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Nine Days in Wuhan, the Ground Zero of the Coronavirus Pandemic

There's no other country where the pandemic's effects have been so concentrated in a single city.

By [Peter Hessler](#)

October 5, 2020



On my second visit to the site of the former Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, at the intersection of New China Road and Development Road, in central Wuhan, I wore a mask and a pair of sunglasses with a loose frame. It was late August, and three security guards in black uniforms sat at the entrance. They examined my passport, checked my temperature, and asked me to scan a QR code that connected to a registration system. The system, though, required a national I.D. number, and the guards seemed uncertain what to do with a foreigner. I handed over the sunglasses and explained that they needed to be repaired.

The [earliest documented clusters of coronavirus infections](#) had occurred in the Huanan market. During my first visit, a week earlier, I had left after attracting the attention of a man who appeared to be a plainclothes police officer. The site remained sensitive, and a high blue wall blocked off the ground-floor stalls where the virus had spread. But the market's second floor was open for business, which was why, when I returned, I brought the glasses.

One guard inspected the loose frame. "You can go in," he said finally. "But no photographs."

Another guard was assigned to accompany me. We climbed a steep flight of stairs, past a freshly painted sign that said "Heguang Eyeglasses Market." Back in December, it had been Huanan Eyeglass City, like the market on the ground floor.

There had never been any logic to the Huanan combo: fish downstairs, eyeglasses upstairs. Locals told me that, more than fifteen years ago, some eyeglass merchants had been attracted by the low rent. Since then, fish and eyeglasses had coexisted peacefully, until the last day of December, when the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission issued a report confirming a series of rumors. The report noted that scientists were studying an unknown type of "[viral pneumonia](#)" that had infected twenty-seven people who were associated with the seafood market. But the over-all message was reassuring: "The investigation so far has not found obvious human-to-human transmission, and no medical staff infection has been found."

In fact, Wuhan physicians had already seen colleagues getting sick. The day before the report, an ophthalmologist named Li Wenliang had sent a series of

warnings to a WeChat group of former medical-school classmates. Somebody posted screenshots of Li’s messages online, and that evening health officials summoned him for questioning. A few days later, the police compelled Li to sign a confession that his warning had constituted “illegal behavior.”

By then, the government had closed the downstairs market. It consisted of more than a thousand stalls that, in addition to seafood, sold freshwater fish and meat, along with some that specialized in [live wild animals](#). On January 1st, workers in hazmat suits arrived, taking samples and disinfecting some parts of the market. Upstairs, people kept selling eyeglasses. It took another ten days for the government to shut the second-floor market; twelve days later, all of Wuhan was placed in quarantine; and then, within two more days, almost every province had declared a first-level public-health emergency. But at that point the virus was already out in the world—there was no longer any possibility of cutting it off at the source. Since then, the Chinese government has released little information about the Huanan site or the possible origins of the disease.

More than eleven million people live in Wuhan, the capital of landlocked Hubei Province. There’s no other country where the pandemic’s effects have been so concentrated in a single city while everywhere else remained relatively untouched. It was a combination of timing and policy: because the pandemic first spread in Wuhan, and the initial coverup and other missteps were followed by effective national policies, the city was unique in its suffering. Thus far, Beijing has reported nine coronavirus deaths, two more than Shanghai. In all of Guangdong Province—population a hundred and thirteen million—the death toll is eight. The second-hardest-hit Chinese city is a place that few outsiders have heard of: Xiaogan, some forty miles from Wuhan, where a hundred and twenty-nine people died.

In Wuhan, the official death toll is 3,869, although many believe that the actual figure is significantly higher. A number of writers documented the quarantine in online journals, the most famous being “[Wuhan Diary](#),” by Fang Fang, a novelist in her sixties. A lifelong resident, Fang Fang often wondered about her home town’s pandemic legacy, and she became a frequent target of Communist Party censorship. On March 4th, she considered the future of the Huanan market. “Some people have suggested turning it into a memorial hall dedicated to this calamity,” she wrote, before making a transition, perhaps with the censors in mind: “Today I’ll just talk about shopping.”

At the eyeglasses market, the guard escorted me down a long hallway with shops on both sides. I didn't see any other customers, and salespeople rushed to their doors as we passed, calling out discounts. After a while, I entered a store run by a middle-aged man who looked friendly. The guard waited outside.

The shopkeeper offered me a seat and some water while his assistant tinkered with my sunglasses. The shopkeeper wasn't wearing a mask, so I took mine off. I asked about business, and he said that he had stayed in his apartment until April 8th, because of the city's quarantine, and then the market reopened on May 12th—like others I met in Wuhan, he readily remembered dates from the spring. "I tried calling old customers, telling them it's safe," he said. "But of course a lot of them wouldn't come."

The shopkeeper said that nobody he knew in the eyeglasses market had been infected. His assistant, a woman in her twenties, claimed that there hadn't been any cases on their floor. "It wasn't like downstairs," she said. "That's where the disease spread." Later, I saw a news article indicating that some staff at the glasses market had been infected, but the story lacked clear details, and I wasn't sure what to believe. And I wondered if this is what folks are bound to say if you go to any ground zero and walk up a flight of steps: Nothing happened here. We're fine. It was those people downstairs.

The shopkeeper mentioned an illicit mah-jongg parlor in the seafood market. "I heard that four people were playing at one table, and all four got sick," he said.

It sounded like another rumor, but subsequently I met a Wuhan journalist who had visited the mah-jongg parlor. His memories also revolved around precise dates: he told me that he had gone to the seafood market on December 31st, the day before it was closed. By then, the journalist had heard about a possible virus, and also about some mah-jongg infections. He found the players unfazed by the rumors, still gambling for small stakes. "It was kind of a secret room," the journalist said. Like many people I talked to in Wuhan, he asked not to be named. He continued, "It was next to the public toilet, and you had to climb a ladder to get there. You wouldn't find it unless you were looking for it. Everybody was smoking and there was no ventilation." The journalist hadn't written about the mah-jongg infections, in part because at that time the local government still hadn't announced that the disease could be transmitted by human contact. "But I personally worried that it was probably spreading between people," he recalled. He didn't wear a mask, though he had purchased some at a

nearby pharmacy.

The journalist had returned the next day, on January 1st, after the hazmat teams arrived. He saw them using a detailed list to inspect and sterilize certain stalls, but they wouldn't answer his questions about what they were targeting. Relatively few images of the interior of the market have been published, and there hasn't been an official report. By now, with worldwide infections at thirty-five million and counting, and with near-total silence on the part of the Chinese government, the market has become a kind of petri dish for the imagination. One common Chinese conspiracy theory claims that the U.S. Army deliberately seeded the virus during the 2019 Military World Games, which were held in Wuhan that October. On the other side of the world, a number of Americans believe that the virus was released, whether accidentally or otherwise, from the Wuhan Institute of Virology, whose research includes work on coronaviruses.



I CAN'T WRITE
OR THROW.

There's no evidence to support these theories, and even the prevalent animal-market connection is unclear. There weren't many wildlife dealers in the market—about a dozen stalls, according to most published reports—and Wuhan natives have little appetite for exotic animals. Such fare is much more popular in Guangdong, in the far south. It's possible that the disease arrived from somewhere else and then spread in the wet, cool conditions of the fish stalls. A few Wuhan residents told me that a considerable amount of their seafood comes from Guangdong, and they suggested that perhaps a southerner had unwittingly imported the disease, along with some fish. But, like many of the origin theories, this could have been another version of the second-floor perspective: Nothing happened here. We're fine. It was those people downstairs.

At the eyeglasses market, the security guard outside was getting antsy. There still weren't any other customers. The shopkeeper refused to accept money for the repair, and I felt bad, so I bought a new pair of sunglasses for fifteen dollars. I asked about the likely fate of this place. He said that nothing had been decided, but he expected the entire complex to be demolished. "What else can they do?" he said. "The name is ruined. They'll tear it down and build high-rises."

Among the dates that Wuhan residents bring up in conversation, the most common are January 23rd, when the city was quarantined, and April 8th, when the restrictions were lifted. All Chinese cities were under strict lockdown during the pandemic, but Wuhan's closure was unique: apart from some foreign-passport holders, nobody in the city was allowed to leave. Citizens have their own vocabulary for this period. They refer to *fengcheng*—literally, "sealed city"—and the eighth day of April is known as *jiefeng*: "taking off the seal."

The experience of being isolated with the virus seared the dates into people's minds. Xiaoyin, the pen name of a Wuhan poet who, during the period of *fengcheng*, posted daily dispatches on Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, often described the city as "an island." He began almost every entry the same way: "I'm in Wuhan. Today is the _n_th day of the sealed city." Like Fang Fang, Xiaoyin also fixated on the dates of December 31st, when the health commission issued its report, and January 20th, when Zhong Nanshan, a pulmonologist who is among China's most prominent medical authorities, became the first official to declare that the coronavirus could be spread by human transmission.

The unexplained gap between those statements—three full weeks—infuriated

people like Xiaoyin and Fang Fang. Perhaps that's another reason for the remembered dates: they represent fixed points during a period when information often seemed fluid and unreliable. One of the most striking qualities of Fang Fang's diary is the effort she made to draw upon the connections of a lifetime in the city, passing on information that she gathered from unnamed physicians, scientists, government officials, and police officers. Even now, after so much more is known about the disease, most of Fang Fang's early assessments come across as accurate and reasonable. She never positioned herself as a dissident, and when government policies were effective she was quick to praise them. She reflects a paradox of China: in an authoritarian country with strict censorship, there are nevertheless many highly educated people, and citizens become adept at discerning reliable sources. Fang Fang's Weibo posts sometimes attracted more than thirty million readers, and, even when the messages were censored, people usually found other ways to transmit them.

On February 19th, Fang Fang noted that a significant number of early deaths happened before there was proper testing and diagnosis. "So I'm afraid that we still don't have a completely accurate tally of just how many victims there really are," she wrote.

One infectious-disease physician who handled testing at a large Wuhan hospital told me that the actual total could be three to four times higher than the government's figure of 3,869. He referred to the chaotic early period of the pandemic, when overwhelmed hospitals turned patients away. "If you were infected and not diagnosed, then you weren't counted," he said. "I think the total is probably more than ten thousand."

In other parts of China, people generally believed the local death counts to be accurate, at least within a reasonable range. The virus simply couldn't be covered up easily: if it was spreading widely in a community, residents would know. But Wuhan was different, because of its role at the start of the pandemic. In town, I met an architect named Kyle Hui, whose stepmother had been among the early deaths. She was sixty-five years old, in good health, and she had had no contact with the Huanan market. Hui had no idea how she got infected, but other relatives also fell ill. Later, after tests became available, some of these relatives were confirmed as positive cases.

Hui's stepmother had raised him from his early teens, and he said that they had been as close as any parent and child. He recalled his own series of dates: on

January 4th, his stepmother fell ill; on January 11th, she was turned away from a crowded hospital; on January 13th, she was finally admitted. She died two days later.

“On the eighteenth, she went to the crematorium,” Hui said. “I went there, too, and I saw some workers wearing masks, gloves, and protective clothing.” He continued, “At that time, there wasn’t much news about the disease spreading, but the hospital workers all knew, and so did people at the crematorium.” He said that the crematorium had been busy, and there he met another family who had also lost someone to a flu-like illness. At that time, the city’s official death toll was only one.

Hui was a Wuhan native, but he now lived in Jiangsu Province, near Shanghai. After his stepmother’s death, he took his wife’s parents, who were also from Wuhan, back to Jiangsu. They happened to leave Wuhan shortly before the city was sealed, but in Jiangsu they experienced their own version of the *fengcheng*. Officials from the neighborhood committee, the most grassroots level of the Communist Party structure, required a fourteen-day quarantine for anyone who had recently been to Hubei. They sealed Hui’s door from the outside with tape that said “Returned Hubei Resident Home Quarantine.” The tape was removed only when committee members delivered food or collected garbage.

Initially, Hui had an angry confrontation with the officials. They told him that if he didn’t allow them to seal the door he and his in-laws would be taken to a government quarantine facility. Hui decided they would be better off in their own apartment, and over time he came to believe that such strict policies were necessary. Tracking down Hubei connections was a key early strategy; at my home, in Chengdu, local committee members and volunteers came to the door five times. They always asked about recent travel to Wuhan or Hubei, which was how they caught the only case in my neighborhood. A resident had recently returned from Hubei, and the committee located him, tested him, and then isolated him, all before he showed symptoms.

“In terms of the big picture, it was correct,” Hui said. But he noted that anybody who witnessed the early mistakes in Wuhan was bound to feel differently from most Chinese. “Behind every statistic, there’s a broken family,” he said. “So I can’t say whether I’m satisfied or not satisfied with the government.”

When we met, Hui had returned to Wuhan on business. It was his first time back

since his stepmother's cremation. Earlier in the year, he had telephoned both the Wuhan mayor's hot line and the local branch of the Chinese Center for Disease Control, in the hope of having his stepmother included in the coronavirus counts. But officials responded that it was impossible, because her death certificate listed pneumonia as the cause. Hui still hadn't told his seven-year-old son that his grandmother was dead. "My father wants to tell him, but we haven't figured out how to do it," he said. Since January, they had been pretending that the boy's grandmother was sick in Wuhan and couldn't talk on the phone. During the Spring Festival holiday, they had given him a traditional gift envelope and said that it was from Grandma. After a while, the boy stopped asking questions. "I think he knows the truth," Hui said.

When Wuhan was sealed, the strategy of isolation was replicated throughout the city. Housing compounds were closed and monitored by neighborhood committees, with residents going out only for necessities. Toward the end of the first month, the guidelines were tightened further, until virtually all goods were delivered. On February 17th, Fang Fang wrote, "Everyone is now required to remain inside their homes at all times." Like other Wuhan diarists, she often referred to food, because it became hard to find much variety.

Meanwhile, approximately ten thousand contact tracers were working in the city, in order to cut off chains of infection, and hospitals were developing large-scale testing systems. But isolation remained crucial: patients were isolated; suspected exposures were isolated; medical workers were isolated. A nurse told me that she left for work on February 3rd and didn't return home until June 7th. She was housed in a hotel room, like most medical workers with families. For four months, the nurse communicated with her husband and their five-year-old son only by phone and WeChat.

In order to create solitude on such a scale, it was necessary to do a great deal of construction. I met a young manager from a building company that renovated a hundred and ten hospitals, clinics, schools, gymnasiums, and other buildings. Much of their work involved installing walls, barriers, and special entrances and exits that allowed people to keep away from one another. The company also helped build Huoshenshan, one of two emergency hospitals that were constructed to house coronavirus patients. Huoshenshan, which had a thousand beds, including thirty in an intensive-care center, became a prime subject of government propaganda, because it went up in roughly ten days, from January 23rd to February 2nd. At one point, there were seven thousand workers on site,

along with more than a hundred excavators.

The young manager, whom I'll call Zhang, recruited and oversaw labor. He told me that he often appealed to the workers' patriotism, but mostly he just paid them well. Recalling this period, he used a phrase that translates as "Money can make the Devil push the grindstone for you." It was common to pay unskilled laborers the equivalent of hundreds of dollars a day, because of the risk and the long hours. The most Zhang ever handed over for a week's work, to a carpenter, was fifty thousand yuan, about seven thousand dollars—ten times a normal wage. Even so, recruitment was difficult, because the city's death toll was surging, and the lack of information terrified people.

The Huoshenshan site had been designed in zones, and Zhang's workers were still finishing the hospital's back zone while infected patients were being admitted in the front. "A big group of workers fled," he said. "They didn't even claim their salaries." Once the hospital had been finished, it was immediately necessary to turn around and go inside, in order to fix leaks and other problems that resulted from the hurried construction.

At that point, Zhang offered the workers a thousand dollars a day, but nobody accepted, and they were unmoved by his talk of the Motherland. In August, when he looked back on this time, he was philosophical. "The pandemic is like a mirror," he said. "A person can see himself more clearly, both his good qualities and his bad qualities."

He found that the only solution was to put on personal protective equipment himself and accompany the workers into the areas where there were infected patients. "I said, 'If you have a problem, then I have a problem,' " he recalled. "Once I did that, they were willing." In truth, he wasn't convinced that it was safe, and he was relieved that nobody got infected.

Zhang said the experience of working through the pandemic had left him calmer and more patient. He drove more carefully now; he wasn't in such a rush. I often asked Wuhan residents how they had been personally changed by the spring, and there was no standard response. Some expressed less trust in government information; others said they had increased faith in the national leadership. The nurse who had been separated from her family admitted that sometimes she missed the simple life of the crisis, when she lived in a hotel room and thought about nothing but work. The physician who handled testing told me that since

the city's seal had been lifted he had become fixated on having enough food in his pantry. Nowadays, he always kept at least sixty-five pounds of rice, sixty-five pounds of noodles and pasta, and thirty tins of canned meat. "I have five friends who do the same thing, but they store even more than I do," he told me.

Across Hubei, nearly four hundred tourist sites had offered free admission from August 8th until the end of the year, in the hope of conveying a message that the province was safe. I didn't meet many people from other parts of China, but Wuhan natives seemed to be taking advantage of the opportunity. When I visited the Yellow Crane Tower, a reconstructed ancient building near the Yangtze, the site was so packed that it was hard to move. Workers told me that daily attendance was capped at twenty-five thousand; that day, the online reservation system filled before noon. At the Hubei Provincial Museum, anybody who wanted to enter had to show evidence of a negative coronavirus test, but that didn't deter the crowds. Every half hour or so, workers doused blue rags in an alcohol solution and obsessively wiped down glass exhibition cases that contained the treasures of ancient Hubei noblemen: Marquis Yi, of Zeng, of the Warring States Period; Prince Liangzhuang, of the Ming dynasty.

I stayed at the Westin Wuhan Wuchang, on the Yangtze's southeastern bank. When I checked in, a smiling clerk offered a special deal that allowed me to include the breakfast buffet for the equivalent of an additional twenty-three cents a day. In the elevator, on an endless loop, a screen played a promotional video that featured happy Westin Wuhan scenes: a wedding reception, a chef at work, some guests drinking cocktails. Then the footage abruptly shifted to men in gas masks, helmets, and white hazmat suits, identified as having come from the Yikang Chemical Company, Ltd., and carrying some kind of industrial-strength spray machines. They wielded the things like flamethrowers, dousing everything in the hotel in white chemical clouds: reception halls, dining rooms, air-conditioner vents. On a table, somebody laid out room-key cards in neat rows, like a game of solitaire, and then blasted them. The soundtrack to these scenes was "Love Is Greater," by Amanda Noelle:

Friday night, feeling fine
I'm gonna have a good time.
Raise my hands, watch me dance
Everything's alright . . .

Wuhan had most recently reported a locally transmitted symptomatic case on

May 18th. It's the most thoroughly tested city in China: at the end of May, in part to boost confidence, the government tried to test every resident, a total of eleven million. I never met a cabdriver who had been swab-tested less than twice, and a couple had been tested five times. Most of the cabbies had no relatives or friends who had been infected; swabbing was simply required by the city and by their cab companies. There are three hundred and twenty-one testing locations in the city, and the system is so extensive that in June, when Beijing suffered an outbreak, Wuhan hospitals sent seventy-two staffers to the capital to help with tests.

The physician who handled testing told me that, on average, his hospital still recorded one positive for every forty thousand exams. Most of these positives were repeat patients: after having been infected during the initial run of the virus, they recovered fully, and then for some reason, months later, showed evidence of the virus again. So far, most of the positives had been asymptomatic, and the physician saw no indication that the virus was spreading in the city. But, whenever the hospital entered these positive results into the government's reporting system, somebody higher up made the decision not to publicize them. "I think they're worried about undermining confidence," the physician said.

In town, there were few propaganda signs about the epidemic, and Wuhan newspapers ran upbeat headlines every morning (*Yangtze Daily*, August 29th, front page: "*STUDENTS DO NOT HAVE TO WEAR MASKS IN SCHOOLS*"). Movie theatres were open; restaurants and bars had no seating restrictions. At the Hanyang Renxinghui Mall, I saw barefaced kids playing in what may have been one of the last fully functioning ball pits on earth, a sight that seemed worthy of other headlines ("*CHILDREN DO NOT HAVE TO WEAR MASKS IN WUHAN BALL PITS*").

Across town, colleges and universities were in the process of bringing back more than a million students. Wuhan has the second-highest number of students of any city in China, after Guangzhou. One day, I walked around the Wuhan University campus with Xiaoyin, the poet who had documented the pandemic on Weibo with his trademark opening: "I'm in Wuhan. Today is the _n_th day of the sealed city."



The Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, where the coronavirus was first identified. “The name is ruined,” a worker said. Photograph by Ju Lan Ching for The New Yorker

Xiaoyin taught in the civil-engineering department, publishing books of poetry on the side. He had grown up on the campus, where both of his parents taught. His father had died in May, at the age of eighty-three, of a heart attack. “He usually went for a walk every day, but they were indoors during the time of the sealed city,” Xiaoyin told me. He thought that the extended period of inactivity had probably weakened the old man’s heart.

Xiaoyin had stopped writing poetry during the pandemic. To him, it didn’t feel like the right form; his Weibo voice was loose, lively, and wide-ranging. In his second post, he described beginning the era of the sealed city with a hangover, because he had gone to a party at the home of a musician named Yang Dong on the night of January 22nd. On January 28th—“I’m in Wuhan. Today is the fifth day of the sealed city”—he mourned the death of Kobe Bryant, in a helicopter crash on the other side of the world. On February 7th—the fifteenth day—Xiaoyin expressed sadness and anger at the death of Li Wenliang, the ophthalmologist who had warned his medical-school classmates about the new disease. Sometime after that warning, and after Li had been forced to sign his confession, he was infected at work. When Li died, at the age of thirty-four, leaving a wife who was pregnant with their second child, he became a touchstone for people’s anger over the government’s early missteps. In March, the Wuhan Public Security Bureau finally apologized to Li’s family, and the following month the provincial government designated him a martyr to the pandemic. But the authorities never explained when the government became aware that the disease could be spread by human transmission, and why they had delayed making this information public.

“A monument should be built for Dr. Li Wenliang in Wuhan,” Xiaoyin wrote, the day after the death. “The name of this monument should be ‘Rumor Spreaders.’ ” When we met, Xiaoyin said that no mainland press could publish his diary. “You can’t even start a Web site to commemorate the pandemic,” he said. “I don’t expect them to build a museum here in Wuhan.”

He led me through the campus, which is perhaps the most beautiful in China. We walked along paths shaded by parasol and camphor trees, and Xiaoyin pointed out buildings that had been designed in the nineteen-twenties by F. H. Kales, an M.I.T.-trained architect who combined elements of Western and Chinese architecture in a graceful, dignified style. “When I came back onto campus after the seal had been lifted, I didn’t see a single person,” Xiaoyin said. “I thought

about how powerful this disease is.”

Now we saw groups of students hauling luggage through the front gate. According to university policy, the students wouldn’t be allowed to leave without making a special application; like most Chinese colleges, Wuhan University was beginning the fall semester with a closed campus. Xiaoyin expressed doubt that the administration would be able to enforce the policy, because the sprawling campus has too many places where students can sneak out.

We stopped at a convenience store to get some drinks, and we met two African medical students. Umaro Sow came from Cape Verde, and Kalaba Mulizwa was Zambian. Of the few foreigners I had seen in Wuhan, most were African. Virtually all North Americans, Australians, and Europeans had been evacuated during the pandemic, often on flights organized by their embassies or consulates. But a number of African students stayed, and Sow and Mulizwa said they hadn’t left their dormitories during the period of the sealed city. The dorms were locked from the outside, with university staff delivering food and other necessities. The men said they had been well cared for, but even after the seal was lifted, and they could leave their dormitories, they were restricted to campus. Today was the first time in more than half a year that they had been granted passes to exit the gates. I asked where they were going.

“McDonald’s,” Mulizwa said.

“Not me,” Sow said. “I want to get some steak. Maybe some chicken. Something grilled.”

I said something to the effect that the worst was behind them, and Sow grinned. “We’re still living,” he said.

Wuhan memories remained fresh, and the materials of documentation were also close at hand. People sometimes handed over manuscripts, and they took out their phones and pulled up photographs and messages from January and February. But I wondered how much of this material would dissipate over time.

In town, I met two Chinese journalists in their twenties who were visiting from out of town. They had been posted during the period of the sealed city: back then, anybody sent to cover events in Wuhan had to stay for the long haul. One was a director of streaming media whom I’ll call Han, and he had found that

government-run outlets generally wanted footage that emphasized the victory over the disease, not the suffering of Wuhan residents. Han hoped that eventually he'd find other ways to use the material. "It will be in the hard drive," he said, tapping his camera.

The other journalist, a print reporter I'll call Yin, reminisced about the unusual freedom the press had been granted for a brief period in January. Journalists reported on whistle-blower figures like Li Wenliang, and they exposed some early missteps, like a failure by the Red Cross to distribute critical medical equipment. Such problems were quickly fixed, and Yin felt glad to be of service to society. "I could see what it means to be the fourth estate," she said. But, in February, as the government started to get control of the pandemic, it also tightened restrictions on the press. "A friend of mine said that it was a very short spring," Yin said.

After that, Yin reported on a number of issues that couldn't be published or completed, and she often talked with scientists and officials who didn't want to say too much. "One person said, 'Ten years later, if the climate has changed, I'll tell you my story,'" Yin told me. "He knew that he would be judged by history." She continued, "These people are inside the system, but they also know that they are inside history."

Yin described an interview with an employee at a research institution who was so upset that he began to weep. He wouldn't answer her questions, but he said that he had been keeping a detailed diary. She hoped that someday such materials would be released.

I suspect that this will eventually happen, because nowadays there are so many ways to preserve information. In time, we will learn more, but the delay is important to the Communist Party. It handles history the same way that it handles the pandemic—a period of isolation is crucial. Throughout the Communist era, there have been many moments of quarantined history: the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, the massacre around Tiananmen Square. In every case, an initial silencing has been followed by sporadic outbreaks of leaked information. Wuhan will eventually follow the same pattern, but for the time being many memories will remain in the sealed city.

When I spoke with scientists outside China, they weren't focussed on the government's early missteps. "I tend to take a charitable view of countries that

are at the beginning stage of epidemics,” Jennifer Nuzzo, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, told me, in a phone conversation. According to her, it’s unrealistic to expect that any country could have stopped this particular virus at its source. “I’ve always believed that this thing was going to spread,” she said.

Wafaa El-Sadr, the director of *ICAP*, a global-health center at Columbia University, pointed out that Chinese scientists had quickly sequenced the virus’s genome, which was made available to researchers worldwide on January 11th. “I honestly think that they had a horrific situation in Wuhan and they were able to contain it,” she said. “There were mistakes early on, but they did act, and they shared fast.”

For much of El-Sadr’s career, she has worked on issues related to *AIDS* in the United States, Africa, and elsewhere. After years of research, scientists eventually came to the consensus that H.I.V. most likely started through the bushmeat trade—the first human was probably infected after coming into contact with a primate or primate meat. El-Sadr views the coronavirus as another inevitable outcome of people’s encroachment on the natural world. “We are now living through two concomitant massive pandemics that are the result of spillover from animal to human hosts, the H.I.V. and the *COVID* pandemics,” she wrote to me, in an e-mail. “Never in history has humanity experienced something along this scale and scope.”

There’s a tendency to believe that we would know the source of the coronavirus if the Chinese had been more forthcoming, or if they hadn’t cleaned out the Huanan market before stalls and animals could be studied properly. But Peter Daszak, a British disease ecologist who has collaborated with the Wuhan Institute of Virology for sixteen years on research on bat coronaviruses, told me that it’s typical to fail to gather good data from the site of an initial outbreak. Once people get sick, local authorities inevitably focus on the public-health emergency. “You send in the human doctors, not the veterinarians,” he said, in a phone conversation. “And the doctors’ response is to clean out the market. They want to stop the infections.”

Daszak believes the virus probably circulated for weeks before the Wuhan outbreak, and he doubts that the city was the source. “There are bats in Wuhan, but it was the wrong time of year,” he told me. “It was winter, and bats are not out as much.” His research has indicated that, across Southeast Asia, more than a

million people each year are infected by bat coronaviruses. Some individuals trap, deal, or raise animals that might serve as intermediary hosts. “But generally it’s people who live near bat caves,” Daszak said. “Every night, the bats fly out, and they urinate and defecate. Some might get on a surface, or on somebody’s clothes, and then they touch their mouths or noses.”

Daszak said that he had always thought that such an outbreak was most likely to occur in Kunming or Guangzhou, southern cities that are close to many bat caves and that also have an intensive wildlife trade. He thinks that Chinese scientists are probably now searching hospital freezers for lab samples of people who died of pneumonia shortly before the outbreak. “You would take those samples and look for the virus,” he said. “They’ll find something eventually. These things just don’t happen overnight; it requires a lot of work. We’ve seen this repeatedly with every disease. It turns out that it was already trickling through the population.”

Daszak is the president of EcoHealth Alliance, a nonprofit research organization based in New York. EcoHealth has become the target of conspiracy theorists, including some who claim that the virus was man-made. Daszak and many prominent virologists say that anything created in a lab would show clear signs of manipulation. There’s also speculation that the outbreak started when researchers accidentally released a coronavirus they were studying at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. But there’s no evidence of a leak, or even that the institute has ever studied a virus that could cause a *COVID-19* outbreak.

“Scientists in China are under incredible pressure to publish,” Daszak said. “It really drives openness and transparency.” He has spent a good deal of time in Wuhan, and co-authored more than a dozen papers with Chinese colleagues. “If we had found a virus that infected human cells and spread within a cell culture, we would have put the information out there,” he said. “In sixteen years, I’ve never come across the slightest hint of subterfuge. They’ve never hidden data. I’ve never had a situation where one lab person tells me one thing and the other says something else. If you were doing things that you didn’t want people to know about, why would you invite foreigners into the lab?”

In April, President Trump told reporters that the U.S. should stop funding research connected to the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Shortly after Trump’s comments, the National Institutes of Health cancelled a \$3.7-million grant to EcoHealth, which had been studying how bat coronaviruses are transmitted to people. EcoHealth has appealed the decision, but Daszak doesn’t expect a

change unless there's a new Administration.

I asked Daszak why, if he has such faith in the openness of his Wuhan colleagues, the Chinese government has been so closed about other aspects of the outbreak. He said that science is one thing, and politics something else; he thinks that officials were embarrassed about the early mistakes, and in response they simply shut down all information. "You're a journalist in China," he said. "I don't know what you would say about the Chinese idea of P.R., but I'd say they're pretty terrible."

One afternoon, I drove past Huoshenshan, the newly constructed emergency hospital. The site was cordoned off; people told me that the hospital had remained vacant in case the virus returns. But this seems unlikely, and Wuhan, like the rest of China, is looking to the next stage of the pandemic. At the beginning of July, China National Biotec Group, a subsidiary of a state-owned pharmaceutical company called Sinopharm, completed construction of a vaccine-manufacturing plant in Wuhan. The project began while the city was still sealed. "That's the politically correct thing to do," a Shanghai-based biotech entrepreneur told me. "To show the world that the heroic people of Wuhan have come back."

The plant has the capacity to produce more than a hundred million vaccine doses a year. Another C.N.B.G. factory, in Beijing, can make an additional hundred million doses a year of a different version of the vaccine. Both plants are already producing and stockpiling the vaccines, which have almost completed Phase III trials. Because China essentially has no active pandemic, C.N.B.G. had to go far afield in order to find subjects. Currently, researchers have enrolled more than fifty thousand people in the United Arab Emirates, Peru, and other countries in South America and the Middle East.

Yiwu He, the chief innovation officer at the University of Hong Kong, told me that the C.N.B.G. vaccine has already been given to a number of Chinese government officials, under an emergency-use approval granted by the authorities. "I know a few government officials personally, and they told me that they took the vaccine," he said, in a phone conversation. He thought that the total number was probably around a hundred. "It's middle-level officials," he said. "Vice-ministers, mayors, vice-mayors."

Pharmaceutical executives have also been expected to lead the way, like the

construction manager who donned P.P.E. in order to escort his workers into the patient ward. “Every senior executive at Sinopharm and C.N.B.G. has been vaccinated,” He said. “Including the C.E.O. of Sinopharm, the chairman of the board, every vice-president—everyone.” The Chinese press has reported that vaccinations have also been administered to hundreds of thousands of citizens in high-risk areas around the world. (C.N.B.G. did not respond to a request for comment.)



"O.K., now can we do a silly one?"
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

In the West, China's image has been badly damaged by the pandemic and by other recent events. The country has tightened political crackdowns in Hong Kong and Xinjiang, and, in May, after Australia called for an investigation into

the origins of the virus, China responded furiously, placing new tariffs and restrictions on Australian goods ranging from barley to beef. But He believes that the situation is fluid. “All of these feelings can turn around quickly,” he told me. “I think that once China has a vaccine, and if they can help other countries, it can make a huge difference.”

Before coming to Hong Kong, He served as the deputy director of the Gates Foundation, where he worked closely with C.N.B.G. on a number of vaccine projects. One of their most successful collaborations involved producing polio vaccines for use in developing countries, an experience that helped C.N.B.G. develop the scale necessary for its work on the coronavirus. Another Chinese pharmaceutical company, CanSino Biologics, is also running Phase III trials with its own vaccine. The government has indicated that it will eventually make these vaccines available in the developing world.

There’s also a competitive element. “China wants to beat America,” He said. He believes that the C.N.B.G. vaccine will receive some level of approval for public use by the end of October. “Chinese officials are thinking that Donald Trump might approve a U.S. vaccine before the election,” he said. “So their goal is to have a vaccine approved before that.”

No matter how quickly [the Chinese develop a vaccine](#), or how effectively they have handled the pandemic since January, it’s unlikely to make Westerners forget the mistakes and misinformation during the pandemic’s earliest phase. Some of this is due to a cultural difference—the Chinese response to errors is often to look forward, not back. On January 31st, Fang Fang commented in her diary, “The Chinese people have never been fond of admitting their own mistakes, nor do they have a very strong sense of repentance.” It’s often hard for them to understand why this quality is so frustrating for Westerners. In this regard, the pandemic is truly a mirror—it doesn’t allow the Chinese to look out and see themselves through the eyes of others.

But, within the country, the reflection is clear. The pandemic illuminates both [the weaknesses and the strengths of the Chinese system](#), as well as the relationship between the government and the people. They know each other well: officials never felt the need to tell citizens exactly what happened in Wuhan, but they understood that American-level casualties would have been shocking—given China’s population, the tally would have been more than a million and counting. In order to avoid death on that scale, the government also knew that people

would be willing to accept strict lockdowns and contribute their own efforts toward fighting the virus.

In turn, citizens were skilled at reading their government. People often held two apparently contradictory ideas: that the Party lied about some things but gave good guidance about others. More often than not, citizens could discern the difference. During the pandemic, it was striking that, when the Chinese indulged in conspiracy theories, these ideas rarely resulted in personally risky behavior, as they often did in the U.S. Perhaps the Chinese have been inoculated by decades of censorship and misinformation: in such an environment, people develop strong instincts for self-preservation, and they don't seem as disoriented by social media as many Americans are.

And lessons from the pandemic are often different from what Westerners might expect. Early in the year, I corresponded by WeChat with a Wuhan pharmacist who worked in a hospital where many were infected. On February 26th, he expressed anger about the early coverup. "My personal opinion is that the government has always been careless and suppressed dissent," he wrote. "Because of this, they lost a golden opportunity to control the virus."

In Wuhan, we met a few times, and during one of our conversations I showed him what he had written in February. I asked what he would do now if he found himself in Li Wenliang's position, aware of an outbreak of some unknown disease. Would he post a warning online? Contact a health official? Alert a journalist?

The pharmacist thought for a moment. "I would tell my close friends in person," he said. "But I wouldn't put anything online. Nothing in writing."

I asked if such an event would turn out differently now.

"It would be the same," he said. "It's a problem with the system."

He explained that, with an authoritarian government, local officials are afraid of alarming superiors, which makes them inclined to cover things up. But, once higher-level leaders finally grasp the truth, they can act quickly and effectively. He found it strange that, after the virus had swept around the world, destabilizing cities and countries, so much in Wuhan remained unchanged. Recently, he had updated his eyeglass prescription, so he went to the same store he had been using for years. He found it in the same place, above the former Huanan market, with

the same shopkeeper. The only difference was that prices had plummeted. “Usually I would bargain, but this time I felt a little embarrassed,” he said. “I didn’t bargain at all.”

On one of my final afternoons in Wuhan, I met Fang Fang in a quiet café. In May, her book was published in the U.S., in a translation by Michael Berry, a professor of Chinese literature at U.C.L.A. Berry started his translation on February 25th, exactly a month after Fang Fang’s first post, and he worked with remarkable speed, essentially riding the wave of the pandemic. By the time he finished, on April 10th, Wuhan had been unsealed, and Los Angeles was under lockdown.

Like so many aspects of the pandemic, this shared experience became divisive in the eyes of certain people. The Chinese state press accused Fang Fang of making her country look bad, and far-left nationalists attacked her online, as they had during the pandemic. They also targeted Berry, in Los Angeles. At one point, the address of Fang Fang’s house in Wuhan was published, and people wrapped rocks with spiteful messages and lobbed them over her wall.

“I’m not passionate about politics,” Fang Fang told me, explaining that she just liked to record things accurately. She is a small woman with lively eyes, and she presented me with a copy of one of her banned books, “Soft Burial.” The novel covers the issue of land reform around the time that the Communists came to power, in 1949—another example of quarantined history, because many landowning families were brutalized. When the book was published, in 2016, it angered various figures on the far left, which idolizes Mao Zedong. Some of these leftists subsequently attacked the quarantine diary.

At sixty-five, Fang Fang is retired, though she receives a pension from the government-sponsored Hubei Writers’ Association. She said that two local officials from a different government bureau had visited and tried to persuade her to withdraw the overseas publication of “Wuhan Diary,” but she refused. “I said, ‘If you cancel my pension, I’ll sue you,’ ” she told me.

Every Wuhan writer I met spoke highly, and protectively, of Fang Fang. In provincial China, literary communities tend to be tight-knit, and writers learn to be thick-skinned and resourceful. When Fang Fang’s Weibo account was suspended, a number of tech-savvy young Chinese helped her find other ways to post material. And there were indications that some people in high positions also

valued her. Fang Fang said that an upper-level editor at Weibo eventually wrote her a private letter apologizing for the censorship. “He said they had no choice in suspending my account, and that he admired me,” she said.

At the moment, though, she couldn’t publish books or articles in China. For a writer who had watched history unfold in her home town, this seemed unimaginable, but Fang Fang spoke about the situation calmly. She said that recently she had been consoling a younger writer who had also been banned. “I said you have to be patient,” Fang Fang said. “I believe it won’t be like this forever.” ♦

More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now](#)?

Art

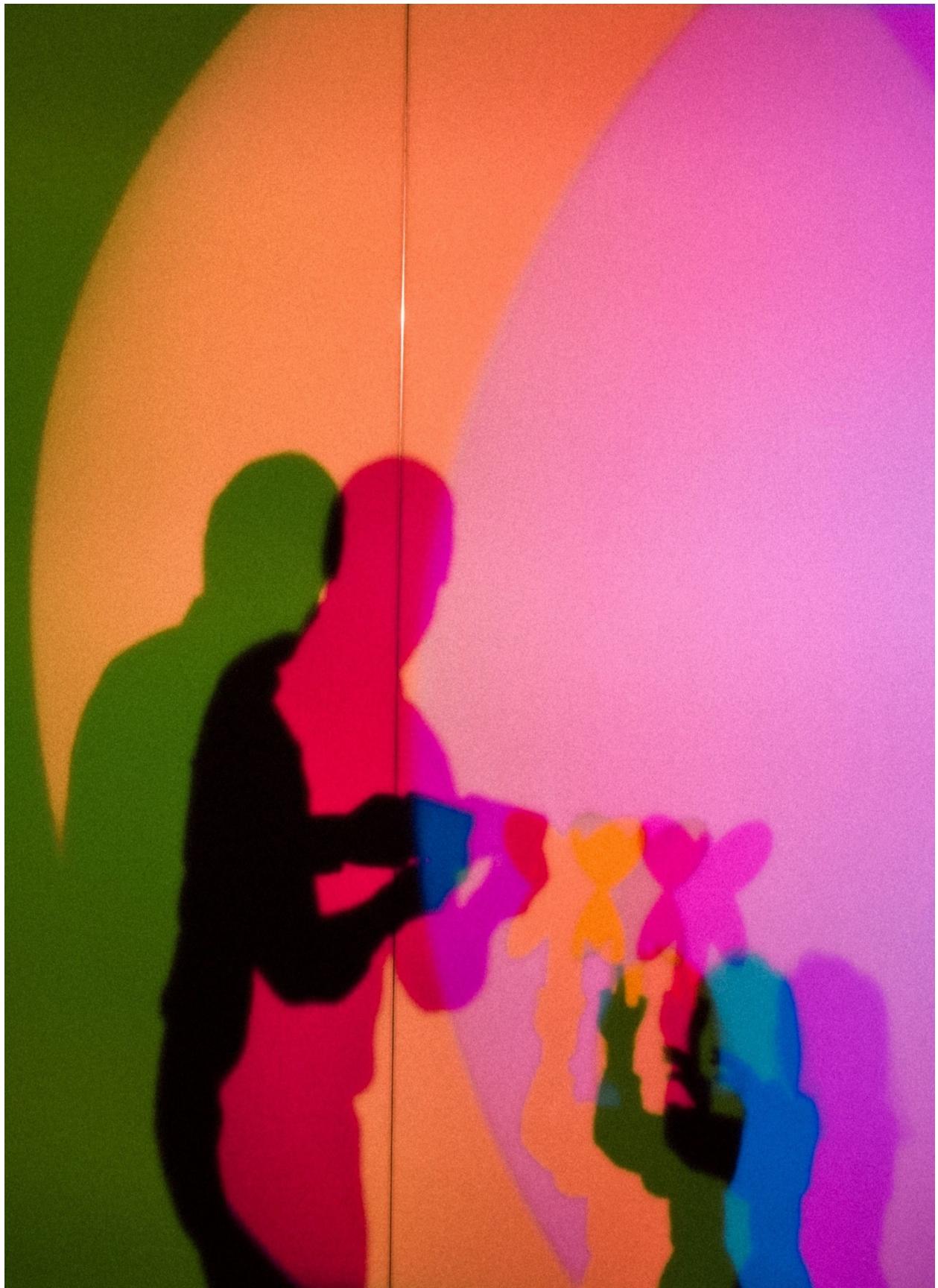
- [“The Nature of Color” at the Reopened American Museum of Natural History](#)

[October 12, 2020 Issue](#)

“The Nature of Color” at the Reopened American Museum of Natural History

Interactive installations teach visitors about the electromagnetic spectrum, purple dye’s connection to snails, and more.

October 2, 2020



Photograph by Daniel Arnold for The New Yorker

Leaf-peeping isn't the only way to bring color into your life this fall. One of the special exhibitions at the **American Museum of Natural History**, which is now open Wednesday through Sunday, is "The Nature of Color" (pictured above). In a series of installations, some of which are interactive, visitors can learn about everything from the electromagnetic spectrum to the fact that purple dye can be derived from snails. Timed-entry tickets must be reserved on the museum's Web site, at amnh.org.

Books

- [How James Beard Invented American Cooking](#)
- [The Day Nuclear War Almost Broke Out](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)

How James Beard Invented American Cooking

The gourmet's real genius wasn't in his recipes but in his packaging. He knew how to serve up the authenticity that his audiences craved.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

October 5, 2020



I had dinner with James Beard sometime in the spring of 1984. I was a youngster editing a “feature” on mentors and their protégés for a men’s fashion magazine, with photographs by William Wegman, the avant-garde artist famous for his neo-Surrealist images of his dog—things like that happened in the eighties. Beard’s protégé was the chef Larry Forgione, whose recently opened restaurant on Lexington Avenue, An American Place, had a quote from Beard on the menu. Over dinner, I had the impression that, as happens often in life, the protégé had adopted the mentor more enthusiastically than the mentor the protégé; the epigraph from Beard was opaque, not to say a little fatuous: “The truth is, one must be inspired to cook. For, You Know, we always learn from others and end up teaching ourselves.” But the point of the restaurant was to cook *American* American food. Part of the kitchen’s indigenous exoticism—not a contradiction; the whole point—was the presence on the menu of halibut, which Forgione proudly presented as an overlooked American fish. (Things like that happened in the eighties, too.)

Only Beard could preside over such ambition. For Beard, a stolid, even sleepy, presence that evening, was unquestionably, as the *Times* had called him in the nineteen-fifties, the “Dean of American Cookery,” in the same way that Aaron Copland was the “Dean of all American music,” as [Leonard Bernstein](#) called him in the same period. In both cases, the reputation was somewhat independent of the achievements. You didn’t have to know the tunes, or the recipes, to know that the mantle rested here.

Beard was perfectly cast. Large, broad, and jovial-seeming, a Santa of the buffet table, he was untouched by the nervous tension, produced by early training and endless anxiety, that ran like an electric current through classic French chefs in those days. He was also clearly a pro—he had run a restaurant and a catering business—unlike the charming amateur [Julia Child](#). Even in his waning years, he presented himself as a knowing headmaster overseeing the students.

Reading John Birdsall’s new biography of Beard, “[The Man Who Ate Too Much](#)” (W. W. Norton), I realize now that I had caught Beard in a somewhat sad dotage. (He would die a year after our dinner.) The only semi-memorable thing he offered that night was an anecdote, presumably meant to be mildly titillating, about eating in the nude with the great gastrophile [M. F. K. Fisher](#), whom, of course, he called Mary. This, too, was part of the act: though gay and happily so in private, he had trained himself to play a cagey part in public when it came to

his sexual tastes, as was the enforced manner of the day.

Birdsall's biography is very different in tone from the largely serious and admiring biographies that have been written about Child and Fisher. Without actually saying that Beard was a fraud, Birdsall suggests that he was something of a figurehead, one of those people who represent a field rather than remake it. By Birdsall's not particularly unkind record, Beard often borrowed other people's recipes, frequently recycled his own, and generally relied on other cooks for his innovations and, not infrequently, on editors and assistants for his prose. Still, Beard emerges from the inevitable biographer's bath of debunking as an essential figure in the emancipation of American cooking. Perhaps his abilities were those of the actor he had been in his youth, someone impersonating a gourmet more than actually knowing how to be one; Birdsall shows us a young Beard learning that all you have to do is swirl the wine around and sniff to pass as an oenophile. But the role that Beard invented and played was vital in creating a new idea of what American cooking was. In 1980, in the best restaurant guide in New York, all the four-star places were classic French ones. Four decades later, that type of restaurant has vanished, or has only been clinging to life (even before the pandemic), while places that share Beard's tastes, if not his food, are taken for granted as the best in show. Beard, having little to do with what they serve, has everything to do with what they've accomplished.

Beard, we learn, played a suggestively ambiguous role in capitalizing on the American abundance of the fifties and sixties, and then mediated a dialogue between the country's West and East Coasts that helped shape American cuisine. Born in 1903 and raised in Portland, Oregon, Beard was really a member of the Liebling-Hemingway generation, imprinted as he was by his experiences of France in the twenties. After a largely peripatetic childhood and a year at Reed, then a new liberal-arts college, he spent time in London and in Paris, studying voice, and then dove into performing, without great success, in London and New York and even silent Hollywood. His ambition to be an actor never really vanished. His move to food occurred, as much out of desperation as purpose, in the late thirties, under the influence of a couple of now forgotten New York socialites, Bill Rhode and James Barlow Cullum, Jr. Beard, his biographer tells us, "started the night wanting to go to bed with Bill; after hearing him talk for a couple of hours in Cullum's living room, he wanted to *be* Bill." Rhode showed that cooking could be a form of theatre. "His storytelling—the bravado behind the invented anecdotes—breathed life and drama into the recipes," Birdsall

writes. It was the central lesson that Beard absorbed: not merely selling the sizzle more than the steak but selling the story of how the sizzle came to be, even if the steak was not actually sizzling.

The next year, he joined with friends to open a catering business, the legendary Hors d’Oeuvre, Inc. It’s hard to believe now that a firm called Hors d’Oeuvre, Inc. could change the face of New York food, but it did. “The food at most cocktail parties relied on cheap, starchy fillers and bland spreads,” Birdsall reports. Instead, Beard served vichyssoise and stuffed tomatoes. Around this time, too, Beard met Jeanne Owen, a New York radio figure and a formidable gourmet. It was Owen who raised the brow of Beard’s palate, teaching him what was possible in French food; of the wineglass-swirling fakery, Birdsall adds that, if Beard “waited a minute, Jeanne would subtly signal to him what to think of it.” The relationship established a pattern in which Beard often depended on a woman partner who did not look the part of great chef quite as obviously as he did.

A lot of his authority derived from his appearance and his often heretical performances. He once scandalized but delighted an audience by mixing the egg whites and the base of a soufflé using only his hands. And his story about nude dining seems to have been thematic; he liked to cook and eat naked, and didn’t mind people knowing.

Building a reputation, he made his television début right after the war with a cooking spot on “Radio City Matinee.” It was here that he was introduced to a broad public, and he soon became a host of one of the first televised cooking shows, “I Love to Eat.” Birdsall writes that Beard exuded authority without pedantry—“he tempered information with folksiness and self-effacing fun.” One can’t help envy the ease with which Beard’s audience could be educated and edified—he encouraged viewers to seek out olive oil—but one recognizes that his tagline, “Yes! I love to eat!,” was exactly what Americans needed to hear to de-snob their culinary ambitions. The happy stout man showed that you could eat well without being frightened of eating incorrectly.

Beard’s rise on television in the forties coincided with the introduction of frozen food to America’s electric iceboxes, as they were called. Frozen food signalled both American ingenuity and the American degradation of fresh produce, and Beard skillfully played both sides of the supermarket aisle. On the one hand, he developed a professional relationship with the frozen-food company Birds Eye.

(It soon sponsored his television show, which was renamed “Birds Eye Open House.”) “Despite himself,” Birdsall tells us, Beard came up with “recipes for frozen squash with oranges, frozen green bean and ham hash, and frozen three-fruit compote.”

On the other hand, he came to understand that the empire of frozen food, including so-called TV dinners, was stirring a contrary demand, among a smaller but choicer market, for fresh produce and “natural” options. In an age when every neighborhood in Brooklyn makes six kinds of artisanal ale and every emporium on the West Side offers sixteen kinds of American chèvre, it may be hard to grasp that simply promoting decent American Cheddar was once a defiant assertion of value against the ascendancy of Velveeta.

Beard brought both an American curiosity about adventurous cooking and a conservative sensibility then seen as French to “[The Fireside Cook Book](#),” published in 1949 and gloriously illustrated by Alice and Martin Provensen. It expressed his love for the hearty “traditional cooking” of France, redefined for an American audience often simply by language games. Beard’s “country omelet,” in which eggs were combined with diced bacon sautéed with potatoes and onion, was just a variant of the French *omelette paysanne*, which used salted pork belly. “With American smoky bacon and an English name to reorient it,” Birdsall writes, “James created something new in *Fireside*: a dish that seemed to have roots with farmers in the Willamette or Susquehanna Valley, not villagers in the Rhône. American food.”

The book was, however, made up in large part of work already done: more than a hundred of its twelve hundred or so recipes were, Birdsall says, “slight tweaks of ones published in James’s previous books, with perhaps only a single word altered”; Birdsall calls these “brazen acts of self-plagiarism.” Self-plagiarism is a dubious concept in any case—Kant repeated the same ideas over and over—and in recipe books it seems an absurd one. If you have made something well once, why make it differently for the mere sake of variation? Nonetheless, the recycling irritated the New York food world—about as generous and free from competitive malice then as now—and the book, despite its still unequalled beauty, got a nasty pan in these pages from, as Birdsall deduces, a food writer named Sheila Hibben. She declared it “enormously pretentious, repetitious, padded with bits of women’s-magazine anthropology.” Birdsall suggests that Hibben wrote at the direction of Jeanne Owen, who apparently had fallen out with Beard. The experience left Beard with a cynical clarity: you just had to

push your way through, and rely on consumers, not critics, for your living.

“The Man Who Ate Too Much” makes a fascinating and persuasive case that Beard was brought to an idea of culinary Americanness by re-experiencing the American West. Taken with the recipes of Helen Evans Brown, who wrote the first substantial California cookbook, he spent much of 1954 with Brown in San Francisco, back home in Oregon, and in Seattle and Salt Lake City. Beard glimpsed what he considered a more authentic form of Americanness, which depended on cooking not being too self-consciously American. Once again with a woman to guide him, he sensed clearly that the future lay not with French cooking made American but with something akin to what came to be called fusion cooking. As a child, he’d watched a Chinese émigré he met adapt her cooking to the ingredients of the Oregon countryside and start to create something new. And, Birdsall illuminatingly points out, San Francisco bar-and-grills had been high-low joints from the start, serving steaks and cioppino alike. Ever afterward, the richest vein in Beard’s teaching depended on this epiphany: that what mattered was the hybrid connection of culinary cultures with good local foodstuff.

This primacy of a West Coast ethic in cleaning up New York anxieties was a general rule of American culture at the time. The painters Wayne Thiebaud and Richard Diebenkorn both had a less harried and tense relationship to their material—the one to pop culture, the other to landscape—than their New York counterparts could. Making the American sublime landscape into large-scale abstraction was a worry for Barnett Newman; Diebenkorn just kind of did it. The West Coast turned you on by turning off the pressure.

In the fifties, Beard moved to a town house in the West Village and began an extremely successful life as a cooking teacher. By the mid-sixties, he held food seminars for a student body made up, significantly, of men, many apparently of the executive class, seeking a new kind of fashionable accomplishment, much as nineteenth-century girls had mastered drawing. Some of the food prepared will seem to us now more alarming than appetizing: Birdsall describes “‘an elaborate jelly roll’ of veal, salami, mortadella, and prosciutto, to be wrapped around hard boiled eggs laid end-to-end down the center.” Beard published a series of books, some very successful and some less so—“[The James Beard Cookbook](#)” sold extremely well, while the lively recipe-sprinkled memoir “[Delights and Prejudices](#)” did not. He continued to depend unduly on editors and ghostwriters for his prose, and never quite got past the charges of cynical recycling.

Birdsall makes the right point: that the food being taught, despite its heavy and righteous patina of Americanness, was still essentially French in conception and technique. Tellingly, one of Beard's protégés was accused of plagiarizing a series of recipes from Richard Olney's "[Simple French Food](#)" for his own book on American cooking. That the national styles could be so neatly swivelled around says something about the common grammar of food. (Indeed, as the fine forgotten restaurant critic Seymour Britchky wrote back in the eighties, about Forgione's flagship, there was hardly a dish being served that, minus the American rhetoric, you couldn't have sold at a French place down the street.) It took small, constant waves of novelty—a variety of Eastern influences, the new primacy of Italian cooking, the emphasis on localism, implicit but not fully realized in Beard's food—to change that for good, and make American cooking less showily "American" and more unself-consciously itself.

Birdsall has a good story to tell, and tells it well, but he is one of those authors who would amuse others more if he amused himself a little less. He loves the sound of his own crabby and condescending judgments, and the proportion of sneering to seeing is sometimes high. He also has a weakness for breezy but off-beam generalizations about people and places: though one of them had worked at Disney, the Provensens, the gifted and original illustrators of Beard's "The Fireside Cook Book," were not "Disneyfied"—just the opposite, their style being rooted in Greek vase painting and in the art of Juan Gris—and New York publishing, in an era when Knopf and Liveright were both central, seems mischaracterized as "anti-Semitic." Birdsall's generalizations about France, where Beard visited throughout his life, can be particularly puzzling. De Gaulle's cultural minister André Malraux did not clean the Louvre in the sixties with an eye to luring American tourists—on the contrary, it was a declaration of French cultural preëminence. And if gay life in Paris was indeed driven underground in the fifties, compared to its supposed prewar flourishing, this has left little trace in the literary record; it was in 1952 that the locus classicus of French homophilia, Sartre's "Saint Genet," appeared, making transgressive sex seem not merely acceptable but sanctified, and an influx of gay American exiles, from James Baldwin to James Lord, filled the city in that period.

Well, damn braces and bless relaxes, as Blake propounded, and Birdsall is at his best when *he* relaxes and tells rather than judges. The Beard who finally emerges is indeed a big figure, and, if more role player than role model, his was the role that the play demanded at the moment. His books are a chronicle of beautiful borrowing. At one point, Birdsall, while pointing to recipes taken without credit,

also points out that in Beard's "[American Cookery](#)" there is "a kind of secret record of twentieth-century gay migration to cities from across the county and beyond its shores," with Lemon Cake Pudding and Slaw with Egg Dressing marking the flight of young gay men from their imprisoning provincial backgrounds to the havens of lower Manhattan and Los Angeles.

The migrations are the man, and the food. Beard's energetic foundation has kept his name alive, handing out prizes and grants (although this year's Oscars of Food were suspended). His critical contribution was to see that good American cooking is everything American, which is to say pretty much everything there is. Appetite is too honest in its nature to exalt anything that it doesn't relish. The British love of curry survived the loss of empire and left space for South Asian cooks in Scotland to develop tikka masala. French bistro fare, renamed, provided the syntax of American cooking, while the dietary staples of the Northwestern indigenous peoples provided its vocabulary. For all that James Beard didn't know, there was one thing he did: everything on your plate is hybrid, made from many kinds and from many places.

In this sense, all food writing is travel writing, a story of migrations and journeys, as all travel writing is at heart literary criticism, a comparison of books and experience. All books, meanwhile, exist in the first instance to feed their authors. The circle of life is shaped like a plate, and we share many at once, or just go hungry. ♦

The Day Nuclear War Almost Broke Out

In the nearly sixty years since the Cuban missile crisis, the story of near-catastrophe has only grown more complicated. What lessons can we draw from such a close call?

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

October 5, 2020



On October 27, 1962, a day that's been described as the "most dangerous" in human history, a Soviet submarine designated B-59 was churning through the Sargasso Sea when suddenly it was rocked by a series of explosions. "It felt like you were sitting in a metal barrel, which somebody is constantly blasting with a sledgehammer," Vadim Orlov, a communications specialist on board the sub, later recalled. "The situation was quite unusual, if not to say shocking, for the crew."

Four weeks earlier, B-59 had been dispatched from the U.S.S.R. with three other so-called F-class subs as part of Operation Anadyr, Nikita Khrushchev's top-secret effort to install ballistic missiles in Cuba. (The Anadyr is a river that flows into the Bering Sea; the code name was intended to make even soldiers participating in the operation believe they were headed somewhere cold.) Pretty much from the outset of the voyage, things had not gone well.

"For the sailors, this Cuban missile crisis started even before its beginning," Ryurik Ketov, the captain of another Cuba-bound sub, once observed. The Atlantic that October was turbulent, and the pitching sea made it tough for the boats to maintain their desired speed.

"You have to hold on to something even in your sleep, or else you'll fall off," a crew member complained. Communications, too, were difficult. Once past Iceland, the subs had trouble contacting Moscow; for a while, according to Ketov, the only voices audible over the radio "were those of Murmansk fishermen."

By the time President [John F. Kennedy](#) learned of Operation Anadyr, on October 16th, the subs were halfway across the Atlantic. By the time he announced the "quarantine" of Cuba, on October 22nd, they were nearing the island. They were ordered by the Soviet naval command to change course and take up positions in the Sargasso Sea. There a new set of problems arose. The subs, built for navigating farther north, had trouble operating in warm water. Temperatures inside rose to uncomfortable levels and kept on rising, to more than a hundred and ten degrees, and carbon-dioxide levels climbed, too. "It's getting hard to breathe in here," a crew member recorded in his diary.

By October 27th, conditions on B-59 were so bad that men were passing out; in the words of one, "They were falling like dominoes." American destroyers were

practically on top of the sub; this prevented it from surfacing to recharge its batteries and use its antenna. The boat's captain, Valentin Savitsky, knew from previous days' communications that a crisis was unfolding above the waves, but, unable to receive radio signals, he had no way of learning about recent developments.

To avoid escalation, American warships were supposed to follow a careful protocol when they came across subs. They were to drop harmless depth charges and instruct the subs to surface. But that day someone decided to drop hand grenades into the water. Savitsky ordered the crew to get ready to fire back.

"Maybe the war has already started up there, while we are doing somersaults here," he shrieked. "We're going to blast them now!"

What the grenade tossers did not know—what almost no one knew until four decades later—was that one of B-59's torpedoes was carrying what the Soviets called "special ammunition." The "special" part was a fifteen-kiloton nuclear warhead. Had Savitsky's orders been carried out, chances are good that the Americans would have responded in kind, and a full-scale nuclear war would have broken out. There should, it seems, be a useful lesson to be learned from that frantic afternoon. But what, in God's name, is it?

The story of what the Americans call the Cuban missile crisis, the Cubans call the October crisis, and the Russians call the Caribbean crisis has been told many times. The most influential account, which was also one of the earliest, was written by Robert F. Kennedy, the President's brother and Attorney General.

R.F.K. was a member of the Executive Committee of the National Security Council, or ExComm, which was swiftly assembled to advise the President during the crisis. In his memoir, eventually titled "Thirteen Days," he plays a leading role in the deliberations—so much so that one White House aide, who read a manuscript version of the book in 1964, a few months after J.F.K.'s assassination, is said to have remarked, "I thought Jack was President during the missile crisis." (Bobby, who was by then campaigning for the U.S. Senate, reportedly replied, "He's not running, and I am.")

In "[Thirteen Days](#)," R.F.K. portrays himself as levelheaded and high-minded. When other members of ExComm press for a surprise attack on Cuba, he counters that such an attack could not be launched without undermining the

United States' "moral position at home and around the globe." "Thirteen Days" was published in 1969, a year after its author's assassination; it has never been out of print since.

In the nineteen-seventies, in the midst of the Watergate scandal, it was revealed that J.F.K. had secretly taped most of ExComm's deliberations. He'd had a recorder installed in the basement of the West Wing that could be discreetly activated by flipping a switch under the table in the Cabinet Room. In the nineteen-eighties and nineties, the tapes were gradually declassified and released. Meanwhile, the breakup of the Soviet Union gave historians access to documents and other materials that had previously been off limits. As a result, just about everything anyone has claimed about his own conduct during the crisis has been called into question.

In "[Gambling with Armageddon: Nuclear Roulette from Hiroshima to the Cuban Missile Crisis](#)" (Knopf), Martin J. Sherwin summarizes the "official" narrative of the "thirteen days" as follows. Members of ExComm, through "their careful consideration of the challenge, their firmness in the face of terrifying danger, and their wise counsel," steered the world to a peaceful resolution of a potentially civilization-ending conflict. Nothing, he writes, "could be further from the truth." The guidance J.F.K. received was, for the most part, lousy. Some of it was loony. Had he heeded ExComm's "wise counsel," chances are I would not be writing this, or you reading it. As the President told a friend not long after the crisis ended, "You have no idea how much bad advice I had in those days."

As it happens, much of this bad advice came from the author of "Thirteen Days." "Oh, shit! Shit! Shit!" the supposedly levelheaded Attorney General exclaimed when informed that the Soviets were installing missiles in Cuba. "Those sons of bitches Russians."

At the time of the missile crisis, R.F.K. headed the awkwardly named Special Group (Augmented), which oversaw the Kennedy Administration's covert efforts to topple Fidel Castro. Among the many schemes that had been suggested to this end were Operation Free Ride, which would have dropped plane tickets on Cuba, good for a one-way trip to Mexico City or Caracas, and Operation Bingo, which would have staged an attack on the U.S. base at Guantánamo Bay in order to justify a counterattack. On Day One of the missile crisis, R.F.K. proposed his own version of Bingo. The U.S. should "sink the *Maine* again or something" to provide cover for invading Cuba. So much for high-mindedness.

Sherwin, a professor of history at George Mason University, is the author of two previous books on the development of atomic weapons. In his view, it's not just the claims of those who were directly involved in the missile crisis that need to be reevaluated; it's also the claims of many who were not. This latter group includes President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

In the lead-up to the 1960 election, the Eisenhower Administration had started to train Cuban exiles in Guatemala; the plan—supposedly top-secret—was that the exiles would return home as a guerrilla force and rally the disenchanted Cuban public to depose Castro. The plan's cover was quickly blown. In October, 1960, a Guatemalan newspaper reported that the C.I.A. had spent a million dollars on a property that it intended to use for training exercises.

Eisenhower didn't care for Kennedy. During the campaign, he had declared privately that he'd do "almost anything to avoid turning the country over" to him, and, to his staff, he referred to J.F.K. as "Little Boy Blue." According to Sherwin, Eisenhower wanted Kennedy to feel compelled to carry out his no longer secret plan. At a meeting the day before J.F.K.'s Inauguration, Eisenhower told the incoming President that it was the new Administration's "responsibility" to do "whatever is necessary" to get rid of Castro. "We cannot let the present government there go on," Eisenhower reportedly said.

Kennedy had used Cuba against his opponent—Richard Nixon, Eisenhower's Vice-President. "If you can't stand up to Castro, how can you be expected to stand up to Khrushchev?" he'd chided. This boxed Kennedy in; if he rejected Eisenhower's plan, he'd be criticized on precisely the ground he'd criticized Nixon. The result, of course, was a fiasco. On April 17, 1961, the exiles landed on the beach at Bahía de Cochinos—the Bay of Pigs. It took Castro's forces less than two days to round up or kill them all. Kennedy at first tried to deny that the U.S. had anything to do with the scheme, but that lie was quickly exposed. The director of the C.I.A., Allen Dulles, had assumed that, once the operation got under way, Kennedy would send the U.S. military to support the ill-prepared guerrillas. But the President refused to do so.

Following the debacle, some Kennedy confidants falsely claimed that they'd opposed the plan. The President was enraged by this duplicity, and there's some speculation that this was what prompted him to install the secret taping apparatus in the West Wing. Eisenhower, for his part, insisted throughout his life that he had never passed on a "plan" to invade Cuba, a claim Sherwin likens to Bill

Clinton's, vis-à-vis Monica Lewinsky, that "there's nothing going on between us." ("It depends on what the meaning of the word 'is' is," Clinton later explained.)

A lesson Kennedy seems to have taken from the Bay of Pigs—in addition to the importance of keeping good records—was that even the most knowledgeable advisers can screw things up royally. After the Bay of Pigs, "he was more skeptical of the recommendations which came to him from the experts," Ted Sorenson, one of Kennedy's closest aides, later reported. This would serve J.F.K. well when it came time for him to deal with ExComm.

Khrushchev lit on the idea of sending missiles to Cuba almost exactly a year after the Bay of Pigs. He was convinced, correctly, that the U.S. was still intent on ousting Castro, and he wanted to prevent that from happening. Surely the Americans would think twice about attacking Cuba if they knew it was equipped with nuclear warheads. Also, just a year earlier, the U.S. had installed intermediate-range ballistic missiles in Turkey, a Soviet neighbor, so he thought that missiles in Cuba would right the balance of terror.

Before the Americans realized what was going on, Khrushchev had managed to ship forty thousand troops and more than a hundred and sixty nuclear warheads to Cuba. "American intelligence was good for nothing," General Anatoly Gribkov, the Soviet General Staff's chief of operations at the time, crowed years later. The tipoff finally came from spy-plane photographs.

ExComm, whose members included Vice-President [Lyndon Johnson](#), Secretary of State Dean Rusk, and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, spent its first few sessions debating how best to destroy the missiles. Should there be a declaration of war? Air strikes on the sites? No one knew if any of the missiles were operational, which was obviously a major intelligence shortcoming. Should air strikes be followed by a full-scale invasion of Cuba? In that case, ninety thousand troops would have to be assembled, and it was hard to imagine how such preparations could be kept secret. McNamara warned that any form of "direct military action" would prompt a Soviet response along the same lines. But this might be "worth the price," he opined. "Perhaps we should pay that." R.F.K. worried that, in the days between air strikes and the deployment of ground troops, international pressure against an invasion would build. Wasn't there some way, he asked, to get an invasion "started, so that there wasn't any turning back?"

A few days into the crisis, Kennedy began to pull away from his advisers. It was imperative to get the missiles out of Cuba, but it was also imperative to avoid a nuclear exchange—what he termed “the final failure.” He argued in favor of blockading Cuba, rather than invading it. (The “blockade” eventually became a “quarantine,” because the former assumes a state of war.)

What prompted the shift in Kennedy’s thinking? Sherwin gives much of the credit to Adlai Stevenson, J.F.K.’s Ambassador to the U.N.—and his former opponent for the 1960 Democratic nomination—who, notably, was not a member of ExComm. Early in the deliberations, Stevenson happened to attend a lunch at the White House for the Crown Prince of Libya. After the lunch, the President pulled him aside to show him the spy photographs.

“I suppose the alternatives are to go in by air and wipe them out, or to take other steps to render the weapons inoperable,” Kennedy said.

“Let’s not go into an air strike until we have explored the possibilities of a peaceful solution,” Stevenson replied. This hardly seems a novel idea, but, Sherwin maintains, it was “the first reaction of its kind to confront Kennedy.” Stevenson subsequently sent J.F.K. a memo advocating that diplomacy be pursued before attacks, which, in Sherwin’s account, “provided Kennedy with a blueprint to do exactly that.” In an interesting twist, Sherwin presents J.F.K.’s well-known dislike of Stevenson as evidence in support of his theory. “The psychology is complicated,” he acknowledges.

Despite J.F.K.’s (and Stevenson’s) best efforts, the world came perilously close to “the final failure” on day twelve of the thirteen—a Saturday. Even as Savitsky was ordering the “special ammunition” to be loaded, the situation on land was spinning out of control. On what became known as Black Saturday, an American spy plane was shot down over Cuba, and Khrushchev received a message from Castro that seemed to urge a nuclear strike against the U.S. (Castro’s thoughts, translated into Russian, were a bit hard for the Soviet Premier to decipher.) That evening, R.F.K. was charged with making an offer to the Soviet Ambassador, Anatoly Dobrynin. If the Soviets removed their missiles from Cuba, the Americans would pledge not to invade the island. As an added incentive, the U.S., in the next several months, would pull its missiles from Turkey. Key to the deal, Dobrynin was told, was that the provisions about Turkey be kept secret.

In fact, they were kept so secret that most members of ExComm were unaware

of them. Johnson wasn't informed that the President had traded away American warheads, even after he became President. The lesson L.B.J. seems to have drawn from the crisis was that Kennedy had succeeded by refusing to compromise. This would have deeply unfortunate consequences when it came time for Johnson to deal with North Vietnam.

In the fall of 1962, Sherwin was a junior officer in the U.S. Navy. As the air-intelligence officer for an anti-submarine-warfare training unit based in San Diego, he was the custodian of the deployment orders that the unit was to follow in case of war. On the day that Kennedy announced the quarantine, Sherwin was instructed to retrieve the orders from his office safe and deliver them to his commanding officer. As he recalls, the orders said that, in the event of war, the unit was to deploy to an airfield in Baja California. There were jokes that Baja would be a beautiful place to die.

"I did not know until I researched this book how close to death we had come," Sherwin writes.

Sherwin makes much of the events aboard B-59, and focusses, in particular, on the role of Vasily Arkhipov, a Soviet Navy captain who happened to be travelling on the sub. Before Arkhipov set off for Cuba, he had already been involved in a nuclear disaster, as an officer on a vessel designated K-19. This was the U.S.S.R.'s first nuclear-armed and nuclear-powered submarine. It had been rushed into service in an effort to keep up with the Americans, and it was so danger-prone that its crew began to refer to it as "Hiroshima." In the summer of 1961, K-19 was participating in exercises off the coast of Greenland when its reactor-coolant system failed. It had no backup system. K-19's commander sent in crew members to repair the damage, knowing they were likely to receive lethal doses of radiation. Within days, eight of the crew members who had volunteered for the task were dead.

According to various accounts, it was Arkhipov who talked Savitsky down from firing B-59's nuclear torpedo and, potentially, starting the Third World War. Sherwin suggests that, if it weren't for Arkhipov's experience off Greenland, he might not have stepped in. More fundamentally, Sherwin concludes, it was a matter of chance that war was averted. Arkhipov, he observes, could have been assigned to a different sub. Or the commander of one of the other subs could have decided to launch a torpedo. Or Adlai Stevenson could have skipped lunch at the White House, or the message from Castro to Khrushchev could have been

further obscured in translation, or Khrushchev could have rejected the deal that R.F.K. proposed to Dobrynin. Had countless other possible decisions been made during those thirteen days, the crisis might have been remembered very differently—had there been anyone around to remember it. As E. B. White once put it, admittedly in another context, “Things might easily have gone the other way round, and none left to do the accounting.”

“Unanticipated events can happen no matter how carefully actions are planned,” Sherwin writes. “Avoiding their terrible consequences is often as much a matter of luck as it is of careful management.” This would be a discomfiting message in the best of times. It seems especially so right now. Just two weeks after Inauguration Day, the last remaining nuclear-arms treaty between the U.S. and Russia—the so-called New *START*—is set to expire. The Trump Administration has already scuttled the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty—it withdrew from the accord last year—and its efforts on behalf of New *START* have been so halfhearted it seems likely to lapse, too. As the journal *Arms Control Today* noted, were this to happen there would “be no legally binding limits on the world’s two largest nuclear arsenals for the first time in nearly five decades.” In case you need another reason to lie awake at night, there’s that. ♦

[October 12, 2020 Issue](#)

Briefly Noted

“Perilous Bounty,” “Sex and Lies,” “The Awkward Black Man,” and “The Searcher.”

October 5, 2020

"A tour de force." —Bill McKibben

PERILOUS BOUNTY

The Looming Collapse
of American Farming and
How We Can Prevent It

TOM PHILPOTT

BLOOMSBURY

Perilous Bounty, by Tom Philpott (Bloomsbury). Focussing on the agricultural crises of California's Central Valley and the Midwest, this study illustrates how years of shortsighted policies and practices have brought the nation's food systems to the point of collapse. California, which yields fruits, vegetables, and nuts, relies on precarious water supplies, threatened by droughts and floods, while the dominant crops of the Midwest, corn and soybeans, are depleting the region's soil. Philpott characterizes industrial agriculture as an oligopoly, dominated by a few companies that squeeze farmers and by financial firms that bet on land and water shortages, and he discerningly identifies past mistakes and possible solutions.

LEILA SLIMANI

bestselling author of *The Perfect Nanny* and *Adele*

SEX AND LIES



**TRUE STORIES OF
WOMEN'S INTIMATE LIVES
IN THE ARAB WORLD**



"Slimani is an astute observer of power politics
in the home." —The Boston Globe

[**Sex and Lies**](#), by Leïla Slimani, translated from the French by Sophie Lewis (Penguin). While on book tour in her native Morocco, Slimani, best known for her novels about female transgression, collected stories of women from many walks of life about laws that criminalize abortion, premarital sex, homosexuality, and adultery. Although the Arab Spring increased openness about sex, repressive cultural norms still foster a shadow society, in which people of all ages and religious backgrounds secretly engage in sexual activity, despite fear of exposure. Slimani's interviewees convey the social stresses that this strict environment gives rise to. As Slimani writes, "We can view this condition of sexual deprivation as an obstacle to the development of individuals and citizens."

THE
AWKWARD
BLACK
MAN

STORIES

WALTER
MOSLEY

The Awkward Black Man, by Walter Mosley (Grove). These seventeen bold stories of brokenhearted Black men depart from Mosley's usual detective genre. His emotionally "stuck" characters, shattered by lost loves and missed chances, want to "turn off the world outside," often leading to self-destruction. They recount misunderstood gestures of attention to white women, and receive incorrect medical diagnoses. One seeks therapeutic counselling after a wife's betrayal; another imagines the afterlife. A plastic surgeon reveals his passion for neurological science, and a man undertakes a questionable experiment involving "transmigration of the human soul." The stories are tinged with sardonic humor and acerbic observations, many echoing the pained, bristling voices of Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin.

New York Times bestselling author of
THE WITCH ELM

TANA
FRENCH

The Searcher

A NOVEL



[**The Searcher**](#), by Tana French (*Viking*). A small farming town in the West of Ireland is the setting for this novel by the veteran thriller writer, which offers a larger reflection on morality in policing. Cal, a former Chicago officer, moves there, broken down by years of trying to be a good cop in a bad system. Soon, he is asked to find a missing boy from a poor family. As Cal investigates, unaided (and unhindered) by a badge, he finds himself embroiled in local politics and in the decades-old grudges of townspeople. The novel, presumably finished before the protests of this past summer, scants issues of race and violence in policing, but French's portrayal of intimate village dynamics is nuanced and compelling.

Comment

- [**The Coronavirus and the Threat Within the White House**](#)

[October 12, 2020 Issue](#)

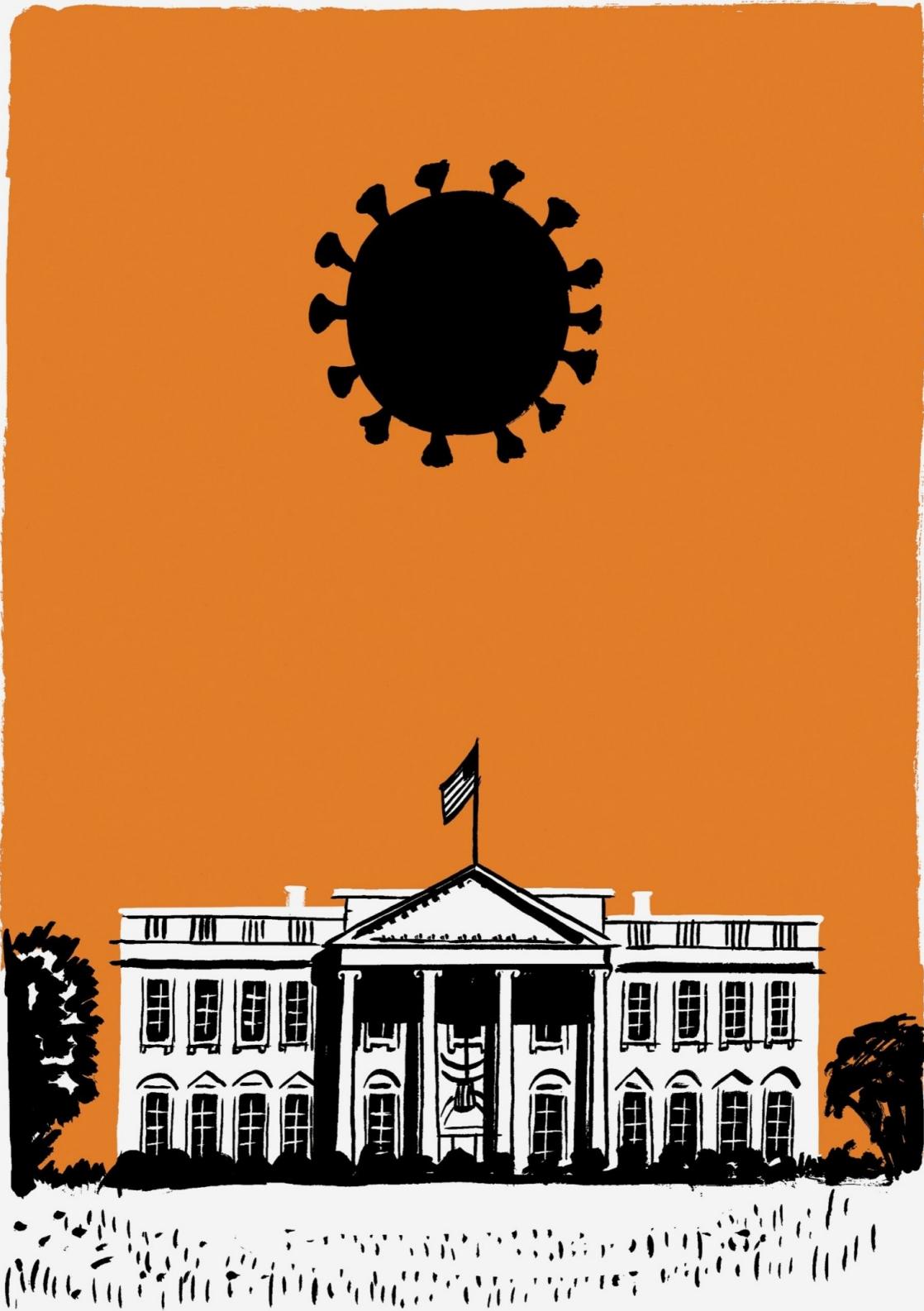
The Coronavirus and the Threat Within the White House

The best security system and the most solicitous medical officers in the world could not protect Donald Trump from a danger that he insisted on belittling and ignoring.

By [David Remnick](#)

October 3, 2020

From the start of his Presidency, [Donald Trump](#) has threatened the health and the security of the United States. It has now been made clear that Trump's incompetence, cynicism, and recklessness have threatened his own welfare. Even the best security system and the most solicitous medical officers in the world could not protect him from a danger that he insisted on belittling and ignoring. On Friday, at 12:54 a.m., Trump announced by Twitter that he and the [First Lady](#) had tested positive for the [novel coronavirus](#). By the end of the evening, "out of an abundance of caution," the President had gone to Walter Reed hospital to spend "the next few days." The Trumps join the more than seven million other Americans who have contracted the virus. More than two hundred thousand have died from *Covid-19*, the disease it causes. Most of them were older than sixty-five. Trump is seventy-four.



The contrast between Trump’s airy dismissals of the pandemic’s severity and the profound pain and anxiety endured by so many Americans has helped define the era in which we live. Hours before he announced the diagnosis, Trump claimed, in a speech recorded for the annual Al Smith Dinner for Catholic charities, that “the end of the pandemic is in sight, and next year will be one of the greatest years in the history of our country.”

Any ailing individual ought to be able to depend on the best wishes of others—and on affordable, decent [health care](#). Trump can depend on both, even if millions of Americans cannot. We can only hope that he and his wife get through the virus in a couple of weeks with minimal suffering, and, with prime medical attention and a modicum of luck, there’s reason to think that they will. But, as President and as a candidate for reelection, Trump should not count on the silencing of American citizens—on a deference that he has never shown to the people whom he swore to protect and has not. Because of his ineptitude and his deceit, because he has encouraged a culture of heedlessness about the wearing of masks and a lethal disrespect for scientific fact, he bears a grave responsibility for what has happened in this country. It will never be known precisely how many preventable deaths can be ascribed to his irresponsibility, but modest estimates run into the tens of thousands. Yet Trump’s insistence that Americans pay the virus little mind never ends. Just before the death toll reached two hundred thousand, last month, he declared at a rally in Ohio that the virus “affects virtually nobody. It’s an amazing thing.”

In terms of scale, the West Wing is less like the Kremlin or the Élysée Palace than like the cramped executive offices of a medium-sized insurance company. The hallways are tight. The chairs in the Cabinet Room sit close to one another. The Oval Office itself, where Presidents routinely hold working sessions with many aides, is smaller than you might expect. And yet numerous reports in the press have described how, owing to the President’s attitude, employees, reporters, and visitors to the West Wing are disdained or mocked if they [wear a mask](#).

[The Centers for Disease Control](#) and other public-health institutions have long said that wearing masks is essential to minimizing the spread of the coronavirus. Trump has been of another opinion, a delusional one. In April, as he would so many times, he waved the counsel away, saying, “I don’t think I’m going to be doing it.” He went on, “I don’t know, somehow sitting in the Oval Office behind

that beautiful Resolute desk, the great Resolute desk. I think wearing a face mask as I greet Presidents, Prime Ministers, dictators, kings, queens—I don’t know, somehow I don’t see it for myself.”

That this perilous variety of magical thinking has encouraged all manner of self-destructive behavior across the country—in crowded bars and on beaches, at motorcycle rallies, at Trump rallies—heightens not only the chances of lethal outbreaks in countless cities and towns but also the divisions among our citizens. Trump regularly mocks his opponent, [Joe Biden](#), for taking care to wear a mask at public events. “Every time you see him, he’s got a mask,” he said during Tuesday night’s Presidential debate in Cleveland. “He could be speaking two hundred feet away, and he shows up with the biggest mask I’ve ever seen.” (On Friday morning, the Democratic standard-bearer tweeted, “Jill and I send our thoughts to President Trump and First Lady Melania Trump for a swift recovery. We will continue to pray for the health and safety of the president and his family.”)

It is difficult to overstate the psychological overload that the drama of the Trump Presidency presents to anyone who has been following the narrative. Take a week in the life: One day we learn that Trump, who is alleged to be the wealthiest President in U.S. history, paid [just seven hundred and fifty dollars in federal income tax](#) during his first year in office. Then comes a debate performance in which he tries to baselessly undermine mail-in voting and [asks the Proud Boys](#), a far-right extremist group, to “stand back and stand by”—presumably, to be mobilized should he lose. He made it plain, as he has in his public speeches, that he is not so much running for reëlection as running against the election itself, hoping to invalidate its results preëmptively with threats and conspiracy theories. Then, at an ugly, mask-free rally in Minnesota on Wednesday, Trump riled the crowd, declaring that a Biden Presidency would “inundate your state with a historic flood of refugees.” Misinformation and violence, too, are contagions, and Trump, who sees only political advantage in fomenting schism and mistrust, has long been a superspreader.

There is no way of knowing how the President’s illness will shape the coming weeks. The polls suggest a motivation for the desperation of his rhetoric and his tactics: the last time there was a polling deficit like the one we’re now seeing at this point in a national election was in 1996, when Bob Dole trailed [Bill Clinton](#) all the way to Election Day. The President is obsessed with menaces—posed by shadowy members of a “deep state,” by “the radical left,” by foreigners of all

sorts. But the gravest menace to public health and public order has come from within the White House. So long as Trump holds office, no manner of quarantine will suffice to contain it. ♦

More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now](#)?

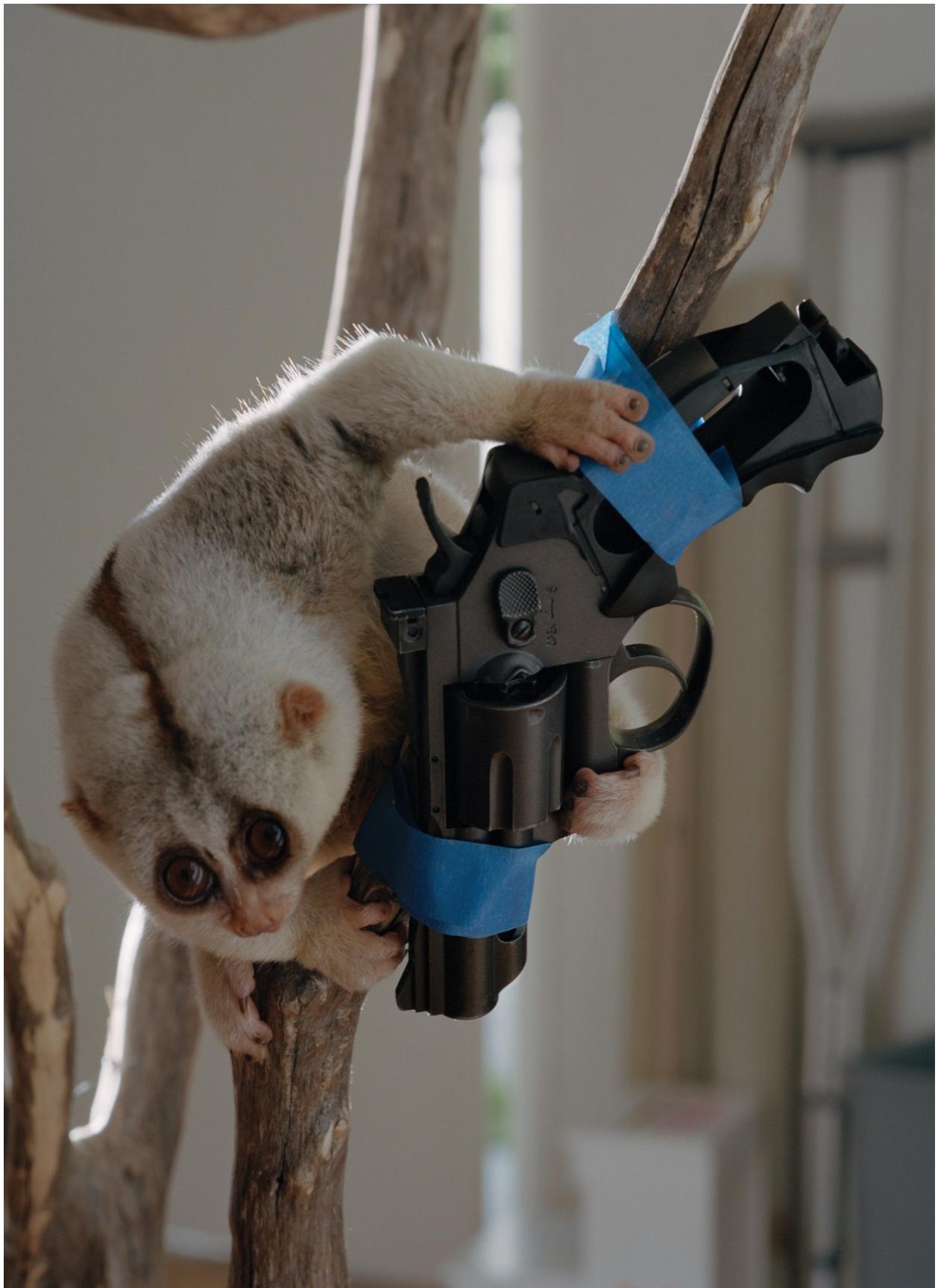
Fiction

- “Suffocation Theory”

Suffocation Theory

By [David Rabe](#)

October 5, 2020



Audio: David Rabe reads.

Amanda surprised me when she said we had to move. I'd barely got in the door, barely been in the hallway of our apartment a second, when she passed in and out of my peripheral vision, catching sight of me, I guess, and making her announcement. I'd been planning to take off my shoes and flop down on the couch with a cup of coffee to watch the news on TV—one blast of terrible news after another. I didn't know what the terrible news would be today, but I knew it'd be terrible. Car crashes would be the least of it. Accidental ones, anyway. It had become common for people in cars to mow other people down. But that wasn't the only thing. There were terrorists and gun battles in shopping malls. Locals and tourists in Malaysia and Mali and London and Paris fleeing, stampeding, as soldiers ducked behind jewelry displays and fast-food counters, hunting down militants in one boutique after another. Bombs were often involved. We'd all become familiar with acronyms like I.E.D. Long guns—that was another term we were necessarily familiar with. *Boom*, they'd go, these I.E.D.s, in churches, synagogues, mosques, concert halls, and the aforementioned shopping malls. Movie theatres, too. Strip malls. Scattered and maimed bodies, an outward gyre of victims propelled from the explosion. Or the perpetrator (or perpetrators) might arrive with military-style weapons loaded with clips or magazines of hundreds of rounds. Like that goofy-looking white kid who went to a church meeting, where those prayerful African-Americans welcomed him, and he listened to them read the Bible, and then he stood up and started shooting them.

Something is up. That's what I think. Something is up.

Anyway, back to the cars. Or maybe not. I don't want to forget the pundits, who come on right after the shootings or the bombings, as regular as clockwork, these experts, talking heads, network contributors on national security or terrorism or profiling the criminal mind. Lone wolf or affiliated? A bomb goes off and these experts weigh in, a banner below them broadcasting their names and specialties. I find the fact that they show up consoling, the way they chart a course through the mayhem.

[David Rabe on nightmares in daily life.](#)

Anyway, I came in the door eager to get settled in front of the terrible news. I'd grown addicted, you might say. "Dependent" was probably closer. I had come to

feel that it was important for me to pay attention to it all. It seemed the responsible thing to do.

A gun, a bomb, or a car, the instrument was always in the hands of a person or people overcome by the power of this very powerful idea, this irresistible idea—at least to them—that killing a bunch of strangers would solve whatever problem they thought they couldn’t solve in any other way. The problem might be personal—a lost job, a failed marriage. Or it might be cosmic, with supernatural imperatives. Some astrophysical battle between light and dark. This religion or that one. Or this one over that one. But the solution was always the same. Dead strangers. Sometimes these terrible news events were deemed to be terrorist events—bloodshed with a political motive. Sometimes the deaths were the result of rage or simple insanity. Not that the factors couldn’t be combined. And then there were storms, floods, tornadoes. Those received some attention, too. Entire small towns wiped out. Overturned double-wides. That kind of thing. But I have to say that bad weather was a relief when compared with all the other pieces of terrible news, because it didn’t have a human behind it. Unless it was due to our ignorance, greed, indifference, self-delusion. Everybody argued, “Climate change this and that.” But not this one environmentalist. With dark, stricken eyes, he said that calling it “climate change” was wrong, because it should be called “climate suffocation.” That was what would happen once the oceans stopped making oxygen, which was already happening, with dead zones and oxygen declines. The oceans were suffocating. And after they stopped producing oxygen the trees would stop, too. And the fish and sea life would suffocate; the animals would all suffocate.

When I caught up with Amanda, I told her that I liked our apartment. I hadn’t known we were thinking of moving. But she had everything arranged, she said. The movers were on their way up. I went to the window and there were cars and people on the street, but no moving van. Then I heard loud knocking, and she yelled at me to “let them in,” and when I failed to move, pretending I was captivated by things outside, she ran past me, shouting that she didn’t understand why she had to do everything. I said I didn’t know why, either. They came in, six big men in uniforms, with their names embroidered on their shirts in red stitching, right above the chest pocket—Brett and Tom and Buck were three of the names. Actually, it was seven men. And when I counted again there were eight. There was a logo of a truck on the back of their jackets. They were laughing and pushing one another, like cowboys or football players. They started taking our furniture—two of them to the armchair, three to the couch. Several

were dismantling the television.

Grabbing my shoes before one of the movers took them, I headed for the door.

The new apartment was a big disappointment. Too small to be a real warehouse, it had that feeling of vast emptiness one finds in a warehouse. Amanda kept saying that it was perfect. She ran from room to room, shouting, “I like it! I like it! It’s perfect!” I still didn’t understand why we’d had to leave our old place. I really didn’t like the new neighborhood. And we had this new roommate. I could tell the minute I saw him that I disliked him and he disliked me. Amanda said that we’d get used to each other. She said that it would work out and that it would save money. We’d been living frugally but nicely, I thought. Money didn’t seem to be a problem. At least, not more of a problem than it was for most middle-of-the-road people. So I was completely confused by what she said. I could tell that the kids were unhappy, too, wandering about barefoot, in clothes that needed to be washed.

I told Amanda that I didn’t like the new apartment or the new neighborhood. She gave me her patented fed-up headshake, which left no doubt that I’d just confirmed something she knew about me and could barely tolerate. The point here was that, although the new neighborhood wasn’t that far from the old one, it was drastically different. Our old place was on a wide, beautiful street running along the crest of a hill. Below it was another street running parallel to the crest of the hill. And below that another parallel street, and so on, for five streets down, each one getting narrower, more potholed, and dirtier. Desolate and chaotic would be a good way to evoke the lonely, abandoned mood of the last street, the fifth street, where the new apartment was. Almost no one had a car and nearly everyone you saw was bedraggled and despondent. The amount of trash adrift in the wind and kicked by these dispirited people steadily grew. It wasn’t a class system, Amanda said, but just the way things were.

I’d gone out to look around and get a better feel for the new neighborhood when it suddenly got dark, and there were no street lights. I was on one of the side streets that ran up and down the hill. It was an irritating feature of the area that the street signs disappeared as you got lower. I couldn’t remember how to get back into the new building. The door in front of me didn’t look right, but I went in anyway, and started to climb the stairs. Usually, in this type of building, there’s a door on each landing, marked with a number to indicate the floor. But this stairway didn’t offer that kind of exit or information; nor did it switch back

the way most stairways do. It just kept going straight up, which meant that the building was very, very tall, and unusually wide. At last, I spied a door very far above me, a hundred yards or more. It seemed too far to go without knowing if I was in the right place. After backing down a few steps, I turned and hurried the rest of the way until I was outside, where I recognized the shabby façade of our building across the street. I didn't have a key to the front entrance yet, but one of the movers held the door open for me.

The new roommate was the first person I saw when I got to the apartment. Blond, younger than me, muscular across the shoulders, which was all I could see of him, except for his calves and the lower portion of his thighs, he trailed water on the floor, his hair sopping. He had wrapped a beach towel around himself and tucked it high under his armpits, the way women do, so the towel covered him from his armpits to his thighs. In one hand, he held a sandwich that looked like ham and cheese on white bread, gobs of mustard dripping out, and in his other hand he had a pistol, and he was walking around the way people do when they're looking for something.

"Did you lose something?" I asked.

"Why?"

"You look like you're looking for something."

"No."

"Where'd you get that?" I nodded in the general direction of his hand and fixed my eyes on the gun.

"It's mine," he told me. "Don't worry."

"I don't want guns in this place."

"It's just one."

"I'll get one, too. If you have one, I think I'd better have one."

"If you want."

"That's what I'll do."

“So right now the one I have is the only one here.” He smiled icily.

“But I’m going to get one.”

He pointed the pistol at me. It was silver-plated with a long barrel and a white pearl handle.

“Don’t do that.”

“Why?”

“I don’t like it.”

“Why?” He put the gun against my temple. Then he pressed the barrel into my cheek. He stuck it against my stomach and my chest. He bumped my cheek with the tiny tip thing on the end of the barrel—one, two, three, four, five, too many times. He tried to poke it into my mouth. I pushed it away.

“I don’t like it here,” I said.

“I do. It’s nice.”

“I don’t like the neighborhood.”

I don’t know how long we talked like that. Amanda came back from wherever she was, and I said I needed to take a shower. She pointed me to the bathroom, and that was when I discovered that there was no shower. Just this old bathtub full of scummy water, which must have been left from the new roommate’s bath. There was rust on the faucet handles, and the tub had old-fashioned legs, like chicken legs. I started shouting that I needed a bathroom with a shower. We argued for a while. Amanda looked hurt and angry, but she kept yelling, so I kept yelling. I don’t know for how long. But when we stopped the President was on the television, shouting. He wanted revenge. He wanted to get even. He started reading from a list of names of people and countries that he liked. He had a second list of people and countries that he hated, and it was long, and eventually some of the names from the first list started showing up.

Then the front-door buzzer buzzed, indicating that somebody wanted to be let in, and when I went down and pulled the door open there was Amanda, with dirt smeared on her face and a thick black hose thing in her hands. “I got this for

you,” she said.

At that instant, I heard cursing. A large, lumpy man in a ripped shirt jumped out of his car and threw open the hood. “It’s gone, goddammit!”

I looked for Amanda, but didn’t see her. Something tugged at my pants leg. She was down on her belly, and I realized that the dirty tube thing was a car part that she had stolen. “For the shower,” she said.

“What?”

“For your shower.”

That was her way of saying that she’d taken the hose because I’d been upset. She explained that she hoped to rig a shower by running the car hose from the tub faucet up over this kind of towel-rack thing sticking out of the wall, so the water could pour down.

“But it will be filthy, because it’s a car part,” I told her. “You have not really thought this through.”

“No. The water will clean it out.” She looked scared, and I wanted to help her, although I was mad. I inched the hose in through the doorway, so as not to draw attention from the owner, who stomped around his car, screaming and slamming the hood.

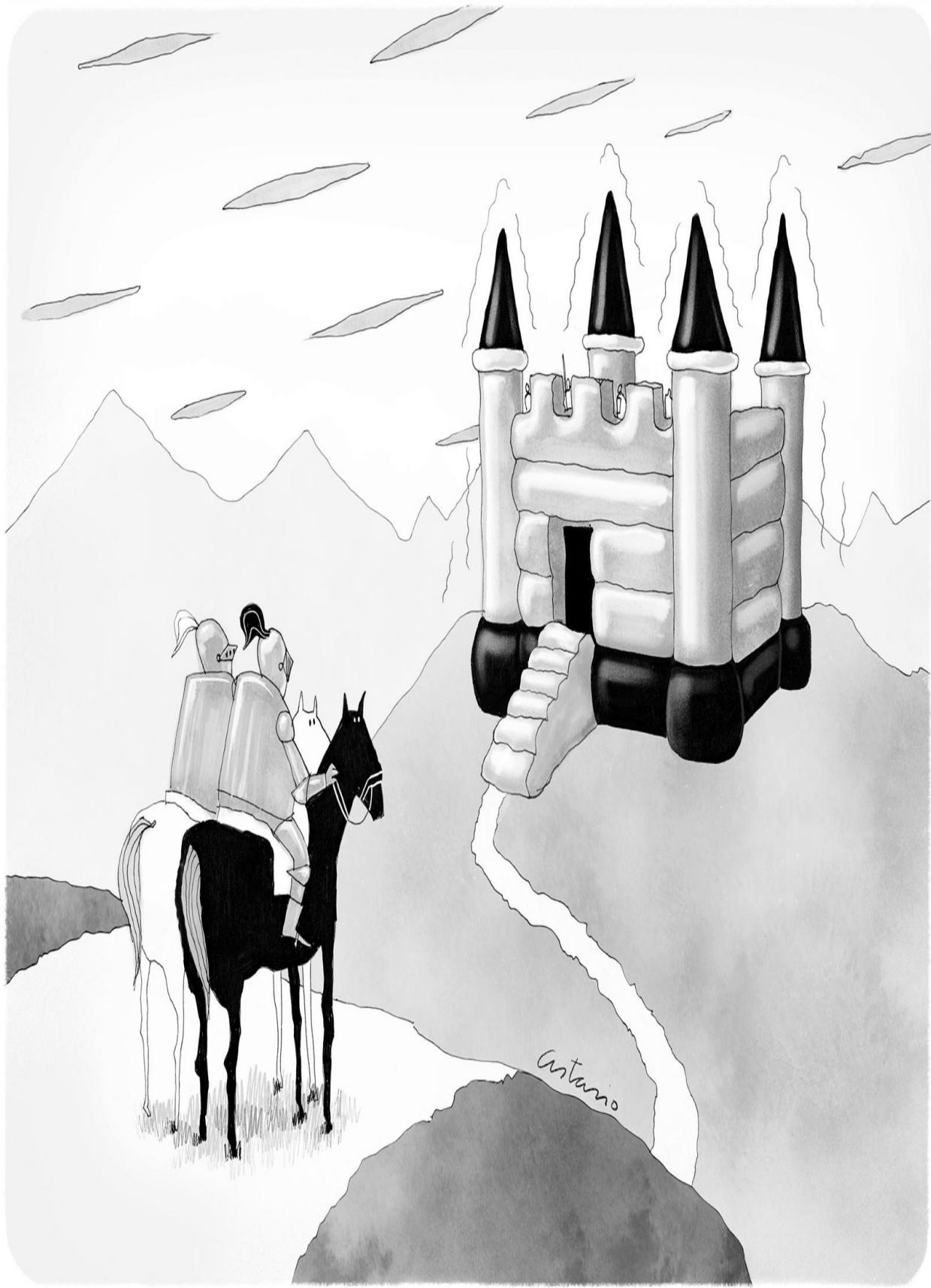
I’d barely shut the door, with both of us safely inside, when my cell phone dinged. It was a text from *PETA*:

Friend—we have heartbreak news: Slow lorises are threatened with extinction. But, instead of being protected, they are trafficked, because people want these cuddly creatures for pets or as status symbols.

A photograph presented a tiny primate, its furry face contorted by a yearning to be friends with everyone.

Amanda and I were reading to the kids. It was a children’s book, and we all four nestled around the open pages with their energetic illustrations. A man came in. Sports coat, linen slacks, top three buttons of his shirt undone. He carried a bottle of wine. For an instant, I didn’t remember that we had a new roommate,

but, even when I did, I had to ask what he was doing. He shook his head and complained about his inability to find a corkscrew. What the hell did he have to do to get along in this place? The children were waiting for the story to continue. Amanda watched the new roommate, her eyes full of concern. And then I remembered. They were having an affair. Amanda and Reed. How had I ever forgotten? It had been going on for a long time. He was over by the window looking out. His baggy trousers had baggy pockets, and there were other pockets in his coat. His pistol could have been in any one of them, and I didn't know which, but I did know that it wasn't in his hand. I sprang on him and got him in a choke hold from behind. He wanted to grab for his pistol, wherever it was, but he couldn't make his hands do anything but fly up to claw at my forearm, which I'd locked around his throat. He was gurgling with a kind of pleading sound that might have been his attempt to say "Please" and "Don't" and "Stop." I constricted every muscle I had, so that he'd never get away. I could feel the life going out of him, and I could see the light in his eyes dimming in the full-length mirror that Amanda held up. He was too heavy for me to keep upright, so we sank to the floor, where his life continued to slip out of him.



"He assumed the crown at a very young age."
Cartoon by Juan Astasio

Amanda said, "What are you doing? Let him go."

I asked myself if I dared to do as she wanted. Or did I really want him dead? He would be my bitter enemy for as long as we lived now that I'd done this. I wished Amanda weren't holding the mirror, because then I wouldn't have to see his eyes. They were so lonely and hopeless. But she made sure I saw.

I collapsed off him. He flopped onto his back. Amanda hurried to him. She brushed his brow tenderly and placed her mouth over his. She pinched his nose shut and blew into his mouth, and I knew I'd made two terrible mistakes—one in attacking him and another in letting him go. She peeked at me out of narrow, hate-filled eyes as she established a rhythm for puffing the life back into him, until he let out a growling cough full of tears and then curled into a fetal position. After a minute, she helped him to his feet and they went off.

I'm not sure where the young woman came from. She might have come from another apartment, or from one of the many rooms in the new apartment that I hadn't been able to look into yet. She was animated, talking to people I didn't know, who I assumed were Amanda's friends, or maybe the new roommate's. There was a circle of four or five men and three women, and they talked excitedly to the young woman. They were fascinated by her, though I could tell they didn't know why. And then she reached for some chips in a bowl. As she ate, her eyes came to rest on me. She didn't say a word, just crossed over to where I sat in an armchair and lowered herself onto my lap. She took my hands and put them on her waist. I didn't care if people stared at us. An elderly man in a vest and bow tie approached with a tray of party snacks. She asked for a glass of water and rocked her hips a little forward and back, causing a shiver in me, and then in her.

"Where did you come from?" I asked her, thinking I'd make idle conversation.

"Troy." Her dark eyes had a fathomless quality, with flickering light in the irises.

My cell phone dinged, and, though I didn't recognize the organization that was texting, I did see what it wanted to tell me: "Rabbits are screaming." I said, "Troy? Really? The city?"

"Troy. Yes."

“The ancient city?”

I imagined her ship at anchor outside, where the dirty street contended with wind and debris, its square sail furled, its oars pointed skyward.

It was dark now and some men were gathered at a table in a little room off the kitchen. They were bunched around a light, and the biggest of them glowered at me. I didn’t recognize him, or any of them, but when I got closer I saw the smallish television that entranced them, their bodies warped by their angry, worried concentration. The volume was low, but I heard two sombre voices, before I saw the team of male and female newscasters.

“The President is unhappy,” the sharp-faced female anchor said.

The men at the table conferred in intense tones. “*THE PRESIDENT IS UNHAPPY*,” read the crawl across the bottom of the screen.

“He imagines himself happy,” the male anchor declared. “He imagines himself young. He imagines himself handsome. He imagines he is well liked by everyone in the world. He imagines he is omnipotent.”

“Day after day,” the woman said, her lucidly intelligent eyes blinking. She had straight brown hair. “Night after night. Prowling the halls.”

The men at the table were solemn, nodding at the screen and then at me in a uniform way that made me uneasy.

Duppedee-do! went my phone, delivering an e-mail with a yellow Labrador and a golden retriever looking at me mournfully, each trapped in a structure of metal rods that immobilized its head, as text explained, “These innocent dogs await the pharmaceutical experimenters who will drill holes in their skulls, in order to inject a deadly virus into their brains to kill them slowly.”

“We’re trying to help the President,” one of the men said to me. “He needs our help. No one understands him. He wants people to understand him so that they’ll like him. So we’re trying to understand him, and then like him, so we can teach everybody how to understand him and like him.”

“Oh,” I said. The man who was talking turned away, and so did the others, except for one who stared me down, his spiteful eyes full of plans. Suspicion

clouded the air between us, like an oil spill.

I went off down the hall and in a door. Amanda and the new roommate were in bed. Just lying on their backs with their eyes open. They seemed to be staring at the ceiling.

“What do you want?” he said.

“Nothing,” Amanda answered.

“Not you.” He poked her. “Him.”

“Who?”

“Him.”

I left. Behind me, Amanda kept saying, “Who? Who?”

“Open your eyes, Amanda. For God’s sake, open your eyes—he was just here.”

Sinister men were waiting for me. They wore dark suits. They circled me and then moved closer. “You’re in danger,” one of them whispered. His eyes shimmered, like broken glass.

“I know,” I told him.

“We want to help you.”

“We want to warn you,” a different one said. He shoved me.

“We want to protect you,” the first one said, and he shoved me harder. I staggered back a few steps.

“Don’t trip,” another one said.

“There’s a border,” one said.

They kept shoving me every time they said something.

“There’s a border that is a boundary.”

“Don’t cross it.”

“It’s a boundary that is a border.”

“I understand,” I said. “Now let me alone.”

“We’re done anyway.” They tried to speak in unison, creating noise like an out-of-kilter engine ready to explode.

I went toward the television I heard blasting. Not the little one in the room off the kitchen but the big one that I usually watched. The little one was gone. The men who’d huddled around it must have taken it. It seemed they’d taken the room, too. The kitchen was there, but the small room off the kitchen was gone.

Duppeedee-do! went my phone: “Help. It’s up to you.” I hit Delete and walked away. I didn’t know where I was going. When my phone dinged again, I knew better than to look, but I did anyway, and I learned that a man, infuriated by his crying infant daughter, had stuck his finger down her throat to make her be quiet. I kept walking. I don’t know for how long I walked and walked, but I came to the small room off the kitchen. It was back, as were the little television and the men watching it. A beaming, impish man identified as a Presidential adviser announced, “The President knows more than anyone about everything.”

The interviewer, a woman with a quirky mouth, asked, “More than the scientists, who—”

“Absolutely.”

“You’re saying he knows more than the scientists, who—”

“Yes, yes.”

“Wait. I’m speaking of people who are experts in their particular field, such as climate change. Let’s talk about that.”

“Cassandras. All of them.”

“Cassandras? Your position is that the experts on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change are Cassandras? That those predicting disappearing glaciers, rising sea levels, and—”

“Cassandras, Cassandras, Cassandras.”

“But she was a prophetess. You know. She told the future.”

“Exactly.” His face formed a childish, doll-like grin, while his eyes disclosed cold-blooded desires that he believed no one could see. “A prophetess people didn’t listen to. If you’re a Cassandra, nobody listens to you. That’s the great part, that’s the fun part, the thrilling part—they know the future, and they tell us, but we don’t have to listen, because the President is smarter than anyone.”

Duppee-dee-do! went my phone: “AUSTRALIA IS ON FIRE!” Images flashed: The sky blazing with supercharged pillars of twisting flame. People retreating to a beach. A woman spraying water onto frightened alpacas, their long necks pivoting between her and the burning world.

Amanda and the new roommate were throwing my things around. Into boxes. Into piles on the floor. I didn’t know what was going on. When I first came upon them, I was too startled to speak. I stood off to the side, hoping they’d explain without my needing to ask, but they just kept throwing my things. Finally, he looked at me, clearly thinking I was the stupidest person he’d ever seen in his life. “Amanda,” he said.

“Oh, I know, he’s utterly useless.” She looked at me. “You’re in the way.” And then, to him, she said, “Don’t pay any attention to him.”

I couldn’t take it. I shouted, “What are you doing?”

“We’re throwing all this junk away,” she said.

“Those are mine,” I said.

“It’s all junk.”

“I want it. I like it.”

They laughed. “We’re getting new things,” they said, one after the other.

I picked up a short-sleeved shirt. “This is a good thing.” I grabbed a coffee cup. “I really like this. I’ve had it all my life.”

They laughed so hard they started to gasp. “He likes it. He likes it.”

“We’re getting rid of it. All of it. It’s old.”

“Her, too,” one of them said.

“What?”

“Her, too,” the other one said.

And I realized that they were talking about my mother, who I remembered was in a room at the very end of the hallway, a little room you reached after almost doubling back. I’d hidden her there so they wouldn’t know, but they must have found her. “No,” I said. “You will not!” I hurried toward the hallway, aware that they were laughing uproariously behind me.

“We’ve already done it,” they shouted. “She’s gone.”

It was maybe the worst laughter I’d ever heard. This was what they’d been thinking about when they were in bed, looking at the ceiling, and I walked in. “We can keep the reading lamp,” I said, rushing back. “I think the reading lamp and some books.”

“No, it’s all going.”

“We’re moving,” he said, and she said it, too.

“But we just got here!”

“No, no, not you.”

“You’re not moving. We are.”

The moving men walked by with their stitched names, all nine of them, going into a room and shutting the door. I saw how big their feet were.

“If you’re moving,” I said, “if you’re—”

“That’s right.”

“Why take my things? I like them.”

“I hate them.”



NO TV AFTER DINNER WAS
WORKING OUT WELL FOR THE HUDSONS

zoe si

“Amanda hates them.”

“But they’re mine. And you’re moving out.”

“You’re such an idiot,” Amanda said. “You don’t understand anything.”

“Just leave my things, goddammit!” I screamed.

She ran in, the young woman. She searched wildly, perspiration on her brow. She had something to tell me, and her mouth was open with fear that she was too late.

Other people walked and talked all through the apartment. It was a party of some kind. Amanda and the roommate laughed, welcoming their guests. They were hosting. When Amanda gestured at me, the guests regarded me with the dismissive, intolerant attitude she modelled for them. The party guests shouted, drinking rabidly, grabbing goblets off trays. The young woman disappeared in the ribaldry, everyone smelling of perfume and drowning one another out in their hysterical good time.

“It’s a housewarming. In reverse,” Amanda said. And the way she howled, and everyone howled with her, made it clear that this was the wittiest comment ever made by the wittiest woman ever to live. “The end is here,” she added. “The absolute end.”

“Of everything,” the new roommate said.

They howled even louder. The young woman whirled back into view. Several men jumped in front of her. They grabbed at her arm. The women stayed aloof, behind blinding veneers of gems and furs, jewelry storming their ears, hair, and necks. But the young woman escaped.

It seemed impossible, but she did it, and she came straight to where I sat in the big armchair. Her eyes affirmed that, as I’d thought, she did have something to tell me. Out of breath from wrestling free from the party guests, she sank onto my lap, and leaned close, whispering so softly I didn’t understand. “What?” I asked. “What did you say?”

She threw her head back in a way that suggested anguish. “Mankind is suicidal,

I'm afraid—a suicidal species.”

“Is that what you said?”

“I thought you heard me.”

“Oh, I hope that’s not true. It’s just too hopeless to think that. I want to have a little hope.”

“But what if there isn’t any?”

I stared into her profound eyes, following their dark invitation to consider her wide forehead, her high cheekbones, the depths she had yet to reveal. “Troy?” I said. “That’s where Cassandra lived, isn’t it?”

“Yes. I am Cassandra, the prophetess, whom no one believes. Cassandra, full of mourning and prophecy.”

Like the horizon, her eyes went on, until they could go no further. I was so relaxed, so dreamy, she could have said anything.

“It’s your body,” she said. “And my body. We’re animals. Two animals.”

I just wanted her to keep moving, and letting me fill with that bewildering syrup for which I felt only love and gratitude. “Are you Cassandra? Are you really?” I wanted to hear her say it again, but I couldn’t wait for her to respond. “I like to think that people are good at heart, Cassandra.”

“We all do, but unfortunately they’re not anything at heart.” She closed her eyes and chanted, “Thus said the hawk to the nightingale with speckled neck, while he carried her high up among the clouds, gripped fast in his crooked talons, and she cried pitifully. To her, he spoke disdainfully: ‘Miserable thing, why do you cry out? One far stronger than you now holds you fast, and you must go wherever I take you, Songstress. And, if I please, I will make my meal of you, or let you go. He is a fool who tries to withstand the stronger, for he does not gain mastery and suffers pain in addition to his shame.’ So said Hesiod, the Greek, of the fast-flying hawk, the long-winged bird.”

I groped to keep my hands on her waist. “Doesn’t it make you sad?”

“That people are not good at heart? Of course it does.”

“No, no. That no one believes you.”

“It’s a curse.” Again, she closed her eyes. “We possess in full bounty all that animals need to live, any animal, all animals. Of which man is one. Except he has decided that he isn’t.”

“Because mankind has a spirit,” shouted one of the partygoers celebrating the end of everything. Amanda handed him a megaphone, as if she were dissatisfied with how loud he’d been so far.

“Mankind may or may not have a spirit,” Cassandra roared. “But, either way, our bodies are animals and that’s true of me, you, Amanda, and the hawk.”

“Oh, Cassandra,” I said. “Why are you doing this?”

“Bodies,” she sighed, and shivered. “They want things. We’re so ignorant, and we hate being ignorant, and we hate being told we are ignorant. But we hate most of all being told we are animals. Especially when we are tall men, or short men, or fat men, or balding men, or gray-haired men in suits who believe that we eat, shit, and breathe money, and so we don’t need food, water, or air. Here is my prophecy: Breath after breath, the air insults us by saving us, by letting us live a few seconds more. But only a few, before another breath is needed. Twenty-three thousand and forty times a day.” Her lips exhaled her vision: “I am Cassandra and this is my prophecy. To prove that we are not animals, that we are above and superior to animals, we will destroy everything that an animal needs to live, and thus obliterate our world and ourselves.”

Color and light shift inside me. I’m a landscape before a storm. I’ve assumed that all those men and women with their guns, cars, and bombs—I’ve assumed that they don’t really solve their problems. That the solution of dead strangers doesn’t work. But what if it does? What if the mayhem they cause, the bloodshed and slaughter, in fact solves their problems, and could also solve mine? They don’t know until the last minute. I can know only at my last minute. I begin to feel it. Holding the long gun. Watching the world flee before me, the blood on the pavement, the raining flecks of gore. I’ll never know unless I try. It’s happening already, just by thinking, just by considering, a strange but powerful sense of completion. There are gun shops not far from here. I’ll go to one. I’ll tell no one. I’ll go about everything as I always have, quietly, privately.

It seems obvious now. Dead strangers solve everything. “Mankind is a suicidal species.” The evidence is in. And, so, what could it matter, even if I’m wrong, and the problems remain, and the only thing that’s gone is a few strangers and me?

I make excuses to Amanda and the new roommate about my travels. I tell them that since they are thinking of moving I am thinking of moving, too. The way they smirk and roll their eyes tells me how much they underestimate me. I imagine Amanda’s shock when I shoot her. I’ll start with them. Him first, one in the chest and one in the head, before he can move to get his pistol. Then her. I’ll go on from them to strangers. To the fat men in suits, the balding, or gray-haired, or sleek-bodied men. But first Amanda and the new roommate. “I’m not moving again,” I’ll scream. “Where did you put my mother?”

I start evaluating fat men on the street. I need to pick the right fat man to make it worthwhile, and there are so many of them. Maybe a bald man. But there are lots of them, too.

In a nearby state, I find a gun show in a defunct supermarket with “gone out of business” painted in white on its windows. The inside is an expanse of arid deadness, where I wander about, hoping to blend in with the men and women in sneakers and boots, T-shirts and jeans, sports coats and camo clothing. They munch chips and hot dogs, gulp soda and coffee, looking awestruck as they shoulder a weapon and peer down the sight.

Driving home with an AK-47, a twelve-gauge shotgun, and ammo for both, I begin to worry that I might have betrayed my intentions somehow. Churning anxiety advises me to act more swiftly than I was thinking.

At the apartment, Amanda and the new roommate pass me in the hall, smug and dismissive. I start to think that it may not matter which fat man I shoot. It’s probably not a matter of getting the right one. Any fat man, or balding man, in a suit. Or maybe not in a suit. Or maybe not even a fat man or a balding man, but just someone.

But then I wake up in the dark, knowing that my Dear One is dying. I feel stricken and alone with the force of this knowing. I want to escape it, but it takes me into the blackest of nights. I’d forgotten her, and now she is dying and she’s looking for me to say goodbye. How could I have forgotten her? My Dear One,

my Dear One. She's down by the sea. She's standing at a harbor, or a dock, or a port, or a waterfront at the edge of dark water, and she's looking off into the dark water. For an instant, I think she's Cassandra. But I know I'm only thinking this because I want to understand more than I can. She's older and deeper and more loving than Cassandra. My Dear One is everything to me, and I want to say goodbye to her, too. I want to tell her that I love her. I have always loved her.

I start down toward her, because the gigantic lightless vessel coming to carry her off is crashing close through the waves. I'm sorry I forgot her, and I have to get to her before she is gone. I'm running, but trying to conserve energy, because I don't know how long it will take before I reach her. Strangers start coming from the opposite direction. They don't mean to block the way, and yet they do, because they're frightened, and their fear makes them clumsy. First a bearded man, and then a trio of men and a gaggle of women, panting as they go up the hill I need to go down. Some carry babies or drag children. I dodge and shove to get through them, but it's almost impossible, and I realize from the wild look in their eyes that they are almost blind with fear.

Suddenly someone pushes me out of the way, wanting to get past me. He's shouting for my Dear One, trying to get to her, too. He announces that he's near, begging her to answer if she hears him. He's taller than me, with unnaturally thin, expressive arms and legs. He's graceful, and his voice is cultured. He shoves people aside, and, through the jumbled bodies climbing toward me, I see him reach her and take her in his arms. She's slight, a wisp, looking up at him, but so precious. He loves her, he tells her. He is shameless in his passion, pointing to the sky to invoke it as his witness. He has come to say goodbye and she must know that he loves her more than anything or anyone else on earth ever could.

I have to turn back. I cannot go to my Dear One now and say the things I want to say, because he has said them all. My words will ring hollow and insincere, like I'm imitating him.

I join the rabble laboring up the hill, and now that I am in their ranks I understand that they are fleeing the dark water below, where burning boats inflame the rolling waves and the sky, as far as anyone can see.

Men and women flow on, lugging boxes, bags, and children, the sound of their breath like a growing wind. When I nearly stumble over something, I look down

at one of the big fat men, who has fallen, his suit in tatters. The wheels of a cart grind over an old woman who barely responds. And then I hear my Dear One behind me. I see her fighting to reach me. She calls to me that she wants me.

When my Dear One reaches me, we both start to cry. She says that she had to find me. She could not go out onto the dark sea without telling me she loved me. Without saying goodbye. She must say goodbye to me. All the things I wanted to say to her she wants to say to me. As I hold her, she is as slight as when I first saw her, barely there in her clothing. People bang against us, and then part to go by, sweeping on in two streams that rejoin in one ongoing throng.

After a while, we begin to walk with them, and we are refugees, too. ♦

By [Deborah Treisman](#)

In the Heights

- [The Dad Who Taught Lin-Manuel Miranda Retail Politics](#)

[October 12, 2020 Issue](#)

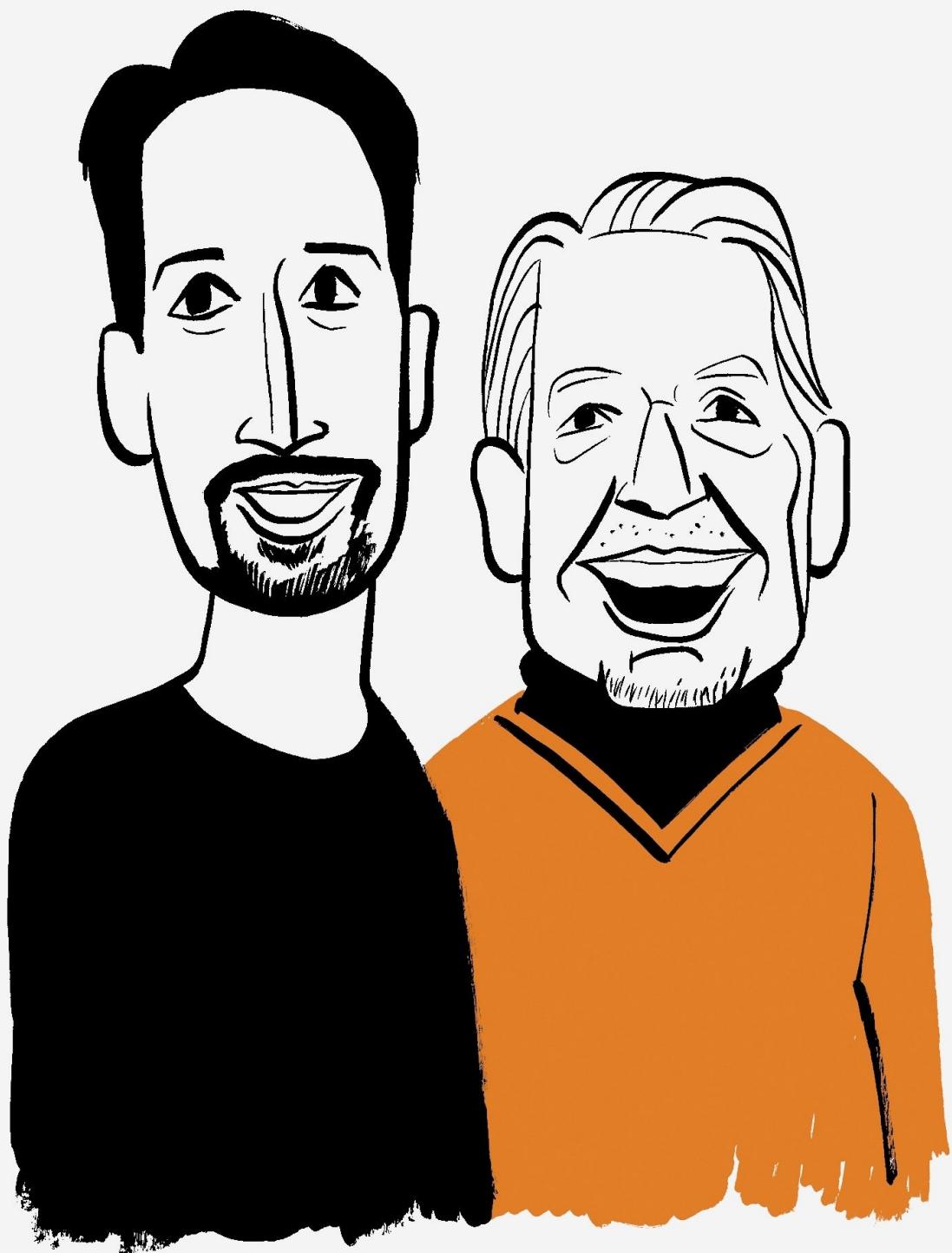
The Dad Who Taught Lin-Manuel Miranda Retail Politics

The political consultant Luis Miranda is helping Joe Biden reach Latino voters—and reminisces about the old days working for Chuck Schumer and Hillary Clinton.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

October 5, 2020

Up in Washington Heights the other day, the political consultant Luis Miranda took a break from reviewing Joe Biden ads aimed at Latino voters in Florida to catch up on Zoom with his son, Lin-Manuel. Miranda *père*, who is sixty-six, was at an office near his apartment. He wore a loud patterned shirt and round glasses. Miranda *fils*, in a hoodie and a cap, was upstate, getting ready to direct the movie musical “*Tick, Tick . . . Boom!*”



Though his career is not in the theatre, Luis is possibly even more animated than his son. “Everyone who meets Luis Miranda goes, ‘Your play is good, but your dad is a *character*,’ ” Lin-Manuel said. In “Siempre, Luis,” a new HBO documentary about Luis, directed by John James, Lin-Manuel describes his father as a “relentless motherfucker,” not unlike another Caribbean-born politico, Alexander Hamilton. “It keeps surfacing in my work,” Lin-Manuel went on. “I’m in awe of people who come to New York from somewhere else and make a life for themselves here.”

Luis grew up in Vega Alta, Puerto Rico, a small town west of San Juan. His father, Luis, Sr. (nicknamed Güisin), was the local credit-union manager. “If you needed five hundred bucks, you went to see Güisin,” Luis recalled. “Lin-Manuel says that he always had the fantasy of my dad being like the banker in ‘It’s a Wonderful Life.’ You could not walk through town without my dad being stopped all the time, so much that I swore to myself that I would never name my kid Luis. *Never ever.* Because I didn’t have a name. I’m back to not having a name. I’m Lin-Manuel’s dad. After my eighteen years in Vega Alta, I was ‘Güisin’s son, the one who left and went to New York.’ ”

In 1974, Luis—young, scrappy, hungry, and newly married to his seventh-grade sweetheart—was recruited to a Ph.D. program in clinical psychiatry at New York University. With ten dollars from his father, he left his wife behind in Puerto Rico, moved in with an aunt in Chelsea, and got a job at a nonprofit, where his salary was five dollars an hour, twice what he had made at a Sears back home. He said, “I remember calling my wife that night and saying, ‘Baby, New York is the *shit*. My salary just doubled, and all I had to do was *take a plane!* ’ ” The marriage didn’t last—he met Lin-Manuel’s mother, Luz, through the N.Y.U. program—nor did his career as a therapist. “I quickly realized that I am not cut out to be the kind of psychologist that I was being trained to be,” he recalled. “I would be sitting there thinking, You’re such a *loser!* Do something! We talked about this problem the last two months! *Please.* ”

“Luis Miranda as your psychologist is nightmare fuel,” Lin-Manuel said.

Luis and Luz moved to Washington Heights in 1980, the year Lin-Manuel was born. “We got involved in electing Hispanic school-board members in District 6,” Luis said. “I had picketed Ed Koch every time he came to our community, because we were fighting for more schools.” Luis, whose colorful belligerence

matched Koch's, talked his way into a job as the mayor's director of Hispanic affairs. "I very weirdly remember the day he was hired," Lin-Manuel, who was seven at the time, recalled. "I was watching the episode of 'Good Times' when John Amos's character died, and I was hysterically crying. And my dad came home a half hour later with this letter on mayoral stationery and said, 'Your dad got a new job!'" Growing up, Lin-Manuel ran around Gracie Mansion at holiday parties and picked up lyrical skills from Inner Circle shows, which featured song parodies making fun of Koch. "I never got to go, but my dad would bring home programs," he said. "Because I grew up worshipping Weird Al, I just thought it was so cool that they were ripping the mayor to shit to Michael Jackson tunes." In 1998, Luis formed a consulting firm, through which he helped Chuck Schumer and Hillary Clinton win their Senate seats. ("The dude was *relentless*," he said of Schumer.) More recently, he helped Letitia James become the attorney general of New York. Lin-Manuel, meanwhile, channelled the retail side of politics into "Hamilton." "I remember Andrew Cuomo seeing the show and saying to me, 'You learned politics at the kitchen table,'" he said.

Now that "Hamilton" is big business, Luis applies his behind-the-scenes boosterism to his son. A month before Hurricane Maria, in 2017, he opened a commercial courtyard in Vega Alta called La Placita de Güisin, with an arepa stand, a mosaic of Lin-Manuel as Hamilton alongside Luis's father, and a gallery called Museo Miranda, displaying "Hamilton" fan art, family photos, and one of Lin-Manuel's Tonys. Lin-Manuel wasn't always the pride of his father's home town. "When I went to visit as a kid," he recalled, "I was introduced as '*Ese es el de Luisito que se fue*': 'That's the kid of Luis who left.' " ♦

Legacies Dept.

- [Ruth's Army: R.B.G.'s Former Clerks Show Up](#)

[October 12, 2020 Issue](#)

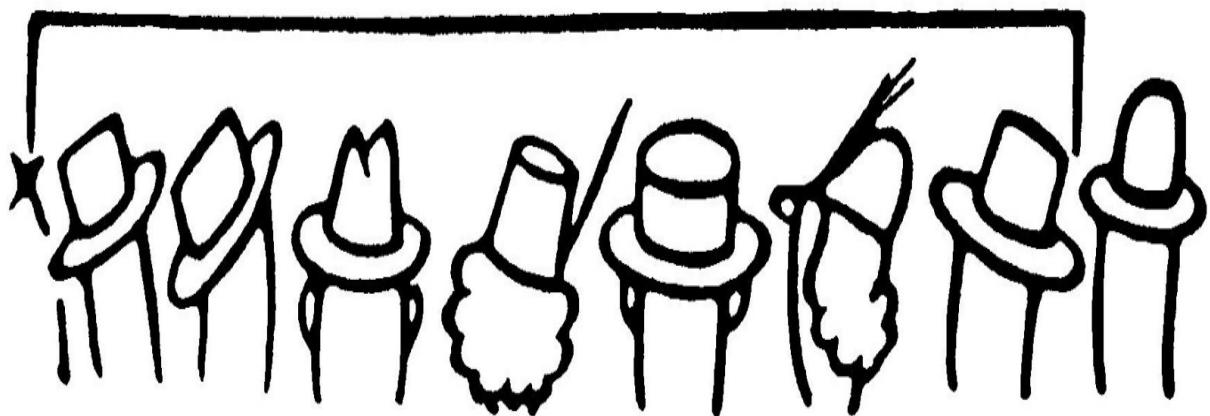
Ruth's Army: R.B.G.'s Former Clerks Show Up

At the Supreme Court Justice's funeral, more than a hundred people who clerked for her gathered, in dark suits and masks, and took shifts standing vigil by her casket for two days and nights.

By [Jay Wexler](#)

October 5, 2020

It was like something out of a heist movie, only sadder. When Ruth Bader Ginsburg died, on Friday, September 18th, her far-flung crew of more than a hundred former clerks dropped everything and headed to the nation's capital for a final mission: honoring their beloved boss.



In Manhattan, Trevor Morrison, the dean of N.Y.U.’s law school (he clerked for R.B.G., in *SCOTUS* lingo, in October Term ’02), grabbed his computer so that he could teach a class from a hotel room and headed to the District. Nick Bravin (O.T. ’00), a four-time national fencing champion, got in his car and drove from his *Covid* refuge on the North Fork of Long Island. On the other coast, Goodwin Liu (O.T. ’00), a justice of the California Supreme Court, had his assistant cancel a week’s worth of appearances and got a flight east.

Early the following Wednesday morning, a hundred and twenty clerks gathered by the northern entrance of the Court to receive their instructions for the week’s ceremonies. Almost all were dressed in dark suits, though a few accessorized with flashes of bright blue, the Justice’s favorite color. Old friends, some of whom hadn’t seen one another in decades, traded elbow bumps and socially distant condolences, their masks making recognition a challenge.

Soon the clerks were on the move: through the Maryland Avenue entrance, past the closed cafeteria, up the stairs into the Great Hall, and then out the bronze front doors to the grand marble staircase and plaza, where they broke into six lines roughly twenty deep to greet the Justice’s casket. “I lost my breath for a moment,” Bravin said, describing the arrival of the flag-draped coffin. “I knew she would have appreciated the overwhelming force of the presence of her clerks. Everyone showed up. Justice Ginsburg believed devoutly that you show up, and she lived her life that way.”

Liz Magill (O.T. ’96), the provost of the University of Virginia, said, “We felt like an army.”



"Why don't you wait till we get a tree."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

The pallbearers carried the casket into the Court, and the clerks returned to their staging area to watch a live feed of the ceremony on several large screens. The Chief Justice joked that R.B.G. was “clueless” about sports, and laughter rippled through the audience. He then said, “Ruth is gone and we grieve,” prompting sounds of sorrow.

Then began the vigils. Two clerks at a time stood, in twenty-minute shifts around the clock, for almost forty-eight hours, at the top of the courthouse steps during the day and in the quiet of the Great Hall overnight. The idea is never to leave a departed Justice alone; the ritual is an enduring one at the Court, but a Justice hasn’t laid in repose for such a long time in recent history.

Kelsi Brown Corkran (O.T. ’13), the head of the Supreme Court practice at the Orrick firm, had organized the shifts utilizing a spreadsheet sign-up system modelled on the one used by Justice Antonin Scalia’s clerks, several years earlier. Corkran sent an e-mail asking fellow-clerks to sign up for shifts, and within an hour nearly every slot was filled. A professor from Boston who teaches marijuana law promptly snagged Thursday’s 4:20 *a.m.* and 4:20 *p.m.* slots.

For two days, the clerks stood by the Justice’s side while mourners took turns paying their respects. For many, the wait to view the casket took hours. At 9 *P.M.* on Thursday, the end of the second day of viewing, the line extended for seven blocks. The clerks stood perfectly still as people of all ages and races, some in Notorious R.B.G. garb, said their goodbyes. Some prayed; others wept. Mothers clutched their daughters and tearfully explained who the Justice was and why it was so important to say farewell.

In the following days, the clerks returned to their firms, their courtrooms, and their classrooms. Bravin headed back to Long Island on the New Jersey Turnpike, arriving just after midnight. Like many of the other clerks, he tuned in to the Presidential debate on Tuesday, which opened with a question about the Supreme Court and then quickly derailed. “I never saw Justice Ginsburg try to shout down an adversary or drown out an opposing view,” Bravin said. “And I worked for her during Bush v. Gore.” ♦

Letter from Santiago

- [Chile at the Barricades](#)

Chile at the Barricades

Can a once-in-a-generation political revolution survive the pandemic?

By [Daniel Alarcón](#)

October 5, 2020



[Read in Spanish | Leer en español](#)

I arrived in Santiago in early March to a city transformed. In my previous trips to the Chilean capital, Santiago had always seemed relatively orderly and safe, but now all that had changed. What had begun, the previous October, as civil disobedience against a metro-ticket price hike had escalated to encompass decades' worth of political, economic, and social grievances, and the impact was everywhere. Plaza Italia, the city's traditional meeting place for political rallies and championship celebrations, had become known colloquially as Plaza Dignidad, or Dignity Plaza. The scarred blocks surrounding it, which until recently had been a lively upper-middle-class neighborhood dotted with bars, restaurants, hotels, and theatres, were mostly shuttered now, or else burned and abandoned. The area was being referred to as Zona Cero—or Ground Zero—and had the weary, blighted look of an urban battleground, with broken street lights, boarded-up windows, and sidewalk cement cracked into pieces conveniently sized for throwing at police. One morning, a friend and I walked through the burned and looted remains of an old Italianate building, a *casona* that had been the central office of a private university. Little was left, except the building's crumbling husk of white, graffiti-covered walls. A few homeless men tended to a small trash fire in the courtyard.

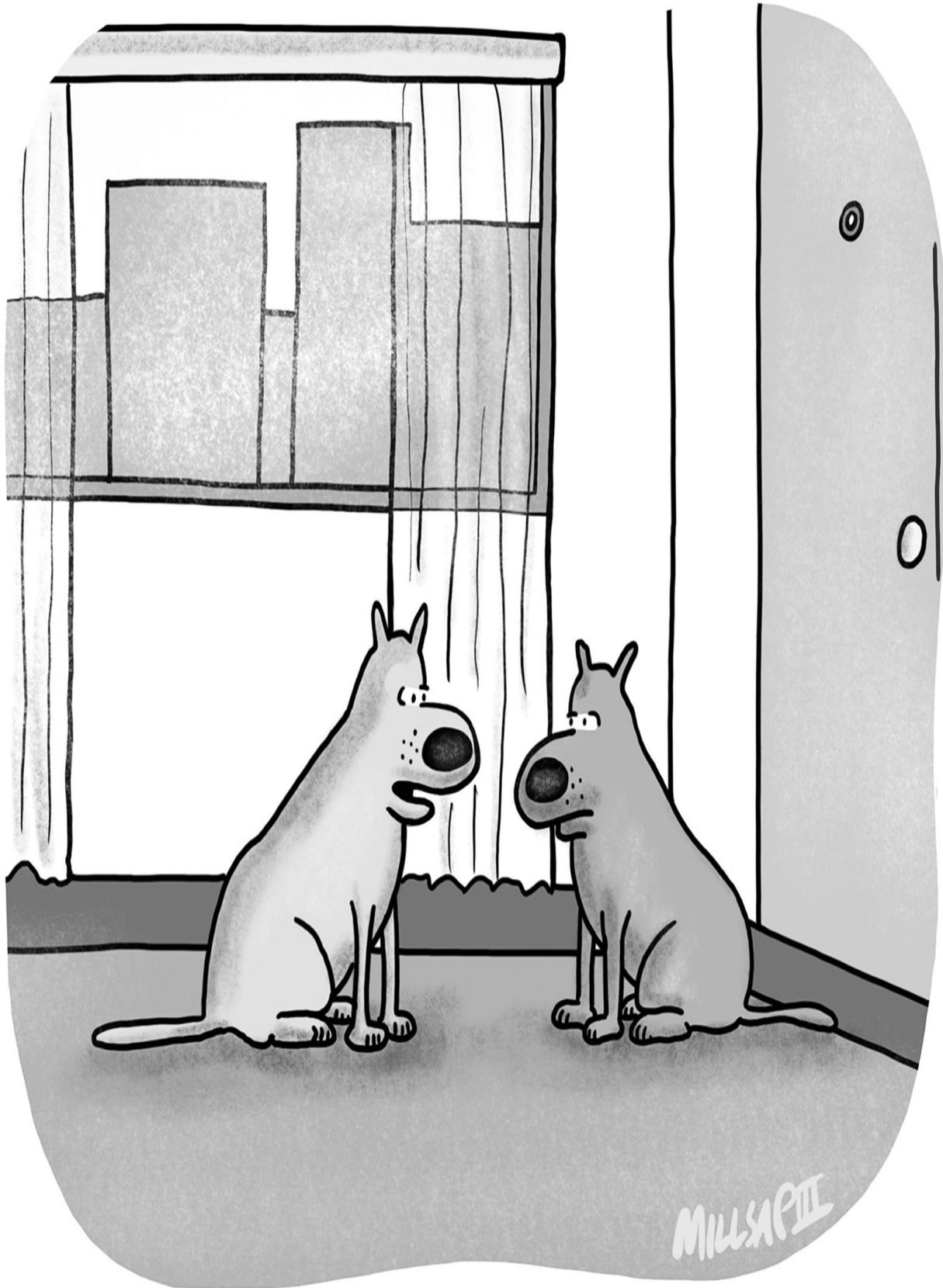
More than a dozen metro stations across the capital were closed, including Baquedano, whose circular entrance in Plaza Dignidad had been transformed into an open-air art gallery, a swirl of colorful, intricate murals celebrating the protests and denouncing the police, demanding the resignation of President Sebastián Piñera, and calling for a new constitution. A short walk from the plaza, streams of blood-red paint dripped down the cheeks of the bronze statues that stood in front of the National Museum of Fine Arts—a reference to the more than four hundred protesters who had suffered eye injuries at the hands of Chilean police. Although the violence had waned since November 15th, when Congress agreed to hold a referendum to decide whether the majority of citizens favored the creation of a new constitution, it certainly had not stopped. Day after day, I came across an improvised march down the center of a busy avenue, a skirmish between students and police officers at the entrance to a metro station, or the shards of a smashed window glinting on the pavement, the acrid smell of tear gas wafting across an intersection.

To walk the streets of Santiago was to read a collective, anonymous scroll of

inchoate rage: *Abort the police, Die Piñera, ACAB, Bankers to the gallows*. The graffiti was on seemingly every wall and sidewalk in the central districts of the city. “Anti-everything,” I read one day, a phrase that lodged in my brain and served as a kind of shorthand for understanding many of the conversations I had in Santiago. Scores of medical brigades had sprung up to tend to the wounded protesters who fought police every night. Their shields, made of corrugated metal or modified oil drums, had become, for many, a symbol of heroic resistance. *La primera línea*, the front-line protesters, who risked nightly beatings, arrest, tear gas, and rubber bullets in order to hold the Plaza Dignidad, were the subject of awe and worried conjecture: who were they, where did they come from, why did they seem to have so little to lose?

And still, somehow, life continued. One night, I saw a police truck scatter protesters who had set fire to a small barricade; as the street filled with tear gas, I hurried around the corner, and found myself at a storefront dance studio that was hosting tango lessons. Another evening, I was eating dinner at a sidewalk café when a police van rolled by, its blue lights flashing. In an instant, all the diners at the restaurant and at the one next door had put down their forks and knives and beers and napkins to yell vulgarities at the cops. It happened so quickly, a reflexive, automatic response—“*;Fuera paco culiao!*” “Fuck off, you fucking cops!”—and a moment later they all fell back into their conversations, as if nothing had happened.

I’d left New York in a barely contained panic—it was the coronavirus, of course, beginning to encroach upon the edges of normalcy. The scale of what lay ahead was hard to fathom, a variety of doom that felt both inconceivable and inevitable. In Chile, where the virus was barely a rumor, many people, including me, wore face masks and goggles, but these were meant to protect us from tear gas, not from an infection. As it turned out, the first case of the coronavirus in the country had already been confirmed, on March 3rd, the day before I arrived, in a provincial city several hundred miles from Santiago. The patient was a thirty-three-year-old man who had travelled to Southeast Asia and fallen ill upon arriving home. President Piñera expressed confidence that the situation was under control. “Since the very moment we knew of the appearance of this new virus, we’ve taken all the measures recommended by the World Health Organization and those we deemed necessary to protect the health of our countrymen,” he said. “We’re prepared.”



"If I had opposable thumbs, I could've given you the world."
Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

About a week later, a cluster of cases appeared, centered on the upper-class school St. George's College, in Santiago. A thirty-nine-year-old teacher had apparently been infected by someone returning from Italy. Before becoming gravely ill, the teacher met with colleagues, students, and parents, seeding an outbreak that eventually spread to more than seventy people. On March 13th, the school sent a message to parents, asking that all families quarantine for fifteen days. They expected classes to resume at the end of the month.

Instead, within a matter of days the government had imposed a system of “dynamic quarantines” across Santiago—that is, stay-at-home orders for specific districts that had been identified as hot spots. Initially, these were mostly wealthier areas, where infections could be traced to overseas travel. Outside the quarantined zones, life went on as usual: bars and restaurants remained open and hundreds of thousands of people continued to move across the city, commuting from home to work and back, as if nothing were happening. Even within the quarantine area the household employees of families living under stay-at-home orders kept working, travelling to and from the quarantined districts every day. Naturally, inevitably, the virus travelled with them.

Still, it would be incorrect to say that the threat wasn’t taken seriously. On March 18th, the government closed all national borders to foreign travellers. The next day, after some prodding from the Medical College, the political parties that had agreed on the constitutional referendum gathered once more, this time to postpone the vote from April until late October of 2020. At the time, there were fewer than three hundred cases of *COVID-19* in Chile. The first death attributed to the virus was confirmed on March 23rd, and by then the number of cases had more than doubled.

Zona Cero fell within the first quarantine area the government announced, and so the unprecedented public-health emergency managed what the President, political parties, and the police had not: to empty Plaza Dignidad of the protesters who had held it since the previous October. One afternoon in early April, President Piñera stopped by the desolate plaza. Photographs soon emerged of him sitting at the base of the graffiti-covered statue of General Manuel Baquedano, a nineteenth-century military hero, and resting an elbow on his knee. “Piñera Out” had been spray-painted on the statue behind him, but the President faced the opposite direction. He appeared to be smiling.

The 2019 uprising began at the National Institute, Chile’s oldest and most famous public high school, housed in a gray and unlovely building just a few blocks from the Presidential Palace, in Santiago. On a normal weekday, more than four thousand boys dressed in blue-and-gray uniforms come here from the far reaches of the capital to attend classes in morning and afternoon shifts. The Institute, like a handful of other schools in the older districts of Santiago, is often referred to as a “*liceo emblemático*,” an emblematic school, in recognition of its history and its central place in the national drama. The Institute’s founding, in 1813, predates that of Chile itself, and the school counts seventeen Presidents among its graduates.

But this prestigious, almost mythical school, which shaped the young men who then shaped the nation, has changed through the years. The élite have mostly dispersed to the foothills of the Andes, far from the center of the city, and, these days, *institutanos* are more likely to come from the working-class districts of La Florida or Puente Alto. The hulking building itself has fallen into disrepair, with crumbling walls and peeling paint. Overcrowding is a concern: students on the second shift end their classes after eight in the evening, which makes basic cleaning and maintenance both a logistical and a budgetary challenge. The disconnect between the Institute’s proud history and its complicated present is not lost on the current generation. “The only way to explain this is to say we were abandoned,” Rodrigo Pérez, who served as the student-body president in 2019, told me last March.

That year, as in most recent years, classes were often interrupted by strikes, walkouts, takeovers, and alarmingly violent clashes with police. The atmosphere was volatile: a protest might erupt in the morning, forcing the evacuation of the school, but a few hours later there would be no trace of it; it was just part of the background of a normal day. “If it happened at another school, no one would even notice,” Mario Vega, who has taught history at the Institute for more than twenty years, told me, “but, because of the school’s presence, everything that happens here is news.” Police checked backpacks as students entered the building, arresting and detaining them almost at will, and, more than once, firing tear gas inside the school. At one point, officers were stationed on the roof to keep an eye on students, and they stayed for several weeks. It was humiliating. “The cops would piss on the roof and it would leak into the classrooms,” Pérez told me.

Then, last October, the *institutanos* turned their attention to events outside the

school, setting in motion the political upheaval that still roils Chile today. The immediate catalyst was the announcement of a modest price hike for the Santiago metro: the basic adult ticket for a rush-hour commute would cost thirty pesos more, an increase of less than four cents, with students and the elderly exempted. But the students were outraged—it would, after all, be working-class families like theirs who shouldered the extra cost. Within hours of the announcement, Pérez and his classmates were on WhatsApp, organizing a walkout for the next school day.

The Institute lies within the district represented in the Chilean Congress by Giorgio Jackson, a leftist and himself a veteran of the widespread student protests of 2011. On Monday, October 7th, Jackson was in a meeting when he heard shouting, and he ran to the window in time to see dozens of uniformed adolescents, filming with their phones as they marched toward a nearby metro station. Once there, the *institutanos* jumped the turnstiles en masse. “We must have had a hundred and eighty, two hundred students running down to the platform,” Pérez recalled, with evident pride. Word of the action spread quickly among the hyper-connected teen-agers of Santiago, with texts and Instagram posts and WhatsApp groups amplifying the news. In response, the economics minister at the time, Juan Andrés Fontaine, defended the new prices. He recommended that workers wake up a little earlier to avoid paying the extra thirty pesos. “Unfortunately, this effort is necessary,” he told a reporter.

By midweek, students at several nearby schools had joined in the protests, and by the following week young people were jumping the turnstiles at metro stations across the city. On Tuesday, October 15th, in response to a fire caused by a Molotov cocktail, classes at the National Institute were suspended for three days. It proved to be the last full day of classes for the academic year, which would normally run until December. That Friday, after more fare evasions and clashes with police, the transportation minister, Gloria Hutt, abruptly ordered the metro closed.

Every weekday, the Santiago metro moves about two and a half million passengers across the sprawling capital, the equivalent of almost half the city’s population. Without it, Santiago is an untenable proposition, a fact that became painfully clear that afternoon, when the transportation system all but collapsed. Stranded commuters pushed onto overcrowded buses that could scarcely move in the snarled traffic. Most had no choice other than to walk home. “It looked like a march, but it wasn’t,” Jackson told me. “There were no signs. No slogans.

It was simply people walking in the middle of the streets because they didn't fit on the sidewalk." The metro stations themselves became targets: more than half of Santiago's hundred and thirty-six stations were vandalized, some burned and severely damaged. But if the government's intention was to turn public opinion against the students and blame them for the inconvenience of the shutdown, it backfired spectacularly. Instead, hundreds and then thousands began to congregate at Plaza Italia. Neighborhoods across Santiago came alive with the sound of wooden spoons banging on pots and pans, in an hours-long citywide *cacerolazo*. Similar protests sprang up in dozens of cities across the country. Out of thin air, it seemed, a social and political revolution had begun.



Catalina Pérez (center), the president of the Democratic Revolution, explains the coming plebiscite in an open market. Photograph by Tomás Munita for The New Yorker

The events of October, 2019, became known as *el estallido*, or “the explosion.” Protesters gathered in Santiago’s Plaza Italia that first night, and more or less held it for the next several months, despite the declaration of a state of emergency and a curfew, and despite nightly battles with police, who used water cannons, tear gas, and rubber bullets in increasingly violent attempts to disperse them.

Just days before the uprising, President Piñera had given a radio interview in which he described Chile as “a true oasis” in Latin America. Comparing the nation favorably with its neighbors, which were beset by recession and corruption scandals, he added, “The more I see these crises, the more we must appreciate our country.” The truth is that this statement became controversial only in hindsight, after *el estallido* had made a mockery of Chile’s supposed tranquillity and order. Since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship, in 1990, the country had positioned itself as an outlier in South America, a stable democracy with strong institutions and a thriving middle class. But, while economic growth has been relatively steady during the past thirty years, lifting hundreds of thousands of Chileans out of extreme poverty, those numbers don’t tell the full story of the country today. According to a 2017 United Nations Development Program study, the wealthiest five per cent of Chilean households hold more than fifty per cent of the wealth, while more than half of salaried workers hardly earn enough to maintain a household. The campaign slogan for the 1988 referendum that ended Pinochet’s dictatorship was “*La alegría ya viene*,” or “Happiness is coming.” Catalina Pérez, the president of the leftist Democratic Revolution party and, at twenty-nine, one of the youngest members of the Chilean Congress, told me that, for most Chileans, that happiness never came. “For eighty per cent of Chileans, this democracy is an unfulfilled promise in political and economic terms,” she said. The widespread availability of consumer goods in Chile and the country’s apparent prosperity mask a stark inequality—among the highest in the region—and a workforce stretched to the breaking point. The poorest Chileans are spending nearly a quarter of their monthly wages to finance debts. According to *Forbes*, Piñera himself is worth nearly three billion dollars, and his family is among the five richest in the country. In recent years, discontent has boiled over several times, with occasional large mobilizations, focussed mostly on education, but also on health care and the much criticized private pension system, known as A.F.P.s.

Days after *el estallido*, with the streets of Santiago and other major cities filled

with protesters, Piñera was no longer celebrating Chilean exceptionalism. “We are at war with a powerful, implacable enemy, who respects nothing and no one, and who is willing to use violence and delinquency without limits,” he announced on the evening of October 20th. It wasn’t clear whether he was referring to the students or to outside forces, but, in any case, he ordered the Army into the streets, a provocative act in a country where memories of a military dictatorship are still fresh. The following day, acting on a proposal from Piñera himself, the Senate reversed the thirty-peso price hike, but it was too late. On October 25th, an estimated 1.2 million Chileans gathered in Plaza Italia, the largest demonstration in the nation’s contemporary history.

By early November, what had begun as a relatively small protest by a couple of hundred high-school students had become an existential crisis for the country’s political order. On any given Friday night, there might be tens of thousands of protesters in Plaza Italia. The Chilean police force, which, until recently, had been one of the most trusted institutions in the country, attempted to control the situation, but its violent tactics were soon condemned by international human-rights organizations. For those on the left, the unrest represented a unique—and unexpected—opportunity to pursue demands that had been unthinkable just a few months earlier, including, most significant, the demand for a new constitution.

“A year ago, if you talked about a constituent assembly you were treated like an opium smoker,” Catalina Pérez told me. For the left, crafting a new constitution has been a goal, if not an obsession, for years, and in early November, with thousands of ordinary Chileans taking to the streets every night, the once far-fetched idea had begun to seem realistic. The marchers’ oft-repeated slogan captured a sense of exhaustion with the status quo: “It’s not thirty pesos, it’s thirty years”—a reference to the three decades since the end of the Pinochet dictatorship and the country’s return to democracy. “What about health care? What about education? What about labor? What about pensions?” Pérez asked. “It’s not about the price of the ticket. It’s about thirty years of abuses.”

In the eyes of its critics, the 1980 constitution is the origin point for those abuses. After the 1973 coup, Pinochet’s military junta consolidated its power through state terror, operating outside any legal framework to disappear and torture thousands and send thousands more into exile. The U.S. Congress responded by blocking arms sales to Chile, an embargo that continued for more than a decade. Meanwhile, Pinochet’s campaign against his enemies went global,

with political assassinations carried out in Buenos Aires and even in Washington, D.C., just a couple of miles from the White House. The 1976 election of President Jimmy Carter, who placed special emphasis on human rights, put the Chilean dictatorship in an even more precarious international position, with the country in danger of being considered little more than a rogue state, known worldwide for its brutality.

Shortly after taking power, Pinochet appointed a commission to write a new constitution, and in August, 1980, he announced that the work was complete. There would be a referendum just a month later, on September 11th, not coincidentally the anniversary of the coup seven years earlier. At the time of the 1980 vote, all political parties were illegal, all television stations were controlled by the regime, and there was no opposition press. The country remained in a state of emergency. While Pinochet campaigned for his new constitution all around the country, the opposition was allowed a single public event, held in the Caupolicán Theatre, in Santiago. The rally wasn't televised, but three radio stations broadcast the speeches nationwide, while thousands gathered at the theatre in the largest public demonstration against the regime since the coup. The keynote speaker that night was former President Eduardo Frei Montalva, who urged Chileans to vote no and demanded the formation of a constituent assembly. Predictably, given the anti-democratic circumstances of the vote, the 1980 constitution was approved by a suspiciously high two-to-one margin. Less than two years later, Frei Montalva died mysteriously after undergoing a procedure at a clinic in Santiago. It took nearly four decades to confirm what his family had always thought: that he'd been poisoned by Pinochet's secret police, with the coöperation of the doctors who'd treated him.

The constitution's chief architect was the right-wing intellectual Jaime Guzmán, a law professor at the Catholic University in Santiago, and a close ally of the Pinochet regime, who was assassinated in 1991. Guzmán envisaged an eventual end to the dictatorship and a transition to democracy, with constitutional safeguards in place to protect the nation from socialism and preserve the market capitalism that he hoped would transform Chilean society. Crucially, the post-Pinochet democracy outlined by the constitution would be forced to continue many of the economic policies the dictatorship had put in place. In most respects, the constitution worked as designed. A few years ago, on a trip to Santiago, I met Luis Hermosilla, a lawyer for the Guzmán family, in his office in Vitacura, a district of banks and embassies and high-rise buildings made of glass and steel. Guzmán had been Hermosilla's professor, and a man he loved and

admired. When we finished the interview, Hermosilla stood by his office window and, with a sweep of his arm, said, “This is the Chile Guzmán made.”

Guzmán’s political opponents would mostly agree—but, for them, that’s precisely the problem: Guzmán’s constitution, as they see it, acts as a kind of straitjacket on Chilean democracy. Claudia Heiss, a professor of political science at the University of Chile, told me that the constitution has served, again and again, as an impediment to social progress. Important reforms have passed the Chilean Congress, and even been signed into law—only to be struck down by the Constitutional Tribunal, an independent court that rules on the constitutionality of legislation, as well as on Presidential and judicial decrees. Heiss cited an example from early 2018, when the Constitutional Tribunal overturned a bill that had given *SERNAC*, the government agency charged with consumer protection, the power to levy fines against businesses that committed fraud or abuse. The reform had passed with broad support, and the court’s ruling caught many by surprise. *SERNAC*’s director said that the decision severely diminished his agency’s ability to protect consumers, and could be “potentially catastrophic.” As arcane as it may seem from the outside, Heiss said, it should come as no surprise that the people’s rage began to focus on a legal document. Even before *el estallido*, she told me, “there was a growing sense that the constitution was having a real impact on the problems people faced.”

Heiss noted the almost surreal ironies of growing up under Pinochet’s constitution. Chilean high-school students in the nineteen-eighties studied a kind of theoretical civics: they learned about a Chamber of Deputies and a Senate, and they learned about elections, but, of course, none of these things did or could exist under a dictatorship. From 1980 until the return of democracy, a decade later, the constitution was a useful piece of fiction, and even after Pinochet had given up the Presidency he remained the head of the armed forces before serving, along with eight other allies, as an unelected senator. Chile’s democracy in those early years was precarious; President Patricio Aylwin, elected to succeed Pinochet and lead the transition, admitted as much, famously conceding that he would pursue justice for the many victims of the military regime only “insofar as it is possible.” In any case, Aylwin had no authority to remove Pinochet as head of the armed forces.

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KARL STEVENS

A series of reforms to the constitution in the two-thousands eliminated the designated senators, but the desire by many on the political left to rewrite the country's foundational legal document did not go away. Replacing Pinochet's constitution with a new one would be a way of breaking—finally and definitively—with the legacy of his regime. “There are grandparents who were tortured during the dictatorship who see this as the end of a cycle and say, ‘I can die in peace,’ ” Catalina Pérez told me.

In the days after *el estallido*, as public discourse coalesced around the constitutional question, mayors from across the country and across the political spectrum began to publicly support a referendum to decide the issue. On November 13th, Mario Desbordes, the leader of President Piñera’s own party, expressed his support as well. When we spoke, in March, Desbordes said he’d always known that political reforms were necessary, but the anger he witnessed last October caught him off guard. “I think the majority of us thought we had more time,” he told me. “The violence surprised us all.” Desbordes is a somewhat anomalous figure among the traditionally aristocratic élite of the Chilean right. He grew up in the working-class district of Maipú and served as a police officer for seven years, before becoming a businessman and eventually entering politics, in his forties. It was a trip to visit his mother, Desbordes told me, that convinced him that there was widespread support for the protests. The local metro station had been burned down, and the entire neighborhood was out banging pots and pans. As he saw it, “a pressure cooker had exploded.”

Once Desbordes had broken with the right, it was only a matter of time. On November 15th, after a historic daylong negotiation in Congress, the political parties reached an agreement and a referendum was scheduled for the end of April.

The pandemic did not end the revolution unleashed by *el estallido*, but it did quite abruptly change the subject. March and April, which would have been consumed by the tense run-up to a historic vote, were instead spent dealing with an unprecedented public-health emergency.

By mid-March, Piñera’s government had managed to secure nearly nine hundred respirators, and eventually expanded the number of available intensive-care beds from about seven hundred to nearly three thousand. The President and other political leaders wore face masks at press conferences, while preaching social

distancing and hand-washing. Chile quickly became first among South American nations in tests per thousand residents (and it was still leading the region in August, with a rate comparable to that of Germany). Even as the number of infections, hospitalizations, and deaths steadily grew through March and mid-April, the public-health system did not collapse, nor did the hospital beds and respirators run out, as many had feared might happen, and as would occur in some neighboring countries.

It was the economic response to the disaster that split the political parties along predictable ideological lines. By mid-April, Piñera’s government had begun to emphasize the need to reopen the economy, and, in late April, Piñera announced a phased reopening plan that he called Safe Return. “There’s no contradiction between protecting the health and life of the people, and protecting their jobs, their income, and their quality of life,” he said. The strategy was intended not to suppress the virus but to mitigate its impact.

As the left pushed for emergency subsidies to keep Chilean workers at home during the pandemic, Piñera’s allies in Congress resisted. By May, with infections rising at an alarming rate and much of the country in quarantine, the legislative debate was deadlocked on the size of the household subsidy the government would pay to those who were most in need. In the end, Piñera’s allies won, and the first round of subsidies was only sixty-five thousand pesos, about eighty-one dollars. Families struggling in an economy ravaged by the coronavirus were subjected to images of senators celebrating their legislative win.

Pablo Ortúzar, of the conservative think tank I.E.S., told me that Piñera’s strategy was to centralize the response to the virus. The President’s approval ratings had dropped as low as six per cent in the wake of *el estallido*. “The administration saw it as a way to recover the legitimacy it had lost,” Ortúzar said. It soon became clear that Piñera’s plan for a safe return to normalcy had been premature. In a TV interview, Jaime Mañalich, the health minister, admitted that the virus had spread at a pace he had not anticipated, in part because of social conditions. “There is a level of poverty and overcrowding that I was not aware of,” he said—another example of the startling disconnect between the political élite and the lived reality of millions of ordinary Chileans.

In the middle of May, with new cases spiking by more than sixty per cent, a strict quarantine was imposed across Santiago’s entire metropolitan region, along

with a couple of provincial cities. The Army and the police were charged with enforcement, detaining and arresting violators. Residents of Santiago, who had previously been allowed daily outings, were now limited to two a week, for groceries and other necessities. By mid-June, Chile had one of the highest per capita rates of infection in the world, and a few days later Mañalich resigned, after the investigative Web site *CIPER* revealed a discrepancy between the number of deaths reported in his daily briefings to the nation and the far higher number that he sent to the World Health Organization. By the end of June, more than two hundred and seventy-five thousand Chileans had tested positive for *COVID-19*, and the virus had claimed more than five thousand lives.

Just as the unrest in the weeks after *el estallido* had made an agreement on a referendum possible, the pandemic and the battered economy presented the Chilean left with another unexpected opportunity. This time, it was the chance to reform the controversial private pensions known as A.F.P.s, which are more or less like American 401(k)s, only with miserly returns. The proposal would allow Chilean workers to withdraw ten per cent of their A.F.P. holdings without penalty. The spectre of *el estallido* hung over the debate. “If we reject the withdrawal, there’ll be another social explosion,” one senator said. The U.D.I., the conservative party founded by Jaime Guzmán, on the other hand, argued that the proposed reforms were a short-term solution that would have long-term consequences for the middle class. Pablo Ortúzar told me that he found the entire debate frustrating. “There was never any discussion of the common good. No discussion of the economic impact,” he said. Workers in the informal economy were left out, and of course those with savings would benefit more. Ortúzar saw the left’s push as purely tactical. “Everything was defined by the polarization of October,” he said. Nevertheless, the Senate vote was watched by millions of Chileans. When the reform measure was approved, many districts of Santiago erupted in a celebratory *cacerolazo* once again. Catalina Pérez told me that the vote “would be remembered as one of the foundational events for the Chile that was born last October.”

By late July, with the coronavirus curve flattening, the country cautiously prepared to reopen for a second time. The last quarantine covering Zona Cero was lifted on August 17th, and residents emerged from their homes to discover that the area had had a makeover: many of its colorful murals and much of the political graffiti had been covered with fresh paint, the street lights repaired, the sidewalks restored. Soon protesters, in smaller numbers now and flanked by large contingents of police, appeared in Plaza Dignidad again. By then, some

parts of the country had been in a continuous lockdown for four and a half months.

One afternoon in March, I went with the political scientist Claudio Fuentes to a school in La Florida, a working-class district southeast of Santiago. The day was bright and hot, and it got brighter and hotter, it seemed, the farther we moved from the center of the city. This was a different Santiago, bleached of color, with fewer trees and broader avenues, and block after block of low-rise housing.



Mario Desbordes, the president of National Renewal, at his office. Photograph by Tomás Munita for The New Yorker

Fuentes teaches at the Diego Portales University, but in the run-up to the referendum he'd stepped out of the classroom, and was offering workshops on the constitution and its history to community groups and schools across the country. It was a personal project, and he told me that he found it heartening to discover how much interest there was in the topic. *El estallido* had made people hungry to know more about the current constitution, about what the referendum might mean. Still, the same distrust that many Chileans felt toward the political élite extended to him, Fuentes told me. He found this bemusing, hard to square with his own background. He'd grown up in San Bernardo, another working-class district of Santiago, the son of a truck driver and a stay-at-home mom. His last name is not a typical upper-class surname of the Chilean élite, nor, with his dark hair and olive skin, did he look the part. But he was a university professor, had studied abroad, occasionally even appeared on television, and that was enough. Every time he gave a workshop, even as he entered spaces that felt entirely familiar to him, he had to prove that he belonged.

When we arrived at the school and introduced ourselves, the security guard informed us that the event had been cancelled. We stood there a moment, in shock, until the guard finally smiled. It was a coronavirus joke, told in that dim recent past when people could still joke about the virus. We all laughed, and the guard beckoned us inside. In the cafeteria, a couple of hundred straight-backed wooden chairs had been arranged in rows. As we waited for the students, I chatted with a tall, thin veteran teacher named Sergio Salazar, who told me that on the night of *el estallido* neighborhood parents had gathered to protect the school, in case the rage spilled over and someone attacked the building. Thankfully, he said, nothing had happened.

A few minutes later, the uniformed students filed in, filling the back rows first, joking with their classmates, casting a few ambivalent glances at the strangers. Fuentes began right away with questions: "How many of you know that there's a referendum in April?" Everyone raised a hand. He quickly established the stakes of the debate. "How," he asked the students, "do we want to be governed?"

What followed was a thoughtful discussion about the political structure of a nation, the mechanics of the vote, the rights and responsibilities of citizenship, and what might lie ahead if the referendum was approved. Even then, the details were in flux. Only the week before, the Congress had mandated gender parity for a constitutional assembly, should the referendum pass. There was talk of similar

guarantees for the Mapuche community, Chile's largest indigenous group, which makes up more than seven per cent of the population. Meanwhile, the students had their own questions: Why doesn't Piñera resign? (He can't, by law.) Who might write a new constitution? (Either a group of elected citizens or a group of citizens and lawmakers, depending on the outcome of the referendum.) What might that new document say? This last question was unanswerable for the moment, and those opposed to the referendum argue that that is precisely the danger. Why should Chile leap into the unknown? Why not reform the existing constitution instead?

Chile, Fuentes explained to the students, has had ten constitutions in its history, but none have been written by the people. At one point, he asked the students if they thought their country was a democracy.

The entire room of young people shouted "No!"

I watched the adults in the room exchange confused glances. Sergio, the teacher I'd been chatting with, had answered yes, and now stood with his arms crossed, smiling awkwardly.

Fuentes later admitted that he'd been surprised by the unanimity and the vehemence of the response to what he thought of as a simple question with a simple answer. Chile *is* a democracy, an imperfect one, but a democracy nonetheless. Then he said, "But we have to distinguish between formal democracy, elections, and so on, and democracy as a sense of belonging, a feeling that your decisions matter." In light of that more elastic definition, it was easy to understand the students' response. In Chile, "there is no connection between the representatives and the represented," Fuentes told me. He hoped for a big turnout at the referendum in October, for a convincing victory; otherwise, he feared, the moment and the opportunity for building a more authentic democracy would be lost.

A few years after the 1973 coup, Jaime Guzmán wrote an op-ed for *El Mercurio*, a right-wing newspaper that supported Pinochet. The dictator's constitutional project was just getting under way, with Guzmán's leadership. "No one who reads the 1925 constitution," Guzmán wrote, "can really be convinced that it is still valid." He went on, "It is dead as a matter of practical reality, and, more importantly, it is dead in the minds of the Chilean people."

In September, the polls, as they had consistently done throughout the year, were predicting a victory for a new constitutional convention. By Guzmán's own logic, it would appear that the 1980 constitution is already dead. ♦

More on the Coronavirus

- To protect American lives and [revive the economy](#), Donald Trump and Jared Kushner should listen to Anthony Fauci rather than trash him.
- We should look to students to conceive of appropriate [school-reopening plans](#). It is not too late to ask what they really want.
- A pregnant pediatrician on [what children need during the crisis](#).
- Trump is helping tycoons who have donated to his reëlection campaign [exploit the pandemic](#) to maximize profits.
- Meet the [high-finance mogul](#) in charge of our economic recovery.
- The coronavirus is likely to reshape architecture. What kinds of space are we willing to [live and work in now](#)?

Marmalade Skies Dept.

- [**Turn On, Tune In, Get Well**](#)

[October 12, 2020 Issue](#)

Turn On, Tune In, Get Well

New York is getting its first psychedelic-medicine center, with the help of a startup called MindMed, which develops hallucinogens to treat mental illness and addiction, and is funding an institute at N.Y.U. Langone Medical Center.

By [Nathan Heller](#)

October 5, 2020

J. R. Rahn, a techie whose company is helping fund New York's first psychedelic-medicine center, spent the middle years of the past decade leading a successful startup while his life quietly came apart. "To the outside world, I was doing really well, but inside me I was *struggling*," Rahn, a thick-built thirty-three-year-old with a shaved head, a smile-shaped beard, and delicate rimless glasses, said on Zoom the other day. He'd left New York to weather the pandemic in Miami; some palm fronds fluttered behind him. "People would say, 'Oh, you're just depressed.' Well, I'm depressed, but I also can't fall asleep without drinking a bottle of wine. I can't have fun at a party without using cocaine." Also, there was Xanax, for anxiety. Rahn needed help—or did he just need drugs of another kind? "A friend recommended I have a psychedelic experience, to piece together a solution," he said. He did LSD and mushrooms a few times, and gave up all the other stuff.



Now Rahn is the co-founder of MindMed, a startup that develops psychedelic drugs to treat mental illness and addiction. In theory, such drugs are promising because they could be administered on a limited course (“like antibiotics,” Rahn says), in coordination with talk therapy—a contrast to addiction medications like methadone and Suboxone, and to many mental-health medications, which are often taken indefinitely. In practice, obstacles include the Timothy Leary factor (people still associate psychedelics with Ram Dass and British Invasion sitars) and the challenge of transferring lab successes to the therapeutic couch. “There’s really never been a precedent for using these substances within the psychiatric community,” Rahn said. “So how are you going to train the next generation of psychiatrists to take them seriously?”

One way is to train them at the training point. For years, researchers at N.Y.U. Langone Medical Center had been discussing the idea of a center for psychedelic medicine. MindMed just pledged five million dollars to N.Y.U. Langone, to kick off such an establishment, with the money earmarked for training. As the center-to-be settles the rest of its funding, its director, the psychiatry professor and addiction researcher Michael P. Bogenschutz, is preparing to bring aboard four junior faculty members and two postdocs: a New York team. (The first psychedelic-medicine center in the country, at Johns Hopkins, was created last year.)

“What distinguishes our effort is, you’ve got the practical focus on treatment of hard-to-treat psychiatric disorders front and center,” Bogenschutz said. The center will have no structural relationship with MindMed, but MindMed is looking to return its testing, now run by partners in Australia (tax incentives) and Switzerland (out-there medicine), to the U.S. for late trials.

In assessing drugs for study, Rahn was first drawn to ibogaine, a shrub-root derivative that had shown promise in addiction therapy. Unfortunately, at certain doses, it can lead to sudden death. Then Rahn’s co-founder, Stephen L. Hurst, turned him on to 18-Methoxycoronaridine, or 18-MC, a non-hallucinogenic relative of ibogaine that, in one study, helped rats stop eating cocaine and responding to Pavlovian triggers. The company is also running trials on LSD as a treatment for anxiety.

Rahn says that, for him, psychedelics opened his eyes to the source of his depression, anxiety, and substance abuse: his mother. “I discovered her dead on a

vacation in the Dominican Republic as an eight-year-old child,” he said. It had not previously occurred to him that this might relate to his problems. “I think I probably got over the trauma, but what I didn’t get over was the guilt.”

Regarding the potential mental-health benefits of psychedelics, Bogenschutz notes, “What’s interesting is, why do people end up changing in a particular way as a result of a relatively brief experience?” So far, it’s unclear. “Our working model is that, because of an enhanced neuroplasticity, there is a temporary weakening of the established dominant networks that may keep people within a rigid pattern of behavior, such as drinking or ruminative thoughts,” he said. In addiction treatment, the effects sometimes last for years, suggesting a baking-in of new patterns—hence, in Bogenschutz’s view, the value of accompanying therapy.

In recent years, the market for psychedelic medicines, once a punch line, has become serious business. Compass Pathways, a psilocybin-centered company backed by Michael Novogratz and Peter Thiel, had its I.P.O. last month, and is listed on the Nasdaq. MindMed has filed Nasdaq papers, too, after noting clouds over the nation’s mental health. “I came to this realization that technology, A.I., this world I was in was about to displace a whole lot of people from work,” he said. “And, when people are displaced from work, rates of addiction and mental-health issues skyrocket.” The pandemic has darkened those skies further; prescriptions for anti-anxiety drugs leaped by a third in its first month. “Eleven per cent of Americans seriously considered suicide in June,” Rahn observed—a doubling since last year. “We’re not O.K.” ♦

Poems

- “[Daffodils](#)”
- “[Lipsticks](#)”

[October 12, 2020 Issue](#)

Daffodils

By [Henri Cole](#)

October 5, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

Sometimes I arrive with my buds closed,
and I am mistaken for scallions,
but if you cut a half inch from my stems
and put me in water, I open up and release
yellow dust from my petal cups,
like talcum sprinkled on her shoulders
after she bathes and swallows her
third tranquilizer to erase herself,
the sedative piercing right through her
like a small bunch of flowers grasped
by a hand that connects the melancholy
to something in nature urging *Trust me*,
as the blackbirds at dawn trust
the aurora that conquers night.

[October 12, 2020 Issue](#)

Lipsticks

By [Nicholas Goodly](#)

October 5, 2020

Audio: Read by the author.

OVAH No. 5
Not That Innocent Pink
Violet Chachki
See You Next Tuesday
Amanda Lepore's Revenge
Nude Descending a Staircase
They're All Gonna Laugh at You
I Will Always Love Blue
This Is My Hair
Electric Twiggy
Grey Gardens
Nene Is Very Rich Green
Spell on You
A Clair Huxtable Hue
The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia
Mutha! Has Arrived
Lips Don't Lie
Put a Little Yellow in My Bowl
Mrs. Bates
Priscilla: Green of the Desert
Bag Lady Blue
Metallic Cyndi Mayweather
Little Latin Boy in Drag
Touch All This Skin
Orange in the 212
Burnt Sunset Boulevard
Iris Apfel Bloom
Naomi's Pout
C'est Si Bon
Meow

Fleetwood Matte
Divine Intervention
Good Witch, Bad Witch
Onyx First Lady
Proud Mary
The Banana-52's
Cleopatra
RuPocalypse Red
No Wire Hangers
Beat for the Gods
Barbarella Blue
Bette Davis Eyes
Opulence
Tangerine

Profiles

- [The Iconoclast Remaking Los Angeles's Most Important Museum](#)

The Iconoclast Remaking Los Angeles's Most Important Museum

Will the new LACMA building be Peter Zumthor's masterpiece or a fiasco?

By [Dana Goodyear](#)

October 5, 2020



Many nights last fall, Peter Zumthor, the Swiss architect, lay awake wondering, *Is Michael Govan my friend?* Govan is the director of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Soon after he was hired, in 2006, he invited Zumthor to propose a plan to transform its sprawling campus. “He called me and said, ‘Listen, I’m about to take a new position in Los Angeles. I need an architect,’ ” Zumthor told me. “He said, ‘I don’t believe in competitions. And I would like to work with you out of public view.’ ” The pitch was irresistible, Zumthor said: “A new museum, completely new. Who wouldn’t say yes?”

Zumthor is seventy-seven, and oversees a thriving boutique architecture practice, with three dozen employees and projects on three continents. Though he has never built in the United States, he is known throughout Europe as the creator of exquisitely stern structures with jewel-box proportions; in 2009, he won the Pritzker Prize. *LACMA* belongs to a vast public—the ten million people of Los Angeles County—and sees a million visitors each year. It shares a park with the La Brea Tar Pits archeological site, and occupies a position at the midway point between downtown and the coast. Because of the building’s prominence, scale, and cost—some six hundred and fifty million dollars—Zumthor’s *LACMA* is poised to be the most significant architectural addition to Los Angeles since [Frank Gehry’s Disney Hall](#) opened, two decades ago.

The new building, as Zumthor conceives it, is an elevated, single-story structure loosely shaped like a Matisse cutout. In various iterations, as he has recast its form, critics have likened it to an inkblot, a blob, a minor-city airport terminal, Bullwinkle’s antler, and an Italian Autogrill. The actor Brad Pitt has publicly defended Zumthor’s designs as emanating “from the soul for the soul,” but the building has caused an uproar that reaches beyond aesthetic concerns. In May, Christopher Knight, the art critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, won a Pulitzer Prize for a series of pieces decrying it as a betrayal—a museum that would undermine the collection it was meant to house. Govan, protective of Zumthor’s process, does not share bad press, and Zumthor doesn’t ask.

Govan likes to work with artists on long-term, moon-shot projects—James Turrell’s Roden Crater, Michael Heizer’s “City.” Making a major building with Zumthor was a similar proposition. His body of work is idiosyncratic, even peculiar: a memorial on the Barents Sea to people burned at the stake during Norway’s seventeenth-century witch trials; a museum, also in Norway, commemorating an obsolete zinc mine; a thermal spa in the Alps. He has built

two small and highly specific art museums: a *Kunsthaus* in Bregenz, Austria, often given over to the work of a single artist, and a museum for religious artifacts that emerges from the ruins of a bombed-out Catholic church in Cologne.

An emotional, intuitive designer, Zumthor draws on the sensory memories of a mid-century European boyhood—the hexagonal tiles in his aunt’s kitchen, the way light fell on the forest floor. He often begins his designs with impressionistic pastel sketches, and spends years pondering models constructed with the actual materials, watching the effects of light on the world’s most expensive doll houses. He is known to handcraft his buildings, slowly, but the deliberate pace didn’t concern Govan. “I knew that the longer he had the better the building would be,” he told me. “Some artists add complexity with time. He carves away, till you’re left with a distilled thing.” In any case, Govan added, “I needed a decade to raise money.”



C.TOM

"Please be mindful that we are still caught in a Biblical swarm of locusts."
Cartoon by Colin Tom

After fourteen years of planning and debate, construction is set to begin this fall. Zumthor, who despises monuments, finds himself responsible for a building intended to anchor a diffuse and sporadically planned city, where the forests catch fire every fall. A year ago, when I visited him in Haldenstein, an ancient village in the low Alps where he lives and has his atelier, it seemed to him as if the project might, at the final moment, fail, and ruin his good name. He was despondent, familiarly so. "Maybe it happens, maybe it won't," he told me. "I always get burned."

Zumthor's front door is made of heavy oak; its handle, which resembles an oversized metal staple, is wrapped in a cord of stained umber leather, like a riding crop. A similar one greets visitors at Kolumba, the museum in Cologne. Handles are a minor fetish for him—the point of contact, where a person holds on to a building. (Major fetishes: shadows, rubble and the presence of the past, dancing, his troublesome backhand.) I found Zumthor in his sitting room, brooding in a pool of lamplight, sipping Riesling. He is tall and white-haired, with an open face and an attitude of canny befuddlement—"a little Swiss boy from the Alps," he says. The floor was covered by an abstract carpet in cobalt blue and oxblood red: a reference to a house that he had designed for Tobey Maguire and Jennifer Meyer but never built. "He got a divorce and the house was lost," Zumthor told me. "I was happy. It was becoming painful. He doesn't know, but the floor plan became my beautiful Persian carpet."

Two weeks earlier, Zumthor had proposed yet another tweak to the *LACMA* building's shape. "It was not so big a change, but they freaked out," he said, as we sat down to eat risotto, prepared by his cook, in a kitchen nook panelled with tigerwood. The horizontal stripes in the wood, he explained, were created by stress from the wind. This wasn't a fact he had read but, rather, like many things he knows, something he sensed and believed firmly.

"They all panicked, said it's too late," he told me, ruefully. The museum's corporate officers were indignant. The county had allotted a hundred and twenty-five million dollars of taxpayer money; materials were being procured. Plans needed to be submitted the following month, or the building might have to be completely overhauled, to conform with changing building codes. Each week of delay could cost eight hundred thousand dollars.

Zumthor's thoughts, though, were not about time or expense. They were about posterity. "How can I deliver this building of which I know there's a better version?" he said. "But Michael, my friend, tells me, 'You cannot implement these changes.'" Govan had written to say that if Zumthor wanted the revisions he would need to find the money—three million dollars—himself. "In a seven-hundred-million-dollar building, I'm now obliged, after all of this, *I am* to find these three million dollars, me personally. I want to say, 'Listen, guys, this is *your* God-damned museum!'" He went on, "Everyone is playing me. I'm the only straight guy there—the straight guy from the Swiss Alps."

Zumthor prefers to work like an omakase sushi chef: trust him completely or go elsewhere. Over dinner, he told me the story of a chapel he had designed to commemorate Bruder Klaus, the farming saint of Switzerland. It started when Hermann-Josef Scheidtweiler, a pious German farmer, read about Kolumba and wrote Zumthor a letter, asking him to make a chapel in his wheat field. Zumthor told me that he replied, "Dear Mr. Scheidtweiler, I have to tell you, I only do contemporary architecture, first, and, second, this is such a tiny commission that my salary would be way too high for you." In a postscript, he added that Bruder Klaus had been his mother's favorite saint. "He responded to this P.S.," Zumthor said, smiling. He admires stubbornness.

Zumthor had an avant-garde idea for the chapel: a narrow tower, with a cavelike interior. So that the farmer could not object, he insisted on working for free. With the help of Scheidtweiler's farmhands and children, Zumthor constructed a pine-log wigwam with a tunnel leading to an inner chamber. They mixed concrete using sand and stones collected nearby and layered it on in hand-tamped strata, forming a five-sided tower. Then they slowly burned the wigwam away, curing the inside. In the ceiling, a tear-shaped oculus opens to the sky, allowing rain to pool on the lead floor; the smell of smoke lingers in the close interior.

The chapel, where the Scheidtweilers light candles every morning, has become a destination for international architecture buffs. Many of Zumthor's buildings have. Still, success on a prominent commission in the United States would break him out of his niche, establishing him among the major architects of his generation. In spite of the pitfalls of massive, expensive public works, he was determined to make LACMA a masterpiece. At dinner, he softly sang, "*Ma l'America è lontana . . .*"—"but America is far away," a line from a pop ballad of his youth. "You can feel I am alone, with very few people supporting me," he

said. “I don’t have the right education, or I refuse to have the right education.”

A few days later, on the way to Basel, where he is designing a building for the Beyeler Foundation, he was still agonizing. “I’m asking myself, Why am I so God-damned nervous? And I found out it’s that, it’s a trauma. That’s the trauma from Berlin,” he said. In the early nineties, he won a government competition to design a museum for the Topography of Terror Foundation, on the site where the S.S. had its headquarters and the Gestapo tortured prisoners. Zumthor found himself pinned between the demands of his vision and the realities of a public project. The client, he says, wanted a neutral building, which would not disturb visitors. In his design—three towers connected by a vast hall—he planned to feature the torture chambers at the entrance.

During the project’s decade-long gestation, costs escalated dramatically. The towers were built, but then, after two contractors went bankrupt, the government withdrew support. Zumthor, enraged and humiliated, filed a complaint against the city, claiming that his rights had been violated. “People started to believe I’m doing buildings that cannot be constructed,” he said. He lost in court, and the towers were destroyed. Zumthor believes it would have been his best work.

In Basel, we ate dinner with his daughter, Anna, a psychologist, at a swanky Italian restaurant on the Rhine. He ordered an Old-Fashioned and put it to her directly: “Do you think the Berlin experience has traumatized me?”



Zumthor's atelier in Haldenstein, in the Swiss Alps, where he spends years studying handmade models. Photograph by Joël Tettamanti

Anna studied him. She has blond hair, cut asymmetrically, and wore a cobalt-blue shirt. “No,” she said. “You’re a good example of post-traumatic growth.” In 2004, she had accompanied her father to the site one last time before the towers came down. At dinner, she said that in footage of that visit “you can see the exact moment when you realize this is a stillbirth. You’re brokenhearted. You were misunderstood, blackmailed, your reputation was murdered.”

“Two weeks ago, when Michael Govan wrote me that I cannot implement the changes I want, I’m worried, getting no sleep,” Zumthor said. “Will he sacrifice the building?”

Anna reassured him that Govan was an ally. Slowly, Zumthor said, “He’s a getter. He makes things happen, and he’s smiling. This was the first time he said this is the limit. Like when you realize your parents are not gods.”

He said the only consideration ever in his mind was whether he could put his name to a building. But he had come to seem like a purist, even an ascetic—out of touch, in his Alpine retreat. “How does this come to the mountain hermit, the monastic creature?” he lamented. “I only do what I like.”

The first major public art museum in the city of Los Angeles, LACMA separated from the old museum of history, science, and art, and opened its own campus in 1965, next to the tar pits, in the shopping district known as Miracle Mile. The land belonged to the county, as did the buildings, for which the museum’s board had raised the money.

Howard Ahmanson, a savings-and-loan magnate and the leading donor in the building campaign, had wanted Edward Durell Stone to design it; Norton Simon, another influential donor, wanted Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. They settled on William Pereira, who had built the headquarters for Hunt Foods, which Simon owned. Pereira was an affable, attractive pleaser, who started out designing movie theatres and went on to work in the studio system as a production designer and a producer. (He won an Oscar for special effects in 1943.) During his career, he contributed to dozens of iconic buildings, including the spaceship-like Theme Building, at LAX, which helped to define mid-century Los Angeles. A critic in San Francisco, where Pereira designed the Transamerica Pyramid, dismissed him as “Hollywood’s idea of an architect,” a likable lightweight. At LACMA, he was, indelibly, the second choice.

Pereira designed three buildings, in a U shape, open to Wilshire Boulevard: the Ahmanson, for the permanent collection, a pavilion for special exhibitions, and a six-hundred-seat theatre. Fluted columns decorated their exteriors, which, in a deferential allusion to the design of Ahmanson's banks, were faced with marble chips. The buildings hovered over large reflecting pools, fed by arcing fountains. Oil from the tar pits often leached in, tinting the water a smudgy black. On opening night, the pools were dyed blood-red, a portent of critical carnage to come.

Arts & Architecture pronounced the *LACMA* buildings "theatrical rather than dramatic, pitiful rather than sad." Like a film set, they looked good in pictures but felt too flimsy for sustained, real-world use. The lighting was terrible; the staircases were narrow and seemed likely to buckle in a crowd. After a year, the museum's first director resigned, maddened by the buildings' inadequacy.

It was partly *LACMA*'s burden to validate the city's stature. Was Los Angeles a place of culture and substance, or was it not? *LACMA* aspired to be an encyclopedic museum, akin to the Metropolitan Museum of Art: a temple filled with treasures from various cultures and historical periods. Its holdings, bolstered by a trove of objects donated by William Randolph Hearst, swelled over the decades; there are now some hundred and forty thousand items, ranging from Rubens paintings to ancient Indian ritual sculpture and nineteen-forties California coffeepots. The site itself grew to include the Art of the Americas, a postmodern building added in the eighties, and the Pavilion for Japanese Art, a kitschy, beloved folly by Bruce Goff. But the Pereira buildings were neglected. With plumbing problems and long-deferred seismic upgrades, they were trapped in a narrative of imminent collapse. "The employees' nickname for it is *LEAKMA*," Govan told me. "We removed pictures from the walls of the Ahmanson whenever it rained." Zev Yaroslavsky, who represented Miracle Mile on the County Board of Supervisors until 2014, told me, "There were buckets in the basement. The campus didn't flow well. It was time to replace it."



Shanahar

"Rat emoji, frown emoji, dead-fish emoji, send."
Cartoon by Danny Shanahan

Govan's mandate was to solve the problematic site. "I literally came to LACMA to tear the whole thing down," he told me. At the Guggenheim, early in his career, he helped facilitate the museum's expansion to Bilbao, working closely with Frank Gehry; later, as the head of the Dia Art Foundation, he masterminded its development of a former Nabisco factory in Beacon, New York. Govan is eloquent and appealing, with a reputation for finesse—at ease with both single-minded architects and reluctant donors. At LACMA, he quickly won the support of the Board of Supervisors. Yaroslavsky told me, "I don't want to say I fell in love with Michael, but I was totally swept off my feet by his ideas, enthusiasm, optimism, intellect, his can-do attitude."

Govan's predecessor had spent years on a competition for a master plan. The winning design, by Rem Koolhaas, proposed razing the Pereira buildings and the Art of the Americas to their foundations and unifying the remains under a single roof, like a lid over a dinner pot you don't want to look at till morning. The museum would have to close for several years during construction—a deeply unpopular idea. Between that and the fact that fund-raising was launched in the midst of the 2001 economic downturn, donations were tepid, and the plan was abandoned. "The environment simply went to hell," the museum's then chair told the *L.A. Times*.

Govan chose not to hold another competition. "It gets dangerous if you fail," he told me. In order to raise the money that a new building would require—an unprecedented amount in Los Angeles, where cultural philanthropy doesn't confer the social rewards that it does elsewhere—he needed to offer something dazzling: a forever building, with a motivating story to accompany it. "It had to be a compelling concept, because we were going to have to raise money the likes of which we had never seen," he told me. "The Rem failure was five years old. That was the strong thing in my mind—the last thing got killed. How do you get one through?"

Zumthor is a cabinetmaker by training; he taught himself architecture in an act of rebellion. His father, an overbearing furniture-maker, expected his son to join him in crafting bedroom sets for middle-class couples. The family history is the root of Zumthor's confidence—he knows how to make things by hand—and his defensiveness. He gives lectures with titles like "Why Do I Know What I Know?," as if still trying to make sense of it himself.

Zumthor grew up in Oberwil, the “upper village,” on the outskirts of Basel. He was the eldest of eight. The birth of a sister, when he was seven, allowed his parents to take advantage of a government program that subsidized land for families with four children. On weekends, Zumthor went with his father to dig in unyielding clay, making the foundation of their future home.

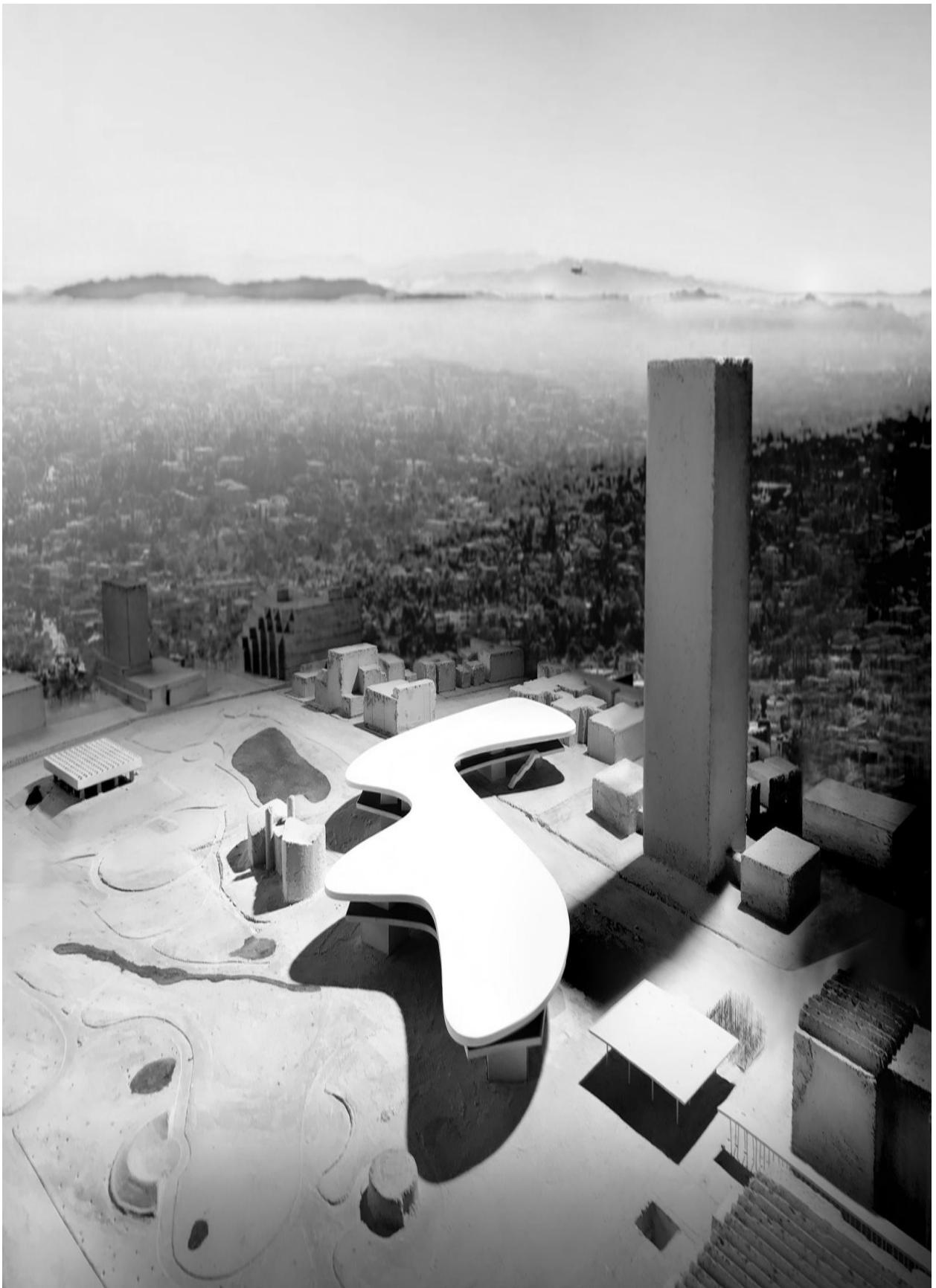
His father, he felt, was constantly putting him in humiliating situations: So you think you’re an architect? Let’s see you design a building. When he was nineteen, his father insisted that he draw an addition for the house, the awkward result of which confronts him every time he visits the family home. “The house was destroyed by this annex,” Zumthor told me. “Twenty years later, I was still dreaming about a house which never gets finished.”

For an unhappy period, Zumthor was his father’s apprentice, learning to make cabinets and furniture. The experience was so stressful that, when it came time to be certified, he nearly failed his practical exams. Seeking escape, Zumthor attended art school in Basel, and then applied to Pratt, in New York City. For a blissful stretch in the late sixties, he studied there, and steeped himself in the counterculture. A young photographer picked him up with the line “You look alienated,” and became his girlfriend. An interior-design professor mocked his projects as “cuckoo clocks”—neatly built Swiss clichés—but he found a circle of Bauhaus-connected expatriates who excited him. Then his father, who spoke no English, showed up in New York and said he would not pay for more schooling, and Zumthor returned to Switzerland, bringing along his American girlfriend. His father died at fifty-nine, in a mountaineering accident in the Alps. “I didn’t have time to forgive him,” Zumthor told me. “I was crying, ‘You idiot, you stupid idiot. How did you torture me, and now you’re dead?’ ”

Zumthor went to Chur—“vacation country,” he calls it, in the same canton as St. Moritz—and found work in the regional office of historic preservation. In the job, he scoured the Alps for pre-twentieth-century farmhouses and advised the owners on how to renovate with sensitivity. To appease their Catholic parents and a law forbidding cohabitation, Zumthor and his girlfriend married, but, as he recalls it, she soon got bored with farmhouses and left for Zurich. After they separated, Zumthor met Annalisa, a schoolteacher for special-needs children who spoke the local language, Romansh, and knew how to swing a scythe for haymaking. He can still describe the leather coat she was wearing when he first caught sight of her.

In the early seventies, the couple moved to Haldenstein, sharing a house communally with another couple. The villagers were scandalized—by male ponytails, and by the unconventional life style. At night, Zumthor told me, the postmaster would lie on his belly on a hillock, binoculars trained on the Zumthor house, hoping for a glimpse of a naked woman, or at least something he could report. “Growing up, we were ‘the others,’ ” Anna, Zumthor’s daughter, told me. (She has two younger brothers, Peter and Jon.) “My parents didn’t come from there, which was very bad. Also, we had so much freedom. Everyone had curfews. We did not.”

In his late thirties, Zumthor entered and won a competition to design an elementary school near Chur. The school, his first architecture project, was completed when he was forty. Others came slowly. “I had to fight my way without a diploma,” Zumthor told me. “This was actually wonderful. *Nobody* was like me, without a diploma.” In Haldenstein, he bought another house and transformed it into an atelier, a modernist take on a nineteenth-century farmhouse, with vertical larchwood slats that over time turned the soft, splintered gray of a weathered fence. As the children grew up and his practice matured, he built himself a new house, and eventually a new atelier. He bought more houses in Haldenstein. “Every time someone died, he bought the house,” Anna said.



At LACMA, Zumthor has been charged with making a building to anchor a diffuse and sporadically planned city. As he has recast its form, critics have likened it to an inkblot, a blob, a minor-city airport terminal, Bullwinkle's antler, and an Italian Autogrill. Photograph courtesy Atelier Peter Zumthor

Zumthor retained a feel for simple joinery, and many of his early projects are wooden, including a pair of restrained timber sheds that protect the excavation of a Roman ruin in Chur. Even now, his practice remains homespun, suspicious of glamour, and he is ironic about more prolific architects, with so many projects that they become mere businesspeople. “He trusts non-architects more than he trusts architects,” Melissa de La Harpe, who has worked at the atelier for five years, told me. “He asks his children about his projects.” In recent years, his children have discouraged him from accepting commissions. They want him to stay home.

Zumthor’s earliest experiences remain his strongest aesthetic guides. One day, he took me to see Mariastein Abbey, a Benedictine monastery tucked into the Jura Mountains, above Oberwil. Every year of his childhood, Zumthor took part in a procession from the village church to the abbey, leaving with hundreds of other pilgrims before dawn and walking through the fields, carrying an enormous cross. “It looked like an Italian movie,” he told me.

We got out of the car and walked into a broad, deserted square, made spacious for pilgrims. Mariastein’s limestone façade glowed in the afternoon sun. “I think it’s a marvel,” he said. “It’s so serene and simple.” Was it really that complicated to make a monument to anchor and define a public space? “All it takes is the square, the house, and a door,” he said.

We passed through the nave, where sun streamed through the windows, striking fat-faced cherubs and their golden trumpets, and descended into the underbelly of the church. The walls grew rough and turned to rock. A window framed a view of a forested limestone cliff, where, in the miracle that put the site on the pilgrim map, a child falling to his death is said to have been saved by the Virgin Mary. We kept walking, until the natural light was snuffed. Zumthor’s favorite spaces are whorled, with a hidden inner core. Finally, we entered a shadow-soaked cave that smelled of candle smoke, where petitioners were praying to a statue of Mary. Zumthor paid a hundred Swiss francs and lit a candle for Annalisa. For several years, owing to complications from an old cancer, she has been confined to a wheelchair. “She’s Protestant and doesn’t believe,” he said softly. “But you should do it anyway.”

The project that announced Zumthor to the world is Therme Vals, the spa, which

was completed in 1996. A Tetris-like assortment of plunge pools half submerged in a bucolic hillside, the baths have a seductive power. “It’s the Xanadu effect, the beauty of the remote,” one architecture critic told me. “It’s so sensual, it’s so delicious in so many ways, and it photographs so beautifully.” Zumthor’s spa is regarded as an exalted expression of regional modernism: site-specific, culturally grounded, made from local materials using traditional techniques.

Vals, an avalanche-prone Alpine village of a thousand people, is home to a thousand sheep and a springwater bottling plant owned by Coca-Cola. It is an hour or so from Haldenstein—past waterfalls, through clouds, around hairpin turns overhung with slick rocks. In the nineteen-eighties, Vals was a shrinking speck with few prospects and a decrepit, German-owned resort beside natural hot springs. Several Valsers persuaded the owners to sell the resort and the springs to the townspeople. “We were reflecting, what shall we do with this sorry bloody hotel?” Pius Truffer, a local quarry owner who led the citizens’ board overseeing the project, told me. “We started dreaming, dreaming. Maybe we should invest in something unique—a spa, a swimming pool, which would attract people from all over the world to Vals!” Hoping to find an architect who could reimagine the resort, they hired Zumthor.

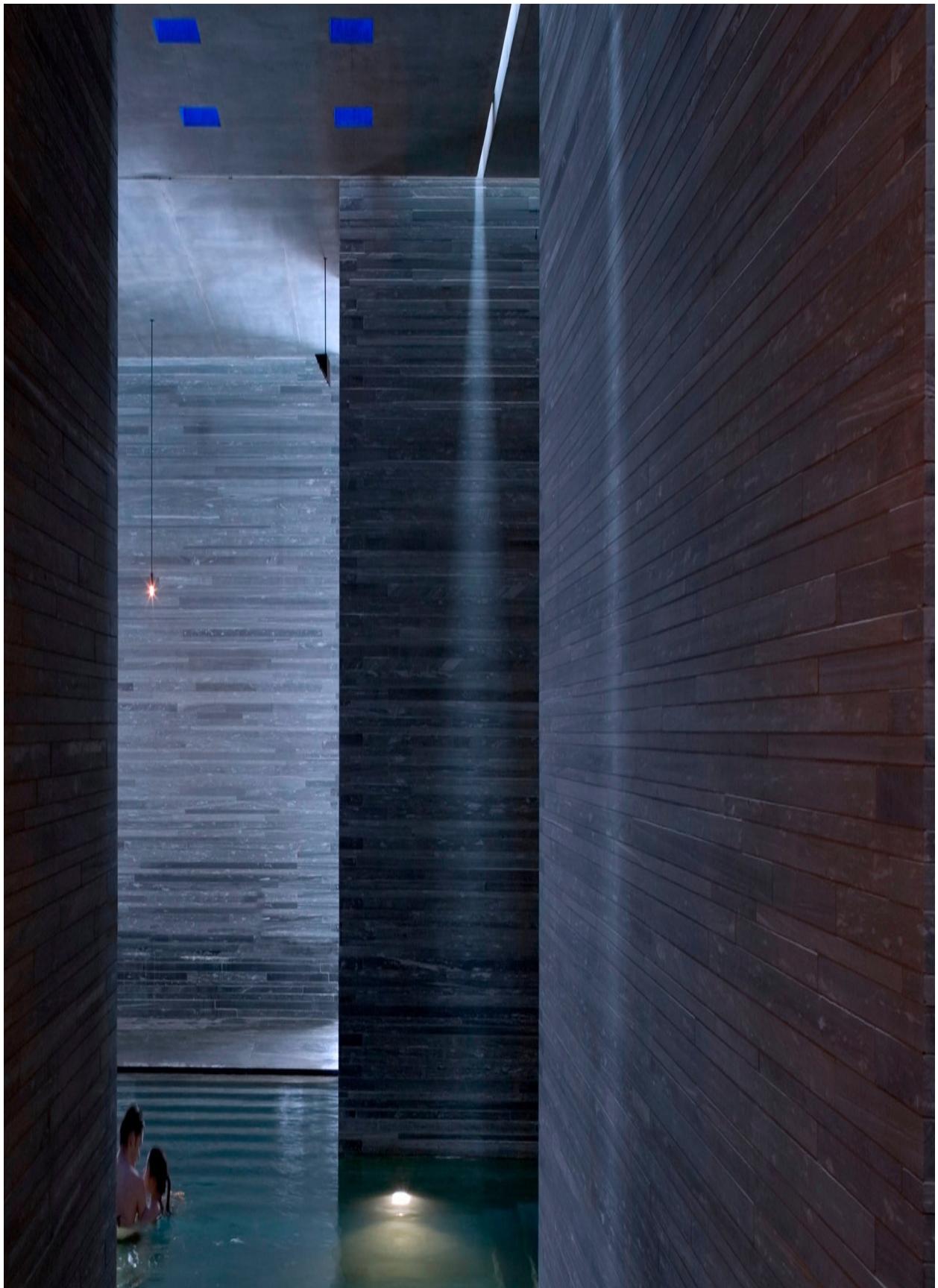
For more than a decade, Zumthor interrogated the features of a mountain soak, trying to determine its quintessence. How cold is the water in an Alpine lake, how deep? What does the stone feel like on the soles of your feet? Would it be nice to bathe in hay? Or lie on heated gravel? (No and no.) Perhaps visitors would like to descend into a cave, engulfed in heat and steam, and contemplate life? Truffer told me that one of the villagers said, “Peter, it’s like a crematorium!”

According to Truffer, the community grew exasperated with Zumthor’s process, fearing that they had entrusted their precious resource to an artist on a journey, not an architect with a plan. “There was widespread opposition,” he told me. “They said, ‘We cannot spend our money for modern art. We would like to have a spa and take a bath.’ Peter said, ‘Ja, about feeling and ambience, you have to trust me.’ ”

Zumthor reduced the materials to water, glass, brass, and stone—no visible pipes or ducts, no clocks except a single hidden timepiece on a brass eyestalk. “It’s a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total art work,” he told me. The walls are made from elongated quartzite bricks, with gray-scale variations reminiscent of the

larchwood slats of his atelier. Open seams in the ceiling allow sunlight to enter in ghostly lines—some defining an alternative volume within the space, others fanning out like an annunciation. A brass spout funnels water from the source, St. Petersquelle, into a brass basin with cups attached by chains. In one secluded pool, swimming around a corner reveals a chamber where the human voice harmonizes with the room so that humming creates a glorious Gregorian echo. “It’s an accident,” Zumthor said. “I wouldn’t know how to do this. Sometimes we deserve to be lucky, right?”

The spa was a wild success. Zumthor began renovating the hotel, and for several years Annalisa managed it, alongside Truffer. In a unique experiment, the villagers owned the resort, and the proceeds flowed back into their town. “It was a social-cultural project,” Zumthor told me, a fantasy of communal life made real. He built a trio of small vacation houses for his family in Leis, an even tinier village on a slope overlooking Vals.



At Therme Vals, in a tiny Swiss village, Zumthor reconceived a neglected hot springs as a spa, using just a few materials: water, glass, brass, and stone. The project announced him to the world, and is now regarded as an exalted expression of regional modernism. Photograph by Fernando Guerra-VIEW / Alamy

But Truffer was still dreaming of how to maximize the potential that had been tapped. Global nomads and art-fair habitués were flocking to Vals. What if he gave them more? According to Zumthor, Truffer sought out Remo Stoffel, a young financier who had grown up in town, where his father worked at the bottling plant; he bought the hotel, driving the Zumthors out of Vals.

Stoffel renamed the resort 7132, and began commissioning projects from other architects. Thom Mayne, a co-founder of the Los Angeles firm Morphosis, designed a new entryway for the hotel, a groovy white stucco overhang that resembles a half-sucked Life Saver. Mayne, along with Tadao Ando and Kengo Kuma, major Japanese architects, was hired to create suites, for a special wing called the House of Architects. Zumthor was not amused. “I saw the rooms my colleagues made—awful,” he told me. He had lived and worked in Vals on and off for twenty years. His starchitect colleagues were faxing it in from nine time zones away. So much for regionalism.

Morphosis soon announced that it would build another hotel for 7132, “a minimalist object connecting guests to nature.” Clad in reflective material, it would be the tallest tower in Europe and, with only one room per floor, would provide “exclusive panoramic views of the Alps.” Five years later, there is no sign of construction. “It’s a protected groundwater zone, where Coca-Cola gets the water,” Zumthor said. “I could have told Thom Mayne, ‘Forget about your tower.’” Even unbuilt, the project violated the spirit of his work in Vals. “That soil is the sacred source of minerals,” he told me. “My colleagues are so conceited, they don’t ask me, ‘What do you think? This is *your* bath.’”

Stoffel abruptly moved to Dubai last year, and Mayne did not respond to requests for an interview. Truffer, too, no longer works for 7132, but he maintains that the plan was always to juxtapose Zumthor’s works with other architects’. “That is not the right solution, to say every building in this valley is Zumthor, Zumthor, Zumthor,” he said. “The village has said, ‘This is not Zumthortown.’”

With his total art work destroyed, Zumthor disavows the spa and rarely visits. “It makes me puke,” he told me. Still, Vals has proved a powerful tool for Govan’s fund-raising. Several years ago, after the casino owner and philanthropist Elaine Wynn became co-chair of LACMA’s board, she and Govan arranged a jaunt to

Europe to see Zumthor's work. They spent, she recalled, "the most magical night at the baths," and she and her granddaughter stayed over in one of the Zumthor chalets in Leis. When she returned, she recounted her experience to the rest of the board. "Michael is a dream weaver," Wynn told me. "When you get through with him, you want to say, 'Well? How much?'" She donated fifty million dollars to the new building, and says that almost every member of the board has made a contribution. "We shamed a few people," she said. "Like, 'Come on, man, you can do better!'" The naming rights went to David Geffen, who offered a hundred and fifty million dollars, the largest single gift in *LACMA*'s history.

For the new building, Govan wanted a one-story, horizontal structure, with abundant natural light and physical heft. It needed to be solid, elemental, grounded. "Most architecture in Los Angeles is quite temporary-feeling," Govan said. "Built with sticks. What L.A. needed, and what would stand out next to the primordial quality of the tar pits and the ancientness of our collections, was gravitas and real materials." The building should look old, excavated rather than superimposed—something that "feels like it was there forever and should be there forever."

Inside, the program would be radical—a reinvention of the encyclopedic museum for the twenty-first century. The idea was to abolish the hierarchies inherent in the old museums, which offered prime real estate to European painting and shunted other cultures and their artifacts aside. In *LACMA*'s Ahmanson Building, Islamic, South Asian, and Southeast Asian art were on the fourth floor. "Less than a quarter of the people go up there," Govan told me. He wanted the future *LACMA* to have no front, no back; no up or down. Flatness means access, as mall developers know. "It is essential that we create an equitable organization of cultures, equally accessible, and it is also essential in art history that we start to look at history from different points of view," he said. The object was to engage visitors, not to instruct them. "Who wants them to see thousands of things?" he said. "You want them to stay longer."

Zumthor's first design was a pair of glass boxes, contained on the northern side of Wilshire Boulevard and cantilevered over the tar pits. Govan was unimpressed. Years passed. "I showed them drawings and things—they looked so ugly," Zumthor said. "After two to three years of hard work, it looks worse and worse." After presenting the sixth version of his idea, and suffering through a nearly wordless dinner in a restaurant in Haldenstein, Zumthor was certain that he would be fired. The next morning, he got up early and went to the atelier. He

swept the model off its mount, and on a chalkboard drew a large amoeba, in conversation with the shape of the site's main tar pit. "The Black Flower!" Zumthor said. But a new problem presented itself. The amoeba shape encroached on the tar pit, which is an active excavation site, and the director of the natural-history museum objected. There was another way to go: the building could cross Wilshire and land in a parking lot owned by *LACMA*. Zumthor said, "The breakthrough power came out of frustration and desperation, out of 'God damn it, there is no solution here!'"

I first heard Zumthor describe the building in 2017, at a talk held in Pereira's Bing Theatre, at *LACMA*. Every seat was taken, one of them by Frank Gehry. From the stage, Zumthor suggested that encyclopedic museums fail by definition. No museum can be a complete catalogue of all art, and no master narrative explains how disparate objects relate. A new encyclopedic museum, therefore, must not strain for logic but appeal to the visitor's emotions. "These museums, they shouldn't say—to me, nowadays—Look, we know everything from East to West, from 4000 to the present," he said. "They should say this: There were people before us, and look what they did." The objects in *LACMA*'s collection were deracinated, he said, cut loose from their contexts and histories. "I think this could be my task, to create a new home, a temporary home for these homeless pieces," he said.

A screen behind Zumthor displayed the latest rendering of the building, with glass walls sandwiched between two undulating slices of concrete, a profile like sci-fi eyewear. "Maybe art should not be housed in palaces, closed like castles where you need a high-school degree to enter, or a doctorate," he said. "It should be open to the people."

According to the rendering, the floor plate will be thirty feet off the ground, supported by towers on either side of Wilshire Boulevard. In the space below, people will visit stores and restaurants within the tower bases, and wander among them, encountering outdoor sculptures by Alexander Calder and Tony Smith. The exhibition level will be broken up into boxy, conventional galleries; intimate cul-de-sacs, with only one door, like a chapel; and irregular rooms formed from the negative space in between. The corridors along the building's perimeter, with glass on one side, will provide more exhibition space, along with benches where museumgoers can sit and look out at the city beyond. Sidelight is flattering to sculpture and ceramic; the darker interior galleries would suit sensitive works on paper. "I can't think of another museum that has these types

of spaces,” Govan told me later. “These are the Zumthoresque spaces, with the play of light and shadow, to get that emotional response.”



R. Chas

“What do I want to offer to the visitor?” Zumthor said at the talk. “I think we should all be able to make personal discoveries as we go along. And that the architecture is made in a way that you don’t go from object to object reading the tag and then go to the next tag, but you really look at the object, because”—he lowered his voice to a whisper—“there won’t be any tags, I hope.” The audience groaned faintly. “Personal discoveries—this is the start of all the art. *Intimate encounters*,” he said. “I would like to have rooms in this thing where you all of a sudden would have an intimate encounter with a piece of art.” In such a museum, viewers would find their own way: “Look at the objects of art first, get moved or touched or interested, and then we ask, What is this? What do we know about this? But first the emotion, and then the scientific, academic explanation.”

Zumthor is known to conduct exhaustive research into the conditions and customs of places where he builds. During the mine project, in Norway, he worked for years with local historians. But the emotional approach to learning permits a person to dwell only on what truly interests him. In the late eighties, Zumthor lived for a few months in Los Angeles and taught at SCI-Arc, an experimental architecture school. He went to all the Schindler buildings, learned to manage freeway interchanges, and explored the San Fernando Valley. But he seemed to view the place from a distance, and with some dislike. In “Thinking Architecture,” a book of musings from 1998, he describes the city by night:

Seen from an approaching aircraft that is gradually losing altitude, the nighttime illumination of Los Angeles looks like a magical image. Later, on the streets of the city, that same light seems pallid and sickly to me, an unnatural brightness in which the green lawns and bushes in the front yards of the houses look as if they were made of plastic.

One evening, I sat with Zumthor, Govan, and a couple of curators on the terrace of a restaurant on Wilshire Boulevard, across from the museum. One of the curators said that this was the place where Biggie Smalls had been shot. Zumthor looked at her and smiled blankly. A bus idled at a bus stop, and a plane flew overhead. The other curator said, apologetically, “It’s an urban environment.” Then Govan told Zumthor, as if for the first time, that in the days of the grand department stores the neighborhood was named Miracle Mile. “Is it still called Miracle Mile?” Zumthor asked, amused. “There was a time when people think this is such a great stretch? So what were the miracles?”

Kim Cooper and Richard Schave have a business called Esotouric, which offers guided bus tours of Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles and James M. Cain's Glendale. "We advocate for the forgotten, the unimportant," Cooper told me. Some years ago, using the landmark process, they helped rescue from demolition a bungalow where Charles Bukowski once lived. More recently, they started to fight the planned demolition of the William Pereira buildings at LACMA.

In December, I walked around the site with Cooper and Schave. A large construction fence had been erected, in anticipation of demolition. Cooper pointed at one side of the Bing Theatre, where asbestos abatement was under way. "He's got these twin fluted columns, almost like chopsticks, very slender, very delicate, wonderful, very distinctly Pereira," she said. "The whole thing floated above water—walkways took you over these water features."

Cooper and Schave are native Angelenos, and they were adamant that Zumthor and Govan misunderstood Los Angeles completely. (Much of the negative online commentary about Govan refers to his East Coast origins; one anonymous critic sinisterly encouraged him to seek early retirement on Martha's Vineyard.) Sure, Zumthor was a talented architect, but he had a context, and it wasn't Los Angeles. "He's not aware of L.A.," Alan Hess, an architect who is working on a book about Pereira, told me. "His building does not relate, it's superimposed." Spanning Wilshire would be a disaster. "Angelenos have all been stuck under underpasses, like at Wilshire and 405," he said. "That's what that is going to be. It's a shame. The acoustics under there will be like being in a car in a traffic jam."

Cooper said, "Everything Michael Govan has done since he came to LACMA has been to create a checkmate situation." We walked to the western end of the campus, where the old May Company department store stands. LACMA owns the property, but, instead of redeveloping it for the museum's use, Govan had leased it to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences—a hundred and ten years for thirty-six million dollars. The Academy is converting the building into its own museum, with a huge glass-dome addition by Renzo Piano. Cooper peered through a gap in the construction fence. A representative of the Academy, who turned out to be Omar Sharif's grandson and namesake, greeted her. She asked him if the top-floor restaurant would be preserved; the room, she explained, was haunted by the ghost of a woman whose husband had killed her there in the eighties. Sharif smiled nervously and said that he wasn't authorized to provide a tour.

Cooper said, “The May Company would have been perfect office space, lab space, theatre space, restaurant space, everything needed. It was essentially given away to the Academy.” By landing in the *LACMA* parking lot on the other side of Wilshire, Govan had raided the museum’s last trust fund: space for an office building, which the museum could lease out to generate income.

Schave said, “Michael Govan wants it to seem like this is not a battle . . .”



Zumthor's favorite spaces are whorled, with a hidden inner core. His chapel devoted to the Swiss saint Bruder Klaus, built in a wheat field, was constructed by layering concrete over a wooden frame and then burning the frame away. Photograph by Till Strohmeier / Alamy

“. . . for the soul of Los Angeles,” Cooper muttered.

“This is very much a battle,” Schave said. “This is a thin red line. This is Chapter 2 of the Bhagavad Gita. You have giant armies assembled.”

Part of the problem was secrecy. The project began out of public view, and even with demolition imminent Govan and Zumthor hadn’t released detailed floor plans. In the spring of 2019, LACMA submitted its final environmental-impact report to the County Board of Supervisors. Reading the document, William Poundstone, an arts writer whose site is called *LACMAonfire*, observed that the building had shrunk slightly from the draft version—and was now some forty-five thousand square feet smaller than the buildings that it would replace. Joseph Giovannini, an architect and critic in New York who has waged war on the Zumthor project for years, performed a forensic analysis and determined that the design would significantly diminish the number of galleries and cut the exhibition space by twenty per cent. (LACMA disputes his calculations.)

The shrinkage, Giovannini believes, will change the fundamental nature of the institution. “The building he commissioned—based on false premises—is really the Trojan horse,” he told me. While everyone was arguing about the aesthetics of the building, he suggested, Govan had quietly changed the premise of the institution. “You can’t possibly put an encyclopedic museum in a space that size,” he said. “You can do a boutique museum. But Michael doesn’t want an encyclopedia museum. They think encyclopedia is old-brain, that it perpetuates an imperial notion—Napoleon goes to Egypt and takes everything.” Earlier this year, Giovannini, with an organization called the Citizens’ Brigade to Save LACMA, took out full-page ads in the *L.A. Times* and the *New York Times* to protest the building, and also held a competition for alternate designs.

According to Govan and Zumthor, the museum is designed to foster “adjacencies,” counter-narratives and moments of cross-cultural connection—in other words, don’t expect to go into a room and see scores of nineteenth-century landscape paintings. J. Patrice Marandel, a retired curator who for two decades helped build LACMA’s world-class European-painting collection, told me that the display of objects in this vision was mere interior decorating. “The idea is to build this structure which some people find beautiful—or not—without thinking about the collection we have, the history we have to preserve, where the only

idea is to mix things without any kind of intellectual plan,” he said. “It’s just aesthetic—Cy Twombly looks good next to Chinese bronze, the way it would look good in your living room.”

Christopher Knight, the L.A. *Times* art critic, acknowledges that encyclopedic museums emerged in a different cultural moment, with questionable motives—but, he argues, they remain relevant, especially in a polyglot city such as Los Angeles. “The great virtue is the juxtaposition of global works of art in one place,” Knight said. “Anyone in the city can go to *LACMA* and find his or her origin culture and see how it relates to other global cultures.” It didn’t ease Knight’s anxiety when Govan began talking about someday, with more money, building satellite museums in underserved Los Angeles neighborhoods. “It will never happen,” Knight told me. “The expense being racked up for this building will take a very long time to pay off. The satellites are an expression of dismantlement.”

Several months ago, the Ahmanson Foundation, which has given more than a hundred and thirty million dollars’ worth of European paintings and sculpture to the museum, suspended its donations to *LACMA*. The foundation’s president, William Ahmanson, is the great-nephew of Howard Ahmanson, the lead donor for the original campus; he also sits on the museum’s board. He told me, “We’ve helped *LACMA* amass a terrific European-art collection, and it seems this building is not going to be sufficient to exhibit it. I’ve heard quietly there are others on the board who are unhappy, but they’re not willing to go against the power structure.”

Critics of the new design tend not to mention that the museum was considerably smaller for much of its life. In Govan’s first few years as director, *LACMA* opened two new buildings, the Broad Contemporary Art Museum and the Resnick Pavilion, both designed by Renzo Piano, which provided an additional hundred thousand square feet of exhibition space. The space would permit the museum to stay open during construction. “You double the size of the museum, halve it during construction, and redouble it with the new building,” Govan said.

At *LACMA*, Govan has raised a record amount of money for a cultural institution in the city, drawn from public and private sources. But, it turns out, six hundred and fifty million dollars is not all he needs. Recently, he acknowledged that the project would require an additional hundred million, to pay for moving and storing the art during construction, maintaining the Broad and Resnick buildings,

and renting office space. (The Zumthor building does not allow for offices, or a conservation lab.) His approach followed the logic of fund-raising: you must have to get. “When you have five hundred million, it’s easy to talk about seven hundred and fifty million,” he told me. “When you have zero to a hundred, it’s a scary thought.” But, for those who oppose Govan, it’s another example of duplicity. With such an expensive building, and more obligations on the horizon, how can the museum continue to expand its collection? Privately, Govan has suggested that *LACMA* has been misunderstood all along. “Michael says this will never be the Met,” one person close to the project told me. “It’ll never be the Louvre. We got started a hundred and fifty years later than they did. It’s a fantasy that this is encyclopedic in that sense.”

The second floor of Zumthor’s atelier is devoted to the museum and its models. Architects who come to work for Zumthor must first spend three months in the model room. For *LACMA*, they made tiny replicas of “Urban Light,” a street-lamp sculpture by Chris Burden, out of pins with blobs of translucent glue stuck to their heads. When I visited, a large set of detailed plans, with numbers, was tacked to the wall. Hard costs: \$493 million. Total exhibition space: 108,951 square feet. Zumthor, despite being shielded from the critical maelstrom, had managed to get wind of the discussion about shrinkage. He insisted that his critics had misunderstood the galleries on the building’s perimeter. “They think they’re just corridors,” he said. “It’s like they have never heard of an open floor —never heard of Mies or Corbusier. They will see.”



Kolumba, a museum in Cologne that houses religious artifacts, emerges from the ruins of a bombed-out Catholic church. Photograph by Veit Landwehr

Zumthor regularly visits the models, making a master class of each project while all the architects and the interns gather around. Today, it was a pep talk. “Where are we, where are we going?” he said. “We need to implement the last changes in geometry.” These were the modifications he had asked Govan for, refining the shapes of the interstitial galleries and slightly recontouring the roofline. A pedestal supported a 1:50 scale model of the building: a curvilinear shelf that arced like a boomerang, so that the southern end faced the northern end. The roof plate protruded, like a slight overbite, casting shade. The exterior walls were all translucent, allowing for ample sidelight. To study paving material for the understory, an intern had collected leathery fallen leaves from Zumthor’s garden and torn them up, an approximation of cracked earth. The over-all effect was of a desert palace, equal parts fortress and oasis, sturdy and serene.

“There’s always this conflict between an artistic way of working, when you need another iteration, and the building process, which is a big administration and a lot of money,” Zumthor said. “Michael says, If I’m over budget, I’m gone. He has stressed his board with money so much they have said, This is it. I have a full understanding of their nervousness. We personally have to get the 3.3 million.”

“I have to be sly as a fox,” Zumthor went on. “The project is in its psychologically worst phase. The museum is empty. People are moving out. Everything looks so sad. People are saying, You will be over budget, the idea won’t work.” But, he said, the same thing had happened at Kunsthaus Bregenz: “The workers were turning away from the crazy architect who had no idea of nothing. But when the scaffolding went away, and people saw the structure, all of a sudden I was someone. When the first glass façade went up, they rolled out the red carpet. This will happen here, I know this.” He addressed the architects again: “We have to go through this. We just have to be strong.”

In late February, Zumthor made his last visit to Los Angeles before demolition. (As it turned out, it was his last trip anywhere for some time; shortly after he got home, Switzerland imposed a strict coronavirus lockdown, and he was sequestered in his home, alone.) The three million dollars had been found. Zumthor said that he had leaned on subcontractors to simplify elements, a process known as “value engineering.” Govan said only that everyone had come together around the changes. In any case, the museum’s corporate officers were mollified, and the work could proceed.

One clear morning, Zumthor arrived at the LACMA campus after his daily tennis, to make a study of the light conditions with the contractor. Critics and commenters had bemoaned the glass walls of the peripheral galleries, another way in which he was out of touch with local conditions. Maybe glass would be appropriate in the gloomy European cities where Zumthor was accustomed to working—but not here, with three hundred and sixty days of sunshine!

Zumthor crossed Wilshire, eating a green apple, his black shirt billowing behind him like a wind sock. Beside the Ahmanson Building, soon to be demolished, sample materials for the new museum had been amassed: a slab of concrete, for the internal walls; black terrazzo, for the floors; a windowpane and some bronze mullions. That was everything, a simple monolith with just a few ingredients. “Please visit the museum!” Zumthor said to the builders who had gathered, gesturing at the impromptu model. He walked around to the northern side of the setup. “We have shadow and sunshine,” he said. The window was a mirror. “You can see there’s a lot of reflection. Because of paintings, we should be in the dark, and the darker we are inside the less we have to draw the curtains.” He checked the south. “Now you see the reflection in the glass is almost gone. I know we all learned this in architecture school—but I wasn’t there!” He laughed.

Zumthor crossed Wilshire again, to a lot where additional slabs of concrete were being craned in for him to examine. “There’s a big discussion we have to have about: how does the concrete, quality-wise, have to look?” he said. “We don’t have to be too polished. This is not a black concrete, O.K.? This is just a bit darker. When we talk about black concrete, we run into problems.” Over time, Zumthor had revised the building’s color from tarry black, which was controversial, to mild beige. Now he was contemplating a weathered gray.

Govan arrived, wearing a charcoal-colored suit—a nice shade for a museum. “What do you say, Maestro?” he called out.

“It’s good to be a little darker,” Zumthor said. “It’s the circle coming back to darker. But this is not black.” No, Govan agreed, definitely not black. “It’s a little bit older. Looks a little bit more historic,” Zumthor said.

Govan agreed. “It looks like it was *here*,” he said.

That night, Zumthor and Govan celebrated. The last piece of art had been moved out of the Ahmanson, and demolition could begin. By fall, they’d be building.

Govan shared in the triumph. “We do what we want, and we are on budget!” he said. “I told you this would happen.”

“Well, I didn’t want to be on budget,” Zumthor said. “I said, ‘I don’t give a fuck if we’re on budget.’ ”

“It’s going to ruin your reputation,” Govan joked.

Zumthor looked at him. “I said, ‘We have to build, and they can’t go back.’ ” ♦

Reality TV

- A Star of “The Boys” on Sending Up the Superhero Genre

[October 12, 2020 Issue](#)

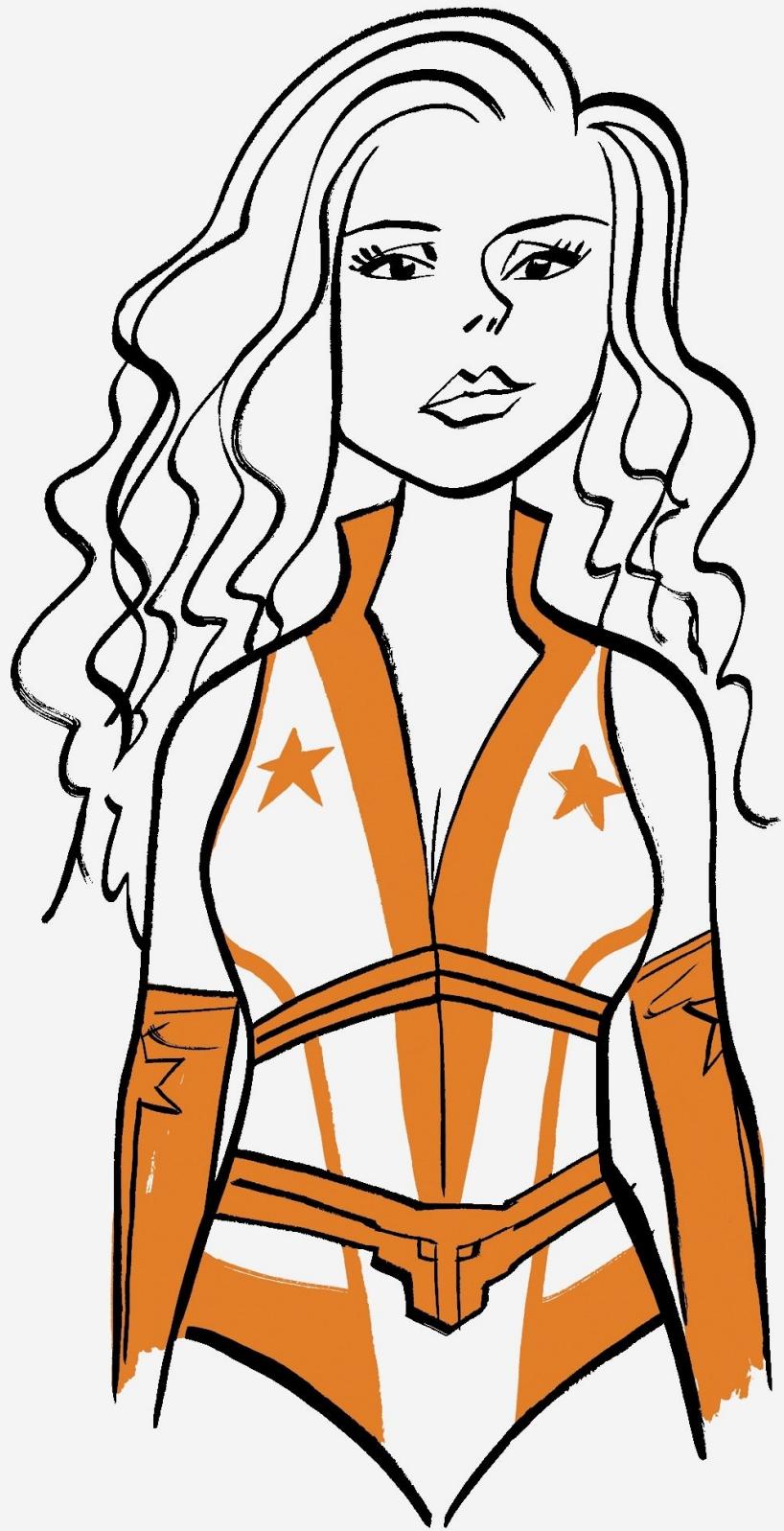
A Star of “The Boys” on Sending Up the Superhero Genre

Erin Moriarty, who plays Starlight in the Amazon Prime series, talks about heroes, toxic masculinity, and fighting systemic racism.

By [Tyler Foggatt](#)

October 3, 2020

Last year, at Comic-Con, the director Eric Kripke explained the premise of “The Boys,” his Amazon Prime series, now in its second season: “It started with just wanting to take the piss out of the superhero genre a little bit.” The show follows a group called the Seven, whose members, in between battles with superpowered terrorists, appear on morning talk shows, headline Christian-rock festivals, and casually commit war crimes. The Seven is a parody of the Justice League: A-Train is like the Flash, except he’s a drug addict and unwittingly murders civilians by plowing through them, and the Seven’s leader, Homelander, is a sociopath, much like his DC equivalent, Superman. So far, the show has avoided the wrath of comic-book superfans.



“Surprisingly, no one has been offended,” Erin Moriarty, the twenty-six-year-old actress who plays Starlight—the only sane member of the Seven—said the other day, on a Zoom call from Los Angeles. “What we’re mainly satirizing is the Zeitgeist.” She went on, “If this were real life, do you really think that superheroes would be good?” If you look at statistics, she pointed out, “men in power abuse their power.”

Moriarty’s character bears the brunt of such abuse. She begins as Annie January, a girl next door from Des Moines who happens to have the ability to suck up electricity and blast people with light. She moves to New York to join the Seven, and is promptly sexually assaulted by the group’s Aquaman knockoff, the Deep (real name: Kevin). While crying in the ladies’ room afterward, she discovers Translucent, the invisible member of the Seven, lurking. Moriarty said that, when she got the script, she thought it was standard superhero pabulum. But, when she got to the scene in which the Deep pressures Starlight into performing a sexual act (“Just roll with the punches for, like, three minutes, maybe, it’s not a big deal,” the Deep tells her. “And then you know what happens? All your dreams come true”), a bell rang. After that, she said, “I was all in.”

At the age of eleven, while growing up in New York City, Moriarty starred in a community-theatre production of “Annie.” Later, she played a lot of movie stars’ daughters—Mel Gibson’s, in “Blood Father”; Vince Vaughn’s, in “The Watch”; and Woody Harrelson’s, in “True Detective.” Starlight is her breakout role. A few episodes after being assaulted by the Deep, she mocks him as “the fish guy” and threatens to burn his eyes out if he touches her again. In another, she uses her electric powers to save a woman who is being attacked by two men.

Normal life can be a comedown—especially during quarantine. “I’m not one of those people who have been able to take advantage of this time and be hypercreative,” Moriarty said. “I haven’t written a script. I haven’t learned a language. I haven’t been in a mental position to absorb something like that.” She was dressed in white, sitting in a white-walled apartment hung with minimalist art. She rattled off some recent activities: “Lots of hiking with my dog, lots of therapy sessions, lots of cooking, anything meditative.”

She has also been watching the new season of “The Boys,” which finished filming in November. (Amazon began releasing episodes last month; the finale will drop on Friday.) The season features a redemption arc for the Deep, whose

gills, it seems, have afflicted him with crushing body dysmorphia. (The gills speak, and are voiced by Patton Oswalt: “You can’t accept your own body, so you violate theirs.”) He marries a Vassar anthropology professor as part of his rebrand. “So often, this toxic-masculinity thing comes from an internal deep well of insecurity,” Moriarty said.

The Seven also has a new recruit, played by Aya Cash. Her name is Stormfront. (Yes, like the neo-Nazi site.) In one scene, she explains to Homelander, “You can’t win the whole country anymore, so stop trying. You don’t need fifty million people to love you. You need five million people fucking pissed. Anger sells. You have fans. I have soldiers.”

It’s hard to believe that this was filmed almost a year ago. “We wanted to tackle systemic racism and other issues in society that we don’t talk about enough,” Moriarty said. “The show would have been topical no matter what. But we didn’t know that this would be, you know, sort of the theme of 2020.” ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

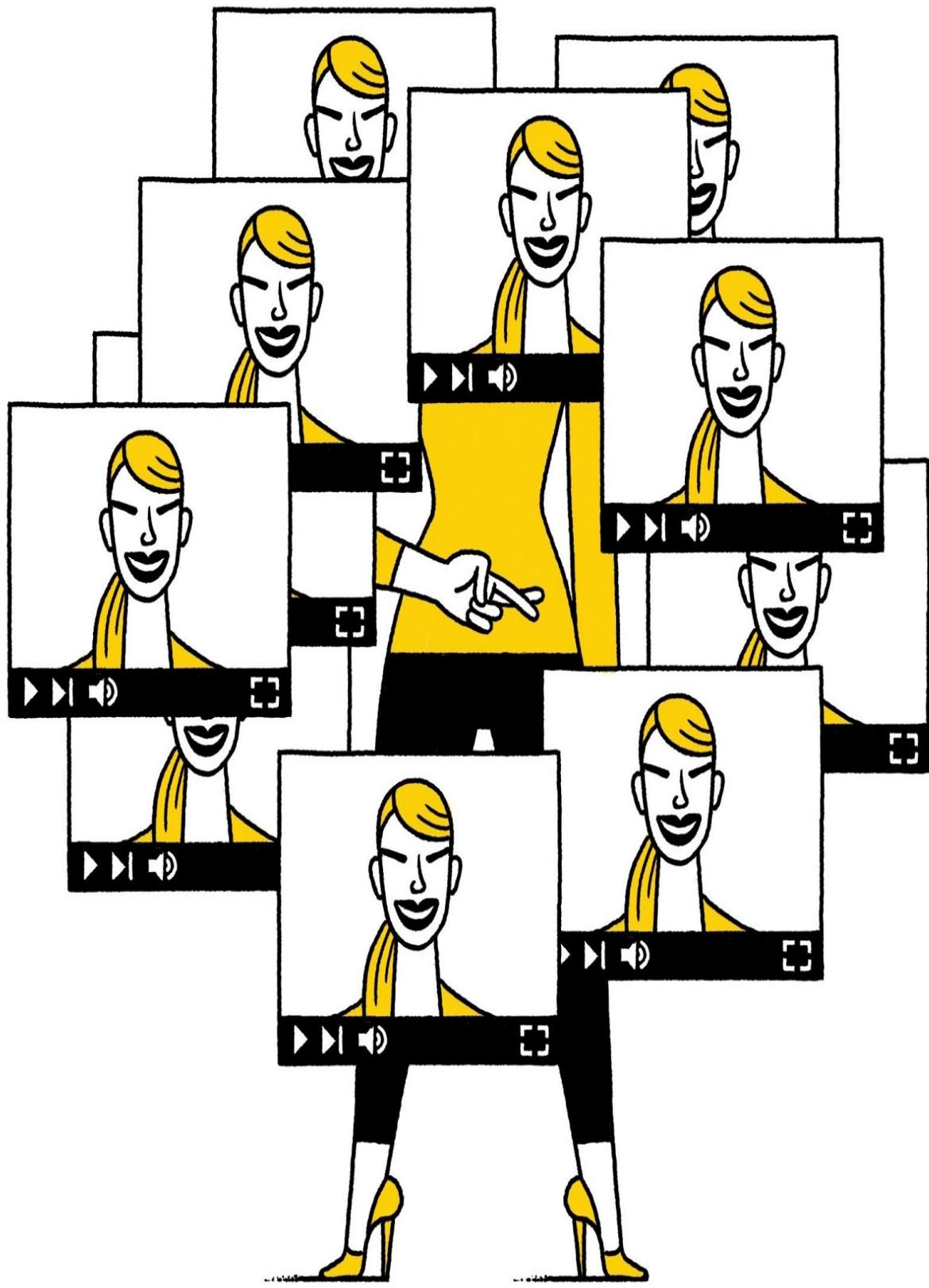
- [A Few Clarifications About My Viral Video](#)

[October 12, 2020 Issue](#)

Now That It's Gone Viral

By [Rachel Axler](#)

October 5, 2020



Now that it's gone viral, I just need to clarify a few things about that video.

I'm not a doctor. I'm also not a statistician, a meteorologist, a lawyer, a politician, a generally informed individual, a scientist of any kind, a gymnast of any kind, a historian, or even an historian. I'm also not a squirrel. I'm not saying this to justify any of the content in the video (especially the slo-mo part), nor am I trying to avoid a lawsuit. I actually invite lawsuits! They're cute. Send me all of them.

Those quotes from Jesus and Gandhi and my local pediatrician were all real and in context, although they may have been paraphrased or misunderstood owing to translation/oral tradition/being out of context/being mildly to completely fabricated.

Yes, that is my real hair. In the slo-mo part, where you see more of it, that's, like, eighty per cent my real hair.

I am now aware that what was labelled as footage from a recent protest was in actuality doctored footage from a June, 1989, episode of "Sesame Street." Not to place blame, but I blame the doctors.

It also turns out that Siri and Alexa did *not* have a trafficking ring, of the human type or of the car type, and that it's actually impossible to hide human organs in either of their voices.

A lot of you are making fun of my pronunciation, but, for the record, I really *was* talking about the Ku Klux Clam.

Several of my former friends and former parents and also a few celebrities (hi, Alyssa Milano!) have kindly alerted me to the fact that the audio from both Nancy Pelosi clips has somehow been replaced with a speech by a singer (?) named Mussolini. I legitimately don't know how that could have happened, but I want everyone to know that I have a SoundCloud and a Patreon.

That's not my nipple. I'm not saying it's not anyone's nipple, but it's not mine.

The "incorrect" statistic regarding vaccinations turns out to be completely correct if you apply it to nutmeg poisoning.

Earlier, when I said the thing about lawsuits, I feel I should clarify that what I thought I was talking about were jumpsuits, which are apparently a different thing. (One is clothing.)

Yes, that *is* my cat who runs through the shot at 18:02—thanks for asking!! Her name is Rescue, and she's a tenth-generation competition-and-sushi-grade pedigreed H1N1 long-hair Bengal-and-cream-cheese mix that I bought on Conservapedia Marketplace from a very legit breeder named Back Yard Sh-h-h-h Cash App Only. Her favorite food is liberal tears.

I did alter the Bible quotes just a little, but it was only to make them look cute.

In the slo-mo part, I think mostly what you're all reacting somewhat strongly to might be the animation? I just want to be clear that the dancing blur was intended to be the mouth.

Finally, no, I do not attend that preschool, nor do I have any children of my own besides the ones I reference throughout the video, who are metaphors. Did I try to record those international-cabal secrets by planting a microphone in a strange child's lunch box? Yes. Did I need to remove a string cheese to make room for it? Absolutely. Did it not matter anyway, because the microphone was ruined by leaking fruit juice? It is certain. Do I still believe those things I said in the fourteen-minute rap? A hundred per cent.

I hope that this has cleared up most of the issues you've all been reporting/blocking me about! For any viewers who lost their jobs after reposting, thank you for reposting! The truth is, I love the truth, but, even more than that, I love the idea of loving the truth, without whose help I couldn't have made “Open Your Eyes: Covidfluencer Propagandamerica Lies and Neon Eye-Makeup Tutorial 2: The Second Video: So Much More Neon.” Link below! ♦

Sketchbook

- [**Trump's Taxes: But Wait, It Gets Worse**](#)

[October 12, 2020 Issue](#)

But Wait, It Gets Worse

By [Barry Blitt](#)

October 5, 2020

Tables for Two

- [Chilaquiles Straight from a Chef's Home Kitchen](#)

[October 12, 2020 Issue](#)

Chilaquiles Straight from a Chef's Home Kitchen

In his Greenpoint apartment, Juan Sánchez fries tortillas and smothers them in smoky-sweet tomatillo salsa and queso fresco, for pickup on Sundays.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

October 2, 2020



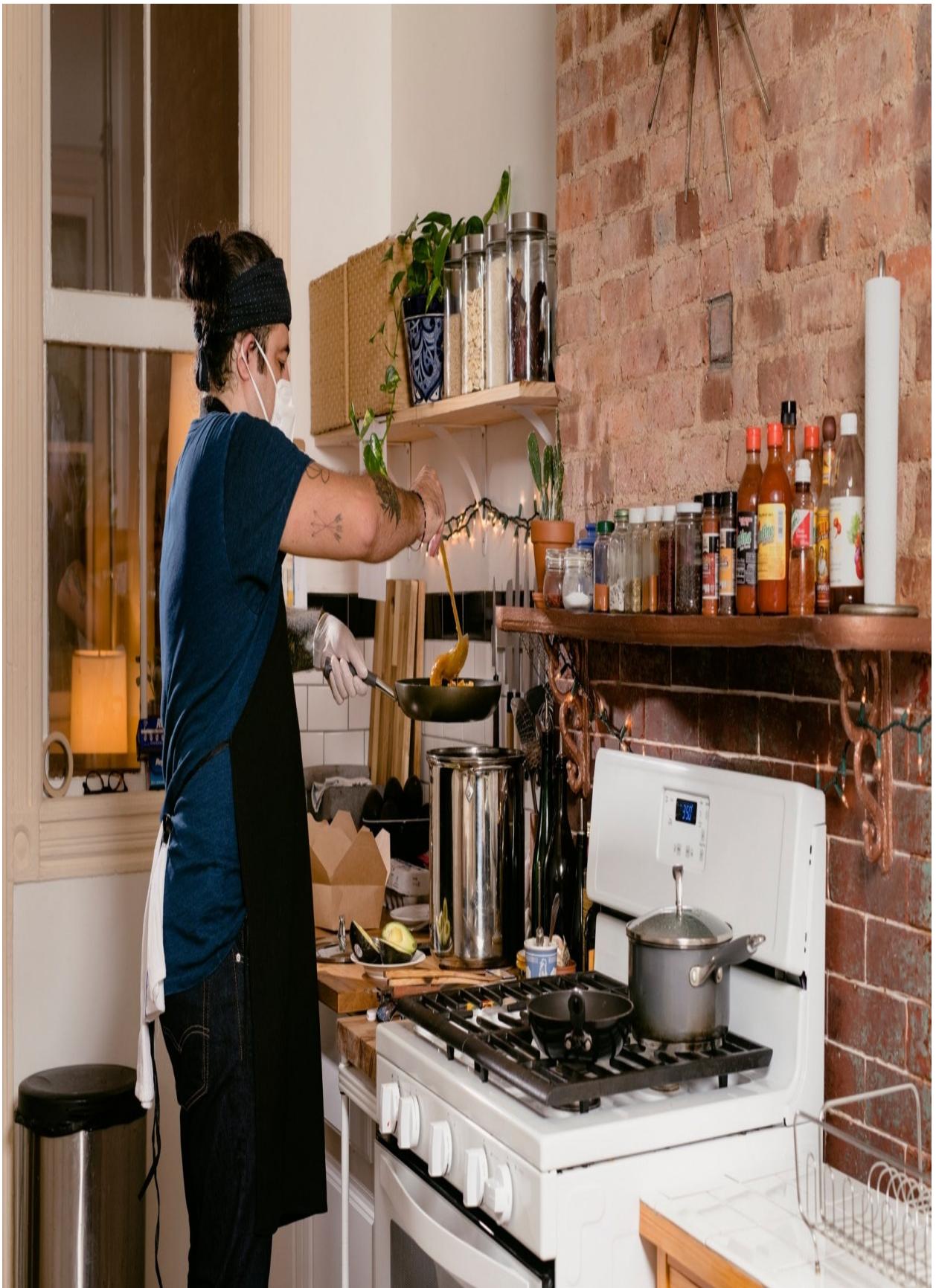
In December, Juan Sánchez, who was then a chef at Made Nice, Eleven Madison Park's casual sister restaurant, started an Instagram account: @citlali_cocina. After five years in New York, Sánchez had noticed that the city's Mexican food was mostly confined to the styles of a few regions, including Puebla, in central Mexico, and Oaxaca, in the south. Citlali Cocina would be a small way to highlight the cuisine of his home town, Guadalajara, and a place to collect ideas for the restaurant that he hoped to open someday.



Sánchez gets his corn tortillas from the Bronx and cuts them into postage-stamp-size squares before frying them. His salsa is made with tomatillos and two kinds of chilis. Photograph by Caroline Tompkins for *The New Yorker*

The first photo he posted was a glamour shot of a quesadilla, a pale corn tortilla topped with thick, melty strands of *quesillo*, a stretchy cheese, and a leaf of epazote, an aromatic herb, sprinkled with tequesquite, a mineral salt used since the pre-Hispanic era. A video followed: glistening chunks of *birria de res*, beef marinated in chilis, spices, and herbs, covered in banana leaves, and cooked for four hours.

On Christmas Eve, there appeared a tantalizing image of a bowl piled with a poached egg, coarsely crumbled white cheese, and wispy greens, under which peeked the corners of tortilla chips coated in red salsa. Beside it was a mug containing a dark, glossy beverage. “There’s nothing like waking up to a warm hug of chilaquiles and café de olla,” the caption read. How could Sánchez have known that he was describing his future business model?



Sánchez, who was furloughed from his job as a chef in March, hopes to own his own restaurant someday but, in the meantime, has turned his Greenpoint apartment kitchen semi-professional. Photograph by Caroline Tompkins for The New Yorker

In March, Sánchez was furloughed from Made Nice and began to while away quarantine by drafting a dream menu. By summer, he had decided that he didn't have to wait to open a restaurant, and in August he turned the kitchen in his Greenpoint apartment semi-professional, accepting orders for pickup once a week, between 11 A.M. and 2 P.M. on Sundays. There was only one thing on the menu: warm hugs in the form of chilaquiles.

Chilaquiles is a dish popular all over Mexico, in endless iterations, especially for breakfast or brunch. (It can work wonders on a hangover.) The common denominator is stale tortillas—chilaquiles is to Mexican tortillas as pain perdu is to French bread—cut up and fried into chips, then tossed in salsa on the stove or in the oven; the less time cooked, the crispier the final dish.

There's nothing about Sánchez's version that makes it particularly Guadalajaran. His recipe is as unique to him as his accent, which sounds distinctly Mexican but also a bit Liverpudlian; he lived in England for two years. He gets his corn tortillas from the Bronx, cuts them into postage-stamp-size squares, lets them dry out for a few days, fries them until crunchy, and cooks them in salsa on the stove only briefly.



Sánchez currently offers his chilaquiles for pickup once a week but hopes to expand his hours in the near future. Photograph by Caroline Tompkins for The New Yorker

Sánchez's smoky-sweet salsa is made with tomatillos, mild, fruity guajillo chilis, and dried *chiles de árbol*, for heat. Once coated, the chips get topped with queso fresco, chopped white onion, and a sprinkling of delicate greens or edible flowers from the farmers' market. For a few extra dollars, he'll add avocado, a poached or over-easy egg, and a perfectly cooked, skin-on boneless chicken breast. It's a truly glorious combination.

Sánchez doesn't currently offer *café de olla*, which is coffee steeped with cinnamon and unrefined cane sugar, though he may yet—he is slowly starting to expand his menu. In the meantime, you can get *café de olla* at For All Things Good, a brand-new Bed-Stuy café and *molino*, or mill. The mill grinds corn, imported from Mexico, to make its own masa, which is sold uncooked and is also used to press house-made tortillas. When the tortillas grow stale, they're made into chips, some of which are destined for chilaquiles.



Pickup times are carefully scheduled to maintain social distancing between customers. Photograph by Caroline Tompkins for The New Yorker

In this version, the chips are cooked much longer in the salsa, so that they start to take on the texture of porridge, and the cheese is a disk of queso Chihuahua, griddled until it wears a beautiful skirt of lacy frico. It's different, but no less comforting or delicious. New York needs all the chilaquiles it can get. (*Citlali Cocina chilaquiles \$10. For All Things Good chilaquiles \$10.*) ♦

The Current Cinema

- [A Feminist Fractal in “The Glorias”](#)

[October 12, 2020 Issue](#)

A Feminist Fractal in “The Glorias”

Julie Taymor’s quixotic bio-pic about Gloria Steinem mocks the clock, skipping between eras and letting different versions of the activist talk with one another.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

October 2, 2020



There are five [Gloria Steinems](#) in “The Glorias,” a new movie directed by Julie Taymor. We have Ryan Kiera Armstrong as the young Gloria, growing up in the early nineteen-forties; Lulu Wilson as a more knowing Gloria, approaching her teens; Alicia Vikander as Gloria the student, the writer, and the budding activist; [Julianne Moore](#) as Gloria in full bloom, a co-founder of *Ms.* magazine, alternately hailed and patronized for her devotion to the feminist movement; and, last of all, Steinem as herself, cheerfully addressing the crowd at the Women’s March on Washington, in 2017—Gloria in excelsis, amid a firmament of pink hats.

As Taymor demonstrated in “Frida” (2002), her film about [Frida Kahlo](#), she treats the bio-pic as the most accommodating of forms, and the new film, which she co-wrote with Sarah Ruhl, is no less quixotic. It doesn’t trudge in one direction, from the heroine’s childhood onward; instead, it mocks the clock, ticking to and fro among the various Glorias. Thus, we cut straight from Vikander’s Gloria, ordering a hot-fudge sundae for breakfast, the better to soothe her rage at being propositioned by a creepy boss, back to Armstrong’s Gloria, dawdling over her vegetables at dinner and being rescued by a friendly scoop of ice cream from her father, Leo (Timothy Hutton). Occasionally, we see the different Glorias sitting on the same bus, chatting with one another: a handy conceit, if you’ve ever wished to quiz your older self on things to come, or to scold the younger you for being a klutz.

The film arises from Steinem’s 2015 memoir, “[My Life on the Road](#),” in which she admits to a constitutional restlessness, bred by an itinerant childhood. Her father—happy to be known by his business moniker, “Steinemite!”—was a Micawber of the Midwest. He shipped himself and, as often as not, his family from place to place, buying odds and ends and selling them as antiques. He vaults off the page, already halfway to a movie, and Hutton, usually a reticent performer, grabs his chance, expanding into a florid and unfamiliar buoyancy. Watch Leo giving Gloria cash to play the slots in Las Vegas and, only after she’s won, confessing that that was his last fifty dollars. He’s always up on his luck.

Vikander, likewise, is a curious choice. There’s something dreamy and withdrawn about her, but what made her mesmerizing as the android in “[Ex Machina](#)” (2014), thinking herself into sentient life like Pinocchio with a Ph.D., doesn’t entirely square with Steinem’s combative edge—or with her unblunttable sense of humor, to which this movie gives worryingly short shrift. “A Bunny’s

Tale,” Steinem’s famous 1963 essay about her stint as a Playboy Bunny, remains forensically witty, drilling down into the unglamorous minutiae of wages, tips, foot pains, and medical inspections, and it’s duly dramatized in Taymor’s film, yet the onscreen Gloria seems to drift through the ordeal, fluffy tail and all, with a distant and disbelieving air.

This is a long movie, nudging two and a half hours, and it’s gradually gripped by a structural panic: So many tales to tell! How to cram them in? One instructive episode follows another, with characters wheeled on to say their piece. At the [March on Washington](#), in August, 1963, Steinem stands beside a woman who says to her, “That’s Dorothy Height, up on the speakers’ platform. She’s head of the National Council of Negro Women. Why isn’t she speaking? And where’s Ella Baker, who trained all the SNCC young people?” The woman adds, “Or Fannie Lou Hamer? She got beat up in jail and then sterilized in a Mississippi hospital.”

Most of this comes verbatim from “My Life on the Road,” and is cause for indignation. But too much truth has an annoying habit of sounding unreal when recounted on film, and viewers know when information is being foisted upon them. The result is that what should be most uplifting, in “The Glorias,” is most at risk of clunkiness. As Steinem, inquisitive to the core, puts perfectly reasonable questions to the women she meets (“I read that the Cherokee Nation was once matrilineal—is that true?”), I couldn’t help being reminded of a sleuth in a B-movie mystery. (“And where were you, the disinherited stepson with a gambling addiction and access to commercial poisons, on the night of the murder?”) Taymor is aware, I reckon, that her narrative is starting to sag; that’s why she suddenly pumps it up with fantasy sequences—one based on the Hindu goddess Kali, and another on the tornado from “The Wizard of Oz,” tricked out with a witchy line from [“Macbeth”](#) and tinted a hellish red. Fancy stuff, but it ain’t enough, and the road goes ever on. Given that Gloria Steinem is so awe-inspiring a figure, to so many people, is it any wonder that a film about her should end up being overawed?

There is a memorable image, in “Save Yourselves!,” of Su (Sunita Mani) and Jack (John Reynolds) preparing to take a break. Both of them are wearing shorts and tops. On the left side of the frame, we find Su standing upright, talking on her cell phone, and extending a foot like a dancer; on the right is Jack, also holding a phone but sitting at a desk, facing a laptop *and* a desktop computer. Though Su and Jack are together, enclosed in the camera’s gaze, they somehow

look marooned in their respective spaces. And there's the rub. As they inform their professional colleagues, they will be going not just away from Brooklyn but—heaven help them—offline, for one whole week. Such is the ultimate sacrifice, if you seek to reboot your love: only disconnect.

Targeting hipsters is hardly the most challenging of sports, but that is no reason not to take a pop. It is with a mischievous delight that Alex H. Fischer and Eleanor Wilson, who wrote and directed "Save Yourselves!," zero in on the distinguishing features of the species. Jack has a nonsensical mustache and a jar of sourdough starter. When he showers with Su, she tells him to "acquaint yourself with the soaps." As they converse, the English language drips and slips like lather. She says, "I want to be better people." He says, "I'm proud of us." At a party, they meet a friend who is working on "3-D-printed surfboards, made out of algae," and who offers them the use of a cabin upstate. He also provides a crystal from Patagonia, to be gripped in times of stress.

So our heroes head for the country, bringing the bare necessities, including microgreens and quinoa. They stop to let a chicken cross the road, without bothering to inquire into its motivation, and switch off their phones. "Bye, world!" Su cries, like a nun stepping into a convent. Here's the joke: immediately, that world begins to change. Strange trails arc through the sky, as if fireworks were being set off in daylight. Later, after Su and Jack arrive at the cabin, the night resounds with rubbery pings and twangs. Frogs, perhaps, or something with an even longer hop? Without warning, "Save Yourselves!," which was set fair as a sharp romantic comedy, changes its spots and turns into an alien-invasion flick. Hey, why not?

The aliens in question are not housed in gigantic tripods or armed with slavering fangs. Rather, they resemble a cross between a sea urchin and a scatter cushion. Su and Jack refer to them as poufs. They emit either a cute chirrup or, when provoked, a thin red line, which lashes out and sticks to whatever's in the way, such as a wall or the inconvenient head of a human. (Su has to chop through one of the lines, and it's as if she were cutting the umbilical cord of a devil.) The only person who might bond with the poufs is Spider-Man, thanks to his equally adhesive powers, but he's unavailable, and everyone else is in peril. Not that Su and Jack know, or particularly care, about anyone else—not, at least, until they acquire an unexpected plus-one.

Do not be fooled by the sci-fi trimmings of this film. Despite its light and

amiable manner, it's a sort of "Deliverance" for the digital age, deriding the ability of tame souls, at a supposedly advanced stage of civilization, to cope with the unknown. Listen to Jack, as he ponders the need to fight: "I think there's more weaponry stuff in the basement." As for food, "I've been wanting to YouTube 'How to make a trap to catch a rabbit' so bad," he says. Such is the ascent of man: the competent hunter-gatherer has become a slave to Firefox.

Like an old "Thin Man" comedy, "Save Yourselves!" rests on its central pairing. Reynolds is one of those tall actors, like [John Cleese](#) or Jeff Goldblum, whose height is intrinsically funny; regular-sized experiences just don't fit such folk, and they constantly seem to duck and tilt, as if to squeeze through invisible doors. Mani, as Su, is less gawky, and much better at driving with a stick shift, yet her wide-eyed stare shows that she, too, exists in a state of sweet perplexity. "I'm afraid of our lives getting stagnant," she says. Well, no fear of that now. You have to say this for Su and Jack: they may be completely useless, but they're also harmless and charmingly well matched. If they *were* to be abducted by the poufs and sucked into unfathomable space, it couldn't happen to a nicer couple. ♦

The Political Scene

- [Inside the Lincoln Project's War Against Trump](#)

Inside the Lincoln Project's War Against Trump

Progressives are wary of the conservative group hammering the President, but its founders say they're fighting for all Americans.

By [Paige Williams](#)

October 5, 2020



The week of Labor Day, the founders of the Lincoln Project, a [super PAC](#) of Republican operatives who have disavowed their own party in order to defeat President [Donald Trump](#), set up a war room in a location far outside Washington, D.C. Since January, the group, whose founders include the consultants Steve Schmidt and Rick Wilson, had been targeting Trump with the kind of merciless ads that the strategists had aimed at Democratic candidates throughout their careers. A spot titled “[Regret](#)” features the comedian David Cross offering such a long list of Trump’s flaws—“the blatant racism, and the crass sexism, and the deranged narcissism, and pandering to Nazis”—that the recitation is still unspooling as the ad fades out. This type of message is aimed at convincing Republican voters that Trump’s dangerous and divisive impulses imperil the country. Another type of ad is designed to unsettle a single viewer—the President himself—and often appears during TV programs he is likely to watch. “[Shrinking](#)” directly addresses Trump, saying, of his notorious Tulsa campaign rally, in June, “You’ve probably heard this before, but it was *smaller* than we expected.” The founders knew that they were getting to the President when he started tweeting and talking about them, predictably calling their organization the Losers Project.

The founders, who consider themselves Trump “anthropologists,” try to predict the President’s missteps, stockpiling material that can be deployed at the ideal moment. A recent spot, “[P.O.W.](#),” contrasted images of honorable military service with Trump’s denigration of people in the armed forces. The ad débuted shortly before *The Atlantic* [reported](#) that Trump, during a 2018 trip to France, had refused to visit an American cemetery and had referred to the war dead as “suckers.” In the ensuing public outcry, the Lincoln Project [tweeted](#), “Let’s show @realDonaldTrump what real heroes look like,” and asked its followers to tweet photographs of veterans, hashtagged #WeRespectVets. Within an hour, the hashtag had become the leading Politics topic on Twitter.

On September 9th, the group released an ad about the South Carolina senator [Lindsey Graham](#), “Parasite,” in which [gruesome footage](#) of feasting maggots is accompanied by narration mocking Graham’s obeisance to Trump: “Parasites don’t care if they feed off a good host—or *an evil one*.” At one of the strategists’ regular morning meetings, Wilson—a gregarious Floridian, an aggressive adman, and the most likely of the founders to swear in public—said that a reporter had asked him, “What do you guys say when people think that you’re using the same harsh tactics and language that Trump uses?” Wilson said, “I

was, like, ‘Who gives a fuck?’ I was, like, ‘Dude, *I’m* not running for President.’ ” Schmidt, who headed [John McCain](#)’s 2008 Presidential campaign and now elegantly eviscerates Trump on MSNBC, reminded the group that the President has insulted everyone from Gold Star families to disabled people. The Project had endorsed the Democratic candidate, [Joe Biden](#), and was airing positive spots about him, with titles like “[Decency](#).”

The founders discussed how to target their advertising in such swing states as Florida, Arizona, and Pennsylvania. [Stuart Stevens](#), an adviser who has worked on five Presidential campaigns, suggested, “Basically, look at it like we’re running three governor’s races.” It would waste resources, he warned, to try “to boil the ocean.”

An excerpt of Bob Woodward’s new book, “[Rage](#),” had reported that Trump knew about the deadliness of [the coronavirus](#) in early February yet went on to promise that the virus was going to “disappear.” The founders decided to tweet about Woodward’s news and to produce a short video about the revelation. As the group chatted, the Project’s communications director tweeted “#TrumpKnew.” The hashtag reached No. 1 before the meeting ended.

The Project, which was founded by eight people, now employs about thirty-five paid staffers. For the first months, everybody worked remotely—in Tallahassee, Denver, East Hampton, Sacramento. Once the war room was ready, more than a dozen employees began arriving at their assigned housing with luggage and pets, prepared to stay until November. The selection of a temporary headquarters had been complicated by the pandemic, but security was also a factor. Founders had been publicly accosted for opposing Trump, and the Project had received menacing voice mails. A Las Vegas caller: “Get the fuck out of my country, bitches!” From Pennsylvania: “Fuck every last one of you motherfuckers! And when a civil war happens . . . duck.”

The filmmakers Fisher Stevens and Karim Amer, along with the producer Amy Redford, had arrived to shoot a documentary about the Project. Stevens, a Hollywood actor and a liberal activist, had wanted to make anti-Trump ads himself, but every time he had an idea for a spot he discovered that the Lincoln Project had already done it. “These guys were out there every day, putting out a movie!” he told me. “I thought, Who *are* these fucking people? Who is *doing* this stuff?”

The Project's founders are a murderers' row of conservative operatives. Wilson, who has worked for [Rudolph Giuliani](#) and [Dick Cheney](#), counts hundreds of elections, from "dogcatcher to U.S. Senate," that he and the other founders have helped Republicans win. Schmidt served in the [George W. Bush](#) White House, where he was instrumental in seating the Supreme Court Justices Samuel Alito and [John Roberts](#). He is widely known for having suggested Sarah Palin as a running mate for McCain, in 2008. Schmidt clearly regrets choosing someone whose crude populism presaged Trump. He was a source for "[Game Change](#)," a book about the McCain campaign that characterized Palin as unprepared and difficult; in September, he said that Palin represented "the beginning of the politics of cowardice and fear."

Another founder, Reed Galen, whose father worked for Newt Gingrich and Dan Quayle, oversaw with Schmidt the reëlection campaign of the California governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. John Weaver, a Texan whom the Democratic strategist James Carville nicknamed Meat Cleaver Weaver, spent a decade trying to get McCain elected to the Presidency. Stuart Stevens was [Mitt Romney](#)'s chief strategist in the 2012 race against [Barack Obama](#). A notable early Project participant was George Conway, the lawyer who antagonizes Trump on Twitter—"You. Are. Nuts."—and whose wife, Kellyanne, was a top White House adviser until she resigned, in August. The couple, citing family demands, receded from public life, and George Conway quit the Project.

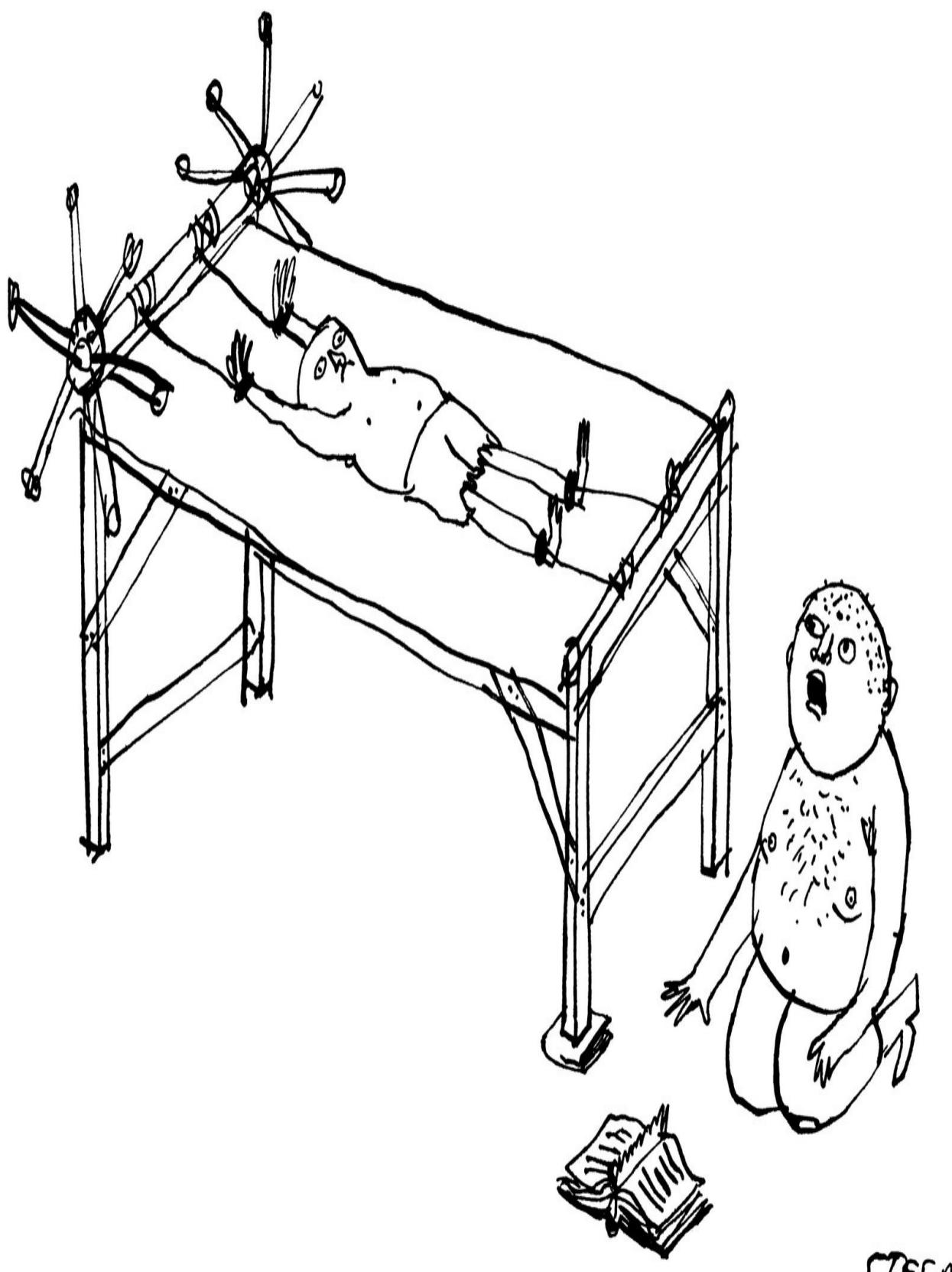
The consultant Sarah Longwell, who heads a group called Republican Voters Against Trump, said, of the leaders of the Lincoln Project, "They've very successfully tapped into the rage that a lot of people feel, including me." The Project's scorched-earth approach distinguishes it from similar organizations: the founders, some of whom have entirely shed their Republican identities, have left themselves no clear path of return. (Wilson and Schmidt are now registered Independents.) Longwell said, "In many ways, this is their last stand."

Most of the Project's core founders are in their fifties and came of age under [Ronald Reagan](#). They were drawn to Reagan's optimism and to his belief in fiscally responsible government, which, as Galen points out, "doesn't necessarily mean lower taxes—it means being *smart* with taxpayers' money." Socially, they favor individual liberty: worship however you want, marry whomever you want. They support responsible gun ownership and a judiciously interventionist foreign policy. Weaver served in the Air Force, and Wilson worked in the Defense Department, but all the founders revere military service. In 2015, Trump

disgusted them when he mocked McCain—a fighter pilot who was a P.O.W. during Vietnam—by saying, “I like people that weren’t captured.”

After Obama won his second term, the Republican National Committee commissioned a study that became known as the “autopsy report.” The country’s voting population was diversifying rapidly, and, the report said, young voters were “increasingly rolling their eyes at what the Party represents.” It noted, “Many minorities wrongly think that Republicans do not like them or want them in the country.” In a recent book, “[It Was All a Lie](#),” Stevens writes, “How do you go from dedicating a political party to expansion and inclusiveness and two years later rally around a man who calls Mexicans ‘rapists,’ and called for a religious test to enter the United States?” He goes on, “For decades, conservatives attacked liberals for living by ‘situational ethics,’ but the ease with which Republican leaders abandoned any pretense of being more than a whites-only party is the ultimate situational ethic.” In January, Wilson told Trevor Noah that Trump “has broken the Republican Party—it doesn’t believe in *anything*.” Stunningly, the 2020 Republican National Convention put forward no new platform, signalling that the Party’s sole position was fealty to Trump.

In 2017, Jennifer Horn, another Project founder, chose not to seek a third term as the chair of the Republican Party of New Hampshire, unable to countenance “a President and Party leadership that think the President himself is above the law.” She told me, “Look at the deficit spending since Trump took office—we’re supposed to be the party of *limited* spending. We’re the party of a strong national defense—we have a President who is colluding, basically, with foreign dictators.” When Trump was impeached, Horn said, she waited for Republican senators to uphold their constitutional oath, only to watch “each one fall”—except for Romney, who voted to convict. Senators who condemned Trump privately said nothing publicly. Schmidt told me, “You have an entire political class that is scared to death of being tweeted at or given a Presidential nickname.”



STEED

"Is that better?"
Cartoon by Edward Steed

Mike Madrid, a founder who analyzes voting patterns, joined the G.O.P. as a young Latino with “the idea that it could lift my community up.” In the late nineties, he served as the political director of the Republican Party in California, his home state. He continued working for Republican causes, but, in 2016, he was mortified when colleagues and friends “somehow found the rationale” to support Trump, even after his vilification of immigrants.

When Schmidt publicly left the Party, in 2018, he [tweeted](#) that the Administration’s policy of separating migrant families at the border was “connected to the worst abuses of Humanity in our history,” including slavery, and said that the current G.O.P. represented a “danger to our democracy.” Galen’s long-held concerns about Trump intensified as he watched the President unleash unmarked officers on Black Lives Matter demonstrations. He told himself, “That’s about as anti-Republican as you can get—unfettered federal power, applied at the state level.” The Project’s sole millennial founder, Ron Steslow, a political strategist, has said, “My generation is being forced to learn that democracy cannot be taken for granted.”

The small number of Republicans who initially assembled the loose coalition now known as the Never Trump movement tended to represent certain interest areas, such as veterans’ affairs. No group had what Galen called “the skills or the willingness” to fight Trump publicly—or to convey explicitly the constitutional dangers of a second term. “He will be unrestrained,” Schmidt said. “And he will be validated.” The Project’s founders felt that the Democrats largely lacked killer instincts. Watching the primary debates, they were dismayed that the candidates rarely mentioned Trump; by focussing on liberal policy divides, they were doing little to win over Republicans.

The founders had been combatting Trump individually, through books, tweets, podcasts, op-eds, and TV appearances. Then, last fall, they decided to unite, in a move that Vox later [compared](#) to “Darth Vader, at the very last minute, switching sides to help Luke Skywalker defeat the Emperor.” On December 17th, they published [a Times Op-Ed](#), written by Galen and bylined by Conway, Schmidt, Weaver, and Wilson, announcing the Lincoln Project’s aim to persuade “disaffected conservatives, Republicans and Republican-leaning independents” to vote Trump out. They also sought to remove Trump’s Senate “enablers,” even if it meant ceding Republican control of Congress, and to “salt the earth”—

insuring that none of Trump's children or other loyalists could become President.

Republicans have always invoked their connection to [Abraham Lincoln](#), the Party's first President; the Project sought to weaponize it. On February 27th, several of the founders appeared at Cooper Union, in the East Village, where, in 1860, Lincoln delivered an address that urged the containment of slavery and the preservation of the Union, propelling him to the Presidency. His speech began with "the facts"; in his conclusion, he said, "Let us have faith that right makes might." Exactly a hundred and sixty years later, Wilson stood at the same lectern that Lincoln had used and invoked a tough-guy monologue from the vigilante movie "Taken": "We have, as the great political philosopher Liam Neeson once said, a particular set of skills—skills that make us a nightmare for people like Donald Trump."

Wilson likes to say, "Democrats play to win an argument; I play to win an *election*." His ads have historically been cutthroat: in 2008, he characterized Obama's pastor, Jeremiah Wright, as a "preacher of hate." In Wilson's recent book, "[Running Against the Devil](#)," a pointedly indecorous follow-up to his 2018 best-seller, "[Everything Trump Touches Dies](#)," he calls out the President's "enablers and ball-washers," and describes Trump as "a dark, shitty monster" with "nanoscale raccoon-paw hands." The book offers strategic advice on how Democrats could win in November: They must stop courting "woke Twitter" and become "cold-eyed, clearheaded operators" who put "electoral realities ahead of progressive fantasies." Policy can be debated *after* Trump is gone. Democrats need to present relentless evidence of the President's "corruption, vulgarity, dishonesty, broken promises, and failed policies." Never forgetting that Trump's team would "burn this country to the fucking ground" in order to win, they must choose combat over scholarly discourse: "This is a chain fight in a biker bar in Frogsass, Alabama."

Other Project founders court unity in grander terms. Horn said, "My country is so much more important than my party. My optimism comes from the belief that the majority of Americans feel the same way." At the Cooper Union event, Madrid joked, "I never thought it would be the political *consulting* class that would have to stand up for moral righteousness."

Some progressives do not see the Project as righteous. They worry that its founders are pushing Democrats to repeat moral and tactical mistakes: tabling transformative proposals that galvanize the liberal base in favor of courting

centrists with establishment bromides. The analyst Lincoln Mitchell, writing for CNN, recently [observed](#), “If Biden wins, organizations like the Lincoln Project will have newfound influence and options.” He continued, “They will be well positioned to be a conservative counter to the progressives who would like to see a President Biden tack left once elected.”

The Lincoln Project’s first ad, “[MAGA Church](#),” set a tone of sophisticated damnation. Scored with gospel music, the spot, which débuted on January 9th, illuminated the hypocrisy of Trump’s appeals to evangelicals, skewering him with his own words. (From a campaign rally: “If you don’t support me, you’re gonna be so goddam poor.”)

At the time, COVID-19 had not been detected in the U.S., the economy was strong, and [George Floyd](#) was alive. By late April, the country was in crisis. The Project had aired nearly two dozen spots, most of them about the pandemic and some about Trump’s impeachment trial and Ivanka Trump’s business dealings in China.

In 1984, Ronald Reagan framed his reëlection campaign with the ad “[Morning in America](#).” The economy had recovered from a severe recession, and the spot offered dreamy imagery of prospering families. In early May, the Lincoln Project released a dystopian homage: “[Mourning in America](#).” A sonorous male voice-over recalled the narrator of the Reagan video, but the ad showed a grayscape of dilapidated houses, coronavirus patients, and unemployment lines. An American flag flew upside down. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, the author of “[Packaging the Presidency](#)” and the director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, at the University of Pennsylvania, told me that, if the point of the ad was to “remind older voters of the difference between what a Republican *used* to be and what *this* Republican is, you couldn’t do it more effectively than that.”

Hours after the ad appeared, Trump unleashed a string of late-night tweets, calling the Project’s founders *RINOs*—Republicans in Name Only—who “don’t know how to win.” “Mourning” went viral, and the Project quickly received more than a million dollars in donations. Schmidt later told me, “We’ve told the truth on the guy effectively, in a way that hurts. It’s fair to say that we’re the first group that cut him, in a fight, in a long, long time.”

The founders are devoted readers who send one another books. General Stanley McChrystal’s “[Team of Teams](#)” has served as a guide on decision-making. They

admire Nigel Hamilton's [trilogy](#) on Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Robert A. Caro's [masterworks](#) on Lyndon Johnson. They have studied a combat technique, developed after the Korean War, called the *OODA* loop—Observe, Orient, Decide, and Act—in which a fighter outmaneuvers an opponent by processing and acting on information quickly, rather than waiting to develop a definitive assessment. Such a rapid offense is meant to disorient and overwhelm a target. The Project's strategists metabolize news quickly enough to create spots within hours, or even minutes, of an event. In June, after Trump timidly descended a ramp at West Point, and struggled to lift a drinking glass to his mouth, the Project combined footage of the appearance with other videos of him looking feeble, and released "[#TrumpIsNotWell](#)." The viral spot subjected the President to one of his own tricks: he mocked [Hillary Clinton](#) when she stumbled in 2016, and constantly suggests that Biden is senile. Trump was soon wasting time at a campaign rally defending his ability to walk and to drink water.

After the President failed to act on intelligence that Russia paid Taliban affiliates to kill American soldiers, the Project released two videos featuring Dan Barkhuff, a former Navy *SEAL* who is now an emergency physician. In "[Betrayed](#)," Barkhuff declared, "Any Commander-in-Chief with a spine would be stomping the living shit out of some Russians right now." He continued, "I'm a pro-life, gun-owning combat veteran, and I can see Trump for what he is—a coward." This type of ad may disquiet progressive Democrats, but they are not the Project's intended audience. The founders are trying to reach Republicans in a language that they share.

Wilson believes that once you start hitting an opponent you should "never let up." Since January, the Project has released well over a hundred ads, which on YouTube alone have attracted some hundred and forty million views. Jamieson said that, whereas a typical campaign may yield one or two memorable spots, the Lincoln Project "routinely" produces noteworthy work. She told me, "They're basically mining everything you can reasonably mine from the available news cycle and the anxieties of the moment. We've never seen that before."

By summer, the Lincoln Project was rapidly expanding its staff, and its new hires included young Democrats with digital skills and campaign experience. The telltale stickers on one laptop: "California for Warren," "Justice for Breonna Taylor," "Save the Bees."

The Project was on track to take in some seventy million dollars by Election Day

—not as much as many established PACs, but far more than the founders anticipated. What they did anticipate was vitriol, from both the left and the right. On [Fox News](#), Laura Ingraham referred to the founders as disgruntled “Bush toadies,” as “cretins,” and as “swamp creatures”—within a single segment. When the Project tweeted a sombre lament about the death of [John Lewis](#), the civil-rights leader and congressman, the liberal columnist Charles Pierce responded, “Everything you did in your previous lives to help put right wing judges into the federal court, up to and including John Roberts, is in need of atonement.” Samuel Moyn, a Yale professor of law and of history, recently wrote that it was “laughable” for the “crew that promoted Newt Gingrich and Sarah Palin as standard-bearers of American conservatism” to suggest that it had “always demanded exemplary leaders.” Moyn made his point in a review of [“Never Trump,”](#) by Robert Saldin and Steven Teles, who suggest that mainstream Democrats have “rehabilitated” the “moral status” of certain Republicans merely because they oppose the President.

In “It Was All a Lie,” Stevens agrees that Republicans should not be forgiven for what they have “encouraged, blessed, and promoted.” He says, “Even if Donald Trump loses in 2020, the Republican Party has legitimized bigotry and hate as an organizing principle.” He also confesses the strangeness of realizing that “what you have spent a good portion of your life working for and toward was not only meritless but also destructive.” Horn told me, “Put me on the same list as Stuart.” She explained, “The party system in general, and the degree to which it has corrupted the ability for anyone to provide good governance, is a serious problem.”

Sarah Lenti, a policy specialist and a Russia expert who worked for Condoleezza Rice during the Bush Administration, is the Project’s executive director. Yet the group’s top leadership is predominantly male, and white, even though women—particularly Republican suburban women—are considered an essential demographic for a Biden victory. All the Project’s military ads are narrated by men; women tend to narrate spots about palace intrigue and the pandemic. The choice is strategic. One of Horn’s responsibilities has been to build a Lincoln Women coalition, and she has noticed that conversations among its members inevitably turn to Trump’s “gross mismanagement” of the coronavirus. She believes that *COVID-19* “will be the single most powerful influence on the election.” On October 2nd, after Trump tweeted that he had tested positive for the coronavirus, the Project publicly wished the President a “swift recovery” yet condemned his “dangerously irresponsible messages” about the seriousness of

COVID-19. The founders then pushed out a bleak new ad, set in a hospital, that ended with the message “VOTE HIM OUT.”

The Project has also worked to forge another crucial partnership, with Latino voters. At a recent war-room session, Wilson said, “This is where Democrats blow it with Puerto Ricans. They think, Oh, well, they’re largely anti-Trump, so they must be super, super, super-woke liberal—and they’re *not*.” Madrid was commissioning bilingual videos featuring Puerto Rican military veterans. On September 30th, he hosted a Lincoln Project town hall for Latino voters, where the actor John Leguizamo urged attendees to take their “power back” and not let others “demonize us.”

As the Presidential campaign entered its final weeks, the Lincoln Project strategists were increasingly pushing ads into swing states and hosting Zoom town halls. The Project’s political unit analyzes the viewing habits of social-media users to determine who’s watching the ads, and for how long. “That’s how we decide who to target,” Ryan Wiggins, the senior adviser for communications, told me.

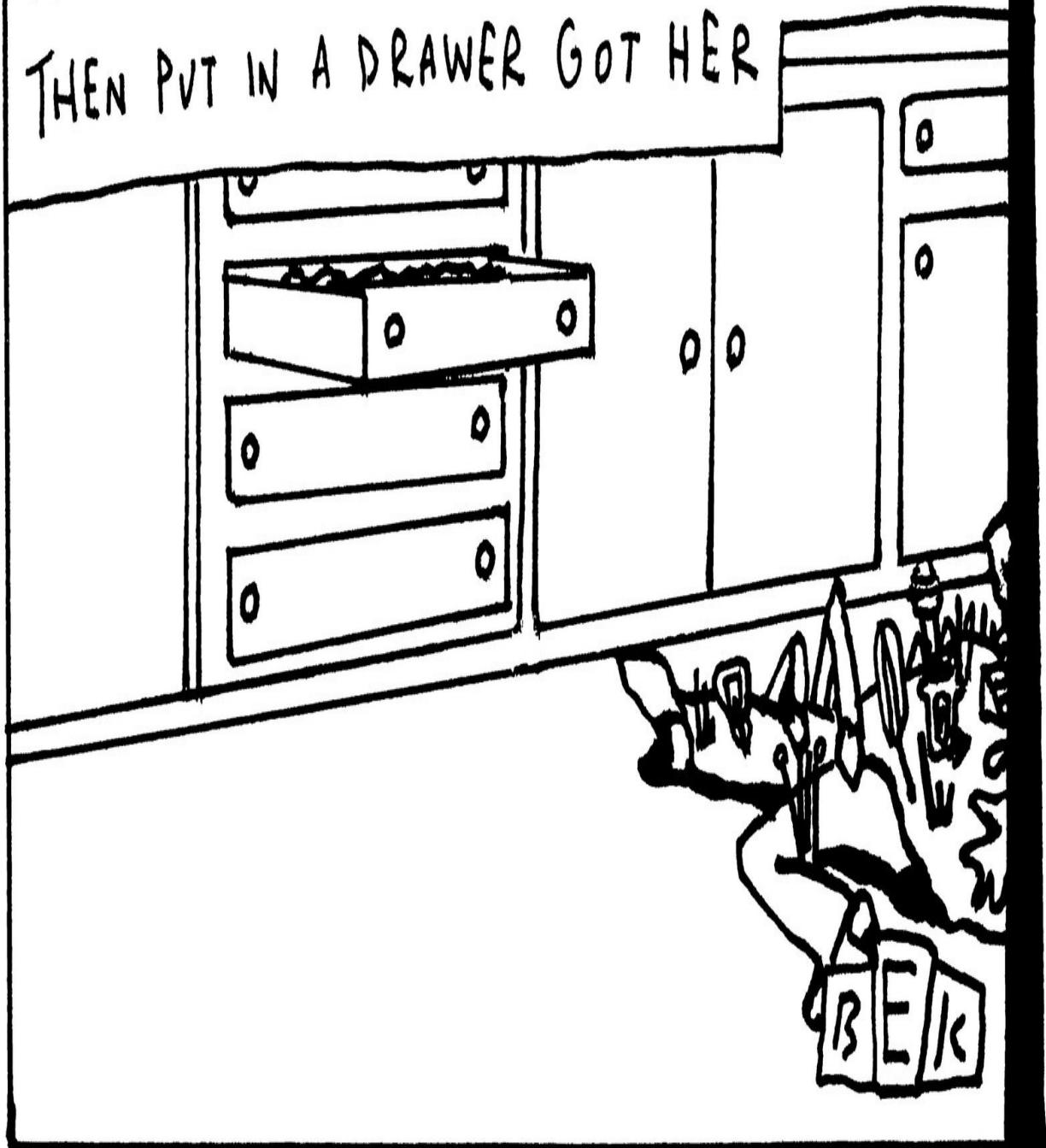
Wiggins, a forty-year-old protégée of Wilson’s who had spent her career in G.O.P. politics in Florida, had temporarily left her husband and two children to work in the war room. She and the Project’s other data analysts were seeing that Marion County, in north-central Florida, was an example of a “target-rich environment” where Republican voters might be persuaded—this time—to vote Democrat. The county is deeply red, but viewers there were watching Lincoln Project ads all the way through. Galen told me, “We go after segments of *segments of states*.” The founders had discussed the influx of Puerto Ricans to the I-4 corridor, in central Florida, after [Hurricane Maria](#), and decided that messaging to these voters should emphasize the fact that they’d relocated “because the federal government refused to respond adequately to a massive hurricane in a U.S. territory.”

Ideas for the Project’s major ads tend to come from the founders, who categorize their creative efforts by intention. “There’s our marquee ad of the week—the tentpole ad that we’re going to try to push up toward ten million views,” Schmidt said during one brainstorming session, in late July. The purpose of a “magisterial positive spot” was to remind Republicans that politics didn’t have to be shameful. Some ads pivoted on the news or were “the equivalent of us trying to force a turnover”; others made tactical strikes against such Presidential allies

as Senator Martha McSally, of Arizona. (“You’ll be remembered as just another Trump hack—if you’re remembered at all.”) The “audience of one” ads that aimed to destabilize Trump were akin to a military “PsyOp.”

Economic inequality, climate change, and universal health care were not overtly addressed. The typical themes of attack were *COVID-19*, the shattered economy, Trump’s weakness on national security, and, as Schmidt put it, the President’s “total disgracefulness.” Schmidt later said, “As you look at the news cycle, whatever the story may be, it passes through some combination of anger or ineptitude or racial animus.”

FINALLY, ALL THE LITTLE THINGS IN HER
KITCHEN THAT SHE BOUGHT AND USED ONCE
THEN PUT IN A DRAWER GOT HER



Trump had recently dispatched an unidentified band of federal officers to quell protests in Portland. Schmidt, at one planning meeting, called the development “sinister and an important thing for us to talk about,” and noted that Trump’s message to white voters was “Hordes of minorities are gonna come and burn down your suburbs.” The ad that the Project eventually released about Portland skirted the racial dynamics and focussed on personal freedom—on the “thugs” and “faceless enforcers” who “say you don’t have a right to protest.”

When the discussion landed on the pandemic and the difficulty of reopening schools, Schmidt said, “What we need to do is talk about *loss*, right?”

Trump, confronted with the enormous national death toll, had recently said, “It is what it is.” The founders compared this remark to “colossal fuckup” messages by previous Presidents, including “Mission accomplished”—Bush’s premature claim of victory during the Iraq War.

Wilson, referring to “It is what it is,” said, “Guys, we can *localize* that spot ‘What it *is*, here in Wisconsin: thirteen-per-cent unemployment.’ ‘What it *is*, here in Florida: record *COVID* cases, and tourism down x kajillion per cent.’ ”

Schmidt reminded them, “We gotta sell *hope* in this space.” This work would be important, he added, because “it will signal to other groups that this is how we ought to do this.”

By law, super *PACs* cannot coördinate with a Presidential campaign, but there’s nothing stopping a campaign from borrowing rhetoric. The other day, the Biden campaign [tweeted](#) a ten-second video of Trump promising supporters that, if he loses, “I will never speak to you again,” and appended a snarky caption: “I’m Joe Biden and I approve this message.”

In May, the Project added a new communications staffer, Keith Edwards, a thirty-five-year-old liberal who was breaking up with his boyfriend and ready for change. Edwards had moved to New York in 2005, from Detroit, after having worked in a beauty salon. In Manhattan, he no longer wanted “to do anything related to hair,” and wound up with a production job on reality shows—“The Real Housewives of Miami,” “Wicked Single.” He wasn’t a consistent voter. But after Trump was elected Edwards joined the communications staff of Corey Johnson, the Democratic speaker of the New York City Council, and, later, the

Presidential campaign of Michael Bloomberg.

Edwards's Twitter habits aligned with the *OODA-loop* strategy: he is always online, a habit he describes as a form of addiction. (He is eleven years sober.) He shortened and sharpened the Project's tweets: "Something's not white about this"; "How much is that in rubles?" He also upped the pace: in February, the Project tweeted only forty-seven times; in June, when Edwards took over the feed, the number jumped to eight hundred and fourteen. When followers asked who was behind the edgy tweets, Edwards often tweeted back "Abe." The Project's audience subsequently exploded, in large part because the founders amplified the official tweets: collectively, they and their top advisers have more than four million followers.

Edwards and two colleagues make up a "rapid-response" team, which monitors the Internet for exploitable material: when a tape of Trump's sister describing him as dishonest was leaked, Edwards tweeted, "Joe Biden's sister cherishes him." In July, after Trump bragged, in a televised interview, about having passed a mental-acuity test by successfully repeating "person, woman, man, camera, TV," Wilson hired Shawn Patterson, a composer who, in 2015, was nominated for an Oscar for "Everything Is Awesome," from "The Lego Movie," to work on a Twitter video. Using heavy synth beats, Patterson remixed the audio of the Trump interview overnight. Edwards captioned the clip with nothing but emojis. The spot has been retweeted, quoted, and liked nearly sixty thousand times.

Late one afternoon in September, members of the rapid-response team were holed up in a condo near the war room, staring at their screens. Edwards, stretched out on a sofa with his terrier mix, Zuki, was tapping on his laptop. Kate Salkowitz, a twenty-two-year-old video editor from Westchester County, was working at the dining-room table, using editing software to excise snippets of Trump's latest campaign rally. She color-coded his speaking parts—in bright orange—then tested various background music, muttering, "too circusy," and then "too sinister."

Salkowitz began college in 2016, at the University of Texas at Austin, majoring in radio, television, and film. When she voted for Hillary Clinton—her first Presidential election—she was writing jokes for a campus knockoff of "S.N.L." On Election Day, she ended up hosting the live returns. The Presidential results so alarmed Salkowitz that she decided to minor in government.

When Salkowitz graduated, in May, her dad, an audio engineer, urged her to apply to the Lincoln Project—he was a fan. She sent in a video sample and landed an internship. Edwards later challenged her to quickly make a spot about a campaign speech that Trump had just delivered. Salkowitz highlighted the President’s most buffoonish lines (“I’m sort of making it up as I go along”) and layered in pop-up text (the definition of “xenophobia”) with buoyant sound effects. She pulled music from an audio stockpile containing such files as “sitcom laugh track” and “harp.” The video, “[Trump’s Minnesota Speech in 90 Seconds](#),” has been viewed more than two million times, and helped secure Salkowitz a staff position. With Edwards, she has created some of the Lincoln Project’s most popular Twitter videos, including a satirical clip of [Kimberly Guilfoyle](#)’s apocalyptic speech at the Republican National Convention. When Salkowitz informed friends that she was decamping to the war room, they said, “You’re really about to go hang out with all these Republicans?” She told them, “I *like* these people. They’re really smart. What have *you* done for your country today?”

One of Salkowitz’s new roommates, Wiggins, was sitting next to her, building a media database. Wiggins, a United Methodist, believes that “we are called to love everyone” and that supporting Trump perpetuates hate. She told me that after she became alienated by the Republican Party she found a new ideological home in the Lincoln Project, and now thought of herself as a “Lincoln voter.” In town halls, the founders were coaching Republican supporters on how to persuade fellow-conservatives to vote for Biden. In 2017, Schmidt, appearing on a panel at the University of Southern California, noted that Reagan, when running against Jimmy Carter, in 1980, “didn’t *attack* the Carter voter”; he “created a permissive environment” where Democrats could “cross back over.”

As the Project has grown, the founders have reassessed how the organization presents itself to its politically diverse audience. Wilson champions the image of a pirate ship, but another founder opposes the metaphor: pirates pillage. In August, Edwards tweeted, “We go low so you don’t have to”; the tweet drew more than ten thousand likes, but some Project leaders felt that it clashed with the idea of amassing a “coalition of the decent,” and the tweet was deleted. Around that time, an NBC News reporter tweeted examples of the Project copying other people’s tweets and presenting them as original. (Proper crediting is a big debate in meme culture.) The Web site TheWrap asked, “Is this something Honest Abe would do?” The Project publicly vowed to do better.

During the Republican National Convention, the media circulated footage of Trump talking to delegates in North Carolina. The President had just mentioned Obama when a man in the crowd yelled something hard to decipher. Several media outlets quickly characterized the outburst as a racial slur. Edwards tweeted, “When President Trump mentioned Obama, someone from the crowd shouted, ‘Monkey!’ and the president relished in it. Disgusting.”

Others insisted that the man had shouted “Spygate.” (Trump often claims, dubiously, that the Obama Administration used the F.B.I. to spy on his 2016 campaign.) Edwards and I happened to be talking on the phone as Twitter users argued about what the man had said. I watched the clip and heard “Spygate.” Edwards agonized for a moment, then removed the tweet. When a *Washington Post* reporter flagged the deletion, a Biden supporter tweeted that it was “the right thing to do”; another user replied, “The right thing to do is make sure it’s true first.”

On Twitter, the battle instinct has occasionally overtaken judgment and expertise, but the Project’s founders pride themselves on fighting Trump with the truth: every ad is fact-checked, and vetted by a lawyer. At the same time, Wilson has said that all campaigns need communications teams that are “aggressive as hell and don’t need much sleep.” He wrote, “It’s better for them to move fast, break shit, and cause trouble than it is to be too cautious.”

The Lincoln Project now has 2.3 million Twitter followers—a number approaching that of the Republican Party’s official account—and is expected to have a million e-mail subscribers by Election Day. With each high-profile assault from the right, the founders disseminate a fresh fund-raising plea. The solicitations often mention targets by name: when the group was raising money for “Parasite,” Schmidt wrote the e-mail, saying that Graham, whom he once loved “like a brother,” was no longer a “man of courage and conviction.”

The founders also host private fund-raisers on Zoom. In mid-July, about a hundred and fifty prospective donors at a bipartisan event watched Galen, Schmidt, and Wilson describe the Project’s work. One of the hosts, George Vradenburg, a longtime Republican and a former media executive at Fox Broadcasting Company and at AOL Time Warner, said that after he saw the Project’s first ad he “immediately jumped on my checkbook.” The other host, Melissa Moss, the former finance director for the Democratic Party, later told me that the Lincoln Project has “made Democrats better this cycle,” adding,

“They’ve upped the game for everybody.”

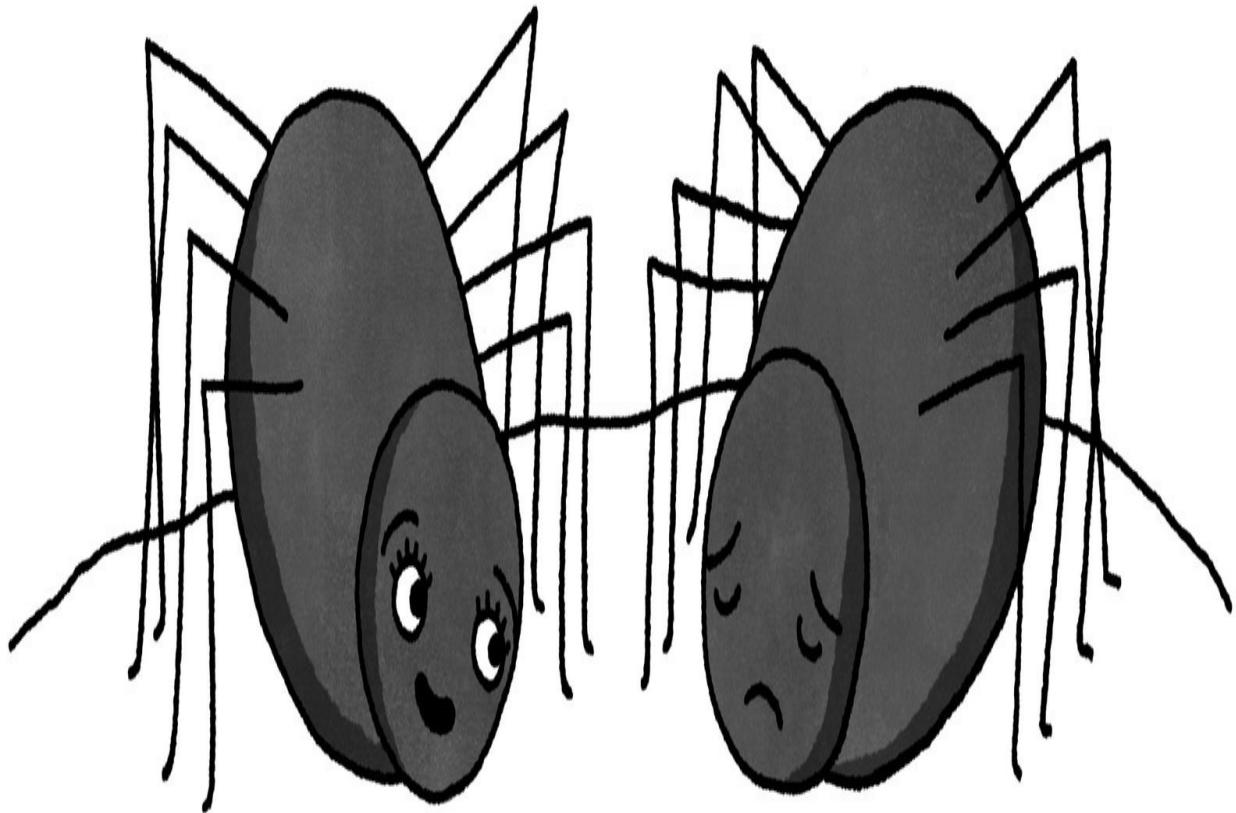
From December to the end of June, the Project received about twenty million dollars. (Third-quarter data isn’t yet available.) Hollywood names show up on the donor roll—Rob Reiner, Goldie Hawn—as does the occasional former politician, such as Senator Bob Kerrey. The group sometimes takes in large donations: Stephen Mandel, the founder of a Connecticut hedge fund, gave a million dollars; Joshua Bekenstein, the co-chair of Bain Capital, the Massachusetts investment firm co-founded by Romney, donated a hundred thousand; the Walmart heir Christy Walton has given thirty thousand. But, notably, more than forty per cent of the donations are of two hundred and fifty dollars or less.

It is hard to know precisely how the money is being spent, because super *PACs* can legally withhold some details of transactions with subcontractors. The Project has been criticized for channelling most of the group’s spending through two of the founders’ consulting firms. Galen, who owns one of the firms, told me that some of the Project’s collaborators are Republicans who don’t want to be publicly identified.

Mother Jones recently [documented](#) the rise of “resistance graft”: profiteering from the public’s despair over Trump. A “scam *PAC*” presents itself as a political-action committee but shows little evidence of activity. The Project does not meet this definition: it produces a weekly barrage of ads, Twitter shorts, op-eds, Zoom town halls, Facebook groups, data analysis, coalition work, and Instagram posts, in addition to a podcast and an online program, “LPTV,” that features unbridled political analysis. (During the Republican convention, Wilson chortled that Melania Trump’s speech was “focus-grouped until it fell over dead.”)

The Washington Post columnist Max Boot recently [wrote](#) that, if the founders are being well compensated, “they deserve it”; they have “shown greater fealty to conservative principles than 99 percent of elected Republicans.” Some liberals, however, fear that Democrats who give to the Lincoln Project are naïvely funding savvy operatives who could end up splitting their party into progressive and centrist factions. *National Review*, meanwhile, has accused the Project of adopting liberal talking points in order to “open up anti-Trump wallets on the left.”

Late last year, Paul Spector, a liberal organizational consultant in Massachusetts, read the founders' *Times* Op-Ed and was surprised to discover that their principles seemed to mirror his own. He later said, "Mitt Romney was my governor. I didn't like him, but he and I basically agree on what democracy stands for. The same is true of the folks at the Lincoln Project."



m.e. mcnair

"Well, you're not itsy-bitsy to me."
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

When Spector arranged a Zoom fund-raiser for the group, in August, some Democrats he approached initially refused to participate. Spector recalled, "My reaction was 'I'm glad you weren't President in World War Two, because without the Soviet Union we wouldn't have won.' " Schmidt appeared at Spector's event and told the prospective donors, "What I'm looking for in this

election is a repudiation—a *humiliation*—of Trump and Trumpism.” The fund-raiser brought in some forty thousand dollars, enough to finance the production of a handful of new spots or to buy a few days’ worth of ads on Fox News in Washington, D.C. Spector told me, “People complain that these guys aren’t spending enough on the ads, and that it’s a bunch of big-shot rich people. I say these big-shot rich people know how to get these ads seen by millions of people.”

After Abraham Lincoln’s appearance at Cooper Union, one of his New York hosts sent him a note lauding the speech as “so weaved & linked with truth, that it *convinced men*.” Will the Lincoln Project change votes? The question won’t be answerable until after the election, but the founders sometimes hashtag their efforts #LincolnProjectEffect. They suspect that an ad describing [Brad Parscale](#), the President’s campaign manager, as “the man Trump can’t win without” pierced the President’s ego so deeply that it led to Parscale’s demotion. They believe that, with “[Flag of Treason](#),” an ad connecting the Confederate flag to Trump and his supporters, they influenced Mississippi lawmakers’ decision to change their state banner. (College athletes, including football players at Mississippi State and the University of Mississippi, had also pushed for change.) On September 16th, the Project tweeted, “You gave us \$1MIL to go after @LindseyGrahamSC. So, we created one of our hardest hitting ads to date and we blanketed South Carolina with it. Now Harrison”—Jaime Harrison, Graham’s challenger—“is tied with Graham.”

Spector, the Massachusetts donor, knows that some pollsters believe the ads “won’t change anybody’s mind.” But he said that, in a time of vicious partisanship, the Lincoln Project offered him a glimmer of the old consensus, however romantic, that America’s leaders should embody character and reason. The Project, he said, “expanded the universe of who’s fighting for our country.”

Kate Kenski, who teaches political communication at the University of Arizona, said, “What makes the Lincoln Project interesting, and important, is something that perhaps *everyone* should do within the groups in which they reside—question leadership.”

On the morning of September 10th, Wilson, Schmidt, Galen, and several others gathered on a sunlit patio, near a blazing fire pit. The group’s dynamics were evolving. Conway wasn’t the only core member to have left: Weaver had suffered a heart attack over the summer and was recuperating. The former

R.N.C. chairman Michael Steele had joined. The [first Presidential debate](#) was scheduled for September 29th. Galen said, of Trump, “What’s the story that we want everybody to be talking about, or to know, before he hits that stage in Cleveland?” (After Trump’s tyrannical performance, Schmidt, on the “LPTV” show, said, “We’re gonna put this insanity in the grave.”)

Biden was leading in the polls, but Project members weren’t feeling complacent. Galen had received an e-mail from “a friend of ours in Minnesota” who was “a little worried.” Madrid said, “It’s worrying time—everyone’s getting a little worried *everywhere*.”

The period between Labor Day and mid-October would be the “sweet spot” for ads, as voters mailed in absentee ballots. “Parasite,” the Graham ad, was popular on social media, but “Morning Joe” had declined to feature it, and South Carolina news stations were asking the Project to “tone it down.” Galen reported that images of rotting flesh apparently “did not go well with people’s bagels.”

The Project’s ads continued to filter through the public consciousness: the hosts of a Ringer podcast had recently interrupted their discussion of athletes to describe the average Lincoln Project spot as a “John Oliver sketch in political-action-committee form.”

The founders moved on to a spot that they were preparing for the nineteenth anniversary of 9/11. The documentary-film crew navigated the patio with cameras and boom mikes. At one point, a director asked if the team was disappointed that George W. Bush hadn’t joined the Project. Schmidt said that it wouldn’t be appropriate: “He’s an ex-President.” Would there be an October surprise? The founders laughed. Stuart Stevens said, “Trump would invade *Canada* if he thought he could win.”

The founders had wondered whether they should compare the 9/11 death toll to *COVID-19* casualties, or instead create something “uplifting and patriotic,” honoring first responders. Stevens stepped away to work on a script, then came back to the patio and read a draft aloud: “‘9/11, 2001. A day of national tragedy and heroism. Americans coming together. But not for Donald Trump.’” The ad would feature excerpts of an interview in which Trump bragged that the terrorist attack had left him owning the tallest building in Manhattan. (Trump’s claim wasn’t true.)

Schmidt, who wanted the new ads to convey an unambiguous “call to action,” suggested a jab: “ ‘Then, he was just a terrible person. Today, he’s the worst President in American history—and the greatest divider. Vote him out.’ ”

The following week, Supreme Court Justice [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#) died. Republican leaders immediately began maneuvering to replace her, even though some of them vowed not to fill any vacancy on the Court during an election year. That night, I had dinner with Schmidt, Wilson, and Wiggins, who were concerned that heightened discussion over the policy ramifications—guns, abortion, health care—would interfere with their goal of keeping voters focussed on Trump’s failings. “It’ll be a red-meat *circus*,” Wiggins said.

At the Cooper Union event, Wilson had told the audience that the 2020 election is a test of “whether we’re gonna be a nation of idolaters, or of ideas.” The Lincoln Project was less “Never Trump” than “always *America*”—the strategists felt that they were helping to frame the election as an existential choice.

The morning after Ginsburg died, they held an emergency meeting, then released a [statement](#): “In a Presidency marked by corruption, malfeasance, incompetence, and a profound disrespect for the American system of government and our Constitution, any nominee put forth by Donald Trump, regardless of their resume or background, would forever bear the stain of a majoritarian, hyper-partisan choice made by a president and Republican Senate majority desperate to cling to power.” The Project released a Twitter short, showing news footage of G.O.P. senators making such empty declarations as “The people deserve to be heard!”

Then the founders pivoted back to flaying Trump. A fresh [Twitter strike](#) on the President’s troubling relationship with Russia was set to Britney Spears’s “Oops! . . . I Did It Again.” The caption: “He’s not that innocent.” ♦

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- [How Are Audiences Adapting to the Age of Virtual Theatre?](#)

How Are Audiences Adapting to the Age of Virtual Theatre?

With so much time away from in-person performance, we are undergoing a worldwide reconstrual of what it means to be a member of the crowd.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

October 5, 2020



A lot of work goes into seeing a show at home. For one thing, it's impossible to settle on a seat. I've watched plays while sitting at the desk where I write, or on the floor next to the desk, or on the couch across the room, or at the kitchen table, or, least proudly, lying in my bed, under the covers. I'm never even close to dressed up; I'm there to see but not be seen.

One of the preoccupations of theatre-makers and critics during the past six months has been the construction and presentation of plays to be performed on laptop screens and smart TVs instead of on stages. "Virtual theatre"—a sprawling category, more experiential than formal, which ranges from high-quality performance recordings, such as the recently released filmed version of "Hamilton," to staticky live Zooms, and is unified as a genre only by its reliance on Wi-Fi—is still in its vulnerable infancy. But something else, perhaps even more important for the future of the art, is happening, too: we are undergoing a worldwide reconstrual of what it means to be a member of the crowd.

It's easy to forget that, in the theatre, each ticket buyer plays a role. The quality of our attention—silent or ecstatic, galled or bored—is a kind of freestanding, always improvising character, and makes each in-person performance unrepeatable. Call it the congregational art, and remember how you once practiced it: it has something to do with location, and feeling, and your invisible relationship with individual performers and the whole panoply of action on the stage.

The particulars of the audience member's role change over time, often because of extremity in the wider world. In the nineteen-thirties, during the New Deal, when the Federal Theatre Project cropped up under the umbrella of the Works Progress Administration, Black performance groups, called Negro Units, helped build a bridge away from minstrelsy—which was still very much alive on the mainstream stage—and from other exploitative portrayals of Black characters and performers, toward new, more complex forms of societal and political expression. In a book released earlier this year, "Radical Black Theatre in the New Deal," which explores the output and the outlook of the Negro Units, the scholar Kate Dossett shows how, by using "folk dramas, domestic tragedies, black realist dramas," and other forms, they "pushed generic boundaries and explored what it meant to be a black hero in American culture."

The new plays—like Theodore Ward's Marcus Garvey-influenced family drama

“Big White Fog”—were received gratefully by Black Americans, who, for the first time, could “imagine themselves as the audience for a drama.” In turn, F.T.P. playwrights always had their new public—which, in addition to individual theatregoers, included “federal agencies, unions, professional associations, and civil rights organizations,” along with “poets, novelists, essayists, politicians, and activists”—in mind as they went about their work. If the crowd was unsatisfied, the manuscript changed; these new spectators were also collaborators. The result was a dramatic reimaging of what a theatre audience could be. And, because of the racially integrated nature of F.T.P. audiences, communities who were usually isolated from one another were now brought uncomfortably together in the seats. “For many Americans,” Dossett writes,

a Negro Unit drama was their first experience of theatre as a black event for black communities. In Harlem, opening night of a Negro Unit production was the place to be, and be seen, for black celebrities and political figures alike. But what was embraced by black communities could be alienating and even shocking for whites: white critics and audience members who traveled uptown were fascinated, and often troubled, by the vocal manner in which African American audiences asserted their ownership of a production.

The discovery of our own time, when it comes to audiences and the performing arts, feels like the diametric opposite of the one Dossett describes. Our great crisis, the coronavirus, forces us to watch plays alone, in the crannies of our homes, instead of drawing us into proximity with strangers. Our current government, unlike that led by Franklin Roosevelt, doesn’t see a connection between economic privation, social estrangement, and the kind of nourishment that can come only through an encounter with art—and has no sense of responsibility to encourage the flourishing of art and public life. And so, in a very real way, each of us is on her own. The work of playwriting, acting, and theatrical production today might be to reintroduce us to one another, one at a time.

I found myself startled by interaction during “Theatre for One: Here We Are,” a program of very short plays commissioned by Arts Brookfield. Before the social-distancing era, “Theatre for One” made its name with productions of uncomfortably intimate works which paired one performer with a single audience member. The latest iteration of the program features plays written by women of color, and brings actor and spectator together via Webcam. I’d

somewhat forgotten about my end of the bargain while getting ready for the show, and, as my Webcam lit up, I jetted into my bedroom and changed from my grungy T-shirt into the blue chambray button-down number that I've come to think of as my "Zoom shirt." It felt strange to dress for the theatre again.

But, before the performer for the first of my shows popped up, I was plopped into a digital "waiting room"—just a dark screen with a bar to type into. Other audience members sent messages into the seeming void. Some asked where the others were from. Others got more speculative. "When do you think we will be back in theatres together?" somebody asked. "When a vaccine comes," the deadpan but still somehow hopeful answer came. "I feel like I'm being punked," somebody else said.

Soon I was shuttled away from the chat room—out of the company of my fellow-theatregoers—and into the soft gaze of Zuleyma Guevara, performing in "Pandemic Fight," written by Carmelita Tropicana and directed by Rebecca Martinez. The play is a short recounting of an argument between ex-lovers under lockdown. When Guevara, glimpsing me across the digital expanse, asked, "In this pandemic, are you having fights with your loved ones?," it took me a beat to realize that she actually wanted an answer. "No, not really," I said. "Not a lot." As the play went on, the effect of that quick exchange lingered. I could feel my own presence, and imagined that my expression—which I hoped said "Generous Listener"—was subtly influencing Guevara's performance, that I was the unspeaking scene partner in an acting exercise.

The feeling grew during "What Are the Things I Need to Remember," written by Lynn Nottage, performed by Eisa Davis, and directed by Tiffany Nicole Greene. Here was another short monologue—all the plays are less than ten minutes—this time about a sweet, slender, suddenly dangerous-feeling memory of making a new acquaintance. "Naima"—the new friend—"had the kind of allure that made people just wanna be next to her," Davis said. "I knew as we danced, we were gonna be good friends. You ever feel that way?"

"Just a few times," I said. Davis's cool, earnest delivery of Nottage's narrative got me thinking about the mechanics of a monologue, and how, in the right hands, it spins intimacy out of simple materials: precise syntax, moving gesture, a look or two. Now, face to face with Davis, moments of gently heightened language took me out of, then put me right back into, the action of the play—and made me feel its artifice while being convinced of its deeper reality, all at once.

“Whiterly Negotiations,” by Lydia R. Diamond, also directed by Greene, is one of the least “interactive” but most convincingly intimate of the plays. Nikkole Salter plays a Black writer run ragged by the slights and indignities she suffers at the hands of editors. She flits in and out of realistic passive-aggressive professional phone and Zoom language, sometimes floating away into arias of rightful anger: “I’ve been trying to tell y’all that my Black life matters,” she says, “but noooo . . . nooo. . . . Another person had to get killed on the TV. . . . But fuck you anyway because I spent the advance!” I laughed, and felt happy, for a moment, that someone could hear me. ♦

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