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On this page: Photojournalist Aristide Economopoulos runs for cover as the North Tower of the World Trade Center collapses. Photo by Joe Tabacca.

About the cover: Photo of a first responder at Ground Zero on Sept. 12, 2001, by Yoni Brook. See Page 20 for more about this photo.


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The Art of Birch Bark Biting

How Indigenous artists are reinvigorating a centuries-old practice

BY EMILY REILY

In Saskatchewan and Manitoba, just after the snow melts but before flowers start to bud, Pat Bruderer, 67, searches for paper birch trees. When she finds bark with just the right color on the inside (dusky pink), the right feel (“very soft ... almost like silk”) and the right age (older bark won’t work), she thanks the tree for what it’s about to give her. She cuts the bark with a knife and later will peel it and bite it into unique designs.

“I offer tobacco out of respect and say a prayer before I take the bark from the tree. There’s a cracking sound you’ll hear when the bark releases. And then I peel the many layers — layers and layers,” says Bruderer, a member of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation who is also known as Halfmoon Woman. She is one of a small number of birch bark biters, practitioners of an art form that has been part of life among many Indigenous groups in the United States and Canada for centuries. The artists use their teeth to create delicate, sometimes complex designs from single layers of bark. The practice has seen a resurgence in recent years as artists seek to keep the tradition alive for future generations — a small but powerful act of resistance against cultural annihilation.

Each artist has their own method of working with birch bark. They find their preferred trees at various times of the year, depending on the need. Spring bark is thinner and easier to peel, while winter bark is thicker.

Bitters told me they look for silvery, bright white birches with dusky pink or tan-colored inner bark that’s pliable and free of knots. After peeling anywhere from 10 to 20 layers of bark, they fold a single sheet into a square, rectangle or triangle.

To create an image — a dragonfly, a flower, a hummingbird — artists use their eyeteeth (the sharp teeth also known as canines) to pierce the delicate, onion-thin skin just enough to make indentations. They move the piece around in their mouth, creating symmetrical shapes. They can’t see the results of their work until they unfold the bark and hold it to the light.

Ideas for designs come to Bruderer only after she touches the bark. “I hold it. I visualize in my mind what I hope to bite. And then I begin to draw the
From top: “Round Dance,” from the collection of birch bark biter Pat Bruderer. White birch, also known as paper birch.
Photographs by Hilary McDonald.
The art takes skill, practice and experience, but also patience. “There are periods of calm and frustration when you’re trying to create. As bossy humans that we are, sometimes we force the issue. And that’s when we find that our bark won’t peel or it rips,” says Abenaki biter Liz Charlebois, 46, of Brattleboro, Vt.

Known as mizinibaganjigan, pictures bitten on bark, or birch bark transparencies, birch bark biting has existed since “precontact days,” before White people landed in North America. White settlers took note of the craft: In 1687, a Jesuit missionary in Quebec sent “pieces of bark, on which figures have been marked by teeth,” in a box along with other “curiosities” bound for France. In 1855, when German writer Johann Georg Kohl visited an Ojibwe village in what is now Garden Village, Ontario, he described “pretty figures of every description which they contrive to bite on the bark with their teeth.” Birch bark biter Angélique Marte gave Kohl a “specimen of her tooth carving” — a figure of a girl, a flower bouquet and a tomahawk. Kohl called it “beaux arts.” His contemporary, geographer and ethnologist Henry Rowe Schoolcraft, called it “dental pictography.”

During precontact days, birch bark biting was practiced mainly by women in tribes “wherever the birch tree grows,” Church says. That area is vast; it includes British Columbia, northwest Alaska, Washington state, the northern Great Plains, the Appalachian Mountains, the Great Lakes and New England. Tribes that have practiced the art form include some Algonquian peoples of the Great Lakes parts of Canada and the United States, Ojibwe, Pottawatomi, Abenaki, Odawa, Chippewa and some groups of Cree.

“I just seem to be able to see the pattern when I close my eyes,” says biter Denise Lajimodiere, 70, of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa in Belcourt, N.D.

Basketmaker Kelly Church, 54, with the Gun Lake Tribe in Hopkins, Mich., says birch bark biting is like “connecting your mind to your teeth. … I’m thinking of a butterfly, and I’m turning the bark in my mouth in the shape of a butterfly wing. And then I open it up, and then there’ll be butterfly wings.”
From top: The hands of contemporary dancer Marcus Merasty cradle a projection of “Bee Resilient,” a scroll biting from Bruderer’s collection. Bruderer at work on a piece of birch bark. Photographs by Hilary McDonald

Women made bitings as a lunchtime diversion while out picking berries, "to see who could make the best design, the most intricate design," Charlebois says. People made boats and baskets and cooked with birch bark. Babies were birthed onto the bark, Bruderer says. Upon death, members of some tribes were wrapped in birch bark shrouds.

Bitings were used to make maps, record meetings, tell stories and, more recently, generate income from tourists. Patterns were used for clothing designs, beadwork and quill work. “I love working with birch bark, the feel, the sound,” says Lajimodiere. “It has a powder to it that has no taste. We would put our [dried] food in the basket, and that powder was a preservative. It gave us our wigwams, our homes, our canoes, our baskets.”

Biters often learn the craft from tribal elders and relatives eager to pass on the tradition. Angelique Merasty, of the Peter Ballantyne Cree Nation in Canada, learned from her mother, Susan Ballantyne, and other elders. Today Merasty is widely known as one of the master birch bark biters, and her work has appeared in books and museums. At her death at age 72 in 1996, she was also considered one of the last.

She employed a pointillist style, using her teeth to dot the bark with tiny circles or dashes that grew into imaginative lines and curves. She often designed soaring birds, playful shapes and long-legged insects with segmented, symmetrical bodies. In one example, whimsical butterflies dance in a circle adorned with swirls, birch leaves and ovals. In another sample, from the British Museum, four plump insects — two butterflies and two bees — huddle in a circle, deep in conversation.

Though Merasty brought the art worldwide recognition, birch bark biting lay on the verge of extinction for centuries, with just a handful of documented practitioners. “Native Americans, Indigenous people, are victims of wide-scale genocide, culturally,” says Charlebois. “Residential schools — kids were taken from their families and put in these schools. Their traditional ways were erased, or the children didn’t come home. We’re talking about an entire generation of folks who didn’t have access to their elders, or to their traditional languages, or their traditional art forms. That is so debilitating to Indigenous cultures.”

Birch bark biters believe it’s their responsibility to pass their knowledge on to younger generations. Artists are working on educational outreach through Zoom sessions, presentations and workshops, where children are surprised at what they can make. Bruderer says she teaches about 4,000 children a year: “I never want it to be a lost art.”

Emily Reily is a writer in New Hampshire.
"We have this unique opportunity in front of us to make some major changes in the workforce and to come back stronger."

Marty Walsh

INTERVIEW AND PHOTOGRAPH BY KK OTTESEN

Before joining the Biden administration as U.S. secretary of labor, Marty Walsh, 54, served as mayor of Boston, as a member of the Massachusetts House of Representatives, and as a union leader.

You’re leading the Department of Labor with people getting back to work after so many lost jobs during the pandemic — and with the way we work potentially reshaped by the experience. What do you see as the opportunities or as your central mandate in this moment?

This is such a huge opportunity to do things right this time. Whatever the number on the infrastructure plan, it can be transformative for working people. So I view it as an opportunity for us to tackle the toughest issues that, quite honestly, maybe we haven’t tackled directly head-on as an administration. To tackle inequity in the workplace. To tackle wage disparity between women and men. To tackle racial inequities in the workplace and create better pathways.

We have this unique opportunity in front of us to make some major changes in the workforce and to come back stronger. I think you get that opportunity once in a political career or once in a generation. And this is the time.

We’re also at a point where income inequity is at its highest. But during the pandemic, there was a huge reliance on essential workers. Do you think that has changed public opinion, making the ground fertile for revaluing labor?

I hope it does. But I don’t think it’s going to happen unless we stay focused on it. People have short attention spans. Throughout the last year, grocery store workers have been essential workers and almost first responders, if you will, in keeping the shelves stocked and the food there. And then you hear stories of some of these larger chain companies around the country subbing out now and getting independent contractors to deliver the food and deliver the service. Like, how do you do that to a group of employees that kept your doors open through the most difficult time, maybe since the beginning of your store? So I think we have to keep a real focus on our workers. I think we should always raise up our essential workers because, at the end of the day, whether it’s a global pandemic or a blizzard or nor’easter or a hurricane, they’re there.

People have asked me: Why aren’t 8.5 million [people] — today, as we’re talking — back in the workforce? There’s a lot of reasons. Number one is the concern about their health. Number two, I think the time off gave a lot of people time to think about their future and where they want to be. You know, we’re sitting there at home at night, every night, like: What’s next?

I was in St. Louis the other day, and I was listening to care workers talk about their jobs. They were advocating for the Cares Act plan. And this woman, Monique, started talking about making $12.65 an hour. And she just started crying uncontrollably about how her life is just — she’s not making enough money to keep her food on the table and a roof over her head and keep her family fed and clothed. That one hit me hard. I had heard that [kind of] story before as mayor — but now that I’m the secretary of labor, it hit me in a different way. Because now it’s not just Boston. It’s the whole country. And we have an opportunity to actually change the outcome of her life and help her.

You’ve been open about struggling with alcoholism and recovery. Can you talk about how that shaped you?

Getting into recovery when I was 28 changed my whole life, my whole perspective. It grounded me in a different way. The way of living sober is: a day at a time. A friend of mine gave me this sign: “A day at a time.” Having that perspective in life is so important. I’m not perfect at it, but you try to let things go, you deal with what’s in front of you a day at a time.

KK Ottesen is a regular contributor to the magazine. This interview has been edited and condensed. For a longer version, visit wapo.st/magazine.
Something I’ve noticed in this city is that everyone is really arrogant, which might sound kind of bad. I’m sure not everyone is,” said Tori Worley, who is originally from South Carolina. “It’s a lot of ‘Who do you know? Where do you work? Where do you go to school?’ in D.C., and I’m not used to that, nor does it appeal to my personality.”

The 23-year-old PhD student moved to the city in June 2019 and found that the small world of academia makes it difficult to date within her department at the University of Maryland — and “most people are older and married.” Her job seems to be an issue even when she’s trying to meet people. “I have a problem with people not believing that I am a PhD student,” she explained. “When I go to a bar, they say, ‘No, you’re not!’ or ‘You’re too young for that!’ ”

Perhaps Tennessee native Jay Hearn will be more of a gentleman about it. Jay, 23, who moved to D.C. a year ago and works in marketing for a consulting firm, is frustrated with dating apps. “You’d be texting for a while and then it would just fizzle out” before meeting in person, he said. That’s why he was so excited for Date Lab’s “straightforward approach.” Once you are matched, “you will go out and meet them. You’re committed.”

We sent the duo to dinner at 5:30 p.m. at Primrose, a Brookland bistro specializing in French comfort food. Jay’s first impression: “I thought, ‘Oh, she doesn’t seem terrible.’ I know that sounds awful, but I was worried I’d be matched with someone I would not be able to get along with.” Tori’s first impression: “He seemed kind of sweet, kind of nerdy, easygoing and easy to talk to.”

They got to know each other over cocktails, a dark and stormy for her and an old-fashioned for him. Jay admitted to me that he was struggling with his drink. “It was so bitter and just pretty gross,” he said. “It was funny having a conversation because occasionally I would take a sip and have a puckered-up face. ... I had to promise, ‘It’s not you. It’s the drink!” ”

Tori couldn’t handle her boozy beverage either: “Neither of us could finish because you could smell the liquor. Then we had beers.”

While they sipped their brews, they discovered that alcohol intolerance wasn’t all they had in common. Both had studied political science as undergrads at Southern universities. Tori is familiar with professors Jay studied with at the University of Tennessee, and Jay’s former roommate is also getting a doctorate at the University of Maryland.

Tori told me that Jay seemed interested — not surprised or intimidated — that she’s pursuing her PhD. Jay was comforted that they had so many things in common, particularly that they were both from the South. “When I mention that I’m from a small town in Tennessee, sometimes it’s like, ‘Whoa, where is that?’”
What’s it like?” he said. “We understand a lot of the stereotyping people have about the South aren’t necessarily true — I mean some are, but it depends on the region. It’s more nuanced.”

While Tori appreciated their similarities, she also told me she welcomes differences, since “having too much in common makes for a boring relationship.” Tori, who loves dogs, wasn’t bothered when she found out that Jay was a cat person. However, things got tricky when they talked about their feelings about the ocean. Tori loves the beach and misses being on the coast. She told me Jay said he was uncomfortable around open water and has a fear of Hawaii.

“And I thought, ‘Okay, that’s not something that I could be long-term compatible with,’” Tori said. When I asked Jay about this fear, he explained: “It’s just the idea of being out in the middle of the ocean that freaks me out. What if there aren’t any planes or boats available for leaving the island?”

However, all was not lost. As they ate dinner (crispy lamb for her and duck confit for him), Tori discovered they had a similar sense of humor. “We were both being sarcastic for a good part of the night. ... It was a fun back-and-forth,” she said. She enjoyed how easy it was to talk to him: “He was able to instantly pick up on the fact that I am a sarcastic brat, and he just went with it.”

However, she also felt at times that he was just agreeing with her. She added: “We also didn’t talk about each other’s hobbies or interests.”

When the clock approached 8 p.m., they left the restaurant. As Jay waited for his Uber, Tori asked to exchange numbers before she strolled to her home nearby.

RATE THE DATE

Tori: 4.3 [out of 5]. “He was easygoing and funny, but I felt like he didn’t contribute a lot to the conversation.”

Jay: 4. “It was a good date, it was fun. She was nice and easy to talk to. But I’m not sure if there’s a spark.”

UPDATE

They met up for coffee, but both left feeling that romance was not brewing.

Vijai Nathan is a writer and comedian in Washington.
Sept. 11, 2001, was first and foremost a human tragedy, claiming the lives of 2,977 innocent people and leaving, in its wake, incalculable grief. The attack would alter the lives of U.S. troops and their families, and millions of people in Afghanistan and Iraq. It would set the course of political parties and help to decide who would, and who would not, lead our country. In short, 9/11 changed the world in demonstrable, massive and heartbreaking ways. But the ripple effects altered our lives in subtle, often-overlooked ways as well. In the pages that follow, 23 writers and five artists reflect on some of the less-obvious changes caused by 9/11 in America and the world.

ILLUSTRATION BY KRIS ANDREW SMALL

TV BY INKOO KANG

The current TV era, which is to say the antihero era, kicked off in 1999 with “The Sopranos.” And two years later — just a couple of months after the 9/11 attacks, in fact — “24” debuted, introducing us to Kiefer Sutherland’s counterterrorism agent Jack Bauer, the king of the ticking-time-bomb scenario.

Later antihero dramas, like “The Wire” and “The Shield,” would use their troubled, and troubling, protagonists to critique the violence of the state and the difficulty of attaining justice within inherently unjust systems. But “24,” co-created by a buddy of Rush Limbaugh’s, wasn’t so interested in introspection. The character of Jack Bauer now feels like an inevitability, the meeting point of two cultural currents: the turn on TV toward the grisly and the morally murky that audiences would grow to find acceptable, if not desirable, in its “heroes”; and the win-at-all-costs ethos that would come to define too much of the prevailing mood about the War on Terror. The show’s validation and normalization of torture grew so influential it prompted an attempted intervention by experienced interrogators and a West Point dean. But the damage was done — as propaganda and to America’s reputation.

Inkoo Kang is The Post’s TV critic.

Art BY SEBASTIAN SMEE

The art world entered a period of schizophrenic insecurity after 9/11. The ongoing threat of terrorism made exhibitions with international loans that much harder to organize — especially as insurance and transportation costs skyrocketed. (Museums have yet to return to the levels of ambition we saw before the attacks.) The increase in global insecurity also led to a temporary slump in the art market, a notable swing in the pendulum toward more overtly political art, and a boom in memorial building.

But perhaps most notably, museums went to great lengths, after initial wariness, to educate the public about both the richness of Islamic artistic traditions and the complexity of contemporary Islamic visual culture. Museums that already had strong Islamic collections had an obvious advantage. The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York was just one of dozens of major museums that opened wings devoted to art from Muslim lands. A select few contemporary artists from Muslim countries became household names. Shirin Neshat was arguably the most prominent. Meanwhile, universities and museums spearheaded a concerted attempt to push back against Orientalism — the West’s habit of projecting its own false fantasies onto the cultures of North Africa and the Middle East.

Sebastian Smee is The Post’s art critic.

Sports BY JERRY BREWER

The tradition of patriotic displays at major sporting events went to another level 20 years ago. After 9/11, sports leagues embraced their role of symbolizing American unity and healing, and they did so by stitching more than just the national anthem into their game presentation. It started with Major League Baseball teams including performances of “God Bless America” during the seventh-inning stretch — and once all the leagues saw the emotional response...
to enhanced patriotism, they chose to go bigger and bigger with their gestures. Field-length flags. More military flyovers.

Later, in 2015, the entanglement of patriotism and sports became problematic when it was revealed that the Department of Defense had paid teams millions for some of these acts. And over the past five years, many athlete activists have chosen to protest for their causes during the national anthem. What once seemed like a compassionate reaction to tragedy keeps growing more complicated and divisive.

Jerry Brewer is a sports columnist for The Post.

Education BY MORIAH BALINGIT

Following the 9/11 attacks, many teachers returned to classrooms full of youngsters who were confused and scared, and they tried to figure out how to explain an event that had shattered a sense of security for Americans everywhere. Many children had witnessed the attacks on television; teachers had to comfort them and help them feel safe, even as the educators struggled themselves to come to grips with what had happened. It was an event without precedent, and there was no blueprint for how to attend to students in its wake.

But it was only the first of many traumatic moments that educators would confront. In the two decades since the towers fell, they have been tasked with explaining any number of destabilizing events. An elementary school teacher who began a career in 2001 would have dealt with not only 9/11, but students traumatized by a shooting at Virginia Tech that killed 33, or a massacre at an elementary school in Newtown, Conn., where 20 first-graders were gunned down. Then came the mass shootings in public venues such as theaters, concerts and nightclubs.

Today, teachers continue to face this challenge, attempting to explain a pandemic that has wrought so much uncertainty for young people. This time around, though, educators are equipped with a better understanding of how to treat and identify trauma, knowledge gleaned through the experience of helping students during two decades of turmoil.

Moriah Balingit is an education reporter for The Post.

Global Islam BY AZAR NAFISI

After 9/11, a myth propagated by the Islamic Republic of Iran became more pronounced and more accepted with regard to all Muslim-majority countries. These nations, with vastly different histories, nationalities, languages and cultures, were reduced to one aspect: religion. And that religion, which, like other religions, had many different denominations and interpretations, was reduced to its most extreme elements: fundamentalism and sharia law. So now all these countries were even deprived of their proper names and were generalized into the “Muslim world,” denying the diversity of Islam and its followers. It’s like saying that France, Britain and the United States are all Christian countries and part of the “Christian world.”

Those on the far right, like Donald Trump, would use this argument to justify reactionary and racist policies against those from Muslim-majority countries with the excuse that brutality is “their culture,” while on the far left, some have decided that since this is “their culture,” we should not criticize “them” — refusing to differentiate between the rulers and the ruled, the regimes that created such mythologies and the people upon whom they are imposed.


American Muslims BY FARAH PANDITH

What if, in the aftermath of 9/11, everyone you encountered in your normal American life suddenly perceived you differently? At the gas pump, the driver next to you stares. In the supermarket, people turn their carts in another direction. At once, you feel unwanted, unwelcome, distrusted, alone.

The impact of all this changes your self-image. You question every aspect of your life, victim of an emotional shock so deep that you question your own identity.

Most Americans understand the nation was destabilized by the attacks. For American Muslims, the destabilization was profound — shaking them to the core — and reverberating to this day. It manifests itself in how they explain who they are, how they raise their children, how they interact with co-workers. 9/11 is like a shard of glass embedded in your heel. You always feel it; the pain never subsides.

But there is a brighter side. Twenty years on, the destabilization of identity and belonging has led to a new resilience among American Muslims. Today, there is increased involvement in local and national causes, broader interest in public service, and more engagement with fellow citizens. American Muslims did not retreat, choosing instead to rebuild our American bonds — making the country stronger as a nation for all of us.

Farah Pandith is the author of “How We Win: How Cutting-Edge Entrepreneurs, Political Visionaries, Enlightened Business Leaders, and Social Media Mavens Can Defeat the Extremist Threat.” She is a senior fellow at the Future of Diplomacy Project at Harvard University’s Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, an adjunct senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, and the Muhammad Ali Global Peace Laureate.

Photography BY DUDLEY M. BROOKS

It was midorning on Sept. 11, 2001, when Star-Ledger photojournalist Aristide Economopoulos frantically scrambled for safety. What had started off as a benign morning of prepping for an afternoon assignment suddenly morphed into a nightmare scenario, and he found himself at the center of it.

A photographer by Joe Tabacca, who was working for the Boston Globe, captured this moment. The photo — reprinted with the table of contents in this issue — shows Economopoulos with cameras dangling from his shoulders, literally running for his life as the North Tower collapses behind him in a cloud of toxic dust. Economopoulos suffered eye damage from the ensuing debris. “I couldn’t sleep for days, and I just would stare at the TV from a couple inches watching the news because that’s the only way I could see,” he told me recently. “I was frustrated that I couldn’t
Bigotry, Part 1

BY CHARLES CHAISSON

Following 9/11, hate crimes against Muslim Americans went from being the second-least reported to the second-highest reported among religious bias incidents in the United States. As a species, we often fear people and cultures we don’t understand, especially when they are vilified and treated as a monolith by media outlets. This translates to the projection of dangerous stereotypes and gives people the idea that they have the right to insult or physically attack others.

Charles Chaisson is an artist and a professor in New Orleans.
Like everyone else, cartoonists were grief-stricken and enraged in the aftermath of 9/11, but there are only so many sad Statue of Liberty and angry bald eagle cartoons you can draw. In the weeks that followed, the challenge was to draw cartoons related only to the events of 9/11 (silly commentary on the latest baseball scandal or reality show was a thing of the past), and there seemed to be an unspoken rule that our favorite target, President George W. Bush, was off-limits. Luckily, that didn’t last long, and we were free to go after Bush (as well as Dick Cheney, John Ashcroft, Tom Ridge, etc.) unfettered. One positive effect for many (not all) cartoonists was a new and more careful depiction of Arabs and Muslims in cartoons.

Steve Breen is a nationally syndicated cartoonist who won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning in 1998 and 2009.
continue to work on such a big story anymore, but I knew how lucky I was to be alive. I lost a little part of myself that day. We saw the best in humanity and also the worst.”

Photojournalists, like all reporters, are adept at building a protective wall of emotional distance that can sometimes separate us from the human experiences we document. It’s often a prerequisite for objective storytelling. I would guess that, for most photographers who covered the events of 9/11, that wall was much lower at the end of it all. This wasn’t a battle in a distant war-torn republic. This was home. This was us together as one.

A higher level of empathy for others often emerges from severe tragedy. We can only hope that raised bar is still with us today — in photography and everywhere else.

Dudley M. Brooks is the magazine’s photo editor.

Humor BY GENE WEINGARTEN

The biggest effect on comedy was immediate, and profound, and philosophically debilitating. All humor stopped. Parody, satire, edge, political cynicism, all gone. Funny shows on TV went dark. Most comedy clubs were shuttered. The New Yorker banished all the usual cartoons for the first time since Hiroshima. As the editor of the Style Invitational, The Post’s famously irreverent and iconoclastic and aggressively rude weekly humor contest, I went in at the last minute and stripped it of all references to George W. Bush’s intellectual and syntactic gaffes. (There were many, as always; that was a staple of the contest back then.)

From the moment of the first attack, it took 5 days 2 hours 8 minutes and 1 second before the first known instance of someone sending humor over email; it was lame and ham-handed, but it was at least a sputtering attempt, proposing some anagrams for “Osama Bin Laden.” (“A banal demon.” “No! A mad lesbian.”)

In a story in The Post, I lamented the end of humor. I wrote: “When people are filled with grief, they need to cry. When they are filled with fear, they need to laugh.” It’s the only quote I hope to be remembered for.

Pretty quickly, humor returned. It was, I think, the first return to normalcy after that ghastly day, the first good thing to happen.

Gene Weingarten is a columnist for the magazine.

Movies BY ANN HORNADAY

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Hollywood shied away from darkness and violence, giving us easygoing escapist fare like the “Pirates of the Caribbean” and Harry Potter movies. Spike Lee boldly made Ground Zero part of the mournful backdrop of his 2002 Manhattan crime drama “25th Hour”; it took a few more years for the anxieties that lingered after the event to emerge within cinematic language itself, whether in the form of 9/11-esque iconography in action thrillers like “War of the Worlds” (2005) and “Cloverfield” (2008) or the “grimdark” realism of Christopher Nolan’s “Batman” movies. Filmmakers have attempted to make serious-minded movies about history and geopolitics since 9/11. But for the most part we’re still in the same escapist bubble that immediately followed the event, and entertaining spectacle for its own sake has even more thoroughly colonized the medium. It’s somehow meaningful that when we first met Robert Downey Jr.’s Iron Man in the 2008 movie, he was on his way out of post-9/11 Afghanistan; the universe he wound up originating is one we never really left.

Ann Hornaday is The Post’s film critic.

Immigration BY CÉSAR CUAUHTÉMOC GARCÍA HERNÁNDEZ

When President George W. Bush met with his Mexican counterpart, Vicente Fox, at the White House on Sept. 6, 2001, they spoke of their countries’ “special friendship.” Separately, the White House commended the Senate for approving immigration reforms that would “make America more welcoming of new immigrants.”

The following month, Bush’s attorney general, John Ashcroft, moved seamlessly from terrorists to migrants — that is, from new acts of violence to age-old features of human mobility. “Let the terrorists among us be warned: If you overstay your visa — even by one day — we will arrest you,” Ashcroft said. To prominent policymakers, immigration was a weakness in the nation’s armor. Soon Congress shifted many immigration affairs from Ashcroft’s Justice Department to the new Department of Homeland Security.

The nation has not turned back. Today, the Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency claims to protect against “crime and illegal immigration that threaten national security and public safety.” Its border-focused partner, Customs and Border Protection, says it “is charged with keeping terrorists and their weapons out of the U.S.” Along the international boundary that 20 years ago joined friends, helicopters now fly overhead, steel and concrete barriers rise high, and immigration officials expel people requesting safe harbor.

César Cuauhtémoc García Hernández holds the Gregory Williams Chair in Civil Rights and Civil Liberties at Ohio State University and is the author of “Migrating to Prison: America’s Obsession With Locking Up Immigrants.”

New York BY JADA YUAN

That feeling of isolation still lingers, for those of us who were in the city that day; who saw the smoke and flames; who frantically called our people who worked there; who stood near the Pit amid steel beams twisted like ribbon and paper blanketing the ground like snow; who daily walked past blocks and blocks of posters of the missing; who read them all, hoping someone would be found. We were united in grief. We were so sad for so many months and years, and the country around us was so angry. And eventually the debris was cleared, and the subways ran again, and the Yankees came back and so did the Naked Cowboy and “Saturday Night Live.” But that feeling of being a city of witnesses, the ones who must remember the humans who died and the humanity that rose up around them, will always remain.

New York became a cleaner, more sanitized version of its old self, with a gaping void in the skyline, after 9/11. Shaken, we turned to a billionaire technocrat to lead us, who championed bike lanes and a Disney-fied Times Square and luxury high-rises blocking everyone’s views. The economy bounced back, but the garment workers left Chinatown and artists crossed the East River and could never afford to come back. Taxi drivers suffered anti-Muslim abuse and then lost their jobs to Uber. As before, we were
hedonists, but with a different urgency, because we knew that any moment the world could end. Some of us (just a few!) started talking to our neighbors. When a blackout hit the city two years later, we swallowed our collective panic and marched down stairwells with the flashlights and spare sneakers we’d hidden under our desks just in case. The city is less affordable and less equitable than it once was. We worked so hard to bring tourists back that we sometimes forgot about the people who live here. When the pandemic came, though, we dug in and fought, because we’d done it before. We are a city of witnesses, bonded by our collective memory and heartache. And love.

Jada Yuan is a staff writer for The Post’s Style section.

Washington BY COURTLAND MILLOY

I was living at Eighth and C streets NE, a little more than eight blocks from the U.S. Capitol. United Airlines Flight 93 was headed our way but crashed in Somerset County, Pa., 30 minutes from D.C. Passengers and crew had fought with the terrorists for control of the plane and all 40 of them, along with the four hijackers, were killed.

Post-9/11, the question wasn’t if there would be another terrorist attack; it was when. And the Capitol, where my son and I would bicycle along the marble terraces overlooking the Mall, remained a prime target.

Sometimes, the attack was expected over the “next several days,” as the FBI warned on Oct. 11, 2001. Two days before Halloween, Attorney General John Ashcroft said we would be attacked “over the next week.” In 2002, a Post poll found that 63 percent of D.C. residents were somewhat or very concerned that there would be major terrorist attacks in the region.

Today, the District’s infrastructure has been “hardened,” with barricaded streets around government facilities, beefed-up surveillance and armed guards. Still, fears persist. Local law enforcement has geared up for tactical combat should terrorists show up in the streets. In the absence of al-Qaeda on Pennsylvania Avenue, however, police will sometimes take a military stance against, say, peaceful protesters or motorists stopped for minor traffic infractions.

My bike ride around the Capitol was a simple pleasure, but a freedom lost just the same. In a contest between feeling safe and enjoying civil liberties, the outcome is far from settled. As for when the next terrorist attack would occur in D.C., that was answered on Jan. 6 — at the Capitol. And everybody was caught off guard.

Courtland Milloy is a local columnist for The Post.

Country Music BY EMILY YAHR

“We’ll put a boot in your ass, it’s the American way.” Whether you’re a country music fan or not, chances are you’ve heard that lyric from Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)” from 2002. The instantly polarizing song is generally cast as bold and cathartic or ignorant and jingoistic; either way, it’s often held up as a symbol of country music’s fierce embrace of patriotism and the military in response to 9/11.

But a lyric from a different song also stands out: “I’m just a singer of simple songs, I’m not a real political man; I watch CNN, but I’m not sure I could tell you the difference in Iraq and Iran,” Alan Jackson sings in the 2001 ballad “Where Were You (When the World Stopped Turning).” That line captures the post-9/11 public persona of most country singers. After watching the Chicks’ career nearly implode when lead singer Natalie Maines criticized President George W. Bush and the Iraq War in 2003, the majority of Nashville artists have taken Jackson’s cue when it comes to politics: They’re just singers. Their job is to entertain. They love America — and other than that, they would prefer not to share an opinion.

Emily Yahr is an entertainment reporter for The Post.

Millennials, Part I BY MARIN COGAN

How old were you when you first realized that the adults you’d been told to trust weren’t really in control? Those of us who came of age at the turn of the millennium had a sense of it before 9/11; after all, we were the school shooting generation. Still, it’s hard to overstate just how profound the moment was for those of us who learned about the attacks during daily announcements or watched the planes hit on our English teachers’ televisions. For many of us, 9/11 was an awakening to the fact that large forces — extremist ideologies, past wars, our own government’s earlier foreign policy decisions — could affect our lives in major ways. It was a precursor to an era of turmoil that has come to define our adult lives, from the 2008 financial crisis to the election of Donald Trump to the pandemic.

What did we learn from it? Not fatalism, exactly, but a sense that we live in a world more closely connected than the one our parents grew up in. That we will experience the consequences of this closeness in ways they didn’t. That we need to do more to prepare for the next threats — both those we can see coming, and those we can’t.

Marin Cogan is a writer in Washington and a frequent contributor to the magazine.

Millennials, Part II BY ANDREW BORYGA

On 9/11, I watched thick smoke engulf the sky from my elementary school window in the Bronx. The country was under attack. More important, my city was under attack. By that point, I’d been in a handful of fights. I knew what corners to stay away from to better my odds of not ending up on the wrong side of a fist.

But after the towers fell, I began to worry about a whole new magnitude of threat. A bomb could appear. A plane could fall out of the sky. Anthrax could arrive in the mail. Existential, world-shattering dangers replaced run-of-the-mill ones.

As an adult, over a decade later, I made plans to leave New York. I debated new locations, weighing the price of rent, transportation and so forth. Among those considerations, I also wondered: Would a terrorist attack me here?

The psychological effect of watching one’s country attacked at a young age can play out in a lot of different ways for different people as the years go by. But it has never really left me, and I don’t believe it has ever left my generation, either.

Andrew Boryga is a reporter for the Daily Beast.
Travel, Part I
BY ANJELICA ROSELYN DARIAH

Before 9/11, flying could be, at its best, a glamorous occasion. Post-9/11, flying became more of a hassle, and functional outfits — easily removable shoes, minimal clothing — made it easier to get through security.

Anjelica Roselyn Dariah is a London-based fashion illustrator who was born in Washington, D.C.
At least for a time, 9/11 changed the global perception of the United States — leading to an image of tragedy and vulnerability, while promoting feelings of empathy for Americans in the rest of the world.

Jennifer Tapias Derch is a Colombian illustrator based in Valencia, Spain.
**Fashion** BY ROBIN GIVHAN

In the aftermath of 9/11, an entire generation of American fashion designers rose to prominence, propelled by an urgent belief that if creativity faded, if dreams evaporated, if the shopping ceased, then the terrorists would win. And so the industry establishment — the Council of Fashion Designers of America, Vogue magazine and legacy designers — rallied around young brands as a matter of both patriotism and survival.

They began by supporting a group show — a replacement for the many individual presentations that had been canceled when New York City found itself under siege. That group effort spawned the CFDA/Vogue Fashion Fund, an annual competition to help young designers develop their businesses with both money and mentoring. A world of accomplished men and women have passed through that program, including Aurora James, Kerby Jean-Raymond and the duo behind Proenza Schouler.

In the years that followed, other design competitions and mentorships were born. The post-9/11 fashion industry puts a premium on fresh faces and wily entrepreneurs. And while those celebrated young talents often move with reckless speed, the desire to create and a belief in the impossible were salvaged from the wreckage.

Robin Givhan is The Post’s senior critic-at-large.

**Theater** BY PETER MARKS

It may sound wildly counterintuitive, but at no time was theater funnier than after 9/11. The peals of laughter that rumbled across Broadway in the months following the terrorist attacks were emblematic of the most exuberant theatrical catharses I have ever experienced. The comic relief began with the musical version of “The Producers” that started in April 2001, then restarted a few days after the disaster, and continued with the dancing-in-the-aisles spirit of “Mamma Mia!,” the Abba jukebox musical that opened that October. I like to think the success of the priceless Tony-winning musicals that followed — “Avenue Q” in 2003, “Spamalot” in 2005 and “The Book of Mormon” in 2011 — was an enduring signal of how eternally hand-in-hand go the theater’s timeless twin masks, of comedy and tragedy.

Peter Marks is The Post’s theater critic.

**Travel, Part II** BY ANDREA SACHS

On the day of the attacks, the sky fell silent. As a precautionary measure, the Federal Aviation Administration grounded all commercial flights for the first time ever. When airports started to reopen a few days later, a dramatic shift in perspective had already taken hold. Planes had long symbolized freedom and adventure; now, by weaponizing them, the terrorists had replaced those positive associations with fear and suspicion.

The airline industry took almost three years to recover, and surpass, pre-9/11 passenger numbers. When travelers finally returned, they discovered a host of new restrictions that added more time and stress to the departure process. At security checkpoints, they had to place their electronics in bins, remove their coats and shoes, and limit their liquids to 3.4-ounce containers.

They could no longer hug loved ones goodbye at the gate but had to part ways before security. On board, the flight attendants reminded passengers not to congregate by the forward lavatories or cockpit door, which was locked and fortified to prevent future hijackings.

Early in the rebound, the lines at the airport were long because travelers were adjusting to the new measures. Two decades later, the wait can still be lengthy, but for an entirely different reason: After being cooped up for more than a year because of the pandemic, people really want to fly again.

Andrea Sachs is a travel writer for The Post.

**Architecture** BY PHILIP KENNICOTT

First came the jersey barriers, a provisional defense against car bombs. Then came the bollards, permanent incursions on the built environment. Older buildings suffered most, their front doors closed, their atria clogged with magnetometers and barking security guards. Architectural symbolism was expendable. We enter the Supreme Court not via the grand front stairs but through side entrances, and the Capitol is accessed through an underground visitors center.

Paranoia was programmed into new structures. The tower that replaced the twin towers is built on a giant, windowless concrete plinth. U.S. embassies were rebuilt outside city centers, forlorn, generic buildings surrounded by moats of empty land. The United States said the quiet part aloud: We’re scared.

But designers are resourceful. Laurie Olin used benches and retaining walls to encircle the Washington Monument with an elegant defensive perimeter. Security is now built into design, for better and worse. Meanwhile, architects plan for a new enemy, an airborne virus.

Philip Kennicott is The Post’s architecture critic.

**Policing** BY CHERYL W. THOMPSON

Before 9/11, federal, state and local law enforcement rarely communicated or shared information with one another. It was on a case-by-case, need-to-know basis. But the terrorist attacks — and the fallout — prompted a seismic shift in how information was shared among agencies like the FBI; the Drug Enforcement Administration; the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; and state and local police. Initially, it was all about terrorism, mostly foreign. It made many police departments more effective because they felt “valued.” They suddenly had a seat at the table to discuss ways to prevent unimaginable things like this from happening again.

But it also stretched some local departments. When a tip or leak came into the FBI or another federal agency, they would often partner with a local police department to conduct interviews or surveillance. That sometimes forced strapped departments to reallocate resources.

Now, in the aftermath of the Jan. 6 insurrection at the Capitol, there has been finger-pointing about a lack of communication and information sharing — raising the question of whether law enforcement has reverted to its pre-9/11 habits.

Cheryl W. Thompson is an investigative correspondent for NPR and an
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Ron Charles writes about books and publishing for The Post.

**Love** BY LISA BONOS

“I don’t know if I’m going to be okay. I love you so much.”

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The voice mails: There’s calm and confusion in those recordings, as people in the World Trade Center, at the Pentagon and on Flight 93 tried to reassure spouses and family members that they were okay — or that they would be. The “I love you” telegraphed the true direness of the situation. The callers wanted to make sure they got one last chance to say it.

At the time, cellphones were newly ubiquitous — and so was the notion that a mass act of terrorism could unfold on U.S. soil. Not only did these voice mails become digital mementos for those who lost loved ones on 9/11, but they showed all of us the importance of ending a phone call with “I love you,” even when you weren’t calling from a burning building.

These farewell calls became a reminder that you might lose a loved one at any moment, explains Deborah Tannen, a professor of linguistics at Georgetown University and author of many books, including “You Just Don’t Understand: Women and Men in Conversation.”

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Lisa Bonos writes about dating and relationships for The Post.

**Journalism** BY MARGARET SULLIVAN

The Long Island cable-television executive thought he was making a simple, journalistically sound decision when he forbade his on-air talent, shortly after 9/11, to wear American-flag lapel pins.

“We don’t want anyone to get the false impression that our patriotic emotions cloud our reporting of the facts,” Patrick Dolan explained later in a televised apology, responding to a backlash. Advertisers were pulling out, and viewers were angry that journalists should be anything other than showily patriotic.

The incident was small but emblematic. In the months and years that followed, too many journalists would behave almost as if they were part of the Bush administration’s team. They got on board with the government’s drive toward a misbegotten and ultimately disastrous war in Iraq. Reporters relied on anonymous sources to suggest that Iraq’s president, Saddam Hussein, had stockpiled weapons of mass destruction. Editorial writers and pundits became warmongering cheerleaders. A few journalists, like those in Knight Ridder’s Washington bureau, showed skepticism and restraint; many more did not.

Eventually, many Americans came to understand that they had been poorly served by this failure of mission — by jingoism substituting for journalism. Public trust in the press, already declining for many reasons, took a big hit. It hasn’t recovered.

Margaret Sullivan is The Post’s media columnist.

**Fiction** BY RON CHARLES

The cover photograph in this issue was also featured — minus the red tint — on the cover of the Oct. 7, 2001, issue of the magazine. Photographer Yoni Brook recounts how it happened: When I took this photo, I was 19 years old. I was a D.C. kid obsessed with photojournalism and had just started my sophomore year at New York University. The morning of 9/11, I was in class when the towers fell. I immediately ran to the World Trade Center with a few rolls of expired film. That night, I transmitted photos to The Post for the next day’s newspaper. Photo editor Michel du Cille, one of my mentors, told me on the phone that Post photographers couldn’t get into New York City because the bridges were closed. He said I needed to figure out how to get back to Ground Zero, which by then had been closed by the police and National Guard. I made a makeshift press pass out of my military-dependent ID (my father was in the Navy). I worked my way back to Ground Zero at about 1 a.m. and spent the night hidden inside 2 World Financial Center, overlooking the rubble pile from the west side. All night, ironworkers and firefighters were trying to split steel beams with sparking torches. I remember the sunrise was almost obscenely beautiful. The sun backlight the smoke and rescuers. Only later, when I looked at the enlarged photo, did I realize that this firefighter was holding a thermal imaging camera, searching for survivors.

Yoni Brook is an associate professor at George Washington University. She was a reporter for The Post from 1997 until 2019. She covered the D.C. Police Department, the Justice Department and the White House, and was a member of the investigations team.

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Lisa Bonos writes about dating and relationships for The Post.
Bigotry, Part II

BY ROSHI ROUZBEHANI

Ever since 9/11, many Muslims — especially those living in Western countries — feel like they are being watched. They feel insecure because the burden of proof is on their shoulders to show that they are innocent.

Roshi Rouzbehani is an Iranian illustrator based in London.
The Mystery of 9/11 and Dementia

New York’s first responders have suffered a host of physical and mental health issues since 2001. Now many are experiencing alarming cognitive decline.

STORY BY PATRICK HRUBY
PHOTOGRAPH BY ANASTASSIA WHITTY
More than a decade after the twin towers fell, Ron Kirchner began forgetting things. Buckling his belt. Closing his car door. Once, while visiting a preschool class on the 13th anniversary of 9/11, he even neglected to wear his customary necktie and New York City Fire Department hat. “He was in a panic,” says his wife, Dawn. “He used to like to bring the kids something, like coloring books. And he couldn’t find anything.”

This was unlike Ron, who had always been devoted and dutiful. He frequently wrote Dawn love notes, hiding them around their house. He made time after work to play with his two children, Luke and Ava. He mopped the floors before going to bed, whistling while he pushed the handle. “He did it joyfully,” Dawn says. “Ronnie was a giver.” Ron brought the same enthusiasm to his job as a firefighter in Queens, where he obsessively cleaned his truck, stayed up all night waiting for calls, and — according to unit lore — once smashed an Xbox with an ax because he thought that some of his younger colleagues were spending too much time playing video games. “Dad thought they should be reading up on fire stuff, training and procedures,” Luke says with a laugh.

Ron was one of the tens of thousands of police, firefighters, construction workers and others who worked amid the ruins of the World Trade Center in Lower Manhattan following 9/11. Like many of those responders, he later paid a price. Diagnosed with asthma and a lung disease both linked to Ground Zero exposure, Ron retired on disability in 2009 and moved to Arizona.

At first, life in the desert was good. Ron landed a comfortable job working private security for a wealthy client. He and Dawn visited the Grand Canyon. They saw the red rocks of Sedona. Ron would wheeze while hiking, and sometimes at night, but a nebulizer made his breathing less strained.

By 2014, however, Ron’s troubles with thinking and memory were becoming unmanageable. Back in New York, he had deftly maneuvered a fire engine along the city’s crowded streets; now, he struggled to parallel park the family’s SUV inside two spaces. He would put toothpaste on his toothbrush and not know what to do with it. He was let go from his security job — in part, Dawn says, because he struggled to use a smartphone.

One day in early 2015, Dawn received a call from her husband’s naturopathic doctor, who had given Ron the Montreal Cognitive Assessment, a brief test that screens patients for cognitive disorders. Ron had scored poorly, unable to draw a simple clock face with the correct time. Dawn took him to a neurologist, who diagnosed him with dementia. Ron was 51. The neurologist, Dawn says, told her that a magnetic resonance imaging scan of his brain was comparable to that of an 85-year-old.

Today, Ron suffers from seizures. He can no longer speak coherently, cut his own food or bathe himself. He requires round-the-clock care and supervision from his wife and children, lest he wander into the streets around his family’s home in Oceanside, N.Y., where they moved in 2017. “He doesn’t really know who I am,” Dawn says, “or who he is, or what his favorite thing in the world — the fire department — is.” She doesn’t think Ron knew he was being photographed for this article, and believes it would have been impossible to explain it to him. But Dawn feels that it’s important to share his story as a way of helping others — and that her husband, if he could still understand, would feel the same.

Ron’s condition is almost unheard of for a 59-year-old man, and it points to an emerging medical mystery: Twenty years after 9/11, Ground Zero first responders are suffering from abnormally high rates of cognitive impairment, with some individuals in their 50s experiencing deficiencies that typically manifest when people are in their 70s — if at all.

“That is the most extraordinary thing with these cognitive issues, and what blows me away,” says Benjamin Luft, director of Stony Brook University’s World Trade Center Health and Wellness Program, which cares for and studies responders. “You don’t expect this to occur in your 50s, because it doesn’t occur. And a lot of these people are in their early 50s.” Although most cases are not as severe as Ron’s, the number of responders showing memory loss and other signs of impairment has been rising over time. Scientists and doctors are now asking: Is 9/11 to blame?

On the night of the attacks, Ron Kirchner arrived in Lower Manhattan with a group of firefighters. Bewildered by the sheer scale of the devastation, they froze — until someone in the group spoke up. What are we waiting for? Let’s go. “From that point on,” Luke Kirchner says, “they were working like crazy.”

When the planes hit the towers, it triggered an almost inconceivable catastrophe. Collapsing buildings pulverized hundreds of thousands of tons of cement, steel, glass and other materials, along with thousands of computers, miles of electrical cables, and hundreds of thousands of gallons of heating and transformer fluids. The destruction created a blizzard of pinkish-gray dust that seemed to coat everything; beneath the piles of rubble, jet fuel ignited fires that burned and smoked across a 16-acre area until Dec. 19.

Seven days after the attacks, Environmental Protection Agency administrator Christine Todd Whitman reassured the public that the air around Ground Zero was safe to breathe. It was not. (In 2016, Whitman apologized for her remarks.) The dust contained glass fibers and other particles small enough to lodge deep in the lungs, as well as many substances and chemicals that are known toxins — including asbestos, lead, and
polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), a category of odorless compounds whose manufacture in the United States was banned in the late 1970s after they were linked to cancer. In 2003, an atmospheric scientist described the area’s smoking wreckage as a pollutant-spewing “chemical factory.” Four years later, an EPA analysis of Ground Zero air quality in the days following 9/11 found that ambient levels of dioxins — another group of chemical compounds known to cause cancer and other maladies — were the highest measurements “ever recorded anywhere in the world.”

Renée Totaro, then a New York City police officer, arrived at Ground Zero on the same night as Ron Kirchner. She worked there for the next three months. Now retired, she says she will never forget the smell. “It was so strong, almost like acid,” says Totaro, 52. “You could taste it in your mouth. Our eyes were burning. Our throats were burning. Our ears were burning.” The physical stress was compounded by emotional trauma. Responders saw things no one should. Richard Roeill, a retired Nassau County firefighter and rescue swimmer who spent months sifting through the ruins, remembers searching a space under the remnants of Windows on the World, the famous restaurant that had occupied the top floor of the North Tower. Crouching below a beam, he saw a desk, a computer, a datebook — and then, a piece of fabric. “It was just slimy,” says Roeill, 59. “Almost like a greased rag. It looked like a female garment. Things like that still bother me.”

After two weeks on “the pile” — the term many responders used to describe the 1.8 million tons of debris they searched and ultimately removed — Roeill began coughing, suffering nosebleeds and throwing up. Totaro experienced migraines, a sinus infection, blurred vision and a perpetually upset stomach. “I was just chugging Pepto Bismol,” she says. “I didn’t even need to use the cap” to measure. Both continued to work — as did Ron Kirchner, who spent nearly 600 hours at Ground Zero, signing up for a series of 30-day stints until March 2002.

“We had family members and friends of [missing people] giving us pictures, saying, ‘Please, if you see my husband, my brother,'” Roeill says. “I went down there thinking I was going to save the world. That I was going to bring someone home. And I

Over the following weeks and months, many responders developed what doctors later dubbed “World Trade Center cough,” a syndrome that often includes shortness of breath, nasal congestion and acid reflux. Others suffered from nightmares and anxiety attacks. For some, the problems were temporary. But for others, they persisted — or got worse. In the years since the attacks, a wide range of chronic health conditions linked to 9/11 have emerged: asthma and sinusitis, sleep apnea and depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and a laundry list of cancers. Studies have found that New York City firefighters who worked at Ground Zero are at increased risk for heart disease, and that people exposed to the dust cloud have a higher risk of developing autoimmune disease.

Before 9/11, Totaro had an undiagnosed autoimmune disorder. It flared up at Ground Zero and nearly caused her to lose sight in her right eye. She retired from the police in 2004 when her compromised vision made it hard for her to hit targets at a shooting range. Roeill once played bagpipes in a firefighter band. At work, he used to be able to hold his breath for up to three minutes underwater. He now sleeps with the help of an oxygen machine and spends four days a week being treated for PTSD, pulmonary disease and toxic metals in his blood. “When I talk,” he says, “I feel chest pains.”

Luft, the director of Stony Brook’s WTC Health and Wellness Program, is a renowned infectious-disease specialist who developed some of the first treatments for Lyme disease and AIDS-related infections. On 9/11, he spent the day preparing the Department of Medicine at Stony Brook University Hospital for an expected influx of wounded people. No one arrived. Survivors were too scarce. Days later, he visited Ground Zero; upon returning to his office on Long Island, he began establishing a clinic to care for responders. His efforts and others like it have evolved into the World Trade Center Health Program, which is administered by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and provides medical monitoring and treatment to more than 100,000 responders and survivors through a nationwide provider network and at seven clinical centers in New York
and New Jersey. Enrollment in the program has increased over time, and doctors continue to see new and unusual ailments. In 2018, for example, researchers found that firefighters who worked at Ground Zero are at elevated risk of developing a rare variant of a blood cancer precursor disease that was also more common among Vietnam War veterans exposed to the toxic herbicide Agent Orange. “The asthma that [9/11 responders] have is not typical asthma,” Luft says. “The sinusitis is not typical sinusitis. The GERD [gastroesophageal reflux disease] is not typical GERD, where you just take a Tums” to treat it.

Like Totaro, Luft still remembers the smell at Ground Zero — and an unsettling realization that the fallout would be ongoing. “What I knew right away was that this was something that had not been seen before,” he says. “There have been other mass disasters, like Fukushima and Chernobyl. But this was a unique combination of prolonged and complex physical and psychological exposures. So it would be totally unpredictable as to what the [long-term health] problems would be.”

In 2014, Sean Clouston began to see a disturbing trend. An epidemiologist and professor of public health at Stony Brook University, he had suggested giving the Montreal Cognitive Assessment to some of the nearly 8,000 responders, mostly living on Long Island, who were being followed by Luft’s clinical center. On 9/11, many had been in their late 30s. “They were now in their 50s, so I thought we should get a baseline to see where they were and help us follow up later,” Clouston says. “We didn’t anticipate that many of them would have problems.”

But they did. Of the 818 responders Clouston and his colleagues first tested, 104 had scores indicative of cognitive impairment, a condition that can range from mild to severe and that occurs when people have trouble remembering, learning new things, concentrating or making decisions that affect their everyday lives. Ten others scored low enough to have possible dementia. Clouston was stunned. As a group, the responders were relatively young. Many had to pass mentally demanding tests to become cops and firefighters in the first place. They were some of the last individuals you would expect to be impaired, let alone at roughly three times the rate of people in their 70s. “We should have seen — maybe — one person” with dementia, he says. “And we had way too many people showing impairment. It looked like what I’m used to seeing when we study 75-year-olds. It was staggering.”

When Clouston first shared his findings in a meeting, Luft had one thought. No way. “I couldn’t believe it,” he says. The researchers double-checked their work, making sure they were using the cognitive test properly. Still worried that something was amiss, they gave more than 1,000 responders a different test that measures reaction time, processing speed and memory. In each area, responders performed below the norm for their age group — and almost 15 percent had scores consistent with cognitive impairment. In each area, responders performed below the norm for their age group — and almost 15 percent had scores consistent with cognitive impairment.

Since then, other studies from Stony Brook researchers have found that within a group of 1,800 responders who were initially cognitively healthy, 14 percent developed impairment over a 2½-year period, and that responders with PTSD and impaired cognition have both blood and brain protein abnormalities similar to
Stony Brook research professor Erica Diminich. “If you put a rat in a little chamber and blow a bunch of fumes and exhaust into it over a period of weeks, it’s not looking too good for the rat. So it’s not a stretch to say that [Ground Zero air] could have some detrimental long-term effects on responders.”

And the explanation may not only be physical. When Clouston was a child, he was careful not to wake his grandfather, a World War II veteran, from naps. “If you surprised him, he would hit you, because he thought you were a German” soldier, Clouston says. “My grandfather had PTSD to the last day of his life.” Many responders have PTSD, in which people suffer from a variety of physical and emotional disorders — including flashbacks and difficulty sleeping — after experiencing dangerous or terrifying events. Among the responders Clouston has studied, PTSD correlates with lower scores on cognitive tests. And a study of New York City firefighters and paramedics conducted by the New York City Fire Department and researchers from the City University of New York and the Albert Einstein College of Medicine found that those who had more intense exposure to Ground Zero were more likely to report cognitive concerns and elevated PTSD levels than those with less intense exposure.

Clouston says that toxic air and PTSD could both be culprits — perhaps even joint accomplices, acting as a “one-two punch” to responders’ brains. “We’re trying to understand that,” he says. “Some of it is impossible to tease out.” Many other important questions remain unanswered. Why are some responders fine, those seen in patients with Alzheimer’s and related diseases. “We are slowly getting pieces of the puzzle,” says Stephanie Santiago-Michels, a research coordinator for Stony Brook’s WTC Health and Wellness Program. “We know that their brains are changing.”

At the program’s clinic in Commack, N.Y., responders have told research program coordinator Alison Pellecchia about getting lost while driving in their own neighborhoods and struggling to figure out how much money to give cashiers. Some have trouble recalling anything that they don’t write down — including coming in for lab tests and brain scans. “They always feel horrible about that,” Pellecchia says. “They’ll tell me, ‘I’m doing a study about memory, and I can’t remember my appointment!’”

The evidence that 9/11 was responsible may not be definitive, but it is difficult to ignore. The air at Ground Zero contained chemicals and microscopic particles that are toxic to brain cells and have been linked to higher risk of Alzheimer’s and other dementias. Clouston’s group has found elevated levels of a protein linked to neuroinflammation in the brains of responders, with higher amounts corresponding with having spent more time on the pile. In a 2017 experiment, Michelle N. Hernandez, then a doctoral student at New York University, injected Ground Zero dust into the nasal passages of mice. The mice subsequently suffered neuroinflammation, and metals associated with the dust were found to persist in their brains.

“Pollutants aren’t good for your brain in animal studies,” says Stony Brook research professor Erica Diminich. “If you put a rat in a little chamber and blow a bunch of fumes and exhaust into it over a period of weeks, it’s not looking too good for the rat. So it’s not a stretch to say that [Ground Zero air] could have some detrimental long-term effects on responders.”

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Dawn Kirchner, 57, sits in her dining room, trying to explain life with Ron. Lacking the right words, she pulls up her sweater sleeves. She is not physically imposing: At 5 feet tall and 95 pounds, she’s a foot shorter and 120 pounds lighter than her husband. Her biceps, however, are well developed. “I never had these before,” she says.

The work starts early. It never really ends. Ron wakes up between 5 and 6 a.m. He likes to walk around the house. Dawn makes breakfast, cuts his food into small bites — so Ron won’t choke — and feeds him as he comes and goes from the kitchen, one forkful at a time. She then shaves his face, brushes his teeth and gives him anti-seizure medication.

Some mornings, Ron will nap. Some mornings, he won’t. Nothing is predictable, and everything is fraught. Ron swallows his toothpaste. He struggles to step into the shower. He resists when Dawn tries to change his pants, or take off his shoes, or get him in and out of their car. “At one point, he was infatuated with my and others anything but? Are they suffering from a variation of a known neurological ailment, or something unique? Did Ground Zero exposure simply fast-forward the arrival of cognitive problems that naturally occur with advancing age? What role do genetics play? Will impaired individuals decline into dementia, like Ron Kirchner?

Seven years ago, Luft’s initial skepticism was shared by many in the larger medical community. “People said this was impossible, that [the responders] must not have anything because they are just too young,” Clouston says. “And we still hear that.” Those doubts are changing, however. In October 2019, the WTC Health Program gathered experts from across the country for a two-day meeting in Alexandria, Va., to discuss responders’ cognitive problems. Caleb Finch, a University of Southern California professor who studies how environmental factors contribute to Alzheimer’s and accelerated brain aging, was in attendance. “There’s a large amount of uncertainty, and the data is just in the beginning of being collected,” he says. “But everyone there I talked with said this is something we ought to look at very seriously. It’s clear that this is a lingering brain insult, 20 years later.”

In their published studies, Clouston and his colleagues are careful to use the term “mild cognitive impairment” instead of “dementia.” So much remains unknown, Clouston says, and “we don’t want to scare anyone.” But recently, he says, other scientists looking at the same data have started to give unexpected feedback. “They say our language is too soft,” Clouston says.

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problems, a Mr. Fix-It who spent his free time renovating his family’s house and building decks for his neighbors. “Ronnie would clean the pool and then call me from work just to ask, ‘Is your father in the pool? Your friends? Are you enjoying it?’” Dawn says. “That brought him joy.” Later, when he was losing his ability to speak, he would still hold doors open for strangers while out shopping.

Ron didn’t talk much about his time on the pile. After 9/11, Luke says, his father attended funerals and “wasn’t home a lot.” Dawn believes that Ground Zero triggered his dementia, just as it almost certainly was responsible for the breathing problems he developed in the late 2000s. “He had so much exposure,” she says.

Back then, she didn’t think about what was in the air in Lower Manhattan, or how it might be harmful — and even now, she’s not sure her husband would have cared. “If he knew what we know now, do I think he would have done anything different?” she says. “Absolutely not. And not just him. Most of” the responders.

Dawn and her children now live in limbo. Ron is still here. But the man they knew is mostly gone. The family holds on to what they can, remembering what Ron can’t. He is hard-working, full of seemingly inexhaustible energy. He lived to take care of others. In addition to his day job, he had his own construction company and sometimes drove a limo. He was the person Dawn’s sisters would call when they had plumbing problems, a Mr. Fix-It who spent his free time renovating his family’s house and building decks for his neighbors. “Ronnie would clean the pool and then call me from work just to ask, ‘Is your father in the pool? Your friends? Are you enjoying it?’” Dawn says. “That brought him joy.” Later, when he was losing his ability to speak, he would still hold doors open for strangers while out shopping.

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They met in the summer of 1989. Fresh from graduate school, Dawn was living with her parents. Ron was helping to build a deck for the house next door. One day, he approached her. Hey, are you married or anything? “I had a boyfriend at the time,” Dawn says with a laugh. “But Ronnie was cute.”

Dawn learned that Ron had grown up in Spanish Harlem, and that his father died when he was a toddler. As a child, he idolized firefighters; after he became one in his late 20s, he began wearing a custom fire department belt buckle. Nobody does that,” son Luke says.

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Dawn and her children now live in limbo. Ron is still here. But the man they knew is mostly gone. The family holds on to what they can, remembering what Ron can’t. Luke, 25, treasures his father’s old tools. He wants to become a firefighter. Ava, 20, has a collection of notes that Ron wrote to her, and a tattoo on her right forearm in his handwriting that reads I love you. Sometimes, the family will play a 17-year-old voice mail that Ron left for one of his co-workers, just to hear his once-commanding voice. “It carries several expletives,” Dawn says. “But it’s still good to listen to.”
T here is nothing good about Ron Kirchner’s condition. But in exactly one way, Dawn feels fortunate: She can afford to personally care for her husband. The Kirchners have money saved. Ron’s pension and Social Security cover their expenses. Some of his former firehouse colleagues built the family a backyard deck and helped them get a hospital bed for Ron to sleep in at home. Luke and Ava live with their parents, which means Dawn usually can count on a helping hand. “If it wasn’t for my daughter, I’d never be able to take a shower,” she says.

Dementia care can be ruinously expensive. The median cost of a nonmedical home health aide is nearly $50,000 a year, while a private room in a nursing home is roughly $106,000. And even less severe cognitive impairment can make it hard to earn a living. Totaro, the retired New York City police officer, says that she scored highly on the memory portion of her academy exam. “I didn’t need a calendar,” she says. “I didn’t need a phone book.” She is now coping with memory loss. Totaro quit a job as a bank teller because she couldn’t keep numbers straight. She tried working at a fast-food restaurant. “They put me on the drive-through window, and had to take me off immediately,” she says. “It was too much.”

John Feal hears similar stories. A construction worker who was seriously injured at Ground Zero in the days following 9/11 and has since become a leading advocate for responders, Feal gets phone calls and emails from worried spouses. My husband is deteriorating. He doesn’t remember anything. I think he has dementia. Every September, Feal organizes a ceremony at the granite memorial wall for people who died of illnesses related to 9/11 that he helped build in Nesconset, N.Y. “I see the same guys each year, and the physical and mental differences are so evident,” he says. “They are so macho and full of bravado that they will say otherwise. But they are not the same people.”

Working with other responders and former “Daily Show” host Jon Stewart, Feal was a driving force behind the James Zadroga 9/11 Health and Compensation Act, a 2010 federal law that provides health care to 9/11 responders and survivors through the World Trade Center Health Program, as well as money through a victim compensation fund. To date, that fund has paid almost $8.7 billion to about 40,000 sick or dying people, and the number of 9/11-related illnesses it covers has expanded over time. But cognitive ailments are not among them. “As people become more and more impaired, they may need more and more care,” Clouston says. “But none of that is provided. You are on your own.” For that to change, as it did in 2012 when 50 types of cancer were added to the list of covered conditions, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health and a special scientific advisory committee will need to see more and better evidence that what is happening to Ron Kirchner and others began on 9/11. That will require more research and more time. “To put a new condition on our list, you have to show that it is substantially likely to be causally related to [9/11] exposures,” says institute director and health program administrator John Howard. “That means we can’t explain it in any other way.”

A physician now serving his third term as the institute’s director, Howard was appointed by President George W. Bush to coordinate the earliest federal response to the health effects of 9/11 and has overseen the health program since its creation. He says the program is concerned about cognitive impairment among responders and eager for researchers to answer the questions surrounding it. “Without them,” Howard says, “we would be blind.”

Luft worries that the worst may be yet to come. Stony Brook’s studies cover a sliver of the total responder population. There could be thousands more with cognitive impairment, and hundreds more with dementia. Are they falling through the cracks? The group is aging, which places all of them at greater risk. “It’s terrifying,” Luft says. “Five to six years ago, [the responders] were at one level. And now they are worse. Five to six years from now, we don’t know exactly what it will look like. Some will level off. But some will be worse.”

When Ron was first becoming forgetful, Dawn would tape family photos to their kitchen cabinets. This is Ava, our daughter. This is Luke, our son. She would look her husband in the eyes and show him her wedding ring. “We’re married,” Dawn would say. “Oh!” Ron would respond, surprised but pleased. “That’s good.”

Sometimes, Ron still laughs when Ava makes funny voices. But it’s hard to know what he’s responding to, or why. For the Kirchners, 9/11 never really ended — and in the future, Dawn fears, her family will have company. “It’s not an official World Trade Center illness yet,” she says. “But it will be.”

Patrick Hruby is a writer in Washington.
At Daru, a reverence for ‘Indian-ish’ fare

The entrance to Daru tells you much about what you need to know about what’s inside the new Indian restaurant off H Street NE. The door consists of four windows framed in black trim, simple but dramatic. Concentric rings of white paint, inspired by Himalayan mandalas, create a seductive portal. A written welcome, based on the Hindu-Buddhist philosophy that hosts should revere guests, appears above the door in Sanskrit.

Even for passersby who have no intention of going in, the entrance creates the desired effect: “It brings attention to the corner,” says Dante Datta, who opened Daru with Suresh Sundas in early August. Their work histories should induce lip-smacking. Datta, 38, the drinks maven whose parents are from West Bengal, comes to the project from neighborly Elle, the Columbia Room — the groundbreaking bar created by Derek Brown — and the acclaimed Rasika West End, where he met Sundas, also 38, nine years ago. Sundas, a native of Nepal, was the tandoor chef at the contemporary Indian restaurant, responsible for breads, barbecue dishes and more.

Had there been no pandemic, Daru would be a watering hole serving snacks. (The owners say they were inspired in part by Bar Goto in New York, a Japanese izakaya, or tavern, on the Lower East Side.) The name of the new establishment derives from a type of moonshine, desi daru, popular in rural India and sprung from palm sugar. The bar, ringed by a dozen seats, tends to fill

DARU 1451 Maryland Ave. NE. 202-388-1848. darudc.com. Open for takeout and indoor and outdoor dining 5 to 10 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Prices: Appetizers $8 to $14, main courses $16 to $26. Accessibility: No barriers at the front door; ADA-compliant restrooms.
first. The shake-shake-shake of drinks is music to the ears of ringside participants.

Smooth off the edges of a rough day with Hari Daiquiri. Crafted from rum, curdled and clarified kefir and a puree of cilantro and mint, it’s the color of life — green — and inspired by mint chutney. Datta credits bar manager Tom Martinez, formerly of Columbia Room, for the liquid elegance, which like all the Indian-inspired cocktails here costs $14.

The global crisis forced the business partners to put more focus on food. Good call. People seated at safely distanced tables bests people standing inches from one another at a bar. Besides, a larger-than-intended menu throws more well-deserved attention on the chef. Dish after dish shows Sundas to be as attentive to presentation as flavor. He even reveals a sense of humor with what the owners refer to as an “Indian-ish” operation. “Local ingredients and Indian techniques,” says Sundas.

Cue the... tacos? You read that right. Sundas swaps in an herby, whole-wheat flatbread for tortillas and tops it with chunks of jackfruit. Like tofu, jackfruit acts like a sponge and absorbs the flavor of whatever it connects with, in this case, a blend of chile paste, caramelized onion and lemon juice for tang. The texture of the tropical fruit mimics that of meat. In fact, were you to leave off the sour cream base, the taco would be vegan. Gracing the plate is shredded red cabbage tossed with red wine vinegar and what sounds like a kitchen sink: oregano, green chile, honey, saffron. My mouth can’t get enough of the jousting.

Another distinctive introduction is a chicken kebab made rich with blue cheese, cream cheese and sour cream and cooked on an open flame. To look at the kebab is to see toasted marshmallows. The perfect foil to the creamy richness is a vivid sour cherry sauce, warm with bay leaf and cinnamon, pooled under the chicken.

Sundas clearly learned a lot at Rasika West End, where even the more straightforward-sounding dishes sparkle. Lamb chops are marinated overnight in garlic, Greek yogurt and green chiles — elements that insert themselves into every nook and cranny of the meat — and acquire a shower of crushed pink peppercorns after they leave the grill. The green comet tail on the plate? You’ll want to swipe a bite of oh-so-soft lamb through the chef’s turmeric-sparked take on chimichurri. Fluffy biryani benefits from warm spices, a treasure of seasonal mushrooms and dried apricots. Set off with a pretty viola, a side dish of smoked mashed eggplant fairly pulses with cilantro, ginger and sweet onions.

The single most alluring entree is a big blue plate of moist sea bass, yellow from turmeric and swaddled in a banana leaf, escorted by tomato chutney and a bowl of kichidi, one of the few nods to the chef’s homeland. The puree of kale, jasmine rice and mung lentils is something Sundas remembers his mother making for him when he was sick as a child. At Daru, the comfort is enhanced with ghee, cumin seeds and more. TLC lives on.

Different servers, including Datta, check in like the mindful hosts they’ve learned to be at such feel-good Washington restaurants as Bar Charley and the Dabney as well as the aforementioned Columbia Room and Elle (where the graphic artist behind Daru’s distinctive door, T.J. Buttner, works as a
Sundas sightings are rare. As at his former place of employment, the kitchen is below ground.

The bar is the heart of the otherwise simple dining room, whose walls of white paint or red brick and knotty wood floors keep eyes focused on the food and drink. Picture windows pull in streams of light and catch diners on the small patio, merrymaking in a silent movie. Speaking of sound, the return of so many people to so many restaurants has some readers imploring me to resurrect sound checks. For the record, Daru averages 82 decibels, “extremely loud,” at prime time.

Conversation can mean leaning in to hear tablemates. You might not always catch what they’re saying, but you know by a nudge of, say, a Kesari old-fashioned that they want you to sample scotch as you likely haven’t — gold with saffron liqueur, biting with ginger liqueur and softly nutty. The last flavor is the result of roasting cashews, turning them into butter, pouring scotch over the spread and letting the spirit absorb the nuttiness. A day later, the liquid is strained. The next time you question the cost of drinks, think of the unseen labor that goes into some of the best.

The entrance catches your eye. The food, drink and hospitality — even early in its game — win your devotion. Like it says above the door, the guest is god at Daru.
Workbench

BY RANDY MAYS

Find the 12 differences in the photo of a workbench at a farm in Friendsville, Md., in July.

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Five animals live in my house. Two are humans. One is a dog. One is a cat. We have a new, fifth roommate, and in her sudden presence lies a prescription for world peace.

I am Gene. My girlfriend is Rachel. Our dog is Lexi. Our cat is Sherman. I do not know the new roommate’s given name, if she has one, but I call her Elaine. Elaine is a mouse.

Elaine is not a fancy mouse, the pristine lab-grown white kind you buy at pet stores for $2 and then feed to your stupid snake. Elaine is the color of a dust bunny and lives by her wits under our stove. She is chubby, probably from horked-down stove drippings. When she first appeared I was a little alarmed — I thought she might be a baby rat. (Perhaps unfairly, humans regard rats with disgust, whereas rats are not very different from mice except that they were blamed for killing half of Europe back in the 14th century through an outbreak of the bubonic plague, a terrible global tragedy that I am mentioning here simply because I get to tell you that “bubonic” refers to “buboes,” which sound like boo-boos but were terrible explody awfulnesses that grew on victims’ skin. You are learning important scientific things here, so shut up and listen.)

Elaine is definitely a mouse. I have decided she is female — misogyny alert — because she seems to have feminine characteristics. She is darned cute and quite resourceful, and most important, she doesn’t seem to give a crap about what people think. She may well have a full family of meece under the stove, in which case she is both a feminist and a mom, because she selflessly protects them — I have never seen one — and forages for food for them at personal risk. She also is fearless: She will boldly make noise scuffling through things, knowing she is revealing herself and not caring. (If there is a husband mouse, he probably spends his days watching porn and drinking beer drippings.) Recently, Elaine brazenly ran out from under the sofa to try to find some morsel of food — I had left a jar of fig jam uncovered on the living room floor, so this was not a completely insane notion. Then Elaine noticed that Rachel was watching her, and didn’t care. Rachel didn’t care either; she opened a new window on her computer; she was working and didn’t want any distraction. They are women, living together in a man’s world, and winning. There are no “eeks!” in this house.

Now, I know what you are thinking, and I am way ahead of you. Why has neither Lexi nor Sherman killed and digested Elaine yet? Sherman, for example, who is out on the street a lot, regularly kills rats and leaves them on our doorstep as thank-you tributes, presumably for our dinner. The answer is, I think, that Elaine is family. She is part of our pack. Animals understand that. Elaine is not some shiftless next-door neighbor whom you can attack with impunity, some member of a competing tribe who must be dispatched with dispatch. To animals, she is one of us.

And she is. That’s where we are going here. We are in times of terrible partisan divide. We mistrust, and even hate, individuals who differ from us. And yes, a mouse is very different from a dog or cat or human. Very foreign. But we are all mammals. We have common enemies: We are clearly aligned against snakes. We have common desires and values: We like to eat delicious things, for example, and live in peace. We can make this whole thing work.

I have learned that mice live only 18 months or so, so Elaine’s time on Earth is short. When she goes, she will be missed, by four animals living together.

Email Gene Weingarten at gene.weingarten@washpost.com. Twitter: @geneweingarten. For previous columns, visit wapo.st/weingarten.
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