

PRICE \$8.99

THE

AUG. 24, 2020

# THE NEW YORKER



R. S. P.

- [A Critic at Large](#)
- [Annals of Horticulture](#)
- [Art](#)
- [Books](#)
- [Brave New World](#)
- [Comment](#)
- [Dept. of Normality](#)
- [Fiction](#)
- [Letter from Michigan](#)
- [Our Local Correspondents](#)
- [Poems](#)
- [Postcard from Before](#)
- [Profiles](#)
- [Shouts & Murmurs](#)
- [Tables for Two](#)
- [The Theatre](#)
- [Try It at Home Dept.](#)

# A Critic at Large

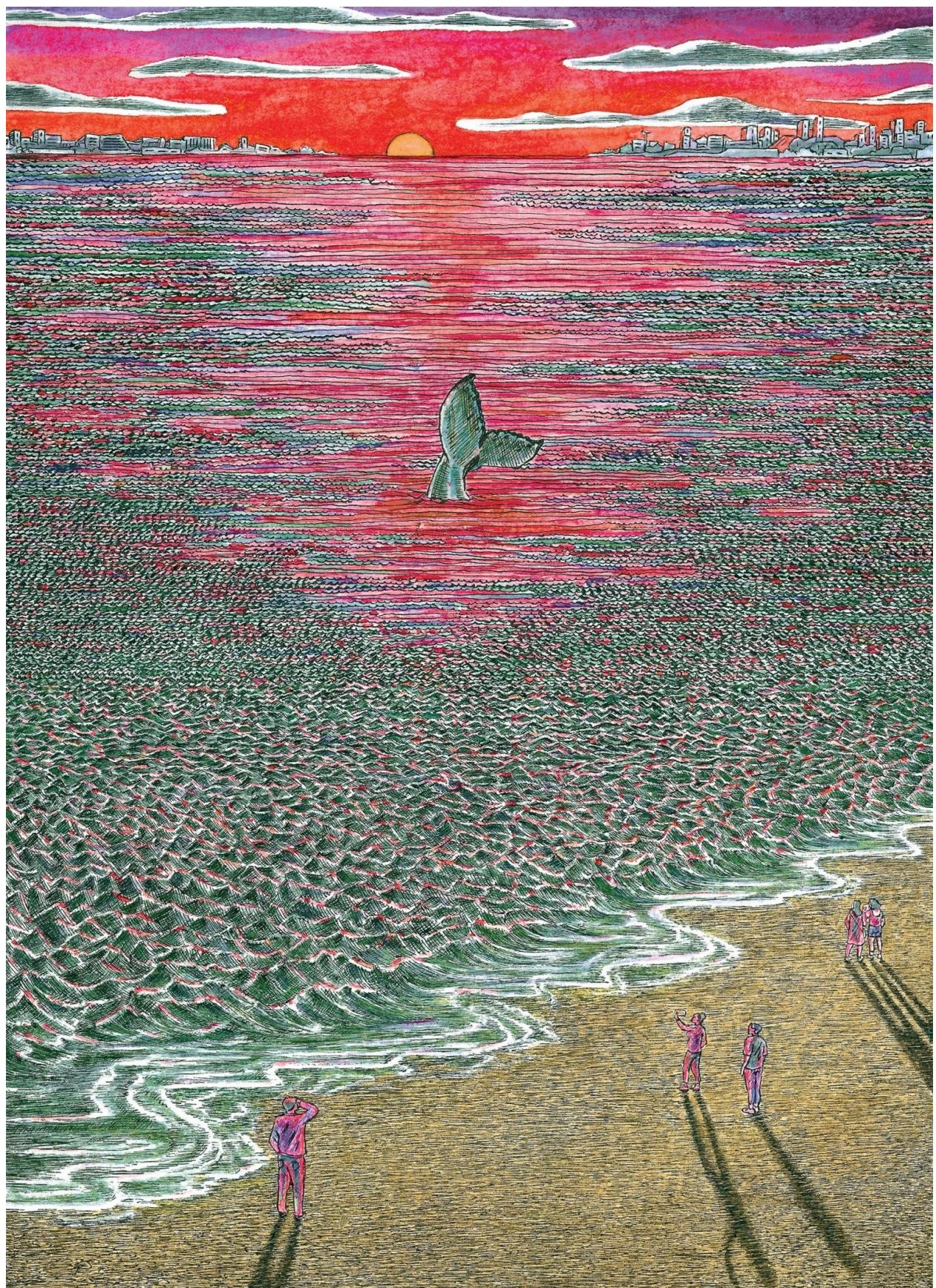
- [What Have We Done to the Whale?](#)

# **What Have We Done to the Whale?**

The creatures once symbolized our efforts to save the planet; now they demonstrate all the ways we have devastated it.

By [Amia Srinivasan](#)

August 17, 2020



Last November, drone footage was posted on Instagram of a gray whale swimming near the surface just off the coast of Dana Point, California. In the video, the whale, a juvenile maybe twenty-five feet long, cruises slowly into a lineup of surfers, its undulating tail casting arcing ripples, and then emerges from the water, exhaling through its blowhole. A few surfers paddle off in alarm, though most seem oblivious. The whale dips below the surface again, a ghostly silhouette, and glides out beyond the surfers, away.

I had been surfing in that spot just a few weeks before. Had I been in the water that day, and suddenly seen the whale's body beneath me, gargantuan and silent, I would have, for a moment, gone cold with dread. How could I not? To be close to a whale, in the wild, not in a boat but in the water itself, is to encounter an embodied agency that exists, across every dimension, on a scale that swallows our own: its physical size, its evolutionary age, its polar voyages. The fear evoked by the whale is not a judgment on its character. Whales almost never harm humans, and when they do it is invariably the humans' fault. And yet: what am I to a whale? After the whale passed, terror would have melted into an abiding thrill: of having met life in its largest, ancient form. Of having been blessed, in the most pagan sense of that term. In drawing close to those surfers, the whale drew them closer to its own alien dominion, offering the watery communion for which every surfer quietly longs: to be absorbed, returned, dissolved into the sea.

“Would we know it, the moment when it became too late; when the oceans ceased to be infinite?” Rebecca Giggs asks in her masterly “[Fathoms: The World in the Whale](#)” (Simon & Schuster). She means the moment when the oceans become so disfigured by human activity that, seeing them, we will see only ourselves. Her answer is that this moment is already here, and most of us are missing it. For Giggs, the whale is a potent but misleading symbol of the ocean’s infinity, its alterity and expansiveness. We tend to think of the whale as a story of human redemption: a creature almost hunted out of existence by the commercial whaling industry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and then saved by our collective recognition that, as activists told the United Nations in 1972, whales are “the common heritage of mankind.” Since 1986, when the International Whaling Commission began enforcing a global moratorium on commercial whale hunting, many whale populations, once near extinction, have rebounded. The laying down of harpoons and the return of the whale appear to speak not just to our empathy for creatures that, like us, care for their young, create culture, and

sing songs but also to the part of our humanity that respects what lies beyond it. In truth, Giggs argues, our mass consumption and globalized supply chains, our carbon emissions and throwaway plastics threaten to bring us a sea that is “not full of mystery, not inexplicable in its depths, but peppered with the uncannily familiar detritus of human life.” In 2017, a beaked whale washed up onshore near Bergen, Norway. In its stomach were some thirty pieces of plastic trash, including Ukrainian chicken packaging, a Danish ice-cream wrapper, and a British potato-chip bag. This is the “world in the whale” of Giggs’s title: not an alien dominion but the totalized reality of human domination.

The size of whales has made them, for most of human history, extremely difficult to kill. Adult grays can grow up to fifty feet long and weigh forty tons. Blue whales, the largest creatures ever to have lived, can grow almost a hundred feet long and weigh a hundred and ninety tons. When whales exhale through their blowholes, the vapor is so dense that it produces rainbows. The earliest evidence of whale hunting is perhaps as old as eight thousand years, in South Korea, where Neolithic-era shale carvings depict marine animals being hunted with lances and makeshift floats. Traditional whale hunters typically had to harass their prey to death over many days and nights. They used bludgeons and spears, sometimes tipped with poison, to serially wound and exhaust the animals, while floats were used to prevent them from diving—“sounding”—out of reach. The Inuit created their floats by inflating gutted seals, their orifices stitched shut. All the indigenous cultures that hunted whales for subsistence—on the coasts of the Korean Peninsula, the Pacific Northwest, Alaska, Zanzibar, Siberia, Canada, Greenland, Iceland, Norway—did so at their peril, and with elaborate ritual and frugality, using the whale’s many parts for food, shelter, and amulets.

Then, in the sixteenth century, Basque whalers created a global whale trade. This was made possible by a technological advance: the attaching of a two-flued iron harpoon to a braided rope that could be uncoiled at great speed off a boat’s deck. Although the harpoon was unable to pierce through to a whale’s vital organs, it was, with its flared barbs, almost impossible to dislodge from the animal’s blubber. Thus tethered to the boat, the whale could not escape the hunters’ lances.

Soon Basque whalers depleted shoreline populations in the Bay of Biscay. Bigger ships, in turn, allowed the whalers to hunt in the open seas—what’s known as “pelagic whaling”—and to pursue various species at different points in their migration routes. Near Newfoundland, Basque whalers killed as many as

forty thousand whales between 1530 and 1610, becoming, for a time, the world's dominant whaling force. Their preferred method was to harpoon calves first, followed by the mothers that rushed to their rescue.

Whale hunting became a year-round business. The Dutch, the Danes, and the British joined in; by the late eighteenth century, commercial whaling had spread to South Africa and New Zealand. American colonists pioneered the onboard rendering of oil from whale blubber. In this process, a whale carcass was chained to the side of the ship, and rotated with pulleys as sickle-shaped blades peeled it like an orange; the blubber was then separated from flesh and skin, and liquefied in huge cast-iron cauldrons, underlaid with water to avoid setting fire to the ship. By turning their vessels into mobile slaughterhouses, American whalers were able to hunt whales that were then abundant in equatorial waters, whose carcasses would have otherwise rotted by the time the ships returned home. The whalers also came to use shoulder guns and bomb lances, increasing the possible distance between hunter and prey. By the mid-nineteenth century, pelagic whaling was the fifth-largest industry in the United States.

Why whales? Like traditional whale hunters, early commercial whalers sought out whales largely for their flesh, a food approved by the Vatican for meatless Fridays. By the nineteenth century, though, whales had become prized as a source of a much more valuable commodity: oil. In 1854, whale oil, extracted from blubber, traded at, in today's terms, eighteen dollars a gallon. A single mature right whale could yield seven thousand gallons. Whale oil greased factory cogs, lit shop floors and streets, and, deployed as an insecticide, spurred industrial agriculture. Sperm whales were hunted for the waxlike spermaceti found in their heads, which was used as a lubricant in looms, trains, and guns, and, most significant, as a raw material in fine candles. New Bedford, Massachusetts, the center of sperm-whale hunting, was called "the city that lit the world." Baleens, the bristly combs that certain whales, including humpbacks, have in place of teeth, were used in corsets, parasols, hairbrushes, fishing rods, shoehorns, eyeglass frames, hat rims, sofa stuffing, police nightsticks, and the thin canes used to beat misbehaving schoolchildren, which may explain the phrase "to whale on." Increasingly, whales were seen not as prey but as a natural resource to be mined; whalers talked about migrating sperm whales as veins running through the ocean, like gold.

An estimated two hundred and thirty thousand sperm whales were killed in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth, that number grew to more than seven

hundred thousand. In total, nearly three million whales of all species were killed in that century. (Human hunting has reduced the world's great-whale biomass by as much as eighty per cent.) Early-twentieth-century whaling was a truly international concern, run by conglomerates of Norwegian, British, Dutch, German, Japanese, Australian, and American fleets and capital. That whaling became more aggressive is a departure from the trajectory one might have expected: the previous century's whaling had depleted whale populations, and abundant substitutes for whale oil—cheaper vegetable oils and petroleum products—had been found. But nautical technology advanced; coal-powered and then diesel-powered ships allowed whalers to hunt species that had previously been too quick—blue, fin, sei, minke. Ships were also equipped with mechanized weapons that could detonate or electrocute, and with improved tools for processing whale carcasses, including hydraulic tail grabbers, pressure cookers, and refrigerators. These ships were noisy machines, but radar and spotter planes, perfected in wartime, allowed them to home in on whales, called “the listening prey.” At the same time, new commercial uses were found for whale oil: in explosive munitions, a trench-foot treatment, soap, margarine, lipstick, burn gel. General Motors used spermaceti in its transmission fluid until 1973. During the Cold War, the substance was used in intercontinental missiles and submarines. Whaling had become a matter of military interest.

The International Whaling Commission (I.W.C.) was set up, in 1946, to regulate whale hunting in international waters. But the quotas that the commission initially imposed backfired, sparking a mad rush by whalers who were keen to stockpile whale oil, anticipating a scarcity-driven price surge. Commercial fleets raced to take all the whales they could get, harpooning animals and then abandoning them when fattier specimens were spotted. Whalers hunted out of season and in whale sanctuaries, and illegally targeted whale calves. Aristotle Onassis's lucrative whaling enterprise ended when his own sailors testified, in the *Norwegian Whaling Gazette*, to practices on his factory ships: “Shreds of fresh meat from the 124 whales we killed yesterday are still lying on the deck. Scarcely one of them was full grown. Unaffected and in cold blood, everything is killed that comes before the gun.”

The commercial whalers of the postwar period hunted Southern Hemisphere whales to near “commercial extinction,” the point at which the cost of killing an animal is no longer worth the returns. American and European whaling operations shrank, but the cause was taken up by two countries driven by nationalist rather than by commercial prerogatives. The U.S.S.R.’s whaling

industry, which had begun in the nineteen-thirties, expanded during the Cold War. The Soviet military needed spermaceti, because Western embargoes cut off its access to synthetic substitutes. More than that, the Soviet state felt that it had not taken its “share” of the world’s whales, and set quotas for its whaling industry that far exceeded domestic demand for whale meat and oil. Soviet ships, frantic to keep up with state mandates that specified the total raw mass of animals to be killed, would often bring back carcasses too decayed for human consumption, or would simply throw them overboard, unprocessed. Between 1959 and 1961, Soviet ships harvested nearly twenty-five thousand humpback whales in the Antarctic.



C. TOM

*"I made us margaritas, if you're not too busy with your magnum opus or whatever."*  
Cartoon by Colin Tom

Japan, meanwhile, was suffering from a postwar food crisis that lasted into the nineteen-sixties, triggered by the destruction of supply chains and agricultural land. On the advice of the U.S. overseer, General Douglas MacArthur, the country turned to whaling. Whale meat was served as a cheap source of protein to elementary- and middle-school children, and became a symbol of national resilience. Though whale is eaten in very small amounts today—just one and a half ounces per person a year—whaling is still heavily subsidized by the state, with most of its output stored, uneaten. In 2019, a researcher at Rikkyo University estimated the Japanese stockpile of whale meat at thirty-seven hundred tons. After the I.W.C. imposed its global moratorium on whaling, Japan was undeterred. Until 2019, when the country withdrew from the I.W.C., Japan openly exploited a loophole that allows whales to be killed for research purposes, and any leftover whale meat to be sold as food. Between 2005 and 2014, around thirty-six hundred minke whales were killed by Japanese whalers in the Southern Ocean, resulting in just two peer-reviewed scientific papers.

The I.W.C.'s moratorium, perhaps the greatest triumph of the postwar conservationist movement, was spurred by decades of dire news. In 1964, an independent committee of biologists had warned that Southern Hemisphere whale populations faced "a distinct risk of complete extinction." The scientists reported that there were fewer than two thousand Antarctic blue whales left. A decade later, that number was three hundred and sixty, representing a population decline of 99.85 per cent since 1905. This is the sort of mass destruction that biologists refer to as a "bottleneck" event, a decisive shrinking of a species' gene pool that may well be irreversible. Once anti-whaling advocates helped bring non-whaling (including many landlocked) nations into the I.W.C., the group's scientists were able to take a more explicitly conservationist stance. They were also buoyed by a worldwide outcry against whale killing. Greenpeace, employing a strategy that one of its leaders called "more an imagology than an ideology," used footage of its theatrical high-seas tactics to evoke public sympathy and outrage. A fifteen-thousand-person anti-whaling rally was staged in London, and photographs of it were broadcast around the world. Popular books were written that celebrated whales and mourned their death; Farley Mowat's "[A Whale for the Killing](#)," from 1972, called whaling a "modern Moloch." Whale songs—first recorded by accident in the nineteen-fifties by U.S. naval engineers sweeping for Soviet submarines—became, in the nineteen-seventies, a big commercial success. The 1970 album "Songs of the Humpback

Whale” went multi-platinum. It provided a natural soundtrack for the decade’s faddish embrace of Eastern spirituality, promising an auditory portal to higher spiritual planes, repressed memories, and past lives. And it was taken as proof of the animals’ intelligence and sensitivity. Animal protectionists, appearing before Congress during a 1971 hearing on whale conservation, played the record as part of their testimony. One of them said, “Having heard their songs, I believe you can imagine what their screams would be.”

This mass gestalt shift, from whales as an extractive resource to whales as symbols of a global inheritance, is striking in part because whales are not typical of what conservationists call “charismatic” animals. Animals that win human sympathy tend to be readily anthropomorphized (elephants, chimps, dolphins), or cute (baby tigers, pangolins), or—the holy grail of animal conservation—both (otters). Whales, by contrast, are too large to be taken in easily by the human eye, let alone imaginatively given human form. They are magnificent but hardly cute. Philip Hoare, in [“Leviathan or, The Whale”](#) (2008), notes that the “blue marble”—the photograph of Earth captured by the astronauts aboard Apollo 17, in 1972—became famous before the first photograph of a free-swimming whale did. “We knew what the world looked like before we knew what the whale looked like,” he writes. Human uncertainty about the whale is reflected in the stories we have long told about the animal. Ancient cartographers used drolleries—hybrid monsters, part whale, part sea serpent—to indicate the limits of their knowledge. In the thirteenth century, Norse sailors said that whales fed on rain and darkness. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when taxonomists began classifying animals according to their internal structures as opposed to their outward appearance, they were stunned to discover the signs of whales’ evolutionary history as land-dwelling mammals: fin bones, a physician wrote in 1820, that resembled “a man’s hand . . . enwrapped in a mitten.”

And there is still much we do not understand about whales. They navigate tremendous distances—some humpbacks swim more than sixteen thousand miles each year, three-fifths the circumference of the earth—aided by unknown sensory apparatuses, and according to migratory routes that are passed, somehow, from parent to child. Scientists know that whale vocalization—the singing of humpbacks, the chattering of belugas, the powerful clicks of sperm whales (at up to two hundred and thirty-six decibels, the loudest animal noise on the planet)—performs an important communicative function. Whales converse, and perhaps commune, at great distances. Songs of humpbacks off Puerto Rico are heard by whales near Newfoundland, two thousand miles away; the songs

can “go viral” across the world. Some scientists believe that certain whale languages equal our own in their expressive complexity; the brains of sperm whales are six times larger than ours, and are endowed with more spindle neurons, cells associated with both empathy and speech. Yet no one knows what whales are saying to one another, or what they might be trying to say to us. Noc, a beluga that lived for twenty-two years in captivity as part of a U.S. Navy program, learned to mimic human language so well that one diver mistook Noc’s voice for a colleague’s, and obeyed the whale’s command to get out of the water. A [recording](#) of Noc’s voice can be heard online today: nasal and submerged, but also distinctively like English. (*Oooow aaare you-ou-ou-ooooo?*) At the very least, it’s a better impression of a human’s voice than a human could do of a whale’s.

The whale’s aura lies in its unique synthesis of ineffability and mammality. Whales are enormous and strange. But—in their tight familial bonds, their cultural forms, their incessant chatter—they are also like us. Contained in their mystery is the possibility that they are even more like us than we know: that their inner lives are as sophisticated as our own, perhaps even more so. Indeed, contained in whales is the possibility that the creatures are like humans, only much better: brilliant, gentle, depthful gods of the sea.

The I.W.C. moratorium on commercial whale hunting has some important exceptions. It grants special whale-hunting rights to indigenous communities, including the native peoples of Alaska and of Russia’s Chukotka Peninsula, the Greenlanders, and the residents of the island of Bequia, in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. It also excludes species classified as “small cetaceans,” such as the long-finned pilot whale, a species of dolphin hunted off the Faroe Islands, an autonomous Danish territory about two hundred miles north of Scotland. (The Faroe Islands, unlike Denmark, are not part of the European Union, which prohibits the hunting of whales and dolphins.) The *grindadráp*—or the *grind*, for short—is a traditional Faroese drive hunt that dates back to at least 1298, when the first law regulating the hunt was introduced. Records of the hunt have been kept since 1584 (the longest such archive), and show that an annual average of eight hundred and thirty-eight pilot whales have been killed by the Faroese during the past three centuries. The *grind* has long been the focus of anti-whaling advocacy: gruesome photographs showing rows of black whale corpses, their necks slit, floating in a sea bright red with blood, spark outrage on Facebook and Twitter. Faroese defenders of the *grind* argue that the hunt is not only a traditional part of their culture but also a sustainable and ecologically

friendly practice. They point out that they monitor the pilot-whale population, and hunt only a small proportion each year, consuming what they kill. In an extreme northerly landscape that does not support agriculture, the Faroese maintain that they still depend on the ocean for their food.

The irony is that pilot whales, like whales the world over, are becoming inedible. Whale blubber stores toxins that have made their way to the sea, in the form of agricultural and mining runoff or condensed emissions—an effect magnified by whales' longevity. Mercury levels in pilot whales are so elevated that scientists have advised the Faroese to drastically reduce their consumption of whale meat, which might in turn force them to import farmed protein from elsewhere, increasing their carbon impact. The breast milk of Inuit women in Greenland, one of the least industrialized places on earth, has, because of mercury levels in beluga whales and other marine animals, become a dangerous substance. Some studies suggest that the Inuit's mercury exposure is comparable to that of people living downstream from gold mines in China. Orca in Washington's Puget Sound have been declared among the earth's most toxified animals; the carcasses of beluga whales that wash up on the shores of Canada are classified as toxic waste. The most prolific whale killers are no longer the whale hunters. They are, instead, the rest of us: creatures of late capitalism whose patterns of consumption make us complicit, however unwittingly or unwillingly, in an unfolding mass biocide.

Whales consume much of the eight million metric tons of plastic that enter the oceans each year, which gather in swirling trash vortexes known as gyres and can extend for miles. Often, this plastic is from packaging that allows us to consume non-seasonal food year-round. A sperm whale that recently washed up on the Spanish coast had an entire greenhouse in its belly: the flattened structure, together with the tarps, hosepipes, ropes, flowerpots, and spray cannister it had contained. The greenhouse was from an Andalusian hydroponics business, used to grow tomatoes for export to colder climes. Food waste produced by the globalized supply chain accounts for eight per cent of carbon emissions (air travel accounts for only about 2.5 per cent), which melt the ice on which whales depend indirectly for their food. Since the nineteen-seventies, with the loss of ice-fixed algae, Antarctic krill populations have declined by between seventy and eighty per cent. Noise from industrial shipping—eighty per cent of the world's merchandise is transported on cargo vessels—has shrunk the whale's world: the distance over which a whale's vocalizations can travel is just one-tenth of what it was sixty years ago. Whales have washed up on the

Peloponnesian coast with ears bleeding from decompression injuries caused by anti-submarine-warfare training.

Ecologists have warned that the dramatic shifts associated with climate change could subject even relatively large whale populations to sudden extinction. There are signs that this is already happening. In 2015, three hundred and forty-three sei whales, an endangered species, were found dead on the coast of Chilean Patagonia, likely because of a toxic algae bloom. The seis, scientists said, could be “among the first oceanic megafauna victims of global warming.” Meanwhile, because whales are enormous carbon sinks, the era of commercial whaling hastened today’s climate crisis. According to one estimate, a century of whaling equates to the burning of seventy million acres of forest. The people of the Lummi Nation, who live on the coast of the Salish Sea, between the U.S. and Canada, have started to feed salmon to wild orca that are starving because of the effects of pollution and climate change. “Those are our relations under the waves,” one Lummi tribal member said.

On an Argentine beach in 2017, a stranded baby dolphin was killed by a mob of tourists intent on taking selfies with it. Something similar had happened in Argentina the year before, when a baby La Plata dolphin washed up at a Santa Teresita beach; the animal was passed from tourist to tourist until it died of dehydration. Ecological historians may one day write about the early twenty-first century as a time of frenzied cultural obsession with wild animals: anime-eyed lorises, badass honey badgers, “trash panda” raccoons. As Rebecca Giggs observes, this frenzy has been facilitated by the rise of social media. On Twitter and Facebook, animal cuteness has become the only antidote to political fury. Instagram encourages us to curate our encounters with the extraordinary, so that we may ourselves seem extraordinary. Driven by a search for the perfectly “grammable” shot, ecotourism is everywhere on the rise, though it rarely delivers on the promise of its name, which is to reconcile the impulse to consume nature with the desire to conserve it. At least thirteen million people worldwide have been going on whale-watching tours each year, leading to more and faster diesel-powered boats. Wildflower superblooms are trampled by social-media influencers. Thousands of recreational drones—like the one that produced that video of the whale swimming through the surfers off Dana Point—disturb the wildlife they so rapturously capture.

Future historians will have the task of explaining how our performative love for animals relates to our relentless extermination of them. It is not simply a lack of

knowledge. Could the Argentine tourists not sense the dolphin going limp in their arms? Don't many of us acknowledge the contradiction of flying across the world to lose ourselves in nature? Who doesn't grasp the vulnerability of the world to our collective power? Perhaps it's something more like willful self-deception: a refusal to believe what it is we know. Or perhaps we are simply embracing what we sense will soon be gone, memorializing what does not really exist, as social media has taught us to do. Here is my fabulous holiday; here is my happy wedding day; here is the vast ocean; here is a whale. ♦

# Annals of Horticulture

- The Therapeutic Power of Gardening

# The Therapeutic Power of Gardening

Can anxious minds find solace working with plants? A therapist and her husband, a garden designer, say yes.

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

August 17, 2020



In mid-March, in the tense week before the British government announced its belated coronavirus-induced lockdown, certain everyday products became extraordinarily hard to find. Panicked buyers swept up fundamentals of alimentation and elimination: yeast, flour, bathroom tissue. More surprising, the horticulture industry experienced a surge in demand. In the week before the lockdown began, sales of plants, seeds, and bulbs were reportedly up thirty-five per cent from 2019. Seed packets, especially for tomatoes and lettuces, were in limited supply. As Britain faced [the COVID crisis](#), reassurance was difficult to come by, and one way it could still be attained was in the reliable germination of a windowsill pot of watercress or a garden-patch row of chard.

Eight out of ten people in Britain live in a home with a private garden; one in ten at least has access to a balcony, a terrace, a patio, or a communal garden. The national affection for [gardening](#) sustains a horticulture industry that is worth about thirty billion dollars a year to the U.K. economy. British consumers spend more than three billion dollars annually at garden centers, many of them sprawling outdoor emporiums that feature cafés offering quiches and cream teas, and playgrounds for children bored by the begonias. The Horticultural Trade Association, founded in 1899, estimates that half of all adults in the U.K. engage in some sort of gardening, and in the past six months—which included an unusually prolonged stretch of warm, dry weather—Britons have been able to do more gardening than ever. Once the lockdown began, the Royal Horticultural Society, the nation’s leading garden charity, saw a dramatic spike in Internet searches for how to grow potatoes—and the number of people asking how to compost, or how to divide perennials, was six times higher than the previous year’s figure.

I was among the Londoners who thought to counter potential disruptions in the food-supply chain by growing edible plants. I spent countless hours searching online for seeds, which, I imagined, I could cultivate in the three planters that the previous occupant of my home had left on a roof terrace; they had become unkempt and weedy since my husband, son, and I moved in, last year. Eventually, I found an online nursery that still had seedlings, and I ordered a dozen plugs of arugula and spinach. They did not travel well: when a package of trays eventually arrived, two weeks later, the soil had mostly been shaken out into the bubble wrap, and the seedlings looked like blasted blades of grass. Despite my efforts to tuck the roots gently back into the soil and resuscitate the plants with daily watering, they were totalled; a few weeks later, I tossed the

trays in the rubbish.

I've never been a gardener, but my parents energetically cultivated the modest back yard of my childhood home, in Weymouth, a coastal town a hundred and twenty miles southwest of London. When I was young, the garden was largely given over to a lawn, so that my brother and I could play, but my father kept a small vegetable patch where he grew runner beans, tomatoes, and marrows, and we had a plum tree and a pear tree. Along the lawn's edges, my parents planted beds with fragrant roses and tall daisies; hostas flourished in the shady, sluggy corners. My father died eight years ago; my mother, who is now eighty-nine, still lives in the house. Over the decades, the lawn has become smaller and the beds more lush and abundant, planted with clumps of geraniums and clouds of lavender. Until a few years ago, my mother clipped the green-gold griselinia hedges herself; she has now surrendered the more strenuous tasks to Shane, a weather-beaten retired firefighter about twenty years her junior, who mows the lawn and prunes the bigger shrubs. Most days when the weather is fine, my mother spends hours in the garden, weeding or potting up seedlings, or drinking a cup of coffee on a bench, amid the sweet-smelling shelter of honeysuckle. Somewhere between a conifer and a cooking-apple tree, my father's ashes are scattered. "Shane will be here maybe for the last time," she wrote to me in March, after the government announced that senior citizens should isolate completely. "It will be interesting to see the grass turn into a meadow this summer."

"When we sow a seed, we plant a narrative of future possibility," Sue Stuart-Smith, a British psychiatrist and psychotherapist, writes in her new book, "[The Well-Gardened Mind](#)." A surprise best-seller in the U.K., it came out in America earlier this summer. In recent years, the benefits of gardening to mental health have become widely acknowledged in Britain. Primary-care doctors increasingly give patients a "social prescription" to do something like volunteer at a local community garden, believing that such work can sometimes be as beneficial as talk therapy or antidepressants. Some hospitals have been redesigned to incorporate gardens, spurred by findings that patients recovering from catastrophic injuries can heal more quickly if they have access to outdoor spaces with plants. Stuart-Smith's book compares the uses of gardening in historical and contemporary mental-health treatments, and reports on empirical research into gardening's effects on mood. (Laboratory rats whose cages contain soil and logs are more energetic and sociable than those whose cages include a wheel, a ladder, and a tunnel.) She draws on thirty years of clinical practice. Previously

the lead psychotherapy clinician in the county of Hertfordshire, she now works for an affiliate of the British Medical Association which provides mental-health support to doctors. She is also informed by her own proximity to gardening on an unusually elevated plane: her husband of thirty-four years, Tom Stuart-Smith, is one of the country's best-known garden designers, with clients ranging from Victoria Beckham to the Queen; in 2002, he created a public garden at Windsor Castle to commemorate the monarch's Golden Jubilee.

In "The Well-Gardened Mind," Sue Stuart-Smith seeks to go beyond the truism that getting out in the garden is good for you. "Much of the research that's been done has been by environmental psychologists, who look at things like attention and cognition," she told me recently. "That's all very important. But I was interested in the unconscious aspects of gardening—the symbolism, and the level of metaphor." Her book describes a middle-aged patient, Kay, whom she was treating for depression. As a child, Kay had experienced neglect and violence; as an adult, she often had conflicts with her two adolescent sons, whom she raised alone, in a flat with a small garden that the boys had destroyed with their antics. When her sons moved out, Kay reclaimed the garden. One day in therapy, she made a striking observation: "It is the only time I feel I am good." Stuart-Smith explains that feeling one *is* good—rather than merely *feeling* good—is an example of gardening's reparative power. Gardening provided Kay a refuge and an engagement with the world beyond herself; it also gave her confirmation of her capacity to provide care and tenderness, in a less fraught context than that of her family relationships.

In making a case for the profound, if sometimes obscure, significance with which we imbue our gardens, Stuart-Smith draws especially on the work of the British psychoanalyst and pediatrician Donald Winnicott, who died in 1971, at the age of seventy-four. Winnicott [argued](#) for the crucial importance of play in a child's evolving sense of self. He was also known for his writings on the foundational bond between mothers and their children, and developed the concept of "holding" to describe the infant's earliest experience of its mother not as a separate individual but as a merged being who provides necessary support for its continued existence. Winnicott proposed the concept of a "transitional" space, in which the child, feeling sufficient security owing to its mother's early care, begins to relinquish a sense of being merged with her. In such a space—which may be found in a game of peekaboo, as a baby experiments with losing and then refinding her mother—a child explores the possibilities of separation through play, experiencing what Winnicott [characterized](#) as the paradoxical

feeling of being “alone, as an infant and small child, in the presence of mother.”

A garden, Stuart-Smith suggests, can be a Winnicottian “in-between” space that allows the inner and the outer worlds to coexist simultaneously—“a meeting place for our innermost, dream-infused selves and the real physical world.” The meditative and repetitive aspects of gardening can function as a form of play for grownups who have otherwise stopped playing—or who, like Stuart-Smith’s patient Kay, were denied the possibility of doing so safely as children. Gardening can be especially helpful for people suffering from P.T.S.D. Stuart-Smith describes research done by two professors at the University of Copenhagen, Dorthe Poulsen and Ulrika Stigsdotter, at a Danish arboretum. One war veteran there said that only in the company of trees did he feel safe enough to close his eyes. Another reported that trees offered him mute, complete acceptance: “There is a tree, and I am sitting here, no expectations, no questions, no nothing.”

Gardening can also help heal a mind wounded by more ordinary forms of grief, such as bereavement. Contemplating the restorative effect of working the soil in her own yard, Stuart-Smith writes that, “in the safe curtilage of the garden, I am in the kind of company that allows me to be alone and enter my own world.” When I read those words this spring, while sitting by my withered arugula on the terrace of the house where I have largely been confined, I reflected that my urge to sow seeds was about more than keeping my fridge stocked. Gardening provided a way of being alongside my mother, whom I could not visit, as she pottered, alone, in the space of my childhood.

A few weeks into the lockdown, I introduced myself to Sue and Tom Stuart-Smith in a Zoom call. They were at home, in the garden, and behind them I could see a breeze-rippled sea of pink and purple blooms, backed by rounded green embankments of hedges and towering trees. Sue was doing her clinical work remotely, rather than in London. Tom’s many public projects had been put on hold: a garden that he designed for the Hepworth Wakefield art gallery, in Yorkshire, which was supposed to have been completed this spring, would remain unfinished for now. “But with private clients the owners are all now at home, and are *really* on the case,” Tom said. “Rather than one desultory e-mail a month saying, ‘Wouldn’t it be nice if we had a cutting garden?’, I’m getting one a day saying, ‘What’s this plant here?’ ” The Stuart-Smiths weren’t surprised that the pandemic had led Britons to become even more consumed with gardening. Sue said, “Whenever there’s a crisis—be it a war, or the aftermath of

war, or a natural disaster—we see this phenomenon of urgent biophilia.” She noted that, in the First World War, infantrymen created gardens in their trenches, growing not just vegetables to eat but also flowers. “We gain sustenance from nature’s regeneration,” she said.

The Stuart-Smiths met in 1978, as undergraduates at Cambridge University. Sue was studying English, and would have gone on to do a Ph.D. in Romantic poetry, but as she was starting her final year her father died, at the age of forty-seven, from bone-marrow failure. The combination of her grief and her discovery of [Freud](#), in a class covering morality and philosophy, helped her decide instead to become a psychiatrist and psychotherapist. “I wanted a more direct interaction with the world,” she said. Tom, meanwhile, was studying zoology, but an adolescent fascination with gardening intensified at Cambridge. There, he got to know Geoffrey Jellicoe—one of the most distinguished gardeners of the twentieth century, whose practice drew on both Renaissance architecture and Jungian theory—and Lanning Roper, a witty American landscape designer known for combining structure with exuberance. For the first time, Tom saw gardening as a professional option for himself. After graduating, he went to Manchester, to train as a landscape architect.

When the Stuart-Smiths married, in 1986, Sue was enrolled at University College Hospital, in London, and Tom had started his career. “I did an underground nuclear bunker for the R.A.F.,” he told me. “I did a reservoir, in Devon.” Sue was not a gardener—she had long viewed gardening as outdoor housework—but she embraced Tom’s interest as she accompanied him on visits to the famous gardens of England: Sissinghurst, in Kent, where Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson amassed one of the country’s great plant collections; Knightshayes, in Devon, with its sculptural topiary and its acclaimed kitchen garden. Meanwhile, they read together the psychoanalytic thinkers, such as Winnicott, whose theories Sue was learning to put into practice. “There was a kind of shared territory,” Sue told me.

When they were first married, they lived in a house with a tiny garden in Queen’s Park, in northwest London. In 1987, Tom’s parents offered them the opportunity to make a home in a dilapidated seventeenth-century barn that they were restoring across the lane from Serge Hill—the estate where both Tom and his mother had grown up, in Hertfordshire. Tom’s father, Sir Murray Stuart-Smith, was at the time a High Court judge; his mother, Lady Joan Stuart-Smith, was the head of the local magistrates’ court. “My father had a passion for

building, and in those days High Court judges had three-month holidays,” Tom explained. “Over two summers, they took on a team of bricklayers, and my mum was the project manager, and my dad was the chief hod carrier, and they renovated the barn.” Sue, having been bereaved of her father, was eager to put down roots; by the time they moved in, their daughter, Rose, had been born. (Two sons, Ben and Harry, followed.) But the barn-renovation project had its tensions. “My father’s approach was very practical, while my approach is partly practical, but also aesthetic,” Tom recalled. “He would be laying a terrace and I would come along and say, ‘Oh, God, this is absolutely terrible.’ ” An opportunity for autonomy was presented by the garden, which was Tom’s to coax from a stony, north-facing hillside.



*“Ah, this is going to be another one of those series where the only two minority characters, who have nothing in common, fall in love.”*  
Cartoon by Sarah Akinterinwa

The Barn garden, as the five-acre site is now known, serves not just as a family home but also as a laboratory for Tom’s practice. He is celebrated for designs that are both sensuous and cerebral, combining man-made forms and structures—a clipped hedge, a grid of paths—with patterns created by wild nature. At a private house on the Norfolk coast, an orchard-like space enclosed by tall hedges and wood fencing incorporates fringed staghorn sumac trees, which are underplanted with boxwood arranged to recapitulate the forms of detritus that washes up on a nearby beach. Working with a couple in North London who had a small child, Stuart-Smith transformed a two-thousand-square-foot back yard into a fantastical, stylized forest that looks like something out of [Maurice Sendak](#), with half a dozen or so giant fern trees imported from Tasmania quivering amid grasses and lumpy mounds of boxwood. At the far end of the yard is a sandpit and a children’s secret garden—“a place to hide,” as Tom puts it.

A client’s quest for a garden that is flawless year-round can be at odds with the psychological satisfactions that Tom and Sue think gardening can foster. “A garden is fundamentally a process—there is change, and sometimes it is dying, and sometimes it is hibernating,” Tom said. One of Winnicott’s most important contributions to child psychology was to define the notion of the “good enough” mother, who, by being less than perfect, and by occasionally frustrating her baby’s demands, helps him learn where she ends and he begins. Tom urges his clients to see gardens from what might be called a more Winnicottian perspective: “It’s like the good-enough parent—it’s much more to do with how you feel about your garden than how it looks. It could be that your garden is the most fantastic mess, but if you love it, because there’s a fox living in one corner, and a lot of snails whom you know personally by name, and you have a sort of in-depth relationship with it, then it’s a good-enough garden.”

The Barn garden is both a good-enough garden and an extraordinary one. In a landscape ceded to him by his parents, Tom has created a highly distinctive place of his own. The garden also expresses the mutuality of a long marriage in which enthusiasms have been exchanged. “The Well-Gardened Mind” is an exploration of ideas to which Sue has been prompted, in no small part, by the experience of living with Tom; the Barn garden gives material form to ideas that Tom has developed in decades of conversation with Sue. Over the years, Tom explained to me, his landscape designs have increasingly reflected ideas of attachment and

separation; safe enclosures near the house gradually open to more untamed reaches beyond. At the Norfolk property, the manicured garden with the sumac trees flows into a much wilder garden leading down to the North Sea.

On a gloriously sunny day in June, my husband and I went to visit the Stuart-Smiths at the Barn garden, where they had spent most of their time since the lockdown began. For twelve weeks, we had been no farther from home than we could pedal on our bikes; with public transport off limits to all but essential workers, we walked for almost an hour to the nearest open car-rental agency, then drove northwest out of London on the M1 motorway, which had a ceaseless stream of traffic even in lockdown. Serge Hill lies less than a mile from the M1's intersection with the M25, the highway that loops around London. The property is on a narrow lane that would barely have accommodated a hay wagon when the surroundings were all farmland; in a 2011 photo book titled "[The Barn Garden](#)," Tom writes of how, at night, highway lights "encircle us like a bright necklace of sodium." We were the first guests the Stuart-Smiths had received in many weeks, and they greeted us from the mandated awkward distance while their terrier, Rabbit, scampered at our heels. Sitting on the terrace, we overlooked what was once a farmyard and is now a courtyard garden, with brick paths between flower beds in which mauve pompoms of alliums danced. Other purple flowers were in abundance, a cool complement to the prevailing green. The sight was beautiful, but the roar of traffic was daunting. "In the morning, you can tell which way the wind is blowing without opening the windows," Tom said, ruefully. Yet the highway served as a useful reminder of the outside world: it made a complete retreat into the private world of a garden impossible.

The Barn garden has slowly expanded as the Stuart-Smiths have acquired more land, mostly from Tom's oldest brother. (His father is still alive, at ninety-two; his mother died in 2015.) In addition to the more enclosed spaces near the house, there is an area called the Prairie, which Stuart-Smith began sowing a decade ago with flowers that bloom from late summer to early fall: red-hot poker, asters, and echinacea. He has also added an expanse of meadow, where he has planted hundreds of trees, from oak to chestnut to zelkova. This year, the Stuart-Smiths are turning the property's former orchard into a community garden and offering allotment patches to nearby residents. It will also be the site of a therapeutic horticulture program, similar to those described in "*The Well-Gardened Mind*"; it will be jointly supervised by the Sunnyside Rural Trust, a charity serving people with learning difficulties.

Taking us on a tour of the gardens, Tom and Sue first led us through the barn. Warm-colored kilims hung from ancient rafters above a seating area furnished with tapestry-upholstered couches, sculptures perched on tables, and tall bookcases. The space had the atmosphere of Freud's famous analytic study, but on a giant scale. A huge picture window framed the countryside beyond. An enormous honeysuckle, which looked as if it had flourished as long as the Stuart-Smiths' marriage, climbed a dark, shingled wall and crept over the roof. A narrow strip of lawn extended from the house, leading the eye up a gentle rise toward sculptural mounds of box and flat-topped hedges; the grassy path was like a serene green river that flowed uphill instead of down. To the sides, there were accents of willow herb, small purple flowers with long leaves. The plant grows wild on English roadsides and railway banks. Tom said, "My plantings are absolutely full of things that shouldn't really be used in people's gardens, because they are so unruly."

We entered an area where trees planted thirty years ago had created a shady canopy. In the dense bed of plants before us, thin stems topped with clinging bursts of delicate pastel flowers—orange, pink, yellow—had grown to twice the height of their neighbors, looking like slender sticks of licorice dipped in sherbet. "They are foxtail lilies," Tom explained. "They are from Kazakhstan. Aren't they great?"

As Tom guided us through the garden, he explained that there was no prescribed route. "Of course, as a designed thing, a garden has to be up to a point didactic," he said. "But it should also be a territory of discovery and self-expression." We entered a small circular hedge made from woodland hornbeam, and I found myself imagining a game of hide-and-seek in which this would be an ideal hiding spot. Tom then led us through what felt like a gateway, into a large area surrounded by squared-off hedges. It was the garden equivalent of an empty room—a flat lawn dotted with buttercups and enclosed by walls of green, the blue sky demarcated by the crisp hedges. After the stimulating variety of plantings that had come before—and with my imagination having moved, unbidden, back into childhood—walking into the green rectangle felt like entering a psychoanalyst's consulting room, with its calm invitation to reflect on one's personal history. All that was missing was a couch.

In "The Well-Gardened Mind," Sue Stuart-Smith describes the garden of the house, in North London, where Freud spent the final year of his life. In the summer of 1938, he fled Vienna with his wife, forced to leave behind four

sisters, who later died in concentration camps. In September, he moved into 20 Maresfield Gardens, in Hampstead—currently the Freud Museum. Having lived for decades in an apartment building in Vienna, Freud now had his first private garden. Stuart-Smith writes of how Freud was eager to see it change through the seasons. His son Ernst, an architect, installed French windows in his father's study to allow easy access outside, and on the rear of the house he attached a light-filled loggia—an indoor-outdoor space where one could be suspended between worlds.

Freud had spent years battling oral cancer, and in the months that followed his condition grew worse. By the early summer of 1939, he was sleeping much of the time, sometimes outdoors in a swing bed, which had been set up in a sheltered corner. Freud's study, containing his desk and analytic couch, was converted into a sickroom with a bed, from which he could look onto the greenery in the yard. He died on September 23, 1939, a year after moving in. Stuart-Smith writes, "When life forecloses on us, the lack of a sense of a future is the hardest thing to deal with." Many people, when faced with their own mortality or that of their loved ones, become more attuned to the natural world. This is evidence not just of a garden's power to distract and inspire but of its power to console through its cyclical replenishment.

The spring and summer of 2020 have been shadowed by death—not just by the loss of hundreds of thousands of people to *COVID-19* but by the loss of our ordinary way of life. Gardening has been a solace to so many, Sue Stuart-Smith suggested to me, because it invokes the prospect of *some* kind of future, however uncertain and unpredictable it may be. "When the future seems either very bleak, or people are too depressed to imagine one, gardening gives you a toehold in the future," she said. It can also help reconcile us to the inevitability of our demise. At the Barn garden, Tom Stuart-Smith told me that every spring, when the bulbs of fawn lilies and summer snowflakes are flowering and the meadow is full of narcissus, he goes around the garden with a notebook, to make plans about where to add things in the autumn. "I think a lot about next year, but I also think, absolutely, about what it's going to be like when I am dead," he said. The future promised by a garden may not always be ours to enjoy, but a future there will be, with or without us in it.

In mid-May, garden centers reopened in England—they were the first nonessential retail businesses permitted to engage in commerce—and a few weeks later my husband and I went to our local one. After waiting in a line

marked along the sidewalk outside, we loaded up a cart. The next Sunday, I spent hours in our small, brick-walled back garden, trimming back shrubs that the previous owner had planted and pulling up weeds. At first, I was tentative, making frequent recourse to the [Royal Horticultural Society Web site](#) on my phone, but my confidence grew. I planted terra-cotta pots full of herbs: sage, marjoram, basil, thyme. They would accent dishes made with store-bought produce that, despite my early fears, has not been hard to come by.

As I made progress, I took photographs for my mother, who e-mailed me advice on how to prune a clambering rose, and what to do with a sprawling patch of woody lavender. Pull the lavender up, she said—its time had come. Under the current circumstances, I have no great confidence that my mother will ever again travel to London and see this garden of mine. “Have you room for a honeysuckle?” she wrote to me. I planted one in a sunny spot against the wall, in the hope that the near-invisible trellis of wires that I hammered to the brick will help it stand upright, as if it were doing so on its own. ♦

---

## 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

- [\*\*A Taste of Venice with the Frick's "Cocktails with a Curator"\*\*](#)

[August 24, 2020 Issue](#)

## A Taste of Venice with the Frick's “Cocktails with a Curator”

An upcoming installment of the museum's weekly online series includes a discussion of the Venetian painter Titian, and instructions for mixing a popular cocktail he inspired.

August 14, 2020



*Photograph by Nick Proscia for The New Yorker*

Nonessential travel from New York to Venice is off limits, but the Frick has a festive alternative. On Aug. 21, during its weekly online series “**Cocktails with a Curator**,” Xavier F. Salomon discusses a portrait of the Renaissance writer Pietro Aretino by the Venetian painter Tiziano Vecellio, a.k.a. Titian. Viewers are invited to mix a Titian-inspired version of a popular drink named for another Italian Old Master, Giovanni Bellini. A classic Bellini calls for prosecco and peach juice; use red grape juice instead and—*cin cin!*—it’s a Tiziano.

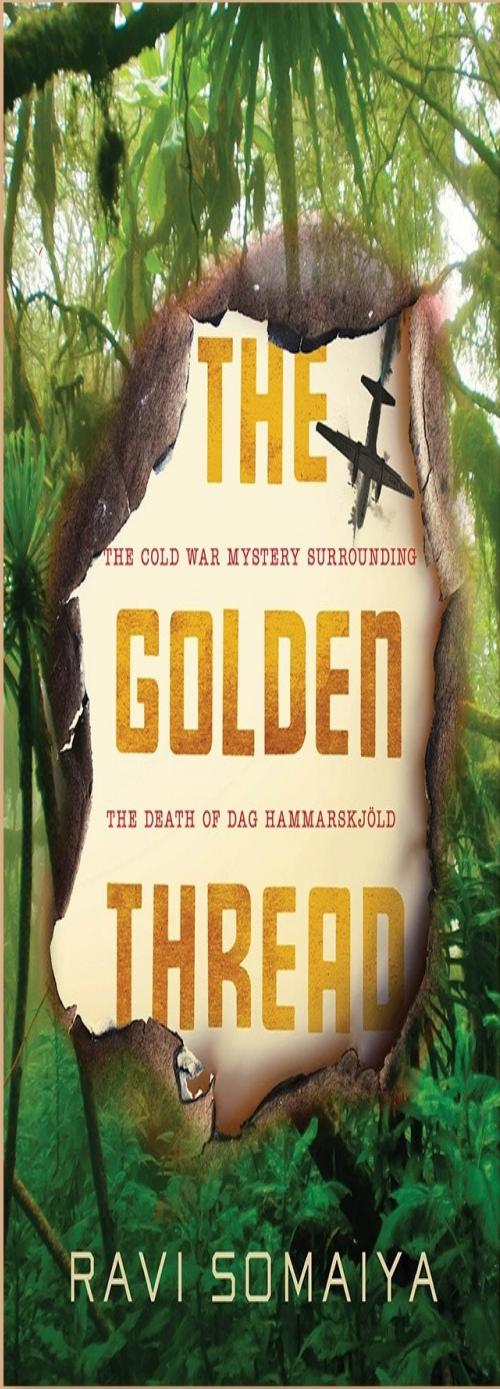
## Books

- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
- [Catherine Lacey and the Art of Enigma](#)
- [Alice Oswald's Homeric Mood](#)

[August 24, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Briefly Noted**

“The Golden Thread,” “To Start a War,” “Via Negativa,” and “Life Events.”  
August 17, 2020



**The Golden Thread**, by Ravi Somaiya (*Twelve*). This taut investigative history delves into the death of Dag Hammarskjöld, the second Secretary-General of the United Nations, who was killed in a plane crash in 1961, en route from Congo to Northern Rhodesia. The crash was ruled an accident, but Somaiya's painstaking re-creation of events all but proves the role of foul play. The first half of the book establishes motive, showing how Hammarskjöld's efforts to rid Congo of foreign influence had thrust him into the center of a Cold War struggle for the country's mineral resources, including cobalt and uranium, used in nuclear weapons. Contemporary accounts show that Hammarskjöld was mistrusted by the Americans, the Soviets, and the Congolese, and, while there's no smoking gun here, Somaiya gathers more than enough evidence to justify his plea for the C.I.A. to release pertinent documents that have been too long under wraps.

• ROBERT DRAPER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF DEAD CERTAIN

• TO START A WAR

• HOW THE BUSH

• ADMINISTRATION

• TOOK AMERICA

• INTO IRAQ

[\*\*To Start a War\*\*](#), by Robert Draper (Penguin Press). Draper takes on a monumental and tragic subject—the Bush Administration’s decision to invade Iraq, in 2003—with consummate skill. The old saw is that the Chinese leader Zhou Enlai, when asked what he thought of the French Revolution, replied, “It’s too early to tell.” And yet Draper, by writing now, is able to interview all the crucial witnesses inside the Bush White House and the national-security establishment. His scrupulous reporting and judicious analysis yield a close-to-definitive picture of all the vanity, misdirection, ignorance, and colossal misjudgments that led to the bloodiest American misadventure since the Vietnam War.

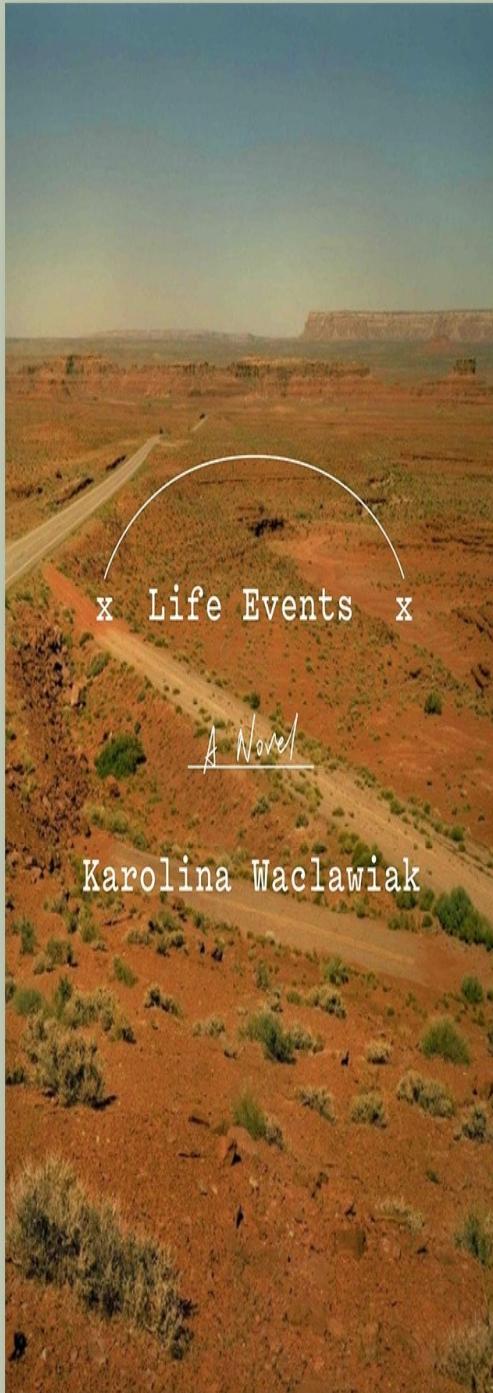
# Via Negativa

## Daniel Hornsby



"A beautiful and meditative exploration of shattered faith."  
—BRIT BENNETT, author of *The Mothers* and *The Vanishing Half*

[\*\*Via Negativa\*\*](#), by Daniel Hornsby (Knopf). This novel of troubled faith and unlikely connection features an elderly pot-taking priest, mystically inclined and at odds with Catholic conservatism. On a road trip across the Midwest to confront a pedophile priest who was once his teacher, he encounters a wounded coyote, a runaway teen-ager, and a tattooed bar owner who gives him a gun. He tries to emulate early Christian hermits and ruminates on the “via negativa,” the belief that you can’t know God, only what God is not. If you approach faith any other way, he muses, “you wind up making God in your own image and forget to look for Him anywhere else.”



[\*\*Life Events\*\*](#), by Karolina Waclawiak (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). When Evelyn, the protagonist of this novel, enters a training program for people to learn “to help other people die,” it seems to be a distraction from her disintegrating marriage and her strained relationship with her aging parents. As the “exit guides” lead their clients through preparations—compiling lists of passwords, writing letters of forgiveness—Waclawiak gives us a sidelong examination of death. Vivid portraits of those who have chosen to end their lives leave a lasting impression, as do Evelyn’s long drives in the California desert, during which she conceives of the wilderness as taking “the land back from people, to turn it back over to vast nothingness.”

# Catherine Lacey and the Art of Enigma

A puzzling stranger puts a religious community to the test in Lacey's new novel, "Pew."

By [James Wood](#)

August 17, 2020



Like much of Catherine Lacey's writing, the title story of her collection "[Certain American States](#)" (2018) only just hangs together: the frailty of coherence is her great theme. In little more than five pages, a world that is at once hypothesis and presumption fizzles into view. Lacey certainly knows how to open: "I was one of those babies who look as if they won't survive to dinnertime, but somehow do, then become toddlers with the tics and nerves of a used-up veteran." Our narrator tells us that her mother died "while the ink was still wet on my birth certificate," and that she was brought up by a man named Leonard, who disliked her. When the narrator is sixteen, Leonard writes her a large check, walks to town, and never returns. She looks after herself for many years, until one evening the phone rings—"I answered the phone because it rang and that's what you do." Leonard is dying in a hospital in North Dakota, and is hallucinating about taking a "last ship to Tanzania." Once at his bedside, the narrator decides to humor him. "Madagascar has been beautiful," she says, "and also I find it strange that there are so many Italians here." For a second, Leonard breaks the illusion and speaks her name, and the two recognize each other as a living person and a dying person, with assigned tasks: "The dying and the living have certain agreements about these states we're in." But Leonard quickly falls back into gentle babble, about the opium trade and how he is going far away "to a remote location, in the Commonwealth of Dominica."

There the story ends, dismantling itself as strangely as it began. A sparse realism scars the pages—Leonard, abandonment, the phone call, a North Dakota hospital. Leonard is the one who gives the story its title, when he says that "the loneliness of certain American states is enough to kill a person if you look too closely." That's the kind of great, plangent statement, as wide as the prairies, that burns through American writing, especially American realist short-story writing. But it is as if Lacey took the frame of something by Raymond Carver or Richard Ford and then emptied it—of sequence, not of consequence. Events are announced as actual events, yet linger in the text like dreams. We are not told how or even if the loneliness of certain American states killed Leonard and is killing the chronically nervous narrator. We know only that this piece of writing is suffused by a killing sense of loneliness and disconnection; that Lacey puns on the word "states" (of being and of geography); that here, on the page, North Dakota is no more real than the hallucinated Tanzania; and that somehow the spectral prose holds together the assemblage for long enough to haunt the reader. Wherever we have been, we have been in some kind of "state."

“Certain American States” compacts many of Lacey’s virtues and interests as a writer. Overwhelmingly, her characters are trying to make sense of what a self is, and of how this self might function in the world. Of course, that’s one definition of what much serious fiction has traditionally sought to resolve: how should a person be? The postmodern difference has to do with the difficulty of resolving that question, and the way this difficulty is foregrounded. In Lacey’s novels and short stories, the coherence that most of us look to in order to make our way in the world is fraught or elusive. The self hangs together rather as Lacey’s fictions do, with apparently arbitrary filaments. Like the narrator of “Certain American States,” the protagonist of Lacey’s second novel, “[The Answers](#)” (2017), has been brought up by someone other than her parents. She goes by the name of Mary Parsons but was originally named Junia Stone. Her body, racked by pains and ailments, often seems to be something she is trying to escape. She has never had a television or a cell phone, and made it to the age of eighteen without having heard of Michael Jackson. When asked what she thinks falling in love is like, Mary Parsons answers, “It makes sense of something that doesn’t make sense.”

Estranged from themselves, Lacey’s characters go around decoding reality, only to discover how little sense it makes. The narrator of her first novel, “[Nobody Is Ever Missing](#)” (2014), who suddenly leaves her life in New York to take an open-ended journey around New Zealand, responds like this to eating in a diner: “A waitress came by and I told her what I wanted to eat, which seemed suddenly a very personal thing to tell a stranger, what things you were going to turn into your body.” In “Certain American States,” when the narrator is trying to tell the dying Leonard what she and her husband now do, she says that he “has a good job as a manager and I am a manager too, which means I am managing.”

Unsettling, mundane, and funny, Lacey’s fictions sometimes read as if characters let loose from Beckett were wandering through a recognizable, even realist landscape. The world looks solid enough, but her protagonists are wraithlike. Lacey’s third and latest novel, “[Pew](#)” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), reads, in several ways, like the logical and relentless development of this bold young writer’s previous work. (Lacey is thirty-five.) Many of her characters have hazy or incoherent pasts, but Pew, as the narrator of her new book comes to be known, is nameless, of ambiguous gender and race, and almost mute, barely able to summon or speak a memory. Pew’s body seems a matter of indifference or worse: “This body hangs beneath me, carries me around. . . . Anything I remember being told about my body contradicts something else I’ve been told.”

Pew is perhaps an orphan, but can't remember. Occasionally, like an old pain, something resembling a distinct and individual memory begins to make itself felt: "I could remember a low, windowless room. Three paces by two paces. A damp floor. The taste of blood. A child. A long hunger. Some years. Some years, but gone now. . . . They were mine, or had been mine, but now they were somewhere else, somewhere near and far from me."

Amid these desperate reductions, it's hard not to hear the voice of late Beckett, who, in, say, "[Company](#)" (1979), is forever adding something only to negate it: "You were once. You were never. Were you ever? Oh never to have been! Be again. Same flat tone. . . . You are no older now than you always were." "I must have had a mother," Pew thinks at one moment, "but I also knew I didn't have a mother." Pew is dressed as if ready for a Beckett play, in a drab, canvaslike material of "gray-black-brown" and plain shoes with thick soles and no laces. The unnamed world the narrator is found in, though, is a solidly realized American community, apparently somewhere in the South; the plot draws its energy from the abrasions created when Pew's abysmal enigmas rub up against the understandable curiosity and puzzlement of a conservative, God-loving place. People want to help this refugee-like person, discovered on a church pew one Sunday morning (hence the name). In order to help, however, they must first know what they are dealing with. Where does Pew come from? Is Pew a boy or a girl? Perhaps Pew is a genuine refugee, in flight from vicious but distant religious and civil wars, like Nelson, a boy whom a family in town is fostering? One of the residents, a woman named Kitty, says of Pew's complexion, "You know I would just about die to have skin like yours—what is that, just genetics?" But people are no better at divining Pew's ethnicity than at sorting out his or her or their gender, and they are certainly not going to get any help from this almost post-human foundling.

Pew is taken in by the robustly conformist Hilda and Steven, and given a temporary berth in the family attic until the church community can work out the next steps. Like many people in the town, Hilda and Steven are at once religiously well intentioned and religiously punitive, the gestures often indistinguishable and clumsily manifesting as racism, condescension, or angry befuddlement. The church pastor is brought in, to inquire about Pew's gender. (Pew says nothing.) At the Monroe Medical and Rehabilitation Center, a doctor attempts a physical examination. (Pew declines to undress.) A picture emerges, slightly heightened and satirical, of a prosperous, fearful, unquestioning, and highly conservative religious enclave, into which Pew has been thrown like a

great incendiary Other. The community's willingness to "help" Pew is premised on its eagerness to identify Pew, but that identification is enigmatically withheld. So people project onto this interloper both their anxieties and their dreams—eventually, a couple of old ladies in the Glendale retirement home begin talking of Pew as an archangel. ("Happened in the Bible all the time.") For another elderly resident, Pew may be the Messiah himself.

Meanwhile, Pew explores the surroundings. With Pew, we meet a number of rebels and misfits, who tell their stories and sound their complaints to the generally mute auditor. There's a gay counsellor named Roger, who has already worked with Nelson. Roger is a liberal believer among the evangelicals, with a gentle faith: "God really is looking out for each of us." Pew meets the acidly anti-religious Nelson, who complains that his whole family was massacred in the name of God, "and now these people want me to sing a hymn like it was all some kind of misunderstanding. Must have been some other guy." A resident named Mr. Kercher shares Nelson's disillusionment, telling Pew that, as far as he is concerned, the only thing that belief in God makes possible is "a right toward cruelty—the belief in an afterlife being the real life."

Unlike most of her literary peers, Lacey, who grew up in Tupelo, Mississippi, has been closely interested in religious belief. More often than not, her characters endure and perform the frailty of their selves in relation to the vaunted coherence of an inherited Christianity: they are refugees from religion. Mary Parsons, in "The Answers," was raised in a spirit of "complete purity," and is in flight not only from her body and her past but also from God's very certain answers—"my parents would have said it was just a part of His plan." The narrator of the story "Small Differences" was once a teen-ager "heartsick over the idea of Jesus the way that other girls were heartsick over the idea of River Phoenix."

Lacey's preoccupation with pain is thus a preoccupation with religious pain, what Mary Parsons calls "just a part of living in the world . . . of not having an obvious god." In the acknowledgments for "Pew," Lacey mentions as an inspiration the philosopher of self (or selves, rather) [Derek Parfit](#), but reading this unsettling allegory I was reminded not so much of Parfit's Buddhist self-dissolutions as of Emmanuel Levinas's deeply Biblical challenge: how will we respond when the face of the Other shows itself? Lacey seems determined to narrow that challenge to the barest provocation: what if the Other were only a face? No body to see, no gender or race to identify, no past to make sense of, just

the cry of the human. How would we do then? Not only does this Christian community largely fail what might be called the Pew test; its members have, it would seem, already failed similar tests. Each year, the town holds a ritual of purgation called the Forgiveness Festival. The novel, set over seven days before and during the festival, progresses ominously toward this culmination, in which hundreds of churchgoers, wearing blindfolds and dressed entirely in white, confess aloud to the bad they have done and the good they have not done. But, quite apart from Lacey's suggestion, late in the novel, that an awful deed may have been hushed up, the festival appears to fail on its own terms. The lurid confessions, laid out over several pages ("don't know how to stop hating her" . . . "I know I killed" . . . "I doubt all the time"), seem likely to provoke not absolution but suspicion, fear, blame: after such knowledge, what forgiveness? Moreover, we learn that only half the town, the white half, attends the ceremony. What began as an attempt to bring together the whole community has become a badge of racial and moral separation; Steven boasts that the festival is "what sets our community apart from other communities in the area."

"Pew" is a brave book, in both concept and execution. These days, few writers would venture a novel structured around an almost mute enigma. Caught in the sombre reductions of the tale, though, I sometimes missed the comedy and verve of Lacey's earlier writing. One would trade a page or two of allegory for this marvellous line, from "The Answers," about a fancy Manhattan neighborhood: "a neighborhood full of French patisseries, chocolatiers, and the sort of high-fashion shops that seemed angry to be themselves." Or her description of what diners are served in the restaurants of such a neighborhood: "They ate blossoms and mosses, saps, uncommon pickles, thin slices of flesh." Lacey's tendency to push the hypothetical up against the real, the ghostly up against the grounded, can become, in "Pew," a kind of drift through genres. It is, in part, an allegory about a Christlike figure, a holy fool, a blessed "idiot" who has gone beyond the human, but it is also a fable about sinister conformist suburban communities, along the lines of "[Revolutionary Road](#)," "[The Stepford Wives](#)," and "[Get Out](#)." And as we, along with Pew, are steadily funnelled toward the festival—its dark secrets staining the oh-so-white raiment—another shift is threatened, and the festival comes to seem more like something from the movie franchise "The Purge." At such moments, one has the sense of Lacey being a little unsure of where to take her book.

Perhaps my resistance suggests that I have failed the Pew test? Certainly, this difficult and discomfiting book throws down a challenge to our readerly

hospitality: in truth, I didn't always feel inclined to take in this smudged blank of a character, to give Lacey's cipherlike creation lodgings in the house of empathy. At one moment, Pew muses that "at some point in the future, long after humanity had run its course, after some other creature had replaced us . . . at some point in a future I could not fully imagine, a question might occur in some mind, and that question might be *What was the human? What was the world of the human?*" Daringly, Catherine Lacey has attempted that imagining, and Pew is the pioneer of this voyage into speculative post-humanity. One shouldn't be surprised, amid such a searching experiment, if the novel form struggles to accommodate a deliberate affront to what novels do uniquely well: the human. ♦

# Alice Oswald's Homeric Mood

Her poetry conjures the worlds of the Iliad and the Odyssey with startling, sometimes vexing, beauty.

By [Judit Thurman](#)

August 17, 2020



When I am falling asleep, I sometimes hear voices. They are not hallucinations—I am perfectly aware that they are inside my own head. It feels as if my brain had pulled them down from the airwaves, or up from storage in my synapses. Their speech has meaning, though it comes in snatches. The closer I get to going under, the more indistinct the buzz becomes, until I am hearing not language but an oceanic murmur.

Alice Oswald eerily evokes that state in her eighth and most enigmatic volume of poetry, “[Nobody: A Hymn to the Sea](#)” (Norton). The book has had several incarnations. It began as a collaboration with the British artist William Tillyer, to accompany a 2018 show of his lyrical, semi-abstract watercolors. Her wall text and his images were later published as an art book; Oswald then rewrote the text to stand on its own—or perhaps, like the sea, to keep moving. In an endnote to the American edition, she writes, “The poem is designed to be mobile.”

I am, by chance, reading “Nobody” by the sea. This morning, the tide is coming in aslant, while a black cormorant skims the waves in a straight line, from left to right, as if it were writing a sentence. I keep looking out the window, partly to rest from an exertion that feels like swimming in open water, but partly to ask the waves for help in deciphering Oswald’s dreamlike dissolves:

the same iridescent swiftness and the same  
uncertain certainty either brimming or rippled  
or swelling over of hollowing water  
as one thought leads to another if you stand  
here on these boulders with your back to the earth  
you can see the whole story of the weather  
the way the wind brings one shadow after another  
but another one always sweeps up behind  
and no-one can decipher this lucid short-lived  
chorus of waves it is too odd and even  
as if trying to remember some perfect prehistoric  
pattern of spirals it is too factual too counter-factual  
too copper-blue too irregular-metrical

listen

Oswald studied classics at Oxford, and “Nobody” is the second of her book-

length homages to Homer. The first, “[Memorial: A Version of Homer’s Iliad](#),” published in 2011, was short-listed for the T. S. Eliot Prize, which Oswald had won nine years earlier, for her second book, “Dart.” But the prize now had a new sponsor—a hedge fund—and Oswald withdrew the poem from consideration. Explaining her decision in the *Guardian*, she defined her art as a form of dissidence. “I think it’s often assumed that the role of poetry is to comfort,” she [wrote](#), “but for me, poetry is the greatunsettler. It questions the established order of the mind. It is radical, by which I don’t mean that it is either leftwing or rightwing, but that it works at the roots of thinking.”

“Memorial” thinks radically about violence, and it has earned a place in the canon of great antiwar poems. Simone Weil believed that the Iliad itself was a great antiwar poem, perhaps the greatest treatise ever written on the nature of force, but also on the nature of compassion, and she argued that conviction in a celebrated essay, published in 1940, during the Nazi occupation of Paris. There are echoes of Weil’s mystical activism in Oswald’s “version” of the Iliad (the British edition was subtitled “An Excavation of the Iliad”), although in paying homage to Homer’s masterpiece with one of her own, she tacitly reproaches his hero worship, a foundation of patriarchies.

Oswald’s work is not widely known in the United States, but in her native England she is justly considered a major poet. Last year, she became the first woman to serve as the Oxford Professor of Poetry, a chair established in 1708 which has, since then, been held by forty-five white men, including Matthew Arnold, W. H. Auden, and Seamus Heaney. Edmund Blunden, who assumed the professorship in 1966, the year Oswald was born, was the last incumbent obliged to give a biennial oration in Latin. Oswald could certainly manage a speech in the language of Cicero. She commands a stage to mesmerizing effect, according to those who have heard her perform her longer works, including “Memorial” and “Nobody,” by heart. In oral cultures, bards have been revered for their power to enrapture. Oswald, who acted in her youth (she met her husband, the playwright Peter Oswald, when he cast her in a student production of Shakespeare), has noted that the fear of forgetting one’s lines, or of losing one’s place, was an occupational hazard of the Homeric tradition. In her view, that anxiety helped to keep the poetry alive.

Too many artists to name have appropriated Homer. A notable recent one—Oswald’s compatriot Christopher Logue, who died at eighty-five, the year that “Memorial” was published—spent four decades writing “War Music,” a

multivolume modernist adaptation of the Iliad that he never finished, but that runs to more than three hundred pages. Logue, who cheerfully admitted he knew no Greek, offended purists with what one critic called his “flagrantly anachronistic” imagery. (Logue’s epithet for Aphrodite was “Miss Tops and Thongs.”)

Oswald, at the other extreme, dispenses with narrative. She distills the carnage of the Iliad into an elixir of grief: two hundred and fourteen capsule obituaries of the fallen on both sides—young foot soldiers throwing themselves at death, or helplessly being thrown at it. It would be a searing lament for any murderous conflict since the Bronze Age (when the Trojan War may or may not have been fought), but what feels most radical about “Memorial,” in 2020, is Oswald’s determined focus on the lives that didn’t matter, except to the families gutted by their loss. The briefest of her cameos are often the most devastating:

*POLYDORUS* is dead who loved running  
Now somebody has to tell his father  
That exhausted man leaning on the wall  
Looking for his favourite son

The original Greek served Oswald “as openings through which to see what Homer was looking at,” she explains in a preface. The obituaries are her “paraphrases” of the original, and the pastoral similes planted between them—as if to give them breathing space, like the melancholy willows in a graveyard—are “irreverent” translations:

Like leaves who could write a history of leaves  
The wind blows their ghosts to the ground  
And the spring breathes new leaf into the woods  
Thousands of names thousands of leaves  
When you remember them remember this  
Dead bodies are their lineage  
Which matter no more than the leaves

But what Oswald sees, more clearly than Homer could—not least, perhaps, because she is a woman and a mother—is the obscenity of the human sacrifice. The last of her obituaries leaves nothing to be said: “And *HECTOR* died like everyone else.” The chasteness of her style recalls that of a different memorial, one that is also a roll call: Maya Lin’s monument to the American dead of the

Vietnam War. In both cases, you find yourself mourning other people's children as if they were your own.

"Memorial" waylaid Oswald from her poetry's Ithaca: the English countryside. Her mother, Lady Mary Keen, is a well-known garden designer, whose job often came with housing, and the four Keen children grew up on the estates where Lady Mary was employed. After Oxford, Oswald studied horticulture and became a gardener herself. Until recently, she lived with her husband and children in Devon, at a bend of the River Dart, where she worked in an unheated writing hut. (The family now lives in Bristol.) She relishes research in the field, and she spent three years following the river's course and interviewing people whose livelihoods depend on it: a salmon poacher, a tin extractor, a worker in a woollen mill. In "[Dart](#)" (2002), their voices—which have the twang of folk song, along with its stoic nonchalance toward hardship—flow together with mythical and imagined ones. "[A Sleepwalk on the Severn](#)" (2009) was another river project that got Oswald out in her Wellingtons, with a notebook, at ungodly hours. She aimed to chart the phases of the moon as it rose, in the course of a month, over the flooded fields and chalky cliffs along the Severn's banks, recording the effect of the moonlight on water and voices. "This is not a play," she advises the reader—paradoxically, since she presents it as one, with stage directions and dialogue, some of it slapstick, for a cast of locals. Her disclaimers are worth attention. They speak to the mistrust that she wants you to feel toward the way that language betrays reality by stabilizing it.

Light, time, water, weather, growth, and decay: transience is Oswald's muse, and it inspires startling, almost fugitive leaps of syntax and perception. She often asks one of her senses to do the work of another: her eyes to feel, her touch to hear, almost as if she were retraining them, like participants in an acting workshop instructed to change places with someone or something alien—a stranger, a foe, a bird, a plant, even a corpse—and to inhabit that otherness. In a poem from her collection "[Falling Awake](#)" (2016), she seems to envy the clouds reflected in a puddle, which are "without obligations of shape or stillness." "I'm going to flicker for a moment," she announces in another poem, "and tell you the tale of a shadow . . . not yet continuous / no more than a shiver of something." In "A Rushed Account of the Dew," she writes:

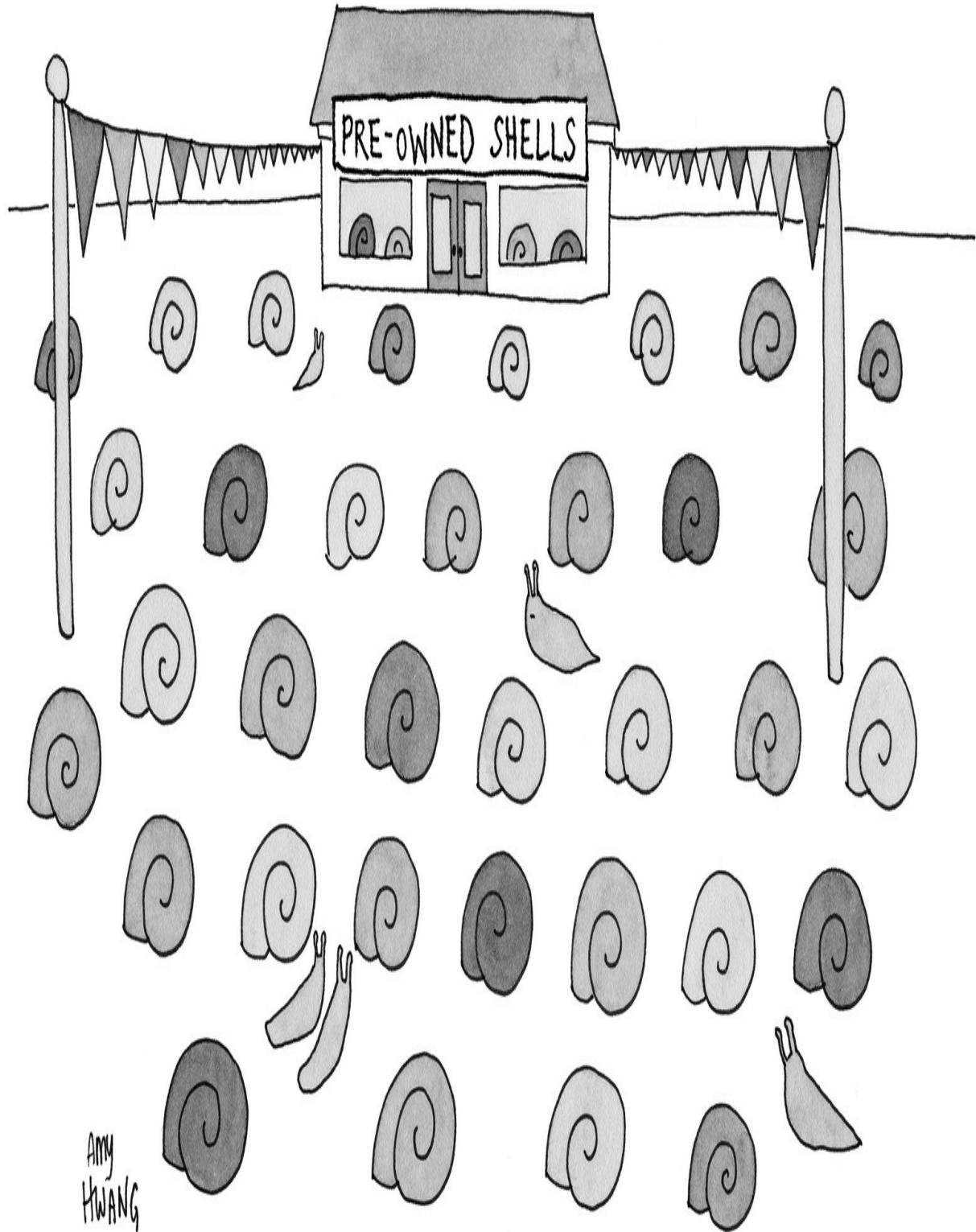
I want to work out what it's like to descend  
out of the dawn's mind

and find a leaf and fasten the known to the unknown  
with a liquid cufflink  
    and then unfasten

to be brief

to be almost actual

Anyone who has tried to write an artful sentence knows that it involves fastening the known to the unknown by some mysterious process that takes place “at the roots of thinking,” where the brain wrests an idea from an inchoate mass of sensory data and encodes it in parts of speech that another mind can decrypt. Pedestrian language bears few traces of the staggering richness and particularity that are lost in the transaction. The work of visionary poets like Rimbaud or Gérard de Nerval, or of modernists, like Pound in the late “Cantos,” who write at the edge of intelligibility, gives you a glimpse of what it signifies “to be almost actual” while refusing to simulate reality. Oswald belongs to their lineage, and she writes at that edge, too. But, in “Nobody,” she goes over it.



Cartoon by Amy Hwang

Oswald's intention in "Memorial," she tells us in the preface, was to translate the "atmosphere" of the Iliad, seeking "translucence" rather than fidelity. That is what she aims to accomplish in "Nobody." In another of her brief prefaces (many of her books require a word of explanation), she writes that "this poem lives in the murkiness" between two stories from the Odyssey. One is of King Agamemnon's murder by his wife, Clytemnestra, and her lover, Aegistheus. The other is of Odysseus' ten-year voyage home from Troy. But a minor figure in the tale seems to have hijacked the telling: a court poet whom Agamemnon hired to guard his wife when he sailed off to war. Aegistheus, the evil usurper, maroons the poet on a stony island so that he and the Queen can commit adultery undisturbed. Presumably, the castaway goes mad with thirst and solitude, since Oswald seems to be channelling his delirium:

These voices flit about quick-winged  
with women's faces or land on a clifftop singing  
so that here and there you find fading contrails of song  
and a swimmer slooshing along breathing in and out  
with the purple sea circling his throat always  
thinks he can hear something which nevertheless escapes him

The title "Nobody" is a gender-neutral translation of Outis, the alias that Odysseus uses to deceive the Cyclops. (For centuries, it was rendered in English as "Noman.") But it also alludes to the bodiless anonymity of the sea, and to the unmoored voices that the castaway hallucinates. They ostensibly belong to the main characters of the Odyssey, though a few, like Icarus, seem to have flown into the poem from elsewhere in Greek mythology—or from the future. Oswald's sea proves no less vulnerable to pollution by the debris of modernity than oceans everywhere. The poet pacing his rocky outcrop is "dry as an ashtray"; a drowning man's will to live—his "upwardness"—keeps him afloat "like a wedge of polystyrene."

"Memorial," for all its translucence, feels carved in stone; its combatants are conjured so precisely that their sufferings become indelible. "Nobody" is written in disappearing ink. None of its phantoms have a stable contour, and if you are not a student of the classics you can chafe at Oswald's donnish presumption that you should recognize their fleeting apparitions. (Their names do appear, teasingly, in an unpunctuated frieze that runs across the bottom half of six pages, in Attic-style font, bleached out in places, bold in others, as if randomly timeworn.)

An “old sea-god sometimes surfaces”—Proteus, perhaps—shifting shape to avoid capture:

and became a jellyfish a mere weakness of water  
a morsel of ice a glamour of oil  
and became a fish-smell and then a rotting seal  
and then an old mottled man full of mood-swings

Odysseus materializes from the murk more distinctly, telling a listener how he took leave of “our hostess who is a goddess long-haired inhuman / but her language is human except when she sings.”

A woman who may be that hostess wryly addresses a messenger: “You’ve come to remove my lover / who is tired of this hotel life.” We last glimpse her as she “shrieks and flies up laughing and loud-speakering / and turns and dives unable to be anything for long / and the black wave covers her.”

The *Odyssey* plays loose with chronology, almost like a modern novel, though without sacrificing suspense. The tension in “Nobody” is generated by bewilderment, as one shimmering mirage supplants another. It unsettles your senses the way some avant-garde music does, and its vexing beauty invites surrender to incomprehension. But rarely does it unsettle your heart. Oswald’s perceptions are variously too personal, unique to her; or too impersonal, too purely literary; or, in the case of her phantoms, too disassociated to forge a sustained connection between sensation and insight. The intimacy of her best work is absent. I even felt, at times, that she had devised the poem as a cognitive experiment to test a reader’s tolerance for disorientation.

As an experiment, however, “Nobody” dramatizes Oswald’s audacity with language. The extremes she goes to may have been emboldened by Tillyer. He turned eighty in 2018, and their show was one of five mounted by his London gallerist to celebrate a career of mercurial engagement, formal and spiritual, with the flux of nature. In that respect, his work and Oswald’s have an obvious affinity. Yet Oswald says she hates being told that she is “a nature poet.” Perhaps she’s mindful that the pastoral idyll, since Theocritus, has been a luxury for poets and readers with clean fingernails. More to the point, Oswald has spent her writing life refusing to be told who she is. Like Proteus, she keeps wriggling out of confinement to one body, and its finality. ♦

# **Brave New World**

- [The Samuel Johnson of Emoji](#)

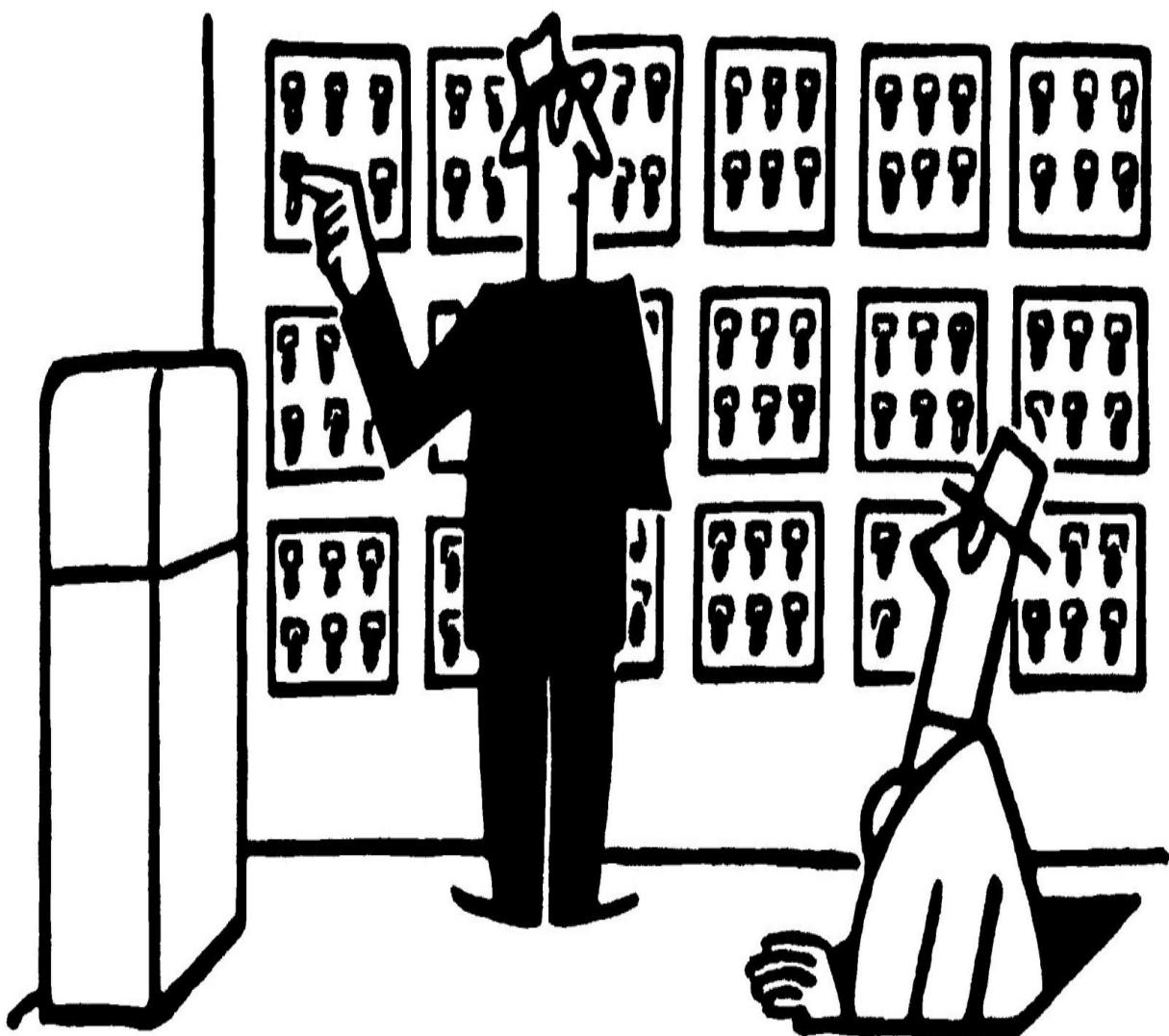
[August 24, 2020 Issue](#)

## The Samuel Johnson of Emoji

Jeremy Burge isn't like other tech C.E.O.s. He has never raised money, he has no employees, and his official title is Chief Emoji Officer. But he still deals with controversy, such as demands for a Kurdish-flag emoji and for more emoji skin tones.

By [Leo Mirani](#)

August 17, 2020



When lockdown came to Britain, Jeremy Burge did what any self-respecting tech-industry C.E.O. would do: he hunkered down in his fifty-three-foot-long boat, Dottie M, far from the virulent crowds of the big cities. But Burge wasn't bobbing in the turquoise waters of the Caribbean. His safe haven was in the brownish-gray waters of Alvecote Marina, just outside Tamworth, a nondescript town in the English Midlands. He had little choice: the boat is his home, and it was already in berth. It's narrower than a subway car.

Burge is an unusual tech C.E.O. He has never raised money. He has no employees. His official title is Chief Emoji Officer. And his tech company is a reference Web site that he started in 2013, after he noticed a doughnut emoji on his iPhone keyboard and wondered if it had always been there. Google and Wikipedia were no help. Thus was born Emojipedia—described by the radio host Molly Wood as a “Merriam-Webster for emoji” and the actor Stephen Fry as “a kind of Académie Française for your iPhone.” It is the Internet’s most comprehensive emoji directory, encompassing all platforms, versions, and operating systems. Burge is the Samuel Johnson of emoji.

“It’s not a world-changing origin story,” Burge said one recent morning in his floating living room. A gentle rain disturbed the stillness of the canal. The latest issues of *The Tillergraph* and *Towpath Talk*—“The UK’s number ONE read for all waterways users”—sat on a coffee table. Dottie M is one of around thirty-four thousand vessels chugging serenely—the speed limit is four miles per hour—through the two thousand-odd miles of narrow canals winding through England’s countryside and industrial towns. In the summer, Burge cruises for four to ten hours a day, up to four days a week, depending on the weather. The rest of the time, he works on updating Emojipedia.

But in one way Burge did change something about the world: in 2014, he declared July 17th World Emoji Day, choosing the date depicted on Apple’s calendar emoji. “It struck me that probably someone’s going to do a World Emoji Day, and it’s gonna be annoying,” he said. “It’s gonna be some dumb thing that people are gonna make us talk about.” So he decided to do it first. It has since become a real thing: the day has been celebrated by Kim Kardashian (who launched “Kimoji”-themed fragrances), the Empire State Building (which lit up “emoji yellow”), and Pepsi (which put the things on its cans and bottles). The day has also helped raise Emojipedia’s profile—on World Emoji Day in 2017, Burge was invited to join the crew of “The Emoji Movie” to ring the

closing bell at the New York Stock Exchange. He has advised police and defense lawyers and is on Unicode's Emoji Subcommittee, the body that standardizes emoji across platforms. Until recently, Emojipedia averaged thirty-three million page views a month, earning enough ad revenue to cover Burge's salary, pay a handful of contractors, and generate a tidy profit. Last year, Burge and his fiancée had saved up enough money to leave their rental in London and fulfill their dream of living on a boat.



*"There's also my theory that we all come from a bad dream I'm having."*  
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

When covid-19 hit, Emojipedia's traffic suddenly shot up, hitting fifty million page views in April. At first, visitors were looking up things like "face with medical mask" and "the microbe" emoji—Apple's version conveniently looks like a coronavirus cell. But, as more people started to work from home and communicate digitally, they sought out ways to add context to their messages, leading them to the site. Then came the Black Lives Matter protests, and suddenly the "raised fist with medium-dark skin tone" was everywhere.

Unicode introduced skin-tone variations for emoji in 2015. Until then, every human emoji was white—except the "man with turban," who was brown, and the "man with Gua Pi Mao," who was Asian. Now the default is Simpsons yellow, with five other skin-tone options. A common argument Burge encounters is that emoji skin tones complicate matters. Why not just make them all blue? ("If you look at the numbers alone, you would get rid of the skin tones," he said. "The yellow one is like eighty per cent of the use.")

Emoji, which originated in Japan in the nineteen-nineties, are frequently controversial. Most professionals were depicted as men until 2016, when female alternatives were added. Redheads and people with curly hair finally found representation in 2018. A gender-neutral option was introduced last October. The transgender flag will appear on emoji keyboards later this year. Demands for the Australian Aboriginal flag and the Kurdish flag remain unmet. So do requests for mixed-race families. Today, there are twenty-seven emoji for families of various sizes, but they are all yellow. Unicode considered seven options, from removing the families altogether to creating families with every possible combination of skin tones. That would add 7,230 emoji to the standard 3,304. (Apple's first set had 471.) In the end, Unicode opted for the simplest choice: do nothing. "The way you could have avoided a lot of issues is if you removed humans from the emoji set earlier on," Burge said. Now, at the very least, "stop adding humans." ♦

## **Comment**

- **Do V.P. Picks Matter?**

[August 24, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Do V.P. Picks Matter?**

What the choice of Kamala Harris does, and doesn't, tell us about the future of the Democratic Party.

By [Margaret Talbot](#)

August 16, 2020



Nowadays, the consensus seems to be that a Presidential contender's running mate doesn't matter in any direct, instrumental sense. In the endless rehashing of [Hillary Clinton](#)'s loss to [Donald Trump](#), Tim Kaine plays barely a walk-on role. Vice-Presidential candidates can't be counted on to deliver their own states or regions or to balance the ticket in any reliably strategic way. Two political scientists who have studied the issue, Christopher Devine and Kyle Kopko, write, "While most voters say that the choice of a running mate will be important in deciding their vote, few can recall a time when it actually has changed their vote."

But the scholars also conclude that the choice can produce a sort of halo effect. The selection of a running mate—sometimes called the first Presidential act—can influence perceptions of the candidate's own qualities of character or judgment, and this, in turn, can make a difference electorally. It's why [John McCain](#)'s pick of the ill-qualified [Sarah Palin](#) is often thought to have done his campaign irreparable damage, no matter how many Republican men were convinced that she was winking at them.

[Joe Biden](#)'s choice to fill the second spot on his ticket is, on that basis, a smart one. Senator [Kamala Harris](#) is a fifty-five-year-old woman whose debating and cross-examining skills outshine his. ("I'm not able to be rushed this fast," then [Attorney General Jeff Sessions](#) complained when she questioned him about his contact with Russians preceding the 2016 election. "It makes me nervous.") Her campaign's high point came when she attacked Biden himself on the debate stage, for his onetime opposition to school busing and his willingness to work with Southern segregationists in the Senate. So the choice marks a contrast with Trump, whose judgment of anyone's worth depends on how much they capitulate to him. Just as important, the choice also shows that Biden, who is seventy-seven, understands something more important than short-term strategy: that he is a transitional figure, and that the future of his party and of the country depends on diversity.

"Here's the thing," Harris told Dana Goodyear, who profiled her [for this magazine](#), in 2019. "Every office I've run for I was the first to win. First person of color. First woman. First woman of color. Every time." There are plenty of people who are exhilarated by the barrier-collapsing force of her selection. Harris, born in Oakland, California, to Jamaican and Indian immigrants, will be only the third woman and the first Black woman to occupy the Vice-Presidential

spot on a major-party ticket. “I’m jumping for joy,” Johnnetta Cole, the first Black female president of Spelman College, told the *Washington Post*. “Anyone who does not feel the significance of this, I have to ask, ‘Who are they? Where have they been?’ ”

Even the fact that Harris seems, to many Democrats, like such a safe, almost conventional choice, could be read as low-key revolutionary. So could the fact that Biden, having signalled that he would pick a woman of color, had a demonstrably deep bench of prospects to choose from, including senators and congresspeople, a big-city mayor, and a former national-security adviser.

It didn’t take long for conservative pundits and Trump surrogates to start twisting that symbolism in predictably ugly ways: questioning Harris’s right to identify as Black, or—taking a page from the birther script concocted to smear [Barack Obama](#)—falsely suggesting that she is ineligible to be Vice-President, because (as was the case with George Washington and many of his successors) her parents weren’t U.S. citizens when she was born. On Fox, [Tucker Carlson](#) griped about having to pronounce Harris’s first name right, as though this were an intolerable exercise in political correctness. We’ll be in for a lot of that sort of nonsense. With the pandemic raging and the economy tattering, in a campaign that will inevitably be a referendum on how the Trump Administration is managing these twinned crises, the President has little in his arsenal except the old rallying cries about beleaguered whiteness, immigrant invasion, and progressive subversion.

One quick and easy line about Harris’s selection is that it was a kind of reward for, or, less transactionally, an acknowledgment of, the way that Black women voters have effectively mobilized for the Democratic Party. Turnout among Black women is consistently high, and they overwhelmingly side with Democrats. As many as ninety-eight per cent of Black women voters backed Hillary Clinton in 2016—the highest rate of any major demographic. They helped to deliver the Democratic victories in the last midterm elections and to secure Biden’s win in the critical South Carolina primary. An analysis by the A.A.P.I. Civic Engagement Fund and the Groundswell Fund found that turnout in those midterms “was fueled by women of color mobilizing friends and family” to vote, and that “Black women led the way,” with eighty-four per cent of them reporting that they had done such mobilizing.

That line has some flaws, though. In the first place, Black women aren’t

uniformly enthusiastic about Harris. She has been criticized for her record as San Francisco's district attorney and as California's attorney general; she pursued cases aggressively, without the commitment to reducing mass incarceration that has become central to the anti-racist movement. (She declined to support mandatory reviews of police shootings and embraced a draconian initiative under which parents whose children were truant from school were subject to prosecution, a position for which she has since expressed regret.) If their main concern was having a Black woman on the ticket, Black voters could have come out more strongly for Harris in her own Presidential bid, and she might be at the top of the ticket today.

Like female voters in general, Black women are more likely than men to support the policies of the Democratic Party, regardless of the candidate. The gender gap in American politics has, in fact, only widened. More women than men favor government action to insure access to health care, child care, and a strong social safety net. Women, and particularly Black women, are more inclined to back gun-control legislation; eighty-two per cent of Black women voters think gun laws should be stricter, according to a recent analysis of polling data. Eighty-five per cent of Black women voters want to see undocumented immigrants given a path to citizenship, according to the same analysis. And their leadership in the Black Lives Matter movement demonstrates how important the issue of police violence is for them. The real reward would be a Biden-Harris campaign that counters Trumpism with a commitment to issues that Black women have reason to care about. ♦

## **Dept. of Normality**

- [The Very Normal Life of Daisy Edgar-Jones](#)

[August 24, 2020 Issue](#)

# The Very Normal Life of Daisy Edgar-Jones

“Normal People” made the twenty-two-year-old British actress, who plays Marianne in the Hulu show, famous overnight. But, thanks to the pandemic, she’s stuck at home playing board games and learning TikTok dances with her roommates.

By [Sarah Larson](#)

August 17, 2020



Like many British actors, Daisy Edgar-Jones, twenty-two, has appeared in period pieces—“Gentleman Jack,” on the BBC, in which she plays a wide-eyed innocent in a huge bonnet, who, as Edgar-Jones put it, gets “a little bit infatuated” with the lead “and then is never seen again,” and “Pond Life,” an indie film set in the nineties, in which “one of the characters is listening to a Walkman.” But she’s best known for more Zeitgeisty material: her breakout role, this year, in the Emmy-nominated BBC and Hulu adaptation of Sally Rooney’s novel “Normal People,” set in County Sligo and Dublin, in which Edgar-Jones stars as Marianne, a prickly high-school outcast who falls in love with Connell (Paul Mescal), a kindly jock in a chain necklace so iconic that, in real life, it has its own Instagram account (@connellschain).

“Normal People,” in normal times, would likely have found an eager audience, as Rooney’s best-selling novel did; in the quarantine era, it arrived with uncanny power. “It’s quite hard to watch things now and not be very aware of people’s closeness,” Edgar-Jones said. “When they shake hands or embrace, you think, Oh, gosh. It’s strange—things are so different now.” On a Zoom from her flat in North London, Edgar-Jones wore a green blouse and big earrings; a bun accentuated prominent, Marianne-like bangs. She sat in front of a gray closet door, in a bedroom decorated with a cloud mural and a painting of two nattily dressed crocodiles. “I think what ‘Normal People’ really does celebrate is human connection and intimacy, and that is something we’re all hyper-aware of craving,” she said. Marianne encourages Connell to go to Trinity College, and to become a writer; Connell encourages Marianne to love and to be loved. The series takes an unhurried approach to the intricacies of human connection, from casual nudity to thoughtful conversation; the camera lingers on a hand or a moment, as if the viewer were hanging out with the characters in real time.

Edgar-Jones had the uncommon experience of becoming famous overnight while being unable to leave her house, doing interviews and virtual appearances in front of the gray closet door, in the flat she shares with her boyfriend and two friends. Her life is otherwise that of a conventional twentysomething. “My flatmates and I have played a lot of board games,” she said. “We find karaoke songs on YouTube and sing them. We’ve, like, learned a lot of TikTok dances.” She grew up in North London, the only child of a Scottish entertainment-executive father and a Northern Irish film-editor mother; she and her mother would speak in different accents together for fun. She attended a small girls’ school and joined the National Youth Theatre at fourteen. (“I did a Juliet speech

for my audition,” she said. In school, studying Shakespeare, “we had to watch the Baz Luhrmann ‘Romeo + Juliet,’ and I fell in love with Claire Danes’s performance.”) At seventeen, she was cast in a revival of “Cold Feet,” a “Friends”-like British sitcom, where she learned more about comic timing. “And with ‘Normal People’”—not a comedy—the dynamic between Connell and Marianne was so much about timing and beats,” she said. “Letting things sit, choosing when to come back in, allowing an actor to take the time they needed. That was a core part of the process.”

Before auditioning for the show, she hadn’t read “Normal People.” “My friend had bought it for my flatmate and was, like, ‘It’s my favorite book ever.’ She’s actually writing her dissertation on Sally Rooney now.” Then, she said, “I read it in a day. I loved it so much. I’ve always loved romances.” She was drawn to Rooney’s evocation of her characters’ inner lives. “They are both incredibly complex and flawed. Sally doesn’t shy away from the darker sides. Often, you get quite a lighthearted version of young love and growing up.”

Her other favorite romances aren’t so lighthearted, either. “Obviously, ‘Romeo and Juliet,’ ” she said. There’s also “The Hunger Games,” she added, and laughed. “It’s got love *elements*. Oh, and Patti Smith’s ‘Just Kids’—kind of a love story between her and Robert Mapplethorpe.” She went on, “I want to write down every writer she references and read their books, go look at all the art, listen to those records. . . . The way she talks about the Chelsea Hotel—walking down the corridor and looking through the door and there’s Hendrix. I wonder if we have an equivalent.”

Smith’s book was popular on the set of “Normal People.” Mescal is a fan, too. “I lent it to him and he read it,” Edgar-Jones said. Her other current series is an adaptation of another book: H. G. Wells’s “The War of the Worlds.” In the show, she plays a blind earthling coping with an alien invasion. Are there other literary adaptations she admires? “I’d love to see them adapt Patti Smith, actually,” she said. Perhaps she and Mescal could star? Edgar-Jones reeled a bit. “I don’t think I’m cool enough to be Patti Smith!” she said, laughing. “I wish! Oh, my God.” ♦

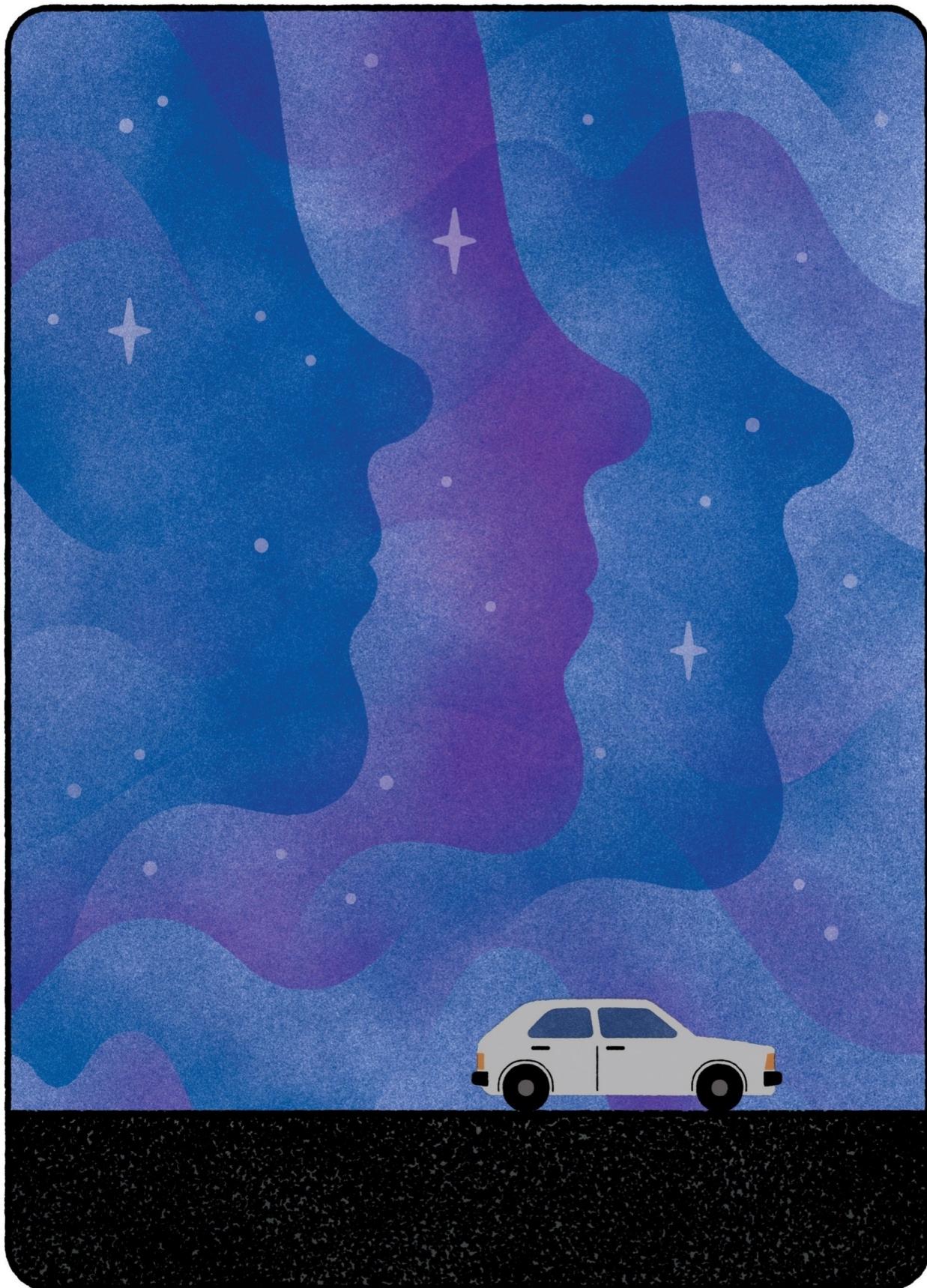
# Fiction

- “[Cicadia](#)”

# Cicadia

By [David Gilbert](#)

August 17, 2020



*Audio: David Gilbert reads.*

There was once a beginning and it involved sprinklers and green grass, but that happened a long time ago. Right now it's Saturday night, the night of the big night, in the eternal return of suburban Cincinnati, summer of 1986. The neighborhood in question could be Indian Hill. Or Oakley. Or Stetson Square. Though in reality it's Hyde Park that the boys are driving through, fresh from their stop at Graeter's Ice Cream, which might elicit a few nods from the locals in the know—Graeter's and its black-raspberry chocolate chip, the flavor of choice for all three boys. They lick their cones in almost comedic unison. Like they're ten again. Speed three-fourths of pleasure. Feeling the cold against the humid air, the sweet smooth taste on their tongues, the tart undertones, the bits of chocolate like smaller deeper holes, like memories within memories. No matter how familiar, this moment is still a delight. Best friends cruising together. On the cusp of senior year. The sky water-colored in dark blues and grays and blacks, the moon eyeballing them through the clouds. On the radio, "I Got You" by the Split Enz, which could've been playing on the radio of every car on every street, the sound so big, so all-encompassing, filling the night with its fear and longing, its something wrong:

I got you, that's all I want  
I won't forget, that's a whole lot

As usual, Max sits by himself in the back seat, while up front Rodney guides his banged-up Rabbit along Observatory Avenue, and Ben attempts to roll a joint from the bag of weed they stole earlier from Rodney's older brother. It's a classic scene, well remembered: the three of them sneaking into Oscar's room while Oscar naps, huge and hairy and half-naked in bed, resembling an ogre in an Ohio State football jersey. The boys tiptoe about like secret agents, rifle through Oscar's bureau, his desk, his bedside table, his closet, wherever he might stash his stash in this wreck of a room. Dirty laundry litters the floor, the walls decorated with posters of girls and cars and girls on cars and that blown-away Maxell-tape dude, which Max always notices, because his name is in there, but also because Max is the designated philosopher in this group and he appreciates how life moves pretty fast, regardless of high fidelity. Next summer will be the summer before college, before everything changes. Not that Max believes this anymore, as he watches himself go through the motions of searching for the weed. Looking here, looking there. Discovering the *Penthouse* and the Lubriderm and the discarded tube sock. Check, check, and check. Max is

relieved when this part is done, even as his expression never wavers from slapstick repulsion. What used to seem funny and disgusting now just seems small and human and maybe even tender. So Oscar chokes the chicken. Perhaps a lot. Big fucking deal. And yet here they are giggling for the millionth time. Max tries to distract himself by taking note of the minor details in the background of Oscar's room. The records, the books, the clutter on the bureau, things through which he might discover the hidden Oscar. The trumpet always intrigues him. As does the Evel Knievel action figure: all those failed attempts, all those broken bones. Meanwhile, Ben and Rodney are waving their hands against the primal Oscar stench, which Oscar escalates by passing gas in his sleep, the resulting fart like a bee escaping his asshole. A large, fat bee. It stings Ben in the nose, Ben who's squeamish, who gags, and Rodney mimes cracking up, Rodney who's easily amused, and Ben slaps Rodney, and Rodney slaps Ben, and back and forth they go, slap-slap-slap, the two of them always getting into ridiculous slap fights, until Oscar starts to rustle and snort, and all three boys freeze, because if Oscar wakes up and discovers these fudge packers snooping around his room, let alone trying to steal his weed, well, he'll massacre them.

[David Gilbert on John Hughes.](#)

In this charged atmosphere, Max stares at his friends, like really stares at them, Rodney with his front tooth perfectly chipped, as if Pythagoras lived in his mouth, Ben with his pinch-pot face. Once again Max tries to communicate something meaningful, something real beyond the repetition, the eyes behind his eyes attempting to pierce the eyes behind their eyes. You guys in there? You with me? Max sort of whispering without whispering. Hello, hello? Like NASA sending those messages into outer space. And sometimes Max thinks he catches a murmur of something. An alien crackle in the static. Like earlier, when they went swimming in the old quarry and experienced the never-boring bliss of sunning themselves on those rocks. They could've been ancient creatures, immutable yet resigned to the daily grind. Tortoises, maybe. Or the cicadas buzzing in the trees, electrifying the air after seventeen years underground. Kindred bug spirits just wanting to get laid. Or, as Rodney put it, in full fuck mode, Rodney's arms and legs spread-eagled, his skin covered in almost ludicrous levels of acne. And that's when Ben chimed in with: Imagine if we were fags, we'd be fucking each other non-stop. Even the cicadas seem thrown by this sentiment. Of course, Rodney and Max tease Ben about his inverted logic, but this time around Max could swear he heard something different in Ben's tone, as if the same chords were strummed but with more feeling,

transmitting a simple yet sincere truth to his friends: I love you guys, like, with all my heart. And Max wants to respond in kind, wants to tell Ben he finally understands—I love you, too—but Max is stuck with the same old wisecracks as Ben gets up and jumps into the water, and Rodney yawps and dives in after, and Max stands by the edge in typical Max-musing fashion. How many boys and how many years have been swallowed up by this pit? And here they are, splashing around yet again, whatever offense already forgotten. Max steps off the edge. The rush of falling is always a thrill, the fast never getting faster before ending with the Max-shaped flume and Max weightless underwater. Like being born in reverse. Listening for other heartbeats in the hydrosphere. But back in the stink of Oscar’s room there are no signs of extraterrestrial life from Rodney or Ben, just the normal geek routine as Oscar rolls on his belly and returns to his midday nap. Soon Max finds the weed where he always finds the weed—stuffed in a box of scented Kleenex—and they’re gone.

“I have no idea how to roll a joint,” Ben says from the front seat of the Rabbit.

“Just roll it in the rolling paper,” Rodney tells him.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m doing that, but it falls apart.”

“Have you licked it? Like, licked the paper?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve licked it,” Ben says.

“Did you lick it enough?”

“Um, I think I did.”

“Maybe lick it some more.”

Ben angles his head down. Then stops himself. “Are you messing with me?”

“How would I be messing with you?”

“I don’t know . . . you know . . . never mind.”

Ben starts over again, his fingers and tongue trying to massage the joint into shape, and Max pokes in from the back seat by saying, “Looks like you’re nibbling on a tiny ear of corn,” which is an innocent enough comment, but Max

still regrets how he sounds, all dismissive and snide, full of ridicule for no good reason. Just as he regrets calling Rodney pizza face in the pizza parlor (that was mean and stupid) and regrets telling Claire she's destined to marry a rich douche bag (that was mean but accurate) and regrets asking his dad how they could be related when all his dad wanted was for Max to join him at the Reds game (that was mean, though, in fairness, his dad was wearing his size-too-small Johnny Bench jersey and holding up a foam "We're #1" finger). Poor Dad. Grabbing Max by the shoulders and fake-throttling him. And Max could feel the man's enduring affection, and his lack of resentment, and, even worse, his melancholy over losing this boy who was once up for anything Dad-related. Max squirming to get away. As if parents were perverts. His dad finally releasing him and performing a coup de grâce with that foam finger to the chest. The Max inside Max sighs. Wishes he could run back into the belly of Old Spice and Marlboros. But Dad is done, and what's been done can only be redone. The memories Max lugs around seem to fill a bucket, everything sloshing near the rim as he tries to navigate another day without getting soaked. The constant reckoning. Even the street lights on Observatory Avenue are in synch with this theme, hanging over the road like gallows, suggesting punishment from some unseen tyrant. This was an early impression Max has never been able to shake, and now it's permanently etched into this drive: ghost bodies swaying above the traffic. But nowadays Max pushes for Rodney to go faster through this stretch of road and launch them straight into the party and the wink from the girl in the red beret. A definite wink. As she raised two watermelon wine coolers into the air. Max has only recently noticed her. Like, really noticed her. In the last dozen soundings of this summer night. She was standing in the background, on the outer edge of his imagination, with the other nameless girls drinking by the fridge as the Talking Heads sang about warning signs—oh, man, what an opening that song has, with the drums, phaser on snare, and then the killer bass line. Chris and Tina. Max thinks of them fondly, as if they were pals. And it's one of those songs Max has to listen to over and over, the way it opens him up, like deep down, revealing him to himself, the uncanny pleasure becoming a compulsion, more, more, more, listening on repeat until all the raised hairs have been plucked and he can move on, scrubbed and numbed. Max is shocked at how he could've missed this girl. It seems inconceivable. This girl in the red beret, this winking girl. But afterward he always notices her and always looks extra hard when he's looking in her general direction, as if she might shrug and step forward. There seems to be an unspoken rapport between them. And he can swear her winks are evolving. Shifting from theatrical to sarcastic to ironic to playful and then circling back to innocent. A wink wrapped in winks. And maybe she's getting closer by the

micron. Breaking away from the fridge, a statue reflecting its internal manic entropy. Smiling wider. Or grimacing with a sense of humor. Or, better yet, with a sense of the absurd. Here we go again. The most recent addition to his mental scrapbook was the sight of her chin tilting as if she could hear him loitering beneath her window, collecting pebbles. What're you doing down there? And Max's insides turned into Alka-Seltzer. All this spooky attraction at a distance while he babbles on with Claire, his eyes trying to reach back toward the fridge. And then he goes upstairs with Rodney and Ben and never sees her again, even after he slugs Blaine and Blaine falls into the pool and everyone cheers except the girl with the red beret, who's gone. But gone where? Come back, please. She has a round face. Short black hair. A pale complexion. Every frame of her might as well have been snipped from its source and taped to the walls of his memory, arrows charting connections. Bow-shaped lips. Freckles straddling her nose. She seems to flutter with mutual conspiracy. As if they were prisoners planning an escape, passing notes between their eyes. Maybe she's French. So step on it, Rodney, the it never wavering above forty miles per hour. And either way they'll soon get lost and have to ask directions from the man walking his golden retriever. Because Max and Rodney and Ben are heading into unfamiliar territory: the land of rich preppies, with their popped collars and Izod shirts and lit-from-within hair, none of these Hardys or Chips or Sheps working over the summer, except on their tennis and golf swings at Kenwood, where Max and Rodney and Ben labor as their wombats for three-thirty-five an hour.

Ben does a few more twists and licks and then presents the joint in behold fashion.

“Seems a bit pudgy in the middle,” Rodney says.

“Agreed,” Ben says.

“But it does have a joint-like presence.”

Max always liked that line. A joint-like presence.

“Well, should we?” Ben asks, raising a lighter.

None of them are stoners; if anything, they maintain a certain uncontaminated existence, mainly so that they can talk shit about everyone else. By far their greatest obsession is their own tight bond, which started in second grade and now seems biological, like when Rodney chugged his RC Cola and Ben burped.

And yet Max can sense himself separating. He's always prided himself on his straight B-minus persona: tests and papers crafted into meticulous examples of average work. It was almost like an art project. But this spring Max took the SATs and by mistake racked a near-perfect score, and while this was laughable, he was curious, maybe even pissed, about the few questions he missed. I mean, what the fuck? So he's decided to try this fall. Like, really try. Apply himself. Realize his full potential. His newest art project is to get into Yale, all because of Blaine and his inescapable Yale crew-neck T-shirt, Blaine strutting around as if he were already accepted, Blaine and his Yalie father and his Yalie older brother and his Labrador retriever named Davenport. This summer Max has put down Stephen King and Philip K. Dick and Robert A. Heinlein and picked up Kafka and Schulz and Borges and Burroughs and whatever else Lou Reed recommended in that article. Oh, and the other thing: Max has grown six inches in the past eighteen months, his baby fat acting like rocket fuel. He went from boy to man in a disorienting flash, his shins and knees aching as if he had climbed twenty flights of stairs. From this vantage Max wonders if his world might be bigger than the world of Rodney and Ben and southwest Ohio, which was always a shit hole but now seems braided with the limited fate of his friends. Max suspects that he's bound for something better. Like an actual life. Max in Chicago. Max in New York or L.A. He has visions of being a writer. He's been reading "The Metamorphosis" and nodding a lot. Yeah, ridiculous, Max thinks, as the Rabbit passes the same set of cars on the same stretch of Observatory Avenue, the same boy in the back seat of the same Country Squire station wagon lifting his hand and waving. Like Max is seeing Max. Damned by the gods. A suburban Sisyphus and Cincinnati is his rock. Nobody's getting older, but we're all aging, or so Max thinks as he waves back.

Ben slips the joint into his mouth and flicks the lighter. The flame catches the crimped end and burns more than expected, surprising Ben, who shakes the joint until the flame settles and meets the waistline of weed. It smells dirty yet sweet, like something crawling forth from a cave. Max pictures Oscar napping in his room, Oscar scratching himself, though Max knows Oscar is already awake and searching for them, armed with a pair of nunchucks. Blaine's glass coffee table is doomed. Up front, Ben puckers and inhales, puckers and inhales, but nothing gets through except the normal Ben humiliations.

"I don't know what's wrong," he says.

"Fire it up again," Rodney says.

“We are without a doubt the world’s worst drug dealers,” Max says.

The things he notices this time:

The dashboard’s submarine glow.

The tires on rutted pavement, like a stylus on vinyl.

The underlying whiff of old sneakers.

“Wait . . . wait . . . ” from Ben, sucking on the joint some more.

“How much should we sell the bag for?” Rodney asks.

“Haven’t a clue,” Max says.

“Fifty bucks?”

“Seems a lot.”

“Forty?”

“Maybe. Maybe fifty.”

Rodney glances in the rearview mirror. “My brother’s going to kill me.”

But Oscar is going to be their savior. As he always is. Oscar the berserker bursting onto the scene with exquisite timing, creating mayhem and staring down Blaine’s cohort of pretty boys who are ready to thrash Rodney and Ben and especially Max; Oscar grabbing the biggest by the throat and proclaiming dominion over kicking his brother’s ass and the asses of his brother’s asshole friends.

“Wait . . . wait . . . ” from Ben, still sucking on the joint.



*"I just can't get past the inaccurate depiction of Jewish mothers."*  
Cartoon by Liana Finck

“Please stop,” Rodney says. “You’re just making me sad.”

Edwards Road appears on the right and the Rabbit turns and soon the boys are in the wealthy section, away from the ranch-style houses and bungalows of their own modest upbringing. Like Max’s home. Where his parents are fixed in the amber of the ABC Saturday-night movie—tonight Robert Conrad is “Charley Hannah”—and his younger brother is guiding Mario through the Mushroom Kingdom, Max’s goodbye still warm at the front door, unacknowledged, as he sprinted for the freedom of Rodney and Ben and the waiting Rabbit, Mom microwaving popcorn, Dad rubbing his feet, Mike fighting the Koopa Troopas, Max closing the front door, the same dumb grin plastered on his face, while Mom watched through the small lit-up window as those kernels gave up their more divine selves, and Dad sat slumped on the living-room couch, drained yet relieved, his body bisected after selling a day’s worth of used cars, the fan oscillating above a bowl of ice, the popcorn smelling of buttered cardboard, the screen door slamming like a firecracker, like a starter’s pistol, like a mousetrap, like a whip and Indiana Jones has escaped yet again, Max sprinting for the freedom of Rodney and Ben and the waiting Rabbit.

“So where is this party, exactly?” Rodney asks.

“18 Far Hills Drive,” Max tells him.

“And where the hell is that?”

“Somewhere around here,” though Max knows they’ve already missed the turn.

“That’s helpful.”

“You sure this isn’t a setup?” Ben asks.

“We’re bringing the drugs, man,” Rodney says. “We’re the cool guys.”

“Yeah, right, the cool guys,” Ben says. “We can’t even roll a joint.”

“You can’t.”

“O.K., you try it, then.”

“I’m driving, asshole.”

“All you can roll are big fat boogers.”

“Did you really just say that?”

“I did.”

Rodney reaches over and slaps Ben.

Ben slaps Rodney back.

“Guys, c’mon, seriously,” Max says.

“Yeah, guys, c’mon,” Rodney says in his best Max impersonation.

“Yeah, guys, don’t be so immature,” Ben says in his best Max impersonation.

“Don’t make me look bad in front of Claire.”

“Yeah, I really like her, so don’t be idiots.”

Max tells them to shut up, but he enjoys their teasing now.

“She is yummy,” Rodney says.

“You make that word sound disgusting,” Max says.

“Yummy, yummy, yummy.”

Rodney’s yummy presses against the vision of Claire lounging on a chaise at the Kenwood swimming pool. They spied on her during their lunch break, Rodney a valet, Ben a caddie, Max part of the grounds crew—decent summer jobs, the three of them happy to be working together and even happier to be crapping all over the rich people, who really are beyond moronic. All in all, a safe not worth cracking. Except for Claire. In her white bikini. Rodney and Ben and Max watching her from the hedged-in area around the pool’s filtration system. The boys munching on P.B.J. sandwiches stuffed with Fritos. Pipes and pumps humming around them. Claire getting up and stretching and then prancing filly-like toward the high dive. Rodney and Ben and Max nosing the privet.

“So so yummy,” Rodney says. “Me cummy on my tummy.”

Ben laughs his snot laugh.

“Jesus, shut up,” Max says.

“She seems twenty-five,” Ben says.

“More like sixty-nine,” Rodney says.

“Please, shut up,” Max says, wondering how Claire ever burned so bright.

But she did.

Large, impressive trees line the streets, most of them elms, which Max has learned to identify from Jerry, his burnout of a boss at Kenwood. Jerry schools him on the elms and maples and oaks around the golf course, the difference in their leaves and canopies, the quality of their bark. Jerry shared some of this knowledge while pissing near the eighth tee, against a sugar maple. Probably a hundred years old. Shooting up from the ground like a gusher fixed in wood. Jerry despises golf, but he loves the trees as well as the elegant spread of grasses, from rough to fairway to green, the amoeba-like design of the holes, even the stupid sand traps. Jerry shaking his head as he zipped his fly. The things we like despite ourselves. What would he make of these houses set back from the curb? Their architectural styles seem arbitrary, as if determined by dice rolled from a large cup. Colonial. Tudor. Georgian. French château. The foreign imports parked in their driveways resembling Corgi cars come to life. Citroën. Mercedes. Jaguar. Plus the well-tended lawns. The trimmed boxwoods. The stone paths illuminated by ye olde lanterns. Yeah, the things we like despite ourselves.

“O.K., we’re lost,” Rodney says.

Up ahead they see the man walking his golden retriever on the grass curb.

Hello, Harold; hello, Cupcake.

“Ask that guy,” Rodney says to Ben.

Harold is staring up at the stars while Cupcake circles a possible target.

“Why me?” Ben asks.

“Because you’re in the asking-for-directions seat.”

Harold breaks from whatever contemplations of the universe he’s having, perhaps on time and being, on the ouroboric nature of life, on the infinite and the ripples of eternal recurrence, to turn his attention to the Rabbit and the boys arguing inside the Rabbit.

The passenger window inches down.

“Um, hello,” Ben says.

Cupcake has found his bull’s-eye and is darting the ground with turds, so Harold greets them from the utmost tether. “Hello, fellas,” he says.

“Do you happen to know where 18 Far Hills Drive is?” Ben asks.

“What’s that?”

“18 Far Hills Drive.”

Just then the door of the Mediterranean Revival in front of them opens and an older man appears, wearing a paisley robe; he squints as if a merciless sun were shitting near his mailbox. “Is that you, Harold?!”

Cupcake done, Harold tugs him toward the Rabbit.

“18 Far Hills Drive,” he repeats.

“Really, Harold, again!” the older man yells.

But Harold remains unperturbed. “I think I know where that is.”

“Enough is goddam enough!”

The older man in the paisley bathrobe disappears—

“Is it close by?” Ben asks.

—and reappears with an aluminum baseball bat.

Ben goes full aperture. “Um . . .”

“Tell you what, fellas,” Harold says, “why don’t I just show you,” and he opens the back door of the Rabbit and scoots Max over, and Cupcake jumps in as if he had been in this situation before, and Harold follows suit, shutting the door and encouraging the boys onward, “Let’s go, go, go!” And Rodney does go, and then goes faster, because the older man with the baseball bat has surprising speed, his paisley robe fluttering like a vampire’s cape.

“Take this left,” Harold says.

The Rabbit’s tires screech left.

The older man tosses the bat.

It skitters toward the curb.

“Asshole!” he yells.

Harold turns back around. He’s beaming.

“You must be Harold,” Max says.

“That’s right, that’s right, and this here is Cupcake.”

The boys say hello to Cupcake.

“Daughter named him,” Harold says. “But I approved.”

Cupcake grins as if he can sense, like keenly sense, like down to the subtlest sound and smell, everyone’s absolute and complete affection for him. It must be something, to feel so practically loved. Max reaches over and rubs Cupcake’s neck and ears, Cupcake leaning into his hand. All so pure and tangible. Like a respite, Max thinks, using one of the words from the SATs. No language, no false impressions, no confusion, just the unmediated pleasure of presence and the everyday faith of some sort of understanding passing between them.

“So where’s Far Hills Drive, Harold?” Rodney asks.

“Keep straight,” Harold says, his own presence a doodling pen. “Straight for two

blocks.” Then the nib stops, and Harold tilts forward and sniffs like the Child Catcher if the Child Catcher were catching weed. “Is that what I think it is, fellas?” he says.

The boys remain silent.

“You know, a certain evocative odor.”

“Maybe a skunk,” Rodney says. “We saw one down the road.”

“Yeah, yeah, a skunk,” Ben says, always quick to second.

“No, fellas, not a skunk.” Harold gets grim. “Is there marijuana in this vehicle?”

Max removes his hand from Cupcake as if Cupcake might be working undercover. But Max is no longer nervous, as he was in the beginning, when he feared they might get into genuine trouble, and he’s no longer baffled, no longer puzzled, no longer scared, freaked, fried, fritzed, bent, depressed, bored, lonely, or whatever else the thesaurus of bad feelings might conjure, even though Max is all those things. He’s a collection of thousands of Maxes, past, present, and future, and this Max, sitting in the back seat of the Rabbit, hugging his backpack, is just going through the motions for today. He bites his lip. Mimes busted concern. Full breath in through the sliding glass door of the party and the crowded terrace and the pool and the underwater lights in the pool lighting water like jewels gone liquid and the whispers near the trees and the whiff of secrets being secretly burned in the far corner. All he can do is fill his lungs with the parameters of this particular life.

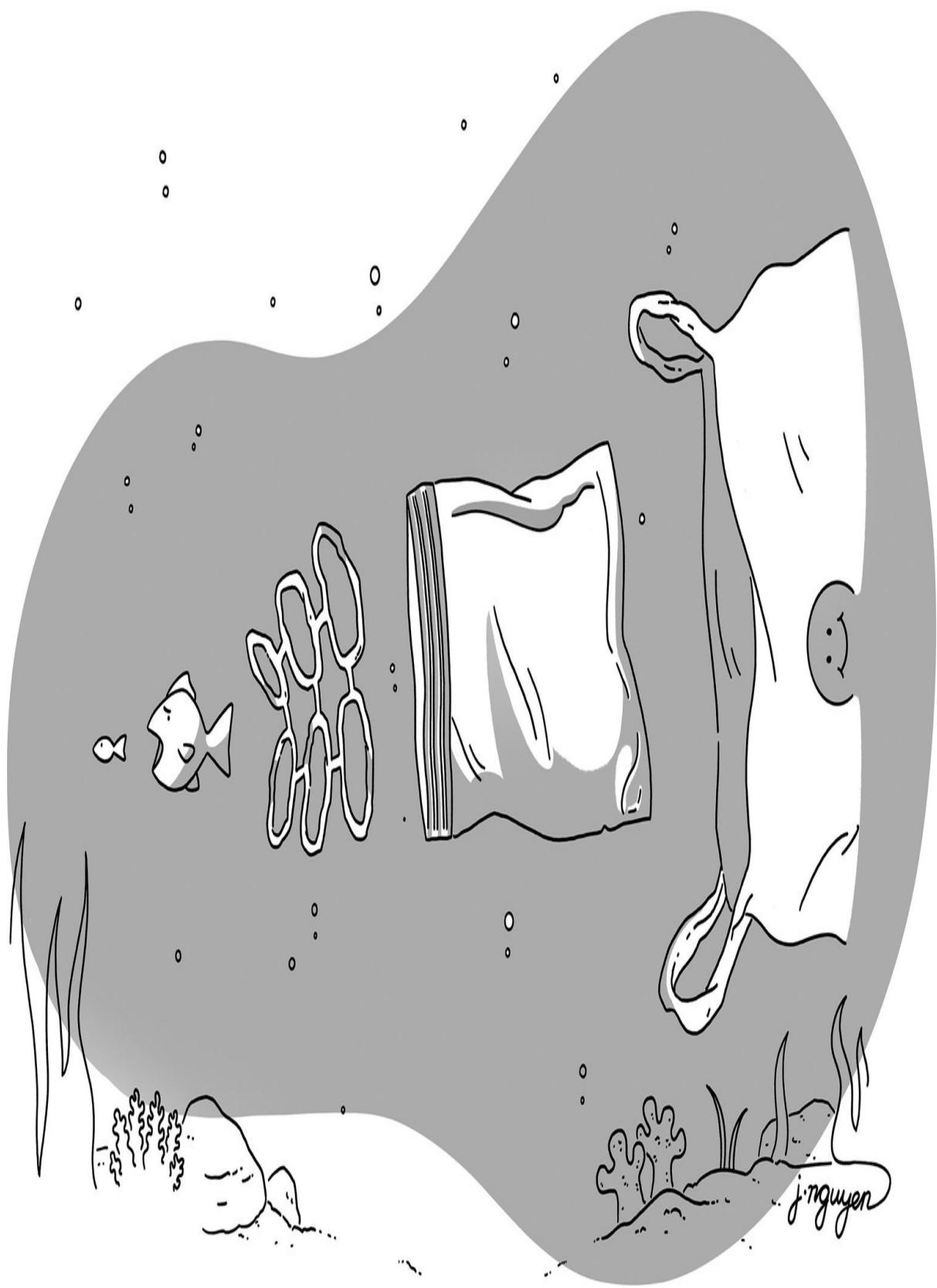
Harold snaps his fingers. “Hand it over,” he says.

“Hand over what?” Rodney says.

But, too late, Ben has already surrendered the evidence.

“It’s not ours, sir,” he says.

Harold dips his nose inside the bag.



“It’s my brother’s,” Rodney says.

Does Rodney ever regret giving up Oscar so quick?

Those moments where you are exposed.

Like running into yourself in a dark alley.

“Take a left,” Harold says, as if he were guiding them to the local authorities.

And then Ben offers up this brilliant defense:

“We were just going to sell the marijuana, sir,” he says.

“What the hell, Ben,” from Max.

“But we were.”

“Ben, shut up.”

Harold removes the Zig-Zag rolling papers from the bag. “Fellas, fellas, fellas,” he says, and maybe, like Max, you know where this is heading, Harold lecturing the boys on the dangers of drugs, all while discreetly rolling himself a perfect joint, and maybe you’re tapping the person next to you and telling him or her, I know what’s going to happen, because you’re the kind of person who can predict these things, the twists and turns, because you understand narrative cause and effect, the tropes, because you’re more simpatico with creative types, and if you had wanted to, well, you could’ve been a writer yourself, if you had known the right people, if you’d had a cushion in terms of money, but instead you took the more traditional path, secure and foreseeable, though you wish life had followed this premise more closely rather than the fits and starts of reality, which most of the time is tedious and occupied by two questions: What should I have for lunch and what should I have for dinner, and, if married and with children, what should we have for lunch, what should we have for dinner? Otherwise, there are just the random triumphs and tragedies, the tragedies always lasting longer, and the joys that are both insisted upon and in rarer cases unexpected, wedged between the salami sandwich for lunch and the healthy salad for dinner and only two drinks tonight that will likely turn into three, because nowadays you’re a cliché, but you’re still a responsible cliché, at least for the moment, and you smile and sink

into the stained upholstery of the back seat because you realize you've become Harold, which you could never have guessed, guiding the boys to 18 Far Hills Drive, where cars crowd the driveway and the house pulses with Oingo Boingo, Harold lighting the joint, Harold taking a hit, Harold saying, "Here we are, fellas," through an obliterating cloud of smoke.

The Rabbit pulls over.

Harold hands back the weed. "Well," he says, "you have yourself a good night," and leaves the car, Cupcake leaping down after him. Man and dog stand for a second in the blast range of "Just Another Day."

"Bye, Harold; bye, Cupcake," Max says.

Harold raises his hand in both goodbye and see you around.

Rodney slaps Ben.

"*We're selling the weed?*"

"What?"

"You're a fucking idiot."

"O.K., whatever," Ben says. "But hey, we're here, so success."

Blaine's house is a white Colonial with black shutters, the pillars implying dollar signs. A pair of small stone lions guard the path to the front door and its huge brass knocker, the world behind hinted at through the windows like a coming attraction: *three friends about to have the time of their lives*.

"Who's going to be the dealer?" Rodney asks.

Cicadas are everywhere in the trees. Like a million rattles rattling at once.

"I will," Max says, slipping the bag of weed into his backpack.

The noise is crazy-loud and constant, silence redefined as sound.

"I don't know about this," Ben says.

As if something had gone haywire with the frequency levels, Max thinks.

“It’ll be fine,” Max says.

As if the earth needed a few hard knocks on its side.

“I’ll be the muscle.” Rodney rolls up his sleeves.

The three boys are standing under a large shade tree—a sugar maple, Max knows, thanks to Jerry, and also because of the helicopter seeds, which he and Rodney and Ben used to peel apart and stick to the sides of their noses, as if they were plant people or something. Probably a mom had shown them this trick. Or another kid. One of those things passed down through generations, like whistling a blade of grass. Or even a gesture, how we might lick our lips or rub our eyebrows or fiddle with our knuckles and there’s Dad, there’s Granddad, there’s Great-Granddad. Max, as always, notices the cicadas stuck all over the trunk of the sugar maple, dozens of them, maybe hundreds, alive and clinging, it seems, even though they’ve departed this version of themselves and these are just the husks. Non-corpse corpses. For seventeen years they sucked on the roots underground. In darkness. Tasting only the effects of the sun until they responded to a mysterious call. Arise, cicadas! Your day has come. And up they went. Their sloughed bodies look like the remnants of a cicada massacre, perhaps by death ray. But Max knows the opposite is true. He and Jerry witnessed one hatch just the other day. Is “hatch” even the right word? Twitch and flex until the back splits open with scalpel-like precision and the body inside the body pushes up like a weight lifter hefting an intimate weight.

“They’re nymphs when they’re terrestrial,” Jerry said.

What remains on the tree is as crunchy as an air-puffed snack.

Max is always tempted to pop one into his mouth.

“Then they become an imago.” Jerry delivered the word with Jerry delight.

“Imago?”

“Yeah, the last stage is called the imaginal stage—that’s when they get their wings.” Jerry went loose and soft. “I know, I know, it’s perfect.”

And it was perfect. A perfect metaphor. Which Max recognized from the beginning, when the Rabbit drove through the swarm of cicadas in the early morning, and there was the machine-gun patter of yellow goo against the windshield, as if the boys were under attack. Yeah, a metaphor. A metaphor for something. I mean, Max is reading “The Metamorphosis,” for Christ’s sake, and he certainly understands that Gregor Samsa turning into a large bug is a metaphor though he isn’t sure for what. Not yet, at least. Mostly it just seems sad and lonely. Something about alienation, he supposes. Or just an epic leap of the imagination, like a stunt and Franz Kafka nails the landing. But these cicadas. Seventeen years old. The whole transformation business. Well, that seems obvious. I am the cicada, Max thinks. Or the cicada is me. Spooled in by this electric buzz. Tighter. Denser. A shell staring up at his own reverb. But what about the metaphor of Max’s own narrow youth as he stands before the same house, under the same tree, under the same set of stars, under the same platinum-printing moon, all in the same way. Again and again and beyond his control. And Max, he feels the same but he also feels different in the sameness, his cored parts filled with the need for meaning, which is embarrassing to admit, let alone to say aloud. Like, why me? And why this? And for how long? Max is young, but he’s also old, how old he isn’t even sure. Time is a fucked-up thing is the only sense he can make.

Rodney smiles, revealing that front tooth folded like a paper airplane. “Let’s do it,” he says.

“I’m just going to nod a lot,” Ben says, already nodding a lot.

For a moment, Max and the Max inside Max are on the same page in terms of nervousness and excitement. We’ll see her soon, they both think, but this Max, our Max, is thinking of the girl in the red beret, beyond the blond of Claire. The winking girl. His girl. The eyes behind her eyes piercing him. Maybe she’ll break free from the fridge and come over as if she’d been waiting for him—Excuse me, Claire—like he’s finally arrived. Handing over one of those watermelon wine coolers and tapping her bottle against his. Hello. I’ve missed you. As if she’d occupied the same regret. She looks like Noxzema and water flying everywhere.

Max secures the backpack to his shoulders.

He turns to Rodney and Ben.

My oldest friends, he thinks, taking them by the hand.

“Cue kick-ass music,” he says. ♦

By [Cressida Leyshon](#)

# **Letter from Michigan**

- [The Militias Against Masks](#)

[August 24, 2020 Issue](#)

# The Militias Against Masks

Groups protesting lockdown measures see the coronavirus pandemic as a pretext for tyranny—and as an opportunity for spreading rage.

By [Luke Mogelson](#)

August 17, 2020



Early in the morning on May 11th, the neon “Open” sign in the front window of Karl Manke’s barbershop was dark. A crowd loitered in the parking lot. Spring had not yet arrived in Owosso, Michigan, a small town an hour and a half northwest of Detroit; people had on heavy coats and snow gloves, or sat in their trucks with the heater running. Michelle Gregoire, a twenty-nine-year-old school-bus driver and mother of three, looked unbothered by the cold. Wearing a light fleece jacket emblazoned with [Donald Trump](#)’s name, she smiled and waved a “Don’t Tread on Me” flag at the passing traffic. She said of Manke, “He’s a national hero.”

Seven weeks earlier, Governor [Gretchen Whitmer](#), a Democrat, had added “personal-care services” to the list of nonessential businesses required to temporarily close in the interest of containing the coronavirus. Since then, [COVID-19](#) had killed nearly five thousand Michiganders—at the time, the fourth-highest death toll in the country—but most of the cases were in Detroit, and some residents of rural areas had come to resent the statewide lockdown. In April, thousands of people had attended a pair of protests at the state capitol, in Lansing, and hundreds of thousands had joined anti-lockdown groups on Facebook. On May 4th, Manke, who is seventy-seven, had reopened his barbershop. Four days later, Michigan’s attorney general, Dana Nessel, had declared it an “imminent danger” to public health, and state troopers had served Manke with a cease-and-desist order. That had been Friday. Now, on Monday, Manke’s supporters waited to see if he’d defy the order.

A number of them, including Gregoire, belonged to the Michigan Home Guard, an armed militia with more than a thousand members. Over the weekend, some Home Guardsmen had said that they would not allow Manke to be arrested. Gregoire, who lives in Battle Creek, had driven ninety miles to stand with her comrades. Several of them were dressed in fatigues and carried sidearms.

Manke arrived at nine-thirty, to cheers and applause. He had a white goatee and wore a blue satin smock, black-rimmed glasses, and a rubber bracelet bearing the words “When in Doubt, Pray.” As he stiffly climbed the steps to the front door, his posture was hunched; the previous week, he had injured his back working fifteen-hour days, pausing only to snack on hard-boiled eggs that his wife brought him. Customers had travelled from all over Michigan, and some from out of state—a fact highlighted by Nessel to underscore the extent of the viral hazard.

When the “Open” sign flickered on, people crowded inside. Manke had been cutting hair in town for half a century, and at his current location since the eighties. The phone was rotary, the clock analog, the gumball machine out of service. Black-and-white photographs of Owosso, where he graduated from high school in 1960, sat on cluttered shelves alongside old radios and bric-a-brac. Also on display were paperback copies of the ten novels that Manke had written. “[Unintended Consequences](#)” features an anti-abortion activist who “stands on his convictions”; “[Gone to Pot](#)” offers “a daring view into the underbelly of the sixties and seventies.”

As Manke fastened a cape around the first client’s neck, another man picked out a book and deposited a wad of bills in a basket on the counter. “My father was a barber,” he told Manke. “He believed in everything you believe in. Freedom. We’re the last holdout in the world.”

“We did this in 1776, and we’re doing it again now,” Manke said.

He had a weakness for pat aphorisms, his delight in them undiminished by repetition: “Politicians come to do good and end up doing well”; “You can’t fool me, I’m too ignorant.” In the several days that I spent at the barbershop, I heard Manke give countless customers the same stump speech. Until the pandemic, he’d never witnessed such “government oppression”; Whitmer was not his mother; he’d close his shop when they dragged him out in handcuffs, or when he died, or when Jesus came—“whichever happens first.” His admirers could not have asked for a better paragon of the mythical era when America was great.

Around noon, [Glenn Beck](#) called, live on the air. Manke told him, “It’s hardly my country anymore, in so many different ways.”



*"Harold, I'm really going to need you to sign the divorce papers in blue or black ink."*  
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

“You remind me of my father,” Beck said, with a wistful sigh.

Outside, I met a sixty-eight-year-old retiree named Roger Ball. We had to raise our voices to hear each other over a family of evangelicals singing hymns. “This has nothing to do with the virus,” Ball said. “This has to do with power. They want to take power away from the people, and they want to control us.” Ball considered the effort to shut down Manke’s barbershop an affront to America’s most sacred ideals—and he knew that he wasn’t alone. “We’re a trigger-pull away,” he told me. “We’re getting to the point where people have had enough.”

From the start, President Trump resisted a national pandemic strategy centered on federal resources, preferring instead for each state to tailor its own response. By early April, all American governors had declared states of emergency, a move that granted them the power to issue executive orders (which, unlike the sometimes tedious legislative process, can allow leaders to keep pace with quickly evolving circumstances). In Michigan, the legislature voted unanimously on April 7th to extend Governor Whitmer’s state of emergency—a rare instance of bipartisan consensus. The Senate majority leader, a Republican, opened the session by singing “It Is Well with My Soul.” The lieutenant governor, a Democrat, presided over the vote in a T-shirt that read “*EVERYBODY VS COVID-19.*”

The comity was short-lived. Two days later, Whitmer imposed additional restrictions, which went beyond those of most other states: she banned travel between counties, any work “not necessary to sustain or protect life,” and the sale of paint, furniture, and garden supplies. The following week, the Michigan Freedom Fund, a conservative organization partly financed by the Secretary of Education, [Betsy DeVos](#), rallied thousands of protesters in Lansing. It was the first major anti-lockdown demonstration in America, and not by chance. Michigan, a swing state that is as divided as it is diverse, contains many of the national fault lines that the pandemic has deepened.

The Michigan Freedom Fund was created in 2012, to lobby for legislation that curbed the collective-bargaining powers of organized labor. A so-called right-to-work bill, which would forbid making union membership a condition of employment, had been promoted by Americans for Prosperity, the national Tea Party advocacy group supported by the billionaire industrialists [David and](#)

[Charles Koch](#). The governor at the time, Rick Snyder, was a Republican, and the day that he signed the bill into law Whitmer, then a state senator, joined a raucous protest in Lansing, which turned briefly violent. Backers of the law framed the debate as a matter of individual autonomy; opponents, such as Michigan's automotive unions, saw a cynical campaign to sacrifice the common good for capitalist gain. *COVID-19* has pitched these same ideological camps against each other, and, just as right-to-work laws spread from Michigan to other parts of the country, so has the anti-lockdown movement. Within a few weeks of the Michigan Freedom Fund rally, similar events were held in more than thirty states. In Kentucky, the governor was hanged in effigy outside the statehouse; in North Carolina, a protester carried a rocket launcher through downtown Raleigh; in Texas, the conspiracy theorist [Alex Jones](#) beseeched demonstrators to resist a “Chinese globalist Bill Gates attack on our freedom.”

On April 30th, Michigan lawmakers reconvened to vote on extending Whitmer’s state of emergency a second time, and protesters again converged on Lansing. Many were armed. Michigan is an open-carry state, and no law prohibits licensed owners from bringing guns inside the capitol. Dozens of men with assault rifles filled the rotunda and approached the barred doors of the legislature. Facing a police line, they bellowed, “Let us in!”

A widely circulated photograph of the confrontation showed a man with a shaved head and a blond beard, his gaping mouth inches away from two young police officers in blue masks, who gazed stonily past him. The historian Heather Richardson, in [her popular political newsletter](#), summed up what the image represented for liberal audiences: “This is a man who punches down, not up, and who wants to have the power to decide whether his neighbors live or die.”

In fact, the man was yelling not at the police but at the chief sergeant at arms for the Michigan House of Representatives, David Dickson, who stood outside the picture’s frame. The previous afternoon, Dickson and two of his colleagues had forcibly removed three female protesters—Michelle Gregoire among them—from a public gallery overlooking the House chamber. Access had been curtailed in order to maintain social distancing; when Gregoire and her friends refused to leave, Dickson dragged Gregoire through the doors, telling her, “Stay out.” One of the women filmed the encounter and posted the video on Facebook, alongside the caption “We are living in NAZI Germany!!!” Many of the protesters inside the statehouse the next day had watched the clip. When the bearded man was photographed, he was shouting at Dickson, “You gonna throw me around like

you did that girl?”

Various protesters, arguing that Dickson had been the one punching down, characterized the photograph to me as proof of the media’s bad faith. “Camera angles are a bitch,” one man said. But the image also omitted another piece of information. Whereas all the women in the gallery—like most of the protesters in the rotunda—were white, two of the three men who ejected them, including Dickson, were Black. When I met Dickson, in June, he declined to assign importance to this detail. “I don’t play the race card,” he told me. He said of his expulsion of Gregoire, “I didn’t sleep for weeks. You don’t feel good about those kinds of things.” Yet, Dickson added, he was duty-bound to enforce the statehouse rules. In his opinion, the armed white men who had screamed at and insulted him had simply failed to grasp that.

Others saw a more pernicious force behind the rage. Protesters had displayed a Confederate flag and a noose. The state representative Sarah Anthony, who is African-American and could hear the yelling demonstrators from inside the House chamber, told me, “Those symbols mean something very, very clear to a Black woman. No one can convince me that the Confederate flag or a noose means something different now. It just felt like, if they had rushed that door, I’d be one of the first to go down.”

Anthony was born and raised in Lansing. In 2000, when she was seventeen, she participated in an after-school internship program at the state capitol, “for nerdy kids who had too many credits and needed something productive to do.” After shadowing Mary Waters, a Black representative from Detroit, Anthony resolved to become a politician. “To see a woman that looked like me in a leadership position—I didn’t know we could do that,” she said. In 2012, at the age of twenty-nine, Anthony became the youngest Black woman in America to serve as a county commissioner. Six years later, a landslide victory made her the first Black woman to represent Lansing in the Michigan legislature.

Anthony took me on a tour of the statehouse, her eyes visibly brightening above her mask. “There’s a sense of awe,” she said, pointing out its painted murals, limestone floor, and ornate chandeliers. Her reverence for the space had made the April 30th protest that much more disturbing. She had since acquired a bulletproof vest. Although she was an optimist by nature, her outlook concerning Michigan, and the country in general, had dimmed. “People are angry about being unemployed, about having to close their businesses—I understand that,”

she said. “But there are elements, extremists, who are using this as an opportunity to ignite hate. Hate toward our governor, hate toward government, and also hate toward Black and brown people. These conditions are creating a perfect storm.”

In the nineteen-fifties, when Karl Manke was in high school, Owosso was a “sundown town”: African-Americans were not welcome. Today, it remains almost exclusively white, as does much of rural Michigan. For as long as Sarah Anthony has had a license, her parents have told her, “If you are driving from Detroit, and it’s too late, you stay in Detroit.” Some white Michiganders give one another the opposite advice.

Nationwide, *COVID-19 has disproportionately affected African-Americans*, and in Michigan nearly a quarter of coronavirus-related deaths have been in Detroit, which is eighty per cent Black. On April 30th, Anthony live-streamed a video on Facebook from her office. She was clearly upset by the presence of armed protesters—but it was their dismissiveness about *COVID-19* that most offended her. “It’s infuriating to me because I feel as though they aren’t taking this seriously,” she said, wiping a tear away. She was similarly frustrated with the legislature, which that day voted against extending Whitmer’s emergency powers.

Although the political tension between Michigan’s urban, Democratic residents and its rural, Republican residents can look like racial animus, the latter group often ridicules any such interpretation as liberal cant. After the intense negative attention that the April 30th demonstration received, its organizers, a few Michiganders calling themselves the American Patriot Council, insisted that Whitmer had unfairly branded them as racists in order to discredit them. Two and a half weeks later, they held a rally in Grand Rapids—at a plaza known as Rosa Parks Circle.

This time, there were no Confederate flags. A video from the previous protest, which had sparked backlash online, had shown two adolescent girls dancing on the state capitol’s steps in rubber masks: one of Trump; the other of Obama, with exaggeratedly dark skin. In Grand Rapids, the same two girls danced—without masks—to “Bleed the Same,” by the gospel singer Mandisa. Their performance was followed by a sermon given by a Black minister.



*Karl Manke, who is seventy-seven, kept open his barbershop, in Owosso, Michigan, in defiance of a cease-and-desist order, after the state's attorney general declared it an "imminent danger" to public health. Photograph by Mark Peterson / Redux for The New Yorker*

The keynote speaker was Sheriff Dar Leaf, from nearby Barry County, who had refused to enforce Whitmer's executive orders. A short, plump white man with a high-pitched voice and an unruly mop of curly blond hair, Leaf captivated the several hundred attendees by inviting them to imagine a version of the past in which Alabama law-enforcement officers, loyally upholding the Constitution, had not arrested Rosa Parks. To facilitate the thought experiment, Leaf channelled a hypothetical deputy sheriff. "Hey, Ms. Parks, I'm gonna make sure nobody bothers you," he said. "And you can sit wherever you want."

The overwhelmingly white crowd erupted into cheers. "Thank you!" a white man cried out.

In Alabama, during the sixties, sheriffs and deputies were especially ruthless toward Black protesters—the sheriff Jim Clark led a horseback assault against peaceful freedom marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge, in Selma, and habitually terrorized African-Americans with a cattle prod that he wore on his belt. Leaf, however, saw himself as heir to a different legacy. "I got news for you," he told the crowd. "Rosa Parks was a rebel." And, in case anybody hadn't understood his point: "Owosso has their little version of Rosa Parks, don't they? Karl Manke!"

According to this narrative, police brutality against African-Americans, and the weaponization of law enforcement to suppress Black activism, were not manifestations of institutional racism; rather, they arose from the same infidelity to American principles of individual freedom that, in our time, defines the political left. The false equivalency of the anti-lockdown movement with the civil-rights movement appeals to the libertarian conviction that all government interference is inherently oppressive. It also elides the fact that the civil-rights movement demanded government interference on behalf of oppressed people.

Leaf belongs to the Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association, which holds that county sheriffs retain supreme authority within their jurisdictions to interpret the law, and that their primary responsibility is to defend constituents from government overreach. Cracking down on illegal immigration is also paramount. The group's Web site asserts, "Immigrants are not assimilating into our culture as they once did. This results in devastating consequences culturally and economically." The notion of the "constitutional

“sheriff” was first proposed in the late fifties, by William Potter Gale—a Klansman, a leader in the white-supremacist Christian Identity church, and the founder of the Posse Comitatus movement. (In Latin, the phrase means “power of the county.”) Signed into law in 1878, the Posse Comitatus Act prevented federal troops from insuring the rights of emancipated slaves in former Confederate states. In 1957, when Arkansas refused to desegregate its schools, President Dwight Eisenhower mobilized the Army to protect Black students from white mobs. Gale decried the deployment as the very “evil” that the Posse Comitatus Act “was written to prevent.” In the seventies, he built a network of rural resistance to federal authority. This organization, which he called Posse Comitatus, recognized county sheriffs as “the only legal law enforcement” in America.

Daniel Levitas, in his 2002 book, “[The Terrorist Next Door](#),” describes how Gale expanded the model of white vigilantism in the South to a national scale, using fears of Black integration and adding the spectre of governmental infiltration by Communists and Jews. Posse Comitatus groups across the country were instructed to convene “Christian common-law grand juries,” indict public officials who violated the Constitution, and then “hang them by the neck.” Gale’s guidance on what kinds of transgression merited such punishment was simple: any enforcement of the Civil Rights Act (African-Americans being subhuman “mud people”) or of tax laws (the I.R.S. and the Federal Reserve being sinister instruments of international Jewish bankers).

In Grand Rapids, Sheriff Leaf said, “We’re looking at common-law grand juries. I’d like to see some indictments come out of that.”

Was this a crafty dog whistle? Historical ignorance? Or was Leaf convinced that the racist and anti-Semitic provenance of such ideas no longer pertained? Although the violence and explicit bigotry of the Posse Comitatus fell out of favor during the eighties, much of Gale’s thinking continued to inform right-wing movements, which sanitized his rhetoric while extending his influence. The menace of immigration supplanted the evil of desegregation; the New World Order replaced Jewish cabals. For more than a century and a half, antipathy toward the federal government was virtually synonymous with the subjugation of Black people, but since the Clinton Administration many conservative white Americans have enlisted the Second Amendment to cast themselves as victims of persecution. In 2008, when [Barack Obama](#)’s election incited a resurgence of anti-government groups that championed such Posse Comitatus tenets as

“sovereign citizenship,” their members claimed that they objected to the President not because he was Black but because he wanted to take their guns. The Constitutional Sheriffs and Peace Officers Association was founded around 2010, by Richard Mack, a former sheriff from Arizona who propounded the debunked theory that Obama was born in Kenya. In 2014, Mack joined the rancher Cliven Bundy in his standoff with federal authorities, in Nevada. “This was Rosa Parks refusing to get to the back of the bus,” Mack later said.

At the end of his speech, Sheriff Leaf called onto the stage Phil Robinson, the forty-three-year-old co-founder of a militia that had been providing security at Rosa Parks Circle. With a shaved head and a graying beard spliced into long braids, Robinson lives up to his nom de guerre and Facebook handle: Odin Heathen. I saw him at several events, always in black cargo pants, a flak jacket, and tactical gloves, with a sidearm and a long gun. “This is our last home defense right here, ladies and gentlemen,” Leaf said. Glancing at Robinson’s assault rifle, he added, “These guys have better equipment than I do. I’m lucky they got my back.”

“That’s right!” Robinson said, laughing.

The original Michigan Militia was formed in 1994, during a national wave of white paramilitary mobilization prompted by the government’s deadly assaults on the Branch Davidian compound, in Waco, Texas, and on the white supremacist Randy Weaver’s cabin at Ruby Ridge, in Idaho. Two months after federal agents killed Weaver’s wife, Vicki, and their son, Sammy, hundreds of neo-Nazis, Klansmen, and Christian Identity adherents met in Estes Park, Colorado, where, many historians say, the American militia movement was born. The Michigan Militia quickly became the largest in the country, with an estimated seven thousand members. But a year after its establishment Timothy McVeigh, who had attended several of its meetings, detonated a bomb outside a federal building in Oklahoma City, killing a hundred and sixty-eight people. The Michigan Militia soon collapsed. Not until Obama was elected did rural Michiganders again feel called upon to muster. Currently, there are more than a dozen militias in the state, some with only a handful of members, others with thousands.

At Rosa Parks Circle, members of the group to which Michelle Gregoire belongs, the Michigan Home Guard, stood on the periphery of the crowd. A few held flags with a large Roman numeral III—a reference to the dubious

contention that only three per cent of American colonists fought the British. Several Three Percenter organizations were created after Obama's election, when the number of militias in America leapt from around fifty to more than two hundred. Some Three Percenters are openly hostile to Muslims and immigrants; others concentrate on gun rights and opposing big government. A Home Guardsman wielding an AK-47 with a flash suppressor told me, "It only takes three per cent to defend from tyranny. We're here for everybody."

Every militia in Michigan now adamantly disavows racism and anti-Semitism. Robinson created his outfit—the Michigan Liberty Militia—in 2015, after "seeing what happened with the Bundys," he told me. With twelve members, it is one of the smallest groups in the state, but Robinson's involvement in the anti-lockdown protests has brought him notoriety. In interviews, he has expressed outrage and puzzlement at being labelled a racist. "I'm tired of the fake news," he told me, with seemingly genuine indignation. Robinson practices Odinism, which is popular among white supremacists, some of whom embrace it as a more racially pure alternative to Christianity. But he says that it infuriates him to see others "using my religion for hate." Like Sheriff Leaf, he presents himself as an impartial guardian of the Bill of Rights.

This strikes many people of color as disingenuous. "How about when the rights of Hispanics, Black Americans, and Muslims are trampled on?" an activist in Lansing said. "Where are these rallies? Where is all this outcry? We don't see it." Attorney General Nessel, who, as a private lawyer, successfully challenged Michigan's ban on same-sex marriage in a case that, along with others, was upheld by the Supreme Court, told me, "You didn't see these people who now refuse to enforce the Governor's orders saying, 'Well, if you're a county clerk and you don't like the law, go ahead and start handing out marriage licenses to same-sex couples.' These same sheriffs would have been horrified had that happened."

Most militia members I met subscribed to a version of constitutional fundamentalism that is inseparable from their Christian faith. The only legitimate role of government, they believe, is the protection of individual liberties vouchsafed to humanity by God. Plenty of mainstream Republicans share this philosophy, and during the pandemic they have struggled to reconcile it with the need to manage a public-health catastrophe. In Michigan and elsewhere, some Republican politicians have adopted the position, often espoused by militias, that no scenario warrants infringing on divinely given

rights.



*"Listen, lady—you order it drunk, I'm delivering it drunk."*  
Cartoon by Will McPhail

After the April 30th rally, Mike Shirkey, the Republican Senate majority leader who sang “It Is Well with My Soul” before voting to extend Whitmer’s emergency powers, released a statement criticizing the demonstrators for using “intimidation and the threat of physical harm to stir up fear and rancor.” He added, “At best, those so-called protesters are a bunch of jackasses.”

But the national divide over *COVID-19* had since grown sharply partisan, and Shirkey, perhaps fearing for his political survival, had come to Rosa Parks Circle with hat in hand—or, rather, with a Bible and a bound copy of the Constitution in hand. After Sheriff Leaf left the stage, Shirkey took the microphone: “One book gives us our rights, assigns them to us, is inalienable. The other book is supposed to defend our rights.” Sometimes politicians got it backward, he said. Gesturing at the armed men around the square, Shirkey concluded, “That’s when these groups need to stand up and test that assertion of authority by the government. We need you now more than ever.”

The Senate majority leader’s volte-face suggested that, however fringe some anti-lockdown protesters might seem, they were more ahead of the Republican Party than to the right of it. Trump had intuited this early. After the first anti-lockdown protest at the capitol, he tweeted, “LIBERATE MICHIGAN!”—distilling into two words the Three Percenter world view.

If the comparison of Karl Manke to Rosa Parks captures how some conservative Americans perceive themselves, their frequent insistence that anti-lockdown measures are analogous to the policies of the Third Reich suggests what they believe to be at stake. Though Nazi imagery was common at the rallies, most protesters used it to accuse Whitmer—whom some of them have taken to calling Whitler—of governing like a dictator, not to endorse fascism. The Nazis were also a topic of conversation in Manke’s barbershop, which, for his supporters, represented a bulwark against the kind of creeping authoritarianism that gradually engulfed Germany during the nineteen-thirties. Manke, who grew up attending Lutheran services in German and speaking German with his grandfather, often cited the Jewish victims of the Holocaust as a cautionary tale.

“They would trade their liberty for security,” he told a customer one day. “Because the Nazis told them, ‘Get in these cattle cars, and we’re gonna take you to a nice, safe place. Just get in.’ ”

“I would rather die than have the government tell me what to do,” the man in the chair responded.

In mid-May, after the local sheriff declined to arrest Manke, Attorney General Nessel suspended his business license. “It’s tyrannical!” Manke told journalists. “I’m not getting in the cattle car!” (Several weeks later, the Michigan Supreme Court decided that Manke could keep his shop open. One justice admonished that judges should follow the “rule of law, not hysteria.”)

Manke’s 2015 novel, “[Age of Shame](#),” recounts the travails of Rhena Nowak, a thirteen-year-old Polish Jew, during the Second World War. After her family is killed by the S.S. and she is raped by a German sergeant, Rhena is loaded into a cattle car. Manke writes, “Millions of Jews have already been moved through this process with little to no resistance, holding true to their centuries-old compliance to their weakness toward fatalism.” However, he adds, a few outliers “are not cut out to become willing participants in this collapse of strength.” Rhena pries loose the wooden slats nailed over a window and leaps from the train, earning her freedom. In my signed copy of “Age of Shame,” Manke wrote, “History unheeded is history repeated.”

Manke and his customers were not only fighting against tyranny; they were also fighting *for* something. Everyone in the barbershop harbored a uniquely American veneration of work—which, especially in Michigan, the Republican Party has succeeded in equating with freedom. The first right-to-work campaign was spearheaded, in the nineteen-thirties, by the Christian American Association, which condemned the New Deal as a Jewish plot and organized labor as a threat to Jim Crow segregation, warning that unions would force white and Black workers into alliance. By 2012, when the Koch brothers and the Michigan Freedom Fund resurrected the term “right to work” for their own anti-union crusade, its origins had been forgotten. Today, for many Americans, working is an expression of liberty as sacrosanct as the right to bear arms.

Though lockdown advocates accuse detractors of refusing to make personal sacrifices during a national crisis—and, therefore, of being the opposite of patriotic—detractors reject the premise that we are in a crisis. Doubt about the seriousness of COVID-19 circumvents any question of selfishness: social distancing is for benighted conformists, or “sheeple.” This may explain why otherwise reasonable conservatives who object to lockdown measures on ideological grounds can sometimes be receptive to conspiracy theories and

outlandish quackery.

Jane Ward, a middle-aged resident of Owosso and one of the few women at the barbershop, told me that she had come for the company, after experiencing depression while isolated at home. “I’ve had all-time lows,” she said. “The Governor doesn’t address mental wellness—only the virus.”

A man sitting beside us told her, “That’s what they’re counting on, that people don’t talk to each other.” He wore a leather racing jacket, an American-flag bandanna tied around his neck, and a hunting knife on his belt. A crucifix was tattooed on the back of his hand. “That’s what the social distancing is for.”

“Right,” Ward said.

The man explained that the government was working with a “facial-recognition company in Israel” to conduct “mass-scanning”—but people needed to be “spaced apart for it to work.”

I was about to cite the potential benefit of masks in thwarting such technology when another customer said, “They have refined it to the point where all they need to see is the eyes.”

Ward said, “Like, what’s the movie—‘The Matrix’? I mean, I can relate so much of this to so many movies.”



*"I just want a man who will make me laugh as we count his family's money on his rock-hard abs."*  
Cartoon by Karl Stevens

The online video “Plandemic,” which features Judy Mikovits, a former biochemistry researcher whose career was dogged by accusations of misconduct, has accrued a devoted anti-lockdown audience. (Mikovits denies any wrongdoing.) The video posits that [Anthony Fauci](#), the director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, and one of the leaders of the White House Coronavirus Task Force, was complicit in the release of *COVID-19*, and has suppressed effective treatments and falsified epidemiological data in order to benefit patent holders of harmful vaccines.

On May 20th, the Michigan Freedom Fund organized a second protest at the state capitol, where Manke and more than a dozen female stylists gave free haircuts on the steps and lawn. Hundreds of people attended. Marlene Palicz, an elderly protester in a *MAGA* hat, told me that “Faux-Fauci” and the “Democrats” had orchestrated the “plandemic” to prevent Trump’s reëlection. Bill Gates wished to depopulate the world by fifteen per cent, which is why Palicz would never submit to a *COVID-19* vaccine. “They’d have to tie me down,” she said. “But they’d have a problem doing that. I used to be a member of the Detroit Judo Club.”

The daughter of a coal miner, Palicz had “evolved from Democrat to Republican to Libertarian to Tea Party.” Now she was a diehard Trumper. She’d attended at least a dozen of the President’s rallies. “I’ve been to them in blizzards!” she said. “That’s when I feel most alive. The people, the energy—it’s unbelievable.”

Barack Obama easily carried Michigan in both of his elections, but in 2016 [Hillary Clinton](#) lost there, by a little more than ten thousand votes. For Trump to defeat [Joe Biden](#) in the general election, he will likely have to repeat the upset in Michigan. Throughout the pandemic, Trump has shown a special interest in the state, encouraging protesters while belittling Whitmer and Nessel. White House officials have also cultivated the loyalty of science skeptics like Palicz by disparaging Fauci, who recently joined Biden in calling for a temporary nationwide mask mandate. “Trump is the only one who can handle what’s going on, the only one,” Palicz told me—something no Democrat has been known to say about Biden. Although Trump’s consistent undermining of his own experts makes his Administration look dysfunctional, it has reinforced his outsider status—a singularly important quality to Americans who are more concerned about government overreach than they are about *COVID-19*.

In current polls, Biden leads Trump by nearly eight points in Michigan, but if 2016 was any indication turnout will be a decisive factor in November, and residents inflamed by Whitmer's policies are highly motivated to get out the vote. Moreover, the relatively modest number of protesters at anti-lockdown rallies likely belies a much larger demographic. On April 9th, before any protests had occurred, Garrett Soldano, a chiropractor from Onsted, created a Facebook group called Michiganders Against Excessive Quarantine. He expected to attract perhaps a few hundred followers. Within a month, the group had more than four hundred thousand members. As enrollment skyrocketed, Soldano told me, he spoke with Republican state senators, via Zoom, "to figure out what we needed to do."

In early May, Facebook deleted several similar accounts whose comments sections had devolved into profane, misogynistic attacks on Whitmer. Michiganders Against Excessive Quarantine was more stringently moderated, but Soldano said that he couldn't keep up: "There was obviously a lot of hate comments on there, because people are frustrated." (Soldano added that he and his family had been relentlessly harassed by "the other side"; one anonymous caller threatened to slit his children's throats.) On May 12th, a member of the group remarked, "Hopefully, Nuremberg style hearings will commence to shine the light on everyone who has had a hand in this whole pandemic." Another said, of Whitmer, "She is literally killing people, she must be stopped." That afternoon, Michiganders Against Excessive Quarantine vanished.

In an e-mail, a Facebook spokesperson said that the group had been removed "for repeated violations of our Community Standards," but wouldn't specify which ones. Soldano told me that Facebook reprimanded him for "advocating the spread of disease" after he live-streamed a video from Manke's barbershop. When Soldano set up a new page on Facebook, his followers joined him there. Facebook's censorship had only intensified their sense of dispossession: "They took away our stories, our truth! Disgusting!" It had also deepened their belief that invisible forces were out to control them, galvanizing their determination to fight back: "You just added fuel to the fire"; "**THERE'S AN INFERNAL BURNING.**"

In addition to owning two chiropractic offices, Soldano is a motivational speaker and the author of a self-help book, "God's True Law," in which he writes that disease can be "caused by interferences in the natural vibrational frequencies." Last year, Soldano became a national director of Juice Plus+, a dietary-

supplement company with a multilevel marketing strategy. (Such business models have been likened to pyramid schemes.) Two days after Michiganders Against Excessive Quarantine was expelled from Facebook, Soldano launched a Web site called Stand Up Michigan, whose home page includes a video of him wearing a blue suit with a pocket square. “We want to be the lantern in the darkness of today’s challenges,” he proclaims.

The Web site promised paying subscribers “relevant and timely information on current issues” and “expert insight and education.” An online store sold backpacks (a hundred and ninety dollars), yard signs (a hundred and fifty dollars), and other merchandise. Most of the products showcased the Stand Up Michigan logo: a silhouette of Paul Revere on a galloping horse, holding a lantern.

Across America, seemingly grassroots mobilizations against lockdown policies have turned out to be partly financed or directed by Republican donors and operatives. The chairman of the Michigan Freedom Fund is a former political adviser to Betsy DeVos’s husband, Richard, who is the heir to Amway—another multilevel-marketing company. The DeVoses have contributed at least half a million dollars to the organization. According to Soldano, Stand Up Michigan has received no outside financial support. (He also told me that he has “not taken a penny” from the Web site’s proceeds.) He said that the Republican state senators with whom he spoke advised him to launch a petition to repeal a 1945 law that allowed Whitmer to issue executive orders without legislative approval. “That gave us a goal that we needed to achieve,” Soldano explained.

On May 21st, Soldano put on an event called the Freedom Festival, in Newaygo, a town on the Muskegon River. In a park with an outdoor amphitheatre, hundreds of people congregated. Corporate-looking banners read “*EQUIP AND EMPOWER*”; tables under tents offered Stand Up Michigan apparel. Soldano led the crowd in chants of “U.S.A.” He then issued a confounding series of words with such ardent emotion that it was hard not to be moved by them: “Every action is a call set in motion, and its effects build on past effects, to move us into a definite direction. That direction is our destiny. That direction is the new America!” Later, he implored, “Buy some T-shirts—support the movement.”

It was a beautiful, sunny afternoon. Everyone seemed thrilled to be outside, breathing freely. As at the barbershop and in the deleted Facebook groups, a shared experience of feeling shamed and ostracized had fostered embattled

solidarity. It wasn't only the government that had lost its bearings but society as a whole. Whitmer's overzealous restrictions were symptomatic of the same ubiquitous insanity that afflicted people who wore masks while alone in their cars, or who refused to hug loved ones. The folks in Newaygo, many of whom had travelled from distant counties, were clearly gratified to be in the company of like-minded citizens. I spent most of the Freedom Festival next to a middle-aged man in a Stand Up Michigan hat and shirt, who had a revolver in a leather holster on his belt. His happiness was palpable. He resembled a worshipper at a Baptist revival, punctuating the speeches with "Yes!" and "All right!"

At one point, the owner of a mixed-martial-arts studio told the crowd that he had reopened his gym after researching COVID-19 and concluding that widespread exposure to it would "perpetuate and move the species throughout history." My neighbor applauded as fervently as he had for an attorney who had denounced the unconstitutionality of executive orders. When Toby Keith's "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue" came on, he turned to me and said, "I love this music! I love this, brother!" He scanned the park, taking it all in. "*These are my people.*"

In 1964, the year that Barry Goldwater won the Republican Presidential nomination, Richard Hofstadter published his celebrated essay "[The Paranoid Style in American Politics](#)," which cautioned against dismissing as a marginal phenomenon the tendency toward "heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy." Hofstadter also identified a dangerous consequence of this mentality: "Since what is at stake is always a conflict between absolute good and absolute evil, what is necessary is not compromise but the will to fight things out to a finish."

The belief that such a battle is forthcoming, and maybe desirable, underlies a growing subset of the broader anti-government scene. In 2012, users on the Web site 4chan appropriated the title of "Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo"—a 1984 movie about break dancing, starring Black actors and directed by an Israeli-American—to ironically dub their anticipated armed insurrection Civil War 2: Electric Boogaloo. White supremacists, envisaging the Boogaloo as a race war, popularized the meme online, and since then the concept has been adopted and modified by Second Amendment advocates, preppers, survivalists, and conspiracy-minded youth. An alternative name for the Boogaloo is the Big Luau, and every anti-lockdown protest I attended in Michigan had at least a few so-called Boogaloo Bois, who were easily identifiable by their signature ensemble: Hawaiian shirt, flak jacket, assault rifle.

When I asked them for their names, most responded, “I am Duncan Lemp.” Lemp was a twenty-one-year-old software developer who, in right-wing chat forums, called himself a Three Percenter. On March 12th, a *SWAT* team searching for illegal firearms killed Lemp while he was asleep in his house, in Potomac, Maryland. (The team had a no-knock warrant, like the one used by the police who, on March 13th, killed Breonna Taylor, in Louisville, Kentucky.) Lemp’s death has energized Boogaloo enthusiasts in the way that Vicki and Sammy Weaver’s did the modern militia movement, in the nineties. So, too, have *COVID-19* lockdowns.

“It seems like it gets closer every day,” a twenty-eight-year-old named Justin Mishler told me, at the rally in Grand Rapids. Although he lives in Illinois, where he is a full-time student, Mishler rarely missed a protest in Michigan, driving in alone in his S.U.V. He was different from other Boogaloo Bois, many of whom resembled heavily armed cosplayers more than dangerous revolutionaries. (One Hawaiian-shirted kid wore green Army ammo pouches that were usually stocked with Slim Jims.) Mishler had joined the Marine Corps after high school and had deployed to Afghanistan, as an infantryman. The M16 that he brought to the protests had the same pistol grip, magazine, charging handle, and bolt carrier with which he had customized his rifle overseas. He didn’t wear Hawaiian shirts. “The way I look at it, joining the service was patriotic, and this is just an extension of that,” Mishler told me. “A lot of people like to call it Civil War 2, but it’s more American Revolution 2.”



*In 2012, at the age of twenty-nine, Sarah Anthony became the youngest Black woman in America to serve as a county commissioner. Six years later, a landslide victory made her the first Black woman to represent Lansing in the Michigan legislature. Photograph by Mark Peterson / Redux for The New Yorker*

The Boogaloo movement can be divided into two camps. One looks at America, decides that war with the state is inevitable, and deems it prudent to be ready. The other looks at America, decides that such a war is necessary, and deems it righteous to hurry things along. Adherents of this latter view are sometimes called “accelerationists,” and they differ from most militia members, who hew to a principle of “no first use of force.” To date, accelerationism has largely been restricted to the Internet. On May 29th, however, a gunman fired an assault rifle at security guards outside a federal building in Oakland, California, killing one and wounding another. About a week later, investigators surrounded the home of a suspect: Steven Carrillo, a thirty-two-year-old sergeant in the Air Force. Carrillo fired on the officers, killing a deputy, then hijacked a car in an attempted escape, which ended with his capture. During the shootout, Carrillo was wounded, and he used his blood to write “*BOOG*” on the hood of the stolen vehicle.

The next month, Facebook banned Boogaloo proponents from its platform, erasing more than a hundred groups. I had been monitoring several of them. The discussions had tended to revolve around defining Boogaloo priorities—a debate often reduced to who should be “yeeted,” or killed. The general tone of trollish causticness and misanthropy was distinct from anything I heard at the anti-lockdown rallies, whose participants could often be defensive, earnest, and shrill. The online groups were rife with racism, and anti-Semitic postings were prevalent: Jews were behind all manner of diabolism that the Boogaloo would remedy, from the media to child pornography. At the same time, nearly every hateful comment was met with incensed responses from other Bois, for whom the Boogaloo meant universal emancipation from government oppression.

When I asked Mishler what political system he hoped to see emerge post-Boogaloo, he answered, “Extreme libertarianism.” He repudiated any talk of racial violence and, like many Bois, seemed to assume that maximum freedom would lead to maximum equality. “We want gay married couples adopting Chinese kids to be able to protect their marijuana fields with their machine guns,” I heard him say, at a rally in Lansing, to a Jewish counterprotester who wore a Star of David armband.

That day, *Newsweek* published a photograph of Mishler standing outside the statehouse with his rifle. Hillary Clinton tweeted the image. “Armed men

storming a legislature to disrupt its democratic proceedings is domestic terrorism,” she wrote. “It cannot be tolerated.”

I later asked Mishler how it felt, as a combat veteran, to be called a terrorist by a former U.S. Secretary of State.

He smiled. “It takes a lot to make me upset,” he said.

When Sarah Anthony, the state representative, live-streamed the video from her office at the capitol, one of her constituents, Michael Lynn, Jr., watched it with a rising feeling of anger at the protesters. Lynn, an African-American firefighter who, like Anthony, grew up in Lansing, could see that she was afraid. “I took that personally,” he said. “I feel like, when Black and brown people elevate a person from our community to that level, we can’t allow her to be intimidated to speak for us.” A week later, Lynn, his wife, Erica, and their twenty-year-old son, Michael III—all licensed gun owners—escorted Anthony from her office to an Appropriations Committee hearing. Lynn and Michael III carried assault rifles; Erica, a pistol. Anthony, an advocate of gun-law reform, had been reluctant at first. But she later told me, “I will say that I felt safer.”

In 1967, Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, the founders of the [Black Panthers](#), led a group of armed African-Americans into the California statehouse, in Sacramento, to protest a Republican-sponsored bill that would criminalize guns in public. Photographs of the demonstration shocked the country. After Governor Ronald Reagan signed the bill—which received the endorsement of the National Rifle Association—he declared, “There’s no reason why, on the street today, a citizen should be carrying loaded weapons.” Like the Panthers—and, before them, Malcolm X—Michael Lynn treats gun ownership as a means of empowerment. After escorting Anthony, Lynn and his wife and son lingered on the capitol steps, posing with their weapons for journalists. Lynn told me that he wanted to “change the narrative—show that we can do this, too.”

I met Lynn on May 15th, the day that Hillary Clinton called Justin Mishler a terrorist. The Lansing legislature had adjourned in anticipation of the rally, forestalling the possibility of armed protesters again filling the rotunda. Lynn disapproved of the closure. “That shows people that ‘Damn, we can go down there and get whatever we want, if we bring guns,’ ” he said.

Anthony and other Democratic lawmakers had tried, unsuccessfully, to persuade

their Republican colleagues to ban weapons from the statehouse. But, for Lynn, the pandemic had revealed a more ominous danger, which no amount of regulation could neutralize. He had recently created a Facebook page, Black and Brown 2a Advocates, to help encourage and expand minority gun ownership in Lansing. “You see these white groups—they’re stockpiling ammunition while everybody else is stockpiling toilet paper,” he said. “We need to protect our own.”

Ten days later, [George Floyd](#) was killed, in Minneapolis. I crossed paths with Lynn again that week, at the first protest that Floyd’s death inspired in Michigan: a rally at the state capitol, organized by a Black firearms instructor from Detroit. All the attendees carried weapons, and most belonged to the National African American Gun Association, which promotes “the usage of the Second Amendment to protect our community when all other methods fail.” Lynn, wearing an assault rifle slung across his chest, addressed the crowd, saying that what saddened him most about Floyd’s murder was the fact that no bystander had intervened. “I’m here to swear to all of you that, if I see that happening, I will do as I’ve been trained, and I will stop the threat,” he vowed. He recited a litany of now famous names—Ahmaud Arbery, Michael Brown, Philando Castile, Tamir Rice, Eric Garner—and, at the end, he added one that is less familiar: his childhood friend Aldric McKinstry.

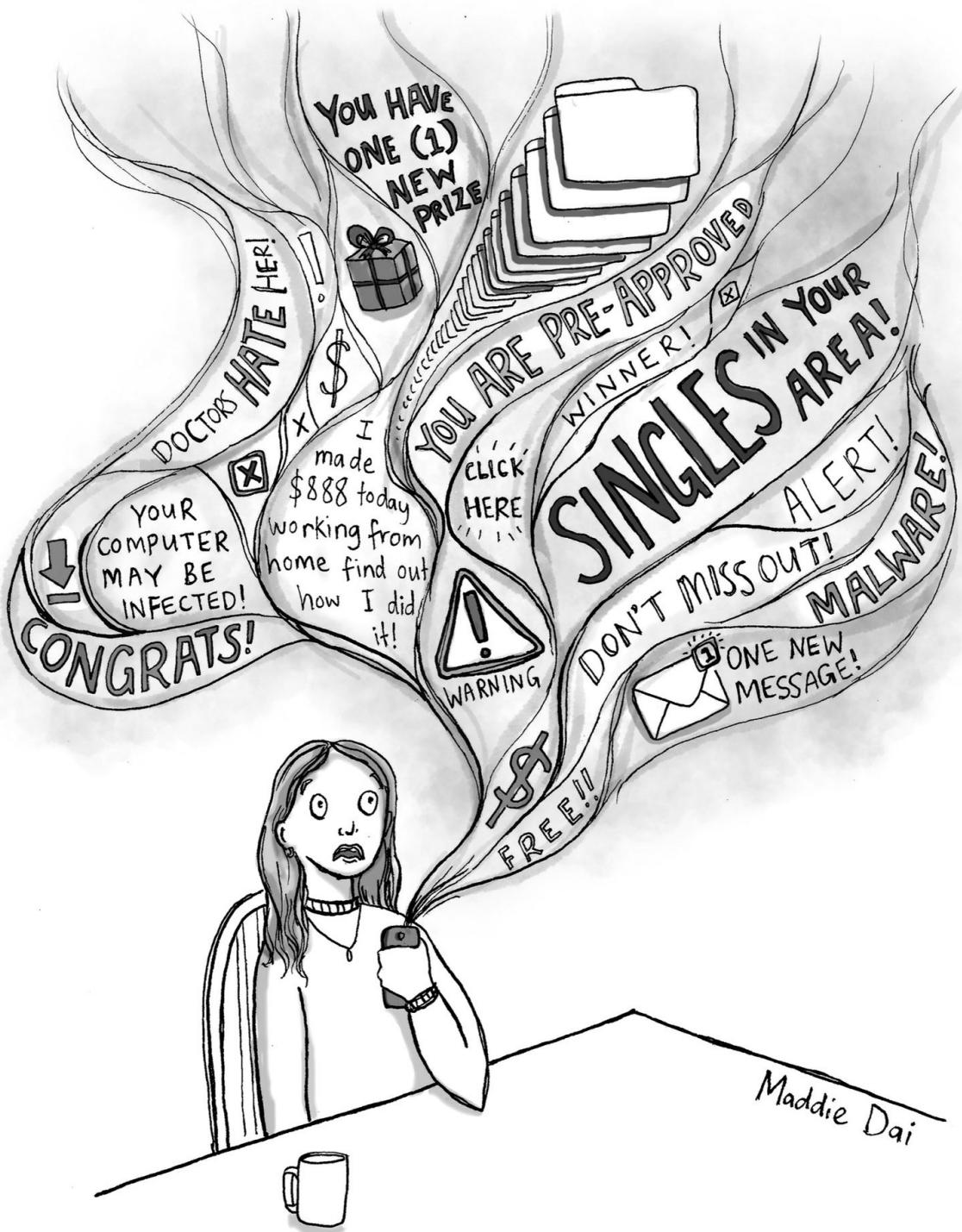
In 1999, when Lynn and McKinstry were teen-agers, they were at a party in a Lansing apartment when squad cars arrived. McKinstry fled, was pursued, and hid in someone’s basement. The police released a German shepherd through a storm hatch. Later, they claimed that McKinstry fired on the dog. Officers shot him six times. Lynn insists that McKinstry had no gun. [An article](#) in the *Lansing Journal* showed a photograph of Lynn at McKinstry’s funeral. “They are just trying to justify killing him,” Lynn was quoted as saying. None of the officers involved were disciplined.

Since McKinstry’s death, much of Lynn’s life has been consumed by community activism. He and Erica, whom he met in high school, run a nonprofit organization, the Village Lansing, which provides mentoring and other services for local youth. Lynn became a Lansing firefighter in 2014, but last year he sued the city, alleging that racial discrimination pervaded the department. He says that he lodged numerous complaints, all of which resulted in further retaliation. The abuse culminated with someone placing a banana under the windshield wiper of his truck.

At the capitol, Lynn sounded exasperated: “We can no longer throw our hands in the air and say, ‘I can’t breathe.’ ” He went on, “When we start taking up arms, and people start dying in the streets when they are killing us, that’s when change will come.”

During the next several weeks, demonstrations for racial justice took place across the state. In Grand Rapids, a peaceful march that began in Rosa Parks Circle gave way to rioting at night. Businesses were looted and cars were burned. Similar unrest occurred in Lansing. On June 4th, Governor Whitmer—after weeks of admonishing anti-lockdown protesters for potentially spreading *COVID-19*—joined thousands of marchers in Detroit. For her critics, photographs showing her shoulder to shoulder with Black community leaders proved that she had politicized the virus.

Whitmer’s supporters, meanwhile, pointed out that her policies appeared to have worked. By mid-June, Michigan’s economy had begun to reopen, and *COVID-19* cases had fallen significantly. Hospitalizations had decreased to a tenth of their peak. On July 5th, Michigan reported zero *COVID*-related deaths for the first time since March, even as the virus surged in states that rejected early lockdowns, such as Texas, Arizona, and Florida. Michigan’s numbers have stayed relatively low in August, though the restrictions have been costly: unemployment, at almost fifteen per cent, far exceeds the national rate, and more than eight hundred small businesses have permanently closed in Detroit alone.



Maddie Dai

PANDORA'S INBOX

After George Floyd was killed, there were no lockdown protests in Michigan for several weeks. But on June 18th the American Patriot Council held another rally in Lansing. This time, the theme was not anti-Whitmer but, instead, pro-militia. Attendees were encouraged to bring weapons and flags. The event was scheduled for the eve of Juneteenth—the day when African-Americans celebrate the end of slavery—which was difficult not to interpret as a provocation.

In Lansing, rioting connected to Floyd's death had lasted a single evening. Every night since then, protesters had gathered at the state capitol and marched peacefully through downtown, led by a thirty-four-year-old named Paul Birdsong. Unaffiliated with Black Lives Matter or any other activist organization, Birdsong had attracted a following after confronting aggressive police officers at an early Floyd demonstration. The role came naturally to him. His father was one of the founders of the West Side Piru, a Los Angeles street gang that evolved into the Bloods; today, Birdsong oversees Bloods in multiple states and describes himself as a gang leader. The impetus for the West Side Piru was to defend Black neighborhoods from the Crips, an older and larger Los Angeles gang. Although many Bloods came to engage in the same rapacious activities as their rivals, Birdsong claims to uphold the original Piru code: "To live, love, and learn, and to keep each other off strong drugs, out of jail, and from dying." He sees no distinction between fighting Crips and demonstrating against police brutality. "We will stand up to any destructive forces that attempt to invade and pollute our communities," he told me.

Birdsong also emulates Malcolm X, who grew up in Lansing and whose family home was burned down by a white-supremacist militia in 1929, when he was four. During marches, Birdsong usually carries a handgun; other protesters bring assault rifles.

When I arrived at the capitol on June 18th, at 6 P.M., hundreds of armed white citizens were already at the base of the steps. A man and a woman wearing Stand Up Michigan T-shirts collected signatures to repeal the 1945 state-of-emergency law. The petition had grown considerably more ambitious since April, and now proposed extensive amendments to Michigan's constitution, including abolishing the state's civil-rights commission. Michelle Gregoire, of the Michigan Home Guard, chatted with Phil Robinson, of the Michigan Liberty Militia; each had a semi-automatic rifle. When I mentioned to Robinson that Birdsong had been protesting at the capitol every night, and would probably be arriving soon, he

said, “That would be awesome.” I asked if he was worried about potential conflict. He laughed. “Have you looked around? You’d be a fool to come here and start shit.”

Three days earlier, in Albuquerque, members of the New Mexico Civil Guard militia had confronted protesters attempting to topple a statue of a Spanish conquistador. When the altercation led to somebody shooting a protester—he survived—the militia members formed a protective circle around the gunman, who was charged with aggravated battery but has claimed self-defense. Robinson told me that, if anyone assaulted him, he was “gonna do the same thing” as the gunman in New Mexico.

The head of the American Patriot Council, a real-estate agent from Grand Rapids named Ryan Kelley, hurried about, greeting attendees. I asked him why he was putting on the event. “Chaos across the United States,” Kelley replied. “Antifa taking over areas of the country. People not feeling safe.” President Trump—who can be seen standing beside Kelley in Kelley’s Facebook profile picture, giving a thumbs-up—had recently announced his intention to designate Antifa as a terrorist organization. Although no national organization called Antifa exists, some activists who identify as anti-fascists have responded to the rise of right-wing ideologues by impeding them—at times violently—from publicly speaking and assembling. Trump has increasingly invoked Antifa as evidence of a vast left-wing menace bent on sowing discord in America. In casting the widespread mobilization against racism as the work of state enemies, he has echoed such segregationists as William Potter Gale, who ascribed the civil-rights movement to a Communist plot to divide Americans.

I asked Kelley why his rallies had evolved from addressing *COVID-19* policies to addressing domestic security. “*COVID* is nonsense,” he said. “And so the evolution of that is the Democratic Party continuing to do anything they can to get Trump out of office—including hiring people to riot and loot in our streets.”

A young African-American with an assault rifle, who had been following Kelley around, now stood silently beside him. When I asked Kelley if the man was his bodyguard, he said, “You can say that. Yeah, we’ll roll with that.”

“I’m an independent American,” the man told me.

A few minutes later, Kelley climbed the steps and spoke to the Lansing police

officers monitoring the scene: “We say thank you for being here. Thank you for standing up for our communities.”

I was surprised by the applause this tribute received. Before Floyd’s death, much of the anti-lockdown anger had been directed at law enforcement. Protesters at the April 30th rally had called the officers guarding the Michigan House chamber “traitors” and “filthy rats.” Karl Manke’s customers had told me that the state police who served Manke with a cease-and-desist order were “Storm Troopers.” When officers issued citations to some of the female stylists at the second Michigan Freedom Fund rally, protesters likened them to the Gestapo. “People like me used to fucking back you!” an Iraq War veteran carrying an American flag had shouted. “But you are trash!” Several of the officers being praised by Kelley were the same ones who’d been berated that day.

“There’s a lot of chaos right now,” Kelley said. It broke his heart “to see elected politicians telling police to stand down.”

Suddenly, a group of young people appeared on the lawn. Among them was Birdsong. Notably taller than those around him, he had the thick but rounded build of a former athlete, and he wore red Chuck Taylors, black shorts, and a red bandanna tied around his wrist. Walking into the crowd of pro-militia demonstrators, he lay face down and crossed his hands behind his back, reënacting George Floyd’s final minutes. The other counter-protesters followed his lead. None had weapons. Some wore empty holsters. Birdsong later told me that he had forbidden guns.

“What are we gonna do here, guys?” Kelley said into the microphone. “What are we gonna do?”

The militia members and their supporters called Birdsong and the counter-protesters “faggots,” “pieces of shit,” “pussies,” and “fucking inbreds.” Birdsong lifted his head from the pavement and told those lying around him, “Don’t say anything.”

Kelley shouted, “We will not stand for the destruction of our state, of our country, of our citizens! You will not terrorize us!”



*Michael Lynn, Jr., and his wife, Erica, escorted Anthony from her office to an Appropriations Committee hearing. Lynn carried an assault rifle; Erica, a pistol. “I feel like, when Black and brown people elevate a person from our community to that level, we can’t allow her to be intimidated to speak for us,” he said. Photograph by Mark Peterson / Redux for The New Yorker*

An older man in a Michigan Home Guard hat appeared enraged by the passivity of the demonstration. Leaning over the prostrate bodies, he barked, “Stand up! Your grandfathers and your uncles and your brothers—every one of them that fought for our country is ashamed of you!”

Eventually, Birdsong rose. When a woman yelled at him, “This is our state!,” he replied, “This is our city. We live here. You don’t live here. In my city, you don’t threaten anybody.”

“A mouth, that’s all you are,” a man in an ammo vest and a Hawaiian shirt said. In the middle of his chest was a patch with the Latin adage *Si vis pacem, para bellum*: “If you want peace, prepare for war.” He told Birdsong, “I can look at you and tell you’re a weak fucking man.”

Birdsong silently held the man’s stare, then turned his back. Later, when I asked about this moment, he said, “That’s the Piru training. I refuse to be provoked.”

One of the American Patriot Council organizers walked through the counter-protesters, filming them with his phone. Standing over a white man who was clothed in black and wearing a face mask, the organizer announced, “This is Antifa!”

At first, Phil Robinson and the rest of the Michigan Liberty Militia attempted to de-escalate tensions, urging people to give the counter-protesters space. But when Birdsong and others raised their fists Robinson lost his equanimity. “Coming here, disrupting our event?” he yelled. “They have no respect for anybody!”

A heavyset man with a rifle in a scabbard on his back told Robinson, “Don’t fucking worry about it, brother. This fucking shit ain’t nothing.”

Robinson jabbed the man in the sternum. “If these motherfuckers wanna go up a calibre, I am ready,” he said. “I am ready.”

After a while, Kelley and several other rally organizers pulled Birdsong aside. When Birdsong stated that the Constitution meant something different for African-Americans, whose enslavement it had allowed, Kelley said, “Slavery has been abolished. That has all changed.”

“No, it hasn’t,” Birdsong said. “The torture, the oppression, the beatings—it’s just done in a different way.”

A discussion of sorts ensued, but Kelley seemed most interested in being photographed, and kept interrupting Birdsong to demand that journalists take their picture. At one point, he suggested that Birdsong recite the Pledge of Allegiance with him on the capitol steps. Birdsong agreed—if Kelley would raise his fist with him. Kelley declined. Shortly afterward, he said, “I gotta get back to the rally.” Smiling for the cameras, shaking Birdsong’s hand, he told him, “I think this conversation should continue.”

Three days later, the American Patriot Council published an article on its Web site describing Birdsong as a “local thug” and “an ongoing problem in the community.” The article also mentioned Michael Lynn, Jr., calling the Lansing firefighter a “gang banger.”

According to a recent Brookings Institution analysis of American gun purchases, “almost three million more firearms have been sold since March than would have ordinarily been sold.” Most of the people I met in Michigan, no matter their politics, had one thing in common: a diminished faith in the government as a reliable authority, whether to administer justice or to keep its citizens safe and healthy.

In the first days of the pandemic, Trump attempted to do what Presidents traditionally do in a crisis: unify the country. “We must sacrifice together, because we are all in this together,” he said. Presenting himself as a “wartime President,” he called *COVID-19* “the invisible enemy” of all Americans.

By the summer, Trump had set his sights on a different enemy. On the eve of July 4th, he addressed the country from Mt. Rushmore. Barely mentioning the virus, which had killed more than a hundred and thirty thousand Americans, he instead warned of “a merciless campaign to wipe out our history, defame our heroes, erase our values, and indoctrinate our children.” The people behind this scourge were agents of “far-left fascism” determined “to overthrow the American Revolution.” He intimated civil conflict: “Tonight, before the eyes of our forefathers, Americans declare again, as we did two hundred and forty-four years ago, that we will not be tyrannized—we will not be demeaned, and we will not be intimidated by bad, evil people.”

It was the language of the Boogaloo. ♦

---

## 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?](#)

## Our Local Correspondents

- [El sacerdote renegado que ayuda a los indocumentados a sobrevivir a la pandemia.](#)
- [The Renegade Priest Helping Undocumented People Survive the Pandemic](#)

# **El sacerdote renegado que ayuda a los indocumentados a sobrevivir a la pandemia**

Juan Carlos Ruiz, un pastor mexicano que vive en Brooklyn, hace de todo: desde defender los derechos humanos hasta entregar comestibles.

By [Jonathan Blitzer](#)

August 19, 2020



[Leer en inglés | Read in English](#)

En marzo, Victorino Narcizo desarrolló una tos seca. Él y su cuñado Fidel, inmigrantes indocumentados que vivían juntos desde hace una década, no se ponían de acuerdo sobre qué hacer. El jefe de Narcizo había amenazado con despedirlo si perdía un turno. Su madre, en México, dependía del dinero que enviaba a casa, así que decidió seguir trabajando. Tenía veinticinco años y, por lo demás, buena salud; dudaba que sus síntomas fueran graves. Fidel, sin embargo, argumentó: “Quédate en casa y mejora. Hay trabajo en todas partes. Esto es Nueva York”. Narcizo y Fidel se movían por la ciudad como un dúo, más como mejores amigos que como familia política, y compartían un apartamento tipo estudio en Harlem con dos compañeros de habitación que trabajaban en cocinas de restaurantes, tal como ellos.

Unos días después, Narcizo se despertó sin aliento, y él y Fidel se apuraron para llegar al hospital Mount Sinai Morningside, en la avenida Amsterdam. La sala de espera estaba abarrotada y un enfermero con cubrebocas y bata lo interceptó. “¿Por qué lo trajiste aquí?”, le preguntó a Fidel. “Vas a enfermar a otras personas”. Fidel intentó responder, pero su inglés trastabilló; se fueron aturdidos, con Narcizo apoyado en su cuñado. Finalmente, un amigo bilingüe los acompañó al hospital Bellevue, donde Narcizo fue ingresado. Fidel nunca lo volvió a ver. Narcizo murió el 1 de abril, uno de los veintiún mil neoyorquinos que sucumbieron a la *COVID-19* esta primavera.

Las siguientes semanas fueron una confusión de luto y de logística. Fidel le dio la noticia a la familia de Narcizo, que vive en el estado mexicano de Guerrero, y trató de recaudar dinero para la cremación entre amigos en Facebook. Pero como las empresas cerraron en respuesta a la pandemia, algunos de los amigos habían perdido sus trabajos y no tenían nada con que contribuir. Fidel siguió yendo a trabajar en un restaurante de sushi en el centro de Manhattan, mientras intentaba encontrar a alguien que se mudara al apartamento para cubrir el alquiler. Lo consumía una pregunta que no tenía ni tiempo ni energía para responder: si también había estado expuesto al virus, ¿por qué se salvó? Dos semanas después, el hospital llamó para advertir a Fidel que los funcionarios de la ciudad enterrarían a Narcizo en una fosa común si no hacía otros arreglos. Cuando Fidel comenzó a llamar a los familiares de Narcizo en Nueva York para pedirles consejo, un tío que acababa de ser despedido como sandwichero en una tienda de delicatessen del Bronx le dio el nombre de alguien que podría ayudar: Juan

Carlos Ruiz, un pastor mexicano de cincuenta y un años que dirige una congregación en Bay Ridge, Brooklyn.

Entre los inmigrantes indocumentados en la ciudad de Nueva York, Ruiz tiene fama de ser un defensor dedicado e implacable de su comunidad. Todo el mundo parece conocerlo o conocer a alguien que lo conoce, y no es difícil ver por qué. Un día reciente entregó comidas en tres apartamentos, recibió un camión lleno de alimentos donados por un tendero del Bronx, habló en una manifestación callejera en solidaridad con los trabajadores esenciales y visitó un hospital local para identificar los restos de un inmigrante. Otros pastores simplemente le han dado las llaves de sus iglesias. Últimamente, con una frecuencia sombría, ha hecho arreglos para entierros con descuento en una funeraria en Park Slope dirigida por un viejo amigo. Ruiz tiene parientes en Puebla y Guerrero y, debido a estos vínculos, los funcionarios y defensores de los derechos humanos de allá también dan su número de teléfono.



*Ruiz, cerca de Red Hook, Brooklyn, lleva comida para distribuir a las familias. Fotografía de Gaia Squarci para The New Yorker*

Durante su conversación telefónica, Ruiz le dijo a Fidel: “Yo me encargo de todo”.

Una fresca mañana de lunes, en mayo, me encontré con Fidel en la iglesia El Buen Pastor, un austero edificio de piedra gris con puertas rojas en la esquina de la Cuarta avenida y Bay Ridge Parkway. Un primo y dos amigos lo acompañaban—todos vestían sudaderas con capuchas negras y usaban mascarillas quirúrgicas—sentados en silencio alrededor de una mesa plegable dentro de la iglesia vacía. Habían viajado en metro durante una hora y media, desde el Alto Manhattan y el Bronx, para asistir a un funeral que Ruiz había organizado de forma gratuita.

Ruiz entró unos minutos después, con una bata blanca, seguido por su perro, un Bichón Habanero que ladraba mucho y llevaba un suéter. Ruiz es bajo y esbelto, luce una barba que sigue la línea de su barbilla y quijada, usa anteojos de montura cuadrada, y tiene el aire de quien está en constante actividad. Saludó a Fidel chocando los codos y guió a los hombres a las bancas, instruyendo a cada uno a sentarse en su propia fila. La esposa de Ruiz, Cinthya Briones, antropóloga y fotógrafa, entró con una cámara, y un amigo suyo, un oaxaqueño llamado Próspero, quien ha trabajado como voluntario en la iglesia durante el último año, instaló una videocámara. “Quieres que podamos filmar esto, ¿verdad?”, le preguntó Ruiz a Fidel, quien asintió. Tenía planeado enviar imágenes de la ceremonia a la familia de Narcizo. Para la ocasión había un programa sencillo, con una fotografía de Narcizo en blanco y negro, sonriendo, con una gorra de chef. Una urna con sus cenizas estaba colocada sobre una pequeña mesa de madera.

Haciendo un gesto hacia ella, al comenzar la ceremonia, Ruiz dijo: “El dolor es un gran abismo que nos invita a realizar un acto de fe”. Enumeró las dificultades que los hombres habían soportado: la muerte de Narcizo, sus perspectivas laborales cada vez más oscuras, la añoranza de su tierra, los temores de contraer el coronavirus y los recuerdos traumáticos del cruce de la frontera. Los bancos crujieron cuando los hombres asintieron. “Dios está ahí afuera”, dijo Ruiz. “Pero hay llamas en todas partes a nuestro alrededor, y el humo hace que sea muy difícil de ver”.

Durante la primavera y principios de verano, el celular de Ruiz sonaba sin cesar. La gente perdía su trabajo, pasaba hambre, enfermaba, moría. “Era como si

hubiera comenzado una guerra”, me dijo. Un hombre llamó a Ruiz a altas horas de la noche, después de pelear a puñetazos con su casero por el alquiler que no podía pagar ya que había perdido su trabajo. Ruiz escuchó de un inmigrante indocumentado que había estado viviendo durante varios días con el cadáver de su hermano en el apartamento que compartían; temía llamar a las autoridades de la ciudad pero no podía pagar a una funeraria para que recuperase el cadáver. Las autoridades de Guerrero buscaban regularmente consejos sobre cómo repatriar los restos de los lugareños que habían fallecido en Nueva York.

La pandemia ha devastado comunidades de inmigrantes y minorías, y mató a negros y latinos a tasas mucho más altas que el resto de la población; la recesión subsiguiente, en la que la ciudad de Nueva York ha perdido más de un millón de puestos de trabajo, los ha dejado desproporcionalmente sin empleo. Los indocumentados no califican para las prestaciones de desempleo o la indemnización por despido, y están excluidos de los programas de ayuda federal diseñados para aliviar el golpe financiero del coronavirus. Según la Oficina del Alcalde para Asuntos del Inmigrante, trescientos setenta y seis mil trabajadores y cuarenta y siete mil dueños de negocios son indocumentados. Aunque el alcalde Bill de Blasio y el gobernador Andrew Cuomo se jactan habitualmente de sus logros progresistas, ninguno ha financiado un fondo de ayuda para los indocumentados, a diferencia de gobiernos municipales y estatales en California, Oregón, Washington y Connecticut.



*El templo Church of the Good Shepherd, en Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, ha servido de base de operaciones para las actividades de ayuda por la pandemia. Fotografía de Gaia Squarci para The New Yorker*

En abril, la Open Society Foundations, la organización filantrópica fundada por el financiero liberal George Soros, donó veinte millones de dólares a la ciudad para ayudar a los inmigrantes. “Fue una intervención humanitaria”, me dijo Gregory Maniatis, director de la Iniciativa de Migración Internacional de la organización. “Pero vamos a satisfacer solo una pequeña parte de la necesidad de la comunidad”. El plan era impulsar las donaciones de otros filántropos, ya que los asesores del alcalde, que señalaban un déficit presupuestario, consideraban imposible gastar dinero público en asistencia directa en efectivo a neoyorquinos indocumentados. Sin embargo, hasta ahora ningún otro donante ha contribuido al fondo y el gobernador ha mantenido su distancia. “Cuomo no va a ganar o perder una elección debido a este problema”, me dijo un funcionario municipal.

Para Ruiz, el hecho de que el estado no ayude a cientos de miles de personas en situación desesperada es el último recordatorio de que los inmigrantes más vulnerables de la ciudad siempre han estado solos. Desde los años ochenta, me dijo, los centroamericanos se han visto cada vez más apretujados por la prensadora de la política de inmigración estadounidense y sus efectos cotidianos: trabajos mal pagados, aumento del costo de vida, operaciones de control de la inmigración en constante expansión. Ahora, dijo Ruiz, los inmigrantes se preguntaban si los beneficios de venir a Estados Unidos superaban los costos. Dijo: “Creo que estamos por llegar a la etapa en la que las cosas se estén poniendo tan malas que las personas que han sacrificado todo para venir aquí y trabajar en la ciudad de Nueva York duden si realmente vale la pena”.

Ruiz llegó a Estados Unidos en 1986, con sus propias dudas. Tenía dieciséis años y estudiaba para ser sacerdote católico en un seminario en San Luis Potosí, un estado en el centro de México, donde nació y se crió. Sus padres y cinco hermanos se habían mudado a Paterson, Nueva Jersey, más de un año antes, pero él no había querido irse con ellos. “Los mexicanos tenemos un sentido ambivalente del norte”, me dijo. (Le gusta citar un dicho popular: “Pobre México, tan lejos de Dios y tan cerca de los Estados Unidos”). Finalmente visitó a su familia con una visa de turista y planeaba regresar a casa para continuar su instrucción, pero dejarlos por segunda vez le resultó demasiado difícil.

Después de que expiró su visa, cayó en un limbo legal que duró ocho años. Durante ese tiempo, atendió a la escuela secundaria, la universidad y el seminario, pero no obtuvo un número de seguro social hasta los veinticuatro años. Su familia, que había ingresado al país legalmente, perdió su estatus luego

de no poder renovar sus visas. “Mis padres estuvieron en las sombras por los primeros dieciocho años de sus vidas en Estados Unidos”, me dijo. “Hay otro mundo aquí, la vida subterránea, la vida clandestina”. Descubrir la necesidad de curas bilingües para apoyar a esta población fue una epifanía para Ruiz, y una de las razones por las que decidió quedarse en Estados Unidos. Él y su familia finalmente obtuvieron tarjetas de residencia, pero nunca se despojó completamente del sentimiento de indocumentado. “Estás desconectado de la manera oficial y formal de hacer las cosas”, dijo. “Ignoras la ley. No la estás rompiendo, no intentas hacerlo. Pero está la sensación de que haces algo ilegal todo el tiempo y eso comienza a filtrarse en la vida cotidiana”.

En 1993, era un joven seminarista que vivía en el lado norte de Chicago cuando se hizo amigo del poeta y sacerdote jesuita Daniel Berrigan y su hermano, Philip, quienes habían cumplido condena en prisión por su activismo contra la guerra de Vietnam. Estaban involucrados con el Movimiento de Trabajadores Católicos y se oponían ferozmente al militarismo y los excesos del capitalismo estadounidense. “Pusieron sus cuerpos en juego y mi espíritu se despertó”, me dijo Ruiz. En América Latina, a partir de los años sesenta, un movimiento religioso conocido como la teología de la liberación llevó a los sacerdotes católicos a luchar contra las élites autoritarias por la igualdad económica y los derechos humanos. Ruiz, que había estudiado con uno de los fundadores del movimiento mientras vivía en Estados Unidos, encontró su expresión en las decaídas ciudades industriales de Indiana, donde predicaba en español los fines de semana. “En las ciudades de todo el país, había una clase de personas invisibles que trabajaban en los restaurantes, limpiaban las casas”, dijo. “¿Somos una iglesia si excluimos a estas personas?”

Unos años más tarde, después de regresar a la diócesis de Paterson, Ruiz fue destinado a una serie de pequeñas iglesias en la zona rural de Nueva Jersey. Al viajar entre pueblos como Parsippany, Sparta y Morristown, conoció a cientos de trabajadores agrícolas indocumentados que vivían en moteles miserables al borde de las carreteras y no tenían atención médica ni protección laboral. Ruiz persuadió a un hospital local para que administrara una clínica móvil en una autocaravana donada, y organizó un pequeño grupo de sacerdotes para formar lo que llamó el Ministerio de Migrantes. “Era una parroquia flotante”, dijo. “Una semana estaríamos en el área de Newton, una semana haríamos una misa en Parsippany. Se movería así, según donde estuvieran las poblaciones”. Si había algo que la iglesia católica tenía en abundancia era bienes raíces: las congregaciones en pueblos de mayoría blanca prestaban sus iglesias a Ruiz para

sus servicios religiosos. “La manera de involucrar al mundo es el evangelio social que dice que Dios se encuentra en los oprimidos, en los márgenes, más allá de nuestros límites. Para ser realmente una iglesia, debes ser relevante para tu comunidad. De lo contrario, solo somos un grupo de fanáticos y fundamentalistas”, dijo.

A principios de la década de 2000, Ruiz y el obispo que supervisaba la diócesis de Paterson estaban enfrascados en una serie de disputas sobre la necesidad de respetar la jerarquía de la iglesia y seguir las prácticas formales; sintió que el obispo quería que restringiese su trabajo pastoral a su propia parroquia y suavizase sus posturas políticas. Sin embargo, la mayoría de los desacuerdos eran personales y la iglesia puso a Ruiz en licencia. Se mudó a Nueva York, donde vivió dos años en el Hotel Chelsea, y comenzó a trabajar con un grupo de defensa de latinos llamada Asociación Tepeyac, que impulsaba una reforma migratoria integral. En Washington, las conversaciones legislativas comenzaban en una nueva atmósfera: el Departamento de Seguridad Nacional nació en 2003 y recibía recursos sin precedentes para llevar a cabo arrestos y deportaciones en nombre de la seguridad del país. El compromiso tradicional que contemplaron los líderes del Congreso—un camino hacia la ciudadanía para millones de inmigrantes indocumentados a cambio de estrictas medidas de ejecución—les pareció a algunos defensores de los derechos de los inmigrantes una apuesta con recompensa incierta.

Al poco tiempo, Ruiz se enfrentó a su jefe. (Este es un tema recurrente en su vida profesional; rara vez se ha quedado en un trabajo por mucho tiempo). Ruiz argumentó que los compromisos y los acuerdos legislativos socavaban todo el sentido de la reforma migratoria. En términos políticos, él estaba claramente equivocado, dada la composición del Congreso y la cautela del debate nacional; en términos morales, sintió que el caso era irrefutable. “Les dije ‘amnistía’ sería la palabra que necesitamos reivindicar: amnistía total, en el sentido religioso de la palabra”, recordó. Ese fue, por décadas, un tabú bipartidista en Washington. Los legisladores tendían a tolerar la compasión en la política de inmigración solo si pudieran acentuarla con dureza; el resultado fue un esquema en el que se financió la vigilancia para preparar el escenario para las medidas de legalización, que nunca se materializaron. “La tentación no está entre lo malo y lo bueno”, dijo Ruiz, parafraseando una lección que había aprendido de los Berrigan. “La tentación está entre lo bueno y lo mejor”.

En 2006, lanzó un nuevo proyecto, con Donna Schaper, pastora de la Judson

Memorial Church en Washington Square, un tradicional hogar de activismo progresista en la ciudad. Llamada Coalición Nuevo Santuario, fue un resurgimiento del movimiento activista de los años ochenta que había albergado a refugiados centroamericanos que huían de regímenes militares respaldados por Estados Unidos. La idea era formar una coalición de clérigos, abogados y activistas en toda la ciudad para brindar asistencia legal a quienes se encontraban en procedimientos de deportación y para acompañar a los inmigrantes cuando tenían citas en la corte o en la sede del Servicio de Control de Inmigración y Aduanas (*ICE*, por sus siglas en inglés). “La ausencia de perdón está escrita en el corazón de las leyes de inmigración”, me dijo Schaper. El trabajo de la coalición, dijo, era restaurar el sentido de dignidad humana a la ley y hacer frente a la nueva realidad del Departamento de Seguridad Nacional. En palabras de Ruiz: “¿Cómo nos interponemos en el camino de esta maquinaria, para desacelerarla?”.

Ruiz no era de los que delegaban tareas, y se detenía a ayudar a alguien que conocía en la calle aunque llegase unas horas tarde a una reunión programada. Su estilo espiritual indisciplinado irritaba las necesidades organizativas de la Coalición Nuevo Santuario a medida que se expandía en la era Trump. En 2018, el personal creció de cuatro a trece personas, y la coalición ahora tiene un presupuesto de un millón de dólares y cinco mil voluntarios capacitados. Ruiz admite que administrar una organización de este tamaño era menos atractivo que crear otra desde cero y comenzar cada día con un renovado sentido de lucha contra viento y marea. “Muy pocos de nosotros podemos hacer lo que él puede hacer”, dijo Schaper. Cuando le pregunté qué quería decir, mencionó su “semejanza a Cristo”, que parecía ser tanto una fortaleza como una debilidad.

Para entonces, dijo Schaper, Ruiz vivía su verdadera vocación, como un “sacerdote renegado”. Se retiró de la iglesia católica romana y se convirtió al luteranismo. Cuando lo conocí, en 2017, no lo hubiera reconocido como pastor si no fuera por el entorno: estábamos en la iglesia Holyrood, en Washington Heights, donde ayudaba a una madre guatemalteca y a sus dos hijos pequeños que buscaban refugio de los agentes de inmigración. Llevaba un bolso de lona, vestía jeans, botas de motociclista y un largo suéter de lana. Y se movía con una energía tan implacable, casi como la de un niño, que era difícil imaginarlo llevando una vida de contemplación. Sin embargo, llegué a pensar que solo una persona profundamente espiritual podría trabajar tan fanáticamente como él. “Le podría vender la Biblia al diablo”, me dijo una vez. Briones, su esposa, comparte sus intereses en la inmigración y el activismo pero no es particularmente

religiosa. Nunca está sin su cámara o un cuaderno. En 2011, vino a Nueva York para un estudio etnográfico que estaba escribiendo sobre una familia indígena de las montañas de Veracruz que migraba a Flushing, Queens. La familia la consideraba como una de los suyos, a pesar de que era de Hidalgo, el estado al norte de la Ciudad de México.

En 2018, Ruiz dejó la Coalición Nuevo Santuario para encabezar la parroquia El Buen Pastor, una congregación luterana de menos de cien miembros. La iglesia solía atraer a residentes de clase media cuyas familias habían vivido en Bay Ridge durante generaciones. Cuando Ruiz llegó, hubo una afluencia de inmigrantes de habla hispana y muchos de los antiguos feligreses se fueron. Ruiz vio esto como una transición inevitable. Bay Ridge estaba en proceso de cambio, y ahora la iglesia también. El reverendo Luis Barrios, pastor de la iglesia Holyrood y viejo amigo de Ruiz, me dijo: “La mayoría de las personas, a medida que envejecen, se vuelven más conservadoras. Juan Carlos sigue volviéndose más radical”.

Después de comenzar el trabajo, Ruiz y algunos miembros de la junta de la iglesia decidieron organizar una cena semanal para que los feligreses conocieran a su nuevo pastor. Lo llamaron *Breaking Bread* con J.C. (Compartiendo el pan con J.C.), una metáfora que Ruiz, un encantador muy consciente de su propio magnetismo, podría llevar a cabo. “Él es sacramental hasta los huesos”, me dijo Schaper. “Piensa que todo es sagrado. Él hace lo que sea en el momento”.

La mañana del 19 de mayo, unas cincuenta personas con cubrebocas se reunieron en la esquina de la calle Cuarenta y dos y Quinta avenida en Sunset Park, Brooklyn. Un organizador de Comunidades para el Cambio de Nueva York, un grupo activista local, usó un megáfono para instruirlos a mantener el distanciamiento social. Más tarde esa semana, la legislatura estatal consideraría un plan para suspender la cobranza del alquiler en Nueva York, y los activistas de toda la ciudad organizaban manifestaciones simultáneas en apoyo a la propuesta.

Para Ruiz, el llamado a la cancelación del alquiler fue una especie de reivindicación: las acciones radicales para salvar a la comunidad ahora se veían como la única forma de avanzar. Pero, cuando fue el turno de Ruiz de dirigirse a la multitud, habló en términos abstractos, alternando entre español e inglés. “¿Por qué tenemos tantos pobres entre nosotros? ¿Cuál es nuestra responsabilidad? ¿Por qué ya victimizamos a los más vulnerables?”, dijo. “Ya

tenemos un virus en nuestra sociedad. El racismo. La exclusión. ¡El coronavirus no causó esto!".



*Donaciones de alimentos preparadas en la iglesia para las personas que no pueden salir de casa. Fotografía de Gaia Squarci para The New Yorker*

En los márgenes de la multitud, una madre y su joven hija estaban inclinadas sobre un trozo de cartulina amarilla cortada en forma de cruz. La hija estaba escribiendo un nombre con marcador negro: Fernando Zempoalteca. Cuando terminó, llevó la cruz a uno de los organizadores, quien la colgó en una cerca a lo largo de la acera. La madre, Verónica Díaz, de treinta y cuatro años y con cabello largo y ojos oscuros, lloraba suavemente. Zempoalteca, un trabajador de la construcción de veintidós años, quien murió de coronavirus en abril, era su sobrino. Quedaban su novia y su hijo de dos años. La novia, de poco más de veinte años, llegó a Estados Unidos cuando tenía cinco y cuando Zempoalteca murió estaba embarazada de cinco meses de su segundo hijo; iban a casarse en mayo. “Lleva muerto más de un mes, pero mi sobrina aún le habla en voz alta como si estuviera en el apartamento con ella”, dijo Díaz.

Díaz había tenido a sus dos hijas pequeñas sin salir de casa, pero su vecino ofreció llevarlas al mitin en su carro. Por mil doscientos dólares al mes, la familia alquila dos dormitorios en un apartamento de cuatro habitaciones, que comparten con otros tres inquilinos. Al comienzo de la pandemia, Díaz perdió su trabajo limpiando casas en Park Slope y no había podido pagar el alquiler en tres meses.

A pesar de sus precauciones, Díaz había contraído la *COVID-19* a fines de marzo. Tenía fiebre alta y no podía respirar si se acostaba, así que dormía sentada en cuillillas, acurrucada a lo largo del alféizar de la ventana de su dormitorio. A medida que su estado se deterioraba, sus hijas le suplicaron que fuera al hospital. Cuando finalmente aceptó ir, le dio instrucciones a su hija mayor, que tiene catorce años, para que se mudara con su hermana al apartamento de su tía, en el Bronx, en caso de que ella no regresara.

En el hospital, una enfermera le dijo que podría ser internada y enviada a cuarentena o podría correr el riesgo en casa. Optó por lo último, y tomó de seis a siete pastillas (Motrin, Tylenol, a veces ambas) cada cuatro horas, durante varios días, para intentar bajar la fiebre. “En cierto momento, el mayor riesgo era intoxicarme con todos los medicamentos”, dijo. “Pero funcionó”.

Díaz y sus hijas ahora viven de las donaciones de la iglesia: miembros de una congregación local les entregan una caja de alimentos cada quince días. “Tratamos de que dure”, dijo. Solía enviar de doscientos a trescientos dólares cada ocho días a sus hermanas y su madre, que estaba en diálisis, en México.

Pero sus ahorros se terminaron y en abril tuvo que dejar de hacerlo. Mes y medio después, su madre murió. “Crucé un desierto para llegar aquí. Pensé que era lo peor que había experimentado en mi vida”, me dijo Díaz. “Pero no, esto es lo peor: estar estancada”. Ahora ha vivido en Estados Unidos durante dieciocho años, más de lo que nunca vivió en México, y sus hijas, que nacieron aquí, son ciudadanas estadounidenses. “Deberían tener una oportunidad”, dijo. “Pero no puedo ayudarlas. Esto no es vivir. Esto es apenas sobrevivir”.

Cada día, a la hora del almuerzo, frente a la iglesia de Ruiz se forma una fila de mujeres con carritos de compras y bolsas que se extiende por Bay Ridge Parkway. Llegan camiones con comida de tiendas de abarrotes y restaurantes cuyos dueños conocen a Ruiz, y un equipo de voluntarios, muchos de ellos mexicanos recién desempleados, distribuye vegetales, granos y productos enlatados en cajas de cartón. La mañana del 1 de junio se apilaron mil cajas de tomates frescos en el salón de banquetes de la iglesia y los voluntarios llamaban a Ruiz, que vestía pantalones capri y chanclas, el “rey del tomate de Nueva York”.

Antes de la pandemia, los inmigrantes de toda la ciudad habían creado asociaciones para hacer frente a las emergencias del vecindario. La mayoría de las veces, las situaciones involucraban redadas del ICE: se enviaban mensajes de texto masivos para advertir a las personas que no salieran y las iglesias daban la bienvenida a cualquiera que no se sintiera seguro en casa. Cuando la pandemia llegó, estos grupos cambiaron su enfoque. Recaudaron dinero para enviar los restos de las víctimas de la COVID-19 a sus familias en México y entregaron comida a las personas que estaban atrapadas en casa y comenzaban a morir de hambre.



*En la iglesia, las cruces recuerdan a las personas que han muerto por el coronavirus. Fotografía de Gaia Squarci para The New Yorker*

Fabiola Mendieta, una organizadora comunitaria mexicana de treinta y ocho años que también trabaja en la oficina del Defensor Público de la ciudad de Nueva York, conoció a Ruiz hace cinco años, cuando su hermano fue deportado. (“Ve a buscar a Juan Carlos”, le dijo su hermana cuando su hermano estaba detenido). En marzo, Mendieta formó una organización de ayuda mutua llamada Grupo de Apoyo Comunitario de Inmigrantes de Brooklyn, que en dos meses recaudó casi diecinueve mil dólares y entregó alimentos a más de cuatro mil personas. Su número de teléfono circuló entre familias hambrientas que buscaban ayuda en las redes sociales. Una llamada fue de una mujer de treinta y cinco años que vivía con su bebé y su niño pequeño en una habitación alquilada en Kensington, al sur de Prospect Park. Mendieta la encontró demacrada, su cabello se caía en mechones. “Estaba pasando hambre, estaba asustada, pero sus vecinos no sabían nada”, dijo Mendieta.

Para la primavera, la iglesia de Ruiz, donde Mendieta es feligresa, se había convertido en la principal base de operaciones del grupo. Pero Ruiz, que pasaba horas de su tiempo en la coordinación de pedidos de comida y en hacer entregas a domicilio, comenzaba a sentirse en conflicto con el trabajo. “Vamos a vivir con este desastre durante meses y meses”, me dijo una noche, después de hacer la entrega final del día. “Quiero que estemos haciendo más, algo más duradero. No podemos simplemente convertir la iglesia en una despensa de alimentos permanente”.

Se encontró en una posición habitual, atrapado entre realizar un triaje y planear una acción más radical. La pandemia expuso los límites del uno y la impracticabilidad del otro, así que Ruiz intentó ambas cosas: contrató a tres trabajadores para que realizaran tareas en la iglesia, desde carpintería hasta cocinar almuerzos, y les pagó en efectivo. Pero también les pidió que se unieran a una cooperativa que estaba tratando de formar, que estaría “completamente documentada”, dijo; pagaría impuestos y operaría con un presupuesto modesto, mientras servía como un colectivo para que los trabajadores mancomunaran sus recursos. “Podríamos traer más gente para diferentes trabajos”, dijo. “Y los trabajadores estarían protegidos. Podrían recibir atención médica, por ejemplo”. Una noche a principios de junio, Ruiz y su esposa se reunieron con dos feligresas en una oficina sin ventanas de la iglesia. Las mujeres propusieron una campaña de recolección de ropa: miembros de la comunidad donarían prendas viejas para que la cooperativa las convirtiera en bolsas de supermercado y cubrebocas. Podían venderlos a bajo precio en actividades y reuniones de la

iglesia.

Se suponía que la cooperativa volvería a reunirse la noche siguiente, pero ese día el alcalde De Blasio impuso el toque de queda a las ocho. Tras la muerte de George Floyd a manos de agentes de policía en Mineápolis, a finales de mayo, decenas de miles de manifestantes inundaron las calles de Nueva York.

Una tarde poco después, estaba en la iglesia con Gerardo y Joel, dos mexicanos amistosos y alegres de treinta y tantos años, que habían trabajado en la construcción antes de perder sus empleos cuando la ciudad entró en confinamiento. Estuvieron en la iglesia todo el día, descargaron camiones de reparto y distribuyeron alimentos. Fue un trabajo voluntario, con beneficios que se ajustaban a su orgullo. Cuando Ruiz y los demás hicieron una pausa para un breve almuerzo de pozole, hecho en la cocina del sótano de la iglesia, Gerardo y Joel recibieron porciones generosas, y Ruiz insistió de forma casual que se llevaran algunos comestibles a casa.

Llevaban cajas a la Cuarta avenida cuando pasaron cerca de un centenar de manifestantes de Black Lives Matter, que se dirigían a una manifestación al final de la cuadra, rodeados de camionetas de la policía y decenas de agentes a pie. Cuando los policías se acercaron, los manifestantes gritaron más fuerte y levantaron carteles. Gerardo y Joel retrocedieron en silencio hasta el vestíbulo de la iglesia, a la espera de que pasara la multitud antes de continuar su trabajo.

Se supone que la policía no debe realizar arrestos por motivos de inmigración en Nueva York, sin embargo, en las ciudades con un gran número de manifestantes se han enviado agentes de inmigración para el control de las multitudes. “Cuando eres indocumentado, no puedes correr riesgos”, me dijo Luis Reyes, de cuarenta y siete años y padre de tres hijos. Había pasado por la iglesia ese día para mostrarle a Ruiz una factura que había recibido de un crematorio en Nueva Jersey, donde había llevado los restos de su mejor amigo, quien murió de *COVID* en abril. Ruiz ayudaba a Reyes con los arreglos, y cada vez que Reyes recibía más papeleo, lo llevaba a la iglesia; le tranquilizaba consultar con Ruiz.

Reyes trabaja en un mercado de pescado en Manhattan. Su jornada laboral termina a las siete y media, media hora antes del toque de queda, y el trayecto hasta Sunset Park, donde vive, toma más de una hora en metro. Las dos primeras noches de esa semana, había decidido tomar un taxi de treinta dólares a casa. Mientras se sentaba en la parte trasera del auto, se dio cuenta de que la situación

era insostenible: ganaba solo doscientos dólares a la semana. Amigos en puestos similares habían dejado de ir a trabajar; después de unos días, viajar al trabajo les costaba más dinero del que ganaban.

Al día siguiente, Ruiz condujo su Toyota Prius blanco para recoger a un mexicano desgarbado de veintiséis años llamado Erick Díaz-Cruz de la casa de su madre, en Gravesend, y llevarlo al hospital Maimonides para recoger algunos documentos de una cirugía reciente. En febrero, Díaz-Cruz había viajado a Nueva York con una visa de turista para visitar a su madre. Una mañana, dos agentes de *ICE* vestidos de civil llegaron para arrestar al novio de larga data de su madre quien, según *ICE*, antes había sido deportado dos veces y enfrentaba una nueva orden de expulsión por una condena por agresión en 2011. Díaz-Cruz salió para averiguar qué estaba pasando y uno de los agentes le disparó en la cara. Díaz-Cruz se sometió a una serie de operaciones de emergencia y él y su familia finalmente demandaron a *ICE*. Mientras un equipo de abogados en Manhattan manejaba el caso, la familia se acercó a Ruiz en busca de orientación y asistencia práctica.

En el carro, Díaz-Cruz quería saber más sobre las protestas policiales en toda la ciudad. “La vigilancia racista es una parte importante de la historia en este país”, le dijo Ruiz. “Lo que te pasó, lo que *ICE* hizo, es parte del mismo sistema. Es por eso que debemos hablar sobre tu caso, para que la gente pueda ver las conexiones”. En la primavera, Ruiz había pegado un cartel escrito a mano en el parabrisas. “Libérenlos a todos”, decía, una referencia a las treinta mil personas en los centros de detención de inmigrantes de Estados Unidos. Ahora, el letrero también se aplicaba a los cientos de manifestantes de Black Lives Matter arrestados cada día en Nueva York; Ruiz los llamó “prisioneros políticos”. “Pasa por la iglesia, te organizaremos una rueda de prensa”, le dijo a Díaz-Cruz, quien se iba a reunir con sus abogados luego de la parada en el hospital. Un equipo de filmación de Telemundo estaría allí esa tarde. “Puedes hablar sobre lo que has pasado”.

Cuando Ruiz y yo regresamos a la iglesia, afuera esperaba un reportero de Telemundo, vestido con traje y mascarilla quirúrgica; sostenía un micrófono al final de una larga vara negra de metal. Un camarógrafo salió de detrás de una camioneta y comenzó a filmar mientras Ruiz hablaba. Se puso de pie, con las manos a los lados, respondiendo en voz alta y uniforme mientras los peatones se abrían a su alrededor. Gerardo, Joel y Próspero, los voluntarios de la iglesia, bajaron las escaleras para mirar de lejos. No podían escucharlo, pero no era

necesario. ♦

(Traducción de inglés a español por Sabrina Duque.)

*Este artículo fue publicado en inglés, en la edición impresa del 24 de Agosto del 2020, con el título “Higher Calling”.*

*Jonathan Blitzer es escritor en The New Yorker.*

# The Renegade Priest Helping Undocumented People Survive the Pandemic

Juan Carlos Ruiz, a Mexican pastor in Brooklyn, does everything from human-rights advocacy to grocery delivery.

By [Jonathan Blitzer](#)

August 17, 2020



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

In March, Victorino Narcizo developed a hacking cough. He and his brother-in-law Fidel, undocumented immigrants who had lived together for a decade, disagreed about what to do. Narcizo’s boss had threatened to fire him if he missed a shift. His mother, in Mexico, depended on the money he sent home, so he resolved to keep working. Twenty-five, and otherwise in good health, he doubted whether his symptoms were serious. Fidel, however, argued, “Stay home and get better. There’s work everywhere. This is New York.” Narcizo and Fidel moved around the city as a duo, more like best friends than like extended family, and they shared a studio apartment in Harlem with two roommates who worked in restaurant kitchens, as they did.

A few days later, Narcizo woke up gasping for air, and he and Fidel rushed to Mount Sinai Morningside, on Amsterdam Avenue. The waiting room was crowded, and a nurse in a mask and scrubs intercepted them. “Why did you bring him here?” he asked Fidel. “You’re going to get other people sick.” Fidel tried to respond, but his English faltered; they left in a daze, with Narcizo leaning on his brother-in-law. Eventually, a bilingual friend of theirs accompanied them to Bellevue, where Narcizo was admitted. Fidel never saw him again; on April 1st, Narcizo died, one of twenty-one thousand New Yorkers to succumb to [COVID-19](#) this spring.

The following weeks were a confusion of mourning and logistics. Fidel broke the news to Narcizo’s family, who live in the Mexican state of Guerrero, and tried to raise money among friends on Facebook for a cremation. But, as businesses shut down in response to the pandemic, some of the friends were losing their jobs, and they couldn’t spare the cash. Fidel continued to go to work, at a sushi restaurant in downtown Manhattan, while trying to find someone to move into the studio apartment, to make up the rent. A question consumed him that he didn’t have the time or the energy to answer: If he’d also been exposed to the virus, why was he spared? Two weeks later, the hospital called to warn Fidel that city officials would bury Narcizo in an unmarked grave if he didn’t make other arrangements. When Fidel began calling Narcizo’s relatives in New York to ask for advice, an uncle who’d just been laid off as a *sandwichero* at a Bronx deli gave him the name of someone who could help: Juan Carlos Ruiz, a fifty-year-old Mexican pastor who leads a congregation in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn.

Among [undocumented immigrants](#) in New York City, Ruiz has a reputation as a dedicated and implacable fighter for their community. Everyone seems to know him, or to know someone who does, and it isn't hard to see why. On a recent day, he delivered meals to three apartments, received a truck full of donated food from a Bronx grocer, spoke at a street demonstration in solidarity with the city's essential workers, and visited a local hospital to identify an immigrant's remains. Other pastors have simply given him the keys to their churches. Lately, with grim frequency, he has been arranging for discounted burials at a funeral home in Park Slope run by an old friend. Ruiz has relatives in Puebla and Guerrero, and because of these ties officials and human-rights advocates there give out his phone number, too.



*Ruiz, near Red Hook, Brooklyn, with food to distribute to families. Photograph by Gaia Squarci for The New Yorker*

During their phone call, Ruiz told Fidel, “*Yo me encargo de todo*”—“I’ll take care of everything.”

On a cool Monday morning in May, I met Fidel at the Church of the Good Shepherd, an austere gray stone building with red doors on the corner of Fourth Avenue and the Bay Ridge Parkway. A cousin and two friends joined him, all dressed in black hoodies and wearing surgical masks, sitting silently around a folding table inside the empty church. They’d taken the subway an hour and a half, from upper Manhattan and the Bronx, to attend a funeral service that Ruiz had arranged, free of charge.

Ruiz entered a few minutes later, in a white robe, trailed by his dog, a yapping Havanese in a sweater. Ruiz is short and trim, with a chinstrap beard and square-framed glasses, and he has an air of constant activity. He greeted Fidel with an elbow bump, and guided the men to the pews, instructing each one to sit in his own row. Ruiz’s wife, Cinthya Briones, an anthropologist and a photographer, entered with a camera, and a friend of theirs, a Oaxacan named Próspero, who’s been volunteering at the church for the past year, set up a video recorder. “You want us to be able to film this, right?” Ruiz asked Fidel, who nodded. He planned to send footage of the ceremony to Narcizo’s family. There was a simple program for the occasion, with a black-and-white photograph of Narcizo, smiling, in a chef’s cap. An urn with his ashes rested on a small wood table.

Gesturing toward it, as the service began, Ruiz said, “Pain is a great abyss that invites us to perform an act of faith.” He listed the hardships that the men there had endured: the death of Narcizo, their darkening work prospects, homesickness, fears of contracting the coronavirus, and traumatic memories of crossing the border. The pews creaked as the men nodded. “God is out there,” Ruiz said. “But there are flames everywhere around us, and the smoke makes it so hard to see.”

Throughout the spring and early summer, Ruiz’s cell phone rang incessantly. People were losing work, going hungry, falling ill, dying. “It was like a war had started,” he told me. A man called Ruiz late one night, after a fistfight with his landlord over rent he couldn’t pay because he’d lost his job. Ruiz heard from an undocumented immigrant who’d been living for several days with the corpse of his brother in their shared apartment; he was afraid to call city authorities but unable to pay a funeral home to retrieve the body. Officials from Guerrero were

regularly seeking advice on how to repatriate the remains of locals who had died in New York.

The pandemic has ravaged immigrant and minority communities, killing Blacks and Latinos at much higher rates than the rest of the public; the subsequent recession, in which New York City has lost more than a million jobs, has left them disproportionately out of work. The undocumented don't qualify for unemployment benefits or severance, and they are excluded from federal aid programs designed to ease the financial blow of the coronavirus. According to the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs, three hundred and sixty-six thousand workers and forty-seven thousand business owners are undocumented. Although [Mayor Bill de Blasio](#) and [Governor Andrew Cuomo](#) routinely boast of their progressive accomplishments, neither has financed a relief fund for the undocumented, unlike municipal and state governments in California, Oregon, Washington, and Connecticut.



*The Church of the Good Shepherd, in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, has served as a hub for pandemic-relief efforts. Photograph by Gaia Squarci for The New Yorker*

In April, the Open Society Foundations, the philanthropic organization founded by the liberal financier [George Soros](#), donated twenty million dollars to the city to aid immigrants. “It was a humanitarian intervention,” Gregory Maniatis, the director of the organization’s International Migration Initiative, told me. “But we’re going to meet only a tiny sliver of the need in the community.” The plan was to jump-start donations from other philanthropists, since the Mayor’s advisers, pointing to a budget shortfall, considered it impossible to spend public money on direct cash assistance to undocumented New Yorkers. So far, though, no other donors have contributed to the fund, and the Governor has kept his distance. “Cuomo’s not going to win or lose an election because of this issue,” a city official told me.

For Ruiz, the state’s failure to help hundreds of thousands of people in desperate need is the latest reminder that the city’s most vulnerable immigrants have always been on their own. Since the nineteen-eighties, he told me, Central Americans have been squeezed in the tightening vise of American immigration policy and its daily effects: poorly paid jobs, increasing cost of living, ever-expanding immigration-enforcement operations. Now, Ruiz said, immigrants were questioning whether the benefits of coming to the U.S. exceeded the costs. He said, “I think we’re reaching the stage when things are getting so bad that people who have sacrificed everything to come here and work in New York City are doubting what the whole point is.”

Ruiz came to the United States in 1986, with his own hesitations. He was sixteen, and studying to be a Roman Catholic priest at a seminary in San Luis Potosí, a state in central Mexico, where he was born and raised. His parents and five siblings had moved to Paterson, New Jersey, more than a year before, but he hadn’t wanted to join them. “We Mexicans have an ambivalent sense of *el norte*,” he told me. (He likes to cite a popular saying: “Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States.”) He finally visited his family on a tourist visa, planning to return home to continue his studies, but leaving them a second time proved too difficult.

After his visa expired, he fell into a legal limbo that lasted eight years. During that time, he attended high school, college, and seminary, but he didn’t get a Social Security number until he was twenty-four. His family, who had entered the country legally, lost their status after failing to renew their visas. “My parents were in the shadows for the first eighteen years of their lives in the States,” he

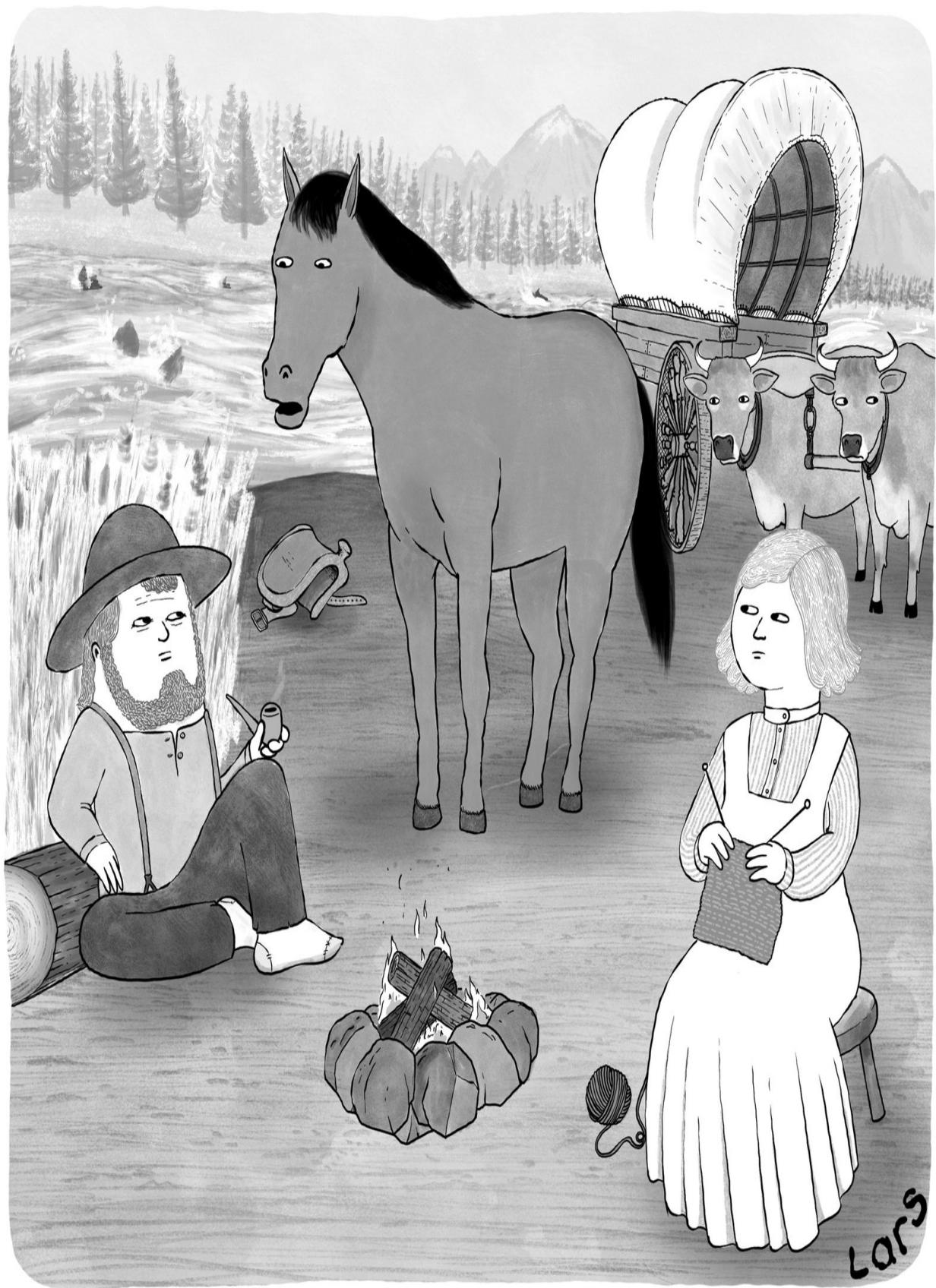
told me. “There is another world here, the underground life, the clandestine life.” Seeing the need for bilingual ministers to support this population was an epiphany for Ruiz, and one of the reasons he decided to stay in the U.S. He and his family eventually obtained green cards, but he never fully shed the feeling of being undocumented. “You’re out of the formalized, official way of doing things,” he said. “You disregard the law. You’re not breaking it—you’re not trying to. But it’s the sense that you’re doing something unlawful all the time, and that begins to seep into everyday life.”

In 1993, he was a young seminarian living on the North Side of Chicago when he befriended the poet and Jesuit priest [Daniel Berrigan](#) and Berrigan’s brother, Philip, both of whom had served prison time for their activism against the Vietnam War. They were involved in the [Catholic Worker Movement](#), and were fiercely opposed to American militarism and capitalist excess. “They put their bodies on the line, and my spirit was awakened,” Ruiz told me. In Latin America, beginning in the nineteen-sixties, a religious movement known as liberation theology brought Catholic priests into the fight against authoritarian élites for economic equality and human rights. Ruiz, who had studied with one of the movement’s founders while living in the U.S., found its expression in the decaying mill towns of Indiana, where he preached in Spanish on weekends. “In towns across the country, you had an invisible class of people, working in the restaurants, cleaning houses,” he said. “Are we a church if we’re excluding these people?”

A few years later, after returning to the Paterson diocese, Ruiz was posted to a series of small churches in rural New Jersey. Shuttling among towns like Parsippany, Sparta, and Morristown, he met hundreds of undocumented agricultural workers, who lived in squalid roadside motels and had no medical care or employment protections. Ruiz persuaded a local hospital to run a mobile clinic out of a donated Winnebago, and he organized a small group of pastors to form what he called the Migrant Ministry. “It was a floating parish,” he said. “One week we’d be in the Newton area, one week we’d do a Mass in Parsippany. It would move around like that, according to where the populations were.” If there was one thing the Catholic Church had in abundance, it was real estate: local congregations in majority-white towns lent their church spaces to Ruiz for his services. He said, “The way to engage the world is the social gospel that says God is found in the downtrodden, at the edges, beyond our limits. To really be a church, you have to be relevant to your community. Otherwise, we’re just a bunch of fanatics and fundamentalists.”

By the early two-thousands, Ruiz and the bishop overseeing the Paterson diocese were locked in a series of disputes over the need to respect Church hierarchy and follow formal practices—he felt that the bishop wanted him to restrict his pastoral work to his own parish and to soften his political stances. Mostly, though, the disagreements were personal, and the Church put Ruiz on leave. He moved to New York, where he spent two years living in the Chelsea Hotel, and started working with a Latino advocacy group called the Asociación Tepeyac, pushing for comprehensive immigration reform. In Washington, legislative talks were starting in a new atmosphere: the Department of Homeland Security came into existence in 2003 and was receiving unprecedented resources to carry out arrests and deportations in the name of national security. The traditional compromise that congressional leaders entertained—a pathway to citizenship for millions of undocumented immigrants in exchange for tough enforcement measures—struck some immigrants’-rights advocates as a wager with an uncertain payoff.

Before long, Ruiz clashed with his boss. (This is a recurring theme in his professional life; he has rarely stayed at a job very long.) Ruiz argued that compromises and legislative dealmaking were undermining the whole point of immigration reform. In political terms, he was plainly wrong, given the composition of Congress and the cautious cast of the national debate; in moral terms, he felt that his case was unassailable. “I told them ‘amnesty’ would be the word we need to reclaim—full amnesty, in the religious sense of the word,” he recalled. This was a decades-old, bipartisan taboo in Washington. Legislators tended to tolerate compassion in immigration policy only if they could accent it with toughness; the result was a pattern in which enforcement was funded to set the stage for legalization measures, which never materialized. “The temptation is not between bad and good,” Ruiz said, paraphrasing a lesson he’d learned from the Berrigans. “The temptation is between good and better.”



*"So, Jacob, some of us have been talking, and, um . . . what if we don't ford the river?"*  
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

In 2006, he launched a new project, with Donna Schaper, a pastor at Judson Memorial Church, on Washington Square, a longtime home of progressive activism in the city. Called the New Sanctuary Coalition, it was a revival of the activist movement from the nineteen-eighties that had sheltered Central American refugees fleeing U.S.-backed military regimes. The idea was to form a citywide coalition of clergy, lawyers, and activists to provide legal assistance to those in deportation proceedings, and to accompany immigrants when they had appointments in court or at Immigration and Customs Enforcement headquarters. "The absence of forgiveness is written into the heart of the immigration laws," Schaper told me. The coalition's work, she said, was to restore a sense of human dignity to the law, and to deal with the new reality of the Department of Homeland Security. As Ruiz put it, "How do we stand in the way of this machinery, to slow it down?"

Ruiz wasn't one to delegate tasks, and he would stop to help someone he met on the street only to show up a few hours late to a scheduled meeting. His roving spiritual style chafed against the organizational needs of the New Sanctuary Coalition as it expanded in the Trump era. In 2018, the staff grew from four to thirteen people, and the coalition now has a million-dollar budget and five thousand trained volunteers. Ruiz admits that managing an organization of this size was less appealing than creating another one from scratch, starting each day with a renewed sense of fighting against the odds. "So few of us can do what he can do," Schaper said. When I asked her what she meant, she mentioned his "Christlike-ness," which seemed to be both a strength and a weakness.

By then, Schaper said, Ruiz was living out his true calling, as a "renegade priest." He withdrew from the Roman Catholic Church, and converted to Lutheranism. When I first met him, in 2017, I wouldn't have recognized him as a pastor if not for the setting: we were in the Holyrood Church, in Washington Heights, where he was helping a Guatemalan mother and her two small children as they sought sanctuary from immigration agents. Carrying a canvas tote bag, he wore jeans, motorcycle boots, and a long wool cardigan. And he moved with such relentless, almost boyish energy that it was hard to imagine him leading a life of contemplation. Yet I came to think that only a deeply spiritual person could work as fanatically as he does. "I could sell the Bible to the Devil," he once told me. Briones, his wife, shares his interests in immigration and in activism but isn't particularly religious. She is never without her camera or a

notebook. In 2011, she came to New York for an ethnography she was writing about an indigenous family from the mountains of Veracruz who were migrating to Flushing, Queens. The family considered her one of their own, despite the fact that she was from Hidalgo, the state just north of Mexico City.

In 2018, Ruiz left the New Sanctuary Coalition to head the Church of the Good Shepherd, a Lutheran congregation of fewer than a hundred members. The church used to draw middle-class residents whose families had lived in Bay Ridge for generations. When Ruiz arrived, there was an influx of Spanish-speaking immigrants, and many of the old parishioners left. Ruiz saw this as an inevitable transition. Bay Ridge was changing, and now the church was, too. Father Luis Barrios, the pastor of the Holyrood Church and an old friend of Ruiz's, told me, "Most people, as they get older, grow more conservative. Juan Carlos just keeps getting more radical."

After he started the job, Ruiz and a few of the church's board members decided to host a weekly dinner for congregants to get to know their new pastor. They called it Breaking Bread with J. C., a conceit that Ruiz, a charmer well aware of his own magnetism, could carry off. "He is sacramental to his bones," Schaper told me. "He thinks everything is holy. He does whatever is in the moment."

On the morning of May 19th, about fifty people in masks gathered at the corner of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue in Sunset Park, Brooklyn. An organizer from New York Communities for Change, a local activist group, used a bullhorn to instruct them to maintain social distance. Later that week, the state legislature would be considering a plan to cancel rent in New York, and activists across the city were staging simultaneous rallies in support of the proposal.

For Ruiz, the call for rent cancellation was a vindication of sorts: dramatic action to save the community was now widely seen as the only way forward. But, when it was Ruiz's turn to address the crowd, he spoke in abstract terms, alternating between Spanish and English. "Why do we have so many poor among us? What is our responsibility? Why do we already victimize the most vulnerable?" he said. "We already have a virus in our society. Racism. Exclusion. The coronavirus didn't cause this!"



*Food donations prepared at the church for people who are stuck at home. Photograph by Gaia Squarci for The New Yorker*

On the outskirts of the crowd, a mother and her young daughter were bent over a piece of yellow poster board cut into the shape of a cross. The daughter was writing a name in black marker: Fernando Zempoalteca. When she finished, she carried the cross to one of the organizers, who hung it on a fence along the sidewalk. The mother, Verónica Díaz, a thirty-four-year-old with long hair and dark eyes, was crying softly. Zempoalteca, a twenty-two-year-old construction worker, who died from the coronavirus in April, was her nephew. He left behind his girlfriend and their two-year-old son. The girlfriend, who was in her early twenties, came to the U.S. when she was five, and she was five months pregnant with their second child when Zempoalteca died; they were due to marry in May. “He’s been dead more than a month, but my niece still talks aloud to him like he’s there in the apartment with her,” Díaz said.

Díaz had been keeping her two young daughters inside, but their neighbor offered to drive them to the rally in his car. For twelve hundred dollars a month, the family rents two rooms in a four-bedroom apartment, which they share with three other tenants. At the start of the pandemic, Díaz lost her job cleaning houses in Park Slope, and she hadn’t been able to pay rent in three months.

Despite her precautions, Díaz had come down with *COVID-19* in late March. She had a high fever, and couldn’t breathe if she lay down, so she slept sitting in a crouch, wedged along the windowsill of her bedroom. As her condition deteriorated, her daughters pleaded with her to go to the hospital. When she finally agreed to go, she instructed her eldest, who’s fourteen, to move with her sister to their aunt’s apartment, in the Bronx, in the event that she didn’t return.

At the hospital, a nurse told her that she could be admitted and sent into quarantine or could take her chances at home. She opted for the latter, taking six to seven pills (Motrin, Tylenol, sometimes both) every four hours, for several days, to try to reduce her fever. “At a certain point, the bigger risk was poisoning myself from all the drugs,” she said. “But it worked.”

Díaz and her daughters are now living off church donations—a box of food is delivered every fifteen days by members of a local congregation. “We try to make it last,” she said. She used to send two hundred to three hundred dollars every eight days to her sisters and her mother, who was on dialysis, in Mexico. But her savings are gone, and in April she had to stop. A month and a half later, her mother died. “I crossed a desert to get here. I thought that was the worst

thing I'd ever experienced," Díaz told me. "But, no, this is the worst—being stuck." She's now lived in the U.S. for eighteen years, longer than she ever lived in Mexico, and her children, who were born here, are U.S. citizens. "They should have a chance," she said. "But I can't help them. This isn't living. This is barely surviving."

Each day around lunchtime, a line of women with carts and bags forms in front of Ruiz's church and stretches down the Bay Ridge Parkway. Trucks pull up with food from grocery stores and restaurants whose owners know Ruiz, and a team of volunteers, many of them Mexican men newly out of work, dispense vegetables, grains, and canned goods in cardboard boxes. On the morning of June 1st, a thousand crates of fresh tomatoes were piled in the church's banquet hall, and the volunteers were calling Ruiz, who was wearing Capri pants and flip-flops, the "tomato king of New York."

Before the pandemic, immigrants across the city had created community associations for dealing with neighborhood emergencies. Most of the time, the situations involved roundups by [ICE](#): mass text messages were sent, warning people to stay inside, and churches welcomed anyone who didn't feel safe at home. When the pandemic hit, these groups shifted their focus. They raised money to send the remains of *COVID* victims to their families in Mexico, and delivered food to people who were stuck at home and beginning to starve.



*At the church, crosses memorialize people who have died of the coronavirus. Photograph by Gaia Squarci for The New Yorker*

Fabiola Mendieta, a thirty-eight-year-old community organizer from Mexico, who also works in the office of the New York City Public Advocate, met Ruiz five years ago, when her brother was deported. (“Go find Juan Carlos,” her sister told her while their brother was in detention.) In March, Mendieta formed a mutual-aid organization called the Brooklyn Immigrant Community Support Group, which within two months raised nearly nineteen thousand dollars and delivered food to more than four thousand people. Her phone number circulated among starving families who were searching social media for help. One call came from a thirty-five-year-old woman who lived with her infant and toddler in a rented room in Kensington, just south of Prospect Park. Mendieta found her emaciated, her hair falling out in clumps. “She was going hungry, and she was scared, but her neighbors didn’t know a thing,” Mendieta said.

By the spring, Ruiz’s church, where Mendieta is a parishioner, had become the group’s main base of operations. But Ruiz, who was spending hours of his time coördinating food orders and making home deliveries, was beginning to feel conflicted about the work. “We’re going to be living with this disaster for months and months,” he told me late one night, after making the day’s final delivery. “I want us to be doing more, something more lasting. We can’t just turn the church into a permanent food pantry.”

He found himself in a familiar position, trapped between performing triage and plotting more radical action. The pandemic exposed the limits of one and the impracticability of the other, so Ruiz attempted both: he hired three workers to perform tasks around the church, from carpentry to cooking lunches, and paid them in cash. But he also asked them to join a coöperative he was trying to form, which would be “fully documented,” he said—it would pay taxes and operate on a modest budget, while serving as a collective for laborers to pool their resources. “We could bring more people in for different jobs,” he said. “And the workers would be protected. They could get medical care, for instance.” One evening in early June, Ruiz and his wife met with two female congregants in a windowless office at the church. The women proposed a clothing drive: members of the community would donate old garments for the coöperative to repurpose into grocery bags and masks. They could sell them cheaply at church events and gatherings.

The coöperative was supposed to meet again the following night, but that day Mayor de Blasio imposed an eight-o’clock curfew. After George Floyd’s death at

the hands of police officers in Minneapolis, in late May, tens of thousands of protesters had flooded the streets of New York.

One afternoon shortly afterward, I was at the church with Gerardo and Joel, two genial men from Mexico in their late thirties, who had worked in construction before losing their jobs when the city shut down. They hung around the church all day, unloading delivery trucks and dispensing food. It was volunteer work, with perks that accommodated their pride. When Ruiz and the others broke for a brief lunch of pozole, made in the church's basement kitchen, Gerardo and Joel received generous portions, and Ruiz casually insisted that they take home some groceries.

They were carrying boxes onto Fourth Avenue when about a hundred Black Lives Matter protesters passed by, heading to a rally down the block, surrounded by police vans and dozens of cops on foot. When the officers got close, the protesters chanted louder and raised signs. Gerardo and Joel quietly backed into the foyer of the church, waiting until the crowd passed before continuing their work.

The police aren't supposed to make immigration arrests in New York, yet in cities with large numbers of protesters immigration agents have been dispatched for crowd control. "When you're undocumented, you can't take chances," Luis Reyes, a forty-seven-year-old father of three, told me. He had stopped by the church that day to show Ruiz a receipt he'd received from a crematorium in New Jersey, where he'd taken the remains of his best friend, who died of *COVID* in April. Ruiz was helping Reyes with the arrangements, and every time Reyes received more paperwork he brought it to the church; it reassured him to confer with Ruiz.

Reyes works at a fish market in Manhattan. His workday ends at seven-thirty, a half hour before the curfew, and the commute to Sunset Park, where he lives, takes more than an hour by subway. The first two nights that week, he had decided to take a thirty-dollar cab ride home. As he sat in the back of the car, he realized that the situation was untenable: he made only two hundred dollars a week. Friends in similar positions had stopped going to work—after a few days, it was costing them more money to commute than they earned.

The following day, Ruiz drove his white Toyota Prius to pick up a gangly twenty-six-year-old Mexican named Erick Díaz-Cruz from his mother's house,

in Gravesend, and take him to Maimonides hospital to retrieve some paperwork from a recent surgery. In February, Díaz-Cruz had travelled to New York on a tourist visa to visit his mother. One morning, two *ICE* officers in street clothes arrived to arrest his mother's longtime boyfriend, who *ICE* claimed had been deported twice before and faced a new order of removal, for a 2011 assault conviction. Díaz-Cruz stepped outside to find out what was going on, and one of the officers shot him in the face. Díaz-Cruz underwent a series of emergency operations, and he and his family eventually sued *ICE*. While a team of lawyers in Manhattan handled the case, the family approached Ruiz for guidance and practical assistance.

In the car, Díaz-Cruz wanted to know more about the police protests across the city. "Racist policing is a big part of this country's history," Ruiz told him. "What happened to you, what *ICE* did, is part of the same system. It's why we need to speak up about your case, so people can see the connections." In the spring, Ruiz had taped a handwritten sign on the windshield. "Free Them All," it read, a reference to the thirty thousand people in U.S. immigrant-detention centers. Now the sign also applied to the hundreds of Black Lives Matter protesters being arrested each day in New York—"political prisoners," Ruiz called them. "Come by the church, we'll arrange a press conference for you," he told Díaz-Cruz, who was going to meet his lawyers after the stop at the hospital. A film crew from Telemundo would be there that afternoon. "You can talk about what you've gone through."

When Ruiz and I returned to the church, a Telemundo reporter was waiting outside, wearing a suit and a surgical mask; he held a microphone at the end of a long black metal pole. A cameraman emerged from behind a van and began filming as Ruiz spoke. He stood upright, with his hands at his sides, talking in a booming, even voice as pedestrians parted around him. Gerardo, Joel, and Próspero, the church volunteers, came down the steps to watch from a distance. They couldn't hear him, but they didn't need to. ♦

---

## 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?](#)

## Poems

- [“Whisk”](#)
- [“Ode to Patrick Kearns, Funeral Director of the Leo F. Kearns Funeral Home, in Queens”](#)

[August 24, 2020 Issue](#)

# Whisk

By [Anna Scotti](#)

August 17, 2020

*Audio:* Read by the author.

I told my grandmother I am afraid and she made that little wave, each plump finger brushing away my worries just the way she'd brush crumbs from around the toaster tray, the way she'd sweep the dog's dry tracks from the trailer floor. *Oh, now, it's not so bad here*, she said, but I am afraid that when I'm gone no one will remember her, her dimpled knuckles, the way her mouth turned down at the corners in a sweet prim frown. No one will put flowers on her grave; even I don't do that now, but what I mean is, no one will intend to. I told my mother I am afraid she'll die alone and she laughed out loud: *Let's hope that's the worst thing coming*. I looked down at my own hands, knotted in the dog's fur, and saw that they are like my father's, blue-veined and broad, and I stroked my hair, my cheek, with the hand that is most like his, until the dog struggled to get down, until the kettle whistled; then I sat alone at the kitchen table and stirred a cup of tea.

[August 24, 2020 Issue](#)

# Ode to Patrick Kearns, Funeral Director of the Leo F. Kearns Funeral Home, in Queens

By [Diane Mehta](#)

August 17, 2020

*Audio: Read by the author.*

By blood we go into the fabric of what once felt hymnal at worst;  
we are tuned to higher pitches now, in languages invented,  
not imagined rites of spring but last rites in strange establishments.  
Trucks collect the dead and roll uptown to bury in a potter's field  
corpses we knew, and loved, their long solemn graves  
together, better here than bodies shelved or stacks of flesh  
shipped out of state to cremate or left to rot. We formalized obituaries  
(she was first to graduate, he escaped, she was a composer, he,  
though deaf, was a composer, too; we pray alone to keep their souls  
alive) until this month. We lived in adverbs, dressed for rainshine  
half the time and not according to the daily toll, not this running  
tally, at scale in every borough. Our minds are lost to gravity  
again. By gravity we live. We move from cell to fingers, toes,  
our footprint handprint fingerprint alone identifies us as one  
person in this widening morgue; you men and women of generations,  
ever upward, we say now; if Whitman could, he'd hold us dear,  
our arms, our feet, our hands, our fingerprinted fingers wrapped in his—  
“myself disintegrated, every one disintegrated yet part of the scheme”—  
and renew us with varied meanings, rebellious curiosities;  
I will miss him in my future, if it is me, and in twenty or a hundred years,  
history will ask: How did we wear on with so much  
weeping? It was never so beautiful as this April  
in the park with yellow oaks deliriously blooming  
despite the trill of siren after siren to the east; we ignored it,  
walking west or north, southeast, any which way  
someone else wasn't. Sunlight far-flung itself

sideways across the arms-up oaks and Olmsted's slopes;  
oh I was rapt, convinced this surreal afternoon was magic-cast  
in lavender and grass-green thickening itself, cardinals flying  
straight up into that vanishing we are all doing now,  
minding our eternities—transcendent limbo, this,  
but cherish the eclipse, our orbit moving over  
our polyphonic voices in fugue-walking choices, prelude  
to nothing, yes, nothing, because when the wind is all C major  
unravelling in D minor, we are in the neuro-beat of wondering  
who will stay today and who departs tomorrow, but here  
are my children, my coffin, my love, it doesn't matter what color  
the coffin is or that we swooned too long in idioms; we broke  
on counterpoint and this is where it leads. I swear  
this is not my story. On our tombstones, what do we see?  
What we love most is always free and far irrational,  
fine with me. What is true today  
if not my teeth, my bones, my nothingness? Is it near?  
I must endear myself. I'll think, oh, it wasn't me, I was  
just a sentence after all. But my sentence: Was it wrong?  
I am young to be this old, too old to be that young.  
When we are all accounted for, someone will surely say:  
Unevenly I conclude we count facts because we cannot lose our minds  
in facts; we lose them in the vivid air, thousands elsewhere.

## **Postcard from Before**

- [A Drive-By Eulogy for New York City's Record Stores](#)

[August 24, 2020 Issue](#)

# A Drive-By Eulogy for New York City's Record Stores

Just before lockdown, the indie-rock band Real Estate paid tribute to the now defunct record shops that nurtured its rise by performing a series of guerrilla-style concerts, or “out-stores,” in front of them.

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

August 17, 2020



On a Wednesday afternoon just before lockdown started, the indie-rock band Real Estate played a series of brief, guerrilla-style concerts outside former locations of three of the city's most beloved and now defunct record stores: Rocks in Your Head (157 Prince Street; 1978-2006), Other Music (15 East Fourth Street; 1995-2016), and Kim's (124 First Avenue; 1987-2014). Real Estate had just released its fifth album, "The Main Thing," and wanted to salute the shops that had nurtured its rise. The band called the shows "out-stores," and announced the events on social media. No permits had been acquired.

The record store has been eulogized plenty, but, for anyone who came of age before the streaming era, it was a formative and necessary space. Now that music is a digital commodity, it's easy to dismiss record collecting as a pretentious affectation, but the practice continues to hold a certain kind of outré allure. ("High Fidelity," Nick Hornby's 1995 novel about the romantic devastations of an obsessive record-store owner, was made into a film in 2000, and then adapted again this year, as a Hulu TV series, starring Zoë Kravitz.) New York still has excellent record stores—Record Shop, in Red Hook, or Academy Records Annex, in Greenpoint, or 2 Bridges Music Arts, in Chinatown—but they have come to feel like obscure specialty markets. Record Store Day, a holiday devised to celebrate brick-and-mortar shops, was postponed this spring, owing to *Covid-19*, and is now being held on three dates, beginning on August 29th. One hopes that there will still be record stores to celebrate.

On the day of the "out-stores," the sun was shining. A small scrum of Real Estate fans gathered in lower Manhattan. The band's setup was ad hoc: a couple of battery-powered amplifiers, an electric guitar, a small keyboard, an electric bass, and an acoustic guitar. The audience members didn't seem worried that this might be the last live music they'd see for a while.

Real Estate formed in Ridgewood, New Jersey, in 2008. The band is expert at communicating a particular type of suburban ennui: the bliss and boredom of cruising quiet, wooded streets; getting stoned; and fantasizing about life elsewhere. The group was named while the singer and guitarist Martin Courtney was acquiring his real-estate license—an evergreen (if slightly demoralizing) backup plan for aspiring musicians.

At each location, the band erected a large white placard that resembled a tombstone, listing the name of the shuttered shop and its years in business. Other

Music is now occupied by a café called Broken Coconut. A pair of young women in N.Y.U. gear walked by and paused. “Who is that?” one asked. “Not the Jonas Brothers,” her friend assured her. Another woman stopped and removed her headphones. “I was just listening to you!” she told the bassist, Alex Bleeker. The band played four songs—as many as it could get away with without exhausting the patience of the café’s staff. The musicians thanked the crowd, climbed into a rented van, and headed east, toward First Avenue. “Thanks for doing this—this was awesome!” someone yelled as they pulled away.

Courtney was driving. “I’m surprised by how well this is going,” he said, laughing. “I thought the vibe would be us playing and people just walking by,” Bleeker added. “We played an in-store at Other Music when our album ‘Days’ came out. We grew up on the other side of the river, in Jersey, and, right when we were getting into what we thought was super-esoteric music, we would come into the city. These stores were our meccas. I would buy whatever was playing on the stereo.”

A few minutes later, they arrived at the former location of Kim’s—now a juice bar and organic market—where a crowd had already gathered outside. Courtney let the others out of the van as he tried to find parking on Avenue A. It took him a while. “Any of you guys know how to sing?” Bleeker asked the people in the crowd, as they waited for Courtney to return. A woman in an apron emerged from the juice bar, surveyed the situation, shrugged, and went back inside.

The band played for a little less than half an hour. It opened with “November,” a new song. “When I was just nineteen, I was not here nor there, but I recall being alive,” Courtney sang. His voice was high and wistful. It felt like the right way to eulogize the space. Midway through the set, a twenty-three-year-old man appeared on the fire escape of an apartment building next door. He had tousled hair and a bewildered expression. Last November, he moved to the East Village from Northern California. Real Estate had been a considerable influence on his high-school and college bands. He heard the music from his living room, and had gone outside to see what was happening. “It was a pretty surreal moment,” he said. “I guess this is what living in New York is like.” ♦

## Profiles

- [Michael Rakowitz's Art of Return](#)

# **Michael Rakowitz's Art of Return**

Through playful, outraged interventions, a sculptor seeks to reclaim a lost Iraq.

By [Raffi Khatchadourian](#)

August 17, 2020



Michael Rakowitz was looking for Kubba, a stall in London’s Borough Market that serves Iraqi cuisine. The air was temperamental: a cold mist clung to hair between bouts of drizzling rain. Rakowitz had arrived on a red-eye from Chicago, where he runs a nine-person studio, producing sculpture that shows frequently on the international art circuit. He had wrapped himself in a dark coat and a checkered kaffiyeh, which pushed up against his wavy, disordered hair. The stall had just opened, and he had never been to it. His phone was no help. “It should be here,” he said, looking up from a map quizzically.

Kubba’s owner, the chef Philip Juma, is a friend and a collaborator of Rakowitz. Last year, they prepared an Iraqi dinner at London’s Whitechapel Gallery, to celebrate the launch of a cookbook that Rakowitz had edited. The book was tied to his most visible public installation: a large sculpture in Trafalgar Square, inspired by an Iraqi monument built in ancient Nineveh—a gypsum carving of a winged protective spirit, called a lamassu, which was [destroyed](#) by [ISIS](#) in 2015. Rakowitz had “reappeared” the lamassu using the ephemera of exile: cans of Iraqi date syrup in five different brands. To underscore that the project was as much about the present as about the past, the cookbook included dishes by Juma and chefs like [Yotam Ottolenghi](#), as well as by Rakowitz’s mother, who was born to Baghdadi Jewish parents in India. Its title is taken from a Mesopotamian proverb: “A house with a date palm will never starve.”

Although Rakowitz is known as a sculptor—this year, he was awarded the hundred-thousand-dollar Nasher Prize—the act of making things is often secondary to his art. He frequently deploys found objects to create what *Artforum* once called “simple but dizzying interventions.” The pieces can be playful, sometimes invoking his own pop-culture obsessions, like the Beatles, or food. In 2011, at a Park Avenue restaurant, he staged a “happening,” titled “Spoils,” which involved a meal of venison atop date syrup and tahini, served on plates looted from Saddam Hussein’s palace. (He had purchased them on eBay.) When the Iraqi government demanded that the plates be returned, Rakowitz considered it part of the work, and rushed to get them to Iraq’s Prime Minister, who was visiting Washington. They were ferried to Baghdad on a government plane—journeying, through diaspora, from tyrant to elected leader.

“Spoils” ended when the plates were surrendered, but many of Rakowitz’s other pieces evolve over years, sometimes blurring into the world beyond art. “These things are part of a *lived* work,” he told me. In 2004, a year after the invasion of

Iraq, he reconstituted an import-export business that had belonged to his late maternal grandfather, Nissim bin Ishaq Daoud bet Aziz, and offered to export to Iraq anything that anyone wanted, free of charge. He called the piece “Return,” and ended up shipping three items: a bootleg CD-ROM of Microsoft Office 98, a battery for a discontinued Nokia phone, and a Paul Auster novel. (“They were portraits of the sender and the receiver,” he told me.) Later, as he expanded on the idea artistically, he also began to broker samples of Iraqi goods to American grocery stores.

Rakowitz, who is forty-six, wears a handlebar mustache, shaped in a half-Ottoman, half-hipster style, with curls at each end. His typically unshaven face is expressive, shifting between uncertainty, empathy, melancholy, and thoughtfulness. Like a character from [W. G. Sebald](#), he is searching and inquisitive, immersed in historical memory, often pursuing the trace routes of exile, with the apparent hope that the ensuing art might heal the traumas of dispossession, of war, of expatriation.

As Arab Jews, Rakowitz’s family had to navigate a triple dislocation: in Iraq, in America, and among other Jews they encountered as émigrés, who could not comprehend their attachment to Arab culture. Nissim Daoud was born in Ottoman Baghdad in 1899, when a thriving community of Jews made up a quarter of the city’s residents. But, in 1941, an Iraqi nationalist aligned with the Nazis orchestrated a coup, and began stoking ethnic tension, which erupted in a pogrom that killed two hundred Baghdadi Jews. Daoud fled to Bombay, part of an exodus that in the coming decades would reduce the city’s Jewish population to less than ten. From India, Daoud helped British intelligence monitor Nazi activity in the Middle East. After India achieved independence, he moved again, settling on Long Island.

Rakowitz grew up living with his family in his grandparents’ house. “They were the first installation artists I ever met,” he told me. “Their home was an immersive environment. What was on the floor, what was on the wall, what came out of the stereo, what came out of the kitchen was from Iraq. It was tinged with a brokenhearted longing.” Although Rakowitz has never been to Iraq—perhaps he never will go, he told me—the influence of his family’s estrangement is legible in much of his work. “Michael tries to bring forth something that is dead,” his mother told me. “He converts a discarded thing into something else—to say, ‘Look, acknowledge us.’ ”

We found Kubba around a corner. When Rakowitz saw Philip Juma, a thin young man of Iraqi Christian heritage, he quickened his pace and embraced him. “*Ashat eedak*,” he said—“Bless your hands,” traditional Arabic praise for someone who works in the kitchen. As we stood in the damp air, Juma placed steaming dishes before us, and Rakowitz explained why he had come. The lamassu in Trafalgar Square, a temporary installation, was scheduled to come down in a month; he wanted to secure a home for it. He also had a new commission, in the seaside town of Margate, where T. S. Eliot worked on “[The Waste Land](#).”



*Rakowitz has “reappeared” hundreds of artifacts looted from Iraq. Photograph by Paul D’Amato for The New Yorker*

As Juma cooked, Rakowitz spoke about the Margate project, which was inspired by a monument in Basra that Saddam had dedicated to soldiers who died in his ill-planned war with Iran. Along a waterway separating the two countries, the likeness of uniformed men, cast in metal at an imposing scale, stood and pointed accusingly toward Iran. Ostensibly, the monument was a memorial, but it also functioned as a dictator’s warning to Basra’s Shiite population, whose faith spanned the border. After the 2003 invasion, Iraqis living nearby destroyed it. One told the *Times*, “We don’t want our children growing up to hate Iran.”

Rakowitz told Juma that he wanted to transform the original into a symbol of peace. “I worked with veterans,” he explained. “They have become not just pacifists but devoutly dedicated to dismantling the military-industrial complex.” His sculpture would be of a British vet who had been stationed in Basra when the Saddam-era monument was torn down. Instead of pointing accusingly over a border, it would point toward Parliament, which had made the decision to go to war in Iraq. In Margate, Rakowitz planned to erect it near a nineteenth-century statue of a man looking out for shipwrecks, which commemorated a rescue mission in which nine rescuers died. The sculptures, facing opposite ways, would stand at human scale, each in its way speaking of sacrifice and deliverance.

“I was trained by artists who were always interested in the quiet, in the counter-monument,” Rakowitz said. Whereas Saddam’s monument asserted authority, the Margate sculpture was meant to expose vulnerability. It would be cast in concrete and embedded with war mementos contributed by veterans and residents of Margate, which was heavily bombed in the Second World War. “You are going to see these things in the piece, like fossils,” Rakowitz told Juma. But the physical installation would be only a part of the work. “It’s not just the sculpture,” he said. “It’s the social space that the sculpture activates.” He was hoping to cook an Iraqi meal with Juma beside the work.

“I’d have to get away from here,” Juma said.

“We’ll figure it out,” Rakowitz said.

Juma smiled, and set down his take on *knafa*: mozzarella, crumbled pistachio, orange-blossom water.

“This is evil!” Rakowitz said and grinned.

The meeting was a social visit, but it was also, in a sense, part of the piece. As the artist Krzysztof Wodiczko later told me, “Art can set the conditions for different parts of society to connect, to change their thinking on the site of the work and *during* the process of making it. That is expected in Michael’s work. There is something diabolical, in a good sense, about the man. He is a kind of magician, someone who connects things that should not be connected, someone who can surprise.”

In Borough Market, rain began to gather overhead, and seagulls cawed. As we left Kubba, Rakowitz talked about the mementos that he was gathering for the Margate sculpture. “I am always building a collection for these works,” he said. In his studio, in Chicago, there is a chalkboard diagram that he has not erased since 2015: a memorial to a cherished conversation. “I’m never going to be neat,” he told me, ruefully. Several years ago, he saw Leonard Cohen’s Olivetti typewriter on eBay and bought it; likewise, an Iraqi military helmet inspired by Darth Vader. Both purchases evolved into projects. “I am a firm believer that if you sit with an object long enough it starts to tell you about itself,” he said.

Rakowitz stopped walking and pulled out a worn plastic bag containing azure beads and a broken thread. “Lapis lazuli, from Afghanistan,” he said. “They broke about a year ago, but in Iraq you are always supposed to have a blue stone. It’s protection against evil, and ever since I was a kid I have never left the house without a blue stone.”

The beads were a gift from a collaborator in Bamyan, where, in 2001, the Taliban destroyed ancient Buddhas carved into travertine cliffs. Rakowitz, moved by their absence, organized a stone-carving workshop there, to train Afghans in the art of their ancestors. He planned to tell the story at the Documenta (13) exhibition, at a museum in Kassel, Germany. But, as he worked, the project changed. Learning that Allied forces in the Second World War had bombed the museum, destroying some of its rare books, he asked an Afghan artist to sculpt simulacra of the volumes using Bamyan travertine. As Rakowitz saw it, the ravaged artifacts could be made to reëmerge, to haunt and to rehabilitate, with “one cultural trauma suturing another.” He called the work “What Dust Will Rise?”

The piece echoed Rakowitz’s early interest in sculpture, which began in high

school, when a stone carver invited him to apprentice. “To this day, stone is the material that I love the most,” he said, though he rarely uses it now. “The removal of material is something that I took to. It was therapeutic.”

As an undergraduate at SUNY Purchase, Rakowitz was drawn to [Donald Judd](#)’s Minimalism and to [Richard Serra](#)’s monumentalism, until he enrolled in a class taught by Allan Wexler, who had a more symbolic approach to sculpture. In one piece, Wexler took apart a Braun coffeemaker, then rebuilt it to expose its inner workings. In others, he examined the Seder as a form of art. “It’s performance—it’s the projection of magical meaning onto objects,” Rakowitz recalled.

From Purchase, Rakowitz found his way to a graduate program for public art at M.I.T., which had six faculty members and about as many students. Rakowitz lacked fluency in art theory, and at first felt lost. He crafted tiny pieces in bottle caps, which he surreptitiously screwed onto bottles in stores. He liked the idea of a surprise micro-exhibition, but, he told me, “I think my teachers felt it was contentless.” Wodiczko, who taught there, encouraged him to be more finely attuned, to engage in “fearless listening.”

On a winter break, Rakowitz travelled to Jordan, for a government-sponsored program in al-Karak, a town with a grand citadel built by Crusaders, to develop the area’s historic stone architecture for tourism. He quickly drifted from the program; the trip brought him closer to Iraq than he had ever been, and he found himself less interested in relics than in the daily life of the Near East. Visiting a Bedouin encampment, he studied shelters made from tapestries. “I was amazed,” he told me. “The tents were set up differently every night, to react to wind patterns—in some cases for ventilation, in some to make sure the tent would not collapse.”



*"It wouldn't do for you to approach this desk."*  
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Back in Boston, Rakowitz was walking out of a movie one night when he noticed a homeless man sleeping under a building's ventilation grate for warmth. "Immediately, in my head, there was this constellation: the wind from the desert, and this wind that is the by-product of a building's heating system," he told me. "In both cases, there were nomads, and I saw what it would mean to harness all of this air and to materialize it, like a cloud." He imagined shelters for homeless people, made from garbage bags and duct tape, that could attach to building vents. They would inflate and be heated by the exhaust. He would call them paraSITES.

Rakowitz built the shelters according to their inhabitants' preferences, making them acts of expression, too. One day at M.I.T., he discussed them with the artist [Joan Jonas](#), recounting the homeless men's biographies and desires: one wanted a shelter resembling Jabba the Hutt; another, a dome. "She says, 'You know, the work is beyond just the shelter,'" Rakowitz recalled. "'You're talking about dispossession. You're telling me this is about Massachusetts. You're actually talking about Baghdad.' It was incredible. She gave me permission to story-tell."

After completing his degree, Rakowitz moved to New York, where he continued making paraSITE shelters. (He still builds them every winter.) At the time, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was cracking down on homelessness, and, when the *Times* learned of Rakowitz's project, a Metro-desk reporter covered it as an anti-Giuliani agitation. Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, then a curator at PS1, read the piece, and liked that the shelters were not easily understood as art. "His love for the specificity of each individual attracted my attention," she told me. She invited him to show at the museum. When Rakowitz learned that PS1's environmental controls were too poor to protect climate-sensitive works, he ran a pipe between a gallery space and an outer wall, to balance its temperature. "It was really shocking to me," she recalled. "I thought I was giving him a break. Instead, he saw PS1 as a place that needed help."

Rakowitz had an appointment near the Thames. By the time we began heading over from Borough Market, it was dusk, and the streets glistened under the lights. He fell into a reflective mood. "When I was growing up, I had a lot of trouble with numbers," he told me. "Learning how to read the clock was stressful. My grandmother told me about these singing towers in Baghdad that told the time. I didn't know it then, but she was talking about minarets." In the

late nineties, Rakowitz devised a piece that connected his grandmother's story with an object from his collection: a mosque-shaped alarm clock, which Muslims used in places where broadcasting the call to prayer was discouraged. Equipped with the clock and a megaphone, he went to the tops of high buildings and broadcast the call five times a day.

The [American-led invasion of Iraq](#), in 2003, had a momentous effect on him. "I was split down the middle," he told me. "The place that my grandparents had fled from was being bombed by the place that they had fled to." As coalition bombs fell on Baghdad, he recalled his teen-age experience of the 1991 Gulf War—how, during a run of CNN programming, his mother, Yvonne, had remarked, "You know, there are no Iraqi restaurants in New York." The comment stuck. In 2001, during the invasion of Afghanistan, New Yorkers had showed solidarity by lining up at an Afghan café called Khyber Pass; at the onset of the Iraq War, two years later, there was no comparable place to go. This absence seemed to touch on a deeper cultural invisibility—one that had made it easier to initiate the attack and harder to heal its wounds. In response, Rakowitz enlisted Yvonne and launched his first culinary intervention, "Enemy Kitchen," cooking Iraqi dishes and teaching recipes.

The more he explored Iraq as a subject, the more his art drew on his associations with it. The following year, he and Yvonne had a series of intense conversations about his grandfather. Nissim Daoud had died when Rakowitz was young, but the two shared a deep bond. "They were like one heartbeat," Yvonne recalled. Rakowitz's first playthings were Daoud's worry beads; when he was a teen-ager, his mother gave them to him, along with Daoud's electric razor. "His hairs were in there," Rakowitz told me. "I was breathless. It was an instant memorial."

When Rakowitz reopened Daoud's import-export company, in 2004, he was interested in the human dimensions of trade with a war-torn society. "I wanted to show how a system worked, but I didn't feel like I needed to be an objective, disembodied voice," he said. His title, "Return," hinted at a personal yearning. The items he shipped had, like him, never been in Iraq; could one think of them *going back*?

"Return," which began as a rented mailbox in Queens, grew into a career-defining project. One day in 2006, Rakowitz was in Brooklyn, shopping in Sahadi's, the grocery on Atlantic Avenue where his grandparents had shopped, when he encountered a can labelled "Second House Products Date Syrup." He

was intrigued. His grandfather had made date syrup with a mortar and pestle; later, his children bought it imported. When Rakowitz took the can to the register, Charlie Sahadi told him, “Your mother’s going to love this. It’s from Baghdad.”

Rakowitz looked at the label: “Product of Lebanon.” Baffled, he asked how that could be, and Sahadi explained that it was a marketing deception, begun before the 2003 invasion, to circumvent sanctions. Dates—once Iraq’s second-largest export—were smuggled across the border, labelled, then shipped onward. After Saddam’s fall, the practice continued amid wartime restrictions.

Rakowitz wondered if he could use his grandfather’s company to import the dates and sell them with their identity unmasked. The fact that Iraq had a barely functional government and was mired in war only made the idea more alluring; the shipment would have to overcome the obstacles that people faced. He returned to Sahadi’s, seeking advice.

“It’s really bad business,” Charlie Sahadi said.

“I know,” Rakowitz said. “But it’s really good art.”

With Sahadi’s help, he arranged for an Iraqi exporter to ship a ton of dates. Then he found a retail space on Atlantic Avenue and put decals on the windows with the name of Nissim Daoud’s firm, Davisons & Co., along with his grandfather’s image and his own. In English and Arabic, he advertised “free shipping to Iraq” and a supply of Iraqi dates.

Rakowitz stocked his store with the falsely labelled date syrup, and with dates grown in California from Iraqi seeds. On a wall, he created a time line documenting the history of Iraqi date farming. Then, four days a week, he sat behind a counter, coördinated with exporters, and engaged with walk-ins seeking to place orders or just to talk.

The simple conceit—importing a ton of fruit—quickly turned into a project of novelistic complexity. First, the dates were trucked to the Jordanian border, where they sat for days in a convoy filled with fleeing Iraqis, only to be turned away because they had not been tested for traces of radioactive particles dispersed by American munitions. An attempt to route them through Syria encountered more obstacles. Rakowitz’s chief partner had fled to Jordan; a date farmer was kidnapped and killed. Weeks went by. The dates deteriorated.



On Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue, Rakowitz reconstituted an import-export business run by his grandfather, who fled persecution in Iraq. From the store, he sold imported dates and date syrup—poignant objects for an émigré community whose heritage was complicated by war. Photograph courtesy the artist

As the delays mounted, people across the United States reached out: émigrés from Yemen and Morocco. At the store, one Iraqi man described how he had admonished Colin Powell. Another scanned Rakowitz's time line and muttered,

“Seeing all this makes me nostalgic, sad, confused, and sick to my stomach.” His name was Shamoon Shamoon, but he had changed it to Shamoon Salih, hoping not to perplex Americans. He had thick glasses, a broad mustache, a kind face.

Shamoon ordered some dates. “Just a little something for *thikra*,” he said. Rakowitz asked him to explain the term, and he told a story, from the fifties, about a leftist exiled to Turkey by Iraq’s monarchy. At the border, the man asked an officer for a bag of dirt to take with him. “The officer said, ‘What’s the big deal? They have dirt in Turkey,’ ” Shamoon recalled. “The man said, ‘This is *thikra*. This is the memory of the dust of the beloved homeland.’ ”

Rakowitz’s ton of dates were too spoiled to be delivered. But, during the project, he learned that DHL was operating in Baghdad, and he decided to use it to import a smaller batch—a hundred and ten pounds, bringing his total cost to eighty-five hundred dollars. The morning he went to retrieve them, he awoke with tears in his eyes. Whatever “Return” had revealed socially or politically, it was also about how an American like him could feel the sting of exile. “Do I have the right to feel in all this?” he asked. “I have never set foot in Iraq. I don’t know if I ever will.”

With his store crammed with onlookers, Rakowitz slowly unpacked the dates, documenting the varieties. (“Deep red. Like wine. Tiny.”) On the final evening of the project, three months after it began, he noted in his log, “Just before the store closes, Shamoon Salih returns for his taste of *thikra*. He looks at the boxes, smiling slightly and nodding, assessing the four different varieties. He slowly put his first date in his mouth, closes his eyes, smiles, and softly says, ‘This is forty-six years in the making.’ ”

The idea of “reappearing” destroyed Iraqi monuments came to Rakowitz one afternoon, when he was sitting in his store thinking about an article that he had read on the looting of Iraq’s National Museum. “It didn’t matter if you were for the war or against,” he told me. “This was a loss for all of humanity.” Yet Rakowitz was struck that the concern for the lost objects did not extend to the Iraqi people. He had been invited to exhibit work the following year, and he wondered how he could bring back the looted artifacts in a way that summoned both the cultural and the human loss.

He knew that he didn’t want to make realistic copies of the objects. “If these come back as ghosts, they should wear the skin of a provenance that is more

confusing,” he told me. Surveying his shop, he sensed the mislabelled date syrup speaking to him. “It was almost like the pressure of xenophobia had been visited on these cans,” he said. “They were too scared to tell me where they were from —a terrified object.” Inspired, he began using such materials—food labels, newspaper clippings, and other disposable items that could be found in an émigré’s house—to re-create the artifacts in papier-mâché. “I wanted to keep the wound alive, and show the urgency, the impossibility, of making these things again,” he said.

Rakowitz set out to “reappear” every object lost from the museum. When *ISIS* destroyed ancient stone panels from the Northwest Palace, in Nimrud, he added those, too: two hundred exquisitely carved wall-size reliefs. Borrowing a phrase from ancient Babylon, he called the project “The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist.” He has been working on the “reappearances” for thirteen years.

This January, at Jane Lombard Gallery, in New York, I saw his rendition of a chamber from the Northwest Palace, which archeologists call Room F. He had measured the precise dimensions and, using two-by-fours, hung his papier-mâché panels where the originals would have stood: a tree motif in a corner, a godlike creature on a wall. They were vibrant and playful but also suggested a whispered lament. Between the panels, Rakowitz had left empty spaces, indicating where stone reliefs had once stood. These had been spared destruction, but only because archeologists removed them from Iraq decades before *ISIS* arrived; one was in the Brooklyn Museum, a subway ride away. It was hard to know which absence was more haunting: the destroyed panels that Rakowitz had brought back in effigy, or the vacant spaces, representing art that still existed but was just as lost to Iraq. Interpretations spun out of the arrangement: was it about the destruction of heritage, about cultural imperialism, or about *thikra*? Paradoxically, the piece seemed to be built on layers of emptiness.

The embankment along the Thames was crowded with commuters, and Rakowitz thrust his hands in his pockets as we pushed against an evening wind. He was calling his Margate sculpture “April Is the Cruellest Month”—a reference both to “The Waste Land” and to the fall of Baghdad in 2003—but the piece was in effect an addendum to “The Invisible Enemy.” Half an hour outside London, in Erith, a mold was being formed of a young British veteran, Daniel Taylor, who had volunteered to model for the sculpture.

That summer, Taylor had been shuttled to Pinewood Studios, where the James Bond movies are filmed, and dressed in combat gear, before being photographed in a room fitted with a hundred cameras to capture a 3-D image. A robotic milling machine then used the data to carve his likeness from a block of polyurethane foam. This was being used to make the mold, which had to be strong enough to sustain a thousand pounds of concrete and mementos.

As we walked, Rakowitz told me that he had met Taylor only briefly—just long enough to explain his basic vision—but that they were planning to talk at length that evening. Heading to Taylor’s apartment, he explained that his work with antiwar veterans had begun in 2012, when he decided to buy a food truck for “Enemy Kitchen,” and staff it with Iraqis as chefs and former soldiers as their servers. The veterans, like him, had a relationship with Iraq that was intimate but distant; troubled, no matter the good intentions.

The food truck led to other projects, which gave him insight into the complex traumas that soldiers can endure. “It’s not just about P.T.S.D.,” Rakowitz told me. “It is moral injury.” In 2017, he began working with a former medic, Gin McGill-Prather, on a piece involving a doll called Special Ops Cody, which American service members in Iraq could buy at the PX and mail to their children. In 2005, insurgents had obtained a Cody, taken a blurry photo, then claimed that it was a captured soldier and threatened to behead him. The military scrambled to locate the captive, until it realized that he did not exist.

“I had to get that doll, and for three years I tried to hunt it down,” Rakowitz told me. “Finally, I did, but I had no idea what to do with it.” Then he learned that, when the insurgents carried out the hoax, McGill-Prather had been deployed at a detention facility outside Umm Qasr, near the Kuwaiti border. At the time, American troops had fired on the facility’s captives, and McGill-Prather helped identify the dead: gruesome work that, in one case, involved taking a retinal scan of a man whose eye was blown into his head. “She had a reckoning with that,” Rakowitz said.

The ensuing project was also at Jane Lombard: a short film called “The Ballad of Special Ops Cody.” In jerky stop-motion, the doll emerges from its hostage photo and steps into the University of Chicago’s Oriental Institute, which houses a collection of ancient Sumerian temple sculptures. Cody strides past a towering lamassu and grapples his way into a vitrine with the sculptures. McGill-Prather supplies his dialogue, improvised along guidelines set by Rakowitz. “I told her I

wanted to know what a votive figurine from 2005 C.E. would say to one from 2005 B.C.E.,” he recalled. “I wanted Cody to offer them liberation, something that was impossible, and that the figures would remain petrified, too frightened to move.”

With the narration drifting between wartime flashbacks and elegiac responses to scenarios that Rakowitz staged with the doll, the video was affecting enough to raise the hair on your arms. As Cody surveys the empty-eyed, impassive figures, McGill-Prather says, haltingly, “When I see you, your faces—I see your faces without eyes, and I think of that day. They were broken, but we destroyed them. You were broken, so we keep you locked up.”



*"I feel like you're judging me for not wearing a mask."*  
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

Reaching Vauxhall, we crossed a thoroughfare into an area between the American Embassy and commuter-train tracks. Taylor and his girlfriend had just moved into a subsidized apartment there, after squatting for a time in an abandoned church. When Rakowitz knocked, Taylor appeared, wearing track pants, a turtleneck, and a necklace with a crystal. He was smiling, but with an uncertain expression. Big glasses shielded sorrowful eyes. He had sandy-blond hair that stood up when he ran a hand through it.

Rakowitz gave Taylor a warm hug, and we moved to a meticulously kept sitting room. Since leaving the Army, Taylor explained, he had lived with the constant anxiety that a sergeant would blast in and berate him for any disarray. There was some gentle electronica playing. Periodically, the rumble of passing trains filled the apartment.

Taylor folded his thin frame into a sofa, and spoke about his upbringing and his military service, which was brief and drenched in fear, and ended with a prison sentence, after he punched an officer. Later, he was given a diagnosis of P.T.S.D. and found his way to an antiwar group, Veterans for Peace. He hoped to become a therapist, to help people like him.

“We came to Kuwait, and the Americans showed us an awful, splayed piece of metal,” he recalled. “I had never seen anything so horrific. This was shrapnel from rockets being fired at us. I looked at that metal, thinking, *That is searing through the sky at any moment!* In Iraq, I prayed to fire my weapon, just so I could fight back. That’s how bad it got. When we were killing them, I actually felt happy about it.”

“Yeah,” Rakowitz said, in a near-whisper.

With his voice wavering, Taylor described a bombardment on his base, and his growing disaffection with the military mission in Iraq. “Something’s got to change!” he said, suddenly. “Which is why I have had a think, and I am going to give you something.” He ran out, then returned with a small bag containing items that he wanted in the sculpture. “These things haunt me,” he said. “I want to let go of them.”

Rakowitz asked if he should open it later. “You can open it now,” Taylor said, wiping away tears. The apartment rattled as a train passed, and Rakowitz

carefully excavated the bag's contents: flags and other mementos, including a combat medal that Taylor had earned in Basra.

Sensing the importance of the medal, Rakowitz tried to dissuade him from parting with it. "You mentioned that it is a kind of currency for you—" he began, but Taylor interrupted, saying, "I want to spend it now! I don't want it anymore." A bit later, he added, "I'm in a boat, doing my best to paddle, but, you know, I can feel healing coming." Then he smiled uncertainly. "In my own selfish way, I can leave myself by the sea in Margate."

The next day, Rakowitz took what Taylor had given him to Erith, along with other mementos that he had collected. He carried it all in a large rolling suitcase, which he dragged through the city's industrial landscape. Brick factories dating to the First World War stood alongside windowless buildings with metal siding. Near a depot for used clothes, the pavement looked like an exploded lost and found.

The White Wall Company occupies an old building with a thirty-foot ceiling. "This was once a cannon factory," Rakowitz said. He had been working with the company, which specializes in art fabrication, since he was awarded the commission in Trafalgar Square; White Wall had built the lamassu for him, with engineers working out how to keep a large structure constructed out of date-syrup cans from blowing over once it was set atop a plinth.

We entered through a squeaky door. An employee looked at Rakowitz's luggage. "Did you come straight from the airport?" she asked.

"No, no," Rakowitz said. "I'm saving on shipping!" A group of people gathered, some with White Wall, some with England's Creative Coast, a festival associated with Turner Contemporary gallery, which was co-sponsoring the installation. While surveying the polyurethane likeness of Taylor—a seven-piece fibreglass mold was being fitted around it—Rakowitz told the engineers that he did not want the concrete to look polished. He had visited Margate to scout the location, and, he said, "I was very inspired by the chalk that is part of the cliffs in the geology—the calcite. When it went into the water, it was like sea glass. It would become smooth, but also these holes would be carved through it, and I just loved that." He was hoping for a textured, porous effect. Nodding, a project manager said, "Bubbles would be good."

Everyone headed for a room holding items gathered from the veterans and from Margate locals who had participated in workshops for the project: a geode that a soldier picked up in Oman, a letter from Gaza. All the objects would be photographed before they were embedded in the sculpture; the photos would be exhibited, along with personal statements, at the Turner gallery. A Turner employee who had run the workshops walked Rakowitz through the stories: one local woman had offered a poppy to mark war traumas passed down to grandchildren. “She went to a mine crater that saw the Battle of the Somme, and every anniversary people scatter these into the crater,” she said.

“This is just amazing,” Rakowitz said, surveying the mementos. “The provenance is what gives it weight.” From his luggage, he produced more things people had given, and some mementos of his own: pearls from Umm Qasr and date seeds. “In Bamyan, one of the stores had dates from Basra,” he said. “I kept those since 2012.” He looked at them. “I am piecing together an idea of Iraq that can only have existed through the stories and the culture that has been transmitted to me.” Parting with the objects wasn’t easy, but he felt that he, too, should sacrifice something. “I’m letting go,” he said.

The Margate project—situated outside the glare of the international art world—came at a good time for Rakowitz. Since 2007, he had been making art about looted artifacts and cultural expropriation, offering a quiet critique of the art institutions that made the removal of Iraqi heritage possible. Then, in 2018, he became embroiled in one of the most overt acts of criticism of a museum in recent memory. Overnight, the glare became blinding.



*Rakowitz's most visible public installation sat in Trafalgar Square—a statue of an ancient protective spirit called a lamassu, built from date-syrup cans. He says that he is inspired by the "projection of magical meaning onto objects." Photograph courtesy the artist*

Early that year, as curators working at the Whitney prepared for the Biennial, they had asked Rakowitz to screen “The Ballad of Special Ops Cody,” and to install Room G, from the Northwest Palace, in the lobby. But then news broke that the [vice-chairman of the Whitney's board](#) owned a company that manufactured tear gas being used on asylum seekers. Employees wrote a protest letter, and Rakowitz, in support, reached out to the curators. “They were lovely,” he told me. They invited him to respond to the issue in his work. Instead, he withdrew from the show, believing that it would remain private. Soon afterward, his withdrawal leaked, and he became a headline. “The Whitney Biennial: 75 Artists Are In, and One Dissenter Steps Out,” the *Times* reported. Later, other artists in the show addressed the issue in their work, and some threatened to withdraw. By summer, the board member had resigned.

For a time, Rakowitz told me, trips overseas were a welcome escape from the spotlight. But his involvement in museum criticism continued. Returning from Erith, we had dinner at the home of an Iraqi-born artist, Jananne Al-Ani. She owned one of Rakowitz’s pieces, an Iraqi military helmet based on the Darth Vader design, cast in resin and embedded with toy soldiers. He put it on and mugged. But, as the wine flowed, he became sombre, noting that “Return” was under curatorial assault, amid another museum protest. The piece was in a group exhibition at PS1, which *MOMA* had acquired in 2008. The show, titled “[Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars, 1991-2011](#),” was designed to explore a country still mired in war. Al-Ani also had a piece in it, a video evoking a drone’s targeting of Iraqi soil: aerial photos of archeological mounds and farms, set to staticky bursts of military radio chatter.

The *MOMA* protests centered on a board member and trustee, Larry Fink, who had ties to a company that runs commercial prisons. Just before “Theater of Operations” opened, in November, Rakowitz flew to New York and met with Al-Ani and with Rijin Sahakian, an essayist who had contributed to the exhibition’s catalogue. By then, one artist had withdrawn, and Rakowitz was uncertain what he should do. During the meeting, Sahakian mentioned that the chairman of *MOMA*’s board, Leon Black, headed an investment firm with a stake in Constellis Holdings, which owned the latest incarnation of Blackwater—a company whose mercenaries had fired into a crowd of Iraqi civilians in 2007, slaughtering seventeen people. Constellis was still active in Iraq, she noted, sharing a recruitment ad depicting men firing guns. The text asked, “Ready for

your next adventure?"

The three raised their concerns with the museum's director, Kate Fowle, and the show's curators, who told them that their worry was misplaced, because *MOMA* and *MOMA PS1* had separate boards. Rakowitz was unmoved. "The connection is right there in the name," he told me. Afterward, Sahakian reviewed public documents indicating that *MOMA* assists *PS1* with management, development, and funding, and that Black was an ex-officio member of *PS1*'s board. His son, who works with him, was a full board member.

Rakowitz understood that his involvement in the protest might affect his career, but any other path seemed to lead him to hypocrisy. Instead of withdrawing, he proposed altering "Return" by pausing a video that told the story of his Brooklyn store and posting a statement. The curators refused, and after three unsuccessful offers Rakowitz took matters into his own hands. With his assistant, he researched the kind of media player the museum might be using, narrowing the list to four possibilities. Then he bought four remotes, and walked into *PS1*, paying cash for a ticket. ("It's good to be paranoid a little bit," he told me, laughing.) Finding "Return," he stopped the video and put up his statement. *PS1* quickly undid his intervention—even as it allowed other artists to alter their work in ways unrelated to the institution. Frustrated, Rakowitz consulted a lawyer and demanded that his name be stripped from the piece if it could not be shown as he intended. Just before the show closed, the museum agreed to remove his name.

By then, thirty-seven participants in the show had signed a letter expressing concern about *MOMA*'s board, hoping for a response. (None came.) One of the Iraqi signatories, Ali Yass, had been unable to visit New York because of his asylum status in Germany. He felt so silenced that he invited activists to make small tears in his paintings on the show's final day, as a protest. Hearing about Yass's plan, the museum rushed to remove his work, and called in N.Y.P.D. officers to guard the space. (*PS1* says that the work was "removed from view to ensure its safety.") Distraught, Yass called Rakowitz, who consoled him. "I am furious," Rakowitz told me, at the time.

Still, he was optimistic that art institutions would become more careful about their entanglements. In London, he had visited Tate Modern to offer his Trafalgar Square sculpture as a gift. (The idea of selling the lamassu was unthinkable, he told me.) Initially, he hoped the piece could travel indefinitely

after it was removed. “There is something about it being in a constant diasporic relationship throughout its life that interests me,” he said—not letting on, until months had passed, that he had proposed to the Tate that it share custody of the sculpture with an Iraqi museum, allowing the work to travel back and forth. This spring, he told me that the Tate had agreed.

“It is truly refreshing,” he said, and shared an excerpt from his proposal. “The perpetual migration between these institutions acknowledges the contemporary Iraqi situation, in which so much of the country now exists outside of its borders due to the succession of wars and occupation,” he wrote. “It also acknowledges the desire to return.”

Pigeons fluttered across Trafalgar Square. The sun was bright. A man dressed as Yoda, holding a staff, had engineered a way to make it look as though he were levitating. Buskers sang, and crowds gathered.

The square sits between the National Gallery and the Mall, which leads to Buckingham Palace. At the center, a towering column supports a sculpture of Admiral Horatio Nelson, who commanded the British fleet against Napoleon. At the far corners are four plinths; two hold statues of generals who assisted in the conquest of India, and a third has a sculpture of George IV on a horse. The fourth plinth was meant for a monument to William IV, but the sculpture was never made. In 2005, the mayor of London began inviting artists to design pieces for it, and it is now one of England’s most important spaces for public art. We approached the fourth plinth, where the lamassu stood: a chimera, fourteen feet long, with a bull’s body, a falcon’s wings, and a human head, its face set in an expression of implacable calm. The date-syrup cans glinted in the sun. In the years that the piece had stood there, some of the cans had lost their color. Strangely, only those that were accurately labelled as from Iraq had not.

The monument, inspired by a design from an imperial court, was visually at home in the square, even as it asserted its own complicated story. As the showpiece of “The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist,” Rakowitz told me, it was “one of the most meaningful things I have had the luck to do.” At its base, he met two Iraqi émigrés—friends of his, who took pictures with him and chatted, until Rakowitz broke away to silently take in the piece a last time.

As we stood there, I thought of what Rakowitz had written in the store log for “Return”: “I have never set foot in Iraq. I don’t know if I ever will.” Later, I

asked why not, and he explained by recounting a dream. “I was at an art event in Istanbul,” he said. “It had ended. Some people were going to Syria, others to Palestine. Then somebody was, like, ‘Are you going to Iraq? There’s a flight!’ I was at the ticket desk, and a friend was there, and I said, ‘I don’t think I should go.’ She said, ‘No,’ and I said, ‘Why?’ And she said, ‘Because some things in this life should still make us tremble.’ I woke with that. I was, like, ‘What does that mean?’ ” He smiled and ran a hand through his hair. “I think it means there is an immensity to it. It feels like an unpromised land, a place I don’t need to go to in order to consummate my relationship with it.”

He thought for a moment. “The food, the reappearance of artifacts—all of these things,” he said. “When they are enunciated away from the place, it almost seems like a magic trick, being able to close distances, and protect against the will of those who say you don’t belong here. It’s, like, they can’t keep you from having a relationship to that place just because they forced you out.” Then uncertainty set in. Maybe he would go, he said, noting, “I don’t want to foreclose anything.”

A week later, he travelled to Sweden, to exhibit another room from the Northwest Palace. Changing planes in Copenhagen, he had felt drained, but when he spotted a gate serving an Iraqi Airways flight for Baghdad he stopped to take a photo. He sent it to me, writing, “Was tempted by this possible detour.” A couple of weeks later, he was en route to Dubai. From the plane, he wrote again, a single line: “I just flew over Basra!!!” ♦

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

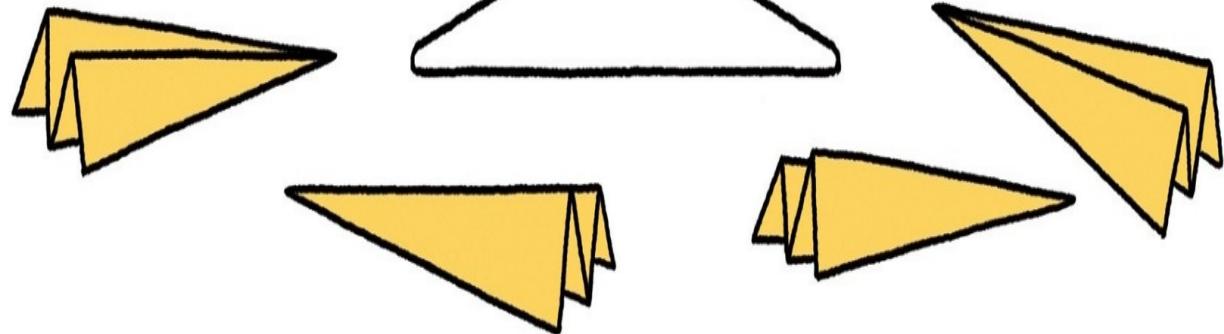
- [Virtual Freshman Orientation](#)

[August 24, 2020 Issue](#)

# Virtual Freshman Orientation

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

August 17, 2020



Welcome, freshmen, to your first year at William McKinley Virtual High School. Even in the midst of a global pandemic, we're committed to providing you with a classic all-American high-school experience—online.

At McKinley Virtual High, education comes first. In math, you will learn the principles of geometry. The four walls of your bedroom form a rectangle. No point in learning the other shapes. For science class, you will engage in the global race for a *COVID-19* vaccine. Sure, it's unlikely that the cure is dog food mixed with Clearasil, but the scientific method says you have to test everything. Except drinking bleach. Science has always known that you can't drink bleach.

Socially distant P.E. will look a little different. This year, students will have to pummel *themselves* with dodgeballs. If you wear glasses, you must leave them on. It's all part of the educational experience. To simulate the locker-room environment, you will split into two Zoom “breakout rooms”—one for girls and one for boys—and get naked. Our lawyers have assured me that this is both legal and a cherished part of high school. For those of you who are self-conscious about your changing bodies, please know this: you are not normal. You are the only one who has ever looked like that. Google “fifteen-year-old boy normal” and you'll see. In lieu of a school-provided gym uniform, please change into whatever clothes make your body look lumpiest.

While there's no substitute for the healthy meals prepared in our cafeteria, you can re-create the nutritional profile of a school meal by squirting ketchup on a slice of pound cake.

High school is about social life, too. Even in virtual high school, you will quickly find new friends and establish social circles. But some things will be a little different. Drama kids: though the school's production of “Our Town” has been cancelled, you'll be happy to know that all of you got the lead role. Debate team: you will now be holding practice sessions in the reviews section of Amazon.com. (Resolved: the SleepTech 2000 is an imperfect mattress pad.) Goths: your belief that the world is a purposeless wasteland of dysfunction and fear used to set you apart. But, now that we're all in agreement on that, maybe it's time to find a new thing—have you tried jogging? Bullies: you'll have to cope with your parents' divorces some other way. Popular kids: don't worry, even through the small window into your lives which a Webcam provides we can still tell that you're rich. Stoners: as you were. This is really your time. And,

since we won't be able to find out who would have been that kid whose rolling backpack runs over everyone's feet, please just raise your hand now. (Thanks, I had a hunch it was you.)

I know that virtual high school must be a disappointment. Many of you had big plans for this year. Some of you were going to find yourselves in detention with students from different backgrounds. After a series of comical misunderstandings and a dance montage, you would have learned to like—maybe even love—one another. This will no longer be possible. Detention will be virtual, too. You will watch a nine-hour video about corn.

One of you was going to be crowned homecoming queen, only to break the tiara into dozens of pieces and share it with the entire class. I cannot emphasize enough how unsanitary that is. Still others were going to connect with an ambitious young English teacher from another walk of life, who would have shown you that poetry is just like rap, and that, through the written word, you could transcend your background. Maybe next year. And, if you were planning to take off your glasses and reveal that you've actually been hot the whole time, please sign up for a time slot. When you all do it at the same time it doesn't work.

As you imagine yourselves stepping through the doors of William McKinley Virtual High, think of our namesake, a President who did not live through the pandemic of 1918, since he was shot in the chest in 1901. What a lucky break.

I can't wait to see you all at graduation. Maybe. ♦

## **Tables for Two**

- [Rippers, Brothers, and More of the Rockaways' Seaside Fare](#)

[August 24, 2020 Issue](#)

# Rippers, Brothers, and More of the Rockaways' Seaside Fare

The Rockaway boardwalk offers savory Venezuelan arepas, memorable Brussels sprouts with lobster caramel, classic burgers, and shady benches for snacks with a view of the surf.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

August 14, 2020



There is something surreal, almost hallucinatory, about the view of Manhattan as seen from the southernmost end of Flatbush Avenue when leaving the Rockaway Peninsula. A glimpse of the silvery skyline, just after you've crossed the Marine Parkway Bridge, inspires astonishment: How can *that* be mere miles from *this*? The Rockaways, as these blocks and beaches of Queens are known, make up a beach community so incongruous with the rest of the city that being there can feel like one of those dreams in which you find an extra room in your apartment.



*Though the Rockaway boardwalk concessions are naturally pandemic-friendly—open-air, counter service only—a host of extra precautions have been taken. Photograph by Myesha Evon for The New Yorker*

Even the name sounds like a fairy tale—which, of course, it's not. It's a phonetic corruption of a word from the language of the Lenape, an indigenous people decimated by European settlers in the seventeenth century. The peninsula has a complicated, sometimes ugly history, and no shortage of modern-day problems. Still, in the summer, it has all the trappings of a genuine seaside retreat, including a serious surf culture and plenty of wonderful things to eat, and safely. It's possible that there's no dining format better suited to the global pandemic than boardwalk concessions.

The experience of procuring food from Rippers, a nine-year-old burger stand on the boardwalk at Beach Eighty-sixth Street, was so contactless one recent afternoon that it pushed past impersonal and straight into charming, with the retro appeal of an automat. Through a crackling speaker embedded in a Plexiglas window, I made selections from a slightly pared-down version of the already streamlined menu. (No hot dogs this summer, nor specials or soft serve.) Minutes later, a masked employee hollered my name and shoved a bag through a small opening in another window, sliding it shut as I retreated.



**NO MASK  
NO SERVICE**

ALL BURGERS  
ON A  
ROLL  
ICKLES  
SAUCE

*The slightly pared-down menu at Rippers includes "beach juice," a frozen sangria. Photograph by Myesha Evon for The New Yorker*

In possession of a crisp paper sack full of consummate drive-through-style cheeseburgers (\$11)—smashed patties, American cheese, pickles, and shredded lettuce on potato buns—plus French fries and ice-cold cans of Coke, I felt, gleefully, like Jughead Jones. The classic combination was especially winning on a partially shaded bench overlooking surf and sand, the scent of salt and sunscreen in the air, where I was so relaxed I could muster no surprise, only delight, when I bumped into a friend wheeling a vintage bicycle painted a shade of Sunkist orange that matched her Crocs. She was renting a houseboat on Jamaica Bay for the week; of course she was, what a brilliant idea.



*A spread from Rockaway Clam Bar, clockwise from bottom: fried-clam basket; fish tacos; crispy Brussels sprouts with lobster caramel; peeled shrimp with cocktail sauce. Photograph by Myesha Evon for The New Yorker*

If I were renting a houseboat on Jamaica Bay, I'd ride my bike, at breakfast time, to Brothers, on the boardwalk at Beach 106th Street, for a scrambled egg tucked neatly with pesto, Cheddar, and radish microgreens into an English muffin, and a frothy Get Up and Catch It smoothie, made with peach, coconut water, lavender, and banana (\$3-\$12). The words "Be patient / with us / with each other / with yourselves" are scrawled on the Plexiglas there, and on the wooden counter below them, "BLACK TRANS LIVES MATTER." When I got hungry again, I'd make a beeline for Caracas, my Rockaways go-to, for Venezuelan arepas (\$9-\$11)—I'm partial to La del Gato, stuffed with ripe avocado, caramelized plantains, and stretchy, salty Guayanés cheese, slathered in the house-made hot sauce—and a passion-fruit juice.



*A Rippers employee eating a burger on his break. Photograph by Myesha Evon for The New Yorker*

For eating on the sand, arepas, with their tidy compactness and tropical vibes, are the perfect food. If you prefer to imagine your lunch was caught just offshore (there's a big fishing scene out here, though it's mostly catch and release), High 97, at Beach Ninety-seventh, offers fish and chips (\$16), plus a foot-operated hand-sanitizer pump and a framed head shot of Anthony Fauci. For a seafood cornucopia, there is Rockaway Clam Bar, a seasonal offshoot of Red Hook Lobster Pound, on the more bucolic beach at Jacob Riis Park. The menu features standards including fried clams, fish tacos, and cold peeled shrimp to dip in cocktail sauce, zesty with horseradish (\$6-\$22). The dish that lingers in my mind, weeks later, is the fried Brussels sprouts drizzled in a caramel made with lobster stock, lemongrass, ginger, and Thai chili, as unexpected as the Rockaways. ♦

---

## 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](#)?

## The Theatre

- [The Urgency of Anna Deavere Smith's "Twilight: Los Angeles"](#)

# **The Urgency of Anna Deavere Smith’s “Twilight: Los Angeles”**

The pandemic cut short the playwright’s residency at the Signature Theatre, but her 1993 play is available to stream, and feels as incisive as ever.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

August 17, 2020



In 1993, the photographer Richard Avedon made a portrait, in edgeless black-and-white, of the playwright and actor Anna Deavere Smith, to accompany an article in this magazine by John Lahr. In the picture, Smith wears a dark, baggy jacket, and her English garden of loosely coiled hair tickles at her shoulders and clavicle. Her face is hard to parse. Her scrunched brows are like thin awnings over her eyes, which stare intensely; there's a tension in her mouth that draws one side slightly higher than the other—this could be a put-on sneer or an attempt to mask a sudden laugh. Smith looks serious and funny, formidable and unpredictable, and—not unlike the works of confessional-historical theatre with which she has made her name—capable at once of intimate empathy and detached appraisal.

The photograph conveys what her plays confirm: that a whole world of thought and emotion can be made, through art, to live and accrue new meanings in just one person's mind and body. Smith, now sixty-nine, has devoted her career to making panoramic documentary plays that depend for their power on her talents as a journalist and as an uncanny, soul-embodying mimic. For her one-woman shows, she conducts hundreds of interviews about high-profile civic events and, through a miracle of compression, presents verbatim the answers of her subjects, one after the other, retelling recent history as a kind of audiovisual collage.

Her most famous plays, “Fires in the Mirror: Crown Heights, Brooklyn and Other Identities” (1992)—about the 1991 Black-Jewish conflict in Crown Heights—and “Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992” (1993), about the riots in Los Angeles following the acquittal of four policemen accused of beating Rodney King, illustrate the power of her method. Both tally the reasons for and the results of civic eruption and interracial strife. Smith is in dialogue with the soul-funk legends Sly & the Family Stone, whose funniest and darkest joke was a song called “There’s a Riot Goin’ On,” which consisted of four seconds of total silence. Yeah, there’s a riot, but who can really speak its language?

Smith’s dramatic invention is spiritually descended from the Living Newspaper tradition of political theatre, which reached the height of its influence in America in the nineteen-thirties, under the aegis of the Federal Theatre Project. Living Newspapers narrated current events—sometimes framed by frank propaganda—for Depression-era audiences. You might think of Smith’s plays as Living Magazines: thoroughly reported, yes, but shot through with a chorus of sensibilities, curated into a higher coherence.

Editing is key to Smith's art; she makes distant world views sometimes painfully proximate. Voices come in concert if not always in conversation. They differ in timbre, perhaps, but Smith places them so precisely that their parallels in attitude or style or content become apparent. When her people contradict one another directly, in succession, the collision clears the way for epiphany. Smith's plays take pluralism as a given, but subtly synthesize it into a unified whole. (Another way to say this is that Smith delivers in art what America has chronically failed at in practice.)

Smith began a playwright's residency at the Signature Theatre, in New York, during the 2019-20 season, which was cut short by the *COVID-19* pandemic. It was to be an extension of her great experiment: "Fires" and "Twilight" would be staged with new actors—which is to say, without Smith. Might these voices, now almost thirty years removed from the moment of their utterance, still hold together if sung by someone else? Based on the evidence of "Fires," directed last fall by Saheem Ali, the answer was a tentative yes. The show was performed by Michael Benjamin Washington, and its mixture of empathy and terrifying neutrality was still intact. As Washington riffled through personages—Al Sharpton, Lubavitcher housewives, a Caribbean father shocked into silence by the death of his child—the audience moved with him toward an awful comprehension of the riots' costs.

Pershing Square Signature Center shut down before the new "Twilight" could hit the stage. It's a shame, a situation that I hope will be rectified whenever it's safe for people to rejoin one another on the aisles.

Happily, the Public Broadcasting Service has made its "Great Performances" production of "Twilight: Los Angeles," directed by Marc Levin, available to stream on pbs.org. The PBS version of "Twilight"—which first aired in 2001—is more than simply a recording of Smith's original play. It opens in 1999, seven years after the riots; Smith is back in town, again looking for answers. Has there been some salutary result of the chaos? "I think it didn't get any better," a wide-eyed older woman says in response to Smith's questions. Daryl Gates, the former chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, still thinks, from the fresh vantage of the turn of the century, that the brutal beating of Rodney King by officers under his charge "had nothing to do with race."

These newer scenes are woven into the film's fabric, but most of the show focusses on Smith's original material. She portrays her interviewees in front of

minimalistic sets, shot with a calm naturalism by the cinematographer Maryse Alberti, giving the production a hint of the immediacy of the theatre. Here, though, the great physical limitation of Smith's stage plays—the imperative to change costumes and characterizations on the fly, presenting a human panoply through a series of quickly achieved vocal and physical transformations—is gone. I missed that constraint, which typically yields gold for Smith. Except for a few quick changes, each of her characters has his or her own scene; rarely do we get to see her hurriedly morph, perhaps her most impressive (and metaphorically humane) trick.

It's still miraculous to watch Smith work. She plays Rodney King's aunt, Angela King, with a reproving, sulky comedy that nearly masks her deep pain about her nephew, and the racial strife that followed the attack on him. "We wasn't raised like this. We wasn't raised with no black and white thing," Smith says, as King. When she says the word "Chinese," the "s" comes out as a hard hiss instead of the usual "z" sound, and that quirk of pronunciation opens up a whole world of personality and ethnic perspective. Then, suddenly, she's talking mournfully about Rodney's beaten face. "It was a hell of a look," she says.

As Charles Lloyd, the defense attorney for Soon Ja Du—a Korean shopkeeper who killed a fifteen-year-old Black girl, Latasha Harlins, in an incident that, along with the King assault, helped to catalyze the riots—Smith is again ruefully comic. The lawyer's patter becomes a kind of sick boxing commentary: "I mean, this fight was no contest. I'll take the girl." For a second, we're the implicated jury, caught up in the spectacle and almost forgetting that blood has been shed. Smith knows what is funny, what is tragic, what is monstrous about her characters, and knows which words—which barely perceptible movements of the face—contain those truths.

She knows, too, that life as an ethnic minority, living in close quarters with other tossed-aside people, is full of violent paradoxes. One of the rigors of Smith's work is the way she draws the shapes of possible alliances—Black and Jewish in the case of "Fires"; Black, Chicano, and Korean in the L.A. of "Twilight"—that are troubled, perhaps fatally, because their participants have been pushed into material competition. It's excruciating to watch her portray a Korean woman, her eyes full of tears, as she weighs the righteousness of Black struggle against the bitter invisibility of her own community.

A better government than we have would reanimate the Federal Theatre Project

and commission hundreds of Smith-style projects, inviting communities around the country into a more complete understanding of themselves. The moment of justice and clarity toward which “Twilight” so ardently strives will look like this: somebody with her ears open and her heart ready. She steps onstage only when all the knowledge she’s been seeking—terrible and strange, contradictory and tough to take—lives as much in her body as in her mind. ♦

## **Try It at Home Dept.**

- **Be Your Own Bubble Boy**

[August 24, 2020 Issue](#)

## **Be Your Own Bubble Boy**

It'll be tough to navigate the aisles of a bodega, and a kid on the street might ask to kick you, but walking around the city in a plastic bubble is one way to brave the pandemic.

By [Henry Alford](#)

August 17, 2020



Under quarantine, some people feel like they've turned into the proverbial boy in the plastic bubble; others are desperately *trying* to turn into him. The other day, a New York City quarantiner used one of his online purchases (electric air pump, \$38.66) to inflate a second one (four-foot-wide plastic wearable bumper ball, \$117), before it dawned on him that his apartment's narrow doorway would not permit egress. D'oh! Remembering the scene from the Laurence Olivier film "Henry V" in which a knight, in full armor, is lowered onto his horse with a winch, the quarantiner deflated his bubble ball a bit, put it on his fire escape, reinflated it, and then lowered it four flights down to the sidewalk with a piece of twine. Huzzah.

The bubble, which has a column of air through its middle, like a tall doughnut, weighs eighteen pounds and, when worn, extends from the quarantiner's hips to six inches above his head. Though the bubble, like its more immersive predecessor the Zorb, is considered a toy or a sporting good, the online customer reviews for bubble balls suggest a broader range of uses: "Fun way to tire out your kids." "Great for couples therapy." "Like a mini-vacation in a terrarium of your own sweat."

The quarantiner had a different application in mind: extreme hygiene. "You're looking at the future, or some version of it," he said, in greeting, to the proprietor of a deli. "But, unfortunately, I can't fit through your doorway." The deli man smiled and said, "Maybe I squeeze you."

No amount of squeezing would have helped the quarantiner—who wore a mask under the bubble—to gain entrance to a nearby market. Outside, a kind passerby in a wheelchair consoled him: "That's a tough store anyway—very narrow aisles." The quarantiner did manage to squeak through the doors of the Morton Williams grocery store on Bleecker Street, but shopping was cumbersome, because his arms were grasping the ball's two inner handles. To put a package of mozzarella into his shopping basket, he had to wriggle an arm out from under the bubble and then skyhook the cheese. In the process, he knocked over a display of stroopwafels. At the checkout, the quarantiner accidentally exposed his head when he was compelled to lift the bubble over one of the store's Plexiglas sneeze shields; he thought about Shelley Winters in "The Poseidon Adventure."

The quarantiner called up Andrew Akers, a New Zealander who, in 1994, with

his partner Duane van der Sluis, built a Zorb in his garage and went on to pioneer commercial Zorbing. Had biocontainment been on Akers's mind when he made his Zorb? "Not at all!" he said. "We only thought about rolling people down hills. No redeeming features." Did he have any advice for the quarantiner? "Don't let anyone sneeze on your bubble."

Although most people's reactions to the quarantiner's bubble were positive—one night, a drunk, maskless reveller on Hudson Street exclaimed, "You look like how I feel!"—there were occasional lows. "Can I kick you?" a young man in Washington Square Park wondered aloud. At the Union Square farmers' market, an elderly woman stared diagnostically, before offering up the information that the coronavirus can live on plastic.

For context, the quarantiner re-watched the overripe 1976 TV movie "The Boy in the Plastic Bubble," starring John Travolta. He loved the scene in which Buzz Aldrin, the astronaut, visits the title character and confesses, "The thing I remember most was the loss of freedom. I felt like I was in a fishbowl." Then the quarantiner called Jorge Gutierrez, the owner of Knockerbball NYC—which rents out bumper balls to groups—for advice on navigating doorways. Gutierrez suggested, "Butter it up."

The next day, back in the bubble, the quarantiner squeaked through the unforgiving entryway of a Citibank A.T.M. vestibule; a pedestrian stared with equal parts glee and terror. "I'm not a bank robber," the quarantiner told her. "I'm just trying not to resort to butter." ♦

---

## 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?

# Table of Contents

- [New Yorker Magazine](#)
  - [A Critic at Large](#)
    - [What Have We Done to the Whale?](#)
  - [Annals of Horticulture](#)
    - [The Therapeutic Power of Gardening](#)
  - [Art](#)
    - [A Taste of Venice with the Frick’s “Cocktails with a Curator”](#)
  - [Books](#)
    - [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
    - [Catherine Lacey and the Art of Enigma](#)
    - [Alice Oswald’s Homeric Mood](#)
  - [Brave New World](#)
    - [The Samuel Johnson of Emoji](#)
  - [Comment](#)
    - [Do V.P. Picks Matter?](#)
  - [Dept. of Normality](#)
    - [The Very Normal Life of Daisy Edgar-Jones](#)
  - [Fiction](#)
    - [“Cicadia”](#)
  - [Letter from Michigan](#)
    - [The Militias Against Masks](#)
  - [Our Local Correspondents](#)
    - [El sacerdote renegado que ayuda a los indocumentados a sobrevivir a la pandemia.](#)
    - [The Renegade Priest Helping Undocumented People Survive the Pandemic](#)
  - [Poems](#)
    - [“Whisk”](#)
    - [“Ode to Patrick Kearns, Funeral Director of the Leo F. Kearns Funeral Home, in Queens”](#)
  - [Postcard from Before](#)
    - [A Drive-By Eulogy for New York City’s Record Stores](#)
  - [Profiles](#)
    - [Michael Rakowitz’s Art of Return](#)
  - [Shouts & Murmurs](#)

[Virtual Freshman Orientation](#)

[Tables for Two](#)

[Rippers, Brothers, and More of the Rockaways' Seaside Fare](#)

[The Theatre](#)

[The Urgency of Anna Deavere Smith's "Twilight: Los Angeles"](#)

[Try It at Home Dept.](#)

[Be Your Own Bubble Boy](#)