graduation song, and as a we-just-beat-Barcelona-in-the-Champions-League song. As former Liverpool player and manager Kenny Dalglish said, "It covers adversity and sadness and it covers the success." It's a song about sticking together even when your dreams are tossed and blown. It's a song about both the storm and the golden sky.

At first blush, it may seem odd that the world's most popular football song comes from musical theater. But football *is* theater, and fans make it musical theater. The anthem of West Ham United is called "I'm Forever Blowing Bubbles," and at the start of each game, you'll see thousands of grown adults blowing bubbles from the stands as they sing, "I'm forever blowing bubbles, pretty bubbles in the air / They fly so high, nearly reach the sky / Then like my dreams, they fade and die." Manchester United fans refashioned Julia Ward Howe's U.S. Civil War anthem "Battle Hymn of the Republic" into the song "Glory, Glory Man United." Manchester City fans sing "Blue Moon," a 1934 Rodgers and Hart number.

All these songs are made great by the communities singing them. They are assertions of unity in sorrow and unity in triumph: Whether the bubble is flying or bursting, we sing together.

"You'll Never Walk Alone" is cheesy, but it's not wrong. The song doesn't claim the world is a just or happy place. It just asks us to walk on with hope in our hearts. And like Louise at the end of *Carousel*, even if you don't really believe in the golden sky or the sweet silver song of the lark when you start singing, you believe it a little more when you finish.

In March 2020, a video made the rounds online in which a group of British paramedics sang "You'll Never Walk Alone" through a glass wall to coworkers on the other side, who were in an intensive care unit. The paramedics were trying to encourage their colleagues. What a word that is, *en-courage*. Though our dreams be tossed and blown, still we sing ourselves and one another into courage.

I give "You'll Never Walk Alone" four and a half stars.

HUMANITY'S TEMPORAL RANGE

WHEN I WAS NINE OR TEN, I saw a planetarium show at the Orlando Science Center in which the host, with no apparent emotion in his voice, explained that in about a billion years, the sun will be 10 percent more luminescent than it is now, likely resulting in the runaway evaporation of Earth's oceans. In about four billion years, Earth's surface will become so hot that it will melt. In seven or eight billion years, the sun will be a red giant star, and it will expand until eventually our planet will be sucked into it, and any remaining Earthly evidence of what we thought or said or did will be absorbed into a burning sphere of plasma.

Thanks for visiting the Orlando Science Center. The exit is to your left.

It has taken me most of the last thirty-five years to recover from that presentation. I would later learn that many of the stars we see in the night sky are red giants, including Arcturus. Red giants are common. It is common for stars to grow larger and engulf their once-habitable solar systems. It's no wonder we worry about the end of the world. Worlds end all the time.

A 2012 survey conducted across twenty countries found wide variance in the percentage of people who believe humanity will end within their lifetimes. In France, 6 percent of those polled did; in the United States, 22 percent. This makes a kind of sense: France has been home to apocalyptic preachers—the bishop Martin of Tours, for instance, wrote "There is no doubt that the Antichrist has already been born." But that was back in the fourth century. American apocalypticism has a much more recent history, from Shaker predictions the world would end in 1794 to famed radio evangelist Harold Camping's calculations that the apocalypse was coming in 1994—and then, when that didn't happen, in 1995. Camping went on to announce that the end times would commence on May 21, 2011, after which would come "five months of fire, brimstone and plagues on Earth, with millions of people dying each day, culminating on October 21st, 2011 with the final destruction of the world." When none of this came to pass, Camping said, "We humbly acknowledge we were wrong about the timing," although for the record no individual ever humbly acknowledged anything while referring to themselves as "we." I'm reminded of something my religion professor Donald Rogan told me once: "Never predict the end of the world. You're almost certain to be wrong, and if you're right, no one will be around to congratulate you."

Camping's personal apocalypse arrived in 2013, when he died at the age of ninety-two. Part of our fears about *the* world ending must stem from the strange reality that for each of us *our* world will end, and soon. In that sense, maybe apocalyptic anxieties are a by-product of humanity's astonishing capacity for narcissism. How could the world possibly survive the death of its single most important inhabitant—me? But I think something else is at work. We know we will end in part because we know other species have ended.

"Modern humans," as we are called by paleontologists, have been around for about 250,000 years. This is our so-called "temporal range,"

the length of time we've been a species. Contemporary elephants are at least ten times older than us—their temporal range extends back to the Pliocene Epoch, which ended more than 2.5 million years ago. Alpacas have been around for something like 10 million years—forty times longer than us. The tuatara, a species of reptile that lives in New Zealand, first emerged around 240 million years ago. They've been here a thousand times longer than we have, since before Earth's supercontinent of Pangaea began to break apart.

We are younger than polar bears and coyotes and blue whales and camels. We are also far younger than many animals we drove to extinction, from the dodo to the giant sloth.

In the spring of 2020, a few weeks after the emergence of a novel coronavirus began to shut schools and clear out grocery stores in the U.S., someone sent me a collection they'd made of times I'd publicly mentioned my fear of an infectious disease pandemic. On the podcast *10 Things That Scare Me*, I'd listed near the top, "a global disease pandemic that will result in the breakdown of human norms." Years earlier, in a video about world history, I'd speculated about what might happen "if some superbug shows up tomorrow and it travels all these global trade routes." In 2019, I'd said on a podcast, "We all must prepare ourselves for the global pandemic we all know is coming." And yet, I did nothing to prepare. The future, even in its inevitabilities, always feels vague and nebulous to me—until it doesn't.

After my kids' school closed, and after I'd found a mask that I'd bought years earlier to minimize sawdust inhalation while building their tree house, but long before I understood the scope of the pandemic, I called my brother, Hank, and told him I was feeling frightened. Hank is the levelheaded one, the sane one, the calm one. He always has been. We have never let the fact of my being older get in the way of Hank

being the wise older brother. Ever since we were little, one of the ways I've managed my anxiety is by looking to him. My brain cannot reliably report to me whether a perceived threat is really real, and so I look at Hank, and I see that he's not panicked, and I tell myself that I'm okay. If anything were *truly* wrong, Hank wouldn't be able to portray such calm confidence.

So I told Hank I was scared.

"The species will survive this," he answered, a little hitch in his voice.

"*The species will survive this?* That's all you've got for me???"

He paused. I could hear the tremble in his breath, the tremble he's been hearing in my breath our whole lives. "That's what I've got for you," he said after a moment.

I told Hank I'd bought sixty cans of Diet Dr Pepper, so that I could drink two for each day of the lockdown.

And only then could I hear the old smile, the my-older-brother-really-is-a-piece-of-work smile. "For someone who has spent four decades worrying about disease pandemics," he said, "you sure don't know how disease pandemics work."

One rule of retail marketing maintains that to maximize sales, businesses need to create a sense of urgency. *Mega-sale ends soon! Only a few tickets still available!* These commercial threats, especially in the age of e-commerce, are almost always a fiction. But they're effective, an echo of our apocalyptic visions: If we feel a sense of urgency about the human experiment, maybe we'll actually get to work, whether that's rushing to save souls before the Rapture or rushing to address climate change.

I try to remind myself that back in the fourth century, Martin of Tours's eschatological anxiety must have felt as real to him as my current anxiety feels to me. A thousand years ago, floods and plagues were seen as apocalyptic portents, because they were glimpses of a power far

beyond our understanding. By the time I was growing up, amid the rise of computers and hydrogen bombs, Y2K and nuclear winter made for better apocalyptic worries. Today, these worries sometimes focus on artificial intelligence run amok, or on a species-crushing pandemic that we have proven ourselves thoroughly unprepared for, but most commonly my worry takes the form of climate anxiety, or eco-anxiety—terms that did not exist a few decades ago but are now widespread phenomena.

Humans are already an ecological catastrophe. In just 250,000 years, our behavior has led to the extinction of many species, and driven many more into steep decline. This is lamentable, and it is also increasingly needless. We probably didn't know what we were doing thousands of years ago as we hunted some large mammals to extinction. But we know what we're doing now. We know how to tread more lightly upon the earth. We could choose to use less energy, eat less meat, clear fewer forests. And we choose not to. As a result, for many forms of life, humanity *is* the apocalypse.

There are worldviews that embrace cyclic cosmologies—Hindu eschatology, for instance, lays out a series of multibillion-year periods called kalpas during which the world goes through a cycle of formation, maintenance, and then decline. But in linear eschatologies, the end times for humanity are often referred to as "the end of the world," even though our departure from Earth will very probably not be the end of the world, nor will it be the end of life in the world.

Humans are a threat to our own species and to many others, but the planet will survive us. In fact, it may only take life on Earth a few million years to recover from us. Life has bounced back from far more serious shocks. Two hundred and fifty million years ago, during the Permian extinction, ocean surface waters likely reached 104 degrees Fahrenheit, or 40 degrees Celsius. Ninety-five percent of Earth's species went extinct,

and for five million years afterward, Earth was a "dead zone" with little expansion of life.

Sixty-six million years ago, an asteroid impact caused a dust cloud so huge that darkness may have pervaded Earth for *two years*, virtually stopping photosynthesis and leading to the extinction of 75 percent of land animals. Measured against these disasters, we're just not that important. When Earth is done with us, it'll be like, "Well, that Human Pox wasn't great, but at least I didn't get Large Asteroid Syndrome."

The hard part, evolutionarily, was getting from prokaryotic cells to eukaryotic ones, and then getting from single-celled organisms to multicellular ones. Earth is around 4.5 billion years old, a timescale I simply cannot get my head around. Instead, let's imagine Earth's history as a calendar year, with the formation of Earth being January 1, and today being December 31 at 11:59 PM. The first life on Earth emerges around February 25. Photosynthetic organisms first appear in late March. Multicellular life doesn't appear until August or September. The first dinosaurs like eoraptor show up about 230 million years ago, or December 13 in our calendar year. The meteor impact that heralds the end of the dinosaurs happens around December 26. *Homo sapiens* aren't part of the story until December 31 at 11:48 PM.[2]

Put another way: It took Earth about three billion years to go from single-celled life to multicellular life. It took less than seventy million years to go from *Tyrannosaurus rex* to humans who can read and write and dig up fossils and approximate the timeline of life and worry about its ending. Unless we somehow manage to eliminate all multicellular life from the planet, Earth won't have to start all the way over, and it will be okay—at least until the oceans evaporate and the planet gets consumed by the sun.

But we'll be gone by then, as will our collective and collected

2. Agriculture and large human communities and the building of monolithic structures all occur within the last minute of this calendar year. The Industrial Revolution, two world wars, the invention of basketball, recorded music, the electric dishwasher, and vehicles that travel faster than horses all happen in the last couple of seconds.

memory. I think part of what scares me about the end of humanity is the end of those memories. I believe that if a tree falls in the woods and no one is there to hear it, it does make a sound. But if no one is around to play Billie Holiday records, those songs really won't make a sound anymore. We've caused a lot of suffering, but we've also caused much else.

I know the world will survive us—and in some ways it will be *more* alive. More birdsong. More creatures roaming around. More plants cracking through our pavement, rewilding the planet we terraformed. I imagine coyotes sleeping in the ruins of the homes we built. I imagine our plastic still washing up on beaches hundreds of years after the last of us is gone. I imagine moths, having no artificial lights toward which to fly, turning back to the moon.

There is some comfort for me in knowing that life will go on even when we don't. But I would argue that when our light goes out, it will be Earth's greatest tragedy, because while I know humans are prone to grandiosity, I also think we are by far the most interesting thing that ever happened on Earth.

It's easy to forget how wondrous humans are, how strange and lovely. Through photography and art, each of us has seen things we'll never see—the surface of Mars, the bioluminescent fish of the deep ocean, a seventeenth-century girl with a pearl earring. Through empathy, we've felt things we might never have otherwise felt. Through the rich world of imagination, we've seen apocalypses large and small.

We're the only part of the known universe that knows it's in a universe. We know we are circling a star that will one day engulf us. We're the only species that knows it has a temporal range.

Complex organisms tend to have shorter temporal ranges than simple ones, and humanity faces tremendous challenges. We need to find a way to survive ourselves—to go on in a world where we are powerful enough

to warm the entire planet but not powerful enough to stop warming it. We may even have to survive our own obsolescence as technology learns to do more of what we do better than we can do it. But we are better positioned to solve our biggest problems than we were one hundred or one thousand years ago. Humans have more collective brainpower than we've ever had, and more resources, and more knowledge collected by our ancestors.

We are also shockingly, stupidly persistent. Early humans probably used many strategies for hunting and fishing, but a common one was persistence hunting. In a persistence hunt, the predator relies on tracking prowess and sheer perseverance. We would follow prey for hours, and each time it would run away from us, we'd follow, and it would run away again, and we'd follow, and it would run away again, until finally the quarry became too exhausted to continue. That's how for tens of thousands of years we've been eating creatures faster and stronger than us.

We. Just. Keep. Going. We spread across seven continents, including one that is entirely too cold for us. We sailed across oceans toward land we couldn't see and couldn't have known we would find. One of my favorite words is *dogged*. I love dogged pursuits, and dogged efforts, and dogged determination. Don't get me wrong—dogs are indeed very dogged. But they ought to call it *humaned*. Humaned determination.

For most of my life, I've believed we're in the fourth quarter of human history, and perhaps even the last days of it. But lately, I've come to believe that such despair only worsens our already slim chance at long-term survival. We must fight like there is something to fight for, like we are something worth fighting for, because we are. And so I choose to believe that we are not approaching the apocalypse, that the end is not coming, and that we will find a way to survive the coming changes.

"Change," Octavia Butler wrote, "is the one unavoidable, irresistible, ongoing reality of the universe." And who am I to say we are done

changing? Who am I to say that Butler was wrong when she wrote "The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars"? These days, I choose to believe that our persistence and our adaptability will allow us to keep changing with the universe for a very, very long time.

So far, at a paltry 250,000 years, it's hard to give humanity's temporal range more than one star. But while I initially found my brother's words distressing, these days I find myself repeating them, and believing them. He was right. He always is. The species will survive this, and much more to come.

And so in hope, and in expectation, I give our temporal range four stars.

How recent is penicillin? That police officer's daughter, who ended up in the orphanage, is still alive as of this writing. Sheila Alexander married an American soldier and moved to California. She's a painter. One of her recent paintings depicts a block of homes in an English village. Ivy grows up along the wall of one home, creeping over rough stone.

To me, one of the mysteries of life is *why* life wants to be. Life is so much more biochemical work than chemical equilibrium, but still, staph desperately seeks that work. As do I, come to think of it. *Staphylococcus* doesn't want to harm people. It doesn't know about people. It just wants to be, like I want to go on, like that ivy wants to spread across the wall, occupying more and more of it. How much? As much as it can.

It's not staph's fault that it wants to be. Nonetheless, I give *Staphylococcus aureus* one star.

THE INTERNET

WHEN THE INTERNET FIRST CAME to our house in the early 1990s, so far as I could tell, the internet was inside of a box. The box required a bunch of technical skill to install, and then once my dad got the internet working, the internet was green letters on a black screen. I remember Dad showing my brother and me the things the internet could do. "Look," he would say. "The internet can show you what the weather is like right now in Beijing." Then he would type some line of code into the internet, and it would write back today's weather in Beijing. "Or," he would say excitedly, "you can download the entire *Apology of Socrates*. For free! And read it right here, in the house."[20]

To my dad, this must have seemed like an actual miracle. But I was not a fan. For one thing, we couldn't get phone calls while my dad was online, on account of how the internet used the phone lines. Admittedly, fourteen-year-old me wasn't fielding a ton of calls, but still. More than that, it seemed to me that the internet was primarily a forum for talking about the internet—my dad would read (and tell us about) endless user

20. One of the weird solipsisms of American life, especially toward the end of the twentieth century, was that the news almost never talked about the weather outside of the United States unless there was some natural disaster unfolding. I guess I should also say that it is still kind of cool that you can download the *Apology of Socrates* for free on the internet.

manuals and message boards he'd read about how the internet worked, and what it might be able to do in the future, and so on.

One day, Dad showed me that on the internet, you could talk to real people all over the world. He explained, "You can practice your French by going to a French forum," and he showed me how it worked. I messaged a couple people on the forum: "Comment ça va?" They responded in real time, with real French, which was unfortunate, as I didn't know much French. I started wondering if there might be an English-language version of the service, and it turned out there was. In fact, there was one built just for me: the CompuServe Teen Forum.

On the CompuServe Teen Forum, nobody knew anything about me. They didn't know that I was a miserable, cringingly awkward kid whose voice often creaked with nervousness. They didn't know I was late to puberty, and they didn't know the names people called me at school.

And paradoxically, because they didn't know me, they knew me far better than anyone in my real life. I remember one evening, in an instant message conversation, I told my CompuServe friend Marie about the "night feeling." The night feeling was my private name for the wave that crashed over me most school nights when I got into bed. My stomach would tighten and I'd feel the worry radiating out from my belly button. I'd never told anyone about the night feeling, and my heart was racing as I typed. Marie responded that she also knew the night feeling, and that she sometimes found comfort in listening quietly to her clock radio. I tried that, and it helped.

But most of the time, my Teen Forum friend group did not share our secrets. We shared inside jokes, and learned/built/borrowed/created together. By the summer of 1993, the CompuServe Teen Forum was a vast universe of mythology and references, from jokes about the TV show *Barney & Friends* to endless acronyms and abbreviations. The internet was still just green letters on a black screen, so we couldn't use images, but we arranged text characters into shapes. The idea of ASCII art, as it

is known, had been around for decades, but *we* hadn't been around for decades, and so we felt like we were discovering it as we built everything from extremely simple images—like :-) for example—to ridiculously complex (and often obscene) ones. I don't recall using a word to describe what we were doing, but these days we would call this stuff memes.

That summer, with school out of the way, I was able to devote myself full-time to the Teen Forum. I even got something called an email address—a series of randomly generated digits @compuserve.com. Back then, the internet charged by the hour, which became a real issue because I wanted to spend every hour on it. Now it was my parents who complained about the phone line being tied up. They loved that I was making friends, that I was writing and reading so much, but they could not afford a one-hundred-dollar monthly internet bill. At this point, a lifeline appeared when I was "hired" as a moderator for the Teen Forum. The payment came in the form of all the free internet I wanted, and I wanted a lot of it. CompuServe even paid for a separate phone line so I could be online constantly. If a single event in my life occurred outdoors that summer, I do not recall it.

I fear I've been romanticizing. The early-nineties internet had many of the problems the current internet does. While I recall the Teen Forum being well moderated, the same racism and misogyny that populate today's comments sections was prevalent thirty years ago. And then, as now, you could fall very far down the rabbit hole of the internet's highly personalized information feeds until conspiracy theories began to feel more real than the so-called facts.[21]

21. I lived this experience, actually. In the early nineties, I became entranced by something called the Phantom Time Hypothesis, which held that around three hundred years of time between the seventh and tenth centuries never actually happened and were instead invented by the Catholic Church. I was originally turned on to this idea by one of those memes that is itself not sure whether it's ironic. The conspiracy theory, which was pretty widespread at the time, held that I was really living not in the year 1993 but instead around 1698, and that a bunch of years had been faked so that the Church could . . . maintain power? The details of it escape me, but it's amazing what you can believe when you're down the rabbit hole.

I have wonderful memories of that summer, and also traumatic ones. A few years ago, I ran into an old friend, who said of our high school, "It saved my life. But it also did a lot of other things." So, too, with the internet.

These days, after drinking from the internet's fire hose for thirty years, I've begun to feel more of those negative effects. I don't know if it's my age, or the fact that the internet is no longer plugged into the wall and now travels with me everywhere I go, but I find myself thinking of that Wordsworth poem that begins, "The world is too much with us; late and soon."

What does it say that I can't imagine my life or my work without the internet? What does it mean to have my way of thinking, and my way of *being*, so profoundly shaped by machine logic? What does it mean that, having been part of the internet for so long, the internet is also part of me?

My friend Stan Muller tells me that when you're living in the middle of history, you never know what it means. I am living in the middle of the internet. I have no idea what it means.

I give the internet three stars.

ACADEMIC DECATHLON

BEGINNING IN TENTH GRADE, I attended a boarding school in Alabama, where my best friend, Todd, was also my roommate. He would often say that late at night, when he was trying to fall asleep in our air-conditionless dorm room, I turned into a stream-of-consciousness novel. I'd tell him everything—my every interaction with my English class crush, including selected quotations from the notes she and I exchanged; the reasons it just wasn't possible for me to turn in the paper I had due for history; the weird ache I always felt on the outside of my left knee; how nervous I'd been smoking a cigarette behind the gym because someone got caught there last week; and on and on and on until finally he would say, "Seriously, Green. I love you, but I have to sleep." We were not afraid to say "I love you" to each other.

Here's my favorite story about Todd: In those days, the SAT was offered only every other month in Alabama. Todd and I managed to miss the last local SAT test before our college application deadlines, so we had to drive to Georgia to take the test. After a road trip and a night in a Motel 6, we arrived bleary-eyed at the testing site, where I struggled to concentrate for four endless hours. When the test was at last over, I met back up with Todd. The first thing he said to me was, "What's

PIGGLY WIGGLY

IN 1920, according to census records, my great-grandfather Roy worked at a grocery store in a tiny town in western Tennessee. Like all U.S. grocery stores at the beginning of the twentieth century, this one was full-service: You walked in with a list of items you needed, and then the grocer—perhaps my great-grandfather—would gather those items. The grocer would weigh the flour or cornmeal or butter or tomatoes, and then wrap everything up for you. My great-grandfather's store probably also allowed customers to purchase food on credit, a common practice at the time. The customer would then, usually, pay back their grocery bill over time.

That job was supposed to be my great-grandfather's path out of poverty, but it didn't work out that way. Instead, the store closed, thanks in part to the self-service grocery store revolution launched by Clarence Saunders, which reshaped the way Americans shopped and cooked and ate and lived. Saunders was a self-educated child of impoverished sharecroppers. Eventually, he found his way into the grocery business in Memphis, Tennessee, about a hundred miles southwest from my great-grandfather's store. Saunders was thirty-five when he developed a concept for a grocery store that would have no counters, but instead a

labyrinth of aisles that customers would walk themselves, choosing their own food and placing it in their own shopping baskets.

Prices at Saunders's self-service grocery would be lower, because his stores would employ fewer clerks and also because he would not offer customers credit, instead expecting immediate payment. The prices would also be clear and transparent—for the first time, every item in a grocery store would be marked with a price so customers would no longer fear being shortchanged by unscrupulous grocers. Saunders called his store Piggly Wiggly.

Why? Nobody knows. When asked where the name came from, Saunders once answered that it arrived "from out of chaos and in direct contact with an individual's mind," which gives you a sense of the kind of guy he was. But usually, when Saunders was asked why anyone would call a grocery store Piggly Wiggly, he would answer, "So people will ask that very question."

The first Piggly Wiggly opened in Memphis in 1916. It was so successful that the second Piggly Wiggly opened three weeks later. Two months after that, another opened. Saunders insisted on calling it "Piggly Wiggly the Third" to lend his stores the "royal dignity they are due." He began attaching a catchphrase to his storefront signs: "Piggly Wiggly: All Around the World." At the time, the stores were barely all around Memphis, but Saunders's prophecies came true: Within a year, there were 353 Piggly Wigglies around the United States, and today, Saunders's concept of self-service aisles really has spread all around the world.

In newspaper advertisements, Saunders wrote of his self-service concept in nearly messianic terms. "One day Memphis shall be proud of Piggly Wiggly," one ad read. "And it shall be said by all men that the Piggly Wigglies shall multiply and replenish the Earth with more and cleaner things to eat." Another time he wrote, "The mighty pulse of the throbbing today makes new things out of old and new things where was nothing before." Basically, Saunders spoke of Piggly Wiggly as today's

Silicon Valley executives talk of their companies: We're not just making money here. We are replenishing the earth.

Piggly Wiggly and the self-service grocery stores that followed did bring down prices, which meant there was more to eat. They also changed the kinds of foods that were readily available—to save costs and limit spoilage, Piggly Wiggly stocked less fresh produce than traditional grocery stores. Prepackaged, processed foods became more popular and less expensive, which altered American diets. Brand recognition also became extremely important, because food companies had to appeal directly to shoppers, which led to the growth of consumer-oriented food advertising on radio and in newspapers. National brands like Campbell Soup and OREO cookies exploded in popularity; by 1920, Campbell was the nation's top soup brand and OREO the top cookie brand—which they still are today.

Self-service grocery stores also fueled the rise of many other processed food brands. Wonder Bread. MoonPies. Hostess CupCakes. Birds Eye frozen vegetables. Wheaties cereal. Reese's Peanut Butter Cups. French's mustard. Klondike bars. Velveeta cheese. All of these brands, and many more, appeared in the United States within a decade of the first Piggly Wiggly opening. Clarence Saunders understood the new intersections between mass media and brand awareness better than almost anyone at the time. In fact, during the early 1920s, Piggly Wiggly was the single largest newspaper advertiser in the United States.

Keeping prices low and employing fewer clerks also meant many people who worked at traditional grocery stores lost their jobs, including my great-grandfather. There's nothing new about our fear that automation and increased efficiency will deprive humans of work. In one newspaper ad, Saunders imagined a woman torn between her longtime relationship with her friendly grocer and the low, low prices at Piggly Wiggly. The story concluded with Saunders appealing to a tradition even older than the full-service grocer. The woman in his ad mused,

"Now away back many years, there had been a Dutch grandmother of mine who had been thrifty. The spirit of that old grandmother asserted itself just then within me and said, 'Business is business and charity and alms are another.'" Whereupon our shopper saw the light and converted to Piggly Wiggly.

By 1922, there were more than a thousand Piggly Wiggly stores around the U.S., and shares in the company were listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Saunders was building a thirty-six-thousand-square-foot mansion in Memphis and had endowed the school now known as Rhodes College. But the good times would not last. After a few Piggly Wiggly stores in the Northeast failed, investors began shorting the stock—betting that its price would fall. Saunders responded by trying to buy up all the available shares of Piggly Wiggly using borrowed money, but the gambit failed spectacularly. Saunders lost control of Piggly Wiggly and went bankrupt.

His vitriol at Wall Street short sellers presaged contemporary corporate titans just as his reliance on big advertising and hyperefficiency did. Saunders was by many accounts a bully—verbally abusive, cruel, and profoundly convinced of his own genius. After losing control of the company, he wrote, "They have it all, everything I built, the greatest stores of their kind in the world, but they didn't get the man that was father to the idea. They have the body of Piggly Wiggly but they didn't get the soul." Saunders quickly developed a new concept for a grocery store. This one would have aisles and self-service but also clerks in the meat department and the bakery. Essentially, he invented the supermarket model that would reign into the twenty-first century.

In less than a year, he was ready to open, but the new owners of Piggly Wiggly took him to court, arguing that the use of the Clarence Saunders name in relation to a new grocery store would violate Piggly Wiggly's trademarks and patents. In response, Saunders defiantly named his new grocery store "Clarence Saunders: Sole Owner of My Name,"

perhaps the only business name worse than Piggly Wiggly. And yet, it succeeded tremendously, and Saunders made a second fortune as Sole Owner stores spread throughout the South.

He went on to invest in a professional football team in Memphis, which he named the Clarence Saunders Sole Owner of My Name Tigers. Really. They played the Green Bay Packers and the Chicago Bears in front of huge crowds in Memphis, and they were invited to join the NFL, but Saunders declined. He didn't want to share revenue, or send his team to away games. He promised to build a stadium for the Tigers that would seat more than thirty thousand people. "The stadium," he wrote, "will have skull and crossbones for my enemies who I have slain."

But within a few years, the Sole Owner stores were crushed by the Depression, the football team was out of business, and Saunders was broke again. Meanwhile, the soulless body of Piggly Wiggly was faring quite well without Saunders—by the supermarket chain's height in 1932, there were over twenty-five hundred Piggly Wigglies in the United States. Even in 2021, there are over five hundred locations, mostly in the South, although like many grocery stores, they are struggling under pressure from the likes of Walmart and Dollar General, which can undercut traditional grocery stores on price partly by providing even less fresh food and fewer clerks than today's Piggly Wiggly does.

These days, Piggly Wiggly ads tend to focus on tradition, and the human touch. One north Alabama Piggly Wiggly TV spot from 1999 included this line: "At Piggly Wiggly, it's all about friends serving friends," a call to the kind of human-to-human relationships that Saunders ridiculed in that Dutch grandmother ad. The mighty pulse of the throbbing today does make new things out of old—but it also makes old things out of new.

Today, food prices are lower relative to average wage than they've ever been in the United States, but our diets are often poor. The average American ingests more sugar and sodium than they should, largely

because of processed, prepackaged foods. More than 60 percent of calories consumed by Americans come from so-called "highly processed foods," like the OREO cookies and Milky Way bars that flourished at early Piggly Wigglies. Clarence Saunders didn't make any of this happen, of course. Like the rest of us, he was being pulled by forces far larger than any individual. He merely understood what America was about to want—and gave it to us.

After Saunders's second bankruptcy, he spent decades trying to launch another new retail concept. The Keedoozle was a totally automated store that looked like a massive bank of vending machines and involved purchasing food with almost no human-to-human interaction. But the machinery often broke down, and people found the shopping experience slow and clunky, and so the Keedoozle was never profitable. The self-checkout process Saunders envisioned would only become a reality many decades later.

As he aged, Saunders grew more vitriolic and unpredictable. He began to suffer from debilitating bouts of mental illness, and eventually entered a sanitarium that treated people with anxiety and depression.

The mansion Saunders built with his first fortune became the Pink Palace Museum, Memphis's science and history museum. The estate he built with his second fortune became Lichterman Nature Center. In 1936, the journalist Ernie Pyle said, "If Saunders lives long enough, Memphis will become the most beautiful city in the world just with the things Saunders built and lost."

But Saunders never made a third fortune. He died at the Wallace Sanitarium in 1953, at the age of seventy-two. One obituary opined, "Some men achieve lasting fame through success, others achieve it through failure." Saunders was a relentless innovator who understood the power of branding and efficiency. He was also hateful and vindictive. He committed securities fraud. And he helped usher in an era of food that fills without nourishing.

But mostly, when I think of Piggly Wiggly, I think about how the big get bigger by eating the small. Piggly Wiggly swallowed up the small-town grocery stores only to be swallowed itself by the likes of Walmart, which will in turn be swallowed by the likes of Amazon. James Joyce called Ireland the "sow that eats her farrow," but Ireland has nothing on American capitalism.

I give Piggly Wiggly two and a half stars.

THE NATHAN'S FAMOUS HOT DOG EATING CONTEST

AT THE CORNER OF SURF and Stillwell Avenues in Brooklyn's Coney Island, there is a restaurant called Nathan's Famous, which started out in 1916 under the ownership of Polish immigrants Nathan and Ida Handwerker. The restaurant serves a variety of food—from fried clams to veggie burgers—but Nathan's began as a hot dog place, and remains one at its core.

A Nathan's hot dog is not the best food you will ever eat, or even the best hot dog you will ever eat. But there's something special about the experience of eating one amid the clamor of Coney Island. And the hot dogs have a pedigree—they've been eaten by King George VI and Jacqueline Kennedy. Stalin supposedly ate one at the Yalta Conference in 1945.

Coney Island used to be the huckster capital of the world, where fast-talking barkers wearing straw hats would sell you on this carnival attraction or that one. Now, like all places that survive on nostalgia, it is mostly a memory of itself. The beaches are still packed in summertime. You can still ride the carousel, and there is still a line at Nathan's Famous. But a big part of visiting Coney Island today is imagining how it must have once felt.

Except for one day a year, when Coney Island becomes its old self,

for better and for worse. Every July 4, tens of thousands of people flood the streets to witness a spectacular exercise in metaphorical resonance known as the Nathan's Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest. It says so much about contemporary American life that our Independence Day celebrations include 1. fireworks displays, which are essentially imitation battles complete with rockets and bombs, and 2. a contest in which people from around the world attempt to discover how many hot dogs and buns can be ingested by a human within ten minutes. To quote the legendary comedian Yakov Smirnoff: What a country.

Like the nation it aims to celebrate, the hot dog eating contest has always been a strange amalgamation of history and imagination. The contest's originator was probably a guy named Mortimer Matz, whom the journalist Tom Robbins described as "part P. T. Barnum, part political scalawag." Matz made much of his money as a public relations rep for politicians in crisis—a resource never in short supply in New York—but he also did PR for Nathan's Famous along with his colleague Max Rosey. Matz claimed that the hot dog eating contest could trace its history back to July 4, 1916, when four immigrants staged a hot dog eating contest to determine which of them loved America the most. But he would later acknowledge, "In Coney Island pitchman style, we made it up."

The contest actually started in the summer of 1967, when several people were given an hour to eat as many hot dogs and buns as they could. A thirty-two-year-old truck driver named Walter Paul won the initial contest with a purported 127 hot dogs and buns in a single hour, although bear in mind that number was fed to the press by Rosey and Matz.

The event didn't become annual until the late 1970s. Most years, the winner would eat ten or eleven hot dogs in ten minutes. The hot dog eating contest was a fairly quiet affair until 1991, when a young man named George Shea became competitive eating's professional hype man.

Shea was an English major who loved Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner and wanted to become a novelist, but instead he is the last great American carnival barker. He wears a straw hat and is known for his phenomenally grandiloquent annual introductions of the contest's competitors. In fact, Shea's annual preshow performance, which is broadcast live on America's top sports network, often lasts longer than the hot dog eating contest itself.

He always starts out with reasonably normal introductions. "In his rookie year, he is already ranked number twenty-four in the world," Shea began one year. "From Nigeria, now residing in Morrow, Georgia, he's eaten thirty-four ears of sweet corn. Six feet nine inches tall, let's hear it for Gideon Oji." But as we meet eater after eater, the introductions become progressively more surreal. Introducing seventy-two-year-old Rich LeFevre, Shea said, "When we are young, we drink our coffee with milk and sugar. And as we age, we drink it with milk only, then we drink it black, then we drink it decaf, then we die. Our next eater is at decaf."

Of another eater we are told, "He stands before us like Hercules himself, albeit a large bald Hercules at an eating contest." Introducing longtime competitive eater Crazy Legs Conti, who is a professional window washer and the French-cut green bean eating champion of the world, Shea says, "He was first seen standing at the edge of the shore between the ancient marks of the high and low tide, a place that is neither land nor sea. But as the blue light of morning filtered through the darkness it revealed the man who has been to the beyond and witnessed the secrets of life and death. He was buried alive under sixty cubic feet of popcorn and he ate his way out to survival."

If you don't regularly watch ESPN, it may be difficult to understand just how odd this is compared to its daily fare, which is comprised almost entirely of athletic events and analyses of athletic events. ESPN is not in the business of visiting the place that is neither land nor sea.

But ESPN *is* a sports network, and I'll concede that competitive eating is a sport. Like any sport, this one is about seeing what a human body can accomplish, and like any sport it has a variety of rules. You have to eat the hot dog *and* the bun for it to count, and you're immediately disqualified if during the competition you experience a so-called "Reversal of Fortune," the sport's euphemism for vomiting. The competition itself is, of course, gruesome. These days, the winner usually consumes over seventy hot dogs and buns in ten minutes.

One can feel something akin to joyful wonder at the magnificence of a perfectly weighted Megan Rapinoe cross, or the elegance of a LeBron James fadeaway. But it's hard to construct the Nathan's Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest as beautiful. When a soccer ball is at Lionel Messi's feet, you don't want to look away. When watching competitive hot dog eating, you can't bring yourself to look away.

The hot dog eating contest is a monument to overindulgence, to the human urge to seek not just more than you need but also more than you actually want. But I think it's also about something else. The world's best competitive eater, the American Joey Chestnut, has said of Shea's introductions, "He convinces the audience these guys are athletes. He does such a good job, he convinces *me* I'm an athlete."

The carnival barker is an obvious flimflam artist—we know that Shea is kidding when he refers to Chestnut as "America itself" and claims that the first words Chestnut's mother ever told him were, "You are of my flesh but you are not mine own. Fate is your father and you belong to the people, for you shall lead the army of the free." We know that's a joke. And yet people scream along. They chant, "Jo-ey, Jo-ey, Jo-ey." As the announcer continues to rile the crowd, they began to chant: "U-S-A, U-S-A!" The energy on the street changes. We know that Shea isn't speaking in earnest. And yet . . . his words have power.

Beginning in 2001, a Japanese man named Takeru Kobayashi won the hot dog eating contest for six consecutive years. Kobayashi totally

revolutionized the approach to the competition—before him, no one had ever eaten more than twenty-five hot dogs. Kobayashi ate fifty in 2001, more than double what the third-place eater that year managed. His strategies—including breaking each dog in half and dipping the bun in warm water—are now ubiquitous at the contest.

Kobayashi was long beloved as the greatest eater of all time, although he now no longer participates in the contest because he refuses to sign an exclusive contract with Shea's company. But he competed in the 2007 event, and when the Japanese Kobayashi was beaten by the American Chestnut, Shea shouted into the microphone, "We have our confidence back! The dark days of the past six years are behind us!" And that seemed to give the crowd permission to fall into bigotry. You can hear people shout at Kobayashi as he walks over to congratulate Chestnut. They tell him to go home. They call him Kamikaze and Shanghai Boy. Recalling this in a documentary more than a decade later, Kobayashi wept as he said, "They used to cheer for me."

When you have the microphone, what you say matters, even when you're just kidding. It's so easy to take refuge in the "just" of *just* kidding. It's just a joke. We're just doing it for the memes. But the preposterous and absurd can still shape our understanding of ourselves and one another. And ridiculous cruelty is still cruel.

I love humans. We really would eat our way out of sixty cubic feet of popcorn to survive. And I'm grateful to anyone who helps us to see the grotesque absurdity of our situation. But the carnival barkers of the world must be careful which preposterous stories they tell us, because we will believe them.

I give the Nathan's Famous Hot Dog Eating Contest two stars.

In her public appearances, Amy would sometimes use that recursive lament of British soldiers and transform it without ever changing the tune or the words. She would ask an audience to sing that song with her: "We're here because we're here because we're here because we're here." And although it's a profoundly nihilistic song written about the modernist hell of repetition, singing this song with Amy, I could always see the hope in it. It became a statement that *we* are here—meaning that we are together, and not alone. And it's also a statement that we *are*, that we exist. And it's a statement that we are *here*, that a series of astonishing unlikelihoods has made us possible and here possible. We might never know why we are here, but we can still proclaim in hope *that* we are here. I don't think such hope is foolish or idealistic or misguided.

We live in hope—that life will get better, and more importantly that it will go on, that love will survive even though we will not. And between now and then, we are here because we're here because we're here because we're here.

I give auld lang syne five stars.

GOOGLING STRANGERS

WHEN I WAS A KID, my mother often told me that everyone has a gift inside them. You might be an extraordinarily astute listener of smooth jazz, or a defensive midfielder with an uncommon understanding of how to open up space with the perfect pass. But as a child, I always felt like I had no inborn gift. I wasn't a particularly good student, and I had no athletic ability. I couldn't read social cues. I sucked at piano, karate, ballet dancing, and everything else my parents tried to sign me up for. I thought of myself as a person without a specialty.

But as it turned out, my specialty just hadn't been invented yet, because I am—please forgive the lack of modesty here—really, really good at googling strangers. Sure, I've put in the work—Malcolm Gladwell famously said it takes ten thousand hours to become an expert in a field; I've clocked my ten thousand hours, and then some. But also, I just have a knack for it.

I google strangers almost every day. If my wife and I have to attend a party—and I say *have to* because that is my relationship with parties[28]—I usually research all the known attendees in advance. Of course, I know it's weird when a stranger tells you they are in the carpet installation

28. Yes, even in 2021.

business and you answer, "Oh yeah, I am aware. Also, you met your wife in 1981, when you were both working at the same savings and loan institution in Dallas. She was living at home with her parents, Joseph and Marilyn, at least according to census records, while you had recently graduated from Oklahoma Baptist University. Your wedding reception at the Dallas Museum of Art was right next to that Dale Chihuly sculpture, *Hart Window*. Then you moved to Indianapolis for your wife's job at Eli Lilly. How is the carpet business these days? Do you guys have, like, a rivalry with hardwood floor people?"

It's horrifying, how much information can be accessed via Google about almost all of us. Of course, this loss of privacy has come with tremendous benefits—free storage of photos and video, a chance to participate in large-scale discourse via social media, and the opportunity to easily keep in touch with friends from long ago.

But giving so much of our selves to private corporations like Google makes other people feel comfortable sharing their selves. This feedback loop—we all want to be on Facebook because everyone else is on Facebook—has led to me making so much of my life publicly available that when creating accounts on new social media platforms, I often struggle to find security questions that can't be answered by studying my old social media accounts. Where did I go to elementary school? That's easy enough to find out. What was the name of my first dog? I've vlogged about our miniature dachshund Red Green. Who was your childhood best friend? You'll find baby pictures of us tagged together on Facebook. What was your mother's maiden name? You can't be serious.

But even though less of our lives belong to us and more of our lives belong to the companies that host and gather our browsing habits and hobbies and keystrokes, even though I am revolted by how easy it has become to scroll through the lives of the living and the dead, even though it all feels a bit too much like an Orwell novel . . . I can't outright condemn the googling of strangers.

When I was twenty-two and working as a student chaplain at a children's hospital, I would spend twenty-four hours on call once or twice a week. This meant that I'd stay in the hospital with two beepers. One beeper went off whenever someone asked for a chaplain. The other buzzed when a serious trauma case arrived at the hospital. One of my last nights on call, toward the end of my six-month chaplaincy, I was asleep in the pastoral care office when the trauma pager sent me down to the Emergency Department. A three-year-old child was being wheeled in. He'd suffered severe burns.

I'm not sure whether it's even possible to talk about the suffering of others without exploiting that suffering, whether you can write about pain without glorifying or ennobling or degrading it. Teju Cole once said that "a photograph can't help taming what it shows," and I worry the same might be true of language. Stories have to make sense, and nothing at the hospital made any sense to me at all, which is one of the reasons I've rarely written about my time there directly. I don't know the proper way through this morass, and I never have, but in telling this story, I've chosen to obscure and alter certain details. The important thing is that despite the severity of his injury, the child was conscious, and in terrible pain.

Although I'd been around the Emergency Department for months, and seen all manner of suffering and death, I'd never seen the trauma team so visibly upset. The anguish was overwhelming—the smell of the burns, the piercing screams that accompanied this little boy's every exhalation. Someone shouted, "CHAPLAIN! THE SCISSORS BEHIND YOU!" and in a daze I brought them the scissors. Someone shouted, "CHAPLAIN! THE PARENTS!" And I realized that next to me the little boy's parents were screaming, trying to get at their kid, but the doctors and paramedics and nurses needed enough space to work, so I had to ask the parents to step back.

Next thing I knew I was in the windowless family room in the Emergency Department, the room where they put you on the worst night of your life. It was quiet except for the crying of the couple across from me. They sat on opposite sides of the couch, elbows on knees.

During my training they told me that half of marriages end within a couple years of losing a child. Weakly, I asked the parents if they wanted to pray. The woman shook her head no. The doctor came in and said that the kid was in critical condition. The parents only had one question, and it was one the doctor couldn't answer. "We'll do everything we can," she said, "but your son may not survive." Both the parents collapsed, not against each other, but into themselves.

We are able to navigate the world knowing these things happen. My chaplaincy supervisor once told me, "Children have always died. It is natural." That may be true, but I can't accept it. I couldn't accept it sitting in the windowless family room, and I can't accept it now, as a father myself.

When the kid finally went upstairs to the ICU and his parents followed, I walked to the break room to get a cup of coffee, and the doctor was in there, her face hovering over a trash can that she'd been vomiting into. "I'm sorry," I said. "You did good with them. Thanks for being kind to them. I think it helped." She dry heaved for a while and then said, "That kid's gonna die and I know his last words. I know the last thing he'll ever say." I didn't ask her to tell me what it was, and she didn't volunteer.

A week later, I finished the chaplaincy program, and decided not to go to divinity school. I told everyone it was because I didn't want to learn Greek, which was true, but it was also true that I couldn't cope with the memory of this kid. I still can't cope with it. I thought about him every day. I prayed for him every day, even after I stopped praying about anything else. Every night, still, I say his name and ask God for

mercy. Whether I believe in God isn't really relevant. I do believe, however tenuously, in mercy.

As an inveterate googler, I knew I could have just looked up his name, but I was too scared. To google would have been to know, one way or another. I'm reminded of that great line from Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*: "The end of man is knowledge, but there is one thing he can't know. He can't know whether knowledge will save him or kill him."

The months of not knowing became years, then more than a decade. And then one morning not long ago, I typed the kid's name into the search bar. It's an unusual name, easy pickings for Google. I hit enter. The first link was to a Facebook. I clicked over, and there he was. Eighteen years old, a decade and a half removed from the one night we spent together.

He is alive.

He is growing up, finding his way in the world, documenting a life that is more public than he probably realizes. But how can I not be grateful for knowing, even if the only way to know is to lose our autonomy over our so-called selves? He is alive. He likes John Deere tractors, and is a member of the Future Farmers of America, and he is alive.

Scrolling through his friends, I find his parents' profiles, and discover that they are still married. He is alive. He likes terrible, overly manufactured country music. He is alive. He calls his girlfriend his bae. Alive. Alive. Alive.

It could've gone the other way, of course. But it didn't. And so I can't help but give the practice of googling strangers four stars.