start printing out copy after copy of the phage genome instead. Eventually, the *E. coli* cell would become so stuffed with phage copies that it would burst, releasing a horde of phages ready to invade the next bacterial cell. We

would know in a day or two if our phage had been successful by the appearance of a circle of dead microbes puncturing the thick layer of *E. coli*.

Across the U.C. San Diego campus from *IPATH* is the office of Saima Aslam, a transplant specialist who has probably become the leading phage-therapy physician in the United States, having treated ten patients, with more pending, and advised on a number of other cases around the country. She came to phages in a roundabout way: transplants require immunosuppression, leaving her patients vulnerable to hospital-acquired infections, which are, increasingly, antibiotic resistant.

In the waiting room the day I visited was a man in his early eighties named Napoleon Del Fierro, a retired electrician, originally from the Philippines, who had served in the U.S. Navy. He was there with his wife, Violeta, a former nurse, and their son, Dino, a pediatric dentist. While he rested his head in his hand to sleep, occasionally blinking his eyes slowly open, his family and Aslam told me about his case. A few years ago, after suffering from congestive heart failure for nearly a decade, he'd had a pump implanted just under his sternum to take over the work of circulating blood around his body. Almost immediately, the area had become infected with *Pseudomonas*. "The pump is so infected, it's eroding the bone, and so he's got a couple of holes where pus just constantly comes out," Aslam said. "The infection is a slime layer on the device—we call it biofilm—and his immune system and antibiotics can't get to it." The pump couldn't be replaced—Del Fierro would not survive the surgery required to remove something so deeply embedded—and so the infection just smoldered, with bacteria sloughing off into his bloodstream and occasionally sending him into septic shock.



"Are you sure you're very hungry? Or are you maybe just eating because you're bored?"

Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

Violeta had read about Tom Patterson's case in *People* magazine; Napoleon's daughter Divina wrote one of the hundreds of pleading e-mails that Strathdee routinely receives and forwards to Aslam. By the time I met Del Fierro, it was four months since he had undergone his first round of phage therapy: a surgeon had opened him up, removed pus and dead tissue, and applied phages directly to the device; then he was given further doses of phage, in combination with antibiotics, intravenously for six weeks. "He looked great—everything was great," Aslam said. "I really thought we had eradicated his infection." But, as soon as she stopped his antibiotic dose, the infection came back. Aslam admitted that she was "very, very disappointed." Still, she told the family that she'd just heard that researchers had found a couple of phages that were highly active against his *Pseudomonas*, and she was preparing the paperwork to secure F.D.A. approval for another round.

Later, after the family had left, Aslam told me that she was trying to keep their and her own expectations low. "You know, he's eighty-three, he's got a device in his heart, he's got this very drug-resistant infection, he's failed a course of therapy already," she said. "But I hope it cures him. I want to cure him."

The excitement created by success stories like Patterson's is itself infectious. But Aslam explained that phage therapy is still a long way from being a standard treatment. Because phage cocktails are classed as experimental drugs, each patient requires a waiver from the F.D.A. and approval from the review board of whatever medical facility is involved, and health insurance doesn't cover any of the costs. Despite an abundance of inspiring case studies, there haven't been good clinical trials of phage, the next step before it can become part of standard medical care. "There's amazing promise, and we've had some wonderful outcomes," Aslam said. "But each time I do this I feel like I have ten other questions—maybe I should do it this way or that way?"

She worried that the dose initially applied to Del Fierro's heart pump hadn't been high enough, but the research to determine the right dose hasn't yet been done. It's also possible that biofilms like the one on his device are not suitable for phage treatment. They are anaerobic and made of polysaccharides, and some scientists believe that environments with lots of

sugars and no oxygen can cause phages to lose their killing ability and become more “temperate,” coexisting in harmony with their bacterial hosts. On the other hand, lab studies seem to show that some phages release enzymes that could help them penetrate biofilms.

One of Strathdee and Schooley’s goals with *IPATH* has been to conduct the first clinical trial of intravenous phage therapy, with cystic-fibrosis patients. They are hoping to establish basic therapeutic principles: the best dose, and the best way of administering it; how the phages interact with a bacterial host in the human body; what side effects there might be. Schooley’s major challenge has been securing a phage supply. “We could have started it two and a half years ago if we had a phage source,” he said. The pandemic has delayed the trial yet further. In the meantime, a handful of labs and small startups volunteer their time and their phage libraries to help Aslam and others treat sick patients; finding an institution or a company that is willing and able to invest in the basic clinical trials needed to learn how phages work has been all but impossible.

Forest Rohwer, a microbial ecologist at San Diego State University, pointed to a more fundamental problem. In a dynamic ecosystem, whether a coral reef or our bodies, enemies and friends are situational rather than static. Indeed, phage viruses are responsible for *creating* the majority of pathogenic bacteria in the first place, thanks to their ability to move genes around. An *E. coli* bacterium is usually harmless until it acquires virulence genes from an invading temperate phage. A cholera outbreak is both triggered by phages and halted by them: one kind of phage donates a virulence gene to cholera bacteria, causing it to expand its range, only for another kind to hijack those newly vulnerable pathogenic bacteria to make copies of itself. Sick or healthy humans are just a side effect. Although Rohwer is excited about phage’s therapeutic possibilities—his lab purified part of Tom Patterson’s phage cocktail—he worries that our ambitions to manipulate an entire ecosystem within the human body might overstep our abilities, and that the unintended consequences might be as unwelcome as the pathogenic bacteria itself. “They can kill you, no problem,” he said. “You get the wrong phage and the right bacteria and you’re dead.”

Phage therapy thus continues to be a boutique affair—just a few patients, each treated with a personalized phage cocktail scavenged from moldy

eggplants, cesspools, and pig farms. It's also hit-and-miss: the phages that Strathdee and I collected at Batiquitos Lagoon turned out, unfortunately, not to be a good match for Joseph Bunevacz's infection.

In mid-January, Napoleon Del Fierro began receiving a phage injection, twice daily, through a port in his arm. There were four phages in his dose, all isolated from wastewater-treatment facilities near Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, which prepared the treatment. When I visited him, at the end of the month, he was asleep after a big morning: he'd finished a breakfast of oatmeal and managed to get out of bed for the first time in two weeks. "He was sitting up," Violeta said. "I hope that's the start." We sat together by his bed while Violeta told me how they met, back in Manila; his brother borrowed her sister's textbooks after school. A nurse came in and, as she rearranged his blankets to tuck him in more comfortably, gave us the good news that Del Fierro's latest sample results had just come back and showed significantly lower levels of *Pseudomonas*.

By February 10th, the medical team decided that Del Fierro was healthy enough to continue treatment from home. But, just as he was about to be discharged, he began vomiting dark-brown fluid, and his temperature soared. He had suffered a gastrointestinal bleed, and fluid from his abdomen had entered his lungs, causing aspiration pneumonia. Meanwhile, the *Pseudomonas* levels in his bloodstream had crept up again. Although he could no longer speak, it was clear that he was now in considerable pain. On the afternoon of February 22nd, his family gathered around his bedside, and his heart pump was switched off. He died a few minutes later.

When I spoke with Divina after the funeral, she told me that she still believed in the promise of phage therapy. "It just didn't have a chance to perform," she said. "It was up against such a big obstacle, in a vessel that was so compromised. I'm just eternally grateful they even gave it a shot." Aslam, however, was discouraged. "That's the second *Pseudomonas* biofilm infection I've treated where the outcome has been really difficult," she said. "We try to help everyone, but we really need clinical trials to figure out why in some cases it just doesn't work." Scientists in the *IPATH* team had begun analyzing samples from Del Fierro, to try to understand why therapy failed, but this work is now on hold because of *COVID-19*.

There was better news from Baylor College of Medicine, where researchers had isolated phages that were active against Joseph Bunevacz's *E. coli* infection. As Southern California emerged from late-spring rains into a dazzling superbloom, Filomena texted me a photo of the couple embracing on a hillside blanketed with poppies. As it turned out, the coronavirus outbreak was about to slow everything down, and it was late fall before his treatment received F.D.A. approval. This month, Bunevacz should finally be able to start his phage therapy. "It's a beautiful life," he said when I met him. "And I'd like to push it a little longer." ♦

An earlier version of this story misidentified the institution that prepared Napoleon Del Fierro's phage treatment and misstated the number of phage-therapy patients treated by Saima Aslam.

Arts and Crafts Dept.

- [Can Kid Art Be Real Art?](#)

[December 21, 2020 Issue](#)

Can Kid Art Be Real Art?

“These aren’t just any kids,” Amy Zion, the curator of an exhibition of children’s art at the Queens Museum, said. “Their control of the page is really fantastic.”

By [Bruce Handy](#)

December 14, 2020

A thought prompted by a pair of untitled paintings currently on display at the Queens Museum: My kid could do that . . . but thank God my kid didn’t do that. Executed in what looks like tempera, the first painting depicts two tall teal-colored slabs. In the second painting, one of the slabs is now stabbed by a pointy, angry red shape that could be an airplane or an explosion or both, because the subject, of course, is 9/11. The unknown painter, an actual child, had participated in a program that encouraged kids to untangle their emotions about the attacks through painting and drawing. Some of the resulting works are now part of a small but lively exhibition of kid art, dating back to 1900, that will remain on view at the museum, in Flushing Meadows–Corona Park, until mid-January.



Can kid art be art art? Can it have not just psychological or sentimental import but genuine cultural worth? Can it even be “good”? Well, maybe. “Children’s art isn’t really treated as art normally. It’s treated as ephemera,” Amy Zion, the curator of the Queens Museum show, said. “We don’t really have a language to critically engage with it.” (Some might argue that this is to kid art’s benefit.)

The exhibition has a complicated backstory. It began with an adult artist named Ulrike Müller, who was commissioned, in 2019, to create a temporary floor-to-ceiling mural in the Queens Museum’s lobby. That work, also now on view, depicts several animals of indeterminate species, monumental in scale yet drawn with a childlike simplicity of line and shape. Müller was partly inspired by “The Animals’ Conference,” an allegorical picture book published in 1949, by Erich Kästner, in which the world’s beasts band together to rid the planet of war and bureaucracy, disgusted by the slow pace of human diplomacy. (They should see us now!) The mural’s palette, though muted, evokes the W.P.A. murals of the nineteen-thirties as well as the slightly more garish aesthetic of the 1964 New York World’s Fair. The museum is home to one of the fair’s main attractions: the Panorama of the City of New York, an insanely detailed scale model—roughly the size of two basketball courts.

A further strand of inspiration, Müller said, was a conversation she had with one of her art students at the Cooper Union, “who, as a child, lived in lower Manhattan, and told me that for a long time after 9/11 she was drawing smoke coming out of all kinds of objects”—cats’ ears among them. That kind of charged kid art, Müller felt, might illuminate and even comment on her own work. She asked the museum about the possibility of installing some alongside her mural.

Children’s art can be difficult to curate. Aside from parents stashing it away in the dustier reaches of attics and storage units, it has tended to be valued and preserved only when its scribblers have gone on to be famous adult artists, or when the work can serve some propagandistic purpose, such as bearing heart-wrenching witness to war or injustice, with atrocities depicted in styles usually reserved for drawings of pets or happy families. In the process of curating the show, Zion found examples of both genres. A domestic interior by Louise Nevelson (née Berliawsky) when she was about

three betrays an eye for detail befitting the future sculptor of intricate wooden assemblages; a drawing by the roughly nine-year-old Philip Howard Evergood pokes fun at a rich lady in a fancy hat several decades before Evergood became a socially conscious W.P.A. muralist. On the grimmer side are children's views not only of 9/11 but of the Holocaust, the conflict in Kosovo, and the civil wars in Spain and Sierra Leone—the latter including a brightly colored painting of a boy being chased by another boy who is wielding what appears to be a club.

Zion said that she and Müller tried to broaden the usual curatorial boundaries for kid art by including works with no obvious art-historical or political context—works that could simply be described as “good,” though neither woman would use that exact term. Both said that they are fascinated by kids’ approaches to perspective and the sometimes ingenious ways in which they organize space. Examples, culled from several caches of decades-old work mainly by New York City schoolchildren, include a dramatically angled and foregrounded pool table that Cézanne could have sketched, and a street scene with vertical climbs worthy of Wayne Thiebaud’s San Francisco paintings. “These aren’t just any kids,” Zion said. “They are very talented artists who probably didn’t end up becoming professional artists, but their control of the page is really fantastic.”

One small but unfortunate by-product of the pandemic is that the busloads of schoolchildren who would normally be pouring into the museum every day on field trips aren’t able to encounter these works by their forebears. What might they make of the exhibit, if they slowed down to take it in while tromping to and from the Panorama (where, by the way, the Twin Towers still stand), and then on to the gift shop? ♦

Books

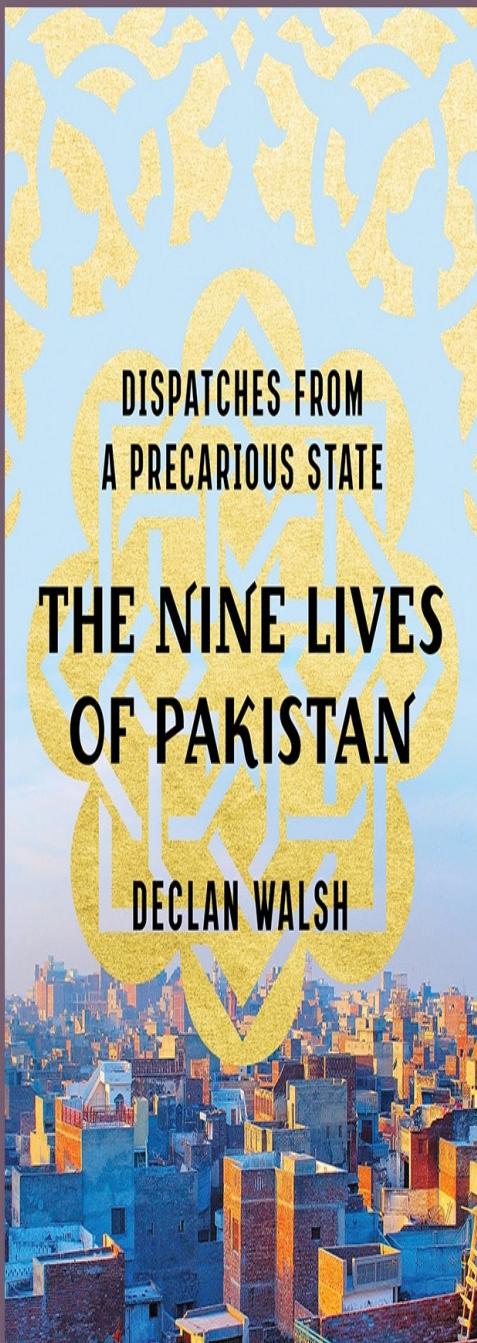
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
- [America's War on Syrian Civilians](#)

December 21, 2020 Issue

Briefly Noted

“The Nine Lives of Pakistan,” “Oak Flat,” “Nights When Nothing Happened,” and “At Night All Blood Is Black.”

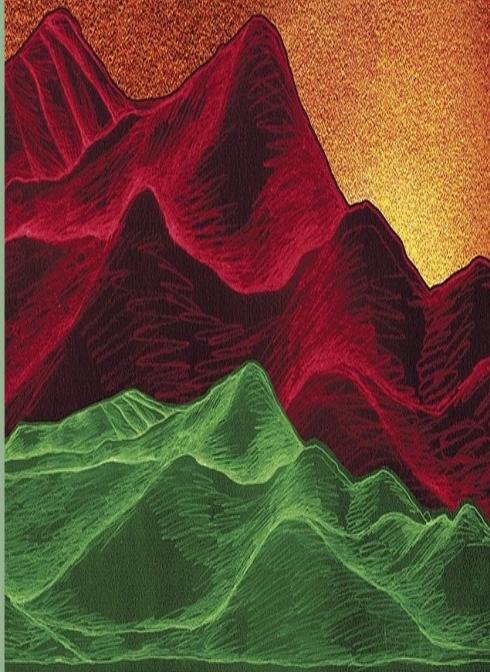
December 14, 2020



The Nine Lives of Pakistan, by Declan Walsh (Norton). The author, a foreign correspondent who was based in Pakistan for almost a decade, here tells the story of this complicated nation through some of its most influential personalities, including Muhammad Ali Jinnah, its founder; the human-rights activist Asma Jahangir; and the legendary spy Sultan Amir Tarar. Equally perceptive about the megacities of Karachi and Lahore and the remote regions of Waziristan and Balochistan, Walsh portrays a Pakistan that is “more concept than country . . . strained under the centrifugal forces of history, identity and faith.” After examining the legacy of partition, the grip of the Taliban, and a web of ethnic and sectarian fault lines, Walsh concludes that “the most pertinent question might be not whether Pakistan will fail, but how it has survived this long.”

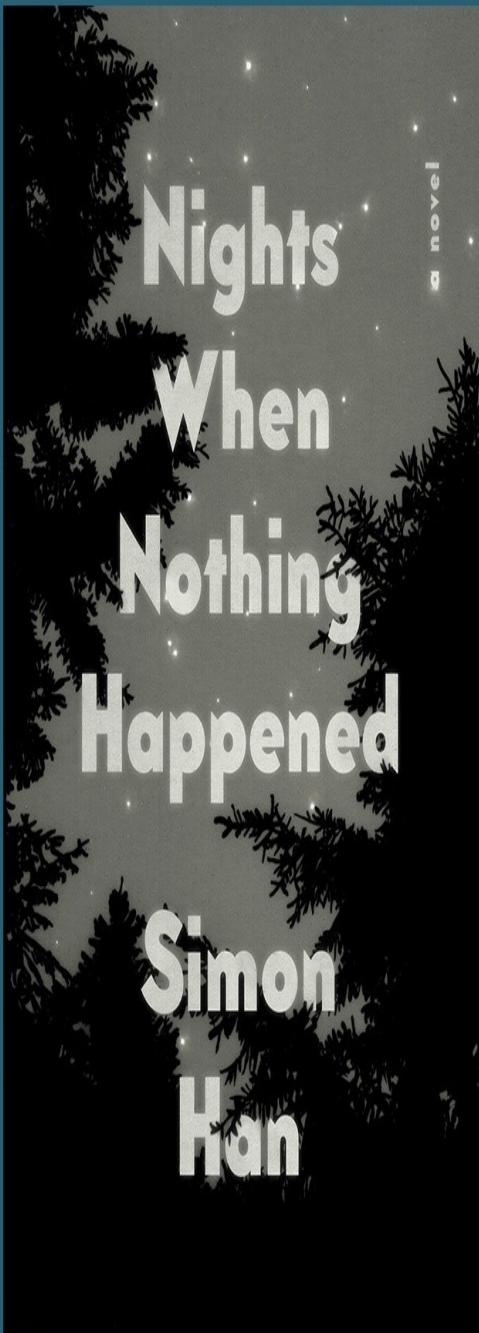
OAK FLAT

A FIGHT FOR SACRED LAND
IN THE AMERICAN WEST



LAUREN REDNISS

Oak Flat, by Lauren Redniss (*Random House*). The value of time is at the heart of this illustrated nonfiction book, which blends reportage, oral history, and cosmology in an account of conflict over a copper mine in southeastern Arizona. The mine will cause Oak Flat—an ancient burial ground and religious site of the San Carlos Apache—to collapse into a crater a thousand feet deep. Redniss focusses on Naelyn Nosie, a self-proclaimed “modern day Apache female warrior,” whose family has lived on a reservation for generations, and on the Gorham family, for whom the new mine promises relief from years of hardship. The narrative resists oversimplification and draws out points of connection among people thrown into opposition by circumstance.



Nights When Nothing Happened, by Simon Han (*Riverhead*). This suspenseful début novel opens in a middle-class suburban neighborhood in Texas. The members of the Cheng family, having arrived from China at different times, are wildly disconnected. The career-oriented mother came first, followed by her aimless husband, while their son stayed behind with grandparents. Only Annabel, the youngest, was born in the U.S., and her empowered outlook clashes with the rest of the family's determination to tread lightly and fit in. Han switches nimbly among family members' perspectives, and tensions culminate at a potluck hosted out of obligation, "for to cancel a party was to announce to your guests that something was wrong."

AT
NIGHT
ALL
BLOOD
IS
BLACK
DAVID
DIOP

A Novel

At Night All Blood Is Black, by David Diop, translated from the French by Anna Moschovakis (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Alfa Ndiaye, the narrator of this mystical novel, is a Senegalese soldier during the First World War. Recruited by the French Army to “play the savage,” he sneaks into the “blue-eyed enemy” encampment every night, returning with a severed hand from each kill. He sees the attacks, which earn him a fearsome reputation, as avenging the death of a friend, but they exact a psychological toll. Hospitalized, he is made to draw, an activity that unleashes memories of his childhood in colonial Senegal, reveals parallels between his parents’ suffering and his own, and brings a deepening confrontation with a heritage of brutality.

America's War on Syrian Civilians

Bombs killed thousands of civilians in Raqqa, and the city was decimated. U.S. lawyers insist that war crimes weren't committed, but it's time to look honestly at the devastation that accompanies "targeted" air strikes.

By [Anand Gopal](#)

December 14, 2020



For four months in 2017, an American-led coalition in [Syria](#) dropped some ten thousand bombs on Raqqa, the densely populated capital of the Islamic State. Nearly eighty per cent of the city, which has a population of three hundred thousand, was destroyed. I visited shortly after [ISIS](#) relinquished control, and found the scale of the devastation difficult to comprehend: the skeletal silhouettes of collapsed apartment buildings, the charred schools, the gaping craters. Clotheslines were webbed between stray standing pillars, evidence that survivors were somehow living among the ruins. Nobody knows how many thousands of residents died, or how many are now homeless or confined to a wheelchair. What is certain is that the decimation of Raqqa is unlike anything seen in an American conflict since [the Second World War](#).

As then, this battle was waged against an enemy bent on overthrowing an entire order, in an apparently nihilistic putsch against reason itself. But Raqqa was no Normandy. Although many Syrians fought valiantly against [ISIS](#) and lost their lives, the U.S., apart from a few hundred Special Forces on the ground, relied on overwhelming airpower, prosecuting the entire war from a safe distance. Not a single American died. The U.S. still occasionally conducts conventional ground battles, as in Falluja, [Iraq](#), where, in 2004, troops engaged in fierce firefights with insurgents. But the battle for Raqqa—a war fought from cavernous control rooms thousands of miles away, or from aircraft thousands of feet in the sky—is the true face of modern American combat.

We have been conditioned to judge the merit of today's wars by their conduct. The United Nations upholds norms of warfare that, among other things, prohibit such acts as torture, rape, and hostage-taking. Human-rights groups and international lawyers tend to designate a war "humane" when belligerents have avoided harming civilians as much as possible. However, in "[Asymmetric Killing: Risk Avoidance, Just War, and the Warrior Ethos](#)" (Oxford), Neil Renic, a scholar of international relations, challenges this standard. He argues that, when assessing the humanity of a war, we should look not only to the fate of civilians but also to whether combatants have exposed themselves to risk on the battlefield. Renic suggests that when one side fully removes itself from danger—even if it goes to considerable lengths to protect civilians—it violates the ethos of humane warfare.

The core principle of humane warfare is that fighters may kill one another at any time, excepting those who are rendered hors de combat, and must avoid targeting civilians. It's tempting to say that civilians enjoy this protected status because they are innocent, but, as Renic points out, civilians "feed hungry armies, elect bellicose leaders, and educate future combatants." In Syria, home to a popular revolution, entire towns were mobilized for the war effort. Civilians—even children—acted as lookouts, arms smugglers, and spies. What really matters, then, is the type of danger that someone in a battle zone presents. The moment that a person picks up a weapon, whether donning a uniform or not, he or she poses a direct and immediate danger. This is the crucial distinction between armed personnel and civilians.

But what if the belligerents themselves don't pose a direct and immediate danger? Renic argues that in such theatres as [Pakistan](#), where Americans deploy remote-controlled drones to kill their enemies while rarely stepping foot on the battlefield, insurgents on the ground cannot fight back—meaning that, in terms of the threat that they constitute, they are no different from civilians. It would then be just as wrong, Renic suggests, to unleash a Hellfire missile on a group of pickup-riding insurgents as it would be to annihilate a pickup-riding family en route to a picnic.

One might respond that, say, the Pakistani Taliban does pose an immediate threat to Pakistani civilians, if not to U.S. soldiers. But Renic contends that the U.S., by avoiding the battlefield, has turned civilians into attractive targets for insurgents eager for a fight. Whether this claim is correct or not, it's clear that risk-free combat has brought warfare into new moral territory, requiring us to interrogate our old notions of battlefield right and wrong. If we can distinguish combatants from civilians only by the danger that they pose to other combatants, then the long-distance violence of modern warfare is inhumane. Renic concludes that the "increasingly sterile, bureaucratized, and detached mode of American killing" has the flavor of punishment rather than of war in any traditional sense. In [Barack Obama](#)'s recent [memoir](#), he writes that, as President, he wanted to save "the millions of young men" in the Muslim world who were "warped and stunted by desperation, ignorance, dreams of religious glory, the violence of their surroundings." Yet he claims that, owing to where they lived, and the machinery at his disposal, he ended up "killing them instead." Leaving aside Obama's crude generalizations,

Renic argues that he could indeed have saved them—by “severely restricting” remote warfare.

Renic’s book is part of a broader trend of scholars and human-rights activists contending with the wreckage caused by America’s recent conflicts abroad. Their studies share a basic quest: how can we use rules to make warfare more humane? Whereas Renic focusses on moral rules, much of this other work is concerned with legal rules. In the aftermath of the Raqqa battle, Amnesty International and other organizations sifted through the rubble, carefully documenting whether this or that bombing complied with the laws of war. This work is salutary, but a troubling question looms behind it: in our drive to subject the battlefield to rules, are we overlooking deeper moral truths about the nature of war itself?

The notion that warfare should be governed by rules is ancient, and dates at least to Augustine, who argued that a legitimate ruler can wage war when he has good intentions and a just cause. In the Middle Ages, the Church attempted to ban the crossbow, and took efforts to protect ecclesiastical property and noncombatants from wartime violence. But it was only in the nineteenth century that states attempted to fashion laws and treaties to regulate wartime conduct. During the American Civil War, the Union implemented the Lieber Code, which sought to restrict the imposition of unnecessary suffering—torture or poisoning, for example—on the enemy. The code also enshrined as legal convention the principle of “military necessity”: if violence had a strategic purpose—that is, if it could help win a war—it was allowed. In the Hague Conventions of 1899 and 1907, world powers accepted vague limits on wartime conduct while upholding the principle of military necessity. States agreed to a moratorium on balloon-launched munitions, which had little tactical value, but were silent on the question of motorized aircraft.

Many nations ignored even these lax regulations. The Hague Conventions prohibited “asphyxiating gases,” but world powers flouted the treaties with abandon in the trenches of [the First World War](#). The conventions effectively outlawed the intentional targeting of civilians, but by the Second World War belligerents had recognized the military advantage of bombing towns and villages. In 1942, British policy actually barred aircraft from targeting military facilities, ordering them instead to strike working-class areas of

German cities—“for the sake of increasing terror,” as Churchill later put it. In 1943, the U.S. and British Air Forces of Operation Gomorrah rained down fire and steel upon Hamburg for seven nights, killing fifty-eight thousand civilians. Urban bombing campaigns left millions of homeless and shell-shocked Germans roaming a ravaged land that W. G. Sebald later described as the “necropolis of a foreign, mysterious people, torn from its civil existence and its history, thrown back to the evolutionary stage of nomadic gatherers.” Then came the nuclear bombs dropped on [Hiroshima](#) and Nagasaki, which killed about two hundred and fifty thousand people. In all, Allied terror raids may have claimed some half a million civilian lives. The pattern continued in [the Korean War](#); Secretary of State Dean Rusk later recalled that the U.S. had bombed “every brick that was standing on top of another, everything that moved.”

During [the Vietnam War](#), a powerful antiwar movement emerged for the first time since the First World War. Through television, the news of such atrocities as the My Lai massacre reached directly into American living rooms, and conscientious objectors and antiwar activists appealed to international law to justify their opposition to the carnage. They were more successful in shaping U.S. conduct than they could have ever imagined. After the war, the Pentagon revamped its arsenal with such inventions as laser-guided munitions, which could carry out “precision strikes.” The U.S. military began to follow the principles of the Hague Conventions, as well as those found in other treaties, calling these combined regulations the Law of Armed Conflict. American terror bombings became a thing of the past. In the first Gulf War, hundreds of specialist attorneys sat alongside generals at CENTCOM headquarters in Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere, to insure that the U.S. followed legal rules of warfare. It was the largest per-capita wartime deployment of lawyers in American history.

On the face of it, scrupulous adherence to the law is a victory for the cause of humane war. Yet the ruins of Syria tell a more complicated story. Not long before the U.S. assault on Raqqa, Russian and Syrian forces launched a major offensive to capture the rebel-held eastern side of Aleppo. Paying no heed to international law, they retook the city with savage efficiency, laying waste to crowded markets and hospitals. Yet the end result looked no different from Raqqa: a large civilian death toll, honeycombed apartment buildings, streets choked with rubble, entire neighborhoods flattened.

The U.S.-led coalition waged its assault on Raqqa with exacting legal precision. It vetted every target carefully, with a fleet of lawyers scrutinizing strikes the way an in-house counsel pores over a corporation's latest contract. During the battle, the coalition commander, Lieutenant General Stephen J. Townsend, declared, "I challenge anyone to find a more precise air campaign in the history of warfare." Although human-rights activists insist that the coalition could have done more to protect civilians, Townsend is right: unlike Russia, America does not bomb indiscriminately. The U.S. razed an entire city, killing thousands in the process, without committing a single obvious war crime.

During the summer of 2016, residents of Tokhar, a riverside hamlet in northern Syria, gathered every night in four houses on the community's edge, hoping to evade gunfire and bombs. This was the farthest point from a front line, a mile away, where U.S.-backed forces were engaging *ISIS* fighters. Every night, a drone hovered over Tokhar, filming the villagers' procession from their scattered homes to these makeshift bunkers. The basements became crowded with farmers, mothers, schoolgirls, and small children. On July 18th, at around 3 A.M., the houses exploded. Thick smoke covered the night sky. Limbs were strewn across the rubble. Children were buried under collapsed walls.

People from surrounding villages spent two weeks digging out bodies. The coalition, meanwhile, announced that it had destroyed "nine *ISIL* fighting positions, an *ISIL* command and control node, and 12 *ISIL* vehicles" in the area that night. Eventually, after reports surfaced that many civilians had died, the coalition admitted to killing twenty-four. When a colleague and I visited, a year after the raid, we documented at least a hundred and twenty dead civilians, and found no evidence that any *ISIS* members had been present near the four houses. A mother told me that some small children were obliterated, their bodies never found.

"We take all measures during the targeting process . . . to comply with the principles of the Law of Armed Conflict," U.S. Marine Major Adrian J. T. Rankine-Galloway said. The essence of this legal code is that militaries cannot *intentionally* kill civilians. It is true that no one in the chain of command wished to massacre civilians that night—not the pilot or the targeteers or the lawyers. The U.S. points to this fact in calling the Tokhar

incident an error, regrettable but not illegal. Yet, though it is reasonable to invoke intention when referring to the mind-set of an individual—this is the idea behind the legal concept *mens rea*—it seems odd to ascribe a mental state to a collective actor like an army or a state. It is clear, however, that the coalition could have foreseen the outcome of its actions: it had filmed the area for weeks, and intelligence indicating that the village was populated would not have been difficult to gather. During the coalition’s campaign against *ISIS*, it often based its bombing decisions on faulty assumptions about civilian life; in Mosul, it targeted a pair of family homes after failing to observe civilians outdoors over the course of a few afternoons. Iraqis typically avoid the blazing midday heat. Four people died. The Law of Armed Conflict excuses genuine errors and proscribes intentional killing, but most American warfare operates in a gray zone, which exists, in part, because the law itself is so vague.

A second pillar of the legal code is the rule of proportionality: states can kill civilians if they are aiming for a military target, as long as the loss of civilian life is proportional to the military advantage they gain by the attack. What this means is anyone’s guess: how do you measure “military advantage” against human lives? During the Mosul battle, snipers went onto the roof of the home of Mohammed Tayeb al-Layla, a former dean of engineering at Mosul University. According to neighbors, he and his wife rushed upstairs, pleading with them to leave. In a flash, a warhead flattened the home, killing the snipers, al-Layla and his wife, and their daughter, who was downstairs. It’s nearly impossible to say how one would weigh two dead snipers against a dead family, but most conventions would consider the killing lawful. Much of the destruction in Raqqa follows the example of the al-Layla household: death by a thousand proportional strikes.

American officials are quick to point out that *ISIS* deserves a good share of the blame: militants dispersed themselves throughout schools and apartment buildings, and otherwise lived among the civilian population. Yet this does not necessarily absolve the U.S. When counter-insurgency doctrine was in vogue during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, American forces sought to win “hearts and minds” by embedding in population centers. For an Afghan, few sights stirred as much dread as a column of beige armored Humvees snaking through a crowded market. If a suicide bomber attacked the Humvees, Americans would rightly condemn him for his disregard for

the surrounding civilians—even if he had the force of the law, in the guise of proportionality, behind him.

The contradictions of U.S. military conduct don't go unnoticed. Human-rights organizations frequently accuse the U.S. of committing war crimes, including in the Raqqa battle. In nearly every case, though, the U.S. can muster a convincing defense. What is in dispute is not whether or not the U.S. killed civilians but the interpretation of the law: the U.S. uses a much looser interpretation of intentionality and proportionality than most human-rights groups do. After such deaths occur, no independent arbiter adjudicates the U.S.'s actions—only vanquished forces ever get dragged before an international tribunal. The Pentagon is left to judge itself, and, unsurprisingly, almost always finds in its own favor. The law's ambiguities allow the U.S. to classify atrocities like that in Tokhar as accidents, even if the deadly results were foreseeable, and therefore avoidable.

How many civilian deaths in Raqqa were avoidable? In Tokhar, it was possible to reconstruct the evidence, but often it is not. Without transparency in the targeting process, the military usually has the final word. Yet there is one way we can intuitively know when an armed force has an alternative to causing civilian suffering. When U.S. forces are faced with a pair of *ISIS* gunmen on the roof of an apartment building, they can call in a five-hundred-pound laser-guided bomb—or they can approach the enemy on foot, braving enemy fire, and secure the building through old-fashioned battle. In the past, armies have sometimes chosen the harder path: during the Second World War, when Allied French pilots carried out bombing raids on Vichy territory—part of their homeland—they flew at lower altitudes, in order to avoid striking civilians, even though it increased the chances that they'd be shot down. For the U.S. military, however, the rules are blind to the question of risk. The law doesn't consider whether an armed force could have avoided unnecessary civilian suffering by exposing itself to greater danger. For Neil Renic, wars waged exclusively through drones, therefore, point to the “profound discord between what is lawful on the battlefield and what is moral.”

This may be why the U.S. military today tends to downplay the old martial virtue of courage. Historically, though, the concept was so central to the idea of good soldiering that weapons or tactics lacking in valor sparked

objections from the ranks. Renic writes that when aircraft first entered the modern arsenal, in the nineteen-tens, fighter pilots engaged in dogfights reminiscent of the gallantry of a medieval duel. But such long-distance tactics as mortar fire and aerial bombardment had little to do with valor. A pilot from the First World War recalled, “You did not sit in a muddy trench while someone who had no personal enmity against you loosed off a gun, five miles away, and blew you to smithereens.” He concluded, “That was not fighting; it was murder. Senseless, brutal, ignoble.” A British airman from the Second World War wrote, “I was a fighter pilot, never a bomber pilot, and I thank God for that. I do not believe I could ever have obeyed orders as a bomber pilot; it would have given me no sense of achievement to drop bombs on German cities.”

Though sniping causes far less devastation, it has long aroused a similar unease. In the First World War, a British brigadier-general denounced the practice as “an act of cold murder, horrible to the most callous, distasteful to all but the most perverted.” During the American Revolution, a young British officer trained his rifle’s sights on a target, only to decide that “it was not pleasant to fire at the back of an unoffending individual who was acquitting himself very coolly of his duty.” The individual in question was George Washington.

In 2014, the bio-pic “[American Sniper](#)” ignited a debate about whether its protagonist, a legendary marksman, had fabricated parts of his story. But, Renic points out, nobody questioned the moral legitimacy of sniping itself, an indication of the extent to which courage has vanished as a battlefield norm in today’s wars. Even if he is overstating the role of valor historically, it’s clear that the U.S. military today goes to great lengths to avoid risk, justifying its conduct instead by extolling the Law of Armed Conflict. A military that emphasizes courage may wind up protecting more civilians, but with bravery comes body bags—and, the moment that body bags arrived in the U.S., we would be forced to contend with the hard questions that the law lets us ignore. Were those deaths of Americans worth it? What is the purpose of this war? Should it be fought, and, if so, fought differently? These are conversations that neither the military nor human-rights organizations appear interested in having.

Critics might say that the ruins of Syria reveal the limited value of the laws of war: two armies, operating under greatly differing norms, produced nearly identical results in Raqqa and Aleppo. Defenders might retort that such rules, even when vague or overly permissive, are better than none at all. Probably both views are correct, but the focus on legality may have lulled us into a comfort with war itself. Human-rights groups have found the U.S. guilty of dozens of war crimes in Afghanistan, but most American killing has been lawful: a housewife wandering too close to a convoy, a farmer gunned down on faulty assumptions, a family made victim to the rule of proportionality. Americans seem to become exercised about the miseries of combat only when the rules are flagrantly violated; as long as they are not, a war quietly slides into the background—even into a permanent state of being. If the Afghan war continued for another twenty years, it's doubtful whether it would arouse much domestic opposition, even though the over-all suffering may be as great as a wanton slaughter that ended in a decisive victory. The U.S. cannot carry out such a slaughter without violating the law and provoking widespread opposition, and so the conflict remains at a perpetual low boil. The U.S. finds itself in a peculiar situation in which it can neither win nor lose its wars.

Faced with this bitter truth, some thinkers espouse the doctrine of realism, which bluntly states that the battlefield is no place for moral strictures. But this doctrine can be used to excuse terrible and unnecessary suffering. Another approach is pacifism, which, for all its merits, asks us to condemn both the tyrant and those violently resisting tyranny. That leaves the moral tradition of “just war,” which maintains that warfare is a fixture of human existence, so the best we can hope for is to regulate when and how it is waged. This is the essential idea informing the laws of war.

Yet, although armed conflict is not disappearing anytime soon, that doesn't mean we must reduce war solely to a question of legal violations and battlefield rules. Even if we can never abolish war, Immanuel Kant argued, we should *act* as if we could, and design our institutions accordingly. Today in America, we could work to insulate the Pentagon's decisions from defense contractors and other vested interests; more important, we could revert the decision to make war to democratic control. After 9/11, Congress passed the Authorization for the Use of Military Force, which Presidents have since invoked to justify at least thirty-seven military activities in fourteen

countries, including the U.S. war in Syria, without formal declaration or public debate. Whether this or that pile of rubble was produced lawfully, or whether or not American boots touched Syrian soil, is not nearly as important as the fact that the U.S. was free to raze a foreign city with no public discussion or accountability. Perhaps only when our foreign adventures are subject to democratic constraints will we view the starting and ending of wars—not just their conduct—as a matter of life and death. ♦

Comment

- [The High Stakes of Georgia's Loeffler-Warnock Senate Race](#)

[December 21, 2020 Issue](#)

The High Stakes of Georgia's Loeffler-Warnock Senate Race

The debate between the two candidates showed how Republicans are approaching close races in a state where they've grown accustomed to winning with ease.

By [Jelani Cobb](#)

December 13, 2020

Last week, when Senator Kelly Loeffler, Republican of [Georgia](#), and the Reverend Raphael Warnock, her Democratic challenger in a special runoff election, to be held on January 5th, met for a debate, expectations for conflict were high. Loeffler, who was appointed to her seat in January, by Governor [Brian Kemp](#), needs to persuade Republican voters to keep her there. Warnock, a respected pastor who until recently led the New Georgia Project, an initiative, founded by [Stacey Abrams](#), to increase voter turnout, has wide name recognition among African-Americans but needs to turn that support into a constituency broad enough to deliver him a victory. Neither candidate has been elected to office before, and, almost certainly, neither expected to be in one of two runoff elections in the state which will determine control of the United States Senate—and, by extension, the degree to which vestiges of [Trumpism](#) will remain in place during the early [Biden](#) Administration. (The other race pits the Republican senator David Perdue against the Democrat Jon Ossoff; if the polls are to be believed, Ossoff leads Perdue by less than one point, and Warnock leads Loeffler by nearly three.)



Illustration by João Fazenda

In the debate, Loeffler, who appeared stiff, raised familiar Republican themes, accusing Warnock of wanting to defund the police (he said that he does not), and challenged his position as a pro-choice clergy member. Warnock, alternately relaxed and subdued, stuck mostly to kitchen-table issues such as pandemic relief and health care. Yet, if the debate lacked the anticipated drama, it provided some insights into how Republicans are approaching close races in a state where they've grown accustomed to winning with ease. Meanwhile, on the same night, Ossoff debated an empty lectern, since Perdue did not show up to their scheduled event. (A clip from a previous debate, in which Ossoff called Perdue a "crook" who was more interested in his financial affairs than in the well-being of the state, had gone viral.) But Loeffler, too, debated someone who wasn't in the room. She addressed an imaginary Warnock, a raging Marxist sympathizer whom she referred to thirteen times as a "radical liberal"—a seemingly handy oxymoron directed at people not much interested in the significant differences between radicals and liberals.

In fact, Warnock is the senior pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, the institution that was home to Martin Luther King, Jr., and whose congregation, degreeed and pedigreed, is known as much for its relative economic comfort as for its historic civil-rights legacy. (In January, Loeffler attended M.L.K. Day services there, in keeping with the tradition of Senator Johnny Isakson, whose term she was appointed to complete when he retired.) One of twelve children, Warnock was raised in public housing in Savannah, and went on to graduate from Morehouse College and earn a doctorate from Union Theological Seminary, in New York.

Still, Loeffler called him "someone that has invited Fidel Castro, a murderous dictator, into his own church, someone that has celebrated anti-American, anti-Semite Jeremiah Wright." Actually, Castro spoke in 1995 at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, where Warnock was a twenty-six-year-old youth pastor. Warnock replied that he didn't invite Castro and had never met him. With the Jeremiah Wright charge, Loeffler was asking voters to reach back a dozen years, to [Barack Obama](#)'s Presidential primary campaign, and remember a now retired clergyman whose church the Obamas attended and whose incendiary sermons—recall the clip of him shouting "God damn America!"—ignited a firestorm but were not enough to deny Obama the nomination.

If elected, Warnock will be Georgia's first Black senator—and the eleventh Black senator in the nation's history. The Republican plan to defeat him is apparently drawn from the playbook used against the nation's fifth Black senator, who went on to become the first Black President. A Republican strategist told the *Times* that Ossoff is "too dull" to caricature, noting that Warnock offers much more material to work with. (Translation: Ossoff is white, Warnock is Black, and this is still Georgia.) Warnock released an ad mocking the lines of attack against him: "Raphael Warnock eats pizza with a knife and fork. Raphael Warnock once stepped on a crack in the sidewalk. Raphael Warnock even hates puppies."

The fervor of Loeffler's campaign points to other headwinds she faces. A former C.E.O. of the financial-services company Bakkt and a co-owner of the W.N.B.A.'s Atlanta Dream, Loeffler has held office for less than a year, and she was reportedly not Trump's first choice to replace Isakson. Trump lost the state (the ballots have now been counted three times, though Loeffler has not acknowledged the result), but his claims that he was a victim of voter fraud may lead to some Republicans' not bothering to vote this time. When the chair of the Republican National Committee, Ronna McDaniel, appeared at a gathering of voters in Marietta, a woman asked how the election is supposed to work if it's already been decided. "It's not decided!" McDaniel replied. Trump, too, visited Georgia recently, for a rally in Valdosta, and told the crowd, "They cheated and they rigged our Presidential election. But we will still win!" There is a contradictory logic to having the person who just lost the Presidential race in the state campaign on behalf of people hoping to win Senate seats there—especially in the case of Perdue, who got more votes statewide in November than Trump did. The effect could be to further demoralize the Republican electorate.

All this points to a supreme irony confronting Georgia as early voting begins, on December 14th. Last year, the House of Representatives passed H.R.1, the For the People bill, which includes the most comprehensive election-reform measures in recent history. Among its provisions are new mechanisms to govern voter-roll purges, oversight of standards for electronic voting machines, and measures to prevent foreign interference in American elections.

Like much other legislation, it has been stalled by a Senate controlled by Republicans under Majority Leader [Mitch McConnell](#). This means that, for those Georgia Republicans who believe that Trump was the victim of fraud in their state, returning Loeffler and Perdue to office would actually further postpone a remedy to their alleged problem. American elections are vulnerable, just not in the ways that some Republicans in Georgia are claiming. (The 2018 gubernatorial race that delivered Brian Kemp to office was itself marred by irregularities.) An argument for electing Warnock and Ossoff is the fact that the biggest obstacle to preventing “rigged” elections in the future is the Party complaining about rigging in the one that just happened. ♦

Dept. of Earworms

- [The Fiftieth Anniversary of “Feliz Navidad,” the Simplest Song Ever Written](#)

[December 21, 2020 Issue](#)

The Fiftieth Anniversary of “Feliz Navidad,” the Simplest Song Ever Written

José Feliciano looks back on the nineteen-word Christmas song, which he wrote in ten minutes and recorded in a single take.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

December 14, 2020

Writing a Christmas hit can be mind-blowingly lucrative, and also a little annoying. Johnny Marks, who made millions from “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer,” griped in his later years, “This is not exactly what I hoped to be remembered for.” (Too bad; “Rudolph” was in the headline of his *Times* obituary.) José Feliciano has no ambivalence about “Feliz Navidad,” his bilingual earworm from 1970. He is celebrating its fiftieth anniversary with a live-streamed concert, a children’s book, a line of branded Teddy bears, and a re-recording featuring artists such as Lin-Manuel Miranda, Michael Bolton, and La India. “I’m probably going to hear a lot of *ka-ching!*” he said recently.



José Feliciano Illustration by João Fazenda

Feliciano was at home in Connecticut, where he lives in an eighteenth-century former tavern. “He had his shirt off this morning, sitting out in the sun with his oatmeal,” his wife, Susan, said. When a visitor arrived, Feliciano was clothed (black shirt, black mask, black sunglasses) and listening to music on his porch, as his son Jonnie stacked firewood. Feliciano, who was born blind, is seventy-five, diminutive, and a punster. Susan guided him to a red barn, where he has a recording studio festooned with gold records and guitars, and he sank into an armchair. His first memories of *Navidad* are from his childhood in Puerto Rico, where he was one of eleven boys. “We had no septic tanks or anything,” he recalled. “I don’t mean to rat on my father, but he stole chickens, and I told my parents that I was going to study chickens—at *Perdue* University!”

“Don’t encourage him,” Susan said.

“When you’re blind, you’d better have a sense of humor, because you get a lot of jerks in your path,” he went on. “Like, ‘What’s the matter? You blind or something?’ ‘Yeah, what’s your excuse?’” His family moved to Spanish Harlem when he was five, and he left home at eighteen, to make it as a singer in Greenwich Village. In 1968, he released his hit cover of “Light My Fire” and caused a firestorm by putting a folksy spin on “The Star-Spangled Banner” at the World Series. One day in 1970, he and his producer, Rick Jarrard, were planning a holiday album at Feliciano’s place in California, in a room with some squawking parrots. “Rick said, ‘José, I think it’s time for a new Christmas song.’ Because the last huge one was ‘Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree,’ by Brenda Lee.” Feliciano added as an aside, “When I was a kid, I had a mad crush on Brenda Lee.” Then he crooned a bit of “All Alone Am I.”

He wrote “Feliz Navidad” in ten minutes. “That’s why it’s the simplest song ever written,” he said. “Nineteen words to it”—six in Spanish (“*Feliz Navidad, próspero año y felicidad*”) and thirteen in English (“I wanna wish you a merry Christmas from the bottom of my heart”), repeated ad nauseam. “I wanted a song that belonged to the masses,” he recalled. He and Jarrard recorded it at RCA studios, on Sunset Boulevard, in a single take. “If you know where your song is going to go, you don’t have to fuck around with it too much,” Feliciano said, letting out a hoot. “I used to say to myself, ‘Joke ’em if they can’t take a fuck!’”

“O.K., that’s twice,” Susan chided him.

He recorded the track with the Brazilian drummer Paulinho Magalhães, accompanying himself on bass and the cuatro, a ten-string mahogany instrument his uncle had given him. The song drew on Spanish Christmas carols, known as *villancicos*. “I’ll tell you a joke that will illustrate it better,” Feliciano said. “Three people die, and on their way to Heaven St. Peter stops them and says, ‘I need something from each of you that reminds you of Christmas.’ ” The first man takes out a lighter, signifying candles. The second shakes some keys, like bells. The third displays a pair of women’s panties. “St. Peter says, ‘How do these remind you of Christmas?’ And he goes, ‘These are Carol’s!’ ”

“That is terrible, José,” Susan said. When “Feliz Navidad” came out, Feliciano was still married to his first wife, Hilda, and Susan was a high-school student in Detroit who had started a José Feliciano fan club. “Instead of taking the bus home, I took it downtown to the department store, where I knew they’d have the new album,” she recalled. The song became a crossover hit; Feliciano bought himself a Cadillac Eldorado. (“I wanted to be like Elvis,” he said.) Does anyone ever complain to him about the way it lodges itself in one’s brain? “Sometimes Texans come up to me, and they’ll say”—he broke into a Yosemite Sam accent—“ ‘Hey, is yer name José Felicianer?’ And I’ll say, ‘Yes, it is.’ ‘Well, I jus’ want you to know, I *lurve* that Christmas song that you wrote. It’s in my head, and I *cain’t* ever get rid of it.’ ”

“That’s a true story,” Susan said, and guided him back to the house. ♦

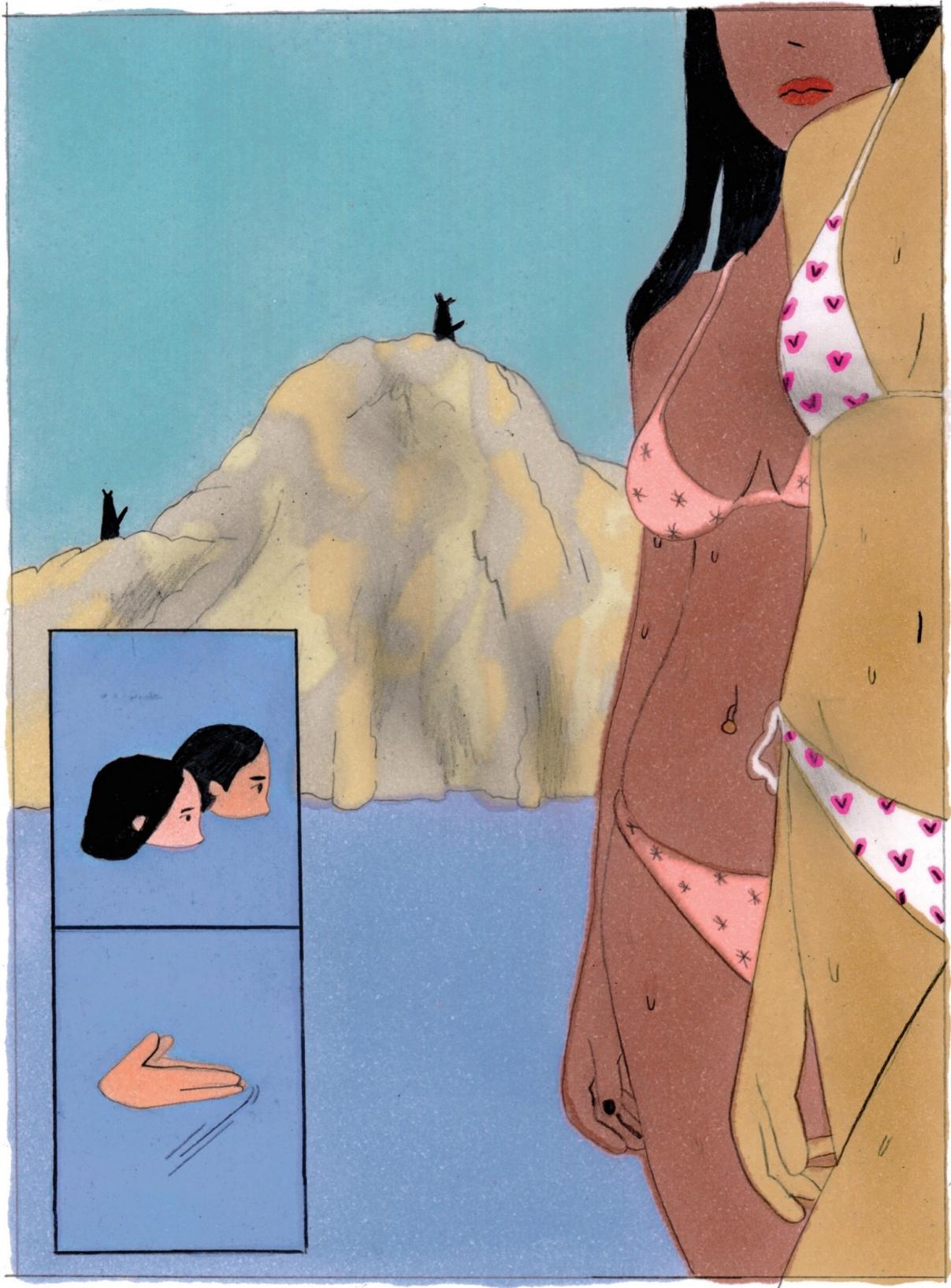
Fiction

- “Our Lady of the Quarry”

Our Lady of the Quarry

By [Mariana Enriquez](#)

December 14, 2020



Silvia lived alone in a rented apartment of her own, with a five-foot-tall pot plant on the balcony and a giant bedroom with a mattress on the floor. She had her own office at the Ministry of Education, and a salary; she dyed her long hair jet black and wore Indian blouses with sleeves that were wide at the wrists and silver thread that shimmered in the sunlight. She had the provincial last name of Olavarria and a cousin who had disappeared mysteriously while travelling around Mexico. She was our “grownup” friend, the one who took care of us when we went out and let us use her place to smoke weed and meet up with boys. But we wanted her ruined, helpless, destroyed. Because Silvia always knew more: if one of us discovered Frida Kahlo, oh, Silvia had already visited Frida’s house with her cousin in Mexico, before he vanished. If we tried a new drug, she had already overdosed on the same substance. If we discovered a band we liked, she had already *got over* her fandom of the same group. We hated that her long, heavy, straight hair was colored with a dye we couldn’t find in any normal beauty salon. What brand was it? She probably would have told us, but we would never ask. We hated that she always had money, enough for another beer, another ten grams, another pizza. How was it possible? She claimed that in addition to her salary she had access to her father’s account; he was rich, she never saw him, and he hadn’t acknowledged paternity, but he did deposit money for her in the bank. It was a lie, surely. As much a lie as when she said that her sister was a model: we’d seen the girl when she came to visit Silvia and she wasn’t worth three shits, a runty little skank with a big ass and wild curls plastered with gel that couldn’t have looked any greasier. I’m talking low-class—that girl couldn’t dream of walking a runway.

But above all we wanted Silvia brought down because Diego liked her. We’d met Diego in Bariloche on our senior-class trip. He was thin and had bushy eyebrows, and he always wore a different Rolling Stones shirt (one with the tongue, another with the cover of “Tattoo You,” another with Jagger clutching a microphone whose cord morphed into a snake). Diego had played us songs on the acoustic guitar after the horseback ride when it got dark near Cerro Catedral, and later in the hotel he showed us the precise measurements of vodka and orange juice to make a good screwdriver. He was nice to us, but he only wanted to kiss us, he wouldn’t sleep with us, maybe because he was older (he’d repeated a grade, he was eighteen), or maybe he just didn’t like us that way. Then, once we were back in Buenos

Aires, we called to invite him to a party. He paid attention to us for a while, until Silvia started chatting him up. And from then on he kept treating us well, it's true, but Silvia totally took over and kept him spellbound (or dumbfounded—opinions were divided), telling stories about Mexico and peyote and sugar skulls. She was older, too, she'd been out of high school for two years. Diego hadn't travelled much, but he wanted to go backpacking in the north that year. Silvia had already made that trip (of course!), and she gave him advice, telling him to call her for recommendations on cheap hotels and on families who would rent out rooms, and he bought every word, in spite of the fact that Silvia didn't have a single photo, not one, as proof of that trip or any other—she was quite the traveller.

Mariana Enriquez on teen-age desire.

Silvia was the one who came up with the idea of the quarry pools that summer, and we had to hand it to her, it was a really good idea. Silvia hated public pools and country-club pools, even the pools at estates or weekend houses; she said the water wasn't fresh, it always felt stagnant to her. Since the nearest river was polluted, she didn't have anywhere to swim. We were all, like, "Who does Silvia think she is, she acts like she was born on a beach in the South of France." But Diego listened to her explanation of why she wanted "fresh" water and he was totally in agreement. They talked a little more about oceans and waterfalls and streams, and then Silvia mentioned the quarry pools. Someone at her work had told her that you could find a ton of them off the southern highway, and that people hardly ever went swimming in them because they were scared, supposedly the pools were dangerous. And that's where she suggested we all go the next weekend, and we agreed right away because we knew Diego would say yes, and we didn't want the two of them going alone. Maybe if he saw how ugly her body was—she had some really tubby legs, which she claimed were that way because she'd played hockey when she was little, but half of us had played hockey, too, and none of us had those big ham hocks. Plus she had a flat ass and broad hips, which was why jeans never fit her well. If Diego saw those defects (plus the black body hairs she never really got rid of—maybe she couldn't pull them out by the root, she was really dark), he might stop liking Silvia and finally pay attention to us.

She asked around a little and decided we had to go to the Virgin's Pool, which was the best, the cleanest. It was also the biggest, deepest, and most dangerous of all. It was really far, nearly at the end of the 307 route, after the bus merged onto the highway. The Virgin's Pool was special, people said, because almost no one ever went there. The danger that kept swimmers away wasn't how deep it was: it was the owner. Apparently someone had bought the place, and we accepted that; none of us knew what a quarry pool was good for or if it could be bought, but, still, it didn't strike us as odd that the pool would have an owner, and we understood why this owner wouldn't want strangers swimming on his property.

It was said that when there were trespassers the owner would drive out from behind a hill and start shooting. Sometimes he also set his dogs on them. He had decorated his private quarry pool with a giant altar, a grotto for the Virgin on one side of the main pool. You could reach it by going around the pool along a dirt path that started at an improvised entrance from the road, which was marked by a narrow iron arch. On the other side was the hill over which the owner's truck could appear at any moment. The water in front of the Virgin was still and black. On the near side there was a little beach of clayey dirt.

We went every Saturday that January. The days were torrid and the water was so cold: it was like sinking into a miracle. We even forgot Diego and Silvia a little. They had also forgotten each other, enchanted by the coolness and the secrecy. We tried to keep quiet, to not make any racket that could wake the hidden owner. We never saw anyone else, although sometimes other people were at the bus stop on the way back, and they must have assumed we were coming from the quarry because of our wet hair and the smell that stuck to our skin, a scent of rock and salt. Once, the bus driver said something strange to us: that we should watch out for wild dogs on the loose. We shivered, but the next weekend we were as alone as ever—we didn't even hear a distant bark.

And we could see that Diego was starting to take an interest in our golden thighs, our slender ankles, our flat stomachs. He still kept closer to Silvia and he still seemed fascinated by her, even if by then he'd realized that we were much, much prettier. The problem was that the two of them were very good swimmers, and although they played with us in the water and taught us

a few things, sometimes they got bored and swam off with fast, precise strokes. It was impossible to catch up with them. The pool was really huge; from the shallows we could see their two dark heads bobbing on the surface, and we could see their lips moving, but we had no idea what they were saying. They laughed a lot, that's for sure, and Silvia's laugh was raucous and we had to tell her to keep it down. The two of them looked so happy. We knew that very soon they would remember how much they liked each other, and that the summer coolness near the highway was temporary. We had to put a stop to it. We had found Diego, and she couldn't keep everything for herself.

Diego looked better every day. The first time he took off his shirt, we discovered that his shoulders were strong and hunched, and his back was narrow and had a sandy color, just above his pants, that was simply beautiful. He taught us to make a roach clip out of a matchbook, and he watched out for us, making sure we didn't get in the water when we were too crazy—he didn't want us getting high and drowning. He ripped CDs of the bands that according to him we just had to hear, and later he'd quiz us; it was adorable how he got all happy when he could tell we'd really liked one of his favorites. We listened devotedly and looked for messages—was he trying to tell us something? Just in case, we even used a dictionary to translate the songs that were in English; we'd read them to one another over the phone and discuss them. It was very confusing—there were all kinds of conflicting signs.

All speculation was brought to an abrupt halt—as if a cold knife had sliced through our spines—when we found out that Silvia and Diego were dating. When! How! They were older, they didn't have curfews, Silvia had her own apartment, how stupid we'd been to apply our little-kid limitations to them. We sneaked out a lot, sure, but we were controlled by schedules, cell phones, and parents who all knew one another and drove us places—out dancing or to the rec center, friends' houses, home.

The details came soon enough, and they were nothing spectacular. In fact, Silvia and Diego had been seeing each other without us at night for a while. Sometimes he went to pick her up at the ministry and they went out for a drink, and other times they slept together at her apartment. No doubt they smoked pot from Silvia's plant in bed after sex. We were sixteen, and some

of us hadn't had sex yet—it was terrible. We'd sucked cock, yes, we were quite good at that, but fucking, only some of us had done that. Oh, we just hated it. We wanted Diego for ourselves. Not as our boyfriend—we just wanted him to screw us, to teach us sex the same way he taught us about rock and roll, making drinks, and the butterfly stroke.

Of all of us, Natalia was the most obsessed. She was still a virgin. She said she was saving herself for someone who was worth it, and Diego was worth it. And once she got something into her head she hardly ever backed down. Once, when her parents had forbidden her to go dancing for a week—her grades were a disaster—she'd taken twenty of her mom's pills. In the end they let her go dancing, but they also sent her to a psychologist. Natalia skipped the sessions and spent the money on stuff for herself. With Diego, she wanted something special. She didn't want to throw herself at him. She wanted him to want her, to like her, she wanted to drive him crazy. But at parties, when she tried to talk to him, Diego just flashed her a sideways smile and went on with his conversation with one of us other girls. He didn't answer her calls, and, if he did, the conversations were always languid and he always cut them off. At the quarry pool he didn't stare at her body, her long, strong legs and firm ass, or else he looked at her the way he would at a pretty boring plant—a ficus, for example. Now, *that* Natalia couldn't believe. She didn't know how to swim, but she got wet near the shore and then came out of the water with her yellow swimsuit stuck to her tan body so tight you could see her nipples, hard from the cold water. And Natalia knew that any other boy who saw her would kill himself jacking off, but not Diego, no—he preferred that flat-assed skank! We all agreed it was incomprehensible.

One afternoon, when we were on our way to P.E. class, Natalia told us she'd put menstrual blood in Diego's coffee. She'd done it at Silvia's house—where else! It was just the three of them, and at one point Diego and Silvia went to the kitchen for a few minutes to get the coffee and cookies, although the coffee was already served on the table. Real quick, Natalia poured in the blood she'd managed to collect—very little—in a tiny bottle from a perfume sample. She'd wrung out the blood from cotton gauze, which was disgusting; she normally used pads or tampons, the cotton was just so she could get the blood. She diluted it a little in water, but she said it should work all the same. She'd got the technique from a parapsychology book,

which claimed that while the method was not very hygienic, it was an infallible way to snag your beloved.

It didn't work. A week after Diego drank Natalia's blood, Silvia herself told us they were dating, it was official. The next time we saw them, they couldn't keep their hands off each other. That weekend when we went to the quarry pool they were holding hands, and we just couldn't understand it. We couldn't understand it. The red bikini with hearts on one of us; the super-flat stomach with a belly-button piercing on another; the exquisite haircut that fell just so over the face; legs without a single hair, underarms like marble. And he preferred her? Why? Because he screwed her? But we wanted to screw, too, that was *all* we wanted! How could he not realize, when we sat on his lap and pressed our asses into him, or tried to brush our hands against his dick like by accident? Or when we laughed close to his mouth, showing our tongues. Why didn't we just throw ourselves at him, once and for all? Because it was true for all of us, it wasn't just an obsession of Natalia's—we wanted Diego to choose us. We wanted to be with him still wet from the cold quarry water, to fuck him one after the other as he lay on the little beach, to wait for the owner's gunshots and run to the highway half-naked under a rain of bullets.

But no. There we were in all our glory, and he was over there kissing on old, flat-ass Silvia. The sun was burning and flat-ass Silvia's nose was peeling, she used the crappiest sunscreen, she was a disaster. We, though, were impeccable. At one point, Diego seemed to realize. He looked at us differently, as if comprehending that he was with an ugly skank. And he said, "Why don't we swim over to the Virgin?" Natalia went pale, because she didn't know how to swim. The rest of us did, but we didn't dare cross the quarry, it was so wide and deep, and if we started to drown there would be no one to save us, we were in the middle of nowhere. Diego read our thoughts: "How about Sil and I swim over, you guys walk along the edge and we'll meet there. I want to see the altar up close. Are you up for it?"

We said yes, sure, though we were concerned because if he was calling her "Sil" then maybe our impression that he was looking at us differently was wrong, but we were just dying for it to be true and we were going kind of crazy. We started to walk. Getting around the quarry wasn't easy; it seemed much smaller when you were sitting on the little beach. It was huge. It must

have been three blocks long. Diego and Silvia went faster than us, and we saw their dark heads appear at intervals, shining golden under the sun, so luminous, and their arms plowing slippery through the water. At one point they had to stop, and, as we watched from the shore—the sun beating down on us, dust plastered to our bodies with sweat, some of us with headaches from the heat and the harsh light in our eyes, walking as if uphill—we saw them stop and talk, and Silvia laughed, throwing back her head and treading water, paddling with her arms to stay afloat. It was too far to swim in one go, they weren't professionals. But Natalia got the feeling that they hadn't stopped just because they were tired, she thought they were plotting something. "That bitch has something up her sleeve," she said, and she kept walking toward the Virgin we could barely see inside the grotto.

Diego and Silvia reached the Virgin's grotto just as we were turning right to walk the final fifty yards. They must have seen the way we were panting, our armpits stinking like onion and our hair stuck to our temples. They looked at us closely, laughed the same way they had when they'd stopped swimming, and then jumped right back into the water and started swimming as fast as they could back to the little beach. Just like that. We heard their mocking laughter along with the splash. "Bye, girls!" Silvia shouted triumphantly as she set off swimming, and we were frozen there in spite of the heat—weird, we were frozen and hotter than ever, our ears burning in embarrassment as we cast about desperately for a comeback and watched them glide away, laughing at the dummies who didn't know how to swim. Humiliated, fifty yards away from the Virgin that now no one felt like looking at, that none of us had ever really wanted to see. We looked at Natalia. She was so filled with rage that the tears wouldn't fall from her eyes. We told her we should go back. She said no, she wanted to see the Virgin. We were tired and ashamed, and we sat down to smoke, saying that we would wait for her.

She took a long time, about fifteen minutes. Strange—was she praying? We didn't ask her, we knew very well how she was when she got mad. Once, in an attack of rage, she'd bitten one of us for real, leaving a giant bite mark on the arm that had lasted for almost a week. Finally she came back, asked us for a drag—she didn't like to smoke whole cigarettes—and started to walk. We followed her. We could see Silvia and Diego on the beach, drying each other off. We couldn't hear them well, but they were laughing, and suddenly Silvia shouted, "Don't be mad, girls, it was just a joke."

Natalia whirled around to face us. She was covered in dust. There was even dust in her eyes. She stared at us, studying us. Then she smiled and said, “It’s not a Virgin.”

“What?”

“It has a white sheet to hide it, to cover it, but it’s not a Virgin. It’s a red woman made of plaster, and she’s naked. She has black nipples.”

We were scared. We asked her who it was, then. Natalia said she didn’t know, it must be a Brazilian thing. She also said that she’d asked it for a favor. And that the red was really well painted, and it shone, like acrylic. That the statue had very pretty hair, long and black, darker and silkier than Silvia’s. And when Natalia approached it the false virginal white sheet had fallen on its own, she hadn’t touched it, like the statue wanted her to see it. Then she’d asked it for something.

We didn’t reply. Sometimes she did crazy stuff like that, like the menstrual blood in the coffee. Then she’d get over it.

We arrived at the beach in a very bad mood, and we ignored all of Silvia and Diego’s attempts to make us laugh. We saw them start to feel guilty. They said they were sorry, asked our forgiveness. They admitted it had been a bad joke, designed to embarrass us, mean and condescending. They opened the little cooler we always brought to the quarry and took out a cold beer, and just as Diego flipped off the cap with his keychain opener we heard the first growl. It was so loud, clear, and strong that it seemed to come from very close by. But Silvia stood up and pointed to the hill where the owner supposedly might appear. It was a black dog, though the first thing Diego said was “It’s a horse.” No sooner did he finish the sentence than the dog barked, and the bark filled the afternoon and we could have sworn it made the surface of the water in the quarry pool tremble a little. The dog was as big as a pony, completely black, and it was clearly about to come down the hill. But it wasn’t the only one. The first growl had come from behind us, at the end of the beach. There, very close to us, three slobbering pony-dogs were walking. You could see their ribs as their sides rose and fell—they were skinny. These were not the owner’s dogs, we thought, they were the dogs the bus driver had told us about, savage and dangerous. Diego made a

“sh-h-h” sound to soothe them, and Silvia said, “We can’t show them we’re scared.” And then Natalia, furious, finally crying now, screamed at them, “You arrogant assholes! You’re a flat-ass skank, and you’re a shithead, and those are *my* dogs!”

There was one ten feet away from Silvia. Diego didn’t even hear Natalia: he stood in front of his girlfriend to protect her, but then another dog appeared behind him, and then two smaller ones that came running and barking down the hill where the owner never did turn up, and suddenly they started howling, from hunger or hatred, we didn’t know. What we did know, what we realized because it was so obvious, was that the dogs didn’t even look at us. None of us. They ignored us, it was like we didn’t exist, like it was only Silvia and Diego there beside the quarry pool. Natalia put on a shirt and a skirt, whispered to us to get dressed, too, and then she took us by the hands. She walked to the iron arch over the entranceway that led to the highway, and only then did she start to run to the 307 stop; we followed her. If we thought about getting help, we didn’t say anything. If we thought about going back, we didn’t mention that, either. When we got to the highway and heard Silvia’s and Diego’s screams, we secretly prayed that no car would stop and hear them, too—sometimes, since we were so young and pretty, people stopped and offered to take us to the city for free. The 307 came and we got on calmly so as not to raise suspicions. The driver asked us how we were and we told him, Fine, great, it’s all good, it’s all good. ♦

(Translated, from the Spanish, by Megan McDowell.)

By [David Wallace](#)

Georgia Postcard

- [Asking All Georgians: Are You Seventeen and a Half?](#)

[December 21, 2020 Issue](#)

Asking All Georgians: Are You Seventeen and a Half?

There are twenty-three thousand teen-agers in the state who weren't old enough to vote in November, but who will be old enough to vote in the Senate runoffs, in January. These volunteers tried to find them.

By [Charles Bethea](#)

December 14, 2020

Aly Yamamoto, a seventeen-year-old in Georgia, won't turn eighteen until March, which has been bugging her lately. "Two months too late to vote in the runoffs" that will determine which party has control of the Senate, she explained. "But at least I can still register people." Yamamoto, a volunteer for the New Georgia Project, a local voter-mobilization effort, was holding a clipboard and standing outside Decatur High School, east of Atlanta, where she is currently a senior. She was joined by another volunteer, Elizabeth Woodcock, a fifty-year-old health-care-management consultant. In Georgia, you must be eighteen to vote, but only seventeen and a half to register. Yamamoto and Woodcock decided to see how many seventeen-and-a-half-year-olds they could find. They'd heard that there were twenty-three thousand teens in the state who hadn't been old enough to vote in November but who would be in January.



“That’s, like, twice as many people as Biden won by here,” Yamamoto said. She wore a purple sweatshirt and a burgundy mask. (Woodcock wore a “Count Every Vote” mask.) The two headed toward Decatur Square, a historic walking and shopping district, but, first, they stopped at a Chick-fil-A, where a young man was standing outside. “Are you seventeen and a half?” Woodcock asked him. He shook his head and left to check on his order. They continued on to the square. A group of skateboarders were hanging out under a tree. “Hi,” Woodcock said. “Are you guys seventeen and a half?”

“No,” one said, “we’re much younger. Thank you, though.”

“Those are my brother’s friends,” Yamamoto said. “They’re fourteen.”

They kept walking. “Are you registered?” Yamamoto asked a young man in headphones. “You already asked,” he replied.

Turning a corner, Yamamoto bumped into a floppy-haired guy who was wearing a puffy jacket and carrying his own clipboard. His name was Ewan Pritchard, and Yamamoto had recently beaten him in an election for student-body president. “Very fierce competition—very emotional,” Pritchard said. “I didn’t look at the numbers. But I trust the system.” He was walking around with Woodcock’s mother.

Pritchard, who is eighteen, said that he’d voted for Joe Biden in November: “It’s fun to be able to finally vote.”

“I bet,” Yamamoto said.



"I had to eat a couple of people ahead of me in line, but, yep, I got the last chess set."

Kate Kenberg

“I have a lot of friends who are just behind the cutoff,” Pritchard went on. He and Yamamoto figured that about a hundred of their classmates might vote, out of the hundred and fifty who’d be old enough. “That’s why we’re doing this,” Pritchard said. “My résumé has already gone to colleges,” he added.

Yamamoto and Pritchard split off from Woodcock and her mom and took a roundabout path back to the school. (“Maybe we can register the parkour guy,” Pritchard said.) They waved to some underclassmen playing soccer, dodged a spewing fire hydrant, and chatted with an elderly woman for a while about pecan trees and God. But they did not find anyone who was seventeen and a half.

Thirty minutes later, they debriefed with the rest of the team in the school parking lot. “We didn’t get any takers,” Yamamoto said. Then she turned to a young man named Miles Havard, her co-student-body president, who was also volunteering: “When’s your birthday?”

“June 3rd,” Havard said. “On the day of the registration deadline, I’ll be seventeen and five months and twenty-nine days. One day short.” He shook his head.

Pritchard began texting classmates in his address book, at random. One, Dominick Calandra, was the right age. “He’s in the apartments up there,” Pritchard said to the volunteers, pointing a few hundred yards away. He told Calandra to bring his I.D.

A few minutes later, Calandra, a skinny kid with sagging jeans and tousled hair, arrived with four friends from the senior class. Calandra was the only one who would be newly eligible to vote in January. “We’re all here to register,” he mumbled, drawing applause from the small crowd of volunteers. Calandra explained how his day had gone. “Worked on some world-history work,” he said. “Then came here.” A girl he’d brought with him added, about the decision to come register, “It was really convenient, so we figured we might as well.”

“Do you guys mind if I take a picture for the yearbook?” a young woman asked. They obliged.

Pens began to scratch paper: the scribble of democracy. Pritchard offered the new registrants some candy. “I’m not super enthusiastic about politics,” Calandra confessed afterward. “But,” he added, “this seems important.” ♦

On Television

- [“How To with John Wilson” Offers a Martian’s-Eye View of Homo Sapiens’ Habits](#)

“How To with John Wilson” Offers a Martian’s-Eye View of Homo Sapiens’ Habits

The oddball, comic show about New York City is the perfect documentary for our documentary-obsessed culture.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

December 14, 2020



How did “How To with John Wilson” make it onto HBO? I mean that as a compliment. The show, an endearing, oddball comic documentary in six half-hour episodes, isn’t glamorous, or suspenseful, or slick. It has minimal drama and no murder, and looks as if it were shot for roughly the same budget that the network once allotted for a pair of [Carrie Bradshaw’s](#) shoes. There’s no sex—though one episode contains an astonishing, if chaste, display of male nudity—but there is a ton of city. Wilson’s subject is human behavior, and his terrain is New York, which he trawls with the obsessive devotion of a beachcomber, sifting through the streets with his camera to find the treasures buried among the trash, and not just the figurative kind. The show opens on an image of an overflowing, graffiti-speckled dumpster, with the Manhattan skyline hovering in the background, waiting for her closeup. It never comes. Wilson is interested in what happens at ground level; when he does look up, he can’t see the skyscrapers for the scaffolding.

Wilson is thirty-four and lives in [Queens](#). He has worked as a video editor for a private investigator, and as a cameraman on infomercials. The first job must have trained him to look for the telling detail, the blip in the pattern, and the second to whet the visual appetite, or simply to tolerate the superfluous and the occasionally grotesque. (“How To” includes some footage from Wilson’s infomercial years: lots of closeups of processed meat.) He has an eye for pun and metaphor, and an affectionate attunement to human foibles and eccentricities, which he captures with sneaky technique. If you happen to be having an upright nap on a park bench with your jacket draped, shroudlike, over your face, or trying to patiently lure a pigeon into a shopping bag on the streets of midtown in broad daylight, Wilson may well be lurking near you, recording the whole thing.

For years, Wilson posted short films to his Web site, where he garnered a small and passionate following. He is, at heart, a collector and collagist, and he hit on the conceit of mock-instructional videos as a way to organize his abundance of material. One of his fans was the cringe-comedy pioneer Nathan Fielder, who became an executive producer of “How To,” pitching the concept to networks as “‘Planet Earth,’ but for New York.” That description is sort of right. In episodes with names like “How to Make Small Talk” and “How to Cover Your Furniture,” Wilson takes a Martian’s-eye view of the habits and customs of *Homo sapiens*, though he doesn’t profess the expertise of a [David Attenborough](#). His primary student seems to be

himself. “Small talk is the glue that binds us all together, and the armor that shields us from each other’s darkest thoughts” is a standard piece of Wilson narration. His affect is that of an awkward man-child; he has a slightly squashed, Kermit the Frog voice that sits in the back of his throat, and the halting, reading-aloud style of a novice public speaker. Even the closed captioning preserves his “um”s.

What makes the show spark is the specificity of the images that Wilson pairs with his deadpan text. As breezy as the result can seem, his process of foraging is painstaking; the footage that went into the show took two years to gather. Wilson edits musically, using visual beats to create tight rhythms, tonal ironies, felicities, and jokes. The phrase “New York is filled with friendly people” means something different when it is paired with the sight of a scowling FedEx driver flaunting his crotch in a *va fangool* grip. The show contains an encyclopedic array of grimaces, eye rolls, and acquiescent smiles. One of my favorite shots is of a portly man in a business suit, rubbing his hands together over and over, in an age-old gesture of distress. What I felt, after nearly three hours of touring through this human menagerie with Wilson as my guide, was a fresh admiration of our species’ physical ability to express so many variations of the same thing.

Because the success of each episode depends on Wilson’s ability to hook a distinctive subject who can nudge it in new directions, we meet a parade of earnest and self-promoting weirdos, not all of equal interest. You can understand how exciting it must have been for Wilson to discover, in a grocery store, an apostle of “The Mandela Effect”—the phenomenon of commonly shared false memories—and to follow him to a conference in Ketchum, Idaho, where attendees swapped elaborate theories of the multiverse to explain the fact that they always thought that “Oscar Mayer” was spelled with two “e”s. But this kind of American kookiness is not all that hard to sniff out, and Wilson’s arch, zoological approach stumbles when it courts his viewers’ condescension. The show, with its scavenger-hunt ethos, can get a little cutesy, and some of the gags border on Facebook meme material. When everyone’s a documentarian, the professional loses his edge.

Fundamentally, though, Wilson is an appreciator. He likes to talk to people, and people like to talk to him. On a mission to learn how to cook risotto, he wanders into the back yard of a house flying the Italian flag and ends up in

the kitchen, where the owner, a middle-aged Italian-American guy, prepares the dish from scratch. (At moments like this, it's worth pondering the private worlds that Wilson, a bespectacled, bearded white dude, is given access to, and the ones he isn't.) It can make you a little queasy to watch Wilson focus his lens on some unsuspecting schmo. Still, you could argue that the quirks that he spies on in secret pale in comparison with what people willingly reveal about themselves. In "How to Split the Check," Wilson, investigating notions of fairness, attends a dinner on Long Island for an association of soccer referees, which devolves into acrimony and petty theft. If a group of refs can't establish order, who can? Another highlight is a portrait of Wilson's landlady, an Old Country, kerchief-wearing woman he calls Mama, who invites him to watch "Jeopardy!" on her sofa and does his laundry as if he were her young son. Mama watches [Alex Trebek](#), and the camera watches Mama, returning her devotion with love.

In a sense, "How To with John Wilson" is the perfect documentary for our documenting-obsessed culture, a bizarro companion—or corrective—to Instagram's bombardment of images of other landscapes, other homes, other lives. We take pictures so that we can show one another—and remind ourselves—where we were, what we saw, what we wore, what we ate. Wilson opens one episode with a clever montage of people posing for photographs and selfies; under his living lens, they wobble and bob, straining to keep still. That kind of preservation of dailiness is what he's after, too. In an episode called "How to Improve Your Memory," he reveals that, for the past decade, he has kept notebooks listing each day's activities, beginning with the time he woke up and what he ate for breakfast. The sight of the notebooks, divided into grids and filled with cramped handwriting, is startling. Wilson puts his anxiety on full display; he has spent years worrying about losing the past, but, when he reads over what he has written, he finds that it has managed to escape anyway.

Memory, in New York, is a way of planting a flag in our ever-shifting city, claiming a stake for ourselves. See that bank? It used to be my favorite bar. I remember how it was before, and it was better then. The city is always vanishing, maybe never faster than now. Wilson shot his last episode in early March, as the coronavirus hit the city. He enters a supermarket, trying to find the end of a snaking line of panic shoppers, a new era of city life beginning before his eyes. Then, like everyone else, he retreats home. Will New York

still be New York when he ventures out again? A true New Yorker doesn't have to ask. ♦

Onward and Upward with the Arts

- [Cartoon Saloon and the New Golden Age of Animation](#)

[December 21, 2020 Issue](#)

Cartoon Saloon and the New Golden Age of Animation

The studio's hand-drawn movies—including its latest, "Wolfwalkers"—offer an alternative vision of what children's entertainment can be.

By [Mark O'Connell](#)

December 11, 2020

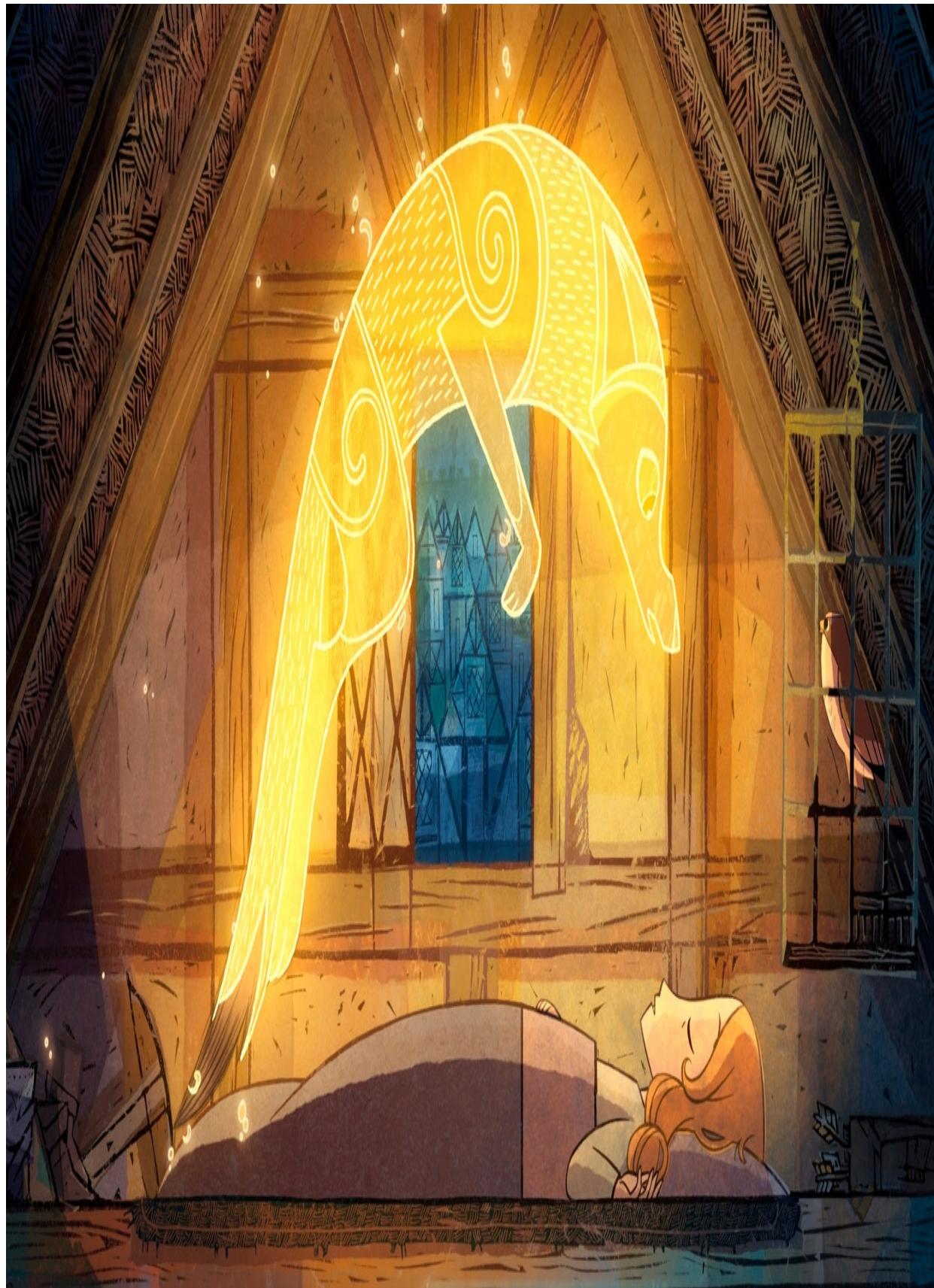


In the seventeenth century, after wolves were hunted to extinction in most of the British Isles, Ireland was sometimes referred to as Wolf-Land. The implication, perhaps, was that it needed to be tamed. In 1649, Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army invaded Ireland on behalf of the Commonwealth of England, leading to the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Irish people. The Army also appointed professional hunters to cull the country's wolves. Cromwell's men captured the walled city of Kilkenny, which was surrounded by forests full of wolves and was home to as many superstitions about them. One myth held that certain natives of the region could transform into wolves, roaming the land while their ordinary bodies lay in a kind of trance. If they were injured in the course of this lupine marauding, the wounds would appear on their human flesh. The meat of their animal prey could be found in their teeth.

The animator Tomm Moore first learned of these myths as a teen-ager in Kilkenny, in the early nineties. He belonged to a program called Young Irish Film Makers, and one day he overheard two of the group's adult facilitators recounting the old tales. Moore had joined the club because he wanted to make animated movies; as a child, he had squirrelled away acetate sheets that his father, an engineer, brought home from work, and used them to paint cels with superheroes of his own devising. His partner in this enthusiasm was a schoolmate named Ross Stewart, who also shared Moore's passion for animal rights—a somewhat eccentric preoccupation, back then, for two Irish boys. Moore had felt strongly about the matter ever since his uncle, a farmer, asked him to pick out a chicken he liked, and he realized, belatedly, that he had selected not a pet but that evening's dinner.

Thirty years later, Moore and Stewart are the co-directors of "Wolfwalkers," the fourth feature from Cartoon Saloon, an independent animation studio that Moore co-founded, in his home town, in 1999. Kilkenny is technically a city—I was born and raised there, and I am more or less obliged to fight you if you refer to it as a town. But it was given that status by King James I, four centuries ago; it's home to fewer than thirty thousand people. Cartoon Saloon used to screen works in progress in a theatre at the high school Moore went to, and he would sometimes walk behind the stage and see where he'd written his name on the wall when he was fifteen. That theatre is also where he met his wife, Liselott Olofsson, a schoolteacher and a ceramic artist.

Now forty-three, Moore is a soft-spoken man whose serious and thoughtful manner is periodically disrupted by a gentle laugh. “I grew up thinking it would be terribly tragic if I stayed in Kilkenny my whole life,” he told me this past spring, over Zoom. That success rather than stasis has kept him there is not an irony he tends to dwell on, but neither is it lost on him. Cartoon Saloon produces movies using essentially the same techniques that he practiced on his father’s acetate sheets as a child. This approach sets it apart in the animation world, which has gone almost entirely digital. But Moore believes that computer graphics are subject to a built-in obsolescence. “Computer animation is moving so fast that ‘Toy Story’ looks really ropy now,” he said. “Whereas there are hand-drawn films from the nineteen-forties that still stand up. ‘Bambi’ still looks really timeless. And that’s because its language is the language of painting and illustration, rather than the language of the latest technology.”



"We made it part of a personal manifesto that we were going to reinvent hand drawing," the Cartoon Saloon co-founder Tomm Moore said. Still courtesy Cartoon Saloon and Abrams Books

The hero of "Wolfwalkers" is a young girl named Robyn Goodfellowe, whose father, a wolf hunter, has brought her from England to Kilkenny at the height of Cromwell's campaign. One night, she sneaks into the forest, where she meets a wild girl named Mebh. Mebh is a wolfwalker—a shape-shifter, like the lycanthropes of local legend. The character designs are expressionistic, rendered with artful sketchiness or geometric rigidity, according to the figures' proximity to nature or to political power. There's a woodcut look to the Kilkenny backgrounds, which have a flatness typical of Moore's style, while the forest is full of circles and swoops; when the wolfwalkers roam, their visions have a dreamy fluidity, as of a world delineated by scent more than by sight. "Wolfwalkers" is the culmination of a loose trilogy of films rooted in Irish history and folklore, which began with the studio's first feature, "The Secret of Kells." After the movie had its virtual première, at the Toronto Film Festival, in September, *Variety* proclaimed it "another stunning artwork for the ages."

Thanks to my children, who are seven and two, I have invested, at a conservative estimate, several hundred hours watching the latest animated films from the big studios. Computer animation predominates, as does an algorithmic adherence to story mechanics that betrays an unwillingness to risk, even momentarily, the dilation of a young viewer's attention. Although these movies are expensive to produce, they have become one of Hollywood's most profitable genres: the animation industry is now valued at more than two hundred and fifty billion dollars. But this growth—and, especially, the advent of the big streaming services, with bags of cash and a nearly bottomless need for new things to stream—has also created space for more idiosyncratic operations. "Wolfwalkers," which began its coronavirus-curtailed theatrical run in November, has recently arrived on Apple TV+. The film appears to mark the end of one phase for the studio, and perhaps the beginning of another. It offers an alternative vision of what popular art for children might be.

There was a time, around the middle of the last century, when Disney was the only studio in the English-speaking world that regularly produced feature-length animated films. After Walt Disney died, in 1966, the studio's animation division entered a period of decline; in the late seventies, one of

its animators, a Mormon from Texas named Don Bluth, left to start his own firm, eventually called Sullivan Bluth Studios. Bluth wanted to spark a renaissance in hand-drawn animation. In the mid-eighties, while working on the movie “An American Tail,” about a mouse who leaves a Russian shtetl for New York City, he began to move his studio to Dublin, lured by fiscal enticements from the Irish government. That film was a hit, and so was his next, “The Land Before Time,” from 1988, about the trials of a young apatosaurus. As teen-agers, Moore and Stewart wrangled an invitation to Bluth’s studio, thanks to a friend whose aunt worked there. “We imagined it being Willy Wonka’s factory,” Moore said. “But it seemed that Don Bluth was the only one there with a creative job, and that for everyone else it was this really industrial process.”

Bluth needed a steady stream of talent for his Dublin offices, and so he helped set up an animation course at Ballyfermot Senior College, at that time a vocational school in a working-class suburb of the city. Moore enrolled in 1995. He was seventeen, and Olofsson, who was still in school, had just become pregnant with their son, Ben. At Ballyfermot, Moore met Paul Young and Nora Twomey, who became co-founders of Cartoon Saloon. (Two other founders, Aiden Harte and Ross Murray, childhood friends of Moore’s, have since left the studio.) Young, an irrepressible extrovert from the west of Ireland, had studied fine art in Belfast, then travelled for a bit, scraping together a living as an illustrator and a street caricaturist. Twomey was quieter, and slightly older. She had dropped out of school at fifteen, after her father died, and taken a job at a frozen-food processing plant, watching diced carrots and peas scroll past like a looping background in an old Hanna-Barbera cartoon, inventing stories to pass the time.

When the trio met, Sullivan Bluth was winding up its business after a string of box-office disappointments. The renaissance Bluth envisaged had occurred—at Disney, which, spurred by the new competition, made a series of hits, including “Beauty and the Beast,” “Aladdin,” and “The Lion King.” Disney also began working with the computer-animation firm Pixar. The two companies jointly released “Toy Story,” the world’s first fully computer-animated feature film, in the fall of Moore’s freshman year.

“Nearly everyone in my class ended up going into computer animation,” Moore told me. “I wanted to be a classical animator in the way of the old

Disney movies.” He and his friends soon found other inspirations, too. Hayao Miyazaki’s Studio Ghibli, in Tokyo, had begun to achieve global renown, with its classically animated masterworks that drew on Shinto-inflected ideas about the oneness of nature. Another hero was the Canadian maverick Richard Williams, who labored for thirty years on a lavish fantasia called “The Thief and the Cobbler,” about a thirteenth-century Arab folk hero. The movie employed radically flattened perspectives inspired by Persian miniature paintings. It never got a proper release: Warner Bros., which had agreed to finance the film, took it away from Williams in 1992, the same year that “Aladdin”—which borrowed liberally from Williams’s unfinished picture—had its première. Moore got hold of a rough cut, on VHS, and was awestruck. He and Harte had been trying since their teens to craft a story around the Book of Kells, an illuminated manuscript of the Gospels from the eighth or ninth century, which is considered one of the great works of Celtic art. In 1998, Disney released “Mulan,” based on a Chinese legend, and Moore decided that they had better make their Irish feature before Disney beat them to it.

He moved back to Kilkenny with Olofsson after graduation. The director of Young Irish Film Makers offered him space in the group’s offices, and helped him secure a government grant, allowing him to bring more than a dozen other Ballyfermot graduates with him. “We made it part of a personal manifesto that we were going to reinvent hand drawing,” Moore told me. The studio’s first productions were short films directed by Twomey, one based on an Inuit myth, and one, in Irish, about a boy whose head is on backward. Its long-term project was what became “The Secret of Kells.”

At the time, I was at college in Dublin, but I often returned to Kilkenny on weekends. My friends and I drank in a modestly artsy pub that the animators also frequented; I heard that they were working on a movie about the Book of Kells. Moore’s name was often invoked, and I imagined him as an aloof, quixotic figure who’d somehow dragooned these talented young people into a mad scheme—a feature-length cartoon about, of all things, medieval monks making an illuminated manuscript. When I mentioned this recently to Moore, he explained that he hadn’t been reclusive; he’d just been raising a small child. Also, he said, although starting an animation studio in Kilkenny may have seemed like a wild undertaking, it was “kind of a safe move,” too:

“Even though the things I was doing seemed really ambitious, I was also just continuing things I had done as a teen-ager.”



Cartoon Saloon's first feature, "The Secret of Kells," is an adventure story that also stages an argument about art in times of uncertainty and darkness. Stills courtesy Cartoon Saloon

“*The Secret of Kells*,” which came out in 2009, was co-directed by Moore and Twomey. Stewart served as the art director. (Harte left the project to focus on “*Skunk Fu!*,” a TV show about a kung-fu-fighting skunk, which ran for one season in 2007.) The film centers on a red-headed boy named Brendan, who lives in the abbey at Kells and yearns for a life of creativity and freedom. Brendan spends his days at a scriptorium, learning from a master illuminator, Brother Aidan, and gathering materials for ink in a nearby forest. Brendan’s uncle Cellach is the abbot; his tall, rigid form evokes a monastic tower. Cellach has become monomaniacal about protecting the monastery from Vikings by building a vast wall around its perimeter. He and Brother Aidan—long-haired, with sharp, witty features—are proxies for an argument about art in times of uncertainty and darkness: the abbot wants to preserve civilization with a wall, while the illuminator is determined to enact it with pen and ink. “It is very self-reflexive,” Moore confessed. The forest surrounding the monastery is rendered as a kind of

sprawling art work—whorled mists, curlicued branches, spiralling wasps—which echoes the nested and interlocking volutions of the Book of Kells.

Though the movie's budget was small by mainstream standards, it was significant for a tiny studio; at the peak of production, Cartoon Saloon employed eighty-five animators in Kilkenny. Luckily, Young had reserves of entrepreneurial charm. (Brother Aidan's look was inspired by Young, Moore told me.) At an industry forum, he buttonholed Didier Brunner, the founder of a French studio called Les Armateurs, which ended up co-producing the film and helped it secure international distribution. Critics loved the movie, and it was nominated for an Oscar for Best Animated Feature. It lost to Pixar's "Up," which had a budget many times as large.

Pete Docter, the director of "Up," told me that when he first saw "The Secret of Kells" he was struck by how it defied prevailing trends. "At the time," he said, "it was all about 3-D, and Cartoon Saloon were instead embracing the graphic. They were embracing flatness—not only the flatness of an animation tradition, but also of Celtic design, and merging these things together in ways that were really unexpected but also very sophisticated." In the studio's approach to the form, he said, he recognized a countercultural force.

No one expected a children's film about manuscript-making monks to be the next "Lion King," and no one was disappointed when it wasn't. (The studio told me that the movie made around two million dollars.) After it was finished, Cartoon Saloon shrank to twelve people in a single office. Stewart went to Laika Studios, a stop-motion outfit near Portland, Oregon, which also released its début feature in 2009, the Oscar-nominated "Coraline." Moore told me that everyone at Cartoon Saloon could have got on a flight to L.A. and walked into a job at a major studio; for a time, he thought about doing so. "But, after the Oscars, I started to meet people who worked at Pixar and places like that," he said. "And they were, like, 'Man, you guys are living the dream! You're doing what everybody wishes they could do, making your own films in your own way.' "

It wasn't easy. The studio had no other projects far enough along in development to attract funding; Young, Moore, and Twomey all had to take out personal loans to keep the company afloat. But Moore had an idea,

which had come to him while “Kells” was still in production. On a holiday in County Kerry, he was sketching on the beach with his son, who had recently turned ten, when they saw what appeared to be large rocks. As they got closer, they realized these were seals that had been clubbed to death. Ben was devastated. The family was renting a cottage from a local woman, who explained that fishermen blamed seals for the declining fish population. The real culprit was overfishing. In the old days, she said, it would have been considered bad luck to kill a seal.

The remark reminded Moore of stories he’d heard as a child about selkies, mythical creatures who changed from human to seal form and back again. “When people believed in those stories, there was a better, more pantheistic way of looking at the world,” he told me, “rather than just simplifying everything down to the very commercial logic of ‘The seals are eating the fish, we’re losing money, kill the seals.’ ” With the Irish screenwriter Will Collins, he wrote a story about a ten-year-old boy named Ben, who lives on the coast with his father, a lighthouse keeper named Conor, and his mute and seemingly haunted little sister, Saoirse. Their mother has disappeared. Conor, lost in grief, sends the children to live with their overbearing grandmother in Dublin. Saoirse becomes ill: she and her mother, Ben discovers, are selkies. Saoirse and Ben journey back to the coast, and on the way they encounter a group of fairy folk and a sinister owl-witch named Macha, who steals emotions and keeps them in jars.

I’ve watched “Song of the Sea” with my seven-year-old more than once. His cousin has a small but pivotal role in the film—when Saoirse finally sings the titular song, the voice you hear belongs to my niece, Lucy O’Connell—but my son is indifferent to her star turn. He reacts strongly, on the other hand, to a scene in which Ben confronts Macha, who has taken Saoirse captive. “You’re so full of emotions!” Macha says. “I can see them in your face. Nasty, terrible things!” Macha is voiced by the great Irish actress Fionnula Flanagan, who also provides the voice of the grandmother, and there is an uncanniness to the character, at once predatory and maternal. She gazes at Ben with fiery raptor’s eyes and strokes his face with hands both soft and lethally taloned. All this seems to overwhelm my son in a way that most of the cartoons he watches never do, because they are precisely calibrated not to. “Song of the Sea” holds his attention but doesn’t

condescend to it; the movie is more expertly paced than “Kells,” but stretches of it are quiet and elegiac.



"If I weren't petrified of catching a debilitating disease, spreading it to my loved ones, and being hospitalized for weeks, I'd give him a piece of my mind."

Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

“If you go back and watch ‘Bambi,’ it’s very slow and lyrical,” Moore told me. “It’s a little tone poem of a film, compared to what Disney would do now, with their story science, where like every ten minutes something happens that moves the character on to the next bit. There’s a really clear formula for keeping kids engaged now.” Cartoon Saloon doesn’t exactly ignore this formula—the studio makes adventure stories with child heroes who follow clear narrative arcs. But its movies allow the viewer space to dream and to wander.

“Song of the Sea” earned Cartoon Saloon its second Oscar nomination, and made more than twice as much at the box office as “Kells” did. This time, there was streaming money, too. “We had Amazon writing a big check, without us having to do much of that work at all in terms of distribution,” Gerry Shirren, a onetime Sullivan Bluth production employee who is now Cartoon Saloon’s managing director, told me. Days before the Oscar nomination was announced, the studio released its second TV series, “Puffin Rock,” created by Moore and Young with Lily Bernard, then a background artist at the studio. A peaceful show about a puffin named Oona and her gentle adventures on a little island, it became a surprise hit on the Chinese streaming platform Tencent Video, where it was watched fifty-five million times in its first six weeks. It ran for two seasons, was nominated for an Emmy, and is now on Netflix. After sixteen years, Cartoon Saloon had chanced upon something like commercial stability.

This past summer, shortly after Ireland’s internal travel restrictions were lifted, I met Paul Young, now a bespectacled fortysomething with a neat red beard, at one of the studio’s three offices in Kilkenny. It was nearly empty—almost all the animators were still working from home. As we walked through the I.T. department, Young plucked a stuffed animal from a shelf. It was Oona; a line of plush toys will go into production next year, to coincide with the release of a “Puffin Rock” movie. Young made a point of saying that the prototype’s manufacturer had strict standards for sustainability and fair trade. Later, Moore told me the same thing, but he was plainly ambivalent about the prospect of commercial diversification. “I used to sort of buy into that whole sustainable-consumption model,” he said, “but I don’t

see it that way anymore. You know, ‘No ethical consumption under capitalism,’ and all that.”

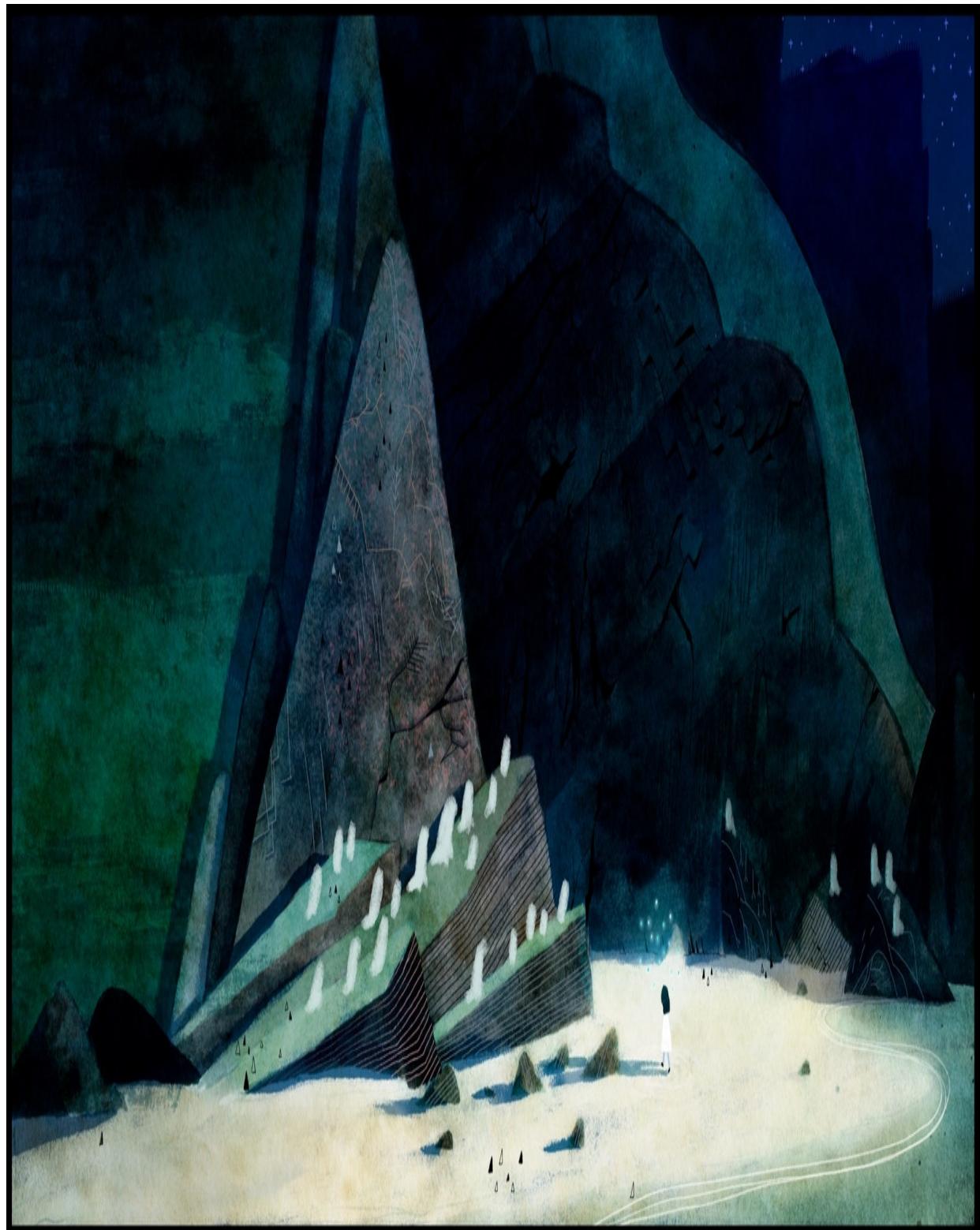
Moore originally imagined Cartoon Saloon as a kind of artists’ coöperative. Its actual structure is more corporate than that—largely, Moore said, because people prefer a regular paycheck and a “gaffer they can complain about over pints on a Friday.” There is necessarily some tension between the commercial possibilities offered by a successful studio and the vision that drew Moore to the work in the first place.

That hoped-for spirit does live on, everyone told me, in the culture of the studio. Louise Bagnall, who went to work there eight years ago, in her late twenties, said that, almost as soon as she was hired, she was encouraged to pitch ideas for things she wanted to make. Moore and his co-founders didn’t want Cartoon Saloon to employ the industrial approach he’d seen at Sullivan Bluth. Bagnall worked on the animation for “Song of the Sea,” and then on Cartoon Saloon’s third feature, “The Breadwinner,” which was directed by Twomey. Set in Kabul in 2001 and based on a young-adult novel by the Canadian writer Deborah Ellis, “The Breadwinner” is about an Afghan girl who is forced to earn a living when her father is imprisoned by the Taliban. An elegantly structured film, aimed at an older audience than the studio’s other features, it also has a distinct visual language, with clean-lined characters and a more realist style. The movie garnered the studio its third straight Oscar nod. Bagnall got a nomination the following year, for a short film she directed, called “Late Afternoon.”

While Moore, as a director, develops the art and the story for his films hand in hand, Twomey, Bagnall learned, focusses first on the narrative. She spends a lot of time, when directing, on what’s called the animatic—the rough storyboard that is used for editing before the animation proper begins. She obsessively tweaks the narrative, doing many of the voices herself. Midway through production of “The Breadwinner,” she was diagnosed as having breast cancer; she would go in for chemo on a Friday, and feel well enough by Tuesday to get back to work. “Work gave me some sense of normality,” she said. “I could look at a scene of animation, and if there was a problem with it I could fix it.”

She's now working on an adaptation of "My Father's Dragon," a children's book from 1948 by the American author Ruth Stiles Gannett. It will be released by Netflix and will have the studio's largest budget to date. Bagnall is the assistant director. Twomey, whose husband also worked in animation at Cartoon Saloon before becoming a stay-at-home dad, told me that the studio has begun to be shaped by a younger generation of animators, whose sensibilities were informed, in some cases, by watching "The Secret of Kells" as kids. "There's kind of a weird circular thing going on now, where they were influenced by us early on, and then in the meantime they've taken on board lots of other influences and become themselves, and then we're influenced by them in turn," she said. These days, one of the founders' primary ambitions is that the studio outlive, and outgrow, their own involvement with it.

When the pandemic hit Ireland, in the spring, "Wolfwalkers" was in the final stages of production. Cartoon Saloon's hand-drawn animation was mostly complete, and a skeleton crew in Kilkenny completed the visual effects. The film's score was in the can; vocal tracks were recorded by singers in their own homes. The studio's staff in Ireland had been working with overseas partners since the beginning, so Zoom was familiar to them long before it became the predominant global mode of workplace chatter.



In some of the old Irish myths, Moore found a “better, more pantheistic way of looking at the world.” Still courtesy Cartoon Saloon

Late in the summer, I finally met Moore in person, for lunch at an otherwise empty restaurant a short walk from one of the studio’s offices. He’d grown

an impressive lockdown beard since I last saw his face on my laptop. As I studied the menu, he pointed to a subheading below the vegetarian section: “Inspired by Cartoon Saloon.” The company has more non-meat-eating staff than your typical Kilkenny business, he explained. He’d just returned from putting the finishing touches on “Wolfwalkers,” with Stewart, at a partner studio, in Paris. His fingernails had been painted matte gray—the work of his granddaughter, he told me. Two years ago, Ben had a daughter, and Moore, at forty, became a grandfather. This clearly brought him great joy, but at first, he told me, he’d found it difficult to accept that his son was about to have all the responsibilities of fatherhood. Various strands of anxiety, personal and political, became entangled: he’d wake in the night terrified about climate change and capitalism and the kind of world that awaited his granddaughter. Shirren eventually took him aside, he said, and gave him a gentle pep talk about the negativity he was bringing to the office.

Over vegan nut roast, Moore talked cheerfully about coming to the end of a phase in his life and his career. The Irish trilogy was a single project; whatever he did next would be different, he felt. He was finishing a short for Greenpeace about industrial meat and deforestation—he hoped it would play in theatres with “Wolfwalkers.” Once that was done, he was going to step away from the studio for a bit: he and Olofsson were headed to Paris for a few months, and then to Amsterdam for a few more. He would focus on life drawing, and on microdosing psychedelics. At a stage in life when many people are in the thick of parental obligations, he and his wife have a freedom they’ve never experienced.

The duty of fatherhood is a recurring theme in the Irish trilogy. In “Wolfwalkers,” the widowed hunter is, like Cellach, initially overprotective. Then Robyn becomes a wolfwalker, and he has to learn to see things through her eyes. When he does, the oneness with nature that we glimpse intermittently throughout the trilogy becomes a kind of family unity, too. There is, in all three films, what seems to me a characteristically Irish interest in complicating the categories of the natural and the civilized, and in wielding creativity, in its various forms, as a weapon against oppressive power. The last known wild wolf in Ireland is believed to have been hunted down in 1786. “Wolfwalkers” offers a melancholy counter-myth: a vision, against the grain of Ireland’s colonial and ecological history, of a world that might have been.

After lunch, we walked outside and into a narrow passageway with stone arches above flights of steps running between the city's main street and a quieter thoroughfare below. Only small sections of the walls that once surrounded Kilkenny remain, but the place is still recognizable as the enclosed world from which Robyn escapes in lupine form, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, slinking through the city's iron gates. When she looks back across Kilkenny, its outline has assumed an alien aspect, a geometry at odds with nature. The passageway where Moore and I were walking was one of the places in the city that have changed the least since that time. You could imagine a shape-shifting creature dashing down the steps, making a break for the city walls, and bounding into the wilderness beyond. ♦

Performance

- [Reimagining August Wilson's “Ma Rainey's Black Bottom” on the Small Screen](#)

Reimagining August Wilson’s “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” on the Small Screen

Viola Davis plays the blues singer, whose wounds live right next to her cynicism.

By [Hilton Als](#)

December 14, 2020



The real star of the director George C. Wolfe's film of [August Wilson's](#) play "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" (on Netflix, starting December 18th) is Viola Davis's makeup. Designed by the industry veteran Matiki Anoff, it is a masterpiece of Black American style. Anoff gives Davis, who plays Gertrude (Ma) Rainey, the singer often described as the "Mother of the Blues," the rouged look we associate with the era—the play is set in 1927—but filters it through the singer's extravagant and scrutinizing vision. Bottom-heavy but light on her feet, the forty-five-year-old Rainey is a renegade, with long, sharply drawn eyebrows and a layer of too much shine on her face. She also has a mouth full of gold teeth that flash like artillery whenever she issues a directive or criticizes the incompetence and insurrections that threaten to undermine her stinging authority.

When we meet Rainey, she's in Chicago with her female lover, Dussie Mae (Taylour Paige, overdoing her sweet-young-thang thing), being driven around by her nephew, Sylvester (Dusan Brown). Rainey and her band have been asked to cut a few sides by a white man named Sturdyvant (Jonny Coyne), who owns a small race-music record label where Rainey has worked before. While Sturdyvant may know what he has in the great, brazen composer of such blues standards as "See See Rider" and the in-your-face queer classic "Prove It on Me Blues" ("Went out last night with a crowd of my friends / They must've been women 'cause I don't like no men"), Ma, too, has a strong sense of her own worth. She sits in the back of her fine car while Dussie Mae sits up front with Sylvester, because empresses do not share thrones. Wrapped in her summer furs and her beautiful snobbery, Ma looks out at the world with little love. To show love is to be vulnerable, and the only time it's not an embarrassment to be vulnerable is onstage; there you can have and give life that's not always in danger of being devalued or hurt by the white world.

Once Rainey gets to the studio—she's late, and she doesn't apologize for it—she keeps her distance from others. It's a lonely business, being the head of your own operation, trying to book paying tours with Black male band members in a racially segregated America, while also writing music and getting paid yourself. It shuts you off from playfulness and worries your mind. And, as if that weren't enough, Rainey also has to keep an eye on her anxiety-ridden manager, Irv (the touching Jeremy Shamos), who's supposed to buffer her from white-male demands, including those of the whiny

Sturdyvant, who hopes to make as much money as possible by capitalizing on her unique sound. One song Sturdyvant would like to cut is the popular “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” which, like a number of her works, is about showing your ass and revelling in it:

The other night at a swell affair
Soon as the boys found out I was there
They said, “Come on, Ma, let’s go to the cabaret”
When I got there you oughta hear me say
Want to see the dance you call the black bottom . . .
Want to see that dance you call your big black bottom
That puts you in a trance. All the boys in the neighborhood
They say your black bottom is really good.

When Rainey looks at Dussie Mae’s young bottom, she lights up with lust or irritation, sometimes both. Dussie Mae wants to be an entertainer, too, but she doesn’t have any real talent; she exists primarily in the eyes of those who desire her. For Ma Rainey, Dussie may be more of a status symbol than a beloved—a pretty, light-skinned girl whom Rainey was able to hook up with thanks to her success rather than her own desirability in a gay-phobic, color-struck world. Rainey understands that, in this life, her talent will be her only constant; intimacy takes time, and there aren’t enough hours in the day to tend to both a lover and the big, swamp-deep sound that makes Ma who she is. And even though Dussie Mae has the power to make her jealous and break her heart, Ma is always more than all right when she performs, and those notes drift up and on the air; it’s at those times that the singer becomes the object of her own queer gaze.

There’s an extraordinarily beautiful moment in Wilson’s play when Rainey—after she’s taken off her shoes and put on her slippers so that she can relax and start the session—is talking to her trusted old friend and trombonist, Cutler (the sensitive and soulful Colman Domingo, who, unlike the majority of the cast, tends to underplay his role, and it’s a relief). Speaking softly, and looking off into space, Ma confesses, “I always got to have some music going on in my head somewhere. It keeps things balanced. Music will do that. It fills things up. The more music you got in the world, the fuller it is.” What Ma doesn’t like is silence, even if she has engineered it. But how does that silence sound to her? What does it do to her? Does it, like grief, threaten

to overwhelm her voice? We don't know, and Davis's performance isn't saying; entertaining existential questions isn't part of what she does.

Before Ma can sing a note, she needs her Coca-Cola—and where is it? When Irv tries to coax her into going ahead without it, she tears him down: "Get out my face, Irvin. You all just wait until I get my Coke. It ain't gonna kill you." Irv may object to Rainey's demands, but he's turned on by her imperiousness. His jitteriness and his lap-dog eyes tell us that, for him, being degraded by Ma is sort of exciting. Rainey sends Sylvester and her bassist, Slow Drag (Michael Potts), out to get some Cokes, so that she can talk to Cutler. "They don't care nothing about me," she tells him. She's referring to Irv and Sturdyvant, but she might just as well be talking about the world. "All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them." There is so much poetic realism in Wilson's script that it's hard to pick a favorite moment, but the over-all impression his language leaves us with is that this woman is a wound and that her injury, like everyone else's, lives right next to her cynicism and her defensiveness. The point that Ma is always trying to make is this: if you're messing with her sound, you're messing with her soul. And who wants to go there?

Ruben Santiago-Hudson, who adapted the play for the screen, has done a creditable job of opening the material up, making some scenes more cinematic, but cinema isn't Wolfe's thing. He's not at home with framing, with moving a story along pictorially, and his primary influence here is Rob Marshall's 2002 [film version](#) of Bob Fosse's "Chicago," with its celebration of tinsel and tits in the twenties. (Wolfe is a nostalgist at heart, and is never happier than when his actors look like figures out of a John Held, Jr., drawing.) Many of the early scenes feel familiar because you've seen them before, in a hundred and one other Jazz Age pictures where a Black woman gets everyone riled up and in the spirit. When, toward the middle of the movie, the ambitious young horn player Levee (the late [Chadwick Boseman](#)) is frustrated at not being able to play his own music, Wolfe has him push through a door that leads out of the rehearsal studio only to be confronted with a brick wall. The literalization of the characters' feelings in clichéd images like this makes "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" dull to watch, which is a shame, because a director with more passion for the medium could have brought so much to this project.

Levee, like most Young Turks, sees only himself, hears only his own story. He loves music as much as Rainey does, and is just as egotistical, but Rainey has been at it since she was a girl and has a band, and Levee doesn't. The blues, like Ma, is old; the music Levee wants to play is faster, harder, like him. Wilson dramatizes the struggle between these two currents in Black culture by conventionalizing the story, and throwing Dussie Mae into the middle of it.

No playwright can do everything, and the ten-play cycle about Black American life that Wilson left behind when he died, in 2005—"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" is the second in the series—is one of the great edifices in American theatrical history. But there are always cracks in institutions, and, for me, Wilson's depictions of women is one of them. For sure, they exist in full-blooded ways in several of his plays, but often they're present as a kind of pillow on which Black masculinity gets to rest its weary head. Levee tells the gold-digging Dussie Mae that he's going to have his own band, as he tries to kiss and grab her, the implication being that he'll be a bigger and cooler musician than Ma, because he's younger and he's a real man; Wilson justifies Levee's misogyny with a horrific backstory that's supposed to explain all, but it feels like a made-up story. (One can hear traces of Hickey, the delusional salesman in Eugene O'Neill's "The Iceman Cometh," in Levee's long monologue about his youth.) Still, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" is one of the few plays in the American canon that focus on a Black woman, and Rainey is among Wilson's most organic female characters. The real Rainey's interior life existed in her music, and all Wilson had to do was stand back and listen, and then transcribe it.

Davis has played Wilson women before—most recently, Rose, in the 2010 Broadway revival of the 1987 play "Fences." (She reprised the role in the 2016 [movie version](#) and won an Oscar for it.) I saw Davis in the Broadway production, and, whenever she came onstage, I thought of Montgomery Clift and Judy Garland. In 1961, the two stars were working on Stanley Kramer's film "Judgment at Nuremberg," and Kramer invited Clift to sit in while Garland shot her scene. Playing the wife of a lowly German official, Garland sputtered and cried. When Kramer turned to Clift to get his reaction, Clift was crying, too. Not because he was moved by the performance but because he felt that Garland had done it "all wrong." Clift, one of the most character-driven of performers, disliked it when acting replaced being. Davis, like

Garland, rarely plays a person; instead, she embodies marginalization, inadvertently playing to a white audience's idea of what a Black woman is or should be. I was lucky enough to see Adriane Lenox in the 2005 Broadway staging of John Patrick Shanley's "Doubt"—something I won't soon forget. Awful and brilliant as a selfish mother who never tried to use her story to elicit our sympathy, Lenox upended the stereotypical view of Black motherhood by not performing tragedy: she *was* tragic, trapped in circumstances that she understood but wouldn't do anything about. When Davis took over the role in the 2008 film version, she reverted to the style that has made her part of the troupe of Black actresses, working in the tradition of Beah Richards and Cicely Tyson, whom white people describe as "regal" or "noble," because they remain self-righteous as they cry and cry. I don't know what to make of her work in "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," because she's playing against that type, and that's terrific, and yet there's something in her that keeps her in a state of self-awareness: *Look how I'm acting here. And here.* She isn't free enough to risk being disliked, but you can't be Ma Rainey and want to be embraced and accepted; Ma didn't play that shit. To be Wilson's magnetic, tough character, you have to go it alone. You have to understand where life began for Ma Rainey, and where it ended: in the terrors that she shouted and laughed at and turned into song after song. ♦

Poems

- “[The Bats](#)”
- “[April](#)”

[December 21, 2020 Issue](#)

The Bats

By [Mark Wunderlich](#)

December 14, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

I share my house with a colony of bats.
They live in the roof peak,
enter through a gap.

At dusk they fly out, dip
into inverted arcs
to catch what flutters or stings,

what can only be hunted at night.
Sunlight stops their flight,
drives them into their hot chamber

to rest and nest, troll-faces
pinched shut. I hear them scratch.
In darkness they chop and hazard through the sky,

around blue outlines of pines,
pitch up over the old Dutch house
we share. They scare some

but not me. I see them
for what they seem—
timid, wee, happy or lucky,

pinned to the roof beams,
stitched up in their ammonia reek
and private as dreams.

[December 21, 2020 Issue](#)

April

By [Cynthia Zarin](#)

December 14, 2020

Audio: A version read by the author.

Now out of this vast silence
the cherry trees scraping their gnarled limbs
 on the sky, and the wind hurls down
a flurry of petals, a snowstorm really,

a thousand prints on the wet pavement,
each one a pair of white shutters, opening.

Numinous, the souls of the dead, and now you,
. . . among them—an intake of breath.

How little it seems to me now,
we knew each other.

But still, it is so beautiful, the place where you were—
 a table, two chairs, a tree growing up
right through the floor, and outside,

a flicker of swallows in the hedgerows,
 the tulips' purple chevrons a row of arrowheads.

. . . It is wherever you
want to be, although by now you are
beyond wanting. Or at least that's
 what they say of the dead.

The place where you were holds the light
the way the leaves do after dusk
when small animals conduct

their assignations—the shrew, the mouse, the mole
running their études in the mossy shadows.

. . . You were always so
afraid of falling short. If only you hadn't
done such a good job of dying.

But it is so
beautiful where you were, above
the garden, where it is snowing, this morning in April,
on the bleached white pansies,

the downed cherry blossoms

. . .
where you so often sat,
talking and talking.

Pop Music

- [Paul McCartney's Surprisingly Playful Pandemic Album](#)

Paul McCartney's Surprisingly Playful Pandemic Album

Other artists used quarantine to produce work about the isolation of modern life. McCartney's new album, by contrast, is cheery and optimistic.

By [Hua Hsu](#)

December 14, 2020



Since the Beatles officially broke up, in 1970, Paul McCartney has released more than thirty original albums and dozens of singles. They have included ragged, folksy home recordings; propulsive, glossy rock; children's music featuring singing frogs; covers of fifties R. & B. favorites; duets with Carl Perkins, Michael Jackson, and Stevie Wonder; collaborations with members of Led Zeppelin and the Royal Liverpool Symphony Orchestra; and excursions into disco, ambient techno, and cut-and-paste soundscapes. By comparison, the Beatles released only twelve full studio albums—about nine hours of music. They made statements with their records, but McCartney seems to be perpetually sketching, pursuing a career of whims and compulsions. In 1971, he and his then wife, Linda, formed a new band, Wings, perhaps so that their family could spend more time together. “It was just something we wanted to do, so if we got it wrong, big deal,” he said. He characterized an album in the eighties as having started as “a mess-around.” Even when he compiled “Pure McCartney,” a 2016 retrospective of his post-Beatles career, he shrugged off any grand purpose, saying that it was simply “something fun to listen to.” No doubt McCartney takes his craft and his career seriously. But he’s a living legend who seems less interested in tending to his legacy than in scratching a chronic itch.

He recorded his solo début in secret, in 1969 and 1970. The Beatles were in the process of disbanding, and he was reportedly sullen; the album, called “McCartney,” is a breakup record, though its heartache manifests less in the songs’ lyrics than in their tattered edges. The record is filled with gorgeous half-finished melodies that eschew the perfectionism to which Beatles fans had grown accustomed, baffling listeners. “The Lovely Linda,” for example, starts off as a pretty ode to his wife but then ends suddenly, as McCartney dissolves into giggles. In the eighties, as Wings was breaking up, McCartney recorded a sequel, “McCartney II,” on which he ditched rock classicism for synthesizers and drum machines. Perhaps it wasn’t a masterpiece, he told an interviewer, but it was “total freedom.”

This year, as the pandemic swept across the world, McCartney and his family retreated to his farm in East Sussex. He turned his prodigious work ethic to home recording and started tinkering with a scrap of a song he’d begun in the nineties. He ended up with an entire album, “McCartney III,” which comes out on December 18th. The opener, “Long Tailed Winter Bird,” summarizes the one-man approach. He begins by casually strumming

his guitar, almost as if he's tuning it, and then works out a raga-like pattern. He adds layers: a friendly bass line, background coos, electric guitar, pounding drums, strings and woodwinds. It goes on a bit longer than necessary, as if he were just noodling around. "Deep Deep Feeling" opens with McCartney riffing about the highs and lows of love, exhausting the rhyming possibilities of the word "emotion" with "devotion," "ocean," and "motion." He adds an ethereal synth line, a stretched-out blues guitar; together, the instruments convey a storminess that his words never quite capture.

In the popular imagination of the Beatles, John Lennon was the anguished, hard-driving dreamer, the one plumbing his psychological depths or reaching for the impossible vision. McCartney was the simpler one: he was congenial and silly, pathological only about songwriting. He came up with melodies and left them unfinished because there were always more to write. There are a few moments of "McCartney III" that recall this sense of delight. "Lavatory Lil," a trifling blues boogie, echoes the childish, character-driven songs of the Beatles' "Abbey Road."

Since the nineties, many of McCartney's albums have been produced in a way that seems conscious of his glory days, and his effect on British music. Sometimes it sounds as though he were singing over a simulacrum of a Beatles song, and at other times as though he were sharing in the fun of disciples like Oasis or Adele. The most affecting moments of "McCartney III" are when his age and his limitations show. (He's seventy-eight.) He works his way through a lovely acoustic ballad called "The Kiss of Venus" slowly and gingerly, his voice carefully tracing an ascending guitar line. On "Women and Wives," he sounds warbly, as though he were losing control of his instrument. "When tomorrow comes around / You'll be looking at the future," he sings sternly. "So keep your feet upon the ground / And get ready to run."

A few years ago, there was a trollish online debate about whether the Atlanta rap trio Migos was better than the Beatles. A version of it took place in my college dorm in the nineties; the challenger then was Boyz II Men. I've since decided that there is no way for the upstart to win this argument. One gets the sense that it simply entrenches the Beatles as a cultural monolith. Invoking their name connects us to the possibility of some universally

agreed-upon standard of greatness, a kind of consensus that no longer seems within reach.

In this way, McCartney can sometimes seem like a symbol rather than a person. Currently, his most streamed song on Spotify is “FourFiveSeconds,” a 2015 track featuring Rihanna and Kanye West. (It has seven hundred million listens, nearly two hundred million more than “Here Comes the Sun.”) Kanye and Rihanna are the stars of the song; McCartney’s presence seems gestural, a way for them to link themselves to the canon. But McCartney appears to relish these brushes with the Zeitgeist. In 2016, when Rae Sremmurd’s “Black Beatles” (streamed a hundred and thirty million more times than “Here Comes the Sun”) became the soundtrack for a viral “mannequin” challenge, McCartney took part, filming a video of himself frozen while playing a grand piano. “Love those Black Beatles,” he wrote on Twitter. In recent years, McCartney has sung on a track by the E.D.M. producer the Bloody Beetroots and performed with the surviving members of Nirvana. He is on this month’s cover of *Rolling Stone*, alongside Taylor Swift. Such moments give younger artists a bridge to history; McCartney satisfies his curiosity about kids these days.

But it may be impossible for a septuagenarian ex-Beatle to grasp the anxiety-filled world that his musical descendants have inherited. The pandemic has provided an occasion for younger artists, including Taylor Swift, Charli XCX, and BTS, to release work that touches on the isolation and loneliness of contemporary life. By contrast, there’s something incredibly “Paul” about McCartney’s approach to the pandemic album: cheery, resilient, forever looking forward. It’s a reminder of one of the Beatles’ most powerful messages to baby boomers: life gets better. It’s getting better all the time.

McCartney’s optimism feels vintage. In “Seize the Day,” he reminds us, over warm electric keys, to stay in the moment: “When the cold days come / When the old ways fade away / There’ll be no more sun / And we’ll wish that we had held on to the day.” For the album’s splendid closer, “Winter Bird—When Winter Comes,” he returns to the album’s opening guitar lick. The song then morphs into a folk tune that doubles as a to-do list of tasks around his farm: fix a fence, dig a drain, plant some trees. Time passes, he notes, and someday the trees will cast shade. The implication is that McCartney won’t be around to see them, but, by doing his part, he has

helped a future visitor. The sentiment is lovely, and it harks back to a different generation's sense of what's possible. We'd all like to believe that love will prevail, that the earth will heal itself, and that we'll leave things better than we found them. He's written this song countless times. But it sounds a little different now. ♦

Profiles

- [Arthur Jafa's Radical Alienation](#)

Arthur Jafa's Radical Alienation

The filmmaker left an art world he found too white; years later, he made a triumphant return with “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death.”

By [Calvin Tomkins](#)

December 14, 2020

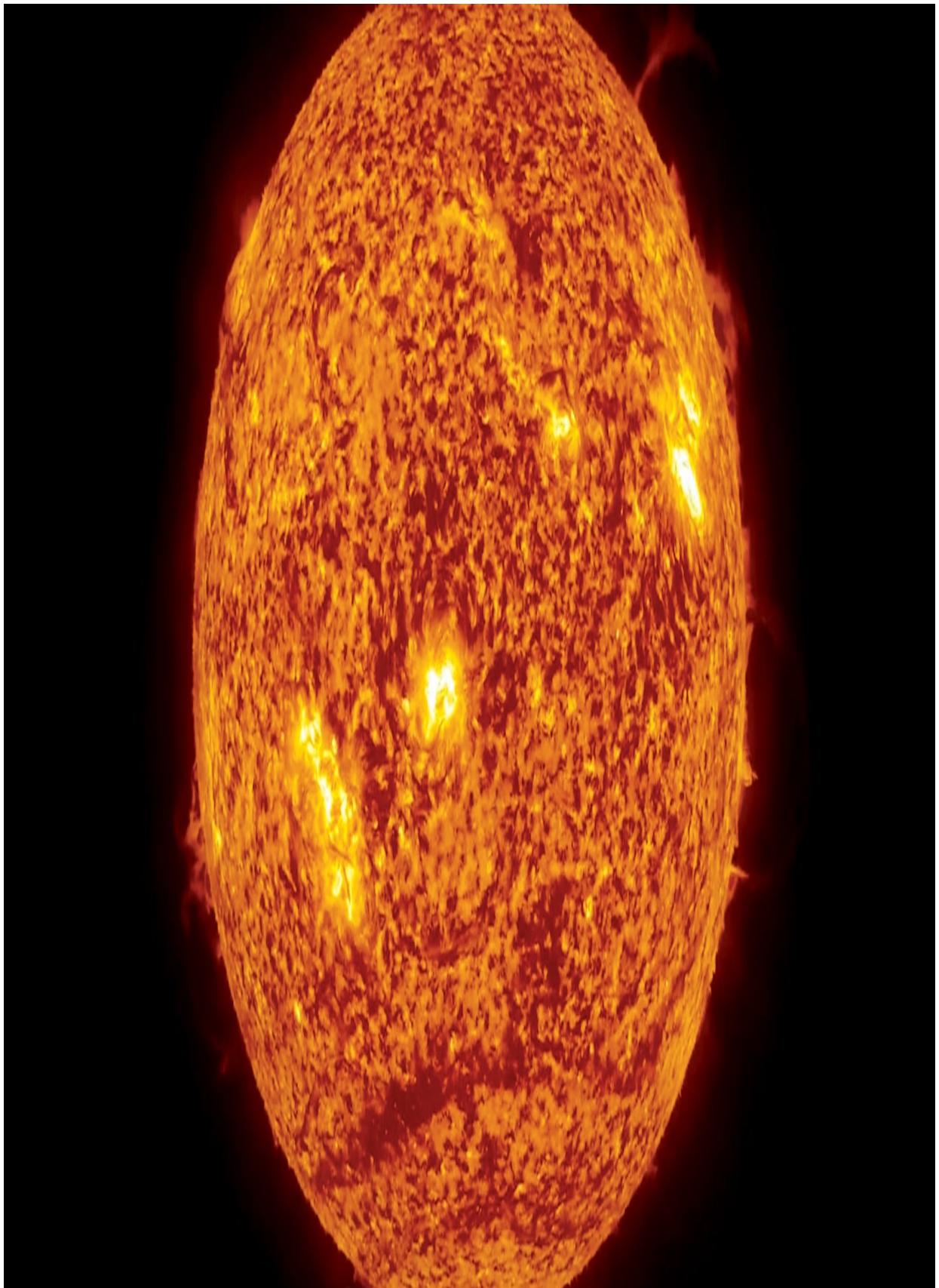


The most spellbinding art work of the past decade is a seven-and-a-half-minute film called “Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death,” by the artist and filmmaker Arthur Jafa. Word spread quickly after its New York première, in November, 2016, at Gavin Brown’s gallery. People crowded the gallery to see it, but nothing they had heard prepared them for the rapid-fire sequence of a hundred and fifty film clips of Black people in the maelstrom of American life: a teen-age girl being thrown to the ground by a white police officer, burning cars and hip-hop dancers, [Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), in an open car, a man being beaten by several uniformed policemen, LeBron James soaring in for a gorgeous dunk, [Barack Obama](#) singing “Amazing Grace” at a memorial service in Charleston, a woman saying, “What would America be like if we loved Black people as much as we love Black culture?” Most of the images are found footage, taken from YouTube. Their emotional impact comes from the way Jafa has put them together, shifting and editing and choreographing to create a flow of deeply resonant juxtapositions, over a soundtrack of Kanye West’s ecstatic “Ultralight Beam.”

For Jafa (pronounced Jay-fa), who turned sixty in November, the film’s reception was startling. A dozen major museums in this country and in Europe acquired copies of “Love Is the Message,” and many more borrowed it for special screenings. As Jafa’s friend John Akomfrah, the British artist and filmmaker, said to me, it was ironic that “this figure who was heralded for a long time as a kind of prophet in the world of cinema would turn out to be the savior of the art world.” Jafa had a lively interest in contemporary art, and from 1999 to 2005 he had shown sculptures and other works in art galleries here and abroad, but cinema had been his primary focus since the seventies, when he was an undergraduate at Howard University, in Washington, D.C. Howard had an excellent film department, and in Jafa’s third year there his interest had shifted from architecture to film studies. Incorrigibly curious and hugely ambitious, A.J., as everyone called him, identified his goal very early: “To make Black cinema with the power, beauty, and alienation of Black music.” Jafa was not the first to stake this claim, but, as Akomfrah said, “somebody needed to articulate it for our generation, and A.J. was that figure.”

Jafa’s thinking was based on a concept that he calls “Black visual intonation.” “Something I’ve pointed out a million times is that, if you look

at Black folk and our visual expressivity, it's very, very undeveloped in comparison to what we've been able to achieve in music," he told me, one day this summer. "It's undeveloped despite the fact that we come from a visual tradition that's just as rich as the musical one. There is no contemporary art without African descent. Cubism is Picasso trying to understand African artifacts." Africans brought music with them on the slave ships, he said, and the music changed and developed in response to the new context, and this led to "everything from Billie Holiday to Jimi Hendrix to Motown, Charlie Parker, Thelonious Monk—you can go on and on." But nothing comparable had happened in African-American visual expression, and when Jafa's teachers in the film department at Howard introduced him to the idea of cinema devoted to Black lives, he said, "I was very excited. It sort of fired my imagination."



A still from Jafa's film "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death," for which there was no concept and no script. Art work courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery

“Love Is the Message” is the closest he has come to realizing the goal he set for himself forty years ago. “I think what the film captures is the Black struggle to live,” the writer and scholar [Saidiya Hartman](#), who has known Jafa for many years, said to me. “It’s a series of iconic images that show the brilliant virtuosity of the Black thinkers, artists, and athletes that ordinary Black folk have given to the world, alongside some of the forces that have negated Black life. You don’t have to know the exact reference for each image to feel the work’s density and power.” The poet Fred Moten, another friend of Jafa’s, talked to me about the “entanglement of absolute joy and absolute pain” that is fundamental to Black art and Black music. “ ‘Love Is the Message’ has all of that, and you know it immediately,” he said. “It’s in every moment. There is no break, and this is why it’s good that it lasts only seven minutes, because that’s as much as anyone can take.”

Two of Jafa’s teachers at Howard, Haile Gerima and Ben Caldwell, were recognized independent filmmakers. Gerima, who was born in Ethiopia, had been a leader of the L.A. Rebellion, a group of cinema students at U.C.L.A. in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, whose rebellion, in Gerima’s words, was against “the white supremacist vocabulary” of mainstream Hollywood. Gerima was Jafa’s mentor and role model. His films (“Bush Mama,” “Ashes and Embers,” “Sankofa”), along with those of Caldwell, Charles Burnett, Larry Clark, and other pioneers of L.A.’s Black film movement, opened Jafa’s eyes to the boundless possibilities of cinema, but he gradually came to feel that something was missing in their approach. “It seemed to me early on that it wasn’t enough to say a Black person made the film,” he said. “It had to be something more. And, in trying to think about what I consider fundamental Black aesthetic values, one of the things that came up was rhythm. Most people will say Black people have rhythm—they seem able to do things with time. So I became interested in how cinema could be inscribed with a more idiomatic sense of timing.”

Jafa had been an omnivorous reader since he was seven or eight. In the Howard library, where he spent much of his free time, he discovered a citation, in a musicology book, about a missionary who had listened to the music in African villages and had tried to transcribe it. “One of the things I remember is the missionary saying that the difficulty in studying the music of the Negroes is their tendency to worry the note.” He paused, and rubbed the graying thatch of beard on his chin. “Worry the note,” he repeated.

“Basically, what he means is that, in most African music, and in fact many musics of the non-Western world, the thing you call a note, which in Western music is a pure sound that vibrates in a measurable fashion, is neither pure nor measurable. A B-flat has a very specific tonal vibration. But what you hear in a lot of African and non-Western music—certainly in Black music—is a vibrational frequency that fluctuates. So when this guy tried to notate their music, he’d say, ‘That sounds like a B-flat to me,’ but in fact it was never only a B-flat. There is a certain quiver in a Black person’s playing. Even M.L.K.’s ‘I Have a Dream’ speech is a combination of the words and the thing he’s doing with his voice.” Jazz historians and other musicologists may well dispute aspects of Jafa’s analysis, but it gave him the insight he needed. “What I realized,” he concluded, “is that there must be techniques, ways to get visual movement in cinema that has something of what Black vocal intonation does in Black music.”

Gerima remembers Jafa as a “very noticeable” student, “brilliant, energetic, and full of imagination.” Jafa says he gave Gerima and his other teachers a lot of trouble. “I argued a lot,” he told me. “It bothered Haile that I was swinging my Super 8 camera around and just burning film—I was being Jackson Pollock.” His talent was unmistakable, though, and in the summer of 1980 Gerima sent him to Los Angeles to work with [Charles Burnett](#) on his new film, “My Brother’s Wedding.” Jafa thought Burnett’s previous film, “Killer of Sheep,” a deeply evocative study of working-class people in Los Angeles, was the best movie yet made by a Black director. “My Brother’s Wedding,” about a quiet young man and his reckless best friend, received a poor review in the *Times*, because the producer had shown the film before Burnett had finished editing it. But Jafa learned a great deal about cinematography from Burnett, who shot his own films, and he fell in love with the film’s assistant director, a dazzlingly gifted woman named [Julie Dash](#).

Eight years older than Jafa and a graduate student at the U.C.L.A. film school, Dash had already made three films of her own, and she was working on a series of shorts about Black women in America at the turn of the century. When their time on the Burnett film came to an end, Jafa moved in with Dash. (Although he went back to Howard a few times after that and took classes, he never graduated.) “A.J. admired my independent spirit,” Dash told me. “When we first met, he thought I was gay. Why? I don’t

know. We'd have conversations that went long into the night, so long I'd sometimes go to sleep. We wore each other's clothes. Everybody we knew wore surplus Army khakis, and we were actually the same size." Jafa urged her to put aside the series of short films so that they could concentrate on one of them, about Black people in an isolated Gullah community on an island off the coast of South Carolina. Dash was persuaded—her father's people had come from this region. The result, eleven years later, was "Daughters of the Dust," one of the enduring classics of independent cinema.

The script for "Daughters" called for a large cast—three or four generations—and required serious funding. Dash had managed to raise about thirty thousand dollars, enough to start putting together a production team. Jafa was the cinematographer, and he brought in Kerry James Marshall, a young artist he had never met, to be their production designer.

"I'd just had a show in Los Angeles, and A.J. read an interview with me in the paper and called out of the blue," Marshall recalled. "We were on the phone for a couple of hours. I said, 'Why don't you come by?,' and a few days later he came and we stood near the door talking for another two hours before we sat down. He is a talker. One of the things that really got us together was my deep interest in Mississippi Delta blues. I was always trying to paint a visual equivalent to things like the Robert Johnson songs 'Cross Road Blues' or 'Devil Got My Woman,' and when I read Julie's script that's what it sounded like to me. I hadn't had any experience at all in making a film, but, as it turned out, I had the combination of skills they needed to help that happen." Marshall became an essential third figure in the collaboration, and his wife, the actress Cheryl Lynn Bruce, played the role of Viola Peasant.

Dash and Jafa married in 1983, and their daughter, N'Zinga (named for an Angolan queen), was born a year later. They moved from Los Angeles to Atlanta in 1986, to be closer to where "Daughters of the Dust" would be filmed. Jafa's parents, who had recently moved there, were delighted to look after N'Zinga—they called her Zing—while Jafa and Dash scouted locations. They were still far short of their funding goal, which was eight hundred thousand dollars, but in the fall of 1987 they assembled a small team and went to the island of St. Helena, South Carolina. They managed to

shoot a trailer and some of the film that fall. Soon afterward, Lindsay Law, the executive producer of PBS's "American Playhouse," saw the trailer and loved it. He arranged for "American Playhouse" to give Dash and Jafa eight hundred thousand dollars, which allowed them to go back to St. Helena in 1989 and reshoot the film from scratch, with new costumes and equipment.



"And you're honestly not feeling any transference?"

Kanin

Jafa rented two 35-mm. movie cameras, and a computer that allowed him to weave together normal-motion and slow-motion footage. “He wanted the camera to move through space like Michael Jordan driving through the lane,” Marshall said. Jafa also had specific ideas about lighting that would bring out the subtle variations in Black skin. He made his own reflectors—instead of using the usual large aluminum sheets, he cut out small, handheld ones that threw light on the actor’s face. When they finished shooting, though, the money was gone, and there was nothing left for the editing. “We went back to ‘American Playhouse,’ ” Jafa said. “They gave us the money to edit, but in return we had to give up most of our financial interests in the film.”

“Daughters of the Dust” premiered in 1991 at the Sundance Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize, and Arthur Jafa won the award for Excellence in Cinematography. But the film’s nonlinear narrative structure and the fact that some of its dialogue was in the Gullah language made distributors nervous, and none of them would go near it. Jafa eventually negotiated an agreement with Film Forum, the art-house theatre in Greenwich Village, which showed “Daughters” in 1992. Dash went on the “Today” show, and when the film started drawing sellout crowds the run was extended. “Daughters of the Dust” was the first film by an African-American woman to get a theatrical release.

“That was a weird time,” Jafa said. “ ‘Daughters’ was the toast of the New York film community, but we’d given away a large part of our financial interests, and knew we weren’t going to make any money on it. Plus, Julie’s and my relationship at that point was not in the best place.” By 1991, they had separated. “I was struggling with some personal stuff, psychological stuff, and Julie, what with the child and the movie, couldn’t help me,” he said. “I was just very immature.” He also said, “I didn’t want to become Mr. Dash.”

Talking on Skype, as Jafa and I were obliged to do because of the pandemic, has unexpected limitations. I was on the East Coast, and Jafa was in Los Angeles, and it took me three sessions to realize that Jafa’s brother Boston was sitting across the desk from him, working quietly while we talked. I finally “met” him when he got up and walked into view and waved. The

brothers don't look alike, but they sound very much like brothers, with Deep South accents. A.J., who is interested in clothes and gets invited to openings at Gucci, wears a small diamond stud on his right eyebrow, and another one just under his lower lip. "I've had the studs for more than twenty years," he told me. "People used to think the one below my lip was a crumb—before *Covid*, they'd try to brush it off."

Jafa usually sat with his back to a window, so on bright days he was in shadow, and only gradually did I become aware of his tattoos. They were more or less everywhere: a black panther on his neck; a drawing of an early work by [Zaha Hadid](#), "The Peak," which was never built, on his left arm; "FRODO," from "The Lord of the Rings," in capital letters and also on his left arm; Krazy Kat on the back of one hand. There were a lot more of them, he said, and a story to go with each. So, Krazy Kat? "People have pointed out to me that it's ironic, because I don't like cats," Jafa said. "They don't respect your personal space. But Krazy Kat at one point was the biggest thing in American popular culture, and the artist who drew him, George Herriman, is such an interesting figure to me—his own kids never knew their father was Black."

When Jafa tells stories, the words come slowly at first, in a baritone drawl, but as he gets going the pitch rises and the tempo accelerates. "The cat loves the mouse, the mouse hates the cat," he said. "The dog, Officer Pupp, loves the cat, but the cat can't see him because the cat loves the mouse. And what makes it worse is that the mouse keeps throwing a brick at Krazy Kat's head, which is an act of violence, but the cat sees the violence as an act of love, and so the circle continues. The absurdity of it strikes me as being as good a model of Black love and hate in white society as we've ever seen, a profound and absurd meditation on the thin line between love and hate."

Jafa was born in 1960 in Tupelo, Mississippi, the birthplace of Elvis Presley. "My mom was born in Tupelo, and so were my aunt and uncle, and my grandparents grew up there," Jafa told me. His aunt Nettie has served on the Tupelo City Council since 2001. Jafa's full name is Arthur Jafa Fielder; he dropped Fielder (as his grandfather, another Arthur Jafa, had done) when he was in his early twenties, but his family ties have never weakened. Arthur and Rowena, his parents, were teachers, and his siblings—three younger brothers—have all found arts-related careers: Boston, the second oldest, is a

musician and a filmmaker. (Named for their father's cousin, Ralph Boston, he was called Ralph until he got to high school, where everyone started calling him Boston.) Jim teaches film production in New York City high schools, and his twin brother, Tim, writes graphic novels.



A still from Jafa's film "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death." "It was a response to the influx of footage of Black people being assaulted, which I had just been throwing in a file," Jafa says. Art work courtesy the artist and Gladstone Gallery

Jafa's school integrated the year he entered first grade, and he was one of a handful of African-Americans in his class. Two years earlier, the family had moved to Russellville, Alabama, but Jafa was sent back to Tupelo to live with his grandparents so that he could go to school there. When the Ku Klux Klan burned down their house in Russellville (Arthur had been named football coach of the recently combined white and Black high schools), they returned to Tupelo. The whole family moved again, less than a year later, to Clarksdale, Mississippi, where Arthur and Rowena had been offered positions at Coahoma Junior College, an innovative school for Black students. Arthur taught physical education and coached football and basketball; Rowena, who taught business administration, became the school's financial director.

Clarksdale is in the Mississippi Delta, which Jafa describes as a Black Jurassic Park. "I grew up in a region where some of the more horrific acts in the century occurred," Jafa said. "Emmett Till was killed, the three civil-rights workers were killed, people were tortured and murdered and nobody was brought to trial." Unlike Tupelo, Clarksdale had held on to hard-core segregation long after it became illegal. And yet, growing up in a supportive family and on a college campus, the Fielder children felt protected and encouraged. For the first few years, the family lived on the campus in a blue-and-white trailer with three bedrooms. "Art and I shared a room," Boston recalled. "It was filled with Marvel and DC comic books, and boxes of the magazines that Art cut pictures out of and pasted in notebooks. He slept in the top bunk, and I was on the bottom. We'd tell each other stories and make drawings—he'd draw something and hand it down to me, and I'd hand one up to him."

"The move from Tupelo to Clarksdale was mainly a change in soundtrack," Jafa said. "In Tupelo, the radio was dominated by Elvis Presley. I remember my grandmother telling stories about Elvis. They knew him in the Black part of town—that's how poor he was. When Elvis was a kid, he would sit on the porch of a nearby house and play guitar." Jafa was never a Presley fan. In Clarksdale, where the soundtrack was Memphis soul, all four Fielder boys went to Catholic school, because their non-Catholic parents thought they would get a better education that way. (Their father eventually converted to

Catholicism.) Jafa was an altar boy and a straight-A student, and in high school he became a National Merit Scholar. “I was just elated to know that I had one student, just one, who could have gotten into M.I.T.,” Olenza McBride, his social-studies teacher, recalled.

Jafa read all the time—first comics, then science fiction, the World Book (his parents bought the series, and later they added the Encyclopædia Britannica), history, sociology, and world literature. “Our neighbor was head librarian at the college,” he said. “She would let me stay there after hours—I’d fall asleep in the stacks, and my dad would come to pick me up at two in the morning.” Jafa and Boston saw every movie they could get to. One Saturday afternoon, when Jafa was ten, their parents dropped them off at the white people’s theatre on the other side of town to see Stanley Kubrick’s “2001: A Space Odyssey.” The theatre was empty except for a few white couples, who left before the intermission. “The lights go down, the movie begins, and it’s like being buried alive,” Jafa wrote, in a 2015 essay called “My Black Death.” “Even now, I’m still searching for an art experience capable of matching the effect this film had on me.” When it ended, he and Boston walked out in a daze to the empty lobby, where the white theatre manager sat in the ticket booth reading a newspaper. “At this point in my life I didn’t have un-chaperoned interactions with white people, young or old,” Jafa wrote. “He was sitting in the ticket booth with the door open, so I walked over to him and said, ‘Excuse me, sir, I’ve just come out of the movie, could you tell me what it was about?’ He looked at me over his paper, paused a moment, and said, ‘Son, I’ve been looking at it all week and I haven’t got a clue.’ ”

There was a coda to the experience. In the mid-nineties, when Jafa was working as a cinematographer, Kubrick hired him to be a second-unit cameraman for “Eyes Wide Shut.” Kubrick shot most of the film in England, but it was set in New York, and Jafa spent a lot of time filming locations there. “We were constantly shooting things over and over, because Kubrick kept sending notes saying would we try it again three degrees to the left, or three degrees to the right,” Jafa recalled. “He called many times a day, and occasionally the assistant director would say, ‘Stanley’s on the phone, he wants to say hi,’ and I would say, ‘Not now, I’m shooting.’ ” In 1999, returning from Europe to attend the film’s New York première, Jafa saw a newspaper headline: “*STANLEY KUBRICK DIES AT 70.*” “Stanley Kubrick

was one of my heroes,” he said. “There was so much I wanted to say to him, and I’d had this fantasy that when we finished shooting we’d be able to have a proper conversation. I went to the première and got very depressed, trying to figure out why I had never spoken to him.”

Shooting other people’s films was always, for Jafa, a stepping stone to shooting his own. “I love cinematography, but once I’d mastered the craft it was never fulfilling on its own,” he told me. “*Daughters of the Dust*” had brought no directing offers, though, and until recently neither Dash nor Jafa could get funding for a second feature. Hollywood producers had financed and profited from nineteen-seventies blaxploitation films, some of which had Black directors, but the first Black filmmaker of Jafa’s generation to break into the Hollywood system and establish a career on his own terms was Spike Lee. Lee went to a screening of “*Daughters*” and as he was leaving the theatre he introduced himself and asked if Jafa would like to work on a film about Malcolm X. Jafa said yes, and his skill as a cameraman on the movie led to his becoming the cinematographer for Lee’s next feature, “*Crooklyn*.” “Spike changed my life,” Jafa said. “He put me on the path to being a legitimate entity in the film universe.” The two of them didn’t get along, though, and they haven’t worked together since. Lee had no interest in Jafa’s urge to experiment on “*Crooklyn*” with lenses and film speeds, cinematic rhythms, and nonlinear storytelling. “We had a rocky collaboration, but we’ve finally reached a rapprochement, and I want to keep it that way,” Jafa told me.

I asked him to name the filmmakers he most admired. “I like films more than filmmakers,” he said. “But, anything Andrei Tarkovsky ever did, especially ‘The Mirror’ and ‘The Sacrifice,’ his last. Tarkovsky’s films are philosophical meditations on life, time, aging, things like that.” Yasujirō Ozu, he said, was “right up there, not quite as high as Tarkovsky. Ozu will sit with things.” The Italians? “I love Fellini, Pasolini, Antonioni. Antonioni is a great filmmaker, but to me that really does come down to ‘L’Avventura,’ the film where he plays with dimensions of dramatic time and space. There’s a scene with Monica Vitti in a hotel corridor. She walks into the frame, and then out of the frame, and in a Hollywood film you would cut, but the camera just stays on that long, empty hallway.”



Antagonist

"I'm a huge proponent of control over speed."

Jafa respects Ingmar Bergman, but, he said, “I don’t know if his films have aged so well, even ‘Personas,’ which is clearly a great film.” He likes Godard more than Truffaut, and, he said, “Bresson is above anybody we’ve mentioned, except Tarkovsky—Bresson is the Beethoven and Bach of cinema.” He also paid homage to Oscar Micheaux, whom he called “the godfather of Black American cinema.” I asked him about Andy Warhol. “Neck and neck with Bresson,” he said, to my surprise. “Every moment in a Warhol film is an extended moment. You think of Miles Davis, the speed at which he improvises. His notes sit in the air like they’re unfurling in slow motion. They always feel introspective, considered, not in the moment.” Jafa puts “The Godfather: Part II” in his top ten films, “but Coppola is not in my top ten directors.”

From the early nineties to 2000, living in New York, Jafa shot documentaries (on Audre Lorde and W. E. B. Du Bois, among others), music videos, and television commercials. “The early nineties was when you started to see more Blacks in Hollywood movies,” he said. “I wanted to direct music videos, and I was very unsuccessful. I could never crack it. I guess I could have moved to Hollywood and done what everybody else does, but I didn’t see that.” Ideas for films proliferated in his head. The schoolboy notebooks in which he’d pasted images from comic books and magazines when he was ten had been succeeded by three-ring binders filled with movie stills, advertisements, news photographs, and reproductions from art books and countless other sources—images that he liked to show to people. He often had binders with him. “A.J. was always a great storyteller of his own film ideas,” the writer and critic Greg Tate recalled. “He would act out all the parts.” Tate and Jafa connected when they were both returning books to the Founders Library at Howard. They talked for six hours on the library steps, and the conversation has been going on ever since.

Jafa also spent time in art galleries and museums, and immersed himself in art history and theory. His fascination with Marcel Duchamp kept surfacing in our conversations. “My whole understanding of Duchamp has to do with African artifacts, aesthetic artifacts, and their profound effect on Western art,” Jafa said. Picasso, Matisse, Derain, and other artists in Paris during the early years of the twentieth century had discovered African sculpture at the

Musée d’Ethnographie du Trocadéro, and it had changed the way they saw the world. “All those people used African artifacts to make paintings, because they had certain spatial and formal implications, and the massing of those implications produced Cubism,” Jafa said. “Duchamp made paintings in that modality—‘Nude Descending a Staircase,’ where you see the figure multiple times at the same moment and from different vantage points. But Duchamp was smarter than anybody around. I think he realized that a lot of the energy produced by African objects came not from their formal and spatial qualities but from their being what I would call radically alienated. It was contextual. An African artifact in a white museum space, with all this baggage of ideas about painting and contemplation, was deeply alien.”

Jafa believes that Duchamp’s 1917 “Fountain,” a porcelain urinal from a plumbing-supply store, turned upside down and signed “R. Mutt,” was directly influenced by African sculpture and drew its undeniable power from the same sort of radical alienation. “What Duchamp did better than any other artist was to take something that existed and turn it into another thing,” Jafa said. “He didn’t make it—he turned it into something else. It’s like what I say about Black people and basketball. We didn’t invent basketball, but we created it. One of the more telling things about Black people is that we do things that don’t make our job easier. Why do a three-sixty before you land a basketball? You don’t get more points—it just raises your level of difficulty. What is that about?” (His voice went up about an octave.) “Folks argue that it’s entertainment, but it’s central to who we are. It’s refusing the structures that want to turn the game into a business. We know it’s a business—winning—but we refuse to acquiesce in the elimination of play. And I don’t think it’s a big leap to say that’s central to Duchamp’s entire practice. For all the intellectualism around Duchamp, what did he always insist on? That it was playful. His tongue was definitely in his cheek.”

So was Jafa’s when he revealed his “secret theory” that Jeff Koons is “a very light-skinned Black guy passing for white.” He argued, “Look at the works that made his reputation. The vacuum cleaners refer to Black women, domestic workers. The two basketballs floating in vitrines, I insist, are testicles, connoting everything from castration to Black sexual prowess. The bunny rabbit, which most people say is his masterpiece, is clearly Brer Rabbit.” Jafa went on in this vein for quite a while before returning to Duchamp.

“He is one of the non-musicians I would put in the company of John Coltrane and Miles Davis,” he said. “There were occasionally white people at our family reunions, in-laws and white friends of my parents. Duchamp is one of the people we will always reserve a seat for.”



Arthur Jafa on the set of "Daughters of the Dust" in 1989. Photograph by Kerry James Marshall

In 1999, Jafa decided to quit the film world. He wasn't getting any closer to directing his own films, and it seemed to him that the art world offered more opportunities to realize the ideas swarming in his head. He'd been interested in art since his second year at Howard, when one of his architecture teachers sent the class to see I. M. Pei's new East Building, at the National Gallery of Art. "There was an exhibition of Mark Rothko, eight brownish paintings that all looked the same to my untrained eye, and they infuriated me," Jafa recalled. "I told the instructor it was bullshit. I was irate. I went back to that show ten times, kept going back, couldn't get it out of my mind. I was obsessed. He's still my favorite painter."

Twenty years later, when Jafa decided to do "this art thing," success came almost immediately. A group of his short videos appeared in the 2000 Whitney Biennial—one of the curators, Valerie Cassel Oliver, described them in *ARTnews* as "very subtle, very poetic." Jafa's "Tree" was included in the Whitney's "BitStreams" exhibition a year later; it's an eight-minute video of a blurry, constantly moving tree that looks like it's escaped from a Monet painting and gone off on its own. Other art works by Jafa appeared in group shows in this country and abroad: a metal bench he had found on a visit to Bamako, Mali; a Pontiac Firebird Trans Am, resting on a frame that gave it the appearance of floating; a video of a man in a yellow jacket lying on a sidewalk with people walking past. By 2005, though, the overbearing whiteness of the art world had driven him back to filmmaking. "I was invited to parties where I was the only Black person," he recalled. "It just didn't feel right, so I walked away from the art world."

In 2002, at a New Year's Eve party in New York, he met Suné Woods, a young woman on her way to becoming an artist. "It was almost like a force turned me around, and I said to Greg Tate, 'Hey, man, who is that? I'm going to marry her.'" Woods and Jafa never married, but in 2004 they had a son, Ayler. "Then we just fell apart," Jafa said. "Suné said she was going to graduate school in San Francisco and taking Ayler with her, and that was terrifying to me, because I'd had the same experience when I split up with Julie." Jafa commuted between New York and San Francisco for two years, before moving to Los Angeles in 2010. He wanted to be closer to Ayler, and also to N'Zinga, who was living with her mother in L.A. Dash had built an impressive reputation as a director of film biographies (she's currently doing one on Angela Davis), and she and Jafa had never been out of touch.

(“We’re still best friends,” Dash told me recently. Their first grandchild, Adrian Julian Arana, born to N’Zinga in 2017, brought them even closer.) When Jafa moved to Los Angeles, his self-confidence was at a low ebb. The film industry seemed less and less interested in hiring him. He was approaching fifty, and he felt as though he hadn’t achieved any of his goals. His friends were worried. “He was like a falling star,” John Akomfrah said. “He’d always been a figure of such promise. All of us expected something great to happen, and as the years went by some people were thinking maybe it wasn’t going to come.”

In 2011, he hit rock bottom. Depressed and suicidal, he went to stay with his parents, in Atlanta. (“You can always come home,” they had told their children.) After the breakup with Dash, Jafa had dealt with his depression by going into therapy. This time, the film world intervened. Sitting in his parents’ living room, wondering what to do with his broken life, he got a telephone call from Paul Garnes, a Hollywood producer who worked with the showrunner Salim Akil. “Paul said I was like a mythical beast, because everybody out there had heard of me but nobody knew me,” Jafa told me. He had called to see if Jafa was available to shoot the pilot for a new TV series, a comedy-drama like “Entourage,” about Black people, that Akil was directing. “Available? I was broke and out of work. The producers must have liked the pilot, because they asked me to shoot the series—for a shitful of money. I thought, Well, maybe just grow the fuck up and take the money.”

Jafa used the forty-five thousand dollars he’d been paid for the pilot to buy a new Prius and to rent a small apartment in L.A. The series wasn’t picked up, though, and he had to find something to do right away—he was determined not to sink back into despair. Kahlil Joseph, a filmmaker and a close friend, called to say that ZDF, a German public-television network, had commissioned him to make a documentary about the March on Washington, whose fiftieth anniversary was coming up in 2013. Joseph had scheduling conflicts. Would Jafa be interested in directing it? Jafa said he would—and he had ideas about how. “I wasn’t interested in looking back,” Jafa told me. “I was interested in where Black people are now. I wrote a really insane, crazy treatment that had very little to do with the March on Washington, and they gave me the money and I went off and did it. And that was the beginning of the work I’m doing now.”

Jafa's film, called "Dreams Are Colder Than Death," is a fifty-two-minute collage of brief and not so brief interviews with African-American artists, writers, filmmakers, academics, and friends, alternating or coinciding with images of houses and back yards, waves breaking over rocks, Civil War photographs, extreme closeups of eyes, mouths, and faces, photographs of Martin Luther King, Jr., and James Baldwin. The speakers pull no punches, and what comes through is an orchestrated assault of incendiary thinking about racism. There were financial disagreements with a producer, and "Dreams" wasn't televised in the U.S. But it was shown in 2014 at the BlackStar Film Festival, in Philadelphia, and at the New York Film Festival. By then, Jafa had started working on a project that he called "*APEX*."

Close to eight hundred separate images flash by in "*APEX*"'s eight minutes and twenty-two seconds, against a pounding techno beat: a man's deeply scarred back, Walt Disney and Mickey Mouse, the fiery surface of the sun, a cartoon shark, lynchings, Sojourner Truth, Aretha Franklin, a cross-legged monk on fire, movie stills of white actors in blackface, Black people being fire-hosed, a 1920 Harlem street parade beneath a sign that reads "The New Negro Has No Fear." Jafa worked on "*Apex*" for four years, off and on, without knowing what it was. "I didn't understand it as a film, or as art," he told me. "I assumed it was an internal document that I showed to my friends."

Early in 2016, working again as a cinematographer and staying in a New York hotel room between jobs, Jafa put together the basic elements of "Love Is the Message, the Message Is Death." There was no concept and no script. "It was a response to the influx of footage of Black people being assaulted, which I had just been throwing in a file." A week later, he heard Kanye West's "Ultralight Beam" performed on "Saturday Night Live" and decided to use it as the soundtrack—without notifying West or getting permission. (West's reaction, when he and Jafa met, in 2020, was to say that Jafa's film had brought him "back to life," and to hire him to direct a music video for the song "Wash Us in the Blood.") Jafa showed an early version of "Love Is the Message" to Greg Tate, Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, the cinematographer Bradford Young, and other friends. Tate said, "There's something about the construction of it, the flow and the velocity, that's very much the way young people experience the Internet. It resonates with this generation's hip-hop culture."



"I just never got into the whole Nativity scene."

Jafa wanted to post the film on YouTube, but Kahlil Joseph urged him not to give it away. Joseph screened it several times on film nights at the Underground Museum, in Los Angeles, as an unannounced opener for the main feature. Soon afterward, in June, Joseph showed it to a small, private audience in Switzerland during Art Basel, the international art fair. Gavin Brown, a British-born artist who had become a New York art dealer, and who had a long history of finding and nurturing new talent, saw it there. “I remember being stuck to my chair, eyes wide, trying to keep up with it, and then as it ended I felt the air being expelled from my body,” he said.

Brown had never heard of Jafa. When he got back to New York, he tracked down a number and called him. Jafa was in Los Angeles, driving Ayler to school. Brown started to introduce himself, but Jafa broke in and said, “I know who you are. I’m coming to New York next week—we should meet.” They met at Brown’s gallery in Harlem, and walked to Maison Harlem for a four-hour lunch. “It was like being in a storm,” Brown recalled. “Toward the end, he said, ‘What are we doing here? Why are we meeting?’ I told him I would love to show his film. He said, ‘Nah, I don’t want that,’ but then we talked some more, and he asked, ‘When would you want to do this?’ I said, ‘In a couple of weeks.’ He said that was crazy, and then he left, and the next day we talked and he said, ‘Let’s do it.’ ”

“Love Is the Message” opened at Gavin Brown’s gallery on November 12th, four days after Donald Trump was elected President. “Everybody was stunned by what had happened to this country, or by what this country really is,” Brown said. Projected onto a large wall in an empty, darkened gallery, the images of “Love Is the Message” were larger than life, and the sound was enveloping. Several viewers wept openly. Jafa hadn’t expected this response, and, later, when he kept hearing about the film making people cry, he felt uneasy. “Why are tears the metric of having a critical or productive engagement with it?” he wondered. “I don’t know if I completely understand.” That his success had come in the art world, which he’d given up on more than a decade earlier, made it even more unexpected. The art world had changed since 2005, and many more Black artists were being shown—Jafa among them. The Hammer Museum, in Los Angeles, had

exhibited sixty-three of Jafa's three-ring binders in its 2016 "Made in L.A." show.

Hans Ulrich Obrist, the director of London's Serpentine Galleries, saw the Hammer show and gave Jafa a large solo exhibition in 2017; it was a retrospective, although many of the works in it were new. In June, "*Apex*" made a sensational début at Art Basel. Jafa had his second show at Gavin Brown's gallery a year later. It occupied three floors, and included a sculpture of two eight-foot-high truck tires wrapped in heavy chains; a mural-size montage of the eight hundred images he had used to make "*Apex*"; and a new, two-hour-long film called "*akingdoncomethas*," which was devoted largely to footage of preachers and gospel singers. When asked by a young woman in a lecture audience whether he had now chosen the art world over the film world, Jafa laughed and said, "I didn't choose the art world, the art world chose me. I thought I was done with it."

Jafa's next film, "*The White Album*," won the Golden Lion, the top prize at the 2019 Venice Biennale. As a political document, it overpowers "*Love Is the Message*." A fat, middle-aged white man delivers an anguished mea culpa on white supremacy: "We're scared of Black vengeance. We're scared shitless, and we always have been. Since Day One, we've put our hands on Black people, grabbed 'em, snatched 'em up, put 'em on a boat, and made 'em our own friggin' personal slaves and assistants for no pay. We did all that. You're goddam right we're scared. . . . So we got a lot of fuckin' fear, man." A blond Valley Girl type, echoing Trump, tells us that she is "the farthest person from being racist," and complains that "white people have the hardest time nowadays because we try so hard. . . . Have some respect for white people, O.K.?" Nearly all the speakers are white. At one point, we're airborne, watching bombs explode on the ground and people flee machine-gun fire from a helicopter. In another sequence, a handcuffed white man sits on a curb yelling "Niggah, niggah, niggah" and "Fuck you" at an impassive Black policewoman. The film, to which Jafa keeps adding, also offers brief glimpses of Gavin Brown and other white people Jafa loves and respects. "Like many of my best ideas, '*The White Album*' started as a joke," he said. "Echoing the Beatles' title was super-intentional. But a very thoughtful friend of mine said, 'Man, this is something huge. White folks are going to *love* it.' "

The horrifying death of George Floyd, in May, has had lasting repercussions. “I was tremendously moved the first time I saw images of the protest marches in Paris and London and other places,” Jafa said recently. “I was moved, but I was also very reticent to unblock my heart. We’ve been living with this for so long.” A week later, his thinking had shifted: “This is such a complex moment. I don’t know if we’ve had a moment like this, where we have a pandemic and on top of that an insurrection. George Floyd’s murder is as close to a straight-up lynching as anybody has seen. So many of my friends have parsed and dissected over and over why this particular instance of something that Black people have been complaining about from time immemorial—what is it about this instance that triggered people? One of the things I’ve heard, and that I think is true, is the unflinching nature of George Floyd and the cop looking at the camera. It’s that rare instance of white America looking into a mirror and being frightened by what it sees staring back. Cornel West says there are certain things that Black people cannot not know in America. We know these things, even though they are fearsome, horrible things. And I’ve hardened my heart, because I don’t want to be debilitated by the lack of empathy for Black people. But I think maybe people are starting to realize that the way we have been treated for the last couple of hundred years doesn’t just diminish the collective lives of Black people—it diminishes the living force of everybody. I think they are starting to get that.”

There is no longer a separation in Jafa’s work between filmmaking and art. A large Jafa retrospective is scheduled to open in January at the Louisiana Museum, in Denmark. Many of his recent films will be on view, and the show has given him the chance to fabricate new works that he’s been thinking about for years. A film made with computer technology alone (no camera was used) conjures up what looks like black, turbulent water endlessly plunging and crashing in on itself. A series of long, wall-mounted sculptures that resemble railroad tracks, in varying lengths, relate to something Jafa talked about with David Bowie thirty years ago: “The idea of taking things that don’t have any value, that are detritus, and making something magnificent of them. They feel like found objects, readymades, but they are imagined and generated.”

Jafa also has several full-length films in development. In 2014, he and two friends, the cinematographer Malik Sayeed and the curator Elissa Blount

Moorhead, joined forces in a film production company called *TNEG*, but it never quite got off the ground. “I couldn’t decide whether I wanted to be Walt Disney or Mickey Mouse,” Jafa joked. The attention paid to “Love Is the Message” wasn’t lost on potential backers, though, and early in 2020 Jafa, Gavin Brown, the Hollywood producer Melinda Nugent, whom Jafa has known for twenty-five years, and the Swiss collector and entrepreneur Maja Hoffmann started a company called SunHaus to support Jafa’s projects and also to develop film work by other artists. “Our funding is coming from the art world, and we’re confident that we will be able to control the process,” Nugent told me. An investor has pledged enough money to keep them running for three years.

Jafa had planned to start work this past spring on “Cudhial,” a narrative film, set in the Mississippi Delta, about a love affair between a seventeen-year-old high-school student and his teacher. (The pandemic intervened; he will try again next spring.) This is the kind of film that Haile Gerima has always wanted Jafa to make: personal, relational, and deeply felt. “Daughters of the Dust” had been a “promissory note” for both Jafa and Dash, according to Gerima—a preview of the storytelling talent they shared in such abundance. Jafa read the “Cudhial” script to Gerima thirty years ago, on the phone; it took hours. “The first script was lost,” Jafa said. “I moved so many times over the years.” He is rewriting it, with help from Boston. “A lot of my feelings about Julie Dash are bound up in ‘Cudhial,’ ” he said. “She was the most beautiful, the most sophisticated . . .” His voice trailed off. “She taught me so many things.”

“Cudhial” (pronounced “Cu-jul”) is a word Jafa made up. He does this now and then, if the language seems to need it. “I used to have a tight grasp of what ‘Cudhial’ meant, but now it’s just a feeling, a kind of nostalgia—not longing for a moment as much as ambivalence about a moment,” he said. “I think it’s about my personal notion of Black being. It’s like saying, ‘That painful experience I went through made me who I am. I wouldn’t want to relive it, but I constantly return to it, and I luxuriate in it in a certain way. But the parts that were amazing, the parts that were pleasurable, are strictly bound up with the parts that were painful.’ ”

In a remark that was widely misunderstood, Jafa once said that he wasn’t addressing white people in his work. “I never said I don’t care what white

people think about it,” he told me. “I’m super-pleased when white people like my work, or are interested in it, or provoked by it. But I’m talking to Black people, not to everybody. I’m certainly not trying to talk to white people, and I don’t think it serves white people to be spoken to. It makes them feel like they’re the center of the universe, in a way that is profoundly problematic. In Eric Clapton’s ‘Layla,’ which I think is the greatest hard-rock love song ever, he’s not singing to everybody. He’s singing to Pattie Boyd. He fell in love with his best friend’s wife, and he’s singing to her. And everybody else is listening in.” ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

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Your Monthly Horoscope

By [Jena Friedman](#)

December 14, 2020



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

CAPRICORN: You started off the year energized, but unforeseen circumstances have left you feeling listless. For a dynamic sign like the Goat, you're tired all the time, and you've been finding it difficult to concentrate. This month, prepare to continue to not get any work done. Also, that lingering career anxiety you've been feeling isn't just in your head after all! Don't worry. It's highly likely that your entire profession is screwed.

AQUARIUS: As an air sign, you love to travel, but, for some reason, you haven't been running around as much lately. Ever since March, you've barely ventured out, instead spending the bulk of your time online. It's a good thing you love technology, Aquarius, because the stars predict that you will be logging a lot of Zoom hours this month. Keep an eye out for a notice from your bank with some unwelcome news about your finances.

PISCES: Poor, sensitive Pisces. This really hasn't been your year! Would it make you feel better to know that someone is admiring you from afar? That's right, some attractive stranger's eyes are set on you, dear Pisces! Unfortunately, you'll probably never meet the person.

ARIES: Ever since Mercury entered Pisces in mid-March, you haven't been able to shake an unusual anxiety. Much of your stress is related to new developments in your career, your health, your personal life, your family, global warming, income inequality, the state of our democracy, and the industry you work in. This month, buckle up, because it's all about to get much worse. Oh, and you may receive some unfavorable information regarding your finances.

TAURUS: The moon entered your Tenth House of Career Success at some point, but I've lost track of when, as it's all become a meaningless blur. That said, in normal times your career might be getting a boost right now, but a cosmic shift has thrown everything into limbo. Protect that rainy-day fund, responsible Taurus, as you're about to get bad news about your finances.

GEMINI: As the life of the party, Gemini, you have a hard time settling down. But, with Jupiter in retrograde since mid-September, it might be a good moment to avoid social gatherings. The moon in your Seventh House of Not Being an Idiot suggests that going out in public is a mistake. But, if you do, wear a fucking mask.

CANCER: You seem pretty emotional lately, even for a Cancer. You are a sensitive creature who needs coaxing to come out of your shell. Unfortunately, that's not going to happen, at least not this month. Just remember that you're not alone—well, at least metaphorically. Have you thought about adopting a pet? I know your sourdough starter is technically a living organism, but it won't love you back.

LEO: You love drama, and, lucky for you, there's a lot of it on TV right now! But, if your moon is in Cancer, Gemini, Capricorn, Scorpio, Aquarius, Virgo, Leo, Pisces, Sagittarius, Aries, Libra, or Taurus, I would avoid cable news. Also, I hope that you have a nest egg, because you are about to receive some troubling news regarding your finances.

VIRGO: How's it going, control freak? The past few months have been a little rocky for you, and, sorry to say, the storm doesn't appear to be subsiding. This month, try to stop obsessing about what you can't control and focus instead on what you can control, like the amount of stuff you've been ordering on Amazon. Do you really need that six-dollar milk frother? The answer is yes.

LIBRA: Feeling a little lonely lately? If you're single, there's a good chance you'll stay that way for the immediate future. If you're in a relationship, good luck with that—everyone I know is breaking up. On the bright side, a medical breakthrough on the horizon might make it easier for you to navigate society. The bad news: you're probably last in line for it.

SCORPIO: Scorpio is a natural homebody, but nine months in isolation is a lot, even for you. Since you've been moving around so much less lately, you may have put on a few pounds around your midsection, or all over your body. Don't fret, dear Scorpio. Now that Venus has entered your Fifth House of It Doesn't Even Matter Anymore, no one is likely to notice.

SAGITTARIUS: As one of the most resourceful signs of the zodiac, you have all the skills necessary to weather any storm, except for the one that's currently approaching. We're about to embark on an astrological apocalypse, which isn't actually a thing, but what do I care? I'm not even an astrologer. I'm grasping at straws. (Remember straws?) Like everyone else in this country (except Jeff Bezos), I'm scrambling to find ways to monetize my

skill set now that my profession (standup comedy) won't be coming back anytime soon. Are you still reading this? Want to know what the stars have to say about your finances? It's not looking good. ♦

Tables for Two

- [Obsession-Worthy Tacos at Yellow Rose](#)

[December 21, 2020 Issue](#)

Obsession-Worthy Tacos at Yellow Rose

The Texas-themed pop-up turned restaurant in the East Village offers vegan queso, chocolate sheet cake, and Sonoran-style flour tortillas stuffed with four recommendable fillings.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

December 11, 2020



“Texas is a state of mind. Texas is an obsession,” John Steinbeck wrote in “Travels with Charley: In Search of America,” his 1962 book. Then he doubled down: “But I think it is more than that. It is a mystique closely approximating a religion.” Consider me, at least, a worshipper at the altar of Yellow Rose, a Texas-themed pop-up turned restaurant in the East Village. Obsession, indeed, is what led me to commit, the other day, to an entire Pizza Box of Tacos: twelve freshly made Sonoran-style flour tortillas, each folded around one of four fillings and wrapped tightly in foil, containers of a tomatillo-and-poblano salsa verde tucked beside them.

I recommend all of the fillings, without reservation: impossibly plump shreds of chicken cooked in salsa verde; a saucy *carne guisada* (a.k.a. beef stew), featuring pink-fleshed, melt-in-your-mouth morsels of chuck; cubes of fried potato dyed neon with a purée of tomato, onion, and pepper. But my runaway favorite is arguably the least exciting-sounding: refried pinto beans (from the cult bean purveyor Rancho Gordo) topped with coarsely shredded Cheddar cheese, impeccably seasoned and cooked to the ideal consistency to let the texture of the tortillas sing.



Iced hibiscus tea with lime. Photograph by Bubi Canal for The New Yorker

Do I even want to know what's in the tortillas? They left me so gobsmacked—thick, chewy, a little stretchy, salty, charred, ever so slightly powdery to the touch—that I think I'd rather not; to peek behind the curtain is to risk dissolving the allure. The shelves of dry goods in the restaurant's small anteroom offer a hint. (Yellow Rose, which opened in November where the restaurant Feast was, in partnership with Feast's owners, is counter service only for now, with outdoor seating; behind the swinging saloon-style doors, you'll catch a glimpse of what will one day be the bar and dining room.) Among jars of mesquite honey and bags of Bandera Rosa coffee beans, roasted in San Antonio—and next to a fully functioning, and free, vintage Pac-Man arcade machine—are sacks of stone-ground flour from Barton Springs Mill, based near Austin.

I've observed the finicky standards to which Texan transplants to New York tend to hold local restaurants claiming to represent their state. It's hard to imagine better ambassadors than Yellow Rose's proprietors, Dave and Krystiana Rizo, a married couple who moved to the city from San Antonio four years ago—but they're far from staunch traditionalists. For their "Texas sheet cake," a gloriously moist chocolate sponge is layered with a thick, tangy crème-fraîche chocolate frosting and finished with lightly candied, crackly Pawnee pecans, flaky sea salt, and Frankies olive oil. If anyone, native Texan or not, takes issue with it, I'll gladly finish his portion.



Bean-and-cheese tacos, featuring refried pintos and shredded Cheddar in Sonoran-style flour tortillas. Photograph by Bubi Canal for The New Yorker

The same goes for the brilliantly conceived masa snickerdoodles, zingy with lime zest, and for the queso, which happens to be vegan, made with cashew cheese, potato, and guajillo chilies. (Before Yellow Rose, Dave cooked at Superiority Burger.) Some may argue that this renders the queso inauthentic, even sacrilegious. To me, it seems realistically modern—and absolutely delicious, besides, even reheated in the microwave.

I would cross a frozen tundra for a couple of those bean-and-cheese tacos, not to mention brave the hubbub of Third Avenue on a frigid day. You can heat them up at home, too, though it may not be necessary: hours after I drove my pizza box home to Brooklyn, even after storing it in my refrigerator, the foil was still somehow slightly warm to the touch. Especially paired with a kit for making micheladas—a six-pack of Lone Star, a bottle filled with a blend of roasted tomatoes, peppers, and pickled jalapeños, and a few tablespoons of a house-made Tajín-like seasoning (containing dried guajillo and salt, among other ingredients), for coating the rim of a glass—they felt like the makings of a party, even if there were only two guests. (*Tacos \$4-\$6, other dishes \$5-\$12.*) ♦

The Art World

- [The Melancholy Gestalt of Isolation](#)

The Melancholy Gestalt of Isolation

The works in “100 Drawings from Now” speak to our lockdown epoch with startling poignancy.

By [Peter Schjeldahl](#)

December 14, 2020



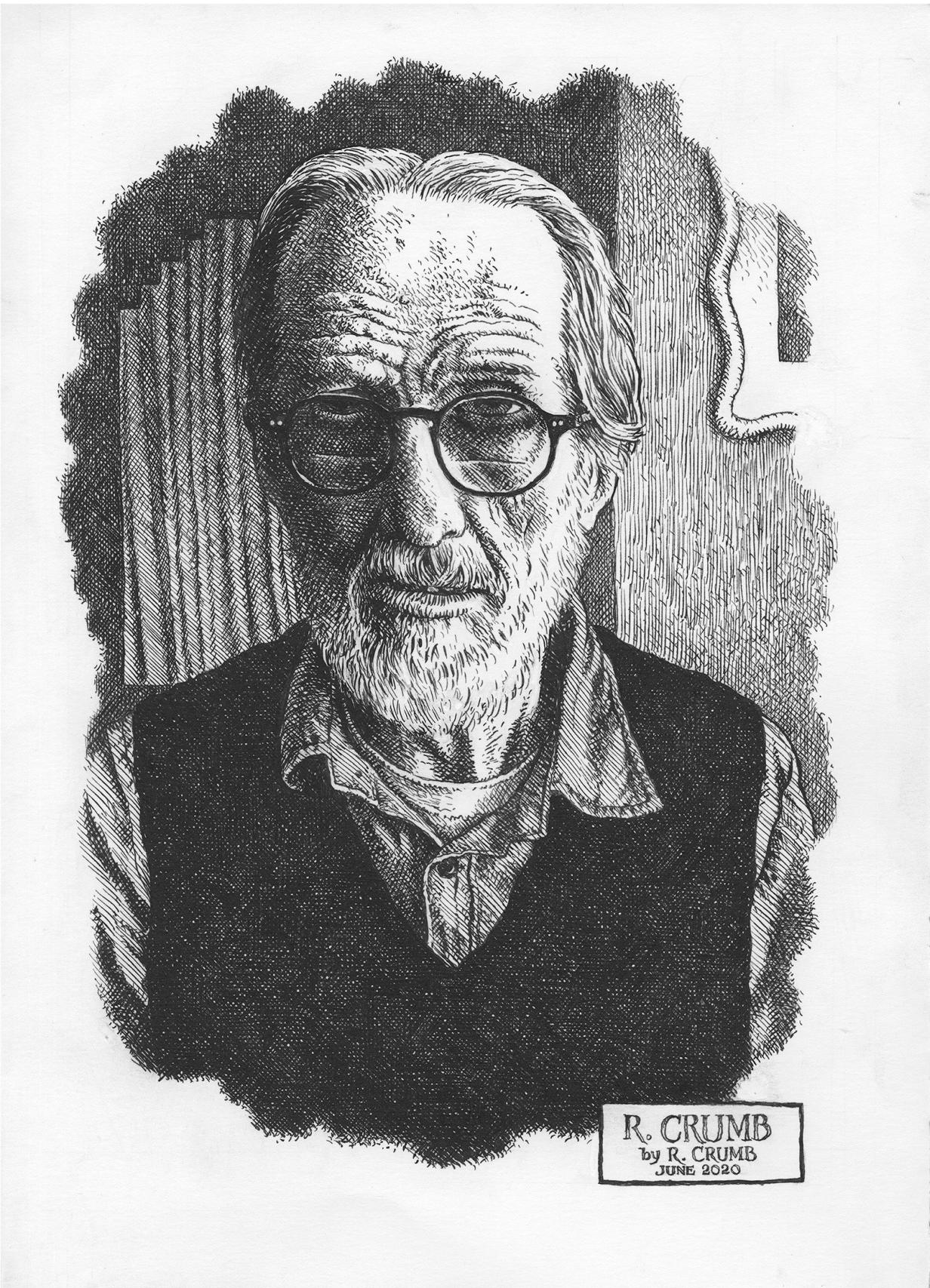
An invitational show of international artists, “100 Drawings from Now,” at the Drawing Center, in SoHo, speaks to our lockdown epoch with startling poignancy. All but one of the works have been created since the pandemic’s onset. They are mounted on walls with magnets, unframed, and arrayed seemingly helter-skelter. Few are thematic. There are scant visual references to the spiky virus, though there are some good jokes on homebound malaise. Among the better-known artists, [Raymond Pettibon](#) pictures himself bingeing on episodes of “The Twilight Zone” and Katherine Bernhardt reports a homeopathic regimen of cigarettes and Xanax. Stylistic commonalities are scarce, aside from a frequent tilt toward wonky figuration. The show confirms a deltalike trend—or anti-trend—of eclectic eccentricities without any discernible mainstream. (Does this signal the end of art history? It can feel that way, absent competitive modes and manners. Anyone today can do anything, which sounds nice but makes for little synergy.) What unites Rashid Johnson’s grease-stick abstraction, conjuring a state of alarm in a pigment that he has invented and dubbed Anxious Red; Cecily Brown’s pencilled carnage of game animals after a seventeenth-century still-life by Frans Snyders; and a meticulous, strikingly sombre self-portrait by R. Crumb? Isolation. Intended or not in individual cases, the melancholy gestalt is strong, as is its silver-lining irony of satisfying all artists’ ruling wish: to be alone in the studio. Alone with themselves. Alone with drawing. I found myself experiencing the works less as calculated images than as prayers.

It’s an effect common enough in both art and life: consciousness stumbling upon soulfulness. I think of lines by [John Ashbery](#):

the soul is not a soul,
Has no secret, is small, and it fits
Its hollow perfectly: its room, our moment of attention.

An event rather than an entity, the soul defines our deepest depths, oblivious of sensation, thought, and feeling—touching bottom in our simple existence. Nearly all mystics posit a oneness of attention and worship. This may seem a lot to lay on a group show of overwhelmingly secular and cosmopolitan art, but you know what? I may have a point. Friends agree with me that, for those of us who have been confined to home, these past months of forced lassitude have given rise to moments that are essentially mystical: temporary

losses of ourselves, like existential hiccups, that we would likely not have noticed if we were leading full lives. When time is a trackless waste, escapes from the aridity detonate. Gone before we're quite aware of them, they return us to interminable tedium—in which it's easy to brood that the world is full of possibilities, all of them over—but with a lasting glint of resilience. The universe isn't done with us yet. Will we recall our ordeals and their momentary reprieves or expunge them from memory when the [vaccines](#) kick in? (The flu of 1918, which resulted in fifty million deaths, seemed to have dropped from the nation's collective mind the instant it ended.) But here we are, and “100 Drawings from Now” vivifies the situation for me.



"R. Crumb by R. Crumb," by R. Crumb. Art work courtesy the artist, Paul Morris, and David Zwirner © Robert Crumb, 2020

Drawing seems the most apt medium for expressing the fix we're in. It's quick, and hospitable to surges of soulfulness: the assertion (or insertion) of individual solitudes in shared time. For most artists, perhaps including most of those in the show, drawing is a workaday task central to a process that is destined to yield results in painting, sculpture, installation, or another format. (If a drawing is like a prayer, a completed project is like a Sabbath.) I'm imposing my thesis on a lot of work that, while impressive on its own terms, seems output-as-usual for its creators: a powerfully composed (and plenty timely) protest of institutionalized violence against Black people, by the Bahamas-born Lavar Munroe; an antic scarecrow figure against a geometric ground, by the thirty-one-year-old Walter Price, from Georgia; a congeries of jammed-together gray-and-yellow checkerboard patterns, by Sam Moyer, a promising Brooklynite new to me. But those fine efforts amount to background accompaniment to the show's instances of urgency and agitation. (And who can say what inner pressures attended their making?) Even—or especially—understatement succeeds. I was at first perplexed and then riveted by the contribution from Karen Kilimnik, a rococo visual poet of courtly romance. She sketched only the symbols of the four card suits—heart, spade, diamond, club—in blue, two greens, and red. I take the work as a confession of the inadequacy of art in the face of lived suffering, but also as a log-in for the occasion: another artist is present, making things despite all. Kilimnik's gesture seemed to me the next best thing to [Wittgenstein's](#) dictum "Whereof one cannot speak thereof one must be silent." A fluent acrylic of a blooming iris by Amy Sillman evinces similar tact: the artist weighing in with the little, but all of the little, that she can muster amid common distress.

The Drawing Center merits gratitude for the thoughtfulness and nimble timing of the show. It is an exemplary nonprofit that has survived art-world ups and downs since its founding, in 1977, in a disused warehouse on Greene Street and its move, ten years later, to 35 Wooster Street, in what was then a hot zone for galleries but is gelid now. The rationale for its creation was an argument that graphic mediums are too often discounted in assessments of new art. I remember initially doubting the emphasis, which seemed to me a mite precious. (What next? The Macramé Nook?) But the center's exhibition programs, featuring artists both prominent and tyro, have proved invaluable for their sidelights on technical developments and critical issues in art and the wider culture. (There have been tours de force

representing tattoo artists, writers, chefs, soldiers, and, last year, prisoners.) The artists in “100 Drawings from Now” were selected by three staff curators of different generations: the boomer Laura Hoptman, the Gen X-er Claire Gilman, and the millennial Rosario Güiraldes—though, again, you wouldn’t easily distinguish period styles among their respective cohorts. The works pick no perceptible critical fights with one another. Movements are moot. Romances of avant-gardism have died on the vine. Today, becoming an artist at all has come to seem the limit of an individual’s intervention in history. But quality and energy count, as always. You know you’re in good hands with brisk portraits that the New Yorkers Sam Messer and Rochelle Feinstein drew of each other, simultaneously, via Zoom. There’s refreshment, besides ominousness, in the Chinese artist Cao Fei’s realist rendering of a bottle of hand sanitizer and introspective drama in the Hong Kong-born Paul Chan’s inky and dense semi-abstract of his studio, drawn with his nondominant left hand.



"Untitled," by Katherine Bernhardt, from 2020. Art work courtesy the artist and Canada Gallery

Silence reigned as, masked and wary, I viewed the show. The space was almost deserted. I might have thought, Where is everybody? But, of course, I knew. The world's population is atomized among the dying, the ill, the quarantined, the sheltered, the heroically imperilled "essential" (never forget!), and, God save the mark, the blinkered fools. None are likely to crowd art shows anytime soon, even as precautionary measures have enabled the reopening of galleries and museums in parts of the country. Do you sometimes imagine that you're getting used to the emergency? I think I can guarantee that you're not, burdened by states of mind that will be comprehensible only retrospectively, when they no longer pertain. The world going on nonetheless, as the world will, feels bizarrely conditional, subject in thought and action to a blanketing subjunctive mood: things as we wish they were. We are waiting this out with nostalgia for lost freedoms, fear and empathy in the present, and, perhaps, vague anticipation of eventual survivor's guilt. Never has social privilege seemed more unfair while being clung to so tenaciously. Some of us—artists—are undergoing the siege in ways that can alert us to the subjective dimensions of an objective calamity. We should want those people to keep it up as best they can. ♦

The Current Cinema

- Planned Alcoholism in “Another Round” and Weaponized Camp in “The Prom”

[December 21, 2020 Issue](#)

Planned Alcoholism in “Another Round” and Weaponized Camp in “The Prom”

In Thomas Vinterberg’s new film, melancholy friends experiment with alcohol; in Ryan Murphy’s, Broadway liberals experiment with Indiana.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

December 11, 2020



The latest film from the Danish director Thomas Vinterberg, “Another Round,” marks the second occasion on which he has teamed up with his countryman Mads Mikkelsen. In “The Hunt” (2012), Mikkelsen played a kindergarten teacher who is wrongly accused of being a pedophile. In the new movie, he plays Martin, a high-school history teacher who is accused, correctly, of being an alcoholic. Note that both protagonists (it’s hard to call them heroes) are in positions of civic responsibility, from which they slide: our two-bit modern answer to the kings and overlords whose precipitate falls were formerly the stuff of tragedy. In each case, the result is at once compelling and difficult to watch. Martin, for example, is discovered, in the early morning, sleeping outside a neighbor’s house, with his keys in his hand and a livid cut on his brow. He is retrieved by his son Jonas (Magnus Sjørup), and what’s shocking is how unshocked the boy looks; this must have happened before. Later, at dinner, Martin tries to explain. “Well, I got a little drunk yesterday,” he says. “But, Dad,” Jonas replies, “you’ve been drunk for a while, haven’t you?”

There are two unusual things about Martin’s drinking. First, it’s not a passive condition into which he has slumped; it’s a plan. Second, it’s a joint effort. Keeping him company are three of his colleagues: Tommy (Thomas Bo Larsen), a sports coach, who goes to soccer practice with a plastic bottle of liquor, as if it were Gatorade; Peter (Lars Ranthe), a music lover, who verses his pupils in patriotic songs, while grabbing a quick swig behind their backs; and Nikolaj (Magnus Millang), who teaches psychology, asking his class, “Why do we behave, experience, and react as we do?” An excellent question, and one response, apparently floated by a Norwegian philosopher, is that humans are born with too little alcohol in their veins. So *that’s* it. We have a duty to repair the deficit, and, to this end, Nikolaj, Peter, Tommy, and Martin resolve to keep themselves topped up, while collating evidence of “verbal, motor, and psycho-rhetorical effects.” No booze after 8 P.M., or on weekends, but otherwise let it flow.

To begin with, the scheme goes swimmingly. At school, after making a pit stop in the bathroom to refuel with Smirnoff, Martin treats his admiring students to a master class on Churchill, Roosevelt, and the art of leadership. “I haven’t felt this good in ages,” he tells his fellow-lushes, and, like gamblers on a hot streak, they raise the stakes. Up goes their daily intake. You can see where the film is heading, and, sure enough, the comedy of

excess—profoundly unfunny to those who are bruised by it, like Martin’s wife, Anika (Maria Bonnevie)—kicks in. Nikolaj crawls home after a Rabelaisian binge, makes it to the bedroom, and tries, in vain, to use a baby monitor as a Breathalyzer; Peter, for his part, advises a fretful pupil to soothe his nerves with a drink before an oral exam. Mind you, this being Denmark, the subject of the test is Kierkegaard, so Peter may have a point.

The four leading men are all too convincing, not least when they lark about in the park like small boys, yet that virtue creates a problem for the film. Is it really an ensemble piece, or do we want it to revolve around Martin? Is he not the story’s lonely heart? The issue arises early on, at a lavish dinner for Nikolaj’s fortieth birthday, where the quartet of friends progresses—if that is the word—from champagne, to vodka, to a fine 2011 Burgundy. Martin, who is driving, opts for a soda, but Peter cajoles him to hit the hard stuff, and Nikolaj argues that it makes a person “more relaxed and poised and musical and open.” We follow Martin’s expression as he listens—distracted and half amused, with a spectre of a smile. When he gives in and samples the vodka, then drains a glass of the wine in a single quaff, you see tears, unshed, befogging his gaze, as if he were moved by a sudden memory. Or maybe the alcohol went straight to his eyes. Either way, as he slowly mists over, his features illuminated in the soft-shadowed room, you stare at him and enter into his trance.

Now that Jack Palance is dead, does any living star have a face more distinctive than Mikkelsen’s? It seems carved rather than molded, with hints of both the delicate and the incisive. He broke through as a villain, in “[Casino Royale](#)” (2006), scrutinizing 007 at the poker table, but you can imagine him as a penitent, or as the leader of a cult, and his handsomeness is of the secretive, non-open variety that invites suspicion. That’s why “The Hunt” grew so taut, and why, in “Another Round,” as Martin dives ever deeper into the drink, and as it renders him unbeautiful, you can’t help asking what sorrows, or what smoldering disappointments, this man is seeking to douse. As he remarks to his pupils, “The world is never as you expect.”

Audiences in 1945 were equally curious, I’d guess, about Don Birnam, the sozzled character in [Billy Wilder](#)’s “The Lost Weekend.” That film certainly touched a chord, winning the Academy Award for Best Picture, and its

triumph suggested that Don was not an exception. His plight was practically a rule, and I thought of him during “Another Round” as Anika sighs over Martin’s carousing and says, “This entire country drinks like maniacs anyway.” The movie’s original title was “Druk”—a splendidly percussive Danish noun, our nearest equivalent being “bender,” so why dampen it into “Another Round,” with its hearty and pub-heavy dullness? (Vinterberg has suffered this belittling before. In 1998, “Festen,” his fiercest film, became “The Celebration” for American viewers.)

All in all, however, this is one of the director’s most absorbing works. It soaks you up, and its melancholy (a shot of Martin, say, eating cereal on his own, in the semi-dark) is somehow less disturbing than its sprees. Hence the book-ends: scenes of revelling students, who begin the movie by racing around a lake, knocking back beers as they go, and bring it to a conclusion, after graduating, by parading in trucks festooned with greenery. Whether such hoopla counts as a happy ending or as a reckless lie—whether the kids should be granted their fun, or whether the next generation of inebriates is already in training for its own destruction—is open to debate. As for Martin, he is greeted with delirium by the graduates, beside a harbor, and retorts by exploding into a dance. In his youth, Mikkelsen trained as a dancer, and it shows. Martin has just had a fortifying drink with his pals, and now, inspired, he springs and curvets, ominously close to the water’s edge, jumping for something worse than joy.

How much alcohol you should insert into your bloodstream before attempting to watch “The Prom,” the new [Ryan Murphy](#) film, is not easy to gauge. It may well be most amenable to the completely blotto. I made the grave mistake of seeing it sober, and there were moments when I simply lost my courage and had to look away, as some people do during the tooth-drilling scene in “Marathon Man.”

There are oodles of self-mockery here, yet never quite enough, and the plot is a rum affair. Two stage troupers from New York, Dee Dee Allen (Meryl Streep) and Barry Glickman ([James Corden](#)), are mortified when their new show, a musical about Eleanor Roosevelt, shuts after opening night. Informed that the fault lay not with the production but with the rampancy of their egos, they decide to burnish their moral reputations by finding a cause to support. A friend of theirs, Angie Dickinson ([Nicole Kidman](#)), learns, via

Twitter, about a student named Emma Nolan (Jo Ellen Pellman), out in the hinterland, who wants to take her girlfriend to the prom. Rather than indulge her heathen wishes, the school's PTA has cancelled the whole event. Horrors! So it is that Dee Dee, Barry, Angie, and another resting performer, Trent Oliver (Andrew Rannells), travel to Indiana—boo, hiss—to save the day, or the magical night. “We are liberals from Broadway!” they exclaim.

According to [Susan Sontag](#), in an influential essay from 1964, “It goes without saying that the Camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized—or at least apolitical.” Not anymore. “The Prom” uses camp very determinedly as a weapon, designed to inflict maximum correction and complaint. Although the big routines retain the crisp and fevered stomp, weirdly bereft of grace, that was the house style of Murphy’s “Glee,” the purpose of them, as enacted by Dee Dee and her posse of urban outsiders, is to demonstrate to any recalcitrant hicks the error of their non-inclusive ways. Nothing that I’ve witnessed onscreen in 2020 is more bizarre than a sequence in a shopping mall, where Trent, by means of song and dance, not only berates the senior squares from Emma’s school but specifically targets their Christian faith; by the end of the number, he has successfully converted them to his secular vision of love. It’s possible both to agree entirely with the movie’s politics and, at the same time, to feel that you’re being strangled by a rainbow, and we should thank the Lord that “The Prom” wasn’t released before the election. I can think of some states, not just Indiana, where wavering voters, disgruntled rather than wowed by the film’s remorseless plea for tolerance, might have swung in the opposite direction. ♦

Wheeling and Dealing Dept.

- [What are the Odds That Trump Pardons Himself?](#)

[December 21, 2020 Issue](#)

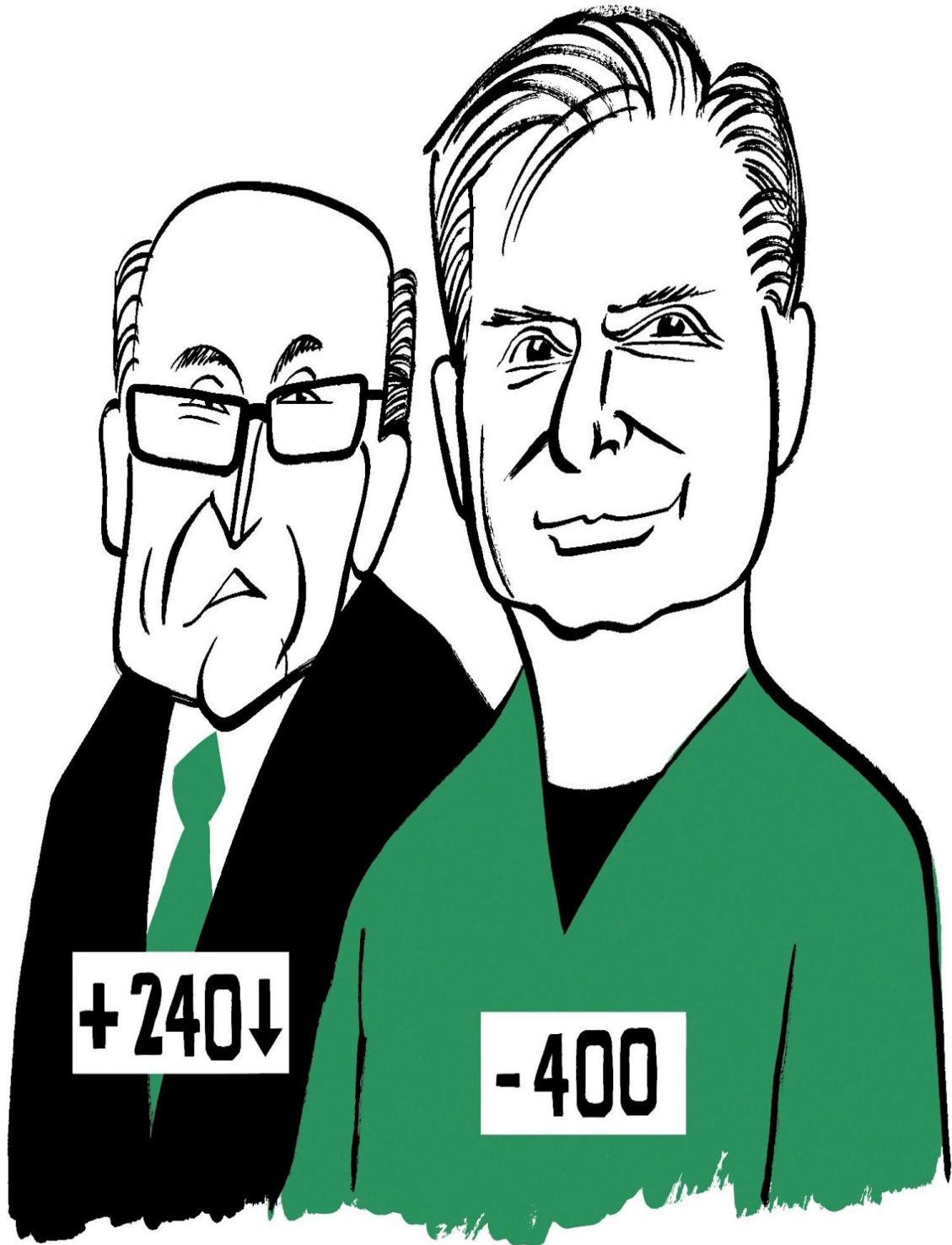
What are the Odds That Trump Pardons Himself?

Better than two to one, according to an oddsmaker who accepts bets on Presidential pardons.

By [Zach Helfand](#)

December 14, 2020

It's Presidential pardon season! For obstructors of justice and launderers of foreign cash, the waning days of the Trump Administration might as well be the Super Bowl. Historically, this end-of-term bonanza has been the domain of a privileged guilty few, with the general public cut out of the action. But times change. Recently, a man named Pat Morrow surveyed the scene and thought, What if I gave you two-to-one odds on Giuliani?



Rudy Giuliani and Paul Manafort Illustration by João Fazenda

Morrow runs the odds-making operation at Bovada, an online sports book. This year, with the N.C.A.A. Tournament cancelled and the Olympics postponed, Bovada has cleaned up on political wagering. It has allowed bets on everything from Biden's running mate (Kamala Harris led for weeks) to which word Trump would say first at a post-election press conference ("fraud" and "steal" lost to "count," a heavy underdog). "If you are a patriotic American concerned about the electoral process, that's kind of depressing," Morrow said, of the press-conference bet. "But it got great engagement."

The latest action is on Bovada's pardon market. From the start, the former Trump campaign chair Paul Manafort has been the favorite to receive a pardon, at minus 400 (a winner must bet four hundred bucks on him in order to make a hundred). He is trailed by the campaign advisers George Papadopoulos (minus 325) and Rick Gates (minus 300). When setting lines for events like a Mets game, Bovada uses stats and probabilities. But for pardons, Morrow said, "we really just went through a *Who's Who* of people who are in trouble, and who have some kind of connection to Trump." He added, "Who would be in his best interest? Bannon makes sense, Gates makes sense, Manafort really, really, really makes sense." For those looking for a potential dark horse, Julian Assange is plus 250: a hundred-dollar wager would net two hundred and fifty. "Ghislaine Maxwell's at three to one," Morrow said. "That's probably not fair. I would recommend not betting that."

Getting in on the pardon game requires a working knowledge of constitutional law. "I wasn't sure if we wanted to put Trump himself as an option, because there's still some legal discussion as to whether that's possible," Morrow said. Trump made the cut as a plus-160 dog. Initially, his three eldest children did not. "We thought he did not have the power to do it," Morrow said. But, when the *Times* reported that Trump was, in fact, discussing the matter with advisers, the lines went up. They're currently plus 130. Jared Kushner is plus 150.

Rudy Giuliani posed another quandary. Can a President pre-emptively pardon someone who hasn't been charged with a crime? Giuliani began as a bargain, plus 240. "That one was probably a mistake on our side," Morrow said. "I personally didn't price this one. I would suggest that perhaps the trader

behind it was thinking that, as it currently stands, Rudy doesn't have any indictments pending." Bettors hammered the line all the way down to plus 140. Giuliani is now the most popular wager on the board. Trump is second.

The election itself accounted for a quarter of Bovada's 2020 revenue. ("It was bigger than Mayweather-McGregor!" Morrow said.) About two-thirds of the money was on Trump, though most savvy bettors, or sharps, bet Biden. The Biden bettors were paid only after the votes were certified. Morrow is now concerned about the tiny chance that the certifications will be overturned; he'd have to pay out the Trump wagers, too. "But, in the grand scheme of things, what's a quarter of a year's revenue versus, you know, the republic being torn apart?" Morrow asked. "That's actually kind of given me a weird bit of peace."

How are the sharps approaching pardons? Gadoon Kyrollos, a prominent professional gambler who goes by Spanky, recommended betting against the news. That strategy returned a big profit for him on Election Night. The market went crazy after Trump, then the underdog, won Florida. "I was trading until 4 a.m.," Spanky said. "Trump was a three-to-one favorite. When I wake up, Trump becomes a three-to-one dog. And then, by 7 p.m., that became a ten- or fifteen-to-one underdog. You never see movement like that. That's once in a lifetime. Almost like last weekend's Jets game. Although that might have been on purpose."

Despite the windfall, Spanky and his partners are sitting out the pardon market. "If we're not getting down fifty, a hundred thousand a game, we're really not into it," he said. Plus, it's personal. Eight years ago, Spanky was pinched in a gambling bust. He maintains that he was simply a bettor (legal), but that the large sums he was moving convinced the police that he must be a bookie (illegal). He pleaded guilty to avoid a trial. Officially, he's a felon. Earlier this year, he petitioned both Trump and Andrew Cuomo, on Twitter, for a pardon. "I'm a hundred to one," Spanky said. ♦

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