Commonplace •

A Feast of Things with the KFG

Knowledge Futures Group

Published on: Nov 29, 2021

DOI: 10.21428/6ffd8432.426a8f5e

License: [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC-BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

With the holiday seasons emerging and ongoing, the [Commonplace](#) editorial team thought it'd be fun to have a friends-giving-esque November newsletter that highlights some of the things that we all have been thinking about recently. Below you'll find a potluck of things from songs, to articles, to curiosities, to ideas that we've been munching on. We hope they make you as hungry for knowledge as they made us!

Can you guess which KFG-er corresponds to which thing?

"The War Inside HG Wells" by Adam Gopnik in *The New Yorker*

As many of us grapple to understand the times we're living in (a task I'm suspecting is not possible and never has been), we seem to be turning more often to science fiction, wondering if past fictions of our future can tell us anything about today. A mentor of mine once told me that *the world as it exists is embedded in the world as we wish it to be* and I think about this often when reading scifi—even the kind that's more foreboding than aspirational—and in my work at the KFG as we strive to imagine futureS (plural!) that aren't beholden to the directional weight of the way things are right now (hello, broken scholcomm ecosystem!).

This was all swirling around in my head as I read Gopnik's account of Wells as a writer whose "chief imaginative gift was to extrapolate the worst that could happen if we abandoned ourselves to a romantic idea." What's stuck with me is Wells' ability to balance the good and the bad of his future imaginings (romantic ideas! consequences!) with the issues of his present time that would cause some writers to put down the pen and give themselves over to despair entirely. Concluding he writes, "[Wells] foretold a future in which intellectuals were cannibalized by construction workers, and then everyone got devoured by a big bug. Yet he went on working to improve the municipal sewers." So, I suppose this is my long-winded way of saying that I'm feeling supportive of the sewers these days, too. I'm here for the infrastructures—and for the futures.

“History of the entire world, I guess,” by Bill Wurtz

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

history of the entire world, i guess

Bill Wurtz makes jingles. Funky, trippy jingles. He also makes 20-minute long jingles that happen to be decently accurate historical documentaries. His "History of the entire world, I guess" is one of those. It's not exhaustive or authoritative - but it's not trying to be (he did preface with, "I guess", after all). I keep coming back to it. Each time I watch I tumble down a dozen new wikipedia rabbit holes and I'm always surprised the 20 minutes is over so soon.

Warning: Some explicit language, maybe not for kids despite its cartoon nature.

“The Unusual Chemistry of the Tar Sands,” by Aaron Bradshaw in *It’s Freezing in LA!*

Illustration by Sonja Burniston

“Petroleum deposits have long been known to cause intense social and atmospheric impacts: not only are they sites to extract crisis-inducing fossil fuels, they ravage local communities and natural spaces, causing immense destruction on any scale you choose.” This article explores the pharmacokinetics (aka the distribution of drugs and molecules) and other processes of distribution in petroleum deposits—from their seepage into hormonal system (where they modulate, mimic and hijack the physiology of organisms) to the way they seep from deposit sites into ecosystems with repercussions that are geochemical, biological, sociopolitical, and even climatic in their scope.

Fun fact: this London-based magazine gets its name from a Trump quote when he dispelled climate change because he was freezing in LA.

Magnetars shaking up the cosmos

Source: http://www.astro.sunysb.edu/lattimer/AST301/lecture_magnetar.pdf

Magnetars are neutron stars with a magnetic field 1 trillion times that of Earth. If that's not impressive enough, they can have crustal readjustments (aka '**glitches**') that produce **starquakes** which can obliterate nearby systems. In [1998](#), the magnetic pulse from a starquake 20,000 light years away shut down our asteroid-exploring satellite [NEAR](#) (and overloaded sensors on a few others).

“Yefikir Engurgo,” by Hailu Mergia

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

Hailu Mergia — Yefikir Engurguro

This piece titled 'Yefikir Engurguro' is very near and dear to me. The title refers to singing about love. As it's composer, Hailu Mergia puts it - everybody has different kinds of love in their life. Friendship, the days of old, love of country... The song played

in "Tizita" major, one of four main modes of music from the Ethiopian Highlands, expresses longing that not only reflects the best of what was but also dreams about what could be. As a grateful member of an organization who's mission is a labor of love that builds on communal knowledge and empowerment, I want to share this heartfelt sound in hopes that it serves as inspiration for the best of what was and the best of what's to come.

LibGen doesn't infringe copyright

IN THE HIGH COURT OF DELHI AT NEW DELHI
ORDINARY ORIGINAL COMMERCIAL JURISDICTION
IA No. _____ of 2021
In
CS (COMM) NO. 572/2020

IN THE MATTER OF

Elsevier Ltd. & Ors

...Plaintiffs

Vs.

Alexandra Elbakyan & Ors

...Defendants

Scholars [submitted](#) an Intervention Application in mid-November, in an effort to prevent Elsevier, Wiley, and the American Chemical Society from violating India's progressive copyright law by making SciHub and LibGen unavailable to independent and university-affiliate researchers in the social sciences. As we meditate on the meanings of the [Global Transition to Open](#), can we think deeply about the principle that makes all research access a legal right? There are reasons for gratitude in some of these resonances: "The access to material owned by the Plaintiff and made available by Defendant Websites for research and education must be construed as the 'right' of the Applicants rather than as a limited exception." [Check it out.](#)

“Safe Passage,” by Laura Mvula

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

Gated reverb on drums open it up, creating a lot of empty space around the percussion. Then, spare, just Laura's voice soars over the top, a solitary artist in an expanse. Very deep synth comes in below, further opening up the field around Laura. The instrumentation remains pretty spare -- only a thin synthy trill now and then, and a modest guitar plucking. Her own voice layered throughout keeps her company. I get the impression of a person alone, and with the lyrics about safe passage, I see her sailing isolated on open water.

“Wolf Peach,” by Hillery Stone in Guernica

Drawing by Bianca Stone

Stone writes about the trials, tribulations, and symbolism in trying to grow a tomato, aka *Lycopersicon* (Greek, meaning “wolf peach”). With the harvest season coming to a close — indeed, now is the time to celebrate and give thanks for the bounty from our farms and gardens — it’s prompted me to remember and consider, not just the different seasons of planting, harvesting, preparing, and resting but the amount of effort and dedication and attention it really takes to be able to foster and grow a nutritious life. Humans are not unlike a tomato or squash: we need attention, we need the right environment, we need encouragement, but sometimes we just need our own space to grow.

“Invisible Cities” by Italo Calvino

In a lecture ([Six Memos for the Next Millenium: Lightness](#)) Calvino talked a bit about how he attempted to remove weight from his writing. For example, in [Invisible Cities](#), he describes structureless cities with a nonlinear flow of depictions. Many people have found it easy to relate to the qualities of each city, and I feel that’s a result of Calvino crafting a space that’s light and easy to be filled. The act of leaving something empty so it can be easily filled occurs again in Kierkegaard’s Either/Or, as the quality of a poet:

What is a poet? An unhappy man who conceals profound anguish in his heart, but whose lips are so fashioned that when sighs and groans pass over them they sound like beautiful music. People flock about the poet and say to him: do sing again; Which means, would that new sufferings tormented your soul, and: would that your lips stayed fashioned as before, for your cries would only terrify us, but your music is delightful.

For me, I started to think a bit about what lightness would mean, in the realm of software/tools. There’s the usual opposition between the single-focus, composable, one-thing-well software philosophy in the Unix world and the one-thing-for-all philosophy as exemplified by Windows. Although Calvino advocates for lightness, he nevertheless appreciates the greatness of some heavy, dense, detailed, “full” novels. Similarly, I don’t feel my like for light software/tools need to base themselves on a discredit of the opposition, but I have enjoyed looking at them through the lens of space & poetry.

NTS Radio

INFINITE MIXTAPES

You are what you eat? Vote with your dollars? Listen to great music? Yes! I was talking with a friend recently about the difference between recommendation engines and human curation for music apps (for other things too) and how I love NTS Live because it has the feel of a modern music app with the intimacy of listening to a good DJ. Don't get me wrong, the algorithmic machine of Spotify can lock me into a groove during a long drive and consistently deliver the songs I wanted to hear before I even knew that's the case. However, then there are times where I click Discover Weekly on Spotify and think to myself, "who even is this person?" I'm thinking about NTS Live as we go into this holiday of gratitude. I'm thinking about people and the art of curation and how we get to discover weekly through the eyes of other people. Music does that for me. So this week I'm gonna listen to finely curated, granularly tagged for discovery, music sets on NTS Live and appreciate the thoughtfully done and humble technology products I use in my life. And see the world through the eyes of another person, not the hall of mirrors I've created for myself.

Bonus: can you find the songs in this newsletter on NTS?

Thinking About the Immortality of the Crab

WIKI WORLD® by Craig Williams

Text excerpted from the Wikipedia article *Thinking about the immortality of the crab*. 18 Feb 2008

Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thinking_about_the_immortality_of_the_crab

An old friend of mine Tom Sharpe hosts the fantastic podcast '[Grubbing in the Filth](#)', where he speaks with experts about invertebrates and their relationship with humans. The podcast covers a great range of topics, like how to control common garden "pests", the robustness of cold tolerant insects in Antarctica, and how crustacean species commonly evolve into [crab-like](#) forms from non-crab-like forms. Speaking of crabs, Tom recently [tweeted](#) a screen capture of the Wikipedia page on "Thinking about the immortality of the crab", a lesser-known Spanish idiom about daydreaming. The tweet went viral and felt too good not to share. And if you contemplate the meaning of this saying, you too may find yourself thinking about the immortality of the crab.

“Sit Around the Fire,” by Jen Hopkins

Visit the web version of this article to view interactive content.

Sit Around The Fire

"Sit Around the Fire" is a new release from one of my favorite electronic artists, Jon Hopkins, off his new album *Music for Psychedelic Therapy*. The whole album is really something special, very different from his other stuff and some of it arrestingly unlike any music I've ever heard. This is the final track on the album, and it has been the center of gravity for my self-reflection all fall. There's something very autumnal about it. I highly recommend taking a quiet ten minutes to listen with headphones.

The Dawn of Everything, by Davids Graeber and Wengrow

Let's pause for a moment to take stock. In the years between 1703 and 1751, as we've seen, the indigenous American critique of European society had an enormous impact on European thought. What began as widespread expressions of outrage and distaste by Americans (when first exposed to European mores) eventually evolved... into an argument about the nature of authority, decency, social responsibility and, above all, freedom. As it became clear to French observers that most indigenous Americans saw individual autonomy and freedom of action as consummate values... they reacted in a variety of different ways.

The first chapter of *The Dawn of Everything*, the new book by Davids Graeber and Wengrow, is very much worthy of feasting on, and feels particularly helpful for understanding the context of Thanksgiving, both historically and metaphorically. In it, they argue that the entire Enlightenment project may have been started to justify the relative cruelty of European society, in particular the link between private property and political power, in the face of extremely effective Native American critiques relayed to the continent via the travelogues of colonists and missionaries. The question of whether inequality is a necessary precondition of technological progress plagues our society to this day, and is one that we should question deeply, particularly if we're fortunate enough to be able to tuck into a feast with family and friends this week.

Happy holidays!

— KFG*

Citations

1. Catherine, Travis, Quincy, SJ, Dawit, Allison, Ben, Sarah, Pine, Zach, Eric, Ian, and Gabe (in order this time) [☞](#)