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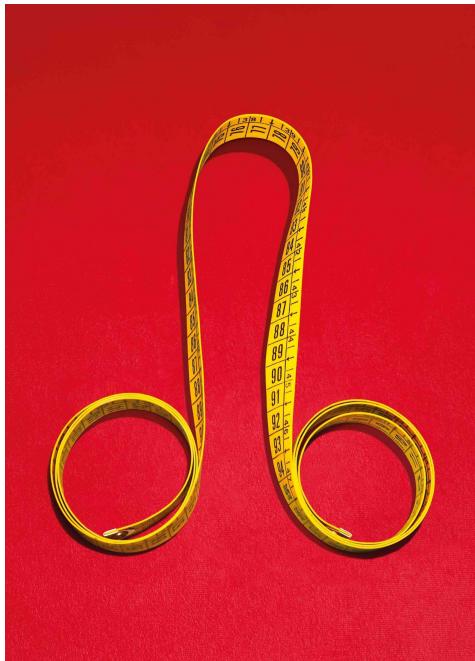
A Reporter at Large

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The Perils and Promises of Penis-Enlargement Surgery

One doctor's Promethean quest to grow the male member is leaving some men desperate and disfigured.

By [Ava Kofman](#)



They wanted it because they'd just gone through a bad breakup and needed an edge in the volatile dating market; because porn had warped their sense of scale; because they'd been in a car accident, or were looking to fix a curve, or were hoping for a little "software upgrade"; because they were not having a midlife crisis; because they were, "and it was cheaper than a Bugatti Veyron"; because, after five kids, their wife couldn't feel them anymore; because they'd been molested as a child and still remembered the laughter of the adults in the room; because they couldn't forget a passing comment their spouse made in 1975; because, despite the objections of their couples therapist, they believed it would bring them closer to their "sex-obsessed" husband (who then had an affair that precipitated their divorce); because they'd stopped changing in locker rooms, stopped peeing in urinals, stopped having sex; because who wouldn't want it?

Mick (his middle name) wanted a bigger penis because he believed it would allow him to look in the mirror and feel satisfied. He had trouble imagining what shape the satisfaction would take, since it was something he'd never actually experienced. Small and dark-haired, he'd found his adolescence to be a gauntlet of humiliating comparisons: to classmates who were blond and blue-eyed; to his half brothers, who were older and taller and heterosexual; to the hirsute men in his stepfather's Hasidic community, who wore big beards and billowing frock coats. After he reached puberty—late, in his estimation—he grew an impressive beard of his own, and his feelings of inadequacy concentrated on his genitals.

None of Mick's romantic partners ever commented on his size, but his preoccupation had a way of short-circuiting the mood. He tried several kinds of self-acceptance therapy, without success; whenever he went to the bathroom, there it was, mocking him. "Like an evil root," he said of the fixation. "It gets in there and grows like a tree. But I think everybody has that on some level about something."

This article is a collaboration between The New Yorker and [ProPublica](#).

After high school, Mick decided to study art and moved to Berkeley, California, where his mother had spent her hippie years. Eventually landing in Seattle, he supported his life as an artist by working in the hospitality industry. His paintings often depicted a human body glowing, as if transfigured, in a geometric landscape.

Over the years, Mick kept up with advances in male augmentation but wasn't thrilled by the options. The gains from a vacuum pump were fleeting; hanging weights from the end of his shaft seemed like a painful investment for an uncertain result; and having a surgeon snip his suspensory ligament, which promised an additional inch or so, could lead to wobblier erections. It wasn't until the spring of 2019, when he was thirty-six, that he came across something appealing: a silicone implant shaped like a hot-dog bun which could be inserted just under the skin of the penis to increase its girth and flaccid length.

The device, called the Penuma, had been invented by James Elist—a silver-haired urologist who has been described on TMZ as "the Thomas Edison of

penis surgery.” Elist’s procedure was touted as reversible, and, according to a rapturous article in *GQ*, more than a thousand men had already undergone it. It was also, as far as Mick could tell, the only genital enhancement on the market to have received the blessing of the Food and Drug Administration.

The basic operation would cost fifteen thousand dollars—roughly half of Mick’s life savings—though he added in a pair of discounted testicular implants, at seven grand more. He put down a deposit, told his long-distance boyfriend that he was taking a work trip, and, on a sunny morning in September, arrived at Elist’s office, in Beverly Hills. A framed copy of the *GQ* story—cover line: “We Have Huge News About Your Manhood”—hung on the wall of the exam room. Elist strode in, directed Mick to drop his pants, and rolled Mick’s scrotal sac appraisingly between his fingers, as though it were a piece of fruit at a market stall.

Elist’s hands seemed reassuringly delicate, but Mick wanted to see the implant before it was put inside him. The surgeon clicked open a briefcase containing three translucent sheaths: Large, Extra Large, and Extra Extra Large. The device felt stiff to Mick’s touch, but Elist told him that over time it would soften to the consistency of a gummy bear.

The consultation lasted about five minutes, Mick recalled. He signed a stack of consent forms and releases, including one that said his consultation had lasted more than an hour, and another promising “not to disclose, under any circumstance,” his “relationship with Dr. James J. Elist.” The operation took place the same morning in an outpatient clinic up the street. In the pre-op room, awaiting his turn, he watched “Rush Hour” in its entirety on a flat-screen TV.

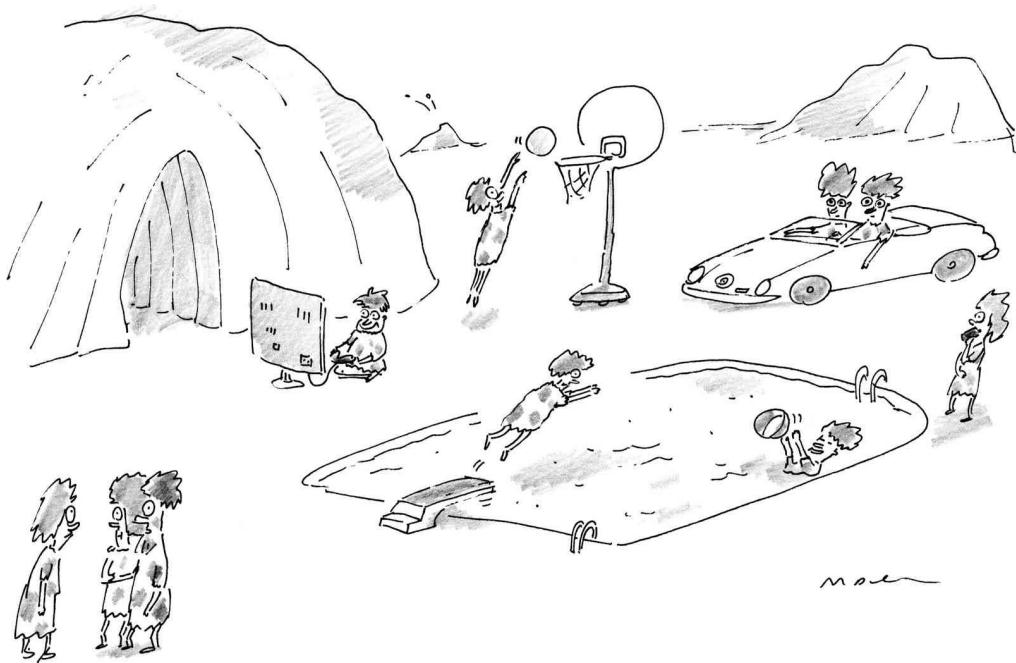
When the surgery was over, Mick, still groggy from the general anesthesia, took an Uber to a Motel 6 near the airport, where he spent the next five days alone on his back, his penis mummy-wrapped in gauze. Morning erections were excruciating. Sharp jolts seized his crotch whenever he peed, which he could do only by leaning over the bathtub. He’d anticipated some discomfort, but when he changed his gauze, he was startled to see the corners of the implant protruding under the skin, like a misplaced bone.

Back in Seattle, the Penuma's edges continued to jut out, particularly on the right side, although the testicular implants looked fine. He decided not to tell his boyfriend about the operation: talking to him would only make it seem more real, and he wasn't yet prepared to entertain the possibility that he'd made a terrible mistake. When he e-mailed Elist's clinic, the staff urged patience, counselling him that he was "continuing to heal as we expect." Then he began to lose sensation.

"I know it's been just three weeks and I'm following by the letter all the instructions but I'm a bit concerned about the look of it as you have seen in the pictures," he wrote Elist.

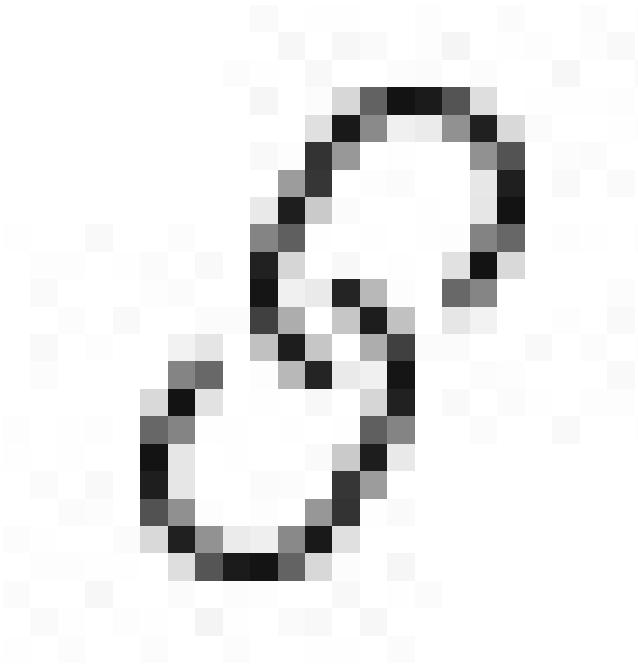
"It's been 70 days since surgery and yet it feels like a shrimp," he wrote in November.

"I'm so sorry for another email," he wrote in December, "but I am freaking out about the fact I have zero sensitivity in my penis!"



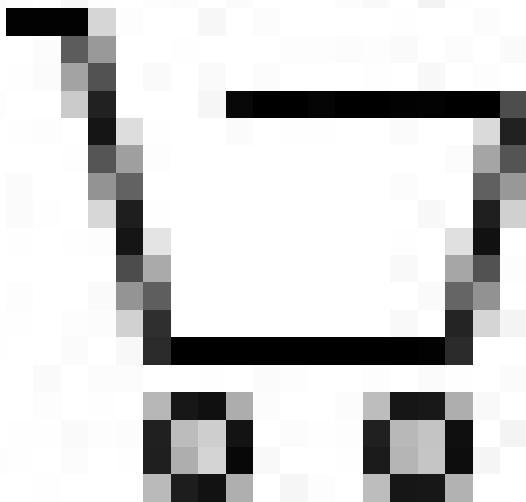
"We wanted our kids to have all the things we never had."
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

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Shop



“Being totally numb is normal as mention[ed] in the past correct?” he asked later that month. “It will pass correct?”

For much of the twentieth century, urologists devoted themselves to the prostate, testes, kidneys, and bladder. A man's sexual function, or lack thereof, was largely considered a matter for psychoanalysts to puzzle over. It wasn't until the late nineteen-seventies that a handful of researchers began demonstrating that erectile troubles, though occasionally psychogenic, were primarily vascular in cause. Their discoveries transformed the mercurial penis—John Updike's “demon of sorts . . . whose performance is erratic and whose errands seem, at times, ridiculous”—into a tamable medical object.

It was at this moment of upheaval that Elist entered the clannish, hypermasculine world of American urology. Raised in a Sephardic family in Iran, he completed a residency in Washington, D.C., just before the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Instead of going home, he remained in the States and went into private practice in Beverly Hills. There, he joined the vanguard of physicians who were treating impotence with a suite of novel procedures, such as injections and inflatable penile prostheses. “If the penis is the antenna to a man’s soul, then James Elist must be the Marconi of medicine,” *Hustler* announced in a 1993 profile. Larry Flynt, the magazine’s publisher, was among his celebrity clientele.

With the blockbuster launch of Viagra, in 1998, Elist feared that demand for surgical cures for erectile dysfunction would fall, and decided it was time to diversify. Over the years, many of his patients had asked if he could make them bigger while he was down there. Walking around the 90210 Zip Code, where the median breast size seemed to balloon by the day, Elist realized that his next move was staring him in the face.

As he toyed with an early prototype for the Penuma, other doctors were dismissive. The penis—a tentacle that shrinks and swells with an exquisite sensitivity—was nothing like the breast; it wouldn’t be possible, they told him, to put something static under its elastic skin.

Because the F.D.A. requires the pharmaceutical industry to conduct clinical studies of new drugs, it is often assumed that the same is required of medical-device manufacturers. However, a loophole known as the 510(k) process allows companies to implant untested products in patients as long as they can demonstrate that the devices are “substantially equivalent” to those already on the market. In September, 2004, not long after Elist convinced the

U.S. Patent and Trademark Office of the novelty of his invention, he informed the F.D.A. that his “silicone block” was comparable to calf and butt implants. A month later, when the agency cleared the device for the “cosmetic correction of soft-tissue deformities,” the word “penis” did not appear in its indications for use.

Despite the F.D.A. imprimatur, persuading men to get the implant was a challenge, even after one of his patients, Bryan, a twentysomething with biceps the size of porterhouse steaks, began modelling it for prospective customers. Bryan, who later referred to himself as Elist’s “spokespenis,” told me he also moderated content on My New Size, an online forum for male enhancement, where Elist’s invention was often extolled. Still, by 2014, the doctor was averaging barely a hundred implant surgeries a year. It wasn’t until the 2016 *GQ* article that his device—newly christened the Penuma, an acronym for Penis New Man—was propelled from the margins to the mainstream. (*The New Yorker*, like *GQ*, is owned by Condé Nast.) By the end of the year, Elist was doing roughly sixty Penuma procedures a month, and his oldest son, Jonathan, left a job at McKinsey to become the C.E.O. of International Medical Devices, as they called their family firm.

Prominent urologists had long seen penile enlargement as the remit of cowboys and regarded Elist as such, insofar as they regarded him at all. As part of Penuma’s gentrification campaign, Elist got the F.D.A. to explicitly clear his implant for the penile region in 2017, noting in his application that the “unique anatomy, physiology, and function of the penis does not increase the overall potential risks.” At conferences of the Sexual Medicine Society of North America, his company also began to recruit “key opinion leaders,” as Jonathan put it, to advise the company and join its new board.

Among the K.O.L.s in the field of sexual medicine are those who install the highest number of prostheses to restore erectile function, typically in prostate-cancer patients or in men with diabetes. So entrenched is this hierarchy that specialists to whom I spoke frequently rattled off their colleagues’ stats. “It’s all about who has the biggest whatever and who has the bigger numbers,” Faysal Yafi, the director of Men’s Health at the University of California, Irvine, and himself a high-volume implanter, explained.

Elist's first big catch was Steven Wilson, formerly a professor of urology at the University of Arkansas, who, until his apparent unseating by Paul Perito, a spirited upstart in Miami, was feted as the highest-volume implanter in the country. ("Our Tom Brady," Yafi said of Wilson, admiringly.) Wilson, a paid consultant for Elist's company, helped vet skilled surgeons around the country who could be trained to perform the Penuma procedure. "The cosmetic revolution of the flaccid penis," Wilson said, is urology's "last frontier."

On the conference circuit, where the goals of the revolution were the subject of fervid debate, Penuma surgeons argued that urologists were at a crossroads. They could cede the augmentation market to quacks and overconfident plastic surgeons, or they could embrace their vocation as the so-called champions of the penis, and in their hygienic, well-lit clinics provide patients with what they'd been asking for and might otherwise find an unsafe way to secure. When the tabloids reported in March, 2019, that a Belgian-Israeli billionaire had died on a Parisian operating table while getting an unknown substance injected into his penis, it seemed to prove their point. A month later, Laurence Levine, a past president of the Sexual Medicine Society of North America and a professor at Chicago's Rush University Medical Center, successfully performed the first Penuma procedure outside Beverly Hills, kicking off the implant's national expansion.

Soon afterward, the pandemic began fuelling a boom in the male-augmentation market—a development its pioneers attribute to an uptick in porn consumption, work-from-home policies that let patients recover in private, and important refinements of technique. The fringe penoplasty fads of the nineties—primitive fat injections, cadaver-skin grafts—had now been surpassed not just by implants but by injectable fillers. In Las Vegas, Ed Zimmerman, who trained as a family practitioner, is now known for his proprietary HapPenis injections; he saw a sixty-nine-per-cent jump in enhancement clients after rebranding himself in 2021 as TikTok's "Dick Doc." In Manhattan, the plastic surgeon David Shafer estimates that his signature *SWAG* shot—short for "Shafer Width and Girth"—accounts for half of his practice. The treatment starts at ten thousand dollars, doesn't require general anesthesia, and can be reversed with the injection of an

enzyme. In Atlanta, Prometheus by Dr. Malik, a fillers clinic, has been fielding requests from private-equity investors.

In a business that's often reduced to a punch line, enhancement entrepreneurs are unusually vocal about the perceived or actual chicanery of their rivals, whom they see as posing a threat to their fledgling legitimacy. "What can we do to keep patients out of the hands of these charlatans?" Paul Perito, who developed a popular filler named UroFill, asked colleagues at a recent Webinar attended by doctors across the world. He displayed a slide highlighting an ad by Victor Loria, an osteopath and erstwhile hair-transplant specialist headquartered in Miami, whose permanent penile-filler injections were on sale for \$14,950. Loria's concoction, mixed in-house, includes liquid silicone oil, which is typically used to refill damaged eyeballs. Perito described Loria's methods as "practically criminal," but Loria, who self-identifies as the highest-volume permanent penile-filler administrator in the nation, denies unethical conduct, defends the safety record of his product, and told me that Perito and his "bandits" were just upset that he'd stepped into the urologists' sandbox.

What the Penuma promised the urologists was effectively what it promised patients: the chance to make it even bigger. Even as costs soar, physician-reimbursement rates from Medicare for complex operations have declined. Inserting an inflatable penile prosthesis to treat erectile dysfunction brings a surgeon around eight hundred dollars. For the Penuma procedure, which is not covered by insurance, that same surgeon can pocket six times as much.

During a call in January, 2020, four months after Mick's Penuma surgery, Elist told him that the sensation in his penis would return in time. Having invested so much, financially and psychologically, in the implant, Mick felt grateful for the doctor's assurances and tried to focus on his paintings, producing several large acrylic canvases in which forlorn human figures appeared to be tossed about by waves. But the numbness of his penis reminded him of having a limb fall asleep, indefinitely.

In the paperwork Mick had initialled on the day of the surgery, a clause said, "The clinic highly discourages seeking information elsewhere as the information provided can be false, misleading, and inaccurate." One day, though, Mick opened Google and searched "Elist," "Penuma," "numb."

"I was looking for people to tell me, 'Oh, yeah, I waited three months, and now everything's fine, I am very happy,'" he said. Those people were hard to find.

A truck driver whose device dug into his pubic bone told me that he felt like a "prisoner in my own body." An executive at an adhesive company, who hid his newly bulging crotch behind a shopping bag when walking the dog, began to have nightmares in which he castrated himself. A sales specialist at an industrial-supply store sent me his diary, which imagined Elist as its addressee. "I wish you would have told me I would lose erect length," he wrote. "I wish you would have told me it could shift and pinch my urethra and make it difficult to urinate."

It was tricky to bend over to tie the laces of winter boots, tricky to slip on a condom, tricky to sleep in a comfortable position, tricky to stretch, tricky to spoon. "It makes you look like you're always semi-erect," a health-spa vice-president said of his Penuma. "I couldn't let my kids sit on my lap. I couldn't jump on the trampoline with them. I even felt like a pervert hugging my friends. And God forbid you get an actual erection, because then you have to run and hide it."

Not everyone minded. Kaelan Strouse, a thirty-five-year-old life coach, was thrilled by both the "restaurant-size pepper mill" between his legs and the kilts he began wearing to accommodate it. Richard Hague, Jr., a seventy-four-year-old pastor at a Baptist church in Niagara Falls, said his implant made him feel like "a wild stallion." Contented customers told me they were feeling better about their bodies and having better sex, too. But even they acknowledged that getting a Penuma could require adjusting not just to a different appendage but to a different way of life. As one pleased Elist patient counselled others, "You have to treat your penis like a Rolex."

For dozens of Penuma patients who spoke to me, the shock of the new was the prelude to graver troubles. Some, like Mick, lost sensation. Others said they experienced stabbing pains in the shower or during sex. Seroma, or excess fluid, was not uncommon. When a defense-and-intelligence contractor's girlfriend, a registered nurse, aspirated his seroma with a sterile needle, a cup of amber fluid oozed out. The one time they tried to have sex,

she told me, the corners of his implant felt like “someone sticking a butter knife inside you.”

Some implants got infected or detached. Others buckled at the corners. Occasionally these protrusions broke through the skin, forming holes that would fester. The hole of the health-spa vice-president was so tiny that he originally mistook its fermented odor for an S.T.D. An engineer with gallows humor played me a video of the snorting crunch his penis made when air moved through a hole. He had two holes, and the skin between them eventually eroded so that a corner of the implant emerged, pearlescent.

Later, doctors unaffiliated with the Penuma would compare such penises to “a torpedo,” “a penguin,” “a pig in a blanket,” “a beer can with a mushroom sticking out on the top,” and “the tipped-down nose of the Concorde.” But the imperturbable assistants at Elist’s clinic, besieged by photographs documenting these phenomena, told patients that they were “healing as expected” and “continuing to heal well!” It was only after months had passed and the men insisted they weren’t healing well at all that Elist would sometimes suggest that an “upgrade” to a bigger size would resolve their problems. (Elist said in a deposition that upgrades are “part of the process of the procedure,” noting that some patients “might need the upgrade with the larger implant or the longer implant, and that happens often.”) Faced with the prospect of more surgery, some men began, quietly, to seek other advice.

The subculture of penile enhancement remains shrouded in stigma, because for a man to admit that he wants to be bigger suggests that he isn’t big enough. In February, the rapper 50 Cent settled his claims against the Shade Room, a gossip blog he’d sued for falsely insinuating that he’d had work done on his penis and subjecting him “to ridicule.” Only six of the forty-nine enlargement patients I spoke to agreed to have their last names printed, also fearing ridicule. In such a taboo and information-poor environment, anonymous testimonials can take on the authority of peer-reviewed journal articles.

Elist understood this dynamic. In addition to encouraging Bryan, the spokespenis, to post positive comments on My New Size, Elist tracked his own mentions on PhalloBoards and Thunder’s Place, other online forums for male enhancement, demanding that their moderators stop harboring

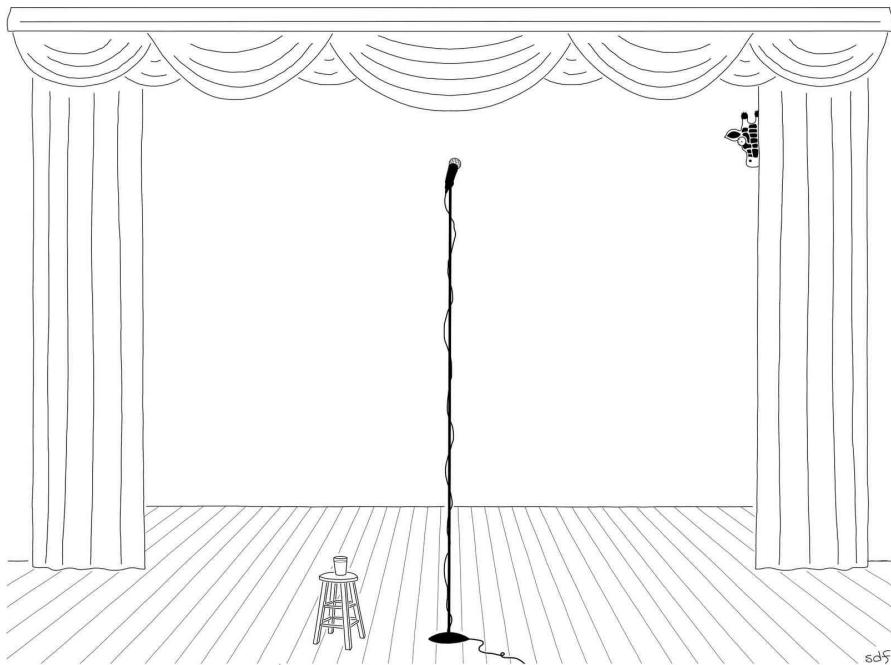
“defamatory” statements. He offered a PhalloBoards user, after an abscess had formed, five thousand dollars for deleting his posts about the procedure and releasing the clinic from liability, according to a settlement agreement I reviewed. (Elist said through a spokesperson that the patient didn’t follow post-op advice, and that, while he was not able to respond to some of the accounts in this story because men had requested anonymity, complications were rare.)

A sign in Elist’s waiting room instructed patients not to speak to one another about medical issues (the better to protect their privacy, Elist said through the spokesperson). But Elist could only do so much to disrupt the communities of unhappy men coalescing online. As Mick pored over hundreds of posts, he was horrified to discover that he had been acting out a well-worn script. The others had also read the *GQ* article about the Penuma, learned that the implant was “reversible,” and, heartened by the F.D.A.’s clearance, put down their deposit. They, too, felt that their consultations were rushed and that they hadn’t had enough time to review the cascade of consent forms they’d signed alerting them to potential complications.

Emmanuel Jackson, then twenty-six, was a model who had grown up in foster homes outside of Boston. He won a free Penuma in a contest in 2013, as part of a marketing campaign involving the rapper Master P. According to a complaint by the Medical Board of California, Jackson said he was given scripted answers for a promotional video, which later appeared on Elist’s YouTube channel. (Elist’s spokesperson said Jackson volunteered his positive comments in the video, and Master P, who once featured Elist on his Playboy Radio show, said through his own spokesperson that he was not involved with any YouTube testimonials for the implant.)

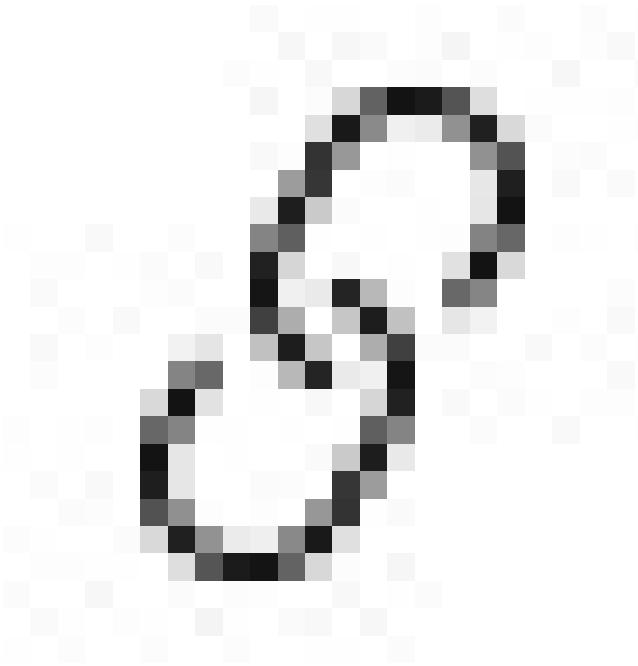
Jackson didn’t find the other men online until 2018, around the time a doctor at the Cleveland Clinic told him his implant had fractured into pieces that were floating under his skin. A young Iraq War veteran whom Jackson met through PhalloBoards warned him that having the implant out could be even worse than having it in. “He told me, ‘Manny, you’re going to lose your mind,’ ” Jackson recalled. “He was right.” Medical records show that, not long after the fragments were removed, Jackson attempted suicide.

"I've been threatened for saying the things I'm telling you," Mark Solomon said when I visited him in his waiting room, in Los Angeles, this spring. A plastic surgeon with an elegant Roman nose and a crisp white lab coat over a brown cashmere sweater, he'd learned the *techne* of male enhancement in Vienna in the nineties. But he never imagined that, one day, nearly half his male practice would involve fixing the handiwork of other practitioners. Now, as much as he liked to joke that the last thing Beverly Hills needed was another plastic surgeon, he was doing such brisk business repairing Penuma complications that he'd relocated his practice from Philadelphia to an office down the street from Elist's clinic.



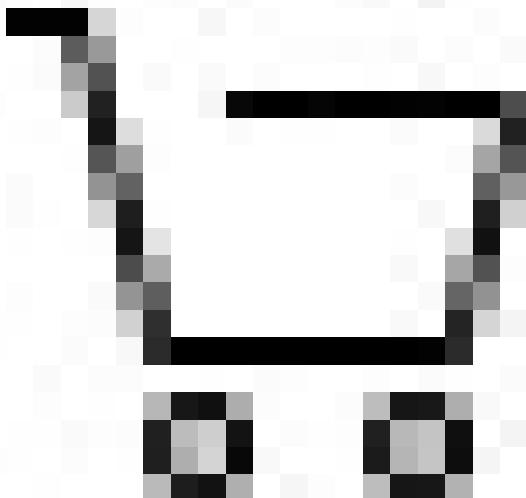
Cartoon by Seth Fleishman

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As the number of Penuma procedures increased, a cottage industry emerged to treat what Solomon describes as a new class of “penile cripples.” William Brant, a reconstructive urologist in Salt Lake City, who told me he sees about ten Penuma patients a month, noted “the deep despair of men who

can't unring the bell." Gordon Muir, a urologist in London, said that he's been taking out Penumas "all the way across the bloody pond." But other reconstructive surgeons asked to speak confidentially, because they were afraid of being sued. Solomon had received a cease-and-desist letter from Elist's lawyers arguing that the mere mention of Penuma on his Web site infringed on the implant's trademark. (Solomon now notes his expertise in treating complications from "penis enlargement implants" instead.)

From his satchel, Solomon produced a couple of biohazard bags. One held two sheaths of silicone stitched together with a blue thread: an early edition of the Penuma that he'd removed from a patient. The other contained a modern Penuma, a single piece with a built-in crease. "Once this goes in, these men are never going to be the same again, because their penis is never the same again," he said.

When a foreign object is placed in the body, the body reacts by forming an envelope of tissue around it. In the penis, a retractable organ, this new tissue can distort shape and mobility, causing the penis to shorten and curve. The disfigurement can be exacerbated if the Penuma is removed, Solomon explained, since the penis can contract to seal up the vacuum of space—a phenomenon that patients have called the "mini-dick" or "dicklet" phase.

To counteract retraction and scarring after removal, some men engage in an elaborate penile-rehab regimen. Solomon directs his patients to wear a condom with a metal weight at its tip six hours a day. Other doctors who remove the device—explanters, in the parlance—prescribe RestoreX, a contraption whose painful clamp and extension rods its users compare to a medieval rack. These daily stretching routines are sometimes accompanied by further revision procedures, as well as by prescriptions for Viagra and antidepressants. The great irony—lost on few—was that, after getting surgery to stop thinking about their penises, these men were now thinking about their penises all the time.

At conferences and in case reports, urologists across the country cautioned that, although they were seeing only the subset of patients unhappy enough to seek them out, the complications those patients presented ("significant penoscrotal edema," severe erectile dysfunction "necessitating placement of an inflatable penile implant during removal") could be "devastating" and

“uncorrectable.” Penuma surgeons, meanwhile, were collecting their own data, which showed that the complication rate was both low and comparable to that of other procedures. In the largest study to date, published in *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, Elist’s clinic surveyed four hundred of the five hundred and twenty-six patients who’d received a Penuma between 2009 and 2014. Eighty-one per cent of the subjects who responded to the questionnaire indicated “high” or “very high” levels of satisfaction. Other surgeons told me they wouldn’t be associated with Elist’s invention if most of their patients (some of whom, they added, were urologists themselves) weren’t similarly pleased. On his Web site, one of the Penuma doctors dismissed PhalloBoards as being populated by patients who ignored post-op instructions and said it was propped up by “opportunistic” competitors. (Solomon is among a dozen doctors who sponsor PhalloBoards.)

Elist’s consent forms included a provision releasing the clinic from “any liability” if a patient receives post-op treatment elsewhere, but Mick, confused about whom to trust, online or off, decided to seek out a second professional opinion—and then a third, a fourth, and a fifth. Some of the physicians he consulted were, as Elist had forewarned, baffled by the alien device. But Thomas Walsh, a reconstructive urologist and director of the Men’s Health Center at the University of Washington, was not. He was struck that Mick, like other Penuma patients, had the misapprehension that the device was easily “reversible,” as Elist and his network had advertised. “To fully consent to a procedure, the patient needs someone to tell him everything,” Walsh said. “He doesn’t need a salesman. The problem here is that you’ve got someone who is inventing and manufacturing and selling the device. That personal investment can create a tremendous conflict of interest.” (Elist, through his spokesperson, said his expertise with the device outweighs the conflict, which he freely discloses.)

Before removing Mick’s implant, in May, 2020, Walsh ordered an MRI, which suggested that the device was impinging on the nerves and arteries at the head of his penis. Walsh also sent Mick to a neurologist, who, after prodding Mick’s shaft with a sharp metal tool, declared the glans to have lost “total” sensation.

There was no guarantee it would return. The challenge of removing a Penuma, Walsh told Mick, can lie in the detachment of a rectangular piece of

mesh from the tip of the penis. Mesh prompts the body to create scar tissue, which binds together everything in its vicinity; to help the implant adhere, Penuma doctors stitched some near the head, an area dense with arborized nerves and blood vessels. Despite carefully planning the explantation, Walsh found himself disconcerted in surgery by the sight of his patient's erogenous zone ensnared by the patch of plastic. "I feel like it's sacrilege, wrapping a man's neurovascular bundle in mesh," Walsh later said. "How would anyone want to do that?"

It has been hypothesized that a longer penis confers an evolutionary edge in launching the reproductive payload into the vaginal canal. But, as the journalist David Friedman recounts in "*A Mind of Its Own*," a cultural history of the male sex organ, some primatologists who have seen male apes brandish their genitals during a fight have posited that its purpose, if any, is simpler: to impress and intimidate rivals.

"They notice the penis of a brother or playmate, strikingly visible and of large proportions, at once recognize it as the superior counterpart of their own small and inconspicuous organ, and from that time forward fall a victim to envy for the penis," Freud wrote in 1925. He was referring to the "momentous discovery which little girls are destined to make" about their lack of a phallus, but his description more precisely captures the "penis envy" that some men told me they'd felt after catching a glimpse of the competition. As John Mulcahy, a clinical professor of urology at the University of Arizona, put it, "It's more of a locker-room thing than a bedroom thing."

Yet, after biological explanations for impotence triumphed and urologists wrested the penis away from the psychoanalysts, they seemed to overlook the man and the society to which it was attached. Critics of male enhancement said they had no desire to body-shame men in search of something extra, noting that women who get breast implants can do so without provoking a moral panic. But, especially in the case of men with an unrealistic self-image, the critics worried that doctors seemed too eager to pitch a risky surgical procedure for what is a cultural, and, in some instances, a psychiatric, phenomenon.

What surgeons continually emphasized—the implanters with pride, the explanters with dismay—was that most of the men they were seeing had been of at least average size before going under the knife. (The photographic evidence men sent to me over text and e-mail supported this contention.) “Most don’t have anything physically wrong with them at all, so what they don’t need is vultures preying on them, which is almost always a disaster,” Muir, the London urologist, said.

Along with other urologists and psychiatrists, at King’s College and the University of Turin, Muir conducted a literature review called “Surgical and Nonsurgical Interventions in Normal Men Complaining of Small Penis Size.” The research showed that men dissatisfied with their penises respond well to educational counselling about the average size, which is 3.6 inches long when flaccid, and 5.2 inches erect. (The average girth is 3.5 inches flaccid, and 4.6 inches erect.) For men who have an excessive and distorted preoccupation with the appearance of their genitals—a form of body dysmorphic disorder—Muir said that cognitive-behavioral therapy and medications may also be necessary.

Penuma surgeons told me they use educational videos, intake surveys, and sexual-health therapists to make sure that the men they operate on have realistic expectations and to screen for those with body dysmorphia, though only a handful of the patients I spoke to recalled being referred to a therapist before their surgery.

Shortly before the pandemic, Elist received a Google alert for “penile implant” and noticed something strange: a Houston urologist, Robert Cornell, had been issued a patent for the Augmenta, a device that bore an uncanny resemblance to his own. The previous year, Cornell had asked to learn about the Penuma “expeditiously,” saying that he saw a “real opportunity to expand the level of service” he offered to patients. Run Wang, a Penuma board member and a professor at the University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center, in Houston, had cautioned Elist that Cornell could be a bit of a snake, according to Jonathan Elist. But father and son chalked up Wang’s warning to the machismo of the Texas urological market, and Elist invited Cornell to shadow him as he performed four Penuma procedures. Now, as Elist thumbed through Cornell’s patent, he was startled

to see his future plans for the Penuma, which he said he recalled discussing with Cornell, incorporated into the Augmenta's design.

In April, 2020, Elist and his company sued Cornell, alleging that his visit to Beverly Hills was "a ruse" to steal trade secrets. Later that year, when Elist discovered that Wang was listed as the Augmenta C.E.O. and had assisted the penile startup with its cadaver studies, Elist and his company added Wang as a party to the suit. (Cornell and Wang did not comment for this story, though Wang denied through his counsel that he'd called Cornell a snake and said in court filings that he'd been named C.E.O. without his consent.)

When deposed, Cornell said that he'd talked to Elist about marketing strategies, not proprietary specifics, and that his invention had been spurred by potential hazards he'd observed during the surgeries, particularly the use of mesh. As both teams began conscripting high-volume implanters as allies and expert witnesses, the fraternity of sexual medicine was sundered into warring camps. "This is a tiny smear of people, and they are fucking cutthroat," one high-volume implanter told me of the intellectual-property dispute. "It's vicious because there's so much money to make."

Augmenta's team endeavored to put the safety record of the Penuma on trial, securing Elist's confirmation in a deposition that twenty per cent of the patients in his 2018 study had reported at least one adverse post-surgical event. Foster Johnson, one of the Augmenta attorneys, also tracked down some of the patients who'd posted horror stories online. In 2021, he reached out to Mick.

A year had passed since Mick's explant, and he'd entered a serious depression. He'd barely noticed when pandemic restrictions were lifted, because he'd continued to stay in his bed. Originally six and a half inches erect, he had lost an inch of length. Whenever he caught sight of himself in the mirror, he felt desperate.

So did other post-removal patients. An F.B.I. agent in his early thirties said that he was afraid he would never date again, let alone start a family, because his penis had shrunk to a stub. A Hollywood executive who'd undergone multiple surgeries with Elist told me, "It's like he also snipped

the possibility of intimacy away from me.” The defense-and-intelligence contractor, who’d travelled the country to consult six reconstructive surgeons, said he’d tucked a Glock in his waistband before one appointment, thinking he might kill himself if the doctor couldn’t help.

Mick had come to believe that the only thing more humiliating than being a satisfied penile-enhancement patient was being a dissatisfied one. Still, he tried to alert local news stations, the Better Business Bureau, the F.B.I., the district attorney, malpractice lawyers, the California medical board. No one returned his calls—“Who could blame them when it almost sounds like a joke?”—apart from an investigator with the medical board, who didn’t treat his distress as a laughing matter.

Neither did Johnson, who decided to tip off a Houston-based firm that specialized in class-action complaints. Last year, a Texas man accused International Medical Devices of falsely advertising the Penuma as F.D.A.-cleared for “cosmetic enhancement” when it was, until recently, cleared only for cosmetic correction of soft-tissue deformities. Jonathan Elist called the lawsuit, which awaits class certification, meritless. “It’s not medical malpractice,” he said. “And it’s not a product-liability case, either, which is what one might expect from something like this.” His expectations proved prescient when, in March, a personal-injury law firm in Ohio brought the first of what are now eight product-liability suits against the company. The lawsuits, all of which Elist’s spokesperson called “frivolous,” feature ten John Does.

Every surgical revolution is bloody by definition. When I met Elist, earlier this year, he underscored how many taken-for-granted medical breakthroughs had emerged from tweaks and stepwise developments. The breast implant had been dogged by ruptures and leaks in its early days. Even the celebrated penile pump—the object around which the egos of many eminent urologists now orbit—had taken years to overcome high rates of removals. Two decades of innovation had led to the current Penuma procedure, he noted, and during that time nearly everything about it had improved, from the deployment of a drain to the placement of the incision. “This procedure is like any other procedure,” he told me. “It has its own evolution.”

Recently, the Penuma procedure evolved again. Elist had got rid of the vexing patch of mesh, and the company was shipping out a new model. He invited me to shadow him as he implanted it.

The first operation of the day complete, Elist was in a giddy, expansive mood. As his next patient was put under anesthesia, Elist sat behind an imposing desk in a borrowed office and spoke about his forthcoming book, a collection of parables for spiritually minded surgeons titled “Operating with God.” His ghostwriter had rendered his voice so skillfully, he said, that he’d found himself moved to tears while reading it. Beside a gilt statue of a jaguar in the corner of the room, someone had propped a mirror with an image of Jesus etched at its center. As Elist recounted passages from his book, his merry face, crowned by a hairnet, hovered next to Christ’s.

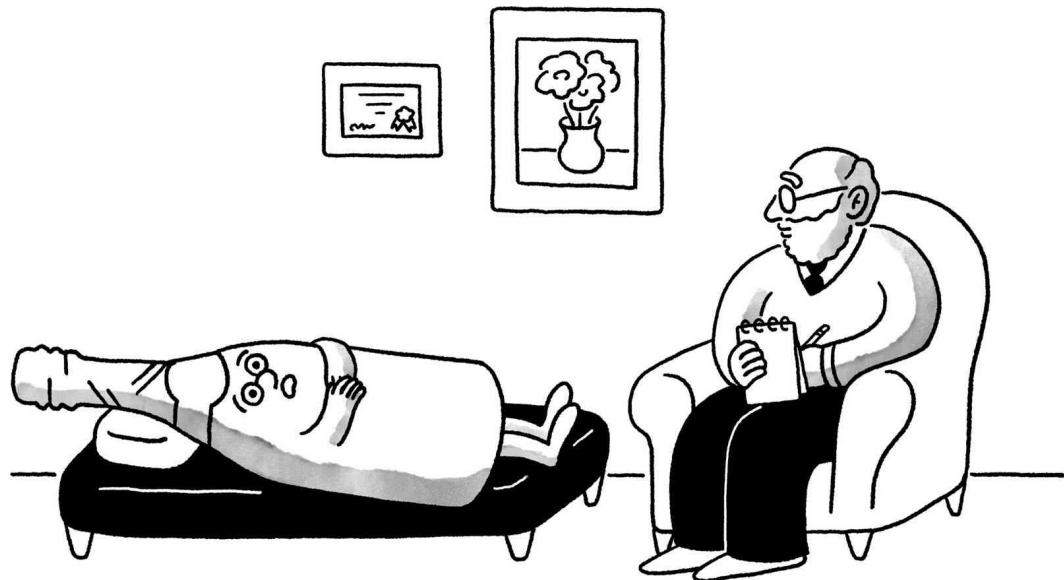
The surgery, which Elist said was supposed to take approximately thirty-five minutes, lasted twice as long. A surgical technician had covered the patient’s body in sheets until only his penis, gleaming beneath the overhead lamp, was visible. With a purple marker, Elist drew a dotted line close to where the scrotum met the shaft. A clamp pulled the skin taut, and he began to cut along the line. The scrotal skin gave easily, like something ripe, and a few seconds later, the man on the table let out a high-pitched sound.

To stop the bleeding, Elist applied a cautery pencil that beeped each time it singed the skin, giving off smoke and a whiff of burned flesh. Alternating between his cautery tool and a pair of scissors, he deepened the incision, centimetre by centimetre, revealing the chalky tissue below, until he approached the pubic bone. Then, in a stage known as “degloving,” he began to flip the penis inside out through the hole he’d created at its base. Wearing the marbled interior flesh around his fingers, he trimmed the soft tissue and cauterized a series of superficial blood vessels, speckling the interior of the shaft with dark dots. For a few moments, a quivering red sphere popped up like a jellyfish surfacing at sea—an inverted testicle, he explained.

A nurse unwrapped an Extra Large implant from its box and handed it to Elist, who used curved scissors to smooth its top corners. With a hook-shaped needle, he began to sew the implant into the inverted penis, and he asked his surgical tech to tie a “double lateral” knot. He barked the word

“lateral” several times and sighed. “She’s never seen this procedure,” he told me. When he asked for wet gauze a few minutes later, she handed him a piece they’d discarded. “You know that it’s dirty,” he reprimanded her in Farsi. “It was on the skin. And you bring it for me?”

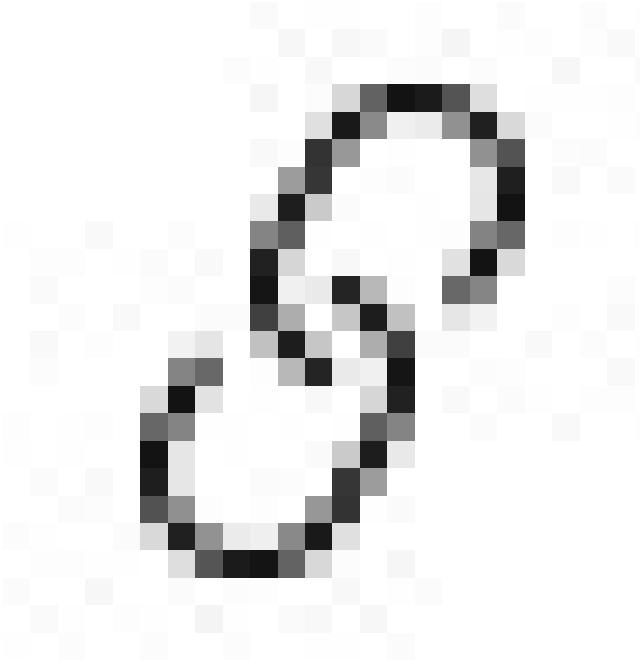
I recalled that Zimmerman, the “Dick Doc” of Las Vegas, had compared his own visit to Elist’s operating theatre to being “in the presence of a master conductor who can bring the whole orchestra together.” But as Elist chided his tech for being “a troublemaker”—she’d handed him the wrong size of sutures, an unnecessary needle, the wrong end of the drain, the wrong kind of scissors—it felt like watching the stumble-through of a student ensemble.



“They may be champagne problems, but they’re my problems.”
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

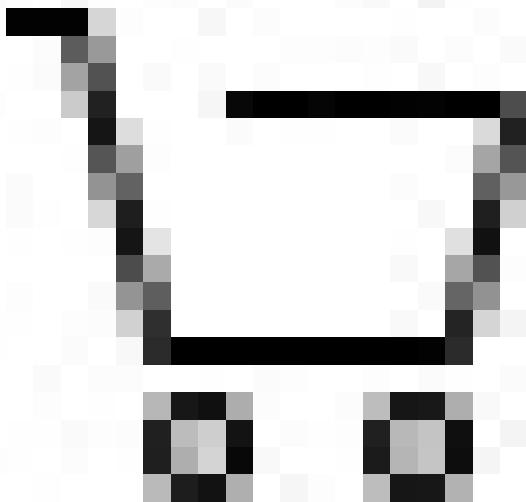
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Elist cauterized more tissue by the pubic bone to make sure the implant would fit there, and at this the patient's breaths rose into a moan. Elist regloved the penis with the Penuma tucked under its skin. Too long, he decided. He slid the implant out partway and snipped a bit off the bottom.

Pushing it into the shaft, he wagged it back and forth. “O.K.,” he said. It was done. The patient, who had arrived that morning average-sized—four inches in length by four inches in girth—was now six by five. Later, through his spokesperson, Elist would say that the patient’s outcome was excellent. In the room, talk turned to preparing the table for the next man.

Elist has always been keen to distance himself from other purveyors of controversial penile-enhancement techniques—“gimmick” surgeons, he has called them. At one point during our conversations, which were punctuated by lively digressions, he said that some of his unscrupulous rivals reminded him of Josef Mengele, the Nazi doctor who conducted lethal experiments on prisoners at Auschwitz. “How do you allow yourself to put something on the patient’s body that you know gets infected?” he asked, as though addressing them directly. Sections of his Web site and of a book he self-published in 2015, “A Matter of Size,” are devoted to chronicling the macabre complications that can result from skin grafts and fat injections to the penis.

When I reviewed old files in an underground archive for the Los Angeles County courts, however, I saw that, a decade before the Penuma came into being, Elist had been part of a coterie of L.A. surgeons promoting the very methods he now decried, with coverage in *Hustler*, *Penthouse*, *Penis Power Quarterly*, and local newspapers like the *Korea Central Daily* and the *Korea Times*. One ad, in Korean, for the surgery center where Elist operated sounded a familiar note, promising a “life-changing” procedure with no complications and “guaranteed results,” performed by “the Highest Authority in Urology in Beverly Hills,” “approved by the state government,” and “authorized by the F.D.A.”

At least twenty-three malpractice lawsuits have been filed against Elist in Los Angeles since 1993. (He has also been named as a defendant in product-liability lawsuits regarding inflatable penile prostheses brought by plaintiffs Dick Glass and Semen Brodsky.) The dockets indicate that some of the complaints were settled confidentially out of court, a few were dismissed, and in one of two trials a jury ruled in Elist’s favor.

It is not unusual for a doctor practicing for more than forty years to be accused of malpractice, and it is not unusual, either, for patients to be self-serving in their recollections of informed consent, but as I scrolled through

the microfilm I was surprised to see how many of Elist's past patients—who'd received cosmetic surgeries, medical procedures, or both—described the same M.O. Three men alleged that they'd been asked to sign consent forms after being injected with Demerol, a fast-acting narcotic. A number of foreign-born patients seeking treatment for erectile dysfunction alleged that they were given forms in English, which they couldn't read, and some of those same patients, who said they'd thought they were undergoing a vein-cleaning procedure, alleged that they awoke from surgery to find themselves implanted with a penile prosthesis for erectile dysfunction. Multiple patients who said they'd turned to Elist for a functional issue alleged that they'd been upsold enhancement procedures that resulted in their disfigurement. Ronald Duette, a sixty-five-year-old property manager and auto detailer who filed a malpractice case in 2021, told me that a consultant at Elist's clinic had encouraged him to get the Penuma by reassuring him that Elist had one himself.

Elist's spokesperson told me that Duette's allegations and the claims in the other lawsuits are false; that Elist does not have a Penuma; and that Elist is a gifted, responsive, and exacting surgeon, supported by conscientious employees, who does not rush his patients and performs additional surgery only when medically appropriate. The spokesperson said Elist was not aware of any patients suffering extreme dissatisfaction or sleeplessness or mental-health crises as a result of Penuma surgery, and noted that complications were more likely when patients failed to comply with post-op instructions. The spokesperson disputed some particulars of Mick's account (Mick waived his medical privacy rights so that Elist could discuss his records) and said this article “cherrypicks and sensationalizes” outlier cases.

Elist told me that what his critics failed to grasp, whether by dint of envy or closed-mindedness, was that for every dissatisfied customer there were many more whose lives had improved immeasurably. Nobody hears about the happy implantees, he said, because “unfortunately people are not willing to come out and talk about penile enlargement.”

All nine deeply satisfied Penuma patients I spoke to, several on the recommendation of Elist and his associates, said they would do it again. “I can give someone pleasure and see it in their eyes,” an industrial designer said. “That’s the part that makes me almost cry.” But hearing some of their

stories I found myself wondering whether the difference between happy and unhappy customers was less a matter of experience than of its interpretation. Two men said they'd needed a second surgery to replace their implants when complications arose, and one continued to volunteer as a patient advocate even though he'd had his Extra Extra Large removed. He explained, "It was very uncomfortable for my wife. She was getting micro-tears and was considering getting a procedure done to enlarge that opening."

Elist emphasized to me that "the best advantage of Penuma over any other procedure" was how easy it was to remove. He said that some patients even gained length upon removal. Last year, Penuma's monthly newsletter, "Inching Towards Greatness," featured the YouTube testimonial of a man who, after his removal, said that the procedure had still been "worth every cent." This patient—who described his Penuma to me as a "life-ruiner"—said that he'd been under the influence of drugs the clinic had prescribed at the time. Elist, through his spokesperson, declined to comment on the matter; the video is no longer available.

In April, Mick received a letter from the office of California's attorney general, notifying him of a hearing this October on Elist's conduct. Since Mick had filed his complaint, the California medical board had investigated the surgeon's treatment of ten other Penuma patients, including the contest winner Emmanuel Jackson and other men I interviewed. Alleging gross negligence and incompetence, the board accused Elist of, among other lapses, recommending that patients treat what appeared to be post-op infections with Neosporin, aloe vera, and a blood-flow ointment; asking them to remove their own sutures; and deterring them from seeking outside medical care. Elist said through his attorney that innovative procedures like his are routinely reviewed by regulators; that many specifics in the complaint are false; and that a previous medical-board complaint against him was resolved in 2019, when he agreed to improve his recordkeeping.

Reading the letter from the attorney general's office dredged up "dark thoughts from the ditch where I'd been burying them," Mick said. In the three years since his Penuma removal, he estimates that he's regained about eighty per cent of the sensation in his penis, but his anger and sense of powerlessness have remained. In one of his last e-mails to Elist's office, he wrote that he'd felt like "a testing mouse." Given a recent expansion of

Elist's empire, the possibility that the surgeon might be censured, fined, or lose his license now seemed to Mick beside the point. "They should have cut down the tree before it grew," he said. "It's too big now."

In Times Square, a billboard recently appeared: "*MANHOOD REDEFINED*," it said, beside the URL for the Penuma Web site. A few weeks after Elist and his lawyer were served by the office of the California attorney general, Elist was travelling on the East Coast, training new recruits to his network. He has also been pitching interested parties in the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, and South Korea, the world capital for cosmetic surgery. Colombia was already a go. "The Penuma is going to be the only procedure that surgeons not just in the United States but worldwide are going to accept," Elist told me.

In June, his company rebranded the updated Penuma as the Himplant, and the Augmenta trial unfolded in a federal courthouse in downtown Los Angeles. Elist testified with brio about his victimization at the hands of Cornell, who'd violated "the sanctuary" of his operating theatre; the judge ruled with Penuma's attorneys that the negative experiences of patients like Mick were irrelevant to the question of theft at hand. On June 16th, the jury returned a verdict in Elist's favor and invalidated Cornell's patents.

Not long ago, I met Bryan, Elist's former penis model, at a coffee shop in Orange County. He had undergone multiple surgeries with Elist, with two different iterations of the implant. He said he'd experienced complications and, in 2011, he'd had his second implant removed. The following year, Bryan ended up flying to Philadelphia for the first in a series of revision and enhancement procedures with Solomon, whom he'd learned about on PhalloBoards.

This spring, he was released from prison, where he'd served time for participating in a car-theft ring that a prosecutor described as highly sophisticated and that Bryan described to me as a matter of "incorrectly filled-out paperwork." When he returned home, he got back into the enlargement scene. He now works as a paid patient advocate for Solomon—a role that involves fielding inquiries from men struggling with the fallout from unsatisfactory operations. The week before we met, Bryan had spent hours on the phone with Kevin (his middle name), an aspiring actor. Kevin

said that he had undergone five surgeries with Elist, including two upgrades, a revision, and a removal, and his penis no longer functioned.

Still, Kevin had always found the surgeon to be caring, if a little preoccupied. “He reminded me of Doctor Frankenstein—the intensity of him wanting this thing to come to life,” Kevin told me. It sounded strange, he acknowledged, but before each operation he’d been filled with excitement. “You just feel relieved that you’re fixing something,” he said.

At an appointment earlier this year, Kevin said, Elist promised to fix him again with a sixth procedure, but one of the surgeon’s assistants discreetly advised against it. Kevin thought he could spot “the other experiments” in the clinic from their loose-fitting sweatpants and the awkward way they walked. There were so many men waiting to see the doctor that they spilled into the hallway. ♦

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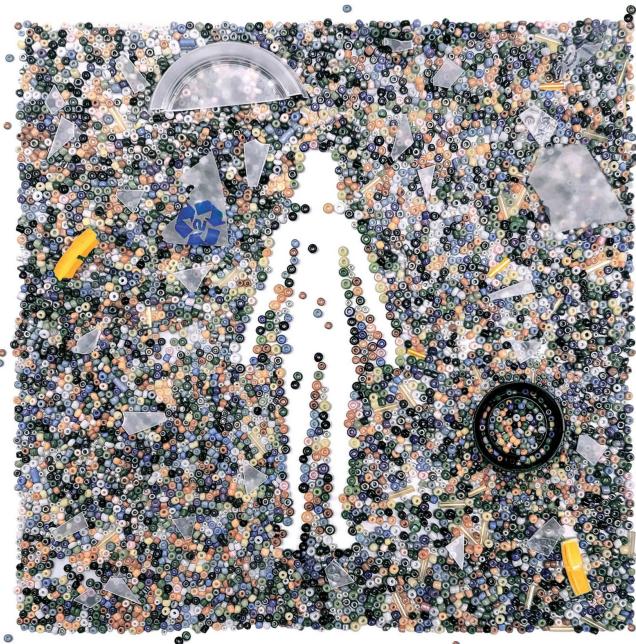
Annals of Science

- [How Plastics Are Poisoning Us](#)

How Plastics Are Poisoning Us

They both release and attract toxic chemicals, and appear everywhere from human placentas to chasms thirty-six thousand feet beneath the sea. Will we ever be rid of them?

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)



In 1863, when much of the United States was anguishing over the Civil War, an entrepreneur named Michael Phelan was fretting about billiard balls. At the time, the balls were made of ivory, preferably obtained from elephants from Ceylon—now Sri Lanka—whose tusks were thought to possess just the right density. Phelan, who owned a billiard hall and co-owned a billiard-table-manufacturing business, also wrote books about billiards and was a champion billiards player. Owing in good part to his efforts, the game had grown so popular that tusks from Ceylon—and, indeed, elephants more generally—were becoming scarce. He and a partner offered a ten-thousand-dollar reward to anyone who could come up with an ivory substitute.

A young printer from Albany, John Wesley Hyatt, learned about the offer and set to tinkering. In 1865, he patented a ball with a wooden core encased in ivory dust and shellac. Players were unimpressed. Next, Hyatt experimented with nitrocellulose, a material made by combining cotton or

wood pulp with a mixture of nitric and sulfuric acids. He found that a certain type of nitrocellulose, when heated with camphor, yielded a shiny, tough material that could be molded into practically any shape. Hyatt's brother and business partner dubbed the substance "celluloid." The resulting balls were more popular with players, although, as Hyatt conceded, they, too, had their drawbacks. Nitrocellulose, also known as guncotton, is highly flammable. Two celluloid balls knocking together with sufficient force could set off a small explosion. A saloon owner in Colorado reported to Hyatt that, when this happened, "instantly every man in the room pulled a gun."

It's not clear that the Hyatt brothers ever collected from Phelan, but the invention proved to be its own reward. From celluloid billiard balls, the pair branched out into celluloid dentures, combs, brush handles, piano keys, and knickknacks. They touted the new material as a substitute not just for ivory but also for tortoiseshell and jewelry-grade coral. These, too, were running out, owing to slaughter and plunder. Celluloid, one of the Hyatts' advertising pamphlets promised, would "give the elephant, the tortoise, and the coral insect a respite in their native haunts."

Hyatt's invention, often described as the world's first commercially produced plastic, was followed a few decades later by Bakelite. Bakelite was followed by polyvinyl chloride, which was, in turn, followed by polyethylene, low-density polyethylene, polyester, polypropylene, Styrofoam, Plexiglas, Mylar, Teflon, polyethylene terephthalate (familiarly known as *PET*)—the list goes on and on. And on. Annual global production of plastic currently runs to more than eight hundred billion pounds. What was a problem of scarcity is now a problem of superabundance.

In the form of empty water bottles, used shopping bags, and tattered snack packages, plastic waste turns up pretty much everywhere today. It has been found at the bottom of the Mariana Trench, thirty-six thousand feet below sea level. It litters the beaches of Svalbard and the shores of the Cocos (Keeling) Islands, in the Indian Ocean, most of which are uninhabited. [The Great Pacific Garbage Patch](#), a collection of floating debris that stretches across six hundred thousand square miles between California and Hawaii, is thought to contain some 1.8 trillion plastic shards. Among the many creatures being done in by all this junk are corals, tortoises, and elephants—

in particular, the elephants of Sri Lanka. In recent years, twenty of them have died after ingesting plastic at a landfill near the village of Pallakkadu.

How worried should we be about what's become known as "the plastic pollution crisis"? And what can be done about it? These questions lie at the heart of several recent books that take up what one author calls "the plastic trap."

"Without plastic we'd have no modern medicine or gadgets or wire insulation to keep our homes from burning down," that author, Matt Simon, writes in "[A Poison Like No Other: How Microplastics Corrupted Our Planet and Our Bodies](#)." "But with plastic we've contaminated every corner of Earth."

Simon, a science journalist at *Wired*, is especially concerned about plastic's tendency to devolve into microplastics. (Microplastics are usually defined as bits smaller than five millimetres across.) This process is taking place all the time, in many different ways. Plastic bags drift into the ocean, where, after being tossed around by the waves and bombarded with UV radiation, they fall apart. Tires today contain a wide variety of plastics; as they roll along, they abrade, sending clouds of particles spinning into the air. Clothes made with plastics, which now comprise most items for sale, are constantly shedding fibres, much the way dogs shed hairs. A study published a few years ago in the journal *Nature Food* found that preparing infant formula in a plastic bottle is a good way to degrade the bottle, so what babies end up drinking is a sort of plastic soup. In fact, it is now clear that children are feeding on microplastics even before they can eat. In 2021, researchers from Italy announced that they had found microplastics in human placentas. A few months later, researchers from Germany and Austria announced that they'd found microplastics in meconium—the technical term for an infant's first poop.

The hazards of ingesting large pieces of plastic are pretty straightforward; they include choking and perforation of the intestinal tract. Animals that fill their guts with plastics eventually starve to death. The risks posed by microplastics are subtler, but not, Simon argues, any less serious. Plastics are made from by-products of oil and gas refining; many of the chemicals involved, such as benzene and vinyl chloride, are carcinogens. In addition to

their main ingredients, plastics may contain any number of additives. Many of these—for example, polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFASs, which confer water resistance—are also suspected carcinogens. Many of the others have never been adequately tested.

As plastics fall apart, the chemicals that went into their manufacture can leak out. These can then combine to form new compounds, which may prove less dangerous than the originals—or more so. A couple of years ago, a team of American scientists subjected disposable shopping bags to several days of simulated sunlight, in order to mimic the conditions that they'd encounter flying or floating loose. The researchers found that a single bag from CVS leached more than thirteen thousand compounds; a bag from Walmart leached more than fifteen thousand. “It is becoming increasingly clear that plastics are not inert in the environment,” the team wrote. Steve Allen, a researcher at Canada’s Ocean Frontier Institute who specializes in microplastics, tells Simon, “If you’ve got an IQ above room temperature, you have to understand that this is not a good material to have in the environment.”

Microplastics, meanwhile, don’t just leach nasty chemicals; they attract them. “Persistent bioaccumulative and toxic substances,” or PBTs, are a hodgepodge of harmful compounds, including DDT and PCBs. Like microplastics, which are often referred to in the scientific literature as MPs, PBTs are everywhere these days. When PBTs encounter MPs, they preferentially adhere to them. “In effect, plastics are like magnets for PBTs” is how the Environmental Protection Agency has put it. Consuming microplastics is thus a good way to swallow old poisons.

Then, there’s the threat posed by the particles themselves. Microplastics—and in particular, it seems, microfibres—can get pulled deep into the lungs. People who work in the synthetic-textile industry, it has long been known, suffer from high rates of lung disease. Are we breathing in enough microfibres that we are all, in effect, becoming synthetic-textile workers? No one can say for sure, but, as Fay Couceiro, a researcher at England’s University of Portsmouth, observes to Simon, “We desperately need to find out.”

Whatever you had for dinner last night, the meal almost certainly left behind plastic in need of disposal. Before tossing your empty sour-cream tub or mostly empty ketchup bottle, you may have searched it for a number, and if you found one, inside a cheerful little triangle, you washed it out and set it aside to be recycled. You might also have imagined that with this effort you were doing your part to stem the global plastic-pollution tide.

The British journalist Oliver Franklin-Wallis used to be a believer. He religiously rinsed his plastics before depositing them in one of the five color-coded rubbish bins that he and his wife kept at their home in Royston, north of London. Then Franklin-Wallis decided to find out what was actually happening to his garbage. Disenchantment followed.

“If a product is seen as recycled, or recyclable, it makes us feel better about buying it,” he writes in “[Wasteland: The Secret World of Waste and the Urgent Search for a Cleaner Future](#).” But all those little numbers inside the triangles “mostly serve to trick consumers.”

Franklin-Wallis became interested in the fate of his detritus just as the old order of Britain’s rubbish was collapsing. Up until 2017, most of the plastic waste collected in Europe and in the United States was shipped to China, as was most of the mixed paper. Then Beijing imposed a new policy, known as National Sword, that prohibited imports of *yang laji*, or “foreign garbage.” The move left waste haulers from California to Catalonia with millions of mildewy containers they couldn’t get rid of. “*PLASTICS PILE UP AS CHINA REFUSES TO TAKE THE WEST’S RECYCLING*,” a January, 2018, headline in the *Times* read. “It’s tough times,” Simon Ellin, the chief executive of Britain’s Recycling Association, told the paper.

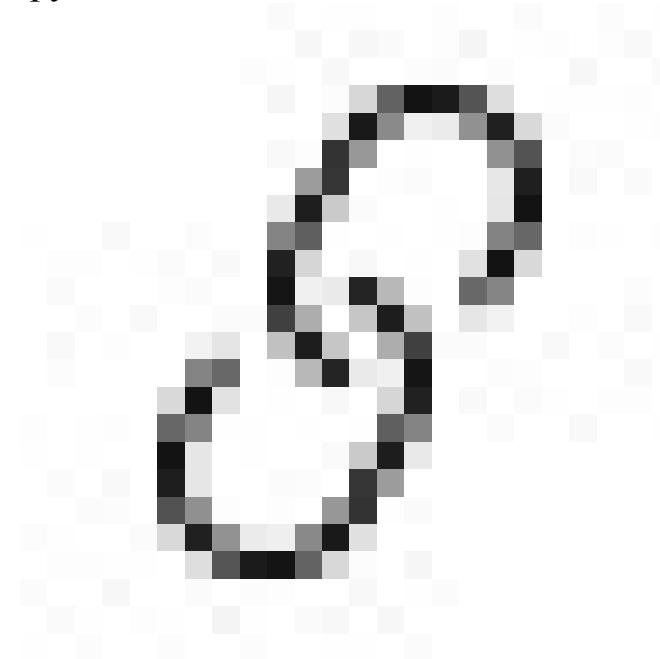
Trash, though, finds a way. Not long after China stopped taking in foreign garbage, waste entrepreneurs in other nations—Malaysia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka—started to accept it. Mom-and-pop plastic-recycling businesses sprang up in places where they were regulated laxly, if at all. Franklin-Wallis visited one such informal recycling plant, in New Delhi; the owner allowed him inside on the condition that he not reveal exactly how the business operates or where it is situated. He found workers in a fiendishly hot room feeding junk into a shredder. Workers in another, equally hot room fed the shreds into an extruder, which pumped out little

gray pellets known as nurdles. The ventilation system consisted of an open window. “The thick fug of plastic fumes in the air left me dazed,” Franklin-Wallis writes.



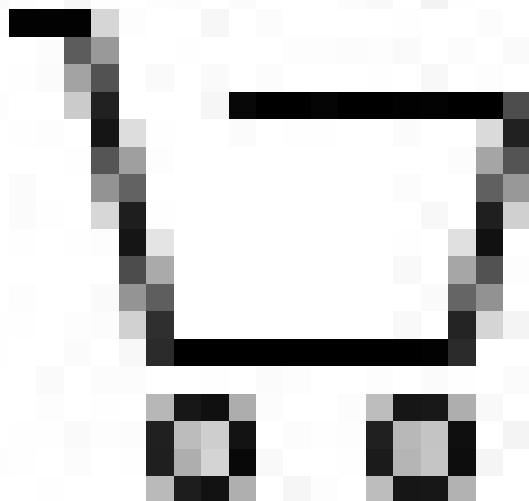
"Look, I can explain—it's Brad Pitt!"
Cartoon by Karl Stevens

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Nurdles, which are key to manufacturing plastic products, are small enough to qualify as microplastics. (It's been estimated that ten trillion nurdles a year leak into the oceans, most from shipping containers [that tip overboard](#).) Usually, nurdles are composed of "virgin" polymers, but, as the New Delhi plant demonstrates, it is also possible to produce them from used plastic. The problem with the process, and with plastic recycling more generally, is that a polymer degrades each time it's heated. Thus, even under ideal circumstances, plastic can be reused only a couple of times, and in the waste-management business very little is ideal. Franklin-Wallis toured a high-end recycling plant in northern England that handles *PET*, the material that most water and soda bottles are made from. He learned that nearly half the bales of *PET* that arrive at the plant can't be reprocessed because they're too contaminated, either by other kinds of plastic or by random crap. "Yield is a problem for us," the plant's commercial director concedes.

Franklin-Wallis comes to see plastic recycling as so much (potentially toxic) smoke and mirrors. Over the years, he writes, "a kind of playbook" has emerged. Under public pressure, a company like Coca-Cola or Nestlé pledges to insure that the packaging for its products gets recycled. When the pressure eases, it quietly abandons its pledge. Meanwhile, it lobbies against any kind of legislation that would restrict the sale of single-use plastics.

Franklin-Wallis quotes Larry Thomas, the former president of the Society of the Plastics Industry, who once said, “If the public thinks recycling is working, then they are not going to be as concerned about the environment.”

Right around the time that Franklin-Wallis started tracking his trash, Eve O. Schaub decided to spend a year not producing any. Schaub, who has been described as a “stunt memoirist,” had previously spent a year avoiding sugar and forcing her family to do the same, an exercise she chronicled in a book titled “[Year of No Sugar](#).” The year of no sugar was followed by “[Year of No Clutter](#).” When she proposes a trash-free annum to her husband, he says he doubts it is possible. Her younger daughter begs her to wait until she goes away to college. Schaub plunges ahead anyway.

“As the beginning of the new year loomed, I was feeling pretty good about our chances,” she recalls in “[Year of No Garbage](#).” “I mean, really. How hard could it be?”

What Schaub means by “no garbage” is not exactly *no* garbage. Under her scheme, refuse that can be composted or recycled is allowed, so her family can keep tossing out old cans and empty wine bottles along with food scraps. What turns out to be hard—really, really hard—is dealing with plastic.

At first, Schaub divides plastic waste into two varieties. There’s the kind with the little numbers, which her trash hauler accepts as part of its “single stream” recycling program and so, by her definition, doesn’t count as trash. Then, there’s the kind with no numbers, which isn’t supposed to go in the recycling bin and therefore does count. Schaub finds that even when she purchases something in a numbered container—guacamole, say—there’s usually a thin sheet of plastic under the lid that’s numberless. A lot of her time goes into rinsing off these sheets and other stray plastic bits and trying to figure out what to do with them. She is excited to find a company called TerraCycle, which promises—for a price—to “recycle the unrecyclable.” For a hundred and thirty-four dollars, she purchases a box that can be returned to TerraCycle filled with plastic packaging, and for an additional forty-two dollars she buys another box that can be filled with “oral care waste,” such as used toothpaste tubes. “I sent my TerraCycle Plastic Packaging box as densely packed with plastic as any box could be,” she writes.

Eventually, though, like Franklin-Wallis, Schaub comes to see that she's been living a lie. Midway through her experiment, she signs up for an online course called Beyond Plastic Pollution, offered by Judith Enck, a former regional administrator for the E.P.A. Only containers labelled No. 1 (*PET*) and No. 2 (high-density polyethylene) get melted down with any regularity, Schaub learns, and to refashion the resulting nurdles into anything useful usually requires the addition of lots of new material. "*No matter what your garbage service provider is telling you, numbers 3, 4, 6 and 7 are not getting recycled,*" Schaub writes. (The italics are hers.) "Number 5 is a veeeery dubious maybe."

TerraCycle, too, proves a disappointment. It gets sued for deceptive labelling and settles out of court. A documentary-film crew finds that dozens of bales of waste sent to the company for recycling have instead been shipped off to be burned at a cement kiln in Bulgaria. (According to the company's founder, this is the result of an unfortunate mistake.)

"I had wanted so badly to believe that TerraCycle and Santa Claus and the Easter bunny were real, that I had been willing to overlook the fact that Santa's handwriting looks suspiciously like Mom's," Schaub writes. Toward the end of the year, she concludes that pretty much all plastic waste—numbered, unnumbered, or shipped off in boxes—falls under her definition of garbage. She also concludes that, "in this day, age and culture," such waste is pretty much impossible to avoid.

A few months ago, the E.P.A. issued a "draft national strategy to prevent plastic pollution." Americans, the report noted, produce more plastic waste each year than the residents of any other country—almost five hundred pounds per person, nearly twice as much as the average European and sixteen times as much as the average Indian. The E.P.A. declared the "business-as-usual approach" to managing this waste to be "unsustainable." At the top of its list of recommendations was "reduce the production and consumption" of single-use plastics.

Just about everyone who contemplates the "plastic pollution crisis" arrives at the same conclusion. Once a plastic bottle (or bag or takeout container) has been tossed, the odds of its ending up in landfill, on a faraway beach, or as

tiny fragments drifting around in the ocean are high. The best way to alter these odds is not to create the bottle (or bag or container) in the first place.

“So long as we’re churning out single-use plastic . . . we’re trying to drain the tub without turning off the tap,” Simon writes. “We’ve got to cut it out.”

“We can’t rely on half-measures,” Schaub says. “We have to go to the source.” Her own local supermarket, in southern Vermont, stopped handing out plastic bags in late 2020, she notes. “Do you know what happened? Nothing. One day we were poisoning the environment with plastic bags in the name of ultra-convenience and the next? We weren’t.”

“We now know that we can’t start to reduce plastic pollution without a reduction of production,” Imari Walker-Franklin and Jenna Jambeck, both environmental engineers, observe in “[Plastics](#),” forthcoming from M.I.T. Press. “Upstream and systemic change is needed.”

Of course, it’s a lot easier to talk about “turning off the tap” and changing the system than it is to actually do so. First, there are the political obstacles. For all intents and purposes, the plastics industry is a subsidiary of the fossil-fuel industry. ExxonMobil, for instance, is the world’s fourth-largest oil company and also its largest producer of virgin polymers. The connection means that any effort to reduce plastic consumption is bound to be resisted, either openly or surreptitiously, not just by companies such as Coca-Cola and Nestlé but also by corporations like Exxon and Shell. In March, 2022, diplomats from a hundred and seventy-five nations agreed to try to fashion a global treaty to “end plastic pollution.” At the first negotiating session, held later that year in Uruguay, the self-described High Ambition Coalition, which includes the members of the European Union as well as Ghana and Switzerland, insisted that the treaty include mandatory measures that apply to all countries. This idea was opposed by major oil-producing nations, including the U.S., which has called for a “country-driven” approach. According to the environmental group Greenpeace, lobbyists for the “major fossil fuel companies were out in force” at the session.

There are also practical hurdles. Precisely because plastic is now ubiquitous, it’s difficult to imagine how to replace all of it, or even much of it. Even in cases where substitutes are available, it’s not always clear that they’re

preferable. Franklin-Wallis cites a 2018 study by the Danish Environmental Protection Agency which analyzed how different kinds of shopping bags compare in terms of life-cycle impacts. The study found that, to have a lower environmental impact than a plastic bag, a paper bag would have to be used forty-three times and a cotton tote would have to be used an astonishing seventy-one hundred times. “How many of those bags will last that long?” Franklin-Wallis asks. Walker-Franklin and Jambeck also note that exchanging plastic for other materials may involve “tradeoffs,” including “energy and water use and carbon emissions.” When Schaub’s supermarket stopped handing out plastic shopping bags, it may have reduced one problem only to exacerbate others—deforestation, say, or pesticide use.

“In the grand scheme of human existence, it wasn’t that long ago that we got along just fine without plastic,” Simon points out. This is true. It also wasn’t all that long ago that we got along just fine without Coca-Cola or packaged guacamole or six-ounce bottles of water or takeout everything. To make a significant dent in plastic waste—and certainly to “end plastic pollution”—will probably require not just substitution but elimination. If much of contemporary life is wrapped up in plastic, and the result of this is that we are poisoning our kids, ourselves, and our ecosystems, then contemporary life may need to be rethought. The question is what matters to us, and whether we’re willing to ask ourselves that question. ♦

By Heidi Blake

By Ann Patchett

By Joshua Rothman

By Beverly Gage

Art

- [The Glittering Vultures of Ebony G. Patterson](#)

The Glittering Vultures of Ebony G. Patterson

The Jamaican-born artist's installation "... things come to thrive ... in the shedding ... in the molting ..." probes beneath the surface at the New York Botanical Garden.



The Jamaican-born artist Ebony G. Patterson's installation "**... things come to thrive ... in the shedding ... in the molting ...**," at the New York Botanical Garden, in the Bronx (through Oct. 22), is the result of a four-year residency. Dotting the Enid A. Haupt Conservatory and its lawn are glittering black-foam vultures and glass sculptures of feet and plants, just some of the pieces with which Patterson probes the garden's surface. "How do I get people to look beneath the landscape?" she asks. "There's a secret that's being concealed."

By Nathan Heller

By James Lasdun

By Ann Patchett

By Rachel Aviv

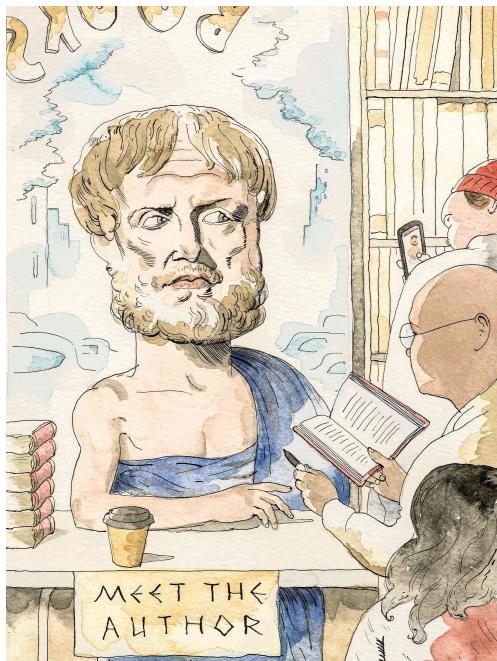
Books

- [Aristotle's Rules for Living Well](#)
- [How to Raise a Man Child](#)
- [Ernst Jünger's Narratives of Complicity](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)

Aristotle's Rules for Living Well

The Nicomachean Ethics is an unexampled work by a paragon of classical thought. How does it hold up as a self-help manual?

By [Nikhil Krishnan](#)



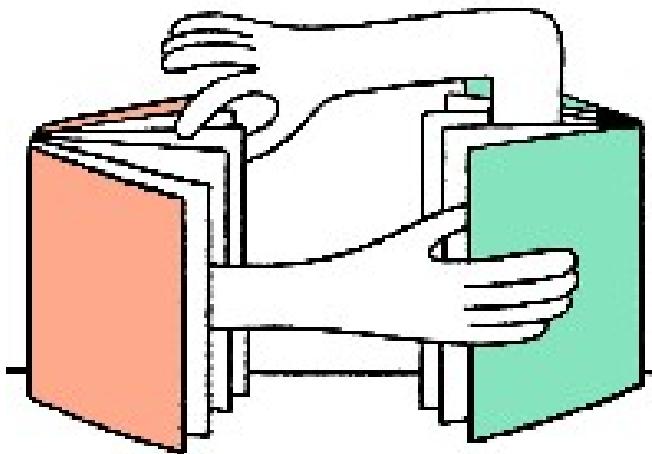
The Internet has no shortage of moralists and moralizers, but one ethical epicenter is surely the extraordinary, addictive subreddit called “Am I the Asshole?,” popularly abbreviated AITA. In the forum, which celebrates its tenth anniversary this summer, users post brief accounts of their interpersonal conflicts and brace themselves for the judgment of online strangers: usually either YTA (“You’re the asshole”) or NTA (“Not the asshole”). A team of moderators enforces the rules, of which the most important, addressed to the supplicant, reads “Accept your judgment.”

A few recent ones: Am I the asshole for “telling my brother that he is undateable?” For “asking my girlfriend to dress better on a date night?” For “refusing to resell my Taylor Swift Tickets?” Some posts have become famous, or Internet famous, like the one from a guy who asked an overweight seatmate on a five-hour flight to pay him a hundred and fifty dollars for encroaching on his space. The subreddit promises, in its tagline, “a catharsis for the frustrated moral philosopher in all of us.”

What's striking about AITA is the language in which it states its central question: you're asked not whether I did the right thing but, rather, what sort of *person* I'm being. And, of course, an asshole represents a very specific kind of character defect. (To be an asshole, according to Geoffrey Nunberg, in [his 2012 history of the concept](#), is to "behave thoughtlessly or arrogantly on the job, in personal relationships, or just circulating in public.") We would have a different morality, and an impoverished one, if we judged actions only with those terms of pure evaluation, "right" or "wrong," and judged people only "good" or "bad." Our vocabulary of commendation and condemnation is perpetually changing, but it has always relied on "thick" ethical terms, which combine description and evaluation.

The Best Books We Read This Week

Read our reviews of notable new fiction and nonfiction, updated every Wednesday.



This way of thinking about ethical life—in which the basic question is who we are, not what we do—has foundations in a work of Aristotle's from the fourth century B.C., known as the Nicomachean Ethics. A new translation and abridgment, by the University of Pennsylvania philosopher and classicist Susan Sauvé Meyer, comes with a new title: "[How to Flourish: An](#)

[Ancient Guide to Living Well](#)” (Princeton). The original text, Meyer explains, has been whittled down to “Aristotle’s main claims and positive arguments, omitting digressions, repetitions, methodological remarks, and skirmishes with opponents.”

The volume is part of a series of new translations of ancient texts. Aristotle’s Poetics, for instance, is now “[How to Tell a Story: An Ancient Guide to the Art of Storytelling for Writers and Readers](#),” and Thucydides’ “History of the Peloponnesian War” is now “[How to Think About War: An Ancient Guide to Foreign Policy](#).” You can debate whether these name changes are kitschy or canny, but the title “How to Flourish” isn’t that much of a stretch, because the Nicomachean Ethics is one of the handful of texts chosen that might plausibly be considered a guide in a sense we recognize today. Still, if Aristotle’s ethics is to be sold as a work of what we call self-help, we have to ask: How helpful is it?

We know only a few things about the man who claimed to know how to flourish. He was born in 384 B.C., in a Macedonian city in what’s now northern Greece. His mother came from a wealthy family on the island of Euboea; his father was a court physician to a Macedonian king. Aristotle was seventeen when he left his native land for Athens, where he evidently encountered Plato and his Academy—the legendary circle of scientists, mathematicians, and philosophers. When Plato died, in 347, Aristotle left Athens. About his reasons we can only speculate: one theory is that Aristotle was moved by the perennial anxieties of the immigrant without citizenship in a time of political strife. Outside on the streets, the orator Demosthenes was decrying the wickedness of Macedonians.

A few years later, Aristotle was engaged to tutor a young Macedonian prince, who would later be known as Alexander the Great. One of the more vivid depictions of the philosopher appears in Mary Renault’s “[Fire from Heaven](#),” the opening volume in her splendid trilogy of novels about Alexander’s life. First laying eyes on his tutor, the prince sees “a lean smallish man, not ill-proportioned, who yet gave at first sight the effect of being all head.” A second look “revealed him to be dressed with some care and with the elegance of Ionia, wearing one or two good rings. Athenians thought him rather foppish. . . . But he did look like a man who would answer questions.”

He was certainly that. During an extraordinarily fertile career, he raised, often for the first time, questions in science and philosophy that he treated so thoroughly it was many centuries before anyone could improve on his answers. In ethics, at least, there's a decent case that no one *has* improved much on them.

“How to flourish” was one such topic, “flourishing” being a workable rendering of Aristotle’s term *eudaimonia*. We might also translate the term in the usual way, as “happiness,” as long as we suspend some of that word’s modern associations; *eudaimonia* wasn’t something that waxed and waned with our moods. For Aristotle, ethics was centrally concerned with how to live a good life: a flourishing existence was also a virtuous one.

For first-time readers of the Nicomachean Ethics, though, the treatise is full of disappointments. It is not, strictly, a book by Aristotle; a later editor evidently stitched it together from a series of lecture notes. (Aristotle’s father and son were named Nicomachus; the title may have honored one of them.) There are repetitions and sections that seem to belong in a different book, and Aristotle’s writings are, as Meyer observes, “famously terse, often crabbed in their style.” Crabbed, fragmented, gappy: it can be a headache trying to match his pronouns to the nouns they refer to. Some of his arguments are missing crucial premises; others fail to spell out their conclusions.

Aristotle is obscure in other ways, too. His highbrow potshots at unnamed contemporaries, his pop-cultural references, must have tickled his aristocratic Athenian audience. But the people and the plays he referred to are now lost or forgotten. Some readers have found his writings “affectless,” stripped of any trace of a human voice, or of a beating human heart.

It gets worse. The book, though it purports to be about the question of how to flourish, is desperately short on practical advice. More of it is about what it means to be good than about how one becomes it. And then much of what it says can sound rather obvious, or inert. Flourishing is the ultimate goal of human life; a flourishing life is one that is lived in accord with the various “virtues” of the character and intellect (courage, moderation, wisdom, and so forth); a flourishing life also calls for friendships with good people and a certain measure of good fortune in the way of a decent income, health, and

looks. Virtue is not just about acting rightly but about *feeling* rightly. What's best, Aristotle says, is "to have such feelings at the right time, at the right objects and people, with the right goal, and in the right manner." Good luck figuring out what the "right time" or object or manner is.

And virtue, his central category, gets defined—in a line that Meyer's abridgment culls—in terms that look suspiciously circular. Virtue is a state "consisting in a mean," Aristotle maintains, and this mean "is defined by reference to reason, that is to say, to the reason by reference to which the prudent person would define it." (For Aristotle, the "mean" represented a point between opposite excesses—for instance, between cowardice and recklessness lay courage.) The phrase "prudent person" here renders the Greek *phronimos*, a person possessed of that special quality of mind which Aristotle called "phronesis." But is Aristotle then saying that virtue consists in being disposed to act as the virtuous person does? That sounds true, but trivially so.

To grasp why it may not be, it helps to reckon with the role that habits of mind play in Aristotle's account. Meyer's translation of "phronesis" is "good judgment," and the phrase nicely captures the combination of intelligence and experience which goes into acquiring it, along with the difficulty of reducing it to a set of explicit principles that anyone could apply mechanically, like an algorithm. In that respect, "good judgment" is an improvement on the old-fashioned and now misleading "prudence"; it's also less clunky than another standby, "practical wisdom."

The enormous role of judgment in Aristotle's picture of how to live can sound, to modern readers thirsty for ethical guidance, like a cop-out. Especially when they might instead pick up a treatise by John Stuart Mill and find an elegantly simple principle for distinguishing right from wrong, or one by Kant, in which they will find at least three. They might, for that matter, look to Jordan Peterson, who conjures up as many as twelve.

Treated as a serious request for advice, the question of how to flourish could receive a gloomy answer from Aristotle: it may be too late to start trying. Why is that? Flourishing involves, among other things, performing actions that manifest virtues, which are qualities of character that enable us to perform what Aristotle calls our "characteristic activity" (as Meyer renders

the Greek *ergon*, a word more commonly, but riskily, translated as “function”). But how do we come to acquire these qualities of character, or what Meyer translates as “dispositions”? Aristotle answers, “From our regular practice.”

In a passage missing from Meyer’s ruthless abridgment, Aristotle warns, “We need to have been brought up in noble habits if we are to be adequate students of noble and just things. . . . For we begin from the that; if this is apparent enough to us, we can begin without also knowing why. Someone who is well brought up has the beginnings, or can easily acquire them.” “The that,” a characteristically laconic formulation of Aristotle’s, is generally taken to refer to the commonsense maxims that a passably well-parented child hears about not lying, fighting, or talking with food in one’s mouth.

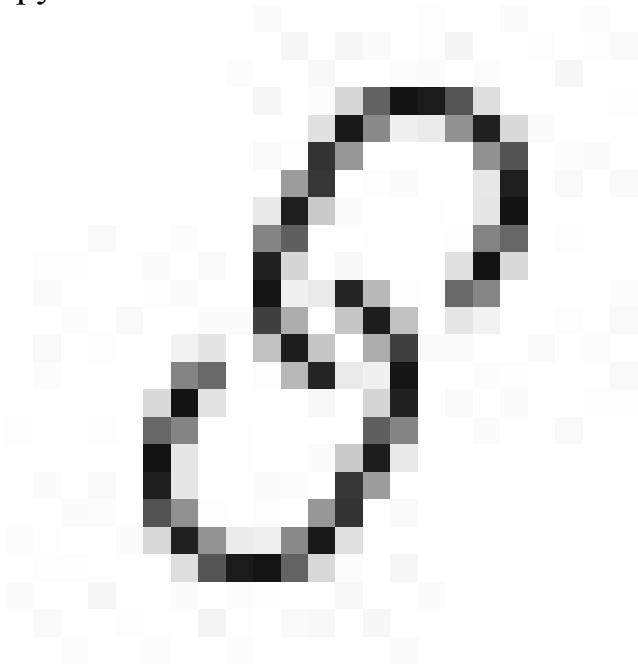
A search for what we might call “actionable” guidance will yield precious little. The text yields just enough in the way of glancing remarks to suggest that Aristotle may have been the sort of man who gave good advice. He says, for instance, that people in politics who identify flourishing with honor can’t be right, for honor “seems to depend more on those who honor than on the one honored.” This has been dubbed the “Coriolanus paradox”: seekers of honor “tend to defeat themselves by making themselves dependent on those to whom they aim to be superior,” as Bernard Williams notes. Replace “honor” with, say, “likes on Instagram” and you have a piece of advice that works as well now as it did in the fifth century B.C.

Aristotle suggests, more generally, that you should identify the vices you’re susceptible to and then “pull yourself away in the opposite direction, since by pulling hard against one fault, you get to the mean (as when straightening out warped planks).” Only the vivid image of the warped planks keeps this remark from being the type of sententious counsel that Polonius might have given his son.



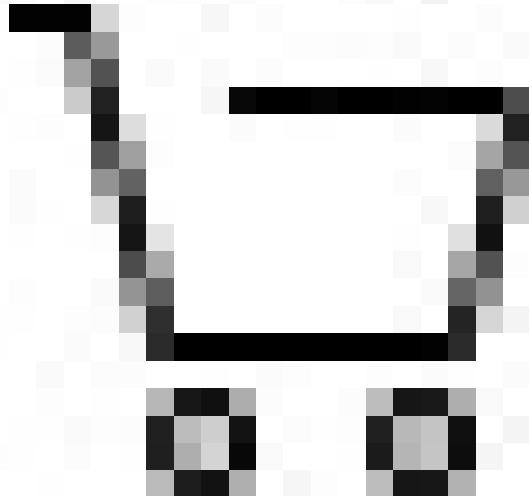
"The person you're trying to reach is available, but not answering this call because he hates all forms of confrontation."
Cartoon by Anjali Chandrashekhar

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The question then must be faced: Is there anyone who both needs to hear what Aristotle has to offer and would be able to apply it? Sold as a self-help manual in a culture accustomed to gurus promulgating “rules for living,” Aristotle’s ethics may come as a disappointment. But our disappointment may tell us more about ourselves than it does about Aristotle.

I started to study Aristotle at the same time I was learning to cook. At college five thousand miles away from home, I found that it didn’t take long to tire of baked beans and something called “jacket potatoes.” There was Indian takeout, of course, but it was not cheap, and the chefs came from parts of the subcontinent about as far away from my ancestral village as Oxford was from Jerusalem. It was in the days before obliging Indian grandmothers had YouTube channels, and no one seemed to have thought to write a book of recipes from our little corner of Kerala.

Not that a mere recipe would have helped. The philosopher Michael Oakeshott wrote that “nobody supposes that the knowledge that belongs to the good cook is confined to what is or may be written down in the cookery book.” Proficiency in cooking is, of course, a matter of technique. Sometimes we acquire our skills by repeatedly applying a rule—following a recipe—but when we succeed what we become are not good followers of

recipes but good cooks. Through practice, as Aristotle would have said, we acquire judgment.

The existence of recipe books, I came to think, was itself a melancholy fact about a world of emigration and the growing distance between generations. The most widely available book of Indian recipes in Britain, by the actress and grande dame [Madhur Jaffrey](#), was, in fact, assembled out of letters from her mother when she was a homesick drama student in nineteen-fifties London. Recipes were second best, the sign of a fall from a condition of organic wholeness.

As I blundered in the evenings at the single stovetop in the student kitchen I shared with half a rugby team, I was also working line by line through the text of the Nicomachean Ethics. I started with an English translation, and then turned to the original Greek, my familiarity with the language acquired over a frantic month at the geekiest summer camp in the world. Something about that juxtaposition—Aristotle in the mornings, clumsy pots of dal in the evenings—has inured me to all visions of moral philosophy as a simple variety of self-help.

At Oxford, the text had been taught the same way since at least the nineteenth century, in a series of weekly tutorials. Mine were solo, and my tutor was a man of enormous charisma and intensity. I would read out my essay on the set passages of text—the local word for such extracts was the charmingly English “gobbet”—while in the background a kettle came climactically to the boil. My tutor would pour out strong black Indian tea along with some weakly complimentary judgment—usually, in my case, the damning “Thorough.” And then we’d start. He passed on to me a scholarly maxim that he had heard from his own tutor, a man combining great erudition and eccentricity who wore gold-rimmed spectacles and dressed like a fugitive from the eighteenth century: “How to read Aristotle? *Slowly.*”

I tried to comply, but I was never slow enough. There was always another nuance, another textual knot to unravel. My tutor’s fundamental pedagogical principle was that to teach a text meant being, at least for the duration of the tutorial, its most passionate champion. Every smug undergraduate exposé of a fallacy would be immediately countered with a robust defense of Aristotle’s reasoning. When I stayed on as a graduate student and edged into

the strange and wonderful world of Oxford's scholars of ancient philosophy, I attended seminars where hours were spent parsing a single Aristotelian sentence. At one session, a nervous participant asked, "Would you think it precipitate if we moved on to the next sentence?"

What we were doing with this historical text wasn't history but philosophy. We were reading it not for what it might reveal about an exotic culture but for the timelessly important truths it might contain—an attitude at odds with the relativism endemic in the rest of the humanities. The deliberate pace of the Aristotelians who taught me was not only an intellectual strategy but also an enactment of the lesson of the text I was reading. There is no shortcut to understanding Aristotle, no recipe. You get good at reading him by reading him, with others, slowly and often. Regular practice: for Aristotle, it's how you get good generally.

A few days into my Ph.D. program, I met a fellow-student, a logician, who announced that he didn't share my philosophical interests. "My parents taught me the difference between right and wrong," he said, "and I can't think what more there is to say about it." The appropriate response, and the Aristotelian one, would be to agree with the spirit of the remark. There is such a thing as the difference between right and wrong. But reliably telling them apart takes experience, the company of wise friends, and the good luck of having been well brought up. Even the philosophers who think that we would ideally act in accordance with statable principles must ask themselves how someone without experience could identify such principles in the first place.

I'm convinced that we are all Aristotelians, most of the time, even when forces in our culture briefly persuade us that we are something else. Ethics remains what it was to the Greeks: a matter of being a person of a certain sort of sensibility, not of acting on "principles," which one reserves for unusual situations of the kind that life sporadically throws up. That remains a truth about ethics even when we've adopted different terms for describing what type of person not to be: we don't speak much these days of being "small-souled" or "intemperate," but we do say a great deal about "douchebags," "creeps," and, yes, "assholes."

In one sense, it tells us nothing that the right thing to do is to act and feel as the person of good judgment does. In another sense, it tells us virtually *everything* that can be said at this level of generality. It points us in the right direction: toward the picture of a person with a certain character, certain habits of thinking and feeling, a certain level of self-knowledge and knowledge of other people. In Aristotle's view, I might, in a couple of years, be *just* about ready to start studying ethics.

Aristotle's world, like that of his teacher Plato, was one in which philosophy had to distinguish itself from rivals for the prestige and the authority it claimed. Those rivals, whom Plato regarded as hucksters and grifters, have been tarred forever by the disobliging epithet he gave them: "Sophist." The Sophists of the ancient world were liberal with the "rules for living" that they gave the teen-age boys who were their most ardent (and paying) customers. Aristotle faced the challenge of courting the same constituency armed with a more modest product.

Later in his life, in 322, as anti-Macedonian sentiment surged among the Athenians after Alexander's death, Aristotle left Athens to spend his final days in Chalcis, on his mother's island of Euboea. An ancient source tells us that he did so to avoid the fate of Socrates, and to stop the Athenians committing "a second crime against philosophy." He may not have been a modest man, but he hadn't led a sheltered life.

Notoriously, the Nicomachean Ethics ends with a sort of plot twist. Until this point, Aristotle has spent most of his time on a patient explanation of the virtues of character, with only a brief digression to tell us about the virtues of the intellect. But the last few chapters contain a genuine surprise—if you have not been reading closely. The highest of the virtues, he announces, is not (as most of his original audience would have taken him so far to be saying) "good judgment" but, rather, one he labels with that beautiful Greek word *sophia*.

"Wisdom" is the usual translation, but Aristotle's discussion of it makes it clear that he is using the word in what Meyer calls "a restricted technical sense." Her rendering is "scientific learning." Being *sophos*, Aristotle says, is "not only knowing what follows from the principles of a science but also apprehending the truth of the principles themselves." Yet, if *sophia* is indeed

a higher virtue than phronesis, mustn't a life devoted to the exercise of "scientific learning" be a higher, a more flourishing, existence than one devoted to the exercise of "good judgment" in the practical spheres of living (running a household, ruling a city)? It surely would have surprised the aristocrats in Aristotle's original audience to be told that their ambitions to be rich, well regarded, and powerful fell short of the highest flourishing of which human beings are capable.

Aristotle had little hope that a philosopher's treatise could teach someone without much experience of life how to make the crucial ethical distinctions. We learn to spot an "asshole" from living; how else? And, when our own perceptions falter, we continue to do today exactly what Aristotle thought we should do. He asserts, in another significant remark that doesn't make Meyer's cut, that we should attend to the words of the old and experienced at least as much as we do to philosophical proofs: "these people see correctly because experience has given them their eye."

Is it any surprise that the Internet is full of those who need help seeing rightly? Finding no friendly neighborhood *phronimos* to provide authoritative advice, you defer instead to the wisdom of an online community. Its members help you to see the situation, and yourself, in a different light. "The self-made man," Oakeshott wrote, "is never literally self-made, but depends upon a certain kind of society and upon a large unrecognized inheritance." If self-help means denying the role that the perceptions of others play in making us who we are, if it means a set of rules for living that remove the need for judgment, then we are better off without it.

We have long lived in a world desperate for formulas, simple answers to the simple question "What should I do?" Some of my contemporaries in graduate school, pioneers in what was then a radical new movement called "effective altruism," devised an online career-planning tool to guide undergraduates in their choice of careers. (It saw a future for me in computer science.) I've had bemusing conversations with teen-age boys in thrall to Andrew Tate, a muscled influencer who has as many as forty-one "tenets." My in-box is seldom without yet another invitation to complete an online course on the fine-grained etiquette of "diversity, equity, and inclusion." (Certificate awarded upon completion of multiple-choice test.)

But the algorithms, the tenets, the certificates are all attempts to solve the problem—which is everybody’s problem—of how not to be an asshole. Life would be a lot easier if there were rules, algorithms, and life hacks solving that problem once and for all. There aren’t. At the heart of the Nicomachean Ethics is a claim that remains both edifying and chastening: phronesis doesn’t come that easy. Aristotle devised a theory that was vague in just the right places, one that left, intentionally, space to be filled in by life. ♦

By Elif Batuman

By Jordi Graupera

By Rebecca Mead

By Nathan Heller

How to Raise a Man Child

In “Directions to Myself,” Heidi Julavits worries about what the world will do to her son—and what he might do to the world.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)



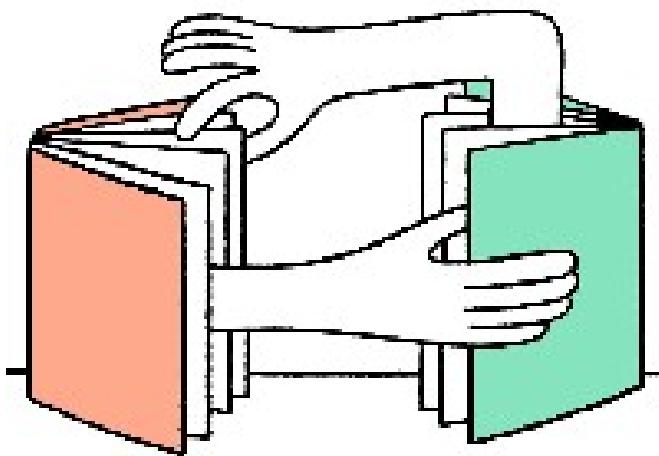
Life so often rhymes with reading; what happens on the page primes our expectations for what we'll find beyond it. So, a few weeks ago, as I was sitting on a sidewalk bench with “Directions to Myself” (Hogarth), Heidi Julavits’s new memoir, it seemed inevitable that a posse of teen-age boys should come strutting down the avenue, jostling and preening for their own benefit and that of the neighborhood at large. “I’m not listening to your bitch ass,” one shouted at his friend, before glancing at me and sheepishly correcting himself: “—your ass.” It was an oddly tender thing, this boy the size and shape of a man tempering his bluster lest his use of the word “bitch” offend me, a stranger who belonged to the category to which it refers, when he meant only to demean his friend by association. Some inner voice had spoken up and told him to tone it down. Maybe it was his mother’s.

I might have made a note of this episode regardless of what I was reading, but the fact that it was Julavits pinned it fast to my mind. “Directions to

"Myself" is full of scenes like this one, moments in which boys roughhouse and shit-talk, honing themselves against one another. Julavits watches them closely. She's interested in the formation of masculinity, how boys learn to do and to be, and in the development of one boy in particular: her son, who is five when the book begins and ten when it ends. Those private years happen to coincide with ones of public consequence—the period leading up to and immediately following Harvey Weinstein's downfall, when the alleged grotesqueries of men, and a few notable boys, were thrust into the news. We get glimpses of Brock Turner, the Stanford swimmer who was sentenced to six months in jail, in the spring of 2016, after being convicted of assaulting an unconscious woman outside a campus party, and of Paul Nungesser, the Columbia student accused of rape by his classmate Emma Sulkowicz, who, after Nungesser was cleared of wrongdoing by a university panel, carried a mattress around campus during the 2014-15 school year to demand his expulsion. Julavits doesn't mention Weinstein, or, for that matter, Donald Trump, and she doesn't need to. They are simply part of the air we all breathe.

The Best Books We Read This Week

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Her son knows nothing of these guys. In the chapter in which Turner appears, he's only six. But that six-year-old will one day be sixteen, then twenty, far from the sphere of a mother's influence. Julavits has seen what growing up looks like—she has an older child, a daughter—and she mourns the loss of her son even now. He's barely old enough to tie his shoelaces, but already she fears that he is entering what she calls, a touch dramatically, "the end times of his childhood," that period when he'll start to test the bounds of his independence. "Eventually, whatever force has grounded this oscillation—from my perspective, me—fails to exert any power at all," she writes. All parents worry about what the world might do to their children. Julavits worries about what her child might do to the world. Some boys become loving, gentle, generous men. Others cause grievous harm. What power does Julavits—does any mother—have to set her son's course?

Going by the numbers, not much. The world is full of countless bad influences, but there is only one Julavits to combat them. Early in the book, her son—he is still six—comes home from a friend's house boasting of a new word that he has added to his vocabulary. "He was so excited to share with me what had happened," Julavits writes. "His friend's older brother was making fun of a boy in his grade who loved musicals and was only friends with girls. The brother said of this boy, according to my son, *He hangs out with sluts!* "

Julavits discusses the situation with her husband. She favors direct intervention. "Clearly, I said, if the two of us don't pay close attention, our small boy might call girls sluts so his friends would like him better, and then, over time, he might come to think that girls *were* sluts, maybe especially the ones who refused to have sex with him." Today's word is tomorrow's belief, and isn't belief the seed of action? Her husband prefers a wait-and-see approach: "He trusted that, through example and education—and by staying vigilant—the two of us could limit certain negative outcomes and help him sort through the many competing messages the world can send a small boy on his way to adulthood." Julavits finds this adamantly reasonable, and totally insufficient. The next day, she sits her son down for a talk. Does he know what the word "slut" actually means? Its definition, she informs him, is "a woman who has many casual sex partners":

So, I said. This definition implies a lot that isn't stated. Conventionally, when a female is called a slut, it's an insult meant to suggest that, based on antique notions of female sexuality, she has "low morals" and is "easy," thus cheapening her value in the marriage economy and exposing her to other dangers, such as being blamed for crimes when she is, in fact, their victim. Males, when they are called sluts, are more conventionally being congratulated, because their ability to have sex with many people is seen as proof of their irresistibility, vigor, and skill. To be fair, a male slut might also limit his options in the relationship economy. His potential mates might be wisely warned away. But he can always change, and his past will not follow him into the future, and whoever presides over his change will be seen as powerful. The reformed male slut, in other words, confers value on the reformer, as well as on himself, and poses no ongoing reputational risk to any person who bravely dares to love him.

Forget about defining "slut" for a six-year-old; what about "economy," "vigor," "conventionally," and "presides"? Julavits's book is full of this kind of reported speech—hard, hammered sentences stripped of voice and styled like logic proofs—but to what end? Nobody talks this way in life. (Sometimes they do in books. Rachel Cusk's "Outline" trilogy casts a long stylistic shadow here.) Maybe Julavits, who was born in 1968, is sending up her generation's overdetermined pedagogy, the belief that a child can't merely be told that a behavior is wrong but must be made to understand *why*. The threat of an explanation may be deterrent enough: this one goes on for two more excruciating paragraphs, and by the end her son seems thoroughly baffled.

But Julavits doesn't play the scene for laughs. The mood, here and throughout "Directions to Myself," is anxious, ominous, tense—"vigilant," to borrow Julavits's word, as if disaster were forever lurking a beat away. This will surprise readers who thrilled to "The Folded Clock," Julavits's previous memoir, which was published in 2015. The Julavits of that book was a sly, charming narrator of her own life, a witty formal manipulator who took the idea of a diary and bent it all out of shape, creating an ingeniously plastic calendar in which a day in October might follow one in July and the past could come blowing suddenly through the present before time settled,

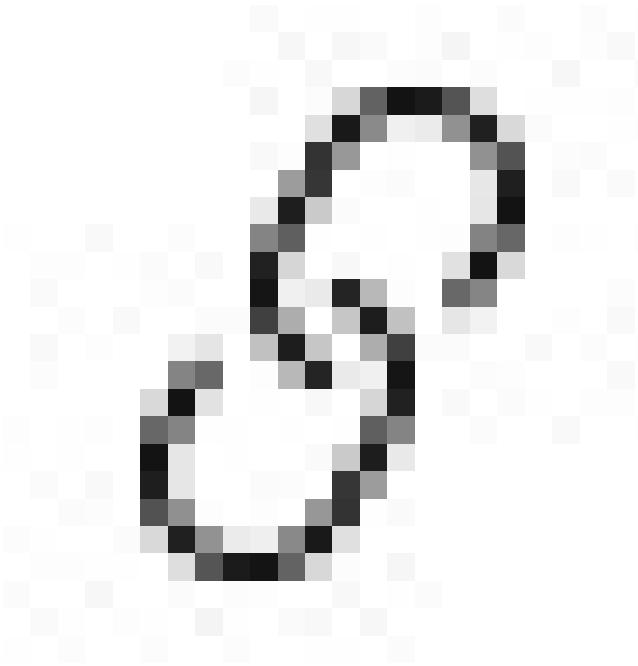
again, into its proper order. Her intelligent, disciplined playfulness seemed evidence of a happy mind.

It's not hard to guess at some of what has come to trouble it since: Trump, #MeToo, the decade's non-stop parade of bad news about bad men. In "Directions to Myself," Julavits is frequently funny on the level of the sentence—I'm still laughing at her description of an Annunciation painting in which "a woman is hiding behind a table because a little boy wearing a dress broke into her house"—but she has lost her broader comic point of view. Comedy depends on a confidence in endings, a trust that all will be well. That faith is tough to keep when the world insists on brandishing evidence to the contrary.



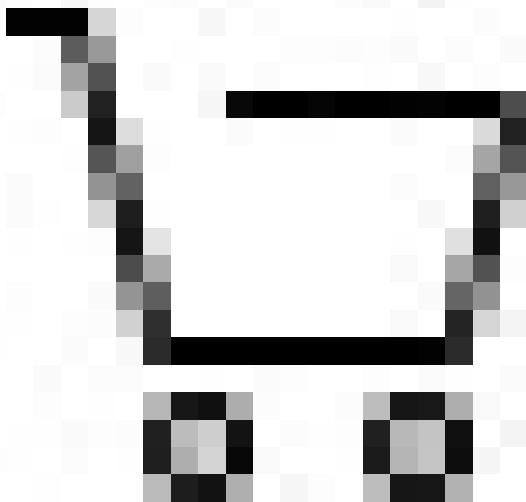
"I'd like to exchange it for a cockatoo that says, 'Cheer up, cutie.'"
Cartoon by David Borchart

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Take Brock Turner. Julavits doesn't call him, or anyone else in her book, by name; she prefers the obscuring gloom of allusion. (Even Columbia University, where Julavits and her husband, the writer Ben Marcus, teach, is referred to, with euphemistic menace, as "our boss.") But Turner is plainly

the “young man who’d been convicted of sexually assaulting an unconscious woman” whom Julavits discusses, at a café, with one of her former students, who is now in law school. He and some classmates have been analyzing the letters that Turner’s parents sent to the judge before sentencing. The father, Julavits’s student says, “makes excuses and blames everyone and everything except his son.” The mother he finds even more egregious. She begins her letter by listing her son’s admirable qualities—“easy-going, kind, considerate”—but soon loses all control. “WHY? WHY?” she writes to the judge. The student says she might be addressing “herself or the universe or, because she mentions church at one point, God.” Julavits has a different thought, though she doesn’t tell it to him: “Maybe she was addressing her son. Why had he done it? Why had he become this man?”

On that note of fraught ambiguity, the chapter ends. Does Julavits share a contempt for Turner’s mother, whose refusal to acknowledge her son’s crime may be its own moral stain? Or does she have some sympathy for this woman, who, finding herself in the nightmarish position of discovering that her son has done something awful, must nonetheless go on loving him? There is a sense that Julavits is forcing herself to confront the question now as a kind of insurance against being made to face it in the future. Of course, she doesn’t expect her son to one day commit assault—but neither did the mother of Brock Turner. Neither, we can assume, did the mother of the boy who, Julavits writes, a month into her freshman year at a college “known for its terrible treatment of women” (she went to Dartmouth), crept into her dorm at night and assaulted a visiting high-school student who was staying on her couch. This is the kind of story that people like to call “shocking but not surprising.” “That’s somebody’s daughter,” such people might say, as if a girl’s personhood is conferred through her family. Yes, and it was also somebody’s son.

As a moral matter, Julavits’s vigilance is admirable; she is trying not to prioritize personal love over collective responsibility. As a human one, it puts her in a double bind. On the one hand, to not do everything in her power to prevent her son from harming women would be to abnegate her duty to the future. On the other, obsessing over possible bad outcomes has a way of poisoning the present. In “The Folded Clock,” Julavits’s home life—she and her family spend the school year in New York and the summers in Maine, where she grew up—was a particular source of pleasure, and of

spiritual safety. Now the home seems appallingly permeable to external forces. When her son is eight, Julavits and her husband allow him to have a video-game console, which they keep in the living room for the purpose of parental surveillance. “After plugging in the machine, my husband gives our son a primer about gamer culture, and how boys and men, as an acceptable, and even socially pressured, part of their patter, boisterously disrespect and verbally abuse people,” Julavits writes. “He makes it clear that the virtual world he’s about to enter does not reflect the values of our household, and he should be aware of maintaining that gap. Should he be overheard making misogynistic or homophobic or transphobic or racist or in any other way offensive comments, even if he doesn’t know what they mean, he will be banned from playing for a week.” The inadequacy of this system is evident from the very nature of the rules established to enforce it. They might as well take their son to an amusement park and tell him to stay off the rides.

Julavits’s preoccupation with things that have not yet and, it must be hoped, will never come to pass presents a literary problem, too. The future holds any number of possibilities for the man her son will become. In the present, though, he is still a boy, and a young one at that. Even as Julavits makes him her subject, she is reluctant—wisely—to show us too much of him; as a result, the child we get can seem more a collection of characteristics than a character in his own right. The most distinctive of these is his long hair, which Julavits seems to think will somehow develop his capacity to empathize with the female condition by giving him “a brief chance to experience what some never do”—that is, to be treated by strangers as a girl, though this seems merely to embarrass strangers and to distress him.

Maybe to make up for the particulars that she can’t disclose, Julavits leans heavily on metaphor. The big motif of the book is navigation; Julavits finds much figurative wisdom in an old volume she buys at a Maine yard sale called “A Cruising Guide to the New England Coast.” A steady refrain of harbors, storms, rowing, and guiding stars at first summons a parable-like rhetorical power but comes to erode her book’s finer observations. (“Points of orientation aren’t constant,” she tells her son. “They change over time.”) There’s also a parental tendency to issue pronouncements. “True stories don’t have ‘endings,’ ” Julavits tells her kids. “They have morals.” But morals are the province of fables. Life rarely comes to a single point.

Julavits the mother may not want to believe this. Julavits the writer must know it to be true. “Directions to Myself” is at its best when Julavits, as her title suggests, considers how she might grow alongside her child. What she fears most—the passage of time—is also that fear’s remedy. She dreads the moment when she won’t be able to act as her son’s protector, but she sees a sort of freedom in it, too. Toward the end of the book, as Julavits and her son are rowing along the Maine coast, they pass a rock that she has selected as the site of her eventual funeral. She has already given her kids “very specific directions” for the event. It will take place in early August, at around 6 p.m., when the tide is high “and the wind blowing not at all or from the south, so that the rock will be in the lee”:

First they should go for a swim. Maybe out around the nearest boat and back, because the water temperature won’t be terrible at that time of year, 58 degrees or, depending on what decade it is, considerably more. And then, while wet, and wrapped in towels, they should throw my ashes into the ocean where their bodies were just floating, supported by the chilly brine, and drink a bottle of champagne as the salt water evaporates from their skin, leaving it tight, as though every inch of them is being hugged.

This is sweet, serene, loving, and delightfully macabre. Julavits is regaining her comic equilibrium. When she reminds her son of her plans, he rolls his eyes, which pleases her. “I can’t insist that my children tell laughingly critical stories about me at my funeral, so I must, while alive, behave in a laughable manner to have any shot of getting what I want when I’m dead,” she writes. There’s wisdom in this strategy. We look to the past to guide the future, but the present is where we live. We prepare for the worst and hope for the best. It may all turn out fine in the end. ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Chandi Deitmer

By Elizabeth Kolbert

By Jelani Cobb

Ernst Jünger's Narratives of Complicity

A morally compromised writer can project a strange kind of honesty—especially when his society is compromised to the same degree.

By [Alex Ross](#)



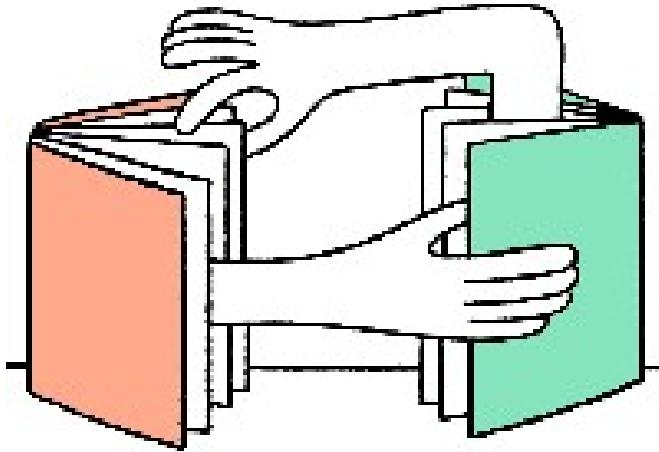
Ernst Jünger, the stylish supervillain of twentieth-century German literature, fit the profile of a war hero, however dubious the title may seem in retrospect. While serving in a Prussian infantry regiment during the First World War, he suffered seven major wounds, the last one almost fatal. At the Second Battle of Bapaume, in August, 1918, he was shot through his right lung and was on the verge of bleeding to death when a medic swaddled him in a tarpaulin. Moments later, the medic was killed by a bullet to the head. Another soldier hoisted Jünger onto his shoulders; that man, too, was shot dead. Finally, the company succeeded in hauling Jünger to a field hospital, where he was given a glass of lemonade and a dose of morphine. The next day, according to Jünger's war memoir "In Storms of Steel," he was "in the hands of the nurses and reading 'Tristram Shandy' from the point where I had been interrupted by the order to attack."

This indestructible youth lived another eighty years, outlasting both the Weimar Republic, which he loudly opposed, and the Nazi regime, which he quietly disdained. Germany was split in two, then reunified; Jünger was still there. By the time he died, in 1998, at the age of a hundred and two, he had found a tenuous, solitary place in the German canon. He published more than a dozen volumes of empirically acute but emotionally distant diaries, starting in 1920 with “In Storms of Steel.” He wrote sci-fi-inflected novels, fashioning allegories of the terror state and spinning out prophecies of future technology. And he produced far-right political tracts that have inspired several generations of fascist rhapsodists, antimodern elegists, and élitist libertarians. (Peter Thiel is a fan.) All of this was filtered through a terse, chiselled literary voice—coolly handsome, like the man himself.

The four-year orgy of violence from which Jünger emerged mysteriously intact grants him unimpeachable authority on the subject of war; when he inserts scenes of stomach-churning gore into his fiction, he is not relying on fantasy. Recent reporting on the desperate mind-set of soldiers in Ukraine gives his diaries a haunting currency. At the same time, his mask of insouciance—he was indeed reading “Tristram Shandy” just before a bullet tore through him—makes him an infuriatingly detached witness to the suffering of others. One notorious passage in his journals evokes an Allied air raid on German-occupied Paris, in May, 1944: “I held in my hand a glass of burgundy in which strawberries were floating. The city, with its red towers and domes, was laid out in stupendous beauty, like a calyx overflowed by deadly pollination.”

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Despite his faintly nauseating aura, or perhaps because of it, Jünger is still finding readers. New York Review Books has brought out a fine new translation, by Tess Lewis, of Jünger's 1939 novel, "On the Marble Cliffs," a parable of ascendant barbarism that contains an oblique protest against Nazism. Telos Press, which is associated with the formerly radical, now rightward-tending journal *Telos*, has issued six other Jünger titles, on topics ranging from pain to drugs. In Germany, Jünger's chief publisher, Klett-Cotta, is releasing scrupulous scholarly editions of his works, which are rigorously debated in the mainstream press, with some critics wondering why anyone of a sane political orientation should still bother with him.

It's a valid question. Jünger's writing gives off an odor of hypermasculine onanism; there are almost no women, and there is almost no sex. Among his more grating qualities is an inability to admit his mistakes: the steely aesthete is also a chameleon, adjusting his positions to the latest political circumstances. But that shiftiness exposes a weaker, more vulnerable figure—and also a more interesting one. His stories generally do not tell of war heroes; rather, they dwell on ambivalent functionaries and complicit observers. We like to think that novelists possess a special ethical strength, yet the morally compromised writer can project a strange kind of honesty—especially when his society is compromised to the same degree.

Like many an archenemy of the bourgeoisie, Jünger came from a thoroughly bourgeois background. He was born in 1895, in the university town of Heidelberg; his father was a rational-minded chemist and pharmacist, his mother an enthusiast of suffragist causes. In school, Jünger proved a rebellious, flailing student. He recalled his formative years in the late-period novel “Die Zwille,” or “The Slingshot,” which has as its lead characters a sensitive-artist type named Clamor and a proto-fascist bully named Teo. Jünger invested himself in both personalities, but Clamor’s bashful, nature-attuned perspective holds sway; the name is derived from one of Jünger’s grandfathers. This author’s greatest passion, aside from war, was collecting insects.

The need to evolve from a Clamor into a Teo impelled a series of self-consciously virile escapades. First, Jünger revelled in the outdoor ramblings of a Wandervogel youth group. Then, at the age of eighteen, he ran away to join the French Foreign Legion, in North Africa. After various mishaps, he was bailed out by his indulgent father, who, as if with an eye to future publicity, sent him a telegram: “Have yourself photographed.” (A picture of Jünger as a baby legionnaire shows him adopting the arrogant half smile of his later years.) There followed a humiliating return to school, in early 1914. War freed him from his youthful messes.

The German scholar Helmuth Kiesel, in his 2007 biography of Jünger, observes that the nineteen-year-old soldier exhibited few signs of gung-ho patriotism. His original war diaries, which Kiesel has edited for Klett-Cotta, give a clinical picture of the chaos of battle and the omnipresence of death. When Jünger arrives at the front, at the beginning of 1915, he takes in the destroyed houses, the wasted fields, the rusted harvesting machines, and writes that they add up to a “sad sight.” Later, he asks, “When will this *Scheisskrieg*”—“shit war”—“have an end?”

Jünger could have gathered these entries into a blistering denunciation of war, preempting Erich Maria Remarque’s “All Quiet on the Western Front.” But he had convinced himself that the *Scheisskrieg* had a higher meaning. As he prepared “In Storms of Steel” for publication, he threw in all manner of sub-Nietzschean soliloquizing and militarist posturing. Senseless brutality was recast as a salutary hardening of the soul. The *Scheisskrieg* remark was cut, and passages like this set the tone: “In these men there lived an element

that underscored the savagery of war while also spiritualizing it: the matter-of-fact joy in danger, the chivalrous urge to fight. Over the course of four years the fire forged an ever purer, ever bolder warriorhood.”

Such dire blather proliferated through the German right after the defeat of 1918. Hitler, a bohemian who had found purpose in war, was one of many ex-soldiers who devoured “In Storms of Steel.” Jünger fed the marketplace of grievance with more diaries and essays: “Battle as Inner Experience,” “Fire and Blood,” and the like. In 1923, in an article for the Nazi newspaper *Völkischer Beobachter*, he urged the overthrow of the Weimar Republic and the institution of a dictatorship. Although he avoided taking part in coup attempts, his rhetoric was sufficiently feral that he could qualify as the “intellectual exponent of Nazi youth,” as the historian Erich Kahler later called him. In 1930, Jünger attended a pro-democratic lecture by Thomas Mann, who had defected from the conservatives, and joined the playwright Arnolt Bronnen and a squad of Brown Shirts in disrupting the proceedings—one of the more repulsive moments in literary history.

Nevertheless, Jünger stopped short of direct involvement with the Hitler movement. In his eyes, the Nazis were idiot vulgarians, useful mainly as cannon fodder in the wider assault on democracy. Antisemitism surfaces in his writings, yet Nazi race theory held no interest for him. As Kiesel points out, Jünger rejected the stab-in-the-back legend that blamed Germany’s collapse in 1918 on the skullduggery of leftist, Jewish politicians; he readily admitted that his country had lost to superior forces. You could classify him as a cosmopolitan fascist, one who saw war as essential to the development of any national culture. All the bloodshed served no real political purpose; its ultimate virtue lay in making men into supermen. During the First World War, Jünger had enjoyed occasional courtly chats with English officers, whom he considered equals.

In the mid-twenties, intermediaries sought to arrange a meeting between Jünger and Hitler. Autographed books were exchanged, but no personal encounter took place, apparently for scheduling reasons. Jünger proceeded to browse among extremist alternatives, taking particular interest in Ernst Niekisch’s National Bolshevism. In the essay “Total Mobilization” (1930) and in the treatise “The Worker” (1932), Jünger envisions a fully mechanized totalitarian state in which workers serve as soldierly machines.

Spurning the bourgeois ideal of individual liberty, he proposes that “freedom and obedience are identical.” The concept aligns with the anti-liberal thought of Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger, both of whom were devoted Jünger readers.

Impeccably fascistic as all this was, the Nazis could not accept any hint of Bolshevism. Furthermore, Jünger had begun ridiculing the Party for its hypocritical participation in the democratic process and for its reliance on gutter antisemitism. Goebbels, who had praised “In Storms of Steel” as the “gospel of war,” now labelled Jünger’s writing “literature”—in his mind, a grave insult. When the Nazis came to power, in 1933, Jünger backed away from public life, refused all official invitations, and buried himself in, yes, literature. In the late twenties, he had published a volume of short prose pieces, titled “The Adventurous Heart,” in which bellicosity still prevailed. In 1938, he issued a drastically revised version of that book, now offering a curious mixture of nature sketches, literary meditations, and dream narratives.

Jünger was a lifelong Francophile, and the revised “Adventurous Heart” is drenched in the decadent visions of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Huysmans, and Mirbeau. A section titled “Violet Endives” embodies the aesthetic:

I entered a sumptuous gourmet shop, my eye having been caught by a quite remarkable sort of violet endive in the window. I wasn’t surprised when the salesman explained to me that the only kind of meat this dish could possibly accompany was human flesh—I had already darkly suspected as much.

There ensued a long conversation about the art of preparation, after which we descended into the cold-storage rooms, where I saw people hanging on the wall, like rabbits in front of a wild-game meat market. The salesman made a special point of emphasizing that the specimens I was looking at were exclusively captured on the hunt, not fattened in rows at the breeding establishments: “Leaner, but—I’m not just saying this for the sake of publicity—juicier.” Hands, feet, and heads were set out on special platters, with little price tags attached.

As we went back up the stairs, I remarked, “I did not know that civilization had already progressed so far in this city”—at which the salesman appeared to stop short for a moment, before taking leave of me with a very cordial smile.

Such exquisite grisliness may seem like an extreme swerve from the bravado of “In Storms of Steel,” yet Jünger had chronicled the carnage of battle in the same crisp, fastidious fashion. For many readers, his primary appeal lay in the sleekness of his prose, which, if not quite Hemingwayesque, largely banished the ornate sentence structures of classical German.

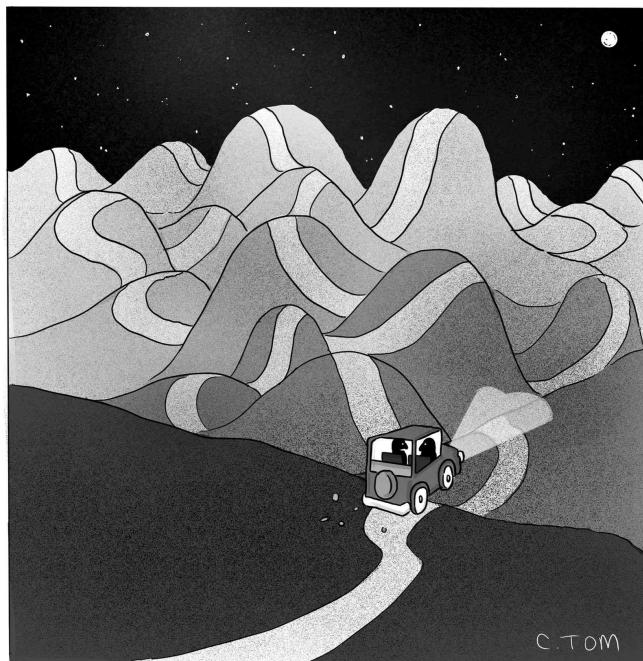
“Violet Endives” is manifestly ironic—but toward what end? It depicts a society that accepts ghastly events without comment, or with only the twitch of an eyebrow. The narrator himself makes no protest, even if he conveys to us his private unease. His closing remark carries a tinge of arch critique, yet the salesman is free to ignore it. We see the emergence of the mature Jüngerian hero: outwardly bemused, inwardly fearful, terminally uninvolved. This macabre little tale captures in miniature the strategies of rationalization and normalization that make up the banality of evil. As it happens, Hannah Arendt read Jünger closely, and credited him with helping to inspire her most celebrated concept.

With his next book, “On the Marble Cliffs,” Jünger attempted something riskier: a dark fable with unmistakable modern overtones. The titular walls of rock, partly suggested by the topography of Rio de Janeiro, rise above the Marina, an ancient, decadent coastal city. The novel’s narrator, a botanist, lives there in a hermitage, working with his brother to catalogue the flora of the region. (Jünger’s own brother, Friedrich Georg, was a poet of minor fame; in the late thirties, the two lived together in seclusion on Lake Constance.) The brothers once belonged to a mercenary order called the Mauretanians, who control the plains and woods beyond the Marble Cliffs. Their chief, known as the Head Forester, has decided to seize the Marina.

The Head Forester is a raw, domineering strongman—less a Hitler than a Göring or a Mussolini. Still, his methods for seeding chaos in the Marina follow Hitler’s playbook:

He spread fear in small doses, which he then gradually increased, with the aim of paralyzing resistance. The role he played in this turmoil, planned in minute detail in his forests, was that of a force of order, for while his lower agents, members of the herders' clans, extended the reach of anarchy, his adepts infiltrated the ministries and courts, even the monasteries, and were seen there as powerful figures who would bring the rabble to heel. In this the Head Forester was like an evil doctor who inflicts an ailment in order to subject the patient to his intended surgery.

On an orchid-hunting expedition into the Head Forester's territory, the brothers stumble upon Köppels-Bleek, a place of organized slaughter. Adorning a barn is a skull, which "bared its teeth in the ashen light and seemed to invite entry with its grin. Like a jewel on a necklace, the skull was the culmination of a narrow gable frieze that appeared to be made of brown spiders. But we immediately realized these were human hands fastened to the wall." Inside, a man is stretching skin on a flaying bench, and the stench of death is overwhelming. It's a shiver-inducing passage, evocative of Nazi atrocities. At the same time, as Elliott Neaman notes in his 1999 study, "A Dubious Past: Ernst Jünger and the Politics of Literature After Nazism," the sequence has the "trivial trappings of a second-rate horror movie."



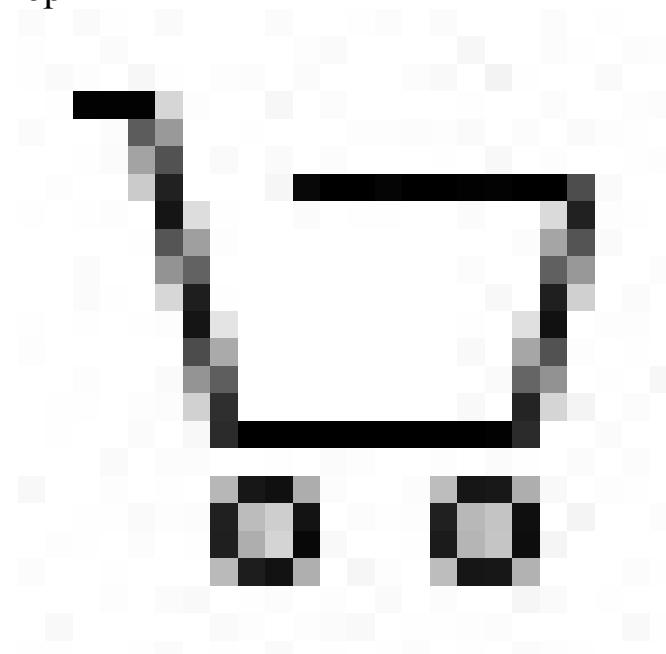
"Living on the fringes of society is great until you need a midnight snack."
Cartoon by Colin Tom

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One scene, though, rises to the level of the uncanny. The narrator is at home, studying a rare Japanese lily, when a car pulls up, “humming softly like the almost imperceptible whirring of an insect.” It’s an unnerving apparition,

since twentieth-century technology has largely been absent from the book. The two men who emerge—a gruff, disgruntled Mauretanian named Braquemart and a noble-minded young prince named Sunmyra—are organizing a plot against the Head Forester. The narrator observes of Sunmyra: “It was astonishing that this languid dreamer felt called to offer protection to others.” When the uprising fails, the Forester has the rebels executed and their heads mounted on spikes. The serene smile on Sunmyra’s face leads the narrator to an epiphany: “I swore before this head that for all future I would cast my lot with the solitary and free rather than with the triumphant and servile.” As the Marina burns, he takes refuge among a free mountain people, carrying Sunmyra’s head with him.

The episode is based on an actual event. In 1938, Heinrich von Trott zu Solz, a young member of the anti-Nazi resistance, drove up to the house where Jünger and his brother were living, accompanied by two former members of the Communist Party, one of whom appears to have inspired the character of Sunmyra. The idea was to recruit Jünger, but he proved unwilling. Five years after “On the Marble Cliffs” was published, on July 20, 1944, Count Claus von Stauffenberg, acting in league with Trott zu Solz’s brother Adam, attempted to assassinate Hitler. Both conspirators were executed. Jünger, like the narrator of his novel, realized that the plotters had nonetheless achieved something of symbolic value: their sacrifices had “prevented the nation as a whole, as a block, from falling into the terrible depths of fate.”

“On the Marble Cliffs” appeared in bookstores shortly after Germany invaded Poland. Critics abroad expressed astonishment that Nazi censors had permitted such a book to see the light of day. *Partisan Review* interpreted the novel as a “bitter satire on Nazism in thinly veiled allegorical terms.” Even Thomas Mann was impressed, despite his understandable aversion to Jünger. Inside the Third Reich, however, no one seemed especially concerned. Perhaps the allegory was overlooked; perhaps it was deemed harmless. Goebbels, whom some readers saw encoded in the name Köppels-Bleek, no longer mentioned Jünger in his diary.

When the Second World War began, Jünger did not exactly disavow the company of the “triumphant and servile.” Resuming military service at the rank of captain, he went to Paris and joined the staff of Otto von Stülpnagel, the general in command of Occupied France. One of Jünger’s duties was to

censor mail, although he proved ineffectual at the task, quietly disposing of letters that contained negative remarks about the regime. He also monitored local artists and intellectuals. Picasso inquired about the “real landscape” of “On the Marble Cliffs.” Cocteau, who called Jünger a “silver fox,” gave him a book about opium. Louis-Ferdinand Céline wanted to know why Germans weren’t killing more Jews. Jünger spent his off hours visiting museums, browsing bookstalls, and romancing a Jewish pediatrician named Sophie Ravoux. His wife, Gretha, was back in Germany with their two sons.

Jünger’s Second World War journals were published in 1949, under the peculiar title “Strahlungen,” or “Emanations.” (Thomas and Abby Hansen have translated them into English as “A German Officer in Occupied Paris,” for Columbia University Press.) These diaries are the most stupefying documents in a stupefying œuvre. The episode in which Jünger watches a bombing raid while sipping burgundy has been so widely cited that German critics have given it a name: *die Burgunderszene*. No less dumbfounding is a passage that recounts, in obscene detail, the execution of a Wehrmacht deserter. Jünger was assigned to lead the proceedings, and, he tells us, he thought of calling in sick. He then rationalizes his participation as a way of insuring that the deed is done humanely. Finally, he admits to feeling morbid curiosity: “I have seen many people die, but never at a predetermined moment.”

A new three-volume edition of “Emanations,” which Kiesel and Joana van de Löcht have edited for Klett-Cotta, is printed in multiple colors, to show how Jünger changed the text at various stages. In the execution scene, the emendations almost seem designed to make an already dismaying narrative intolerable. The calling-in-sick remark is inserted when he copies out the original entry; the confession about curiosity is added before publication. The text is larded with metaphor, which keeps reducing human beings to natural phenomena. When the deserter’s face goes white, it is “as if a bucket full of limewater had been emptied over it.” In the case of the *Burgunderszene*, Jünger can’t help tacking on one more smug aphorism: “The whole thing was theater, pure power affirmed and magnified by suffering.” Although Jünger never wore a monocle, he had in him a streak of Erich von Stroheim—the man you love to hate.

“Emanations” is not all heartless stylization. The book records Jünger’s dawning realization that a new kind of evil had permeated Nazi Germany. (He refers to Hitler by the code word Kniébolo—apparently, a play on “Diabolo.”) When he sees a Jew wearing a yellow star, he is “embarrassed to be in uniform.” When he hears of deportations of Jews, he writes, “Never for a moment may I forget that I am surrounded by unfortunate people who endure the greatest suffering.” And, when precise reports of mass killings in the East reach him, he is “overcome by a loathing for the uniforms, the epaulettes, the medals, the weapons, all the glamour I have loved so much.” Even if none of this is remotely adequate to the reality of the Holocaust—stop everything, Ernst Jünger is embarrassed!—it does show traces of remorse. The émigré writer Joseph Breitbach reported that Jünger had warned Jews of imminent deportations.

Jünger’s façade of disinterest eventually collapsed. In early 1944, his older son, Ernstel, was arrested for saying that Hitler should be hanged. Jünger pulled strings to have him released. Later that year, Ernstel turned eighteen and joined the Army. He died in action in November, 1944, in Italy. For years, Jünger was haunted by the thought that the S.S. had punished him by having his son killed. (There is no evidence that this was so, but the idea was not irrational.) The entries that follow Ernstel’s death are wrenching, although anyone waiting for a grand moral epiphany will be disappointed. It takes a certain kind of grieving father to write, “We stand like cliffs in the silent surf of eternity.”

The second half of Jünger’s immense life was calmer than the first. In West Germany, the ultra-militarist reinvented himself as an almost respectable, and avowedly apolitical, figure. From 1950 on, he lived in Wilflingen, in southern Germany, occupying houses that were lent to him by a distant cousin of Claus von Stauffenberg’s. He kept up his entomological pursuits, building a museum-worthy library of specimens. He dabbled in astrology, explored the occult, and took LSD under the tutelage of Albert Hofmann, who discovered the drug. Telos Press recently published Thomas Friese’s translation of “Approaches,” Jünger’s 1970 drug memoir. His stories of getting high are just as tedious as everyone else’s, but they include unexpected touches, such as quotations from “Soul on Ice,” the autobiography of Eldridge Cleaver.

For many critics, this elder-hipster pose made Jünger all the more dangerous. Although he had retreated from his high-fascist phase, he had not renounced it, and his skepticism toward democracy never wavered. When, in 1982, he received the Goethe Prize, one of Germany's highest literary honors, left-wing politicians staged furious protests. Helmut Kohl, a Jünger admirer, had just become chancellor, and the veneration of a martial icon was seen as a sign of political regression. Indeed, a stealthily resurgent far-right faction hailed Jünger as a forebear—attention that he did not always welcome. Armin Mohler, a founder of the so-called New Right, served for several years as Jünger's secretary, but when Mohler criticized his mentor for concealing his archconservative roots Jünger broke off contact for many years.

There is no such thing as an apolitical artist, Thomas Mann once said. The postwar Jünger adhered to a philosophy of radical individualism, which ostensibly bars ideological commitments. In his novel "Eumeswil" (1977), he theorizes a figure called the Anarch, who rejects the state yet also takes no action against it. The book's narrator, a crafty fixer in service to a tyrant, articulates the ethos: "I am in need of authority, even if I am not a believer in authority." This is a feeble form of opposition, bordering on the nonexistent, and it is pitted against a generalized conception of the state that elides the huge systemic differences between, say, a republic and a dictatorship. Social-democratic programs are equated with totalitarian control. You can understand Jünger's appeal to the modern right when you read him complaining, in the 1951 treatise "The Forest Passage," about liberal health policy: "Is there any real gain in the world of insurance, vaccinations, scrupulous hygiene, and a high average age?" Somehow, Jünger's fiction avoids being trapped by the poverty of his political thinking. So profound is this writer's detachment that he manages to remain aloof from his own beliefs.

Most of Jünger's novels take the form of popular genres: fantasy, science fiction, even a Belle Époque whodunit ("A Dangerous Encounter," from 1985). The typical protagonist is a wayward cog in a fraught system. In the 1949 sci-fi epic "Heliopolis," aristocrats confront another Hitlerian demagogue, this one persecuting a group of outsiders called the Parsen. The plotting is haphazard, but Jünger excels at imagining future gadgetry. The Heliopolis world, which is further developed in "Eumeswil," includes a

surveillance office that runs statistical analyses against a vast library of data; a holographic archive called the Luminar, which replays scenes from all of history; and handheld devices known as phonophores, which can be used for phone calls, financial transactions, voting, and the like. When Lucius, the hero of “Heliopolis,” demonstrates the phonophore to his Parson girlfriend, Budur Peri, she sagely replies, “It must be some lower spirit that has invented this machine for the destruction of solitude.”

The most formidable of Jünger’s later novels is “The Glass Bees” (1957), which is also available from New York Review Books, in a translation by Elizabeth Mayer and Louise Bogan. Captain Richard, a downtrodden soldier in search of employment, goes for an interview with a corporate visionary named Zapparoni, who has built a multimedia empire from the manufacture of automatons. Some of his creations resemble small animals and can perform everything from household chores to military operations. Others, human in appearance, are cast in movies and in productions of Shakespeare. Zapparoni’s headquarters are embedded in a natural wonderland from which all vestiges of industry have been removed. In this magic kingdom, you lose the “capacity of distinguishing between the natural and the artificial.” Walt Disney may have been the original model, but these days Zapparoni’s affectless will to power brings to mind the overlords of Big Tech.

After Richard has his initial interview, he ambles around the Zapparoni campus and lingers at a meadow populated by mechanical bees. In a sequence comparable to the Köppels-Bleek scene in “On the Marble Cliffs,” he makes a hideous discovery: strewn through the rushes are dozens of severed ears. A charnel house lies at the heart of the late-capitalist phantasmagoria. One expects the old soldier to strike out at Zapparoni, as Lucius does in “Heliopolis,” or at least to steal away with evidence of the crime, like the narrator of “On the Marble Cliffs.” But Richard begins to rationalize: Are these robot ears? Is it a test? Zapparoni, when he reappears, answers yes to both questions, sincerely or not. Richard is offered a job, and he accepts. His money problems solved, he buys his wife a summer dress.

This pitch-black ending shows that Jünger offers more to the modern reader than perverse echoes of German history. “The Glass Bees” captures with uncommon precision the psychology of acquiescence and abjection on which the sickening miracles of technology depend. The Venus flytraps of

social media are a case in point; so is the heedless embrace of artificial intelligence. Richard spells out the moral: “Human perfection and technical perfection are incompatible. If we strive for one, we must sacrifice the other.” In the end, the technical almost inevitably wins out over the human.

Underneath the carapace of Jünger’s writing was an obscurely damaged man. Even before he entered into the torture chamber of the First World War, he had undergone a kind of psychic dissociation, perhaps related to bullying he had suffered as a boy. He wrote of his childhood, “I had invented a mode of indifference that connected me, like a spider, to reality only by an invisible thread.” According to the literary scholar Andreas Huyssen, Jünger was always trying to compensate for the fragility of his own body—to “equip it with an impenetrable armor protecting it against the memory of the traumatic experience of the trenches.”

The Second World War inflicted a different wound, one that cut deeper. The leaders of the plot against Hitler were nationalist conservatives, often fanatically so. The author of “In Storms of Steel” was a hero to them. Jünger’s inability to support their cause, and thereby live up to his own legend, troubled him for the remainder of his life. In “Heliopolis,” Lucius leads a commando raid against a murderous medical institute that recalls Josef Mengele’s laboratory at Auschwitz. The scene reads like a fantasy of what Jünger might have done if he had joined Stauffenberg, Trott zu Solz, and company. Lucius presses a button and the facility goes up in flames: “Dr. Mertens’s highbrow flaying-hut had exploded into atoms and dissolved like a bad dream.”

In “The Glass Bees,” that self-serving fantasy is revoked. As a soldier, Captain Richard witnessed Nazi-like abominations, including a human butcher shop—a nod to the gourmet cannibalism of “Violent Endives.” Yet, when Zapparoni lures him back into the zone of horror, he capitulates. Not only does he need authority; he makes himself believe in it. Zapparoni, he claims, “had captivated the children: they dreamed of him. Behind the fireworks of propaganda, the eulogies of paid scribes, something else existed. Even as a charlatan he was great.”

Jünger described Hitler in similar terms, as a “dreamcatcher,” a malign magician. What might have happened if the two men had come face to face?

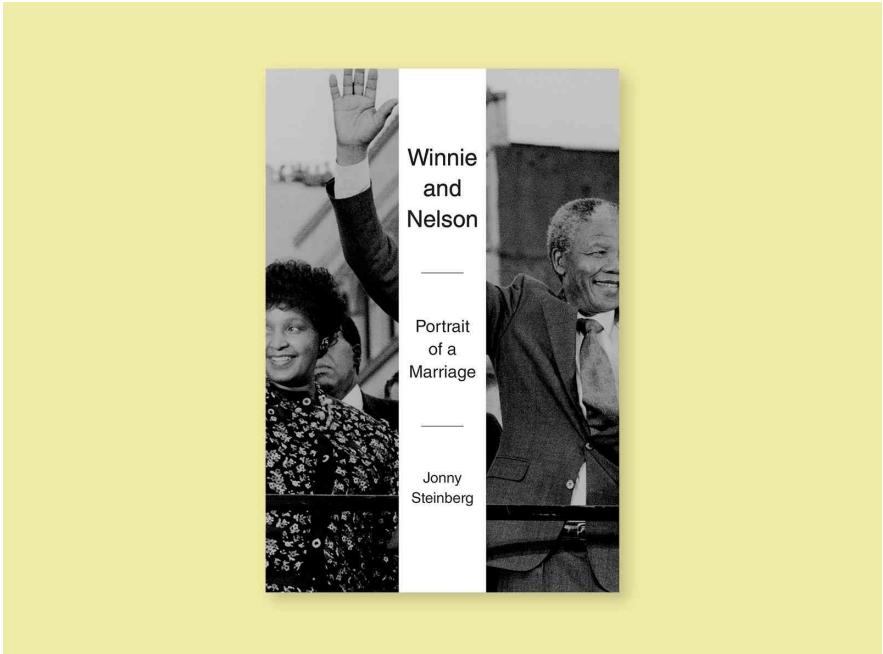
In a 1946 diary entry, Jünger assures himself that a meeting with Hitler “would presumably have had no particular result.” But he has second thoughts: “Surely it would have brought misfortune.” The ending of “The Glass Bees” may be an imagining of that disaster. As such, it would be Jünger’s most honest confession of failure. When the great test of his life arrived, the warrior-aesthete proved gutless. ♦

By Nathan Heller

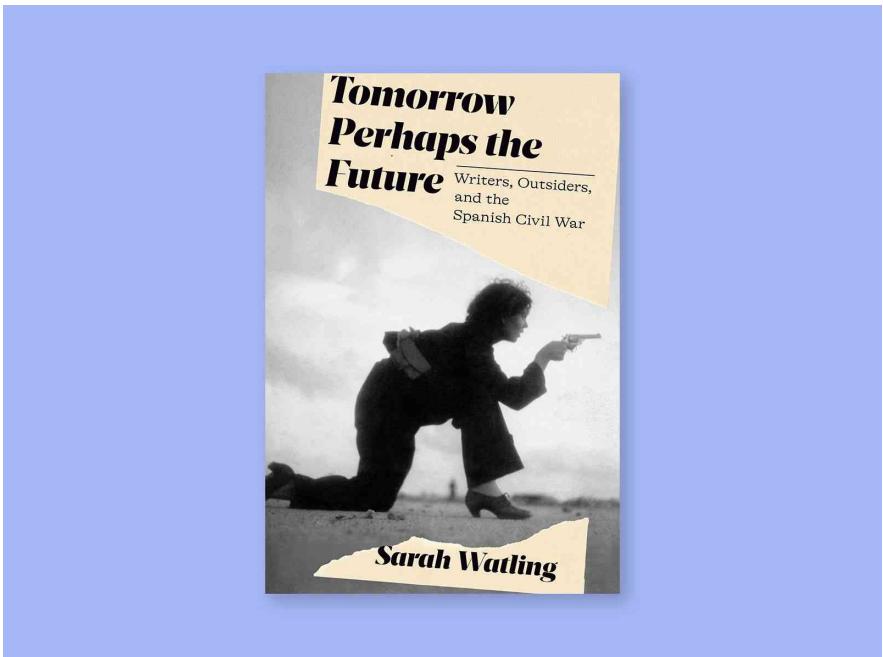
By James Lasdun

By Ann Patchett

By Rachel Aviv



[Winnie and Nelson](#), by *Jonny Steinberg* (*Knopf*). Eschewing hagiography, this portrait of the Mandelas' marriage does justice both to the couple's political heroism and to the betrayals and the secrets that hounded their union. Nelson emerges as the quieter force, with Winnie essential to his consecration. She could be shockingly cruel, "a monument to the revolution's underbelly" who would settle personal scores by leveraging "the contagion of violence that besets unstable times," most notoriously through her "football club," an assembly of brutal bodyguards. Still, she was a world-class messenger, crucial in bringing Black South Africa's plight to the international stage. The Mandelas, Steinberg writes, were "throwing themselves into the maelstrom of history, and nobody in a maelstrom is in control of their journey."

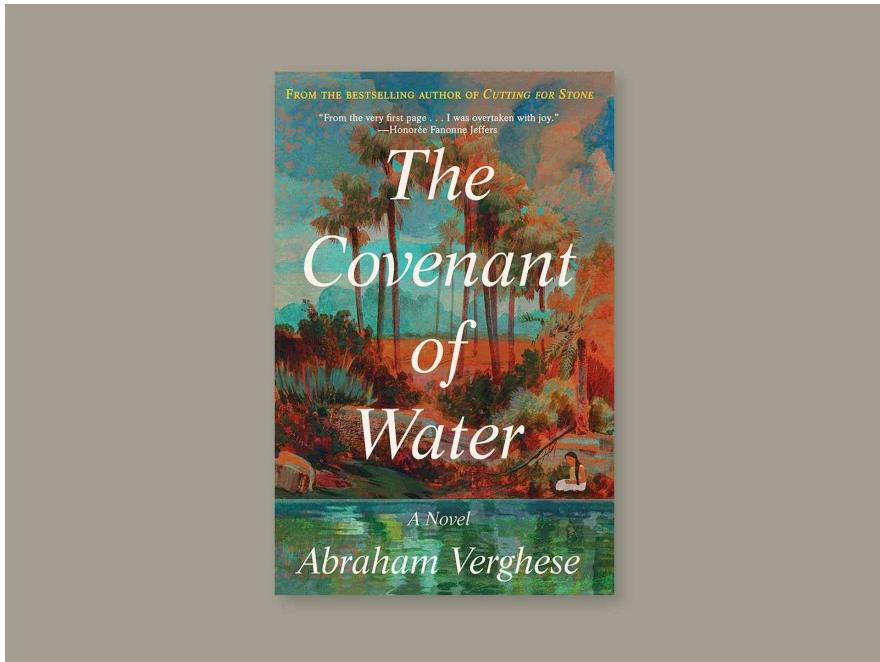


[**Tomorrow Perhaps the Future**](#), by *Sarah Watling* (*Knopf*). This group portrait examines those people—including Jessica Mitford, Langston Hughes, Sylvia Townsend Warner, Nancy Cunard, Martha Gellhorn, the war photographer Gerda Taro, and the nurse Salaria Kea—whose commitment to anti-Fascism was galvanized by the Spanish Civil War. Watling deploys a wealth of firsthand testimony and archival materials, not in service of a conventional work of history but in an extended consideration of contemporary concerns: What is the line between solidarity and appropriation in joining the struggles of others? How should writers navigate between objectivity and engagement? “The people in this book were imperfect in their commitment,” she writes. Yet they were prepared to “pick a side anyway.”

[**The Best Books of 2023**](#)

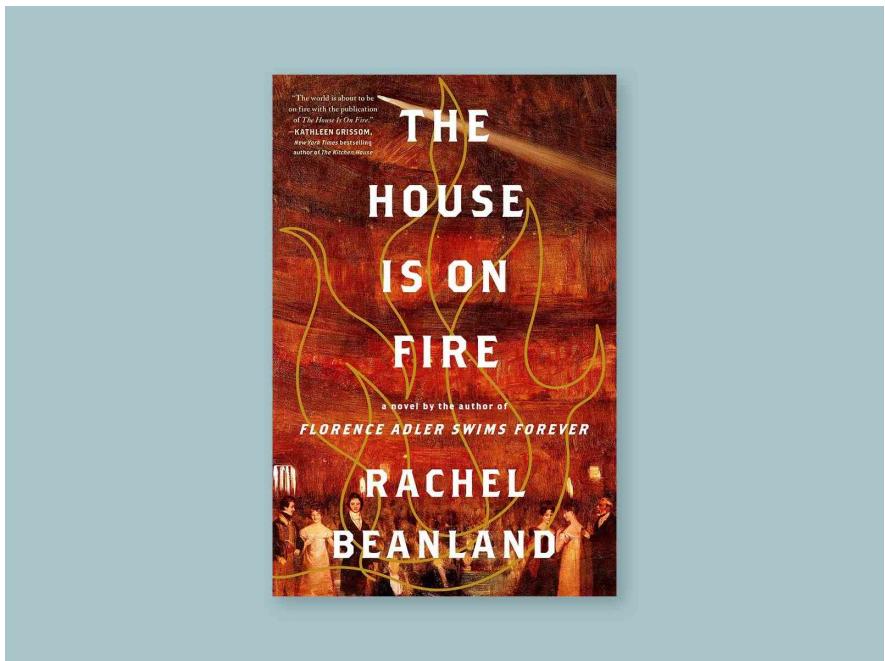


Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



The Covenant of Water, by *Abraham Verghese* (Grove). This novel begins in 1900 in southern India, with the arranged marriage of a twelve-year-old girl to a forty-year-old widowed farmer. Big Ammachi, as she comes to be called, has married into a family with a curse: once every generation, a

member drowns. Life unspools across seven decades, during which time Big Ammachi's loved ones suffer maladies that are treated by practitioners of both traditional and Western medicine. The novel is a searching consideration of the extent to which seemingly contrary approaches to healing can coalesce; for a Swedish doctor who has founded a leprosarium, "medicine is his true priesthood, a ministry of healing the body and the soul of his flock."



The House Is on Fire, by *Rachel Beanland* (*Simon & Schuster*). The Richmond Theatre fire of 1811 was, at the time, the deadliest disaster in U.S. history, killing seventy-two. This historical novel examines the event and its aftermath through four figures: the stagehand who accidentally starts the fire; a well-to-do widow in a box seat; an enslaved young woman, attending with her mistress but confined to the colored gallery; and a blacksmith, also enslaved, who rushes to the scene and rescues patrons jumping from windows. The bad behavior of the powerful becomes a theme: the theatre company attempts to pin blame on a fabricated slave revolt, and men in the audience trample their wives in making their escape.

By Nathan Heller

By James Lasdun

By Ann Patchett

By Rachel Aviv

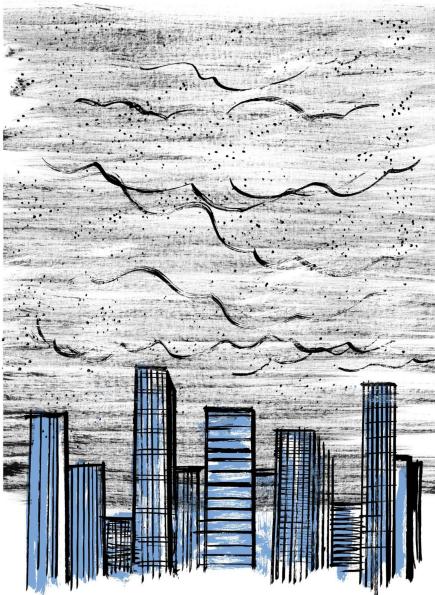
Comment

- [The Hazy Days of Summer](#)

The Hazy Days of Summer

An awareness that the air around you isn't fit to breathe can be a uniquely alarming sensation. It is also likely to become more common.

By [Dhruv Khullar](#)



The masks came out again this month—only, contrary to the *COVID* years, New Yorkers donned them outdoors and slid them off when they stepped inside. As smoke from hundreds of Canadian wildfires drifted across the northern U.S. border, engulfing much of the eastern seaboard in an orange miasma, it sent New York's air quality to the worst levels on record, and, at one point, the worst in the world. Planes were grounded, outdoor activities were cancelled, and patients with asthma and other respiratory conditions filled emergency rooms. Senator Chuck Schumer called on the Biden Administration to send more American firefighters up North to stave off a “summer of smoke.”

There is nothing more fundamental to life than respiration, and an awareness that the air around you isn't fit to breathe can be a uniquely alarming sensation. It is also likely to become more common. Summer is only beginning, but Canada's fire season is already one of the worst in its history. Fifteen times as much Canadian land has burned relative to this time last

year—eleven million acres, an area twice the size of New Jersey—and firefighters in Quebec’s boreal forests have called the fires “unstoppable.” Days after smoke enveloped New York, an acrid haze descended on the Upper Midwest, pushing air quality in the Twin Cities to “very unhealthy” levels and obscuring the Chicago skyline. These scenes already occur with growing regularity in the western United States, where in some states wildfires in recent years have reversed about half of the air-quality gains that resulted from the Clean Air Act. In that region, smoke now accounts for as much pollution as fossil fuels do, if not more, and across the country the number of Americans who experience at least one day of “extreme smoke” a year has increased twenty-seven-fold since 2006.

When it comes to our health, wildfire smoke may be the most injurious form of air pollution; according to one study, it can be ten times as toxic as other forms of pollution, including car exhaust. Wildfires release enormous amounts of fine particulate matter known as PM2.5—toxins up to 2.5 microns in size, or roughly one-twentieth the diameter of a human hair. These particles travel long distances and are readily inhaled into the lungs; from there, they can slip into the bloodstream, lodge in organs, and even enter the brain. Their effects may be especially damaging to children, whose bodies are rapidly developing and whose immune defenses haven’t fully matured.

There’s still much to learn about the hazards of wildfire smoke, but research on air pollution more generally paints a morbid picture. When the air quality is poor, studies have shown that crime goes up, test scores go down, umpires make more bad calls, and investors make more mistakes. Exposure to air pollution has been linked to asthma and emphysema; Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s; cancer and strokes; depression and suicide; miscarriages, premature births, and infant mortality. Each year, air pollution contributes to as many as ten million deaths around the world. Given the scale of damage, the status quo represents a profound failure of mobilization and a striking feat of normalization.

This may not be surprising, considering that air pollution is, by and large, a slow and invisible killer, and many corporations profit from the continued burning of fossil fuels. Yet it’s possible to imagine that the salience of smog—obscuring our vision and offending our nasal passages—could catalyze a

response, in much the way that the acid rain of the nineteen-eighties motivated major improvements to the Clean Air Act. (According to a 2020 report, the original legislation still produces 3.8 trillion dollars in economic benefits, and saves nearly four hundred thousand American lives each year.) In most of the world, renewable energy is now cheaper than polluting sources, meaning that even developing countries need not rely on dirty energy to grow their economies. “It would be worth freeing ourselves from fossil fuels even if global warming didn’t exist,” the climate writer David Roberts notes. “The air quality benefits alone are enough to pay for the energy transition.” And slowing climate change may also be the most effective mitigant of wildfires, which thrive in hotter, drier conditions.

What about today? There are still hundreds of wildfires burning in Canada—many of which are considered to be out of control—and nearly a dozen countries have dispatched firefighters there. To protect our health, admonitions to stay inside won’t be enough. For one thing, not everyone can; for another, the air quality indoors is often little better than it is outside. Even in wealthy neighborhoods where there is newer construction, indoor air quality deteriorates considerably during fire season, especially in the absence of high-quality air-filtration systems. But air purifiers appear to work—sometimes strikingly well. After a gas-leak scare near Los Angeles, the city school district installed air filters in classrooms, and students’ math and English scores shot up, the magnitude roughly on a par with cutting class sizes by a third. Meanwhile, for those venturing outside, N95 masks, if worn properly, seem to offer meaningful protection; in one laboratory study, they reduced exposure to wildfire smoke by a factor of sixteen. Some models suggest that widespread use of N95s could have averted thirty per cent of hospital visits attributable to smoke during a recent fire season in Washington State.

Many of Canada’s wildfires were ignited by lightning. But, in the United States, some eighty per cent are thought to be caused not by an act of God but by the recklessness of humans. In an essay in the *Times*, Clare Frank, a former chief of fire protection in California, cites pyrotechnics at a gender-reveal party, the smoking out of wasp nests, and campers who decided to burn their excrement as precipitants of recent wildfires. At least some fires, Frank says, could be prevented with greater public awareness and harsher penalties. At the same time, ecologists are reevaluating forest-management

techniques. Traditionally, authorities have aimed to suppress wildfires completely—an approach that allows for the accumulation of unnatural quantities of vegetation. It now seems more sensible to tolerate small fires in order to reduce the chance of catastrophic ones.

Good health has, in some sense, always been a fight with nature. For much of history, that battle has been waged against microbes, mutations, and the ravages of old age. Increasingly, however, we find ourselves contending with the planet itself—a consequence of the damage that we've inflicted upon it. For many of us, the danger has long seemed remote, theoretical, abstract. Now simply breathing makes it hard to ignore. ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Chandi Deitmer

By Elizabeth Kolbert

By Jelani Cobb

Crossword

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, June 21, 2023](#)

By [Paolo Pasco](#)

By Natan Last

By Brooke Husic

By The New Yorker

Dept. of Song

- [Joanna Sternberg Is a Music Ninja](#)

Joanna Sternberg Is a Music Ninja

Growing up in Manhattan Plaza, an artists' housing complex, the singer-songwriter sat in with the Marsalis brothers and almost had Alicia Keys as a babysitter.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)



Joanna Sternberg, the musician and songwriter, grew up in Manhattan Plaza, a pair of apartment towers west of Times Square that are reserved mostly for performing artists. Sternberg, now thirty-one, and Sternberg's parents lived, and still live together, in a two-bedroom on the fortieth floor.

Music was everywhere, in the building and in the blood. Two prominent jazz bassists lived down the hall, and Sternberg studied with both of them, while getting piano lessons, on twenty-six, from Margaret Pine, who taught Alicia Keys. ("She *almost* babysat me," Sternberg said of Keys, who had given her number to Sternberg's father, Michael, a musician himself.) Then, there were the forebears. Michael's father, Harold, was a longtime basso with the Metropolitan Opera, who'd urged Joanna, sitting on his lap, to sing stanzas back to him. Grandma was Fraydele Oysher, the pioneering female cantor and star of Yiddish theatre, who often performed in the guise of a boy.

“Her parts were gender fluid,” Michael said recently. “She went by one name. Like Cher, or Madonna. *Fraydele*.”

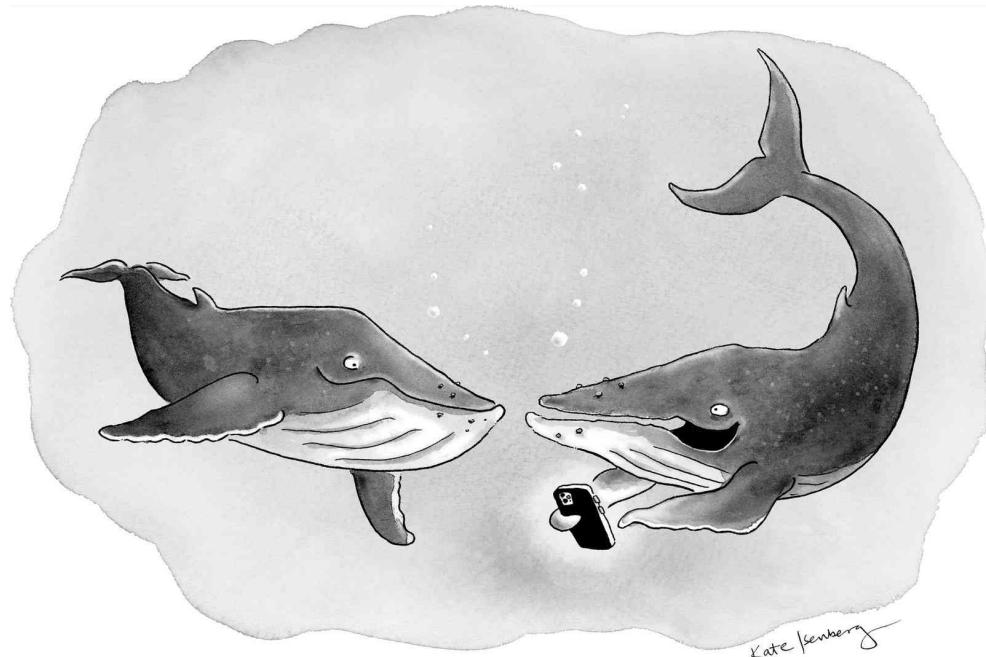
Sternberg’s mother, Jackie, wondered if Fraydele might have been the inspiration for “*Yentl*. ”

“She was sassy and mean, but *funny*, ” Sternberg remembered.

More antecedents: Fraydele’s brother Moishe Oysher, the famous cantor and Yiddish-theatre actor; Michael’s sister, Marilyn Michaels, the singer, comic, and impressionist. (“If you’re gay, you know who she is,” Sternberg said.) Not to mention encounters with fellow Plaza tenants and visitors through the years: Tennessee Williams, at the market by the orange juice, in a full-length ermine, or Richard Burton, down in the health club, reclining on a chaise longue. A teen-age Joanna sitting in on bass with the Marsalises, in the East Wing of the White House.

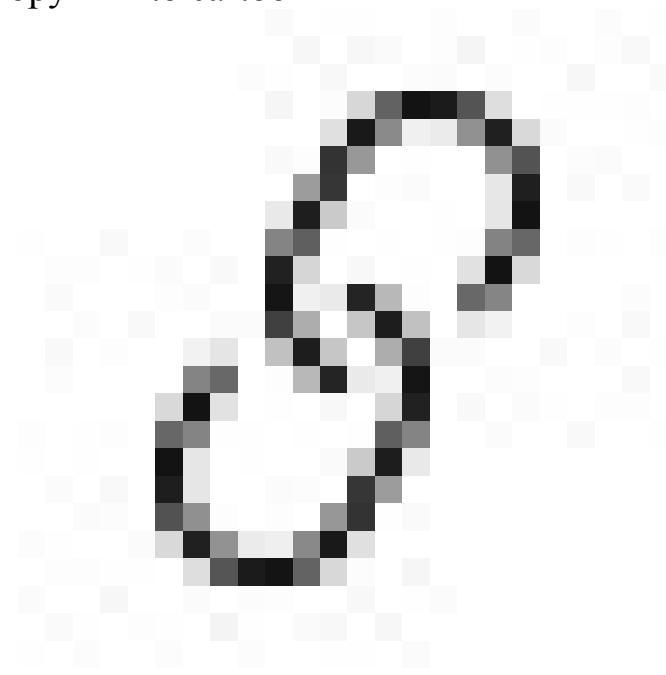
“They let me play for like five seconds, but we got a picture,” Sternberg said. “I was the only girl, obviously.”

“As far as your parents are concerned, you played at the White House,” Michael said.



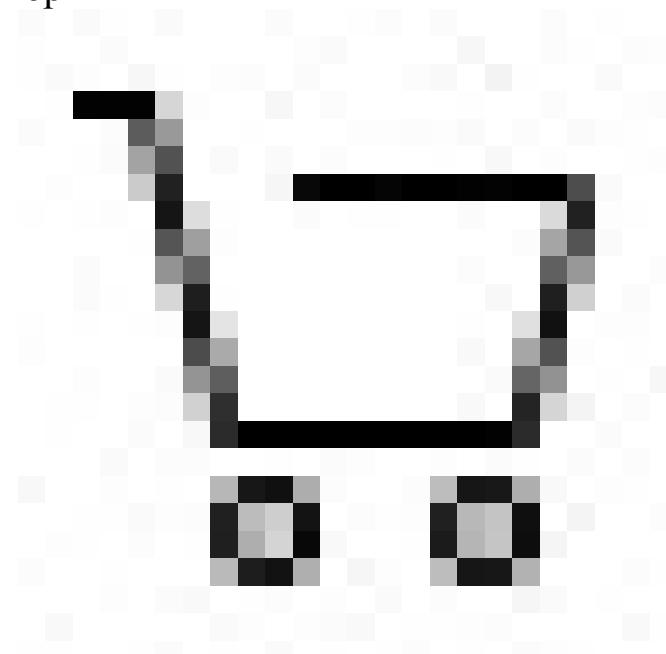
“I used to drift around moaning all the time, too. Now I just D.M.”
Cartoon by Kate Isenberg

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And yet somehow, as one sat with the Sternbergs in their living room, one perceived the mighty names not so much being dropped as hovering in the air—as friendly ghosts appreciating that Joanna, the sweet, eccentric prodigy

on forty, had found a style and a voice of their own. (This is assuming that these ghosts had heard Sternberg's new album, "I've Got Me," out this week on Fat Possum Records.)

"I sound like a Muppet," Joanna said.

"No," Jackie said. She named a favorite song. "I have to brace myself when I hear it. The only other singer who does this to me is Frank Sinatra, and I don't know him."

Joanna gasped, then cackled. "Yes! All these compliments. I won't need therapy anymore!"

Joanna—upbeat, considerate, nervous, humble, mirthful—wore a rust-colored T-shirt, tucked into jean shorts. Blundstones, bangs, tattooed forearms, skin itchy in the heat: "There's a summer camp in the building. I went every summer until I was thirteen. I didn't have friends from school, but I did have friends in the building, even if some of them wound up ditching me."

"Aww," Jackie said.

"I did not know then that I had autism. But I have autism and A.D.H.D."

As to which years of school were the worst, Joanna said, "Middle school, high school, college—all of it."

Switching from studying classical music to jazz, at the New School, gave Sternberg a way forward: "Classical was too scary. You have to be a ninja, basically." Sternberg was soon lugging a double-bass on the subway to jazz gigs around town: "Then I spent a year in my room drawing comics and listening to music." And then composing music that was more direct, more personal, than any they'd been playing.

Sternberg had warned a visitor about that room: "I'm a hoarder. It might smell." But it wasn't too bad. The bed was cluttered with clothes, drawings, cartoons, colored pens, and other stuff: "I push it all to the side and sort of . . . nest." Sternberg teaches drawing and songwriting to kids in the building, and over the years has babysat for more than fifty neighbors.

Sternberg was preparing for a trip out West for some solo shows. They prefer to perform alone, and on the new album play all the instruments—cello, bass, violin, drums, guitar, piano: “I have too much anxiety about a band. It’s easier to do it alone.” There was anxiety, too, about encountering butterflies and moths (“If I see one, it’s over”) and procuring a guitar (“It’s too hard to travel with one”), but not too much about the performances themselves (“I have a way. I don’t look at the audience”).

Sternberg, who earlier had said, “I’m bad at making segues into big topics,” now said, “It’s time to address the elephant in the room.” Michael and Jackie seemed to hold their breath. Sternberg announced, “I’m obsessed with ‘Real Housewives.’ It became, during the pandemic, like, *insert name of illegal drug here*. I watch it every day.”

Michael and Jackie, out of fellowship, had tried to watch. But no. Sternberg said, “Either you get it or you don’t.” ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Chandi Deitmer

By Elizabeth Kolbert

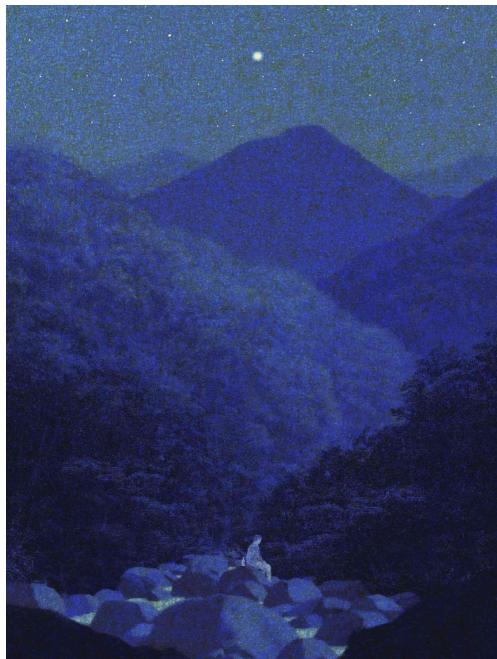
By Jelani Cobb

Fiction

- “Valley of the Moon,” by Paul Yoon

Valley of the Moon

By [Paul Yoon](#)



Listen to this story

Paul Yoon reads.

Two years later, he left the settlement.

He took the bus heading north and then hitchhiked on the back of a repurposed U.S. Army truck that was filled with others like him who all said the same thing: they were heading home. They all said this knowing that there wasn't much left for them to go home to. Still, it felt good to say this to one another, to say without saying that they had survived, and as the truck made stops they exchanged cartons of cigarettes, small sacks of grain, shoelaces, pieces of cloth. Then they asked one another where home was and how far from the border they would be living. They asked what refugee settlement others had found themselves in or how many settlements and for how long or if they had been in one at all. They asked one another what they had done before the war, and they asked one another their names and how old they were.

His name was Tongsu. He was, like so many of them, from a farming family and he was thirty-one years old.

Paul Yoon on the Korean War's aftershocks.

Crowded together in the back of the bumpy truck, they asked him about his eye patch. He was honest and told them that when he first arrived at the settlement he was stabbed during a scuffle. Some of them showed him the toes or the fingers they were missing from frostbite during winter. Tongsu did the same—he was missing a toe—and then they made a joke about how maybe what they had lost would turn up now that the war was over.

“Tongsu, I will remember you!” they all said, when it was his turn to get off the truck, and he said that he would remember them, too, knowing that he wouldn’t.

When he reached the mountains, he walked. He walked along the road until he reached a part that had been bombed out and then he walked into the woods and climbed the steep slope. A sack of rice grains was strapped to his back with the moth-eaten wool blanket he had used for sleeping. Hidden among the grains was a large amount of money he had taken from the inside wall of the shanty where he and a dozen others slept, money that belonged to a man who had died a year earlier. In Tongsu’s chest pocket, tucked inside a handkerchief, were vegetable seeds.

He climbed steadily without rest, using the trees that had survived to pull himself up. He climbed for almost an hour, zigzagging up the slope. When he eventually reached the crest, he could see below, almost halfway down the other side, the small farmhouse where he had been born and where his parents had most likely died, he didn't know. It was more than half in ruin, as was most of the land, the soil upturned and dried out. Deep craters were everywhere. Pieces of rubber and metal. He spotted the bones of animals, some of them likely belonging to the goats that used to roam here, and he wasn't sure why but he spent the rest of the day gathering the bones and burying them down in the valley, even before he stepped inside.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Paul Yoon read "Valley of the Moon."](#)

When he did, it had grown dark, with only the moonlight to guide him through this house he had not seen in a lifetime, where, in the one room where the walls remained intact, he found nothing but a cup on the floor brimming with dirt and rainfall.

Tongsu spent a year fixing up the house. He found thatch to repair the roof and wood to build a fence for the eventual animals he planned to have. He planted new grass. Once a month, following the river, he walked the four hours into the nearest village and purchased supplies he needed or, after the vegetables and the rice began to grow, used food to barter with. Every season, a tinker passed through the valley, riding a wagon pulled by a mule, and Tongsu was able to get from the man cookware, straw baskets, more cups. The tinker recognized him from when he was a boy, but, as hard as Tongsu tried to remember the old man, he couldn't.

"It's good to see someone again," the tinker said. "In the Valley of the Moon."

Tongsu had forgotten people called it that. He asked if there was anyone else around here—he recalled another farm, farther along the valley, around a bend, but the tinker shook his head. "Who wants to live out here? Only you. Not even the soldiers guarding the border, a day's journey north, want to be there." The tinker laughed. Then he slapped the mule and said, "At least they

buy my stuff,” and sang a song loud enough that it kept echoing back as he grew smaller and smaller in the distance.

Unless Tongsu went to the village, he saw no one else. This became his life. He grew his own food and made his own rice wine. He repaired the roof when it leaked and caught rabbits and eventually found someone from whom he could purchase a goat. He began to think less of that time when he’d lived surrounded by voices, yelling and crying and praying, and noises he had never heard before, and bodies sleeping and living and shitting and pissing and working around him.

Here, he woke and slept to complete silence. Not even a plane. Sometimes the faint sound of an engine—a truck or a tank on the faraway mountain road—but that was rare. Only on occasion the clanking of the tinker’s wagon passing somewhere through the valley. He kept track of the growing grass. The return of birds. He grew a long beard then cut it and then grew it again. He made a backpack out of wood and rope and, one summer, he bought a gramophone with a hand crank—how did it get to the village?—and a stack of records and carried it all back with him and listened to music.

Sometimes, at the start of evening, he would pack a bottle of rice wine and, letting the music play for as long as it could, he would walk all the way down to the valley floor, where there was an immense cluster of very large, pale stones near the riverbank that were not from the war but from long before.

Every night, the moon rose from here, and fell, and shattered. And then built itself back up again.

He remembered that from when he was a child. He had never liked the story —had avoided this area as a child. It had frightened him, the idea of the moon dropping and shattering like a bowl, but he had been too embarrassed to say that out loud. He realized he didn’t often think of his parents and his sister anymore, but, with the wine in him, sitting on one of the large, pale stones, he did. Strangely, or at least he thought so, what came to him most vividly were their hands, or the feel of their hands, and the sweet, sweat smell of his sister’s hair. But he could recall neither their faces nor their voices anymore. He thought if he saw them, say, in a dream, or as ghosts, he

would recognize them. But he never dreamed of them. And their ghosts had yet to visit him.

Which was what he thought was happening one night when he opened his eyes to find someone crouched across from him, on another stone. Tongsu had been living on the farm for a few years by then. He had drunk too much wine and fallen asleep. For a moment, he believed he could still hear the gramophone playing, but then the sound vanished. Tongsu, trying not to move too quickly, sat up. He was startled, holding his breath, but he was not afraid.

The ghost was avoiding the moonlight. And then it spoke: “I was told to come find you.”

“Me?” Tongsu said.

“I need to get across.”

It was a man’s voice. In that moment, Tongsu realized the man wasn’t a ghost at all. The man lifted a finger, piercing the moonlight like a knife.

“What happened to your eye?” he said.

When Tongsu didn’t answer, the man went on, “I’ve got the money. Please. I need to get across.”

The man threw a canvas bag at his feet. It hit the empty bottle with a thud.

“I think you have me mixed up with someone else,” Tongsu said, growing more sober as his mind raced to gauge the situation. His tongue felt heavy. Not because of the wine but because he had not talked to anyone in months. When the man stood and jumped over to his rock, Tongsu was so shocked by the sudden enormity of his silhouette, the stranger’s proximity, that it took him a moment to feel the hand grabbing his shoulder and then the pistol that was digging into his rib. It felt as if a net had been thrown over him, so that everything that seemed to be happening was briefly delayed.

“Please,” the man said. “I need to get across.” He mentioned a family he had not seen in years. How they had been separated and how he had lost track of

them. How he couldn't even remember their faces. "Can you imagine what that's like?" he shouted. He threw Tongsu off the rock and jumped on him and began to strike him. Tongsu covered his face, so that the strong blows hit his wrist. His eye patch fell off. In that moment, he reached out desperately, grabbed a stone, and swung, landing a direct hit against the side of the man's head.

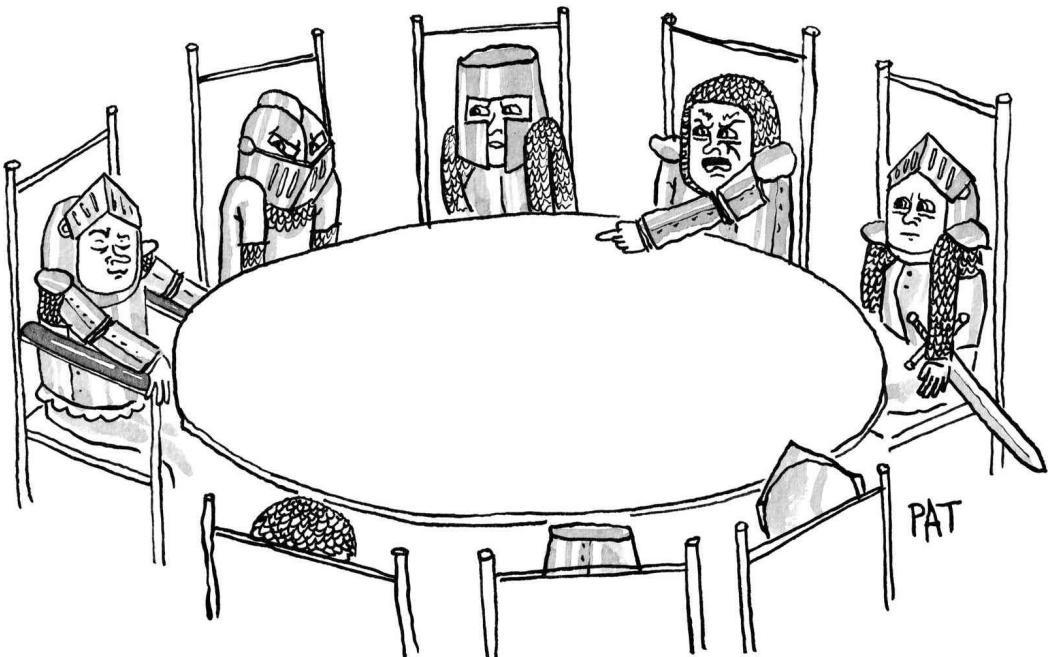
Tongsu was on top of the man now and that was when the pistol went off. It was quieter than he'd have guessed it would be. Like a soft balloon popping. He thought at first he had been shot, he felt the warmth and the wetness all over him, but when he looked down it wasn't his blood. The man's eyes widened. Tongsu kicked himself away and the two of them faced each other once again, leaning against separate rocks.

"I just wanted to get across," the man said, and hiccupped.

Tongsu looked down. He was holding the pistol now. He aimed it at the man's chest and, when the man hiccupped again, Tongsu squeezed the trigger. And then it was quiet again.

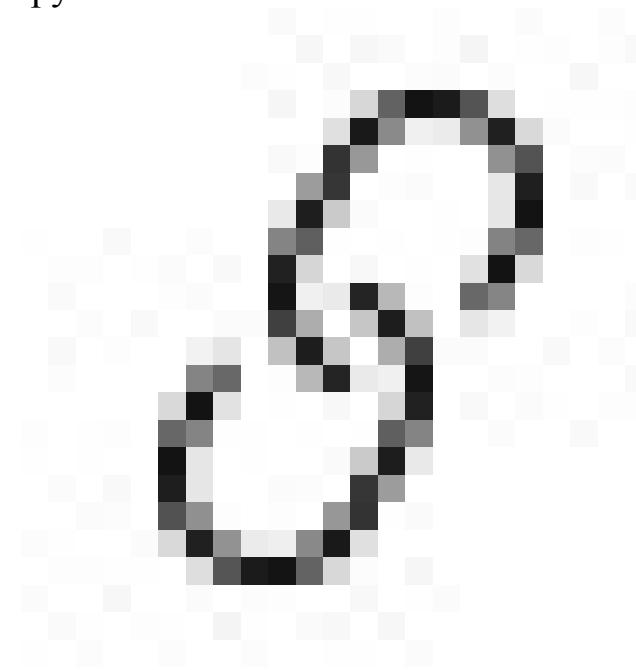
Tongsu stayed there all night. He waited in case the man was still alive, and he waited to see if anyone else was coming. He listened. He heard the slow, steady current of the river; a night bird; then another. He faced his house to see if he could spot anyone up there. He tried to remember if the shots were loud enough for the soldiers a day away to hear, and then couldn't remember if a sound could travel that far.

At the refugee settlement, people had thought they could hear bombs from halfway across the country. There was a time when in a late-night insanity he was convinced that all sounds could travel far across the country, even his own breathing—especially his own breathing—so that what he had to do was stop his own breathing.



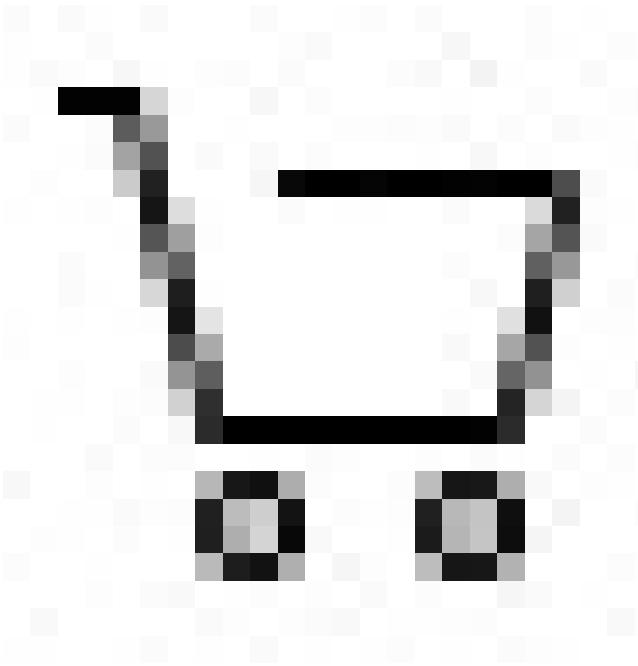
"Wait—why does he get a chair with armrests?"
Cartoon by Patrick McKelvie

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Shop



He never did that again. He breathed now. He breathed and waited. The sun came up. The valley around him clarified. The rocks grew more brown and the fields green and the trees everywhere showed the start of fall. He was unaware how cold he was until he tried to move.

His whole body felt broken. The pistol seemed glued to his palm. His eye patch was by the canvas bag and he reached for it, slipping it back on. Then he opened the bag for the first time and saw the money and closed the bag again.

In the morning light, he could now see the man. He was older than Tongsu, perhaps in his late thirties, and pencil-thin, and had a beard. The blood had thickened almost to a paste and covered his entire front, as if someone had emptied a can of paint on him. The man's eyes were open. The shine of them had left, the way it always did in the dead, and they did not seem real. The wounds were already attracting flies.

Tongsu's first thought was to walk to the village. Or to the soldiers. Then he concluded that they would be suspicious of him and would never believe the story. Someone would ask why the man had thought that Tongsu could take him across the border.

He thought of all the routes and the avenues that led to tomorrow and another tomorrow and another one. The day grew brighter. A wind arose. Still no one. If the tinker was close, he would hear the clank of his wagon first.

Tongsu forced himself up. He dropped the pistol and picked up the bag and headed as fast as possible to his house.

He drank a cup of water. He hung the bag on a nail by the front door but changed his mind and took the money out and hid it in a ceramic pot. Then he took out a hoe and a shovel and climbed back down to the valley floor.

He almost believed that the body wouldn't be there. He almost wished it weren't.

But of course the body was there. Tongsu looked around one more time, listening, and began to dig beside the stones. He worked through the morning, and then he buried the pistol, the man, the empty canvas bag, and even the wine bottle.

And then Tongsu walked over to the river, washed his hands and his face, and climbed back up to his house, collapsed on the floor, and slept.

He expected that someone would eventually come looking for the man. He thought about this every day, waited for this every day. The more he thought about it, the more the days kept to how they had been before the man appeared. A month went by. And then another. In the evenings, he walked down to where he had buried the man. Drinking wine, Tongsu talked to him.

Tongsu said, "Is there anyone coming? No? Why not? Because they are all on the other side? That's a pity."

He said, "Now we're friends. Find my parents instead. They will take care of you now."

He said, "Thank you for your money. I will buy animals with it."

He bought another goat as well as chickens and a pig. The pig followed him around all through the house and he let it sleep with him on the mat on the

floor and sometimes he woke to find his arm wrapped around the contented animal. He stopped talking to the buried man but talked to the animals instead.

He bought a new eye patch from the tinker, who made him one on the spot using cloth from a military uniform. He asked the tinker for any news from the border, but the tinker shrugged. He said instead that a church van was driving around the mountains, not too far from here, wondering if people needed help with their homes—taking care of them, rebuilding them.

When Tongsu slipped one day after a day of rain, twisting his ankle badly enough that he knew he couldn't work for a while, he thought of the church van.

When he was well enough, Tongsu walked to the village. He had made a walking stick and it helped but the pain had returned by the time he got to the village. He found the scribe who wrote letters for people and asked if the church group had passed through yet. When the scribe shook his head, Tongsu asked if he could leave a message for them.

A week later, Tongsu heard movement on the slope behind his house and walked out to find two kids, a boy and a girl, brushing dirt off their trousers. They said that they were from the church and that they would be happy to work for him if he needed. The girl was named Eunhae and she was eleven; the boy, Unsik, was ten.

Tongsu asked if they were orphans and the girl said, "We wouldn't be part of that stupid church if we weren't."

This made him laugh. He liked her. He told them what to do, and he fed them, and, in the evening, he rolled out the moth-eaten wool blanket for them to sleep on; he built a fire and told them to sleep beside it for warmth.

The next morning, he thought that he would wake to find them gone, but they were still there. And they were there that night and still there the following morning. Soon the kids were living on the farm, and it was only a matter of time before he unofficially adopted them or asked if that would be all right by them, and they nodded. He said that they didn't have to call him

their father, that he wasn't expecting them to. They didn't, but he noticed as the years went on that they called each other brother and sister.

Now he could send them into the village together and not do that walk on his own. Some days, they cooked, and they assigned birthdays for each other and also celebrated his, though he never told them his age, told them to guess, it was more fun that way, and they guessed that he was much older than he really was, and they gave him gifts they had made or ones they had got from the church people, whom they spoke to on occasion when they crossed paths in the village.

The mountain roads were rebuilt. It was easier to access the house and the valley, but no one seemed interested in visiting. It was a forgotten place. That was what Tongsu thought. And he wondered if that bothered the children; he didn't know, they didn't talk about it. They walked with him at the start of evening to the stones on the valley floor and it was the boy who one day noticed a small knife etching on one of the surfaces. Tongsu had done this absent-mindedly during that year when he would walk down in the evenings, sit down, and talk.

Tongsu didn't know what to say. And then the not knowing grew into a frustration that bloomed inside him—not unlike those nights at the settlement when a man beside him would not stop talking or weeping or panting—and he grabbed Unsik's shirt collar and told him that it had nothing to do with him, what did he know about things like that.

In the moonlight, the boy stiffened and looked first at the river and then at Eunhae, who had brought her knees up to her chest. It was then, seeing the girl like that, that Tongsu released his grip, cleared his throat, and ruffled the boy's hair. Then he tapped Eunhae lightly on her knee and leaned forward and told them both that his wife was buried here.

He said that in the chaos of the war you buried people where you could. He said that he was lucky she could be buried here, at home.

That was the first time he had lied to them and the last time he ever would.

“Would you like to be buried here?” Unsik said, looking back at him now.
“When you are gone?”

Eunhae glared at her brother and said that he was being disrespectful. But Tongsu waved a hand in the air and took some time thinking about it.

“Yes,” he said.

One day not long after that conversation, while feeding the animals, Tongsu felt a shadow pass over him. He turned but there was no one. He was about to return to the animals when he spotted, down in the valley, Unsik, who was leading a man toward the house. Tongsu watched as they followed the river and then navigated the stones and began to climb the slope.

He told Eunhae, who was beside him, to go inside and not come out until the man was gone. He said this in a tone the girl had never heard before, very different from when he had yelled at her brother—this time both urgent and controlled—and so she did as she was told, sliding the door closed and pulling down the shutters.

Tongsu took out his knife, checked the blade, and slipped it behind him, under his waistband.

Even from a distance, Tongsu knew that the man was not from here. He was wearing country clothes that were clearly new, clothes that seemed meant for taking long treks but had never been worn—the shirt too crisp, the wool vest too bright, the boots clean of any scuff marks. And then, closer, he saw the hair that had clearly been a government haircut and was growing out. But which government, the north or the south?

When the stranger made it to the house, he wiped his brow with his handkerchief, looked all around him, and said, “Time never reached here. If I wanted to hide, it would be here. What beautiful country.”

Tongsu told him he wasn’t hiding, and the man wiped his brow again and grinned. Unsik noticed the door and the windows closed, and when Tongsu told him to go inside the boy bowed.

The man thanked Unsik for leading him all the way here from the village and offered him some coins. Unsik took them and hurried inside.

Then the stranger bowed to Tongsu and said to please forgive him, but he was looking for an uncle who had vanished some years ago and was last seen in these mountains.

“There are a lot of mountains,” Tongsu said.

“Yes,” the stranger said. “Quite.”

The stranger walked over to the animals and inspected them. “He never came home,” he said. “This would have been three years after the war. He would have come this way.”

Tongsu asked the stranger where he was from, but the man didn’t respond. Instead, he went on, “He would have climbed up and passed through this ridge to enter the valley. Because the roads were a mess back then. You remember. Craters from bombs and from shelling everywhere. I’m sure you know this, but they used to bury animals and the unclaimed dead in them and then, if the holes still weren’t full enough, they would use whatever else they could—sacks of stones, steel drums, wood—so that vehicles could cross. Transport vehicles all over the country, carrying supplies, tires, concrete, animals. A pig passing over the bones of another one. Isn’t that something? That was reconstruction back then. But you know that, too. Which camp did you spend the war in? Were you in Busan? One of the shantytown settlements? Did you ever need to find someone you had lost? You went to the forty steps there, didn’t you? That was where you went to find someone in Busan. Everyone knew that. On those steps near the port, you could listen to an accordion player playing a song or buy popcorn from a street vender and find your person. You’re lucky, you know. You were displaced, but safe. Maybe not from one another and your petty greed and insignificant dramas but from the greater madness. I would willingly be displaced for my entire life just to be safe from that. Not my uncle. He survived the war only for it to take him later when it was all over. What happened to your eye?”

Tongsu, who had reached behind him for his knife as he listened to the stranger, wondering if he could move faster than this man—and where he would position himself to make sure the stranger didn't enter the house—asked what he meant by the war taking his uncle after it was over.

The stranger paused. He was pretending to not notice the hand that Tongsu had behind his back. Then he bowed and asked for Tongsu's forgiveness. He said he was tired from the long walk and from the years of looking for his uncle. He asked if Tongsu would be hospitable enough to offer him some water. Tongsu took his own cup and walked over to the pump. The man gulped the water down and wiped his mouth with his handkerchief. Then he bowed a third time and offered the cup back with both hands.

"I was sorry to hear about your wife," the man said.

Tongsu wasn't sure if his face revealed anything, but the man said that the boy had mentioned the grave down there. "The moon rises," the man said, "and falls and shatters. And then it builds itself back up again."

He bowed a fourth time, not as deeply, and then without saying anything else, not even a goodbye, he walked around the house and over the ridge into the forest that would lead him down the other side of the mountain.

Although Tongsu never saw the man again, and no one else came asking about a missing person, the strangeness of the encounter and the unsettledness of it hummed inside his chest for the remaining years of his life. It was at first like a fly that was trapped in his heart, something he learned to ignore, only for it to turn later on, as he grew older, into a claw.

There were times when he avoided walking down to the valley floor altogether or refused to leave the house. He sat looking out, or paced the grounds, and he let the kids, who were no longer kids, do everything around the house. He ignored their glances and ate what they made him and went out again to sit and stare across to the other side of the valley.

There were also periods in his life when the feeling went away, when it seemed that he could reclaim the days, only for the face of the stranger or the stranger's voice to return in a dream where Tongsu kept tripping over the

bones of animals and could never climb out of the crater he found himself in, a silhouette high above him peering down.

Perhaps this was why Tongsu hit Unsik one day when a pig died. Or perhaps it was the grief of the pig dying that caused him to behave illogically and recklessly. He found the pig, which had apparently died peacefully in its sleep on the grass, and he went straight for Unsik. Tongsu struck him and pushed him against the side of the house, closed his fist, and punched him. Unsik, staggering, opened his eyes, his face filling with shock and confusion. He reached out with both hands, as though trying to hold up a wall that was about to topple over, and that was when Tongsu punched him again, and then kept punching him until Unsik's nose split open. Tongsu did all this silently, forgetting whom he was hitting, his vision gone black, unaware of Eunhae screaming behind him and clawing at his back so hard that she ripped his shirt, her nails digging into him and scraping rivers in his skin.

Eunhae was by then seventeen, a young woman, and that night she caught Tongsu looking at her for a beat longer than he normally did, caught him in the wake of whatever storm had erupted inside him that day. She had buried the pig by herself in the field and was on the other side of the room, caring for her brother, using a warm, damp cloth to wipe his face, which was no longer recognizable, a lock of her hair falling over her own face. And, as she tucked her hair behind her ear, it was then that she felt Tongsu's eye on her—the foreign heat of him from across the room, like a drowsy, ancient bear that had lived many lives and was now weary and impatient in the back of a cave, watching.

The siblings left not long after that. Not together. Unsik, who had lost partial vision in one of his eyes, sneaked away early one morning before it grew light. Instead of a note, he left Eunhae a piece of paper he had folded into an origami boat—the tinker had taught him this, a skill that Unsik, when he first saw it, thought was magic—and the socks she was always stealing from him.

They would never see each other again. She would never know of his many lives, and he would never know that his sister had left the same day he did, left the one-eyed farmer and the house that had been their home, left the

valley, walking first to the village, looking frantically for her brother, and then catching a ride with the scribe, who was now retired and was going to visit a war memorial on the anniversary of the armistice. From there, she found another ride, and then another, at some point the desire to find Unsik folding together with a new desire to keep moving.

A week later, she ended up in the city of Daegu. The church that had taken her to the valley was based in that city and it connected her with a pharmacy where she worked the register three days a week. She found a room to rent at a women's boarding house near the river. She developed insomnia. Every night, she climbed out onto the rooftop to smoke cigarettes and listen to a neighbor's radio that was always too loud, tuned to an American G.I. station that played rock and roll. Looking at the river, and the city, she understood slowly, and then quickly, that the country had been changing dramatically while she and Unsik lived in that forgotten valley, and was changing still.

One night, a woman from the boarding house asked her if she liked to dance. Eunhae didn't know—she had never danced, not at the farmhouse, not even with those records, or before those years. But she went with the woman anyway, avoiding the police as they held hands and hurried toward the outskirts of the city, to the basement of an abandoned factory where Eunhae froze under a brick arch, letting go of the woman's hand, confronted by a mountain of sound—was that jazz?—and a forest of shadows: everyone inside, ignoring the stink of sewage and flailing their arms, twisting their hips, jumping, dancing.

It was a space Eunhae would keep coming back to, staying right up until curfew, wanting to be swallowed by the boom of music and a crowd.

On weekends, she helped the church host community dinners and she drove the homeless around in its van to receive medicine and vaccinations. She met old men and old women who had been born in the north but never returned after the war. She met people heading off to Germany to be nurses and miners for more money than they had ever made in all their lives, and she met American G.I.s at the base who were sometimes kind and other times cruel, obnoxious, and dumb. She met people who supported the new government and others who wanted to wage another war against it. She watched protests, fled protests, and then later watched a policeman line up a

group of boys against a wall, take out a pair of scissors from his belt, and trim their hair, which was an inch too long.

She fed as many of the stray dogs as she could and she had conversations with university students who called themselves activists and intellectuals and musicians and painters and one day with a hotel receptionist who told her that she should come work with her, that she would meet people from all over the country and sometimes from other countries.

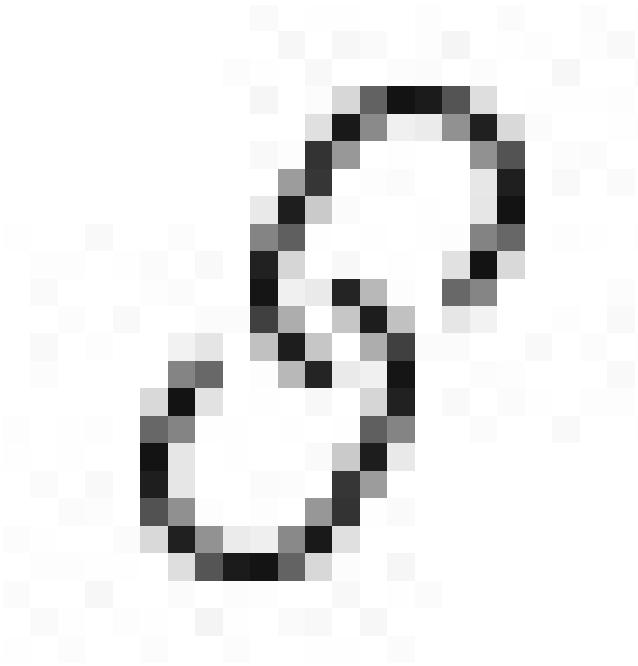
By then, more than a decade had passed since Eunhae left the valley. She had received no news of the one-eyed farmer other than from someone at the church who mentioned seeing him once in the village—to Eunhae's surprise, the old man had been asking about telephones, because lines were being installed in that area.

Eunhae turned twenty-eight in the lobby of the hotel, working the night shift. Because of the curfew, the birthday was uneventful, but she loved being in the lobby, the pretty lights, the space that never smelled of sewage.



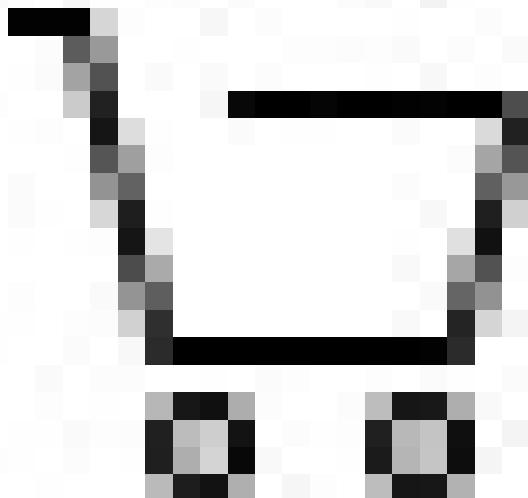
"I can really picture settling down and destroying a suburban family's attic with you."
Cartoon by Ellie Black

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She learned to appreciate the quiet again. The nights. There was always a notepad to doodle on. A Japanese comic book a guest had left behind, Eunhae unable to read it but savoring the illustrations.

And, almost every day, Eunhae was aware that she was living a life she could have neither conceived of nor made sense of a decade ago. Where was that girl now?

Late one night at the hotel, not knowing exactly why, she picked up the phone and dialled a number she had been given by the church, the number, supposedly, of the farmhouse in the valley. When Tongsu answered, she paused, listening to him breathing, his voice saying, “Hello, hello?” and she hung up.

A few days later, she called back, hung up, and then she called again, and again, not too often, perhaps once a month. Tongsu always picked up. He said, “Hello, hello?” and eventually she answered his hello, and they began to talk.

Which was how she got back in touch with the one-eyed farmer who had taken care of her and her brother. She and Tongsu talked two or three times a year, mostly near a holiday, or the farmer’s birthday. They never talked about the past, or what happened, or any memory they had of each other and of those years. They talked about the small things in the day: he had got some new chickens; the scribe had died; so had the tinker; she had finished a comic book she thought he might like.

Why?

Because it features a pig.

Silence. His breathing. There was a rumor that South Korea was planning to make a bid for one of the future Olympics, she said. She had heard that, but couldn’t believe it. To think of the world coming here one day. The whole world. It almost made her laugh. She tapped her pen on the notepad. And then, when he didn’t respond, she told him something she wasn’t supposed to tell anyone, a secret—but whom would he tell?

There were diplomats coming to stay at her hotel, she said. Important people whom she would have to greet. She was nervous about that. She didn’t even know what a diplomat was.

“Pretend they’re goats,” he said.

“Goats?”

“That used to calm you. To see the goats on the mountain. When you were scared or crying from a nightmare, or missing your mother.”

Eunhae had no memory of this. Just as she would have no lasting memory of greeting the diplomats when they arrived or greeting some others the following year. She finished her shift and then she met some people by a house near the river. A jazz band was there. A piano and a trumpet that sang like slow-falling leaves. She lost track of time. It grew late, almost past curfew. The buses had stopped coming. She thought she could walk it, and she did, the music trailing her as she followed the river, sensing something behind her but trying to ignore it. When she turned, she saw two silhouettes in the near-distance, walking her way.

There was no one else on the river road. The shops were closed. She heard a distant siren. She turned around again, and they were there, still following. She thought of running, intended to, but she froze. She would think of this sometimes, later, unable to remember how long she was on the road that night, stopped in the middle of it, her body unable to move as though waiting for the inevitable, wondering why it was a thing she was waiting for, wanting to scream but unable to as the two men hurried up behind her and then passed, a pocket of air, not even looking her way but deep in their own private conversation and holding hands, briefly, she saw, before they parted, one continuing down the road, the other crossing a bridge, running now the way her brother used to run, with long strides, stopping to turn, once, believing that she, Eunhae, from that distance was his lover, a silhouette that he waved toward with reckless happiness as the clock struck midnight.

It wasn’t long after this that Eunhae took a weekend off and caught a bus heading north. As she left the city, evidence of fall began to appear; the colors of the trees grew deeper and bolder. The woman beside her had an arm in a sling. When they were far enough out of the city, the woman slipped off the sling and began knitting. She knitted the whole way up, though what she was making Eunhae couldn’t tell. Whenever the bus hit a bump, their elbows touched, but they never spoke. Eunhae got off first.

From the start of that mountain road, she walked. It was fully paved now. She kept to the side of it as a car or a truck raced by. A light rain began to fall. More like a mist. It was not unpleasant and went away before she got soaked. She paused when she thought she heard a song playing, a humming, only to realize that it was a bird.

There were no animals when Eunhae arrived at the farmhouse, not a single one. When no one answered, she walked in and saw him sitting on the floor beside his tea table, his legs crossed, leaning against the wall with his mouth open and his hand clutching his chest.

She didn't know how long he had been dead. She had not talked to him in months, but it appeared that he had died recently. There was a faint smell to him, and a fly buzzed away when she approached, but otherwise it was as though he had fallen asleep. Save for the hand on his chest—he had been clawing his skin, a heart attack?—he looked peaceful sitting there. His hair, which had turned entirely white, was combed neatly, the comb itself in his chest pocket, in front of his handkerchief.

The only thing odd to her was that he was not wearing his eye patch, and she wondered how long ago he had stopped wearing it. It occurred to Eunhae that she had never seen him without it, not once. It occurred to her also that she didn't know how old he was exactly. He could not have been older than seventy.

She knelt and leaned forward to look at him fully. She kept waiting to feel afraid, but the fear never came. She tried to move his hand away from his chest, but his body had stiffened too much. She bumped against the tea table. The cup there was full of tea, and it spilled a little. She dipped her finger into the cup—cold—and almost put her finger into her mouth, but paused. She turned around and listened. Nothing. She looked at him again. The hand on his chest and the dark coin of skin where his eye had once been. She rubbed the tea between her fingers, sniffed, and wiped her hands.

She searched the house, but it was as it always was. Perhaps not as clean or as tidy—they had done that, she and her brother—but the same otherwise. The gramophone was there; his backpack and his walking stick; his mat rolled up as though there would be another evening and morning. The only

thing missing was his eye patch, and she walked around again trying to find it, and then when she couldn't she cleaned up a bit, taking away the teacup and pouring it out, and sat down again in front of him for a while.

From her pocket, Eunhae took out the origami boat that her brother had left for her all those years ago. For the first time, she unfolded it, knowing there wasn't anything written on it but hoping anyway the way she used to, wanting every night on that rooftop overlooking the river when she couldn't sleep, listening to someone's rock and roll, to take the origami boat apart but being unable to. Now she flattened the blank paper on the tea table and left it there, thinking of what Tongsu had said to them both a long time ago.

She unplugged the telephone. She closed the windows and looked back at Tongsu one more time and went out to find a shovel and a hoe.

The sun was setting by the time Eunhae reached the bottom of the valley. She headed over to the cluster of stones not far from the river and, when she found the one with the knife markings on it, she stepped a few paces to the side and began to dig. She dug and used her boot to sink the shovel in and, when she came upon some rocks, she used the hoe.

It grew dark. Even in the cold, she was sweating. The moon came up and, when the shovel hit something that was not dirt or rock, she didn't hear or feel it at first. She had lifted the shovel, ready to strike again, when the moonlight shifted, and she stopped. She got on her knees. She brushed the dirt away and lifted up a bulky, heavy sack and unwound the twine.

Inside was a large collection of animal bones. She picked up what was probably a rib or a leg. And also the skull of something small, perhaps a rabbit. Also, the skull of a goat. Hooves. She had no idea how old the bones were or whether it was even Tongsu who had buried them. Or whether this was a history much older than his or her own.

She sat down on one of the stones and thought of the multitude of animals that had lived and passed through here. The ones that were cared for, eaten, released, left behind, caught in gunfire and shelling, were terrified into stillness, were born, lived, played with each other, breathed.

Her body hurt. Eunhae wondered if she should go on digging. Whether it was silly and irresponsible, what she was doing.

She wished Unsik were here. She wondered where he was. What he looked like these days. Whether he was alone or with someone right now. Whether she would wake one day and sense that he was gone. Or whether he had already gone.

She thought about how a decision could reveal all the different layers of life, which felt to her as unreachable as the inside of a flower.

In the valley, all was silent. And clear. And then from faraway came a sound of clanking metal. Or that was what Eunhae thought it sounded like as she returned the bones to the ground. She walked a little farther to another spot and started over again, digging.

The moon rises and falls . . .

What was the rest of it?

In a moment, Eunhae would remember. ♦

This is drawn from “[The Hive and the Honey](#). ”

By Cressida Leyshon

By Nathan Heller

By James Lasdun

By Ann Patchett

L.A. Postcard

- Kris Jenner Cleans Up

Kris Jenner Cleans Up

The reality-television personality co-hosts a dinner party to show off her (lucrative) new plant-powered cleaning brand. Scent? Linens laundered by somebody else.

By [Sheila Yasmin Marikar](#)



The other day, the reality-television personality Kris Jenner co-hosted a dinner party at the Bel Air house of one of her business partners, a woman named Emma Grede. Two years ago, Jenner and Grede founded Safely, a company that makes “plant-powered” cleaning products “efficient enough to get the job done,” according to its Web site. What’s in them?

“Well, there are so many things that are *not* in them,” Grede said, waiting for guests to arrive. She had on a white pants suit and sat on a white love seat on a cobblestoned patio; staffers and bees buzzed about. Out: sulfates, “harsh chemicals,” “anything toxic.” In: coconut, willow bark, corn-derived alcohol, all sold in plastic packaging.

“These products had to be something that everyone can have access to,” Jenner said, referring to the price point (from six dollars to sixty-three

dollars, for a “calm kit” that contains soaps, sprays, and a salve). She sat next to Grede, wearing a black-and-white mock-turtleneck dress.

“Glass bottles—that isn’t the way that most people shop,” Grede said. “Most people are carrying their groceries, at least to the car.”

Last year, Walmart began selling Safely. Target recently followed suit. “We just got Green Seal-certified,” Grede said, referring to the not-for-profit that validates environmentally friendly products. “We’re not the *most* sustainable product in the world—that would actually involve using no products at all.” Jenner laughed. “But we have a real presence on the shelf,” Grede said.

Jenner and Grede did a final sweep of the party premises. Was the powder room stocked with Safely hand soap and lotion? (Yes.) Were Safely candles strategically placed and lit? (Yes.) Was every surface sparkling and free of streaks?

“Uh-oh, look at this,” Jenner said, lifting a tumbler from a low glass table. “We have a little ring.” She reached for a spray bottle of glass cleaner and a reusable paper towel.

“Only Kris Jenner would be cleaning in vintage Valentino,” Grede said.

“There you go,” Jenner said. “Clean as a whistle.”

Jenner and Grede met a decade ago, at L’Avenue, the Paris restaurant frequented by Catherine Deneuve and Beyoncé. (“I was, like, I hope she doesn’t ask me to pay,” Grede said.) Grede was the C.E.O. of a brand-marketing agency in London. A few months later, Jenner recalled, Grede phoned and said that she was interested in “doing something with Khloé,” one of Jenner’s daughters.

Their conversation resulted in Good American, a size-inclusive denim brand, founded in 2016 (last year’s revenues were two hundred million dollars). In 2019, Khloé’s sister Kim partnered with Grede on Skims, a size-inclusive shapewear brand (last year’s revenues were four hundred and seventy-five million dollars).

Both self-described neat freaks—"I find great pleasure in cleaning my drawers over the weekend," Jenner said—Grede and Jenner bonded over a shared distaste of how mainstream cleaning products smell.

What kind of smells do they like? Jenner was momentarily at a loss for words. "I remember walking into Ellen's house," she said, referring to Ellen DeGeneres. "I was with my daughter Kendall. I said, 'Pay attention,' and she said, 'What is the smell in this house? I need to know.' Ellen had some incense burning. I realized how important fragrance is to everyone, even if it's subliminal."

The names of Safely's scents evoke calls to action—Bloom, Rise. The latter smells like linens freshly laundered by somebody else.

"Kris and I both do a lot of vacations in Italy," Grede said. "We were, like, You know when you walk into a restaurant in Capri and it's, like, the lemon groves? That was the idea behind Fresh"—a Safely scent sold exclusively at Target.

"We'll just call it 'Dinner at the Lemon-Tree Restaurant,'" Jenner said.

"Slash 'Fresh,'" Grede amended.

Dinner beneath Grede's own trees (oaks) was about to begin. Guests negotiated her pea-gravel back yard in stilettos. ("We should be grounding," one said. "Not on these pebbles," another said.) Beet salads and boneless chicken were served. Someone asked Jenner where she got her dress.

"Vintage archives," she said. "Now that I've worn it once, it's time to pass it along. What was that movie about the travelling pants? We could have the travelling dress."

"I'll take the dress," someone offered.

Jenner smiled. Light-bulb moment. "There might be a paycheck in this for me," she said. "Mama's gotta eat." ♦

By Nathan Heller

By James Lasdun

By Ann Patchett

By Rachel Aviv

Letter from Chengdu

- [The Double Education of My Twins' Chinese School](#)

The Double Education of My Twins' Chinese School

The President of China compared moral education to buttons on clothes. The girls' buttons were wrong from the start, but they learned the more valuable lessons that two systems can impart.

By [Peter Hessler](#)



At 7:01 A.M. on September 2, 2019, more than an hour before my twin daughters, Natasha and Ariel, were scheduled to begin third grade at Chengdu Experimental Primary School, the first message appeared on the WeChat group for parents. The group name was Class Six, and every time somebody posted a message, my phone beeped. The initial beep came from somebody called Number 16 Zhou Liming's Mama:

Regarding today's weather, is it fine to wear shorts?

It took less than a minute for the next beep. This time, the writer was Number 35 Li Jialing's Mama:

We are wearing shorts, it's not cold.

Each message appeared in the standard WeChat format: a time stamp, the sender's name, an avatar, and the text within a bubble. The bubbles scrolled down the screen like the dialogue of a play in which characters had been both named and numbered:

7:08 A.M.

Number 13 Zhao Fan's Mama:

There will be lots of people inside the classroom, it won't be cold.

7:17 A.M.

Number 16 Zhou Liming's Mama:

Fine, then we will also wear shorts. Thank you, dears @Number 35 Li Jialing's Mama and @Number 13 Zhao Fan's Mama.

For my wife, Leslie, and me, getting our daughters into Chengdu Experimental had been a long and mysterious process. In the spring of 2018, we had travelled from our home in Colorado to Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province, in southwestern China, in order to visit schools. We'd come away with a good impression of Chengdu Experimental, which is considered to be perhaps the best public primary school in the city. But administrators were noncommittal about admitting Ariel and Natasha. The school had no recent tradition of educating foreigners, and if the twins were to attend they would be the only Westerners in a student body of about two thousand.

They would also be the only children who didn't speak Mandarin. Leslie is Chinese American, and we met while working as journalists in Beijing, more than twenty years ago. When Ariel and Natasha were born, in southwestern Colorado, in 2010, they were given proper Chinese names. But the twins had never used these names, and Leslie and I hadn't tried to teach them Mandarin. We always had the idea that someday I would return to teach at a Chinese university, and the girls could learn the language through immersion.

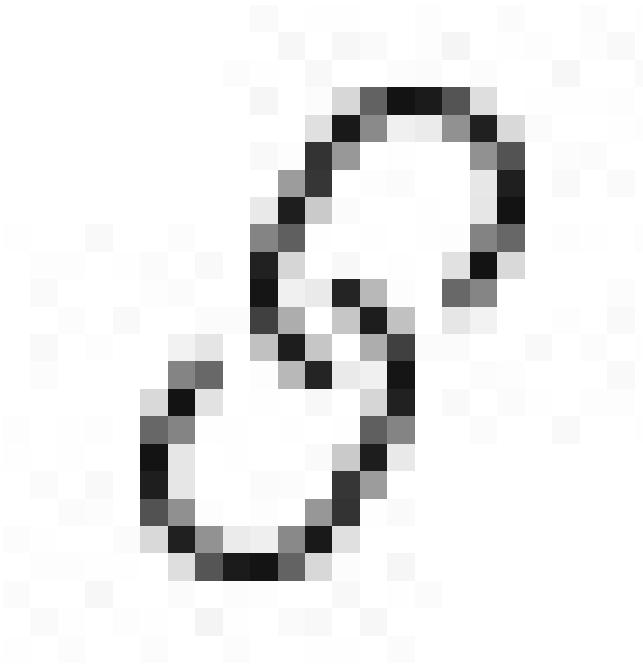
This remained our plan when we moved to Chengdu, in August of 2019, three weeks before the fall semester. We stayed in a Sheraton across the street from Chengdu Experimental, and a tutor came every morning to give Ariel and Natasha a crash course in Mandarin. Meanwhile, Leslie and I tried to reach administrators and teachers at the school, mostly without success—it seemed that everybody was out of contact. Finally, with only four days until the start of the semester, just when we were starting to panic, a teacher informed us that the girls were welcome to attend. It was never clear to us how or why this decision had been made.

As part of the registration process, I was instructed to join the other parents on WeChat. Sometimes WeChat groups develop their own distinct language, and in Class Six the standard pronoun was first-person plural, as if parent and child had merged: *We are wearing shorts; we have the math assignment*. For usernames, parents identified themselves by their children, and often they included the school-assigned student numbers. (For this story, I have changed the names and numbers of the other children.) In exchanges, people politely referred to one another by their full usernames—Number 35 Li Jialing’s Mama, Number 42 Zhu Zhentao’s Baba—as if these were formal titles.



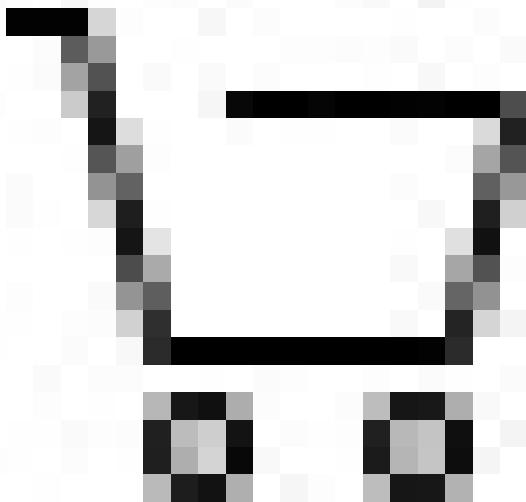
"I love recording shaky videos I'll never watch or show anybody."
Cartoon by Ivan Ehlers

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Along with the Mamas and the Babas, there were a few Nainais and Yeyes: grandmas and grandpas. A user in a WeChat group, in order to prompt a response, can double-tap somebody's avatar, which is called "tickle." Any tickle is documented, like a stage direction that everybody else can see. In

addition to being the most popular app in China, WeChat may also be the most passive-aggressive. Chinese tend to monitor the app obsessively, and they get impatient if a message goes unanswered. I often wondered if anybody else in Class Six found humor in the posts:

9:11 P.M.

Number 07 Chen Qilan's Grandma tickled Number 26 Liu Peiyu's Mama

If I had followed the standard format, my own title would have been the longest: Number 54 Zhang Xingcai and Number 55 Zhang Xingrou's Baba. Ariel and Natasha were the only twins, and as latecomers they had been assigned the highest numbers. We hadn't had time to buy uniforms, so on the first day we borrowed two sets from the school: dark plaid skirts and white button-up shirts embroidered with the school insignia. All the other students were also wearing red scarves, the mark of the Young Pioneers, the Communist Party's organization for schoolchildren. Ariel and Natasha seemed nervous but composed when we said goodbye. A large sign hung on the classroom wall:

The Entire Nation Celebrates the 70th Glorious Birthday of the People's Republic

That day, Leslie and I were moving into an apartment. We hired a van to transport luggage from the Sheraton, and then Leslie took a cab across town to *Ikea*, in order to buy some furnishings. While I was unpacking, my phone beeped periodically, and I checked in on the Class Six dialogue. I noticed that parents also referred to their spouses by the children's names, which created even more opportunities for passive aggression:

11:58 A.M.

Number 16 Zhou Liming's Mama:

May I ask what time in the afternoon we are supposed to pick up the children?

Chen Qilan's Mama:

Yesterday at the parents' meeting Teacher Zhang said that they should pick up their children at the main gate at 3:40.

Number 16 Zhou Liming's Mama:

@Chen Qilan's Mama—Oh, thank you. Zhou Liming's Baba went to the meeting but he didn't tell me. [weeping-and-laughing-while-covering-eyes emoji]

Shortly before three o'clock, Number 54 Zhang Xingcai and Number 55 Zhang Xingrou's Mama called to explain that, because of various *Ikea*-related delays, she would be unable to make it to school for pickup. [weeping-and-laughing-while-covering-eyes emoji] I waited alone in front of the gate. When Class Six marched out of the schoolyard, Teacher Zhang walked at the front of a neat line of children, and Ariel and Natasha were at the end. The twins held it together until they reached me.

"I feel so stupid!" Ariel said. She burst into tears, pressing against my side. "We didn't understand anything!" Her sister was also sobbing: "I don't want to go back!"

A few parents looked sympathetically in my direction, and Teacher Zhang hurried over. She was middle-aged, with large, alert eyes and a gentle manner. "I think that it was difficult for them," she said.

I thanked her for her patience, and I said that we would continue to work on Mandarin at home. I waited for Ariel and Natasha to calm down before we walked to the subway station. Along the way, we passed a large red sign:

Chengdu Experimental Primary School
(Founded in 1918)
Experimenting and Researching
to Guide the Region

The school had no other American students or teachers, but early on it had been heavily influenced by ideas from the United States. At the end of the nineteenth century, John Dewey, the American philosopher and educator, had pioneered the concept of the experimental, or laboratory, school. For

most of his career, Dewey had no special interest in China, but in the spring of 1919 he was invited to deliver a series of lectures in Japan. When Dewey was in Tokyo, a delegation of Chinese scholars visited and persuaded him to travel to China for a lecture tour.

Dewey's trip coincided with a critical historical moment. On May 4, 1919, three days after the philosopher arrived in China, thousands of university students gathered in Beijing to protest the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. The students were upset that the victorious Allies planned to give German concessions in eastern China to the Japanese. Their protest expanded to address other political and social issues, eventually becoming known as the May Fourth Movement.

For more than two millennia, the Confucian emphasis on learning had been a strength of Chinese culture. But the primary goal of education had always been narrow: to prepare men—and only men—to pass the imperial civil-service examinations and become government officials. In 1905, the examination system was abruptly abolished, leaving intellectuals with an existential question: What should be the purpose of schooling in a modern China?

The title of Dewey's first public lecture in China was "Democratic Developments in America." More than a thousand people attended, and soon the American was being hailed as a "second Confucius." He extended his lecture tour to last for more than two years, and he delivered some two hundred speeches around the country. *The Chinese Students' Monthly*, an expat publication based in New York, described the reception:

Bankers and editors frequent his residences; teachers and students flock to his classrooms. Clubs compete to entertain him, to hear him speak; newspapers vie with each other in translating his latest utterances.

Dewey emphasized pragmatism and experimentation, and he warned his Chinese audiences against blindly importing any single Western model of schooling. China needed, in Dewey's opinion, "a new culture, in which what is best in western thought is to be freely adopted—but adapted to Chinese conditions." Dewey believed that education should prepare students to participate in democracy, an idea that was embraced by the May Fourth

Movement, which promoted values that students personified as Mr. Democracy and Mr. Science. Other political thinkers also took note. In 1920, a young Mao Zedong mentioned in letters that he was studying Dewey's works, and initially the young Communist was swayed by the American philosopher's stance against violence. In an early essay, Mao wrote, "Thus we will not provoke widespread chaos, nor pursue that ineffectual 'revolution of bombs,' or 'revolution of blood.' "

A number of educators who attended Dewey's lectures and classes subsequently tried to incorporate his ideas into Chinese schools. One of these figures was Hu Yanli, who eventually became the principal of Chengdu's most important primary school. In homage to Dewey, the school's name was changed to include the word *shixian*—"experiment; test."

Hu Yanli led Chengdu Experimental for a dozen years, and the school still celebrates this period. On the twins' first day, in the main courtyard, we passed a series of prominent commemorative displays. One featured a black-and-white photograph of Hu and other teachers gathered on the site of the current school. Another featured a quote from Hu, along with a reference to the most famous student educated under his watch:

"In order to make it easier for other schools to adopt these concepts, we didn't do anything capricious, but we consistently emphasized self-motivated study, and in particular we emphasized the fostering of a democratic spirit. We hoped to adapt to the individuality of each student and fully develop their genius."

From 1935 to 1939, Li Peng, the former Premier of the State Council, studied in Chengdu Experimental Primary School.

The school agreed that, in the beginning, Ariel and Natasha would be responsible for only their math homework. For *Yuwen*, or Language class, it was impossible for them to jump in at grade level, but there was no mystery about what they had missed. In the earliest grades, Chinese writing is itself a kind of math: an exercise in basic addition, as characters are memorized one after another.

Across China, all first graders begin the march to literacy with the same character: 天, “sky; Heaven.” From there, during the fall semester, children learn two hundred and ninety-nine more characters, and they add another four hundred in the spring. The pace accelerates in second grade: four hundred and fifty a semester, with the final lesson ending on 坟, “tomb.” All this is laid out in a series of four textbooks that are accompanied by boxes of flash cards, published by the Ministry of Education. In order to become proper Chinese third graders—to go all the way from Heaven to tomb—Natasha and Ariel needed to memorize a total of sixteen hundred characters.

They started with ten a day. Leslie organized our system of home study, and every afternoon, when the twins returned from school, she handed them a new stack of flash cards. For each set of ten, we quizzed them twice: first on recognition, then on writing. The flash cards outlined the correct stroke order, and the twins wrote the characters over and over in dozens of cheap brown exercise books that lay scattered like autumn leaves around the apartment. On the opening page of the Language textbook, there was an image of the Chinese flag, a crowd of happy children from various ethnic groups, and Beijing’s Tiananmen Gate with its famous portrait of Chairman Mao. The top of the page said, in large characters:

我是中国人
(I am Chinese)

That semester, the twins spent thirty per cent more days in class than they would have at their Colorado public school. There are few school vacations in China, and the only significant break in the fall is for National Day, on October 1st. In 2019, children had five days off for the holiday, but they were required to make up two of those days on weekends. Ariel and Natasha’s class was also given thirty-six pages of math homework to be completed during the break.

Leslie and I often felt overwhelmed, but even the parents whose children had been at Chengdu Experimental from the start seemed to be playing catch-up. Most of Ariel and Natasha’s classmates were enrolled in private supplemental courses, and it was hard to imagine parents who were more attentive to their children’s schooling. On the first day of class, I counted forty-nine beeps from the WeChat group. There were seventy messages on

the second day. Day Three clocked in at two hundred and thirty-seven—an average of one beep every six minutes for twenty-four hours. That was also the day that I figured out how to mute the alerts on WeChat.

Parents wrote at any time of the day or night. Once, when Leslie and I were uncertain about a math assignment, I posted a question, and in less than ten minutes the parents of two different children had sent photographs of the homework. The school relied on the parent group to handle certain administrative duties, like distributing official notices and collecting fees for uniforms and lunches. Occasionally, a parent visited a class in order to photograph the children's activities. Late one evening during the first week, Tang Zhiyun's Mama began posting pictures that she had taken during science class. Each image was perfectly focussed on an individual child wearing a white lab coat; I found Natasha in the thirty-first frame and Ariel in the seventy-third. Finally, after midnight, and after a hundred and seven photographs, the WeChat dialogue came to a temporary halt:

12:10 A.M.

Number 42 Lei Hejia's Baba:

@Tang Zhiyun's Mama, you still haven't gone to bed? You've been working hard

12:15 A.M.

Tang Zhiyun's Mama:

I have a lot more, but I can't send them all right now. Tomorrow . . .

Sure enough, ten hours and eleven minutes later, Tang Zhiyun's Mama posted another seventy-six images of children in lab coats.

At afternoon pickups, I looked at the faces around me and marvelled at the apparent normalcy. Most parents seemed like typical middle-class urban Chinese: they didn't dress in expensive clothes, and many of them took the subway, like us. They appeared unfazed by the presence of foreigners, and they referred to the twins as Cai Cai and Rou Rou. In China, it's common to

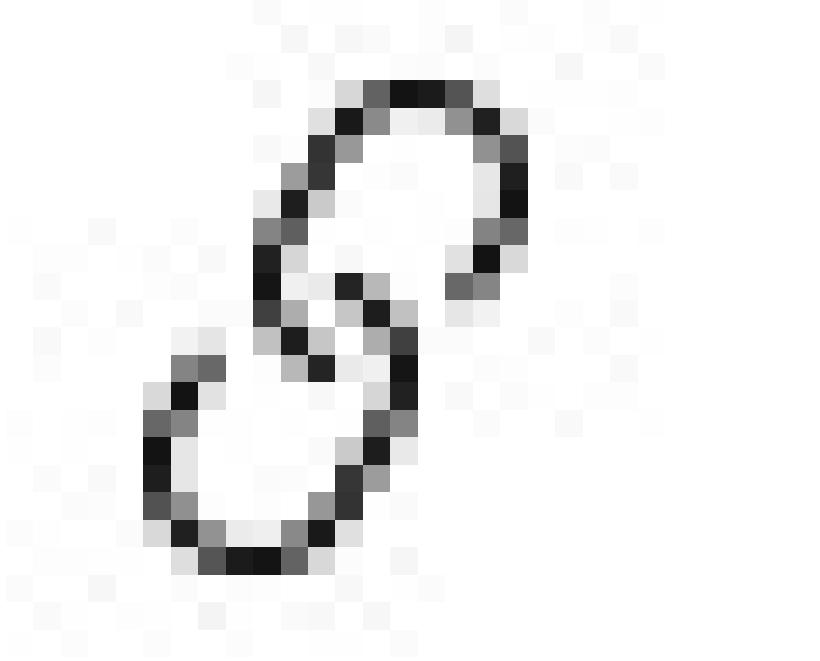
simplify a three-part name by doubling the last character, and the twins had been nicknamed almost immediately.



"You're telling me I should leave the artists' commune that saved me from my stepmother's tyrannical élitism, where I have seven boyfriends, to become the impotent figurehead of another unjust power structure?"

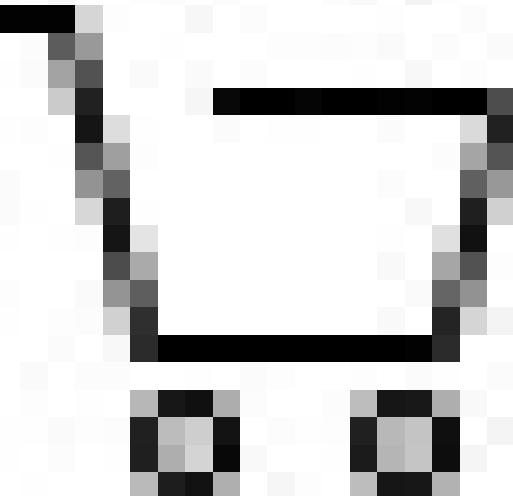
Cartoon by Amy Kurzweil

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It was remarkable how quickly they were incorporated into the school's system. On the second day, Teacher Zhang found two students who spoke some English, and each child shadowed a twin. At the end of the first week, a school rally celebrated Chengdu International Poetry Week, a local festival. The WeChat group distributed a poster with an image of the rally, at which all students had been seated in rows on the sports field. The children wore white uniform shirts and red Young Pioneer scarves, and with their left hands they held blue volumes of a Chinese classic, "[Three Hundred Tang Poems](#)," against their chests.

I saw that Natasha and Ariel had been positioned in the front row. Somebody must have loaned them the scarves, and they clutched books that they couldn't yet read. Like everybody else, the twins were waving their arms at a forty-five-degree angle. Also like the other children, and like many Chinese in photographs, Natasha and Ariel were not smiling. If it weren't for the classical-poetry books, the scene could have been a Maoist rally, and it gave me a strange sensation. But that was all part of what we had signed up for—the characters, the poetry, the nicknames, the rallies. *I am Chinese.*

Like some Chinese American couples, Leslie and I had given our children different family names to be used on each side of the Pacific. In English, the twins were Hesslers, but their Chinese family name—Zhang—came from

Leslie. The first character of their given names—Xing—had been selected more than a century before their birth, by one of their maternal great-great-grandfathers. He was a native of northeastern China, the region once known as Manchuria. Throughout most of history, the northeast had been remote and unpopulated, but it started to develop at the end of the nineteenth century.

The twins' great-great-grandfather capitalized on these changes by buying an oil press and flour mill. Soon, he became the largest landowner in his village, and he established the foundation for what he hoped would become a great clan. He married four wives, built a family compound, and opened a primary school for his offspring and some other local children. For good measure, he named the next twenty generations of Zhangs. These names were arranged in a poem that read, in classical Chinese:

*Feng Li Tong Xing Dian
Hong Lian Yu Bao Chao
Wan Chuan Jia Qing Yan
Jiu Yang Guo En Zhao*

The members of each generation would adopt one character in their names, following the lines in succession—a poem that, in human terms, would be finished in approximately five hundred years. As part of the fourth generation, Ariel and Natasha were given Xing, the fourth character, which means “prospering.” The poem connects the family’s success to that of China:

The phoenix stands in the palace of prospering together
The swan connects and nurtures the dynasty of treasures
Ten thousand generations pass on the continuing family celebration
Nine ornaments display the favor of the nation.

The Zhang patriarch believed in Confucian values, but he was also open to some new ideas. At the family school, he had his daughters educated alongside his sons, which in previous eras would have been unheard of. He decided that his first wife’s second son—the twins’ great-grandfather—should be prepared to enter the modern world. The boy was sent to the first middle school in Jilin Province that followed a curriculum called New

Learning. The school taught the Chinese classics, but the top priorities were mathematics, history, geography, and the natural sciences. The boy excelled, and in his late teens he won a scholarship to study in the United States.

At some point after arriving in America, in 1920, he marked the transition by adopting a new name: Zhang Shenfu. The last two characters come from a classical phrase that means “many diligent men drafted into service.” Shenfu was part of one of the first significant waves of Chinese students to come to the U.S., and this was also when John Dewey was spreading his ideas across China. In America, young Chinese tended to major in pragmatic subjects that they believed would be useful in their homeland. More than a third of the Chinese students who went to the United States between 1905 and 1924 became engineers.

Shenfu had intended to study literature, but he switched his major to mining engineering. He attended the Michigan College of Mines, near the Canadian border, and after graduation he worked a variety of jobs across America. In his diary, he describes his work experience in terms of patriotic responsibility:

January 26, 1926

China still does not have a person who manufactures machinery. To have it begin with me in the future would be a most wonderful thing.

February 4, 1926

Harbin's transport is very convenient; I would like to do some work there. But its railways are all in the hands of foreigners. This is a hateful thing.

He often exhorts himself to self-improvement, and he admires American technology and many aspects of the political traditions. But he maintains a deep wariness of the culture:

January 1, 1926

My personal conduct must be honorable and in my dealings I must be more frugal.

I had lunch with my landlord, Harry Weart. His neighbors, an old couple, like to play with dogs and birds, and they spoke of their pets. I am disgusted by this kind of talk.

January 9, 1926

The youth society in America is all about dancing and cars. Family life has been completely destroyed. The women pursue dissolution and the men seek idleness as pleasure. Thefts and murders are increasing by the day. Morality is regressing. . . . China must take America as a forerunner of what is to come.

In the two-thousands, when Leslie was researching her book "[Factory Girls](#)," which includes some sections on family history, she translated entries with the assistance of a scholar of classical Chinese. In the diary, rows of Chinese characters are punctuated by the English names of various enterprises: Sincerity Coal Company, in Herrin, Illinois; International Lead Refining Company, in East Chicago, Indiana. Shenfu tries factory jobs, engineering jobs, mining jobs. While visiting mines in Colorado, he finds a restaurant called Mandarin Chop Suey. ("There was a half-Chinese waitress who was very pretty and cute, only sixteen years old.") Sometimes, in these hard-edged towns, he feels unsafe:

April 26, 1926

In the morning I went to the factory to work. The night before, two blacks killed a white guy with a knife. Yesterday the whites set fire to a black church. The situation on the streets is very nervous. Tonight the whites have chased all the blacks out of the area. I packed my luggage and will go to New York tomorrow.

This fear seems to have passed quickly, or maybe the excesses of the Roaring Twenties were a distraction. They must have seemed nearly as bizarre to a mining Manchurian as they would have to a Martian:

May 22, 1926

In the morning I went into the No. 72 mine and looked at the rotary dumps.

Since I started work here, I have gotten up every morning at 6:15. I am full of energy. People should get up early and not oversleep.

A theatre operator in New York ordered a woman to take off her clothes before five hundred guests and stand in a giant bottle of alcohol, then he served the alcohol to the guests. There is a lawsuit about this.

In 1927, after seven years away, Shenfu returned to China. His father—the man who had named twenty generations of Zhangs—welcomed his son with a grand celebration in the village. The following day, the patriarch pummelled Shenfu on the backside with a traditional wooden rod called a *jiafa*. The ritual beating was carried out because, on the other side of the ocean, the young man had changed his major without requesting permission from his father. Nearly a century later, it seems incredible: a Chinese parent who beat his son for switching from literature to engineering.

In Chengdu, Leslie and I had thought that math would be relatively manageable for the girls, because numbers are universal. But we quickly realized that Chinese textbooks often bury digits beneath a pile of words. Much of Unit 1 was dedicated to logistics in a crowded country, as students waded through word problems that involved seating large numbers of people on buses, trains, and boats. There were also questions about schoolyard rallies:

The class has 18 boys and 18 girls who will participate in drill performances and group calisthenics.

Naughty: “During drill performances, we classmates stand in 4 lines.”

Smiley: “During group calisthenics, one pattern is formed by a set of 3 boys and 3 girls.”

In drill performances, what’s the average number of people standing in each line?

During calisthenics, how many patterns can be formed by 36 people?

Problems were often conveyed through dialogues between cartoon characters, some of whom had loaded names: Naughty, Little Sloppy, Clever Dog, Wise Old Man. Long paragraphs included irrelevant background information, with some details designed to distract. Occasionally, a mistake was deliberately inserted into a word problem:

While multiplying one two-digit number by another two-digit number, Little Sloppy misreads 22 as 25, and as a result his answer is higher than the correct answer by 69. What is the correct answer?

After a long day teaching at Sichuan University, the last thing I wanted to do was clean up Little Sloppy's second digits. But Leslie and I plowed ahead, dictionaries at hand. Sometimes we came across a word that we didn't know even in English. In Unit 7, we learned *run*, or "intercalary," which, according to Merriam-Webster, means "inserted in a calendar." Cai Cai and Rou Rou kept missing questions about *run* years, until we read the fine print on page 69 of their math textbook:

[Every four years] there is a year that adds 1 day in February, for a total of 366 days, and these are called *run* years. It is also stipulated that if a year ends in double zeros, it must be divisible by 400 in order to qualify as a *run* year. So the year 2000 is a *run* year, but the year 1700 is not a *run* year.

If Leslie or I had ever learned the divisible-by-four-hundred rule about leap years, we had long since forgotten. After all, it would be personally relevant only if we lived until the year 2100, when, at the age of a hundred and thirty, we would need to make plans for a February with just twenty-eight days. But Chinese third graders needed this information now:

Out of 1900, 1996, 2018, and 2016, how many *run* years are there?

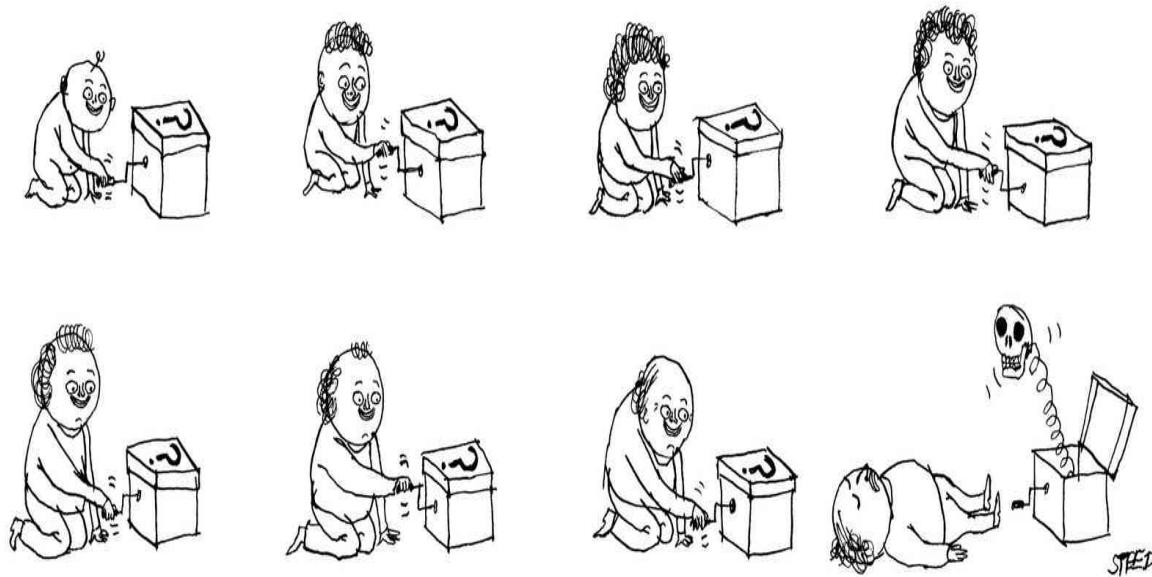
Out of 1800, 1960, and 2040, which is not a *run* year?

Children also had to memorize the number of days in each month, and questions were devious:

Ping Ping: "I was looking through a calendar and saw that there was one year when November had five Saturdays and five Sundays."

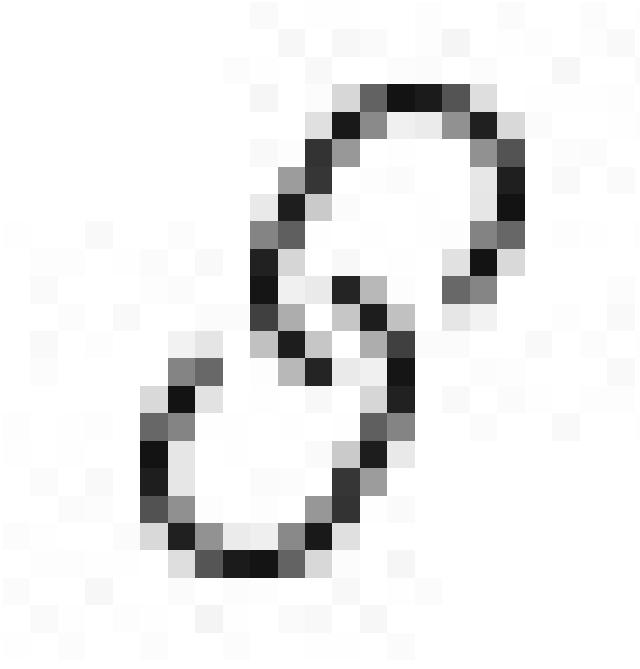
Huang Feifei: "So what day of the week would November 1st have been that year?"

Was this really math? Chinese learning strategies often depend heavily on rote memorization, and I had assumed that math would involve repetitive worksheets. But the subject was far more dynamic than that. Even the problems had problems—students had to figure out what the question was really asking, and which information was extraneous. They were required to show how they arranged equations, and grading was strict. At the end of the first semester, when parents gathered for a conference at the school, the math instructor concluded her talk with a statement on values. "Math is virtue," she declared. "Math is a way to cultivate yourself."



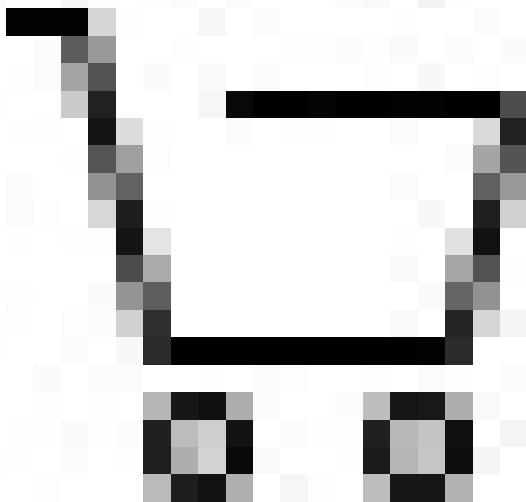
Cartoon by Edward Steed

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It also seemed tailor-made for a hyper-competitive society in which citizens needed to be alert. One guiding principle behind Chinese third-grade math could be summarized as: Don't be a sucker. Leslie said that when you read an American exam you can tell that the writers of the exam want children to

get things right. But the authors of Chinese exams are aiming for wrong answers.

Our favorite question that semester appeared on page 56 of the math textbook. There was a drawing of a mirror, and inside the mirror was an image of a clock. The question read:

Long Yiming started to do his homework after he got home from school. In the mirror, he could see that his wall clock (which had only graduated markings, no numbers) said the time was 6:30. After Long Yiming finished his homework, he turned on the television, and “Dragon Gate Story,” which is broadcast at 18:30, was just beginning. How is this possible?

Those were typical distractions—the digressive grammar, the confusing use of both “6:30” and “18:30,” the sneaky detail of a clock without numbers. But the principle remained the same: Don’t be a sucker. If an image is reversed, an hour hand that appears to be to the left of six o’clock is actually to the right. Rou Rou scrawled the answer in her fledgling characters:

He saw “6:30” in the mirror, but the time was really 5:30. So he did homework for one hour.

Shortly after the twins’ Chinese great-grandfather returned from the United States, one of their American great-grandfathers made his own academic journey. Frank Dietz—my mother’s father—travelled across the Atlantic rather than the Pacific. Eventually, he settled on a different version of Zhang Shenfu’s dream: to study in the West and then apply that knowledge in China.

Like his Chinese counterpart, Frank had grown up in a provincial town that was starting to develop. His father, who worked for a train line in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, died suddenly, at the age of twenty-nine, probably after being infected by an early wave of the Spanish flu. Frank, the eldest of three brothers, was only six. In time, his mother realized that she couldn’t raise the boys alone, and she enrolled them as boarding students at Subiaco Abbey, a Benedictine monastery in west-central Arkansas. Frank was a talented student, and the monks encouraged his interest in the priesthood.

In 1929, the Benedictines sent Frank, who was eighteen, to study as a monk at Sant'Anselmo all'Aventino, an abbey in Rome. As part of the transition, he changed his name to Frank Anselm Dietz. In Rome, he kept a diary, which, like the journals of Zhang Shenfu, has been passed down by descendants. Sometimes these two young men—one writing in classical Chinese, the other in English—comment on the same things. Both wrote about Benito Mussolini on anniversaries of January 3, 1925, the day on which he had assumed the powers of a dictator.

Zhang Shenfu:

January 3, 1926

Since Mussolini's rise, Italy's social situation has improved and the ambitions of its citizens have increased and recovered very much. This will create more problems for the rest of Europe.

Frank Dietz:

January 3, 1931

Read Mussolini's good-will speech to America. I think about half of it is "boloney."

Both diaries describe poor health, undoubtedly from the stress of living in strange environments. Language was part of the challenge. Shenfu learned English, and Frank battled with Latin, Italian, and Hebrew. One patch of common ground between Confucians and Benedictines is self-flagellation, and the tone of certain Shenfu entries—*in my dealings I must be more frugal*—is echoed by Frank:

January 12, 1931

Am dreadfully lazy and "sleep in" for the first time this year, and Deo volente, the last time.

January 24, 1931

Can't get any interest in any of my classes and don't do any work all day. This can't go on!

But the writers' orientations toward their home countries are vastly different. For Shenfu, China's poverty and political chaos represent personal burdens, and his entries are full of distressed references to warlords, race traitors, and foreign aggressors. Frank, on the other hand, almost never comments on news from the United States. His boat docks at Naples the month of the stock-market crash of 1929, but he never refers to that event, or to the Depression. Apparently, Frank is confident that the United States will continue to flourish in his absence, and, in any case, this is not his struggle. He often seems to lack direction, but then, in the spring of his second year, there's a sudden spark of life:

March 18, 1931

Dom Francis Clougherty, chancellor of the Catholic University, Peking, arrives here to-day on his way back to China. A big strapping Irishman.

March 22, 1931

Fr. Clougherty is very interesting to listen to. According to him the University is under a perfectly solid foundation and he has received promises to come out to China from a considerable number of very capable teachers, both Benedictine and otherwise.

March 23, 1931

All small talk among Americans is now about China.

March 25, 1931

Pontifical High Mass this morning and Solemn Vespers before dinner. . . . Talk to Hugh and Donald about China upon my return. Fr. Clougherty had a big day to-day but came down to Donald's room and gives Donald, Hugh, Edward and me an inspiring talk. We are so wrought up that when Clougherty leaves at 12 o'clock Donald, H, and I stay up and talk it over till almost 3 A.M. I believe that this is the

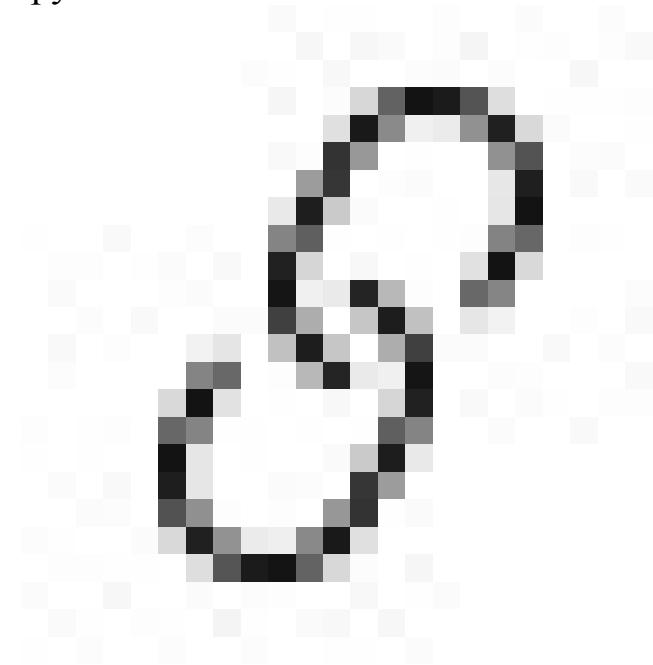
turning point in my life and I am going to sign up for China. God be with us!



"He's not even appreciating the window seat."

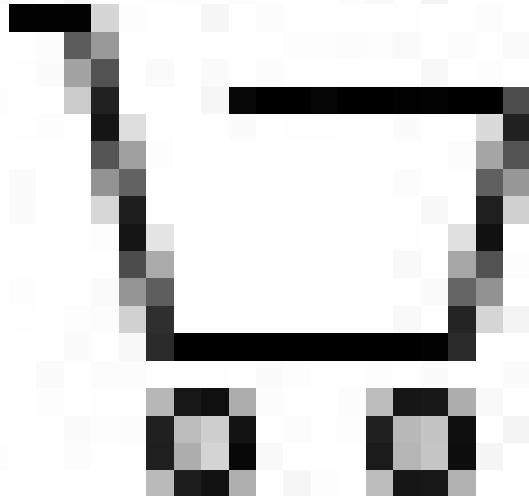
Cartoon by Maggie Larson

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The Catholic University of Peking, known in Chinese as Fu Jen, had been established by Benedictines from Pennsylvania in 1925. Like many foreign projects of the time, the university sought to combine pragmatism and faith, science and God. Pope Pius XI issued a proclamation: “You should supply the University at Peking on the one hand with the men best fitted to govern, to teach, and to bring up souls in piety, and on the other hand to provide the equipment and instruments to teach the sciences properly.”

Father Francis Clougherty—the “big strapping Irishman”—was actually Irish American, from Pennsylvania. His visit to Rome was brief, but he inspired Frank and other young monks to change career plans. That spring, Frank’s diary tracks their progress as they try to negotiate with the formidable Catholic bureaucracy. Some Church titles would not have been out of place in the future People’s Republic:

March 27, 1931

Everything is China at present. I breathe, eat and sleep *China* and I think that is about the case with all of our “China group.” Fr. Clougherty is sick in bed this morning. . . . He & Donald have an interview with Cardinal Van Roseum, Prefect of Propaganda, this afternoon.

May 8, 1931

Raph receives very encouraging letter from his senior at Washington saying that he has no objection to Raph's changing his vows for China.

Frank's superiors remained noncommittal about his China dream. In 1932, Frank returned to the United States, where he planned to be ordained as a priest. He told his Benedictine superior that he had received a call from God to serve as a teacher at the Catholic University of Peking. The superior replied that occasionally God gives a false call, in order to test a young man's obedience to his earthly superior. And, in this case, the earthly superior expected Frank to teach the next generation of schoolboys at Subiaco Abbey, in rural Arkansas.

By the middle of November, Rou Rou and Cai Cai had memorized more than five hundred characters, and they understood most of what was spoken in class. Leslie and I had worried about the twins becoming a burden, but Teacher Zhang never expressed frustration. I couldn't imagine handling two foreigners along with fifty-three other third graders, especially in the Chinese way. There were no groups or divisions: all fifty-five moved through the material at the same pace. At one conference with parents, Teacher Zhang talked about *weibade wenti*, "the problem of the tail." Using a PowerPoint slide, she showed us how, during the previous semester, seven students had failed to reach ninety per cent in the final exam. This term, the number of sub-ninety children had been reduced to four. "These are the students that we spend the most time with," she said. It was probably one reason that she seemed comfortable with the foreigners—if Rou Rou and Cai Cai lengthened the tail, Teacher Zhang could handle it.

Whereas American education often values small classes, the Chinese system tends to focus on efficiency and specialization. A typical American primary-school teacher handles all subjects, but Teacher Zhang taught only Language. She was assisted by a teacher in training, who was also a specialist, and another instructor came to the classroom for math, another for English, and so on across the subjects. Throughout the day, children hardly moved from their seats. Lunch was wheeled into the classroom on a metal cart, and the kids ate at their desks, like little workaholics. During class, they sat with both feet on the floor and their arms crossed neatly atop the desks. If

a teacher called on a student, the child stood up before speaking. In math, whenever a student drew a line in an equals sign, a minus sign, or a division sign, she was required to use a ruler. For a while, the math teacher tolerated Cai Cai and Rou Rou writing these symbols freehand, but then she started deducting points, and the twins quickly adjusted to using rulers. This discipline was part of the over-all emphasis on efficiency: if children were orderly, they wasted less time.

The system also maximized parental support while minimizing input to effectively zero. Parents were discouraged from entering the front gate, with the occasional exception of photographers or others with special business. On WeChat, parents busily engaged in fee collecting and other administrative duties, and they exchanged countless messages about homework, uniforms, and virtually every other topic under the sun. But I never saw a parent post advice for Teacher Zhang. There were no suggestions, no complaints, and no criticisms. The message from the school was clear: We are in charge.

And the “we” of the chat group—the way that parents were subsumed by their children—was also true in person. Parent-teacher conferences were held with everybody at once, and adults sat in their children’s assigned desks. Only Leslie and I attended as a complete Mama-and-Baba set, because having twins gave us the right to two seats. Every other couple had to select one parent to attend.

The moment the adults occupied the desks, their body language changed. They kept their eyes to the front, and they didn’t fiddle with their phones except to take pictures of PowerPoint slides. The conferences could last for two hours, but parents remained fully attentive. In four semesters, nobody asked a single question. That message was also clear: You are here to listen.

Another Chinese educational strategy involves a hierarchy of academic priorities, almost to the point of triage. At Chengdu Experimental, everything revolved around Language and mathematics, which produced almost all the student’s homework—usually, a total of between two and three hours a night. These two subjects also had the best textbooks; in particular, the math book was brilliantly organized. But some of the other textbooks could have been tossed together by Little Sloppy and his cronies.

In English class, the government-published books were full of inane stories about accident-prone children who were constantly falling down, breaking bones, and going to the hospital. These dumb kids couldn't even board a plane without experiencing some far-fetched disaster:

Mary and her mother are flying over the mountains in a small plane. Suddenly there is a loud noise. The plane has a problem! It crashes. Mary's mother is hurt. She says, "Mary, I can't move. We need help." Mary has a good idea. She writes SOS with her feet in the snow.

There were more catastrophes in Morality and Rules, the political class that was supposed to teach third graders to behave well and to love the Communist Party and the nation. In that textbook, children often drowned in rivers and ponds, and they were abducted by apparently friendly aunties who turned out to be predators. One chapter told the story of Mo Mo, a nine-year-old who plays with his father's cigarette lighter in a vacant field. The good news is that the dedicated staff at the hospital save Mo Mo's life. The bad news:

But he suffered extensive burns all over his body, resulting in permanent disability. Blind curiosity and careless experimentation have brought great misfortune to Mo Mo, his family, and society.

It was telling that the nouns "curiosity" and "experimentation" were both connected to negative adjectives. If one guiding principle of Chinese primary education was "Don't be a sucker," another seemed to be "Fear everything outside the classroom." This was one of many contradictions at an institution whose name included the word "experimental." The school's beautiful campus included basketball courts, a soccer field, a jungle gym, and a track. But I rarely saw children playing outdoors. They had daily recess and P.E. class, but the math teacher had the right to requisition these periods if she felt that kids needed to study. Occasionally, Rou Rou and Cai Cai had three math classes in a single day. After school, when I asked them what they had done at recess, they often answered, "Math."

Strict safety rules forbade any child below sixth grade to touch the jungle gym. The twins found this ridiculous—they said that the jungle gym would have bored any Colorado kindergartner. Near the displays about the school's

history, there was a sign with the heading “Rules for Primary School Students.” The guidelines ran for nearly three hundred characters, organized into nine parts, from the Party to Polonius and beyond:

1. Love the Party, Love the country, Love the people. . . .
6. Be honest and keep your promises. Insure that you are as good as your word, don’t lie or cheat, return borrowed things on time. . . .
8. Cherish life and keep safe. Stop at red lights and go at green lights, avoid drowning and don’t play with fire. . . .

The rules didn’t mention individuality, self-motivated study, or other virtues that had been extolled by Hu Yanli, the principal and John Dewey acolyte. In the schoolyard, the sole reference to “democratic spirit” was the one that appeared on the same sign as the name of Li Peng, the former premier. Nearby, there was a short biography of Li and a display of his calligraphy. Of course, none of these materials mentioned that, in June of 1989, Li Peng had reportedly advocated for the use of force to suppress the student and worker protests in Tiananmen Square. In the wake of the massacre, in which at least hundreds of people died, the most famous alumnus of Chengdu Experimental was nicknamed the Butcher of Beijing.

After Dewey’s lecture tour, he never returned to China, and most of his ideas failed to gain traction there in the long term. Mao Zedong quickly turned against the principle of nonviolence, although he continued to value pragmatism and experimentation, at least in the early years of the revolution. Mao, in his home province of Hunan, researched local peasant movements in a systematic manner, and his observations contradicted dogmatic Marxists. Mao concluded that support for Communism was more likely to come from rural regions than from the urban working class, an idea that proved instrumental in the victory of the Chinese Communist Party. Nevertheless, after Mao rose to power, he initiated political campaigns attacking Dewey and his Chinese followers.

This was a common pattern for early educational exchanges between the U.S. and China. It was largely a history of missed connections and lost opportunities; from the American perspective, it often seemed as if China

took the pragmatism without the democratic values, the science without the faith. In the case of Frank Dietz, the China dream ended quickly. His first false call from God was also his last: without the option of going to Beijing, Frank decided to leave the Benedictines. He enrolled in law school, married, had two children, and eventually ran a small business selling insurance.

Later in life, my grandfather rarely talked about his decision to decline ordination. He remained a devout Catholic, and I never learned about his interest in China while he was alive. In my mid-twenties, not long before I went to China with the Peace Corps, my mother gave me Frank's diaries. I often wondered what would have happened if he had joined the other Benedictines at the Catholic University of Peking. Father Clougherty—the “big strapping Irishman”—spent more than two decades in China. During the Second World War, while directing relief work in support of Chinese soldiers who were fighting Japan, he was arrested by the Japanese. He spent four years as a prisoner of war; after surviving that experience, he had a long retirement in the U.S. Back in Beijing, Catholic University was taken over by the Communists, who came to power in 1949. The university's facilities were assigned to Party-run institutions. Eventually, another version of the university was founded in Taiwan, where it's known as Fu Jen Catholic University.

Zhang Shenfu's working life was also shaped by war. During the fight against Japan, he used his American education to oversee Chinese mines on behalf of the Kuomintang government. Accompanied by his wife, Xiangheng, Shenfu moved frequently, and all of the couple's five children were born in remote mining towns. Shenfu continued his diary:

July 17, 1940

These few years have passed quickly without much meaning. First, I have no friends, because I have lived so long in the mountains, separated from the outside world. Second, I have no ideals in life, knowing only about mines and mining work. What is the ultimate aim of life? I have not decided yet. Forty-two years have passed in this way. This is worthy of pity and regret.

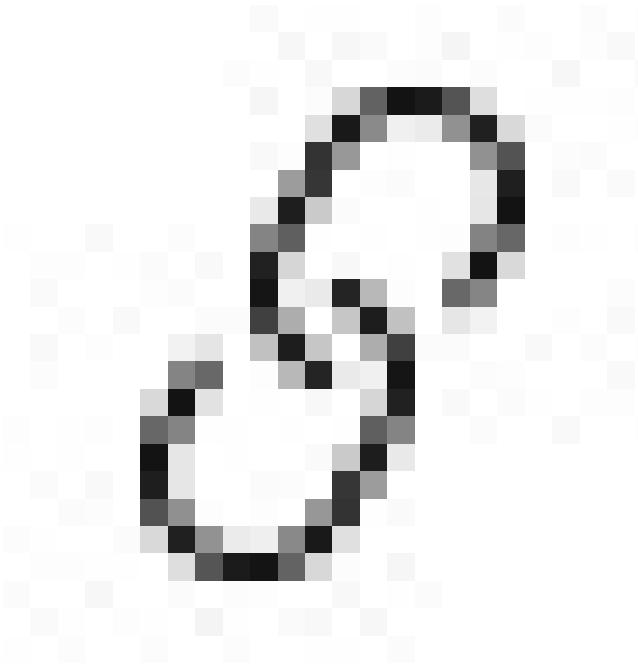
After Japan surrendered, in August, 1945, the Kuomintang needed to regain control of valuable mines. Chinese Communists were building support in the northeast, often with the help of Soviet troops. The following January, the Kuomintang instructed Shenfu to oversee the return of an important coal mine in Fushun, in Liaoning Province. Fushun was dangerous, and another official, who was known for political maneuvering, had found a way to decline the assignment. But Shenfu had always been motivated by duty. Unlike Frank, he had never taken a monk's vow of obedience, but his patriotism seemed as powerful as any religious faith. He accepted the Fushun assignment.

At the mine, local Communist and Soviet agents prevented Shenfu from carrying out a proper inspection. He tried to return to the provincial capital, but a band of armed soldiers boarded the train at a deserted station. At nine o'clock on a bitterly cold evening, the men marched Shenfu and six other Kuomintang mining engineers to a nearby hillside, where, with their hands bound behind their backs, they were murdered with bayonets. Shenfu was stabbed eighteen times. A Chinese newspaper reported his last words: "To die for my duty, I have no complaints."



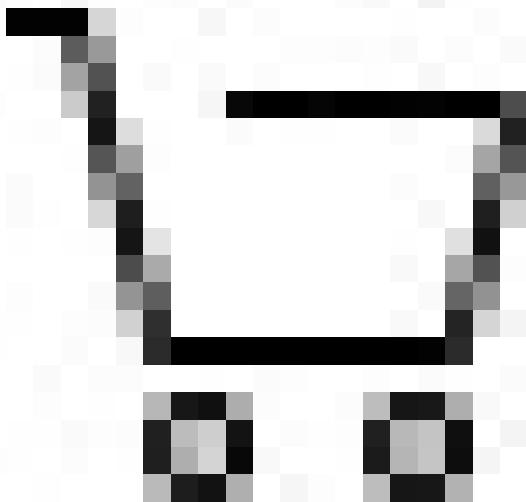
"I warned you there'd be pinecones and needles, jutting roots, sharp twigs, and every kind of pebble known to man."
Cartoon by Guy Richards Smit

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Shenfu's second son was only nine. His name was Zhang Ligang—Li was the second character of the patriarch's poem. The family fled the mainland in 1949, and the boy became a standout student in Taipei. For graduate school, he also journeyed across the Pacific. He studied engineering and

physics in the United States, where he married another science student from Taiwan. Eventually, they became American citizens. With the births of Leslie and her brother—Tonghe and Tongyi—the family poem inched forward another character. Back in China, the official who had declined the Fushun assignment abandoned the Kuomintang, joined the Communist Party, enjoyed a long career in government, and lived to the age of a hundred and two.

Nobody in the Party took credit or responsibility for Shenfu's assassination, and they never explained why they had targeted a civilian. For Shenfu, the Communists had always been mysterious. In America, almost twenty years to the day before he was killed, he had written:

January 19, 1926

Those people who sing the praises of Communism, it is hard to know what they are really thinking in their hearts. Lenin and Trotsky have endured many sufferings without changing their orientation. They have good morality. But China's Communists, I don't know what their morality is like.

During Cai Cai and Rou Rou's second year at Chengdu Experimental, they learned to use Morality and Rules class as a time to catch up on math homework. By now, they had worked through the boxes of flash cards and could study at grade level. On some cards, the contextual sentences also did the Party's work:

Plunder: The imperialist countries plundered a lot of wealth in China.

In June, 2020, along with their classmates, Cai Cai and Rou Rou were given gold pins that marked their membership in the Young Pioneers. They wore the pins and red scarves on Mondays, and they participated in the various rallies in the schoolyard. The twins seemed instinctively skeptical of these routines, and sometimes they came home with tales of a lesson about American imperialists or China's claim to the Spratly Islands. Leslie and I always told them that they should be respectful, because they were guests at the school, but that they had no obligation to believe everything they were taught.

Once, in a speech at Peking University, President Xi Jinping described the project of educating young people in core socialist values as similar to “fastening buttons on clothes.” He said, “If the first button is fastened wrong, the remaining buttons will be fastened wrong.” Leslie and I realized that there was no need to counteract the propaganda, because our daughters, as Americans, had buttons that were wrong from the start. Cai Cai told me that sometimes in Morality and Rules class she kept the text open with her math book inside. She also liked to *zoushen*, a term that means “the spirit walks away”—to daydream. My own students at Sichuan University reported doing similar things during their mandatory political courses.

It was one of many mixed lessons in a Chinese school. Politics was omnipresent, which meant that students often learned to tune out the Party. Some classes taught more eternal truths about bureaucracy, principles, and the art of dissociation. A chapter of the fourth-grade Language textbook told the story of Liu Yuxi, a Tang-dynasty poet and government official. In the story, Liu takes a stance against corruption and is relegated to a remote place called Hezhou. In Hezhou, a petty superior repeatedly demotes Liu to worse lodgings. With each bureaucratic transfer, the poet’s residence is diminished, but he finds his own way to *zoushen*—he gazes out the window and writes a subtle verse about the disconnect between what he sees and what’s happening inside his head. The story concludes by noting that, a thousand years later, Liu’s poems are still alive, while the petty superior is *yipou huangtu*—“a handful of yellow earth.”

In the book “[John Dewey in China](#),” Jessica Ching-Sze Wang, a scholar of education, notes that Dewey believed there was much to be learned from Chinese traditions, a conclusion that seems common among foreigners who spend significant time in Chinese schools. More recently, in “[Little Soldiers](#),” the Chinese American author Lenora Chu described her son’s experience in a Shanghai kindergarten. Chu is critical of many aspects of the school, but she admires its high academic standards. She also pushes back against the common notion that Chinese rigor necessarily stifles creativity. Chu believes that “a strong academic foundation, couched in knowledge, enables higher-order thinking and even the creative process.”

Both Ariel and Natasha liked Chinese math for similar reasons. It was more than simply a gateway to *STEM*: the subject was full of words and ways of

thinking. As a parent, I liked the systematic nature of Chinese schooling, the specialization of the teachers, and the dignity with which they carried themselves. I also liked the fact that nobody cared what I liked—along with every other Baba and Mama, I was welcome to flush any nervous parental energy down the whirlpool of WeChat. During our time in Chengdu, my older sister, who had taught for nearly thirty years in primary and middle schools in Missouri, left the profession. She told me that she had noticed children and parents becoming less respectful of teachers. My sister’s experience doesn’t seem unusual for American teachers, whose burnout rate is high.

I rarely heard such complaints in China. In the nineteen-nineties, I taught English at a teachers’ college there, and since then I’ve stayed in close contact with more than a hundred of my former students, whom I often ask to fill out surveys. I estimate that at least ninety per cent of them still work as teachers in middle and high schools. In 2021, when I asked them to rate their job satisfaction on a scale of 1 to 10, the average response was 7.9.

Still, despite these teachers’ over-all happiness, they are highly critical of the system’s flaws. “China’s education is like junk food,” one English teacher wrote in response to my survey. Another remarked, “Most of what students are learning at school is useless.” Their peers often complained about the volume of homework and the way that pressure builds as students get older, because of entrance examinations for high school and college. But nobody seemed to have any idea how to change the system. Once, when my family had dinner at the home of one of the twins’ classmates, her parents said they hated enrolling their child in private supplemental courses. “Would I rather have her relaxing and learning things other than math?” the father said. “Of course. But there’s nothing I can do about it. That’s the way all parents feel. It’s too competitive. But, if you want your child to have a chance, you have to do all this stuff.” His solution was to send his daughter to spend summers with relatives in the U.S., where she could learn other things with less pressure.

My family left China in the summer of 2021. Before departing, we attended our final parent-teacher conference. Teacher Zhang warned that some children were getting fat, because of physical inactivity. She also emphasized independence. “You can’t wait until they are eighteen and say,

‘O.K., now you start making your own decisions,’ ” she said. “You shouldn’t fear your child failing.” Of course, these messages were contradicted by the textbooks, the school rules, and the sheer workload. That summer, the Offices of the Chinese Communist Party and State Council issued a series of guidelines that were intended to reduce pressure on children. But getting around the rules turned out to be relatively easy, and, two years later, my teacher friends report that little has changed.

Such failed attempts at reform aren’t entirely different from what happened a century ago, when John Dewey was in China, and Zhang Shenfu was in America, and the Benedictines were establishing their university in Peking. Leslie and I were also following a well-worn path. Like many people with experience in both China and the United States, we wanted something in between. But each country had a tendency toward extremes, and deeply entrenched systems resisted reform. Solutions tended to be at the individual level, like the classmate whose parents sent her overseas every summer. In order to combine the strengths of both places, it seemed necessary to have two lives, two educations, two names.

After returning to Colorado, we decided that Cai Cai and Rou Rou would continue to follow the Chinese curriculum for Language and mathematics. Our rural public school in the town of Ridgway agreed, and two mornings a week the twins stayed home and connected by video with a tutor in Chengdu. At night, they did Chinese math problems:

A certain number, when divided by 3, leaves a remainder of 2; when divided by 4, leaves a remainder of 3; when divided by 5, leaves a remainder of 4. What is the smallest that this number could be?

During the first week of school in Colorado, Ariel reported that she had to stop herself from crossing her arms on the desk and standing up whenever teachers called on her. During the third week, the Ridgway middle school bused all students and teachers to a lake on the Uncompahgre Plateau, where, at an elevation of nearly ten thousand feet, they camped for three days. Midway through the semester, Natasha announced that her favorite class was shop. She and her classmates began the term by fixing tables and chairs in the library, and later they learned how to change an automobile tire. One morning, the teacher showed them how to use an extension ladder. He

opened the ladder, propped it against the side of the shop building, and had the children take turns climbing up. Natasha said she was thrilled to stand on the roof of the school without any rails. ♦

By Larissa MacFarquhar

By Leslie Jamison

By Joshua Rothman

By D. T. Max

London Postcard

- Ridding the National Portrait Gallery of Its Gentlemen's-Club Vibe

Ridding the National Portrait Gallery of Its Gentlemen's-Club Vibe

Among the changes that the director, Nicholas Cullinan, has overseen: a higher ratio of females on the walls, Zadie Smith in pastel, and non-polyester staff uniforms.

By [Rebecca Mead](#)



Two decades ago, when Nicholas Cullinan worked part time as a visitor-services assistant at London's National Portrait Gallery, one of his least favorite parts of the job was the uniform. "It was polyester," he explained the other day. "You would put the shirt on, and it was itchy, and it just didn't feel good." In 2015, after stints at the Tate Modern and at New York's Metropolitan Museum, Cullinan was appointed director of the gallery, with a brief to undertake a major renovation of the institution, which reopens this month, after a three-year closure. Among the changes: a new range of gender-neutral, natural-fibre, part-recycled workwear options for the front-of-house staff, emblazoned with the gallery's logo. "It suits all types of bodies, skin tones, and age groups, so I am kind of excited about that," he said.

Cullinan, who is a boyish forty-five, was wearing a slim navy suit over a navy-blue polo shirt, paired with bright-blue sneakers that squeaked on the museum's parquet floors. In a new entrance lobby facing Charing Cross Road, busts of dignitaries were swathed in protective coverings. "Nelson Mandela is *there*," he said, gesturing toward a plinth wrapped in white paper. Previously, visitors to the museum entered through a cumbersome revolving door that was easily mistaken for a side entrance to the National Gallery, its imposing neighbor on Trafalgar Square. Originally, the building's major donor had stipulated that the entrance should be "as close to Trafalgar Square as possible, and as far away from Soho and Covent Garden as possible, because they were insalubrious," Cullinan said. He went on, "One of the very good points that the architect, Jamie Fobert, made is that essentially it was a great public institution that felt more like a private gentlemen's club."

There will be fewer gentlemen on the gallery's walls, at least ratio-wise: of the portraits made in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, almost half will be of women, up from about thirty-five per cent. New commissions include a life-size pastel-and-charcoal representation of Zadie Smith, by Toyin Ojih Odutola, and an oil painting of Jeanette Winterson, by Susanne du Toit. The ground floor now has a new gallery showing contemporary individuals, from Baroness Doreen Lawrence, whose teen-age son, Stephen Lawrence, was murdered in a racially motivated attack, in 1993—in a riveting new portrait by Thomas Ganter—to Michael Eavis, the founder of the Glastonbury performing-arts festival, painted by Sir Peter Blake. Nearby hangs "Work in Progress," a twenty-eight-foot-long collage by the mother-daughter team of Jann Haworth and Liberty Blake, which is stylistically reminiscent of the cover of "Sgt. Pepper's," which Haworth created with Sir Peter, her ex-husband. "Work in Progress" portrays more than a hundred distinguished women from British history. "When you come in, you see people from the newspapers, and then you go upstairs and you go back to the history books," Cullinan said.

Ah, the history books. Upon walls covered with richly colored woollen fabric hang a range of monarchs, statesmen, and other notables, including William Shakespeare, in the only portrait of him believed to be taken from life—the museum's first acquisition, at its founding, in 1856. The earliest portrait in the collection, of King Henry VII, painted in 1505, hangs near a

video representation of the Westminster Tournament Roll, created for Henry VIII in 1511, which includes one of the first British representations of a named Black person, John Blanke, who was a court trumpeter. “It’s not good enough to tell a nonwhite history of Britain that only goes: slavery, Windrush, now,” Cullinan said. “You need to show examples of transcendence, and agency.” He recently pulled off the acquisition of “Portrait of Mai,” which depicts a Polynesian man who travelled to England and, in 1776, was painted in the grand style by Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first such representation of a nonwhite subject. The painting was acquired for fifty million pounds in collaboration with the Getty Museum, which will share it. “I think there’s something very beautiful about the fact that it’s just across the street from where it was painted, and will spend half its time facing the Pacific, where Mai was from,” Cullinan said, deftly.

Like other institutions, the museum is engaged in examining its own history: Liberty Paterson, a Ph.D. student at the University of London, is researching connections to slavery among the museum’s founders, donors, and sitters for portraits. When Cullinan became director, “the criteria for acquiring something was ‘What’s this person’s achievement?’ ” he said. “But that could create a sense that we are a stamp of approval.” He went on, “When I started, I said, ‘Can we talk more about impact than achievement?’ Impact is a bit more nuanced—there’s chiaroscuro, shades of gray. We’re not saying that everyone on our walls is unimpeachable. Every country’s history is complex, and there are things you’re proud of and things you’re very much not proud of.” ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Philip Gourevitch

By Patrick Radden Keefe

On Television

- The End of “Happy Valley,” an Unusually Intimate Crime Drama

The End of “Happy Valley,” an Unusually Intimate Crime Drama

The British cop series, starring Sarah Lancashire, displays a fascination not with violence but with the lengthy shadow it leaves behind.

By [Inkoo Kang](#)



On a misty, windswept day in Brontë country, Sergeant Catherine Cawood (Sarah Lancashire), the protagonist of “Happy Valley,” makes the kind of arrest that sets her apart from other TV cops. After entering a blood-soaked farmhouse, she elicits—softly but persistently—a murder confession from Alison (Susan Lynch), the fortysomething mother of a maladjusted adult son. The previous night, Alison’s son had admitted that he was wanted by the police for the killing of several local prostitutes; in the morning, to spare him from prison, Alison shot him before attempting suicide through an overdose of pills and alcohol. As the sergeant pieces together what happened, she wraps her arms around the dazed mother and cradles her head. Catherine’s recitation of a police caution, the U.K.’s version of the Miranda warning, is as gentle and as absolving as a prayer.

This scene occurs in the second season of “Happy Valley,” which premiered in the U.S. nine years ago. The unusually intimate crime drama is premised on the observation that it is women—especially older women—who have to clean up and live with the messes that men so thoughtlessly make. Season 2 concludes with Catherine staring despondently at her ten-year-old grandson, Ryan (Rhys Connah), dreading the day that she’ll have to tell him about his origins. He’s been informed that his father, Tommy Lee Royce (James Norton), is in prison, but Catherine is loath to burden him with the knowledge that Tommy raped her daughter, Becky, who ended her own life shortly after giving birth to Ryan. (Catherine’s decision to take in the infant herself also led to her divorce from her husband, played by Derek Riddell.) Notably, most of these events took place offscreen, before the start of the series. Though the show’s tensest set pieces can rival the heart-in-the-throat action of any antiheroic police drama, the creator, Sally Wainwright (“Gentleman Jack,” “Last Tango in Halifax”), displays a fascination not with violence but with the lengthy shadow it leaves behind. And yet, despite the weighty subject matter, any trace of self-seriousness is dispelled by the production’s sardonic wit and chatty, neighborly warmth. The show also boasts a tour-de-force central performance by Lancashire, who recently charmed American audiences with her turn as Julia Child in the Max series “Julia.”

This past May, “Happy Valley,” a two-time *BAFTA* winner for best drama, returned for its third and final season on AMC+, BBC America, and the British-programming streaming service Acorn TV. (The final episode will be available on June 26th.) This latest iteration comes nearly seven years after Season 2, and the significant break in between has allowed Wainwright to develop more fully her two animating ideas: that victims of violence have to contend with its consequences long after the wrongdoers have been convicted, and that our culture has a maddening predilection for prioritizing the atonement of men over the pain of women. (The headlines since the #MeToo movement have only borne out Wainwright’s insight into the gendered hierarchy of suffering.) In the Season 3 première, Catherine, just months from retirement, discovers that Ryan, who is now a teen-ager, has been visiting Tommy in prison for the past eighteen months, assisted by family members who hope that the boy may have a tempering influence on his father’s viciousness. The revelation makes it hard not to wonder why Catherine is the only one sane enough to maintain her primordial fury. But

her rage also blinds her to the possibility of those around her being anything but their worst selves: in her eyes, her long-sober sister, Clare (Siobhan Finneran), is always just a bad day away from falling off the wagon, Tommy was born incapable of love, and Ryan may well prove to be his father's son.

Bucolic fields and damp, rolling hills serve as the backdrop for Catherine's many drives, as she zips through rural Yorkshire in her squad car to save dangerously bored yobs from themselves. Comparisons to the movie "Fargo" seem apt, and not just because the characters often look as if they're freezing despite their heavy jackets (and relentless offers of tea); every once in a while, Catherine encounters ordinary shit-heels whose grubby selfishness gets them into situations that quickly veer beyond their control. In the new season, a meek, street-dumb pharmacist named Faisal (Amit Shah), who has a side hustle supplying pills to addicts, gets squeezed by Croatian gangsters displeased about his encroaching on their business, as well as by one of his customers, Joanna (Mollie Winnard), who threatens to report him to the police if he doesn't rent her an apartment to which she can flee her abusive husband (Mark Stanley). Wainwright, whose plotting is frequently coincidence-dependent, seems barely interested in this season's subplots, which include Ryan's mounting conflicts with his splenetic high-school soccer coach, who happens to be Joanna's husband.

Much of Catherine's police work consists of taking the time to learn about the residents of the area. Her compassion—amplified by her Betty Boop lashes, long blond bangs, and disarmingly tender voice—earns her something of a female following around town. Ann (Charlie Murphy), a young woman whom Tommy kidnaps and savagely assaults in the first season, is inspired to join the force after being rescued by Catherine. And Alison, who returns as a reminder of the kinds of people whom communities have to reintegrate once they've served their time, becomes one of the rare uncomplicated confidants in Catherine's life. With its lead more likely to be seen with bruises on her face than with conspicuous makeup, "Happy Valley" could be called gritty or grim, but its darkness never feels put on. Rather, despite the near-farcical pileup of tragedies in Catherine's family, it feels merely like a reflection of the tendency of human misery to reproduce itself through its infliction on the ever more vulnerable.

Is there any point in Catherine’s forgiving Tommy? That’s the question that propels the third season, which strives for a thematically coherent dénouement. Catherine’s desire to protect Ryan from the facts of his gruesome inception naturally leads to unforeseen repercussions; he’s told that the things Tommy did to Becky were “not very nice”—a bit of English understatement popular in the region which also allows family secrets to fester and spread. Sensing an opportunity in Catherine’s reticence, Tommy is eager to fill in the gaps in his son’s knowledge, and Ryan is just as keen to form his own experiences with his charismatic father without the heaviness of everything that happened before his birth. Catherine can see Ryan’s prison visits only as a profound betrayal. But, whether she can bear it or not, her relationship with the man who derailed her life must shift in order to accommodate her grandson’s inevitable curiosity about his paternity.

The tight focus on the mortal feud between Ryan’s grandmother and his father—who nurses an implacable grudge against the policewoman who has tried to keep his son away from him for the boy’s entire childhood—has the unfortunate consequence of depriving the story lines of Ryan’s interiority. (For him to want to visit Tommy, one presumes, he must have forgotten, or forgiven, his father’s attempt to kill him in a desperate murder-suicide in the first season.) To build toward a dramatic crescendo, Tommy escapes the authorities while standing trial for a separate crime. But the plot contortions pay off in the final showdown between Catherine and Tommy, an animalistically shrewd narcissist but also a far more emotionally complex man than Catherine ever gave him credit for. Quickly, the symphonic clamor falls away. It was only the two soloists who ever mattered. ♦

By Nathan Heller

By James Lasdun

By Ann Patchett

By Rachel Aviv

Poems

- “[After the Ballet](#)”
- “[Seven Weeks](#)”

By [Christian Wiman](#)

Read by the author.

I in my whistling instants
sauntering the drab concourses
or thoughtless under the plebeian stars
make of myself a kind of company
that to its origin owes
only obedience to the one
injunction against despair.
O my lost dappers and sleeks,
my paragons of gunge
and scuttled luck,
all my fellow credibles,
all my little filths,
come back. Come back
from the sallowing past,
from the herd immunity
to miracles, for I have seen
a room of depilated marble
moving, a choreography of souls
that would have restored
my own even without
the demoiselle who,
in a moment so tensely silent
it seemed the soul's nerve,
swanned her arms, torqued
her immaculate back, and executed
an improvised, exquisite, and irrefutable
toot.

By [Janet Malcolm](#)

By [Robert A. Caro](#)

By [Philip Gourevitch](#)

By [Patrick Radden Keefe](#)

By [Laura Kolbe](#)

Read by the author.

Only by keeping always one-third full
will my stomach give peace. Empty
it heaves. Topped up, shrieks,
seeks to undo itself.

Is this what I taught it: keep just one shard
of any good thing? Pitch the rest
or moan on emptiness? I think
of each time I was almost falling
in love, crouched a half step behind
the feeling long as I could.

One rye crumb in my throat to soak
how wet the word could make
my tongue. To stopper me.

Little below the breastbone
then but autumn's consommé.

My wrinkled gastric lining
rolling like a rotary phone.

Then giving in so much. Almost always
love fled in a burst. I empty
sat in bilious pain, turned and alone,
a jackknife tossed at a wall, begging
for purchase, drooling down
the particleboard. Keep things
at *almost* always. Keep always the give
not quite undone. The half-stopped
seek. The crouch still curled.

The couch with its washable upholstery,
its holsters of grief that afternoon,
in hotel'd midnight, when I misfielded
all the gift for love I almost caught.

Isn't that what heartburn is? Not knowing how
to bed a good thing down? To settle with the good?
To square it where spleen meets rib
I stole in quiet after. Not wrecking me

all across the porcelain. Nothing teaches me
to be full without revolt.

Still I'd almost always steal it all again.

By Susan B. Glasser

By Chandi Deitmer

By Elizabeth Kolbert

By Jelani Cobb

Psst Dept.

- [Sources: Shams Charania Leaves Hotel Room](#)

Sources: Shams Charania Leaves Hotel Room

The N.B.A. scoop merchant prepared for the rookie draft by hunkering down at the Westin in Times Square and spending eighteen hours a day on his phone.

By [Dan Greene](#)



The work of an N.B.A. scoop merchant can be solitary, even antisocial: texts with execs, D.M.s with players, phone calls with agents, all carefully out of earshot of interlopers. Earlier this week, Shams Charania, perhaps the foremost breaker of basketball news—he tweets trades, signings, and draft picks, sometimes seconds before their official announcement—was making a rare public appearance, in the lobby of the Westin in Times Square. He'd been in town for three days to prepare for the N.B.A. draft, which would be held the following evening in Brooklyn. He'd only occasionally left his hotel room, and had just wrapped a self-shot video urgently alerting the world that the Boston Celtics were pursuing a trade for Kristaps Porzingis, the former Knicks All-Star. Charania's sister had encouraged him to go sightseeing. "I'll walk three blocks and be, like, Get me back to my room," he said.

He sat before a MacBook with his iPhone in hand, wearing a black bomber jacket and, in his left ear, an AirPod. The Westin is the preferred pre-draft hotel for N.B.A. types, so it's an ideal place to work sources. A number of conspicuously tall, conspicuously young men were milling about. Victor Wembanyama, the seven-foot-three, nineteen-year-old Frenchman who would be the draft's top selection, ambled into a nearby conference room.

Charania, who is five feet nine, scrolled constantly on his two screens, his face intermittently slack with focus. He put the phone to his ear. "Is that what you're hearing, or are you asking?" he said, eying his laptop. "I'll find out."

He has two million followers on Twitter, who know him by the mononym Shams, and is more famous than the majority of players. His own athletic career was brief. As a basketball-crazed teen in the Chicago suburbs, he played on his high school's freshman team. "But, like, I didn't *play*, ever," he said. (His self-scouting report: "Straight shooter, no defense.") He launched a blog about the sport and began cold-calling industry types whose numbers he found online. "The good thing about the phone or texting is they're not gonna ask how old you are," he said. When he was a twenty-one-year-old studying communications at Loyola University Chicago, he was hired by Yahoo. (Today, he is employed by the sports sites The Athletic and Stadium, and by the sports-betting company FanDuel.) His parents, Pakistani immigrants who have worked in the medical field, remained unsure. "My mom was, like, 'It's not too late to change your major,'" Charania said. Soon, he began outscooping veteran colleagues.

"If I wasn't a reporter, I'd still be obsessing over all this stuff, in a basement somewhere," he said. He opened his phone's screen-time page. The previous day's usage: eighteen hours. He swiped through other days, each showing upward of seventeen hours. One dipped to sixteen hours and thirty-four minutes. "My mom's birthday," he explained. The draft is a particularly busy time, but, really, there are no idle periods. Once, on a family trip to the Grand Canyon, he was distraught to find that he had no cell service. A nearby library had Wi-Fi. "I was there the whole time," he said. He searched his phone for a photo to prove that he had at least seen the canyon, but couldn't find one.

Charania's connectedness has paid off in unexpected ways. In 2020, he was credited by many with breaking the news of Donald Trump's positive *COVID* test. Some have speculated that Charania simply saw Trump's own announcement, which the President tweeted the same minute as Charania's, and quickly re-stated it. He declined to clarify. "That'll be a story for my book," he said, smirking.

Every few minutes, he retreated to the lobby's work-center annex to field a call with a brisk "What up?" He returned from one of these proudly displaying the draft of a tweet reporting that the Celtics were in "strong talks" to complete the Porzingis trade. He winked and hit Tweet. An agent sidled up to the table where he was working to debate a prospect's true height. ("He's six-six *without* shoes," the agent said.)

Within an hour, the Porzingis video had garnered more than six hundred thousand views and two million impressions. Charania had no plans to leave the hotel that day. His summer aspirations consisted mostly of staying home, in Chicago, and working his sources with calls and texts. "If you miss even a day, you fall so far behind," he said. "That scares me." ♦

By David Remnick

By Sarah Kempa

By Clare Malone

Shouts & Murmurs

- “The Brand New Show”: A Treatment

By [John Kenney](#).

What is “The Brand New Show” about?

What *isn’t* the show about is perhaps a better question. Think “Mad Men.” Now think “The Wire.” Now think “McHale’s Navy.” Now forget that you thought of any of those, because “The Brand New Show” isn’t like any of them. And yet it is almost exactly like all of them, except for the fact that there is no mention of advertising, policing, or PT boats. In a word, the show is about life. But also people. And death. And funny things that happen in hospitals and also in large buildings. Seriously, though, what’s it about? It’s about a man and a woman. And their children. Not *their* children. Children in general. And about how they’re irritating. Lovable, but mostly irritating. But we’ll never see or hear the children. Maybe a photo will be seen in some shots, but it won’t be explained. Our hero might turn, at a poignant moment, and look at the photo and then make a confused face, as if to say, “Who the hell is that?” We don’t know who it is because we can’t see the photo. But we also get the sense that the person in the photo is naked, except for socks and maybe a large, colorful hat. Why? And why hasn’t anything happened in the show yet? The thing is: we already know. We just don’t know that we know.

Who are the characters?

She’s a nurse. But is she? Yes. She’s a nurse. But also a former dentist. Who just happens to have been in the Special Forces. Where she worked as a dentist. Also, is she really a she? We don’t know. But we want to know. Sort of. Is she annoying? She can be. But maybe you would be, too, if you had a brain tumor. Does she have a brain tumor? No. Why would you think that? The point is that she isn’t *just* a nurse. She’s also a midlevel analyst at a hedge fund. Which she keeps secret. Guess who the love interest is. That’s right, it’s *her* dentist. Who is also an assassin, who just happens to be dabbling in becoming a Quaker. Will they ever get together? It’s doubtful, as he’s married, impotent, and gay. Or is he? We’ll also meet her best friend, the thirteenth-century German mystic Meister Eckhart. He’s intense and religious but also super funny.

Where does it take place?

Brooklyn. Of course, Brooklyn. By Brooklyn, we mean New York, greater Manhattan, the Bronx, Queens, but also Ontario. London is a place. Think

“The Crown.” They have accents. People love that. It’s Brooklyn, but everyone has an English accent, which we subtitle, because, sometimes, who the fuck knows what they’re saying?

Seriously, though. What’s it about?

Remember that thing about the nurse? Forget that. Our character isn’t one person. It might not even be a person. They might be an idea or steam or a cartoon you might see at some point. Or not.

Who’s the star?

WME has assured us that Ryan is attached. But also unattached. He read the script and loved it. But doesn’t feel it’s right for him. But, when he heard that we had financing, he signed on and then immediately passed. But asked that we keep him in mind. His agent assured us that there was nothing to worry about, as Ryan (not the first one—the other Ryan) was attached and unattached and both loved and wasn’t interested in the project. So we’re excited about that. Chris also loves it. Not *that* Chris. Chris from the thing. His manager said, “Chris loves the script and we think it’s right for him,” even though Chris didn’t read the script but his manager did. Not. So we’re set there. We like Henry Fonda for the role of the father and think we can get him even though he is dead. Netflix loves the idea, by the way. An exec there said they feel the dead are underrepresented in TV and film. Exciting.

Is “The Brand New Show” really the name? What if it’s on for a few years?

That’s the name. We won’t move from that name unless you want us to think of a different name. As for the future, it’s always “The Brand New Show.” At some point, it might be interesting to call it “The Old New Show.” Or “The Old Show.” Or “The Show.” Or “Dag Hammarskjöld,” which we feel would confuse, intrigue, and surprise viewers. The one other thought we had on a name was “Not My Pants.” Which, if you think about the core idea of the show, makes perfect sense.

If the show is a comedy, why is there a photo of a dead man floating in a motel pool in the pitch deck?

There’s just something funny about a corpse. Not literally, but you know. Also, what’s real? What’s not? Is the man dead? It sure as hell looks like it from the bloating. I mean, it looks like he’s been in that pool awhile. But

nothing is as it seems. We'll come to learn that in Season 2. He is dead, by the way. ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Chandi Deitmer

By Elizabeth Kolbert

By Jelani Cobb

Tables for Two

- [The Unassuming, Exceptional Food of Mitica](#)

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

At Mariscos El Submarino, which opened in 2020, on the border of Jackson Heights and Elmhurst, in Queens, there's no ambiguity about what you're in for. On a chaotic block of Roosevelt Avenue, the restaurant is beachy and brightly lit, mariachi blaring, plastic cutlery and several hot-sauce bottles on every table. The menu is dense with affordably priced seafood dishes from the northwest coast of Mexico, including multiple varieties of *aguachile*, for which raw shrimp (or an assortment of shrimp, fish, and octopus) is quick-cured in a brothy mix of lime juice, salt, and chili.

Mitica—the second restaurant from El Submarino's owners, Alonso Guzman and Amy Hernandez—which opened in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, in May, is altogether more mysterious. “You've heard a lot of stories but never anything like this,” Mitica's Instagram bio reads. “Walk in as a person and leave like a legend.” (The name comes from the Spanish word for “mythical.”) I'm still puzzling over what that means, but my bigger question is: How can such an unassuming restaurant be this exceptional?

Mitica's dimly lit, generically decorated dining room is less than inviting, divided awkwardly by a staircase into two narrow corridors. (The back patio has the best seats in the house.) But a lack of high-design aesthetics belies a menu that is expertly refined, and truly exciting. There is just one *aguachile* here, the most potent variety from El Submarino: the Negro, made with soy sauce, which turns the cold broth an appealingly gothic shade, and chiltepín peppers imported from Sinaloa, which give it a powerful kick, not for the faint of heart or palate. At El Submarino, the bluish raw shrimp are flayed down the middle and fanned out in a molcajete, over cucumber and beneath red onion and avocado. At Mitica, the shrimp are lightly simmered—which adds a lovely pop of coral—then pressed neatly into an elegant arch with alternating slices of cucumber, charred avocado, and red onion, and garnished with flowering Delfino cilantro, a subtle, frilly variety.

In competition with the *aguachile* for my favorite Mitica dish is the Taco Gobernador, another upgrade of an offering at El Submarino, where a corn tortilla, with a little carrot added to the masa, for extra earthy sweetness, is folded around chopped shrimp and queso Chihuahua and then griddled in shrimp butter. At Mitica, the tortilla is filled only with cheese, griddled in lobster butter, and topped with plump shreds of lobster meat, coins of

serrano chili and pearl onion, Delfino cilantro, and a velvety, gently spicy salsa de árbol.



An enormous pork shank adobada served with mashed potato and tortillas.

Mitica's menu is small enough that I ate through it in just two visits, and found nary a misstep. The sixteen-dollar price tag on the guacamole might raise eyebrows, especially given that it's served with just four large chips (additional will cost you), but it's as unexpectedly, beguilingly luscious as the version at Atla, Enrique Olvera's upscale NoHo cantina, where one of Mitica's chefs, Edgar Gonzalez, once worked. Meanwhile, fresh tortillas, still steaming, make for an embarrassment of riches when served with a perfectly cooked fillet of steelhead trout (topped with aioli, smoked and fresh fennel, crispy potatoes, and serrano chili) and with a beautiful rib eye, charred, carved into rosy slices, and finished with a sweet-and-sour pasilla-chili demi-glace, melty whole spring onions, and greens that have wilted in the heat of the meat. *Pipian verde*, a classic Mexican sauce made with pumpkin seeds, tomatillos, and green chilies, is stirred into risotto, which is topped with a crackly sliced duck breast that imparts a richness akin to foie gras.

From a kitchen full of surprises, dessert is no exception, all deception. "Strawberries and cream" turns out to be a heavenly pouf of whipped sour cream, topped with strawberry granita and flaky salt and hiding slivers of

macerated strawberries. An ordinary-looking chocolate mousse has the delightful texture of melting ice cream and blooms on the tongue in bursts of cinnamon and salt—sweet, bitter, and deep. (*Dishes \$15-\$75.*) ♦



Desserts, from left: chocolate mousse; macerated strawberries topped with whipped sour cream and strawberry granita.

By D. T. Max

By Nicole Rose Whitaker

By Patricia Marx

By Lawrence Wright

The Ancient World

- [The Divine Comedy of Roman Emperors' Last Words](#)

The Divine Comedy of Roman Emperors' Last Words

In the end, godlike aspirations often met with all too human final moments.

By [Mary Beard](#)



One of the funniest works of Roman literature to survive—and the only one that has ever made me laugh out loud—is a skit, written by the philosopher Seneca, about the Emperor Claudius’ adventures on his way to Mt. Olympus after his death. Titled “Apocolocyntosis Divi Claudi” (“The ‘Pumpkinification’ of the Deified Claudius”), it recounts how the Roman Senate declared that the dead Emperor was now a god, complete with his own temple, priests, and official rites of worship. The deification of emperors was fairly standard practice at the time, and the spoof claimed to lift the lid on what really happened during the process.

It was an inside joke. Seneca was the tutor of Nero, who was Claudius’ successor and his stepson. The idea is that the befuddled old Emperor—who was rumored to have been finished off with some poisoned mushrooms by his wife, Agrippina—is not really fit to be divine. As Claudius climbs up Mt. Olympus, word comes to the “real” gods that a stranger has arrived, and that

he is muttering incomprehensibly. But, when Hercules is sent to investigate, the two of them swap a few lines of Homer's poetry. ("Thank goodness there are some scholars in Heaven," Claudius enthuses.) The gods meet in private to decide whether to allow Claudius to join their ranks. "Opinions were mixed, but were coming down generally in Claudius' favor," Seneca writes, until the Emperor Augustus, who was deified forty years earlier, swings the vote decisively against him. Claudius, one of his successors, has been such a monster, Augustus points out, that he shouldn't be allowed to become a god. "He may look as if he couldn't startle a fly, but he used to kill people as easily as a dog has a shit," Augustus says.

So, despite the vote of the human Senate, the gods agree to send Claudius packing. In the skit, he will spend eternity in the underworld, as the legal secretary to one of the Emperor Caligula's ex-slaves.

Most Romans thought the dead resided in a shadowy limbo, and, for emperors who hoped to transcend this fate, the Senate was the only path to deification. Turning dead emperors into immortal gods by a vote now seems like one of the most baffling aspects of politics during the first centuries of one-man rule in Rome. The tradition began with the deification of Julius Caesar, in 42 B.C.E., and petered out only with the arrival of a series of Christian emperors in the fourth century C.E. Can the senators really have been serious about the granting of immortality, and the panoply of temples, special priests, and religious rituals that this entailed? Was it all just a crude political stunt? Seneca's takedown of the process seems to reflect some of his contemporaries' skepticism. One emperor even thought that it was worth a deathbed joke. According to the biographer Suetonius, Vespasian supposedly quipped at the end of his life, "Blimey, I think I am becoming a god." The slightly archaic *vae* of the Latin is often translated as "alas" or "woe," but to my ear "blimey" captures the hint of comedy better.

Before becoming gods, emperors famously died in all kinds of different, often unsavory, circumstances. Caligula was killed in an alleyway in the palace complex by some of his closest advisers, in 41 C.E.; Domitian was stabbed in his *cubiculum*, or "private room," in 96 C.E.; Caracalla was knifed while relieving himself on a military campaign in the East, in 217 C.E. These violent ends are partly explained by the fact that death was the only recognized way for an emperor to leave the throne. Apart from one

bungled abdication attempt in the civil war of 69 C.E., no Roman ruler ever gave up his title willingly until the sick and elderly Diocletian, in 305 C.E. Many emperors died of illness in or near their beds, of course, but in general, if you wanted a change of regime, you had to kill for it.

Sometimes the stories of an emperor's behavior appear to have provided ample motivation for getting rid of him. Elagabalus was a teen-ager from Syria when he was made emperor of Rome, in 218 C.E., after having been engineered into power, so it was said, by his mother and his grandmother. He soon became known as an extravagant (and occasionally sadistic) host. His dinners often featured delicacies that were exotic even by upmarket Roman standards, such as camels' heels and flamingos' brains. His party tricks included planting whoopee cushions (the first ever recorded in Western culture) on dining couches; serving fake food made of wax or glass to the least important banqueters, who would be forced to spend the evening watching more illustrious guests enjoy their meals; and releasing tame lions, leopards, and bears among his guests as they slept off the excesses of the feast. The latter was such a surprise for some revellers that when they awoke they died of fright. He also once reputedly showered his dinner companions with flower petals in such generous quantities that they were smothered to death. Is it any wonder that Elagabalus ended up assassinated by the disgruntled soldiery, his body unceremoniously dumped in the Tiber?

Inevitably, the style of an emperor's funeral varied according to the circumstances of his death, and whether it was in anyone's interest to give him a splendid sendoff. Imperial victims of assassination might be quickly cremated and buried by whatever friends and staff had not yet changed sides; in Caracalla's case, his ashes were put into an urn and delivered to his mother, Julia Domna, in Antioch (modern Antakya, in Turkey)—which may have driven her to suicide. But, for the most part, there was a standard format for imperial funerals in Rome, first established for the last rites of Augustus, in 14 C.E., and based on the distinctive funerary traditions of the old republican élite. These included, among other things, a eulogy for the dead man and a public display, in the Forum, of his corpse, which was sometimes rather ghoulishly propped up to make it look as if it were standing. Members of the family would usually march in a procession, wearing portrait masks of their distinguished ancestors, as if the ancestors, too, were among the mourners.

Augustus died of natural causes (unless you believe the rumors that his wife, Livia, poisoned him with toxin-smeared figs), at Nola, near Naples, in the month of August. Over the following days, his body was carried from Naples to Rome, a distance of almost a hundred and fifty miles. Embalming, an Egyptian custom, was regarded suspiciously and rarely practiced in Italy at the time. Hence, Suetonius delicately notes that, “because of the time of year” (that is, during the intense heat of summer), the retinue travelled by night. Even so, by the time the Emperor’s remains reached Rome, they must have been seriously decomposed—and the funeral did not take place for another week or so. This is probably why the body itself, when it was eventually put on display in the Forum, remained hidden, with a wax model of the Emperor placed above it for all to see.

In the funeral procession, a model of Augustus was dressed in the costume of the god Jupiter, as was customary for Roman generals in their victory celebration, or “triumph.” Another image of the dead Emperor was displayed in a chariot. And the Senate decreed that the route of the cortège—from the Forum to the Campus Martius, just over a mile to the north, where the cremation would take place—should follow that of triumphal processions, though the direction was reversed. This was funeral as victory parade.

The staging of Augustus’ funeral procession placed the Emperor at the center of the Roman world, and of the whole sweep of Roman history. Following tradition, the parade featured people wearing masks of Augustus’ forebears. But the images on display were not just of direct ancestors but of all Romans “who had been distinguished in any way” (as the historian Cassius Dio put it), going back to the city’s founder, Romulus. Even an image of Pompey the Great, Julius Caesar’s adversary, was included—as if any enemies of one-man rule could retrospectively be conscripted into Augustus’ illustrious lineage. The Emperor’s body was carried not by family members but by élite Romans and senatorial officeholders, while a period of mourning was imposed on all citizens (one year for women, and only a few days for men). One of Augustus’ honorific titles had been Father of His Country (*pater patriae*): the funeral suggested that all Roman heroes counted among his ancestors, and all citizens were part of his family.

Two hundred years later, the historian Herodian described the funeral, in Rome, of Septimius Severus, in 211 C.E. Not much had changed. Herodian refers to a procession from the Forum to the place of cremation. He describes people, now in chariots instead of on foot, wearing masks representing Roman generals and emperors of the past. But in his account the wax image of the Emperor plays an even more prominent role. Septimius Severus died in York, in northern England, and was cremated there; his ashes were then brought back to Rome. There was no body whatsoever at this funeral, not even a decomposing one. According to Herodian, the waxwork was displayed for a week on a couch at the entrance to the palace, “looking like a sick man,” with the whole Senate in attendance. Every day, doctors would come and pretend to examine the model Emperor and agree that his condition was deteriorating, until they eventually pronounced him dead, at which point the waxwork was taken to the Forum. A similar wax model, dressed in imperial costume, had been used in the official funeral celebrations of the Emperor Pertinax, in 193 C.E., which were held three months after he was assassinated and buried. On this occasion, a “handsome boy”—in the words of Cassius Dio—was assigned to the waxwork, and stood “swatting the flies off it with peacock feathers, as if it really was somebody sleeping.”

Cremation—whether of the emperor’s actual body or of his waxwork—was an important part of the funerary ritual. But it also played a key role in the process by which some Roman emperors became gods.

What happened on the imperial pyre was crucial to the emperor’s apotheosis. Herodian, writing in the early third century C.E., describes a huge multilayered structure built around a wooden frame, with dry sticks inside to get the fire going, and decorative items, such as paintings, ivory carvings, and gold-embroidered textiles, placed around the outside. At the last minute, an eagle would be released from the pyre, presumably glad to escape the flames. The eagle was meant to soar up to the sky, as if it were taking the soul of the emperor to join the gods. This scene is pictured rather awkwardly on the ceremonial arch of the Emperor Titus, which was built after Titus’ death, in 81 C.E., and is still standing near the Roman Forum: the Emperor appears to be clinging perilously to the bird’s back. In trying to capture the scene in marble, the sculptor succeeded in illustrating an even

more important point—how impossible it was to make such a scene convincing.

According to Cassius Dio, an eagle also played a role during the cremation of Augustus. It gave Robert Graves, in his novel “*I, Claudius*,” an irresistible opportunity for satire. In imagining the scene, Graves writes that the grieving widow, Livia, had hidden an eagle in a cage at the top of the pyre, to be freed by a string pulled at the right moment. But it didn’t work. So “the officer who was in charge,” rather than letting the poor bird burn to death, was forced to climb up the blazing pyre and open the cage by hand—capturing the bathos rather than the solemnity of the occasion. Other aspects of this kind of “apotheosis” raised ancient eyebrows, too. There were sometimes witnesses who were prepared to swear an oath that they had actually seen the late emperor’s soul ascending to Heaven. It was one way to get rich: Livia was said to have paid a small fortune to a man who claimed to have witnessed the ascent of Augustus.

Between the reigns of Julius Caesar (who was assassinated in 44 B.C.E.) and Alexander Severus (who was assassinated in 235 C.E. and deified three years later), thirty-three members of the imperial family became gods or goddesses, and were titled *divus* or *diva* accordingly. Seventeen were emperors (counting Julius Caesar); the rest were wives, sisters, children, and, in the case of the Emperor Trajan’s family, a father and a niece. A few of these—what we might perhaps call vanity deifications—made hardly any impact on Roman religious worship. Nero’s baby daughter, Claudia, who died in 63 C.E., at the age of just four months, was made a goddess, and seems to have been forgotten almost immediately. And although Roman writers list the divine honors given to Caligula’s dead sister, *diva* Drusilla (including twenty priests and an annual festival), there is hardly a trace of her status as a goddess in any other sources we have.

We do, however, find strong hints that there was a line of demarcation between ex-emperors (*divi*) and the “immortal” gods proper. The difference between *divus* and *deus* (the standard Latin for “god”) suggests that divine emperors were not so much gods as god-*like*. Seneca’s joke, that *divus* Augustus had never once opened his mouth in the divine Senate until the would-be *divus* Claudius turned up, points in that direction also. Compared

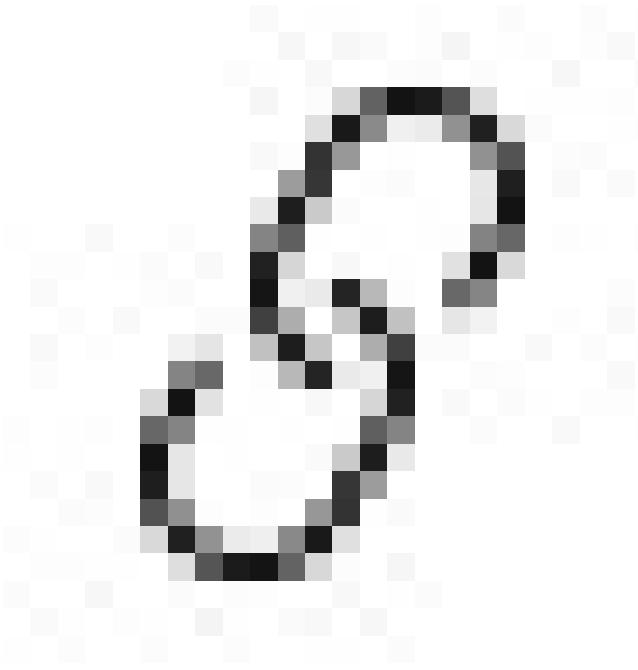
with the other residents of Mt. Olympus, Augustus was of a distinctly subordinate status.

All the same, certain emperors and their family members clearly were treated as immortal gods, with worship continuing for decades, sometimes even centuries, after their deaths. The temples of *divus* Julius (Caesar), *divus* Vespasian, and *divus* Antoninus (Pius) and his wife, *diva* Faustina, still dominate the Roman Forum. Even Claudius—despite the ending of Seneca's satiric fantasy—had his own prominent temple in Rome. Inscribed records give us the names of numerous priests of divine emperors while also listing occasions for the sacrifice of an animal. On *divus* Augustus' birthday, September 23rd, for example, an ox would be slaughtered in his honor, while, on his wife's birthday, a cow would be slaughtered for her.



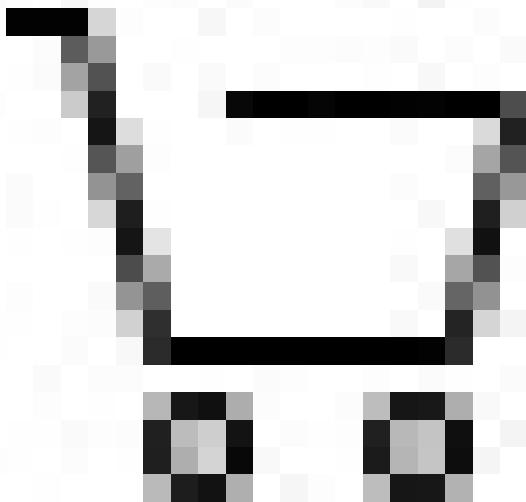
"The asteroid's a little small."
Cartoon by Sofia Warren

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These forms of worship could be found outside Rome, too. A surviving papyrus calendar, from the two-twenties C.E., gives us a window into the religious practices of a Roman Army unit stationed at the base of Dura Europos, on the River Euphrates, in what is now Syria. Discovered in the

nineteen-thirties, the papyrus lists the religious rituals to be carried out by the unit throughout the year, many of them focussed on the ruling emperor, Alexander Severus. Major anniversaries in his life were celebrated, usually with a so-called thanksgiving, a religious offering that honored him but stopped short of animal sacrifice and did not treat him explicitly as a god. His deified predecessors, though, all the way back to Julius Caesar, were honored with a full sacrifice to mark their birthdays or accessions. That is to say, almost three hundred years after *divus Julius*' assassination, the first god in the imperial family was still regularly receiving an ox on his birthday, from a group of soldiers at the far-eastern edge of the empire.

Whether a dead emperor was made a god depended not so much on his worthiness as on how useful his deification was to the man who came after him. For many rulers, the phrase “son of a god” (*divi filius*) after one’s name was a welcome badge of power. The title was an important part of the “signature” of the first emperor, Augustus, referring back to his adoptive father, Julius Caesar. And the reason that the Emperor Tiberius was not made a *divus* upon his death, in 37 C.E., was presumably that it held no particular advantage for his successor and great-nephew Caligula, who traced his own right to rule, through his father and mother, back to Augustus.

It is likely that hardheaded cynicism and political calculation played some part in emperors and their advisers presenting imperial power in divine terms. But it was not quite as simple as that. The imperial cult makes more sense, or at least looks less manipulative or absurd, if we put it back into the context of the principles that governed Roman religion more generally. Some of the aspects of the worship of emperors that make it most difficult for us to take it seriously—in particular, the preposterous idea that someone could be a regular mortal one week and immortal a couple of weeks later—fit much more comfortably into traditional Roman assumptions of what gods were and how their power worked in the world.

For a start, Roman religion typically welcomed new gods. In all its different versions—and there was never a single orthodoxy across the Roman world—it was polytheist. New gods were recognized all the time, while others might be quietly forgotten. (Scholars in ancient Rome enjoyed digging up weird time-expired deities, such as Paventia, the goddess who stopped

children from being afraid, or Cinxia, one of many who presided over sexual intercourse.) Most helpfully for would-be divine emperors, some gods were said to have originally been human beings. Hercules, for example, after a life as a mortal strongman, was deified on his funeral pyre. And Romulus was also said to have become a god after his death.

In other words, for the Romans, the boundary between the human and the divine was crossable. Some mortals were thought to have had gods among their direct ancestors. Julius Caesar's family famously traced itself back to the mythical Trojan hero Aeneas and, through him, to the goddess Venus, his mother. (It's no coincidence that, when Caesar built a new temple to Venus in Rome, he gave it the name Genetrix—"the ancestor.") Then, there was Suetonius' claim that one short-ruling emperor, Galba, paraded Jupiter as his ancestor on his father's side, and (perhaps ill-advisedly) the divine Pasiphaë—who gave birth in Crete to the monstrous half-bull, half-human Minotaur—on his mother's.

Outside the world of myth, extraordinary human power and success in Rome was often presented in divine terms. The clearest example of this is the costume of Jupiter, through which Roman generals, by wearing it in their triumphal processions, could suggest that at the height of their success they became gods—even if only for a day.

Some of the very features that make the imperial cult look so unreligious to us were what made it look typically religious to Romans, for whom there was never a division between church and state. Public worship was based not on personal devotion, individual faith, or tenets of "belief" but on the simple axiom that Rome's military and political success depended on the gods being properly worshipped. If they weren't, the state would be in danger. Personal piety did not come into it.

That axiom helps explain why Augustus, when he compiled a list of his achievements—a summary of his greatest hits—to be displayed outside his mausoleum, included the fact that he had restored eighty-two temples in the city. Civil war had torn Rome apart for a century before he came to power; with these temple restorations, he could now be seen as literally repairing Rome's relations with the gods. It was also one of the reasons that Elagabalus must have seemed a threat. In addition to his reported excesses

and cruelty, he was rumored to have plans to replace Jupiter as the chief deity of the state with a Syrian god. How could Rome survive if it simply threw over the gods who had insured its success? One can recognize a similar logic behind the persecution—or “punishment,” to give it a Roman spin—of the Christians throughout the first two centuries C.E. There must have been a lurking fear among the authorities that the wholesale Christian rejection of the traditional gods would put the state in peril.

The connection between politics and religion was so ingrained in Roman life that the people who controlled the state also controlled its religious rites. The one notable exception was the Vestal Virgins—the priestesses charged with keeping alight the sacred flame of the goddess Vesta in the Forum, while also remaining virgins under penalty of death. (Of course, ancient gossips spread all kinds of rumors.) Otherwise, the major groups or “colleges” of priests in Rome were made up of senators. They had their own particular responsibilities—interpreting signs sent from the gods, say, or worshipping individual deities. But these priests were not exclusively religious practitioners, and they had no pastoral responsibilities for any congregation. Romans did not go to them for personal advice or spiritual counselling.

As a member of all the priestly colleges, the emperor was effectively the head of Roman religion as well as its chief priest. That is how we often still see emperors depicted in sculpture, conducting a sacrifice or displaying their piety in various other ways. Alongside the governors’ reports and pleading letters from subjects, the regular contents of an emperor’s in-tray would have included requests for permission to move someone’s great-uncle’s coffin according to the terms of divine law, or to fill a vacancy in one of the priestly groups. It was through the emperor, more than anyone else, that human relations with the gods were correctly maintained. And some emperors moved relatively seamlessly, in death, from being intermediaries to being gods themselves.

Through the three hundred years of one-man rule after Julius Caesar, the last words of emperors—whether accurately recorded, embellished, or outright invented—were often grounded in all too human concerns. Suetonius portrays Vespasian, during his final bout of the runs, trying to get up and muttering, “An emperor should die on his feet.” It was an appropriate

farewell from the workaholic ruler, who had been dealing with his papers and receiving embassies and delegations (emperors were usually more bureaucrats than libertines) almost right up to the end.

The biographer's long description of Nero's last hours and days, in 68 C.E., reveals what happens when a ruler loses power. Stuck in his palace, as the victory of the armies that had risen up against him became inevitable, Nero realized that his authority had gone when his bodyguard disappeared and no one answered his cries for help. "Even the caretakers had made a dash for it," Suetonius observed, "taking the bedclothes with them." The Emperor made his escape to an out-of-town villa and eventually, with some assistance from his remaining staff, managed to kill himself. Among many lamentations, feeble jokes, and quotations from poetry, he produced his famous utterance "What an artist is dying!" Clearly, in Suetonius' view, Nero's overconfident estimation of his own artistic talents lasted until the very end. These words were not, however, as barbed as the ones that Seneca —referencing Vespasian's "Blimey, I think I am becoming a god"—gave to the dying Claudius in the "Apocolocyntosis": "Blimey, I think I've shat myself." And, just in case his readers missed the point, Seneca goes on, "Whether he had or not, I don't know—but he certainly made a shit of everything."

A few emperors were said to have taken a loftier tone. In Hadrian's final hours, he is supposed to have written a poem to his own soul, sealing his reputation for melancholic mysticism. (The French novelist Marguerite Yourcenar wrote a twentieth-century fictional autobiography of the Emperor, and even used the poem for her ending: "Dear little wandering, lovely soul / the guest and companion of my body, / into what regions will you now depart / you pale little thing, naked and stiff / unable to crack jokes as usual.") Antoninus Pius said just one word on his deathbed: "Composure," which he gave as the day's password for the soldiers of the imperial guard. Septimius Severus was imagined to have been more practical. According to Dio, he handed down some advice for ruling the Empire to his sons, Caracalla and Geta ("Do not quarrel, pay the soldiers, and take no notice of anyone else"), which—if the historical account is at all correct—they signally failed to follow. Within the year, Geta became the victim of his brother's hit squad while clinging to his mother. His last words state the poignantly obvious: "Mummy, mummy, I'm being killed."

But it is Suetonius' description of the closing hours of the Emperor Augustus that encapsulates some of the most difficult truths of one-man rule. The Emperor, now seventy-five years old, had spent several days relaxing on the island of Capri and partying on board a ship in the Bay of Naples—even though he was already beginning to suffer from diarrhea. By the time he arrived at what had been his father's house at Nola, he was feeling much worse. On what turned out to be his final day, while resting in the very room in which his father had died, Augustus requested a mirror and had his hair combed. He then had some friends brought in and, turning to them, asked "if he had played his part in the comedy of life" properly. He added a couple of lines of verse in Greek: "Since the play has gone down well, give us a clap / and send us away with applause." The friends' replies are not recorded. After he had dismissed them, he asked about the health of his step-granddaughter, who was sick, before kissing his wife, Livia. (No trace here of the rumor that she had been doctoring his fruit.) Then he uttered what were supposed to be his very last words: "Live on, remembering our marriage, Livia, and farewell." The only sign of confusion was when he called out that he was being carried away by forty men, but this turned out to be an accurate prophecy, as forty soldiers would soon carry him out to begin that hot summer journey to Rome.

This wonderful concoction of a deathbed scene highlights many of the personal qualities you might hope to find in an emperor. We see the dying Emperor's concern and care for his family. He refers to his enduring marriage and expresses loyalty to his ancestral line. There is also a sense of his being—like most "good" Roman emperors—"one of us," whether in welcoming his friends to his deathbed or in wanting to present an agreeable image. Over all, it was a calm exit from the world, in which even what looked like delirium showed that the Emperor knew what the future held.

But most revealing of all was the quip about having "played his part in the comedy of life," underlined by the theatrical allusion to the play having gone down well. It tells us so much about Roman autocracy that the founding father of the imperial system, one of its earliest emperors turned gods, was said to have summed up his career as a piece of theatre, as an act. ♦

This is drawn from "[Emperor of Rome](#)."

By Susan B. Glasser

By Chandi Deitmer

By Elizabeth Kolbert

By Jelani Cobb

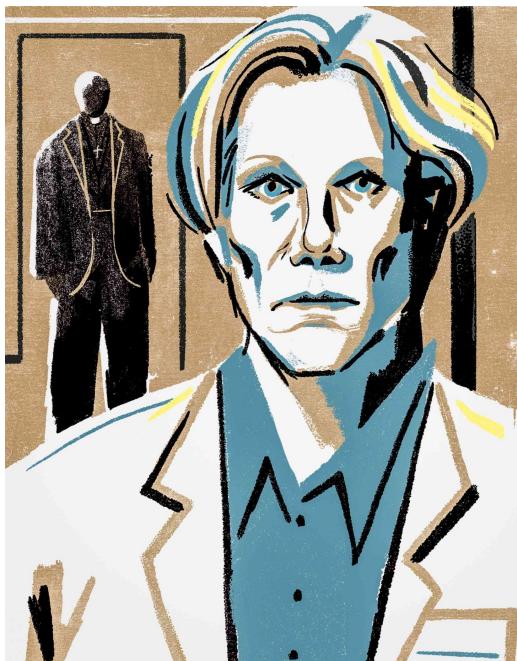
The Theatre

- [The Witch Hunt in “The Doctor”](#)

The Witch Hunt in “The Doctor”

Juliet Stevenson stars in Robert Icke’s adaptation of an Arthur Schnitzler play, as a doctor who is a target of antisemitism, and also language policing.

By [Helen Shaw](#)



Juliet Stevenson’s voice is one of the most frightening things I ever saw. In April, 2021, with much of New York performance still under pandemic interdict, Simon Stephens’s socially distanced adaptation of José Saramago’s “Blindness” came to the Daryl Roth Theatre. The show was basically a radio drama: audience members sat in pairs six feet apart, wearing headphones, listening to a recording of Stevenson telling a horror story about a plague. Her vocal timbre has a supercompressed quality, as suspenseful as a steel spring. In a dark room, in a dark year, her disembodied voice and its magnificent tension leaped straight to my optic nerve, making phantoms flicker inside my eyelids, sonic energy becoming light.

In “The Doctor,” a British production now at the Park Avenue Armory, the in-the-flesh Juliet Stevenson (a compact ramrod in the Glenda Jackson mold) maintains that sense of matter under strain. Wisely, her director-playwright, Robert Icke, exploits it every way he can. The two-hour-and-forty-five-minute show keeps Stevenson onstage for almost its entire length,

even during the intermission—the minimalist gray carpeted turntable stage, designed by Hildegard Bechtler, rotates, slowly, beneath her feet. (The room is her autoclave.) A voice like Stevenson’s can make an argument take on heat and power, thrust and excitement. Of course, the wheels might fall off that argument. The play might grind itself into the dirt. But Stevenson’s motive force keeps pushing the thing whether it moves or not, combative energy becoming, somehow, pure fight.

Icke’s play is a loose adaptation of Arthur Schnitzler’s 1912 “Professor Bernhardi,” an Ibsenish drama about a man of science—straight-talking, unliked, righteous—betrayed by popular opinion and selfish colleagues. (This outline might seem familiar from “An Enemy of the People,” an actual Ibsen play, also adapted by Icke, that was performed at the Armory in 2021.) Schnitzler’s setup sounds modern: a Jewish doctor at a prestigious Viennese clinic refuses to allow a priest into a patient’s room; the doctor would prefer she die in a drugged euphoria, unaware that she’s near death. Details point to a botched abortion (Schnitzler was also a doctor, and had a lover who may have died this way), and Bernhardi is sparing her—or possibly denying her—a last chance to seek absolution.

Icke borrows Schnitzler’s inciting conflict, including the illicit abortion, and also the ensuing firestorm of antisemitism, government cowardice, office-hierarchy jockeying, and anti-élitist fervor. In “The Doctor,” though, Bernhardi has been transmuted into Ruth Wolff (Stevenson), a tart and gifted founder of a dementia clinic, whose partner—and this is unknown to her co-workers—has been struck down with the condition. Icke’s adaptation piles yet more pressures on Ruth. The dead girl in the hospital bed was only fourteen; the clinic’s executive committee can’t stop shouting about whether Ruth is being arrogant or principled in standing her ground (“Yell yell bang bang,” I wrote, helpfully, in my notes); and bigots paint a swastika on her car and kill her cat. Somehow, even after that, Ruth’s name is mud, and she appears on a nightmarish television panel show, in which a smorgasbord of activists tell her she’s racist, too feminist, colonialist, an abortionist, anti-Christian, and a hypocrite. “I don’t go in for groups,” Ruth says, in that coiled voice, as a camera projects her rigid countenance.

Icke clearly wants to turn Schnitzler’s prophetic drama into a state-of-the-world debate—exposing not just the venality of Ruth’s fellow-doctors, such

as the self-serving Hardiman (Naomi Wirthner), but also a larger panic around identity politics. Should a doctor have made an end-of-life, faith-adjacent decision for her patient if she does not share the patient's religion? In order to keep that question before us, Icke sweeps other, more obvious worries under the (slowly rotating) rug.

Icke's specifics of pastoral care seem a bit fuzzy here, since the let-the-priest-in contingent never concede that he would have spent his time badgering the dying girl about Hell. And certainly no one thinks to ask, "Should Ruth really have admitted an emergency patient to a dementia clinic?" or "What about police protection?" or "Who impregnated that fourteen-year-old?" Crimes are stacking up in Icke's narrative, but he ignores them so that he can rail at cancel culture: "people sitting in their back bedrooms and screaming into the Internet" who might keep good-hearted but high-handed professionals from doing their jobs. (It's not a mere thumb-on-the-scale issue. By the time a caricature of a Black activist tried to bait Ruth into saying the N-word on air—*why?*—I had worked out that Icke wasn't too concerned with good-faith argument.)

Icke's innovative gesture, staging-wise, has nothing to do with that glacially rotating turntable, or with the rock-god drummer who plays in a window high above the stage. It has to do with his casting strategy—which provides a way of pacing the audience's thinking while emphasizing (apparently) his point that we shouldn't equate identity with moral suasion. Ruth is a white woman, and Stevenson is, too. But the other roles seem to be cast contra-gender—the executive committee includes two women playing men—or contra-race. (The text notes that, apart from in the TV scene, "each actor's identity should be directly dissonant with their character's.")

This dissonance is sometimes sprung, deliberately, on the audience. For instance, John Mackay, a white actor, plays the priest, and it is only many scenes in, after characters have interrogated Ruth about her possible unconscious bias, that we understand that the priest is actually Black. In this way, Icke pre-punches the ballot for both candidates: when Ruth says she did not perceive the priest's skin color, we sympathize; but, when we remember that she called him "uppity," we wonder, *Is she racist or did she misspeak?* The risk, of course, is that this treatment turns everyone other than Ruth into a reflection of her perceptual world. The secondary cast, none

of whom can stand against a gale-force Stevenson, becomes more like a set of mouthpieces than like fully dimensional figures. And nearly three hours is a long time to spend with only one real person, who keeps getting attacked by straw men.

So what's this argument really all about—the conflict between faith and science? I suspect it might not be, despite the text's statements to the contrary, because of where Icke and his drama finish up. In "The Doctor," Icke leans repeatedly on the idea of a witch hunt. He begins and (almost) ends the play with Ruth saying, "Which"—and then pausing portentously, so that we hear the homonym hanging in the air. Schoolkids refer to Ruth's house as a witch's cottage, and Icke does seem interested in the way old fairy tales encode old hatreds: the revulsion for the person who lives outside the village, say, or for the knowledgeable woman.

But what about the show's own knee-jerk hatred of the public? I'm chilled by Icke's switch from Schnitzler's cool-eyed diagnosis of antisemitism to simplistic grievances about language policing. Icke even has to invent an outsized, manifestly unfair suspension for Ruth, so that we can be furious that someone so valuable should be thrust aside for a gaffe. (Such sidelining is less an issue that faces doctors, and more something that might haunt entrenched cultural power players—directors, perhaps, who find themselves in the spotlight.)

Ruth talks to the priest in the final scene, and they do manage to find common ground: contempt for those who point out bad behavior via social media. "Jesus didn't live in the digital age," the priest says. Ruth responds, "We crucify them differently now." Stevenson's voice is so strong, even as it grows sentimental in the play's final moments, and you can hear the incredible steel spring relaxing. But this time I didn't see phantoms under my eyelids. I saw something uglier—a play of ideas being sabotaged by reactionary self-pity. ♦

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