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# A Reporter at Large

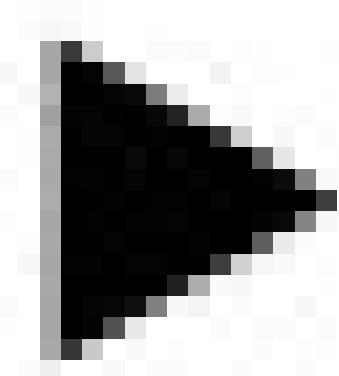
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# Robinhood's Big Gamble

In eliminating barriers to investing in the stock market, is the app democratizing finance or encouraging risky behavior?

By [Sheelah Kolhatkar](#)

May 10, 2021



Early on the morning of January 19th, Cody Herdman woke to the vibration of his smartphone alarm under his pillow. He immediately checked the finance app Robinhood for the trading price of a company called GameStop. Herdman, who is nineteen, is a freshman computer-science major at Dakota State University, where until recently he played center for the Dakota State Trojans football team, and he had been investing in the stock market for a month.

Robinhood, which offers zero-commission trading in stocks and cryptocurrencies, pitches itself as an enlightened version of Wall Street; its stated mission is to “democratize finance for all.” Herdman’s friend Chase Bradshaw had introduced him to trading on the app, which now consumed much of the time that he used to spend playing video games. With a thousand dollars that his father had given him, Herdman had invested in a handful of securities, buying 11.5 shares of BioCryst Pharmaceuticals,

which makes specialized medicines for rare diseases; five shares of Virgin Galactic, the spaceflight company founded by Richard Branson; six shares of Corsair, a gaming-equipment manufacturer; and five shares of Nordic American Tankers, an international oil-tanker operator; as well as 0.007 of a bitcoin. (Robinhood allows the purchase of fractional shares.) He felt a surge of excitement every time he saw a green number indicating that one of those stocks had gone up in value. All Herdman’s previous investments had been based on research into how global events might affect the fortunes of the various companies, but he had also been contemplating buying shares in GameStop, a struggling video-game retailer, after reading posts hyping the stock on an investing forum on Reddit called [WallStreetBets](#). As the stock’s price crept up, from around fourteen dollars a share in mid-December to almost forty a month later, he felt annoyed for not having acted sooner.

That morning, as soon as the stock market opened, Herdman sold nearly everything in his Robinhood account, leaving him with around twelve hundred dollars in cash. Grabbing a clean T-shirt from a plastic bin under his bed, he dressed and rushed to his history class. As his professor delivered a lecture on Coney Island in the eighteen-hundreds, Herdman tracked the market on his phone from a seat in the back of the room. In his dorm after class, he bought shares of GameStop, whose ticker symbol is GME, in two bursts—first 13.77 shares, then sixteen—using all of the cash in his account. As he ate a microwaved pepperoni Hot Pocket, he watched the numbers on his screen. Within forty minutes, GameStop had jumped two dollars. Herdman decided to sell his only remaining non-GameStop holding—a clean-energy stock he’d expected to do well under the Biden Administration—and used the proceeds to buy 6.3 more shares of GME. “I was, like, screw it,” he told me recently. “I’m going all in.”

Herdman, as Dakota State proudly announced when he signed to play for the Trojans, a little more than a year ago, is six feet two and two hundred and eighty pounds. He grew up in Aurora, Colorado. He has a full, ruddy face, thick black hair, and a goatee, and has a crucifix tattooed on his formidable right biceps. His mother, Karen, a former local TV news reporter and a highly ranked master in Tang Soo Do, a Korean martial art, told me that Cody had always been strong. By the time he was fifteen, she said, he could leg-press five hundred pounds and was a two-time power-lifting state champion. “I told him, ‘A time will come when you’re glad to be bigger

than everyone else.’ And when he got the football scholarship I said, ‘See, I told you,’ ” she said. “Cody’s one of those kids, he never has to study for anything. He remembers everything. He picks up stuff really quick—if he’s interested in it.”

In the next few days, Herdman monitored the online chatter about GameStop. He was convinced that the price would continue to climb. He’d read about previous instances when large numbers of small investors had organized online and caused a stock to rise, such as in 2008 with Volkswagen, which had quadrupled in price in two days. The prospect of being part of such a movement was so enticing to Herdman that, one night at the gym, he called his mother to ask for more money. Herdman’s father is a retired electrician; his mother now teaches martial arts. The family finances had been tight in the past, but she said that she could give him about two hundred and fifty dollars, and told him to talk to his father, Jerry.

Herdman explained the situation to his father as clearly as he could. Several large hedge funds, including Melvin Capital, a twelve-billion-dollar fund, had borrowed GameStop shares and had sold them short, betting that they would go down and that the company might go out of business. Millions of individual investors on Robinhood and other apps had decided to buy the shares—not so much because the company showed promise but simply in order to push the stock price up. As long as Herdman and the other investors kept buying, they would trigger a “short squeeze,” forcing the hedge funds to pay exorbitant amounts to buy the stock back. Herdman told his father, “Seeing these hedge funds get screwed is good for everybody.”

Jerry supported Cody’s investing as a valuable learning experience, but he always counselled him not to trade more than he could afford to lose. Cody asked about cashing in some savings bonds that he had been given when he was a baby; his mom later agreed to lend her son a hundred dollars against the bonds, which hadn’t yet matured. On Monday morning, Herdman bought four more shares of GameStop, which was trading at close to ninety dollars. He waited a few minutes, and then decided to draw two thousand four hundred and thirty dollars from his Robinhood margin account, which allowed him to borrow money from the company to invest. He purchased another twenty-seven shares, bringing his total to around sixty-seven shares.

Herdman spent the next few days obsessively reading through WallStreetBets on Reddit. In less than a month, the number of subscribers to the forum had nearly quadrupled, to more than five million, and the talk of squeezing the hedge funds had turned into a collective expression of populist rage. “Literally everyone is on board,” one Reddit post read. “Left, right, trump supporters, trump haters. You want some sort of unification movement? Well this is it.” Someone else responded, “Instead of guillotines this time it’s beating them at their own game.” It was hard to know how seriously to take these pledges of class solidarity; a number of professional money managers had also made large investments in GameStop. The hedge-fund manager Michael Burry, who was featured by Michael Lewis in his book “The Big Short” for his prescient bet, in 2005, that the housing market would collapse, had bought and sold shares in GameStop. Some financial commentators speculated that professionals like Burry were somehow behind the phenomenon, manipulating the conversation and the share price.



*"At least this is only boring for ninety minutes."*  
Cartoon by Maggie Larson

On January 27th, the stock hit three hundred and eighty dollars a share, fifteen hundred per cent higher than it had been two weeks earlier. Herdman’s Robinhood account showed a gain of about twenty-five thousand dollars—a “ridiculous” amount of money, to his mind. He took a screenshot of his profits and sent them to a group of friends on Snapchat. “Oh my god,

dude,” one of his friends wrote back. “You made as much money in a month as I’ve made over the course of a year.”

Reddit users’ goal to inflict pain on the hedge funds appeared to be working. Dozens of news articles reported that Melvin Capital, which was managed by Gabriel Plotkin, a forty-two-year-old trader, was showing a loss of more than thirty per cent for the year, partly due to its GameStop short. Before launching Melvin, in 2014, Plotkin had been a portfolio manager at S.A.C. Capital, the fourteen-billion-dollar hedge fund founded by Steven A. Cohen. In 2013, S.A.C. was indicted for insider trading, and, as part of a settlement, was required to pay \$1.8 billion in penalties and fines. Cohen shut down S.A.C. He now runs Point72 Asset Management and owns the Mets. In late January, Point72 invested seven hundred and fifty million dollars in Melvin Capital’s main fund. In a move portrayed by the financial press as an emergency bailout, Citadel, a hedge fund managed by Kenneth C. Griffin, also invested two billion dollars. Plotkin denied that the new investments were due to a financial emergency. Griffin said at the time, “We have great confidence in Gabe and his team.”

Early the next morning, Robinhood made a startling announcement: “In light of recent volatility,” it had “restricted transactions for certain securities to position closing only.” Robinhood would not allow any of its users to purchase new shares of GameStop or other “meme stocks”—those that were trading wildly after being promoted on social media—including AMC Entertainment and BlackBerry. Robinhood users could only sell shares that they already owned. The move was sure to have the effect of halting the rise in GameStop shares—to Herdman, it looked like a manipulation of the market that would directly benefit the hedge funds.

After the stock market opened, GameStop plunged from \$347.51, where it had closed the night before, to a low of \$112.25. Herdman’s portfolio dropped sixty-six per cent, to ten thousand dollars. Other brokerages placed temporary limits on trading in GameStop, but Robinhood’s ban was one of the most restrictive, and most of the online anger focussed on it. Someone posted on Reddit, “robinhoods whole shtick is that they allow the little guys to enter the market. guess they don’t actually give two shits about the little guy and i hope they lose a ton of users from this.”

The investors challenging the Wall Street establishment attracted both Democratic and Republican supporters. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez tweeted that Robinhood's restrictions were "unacceptable," and said that she would support a congressional hearing into the company's "decision to block retail investors from purchasing stock while hedge funds are freely able to trade the stock as they see fit." Senator Ted Cruz, of Texas, retweeted her message, adding, "Fully agree." Some Robinhood employees saw the restrictions as selling out their users, and felt insulted when management attempted to improve morale by distributing forty-dollar credits for the food-delivery app DoorDash to employees. On February 18th, the House Financial Services Committee, headed by Representative Maxine Waters, held a hearing to investigate, called "Game Stopped? Who Wins and Loses When Short Sellers, Social Media, and Retail Investors Collide." Herdman and countless other Robinhood users made plans to transfer their accounts to the online brokerage owned by Fidelity Investments, the seventy-five-year-old financial-services company.

The following night, Herdman lay on his bed scrolling through WallStreetBets. In one post, titled "This Is for You, Dad," someone using the name Space-peanut had written, "I remember when the housing collapse sent a torpedo through my family. My father's concrete company collapsed almost overnight. My father lost his home." Around the same time, the author claimed to have seen "hedge funders literally drinking champagne as they looked down on the Occupy Wall Street protesters." The poster said that, as a result of the loss, his father had descended into alcoholism, and existed as only "a shell of his former self, waiting for death."

More than seven hundred people commented on the post. Herdman thought of his own father, who, when Cody was a boy, had suffered a serious back injury on the job, and was given a hundred-and-twenty-five-thousand-dollar settlement, which he invested in the stock market and lost when the market collapsed in 2008. He had resorted to self-medicating with alcohol and painkillers. Around the same time, Herdman's mother had lost work doing public relations for various martial-arts studios. Herdman started typing. "This is about more than just money, it's about fucking these hedge fund managers until they understand what we've all gone through because of them," he wrote. "I am holding to ensure my parents can live comfortable

lives at the expense of the assholes that almost cost them their lives. This is for you, Dad.”

Robinhood was founded in 2013 by Vlad Tenev and Baiju Bhatt, who met as undergraduates at Stanford University. They have argued that putting the investing tools used by the wealthy into the hands of nonprofessionals could help reduce inequality. Tenev likes to cite [Thomas Piketty](#), the author of “Capital in the Twenty-first Century,” who has described the wealth gap as an investing gap. The investing advantages enjoyed by the rich go beyond access to the stock market, though; wealthy investors, unlike the relative newcomers who make up Robinhood’s base, have access to the most sophisticated financial information and opportunities, and can usually afford to lose the money they risk on stocks.

The commission-free trading that Robinhood offers its users has been so popular that its competitors, including Fidelity, Charles Schwab, and E-Trade, were driven, in October, 2019, to cut their commissions of around five dollars per trade to zero. Brian Barnes, the C.E.O. of M1, a competitor of Robinhood’s that focusses on long-term saving and investing, said the app’s influence has been profound. “They’re the first company that introduced premier user experience and design in a mobile application to finance, and they also dramatically lowered the cost of investing,” he said. “They’ve encouraged an entire population who wasn’t buying stocks to buy stocks. There’s a lot to thank them for.”

Robinhood makes money in several ways, including by investing cash its customers have sitting in their accounts, the way banks do, and by charging five dollars a month for a “Gold” level of access, which gives users a margin account from which they can borrow money to trade with. The majority of Robinhood’s revenue comes from trading volume: the more a user trades, the more the company makes. In this way, Barnes explained, the interests of Robinhood’s users often conflict with those of the company. The average person builds wealth through long-term investing rather than by rapidly trading in and out of stocks. Barnes described Robinhood as “more financial entertainment than investment management or wealth building. What they’ve created is an incredibly fun, exciting, legal casino in your pocket.” Charlie Munger, the ninety-seven-year-old business partner of Warren Buffett, the celebrated long-term-value investor, has criticized the frenzied

day trading the company has facilitated among people with little prior knowledge. “It’s really just wild speculation,” he told the *Wall Street Journal* in February. “I think that we’re crazy to allow it.”

Robinhood has become successful in Silicon Valley by following a trajectory similar to that of other tech companies: behaving aggressively in pursuit of fast growth. In the first four months of 2020, more than three million people opened Robinhood accounts, bringing the total number of users to more than thirteen million. The median age of Robinhood’s users is thirty-one; about half of them are first-time investors.

Representatives for Robinhood decline to say whether the majority of its users make or lose money, pointing out that other companies offering similar services don’t release this information. Tenev, the company’s C.E.O., revealed in February that the value of all its customers’ accounts was thirty-five billion dollars more than the total amount of money customers had deposited, although the distribution of this staggering profit is unknown. Last fall, Robinhood was valued at nearly twelve billion dollars; in March, it notified the Securities and Exchange Commission of plans to hold an initial public offering.

Tenev is thirty-four and lives in Silicon Valley with his wife, Celina, and their two toddlers. Long and lean, he has a wide, pale face, dimples, and a mop of shiny dark hair. He was born in Varna, Bulgaria, and immigrated to the U.S. when he was five. When we spoke recently, he recalled that when he was a small child the power went out for several hours nearly every day, and in the evenings his mother and father huddled around a battery-powered radio. From the window of the family’s apartment, Tenev’s father would monitor the line at the grocery store, where people waited to buy milk and bread. Bananas, imported from Cuba, were a special treat. His father had once gone on a trip to Italy and brought back a small Lego set. “I thought it was the coolest thing in the world,” Tenev said.

His mother worked for a book publisher, and his father was studying for a Ph.D. in economics. His father read “banned literature,” including Western economic theory, and refused to write his dissertation on Marxism, something that had been strongly encouraged. When the Cold War ended and Bulgaria’s Communist government fell, Tenev’s father applied for a

scholarship at the University of Delaware, and moved to the U.S. in 1991, to pursue another Ph.D. in economics. A year later, Tenev's mother joined his father, leaving Tenev behind with his grandparents. In the summer of 1992, when Bulgaria was in a severe economic crisis, Tenev's "punk teen-ager aunt" accompanied him to America. Tenev and his parents moved into graduate-student housing in Hyattsville, Maryland, in an apartment complex filled with other immigrant families. Tenev's father took a job as an economist at the World Bank, and Tenev's mother, who had been working in a restaurant and at other odd jobs, enrolled in an M.B.A. program at Georgetown University (she, too, later joined the World Bank), and the family settled in Washington, D.C. Tenev says that he spent much of high school studying and playing with computers, trying to set himself up to be financially secure: "There was this fear that we'd get sent back to Bulgaria, or they'd lose their jobs."



E.S.GLENN

"This one goes out to the anti-maskers in the comments section who helped my last video go viral."  
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn

During a summer research program at Stanford, Tenev met Bhatt, a fellow-undergraduate. Bhatt, too, was an only child of immigrants whose father was an academic. His parents had moved to the United States from India after his father was accepted into a Ph.D. program in theoretical physics at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. Bhatt, who speaks fluent Gujarati,

grew up in Poquoson, a small town in Virginia. At Stanford, he majored in physics; Tenev majored in mathematics. They became inseparable friends.

Tenev's Stanford adviser, Larry Guth, recalled that Tenev had concerns about pursuing math as a career; one could spend years exploring a particular question only to have that research come to nothing. Tenev went on to begin a Ph.D. program at U.C.L.A., where he was astonished at how hard the other students worked for such small financial gain. "It's obviously not a very lucrative profession," he told me.

The financial crisis was creating economic pain across the country, but new tech companies were launching and expanding at a brisk rate: Apple released the iPhone in 2007; Airbnb popularized home-sharing in 2008; and the following year Bitcoin was created. The buying and selling of stocks was growing increasingly automated. Trade orders now travelled from one computer to another, sometimes taking six or seven steps before being fulfilled. Tenev and Bhatt wanted to design a platform that would eliminate most of the steps, making each stock purchase or sale even faster. They started a company and called it Celeris, the Latin word for "quick." The technology would allow them to take advantage of tiny price gaps in the market, for example, by buying a share of Apple on one exchange, and then selling it for a slightly higher amount on another exchange. Soon, Tenev and Bhatt decided to focus exclusively on software for high-speed trading, and formed a new company, called Chronos Research. Operating from a warehouse space in Bushwick, Brooklyn, they hired a group of engineers to develop the software, which they sold to hedge funds and investment banks. They renamed the product Zardoz, for a schlocky science-fiction film from 1974 starring Sean Connery.

By the fall of 2011, [Occupy Wall Street](#) protesters had taken over Zuccotti Park, in New York City's financial district. Hundreds of people were sleeping in tents, protesting the inequality and corruption that the financial crisis had exposed. Acquaintances of Tenev and Bhatt accused them of being sellouts and traitors to the cause of economic justice. Tenev said that some of his friends, whom he characterized as "liberal hipster New Yorkers" and "artists or musicians," participated in the protests. "I didn't protest," Tenev told me. "I was essentially running a company and trying to survive, myself." Tenev took note of the collective frustration, but, he said, "I kind of

thought the protesters weren't really doing anything about it." He went on, "I think a lot of people can be swept up in these narratives. The narrative at the time was 'Financial industry bad. You're either in the financial industry and are part of the problem or you're not.'" Later that year, Tenev and Bhatt moved to San Francisco. The Occupy movement had spread across the country, and protesters had erected a tent city downtown that was visible from the windows of the office Tenev and Bhatt rented.

I wondered whether Robinhood's goal of democratizing finance stemmed from a fundamental misunderstanding of the Occupy protests, and I asked Tenev whether he thought the protesters had been seeking greater access to the stock market. Tenev said no, but he thought that the protesters didn't necessarily know what they were missing; people were traditionally encouraged to invest in real estate, but it wasn't as attractive an investment as the stock market, which historically has risen faster than home prices. "I think we have to move away from the American Dream being about the thirty-year fixed mortgage," he said.

Companies such as Uber, Instagram, and Foursquare were introducing new products designed for mobile devices. Tenev and Bhatt decided to turn Chronos into a free stock-trading application aimed at millennials. There were already many companies, such as E-Trade, that offered low-cost stock trades to nonprofessional investors, but they weren't designed to function well on mobile devices. Tenev and Bhatt started referring to their company as CashCat, inspired by Bhatt's deep fondness for, and serious allergy to, cats. They rented a garage-like space in downtown Palo Alto to use as an office.

Tenev said that when Celina first introduced him to her friends, she would tell them that he "worked in finance," quickly adding that he was a "good" finance guy—"the Robin Hood" of finance. Tenev and Bhatt seized on the name, and applied for a license to operate as a broker-dealer, which would allow the company to buy and sell securities on behalf of customers. In April, 2013, while they waited for approval, they launched Robinhood as a financial-news platform, where users could rate stocks and predict their performance. In an interview, Tenev described the company's philosophy by paraphrasing a quote from Gordon Gekko, a character in the movie "Wall Street": "The most important commodity that I have is information."

Tenev and Bhatt wanted trading on Robinhood to be free. In order to earn revenue, Robinhood planned to engage in a practice called “payment for order flow,” or “*PFOF*” (pronounced “P-fof”). This involves taking customer orders to buy or sell stock and routing them to “high-frequency-trading firms” or “market makers”—companies that engage in the buying and selling of stock to facilitate customer orders. These firms “fill” the orders by buying or selling the shares as the user has requested; at the same time, they use complex computer algorithms to skim a little off the price the customer gets, keeping it for themselves. Predictable, unsophisticated trade orders typically present the greatest opportunities for the high-frequency-trading firms to make money. In exchange for access to the orders, the firms pay rebates to the brokerage company that routed the orders to them. The rebates and the skimming are invisible to the customer placing the trade order.

Payment for order flow is common among brokers, but it is controversial, because it appears to create an incentive for them to send their customer orders to whichever market maker is willing to pay them the most. The S.E.C. requires that brokers disclose to their customers that they are engaging in *PFOF* and that brokers insure that their customers are getting the best prices for their trades. Proponents of the practice, including Robinhood, argue that *PFOF* results in customers getting better prices and faster execution. Some market experts disagree, and studies have been done showing that small investors would be better off without it. *PFOF* is restricted in countries including the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada. In a 2004 letter submitted to the S.E.C. during a debate about legalizing *PFOF* in the options market, an attorney representing Citadel Investment Group wrote, “The practice of payment for order flow creates serious conflicts of interest and should be banned.”

Tenev and Bhatt surely understood that eliminating commissions and then making it easy for users to trade like crazy would lead Robinhood to potentially make an enormous amount of money. They spent the summer and fall of 2012 presenting their idea to venture-capital investors. According to Tenev, approximately seventy-five potential investors rejected them. Some were concerned about putting money into a startup that had not yet released its primary product. Others thought that millennials would not be interested in trading stocks. Some of Robinhood’s early prospective

investors had ethical concerns about the company. Bill Gurley, a partner at Benchmark Capital, who has served on the boards of Uber and Zillow and previously worked as a research analyst at Credit Suisse First Boston, told me that when Tenev pitched the idea, saying Robinhood would rely on *PFOF*, he had qualms: “It made me feel bad. Emotionally bad. Because I think it is misleading to people.” Gurley noted that other brokerage firms that followed the practice didn’t pretend to be doing good. “My issue with Robinhood is, I think their mission and what they say they stand for is not actually true.”

Howard Lindzon, a founder of Social Leverage, an investment fund that was one of Robinhood’s seed investors, said he thought it was a public-relations problem. “First of all, almost every broker does it,” he said, referring to payment for order flow, although, he acknowledged, “people could argue about how their communication of it was, and whether they were tricking people.” He also said he thought that traditional brokers had been lazy about giving their customers the flexibility they wanted. “It’s because of the mistakes the incumbents made that Robinhood even exists,” Lindzon said. Another Robinhood investor, Jan Hammer, of Index Ventures, has said that he envisaged the company as “the Amazon of financial services.”

Robinhood received its regulatory license in October, 2013, and raised three million dollars in seed funding from Index Ventures, Andreessen Horowitz, Lindzon, and others. The following spring, Michael Lewis’s “Flash Boys” became a best-seller. The book described high-frequency-trading firms as insiders who used their superior technology to rig the market and take advantage of regular investors. “Flash Boys” generated so much negative media coverage that a public-relations firm produced a study to gauge the damage. According to a later S.E.C. investigation, senior executives at Robinhood debated whether it was a good idea to mention payment for order flow on the Web site at all. In December, the company removed the reference to *PFOF* from a section titled “How Does Robinhood Make Money?” and stated elsewhere that Robinhood’s revenue from *PFOF* was “negligible.” Tenev acknowledged some early mistakes. “I’m the first to admit, our compliance procedures, especially in those early years, were the compliance procedures of a growing company,” he said. “Now I would say the teams are world class.” He went on, “We had to get world class really quickly, and I don’t think there was a playbook.”

During the early months, Tenev, Bhatt, and a small team of engineers and designers sometimes went to Stanford and showed students prototypes of the app, asking for their impressions, then put their findings into practice. Inspired by an e-mail app called Mailbox, they created a Web site and a waiting list for new Robinhood users, offering those who referred their friends the opportunity to move higher up the list. The company raised another thirteen million dollars from investors, including Aaron Levie, the C.E.O. and a co-founder of Box, a cloud-storage company. Levie had facilitated an introduction to the actor Jared Leto, who also invested.

Robinhood launched on December 11, 2014, with five hundred thousand people on the list. When the app went live, the company's twenty or so employees arrived at work early to watch the downloads tick up on a big projected screen. "There was such a sense of excitement," a former employee said. "Our friends and family and customers who'd been waiting for months could finally download the app. We weren't on a test flight anymore."



"I hope you're not using any of the canned food I so diligently stockpiled."  
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

It takes just a few minutes to open a Robinhood account and be ready to trade. The app asks for your name, your phone number, and your level of investment experience; if you say that you have a little, it will ask if you'd like to enable options trading. Options are contracts, called "calls" and

“puts,” to buy or sell a hundred shares of a stock at a time at a predetermined price and date—and, on Robinhood, they, too, are commission-free. The app requests your employment status and the source of your investment funds. Then it directs you to log in to your bank account in order to link it. Finally, it asks how much you would like to transfer to Robinhood: a hundred dollars, five hundred dollars, five thousand dollars, or a “custom” amount. A green bar glows at the bottom, inviting you to click and submit.

The app features whimsical illustrations, swipe navigation, and a St. Patrick’s Day color scheme; all were developed by the company’s creative director, Zane Bevan, one of Robinhood’s earliest employees. Like many of his colleagues, Bevan knew little about finance when he joined Robinhood. He told me that a year and a half ago the design team had updated the app to a primary-green shade from a teal color. “We wanted it to feel kind of honest and true,” he said. He and the rest of the team found the interfaces of other financial-services companies dense and intimidating. They instead took inspiration from weather, news, and fitness apps that required no prior knowledge to operate.

Natasha Dow Schüll, the author of “Addiction by Design: Machine Gambling in Las Vegas” and a professor in the media, culture, and communication department at N.Y.U., told me that little about Robinhood, or about many other popular mobile-phone applications, is novel. Clever engineers simply repurposed many of the design features of slot machines, which were developed over decades. Green, the color of luck and of money, is found throughout Las Vegas, and Schüll said that the physical design of casinos is also mirrored in Robinhood’s pursuit of a “frictionless” user experience. Even the ability to trade partial shares seemed to Schüll to fit into a trend of “nano monetization,” which also includes multiline video slot machines that run on pennies, and online-poker Web sites that offer players the option of betting a dollar or less on multiple tables simultaneously. One of Robinhood’s most popular features is the “free stock,” which is offered when a new user signs up. Until April, the stock appeared as an onscreen lottery ticket that you scratched off, revealing a share of a company you had likely never heard of.

Adam Alter is a professor of marketing at N.Y.U.’s Stern School of Business, and the author of “Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology

and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked.” He told me, “In a case of a company like Robinhood, it’s not enough for them to have users on the site. You actually have to get them to hit the Buy or Sell button.” He went on, “You’ve got to make that feel like it’s inconsequential. You’ve got to lower all the barriers resistant people might have to making financial decisions, so that you don’t even think about the money at all.” In written testimony for a second congressional hearing, in March, Vicki Bogan, a behavioral-finance expert at Cornell University, said, “The bigger game is the one that online brokers are playing with the retail investors. How much can they get the retail investors to trade even though it may not be beneficial for the investors to do so?” A Robinhood spokesperson said that attracting users who had previously been excluded from the financial system is a “profoundly positive change,” and that “suggesting otherwise represents an élitist, old way of thinking.”

During the March confirmation hearing of Gary Gensler, the new head of the S.E.C., he said that the digital confetti that Robinhood users saw after they placed their first trade might serve as a “behavioral prompt” to encourage more trading. Tenev denied that this was the intent, describing the confetti as a “moment of delight.” “I’m incredibly confident that once that’s investigated and the studies are done, there won’t be any connection,” he said. Nonetheless, on March 31st, Robinhood announced that it was removing the confetti.

In our conversations, Tenev sounded weary of the charge that Robinhood makes investing seem like a game. “I think people need a reason or an explanation for why Robinhood has been as successful as it is,” he said. After the site launched, Robinhood was the only broker offering commission-free trades; when it emerged that the company was making a profit, he told me, some critics credited all of its success to *PFOF*.

Tenev described Robinhood as “an idea and a product in one that nobody else has claimed.” The idea, as he put it, “is that the financial system is an incredibly powerful tool, and it’s been available only to the rich until now.”

At most traditional brokerage firms, trained securities representatives answer phone calls from customers. During Robinhood’s first few years, customer service seemed to be a low priority; the company provided a phone line, but

relied primarily on automated e-mail responses to deal with customer inquiries. In late 2016, Robinhood contracted Voxpro, headquartered in Ireland, to provide its customer service. (Voxpro was acquired by *TELUS* International in 2017.) A former Voxpro employee told CBS News that Voxpro couldn't handle the complicated problems that Robinhood users had with the app. There were sometimes long delays when users couldn't access their money. People called about trades they'd placed but didn't fully understand, and about losses that they thought were mistaken; some of the callers were in distress. None of the customer-service employees at Voxpro's California office had the licensing or certification to discuss investments with users. More serious inquiries were forwarded to Robinhood brokers, who were often too busy to deal with them. The customer-service workers, some of whom were paid fifteen dollars an hour, had little power to resolve any of the disputes. ("We have no information or records that our team members frequently were unable to resolve issues with the Robinhood app," a *TELUS* representative wrote in an e-mail.)

In 2017, Robinhood eliminated the option to call and speak to someone. Gretchen Howard, the company's chief operating officer, who joined in January, 2019, after working at Fidelity and Google, told me that Robinhood wanted to use technology rather than people to address customer issues. Still, she said, the company tripled the number of "customer experience" employees last year, and added an option allowing a user to request a callback from a representative.

At the end of 2017, Robinhood announced options trading on the platform, making it available to all but its most inexperienced users. The company received even higher payment-for-order-flow rates on options than on stocks, and options trading soon became the company's largest source of revenue. In options trading, it is easy to quickly rack up enormous losses, and it has been associated with compulsive behavior. Benn Eifert, the manager of QVR Advisors, an options-based investment firm, told me that the moderators of the WallStreetBets Reddit forum periodically posted information about suicide hotlines. "You have a lot of addiction issues that come along with retail trading," he said. He thought that getting younger people interested in investing was "wonderful," but he worried that Robinhood was "making it too easy for people to take a lot of risk doing things they don't understand." The Robinhood office, like those of many

startups, was accessible from the street. On at least one occasion, another former employee told me, a frustrated Robinhood user showed up at the office to complain.

Robinhood expanded into [cryptocurrency](#) in January, 2018, introducing trading in Bitcoin and Ether in five states where it had received regulatory permission for such transactions. “The app that allows stoned college sophomores to move equities from their dorm rooms . . . is taking the next logical step and letting those same savvy investors buy cryptos!” one blogger wrote. Tenev and other executives recognized that Robinhood needed more experienced managers. In April, the company relocated to a new headquarters in Menlo Park. That November, Robinhood hired a chief financial officer, Jason Warnick, who had spent twenty years at Amazon, most recently as chief of staff to its C.F.O. The following year, Jim Swartwout, a veteran of Ameritrade and Scottrade, became the president of Robinhood Securities, the subsidiary of Robinhood that handles its users’ trades.

Early in March, 2020, Robinhood experienced service outages three times, including on March 9th, when the S. & P. 500 dropped 7.6 per cent, its worst single-day performance since the financial crisis. The dive prompted the exchanges to halt trading for fifteen minutes, so that prices could stabilize. During the service disruptions, Robinhood investors were unable to access their accounts or place any trades.

Tenev and Bhatt wrote on the company blog that the system failures were due to “stress on our infrastructure—which struggled with unprecedented load,” citing “highly volatile and historic market conditions” and the record number of new users. Traders were furious. One, whose Reddit user name was hsauers, wrote, “There’s absolutely no excuse for this in a mission-critical core application.” OA12T2 wrote, “Should I send Baiju and Vlad the losses I endured because they couldn’t handle the traffic?”



"You have retrieved the golden fleece! Only one more quest, and you will have completed your daughter's preschool application."  
Cartoon by Pat Byrnes

By that spring, Alex Kearns, a twenty-year-old student at the University of Nebraska, had been using Robinhood for about two years. The app had permitted him to trade options just months after he opened his account. Kearns grew up in Naperville, Illinois, with his sister and his parents. His father is an I.T. professional at a financial-services firm. The family was close. Kearns was known as an anxious but positive young man who played trombone in the high-school band, received a school-spirit award, and joined the R.O.T.C. at Nebraska, where he majored in business management. Kearns's cousin-in-law Bill Brewster, a professional investor, told me that he'd spoken with Kearns that March. "He was happier than I've ever seen him," Brewster said.

Option-spread trades involve two or more options, and can be used to bet on the price movement of a stock while minimizing risk. Typically, a trader buys one option and sells another of the same type: a call or a put. During the summer of 2020, Kearns made a spread trade by buying and selling puts in IWM, which tracks the movement of the Russell 2000 stock index. If IWM had performed as he expected, he would have made a profit; if it didn't, he would likely have lost a few thousand dollars. At his parents' home in Naperville on June 11th, he received an e-mail a little before midnight informing him that his Robinhood account had been restricted. He

opened the app and saw that his account appeared to show a negative cash balance of more than seven hundred and thirty thousand dollars. He had chosen not to open a margin account precisely to avoid any catastrophic losses. How did his account now show a loss so much greater than the sixteen thousand dollars in assets he owned? A few minutes later, Robinhood “assigned” him the twenty-four puts he had sold, meaning that the person on the other side of the trade had exercised his or her puts, creating an obligation on Kearns to buy two thousand four hundred shares from that person. Kearns does not seem to have been aware that the negative balance in his cash account would be almost entirely offset when he exercised the puts he owned—the other half of the spread trade—on the next trading day. On Robinhood’s minimalist interface, the number looked terrifying.

Brewster told me that, when anomalous balances appeared on his account at TD Ameritrade, he had always been able to get someone on the phone to help him. At Robinhood, Kearns could only send an e-mail to the company. “I was recently assigned on puts I sold in a spread,” he wrote. “As of tonight, my buying power is over -700,000. Will the puts that I bought cover this transaction?” A robo-response noted that his inquiry had been assigned a case number. At 3:26 A.M., another e-mail from Robinhood instructed him to deposit \$178,612.73 into his account by June 17th. Kearns sent two more panicky e-mails to customer service, begging for clarification, but he again received auto-generated responses. Kearns left the house, biked to a local train crossing, and jumped in front of an oncoming train. Later that day, his parents found a note from him: “If you’re reading this, I am dead. How was a 20 year old with no income able to get assigned almost a million dollars’ worth of leverage?” He added, “The amount of guilt I feel as I commit this is unbearable—I did not want to die.”

A week later, Tenev and Bhatt expressed their condolences to Kearns’s family on a company blog post, and outlined steps they planned to take to make options trading safer. They also announced a two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand-dollar donation to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. When I spoke with Robinhood executives, they expressed anguish at what had happened to Kearns, but no one told me that they would have done anything differently. Tenev said it wasn’t clear that hiring more customer-service representatives earlier on would have been the right thing

to do. “It’s easy to say we should have invested more, but that would have come at a cost of something,” he said. “It’s hard for me to find too much fault in the decisions we made.”

In September, 2020, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the S.E.C. was investigating Robinhood for failing to fully disclose, between 2015 and 2018, that it was engaging in payment for order flow. Three months later, on December 16th, the Enforcement Section of the Massachusetts Securities Division filed a complaint alleging that Robinhood had engaged in other illegal practices, including using “gamification” to lure inexperienced investors, and not having the proper controls to keep the service functioning during big market swings. The next day, Robinhood agreed to pay sixty-five million dollars to settle its S.E.C. case, which also alleged that the company had failed to get the best prices for its users. “Robinhood provided inferior trade prices that in aggregate deprived customers of \$34.1 million even after taking into account the savings from not paying a commission,” the S.E.C. said. (Robinhood disputes the allegations in the Massachusetts case and admitted no wrongdoing in the S.E.C. case.)

On January 28, 2021, at around 6 A.M., Swartwout, the head of Robinhood Securities, got a call from one of his colleagues, who had some alarming news. The Depository Trust & Clearing Corporation, which clears and settles nearly all securities trades in the United States, had requested that Robinhood deposit three billion dollars in additional collateral into its account. It was a stunning amount of cash for any company to produce on short notice—thirty times Robinhood’s collateral requirement just three days prior. The extreme volatility in GameStop and a few other stocks had led the D.T.C.C. to demand that more cash be made available to guarantee the value of customer trades between the time they were made and their settlement, two days later. If Robinhood failed to meet its demands, the D.T.C.C., in theory, could liquidate all the holdings in Robinhood’s accounts. After Robinhood said that it was restricting purchases of GameStop and a few other meme stocks, including AMC and BlackBerry, the additional-collateral demand was lowered to seven hundred million dollars.

Dan Gallagher, Robinhood’s chief legal officer, is a former S.E.C. commissioner who joined the company in May, 2020. He described the GameStop frenzy as a “five-sigma event”—something freakish that had only

a one-in-3.5 million probability of happening. Tenev and his colleagues were taken aback by the vitriol directed at them. Cameron Winklevoss, the cryptocurrency investor, tweeted, “Citadel is an investor in Melvin Capital, which got run over by Wall Street Bets. Citadel is also Robinhood’s biggest customer.” Conspiracy theories alleging that Robinhood was preventing people from buying GameStop in order to help Citadel and Melvin Capital quickly spread, and many users pledged on Reddit to leave Robinhood. Tenev rushed to raise more money, in case a five-sigma event happened again. The leaders of Robinhood, Gallagher told me, wanted “to make the balance sheet bombproof.” Warnick spent that weekend calling Robinhood’s investors, asking for additional funds, and Robinhood raised \$3.4 billion.

Tenev went on TV and explained that Robinhood had frozen the buying of stock “preemptively” to meet its clearinghouse requirements. But many users refused to accept the explanation, even after the company began to restore trading in GameStop, the next day. “I don’t believe in the Illuminati, but this is about as close as I get to it,” said Aaron Profumo, a former semiprofessional poker player who, until recently, traded on Robinhood nearly every day. “There’s a good argument to be made that they’re doing this to depress the value of the stock.” As users voiced their discontent, many realized that they were not Robinhood’s primary customers, as they had believed; they were themselves the product, and they were being sold to firms such as Citadel Securities—Robinhood’s most lucrative customers. Since January, dozens of lawsuits have been filed against Robinhood.

The damage to the company’s image has been catastrophic. Gallagher told me that not even the collapse of Lehman Brothers, in 2008, had prepared him for the experience: “The one thing that sort of blows me away was this misinformation, this misallegation of collusion with the hedge funds that you couldn’t have predicted and that got such traction so quickly.” He went on, “I hope that investigators and others will be looking into that campaign against us, of false allegations.”

In spite of the controversy, millions of new users opened accounts, and in the first quarter of 2021 Robinhood’s *pfof* revenue was three hundred and thirty-one million dollars, more than triple what it had been in the same period last year. Like more traditional financial firms, Robinhood now has an office of external affairs in Washington, D.C., and it has hired five

lobbyists. They include Lucas Moskowitz, a former chief of staff to the head of the S.E.C., and Beth Zorc, a former staff member for the House Financial Services Committee. “Traditionally, Robinhood was the anti-Wall Street, and didn’t want to be seen as playing that game, or be seen as lobbying in the tawdry sense of the word,” Gallagher told me. “But you don’t want to have people here in Washington talking about you but not knowing about you.”

During the first week of February, 2021, GameStop’s stock continued to drop. On February 8th, it closed at sixty dollars. That day, the Kearns family filed a wrongful-death lawsuit against Robinhood, bringing a new round of media attention to the case. On February 18th, I spoke to Cody Herdman. GameStop had fallen to forty dollars. “I’m still about even, to be honest,” he said. “I’m not over-the-top concerned about it—it’s not going to go to zero tomorrow.” In early December, Dakota State had lost much of its football funding, and Herdman’s scholarship had fallen through. He would have to leave the school after the semester ended, and he planned to spend the summer attending football camps, trying for a scholarship at a different college. Still, on January 27th, when GameStop’s stock was near its peak, he hadn’t considered selling, believing that it could rise to a thousand dollars a share. He was trying not to dwell on what he could have bought with the twenty-five thousand dollars he might have made: a new gaming P.C., a replacement for his old S.U.V., future college expenses. “I do wish I would have sold it at four hundred and eighty-five, but doesn’t everybody?” he said.

I was struck by the similarities between the lead-up to the financial crisis and the present moment, with millions of relatively inexperienced people jumping into the stock market, determined to take advantage of the wealth-creation machine. After 2008, the middle class suffered far more than the wealthy, and many economists worry that the high participation in today’s volatile stock market will have a similar outcome. In April, I called Cody’s father, Jerry Herdman, to ask what he made of his son’s activities. Jerry, who is now retired, grew up poor in a suburb of Pittsburgh. His father, who served on the front lines in both World Wars, died when Jerry was six, leaving him and his two brothers to try to help support their mother, who was disabled and couldn’t work. Jerry had a paper route and other part-time jobs to help pay for expenses, and after one year of college he joined the

electricians' union. He started investing in the market in 1978, on the advice of a brother-in-law, beginning with shares of A.T. & T. and Philadelphia Electric. He later joined a union stock club, where he talked about investment ideas every week with six other men over coffee and doughnuts. He went on to buy stock in other well-known companies, such as Microsoft and Merck. In the nineties, after two spinal surgeries, he was out of work, and in 2008, when the market crashed, he watched as the value of his portfolio plummeted. He refused to sell his stocks at depressed values. "I just always felt, Wall Street always has control," he said. "If I can ride the coattails and make a little money off of it, great. But I can't get upset at any institution like that, because I know it's their game and I'm playing on their field." As far as Jerry was concerned, the only difference between Robinhood and the Wall Street firms was that Robinhood was targeting idealistic young people as users.

In April, the GameStop stock price was around a hundred and fifty dollars a share. Cody Herdman promised himself that, if it reached four hundred again, he would follow his father's advice and sell just enough shares to recoup his initial investment of about fifteen hundred dollars. Robinhood had liquidated the GameStop shares he had bought on margin, and he had transferred most of his remaining shares to a new trading account at Fidelity, although he still used his Robinhood account to track the market, preferring its user interface. In mid-April, he watched on Robinhood as the price of a cryptocurrency called Dogecoin, which two software engineers had originally created as a joke, surged upward, from pennies to more than forty cents a coin, after Elon Musk tweeted about it, inspiring millions of traders to invest. Robinhood was one of the few platforms on which Dogecoin could be traded, and the increase in volume led to service breakdowns on the platform on April 16th. In a blog post, the company said that providing great customer service was Robinhood's "top priority," and praised its users for "leading a wave of change as they take control of their financial lives." ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated Dan Gallagher's employment history before joining Robinhood.

# **Annals of Gastronomy**

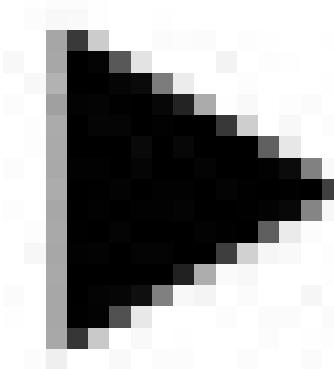
- The Gatekeepers Who Get to Decide What Food Is “Disgusting”

# The Gatekeepers Who Get to Decide What Food Is “Disgusting”

At the Disgusting Food Museum, in Sweden, where visitors are served dishes such as fermented shark and stinky tofu, I felt both like a tourist and like one of the exhibits.

By [Jiayang Fan](#)

May 10, 2021



In the spring of 2019, Arthur De Meyer, a twenty-nine-year-old Belgian journalist, toured the Disgusting Food Museum, in Malmö, Sweden. As with the Museum of Sex, in New York City, and the Museum of Ice Cream, in San Francisco, the Disgusting Food Museum is conceptually closer to an amusement park than to a museum. There are eighty-five culinary horrors on display—ordinary fare and delicacies from thirty countries—and each tour concludes with a taste test of a dozen items. De Meyer, the son of a cookbook author and a food photographer, told me that he'd always been an adventurous eater. As a reporter, he also prided himself on his ability to maintain his composure. “But the taste test was war,” he said. “The kind where you’re defenseless, because the bombs are going off invisibly, inside of you.”

An Icelandic shark dish, called hákarl, was the first assault on his stomach. “Eating it was like gnawing on three-week-old cheese from the garbage that had also been pissed on by every dog in the neighborhood,” he said. Next up was durian, a spiky, custard-like fruit from Southeast Asia that “smelled like socks at the bottom of a gym locker, drizzled with paint thinner.” But worst of all was surströmming, a fermented herring that is beloved in northern Sweden. De Meyer said that eating it was like taking a bite out of a corpse.

He vomited ten times, topping the museum’s previous record of six. Mercifully, admission tickets are printed on airplane-style barf bags.

The Disgusting Food Museum, which opened in 2018, is the brainchild of Samuel West, a forty-seven-year-old psychologist who was born in California and has lived in Sweden for more than two decades. In 2016, during a trip to Zagreb, Croatia, he wandered into the Museum of Broken Relationships. As he studied the remnants of strangers’ failed romances—photos of hookup spots; a diet book that a woman received from her fiancé—West came up with an idea for a museum dedicated to failed business products and services. A year later, in Helsingborg, Sweden, he opened the Museum of Failure, where the takeaway was simple: blunders are the midwives of success. One example on display at the museum was the Newton, a personal digital assistant released by Apple in 1993. Its shoddy handwriting software and exorbitant price nearly torpedoed the entire company, but its sleek black design eventually inspired the iPhone. The exhibits also included Bic for Her, a line of pens, from 2011, that were designed for women; DivX, a 2003 trademark for “self-destructing” DVDs that could be watched for only forty-eight hours; a collection of Harley-Davidson perfumes, from the mid-nineties; and Trump: The Game, a Monopoly ripoff released in 1989. (The game was pulled from shelves after Trump said that it was “too complicated.”)

The Museum of Failure was a resounding commercial success, attracting visitors from across the world and attention from the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *National Geographic*. By 2018, though, West was on to his next project, after reading an article about how reducing beef consumption could slow climate change. The piece explained that a dire problem could be eased by a simple solution—eating insects, a good source of protein—but that the First World had rejected this idea out of disgust. West realized that if the

experience of failure had expedited human innovation, then the experience of disgust was potentially holding us back. Could that aversion be challenged or changed? “I just wanted to know, Why is it that even talking about eating certain things makes my skin crawl?” he told me, animatedly, over Zoom.

The planning for the museum began with a more basic question: What counts as food? West recruited his friend Andreas Ahrens, a former I.T. entrepreneur and a foodie, to help him choose which items would qualify for exhibition. The men ruled out artificially flavored gag gifts—such as Rocket Fizz’s barf soda and Jelly Belly’s booger jelly beans—and novelty foods like deep-fried Oreos and a Polish beer that had been brewed with a woman’s vaginal yeast. Four hundred items made it through the initial screening, after which they were culled based on four criteria: taste, texture, smell, and the process by which they were made. Foie gras “failed” the taste, texture, and smell tests, which is to say that West and Ahrens found it inoffensive on those fronts. But the dish, which is typically produced by force-feeding ducks until their livers swell to ten times their normal size, easily passed the process test, earning itself a place at the museum. (According to Ahrens, many visitors, after reading about the process, swear to never eat foie gras again.) The winnowing of the foods was spirited and combative. West emerged as the bigger wimp; he threw up so many times that he lost count. Ahrens found plenty of the foods unpleasant, but he got sick only after tasting balut, a Filipino egg-fetus snack that is eaten straight from the shell—feathers, beak, blood, and all.

After the men chose the items, they had to contend with customs and transportation. Svið, a traditional Icelandic dish in which a sheep’s head is cut in half and boiled, was impossible to procure, for “logistical reasons,” Ahrens said. The food is instead represented by a photo of the head next to helpings of mashed potatoes and pureed root vegetables. The same goes for ortolan, a nearly extinct French songbird, which is prepared by blinding the bird and then drowning it in brandy, a practice that is now banned in the European Union. Raw monkey brain, which was supposedly served at Chinese imperial banquets, is represented by a type of wooden table that would have been used to hold down a live monkey while the top of its head was sliced open and spooned out. (“It is unclear whether it’s an urban

legend, or something that's still being served in China," an accompanying sign says.)

Even the foods that appear at the museum in their real forms posed unusual difficulties. To make cuy, a Peruvian dish, West had to watch several YouTube videos on how to skin and boil a guinea pig. "I sent my wife and children away the day I did it," he recalled. "It just felt wrong, bordering on criminal." For a South Korean wine that demanded the "fresh turds" of children, Ahrens found himself scooping up his eight-year-old daughter's excrement and fermenting it with rice wine. The final product is on display at the museum, in a gallon jug, though Ahrens has not mustered the will to try it.

On Tripadvisor, the Disgusting Food Museum is ranked No. 1 on a list of ninety-four things to do in Malmö, the third-largest city in Sweden. Visitors are often surprised to find that the museum is situated on the first floor of a shopping mall, between a furniture store and an art gallery. Daniela Nusfelean, a Romanian college student who visited the museum in January, said that one of the first things she noticed was the absence of any odor. "This place is supposed to have so much food," Nusfelean remembered thinking. "How can food not smell?"

The stinkier items are secured under bell jars, Ahrens, the museum's director, said, when he gave me a tour over Zoom, earlier this year. Most foods, such as kale pache—an Iranian soup made from a sheep's head and hooves, which are boiled overnight to eliminate any smells—were displayed in bowls or pots that sat atop a series of white tables, illuminated by long-necked lamps. (Some of the foods are made fresh every week; others, like the poop wine, have a lengthy shelf life.) The museum, whose walls were bright and bare, looked as sterile as a science lab, until Ahrens, who wore a T-shirt that bore the museum's logo and the word "Yuck!," gestured to a chalkboard that read "2 days since last vomit." "This is the scoreboard," he said, grinning.

We went on to the exhibits, each of which was accompanied by a placard that, in English and Swedish, noted a dish's history and its country of origin. First stop: dried stinkbugs from Zimbabwe, which vaguely resembled the buds of microgreen sprouts. Then there was kungu cake (East Africa), a

dessert made from millions of crushed flies; fried locusts (Israel), the only insect that the Torah considers kosher; frog juice (Peru), a frothy green beverage containing frogs and quail eggs; and mouse wine (China), a jug of rice wine infused with two hundred baby rodents.



"Gee, I dunno. What do you feel safe going out and doing?"  
Cartoon by William Haefeli

Eventually, Ahrens led me to a Warhol-esque wall of yellow and red cans. "Our most popular selfie destination," he said, adding that the cans, which were full of surströmming, the fermented herring, had induced more vomiting than any other item in the museum. ("Surströmming is one of the worst smelling foods in the world," a placard read.) The exhibit featured a smell jar, inviting visitors to lift the lid and to take a sniff. Before the pandemic, one of the highlights of the museum was a photo booth that sprayed jet streams of various scents—durian, stinky tofu (a fermented bean-curd dish)—and captured visitors' facial expressions as they inhaled. "Instagram," Ahrens explained.

The term "disgust" entered the English language more than four hundred years ago, from the Old French word *desgouster*, meaning "to put off one's appetite." But disgust wasn't considered worthy of scientific examination until 1872, when Charles Darwin defined it as a reaction to "something revolting, primarily in relation to the sense of taste . . . and secondarily to anything which causes a similar feeling, through the sense of smell, touch

and even of eyesight.” Darwin theorized that disgust is a basic human emotion—like anger, fear, or sadness—and that it is expressed with a universal “disgust face.” If you are presented with a glass of sour milk, you will almost certainly scrunch up your nose, purse your lips, and blow out air between them, making an “ack” or “ugh” sound through clenched teeth. If you are forced to drink the milk, you might open your mouth wide, tense your brows, and retract your upper lip to decrease inhalation, pinching your features into the likeness of the vomit-face emoji (all of which is often a precursor to the act itself).

There is a reason that we find certain foods offensive. A prehistoric human who scarfed down decomposing meat or bacteria-ridden feces wouldn’t have lived long. “Life would have been simpler if we were koala bears,” Daniel Fessler, an evolutionary anthropologist at U.C.L.A., told me. Koala bears eat only eucalyptus leaves, so there isn’t a lot of hand-wringing about what’s for dinner. But humans have made it a lot further in life than koalas, in large part because of our diet. Eating meat has allowed our digestive tracts to shrink and our brains to grow in outsized proportion to our bodies, because the animals we consume have already extracted the nutrients we need. Meat consumption, however, has also entangled our species in the omnivore’s dilemma: we must be flexible enough to consume a variegated diet, yet wary enough of novelty to avoid accidental death.

Evolutionary psychologists often cite the Swiss Army knife as an analogy for the mind, because both have all-purpose tools designed to cope with an unpredictable world. Disgust is simply one blade of many. If the blade is kept sharp, it helps you avoid disease, but if it becomes too sharp you might not ingest enough calories. “Evolution has optimized this trade-off so that priority is placed on the more urgent goal,” Fessler said. If you’re starving, then the blade is dulled: you may be more likely to eat something that you’d otherwise find disgusting, such as rotting leftovers. (As Cervantes wrote in “Don Quixote,” “Hunger is the best sauce.”) “The key point here is that people do not need to make conscious decisions about these trade-offs,” Fessler said. Evolved psychological mechanisms do the work.

Disgust may have originated as a food-rejection system, Paul Rozin, a psychology professor at the University of Pennsylvania, told me, “but it has expanded into a vehicle for perceiving the social and moral world.” Rozin is

the pioneer of a subfield called disgust studies. His favorite experiment involves dropping a cockroach into a glass of juice. Most people, of course, refuse to drink the juice, citing the dirtiness of cockroaches. “What’s amazing is that even if you disinfect the cockroach and convincingly demonstrate that the juice is harmless, people still won’t want to drink it,” Rozin said. The juice has been irrevocably contaminated.

The concept of contamination is one example of how biology maps onto cultural systems. Both Islam and Judaism forbid the consumption of pork; many cultures avoid other kinds of meat. These taboos may have been provoked by disgust (pigs are thought to be unclean, raw meat tends to be slimy and unappetizing, and both can cause disease if prepared incorrectly), but disgust can also be perpetuated by taboos. Lebanese Christians are technically allowed to eat pork, but many of them abstain, owing to the influence of their pork-avoidant neighbors in the Muslim-majority country.

Like a regional dialect or a style of dress, most food taboos advertise and affirm membership within a group. Humans evolved in tribes, and food taboos helped to define coalitions. In a Hobbesian past, a cohesive tribe would have had a better chance of domination. Chimps know this just as well as high-school cliques do. A show of strength intimidates the loners—by making them feel like losers. It’s not an accident that minorities with unfamiliar customs can pique our suspicion, Mark Schaller, a social psychologist at the University of British Columbia, told me. Our behavioral immune system, much like our biological immune system, is meant to detect danger. But it can go into overdrive. Schaller compared it to a smoke detector. “It’s designed to be hypersensitive for a reason,” he said. “In the wild, it’s O.K. to make small errors by overestimating a threat, but, if you underestimate, you are dead.”

When I was a child in Chongqing, in the nineteen-eighties, food forged the rules and the language of existence. To be fed was to be loved, and to live was to taste the world. (In Chinese, the character for “life” contains the component word “tongue.”) I grew up on an Army compound—my mother was in the military—and the adults I knew had a habit of pinching the round bums of young children, appraising them as “great juicy cuts of meat for dumplings.” Many of those adults, my father included, had lived through the worst famine in history, during which some villagers had cannibalized one

another. When I wondered, at the age of four, if human flesh tasted like pork, it did not occur to me that the thought might be disgusting.

As a young Army recruit, my mother ate the rats that scurried outside the granary she guarded, and for years she ate kernels of rice that she found on the ground—something I was told by other adults never to do. To be the first member of my family spared the pangs of hunger was to live through an epochal transition that felt like cultural transformation. Still, the threat of deprivation hung over our lives like the dangling carcasses in the village wet markets.

At those markets, my mother traded her extra grain coupons—which she began to receive after becoming an Army doctor—for eggs, an expensive protein in the hierarchy of foods. Shortly before I began first grade, my mother stopped feeding me the rice porridge and the pickles that she and my grandmother ate every morning and started me on a special breakfast of what she called “brain foods”: a warm, viscous puddle of milk, bobbing with chunks of raw egg yolk. My Swiss Army knife was already being honed. Disgust welled up in me, but it contended with other blades that were necessary for survival: the shame of ingratitude, and the fear of disobedience. I ate the brain foods every morning for two interminable years.

Even so, disgust did not leave a lasting mark on my psyche until 1992, when, at the age of eight, on a flight to America with my mother, I was served the first non-Chinese meal of my life. In a tinfoil-covered tray was what looked like a pile of dumplings, except that they were square. I picked one up and took a bite, expecting it to be filled with meat, and discovered a gooey, creamy substance inside. Surely this was a dessert. Why else would the squares be swimming in a thick white sauce? I was grossed out, but ate the whole meal, because I had never been permitted to do otherwise. For weeks afterward, the taste festered in my thoughts, goading my gag reflex. Years later, I learned that those curious squares were called cheese ravioli.

Olives were another mystery. In Chongqing, I had been introduced to them as a fig-like snack, dried or cured, that had a sweet-tart kick. In the U.S., I placed a dark-green drop onto my tongue and, for the first time in my life, spat something out of my mouth and into my palm. Salty and greasy weren’t

what I was expecting, and my reaction was born as much of disgust as it was of having been deceived.

To be a new immigrant is to be trapped in a disgusting-food museum, confused by the unfamiliar and unsettled by the familiar-looking. The firm, crumbly white blocks that you mistake for tofu are called feta. The vanilla icing that tastes spoiled is served on top of potatoes and is called sour cream. At a certain point, the trickery of food starts to become mundane. Disgusting foods become regulars in the cafeteria, and at the dinner table.

Recently, I joined a few Asian-American friends at a restaurant in Queens to have hot pot, a fondue-like communal meal in which ingredients are dipped in a shared pot of boiling broth at the center of the table. By the time I arrived, bowls of sliced pig arteries, pig intestines, cow stomach, duck feet, and pale-pink brains of unidentified provenance already sat around a burbling vat of broth, spices, and chili oil. All of these would have made it into a Westerner's encyclopedia of disgusting foods, but everyone at the table knew that the gusto with which we consumed the entrails and viscera connected us.

I asked my companions if they'd had any memorable encounters with disgusting food. Nearly all of them named dairy products that they had tried for the first time in the United States. A Chengdu native recalled the chalky taste of a protein shake, making the classic disgust face as she spoke. "The first time I had pizza was bad," Alex, a forty-year-old network engineer, said. It was margherita pizza, and he thought that the little white splotches of melted burrata were fresh vomit. "I couldn't believe that there were people who ate this regularly," he continued. "But Americans told me this was a very common food here." He bit into the muscled leg of a bullfrog.

"And?" I asked.

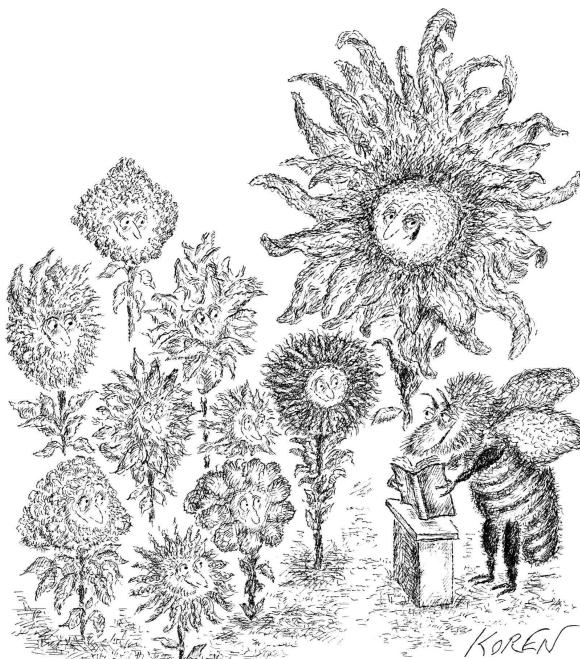
"And I just learned to get used to it."

I had had almost the exact same experience with a Sicilian slice some three decades before. Assimilating requires you to adopt a foreign tongue, in more ways than one. But when the choice is between annihilation and assimilation, you assimilate. This was as true for prehistoric humans as it is

for a young, deracinated Chinese immigrant in America. One of the wonders of the tongue is its sheer malleability. New tastes are acquired and seamlessly incorporated into the tapestry of one's gastronomic predilections. I don't remember the exact moment when I began relishing Western olives, but the change felt natural; with each new experience, the tapestry is rewoven.

Shortly before my virtual tour of the Disgusting Food Museum, I had received a temperature-controlled package in the mail. It contained goat-stomach cheese, fermented shark, surströmming, and several other items from the museum's taste test. I arranged the food in small saucers around my laptop and launched Zoom, where Andreas Ahrens was waiting for me. Before I dug in, he suggested I check that the items had made it through their transatlantic journey O.K. "Maybe smell them just to make sure they haven't gone bad," he said. But, wait, I said, weren't most of them supposed to smell bad? He laughed. "Good luck, then."

I opened a pouch of German sauerkraut juice. Its putrid gray color reminded me of stagnant gutter water. By way of encouragement, Ahrens said, "Very few people try nothing. Most try more than they thought they would." I had skipped lunch to prepare for the taste test, and by then my stomach was growling so loudly that I felt obliged to apologize to the screen.



"Today's speaker has written a colorful tell-all memoir about his life as a pollinator."  
Cartoon by Edward Koren

The juice tasted cool and refreshing—a blend of pickles and kimchi. Next was bagoong, a Filipino fermented shrimp, which tasted so much like a beloved Chinese fish sauce that I was tempted to spoon it over some leftover rice. Things started getting real with hákarl, the Icelandic shark. My head cocked back at the taste of ammonia, but the chewy texture reminded me pleasantly of squid. I moved on to the insects, beginning with grasshoppers from Oaxaca, Mexico, which had been marinated with dried chilies. They were delicious—crispy, sour, and spicy, like lime-tossed tortilla chips. A bag of dehydrated mixed bugs contained mole crickets and sago worms. The hardest part was knowing that you were eating something that you last saw crawling on the bathroom floor. Crunchiness, I discovered, was a crucial factor in palatability; the crickets could have passed for salty granola. The worms, which looked like deformed prunes, were denser and nuttier. Everything tasted considerably better than it looked.

While I sniffed and chewed, periodically watching my features contort onscreen, I couldn't help but think of De Meyer, the hapless Belgian. My lack of disgust felt like cheating. The Chinese pidan, for example—a clay-preserved egg with a swampy blue-green hue—has been one of my comfort foods since childhood. The thought of stinky tofu makes me salivate. Durian was more complicated. I don't like its smell, which some describe as a mix of turpentine and onions, but I've eaten enough durian-flavored desserts to reflexively separate the fruit's odor from its taste, which is simultaneously creamy, sweet, and savory—like chives, garlic, and caramel, blended into a butter.

It was time to try the surströmming, which Ahrens had packed in a vacuum-sealed bag. I used a teaspoon to scoop out a moist, grayish morsel. It was so salty that it tasted bitter. But it was the smell—of rotten eggs brined in raw sewage—that made me jerk my body back like Keanu Reeves dodging bullets in "The Matrix." The fish's scent is so foul, Ahrens told me, that a German man was once evicted from his building after leaving surströmming in the stairwell to annoy his neighbor, with whom he was engaged in a petty dispute. (The man sued his landlord, but a judge ruled in favor of the eviction, stating that "the disgusting smell of the fish brine far exceeded the degree that fellow-tenants in the building could be expected to tolerate.") Ahrens said that, of all the items in the taste test, he'd found the smell of surströmming the most objectionable. The fact that the two of us—a Swede

and a Chinese-American—more or less aligned on this pleased me. Disgust, at least in this instance, seemed to unify rather than divide.

The final item was Lakkris Djöflar, a type of salmiak, or salty licorice candy, that is popular in Nordic countries. Easy, I thought. I don't love licorice, but its herbal taste reminds me of the medicinal soups that my mother fed me as a child. One second after I put the candy in my mouth, though, I spat it out with such force that it left a sticky mark on my screen, where Ahrens's mouth was curled into a smile.

There was a bowl of the vile confection on his countertop. He ate two, emitting a satisfied “Mmm” as he chewed. “It’s one of my favorite things,” he said.

“But isn’t it horribly salty and bitter?” I asked, incredulous, clutching my glass of water. When the candy was in my mouth, I’d felt as if I were drowning in brackish seawater.

“That’s what makes it good,” he said. “People naturally like foods they grew up eating.”

After finishing the taste test, I called up De Meyer. It had been two years since his visit to the museum, and from what I could tell via Zoom—he was slouched on a sofa, chain-smoking Camels—it looked like he had mostly recovered from the experience. “I feel lucky that I was able to go,” he told me. It had been “refreshing” to be taken out of his comfort zone, even if it had involved going through a dozen barf bags.

After a pause, he recounted how he’d recently cooked onions in a miso-butter glaze for his six-year-old niece. “She hated it the first time,” he said. But he kept encouraging her to try it, telling her that it wasn’t weird, and, by the fourth bite, she was fully on board. “That’s why it was a privilege to go to the museum,” he said. “It takes ten tries for people to like something new. But, if you don’t start somewhere, how else would you expand your reference point? How else would my niece learn that she loves miso butter?”

Ahrens’s goal is to replicate such experiences on a large scale. He recently took over the Disgusting Food Museum, and, later this year, he will open

two more locations, in Bordeaux and Berlin, that will feature site-specific exhibits, such as Berliner schnitzel made from cow udders.

The museum in Malmö has been mostly well received by tourists, but it also has numerous critics, who have accused it of cultural insensitivity and, in some cases, of outright racism. In 2018, the L.A. *Times* columnist Lucas Kwan Peterson argued that the museum reinforces prejudices by oversimplifying the customs of other countries and reducing their foods to clichés. A museum's use of the word "disgusting" in its name implies an endorsement of the term, he wrote.

When I asked Ahrens about his use of the word "disgusting," and whether he'd considered using a different name for the new museums, he nodded. "'Disgusting' is a controversial word, but if we used 'unusual' or 'strange' it's just not the same," he said.

"'Disgusting' calls attention to itself," I said.

"Exactly," he replied. "And we are a museum that relies on public support. That is how we survive."

As Peterson wrote, "The museum is trying to have it both ways—poking the bear, then backing away, hands raised innocently." Even those who believe in the museum's statement of purpose question whether it can be put into practice. The trouble with cultural institutions, Casey R. Kelly, the author of "Food Television and Otherness in the Age of Globalization," said, is that those who run them can't always control what's being communicated. "On the one hand, the museum is introducing visitors to new foods," he said, "but, on the other, there's a cosmopolitan sanitization process at work," in which foods are being stripped of their cultural context and then presented at a museum that keeps track of how many people they make vomit.

At the Disgusting Food Museum, I felt both like a tourist and like one of the exhibits. Twenty-nine of the eighty-five dishes on display are Asian, and twelve are from China. Despite Ahrens's reminder that Asia is underrepresented at the museum compared with its population, seeing stinky tofu, century eggs, and other staples of my childhood branded as "disgusting" stung me with self-consciousness. Those foods were in my

fridge at that very moment. Turtle soup and dog meat, also among the exhibits, were dishes that I'd eaten in Chongqing; though I'd likely never revisit them, I knew them well enough as communal holiday fare. Meanwhile, mouse wine, monkey brain, and virgin-boy eggs (eggs boiled in young boys' urine) were as foreign to me as surströmming. Ahrens and West's decision to categorize them all under "China" felt simultaneously alienating and reasonable: the Westerner in me understood the urge not to differentiate them, while the Chinese rebelled at the notion that they would ever belong together.

Just as Michelangelo's David represents the height of the Italian Renaissance, and cobalt porcelain the cultural apogee of the Ming dynasty, the exhibits at the Disgusting Food Museum, divided as they are by geography, perform an act of synecdoche, with the foods standing in for individual places or peoples. This makes sense as a method of cataloguing exhibits, but it can obviate the obvious: foods in the pre-modern era were often disgusting—at least to the uninitiated palate—but they were also ingenious. Why is hákarl the token food of Iceland? The Vikings wanted a way to eat sleeper sharks, which are plentiful but poisonous; consequently, they invented a technique for purifying the two-thousand-pound beasts.

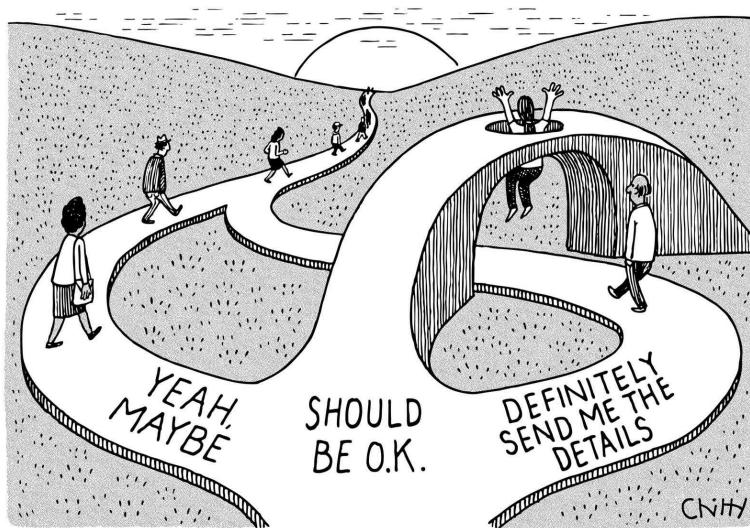
When food is available only to a select few, it becomes a symbol for one's social position. The reason that the French aristocracy once ate ortolans is probably similar to the reason that monkey brains would have been served at royal banquets in China. Across cultures, the élite gravitate toward foods that are inaccessible to the masses, owing to price, scarcity, or difficulty of preparation. It was in part the pursuit of "exotic" spices that led to Western conquests in Africa and East Asia, which in turn created asymmetries of power that surface in the modern sociological concept of "taste," or in a worldly palate informed by various cultural or class-based rituals. (By using the phrase "in good taste," one invokes the gastronomically satisfying to connote something that is socially sanctioned.)

In the twentieth century, powerful nations seemed to reinvent food by processing the disgust out of it. At the Disgusting Food Museum, the U.S. is represented mostly by calorie-packed, nutritionally deficient snacks, such as Twinkies, Spam, and Pop-Tarts. The element of disgust, as detailed by the museum's placards, exists largely in the factory farms, the economies of

waste, the misuse of growth hormones, and the exploitation it takes to produce these items. Kelly said that Americans are generally uninterested in knowing where their food comes from: “There is entitlement in this willful ignorance—to be in a place where you don’t have to think about how to make the feet and beak of a bird palatable.”

At the beginning of the pandemic, many Americans were suddenly confronted with the threat of food insecurity, as the virus exposed the fragility of our supply chains. Restaurants shuttered, bottled water was rationed, and egg prices rose threefold overnight. I asked Ahrens if his view of disgust or of the museum had changed during the pandemic. (Although Sweden did not shut down, ninety-nine per cent of the museum’s visitors disappeared overnight.) In slow, methodical tones, he spoke to me about the health impact of food. “The more foreign foods I come across, the more I realize how little I know about the food I eat, and the more I want to know,” he said. The museum is planning a temporary exhibit on dangerous foods, in which danger is defined as everything from “poison or toxin, like fungus, to manufacturing errors that cause the end product to be injurious.” What’s dangerous is what we don’t know, Ahrens told me. The horseshoe bat, which early in the pandemic was thought to be responsible for the transmission of the coronavirus in China, will be prominently featured in the exhibit.

#### THE ROAD TO NO THANKS



Cartoon by Tom Chitty

Last spring, shortly after Donald Trump referred to *COVID-19* as the “China virus,” I received a Twitter message from a stranger. “Y’all Chinese ppl want eat bat soup & alive mice no wonder this coronavirus started y’all dirty asses eating shit wit rabies,” he wrote. “Get the fuck out the us go back to China with the rest of y’all eating animals alive ass family members.” This was also when photos of bats began arriving in my social-media in-boxes.

One afternoon, while I was talking on the phone at a grocery store, a passerby, hearing me speak Mandarin, hissed, “Nasty Chinese.” Another day, when I was riding the subway for the first time in months, a man called me a “disgusting Chink” over and over until he reached his station and left the car.

Something happens when you discover that you yourself are “disgusting.” It does not matter whether you believe it to be true. Shame and fear flood your body, as involuntarily as the disgust face, until a kind of self-disgust takes root. The origins of self-disgust have yet to be fully understood, but scientists speculate that the emotion likely arises from the internalization of others’ disgust. It is also a unique form of torture; to be perceived as repugnant is to live inside that repugnance, desperate to expel you from yourself.

“Have Americans always been like this?” my mother’s Chinese health aide, Ying, asked me the other day, as she showed me a news story about yet another unprovoked attack on an elderly Asian woman in Chinatown. Ying was wearing a hat and a mask, not only for *COVID* safety, she told me, but also because she was anxious about being identified as Asian—an abstract feeling that, in recent weeks, had concretized to an acute fear.

Perhaps this is what terrifies me the most about disgust: its ability to weaponize one’s gut in service of the outlandish. The idea that all Chinese carry the coronavirus because it could have originated from eating bats is risible. But *COVID*’s invisibility has lent credence to the tribalist notion that disgusting-food-consuming Asians must surely be the ones who are carrying and spreading the virus.

If only nature were so straightforward. In food, funky smells raise an alarm that warns against ingestion; respiratory droplets expelled during a

conversation with an asymptomatic carrier of the coronavirus raise no such alarms. Disgust can't protect us from this particular virus. If anything, it leaves us more vulnerable than we were before. Many people who contract the virus lose their senses of taste and smell. A friend of mine who got *COVID* in March of 2020 can smell and taste again, but can no longer eat meat. "Hamburgers, ground turkey"—foods that were once staples of her diet—"it's all become gross," she told me. Pamela Dalton, an experimental psychologist who studies the interaction between emotion and odor perception, told me that many *COVID* patients have reported a distortion of their senses of taste and smell while recovering from the virus, resulting in disgusting sensations. "The olfactory system is playing a protective role here," Dalton said. "It's not surprising that if parts of the system have gone awry due to *COVID* the default setting is to turn tastes and smells unpleasant, so as to help us avoid high-risk foods." Like meat.

If *COVID* is, in some ways, a failure of disgust, it is also a breeding ground for it. The question—similar to the one that inspired West to open the Disgusting Food Museum—is whether this disgust, particularly as it pertains to other people, can be swallowed for the greater good. Kevin Arceneaux, a political scientist at Temple University, told me, "Your intuition may tell you that the immigrant across the street smells weird, cooks weird food, and therefore does not belong. But we also possess the capacity to reflect and override our intuitions with conscious reason. This second step is harder, but the capacity to do so is also what makes us uniquely human."

To be disgusted is natural, but to understand why we are disgusted requires us to reconfigure the way we see the world. "Human beings are accustomed to protecting themselves and their own," Arceneaux said. "But a pandemic is the kind of unprecedented event that requires people to reframe the threat." The purpose of wearing a mask is not to protect yourself but to protect others around you. "The only way to save yourself from a contagion is to save the strangers who may disgust you," Arceneaux said.

One day this past winter, when my mother's nursing facility was locked down, her aide, Ying, turned up on my doorstep with a bag that refused to stay still. A dozen crabs were squirming inside. My mother had told Ying (accurately) that I had been living on ramen and takeout for a while and that I loved steamed crabs, though I almost never cooked them at home. Both of

them assumed that this was because I couldn't deal with the inconvenience, but the truth was more complicated: the prospect of boiling the crabs alive, as my mother had done while I was growing up, disgusted me. Ying would not have understood this. My refusal to accept the food probably would have struck her as callous and rude. I thanked her and took the crabs. "Boil them quickly or they will die and no longer be fresh!" she admonished.

As I stood in my kitchen, a few minutes later, agonizing over what to do, I became aware of my hypocrisy: I was ready to eat the crabs when they were served by someone else, but I was too cowardly to do the killing myself. Still, if I left them in the bag on my kitchen floor, they would die, and I would have squandered Ying's effort. Reluctantly, I dropped the crabs' writhing bodies into a pot, covered it with a lid, and turned on the stove. Outside, two ambulances sped by, sirens blaring.

I poured vinegar and chopped ginger and tried to think about anything besides the crustaceans in my kettle. Egocentric pain. This was what evolutionary biologists would call my uneasiness. Our ability to empathize with animals is a function of their phylogenetic proximity to us; we can see the emotions of a dog much more clearly than those of a crab. And yet there was an unbearable scratching and scraping inside the pot—a mad scramble for life.

It occurred to me that what I felt was not disgust with the crabs or with the process but with myself, and what I had the power to do—or not to do. The doomed fight for survival is what the crabs and I had in common. Steam and the smell of the ocean had begun to fill my kitchen when the phone rang. It was Ying, and there was an impossible tenderness in her voice when she asked about the dinner: Had I cooked it yet? ♦

# Ars Longa

- [Burnt Banksy's Inflammatory N.F.T. Not-Art](#)

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

# Burnt Banksy's Inflammatory N.F.T. Not-Art

The maybe-artist who bought a ninety-five-thousand-dollar Banksy print and set it aflame has big plans, including an art gallery and an outer-space-based “non-fungible token.”

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

May 10, 2021

The art world is used to antics: Maurizio Cattelan sold a banana duct-taped to a wall, Robert Rauschenberg erased a de Kooning drawing, Ai Weiwei photographed himself smashing a two-thousand-year-old urn. Seconds after the painting “Girl with Balloon” sold at auction for \$1.4 million, its creator, the street artist Banksy, shredded the piece via remote control. Earlier this year, in Chelsea, an aspiring artist in his mid-twenties walked into Taglialatella Galleries and purchased a Banksy screen print, titled “Morons (White),” for ninety-five thousand dollars, using funds that he had raised from investors. Then he set it on fire.



“Art is whatever you want it to be,” the young man, who goes by the name Burnt Banksy, said, laughing. “Do I think I’m an artist? Yes and no. I don’t think it’s even remotely fair to compare me to someone like Banksy. I’m just trying to make a message.” He was dressed all in black: sneakers, jeans, puffer jacket, and mask, which refused to stay put over his nose. “I’m trying to stay anonymous,” he said. “Dude, we’ve received so much hate. Some people are very, very angry.”

Before he torched the art work, Burnt Banksy had a photographer take a picture of it, then minted the photograph as an N.F.T. and uploaded it to an online auction platform. (An N.F.T., or “non-fungible token,” is a certificate of authenticity and ownership attached to an asset, like a *JPEG* image or a viral YouTube video.) Everything went as planned, except that the art work wouldn’t catch fire. Fifty thousand people watched live on Twitter as Burnt Banksy struggled to burn a Banksy.

“It was the worst thing in the world,” he said. “It took, like, fifteen minutes for it to burn. Some of the comments on the video were, like, ‘This kid’s never burnt down the establishment before!’ ” (Another comment: “I hate my generation so much lol.” )

“I’m, like, ‘Fuck!’ ” he went on. “I probably should’ve put lighter fluid on it, but I didn’t want to put lighter fluid on a Banksy. I didn’t want to disrespect it.” Eventually, the print went up in flames, and Burnt Banksy’s début N.F.T. sold to an anonymous buyer for about three hundred and eighty thousand dollars, in cryptocurrency.

“We didn’t see this as destroying the art work and creating a new one,” he said. “Essentially, we were transferring it to the N.F.T. space.” In recent weeks in the N.F.T. space, someone paid sixty-nine million dollars’ worth of cryptocurrency for a digital mosaic by the artist Beeple; an Azealia Banks audio sex tape fetched around seventeen thousand; and a buyer spent just under three million for Jack Dorsey’s first tweet.



*"Are you O.K.? You're barely paying attention to your book, phone, show, laptop, and the crossword you started ten minutes ago."*  
Cartoon by Natalie Dupille

For his next project—a decentralized auction house specializing in N.F.T.s—Burnt Banksy has raised about two million dollars from cryptocurrency venture capitalists in Hong Kong, mainland China, and Singapore. “It’s a bitch to go through Sotheby’s,” he said. “You need to be famous.” His auction house will allow anyone to buy or sell N.F.T.s online, without being vetted by snooty auction-house personnel. “I’m removing every barrier to entry to be an established artist.”

He is also planning to open a pop-up gallery that showcases only N.F.T. art work. “It’s called Not an Art Gallery, because a lot of people have told us that N.F.T.s aren’t art,” he said. “So, fine. There’s art on the wall, but this isn’t an art gallery.”

He and a publicist were scouting locations the other day for Not an Art Gallery, and they checked out a gallery space across from the Whitney Museum. “I’ve been here before,” he said. “I’m kind of a big art fan.” A young gallerist dressed in white linen pants recognized Burnt Banksy and came over to chat, addressing him by his real name. The publicist groaned. “You’re really outing his anonymity!” she said.

Burnt Banksy left and headed uptown, zigzagging between Ninth and Tenth Avenues, peering into empty showrooms and storefronts. “Half the walls are

windows," he said of one. "I think this used to be a Sephora," he said about another. None were quite right.

It started to rain, and Burnt Banksy ducked into Taglialatella Galleries, where he'd bought the Banksy screen print. Someone asked a gallery assistant there what she thought of the stunt. She paused to clear her throat. "Obviously, we never want to encourage the destruction of very valuable and important art," she said. Then she said that Taglialatella was launching its own N.F.T. program.

The storm cleared, and Burnt Banksy went back outside, dreaming up his next N.F.T.: "I want to have a piece of art, a camera facing it, circling the Earth, in orbit for four years. Until it burns up. And whoever buys the N.F.T. gets access to view the art in space." He looked at the sky. "I mean, it's cool, right?" he said. "Let's go to the fucking moon!" ♦

# **Art**

- [Mid-Century Brazilian Photography, at MOMA](#)
- [Summer Art Preview](#)

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

# Mid-Century Brazilian Photography, at MOMA

In “Fotoclubismo: Brazilian Modernist Photography, 1946-1964,” the museum surveys the rigorous experimental work of Foto-Cine Clube Bandeirante, a group of amateur photographers.

May 7, 2021



Photograph © 2021 Estate of Gertrudes Altschul / Courtesy the Museum of Modern Art, New York

In 1939, a group of amateur photographers in São Paulo, Brazil, founded the Foto (later Foto-Cine) Clube Bandeirante. Its members—lawyers, scientists, bankers—took pictures of subjects, ranging from architecture to the natural world (“Filigree,” above, was made by Gertrudes Altschul, in 1953), with an experimental rigor rivalling that of any avant-garde artist. **“Fotoclubismo: Brazilian Modernist Photography, 1946-1964,”** at *moma* (through Sept. 26), surveys the club’s work, beginning the year that it launched the influential magazine *Boletim*.

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

## Summer Art Preview

Sarah Sze’s “Fallen Sky” lands at Storm King, women aim cameras at the Met, MOMA considers the pros and cons of cars, and more.

By [Andrea K. Scott](#)

May 7, 2021



Illustration by Lucy Jones; Source photographs courtesy MOMA / Gift of Christian Sumi Zürich and Sébastien and Pierre Nordenson (car); © Ilse Bing Estate / Collection of Michael P. Mattis and Judith Hochberg (camera)

Paul Cézanne’s prominence as a painter overshadows his dedication to drawing, but the French Post-Impressionist put pencil to paper, often adding watercolor, almost every day of his career. *MOMA* exhibits some two hundred of these revelatory, underappreciated still-lifes, landscapes, and figure studies in “**Cézanne Drawing.**” (Opens June 6.)

The acclaimed American sculptor **Sarah Sze** has a gift for making cosmic subjects seem down to earth—“Fallen Sky,” her new permanent sculpture at Storm King, in the Hudson Valley, is no exception. Thirty-six feet in diameter and made of polished stainless steel, the concave form appears to be both contained by and disintegrating into the grass, alternately suggesting

a dislodged chunk of sky, a reflecting pool, and a portal to another dimension. (Opens June 12.)

In the first half of the twentieth century, female photographers emerged as a powerful force, from the German-Jewish photojournalist Gerda Taro, who died on the front lines of the Spanish Civil War, to the American artist Imogen Cunningham. Pictures by some hundred and twenty photographers from more than twenty countries are on view in **“The New Women Behind the Camera,”** at the Met. (Opens July 2.)

Do cars represent the freedom of the open road or are they harbingers of ruin? The answer is yes in **“Automania,”** *MOMA’s* exhibition of posters, models, movies, photographs, sculptures, paintings (in the cars-as-disaster column, note Andy Warhol’s 1963 canvas “Orange Car Crash Fourteen Times”), and, of course, automobiles. Eight vehicles are installed in the Sculpture Garden, including a freshly restored 1959 Volkswagen Type 1 sedan—also known as a Beetle. (Opens July 4.) ♦

# Books

- [We've Had Great Success Extending Life. What About Ending It?](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [Asia's Anti-Colonialist Journey](#)

# We've Had Great Success Extending Life. What About Ending It?

Now that human beings are surviving longer than ever before, many have another goal: a good death.

By [Brooke Jarvis](#)

May 10, 2021



Throughout most of the seventeenth century, residents of London could buy, from street hawkers who fought one another for sales territory, a peculiar sort of newspaper. It cost a penny, sold about five or six thousand copies a week, and consisted of a single page. On one side, readers would learn how many of their neighbors had died the previous week, in each parish. On the other, readers would learn what was believed to have killed them.

“Jaundice” was common, as was “Apoplex,” an old word for a stroke, and “Dropsie,” which meant swelling. Other entries seemed to answer the question “How did he die?” with descriptions—“Dead in the Streets” or “Stilborn” or “Suddenly”—instead of actual causes. The deaths were usually assessed and recorded by pairs of older women, who were employed by parishes to go to the local church whenever its bell tolled a death. During

one February week in 1664, these searchers, as they were known, recorded three hundred and ninety-three burials across the city. Death causes and counts ranged from “Aged” (thirty-two victims) and “Consumption” (sixty-five) to “Scalded in a Brewers Mash” (one).

For the same reasons that today’s newspapers report coronavirus case numbers on their front pages, the London papers, known as Bills of Mortality, became particularly popular when disease swept through the city. During the 1665 plague, Samuel Pepys wrote in his diary about feeling saddened or cheered by the latest numbers from the Bills, while a contemporary named John Bell noted that the Bills allowed people to know “the places which are therewith infected, to the end such places may be shunned and avoided.” But most of the time, according to the London merchant John Graunt, the Bills were little more than matters of curiosity, especially if there were deaths that were “rare, and extraordinary in the week current.” He didn’t consider this to be odd or unseemly. Death, after all, was the most basic fact of life.

Eventually, though, Graunt began to wonder if the Bills could be put to “other, and greater uses.” He painstakingly collected and organized decades of the death records, creating long tables of numbers. These first known tabulations of population-level health data are now widely recognized as the birth of epidemiology. Graunt pored over them. What types of death were most common? Which groups did they afflict? Why did some causes spike at certain times, while others stayed fairly constant? And, most of all, what could a lot of separate, individual deaths, taken together, tell him about the society in which they occurred? Although Graunt wanted, as he put it in a treatise, to understand “the fitness of the Country for long Life,” he believed that it was in its deaths that he would find answers.

In “[Extra Life: A Short History of Living Longer](#)” (Riverhead), Steven Johnson credits John Graunt with creating history’s first “life table”—using death data to predict how many years of remaining life a given person could expect. (One Dutch contemporary, a proto-actuary, took Graunt’s tables a bit too literally, writing confidently to his brother, “You will live to until about the age of 56 and a half. And I until 55.”) In fact, Graunt’s estimates were more of a guess than a calculation: when he wrote his treatise, in the sixteen-sixties, the Bills of Mortality didn’t record people’s age at death, and they

wouldn't for another half century. Yet his guesses about survival rates for different age groups turned out to be remarkably accurate in describing not just London at the time but humanity as a whole. For most of our long history as a species, our average life expectancy was capped at about thirty-five years.

Johnson calls this phenomenon "the long ceiling." Analysis of ancient burial sites, of modern people living in hunter-gatherer societies, and of pre-industrial city dwellers all tell a similar story, Johnson writes: "Human beings had spent ten thousand years inventing agriculture, gunpowder, double-entry accounting, perspective in painting, but these undeniable advances in collective human knowledge had failed to move the needle in one critical area."

That began to change in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In what the economist [Angus Deaton](#) has named "the great escape," average life expectancies broke the ceiling: what had been a very long, flat line finally rose, at first gradually and then dramatically. Between the Spanish flu of 1918 and the coronavirus pandemic of 2020, global life expectancy doubled. These developments, Johnson argues, should be printed in newspaper headlines and hawked on street corners like the old Bills of Mortality. Extra, extra: The average human has received thousands and thousands of extra days in which to live.

Johnson tries to account for those days. Which scientific or civilizational advancements should we thank for them? He groups innovations by those which have saved millions of lives (this list begins with the *AIDS* cocktail, anesthesia, and angioplasty), hundreds of millions of lives (here the roster goes from antibiotics to pasteurization), and, finally, billions of lives, a small but illustrious pantheon of three: artificial fertilizer, hygienic plumbing, and vaccines.

Johnson gives a hasty tour of the stories behind a few of these life-giving innovations. He explains how centuries-old practices in China, India, and the Middle East eventually inspired a vogue for smallpox variolation among the British aristocracy in the eighteenth century—even then, you needed an influencer to start a trend. And he returns to the same well, or, rather, pump handle, that featured in his 2006 book, "[The Ghost Map](#)," about the disease

detectives who investigated a cholera outbreak in the early days of germ theory. Yet he cautions that it's shortsighted to think of these advancements in terms of a few brilliant geniuses having eureka moments.

Instead, the innovations that have saved the most lives are the product of piecemeal improvements, built on networks of support and inspiration, and spread by social movements. Most were not blockbuster therapies or expensive medicines but unsexy, low-tech ideas, like water chlorination or better techniques for treating dehydration. Almost none, he points out, came from profit-seeking companies. And many were just advancements in basic bureaucracy—the creation of public institutions that could systematically track health data, require that drugs be tested and regulated, or enforce simple safety measures.

The most effective changes have to do with saving the lives of children. When Graunt analyzed London deaths, he estimated that, for every hundred children conceived, “about 36 of them die before they be six years old.” Twenty-four more died before reaching the age of sixteen, fifteen more before turning twenty-six, and so on, the rate of attrition falling slightly with each decade until “perhaps but one surviveth 76.” For much of human history, our early years were so stalked by disease and infection and diarrhea that between a third and a half of us never escaped our own perilous childhoods. Especially in the long years before smallpox was eradicated, Johnson writes, “being a child was to forever be on the brink of death.”

And the peril was universal. Before the advent of proper hygiene and effective medicine, the children of the élite died just as often and just as early as those of the poor. The rich may even have died more often, since they could pay for the treatments of the time, which generally did them more harm than good. (Readers are given grim descriptions of the illnesses of George III and his foe George Washington, both of whom were made sicker by the “medical” care they received, and reminded that George III became king only because the Stuart line had ended with Queen Anne, a half century earlier. Despite her wealth and power, and despite eighteen pregnancies, only one of her children survived past the age of two—and he died at age eleven.) Extra life was one thing money could not buy.

But that equality of loss would soon change. Deaton showed that the great escape was accompanied by another trend, which is now known as “the great divide.” In the past couple of centuries, as changing conditions increased life expectancies within wealthy nations, average life expectancies in poorer ones—the ones bearing the brunt of imperialism, resource extraction, and disease imposed by the wealthy—got shorter. Eventually, average lives lengthened around the world, narrowing the gap, but they still lengthened substantially more for some people, in some places, than for others. “Of all the forms of inequality,” Martin Luther King, Jr., said in 1966, by which time the divide was entrenched, “injustice in health is the most shocking and the most inhuman.” Even in modern American cities, people born into poor neighborhoods can expect to live as many as thirty years fewer than people who are born in affluent ones across town. And that was before the *covid-19* pandemic further widened our existing gaps.

Johnson includes a few caveats about all those extra days (their unequal distribution; their effect on our overburdened planet), but he can’t help being dazzled by the numbers—that impressive slope as the line on the graph climbs ever upward. When he suggests that the charts imply an unstoppable increase, on the way to an average life expectancy of a hundred and sixty years, it seems at first as if he were joking. He’s not. He’s interested in the transhumanism enthusiasts of Silicon Valley, and the possibility that epigenetics may soon allow us to “turn off” the aging process in our cells, giving us ever more years of life—“the Moore’s Law of public health.” This would transform nearly everything about the structure of the world as we know it, he grants, and create a breathtaking new level of inequality “between the rich and the poor, the immortals and the mortals.” But it’s clear what choice he expects society would make if it had the option. Why would anybody, given the chance to live longer and longer, say no?

In October of 2016, a small group of people, many of them elderly women, attended a seminar and a potluck lunch outside Wellington, New Zealand. On the drive home, they were stopped by police officers who seemed to be checking for drunk drivers. The roadblock turned out to be a trick, a way to identify members of an organization called Exit International.

Exit, as it’s known to those involved, is a nexus for coffee chats and workshops, online forums and local chapter meetings. Its members,

according to the group, have an average age of seventy-five, and many of them are owners of its manual, “The Peaceful Pill Handbook,” which offers details and advice about various methods for ending one’s life.

The founder of the group—who is often compared to Jack Kevorkian—and various of its members, scattered all over the globe, are among the central characters of Katie Engelhart’s [The Inevitable: Dispatches on the Right to Die](#) (St. Martin’s). A remarkably nuanced, empathetic, and well-crafted work of journalism, it explores what might be called the right-to-die underground, a world of people who wonder why a medical system that can do so much to try to extend their lives can do so little to help them end those lives in a peaceful and painless way. Engelhart writes, “It would be hard to exaggerate how many people told me that they wish simply for the same rights as their cherished dogs—to be put out of their misery when the time is right.”

One woman, an Upper West Side Manhattanite whom Engelhart calls Betty, was inspired to read the “Handbook” after watching an old friend live into his nineties; in her eyes, he was suffering and depressed, and doctors, whose only philosophy was “Save a life! Save a life! Save a life!,” weren’t thinking about what that meant for him. Wanting more agency to decide when she was finished with living, Betty travelled to Mexico, following the manual’s advice, to buy a stockpile of a lethal drug. She seems excited to tell the story of her illicit adventure: how she bought the drug at a pet store, prepared to “pull the little-old-lady cover” if police stopped her; how she and her two best friends have made a pact for how to use it if and when they decide that it’s time.

In recent decades, the increase in life expectancy has triggered a debate among gerontologists: Would the extra years people were living be years of health and well-being? This scenario is known as the “compression of morbidity” theory, according to which improving health would mean that the primary pains and diseases of aging could be squeezed into an increasingly short period at the end of life. The other possibility, known as the “expansion of morbidity” theory, hypothesized the opposite: that more years of life would be achieved mostly through more people spending more time living with pain and disease and dementia. By the turn of the twenty-first century, an editorial in the journal *Age and Ageing* had noted that the latest

trends seemed to be favoring the second theory, with extra years being achieved not through better over-all health but “predominantly through the technological advances that have been made in extending the life” of people who were sick, and experiencing various degrees of suffering. As Engelhart writes, “Increases in life expectancy have been accompanied by more years of age-induced disability. Aging has slowed down, rather than sped up.” This was exactly what Betty and her friends had hoped to avoid.

In the United States, physician-assisted suicide is permitted in a slowly growing number of states, but only to ease the deaths of patients who fit a narrow set of legal criteria. Generally, they must have received a terminal diagnosis with a prognosis of six months or less; be physically able to administer the drugs to themselves; have been approved by doctors as mentally competent to make the decision; and have made a formal request more than once, including after a waiting period. In California, Engelhart attends the planned death of an eighty-nine-year-old man named Bradshaw, who is dying painfully of cancer. Bradshaw takes a fatal drug cocktail in the company of his family (“Well, Dad, I love you,” his daughter says uncertainly, as they wait) and a doctor who specializes in just this part of medicine: not saving lives but, instead, helping them end on something a little closer to a patient’s own terms. “Maybe that was a good death,” Engelhart reflects when it’s over. “Or a good enough death. Or the best there is.”

Even in this regulated world, there are lots of difficult questions. (If doctors bring up assisted death with their patients, is that discussing options or influencing their choice? How does aid-in-dying interact with hospice? With organ donation? How does anyone really know when the time is “right”?) But Engelhart finds that the world of people who would like doctors to help them die is far larger, and much more complex, than what current laws cover. Venturing into, and beyond, the legal fringes of the assisted-dying movement, she finds people who do not officially qualify for a medically assisted death but long for it, anyway. All feel abandoned by a medical system that they believe ignores their suffering because of what one palliative-care doctor describes as “modern medicine’s original sin: believing that we can vanquish death.”

Avril is a woman in England who, entering her eighties, suffers nearly constant pain and the indignities of age but is not actually dying of anything more diagnosable than the slow collapse of her body. “My body served me obediently for eighty years,” she writes, “but is now, quite suddenly, in every sense, unserviceable and well past its sell-by date.” She obtains the same drug that Betty did, and begins to tell her acquaintances of her plans to die. Then, late one night, the police burst through her front door. Medical professionals eventually deem her mentally competent, but the police still confiscate a bottle they find. Maia, a young woman with a severe and painful form of progressive multiple sclerosis, does not qualify; although she has received a terminal diagnosis, her death is not considered imminent enough, regardless of how she feels about the bearability of her suffering. She applies for admission to a death clinic in Switzerland, where laws are more permissive, but then wonders, for years, how she’ll know that the time has come to buy a plane ticket.

Another subject, Debra, has dementia, a diagnosis with uncertainties of timing and competence that generally keep it outside the laws governing assisted death. She’s so afraid of her growing confusion that a friend suggests a note for her bathroom mirror—“*DEBRA, YOU ARE DEBRA. THIS IS YOUR HOME. YOU ARE SAFE*”—but instead she asks a volunteer “exit guide” (affiliated not with Exit International but with another group, the Final Exit Network) to help her die before she becomes someone she fears and does not recognize. A fourth subject, a Canadian named Adam, live-streams videos of himself on the Internet, talking about his plans to take his own life; he wants his pain, which results from mental illnesses rather than physical ones, to be included in Canada’s update of its assisted-dying law. “It’s a no-win situation here,” Adam’s father tells Engelhart. “I lose my son or I watch my son suffer.”

Adam’s story is particularly fraught—he has declined some treatments, and seems to be driven, in part, by a desire for attention and by feelings of personal disappointment. (“A life of mediocrity is not worth living,” he writes on his blog.) Engelhart eventually becomes so uncomfortable with her role as a journalist in his life that she cuts off communication with him. But she also finds that all such situations are complicated in their own ways, are their own unique versions of unwinnable.

Engelhart gives eloquent voice to different sides of the intricate arguments that ensue when societies decide whether and how and to whom medical assistance in dying should be available. Does excluding people like Maia discriminate against them, as Maia argues, or does it protect them, as many disability-rights advocates contend, from society's existing discrimination—and from an expectation that they will make use of what one advocate dismisses as “a medical treatment for feeling like a burden”? If people with dementia were allowed aid in dying, at what point in their decline would they be considered competent to make the decision? For that matter, whose choice would we listen to: the earlier, cognitively intact person who insisted that she “would never want to live like that,” or the current one, who may no longer remember feeling that way, and may seem to still find plenty of pleasure in life? And what about mental illness? One psychiatrist, noting that oncologists will eventually acknowledge that nothing further can be done to stop a cancer, wonders why her field keeps trying ever more rounds of treatment, as if it could not come to terms with its own therapeutic limits. During her education, she notes, “there was no discussion at all about whether a wish to die could ever be a rational response to any illness, let alone a mental illness.”

That word “rationality” comes up again and again. Doctors who specialize in aid in dying often distinguish between “despair suicides,” the most familiar version, and “rational suicides,” those sought by people who have, in theory, weighed a terminal or painful or debilitating diagnosis and made a measured, almost mathematical choice about how best to deal with it. In practice, though, Engelhart finds that it’s hard to isolate pure rationality; many emotional factors always seem to tilt the scales. People worry about their lives having a sense of narrative integrity and completion. They worry about autonomy, and about “dignity” (this is another word that comes up a lot, and when Engelhart digs in she finds that many people define it quite specifically: control over one’s own defecation and mess). They worry about what other people will think of them. They worry about who will take care of them when they can no longer take care of themselves.

And they worry, especially, about money, which crops up repeatedly as Engelhart’s subjects weigh the options that are available to them. Maia says that one of the main reasons she wants to “exit,” as she calls it, is “the pure socioeconomics of MS”: the expensive treatments, her inability to work,

being rejected by Medicaid, reading about how often people with similar disabilities end up living in poverty, watching her funds dwindling away. Debra, who is at risk of losing her home because of a reverse mortgage her late husband signed after their medical bills mounted, sends Engelhart articles about the cost of long-term-care homes, and worries about what sort she might end up in. She grants that her decision about leaving the world would be different “if I had money and people who I cared about and cared about me,” but she’s working with the choices she has, in the society where she lives.

Given our profit-driven health-care system, highly unequal economy, and hole-riddled social safety net, Engelhart finds herself wondering how often “rational suicide was just a symptom of social and financial neglect, dressed up as moral choice.” The great escape and the great divide, still intertwined.

John Graunt is remembered today as the father of data-driven epidemiology, but you could argue that his greatest insight was simpler, and deeper: that you could tell a lot about how people lived within a society by the way they died. He also realized that seeing those patterns offered an opportunity to try to change them.

Engelhart cites a survey showing that today about half of Americans feel that patients have too little control over the medical decisions that will determine how their lives end. What’s known as “overtreatment” is a real problem; though most people report a desire to die peacefully at home, one in five among the elderly has surgery in a hospital in the month before death, “often supported by loved ones who would do anything to help and who have come to see any option short of *do everything* as a kind of terrible abandonment.”

America spends more per capita on health care than any other nation—much of it in the final year of patients’ lives—but our inequality and our failures in other areas of public health keep our over-all life expectancy well below that of other rich nations. Health-care-related bankruptcies and what Angus Deaton and Anne Case, his collaborator and spouse, call “deaths of despair” are soaring; suicide rates are higher for the elderly than for any other demographic; doctors report plenty of what one calls “pseudo-conversations,” in which suffering patients ask for sleeping pills or

painkillers that both parties know, but do not acknowledge, are for another purpose.

People like Betty take a long look at this system and then decide to stockpile barbiturates from foreign pet stores. Behind every fraught ethical debate about physician-assisted suicide stands this inescapable reality: there are many people for whom the way we do things is not working. The right to die can't be extricated from a right to care. One of the doctors Engelhart interviews—an oncologist in Belgium, where euthanasia laws are widely supported, and aid in dying is legal even for psychiatric patients who request it and qualify—tells her that America is not ready for such laws. “It's a developing country,” he says. “You shouldn't try to implement a law of euthanasia in countries where there is no basic healthcare.”

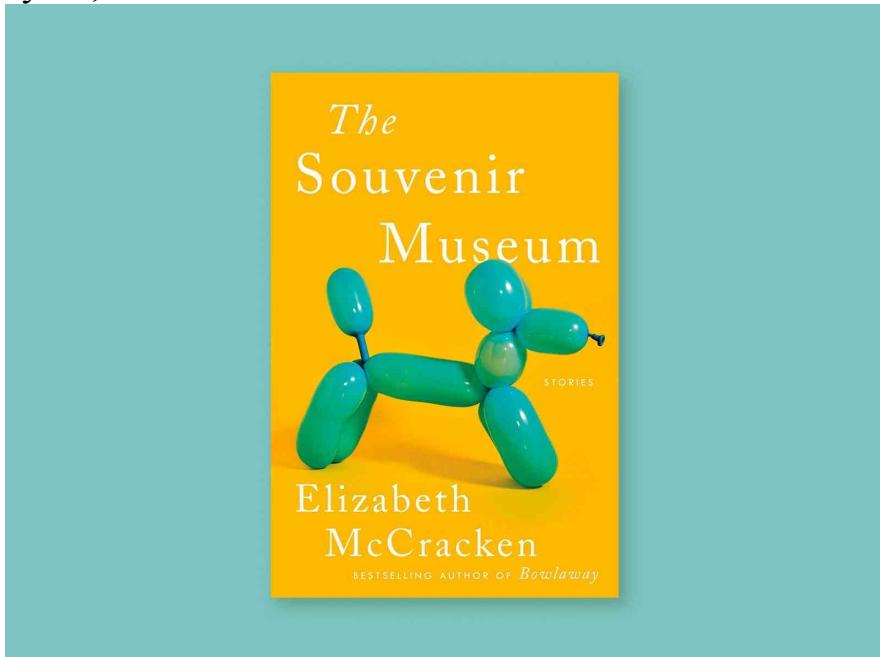
Johnson—in the midst of his excitement about that graph of life expectancy, climbing ever upward—pauses for an acknowledgment. If you poll people about their hopes for their own lives, the answer is that most do not actually want to live longer than current natural limits allow. What they want, in the time available, is to live better. ♦

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

## Briefly Noted

“The Souvenir Museum,” “The Vietri Project,” “Atlas of AI,” and “Beloved Beasts.”

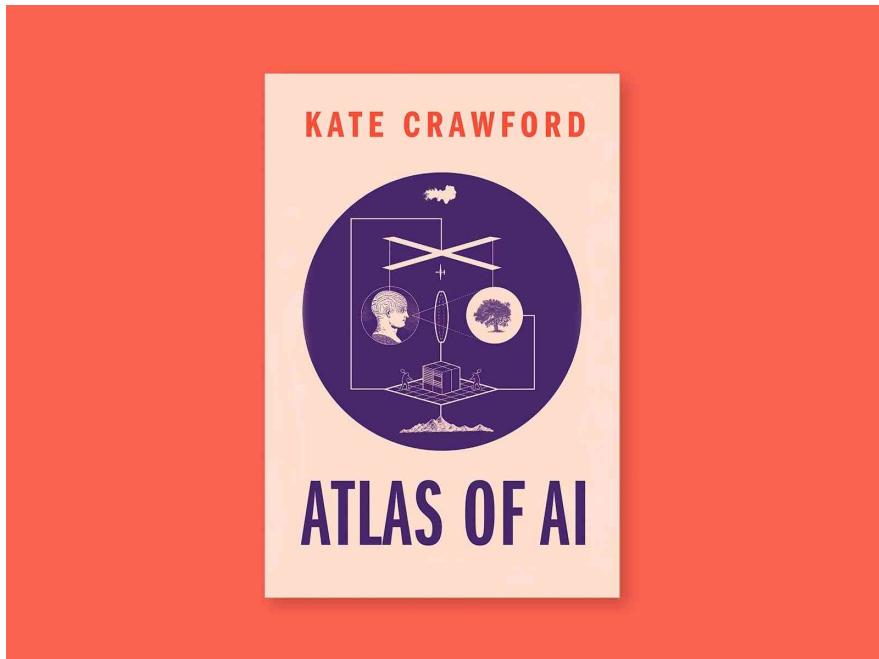
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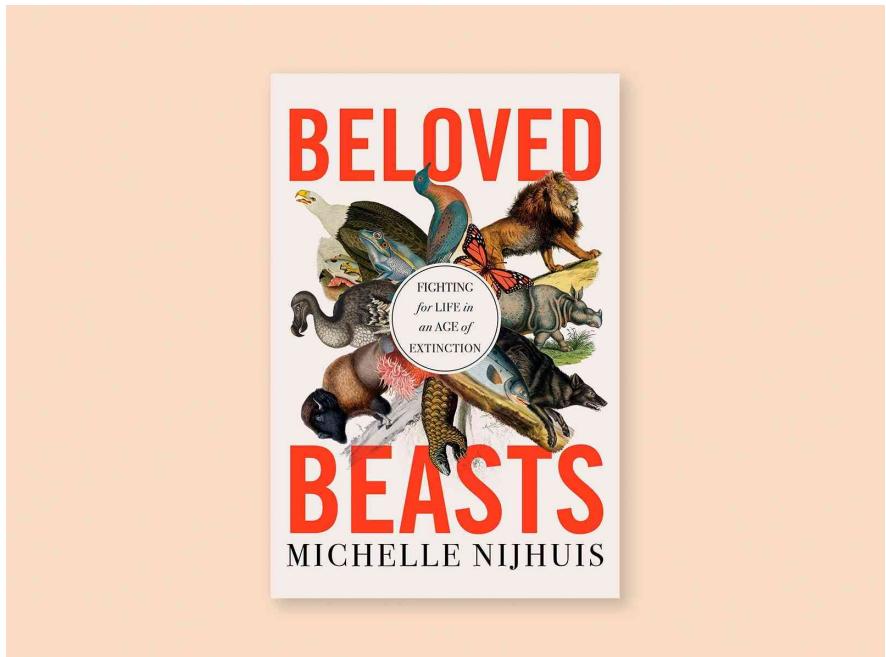
[\*\*The Souvenir Museum\*\*](#), by *Elizabeth McCracken* (Ecco). This incisive, warm-blooded collection of stories is populated by outsiders: expatriates and repatriates, Vikings, travelling ventriloquists. Nearly half the stories are linked, tracing a romance between Jack and Sadie, whom we first meet in Ireland, attending Jack’s sister’s wedding to a Dutchman. Whether it’s over the course of a honeymoon in Amsterdam or a day at a Texas water park, McCracken illuminates qualities of human nature through fragments of her characters’ lives, much like the boy in the title story, examining ancient shards of pottery at a museum: “Looking at a piece of a thing, he might think, deduce, discover something nobody ever had, which was all he wanted in the world.”



[\*\*The Vietri Project\*\*](#), by Nicola DeRobertis-Theye (Harper). An eccentric Italian bibliophile, Giordano Vietri, is the driving force of this assured début novel. The narrator, Gabriele, working in a Berkeley bookstore, receives hundreds of Vietri's requests for obscure titles, and, as she ships them off to him, at an address in Rome, she wonders if he is an academic or someone on a more personal quest for knowledge. She sets out on a haphazard pilgrimage to find him. Rome is also where her mother grew up, and Gabriele, in her mid-twenties, is reaching the age at which her mother was given a diagnosis of schizophrenia. The novel deftly entwines bureaucratic snarls, Italy's Fascist past, surprising companions, and familial rapprochement.



[Atlas of AI](#), by *Kate Crawford* (*Yale*). Examining the hidden costs of artificial intelligence, this study argues that such technology is neither artificial nor particularly intelligent. Human labor is always needed “to support the illusion of automation,” be it in Indonesian tin mines, in crowdsourced databases, or in Amazon warehouses, where workers must stack boxes on pace with an algorithm. Crawford gives a fascinating history of the data on which machine-learning systems are trained, detailing the flawed premises behind emotion-detection technology and the prejudices embedded in image collections that purport to teach computers to categorize by race or gender. She is less concerned about robots replacing humans than she is about “how humans are increasingly treated like robots.”



[\*\*Beloved Beasts\*\*](#), by *Michelle Nijhuis* (Norton). This history of the conservation movement highlights its advocates' struggle to mold public attitudes. What started out, in the mid-nineteenth century, as a colonialist-tinged mission to save the American bison—a species representing both Western expansion and the subjugation of Native peoples—became a movement incorporating animal welfare, environmental restoration, and commerce. The development from campaigns for emblematic animals to today's more expansive preservationist goals owes much to such ecologists as Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold, who preached the need to “preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community.” As threats to wildlife accrue, Nijhuis argues, protecting one species benefits them all, including our own.

# Asia's Anti-Colonialist Journey

After the Russian Revolution, a host of activists saw Communism as the way to end European imperialism. Their diverse fates provide an unexpected key to Asian politics.

By [Thomas Meaney](#)

May 10, 2021



International conferences are notoriously difficult to organize, all the more so when the aim is global revolution and the world's empires oppose your agenda. When, starting in 1919, Vladimir Lenin convened the first congresses of the Communist International, some Bolsheviks were disappointed by the characters who turned up—old-fashioned socialists, trade unionists, and anarchists, coming with false papers, in disguise, under aliases, and all apparently expecting hotel rooms. The Russian revolutionary Victor Serge observed, “It was obvious at first glance that here were no insurgent souls.” Lenin kept a blinking electric light on his desk to cut meetings short. But one of the arrivals made an impression. “Very tall, very handsome, very dark, with very wavy hair,” Serge recalled. It was Manabendra Nath Roy, an Indian who was a founder of the Mexican Communist Party. When ducking imperial authorities, he used a method

described by a comrade: “If you want to hide revolutionary connections . . . you had better travel first class.”

Roy had cut an unusual path to Moscow. Born into a Brahmin family in West Bengal in 1887, he left India in his twenties on a series of missions to secure funds and weapons for an uprising against the British Raj. During the First World War, a group of Indian anti-imperialists wanted the Germans to open a second front against their common enemy. But Roy’s parleys with contacts in Java, China, and Japan yielded almost nothing. In Tokyo, he resolved to press onward to the United States: “I decided to take the bull by the horn, pinned a golden cross to the lapel of my coat, put on a very sombre face, and called at the American consulate.” Disguised as “Father Martin” and having, he said, “reinforced my armour with a morocco-bound copy of the Holy Bible beautifully printed on rice-paper,” Roy arrived in San Francisco in 1916. He met with a radical Bengali poet in Palo Alto, and promptly fell in love with a Stanford graduate student named Evelyn Trent, an acquaintance of the university’s former president, David Starr Jordan, who took pride in cultivating anti-imperialists on campus.

Roy and Trent moved to Manhattan, where British and American agents, investigating a “Hindu-German conspiracy,” shadowed Roy as he met Indian anti-colonialists and immersed himself in the [Marxist](#) canon in the New York Public Library. After a brush with the New York police, the pair fled, in 1917, to Mexico, which was in the midst of a popular upheaval. There Roy witnessed a revolution, learned Spanish, and co-founded the Communist Party of Mexico—one of the first national Communist Parties outside Russia. One day, a Russian man from Chicago asked to meet Roy at a hotel: Mikhail Borodin, one of Lenin’s top lieutenants. Before long, he invited him to the Kremlin. It was the start of a journey that led not only to Moscow and Berlin but also to China, where Roy became a leading Soviet envoy during the Chinese Civil War.

If M. N. Roy is remembered today, it is as one of the more flamboyant international Communists active between the wars. But his globe-spanning trajectory was typical for thousands of young radicals who emerged from the cracks of European empires in Asia early in the last century. In “[Underground Asia](#)” (Harvard), Tim Harper provides the first comprehensive look at this dense web of resistance. The Asian underground

laid long-burning fuses across great distances—attacking colonial officials, organizing strikes, founding schools, plotting insurrections, and raining down tracts and pamphlets.

Recruits for the underground came from the villages of the Punjab and Bengal, from the kampongs of Sumatra and Java, from the cities of China; they drove across the Gobi and took steamers across the Baltic; they slipped in and out of Weimar Berlin, Tokyo, Shanghai, Canton, Paris, and New York City. In Malay, they were known as the *orang-orang pergerakan*—“movement people.” Many of them had studied or worked in Europe, where they got a taste of a civilization whose terms they sought to challenge. But they struggled to form parties and lacked weapons, ammunition, and other material resources. Revolutionary scavengers, they picked up whatever they thought was useful, and flirted with any force—from pan-Islamism to an expansionist Japan—that seemed pitted against the European powers. For them, the Soviet Union was a beacon: the Bolsheviks had not only cast off centuries of traditional rule, transforming Russia from an agrarian backwater into an industrial power; they were also internationalist pioneers who seemed to have escaped the straitjacket of narrow, European-style nationalism.

Harper, a historian of Southeast Asia, is best known for “[Forgotten Armies](#)” (2004) and “[Forgotten Wars](#)” (2006), two extraordinary volumes, co-authored with the late Christopher Bayly, about the unwinding of Britain’s Asian colonies during and after the Second World War. The new book, covering the first three decades or so of the twentieth century, serves as a prologue to the previous ones and is, if anything, more ambitious—concerned not only with the shape that Asia took but also with roads not travelled. Scores of crisscrossing characters and groups sometimes threaten, in their sheer number, to capsize Harper’s nimble storytelling, but this overabundance is part of the book’s strength, allowing us to see the contingent nature of many outcomes. Reading “Underground Asia” is like being privy to a historical particle accelerator, watching as revolutionary agents smash up against different imperial oppositions. Many members of the underground faded from memory or became unmentionable, having wasted away in colonial prison cells or been killed in anti-colonial infighting. A handful of others—Ho Chi Minh, [Mao Zedong](#)—emerged as the founding fathers of nation-states, whose faces now grace public squares

and banknotes. Harper insures that none of this feels predestined. Instead, we see a host of threadbare gamblers crowding the tables, a few of whom eventually walk out with vast winnings.

The story of the Asian underground has rarely been told, because no one has had much incentive to tell it. Victorious anti-colonial nationalists in Indonesia and India had little interest in underscoring their debts to an earlier coterie of ghostly figures, many of whom had been their bitter rivals. In the era of globalization, many historians preferred a narrative in which colonialism itself—fostering trade and cosmopolitanism in Asia’s port cities—brought about the conditions that allowed anti-imperial consciousness to flourish. Others shied away from questioning the purity and the grassroots bona fides of the national revolutions, even if many of the uprisings were kindled by men and women who might have been disappointed by the patchwork of nations that Asia became. Harper avoids these pitfalls by taking a more capacious and clinical approach. He reads the colonial intelligence files on his protagonists against the grain. The result provides an unexpected key to understanding contemporary Asian politics.

Many accounts of the history of the modern nation-state still begin with the French Revolution. But, ever since Benedict Anderson’s classic book “[Imagined Communities](#)” appeared, in 1983, Latin America and Asia have assumed a central place in the study of nationalism, and it is probably no accident that some of the most influential scholars of revolutionary change—Anderson, Clifford Geertz, and [James C. Scott](#)—have been students of Southeast Asia, the most politically heterogeneous region of the world. Anderson argued that, since most members of any nation are unlikely ever to encounter one another directly, nationalism relies on the ability of the populace to imagine the nation as a whole, and that its spread in modern times was therefore fuelled by the proliferation of newspapers and other media. These allowed for “long-distance nationalism,” diasporic solidarities that could leap over international borders—or that today exist online.

Anderson, though of the left, was not keen to oversell the role of Communism in the independence movements of Southeast Asia. Writing early in the Reagan Administration, as the United States hardened its stance toward the Soviet Union, he was wary of feeding the old Cold Warrior line—that the anti-colonial revolutions of the postwar decades were really just

bogus insurrections orchestrated by Moscow. Instead, Anderson and his generation of scholars saw nationalism in Asia as the work of, on the one hand, élites who were educated by colonialism and then turned against it, and, on the other, mobilizations by peasants and urban youth, whose national consciousness merely needed to be stirred.

In “[Republicanism, Communism, Islam](#)” (Cornell), a new book that complements Harper’s account, the political scientist John Sidel, a student of Anderson’s, adds fresh background to this picture. Sidel thinks that the nationalist revolutions of Asia can be fully explained only if we understand how activists profited from older, non-colonial forms of organization that their societies provided. In the Dutch East Indies, these were the Islamic schools that Communists and nationalists built upon; in China and Vietnam, there were Confucian networks to draw on.

Nonetheless, members of the Asian underground were defiantly modern. They hung around cafés and cinemas. Women wore their hair in bobs and stashed bombs in their purses. Other explosives arrived inside commentaries on common law. Typewriters were as treasured as pistols. Harper writes that the revolutionaries “experienced Asia as a series of smaller regions, each with its own customs, its own lingua franca and secret knowledge.” But they shared the belief that there was no returning to a pre-colonial golden age. In the traditional rulers of Asia, the underground saw little but surrender and sordidness. By the early twentieth century, the princes of India and the sultans of Malaya had long since become adjuncts of British colonial power —the price they paid to maintain their ceremonial roles. As French Indochina was established, the Emperor Hàm Nghi was deposed and sent to Algeria, where, in 1904, he married the daughter of a French magistrate. In Bali, two years later, when Dutch soldiers shelled the court of a local king, he staged a *puputan*, a ritual last stand, in which he and his entourage emerged from the palace and threw themselves, singing, into machine-gun fire.

In the eyes of the underground, European imperialists, after the mayhem of the First World War, also appeared ripe for overthrow. When the Prince of Wales toured the Raj in 1921, protests erupted and he wearily bagged a pair of drugged panthers furnished by a local zoo. In the interwar years, anti-colonialists shook the confidence of the Europeans by organizing strikes

across Asia—from the Dutch sugar factories of Java to the British plantations of Assam. The shrewder French, British, and Dutch colonial officials knew that the business of empire could not go on as before, and ideas of reform percolated through European capitals. The British Empire made it easier for its indigenous subjects to become civil servants. The French colonial administration in Indochina poured vast sums into schools to promulgate the Roman script for writing the Vietnamese language—a fateful development, as it facilitated the work of revolutionary networks. The more empires tried to cultivate loyal subjects capable of working in the colonial bureaucracy, the more they produced frustrated, overeducated, dangerous students, who coördinated across borders.

One of them, known in the underground as Nguyen Ai Quoc, is now famous as Ho Chi Minh, the founding father of modern Vietnam. He was the son of a Confucian scholar who held a minor post in the Hue imperial court. As a young man, Ho rebuffed offers from hard-line Vietnamese revolutionaries to join them in Yokohama, where they plotted the overthrow of the French colonial empire with Japanese assistance. Instead, as his biographer Pierre Brocheux details, he travelled on a mail ship as a cook's assistant and wound up in Paris, where he worked as a journalist, joined socialist groups, and helped found the French Communist Party. "He had a Chaplinesque aura," a French comrade recalled. "Reserved but not shy, intense but not fanatical, and extremely clever." Ho maintained that, for the peoples of Indochina, equal citizenship with the French was only a matter of time. In his journalism, he could even appear like a French patriot, complaining, in a boxing report, that Anglicisms—*le manager*, *le round*, *le knock-out*—were contaminating his adopted language. He believed that, if European socialists better instructed workers about the colonial situation, they would come to the aid of their comrades in the colonies.

A more spectral figure in Harper's gallery is Tan Malaka. Born into the matrilineal Minangkabau nobility of Sumatra, in the Dutch East Indies, he went to study in Holland in 1913, and was impressed by the austere manners and morals of the working-class family he lodged with. Both Ho and Tan Malaka quickly became disillusioned with the reformist currents in Europe. Along with the unmistakable racism that any colonial in Europe experienced, Asian radicals were also tracked by a pervasive system of surveillance maintained by imperial intelligence departments. Legions of

spies and double agents generated thick police dossiers, detailing everything from a subject's romantic encounters to personal tics. (Somerset Maugham, who worked in British intelligence, found much fodder for his fiction here.) In addition, political prisoners churned through imperial prison systems that were kept largely out of view of the press. By 1901, the British housed twelve thousand convicts on the Andaman Islands, in the middle of the Indian Ocean. Thousands of men and women died in colonial jails and prison camps, but these places also became informal universities for the very ideological indoctrination they had been built to prevent. Revolutionaries traded knowledge, formed friendships, taught courses, and smuggled out tracts.

As disappointment with Western liberals and socialists mounted, the members of the Asian underground made their way to Moscow. M. N. Roy, recalling his first visit, wrote, "Lenin leaned forward on the desk and fixed his almond-shaped twinkling eyes on my face. The impish smile lit up his face. I felt completely at ease, as if I was accustomed to sitting by the desk, not in the presence of a great man, a powerful dictator, but in the pleasant company of an old friend."

But fierce arguments ensued about how best to spread the Communist revolution. Many Bolsheviks were still convinced that the future of the revolution lay in Germany and in an industrialized Western Europe. They were sticklers about history following the expected Marxian timetable. Roy and Tan Malaka agreed that the Bolsheviks had misread the ground in Asia. "Europe is not the world," Roy declared. After failed Communist uprisings in Germany and Hungary, in 1919, they considered the war for Communism in the West to be already lost. Tan Malaka argued that the best bet for international Communism was in Asia, where the colonial project, by accelerating exploitation, had created the conditions for revolt.

Another point of disagreement was Islam. Lenin held that Islam, like any religion, was a form of despotism, and that it had been co-opted by the ruling classes of Asia. When Tan Malaka arrived for the Fourth Congress of the Communist International, in 1922, he tried to educate the Bolsheviks about the lived reality of Islam. He stressed its value as revolutionary kindling and the need for Communist parties to coöperate with Muslim groups. The Comintern had already squandered an alliance with Sarekat

Islam, a powerful nationalist movement in the Dutch East Indies. Islamic organizations, Tan Malaka declared, had the potential to unite workers from Java to Bengal in a single cause.

Ho Chi Minh arrived in Moscow in 1923, disguised as a Chinese businessman. He was too late to meet Lenin, who died shortly after his arrival, though he did make it to the funeral, at which he developed frostbite. While attending meetings at the Stalin school, he urged the administration not to group Asian students by country—it was not good internationalist practice. The poet Osip Mandelstam described him as “a man of culture,” adding that “it could very well be the culture of the future.”

Like Roy and Tan Malaka, Ho insisted to his Russian hosts that Asia was the next ground zero of world revolution. In the early nineteen-twenties, the Soviet Union started to make its greatest revolutionary investment abroad in China, in the power struggles resulting from the fall of the Qing dynasty, in 1912. The Chinese nationalists had been unable to consolidate the Chinese Republic they declared and were busy fighting various regional warlords. The Comintern saw an opportunity for a coalition between the nationalists and their Communist rivals, and Moscow sent money, materials, and advisers. Ho Chi Minh, Tan Malaka, M. N. Roy, and Mikhail Borodin all made trips to the nationalist stronghold of Canton, as did young Chinese Communists including Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai.

The Chinese Communists were instructed to work with their rivals, the nationalist Kuomintang, to secure China’s sovereignty. Roy disagreed with this strategy, and argued that Communists had to maintain their integrity, lest their cause be taken over by bourgeois collaborators like Chiang Kai-shek, or, in India, Gandhi and Nehru. (For Roy, Nehru, the product of a British private-school education, was simply “the Harrow boy,” and Roy’s wife claimed that “Mr. Gandhi had become an unconscious agent of reaction in the face of a growing revolutionary situation.”) Stalin, who was consolidating power in Moscow, sent Roy to save the Communist-nationalist pact, but in 1927 it failed, and the first phase of the Chinese Civil War began. Chiang Kai-shek instigated a bloody purge of Communists and Mao retreated with a small force into the Jinggang Mountains, on the border of Hunan and Jiangxi. For the Soviets, the outcome was bitter confirmation of China’s backwardness, whereas for Mao, holed up in the wilderness, it

seeded mistrust of the Kremlin, which culminated, in the nineteen-sixties, in the Sino-Soviet split. Mao considered Roy a fool and remarked that Roy stood just to the left of Borodin—"but he only stood." There was irony in the statement, as Mao, by giving up on an alliance with the nationalists and putting all his chips on a peasant rebellion, was in fact following a policy that Roy had pressed the Kremlin to pursue globally for years. Roy was a Maoist before Mao.

Not long afterward, Roy and Tan Malaka fell out with the Comintern. Meanwhile, Ho used his time in Canton to make contacts with Vietnamese revolutionaries there who would help him form the Vietnamese Communist Party.

By the mid-thirties, where Harper's account winds down, all seemed lost for the Communists in China and the Asian underground more generally. It took until the lead-up to the Second World War for the tables to turn again. Harper's book ends on a mournful note: "For the underground, there is a particular cadence to this loss, a grief for that which people were unable to build." He recounts the fates of this early generation of Asian anti-colonialists, most of whom ended their days in despair or worse. In the nineteen-forties, Tan Malaka returned to Java, after a twenty-year absence. Few of the younger nationalists there would likely have realized that the man writing a magnum opus on dialectical materialism on the outskirts of Jakarta was the revolutionary of legend. After the war, while trying to organize resistance to the returning Dutch Army, he was killed by a rival anti-colonial faction. He was buried in an unmarked grave at the base of Mt. Wilis, in East Java. Shortly after Roy returned to India, in 1930, in a deluded attempt to influence the independence movement, he was arrested and imprisoned by the British. Few people had any reason to remember him once he quit the Communists and became a radical humanist, living out his final years in a cottage in the foothills of the Himalayas. Stray visitors to his home were struck by the photograph of Stalin on his mantelpiece.

Ho Chi Minh was a rare figure in the underground who exceeded his wildest expectations. Harper does not really account for this spectacular outcome, and Sidel's more analytical book is helpful on this ground. Sidel shows how Ho was able to achieve more enduring success than his counterparts elsewhere in part because he could draw extensive support from both

nationalist and Communist revolutionaries in China. The Vietnamese nationalist groups were more divided, and their natural patron, the Vietnamese entrepreneurial class, had long been subordinated by Chinese and French capital. Ho, besides being more disciplined and single-minded than either Tan Malaka or Roy, simply had much less fierce local competition. Returning to Indochina, he took control of a patient campaign that ejected the French.

Already, by the late twenties, Harper writes, “there was a sense of the passing of an old guard and the rise of new leaders, more dogmatic thinking and iron party discipline.” This picture more closely corresponds with contemporary Asia, whose Communist heritage is often hard to discern beneath nationalist currents. Even as the Communists prevailed in Vietnam, they were quickly embroiled in a long war with another Communist regime, in Cambodia, exploding the notion of “the great family of socialist nations.” China, meanwhile, fought with the Soviet Union on its border. The current government has made a point of repressing its Muslim and Tibetan populations and cranks up its jingoism every year. In Indonesia, by the mid-sixties, a revolutionary regime had been ousted by a military clique and leftists were being purged in a series of massacres that left hundreds of thousands dead.

All this might lead one to believe that nationalism was always the main driving force in postwar Asia, no matter how Red it once appeared. But some underground figures, like Mao and Ho, never neatly separated their nationalist sentiments from their Communist convictions. Harper and Sidel help us to see that the underground’s record of internationalism and its promise of equality still haunt these post-revolutionary states. There are flashes of such ideals in China, where the Communist Party presents its redoubled effort to rein in the nation’s business class as the fulfillment of its revolutionary mandate, and in Indonesia, where the urban poor protest against an entrenched oligarchy, mostly expressing their discontent, as Tan Malaka foresaw, in the idiom of Islam. In jail in Hong Kong in 1932, Tan Malaka told an interrogator that his voice would be “louder from the grave than it ever was while I walked the earth.” ♦

# **Classical Music**

- [Summer Classical-Music Preview](#)

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

## Summer Classical-Music Preview

The New York Philharmonic at Bryant Park, On Site Opera’s “The Road We Came,” Glimmerglass Festival, and more.

By [Oussama Zahr](#)

May 7, 2021



*Illustration by Lucy Jones*

This summer, New York’s classical programmers embrace ways to entertain audiences outside. The **New York Philharmonic**, which hasn’t performed at its home, in David Geffen Hall, since March, 2020, makes excursions: to Bryant Park, for free ticketed events with **Picnic Performances** (June 9-12), and to Green-Wood Cemetery, in Brooklyn, for a music-and-whiskey concert series by **Death of Classical** (June 3-5). Gil Shaham and the Knights also visit Green-Wood, to perform a chamber arrangement of Beethoven’s Violin Concerto in D Major, Op. 61, a work as sprawling as the cemetery grounds (June 25). **On Site Opera** offers “The Road We Came,” a set of prerecorded and self-guided walking tours of Harlem, midtown, and lower Manhattan that dive into the music and the history of Black communities in New York (available, as a smartphone app, through July 31).

The major New York-area festivals turn their verdant backdrops into pandemic-friendly gathering spaces. **Tanglewood**, the summer home of the Boston Symphony Orchestra, in Lenox, Mass., presents programs without intermission in the open-air Koussevitzky Music Shed; capacity limits apply, allowing for socially distanced picnic blankets (July 9-Aug. 16). Emanuel Ax, Daniil Trifonov, Yo-Yo Ma, and Joshua Bell pass through, and Thomas Adès curates a contemporary-music series. **Glimmerglass Festival**, in Cooperstown, N.Y., produces ninety-minute versions of Mozart's "The Magic Flute" and Verdi's "Il Trovatore," among other works, on a new outdoor stage (July 15-Aug. 17). Both operas are reframed around a single character, but their hit parades of arias remain intact. ♦

# **Comment**

- [The Politics Behind India's COVID Crisis](#)

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Politics Behind India's COVID Crisis

The coronavirus thrives off of complacent leaders, such as Prime Minister Narendra Modi—and has exacerbated the contours of global inequality.

By [Steve Coll](#)

May 9, 2021

Among the world’s autocratic populists, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#), of India, is distinguished as a storyteller. He offers beguiling accounts of Hindu identity and Indian greatness, with the aid of allied newspapers and television networks, as well as on Twitter, where he has sixty-eight million followers and a phalanx of trolls. When the [pandemic](#) struck, last year, Modi summoned his loyal media barons and editors, who, according to the Prime Minister’s Web site, promised “inspiring and positive stories” about his government’s fight against the coronavirus. The country suffered tens of thousands of *Covid-19* deaths in 2020, but forecasts of even more dire outcomes did not materialize. In January, at Davos, Modi boasted that India had “saved humanity from a big disaster by containing corona effectively.” He loosened restrictions and invited worshippers to the Kumbh Mela, a weeks-long Hindu festival that attracted millions of people. As spring arrived, he staged mass rallies during an election campaign in West Bengal, a state with a population of a hundred million. At a gathering on April 17th, he extended his arms and proclaimed, “Everywhere I look, as far as I can see, there are crowds.”



Illustration by João Fazenda

The coronavirus thrives off of complacent politicians. At the time of that rally, new infections in India, by official counts, had exploded to two hundred and fifty thousand a day, a figure that last week reached four hundred thousand. Shortages of oxygen and hospital beds have driven desperate citizens—and even hospital directors—to beg for help on social media. State police have threatened or filed preliminary criminal charges against some of those seeking aid, because the “rumours” they generate may “spoil the atmosphere,” as Yogi Adityanath, a Modi ally and the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, India’s most populous state, put it. According to the *Hindu*, an English-language daily, he called for prosecutions under the National Security Act. On April 30th, India’s Supreme Court held that there should be no “clampdown” on those using social media to plead for oxygen or beds. Crematoriums are overwhelmed; photographs of makeshift funeral pyres have become iconic images of an unspeakable tragedy. Last week, at least a hundred and fifty people in India died of *Covid* every hour. [The surge](#) reflects many factors, including the fragility of the underfunded health system. But, as Meenakshi Ganguly, the South Asia director of Human Rights Watch, wrote last week, Modi’s government “appears obsessed about managing the narrative” rather than addressing urgent needs.

The [Biden](#) Administration and other governments have dispatched planeloads of small oxygen-making plants and vaccine ingredients to New

Delhi, to bolster India's vaccine industry. The aid is needed, but it alone cannot address the scale of India's suffering. The pandemic has laid bare—and exacerbated—the contours of global inequality. The conditions incubating India's outbreak also exist in other emerging countries, such as [Brazil](#) and Argentina, where thousands perish daily. In the U.S. and a few other wealthy nations, about half of all adults have now received at least one vaccine dose, and economies are reopening, whereas in much of the rest of the world it will require many months—perhaps a year or two—before vaccination rates are likely to rise enough to suppress the virus. India's crisis will make that campaign longer, since to address its own emergency New Delhi has suspended vaccine exports to *COVAX*, a World Health Organization project established to assure equitable access to vaccines in low-income nations.

Both India and South Africa have asked the World Trade Organization to waive coronavirus-vaccine patent protections, arguing that this will jump-start manufacturing worldwide and speed global recovery. American and European pharmaceutical companies protest that waivers won't work, because making the vaccines is too complex to scale up quickly. Last Wednesday, the Biden Administration departed from years of precedent to announce support for a temporary waiver of some patent protections. "The extraordinary circumstances of the *COVID-19* pandemic call for extraordinary measures," Katherine Tai, the U.S. trade representative, said. But it isn't clear whether Biden's decision can overcome European opposition at the W.T.O. in order to change existing treaty arrangements. In April, in a signal of political opinion on the Continent, the European Parliament voted decisively against waivers of intellectual property.

The moral and public-health case for prioritizing rapid global vaccination over corporate profits is inarguable. (Last week, Pfizer reported that sales of its *covid-19* vaccine during the first three months of the year brought in three and a half billion dollars.) But the patent dispute lies in the realm of "[vaccine diplomacy](#)," a phrase that describes the use of supplies to win influence and that aptly evokes the cynical maneuverings of great-power politics. While we justly celebrate the heroic service of individuals during the pandemic—nurses, doctors, delivery workers, bus drivers—our governments have often acted with unapologetic selfishness in order to protect national interests. Like the climate emergency, the coronavirus has

challenged political leaders to discover new models of collective survival that might overcome threats that even the most hardened borders cannot stop. The record to date is not encouraging.

India's death toll from *Covid-19* has now officially crossed two hundred thousand, a figure that experts say is almost certainly an undercount. Yet Modi's government continues to expend energy on censorship. The Wire, an independent news outlet, reported that on May 3rd Sun Hospital, in Lucknow, released an emergency announcement on social media that it was "not able to get enough oxygen supply," despite repeated pleas to the government. Appearing to disregard the Supreme Court's ruling of three days earlier protecting such appeals, the state police alleged that the hospital didn't really need oxygen. "No rumours should be spread to create panic among the people," a police statement read.

Last year, [Amartya Sen](#), a Nobel laureate best known for his work on the causes of famine, who is now eighty-seven, wrote in the Guardian about his country's slide toward tyranny. "The priority of freedom seems to have lost some of its lustre for many people," he said, and yet "the growth of authoritarianism in India demands determined resistance." Modi, though, by rallying his followers and suppressing dissent, has weathered many previous challenges, and he is not likely to face another national election for several years. The history of independent India is one of political and humanitarian crisis followed by self-renewal, and the country's eventual recovery from *Covid-19* can hardly be doubted. Whether its democracy can also regenerate seems, at this dark hour, a less certain prospect. ♦

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## More on the Coronavirus

- There are [three moments](#) in the yearlong catastrophe of the pandemic when events might have turned out differently.
- Citizens around the world, from Brazil to Rwanda, [share their experiences of the pandemic](#).
- In countries where the rate of infection threatens to outstrip the capacity of the health system, doctors are [confronting ethical quandaries](#).
- Surviving a severe coronavirus infection is hard. [So is recovering](#).

- Can the *COVID-19* vaccine beat the proliferation of [new virus mutations](#)?
- The pandemic has presented companies with an unprecedented opportunity to [rethink the fundamentals of the physical workplace](#).

# **Contemporary Music**

- [Summer Contemporary-Music Preview](#)

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

# Summer Preview

## Contemporary-Music

The Governors Ball's decennial, John Legend in concert, new albums from Billie Eilish and Lana Del Rey, and more.

By [Sheldon Pearce](#)

May 7, 2021



Illustration by Lucy Jones; Source photographs from WENN / Alamy (Legend); William DeShazer / The Washington Post / Getty (Baker)

After more than a year with live performance in hibernation, the music scene revs up considerably this summer, with a slew of new albums and concerts. The musician and former Vampire Weekend member **Rostam** brings a newfound jazz inspiration to “Changephobia” (June 4), his follow-up to “Half-Light,” from 2017. The pop historian **Lana Del Rey** releases her second album of the year, “Blue Banisters,” on Independence Day. Following a sweep of the major categories at the 2020 Grammys, **Billie Eilish** returns with the highly anticipated “Happier Than Ever” (June 30). The same day, the **Prince** estate plans to release “Welcome 2 America,” a never-before-heard project from the icon’s vaults.

Venues begin the slow process of reopening, with shows rescheduled from early in the pandemic. At Radio City Music Hall, two R. & B. stalwarts will sit before pianos to run through aching ballads from their award-winning discographies—**Alicia Keys** (Aug. 13) and **John Legend** (Aug. 23). New York’s SummerStage concert series starts live, in-person performances at outdoor venues with the indie-folk band **Dawes** (Sept. 16). The Governors Ball moves to Citi Field with headliners **Eilish, Post Malone, A\$AP Rocky, and J Balvin** (Sept. 22-24). As the summer winds down, talented singer-songwriters set up in more intimate venues, including **Julien Baker**, who brings stunning, sobering songs to the Beacon Theatre (Sept. 14). And with the return of live music comes the return of scheduling conflicts: **Soccer Mommy** comes to Brooklyn Steel to share the soft glow of her indie-pop songcraft the same day that the cheeky, R. & B.-influenced folksinger **Faye Webster** plays the Music Hall of Williamsburg (Sept. 21). ♦

# Crossword

- [The Crossword: Monday, May 10, 2021](#)

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

# The Crossword: Monday, May 10, 2021

A challenging puzzle.

By [Natan Last](#)

May 10, 2021

By [Patrick Berry](#)

By [Elizabeth C. Gorski](#)

# **Dance**

- [Summer Dance Preview](#)

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

## Summer Dance Preview

Major companies return with outdoor performances at Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival, Kaatsbaan Cultural Park, Lincoln Center, and more.

By [Marina Harss](#)

May 7, 2021



*Illustration by Lucy Jones; Source photograph by Quinn Wharton*

It took a pandemic to shut down the **Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival**, in Becket, Mass., which, before 2020, had not been cancelled once in its eighty-nine-year history. The festival's return, and that of live performance in general—with small-scale shows *en plein air*—is one of the most welcome signs that life, art, and joy are making a comeback after a grim year. From June 30 to Aug. 29, Jacob's Pillow's outdoor stage will host, among others, Michelle Dorrance's innovative tap company, Dorrance Dance (June 30-July 4), Ballet Hispánico (July 14-18), and the voguing legend Archie Burnett (July 28-Aug. 1). A little closer to home but no less bucolic, **Kaatsbaan Cultural Park**, whose rambling grounds in Tivoli, N.Y., were once a horse farm, is holding a two-week multidisciplinary festival (May 20-30). On a stage in the middle of a field, dancers from

American Ballet Theatre, Alvin Ailey, Martha Graham, Mark Morris Dance Group, and other ensembles will appear in a series of mixed bills.

As part of **Restart Stages** (beginning on May 10), Lincoln Center, which has been quiet for a year, is being transformed into a giant playground, conceived by the scenic designer Mimi Lien. (Renderings suggest something like an epic mini-golf course.) The programming encompasses ten stages, with a revolving roster of artists (check [lincolncenter.org](http://lincolncenter.org)), and a sound-installation-cum-live-dance performance by the choreographer Andrea Miller, entitled “You Are Here” (July 14-31). Every weekend in June, a bit farther uptown, at the New York Botanical Garden, in the Bronx, the **Mark Morris Dance Group** offers short pop-up programs on the plaza in front of the glasshouse. ♦

## **Dept. of Exploration**

- [Has an Old Soviet Mystery at Last Been Solved?](#)

# Has an Old Soviet Mystery at Last Been Solved?

The strange fate of a group of skiers in the Ural Mountains has generated endless speculation.

By [Douglas Preston](#)

May 10, 2021



Igor Dyatlov was a tinkerer, an inventor, and a devotee of the wilderness. Born in 1936, near Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg), he built radios as a kid and loved camping. When the Soviet Union launched Sputnik, in 1957, he constructed a telescope so that he and his friends could watch the satellite travel across the night sky. By then, he was an engineering student at the city's Ural Polytechnic Institute. One of the leading technical universities in the country, U.P.I. turned out topflight engineers to work in the nuclear-power and weapons industries, communications, and military engineering. During his years there, Dyatlov led a number of arduous wilderness trips, often using outdoor equipment that he had invented or improved on. It was a time of optimism in the U.S.S.R. Khrushchev's Thaw had freed many political prisoners from Stalin's Gulag, economic growth was robust, and the standard of living was rising. The shock that the success of Sputnik

delivered to the West further bolstered national confidence. In late 1958, Dyatlov began planning a winter expedition that would exemplify the boldness and vigor of a new Soviet generation: an ambitious sixteen-day cross-country ski trip in the Urals, the north-south mountain range that divides western Russia from Siberia, and thus Europe from Asia.

He submitted his proposal to the U.P.I. sports club, which readily approved it. Dyatlov's itinerary lay three hundred and fifty miles north of Sverdlovsk, in the traditional territory of the Mansi, an indigenous people. The Mansi came into contact with Russians around the sixteenth century, when Russia was extending its control over Siberia. Though largely Russified by this time, the Mansi continued to pursue a semi-traditional way of life—hunting, fishing, and reindeer herding. Dyatlov's group would ski two hundred miles, on a route that no Russian, as far as anyone knew, had taken before. The mountains were gentle and rounded, their barren slopes rising from a vast boreal forest of birch and fir. The challenge wouldn't be rugged terrain but brutally cold temperatures, deep snow, and high winds.

Dyatlov recruited his classmate Zina Kolmogorova, and seven other fellow-students and recent graduates. They were among the élite of Soviet youth and all highly experienced winter campers and cross-country skiers. One was Dyatlov's close friend Georgy Krivonishchenko, who had graduated from U.P.I. two years before and worked as an engineer at the Mayak nuclear complex, in the then secret town of Chelyabinsk-40. Jug-eared, small, and wiry, he told jokes, sang, and played the mandolin. Two other recent graduates were Rustem Slobodin and Nikolay Thibault-Brignoles, of French descent, whose father had been worked nearly to death in one of Stalin's camps. The other students included Yuri Yudin, Yuri Doroshenko, and Aleksandr Kolevatov. The youngest of the group, at twenty, was Lyuda Dubinina, an economics major, a track athlete, and an ardent Communist, who wore her long blond hair in braids tied with silk ribbons. On a previous wilderness outing, Dubinina had been accidentally shot by a hunter, and survived—quite cheerfully, it was said—a fifty-mile journey back to civilization. A couple of days before the group was due to set off, the U.P.I. administration unexpectedly added a new member, much older than the others and largely unknown to them: Semyon Zolotaryov, a thirty-seven-year-old veteran of the Second World War with an old-fashioned mustache, stainless-steel crowns on his teeth, and tattoos.

The party left Sverdlovsk by train on January 23rd. Several of them hid under seats to avoid buying tickets. They were in high spirits—so high that on a layover between trains Krivonishchenko was briefly detained by police for playing his mandolin and pretending to panhandle in the train station. We know these details because there was a communal journal, and many of the skiers also kept personal journals. At least five had cameras, and the pictures they took show a lively and strikingly handsome group of young people having the adventure of their lives—skiing, laughing, playing in the snow, and mugging for the camera.

After two days on trains, the party reached Ivdel, a remote town with a Stalin-era prison camp that, by then, held mostly criminals. From there the group travelled another day by bus, then in the back of a woodcutter's truck, and finally by ski, guided by a horse-drawn sleigh. They slept in an abandoned logging camp called Second Northern. There Yuri Yudin had a flareup of sciatica that forced him to pull out of the trip. The next day, January 28th, he turned back, while the remaining nine set off toward the mountains. The plan was to end up at the tiny village of Vizhai around February 12th, and telegram the U.P.I. sports club that they had arrived safely. The expected telegram never came.

At first, the U.P.I. sports club assumed that the group had just been held up; there had been reports of a heavy snowstorm in the mountains. But, after several days passed, families of the group began placing frantic phone calls to the university and to the local bureau of the Communist Party, and, on February 20th, a search was launched. There were several search parties: student volunteers from U.P.I., prison guards from the Ivdel camp, Mansi hunters, local police; the military deployed planes and helicopters. On February 25th, the students found ski tracks, and the next day they discovered the skiers' tent—above the tree line on a remote mountain that Soviet officials referred to as Height 1079 and that the Mansi called Kholat Syakhl, or Dead Mountain. There was no one inside.

The tent was partly collapsed and largely buried in snow. After digging it out, the search party saw that the tent appeared to have been deliberately slashed in several places. Yet, inside, everything was neat and orderly. The skiers' boots, axes, and other equipment were arranged on either side of the

door. Food was laid out as if about to be eaten; there was a stack of wood for a heating stove, and clothes, cameras, and journals.

About a hundred feet downhill, the search party found “very distinct” footprints of eight or nine people, walking (not running) toward the tree line. Almost all the prints were of stocking feet, some even bare. One person appeared to be wearing a single ski boot. “Some of the prints indicated that the person was either barefoot or in socks because you could see the toes,” a searcher later testified. The party followed the prints downhill for six to seven hundred yards, until they vanished near the tree line.

The next morning, searchers found the bodies of the mandolin player Krivonishchenko and the student Doroshenko under a tall cedar tree at the edge of the forest. They were lying next to a dead fire, wearing only underwear. Twelve to fifteen feet up the tree were some recently broken branches, and on the trunk bits of skin and torn clothes were found. Later that day, a search party discovered the bodies of Dyatlov and Kolmogorova. Both were farther up the slope, facing in the direction of the tent, their fists tightly clenched. They seemed to have been trying to get back there.

The four bodies were autopsied, while the search for the others continued. The medical examiner noted a number of bizarre features. Krivonishchenko had blackened fingers and third-degree burns on a shin and a foot. Inside his mouth was a chunk of flesh that he had bitten off his right hand. Doroshenko’s body had burned hair on one side of the head and a charred sock. All the bodies were covered with bruises, abrasions, scratches, and cuts, as was a fifth body, that of the recent graduate Slobodin, which was discovered a few days later. Like Dyatlov and Kolmogorova, Slobodin was on the slope leading back to the tent, with a sock on one foot and a felt bootie on the other; his autopsy noted a minor fracture to his skull.

By now, a homicide investigation was under way, led by a prosecutor in his mid-thirties named Lev Ivanov. Toxicology tests were done, witness testimony taken, diagrams and maps made of the scene, and evidence gathered and forensically analyzed. The tent and its contents were helicoptered out of the mountains and set up again inside a police station. This led to a key discovery: a seamstress who came to the station to do a

uniform fitting happened to notice that the slashes in the tent had been made from the inside.



*"Who's a good boy? You are. Who drives a Tesla Model X? You do. Who's going to close this sale? You're damn right."*  
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

Something had happened that induced the skiers to cut their way out of the tent and flee into the night, into a howling blizzard, in twenty-below-zero temperatures, in bare feet or socks. They were not novices to the winter mountains; they would have been acutely aware of the fatal consequences of leaving the tent half dressed in those conditions. This is the central, and apparently inexplicable, mystery of the incident.

Four bodies remained missing. In early May, when the snow began to melt, a Mansi hunter and his dog came across the remains of a makeshift snow den in the woods two hundred and fifty feet from the cedar tree: a floor of branches laid in a deep hole in the snow. Pieces of tattered clothing were found strewn about: black cotton sweatpants with the right leg cut off, the left half of a woman's sweater. Another search team arrived and, using avalanche probes around the den, they brought up a piece of flesh. Excavation uncovered the four remaining victims, lying together in a rocky streambed under at least ten feet of snow. The autopsies revealed catastrophic injuries to three of them. Thibault-Brignoles's skull was fractured so severely that pieces of bone had been driven into the brain. Zolotaryov and Dubinina had crushed chests with multiple broken ribs, and

the autopsy report noted a massive hemorrhage in the right ventricle of Dubinina's heart. The medical examiner said the damage was similar to what is typically seen as the "result of an impact of an automobile moving at high speed." Yet none of the bodies had external penetrating wounds, though Zolotaryov's was missing its eyes, and Dubinina's was missing its eyes, tongue, and part of the upper lip.

A careful inventory of clothing recovered from the bodies revealed that some of these victims were wearing clothes taken or cut off the bodies of others, and a laboratory found that several items emitted unnaturally high levels of radiation. A radiological expert testified that, because the bodies had been exposed to running water for months, these levels of radiation must originally have been "many times greater."

On May 28th, Ivanov abruptly closed the investigation. His role was to determine whether a crime had been committed, not to clarify what had happened, and he concluded that homicide was not a factor. Ivanov ended his report with a non-explanation that has bedevilled Dyatlov researchers ever since: "It should be concluded that the cause of the hikers' demise was an overwhelming force, which they were not able to overcome."

In classic Soviet style, a number of officials who had little to do with the tragedy were either punished or fired, including the director of U.P.I. and the chairman of its sports club, the local Communist Party secretary, the chairmen of two workers' unions, and a union inspector. The investigative files, photographs, and journals were classified and the area around Dead Mountain was placed off limits to skiers and outdoor enthusiasts for years. The tent was stored but eventually became moldy and had to be thrown out. The saddle in the mountains which the skiers were heading for but never reached was named the Dyatlov Pass.

The victims' families were left deeply dissatisfied. Many of them wrote to officials, including Khrushchev, demanding a more thorough investigation. But nothing more was done, and the mysterious deaths of the nine skiers subsided into relative obscurity.

In 1990, the prosecutor Ivanov, who had retired, published an article in which he claimed that, while compiling his 1959 report, he'd been pressured

not to include his views on what happened. The article, titled “The Enigma of the Fireballs,” said that the skiers had been killed by heat rays or balls of fire associated with U.F.O.s. In his original examination of the scene, Ivanov had found trees with unusual burn marks, which “confirmed that some kind of heat ray, say, or a powerful force whose nature is completely unknown (to us, at least) acted selectively on specific objects”—in this case, people. The last photograph in Krivonishchenko’s camera showed flares and streaks of light against a black background.

By then, the official files had been released and, in the decades since, the case has become one of the most celebrated mysteries of the Soviet era. It has generated dozens of books and documentaries, along with a slew of Web sites and message boards on which Dyatlov obsessives trade scores of theories—the official count of the Russian Prosecutor General’s office lists seventy-five—about what happened. In 2000, relatives and friends of the victims established the Dyatlov Group Memorial Foundation, whose purpose is to honor the memory of the skiers and seek the truth. Its president is Yuri Kuntsevich, who, as a twelve-year-old boy, attended the funerals of some of the victims. He went on to study and teach at U.P.I. (which has since become the Ural State Technical University) and to join its sports club. Now in his mid-seventies, he still leads tours to the Dyatlov Pass. Kuntsevich told me that Russians generally favor one of two theories: the skiers died because they had stumbled into an area where secret weapons were being tested; alternatively, the party was “killed by mercenaries,” probably American spies.

Kuntsevich insists that the first of these theories is the correct one, and it’s also what the families tend to believe. The idea is that a missile launch of some kind went disastrously wrong, inflicting severe injuries on some of the skiers and forcing the group to flee their tent, at which point they either froze to death or were killed by military observers. Yuri Yudin, whose sciatica compelled him to abandon the trip, likewise maintained that the deaths were not natural. Not long before he died, in 2013, he declared that his teammates had been taken from the tent at gunpoint and murdered. Dubinina, he said, may have had her tongue cut out by the killers because she was the most outspoken of the group.

Proponents of the weapons-test theory cite claims from people in the region that they had seen flashes of light or moving balls of fire in the direction of the mountains. In 2008, a three-foot-long piece of metal was found in the area; according to the Dyatlov Foundation, which took possession of it, the metal is part of a Soviet ballistic missile. Military tests would explain the radioactivity of recovered clothing. Yevgeny Okishev, Ivanov's supervisor in the Prosecutor General's office, gave an interview to a newspaper in 2013, in which he recalled finding it suspicious when he and his colleagues were instructed to test recovered items for radiation. He sent a letter to his superiors asking why radiation was relevant. In response, the Deputy Prosecutor General met with the team. Okishev said that the official dodged questions about weapons testing and ordered them to tell people that the deaths were accidental. "The victims' parents came to my office, some screamed and called us Fascists for hiding the truth from them," Okishev recalled. "But the case was closed, and not on our orders."

The theory, however, is not consistent with what was found at the site. There was no evidence that other people had been there. Snow does not lie: it would have been close to impossible to erase signs of the people and equipment involved in killing the group and restaging the scene. Besides, why make the staging so elaborate and bizarre? Why scatter the bodies around the landscape, cut off the clothing of some and dress others in it, build a snow den, bury four bodies in ten feet of snow, light a fire, and climb a tree to break branches, leaving skin on the bark? The theory would also suggest that there was a secret weapons base in the area, or that an errant missile had exploded over it. Yet, despite the mass declassification of documents from the Soviet era and the diligent searches of Dyatlov enthusiasts, no such evidence has emerged.

The K.G.B. theory centers on Zolotaryov, the man who was foisted on the group at the last minute. A book published in Russia claims that he and two other skiers were K.G.B. agents on an assignment to meet with a group of C.I.A. operatives, to furnish them with deliberately misleading information. Samples of clothing contaminated by radioactive isotopes were to be offered as bait; the C.I.A. agents discovered the deception, killed them, and staged the scene. It is certainly possible that Zolotaryov had a K.G.B. link. His service record in the Second World War had holes and inconsistencies, and his sudden inclusion certainly seems suspicious. Still, a K.G.B. connection,

even if proved, wouldn't mean much; many people were low-level informants at the time. And the idea that the C.I.A. would have chosen a place like Dead Mountain for a rendezvous strains credulity.

Another class of theories considers a variety of natural disasters. An avalanche, perhaps, struck the tent, causing the crushing injuries to three of the victims and forcing the whole group to cut their way out and head to the forest for shelter. But no avalanche debris was found—a ski pole holding up the front of the tent was still standing—and the original investigation determined that the slope was too shallow to generate an avalanche. Besides, the injuries to the three victims found in the streambed were totally incapacitating. They could never have made it there unassisted—it was more than a mile from the tent—but the tracks leading downhill showed no signs of anyone being dragged. There were eight or nine separate sets of footprints, so the fatal injuries must have come after everyone had left the tent. A 2013 best-seller by the filmmaker and writer Donnie Eichar suggests that high winds passing over the mountain created infrasound, vibrations below the range of human hearing, and that this induced such terror that the skiers fled. Much about the book is excellent—Eichar conducted many interviews in Russia and travelled to the Dyatlov Pass in winter—but his thesis would require all nine people to have been so terrified of a sound they couldn't even hear that they ran to certain death, not grabbing their coats or boots, and slashing their way out, when the tent door would have made for a far easier exit.

Various hypotheses considered in the 1959 inquest have also been raked over: carbon-monoxide poisoning from the heater; sudden madness caused by consuming bad alcohol or hallucinogenic mushrooms that the Mansi sometimes hung on trees to dry; or even murder by the Mansi themselves, if, for instance, the party had strayed onto sacred land. But the autopsies ruled out the first two of these, and when the original investigators interviewed the local Mansi they found them “well disposed toward Russians,” and believable. The Mansi had provided valuable help in the search, and they told the investigators that the area was not sacred; on the contrary, it was considered windy, barren, and worthless.

By far the most entertaining theory is that the party was attacked by a yeti. The final photograph found in Thibault-Brignoles's camera has become

famous: a dark figure advancing through the snowy forest, hunched and menacing, with no facial features. The Discovery Channel built an entire show, “Russian Yeti: The Killer Lives,” around the image. The skiers actually had been joking about yetis a few hours before they died. A spoof propaganda leaflet was found in the tent. Alongside such items as “Greeting the XXI Congress with increased birthrate among hikers” was the following: “Science: In recent years there has been a heated debate about the existence of the Yeti. Latest evidence indicates that the Yeti lives in the northern Urals, near Mount Otorten.” Still, the photograph, though blurry, pretty clearly shows a member of the group. Similarly, the Krivonishchenko image of streaks of light, which has been used to bolster the U.F.O. and weapons-test theories, is typical of the end of a film roll.

All the Dyatlov theories share a basic assumption that the full story has not been told. In a place where information has been as tightly controlled as in the former Soviet Union, mistrust of official narratives is natural, and nothing in the record can explain why people would leave a tent undressed, in near-suicidal fashion. For decades, the families and the Dyatlov Group Memorial Foundation pressed for a new investigation; two years ago, elderly relatives of several victims finally succeeded in getting the case reopened.

A young prosecutor in Yekaterinburg, Andrei Kuryakov, was put in charge. In 2019, he organized a winter expedition to the site. His team took measurements, surveyed, photographed, and conducted a variety of experiments. Using photogrammetry of the pictures taken in 1959, they tried to establish the precise location of the tent. The spot they settled on was several hundred feet from a cairn marking the previously accepted location, on a steeper section of Kholat Syakhl’s slope. Combing through historical data, the investigators determined that weather conditions on the mountain that night were even more extreme than had been thought. The skiers were engulfed in a storm with winds of up to sixty-five miles an hour and temperatures around minus thirty degrees Fahrenheit. As evening fell, they were probably unsure of their precise location.

From the outset, Kuryakov adopted an intentionally narrow scope, dismissing seventy-two of the seventy-five explanations for what may have happened. “A large class of these seventy-five versions are conspiracy theories alleging that the authorities were somehow involved in the

incident," he said, when announcing the investigation. "We have already proved that this is absolutely false." This left the investigation with three natural occurrences to consider: an avalanche, a hurricane, and a slab of snow sliding over the tent. Last July, Kuryakov held a televised press conference in which he told his audience that the last of these was the definitive explanation.

Two photographs taken by the Dyatlov party at around 5 P.M., while they pitched the tent, show that they cut deeply into the snowpack at right angles to the slope, forming a hollow. They had picked a spot where the mountain peak offered some shelter from the strongest winds. Later in the evening, Kuryakov said, a snow slab detached from the slope above and buried most of the tent, pinning down the occupants and possibly causing injuries. Fearing that a full-scale avalanche was imminent, the skiers cut their way out of the downslope side of the tent and fled to a rock ridge a hundred and fifty feet away, which Kuryakov termed a "natural avalanche limiter." But the big avalanche didn't come, and, in pitch darkness, they were unable to find their way back to the tent and took shelter in the woods, a mile away. Kuryakov tested this theory by blindfolding a man and a woman and leading them ninety feet downhill from a tent. Asked to find their way back, they quickly went astray. The task would have been even more difficult in a blizzard, with most of the tent buried in snow.

Analyzing 1959 photographs, many Dyatlov researchers had calculated that the tent was pitched on a slope of some fifteen degrees, which is not steep enough to sustain the movement of snow in cold conditions. The new position of the tent as determined by Kuryakov's topographical experts was therefore crucial, because the gradient here was between twenty-three and twenty-six degrees, enough for avalanche formation. A paper corroborating much of Kuryakov's explanation was published in January by two Swiss engineers in the journal *Communications Earth & Environment*. Creating a mathematical model of the snow structure that night, the researchers showed why the slab didn't release immediately when the group cut into it, but only hours later: additional loading of snow during the storm was responsible.



*"Since we can't do the Vegas bachelor party we'd planned, I'm asking you all to light a pile of money on fire to celebrate our friendship with Chris."*  
Cartoon by Kendra Allenby

I reviewed the hypothesis with Ethan Greene, the director of the Colorado Avalanche Information Center, who has a Ph.D. in the physics of heat and mass transfer in snow. He suggested that the party's decision to pitch the tent in the wind shadow of the peak made it likely that they were cutting into a so-called wind slab—an accumulation of hard snow even more dangerous than a typical snow slab. Compacted by the wind, this kind of snow is several times denser than directly deposited snow and, according to Greene, can weigh as much as six hundred and seventy pounds per cubic yard. Furthermore, the clear conditions preceding the storm could have led to the formation of a layer of light, feathery frost, known as surface hoar. When buried in fresh snow during the storm, this layer forms a hazardous stratum that provides poor support to the snow above and often releases, resulting in avalanches. By removing the support on the lower edge of the slab while digging to set their tent, the skiers likely caused it to fracture higher up.

If the wind slab had simply slid over the tent and halted, without developing into a full-fledged avalanche, the evidence, Greene said, might not be visible twenty-five days later. Even the fissure in the snowpack would probably have been erased by the elements. If a three-foot-thick slab moved over the tent, each skier's body would have been covered by more than a thousand pounds. The massive weight prevented them from retrieving their boots or

warm clothing and forced them to cut their way out of the downslope side of the tent.

The two Swiss researchers believe that the snow slab probably caused the terrible injuries to three of the skiers found at the snow den, but this remains unlikely, given the distance of those bodies from the tent. Kuryakov's explanation was more ingenious. The nine skiers retreated downhill, taking shelter under the cedar tree and building a fire. Because the young trees nearby were icy and wet, someone climbed the cedar to break branches higher up—hence the skin and scraps of clothing found on the trunk. The fire they built, in these extreme conditions, was not enough to save them, however. The two most poorly dressed of the group died first. The burned skin on their bodies came from their desperate efforts to seek warmth from the fire. This would suggest that the piece of flesh Krivonishchenko bit from his finger was probably a result of the delirium that overtakes someone who's dying of hypothermia, or perhaps from an attempt to test for sensation in a frostbitten hand.

The surviving skiers cut the clothes off their dead comrades and dressed themselves in the remnants. At some point, the group split up. Three skiers, including Dyatlov, tried to return to the tent and soon froze to death as they struggled uphill. The other four, who were better dressed, decided to build a snow den to shelter in overnight. They needed deep snow, which they found in a ravine a couple of hundred feet away. Unfortunately, the spot they picked lay above a stream, a tributary of the Lozva River. The stream, which never freezes, had hollowed out a deep icy tunnel, and the group's digging caused its roof to collapse, throwing them onto the rocky streambed and burying them in ten to fifteen feet of snow. The pressure of tons of snow forcing them against the rocks caused the traumatic injuries found in this group. The gruesome facial damage—the missing tongue, eyes, and lip—probably resulted from scavenging by small animals and from decomposition.

Kuryakov's reconstruction of events made a single plausible narrative out of previously mystifying anomalies. But what of the radiation? This detail, the most enigmatic of all, might be the easiest to explain. For one thing, the mantles used in camp lanterns at the time contained small amounts of the radioactive element thorium. Even more pertinent, the expedition took place

less than two years after the world's third-worst nuclear accident (after Chernobyl and Fukushima), which occurred at the Mayak nuclear complex, south of Sverdlovsk, in September of 1957. A tank of radioactive waste exploded and a radioactive plume some two hundred miles long—later named the East Urals Radioactive Trace—spread northward. Krivonishchenko had worked at the facility and helped with the cleanup, and another skier came from a village in the contaminated zone.

Kuryakov closed his press conference by declaring, "Formally, this is it. The case is closed." Given how freighted the case is in Russia, this was too optimistic. For many people, nature alone cannot explain a tragedy of this magnitude; perpetrators must be identified and the state and its dark past invoked. Sure enough, the conclusions were greeted with scorn, especially by the families of the dead. The Dyatlov Group Memorial Foundation sent a letter to the Prosecutor General declaring that, in its view, the skiers' deaths were caused by "the atmospheric release of a powerful toxic substance" when a secret weapons test went wrong. Natalia Varsegova, a Moscow journalist, who has covered the subject for many years, also rejected Kuryakov's conclusions. "Two years ago I thought that the prosecutor Andrei Kuryakov really wanted to know the truth," she wrote to me in an e-mail. "But now I doubt it. I don't believe in an avalanche." After the Swiss report came out, she published an article rejecting it as well. "These theoreticians' conclusions are supported by mathematical calculations, formulas, and diagrams, but the local Mansi, numerous tourists, and organizers of snowmobile tours, who have never seen avalanches on this slope, are unlikely to agree with them."

A month after the press conference, Kuryakov was reprimanded for holding it without authorization, and in October he was removed from his post. (The prosecutor's office has claimed that he resigned, and he did not respond to requests for an interview.) Early this year, he was appointed a deputy minister of natural resources in the Sverdlovsk region, which is a major timber producer. As Kuntsevich wrote to me sarcastically, Kuryakov was shunted off to "felling trees." Meanwhile, the Prosecutor General declined to be interviewed for this article, and his office has issued no official report. Kuntsevich believes that a report may never be released, even to the families. The foundation is now calling for yet another investigation. Any

clarity that Kuryakov's solution might have brought was quickly occluded amid an atmosphere of murk and mistrust.

The most appealing aspect of Kuryakov's scenario is that the Dyatlov party's actions no longer seem irrational. The snow slab, according to Greene, would probably have made loud cracks and rumbles as it fell across the tent, making an avalanche seem imminent. Kuryakov noted that although the skiers made an error in the placement of their tent, everything they did subsequently was textbook: they conducted an emergency evacuation to ground that would be safe from an avalanche, they took shelter in the woods, they started a fire, they dug a snow cave. Had they been less experienced, they might have remained near the tent, dug it out, and survived. But avalanches are by far the biggest risk in the mountains in winter, and the more experience you have, the more you fear them. The skiers' expertise doomed them.

At the end of 1958, as the date of departure approached, Krivonishchenko wrote a letter to Dyatlov firming up various logistical matters, and he enclosed a poem addressing New Year's greetings to the entire group:

Here's wishing you  
Camps pitched on mounts afar,  
Routes to hike over ranges untamed,  
  
Packs that, as ever, rest lightly on your backs,  
And weather that smiles upon your quest. . . .  
And let your footprints  
Trace winding tracks across the map of Russia.

Today, the Dyatlov Pass is a popular hiking and tourist destination. Hundreds have visited Height 1079, and followed Dyatlov's route on foot, snowmobile, or skis. People come from all over the world to see the place where the tent once stood, the streambed where bodies were found, and the cedar tree, its broken branches still visible. Others come to take measurements, photographs, and videos to support their pet theories. The windswept heights of Dead Mountain have become a site of pilgrimage. Long after their deaths, Dyatlov and his friends did indeed leave their footprints across the map of Russia. ♦

# Fiction

- “Children of the Good Book”

# Children of the Good Book

By [J. M. Holmes](#)

May 10, 2021



“Stop picking at that food,” Uncle Bull said.

Isaac let go of the foil lid on the tray and turned from the fridge. He straightened his back to meet Bull’s glare. I’d crept into the hall ’cause the worn mattress had shifted when my cousin had gotten out of bed.

“You ain’t pay for this,” Isaac said, nodding toward the tray.

Bull had a mean face, shaped by a long knife’s edge of days whittling away at him. He tilted his head this way and that, trying to crack his neck.

“The fuck you know about bills? You don’t keep the lights on in this house,” Bull said. He was trying to remain calm.

[J. M. Holmes on Black manhood in America.](#)

“Yeah? Then stop taking us to work with your sorry ass,” Isaac said.

Bull was across the kitchen in an instant. The fridge door slammed shut on Isaac's hand and he called out more in surprise than in pain. He fell on his ass, caught himself quick, and scrambled to his feet. I heard a noise behind me—Abraham and Israel, my other cousins, shuffled out of our bedroom sleepy-eyed. Their steps were heavy even on the carpeting. Isaac and Bull spun toward the sound and, seeing us all there, tried to shake off the tension. Auntie Connie came from the bedroom on the other side of the kitchen, in her head wrap and nightgown, squinting as her eyes adjusted.

"What was that noise?" She studied our faces. "What's going on?" she asked.

Bull looked at Isaac. "I slipped, Momma," Isaac said.

Abraham and Israel walked into the weak, sterile fluorescence of the stove light, Abraham filling a glass of water, Iz just cooling out by his brother. Abe was sixteen, Iz thirteen—only six months older than me, but still damn near two hundred pounds—and Isaac, barely fifteen, was smack in the middle. Bull felt the pack measuring him, his wife's sons from another life. He popped the freezer open, grabbed a few cubes from the ice tray, then turned to the sink and filled a reusable cup from Mickey D's, one of the King-size joints with pictures of burgers and fries printed on the side. It took a while and no one spoke. Then, as if all was well in the world, he walked by the boys and kissed Connie on the forehead.

"I gotta get some sleep," he said. "It's only Lonnie and me cleaning the Edward Jones offices tomorrow." He walked into the dark, followed by the sound of their bedroom door swinging closed. Hearing Bull say "Lonnie" was weird. Connie called her baby brother Li'l Big Head. He was Pops to me. I tried to imagine what he was doing right then that had me staying at my cousins' instead of with him for the brief month we spent together each summer, most summers—at least summers when my moms could find him.

Connie took us all in with a glance, then narrowed her eyes. Abraham, Iz, and I got the message and turned toward the bedroom. Isaac went back to the fridge.

"Baby, stay outta that church food," Connie said.

Isaac flashed his smile that'd sell Raid to a roach. "O.K., Momma."

•

*Bull, your whole life played out like one long sacrifice. You ate what this country fed you, marched in step, and wrapped yourself in the colors of a good patriot. Still, they had no place for you. Do their bidding, and they'll let you live out your days wandering their deserts. That ain't for me. I'ma look into the red and blue of their eyes when my time comes, 'cause I know they built those cages up in Monroe for our people, but they'll use a bullet just the same.*

•

Isaac stood apart from his brothers. Their names had all climbed off pages of the Good Book—Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Auntie Connie's boys. But it was Isaac who smiled and laughed as the world bucked in his hands.

Landing in Washington State to visit my pops in the summer felt like landing in a different country for an East Coast kid like me—evergreens tall as city buildings and summer hailstorms that'd blow through, leaving perfect marble-size balls of ice in the street for us to pick up and whip at one another. My cousins took me in like a little brother when we played two-on-two at the park or chicken at the Tanglewilde pool.

Connie's kitchen always smelled like food. True, she almost never had time to clean it and there were trails of ants a football field long, but everyone was glad that she spent the few free hours she had throwing down instead of cleaning up.

My cousins took their God in heaping portions, just like their momma, and they ate the same way. Auntie Connie'd make pork chops some special Sundays, breaded, fried, then smothered in gravy. She was a Baptist with Southern roots, so pork might as well have been the Eucharist, and though Bull was a Seventh-day Adventist, he had let his faith lapse a long while back and was always the first one over the baking dish choosing his cut.

Bull was wild skinny. My pops was not. Bull looked like he had two creams in him—the lightest in a family that stretched across the spectrum. He had a chestnut face, and a frame longer and leaner than those starved dogs you see on the please-donate ads. He worked the darkest part of the night cleaning offices where he couldn't get hired, polishing the tiles and mirrors with a care he never showed to his own things. My uncle worked hard and that's all I knew. His boys knew it, too, and no one but Isaac ever said anything about it. Our family left a lot in silence.

•

The morning after Bull and Isaac tussled over the church food, Bull slept through his chance at atonement. Isaac, though, was ready in his Sunday best before the rest of us had even woke up. He had been hollering at the pastor's daughter every Sunday since I'd arrived, and the closer the two of them got the more religious Isaac became.

The three of us lumbered into the kitchen, half dressed for service, to find Isaac pouring four glasses of orange juice. Abraham took two ramen packs out of the cupboard and crunched them up. He ripped open the seasoning packets and dumped them into the bags of dried noodles, and we sat eating the chunks like potato chips, licking the MSG off our lips, and listening to Connie hum "Nothing but the Blood" in the other room.

Real quick on Auntie Connie: everything about her was big and her strength matched her size. She had a voice that flowed deep and clear as the Chattooga, a voice that moved things inside you. She always ate apples and left the cores on the dashboard of her green '92 Dodge Caravan till the end of the day. She said eating apples was the only way to keep your voice sharp. The boys all sang well, but not like Connie. Abraham sang high and right, and Israel hit the notes with a blocked nose. Isaac's voice had that warm hoarseness to it—a hushed secret, with a rasp and crackle, like everything he sang was on vinyl and what he had to say was only for you, no one else.

That Sunday, he finally pulled the pastor's daughter with his voice. Sonya Mitchell was Nia Long "Boyz n the Hood" bad. She could've turned Pontius Pilate Christian. I followed them outside because I wasn't a Baptist and the

three-hour services were two and a half hours too long for me. I heard Isaac's hushed voice and poked my head around the corner of the building to see. He had one hand on the bricks of the church above Sonya's shoulder and was grinning in that camera-ready way he had. "There's plenty a sermon left."

She looked at his face, stumbling on his handsomeness. "Why can't we wait till the cookout?"

"'Cause everyone's gonna be at the cookout."

"We could go downstairs," she said.

"We could go downstairs now."

"My dad'll see us. You can see the door from the pulpit."

"No, he won't. We'll be quiet as the Holy Ghost." He kissed her on the cheek and smiled again, wide with no slickness in it—which was what made it slick.

She turned to look at the side entrance of the church and I tucked myself back behind the corner. I can still see the snapshot image of Sonya, the sun catching the red undertones in her hair, like her kin had some Irish in them long generations back.

"What if he sees?"

"Then he sees. You think he's gonna stop the sermon?"

"What you mean, *then he sees?* You crazy? I gotta deal with him later. Not you."

Isaac laughed. "There's two hundred people in there. He's not gonna notice." He wrapped his hand around her waist and brought her in. "I promise," he said, pulling her to the side door, but she stopped, peeked through the small window in the door, and then took two steps back, breaking the spell.

“Next week—” she started, and Isaac’s face dropped six stories. “There’s a guest pastor coming and my dad will be running around overtime trying to be host of the year. It’ll be perfect.” Then Sonya whispered something in my cousin’s ear and his face picked back up those six stories, plus some.

•

By the following Saturday, Isaac looked like he was about to levitate. We were all in the bedroom, cooling, nothing doing, and for once Connie hadn’t put us to work around the house or forced us outside so she could enjoy a little peace. Isaac couldn’t stop talking about Sonya. “She needs that Jodeci ‘Freek’n You’ loving, feel me? Sonya’s true, Bible Christian good. I mean real hands-clasped-in-the-front-of-youth-ministry-class, dress-past-the-knees, dark-stockings good,” he said. As he riffed about her, his voice was low and steady.

Iz shook his head and flipped a page of his “Venom” comic book.

“So why you scheming on her then?” Abe said, not looking up from a watch he was putting back together.

“ ’Cause you can’t live all locked up by what *they* think of you. Shit’s unhealthy.” Isaac lightened his tone. “You try to lock all that up, you probably gonna catch cancer or bust a blood vessel or some shit.” He hopped onto the bed, resting his back against the wall next to me. He leaned in and said, “So tomorrow it’s almost like I’m saving her life, feel me?” Abraham rolled his eyes at his brother and Isaac stared at him a beat, dead-ass, then he started to sing, “Every freek’n night, and every freek’n day,” while he pretended to be slow-stroking an imaginary girl, thrusting his hips up. “I wanna freek you baby in every freek’n way.” We were all laughing when Bull came in the room, ready to leave for work again. The laughter stopped.

“Boys, Lonnie and I need you tonight,” he said.

I looked to Iz, who tented his face with the comic book and pretended to sob.



"Keep looking—he's in there. They're experts at camouflage."  
Cartoon by Chelsea Carr

Isaac paused. "What time we gonna get home?"

"We'll get back when we get back," Bull said as he left. Isaac was lost in thought for a minute, then popped up and went to the dresser for his scrub clothes. His brothers got up, too, and joined him. I leaned off the bed and dug in my bag for my own beat clothes. I didn't mind working when my pops worked, too. He could make pigs in the slaughterhouse line get loose.

After Isaac got his shirt off, he poked out his chest and strutted around looking like a fool. "I'm the damned *king* of this mop," he said. "Pharaoh of these motherfuckin' vacuums."

We all laughed at Isaac's act, but he didn't stop.

"I be playin' mind control on these white folks," he started in, imitating Tucker in "Friday." "When they come around—I ain't be talkin'. But when they leave—I be talkin' again." Iz's "Looney Tunes" laugh lifted us all. I swear he tried to watch that movie every weekend. "Work me like a dog, too." Isaac was getting louder. "And, yeah, it's the grave shift and they won't shake my hand when they see me, but I be throwin' they recycling in the wrong dumpster, you can believe that!" Isaac laughed alone then, mean-edged and resounding.

•

Bull's company, King Cleaners, had never really gotten off the ground. His employees were flakes or addicts—often both. He undercut more established companies to get contracts and then hardly had enough money to pay a staff when those contracts actually came through. Connie believed in him, though, deep trust. She used her mortgage as collateral on a loan to help him through his initial deficit, the hole he never climbed out of.

All this meant that the nights when he couldn't find enough workers, or pay them enough, he'd take us. Abraham got to sit up front in the cab of Bull's truck, stuffed between Unc and my pops, 'cause he was the oldest. Me, Israel, and Isaac packed close together in the bed of the Dodge and wrapped ourselves in an old green tarp, hole-ridden from Bull shovelling mulch and gravel off it at his previous job. Iz was a human heater, though, and a big one at that, so we were O.K. He'd sweat even on cold nights—the nights when the wind whipped the tarp till it felt like we were stuck in a blender. Bull tried to hit the larger offices first so that he could drop us back home afterward and finish the smaller ones with just my pops.

Early in the night, we kept the mood above zero. Iz and I were a pair, Abe and Isaac always paired up, and Pops went with Bull, to speed things like sweeping and mopping, scrubbing and rinsing.

"You fat nigga." Bull's voice echoed through the air vents. Iz stopped mopping the floor of the women's bathroom and I stopped scrubbing the sink. Bull never used that word around us, out of respect for Connie, I think.

"C'mon, Bull, it's kinda funny," my pops said.

"How's you clogging the toilet with a shit-covered rag funny?" Bull's voice sounded far away and Iz and I both stood, concentrating on every word.

"What? You want me to tuck it back in my pocket like a shit handkerchief?" my pops said.

"Nah, Lonnie, I want you to not be so fat that you can't wait to grab some toilet paper before you start shittin' like a buffalo," Bull said. I could hear

my pops trying to stifle his laugh. “Shut up,” Bull yelled. “I can’t lose this contract.”

“Lose the contract for what? Using the sacred *whites-only* bathroom?”

“Yeah, you a real soul brother, cleaning mirrors and scrubbing sinks,” Bull said.

I waited to hear my pops clown Bull, but there was silence. My fingers hurt from clenching the scrub brush so tight, and the rubber gloves twisted up on my palms; Bull’s gloves were almost too small for me already. Iz and I drifted into the hall so we could hear better, knowing it wasn’t over yet.

Through the sliver between the doorstop and the door, I caught a glimpse of Bull forcing the metal snake down the toilet. He stopped, yanked it out, and threw it toward the door, skidding and scraping the tiles, feet from where we stood just out of sight. Then he kicked an empty garbage can. “Fix it!” he said. “I’m going to dump the trash.”

The rhythmic sound of Pops’s scrubbing stopped. “Make sure you thank massa for their holy garbage,” he said. “*Yessuh, I’m so honored, suh. To collect yo’ snot rags and Band-Aids, suh, and and—*”

“Fuck you,” Bull said.

Before we could scramble back into the other bathroom, he stormed into the hall, trying to tie the trash bags. He glared at us. “What?” Bull said. “You done with the bathroom?”

Iz shook his head.

“Then stop sticking your nose in grown-men business and fuckin’ finish it,” Bull snapped. He looked back into the men’s room and saw my pops staring at him with no laughter left on his face. Bull glanced at us one more time, then resumed trying to tie the garbage bags. His hands shook bad since he’d quit smoking.

•

The night wore on. Bull never recovered. Usually, you could hear Pops and Bull talking shit about sports, movies, even the news, if they exhausted the other two, but that night they were dead quiet up in the cab. Every time I looked through the window, Abe sat stiffer than marble in the middle seat, eyes fixed ahead.

We rode in the back of that shitty truck so long my legs went completely numb. After we finished each office, Isaac studied the sky from the truck bed as we drove, praying for the light not to come yet.

As we pulled into the Ticor Title parking lot, my pops reached through the cab window and squeezed Iz's shoulder, gentle, to wake him. "Last building for the night," he said. Bull parked and we all paused to watch the top of Mt. Rainier catch the first rays of Sunday and glow blood-orange. Bull banged his fist on the side of the truck. "Let's go," he said. I don't know how I got my feet to move, but Iz and I managed to stumble out, tired and hungry. Isaac stayed.

"Let's go!" Bull said again.

Isaac stood up in the bed of the truck and cocked his head, looking down at Bull. "I ain't missing church," he said.

"Then you better hurry up."

Isaac judged the light in the sky. "It's about to be dawn. You need to take us home." His voice was loud enough to echo in the empty parking lot. My cousins and I stopped in our tracks. My pops doubled back toward the coming storm.

"Get your ass outta the truck," Bull snapped.

"Nah." Isaac levelled his eyes without flinching.

Bull banged both fists on the side of the truck. "Boy, I swear to God—"

"You swear to God, what?"

Bull lunged forward, reaching up for Isaac, who took a step back so Bull missed. Unc lost it, jumping again, pulling himself up by the elbows, then hands, but before he could scramble fully into the bed my pops grabbed both of his shoulders and pulled him back onto his feet.

“Easy, Bull,” Pops said. “We all tired.”

“Fuck that.” Bull glanced from Isaac back to Pops. “I be damned if I’mma let an ungrateful little boy disrespect me.”

Isaac said nothing, stared down at Bull like he was a stranger stumbling and sipping out a brown paper bag instead of his step-pops.

My cousins and I had moved with my pops to stand between them.

Bull kept looking up past us, his face reddening.

“Fuck you, Lonnie. You work for me. You forget that?”

Pops didn’t take the bait. Bull made a weak move to get around us, but Pops placed a large hand on his chest. “I ain’t gon’ let you beat up on my sister’s kid.”

Bull had stopped trying to look through Isaac and turned his glare up at my pops. The situation would’ve been funny—like Shaq holding off that little white kid in “Kazaam”—if they hadn’t been the men in our lives, putting us up on the wrong kind of game and fissuring along all the fault lines they’d been failing to patch since they were kids themselves.

“You gonna tell *me* how to be a father?” Bull fixed the sleeves of his coat.  
“You see your son one month out the whole damned year.”

“Psst, and your feeble ass probably can’t even have kids,” Isaac shot back from the truck.

Bull let out a harsh laugh. “One thing’s for damn sure, your old man was a lot smarter than me—that’s why he left your asses.”

Abe and Isaac were able to keep a straight face, but I could see it'd punched a soft spot in Iz. His face pinched with pain. In that moment, his age broke through his grownup front and his size just made it sadder.

Bull patted his pocket and found the custodial keys. He took my cousins' silence as a victory—smirked, pivoted, and headed for the building, spinning the key ring around his pointer finger, over and over, like a man possessed.

•

*Watching you smile spinning your jailhouse keys was pitiful. You liked to talk to us about honest work, but what you never understood, Bull, is there ain't no such thing in a dishonest system. There would have been easier ways for you to lay down, to go on your knees. Instead, you made it tough on everyone. A man don't drag his kin out in the desert to perish with him.*

•

We heard the door to the office building swing open, then rattle closed.

Pops turned to Isaac. “You better learn not to kick a man while he’s struggling.”

Isaac studied my pops, then nodded. The rest of us started for the door while Isaac stayed behind a minute, eyes to the brightening sky as if he could will the sun to rise slower.

•

*As you sweat in the halls of that last building, scouring the white man's refuse from his corporate temple, was it already on your mind? Or was it later when you believed my momma heaped one more indignity upon you and you broke? No, it was always on your mind. It wasn't always gonna be me offered to restore your wounded manhood, but accepting next to nothing from those white folks for long enough got you to the point where something had to be sacrificed. Boy, did they ever fuck you up, Bull, Black man—ain't got no notion of self, no notion of blood or birthright. You're not the first of us that's lost himself and you damn sure won't be the last. They've been dragging us deeper into the desert for four hundred years.*

•

Even though the morning grayed over, we managed to work up a sweat in a couple hours. Israel swept. I mopped. Abraham swept and Isaac mopped. We started on different floors, then finished the third floor together.

“Hey, Iz, you need to move your fat ass faster than that. I ain’t try’na order off the breakfast menu,” Abraham said. He looked at his knockoff Tag Heuer sport watch, all dramatic.

“Jack in the Box serves everything all the time,” Israel said. “And stop lookin’ at your fake-ass watch. We all know the hands don’t move. What time it say? Quarter past the flea market?” Even Abe had to laugh at that one. He tried hard to teach his brothers and me about the different movements that powered watches, taking them apart himself to look at the inner workings. He wanted to make them one day, have his own line. Said he’d build his watches like Pagani built their supercars, each watch a solitary release, a one of one.

“Less talking, more working,” Isaac said. “I’m try’na take a bath before service.”

“Fresh and clean for Sonya?” I said.

Iz and I were both Outkast stans. He caught my eye, then remixed some lyrics on the spot. “Ain’t my brother whipped on Sonya, Lemon Pledge fresh and clean?” he sang.

“Lemon Pledge clean, clean,” I came in with the backup vocals, and Iz and I shared some nerd laughs.

Isaac put on a straight face. “I go to church to bask in the glory of God and nothing else,” he said. Then, slow, he started gyrating and singing again. “Every freek’n day and every freek’n night . . .”

We all laughed then, delirious from work with no sleep. Isaac leaned in close to the window to catch what little of his reflection he could see.

“Damn, even this mop can’t make a nigga look bad. How much you think they pay models in a janitors’ catalogue?” he said.

Abraham laughed his high laugh and it ricochetted off the emptiness.

“You been huffing that Mop & Glo? You ain’t that pretty,” Iz said.

Bull pushed the cart with all the sprays and disinfectants around the corner, headed for the bathroom.

“Janitors’ catalogue?” Abe said. “When the hell you ever seen a janitors’ catalogue?”

Isaac spoke louder. “I’m serious. Sometimes I just wish Bull had some of my natural beauty, nah mean? Maybe he wouldn’t be so *damn* angry. Shit, I’d be pissed, too, if I had to look in the mirror every day and see his mug.”

Israel shot a glance at his step-pops, then back to his brother. Each pretending the other wasn’t there. Bull propped the bathroom door open with the cart, and I headed over to grab some rags to wipe down the desks.

•

*We both know the anger is merely a symptom. We both know beauty is a fallacy. Bull, you could’ve been the most handsome man to ever live and this country would’ve disavowed you of that. Still, I wish your momma gave you even a little of what mine gave me—soul before flesh / fear not of men because men must die. But they got you out here so far, you think yourself soulless. That’s why you will drag me up the mountain. They want you to do this—break my spirit so their work is easier down the line. They’ve had us tearing each other down for centuries now, ’cause sustenance is scarce in the desert. But, even as you prepare to walk me up the mountain, I still got faith in you—time to cross on over the River Jordan and come on home.*

•

Israel almost cried when the truck came to a stop in the driveway. We had all fallen asleep, so Bull didn’t bother picking up food. Something about dollar eggrolls at Crack in the Box made long nights a little easier. One time we hit

K.F.C. so late Pops talked them into giving us all the biscuits they had left on the rack, 'cause they were going to go stale anyway. He could be a sweet talker like that sometimes. We smothered those things in so much butter and honey they stuck to every part of us on the way down. Isaac nicknamed my pops Uncle Love Biscuits that night and we all laughed with the doughy biscuits still glued to the roofs of our mouths.

Now we just sat in the driveway with no food. Connie came rushing out the house and down the concrete steps where the weeds grew up through the cracks into the gray morning, which was getting darker instead of lighter. It was late even for that type of night.

"Terrance, how you gonna keep the boys out till 7 a.m. on a Sunday? You know church starts in a few hours. They ain't gonna be able to sleep at all," she said.

Bull just slammed the truck door and glared at Isaac, who threw it right back.

"Terr—" Connie started, but Bull walked right by her without even a look. Abe, delirious-quiet, kissed his momma and then dragged his feet into the house after Bull.

"Lonnie, what happened?" she said. "Y'all fight?"

"Apples, you know ain't no one fighting. The boys are just tired," Pops said and hugged her. "Everything'll be fine after they get some rest." He grinned. "And some spare ribs. Abe and Bull mentioned spare ribs specific. Said the ones from last week clogging up the fridge." A slight smile broke through Auntie's stern face.

"Clogged fridge with four boys in the house," Auntie said.

"O.K.—" Pops made like he was gonna sprint into the house. "I'ma just go clean the fridge for you," he said.

Connie's shoulders relaxed and she broke completely, playfully shaking her head with a full smile on her face. "The hell you will. You're gonna sit at the table and I'll heat you up what I can find."

“Don’t even bother. Cold is perfect,” Pops said.

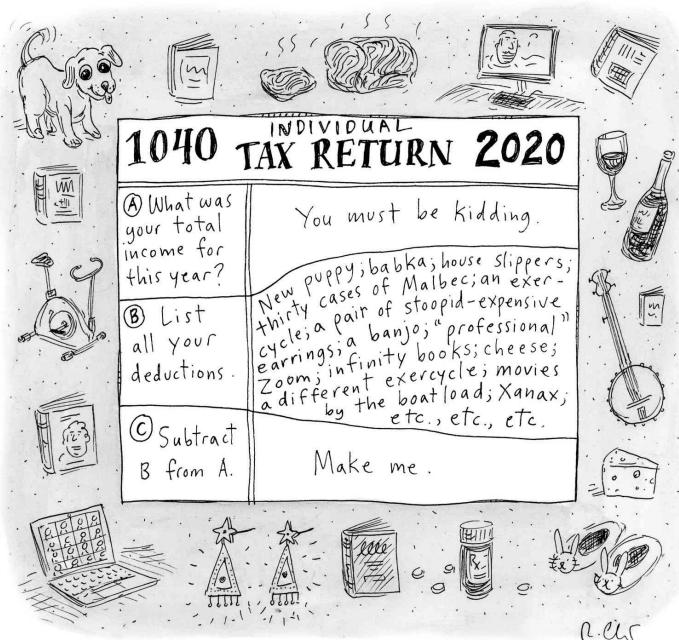
Israel came over and threw his arms round his momma, too. “There enough for me?” he asked.

Connie kissed his forehead, and we all walked up the steps into the house.

“There’s always enough for you, baby,” she said.

Israel ate all my food. I fell asleep at the table with my head in my arms, and not even my Kool-Aid survived. My pops didn’t save me any, either. He was licking barbecue sauce off his fingers by the time he nudged me, my plastic cup empty past the backwash. He woke me up to tell me to go and lie down. Abraham was already in bed and Isaac sat across from his momma trying to fight sleep.

“Momma, can I please take a shower?” he pleaded, the vulnerability in his raspy voice as natural and easy as the tough talk earlier. Hanging around Isaac could learn you that—how to own each and every bit of self. Years later, at my pops’s funeral, Isaac would get up and say that his Uncle Love Biscuits taught him that he could be a stand-up man and still crawl into bed with his momma early on a Sunday morning, ’cause even grown men call for their mommas when all else fails. Lonnie Lion Campbell, my pops, taught him that. He never taught me any of it.



*Cartoon by Roz Chast*

Connie pursed her lips at her middle child.

"Momma, please," he said. "A bath'll take too long."

Bull came out of the other bedroom, already in his sweats and an old Tacoma Dome T-Shirt. Even at home, comfortable, he moved like a cocked hammer on a single-action revolver.

"We don't waste water in this house," Connie said. "So unless you plannin' to take one of your brothers in there with you—bath."

Bull made himself a plate from the fridge. He eyed the three pecan pies on the counter as he filled another Mickey D's cup with water.

Connie caught him looking. "I'll bring home whatever pie's left," she said.

"You cook more for the church than you do for this damned house," Bull said.

The room was silent. Connie ignored Bull and turned to her bedraggled youngest son—sweat and dirt on his face, *my* juice staining his peach-fuzz mustache, lint in his short hair. She picked out some of the lint. "Now you desperately need a bath," she said.

Isaac was still scheming on a shower, and Pops read his mind. “You know that li’l Mitchell girl don’t care if you shower,” Pops said. “She’d sniff your jockstrap after football practice.”

“Lonnie!” Connie glared at her brother. “That’s vile. Don’t bring that talk in my house.”

Bull took the hot sauce out of the cabinet, slammed it shut, and carried his food into the living room. Sinking into the couch, he kicked his feet up on the coffee table and turned the TV on, “SportsCenter” playing loud. He doused his plate with Louisiana, then put the sauce bottle on the coffee table without a top.

Connie couldn’t let that go. “At least put the top on, Terrance,” she said. Bull screwed the top on the hot sauce without looking over.

“Thank you,” Connie said. “And, baby, could you please turn that down.”

Apparently, that was too much. Bull turned the TV off and threw the remote onto the couch, then carried his plate into their bedroom and slammed the door.

Connie turned to my pops. “O.K. What happened at work?” she asked.

Isaac slapped me light on the back of the head as he stood up and I got up and started to leave with him. Iz rose, bleary-eyed, and followed us. As I passed my pops, he reached over the back of his chair and put me in a headlock over his shoulder, nuzzling me like a cub. “You right, Apples,” Pops said to Connie. “I forgot to tell you—we caught young Simba at the offices.” I thought I was too old for his play tousling, but when his two-day beard tickled my ear and neck I laughed so hard my tired body floated in it.

•

Even though the morning was charcoal-dark behind the brown curtains in the bedroom, we started to bake and sweat as soon as we lay down. Abe had the portable Sony sitting on the closed toilet lid in the bathroom next door. He kept the sound down low and hummed along soft, but I could still hear Donnie McClurkin’s ranging voice, lifted by the female choir like wind to a

wing. Lying in bed, I focussed all that was left of my attention on those voices while Isaac's breathing turned steady and rhythmic next to me. The green numbers on the digital clock between the beds glowed 8:57. I reminded myself to wake Isaac up for his bath in a few minutes and rolled onto my side, facing the curtains. Iz's soft snoring rose from the other bed and joined the chorus.

Abe shook me awake. He was wearing his matte, light-purple shirt with a darker purple-and-beige Argyle tie. My auntie thought it was flashy, but she let her boys go all out for church. "The clothes make them feel powerful and powerful grows up to be pride, if you raise it right," she used to say.

"You gotta get dressed quick," Abe said.

I looked from him to Isaac, who was knocked out hard, catching flies, mouth-breathing. I leaned over to shake him awake.

"Nah, let him sleep," Abe said.

"What you mean?" I said as I slipped my church khakis on in the semi-dark.

Connie popped her head into the room. "Hurry up, baby," she said in a loud whisper.

I turned to catch her, ask about Isaac, but she was already onto the next thing.

There was no backup to be found. Iz wasn't in the room and Abe acted like he was busy trying to pick one of his fake watches to wear to church, even though he wore the same one every Sunday—his knockoff Breitling, the brown leather band and simple jewelless face a nod to Connie's sense of modesty, though he'd never admit it. When he wouldn't even look at me, I figured he was already stewing in guilt. Connie peeked back in the door.

"What about Isaac?" I asked.

"Bull told me he was running a fever last night," she said. "So I'ma let him sleep."

Again I looked to Abe, but he was now messing with the crown on his watch, pretending to fix something.

“My dad out there?” I nodded toward the family room, hoping he wouldn’t just let this slide.

“Baby, you’re testing my patience now,” my aunt said. “He had to run home to change. Church starts in thirty minutes and from where I’m standing all your fingers and all your toes are still attached to your body, so whatever you gotta say to him can wait thirty minutes.” Connie looked back into the kitchen. “Israel!” she snapped. “Those juice boxes are for the food drive.”

“Auntie,” I said. She turned. “Bull and—” I started, but Abe was now staring straight at me, nostrils flaring a little from his heavy breaths. Isaac rolled over toward us, on his stomach now, his eyelids twitching in a dream.

“What about your uncle?” Connie asked.

“He’s staying, too?” I asked, unable to say what I meant.

“You know your uncle don’t go to church. Hurry up and get your butt dressed,” she said, and she was gone.

Abe put a hand on my shoulder. “Don’t stress,” he said. “Everybody gets the belt now and again.”

“Why didn’t you say something?” I asked.

Abe cocked his head to the side like I was bugging. “If I ratted to Momma, Bull’d whup Isaac twice as bad,” he said. “Your shoes by the door?” I nodded. “Let’s go then. If we’re late to church, Bull’ll pass the belt right to Momma for Iz and me when we get home.”

•

*What took you so long after the family left that morning? You watched them go from Momma’s bedroom window. You went down into the garage, took a beer from the small fridge there, ’cause Momma wouldn’t let you keep liquor in the house. Even then I prayed for you. You finished the beer and opened*

*another. The irony of numbing ourselves to move through their system is that they want us numb, Bull. We're of no use to them conscious. Halfway through the second beer, you took the long coils of extension cord from the workbench. You opened the plastic tub full of rigging rope and grabbed one off the top. You were moving fast by then. You finished the second beer. You left it alone at two, 'cause the idea of liquid courage always seemed bitch-made to you—you ain't need it. Outside, you laid those coils in the back of your truck on top of the trash bags from the night before. That was the most methodical I'd ever seen you—so overworked and overtired that you could've laid yourself down in that truck bed and slept till Monday.*

*Of course the neighbors would attest to something different, said you were "hyper." A woman who worked at the Catholic school across the street used the word "menacing" in her statement.*

*Even when you snatched me out my bed and bound my hands—I prayed for you. Of course I fought back, too, but I prayed, 'cause you were thirty years my senior and forty pounds heavier and so, so very sick. And I knew then you'd probably die in that desert. Too many of us die lost out there.*

•

The car ride back to Connie's after service was tomb-silent. My pops sat shotgun and wrapped his hand around his sister's on the center armrest. My cousins and I couldn't look at one another.

As we turned onto their street, red, blue, and white lights flashed everywhere—pulsing on the faces of the neighbors who had gathered in the dark-gray day. Bystanders were giving their statements to a cop as the lights kept flashing, soundless, reflecting off the black granite school sign on the other side of the road. Even after the neighbors and strangers had given their testimonies and filled up on our grief, the extension cord still lay, bright orange, among the weeds and overgrown grass, snaking all the way from the tree where Isaac had been tied up to Bull's truck, heaped with trash.

Bull was in the back of a cruiser, but the door was open. Nobody was running from this. Isaac leaned on his momma to keep from stumbling as they walked toward the house. Connie sat on the cracked steps and cradled

his head in her large arms. Pops came out the house and handed his sister some ice wrapped in a washcloth. She pressed it gently all over Isaac's busted-up face. Then she hummed. The edges of her voice spread out to us where we stood—Abraham, Israel, and I, gazing into the solid block of dark sky. As the jakes grouped together, talking about whatever jakes talk about, Bull looked back at those boys with ancient names.

The head jake went over to where Connie and Isaac were. "You want us to call paramedics?" he asked. Isaac's right eye was swollen shut and blood seeped from his jaw onto the beige washcloth his momma kept cleaning his face with. She shook her head.

Isaac sat up and stared across the lawn to the street where Bull sat in the back of the cruiser. The red and blue lights made the day like a flag behind him. ♦

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

## **Here Today Dept.**

- [Maya Lin's Ghost Forest in the Shadow of Shake Shack](#)

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

# Maya Lin's Ghost Forest in the Shadow of Shake Shack

The artist transported a stand of fifty-foot dead cedars up from New Jersey's Pine Barrens and across the Hudson, to show New Yorkers what climate change can do.

By [Zach Helfand](#)

May 10, 2021

For almost a decade, the artist Maya Lin has run an interactive project called “What Is Missing,” which documents ecological loss in New York and other places. Among the missing, for instance, are the lobsters in the harbor that, back in Henry Hudson’s time, were bigger than Citi Bikes. Since the Dutch arrived, it’s been taken for granted that New York is never the same city for long, and this is part of the appeal. But Lin’s project shows that there’s scant record of what’s been lost. We don’t know what we don’t have.



*Maya Lin* Illustration by João Fazenda

The other day, Lin was at Madison Square Park, working on a cousin of “What Is Missing,” an art exhibition called “Ghost Forest,” which opens this week. A ghost forest is an entire stand of trees that has been killed by climate change. Lin was arranging a grove of forty-nine Atlantic white cedars—dead as telephone poles, from a ghost forest in the Pine Barrens of New Jersey—into formation on the lawn. “How can I make you aware of things that are literally disappearing right before our eyes?” she said. She wore a puffy green jacket, a black mask, and rubber boots. “Atlantic cedars used to be up and down the Atlantic seacoast. They were first cut down for building our cities.”

Lin had four trees left to install. She indicated where the next tree should go, and a construction crew, led by Tom Reidy, of the Madison Square Park Conservancy, dug a hole. They tied ropes around one of the trunks and attached the ropes to a crane. “Flying tree!” someone said.

“This is pretty cool,” Lin said, as the tree swung into position.

The crane beeped loudly. Over the noise, Lin said that the exhibition would also have a soundscape, made up of twenty audio recordings, from Cornell University, of woodland scenes and animals, including a bear, a wolf, and a cougar. “These are all animals that used to roam Manhattan,” she explained. The effect would be gently haunting, a reminder of what was once here and now is not. Through “What Is Missing,” Lin has picked up other nuggets from the city’s past lives. Madison Square Park, she said, used to be a dense woodland of maple and sweet-gum trees. “There was Minetta Stream down there,” she said. “There was another creek here.” There were snapping turtles, sharp-shinned hawks, bald eagles, and red-backed salamanders. How many people on line at Shake Shack had any idea? “With every successive generation, we accept what we know,” Lin said. “In the eighteen-nineties, a cod was bigger than a man. They were probably bigger than Tom! And now we think a cod is *this* big.” She held her hands a foot apart.

Tom was occupied at the moment, making sure that the tree, fifty feet tall—roughly nine Tom-size cod—wasn’t cockeyed. For a plumb line, he used the windows on the Flatiron Building. Lin walked over. “Hey, Tom, sorry. It looks a little crooked from the back,” she said.

Lin explained that she had an over-all arrangement in mind, but that she worked mostly by intuition. She'd handpicked all the trees, looking for scars and burrs—cedars that had seen some stuff. "I want you to connect on a very visceral, one-on-one level with each tree," she said. Early in the spring, she said, the cedars looked normal. "I mean, if you know anything about trees, you know these are seriously dead. But as the other trees leaf in from spring, summer, fall, and then back to winter, as nature is all around you and growing and living, these will get grayer and grayer and grayer." The trees did feel sort of ghostly, like letters addressed to a previous tenant. Perhaps it was the times. In the pandemic era, who hasn't experienced loss? In January, Lin's husband, the photography collector and dealer Daniel Wolf, died suddenly, of a heart attack. What was missing in the blocks around Madison Square Park? Three stately crab-apple trees that had recently aged out of existence, a couple of restaurants, and eighty-one victims of *Covid-19*.

On the lawn, a few people gathered to watch the flying trees. Reviews were positive, but dissenters spoke up. "It's reminiscent of an exhibit they had a few years ago which really got my dander up," a man named Farley said. "It had the sound of birds coming out of speakers. It was really annoying. Drove the birds crazy!" Farley said he lived near the park, at Eighteenth and Third. "The building where Alger Hiss used to live," he went on. "Between you and me, he was a boring guy. He moved out because it only had one elevator." Farley watched until the dead tree was wrestled into position, and then he continued his walk across the park, past the cedars, toward where the crab apples used to be. ♦

# **London Postcard**

- [Andrew Lloyd Webber's Architectural Passion Project](#)

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

# Andrew Lloyd Webber's Architectural Passion Project

After a meticulous face-lift, London's three-hundred-and-fifty-eight-year-old Theatre Royal Drury Lane will finally be able to present "Frozen."

By [Anna Russell](#)

May 10, 2021

One rainy night in locked-down London, the composer Andrew Lloyd Webber put on a hard hat and a yellow safety vest and slipped inside the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, via a side entrance. He was accompanied by his friend Simon Thurley, an architectural historian and the former head of English Heritage, which oversees historic buildings and monuments, including Stonehenge and Hadrian's Wall. The pair had their foreheads scanned and stepped backstage, where they peered up at a towering steel rig. "You could swing several double-decker buses from there," Thurley said.



*Andrew Lloyd Webber* Illustration by João Fazenda

The Theatre Royal Drury Lane is the oldest continuously running theatrical site in London. When it opened, in 1663, London had no buses, double-decker or otherwise. It had a lot of fields. People arrived at the theatre mostly by foot, and sat under a cupola that leaked when it rained. When the first theatre burned down, a bigger one, Lane No. 2, was built. When that one was demolished, No. 3 went up; it also burned. (“Theatres are not good things to own, basically,” Thurley said.) The fourth Lane, the one that still stands, was designed by the architect Benjamin Wyatt. It opened in 1812, with a production of “Hamlet” and a now forgotten musical farce, “The Devil to Pay.” “The stage is in exactly the same place as it was in the early seventeenth century,” Thurley said.

In 2000, Lloyd Webber purchased the building, which he calls “objectively marvellous.” For the past two years, with Thurley’s help, he has been restoring it to its Georgian grandeur, a sixty-million-pound undertaking. There’d been some wear and tear since 1812. “The architecture had been greatly compromised,” Lloyd Webber said. The original auditorium was replaced in the nineteen-twenties, by one that “has always been very cold.” Among other changes, Lloyd Webber and Thurley have removed some two hundred and fifty seats, and brought the stage, circle, and stalls forward. “What we’ve done is to try to bring it back, as close as we can, to what we feel does justice to the building,” Lloyd Webber said.

When the pandemic broke out, the opening of the new Lane’s first production, “Frozen,” was delayed. All of Lloyd Webber’s shows in London and New York closed. (“The Phantom of the Opera” soldiered on in South Korea.) He ran into a talented viola player stocking shelves in a supermarket. (“It’s appalling.”) He threw himself into other projects—a cast album for his new musical, “Cinderella,” was recorded entirely during lockdown—including the Lane’s renovation. On the day of the visit with Thurley, he stood in the auditorium, where the orchestra seats will eventually go. “It’s been literally shrunk,” he said. The sounds of sawing and hammering, and workers whistling, could be heard; an ornate curtain on the stage read “For Thine Especial Safety.”

As a child, Lloyd Webber saw “The Tempest” at the Lane, and was awed by the space. Architecture has since become a passion. “It started with a love, when I was a little boy, of really old buildings,” he said, “ruined buildings,

like castles and abbeys, and it developed into a love of churches.” Music came along at the same time, “in parallel,” and the Lane unites his interests, “like two worlds colliding.” He and Thurley often visit buildings, he said, that “other people might find a little extreme.” High Victorian. Heavy stuff. “But if you’ve got something like the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, if you’ve got a building like *that*,” he said, eyes widening, “one’s got the chance to slightly put something back into the buildings.”

The pair passed through a makeshift hallway and entered a rotunda. The walls had been repainted lavender, the hue sourced from a historic house, a departure from the original green. “The green was *very* unwelcoming,” Thurley said. He pointed out entrances marked “King’s Side” and “Prince’s Side,” which were designed to separate King George III and his son George IV, who hated each other. Nearby, a grisaille painting showed the composer Richard Rodgers at a piano, rehearsing “South Pacific,” which had eight hundred and two performances at the Lane. “I’ve put myself into the painting, listening to him,” Lloyd Webber said.

Next, they entered the Grand Saloon, a graceful Greek Revival room full of masked workers and scaffolding. The chandeliers were covered in plastic. “There isn’t a suite of rooms anywhere in Britain to touch this, of this date,” Lloyd Webber said proudly. Before the work, Thurley said, the carpet had looked “a bit sticky,” like in “a seaside hotel fallen on hard times.”

“I remember when you went to London theatres, and you found the theatre manager on the floor coloring in the holes in the carpet,” Lloyd Webber said, his eyes shining.

Thurley looked around. “I think it will knock people’s socks off.” ♦

An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of Simon Thurley, and misidentified the composer of the musical "Frozen."

# Movies

- [Summer Movies Preview](#)

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

## Summer Movies Preview

A musical starring Adam Driver and Marion Cotillard, a Twitter-based road movie, a medieval fantasy, and more.

By [Richard Brody](#)

May 7, 2021



Illustration by Lucy Jones; Source photographs courtesy Amazon Studios (people); Gordon Coster / Getty (flowers)

Along with movie theatres, film festivals are returning this summer—including the most prestigious of all, Cannes, in July. Its opening-night film, Leos Carax's "**Annette**," starring Adam Driver and Marion Cotillard, is scheduled for a late-summer release in theatres and on Amazon. All of Carax's films have a major musical element—such as Denis Lavant's mad, ecstatic dash in "Bad Blood" to David Bowie's "Modern Love"—but "*Annette*" is his first full-on musical, and it's one of a radical sort: even the dialogue is sung, to music by the duo Sparks, in a tale of a standup comic (Driver) and an opera singer (Cotillard) whose lives are changed by the birth of their daughter, a child prodigy.

A real-life Twitter thread by Aziah Wells King provides the premise of “**Zola**” (June 30), which the director, Janicza Bravo, wrote with Jeremy O. Harris; it’s the story of a waitress in Detroit (Taylour Paige) whose wild road trip to Florida with a sex worker (Riley Keough) turns violent. Colman Domingo and Nicholas Braun co-star. The versatile director David Lowery, whose work includes “A Ghost Story” and “The Old Man & the Gun,” adapts an Arthurian legend in the medieval drama “**The Green Knight**” (July 30), about Sir Gawain (Dev Patel) and his confrontation with a mysterious giant; the cast includes Alicia Vikander, Sarita Choudhury, and Joel Edgerton. “**Candyman**” (Aug. 27), the fourth entry in the slasher-film cycle, is set in a now gentrified part of Chicago, where an artist (Yahya Abdul-Mateen II) paints the eponymous serial killer and becomes his target. The film’s director, Nia DaCosta, wrote the script with Jordan Peele and Win Rosenfeld. ♦

## **On Television**

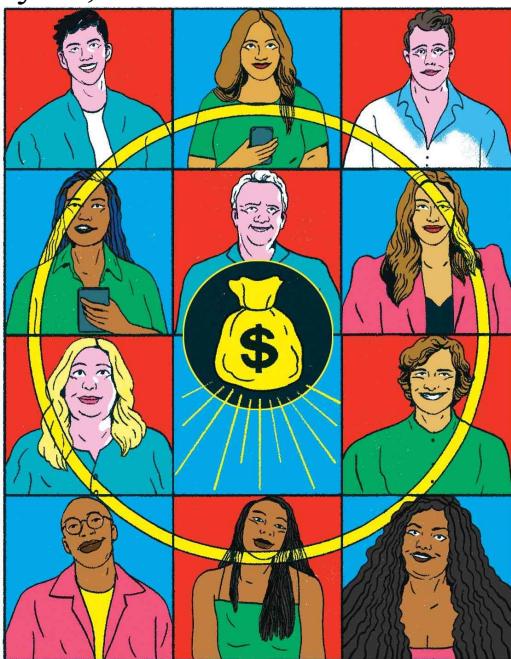
- [Netflix's Flat “The Circle”](#)

# Netflix's Flat "The Circle"

On Season 2 of the reality show, a middle-aged author posing as a young waiter, a volleyballer playing herself, and a personal assistant pretending to be 'NSync's Lance Bass all sound the same.

By [Naomi Fry](#)

May 10, 2021



Last January, when the reality-competition series "The Circle" premiered, on Netflix, I watched a couple of episodes before deciding to drop it. The show's premise felt thin and watery: in an apartment building in Salford, in Greater Manchester, U.K., a group of Americans engaged in the kind of rites familiar to viewers of "Survivor," "Big Brother," and other "Lord of the Flies"-style reality mainstays. Competing for a hundred-thousand-dollar prize, the contestants flirted and fought, forged and broke alliances, and played games meant to sow conflict and suspicion. They ranked one another based on the metric of "popularity," with the top contestants getting the power to "block," or eliminate, other players. The one twist of the show was that all communication among the players—who were housed separately, in their own apartment units—took place through a social-media app called the Circle. The app, which resembled Facebook, allowed contestants to set

profile pictures and post short bios, and to send direct messages and participate in group chats. This format allowed the competitors to catfish one another, with many of them attempting to win the game by posing as someone other than themselves. In the end, however, the prize went not to a catfisher but to a contestant named Joey—a good-natured, well-groomed, and well-muscled Rochester native who could do a surprisingly decent Robert De Niro impression. Though Joey chose to play the game as himself, his “Jersey Shore” mannerisms meant that he was also a retread of a well-known type.

As the coronavirus swept across the United States last spring, and I suddenly found myself at home, flopping from bed to sofa and flipping from screen to screen, I occasionally wondered if, much like how “The Simpsons” had foretold the Trump Presidency, “The Circle” had managed to predict the isolation brought on by the pandemic. The series had initially seemed like a relatively anodyne critique of social media, but it now struck me as a menacing depiction of quarantine, the type of television that serves not as an escape but as a refracted mirror of the human experience. I decided to give the show another try, and, as I watched, it came to remind me, in its existential airlessness, of Sartre’s “No Exit,” with hints of Pasolini’s “Salò” (though, granted, with less overt acts of torture). I texted a friend, “Watching ‘The Circle’ feels like being on a plane with two masks on for twelve straight hours.”

This past April, the second season of the show began airing. It follows the rules laid out in the first: each contestant is, for the most part, stuck in an apartment, a padded cell with one too many throw pillows. The communication is still virtual, and the majority of it occurs over voice-dictated text, which means that much of the action consists of the players pacing in front of a screen while screaming inanities at it. “How is everyone feeling, dot, dot, dot. Is this *crazy* or what?” a substitute teacher named Terilisha, playing as herself, says aloud. Savannah, a saucy data researcher who is also playing as herself, dictates, “Crying emoji, heart emoji, crying emoji, heart emoji, crying emoji, heart emoji.” There are no “confessionals,” in which contestants narrate their experiences—a device, used on many other reality shows, that tends to break up the monotony. Instead, the players talk out their thought processes beat by beat, in real time. Savannah boasts that “making friends and building alliances are of the utmost importance to

me, but I have no problem putting a bitch in check.” Jack, an astrophysics and economics major (and the spitting image of Cousin Greg on HBO’s “*Succession*”), vows to play a tactical game, posing as a sorority hottie named Emily. “I’m the ultimate wolf in sheep’s clothing,” Jack says. “When it comes to strategy, there’s no fucks given.” Chloe, a high-spirited, self-consciously ditzy player from Essex—the only non-American of the bunch—claims that, in playing herself, she’ll “get ‘em all to bloody love me, so they can rank me high, and then I’ll kick ‘em all out.”

Viewers might remember Chloe from another pandemic-era Netflix reality show, “*Too Hot to Handle*,” in which a group of svelte and horny players, locked down in a villa in Mexico, earned a cash prize if they abstained from sexual activity. With “*Too Hot to Handle*,” “*The Circle*,” and “*Love Is Blind*,” a dating show that also débuted in the U.S. during the early days of *COVID*, in which contestants initially engaged with one another through a wall, Netflix has become the source of reality entertainment whose dramatic tension depends not just on constant surveillance—a common reality-TV trope—but also on the hindrance of free and easy communication among its participants.

There is a flat, low-budget, assembly-line quality to these shows. This is especially true of “*The Circle*”: the red brick building in which it is shot is meant, per its architects’ Web site, to “mimic the mills of the cotton and silk weaving historically Salford was known for.” It has come to function as a factory for banging out the version of the show that is available on American Netflix, and also its various international editions. The characters are even flatter; the high-concept ploy of keeping them in a single location while separated, in some way, from one another was clearly employed in order to exert differentiating pressures on their personalities. Instead, what takes place is a smoothing out.

The messages dictated by “*The Circle*”’s contestants, whether they are attempting to catfish or not, are frighteningly non-distinct. The words of Lee, a Texan author in his late fifties who poses as a twenty-four-year-old waiter named River, are not meaningfully different from those of Khat, a six-feet-seven professional volleyballer playing as herself, or from those of Lisa, a fortyish personal assistant pretending to be her own boss, the onetime ’NSync singer Lance Bass. The players speak in an only slightly more

personal version of what the critic Molly Young, in a Vulture article on contemporary corporate-speak, described as meaningless, self-important “garbage language.” At one moment or another, the contestants say that they rep the “#CircleFam”; that they “build strong bonds”; that they “have each other’s back,” are “on the same page,” and are “seeing eye to eye”; that they love one another’s “energy.” When off the chat, they are usually plotting alone, planning the formation of alliances that are interchangeable but for their shifting members. The tactics are similar because so is the goal. As Courtney notes at one point, “I do want to be Khat’s friend after this—I just couldn’t be Khat’s friend in this because she was gonna cost me one hundred thousand dollars.” In “The Circle,” hell isn’t other people; it’s the prison of one’s own self.

You could argue that reality television, especially the kind that quarantines its cast throughout filming, isn’t the right place to go for true emotion or individuality—two elements that tend to lead to engrossing social dynamics. And yet a variety of stuck-in-one-house reality shows have supplied exactly that, from the many iterations of the beloved MTV series “The Real World” to the most recent season of Bravo’s “Summer House,” which, owing to *COVID* restrictions, followed a cadre of young professionals on lockdown in a Hamptons mansion and still managed to squeeze dramatic opportunities out of the situation.

Why hasn’t the same formula worked for Netflix? It could be poor casting, or these shows’ reliance on monologue instead of action, or it could have something to do with the streaming platform’s rapid-fire release structure, which makes a show’s elements blur together, even when a season is dropped in multi-episode batches instead of in its entirety. It could also be the times. As I sat at home, viewing the second season of “The Circle,” which finished airing a few days after the *COVID*-positivity rate in New York hit a six-month low, I found myself thinking, Why am I watching TV right now? I should go outside. ♦

# **Personal History**

- Pearls

# Pearls

After thirty years together, sleeping is the new having sex.

By [David Sedaris](#)

May 10, 2021



It's July in West Sussex, and I'm at a garden party, talking with a lawyer who has two sons in their early twenties. The oldest is living in Scotland, and the other, a sullen college student, is home for the month, tearing everyone's head off. "So, do you have children?" she asks.

"Oh, no," I tell her. "Not yet anyway. But I *am* in a relationship."

She says that she is glad to hear it.

"My boyfriend will turn twenty-one this coming Wednesday," I continue, "and you are so right about the moodiness of young men his age. I mean, honestly, what do they have to be so angry about?"

I do this all the time—tell people misleading things about Hugh. It's fun watching them shift gears as they reevaluate who they think I am.

Sometimes I say that he's been blind since birth or is a big shot in the right-to-life movement, but the best is when he's forty-plus years my junior.

"Well . . . good for you," people say, while thinking, I'm pretty sure, *That poor boy!* Because it's creepy, that sort of age difference—vampiric.

"There's a formula for dating someone younger than you," my friend Aaron in Seattle once told me. "The cutoff," he explained, "is your age divided by two plus seven." At the time, I was fifty-nine, meaning that the youngest I could go, new-boyfriend-wise, was thirty-six and a half. That's not a jaw-dropping difference, but, although it might seem tempting, there'd be a lot that someone under forty probably wouldn't know, like who George Raft was, or what hippies smelled like. And, little by little, wouldn't those gaps add up, and leave you feeling even older than you actually are?

It's true that Hugh is younger than me, but only by three years. Still, I thought he'd never reach sixty. Being there by myself—officially old, the young part of old, but old, nevertheless—was no fun at all. C'mon, I kept thinking. Hurry it along. His birthday is in late January, which makes him an Aquarian. This means nothing to me, though my sister is trying her damnedest to change that. Amy's astrologer predicted that Biden would win the 2020 Presidential election, and when he did she offered it as proof that Rakesh has extraordinary powers and thus deserves not just my respect but my business.

"You have to make an appointment and at least *talk* to him," she said.

"No, I don't," I told her. "I mean, my dry cleaner predicted the same thing. Lots of people did."

I'm a Capricorn, and according to the astrologer Lisa Stardust my least compatible signs for dating are Aries and Leo. My best bets are Cancers, Scorpions, and Pisceans.

I haven't looked at what astrological signs Hugh should avoid going out with, mainly because it's irrelevant. Not long after he turned sixty-one, we celebrated our thirtieth anniversary. Will we make it to thirty-five years? To fifty? Either way, do I really need to hear about it from Rakesh?

My mother became interested in astrology in the nineteen-eighties. She wasn't a kook about it; she simply started reading the horoscopes in the Raleigh *News & Observer*. "Things are going to improve for you financially on the seventeenth," she'd say over the phone, early in the morning if the prediction was sunny and she thought it might brighten my day. "A good deal of money is coming your way, but with a slight hitch."

"Oh, no!" I'd say. "Are you dying?" I thought it was hooey, but in the back of my mind a little light would always go on. I guess what I felt was hope—my life would change, and for the better! The seventeenth would come and go, and, although I'd be disappointed, I would also feel vindicated: "I told you I wouldn't find happiness."

She never had her chart done, my mother, but she did branch out and start reading the horoscopes in *Redbook*, and in *Ladies' Home Journal*, a magazine that had come to our home for as long as I could remember. The only column in it that interested me, the only one I regularly read, was called "Can This Marriage Be Saved?"

You could have taken everything I knew about long-term relationships back then and fitted it into an acorn cap. I thought that, in order to last, you and your wife or boyfriend or whatever had to have a number of mutual interests. They didn't need to be profound. Camping would qualify, or découpageing old milk cans. The surprise is that sometimes all it takes is a mutual aversion to overhead lights, or to turning the TV on before 11 P.M. You like to be on time and keep things tidy, the other person's the same, and the next thing you know thirty years have passed and people are begging you to share your great wisdom. "First off," I say, "never, under any circumstances, look under the hood of your relationship. It can only lead to trouble." Counselling, I counsel, is the first step to divorce.

I've thought of that *Ladies' Home Journal* column a lot lately, wondering if marital problems in the seventies and eighties weren't all fairly basic: She's an alcoholic. He's been sleeping with his sister-in-law. She's a spendthrift and a racist, he's a control freak, etc.

No couple argued over which gender their child should be allowed to identify as; no one's husband or wife got sucked into QAnon or joined a

paramilitary group. Sure, there were conspiracy theories, but in those pre-Internet days it was harder to submerge yourself in them. A spouse might have been addicted to Valium, but not to video games, or online gambling. I don't know that one can technically be addicted to pornography, but that's bound to put a strain on marriages, especially now, when it's at your fingertips, practically daring you *not* to look at it.

I've watched a number of movies and TV shows lately in which the characters' marriages dissolve for no real reason. I said to Hugh during "Ted Lasso," "Did I miss the episode where he or his wife had an affair?" The same was true of Noah Baumbach's "Marriage Story": "*Why* are they getting a divorce?"

Don't people who feel vaguely unfulfilled in their relationships just have too much time on their hands? Decide that you need to discover your true, independent self and the next thing you know you'll be practicing Reiki or visiting an iridologist. That, I've learned, is someone who looks deep into your eyes and can see your internal organs. My sister Amy went to one, who told her that she had something stuck in her colon.

She took the diagnosis to her acupuncturist, who said that, actually, what the iridologist had seen in my sister's eyes was trauma.

Amy said, "Trauma?"

He said, "Remember you told me you saw a mouse *and* a water bug in your kitchen one day last month?"

She said, "Yes."

He said, "That's trauma."

My sister is not dating anyone—a good thing, as she's got way too much time on her hands. And that, I think, is the No. 1 reason so many relationships fail. Too much free time, and too much time together. I'm normally away from Hugh between four and six months a year, and when the pandemic cancelled the tours I had scheduled I panicked. We were in New York at the time, so I sought out his old friend Carol. "What's he really

like?" I asked her. "I think I sort of knew once, but that was twenty-five years ago."

Trapped together for months on end, I learned that Hugh, a painter, reads a lot. Like, every word of the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *The New York Review of Books*. Oddly, though, he doesn't seem to retain much. Whenever guests came to dinner, and the talk turned to politics, Hugh, who might have delivered an informed opinion on, for example, Trump's proposed withdrawal from the W.H.O., would say, "I think we should line them all up and shoot them."

"Shoot who?" I'd ask, though I knew the answer.

"All the jerks who think we should withdraw."

That's his family's most damning epithet: jerk. "Yes, well, that's not going to happen," I'd tell him. "It's not a real solution to the problem."

"Then I don't want to talk about it."

When not reading or cooking, Hugh goes to his studio and stares out the window, high on paint fumes, I'm guessing. I've never known anyone who can stand still for as long as he does, moving nothing but his eyes, which shift back and forth like a cat's on one of those plastic wall clocks where the swinging tail is the pendulum. He doesn't listen to music while he's in there, or to the radio. Once, I put on a recording of Eudora Welty reading a number of her short stories, and, though he claimed to enjoy it, after "Petrified Man" he said he didn't want to hear any more. He likes to be alone with his thoughts, but me, I can't think of anything worse.

When not reading or cooking or staring out his window at nothing, Hugh practices piano. He started taking lessons on a rented upright when he was ten, and living in Ethiopia, but his father couldn't bear to hear him practice. He wasn't particularly inept, but noise, any noise, bothered his dad, a novelist with a day job as a diplomat. Then the family moved to Somalia, where pianos were hard to come by, not to mention piano teachers, and his father wrote another book.

After a fifty-year break, Hugh started taking lessons again, this time on a baby grand a friend gave him, and, though he's really committed, it always sounds to me like he just started last week. "I can't play when you're in the room," he told me. "I feel judged."

Then he decided that he couldn't play when I was in the apartment.

And so we bought the apartment upstairs from us.

"So that you'll have somewhere to go when he *practices piano*?" asked Amy, who bought the apartment upstairs from her just so she could get away from her rabbit.

"Exactly," I told her.

"Makes sense," she said.

I'm up there all the time now. We have no interior staircase connecting the two places, so Hugh e-mails me when he's got news. "Lunch is ready." "The super is here to fix your closet door." That type of thing. We took ownership just as New York went into lockdown, and furniture deliveries were banned in our building. Luckily, the previous owner agreed to leave a sofa and a bed. I found a few chairs on the street, a folding table, a bucket I could overturn and use as a footstool. For months, it looked like a twelve-year-old's clubhouse. Not that we didn't both spend time there. Hugh can do everything upstairs that he does downstairs except practice piano. We call the second apartment Luigi's. "Will we be having dinner on the nineteenth floor or up at Luigi's?"

Luigi's, we decided, is for casual dining.

Eventually we moved our bedroom to the second apartment. After thirty years together, sleeping is the new having sex. "That was amazing, wasn't it!" one or the other of us will say upon waking in the morning.

"I held you in the night."

"No, I held *you!*"

“You kids think you invented sleep,” I can imagine my mother saying.

*But didn’t we?* Hugh and I try new positions. (“You got drool on my calf!”) We engage in quickies (naps). Three times a week I change the sheets so that our bed will feel like one in a nice hotel. Pulling back the comforter, we look like a couple in a detergent commercial. “Smell the freshness!”

For a thirtieth anniversary, you’re supposed to offer pearls, but instead, for roughly the same price, I went to the Porthault shop on Park Avenue and got Hugh a set of sheets. The “Fabric Care” section on the company’s Web site reads, in part, “Do not overload the dryer, as your linens need room to dance.”

How did we become these people? I wonder.

Hugh says that if we ever get separate bedrooms that’s it—he’s finished. I know this works for a lot of couples, they’re happy being down the hall from each other, but I couldn’t bear such an arrangement. “This is what I’ll miss after you’re dead,” I tell him as I turn out the light, meaning, I guess, the sensation of being dead together.

Hugh might be a mystery to me, but it’s a one-way street. “I’m sorry,” I’ll often say to him.

“That’s all right.”

“What was I apologizing for?” I’ll ask.

“Telling the doorman that my mother looks like Hal Holbrook,” he’ll say, or “Wishing I would get *COVID* just so you could write about it.”

He nails it every time! I didn’t need to tell him that after we’re all vaccinated and theatres reopen he will never see me again. “I’ve asked my agent to book me solid—I’ll do three hundred and sixty-five shows in a row, take a night off, and then start all over again,” I said. “I want to make up for lost time, and then some.”

He accuses me of being money-hungry, and I wish it were that simple. Honestly, it’s the attention I’m after.

“What about me?” he asks. “Doesn’t *my* attention matter?”

I say that he doesn’t count, though of course he’s one of a handful of people in my life—along with my sisters, my cousins, and a couple of old friends—who actually *do* count. I just don’t necessarily need him by my side every moment that I’m awake. Sometimes it’s enough to press my ear against the living-room floor of the upstairs apartment, and faintly hear him practicing piano down below, frowning at the keys, I suspect, and at the music before him, a boy again. So determined to get it right. ♦

# Poems

- “[First Date During Social Distance](#)”
- “[Skeletons](#)”

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

# First Date During Social Distance

By [Tiana Clark](#)

May 10, 2021

*Audio: A version read by the author.*

Everything wanted to be touched:  
My bottom lip, the freshly busted

cherry blossoms, creamy drippings  
like soft fluttering pearls that edged

the lack (I meant to write lake  
but kept the mistake) as I rimmed

the risky desires. And you, you  
were all new, suffused with musk

and sadness, height and a milk-  
chocolate sweater that curled

at the collar rim, filling out  
your shoulders like a ripe demigod.

I forgot about the virus  
ravishing the world in its wake.

I forgot about my ache  
as the sky dimmed from spring

and wet-paint blue to sherbet  
shades of pink fruit juice.

I missed it when the bright  
sloppy sun dipped down behind

us and the park slipped right  
into that new-new dark as the city

lights lit up like the spangled tips  
of hot cigarettes, cooing.

I forgot about the six feet collapsing  
between us like prismatic bubbles

breaking between us, between us  
the difficult gift (and guilt) of loneliness.

What did it mean to be touched?  
It felt like I had never been.

Oops! I hadn't been kissed like that.  
That deep and deliberate.

When is the last time someone  
wanted to suck and slurp

you up through a straw  
from some glad underworld

or some strange netherworld  
or any other world

where thousands weren't dying  
alone with flooded lungs?

I didn't care who saw us.  
I didn't care that I might get sick.

I didn't care—I was such  
a reckless, selfish bitch. I know.

You almost walked into the lake,  
but I was already drenched,

happy and squealing like a feral pig  
inside. *Do you like touching me?*

I kept asking. *You know I do.*  
*Do you like kissing me?*

I kept asking. *You know I do.*  
*You know I do—stop asking.*

Everything wanted to be touched  
and I wanted to scratch it all: Him.

My face. My face most of all.  
He tenderly bit and tugged  
at my bottom lip, and I became  
a buoy, bobbing above the hazards.

I slid my index finger in the crack  
at the corner of his smile

like a little hook as we licked  
and puzzled the need and heat.

Remember the cherry blossoms?  
(They're gone now.) So quick

in their delicate beauty  
and brief bloom. I remember

I brought a thermometer  
in my purse and stuck it  
in his mouth like a wet wish—

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

# Skeletons

By [Deborah Landau](#)

May 10, 2021

*Audio: Read by the author.*

So whatever's the opposite of a Buddhist that's what I am.  
Kindhearted, yes, but knee deep in existential gloom,  
except when the fog smokes the bridges like this—  
like, instead of being afraid we might juice ourselves up,  
eh, like, might get kissed again? Dwelling in bones I go straight  
through life, a sublime abundance—cherries, dog's breath, the sun, then  
(ouch) & all of us snuffed out. Dear one, what is waiting for us tonight,  
nostalgia? the homes of childhood? oblivion? How we hate to go—

\*

Sundays I spend feeling sorry for myself I've got a  
knack for it I'm morbid, make the worst of any season  
exclamation point      yet levity's a liquor of sorts,  
lowers us through life toward the terminus soon  
extinguished      darling, the comfort is slight,  
tucked in bed we search each other for some alternative—  
oh let's marvel at the world, the stroke and colors of it

now, while breathing.

# **Pop Music**

- [The Clear-Eyed Songs of Girl in Red](#)

# The Clear-Eyed Songs of Girl in Red

On her new album, “if i could make it go quiet,” the artist has transformed her intimate indie rock into something more electrified and ambitious.

By [Carrie Battan](#)

May 10, 2021



Nine years ago, Marie Ulven, a teen-ager from suburban Norway, was, like most of her peers, broadcasting her interests on social media. Ulven’s hobby of choice was fingerboarding, a miniaturized version of skateboarding in which people perform tricks on tiny boards using just their hands. Ulven eventually amassed a modest following on Instagram. In real life, she participated in formal, refereed “battles,” where she would square off against fellow-fingerboarders. (In one battle, which still lives on YouTube, an antsy, fresh-faced Ulven competes against a male boarder and is met with raucous cheers and fist bumps from the crowd.) One Christmas, Ulven’s grandfather gave her a more traditional outlet for manual dexterity: a guitar. From her childhood home, in the small town of Horten, Ulven began writing jangly indie-pop songs, which she first sang in Norwegian, and later in English. She uploaded them to the D.I.Y. streaming platform SoundCloud under pseudonyms like Lydia X and lyfsuxx. Ulven also promoted these songs on

her fingerboarding page, hoping that her followers would take an interest in her new passion.

Gradually, they did. In 2018, a popular Norwegian music Web site called NRK Urørt caught wind of Ulven’s music, and featured a song called “i wanna be your girlfriend.” Musically, the song was more understated than the slick, icy pop that usually migrates from Norway to the rest of the world, but it was otherwise not especially unusual. The track, a two-chord guitar tune played in 4/4, with mournful, yearning lyrics, sounded like an indie-rock song that could have been recorded in any number of regions and eras. More significant was the nonchalance with which Ulven sang about romance with another young woman. Addressing a love interest named Hannah, she sang, “I don’t wanna be your friend, I wanna kiss your lips.” Soon, hundreds of thousands of people had listened to the song on SoundCloud, and Ulven began drawing the attention of playlist programmers and record labels interested in her obvious talent and candor.

By then, Ulven had settled on a stage name: she called herself “girl in red,” a description once used to identify a friend she was searching for in a crowd. With a new name and a rush of listeners from around the world, Ulven released more of her diaristic music in spurts over the next couple of years. Her first two EPs, “chapter 1,” from 2018, and “chapter 2,” from 2019, were recorded at home; the songs were lo-fi and woozy, evoking the image of the childhood bedroom as confessional. Full of plainspoken meditations on mental health and on the frustrations of adolescent romance, these early EPs had a gentle simplicity and an emotional sharpness that made them stick. “My girl, my girl, my girl,” she sang on the chorus of a lilting song called “we fell in love in october,” from 2018. Even in an age of acceptance, Ulven’s matter-of-factness about gay female love felt like a revelation, and she was soon labelled a queer icon. She has spent much of the past few years trying to make her perspective seem normal rather than extraordinary.

In interviews, Ulven has described the agonizing boredom she experienced growing up in Horten, a town with a population of about twenty-seven thousand. In 2018, she moved fifty miles away, to Oslo, to study music at an arts college. Her début full-length album, “if i could make it go quiet,” which was recorded in 2019 and 2020 and released last month, is the musical equivalent of going from a small town to a major city. Bolstered by

greater technical prowess and confidence, Ulven has transformed her intimate indie rock into something more electrified and ambitious, and her new music sounds as if it were designed to be performed in arenas rather than in small clubs. Her emotional range has expanded, too, moving beyond the realm of the lovesick. On the new record, she bounces among perspectives, from sexual frankness and lust to defiance or guilt. One consistent theme in Ulven's music is her struggle against her own brain chemistry. "I hate the way my brain is wired / Can't trust my mind, it's such a liar," she sings, on "Rue," a grandiose electro-rock song with a folksy refrain. In fact, "if i could make it go quiet" sounds like the work of someone who is reliably lucid. Ulven assumes responsibility for her actions as readily as she blames others. "Let's just face the fact I treated you like trash," she sings, on "hornylovesickmess," a song about life on tour which captures the particular reflectiveness brought on by being on the road.

Ulven is one of the many burgeoning artists who cite Taylor Swift as an idol. In Ulven's case, Swift's influence is not so much stylistic as it is structural—Swift has provided a blueprint for young artists to take ownership of their craft, and to make songs with solid bones. Ulven has written, recorded, and produced nearly all her own music; she is a solo artist who sounds like a band. But on "Serotonin," the opening track of her new album, she enlisted the much sought-after assistance of Finneas O'Connell, the Grammy-winning record producer known primarily for his work with his younger sister, Billie Eilish. O'Connell enjoys using what might otherwise be classified as auditory detritus—the sound of a dentist's drill, say, or of a staple gun—to create textures and moods. Early versions of "Serotonin" contained a stretch of babbling that served as a placeholder for lyrics. O'Connell suggested to Ulven that, rather than swap in actual lyrics, she should keep the gibberish. The song, like most of the work that O'Connell has done with his sister, is a hyper-modern hit—a sweeping, emotional pop track with jarring textural oddities, which switches between full-throated singing and cadences that sound more like hip-hop.

One measure of an artist's success these days is how readily fans can encode her music with new meaning on TikTok. Musicians and labels try to game this system, seeding songs with prominent TikTokers or producing ready-made memes and dance challenges behind the scenes. But the best cases of TikTok virality still involve some element of serendipity and whimsy. Last

year, Ulven's musical project became an online shorthand for queer identification: in TikTok videos that have collectively generated almost twelve million views, the question “Do you listen to girl in red?” was used as a springboard for all kinds of comic riffing about admitting to the world that you slept with women, or wondering whether someone else did. A female news anchor at an Ohio television station posted a clip, recorded on set, in which she mischievously revealed that the underside of her blond bob was shaved, and that she was wearing chunky tennis shoes under her staid outfit. “When you’re professional but wanna show you listen to girl in red,” she wrote. The video has 1.7 million views on TikTok.

The “Do you listen to girl in red?” meme is the sort of promotional engine that most artists and record labels never achieve. But it also represents a form of sexual-identity codification that has tended to make Ulven uneasy. Last year, she suggested in an interview that she doesn’t like the word “lesbian,” prompting a flood of consternation from fans, who misread bad intentions. “I feel passionate in that everyone should be able to identify themselves and their sexuality with the words they feel most comfortable with,” Ulven later clarified in a lengthy statement on Twitter. She concluded, “I hope we can respect and always take the time to understand each other within the whole context of themselves and their lives.” On “if i could make it go quiet,” Ulven doesn’t bother to identify herself at all, barely using language that would allow listeners to emphasize her relationships with other women. The album seems to further blur Ulven’s designation as a queer icon, instead presenting the whole context of herself and her life. ♦

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [Emily Post's Post-Pandemic Etiquette](#)

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

# Emily Post's Post-Pandemic Etiquette

By [Nicky Guerreiro](#) and [Ethan Simon](#)

May 10, 2021



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

**Introductions:** When a gentleman offers his hand—gloved or ungloved—a lady does not recoil and yell, “What are you, crazy?” This is a handshake, and a lady knows it poses her no threat. If she must sanitize immediately afterward, she will do so discreetly. If her companion wishes to hug hello, a lady must never moan in ecstasy at the long-missed sensation of human touch. That would be very weird.

**Greetings:** When a gentleman asks, “How are you?,” a lady generally replies, “Fine, thank you.” She is not to reply, “Unravelling,” or “Today, I sat on my floor sobbing for twenty minutes, just to feel something.” Conversely, if quarantine has been “a really good time” for her, “just creatively and spiritually,” a lady should can it. No one wants to hear that.

**Conversation:** A post-pandemic gentleman is a sparkling conversationalist. If a year of quarantine has dulled his social skills, he may always return to

can't-fail topics such as the weather, weekend plans, and what he read during the past year—even if all he did was rewatch “The Sopranos” while scrolling through Instagram. A few topics should be avoided: How you think you’ve developed acid reflux. How you’re trying this new diet—it’s simple, you just drink a gallon of onion juice every half hour. Actually, I just noticed the clock—do you have a funnel?

**Business Meetings:** When a gentleman is engaged in conference with his business associates, he must always remember that, unlike on Zoom, there is no mute button for real life. If he must talk to his cat or take a swig of bourbon, his associates will definitely notice.

**Restaurants:** Dining at a restaurant generally involves consuming a “meal.” This is not to be confused with what used to constitute dinner: a few olives, some chickpeas straight from the can, and a piece of old Halloween candy. When your food is served, you will be expected to eat it on the premises, not in front of your TV in leggings while you and your partner argue about which of you is the “Jim” and which is the “Pam.”

**Travel:** When a gentleman travels by aeroplane, he must consider every leg of his journey. When he boards a taxi, an Uber, or a car service bound for the airport, he need no longer throw open the windows on the Van Wyck Expressway and scream over the rush of wind that “if you’d just taken the Belt Parkway we wouldn’t be in this mess!” If the gentleman is reasonably sure that the driver has been vaccinated, he may berate him with the windows closed.

**At the Theatre:** When attending the cinema, the opera, or a theatrical performance, it is always inappropriate for a theatregoer to pull out a phone and start playing TikTok videos at full volume. Nor should a theatregoer loudly announce, “I’ve seen this one. It’s the one where Ross and Rachel can’t get their couch up the stairs.” It’s not that one—it’s the one where Lear is driven mad by grief. There’s no couch.

**Invitations:** When a lady receives an invitation to a co-worker’s parrot’s baby shower, a cousin’s boyfriend’s graduation from dental school, or her upstairs neighbor’s experimental-polka-jazz album-release party, she no longer has a built-in reason to decline. Regardless of the situation, a lady

must come up with a believable excuse, such as an unexpected trip to see an ailing relative or a documented allergy to accordions.

**Parties:** A gentleman always has a party trick up his sleeve. Perhaps he can open a bottle of champagne (never sparkling wine!) with a sabre, or recite one of Tennyson's better odes. Under no circumstances should a gentleman offer to cut his host's bangs, no matter how many times he's done it for his roommate. A true gentleman knows: his roommate looks like a mop.

**Playing Hostess:** Before you arrange to host a soirée, you must remember that your guests will expect to be invited inside. This will require actually cleaning your apartment and, yes, disposing of the three hundred copies of *Us Weekly* you've been hoarding for "a craft project." You will never do this craft project. Be grateful that, in a pandemic funk, you didn't découpage your salad bowl with pictures of Johnny Depp.

**Goodbyes:** An aspiring Miss Manners always makes a graceful exit. She would never trail off in the middle of a sentence, stand up awkwardly, and announce that being around this many people has really depleted her and she would like to go stare at a blank wall now. A simple "goodbye," or "ta-ta," will suffice.

**Dressing for the Day:** When putting on makeup, a lady must now remember to also do the bottom half of her face. Gentlemen: See those long, tubular things in the back of the closet? Those are pants. You'll need those. ♦

## **Slideshow Dept.**

- [Telecommuting to Mars](#)

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

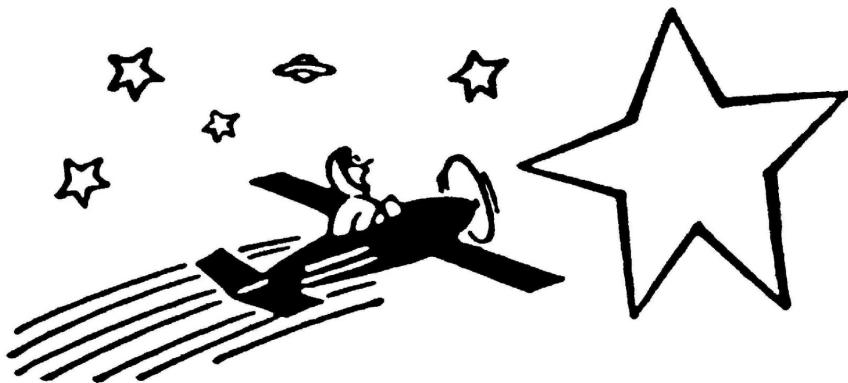
## Telecommuting to Mars

A geologist and an aerospace engineer from NASA, who worked on the Perseverance rover, offer a virtual tour of the planet and discuss the challenges of working on Mars time.

By [Nicholas Schmidle](#)

May 8, 2021

One recent afternoon, Tina Seeger and Diana Trujillo were showing off a few snaps from their latest trip. “I have a soft spot for rover selfies,” Seeger, a twenty-seven-year-old *NASA* geologist, said. She was screen-sharing a shot of the Perseverance rover posing at the Jezero Crater on Mars, taken April 6th. Jezero (rhymes with “hetero”) is just north of the Martian equator. “It’s really special, because it used to have this ancient lake environment with rivers flowing into a delta,” Seeger, who has wavy hair and was seated outside a coffee shop in Bellingham, Washington, said. Deltas are “sexy” for geologists. “They’re murky and gross, with a lot of sediment,” she said. “Maybe there could have been life there!”



She clarified: “We’re not looking for little green men. More like biosignatures, evidence of ancient microbes, and things like that.”

Getting to Mars was a slog. *Are we there yet?* The nearly three-hundred-million-mile journey—about a hundred thousand trips across the United States—took almost seven months. And the landing zone on Jezero was strewn with gnarly rocks. Perseverance entered Mars’s atmosphere travelling more than twelve thousand miles an hour. There was little room for error. It stuck the landing.

“Within *kilometres*,” Trujillo, an aerospace engineer who was video-calling from her home, near Pasadena, said. Thirty-eight, with long dark hair, she came to the United States from Colombia when she was seventeen, with little money or English. After studying at the University of Maryland, she eventually began working on Perseverance’s robotic arm. In February, she hosted NASA’s first live broadcast of a Mars landing—in Spanish. “When we were getting close, you could see the sand moving from the retro-rockets hitting the ground,” Trujillo said. “It was like dancing a tango with Mars.”

“I cried,” Seeger said. “I’m a sucker for those scenes in movies.”

Seeger pulled up a photo that the rover took of a landscape to the northwest. (Perseverance has twenty-three cameras.) “Look at that variety of rocks,” she said. Because Mars does not have tectonic plates, she explained, “they’ve just been sitting there for billions of years!” The foreground looked like a campfire the morning after, with charred briquettes sprinkled across a bed of ochre soot. The background featured a brick-hued mound of delta deposit, more than two hundred feet high. Seeger couldn’t help but admire the framing. “That’s a picture I would take on my vacation,” she said. “Beautifully composed!”

Seeger confessed to a little Photoshopping. Sometimes NASA adjusts the color balance to touch things up, she said, to make Mars look a little less Martian and a little more “intuitive for people on Earth.” The sky in the photo had hints of familiar blue and gray, like ominous snow clouds.

She moved on to talking about the rocks in the shot. “We’re still trying to figure out if they’re sedimentary or igneous,” she said. They were basaltic,

and thus presumably igneous. But, she wondered, were they spewed from a volcanic eruption? Or buried in a lake and only relatively recently unearthed? “If I was in the field, I could pick them up and figure it out,” Seeger said. “*That* would be transcendent.”

She sipped an iced chai through a straw. “It’s funny getting to know a place really intimately that I’m never going to get to go to,” she said. She noticed that her laptop battery was running low. Lightning round:

Did David Bowie’s “Life on Mars?” resonate for them? Trujillo said, “Not my thing.”

Did they have to worry about storms like the one in the opening scene of “The Martian”? “I love ‘The Martian,’ ” Seeger said. “But the atmosphere is just not thick enough to sustain the kind of winds that would impale Matt Damon and strand him on Mars.”

Would you need sunglasses there? Seeger had hers perched on her head. “It’s *real* dusty,” she said.

The odds of going to Burning Man at the Jezero Crater someday? “Water is a pretty big issue,” Seeger said. (There is none.) “And the oxygen thing—you don’t have any air to breathe.”

It sounded pretty bleak. “I wouldn’t want to go on a one-way,” Seeger said. “I really love the Earth.”

Trujillo checked her watch. She said that she hadn’t been sleeping well, juggling family duties, night shifts, and extraterrestrial time-zone challenges. (Earth days are about thirty-seven minutes shorter than Mars days.) “We’re working around the clock,” she said. “I’m on Earth time and Mars time.” ♦

An earlier version of this story misstated Diana Trujillo’s age.

## Tables for Two

- [Caribbean-Inflected Vegan in Flatbush, at Aunts et Uncles](#)

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

# Caribbean-Inflected Vegan in Flatbush, at Aunts et Uncles

Michael and Nicole Nicholas make lighter versions of the foods they grew up with, focussing on meat substitutes, grains, and vegetables, ushering their tight-knit community into a new era.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

May 7, 2021



Michael Nicholas grew up around the corner from the site of Aunts et Uncles, the Flatbush café he opened last year with his wife, Nicole, not far from where they live now. One of the couple's mottoes, Nicole told me the other day, is "make it in"—as opposed to make it out, of the proverbial old neighborhood. In 2006, Michael started a clothing store, Brooklyn Sky, across the street. By the time he closed it, in 2014, he'd married Nicole, a native of Toronto who worked in the food industry, and together they began to envision a local restaurant.



*Michael Nicholas (seated left), who opened the café with his wife, Nicole (seated right), grew up around the corner, not far from where the couple lives now.*

When the couple met, Nicole was a pescatarian, and although Michael was an omnivore, he's allergic to shellfish. "It was getting a little tricky for us to find a common ground," he told me. Moreover, "a lot of our family members fell sick," he said, "and a lot of that was due to diet." Four years ago, they stopped eating animal products and began to devise lighter, healthier versions of the foods they'd grown up with, which leaned Caribbean—Michael's parents are from St. Lucia, Nicole's from Trinidad and St. Vincent. As they experimented with meat substitutes, grains, and vegetables, they posted their meals to Instagram, and so intrigued friends and relatives that, for a brief while, they took orders, operating a casual private-chef service called Fix Me a Plate.



*The Wild Flower Salad, made with purple cauliflower, wild rice, and greens.*

With Aunts et Uncles, they've formalized the concept, building the rare business that fits seamlessly into a tight-knit community even as it helps usher it into a new era. If there's a single menu item that best encapsulates this, it's the Haitian-style patty. Against tradition, its beautifully folded, flaky crust contains no eggs or dairy—almond milk and vegetable shortening replace cow's milk and butter—and its gently spicy filling is made with Beyond Beef. It's produced daily by the family that runs Immaculee, a Haitian bakery two doors down that Michael has been patronizing for much of his life. "It was a challenge for them at first," Michael recalled, "but it actually only took them, like, two or three tries before they nailed it."

I was surprised to find, after a taste-test comparison, that I preferred the vegan patty to the beef equivalent. At dinner one night, the café's theme somehow eluded my omnivorous companion, and when I mentioned that the burger he'd just finished was vegan—Beyond Beef layered with Follow Your Heart smoked Gouda and Sweet Earth bacon, plus caramelized onions, spicy mayo, barbecue sauce, and arugula, on a pretzel bun—he was so shocked that I thought he was pulling my leg. I might have been fooled myself by the breakfast sandwich, featuring Just Egg and Beyond Sausage.



*The café stocks a full bar, plus a selection of books and magazines, and clothing of Michael's design.*

Of course, there are arguments—dietary, environmental, aesthetic—to be made against these sorts of processed products. Anyone concerned with them has plenty else to choose from here. Hearts of palm (sustainably harvested) make for less convincing but still satisfying seafood substitutes: tossed with vegan mayo and fresh dill in a “lobster” roll, or sautéed, à la salt fish, with tomatoes, peppers, and onions and sandwiched in a bake, a traditional Caribbean fried dough. In dishes such as split-pea soup with plantain and dumplings, and All Green Everything—a bowl of crisply sautéed baby okra, asparagus, and Brussels sprouts, garnished with purslane and spinach-and-basil pesto—the vegetables speak for themselves.



A Tivoli Taco awaiting its Caribbean-spiced Beyond Beef.

Between them, the Nicholases are aunt and uncle to many. “On top of that, our aunts and uncles just played such great roles in our lives,” Nicole said. “We disappeared to their houses when we were fed up with our parents.” Inside the café, outfitted with stylish furniture in muted tropical shades, shelves display books and magazines, including the food journal *Whetstone*; “In Bibi’s Kitchen,” a collection of recipes by African grandmothers from the Somali-born chef Hawa Hassan; and Ralph Ellison’s “Juneteenth.” On racks hang chic sweatshirts, designed by Michael. “We are all birds of paradise,” one crewneck reads. “Free to roam but always come home.” (*Dishes \$4-\$16.*) ♦

# The Theatre

- [Summer Theatre Preview](#)

[May 17, 2021 Issue](#)

## Summer Theatre Preview

Shakespeare in the Park returns with “Merry Wives,” Aleshea Harris’s “What to Send Up When It Goes Down” at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, and more.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

May 7, 2021

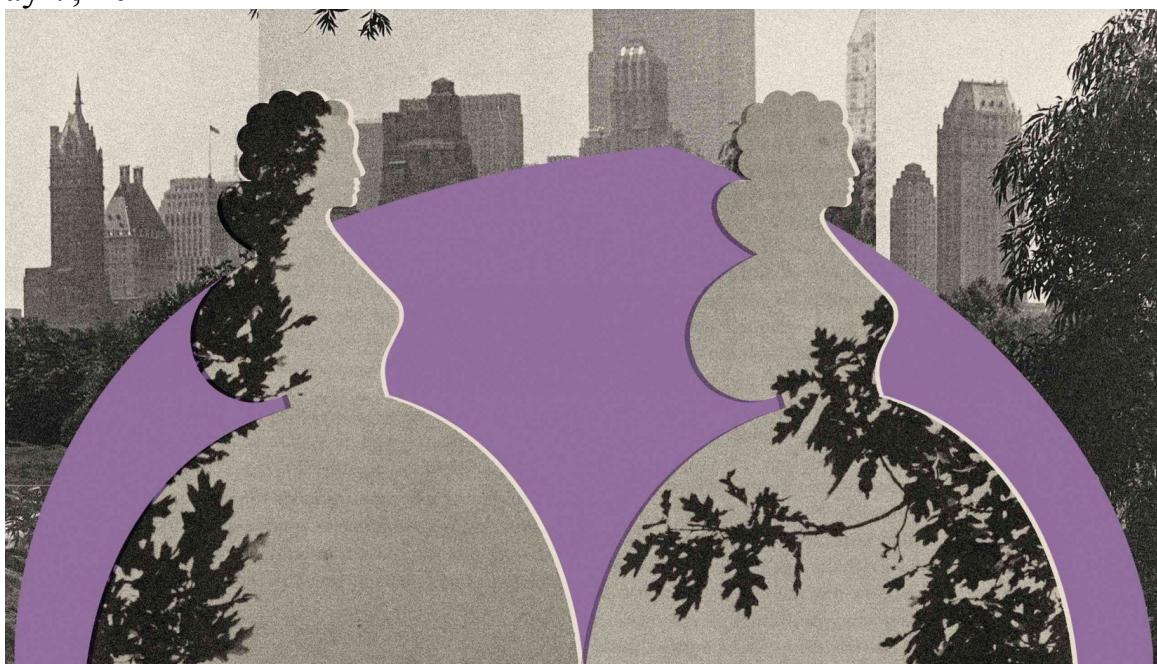


Illustration by Lucy Jones; Source photograph by George Marks / Getty (Central Park)

To quote “West Side Story”—one of the Broadway shows that vanished into the ether last March—New York theatre is in its “Could it be? Yes, it could” phase. After a year of virtual plays, there are finally inklings of a return to flesh-and-blood performance. As Broadway makes plans to come back in September, the summer brings major strides toward post-Zoom theatregoing. **Shakespeare in the Park**, one of the city’s most beloved summer traditions, returns to the Delacorte, with “**Merry Wives**” (beginning July 6), Jocelyn Bioh’s adaptation of “The Merry Wives of Windsor,” now set in South Harlem’s West African immigrant community. The Public’s open-air production, directed by Saheem Ali, promises to be joyful, cathartic, and, as always, free.

Downtown, Moisés Kaufman’s Tectonic Theatre Project and Madison Wells Live stage “**Seven Deadly Sins**” (starting June 23), a collection of short plays by writers including Thomas Bradshaw and Bess Wohl, each tackling a different sin; performances unfold in storefronts in the meatpacking district, with audiences listening through earphones. Also in June, BAM and Playwrights Horizons present “**What to Send Up When It Goes Down**,” Aleshea Harris’s play about the insidiousness of anti-Blackness, reimagined for the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. And, in the Berkshires, the **Williamstown Theatre Festival** returns, on July 6, with an all-outdoor season, including a series of one-person shows by Black writers and a new musical staged around a reflecting pool at the Clark Art Institute: “**Row**,” by Dawn Landes and Daniel Goldstein, based on a memoir by Tori Murden McClure, the first woman to row solo across the Atlantic Ocean. Onward ho! ♦

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