OUR LIFE DURING -LOCKDOWN DISPATCHES FROM THE HOME FRONT ENDURING VISIONS
FOCUS ON NEVADA

PHOTO CONTEST WINNERS



CAN OUR PAST MOVE US AHEAD? BACK TO THE FUTURE

BY DAVID G. SCHWARTZ







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May/June



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BELLAGIO

рнотодгарну **Wesley Tingey**

Honorable Mention, Focus on Nevada

"The Bellagio looks haunted. The sign is dark. The lights are out. It feels like a daydream. It feels like the world ended. So I took a picture."

EDITOR'S NOTE



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Editor's Note

INSIDE OUT

was going to open this Editor's Note with some overwrought line like, "In a city built on risk, chance, and the allure of the unknown, it's hideously ironic that we now find ourselves facing a vast uncertainty that could swallow us." But I distrust it. It feels like an attempt to outflank or glibly deflect the enormity of this uncertain moment. What will a post-pandemic Las Vegas look like? I don't know. Nobody knows. We can barely get our heads around the unreality of our current reality: As I write this, the Strip, our crazy, gaudy, blingy heart, is stopped. Streets and stores are empty. Our homes are now offices and day-care centers and movie theaters. We show our love for family and friends by distancing ourselves. Nobody knows when any of that will change.

But, if the earnest human cooperation that turns the stay-at-home order into a life-saving tool is any indication, I do know that unified collective effort is powerful enough to turn a tide, flatten a curve, and swerve us out of the way of a disastrous possible future. I have faith that reasonable, intelligent people of good will can rise up in singular intent and make the seemingly impossible happen. We can't stop the future, but we can shape it — and shape to it — as it makes itself known. With that idea as our foundation, I'm confident that Las Vegas can come back again - altered, deeply altered, no doubt — but also defiantly alive.

This issue of Desert Companion, I hope, contains a few molecules of that foundation. We consider the strange dynamics of our new forced domesticity in our collection of "Life on the Inside" essays. We grapple with how a newly "inessential" Las Vegas might remake itself in David G. Schwartz's "What Happened Here." And we share visual stories of Las Vegas, as it was and as it is now, in our showcase of "Focus on Nevada" photo contest winners.

There are few certainties in this issue. It's filled with fretting, doubt, even fear — but also hope. I mean, ha, it's not like any of us can go anywhere anyway. Hope is the canned soup at the back of the cupboard that sustains you when you're utterly stuck. Hope is the hungover tourist missing his flight home, but he refuses to worry — another one is coming around, another chance, soon, you know it. This is Las Vegas, after all.

Andrew Kiraly **EDITOR**

OH, YEAH, ALSO

- **1.** In this issue, we review *The Brightest Place* in the World, a novel by David Philip Mullins that incorporates the 1988 PEPCON explosion in Henderson. At desertcompanion.com, check out our November 2013 issue, where we have a graphic novel-style retelling of David McBride, a maintenance man who was working at a marshmallow factory next door when the explosion hit - and who survived to tell the (sticky) tale.
- 2. This issue of Desert Companion was produced from our homes - and largely via Slack, which proved to be a welcome virtual water-cooler for our usual office banter:

andrewkiraly 2:06 PM

Ahhh ... corduroys are like the sweatpants of pants.

dickensheets 2:07 PM You're wearing pants?

andrewkiraly 2:11 PM

The pleasurable "Ahhh" may have suggested I was [bleep] my corduroys, but, no, just wearing them.

chrissmith 2:12 PM

How does one turn off notifications for Slack?

andrewkiraly 2:12 PM

Look for the gear symbol; it should have an option there.

In the absence of copious hair product, I've devolved into John Denver.



3. Speaking of working from home: Catch a glimpse of the Desert Companion team's home offices, and the tools and talismans that help us work (and play), at desertcompanion.com. Here's Scott Dickensheets' home desk, complete with desktop pic of his beloved cat, Pandora.



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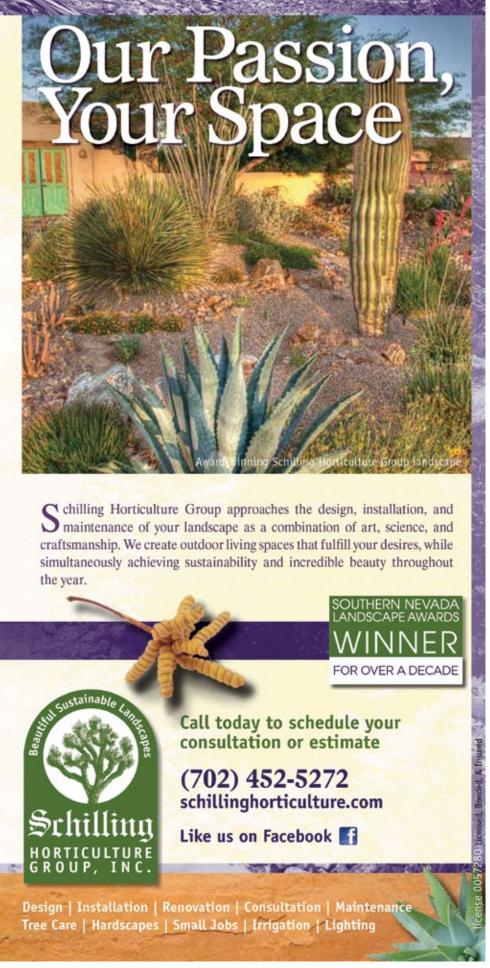
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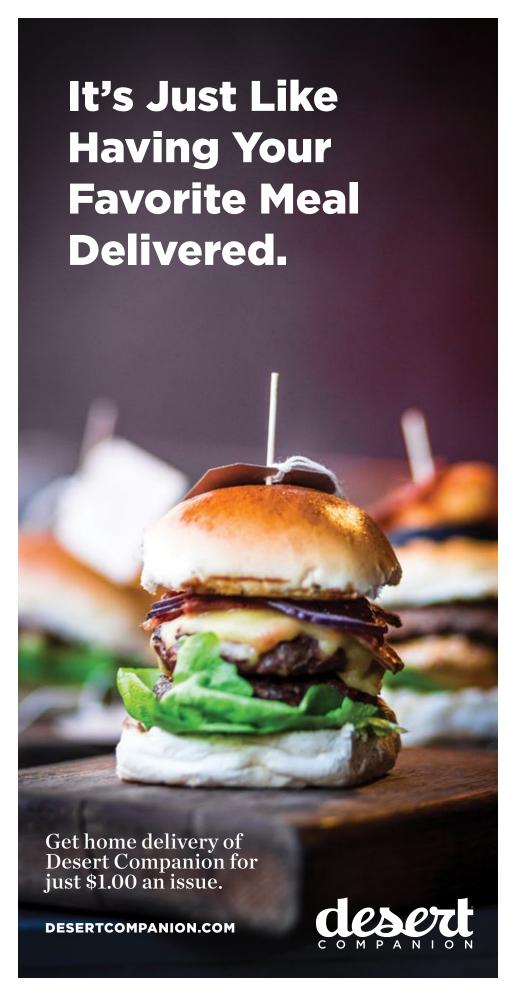
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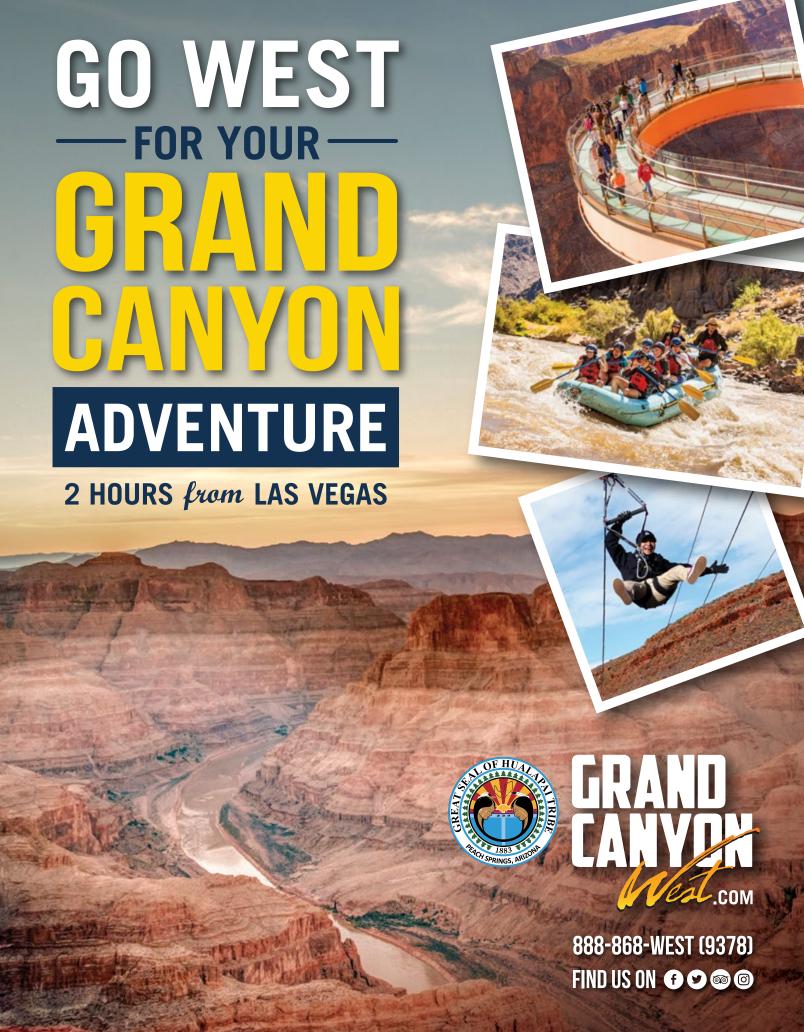
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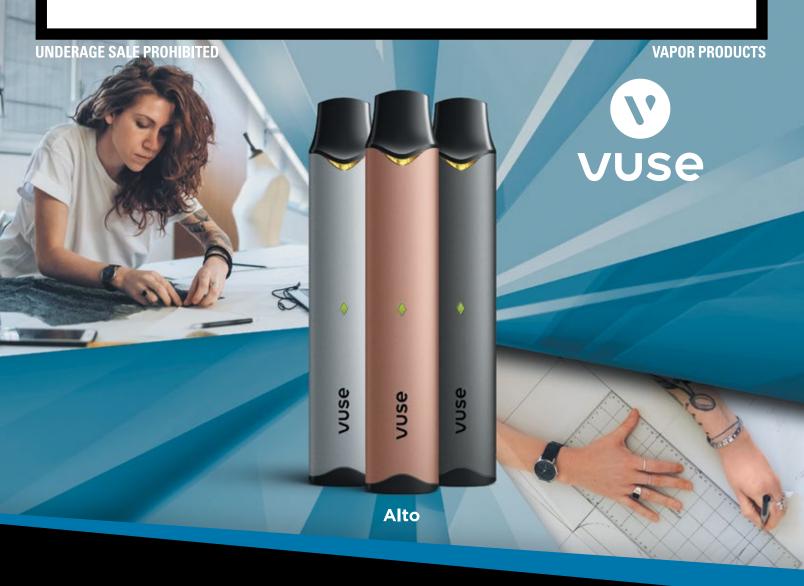
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ORAL HISTORY

Cancel, Postpone, Adapt

The city's arts and culture community responds to the pandemic

BY Scott Dickensheets

o doubt more than a few subscribers to Majestic Repertory Theatre's email list were startled — but immediately resigned to the inevitable — to get a note on April 7 titled "Our Final Email." By then, the pandemic's carnage was everywhere in the valley: dozens dead, hundreds sick, thousands out of work, an economy run scarily aground. There was no reason to assume artists and cultural organizations would be exempt.

That it wasn't a death notice — artistic director Troy Heard had just canceled the company's e-newsletter service to save a few dollars — offered a rare sigh of relief amid the gale of dreadful cultural news. An entire, robust spring season has come undone: exhibitions (five at UNLV's Barrick Museum alone), performance seasons, readings, concerts, major festivals, all postponed or canceled. The havoc scaled up and down, too. Tiny Majestic Repertory is sustained largely by ticket sales — as is the huge Smith Center, as CEO Myron Martin told KNPR's "State of Nevada." As of this writing, neither has an income stream.

Along with artists and nonprofit staffers, plenty of others are feeling the pain, from back-of-the-house technicians to valet parkers, the often-unnoticed workers who make culture possible. The arts can be a fragile line of work in the best of times. Now, the side hustles and gig work that typically keep many artists sheltered and fed are drying up, the financial markets are volatile, everyone's anxious, and no one knows what's next. "Nothing's happening until September," Bunkhouse Saloon music director Ryan Pardey predicted on "State of Nevada."

The damage doesn't stop there: According to the Guinn Center for Policy Priorities, the state was forecasted to earn more than \$128 million this year from the live-entertainment tax; with all the shuttered showrooms, the unproduced festivals, that figure is clearly unattainable.

Even as arts folk fret about the post-COVID future - will people still gather for events? what will be left of philanthropy? - their immediate challenge is also daunting: How to bookmark their place in the culturescape while cut off from audiences and hurting for funds, their core programing in abeyance?

They turned to the internet.

SARA ORTIZ, program manager, Black Mountain Institute: Everyone's moving their conversation to some virtual Zoom call or Facebook Live, Twitter Periscope, Instagram stories.

(Around the world, museums have posted virtual tours, musicians have performed from home, opera companies have streamed recorded shows, Patrick Stewart has been reading Shakespeare on the 'gram. Locally, the same: The Neon Museum offers an online tour; the Clark County poet laureate hosts weekly open-mic poetry nights on Zoom; the Priscilla Fowler Fine art gallery has a pop-up exhibit; and so on.)

NANCY GOOD, owner, Core Contemporary gallery: How do we engage in a way that lets people know that we're still living life, we're still finding value, and this too shall pass? ALISHA KERLIN, executive director, Barrick Museum: We were all sitting there in a G-chat, coming up ways to reach out to our community. (Their solution: daily art prompts on Instagram; they repost the results.) And it's really keeping us alive; the team is really invested in it. And the response is really beautiful. With almost 700 submissions and contributors from around the world, the drawing project has become a record of how



Hear More Listen to a discussion of COVID-19 and the arts on "KNPR's State of Nevada" at knpr.org; search "vibrant city"

some are feeling during this pandemic. So it's not about the museum being productive while we are closed. It's about the people and the stories and the art.

TROY HEARD: We did something live on Instagram — taking a character from *The* Garden Party (the show truncated by the shutdown), a reverend, and he did a Sunday dial-in sermon. To keep ourselves present. But it's not monetized.

SARA ORTIZ: We're trying to be very thoughtful and intentional about how we adapt. I'm hesitant to make any rushed decisions. We're thinking as a team about the how, but also about the why. ... If everyone's doing that, it can be like a menagerie of sounds coming at you. (BMI's eventual response included a weekly broadcast on Instagram featuring BMI Shearing Fellow Kristen Arnett, and a collective dance.) I'm also thinking about accessibility. Not everyone has access to the internet.

NANCY GOOD: I'm looking at all sorts of strategies I've intended to pursue, such as an online store for the gallery. And also set up some of our workshops on video. (As well as pop-up shows online.) We want to make sure we've got eyes on the artist and do justice for their work.

SARA ORTIZ: It's really challenging all of us to look at what we are doing - as individuals, as organizations, as artists, it's really challenging our self-worth in many ways. It might make some feel they must prove their value in these times.

THE CREATIVE CHALLENGE

(Arts supporters have long touted arts and literature as socially beneficial: They promote empathy, connection, perhaps even healing. Does this pandemic moment present a challenge to art and literature to deliver on those ideas?)

JOSHUA WOLF SHENK, executive director, Black Mountain Institute: Well, I think it underscores an ongoing challenge - but it also emphasizes the original need. Our actual survival now depends on our ability to relate to others, to understand and bring home a variety of new, and unruly, realities. For that task, writers and artists are essential. And - this is a sort of grim paradox that artists know well - along with

the urgency for what we do, the constraints on doing it will be heightened, too. So it's going to be a weird, fertile time. Artists are going to respond to the new constraints, which they always do, constraint being the starting point for any creative act. And audiences are going to find new ways to be co-creators, to connect with and support the work they care about.

ALISHA KERLIN: We know that experiencing art and making art brings us together and teaches us about ourselves and others. We know this from our daily operations at the museum. We believe everyone deserves access to the arts. That hasn't changed. And, we're not surprised to see it continuing during this time when we need art more than ever. The medium is just a little different.

DYLAN FISHER, UNLV MFA student and *novelist:* I don't personally feel a pressure to make art of the Moment. Even in the scariest and worst of times, I believe we need a space in which art exists for art's sake, nothing more, art that isn't in direct conversation with the Moment.

KRYSTAL RAMIREZ, artist: I still feel pressure to create artwork. To make sense of all this, to help others get through it. I haven't been working on anything, though. **DENISE DUARTE, artist:** My artwork is a result of significant research and thought into the concept prior to creation. ... I do not make quick one-offs in response to current events.

TROY HEARD: (Who has curated theater seasons in response to political events.) I don't think I'm going to craft an entire season around COVID-19.

HEATHER LANG-CASSERA, Clark County poet laureate: As a poet, yes, I feel immense pressure to make something lasting from this pandemic moment. (But it's not always easy.) I definitely find myself staring blankly at the wall or talking more earnestly than usual to my favorite houseplant, Silvia. ... It is harder to focus. The world is grieving.

IN THE LONG TERM

TROY HEARD: (On optimism vs. pessimism about the future) I'm at 50-50. We're gonna pull through this. But what does that mean on the other side? So, I'm cautiously optimistic.

(So is the Utah Shakespeare Festival, which announced that it plans to reopen July 9, with new hygienic measures in place. The Pirates of Penzance will not be denied.)

MYRON MARTIN, CEO, The Smith Center: (Speaking on KNPR's "State of Nevada") There's going to be a pent-up demand, and people wanting to get out of their living rooms. ... We know The Smith Center is going to open. ... I think there's going to be a big demand for what we do the very minute we're given the go-ahead.

TROY HEARD: I'm sure there are just as many people who are going to be terrified about going out, who've made the major life adjustment to stay in.

JOSHUA WOLF SHENK: I think the appetite for connection will swell in perfect proportion to the present hunger. But I don't think we're going to go back to the same old world. A lot of stuff will definitely go away. And we'll see a surge of new and beautiful things, some of it from familiar institutions, and some from deeply unexpected places. I want BMI to be a place of convergence for new stuff. We're making a pop-up venue people can light up in their homes, and we're making a new talk show live from The Lucy, and we're doing workshops in "Quaranzines." It's a time to take risks, and we're in the right city for it.

NANCY GOOD: (After the 2008 recession) it's taken a long time to build up where people are coming out and buying art again. People are fearful about what's happening to their money.

TROY HEARD: We're going to do some hardcore fundraising to get a bigger reserve in place. We need to do more long-term planning.

HEATHER LANG-CASSERA: I'd love for the Nevada Poets Online Open Mic to continue. Even beyond COVID-19, it is more accessible for some folks. It is also open to the entire Nevada community, not just Clark County, and ... bringing Nevadans together creates something very special.

SARA ORTIZ: What this has done for us as a team, it's kind of alerted us to the fact that many things can be on the table, but nothing is certain.

NANCY GOOD: Being willing to adapt — I think that's going to be our biggest skill set in these times.

DENISE DUARTE: I will be flexible, find a path, or create a detour.

Interviews have been edited for length and clarity.



STAYING POSITIVE

REBUILDING

After two debilitating bouts with cancer, entertainer Elly Brown is sharing a message of resilience

BY LAUREN HYDE

ancer is relentless. The disease is destructive when it strikes and absolutely devastating when it strikes again. Entertainer Elly Brown was diagnosed with oral and then breast cancer within a year's time. Her life completely changed, and her career as an on-camera host, actress, model, and singer was put on hold.

In May 2018 Brown had surgery to remove a tumor on her tongue. It required doctors to cut open the left side of her face, from ear to chin, in order to remove half of her tongue, a portion of her jaw, four of her teeth, and all of the lymph nodes on that side. They then rebuilt her jaw and tongue by taking bone, tissue, and skin from her leg. The procedure left scars on her neck, chin, stomach, and leg. She had to learn how to speak, eat, drink, and walk all over again. During her recovery she was unable to continue her passion for on-camera work, and her ability to sing was taken away. She lost her career. As she was adjusting to life with these new health and professional complications, she received news that she had breast cancer, and had to undergo treatment for that.

Luckily, she survived both battles. Her experiences led her to start a motivational speaking series, "Your Scars Are Your Superpower" (originally scheduled for May 24 at the Sahara West Library, now canceled). "I had built this brand and this image of being so capable and bubbly and ready to represent you," Brown says. "Every part of my toolbox was affected. I feel like so many people can relate to that." Her lecture — when she's able





to give it — is designed to help others turn their setbacks and fears into something positive. A useful message now.

She runs a YouTube channel where she regularly posts honest, motivational videos. Early last year she filmed herself singing to her dog. She didn't plan to post it. The thought of that level of vulnerability was nerve-racking. She posted it anyway. To her surprise, she received an enormous amount of support and praise. "So many things have happened in the last two years that have really rocked my world," Brown says, "and while all that was happening, a lot of people started reaching out who had their own encounters with cancer: scars, physical challenges, speech impediments."

Social media became her haven. Brown made and posted videos diligently. She shared stories about her journey with cancer, the recovery, and adjusting to a new way of life. The vulnerable content she created gave her a new purpose: to serve others. She talks to them about coping with loss, self-image issues, seeking treatment, surrounding themselves with a support system, and practicing peace and stillness. Her online community provides a special level of support because they understand each other. Her followers are her friends.

Of course, as an entertainer she still enjoys being in front of a live audience. Once the pandemic subsides, she intends to do just that.

"The most powerful way to continue delivering this message would be to go back to doing what I was doing before I got cancer. If I could go back to acting exactly the way I am without covering up any of what's happened to me or trying to practice away my speech impediment, what a great message that would be," Brown says. "That in itself would be very powerful and support everything I've been trying to tell people — that just the way you are is fine."

And what of the pandemic and the traumas it's inflicting? Same basic message: "Our job is to mine the gifts of every season of our lives," she says. "The challenging seasons are the ones with the most potential to serve our growth." Also, she says, maintain perspective. "A good thing to ask might be, 'Is this a temporary discomfort, or is this true suffering? Any permanently disabled person will tell you there's a very big difference." +

To find Elly Brown on Facebook, search "The Elly Brown Show"; on Instagram and YouTube, search "real Elly Brown."

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Editor's note: Once we're turned loose into a post-COVID-19 world, a solo road trip is the perfect way to maintain some social distancing while indulging the human impulse to travel.

Looking for the hopeful

truths that endure

on Route 66

BY KRIS SAKNUSSEMM

Let's call her Lavinia." That's what the woman said, referring to herself in the third person. Maybe 90, give or take a late night. Former cocktail waitress, doughnut maker, short-order cook, exotic dancer, chicken farmer, Avon Lady, and failed real-estate agent - a true Route 66 denizen, sharing a double-wide with more plastic plants than I've ever seen, right on the railroad line in Needles, California (which she calls "Needless").

I was fortunate enough to meet her because I'm a dog person and a former infielder. When Sammy, her Pekingese, broke free and dashed across the road, I made like a shortstop, which she appreciated enough to invite me in for pink lemonade. (This was a few months before the coronavirus reached America.) According to our mutual count, 238 train cars pulled by a BSNF diesel electric locomotive passed us by. Rather pleasant to count rail cars with a friendly stranger. (Only later did it occur to me that the road was rather quiet and maybe the dog hadn't been in much real danger.)

I was on a recent soul safari and photo pilgrimage to Flagstaff and back to Vegas. I'm not sure I buy Sinatra driving out from Palm Desert in a white Cadillac to see her every weekend, but there was a man in a crinkled photo stuck to the fridge, who did look a lot like James Garner circa The Rockford Files. If ever stories mattered more than the truth, it's on Route 66.

My love affair with the Mother Road began at 19 when I hitchhiked from Barstow to Hydro, Oklahoma, where I was rewarded with a tornado that whisked a giant plaster ice-cream cone over the rainbow. I've haunted this highway ever since, because it's an essential avenue of American mythos. The Okies fled the Depression dust bowl along this ribbon, making repairs to their claptrap jalopies with shreds of stockings and bits of bacon rind. Neal Cassady and Jack Kerouac are still out here somewhere - as is a certain convertible Corvette Stingray. This is one of two main Greyhound routes. Get your kicks. There might be a girl in a flatbed Ford slowing down in Winslow, Arizona. Latino farmworkers, secret project scientists, escaped convicts, Hollywood stars escaping paparazzi cameras ... vou never know who'll be out there. Or was that yesterday? Time bends here.

You can still hear someone order mocha java in Ash Fork. In Seligman, Arizona, I stopped at a bar to catch some musicians who bill themselves as a "Mexicano motorcycle mariachi metal country blues band," with song lyrics in English such as, "My wife's too fat, my Chevy's too old, and I got too many kids still living at home." (Post-pandemic travel note: Seligman is a wonderful, brash, innocent, colorful tourist landmark that is hugely popular with bikers and vintage car folks.)

I take a special interest in documenting the dying Atomic/Googie style of architecture and graphic design before it's gone. This legendary road has become a true blue highway now — when it's not Interstate 40. Many of the once-charming (and sleazy) motels are boarded up, waiting for bulldozers. The pools are empty. After a freight train, you can hear skinny dogs barking.

Some of the fun has been dampened in recent times by environmental concerns about car travel, and now we have COVID-19 and even more uncertain times ahead. Still, nothing can change the rough beauty of the landscape ... or the still-palpable sense of history.

The route was once as vital to Southern black people as the way north from the Delta to the factories of Chicago and Detroit. Thousands came west to find work in the shipping yards of the Bay Area and the L.A. manufacturing plants and aerospace industries that boomed around WWII. Route 66 looms large in Latino cultural memory, and in every town, the presence of Chinese restaurants with names like The Panda Garden testifies to an entrepreneurial spirit of the past. Opportunity. Of course, this road traverses some of our most important Native American culture.

Then there is the undeniable inspiration

of the scenery. I love how the shadow-andlight play of the Mojave seems to actually hum — strange rock formations changing color as you watch ... and then yucca desert subtly gives way to an emergent green as you near the higher, cooler pines of Flagstaff. I like to imagine myself in a movie based on a Tom Waits or Johnny Cash or Merle Haggard song. Or maybe I just like looking at the Navajo patterns of the clouds.

There's a tremendous amount of vivid photography that captures both the romance and the rugged truths of Route 66. The "keepers of the flame" are dedicated amateur historians, who are tightly networked from California to Oklahoma. Their numbers are dwindling, which is a great loss to the understanding of American cultural evolution. But a couple of insights became very clear this trip. The decade between 1975-85 saw the most profound, irrevocable changes. That was when the chains and franchises appeared in earnest. Sifting through old photos, you can literally watch the changes, like a slow-motion movie. In Bullhead City, I came upon the largest Walmart I've ever seen.

Thirty miles east the next day, I drove past a cinderblock Fraternal Order of Eagles outpost in the rain, a couple of rusted trucks parked outside. Will there be Eagles and Elks Lodges in the future? Will we still see emblems for Kiwanis, Lions, and Rotary? These kinds of organizations have been an important part of communities for a long time. Is their time over, perhaps accelerated by this virus?

There are a lot of self-storage facilities along the road. (That's one of those phrases you don't want to think too much about.) Gutted car washes, closed-down dry cleaner, a phantom garage ... but a tattoo parlor and a Mexican barbershop with a bright paper rooster in the window endure. As I'm crossing the Colorado River, listening to a radio evangelist elucidate the prophecies of 1,260 days in Daniel and Revelations, he mentions the Beast right on cue - the first beast that comes out of the sea and is given authority by the Dragon of Satan. I think of the Number of the Beast ... and realize I'm wearing a Route 66 T-shirt!

HAWAIIAN SHAVE ICE. Pulled Pork. Lemon Meringue Pie.

I feel as American as a U-Haul, thinking back to an early morning in Kingman, a row of ragged kings of the road, already drinking Ripple and Thunderbird wine, their St. Vincent de Paul coats pulled up against the wind coming down Slaughterhouse Canyon Wash from the Hualapai Mountains. I overheard one of their damaged voices say, "Pues no hizo nada ... El dinero habla siempre." I hear him still.

Ghost signs, played-out mines, missing persons, trailer parks, and a special brand of painted-desert Naugahyde diner/Magic Fingers motel loneliness. Yet, after the rain ... if you jut your left arm out the window and turn up the pirate radio station in your mind ... some of the old American optimism, possibility, perhaps even freedom may find you. Now, more than ever, we need

the history, the mythology, the wisdom of Route 66 country. Pack some food in an ice chest and get away from the worries. Hope is still on the map, and everywhere you look is rich with stories. +

Kris Saknussemm is the author of the novels Zanesville and Private Midnight, the memoir Sea Monkeys, and other books.

On Your Face

For many kids, face masks aren't about health, they're about cool

BY Soni Brown

ow everyone's talking about face masks: Should you wear one? Where can you get them? Before the pandemic, if you saw medical-style masks, they were usually being worn by hypochondriacs, residents of cities with bad air pollution, activists hiding their features from facial-recognition monitors, or travelers in crowded cities overseas.

It turns out that preteens in the valley and elsewhere have been donning face masks, too - not for protection against viruses, but for aesthetic value and social clout. A Bape brand face mask was my son's birthday and Christmas request. "I wanted one because it was cool," he says. Although his elementary school is relatively diverse, only the black and white kids wear masks, he tells me. "I would say about 30 percent wear them," he adds. "And no girls." While I cannot verify his numbers, I have seen many kids wearing masks at the school bus stops in our neighborhood.

The masks most preteens wear are not to be confused with the surgical type used by doctors. They're more akin to what bikers wear under their helmets



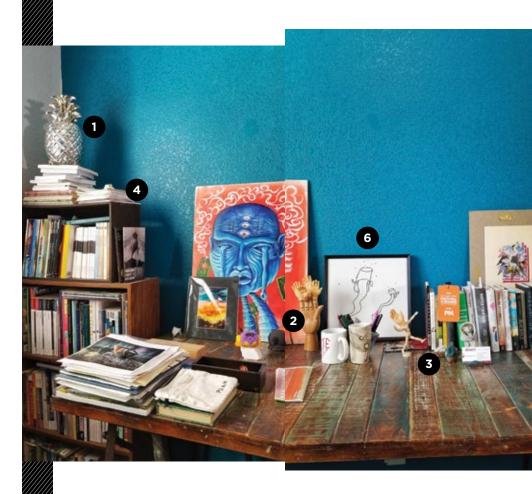
to protect their noses and mouths. Costlier designs appear much like a balaclava cut in half, but my son and his friends prefer the rectangles with a quilted microfiber interior and elastic ear handles. As for their designs, according to my son and his friends, they prefer the Japanese streetwear stalwart Bathing Ape or the Bape design of a shark face with open, glaring teeth against a camouflage backdrop. (If Bape sounds familiar, it might be because hiphop producer and singer Pharell Williams wore their pastel hoodies and shoes in the early aughts.) Graphic designs of powerful natural predators like tigers and sharks are a big hit among my son's friends — boys awkwardly trying to find their place in fifth grade.

For my son and his friends, wearing a mask by Bape or Supreme (another brand) confers rebel status. Before Supreme became a global entity, you could only obtain new items by waiting outside its brick-andmortar stores. The brands are notorious for their scarcity and hype. Which makes the masks that much more special in Las Vegas, where serious strategy is required to obtain one. Counterfeits proliferate online. Kids often pretend to have the real thing - which is unlikely - and it is considered uncool to vigorously inspect someone's mask for authenticity. That it's a fake doesn't deter the boys from wearing it. And, it seems, not a moment too soon.

It's a new brand of cool, but with practical applications. Face masks can help curtail some inhalation of airborne pathogens and dust. This is an especially useful aspect of the trend in Las Vegas, one of the fastest-warming places on the planet, which means more dust as the sun parches the desert. The Bape mask my son desperately wanted was released during the 2016 winter collection to coincide with the flu season. Now, I borrow it to pick up groceries at Smith's.

It's not just kids. At Paris Fashion Week in February, designer Marine Serre had models don masks for the runway. At this year's Grammy awards, singer Billie Eilish completed a head-to-toe Gucci look with a logo-covered mesh face mask. A photo of Slovakian president Zuzana Čaputová went viral under the hashtag #CoronaDrip as she swore in her new government wearing a crimson boatneck dress with matching shoes and a color-coordinated mask.

Not long ago, when no one could imagine a national shutdown, you could see these masks as just another fad that would fall by the wayside soon enough. But now they are likely to be with us for a long time. +



MY SPACE, WORK-FROM-HOME EDITION

Scott Dickensheets

Deputy editor, Desert Companion

When are you going to finish the ones you've already bought?" my wife often asks when I come home with one of the Writer's Block's distinctive red paper bags. Silly question. I mean, has she met me? Books all over the place (including, for one memorable stretch, half-filling a bathtub) has been a defining feature of our domestic life for 35 years. What you see here is a small slice. So, short answer to her question: maybe never! I've always been a rapid buyer of books, but a sloooow reader of them.

You'd think all this COVID-enforced downtime would fully activate a guy like me. READ LIKE THE WIND! But I gotta confess: The swarming anxieties of this thing - medical, fiscal, social, toilet-paperal - just wrecked my focus in weeks one and two. I'd look at this batch of pulped wood in my hand and wonder, what am I doing? So much is falling apart for so many.

I adjusted eventually, of course. But even before that, I found a stabilizing comfort in my home office, this tiny blue ecosystem of books, art, talismans, and, yes, even tchotchkes. Think of it as a diorama of what's left of my mind: cluttered with trivial cuteness, like (1) the chrome pineapple I finally won in a hand-to-hand white-elephant gift sesh two Christmases ago, or (2) the plethora of hands that achieve just the right balance of adorability and weirdness; as well as personal connections, like (3) small ceramic sculptural pieces from a potter I



know in Colorado, and (4) the stack of poetry chapbooks by onetime Las Vegas playwright Red Shuttleworth. I profiled him decades ago, and I sometimes consult his poetry — hard-edged demystifications of the West — when my own typing gets too precious. (I know, I know: Consult him now!) Also, owls (5) — if they don't symbolize good luck, keep it to yourself. There's artwork (6) by Brent Holmes (the orange one, exiled here because it's just too bold and beautiful for rooms where the normal people live), Jorge Catoni, and Jose Bellver.

But mostly it's about the books. (If you look closely, you can see I assembled some of the shelves (7) at cockeyed angles to give the room some *zippity zow*.) The longer, truer answer to my wife's question lies in the levitating gestalt here, in which every book, read or not, is a wormhole of possibilities, ideas, moments of beauty, the workings of other minds. I can only speak for myself: The bookish, joyously unkempt mojo of my office has helped me nurture my (metaphorically!) feverish brain through the newly scrambled requirements of this job—and the existential demands of this moment. •



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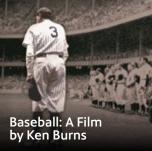
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ime alone — to catch up on projects, discover new hobbies, or just lie in the grass contemplating one's place in the world - is one of COVID-19's few gifts to the masses. Even those who had small business loan requests, unemployment claims, or food assistance applications to fill out eventually found themselves with empty hours on their hands. For many, that meant a reconnection to the benefits of solitude.

As governors lift lockdowns and people venture back into the world, they can take that gift with them to places where social distance was always part of the experience. And now, they will go there with a renewed appreciation for the space to be alone, in the world. Here are a few ideas to start with.

TAKE IN NATURE AT A DISTANCE

Desert Pass Campground, Desert National Wildlife Refuge: You're hardpressed these days to find a campground that isn't overrun with #vanlife influencers. Hopefully, Desert Pass has escaped that fate, because it's one of Southern Nevada's sweetest spots to hide out. Although there are six campsites, they're well-spaced and surrounded by trees, so you don't feel like you're in a campground. You can commune with the neighbors if you want ... or not. And it's got enough amenities (picnic tables, fire rings) to make for a comfortable multiday outing, yet it's far (26 miles from the refuge's visitors center) and primitive (no hookups or running water) enough to keep RVs away. 16001 Corn Creek Road, Las Vegas, 1-702-879-6110 (the 1 is required), fws.gov/ refuge/desert

PARK YOUR PERSONAL THEATER OUTSIDE

West Wind Drive In: You'd forgotten about drive-in movies, hadn't you? Then, after self-isolation began - but before the nonessential business shutdown took effect - someone posted something on your social media feed and you were like, "Oh yeah, I remember watching Star Wars at a drive-in with my siblings, looking out the back of my parents' Oldsmobile station wagon while they had grown-up time in the front seat." Well, West Wind, a family-owned chain of drive-ins based in San Rafael, California, promises all the heart-tickling nostalgia of decades past with the technology of today (digital projectors, audio transmitted to your car stereo). Though this might be more fun with a date than alone, it's a way to get out and catch a movie, while staying in your REEMERGING

Time Out

Venture back into the world - without losing the rewards of solitude

BY Heidi Kyser

own space. 4150 W. Carey Ave., North Las Vegas, 702-646-3565, westwinddi.com/ locations/las-vegas

BAT AWAY YOUR CARES

Big League Dreams batting cages: I might never have gone to a batting cage if I hadn't stupidly volunteered for Vegas Seven's team in the news media softball league and realized what a terrible, terrible batter I am. A friend who's been playing for years took me to a batting cage and spent an afternoon patiently repeating, "Keep your eye on the ball" as I stubbornly kept my eye on the far wall, the clouds in the distance, a bird flying overhead... Afterward, I still sucked at softball, However, I'd been introduced to an activity so repetitively soothing, so delightfully exhausting, I didn't care. Big League Dreams Sports Park offers a similar setup: eight outdoor batting cages - four slow-pitch, four baseball - that you can rent for up to an hour. They come with free bats and helmets (supply your own

Clorox wipes) so all you have to do is show up. And keep your eye on the ball. 3151 E. Washington Ave., Las Vegas, 702-642-4448, lasvegas.bigleaguedreams.com

GO OUT TO TURN IN ... DEEP WITHIN

True Rest Float Spa: Float tanks aren't for everyone. Someone close to me said she had to push the panic button to be let out of the sealed pod after 10 minutes - not because of the sensory-deprived isolation, but because of the saltwater finding its way into some orifices that she'd rather it hadn't. On the other hand, those who are into floating profess to experience near-spiritual levels of relaxing introspection. And in a world so completely saturated with stimuli, there is something enticing about having it all turned off for a time. True Rest fans give it particularly high ratings for its sparkling clean facility and spa-like atmosphere. 5875 S. Rainbow Blvd., Las Vegas, 702-202-0181, truerest.com

REMEMBER WHERE YOU CAME FROM

Your neighborhood: If, during the pandemic-induced isolation period, you didn't indulge in the pleasure of walking around your own block and having everyone you see smile or wave, pausing for a sidewalk-tofront porch chat with a neighbor you'd seen but never gotten to know, and stopping to smell the fragrant flowers of a Cassia bush or honeysuckle hedge, don't worry. This attraction is free and, daylight and weather permitting, always open. Of all the possible ways to situate yourself in this life and world and moment, this is the one I most highly recommend. Don't wait for the next disaster to jump on a hashtag community bandwagon. Get out there and do it now. +





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Michael Doherty in Every Brilliant Thing, 2019





A MEDLEY OF **PODCASTS**

GASTROPOD: Each episode of Gastropod takes listeners on a deep dive into the science and history of food. Hosts Nicola Twilley and Cynthia Graber travel the world to bring you surprising sounds and interviews with cooks, scientists, and farmers.

HELLO FROM THE MAGIC TAV-

ERN: The premise is delightfully absurd: Fictional host Arnie Niekamp starts each episode by explaining that he has fallen through a dimensional portal behind a Burger King, landing in the kingdom of Foon. The show manages to parody both fantasygenre tropes and the most pedantic of podcast talk shows.

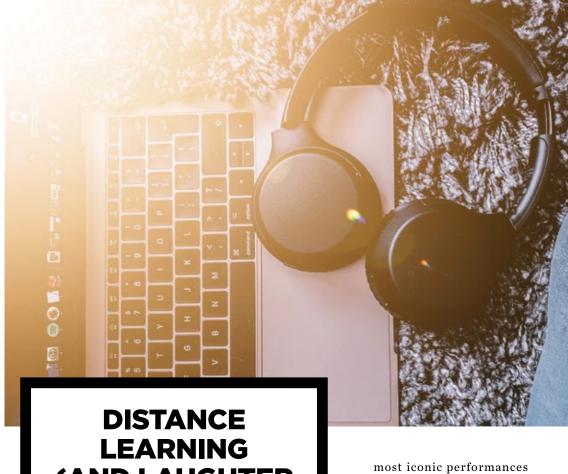
THE SLOWDOWN: Poet Laureate Tracy K. Smith hosts this podcast, reading a single poem on each five-minute episode. It begins with a short reflection - in a recent introduction to Cathy Song's poem "Ikebana," Smith asks, "Is beauty more important to us only after we've grasped the reality of mortality?"

FLASH FORWARD: Ever wondered what life might be like if we could live underwater? Or what would happen if the internet suddenly broke one day? What if we lived in a future where we could swap bodies? Flash Forward tackles questions like these and explores the issues at stake. Sonja Swanson, food writer, co-host of the Spicy Eyes food podcast

SING ALONG, LEARN ALONG

LIVE CONCERT LIVESTREAMS:

Jack White's Third Man Public Access show offers fans daily livestreams from the Blue Room at Third Man Records HQ, featuring TMR acts and friends free on their YouTube



(AND LAUGHTER **AND MUSIC)**

Culture and entertainment aren't dead they're just in your browser window. Here's a stay-home list from our experts!

channel daily at 10a. And New York-based event company Nowadays has launched Virtually Nowadays, streaming DJ sets daily from 8p to midnight. (nowadays.nyc)

MASTER CLASSES: Many artists have taken to digital outlets to inspire and teach fans their tricks of the trade, and sometimes offer insight on their other passions, like cooking, painting, and more. Google these names for all that and more: TAUK Tuesdays, Mike Messer, Arkells, and Live Lesson Masters.

IN HOME SESSIONS: Ever wish vou could sit around the fire with Neil Young and his pups as he strummed through *Harvest*?

Or maybe request a favorite tune from Death Cab for Cutie with a bonus backstory? Search these artists offering special online performances: Questlove/The Roots, Ben Gibbard (Death Cab for Cutie), Neil Young, Diplo, Katherine & David Foster.

CLASSIC CONCERTS: So many to choose from. Try Bruce Springsteen's 2009 London Calling: Live at Hyde Park, one of the last official recordings to feature the big man Clarence Clemons on sax; Relix Live, in which the unofficial home of the jam community features daily past concert streams; and Insomniac Rewind's Electric Daisy Carnival Las Vegas, letting you relive the festival's

under the electric sky. Chris Bitonti, director of marketing, Brooklyn Bowl Las Vegas

THE SHOWS MUST GO ON(LINE)

STATION CASINOS AT HOME **SESSIONS:** Station Casinos jumped into the "living room concert" trend by inviting its casino lounge performers to rock the company's Facebook page. Good things came of it, such as Ray Allaire of Phoenix and the Windjammers using his "unexpected free time" to write a charming song called "No Circus Left in Town."

QUARANTINE CABARET: Burlesque performers got their ostrich feathers clipped, too. With her bookings canceled, L.A.-based burlesque performer Michelle L'amour turned living-room burlesque into an online variety show, featuring separately filmed contributions from the likes of Las Vegas magician Murray SawChuck and physical comedian Jimmy Slonina. (michellelamour.com)

CIRQUECONNECT: Cirque du Soleil consolidated some of its previous ventures into film, television, and making-of documentaries at this new digital hub. CirqueConnect proved the strength of Cirque's fan base when 500,000 fans logged in for the March 26 launch of an hourlong special that included sequences from O. (cirquedusoleil.com) Mike Weatherford, veteran entertainment journalist

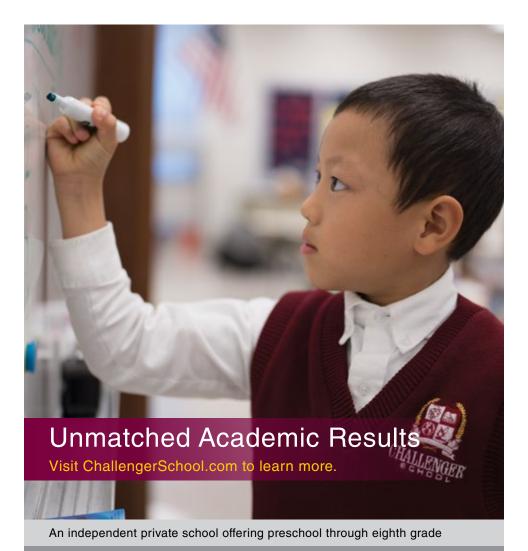
MAJESTIC REPERTORY THEATRE:

When the shutdown suspended the live production The Garden Party, one character from the '60s spoof, the Rev. Eugene Dolor (Mike Vargovich), made the jump to Instagram with an online show Dial S for Salvation. Majestic artistic director Troy Heard says the first installment drew 200 individual views, as far away as Atlanta and Chicago. (ma*jesticrepertory.com)*

TURN A NEW PAGE

THE PANDEMIC: If you want to begin to understand why our country is failing to contend with the pandemic, both morally and materially, you might start with Robert B. Reich's The System: Who Rigged It, How We Fix It. It's short, direct, accessible - and just might light a fire in your mind.





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DYSTOPIAN LIT: There's a never-ending catalog of postapocalyptic and dystopian fiction. If you're looking for an allegorized spin on present-day disasters, why not read the best? Octavia E. Butler's Parable of the Sower has proven shockingly prescient, and feels like escapism with a purpose.

HORROR: I find the horror genre to be a strange comfort food in our strange times - perhaps it's a relief to be afraid of something that isn't real? To that end, I'd recommend Shirley Jackson, who's been enjoying an ongoing renaissance. We Have Always Lived in the Castle is a very on-the-nose novel of domestic imprisonment, and a fitting read for life under quarantine.

BIG FICTION: I never decline an opportunity to recommend C.E. Morgan's 2016 novel, The Sport of Kings. If you're looking for an epic, big-picture, spiritually capacious novel while you're trapped at home — this is it. She's our modern Tolstoy, and if you have a bucket reading list this needs to be on it.

SERIOUS FUN: Samantha Irby is a laugh-out-loud personal essayist in the vein of David Sedaris, and her latest collection, Wow, No Thank You, is coming out right in the midst of our collective crisis. But her earlier collections are just as good, and are worth reading in order. Drew Cohen, The Writer's Block bookstore (Note: The Writer's Block is closed for in-person browsing, but is still fulfilling orders from its online store, and offering shipping specials and curbside pickup.)



OUT-THERE ART

SEVEN MAGIC MOUNTAINS: Part mood-booster, part mind-boggler, Ugo Rondinone's Seven Magic Mountains (2016) deserves more than a glimpse from Interstate 15. The candy-colored mega-cairns - built from 33 boulders weighing up to 25 tons - are an engineering marvel and playful artistic achievement. Can you spot the pattern in the palette? (seven*magicmountains.com*)

DOUBLE NEGATIVE: Among land art's holiest shrines, Michael Heizer's Double Negative (1969) is worth the pilgrimage. Longer than the Empire State Building is tall, the work spans a canyon, rutting 1,500 feet of mesa and displacing 244,000 tons of rock. While the crisp cuts dulled over decades, the slotted Zen emptiness still mesmerizes. Note: You'll need a four-wheel-drive vehicle and GPS capabilities. (moca.org)

SLOAN CANYON: Sloan Canyon is the Eye Spy of rock art: How many of the 1,700 petroglyphs can you find? Some images are as recent as 1800 AD, others as ancient as 8000 BC. And don't forget the "petraforms" - centuries-old turtle sculptures gazing across the canyon at Red Rock's Turtlehead Peak. Note: The parking lot is closed, but street parking is available. Dawn-Michelle Baude, art critic

SCARY GOOD LOCAL FLICKS

ART OF THE DEAD: Brothers Michael and Sonny Mahal of B-movie production company Mahal Empire regularly bring C-list stars such as Tara Reid and Richard Grieco to Vegas for scrappy genre productions. The Mahals' latest, written and directed by Rolfe Kanefsky, features Reid and Grieco in the story of a collection of cursed paintings that turn a

wealthy family murderous. (Amazon Prime)

AN IRISH STORY: THIS IS MY HOME: Karl Nickoley's slick, fun documentary follows the grueling yet inspiring quest of Vegas-based Irish rockers the Black Donnellys (Dave Browne and Dave Rooney) to set a Guinness World Record for playing 60 gigs in 50 states in 40 days, while also meditating on the place of immigrants in America. (Digital rental and purchase on various services)

JEZEBEL: Writer, director and co-star Numa Perrier based this slice-of-life drama on her experiences working as a cam girl in Vegas in the '90s, and it has a refreshing authenticity about the seedy side of Vegas life. It's not judgmental or preachy, though, instead showing the title character (confidently played by Tiffany Tenille) embracing her sexuality as she starts to feel empowered in her new profession. (Netflix) Josh **Bell**, film critic

BOOK REVIEW

Boom Town

A novel based on the PEPCON explosion tells a story that could have happened anywhere

BY Chuck Twardy

uppose a series of explosions destroys a chemical plant in, say, Wichita. Fleeing in his truck before the final blast, a manager sees a man running after him, begging to be saved, but the manager speeds away. The dead man's best friend later learns that his wife had been having sex regularly with the unlucky pal. The wife, in turn, seeks solace in a conniving preacher, while her cuckolded, pothead hubby

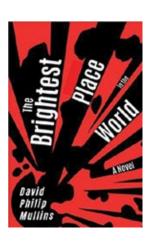
takes off on a ramble around rural Kansas with his late

friend's teenage daughter. The cheated wife, meanwhile, takes up with the man who didn't save her late husband.

Let's transpose the scene to Las Vegas, where David Philip Mullins sets The Brightest Place in the World. The title certainly suggests that the city matters, and many valley residents will remember the PEPCON disaster, which Mullins has moved from 1988 to 2012. At one point, he wonders of cheating wife Emma, who deals roulette: "What is she even doing in a city like Las Vegas? Why was she born and raised in this breeding ground for excess and iniquity?"

Brightest Place unfolds in a series of present-tense vignettes, each from a character's point of view, and Mullins leaves it to Michigan transplant Simon (the man in the truck) to counter this familiar Vegas trope. "Saying the Strip is Las Vegas is like saying Bourbon Street is New Orleans. Vegas is tract homes and strip malls, Taco Bells and Targets." But guilt-tormented Simon reminds himself of this after fending off a hooker while surreptitiously tailing the new widow, Juliet, who has repaired to Guardian Angel Cathedral for another sort of consolation.

All this might transpire in ... well, maybe New Orleans rather



than Wichita. The nexus of this swirl of deceit and self-absorption - oddly enough what tethers it to Nevada - is a book of poems by Sylvia Plath.

Emma's copy of Plath's collection Crossing the Water is a plot hinge, ultimately pitching Andrew's daughter, Maddie, and Russell, Emma's cheated husband, on a Silver State excursion, from the Mojave to the Great Basin and back again - almost. The poems "Leaving Early" and "Two Campers in Cloud Country" take cameo turns, and the

"unending miles" of Highway 50 that daunt Maddie recall the "mad, straight road" in "Sleep in the Mojave Desert." The dark hollow at the core of Plath's last poems, published a decade after her suicide, also centers Brightest Place.

In "I Am Vertical" Plath prefers horizontal:

Compared with me, a tree is immortal And a flower-head not tall, but more startling, And I want the one's longevity and the other's daring.

The novel's characters, except Maddie, suffer the same deficiency. Each has settled for something less than their possible selves, and for them, as with Plath, horizons both tempt and hem.

That story could be told anywhere, and this one, shaped by shabby infidelity, narrowly avoids soap-opera banality. Characters' crucial choices sometimes seem implausible, and the denouement comes across as forced. Mullins' tight craft throughout redeems these faults, as do the echoes of Plath. "Sun-dulled pavement tapers to the horizon like the nib of a fountain pen," Mullins writes, evoking Plath. And you know where to find a road like that.

The Brightest Place in the World by David Philip Mullins. 232 pages. University of Nevada Press. \$24.95

BEGIN WITH THE twisted trunk of a miniature pomegranate tree, with all of its elegant, ravishing curves. Pruning scissors in hand, you follow the trunk to the point where the branches begin to bristle. Then you snip away the ones that don't feel right. You shorten others. Feel is important, as is un-

TREE

The exacting care of small,

bendy trees — the art and

crăft of bonsai – can

lead you into 'the zone'

derstanding the tree in front of you. Because there is no immediate way to know if the cut you just made will ultimately yield beauty or ruin the plant's aesthetic.

This is bonsai, the art of shaping and cultivating miniature trees to mimic full-size trees, through creative pruning and wire guides. It originated thousands of years ago in China, as one branch of a craft devoted to miniaturizing nature. Eventually, it traveled to Japan, before going global.

Perhaps because it is both relaxing yet requires focused atten-

tion, each cut leads you toward a meditative state. "You go into a zone," says Ira Sisson, president of the Las Vegas Bonsai Society. "Like anything that you are passionate about, you could zone into what you are working on, and things just disappear around you." Although, of course, "some people just find joy in watching things grow."

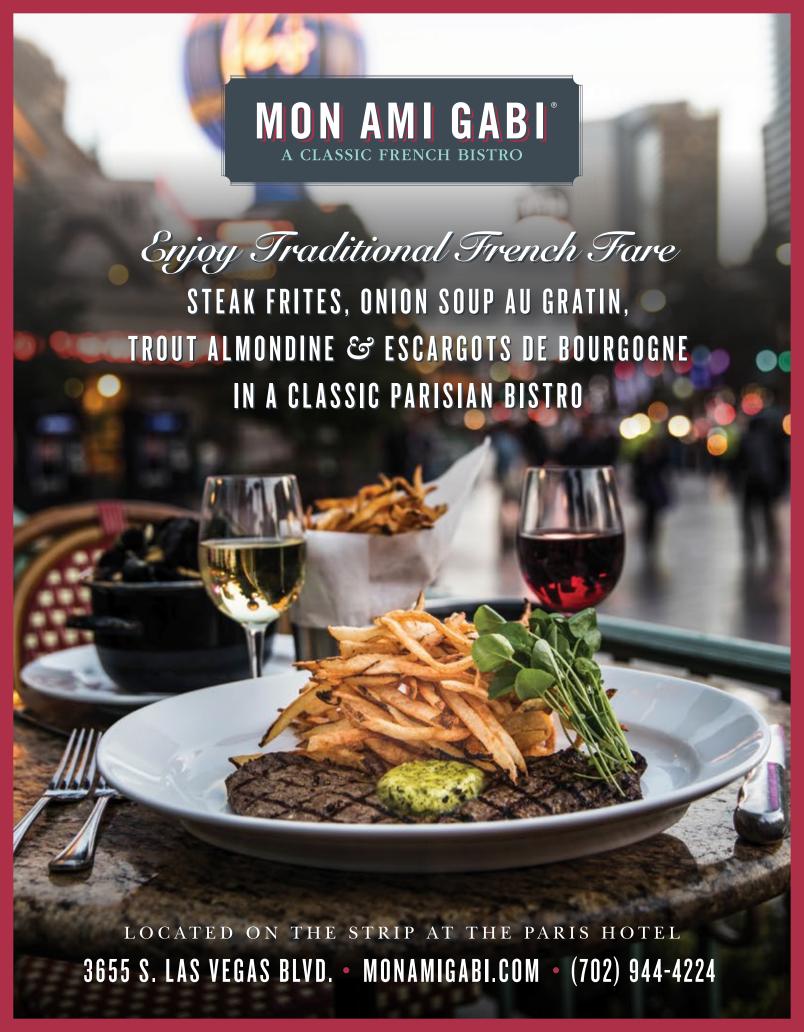
He mentions a member of the society, a retired 20-year corrections officer at New York City's notorious Rikers Island facility, veteran of more than one riot. "He has had a potentially stressful work life," Sisson says. "He got into bonsai, and he has found it incredibly meditative and peaceful. It's something that he has talked to me about more than one time."

The sense of focus extends to nearly every aspect of caring for a bonsai tree. Sisson says it took him more than four hours to transplant a central-California-grown trident maple to the lavish ceramic pot in which the tree will be displayed for years. One wrong move — trimming too much from the roots, even transplanting it at the wrong time of year - could have drastic consequences for the plant.

A good tree for beginners, he says, is the ficus. It's very forgiving in the hands of a greenhorn, and can survive in the valley's unrelenting heat.

Bonsai may seem like a daunting craft, but listening to Sisson enthuse about it, it's clear bonsai is really for anyone who wants to relax, find some meditative space, perhaps expand their artistic side - and nurture their sense of caring, particularly in troubling times. As he says, "If you can take care of another living thing, then you can't be a complete scam." Eduardo Rossal





$\overline{FOOD} + \overline{DRINK}$



EAT THIS NOW

PEACEFUL, **EASY EATING**

aybe it's just me, but sometimes in the midst of a pandemic that's terraforming The Way We Live in frightening, unpredictable ways, you need a few moments of double-secret quarantine — a bubble within the bubble. A quiet space away from the woodpecker tap of current events. Let's call it lunch. Needing just such a break the other day, I muted the implacable news feeds and curled up with some noise-canceling comfort food: a grilledcheese sandwich Postmated from the Truffles N Bacon Café. This turned out to be an inspired idea. The Heather's Choice sandwich (\$11.29) updates the childhood classic with a bit of kick Mom never dared: chipotle ranch, pepperjack, pickled onions, pepperoncinis, and bacon jam (the Not Yo Mama's Grilled Cheese ups the meat ante with brisket, plus sautéed kale). With its rich mouthfeel and nostalgic mindfeel, Heather's Choice sequesters you in a safe place between the contentments of a childhood before hand-sanitizer protocols and the more knowing, sophisticated palate of adulthood. So, for the duration of 13 wonderful bites, I didn't think about our microbial chaos, social distancing, a shipwrecked economy, the organ failures of federal leadership, or the long, hard road ahead ... though, as you see, a sandwich can only ward it off for so long. Scott Dickensheets

Truffles N Bacon, 872 S. Eastern Ave. #100, trufflesnbacon.com



ASKED AND ANSWERED

'Every Day It's, Do We Order Food?'

Talking with the Pasta Shop's Ann Alenik about operating in a shutdown

BY Heidi Kyser

avid and Ann Alenik opened the Pasta Shop Ristorante & Art Gallery in Henderson 31 years ago. David didn't live to see the COVID-19 pandemic, but Ann is still operating the casual-dining restaurant with him as, she says, her "guardian angel." It's taken more than a benevolent spirit to get restaurateurs through this trying time; food service had to make a major pivot to keep serving customers in the new reality of dining room closures and social distancing. Ann Alenik talks about how she and her staff - including her and David's three kids — altered operations to survive, and keep feeding a hungry, nervous public.

When did you start to think things were going to have to change?

Sunday and Monday before last (March 15-16). We said, People are panicking, the grocery stores are out of pasta, and we make it daily, so we can make fresh pasta for them. Our suppliers make an abundance; it's not limited like a grocery store. So, we don't have the shortage issues that others are having.

How did you figure out what you were going to do?

We had several conversations among ourselves, and we knew we could produce anything we wanted to. We have the equipment and the ingredients coming in, and I knew a lot of my customers don't like to cook - they're busy, and it's an inconvenience. So, we decided to keep going.

Who in the family is involved?

I have three kids (ages 22 to 30), and they all help me out. They're Bianca, Trenton, and Clayton, and they've all grown up in the restaurant.

What did you start doing differently?

We didn't do anything differently online; we're still using Postmates and Uber Eats, but we're promoting people picking up their own food. And we're doing what we're calling a quarantine kit, which includes pasta; fresh sauce with meatballs, sausage, or vegan meatballs; Caesar or balsamic vinaigrette salad; and ciabatta garlic bread. You just have to boil the water to cook the pasta and put the bread in the oven. (It

costs \$24.95, and serves two.)

Did you have to institute new sanitary measures?

Yeah, everything is ubered-up on all that. Restaurants are pretty sanitary to begin with, much more so than grocery stores, where so many people are touching the food before it gets to the customer. Our food health and safety rules were already strict. In a restaurant, there's one person touching your food — who now has gloves on - and it's cooked, heated, and then wrapped. There's no contact with outsiders. In the kitchen they wear masks, and out front, it's just me and my family, and we're all quarantined together.

Did you start Clorox-wiping everything that comes in the door?

Yeah, it all (food containers) gets totally sanitized when it comes in. All the surfaces and equipment are sanitized multiple times daily. When someone signs with a pen, we sanitize the pen when we're done - just every precaution we can take.

Anything else you had to change?

Just getting everything done super-fast. Normally, when the dining room is open, orders are lining up while people are enjoying their food, but now, the phones are ringing constantly, and orders are coming in online, and ... we're just turning things around as quickly as we can. There's no leisurely wait. We want the food to get to people when it's fresh and hot.

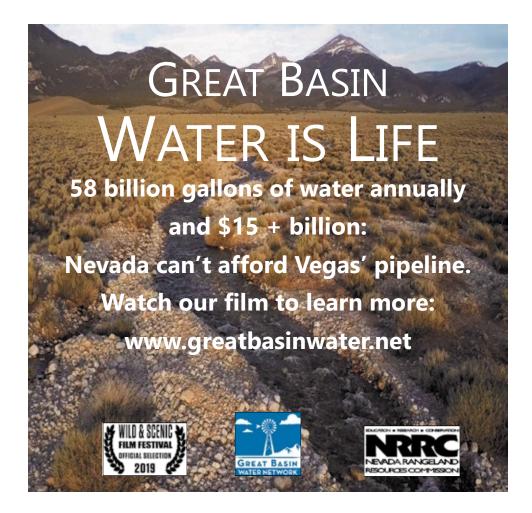
Also, we used to mainly sell our pasta wholesale, but now we're turning to retail.

What are you hearing from your fellow restaurateurs about how they're faring?

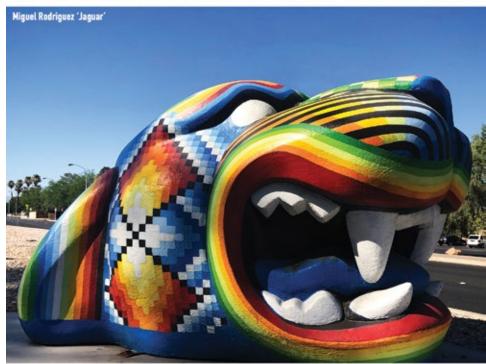
Honestly, a lot of my friends with restaurants have just closed down. But being a family business makes it easier for me to stay open, which also means I can keep some of my staff working. I have three cooks working, and normally six waiters, but only a few of them now, and the bad thing is, there's not enough hours and normally they're making a lot in tips. So, that's been a struggle for them.

How are you holding up, emotionally, physically?

It's definitely trying! Every day: "Do we order food? Will we be shut down?" So many rumors! Tonight was busy, so who knows? But I have a guardian angel that looks after me. +



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ESSAY

GET A GRIP

After I lost the use of my fingers, my rock-climbing career seemed over. But not the adventure. I had to get back in touch with a new sense of self, and a new sense of purpose

BY Stephanie Forté

......

was 60 feet off the deck on the side of a limestone cliff when I heard Jorge's voice.

"What the hell is going on up there?" I hadn't moved in a while. Below, craning their necks, a small group of climbers considered possible outcomes. "Oh God, she can't fall there," a guy from Utah said. "That would totally suck," his partner added. They were right: I had already done the hardest climbing on the route. Battling winter weather and shredded skin, I was as close as I'd ever come to climbing the route clean, without falls or resting on the rope. But climbers know outcomes are uncertain until they are not.

It was a cold winter day in the Virgin River Gorge, aka the VRG, an area with tough climbing on stellar rock, and long routes with well-spaced bolts, which means taking big falls when sorting out moves. Even with the crag's lousy location on the side of I-15 between Mesquite and St. George, VRG regulars know how to focus.

I let Jorge's words and the hum of highway traffic drift by.

The truth is, panic was setting in, because a dime-size foothold — the gateway to the route's easier terrain - was suddenly too far



away. The last of the day's sunlight glimmered off the route's fixed anchors, empty, taunting me. I shifted my focus back to the rock; I didn't want to get too far ahead of myself. Even a momentary lapse in concentration meant space for failure to creep in, upping the chance I'd end up airborne.

If I didn't blow it and fall, the route, Don't Call Me Coach, would become one of the harder ascents of my career. It was 2011, and at 43 years old, I would be the first woman to redpoint the route. (Redpoint means to climb successfully from the bottom to the top of a route without pulling or resting on gear, after the first attempt.) But far more important, how I handled myself would reveal what kind of climber I was, even more so than when I had climbed through the route's crux, the most challenging section, with confident precision, hitting each tiny, razor-sharp hold perfectly.

Problem-solving under stress is paramount in climbing. Assessing the situation, I shook my right arm, first above my head and then alongside my body, resting and hoping to decrease the lactic acid in my forearms. Dipping my hand into my chalk bag, squeezing the hand warmer inside, I placed my fingers on the rock, changed hands, and repeated the process on the left side. All the while, I was taking long, calming breaths, and devising a new plan. I'd come too far to just give up. As in yoga, in rock-climbing you must find comfort in

discomfort. More so than finger strength, grit is often the dividing line between success and failure.

But my fingers had always been my superpower. Knowing I could hang onto almost nothing fostered confidence.

* * * * *

"WHAT ARE YOU even using?" my boyfriend yelled, amazed, from the ground as I pieced together the crux moves on Ghetto Boyz at Mount Charleston. It was 1999, and the route had not yet been climbed by a woman. Earlier, as he loaded the rope in the belay device, he'd been skeptical. He had said, "Look, you're just too short to reach between the handholds." I'm a hair over 5 feet tall, so it wasn't the first time I was told by a taller person (usually male) that a route was unclimbable. "Trust me, it's going to be impossible," he said as I started climbing.

But I had a secret weapon. The first time I pulled onto the rock in 1991, it was clear my small fingers were unusually strong. That was the year I moved to Aspen, Colorado, from New Jersey, an odd choice considering the outdoors had always meant the space between my car and the Paramus Park mall. But I quickly fell in love with the dramatic mountain landscapes and colorful local characters. And of all those characters, the climbers were the most captivating.

Back then, climbers were a small lot. a curious breed of prudent, cool-headed adventurers who were as humble as they were bold. Harrowing tales of near-brushes with death in far-off mountain ranges or dicey moments climbing on desert towers were recounted matter-of-factly, like talking about having to shovel snow. Like, Oh yeah, so that happened.

Since I'd never done anything athletic growing up, discovering the power of my fingers felt like a miracle. Imagine if you started singing a tune one day, and you discovered you had the vocal range of Mariah Carey. That's what it felt like. It was a game-changer. Still, at first, I showed up at the cliff wearing giant silver hoop earrings, scared of heights, and unsure of how to even do outdoorsy-person stuff like pee outside, so I didn't always feel like I fit in. But there was no doubt that climbing was where I belonged.

Exposing hidden strengths and hardto-swallow weaknesses, climbing is where I first discovered how subtle shifts in both body and mindset can dramatically change a result. Climbing is also where I went to process the trauma and grief that had punctuated my early life. In time, it's where

Here for You.

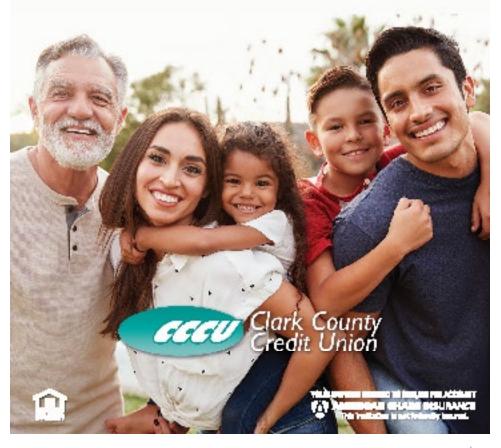
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I turned to trudge through life's muck — a lost pregnancy, failed relationships, and suicides of friends. Climbing was my north node; a climber is what I was meant to become in this life. So, choices, like living in my pickup truck and moving to Las Vegas to climb, were simple.

About six weeks after my impatient boyfriend scoffed at my attempt to ascend at Mount Charleston, I did it. Using tiny bits of rock texture that other, usually larger climbers either didn't have at their disposal or the need to even consider, I became the first woman to complete Ghetto Boyz. He became my ex-boyfriend.

Climbers read rock like braille; holds outside our line of vision can still be within reach. An incredible level of detail is imprinted on a climber's memory through touch. A spot that's just enough for half a pad of an index finger. A sharp, crystal-like feature where the middle finger is placed, and a small depression on the left side of the hold for the right thumb. The sensation of finding a hold where the rock appeared to be blank was like a door opening on a world of possibilities. It was hope.

* * * * *

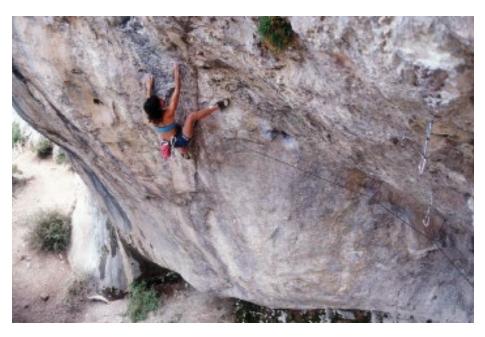
UNTIL THE DAY I woke up, and it was gone.

"I think I have a rope burn under my arm," I said, shortly after opening my eyes. The burning sensation under my right arm was alarming, hot, and raw. It was familiar yet totally misplaced. I know what a rope burn feels like, but I was in a recovery room of a surgical center in Las Vegas after having had rotator cuff surgery.

"Oh, that," my surgeon said. "I tried something new." But something new was not a part of our plan. Something new had never been discussed.

Before I'd gone under for the procedure in September 2015, my surgeon said, "I'm going to fix your right shoulder just like the left. If your bicep is torn, I'm going to fix it like last time." I laughed and said, "Sure, give me another bicep lift." In 2014, he had repaired my left rotator cuff, also fixing a torn bicep tendon, leaving behind a small scar, and a perky bicep, which always looks like I've just finished a few sets of 50-pound curls.

Shoulder surgery is not uncommon for climbers. When I injured my left shoulder in 2012 while climbing in Red Rock, it wasn't a surprise. I had favored it since 2003 when I had torn my right shoulder in a bouldering competition. Terrified of a bad outcome, I did anything to avoid surgery - long stints of physical therapy, prehab exercise routines, platelet-rich plasma shots, acupuncture,



ROCKING OUT Stephanie Forté climbing Ghetto Boyz at Mount Charleston

and many months sidelined from climbing. Finally, in 2014, my physical therapist pulled the plug. "I am happy to keep taking your money," he said. "But you're an athlete, and athletes fix themselves." He worked with big names in the NFL, NBA, and MLB. I trusted him.

A climber surgeon friend had helped me sift through research on orthopedic surgeons; their education and training, tactics, patient reviews, philosophy on PT, along with input from local physical therapists. "You want a surgeon who has done a procedure at least 100 times," urged my friend. So, it was the first question I asked prospective surgeons.

When climbers tackle a hard route, they collect beta, that is, information, to ensure success. Prior ascensionists are consulted about sequences and ideal conditions. Videos are studied, and other climbers who have tried the route — even belayers — are asked for specific details: Have any holds broken since so-and-so's ascent? What's soand-so's reach? If-this, then-that scenarios are carefully considered before leaving the ground. Intelligence gathering is as important as training and diet.

The beta pointing to my surgeon seemed to be good; my left shoulder had had an ideal result - full range of motion in three months - and I was rock climbing pain-free at my usual level nine months after that surgery. When a new MRI showed the right shoulder was hanging by a thread, my surgeon said, "There's no reason you wouldn't have the

same result again."

But like a broken handhold, something new had been introduced.

* * * *

"MY FINGERS WON'T move," I cried into the phone after the nerve block wore off. The thumb, index, and middle finger on my right hand, which is my dominant hand, were frozen stiff, unable to bend, and do the things fingers do. My surgeon was unfazed. "Just a little pissed-off nerve. You'll be fine in three days."

When this something new was finally given a name, a subpectoral bicep tenodesis, I asked how many times he'd performed the procedure. "You make 29," he said. My stomach dropped.

An incision made in my armpit was near the brachial plexus, a network of nerves that sends signals from the spinal cord to the muscles of the shoulder, arm, and hand. The median nerve, one of the five primary nerves originating in the brachial plexus, which innervates the thumb, index, and middle fingers, half the ring finger and the rotation of the palm, had been damaged. The conclusion was I had a first-degree nerve injury, neurapraxia, where there is usually full recovery in a few days to three months, with no lasting muscle or sensory problems. But even as the three-month marked passed, the story remained: I would wake up one morning and be pain-free with fully functioning fingers.

Nerves are the body's electrical system,

stimulating muscles and controlling sensation. The tricky part is, although nerves can regenerate at a rate of one inch per month. muscle reinnervation won't happen if there's a long period without being charged by the nerve. The muscle poops out, withers, and dies. This explained the aggressive muscle waste in my once-muscular forearm, turned thin and frail, unable to tolerate the weight of a small bracelet. According to the Center for Nerve Injury and Paralysis at Washington University School of Medicine — led in part by Dr. Susan Mackinnon, the world's leading peripheral nerve surgeon who performed the first nerve transplant in 1988 - this is why it is essential to reestablish a nerve to muscle connection as quickly as possible. And, if there is no evidence of recovery three to six months following a nerve injury, surgery is usually recommended.

As the months passed, my pissed-off nerve was in good company.

My life had begun to crumble. About 20 minutes after I woke up, the electrical shocks would start, rolling down my right arm, through my hand, finally exploding like fireworks in my fingertips. My skin felt like it was doused with acid, while shards of glass were being pushed under my nails. It was relentless.

Using colored pencils, I shaded a calendar according to Homeland Security's former color chart for terrorism alerts. Most days registered orange or red. I looked for patterns that could shed light on the pain spikes, hoping this would help doctors find a solution.

My sensation was so off, one morning, I found my three fingers touching my 450-degree flattening iron, and I didn't flinch. Yet other textures would generate a deep burning sensation inside my hand. I couldn't type or write with a pen. I couldn't button a button, zip a zipper, hold a fork, or even think, so my work performance tanked, leading to the termination of six figures worth of contracts. Needing to make payroll, I attempted securing new business only to have the nerve pain skyrocket mid-pitch. I swallowed the nerve medication Neurontin like Skittles, but it only made me groggy.

I understood why people with chronic pain — often marginalized and discounted as weak — take their own lives.

I dug deeper into Dr. Mackinnon's work. She had developed nerve transfer techniques, in which healthy nerves are rerouted into areas left paralyzed by damaged ones. The rerouted nerves "wake up" the muscles and get limbs and digits moving again. From what I had read, it seemed I had a fourth-degree nerve injury, which required surgery.

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hobby. "You're just upset about climbing." * * * * *

CLIMBER HAD ALWAYS been the first word I used to describe myself. At work, I used climbing stories to illustrate points about the importance of planning, communication, and being accountable for your actions. One story was about the time I partnered up with a guy who was trying the same route as me, so we spent an afternoon swapping belays and beta. On one of his attempts, he stepped on a foothold, and the rock broke. Because of our weight difference, as he fell, I launched into the air. The falling rock was picking up speed in my direction; finally, it struck me in the leg. An unfamiliar sound left my mouth.

After I lowered myself to the ground, two climbers ran over and orchestrated a safe takeover over of the belay, lowering my partner. The area had no cell coverage, but luckily, the other climbers were highly experienced. One, a paramedic, cleaned and bandaged my leg while a few others rigged a system to lower me to the trail. The paramedic carried me on his back a few miles back to the trailhead. My friends shuttled me to Las Vegas, where it was confirmed the rock had broken my fibula.

As I crutched around town, climbers asked things like, "You're going to still train on a fingerboard, right?" Or, "Think you can climb at the gym with one leg next week?" Non-climbers asked things like, "Are you going to sue your partner? What about suing the state of Utah?"

Outdoor sports come with risks that must be accepted as a part of the package. Within one's control, however, is how we respond and handle the aftermath of a crisis. In climbing, there are books dedicated to evaluating climbing accidents; reflection on poor outcomes is essential in learning to be more prepared for the future. In the heat of a crisis, the focus must be on creating solutions rather blaming someone or avoiding blame. And, as the bystander climbers did, knowing it could have easily been them in my shoes, the default must be practicing empathy.

At that pivotal moment on top of Don't Call Me Coach at the Virgin River Gorge in 2011, what I had in my favor was 20 years of climbing experience and a catalog of thousands of routes. I had learned success



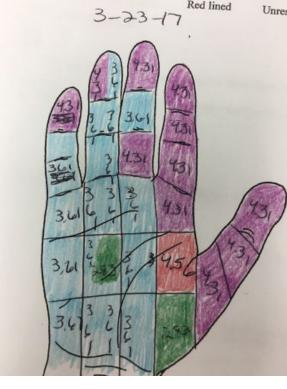
often comes after loosening the grip on a desired result and becoming fully present in the process. It's how I was able to create a new sequence of moves and finally slip the rope through the route's anchors.

That night after my ascent of Don't Call Me Coach, I sat outside my hotel room in Mesquite, thinking about how much climbing had evolved. Women were dominating headlines, and older females with careers like mine were still reaching new levels while redefining the idea of an athlete. "This is a new era of climbing," I thought, as a waning moon lit up the night sky. The times were quickly changing.

* * * * *

TO GET MY fingers to work again, I went to Calico Basin to touch the sandstone boulders. It hurt like hell, but the idea was that if all of my senses were stimulated by the desert, where I had spent thousands of hours using my fingers, maybe I could trip a switch that would turn on my sensation and movement. As the electrical shocks roared, I tried visualizing my hand and arm as separate from my body. I would explain to my hand, "I agree to be a witness to your pain, but you can't be a part of me." As Joan Didion wrote, "We tell ourselves stories in order to live."

I looked for clues to recovery and how to overcome physical adversity in episodes of Oprah's Super Soul Sunday and hours of TED Talks. After watching Dr. Mackinnon's



GETTING BACK IN TOUCH

Above, a color chart used in Stephanie's occupational therapy that tracks the levels of sensation in her injured hand. Left, public speaking is one of the new adventures Stephanie has embarked upon after her injury.

talk, I called Barnes-Jewish Hospital in St. Louis, where she practices, to see if I could become a patient.

"Stephanie Forte, on behalf of surgeons everywhere, I want to apologize for what happened to you. This is not why we go to medical school," Dr. Mackinnon said as she entered the exam room in April 2016, seven months after my botched surgery in Las Vegas. Mackinnon is petite with fair skin and delicate features, but her presence is powerful. I was most struck by her curiosity and how intensely she listened.

"Show us with your left hand what your right hand needs to do to rock climb," she asked, explaining they had never had a climber as a patient. The goal was to save the muscle to ensure my fingers could move again. I should have been referred to a peripheral nerve surgeon months ago. "The window is closing," she said. When the surgical plan came together, joy filled the room. "We are going to make you a climber again," Mackinnon said. Two days later, I had a nearly six-hour nerve transfer surgery.

When I woke up, Mackinnon explained the damage had been worse than expected. The nerve transfer operation was no miracle cure. She told me a story of an esteemed surgeon who had led one of the hospital's departments. After a lot of consideration, he decided to retire. "He was excited to play golf," she explained. But after a while, the surgeon sunk into a severe funk; golf is not cutting-edge surgery. "He made that choice and still struggled," she said. "You didn't choose to stop climbing."

It turned out the retired surgeon found a new way to be of service to his profession that was still fulfilling. "Consider how you can be a climber, but differently," Mackinnon told me. "You are going to show us what's possible." As in climbing, in recovery, my mindset would dictate success or failure. At first, my progress was slow, and I sunk into a deep depression. I had solved one problem, but was now standing there, looking uphill, alone, with no idea where the summit was. but sure it was going to be a long slog to get there. Climbing is where I had gone to make sense of life's messes. I felt its absence deeply. It was like living in white space, a place with enough room for possibilities but also a vast, uninhabited universe that felt lonely.

* * * * *

SO, I MADE an Excel spreadsheet.

In a neat stack, column A held everything I loved about climbing - movement, adventure, problem-solving, and being forced out

of my comfort zone. In column B went the associated emotions and sensations. Column C was a list of sources that could provide those same feelings. Experiences once categorized on my "someday" list started to play out. I have had new adventures walking up big peaks at altitude. The grace and flow of movement found in yoga led me to a teacher training course. Getting onstage and giving a TED-style talk pushes me far out of my comfort zone.

If much of my joy in climbing came from solving problems, then I had just been handed a massive opportunity. I had to figure out how to get my fingers to move in unison, build strength so they could do things like type, and in the absence of sensory feedback, find a way to maintain a grip on a carton of eggs or a climbing hold. I could choose frustration or fascination.

Grief doesn't come in stages; it happens in cycles. The best we can do is to develop tools in the reconstruction phase so that our third - or thirtieth - pass through anger and depression is shorter and a little smoother. When told to just accept what happened, I pushed back; to me, acceptance

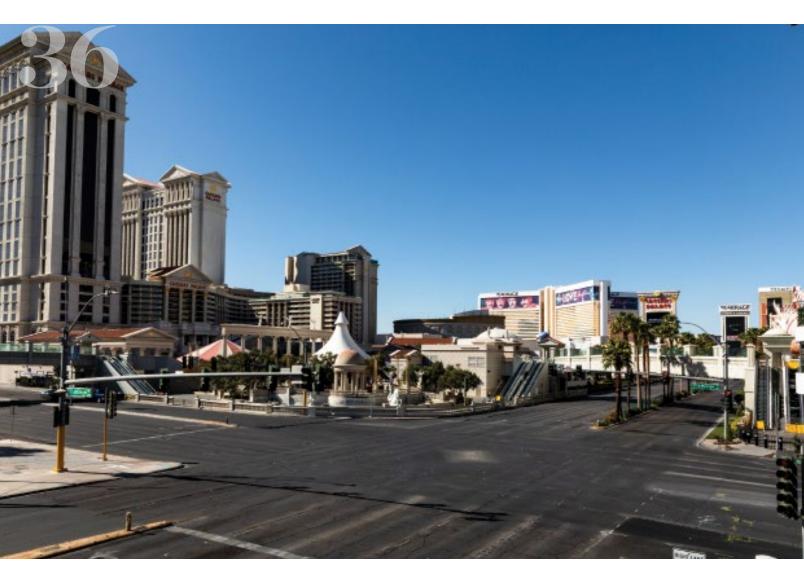
meant embracing the choices of those who marginalized the severity of my injury. I wondered how the pain and heat could ever be something other than the sensation of not being heard, left cliffside, injured. Eventually, I learned to let the grief walk alongside me, but not let it cast a shadow on my future. They are parts of a story, but not the whole.

Today, my fingers operate differently. Sometimes they don't engage, and my sensation is still pretty skewed, so sushi on a first date is out. My hand feels like it is filled with a pliable cement, heavy and stiff. It gets hot after typing or driving. Sometimes, randomly, I feel electrical shocks in a fingertip. These are reminders of the grit required to devise a plan under the gravest of conditions, and the resolve to keep going.

I still climb, but not like before, and mostly in a climbing gym; real rock is a challenge. Maybe one day that will change. I am a climber, so I have the good fortune of knowing an outcome is uncertain — until it is not. ◆

Writer and rock-climber Stephanie Forté made several first-female ascents of difficult sport routes around Las Vegas.





ECONOMY

WHAT HAPPENED HERE

Las Vegas has been deemed 'inessential' before — but not like this. Does our history of essential contributions to the nation offer any hope for a new purpose?

David G. Schwartz

hat you're about to read probably won't age well. Odds are that a year from now, this essay will seem either neurotically pessimistic about dangers that were mostly imagined, or stupidly blind to an impending doom whose signs were all too obvious in retrospect. It will be a relic of an uncertain period when Las Vegas was on the cusp of change, a time capsule seen as quaint in a wiser, and hopefully happier, time. But that reflects both this unprecedented situation, and the difficulty of predicting the future of a resort city that has always banked on selling the world the possibilities of the present.

In that way, Las Vegas has always been an attitude, a spirit, an essence. As such, "What happens here, stays here" still defines the city's image, 17 years after the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority rolled that slogan out. But that's just the surface. We all know that underneath, the real Las Vegas is defined by much more than the debauchery implied by the slogan. We're a diverse metropolitan area whose main economic engine is service.

However, our city and state have historically offered service on a higher level. We've always prided ourselves on contributing to the national mission, whether it be winning a world war or preventing one. Our history of federal projects, our innovations in hospitality, and our infrastructure fine-tuned for an increasingly mobile, globalized economy have connected Las Vegas in meaningful ways to the nation and the world.

THE BIG EMPTY

What some would call the busiest intersection in all of Las Vegas, Flamingo Road and Las Vegas Boulevard, during the coronavirus pandemic.

Now that we're newly reminded how inessential - and potentially dangerous much of what we offer America is, Las Vegas is facing an existential crisis. How does a place that prides itself on its connections find meaning — and offer service — in a time when those connections are cut? There are no sure answers, but history may offer an inkling of guidance.

In 1905, the San Pedro, Los Angeles, and Salt Lake Railroad Company founded the town of Las Vegas with a land auction. The new burg had one purpose: to keep the trains running and make the company money. Following that line's 1921 acquisition by the Union Pacific, a bitter strike led Union Pacific to remove its repair shops from young Las Vegas, leading to a local economic depression and its first loss of confidence.

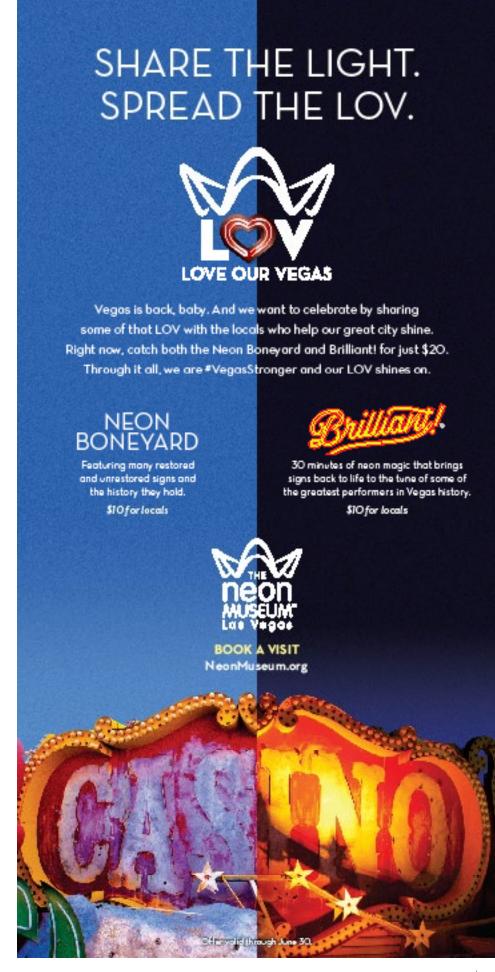
For the rest of the decade, Las Vegas was a city in search of a purpose. Boosters hoped that the town could become an agricultural producer or a haven for outdoorsmen. But nothing clicked. Then, in 1928, Congress passed legislation mandating the construction of what would become Hoover Dam. and the city had a new purpose: gateway to a modern engineering marvel. When construction started in 1931, the project was a model for federal stimulus, as the many paychecks that found their way to Fremont Street made clear. Las Vegas was front and center for the New Deal, an example for the rest of the nation to follow.

During World War II, the Las Vegas Valley prided itself on hosting Basic Magnesium, which produced a metal necessary for munitions and other military stocks, and the gunnery school that would develop into Nellis Air Force Base. We did our part to win the war - nobody could deny that.

HOT STREAK IN A COLD WAR

BUT IT WAS during the Cold War that Las Vegas really and truly stepped up to the challenge of contributing to the defense of the free world. Here, it found a purpose deeper than any other.

At first, Las Vegans were leery of the new identity that had been thrust on them. In January 1951, the Atomic Energy Commission announced that it would soon commence testing atomic weapons at what would become the Nevada Test Site, a sprawling federal landholding 65



ECONOMY

miles from Las Vegas. Understandably, Las Vegans were concerned. Some were even outraged, remembering we had dropped atomic weapons on Japan to end World War II. And here the government wanted to explode them practically on our doorstep.

Following scientists' reassurances that there really was nothing to worry about and federal officials' assurances that the tests were going ahead, no matter what -Las Vegas resigned itself to becoming the Gateway to Ground Zero. The \$10 million that the government was promising to spend helped it go down easier.

Still, the first test, on January 27, 1951, was a jolt, literally and figuratively. The bomb was powerful enough to shake the ground and break windows (but not powerful enough to interfere with the clockwork spinning of roulette wheels). For all the talk of the national interest, it was one thing to buy war bonds or produce magnesium. It was another to be shaken awake by an A-bomb earthquake.

Some thought that the city should take a stand, insist that the testing take place elsewhere. Certainly, the burgeoning gaming and tourism industry would have fared better without the threat of nuclear doom, no matter how faint, hanging around. But, barely two months after Estes Kefauver's crime-fighting Senate committee had visited Las Vegas and found its toleration of "hoodlums" with past organized crime associations potential grist for federal legislation, no one in that quarter was in the mood to stand up to Uncle Sam. Resistance could

invite federal scrutiny. The tests continued.

Then, the casino bosses listened to their PR directors. Don't ignore the testing, they argued. Embrace it. Cue the newspapers printing cheesecake photos of buxom showgirls with mushroom cloud-shaped headpieces, bars serving atomic cocktails, lounges booking watch parties. Selling the American public on coming to the middle of a desert to lose large sums of money and look forward to coming back - might have been the greatest advertising coup of the century. And positioning atmospheric atomic testing as an appealing vacation perk might have been the Las Vegas publicity machine's finest hour.

By the time of the second series of atomic tests that fall, Las Vegas was ready to do its civic duty, proud of its place in the vanguard of the fight against communism. And, when the bomb yields proved to be smaller than those of the preceding tests, some locals actually complained. More duds like that, and the tourists might stop coming.

The atomic tests became part of our civic identity. Whether they made the beds for visiting scientists or served drinks to reporters covering the blasts, Las Vegans felt they were performing a vital service to the national defense effort. We could claim to be standing on the atomic frontier, leading the nation in producing fearsome weapons that would keep a chilly peace.

The end of the Cold War took that relevance from Nevada, but that transition coincided almost exactly with another marquee moment: UNLV's run to dominance in men's basketball. For a too-brief moment, Las Vegas boasted the country's finest college squad. We might not be keeping the Soviets at bay, but we could be a model for excellence in collegiate athletics. Just as the Rebel dynasty was fading, Las Vegas garnered another claim to national signif-

> icance as its formerly guilty pleasure evolved into a nationally respected tool for economic development. Casino gaming, touted as a legitimate way to jumpstart economies, create jobs, and plump tax coffers, was being legalized throughout the United States, and the nation looked to Las Vegas as the model.

Even after Las Vegas lost its place

SCENES FROM A SHUTDOWN

With construction considered essential, work continues on Allegiant Stadium, bottom left. But the clock stopped for boarded-up businesses along Main Street, below. Evel Pie offered a hopeful message on its Downtown marguee, left.





as the globe's gaming capital to Macau in 2007, we could still take pride in being a center of the new world order. With tourists pouring in from all over the world, Las Vegas was the epitome of post-industrial globalism. We would lead not by detonating A-bombs, but by entertaining people. But we did more than merely entertain. We perfected a system that incorporated infrastructure, technology, labor, capital, and marketing to turn tourism into something very close to a durable good. The composition might change – witness our experimentation with fine dining, nightclubs, e-sports, superstar residencies, and professional sports - but our fluid brand of entertainment was optimized for a hyperconnected globe. A network of connections with Las Vegas at its hub kept the planes flying in and room rates spiraling up. Even the Great Recession, it appeared, was a mere blip. Las Vegas had created a global demand for itself, and it would continue to show everyone how to succeed in an increasingly interconnected world. Las Vegas would show the world how to come together.

THE BIG DISCONNECT

AND THEN CAME the pandemic, and the world needed to be apart. Connections are now liabilities, not assets. Many of us went home - some to work, some to sit and worry about an uncertain future. We were sorted into groups: essential and inessential.

Collectively, Las Vegas was inessential.

For the first time in nearly a century, Southern Nevada has no pretense to being on the front lines of anything, no claim to even reflected glory. Worse yet, everything that we've prided ourselves on for the past three decades is yesterday's news. The world is hunkering down, not going out. No one wants to learn from us.

Right now, most of us are worried about staying healthy and paying bills. We are in survival mode. But life is about more than survival. It is about having a purpose. And, for a long time, we Las Vegans have known our purpose. Individually, that purpose was and still is defined by our responsibilities to those around us. But looking beyond that, we could always take at least some measure of pride in our role in Greater Las Vegas, the Hospitality Capital of the World. Even if we didn't personally make visitors feel welcome, we knew someone who did, and a lot of our work centered, in some way, on them: keeping them healthy, educating them and their children, feeding them.

That purpose united us, long before we had the Golden Knights or even the Rebels to cheer. It was something to be proud of, even vicariously. After all, the house always wins, and who doesn't like being on a winning team? Our community's identity was that of host to the world. It meant we had a place in the greater scheme of things, and it was as solid as bedrock.

Now, playing host is not only inessential - it's potentially deadly. The one thing we were good at - getting a lot of very different people together under the same roof - is the one thing that all medical experts agree should, at all costs, be avoided.

A city, its spirit, inessential. Where do we go from here? What will our purpose be?

One upside is that the pandemic, even more than the Great Recession, has rendered pundits mercifully irrelevant. One of the most tiresome aspects of the media-in-









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dustrial complex is the need to try to see ahead of the curve. It isn't enough to know where we're standing and how we got there. Many of us want to see the future. Most of the time, predictions are wrong, or we listen to the wrong predictions. How many pundits anticipated the Great Recession? How many networks gave television time to health experts who, in December, might have been able to better prepare us for the pandemic? Not enough, that's for sure.

The problem is that predicting the future has no upside. Either the current trends will continue — in which case anything you say is so obvious as to sound moronic — or the world will change in ways you can't imagine. At least now, only those completely given over to hubris are pretending that they can confidently predict tomorrow. The pandemic has grown so big that, on the cusp of May 2020, we can't see around it.

Our first instinct is to assume that things will eventually get back to normal, that as soon as someone (The governor? The president? Dr. Fauci?) gives the all clear, Las Vegas hospitality will be back in all its glory. Already, some of us are reasserting our relevance. I read that Las Vegas is being considered to host the entirety of the NBA playoffs. It would be great for business, no doubt, but also a way to reassert that our connections to the world remain strong.

But just as no one can say whether it will be weeks or months before inessential travel and commerce resumes, this isn't a hurricane we're facing, with an obvious "all clear" after the storms have left and the rebuilding can begin. Will someone discover a treatment or vaccine for the coronavirus? Will it become a recurring seasonal malady? No one knows, which makes it nearly impossible to build timelines for tomorrow.

So, it's not going to be much use asking experts (like me) how long it will take Strip room inventory to come back online, when airline capacity will return to "normal," or when, if ever, everyone will go back to work. There just isn't any precedent to refer back to. Anyone who says otherwise is lying to themselves or you and doing everyone a disservice.

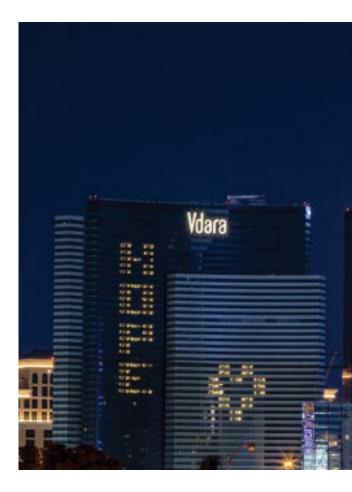
Flying blind is disconcerting, but it has its positives. Unburdened by assumptions, we can be free to do what's right, not what's expected. With no status quo, there is no inertia. Not having a script to stick to will have to benefit Las Vegas - and the world - as we recover from the pandemic.

With the lifeblood of Southern Nevada choked off, there is no possibility of failure.

BRIGHT HEARTS, BIG CITY

Hotels up and down the Strip. including Vdara and Aria, illuminated their windows with messages of perseverance.

Anything would be an improvement. So, when people start traveling again, why not experiment? Tourism will, one day, come back, but the current crisis should demonstrate the absolute necessity of more aggressively diversifying Las Vegas. There are two possibilities: the world stays connected. in which case this probably won't be the last global health crisis, or the world uncouples and a Vegas vacation is out of reach for most. As long as there is room for inessentials there may be desire, but it wouldn't hurt to make at least some of us essential. Investing in medical technology and public health research might put Las Vegas back on the front lines. It isn't as glamorous, but right now I'd trade all the glamour in the world for a bit of essential relevance.



THE FREEDOM OF NOTHING TO FALL BACK ON

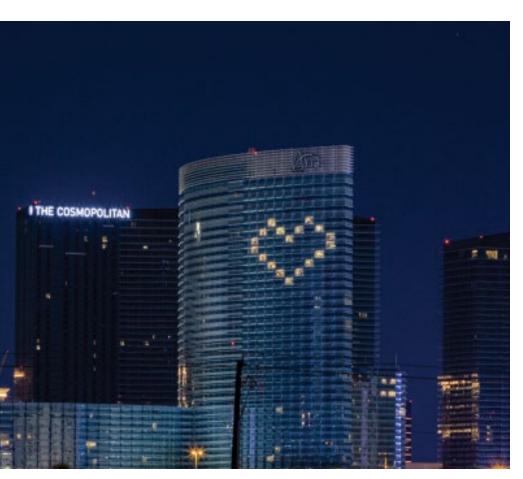
LAS VEGAS IN particular is a city built on one certainty: The house always wins. People come here to court Lady Luck, but no matter how hot the dice run, in the end, casinos win. That statistical guarantee is comforting. It was also comforting, even if you weren't a gambler, to know that no matter what, the dice would continue rolling. Casinos might briefly, voluntarily shutter for the funerals of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. out of a sense of propriety, but nothing, short of an immediate, acute menace (think the 1980 MGM Grand fire or an electrical outage) could shut a casino down. For decades, we could count on casinos going on no matter what. Now, we've seen that there is a force more powerful and pitiless than the house edge, and that should be profoundly disturbing. We have nothing to fall back on.

Nothing except, perhaps, the native desert resiliency that has characterized inhabitants of the Las Vegas Valley since the time of the Paiutes. Humans have always been drawn to this arid land, have always found ways to make lives here. It might have been gathering roots, prospecting for gold,

pouring concrete, or dealing blackjack. To survive in a desert, you have to know the land, but you also benefit from not relying on anything. The life-giving sun, after all, is trying to kill you. Whether they came as refugees from strife elsewhere or for purely mercenary reasons, our ancestors, spiritual and biological, learned how to survive, and eventually flourish, in an unfriendly land by adapting faster than they weakened.

For all the self-serving rhetoric about innovation, the genius of Las Vegas never really was creating new things. Las Vegas didn't invent gambling. Nor was the power of the atom first unleashed here. But Las Vegas did provide a place for gambling, atomic explosions, entertainment spectaculars, pool parties, and so much else to be refined and presented to the public in a better way than they had before. And maybe this is the city's real contribution to the world. After all, what happened here, stayed here. But it made Las Vegas relevant.

No one in Las Vegas asked to host atomic testing, and few suspected that the city would become a magnet for tourism thanks to legalized gambling. Penny slots, high-end baccarat, nightclubs, celebrity eateries, major league sports: Few predicted any



of these coming to fruition, until they did, and suddenly they were everywhere. When Las Vegas changes, it changes quickly, and without looking back. Don't believe me? I'm happy to talk it over with you over drinks at the Copa Room.

Perhaps the key to finding our purpose post-pandemic won't entail returning to our role as the city of global connections. It's too soon to say whether the pandemic will fundamentally change entertainment and hospitality as we know it. If it does, that will be incredibly disruptive. Nightclubs are built on the idea of packing sweaty dancers as close as possible — it's hard to see how that comes back. Many gamblers find no thrill greater than a hot run on a crowded craps table. Post-shutdown experimentation might see a way to retain the essence of the dancing, gambling, and dining experiences while allowing for healthy social distancing. It might make sense to figure out how Las Vegas tourism can work with a smaller base. Can the "what happens here" be made more boutique?

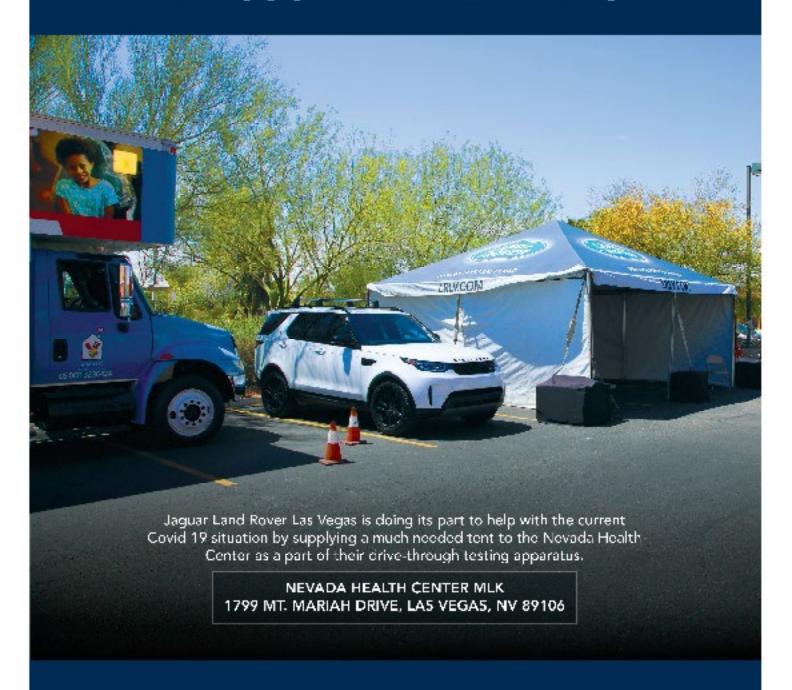
Or maybe Las Vegas goes into the cloud, with "visitors" safe in their homes while they steer drone avatars through an enhanced reality experience, thanks to licensed Vegas IP. Or hospitality takes a reduced role, and Las Vegas really does diversify into something more essential. For years, economic experts have been discussing our potential for "medical tourism," and perhaps now is the time. Using existing infrastructure, it might not be so hard to repurpose some hospitality facilities to hospitals. Many of the grand hotels of my hometown, Atlantic City, were converted into army hospitals during World War II, and Las Vegas resorts served as temporary de facto headquarters for atomic bigwigs during several tests. With massive meeting spaces and an unparalleled infrastructure, it's not hard to imagine hotels shifting to accommodate researchers instead of tourists.

It might seem unlikely, but eight weeks ago the state shutting down was not even a remote possibility. The future is going to look more different than we can probably imagine. It will take agile minds and creative experimentation to rebuild Las Vegas post-shutdown. Connected or disconnected, Las Vegas will find a new purpose. Now more than ever, it's essential. +

Before becoming an associate vice provost, gaming historian David G. Schwartz was the director of UNLV's Center for Gaming Research.



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ON THE INSIDE

DISPATCHES FROM HOME IN THE NEW AS VEGAS

Say what you will about the stay-athome order Gov. Sisolak issued April 1 to stop the spread of coronavirus — that it's a life-saving necessity, that it's a recipe for going stir-crazy, that you've binge-watched the entirety of Tiger *King* twice – but don't say it's bad for introspection. With too much time on our hands, we've had abundant opportunity to closely observe our domestic lives and consider larger truths. These five essays explore just that the family dynamics, moral questions, and emotional pangs that emerge when life is standing still.

What I Hoped For

When I found a box of old mementos, I encountered a past self with a secret that surprised me

By Heidi Kyser

I'M TRAPPED IN my study with a gaggle of girls who won't shut up about their accomplishments. There's a 10-year-old in a brown polyester furtleneck who came in second in the citywide spelling bee. Grinning under her homemade Dorothy Hamill haircut, she says, "I almost won!" And a 12-year-old in a white cheerleading uniform, complete with mascotted knee socks and pleated skirt, who informs me that seventh grade is one of her favorite years of school! The sixth-grade narrator of the church Christmas play, the freshman homecoming princess, the sophomore on the tennis team, they're all hovering around my filing cabinets, chatting on my antique brocade couch, distracting me while I try to work.

> They're cute and sweet, in a white-privilege way, but they're also uninvited. And, perhaps most troubling, they're all me. I stupidly unearthed these old versions of myself in a trove of scrapbooks I found while going through boxes I thought held only books, and now I can't get rid of them. As I pay bills, play with my 16-month-old pit bull Buster, or scour the internet for distractions from the coronavirus pandemic, they're there, nibbling at the edges of my awareness, reminding me - at a time when I least need to be reminded — that I'm going to die alone.

> > * * * * *

Okay, maybe not "alone" alone. I am, after all, married. My husband. Peter, and I bought this four-bedroom house in Downtown Las Vegas in 2006, two years after I moved from Los Angeles to Las Vegas. When I first arrived here, I didn't bother unpacking my dozen or so boxes of books. They're mostly French and classical literature from my college years, and I figured I'd get around to it when time and space allowed. That didn't happen until Peter's kids, who he had joint custody of, got old enough to either get a job (in his son's case) or go to college (in his daughter's) and move out. A few months ago, I bought a set of three, various-sized bookshelves on Facebook marketplace from a retiring child psychologist who was moving home to the South. The white wooden shelves go well with the brocade couch and sea-foam wall paint. At last, I thought, I can turn my functional workspace into the relaxing library I've always wanted!

Eventually. As is often the case, the shopping part of the idea happened much more quickly than the labor part. Weeks went by, and the white bookshelves held only Buster's toys and piles of unread New Yorkers. While I lounged on the couch doing crossword puzzles, Peter would stop in the doorway and joke, "I love what you've done with the place."

Then came the coronavirus. I've worked remotely off and on since the mid-2000s, even as a staff writer, but being sent home from the office with a VPN connection on my laptop and instructions to stay away until further

notice was something new. The freedom to focus on my writing away from the incessant banter of the newsroom turned into an oppressive sentence to the solitude of my home cubicle. Outside my office walls, Peter and his daughter, who'd moved back from college, roamed the rest of the house, inescapable — and contending with their own complicated versions of exile. Even as the isolation period imbued Peter's companionship with a deeper significance, I also realized that, for the duration, my office and the outdoors were the only places I could go to be alone. I needed to make this room a sanctuary.

So, I hauled all the boxes out of the closets and cupboards where we'd stashed them 14 years earlier and started, finally, to unpack.

* * * * *

Over the years, I've learned that I handle big projects best when I take them one digestible bite at a time. In that vein, I told myself I didn't need to unpack more than one box per day. I'd work on them in the evenings, after dinner.

I'd forgotten what was in the boxes, specifically, but I remembered it being mainly books. I studied Romance languages and literature in both undergrad and graduate school, so I had a ton of French novels, classical mythology, and critical theory — interspersed with the Margaret Atwood and Kurt Vonnegut I devoured during school breaks to cleanse my mind of Proust. The boxes' labeling was suspicious, scratched out and written over multiple

times. The first evening, I dragged a box possibly marked "scrapbooks and photo albums" into the middle of the room and dug in not really knowing what to expect. Surprise! It was full of scrapbooks and photo albums.

A funny thing about the memorabilia bound up in these expandable volumes is, I'd completely forgotten them, and yet, once there, they were exactly as I remembered. That's how mementos work, of course, but it was eerie, turning the pages of my life, instantly pulling up images long buried in my mind's cache.

And with the benefit of distance, I was struck by how bluntly and meticulously I documented everything I did. "My first recital after taking piano lessons from Mrs. Hall 1 year," I wrote next to a mimeographed program folded into green construction paper. "Flowers I got this year," above a half-dozen of the two-by-three-inch notecards that come with bouquets.

There are four tabloid-sized volumes of this, stuffed three inches thick with cutout newspaper articles, participation certificates, ribbons, playbills, postcards, and other, seemingly endless, documents. Objectively, the volume of things I did is impressive.

But subjectively, something's missing: An emotional component. Occasionally, I would lace captions with commentary - I was "surprised" I won homecoming princess; chorus banquet was "a blast" – but, by and large, it reads to 51-year-old me more like a detached catalog of accomplishments than a joyful record of a childhood well-lived, which is the only way I can recall recalling it, as long as I've been an adult. The dry, evidential narratives before me made me wonder if, decades before social media (or even the internet) had been invented, I'd fallen prey to the instinct to edit my experiences for a certain audience, presenting what would make my parents and teachers proud, rather than what really mattered most to me.

Who did I do this for? And why?

* * * * *

Ironically, what I found to be missing from my scrapbooks would turn up later ... and be disappointing. Having learned my lesson from the "scrapbooks" label, I shoved the "Heidi's secrets" box to the back of the room and spent the next week's worth of evenings going through what appeared to be - and actually were - books. Then, the first weekend of isolation, I screwed up my courage and dove into my "secrets." It was just as the label promised: cards, letters, and photos from my two previous marriages, and stacks upon stacks of journals and poetry. Here, behind a "Proceed at your own risk" sign, were the emotions I'd found to be lacking from my scrapbooks. All of them.

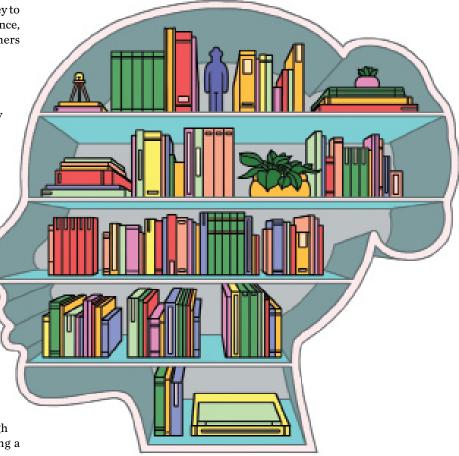
The past relationship stuff was easy enough. With time and good girlfriends, I'd wrestled those regrets into submission. I had to set down the final card my second husband wrote to me and cry for about two minutes, prompting Buster to rush over and lick my face. And that was that.

The journals, which appear to have been mainly creative writing assignments from middle and high school, were unexpected. I didn't remember being a journaler, maybe because I haven't been one as an adult, but I applied to them the same diligence I did to all my schoolwork, with regular entries about friends, siblings, crushes, and the thoughts and feelings they inspired. What little I could bring my present-day self to read was boring as hell, but I didn't have the heart to throw the journals out. What kind of writer would I be if I didn't hold out a modicum of hope that someone, someday, would want to open this window onto my young psyche?

The poetry, on the other hand, was mortifying. Who said everybody's got 100 bad poems inside them and one good one waiting to get out? Well I, apparently, had a million bad poems inside me, maybe two decent ones, and the determination to get them all out. I skimmed it, desperately looking for something worth saving, but only set aside a few collections that I'd gone to the trouble of typing and binding with hand-painted covers. The rest I carried out and dumped into the recycling bin, where I stood for several minutes, wondering anxiously if there was any chance someone could retrieve them, and they'd see the light of day.

It was comforting to realize I'd grown enough as a writer to kill my babies with such ease. I knew work with no potential when I saw it now; it would be unfair to expect the same of my immature teenage and early-20-something selves.

Still, there was something endearing in my innocent hope that everything I wrote held promise. With enough revision, I must have thought, this could be publishable. And this, All this. What a gift to believe in such crap. How could I have kept going in this unforgiving profession any other way?



* * * *

That was pretty much it for the boxes. A few are still piled in the corner of the room, filled with books I plan to donate once schools and thrift stores are back in business. And I left a final one unpacked. It's so lightweight that I know it doesn't hold books, it's bound with packing tape bearing a red "Decision Systems International" logo, which rings no bells whatsoever, and it's unlabeled — a total mystery. I'm saving that one for a special occasion, when my need for a pick-me-up outweighs the guilt I feel for navel-gazing while other people go hungry. When the depression comes, I'll pour myself a glass of wine and take that self-indulgent trip down memory lane.

But besides the books, there's one other thing from my past that found its place in my new study: a handful of hyper-feminized collectibles. I kept three music boxes, for instance, out of a series of dozens I'd been gifted throughout childhood - a family tradition - and a jewelry box with a column of tiny drawers alongside a mirrored stage around which a two-inch-tall ballerina twirls to "Somewhere My Love." There's also a statuette that fits in the palm of my grown-up hand, a flounce-skirted girl bearing, in one arm, a flower with a cubic zirconia center and, in the other, a small, folded piece of cardstock reading, "Diamonds are for innocence / pure and sweet and good. / I always try to do the things / that I'm sure I should." It's a tribute to the month I was born, April, whose birthstone is diamond; my sister had September's equivalent. I placed it at the end of my nonfiction row, right next to Virginia Woolf.

Finally, there were five dolls, ranging in quality from a plastic Southern belle with no shoes to a porcelain blonde named "Joyce," a numbered member of the Heritage Mint Limited series. These I remember wanting, asking Santa for — indeed, I thought I had more of them, Maybe I did and the others are in that lightweight, heavily taped crate. Who knows? What's clear is, I took care of them, brushing their hair and smoothing down the folds of their skirts before packing them into bags and boxes. I was preserving them for posterity.

That's when it struck me: The younger me's, the ones who saved and sorted all the items in the albums, carefully affixing and captioning them, who arranged the journals and poetry in chronological order and put them under metaphoric lock and key - they did this, maybe in part for

The Apocalypse Is a Waiting Room

Notes on video games, and other dumb distractions, in the pandemic age

By Andrew Kiraly

I'VE HAD A song stuck in my head lately. It's part of the thematic score to a popular video game. The opening theme to Fallout 4 is a stern, plodding piano dirge that builds into an anxious baroque of strings and brass. I've come to think of it as the soundtrack to the new reality we're living in. I hear the song in my head when I see images of desolate city streets, or barren store shelves, or tent hospitals in parking lots.

> Fallout 4 was released in 2015 to much acclaim. Even if you've never heard of it, you've surely ingested many of its recycled tropes that have become standard in the subgenre of entertainment that concerns itself with survival after apocalypse - tattered cityscapes, scavenger tribes, humans

and animals transformed into monsters. In Fallout 4, the plot premise is that you've been unsealed from cryogenic suspension 200 years after a global nuclear war, and now you're searching an obliterated Massachusetts to find out whatever happened to your infant son, who was snatched from your bunker. The game is an enthralling interactive museum exhibit of the aftermath of cataclysm. It takes place in a gorgeous ache of a ruined world, a kind of abandon-porn Disneyland filled with rusting cars, sagging high-rises, and supermarket shelves peppered with dusty canned goods. The sky is a queasy, emulsified vellow smear from which radioactive thunderstorms scour the land. You contend with grimy human settlers, cyborg soldiers, mutant bears, and psychopathic robots. Praised for its ambitious scope, Fallout 4 is a vast, complex

the nostalgic older woman I am today, but mostly for the children and grandchildren they imagined I'd have by now. The children I don't have, and never will. Peter's son and daughter are wonderful stepkids, but they have enough to do looking after their birth-mother's and -father's heritages; I don't hold them responsible for mine, too.

I arranged the dolls on my brocade couch, snapped a phone picture, and sent it to my two oldest nieces asking if either would be interested in having them. "It would be nice to keep them in the family," I said. Neither girl replied, but one is a nurse in a children's hospital, and the other is a pregnant schoolteacher with a six-month-old baby. They've got much more important things on their minds right now than the random sentimental request of an aunt who hasn't sent them birthday cards since they were in high school.

Later that evening, Peter held me as I cried, mourning the daughter I'd never had. By the next day, I was done feeling sorry for myself. There was no reason not to save my heirlooms for Peter's kids' kids, who would know both Peter and me as grandparents. And if they weren't interested, so what? I could sell or donate the dolls, and the rest only had intrinsic value to me; after I'm gone, I wouldn't care anymore.

With this notion came another answer to the question of why I'd kept everything the way I did: to find comfort in remembering who I am, where I came from. Saving a small homage to the conventional gender roles I was taught as a child, for instance, served the dual purpose of marking my evolution and reminding me to stay open. There's plenty of space left on my bookshelves for new ideas.

And the process of arranging my study has had something in common with the scrapbooking and journaling I engaged in decades ago. I'm curating evidence - books and décor - of the life experiences that are meaningful to me now, albeit with more fluidity and, hopefully, feeling. I'm creating a space where I can be with myself, hunker down in a crisis, and reconnect with my roots.

The pandemic has only started taking what it will from us - jobs, money, security. I'm no more certain of how it will end than I am of whether I'll have grandchildren someday. But centered in the present, surrounded by evidence of my ability to work hard, withstand heartbreak, and keep growing, I'm ready for whatever comes next. +

game; it offers branching storylines with a cast of pulp-novel personalities, balletic carnage, and a construction system that allows you to forge weapons, manufacture drugs, or build an entire human settlement, if you want. You can even have a pet. (Mine is a German shepherd named Dogmeat.) The game's encyclopedic array of quests, tasks, and pedestrian chores to complete – known in gamer lingo as "the grind" - makes you consider with something like awe the depths to which the shallowness of modern video games can go. As of this writing, my character, Lurkr, is a stealthy level 33 assassin who terrorizes the villains of the Commonwealth with his laser sniper rifle. Even from blocks away, I can hear the red beam's visceral thud as it vaporizes hulking super-mutants into writhing orange ash.

My evenings of the past few weeks have been mostly spent getting high and playing Fallout 4. I submit wholly to its unfulfilling but narcotically satisfying grind. I play until my attention span reaches a state of high, fine, almost haptic hypervigilance that I can only describe as paying attention to attention itself. It's oddly similar to the type of attention our rebooted minds have had to muster in order to operate in this new reality, devoting extended logistics and calculations to things we used to do on autopilot. You know, how going to the grocery store or picking up a prescription suddenly requires adopting the mindset of a military tactician. The metabolic demand of this rewired attention has its own fallout, at least for me: I skim countless headlines and news stories every day, but, embarrassingly, have been too psychically exhausted to read anything of substance whatsoever in weeks. (But, when taking a break from the game, I seem to have no problem inhaling three-hour blocks of Rock of Love with Bret Michaels. Again, embarrassingly.)

I've been thinking about the quality and amount of attention Fallout 4 demands of me, and why I'm so willing to invest it - particularly now, when there are so many more worthwhile things that deserve the engagement of the mature, educated, responsible man I like to think I am, the one who likes books and chess and yoga. Sure, in obedience to ambient social prompts, I guess I should be using this quarantine to embark on a course of virtuous diversion and edifying distraction like everyone else seems to be doing: taking an online Spanish course, learning to pickle eggs on YouTube, or attending streaming concerts in a show of cultural solidarity. Instead, I've become

hooked on what Fallout 4 offers in this particular place and time - not just as a game, and not just as a strangely safe fictive parallel to strange times that feel like fiction, but as a curiously hypnotic resting place for an anxious, brittle mind.

Before the pandemic, the game proposed itself as mere retail dystopian fantasy. I originally played, I suppose, for the traditional purpose of frivolous escape. But in this crux of history, it suddenly offers a more complicated emotional menu. It offers not mere fascination, but a mirror to functional fear. Today, Fallout 4 evokes the specificities of thrift amid scarcity, and provokes, again and again, distressing mental encounters with the real. The game has become a tutorial in the psychological mechanics of chronic uncertainty; its purported offer of escape is punctuated by stark, wholly probable, moments of accidental realism. After, say, the operatic exhilaration of massacring a nest of scuzzy wasteland raiders with well-placed bottlecap mines and my Furious Power Fist (a hunk of concrete and clawlike rebar engineered into a lethal pneumatic boxing glove) comes a mundane ritual that prickles with topical urgency: scavenging corpses, shelves, and crates for food and medicine. Here, a precious box of Sugar Bombs cereal;



there, a rare can of purified water. (Note: Toilet paper is not a thing.) In Fallout 4, the gameworld envelops and enthralls, true to the promise of immersion that any good game delivers. But much of the *gameplay*, intended to provide an element of strategic management, impels me to encounter the version of this happening outside. The game frequently functions not as a diversion from reality, but as a detour toward it. Fallout 4 is why I saved my empty disinfectant wipe container, since I can make ad hoc cleansing towels with the leftover liquid at the bottom. It's why I check the number of cans of soup in the cupboard several times a week, or limit myself to two meals a day to postpone the stress of shopping. But this tic dissolves as the game soundtrack surges in alarm - uhoh, this destroyed supermarket I'm looting is infested with feral ghoul reavers. (I pause to save my progress in case I die.)

There's really no good reason to continue playing. The game is not exactly fun. If I'm having anything resembling fun, it's in playing the game to continually monitor whether I'm having fun playing the game in a kind of neurotic meta-game with myself. In fact, Fallout 4 is trenchantly boring. It's all grind. It offers the same kind of nervy, paralytic boredom of grazing Netflix previews, scrolling through Reddit, or making a project out of worrying a hangnail. It increasingly seems like a monumental waste of time. And it is - intentionally. I acknowledge this obsessive act of killing time as a craven attempt to fast-forward myself through this history we're living in. I suspect we're doing essentially the same thing when we're clicking from one browser tab to another, refreshing news sites in the hope that something, anything has happened with enough gravity to feel like a benchmark that suggests, if not progress, then at least the reassurance of time lurching forward in a world that's become so ruthlessly still. It's a kind of wishful, willful time-travel aiming for the other side of the dire headlines that confront us every day. But putting it like that, characterizing it as time-travel, is far too dynamic a metaphor. Playing Fallout 4 is more like a form of suspension. I'm trying to freeze myself; wake me when the war is over.

One recent Saturday evening, I was on my backyard patio, getting hella high, taking a break from the game. I heard a girl's shriek from a neighboring backyard. Then I heard the shout of a boy. Then I heard another boy, his laughter brassy with the hint of adolescence. They were playing, chasing each other around the backyard, squealing, chattering, and laughing as the sun set. It was the most natural, human music I've ever heard. I sat there for nearly an hour and drank it in, greedy for it, thirsty for it. And yet at the same time, it felt too real, somehow undeserved. I went back inside to play some more, looking forward to the boredom of looting the abandoned National Guard armory without getting nuked by one very offended sentry bot.

Something was amiss in my house. I recognized the feeling, but I felt it as new, freshly misplaced, recently transplanted here from somewhere else. It had taken going outside to make me notice it.

It felt like I was returning to a waiting room. I realized that the appeal of the exotic boredom of this game was that it offered the kind of distractions that beckon in the anxiety of a waiting room.

That's the feeling of the pandemic stayhome order. It's like being in a waiting room. My house has become a waiting room. The anxiety is exactly that of a waiting room - that uncertain anticipation, brushed with a residue of fear, as you wait for the car mechanic's diagnosis, the discomforts of the dentist's chair, the blood-test results from the doctor. A place where all the humans only interact at a level of distant, official remove. A place where the narrowed spectrum of possibility runs from terrible to merely tolerable - and only on rare occasions offers relief that, phew, the news wasn't as bad as you expected.

Waiting rooms are where we often revert to the runner-up version of the selves we think we are. It's where we're vulnerable to moral vacancy in an atmosphere of ready stimulation. In waiting rooms, your anxious mind becomes prey to their thousand facile distractions and benumbing grinds - daytime talk shows, brochures, dog-eared lifestyle magazines, the seductive debris field of Facebook's outrage and antic optimism.

I've always admired people who can read books in waiting rooms, or at bus stops or on planes. That's not me. I need to learn to wait better. Or, the more frightening prospect, learn to accept that we are not in a waiting room — not in a liminal phase of transition, but rather in rehearsal for a new truth. In the meantime, I'm the one bingeing on nothing much. My quest is stasis. My apocalyptic adventure is the mute scream of standing still, refreshing the news, saving my progress, and waiting. *

Passover Magic

You ever have that feeling where you're not sure if you're awake or still dreaming?

By Erica Vital-Lazare

THERE IS A moment at the beginning of *The Matrix*, when Neo is awakened from troubled dreams to a knock at the door. We're made to understand he is a dealer of sorts. It's 1999, so we anticipate baggies of crystal or a vial of what was then the pleasure-seeking epidemic of choice. But what he offers is a disc, a sleeker version of our now-outdated floppies. And as he pulls his stash from the hollowed-out, and hallowed, pages of Baudrillard's Simulacra and Simulation, the writing-directing Wachowski siblings make sleepwalkers of us all. We are Neo, bumbling through tenebrous film glow as we follow the white rabbit. Not in Kansas anymore.

> Who could have known that just days after screening the film for my students in Marginal Voices in Dystopian Literature — where as one body we ooh and swoon over Keanu's feline swagger, marvel at the Oracle, boo the ruthless ubiquity of agents and Cyphers - the college would shut down live classes, converting us to virtual? And we would all become Dorothy, in our own previously unimagined versions of calamitous stories, cycloning in the wind.

> I am often called upon for my calm, for my seeming quiet at the center of alarm. But what has shaken me most about this hyperreal plunge into darkness — this pandemic, this age of plague — is that the fear, this cold drip of cortisol emptying and refilling from head to belly, belly to head, is the baseline for so many of us, an underlying rhythm, even in the days before sequester.

> For single mothers rooting for coins under couch cushions at the end of the month, for itinerant workers waiting for pickup jobs in strip-mall parking lots, for orphaned elders facing a maze of medical bills, for those without shelter, medical insurance, or retirement fund, the threat has been constant and another kind of Real. Hunger, displacement, the doom of arrest and police violence, voter suppression, environmental disaster, separation of family, the takeover of AI, have long drifted across the lids of worried minds struggling for their piece of an elusive good sleep. The juggling of bills and childcare, the fostering of aging parents, prayers for our children of good jobs and no harm — these are now the teeth in the mouths of gators swimming the ponds of our subconscious for eons.

Ides of March 2020, as municipalities slowed, streets cleared, and grocery aisles began to resemble the breadline lore of bygone Soviet drama, we have been forced to share the monster beneath all our beds. It growls, and we buy more sanitizer and pasta. It turns over and we stage another Zoom meeting, plan a podcast — sip Instagram mimosas. It bites and we turn from C-SPAN to CNN.

In 2018, Chapman University published a survey of "America's Top Fears." Having lived through the purloined election of Bush over Gore in 2000, the uranium yellowcake debacle preceding the Iraq War, and the failed majority election of the first woman president in 2016, political corruption was listed first among those polled. Pollution of our waters, second; and not having enough money for the future, along with the serious illness of those we love, close behind.

As those shadowed scenarios have taken shape and now freely romp and roam, America 2018 seems decades ago.

"When the real is no longer what it used to be," Baudrillard writes in Simulacra and Simulation, "nostalgia assumes its full meaning ... it plays at being an appearance — it is of the order of sorcery." Or, as Neo says, "You ever have that feeling where you're not sure if you're awake or still dreaming?"

From the viewpoint of this pandemic, look back into the postmodernist's matrix, and you recognize the false



oases our known fears and comforts have been. Revisit the parables, Ecclesiastes, the teachings of Ífè, the Torah, the Tao, the Qu'ran, and there is precedent for the wailing and the keening, but also for the hope that this too shall pass.

I keep this in mind as I make an emergency run to the pharmacy in the days after "Stay Home for Nevada." Ahead in line is a man, white, possibly 50. We are safe in our quadrants, abiding by taped markings on the floor, when riffs of drugstore jazz give way to '90s R&B. The Backstreet Boys are feverishly belting, "Ain't nothing but a heartache/Ain't nothing but a mistake/ I ne'vah wanna hear you saaayyy, IIIIII want it that way." The man's head is swaying; my body is moving. We are outpacing The Boys aloud and shamelessly. We are masked, but the bop is infectious. We're apart, but the bop will not be contained.

There are moments like this that shimmer 'round the edges of unaccustomed days. On a morning at the market I ask a woman heading out if I might use her cart when she's done. I keep the socially prescribed distance, trailing, so that she might unload at her car. Senior hour has ended, and the woman's mother carefully dodders along. She is 82 and lovely, her accent silky and warm. She warns me there are no potatoes, no Clorox, no dried beans, no eggs. The daughter smiles, forbearing, at her mother's need to chat. The skies are a B-movie above us, unseasonably overcast and dark. I am masked and I am gloved, but the woman and her mother are not. The lot is teeming, cars still inching in. "We got here early," the older woman says. Her cheeks and brow are beautifully etched, her fingers lingering on the

emptied cart are parchment. She blesses me, tells me there is kindness in my eyes, and I see the mirrored versions of ourselves standing closer, talking longer.

As of now there are 3,728 cases and 155 deaths in Nevada. Globally, playwrights and doctors, musicians and artists, delivery persons and pastors have tragically succumbed. A friend quarantined in Manhattan texts daily; his latest report cites the frightening number of NYPD testing positive, while down in Georgia, my cousin KeKe is thankfully off the ventilator and now recovering. I sleep with the light on, wake before dawn: sip tea laced with turmeric, write, love on my sons. I prep elaborate lentil soups, bake peach cobblers with my mom. I read, stretch, e-chat with my students, catch-up via webcam with other women in the arts. Come Saturday, or Sunday, or maybe a Monday — I saddle my dog to her harness for another restless walk.

With casinos decreed nonessential and their doors temporarily closed, my neighbor, a Strip entertainer, has rolled a magic cabinet to the edge of his lawn. He's going to perform anyway. I make a point of crossing to the opposite side of the street, averting my gaze and cooing softly to my pug. I don't want to break the spell my neighbor is crafting. I want my neighbor's magic to hold. But I have already seen the partition lifted, have already heard a woman's voice drift out from behind the false door. Clearly a contortionist to fit the way she does, she is suggesting some adjustments to accommodate her more. They are professionals together. But I know the panic in her tone. I seek comfort in believing they have worked this magic before. *

#PandemicLife

'Our 4-year-old found a dead rat in the backyard. Time for Science Class.'

By Kim Foster

RIGHT NOW, I'm not wearing pants.

I've completely given up and now just wear pajamas. My day jammies, however, should not be confused with my night jammies. They are two totally different pieces of apparel. You see, my night pajamas have a little tomato sauce stain from when my husband, David, and I were binge-watching Tiger King, and there's that moment when Joe Exotic takes his third, hot, completely straight, hillbilly husband, and I go to dip my mozzarella stick into the tomato sauce. but I'm screaming at the TV, and I hit the sauce dish with my foot, and it splatters all over my leg.

I only wear those pajamas at night now. But that could change if I wash them and adopt semi-normal cleanliness standards. But let's be real: Probably not gonna happen.

My day pajamas are not stained. I wear them, with a cleanish, oversized gray sweater when I Zoom with my colleagues. My colleagues are probably naked from the waist down, anyway. This is what it means to be in this together - pretending shit isn't happening as a group.

If my coworkers could see my day pajamas, they'd see how dusty white they are. This is where I wipe my hands while baking sourdough. It is very trendy right now to bake the sourdough. All the cool kids in quarantine are doing it. My neighbor brought me a jar with some starter in it, and I have been feeding it like a newborn baby, making sure it is in a warm place, carefully opening the top to see if the little holes are forming, which tells me that Geraldo is happy. That's right, I named a jar of fermenting bacteria Geraldo. He is my weird-smelling little friend.

Don't judge. Geraldo is getting me through self-isolation.

There's that term again: self-isolation.

That's confusing. See, David and I have four kids. We are never isolated. We have not really been alone since 2005. Isolation is more like a dream than a state-imposed condition. In fact, in the weeks we've been quarantined together, David and I have not said one complete sentence that hasn't been viciously interrupted by a child demanding toast or quesadillas or explaining the intricacies of their poop.

"It looks like a giant brown worm but with pieces of corn in it!"

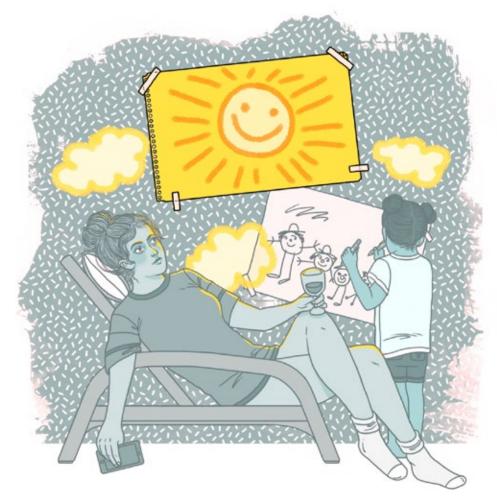
Obviously, we are homeschoolers now. Yesterday, I spent three hours creating an elaborate scavenger hunt, featuring Pinterest-inspired, hand-lettered cards and objects that I shaped out of clay, stashed through the neighborhood. I Instagrammed it. "You are the coolest mom!" someone wrote in the comments. It took the kids 10 minutes to find everything, and then they were bored again. I am thinking about burning Pinterest to the ground.

But things recently took a turn for the better. Our 4-year-old, Desi, found a dead rat in the backyard. Time for Science Class. She carried it around in a Ziploc all day. His name is also Geraldo. This experience allowed us to work on important pre-K vocabulary concepts like "rigor mortis" and "blood pooling."

The unlikely hero of the quarantine is our 15-year-old daughter, Lucy. In the absence of her friends, she has taken to her room to watch a solid 15 seasons of Criminal Minds. We try to lure her out with vegan dinners and threats of dinner table conversation, but she is unfazed.

"Total. Isolation. That's what the governor told us," she says, her hair freshly washed every day and her nails manicured, as if she might get a date to the quarantine. "I'm saving the planet," she scoffs without cracking a smile and then locks herself back in her room. I hear the Criminal Minds theme song again, and I know we've lost her.

Which brings me to our son, Raffi, who could basically ride out this thing in his socks and underwear, on the couch, eating giant Costco bags of cheese sticks and letting Fortnite be his mommy. He is in this for the long haul. To save water, he has given up bathing or brushing his teeth, and could weather any pandemic as long as he has his Nintendo Switch, an internet connection. and a supply of cheddar cheese cubes. I fear he might have coronavirus because he can no longer smell the stench of his own feet. We stay six feet from him at all times. He hasn't noticed.



But I am mostly proud of David for how he's used his time. He has stood over the coffee-maker, morning after morning, painstakingly making and remaking 13-year-old Edie's coffee to her exacting specifications, since she can no longer go to Starbucks. Finally he nailed it - an Iced Grande Vanilla Latte with whole milk and exactly 18 grams of vanilla, which we think might be two pumps.

"Ummmm, yeah, it's okay," she says.

Next week, he'll watch 100 YouTube videos and learn how to make the little heart swirl on top.

The days are looking pretty much the same around here. Is it 2 p.m. already? Wednesday? Where's the relief of a Friday? No matter. It's wine o'clock every damned day. And no need to wait until we all get home from work - it's always cocktail hour in a crisis! Twenty years from now our kids will tell their therapists about how they were educated by day drinkers.

One big plus is that I no longer have to pack lunches for my kids. On the other hand, they want snacks and home-cooked meals pretty much all the time. And they get hungry at different times, so basically I'm running a short-order diner. For breakfast, the baby wants three sausage patties with a lot of ketchup. Raffi wants eggs, scrambled in butter. Edie, hater of all breakfast food, will eat ramen or quesadillas, and Lucy, who is vegan, wants

avocado toast. David is scrambled eggs with a little labneh mixed in, some scallions, and a big ol' dollop of Spicy Chili Crisp. This doesn't include midmorning snacks, prelunch bites, postlunch bingeing, a proper British tea, sitdown dinner with all the fixin's, or evening munchies. After social distancing is called off, I plan to work as a short-order cook in one of those busy diners, where the sassy waitress clacks her gum and hollers, "Gimme an Adam and Eve on a raft and wreck 'em, will ya?"

Now that I have all this free time, I'm working on one of my great aspirations becoming a viral Tik Tok mom. I've been practicing my moves in the mirror, picking out my favorite songs, working on my choreo. Of course, I couldn't care less about Tik Tok, but my teenagers will be mortified. I'm nearly giddy thinking about how much their friends will love it.

I know it's hard to be in isolation, and we all share the anxiety about what will happen as we move forward. And, you know, our livelihoods are all going to hell, and we might die hooked up to ventilators, so there's that — but I have developed some tips for getting through social-distancing at home. I call this list, "Things I Am Going to Be FINE With During the #Coronapocalypse":

• It's FINE to wake up feeling completely paralyzed, because the world actually is

falling apart. Don't look at Twitter until you've had a few belts of coffee and an SSRI. And maybe whiskey. Morning booze

- Feel free to Instagram that you are about to do yoga, lift weights, finish writing your true-crime novel, and then make sushi. We know it's a lie. It's FINE. No one will know you took a preservation-nap on the couch instead. Addendum: It's okay to watch a video of a chipper 22-year-old blonde Marie-Kondo-ing her bedroom closet, then silently wish her dead. You do not have to get shit done. Resist.
- Be mildly amused by videos of folks fighting over toilet paper, but maintain perspective. Connect to that part of you that would wrestle a lady to the ground for the last box of Playtex tampons. Accept that animal part of yourself. It will help you survive. The animal in you is FINE.
- Eat that pound of Whole Foods dark chocolate that you thought would last the whole quarantine. Forgive yourself. The #Corona15 is real, and it's FINE.
- Let yourself become super-existential in the shower — if you do, in fact, decide to shower — and ask a lot of questions that can never be answered. Like, Why didn't our government prepare for this? Can I make a face mask out of my underpants? Can it be the apocalypse without zombies? Why is my apocalypse wardrobe flannel pajamas? Acknowledge that you would be so much more bad-ass wielding a katana and wearing a leather bustier. But stick with the pajamas. This is FINE, too.
- If you are a parent, it's FINE to turn on Pink Panther so you can have 20 minutes of uninterrupted sex on the bathroom floor. The sex will make a whole lot of everything better, so just do it. If the kids bust through the lock and walk in, pretend you both are searching for a lost contact, coincidentally while naked.

In the end, we are all in this together. Let's check on each other, barter for goods, be nice to cashiers, bank tellers, mail carriers, medical folks, and gas station attendants, and send little gifts of food and wine to brighten each other's day. I appreciate every little gift and sweetness that has been given to us.

Still, if you happen by my house and you see my kids in the street, kindly don't worry about making them come back inside. We are having a fire drill. A long one.

Because #PandemicLife is the new normal, at least for now, we just have to buck up and deal as best we can. Meanwhile, the Geraldos send their best. *

Social Distance

In shut-down Las Vegas, another kind of distance separates us: the wide chasm of inequality

By José Orduña

AS I DRIVE toward the Strip, I see remnants of the last catastrophe everywhere: bumper stickers on Kias and billboards on the side of the highway that read "#VegasStrong," the tagline commemorating the massacre that occurred here on October 1, 2017. Along with the slogan, there was the void left by the shooter — a black rectangle surrounded by gold on the north wing of the Mandalay Bay Hotel and Casino where Stephen Paddock fired more than a thousand rounds into a mass of people. I peered into it for days, maybe weeks, every time I went to the university where I work, turning from Russell Road onto Maryland Parkway. It was discomforting, but also made the horror tangible. It reminded me of what had occurred, meaning the threat was over. On one of those occasions, staring at the broken-out window, I remember thinking that it felt particularly "American" that the deadliest mass shooting in this country's history was carried out by an individual.

> I head toward the Strip because, after two weeks in isolation with my wife and baby, I need to see some artefact of this catastrophe in person. We've been lucky in that, so far, the sickness hasn't come into our home, except in the form of apocalyptic headlines, small photos of medical personnel on my laptop screen, and charts with curves that represent the hundreds of thousands of projected dead. But I know the hammer is coming down soon. My parents, both hourly employees and renters in Chicago, are in their late fifties. My mom's hours have dried up, and my dad who works at a grocery store and has high blood pressure has the "choice" to either continue going to work risking his life for a subsistence wage and his employer-provided health insurance, or quit or get fired and be left with no health insurance and no unemployment benefits. Still, for those of us who haven't yet become symptomatic, there's an unsettling ambiguity that makes the virus somehow ubiquitous but also elusive; there's an irreconcilable dissonance between staring out the window at a sunny day and the reality of field hospitals in Central Park, medical personnel working without protective equipment, and refrigerated trailers for the mass of accumulating bodies.

Parking lots that are usually teeming - Spearmint Rhino and Planet 13 - are dead. I pass Trump International Hotel and the trash-strewn lot next to it before turning south onto Las Vegas Boulevard. The lot was supposed to be a second high-rise that was aborted amid the financial crash of 2008. The golden tower abutted by fenced-in blight now looms over an almost completely abandoned Strip. The continuity of the ruin makes it feel as though these crises aren't distinct, but are instead fissures in one long disintegration. The things I see on the Strip look like a second-rate disaster movie: a few mallards linger around the doors of a shuttered casino, loose clusters of pigeons idle in the middle of the boulevard, the fountains at the Bellagio are stagnant, the roller coaster that usually hurls screaming tourists behind the fake Statue of Liberty is silent and still. The colossal LED screen above the 24-hour CVS cycles from an advertisement for a themed saloon to an ominous CDC PSA imploring the public not to touch their eyes, nose, and mouth. The only people I see are a handful of workers in neon yellow vests. One woman pushes a cleaning cart across an otherwise abandoned elevated walkway, two men ride a maintenance cart down the sidewalk, and most absurdly, a man carefully clips the hedges in front of the darkened Louis Vuitton store into perfect geometric shapes.

The familiarity of today's movie images of desolate urban spaces that signal apocalypse reveal the specificities of this country's death fantasy. Hours after returning home from my drive, I see social media images of traffic jams on the Strip that night. Everyone wants to see it. The buildings are all intact, and many of the lights are still blinking. What's missing, and this absence usually signals the apocalypse, here and in the movies, is dynamism. The Strip is a space that completely relies on, and is therefore made and maintained by, a controlled frenzy: the buzzing-about of people, the perpetual flow of traffic, the continuous extraction of money. But now, in an ironic reversal, life requires that everything freeze. This may seem like a novel development - this catch-22 in which we're left to choose between health or perhaps life itself, and money, but masses of workers have been stuck in this impossible situation long before this pandemic came into being. It's not a choice that arises from the nature of this virus, but one that has been constructed by the imperatives of our economic and political systems. Now it's become clearer to many, because it's become generalized, that this system

Just before the Strip suddenly disappears on its south end, a giant Sphinx sits before a black pyramid. An image like this corroborates the idea of Las Vegas as pure spectacle, or the ultimate postmodern city, as some very smart people have declared it. But the imperatives that animate this valley in the desert feel very old to me: the giving oneself to an image one knows is false, the monetizing of the id, and a surplus of good old American exploitation. As

requires us to feed it our people.

much as this is a place of spectacle, it's also a place of service doors and loading bays, undocumented immigrants and low-income veterans, schoolchildren on WIC benefits and single mothers working multiple jobs. The same boulevard that contains a replica pyramid, Eiffel Tower, and Statue of Liberty very quickly turns into strip malls and dingy cheap motels. I see a few people ambling around, some sitting on concrete parking lot barriers, others lingering around shuttered convenience stores. I assume they've got nowhere to go, no home to shelter-in-place within, and now no flow of pedestrians from whom to squeeze a few bucks.

In early March, I stood in front of a classroom full of university students less than two miles from here. We discussed a literary passage where two people suffered from asthma; one was a traveling medical student from an affluent family, and the other was a poor old woman living in a one-room shack. My students, many of whom are Latino and working-class, some of whom work on the Strip, drove straight to the heart of the matter. One of them brought up the notion that although both people would undoubtedly suffer, one of them had access to resources that might alleviate their suffering, while the other didn't. Another brought up the idea that there are a whole host of diseases for which science has cures, but that nevertheless continue to kill innumerable people across the globe. To that point, another student added, "Well, if that's true, can we really say it's the disease that's doing the killing?"

I canceled the following in-person class, then it was spring break, and then everything shut down. Less than two weeks after our discussion, my students and I were immersed in an object lesson that's still ongoing. As New York City became the epicenter, the rich fled the density of the





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metropolis for their bucolic summer homes. Those of us who still have jobs are divided into people who can work from home, and those who now risk contracting the virus for their hourly wage and employer-provided health insurance, if they're lucky enough to have that benefit. Since having our nine-month-old, my wife and I have been relying heavily on ordering everything online, including groceries. When we place an order now, we also displace the risk we would incur by going into a supermarket onto a gig worker.

Early on, politicians and media figures offered the public their version of reassurances. They'd said mostly the elderly and those with underlying health conditions would die, and we're now starting to see some of what that actually means. In addition to the elderly, initial reports out of Chicago and Louisiana indicate that black Americans are dying at an alarmingly high proportion. Chicago's black community makes up 30 percent of the overall population, but 72 percent of those killed by COVID-19. In Louisiana the numbers are even worse. It's by now common knowledge among doctors and researchers that the poor and racial and ethnic minorities suffer from catastrophically high incidences of underlying conditions, like hypertension, Type 2 diabetes, and cardiovascular disease, in other words preventable but nevertheless prevalent chronic diseases. Here in Las Vegas, we're the U.S. city with the highest share of undocumented immigrants, and we're among the top ten cities with the highest homeless population — both communities already at incredibly high risk, and both expressly or de facto excluded from stimulus relief.

During our discussion, I'd asked my students to imagine how forces of nature move through social structures and institutions before becoming effects in peoples' lives. I asked them to imagine a wave washing onto the beach, how it comes in and washes over the sand evenly, and then recedes. Then I asked them to imagine that a few kids playing on the beach dug a trench and a large hole. The wave comes in, and instead of washing evenly over the sand, it's channeled into the hole. When the water recedes, the hole remains filled. Researchers from Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health say that "approximately 245.000 deaths in the United States in the year 2000 were attributable to low levels of education, 176,000 to racial segregation. 162,000 to low social support, 133,000 to individual-level poverty, 119,000 to income inequality, and 39,000 to area-level poverty." The researchers concluded that, "Overall, 4.5% of U.S. deaths were found to be attributable to poverty."

On Saturday April 4, Donald Trump appears on the television and tells the American people that "There will be a lot of death, unfortunately." What he means, more specifically, is that there will likely be a level and distribution of death that we're not well-adjusted to. Society functions without a hitch when premature death and suffering is concentrated in poor, working-class, and racialized populations - those for whom we expect life to be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." And although this virus will surely affect those marginalized by our systems with particular brutality, its high transmissibility is also overwhelming that order. At the time I'm writing this, Boris Johnson, the prime minister of the United Kingdom, is in an intensive care unit receiving oxygen. Paradoxically, at a time when the prescribed intervention is social distance, when we're shuttered away in isolation and asked to only interact with those in our household, it's become impossible to ignore our social reality; the fact that life doesn't allow us to live as granular individuals, that our survival is bound to the survival of others.

On the morning of Tuesday, April 7, my wife and I read that the previous day, the cumulative U.S. death toll exceeded 10,000. We decide to not read any news for the rest of the day, and go for a walk in the park with our nine-month-old son. During this outbreak, he's made us feel both painfully vulnerable but also lost to the world in his games and laughter. There are a few other parents out with their children, everyone avoiding each other in clusters. We see a woman with two young kids on a blanket in the grass. The woman sits, while the kids dance around her singing "Ring Around the Rosie." Despite historians casting doubt on the nursery rhyme's infamous connection to the plague, children do make games out of the stuff of life, including tragedies like disease and mass death. During the SARS outbreak in Toronto in 2003, children played SARS tag, running around pretending to infect one another with the virus that was killing people in their city.

Our boy is too young to know what's happening, but his mother and I fear what kinds of games he'll have to play when he's older. The kids in our park seem too young to have gallows humor, but their words end our walk nevertheless: "Ashes, ashes, we all fall down." +

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ALISHA KERLIN Marjorie Barrick Museum of Art

ANDREW KIRALY Desert Companion

HEIDI KYSER Desert Companion

SCOTT LIEN Desert Companion

VOGUE ROBINSON Former Clark County Poet Laureate

CHRISTOPHER SMITH Desert Companion

HAVE WE REACHED the new normal yet? Or is this just the *newest* new normal, with others to follow? Or, what if - oh, never mind. As Las Vegans, we know change is constant and unpredictable. So, instead, let's dwell on these images, winners of our 2020 Focus on Nevada photo contest, and what they remind us of, which is that "normal" fluctuates, but many things endure. Beauty. The power of nature. The energy of cities. The mysteries of human nature. The magical interplay of light, subject, and a photographer's inspired eye. Congratulations to these winners for providing bright visions in an uncertain time.

ARTISTIC & ABSTRACT

2nd Place

BRYNE HOBBS PROFESSIONAL

of the Strip is actually from the 65th floor of the Cosmopolitan. My wife got us a room with a balcony for our anniversary staycation specifically so I could take some photos."





1 JONATHAN HAMLET **PROFESSIONAL**

"This is the 'Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas' sign shot in macro with extension tubes and water droplets on a plate of glass."

2 NORM CRAFT AMATEUR/STUDENT

"This is all that's left of the back stairs at the old school in Rhyolite."

3 CONRAD BASILIO SEMIPROFESSIONAL

"Taken from the ongoing construction of the Las Vegas Convention Center addition. The scaffoldings were truly everywhere. It's like a maze."

4 COURTNEY KNAUP AMATEUR/STUDENT

"After a winter rain at Red Rock, water pooled around these rocks. Overnight, the surface froze and the pool drained, leaving these rocks entombed in a hanging sheet of ice."

5 DOUGLAS HUGHES AMATEUR/STUDENT

"Lights and action from the Pinball Hall of Fame."

6 TAYLER ALTMAN **SEMIPROFESSIONAL**

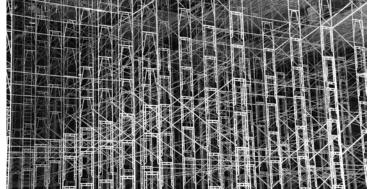
"A drape and LED screen in the Sahara Las Vegas hotelcasino. Very much different than you would think."

















1st Place TIMOTHY SALAZ PROFESSIONAL

"Dancer Amanda Powell at the dry lake beds in Boulder City. I wanted to capture dance, but tell a story in the process."

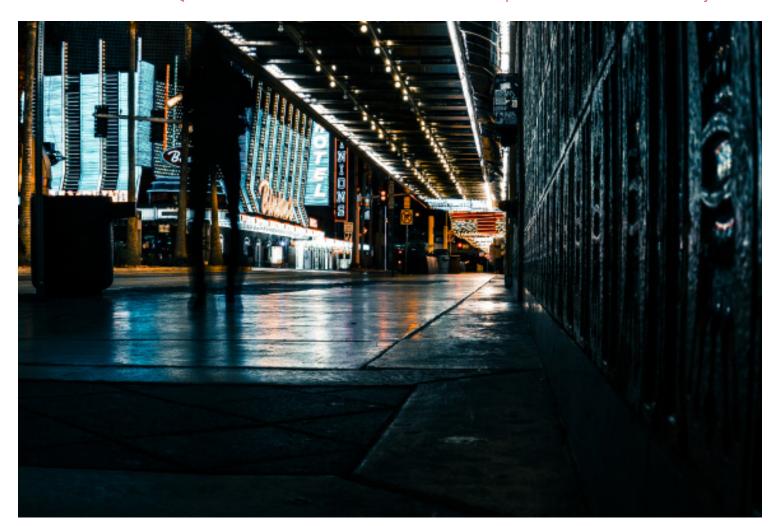


CITY SCENES









1st Place

ANTONIO LOPEZ

AMATEUR/STUDENT

"The bright lights of Fremont. Bright even through dark times."







2nd Place

MARCI CHRISTIE **SEMIPROFESSIONAL**

"The Las Vegas Strip taken from an airplane window flying back to my new home of South Lake Tahoe. I was born and raised in Las Vegas, so I visit my family often since moving away."

Honorable Mentions

1 NATALIE BURT AMATEUR/STUDENT

"Suite views from Vdara looking down at CityCenter on a Sunday morning."

2 DERRICK ADABASHI PROFESSIONAL

"A buddy and I just decided on a whim to go shoot Downtown a few years back. I feel you get some of your best shots when you don't plan them."

3 SAMUEL MARSHALL AMATEUR/STUDENT

"Saw this opportunity to head down to the Strip when it officially closed it doors due to coronavirus. Had to capture this lonely guy outside on the sidewalk, just a perfect moment that captures how empty the sidewalks are now."

4 PAUL REYNOLDS AMATEUR/STUDENT

A man walks by a colorful mural Downtown.

5 MIKE COWAN **SEMIPROFESSIONAL**

"The supermoon photo-bombs the Stratosphere as it prepares to set over Las Vegas."

FOCUS ON NEVADA **STORYTELLER**





2nd Place

ROCKY MONTEZ-CARR PROFESSIONAL

"We were out in the Eldorado Dry Lake Beds shooting Gladius the Show and its horses. I had my drone up in the air when the sun was low in the sky and I saw this shot. I loved how long the shadow was."



Honorable Mentions

1 TIMOTHY SALAZ **PROFESSIONAL** Native American dancers Jocy and Trae

Little Sky.

2 JUSTINE BURTON AMATEUR/STUDENT "Is it ice? Is it snow?

Is it salt? A young boy jumps with joy in the otherworldly playground of Death Valley."

3 JUAN CARDENAS PROFESSIONAL

"Former UFC light heavyweight champion Chuck Liddell watches Conor McGregor weigh in ahead of his fight at UFC 246."

4 CARLOS MANZO **SEMIPROFESSIONAL**

Spider-Man looks on as another street entertainer performs a card trick at the Fremont Street Experience.



1st Place

HOMER LIWAG SEMIPROFESSIONAL

"My parents antique shopping while attending the annual Dam Short Film Festival in Boulder City."









FOCUS ON NEVADA

THE RURALS



2nd Place

MARCI CHRISTIE SEMIPROFESSIONAL

"This was taken in Tonopah after having no choice but to pull over from a very foggy night driving through Nevada. We stayed at the Mizpah Hotel, and this was our

view from the window."





1st Place

CASSIA LOPEZ **PROFESSIONAL**

A girl plays in a puddle after a desert rain in Logandale.

Honorable Mentions

1 PAUL REYNOLDS AMATEUR/STUDENT

"Seven-year-old Maylee competes in her first Mutton-Bustin' event at the Clark County Fair and Rodeo in Logandale."

2 NORM CRAFT AMATEUR/STUDENT

A ghost gas station in Rachel.

3 DARIA OSIPOVA **SEMIPROFESSIONAL**

An RV in rural Nevada as storm clouds gather on the horizon.

4 CARLOS MANZO SEMIPROFESSIONAL

"Driving through Beatty after camping in Death Valley on Thanksgiving weekend, we came across this group of burros stopping for a bite at the local diner."









FOCUS ON NEVADA

WILD NEVADA

Honorable Mentions

1 WARREN LEE SEMIPROFESSIONAL

"Take a gander at that handsome dude. The old Henderson quarry, now Cornerstone Park, is a rich area for sunlight, wildlife, and exercise with social distancing. Early morning provides interesting opportunities."

2 ALEX ISOM **SEMIPROFESSIONAL**

"Taken during the Blood Moon of early 2018 at Red Rock. I scouted out the location the day prior and prayed for good visibility. As the moon lowered behind Mount Wilson, I thought it was over. I walked north about 50 yards and saw that the moon was sliding down the side of Mount Wilson. The clouds were thin and low. I shot as best as I could and got the tree as a bonus. It was an incredible experience."

3 JARROD AMES PROFESSIONAL

"This is the Big Dune at Amargosa, two hours north of Las Vegas. Through the freezing temperature and the windchill, I was able to line up this photograph of the Big Dune with the moon behind it."

4 HOMER LIWAG **SEMIPROFESSIONAL**

"The layers of Red Rock Canyon revealed by storm clouds on an unpredictable but beautiful sunset."

5 THERESE DONEY AMATEUR/STUDENT

A bird relaxes at Sunset Park pond.

6 DANIEL SHUMNY SEMIPROFESSIONAL A vibrant Valley of Fire





2nd Place

HELEN MONTEZ-CARR AMATEUR/STUDENT

"We found this tiny fence lizard inside our window. Before we moved him to safety, he was kind enough to let me take a few photos. He was perfectly calm and only cared that he was able to bask in the sun."













1st Place

WARREN LEE SEMIPROFESSIONAL

"Costas and Annas hummingbirds are yearround residents of the valley. This female is enjoying a solar fountain in our backyard. Our bright desert light enables a fast shutter, which suspended droplets in mid-air and 'caught' the wide open beak of this female."

LIGHT & SHADOW



1st Place

JIM WILTSE **SEMIPROFESSIONAL**

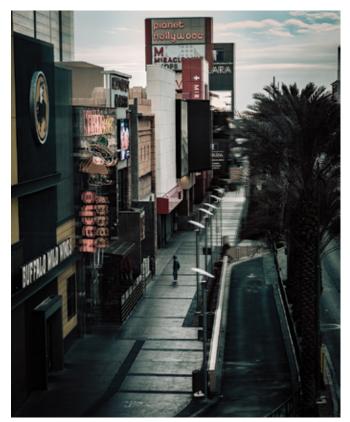
"On my granddaughter's birthday, she was a little sad when it was over, laying in the grass in my backyard with a balloon as I was trying to take her picture."

2nd Place JONATHAN BOARINI AMATEUR/STUDENT "The harsh light of the afternoon creates mysterious silhouettes among the figures in the Las Vegas Strip."













Honorable Mentions

1 BRENDAN STAVE SEMIPROFESSIONAL

"This was taken in The Shops at Crystals. I was impressed by the geometric designs that encompassed the insides, as well as the dramatic light that was hitting this certain section of geometry."

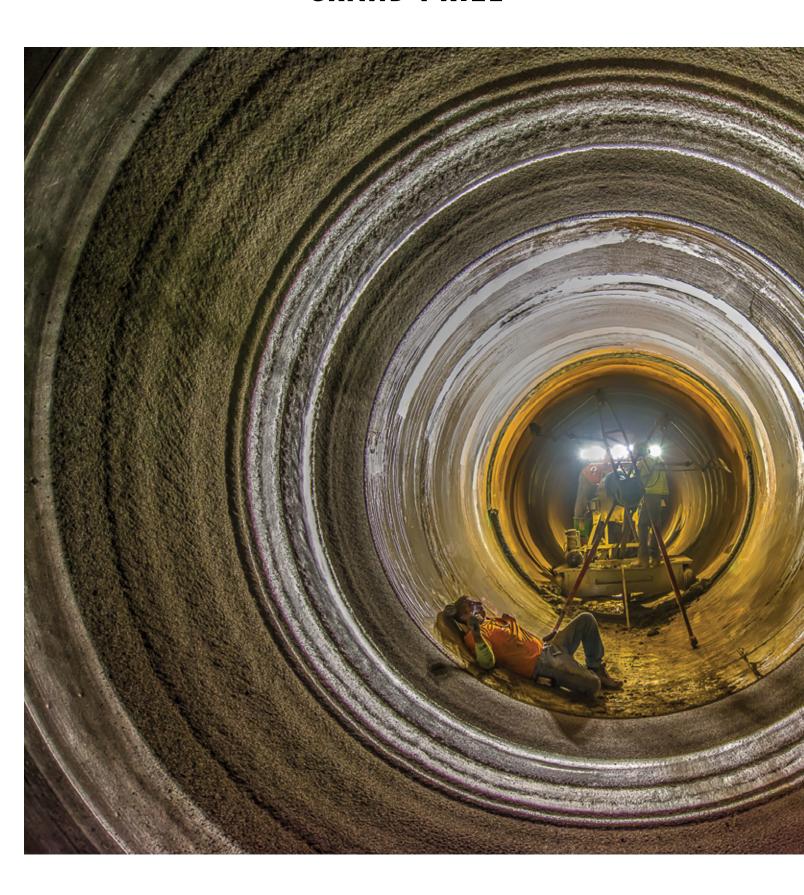
2 HERB HOLDER SEMIPROFESSIONAL A hotel-casino interior photographed in high contrast.

3 ANTHONY DONOFRIO AMATEUR/STUDENT The Big Dipper hangs over a dark desert highway near Valley of Fire.

5

4 BRYNE HOBBS PROFESSIONAL Reflections of a staircase in Downtown Las Vegas. **5 CONNIE ANN SANTOS PROFESSIONAL** "This is a portrait of my friend Ami Divine I took in my home studio."

GRAND PRIZE





MIKE COWAN SEMIPROFESSIONAL

"An exhausted foreman of a construction crew installing cement mortar lining inside a large underground water pipeline takes a smoke break. Meanwhile, his crew resolves mechanical issues with the equipment in the extremely hot and humid pipe."



CLARK COUNTY WETLANDS **PARK**

Everybody's fleeing to the outdoors these days – but there's still plenty of rich solitude to go around Lifeless in appearance, sluggish dazed spring approaches-

"Spring and All," William Carlos Williams

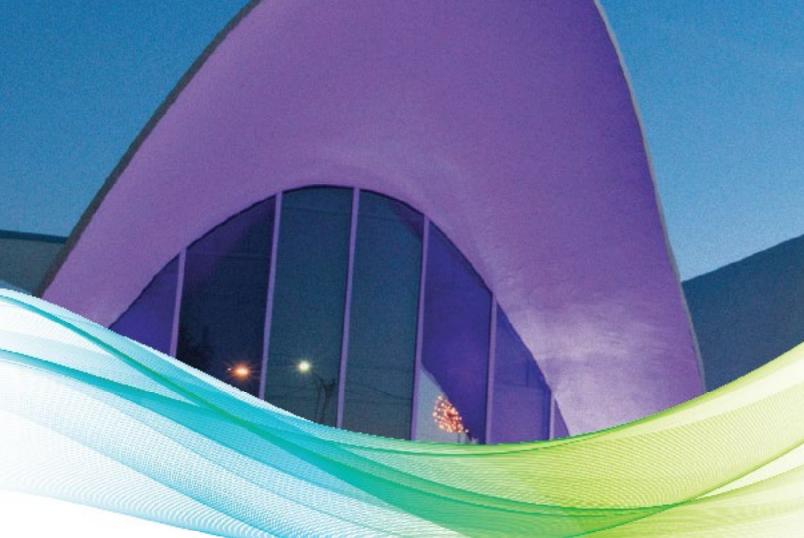
he outdoors has always been an escape, but now it's our only escape. So it's different today when you see other escapists on a perfectly glittering spring day at a place like the Clark County Wetlands Park because we know that we're all getting away from the same thing; the pandemic has recast our parks and recreation areas from places of private renewal into agora for something like wordless public moping. We aren't exactly *drawn* to these spaces like before; it's more as though we're driven there like exiles. This is the tourism of last resorts.

You could totally burrow into your head about this, as I did on that recent spring day. But the great blessing of the outdoors is that nature doesn't care about your philosophical maundering. Its surpassing cosmic indifference will startle you into comic zen moments like when you're stepping too close to a pond to get a better Instagram shot of the birds wheeling and swooping over the water for insects but then the spongy bank heaves inward to muddily consume your shoe and a good portion of your pant leg. Lol nature, good one.

I know, I know. The wetlands park isn't exactly "nature," but rather a highly engineered reconstruction of it. There's an easy metaphor in there somewhere, yours if you want it, for resilience, undying human enterprise, determined imagination. But the gravel trails that stray off the concrete walkways still offer the promise of legit solitude away from the increasing crowds. (I'm still getting used to the twinge of anxiety when I hear feet crunching nearby - a jogger coming my way? Is the path wide enough for social distancing? Should I turn around, dart away?)

Perhaps oddly, my favorite thing to do is wander off on the paths that snake between the tall reeds and spook myself with Children of the Corn vibes — like, wow, it's just me and all the scary unseen forces. But if I have to be less specific and less juvenile about it, the vibe is that of the old solitude we used to enjoy before the pandemic turned our homes into lonesome hibernation chambers — the free refill, the soul defrag, the walking meditation, the nourishing, voluntary solitude that, like a deep sleep, reintroduces the self to the principle of fresh possibility. Possibility cuts a thousand ways; there are no guarantees of any outcome. Prediction, we've learned, is a moribund ritual, but preparedness for what's next — in the most generous, affirmative sense

is as vital as ever. Andrew Kiraly



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enriching the lives of all Nevadans

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