

visited one afternoon. They asked if Father would be so kind as to accompany them on a little errand. He never returned. Later, we learned that he was put on a private jet and sent to Libya. He is counted among Libya's "disappeared."

In 2006, I published my first novel, "In the Country of Men." The publication of the book gave me a bigger platform to speak about my father's abduction and Libya's human-rights record. Even though I was in London, every time I wrote an article or gave an interview about these things I would walk around for days feeling the weight of the Libyan regime's gaze at my back. It was as if a great gust were blowing through my rooms. In the same way that Egypt and Libya conspired to "disappear" my father and silence writers such as Idris Ali, they made me, too, to a far lesser extent, feel punished for speaking out. I could no longer visit my family in Egypt, as it was deemed too dangerous.

Five years later, with Mubarak gone and Qaddafi about to fall, I got on an airplane bound for Cairo. As we were descending, I looked out over the city, all lit up and glittering. I felt that a terrible fate had been reversed. At the airport, the old pain I had carried for so many years about Egypt, which I blamed for the betrayal of my father, began to fade. When the immigration officer paged through my British passport and asked, "What's your origin?" his tone was not suspicious. When I said that I was Libyan, he smiled and replied, "What an honor. Come on, hurry up. Get rid of that tyrant." We laughed, something I had never done before with an Egyptian police officer.

Walking into the family home, finding my family and my childhood friends waiting for me, and seeing old familiar objects—my father's books, family photographs—I felt the tight fist in my heart release. Egyptian friends, who, since Father's disappearance, had felt awkward and silently guilty around me, suddenly became closer than ever. It became clear to me that one of the things these dictators had tried to do was to humiliate us and distance us from one another. Everyone I met in Egypt seemed to be as obsessed as my family was with events in Libya. There was a palpable conviction that the two revolutions were reliant on one another for their success.

Whenever I found myself sitting in a café with Libyan and Egyptian writers, I

wished that Idris Ali, a man I had never met, could be there. And now that Tripoli has fallen to the rebels, the man I most wish were here to witness this new dawn, in which we are holding in our hands the very sincere possibility of a better future, is my father.

—Hisham Matar

DEPT. OF PREPAREDNESS DISASTER ISLAND



The collapse of the World Trade Center towers, nearly ten years ago, registered as minor earthquakes (with magnitudes of 2.2 and 2.4) on a seismometer locked in a former root cellar on the old Lamont estate, twenty miles upriver, in Palisades, New York. A blown-up seismogram of the impacts from that morning now hangs on a wall of Thomas Lamont's onetime swimming pool, which has been converted into a kind of seismological museum, beneath the cafeteria at Columbia's Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory.

Art Lerner-Lam, a seismologist and the interim director at Lamont-Doherty, was at a meeting in Morningside Heights last Tuesday afternoon, on the ground floor of a sturdy Depression-era limestone building. He missed the tremors sent by a reverse faulting beneath the earth's crust in Virginia which would soon overtake his week: the convulsions felt by city drivers idling at stoplights; the swaying of skyscrapers that sent thousands scurrying down flights of stairs, in a replay of the false alarms set off during the early aftermath of September 11th. "There's a certain machismo that didn't get satisfied here," he said the next evening, after conducting a tour of the root cellar and the museum. He'd had a long day of discussing local geologic fractures (the Ramapo Seismic Zone, the 125th Street fault, the Peekskill-Stamford "trend") and the disaster scenarios we might responsibly anticipate. Earthquake expertise can be morally trying, with public validation tending to come only at moments of great suffering. Yet this, it seemed, was a rare win-win: a legitimate seismic event (magnitude 5.8) with relatively little human

cost. It was "a good earthquake," as one of Lerner-Lam's colleagues put it. "Sort of guilt-free." If only Lerner-Lam had felt it with his own biological seismometer.

"In 1985, there was one in Westchester: magnitude four," Lerner-Lam recalled, as he drove from the Palisades campus to his Hell's Kitchen home. "I had actually moved from California a couple of years previously. I was living on the seventeenth floor of an apartment on Broadway. The earthquake occurred at something like 6 A.M. on a Saturday. I was asleep, I woke up, I went back to sleep, because, you know—small earthquake. I thought I was still in California."

Lerner-Lam had long since shed the West Coast chauvinism that was proliferating on the Internet, with dismissive tweets ("5.9? That's what us Californians use to stir our coffee with"). "A little bit snarky, wouldn't you say?" he remarked of the Californians' response to East Coast panic. "For Pete's sake, let them sit down and contemplate Hurricane Irene." Mayor Bloomberg, speaking at a press conference, had just announced that earthquakes were old news, anyway, in light of the storm then passing by the Bahamas. "We used to joke that if you wanted the ultimate hedge you would bet on earthquakes in New York and hurricanes in California," Lerner-Lam went on. They never really considered the possibility of experiencing an earthquake and a hurricane in New York, in the same week.

The car shook several times as Lerner-Lam approached the George Washington Bridge, the ribbed speed bumps in the E-ZPass lane producing simulated aftershocks. "In geology, we have a saying that geology is inevitable," he said. "We happen to know that there is a cluster of earthquakes, some of which happened just last year, right at the break in the continental shelf. The danger there is that they don't need to be too big to cause a tidal surge up the Hudson." The city had not yet fully descended into hurricane hysteria—with uptown Cristedes raids and maps breaking neighborhoods into color-coded evacuation zones. And so, while crossing the bridge, Lerner-Lam invited a couple of passengers to observe the Manhattan silhouette as a geologist might: islands of schist and bedrock beneath the high-rises, and marshes underlying the shorter tenement neighborhoods in between. "If you go back to the last glaciation, where we had

all the ice, Manhattan actually kind of looked like the coast of Norway, with high mountains and deep fjords," he said. A Norwegian coast in view of New Jersey: for a brief moment, before the storm, it seemed more beautiful than frightening.

—Ben McGrath

AT THE SHORE LOCAL HERO



The world's best competitive surfers are a travelling band of thirty-four. They're in rural Tahiti as we speak, riding some of the most powerful waves on earth. Next stop: Long Beach, New York. You read that right. When they get here, Balam Stack will be waiting. Stack is a lanky twenty-year-old professional surfer and Long Beach local. On a recent morning, with Hurricane Irene still meandering through the Caribbean, he squinted into the sun where Monroe Boulevard hits the sand. The surf was tiny, as it had been all summer. "I didn't even bring my board," he said. Stack has been awarded one of two wild-card spots in the Quiksilver Pro New York surf contest, which starts on September 1st and carries a million-dollar purse. Standing on the beach in faded board shorts, Stack, who has short brown hair, T-square shoulders, and wide-set eyes, studied the ocean. "I gotta help Will," he said, suddenly. He disappeared under the boardwalk, and reemerged pushing a rubber-wheeled donkey cart loaded with soft-topped beginner boards. The boards belonged to his friend Will Skudin, who runs a surf school. There was just enough crumbly swell for Stack and Skudin to push some kids into the waves.

New York has never hosted a top-tier surf contest, and there hasn't been one on the East Coast in more than twenty years. Quiksilver, a beachwear company, has made a promotional video featuring interviews with skeptical New Yorkers insisting that there are no waves here. In fact, the Rockaways get rideable waves, and Long Beach, just across the Nassau County line, does, too—most reliably in early September, when swells are created by distant hurricanes (not storms that ac-

tually arrive, like Irene). Still, the show's producers are gambling mightily. In the two weeks of the contest period, they need several days of good waves in order to hold the competition. Storm surf won't work. "We never know what we're going to get," Jodi Wilmott, a contest spokeswoman, said. "Surfing is not football or basketball."

Quiksilver's backup plan is a music festival, featuring bands like Interpol and the Flaming Lips, plus sideshows of motocross, BMX, and half-pipe skateboarding. On the beach, white tents could be seen rising a few blocks west, near National Boulevard. This contest will be a big deal for Long Beach, where hulking retirement homes like Hoffmann Manor ("A Seashore Resort") set the oceanfront tone. Residents have been fretting for months about traffic. (And now they were fretting about Irene.) There is a new hotel on the boardwalk, the Allegria—it stands where the King David Manor was—and Quiksilver is taking over all nine floors.

Skudin gave his students instructions on how to handle a fall. "Come up with your arm over your head," he shouted, while Stack played the dummy, pretending to get hit on the head with a board.

Stack is generally considered the best surfer ever to have come out of Long Island. Posters of him surfing are plastered across local surf shops. The morning's drills kept getting interrupted by friends and neighbors throwing their arms around him and yelling, "Show 'em where we're from, Balls!" Stack blushed under his dark tan. At one point, he helped a little girl in a pink swim cap ride the first three waves of her life. Afterward, she got his autograph, explaining to a bystander, "He's a five-time-winning world champion." Actually, he's won a raft of East Coast contests, but this will be his first top-tier event. And, as a wild card, he will go up against a front-runner in the first heat. Depending on the Tahiti results, that could be Kelly Slater, a ten-time world champion.

Will Stack have a home-break advantage? Yes. He has been surfing National Boulevard since he was ten. He knows every hiccup in the tricky current around the end of the jetty there. Just as important, he did not spend this summer losing his edge in Long Beach. Quiksilver began sponsoring him when he was fourteen, and he has been on the road, more or less,

ever since, surfing in California, Hawaii, Australia, Indonesia; he just got back from Peru. That scrape on his left temple? He hit the bottom hard in Oaxaca in June.

Stack's mother, Mary, appeared. A small woman with dark glasses and a big laugh, she had brought a watermelon for the surf class. "Bal," she said, "start cutting." How did her son get his name? "The same way my first two sons got theirs," Mary Stack said. "I called up my spiritual teacher, Ma, and said, 'He's here!' And she gave him a name. Balamama was Krishna's brother. It means 'strength of God.'" She laughed. "Ma is from the Holy Land: Brooklyn."

After a while, Stack bailed to Gino's, a pizzeria. Down the street, in the dimness



Balam Stack

of Unsound Surf Shop, a pubescent cabal of sunburned shredders discussed his prospects.

"I hope Bal wins."

"If it's, like, waist-high, chest-high, he'll do pretty good."

"Maybe it'll be like Earl."

"Sick!"

Hurricane Earl sent big waves (and minimal bad weather) to Long Island last September.

Stack walked in. One of the girls behind the counter said, lightly, "The rock star." Stack, still barefoot and in board shorts, pretended not to hear. He went behind the counter to study a surf forecast on the shop's computer. There was a hurricane on the way: Irene. But she was coming too soon for the contest.

—William Finnegan