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THE WALRUS

JUNE 2020 • THEWALRUS.CA

Life in the Time of COVID-19



**ASTRONAUTS
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**HOW OUR BRAINS
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PLUS

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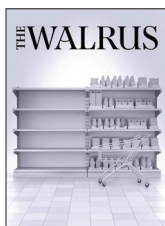
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The Walrus, PO Box 915, Stn. Main
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THE WALRUS

411 Richmond Street East, Suite B15,
Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5A 3S5 • 416-971-5004
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Editor's Letter

A FEW DAYS AFTER federal and provincial governments began urging people to work from home if possible, I ran into my letter carrier. After introducing himself (Adrian) and clearing away some pleasantries, he mentioned that he was “really looking forward” to delivering mail to all of the people, many of them presumably shut in, along his route. “It’s nice to make a positive difference,” he said. In these days of physical distancing, mail—from the household essentials we order online to dispatches from the outside world—has become more precious than many of us would have imagined.

For as long as our printing presses in Ottawa keep running and letter carriers like Adrian can distribute mail from door to door, we’ll keep delivering *The Walrus* in this format. We’ve also created a dedicated page for our ongoing coverage of the coronavirus pandemic at thewalrus.ca/covid-19. Furthermore, the pandemic has provided us with incentives and opportunities to develop new means of connecting with our audience. For example, we’ve launched *The Conversation Piece*, a podcast based on our live national event series, *The Walrus Talks*. Over the coming weeks, we’ll be introducing additional ways to connect with our journalists and will be launching new forms of multimedia storytelling on our website.

If you’re reading this, you’ve received the first print copy of *The Walrus* produced not in our office, in downtown Toronto, but in the homes of our editors and designers. Like so many Canadians, over the past few weeks, we’ve adapted to working remotely. For all of us, the



COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the difference between the things in our lives that felt essential and those we really needed to live. It hasn’t been surprising to find that few staffers miss the late nights in the office or the bracing downtown Toronto commutes, but we’ve gained some new forms of camaraderie via technology. I’ve also been unsurprised to discover, through the Brady Bunch–like squares containing my colleagues during our regular Zoom videochat meetings, that many of them have enviably stocked bookshelves.

For all the work we’ve done to deliver an uninterrupted experience, this isn’t a typical issue of *The Walrus*. The rapidity and totality with which the coronavirus has transformed our lives led to last-minute changes. As the pandemic developed in the public mind from a two-week disruption to an unprecedented societal shift, we commissioned veteran science reporter Carolyn Abraham’s essay, “Your Brain on COVID-19,” on the way our minds process and respond to looming and unfamiliar threats. “Distant Threat,”

by Judy Ziyi Gu, describes the writer’s experience fearing for relatives in China even as Gu and others in North America blithely carried on with their typical routines.

Like you, my colleagues and I are concerned for the world, and for our loved ones. What spurs us on now is that we’re in the fortunate position of having a profession that lets us do something. A good part of our ability to persevere as journalists is the backing of an organization that supports us in our work, especially at a time when our industry is financially threatened. For the past fourteen years, *The Walrus* has been led by executive director Shelley Ambrose. Having

evolved, over fourteen years, from the publisher of a magazine to the executive director of a multifaceted nonprofit that produces, among other things, print and digital journalism, national events, podcasts, and consulting work, Shelley has decided to bring this chapter of her life to a close. It’s through her efforts that *The Walrus* is now in the best shape it’s ever been, thanks in no small part to an educational mandate that promotes fact-based journalism.

As we take another step—not just into a virtual office but also into a new world we’re only just beginning to envision, economically and culturally—I am glad to introduce our incoming executive director, Jennifer Hollett. Her expertise spans digital media, politics, and public administration. We are all lucky to begin a new chapter with her. Change has been a constant at *The Walrus* since the beginning and will remain key to our growth. Thank you for your support and commitment—regardless of how we come together. ♣

—Jessica Johnson

Contributors' Notes



CAROLYN ABRAHAM

“Your Brain on COVID-19,” p. 20

“If, in a year from now, I look back on life during the age of COVID-19, I would like to explore how it has changed us. The fear of physical closeness with one another is a shame and yet completely rational in the context of this pandemic. I also think there will be a fundamentally deeper sense of gratitude for simple pleasures in our lives—sitting beside strangers watching a ball game or having dinner with friends at a restaurant.”

Carolyn Abraham is a Toronto-based science journalist and author. The Globe and Mail's former medical reporter, she covered the SARS outbreak and gave birth to her first child while under quarantine.



CAROLYN THOMPSON

“Point of No Return,” p. 26

“To tell the story of climate change and displacement, I chose to focus on Somali refugees in Dadaab, Kenya. I've worked on refugee stories for a long time, and generally, the first thing a lot of refugees say is, ‘If there's peace in my country, I'll go home.’ They care about their land. But, for a lot of Somali communities that have been displaced because of the climate crisis, this is changing—there's no longer anything left for them at home.”

Carolyn Thompson is a freelance journalist who covers refugees, conflict, and corruption. Her work has been published by the CBC, Al Jazeera, and the Washington Post.



LINDSAY JONES

“Murder in Old Barns,” p. 36

“I was driving to an assignment when I heard on the radio that the Nova Scotia government was offering a \$150,000 reward for tips leading to an arrest for a murder that, at the time, was around twenty-five years old. The province does this with lots of unsolved murders. I looked up old articles and reached out to the victim's family members. One of them got back to me and said he'd been waiting for somebody like me—a reporter without a deadline who wanted to look into this story. And that was my starting point.”

Lindsay Jones is a freelance journalist based in Halifax. She writes for Maclean's, the Globe and Mail, and the CBC. Her work has also appeared on topic.com.



SALINI PERERA

Illustration for “Stand-Up's Next Act,” p. 61

“I grew up listening to a lot of stand-up comedy. But most of the comedians were white men, and we had to try to empathize with their experiences and understand their perspectives. Now, with greater diversity in the stand-up scene, there's a level of specificity that wasn't there before. There are comedians who look like me and talk about experiences I've actually had. Suddenly, something is for us.”

Salini Perera's work has been published by the Globe and Mail, Reader's Digest, and the CBC. She illustrated her first children's book, a biography of Madam C.J. Walker, last year.



JUDY ZIYI GU

“Distant Threat,” p. 66

“I've worked in newsrooms and have had to follow the news even when it was emotionally challenging. My reaction was always to protect myself, and sometimes that meant deliberately ignoring certain stories when I knew they were going to be difficult to process. Writing this essay about my initial response to the spread of COVID-19 made me realize that, to be prepared for times of instability, you have to consume the news and you have to be aware of what's happening to other people. Maybe my own mental well-being isn't always the most important thing.”

Judy Ziyi Gu is a digital producer at CBC Podcasts and the former digital manager at The Walrus.



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Letters



LEARNING CURVE

Kevin Patterson examines COVID-19 through a much-needed historical lens (“Anatomy of a Pandemic,” May). Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there have been at least eight other pandemics from which we could

have learned. Instead, we now find ourselves unable to conduct widespread testing or contact tracing, two of the most important measures we can take to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed. With increasing population density, climate change, and human encroachment on wildlife, we know this will not be the last novel virus to affect us. So, when this is all over, let’s invest in systems that will prepare us to deal more effectively with the next outbreak. How many times do we need history to repeat itself?

Richard Musto

*Canadian Public Health Association
Ottawa, ON*

WEST CASE SCENARIO

Brett Gundlock’s and Max Fawcett’s reporting on the separatist movement in Alberta (“Inside Wexit” and “The New Separatists,” April) left me wondering if its members had considered another alternative to Canadian citizenship. Why don’t they offer Donald Trump their piece of land? This way, they could become America’s fifty-first state, own as many guns as they like, liberate themselves from universal health care, enjoy a deplorable education system, and watch the gap between the rich and the poor widen. Plus, the rest of Canada could quit being concerned with a bunch of right-wing whingers who care for nobody but themselves.

Matthew Marosszeky

Aurora, ON

In articles like Gundlock’s and Fawcett’s, could you please not use the term “the west” when describing Alberta and Saskatchewan’s alienation and separatist ambitions? It’s like referring to Quebec separatism as “eastern alienation.” I’m looking forward to the day when BC, Canada’s third-largest province, gets the same in-depth coverage as the Wexit gang. Maybe then our Toronto-based national media will understand the

political beliefs of those of us who live here—and why the federal government’s push to build more pipelines scares the bejesus out of us.

Kathryn-Jane Hazel

Nanaimo, BC

CREATIVE DIFFERENCES

I enjoyed reading Tom Jokinen’s article on the Banff Centre (“Go Sell It on the Mountain,” April). As a child, I longed to become an artist: someone so compelled to create that it takes over their life. During my time in art school, however, I found that students were there for different reasons. For some, the idea was to make money; others were compelled more by the process than by the product. Professional artists should certainly be able to make a living from their work, but I find the tendency to drag everything down to the level of filthy lucre depressing. If the Banff Centre focuses too much on the business of art, it risks losing its wonderful spirit of creativity.

Carol Hyslop

Wentworth Valley, NS

GRADE EXPECTATIONS

Anne Thériault’s piece on why we shouldn’t call certain young people smarter than others is excellent (“The Biased Ways We Praise ‘Smart Kids,’” *thewalrus.ca*). When I taught secondary school, students and parents were always equating marks in a course with future success in a career. I would always say that, even if you received a very high math or geography mark, there was no company called “Math Inc” or “Geography Ltd” waiting to hire you. The real world is more complex than that and requires a variety of skills to navigate successfully, including flexibility and imagination—qualities we generally don’t assess very well in high schools.

Jim O’Reilly

The Chawkers Foundation

Toronto, ON

TUSK, TUSK

In the April issue, the article “Climate Believers” stated that a video in which faith leaders urged action on climate change had been released by the United Church of Canada. In fact, the video was released by the Canadian Council of Churches, Citizens for Public Justice, and Kairos. The Walrus regrets the error.

“The time has come,” The Walrus said, “to talk of many things.” Send us a letter, email (letters@thewalrus.ca), or tweet, or post on our Facebook page. Comments may be published in any medium and edited for length, clarity, and accuracy.

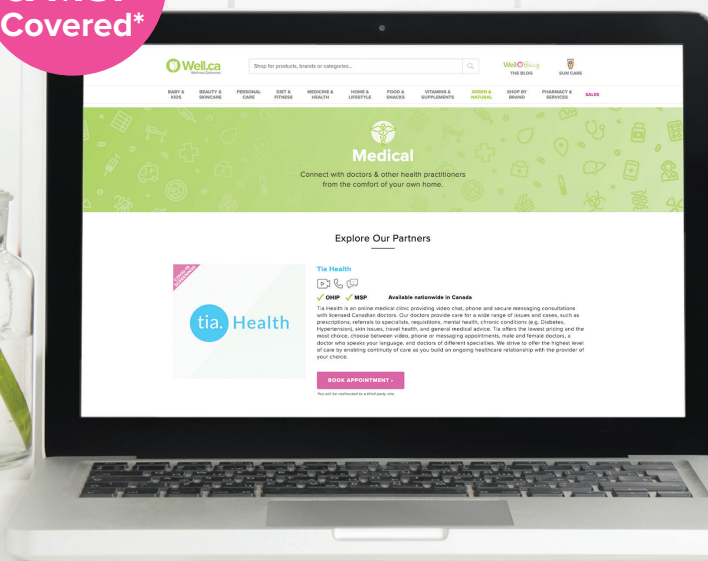
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SCIENCE

Alone in the Universe

*What space missions can teach us about
mental health and isolation*

BY ELIZABETH HOWELL

ILLUSTRATION BY SEAN LEWIS

AFTER SPENDING 328 days in space, astronaut Christina Koch had another ambitious goal: to walk on the beach. In February, the forty-one-year-old returned to Earth after living aboard the International Space Station for almost a year and working a strenuous schedule that involved hundreds of science experiments and six spacewalks. (Koch was lucky: spacewalks are rare, and only some astronauts get to go outside during their missions.)

Astronauts often struggle with even the most routine physical activities, including walking, after experiencing the weightlessness of space. Some have returned from much shorter sojourns than Koch's feeling so physically weak they collapsed during press conferences. Some have also struggled to ease back into everyday life after the thrill of a space mission. To improve the transition, every astronaut follows a tailored rehabilitation program when they return; in Koch's case, that probably involved sixty days of training—split between NASA's Johnson Space Center, in Houston, and her home—to readjust

to Earth's gravity. The beach wouldn't mark the end of Koch's training, but her coach knew that it would offer a mental health boost and that the astronaut's desire to see the water again would get her through the first few days of exercises. A week after landing, Koch tweeted a picture of herself standing on a beach, arms outstretched in triumph.

In many ways, space can be just as hard on the mind as it is on the body. For astronauts, the isolation, the confinement, and, at times, the uncertainty of space travel can be crushing even though they often spend years preparing for their missions. And, as researchers continue to establish mental health supports for spacebound crews and study travellers who have returned, they're finding that there's still much to learn about the long-term psychological effects of these journeys.

Koch had been preparing for her return to Earth while still in space. She told reporters she experienced no serious mental health issues during the

mission, in part due to a personal commitment to “always focusing on what I had and not the things I didn't have.” She also had regular check-ins with a psychologist.

Over the past several decades, space programs have gotten better at recognizing the role of astronauts' mental health in the success of their missions, this after at least a handful of trips were almost derailed due to concerns related to mental health. In 1968, the Apollo 7

crew experienced such uncomfortable conditions, including dealing with bad colds onboard, that they dismissed requests from ground control and even refused to wear helmets during the dangerous phase of reentering Earth's atmosphere; the astronauts were not allowed to fly again. In

1973, the Skylab 4 crew, which spent eighty-four days in space, took a day off from in-flight research in the face of unrealistic deadlines and against the wishes of mission control; some went so far as to call this behaviour a “mutiny.”

**In many ways,
space can be
just as hard
on the mind
as it is on
the body.**

TAKE A DEEP BREATH...

The year is 2050.

Planet Earth is sustaining a thriving global community. The United Nations is hosting a summit to celebrate the success of the “Canadian Approach,” which is credited for creating a new era of worldwide prosperity. This approach puts human health and well-being first, and enjoys consensus across governments, political parties, and economic sectors. Today, people across the globe are healthier and wealthier than at any previous point in human history.

It was thirty years ago that federal, provincial and Indigenous leaders met with industry and investors to design Canada’s response to the “Great Unwinding” caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Canada’s cooperative approach put it at the forefront of a new kind of global leadership, one based on a balance between social and economic priorities, collaboration, and multilateralism. The broad success of this approach was

emulated internationally, building the foundations of a new global economy.

Prosperity emerged from zero carbon technologies created after the 2020 petroleum trade war. These technologies were welcomed as a way to “keep the smog away,” a global catch phrase that emerged during the 2021 economic restart after global air quality radically improved during the pandemic.

The shared experience of the 2020 pandemic led to global cooperation, which enabled humanity to collectively address major multi-generational challenges. Now, the world is set to reach “climate stay” within a few years.

When asked what led to this golden era, the United Nations Secretary General offered that “the worldwide reimagining of what is possible started in 2020. At first, people were surprised when canals in Ven-

ice started teeming with fish. Today, people are surprised to learn that the environment and economy were once separate paradigms. In my view, we unlocked our potential as humans the moment we agreed that everything was truly connected.”

As you look back to 2020 and all the challenges that were overcome, which insights motivated you to approach the global disruption as an opportunity for positive change?

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And American astronauts, such as Jerry Linenger, complained of isolation due to cultural disconnection while working on the Russian-run Mir space station in the 1990s—Linenger spoke little Russian, and his cosmonaut colleagues didn't speak English. As NASA and the Russian space agency continued to work together, they included more language and cultural training for crew members.

Some astronauts experienced breakdowns after coming back to Earth.

Apollo 11 astronaut Buzz Aldrin fell into alcoholism and depression shortly after returning from his 1969 moon landing. To program directors, it became clear that some astronauts might feel a sense of emptiness after completing something as monumental as a space mission. "There was no possible way of setting a goal that would match the goals already achieved," Aldrin wrote of his depression in his memoir, *Return to Earth*. The typical astronaut today tends to be a bit older than Aldrin was at the time of his mission (thirty-nine), and that often means they've spent more time preparing.

But there's still a lot we don't know. While researchers believe that, under certain circumstances, space travel can negatively affect mental health, they can't say for sure whether astronauts suffer more than ordinary people who've never left Earth do. And everything we've learned about mental health in space so far applies only to travels close to home—to the International Space Station and to the moon. NASA's current aim to land astronauts on Mars in the mid-2030s—a voyage that would likely be restricted to a small crew and could take years—raises new questions. Could even the most skilled crews learn to tolerate one another for so long in

such cramped quarters, travelling farther from home than any human has ever gone, without losing their minds?

Meanwhile, aspects of that experience might feel less distant to the millions back on Earth practising physical distancing, isolating in their homes, or living under strict lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. And, while the circumstances differ significantly—staying home but being able to go on occasional walks, as some of us can, isn't the same as



being on a months-long space mission—there's no doubt that many of us have become deeply familiar with something astronauts have known for decades: it's hard to live in a confined space for an extended period of time.

FEWER THAN 600 people have made the journey to space. That's one of the reasons it's so hard to get a comprehensive sense of the mental health impacts of space travel on humans. Just a dozen people fly to space annually due to limited room aboard the Russian Soyuz spacecraft that brings most crews to orbit from Baikonur, Kazakhstan.

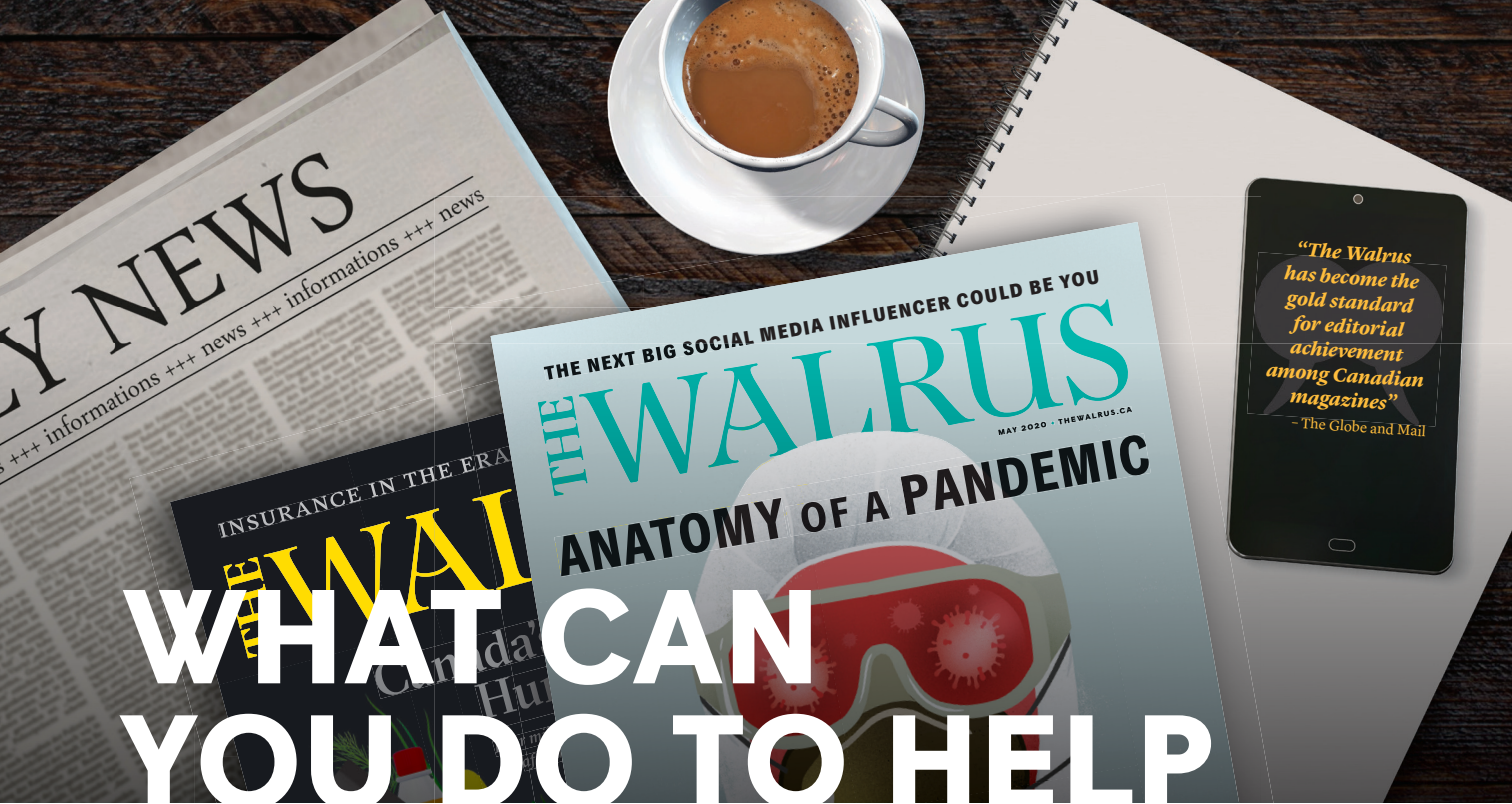
But we can learn from groups on Earth that, like those operating in

space, work in isolated and often dangerous conditions, says Lawrence Palinkas, a medical anthropologist at the University of Southern California. Since the 1980s, he's studied crews in polar environments; many of his subjects have experienced depression, feelings of social isolation, and even a sort of psychological torpor or sleepiness that sets in after a few months of working during the long polar nights or twilights.

California-based cultural anthropologist Jack Stuster, who has also studied polar and space crews, shared anecdotes of cold-weather crews using unusual strategies to pass the time. One pair, confined to a two-metre-by-three-metre space for nine months as they waited out winter, eventually began sleeping seventeen hours a day because "there was nothing to do," Stuster says.

In light of such research, Palinkas's work advocates for "coping strategies" for space-bound crews. Team-building training, for example, "enables them to identify points of tension and conflict and work through conflict resolution strategies," Palinkas says. (Similarly, relationship therapists say couples in isolation should plan ahead for when things get stressful.) NASA, meanwhile, regularly sends astronauts on mini-expeditions in remote areas on Earth, including underwater, to help them learn how to work together in isolated conditions. Canadian astronauts also occasionally accompany university researchers on far-flung geologic field expeditions.

Astronauts are closely monitored during training, which can take years. With regular medical and psychological screenings, the long wait should give space agencies enough time to assess psychological problems before flight,



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says Canadian Space Agency flight surgeon Raffi Kuyumjian, who acts as a physician for Canadian astronauts from the ground. In orbit, astronauts remotely check in with their assigned flight surgeon about once a week and with a psychologist about twice a month.

The outcome of those sessions could range from a simple thumbs-up to interventions to improve the astronaut's well-being, Kuyumjian says. This could mean reducing their workload or giving the astronaut some extra time with family (at a distance, of course). Astronauts also sometimes get surprises, such as care packages in spacecraft deliveries or even a conversation with a celebrity, like the one that Canadian astronaut Chris Hadfield had publicly with *Star Trek*'s William Shatner in 2013. (Usually these conversations are private, but Hadfield, who famously entertained global audiences with guitar playing and a rendition of David Bowie's "Space Oddity" from space, opted to livestream the discussion.)

But Palinkas warns that there have not been any systematic studies

regarding how well these psychological interventions work. Meanwhile, a study at the University of British Columbia aims to create guidelines to help astronauts get ready for the long trip to Mars. Twelve astronauts have been given questionnaires at various points before and after their space missions, focusing especially on any "space culture" crews develop to promote cohesion. Data collection is expected to wrap up this year.

Another stream of research, looking into how being in space affects our cognitive skills, is comparing the health and processing abilities of twin brothers, one in space and one on Earth. Scott Kelly, who spent 340 consecutive days in space, was found to have noticeable drops in cognitive performance compared to his brother Mark, who had also been an astronaut but had retired before the study. In other words, returning from an almost year-long stint in space could potentially affect brain function.

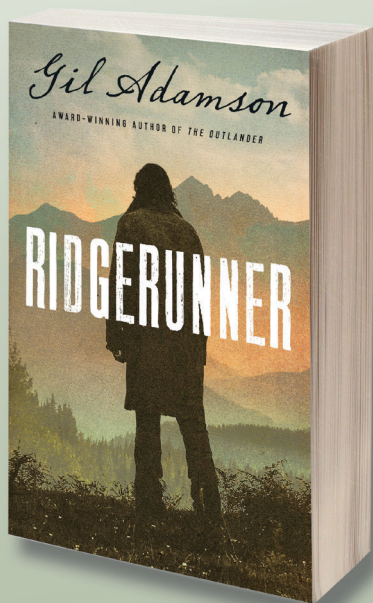
Is this unique to Scott Kelly, or is it something astronauts on lengthy missions can expect? With a single test subject, it's hard to say for sure, and

studies comparing the Kelly twins are not yet complete. NASA plans to send about ten more astronauts for lengthy sojourns on the International Space Station in the next five or six years; each of their missions could add to the small but growing body of knowledge about the human brain in space.

Mars missions aside, tracking the progress of astronauts may also offer insight into how our minds work back on Earth; we don't need to go too far to feel isolated, overwhelmed, or homesick. In March, as many of us adapted to the realities of social distancing and life in quarantine, Hadfield posted a YouTube video in which he offers viewers tips on self-isolating—including starting fresh projects and learning new skills. "Take care of your spaceship," he concludes. "And I wish everybody happy landings." ●

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ELIZABETH HOWELL is a science and space journalist whose work has been published by the CBC, *space.com*, and *Forbes*. Her book about the Canadian astronaut program, *Canadarm and Collaboration*, will be published in October.

Part literary Western. Part historical mystery.



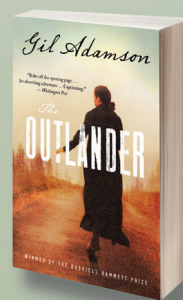
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PSYCHOLOGY

Your Brain on COVID-19

Why our minds struggle to process abstract dangers

BY CAROLYN ABRAHAM
ILLUSTRATION BY CORNELIA LI

AT THIS MOMENT, a savage microbe is holding the human world hostage, forcing nearly 4 billion of our industrious, gallivanting kind into a society of shut-ins. Confined to our homes—if we're lucky enough to have them—we're banding apart, hoping to slow the spread and deprive a greedy pathogen of any more human hosts. COVID-19 already has plenty.

Indoors indefinitely, we watch the outside world through our screens. We see New York's wrapped bodies stacked and refrigerated, army trucks carrying off Italy's dead, rising curves, health care workers weeping, politicians clinging to poise, and we wonder: Should I buy more canned goods? Is my family safe? Can I still smell stuff? Did our lockdown come too late? Will there be jobs when it's over? When will it be over? Is it okay to walk the dog?

Humans are not well designed for this slow-burn brand of threat. We're better equipped for one-off attacks than abstract menaces. Give us muggers, hurricanes, sabre-toothed tigers, hazards that compel us to battle or run for our lives—not the protracted uncertainty of a contagion that has killed tens of thousands and counting.

So just how is the human brain responding to all this?

"It's screaming," says Susan Krauss Whitbourne, a professor of psychological and brain sciences at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. "I know, it's a very technical term," she jokes. "But, in our brains, there's a lot of screaming going on right now."

The coronavirus pandemic has triggered the brain's ancient alarm system, Whitbourne explains. It's sounding full blast, and who knows when it will quiet?

As with everything else COVID-19 has exposed—bare-bones health care systems, threadbare social safety nets, fragile economies—it has also unmasked the flaws of our neurobiology, glitches in the way we assess risk and in the fight-or-flight way we react to it. These neural kinks from another time have shaped everything from how we responded to this virus from the get-go (or, rather, how we didn't respond) straight through to the mental burden we carry now.

THE PROBLEM, in many ways, is one of architecture. The human brain is like a three-storey heritage building, constructed haphazardly by the forces of evolution over a very long time—and the old threat-detector is in the basement.

It sprouted in the primordial ooze, 500 million years ago, bequeathed by fish to our reptilian ancestors, lizard-like creatures that slithered out to make a go of life on land. To this day, the reptilian brain—home to the brain stem and cerebellum—is the master of our vital functions: breathing, sleeping, heart rate, swallowing, movement.

The lizard brain takes its cues from the second-floor addition that the early mammals punched out about 150 million years ago, giving us the unconscious magic of our limbic system: the memory bank of our hippocampus; a hypothalamus that governs emotional responses, blood pressure, and hormones; and the wee almond-shaped fear-processing amygdala that's been key to our survival ever since our blood ran warm.

After furry mammals eventually evolved into us, up went the top floor of our cortex, the brain's executive suite, with its spacious lobes and their astonishing power to learn, speak, plan, anticipate, deliberate—and oh, how they love to imagine.

For all the neural advancement, threat detection remained the job of the lower structures. At the mere inkling of danger, it's the amygdala that kicks our famous fight, flight, or freeze response into motion. It sends a distress signal to the hypothalamus, which triggers the release of adrenalin and cortisol and rouses the reptilian brain a floor below to rev the body for action, pumping up heart rate, breathing, and blood flow so we can, in a flash, dodge an oncoming car or jump back from a snake attack. Research suggests the amygdala is so attuned to danger that it can make us recoil before we're even aware that there is a snake coming toward us in the grass.

The trouble is that, in the modern world, the limbic and lizard brains can be notorious overreactors: part of our unconscious minds, they can mistake everyday stressors for life-and-death threats. And firing up the same response to deadlines and traffic jams as they once did to charging mammoths and bison hunts gone bad can take a toll on the body. Chronically higher levels of adrenalin and cortisol can be hard on the

heart, the arteries, the metabolism, and the mind.

Worse, our primitive brain regions have no capacity to distinguish between threats that are real and those we imagine. It's a failing that contributes to disorders of panic and anxiety—and also what makes COVID-19 such a headache.

As our cerebral brain contemplates the threat of COVID-19, as it is so inclined to do, turning over endless permutations of the devastation the virus may cause, the limbic system pokes the reptile in the basement—which never thinks twice before jacking up the body to act—as if the microbe itself were leaping from the bushes.

“With this kind of threat, you've got the amygdala kicking... the fight-or-flight syndrome, you're kind of operating from the brain stem and below,” says Whitbourne. However, “the fear is mixed with higher-order brain structures trying to regulate the fear and come up with a kind of a plan.”

In that way, Whitbourne says, the pandemic represents a unique threat: the brain is forced to respond to an uncertain danger and, at the same time, is dramatically affected by the effort to contain it.

“Your world is no longer the same. Usually, we have a chance to adapt to big events, and even going back to the disaster of 9/11, people had one day, one hour, or a minute and everything changed,” she says. “But it didn't have that all-encompassing, life-changing effect on your physical self.

“This is a completely new situation. It's not like war. You're not directly in the scene of action, it's not like the people in the bombing raids of World War II, for example. They knew what was coming at them—and it was terrifying, to be sure—but they could see it.”

HUMANS HAVE a spotty track record of relating to the invisible—think Santa, God, climate change. It's estimated that 20 to 30 percent of our brain is devoted to processing visual information, and what we can't see, research suggests, we tend to forget.

But that's not the whole story with COVID-19. In neuroscience, it's generally

accepted that well-defined threats trigger fear while uncertain dangers provoke anxiety—the brain's second defensive system. In a 2016 study from University College London, for example, researchers concluded that a more visible predator in a video game resulted in faster motor reaction times, which is in line with the fear-triggered fight-or-flight response. But, when the predator was hidden, reaction times slowed as the amygdala worked harder to assess the threat.

Whitbourne suspects that the invisible nature of the pandemic sets off a fluctuating, back-and-forth brain reaction that toggles between fear, anxiety, and calm.

Knowing there's currently no drug to cure the disease or vaccine to prevent it may be enough to set off a flight reaction—but, in the case of COVID-19, to where would we flee? Lockdown has already penned us into our homes—or whatever shelter we've found in this storm—where we have much time to consider how we're feeling.

“When we have more time to reflect, that's when you have more interaction between the higher-order brain structures, between the rational versus the gut-wrenching fear people have—and rightly so,” says Whitbourne. “It comes in waves, because you might calm down for a while, and then something makes you afraid again.”

Which is why the next major neural challenge is sitting still.

All over the web, funny memes have spread about the relatively miniscule sacrifice people are being asked to make to beat this viral enemy. One reads, “Your grandparents were being called to war. You're being called to the couch.”

Yet, for some, staying inactive is its own battle. Fear, after all, is the great motivator. It kept the troglodyte searching for the perfect cave. Fear of failure keeps a student up cramming all night. Fear of the coronavirus will sway the anxious to shell out more than \$50 for hand sanitizer. At the same time, the physiological impact of the reptilian brain's fear response—pumping up energy levels as it does—cues us to *do* and to *move*. It's the essence of fight or flight.

The brain wants to act in stressful situations, says Steven Taylor, a psychology professor at the University of British Columbia and the author of *The Psychology of Pandemics*. With the global spread of the coronavirus, we see the threat is major, the scope is massive, the whole world is affected; we're primed for big action—and the instructions are: wash your hands.

For some, Taylor says, that just doesn't seem like enough. “People want to feel like they're doing something rather than just sitting at home twiddling thumbs.”

Even he struggles to digest the surrealism of it. “It occurred to me yesterday that it's one thing to write about a pandemic, which I did, and another thing to actually live through it. It's a little bit disorienting to look out your window and see the streets empty.”

Taylor, who treats people with anxiety disorders, began work on his book in 2018. Having read virologists' warnings that the next pandemic was on its way, he wanted to explore what role psychological factors would play in such a crisis. This sent him on a deep dive into history's outbreaks, and one of the things he found was that people's fears and attitudes can alter the course of a contagion: as we are all learning now, how strictly we choose to follow stay-home orders will determine how widely the virus spreads and how many it kills.

Taylor wrote his book believing it could one day have relevant implications. His editor, he recalls, felt otherwise: “He said to me, ‘Yeah, that's important, but no one will ever read that book.’” Like the rejection letters J.K. Rowling once received turning down the adventures of a boy wizard, those pronouncements now seem quaint. Taylor, who found another publisher, released his book late last year—just about the same time the new coronavirus was making its quiet debut in Wuhan. And none of his insights—about mass panic, hygiene practices, and emotional responses—are hypothetical anymore.

The outbreak, for instance, is also spreading sadness, Taylor says, “because all the important social things in life, cultural milestones, are being cancelled,

weddings and so forth. I was invited last week to attend a funeral by Skype.”

All this contributes to a sense that people have lost control of their lives—and people, primed to act when in a state of fear, “want the illusion of control.” This is why so many of us shift into panic-buying mode, Taylor says—not only to give ourselves an action we can carry out in the face of a threat but also because stockpiling goods gives us the illusion of having some command of the situation. And panic buying, like fear, is contagious. During the 1918 Spanish flu pandemic, which is estimated to have killed at least 50 million, people stocked up on Vicks VapoRub, believing it was helpful to rub the mentholated ointment on your chest. But Taylor never predicted the patterns of “quirky hoarding” that the twenty-first century pandemic would bring—in Vancouver, he says, it’s been cannabis, and almost everywhere, toilet paper. “I’m so sick of talking about toilet paper, I can’t tell you.”

Andrea Soddu, a neuroscientist at Western University’s Brain and Mind Institute, says vulnerability, along with fear, can push people to do things “that are not very rational.” Soddu, who studies human consciousness, describes it as a debate playing out between our reptilian structures and our highly evolved frontal lobe executives—even if we’re not aware of it.

Lizard Brain: Buy the toilet paper, buy it all!

Executive Lobe: I know you are scared and you feel you need to do something, but please, just go home, stay home, wash your hands, and don’t touch your mouth. That’s what you can do, okay?

Lizard Brain: No, I can do more than that! I can buy more toilet paper!

“When we feel very vulnerable, we start overthinking,” Soddu says. The brain falls into a loop of fearfulness—and this is when people need to consciously

shift their attention, he says. “You need to distract your brain: do the cooking, go walking, do things with your hands. Otherwise, it’s like a vortex and you can’t get out of it.”

That vortex, he believes, also sheds light on the motivations of people now driving up gun sales in Canada and the US. In one instance that made headlines, a Wisconsin man said he wanted

the weapon to protect his family against home invaders who might be eager to steal their supplies. In Calgary, the owner of The Shooting Edge told CTV News that sales had gone up by as much as 35 percent with the outbreak. Another store owner, in New Jersey, told the *Star-Ledger*, “They just say, ‘I want a gun, I want a gun.’ ... They’re coming

apart at the seams, these people.” And a North Carolina merchant told the *Charlotte Observer* his store has a new motto: “Dedicated to helping you protect your toilet paper.”

LIKE MOST THINGS involving the coronavirus, the switch from mild concern to full-blown panic happened at top speed. One moment, it was just a regional outbreak of a few dozen cases, a new pathogen without a name. The next, it had gone global and the schools were closed. Yet, though we had seen the makeshift hospitals spring up like weeds in the dirt fields of Wuhan, and even when we knew, after SARS, that any microbe is but a boarding pass away, the hard landing of COVID-19 seemed to take us by surprise.

As with grief, says Soddu, “the very first component of the brain’s response to bad news is denial.”

In some cases, denial can be a good thing, a protective, unconscious mechanism the brain uses to buy itself time to absorb distressing or shocking information without tipping off a psychic maelstrom. But, of course, denial also has a dark, harmful side—it can block you from taking appropriate action.

Originally from Italy, Soddu believes the refusal to accept the coronavirus as an imminent threat helps explain why it has so dramatically devastated his native country. “People think, ‘Oh, it’s not going to happen to me!’ That’s the sense of being invincible, the sense that these things do not affect you. So a lot of people kept behaving as before, denying and not thinking of what the real consequences could be, because they saw it as something that was far away.

“At the end, I think, this is what produced such a spread, because people were not observing the restrictions, especially at the very beginning.”

In public health, denial is a well-known epidemic, one usually coupled with the false sense that faraway scourges pose little threat to the rest of us. Ebola, for instance, has been around since 1976, but not until the outbreak in West Africa from 2013 to 2016 did the hemorrhagic fever catch the world’s attention, says bioethicist Maxwell Smith, “because [then] that outbreak had the potential to infect us in Canada and the US.

“So then, all of a sudden, you started thinking about whether this was a public health emergency of international concern ... yet we hadn’t been thinking about this for decades before, because it’s only affecting poor nations in Africa,” says Smith, a professor at Western University’s School of Health Studies. “As soon as it becomes something that impacts self-interest, that’s when we start to care—and that’s at the last minute.”

Yet, if you usher in containment measures too early and an outbreak is milder than expected—as happened with H1N1 in 2009—you seed public mistrust and accusations that you’ve overreacted, says Smith. He calls it the “paradox of public health”—the success of an initiative is gauged by what does not happen. (And, when the worst doesn’t happen, Smith adds, people question the need for and value of public health protocols.)

With COVID-19, the approach has been to gradually scale up voluntary containment measures, and “as people become accustomed to those, then you say, ‘We have to ratchet it up.’ ... You don’t go straight to locking down the country in

Humans are not well designed for this slow-burn brand of threat—we’re better equipped for one-off attacks.

mid-January, in anticipation of all of this, because by the time the virus gets here, in mid-February or March, it may be that the public doesn't trust public health authorities again because we didn't get it right."

The scope of the current pandemic offers the public a unique perspective on the importance of containment efforts, Smith says, because people can actually see what's happening in other countries: what's working, what isn't, and the consequences of perhaps not trying hard enough. In the context of dealing with an enemy that's invisible, it's a compelling visual motivator to stay home and isolate.

From law-enforced quarantines to widespread closures of churches, playgrounds, and parks, the circles of isolation expand steadily, and social norms seem to mutate on the fly. The upshot is that life in the time of COVID-19 is already heralding a new age of morality, when suspicion follows a casual stroll and a public sneeze and each step beyond your own front door is freighted with second guesses.

Not everyone cooperates. In the early days, notable nonconformers included beach goers in Vancouver, spring breakers in Florida, and returning snowbirds out to restock their empty fridges. But authorities always knew the social restrictions would be a hard sell, says Taylor, who's also an adviser on risk and human behaviour with the Canadian government's expert pandemic panel. With sweeping social-containment rules and the quick financial meltdown that has followed them, it's widely expected that the pandemic will spread distress and despair along with disease.

The government decision to direct people to self-isolate wasn't taken lightly, Taylor says. "They've had to ask themselves, 'When do you implement this?' You know it's going to be enormously costly for everyone and you know there's only a certain amount of time that you can expect really good adherence.

"Some people, their marriages will crumble because they're in isolation and get cabin fever. Some will lose their jobs and lose their houses and go bankrupt. The financial impact is going to hit some

people very hard and that will impact their well-being.

"So, the longer it drags out, in highly individualistic societies, like Canada or America, the more people will rebel."

THERE'S AN analogy Soddu, the Western University neuroscientist, heard recently that he felt nicely summed up why the world must pull together to beat the coronavirus. The situation is not like a meteorite hurtling toward the Earth: a large force coming at us from the outside with nothing anyone can do to stop it, he says. "It's more like you are in a big car, and everybody has a brake pedal, and it's up to everyone to keep their foot on the pedal to stop the car from colliding into a wall. We can do it as a collective." But, in this case, he says, "The collective behaviour came very late."

Why?

"It's the absence of a sense of community," says Soddu. "We lost that."

Whether humans are biologically built to be socially cooperative in the face of threats is an unresolved debate in the sciences. Few experts doubt that cooperation has enabled the survival of our species: we have long relied on a village to raise a child or strength in numbers to bring home the bison. But whether we're hardwired with the inclination to foster community is a debate as fraught as drawing lines between nature and nurture. Research with infants suggests that the desire to empathize takes off in our first year; the study of twins indicates that genes can predispose us toward self-interest or altruism, but genes are reactive and riff off the environment in which they exist.

In today's world, Soddu argues, we generally lead solitary, self-sufficient lives with little appreciation for what can be achieved as a group. "My parents and grandparents lived through the war, and at that time, everybody felt there was a sense of community and 'let's do it together.'" Today, people tend to think of society as something that "imposes things, like taxes," not as a collective that achieves together. Soddu points to declining voter turnout over the past forty

years as evidence of this indifference. He also cites the weaker bonds of our virtual social networks and the general disregard for the well-being of others.

"Before COVID-19, if you woke up one morning and you had to go to work, but you don't feel good, you feel shitty, and you take your temperature and you were maybe 37 or 38 [degrees], what do you do?" says Soddu. "You say, 'No, no, I need to be at work,' so you take an Aspirin and then you go." The consideration that you might expose someone else, perhaps even cause serious illness in someone immunocompromised, did not change your mind, says Soddu. "We lost the sense of responsibility toward the vulnerable ones."

Philip Mai, co-director of the Social Media Lab at Toronto's Ryerson University, views it differently. Online, he sees the sense of community flourishing. Mai and his team are running a government-funded project to track and counter coronavirus-related online misinformation and provide province-specific updates. While it's early days, Mai says, it is already apparent that social media has become an important community hub during the outbreak, locally and beyond.

People have helpfully tweeted which stores have run out of toilet paper, for example, and which still have it, says Mai. "Then all these groups spring up [with people saying], 'I can shop for seniors while I pick up my own bag of beans and I can drop it off, so let me know if you need the help.' So very, very practical stuff."

The idea that a community is just "your neighbourhood and the sixty people you come in contact with on a daily basis is gone, simply because we live more solitary lives, so we use technology as the intermediary. So we have to think of community in a wider way," says Mai, whose own community includes his family members in Vietnam—who know from his social media feeds what he had for dinner—and the people he follows on Twitter, "who are no less real than my neighbour who lives next to me."

The extent to which technology is rewiring the brain, changing its perceptions of the self and the world around

us, is another evolving story. Just a few weeks ago, Mai says, the social narrative around technology was that too much screen time is harming our brains. But now, in the lockdown of the pandemic, “it’s seen as the best way to connect to family and friends,” which helps keep our brains happy and healthy.

One danger with social media is the potentially numbing onslaught of information and, at times, misinformation. People get fed up with conflicting instructions, Mai says, and decide, “I’m not listening to anything.” It could become an “infodemic,” he says, likening the barrage to a waterfall. “What you want to do is turn that waterfall into a tap that you can turn on and off.”

While there are many examples of humanity’s best qualities online as people reach out to help others, there’s also growing evidence of its nasty underbelly: there’s been the rise of self-appointed pandemic police, outing supply hoarders and stockpilers—on YouTube, footage of a BC couple with two cartfuls of meat went viral—and the “quarantine shamers,” who livestream those breaking physical distancing rules under #covidiot, and the smug. They’re the ones, says Mai, who will write, “You deserve to be stuck in Morocco—you knew before you flew out” or “Enjoy Peru—you’re going to be there for quite a while, and it’s your own fault!”

“That’s why we did not see a lot of offers of help for Wuhan when they were going through what they were going through, because there’s a sense that, if you didn’t live the way you live, you wouldn’t be in this trouble, so you kind of deserve it.”

THERE’S A SENTIMENT shared online that humankind had this pandemic coming, that our reckless exploitation of the planet finally caught up with us. And so, in biblical style, fate sent the threat of a pox to all our houses so we’d stay home, park our cars, and ground our planes. One popular Facebook post portrays the pandemic in a Dr. Seuss-style poem arguing that, with the outbreak, “the lungs of the planet caught a small break.”

The notion may well have inspired the creators of a spate of unusually positive fake news as well—doctored photos of nature’s romantic comeback during the COVID-19 shutdown. Beyond toilet paper, it’s another element of the pandemic that surprised Taylor. “We’re all prepared for fake news that spreads malicious stuff, but with this, there’s been a rise of positive stuff that’s fake, which is fascinating.” Among it: photos of dolphins said to be swimming in the now clear canals of Venice (the photos having actually been taken in Sardinia) and a fiction about elephants in China getting drunk on corn wine before passing out in a lovely garden. “They went viral because they depicted images that made people feel good,” says Taylor. “And people see this, and they keep sharing it and circulating it, because they want to make others feel good. That was something that I didn’t anticipate.”

Taylor also agrees that these fake images of the wilderness winning have had particular traction in the public psyche when there’s a growing awareness of climate change and the havoc people have wrought on the planet.

It may be that the pandemic is forcing a social reckoning—long overdue—with the fact that human disregard for life forms other than our own can have deadly consequences on a global scale. After all, if a mere microbe can overtake the business of nearly 200 countries and terrorize us by the billions, will it upend the notion that there is a natural hierarchy—one in which we humans are always on top? Will humans, in whatever state we emerge from this crisis, be humbled?

In a matter of weeks, the world’s response to the coronavirus has been wildly more united and aggressive than any initiative to save the planet. Yet, as far as threats go, climate change and COVID-19 would seem to have much in common in the way they hit the brain. They’re both abstract and global in scope. But, while people initially found it hard to muster a meaningful response to the threat of a new virus, neurobiologically speaking, mounting an urgent response to climate change is even tougher. Not only are rising temperatures and sea levels

largely invisible, their most dramatic visual examples unfolding at a distance (so long, Antarctica), they’re also distant in time. Climate change is a drawn-out threat, with future generations expected to feel the worst of its impact. To the reptile in the basement, the pouncing sabretoothed tiger in front of you always takes priority. In fact, there’s much research to suggest that the human brain does a lousy job assessing future threats, in large part because people don’t even relate well to their future selves. (If they did, they might exercise more and sock away more for retirement.)

Several imaging studies have found that thinking about oneself in the present activates the brain’s medial prefrontal cortex, which is part of that top-floor executive suite involved in behaviour and social cognition. It stays highly active when people think about family members and others they care about. But, when they consider people they have less connection to, this area becomes less active; its activity is similarly weak when subjects are asked to think about themselves in the future.

Writing about the phenomenon for *Slate* in 2017, Jane McGonigal, a research director at the California-based Institute for the Future, said it’s as if our future selves “are strangers to us.”

“This glitchy brain behavior may make it harder for us to take actions that benefit our future selves both as individuals and as a society,” she added. “The more your brain treats your future self like a stranger... the less likely you are to make pro-social choices that will help the world in the long run.”

Whether any of this changes after the pandemic—whether our long history of adaptation forces us, in the post-COVID-19 moment, to recognize that it’s our approach to the world that needs adapting—is another of its great uncertainties. 🧠

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CAROLYN ABRAHAM is a Toronto-based science journalist and author. The *Globe and Mail*’s former medical reporter, she covered the SARS outbreak and gave birth to her first child while under quarantine.


ENVIRONMENT

Point of No Return

The climate crisis is forcing thousands around the world to flee their homes. Many can't go back

**BY CAROLYN THOMPSON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY PATRICK MEINHARDT**



A man with a weathered face and a goatee is sitting on a colorful, patterned mat. He is wearing a plaid shirt and patterned shorts. The background is a textured, orange-brown wall. The lighting is warm and directional, coming from the side.

IN northeastern Kenya, some 400 kilometres from a pristine coastline and a short drive from the porous border with Somalia, is an empty community. The homes have been torn down, the market abandoned. An old tea shop is barricaded with branches of prickly mesquite, known locally as mathenge. There's a rustling of tarpaulins strapped to rickety stalls, where fruit-and-vegetable sellers or those with used clothing ran their shops. Old plastic bottles have turned a deep grey from months of dust and dirt. Herders and their cattle occasionally pass through—some of the few visitors since this site officially closed, last spring.

MOGA HASSAN AHMED lives in Dadaab, a refugee complex in Kenya. He has seen his life altered by both war and drought.

Behind the former market, there are subtle memories of the camp that once held more than 60,000 people. Most of its makeshift dwellings are now lines etched in the sand or, in some cases, stony ledges where residents who could afford it constructed more stable shelters. Here and there are the remnants of piles of garbage that were set on fire. The flames seem to have spared some items: a single plastic shoe, a reusable shopping bag, a piece of fabric marked “UNHCR,” a small T-shirt.

This was once Ifo 2, a camp within the Dadaab refugee complex—one of the largest in the world, sheltering nearly half a million people at its peak population. Ifo, the first camp in Dadaab, which was named for a nearby town, opened in 1991, when civil war broke out in neighbouring Somalia. For much of that decade, rival clans jostled for power and resources in a country whose borders were carved from a former British protectorate and an Italian colony. The fighting disrupted farming and animal herding, leaving many without enough food. It displaced some residents internally while others fled to neighbouring countries. Many of those who crossed the border into Kenya have stayed in Dadaab camps for decades, with children and grandchildren born there.

But it isn't simply war that many are running from. Ifo 2 opened, in 2011, to accommodate an influx of people displaced because of a prolonged and merciless dry season that killed their cattle and vegetation and evaporated water sources. It forced tens of thousands of pastoralists—the preferred local term for herders—across the border. This drought was later one of the first in the world to be partially linked to anthropogenic, or human-caused, climate change; those who fled it may be considered one of the first waves of climate migrants in modern history. And, as many of their experiences—and Ifo 2's recent closure—suggest, much of the world isn't yet ready for them.

MOGA HASSAN AHMED has been forced to flee his home twice. A pastoralist who herded cattle, he first left Somalia as the war broke out in 1991. He crossed the

border into Kenya and registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), receiving food and supplies to build a house. He's now spent decades in a country not his own. Somalia is slowly recovering from war, but instability remains. Though a federal government took power in 2012, it has struggled to maintain control in the face of al-Shabaab, a militant Islamist group that rose in the mid-2000s and made significant territorial advances in the region.

Around 2011, Ahmed began thinking about returning to his hometown. He had separated from his wife, whom he'd met in Dadaab. After going hungry during

Without scientific evidence, governments can easily dismiss climate displacement as temporary or seasonal.

a period when the UNHCR struggled to provide refugees with enough rations, one of their sons hanged himself from a tree. Another son has gone back to Somalia, and Ahmed says he “could be at risk,” a subtle way of implying that his son may have joined al-Shabaab. The pain of those losses was part of why, in 2016, Ahmed decided to accept the UNHCR's offer of repatriation. In return for leaving Dadaab—and, in his case, giving up his refugee status—Ahmed would receive several hundred dollars from the UNHCR and assistance returning to his home region. By the agency's standards, the areas near Kismayo, the southern port city Ahmed first relocated to, were considered secure: Somali and Kenyan military forces had regained control of much of the area by then.

But, though the region Ahmed had fled nearly two decades earlier was now

more politically stable, he soon realized he couldn't see a future there. The land was dry, and he learned his thirty cattle, which had been looked after in Somalia while he was in Kenya, had all died from heat and starvation. He lasted about a month before moving to Dhobley, a town along the Somalia-Kenya border. The situation there was the same. “I really loved my country, and I thought my country had improved in terms of security,” he told me in an interview late last August. “When I went back there, it was with a heart of patriotism.” But, as animals died and people starved, he had no choice but to return to Dadaab.

Somalia's 2011 drought was part of a pattern of extreme weather events, says Abubakr Salih Babiker, a climate scientist with the IGAD Climate Prediction and Application Centre (ICPAC)—part of a trade block of eight East African countries, including Somalia and Kenya. Babiker says there's a link between rising temperatures in the western section of the Indian Ocean, which is warming at a faster rate than any other part of the tropical ocean system, and unusually harsh events in East Africa, including prolonged dry periods followed by longer and heavier rainy seasons. Tropical cyclones—such as the two powerful ones that hit Mozambique last year, causing widespread flooding and destruction of homes—and the locust swarms threatening crops in the region this past spring are also linked. “There is a pattern here,” he says. “What used to be rare [is] not rare anymore.”

It took a few years after 2011 for three researchers from the United Kingdom to announce, in a report published in the journal *Geophysical Research Letters*, that the drought in East Africa could be attributed in part to climate change. It was an important addition to the scientific literature: until then, it had been difficult to prove a link between greenhouse gas emissions and these types of natural disasters, which have led to widespread displacement and exacerbated refugee crises. Without such evidence, governments can easily dismiss the population movement as temporary or seasonal: the disaster will pass, the refugee camps will



close, the people can go home. As it becomes impossible to ignore how climate change is contributing to mass displacement, governments may be forced to grapple with the reality that the affected refugees within their borders, and the temporary camps that house them, may have to stay there permanently.

On the surface, at least, countries like Canada have considered the issue. A 2010 government report cited data suggesting that, by 2050, anywhere from 25 million to 1 billion people could be displaced by climate change. (A 2018 World Bank report looking at sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America estimated that number could exceed 140 million.) Canada is also a signatory to the 2010 Cancun Agreements, which, aside from committing countries to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, addressed the issue of displacement linked to climate change. Although the topic

has come and gone in governmental discussions over the past decade, no policy changes have yet been implemented. And, as Canada and other developed countries are falling short of their targets for emissions reductions to mitigate climate change, some of the world's most vulnerable are the first to feel the effects.

Ahmed is in his mid-sixties now, and frail. He walks slowly, often supported by the arm of a young neighbour. In his left eye, a cloudy white coats the brown iris and the pupil. He says it's his return to Somalia and the drought that made him almost blind. He's sleeping in his nephews' old house, on a woven mat on the ground. Having given up his refugee status, he isn't eligible to work. Ahmed usually eats one meal a day, if he's lucky, when his family and friends can offer something small to spare. Here in the camp, at least, he has some support.

But there's no guarantee that support will remain. For years, Kenya has said it will shut down Dadaab, citing security risks and blaming refugees for inciting terrorist attacks and engaging in criminal activities. Last year, the government announced plans for Dadaab's full closure, and though Ifo 2 has been shuttered, the three remaining camps continue to operate for now. New arrivals are no longer registered there, which is why Ahmed and others who have returned to the camp are not recognized as refugees. A Human Rights Watch report last March urged the Kenyan government to abandon its renewed push to close Dadaab. It cited a leaked UN document in which the government had urged the UNHCR to "expedite relocation of the refugees and asylum-seekers residing

KHATRA ADEN came to Dadaab in 2011. She left Somalia because of a prolonged drought.





therein.” The same Human Rights Watch report says the UNHCR responded by offering up options, some of which it had been pursuing for a few years: voluntary repatriation to places where it’s safe to return, relocating refugees to other camps in Kenya, integrating refugees with Kenyan family links, and resettling some of those refugees outside Kenya’s borders.

In some cases, people displaced across international borders may end up living in an essentially stateless limbo, as Ahmed does—unable to return home and unable to establish new roots. Some of their home countries are considered safe according to a system designed long before climate change began making parts of the world, some of which have seen thousands of years of human civilization, uninhabitable.

DADAAB IS A salient example of how climate change is complicating an already stretched system of support for refugees. It’s difficult to attribute cases of displacement solely to climate change: in some cases, as in Somalia, climate change is exacerbating conflicts that are already sending thousands of people across international borders; it can also contribute to fights over land and resources that could lead to more waves of refugees. In the Lake Chad region of central Africa, climate change is drying up the main water source, where people would traditionally migrate during the dry season. Those people are forced farther afield, sometimes into neighbouring countries, where conflict can arise over access to land. In Somaliland, a self-declared independent state north of Somalia, droughts are transforming once livable land into barren areas. In parts of the Pacific Ocean, islands are flooded by rising sea waters, making it difficult to farm. In each of these cases, those being displaced wouldn’t meet the formal criteria to be categorized as refugees. As a result, they are not only denied support but are often

ELIZABETH NYAKUOTH JOK struggles to grow vegetables in Dadaab due to the hard climate and water shortages.



unable to claim asylum—make a legal request to be considered a refugee—outside their own country.

Their legal plight boils down to the scope of the term *refugee*. The word was first formally defined in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. It comes from the French *réfugié*, to seek refuge or a safe place, and stems from a period in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries when French Protestants fled persecution in the country, many moving to England. Drafted in the wake of mass displacement following the Second World War, the UN treaty identifies refugees as people fleeing conflict or persecution in their home countries due to their race, religion, nationality, political beliefs, or membership in a social group. (The convention also prohibits anyone from expelling refugees to territories where their lives or freedoms would be threatened.) The convention was initially designed to protect mainly

Europeans who had faced persecution during the Second World War, and it referred specifically to those displaced before January 1, 1951. Nearly two decades later, the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees expanded that definition to serve displaced people around the world in the midst of several new refugee crises, including those resulting from war in Vietnam and Algeria.

The terms of the convention have remained unchanged since. This means refugee status doesn't extend to situations where climate change has played a role in displacing residents—which is why the UN challenges the term “climate refugee,” referring instead to climate or environmental migrants. For those who do cross international borders, the burden rests on the asylum claimant to prove their case and build a defence that identifies the ways in which they might face future persecution. And, if they've been displaced by events linked to climate change,

it can be a hard case to build because their circumstances aren't recognized in the legal refugee criteria. Their challenges are even greater if they don't speak the language of their host country or lack literacy skills.

Some experts contend it's time to change the thinking around climate displacement. “These climate-related shocks and humanitarian crises are intimately linked,” says Alvin Munyasia, food-security and climate-justice lead at the Oxfam Pan Africa Programme. The growing crisis of climate displacement, he says, “is a consequence of a deeply unequal, unjust, and unsustainable global system.” The communities most vulnerable to climate change effects, he says, are also those with the lowest carbon footprints. Yet, even as some of the world's greatest emitters, including Canada, pledge to

Two men play chess inside an Ethiopian restaurant in Dadaab.

address their contributions to climate change, none have yet taken significant action to support those displaced by it.

It may be time to rework the refugee system entirely. A 2014 report by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives advocated for, along with admissions targets and integration programs, the creation of a new immigration class for climate migrants. Both Australia and New Zealand have considered such policies to address an influx of refugee claimants from Pacific islands being affected by flooding and loss of fertile lands. Neither country has yet committed to them. This past January, the UN Human Rights Committee issued a landmark ruling in the case of Ioane Teitiota, who sought asylum in New Zealand on the basis that his home country of Kiribati, a Pacific island nation, is under threat from rising sea levels. The ruling said that, when considering deportations, governments must take into account potential threats posed by climate change in asylum seekers' home countries. But it stops short of expanding the formal definition of refugee to include those endangered by the effects of climate change.

Janet Dench, the executive director of the Canadian Council for Refugees, cautions against attempts to revisit that definition. She and other advocates fear doing so would risk ending up with an even narrower set of criteria than those set out by the 1951 convention. But there are other ways for those displaced by forces other than persecution to be accepted within national legislation.

Decision makers can be flexible in their interpretation of what constitutes a refugee. The Canadian government used to have a special class of refugees deemed admissible even if they hadn't been forced to cross an international border. (That policy was abolished in 2011.) Today, the country allows some exceptions to deportation when expelling an asylum claimant would mean sending them back to a region affected by an emergency or a natural disaster, such as Haiti after the catastrophic 2010 earthquake. But, once implemented, these deportation stays often take years to rescind. Meanwhile, claimants live day by day, many unable to

attain permanent residency or citizenship in Canada. As long as they aren't forced to go home, they remain in limbo, much like most refugees in Dadaab.

Some advocates, says Dench, argue for better integration programs, abolishing camps, and helping people learn new ways to make a living, which includes projects such as running a business, making baskets, or building stoves. In Dadaab, that may be the only way forward. Many of the displaced are, like Ahmed, seeing their homes and their livelihoods disappear with little recourse. Researchers have found that nearly half of households

When it does rain, in the wet season of daily downpours, the homes can flood so much that residents barely manage to sleep.

surveyed in the camps around Dadaab say they won't return to their country. They're afraid of the insecurity and conflict—al-Shabaab militants continue to fight for territory in the region—and also of longer-lasting and more-common droughts. They also fear the loss of their livelihoods, including pastoralism.

"People will always keep trying to find a better livelihood if they lost their current livelihood where they live now due to climate change," says Babiker, describing a situation he blames on emissions from developed countries. "I think the migration will continue unless we all work together toward a more climate-just world."

HALIMO MOHAMED SALAT and her grandmother Barwako Shiney Hassan were living with their family in a rural area just north of Kismayo before they fled. They were

pastoralists, herding their animals, goats and camels, through sandy soil among short thorny trees and small bushes. There had been droughts before in this region—times when food became scarce and animals emaciated to the point of producing no milk—but none like the one that, in 2011, spread across Somalia, Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, and Djibouti. The rainy periods were shorter and the dry season lasted longer than usual, leaving much of Somalia with a quarter of its usual rainfall. Over 10 million people were under threat of starvation.

"There was no food, there was nothing to eat," Hassan says. She's sitting on a mat in her shabbily constructed shelter in part of Dadaab's Hagadera camp. Even as the number of refugees increased, the UNHCR and its partners struggled to gather enough funds to serve each displaced family. In other camps, in other sections, the homes are built with better supplies—tin sheets covering the roofs, mud walls or reinforced structures. In this section of Hagadera, families like Hassan's have managed to build traditional homes with small branches in domes or rectangles, layered with torn tarpaulins marked "UNHCR" and cloths contributed by the UN or other aid organizations or purchased with their scant amounts of money. When it does rain, in the wet season of daily downpours, the homes can flood so much that residents barely manage to sleep.

Food-security expert Munyasia says extreme weather cycles can mean each dry or rainy season is increasingly worse. During the dry season, the vegetation dries up and the ground becomes harder. When the rains do come, they don't soak into the ground and can instead rush up riverbanks and over communities more quickly, especially when there is little vegetation to guard against flooding. In the dry season in parts of Africa, increasingly intense forest fires can dry out the land even further. Cyclones and other extreme weather events can be more devastating in an area already weakened by droughts or floods.

As pastoralists, Hassan and her family had little education when they arrived at Hagadera. They expected their children

and grandchildren to inherit the livelihood they'd maintained for generations—herd animals, live off the land. With low literacy levels and competition in urban areas, former herders often struggle to find another profession even after relocating to cities. But Hassan's goats and sheep had all stopped producing milk. The herders had to walk farther, into more risky areas, to find places for them to graze. Then, slowly, animals began to die. After some months, none were left. The family moved to Kismayo, a city that was once a robust trading outpost along the Swahili coast, clustered with bright white-and-blue houses with archways and intricate wooden carvings.

For children like Salat, this was a good time. She'd sculpt camels, cows, and goats out of the sand as toys. There were no problems there, she says. She was barely a teenager. From what she remembers, there was food, there was water, there were no more fears. She was with her family.

But, in reality, the family had run out of money after losing their animals and trying to survive in Kismayo. Salat's father was left behind in the rural area, and no one had heard from him. They suspected he'd died of hunger. Her grandmother Hassan wasn't able to find work in the city. Hassan says they made the difficult decision to walk from Kismayo to Dadaab. There was no money for transportation. With a group, they travelled over 300 kilometres, scavenging for wild fruits and plants where they could, drinking water when they found it.

As the group journeyed on, people began to lose weight, to weaken. Along the road, two of the children died—Abdirahman, about thirteen, and Salat's twin, Fatuma. Neither Salat nor her grandmother remember who died first or exactly where. Just that, at one point, Fatuma couldn't walk any farther. No proper burial was possible. Everyone was too thirsty and hungry. They buried the two in shallow graves, each under a tree, and poured a bit of sand overtop. Hassan wept and continued on with the other children, hoping they would survive. Salat remembers losing her siblings and

how she used to look up to Abdirahman, her older brother. "I also thought I would go. I never thought I would survive," she says. When some people fleeing with vehicles gave them water for the journey, she began to hope they might make it. When the family finally crossed the border to Dadaab, the UNHCR registered them as refugees.

Salat is eighteen now. She attends the local school, an opportunity she wouldn't have had back in Somalia. She is dressed in a purple headscarf, which she pulls up with fingernails still painted with henna from Eid, four months ago. She likes the purple, and she's wearing it over a dress given to her by her classmates. She wears

Unlike so many human conflicts, climate change has no foreseeable end.

borrowed bracelets so that her hands can be beautiful. She dreams of having a black abaya—the stylish one-piece robe worn by fashionable Somali women in the camp. After seeing a Kenyan woman driving an NGO vehicle, Salat decided she too wants to train as a driver. Her life in the camp feels almost as though she's just another Somali Kenyan, with an education and a future.

But, from time to time, the memories return. She has nightmares of the camp closing, of being sent back, of living through it again. Even if she feels that she's Somali Kenyan, the government has made it clear, with measures such as travel restrictions and pressures to close the camp, that she is not.

Her prospects for resettling elsewhere are no more promising. Nearly all the refugees we met in Dadaab made a joke or reference about wanting to move abroad, to somewhere like Canada, whether because they'd learned I was from there or because they'd heard the country was still resettling refugees.

To them, it's a place where their children could study and they could find work. In reality, less than 1 percent of refugees are resettled internationally each year, especially as countries around the world, including the United States, France, and some parts of the United Kingdom, are increasingly closing their borders, tightening asylum policies, and rejecting claimants. Canada's refugee policy is relatively open: the country admitted nearly 30,000 refugees last year, compared with a cap of 18,000 set in the US—a country with nearly ten times the population—for the coming year. But those figures are nowhere near proportional to the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide, which, as of last June, exceeded 70 million. The UN considers more than a third of those people refugees.

International agencies that support refugees are seeing their funds decline. Food rations are cut, and the UNHCR often struggles to raise enough funding to address the needs of the displaced. Many of those displaced are housed in nearby countries, like Kenya, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of Congo, which are themselves grappling with climate change. In many of these host countries, the message is that camps for refugees and internally displaced people are temporary—one day, those people will be able to go home. But, unlike so many human conflicts, climate change has no foreseeable end without countries radically reducing greenhouse gas emissions—something that still wouldn't resolve the problems already created. Unless the international community accepts that some displacement will become permanent, many Somalis and other displaced groups will continue to live in uncertainty.

The UN says publicly that it's safe to go back to regions in Somalia where humanitarian assistance is available. As part of the livelihood programs it offers to assist with reintegration, the UNHCR sometimes purchases cattle for the returnees, with the goal of allowing herders to resume their former lives on a stable financial footing. According to a 2015 UNHCR strategy report, return assistance

included prepaid transportation, \$120 (all figures US) per person for those going by road, or \$60 each for those returning by air. Last year, returning families could receive initial support of more than \$1,000—more money than many Somalis or Kenyans earn in a year.

In November, Somalia passed a national policy to reintegrate internally displaced people and returning refugees. But a UN report issued in September had identified challenges the country would still face, including coping with the vast scale of displacement and finding “climate-resilient” solutions to avoid people returning to unsafe environments. While the plan may not be robust, it’s a sign that the country is trying to address the issue.

Over the past few years, the UNHCR has sent community leaders from Dadaab back to Somalia to assess the situation, hoping they would encourage people to return home. One of the representatives they sent was taken to Kisumu, the southern coastal city. Since returning to Dadaab, he’s been telling other refugees that, if they want to return to an urban centre—if they feel capable of creating a business there—they have a chance at starting over. But, he says, for the pastoralists who plan to go back to rural life, there is nothing left.

EVEN IF DADAAB isn’t forced to close due to government pressure, its future is precarious. When Somalia was experiencing prolonged dry periods, especially in 2011, 2017, and 2019, the Dadaab community and many parts of northern Kenya were too. Herders and community members living near the camp are grappling with access to food and water even as more refugees arrive, adding stress to an already fragile system. Refugees have cut down trees for firewood and shelter, and at times, with the UN and other aid agencies tapping into the local water supply, there hasn’t been enough water to go around.

For nearby residents, like Hawa Gede Amad, the camp brought increased access to water and markets but also left her family more vulnerable to the worsening drought. When I meet her,

she’s standing on a small ledge of rocks, tending to her garden. She’s uprooting some plants and fixing the soil around others. Her fingers work fast, picking and pulling apart weeds from the seeds she’s dropped into the soil. Nearby, her two children play. The tall square silver water towers in the distance were built to cater to refugees, but they have also been accessible to the local Kenyan community.

For Amad, the camp brought access to resources, such as water and food markets, and new friends who spoke Somali with her and sometimes shared the food they got from the UN. Amad used to get water from the UN’s water point, which was designed for the refugees but also served the local community. Now that Ifo 2 has closed, that service is gone. The bustling market that sold tea, fruits and vegetables, used clothing, and even animals is now shuttered. Around where she’s standing, there was once a forest. The trees were all cut down by refugees. Now, her husband, like so many others, has to travel farther away from home, deeper into territory potentially frequented by bandits and possible al-Shabaab militants, for the goats to graze.

The UN is making efforts to counter its camps’ environmental impact, planting trees and assisting local communities by funding educational programs and offering access to the same services given to refugees: health care, markets, water towers. In this way, it hopes to prevent tension between residents and refugees. In a world where many can’t return home and their temporary shelter at Dadaab may close, the two groups are learning how to live together.

In many cases, people like Alvin Munyasia are advocating for approaches to displacement that respond to this reality. Instead of trying to send refugees back to the homes they fled, agencies like the UNHCR can focus more on helping people find new means of survival that aren’t sensitive to climate variability. If the displaced can gain better education, learn new livelihood skills, and even receive business grants, they may be able to better integrate into the communities where they now find themselves.

In a tea shop at Hagadera’s market, the largest in Dadaab—and comparable in size to many open-air markets in Kenya—I meet Rukia Dhubow Samatar. Her shop is long, stretching down a wooden corridor, with tables scattered at one end. People come to perch on stools, taking tea she brews in the traditional Somali style and serves in small round glasses with plenty of sugar. She’s an outspoken businesswoman, and community members strolling by greet her with respect.

Samatar left Somalia during a drought and came to Dadaab with her husband and six children, a pastoralist family with mainly sons. They got a lift in a car and took just two days to cross the border and register as refugees. Somalis are known for helping one another through difficult times, even when they have little.

For their first years in the camp, the family lived in a small shelter under a plastic sheet. Later on, they were able to build a better home, with tin sheets for walls. Samatar’s husband died a few years ago, leaving her alone to care for their eight children. (They had three more after arriving in the camp, and one has died.) “We cook what we have,” she says about feeding her family. “We don’t get oil, sugar, or vegetables. But we don’t have much choice in this situation.” It’s hard to find and pay for sugar for the tea shop, she says, but the family manages to earn small amounts of money to help grow the business.

Now that Samatar and her family have seen what other options exist here in the camp, she says, she hopes for much more for her children. She would return to Somalia if it were safe to do so, but she knows that the pastoralist life is over. Many of her boys are in school. They “grew up here, in the camps, with the pen in their hand,” she says, “and the pen is how they will make their way.” It’s not clear where her family would go if Dadaab were to close. “I’m not a person who likes to sit idle,” she says. “I’ll pick up my business wherever I can.” 🐦

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CAROLYN THOMPSON has had her work published by the CBC, *Al Jazeera*, and the *Washington Post*. She is based in Nairobi, Kenya.



ELM KNO
FARM

CRIME

MURDER IN OLD BARN

Why a Nova Scotia community is still looking for the killer of a beloved farmer, three decades on

BY LINDSAY JONES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SCOTT MUNN

Elmer Yuill's nephew Yuill McGregor spent much of his childhood on Elm Knoll Farm, in Old Barns, Nova Scotia.

IT WAS STILL DARK on October 26, 1991, when Elmer Yuill slid from beneath the patchwork quilt as his wife, Hazel, slept. The seventy-seven-year-old dairy farmer went out to do the barn chores, as he did every morning. In rubber boots, he crunched across frost-laden grass, Becky the black Lab at his heel. At 4:30 a.m., Todd Carlton, the farmhand, found Yuill face down on the concrete. His body was still warm. "I tried to shake him and wake him up," said Carlton. What he didn't see, in that moment of shock before running into the house to call for help, was that Yuill had been shot, execution style, in the back.

Twenty minutes later, the ambulance arrived at Elm Knoll Farm, in the community of Old Barns, Nova Scotia. The paramedics were still pumping Yuill's chest as they raced him to the hospital in the nearby town of Truro. In the waiting room, police delivered the grim news to Hazel. At first, she thought it had been an accident, that Yuill had been struck by a stray round. After all, hunting season had just begun. But, when doctors removed not one but two Tic Tac-size bullets, the truth became clear. Two bullets are no accident. Two bullets are murder.

Carlton, seventeen at the time, had stayed behind. After working at the farm for several years, he knew the sixty swollen udders in the barn couldn't go ignored for long. He ran down the highway in search of help. At the first farm, John Blaauwendraat roused himself from bed, where he was resting after back surgery, and hobbled to his truck. Yuill was a man beloved for his generosity: a tractor ride for local kids, free milk for the family in a tarpaper shack, a home for the nephew escaping a turbulent life. There wasn't a farmer in the countryside who wouldn't do anything for Yuill. Inside the barn, Blaauwendraat noted something odd: on a wooden step were five or six brown beer bottles — curious

items, out of place. Yuill never drank and was fastidious about the state of his barn.

Twenty-nine years later, no one has been held accountable for Yuill's murder. This despite the RCMP using nearly every investigative tool at its disposal, including forensic specialists, criminal profiles, search warrants, and years-long surveillance efforts. Extensive interviews with family members, friends, reporters, witnesses, and former RCMP officers, along with more than 1,000 pages of police and court documents, have helped me piece together a picture of an unsolved crime whose randomness, location, and unlikely victim destroyed a family's farming legacy and ripped the roots out of a community. It's hard not to be struck by how much was done to find those responsible and how little was accomplished. In 2017, the Nova Scotia government and the RCMP offered a \$150,000 reward for any information that led to an arrest. The money remains unclaimed.

Chris Paley, the now retired RCMP investigator who oversaw the case for seven years in the 1990s, is tormented by it. "Horrible crimes happen all the time," he says. "But this one—a farmer in his late years minding his farm in the early morning hours being murdered? That's just terrible." Now sixty-five, pink skinned and bald with an open face that betrays a certain sadness, Paley says this was the only homicide in his three decades as a cop that didn't result in a charge. "So many things went wrong in this investigation," he laments. "These guys weren't rocket scientists," he says, referring to the killers. "It just seemed that luck was on their side."

THE SHOCK OVER the murder had a great deal to do with the victim, the gentle patriarch of a centuries-old family farm. Elmer Dunlap Yuill was born on July 30, 1914. The first of eleven children, he grew up in the white gabled farmhouse that sits back from the road alongside Cobequid Bay. Like many boys of his day, Yuill left school after grade eight to work. During the Great Depression, his father took a seasonal construction job that brought him to

various parts of the community, and from his teenage years onward, Yuill ran the farm when his father was gone. "People who didn't know us thought that he was our dad," says Georgina Lawson, the youngest of Yuill's sisters, fifteen years his junior. Yuill drove his siblings to town for ice cream (he liked orange pineapple best) and helped collect the children from school by horse and sleigh during winter storms. As his sisters grew into young women, it was he who waited outside the local dance halls, leaning against his truck, to take them home. On Georgina's wedding day, Yuill gave her away.

Yuill ran a farm unlike any in the countryside. Cars would pull off the highway to photograph the tidy, picturesque barnyard. Farmers often stopped by for advice. Years of milking by hand had muscled up his forearms. Either too busy or too shy for a serious relationship, Yuill was single until midlife. During a game of bridge one day, Yuill's sister Norma heard her friend Hazel say that she'd always wanted to live on a farm. "You've got to meet my brother!" Norma exclaimed. Two years later, Hazel and Yuill were married in a Baptist church.

They had no children, but by then, Yuill had already helped raise his siblings. And kids were always underfoot, flocking to see him pull a funny face or, from his pocket, a peppermint. The farmer had a sweet spot for his nephew Yuill McGregor. The boy summered on the farm until, one August, when he was eleven, he refused to go home to his troubled life in Toronto, to the father who had sold his coin collection to buy booze and who left his mother's arms ringed with bruises. McGregor stayed on the farm for a year and then returned again permanently when he was sixteen. Yuill taught him how to sharpen an axe, drive a tractor, birth a calf, and use a scythe to hack Scottish thistle. "He changed my direction in life," McGregor, now fifty-eight, tells me, sobbing. "He was the only father I have ever known."

It seems a cruel twist that much of the land Yuill's forebears were granted, more than 250 years ago, now sits empty.

Acadian settlers lived here peacefully among the Mi'kmaq for several decades until the mid-1700s, when the British forced the Acadians out, plundering and burning their homes. When the Yuill family arrived from Boston, in 1765, the only buildings left standing were a few old barns. The name stuck.

Nearly three decades after the murder, the name comes back to haunt. Yuill's old barn is paint chipped and ramshackle, with letters missing from the Elm Knoll Farm sign. A rusty weathervane creaks. The silo stands like a sepulchre.

YUILL'S MURDER remains the worst thing the community has ever seen: a respected farmer gunned down, in the twilight of his life, on his own land. The community is small—probably no more than 200 residents—and some officers working the case knew Yuill, from church, from nods on the road into town, or because his kinfolk were so numerous and had such deep roots.

The investigation appeared doomed from the start. By the time police designated the barn a crime scene, it was too late. It had already been contaminated by a troupe of neighbours that arrived to help with chores. But the pressure to solve Yuill's murder ratcheted up with each passing day as police teams combed the fields and brooks for evidence. The RCMP began a monumental search for the murder weapon. They sifted through a massive manure pile outside the barn with a backhoe and pushed several thousand bales of hay from one end of the barn to the other. Divers scoured the pond inside the abandoned Plumb Hole Lumber Mill. And, as if people weren't already on edge, Blaauwendraat recalls that a surveillance team began to watch Elm Knoll Farm. The police presence didn't ease the paranoia. Residents began locking their doors. Farmers stopped milking alone. Trick-or-treating was cancelled.

The RCMP, meanwhile, came up empty. They knew of no motive because Yuill had no enemies. Did the farmer witness a drug drop? Was it a hunter sleeping in the barn? The police bore down on

every man in the countryside who had any connection to Yuill. They pulled over Randy Durling as he drove his old beater on the highway. Durling grew up in a tarpaper shack on a corner of Yuill's property. Police took him back to his camp, deep in the woods, and seized all of his guns. "We went through hell," says Durling about himself and his brother. Durling's boss told him not to come back to work cutting trees until the murder was solved. Cops also descended on David Lennerton, who had been near the farm, en route to ask Yuill if he could hunt on his land, the morning the farmer was shot. Police arrived as he was fixing pens in the pig barn at Truro's agricultural college to question him a third time: What were you doing on the farm that early in the morning? Do you have any idea who did it?

One of Yuill's nephews, who had been in Maine with his family at the time of the murder, was interrogated for hours on end. Even Blaauwendraat, who could barely stand after his back surgery, was considered a suspect. In his kitchen, police demanded he lay all his guns out on the table. The farmhand, Todd Carlton, faced the same questions multiple times. "Did you ever wish Elmer dead?" police asked. Eventually, Carlton agreed to a polygraph—something police asked many to do.

The investigation stretched on for weeks, then months. The RCMP finally admitted it had no hard evidence to tie anyone to the shooting. Public frustration was palpable. "You can only do so much with so little," said RCMP staff sergeant George Batt in a June 1992 newspaper interview, pleading with residents to come forward with information. "You can't manufacture evidence." In July of that year, 150 people—nearly everyone in the community—turned out to a meeting hosted by the RCMP to unveil a poster promising up to \$7,000 in reward money.

A year later, leads tapered off. Fewer calls came into the RCMP, and eventually, members of the eight-person investigative

team were reassigned. It began to seem like it would never be solved.

IN OCTOBER 1993, RCMP sergeant Chris Paley took over the case as the area's new head of major crime. On his first day, his commanding officer sat him down: he had to do everything in his power to figure out who killed Elmer Yuill. By this time, investigators had taken more than 220 statements and accrued nearly 500 hours of overtime. One officer told the press that, if they added up the costs, they would "probably be staggering." The crime unit was angry over its lack of progress. Paley was equally frustrated. And, he adds, there's no such thing as a perfect murder. Sooner or later, he thinks, DNA evidence or a witness will help solve it. "There's always something left behind."

Deveaux pleaded with Petrie to sell him his gun. Deveaux wanted to scratch off the serial number and use it for a heist.

Paley spent months digging through police documents. He reevaluated interviews, reconsidered witness statements, reassessed leads. He came to understand that the case was not only solvable but that his predecessors had actually come close to cracking it. The year before, as investigators began to cross names off their list of people of interest, they kept circling back to one young man: Duane Deveaux.

A boxer who flipped burgers at McDonald's, Deveaux lived with his mother on the outskirts of Truro. It's unclear how police found their way to him. He had no community connection to Yuill and thus would likely not have been on the police's immediate list of young men to question. Deveaux had an alibi: he had partied with a friend the night before Yuill's murder, drinking in Truro until closing at 2 a.m. Deveaux told police he had been dropped off at home and had gone to bed around 3 a.m.

Yet police began receiving tips that caused them to take a closer look at Deveaux. Redacted witness statements feature an individual who shares aspects of

Deveaux's temperament and alibi. On the day Yuill was found dead, one witness described a suspect who, smiling and cocky during a game of pool at a Truro bar, called the farmer's death "the perfect murder." The same suspect, according to another witness, said that the farmer had been shot in the back of the head or shoulder area and that no shells had been left behind. The suspect said it had happened in the barn, right where you walk in. Yet another witness shared that the same suspect had told him the barrel of the gun used against the farmer had been changed so it couldn't be traced.

In the summer of 1992, police executed a search warrant at Deveaux's home. In his interview with me, Bernard, Deveaux's older brother, recalls that investigators found what they believed could be the weapon used in Yuill's

murder: a disassembled .22-calibre rifle, missing its barrel—the part needed to trace the bullets retrieved from Yuill's body. According to Bernard, his mother grew suspicious of the

attention Deveaux was receiving from the police and went to speak to them. A redacted statement with details consistent with Deveaux's alibi captures a conversation between RCMP officers and someone who appears to be the mother of a suspect. She explains she had "tried different ways to see if I could find out" what the suspect knew.

Then came a breakthrough. In January 1993, RCMP travelled to PEI to gather a statement from Deveaux's cousin Mark Petrie, who gave police new information that tied Deveaux to the murder. Petrie told police that, in the summer of 1991, months before Yuill's murder, Deveaux had pleaded with him to sell Deveaux his gun. He wanted to scratch off the serial number and use it for a heist. Petrie refused. Five months later, Deveaux explained to Petrie over beers how the farmer had been killed. Two men had robbed a store, Deveaux said, and, to avoid police, had hidden out in a barn. When the farmer came to investigate, he had a pitchfork. The guys confronted him and one of them shot him.





The now defunct dairy of Elm Knoll Farm, where Elmer Yuill, seventy-seven, was discovered face down on the concrete October 26, 1991. He had been shot twice in the back. RCMP have never laid a charge in the case.

“He was excited and right enthused about the whole thing,” Petrie told police in a redacted statement he later authenticated with me. “He figured it would never be solved because the police would never be able to connect the murder and the robbery because they really had nothing to do with each other.” Petrie remembers that his cousin had, in fact, bragged to him about knowing who killed the farmer. It was a friend of his, Deveaux said, then speaking vividly about the angle at which the bullet had entered Yuill. “He was pretty detailed about it,” Petrie tells me. “The only way you could be that detailed about it would be if you were there, in my opinion.”

As it happened, Truro police had been investigating an armed robbery that occurred hours before Yuill was murdered. At 10:15 p.m. on October 25, 1991, a store manager locked up the Ryan’s IGA grocery store in Truro, about a thirty-minute drive from Old Barns. He was walking toward his car to make the Friday-night deposit when he heard a shuffling of feet. A man with pantyhose over his face and socks on his hands bumped up against him. “Put the money in the bag—I’ll shoot you!” the manager remembers the man saying, pointing a gun from his hip. The manager dropped the deposit into a navy duffle-like bag and the man bolted. Two weeks later, a similar bag and a sawed-off 16 gauge were found about a kilometre from the Ryan’s IGA. Police believe it was the same weapon levelled at the store manager. A redacted document from December 1992 describes how, during questioning by the RCMP for the armed robbery, a suspect identifies the bag as his. A “blue duffle bag” is later included as evidence in a court document charging Deveaux for the crime.

With Petrie’s statement, the RCMP felt like it was finally on the right track and began a joint investigation with the town police. On March 5, 1993, according to Bernard Deveaux, the RCMP drove to the plastics plant in Truro, where his brother was working, and arrested him in connection with the murder of Elmer Yuill and for the Ryan’s IGA robbery. Redacted documents from an interrogation dated the next day include enough details of

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Deveaux's alibi to indicate him as the suspect being questioned. After more than twelve hours, Deveaux finally relents. He admits to robbing the store manager, saying it had been planned by a former employee of Ryan's IGA who had waited "down the road" on lookout. But the admission wasn't enough for his interrogator, a Truro police constable named Todd Taylor and Deveaux's former boxing coach. "I'll be straight up with you," Taylor said. "If you can provide information leading to much bigger things than what you're involved in here, okay then, yes, things can happen.... Ultimately, I'm looking for information as well on the murder of Elmer Yuill, okay?"

Taylor presses. "You weren't in the barn?"

"No, never was," replies Deveaux.

Taylor presses again. "I think you know more about the Elmer Yuill murder than you're saying."

Deveaux appears to concede. "Well, I would have to talk to my lawyer and all that before, you know."

Taylor tells Deveaux "a solid case" is being built against him for murder, warning, "You're gonna have to tell us something that's gonna change our mind of that" and explaining various scenarios in which Deveaux could be eligible for manslaughter even if he weren't the one who pulled the trigger. Then, in a surprising admission, Deveaux agrees to plead guilty to both the armed robbery and a "murder three charge"—or manslaughter.

Police ultimately felt they did not have enough to convict Deveaux for murder and instead charged him solely with the robbery. He would later plead not guilty despite having apparently confessed to the holdup. While nothing in the police documents shows that the confession was disputed or recanted, there might have been grounds to challenge Deveaux's interrogation as coercive. No lawyer appeared to be present. Different police officers questioned Deveaux in two consecutive sessions, with the confession itself occurring in an unmonitored room.

In the ensuing months, more evidence emerged that appeared to connect

Deveaux to the robbery. Clothes found near the scene on the night of the holdup included white high-top sneakers. Among the materials is a redacted report on those shoes that matches up with other documents charging Deveaux with the robbery. After comparing the white high tops to a pair of Deveaux's winter boots, forensic specialists concluded they were likely worn by the same person.

The trial was scheduled and dozens of witnesses lined up, including Deveaux's mother, his now deceased stepfather, and his cousin Mark Petrie. But, in September 1993, during pretrial meetings, the Crown stayed the charges—meaning they decided against proceeding with the case but did not withdraw the charges. After hearing evidence from the police, the Crown believed Deveaux's involvement in Yuill's murder was far more extensive than he let

Their headstone is etched with an image of Elm Knoll Farm: where Yuill was born and where he was shot dead.

on and that pressing ahead with the robbery prosecution might harm any chance of assembling a bigger case against him. "It was determined that it was in the best interest of the RCMP homicide investigation, and the crown's case, to stay the charges," states a Truro police document.

Stayed charges, however, can be reopened within a year, which is what the Crown did in the summer of 1994. The RCMP, meanwhile, were frustrated. The team had been mobilizing an undercover operation in BC, where Deveaux had recently moved, and the reactivated armed-robbery charge stymied this effort by forcing Deveaux to return to Nova Scotia. Redacted documents from that year—documents that include details that mirror the timeline of criminal proceedings against Deveaux—describe a late-summer confrontation. They refer to a suspect who realized that someone he had confided in—tacitly admitting responsibility for the armed robbery and then expressing regret over a person he wished he "hadn't had to do away with"—spoke to police. Twice, the

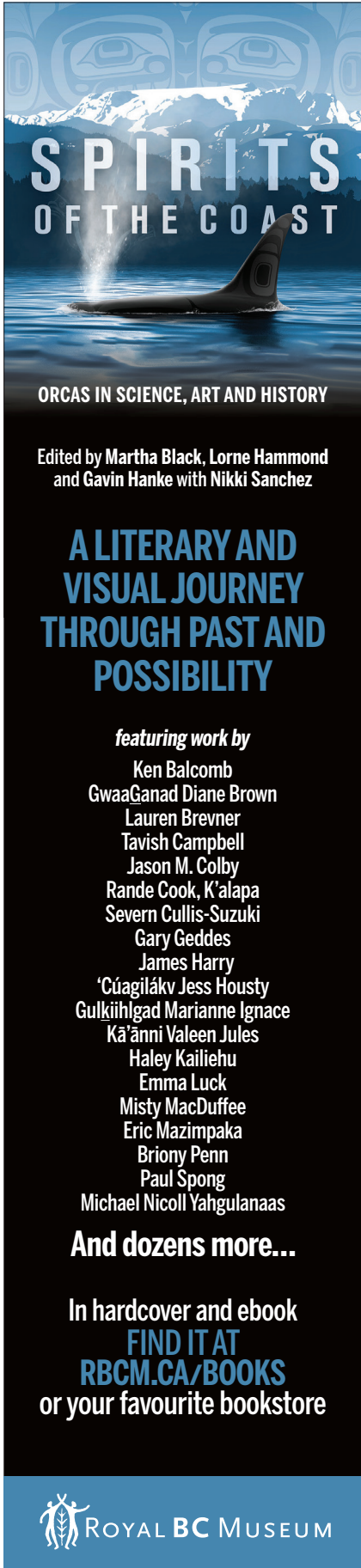
suspect badgered that witness inside a Truro bar. "I thought we were friends," the suspect said. "I can't believe I trusted you. You'll get yours." Then, later: "Don't worry. Nothing will happen to you until after the trial."

A trial by judge and jury on the robbery charge was set to take place in September 1996. But, when Deveaux's counsel argued that, to properly defend her client, information about Yuill's murder might need to come out in court, the Crown prosecutor grew concerned that such details could compromise their homicide investigation. That summer, the robbery charges were dropped.

PALEY STAYED with the Truro major crime unit for another three years, but Deveaux was now ultracautious. He appears to have never breathed a word about the murder or the robbery to anyone ever again. His older brother, Bernard, says he has tried for nearly three decades to talk to him about what

happened. "If he didn't have any knowledge, my conversations with him would be a lot different," says Bernard. "He'd be able to say, 'I don't know anything.' He just can't even talk about it. He's a mess. His whole life—I don't know if it would've been any different if this didn't happen, but he can't take care of himself. He drinks himself to death. To see a guy go that badly, there's something in there eating him."

Early last December, Deveaux, who today lives in Milton, Ontario, collapsed in an alley. When first responders arrived, he had no pulse and wasn't breathing. In the hospital, he went into cardiac arrest a second time and was put into a medically induced coma. Bernard doesn't know whether it was the cocktail of drugs his brother had been given or whether he felt moved by the death scare to finally set the record straight, but when he woke up, Deveaux began to wail that he had to get to the airport, fly home to Truro, and get to the courthouse; he had to tell people what had really happened. "I thought, 'Oh man, he's finally



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gonna say something,'" says Bernard. But, when Bernard questioned him further, Bernard's wife cautioned him: don't upset your brother, he's going through enough.

A year earlier, in December 2018, I had tracked down Deveaux in Milton myself. We met in a diner. He confirmed his arrest in 1993 for the armed robbery, and when I tried to summarize the narrative of events police had put together, he repeated his alibi for the night Yuill was shot. "I was home in bed. He dropped me off at home and he went home," he said, referring to a friend. "We were at a bar together that night."

Deveaux then said he was never charged for Yuill's murder, only for the robbery. "I went through all that bullshit and then they dropped it all because they had no case." I asked Deveaux if he had ever seen Elmer Yuill. "I never met the man," he said.

Laid out in an eleven-page summary, likely written after Petrie gave his statement in 1993, is the police theory of what might have happened. The armed robbery of the Ryan's IGA was one of several heists planned by two suspects in the Truro area in the fall of 1991. The suspects planned to stash firearms and loot in a neutral, remote site. One knew the layout of Yuill's barn and hoped it would be vacant at night, before 4:15 a.m. After the armed robbery, the suspects disposed of evidence and strengthened their alibis by drinking in bars in the Truro area, then they headed to Yuill's barn to divide the proceeds of the robbery, said police.

They thought it would be vacant in the early hours of October 26. Except it wasn't. Yuill was there—in the wrong place at the wrong time. "If he walked in twenty minutes earlier or half an hour later, it's probable nothing would have happened on that farm," RCMP corporal Ken Walker said in an article in 1999. "It was unfortunately just a case of bad timing."

PALEY RETIRED IN 2006, and Yuill's murder investigation remains open, but police work on the case is down to a single officer assigned to take tips. As the years pass,

the likelihood of justice for Yuill and his family fades. Yuill's last living sister, Georgina, now ninety, is bitter. "Even if they had shot him face to face, I don't think I would feel quite so bad," she says softly over the phone from her home in Belleville, Ontario. "But to be shot in the back is just incomprehensible." Yuill's nephew Yuill McGregor has driven to Nova Scotia from Toronto multiple times to meet with police and encourage them to keep the investigation alive.

A year after his uncle's death, Dana, the son of Yuill's youngest sibling, took ownership of the farm. It eventually fell into disuse. The Yuill family no longer congregates in the summer. If they come at all, they visit the cemetery where Hazel, who died of pneumonia two years after Yuill was killed, lies next to her husband. Their granite headstone is etched with an image of Elm Knoll Farm: the white farmhouse where Yuill was born and the barn where he was shot dead.

Many in these parts think they know who killed Yuill, and some theories resemble the one police formulated. Years ago, when the wound was still raw, the talk turned grim, toward meting out justice the old fashioned way, in a cabin back in the woods. But good sense prevailed and most people have gotten on with their lives. The former Ryan's IGA manager, now seventy-seven, is retired. He rarely thinks about the night he was held up at gunpoint, but when he does, he feels "blessed." He knows he could've faced the same fate as Yuill that night.

Yuill's neighbours, the Blaauwendraats, have also retired. One day last spring, Betty looked out the burgundy-and-white curtains of her kitchen window to where a half dozen deer grazed on young grass, and she shuddered. That field is where Yuill's killer likely trod. And, she reminded herself, maybe he's still out there. ❀

LINDSAY JONES is a freelance journalist based in Halifax. She writes for *Maclean's*, the *Globe and Mail*, and the CBC. Her work has also appeared on *topic.com*.

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FICTION

ROOKIE

BY JOSIAH NEUFELD

ILLUSTRATION BY LISA VANIN

THE FIRST TIME Jake saw a woman pee, he was in the middle of a shorn wasteland where a forest of jack pines had once stood. It was the end of the workday. The sun was still high but had lost its warmth. A sharp wind had begun to blow dirty clouds across the sky. The three tree planters were standing on the margin of a two-tire dirt track, waiting for the foreman to come in his pickup to take them back to camp. Jen and Skye leaned on their shovels, their empty planting bags slouched at their hips, passing a cigarette back and forth with dirt-caked fingers.

“So, Jake, how many you get in the ground today?” Skye asked. Her eyes seemed extra bright, surrounded by dirt. She had ripped the sleeves off her shirt and stretched one around her ears to keep out the blackflies.

Jen took the cigarette from between Skye’s lips with a forefinger and thumb, puffed, and flicked it into the middle of the road, scattering sparks.

“Uncle Bernie would fine your ass if he saw you do that,” said Skye.

“He’d have to kiss it first,” Jen replied.

Uncle Bernie was their nickname for the checker from Forestry who stalked the newly planted land each day in orange steel-toed boots and a canary-yellow hard hat. He fined you if your trees were too close together, too far apart, tilted, J-rooted, too deep, too shallow, too loose, improperly screefed, planted in red rot, planted in duff, black spruce in sandy soil, or jack pine in swamp. On the first day of the season, he had stood on a table in the mess tent and shown them how to stub their cigarettes until they could pinch the burned end between finger and thumb. Every fluff of dried moss on the cutblock was tinder. “You fuck up, you’re fired!” he’d shouted.

“So,” said Skye, still looking at Jake, “how many did you get in?”

Jake squinted up toward the sun, as if he were trying to calculate, though he’d counted and recounted his 850 miserable trees, and he knew that, at nine cents a tree, he’d earned \$76.50. Subtracting \$25 for camp costs left him with \$51.50. It was still better than his first few days, after which he’d owed the camp money.

“A thousand,” he said, adding the trees still in his bags.

“Fuckin’ A,” said Skye. “My first week, I don’t think I broke 500.”

“You planted 1,500 on your second day,” said Jen. “I was there.”

“What can I say? My memory’s shit.” Skye grinned, turned her back to Jake, and squatted down in the middle of the road, dropping her muddy pants in a motion so swift Jake couldn’t help glimpsing the curve of her thigh before he managed to look away.

“You could at least warn him,” said Jen. She lit another cigarette.

“Jake, I’m pissing,” said Skye. “Look away if you must. If you can.”

“You’re fucking embarrassing him, man,” said Jen.

“If a man can piss wherever he’s standing, so can I.”

Jake could hear the hiss of her stream hitting the sand. He felt a shiver of excitement. He’d never met a lesbian before—that he knew of, anyway. He’d grown up in a small Prairie town where everyone spent Sunday morning either in church or drinking beer at the gravel pit,



chucking their empties at the dragline. Jake had always been content among the churchgoers, solid people who, if not always lights for the whole world, could certainly be counted on to show up at your door in times of trouble, bearing casseroles and sympathy. At bible college, Jake's roommate, Elmer, had told him about tree planting. You could make ten grand in two months, if you were good. Elmer recruited most of his crew from bible college. He'd even formed an accountability group to keep them from being tempted, out there in the wilderness, by marijuana, alcohol, and sex, all of which were rampant. Every evening, they would gather in front of Elmer's tent, and he'd get out his battered guitar and lead them in singing praise and worship songs. Everyone else in camp gave them a wide berth.

By the time Jake had decided to sign up, Elmer's crew was full, so Jake had ended up with another company, in northern Ontario, where he knew no one. Packing his Liquidation World tent and army-surplus sleeping bag, he'd decided that he'd steer clear of drugs and booze, but if an opportunity to do something with a girl presented itself, he would go for it. He was almost twenty-three. Jesus had lived another decade without sex. Jake wasn't sure he could make it that long.

His Christian friends assumed he was a virgin, and his (few) non-Christian friends assumed he wasn't. Jake didn't bother trying to set the latter group straight, but recently he'd started to think that, as long as he was implicitly lying to someone, he might as well switch things around. He wanted, just once, for a girl to take his hands and guide them to her breasts. Before he died or Christ returned. Sometimes he wanted it so badly he could feel a physical pain, like the blade of a knife, pressing in a vertical line along his breastbone. He couldn't exactly pray for it to happen, but he knew God would forgive him if it did.

EVERY EVENING, as the cold spring wind snapped at the canvas of the mess tent and the tree planters bent their heads over plates piled with food, Brook, the foreman, stood in the doorway and

shouted their names, one by one, and each planter shouted back their tally for the day. Jake always sat at the table closest to the tent door—even though that meant he was farthest from the warmth of the wood stove—so that only those at his table would hear his number.

“Aaron?” yelled Brook.

“3,500.”

“Fuckin’ awesome!” Brook performed the ritual with his boots apart, clipboard in hand, bleached hair tufted into a peak. He had been foremaning the crew for ten years now, the other nine months of each spent surfing in Bali. He had a wreath of hibiscus flowers tattooed around his shoulders and could drive a quad loaded with tree boxes through a shithole that would swallow anyone else.

“Kelly?”

“1,900.”

“Rough day?”

“Yeah. Broke my shovel. Had to wait two hours for a new one.”

“God damn. Jen?”

“3,750.”

“There’s my highballer. Skye?”

“4,100.”

“Jen, what happened? Couldn’t keep up with the legend?”

“Fuck you,” said Jen.

When Jake's turn came, he said his number so quietly that Brook had to walk over to hear it again. The only person who'd planted fewer trees than he had was Naomi, but each tree Naomi planted was impeccable: flawlessly spaced, perfectly vertical in moist mineral soil, deep enough that the plug was entirely covered but not so deep that a single lateral was buried. Uncle Bernie checked everyone's planted land by drawing a circle with his plot cord at random and inspecting each tree within it. Rumour had it that he'd stopped throwing plots on Naomi's land after twelve perfect scores. This was her second year planting, and so far, she'd never planted enough trees in a day to break minimum wage. Still, she carried herself with poise and confidence and was kind to everyone. She also stood out from the rest of the camp for her insistence on showering daily, even when the heater was down and the water was lake cold.

THE NEXT DAY, Jake was stuck on a bald dome of granite. He tapped his shovel into every tuft of grass and island of lichen, in search of soil deep enough to sink a plug into. By noon, his wrist ached and his ears rang with the hateful *tink* of steel on stone. His bags were still half full and had begun to chafe against his thighs. He walked back to his cache for lunch and found Naomi there, filling her planting bags.

“Brook put me on your piece,” she said. “Sorry. I know you like to plant alone.”

“Fine with me,” said Jake. “The sooner we finish this rock, the sooner we can move to something better.” He unbuckled his bags. “I’m taking lunch.”

“I’ll start along the far edge, and we can both work toward the middle.”

“We can plant side by side if you want,” said Jake.

“That’s okay—I don’t want to slow you down.”

“It might speed us up.” He knew that the highballers planted in pairs, shoulder to shoulder, taking turns following trees and bagging each other out.

She smiled. “To be totally honest, it’s best for me to work alone. I’ve got a weird style. Thanks, though.”

Jake watched her fill her bags with plastic-wrapped bundles of black spruce. She was the only one who obeyed the rule about unwrapping one bundle at a time. Everyone else unbundled everything in their feeder bag. It was faster that way, though the trees at the bottom were always mangled. Brook had shown Jake how to strip the needles off a stem with a thumbnail and throw it away. “Just don’t let Uncle Bernie catch you doing that.” Jake felt a twinge of conscience every time he stripped a tree, but unwrapping each bundle individually took too long.

He ate a peanut butter sandwich and watched Naomi move away, over the granite ridge, stooping to look for spots of soil. He flexed his fingers. The numbness in his wrist had spread to his forearm. If he started planting right now, maybe he could catch up to her at the back of the piece. Maybe they would take a break there, at the edge of the clear-cut swath, where the forest sprang back up.

The sheer cutaway seemed so exposed, like a house sawed in half, its occupant caught eating cake straight from the fridge. Maybe he and Naomi would drop their bags there and walk in among the trees to sit on a lichen-covered boulder and talk. Maybe he would put his arm around her and she would move into his embrace and raise her mouth to his. Maybe—

“Hey! Time to get off your ass!”

Jake opened his eyes and saw Brook striding over the tree-stumped land, grinning, teeth white against his tan. Brook hated to see anyone sitting still. “Plant those motherfucking trees!” he liked to sing out whenever he caught someone idling.

“How are you for boxes?” Brook lifted the corner of the Silvicool tarp.

“I’ve got lots.”

“I see that. I sent Naomi to help you finish off this shit. You were taking too long. Did you see her?”

Jake pointed at the ridge.

“I’ve got some creamy land for you when you’re done here.” Brook folded his arms over his muscled chest and examined them in the sunlight. Then he turned and loped over the rise in the direction Naomi had gone.

Jake felt a cramp in his chest. He finished his sandwich, stuffed his bags, and bent to his task, following Naomi’s ragged line of trees back up the ridge. At the top, he paused. He could see Naomi stooping and rising near the treeline. Brook was helping her. Jake watched him reach into her bag for a handful of trees. He seemed to float over the ground. Of course, Jake thought. Of course Brook would help her. They must be sleeping together. He stabbed at a patch of moss but there was no soil underneath and the sharp pang of blade on rock jolted up his arm. “Dammit!” The word tasted satisfyingly sweet. He lashed out with his shovel at a stump. The blade recoiled from the spongy wood and hit him in the shoulder. “Damn you to hell!” He threw his shovel as hard as he could, watched it arc and then fall, blade first, and spark off a stone. There was no one around to hear him. No one but God.

Above him hummed the concave sky. A teardrop-shaped bird skittered across a puddle, stopped in front of him, and shook out its feathers. It moved with a twitching sideways step, turning its head to watch him with one eye. A pine, spared by loggers but shorn of branches, grieved in the wind.

THE NEXT DAY, Brook drove Jake and Naomi around on the quad and let them fill in a series of sandy burns. The planting was fast and they were soon covered in soot.

It was midafternoon when the checker’s tan pickup pulled up at the cache. Uncle

**It was important
to live an
exemplary life
in a place like this;
your actions had
to speak for
themselves.**

Bernie got out, put on his hard hat, and gestured for Brook to come over.

“Someone’s in trouble,” said Naomi.

Jake stopped working and watched the two men confer. He could see Brook’s face sag. The checker got back into his pickup and turned it around in the road. Brook waited until he was out of sight and then came over to Jake and Naomi. “Bad news. Uncle Bernie threw a plot on the piece you finished yesterday. He found two loose trees and a dropped one. Plus the spacing was tight.”

“Shit,” said Jake.

Naomi didn’t say anything. Her mouth was a line.

“He’s pretty pissed,” said Brook. “Apparently yours wasn’t the only bad plot. Sparky’s going to have a fucking hernia.”

“I’ve never had a bad plot in my life,” said Naomi.

“It was probably on my side,” said Jake. He felt a punch of guilt in his gut. He

knew what this meant: a day of replanting without pay. Worse than the penalty was the knowledge that he had planted bad trees. He wanted to throw up.

The mood in the mess tent that night was heavy. The company’s owner, known affectionately as Sparky, yelled at Brook in front of the crew. Sparky was a short balding man of pure muscle who bounced when he walked and grinned at people when he was about to fire them. The company’s sterling reputation had been damaged, he shouted. Everyone who had gotten a bad plot would replant the next day, and Brook would plot them, and anyone with two or more bad trees would pack up their shit and go home.

“It’ll blow over. This happens at least once a season,” said Jen after Sparky had gone. She was sitting at the same table as Jake, who was finding it hard to swallow his shepherd’s pie.

“Easy for you to say,” said a freckle-faced planter with a sheaf of sawdust-coloured dreadlocks atop his head. His name was Tyler and he lived in a van with his rookie girlfriend and their Shih Tzu. The dog yapped all day, locked inside the van.

“What do you mean?” asked Skye.

“Everyone knows Sparky would never fire a highballer,” Tyler answered.

“Maybe that’s because we plant good quality,” said Jen.

“Just sayin’. If heads roll tomorrow, they won’t be yours.”

“Just plant good trees and you’ll have nothing to worry about.”

“I’ve never had a bad plot before today,” said Tyler. “But someone’s gonna have to get the axe so Sparky can cover his ass.”

IN THE MORNING, a mean rain was coming down. Jake and Naomi replanted all day. Brook apologized to Naomi when he dropped them off. “Just put your head down and keep quiet until Sparky cools off.”

Jake worked on his side, Naomi on hers. The cold rain seeped into Jake’s hands. By late afternoon he had checked every tree on the piece, fixing the loose ones, and his fingers were so rubbery with cold he couldn’t pinch his forefinger and thumb together hard enough to jam a plug into

a hole. He hadn't earned a dime, but he felt better. Absolved. He would plant slowly and perfectly, like Naomi. It was important to live an exemplary life in a place like this. As a Christian, you couldn't convince people with words; your actions had to speak for themselves.

Back at camp, they heard the news. Tyler's rookie girlfriend had gotten a second bad plot and been fired. Tyler had gotten into a shouting match with Sparky and been fired as well. There was a dry rectangle of sand where their van had been parked. Jake silently thanked God it hadn't been him.

THE NEXT DAY, the sky cleared and the sun came out. Brook dropped Jake off alone. "Flag a line straight to the treeline and work your way to the right," he said. "I've got Skye working toward you from the other side. When you meet up, you can figure out how you want to divide the piece." He seemed wilted. No cheerful, profanity-laced exhortation this time.

"Skye's not planting with Jen?"

"I had to separate them," Brook said. "They got two bad plots."

The piece was deep. Jake used up a third of his trees just getting to the treeline. At the back it opened up, and he could see that, if he and Skye didn't empty a few bags there, they'd fill in their access. There was nothing more inefficient than having to load up with trees and walk back over planted land.

When Jake returned to the cache, he found Skye squatting in the middle of the road, smoking. She was wearing a lime-green bandana, her hair tied up in a fist on top of her head. "How many bags you done?"

"One. You?"

"Three. You been bagging out in the back?"

Jake nodded.

"It's fucking huge back there."

"Yeah, I know."

"You want to plant it together?"

Jake looked at her. She was wearing black combat boots. Her planting bags dangled, empty, from their shoulder straps. Her wide sun-browned face, eyes slitted against the sunlight, made Jake think of some kind of rough stone Aztec goddess. "I won't be able to keep up."

"After I teach you a few tricks, you will." She took a grubby pack of cigarettes from a pocket in her cargo pants, put an unlit one between her lips, and began filling her bags.

Jake soon found that Skye followed trees effortlessly. She could tell at a glance what was planted and what wasn't, whereas Jake often had to study the land for a moment before he could pick out the tiny green fronds. As they worked their way to the treeline, she showed him how to plant in triangles instead of lines, how to punch or squeeze a hole closed instead of kicking it, how to glance ahead for his next spot instead

of looking at the tree he was planting. Jake scrambled to keep up. He was surprised at how fast he could move when he didn't have to stop and squint for trees. It was all about economy of motion. He wanted to learn to move like she moved.

"Throw me a bundle," called Skye when her bags were empty.

"You don't need to bag me out," said Jake. "I've still got three bundles to go."

"I said throw me a fucking bundle."

Jake threw her a bundle.

They walked back to the cache together. Out of the corner of his eye, Jake watched her stocky body and tried to figure out how she could move so fast.

At the cache, Jake ripped open a box and began stuffing his bags. Skye watched him and smoked. "Goddamn gorgeous day," she said. "You hear that red-tailed hawk?"

Jake stopped and listened. He heard something that sounded like a sharp piece of metal scratching glass.

"She's pissed. Probably has a nest in that tree. You smoke?"

"Uh, sure. I'll have one." The cigarette tasted like mint and the smoke burned his throat. When he flicked his butt onto the road—expertly, he thought—Skye walked over, picked it up, and put it in her pocket. "One of these could kill a bird."

"Oh. I didn't know."

"They're all dying, you know."



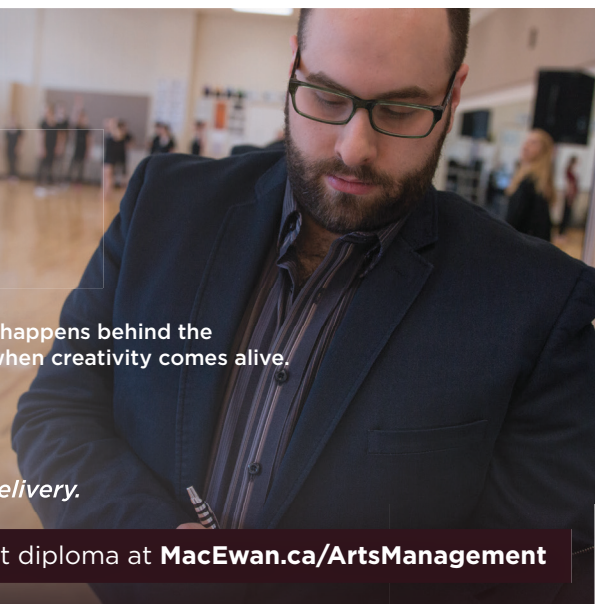
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“The birds?”

“Because of this.” She waved at the wasteland of shattered branches and tire-torn soil around them. “Because of us.”

They planted together for the rest of the day. Skye bagged Jake out every time. She showed him how to follow the contours of the land and fill in the little pockets that were hard to reach. By the end of the day, Jake had planted 2,000 trees and his throat was raw from menthols.

“You’ll be a highballer soon if you keep this up,” said Skye. They sat on the roadside, waiting for the truck to pick them up.

Skye lit up another cigarette and handed him one. She leaned over and lit his with the tip of hers, letting a curl of smoke escape her lips. “Want to try that again without the cigarettes?”

“Sorry?”

Skye looked at him steadily until he realized what she meant.

“Uh. Okay.” His voice broke.

She leaned over, and her lips were gentle and tasted like smoke. Jake’s mind was on fire. He tried to think of something to say.

“That was nice,” said Skye.

Jake cleared his throat. “How long are you and Jen planting apart?”

Skye shrugged. “Ask Brook.”

“Are you and Jen, like, you know, together?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Oh.”

She grinned, eyes narrow. “You’re wondering if I’m queer.”

Jake shrugged.

“I’ve slept with guys. I’ve slept with girls.”

“Oh. Yeah. Of course.” Jake hadn’t thought of that possibility.

“You’re religious, aren’t you?” said Skye.

Jake hesitated. There was no pretending. “Yeah.”

She nodded. “Figured. You don’t talk about it much.”

“It’s better to just live it than talk about it.”

Skye studied him for a minute. It felt weird to be looked at like that. But not bad. His body felt light. “I can respect that,” she said.

COVID-19 Couplets

BY JASON GURIEL

On daily walks, we cut the neighbours swaths
Of space. Instead of paper towel, cloths.

To touch a soul with talk—that’s now the task.
The face approaching us is mostly mask.

“**HOW LONG DO YOU** think it’ll take you to finish this piece?” Brook said cheerfully when he dropped Jake and Skye off at the cache the next morning.

Skye squinted at the sky. “Six thousand-ish more trees? End of the day, if Jake plants like he did yesterday.”

“Awesome,” said Brook. “Keep it up and I’ll get you and Jen together again.”

Jake found it easier on the second day. Skye still bagged him out, but by fewer bundles. By midafternoon, the piece was almost done.

“Another bag-up should do it,” said Skye. “Want to go for a swim?”

“A swim?”

“Yeah. There’s a lake back there, through the trees.”

They planted to the back and hiked into the trees, their half-full bags banging against their thighs. Jake could feel the forest breathing around him, the wind flailing the spruce branches high overhead, the trunks groaning. Between the trees, he caught a glimpse of sunlight glittering on water.

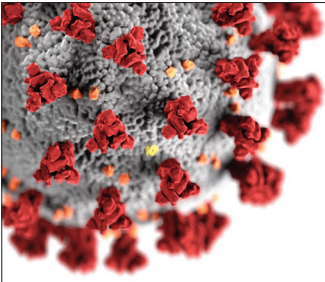
The beach was loose gravel. Skye dropped her bags and shrugged off her

sweater. Jake tried not to look. He stripped down to his boxer shorts, bracing for the icy water. He heard a splash and looked up to see Skye surface. “Fuck, it’s cold!” she yelled. The water caught him like a fist and squeezed the air out of his lungs. He came up gasping and staggered back to the shore. He couldn’t feel the stones under his feet. Skye was sitting in the sun, on a slab of granite. “Come sit here. It’s warm.” She was naked.

Jake walked over to the rock, still unable to look directly at her.

“Sit.” She slapped the granite beside her.

Jake sat on the rock next to her, hugging his knees, staring out at the lake. The heat coming from her was stronger than the sun. Neither of them spoke until Skye leaned toward him and pressed her mouth against his. She moved his hands so he wouldn’t be afraid to touch her. In the shimmer of the sun coming off the lake, Jake felt his mind expand to encompass the whole of the living, breathing forest around them, glorious and ruined. He kept waiting for the wash of guilt, but he felt only wonder. That two bodies



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together could morph into something utterly new and blazing and unlike anything either of them had been alone.

Afterward, they lay on the rock without speaking until they started to get cold. “We should finish the piece,” said Skye. Jake watched her get up and pull her sweater down over her breasts. Dressed, she picked up her shovel, approached a wide rotten tree stump on the lake’s edge, and began to hack at its jagged top. “What are you doing?” said Jake.

Skye’s shovel broke through the spongy wood and opened a hole into the hollow beneath it. She began taking bundles of trees out of her bags and dropping them into the hole. “What the hell does it look like I’m doing?”

“You’re stashing,” said Jake.

“Give me your fucking bag.” Skye walked over to Jake’s planting bags, picked them up, and emptied their contents into the hole in the stump. “Let’s go.”

The two of them walked back through the trees in silence. Jake could feel the heavy, mossy weight of their reproach. Skye moved faster than he did, and by the time he got to the cache, she had already bagged up and was back at work. Jake filled his bags and tried to follow her trees, but his mind was gyrating and he had to stop for minutes at a time before he could locate the trees he was supposed to be following. When Brook came by to pick them up, there was still a section of unplanted land along the road.

AFTER SUPPER, he lay in his tent, trying to think, trying to pray. Something invisible and heavy pressed down on his chest. He felt like vomiting. Stashing trees was an unforgivable offence; he’d be fired if he were caught. He sat up and held his hard hat under his chin, but the spasms wouldn’t come. After a while, he got up and felt around in the darkness for his cellphone. He turned it on, unzipped his tent, and walked down the gravel road to the hill, where there was reception. The moon was high and white and cold. He dialed Elmer’s number and listened to the tinny ring.

“Hey there,” said Elmer. “You staying clean?” He laughed.

“Sure.”

“Good man. A lot of temptation out there. Next year, I’ll get you on my crew.”

Jake told him about the trees in the stump. “What should I do?”

“Aw, man,” said Elmer.

“I feel like shit. I needed to tell someone.”

“If you want my advice, don’t tell anyone. If it’s a rookie’s word against a highballer’s, I can tell you right now who’s going to get the shaft.”

“Should I go back and dig them up?”

“I wouldn’t risk it.”

He didn’t tell Elmer about the sex.

“I’m sure you think you’re doing something noble out here, but you know what? It’s an industry. Pure capitalism.”

THE NEXT MORNING, Brook dropped Jake and Skye off at the cache with a box of trees each. “I’ll be back in an hour,” he said.

Jake waited until Skye was out of sight before he shouldered his empty bags and headed for the treeline. The lake, when he reached it, was as flat as granite, glittering with grains of sunlight. Jake found the rock where he and Skye had lain. When he touched it, the roughness of its surface startled him. He remembered feeling Skye’s body pressing his into it. He still felt no guilt, only incandescence. It was as though a membrane between him and the world had been torn away.

From the rock, it was easy to find the rotten stump. Jake put his arm inside and pulled out trees, piling the shiny, plastic-wrapped bundles around him. He’d intended to replant only his own, but now it didn’t seem right to put Skye’s back in the hole. Also, he

didn't know exactly how many of the bundles were his. He'd have to plant them all.

Jake got back to the cache just as Skye came striding up, flinging handfuls of dirt from her bag like a sower from a parable. She squatted in front of a box and ripped it open. "What were you doing back there?"

Jake looked down at his bags. "I dug up the trees from yesterday."

"What the almighty fuck?" Skye sat back on the heels of her combat boots. Her eyes were ferocious. "Christ. You've never stashed a tree in your life?"

He shook his head.

She looked at him. Then she laughed. The sound rang out over the scarred landscape. "Jesus, of course you haven't." She wiped her eyes. "Let me fill you in. I'm sure you think you're doing something noble out here, replanting these ravaged forests. You know what? It's a fucking industry. Pure capitalism. These trees will never replace what was destroyed. Ten years down the line, they'll send out a crew with brush saws to thin them out and douse the understorey with chemicals so we get a nice straight crop to be harvested and turned into toilet paper."

Jake nodded silently.

"Everyone out here is just making a buck."

He nodded.

She smiled suddenly, and he remembered the feel of her mouth against his and felt a sharp pain behind his collarbone. "Go ahead and keep your Christian conscience clean if you must. Just leave my name out of it, okay?"

WHEN BROOK ARRIVED, he moved Jake to a beautiful flat sandy piece of land. It took him until noon to finish off the trees he'd salvaged. When his bags were empty, he sat down at his cache to eat. The day was half gone and his tally was zero. He closed his eyes and felt the red heat of the sun on his eyelids. He felt clean and good.

He ripped open a box and began stuffing his bags with bundles, tearing away the plastic wrappers. When he started to work again, he found himself following

the movements he had learned from Skye. The trees poured into the ground. Jake emptied his bags and filled them again. The land was gorgeous and open. He could still reach 1,000 by the end of the day. He could have topped two if he hadn't spent his morning planting all those trees from yesterday. He was working near the back of the piece when he came across a patch of soft sand hidden behind a stand of poplars. A wild thought came to him. Without letting himself question it, he stopped and began to dig. The sand yielded under his shovel. Into the hole he dropped fistfuls of trees until his feeder bag was empty. No way of knowing how many—fewer for sure than he'd replanted for Skye but enough to save him hours of work. He stood up and looked down at the trees, lying prone in their mass grave. He couldn't do it. It was impossible to know where his sins ended and Skye's began. As he retrieved the trees and laid them gently back into his planting bags, he found himself craving one of Skye's cigarettes.

JAKE WAS LEAVING the mess tent after dinner when Brook pulled him aside. "Nice work today." There was something odd in Brook's tone. He wouldn't meet Jake's glance. "Sparky wants to talk to you in his office."

"What about?"

"He didn't say."

Jake felt the bottom drop out of his gut.

Sparky was standing at his desk, in the trailer that served as his office, looking at a satellite map when Jake came in. "Jake! How the heck are ya!"

Jake bit his lip. This false enthusiasm—he hated it. "Brook said you wanted to see me."

Sparky's eyes went flat, but his smile stayed. "Yes. That's correct."

"About what?"

"This morning, you were seen going into the forest at the back of your piece. Alone. Brook tells me he has reason to believe you left some trees behind."

Jake's mouth was sticky. He swallowed and glanced briefly into Sparky's small opaque eyes, his mind reeling through all the possible answers he could give.

Broadview

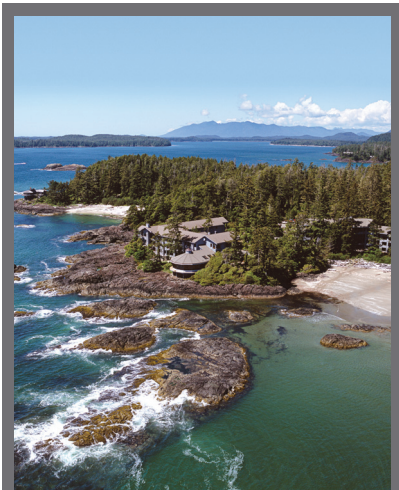
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He heard himself say: "That's not exactly what happened."

"You want to tell me what did?"

"I was trying to fix a mistake."

"A mistake?"

"Yesterday, um, I stashed some trees by accident."

"By accident? I didn't know you could stash trees by accident." His blue eyes blazed. "Ya learn something new every day out here."

Jake looked down at his boots. "I didn't do it myself."

"That so?" Sparky moved his stubbled jaw from side to side. "It sounds like we need all the involved parties in this office."

After Brook and Skye had been summoned, Jake sat outside and listened to the thin walls of the trailer vibrate as Sparky yelled at each of them in turn. Then the two of them came out and Brook nodded at Jake. "Your turn," he said. "Good luck." Skye didn't look at him. Jake was glad for that. He went in.

"You can pack up your tent," said Sparky.

"I'm really sorry."

"I'm aware of that. You'll get paid eight cents a tree retroactive to the beginning of the season, as per your contract."

Jake nodded. He felt the tears behind his eyelids. He turned and walked out of the trailer before any could squeeze out.

He was putting his rolled-up tent into the trunk of his Honda when Skye found him. She put one boot up on the rear wheel of the car. "I thought I told you to leave me the hell out of it."

Jake looked at her. "I tried." He swallowed. "You didn't get fired, did you?"

She shook her head. "I have to plant alone for a week. Brook will check my trees." She took out two menthols and offered Jake one. It felt like an olive branch. He took it and they smoked together in the twilight.

"You shouldn't have gone back for the trees." She blew a gentle cloud of smoke.

"I had to."

"Yeah," she said. "I know." The edge had gone out of her voice. "You still think there's such a thing as purity." She crushed her cigarette against his tire and helped him finish loading up his car. When he got into the driver's

seat and rolled down the window, she said: "You're not a bad kid."

His throat hurt. He glanced at her quickly, one last time, then put the car in gear and drove out of the camp without looking back. There was a woolly grey layer of cloud building along the horizon. The last burn of the sun flashed in his rear-view mirror as he sped around the tight curves of the gravel logging road. By the time he reached the Trans-Canada, a thin rain had begun to fall. Jake stopped at a Husky station to fill up. As he was paying, he saw the cigarettes behind the counter and asked for a pack of menthols. Then he drove west, into the rain, watching the water stream up over his windshield. He listened to the drone of tires on wet pavement and the hiss of water coming off his wipers and felt his chest open up again to swallow the universe, and he was happy. He thought that, if Christ came back right now, right this minute, he'd be ready. 🚗

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JOSIAH NEUFELD's fiction has appeared in *Prairie Fire* and *The New Quarterly*.



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Best Practice

BY ALEXANDRA OLIVER

Your emotions make you a monster.
—The Dead Kennedys

We thought it would be over soon enough.
He'd listen to the facts and move along,
find a job, a house, someone to love,
but we were wrong.

The guys we knew from way back when went clean;
our much sought-after punk lords of misrule
took up cycling, ran a snow machine,
went back to school

while weary girlfriends (Bev or Jane or Bree)
coaxed them into getting on the ladder:
finding a Special out by the PNE
they'd fix together.

If kids appeared, they'd step up to the plate,
cart them up to soccer on the Drive,
put on an act that they had a cleaner slate,
master the high five.

You'd see them hauling speakers at a gig,
drinking Cokes and fondly reminiscing
about that night (the ketamine! The wig!)
a friend went missing.

We told ourselves that maybe they were sellouts,
but, though they thickened up, becoming squares,
a part of us inside was somewhat jealous.
The God that spares

did not spare him. He wouldn't ever soften;
he curled his evil into my life and yours,
and that is why our mother says so often,
Check the doors.



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FEATURED ARTIST

Inner Life

Margaux Williamson pays homage to what's right in front of us

BY SOPHIE WEILER





THE NAMES of the paintings in Margaux Williamson's most recent series are as low-key as their subjects—*Table and Chair, Window, Living Room, Desk, Bed*. In painting ordinary objects, the Toronto-based artist brings a focus to the spaces in and around our homes that usually make up the backgrounds of our lives. She animates everyday items with sweeping strokes of deep blue and brown, and her representations of flowery carpets, rough wooden surfaces, and shiny laptops hover somewhere between real and abstract.

In some ways, the collection is a departure from Williamson's previous work, which depicts everything from the universe to overripe bananas to Scarlett Johansson. Her 2014 book, *I Could See Everything*, explores the idea of being able to see the entire world at a distance, whether from a mountaintop or through the internet. Conversely, "With these paintings," she says, "it just felt like I landed on the ground and could only see what was in front of me." Her new exhibition, *Interiors*, is set to be hosted at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, a gallery in Kleinburg, Ontario. When asked about the name, she laughs. "I think it wasn't until they titled the show *Interiors* that I was like, Oh!" The paintings had come together not by meticulous planning but with an intuitive desire to paint the ordinary—an impulse Williamson simply followed. "I didn't realize I was just literally painting the things around me."

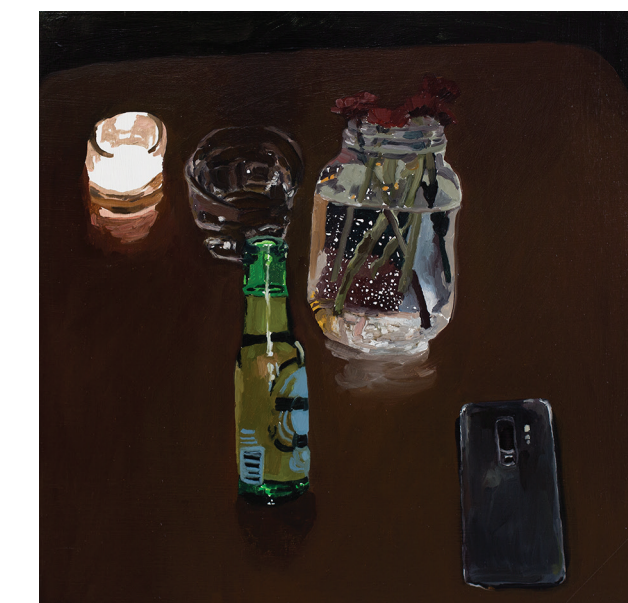
Williamson modelled *Table and Chair*, one of the earliest works in the series, on the idea of a kitchen at night. Each time she revisited the canvas, she painted a new object as she saw it in that moment, not worrying about continuity or realism or planning her composition. She painted the table from her kitchen, the chair from someone else's room, the black tiles from somewhere else. For a window, her initial instinct might have been to depict it looking out at the night sky. Instead, she brushed the darkest blues into the dappled wood of the table, imbuing the piece of furniture with the expansiveness we often

look for through our windows. "The escape is not outside," she says. "All of the depth and darkness and possibility of that beautiful abstract night had to be in the table."

LEFT
Window,
2017

**“The escape is not outside.
All of the depth and darkness and
possibility of that beautiful abstract
night had to be in the table.”**





Although it was developed in a world before COVID-19, the collection feels oddly prescient. In the early days, just after the virus was declared a pandemic, many Canadians who were able to began social distancing in their homes—and reevaluating their relationships with domestic life. But Williamson says she’s used to spending a lot of time indoors. As an artist, she’s always loved solitude and working alone. Through her art, living spaces offer the potential for us to indulge in the present. As our homes take on different meanings—kitchen counter becoming workplace, living room becoming classroom—Williamson’s art encourages us to imagine more. A dining table might become the night sky, and in confinement, the banal can be full of possibility. *

LEFT
Table and Chair,
2016

ABOVE
Flowers,
2020

.....
SOPHIE WEILER is the Cannonbury Fellow
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ARTS

Stand-Up's Next Act

On comedy's growing generational divide

BY ERIKA THORKELSON

ILLUSTRATION BY SALINI PERERA

EVERY TUESDAY NIGHT at a Vancouver restaurant called The Kino, comedians take the stage to work on their routines, to practise before bringing an act somewhere bigger. For a while, The Kino's biggest claim to fame was that, one evening a few years back and before all the sexual misconduct allegations against him came to light, Louis C. K. stopped by for

an impromptu set. The host doesn't brag about that anymore.

Sometimes, Tuesdays at The Kino have meant gritting my teeth in the audience as bro comics rattle through lukewarm bits about their girlfriends talking too much or shopping obsessively. In this brand of comedy, women are, at best, aliens to be theorized about by the Jerry Seinfelds of the world; at worst,

we become the objects of violent fantasies. These sorts of jokes turned me off of mainstream stand-up for much of my life, but what has kept me coming back to The Kino is the occasional bit of gold. Recently, that came in the form of a set by Sophie Buddle, a twenty-five-year-old comic whose day job is writing for the CBC's satirical news show, *This Hour Has 22 Minutes*.

Between jokes about her sex life and Vancouver's murderous crowd population, Buddle isn't afraid to poke at serious topics. She does one bit about the children of millennials: "Our kids are going to be the first generation of kids that can be whatever they want, sexually and, like, gender-wise. And that's it—you know, we're not going to have money to, like, feed them." During one set, at the SiriusXM Top Comic competition, she veered into the #MeToo movement, bringing up the idea that those kids of millennials will be the first generation to be properly taught about consent. "I like that," she quipped, before looking down at the people crowded around the narrow stage. "Big frown up front from this man," she noted, gesturing to one person in particular. His obvious discomfort became a running gag during her next bit, about rape culture.

The relationship between a comedian and their audience is a complicated one. Finnish anthropologist-turned-comedian Marianna Keisalo argues that the line between the performer's onstage persona and their real identity is often incredibly thin. It's the kind of thing you learn in *Comedy 101*: if there's something unusual about you, acknowledge it and move on. For a long time in Canada and the United States, "unusual" applied to anyone not straight, white, cisgender, or male. Even stars that didn't fit this mould, like Joan Rivers or Richard Pryor,

had to work harder to get audiences on-board. Pushing the wrong crowd to an uncomfortable place often meant losing the room entirely.

But, in recent years, audiences have been changing. Today, podcasting, streaming, and social media are bringing large and diverse audiences to comedians who might once have been dismissed as "niche." A handful of years ago, writer Christopher Hitchens and comedian Adam Carolla were proclaiming that women could never be as funny as men. Those arguments now seem quaint: in the past five years, there have been four acclaimed Netflix specials featuring *pregnant* women alone (Ali Wong, Natasha Leggero, Amy Schumer, and Ali Wong again). In fact, many of the most exciting new performers are women, people of colour, LGBTQ people, or some combination thereof, bringing with them a raft of underexplored experiences that are transforming the nature of comedy.

But this shift has also meant a growing divide. On one side, new faces have meant less tolerance for the flippant bigotry that has long been a part of stand-up—Shane Gillis, for example, recently lost a spot on *Saturday Night Live* after people called out his history of using homophobic and racist slurs. On the other side—which includes some of the biggest names in the business, like Dave Chappelle, Bill Burr, and Ricky Gervais—comedians complain that people can

no longer take a joke and that the art is losing its edge because of what they dismiss as "cancel culture." It doesn't seem to have crossed their minds that comedy is changing, and though they might have once been provocative or dangerous, they are now far from the cutting edge.

TIN LORICA likes to test the room with a joke. "My name is Tin," they announce in a deadpan voice. "I use they/them pronouns, in case you want to talk shit about me after the show." The amount of laughter defines the rest of the set: a few nervous giggles mean a turn toward "universal" jokes about life as a barista; gales of laughter allow Lorica to move on to their bit about why they quit dating white women. "That one I have to address," Lorica explains over coffee one afternoon in Vancouver. For certain crowds—like those attending Yellow Fever, the all-Asian lineup that Lorica co-produced for Just for Laughs Northwest, or Millennial Line, the monthly show they co-host—jokes about pronouns and queer-dating perils generally get a warm reception. But for other audiences? "I'm about to alienate half the room," Lorica explains.

Not too long ago, comedians like Lorica might have struggled to perform in front of large crowds. Recently, however, a growing cohort of artists is finding success in pushing back against comedy's



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exclusionary history. In her 2018 Netflix special, *Nanette*, Hannah Gadsby announces that she is quitting comedy, then spends her time onstage exploring the violence she experienced growing up as a non-gender-conforming lesbian in Tasmania. Early in her career, Gadsby learned that the best way to make audiences comfortable with her appearance was to ply familiar stereotypes, like that old saw about lesbians having no sense of humour. Over time, she realized this habit was doing her and her community more harm than good. “Do you understand what self-deprecation means

honest,” gushed Peter Rubin in *Wired*. “It’s *challenging*.”

This new willingness to be critical of comedy’s tendency to pick on marginalized identities has led some more-established performers to think of themselves as being “bullied,” as Ricky Gervais, star of the UK’s *The Office*, has put it. “It’s a slippery slope,” he said in one interview. “[If] you start going by these rules—what it’s okay to joke about—it’s a nonsense.” According to Gervais, if comedians start limiting themselves, thinking they can’t make jokes about certain subjects, the range of

someone who played around with darkness in order to help audiences find their better selves. As Marianna Keisalo pointed out in a 2016 essay, C.K.’s more violent jokes worked because “his demeanor and overall comportment . . . suggest he is not actually a violent man: the reversals into violence are reversible.” Then, in 2017, the news came out that C.K. had been masturbating in front of women without their consent, and that shell of trustworthiness was shattered. Those same jokes would no longer land.

To a lesser extent, a similar phenomenon has happened with the once-radical Dave Chappelle. In the early 2000s, he dived head on into the racial politics of America in both his stand-up and the acclaimed *Chappelle’s Show*; in his latest special, *Sticks & Stones*, he spends a lot of time uncritically plumbing his relationships with his famous, wealthy friends. Structurally, his jokes are still strong, but his habit of poking fun at Michael Jackson’s accusers and his tirades about the imagined cultural power of the LGBTQ community feel more self-serving than scathing.

His newer material about transgender people has drawn particular ire. In a Q&A at the end of *Sticks & Stones*, Chappelle responds to his critics with a story about meeting a trans woman named Daphne, herself an aspiring comedian, after one of his shows. As Chappelle tells it, Daphne told him how much she loves his work


Ricky Gervais is nothing if not part of the establishment, and seeing him go on about Twitter users just isn’t that funny.

when it comes from somebody who already exists in the margins?” she asks her audience. “It’s not humility—it’s humiliation. I put myself down in order to speak, in order to seek permission to speak, and I simply will not do that anymore, not to myself or anybody who identifies with me.”

By choosing to no longer capitulate to her audiences’ prejudices, Gadsby risked losing them. But, in *Nanette*, she succeeds magnificently, and the special received wide acclaim. “*Nanette* isn’t just brilliantly written, or emotionally


acceptable areas will narrow and narrow, and soon, joking about anything will be off the table. But I think this conflict really goes back to the issue of persona. Gervais seems to think of himself as an underdog, but he’s a multimillionaire with a slew of TV shows to his name. He’s nothing if not part of the establishment—and seeing him go on about Twitter users and other comics criticizing his work just isn’t that funny.

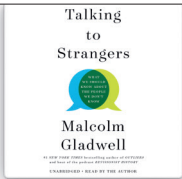
As another example, take Louis C.K. For many years, C.K. reigned on TV and the stage as a schlubby philosopher,



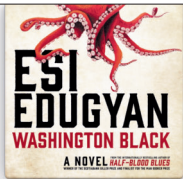
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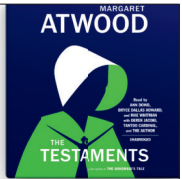




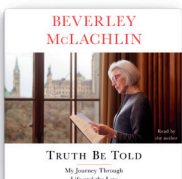
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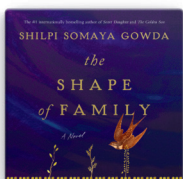
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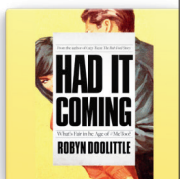
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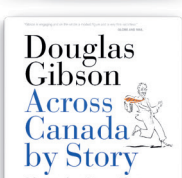
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and how she thinks of his jokes as normalizing transgender people. The anecdote ends with the two making out, as if to illustrate how cool Chappelle is with trans women. It's a story designed to absolve him of any responsibility for his jokes, but the punchline, which has him reaching under the woman's skirt, relies on the same obsession with trans women's genitalia found everywhere in our culture. Like the white people who went around repeating Chappelle's most famous lines in the 2000s, oblivious to the cultural criticisms his words contained, it doesn't seem to occur to Chappelle that

takes the issue personally, and the bit culminates in a glorious deluge of expletives at the selfishness of those who would choose their child's imagined health over the return of terrible diseases. In February, when I saw Gadsby perform the bit at Vancouver's Orpheum theatre, I noticed a woman across the aisle go still, her face screwed up in an expression of discomfort and anger. I saw the same reaction from a man in front of me when Gadsby did a blistering bit about golf.

If Gadsby seems too tame, consider the absurdist humour of Patti Harrison, best known as the mercurial office assistant

Fans of Chappelle go for the same reason people attend classic-rock reunion tours: to have their worldview reflected by a familiar face.

the history of cisgender people making jokes about trans women is wrapped up in terrible violence that continues today. Last October, shortly after identifying herself as the woman in Chappelle's story, Daphne Dorman died by suicide.

Fans still show up in droves to see Chappelle and Gervais perform. They even show up for Louis C. K., who is currently on tour (though, in his case, they come in smaller numbers). But audiences don't pack their venues or watch them on Netflix to be challenged or to see groundbreaking stand-up; they go for the same reason people attend classic-rock reunion tours: to have their worldview reflected and reinforced by familiar faces. What these comedians are doing today doesn't pose a threat to them or to traditional audiences. It's profoundly, comfortably safe.

on TV's *Shrill*. Harrison's Twitter account is one of the most hilariously scabrous feeds I've had the pleasure of following. One recent skit, a faux leaked sex tape, sees her being furiously ploughed by an off-camera beau while stifling a sneeze, making grotesque faces, and picking her nose.

Comedy has changed, but comedy has always been changing—edginess wouldn't be edgy if it stood still. Marc Maron may have outlined the state of stand-up best in a recent episode of his podcast, *WTF*: "There are still lines to be rode if you like to ride a line... If you want to take chances, you can still take chances. Really, the only thing that's off the table, culturally, at this juncture, and not even entirely, is shamelessly punching down for the sheer joy of hurting people, for the sheer excitement and laughter that some people get from causing people pain, from making people uncomfortable, from making people feel excluded." There will be no more polite giggles, no more shrugs and sighs of "boys will be boys." It's no longer possible to pretend we're not in the room. ↘

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ERIKA THORKELSON is a journalist and culture critic living in Vancouver. She teaches humanities and writing at Emily Carr University of Art and Design.



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 TALKS

THERE IS NO SHORTAGE of performers today who rattle cages, carrying on the tradition of Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Richard Pryor, Lily Tomlin, and Margaret Cho. In *Douglas*, Gadsby's most recent tour (which will eventually become her second Netflix special), she does a bit about anti-vaxers, those truthers who believe the conspiracy theory that vaccination leads to autism. As an autistic person herself, Gadsby

FIRST PERSON

Distant Threat

Until my uncle was sent to care for patients in Wuhan, the outbreak didn't feel real to me

BY JUDY ZIYI GU

IN JANUARY, when the COVID-19 death toll was still in the double digits, I thought things would blow over quickly. My extended family lives in a coastal Chinese province, around 1,000 kilometres from Wuhan, the epicentre of the virus; many people went into self-quarantine after the Wuhan lockdown even though the threat seemed far away. When my mother, whom I live with in Toronto, purchased three gallons of isopropyl alcohol and began spritzing it everywhere, like it was a refreshing home scent, I assured her she was overreacting. Two weeks later, I woke to find her crying in the kitchen. Her brother had become one of the hundreds of health care workers who were sent to Wuhan.

In a manner typical to both Asian families and my uncle's low-key personality, he did not say a word to us about being sent to Wuhan, only telling his wife at first. We found out through social media—my mom saw her brother's name in a post from the hospital where he works, a post in which administrators praised his team's bravery. My grandmother saw his face, behind a mask but unmistakably her son's, on a local newscast.

After receiving frantic messages in our family group chat, he tried to reassure us with a photo of himself in a hazmat suit and gloves. His name and title and “武汉加油!” (Be strong, Wuhan!) had been scribbled haphazardly on his back by his coworkers. “Not one inch of my skin is exposed,” he told us.

My uncle left Wuhan at the end of March and went into self-isolation with members of his medical team. Prior to his return, apart from sending him “good energy,” I was useless. Even asking for updates would have put a burden on



him—distributing information from Wuhan is sensitive.

Surprisingly, my uncle's assignment did not make me panic but instead marked a fundamental shift in my attention. I began to focus on the things that, at first, I had deliberately glossed over: I watched an old friend's YouTube videos, in which he and his girlfriend demystify the lockdown in Wuhan by vlogging their grocery trips. He also breaks down how a foreign media outlet twisted the couple's vlogs to incite panic. I read first-person accounts of being attacked for being Asian in public and news of a global spike in racist attacks. I felt the looks thrown at me when I sneezed on the streetcar, and I grieved for the Chinese businesses that had seen major drops in customers since January. I heard people speak about the immunocompromised and the elderly as if they were disposable.

I have the privilege of sidestepping the realities of the pandemic. I can do my job from home. I have health care. My house is stocked with food. Though my fear of anti-Asian violence is growing, I don't live in a city where I'm a small minority. Unlike people whose lives were fundamentally disrupted by this crisis, I maintained the illusion of normalcy for longer than reality should have allowed.

My uncle's assignment made me take an unflinching look at this crisis when it was still relatively far away. It reminded me that the threat was always closer than I wanted to admit. But I shouldn't have needed an uncle, a friend, or someone I know in the epicentre for it to become personal. More than ever, averting one's gaze during a crisis means missing its approach to their own doorstep.

Until March, many North Americans believed there was no way that what happened in China and other countries could happen here. Distance is an obvious explanation for this naïveté, but it is not the only one. This feeling of security was buoyed by the assumption that the public health and government systems in place would be able to protect us. The subtext being that viral outbreaks only happen in developing countries, only to “dirty Asians.” Too bad pandemics don't adhere to the confines of borders or race.

When scores of cancellations and closures populated the news in Canada and the US, I felt no surprise, only inevitability and anger. As cases mounted, portions of the general public still refused to practise social distancing or self-quarantine; international governments scrambled to put together reactive initiatives. The world looked away from China's struggles against COVID-19, missing out on lessons and precious time that could've left us better prepared to deal with the outbreaks elsewhere. Ignorance is not only indifferent and cruel to those who are most vulnerable—in our fundamentally interconnected world, it's deadly. ♣

JUDY ZIYI GU is a writer and audio producer living in Toronto. They produce multimedia projects for the CBC and previously worked for The Walrus.

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