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A Reporter at Large

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How Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya came to challenge her country's dictatorship.

By [Dexter Filkins](#)

Content

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On the north side of Independence Square, in the Belarusian capital of Minsk, is the House of Government—a row of cuboid white buildings, each with a checkerboard of identical black windows. Members of parliament go in through the main entrance, passing a towering statue of Lenin and a forlorn line of trees that stand amid several acres of pavement and brick. People who want to visit the Central Election Commission use a small entrance to the right. On the afternoon of August 10, 2020, [Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya](#) went in through the smaller entrance, to complain that her victory in the Presidential election had been stolen.

Tsikhanouskaya was not a career politician; she was the daughter of a truck driver, a mother of two who had set aside a career as an English teacher in order to help her deaf son learn to speak. An improbable series of events had propelled her to challenge President Alexander Lukashenka, the last dictator in Europe, for the leadership of [Belarus](#).

A few months before, Tsikhanouskaya's husband, a journalist named Siarhei Tsikhanouski, had declared his own candidacy against Lukashenka, whom he had relentlessly derided as an incompetent autocrat, a “cockroach” who was despoiling the country. For years, Lukashenka had regularly staged Presidential elections, and each time claimed an easy victory. This time, though, there was a strong popular reaction, inspired in part by Siarhei's reports. He was arrested and thrown into a “punishment cell,” a dank concrete box without a window. Hundreds of others had already been imprisoned for questioning the regime.

With Siarhei in jail, Tsikhanouskaya decided to run herself. At first, she was reluctant. When I met her recently, she radiated earnest charm: her face is broad, framed by straight brown hair, her voice plain and strong. “I am accidental,” she told me. “I am not building my career, I am not settling scores, I do not know the language of politics, I do not like this business. I

am doing this for the Belarusian people, and for my husband. They jailed him for nothing.”

Tsikhanouskaya’s platform consisted of only three demands: freedom for political prisoners; a new constitution that reduced the powers of the Presidency; and fresh elections. But her speeches were galvanizing. “State officials have failed to understand that it’s not individual candidates but the people who threaten their power,” she told a boisterous crowd in Minsk. “And the people are fed up with living in humiliation and fear.”

Lukashenka declined to debate Tsikhanouskaya, and evidently didn’t consider her enough of a risk to have her arrested. “Our constitution was not written for a woman, and our society isn’t ready to vote for a woman,” he told a gathering at a tractor factory in May. “The President will be a man, I am more than sure.” But, with surprising speed, Belarusians took her side against the regime. The opposition adopted a white-and-red flag—a symbol of Belarus’s brief first attempt at independence, in 1918—which Lukashenka has since banned. They also began wearing white ribbons, as a signal of support. Tsikhanouskaya’s rallies drew enormous crowds. “We set up a stage and a microphone in a field, and five thousand people came,” a press aide named Gleb German told me.

On Election Day, August 9th, Belarusians flocked to the polls, with hundreds of thousands wearing white ribbons on their wrists. Tsikhanouskaya and her allies were certain that she had won. But, that night, Lukashenka declared that he had captured more than eighty per cent of the vote—a preposterous claim, which brought [outraged protesters to the streets](#). As Tsikhanouskaya implored the crowds to remain peaceful, Lukashenka’s riot police threw stun grenades, beat and teargassed demonstrators, and arrested thousands.

The next day, with the streets again swarming with protesters, Tsikhanouskaya and her lawyer, Maxim Znak, approached the election commission to file her protest. Near the entrance, they found a cordon of security officers in dark suits, with guns at their belts; two men were waiting inside. They recognized one of them as Andrei Pavlyuchenko, a notorious enforcer who has served as Lukashenka’s head of security and his chief of Internet police.

The men told Znak to step away, then led Tsikhanouskaya to a dark room and closed the door. “Your campaign is over,” Pavlyuchenko told her. They gave her a choice, she recalled. She could go to prison, leaving her son and daughter to be raised by others. Or she could leave the country immediately; a car was waiting. “All I could think about was my children,” she said.

A few hours later, the two officials led Tsikhanouskaya toward a rear exit. On her way out, she passed Znak. “Sorry, Max,” she said as she was hustled out the door.

The men drove Tsikhanouskaya across town, past throngs of protesters, some chanting her name. The chants were so loud that the car windows seemed to vibrate. “Look what you have done,” one of the men said. Minutes later, they arrived at Tsikhanouskaya’s home, and the men told her to pack a bag. There she was joined by Maryia Maroz, her campaign manager. She, too, was being expelled.



“Have you tried re-starting your computer?”
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

The men loaded them into Maroz’s car, with Pavlyuchenko in the passenger seat and police vehicles ahead and behind. At about 3 A.M., they arrived at the Lithuanian border, where Maroz’s two young children were waiting to meet her. Pavlyuchenko got out and told them to drive through the border post, which seemed prepared for their arrival. Tsikhanouskaya thought for a

moment that she might be shot, but the car kept moving, and she crossed into Lithuania.

The next morning, two videos of Tsikhanouskaya surfaced online. She looked exhausted, sad, broken. In the first, made while she was being detained in Belarus, she told the protesters to go home, that the protests were over. In the second, recorded after she had fled the country, Tsikhanouskaya was free, but her message was even more final. She told the people of Belarus that she had been defeated. “I thought that this campaign had really steeled me and given me so much strength that I could cope with anything,” she said, fighting back tears. “But I guess I am still the same weak woman that I always was.” Moments later, the video went dark.

When I visited Minsk, this past July, I expected to find a grim post-Soviet state, with concrete high-rises and downtrodden workers plodding the streets. I was half right. Much of the city center was hemmed in by brutalist buildings and Soviet monuments; the Avenue of the Conquerors was shadowed by the Stela, a fifteen-story obelisk with a knifelike point. In other neighborhoods, though, wide boulevards and outdoor cafés made Minsk feel as cosmopolitan as Berlin. I spotted only a few remnants of the protests: a white-and-red flag unfurled from a second-story window and quickly pulled back in; a procession of women dressed in white, who walked silently and soon disappeared.

The iconography of the current regime is far more present. One morning, as I rode in a taxi past a convoy of military vehicles, my driver laughed and pointed. “Lukashenka,” he said. “Boom-boom-boom-boom.” Lukashenka is sixty-seven, a bombastic figure with a huge square head, a closely trimmed mustache, and a thick neck that bulges against his dress shirts. “He has a kind of negative charisma,” Pavel Latushka, a former culture minister who fled Belarus last year after denouncing the repression, told me. “From the moment you meet him, he is dominating you.” At cabinet sessions, his ministers are often afraid to meet his gaze. Once, Latushka told me, the President paused a discussion of government business to warn him, “If you ever betray me, I will strangle you with my own hands.”

Lukashenka has often met challenges with threats. After he claimed victory over Tsikhanouskaya, Western nations imposed sweeping sanctions on his

regime. In response, Lukashenka oversaw [a bizarre scheme](#) to destabilize neighboring states, in which tens of thousands of people from Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere were invited to use Belarus as a springboard for migrating west. As refugees clustered in desolate camps on the borders of Poland and Lithuania, much of Europe was embroiled in the crisis. By the time it was resolved, this fall, the election that set it off was largely forgotten in the West.

Within his own country, Lukashenka has imposed a kind of harsh paternalism. “He considers himself to be the protector of Belarus—from the West, from Russia, from extremists within,” a person who has known him for many years told me. “He thinks that everyone else is an infant, a child, against his greatness.” Lukashenka, this person went on, has maintained order, mostly through the force of his will and the prodding of his security forces: “The streets are clean, people go to work. Belarus is still a Soviet state, and Lukashenka is a Soviet personality.” The country’s fearsome secret police force is still known as the K.G.B.

Lukashenka, the only child of an abandoned mother, grew up in the village of Kopyščy, in what was then the Belarusian Soviet Socialist Republic. He began his career as a minor Soviet functionary, working as a border guard, an ideological lecturer, and the head of a state-owned pig farm. When the Soviet Union collapsed, in 1991, Russia became independent, and the Belarusian Republic, shorn of its anchor, followed. Lukashenka was thirty-seven.

Belarus had gained independence before, in the turbulent period near the end of the First World War, but it didn’t last long enough for a sense of national identity to flourish. Between 1937 and 1940, most of the élite was wiped out, as Stalinist purges swept the country. Many victims are buried in mass graves at Kurapaty, a forest outside Minsk, which might hold as many as a quarter of a million people. Visiting there, I found crosses extending so deep into the pines that the farthest reaches were invisible in the shadows. Belarusian nationalism was not so much suppressed as destroyed.

When independence came again, there was a chaotic period of adjustment. Then, in 1994, Belarus held its first and only free election. Lukashenka ran as a populist, battling corruption; during the campaign, he wore the same

jacket every day. In office, he promised to preserve the safety net and the stable employment of the old order, standing against the chaos besetting the post-Communist states that had attempted rapid transitions to market economies. “We did not follow the path of destruction,” Lukashenka told Russian reporters in 2005. “We stood on the foundation that was created in the Soviet Union, here, on this land, and began to build a normal economy.”

In the following years, Lukashenka pushed through constitutional changes that allowed him to consolidate power. Several of his political opponents disappeared, and were presumed to have been murdered on his orders. In 2001, with the press silenced and parliament cowed, Lukashenka staged what was widely regarded as a rigged election; several others followed. “They decide ahead of time, Lukashenka is going to win eighty-eight per cent of the vote,” Jaroslav Romanchuk, who ran in 2010, said. Whenever protesters took to the streets, riot police cracked down. In a speech this summer, Lukashenka warned the country’s intelligentsia to stay out of politics: “Before you do something, think—watch your every step.”

The key to Lukashenka’s survival was an unspoken Russian guarantee. Beginning in the nineteen-nineties, Russia agreed to sell Belarus vast quantities of oil and natural gas at discounted prices. This arrangement insured Belarus a relatively high standard of living, while allowing Lukashenka’s government to resell the oil products abroad at market prices. Prominent Belarusians and Western diplomats estimated that over the years the profits to Russian and Belarusian energy companies amounted to tens of billions of dollars.

According to these officials, Lukashenka, too, grew rich from the sale of Russian gas and oil, and from smuggling between Europe and Russia. A report for the U.S. Congress, published in 2006, estimated his personal wealth at a billion dollars. It has almost certainly grown since then; a former senior Belarusian official put it closer to ten billion, adding that Lukashenka ran the country as “a family business.”

Lukashenka’s officials remain loyal, in part because they are allowed to get rich, from smuggling, kickbacks, and whatever other means they can devise. Stanislav Luponosov, a former security officer who investigated organized crime and corruption, told me that Lukashenka’s office and the K.G.B.

routinely identified people not to pursue. “When that happened, one had to obey,” he said.

From the beginning, Lukashenka affirmed his country’s affinity with Russia, “our elder brother.” He made Russian the official language. Textbooks were rewritten to emphasize the shared culture of the two countries; immigration controls were all but eliminated. Lukashenka consistently downplayed Stalin’s crimes, once declaring, “I’m absolutely not of the opinion that Stalin is the enemy.” A few years ago, he voiced approval of a restaurant built in Kurapaty, overlooking the graves of Stalin’s victims. It was called Let’s Go and Eat.

In the late nineteen-nineties, Lukashenka proposed uniting Russia and Belarus into one country, which he imagined he would lead. Instead, [Vladimir Putin](#) came to power and began encroaching on Belarus’s independence. The two men often appeared together, Putin inscrutable and slight, and Lukashenka flamboyant and imposing. But it was always clear who dominated; in a photo from 2018, Lukashenka stood with his legs wide apart to lower himself to Putin’s height. During a meeting last year on the Black Sea, the Russian news media showed Lukashenka frolicking in the frigid waves, while Putin stayed safely on dry land. State television reported that Putin had asked him to get into the water. “Putin enjoys humiliating him,” Latushka, the former minister, said.

Still, Lukashenka flourished. An ice-hockey fan, he sometimes played for the cameras, with conspicuous success. He fathered at least one child out of wedlock—a boy named Nikolai, who is widely believed to be his chosen successor. He has also maintained a string of mistresses. The woman rumored to be his latest, Maria Vasilevich, was crowned Miss Belarus in 2018. (Vasilevich has denied that the relationship is romantic.) The pair appeared together at hockey matches and at a formal dance. Early in 2019, Lukashenka awarded her a state medal for contributing to a “spiritual revival” in Belarus. In that year’s elections, which resulted in a sweep for parties loyal to Lukashenka, Vasilevich won a seat in parliament.

Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya was born in 1982, during the last years of Soviet dominion. She grew up in Mikashevichi, a granite-mining town in southern Belarus, where her father drove a truck for a cement factory and her mother

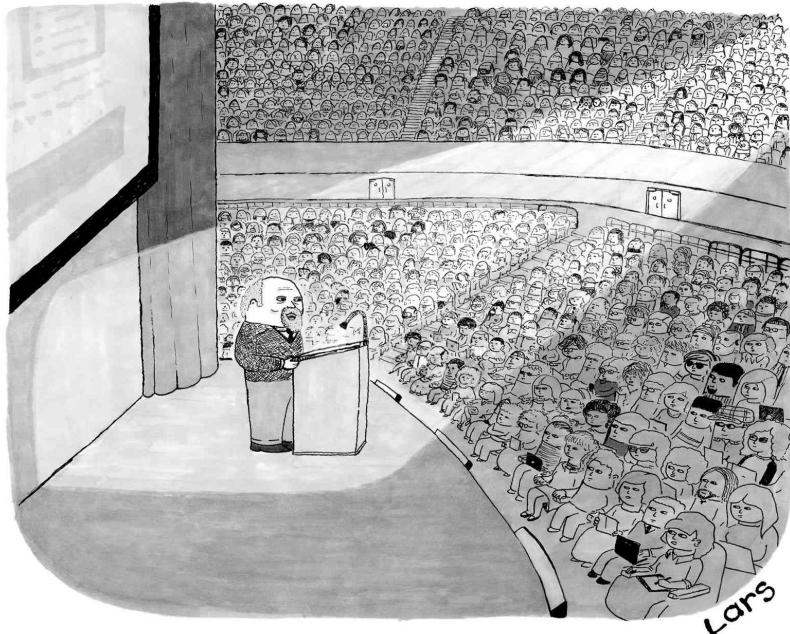
worked as a cook in a cafeteria. In free moments, her parents read as much as they could, but they had to be careful about what they discussed with their children. “Like every family, we talked about politics,” Tsikhanouskaya told me. “But in the kitchen, whispering, so no one could hear.”

When Tsikhanouskaya was three years old, the [Chernobyl nuclear plant](#) melted down across the border, and a vast cloud of contamination spread. Some seventy per cent of the fallout landed on Belarus, and created an unprecedented public-health crisis. Radiation poisoned the rain, the grass, the milk and meat of cows. Thousands of people became ill. “We couldn’t escape,” Tsikhanouskaya said. In the hope of fending off sickness, her mother had her drink red wine—one small glass a day.

As a girl, Tsikhanouskaya studied English, in an experimental program that used American textbooks, and the language inspired curiosity about the world. “I knew there was something more than what we were living,” she said. In 1996, when she was thirteen, a charity called Chernobyl Lifeline invited a group of Belarusian children to spend the summer in Roscrea, Ireland, an ancient market town in County Tipperary. The children were selected because fallout had left them frail. Tsikhanouskaya was healthy, but her English teacher added her to the group anyway, because she was her star student.

Henry Deane, one of the organizers of Chernobyl Lifeline, told me that the Belarusian children were fed heroically, taken to doctors and dentists, and celebrated throughout Roscrea; when he organized garden parties for them, hundreds of locals came. On drives through the countryside, Deane put Sviatlana in the front seat, so that she could translate for the other kids. The conversations ranged broadly, across such contested subjects as God and politics. “Sveta was curious about everything,” Deane said.

Tsikhanouskaya returned to Ireland for three more summers, and was struck by how open and cheerful the citizens seemed. “I saw that people can be happy and polite every day—it’s not normal for Belarusians,” she said. “When I went home, I tried to be polite. I smiled. People thought I was strange.”



"None of this research would have been possible without all the bitter professional vendettas that kept me going . . ."
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

After high school, Tsikhanouskaya enrolled in college in Mazyr, a small city two hours' drive from her home town, and began training as an English teacher. As it happened, Siarhei Tsikhanouski owned a night club in Mazyr —one of a series of ventures, which also included organizing concerts and producing music videos. He and Sviatlana met at the club, in 2003. They were married a year later, and soon had two children.

When their son, Korney, was born deaf, things changed. "I put my ambitions aside," Tsikhanouskaya said. The family moved to Minsk when Korney was two so that he could be given a cochlear implant. By then, though, he was behind his peers in speaking and comprehension. Tsikhanouskaya spent the next eight years teaching him, often working ten hours a day. "He had missed a critical window, when children learn how to talk, so progress was very slow," she said. She recalled an existence that was "half isolated."

By 2020, Korney had caught up and was enrolled in a regular school. For the first time in years, Tsikhanouskaya had a measure of freedom. Then the [coronavirus](#) swept through Belarus. Although the government insisted that the case numbers were low, the virus was ravaging the country. Vladimir Martov, an anesthesiologist in Vitebsk, told me that *covid-19* patients flooded the city's hospitals, overwhelming the stock of beds and oxygen.

When Martov asked the Ministry of Health for help, he was reprimanded. “As a matter of policy, the coronavirus did not exist,” he told me. “Their slogan was ‘Just wait, and it will go away.’” Last March, Martov gave an interview about the situation to Tut.by, the country’s most aggressive online newspaper. He was fired soon afterward, and, when his colleagues protested, they were told that nothing could be done. “It was in the hands of the President,” Martov told me. A few weeks later, Tut.by was shut down and its editor-in-chief arrested.

In public appearances, Lukashenka derided his citizens for being afraid of *COVID-19*, suggesting that a hardy Slavic constitution could easily overcome the virus. “You should not only wash your hands with vodka but probably also drink forty to fifty grams of pure alcohol per day to poison the virus,” he said in a televised meeting. “It’s nice to watch on TV—people working on their tractors, no one talking about the virus. There! The tractor will heal everyone!”

The government’s assurances did not relieve Tsikhanouskaya’s fears. Though the schools stayed open, she pulled her children out; though Lukashenka didn’t wear a mask, she and her family did. “We were misinformed,” she said. In February, Lukashenka himself seemed to have contracted the virus. During a speech before the Belarusian People’s Congress, he lapsed into fits of coughing, as the cameras for state television jerked away to pan the audience. “This infection has come to me again,” he said, between coughs.

Many Belarusians told me the epidemic made them realize that Lukashenka and his ministers held ordinary people in contempt. An English tutor in Minsk, who asked to be identified only as Dmitry, said the virus killed so many of his peers that he drafted his own obituary. “Lukashenka started humiliating people, laughing at doctors, laughing at the dead,” he said. “In my opinion, that was when everything started.”

As the pandemic raged, Siarhei Tsikhanouski was making a name for himself as an independent video journalist, with a show called “Country for Life”—a mocking reference to one of Lukashenka’s favorite sayings. Tsikhanouski was charismatic, and he was doing what no official in the regime had done: travelling the country and talking to people about their

lives. In the town of Hlybokaye, he interviewed a woman who identified herself as Lyudmila. She wore a medical mask, which both announced her position on the *COVID-19* epidemic and disguised her face. While Tsikhanouski held the microphone, Lyudmila delivered a ten-minute tirade; she complained of pitted roads, substandard health care, scarce opportunities, high food prices, the lack of a coherent response to the virus. Barely pausing for breath, she spoke directly to Lukashenka and his inner circle. “You are not masters—you are servants of the people,” she said. Then she addressed the audience. “All of the officials, they live like kings. They prosper, while you live in poverty.” She went on, “People, rise! . . . If we do nothing, you will all just die.”

Moments like this one exhilarated Tsikhanouski’s viewers. Normally, the government would not tolerate such overt criticism. But the show was distributed by an encrypted messaging app, Telegram, which was nearly impossible to block without entirely shutting down both cell-phone and Internet service. Across the country, Telegram hosted an explosion of activity: news channels, some funded from abroad; independent local reporters; citizens discussing the country’s direction.

Many young Belarusians were also energized by travel to Europe; each year, the European Union granted about seven hundred thousand visas to Belarusians. Among them was Oksana Zaretskaya. In 2007, she was a young mother in Minsk when her husband was transferred to a job at the United Nations office in Geneva. Zaretskaya was captivated by the Swiss system of local governance, in which ordinary citizens influenced civic decisions, even on such questions as whether to buy a particular kind of fighter jet for the Air Force. “I participated in everything, every activity,” she said. “I was so amazed to see these people engaging in political life.” She took exhaustive notes. “I wanted to create the same story in Belarus.”

In 2018, Zaretskaya’s family returned home, and she began giving talks on Swiss democracy and its local possibilities. She formed a network of like-minded friends, often communicating on Telegram. Their discussions facilitated what Zaretskaya described as “internal emigration”—leaving Belarus in their minds. “You create a life in the country that is not touched by the government,” she said. “You are trying to save your soul.”

One of the places where this was possible was OK16, an arts center in Minsk. It was supported by Viktar Babaryka, the chairman of Belgazprombank, one of the country's largest financial institutions. Babaryka was known for leading a revival of Belarusian art; he had helped secure works by Marc Chagall and Chaim Soutine, both of whom were born in towns that are now part of Belarus.

Babaryka, like others who gathered at OK16, found that the exchange of ideas about art led to larger questions. In early 2020, he declared that he would challenge Lukashenka for the Presidency. As his campaign manager, he chose Maria Kalesnikava, an intense and charismatic woman who was OK16's artistic director.

Kalesnikava, trained as a flutist, had worked as a musician for twelve years in Germany. When she returned to visit, she would point out to her father, Alexander, that people in Europe enjoyed liberties that did not exist in Belarus. "Human rights, freedom—I didn't understand them fully, and I did not fight for them," Alexander told me. "One of the things that I have come to learn this year is that the children were smarter."

Babaryka was an unprepossessing figure, whom Lukashenka dismissed as a "potbellied bourgeois." But he was a wealthy member of the establishment, and his candidacy gave followers hope that things were about to change. Hundreds of thousands of people came out to support him. Everywhere he went, he told audiences, "Belarus has woken up."

Others jumped into the race, including a former diplomat named Valery Tsepkalo. In May, 2020, Siarhei Tsikhanouski announced his candidacy. In videos on YouTube and Telegram, Tsikhanouski had enumerated the crimes and failures of the Lukashenka administration, urging his viewers to "stop the cockroach!" The government, which was mostly middle aged or older, had been slow to register what was happening online. But, as Tsikhanouski's popularity surged, the regime began harassing him.

On May 6th, he was detained while campaigning in the city of Mogilev. The ostensible charge was participating in an anti-Russia demonstration, six months before. But the timing of the arrest suggested a different reason: it came just nine days before the deadline to file qualification papers.

Tsikhanouski's supporters, hoping to keep the campaign viable, released a prerecorded video, in which he affirmed his candidacy. "For twenty-six years, the dictator has been running the state, and running it with mismanagement and criminal negligence," he said. But, with Siarhei in prison, someone had to file the paperwork for him. The task fell to Sviatlana.

On May 14th, she visited the Central Election Commission to register on his behalf, but officials refused to accept her signature. Tsikhanouskaya went home dismayed. "I thought it was over," she said. That night, though, she hit on an idea: what if she filed to run for President herself? Tsikhanouskaya filed her application hours before the deadline. When the commission's judgment was due, five days later, she returned to the offices, carrying a speech to read if her candidacy was denied. The commission's chairwoman seemed surprised by her presence. She asked if Tsikhanouskaya really intended to run for President, or if she would just serve as a "sparring partner" for her husband. Tsikhanouskaya replied, "I've dreamed of this all my life."

The same day, Siarhei was released from jail. Sviatlana told me that, when he arrived home, he was shocked to discover that his wife had decided to run for President. Although she was listed as the candidate, she promptly disappeared from public view. Siarhei began a whimsical campaign; on the trail, he posed with a life-size cutout of his wife. Sviatlana told me that her husband didn't really think that Lukashenka could be deposed. He was running a protest campaign, in the hope of inspiring his fellow-citizens. "He showed people how to be brave," she said.

Sviatlana did not consider herself the primary candidate. "It was Siarhei's campaign," she said. "Everyone understood this." Still, there are indications that Siarhei was irritated by her place on the ticket. In a video recording, he can be seen talking to Sviatlana by phone while driving with a friend. She was reading a list of local campaign coördinators. "Have you got it wrong again?" he said. "Read on, please. People are waiting!" He signed off, "O.K., see you, Mrs. Presidential Candidate." Before he finished, Sviatlana had hung up on him. He turned to his friend and said, "I have to put up with it now."

Under Belarusian rules, anyone running for President needed to collect a hundred thousand signatures to qualify. In past elections, this was a desultory phase of the campaign. This time, Belarusians lined up by the thousands to give their signatures; together, Tsikhanouskaya, Babaryka, and Tsepkalo collected more than half a million. Each candidate represented a distinct constituency: Babaryka, professionals and young people; Tsepkalo, government workers; and Tsikhanouskaya, people from the towns and villages.



"Sorry, y'all—no locals. This is a tourists-only bar."
Cartoon by Farley Katz

With popular enthusiasm surging, Lukashenka tried to seize control of the election. On May 29th, Tsikhanouski was arrested again, charged this time with assaulting a police officer; videos show that the confrontation was staged when he was attacked by an unidentified woman. Babaryka was also arrested, on charges that he had embezzled from his bank. Tsepkalo was denied a spot on the ballot; he later fled the country. Suddenly, Lukashenka was the only major candidate remaining.

Members of the defunct campaigns decided to draft Sviatlana, whose name was still on the ballot, to lead a combined effort. They found her reluctant, conscious that her husband's aides didn't respect her. "She was actually crying—it was very emotional," a former aide told me. But she agreed. "I am doing it for my husband and the people who supported him," she said.

Only three weeks remained until the election, and Tsikhanouskaya had no training in politics. “She knew nothing—literally nothing,” her aide Anna Krasulina told me. “We told her, ‘You will need a political platform,’ and she said, ‘What is a political platform?’ We told her she would need to meet journalists. She asked, ‘Why do I have to meet journalists?’ ” On the stump, though, she was fluent and forceful, portraying herself as an ordinary citizen stifled by an unresponsive autocrat. “I’m tired of enduring, I’m tired of being silent, I’m tired of living in fear!” she told a crowd in Minsk. “What about you?” The crowd roared back.

There was no time to plan. “We did everything on our knee,” Tsikhanouskaya said. “I was lost, really.” A part of her still wished that she were at home. “I would rather be with my children and my husband, frying up cutlets,” she told supporters. The team decided on a minimal platform. Tsikhanouskaya said that her career in politics would last no longer than it took to accomplish the release of political prisoners, new elections, and the writing of a new constitution. “This put a lot of her potential rivals at ease,” another former aide told me.

Maria Kalesnikava, the flutist who had run Babaryka’s campaign, signed on to join her. So did Tsepkalo’s wife, Veronika. At their first public appearance, a photographer captured the three of them, each making a distinct gesture: Kalesnikava forming a heart with her fingers, Tsepkalo flashing a V, and Tsikhanouskaya holding up a fist. The photo went viral, and they began repeating the pose wherever they went. The crowds grew quickly. Gleb German, the press aide, recalled, “It was like riding a big wave. Everyone just had this feeling that this is the moment we’ve been waiting for, for twenty-six years.”

Skeptical observers suggested that Tsikhanouskaya was merely the beneficiary of unusual circumstances. “The people would have supported whoever was in her place,” Igor Ilyash, a journalist in Minsk, told me. “She was a symbol.” But, to many Belarusians, her distaste for politics made her a more effective vehicle for yearning and anger. Tsikhanouskaya suggested that the right political model for the moment was not an intellectual like Václav Havel, the Czech playwright turned President, but a relatable victim of historical circumstance, like [Princess Diana](#). “She connected with ordinary people,” she said.

The country and the candidate were remaking themselves at the same time, Zaretskaya suggested. “When your qualities are not necessary, they are sleeping inside you,” she told me. “Sviatlana, and many Belarusians, are now in exactly this position, when the times and the conditions demand the special qualities that we’ve been hiding.” Tsikhanouskaya’s role in the campaign required extraordinary resilience. Supporters of the regime threatened to kill her, and to harm her children. Terrified, she sent the kids to Lithuania, where her mother met them. Police arrested volunteers for the campaign, and eventually its manager, Maryia Maroz. “Many times, she told us, ‘I am quitting, I cannot do this,’ ” one of her aides, Anton Radnyankou, recalled.

As the election neared, Tsikhanouskaya and her aides sensed that a nation where civic engagement had been effectively outlawed was turning suddenly political. Andrei Vaitovich, a reporter who had been working abroad for French media, returned home and was struck by what had happened. “The only thing anyone was talking about was the election,” he told me. “That’s when I knew that the country was changing.”

After Lukashenka declared victory, demonstrations spread from Minsk to cities and towns across Belarus. The government shut down the Internet and deployed riot police, many of them wearing large round helmets that hid their faces; protesters called them “cosmonauts.” Luponosov, the former investigator, told me that the Ministry of the Interior ordered police to “beat and maim” the protesters. (In the next twelve months, they would make as many as thirty-five thousand arrests, carrying detainees away in black vans.)

Tsikhanouskaya urged the authorities to show restraint, but she felt increasingly responsible for the people who agitated on her behalf. With protests roiling, reporters pressed her about her plans to try to contain the violence. “The situation is starting to get out of control,” she snapped. “My appearance—would it strengthen the protests or would it, on the contrary, calm them down? I don’t know. I don’t know what to do next.”

When Tsikhanouskaya arrived in Lithuania, she was met by border guards and taken to a safe house in Vilnius. She had nothing with her except her clothes and a small bag containing her son’s spare hearing aid. She felt that

she had abandoned the protesters and assumed that they would shun her. “People believed in me,” she told me. “I felt like I had betrayed them.”

But several of her aides followed her across the border, and, when Tsikhanouskaya saw that the demonstrations were carrying on, she gathered herself. Within days, she had declared herself the leader of democratic Belarus. “I am ready to take responsibility and act as a national leader during this period so that the country calms down and enters a normal rhythm,” she said in a video message.

Tsikhanouskaya had no money, no government, and almost no staff, but sympathizers began showing up to help. One of them was Valery Kavaleuski, a former Belarusian diplomat who was living in northern Virginia and working for the World Bank. He told me that, when Tsikhanouskaya arrived in Vilnius, he decided to quit his job and join her, living on his savings until money for salaries could be raised.

Tsikhanouskaya began touring the capitals of Europe, demanding that leaders withhold recognition of Lukashenka. In Berlin, meeting Chancellor Angela Merkel, she wore a navy suit, borrowed at the last minute from a Belarusian stylist in Vilnius. “She didn’t have any clothes,” the stylist, Tatiana Chaevskaya, told me. “We had to tell her that a head of state couldn’t wear the same outfit every day.”

Her first weeks in exile amounted to a triumph of appearance over reality. “It was smoke and mirrors,” Kavaleuski said. She created a stream of images—in Berlin with Merkel, in Brussels with top E.U. officials, in Vilnius with the French President, Emmanuel Macron—that made her look like a European leader. On September 8, 2020, she warned the Council of Europe that “countries or parties that make deals with Mr. Lukashenka do so at their own risk.” Ten days later, the European Parliament voted to deny recognition to Lukashenka’s government after his term ended in November, effectively declaring Tsikhanouskaya the lawfully elected President of Belarus.

Soon after the election, at a construction conglomerate in the city of Hrodna, a worker called out to a gathering of several hundred colleagues, “Don’t be shy, raise your hand—who voted for Alexander Lukashenka? Nobody gets hurt.” A couple of executives raised their hands. Then the worker asked,

“Who voted for Tsikhanouskaya?” A sea of hands went up, as the crowd roared.

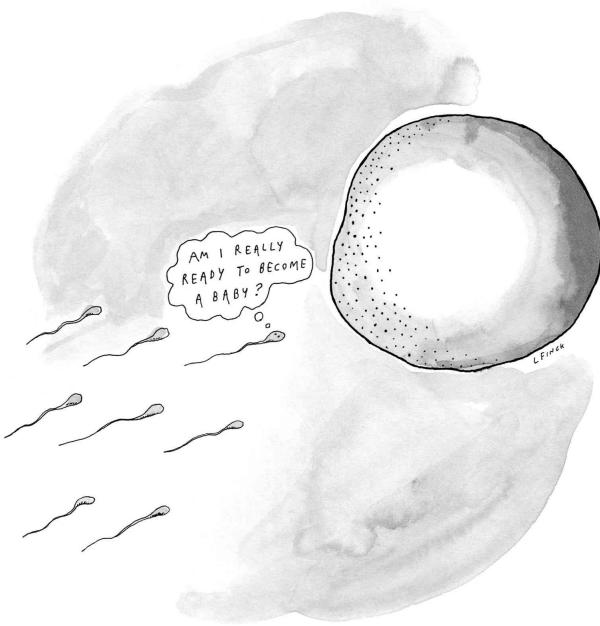
Maryia Maroz believed that in the days around the election Lukashenka’s regime was close to collapse. “The system was shaking,” she said. When she was in prison, she told me, her guards brought her coffee and let her listen to the radio. “I think we were close.”

Even after the demonstrations subsided, residents of Minsk’s Central District continued to tend a small courtyard that they had decorated with art work and white and red ribbons. The locals called it Change Square. Residents congregated, singing protest anthems and discussing how to make their communities better. “Before the protests, people had never been active in their neighborhoods. People did not even talk to each other,” a resident named Olga Kucherenko told me. “For the first time, people were talking about how to fix things in their lives, like how to improve a playground. And the government was opposing it.”

One night in early November, several agents of the regime appeared at Change Square, wearing civilian clothes and masks, and started to cut down the ribbons. Residents asked them to stop. Kucherenko’s cousin, an Army veteran and aspiring artist named Raman Bandarenka, came down from his apartment to join his neighbors. A confrontation ensued, and the masked men pulled him into a van and sped away.

Five hours later, Bandarenka’s mother, Elena, heard her doorbell ring. It was a group of officials, saying that her son had been taken to a nearby hospital. When she arrived, he was in a coma, brain-dead. A doctor told her that Raman had been beaten, and that the back of his head had been crushed. “The doctor told us it was a professional job,” Kucherenko told me.

Bandarenka was one of at least six civilians killed by security forces; hundreds, perhaps thousands, had been hospitalized for injuries. Thousands more were beaten, and some were raped with nightsticks and tortured as well. No one in the police was arrested or charged.



Cartoon by Liana Finck

In September, as Maria Kalesnikava, Tsikhanouski's campaign partner, was walking near her home, masked men forced her into a van. They took her and two other campaign officials to the border with Ukraine, handed them their passports, and told them to cross. Instead, Kalesnikava ripped up her passport and climbed out the car window. "I won't leave the country," she declared. The agents, rattled, dragged her back to Minsk, where they put her in jail and charged her with trying to overthrow the government. She was sentenced to eleven years in prison. Maxim Znak, the lawyer who had accompanied Tsikhanouskaya to the election commission, was given ten.

As the upheaval continued, the spectre of Russian intervention loomed. Lukashenka and Putin spoke regularly, with Putin hinting that he would invade if necessary to keep Belarus from slipping out of the Russian orbit. In late August, he raised the possibility of sending Russian forces in to help the government. "For now, there is no such necessity, and I hope there won't be," he said.

By the time of my visit to Minsk, this past July, Lukashenka had reasserted control. The remaining members of the opposition were presumed to be under surveillance. One night, I met a Western diplomat, one of a few left in the country, at a public park, where we sat on a bench and talked. After

about twenty minutes, the diplomat suggested we get up: “There’s a guy on the other side of the park who has been watching us the whole time.”

The country’s journalists were even more embattled. One of them told me during my visit that she left home every morning carrying a “prison pack,” a knapsack with provisions in case she was arrested: a toothbrush, socks, underwear. As I was arranging to meet Yahor Martsinovich, the editor of *Nasha Niva*, one of the country’s leading newspapers, he disappeared into police custody. Most of the journalists I spoke to believed that it was only a matter of time before they were taken in, but none seemed willing to censor themselves—or were even necessarily convinced that it would make them safer if they did. “As a journalist in Belarus, your freedom no longer depends on what you publish. It depends only on whether they want to take you,” Pavel Sviardlou, the editor of the independent broadcaster Euroradio, told me. “This situation makes us free.”

One target of the regime was an organization called Viasna, which for years has documented violations of civil and human rights. I rode with the deputy chairman, Valentin Stefanovich, as he went to meet a man whose brother had been killed in police custody. Four Viasna activists were already in prison, and Stefanovich was anticipating a full-scale crackdown. “I think they intend to clean the country of all independent media and civil-society groups,” he said.

As we drove, Stefanovich detailed the government’s recent actions—six hundred political prisoners detained, hundreds of people beaten or tortured in custody, thousands fired from their jobs. “Survival is the most important thing for Lukashenka,” Stefanovich said, “because he can’t imagine his life without power.”

Evidence suggested that political prisoners were being widely mistreated. “This whole year, they’ve been trying to make me regret what I did,” Maria Kalesnikava, the campaign manager, wrote to the BBC from her cell. “I’ve been in hot and then cold cells, without air or light, without people. A whole year with nothing.”

With the protests suppressed, Lukashenka moved to expunge any trace of dissent; he even purged school curricula of books by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

and by [Svetlana Alexievich](#), the Nobel Prize-winning author who was one of the revolt's leaders until she fled the country, last year. In May, Lukashenka ordered a fighter jet to force down a Ryanair passenger plane, in order to arrest a journalist named Raman Pratasevich and his girlfriend. Pratasevich was beaten in jail and forced to confess in a surreal televised interview.

Lukashenka also launched a campaign against opponents outside the country. One tactic was to use Interpol, the international police agency, to gather intelligence on dissidents living in exile and to issue arrest warrants on trumped-up charges. European governments picked up at least two such people, but released them once they realized the mistake. Lithuanian officials told me that they were worried about Tsikhanouskaya's security; the location of her home was a secret, and not even her closest aides had been there. In August, a Belarusian activist helping dissidents flee the country was found hanging from a tree in Kyiv.

In July, just after I left Belarus, security forces embarked on a nationwide crackdown of civil society, closing fifty N.G.O.s in a single day—ranging from groups trying to protect human rights to organizations helping the disabled. Police arrested several people I had interviewed, including Stefanovich, Viasna's deputy chairman. In the past, Belarusian dissidents were usually released after a few days or weeks, but this time was different; family members were not allowed to visit detainees, and were given no information about charges against them. Stefanovich's wife took her children to Georgia. "We are thinking it will be a long time," she told me.

When the European Union stiffened economic sanctions, Lukashenka gave a rambling hour-long speech, in which he accused the West of conspiring to topple his government. "Look at the unprecedented pressure on the country today, how they want to aggressively teach us a lesson, put us in our place, provoke us using the dirtiest methods and techniques. All this escalation, impotent rage, and envy arise from their failure to stage an insurrection and coup d'état in Belarus," he said.

Cut off from the E.U., Lukashenka worked to strengthen his ties to Russia. In September, he and Putin met for the sixth time in a year; Putin announced that he would lend Belarus six hundred million dollars, promised to maintain

the flow of cheap natural gas, and said that the two countries had agreed to more closely align their tax and legal systems.

When reporters for Belarusian state-media outlets began resigning, Russian journalists arrived to replace them. In September, the two countries undertook a military exercise that involved two hundred thousand troops; the armies simulated a *NATO* invasion and a Russian-led response. The Russian military opened two joint training centers in Belarus, putting Lukashenka's security forces increasingly under Russian control. "Lukashenka knows he is a hostage," Latushka, the former minister, said.

Many Belarusians worried that Putin had his eyes on valuable state-owned assets, including oil refineries and potash-processing plants, which Russian oligarchs have expressed interest in buying. According to a former senior member of the Lukashenka regime, a joint team of Russian and Belarusian officials has begun meeting regularly to make important decisions on the country's security.

Western officials told me that a formal merger of the two countries was unlikely, if only because such a move could ignite a popular rebellion. "He's made himself much more vulnerable to pressure from Russia," a second Western diplomat in Minsk told me. By crushing dissent, Lukashenka seemed to be mimicking his Russian benefactor, and thus obviating the need for Russian intervention.

Latushka told me that Putin had tacitly approved the scheme to funnel migrants to Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. (A Kremlin spokesperson denied this, saying, "President Putin and Russia have nothing to do with the migrant crisis.") In late spring, the first of thousands of Iraqis began arriving in Minsk, lured by a promise that they would be allowed to migrate to Europe. During my visit, I found myself waiting out a downpour under an awning with a middle-aged man dressed in a cheap suit. He told me that he was from Iraq. When I asked how he'd come to be in Belarus, he grew flustered—"I have to go"—and hurried off into the rain.

European officials told me that the Iraqis were driven in government buses to the Lithuanian and Polish borders, where they were ushered across. By late summer, hundreds of migrants a day were crossing the frontiers.

“Lukashenka has weaponized migration,” Gabrielius Landsbergis, the Lithuanian foreign minister, told me. The migrants were obliged to pay local officials as much as five thousand dollars apiece to reach the border, so it seemed likely that people inside the regime were profiting. On Lukashenka’s watch, some six thousand migrants crossed into neighboring countries.

Tsikhanouskaya, following the developments from outside Belarus, argued that the scheme was merely a symptom of Lukashenka’s ruthlessness. “Supposing this abuse of migrants is somehow stopped, do you really believe the regime’s threats beyond its borders will end there?” she asked the European Parliament. “Do not let the regime manipulate migrant smuggling in order to obscure the human-rights catastrophe inside the country. Both Belarusians and migrants are now hostages of the regime.”

In November, under diplomatic pressure, Lukashenka stopped openly encouraging migrants to come to Belarus, and began sending some home. But there were indications that he was merely pausing his operation; thousands of migrants remained in Belarus. “They have dialled it down,” the second Western diplomat told me. “But they could dial it back up whenever it suits them to do so.”

This summer, Tsikhanouskaya came to New York’s Battery Park and addressed several hundred Belarusian Americans. The Statue of Liberty stood in the background; a sea of red-and-white 1918 flags waved in the crowd. “Over the past year, your actions have directly shaped the events unfolding in Belarus,” she said. “Your demonstrations, your conversations with journalists and politicians, your assistance through solidarity funds—even from so far from home, you are participating fully in the life of our common motherland.”

Her words, though true enough, could have been uttered by nearly any exile leader in the past century. In the history of political exile, leaders forced to flee their countries have often been able to expect two things: they will usually be safe, and they will nearly always be irrelevant. After Poland was captured by Communists, the Polish government in exile met in London drawing rooms for fifty years, but it took a group of dockworkers in Gdansk to spark a revolution. A handful of exiles have returned to power, including Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, in Iran; Ho Chi Minh, in Vietnam; and Lenin,

in Russia. But few of them effected change without the military at their backs, and even fewer established democracies.



"My design aesthetic is ostentatious minimalism."
Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

Tsikhanouskaya and her aides are determined to avoid the fate of similarly situated groups before her. "We are not a government in exile," she said. Her organization occupies a single floor of an office building in Vilnius, with about thirty employees; exiled Belarusians from Poland, Ukraine, and Lithuania meet with her staff regularly. She said that her team was trying to build a permanent opposition inside Belarus. Her staff is in regular contact with dozens of people; if, as many expect, Lukashenka calls a nationwide referendum to reaffirm his rule, they are talking about organizing a campaign of protest votes. Allies of Tsikhanouskaya's circulate dissident literature, including the weekly *Honest Newspaper*; at least a million copies have been distributed in Belarus. I saw one in the stairwell of the building where I stayed in Minsk, stuck to the wall with decals of the 1918 flag.

There are limits to what Tsikhanouskaya's movement can accomplish from afar. "If you want a beautiful picture—of demonstrations, of protesters—we can call people to the streets," she said. "But how many victims will it cost us?" Yet, she added, even a regime as repressive as Lukashenka's had limited means available to control a population that it had already lost.

“Lukashenka can’t keep on arresting people anymore,” she said. “Now, when he arrests one person, two more step forward.”

The journalist Igor Ilyash, a veteran of many police detentions, believes that Lukashenka’s government has entered a long period of instability. “It can keep its power now only by violence,” he told me. “History shows it’s almost impossible to continue with force and violence for very long.”

At times, the regime’s efforts to assert control seem merely to demonstrate how little power it has. After the protests, the phrase “Long live Belarus” was banned. But during my visit I heard people call it out on the street, signalling their allegiance. By contrast, in two weeks in Belarus, I saw just one public display of support for the regime: a middle-aged man, wearing shorts and dress shoes, evidently drunk, wandered up to my café table in Minsk. “Long live Lukashenka,” he said, and then belched and wandered off.

The most important pillar of Lukashenka’s government is the security forces. At the height of the protests, some officers quit in frustration; a few threw their uniforms in the trash. But there was little other visible evidence of dissent. Aliaksandr Azarau, who until two years ago was a senior official in the Ministry of the Interior, told me that police officers had been given generous bonuses to keep going. The institution is still largely intact, he said: “Most people in the security forces have not made up their minds.”

In September, I was invited to sit in on a video conference of local leaders inside Belarus. But, by the time of the meeting, about a dozen of the leaders had been arrested. Others had fled the country; they suspected that the regime had placed a mole among them. “People are quite scared,” one of the participants on the call told Tsikhanouskaya. “They are packing their suitcases.”

Some opponents of Lukashenka have attempted a more forceful response. In the past six months, Belarusian officials have arrested several people who had smuggled weapons into the country, in the hope of setting off a revolt. Vadim Prokopiev, an exile leader who lives in Warsaw, told me that he thought Tsikhanouskaya’s measured approach was doomed. “I am pushing her and pushing her,” he said. “But they prefer talking.”

A senior official in the Biden Administration told me that it was difficult to foresee an early end to the Lukashenka regime. In July, Tsikhanouskaya visited the White House; the U.S. tightened sanctions soon afterward, and did so again this month. But more assertive measures to remove Lukashenka seem likely to provoke a regional confrontation. Putin will not relinquish his influence in Belarus without a fight. “She needs to think about the long game,” the official said.

Tsikhanouskaya said that she had no wish to confront Russia; she hoped that some accommodation would be possible. Still, she conceded that it was Europe, not Russia, that could provide a vision of the country’s future: “Europe’s experience in guaranteeing the rule of law, human rights, an independent judiciary, and free media are of primary importance to the new, reborn Belarus.”

The political situation makes fund-raising difficult. Tsikhanouskaya’s group gets very little money from supporters in Belarus, where the government has tracked down donors and put them in prison. The team’s initiatives are supported by Western N.G.O.s and by private contributors, mostly Belarusians living abroad; the Lithuanian government also provides security, office space, and housing. But, if the group accepts money directly from the U.S. government, it risks being depicted in Belarus as a puppet of the West.

Lukashenka’s regime already seems determined to smear Tsikhanouskaya. In July, Grigory Azarenok, an anchor on state-owned TV, called her a “mustached cow” and a “dastardly woman” with “a rotten stench.” Of Tsikhanouskaya’s visit to the White House, Azarenok said, “Such boot-licking, such servility, such joy.” He cut to scenes of bombing in Ukraine, which he falsely claimed were caused by Americans—a prelude to what Tsikhanouskaya’s efforts would bring.

Despite the odds, the opposition professed optimism that Lukashenka couldn’t continue such intense repression indefinitely. “When he begins to reform, it will all unravel,” Franak Viačorka, a political adviser, told me. I found a similarly upbeat mood inside Belarus, even after waves of arrests. Many opposition members cited the example of Havel, who was a political prisoner six months before becoming President. Among the hopeful was

Olga Kucherenko, whose cousin Raman Bandarenka had been killed in police custody. “We’re going to win,” she said.

Last month, I spoke to Tsikhanouskaya again. When I asked if she could picture herself fighting the Lukashenka regime five years from now, she recoiled. “I can’t imagine this,” she said. “That my children will go five years without their father—absolutely not.”

Lukashenka seems to have settled in for the long haul. With the possibility of open protests cut off, Tsikhanouskaya said that it was impossible to predict how long he could hold on: “It could last a long time—many months.” But she maintained that his administration was mortally wounded, its legitimacy beyond repair. “The regime has cracked, and the crack is widening. Processes are going on inside the regime that we cannot see.” With the opposition shut out of the homeland, the decisive blow might come from within. “The regime is trapped by its own actions—there’s no one left to blame,” she said. “Someone inside the inner circle may decide that the time has come.” ♦

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- [Half a Billion in Bitcoin, Lost in the Dump](#)

For years, a Welshman who threw away the key to his cryptocurrency stash has been fighting to excavate the local landfill.

By [D. T. Max](#)

Content

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If things had gone just a bit differently, James Howells might today be as rich as the Queen of England. The decisive moment, he now thinks, occurred one evening in August, 2013, when he was twenty-eight and at home with his family in Newport, a small city on the Welsh coast. Howells and his partner, Hafina, were raising three children, and family trips—like the one that they had taken to Disneyland Paris—were fun but exhausting. So he had made plans to treat himself to what he called a “lads’ vacation”: a trip with friends to a resort in Cyprus. Howells, an engineer who helped maintain emergency-response systems for various communities in Wales, often worked from home, and that night he decided to neaten up his office. As he recently recalled to me, “The thought process was: I’m going to be drinking every day. I don’t want to be on a hangover and cleaning this mess up when I get back.”

At around 10:30 P.M., Hafina peeked into Howells’s office. “She wanted to have a fag with me,” he remembers. “The office area, with the window open, was the smoking zone.” She chatted with Howells as he chose which items to discard. “I’m chucking this out, putting this back in—bunch of cables, bunch of paperwork, broken mouse.”

In a cluttered desk drawer, he found two small hard drives. One, he knew, was blank. The other held files from an old Dell gaming laptop, including e-mails, music that he’d downloaded, and duplicates of family photographs. He’d removed the drive a few years earlier, after he’d spilled lemonade on the computer’s keyboard. Howells grabbed the unwanted hard drive and threw it into a black garbage bag.

Later, when the couple slid into bed, Howells asked Hafina, who dropped off their kids at day care each morning, if she would mind taking the trash to the dump also. He remembers her declining, saying, “It’s not my fucking job—

it's *your* job." Howells conceded the point. As his head hit the pillow, he recalls, he made a mental note to remove the hard drive from the bag. "I'm a systems engineer," he said. "I've never thrown a hard drive in the bin. It's just a bad idea."

The next day, Hafina got up early and took the garbage to the landfill after all. Howells remembers waking upon her return, at around nine. "Ah, did you take the bag to the tip?" he asked. He told himself, "Oh, fuck—she's chucked it," but he was still groggy, and he soon fell back asleep.

In Cyprus, Howells didn't have as much fun as he had expected. His mates noticed that he wasn't drinking his share, and upon returning to Wales, he told me, he was "in a shit mood, and couldn't figure out why."

A couple of months later, Howells realized what was bothering him. He came across [a BBC news story](#) about a twenty-nine-year-old Norwegian man who had just used profits he'd made as a bitcoin holder to put a down payment on a four-hundred-thousand-dollar apartment in Oslo. When plans for bitcoin were first introduced, in 2008, it was one of a number of new cryptocurrencies being touted as substitutes for government-issued money. Initially, most people had treated bitcoin as a curiosity, but it had since risen significantly in value, and was now starting to find acceptance as something you could actually use for buying and selling things.

Howells had known about bitcoin from the start. Almost five years earlier, shortly after the cryptocurrency was developed, he'd learned about it in an online forum. The Bitcoin system, which operated by linking individual computers together to form a vast, secure network, appealed to him immediately. It reminded him of two applications he'd liked: [Napster](#), the rogue service for sharing music files, and [SETI@home](#), which allowed users to combine the power of their computers to search for extraterrestrial life. Howells downloaded free software that made it possible to acquire bitcoin. He would lend his computer's processing capabilities to help the Bitcoin system create a permanent record of network transactions, and, in return, the program would let him keep some currency. A private key—a unique chain of sixty-four numbers and letters—granted him exclusive access to his bitcoin stash. He soon set his gaming laptop to spend the overnight hours "mining bitcoin," as the process came to be called.

The first time he mined, Howells's computer was one of only five on the network. He told me, "I know this because when you're in a Bitcoin network it tells you, on the bottom right, 'You are connected to x amount of nodes,' or machines." He mined at night, off and on, for a couple of months. But the mining took a lot of processing power, causing the laptop to overheat. The computer's whirring fan began to irritate Hafina, and he decided to stop. "It wasn't worth putting up a fight," he remembers. The coins had no value at the time, and there was no reason to think that they ever would. "It was just mining for fun," he said. "It was an experiment." The electricity required to keep his computer going had cost him about ten pounds.

Howells threw himself into other side projects. The son of a carpenter, he was handy. For his children, he turned an upstairs room into an elaborate replica of Minecraft, the video game. The kids loved it, he told me.

Half a year later, the spilled lemonade destroyed his gaming laptop. He transferred some of the hard drive's contents to a new iMac, but he did not bother with the bitcoin folder. "There was no Bitcoin version on Apple at the time, so there was no reason," he recalls. He then extracted the hard drive and put it in the desk drawer.

According to the BBC article, the Oslo man had bought the apartment partly by selling a thousand bitcoins, which were then worth about a hundred and seventy thousand dollars. By the time Howells ended his mining project, he had accumulated eight thousand coins—and in the fall of 2013 that stash was worth about \$1.4 million. Howells's salary at his engineering job was a small fraction of that, and he sometimes had to get up at 3 A.M. and travel long distances to make repairs to a town's emergency-response system. Panicked, he checked his desk drawer. In it, he found the empty hard drive—not the one with the bitcoin folder.

Bitcoin was first proposed in October, 2008, by [Satoshi Nakamoto](#)—a pseudonym, for one person or perhaps several. No central bank or organization would control bitcoin, a purely digital currency. The total amount of money minted would be capped at twenty-one million coins and could not be changed.

Digital currencies had been proposed before, but none had truly taken off: they either had flaws in their technical design or did not find enough early adopters. Nakamoto framed his proposal, with its focus on decentralization and the limit on the total amount of bitcoin, as a shrewd response to the financial crisis of 2008. Central banks had tried to ward off a depression by flooding their economies with money, a move that had spurred business activity but had also created the potential for runaway inflation to decrease the value of people's savings. Nakamoto declared that bitcoin could correct this flaw. In an early crypto forum, he [explained](#) that a fundamental drawback of conventional currencies was that their buying power depended on the whims of the government that backed them: "The central bank must be trusted not to debase the currency, but the history of fiat currencies is full of breaches of that trust."

Howells read Nakamoto's proposal soon after it was posted. He was already skeptical of power and those who had it. The neoliberal years had not been good for Howells's generation in Wales: the coal mines had closed, reducing trade at the port, and Newport lacked jobs in other industries. "The elders own all the property," Howells told me. "People of my generation just leave." The bailout of big banks after the 2008 crash taught him that "the dollar, the euro, and the pound are scams—the whole *system* is a sham." He was an ideal apostle for the techno-utopianism of the Bitcoin system. "Me and Satoshi in 2009 both had the same vision," Howells said.

Many of the first people who actually used bitcoin as money embraced the concept for a different reason: cryptocurrency transactions were untraceable. If someone paid you in bitcoin, you could evade taxes. If you bought drugs with bitcoin, the money you spent couldn't be tied to you. Governments shut out of the global banking system could use bitcoin to buy weapons on the black market. George Bernard Shaw once wrote, "Money is not made in the light." Bitcoin, then, was generated on a moonless night, at the bottom of a deep pit. As Nakamoto speculated in [an early post](#), bitcoin "would be convenient for people who don't have a credit card or don't want to use the cards they have, either don't want the spouse to see it on the bill or don't trust giving their number to 'porn guys.' "



"I brought a book just in case chatting with you turns out not to be the right option for me."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Illicit activity likely helped bitcoin appreciate in value, but Howells was a libertarian, not a mobster. He liked that the Bitcoin system was borderless and incorporeal, as the rest of his online life was. He had been on the Internet every day since his early teens. During the nineties, when Wales had a brief tech boom, his mother had worked in a computer-chip factory, and she now worked in a betting shop. An appetite for a volatile cryptocurrency was in his blood. Though he had no plans to spend the bitcoin he mined, he was pleased that the government couldn't track how much of it he had. On the Bitcoin network, a central record, called a blockchain, certifies the authenticity of all the coins that have been mined—close to nineteen million to date—but doesn't reveal who has them. Imagine a list of all the world's pieces of gold which lacks the names of their owners.

The downside to the system's anonymity is that bitcoin is a tempting target for thieves. Just as Silas Marner tries to insure that nobody knows where he's stashed his gold, bitcoin owners spend a lot of time insuring that no one can hack their fortunes. Some prefer to deposit their private keys in offline wallets—storage devices that are kept disconnected from the Internet—where they're more secure from hackers.

Bitcoin is also easy to lose. Conventional money comes full of safeguards: paper currency is distinctively colored and has a unique feel; centuries of

design have gone into folding wallets and zippered purses. And once your money is deposited in a bank you have a record of what you own. If you lose your statement, the bank will send you another. Forget your online password and you can reset it.

The sixty-four-character private key for your bitcoin looks like any other computer rune and is nearly impossible to memorize. It can also be difficult to remember where you have stored the key. On Reddit, one user, writing in 2019, complained that he had lost ten thousand bitcoins because his mother had thrown out his old laptop. Another early crypto user was irritated by a clicking sound on his hard drive and unthinkingly tossed it out. It contained a file with access to fourteen hundred bitcoins, which he had bought for twenty-five dollars.

From the start, users debated whether it was a feature or a bug of the system that bitcoin was so easy to lose. In a 2010 [post](#) to an online forum, a newbie named virtualcoin complained that bitcoin seemed risky. “If somebody’s losing his wallet (e.g. due to disk crash) he’s not able to get back his coins, is he?” the poster wrote. “They’re lost forever?” A more experienced owner named Laszlo Hanyecz, a Web developer in Florida, asked what the big deal was—people lose their wallets in the ocean, and “it’s really not that significant.” Nakamoto weighed in a few hours later, and he was unapologetic: “Lost coins only make everyone else’s coins worth slightly more.”

According to Chainalysis, a firm specializing in cryptocurrency data, in Bitcoin’s first twelve years about three and a half million coins—nearly a fifth of the coins mined to date—were lost. Nakamoto himself dropped out of sight in 2011, and he has apparently not claimed his own bitcoin, which is now worth an estimated sixty billion dollars.

Howells remembers thinking it was a good thing that there was no way to access your bitcoin without a private key, because it meant that no one could seize your bitcoin, either. As he saw it, any compromise in this principle would have rendered bitcoin pointless, because that would allow the government and the banks to penetrate, and ultimately dominate, the system. “Bitcoin doesn’t work on bailouts,” he told me. “It is what it is. You’re unlucky, mate! Same as I now think of myself.”

When Howells had his uh-oh moment, his hard drive was already buried under other people's trash. He wanted to go to the dump, but he was embarrassed—and afraid that nobody would believe his story. "Explaining Bitcoin at the time was *not* easy," he recalls. So for about a month he told no one, and watched helplessly as the bitcoin market soared, and with it the value of his lost holdings. He remembers saying to himself, "Oh, shit—this is turning into a bigger and bigger mistake." Around the time that his bitcoin became worth six million dollars, he confessed to Hafina. She was shocked to learn of the potential windfall, and encouraged him to go to the dump to see if anything could be done. When he told the manager there that he'd accidentally thrown away about four million pounds, he got a lot of head shakes, but eventually the manager took him to an elevated spot to survey the site: the mounds of churned earth, the depot where trash was mixed with soil, the grassed-over areas of retired landfill. Howells's heart sank: he saw ten to fifteen soccer pitches' worth of garbage. How could he possibly sift through it all?

But then the manager gave him some cheering news. Dumps were not filled randomly—like computers, they had an architecture. Newport had organized its dump into different cells: asbestos was deposited in one location, general household trash in another. It would not be impossible to pinpoint the area where the hard drive was buried, then disinter it. All he needed was the city's permission.

Howells went home and examined the dump on Google Maps. "There's only a certain amount of space," he told himself. "The amount of rubbish is finite. The object is findable." He was like the protagonist of Poe's story "The Gold-Bug," William Legrand, when he first cracks a coded message on a piece of parchment and sees a huge treasure within his grasp. However, Legrand needs only a shovel to start digging. When Howells called the city's refuse division and left a message asking to launch a search, nobody called back.

By now, he had asked in a Bitcoin forum if there was another way to get his private key without physically recovering his drive—even though, he told me, "I knew there wasn't." On Twitter and other sites, he fielded many amazed responses. To some, the ease with which the coins had come to Howells seemed like a fantasy or a story from an already distant past:

Nakamoto had designed bitcoin mining so that it required more and more computer power as the number of unmined coins decreased. “Did you really mine 7500 bitcoins in only a week?” one commenter asked. (Today, according to [a *Times* report](#), it would require an American home with average electricity consumption at least thirteen years to mine a single bitcoin.) Others were eager to lend a hand in recovering his drive. “Email me,” one wrote. “I’ll help you find your coins and make a movie about it, no cost to you and we’ll have a blast.” Another offered help in finding a team of psychics and “a few diggers who will do the dirty work.” A young woman at the University of Bristol wanted to make Howells a subject of her dissertation, in which she hoped “to investigate the ‘affective atmospheres of cryptocurrency.’”

A reporter from the *Guardian* got wind of Howells’s story. At first, Newport officials said that if they found the drive they would of course give it back, but later they adopted a more hard-line stance. How could Howells be sure that the hard drive had been placed in the landfill? In any case, they cautioned, the drive was likely unusable: it would have been destroyed en route to its noxious burial place. And, besides, the environmental risk of a retrieval would be too great.

Howells studied the technology behind hard drives and came to believe that the city officials were wrong. Although the covering of the drive was metal, the disk inside was glass. “It’s actually coated in a cobalt layer that is anti-corrosive,” Howells told me. He conceded that the hard drive would have been subjected to some compacting when it was layered in with soil and other trash. But, however rough the process, it might not have fractured the disk and destroyed the drive’s contents. Howells told me he’d learned that, in 2003, when the Columbia space shuttle plunged to Earth, one of its hard drives was “burned to a crisp,” but its data could still be retrieved. “They managed to recover ninety-nine per cent of the data,” he said. At one point, Howells reached out to the company that *NASA* had contracted with: Ontrack, a data-recovery firm based in Minneapolis. According to Howells, the company estimated that, if the disk hadn’t cracked, there was an eighty-to-ninety-per-cent chance that the data he needed could be salvaged. Howells’s bitcoin folder, which contained only his private key and the history of his transactions on the network, took up a tiny amount of disk

space—"just thirty-two kilobytes!" he told me. He was certain that, as long as that part of the disk was undamaged, he could recover his fortune.

As Howells tried to ready a plan to present to officials in Newport, the value of the cryptocurrency kept rising. More and more garbage piled on top of the hard drive, and the private key for his bitcoin sank deeper and deeper. In 2017, the city rejected his request to attempt an exhumation, citing an adviser's statement: "There appears to be no practical way that the drive could be recovered."

By the beginning of 2018, Howells had more than a hundred million dollars buried in the Newport dump. He kept pleading his case to city officials. He called his local member of the Welsh Parliament, in Cardiff, and of the British Parliament, in London. He thought of suing Newport, but such moves, commonplace in America, are rare in the United Kingdom. "I'm not a court person," Howells told me.

As a systems engineer, he knew how to organize a project, and through the years he assembled an increasingly sophisticated strategy for finding the hard drive. He met with potential investors, and eventually made arrangements with two European businessmen who agreed to support a recovery operation. Howells would get only about a third of the proceeds. He had hoped for a much higher sum; the money was his, after all. He recalls being told, "James, that's not how it works." He also consulted with companies that could perform targeted landfill removals. He became increasingly convinced that this was a realistic path. ("They probably move more dirt in one season of 'Gold Rush: Alaska' than would be required for this operation," he told me.) This past January, he obtained a letter from Ontrack testifying that the drive was likely recoverable, and, after the Newport dump manager who'd explained to him the architecture of the landfill retired, Howells enlisted him as an expert.

Earlier this year, as the value of each bitcoin passed thirty-five thousand dollars, and Howells's holdings exceeded two hundred and eighty million dollars, he made a public offer to give Newport a twenty-five-per-cent cut of the proceeds, which could be earmarked for a [COVID-19](#) relief fund. The city did not accept his offer. "The attitude of the council does not compute, it just does not make sense," Howells complained to [the *Guardian*](#). Across the

Internet, commenters generally did not take a sympathetic view of Howells's situation. "Your loss fool," a poster on the Web site WalesOnline declared. "This is the ultimate definition of a 'Loser,'" another wrote, adding, "Wondering how this guy even survived into adulthood."

For Howells, it was a particularly cruel twist that he could not get a serious meeting with Newport officials despite having become arguably the city's most famous resident. He had thought that he was striking a blow for the little guy by mining bitcoin; now it was clear that, in Newport at least, little guys still had no power. "It's my own local team who are screwing me over!" he told me. "It's not bankers, it's not somebody from a far distance—it's the people I've grown up with and lived with."

This past May, Howells finally was granted a Zoom meeting with two city officials, one of whom was responsible for Newport's waste and sanitation services. She listened politely to his proposal to recover the bitcoin, at no cost to the city, but was not persuaded. As he recalls it, she informed him, "You know, Mr. Howells, there is absolutely zero appetite for this project to go ahead within Newport City Council." When the meeting ended, she said that she would call him if the situation changed. Months of silence followed. (A spokesperson for the city council told me that the official permit for the site does not allow "excavation work.")

Earlier this fall, I went to see Howells in Newport. We had been talking and texting for nearly a year, mostly on the messaging app Telegram. He had been by turns evasive and defensive, often coming across as an unyielding cyber libertarian. Tech shaped his world view. At one point, I asked him what he thought about the still novel *COVID-19* vaccines. He replied, "Something I've learnt from IT world . . . don't ever get the first version." This past January, when online brokerage companies restricted trading in GameStop stock in order to limit its price rise, Howells wrote to me, "It shows once and for all, in plain view of everyone watching, that the game (life) is completely and utterly rigged against the little guy." While we affably fenced, the value of a bitcoin rose to sixty-three thousand dollars in April, then slumped to thirty thousand dollars in July, then rose again.

On October 21st, the day I arrived in Newport, the value of a bitcoin had just hit a new peak: nearly sixty-seven thousand dollars. Howells met me by the

train station, wearing jeans and a crisp sweatshirt from Lonsdale. He drives a twenty-year-old BMW convertible that he bought before his bitcoin days. He is small and fit, with a skin-fade haircut and a light-brown half beard. The over-all effect was of concision and capability.

Moments after we sat down in a coffee shop, he pulled out his phone and showed me an app that he uses to track his holdings. Under the rubric “Unspent Coins” was the current value of his bitcoin: \$533,963,174. The previous day, he noted, he’d made twenty million dollars. We had Welsh pancakes, and he paid with cash. He explained, “Using credit cards is kind of enabling the opposition, if you see what I mean.”

We next went on a tour of Newport, and he told me about the city’s history of finding lost objects, a topic on which he was very well informed. As we drove across the River Usk, he mentioned that, in 2002, while the city was building a new arts center along its banks, workers had dug up a fifteenth-century Iberian sailing ship. The next day, we visited the local antiquities museum, where he showed me a cooking pot, likely belonging to a Roman soldier, that had been buried in a nearby field. From the shattered remains trickled a trail of coins. Howells compared them to his buried hard drive, then corrected himself: the coins were not like bitcoin at all. Sometimes, he explained, messengers and go-betweens had clipped off a bit of precious metal to repay themselves for the trouble of handling transactions. “People stole from the coins,” he said. The percentage of silver in Roman coins kept declining, setting off runaway inflation. “It’s similar to what the central banks are doing today,” he said. The widespread use of bitcoin, he assured me, would prevent a similar economic collapse.

We went to the dump. It was a bucolic site between an estuary and docks where, many years ago, ships had been loaded with Welsh coal. Derricks stood idle. To get to the landfill, we had to drive past some city offices —“the enemy,” Howells joked. Newport felt rickety: faded signs on small businesses, empty land where factories had once stood. As he drove, Howells mused on why the local officials had refused to allow him to dig up his hoard. He theorized that the dump had not been following environmental regulations, and that unearthing a section of landfill could embarrass the city and make it vulnerable to lawsuits. “Who knows how many dirty baby nappies are buried out there?” he asked.

He drove to the area where he had estimated that his hard drive would likely be. We passed through an open gate and stopped in a paved lot. This large, empty space looked like it was destined for some sort of industrial development by the city, but Howells wanted it to serve first as the command headquarters for his excavation project. We got out. “This plot of land is called B-21,” he said—a propitious number. “How many bitcoins exist? *Twenty-one* million!”

The sun was shining, an unusual occurrence in Wales in the fall. He pointed at an incline about a hundred feet away: at the top was a tufted hill with gauges inserted in it, to measure gas release. “The total area we want to dig is two hundred and fifty metres by two hundred and fifty metres by fifteen metres deep,” he told me, with excitement. “It’s forty thousand tons of waste. It’s not impossible, is it?”

After our visit to the dump, Howells invited me to his house, so that I could see a PowerPoint presentation he’d delivered, on Zoom, to the Newport officials. His project, he told me, was budgeted at five million pounds, but “there is scope for additional funding.” He calculated that a crew of twenty-five could complete the job in nine months to a year. As he spoke, his dog, Ruby, ran back and forth at our feet. Before he showed me the slides, we went down the street to buy beer and crisps at the nearest convenience store. He had equipped the cashier to accept bitcoin a few years ago, but it had not proved a success. “No one used it but me,” Howells said, shrugging. He gave the proprietor two pounds, and a pound that he owed from an earlier visit.

We returned to his house. On a wall of the living room, above his computer, was a gold-and-black Bitcoin clock. Its hands were stopped. Howells checked his holdings. He was down twenty-two million dollars that day, but he was unperturbed. “I expected this,” he said. “Whenever it shoots up so fast, you always have to expect it to come down a little. In fact, I expect it to come down a lot more.”

He loaded the PowerPoint presentation and pulled up a slide titled “Consortium Members.” An avatar of Howells was at the center, with a pickaxe and a bag of gold. Another slide depicted a flowchart of the process by which his hard drive would be returned to him: dump trucks would carry

items from the pit to a hopper, which would feed them onto a conveyor belt, from which “the material would pass under a large 3-D object detection system to identify all hard drive objects for manual retrieval.” The object detector was an X-ray machine outfitted with artificial-intelligence software. “It can spot a gun inside a truck!” Howells told me. All detritus would be loaded onto forty-ton trucks and then, according to Newport’s preference, would be reburied, incinerated, or sent to China.

I said that surely there was an easier way. The whole point of bitcoin was that it was immaterial. It was the eight thousand bitcoins that he was after, and they were the product of a computer algorithm. It was a matter of public record that someone owned them. Why not just run the system backward to the day that Howells mined his coins, and let him re-mine them?



“We are here to witness Jacob, who screamed at his Xbox for four hours just this morning, become a man.”
Cartoon by Mads Horwath

Howells recoiled. My proposal reminded him, he said, of the worst moment in cryptocurrency history. In 2016, the managers of a competing cryptocurrency platform, [Ethereum](#), agreed to restore the equivalent of sixty million dollars to one of the currency’s holders, after the money was stolen through a vulnerability in the system’s code. Howells had publicly disagreed with this decision at the time—he has been very active on crypto social-media sites—and when Ethereum’s holders split into two camps he sided with those who refused to acknowledge the rollback. Howells told me, with

considerable passion, “Just for the record, if somebody came along and said, ‘We can get your five hundred million by doing it this way,’ I’d say, ‘No, thank you.’ Because if they can do it that way for my coins, then they can do it that way for anyone’s coins. And then, if the government asked them to seize someone’s coins, guess what? They could do that as well.”

To my surprise, the loss of his hard drive had not dimmed Howells’s interest in cryptocurrency. He had set his father up with a small amount of crypto, and had even returned to mining for himself a few years ago, using a set of ten S9s—powerful processors that he ran day and night for a year and a half. But the economics of bitcoin mining had changed too much to make it worthwhile: the cost of the electricity exceeded the value of what he mined. The venture was another failure for him.

His notoriety as a bitcoin miner made him feel like a potential target: “Most intelligent people know that I’ve lost my coins, but the bozo local drug dealer with his friends, they don’t know that. That’s what worries me.” He explained that he kept the private keys for some of his crypto in offline wallets that were stored outside the house—or “off site,” as he put it. That way, if a thief broke in and demanded them, he wouldn’t be able to hand them over. This safety measure also prevented him from impulsively divesting himself of his holdings: to sell crypto, you need the relevant private key. Despite everything, he was still in it for the long haul.

Howells took me up to the second floor, to see where the hard drive had been. The dog patrolled the stairs. “Ruby was basically the kids’ dog,” he explained. “And when we split up, and they left, she didn’t want to take the dog.” It turned out that Hafina had left several years ago with their children. I asked him if the bitcoin loss had played a role in their breakup. “The truth?” he said. “I tried publicly, and within my normal life, not to blame her, but I think subconsciously I did.”

Looking around, you could see that time had stood still in the house since then. There was dust on everything. The Minecraft-inspired wallpaper he’d installed to please the children was peeling. The blue-and-white paint was chipping. The sheets on the bunk beds were crumpled and stale, as if the kids had left in a hurry and never come back.

He told me that his children were into other things now, and didn't visit anymore. He did not wish to discuss any romantic relationships that he'd had since Hafina left. "I try to keep to myself," he told me. "Women are costly."

Howells was no longer employed. For more than a year after the loss of the hard drive, he had continued at his job as a systems engineer. To make the workday tolerable, he'd limited how often he consulted the bitcoin-tracking app. He'd even tried to avoid driving routes that took him by the dump. But, eventually, the memory of the money he had thrown away overpowered his work ethic. "I kind of lost the motivation," he explained.

Earlier, he had told me that his favorite movies were "[Fight Club](#)" and "[The Matrix](#)"—typical fare for a young man with his beliefs. Now he mentioned the horror franchise "[Final Destination](#)," in which the smallest mistakes—a loose screw, a malfunctioning pool drain—lead to gruesome deaths. The lesson, he said, was "how one little thing can have a knock-on effect." He told me he could imagine a different past for himself, one without trouble. "For example, if this bitcoin thing hadn't happened, I'd probably still be with my ex-partner," he said. "And now married. Living a completely different life, as we would have done on our original trajectory." And if he had mined the bitcoin and *not* thrown away the drive? "We'd still be living happily ever after—living on a yacht. She was my girl, you know what I mean? We'd been together since I was twenty and she was twenty-two."

Hafina, who confirmed Howells's account of how the hard drive wound up in the dump, says that the relationship ended "not because of the bitcoin" but for other reasons.

Howells's efforts to recover the money had clearly taken a toll on him. Like Poe's Legrand, he was "infected with misanthropy, and subject to perverse moods of alternate enthusiasm and melancholy." He had spoken to the press mainly in the hope that it might help him secure his treasure, and he admitted to me that some of his interviews hadn't been entirely honest. To throw potential thieves off his trail, he said, he had fudged the number of bitcoins he had mined. (He showed me his bitcoin ledger, confirming that the true number was eight thousand.) When I insisted on confirming

information directly with his business associates, he resisted, claiming that I might leak the information to a rival excavation team.

If there is any lesson to be learned from people who missed out on a bitcoin payoff, it's that it's more emotionally healthy to try to let it go. In 2010, Laszlo Hanyecz, the Web developer in Florida, offered to pay ten thousand bitcoins to anyone who would sell him a couple of pizzas. Someone took him up on his offer, accepting the bitcoin and giving him two pies from Papa John's. The value of the bitcoin Hanyecz traded is now worth more than half a billion dollars. On the anniversary of the pizza incident, May 22nd, he often re-states his lack of regret to an increasingly skeptical public and press. Hanyecz likes to note that he was working on bitcoin back when Nakamoto was active, and that at one point he asked him whether the system would be endangered if many of the bitcoins were lost. Nakamoto replied, "Think of it as a donation to everyone." I asked Hanyecz if he had any advice for Howells. "Move on," he said. "No sense in dwelling on what-ifs." He added that it was not too late to buy fresh bitcoin and still make a handsome profit.

Hafina says that the loss of the bitcoin never bothered her. She noted, "It has not been a physical thing. Money has never meant that much to me."

Howells isn't yet capable of such an equanimous response to his bad luck. His frustration isn't about what he could buy with half a billion dollars, he explained. He hadn't mined the bitcoin to get rich: "It wasn't about making money. It was about *changing* money." In the eight years since the hard drive went into the dump, he's occasionally come across something expensive that he's coveted. Two months ago, for instance, the owners of Manchester United offered up for sale a portion of their shares. But he did not strike me as a greedy man. What he could not seem to shake was the allure of the money itself. A stupendous fortune had, against the longest odds, passed into his hands, and now it was gone.

Shortly after I returned home, Howells intensified his push for a response to his Zoom session with the Newport officials. In mid-November, he was told again that the project was too uncertain and the process too environmentally risky. "I appreciate that this is not the outcome you will have been hoping for," the city's chief executive wrote, with sedulous indifference. "But please

be assured that your request has been carefully and appropriately considered by the Council.”

Upset, Howells soon sent me a message: “Jesus, if they had just met with me in 2013, Newport City would now look like f *cking Bel Air.” It hurt him, he said, that the city didn’t care that he had Ontrack and the former site manager of the dump in his corner. For the first time in the year since I’d begun speaking to him, he wasn’t angry, elated, or determined: he seemed close to despair. I tried to keep his spirits up, saying that this was just Round One in a long-term fight. “More like the end of round #3 . . . and they are winning 6-10 every round,” he wrote. “I don’t really know what else to try.”

Within a few days, he had bounced back. He was going to propose a feasibility study to the city now, a proof of principle that a recovery operation could work. He told me that when he finally found his lost private key he planned to listen to Elgar’s “Pomp and Circumstance,” as a way of marking his graduation from bitcoin purgatory. In a text conversation, we had talked about the likelihood that the value of his stash would keep rising. “It’s not even a maybe,” he wrote. “Over time the price of bitcoin against fiat will only go ONE way, up.” He foresaw a battle that might last “2/5/10 years.” He anticipated his fortune being worth one billion dollars, then two billion, and eventually five billion. That might finally motivate the city. Or maybe more publicity would. Or legislative pressure. Or better technology. On November 8th, his bitcoin had just risen to a new high: nearly five hundred and fifty million dollars. “I still hope and feel it can be done,” he told me. “And as long as I feel that I will keep trying. Does that make sense?” ♦

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Backcourt Dept.

- Feral Bigs, Knicks Misery Levels, and Other Basketball Anthropological Studies

By [Jonathan Blitzer](#)

When the New York Knicks recently hosted the Houston Rockets, the worst team in the N.B.A., two superfans decided to visit Madison Square Garden. “The really bad teams are almost as rewarding as watching a LeBron game,” one of them, the artist Andrew Kuo, said. He wore a puffy vest, thick-framed black glasses, and a hat emblazoned with the words “The Starry Night.” Walking to their seats, his companion, the writer Ben Detrick (sweater, fraying khakis, gray sneakers), spotted a small shrine inside the arena and posed for a photo. It was a wall panel commemorating “the Dunk,” in 1993, when John Starks scored over Michael Jordan during a playoff game. (The Knicks, being the Knicks, won the game, then lost the series.) “The vibe here is like the basement of a middle school,” Detrick said, after paying his respects. Translation: still better than a Nets game.



Kuo and Detrick run a company called Cookies Hoops, which is like a support group for the basketball-obsessed. There’s a podcast, an apparel line, a newsletter, an annual three-on-three tournament, and a new book, called [“The Joy of Basketball.”](#) Written by Detrick and illustrated by Kuo, it’s an encyclopedia: part art book, part social commentary, part desk reference. The entries are alphabetical, listing players (“Durant, Kevin”), teams, and miscellaneous themes (“Feral Bigs,” “Ninja Headbands,” “Load Management”). Under “Knicks 4 Life,” there’s one of Kuo’s trademark

charts, plotting the emotions of Knicks fans on a color spectrum ranging from “Relying on hope/faith” (very bad) to “Raving under bridges” (kinda good). A full-page illustration depicts the Starks dunk, with the rim made to look like a halo. “The Knicks reflect the self-identity of the New Yorker—past and present,” Detrick writes. “It is basketball funneled through Fran Lebowitz, wearing Lugz boots and shoveling a bacon, egg, and cheese into her maw while smoking a loosie.”

Clutching beers, Kuo and Detrick settled in for a slow game. The Rockets turned the ball over eight times in the first nine minutes. “You can see the *idea* of an N.B.A. team,” Detrick said. Midway through the first quarter, Whoopi Goldberg appeared on the jumbotron. “It’s the patron saint of the Knicks,” Kuo said. Detrick lifted his sweater to reveal a T-shirt with Goldberg’s face on it. “Didn’t even plan that,” he added.

Knicks optimists expecting an easy night were proved wrong by halftime. The score was tied. “I don’t get mad anymore,” Kuo said. “Linsanity made me a better person.” This was a reference to an eleven-day stretch, in 2012, during which a Harvard-educated benchwarmer named Jeremy Lin stunned the city, and the league, with a bout of dominant play. (Lin, Jeremy: “Before each game there was a sense that, tonight, the spectacle would capsize in flames, and yet, for two weeks, it did not.”)

“Cookies” is hoops slang for a nifty steal—and a hallmark of the Kuo-Detrick backcourt. Several years ago, the two were arguing on Twitter about advanced metrics without actually having met. “I’m Ben, from the internet,” Detrick told Kuo when they finally did. They became friends on the nightlife circuit; Kuo was d.j.’ing and Detrick was working for the Styles section of the *Times*. In 2015, Detrick started a basketball podcast for Vice, but Kuo was wary. “I was a painter. I didn’t want anything to do with this,” Kuo said. “I had to come out as a basketball fan. I had to say, ‘I, too, am a baller.’ ”



"Whatever confidence I once had in him is now gone."
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Now, during a trip to the concession stand, they were discussing edits to the footage they'd shot from their recent tournament. Local businesses field teams (Williamsburg Pizza, Lucien), but the level of play can be suspiciously high (Ringers: European pros, Division 1 players, Royal Ivey). At this year's tournament, Kuo appreciated one group playing for the *Drunken Canal*, the downtown gossip paper: "They seemed hungover from the night before, but young enough to ball. Wiry shooters!" (The *Canal* says that only its managers were hungover.)

The Knicks, who had fallen behind, were starting to sober up. Kuo and Detrick shared concerns about the state of Nerlens Noel's right knee.

Detrick: "He looks hurt."

Kuo: "When the lockdown happened last year, my gallery closed. I made portraits of N.B.A. players to keep the lights on. I made one of Noel. He's our whole season!"

Organ music blared as the Knicks narrowed the deficit. "The spectre of Billy Joel really encompasses this whole place," Kuo said. With five and a half minutes left, Noel skied for a block; the ball wound up in the hands of the Knicks guard Alec Burks, who made a three to tie the game. "Will you guys

ever forget the night the Knicks came back against the Houston Rockets?" Kuo asked with a grin. Detrick replied, "We get to live through history." ♦

Books

- [What Was So Special About Greta Garbo?](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [Should We Believe the Stories of Men Mistaken for Gods?](#)

An enigma onscreen and off, the actress only magnified her celebrity by suddenly renouncing it.

By [Margaret Talbot](#)

Content

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Fame is so powerful that renouncing it can seem like the supreme power move. Celebrities who retreat from the public eye (Howard Hughes, J. D. Salinger, Prince) will always be legends, no matter what else they may be. Rumored comebacks tantalize. Paparazzi circle. The mystery deepens. In 1941, at the age of thirty-six, Greta Garbo, one of the biggest box-office draws in the world, stopped acting and, though she lived for half a century more, never made another film. For a star who, more than any other, “invaded the subconscious of the audience,” as Robert Gottlieb writes in his new biography, “[Garbo](#)” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), this was an abdication, a privilege of monarchical proportions. But it was also a decision made by one particular, peculiar person who had never been temperamentally suited to celebrity in the first place. There was a reason, beyond the exertions of the Hollywood publicity machine, that a single line she uttered in one movie —“I want to be alone”—became so fused with her image. What can look like a strategy for keeping the public interested can also be a sincere and committed desire to keep it at bay.

Few other performers have ascended as quickly to mononymic status as Garbo did—she started off the way most of us do, with a first and last name, but the first soon fell away, like a spent rocket booster, in the ballyhoo surrounding her. When she appeared in her first sound picture, “[Anna Christie](#),” the ads proclaimed, “Garbo talks!”; for her first sound comedy, “[Ninotchka](#),” it was “Garbo laughs!” Quite why she became such a phenomenon is a puzzle to which film critics and biographers keep returning. Garbo made only twenty-eight movies in her lifetime. (By comparison, [Bette Davis](#) made close to ninety, and Meryl Streep has made nearly seventy and still counting.) That slender output could be part of the mystique, compounded by her disappearing act. But Garbo had acquired an enigmatic mythos even before she ended her career—the Hollywood colony

treated her like royalty. Nor has it seemed to matter that only a handful of her movies are much watched or admired today.

What Garbo had to offer, above all, was her extraordinary face, at a time when the closeup, with its supercharged intimacy, its unprecedented boon to the emotional and erotic imagination, was still relatively new. Many of the shots credited as the first closeups were unlikely to have set hearts aflame, since they were often of objects—a shoe, a wrench. But filmmakers soon grasped the centripetal seductions of the human face in tight focus. The screenwriter and director Paul Schrader picks as a turning point the moment in a [D. W. Griffith](#) film from 1912, “Friends,” in which the camera comes in tight on Mary Pickford’s face, revealing her ambivalence about which of two suitors she should choose. “A real close-up of an actor is about going in for an emotional reason that you can’t get any other way,” Schrader [writes](#). “When filmmakers realized that they could use a close-up to achieve this kind of emotional effect, cameras started coming in closer. And characters became more complex.”

A face as beautiful as Garbo’s—the enormous eyes and deep-set lids, the way love or tenderness or some private, unspoken amusement unknit her brows in an instant, melting her austerity—was almost overwhelming when it filled the screen. She belonged, as Roland Barthes wrote, “to that moment in cinema when the apprehension of the human countenance plunged crowds into the greatest perturbation, where people literally lost themselves in the human image.” This is not to diminish her craft as an actress. But her acting was perhaps most effective in her silent films or in nonverbal scenes in talking pictures in which her face is the canvas for emotion. In the famous last shots of “[Queen Christina](#)” (1933), Garbo’s androgynous Swedish ruler stands at the prow of a ship bearing her away from her country; the body of her lover, killed in a duel over her, is laid out on the deck. Garbo stares into the distance, her face a kind of mask but no less eloquent for it. The film’s director, Rouben Mamoulian, had told her that she must “make her mind and heart a complete blank,” empty her face of expression, so that the audience could impose whatever emotions they wanted on it. The scene would then be one of those “marvelous spots,” he said, where “a film could turn every spectator into a creator.”

She was skilled at inciting such projection. More than one contemporary in Hollywood noted that her magic truly showed up only on celluloid, like a ghostly luminescence undetectable until the film was developed. Clarence Brown, who directed Garbo in seven films, recalled shooting a scene with her, thinking it was fine, nothing special, then playing it back and seeing “something that it just didn’t have on the set.” On her face, he said, “You could see thought. If she had to look at one person with jealousy, and another with love, she didn’t have to change her expression. You could see it in her eyes as she looked from one to the other.” Garbo herself, with a kind of arch, adolescent indifference, never wanted to look at the rushes. According to Brown, she’d watch only when sound pictures were played in reverse: “That’s what Garbo enjoyed. She would sit there shaking with laughter, watching the film running backward and the sound going *yakablam-yakablam*. But as soon as we ran it forward, she wouldn’t watch it.”

Much has been written about Garbo over the years, but Gottlieb, a former editor of this magazine, has produced a particularly charming, companionable, and clear-eyed guide to her life and work—he has no axe to grind, no urgent need to make a counterintuitive case for her lesser movies, and he’s generous with his predecessors. By the end of the biography, I felt I understood Garbo better as a person, without the aura of mystery around her having been entirely dispelled—and, at this point, who would want it to be?

The actress who came to embody a kind of unattainable elegance, who would someday wear sumptuous period costumes with a grace so offhand that they might have been rumpled p.j.’s, grew up in a cramped apartment with no indoor plumbing, in one of Stockholm’s most impoverished neighborhoods. She was born Greta Lovisa Gustafsson on September 18, 1905, to parents from rural stock. Her mother was, in Gottlieb’s description, “practical, sensible, undemonstrative”; her father, an unskilled laborer, was handsome, musical, and fun, and Greta adored him. But he was stricken by kidney disease, and Greta, the youngest of three children, made the rounds of the charity hospitals with him. “She never forgot the humiliations they endured as poor people in search of live-or-die attention,” Gottlieb writes. She was fourteen when he died, and she dropped out of school, leaving her with a lasting embarrassment about her lack of formal education. She went to work to help support the family, first at a barbershop, where she applied

shaving soap to men's faces, then at a department store, where she sold and modelled hats. She said later that she was "always sad as a child for as long as I can think back. . . . I did some skating and played with snowballs, but most of all I wanted to be alone with myself."

Alongside her shyness and her penchant for solitude, Greta harbored a passionate desire to be an actress. As a kid, she'd roam the city by herself, looking for theatres where she could stand at the stage door and watch the performers come and go. The first time Garbo was in front of the camera was at age fifteen, in an advertising film for the department store that employed her. Sweden had a thriving film industry, and she soon quit her day job to appear in a couple of movies. At Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theatre, to which she was accepted at seventeen, the young actors were instructed in a system that "scientifically" analyzed the semiotics of movement and gesture. Remarkably, some of her lecture notes from that time survive—she jotted down that "the head bent forward equals a mild concession" or a "condescending attitude," and that "the throwing back of the head" conveys "a violent feeling such as love." Barry Paris, an earlier [biographer](#) whom Gottlieb cites approvingly, notes that "Garbo in silent films would employ that system of gestural meaning to a high degree." She did so in her sound pictures as well. When she plays the Russian ballerina in "[Grand Hotel](#)" (1932), her body language is jittery, neurotic. Depressed, she lets her head droop as if it were simply too heavy to hold up; surprised by delight at the prospect of a romance with John Barrymore's gentleman jewel thief, she tosses her head back at giddy angles. It might have been laughable, but instead it's riveting.

In the spring of 1923, the gifted film director Mauritz Stiller approached the Stockholm theatre looking for actresses to cast in his new movie, an epic based on a Swedish novel, "[The Story of Gösta Berling](#)." Stiller came from a Jewish family in Finland; orphaned young, he had fled to Sweden to avoid being conscripted into the tsar's Army. Garbo and he were never lovers—Stiller preferred men—but their relationship was perhaps the most important in both of their lives. With his commanding height, his taste for luxury (full-length fur coats, a canary-yellow sports car), and his domineering style with actors, he had more than a touch of the Svengali. But Stiller believed in Garbo at a time when, as one veteran actress put it, Greta was "this little

nobody . . . an awkward, mediocre novice," and he loved her. (He also seems to have been the one who suggested replacing "Gustafsson" with "Garbo.")

When Hollywood came calling—in the form of Louis B. Mayer scouting European talent for M-G-M—it wasn't clear whether Stiller was the lure or Garbo; the director was certainly better known. In any case, Stiller made sure that they were a package deal (and, Gottlieb adds, later upped Garbo's pay to four hundred dollars a week, an "unheard of" salary for an untested starlet). The two sailed for the United States in 1925, arriving in the pungent heat of midsummer New York. (Garbo's favorite part of the visit seems to have been the roller coaster at Coney Island.) Then it was on to Hollywood by train.

The studio moguls gave an unknown such as Garbo a very short runway. M-G-M signed up the Swedish girl for two pictures, "Torrent" and "The Temptress," and, as the film historian Robert Dance writes in his smart new book, "[The Savvy Sphinx: How Garbo Conquered Hollywood](#)" (Mississippi), "if those first two films were unsuccessful financially M-G-M would not renew her contract for a second year." As it happened, both were hits. *Motion Picture* was among the industry outlets declaring her début "a complete success." ("She is not so much an actress as she is endowed with individuality and magnetism," it said.) Garbo became a fan favorite, even though she was almost uniquely averse to the kind of goofy stunts and mildly salacious photo shoots that other stars put up with. When she got to be as famous as Lillian Gish, she told one interviewer early on, "I will no longer . . . shake hands with prize-fighters and egg-and-milk men so they will have pictures to put in the papers." Instead, she worked with consummate portrait photographers who lit her gloriously. Eventually, her films were earning enough that she was able to negotiate an unusual contract, one that gave her the right to veto scripts, co-stars, and directors. And she shunned interviews so consistently that in the end her privacy became its own form of publicity.



"Looks like the kids have gone off to college. Let's grab a few years alone in the house before they decide to return."
Cartoon by Paul Karasik

Despite such badassery, she never really adjusted to her new country or her new destiny, at least beyond the movie set. What looked like carefully cultivated hauteur was partly the product of awkwardness, disorientation, and grief. She hardly spoke English when she first arrived, and, within a year, she learned that her beloved sister, an aspiring actress herself, had died back home. Stiller did not make a smooth adjustment to Hollywood and, in a blow to them both, he was not chosen to direct Garbo's first American picture. Garbo wrote to a friend in Sweden about how miserable she was: "This ugly, ugly America, all machine, it is excruciating." The only thing that made her happy, she claimed, was sending money to her family. At a young age, Gottlieb writes, she found herself "trapped in a spotlight extreme even by Hollywood standards," and with no psychological preparation for grappling with the kind of fame—movie stardom—that was new not just to her but to the world.

Athletic and physically restless, she soon took up the long nighttime walks that became a refuge; with her hat pulled low over her head, as it customarily was, she would have been hard to recognize. Stiller, who probably felt that his young protégée no longer needed him, returned to Sweden, where he died in 1928, at the age of forty-five, reportedly clutching a photograph of her. "He never seems to have resented her dazzling ascent to

fame,” Gottlieb writes, “only wanting her to be happy and fulfilled.” Back in Sweden to mourn him, Garbo went with his lawyer to the storehouse containing his possessions, where she walked around touching his belongings and murmuring about her memories. Gottlieb says that this episode must surely have been an inspiration for the scene in “Queen Christina” in which Garbo’s character moves around a room at an inn, touching all the inanimate reminders of the lover she will never spend another night with. On sets, she would sometimes talk softly to herself about what her mentor might have told her to do—one director she worked with referred to Stiller as “the green shadow.”

Garbo appears to have been emotionally stunted in certain ways, damaged by the loss of her father, her sister, and Stiller, abashed by the limitations of her English and her education. Though she had a sense of humor, she emerges in Gottlieb’s portrait as prickly, stubborn, and stingy. The sudden onslaught of celebrity made her more so. She never married, had children, or apparently wanted to do either; she had brief romantic relationships, mostly with men (the actor John Gilbert, probably the conductor Leopold Stokowski), and likely with women, too (the leading candidate seems to have been the writer Mercedes De Acosta, the “ubiquitous lesbian rake,” in Gottlieb’s words, who had affairs with Marlene Dietrich and many others). Her longest-lasting relationships were with friends, especially, as Gottlieb makes clear, those who helped her logistically, advised her devotedly, and steadfastly refused to spill the tea about her. In these, she had pretty good, if not unerring, taste. Probably the closest and most enduring friendship was with Salka Viertel, the intellectually vibrant woman at the center of L.A.’s remarkable community of refugee writers, composers, and filmmakers from Germany.

From the start of her Hollywood career in silent pictures, Garbo was often cast as a vamp—the kind of man-eater who shimmied and inveigled and home-wrecked her way through so many nineteen-twenties movies. (See the entire career of Theda Bara.) As Robert Dance notes, “Adultery and divorce were catnip to post World War I audiences.” The parts quickly bored her: “I cannot see any sense in dressing up and doing nothing but tempting men.” Off the job, she eschewed makeup and liked to dress in slacks, men’s oxford shoes, and grubby sweaters. Her closet was full of men’s tailored shirts and ties. She often referred to herself as a “fellow” and sometimes signed her

letters “Harry” or “Harry Boy.” The movie role she seems to have liked best was the learned cross-dressing seventeenth-century monarch Christina; it allowed her to stride around in tunics, tight-fitting trousers, and tall boots, to kiss one of her ladies-in-waiting full on the lips, to declare that she intended to “die a bachelor!” (As plenty of gender-studies scholars will tell you, this is one queer movie.) She expressed a longing to play St. Francis of Assisi, complete with a beard, and [Oscar Wilde](#)’s vain hero Dorian Gray. In today’s terms, Garbo might have occupied a spot along the nonbinary spectrum. Gottlieb doesn’t press the point, but remarks, “How ironic if ‘the Most Beautiful Woman in the World’ really would rather have been a man.”

Her third American film, “[Flesh and the Devil](#)” (1926)—the ultimate nineteen-twenties title—transformed her into an international star. It’s about a love triangle involving two best friends, played by the magnetic John Gilbert and the handsome Swedish actor Lars Hanson, with Garbo at its apex. It, too, is a pretty queer movie, though it seems less in control of its signifiers than, say, “Queen Christina.” As Gottlieb points out, the two male leads are forever clasping each other fervently, bringing their faces close together, as if about to kiss. (It heightens the vibe that, in silent-movie fashion, Hanson appears to be wearing lipstick some of the time, and Gilbert eyeliner.) “Flesh and the Devil” also features some of the most erotic scenes I’ve ever encountered on film. There’s one, in a nighttime garden, in which Garbo rolls a cigarette between her lips, then puts it between Gilbert’s, her eyes never leaving his, as he strikes a match and illuminates their gorgeous, besotted faces. There’s one where she lies back in sensual abandon on a couch, Gilbert’s head lolling against her lap, and he lifts her hand and drags her fingers across his mouth. And then there’s my favorite: she and Gilbert are at a Communion rail in church. By now, Gilbert’s character has killed her first husband in a duel, and she has married the other friend, but they’re still crazy about each other, natch. Gilbert sips from the chalice just before she does, and, when the priest hands it to her, she turns it around to drink greedily from the side her lover’s lips have just touched. Her expression is one of slow-burn ecstasy.

Gilbert and Garbo fell in love while they were making the movie, but their story is a sad one, mainly because Gilbert is a sad figure. He is often offered up as an example of an actor who couldn’t make the transition to sound—his voice was said to have been too reedy or something. That turns out to have

been an urban legend: his voice was fine. The trouble was that he was best at playing boyish men undone by love at a time when, as Gottlieb observes, Depression-era Hollywood was more into “gangsters, snappy dialogue, musicals.” Garbo and Gilbert lived out a “[Star Is Born](#)” trajectory. When they made “Flesh and the Devil,” he was a big-name actor at the height of his powers, and he helped Garbo by making sure the camera angles were right for her and each take of her was the best it could be. One story is that he planted a stand of trees on his property in the Hollywood Hills to remind her of the woods in Sweden, and he apparently proposed to her repeatedly. (She professed herself puzzled that she kept refusing a more permanent bond, but she did.) By the time she made “Queen Christina,” in 1933, she had top billing, and she insisted that Gilbert, who was then married to someone else, and professionally on the skids, play her romantic interest—rejecting the studio’s choice, a young Laurence Olivier. Gilbert later remembered that she was tactful and considerate with him on the set, though he was drinking heavily, throwing up blood, and nervous about his performance. “It is a rare moment in Garbo’s history,” Gottlieb writes, “when we can fully admire, even love her, as a human being, not only as an artist.” Gilbert died three years later, at the age of thirty-eight. Garbo was characteristically unsentimental. “*Gott, I wonder what I ever saw in him,*” she remarked while he was still alive. “*Oh well, I guess he was pretty.*”

Why did Garbo stop acting? It wasn’t as though her star was truly on the wane. It had been years since she’d made her successful transition to talkies, with a dialogue-heavy adaptation of Eugene O’Neill’s “Anna Christie.” (From the moment she uttered her first lines, “Gimme a whiskey—ginger ale on the side—and don’t be stingy, baby,” her accent proved to be a sexy asset.) She’d been nominated for four Best Actress Oscars. In 1939, she’d made “Ninotchka,” the romantic comedy in which she played a Soviet apparatchik on a mission to Paris who falls in love with a playboy count and discovers, as the pitch for it went, “capitalism not so bad after all.” It was a huge hit—more than four hundred thousand people went to see it at Radio City Music Hall during a three-week run, Gottlieb says. Garbo is very funny, deadpanning her way through the first half of it in boxy jackets, rationally assessing Melvyn Douglas’s charms. (“Your general appearance is not distasteful.”) As one biographer, Robert Payne, [wrote](#), the performance worked so brilliantly because it satirized “Garbo herself, or rather her legend: the cold Northerner immune to marriage, solemn and self-absorbed.”

The next and last movie she made, “[Two-Faced Woman](#),” a clumsy attempt to re-create comedy magic with Douglas, was a turkey, but she could surely have survived it. Instead, she considered projects that fell through, turned down others (offered the female lead in Hitchcock’s “The Paradine Case,” Gottlieb writes, she is supposed to have sent her agent a telegram saying “*No mamas. No murderers*”), and slowly drifted away from the business of moviemaking. She had never liked the limelight and, Gottlieb says, lacked the relentless drive that animated contemporaries such as Marlene Dietrich or Joan Crawford. She doesn’t seem to have been particularly vain about her beauty, but she was practical enough to know its precise value, and to anticipate the cost of its fading. And, though she seems to have enjoyed acting, she was never satisfied with the results. “Oh, if once, if only once I could see a preview and come home feeling satisfied,” she remarked after one film screening. Garbo was no Norma Desmond, viewing her old films over and over to admire her own image. Screening some of them years later, at *MOMA*, Barry Paris reported, she got a kick out of imitating herself: “R-r-rodney, when will this painful love of ours ever die?” She once told the actor David Niven that she’d quit because she had “made enough faces.” The analysis was typical of her—unreflective, cryptic, deprecatory.

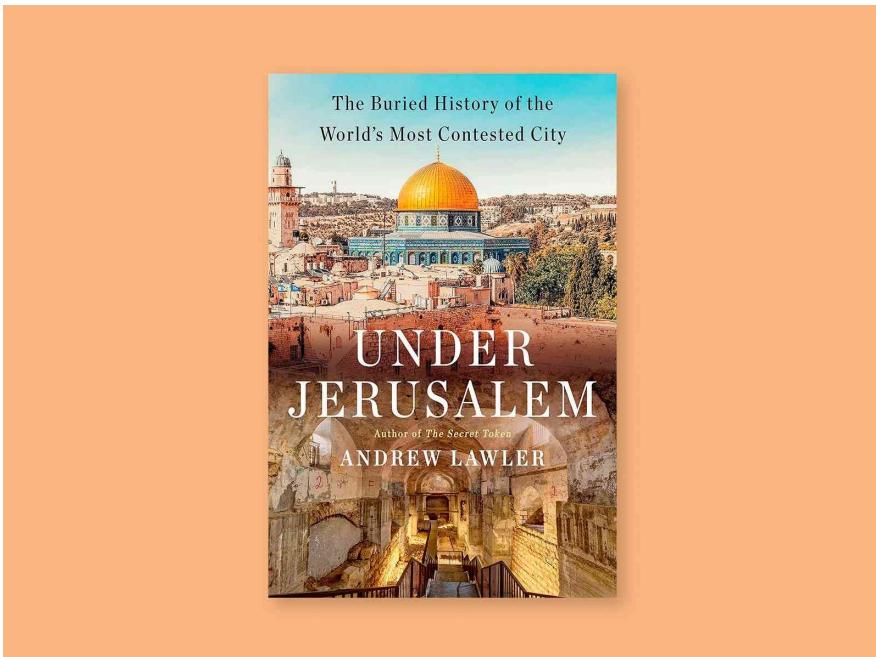
She was, Tennessee Williams thought, “the saddest of creatures—an artist who abandons her art.” Yet Garbo doesn’t seem to have seen herself that way. Perhaps attuned to the perils of growing old in Hollywood, she moved to New York, to an apartment on the East Side, spent long stretches of time in Europe with friends who were wealthy or witty or both, went to the theatre, collected a bit of art. She did not reinvent herself as a memoirist or a philanthropist (though her estate was valued at roughly fifty million dollars when she died, in 1990) or an ambassador of any sort of good will. People loved the mystery of it all; photographers were always chasing after her. But she wasn’t in hiding; she got out. One wag called her a “hermit about town.”

Did Garbo have a rich inner life to sustain her for all those years? There isn’t much evidence of it. She was not a remarkable or notably confiding letter writer, journal keeper, or conversationalist; she does not seem to have had a surfeit of intellectual curiosity. In the movies, she had always been able to convey a sense of hidden depths, of memories and emotions lighting room after interior room, never quite surfacing to be articulated. Were those feelings complex, interesting? We were persuaded they must be. The

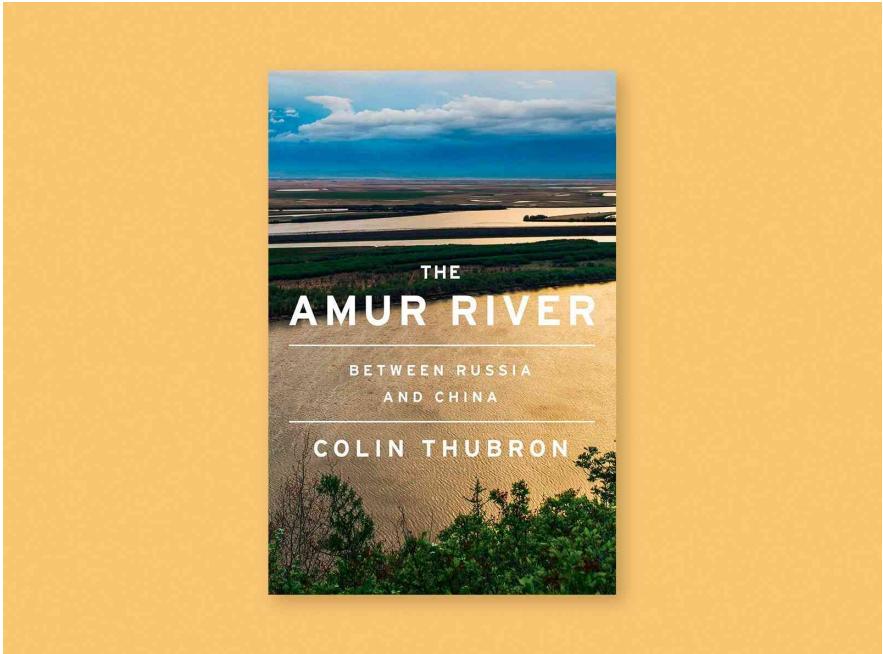
relationship to fame that she enacted in the last decades of her life was something similar: it looked profound, perhaps even spiritual—a renunciation of celebrity’s blessings as well as its scourges. But who knows? Maybe she was just tired of making faces. ♦

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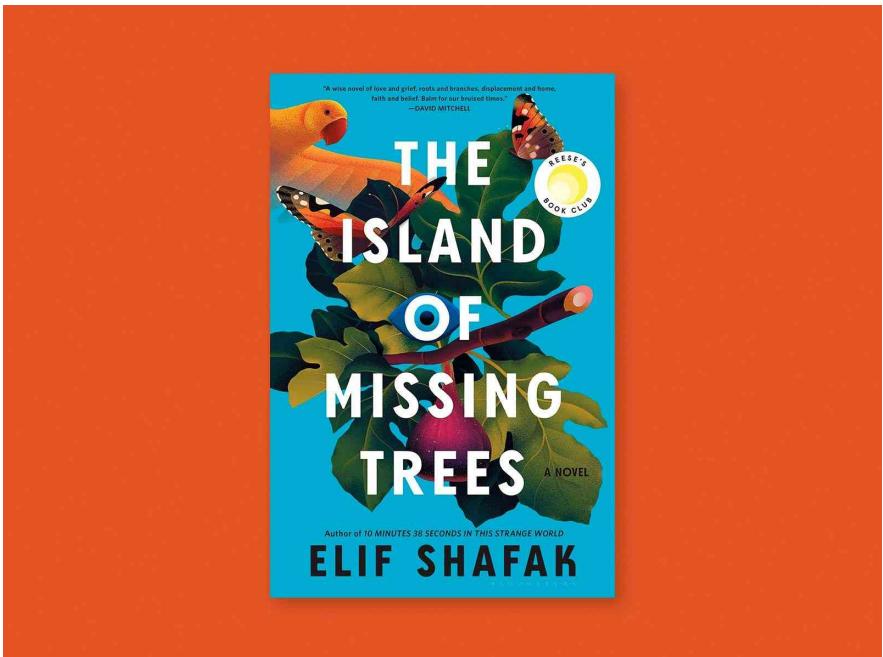
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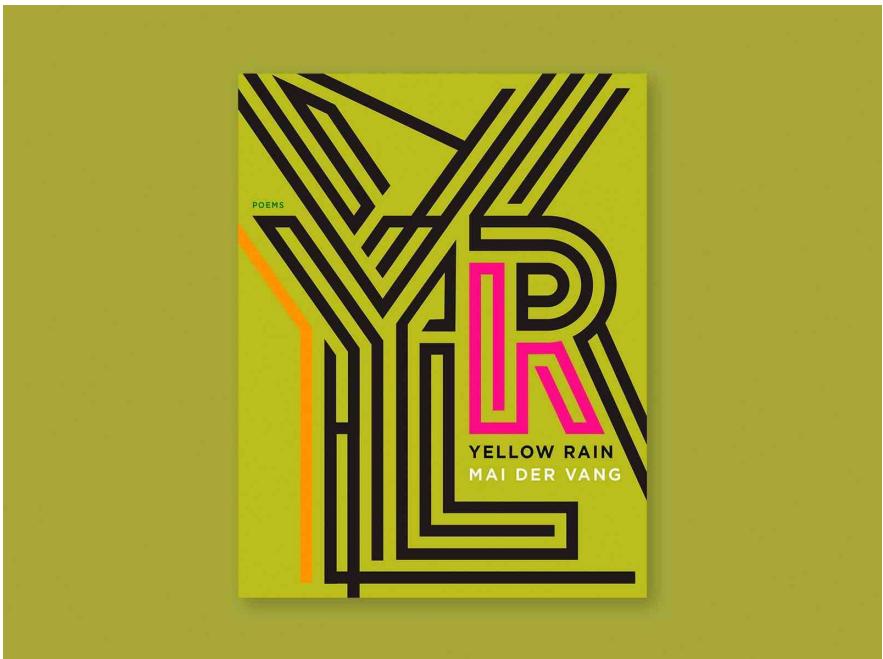
[**Under Jerusalem**](#), by *Andrew Lawler* (Doubleday). Chronicling more than a century and a half of contentious digs around Jerusalem's sacred sites, this history profiles the various "treasure hunters, scholarly clerics, religious extremists, and secular archaeologists" who hoped to uncover the Biblical city. Lawler's history tracks both the marvels found underground and the events unfolding above them, including the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the birth of Zionism, the creation of the Israeli state, and the shattered peace talks of the nineties. Probing excavators' often partisan motivations, Lawler highlights archeology's power to shape narratives and its development from a discipline "not far removed from its far older cousin, tomb robbing," into a modern tool of nationalist mythmaking.



[**The Amur River**](#), by *Colin Thubron* (Harper). The world's tenth-longest river, running through eastern Russia and northeastern China, is unlike such peers as the Mississippi and the Nile, according to this account by a veteran travel writer. Rather than fostering cohesion, the Amur is a source of division, with anxiety and distrust seething on both banks, despite centuries of trade and migration. Thubron travels by horse, boat, and bus, across steppe, wetland, and forest, and encounters Mongols, Russians, Cossacks, and Chinese. Citizens of former Soviet republics complain of economic blight and lost traditions and Thubron weaves in historical anecdotes, such as the freedom Chekhov felt while sailing down the river to interview convicts in Sakhalin, and his stopover with a Japanese prostitute in Blagoveschensk.



[**The Island of Missing Trees**](#), by *Elif Shafak* (Bloomsbury). The focal point of this novel set in Cyprus is a sentient fig tree, capable not only of “volition, altruism and kinship” but also of storytelling. In 1974, the tree becomes a secret meeting place for Defne, a Turkish Muslim, and Kostas, a Greek Christian. The lovers’ story, partly narrated by the tree, illuminates the island’s violent history, colonial legacy, and ecological challenges. More than forty years later, one of the lovers has died and the tree—thanks to a cutting that was smuggled off the island while Defne was pregnant with Kostas’s daughter—is in England. “When you save a fig tree from a storm,” the tree explains, “it is someone’s memory you are saving.”



[**Yellow Rain**](#), by *Mai Der Vang* (*Graywolf*). This poetry collection revolves around disturbing events toward the end of the Vietnam War: thousands of Hmong refugees died, and many others experienced violent illness, after exposure to a sticky, powdery substance that witnesses saw fall from planes. The U.S. accused the Soviet Union of deploying chemical weapons, which the latter denied; later, American scientists claimed that the poisonous “yellow rain” was honeybee feces. Part documentary, part puzzle, the book incorporates text from declassified documents. Vang’s lyrical interventions strike powerful notes of lamentation and rage, yet most effective are her visual collage-poems, which use fragmentation to interrogate the inhumanity of the official account.

A new book casts a mostly skeptical eye over the tales long told about Christopher Columbus, Captain Cook, and many more.

By [Casey Cep](#)

“Dear Sir,” the letter from Lord Sandwich to the English naturalist Joseph Banks began, “poor Captain Cooke is no more.” That was about all the Earl or anyone else could say with certainty, since word of the explorer’s demise had only just reached England’s shores, nearly a year after he died on the black-sand beach of Kealakekua Bay, on the island of Hawaii, on Valentine’s Day, 1779. Yet the passage of time did not clarify the matter: although thousands witnessed Cook’s death, exactly how he died is a matter of dispute to this day.

According to Cook’s journal, and to diaries kept by crew members aboard the Resolution, Cook first reached Hawaii in 1778, while searching for the Northwest Passage. When he returned, a year later, circling the islands for a few weeks before making landfall, the Hawaiians were celebrating Makahiki, a months-long harvest festival that honors Lono, a god who brings rain, peace, and prosperity. Like Cook, Lono travelled by sailing vessel and, before landing, circled Kealakekua—a coincidence that, the sailors later concluded, led the Hawaiians to call the Captain by the god’s name, take him into Lono’s temple, carve a ceremonial idol of him, and serve the crew feasts every day for nearly three weeks.

By the end of their stay, however, Cook and his men had worn out their divine welcome, spreading venereal diseases among the Indigenous population, quarrelling about ships and supplies, and destroying part of a burial ground. When they tried to leave, a storm forced the Resolution back into Kealakekua Bay, and the Hawaiians attacked. Later, some said that a chief named Nuaa stabbed Cook with a knife in the chest, or maybe in the back; others said that a chief called Kana‘ina struck him in the head with a shark-toothed club; and still others claimed that attendants of King Kalani‘ōpu‘u killed him with stones that they picked up along the beach. The story among Christian missionaries, meanwhile, was that Jehovah dealt the fatal blow, punishing Cook for allowing the Hawaiians to worship him.

But whether anyone actually worshipped the explorer is unclear. Was Cook killed because the Hawaiians finally concluded that he was not really Lono,

or because they'd known that all along and decided that the reappearing foreign chief was a mortal nuisance who would never go back to his own kingdom? For every artist who engraved an image of Cook in the empyrean or playwright who staged a pantomime of him ascending from Polynesia into Heaven, there is someone else who insists that the English merely imagined that the Hawaiians deified Cook, a fiction that functioned as propaganda for a self-mythologizing empire that portrayed its agents as gods and its distant subjects as simpletons.

Who can make a god is as fascinating a question as who can kill one, and Anna Della Subin tries to answer both in her new book, "[Accidental Gods: On Men Unwittingly Turned Divine](#)" (Macmillan). Setting Cook alongside the likes of Haile Selassie, Hernán Cortés, Prince Philip, General Douglas MacArthur, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, and even President Donald Trump, she considers why some men are made into gods, by whom, and—the most interesting of the mysteries about Cook and all of his putatively divine kin—to what ends.

“Accidental Gods” is not so much a chronology as an atlas of deification, but Subin nonetheless begins by tracing a history of the idea of apotheosis. In ancient Greece, only gods made other gods, mostly through procreation, but sometimes mortals were deified, too, in a kind of social climbing that could be accomplished through luck (e.g., Glaucus), feats of strength (e.g., Herakles), or marriage (e.g., Ariadne, Psyche, et al.). Shintoists once believed that the emperors of Japan were divine, and Confucianists in China regarded their rulers as sons of Heaven; Egyptians worshipped the pharaohs as gods. Apotheosis was easy, if bureaucratic, in ancient Rome (the Senate made Julius Caesar a god simply by passing a series of laws) but miraculous in Judea, where a prophet named John baptized a man named Jesus on the banks of the Jordan River, whereupon a voice from Heaven declared him the son of God.

The earliest of Subin’s man-god case studies arrives fourteen centuries later, announcing his own divinity. “They threw themselves into the sea swimming and came to us,” Christopher Columbus wrote of the Taíno men and women he encountered on the island of Guanahani, “and we understood that they asked us if we had come from heaven.” He recorded the same thing in his journal basically everywhere he landed, certain that any hand gesture

conveyed worship, that every gift was intended as a religious offering, and that speech in languages he could not understand proclaimed his godliness.

In the age of exploration, sailors and missionaries trailed such self-justifying stories of divinity wherever they went. Although Cortés never claimed to have been mistaken for a god, his secretary made the case on his behalf, writing about how the conquistador was seen as a “white god” by the Mexica. With no Indigenous accounts to contradict it, the myth metastasized; the version handed down to schoolchildren today has Montezuma quivering before a man he has mistaken for the feathered god Quetzalcoatl and surrendering his entire empire to a few hundred Spaniards. Similarly, the Spanish insisted that Francisco Pizarro was heralded by the Incas as the second coming of the bearded, fair-skinned god Viracocha; the English maintained that Francis Drake was perceived as a god by the Miwoks in San Francisco Bay and Walter Raleigh by the Algonquians who met him on Roanoke Island; and the Dutch swore that Henry Hudson, who sailed for the East India Company, was taken for the great Mannitto by the Lenape who lived on the island of Mannahatta.

Sometimes man-gods protested such adulation, as the East India Company officer John Nicholson did when a few hundred Sikh sepoys began following him around Punjab. Nicholson had distinguished himself as a soldier in the First Afghan War, but, in the two decades before his death, in 1857, he became a derring-do deity for men who called themselves Nikalsainis. They prayed at his feet and chanted adoring hymns; they were undeterred when he whipped them with his riding crop or cursed them for their devotions. Nicholson led the invasion of Delhi during the Indian Mutiny and died eight days later from a gunshot wound, but his cult survived his death, and some Muslims, Sikhs, and Hindus identified as Nikalsainis well into the twentieth century.

Nicholson apparently tried to persuade his followers to worship Christ instead, but other man-gods weren’t sure what to do when offered veneration. During the Second World War and in the years after the armistice, General Douglas MacArthur was deified across three continents: by the Guna people on the island of Ailigandi, near the Panama Canal; by some Shintoists in postwar Japan, who saw him as the replacement for Emperor Hirohito or the reincarnation of the country’s very first emperor; by

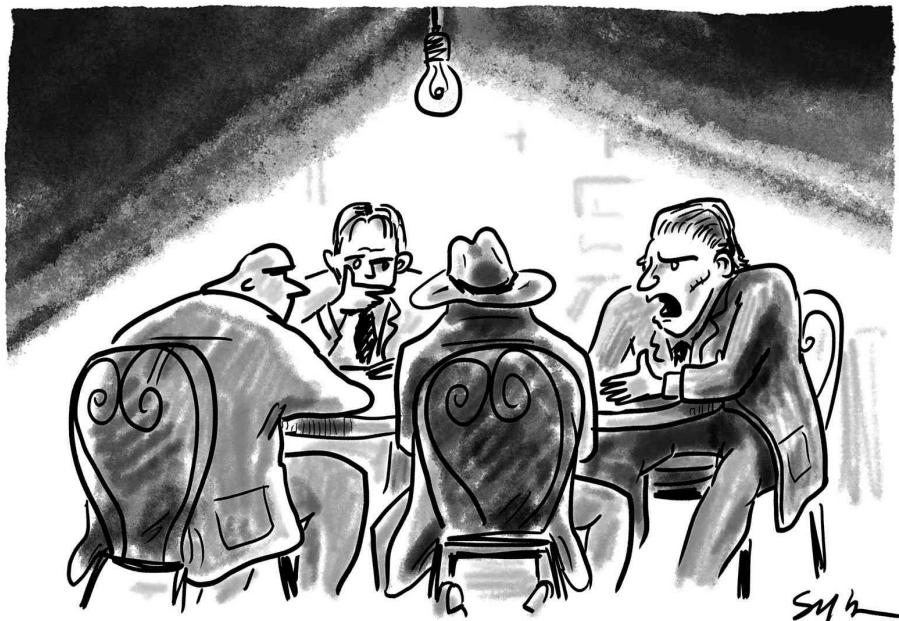
various Hwanghae-do shamans in South Korea, who claimed to channel his spirit while drinking whiskey, chain-smoking, and wearing American military uniforms; and by villagers on the island of Biak, off the coast of New Guinea, who believed he was the scabby old god Manarmakeri, who could slough off his skin to become the Manseren Mangundi—the Lord Himself. For his part, MacArthur might have needed his soldiers to worship him, but he admonished the countries whose armies he defeated to worship democracy.

Prince Philip, the Duke of Edinburgh, took a different tack when he was told that villagers on the South Pacific island of Tanna, in Vanuatu, believed he was the Messiah. With guidance from anthropologists, he sent the villagers autographed pictures, accepted their ceremonial gifts, and eventually helped fulfill one of their prophecies by welcoming a delegation of five Tanna men to Buckingham Palace. Subin observes how collaborative the Duke's divine status always was, with the Tannese encouraged by the British: "The religion of Philip is real because it has been told and retold, by South Pacific priests and BBC storytellers, by journalists and palace press officers, in a continuous, mutual myth-making over the course of forty years."

There are man-gods who aren't white, of course. Subin recounts how a sixty-eight-page feature in *National Geographic* on the coronation of Tafari Makonnen as His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie I, Emperor of Ethiopia, King of Kings, Elect of God, and Conquering Lion of the Tribe of Judah, became sacred scripture for thousands of Rastafarians. And she explores the worship of Gandhi by some of those who opposed the British Raj, noting that it was supposedly the theosophist Annie Besant who first called Gandhi "Mahatma," from the Sanskrit for "great soul," though he hated the title. Both Gandhi and Selassie denied their divinity—their insistent refrains of "I am not God" are two of the epigraphs for Subin's book—but each inspired colonial independence movements in his lifetime and posthumously in communities around the world.

If Subin's book consisted of nothing except these and other biographical sketches, "Accidental Gods" would still be fascinating. But Subin also argues that these deifications came in waves, ushered in by civil wars, conquests, and revolutions, and she observes that some of these men were deified at the same time that the very ideas of religion and race were being

reified. Imperialism sent travellers and missionaries into the wider world, and they in turn sent back travelogues, cultural reports, and foreign relics and manuscripts, from which scholars began formulating new theories, often of their own superiority. Other countries and races were thought to be less evolved than white Europeans, and Christianity was seen as the rational faith against which the emerging science of religion measured all other beliefs and practices.



"O.K., how about this: instead of assassinating her straight out, we subject her to steam heat all winter, so her skin gets really dry and she's prone to nosebleeds and her eyes itch and she's just a little bit uncomfortable at all times for months on end?"
Cartoon by Sofia Warren

Take the German philologist Friedrich Max Müller. He was heralded as an expert on India despite never having been there, Subin points out, and he helped create the discipline of religious studies, in the late nineteenth century. Previously, Europeans had divided the world into four religions: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Paganism. Müller added others, among them Hinduism, Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. He could make a religion out of "anything that sufficiently resembled Christianity," Subin writes, whether or not the culture it came from regarded it as one faith or, for that matter, as a religious faith at all.

So it was that one of the world's oldest, most varied systems of thought became "Bramanism" and "Gentooism" and "Banian Religion," then finally the exonym Hinduism, a single label applied to the diverse beliefs of

all the people living around the Indus River, who were then declared with Procrustean zeal to have a trinity and to be in need of a pope. “African” religion was reduced to fetishism, with allegedly arbitrary objects deemed sacred by believers who were seen as superstitious rather than devout. Any kind of ritual observance in any part of the world was made to conform to belief of the creedal kind, and every pantheon was contorted to fit categories like prophet or saint, with rigid distinctions like deity and mortal imposed where they had never existed before.

The same subjects who knelt before their kings and sang hymns of praise to their queens looked elsewhere and diagnosed all ritual practice as worship, reducing every instance of veneration to deification. The very scholars who were doing that diagnosing were also drawing new distinctions between the religious and the secular, justifying political adoration while judging religious zealotry. Post-Reformation Europe had forced Catholicism and Protestantism into an uncertain truce, with Enlightenment ideas of tolerance banishing spiritual beliefs to the private sphere while public life focussed on politics.

In this new order, Subin argues, deification would become, at best, heretical and, at worst, nonsensical. “With the rise of nationalism and liberation movements in the twentieth century come the politicians and activists, secularists and modernists, who were dismayed to learn of their own apotheoses, as tales of their miracles contradicted their political agendas,” she writes. Such people expected political fealty, not religious faith. Their discomfort was born partly of experience: Prime Ministers Jawaharlal Nehru and Narendra Modi were worshipped as Vishnu, but so was Adolf Hitler. Leadership cults were both agents of empire and agents of its destruction, and they were perceived as dangerous by those for whom the preferred objects of devotion were entities like the state or ideas like human rights. It is in this same spirit that present-day political commentators argue that Americans should exalt the Presidency, not the President.

Yet even when these abstractions do inspire devotion, they often take human form. Thus was “[The Apotheosis of Washington](#)” fresco added to the Capitol dome at the end of the Civil War, featuring the American Cincinnatus being carried up to Heaven by the goddesses Liberty and Victory, surrounded by allegorical figures, including Freedom trampling Discord and Anger, who

appear in the form of Jefferson Davis and Alexander Stephens, the defeated Confederate leaders. Likewise, after the Partition of India, in 1948, when millions of people had been displaced and more than a million had died in bursts of sectarian violence, Gandhi's cremated remains were scattered like those of the Sacred Man of the Rig Veda, with separate urns going to every region of the country, in an effort to promote peace.

But were any of these modern leaders truly worshipped? Venerated by their fellow-citizens, yes, and also revered across the globe, honored with namesakes and national shrines, mythologized in tales of virtue and heroism, and commemorated with national holidays. But were they considered literal gods or merely figurative ones? Put differently, what separates Bussa Krishna, who built a temple in honor of Donald Trump outside Hyderabad, from the American partisans who await the former President's every move and eagerly anticipate his return to power? One might be tempted to regard this question as purely semantic—the word for “god” exists in some languages but not in others—but Subin suggests that it is an epistemological and ontological question, too, about what a god is and how much we can ever know about one of them.

If a god is simply someone we adore and whose every need we serve, then infants might count, and if he is someone to whom we pay allegiance and make offerings, then any politician supported by our tax dollars might qualify, and if he is a personage who fills us with fear and dread, then we could include dentists and domestic terrorists. But when we call someone a god, as with Zeus or Jesus or Shiva, we mean that he has an entirely separate existential status from us, and powers—omnipotence, immortality—that are superior to our own.

Yet this is precisely the distinction that can be erased, or, at any rate, eroded, in cross-cultural comparisons. Consider Captain Cook, and whether he was really heralded by the Hawaiians as Lono or whether his crew and his countrymen chose to believe as much in order to justify colonialism. This single cultural collision has been the subject of an extended debate in anthropology, fostering a decades-long division between two schools. One is represented by the Princeton professor Gananath Obeyesekere, whose “[The Apotheosis of Captain Cook](#)” (1997) claims that it is illogical to believe the natives ever mistook a white colonizer for one of their gods, and that the

fantasy wasn't just about Cook's heroism but also about the legitimacy of imperial rule over allegedly primitive people. The other school is exemplified by the late University of Chicago professor Marshall Sahlins, whose "[How 'Natives' Think: About Captain Cook, for Example](#)" (1995) argues that it is also an act of cultural imperialism to silence Hawaiians in the telling of their own history, which includes, however inconveniently for some scholars, attestations of the confusion of Cook with Lono.

These two camps are ultimately arguing about their field more broadly, and specifically about the possibility that someone from one culture can understand the inner life of anyone from another. For her part, Subin writes that "one can never truly know" what someone else "really believed," basically shrugging off the task. Yet she writes beautifully of the spiritual life of marginalized people, taking their devotions seriously and revealing the subversive purpose and power of the beliefs and practices that their oppressors so often misunderstood. She describes in convincing and compassionate detail the pejoratively named "cargo cults" of the Pacific, which flourished during the Second World War, when airplane runways, military supplies, and commercial goods were incorporated into extant mythologies, not as objects to be worshipped or cultures to be imitated but as part of colonial resistance movements. The John Frum cult on Tanna, for instance, regarded the American G.I.s as servants of the Apocalypse. Equally compelling is her description of the Hauka on the Gold Coast, whose shamans were sometimes possessed by the spirits of colonial bureaucrats and soldiers—not because the shamans believed the outsiders to be demons or gods but because they were attempting to control them, and to manipulate their behavior.

Such accounts belie the salacious coverage that so often characterizes stories of "man worshippers" from around the world. Yet they are sometimes presented here in ways that overlook their atavistic nature and their ancient origins. Where Western figures were deified, or allegedly deified, they were not worshipped as new gods or viewed as godlike on their own merits; rather, they were drafted into preexisting cosmologies, similar to the way the Aztecs consolidated imperial power by replacing Mixcoatl, a Toltec man-god, with Huitzilopochtli. Subin is a subtle thinker and a stylish writer, but her account overlooks precolonial history like this, and here and there is cluttered with bric-a-brac instead: an incomplete abecedarian poem of lesser

gods, occasional lurches into the present tense and the first person, an orphaned appendix that clouds rather than clarifies an earlier chapter. The most trying of these is an interlude that she calls “The Apotheosis of Nathaniel Tarn,” a travelogue of sorts—set not in Santiago Atitlán, where Tarn says he was deified by the Tz’utujil Maya, but in Morocco, where Subin was living when Tarn, whom she had met several years earlier, paid her a visit. Tarn is an anthropologist by training; in the nineteen-fifties, his graduate supervisor sent him to the highlands of Guatemala, where the villagers mistook him for the reincarnation of a radical shaman who was said to have turned into a rain angel after his death, controlling storms from his throne atop the trees, somewhere between Earth and Heaven.

This is all according to Tarn, whose story Subin relates credulously despite otherwise constructing her book around canny critiques of claims of this very nature from others. Cook, Cortés, Columbus: their alleged deification was only ever colonial propaganda, she argues. But when the “accidental god” is a friend his apotheosis is presented as plausible, even appealing: “On Nathaniel’s last morning in Morocco, it was still pouring with rain, appropriately enough for a former rain god.” At the end of her theogony, Subin writes, “If the world we inhabit is disenchanted,” perhaps we can still “find enchantment in one another,” a cheery if condescending assessment of an existence that billions of people—colonized, colonizer, and decolonized alike—still find full of actual gods and real miracles.

What’s telling about this lapse is not that Subin validates her friend’s belief that he was deified; it is that doing so requires her to accept that at least some of the Tz’utujil Maya sincerely worshipped him as a rain god. And why shouldn’t they? This is the deep psychological mystery underlying the theological and political matters that animate “Accidental Gods.” No one can stop us from worshipping anyone else, whether politician, explorer, prince, or poet, or, for that matter, from devoting ourselves to other living things or inanimate objects, whether crocodiles, meteorites, or money. One of the most extraordinary things about apotheosis is how ordinary it is, how truly democratic it can be: anyone can become a god, and we can each have our own. ♦

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Comment

- [The Mississippi Abortion Case and the Fragile Legitimacy of the Supreme Court](#)

By [Jeannie Suk Gersen](#)

The legal landscape of the past weeks and months has prompted questions of which people and entities are legitimate interpreters and enforcers of the law and what happens when you take the law into your own hands. Mississippi and other states took the recent changes in personnel on the Supreme Court as an invitation to defy the Court's constitutional rulings on abortion, and those states now seem likely to prevail.

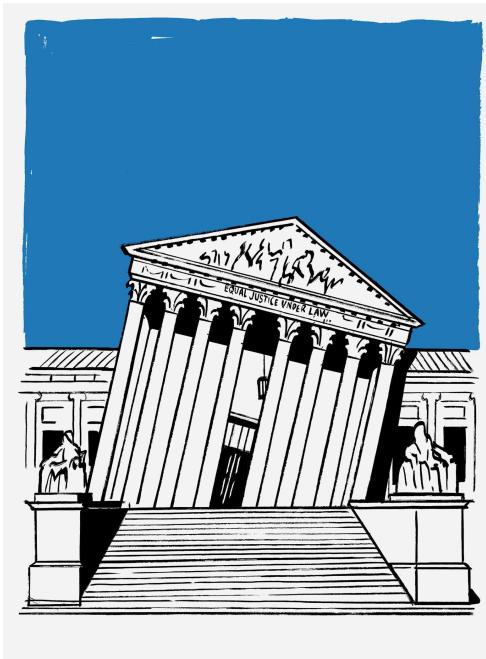


Illustration by João Fazenda

During oral arguments in Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, last Wednesday, the three liberal Justices often seemed to be delivering dirges, as though they had accepted a loss and were speaking for posterity. Mississippi's ban on [abortions](#) after fifteen weeks of pregnancy, which boldly flouts the Court's precedents setting the line at around twenty-four weeks, is likely to be upheld by the conservative Justices. The arguments offered scant reason for hope that Roe v. Wade will be reaffirmed; the newest conservative Justices, [Brett Kavanaugh](#) and [Amy Coney Barrett](#), signalled no qualms about overruling Roe as wrongly decided, which would make a majority of at least five. At a time when the Court's legitimacy appears extremely fragile, it is telling that the majority's response to having the supremacy of the Court's decisions defied seems to be acquiescence and approval.

The open challenge to the Court's authority perhaps broadly reflects a spirit of legal self-help that is running through the land. For instance, we normally think that the role of law enforcement belongs to the states, not to random neighbors, but two recent homicide cases appeared to put vigilantism on trial. On November 19th, in [Kenosha](#), Wisconsin, [Kyle Rittenhouse](#) was acquitted of all charges for shooting three people, two fatally, during racial-justice protests in August, 2020. Rittenhouse, who was then seventeen, had travelled to Kenosha from his home in Illinois and armed himself with a semi-automatic weapon, purportedly to keep the peace and to prevent property destruction. The jury concluded that he shot his victims in self-defense, because he reasonably feared his own death or serious bodily harm.

On November 24th, a jury in Georgia rejected a self-defense claim, returning murder convictions for three white men who, in February, 2020, chased down and shot [Ahmaud Arbery](#), a Black man who was out jogging. The defendants claimed that they had pursued Arbery because they suspected him of committing burglaries in the area, and that the fatal shots were fired in response to his allegedly reaching for a shotgun that one of them was pointing at him. They tried to justify the pursuit by invoking a Georgia citizen's-arrest law that authorized anyone who had "reasonable and probable grounds of suspicion" to arrest an escaping suspected felon. The law has since been repealed, but similar laws have long existed in nearly every state.

Any vigilante revivalism today goes hand in hand with private citizens' increased ability to carry guns in public. The Supreme Court is currently considering the most important gun-rights case since it held, more than a decade ago, that the Second Amendment guarantees an individual's right to keep handguns in the home for self-defense. On November 3rd, it heard arguments challenging a New York law that allows a license for the concealed carry of handguns outside the home, but only upon a demonstration of "proper cause." The perverse, self-fulfilling truth is that, as gun ownership has proliferated, an individual's claim to need a gun for protection has become more plausible. But the idea that ordinary people need to carry guns flows directly from the tradition that champions the use of force by private citizens to uphold the law, instead of—or even against—the state. Looking to the history of carrying arms in early America, the

conservative Justices appear likely to extend the right to bear arms to toting guns on the street.

The spirit of vigilantism is also notable in a case that the Court is considering concerning a Texas law that bans abortions after roughly the sixth week of pregnancy. S.B. 8 specifically does not allow state officials to enforce the law, authorizing only private citizens to do so, by suing an abortion provider for damages of ten thousand dollars for each procedure performed—what several Justices referred to, during oral arguments on November 1st, as a “bounty.” The law was designed to circumvent its being challenged in federal court. The arguments were about whether a state may indeed insulate unconstitutional laws from federal-court review simply by delegating their enforcement to the general public. An amicus brief filed by civil-rights organizations linked S.B. 8 to “the violent history of citizen’s arrests and racist vigilantism in the South.”

For the most part, even the conservative Justices seemed offended by Texas’s gambit, not least because Texas had to admit that liberal states could use the same enforcement scheme to insulate unconstitutional restrictions on gun rights from challenge. The Court will likely push back and allow abortion providers to pursue a constitutional challenge to S.B. 8 in federal court. But the ground on which such a challenge could ultimately have been expected to succeed will have radically shifted. Unconstitutional when it went into effect, S.B. 8’s six-week ban may well be constitutional in several months’ time, even if its enforcement mechanism is not, if the Court issues a decision in Dobbs that overturns Roe. Yet, notwithstanding what publicly transpired during the Dobbs oral arguments, a compromise might still be hammered out behind the scenes, in which Chief Justice John Roberts enables a basic right to abortion to remain, while allowing Mississippi and other states to ban abortion as early as fifteen weeks, and leaving it for another day to decide how much before that is too early.

During last week’s arguments, Justice Sonia Sotomayor lamented, “Will this institution survive the stench that this creates in the public perception that the Constitution and its reading are just political acts?” The stench, so to speak, is a by-product of the unresolved ambivalence within the legal system about who has the authority to decide what the law should be. The conservative Justices seemed eager to “return” the question of abortion to

the people. But the point of a fundamental constitutional right is that it shouldn't be at the people's mercy, particularly when the composition of the Court itself has been shifted through political means for this purpose. The spectacle of states brazenly flying in the face of the Court's constitutional precedents, shortly followed by the Court's discarding those precedents to make illegal actions legal after all, would effectively communicate that the Supreme Court is not, in fact, supreme. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated where Kyle Rittenhouse acquired his weapon.

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Friday, December 3, 2021](#)

By [Caitlin Reid](#)

Extra! Extra!

- [Painting Groovy Colors on the Gray Lady](#)

By [Emma Allen](#)

The artist Fred Tomaselli turned off a radio blasting NPR in his East Village studio the other day, settled into a creaky swivel chair, and described where he'd spent his early-pandemic, after his studio assistant "fled to Vermont." "My work's usually really heavy—I can't lift it myself," he said. "So I was, like, fuck it, I'm going to take my studio and put it in my guest bedroom in Williamsburg and just make little drawings that are sort of a deep dive into the emergency of *COVID*, because every day was a banner headline. In March it was, like, *BOOM BOOM BOOM*—every day was just an earthquake."



In that bedroom, he scanned front pages of the *Times*, printed them on watercolor paper, and painted and collaged over them, creating bright-colored patterns often reminiscent of groovy stained-glass windows. Eventually, he began to move components around, mismatching headlines and photographs. A number of these works are being shown by the London-based gallery White Cube, in a digital exhibition that runs through December 26th.

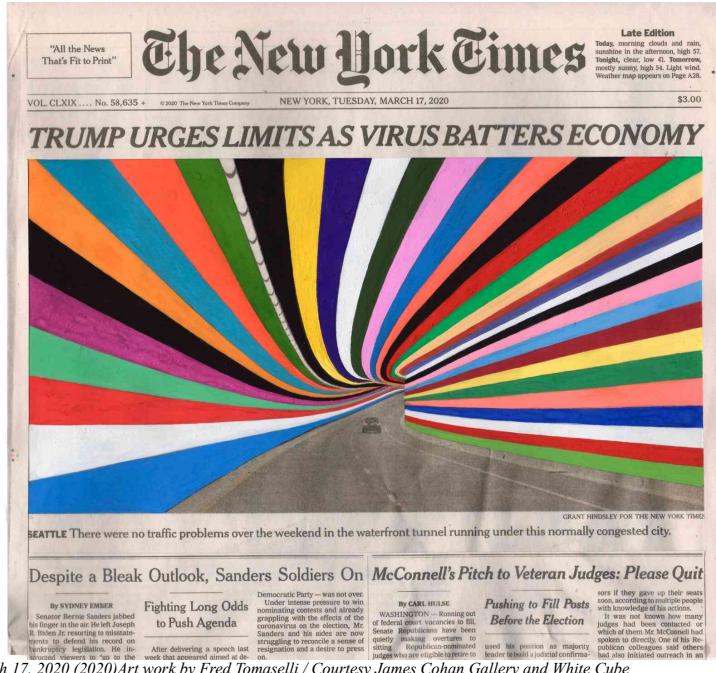


August 17, 2021 (2021) Art work by Fred Tomaselli / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery and White Cube

Holed up in Williamsburg, Tomaselli, who is sixty-five, tinkered, gardened, biked, boogie-boarded, fly-fished, and birded. “It was like being back in high school,” he said. (He grew up in California, “in the shadow of Disneyland—I had Tinker Bell flying in the night sky outside my house, amid the fireworks.”) He went on, “I’m a big birder, and I never really had a chance to focus on my back yard before. But I think I got seven new back-yard birds during the pandemic. I had a Nashville warbler and a Wilson’s warbler in my plum tree—like, on the same tree, at the same time!”

Prints of the newspaper works hung behind Tomaselli, who wore a checked flannel over a gray T-shirt, black jeans, and sneakers. One, from September 29, 2021, featured a photo of a yellow bird, onto which he had affixed yellow flowers, and around which he’d added a leafy pattern, all under the headline “*COVID MISINFORMATION CREATES RUN ON ANIMAL MEDICINE.*”

He asked his new assistant, Ryan, to dig up the actual paper from that day —“He knows where shit is.” The top headline read “*MILITARY ADVISED BIDEN TO EXTEND AFGHAN PRESENCE*” and was paired with a photo of a scowling General Mark A. Milley. Beneath the fold was the bird, captioned “The Maui nukupu‘u, last seen in 1996, is one of 22 animals joining the list of lost species. Page A17.”



March 17, 2020 (2020) Art work by Fred Tomaselli / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery and White Cube

Tomaselli's birding-life list, which he's kept since the nineties, has about four hundred species. He wandered over to stacks of boxes and flat-file drawers, and began pulling out other collections.

"I have every *New York Times* since 2005," he said. "This file is 'collage material, humans,' so this is like plastic detritus and eyeballs and noses and lips and hands and feet and mouths." All of these had been scanned, reprinted, cut out, and arranged by color and size, for ease of collaging. Other drawers and boxes were labelled "Map Prints," "pads o' paper," and "POT" (as in the leaves, which he presses and uses in his work).

"Hey, Ryan," he called. "Do you know where my insects are?"

That's Fit to Print"

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The police dispersed a demonstration in Ankara, Turkey, against Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's party on Wednesday.

Turkish Leader Disowns a Part Of His Legacy

Pivotal Point Is Seen on Legalizing Marijuana

By RICK LYMAN

Battles Over the Drug

A little over a year after Colorado

I Care in More Than

February 27, 2014 (2016). Art work by Fred Tomaselli / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery and White Cube

Warlords With L Battle in Afghanistan

Once a 'Known Killer,' but Mate — U.S. Is Watched

By ROD NORDLAND

KABUL, Afghanistan — Ashraf Ghani, the apparent front-runner in the Afghan presidential race this year, was once unshakable in his opinion of one of the country's most prominent warlords: Gen. Abdul Rashid Dostum, calling him a "known killer."

He said that in 2009, when General Dostum was supporting President Hamid Karzai for reelection. Now, Mr. Ghani simply calls General Dostum his running mate.

In fact, of the 11 campaigns in the April 5 presidential election, six include at least one candidate on the ticket who is widely viewed as a warlord, with past and policies directly at odds with Western attempts to improve human rights here.

That is the field that American military and diplomatic planners have to consider as they take up President Obama's challenge on Tuesday to his past: Mr. Karzai and try to get the next Afghan administration to sign a long-term security deal.

For officials working to finalize the bilateral security agreement

"Like, real insects?" Ryan asked, while continuing to excise scanned images of bird feet with an X-Acto knife.

"Wait, look, here's some monarch-butterfly wings," Tomaselli said. "There was a big praying mantis in my butterfly bush, and it would kill butterflies and you would find the wings. And I thought, Well, the mantis is giving me a present." He paused. "On the other hand, monarch-butterfly populations are crashing, so that bums me out."

Near the flat files hung a centuries-old Tibetan thangka (depicting, per Tomaselli, "the union of compassion and wisdom on this sundial dancing on ignorance"), slightly damaged by yak-oil smoke. Allen Ginsberg—another thangka collector—died upstairs. "Two floors, but, like, *directly*," Tomaselli noted.

He pointed to a foam-board maquette of a building, the U.S. Embassy in Bangkok, for which he's designing an elliptical mosaic. Beside it was a reject, featuring a mosaic owl. "I was gonna do this, but I just found out that owls are considered bad luck there," he said.

He'd made a *Times*-manipulation work about the late Barry the Owl, of Central Park fame. In Tomaselli's piece, Barry is paired with the headline

“FACING AFGHAN CHAOS, BIDEN DEFENDS EXIT.” “They don’t really make any sense together, but it just felt right,” he said. “I saw Barry; I see all the celebrity birds.” The mandarin duck? “I saw that duck before it was famous! And I was, like, it’s an escaped pet, big fucking deal. And then the mandarin duck became a *thing*, in the *news*, and I was, like, that duck is fake! You know you can buy them on the Internet for a hundred and fifty bucks. They’re, like, ornamental ducks you can have in your ornamental pond in your back yard in Connecticut.” ♦

Fiction

- [“A Shooting in Rathreedane”](#)

By [Colin Barrett](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Colin Barrett reads.

Sergeant Jackie Noonan was squaring away paperwork when the call came in, just her and the gosling, Pronsius Swift, in Ballina Garda Station. The third officer on duty, Sergeant Dennis Crean, had run out to oversee the extraction of a Renault Mégane that some young lad—sober, apparently, just a nervous non-local negotiating the cat’s cradle of back roads around Currabaggan—had nosed into a ditch a half mile out from the national school. The car was a writeoff but the lad had got away without a scratch, according to Crean, and he was a lucky lad, because Noonan knew the roads out that way and they were wicked: high-ditched, hilly, and altogether too narrow; scantly signposted and laced with half-hidden, acutely right-angled turns that it took only a second’s inattention to be ambushed by.

Noonan was at her desk drinking coffee as black as a vinyl record from a battered silver cafetière and transferring a weekend’s worth of writeups from her notebook into the central computer system. The weekend had been unremarkable but busy: a dozen or so minor traffic infractions, a fistfight between stocious teen-age cousins outside a main-street chipper late last night, and a callout this morning prompted by what turned out to be a man’s duffle coat snagged in the weir gates of the Moy river, which was enthusiastically mistaken for a body by a band of visiting American summer students and their professor taking an early constitutional along the quays.

[Colin Barrett on cops as outsiders.](#)

The notes, executed in Noonan’s irredeemable *ciotóg* scrawl, were the usual hassle to decipher, their transcription to the computer an activity of an order of tedium that Noonan nonetheless found strangely assuaging. So absorbed was she in this task that she started in surprise when the phone on the main desk rang out.

“Pronsius,” she commanded, without looking away from the screen.

The phone continued ringing.

“Pronsius!”

Noonan glanced up. Pronsius wasn’t at his desk. He wasn’t in the room.

Noonan made her way over to the main desk. She snatched the handset from its cradle.

“Ballina Garda Station, Sergeant Noonan speaking.”

“There’s been a shooting,” a voice, a man’s, declared.

“A shooting?” Noonan repeated just as Pronsius appeared with a mug in his hand. Pronsius Swift was twenty-four, out of Templemore less than three years, and an aura of adolescent gawkiness clung to him yet; he was tall but disposed to stooping, with an emphatic aquiline bump in his conk, jumpy eyes, and a guileless shine coming off his forehead. Even the chevrons of premature gray in his crewcut served only to emphasize his prevailing boyishness. When he heard Noonan say “a shooting,” he froze in place and stared at her with his mouth open.

“When you say ‘a shooting’—a shooting as in someone’s been shot with a gun?” Noonan asked the man.

“What other kind of shooting is there?” the man said.

“Hang on, now,” Noonan said. Keeping the cordless handset to her ear, she returned to her own desk, sat back down, and retrieved her pen and notebook.

“How many people have been shot?” she asked.

“Just the one.”

“The person shot. A man or a woman?”

“A man.”

“Is he dead?”

The man on the other end of the line sighed.

“He is not. He’s out there now in the back field. He’s in a bit of a bad way.”

“How badly injured is he, in your estimation?” Noonan said, raising a finger to catch Pronsius’s attention, then pointing at the phone on his desk, meaning *Call the emergency at Castlebar General.*

“He took a serious enough hit. But what it was was a warning shot. I want it on record I was in fear for my life and my son’s life. I was not aiming at him at all. He broke onto my property. I was in fear for my life and was only trying to warn him off.”

The man was outside, on a mobile, his voice dipping in and out amid the ambient scratch and crumple of the elements.

“I need your name,” Noonan said, and when the man did not immediately answer she added, “It’s important that you answer my questions now, please.”

“Bertie. Bertie Creedon,” the man said.

“Where’s your property located, Mr. Creedon?”

“Rathreedane. I’m on the far side of Rathreedane.”

“You’re going to have to narrow that down for me.”

“Take the Bonniconlon road as far as Mills Turn. Do you know Mills Turn?”

“I do,” Noonan said, dashing down *Mlls Trn* in her notebook. “Where am I heading from there?”

“Take the third road on the left after Mills Turn. Keep along *that* road a mile and a half until you come to a farm with a yellow bungalow and a ’92 Fiat motor home up on bricks out the front.”

“Yellow bungalow, '92 Fiat motor home, up on bricks,” Noonan recited as she wrote. “O.K. I have you, your young fella, and the fella's been shot—is there anyone else to account for on the property?”

“That's it.”

“And the injury. How many times was the fella shot?”

“Just the once. By accident. Like I said.”

“Where on his body did he take the hit, can you tell?”

“In his . . . in his middle. His midriff.”

“What kinda gun was he shot with?”

“A shotgun.”

“Double barrel?”

“Double barrel.”

“And that's your gun, is it?”

The growl of a throat-clear, sounding almost gratified, came down the line.

“It's legally registered and I'm lucky I have it.”

“As far as you can determine, is the man bleeding badly? I don't want you to go prodding at him but it's important to stop the bleeding if you can.”

“The son's after going inside and emptying the press of every last towel. We've the wounds stanchéd as best we can.”

“That's good, Mr. Creedon. Keep the pressure on the bleeding. We are coming right out. The ambulance is on the way, too. What I would ask is that you render your gun safe if you haven't already done so—”

“What happened to this fella is on him,” Creedon interjected with renewed conviction. “He was on my property, he was in the act of committing a

crime, and I was in fear for my life and my son's life. I want that clear."

"O.K. We will be there in fifteen minutes, Mr. Creedon. Just heed what I said about the gun. Let's take the gun out of the equation altogether," Noonan was saying, but the quenched noise of the disconnected line was already in her ear.

Noonan dropped the handset on her desk.

"Did you catch all that?" she asked Swift.

"Ambulance is dispatched," Swift said.

"Let's beat them to the draw," Noonan said.

Noonan and Swift were on the road when they got Crean on the squad-car radio.

"Shots fired, man down, firearm still in play," Crean summarized after Noonan had given him a rundown of the situation.

"That's the size of it," Noonan said.

"I'm wondering if we shouldn't just put a shout in now to the Special Response Unit," Crean suggested.

"Fella's done the shooting rang us of his own volition. I asked him questions, he answered them. He's not lost his reason."

"You can't rely on reason with a firearm in play."

"Just let us put our feet on the ground out there, get the lay of the land. No cause to escalate yet."

"I'm the other side of Ballina and I'll be out to you as soon as I can. But, Noonan, ye get out there and there's a hint of *anything* off, I need ye to withdraw and hold tight."

"I hear you."

“Good luck,” Crean said, and signed off.

They were a couple of miles out from Mills Turn when they ranged into the wake of a tractor towing a trailer full of sheep. Noonan got right up the trailer’s arse, siren *wapwapping*, but the stretch of road they were on was not wide enough for the tractor to let them pass.

“Come on to fuck,” Noonan said as the trailer weaved from side to side ahead of them. Sheep were packed thick into it, stamps of red dye smudged on their coats like bloody handprints, their snouts nudging in anxious query between the gaps in the trailer’s bars. Once the road opened out, Noonan gunned the engine and streaked by the tractor.

As instructed, they took the third left after Mills Turn and found themselves on a single-lane road through Rathreedane. Rathreedane was nothing but flat acres of farmland, well-spaced houses set off the road at the ends of long lanes, and cows sitting like shelves of rock in the middle of the fields, absorbing the last of the day’s declining rays. Where the hedgerows dropped low, those same rays, crazed with motes and still piercingly bright, blazed across Noonan’s line of sight. She flipped down the visor. She considered the gosling. Swift was quieter than usual, his gaze trained out the window and one knee frantically joggling.

“That is some incarnation of sun,” Noonan said, talking just to talk, to draw Swift out of his introversion. “Haven’t seen a sun like that since Guadalajara. You know where Guadalajara is, Pronsius?”

“Is it the far side of Belmullet?”



"I'm trying to be more mindful of what's happening on my phone."
Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Noonan smiled.

“Technically it is. Visited there a few years back. Unreal how beautiful it was. The light just lands different.”

“The world is different everywhere, I suppose.”

“It is. We went there for an anniversary. It was Trevor’s idea. Trevor’s the traveller,” Noonan continued. Trevor was her husband. “Enjoying the place you get to is one thing. But Trevor has this thing for the travel itself: the luggage and the security lines, the time zones, the little trays of food with the foil lids you peel back that they give you on board, and even, these days, having to drag a pair of mewling teen-age boys everywhere with us. Trevor gets giddy at all of it, somehow. Me, I could live a long, happy life never going through a metal detector again. You ever been anywhere exotic, Pronsius?”

“I been the far side of Belmullet.”

“Good man.”

“Ah,” Swift said. “I’ve no interest, really. Wherever I am, that’s where I like.”

“A man after my own heart.”

Presently they found the residence, a low bungalow off a gravel lane, the red galvanized roofs of farm buildings visible at the rear of the property. An enormous, rickety white motor home was stranded in the grass at the front.

“Now we’ll see what’s what,” Noonan said.

She cut the siren and turned through the concrete posts of the gateless gate. The squad car bounced and lurched as it passed over the rattling bars of a cattle grate. Next to the motor home, there were pieces of outdoor furniture and what looked like a little fire pit dug out of the ground, empty wine bottles planted in the moat of ash surrounding the pit. Scattered elsewhere in the grass were bags of feed, a stripped-down, rusted-out engine block, scraps of tarp, scraps of lumber, metal piping, plastic piping, bits and bits and bits.

“Look at all this shit,” Noonan said.

“Steady on,” Swift said, nodding ahead.

A man had come around the side of the house. He was holding something to his head and his other arm was raised, palm forward.

Noonan killed the engine and got out of the squad car, keeping her body behind the door. Swift followed her lead on the other side.

“This the Creedon residence?” Noonan asked.

“It is, surely,” the man said.

He was pressing a stained tea towel of blue-and-white check to his temple. The stains looked like blood.

“I’m Sergeant Noonan, out of Ballina Garda Station. This is Garda Swift. You Bertie Creedon?”

“Christ, no.”

“You’d be the son, then?”

“That’s more like it.”

“What’s your name?”

“I’ve no say in it but every cunt that knows me does call me Bubbles.”

Bubbles looked to be in his early thirties. He was stocky, his head shaved close. He was in a faded gray T-shirt with “*QUEENS OF THE STONE AGE, ERA VULGARIS*” printed on it in a disintegrating white script. There were dark, wet daubs of blood flecking his forearms like tracks left by a bird.

“We hear there’s been a spot of bother,” Noonan said.

“There has.”

“That knock to the head part of the bother?”

“A little bit, all right,” Bubbles said, and lifted the towel away from his temple to let them see. There was an open gash above his eyebrow.

Noonan whistled.

“I wager that needs stitching. I understand there’s another man in a bad way here, too, is that right?”

“There is, yeah.”

“That his blood on you?”

“Some of it, yeah.”

“Can you take us to him?”

“I can.”

“Get the emergency kit,” Noonan said to Swift. Swift popped the boot, took out a bulky, multipocketed bag, and handed it over to Noonan.

“Lead the way,” she said, sliding the kit’s strap over her shoulder.

Bubbles cleared his throat.

“This situation here. You have to understand, my father was in fear for our lives.”

“We’ll be sure to take that into account.”

Bubbles led Noonan and Swift down a short dirt track into the yard at the back of the property. The yard was covered in matted, trampled-down straw. Noonan watched Bubbles step indifferently into a cowpat the size of a dinner plate, his boot heel leaving an oozing bite mark in the pat’s crust. The air was thick with the heavy, grainy-sweet redolence of fodder and shit. Through a window cut out of the galvanized façade of a shed, cows blinked their stark, red-rimmed eyes as if roused from sleep.

“That’s where we caught him, brazen as you like,” Bubbles said, gesturing at the large, cylindrical oil tank mounted on a bed of brick next to the cowshed.

“He was thieving oil?” Noonan asked.

“Such a stupid thing to be at,” Bubbles said. “There’s nothing left from the winter gone and it won’t be filled again for months. Who’s going to have a full tank of oil in the middle of summer?”

They passed a final row of sheds and came out into an open field. Fifty feet ahead of them, a short man was standing over a second man lying on his back on the ground. On the horizon, Noonan could make out the low, blunted serrations of the Ox Mountains.

“Bertie Creedon?” Noonan called out to the standing man.

“Aye,” Creedon said, not taking his eyes off the man on the ground, his shotgun tucked at an idle diagonal under his arm.

Noonan kept walking toward Creedon at an even clip, not hurrying, taking care not to break stride. When she was a handful of paces from him, he finally looked at her. Creedon had watery blue eyes, cheeks latticed with broken blood vessels, a head of windblown, thinning yellow hair, and a set of small, corroded teeth. He did not react as Noonan gripped the barrel of the shotgun, brought her second hand to the butt, and transferred the weapon into her embrace as firmly and gently as if she were taking possession of a newborn. She checked the safety, broke the gun, slipped the ammunition from the chamber, and pocketed the cartridges.

“All right,” Noonan said.

She handed the gun off to Swift, took a second look at Creedon to make sure he wasn’t considering anything, then addressed her attention to the man lying in the grass. The man was young, lanky enough by the sprawl of him, his dark hair sticking to his pale forehead in strings, and for a moment Noonan did not recognize him, his features crushed into anonymity with distress. It was only when his eyes, screwed shut, burst fearfully open—they were blue, but a deeper, more charged blue than the farmer’s, phosphorescent almost—that his face turned into one Noonan knew.

“God above in Heaven, is that you, Dylan Judge?”

Dylan Judge groaned in assent.

Dylan Judge was from Ballina town. He was what you would call “known to the police.” In his early twenties, he had already run up a decent tally of minor convictions: breaking and entering, drunk and disorderly, possession. Judge was one of those prolific, inveterately small-time crooks who possess real criminal instincts but no criminal talent. He was opportunistic, impulsive, and undisciplined, requiring little in the way of convincing—and not even much in the way of incentive—to be roped into an underhanded scheme, so long as the scheme did not involve much effort or forethought. Noonan kneeled down in the grass next to Judge and slid the emergency-kit bag from her shoulder. She tore open a pack of nitrile gloves, worked the gloves over her hands.

“Do you remember me at all, Dylan?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered vaguely.

“It’s Noonan, Sergeant Jackie Noonan, out of Ballina. And that there is Garda Pronsius Swift.”

“Pronsiusssss,” Judge repeated with a faint sneer.

“It’s a name that draws attention to itself, all right,” Noonan said as she began scanning Judge’s wounds. There was a mess of hand towels plastered over his groin and tucked in under his backside; the towels, along with his jeans, were plum-dark with blood. From the amount of blood, Noonan could tell he was in a very bad way. She unpacked the gauze, the trauma shears.

“You remember the last time we met?” Noonan asked. “We were chasing a consignment of cigarettes and wound up at your house.”

“Ye stormed into the gaff at all hours,” Judge said with genuine recollection.

“We thought we had you, Dylan.”

“And ye were out of luck.”

“That time, we were.”

It must have been a little over a year ago. They’d received a tip considered credible that Judge was sitting on a significant quantity of cigarettes smuggled down from the North, so they got a warrant and raided his place, in the Glen Gardens estate. Technically not even his place, because there was only the girlfriend’s name on the lease, if Noonan remembered correctly. They raided the house at dawn and made Judge, his girlfriend, and their little daughter stand outside in their pajamas in the chill gray light while the Guards turned the place upside down. Noonan remembered the girlfriend: five foot nothing, stick thin and incensed, unceasingly effing and blinding while a saucer-eyed and gravely silent little girl, no more than three or four years old, sat up in her arms watching the Guards troop in and out of the house. Not a peep out of this fella that Noonan could remember, Judge just skulking meekly behind his raging *beoir*, eyes on the ground. His entire demeanor had read guilty as sin, but the raid somehow turned out to be a waste of time. All they found was a half-dozen cartons of cigarettes under a

tarp at the back of the property's suspiciously empty shed, nowhere near enough to hang an intent-to-sell charge on.

"Are you still with that young one, Dylan? That little one with the mouth on her?" Noonan asked. She wanted to keep him awake and talking.

"Amy, yeah? Same bird."

"Such language out of her, this tiny thing stood there in her fluffy slippers, and the little beaut good as gold up in her arms. What age is your girl?"

"That's Amy's kid."

Gingerly, Noonan removed the towels covering Judge's groin. Judge gasped.

"That's O.K., that's O.K.," Noonan said. "It doesn't matter a whit whether she's yours or not, so long as you treat her well."

"I treat her like a queen," he slurred.

"I bet you do. Bear with me now, Dylan," Noonan said. She slipped off Judge's runner, lifted the cuff of his pant leg, and with the trauma shears drew a clean slit from his ankle up to his hip, then peeled back the panel of the jean. She could make out several raw black punctures where the buckshot had gone into his thigh. His skin was stained with drying blood and there was fresh blood oozing steadily from the wounds. Noonan continued cutting, delicately tearing away his T-shirt. His abdomen was completely sodden with blood and there were big ugly perforations in the flesh of his stomach, as if he'd been gored. A malign smell began to gather beneath Noonan's nose. It took her a second to recognize it as the smell of human shit.

"How's it look?" Judge croaked.

"Like you got shot."

"Ah, fuck, am I gonta die?"

“I reckon if you were going to bleed to death, you would have done so by now.”

There was little Noonan could do but keep Judge calm and conscious. Steadying her touch as best she could, she began tearing gauze into strips and placing the strips over the worst-looking wounds, watching as each swatch of material was immediately soaked through with a fresh bloom of red. She picked back up one of the towels and pressed it against his abdomen. In close, she heard a faint, insistent noise. There, down in the grass under Judge’s head, a racing, paper-thin beat was escaping from an earbud.

“What’s the little girl’s name?” Noonan asked, but Judge did not answer. His eyelids were heavy and fluttering, like those of a child fighting sleep. His lips were colorless, stuck to his teeth.

“Come on now, Dylan,” Noonan asserted, tapping his cheek with her fingers. “Ambulance’ll be here any second. Come on. They’re going to pump you full of the good stuff. Pharmaceutical-grade narcotics and no fucking about.”

Noonan thought she saw a smile, a brief flicker on Judge’s lips. A few feet away in the grass were a couple of plastic jerricans, a length of hosepipe sticking out of one of them. There was a small amount of urine-colored oil in that can. The second can was empty. Noonan wondered where it was Judge might have been heading, and then she saw it, at the far edge of the field, the squat, muddy white body of a quad bike parked in the declivity of what must have been a boreen or a back lane.

“See that?” she said to Swift. “The getaway vehicle.”

She thought about what Bubbles had said in the yard: that summer was the stupidest possible time to try to rob oil out of an oil tank. Noonan had grown up in the countryside. There had been a tank out the back of the house that was filled every autumn, just before the cold weather set in. Although there was always a sitting-room fire going, use of the radiators was strictly rationed. The goal was to try to make the single tank of oil last the whole winter. And so Jackie Noonan’s house had been a cold house. Noonan

remembered her mother roaring at her and her siblings to put on a jumper whenever one of them dared voice a complaint about the cold. She remembered the single-glaze window above her headboard in the bedroom she shared with her sisters Maureen and Patricia, the brown-putty smell of the flyspecked sill and the clear ache in the tips of her fingers when she touched her hand to the thin glass on winter mornings.

She was holding Judge's arm, two fingers pressed to his wrist. His arm was an alienly cold weight. He was still breathing but she wanted to feel the tick of his pulse under the skin to assure herself it was there. With her other hand, she was keeping a towel pressed against the worst of the bleeding. Beneath his head, she could still hear the tiny, tinny *ttt ttt ttt* of his headphones. The miasmic smell of human shit seemed to be getting stronger. She felt as if it were working itself into her pores, coating the back of her throat. Noonan believed that Dylan Judge was going to die if the ambulance did not arrive very soon, and probably anyway.

"They're here," Swift announced.

Noonan looked up and saw three figures jogging across the field. Sergeant Dennis Crean led the way, followed by two paramedics toting a scoop stretcher. Just as he was about to reach them, Crean stumbled and his jog turned into a sudden hobble.

"Shite!" he exclaimed.

"You O.K.?" Noonan asked.

"I'm after going over my ankle."

The paramedics dropped down into the grass next to Noonan and Judge.

"We have it now," one of them said.

Noonan got to her feet and stepped back. She brushed her brow with the back of her gloved hand and felt the cold slickness of blood on her forehead.

"That's Dylan Judge," she said to Crean, who was grimacing and testing the weight on his foot.

“Are you kidding me?” Crean said, squinting coolly at Judge’s white, unconscious face.

Crean had played rugby for Connacht when he was younger. The rim of his left ear was baroquely gnarled, his nose coarsely flattened from repeated breaks. These historical injuries, combined with Crean’s big belly and bull neck, suggested vigor and capability. Noonan could hear the sound of air being expelled in a slow, pronounced jet through the crushed passage of his nose, a noise she had always found reassuring.

“Judge was in the middle of robbing the oil tank in the yard when these two interrupted him,” she said.

Crean lifted his foot, rotated it carefully in the air, and put it down.

“Who shot him?”

“Bertie here, the senior of the two, is claiming he did,” Noonan said when neither man spoke.

“I did not mean to,” Creedon said.

Crean chuckled coldly at that.

The paramedics were preparing to move Judge. They had strapped him to the stretcher and placed an oxygen mask over his face. Crean touched Noonan on the elbow to indicate that she should stay put. He joined the paramedics, exchanging a couple of hushed sentences with one of them before they lifted the stretcher and began making their way toward the yard.

“Is he still alive?” Noonan asked when Crean came back over to her.

Crean’s grunt was equivocal.

“I reckon he was just about to go as you got here,” Noonan said.

“That’s not your call to make. That boy isn’t dead until they say he’s dead.”

Crean addressed the Creedon men.

“Walk us through what happened here,” he said.

“We’d been away at the Mart in Balla,” Creedon said. “Only we came back earlier than usual this afternoon, because the young fella was supposed to have football training tonight. We got in and Bubbles went out to the yard to check on the animals.”

“That’s when I saw him, brazen as you like, straddling that tank like he was up on a horse,” Bubbles said. “He’d his back to me. Before I could stop myself, I called out *Hey!* But he didn’t pay me a blind bit of heed.”

Bubbles pointed a finger at the side of his head.

“The fella had headphones in! Sat up there in broad daylight, listening to music, having the time of his life. So I rang the oul fella on the mobile and told him come out quick, there was an intruder in the yard, and that’s when this fella turned around and saw me. He was down in a flash, a length of rebar in his hand from God knows where, and before I knew it he’d hit me a clout on the head.”

“I came into the yard and that’s what I saw,” Creedon said. “This fella stood over my son with a steel bar in his hand and my son’s head pumping blood. To see your child like that, the shock of it. He saw me and started running for it.”

Noonan looked back toward the yard, then down at the rumpled patch of grass where Judge had been flat out on his back.

“He was running away from you when you shot him?” she asked.

“Do you understand I had the fear of God in me? I didn’t know where he was going or what he was going to do. I didn’t know how badly my son was hurt. I was afraid he’d be back to finish the job with something worse than the rebar for all I knew. It was a warning shot.”

“If he was running in *that* direction, *away* from you, how’d he end up taking the shot to his stomach?”

“The rush of it—it all happened so fast,” Creedon stuttered.

“But he was running away from you?”

Creedon shook his head. “I don’t know what to tell you, it was all a confusion. I was in awful fear for our lives.”

“You’re telling me you weren’t aiming at him?”

“I swear on my life I was not!”

“You took an awful fucking chunk out of him for a fella you weren’t aiming at,” Noonan said.

“He came here,” Creedon said, pointing angrily at the ground. “He came here!”

The farmer turned toward the worn-down, darkly glinting peaks of the Ox Mountains to compose himself.

Crean unclipped a pair of handcuffs from his belt and sprang them open.

“Garda Swift,” he said, “can you please place these on Mr. Creedon.”

“I will come willingly,” Creedon said.

“This is how we’re doing it, Mr. Creedon,” Crean said as Swift took the cuffs from him. “There’s a forensics team on the way, and once they secure this scene we’re going to run you and your son here down to the station and get everything on record. The cuffs are for your own security. Pronsius, you can cuff him from the front.”

Swift drew Creedon’s arms together in front of his waist and clicked on the cuffs.

“Come here,” Crean said to Noonan, walking a dozen paces off into the field, still tentative on his ankle. Noonan followed.

Dennis Crean was forty-nine years old to Noonan’s forty-five. He had made sergeant eighteen months ahead of her—later in his career relative to her, but before her chronologically—and so, by the dictates of the informal but

binding hierarchy that exists inside any official hierarchy, Crean was considered her superior, despite sharing the same rank. Nobody had ever put it that way to her, nobody had ever had to, least of all Crean, who was impeccable in his behavior toward Noonan. He was always careful to solicit her opinion and often deferred to her judgment. He gave her any amount of latitude and agency in her duties. But still Noonan could never quite forget that that latitude and agency were only ever granted, and only ever his to grant. Noonan knew it, Crean knew it. She had made her peace with this arrangement a long time ago, and she tried not to hold it against Crean. If it weren't him, it'd just be another fella, and probably one less considerate. Crean was fair-minded, decisive, and dependable. He was a good policeman.

"How's the ankle?" Noonan asked him.

"I'll live. Are you O.K.?"

Noonan took off her cap. Navy, with the gold badge of the Garda crest set into the black band above the cap's peak. Noonan rotated the cap in her hands and placed it back on her head.

"It's been a long weekend," she said.

Crean was gazing off down the field.

"They're very presentable all the same, aren't they?" he said, nodding at the Ox Mountains.

"They are."

"That's the thing about Mayo. I find it's very presentable from a distance. It's only up close it lets you down."

Noonan managed a smile.



"I had that nightmare again where everyone found out I'm in my late thirties and still have no idea how the stock market works."
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

"The family will need to be told," Crean said. "Can you handle that?"

Noonan nodded.

Crean studied her for a moment, rooted out a pack of disposable tissues, and offered them to her.

"Your forehead," he said. "You can't be showing up to the family's door with that poor fucker's blood all over your face."

The forensics team arrived, as did Inspectors Burke and McElroy over from Castlebar. Crean and the inspectors escorted the Creedon men to Ballina station. Noonan and Swift detoured back to the station so that Noonan could clean up, change shirts, and double-check the address they had on file. The house in the Glen Gardens estate was under the name Amy Mullally. Noonan rang the listed number but got no answer and decided against leaving a message. She rang home, told Trevor she would be late.

"How are you now?" Noonan asked Swift as they idled in traffic in the town center.

"I'm O.K.," he said. "I mean, you know."

He did not complete the thought, smiling dumbly and gazing out at the streets of Ballina as if he weren't quite sure they were there. It was darker now, the street lights throwing down their harsh yellow dazzle.

"That the first death you seen on the job?" Noonan asked him.

"It's not been called yet."

"No. But was it?"

"There was that lad topped himself in the shed in Easky last Christmas."

"I mean a death where someone else has done the killing."

"There was a couple of gangland shootings up in Dublin, after I'd just come out of Templemore. Only saw the aftermaths, though. Never saw a fella dying in front of me like that. You?"

Noonan shook her head.

They were waiting on a light at the entrance to the Tesco car park. A pack of teen-age boys was crossing the road. There were five of them, moving in addled formation. They were dressed interchangeably in branded hoodies, some in tracksuit bottoms, some in jeans. They were clean-faced and dark-haired. They so resembled one another, at least at a passing glance, that they might all have been brothers. As they moved from street light to street light, Noonan watched their bobbing, intent, vociferating heads and smiled, because the thing about boys was that they only had the one haircut. That haircut changed every couple of years, but whatever it was they all had it. Noonan remembered that for a while—ten, twelve, fifteen years ago?—it had been the peroxide-blond highlights; every strutting little gangster coming up had the peroxide-blond highlights. The style now in vogue was tight at the sides, with just enough hair on top to brush forward or to the side. Her own sons wore that style, and each of these boys did, too. For an idle moment, Noonan's attention dwelled on the lad trailing the group, the tallest and palest, not speaking but sunk in his thoughts and seemingly indifferent to the animated crosstalk of the four in front. He looked up and caught Noonan's eye. Without thinking, Noonan raised two fingers from the

steering wheel in that immemorial gesture of laconic country salute. The boy's face, benignly blank, compressed into a sudden snarl as he hocked a thick pearl of phlegm into the gutter by the squad car and kept on walking.

"Did you see that?" Noonan said to Swift, watching the boys recede in the rearview mirror.

"See what?" Swift mumbled.

Noonan swerved the squad car onto the curb, unclipped her seat belt, and jumped out onto the pavement. She came right up behind the boy, grabbed a fistful of his collar, and shoved him against the parking-lot wall so forcefully that her own hat went twirling to the ground.

"What was that, now? Have you something you want to say?" Noonan roared into the boy's face.

The boy looked at her, startled, a muscle jumping in his clenched jaw.

"Hey, he didn't do nothing," one of the boy's friends blurted.

"Shut up," Swift said to the friend as he arrived on the scene.

"Well?" Noonan asked the boy.

"Tell me what I did," the boy said.

"You know what you did!"

The boy said nothing. The muscle in his jaw stopped jumping.

"Pick that cap up," Noonan said.

The boy looked at the Garda cap on the ground, looked back at Noonan.

"Pick. It. Up."

Noonan released him from her grip and the boy reached down and picked up the cap. As she snatched it from his hand, he skittered out of her reach and

straightened his rumpled top.

“You can’t just be grabbing people for no reason,” he said, brave and indignant now that Noonan had let him go.

Noonan looked at Swift, at the boy’s friends. She stepped up to the boy.

“You know well what you did,” she said. “And you know *I* know. Have some fucking respect for yourself.”

She put her cap back on, nodded at Swift, and turned on her heel.

“What the hell was that about?” Swift asked when they were back in the car.

“Let’s get this done,” she said, putting the car into gear.

There was a large oval green at the center of the Glen Gardens estate. Several teen-agers were punting a ball around beneath the lunar glow of the park lamps, and a couple more were sprawled in the grass spectating, a little nest of bags and soft-drink bottles next to them.

“See that?” Noonan said. “Any money there’s drink in them bottles.”

“Want to ruin their night?” Swift asked.

“Tonight, they’re off the hook.”

Once they’d persuaded Mullally to let them come in, Noonan got a glimpse inside the sitting room as they passed down the hall. It was bathed in the light of a TV, and the little girl, longer-limbed now, was curled in a chair staring at an iPad. Mullally brought them through to the kitchen. She was still perilously skinny, her hair up in a pineapple, the tendons in her neck flexing like high-tension wires when she spoke. Noonan gave a careful, broad outline of the events at the farm: Judge’s apparent scheme to rob the oil tank, the residents confronting him. She said that he had been shot and was not any more explicit about his injuries beyond describing them as extremely serious. This time, Mullally did not shout or rant. She absorbed what Noonan told her without interruption. She did not debate or refute the narrative Noonan laid out. All she asked was if Dylan was going to die.

Noonan reiterated that he had been taken to Castlebar General, and that that was as much as they could tell her right now.

Noonan and Swift stayed put while Mullally rang her mother, who came over to look after the daughter. Mullally agreed to let Swift accompany her to the hospital.

Back at the station, the inspectors' unmarked Focus was parked out front. Noonan picked up the cafetière from her desk and brought it into the station's poky little kitchen. Crean was in there, mugs laid out on the counter, meditatively watching the kettle rattle to a boil.

"Castlebar's finest in with those two?" Noonan asked.

Crean came out of his thoughts, cracked a faint smile.

"They have me fetching the tea while they work their magic," he said, pouring the water from the kettle into the mugs. "Did you talk to the family?"

"The girlfriend. Swift is gone with her to Castlebar General."

"The two will want your report the second it's done."

"I'm getting on that right now," she said, waving the cafetière at him.

Crean stood back so that Noonan could access the counter. He watched her refill the kettle, rinse out the cafetière, and dump in a couple of spoonfuls of instant coffee.

"You know, there's bags of beans you can get for that thing," he said. "Ground, whole, vanilla, real fancy stuff."

"I know. I see them every time I'm in Tesco."

"And you never bother with them?"

Noonan considered the cafetière, its chipped silver handle and scratched glass body. It was Trevor who had bought it for her years ago, under the

characteristically generous misapprehension that it might inspire in her an enthusiasm for something more than the cheapest of cheap coffee.

“I just never got around to it. Every time I see the fancy stuff in the supermarket, I think, Ah, next time, and the next time I think the same.”

“Word came back from the hospital,” Crean said.

“O.K.,” Noonan said.

“Judge was just out of surgery when I spoke to them. Doctors said it’ll be touch and go the next couple of days, but it’s looking like he might pull through.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“I am not.”

The kettle came to a boil. Noonan placed her tailbone against the lip of the counter.

“The fucker,” she said, relieved and appalled. “Oh, the rotten little fucker.”

“I reckon you might just have saved that rotten little fucker’s life.”

“Stop,” Noonan groaned. “When we were over at the girlfriend’s house, giving her the lowdown, the whole time in the back of my head I kept thinking how Judge had just about done her the favor of her life, getting the guts shot out of himself.”

“My condolences on his survival,” Crean said.

“I was sure he was a goner.”

“So was I when I saw the state he was in. But as of right now Dylan Judge remains in the land of the living, thanks to you.”

“Thanks to me,” Noonan said with a shake of her head.

She filled the cafetière with hot water and brought it back to her desk. She knew the report would take her some time. She had decided that what she was going to do was get down the most crucial details quick, by hand, then go back and flesh the events out on the computer. She sat down and opened her notebook, reread the litter of harried notes she'd jotted down over the course of Bertie Creedon's phone call.

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She poured a cup of coffee, turned her notebook to a clean page, and began to write. ♦

By [Cressida Leyshon](#)

Movies

- [The Groundbreaking Films of Gordon Parks](#)

The photographer **Gordon Parks** was the first Black director to make a major-studio feature: “The Learning Tree,” from 1969, an autobiographical drama about growing up in Kansas in the nineteen-twenties. It’s screening in Anthology Film Archives’ near-complete retrospective of Parks’s films (through Dec. 11). Also included are the TV movie “Solomon Northup’s Odyssey,” the bio-pic “Leadbelly,” the personal documentary “Moments Without Proper Names,” and, of course, the Harlem-based private-eye thriller “Shaft.”

Musical Events

- Ash Fure's "Hive Rise" Is a Visceral Experience in Sound

The installation envelops you in ferocious bass frequencies—but it's no dance party.

By [Alex Ross](#)

In the nineteen-nineties, when I fit the profile of a young person, I sometimes ventured into tumultuous New York dance clubs like Twilo and the Tunnel, vaguely in the hope of making some transient romantic connection but mainly to experience the kind of overpowering sonic sensuality in which these clubs specialized. Inept at dancing, I mimicked people around me, bopping up and down as inconspicuously as possible. If I got close enough to the speakers, I could feel bass beats passing through my body—an elemental intersection of flesh and sound. The unrelenting noise was both gorgeous and hellish. Afterward, I'd wander home on empty streets, savoring the distant rumble of the city as a new kind of silence.

Ash Fure and Lilleth Glimcher's performance installation "[Hive Rise](#)," which the Industry and MOCA recently presented in Los Angeles, brought me back to those long-ago nights on the town. The venue was a warehouse-like gallery at the Geffen Contemporary. Fure, a composer and sonic artist whose works often involve the live modification of prerecorded electroacoustic tracks, unleashed an hour-long storm of sound, incorporating extremely low bass frequencies that began below the range of human hearing and slid upward to a barely perceptible 30 Hz. For a few minutes, I stood in front of a tower of speakers, having taken the precaution of inserting earplugs, and had a purely visceral encounter with sound—one that gave me the unsettling and liberating sensation of being no longer material in my own body.

In fact, the first iteration of "Hive Rise," from early 2020, took place in a dance club—[Berghain](#), the storied techno palace in Berlin. But a dance party this is not. There are no steady beats, though various kinds of periodicity come into play, including a rat-a-tat flapping noise that Fure elicits by holding a piece of paper over an upturned subwoofer. The music is amorphous, engulfing, gelatinous, ferocious. Some passages evoke a subterranean machine revving up, grinding as it ascends toward the surface; others suggest tiny creatures excavating a cavernous space. Climaxes have a rancid beauty, the beauty of catastrophe and collapse.

Overlaid on the sonic foundation is a theatrical ritual conceived by Glimcher, an interdisciplinary artist and director who has worked in New York, Berlin, and elsewhere. At the Geffen Contemporary, Fure was stationed at one end of the gallery, amid an array of subwoofers. A squad of fourteen black-clad performers circulated through the crowd, vocalizing into bespoke megaphones that had been generated on a 3-D printer. When members of the group were close by, even their slightest whispers had a tactile immediacy, as if they were coming from inside your head. Full-throated cries bounced around the space with thunderous force.

The performers followed an unpredictable, jagged choreography. Sometimes they stood in place, in statuesque clusters; for a while, they were positioned around Fure, on risers. At other times, they whipped their bodies back and forth or moved swiftly from one place to another. The spectators milled about in pursuit of the squad, maneuvering around neoprene sculptural forms that were devised by Xavi Aguirre and stock-a-studio. We had our own choreography—that pandemic-era dance of avoidance we have perfected in crowded supermarket aisles. The mood was one of bliss and angst intermingled.

What cataclysm does “Hive Rise” have in mind? A program note made general mention of “ongoing states of emergency,” of which there is no shortage at present. I found myself thinking about environmental crisis, particularly because I’d seen a work on that theme at the Geffen Contemporary in October: Lina Lapelytė’s installation opera “[Sun & Sea](#),” which has been touring the world since its première, in Lithuania, in 2017. That piece attempts a lightly ironic, musically ingratiating critique of complacency and obliviousness in the face of climate change, with singers lounging on a man-made beach while the audience looks down from galleries. Such aloofness was impossible in “Hive Rise”: Fure’s acoustical tidal wave, ravishing and dangerous, left a constructive kind of panic in its wake.

On the same weekend that “Hive Rise” unfolded at *MOCA*, the Los Angeles Philharmonic presented “Reel Change,” a festival devoted to fresh energies in film music. The curators for the series, which took place before good-sized audiences at Disney Hall, were the composers Hildur Guðnadóttir, Kris Bowers, and Nicholas Britell, each of whom hosted a concert. The

pieces on offer formed less of a contrast to Fure’s soundscapes than might be assumed. Hildur, a thirty-nine-year-old Icelander, veers toward the experimental, and her L.A. Phil program, under the direction of Hugh Brunt, featured her own work alongside modernist and minimalist classics by György Ligeti, Arvo Pärt, and Henryk Górecki.

Avant-garde disruption is by no means a novelty in movie-music history: the likes of [Ingmar Bergman](#), [Andrei Tarkovsky](#), and [Stanley Kubrick](#) mobilized the unrulier end of twentieth-century musical discourse. In the past ten or fifteen years, though, gritty ambient textures have entered the mainstream. Jonny Greenwood’s otherworldly, glissando-heavy score for “[There Will Be Blood](#),” from 2007, marked a turning point: Paul Thomas Anderson, the film’s director, entrusted long, nearly wordless stretches of the film to Greenwood, who first won notice as the lead guitarist of Radiohead. The composer now has three films in theatres: “Licorice Pizza,” “Spencer,” and, most notably, “The Power of the Dog”—a sustained masterwork of scoring that builds tension and shapes character in equal measure.

Like Greenwood, Hildur is a dual citizen of the pop and classical realms. She studied composition in Reykjavík and Berlin but is also a presence in alternative rock and pop, having played cello with the ear-scouring black-metal band Sunn O))) and with the venerable noise collective Throbbing Gristle. One item on the L.A. Phil program was “Bathroom Dance,” a track from her score for “[The Joker](#),” which last year won her an Oscar. The piece is built around a pensive alternation, on the cello, of the notes C-sharp and E: other string instruments slide in with single tones and chords drawn from the C-sharp-minor scale, yielding a slow-motion kaleidoscope of melancholy harmony. This is a Pärt-like process, and the L.A. Phil made the connection clear by giving an immaculate account of that composer’s “Fratres.”

Much wilder is Hildur’s score for Battlefield 2042, a first-person-shooter computer game that is set in an apocalyptic future ravaged by climate change. Hildur and Sam Slater, her co-composer and partner, unfurled a spectacular barrage of live-orchestral and electronic textures, including sounds extracted from materials that match the landscapes depicted in the game: metal, glass, sand, gravel. Next to it on the program was Ligeti’s “Atmosphères,” a landmark of postwar modernism that seemed almost

serene in this context, its dense sonorities becoming transparent and luminous in Disney's acoustic.

Britell fostered a more buoyant vibe at his concert, although excerpts from Greenwood's "There Will Be Blood" and from Mica Levi's shivery score for "[Jackie](#)" kept Hollywood glitz at bay. Britell is a stylistic omnivore who specializes in churning, off-kilter riffs on familiar forms. He has won pop fame with his music for HBO's "Succession," which walks a tricky line between celebrating and satirizing monopoly capitalism. A happy roar went up from the crowd when the seductively lugubrious chords of the show's theme kicked in: a Baroque progression with hip-hop beats on top. I grinned, too, though part of me wanted Ash Fure's music to rise up and wipe it all out. ♦

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On Television

- A Fun-House Portrait of Black Life on “South Side”

This hilarious, oddly literary satire, now in its second season on HBO Max, brings the bite of Norman Lear to outlandish reflections on American inequality.

By [Doreen St. Félix](#)

I suppose it's accurate to refer to "South Side," a series set in the Chicago neighborhood of Englewood, as a workplace comedy. Simon (Sultan Salahuddin) and Kareme (Kareme Young) are best friends who grudgingly clock in at Rent-T-Own, a shady furniture-and-appliance-rental service. Its name, a parody of Rent-A-Center, is the bitter, primal joke of the show: a retail center where the true product is debt. "South Side" derives a great deal of its Black black humor from the encounters between its protagonists and the delinquent renters: the physical aspect of product repossession allows for so much slapstick. The tang of the show's critique brings to mind other satires of workplace culture, such as "Reno 911" and the genre-shifter "The Office." But the creators of "South Side"—Salahuddin, his brother, Bashir, and Bashir's writing partner, Diallo Riddle—cast a wider net: they have crafted a fun-house portrait of Black life in the Second City.

"South Side" is now an HBO Max original; its second season premiered on the platform last month. But the show debuted, in 2019, on Comedy Central, where it joined a slate of excellent and underwatched indie-ish sitcoms, including "Workaholics," "Detroiters," and "The Other Two." ("The Other Two" has also moved to HBO Max.) In recent years, Comedy Central has become an incubator for joke auteurs—willful classicists who prize, above all else, eliciting belly laughs. Bashir and Riddle are straight-up comedy and TV geeks: the same month they blessed us with "South Side," the duo put out "Sherman's Showcase," on IFC, a loving and layered sendup of seventies variety shows.

Although Riddle-Salahuddin productions are entertaining to viewers of any race, make no mistake—the fun and the farce are pitched to please Black American audiences. You either get the references—to primping culture, to funeral culture—or you don't. Such gleeful specificity is a rarity, and so, after the first seasons of "South Side" and "Sherman's Showcase," fans steeled themselves for the shows to enter the hallowed bin of single-season greats.

The first season of “South Side” can certainly stand on its own. The giggles come early, and easily. In the pilot, Kareme and Simon ditch their jobs at Rent-T-Own to pursue higher ambitions: Kareme dreams of a career in astronomy, and Simon yearns for the white-collar life. But neither of them makes it; Simon can’t pass a background check, and Kareme discovers that astronomers are racist. The guys come slinking back to their old jobs, and their boss, Quincy, Kareme’s twin brother (Quincy Young), punishes them with a dreaded task: they must recover an Xbox from the terrifying Shaw (LaRoyce Hawkins), a hottie gangster with a toothpick lodged in his teeth. “When you was a little homie, did you always dream of harassin’ Black people for their appliances?” Shaw asks Simon, inducing an identity crisis in the upward-striving schlemiel. “You succumb to the system,” Shaw continues. “I circumvent the system. I *circumcise* the system.”

American sitcoms are notorious for their own kind of circumvention: skirting issues of money. Even when lower-class characters are depicted, you never have to worry about their houses being repossessed. The stakes in “South Side,” however, are tangible: Simon spends a night in jail, for instance, because he owes child support. The steadiness of the show’s hilarity is therefore a miracle. Bashir Salahuddin and Riddle, obsessed with the sharper edges of seventies pop culture, bring the bite of Norman Lear to outlandish reflections on American inequality. “The Day the Jordans Drop,” a Season 1 episode, is a masterly satire of sneakerhead fanaticism which peaks with a risky joke based on “Sophie’s Choice.” The dig would be nasty if the writing weren’t so obviously steeped in insider familiarity. “South Side” is full of hustlers thirsting for the American Dream as it has been filtered down to them. Kareme and Simon engage in several get-rich schemes: shilling Viagra to horny senior citizens; hawking a hair cream that creates instant waves but also, inadvertently, attracts bats; selling flavored popcorn outside a local movie theatre. “Tuscan pineapple?” a customer asks, approvingly, after tasting it. “You an innovator.”

In some ways, “South Side” is of a piece with animated sitcoms. There’s the controlled sprawl of loony characters, the granular picture of a city and its people, the surfeit of meticulously wrought gags and cultural references, the interplay of goofy and existential humor, the razzing of dirty political princes. The universe of the series is as dense and as technically adroit as that of “The Simpsons.” We have the cops, Officers Goodnight and Turner

(Bashir Salahuddin and Chandra Russell, Bashir's wife); the mewling politicians, Allen Gayle and Adam Bethune (Diallo Riddle and Langston Kerman); Shaw and his bullies; the pissy desk worker, Stacy (Zuri Salahuddin, Bashir and Sultan's sister); and a bunch of child wiseacres. These characters have inner lives, but they also behave, and even look, like cartoons. In one episode, a crowd of vengeful clowns descends on the neighborhood, wreaking havoc on cops and citizens alike; when an armoire falls on Simon, you almost expect his eyes to bug out like Wile E. Coyote's. The background is thick with the activity of lovable freaks—Scary Barry, Red Cornrows, Trapper (who sells furs, by the way, not drugs). This wackiness is fun, but it is also oddly literary, a kind of translation of the hyperbolic in Black American humor.

No scene demonstrates this so well as one in which Officer Turner, a vulture of sorts, spontaneously buys—using Venmo—a shabby home from an old man sitting on his stoop. It turns out that there's a tenant inside, Miss Dorothy, a legendary civil-rights leader, who refuses to pay rent. Turner rips into the old lady, who hits right back, and their fight escalates with the appearance of a gun, and the funniest line I've heard in years: "Fuck Coretta Scott King! You may know her as King, but I just know her as Retta. Always thought she was so-o-o-o funny. Well, the bitch never made me laugh once!" Through farce, the show stealthily skewers moralistic discourse.

"South Side" has many complete story arcs, and yet it retains the spontaneous energy of a sketch show. Bashir Salahuddin and Riddle have assembled a troupe of lively performers, professional and amateur, unknown and famous. The standout is Russell, as Turner. She's wired a bit like Olivia Pope—cunning, no-nonsense, venal, sexually dominant. We meet her when she's out on patrol, using her police siren to flag down a "zaddy." In a show that is constantly playing the Dozens, Turner reigns supreme; there is a tinge of the sadistic in the way her serrated tongue comes for Officer Goodnight, an uptight, self-loathing dope. But the show also gives her a complex interiority. At a Spades tournament, she is taunted by her slimy pastor father: "I don't even tell nobody my daughter a po-po. Holdin' us down, killin' us, everything." Turner visibly shrinks. The moment is realistic. All the Black cop's bombast has obscured her inner torment: Turner's hustling, more than anyone else's, exacts a human toll.

Sultan and Bashir Salahuddin are Chicago natives, and “South Side” is shot on location. No detail is too minor for the production designers, who arrange tableaux of slightly distended realism. I also want to praise the costume design—in particular, the parodic genius of Turner’s wig-cycling, how rooted it is in diurnal Black womanness. My favorite cold open involves Stacy and Turner buying human-hair extensions from a Vietnamese beauty-supply store. “This is that real uncut virgin,” Stacy says, licking the fibres.

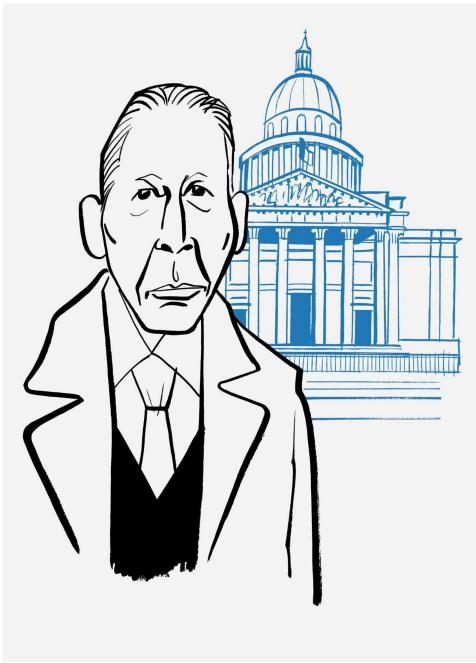
Idealizing one’s love object is a cowardly way to love—“South Side” is a teasing ode to the place for which it’s named. Occasionally, the series portrays TV news segments, in order to detour away from its viewpoint and ventriloquize sensationalist perspectives of the city. These are the show’s version of a righteous rant. In a Season 2 episode, a character reads a fictionalized autobiography by the controversial Lori Lightfoot, titled “If I Did It: How I Became Mayor.” After Gayle, an arriviste alderman, strikes an environmentally disastrous deal with the mafia running the city, his hype men visit a local school: “Hey, kids, do you like oil? Let’s play some drill music!” The kids roar. The writers brilliantly blur the line between stereotype and reality; “South Side” may be naughty, but it’s got a strong moral core. ♦

Paris Postcard

- [A Son Sends Josephine Baker to the Panthéon](#)

By [Lauren Collins](#)

Three hours before Josephine Baker was inducted into the Panthéon last week, Brian Bouillon-Baker, one of her ten sons, was on the terrace of a café in Montparnasse. “We found out in May that they were likely going to nominate *Maman*,” Bouillon-Baker said. He had been summoned to the Élysée, along with the initiators of a petition urging President [Emmanuel Macron](#) to honor Baker’s contributions to the performing arts, to the French Resistance, and to the fight against racism and anti-Semitism by elevating her to the Panthéon, France’s hall of “great men.” “We had been received by Macron’s counsellors, and, at the end of our appointment, Mrs. Macron came into the room,” Bouillon-Baker went on. The President was in Brussels. Bouillon-Baker recalled, “She said, ‘The Élysée is calmer when he’s away; let me show you around myself. And, I can tell you—I know my husband, and his opinion is favorable.’”



Brian Bouillon-Baker Illustration by João Fazenda

The *panthéonisation* was a go, making Baker the sixth woman, and the first woman of color, to be so recognized. Born in St. Louis in 1906, she is also the first American-born person (she became a French citizen in 1937) to be honored alongside the likes of Voltaire and Hugo.

Baker and her husband, the bandleader Jo Bouillon, adopted twelve children from multiple countries. Having survived poverty and segregation in

America, Baker wanted to assemble a “rainbow tribe” to serve as a living demonstration of unity. The children’s upbringing, at Château des Milandes, a rambling castle in the Périgord, was unusual both in its eccentricity and in its strictness. In [“Joséphine Baker, l’Universelle,”](#) a new memoir, Bouillon-Baker compares Milandes to “a perpetual summer camp”: peacocks, baboons, and tourists roaming the property; a regimen of cod-liver oil, Sunday flannels, evening prayers (“*Gablaiss mummy*”); an injunction against musical training. “*Maman* was a Democrat in American politics, but she was conservative as a mother,” Bouillon-Baker said. (He was born Brahim, in Algeria, but Baker called him Brian.) An actor, he is the only member of the tribe to have gone into showbiz. “Never big roles,” he said. “I work regularly, dubbing voices.”

Bouillon-Baker’s fiancée, Sabine Desforges, stopped by the café on her way back from getting her hair blown out.

“It’s a little too beehive,” Desforges said. “But it’ll come down.”

“A mix of Lauren Bacall and Catherine Deneuve,” Bouillon-Baker said.

At three-thirty, they got into a car heading for the Panthéon. Both wore masks imprinted with a 1945 photograph of Baker as an officer in the women’s auxiliary of the Free French Air Force. (“*NEGRO DANCER REPORTED DEAD IS LIVING IN MOROCCO,*” a 1942 article that appeared in the *Times* proclaimed, reporting, “She lives in the splendor of an Arab house and is driven to market behind a team of spanking bays, but her life is quiet and simple, friends say.”) In fact, she had been setting up a liaison center for the French Resistance.)

As the car neared the Panthéon, Bouillon-Baker gazed down Rue Soufflot, where a coffin—filled with soil from St. Louis, Paris, Milandes, and Monaco, where Baker is buried—would be borne along a red carpet. Bouillon-Baker said that he was “excited, joyous, proud.” He only wished that the public, gathering in freezing mist, could get closer. “The most beautiful homage she could have had was that of the street,” Akio Bouillon, another of Baker’s sons, said later.

Inside the Panthéon, rustles of excitement. Practically the entire government was in attendance, as were eight of Baker's children: a generation of stolid French people dressed in warm scarves and puffer jackets, the fruit of an American in a banana skirt. "Stereotypes, Joséphine Baker takes them on," Macron said, in the eulogy that he delivered from the monument's nave. "But she shakes them up, digs at them, turns them into sublime burlesque. A spirit of the Enlightenment ridiculing colonialist prejudices to music by Sidney Bechet."

The occasion was political, of course, coming in an election season and at a moment when French people of color are questioning the disjuncture between the national creed of universalism and their experiences of racial discrimination. "Yesterday as today, France cherishes Black Americans while subjecting its own nationals to twenty times more police checks when they are perceived as Arab or Black," the journalist Rokhaya Diallo wrote, in a Baker-themed edition of *L'Obs*, pointing out that, while France was swooning over Baker, it was exhibiting her own colonized ancestors in human zoos. At the podium, Macron held Baker up as a fighter for "the equality of all before the identity of each." It was possible to interpret his emphasis on her embrace of universalism as a rebuke of the "*wokisme*" that some members of the government believe is eroding national cohesion. "*Ma France, c'est Joséphine,*" he concluded, playing on the lyrics of Baker's hit "J'Ai Deux Amours."

When the sun set in New York, the Empire State Building glowed *bleu, blanc, rouge* in Baker's honor. Bouillon-Baker went to sleep happy: "Her native country was remembering her at last." ♦

Podcast Dept.

- [The Anti-Explainer Insight of “Soul Music”](#)

For more than two decades, the show has explored how memory, association, and sentiment create a song's meaning.

By [Hua Hsu](#)

One of the problems with podcasts about music is that they compete with music. Why listen to people mulling over a song's greatness when the actual song is just a few clicks away? Some of the most popular music podcasts, like "Switched On Pop" or "Song Exploder," essentially reverse engineer a song's magic, disassembling it and puzzling over the constituent parts. Yet professional judgment matters little when it comes to our own sentimental attachments. It's impossible to persuade someone that a song that reminds him of home, or that got him through a rough breakup, is derivative or bad. We don't all have taste, but we all have stories.

In the age of the explainer, it's rare for a podcast to dwell on the mysteries of feeling and memory. "Soul Music" is an exception. The show was launched, in 2000, by BBC Radio 4, and each episode braids four or five interviews into a story about a piece of music, showing us how it shaped lives. A young girl listens to David Bowie's "Life on Mars?" and looks up at the stars, wondering if she'll ever escape her alcoholic parents. A choir of L.G.B.T. Catholics, protesting their exclusion from a meeting of church leaders, perform "We Are Family" outside the event, singing a community into visibility. One of my favorite episodes considers Simon & Garfunkel's "The Boxer," a song that I've heard hundreds of times but rarely contemplated. One participant is an actual boxer—Seamus McDonagh, an Irish fighter who recalls a bout with Evander Holyfield—but the most moving thread comes from Leonard Nimoy's daughter. Nimoy was the son of Ukrainian immigrants; like the song's protagonist, he had to leave home in search of new fortunes. His daughter talks about his obsession with the song, and how it accompanied him from his early thirties to his deathbed.

Listening to the show can be a dreamlike experience, and it sometimes feels as though the voices were in conversation with one another. An episode about the Talking Heads' "Once in a Lifetime" revolves around various people repeating the lyric "How did I get here?" The singer-songwriter Angelique Kidjo recalls leaving the dictatorship in Benin for Paris, in 1983, and hearing the song at a friend's house. Its familiar Afrobeat rhythm moves her to dance. But there's something ghostly about the song, too, and she

begins to feel homesick, seized with “pure sadness.” The music discloses a relationship between her old world and her new one. Meanwhile, a young man from a poor family in Wolverhampton remembers how “utterly lost” he and his friends felt in the eighties, reckoning with life under Margaret Thatcher. (“How did we get here?” he wonders of his resigned generation.) After working a series of dead-end jobs, he goes back to school, and his studies somehow take him to America. The Talking Heads are his soundtrack as he ventures south, eventually settling in Texas, bemused that he got there at all.

There’s an air of mystery to “Soul Music.” The show has no host or lead-in music. Where most podcasts are taut and quippy, this one is diaristic and slow, as people search for the right words to describe the moments of beauty or sorrow that a song evokes. Occasionally, a historian or a musicologist offers an expert’s perspective, but most of the voices orbit the question of what we use music for, and how fate delivers it to us. How often has a friend or a radio station played you the perfect song at the perfect time?

When “Soul Music” began, it was primarily an exploration of classical music, jazz, and hymns. During the past decade, it has embraced pop music, and has come to include a broader cross-section of experiences. Its small team scours forums, message boards, and blogs for people’s stories, looking for surprising resonances. (A producer, Maggie Ayre, told me that Googling specific song lyrics is a particularly effective strategy.) The process is incredibly labor-intensive, and an episode on Wagner’s “Siegfried Idyll” took five years to complete.

A new season débuted in mid-November. The first episode is on “Ain’t No Mountain High Enough,” written by Valerie Simpson and Nick Ashford, and made famous in 1967 by Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell. A man recalls singing it in a convenience store, and being joined by an older woman a few aisles over. They duet their way to the checkout, where she tells him the story of how she helped desegregate a nearby school. In an upcoming episode on U2’s “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For,” an Irishman reflects on his rags-to-riches arc, and on confronting a spiritual deficit in his life. He was driving late one night when the song came on the radio, and he began crying uncontrollably. He decided to choose a life of faith. When he

was ordained as a minister, he played U2 over the P.A., as a wink to his circuitous journey.

In isolation, these stories might feel trite, or a little maudlin. But the show's brilliance lies in the power of people trying to explain the flood of memories that a song triggers, and in the realization that this is always happening, everywhere. We bend songs to fit our circumstances and needs; sometimes intention ceases to matter. A ballad about heartache can remind you of a long-lost friend, and a song about God can become fuel to get through a humdrum day.

An especially moving episode takes on "Song to the Siren," originally recorded by the singer and guitarist Tim Buckley in 1969. A man named Anthony Famiglietti tells us about being a "misguided" teen-ager, and about discovering new music with his best friend, whose father was an avid amateur runner. After his friend died, when they were twenty-one, Famiglietti began to see life differently, devoting himself to running and eventually becoming an Olympian. Throughout this journey, he would listen to "Song to the Siren"—the John Frusciante version, introduced to him by his friend—during warmups. "I heard in that song my friend speaking to his father, and I heard in that song my friend's father calling to his son from this vast distance," Famiglietti says. But he also senses another conversation, between Buckley, who died in 1975, and his son, Jeff, who died in 1997. "I hear it written for Jeff Buckley, through Tim. And when I listen to Jeff Buckley's songs, I hear him calling to his father through his music, and there's this dialogue across time."

The show's best moments involve wondrous feats of listening and imagining like Famiglietti's. What he describes is impossible, yet it feels like a truth around which he has organized his life.

If there's a limitation to "Soul Music," it's that it embodies a kind of generational sensibility. The songs skew toward a middle-aged audience, with a preference for baby-boomer "classics" like "God Only Knows" or Procol Harum's "A Whiter Shade of Pale." The most recent song to be discussed is Amy Winehouse's "Back to Black," from 2006. This season includes Massive Attack's 1991 hit "Unfinished Sympathy," with an affecting story of someone who befriended the band, in their early club days,

and missed out on the chance to collaborate with them. The episode suggests a welcome move toward genres like hip-hop and dance.

Yet the songs themselves often feel secondary. “Soul Music” rarely compels me to revisit the tracks it features. “The Star-Spangled Banner” could never move me as much as the memories shared in a 2016 episode: an American living in rural France, hearing it on the radio the morning after the 2008 election; Jimi Hendrix’s brother, a serviceman in Vietnam, hearing news of the famous Woodstock performance decades earlier. The show is about epiphanies, not nostalgia. What you’re left with is a yearning for your own discoveries, set to your own songs.

In this way, the show couldn’t seem more at odds with how music functions in our lives today. In the streaming era, songs are a constant background thrum, and discovery is mediated through playlists or algorithms, with less opportunity for randomness and chance. On “Soul Music,” several memorable episodes involve soldiers obsessing over finding a new piece of music; the motif reveals how precious, how formative encountering a song could be. These days, we’re relentlessly encountering music, to an exhausting degree. And, more often than not, we’re doing it by ourselves. What music once was—an excuse to gather, to share, to transform together—can seem a quaint notion.

But these life-altering moments are always at hand, so long as we choose to notice them. Songs can often feel like a shelter from the world, a few minutes lifted free from the tendrils of history until, over time, they become foundations for our own lives. “Soul Music” is less interested in telling us how to hear a song than it is in encouraging us to listen. This may sound mawkish—but how much of our inner life is first learned through music? It’s how many of us discover the largeness of the world and our place within it, the meaning of love or loyalty, the poetic depths of despair. What begins as a catchy lyric evolves into an entirely new grammar of friendship or devotion. A melody you can’t stop humming suggests a mood that you want to live in forever. ♦

New Yorker Favorites

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Poems

- “The Weakness Meaning Time”
- From “Call Us What We Carry”

By [Christian Wiman](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Audio: Read by the author.

All morning gently swimming

in the misery of a dead writer.

Poverty like a genetic bequest, polar loneliness.

The finical, fanatical, reciprocal chiselling of mind and matter.

And the long silences, late saliences of God and sound

set like glyphs in the mother country,

childhood. All morning, as if it didn't touch me,

as indeed it doesn't, mostly,

one daughter dead, another mad as jacks,

drafts and diaries scattered like a plane crash in the ocean.

And fragments as fruition, and exile like a birthright,

and, as the sun bleeds out one evening like a suicide,

suicide. All morning my exercise

to keep these muscles strong enough to recognize

the weakness meaning time,

to climb out as if there were an out,

to dry off as if there were a dry,

to look back at a body of water, which, like all water,
leaves no trace.

By [Amanda Gorman](#)

What we call occasional poetry—verse written for or about an event, often ceremonial—reminds us that all poems have occasions, or should. Good poems capture a moment and sustain it. In an era as urgent as ours, many poems strive for timelessness precisely by being timely. Poetry can preserve the fleeting present, encircle the past, and help envision alternative futures.

When Amanda Gorman [read her poem](#) “The Hill We Climb” at the 2021 U.S. Presidential Inauguration, she became both the inheritor of a long tradition and a herald of something new. Her verse, as vibrant and elegant as her yellow coat against the cold, illuminated the imagination as well as the occasion, confirming her as a worthy successor to several other Black women inaugural poets writing to and for an American ideal—a lineage traceable all the way back to [Phillis Wheatley](#), who, at the dawn of the Republic, addressed a poem to then General George Washington. As Gorman acknowledged this country’s contested history, and its contemporary tumult, her invocation of the plural pronoun “we” reminded us that, for good or literal ill, our lives are connected. Hers was an invitation to move forward together.

Gorman continues to explore the “we” further in her new collection, “[Call Us What We Carry](#),” which she calls an “occasional book”—one framed by our many mutating yet seemingly immutable pandemics, from *COVID-19* and racism to climate catastrophes and a general malaise. In “penning a letter to the world as a daughter of it,” Gorman doesn’t merely transcribe a diary of a plague year; her bold, oracular pronouncements bear witness to collective experience, with an uncanny confidence and a prescient tone that are all the poet’s own. By turns devotional and pushing the limits of the page, many poems in the book play with form—appearing as questionnaires and text-message conversations, or taking on the shapes of an urn, a whale, a flag—in ways reminiscent of George Herbert or the concrete poets of the nineteen-sixties, another tempestuous time in search of fixity. Gorman insists that “We are not me— / We are we,” and her poetry is unafraid to name all that we carry. “Our scars,” she writes, “are the brightest / Parts of us.”

—Kevin Young

SHIP'S MANIFEST

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Read by the author.

Allegedly the worst is behind us.
Still, we crouch before the lip of tomorrow,
Halting like a headless hant in our own house,
Waiting to remember exactly
What it is we're supposed to be doing.

& what exactly are we supposed to be doing?
Penning a letter to the world as a daughter of it.
We are writing with vanishing meaning,
Our words water dragging down a windshield.
The poet's diagnosis is that what we have lived
Has already warped itself into a fever dream,
The contours of its shape stripped from the murky mind.

To be accountable we must render an account:
Not what was said, but what was meant.
Not the fact, but what was felt.
What was known, even while unnamed.
Our greatest test will be
Our testimony.
This book is a message in a bottle.
This book is a letter.
This book does not let up.
This book is awake.
This book is a wake.
For what is a record but a reckoning?
The capsule captured?
A repository.
An ark articulated?
& the poet, the preserver

Of ghosts & gains,
Our demons & dreams,
Our haunts & hopes.
Here's to the preservation
Of a light so terrible.

ARBORESCENT I

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Read by the author.

We are
Arborescent—
What goes
Unseen
Is at the very
Root of ourselves.
Distance can
Distort our deepest
Sense
Of who
We are,
Leave us
Warped
& wasted
As winter's
Wind. We will
Not walk
From what
We've borne.
We would
Keep it
For a while.
Sit silent &

Swinging on its branches
Like a child
Refusing to come
Home. We would
Keep,
We would
Weep,
Knowing how
We would
Again
Give up
Our world
For this one.

CALL US

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Read by the author.

Grant us this day
Bruising the make of us.

At times over half of our bodies
Are not our own,

Our persons made vessel
For nonhuman cells.

To them we are
A boat of a being,

Essential.
A country,

A continent,
A planet.

A human
Microbiome is all the writhing forms on
& inside this body
Drafted under our life.

We are not me—
We are we.

Call us
What we carry.

LUCENT

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Read by the author.

What would we seem, stripped down
Like a wintered tree.
Glossy scabs, tight-raised skin,
These can look silver in certain moonlights.
In other words,
Our scars are the brightest
Parts of us.

* * *

The crescent moon,
The night's lucent lesion.
We are felled oaks beneath it,
Branches full of empty.
Look closer.
What we share is more
Than what we've shed.

* * *

& what we share is the bark, the bones.
Paleontologists, from one fossilized femur,
Can dream up a species,
Make-believe a body
Where there was none.
Our remnants are revelation,
Our requiem as raptus.
When we bend into dirt
We're truth preserved
Without our skin.

* * *

Lumen means both the cavity
Of an organ, literally an opening,
& a unit of luminous flux,
Literally, a measurement of how lit
The source is. Illuminate us.
That is, we, too,
Are this bodied unit of flare,
The gap for lux to breach.

* * *

Sorry, must've been the light
Playing tricks on us, we say,
Knuckling our eyelids.
But perhaps it is we who make
Falsities of luminescence—
Our shadows playing tricks on stars.
Every time their gazes tug down,
They think us monsters, then men,
Predators, then persons again,
Beasts, then beings,
Horrors, & then humans.
Of all the stars the most beautiful
Is nothing more than a monster,
Just as starved & stranded as we are.

BACK TO THE PAST

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

Read by the author.

At times even blessings will bleed us.

There are some who lost their lives
& those who were lost from ours,

Who we might now reënter,
All our someones summoned softly.

The closest we get to time travel
Is our fears softening,

Our hurts unclenching,
As we become more akin

To kin, as we return
To who we were

Before we actually were
Anything or anyone—

That is, when we were born unhating
& unhindered, howling wetly

With everything we could yet become.
To travel back in time is to remember

When all we knew of ourselves was love.

This excerpt is drawn from “[Call Us What We Carry](#),” by Amanda Gorman, and her readings from the [audiobook edition](#), out in December from Penguin Random House.

Profiles

- [On “Succession,” Jeremy Strong Doesn’t Get the Joke](#)

“I take him as seriously as I take my own life,” he says of his character, Kendall Roy.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

Content

This content can also be viewed on the site it [originates](#) from.

When Jeremy Strong was a teen-ager, in suburban Massachusetts, he had three posters thumbtacked to his bedroom wall: Daniel Day-Lewis in “My Left Foot,” Al Pacino in “Dog Day Afternoon,” and Dustin Hoffman in “Rain Man.” These weren’t just his favorite actors: their careers were a road map that he followed obsessively, like Eve Harrington casing out a trio of Margo Channings. He read interviews that his heroes gave and, later, managed to get crew jobs on their movies. By his early twenties, he had worked for all three men, and had adopted elements of their full-immersion acting methods. By his mid-thirties, after fifteen years of hustling in the industry, he’d had minor roles in a string of A-list films: “Lincoln,” “Zero Dark Thirty,” “Selma,” and “The Big Short.” He’d played a staffer in both the nineteenth-century White House and the twenty-first-century C.I.A. But, as he approached forty, he felt that his master plan wasn’t panning out—where was his Benjamin Braddock, his Michael Corleone?

“You come to New York, and you’re doing Off Off Broadway plays, and you are in the wilderness,” Strong told me, of his early career. “Your focus just becomes about the work and trying each time to go to some inner ledge. And you get used to people not noticing.”

Then it happened. In 2016, Kathryn Bigelow, the Oscar-winning director of “The Hurt Locker,” cast him in a big role, as a National Guardsman in her film “Detroit.” Around the same time, Strong had lunch with Adam McKay, who had directed him as a financial analyst in “The Big Short.” McKay said that he was executive-producing a new HBO show called “Succession,” which he described to Strong as a “King Lear” for the media-industrial complex. McKay gave him the pilot script and said, “Tell me what role you connect with.” Strong picked Roman Roy, the wisecracking youngest son of Logan Roy, a Rupert Murdoch-like media titan. “I thought, Oh, wow,

Roman is such a cool part,” Strong said. “He’s, like, this bon-vivant prick. I could do something that I hadn’t done before.”

That August, Strong, who was living in Los Angeles with his fiancée, went to film “Detroit.” He had done deep research for the role, watching military documentaries and practicing marksmanship at a shooting range. He arranged to miss part of his wedding-week festivities for the filming. But, after one day, Bigelow fired him. “I was just not the character that she had in her mind,” Strong said. “It was a devastating experience.” (Bigelow says that the character wasn’t working in the story; after Strong pleaded with her, she came up with another part for him, as an attorney.) Then he flew to Denmark to get married, staying at a castle called Dragsholm Slot. That’s when he got the call that the “Succession” people had cast Kieran Culkin as Roman.

[**Read More**](#)

An interview with J. Smith-Cameron, who plays Gerri on “Succession.”

Evidently, the role hadn’t been McKay’s to give. Strong tried to let go of the fantasy he had pursued single-mindedly for decades. But the show’s creator, Jesse Armstrong, agreed to audition him for the role of Kendall Roy, the moody middle son and Logan’s heir apparent. “I’ve always felt like an outsider with a fire in my belly,” Strong told me. “And so the disappointment and the feeling of being thwarted—it only sharpened my need and hunger. I went in with a vengeance.” He tore through books about corporate gamesmanship, including Michael Wolff’s biography of Rupert Murdoch, and cherry-picked details he liked; apparently, Murdoch’s son James ties his shoes extremely tightly, which told Strong something about his “inner tensile strength.”

At the audition, Strong, his shoes tied tight, read a scene between Kendall and the C.E.O. of a startup that he’s trying to acquire. Armstrong was skeptical. He asked Strong to “loosen the language,” and the scene transformed. “It was about, like, Beastie Boys-ing it up,” Strong recalled. “I was missing the patois of bro-speak.” By the end of the day, he had the part.

Kendall is the show’s dark prince, a would-be mogul puffed up with false bravado. He is often ridiculous in his self-seriousness, especially when he’s

trying to dominate his indomitable father. Strong was perfectly cast: a background player who had spent his life aspiring, and often maneuvering, to fill the shoes of his acting gods. “Kendall desperately wants it to be his turn,” Strong said. Last year, he won an Emmy Award for the role.

Strong, who is now forty-two, has the hangdog face of someone who wasn’t destined for stardom. But his mild appearance belies a relentless, sometimes preening intensity. He speaks with a slow, deliberate cadence, especially when talking about acting, which he does with a monk-like solemnity. “To me, the stakes are life and death,” he told me, about playing Kendall. “I take him as seriously as I take my own life.” He does not find the character funny, which is probably why he’s so funny in the role.



“I just realized—I’m indifferent to landscape.”
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

When I asked Strong about the rap that Kendall performs in Season 2, at a gala for his father—a top contender for Kendall’s most cringeworthy moment—he gave an unsmiling answer about Raskolnikov, referencing Kendall’s “monstrous pain.” Kieran Culkin told me, “After the first season, he said something to me like, ‘I’m worried that people might think that the show is a comedy.’ And I said, ‘I think the show *is* a comedy.’ He thought I was kidding.” Part of the appeal of “Succession” is its amalgam of drama and bone-dry satire. When I told Strong that I, too, thought of the show as a dark comedy, he looked at me with incomprehension and asked, “In the

sense that, like, Chekhov is comedy?” No, I said, in the sense that it’s funny. “That’s exactly why we cast Jeremy in that role,” McKay told me. “Because he’s not playing it like a comedy. He’s playing it like he’s Hamlet.”

Actors try to find the real in the make-believe, but anyone who has worked with Strong will tell you that he goes to unusual lengths. Last year, he played the Yippie activist Jerry Rubin in Aaron Sorkin’s film “The Trial of the Chicago 7.” While shooting the 1968 protest scenes, Strong asked a stunt coördinator to rough him up; he also requested to be sprayed with real tear gas. “I don’t like saying no to Jeremy,” Sorkin told me. “But there were two hundred people in that scene and another seventy on the crew, so I declined to spray them with poison gas.” Between takes of the trial scenes, in which the Yippies mock Judge Julius Hoffman, played by Frank Langella, Strong would read aloud from Langella’s memoir in silly voices, and he put a remote-controlled fart machine below the judge’s chair. “Every once in a while, I’d say, ‘Great. Let’s do it again, and this time, Jeremy, maybe don’t play the kazoo in the middle of Frank Langella’s monologue,’ ” Sorkin said.

Strong has always worked this way. In his twenties, he was an assistant to the playwright Wendy Wasserstein, typing up her manuscripts. At night, he performed a one-man play by Conor McPherson in a tiny midtown bar, playing an alcoholic Irishman. Wasserstein discovered that Strong was spending a lot of time with her Irish doorman, studying his accent. Before Wasserstein died, in 2006—Strong was one of the few people who knew that she had lymphoma—she thought of writing a play based on him, titled “Enter Doorman.”

This fall, Strong was shooting James Gray’s film “Armageddon Time,” playing a plumber based on the director’s father. Strong let his hair return to its natural gray—it’s darkened for “Succession”—and sent me videos of himself shadowing a real handyman for research, repeating back terms like “flare nuts” in a honking Queens accent. Costumes and props are like talismans for him. In 2012, he played a possible victim of childhood sexual abuse in Amy Herzog’s “The Great God Pan,” at Playwrights Horizons. “There was a shirt he wore that was really important for him, and for compositional reasons we wanted to try it in a different color,” Herzog told me. “I remember him saying that the shirt he was wearing had functioned as his armor, and this new shirt wasn’t like armor.” They let him keep the shirt.

Strong's dedication strikes some collaborators as impressive, others as self-indulgent. "All I know is, he crosses the Rubicon," Robert Downey, Jr., told me. In 2014, Strong played Downey's mentally disabled brother in "The Judge." (To prepare, he spent time with an autistic person, as Hoffman had for "Rain Man.") When Downey shot a funeral scene, Strong paced around the set weeping loudly, even though he wasn't called that day. He asked for personalized props that weren't in the script, including a family photo album. "It was almost swatting him away like he was an annoying gnat—I had bigger things to deal with," a member of the design team recalled.

"I think you have to go through whatever the ordeal is that the character has to go through," Strong told me. This extreme approach—Robert De Niro shaving down his teeth for "Cape Fear," Leonardo DiCaprio eating raw bison liver for "The Revenant"—is often described as Method acting, a much abused term that, in its classic sense, involves summoning emotions from personal experience and projecting them onto a character. Strong does not consider himself a Method actor. Far from mining his own life, he practices what he calls "identity diffusion." "If I have any method at all, it is simply this: to clear away anything—anything—that is not the character and the circumstances of the scene," he explained. "And usually that means clearing away almost everything around and inside you, so that you can be a more complete vessel for the work at hand."

Talking about his process, he quoted the jazz pianist Keith Jarrett: "I connect every music-making experience I have, including every day here in the studio, with a great power, and if I do not surrender to it nothing happens." During our conversations, Strong cited bits of wisdom from Carl Jung, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Karl Ove Knausgaard (he is a "My Struggle" superfan), Robert Duvall, Meryl Streep, Harold Pinter ("The more acute the experience, the less articulate its expression"), the Danish filmmaker Tobias Lindholm, T. S. Eliot, Gustave Flaubert, and old proverbs ("When fishermen cannot go to sea, they mend their nets"). When I noted that he was a sponge for quotations, he turned grave and said, "I'm not a religious person, but I think I've concocted my own book of hymns."

We first sat down in April, at a restaurant in Williamsburg. Strong, an avowed foodie, seemed to know everyone who worked there. He was midway through shooting Season 3, and he wore Kendall's brown corduroy

jacket everywhere; Strong often borrows items from the wardrobe department, to help “elide the line” between fiction and life. He also wore a chain of good-luck charms that looked like dog tags, including one in the shape of the BT Tower, in London, which he used to gaze at from the window of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, where he took classes as an eighteen-year-old. “It was like a prayer I had, not knowing if I would have the courage to be an actor,” he told me, over trout almandine. He went on, “I can’t work in a way that feels like I’m making a television show. I need, for whatever reason, to believe that it’s real and commit myself to that sense of belief.”

Later, he told me that his recounting of his “Succession” audition had been colored by Kendall. “The narrative was: I’m determined, I’m a fighter, I’m full of doubt,” he said. “And those things are all true of Kendall. I think they’re maybe true of me, but they’re not, maybe, what I would have talked about if I weren’t in the middle of working.” I began to wonder if I’d been interviewing an actor playing Kendall Roy or a character impersonating Jeremy Strong.

One spring morning, Strong was outside the Woolworth Building, in lower Manhattan, filming a short scene between Kendall and his ex-wife, Rava, played by Natalie Gold. Kendall is picking up his two small children to take them to Italy when Rava drops some unnerving news: the kids have told her that their nanny screams at them and steals money from wallets. Like “Succession” at its best, the scene is full of passive-aggressive parries. “Great,” Kendall says, before ushering the kids into a Suburban. “You just planted fire ants in my brain.”

On the sidewalk, Jesse Armstrong hovered behind a monitor. “You’re seeing Kendall right at the end of the season, and it’s been a long and painful process,” he explained. In the Season 2 cliffhanger, Kendall denounces his father at a press conference, and he begins Season 3 on a messianic high. Before the season started shooting, Strong was vacationing in Bora Bora and rode a Fliteboard, a motorized surfboard that provides a precarious sense of flight. He brought that sensation to Kendall, he told me: “He thinks he’s flying, but he’s about to fall any second.” By the eighth episode, when he’s off to Italy, his legal revolt against his father has sputtered. Armstrong told

me, “That high Kendall had, the possibility of change, has dwindled, too. So he’s not in a great place.”

Strong walked through the scene with Gold, without emoting. Then he disappeared. He often refuses to rehearse—“I want every scene to feel like I’m encountering a bear in the woods”—despite the wishes of his fellow-actors. “It’s hard for me to actually describe his process, because I don’t really see it,” Kieran Culkin said. “He puts himself in a bubble.” Before I interviewed his castmates, Strong warned me, “I don’t know how popular the way I work is amongst our troupe.” Since Kendall is the black sheep of a warring family, Strong’s self-alienation may be a way of creating tension onscreen. Though the cast is generally loose and collegial, Strong, during Season 2, began going to the makeup trailer only when no other actors were there—“which I remember making everyone else roll their eyes,” a cast member told me.

When I asked Brian Cox, who plays Logan, the patriarch, to describe Strong’s process, he struck a note of fatherly concern. “The result that Jeremy gets is always pretty tremendous,” he said. “I just worry about what he does to himself. I worry about the crises he puts himself through in order to prepare.” Cox, a classically trained British stage actor, has a “turn it on, turn it off” approach to acting, and his relationship with Strong recalls a famous story about Laurence Olivier working with Dustin Hoffman on the 1976 film “Marathon Man.” On learning that Hoffman had stayed up partying for three nights before a scene in which he had to appear sleep-deprived, Olivier said, “My dear boy, why don’t you try acting?” Cox told me, “Actors are funny creatures. I’ve worked with intense actors before. It’s a particularly American disease, I think, this inability to separate yourself off while you’re doing the job.”

If Strong approaches his role as if it were Hamlet, Culkin plays Roman like an insult comic. “The way Jeremy put it to me is that, like, you get in the ring, you do the scene, and at the end each actor goes to their corner,” Culkin told me. “I’m, like, This isn’t a battle. This is a dance.” It’s possible that the mishmash of approaches adds to the sense of familial unease. Or maybe not. Culkin said, of Strong’s self-isolation, “That might be something that helps him. I can tell you that it doesn’t help me.” Recently, Strong, concerned about press reports suggesting that he was “difficult,” sent me a

text message saying, “I don’t particularly think ease or even accord are virtues in creative work, and sometimes there must even be room for necessary roughness, within the boundaries dictated by the work.”

At the Woolworth Building, Strong reappeared in Kendall’s fleece and power sunglasses. He consulted with Armstrong: shades or no shades? Armstrong suggested that he whip them off mid-scene, but Strong thought that would feel phony. “If we’re holding a mirror up to nature, then let’s not contrive things,” he said later. For Strong, such minutiae are important enough to slam the brakes on a shoot. “Whatever gets you through the night,” Armstrong told me. Between takes, a writer named Will Tracy recalled an earlier scene, which called for Kendall to meet a reporter over a Waldorf salad: “Jeremy said, ‘A Waldorf salad’s way too old-school. That’s something my dad would eat. It should be a fennel salad with a light vinaigrette.’” They changed the salad.

In the Rava scene, Kendall complains about his girlfriend, Naomi. During one take, Strong threw in a new line: “She, uh, thinks she’s on the ‘attractive edge of a co-dependent black hole,’ whatever the fuck that means.” The phrase was lifted from an e-mail that Armstrong had sent him about Kendall and Naomi’s relationship. Strong hadn’t asked about repurposing it on camera. “Better to ask forgiveness than to ask permission,” he told me afterward. Ad-libbing is permitted on “Succession,” but Strong’s improvisations often strike his co-stars as prepared speeches. Culkin recalled a scene from Season 1, with the two of them and Sarah Snook, who plays their sister, Shiv. The family is in New Mexico for group therapy, and Kendall, a recovering addict, goes on a bender. (Strong occasionally gets tipsy for scenes in which Kendall falls off the wagon.)

“He kept doing this speech that he had sort of written,” Culkin said. “All I remember is him saying ‘rootin’-tootin’ ’ a lot. By the third take, he starts that speech again, and Snook looks at him, as Shiv, and goes, ‘Shut. Up. Kendall.’”

When Strong was done with the Rava scene, which was ultimately cut, we walked west on Park Place. At a corner, he ripped up his script pages and tossed them in a trash can. “This is my favorite part of work,” he said. “It’s

like a stay of execution every time you finish a scene and it goes O.K., and you can tear it up and let it go.”

I first met Strong in the summer of 2003, just after graduating from Yale, where I was two years behind him and had seen him act in student plays. I got an internship at a film producer’s office, where Strong, then a day-jobbing theatre actor, worked as an assistant. The producer, an Israeli woman, would scream expletives into her phone all day, while the staff worked on preproduction for an indie film called “The Ballad of Jack and Rose.” Strong taught me how to use the copy machine.

As it turned out, “The Ballad of Jack and Rose” would change his life. The film, directed by Rebecca Miller, starred Miller’s husband, Daniel Day-Lewis, as an aging hippie living on an abandoned commune. Strong got himself hired as Day-Lewis’s assistant for the shoot, on Prince Edward Island. Day-Lewis was already legendary for his immersion techniques: staying in character between takes, building his own canoe for “The Last of the Mohicans.” He arrived in Canada early and helped the crew construct the commune houses, since his character would have built them. (After he botched a window installation, the crew assigned him a dining-room table.) During the shoot, Day-Lewis lived in his own cottage, away from his family. Since his character wastes away from a heart ailment in the course of the film, he starved himself, eating a meagre vegan diet, and became so emaciated that Miller was alarmed.



Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

Strong had driven up in his father's car. Strapped in the passenger seat was Day-Lewis's prop mandolin, which Strong recalled handling "like a knight errant guarding a relic." Strong had turned down a chance to act at the Williamstown Theatre Festival, which, he said, felt in some ways like "an abdication of my path." But he realized that this was an opportunity to be "the sorcerer's apprentice." He told me, "My job was essentially a disappearing act, to be unobtrusive and on hand and play along with the game of it. I kept a diary, and, when I looked at it once, later, the thing that was clear was that my antennae were completely alight and absorbent."

He got so engrossed in his menial tasks that some of the crew cruelly nicknamed him Cletus, after the redneck character on "The Simpsons." "His whole brain was focussed on Daniel Day-Lewis," one person recalled. "I never really saw him unless he was standing outside Daniel's trailer." Miller remembered that Strong bought a lot of nuts and stashed them in Day-Lewis's refrigerator, "when Daniel was trying to starve himself to death. He was so concerned about him getting thinner and thinner that he was feeding him up." Strong remembered the nut story differently, but, out of fealty to Day-Lewis, who is fiercely private, he would not elaborate.

Day-Lewis became an important mentor. Strong said, "At the end of the summer, he wrote me a note that I have still, that contains many of what

have become my most deeply held precepts and beliefs about this work, and which I have treasured and will treasure until I die.” (Strong wouldn’t disclose what was in it.) Nearly a decade later, he was cast opposite Day-Lewis in “Lincoln,” as John Nicolay, the President’s personal secretary. Nicolay was “utterly devoted to Lincoln,” Strong said. “Those were easy shoes to fill.” When Strong won his Emmy, last fall, he wore a floppy taupe bow tied loosely around his neck—nearly identical to the black bow that Day-Lewis wore to accept his Oscar for “My Left Foot.”

Strong’s association with Day-Lewis had actually started before “Jack and Rose,” when he still had the poster shrine in his bedroom. When he was sixteen, he got a job in the greenery department of “The Crucible,” starring Day-Lewis, which was filming near where Strong lived. For one scene, he held a branch outside a window. In high school, Strong also interned for the editor of “Looking for Richard,” released in 1996, in which Al Pacino ruminates on playing Richard III, and he worked in the sound department on Steven Spielberg’s historical drama “Amistad,” for which he held a boom mike while Anthony Hopkins gave a speech as John Quincy Adams. When I asked how he got these jobs as a teen-ager, without connections, Strong said, “I just wrote letters.”

Unlike the ultra-privileged Roys, Strong grew up working class, in Boston. His father, David, worked in juvenile jails. His mother, Maureen, was a hospice nurse and a spiritual seeker; she would bring Strong and his younger brother (who now works for Zoom) to ashrams, or to an African Methodist Episcopal Church in Cambridge, where they were among the only white congregants. Until Strong was ten, the family lived in a rough neighborhood in Jamaica Plain. “My parents felt tremendous economic pressure, just trying to survive and tread water,” he said. “Often, it was somewhere I just wanted to get out of.” They kept a canoe on cinder blocks in the back yard; since actual vacations were a “pipe dream,” the boys would sit in the canoe and take imaginary trips.

In order to send their kids to better public schools, his parents moved the family to the suburb of Sudbury, which came as a culture shock. “I had never seen a Mercedes-Benz before,” Strong recalled. “It was a kind of country-club town where we didn’t belong to the country club.” To fit in, he did some quick character work, trading his Chicago Bulls jerseys and gold

chains for J.Crew polo shirts. But the biggest change was that he got involved in Act/Tunes, a children's theatre group, where, starting in fifth grade, he acted in musicals, including "Oliver!," in which he played the Artful Dodger. His father picked up extra shifts as a security guard in order to finance a trip to L.A. Father and son stayed at the Oakwood apartments and paid a scammy manager to help Jeremy get auditions. Then they came home.

One of the other kids in Act/Tunes was the older sister of Chris Evans, the future Captain America. "I was probably nine, ten, going to my sister's shows, and even then thinking, Damn, this kid is great!" Evans said, about Strong. He later went to Strong's high school, and still speaks about him with the awe of a freshman gaping at an upperclassman: "He was a little bit of a celebrity in my mind." In "A Midsummer Night's Dream," Strong played Bottom to Evans's Demetrius, and Evans has vivid memories of Strong playing identical twins in a Goldoni farce. "The cast would poke their heads through the curtain, just to watch him do his thing," Evans said. "In the end, one of his characters drinks poison. I think every night the death scene grew by about thirty seconds."

Strong applied to colleges with a recommendation letter from DreamWorks, the studio that produced "Amistad," and got a scholarship to Yale. He thought he would major in theatre studies, but, on the first day of Yale's intro-to-acting class, the professor talked about Stanislavski and drew diagrams of circles of energy. "Something in me just shut down," Strong said. "I remember feeling, I need to run from this and protect whatever inchoate instinct I might have." He majored in English instead, while starring in extracurricular productions of "American Buffalo," "Hughie," and "The Indian Wants the Bronx." These were all plays that Pacino had done, as if Strong were checking off boxes on his theatrical résumé. During his junior year, Strong even managed to arrange for Pacino to come to campus to teach a master class. The heavily promoted visit was largely sponsored by the Yale Dramat, the school's undergraduate theatre group.

Many alumni recall the visit as a debacle. Pacino's acting advice was vague. Strong had appointed himself the intermediary between the Dramat and Pacino's office, and the costs of town cars, posters, and a celebratory dinner blew up the budget. To lure Pacino, Strong had persuaded the Dramat to

concoct a prestigious-sounding award, and the students commissioned a pewter chalice from Mory's, a New Haven tavern, on which the winners' names would be engraved each year. But Pacino took the chalice home, adding to the enormous bill. "Basically, in order for Jeremy to have his fantasy of meeting Al Pacino play out, he nearly bankrupted a hundred-year-old college-theatre company," an alumnus said. "But he had one wonderful night of getting to hang out with Al Pacino."

Strong admits to being a "rogue agent" in the Pacino affair, but he doesn't remember the cost overruns. "I never really felt accepted by the Dramat community," he told me. Within the soap-opera bubble of college theatre, his sheer determination was polarizing. "You always had the feeling that he was operating on some level that was past the level that you were at," another classmate recalled. "I'd never met anyone else at Yale with that careerist drive." (Their graduating class included Ron DeSantis, the current governor of Florida.) Other peers recall a more ingenuous superstriver. One summer, Strong and five classmates went to L.A., where he had wangled an internship at the production office of Dustin Hoffman, hero No. 3. Strong didn't have a car, so he got a colleague to loan him a prop Mercedes with a hole in the floor. On his first payday, a friend recalled, "Jeremy was, like, 'Everybody, we're going shopping!' We went to Rodeo Drive, and he blew his whole paycheck on two shirts." (Strong, citing his "fanatically fastidious aesthetic," said that he was more likely to have shopped at Maxfield.)

Strong moved to New York three weeks before 9/11. He lived in a tiny apartment in SoHo and waited tables at the restaurant downstairs. Friends remember the apartment as comically austere, with a mattress on the floor, piles of books and scripts, and a closet of incongruously high-end clothes; he had a Dries Van Noten suit and a Costume National hoodie that he wore to shreds, but few essentials. Strong said that he was living in what Sir Francis Bacon called "gilded squalor." In addition to working at the restaurant, he was a room-service waiter at a hotel, and he shredded documents as a temp for a construction company. He would go to a FedEx store and cadge free cardboard envelopes, slip in head shots and tapes of monologues, and hand-deliver them to agencies. "The first year in New York was really hard," he told me. "I don't think I had any auditions. It was this feeling of being cut off from your oxygen supply."

At some point, Chris Evans, who had broken out with “Not Another Teen Movie,” got a call from Strong, who was looking for help getting representation. “I said, ‘Holy shit, Jeremy! First of all, I can’t believe that. Second of all, this is your lucky day,’ ” Evans told me. He had Strong meet his agent at C.A.A., but the guy never followed up; Hollywood is made for Chris Evanses, not Jeremy Strongs. It wasn’t until the television renaissance of the past twenty years that the line between stars and character actors blurred, elevating such idiosyncratic performers as Adam Driver and Elisabeth Moss, just as the New Hollywood of the sixties and seventies had produced Pacino and Hoffman.

The one place where Strong found creative fulfillment was Williamstown, the summer-theatre haven in the Berkshires. In 2002, he got a slot in the festival’s non-Equity troupe of ten young actors. “We were unpacking our bags, and Jeremy had, like, four or five garments—but all of them were, like, Prada,” a member who roomed with him recalled. Strong returned to Williamstown two years later. Michelle Williams, who had just fallen in love with Heath Ledger on the set of “Brokeback Mountain,” was performing in “The Cherry Orchard,” and Strong got close to her. Williams recalls Strong coaching her in iambic pentameter for a Shakespeare audition and goofing around with her “Cherry Orchard” castmates Jessica Chastain and Chris Messina. “We would go to parks after dark and roll down hills in our clothes until we were sopping wet,” Williams said.

Several years later, just after Ledger died, Strong was broke and moved into Williams’s town house, in Boerum Hill, a social hub that he nicknamed Fort Awesome. He lived there rent-free, on and off, for more than three years. “There was an emptiness in the house,” Williams told me. “So people moved in.” She said that Strong lived in a basement room with her great-grandmother’s player piano: “He had this little bed and stacks and stacks of books about Lincoln.” Friends were amazed by the situation. “He would invite us to parties over there,” the Williamstown roommate said. “I was, like, ‘How the fuck did you pull this off?’ He’s living in a luxury town house with a movie star!”

Some of Strong’s acquaintances see his ability to attach himself like a remora to famous actors as part of his passion for the craft; others see it as blatant networking. I told Strong that I hoped to interview some of his

collaborators. Usually, this requires breaching layers of handlers, but Strong took control, giving his famous friends my phone number and instructing them to contact me. One day, I was at an A.T.M. and got a call from Matthew McConaughey. “This guy’s *committed*,” he said.

The Real C.E.O. of “Succession”

Read a Profile of Jesse Armstrong, the show’s creator.

By the mid-aughts, Strong was making headway Off Broadway. He played a soldier in John Patrick Shanley’s “Defiance” (he joined weapons exercises at Camp Lejeune, in North Carolina), and a young Spinoza in David Ives’s “New Jerusalem” (he binged on seventeenth-century Dutch philosophy). In 2008, an actor in the Public Theatre’s “Conversations in Tusculum” had a family emergency, and Strong was asked to understudy on six hours’ notice. He went onstage with a script, then returned the next night, off book. The *Times* critic Ben Brantley wrote that Strong was “excellent,” which helped him get an agent at I.C.M. But his plans to become the next Day-Lewis were drifting. For a while, he lived in the Hollywood Hills, where, driving home on Sunset Boulevard, he would pass a billboard that read “*WHAT THE SHREK JUST HAPPENED?*” He was thirty-one and asking himself the same question. Six years later, when he was cast in “Succession,” he felt, he told me, “a sense of inevitability.”

I met Strong in Rome in July, a week after he’d wrapped the third season of “Succession,” which concludes with a family wedding in Tuscany. (The season finale airs this week.) Having lived Kendall’s angst for nine months, he was in the process of unburdening himself. He was finally able to appreciate the beauty of Italy, he told me over salumi, since Kendall would have been too jaded to notice: “Another day, another villa.” (Presumably, this had also dampened a trip he took earlier in the summer, with Robert Downey, Jr., and their families, to a villa owned by Sting and Trudie Styler.) On a drive down to the Amalfi Coast, where he went to decompress, he had listened to the Tom Waits song “Who Are You.” Discussing Kendall, he said, “It’s weird saying his name in the third person.”

Strong had sent me text messages from Italy, including a poem by Cecil Day-Lewis (“Daniel’s dad”), and thoughts on the “invisible work” of acting. Since I’d seen him in New York, he had shaved his head, twice—once as

Kendall and once as himself. On his phone, he showed me photos of Jack Dorsey, the co-founder of Twitter, both clean-shaven and with a Rasputin beard. Strong thought that Kendall should go through a similar “physical evolution,” he said, citing the third line of Dante’s Inferno. (“The straight road had been lost sight of.”) No one, Strong included, wanted a clichéd scene of Kendall staring into the mirror with a razor, so the transformation took place off camera. Nevertheless, when a stylist shaved his head, Strong went silent, to experience the moment as part of Kendall’s backstory. After the season wrapped, he shaved his head again, as an exorcism.



“Every gig now is about luring sailors to their deaths—remember when it used to be about the music?”
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

The next morning, we set out for the airport. Strong and his wife, Emma Wall, who was born in Denmark, have apartments in Brooklyn and Copenhagen, and during the pandemic they bought a summer house in Tisvilde, a seaside town north of Copenhagen. Strong’s family was awaiting him there. There hadn’t been much time for sightseeing in Rome, so our driver circled past the Colosseum, shouting out fun facts—“Five hundred before Christ was built the first sewer system!”—as Strong, trying to describe a scene from “Succession,” quoted passages from “The Waste Land.”

As we passed through airport security, Strong set off the metal detector. He stepped back and took off his lucky-charm necklace. It beeped again. He

took off his belt. It beeped a third time. “I have a leg brace,” he explained to a security guy, and lifted his pants leg. After getting patted down, he told me that he had hurt himself on set. “I jumped off a stage, thinking I could fly, but it turns out I can’t,” he said. “It made sense in the moment, though.” In the scene, Kendall is at the Shed, in Hudson Yards, planning his fortieth-birthday party. During one take, in a moment of “exultant anticipation,” Strong leaped off a five-foot-high platform and landed in hard Gucci shoes, impacting his femur and his tibia. (The take was not used.) This was not his first “*Succession*” injury. In Season 1, Kendall gets stuck in traffic on the way to a board meeting and sprints through the streets. Strong wanted to be sweaty and breathless for each take, and he fractured his left foot running in Tom Ford dress shoes. “It’s the cost to himself that worries me,” Brian Cox told me. “I just feel that he just has to be kinder to himself, and therefore has to be a bit kinder to everybody else.”

Before the flight, Strong popped a Xanax; he gets anxious flying, which he attributes to the “total surrender of control.” As we boarded, an attendant told him that his cloth mask was unacceptable. With ten minutes until the gate closed, he raced through the terminal looking for a surgical mask. He found a vending machine, but the instructions were in Italian. When he finally figured it out, the mask got stuck in the rotating dispenser. He tried tilting the machine, but then told himself to keep cool. He ran into a candy store, which carried child-size surgical masks. He returned to the gate wearing a tiny sherbet-colored square.

At seven that evening, we touched down in Copenhagen. Strong was relieved to be returning to Tisvilde. “I don’t feel stress there,” he said in the car. “I don’t feel colonized by all the wanting and needing. If I’m in L.A. or New York, I feel so encumbered by the weight of the profession that I’m in. And ambition.” But, before leaving the city to join his family, he wanted a hamburger. Noma’s burger offshoot was closed, so he looked up the nearest location of Gasoline Grill, a chain that makes his second-favorite burger in Copenhagen. The Web site said that the burgers were available until eleven, or until they sold out. The driver brought us to the Vesterport train station, where there was a Gasoline Grill kiosk on the platform—but the woman there said that they were all gone. “See, now I’m determined,” Strong said.

We drove to another location, at a gas station. No dice. Foiled in his quest for the second-best burger in Copenhagen, he got back in the car and slumped his head. It was getting dark, so he directed the driver toward Tisvilde. “It does illustrate a good point,” he said. “Which is that all drama is about wanting something very badly and not getting what you want.”

The next morning, I met Strong at his house in Tisvilde, the converted laundry building of a now demolished turn-of-the-century hotel. He and Wall had begun the pandemic at her family’s farmhouse, in the Danish countryside, where they chopped wood and vacuumed up spiders. Craving civilization, Strong found Tisvilde on Google Earth. They rented the laundry building on Airbnb, and he wound up buying it. Since then, new floorboards had been installed incorrectly and were now warped and ridging up, like a mountain range.

We walked to the beach to meet up with Strong’s wife and kids. Tisvilde is a laid-back place, full of thatched roofs that look like shaggy creatures. Strong was approached by bands of blond teen-age boys who recognized him from “The Gentlemen,” a Guy Ritchie gangster flick that Strong did not care to discuss on the record. At the beach, Wall, who was eight months pregnant, was playing with their two small daughters. Strong, happily free of Kendall, helped build sandcastles and jumped in the water. He admits to struggling with work-life balance. “I don’t know if I even believe in balance,” he told me. “I believe in extremity.”

He had met Wall, an even-tempered child psychiatrist, at a party in New York during Hurricane Sandy. When I asked her if she sensed a difference in her husband while he was playing Kendall, she said, “He does a really good job of maintaining what he’s doing but also creating a space for the family and a normal life.” Strong, who was towelling off, overheard. Later, he told me that her answer had surprised him. “I think she feels a sort of energy shift,” he said. “But it does make me feel like I’m living a double life.” He brought up the espionage term “the legend,” the fake biography that a spy memorizes before assuming a phony identity. “You have to commit to your legend,” he said, of acting. “At the time, I’m not sure which one is more real. Am I committing to the legend at home, where I’m the father and the husband, or the legend at work?”

He walked me to a nearby forest, having picked up a macchiato in town. (A self-described “coffee snob,” he had travelled through Italy with his own grinder, and had beans delivered from a roastery in Aarhus.) The woods were thick with towering birches. Strong’s leg ached, but he insisted that we keep going. He asked if I had read the Milan Kundera novel “Slowness.” “You get here, and it forces you to decelerate,” he said.

We reached a rock engraved with the word *troldeskov*: troll forest. As we walked on, a mossy carpet appeared underfoot, and the trees became gnarled and gargoyle-like, deformed by the howling winds off the Kattegat sea. “They look like something in a Bosch painting,” Strong said. “They look anguished.” It seemed like a place where Dante might find a portal to the underworld.

We broke through to an empty beach. Strong stood on a dune and looked out to sea in a Byronic pose, clutching the fuchsia macchiato cup in one hand. I asked about the sense of “wanting” he had mentioned the evening before. “I think my life has been animated by wanting,” he said. “I felt like there was so much to prove, both to myself and to the community, for so long. But, in a way, I got that out of my system.” As we turned back to the troll forest, he added, “Now I feel like I’m up against myself in the ring.” ♦

More on Strong and the Series

- Is this the [best sitcom on television?](#)
- [J. Smith-Cameron](#) knows exactly what you think about Gerri.
- How the writer [Jesse Armstrong](#) keeps the billionaire Roy family trapped in its gilded cage.
- [A tribute to cousin Greg](#), the secret weapon of the series.
- [Piss and power](#) in the world of the Roys.
- No, James Murdoch [does not watch](#).
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Shouts & Murmurs

- [Going the Extra Eight Thousand Miles for You](#)

By [Meghana Indurti](#)

After working a hundred hours a week on top of navigating a new culture and country, immigrant parents may not always have the time or the energy to share Hallmark aphorisms. But, if they love you, these are the ways they'll let you know.

Silence

A picture is worth a thousand words, but silence from an immigrant parent after you've completed a task is worth a million. It means that you didn't do anything wrong—yet! Now go clean the garage; someone is coming over for lunch in sixteen weeks.

Fruit cut up and delivered to you on a plate, unsolicited

The less necessary it is to cut up the fruit, the deeper their love for you. If they're slicing bananas, you are the light of their lives.

Lack of physical touch

Physical touch may be an “official love language,” according to the Instagram Explore page, but trying to hug your stoic father at Patel Brothers is basically unacceptable P.D.A. Danny Tanner “Full House” hugs are science fiction.

Forcing you to do Kumon homework for three hours

That's called quality time, O.K.? Sure, you're not talking to each other, but your parents are sitting nearby, reading newspapers filled with misinformation and glaring at you every time you get up to pee, like they're Amazon floor managers. That's what love is all about.

Doing things you didn't ask them to do

Is your gas tank suddenly full? (With gas from Costco, of course.) Are there seventeen bags of Famous Amos chocolate-chip cookies (which you casually mentioned you liked in 2006) in the cupboard? Did your mom hand you fifty dollars for a cup of coffee, to “cover tax”? Did your parents angrily stuff Vaseline, Ziploc bags, and dish sponges into your purse? Accept these gestures, whether you already have several tubs of Vaseline or not. And don't you *dare* say thank you.

Bombarding your phone

An image of a flower with “Good morning” written on it in a serif font. Memes about Jesus. Forwarded texts on WhatsApp. Fifteen missed calls. Consider each a reminder that you’re in their thoughts. And when you do finally answer the phone, only to sit in silence for an hour while being berated about not having kids yet, what they’re trying to say is that you are their reason for existing.

Sending Google alerts about homicides in your area

“Your area” means anywhere within a three-hundred-mile radius of you. Similar to their asking for the *exact* time you will be home, this will do absolutely nothing to insure your safety, but it will make them feel better.

Roundabout questions

Immigrant parents, incapable of asking “How are you?,” will instead ask when you last had the oil changed in your car, or if you mailed in your tax return yet. Also: Have you eaten? Have you been incorporating enough milk into your diet? Whatever amount of milk you’ve been drinking, it’s wrong. If they really want you to open up, they’ll put on a movie from the sixties and explain the plot in excruciating detail until you interrupt them with an update on your relationship status.

Killing mosquitoes

Who else would murder for you? And who else would do it with a forty-two-hundred-volt tennis racquet? You can ask for no deeper love.

Arguing with you, then feeding you

It would be ideal if you were hungry every fifteen minutes so that they could feed you. And nothing makes people hungrier than a shouting match about politics.

Asking about a friend you haven’t thought of since the Bush Administration

How’s Corinne doing? You have no idea. They may not know the names of any of your current friends or your job title, but what their interest in Corinne really indicates is that they care about you. That’s right: it was never about Corinne.

Going the extra eight thousand miles for you

They left behind the only life they'd ever known to move to a foreign place called Paris, but in Ohio. They accept their new reality of not following the metric system and being served tea without milk in it. They said goodbye to their friends, family, and entire network to adapt to a culture where they must keep up with both the Kardashians and the Geico cinematic universe. They did all this just to give their kids the opportunities they never had—to grow up safely, go to a good school, and eat funnel cake at Six Flags. ♦

Smooth Operator Dept.

- Kenny G Stops Traffic on the Escalator

By [Sarah Larson](#)

A few hours before the local première of the new documentary “Listening to Kenny G,” its subject, Kenny G, the best-selling instrumentalist in American history, strolled around the shopping mall at Hudson Yards, the biggest mixed-use private real-estate development in American history, poised to delight passersby. He carried an instrument case and wore a snappy blue suit; as ever, his lush profusion of springy curls were neatly parted on the side. (“I know for a fact that if I cut my hair my career will go right down the toilet,” he says, in the film.) Near a garland-strewn escalator landing by a Uniqlo, he laid his case down, popped it open, and extracted a soprano saxophone—the same one, the documentary explains, that he’s played since high school, in the seventies. He did some confident improv, then segued into a smooth-jazzy “Deck the Halls.” Heads began to turn.



Kenny G illustration by João Fazenda

A young man from Brooklyn, whose parents were visiting from Georgia, waved. “Hey, Kenny!” he said cheerfully. Kenny nodded at them. As he finished “Deck the Halls,” he called after a woman with a riot of brown curls, wheeling a suitcase. “I like your hair!” he said. She didn’t notice. Another passerby, Liz Monte, was more impressed. “Oh, my goodness,” she whispered, with a slight Caribbean accent. “He was my first concert!” (Chicago, the nineties.) Monte, a massage therapist for the Milwaukee Bucks, was having a big week: “We’re here to play a game tonight; a couple

days ago we went to the White House and met the President.” Now she was off to Lululemon. “Thanks, Kenny!” she said, from the escalator. A security guard took a video selfie; Kenny G played some licks into his camera. Next, he surveyed the “ambience” of a glassy foyer by Tod’s, snapping his fingers to sample the acoustics. “Not bad!” he said. “It’s really more about the vibe.”

A rapid-fire soprano-sax “Over the Rainbow” riff filled the air, and a crowd circled the spectacle from a respectful distance, looking alternately excited and confused. A tourist in a green poncho, visiting from North Carolina, took a video for her superfan husband; a backpack-wearing schoolboy with his mother got a fist bump; two business-casual Londoners, “looking at a few things” in New York for work pertaining to an entertainment company in Saudi Arabia, didn’t realize that they were also looking at Kenny G. “That’s *mental*. Absolutely mental!” one said. “I *thought* he was awfully good.” A Hudson Yards employee nervously asked what was going on; she, too, was startled to behold Kenny G in the foyer. The gathering’s boldest attendee, a fluffy white dog named Katsu (“It means, like, little chicken-pork fried cutlets?” his owner said), trotted into the circle, cocked his head, and stared, mesmerized; then he bounced up and embraced Kenny G’s pant leg. The crowd laughed.

“Listening to Kenny G,” just released on HBO Max, is directed by Penny Lane, and styled as a romp through both his popularity—he near single-handedly instigated the genre of smooth jazz (“When you hear that word ‘easy listening,’ it almost sounds *bad*,” he says)—and his being popularly scoffed at, like a Fabio of music. (The critic Ben Ratliff describes Kenny G’s sound as “a corporate attempt to soothe my nerves”; in an old “SNL” joke about Kenny G’s Christmas album, Norm Macdonald says, “Happy Birthday, Jesus! Hope you like crap!”) A few biographical details are surprising: early gigs as a sideman for Barry White, Liberace (“We never really hung out,” he said), and the circus; a breakthrough “Tonight Show” spot; the ubiquity of his song “Going Home” in China, where it is played on P.A. systems to mark the end of the workday. What does he love about music? “I don’t know if I love music that much,” he says in the film—what he loves is practicing. And golf.

The impromptu Kenny G party concluded outside, near the Vessel. Another crowd formed; a courier wearing cat-ear headphones got off his skateboard and took a video. Kenny G played “Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star” to a baby in a stroller, who dozed off. (He’s got music that “makes the babies” and music that “puts them to sleep!” he says.) A young blond guy stopped in his tracks. “This is so dope,” he said. “I went to his concert way back in 2009, in Warsaw.” He was with his parents, who were visiting from Poland. Kenny G played “Songbird,” to oohs and ahs, thanked everyone, and smilingly made his way off, eager fans trailing him. “I pitched a Pied Piper Disney movie to Jeffrey Katzenberg once,” he mused, walking away. What did he hope viewers would take from his current movie? He thought for a second. “To inspire somebody who wants to be good at something,” he said. ♦

Tables for Two

- [Jonathan Waxman's Barbuto Lives On](#)

By [Shauna Lyon](#)

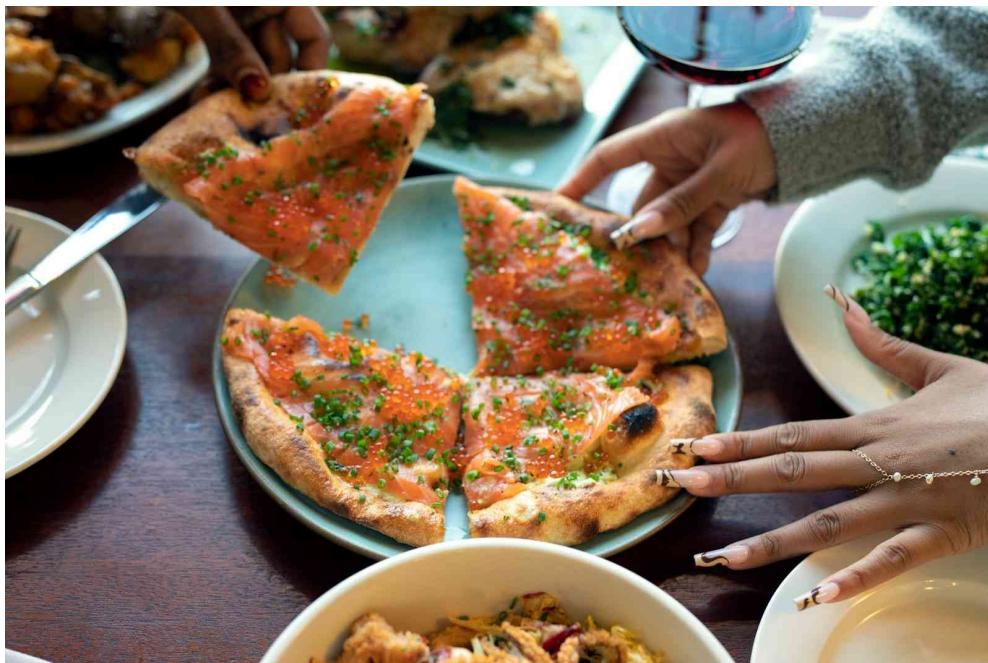
With the original Barbuto, Jonathan Waxman nailed the formula for a great neighborhood restaurant: cool location, lack of pretension, seasonal pastas, killer chicken. It opened in 2004, pre-meatpacking-district mania, on a quiet West Village corner below the photographer Fabrizio Ferri's Industria studio—it didn't hurt that models and celebrities might drop in after sessions—with garage doors that rolled up in clement weather and a chef's table in the tiny kitchen, open for all to see. What they saw was calm, genial Waxman himself, doing his thing at a double-decker oven created by the master oven-builder Nobile Attie, making the traditional cuisine of the Italian Riviera feel fresh.



Waxman's classic dishes, including Pollo al Forno and rosemary-strewn roast potatoes, remain on the menu.

When Barbuto was forced to close, in May, 2019, after the building was sold, a collective cry went up from neighborhood fixtures and restaurant lovers alike. Waxman, ever assuring, found a new spot a couple of blocks away. He told me recently, "To be truthful, after sixteen years of doing business in that space . . . The building was falling apart, so to go into a new space—well, it's an old space, but it's a new infrastructure—was really advantageous for us. The only bad thing was we opened in February of last year, *COVID* happened, and we were only open for three weeks. What're ya gonna do?" After the shutdown, Waxman quickly decided that takeout wouldn't work, and so he waited until it was safe to reopen. "Vaccines were

a game changer,” Waxman said. “The mandates by the city—in terms of, We don’t have to be the bad cop—that really helped my industry.”



The smoked-salmon pizza, with avocado crème fraîche and smoked trout roe, is an homage to Waxman’s friend Wolfgang Puck.

What’s new at the new Barbuto? Besides the gargantuan room, lined with arched, brick-framed windows, not much. *Barbuto* means “bearded,” and the restaurant’s shaggy-dog logo, a likeness of Ferri’s (similarly well-bearded) Irish wolfhound, remains. Waxman has been cooking in élite circles since the seventies, when he worked at Alice Waters’s Chez Panisse, and there are roots to his past everywhere you look. Attie created an even bigger oven than the first one—a must for all the chickens Waxman serves. “I’ll have a dead chicken head on my grave, I’m sure,” he cracked. The dish evolved from a chicken frites that he cooked in 1979, at Michael’s in Santa Monica; then he did a grilled boned chicken at his first New York restaurant, Jams, in the eighties. Barbuto’s Pollo al Forno, an homage to Judy Rodgers’s Zuni Café roast chicken for two (he and Rodgers worked together at Chez Panisse), is half a bird, grilled and drizzled with a salsa verde of anchovies, capers, garlic, olive oil, parsley, and whatever other herbs are around. “We don’t brine it,” Waxman said. “Just sea salt and fresh pepper, and we kind of baste it with its own liquid as it cooks. And the big deal is resting—for a minimum of half an hour.”



Many of the dishes, such as *Insalata di Calamari*, *Bucatini alla Carbonara*, and the pan-fried gnocchi, have an iconic air.

At brunch one cold afternoon, fluffy focaccia, an ideally lemony and garlicky bitter-lettuce salad with fried calamari, and a creamy bucatini carbonara were followed by a chewy-crusted smoked-salmon pizza with avocado crème fraîche and smoked trout roe. The pizza was described by the waiter—whose manner was so easygoing that it seemed as if he were just stopping by to chat—as an homage to “the chef’s friend Wolfgang Puck.” Waxman said that when Puck opened Spago, in 1982, “I walked in one day and Wolfgang goes, ‘I’m making this Jewish pizza,’ and I said, ‘What are you talking about?’ It was a pizza bianca with no cheese, just a little bit of shallots and crème fraîche, this homemade smoked salmon and caviar on top. And I said, ‘You know what? This is the greatest thing I’ve ever had.’ ” The waiter also brought free champagne, because, he said, it was the right thing to do.

Signature items are indicated on the menu with a JW insignia, but there’s no need—almost all of the dishes have an iconic air. It’s unusual for a Manhattan restaurant to take up so much space, and, in spite of the view of the West Side Highway and the river beyond, it feels like you could be pretty much anywhere. But the Whitney is just a block away, and Waxman’s crispy rosemary potatoes are gold. (*Dishes \$5-\$39.*) ♦

The Control of Nature

- [Creating a Better Leaf](#)

Could tinkering with photosynthesis prevent a global food crisis?

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

Content

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This story begins about two billion years ago, when the world, if not young, exactly, was a lot more impressionable. The planet spun faster, so the sun rose every twenty-one hours. The earliest continents were forming—Arctica, for instance, which persists as bits and pieces of Siberia. Most of the globe was given over to oceans, and the oceans teemed with microbes.

Some of these microbes—the group known as cyanobacteria—had mastered a peculiarly powerful form of alchemy. They lived off sunlight, which they converted into sugar. As a waste product, they gave off oxygen. Cyanobacteria were so plentiful, and so good at what they did, that they changed the world. They altered the oceans' chemistry, and then the atmosphere's. Formerly in short supply, oxygen became abundant. Anything that couldn't tolerate it either died off or retreated to some dark, airless corner.

One day, another organism—a sort of proto-alga—devoured a cyanobacterium. Instead of being destroyed, as you might expect, the bacterium took up residence, like Jonah in the whale. This accommodation, unlikely as it was, sent life in a new direction. The secret to photosynthesis passed to the alga and all its heirs.

A billion years went by. The planet's rotation slowed. The continents crashed together to form a supercontinent, Rodinia, then drifted apart again. The alga's heirs diversified.

One side of the family stuck to the water. Another branch set out to colonize dry land. The first explorers stayed small and low to the ground. (These were probably related to liverworts.) Eventually, they were joined by the ancestors of today's ferns and mosses. There was so much empty space—and hence available light—that plants, as one botanist has put it, found terrestrial life "irresistible." They spread out their fronds and began to grow

taller. The rise of plants made possible the rise of plant-eating animals. During the Carboniferous period, towering tree ferns and giant club mosses covered the earth, and insects with wingspans of more than two feet flitted through them.

Some two hundred million years later, in the early Cretaceous, plants with flowers appeared on the scene. They were so fabulously successful that they soon took over. (Charles Darwin was deeply troubled by the sudden appearance of flowering plants in the fossil record, describing it as an “abominable mystery.”) Later still, grasses and cacti evolved.

Through it all, plants continued to make a living more or less the same way they had since that ancient cyanobacterium took up with the alga. Photosynthesis remained remarkably stable over thousands of millennia of natural selection. It didn’t change when humans began to domesticate plants, ten thousand years ago, or, later, when they figured out how to irrigate, fertilize, and, finally, hybridize them. It always worked well enough to power the planet—that is, until now.

Stephen Long is a professor of plant biology and crop sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and the director of a project called Realizing Increased Photosynthetic Efficiency, or *RIPE*. The premise of *RIPE* is that, as remarkable as photosynthesis may be, it needs to do better.

At seventy-one, Long is thin and fit, with a craggy face and a voice so soft it borders on a murmur. He grew up in London in a working-class family and attended what he describes as “not the best” high school. (It’s since been closed.) One of the teachers at the school stood out—a plant enthusiast who took her students on frequent field trips. Inspired, Long decided to study agricultural botany at the University of Reading. Midway to his degree, he took a year off to work for a British food company, Tate & Lyle, which owned sugarcane plantations in the Caribbean and did a lot of sugar refining. Some at the company thought it might be possible to dispense with the plantations and even the cane and coax plant cells to produce sugar in vats. The idea didn’t pan out—“It never became economically feasible,” Long told me when, in July, I went to visit him at his office—but it got him interested in the mechanics of photosynthesis.

Photosynthesis takes place within a plant's chloroplasts—tiny organelles that are the descendants of that original captured cyanobacterium. When a photon is absorbed by a chloroplast, it initiates a cascade of reactions that convert light into chemical energy. These reactions are mediated by proteins, which are encoded by genes. Through a second series of reactions, the chemical energy is used to build carbohydrates. This requires more proteins. Photosynthesis has been called “one of the most complex of all biological processes,” and when Long was starting out a great deal was still unknown about how, exactly, it worked. Gradually, using new molecular tools, researchers succeeded in filling in the gaps. Photosynthesis, they learned, requires the completion of some hundred and fifty discrete steps and involves roughly that number of genes.

The more that was discovered about the intricacies of photosynthesis, the more was revealed about its inefficiency. The comparison is often made to photovoltaic cells. Those on the market today convert about twenty per cent of the sunlight that strikes them into electricity, and, in labs, researchers have achieved rates of almost fifty per cent. Plants convert only about one per cent of the sunlight that hits them into growth. In the case of crop plants, on average only about half of one per cent of the light is converted into energy that people can use. The contrast isn't really fair to biology, since plants construct themselves, whereas P.V. cells have to be manufactured with energy from another source. Plants also store their own energy, while P.V. cells require separate batteries for that. Still, researchers who have tried to make apples-to-apples (or silicon-to-carbon) calculations have concluded that plants come out the losers.

Long went on to get a Ph.D., and then took a teaching job at the University of Essex, on England's east coast. He became convinced that photosynthesis's inefficiency presented an opportunity. If the process could be streamlined, plants that had spent millennia just chugging along could become champions. For agriculture, the implications were profound. Potentially, new crop varieties could be created that could produce more with less.

“All of our food, directly or indirectly, comes from the process of photosynthesis,” Long told me. “And we know that even our very best crops are only achieving a fraction of photosynthesis's theoretical efficiency. So, if

we can work out how to improve photosynthesis, we can boost yields. We won't have to go on destroying yet more land for crops—we can try to produce more on the land we're already using."



"As long as they're giving me the option, I'm going to keep on camping from home."
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

Other biologists were skeptical. Surely, they observed, if there were a way to improve photosynthesis that was truly viable, and not just theoretical, then, at some point during the past several hundred million years, plants would have hit upon it. What their argument missed, Long thought, were the exigencies of evolution itself. To be preserved, biological systems don't have to be optimized. They just have to be functional.

"Evolution is not really about being productive," Long told me. "It's about getting your genes into the next generation."

In 1999, Long decided that he would create his own version of photosynthesis. By this time, he'd moved to the University of Illinois, where many of the major discoveries about the process had been made. Long's idea was to build a computer simulation that would model each of the hundred and fifty-odd steps in photosynthesis as a differential equation. The effort dragged on for years, in part because Long's program kept crashing. Eventually, he got in touch with a computer scientist who worked for NASA on rocket engines.

“He said, ‘Oh, I had exactly the same problem, and this is the routine I used,’ ” Long recalled. “And we worked with him and used that routine, and, bingo, it worked.” Because photosynthesis is so complicated, and because the math involved is also complicated, Long’s model requires a phenomenal amount of computing power. To simulate the performance of a single leaf over the course of a few minutes, it must make millions of calculations.

Once his model, which he dubbed e-photosynthesis, was up and running, Long could create new leaves without the bother of actually growing anything. He could probe the weaknesses of photosynthesis and test possible fixes. What would happen, for example, if a certain gene were ginned up to produce more of a certain enzyme? Would this accelerate photosynthesis or just gum up the works? The model would analyze the results of each virtual intervention, or hack. “Of course, ninety-nine times out of a hundred you’re making things worse,” Long said.

It was the hundredth hack that kept things interesting. Long found that, by rejiggering certain steps, nature *could* be improved upon. In 2006, he published a paper outlining half a dozen “opportunities for increasing photosynthesis.” Among the people intrigued by the idea were some high-level staff members at the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In 2011, the foundation invited Long and some of his colleagues to Seattle to discuss their work. Six months later, the foundation invited the group back. Long and his collaborators spent a week on Bainbridge Island, in Puget Sound, drawing up a funding proposal, and on the last day of their stay they presented their pitch to Bill Gates. In 2012, the foundation awarded them twenty-five million dollars, and *RIPE* was created. Later, the project received additional funding from Britain’s Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office and from the Foundation for Food and Agriculture, a joint public-private venture based in Washington, D.C.

“It will take multiple innovations to solve the global food crisis,” Gates told me via e-mail. These include seed varieties that can better withstand drought, crops that can better fight off disease, and “game-changing discoveries that will lead to better harvests.”

One of the opportunities that Long identified in his 2006 paper involves a process known as nonphotochemical quenching, or N.P.Q. Obviously, plants

need light, but, like us, they can suffer from too much of it. N.P.Q. enables them to protect themselves by dissipating excess light as heat. The problem is that N.P.Q. is sluggish; once initiated, it's slow to stop, even as light conditions change. Long's model suggested that some clever genetic modifications could make the process nimbler.

Researchers at *RIPE* set about testing this proposition on tobacco plants, which are sort of the lab rats of the ag world. They inserted three extra genes into the plants, then raised them in greenhouses. The modified plants did, indeed, outperform ordinary tobacco plants—they grew faster and put on more weight. The team then ran field trials. Long nervously awaited the outcome. The results were even better than he'd hoped: the modified plants outperformed the control plants by up to twenty per cent.

When the resulting paper was published, in *Science*, it made news around the world. “Genetic breakthrough,” the BBC declared. Long was interviewed by the Big Ten Network, which, in addition to airing the conference’s sporting events, sometimes does features on Big Ten professors. He told the interviewer that the day the results of the field trials came in was one of the most exciting of his life. “Don’t tell my wife that,” he added. The network showed the clip on the jumbotron during a University of Illinois football game. Long and his wife, Ann, were watching at home.

“I got an elbow in the ribs for that,” he recalled.

In 1967, two sober-minded men published a book with a sensational title: “Famine—1975!” The authors, William and Paul Paddock, were brothers; William was an agronomist, Paul a retired Foreign Service officer. “A collision between exploding population and static agriculture is imminent,” the Paddocks wrote. They declared, “The conclusion is clear: there is no possibility of improving agriculture . . . soon enough to avert famine.”

Many experts shared their anxiety. In the mid-sixties, the global population was growing by more than two per cent a year, which is believed to be the highest rate in human history. In a number of developing countries—Brazil and Ethiopia, for instance—the annual rate was closer to three per cent. Agricultural production wasn’t keeping up.

“The world food situation is now more precarious than at any time since the period of acute shortage immediately after the second world war,” the director-general of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, Binay Ranjan Sen, wrote. He warned that unless dramatic action was taken “Malthusian correctives” would “inexorably come into play.”

“Famine—1975!” was followed by “The Population Bomb,” by the Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich, published in 1968. Ehrlich, too, declared disaster unavoidable. “The battle to feed all of humanity is over,” he wrote. “In the 1970’s the world will undergo famines—hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now.” Ehrlich became a regular guest on the “Tonight Show,” and “The Population Bomb” sold more than two million copies.

The catastrophe failed to materialize. Ehrlich and the Paddocks were wrong about the future of agriculture. Even as they were writing, the seeds—both literal and metaphorical—were being sown for what would become known as the Green Revolution.

At the vanguard of the revolution was Norman Borlaug, a plant pathologist who worked for the Rockefeller Foundation at an agricultural-research station in Mexico. By painstakingly breeding wheat over the course of two decades, he developed a series of highly productive, disease-resistant varieties. The varieties were unusually stocky—they’d been bred using dwarf strains—and this allowed them to put more energy into their kernels and less into their stalks. As the varieties were adopted, yields shot up; in the two decades following the publication of “Famine—1975!,” wheat production in Mexico nearly doubled. During the same period in India, it more than tripled.

Building on Borlaug’s work, breeders in the Philippines created high-yield, semi-dwarf strains of rice, which led to similar productivity increases. This work was motivated as much by political impulses as by humanitarian ones; boosting rice output might be described as the “hearts and bellies” approach to fighting Communism in Asia.

For his efforts, Borlaug was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970. “More than any other single person of this age, he has helped to provide bread for a

hungry world,” the chairwoman of the Norwegian Nobel Committee stated.

Like most revolutions, the green one had unintended consequences. The new, high-yield varieties were needy; to realize their full potential, they required plenty of fertilizer, pesticides, and water. These “inputs,” in turn, required money. The bulk of the benefits thus accrued to those with resources. Farms became bigger and more mechanized, developments that often cost the very poorest agricultural workers their livelihoods. Research suggests that the new varieties, combined with the agricultural practices they promoted, exacerbated inequality.

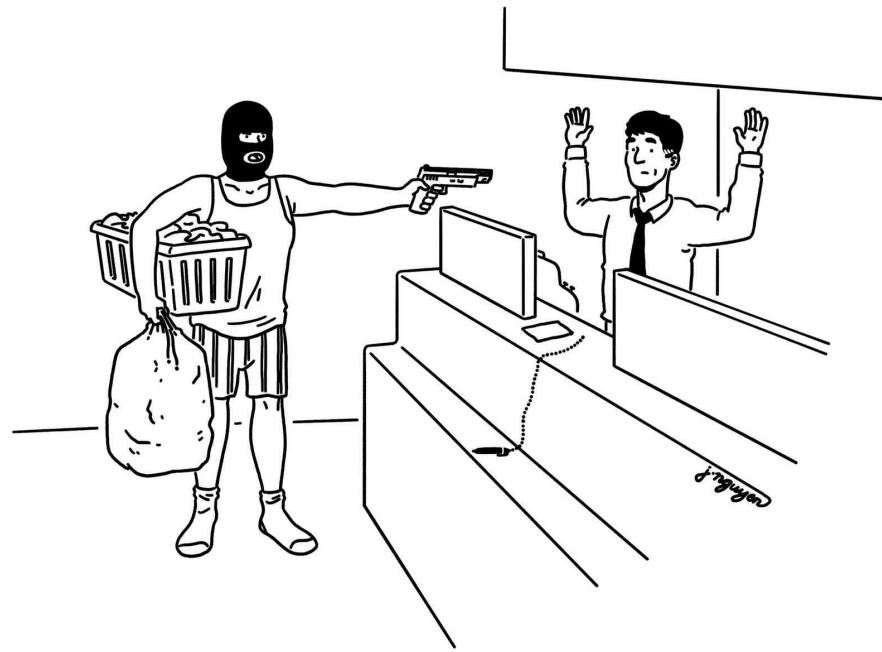
“The availability of 60% cheaper rice would be little consolation to someone who had lost 100% of their income as a result of the Green Revolution,” Raj Patel, a research professor at the University of Texas at Austin, has written.

The ecological costs, too, were high, and by many accounts these are still growing. Fertilizer runoff has filled rivers and lakes with nutrients, producing algae blooms and aquatic “dead zones.” Increased pesticide use has had the perverse effect of doing in many of the beneficial insects that once kept pests in check. The demands of irrigation have emptied aquifers. In the northern Indian state of Punjab, an early center of the Green Revolution, groundwater is being pumped out so much faster than it can be replenished that the water table is falling by about three feet a year. Experts have warned that, if current rates of pumping continue, in twenty-five years the state, which is sometimes referred to as “the food bowl of India,” could be reduced to a desert.

“The situation is alarming,” Rana Gurjit Singh, a member of Punjab’s Legislative Assembly, observed a few months ago. “It is time to wake up.”

It is often said that the world now needs a New Green Revolution, or a Second Green Revolution, or Green Revolution 2.0. The rate of yield growth for crops like wheat, rice, and corn appears to be plateauing, and the number of people who are hungry is once again on the rise. The world’s population, meanwhile, continues to increase; now almost eight billion, it’s projected to reach nearly ten billion by 2050. Income gains in countries like China are increasing the consumption of meat, which requires ever more grain and forage to produce. To meet the expected demand, global agricultural output

will have to rise by almost seventy per cent during the next thirty years. Such an increase would be tough to achieve in the best of times, which the coming decades are not likely to be. Recent research suggests that climate change has already begun to cut into yields, and, as the planet warms, the bite will only get bigger. (Agriculture itself is a major contributor to climate change.) Devoting more land to farming isn't really an option, or, at least, not a good one. Most of the world's best soils are already under cultivation, and mowing down forests to plant corn or soybeans would lead to still more warming.



"All the quarters, now!"
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

"At no other point in history has agriculture been faced with such an array of familiar and unfamiliar risks" is how a recent report from the Food and Agriculture Organization put it.

"We need to up our game," Enock Chikava, who grew up on a ten-acre farm in Zimbabwe and now serves as the interim director for agricultural development at the Gates Foundation, told me. "We can't continue business as usual."

One day while I was in Urbana, Long took me to visit *RIPE*'s test fields. This was in the midst of one of last summer's brutal heat waves, and to avoid the midmorning sun we met up at 8 A.M. Even so, it was sweltering.

RIPE's test plots are to the average farm what a Tesla is to a Model T. Looming above the plots are hundred-and-fifty-foot-tall metal towers strung with guy wires. The wires are controlled by computerized winches imported from Austria—a setup that was originally devised to film professional sports matches. *RIPE*'s setup carries sensors that, among other things, shoot out laser beams and detect infrared radiation. When I visited, the sensors had just been installed; the idea was to track the plants' progress on a day-to-day basis.

Long led me over to a plot surrounded by an electric fence. It was divided into forty identical rectangles, each studded with white tags. The rectangles were planted with different strains of genetically modified soybeans, which had been tweaked in much the same way that the tobacco plants had, to speed up N.P.Q. Long bent over some rows labelled E27.

"I might be imagining, but it looks like these are a little bit taller," he said. He quickly added, "You've got to be very careful at this stage, though." In the summer of 2020, the tweaked soy plants had produced significantly more soybeans than the control ones did. E27 had performed particularly well. But was this just a fluke? "We're hoping to get the definitive answer this year," Long told me.

In another plot, tobacco plants were growing low to the ground. These, he explained, represented an effort to address a different drag on photosynthesis, involving the enzyme RuBisCo.

To make sugars, plants use carbon dioxide they've taken in from the air. RuBisCo, which is believed to be the most abundant enzyme on the planet, in effect grabs the CO₂ and sends it on to the sugar-making process. Like N.P.Q., RuBisCo is slow. Even more significantly, it's error-prone. Sometimes, like an assembly-line worker who picks up the wrong part, it grabs a molecule of oxygen instead of carbon dioxide. (Presumably, RuBisCo makes this mistake because at the point it was first synthesized, billions of years ago, there was hardly any oxygen around to worry about.) When RuBisCo accidentally picks up O₂, the plant produces a compound that's toxic, which it then has to get rid of. The exercise is quite costly: it's estimated that it can reduce the efficiency of photosynthesis by forty per cent. Using genes from bacteria and algae, the *RIPE* team has developed

“bypass” tobacco plants, which break down the toxic compound in fewer steps.

Long pointed to a muddy plot nearby. Had I arrived a few weeks earlier, he said, I would have found “bypass” potatoes growing there. These had been destroyed by heavy rains, and now it was too late in the season to replant. “It’s kind of been wrecked,” he said, with a sigh.

From the fields, we drove to an enormous greenhouse. Before entering it, we had to put on lab coats and sterile booties. Near the door were benches of tobacco plants wrapped in cellophane. The rest of the greenhouse was filled with long rows of what looked like DVD players. These turned out to be high-tech scales connected to a precision irrigation system. Plants could be placed on the scales and given measured sips of water; then they’d be automatically weighed to see how much bulk they’d put on. More than four hundred plants could be tested at once, and the results would quickly reveal which specimens with which genetic changes were the best performers. Someone flipped a switch, and a set of cameras mounted on scaffolding began to creep over the rows. The cameras, I was told, would produce a continuous stream of data about the plants, so that everything down to the curve of their leaves could be studied.

Since its founding, in 2012, *RIPE* has expanded to include almost a hundred researchers across four continents. Long’s hope is that, in addition to the N.P.Q. and bypass tweaks, the project will come up with half a dozen other ways to “improve” photosynthesis. A team in Australia is looking at how to speed carbon dioxide’s journey to RuBisCo, and a team in England is looking at what happens right after RuBisCo does its job. The next step would be to get these genetic modifications into globally significant crop plants—in addition to soy and potatoes, *RIPE* is working with corn, cowpeas, and cassava—and then into local varieties. (Farmers in different parts of the world plant different strains of corn and cassava that have been bred for local conditions.)

Long is particularly keen on getting photosynthetically souped-up seed to farmers in sub-Saharan Africa, a region that didn’t much benefit from the yield gains of the original Green Revolution. Today, more than two hundred million people there are chronically undernourished.

“If we can provide smallholder farmers in Africa with technologies that will produce more food and give them a better livelihood, that’s what really motivates the team,” Long told me. One of the Gates Foundation’s stipulations is that any breakthroughs that result from *RIPE*’s work be made available “at an affordable price” to companies or government agencies that supply seed to farmers in the world’s poorest countries.

Before any of *RIPE*’s creations could be planted in sub-Saharan Africa, though, or anywhere else, for that matter, all sorts of licenses would have to be obtained. (The gene-editing techniques that Long and his colleagues are using are themselves often patented.) Then the altered genes would have to be approved by the relevant agency in the nation in question, and the alterations would have to be bred into local varieties. So far, only a handful of African countries have O.K.-d genetically modified crops, and most of the approvals have been for G.M. cotton. A recent study noted that at least two dozen G.M. food crops—some modified for insect resistance, others for salt tolerance—have been submitted to regulatory agencies in the region but remain in limbo.

“A host of viable technologies continue to sit on the shelf, frequently due to regulatory paralysis,” the study observed. (In the U.S., practically all of the soy and corn grown is genetically modified; other approved G.M. food crops include apples, potatoes, papayas, sugar beets, and canola. In Europe, by contrast, G.M. crops are generally banned.) Meanwhile, to the extent that attitudes toward G.M. foods have been surveyed in sub-Saharan Africa, a majority of people seem to be leery of them. A recent study conducted in Zimbabwe, for example, found that almost three-quarters of the respondents believed them to be “too risky.” And smallholder farmers don’t have enough land to leave buffer zones, which means that, if they grow G.M. crops that cross-pollinate, these could mix with, or contaminate, their non-G.M. neighbors.

When I asked Long about the advisability of developing genetically modified varieties for use in countries that don’t particularly seem to want them, he told me that, at a meeting with *RIPE* researchers, a similar question had been posed to Bill Gates.

“His response was ‘Well, things might change if these predictions of food shortages come to pass,’ ” Long said. “ ‘And, if they do come to pass, it’s going to be too late to do this research.’ ”

Some thirty million years ago, a plant—no one knows exactly which one, but probably it was a grass—came up with its own hack to improve photosynthesis. The hack didn’t alter the steps involved in the process; instead, it added new ones. The new steps concentrated CO₂ around RuBisCo, effectively eliminating the enzyme’s opportunity to make a mistake. (To extend the assembly-line metaphor, imagine a worker surrounded by crateloads of the right parts and none of the wrong ones.) At the time, carbon-dioxide levels in the atmosphere were falling—a trend that would continue more or less until humans figured out how to burn fossil fuels—so even though the hack cost the plant some energy, it offered a net gain. In fact, it proved so useful that other plants soon followed suit. What’s now known as C4 photosynthesis evolved independently at least forty-five times, in nineteen different plant families. (The term “C4” refers to a four-carbon compound that’s produced in one of the supplemental steps.) Nowadays, several of the world’s key crop plants are C4, including corn, millet, and sorghum, and so are several of the world’s key weeds, like crabgrass and tumbleweed.

C4 photosynthesis isn’t just more efficient than ordinary photosynthesis, which is known as C3. It also requires less water and less nitrogen, and so, in turn, less fertilizer. About twenty-five years ago, a plant physiologist named John Sheehy came up with what many other plant physiologists considered to be an absurd idea. He decided that rice, which is a C3 plant, should be transformed into a C4. Like Long, Sheehy was from England, but he was working in the Philippines, at the research institute where, in the nineteen-sixties, breeders had developed the rice varieties that helped spark the Green Revolution. In 1999, Sheehy hosted a meeting at the institute to discuss his idea. The general opinion of the participants was that it was impossible.

Sheehy didn’t give up. In 2006, nearing retirement, he pulled together a second meeting on the topic. Again, the attendees were skeptical. But this time around they decided that Sheehy’s scheme was at least worth a try. Jane Langdale, a plant biologist from Oxford, was among the researchers at the

second meeting. “There was a sense that it was now or never,” she said recently, when I spoke to her over Zoom. “We were either going to have to get younger people interested in this or lose the opportunity.” Thus was born the C4 Rice Project, which Langdale now heads. (Sheehy died in 2019.)

The C4 Rice Project could be thought of as *RIPE*’s edgier cousin. It, too, is funded by the Gates Foundation, and it, too, aims to feed the world by reengineering it from the chloroplast up. “Given that the C4 pathway is up to 50% more efficient than the C3 pathway, introducing C4 traits into a C3 crop would have a dramatic impact on crop yield,” the project’s Web site observes.

What makes the work so challenging is that C4 plants don’t just go through extra steps in photosynthesis; they have a different anatomy. Among other things, the veins in the leaves of C4 plants are much more closely packed than those in C3 plants, and this spacing is crucial to the enterprise. The C4 Rice Project involves thirty researchers in five countries. Some of the scientists are focussed on transforming the plant’s leaves, others on altering its biochemistry.

“We’re working to try to do these two things in parallel,” Langdale explained to me. “But ultimately we have to do them both.”

The project has run into lots of obstacles; still, it has inched forward. Langdale’s lab has succeeded in producing rice plants with a greater volume of veins in their leaves, though the volume is still not quite high enough. Other labs have developed rice plants that generate the crucial four-carbon compound; these plants, however, don’t take the next step, which is to give up one of the carbons to be grabbed by RuBisCo.

“When we started, everybody thought we were mad,” Langdale said. “And it has not been an easy journey. But I think now people look and think, You know—they actually are making progress.

“I don’t know whether we’ll ever make rice with the full C4 anatomy and the biochemistry,” she continued. “But I do think along the way we are going to find things that improve yield and improve efficiency, even if it’s not the full shebang.”



"I got you a gift."
Cartoon by Avi Steinberg

A few days after I spoke to Langdale, three Punjabi villagers were hit by a truck at the site of a demonstration near New Delhi. (The victims were all women in their fifties and sixties.) During the past year, hundreds of thousands of farmers in India have protested against the government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, and for months tens of thousands have been camped out along the roads leading into the capital.

In an immediate sense, the target of the farmers' ire is a set of laws pushed through Parliament by Modi's party; these, they fear, could lead to an end to government price supports. In a deeper sense, though, the tensions go back to the Green Revolution. To encourage farmers to plant the higher-yielding, thirstier varieties of rice and wheat, the Indian government introduced the price-support system, in the nineteen-sixties. Now the subsidies have produced gluts of these commodities, even as growing them is depleting the country's aquifers, and the government wants to prod farmers to move away from the crops it once prodded them to plant. To the country's millions of farmers, most of whom own fewer than five acres, changes in the status quo seem likely to lead only to more misery.

"Many people would argue that the price supports that are currently given are barely adequate to cover the costs of production," Sudha Narayanan, a research fellow at the International Food Policy Research Institute's office in

New Delhi, told me. But farmers depend on the supports to at least set a floor on their incomes: “They are seen as a kind of insurance.” Late last month, in a surprise move, Parliament voted to repeal the laws, but that has not put an end to the protests; farmers are now calling for an extension of price supports to other crops.

How to produce a second Green Revolution without repeating, or compounding, the mistakes of the first is a question that dogs efforts to boost yields, particularly in the Global South. With climate change, the challenges are, in many ways, even steeper than they were in the nineteen-sixties. The research institutes that helped drive the original Green Revolution, which include the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center, in Mexico, where Norman Borlaug was stationed, and the International Rice Research Institute, in the Philippines, where John Sheehy worked, are part of a consortium called CGIAR. (The name comes from the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research.) CGIAR is in the midst of restructuring itself.

“Fundamentally, the reorganization is about trying to attack what we call twenty-first-century problems, paying attention to the critique of the Green Revolution,” Channing Arndt, a division director at the International Food Policy Research Institute, which is part of CGIAR, told me. The Green Revolution “definitely brought a lot of calories,” he continued. “But it also brought pollution and other problems, which we don’t want to repeat.”

One way to look at *RIPE* and the C4 Rice Project is as efforts to bring twenty-first-century tools to bear on twenty-first-century problems. For better or worse, we now have the ability to tinker with life at the most basic level, and this opens up all sorts of possibilities, from treating genetic disorders to manufacturing biological weapons. Crop plants that make fewer mistakes in photosynthesis, or that complete the process more efficiently, would produce more food per acre, potentially with fewer inputs. Not only humans would benefit; so, too, would the myriad species whose habitats would be spared. “Twenty years from now, this could be making a major difference,” Edward Mabaya, a research professor at Cornell, told me.

But, in many ways, the twenty-first century’s problems are holdovers from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and it’s not clear whether the new

tools are a better match for them than the old. As Mabaya, who also serves as the chief scientific adviser for the African Seed Access Index, pointed out to me, researchers have already developed plenty of improved varieties for sub-Saharan Africa, using conventional breeding methods.

“Most of the varieties, maybe eighty per cent of them, just end up on the shelf,” he said. “They never reach smallholder farmers.” (The Access Index, which is working to identify the choke points in African seed systems, is another group funded, in part, by the Gates Foundation.)

Vara Prasad, a crop scientist at Kansas State University and the director of one of its Feed the Future Innovation Labs, made much the same point to me: a majority of the smallholder farmers in Africa and South Asia aren’t planting the improved varieties that already exist. Sometimes the issue is cost. For instance, with hybrids, the seeds can’t be saved, and have to be repurchased every year; though the extra yield should cover the expense, smallholder farmers may just not have the cash. Sometimes the obstacles can be difficult even to identify.

“We always talk about the technologies, but we ignore the social piece,” Prasad told me. “We need to understand the barriers to adoption, and we don’t have a clear understanding of those.

“I’ve looked at the *RIPE* project,” he went on. “Are there anthropologists on it? Any economists? Any nutrition folks? Gender-empowerment folks? We really need to be thinking about social innovation here, not only biophysical innovation—and I’m a biophysical scientist.”

Borlaug himself warned against putting too much faith in technology to solve society’s ills. In his Nobel Lecture, in 1970, he called the Green Revolution a “temporary success”; if the population continued to climb, this success, he feared, would prove “ephemeral.”

“There are no miracles in agricultural production,” he said. And, even if production could keep up with population growth, there would remain the issue of distribution, of bridging the great global divide between the haves, who “live in a luxury never before experienced,” and the have-nots, who send their kids to bed hungry.

“It is a sad fact that on this earth at this late date there are still two worlds,”
Borlaug observed. ♦

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