

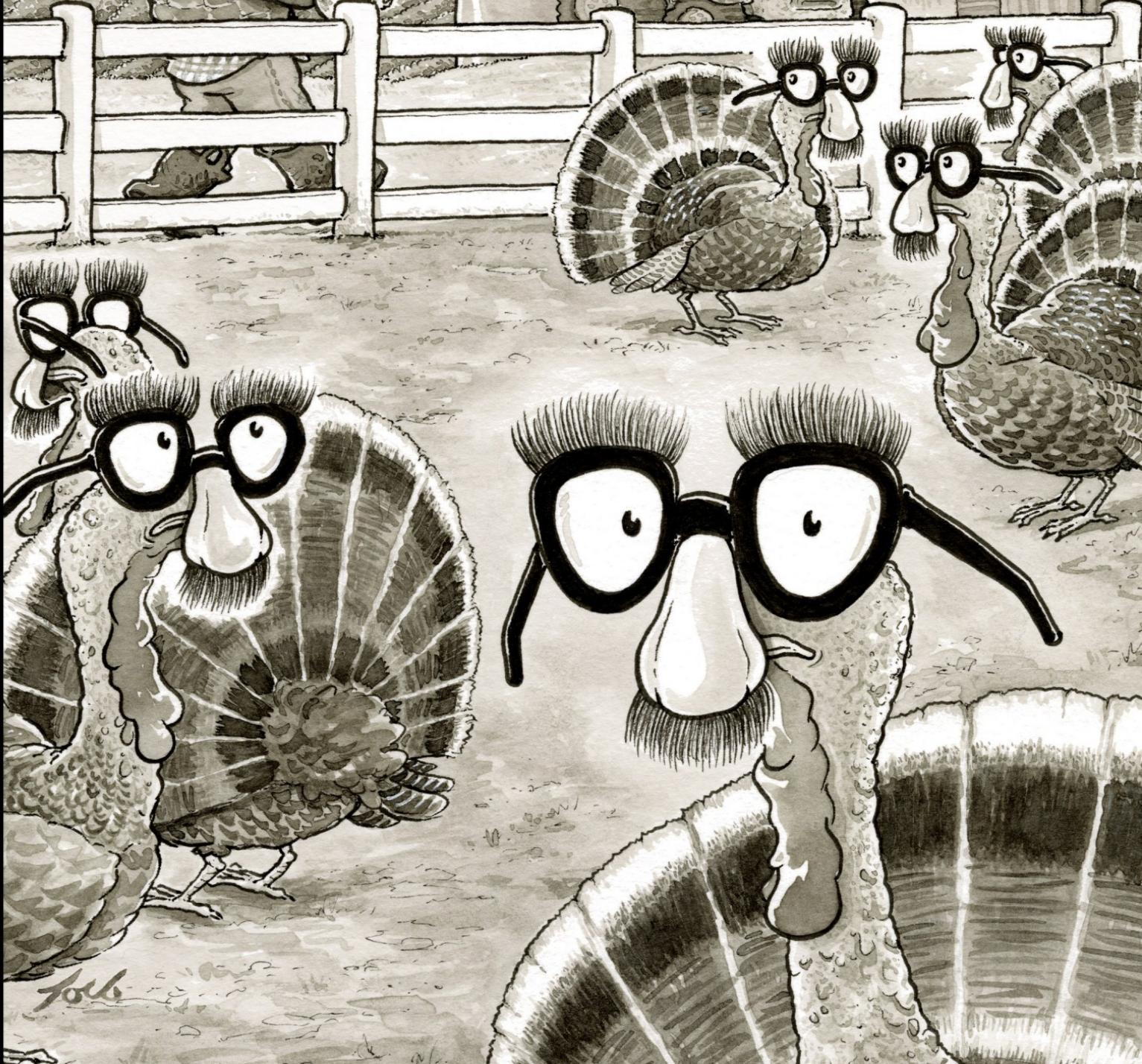
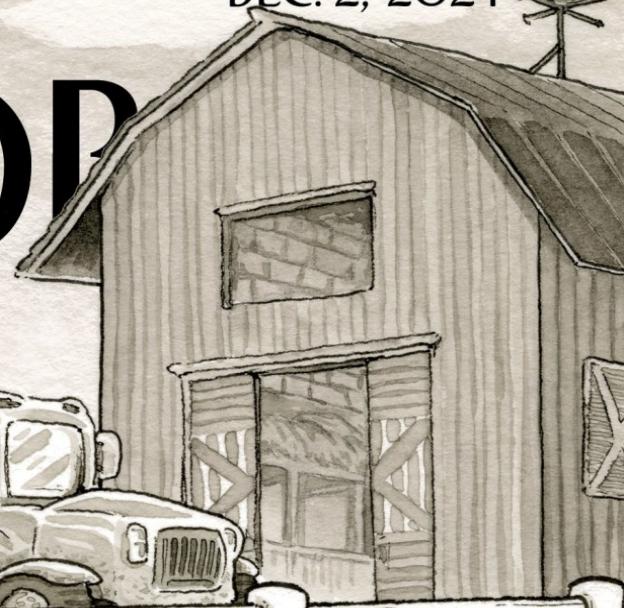
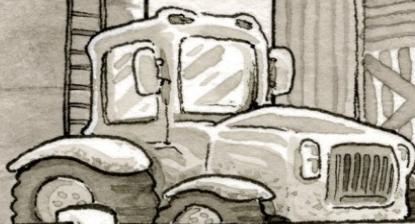
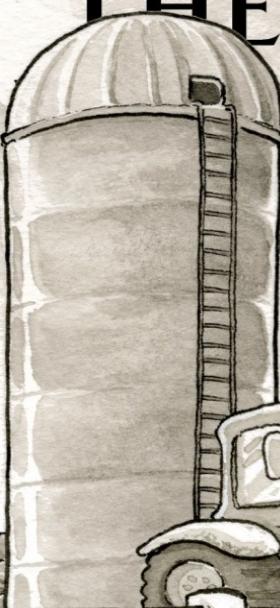
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DEC. 2, 2024



# NEW YORK



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## Goings On

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## [Goings On](#)

# Dalí, Basquiat, Haring, and Hockney at Luna Luna

*Also: Interpol’s “Antics” turns twenty, Kyle Abraham fills Drill Hall, new work by the photographer Jeff Wall, and more.*

November 23, 2024

### [Jackson Arn](#)

*The New Yorker’s art critic*

[You’re reading the Goings On newsletter, a guide to what we’re watching, listening to, and doing this week. Sign up to receive it in your in-box.](#)

I don’t know what [Werner Herzog](#) is up to these days, but if he’s between projects, I humbly suggest that he make a documentary about Luna Luna, the Hamburg amusement park that took more than ten years to put together, included attractions designed by Dalí and Basquiat and Haring and Hockney, and spent thirty-five years in shipping containers. It’s now been partly reassembled at the Shed, for the exhibition **“Luna Luna, Forgotten Fantasy,”** through Jan. 5.



*Luna Luna in Hamburg, Germany, in 1987.*

*Photograph by Sabina Sarnitz / Courtesy Luna Luna*

The park's Fitzcarraldo, a poet-songwriter-pop star named André Heller, was born in Vienna in 1947 and spent much of his thirties persuading artists to decorate rides. Haring slathered a merry-go-round in melty cartoons; Basquiat dressed a Ferris wheel in his customary graffiti. The park opened to the public in 1987, largely funded by a gossip rag, and stayed that way for a summer. Whatever else it was or wasn't, it was a masterpiece of networking—Heller used his connections to Dalí and Warhol to recruit a veritable Ocean's 11 of famous artists young and old, European and American, even if the total number who contributed anything within a thousand miles of their best work was approximately zero.

There is art that fascinates because of what it is, and there is art that fascinates because of its backstory. If toilet humor is your thing, a visit to the Shed will not disappoint: the caricaturist Manfred Deix made an absurdist façade depicting figures farting in one another's faces, and Daniel Spoerri, who died earlier this year, turned the park's bathrooms into mock Nazi headquarters crowned with sculpted mounds of shit. I'd trade it all for a chance to have seen the look on Heller's face when the shipping containers were finally opened, in 2022. "I'm so sorry," he is reported to have told the objects inside. "Please forgive me." Werner, where on earth *were you?*



## About Town

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*Here's our list of [ways to celebrate the holidays in N.Y.C.](#)*

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### Indie Rock

Few bands have come storming out of the gates quicker than **Interpol**, a bastion of indie music in New York during the early two-thousands. The

band's début album, "Turn On the Bright Lights" (2002), which came at the crest of the post-punk revival, felt like a paradigm shift, fiercely rhythmic, vaguely melancholic, and a bit melodramatic. The subsequent Interpol records—"Antics" (2004) and "Our Love to Admire" (2007)—only bolstered the band's epic bona fides with more locked-in, thrumming arrangements and bolder hooks from the singer Paul Banks. By the time one of the band members left, in 2010, Interpol had already become a monument of its era; the band taps into that history as it winds down a tour celebrating "Antics" turning twenty.—*[Sheldon Pearce](#)* (*Brooklyn Steel*; Dec. 3-4.)

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## Classical

**Fretwork**, the early-music ensemble and self-described "consort of viols," made its Carnegie Hall début back in 2012, during a season that was opened by Yo-Yo Ma. This winter, the two are programmed on the same night. At Carnegie's Zankel Hall, Fretwork reunites with the renowned British countertenor Iestyn Davies, to share selections from their collaboration "Lamento," with the early-music specialist Silas Wollston on organ and virginals. A skip away, in the Stern Auditorium, **Yo-Yo Ma** returns to his well-worn spot as a soloist, playing Dvořák's emblematic Cello Concerto in B Minor with the **Czech Philharmonic**. Patrons will have to make a choice, but there isn't a bad one.—*Jane Bua* (*Carnegie Hall*; Dec. 3.)

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## Dance



*Kyle Abraham, in “Dear Lord, Make Me Beautiful.”*

*Photograph by Alex Sargent / Courtesy Park Avenue Armory*

Even for the highly successful choreographer **Kyle Abraham**, who makes dances for companies around the world, the Armory represents a huge canvas. For “Dear Lord, Make Me Beautiful,” Abraham fills the massive Drill Hall with sixteen dancers, moving in the sensual, urban, and gestural style for which he is known. Despite the epic surroundings, his subject is intimate: the passage of time, the joys and the loss that come with age. For the first time in recent years, Abraham himself will dance. There is no greater, nor more subtle, interpreter of his silken movement phrases than Abraham. The dance is complemented by immersive visuals (by Cao Yuxi) and music by the contemporary ensemble yMusic.—[Marina Harss](#) (Park Avenue Armory; Dec. 3-14.)

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## Broadway

In our moment of A.I. anxiety, Hue Park and Will Aronson's musical **"Maybe Happy Ending"** has the audacity to suggest that bots have feelings, too. Granted, the models depicted haven't been invented yet, but the Seoul inhabited by Oliver (Darren Criss, marvellously machinelike yet loving) and Claire (Helen J Shen), two obsolete "Helperbots" consigned by their human owners to a retirement home for sentient machines, isn't hard to picture. That's thanks in part to the sleekly designed production, particularly the canny video projections, whose black-and-white renderings of the Helperbots' memories give the futuristic technology the shimmer of nostalgia. The whole show, under Michael Arden's adventurous direction, revels in such juxtapositions while exploring what robots are capable of feeling for their owners, owners for their robots, and robots for one another.

—[Dan Stahl](#) (*Belasco; open run.*)

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## Art



*"In the Legion," 2022. Photograph © Jeff Wall / Courtesy Gagosian*

Staged photography, the large-scale cinematic style that dominated the medium at the turn of the millennium, has seemed exhausted, if not dead, for some time now. But **Jeff Wall**, one of its most accomplished proponents, is here to remind us how sharp and engaging it can be. In a show of new and old work, including three small early landscapes in light boxes, the most arresting images slip between fact and fiction so convincingly that they feel like remembered dreams or forgotten fairy tales.

In one, a gray-haired woman sits, about to darn a sock, in a bookstore aisle; in another, a dazed, shirtless man sprawls on the ground, surrounded by a menacing crew. Nothing here looks gimmicky or overproduced, and the knockout picture is the simplest: a colossal black-and-white portrait of a young guy, soaking wet, a pathetic Everyman, at once defeated and heroic.

—[Vince Aletti](#) (*Gagosian; through Dec. 21.*)

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## Movies

**“A Traveler’s Needs,”** the third collaboration of Isabelle Huppert and the South Korean director Hong Sangsoo, is the sparest and most idiosyncratic of the trio. Huppert plays a French woman named Iris, who recently arrived in Seoul and is teaching French with an original method, insistently questioning her students (in English) and transforming their personal confessions into poetic reveries, in French, which she has them study. But Iris herself is a mystery—her younger students are open to her probing curiosity, but middle-aged people (including her roommate’s mother) are skeptical of her motives. As Hong evokes the risks of a life lived artistically, Huppert, with energy and determination, invests a restless creative drive with blunt force.—[Richard Brody](#) (*Film Forum and Film at Lincoln Center.*)

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## P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [Long live the Notes app](#)
  - [Cher on Sonny](#)
  - [The greatest love of all](#)
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## [Goings On](#)

# Celebrating the Holidays in N.Y.C.

*Favorite traditions light up the season, including “Messiah”s, “Nutcracker”s, Scrooge, James Joyce, the Rockettes, and more.*

November 23, 2024



*Illustration by Riikka Laakso*

### **“Christmas Spectacular”**

A theatrical tradition, even one in its nineties, has to change a little with the times. Recent years have seen the Radio City Rockettes and the animals of the Living Nativity surrounded by more digital projections and such technological innovations as fairy drones that fly over the audience. But the old verities retain the most durable magic, especially the well-maintained precision of the dancers and the built-to-last construction of the “Parade of Wooden Soldiers” number, which has been collapsing with a comforting continuity since 1933. (*Radio City Music Hall; through Jan. 5.*)

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### **“The Dead, 1904” and “A Child’s Christmas in Wales”**

The Irish Rep welcomes back adaptations of two holiday-forward literary works. An immersive treatment of “The Dead” (*American Irish Historical Society; through Jan. 5*), James Joyce’s not so short story about a family party that induces marital revelations, invites attendees to dine alongside the characters. And a staging of Dylan Thomas’s prose poem (*Irish Repertory Theatre; Dec. 4-29*) ornaments the writer’s childhood memories with carols.

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## **“A Christmas Carol”**

In December, 1867, Charles Dickens visited New York City, an event that forms the basis of Summoners Ensemble Theatre’s adaptation of his holiday classic about a miser turned benefactor. John Kevin Jones plays Dickens himself in a solo show at the Merchant’s House Museum, a landmarked nineteenth-century home whose candlelit parlor makes a period-appropriate venue. Also accessible via pay-per-view; not recommended for children under twelve. (*Nov. 26-Dec. 29.*)

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## **Baroque Neapolitan Crèche**

In Naples, the art of the Nativity scene, or *presepe*, is about much more than putting together a few figures to depict the birth of Jesus. These genre scenes, which you can find in many churches, are sprawling cityscapes peopled by hundreds of characters. Bakers, shepherds, and townfolk go about their lives, mingling with the three wise kings and their retinue. Angels with fluttering robes and wings carved out of wood float above them. The Met displays its vast collection of these eighteenth-century figures around a grand Christmas tree in the medieval wing. (*Metropolitan Museum of Art; Nov. 26-Jan. 6.*)

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## **“The Nutcracker”**

People return to New York City Ballet’s “George Balanchine’s The Nutcracker” because they know what to expect: the tree will grow extravagantly, Marie will vanquish the Mouse King with her slipper, Dewdrop will dazzle with her windswept jumps and spins. The combination of Tchaikovsky’s music and Balanchine’s choreography elicits an almost Pavlovian response: delight, and a craving for wintry things. (*David H. Koch Theatre; Nov. 29-Jan. 4.*) “The Hard Nut,” Mark Morris’s version of the story, is far more knowing. Morris places the opening holiday fête in nineteen-seventies American suburbia. The adults drink too much and make out; the kids brawl. But Morris is not immune to emotional outpourings. His “Snowflake Waltz,” in which the dancers, in meringue headdresses, pop into the air and spray glittery confetti, is pure magic. (*Brooklyn Academy of Music; Dec. 12-22.*)

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## **“A Very Sw!ng Out Holiday”**

In the joyful 2021 production “Sw!ng Out,” the tap dancer Caleb Teicher, along with musicians and dancers including LaTasha Barnes, presented swing dancing, born in nineteen-twenties Harlem, as a form very much alive in the present. It had a variety-show format, accompaniment by the Eyal Vilner Big Band, and a fluid approach to gender, leaders, and followers. Now comes “A Very Sw!ng Out Holiday,” a festive variation that maintains the original ending: dancing that the audience can join. (*Joyce Theatre; Dec. 3-15.*)

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## **Holiday Carols**

Although it’s charming, no doubt, to huddle with your co-workers at a holiday party, trying to remember the words to “Silent Night” (are there really *six* verses?), sometimes carolling is best left to the professionals. This season, cheer abounds, including performances by the New York Choral Society and the Brooklyn Chamber Orchestra for traditional carols (*St. Ann & the Holy Trinity; Dec. 14*); the Chanticleer ensemble for ditties old and new (*St. Ignatius; Dec. 6 and 8*); and the Manhattan Choral Ensemble for a chilly, Nordic-themed program (*Trinity Baptist Church; Dec. 6-7*).

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## **“Peter & the Wolf”**

The Guggenheim’s “Works & Process” has invented its own holiday ritual, its yearly performance of Sergei Prokofiev’s cautionary tale “Peter and the Wolf,” accompanied by Ensemble Connect and recited by Isaac Mizrahi. The action, whimsically choreographed by John Heginbotham, is depicted by a cast of eight dancers, costumed as the animals that young Peter encounters on his morning stroll through the “big green meadow”—here, Central Park. The clever twist is that each animal has a musical counterpart, offering a lesson in the instruments of the orchestra. (*Guggenheim Museum; Dec. 6-8.*)

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## **“Messiah”**

More than two hundred and eighty years after its début, Handel’s “Messiah” shows no sign of waning in popularity. It has become synonymous with the

holiday season, when it is ubiquitous, showcased in churches and halls across the city. Performances include the New York Philharmonic joined by Musica Sacra (*David Geffen Hall; Dec. 11-14*); the early-music ensemble New York Baroque Incorporated with the Saint Thomas Choir of Men and Boys (*St. Thomas Church; Dec. 10*); the Orchestra of the Bronx with the Bronx Opera Chorus (*Lehman College; Dec. 8*); Trinity Baroque Orchestra and the Trinity Choir (*Dec. 11*); and, if you'd like to join in, a "Sing-In" at Lincoln Center, featuring seventeen different conductors and many festive audience members with creative interpretations of pitch (*Dec. 17*).

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### **"The 8 Nights of Hanukkah with Yo La Tengo"**

In recent years, Yo La Tengo's run of Hanukkah shows has become one of the most beloved musical holiday traditions in the city. Each iteration brings its own wonderful set of surprises. But just as thrilling, and endearing, are the recurring rituals: special guests each night, and a rendition of "My Little Corner of the World," performed by Ira Kaplan's mother, Marilyn, bringing the series to a heartfelt conclusion. (*Bowery Ballroom; Dec. 25-Jan. 1.*)

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# The Talk of the Town

- **The Fundamental Problem with R.F.K., Jr.’s Nomination to H.H.S.**

By Dhruv Khullar | Kennedy has many bad ideas. Yet the irony of our political moment is that his more reasonable positions are the ones that could sink his candidacy.

- **Forbidden Sips of the Ukrainian Dom Pérignon**

By Boris Fishman | In the Cold War, Stalin ordered that a winery be set up in an old gypsum mine in Bakhmut; now Russian soldiers are using the prized cuvée to flush toilets.

- **Tyler, the Creator’s Hype Man and D.J. Lets Fly at Camp Flog Gnaw**

By Dana Goodyear | Jasper Dolphin joins two young fans for corn dogs and scary rides at Dodger Stadium.

- **How to Make Fuel (or Booze) from Thin Air**

By Adam Iscoe | Air Company, a startup that has used water and carbon dioxide to make vodka and to power automobiles, taste-tests its product and discusses getting Elon Musk’s business.

- **How Malcolm Washington Pitched Denzel Washington on “The Piano Lesson”**

By André Wheeler | On a visit to August Wilson’s childhood home, in Pittsburgh, the director of a new adaptation of the play discusses casting his brother (alongside Samuel L. Jackson) and working for his father.

[Comment](#)

# The Fundamental Problem with R.F.K., Jr.,'s Nomination to H.H.S.

Kennedy has many bad ideas. Yet the irony of our political moment is that his more reasonable positions are the ones that could sink his candidacy.

By [Dhruv Khullar](#)

November 24, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

In 2018, two children in Samoa died after receiving measles vaccines, because the nurses who administered them had mistakenly mixed the vaccine powder with a muscle relaxant. Local vaccine skeptics seized on the tragedy, and the government temporarily suspended its immunization program. Children's Health Defense, an organization chaired by [Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.](#), posted about the events on Facebook, where the group was one of the largest purchasers of anti-vaccine advertisements. The Samoan government reinstated the program, following an investigation. But

immunization rates remained perilously low, with less than a third of infants getting vaccinated, and, a few months later, the country experienced a devastating measles outbreak. Nearly six thousand people were infected, and more than seventy children died. Kennedy, who had meanwhile visited the island, sent the Prime Minister a letter raising the “regrettable possibility that these children are casualties” of vaccination—not of a lack of it. He later called the outbreak “mild,” and branded a Samoan vaccine opponent a “medical freedom hero.”

President-elect [Donald Trump](#) has now nominated Kennedy to lead the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. If confirmed, he will oversee thirteen operating divisions, including the National Institutes of Health, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. His reach would extend into virtually every corner of the nation’s health-care infrastructure, from messaging on public health and investment in biomedical research to the approval of new drugs and the delivery of medical care. Trump, who in April called Kennedy a “Radical Left Lunatic,” recently encouraged him to “go wild” on health, medicines, and “the food.” Kennedy seems poised to oblige.

In the past few months, Kennedy has indicated that he intends to reëxamine safety data for approved vaccines, advise municipalities not to add fluoride to their water supply, halt infectious-disease research at the N.I.H. and fire six hundred of its employees, and reverse the F.D.A.’s “aggressive suppression” of, among other things, discredited *COVID* remedies such as ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine. Earlier this year, Kennedy said that he would seek to prosecute medical journals if they didn’t “start publishing real science.” (*The Lancet*, one of the alleged offenders, recently published a study showing that vaccines have saved more than a hundred and fifty million lives in the past half century, or about six lives a minute.) Amid the rising threat of [bird flu](#)—this month, a teen-ager in Canada was infected and hospitalized in critical condition—Kennedy has suggested that we should relax restrictions on the sale of raw milk, which, because it is unpasteurized, can potentially spread the virus.

In another era, the sheer volume of Kennedy's bizarre and misleading statements might have disqualified him from running the local wellness spa, let alone the world's largest health apparatus. The pro-Trump editorial board of the *New York Post*, which met with Kennedy last year, wrote that his views amounted to a "head-scratching spaghetti of . . . warped conspiracy theories," and concluded that "he's nuts on a *lot* of fronts." Kennedy has insinuated that H.I.V. isn't the cause of *AIDS*, that Wi-Fi induces "leaky brain," that chemicals in the water are responsible for "sexual dysphoria," and that [Anthony Fauci](#) and Bill Gates led a cartel to prolong the *covid* pandemic and "amplify its mortal effects in order to promote their mischievous inoculations."

The trouble—and the opportunity—with Kennedy is that, although he has many bad ideas, not *all* his ideas are bad. He appears deeply concerned about the staggering rates of chronic disease in this country, and correctly condemns the long-standing failure to meaningfully reform the American food system, which is characterized by a glut of [ultra-processed products](#), owing partly to unhealthful agricultural subsidies. (The U.S. heavily subsidizes commodity crops, such as corn and soy, that often end up as sweeteners and additives.) Kennedy has also railed against gross conflicts of interest in health care and against the malign influence of corporations, especially pharmaceutical companies that aggressively market their products and use dubious tactics to extend patent protections and keep drug prices high. Politics is about principles, but it is also about priorities—if Kennedy chooses to elevate these issues during his tenure, he is likely to find common cause with many physicians and public-health officials.

And yet the irony of our political moment is that Kennedy's more reasonable positions are the ones that could sink his candidacy. Politicians in both parties receive enormous sums of money from the food, agriculture, and pharmaceutical industries. Kennedy has promised to free regulatory agencies from "the smothering cloud of corporate capture," which is sure to hit a sour note with corporations that deploy legions of lobbyists to shape regulations. Meanwhile, his support for reproductive rights—he has argued that [abortion](#) should be legal until a fetus is "viable outside the womb," and that bureaucrats and judges aren't "better equipped than the baby's own mother to decide" when to terminate a pregnancy—has rankled some

conservative activists, which may further complicate his confirmation in a Republican-led Senate. Still, blocking Trump appointments on any ground would require an uncommon level of daring from G.O.P. lawmakers, who have mostly been unwilling to defy even the most brazen whims of the President-elect.

The fundamental problem with Kennedy—the deficiency that unites his strange and sundry views—is that he doesn’t subscribe to what the writer Jonathan Rauch has called the “reality-based community.” Membership isn’t a matter of being right on every issue, but it does require adhering to practices that reliably, if imperfectly, bring us closer to the truth: subjecting one’s claims to scrutiny, critically appraising available data, correcting errors when the weight of evidence contradicts prior stances—the norms that animate the scientific method. With Kennedy, it isn’t clear how he arrives at his views, or what it would take to change them. For years, he has propagated half-truths and outright falsehoods in an environment of mistrust that he helped to create, and he will now be abetted by a cadre of MAGA influencers who share his passions and proclivities. When it comes to reducing human suffering, the scientific method may be the most important idea in history. We could soon be forced to test whether scientific institutions can function with a leader who rejects it. ♦



*Dhruv Khullar*, a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*, is a practicing physician and an associate professor at Weill Cornell Medical College. He writes about medicine, health care, and politics.

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[Smuggling Dept.](#)

# Forbidden Sips of the Ukrainian Dom Pérignon

In the Cold War, Stalin ordered that a winery be set up in an old gypsum mine in Bakhmut; now Russian soldiers are using the prized cuvée to flush toilets.

By [Boris Fishman](#)

November 25, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

At a benefit concert for Ukrainian children, at Carnegie Hall, Nathalie Lysenko and Gayle Corrigan walked up to the bar and paid forty-six dollars for two glasses of a Ukrainian sparkling wine that Lysenko had helped smuggle out of Bakhmut under Russian bombardment.

“I didn’t realize they were charging for it,” Corrigan said.

“It’s a good cause,” Lysenko said.

Lysenko, who is tall and has large, round eyes, is the export manager for Artwinery, which until recently was one of the largest wineries in the former Soviet Union. Corrigan, who wore a black cocktail dress, is her American importer. Before the Russians occupied Bakhmut, the city was a major center of sparkling-wine production. During the Cold War, Stalin, facing a champagne ban, ordered the establishment of a high-end facility there, in a former gypsum mine more than two hundred feet underground. Classical music, which was thought to be calming for the wines and the workers, played twenty-four hours a day. In May, 2023, the music stopped.

“When the Russians get close, everyone at Artwinery argue what to do,” Lysenko, who lives in Kyiv, said, in her accented but capable English. (She studied it as a girl in Ukraine to defy her father, a domineering engineer: “It was the one subject he didn’t know.”) “We thought, We have to blow it up,” Lysenko went on. “But we couldn’t do it.”

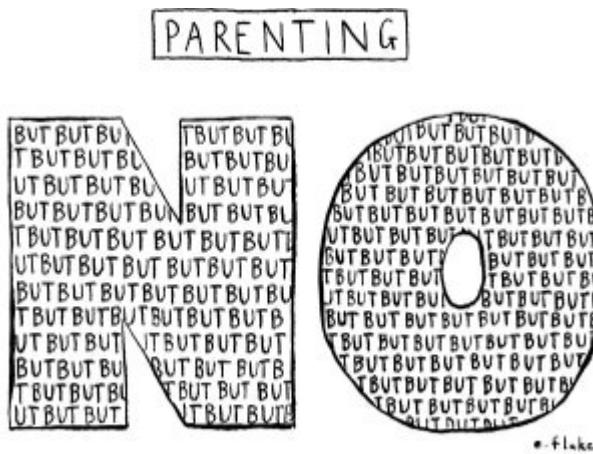
Working in the mine three shifts a day, the company’s employees managed to ready some three hundred thousand bottles for rescue. “When the first bottles go above, the Russians are shelling,” Lysenko said. Some got to a railway point; the tracks were shelled. Surviving bottles were taken to a warehouse; that, too, was shelled, destroying the last Ukrainian bottles of Soloking, Artwinery’s most prized cuvée, made partly from the last grapes harvested in independent Crimea, and aged for seventy-two months. But eighteen months after Corrigan placed an order for them, thirty thousand bottles from Artwinery made it to her warehouse, in Pawtucket, Rhode Island.

“When Gayle tell me she receive the shipment, it was happiest day of my life,” Lysenko said. Corrigan still had a bit of Soloking from an earlier order, which she donated to the Carnegie Hall gala. What few magnums remain are available only through charity auction, and fetch as much as thirty-five hundred dollars each.

The Soloking was a brilliant gold color and smelled like toast and almonds, with hints of green apple and stewed peach. Corrigan held up her glass. “It’s the Ukrainian Dom Pérignon,” she said.

Six million Artwinery bottles remain under Russian control; Lysenko has heard that the caverns were turned into a field hospital for Russian soldiers, and that the winemaking equipment was being carted away, to Moscow. “When the Russians take over, there is no water running, so they used the wine to flush their toilets,” Lysenko said. “We should have blown it up.”

It was time for the show. Liev Schreiber, the m.c., spoke with urgency about waning interest in Ukraine around the world. The Orchestra for Ukraine and a chorus performed Beethoven’s Ninth and, for some reason, a part of the “Star Wars” score.



*Cartoon by Emily Flake*

At the after-party, Lysenko and Corrigan waited to take photos with Schreiber. They had spent the week on what Corrigan called a “‘Thelma and Louise’ tour” of the Eastern Seaboard. They feasted on varenyky and eggs at Veselka, in the East Village. “It was very good,” Lysenko said. “But in Ukraine no one give you varenyky and eggs from one bowl.” They drove to Washington and cried at the Holodomor memorial to the Ukrainian famine orchestrated by Stalin. They wrecked Corrigan’s dad’s Honda Ridgeline in a parking garage. They saw many Halloween decorations. “This is something very strange for me, because everyone is trying very hard to get scared, and putting fake blood on the car, and things like that,”

Lysenko said. “But this is reality of life in my country.” At a friend’s house in Pennsylvania, as they ate s’mores around a campfire, Lysenko’s phone went off, alerting her to air-raid sirens in Kyiv. “It was like the five stages of grief,” Corrigan said. “We buried Bakhmut on that trip.”

Lysenko corrected her: “We’re still fighting for it.”

When they reached Schreiber, Lysenko thrust a black box at him. It was inscribed, “Hello, Mr. Schreiber. We had to smuggle this sparkling wine out of Ukraine.”

“Do you like sparkling wine?” Lysenko asked.

“I’m an Irish-whiskey drinker,” Schreiber, who wore a gray suit and glasses with clear frames, said. Inside the box was a bottle of Artwinery’s Brut Nature Grand Reserve, aged sixty months.

“It’s the only bottle Nathalie brought,” Corrigan said. The bottle had been dressed in felt of blue and gold, the Ukrainian colors.

“We will give a bottle like this, but big, a six-litre methuselah, to President Zelensky,” Lysenko said. “So he opens on Victory Day.”

“I thought Zelensky doesn’t drink,” Schreiber said.

“On Victory Day, he might drink,” Corrigan said. ♦

*Boris Fishman teaches creative writing at the University of Austin. His books include the novel “[The Unwanted](#).”*

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[L.A. Postcard](#)

# Tyler, the Creator's Hype Man and D.J. Lets Fly at Camp Flog Gnaw

Jasper Dolphin joins two young fans for corn dogs and scary rides at Dodger Stadium.

By [Dana Goodyear](#)

November 25, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Davon Wilson met Tyler Okonma—the hip-hop impresario known as Tyler, the Creator—at the Dirty, a skate park in Hawthorne, California, when both were fifteen. “We actually didn’t like each other for that first moment,” Wilson said. “I was, like, ‘Damn, this dude’s loud and annoying.’ I found

out he lived across the street from me, and then somehow we bonded over a couch we were trying to ollie over.”

Wilson goes by the name Jasper Dolphin. He became the hype man for Tyler’s hip-hop collective, Odd Future; a prankster on Tyler’s TV show “Loiter Squad”; and, eventually, Tyler’s d.j. (In February, he’ll join Tyler on tour to promote his album “Chromakopia.”) Wilson, who is thirty-four and wears a clipped goatee and a stud in each ear, has a jaunty, down-for-whatever air. He has bungee jumped from a hot-air balloon, ridden a bull, and performed painful stunts in “Jackass Forever.”

One recent Sunday afternoon, two teen-age boys and their middle-aged chaperon met up with Wilson in the parking lot of Dodger Stadium. Camp Flog Gnaw, a music festival and carnival that Tyler founded and Wilson attends religiously, was in full swing: balloon darts, corn dogs, Playboi Carti.

“Hey, what ride should we get on?” Wilson asked.

“I was feeling that one,” one of the teens said, nodding toward a pendulum with screaming people attached to one end. “I’m with that,” Wilson said. “I’m with that a lot.” The chaperon watched apprehensively as the pendulum swung high overhead, twisted, and flipped over its axis. “It’s a little spin spin twin,” Wilson said, giggling. A minute later, he buttoned his sunglasses into a pocket of his cargo pants and strapped in. As the pendulum began to move, arcing up fast and dropping back suddenly, he said something about the treetops, and advised looking at your shoes. When the ride shuddered and reversed, he muttered, “Aw, naw, naw, naw.” At the moment of crisis, he screamed, “The British are coming, y’all!” The chaperon prayed that it would end.

“My legs feel very light—that was great,” Wilson said afterward. “What d’you guys wanna mob now?” The party headed over to a tent in the parking lot, where there was an exhibition of photos from the early days of Odd Future, taken by Brick Stowell, their tour manager at the time. Wilson tried to remember the full name of the group. “Odd Future Wolf Gang Kill Them All, Don’t Give a Fuck, Loiter Squad, Little Life, Bacon Boys, Sneaky Snake Ninjas?” he ventured. “Something like that.”

On display were Vans sneakers that Tyler had doodled doughnuts on, and a large spray-painted piece of a Christmas tree with a penis in place of the star. “That dick doesn’t need to be there,” Wilson said, a little wistfully. Kids. The members of Odd Future are still his closest friends. “We’re still in a group text,” he said. “In the morning, somebody’s, like, ‘Food?’ And everybody’s, like, ‘Food, food.’ And we go get food.”

Wilson stopped in front of a group shot centered on Earl Sweatshirt (given name: Thebe Kgositile.) “This is New York, when Thebe first came back from boarding school in Samoa. Tyler had a broken hand right there. He broke his hand because he socked me in the face on accident. I was, like, ‘My head is harder than your hand.’ ”

Then there was the incident with a firework on Fairfax Avenue, where Odd Future used to have a store. “No names, but somebody burned down a tree in front of the store,” Wilson said. “They felt bad afterward, because they were young and dumb. Fire department came and everything. The tree was on fire. It was falling down. It was landing on the awning of the building next to ours. And then that caught on fire.”

Stowell, who is wiry and energetic, came up and embraced Wilson. Did he remember that time when the guys bought a bunch of knives and ninja stars? And put them in Stowell’s backpack without telling him, right before they crossed the Canadian border? “I was tour manager, staff photographer, *his* babysitter, got his weed for him,” Stowell said. In Europe, he would steer them away from American fast food, and make them visit monuments. “They’d be, like, ‘The fucking camp counsellor who wants to take photos of us,’ ” he said. “Now they’re, like, ‘God, I’m so glad you did this for us.’ ”

On the last wall was a case containing a jumbo water gun—the reason Odd Future was kicked out of Coachella in 2011. Long story short: they sprayed a security guard in the face and got their wristbands cut, right before a performance by the rapper Lil B. But, as they were leaving, an industry friend gave them new wristbands. They ran back in, and crowd-surfed to the stage for Lil B’s set.

The sun was going down, and Wilson had to go meet his mom. But there was something he wanted to do first. He wanted to hit that ride again. ♦



*Dana Goodyear* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the host of the podcast “*Lost Hills*.”

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# How to Make Fuel (or Booze) from Thin Air

Air Company, a startup that has used water and carbon dioxide to make vodka and to power automobiles, taste-tests its product and discusses getting Elon Musk's business.

By [Adam Iscoe](#)

November 25, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

On a recent morning, near a ramen shop in East Williamsburg, at 0700 hours, a truck loaded with live chickens coughed diesel exhaust. Across the street, at the site of a former night club, in a room dominated by a massive machine that has been rumored to convert water and carbon dioxide into alcohol, a curly-haired Australian man wearing a long blue fireproof lab

coat said, “It’s never too early for a shot of vodka!” Then he downed one —“To another successful demonstration,” he said—hopped in the back of an S.U.V., and headed up to the United States Military Academy at West Point.

Gregory Constantine, the man in the lab coat, is a co-founder of the startup Air Company; he explained that the vodka had been produced by combining carbon dioxide and hydrogen with a proprietary “catalyst” (“our secret sauce,” one employee calls it) to make ethanol, which was then made into vodka. “The world’s cleanest, highest-quality, and first carbon-negative spirit,” Constantine said.

The recipe was devised by Air Company’s other co-founder, Stafford Sheehan, a chemist who studied artificial photosynthesis at Yale. During the pandemic, Air Company switched from distilling vodka to producing hand sanitizer. The process was further modified to produce fuel for astronauts, and, later, refashioned to make fuel for planes, automobiles, and rocket ships. Back in the lab, an Air Company chemist, brewing a batch of carbon-neutral fuel, had said, “The petroleum industry took crude oil out of the ground, and they fractionated it. They were, like, ‘Let’s make plastics! Let’s make diesel!’ We can do that with CO<sub>2</sub>!” The startup’s “synthetic crude” can be similarly fractionated. “We have the ability to be selective, depending on the customer, on what kind of fuel we want to produce,” Constantine said. In 2023, the company scored a sixty-five-million-dollar contract from the Pentagon; it has tested its fuel in an Air Force drone and aboard a Navy vessel. That morning, Constantine would be showing his fuel to the Army.

At West Point, a career fair of sorts was under way. Representatives from each of the Army’s seventeen branches had assembled with rifles, heavy artillery, and helicopters, to recruit cadets. Near a Patriot-missile launcher, an enlisted soldier, who said he had spent the past sixteen years taking orders from twenty-two-year-old West Point grads, said, “We’re here to sell them snake oil. We all brought our cool, shiny toys to get the bright-eyed cadets to say, ‘I want to do *this!*’ ” At a table piled with body armor, scopes, and medical equipment, a soldier demonstrated Microsoft’s holographic-lens augmented-reality device mounted on a helmet; nearby, a

yellow chemical-sniffing Boston Dynamics robot dog waited for action. Freshmen—known as “plebes”—took selfies with Stinger-missile launchers and an Abrams tank.

At the Office of the Chief of Engineers tent (not to be confused with the Army Corps of Engineers tent, which featured a ten-ton amphibious truck that could launch a bridge-erecting boat), an expert on mobile nuclear power plants shouted, “You may not know, but the D.O.D. is the largest emitter of greenhouse gases in the world.” Several cadets laughed. “We’re looking for solutions to *that* issue, but that’s really the cherry on top. This is all about keeping our soldiers and our sailors there safe.” The Pentagon likes Air Company’s fuel because it can be produced anywhere, on demand. According to a 2009 D.O.D. report, at least ten per cent of Army casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan occurred during the transportation of water or fossil fuels. Someday, Air Company’s fuels might be produced in the back of a truck in a war zone, or at a C.I.A. black site, though for now its synthetic fuel is produced with grid electricity (from Con Edison), in Brooklyn, at the cost of more than a hundred dollars a gallon. (“Every batch of fuel thus far has been handcrafted by Ph.D.s. That’s why it’s so expensive,” Sheehan said. “Screw Tito’s.”)

Shortly before 1300 hours, the cadets watched as an Air Company employee poured fuel into an old sand-colored buggy, which had been repurposed by the West Point Spirit Team (“*beat navy!*”) for football season. Then a soldier in a battle helmet took the vehicle on a joyride, zipping up and down a sidewalk, at one point slowing down for a professor on a bicycle.

Later, Sheehan said that he’d just been at Cape Canaveral; Air Company has a deal with NASA to make rocket fuel. His contact had introduced him to SpaceX’s procurement team, hoping to persuade Elon Musk to use Air Company’s fuel to fly home from Mars. ♦

*Adam Iscoe* is a writer based in New York City.

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[The Pictures](#)

# How Malcolm Washington Pitched Denzel Washington on “The Piano Lesson”

On a visit to August Wilson’s childhood home, in Pittsburgh, the director of a new adaptation of the play discusses working with his brother (alongside Samuel L. Jackson) and working for his father.

By [André Wheeler](#)

November 25, 2024



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The filmmaker Malcolm Washington, son of Denzel and Paulette, flew to Pittsburgh the other day, and went straight from the airport to the August Wilson House, in the city's historically Black Hill District. He had last been to the place—a community center that celebrates the legacy of the late playwright—two years ago, before he began directing a movie adaptation of Wilson's play "The Piano Lesson."

Washington, who is thirty-three, wore a blue jacket, stiff jeans, and leather Nikes, and had plaits pulled into a ponytail. At the Wilson House, he surveyed a new exhibition on "Jitney," Wilson's eighth play. Prepping for his movie, the director had spent days digging through Wilson's archive for what he called "nuts-and-bolts research"—scraps of dialogue written on napkins, correspondence with editors. He'd tried to see Pittsburgh as Wilson had seen it. "I remember coming in one day for, like, three hours, to look at maps," he said

Having time to kill before a screening of "The Piano Lesson" that evening, he strolled out to the back yard. He pointed up at the three-story building. "This was August's crib," he said. As a kid, Wilson lived there, with his mother and five siblings, in a two-room apartment with no running water. After they moved out, in 1957, the building fell into disrepair. In 2020, Denzel helped raise five million dollars to restore it. Malcolm Washington has inherited his father's fascination with both Wilson and his home town. "It's like the Lewis and Clark expedition started here," Washington said. "At the turn of the century, there's more millionaires here than in New York City. And it's a release valve—or a receiver—of the Great Migration." He is a fan of Jane Jacobs, and quoted her, apropos Pittsburgh: "She's, like, 'A busy sidewalk's a safe sidewalk.' "

Before getting the gig to direct "The Piano Lesson," Washington had to pitch his father, who, as a producer, is on a mission to adapt all ten of Wilson's plays for the screen. After he wooed his brother John David and Samuel L. Jackson, he approached Netflix about directing. He feels a connection to the story, which concerns family members at odds over an heirloom procured by their enslaved ancestors. "I'm somebody who has, my whole life, been acutely aware of the idea of legacy," he said. "And my connection to my parents." He went on, "In my home, growing up, my

mom's dad was like a hero. My dad's mom was a hero, a legend. *Their* grandparents were *legends*."

So far, Denzel has put three of Wilson's plays on film. He directed and starred in "Fences," for which Viola Davis won an Oscar. Asked why his dad didn't want to direct "The Piano Lesson," Washington said, "He wasn't in that zone. He just wants to get them made."

With time to spare, Washington decided to grab a bite. "There's a chicken place," he said, pointing down the street. The "Fences" crew had introduced him to it. Driving over, he gazed out the window and took in the Hill, a mishmash of renovation and demolition. With his production designer, David J. Bomba, he'd worked to re-create the Hill circa 1936 on a film set in Atlanta. He pointed at an empty lot. "They'll just tear shit down and leave it," he said.

Inside the chicken shop, the two owners greeted Washington effusively. Everyone caught up, and the director did some on-the-ground marketing for his film.

"Is your dad in it?" one of the owners asked.

"No," Washington said. "But Sam Jackson's in it." He ordered six wings—"three buffalo, three fried"—and invited the owners to the screening later. While he waited for his food, he strolled over to the house that his father had used for "Fences," a block away. The owner had spruced the place up. "She took the location money and did some upgrades," he said.

As he returned to the chicken shop to pick up his order, John David pulled up. He'd been craving wings, too. "Hey! How you doing?" John David shouted. Like his brother, he wore his hair in plaits.

When the food was ready, John David reached for a box. "This is me right here?" he asked. He glanced enviously at his brother: "He got two boxes, huh?" They laughed. Then they found a stoop on a nearby corner and dug into their dinner. It was a family meal. ♦

*An earlier version of this article mischaracterized Malcolm Washington's pitch to his brother and Samuel L. Jackson.*

*André Wheeler*, a young-adult novelist and formerly a writer at *Vogue*, has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2021.

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By Stephanía Taladrí | Amid increasingly stringent abortion laws, doctors who provide maternal care have been fleeing the state.

- **How Old Age Was Reborn**

By Daniel Immerwahr | “The Golden Girls” reframed senior life as being about socializing and sex. But did the cultural narrative of advanced age as continued youth twist the dial too far?

- **A Revolution in How Robots Learn**

By James Somers | A future generation of robots will not be programmed to complete specific tasks. Instead, they will use A.I. to teach themselves.

- **Lake Tahoe’s Bear Boom**

By Paige Williams | The vacation hot spot has been overrun by people—whose habits are drawing fast-moving animals with sharp claws and insatiable appetites.

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[\*\*Letter from the Rio Grande Valley\*\*](#)

# The Texas Ob-Gyn Exodus

Amid increasingly stringent abortion laws, doctors who provide maternal care have been fleeing the state.

By [Stephania Taladrid](#)

November 25, 2024



*Dr. Tony Ogburn helped build a residency program in an underserved area. After Roe was overturned, the program collapsed. Photographs by Christopher Lee for The New Yorker*

Eight months after the fall of Roe v. Wade, Vanessa Garcia lay on a hospital table in Texas's Rio Grande Valley, as a technician performed an ultrasound. Garcia had given birth to two children with no complications, but her third pregnancy seemed alarmingly different. The ultrasound revealed that her

placenta was covering her cervix—a condition, known as placenta previa, that heightened her risk of hemorrhage or preterm birth.

Garcia was referred to a maternal-fetal expert at D.H.R. Health Women's Hospital, in Edinburg, Texas, and began going in for weekly ultrasounds. She approached the visits as an opportunity to catch a glimpse of her daughter, whom she had named Vanellope. Before driving to appointments, she got in the habit of drinking half a gallon of water, hoping that it would contribute to a clearer image. During scans, she gazed at the monitor, watching raptly when Vanellope lifted her hand to her eyes, as if gently rubbing them.

At the start of her second trimester, Garcia returned to the hospital and followed a now familiar routine, uncovering her belly and resting on a table. On this visit, though, the technician kept moving the probe across her skin for an unusually long time, without ever turning the monitor to face Garcia. Then she rose and left the room, without saying a word.

Alone, Garcia couldn't resist examining the images. The baby was curled into a ball, looking eerily still. Instinctively, Garcia snapped a photo and texted it to her husband, Erick Escareño, a manager at a supermarket chain. He was checking inventory as he opened the text and told himself, "This isn't real." Then a doctor walked in and informed Garcia that her daughter's heart had stopped.

Garcia was fifteen weeks into her pregnancy, and, in cases of miscarriage in the second trimester, the safest treatment is a surgical removal or a medical induction of labor. Instead, she was "discharged to home self-care," as her chart notes. All Garcia could do was wait until she had a natural miscarriage. The thought of it terrified her. What if she hemorrhaged in the middle of the street? Or in the car, picking up her children from school? Her doctor's only departing instructions were: if you start bleeding or develop a fever, check into the hospital immediately. (The doctor did not respond to requests for comment.)

A mournful silence settled in Garcia's home. Escareño busied himself, but there were only so many times he could empty the trash or mow the lawn. Garcia spent most of her days lying in bed. In a corner of their bedroom sat

purchases she had made for Vanellope: diapers, a snuggly blanket, and now a small urn.

Garcia's situation was not unique. Across Texas, reports were surfacing of women being sent home to manage miscarriages on their own. In 2021, the state had passed a law known as S.B. 8, banning nearly all abortions after electrical activity is detected in fetal cells, which typically happens around the sixth week of gestation. The law encouraged civilians to sue violators, in exchange for the possibility of a ten-thousand-dollar reward.

From a medical standpoint, the treatment for abortion and miscarriage was the same—and so, even though miscarriage care remained legal, physicians began putting it off, or denying it outright. After Roe was overturned, the laws in Texas tightened further, so that abortion was banned at any phase of pregnancy, unless the woman was threatened with death or “substantial impairment of a major bodily function.” Violations could send practitioners to prison for life.



*“I just feel like a failure if I don’t achieve a milestone of human creativity in the fifteen minutes I have to myself each day.”*

*Cartoon by Brendan Loper*

After a week of increasing pain and anxiety, Garcia noticed that her belly seemed to be flattening, and she couldn't help wondering if Vanellope was

still there. Finally, she asked Escareño to drive her to the hospital. In the emergency room, a nurse advised her just to keep waiting and “let the tissue pass.” Garcia shot back, “Tissue or baby? Law-wise, it’s a baby, but now you’re telling me it’s a tissue?”

Eventually, her family doctor referred her to another physician: Tony Ogburn, the founding chairman of the ob-gyn department at the nearby University of Texas Rio Grande Valley. Ogburn, a tall man of sixty-four, with white hair and rimless glasses, had come to the Valley eight years before, with a mission to improve health care for women. When he read Garcia’s file, he was outraged. After carrying the dead fetus for weeks, she risked needing a full hysterectomy. Why had she had to wait this long?

When they met, though, Ogburn reassured Garcia that she had options: his team could induce delivery, or perform a dilation and evacuation—a D. & E., as it’s known. The latter option was “emotionally better for most patients,” Ogburn told me. In his experience, it was traumatic enough for a mother to lose a child, without having to go through labor to deliver a corpse. “For a lot of people, the tipping point is, ‘You mean I can go to sleep, and when I wake up it’ll be done?’ ”

Garcia was torn. For weeks, she had sustained the hope of holding Vanellope at least once. But she couldn’t summon the resolve to go through labor and return home without her child. Ultimately, she opted for surgery, and the procedure was scheduled for the next day. “I’m sorry,” Ogburn told her. “You should never have gone through this alone at home.”

In the recovery room, when the anesthesia wore off after the surgery, Garcia’s eyes filled with tears. “My first thought was, She’s gone,” she said. But Ogburn had provided a memento: with her permission, he had recorded Vanellope’s hand- and footprints on a sheet of paper. “I didn’t get to carry her, but I have that part of her,” Garcia said. Back home, she put the diapers, the blanket, and the urn in storage, and replaced them with Vanellope’s prints, set in a wooden frame.

Garcia felt grateful to have been referred to Ogburn, but there were few other choices: hardly any physicians in the Valley were trained to perform a D. & E. Amid the tightening restrictions on maternal care, doctors had

started leaving Texas; others were contemplating early retirement. Within a few months, Ogburn would leave the Valley, too, and the program he'd started would be shut down.

In the summer of 2016, Ogburn looked on as fifty-five student physicians lifted their right hands to recite the Hippocratic oath. They were the inaugural class at the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley's medical school—a new facility that, in the words of university officials, promised to “forever transform the lives of our children and grandchildren.”

For years, aspiring medical students in the Valley had moved to San Antonio, or farther north to Houston, Austin, or Dallas. They rarely returned home. The United States averaged almost three hundred practicing doctors for every hundred thousand people; even in the most populous county of the Rio Grande Valley, the ratio was less than a third of that. Though the Valley included some of the poorest cities in the nation, there wasn't a single public hospital. The school intended to turn things around. To attract residents, the administrators called in Ogburn, who had spent a career providing care in underserved places.

Ogburn had begun thinking about what doctors owed their patients before he finished medical training. As a student, in the nineteen-eighties, he served for a month at Kayenta Health Center, in Arizona. Situated on the Navajo reservation, the center served a community of about twenty thousand people. Some patients rode horses to appointments. Others—who didn't have running water at home, much less a phone—hailed rides from strangers.

Each week, Ogburn was sent into the countryside with a translator and a nurse, who carried a list of people who had missed appointments. “We would drive twenty miles down a washboard creek bed to get to a hogan out in the middle of nowhere,” Ogburn said. “Nobody was there to make a lot of money. They were there to provide good health care.”

After finishing his residency, Ogburn moved to Gallup, New Mexico, with his wife, Jane, planning to stay a year or two. Instead, they spent six years there, and had two children. Ogburn's next job, at the University of New Mexico, lasted almost two decades. Early on, he worked part time at a

clinic on the Kirtland Air Force Base, east of Albuquerque. It was a “socialized-medicine environment,” he said. Neither he nor his patients had to worry about whether they could afford imaging tests or prescriptions—the government bore all medical costs. The university, too, used a portion of its public funding to care for the indigent. “It was a place where the social determinants of health, which we didn’t have vocabulary for back then, came into play,” Eve Espey, a longtime colleague of Ogburn’s there, said.

Ogburn conducted studies on how to improve health outcomes for women, and advocated for abortion care to be a part of every medical student’s education. He eventually became a leader of the university’s obstetrics-and-gynecology practice. In 2015, a recruiter called to tell him about the effort to build a medical school in the Rio Grande Valley. The region faced needs that were similar to New Mexico’s, but it had never had an ob-gyn residency program. Would he want to start one?

The idea was to create a practice staffed by doctors who would also teach at the med school and oversee residents at the hospital. Ogburn visited medical facilities around the country, seeking talent. His pitch was meant to counteract the stereotype of the Valley as a region defined by clashes between smugglers and Border Patrol agents—what Ogburn described as “people with machine guns driving around in pickup trucks.” But what stood out most was the moral urgency of his message. “He was the only person that talked about human rights,” Zoe Kornberg, one of the residents he recruited, said. She emerged with a galvanizing idea: “It’s a radical act to make somebody feel cared for and empower them, if they’ve never had that before.”

Most of the Valley’s population occupies a string of cities connected by Highway 83, known locally as the world’s longest main street. The region is bordered by vast ranches and fields of mesquite, as well as *colonias*, where thousands of agricultural workers live in trailer homes. The area is defined less by violence than by poverty: the per-capita income hovers around twenty thousand dollars a year.

Even in Texas, which has the largest share of uninsured residents in the nation, the Valley had unusually high numbers. Women suffered and died from cervical cancer at inordinate rates. One ob-gyn routinely performed

surgeries on cancer patients without being board-certified in oncology. “You’re talking about a huge chunk of Texas where you didn’t have a place for physicians to pursue a medical education—nothing,” Adela Valdez, a respected doctor in the Valley, said. “It was an area that was forgotten.”

Residents and physicians around the country signed on to Ogburn’s program, convinced that he would instill a higher standard. In the fall of 2015, Ogburn and his team began working at D.H.R. Health Women’s Hospital, a sand-colored building with a colonnaded entrance. They focussed on starting the residency program and building a series of practices, including one in complex family planning, designed to treat some of the most delicate complications that arise in pregnancy. The consensus, according to Valdez, was that Ogburn would institute “the kind of health care for women that they deserved.”

At the hospital, Ogburn was a calm, observant presence. One night during my visit, he stopped by a glass-panelled room, known as the fishbowl. Inside was a wall lined with screens showing the heartbeats of mothers about to deliver. One of the lines was peaking constantly—a sign, Ogburn said, that the mother was in the middle of contractions. Right above it was the baby’s heartbeat. “If it’s wiggly and has what are called accelerations, it’s fine,” he said. “When it’s straight, or low, it might not be.” Near the center of the wall, one mother’s monitor flashed a dipping line. It was a variable deceleration, Ogburn explained, meaning that the baby was likely in the birth canal, where heart rates tend to slow. It was, in a way, a prelude to the first breath.

When Ogburn and his team started working at D.H.R., they quickly discovered that it was “practicing how most hospitals did twenty years ago,” he said. They found that episiotomies, or perineal incisions, which were regarded as an outdated practice, were not unusual there. C-section rates were high—exceptionally so among some doctors. Ogburn said that women who came to the E.R. with heavy bleeding were typically given a transfusion and then sent home, only to return later with even more severe hemorrhages. When he performed pelvic exams on a group of these women, he determined that they all had cervical cancer. (D.H.R. declined to comment on specific patient encounters but stated that it was “committed to

providing prompt, compassionate care in accordance with Texas state law, maintaining evidence-based practices.”)

Ogburn’s colleagues noticed similarly troubling patterns. Jennifer Salcedo, an ob-gyn who left a practice in Honolulu to move to the Valley, recalled that early on she was rushed into an operating room where a physician had attempted to perform a D. & E. but hadn’t fully dilated the woman’s cervix —a mandatory first step. “He was just kind of standing beside the patient,” Salcedo said. “There was over a thousand millilitres of hemorrhage.” (Women hemorrhage in less than six per cent of D. & E. procedures, and when they do they generally lose only half that much blood.) Salcedo realized that the doctor had used tools reserved for an early pregnancy, even though the patient was well past the twentieth week.



*When Vanessa Garcia was fifteen weeks pregnant, tests found that her baby's heart had stopped. A nurse advised her to go home and "let the tissue pass."*

Like many other hospitals in the Valley, D.H.R. was a for-profit institution. It was also physician-owned, which meant that doctors took a cut of the

proceeds—giving them an incentive to bring in patients. “Volume means money,” Ogburn said. When he began working with D.H.R., the hospital was averaging about eight thousand annual deliveries, making its maternity ward one of the busiest in Texas.

The volume of patients presented an opportunity for the new residents: the more conditions they were exposed to, the more they learned. Ogburn insured that anyone who walked in, irrespective of her ability to pay, could see a resident. “It was a win for the patient, it was a win for the residents, and it was a win for the hospital,” he said. Soon after he arrived at D.H.R., it became the first institution in the Valley to have ob-gyns on-site around the clock. In the past, doctors were hardly ever at the hospital at night, so they had to be called in for after-hours emergencies; often, they ended up just giving nurses instructions over the phone. Now if a woman’s uterus ruptured halfway through labor, there would be someone to treat her. Eventually, the hospital qualified for Level IV status, signifying that it was equipped to handle the highest-risk pregnancies.

Part of Ogburn’s goal was for residents to “serve beyond the walls of the hospital.” That included holding community health clinics and working with institutions connected with underserved populations. Among the uninsured patients who turned up at D.H.R. were referrals from Holy Family, one of the oldest birthing centers in Texas. Previously, physicians had rarely wanted to collaborate with Holy Family—midwifery was viewed in the Valley as a pseudoscience. According to Sandra de la Cruz-Yarrison, the center’s executive director, if a patient faced a life-threatening complication or received a midpregnancy diagnosis of cancer, and couldn’t afford care, there was nowhere to refer her to. “They all went untreated,” she told me. After Ogburn arrived, she said, “his support got us through that door.”

Not everyone at D.H.R. was happy about the university’s influence. According to Efraim Vela, the hospital’s chief medical officer, some saw residents as “ten-year-olds with sharp knives in their hands, running around the house.” Others rolled their eyes whenever a Holy Family patient walked through the door. “I didn’t join D.H.R. to practice at an indigent hospital,” Ogburn was repeatedly told.

The staff tried to contain these tensions, but they became harder to ignore with the passage of S.B. 8, which had the controversial provision that encouraged anyone suspecting a person of “aiding or abetting” an abortion to file a lawsuit. In some instances, nurses openly challenged doctors, invoking their right to sue. “People were so hair-triggered to be looking for a crime,” Zoe Kornberg, the resident, said.

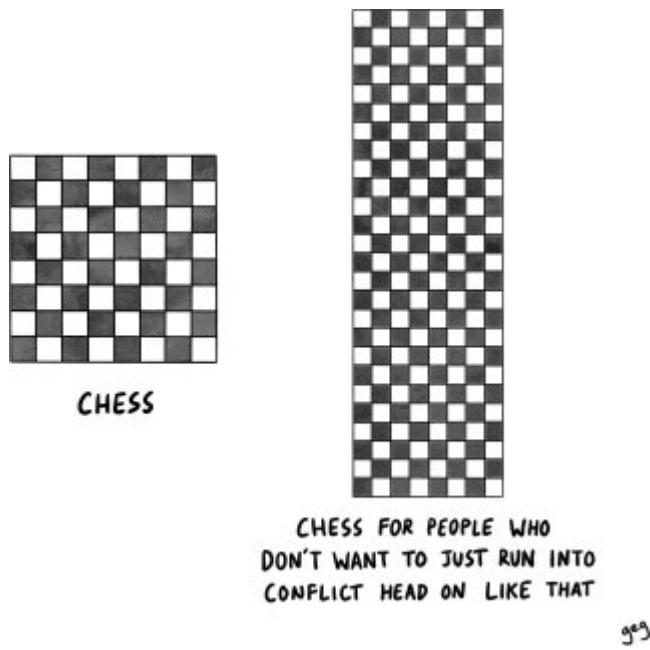
Ogburn began meeting with patients behind closed doors and instructing his residents not to offer counselling over the phone. “You never know who’s on the other end listening,” he told them. By then, “nobody felt comfortable talking about anything,” Elissa Serapio, one of the ob-gyns, said.

The list of conditions that could be treated narrowed substantially. If a woman came to the hospital with a lethal fetal anomaly, she had no option but to carry the pregnancy to term. The outcome was traumatic for both the mother and her doctors. “Several people had babies die in their arms,” Ogburn said. Doctors were even reluctant to treat life-threatening complications such as ectopic pregnancies. “It’s the standard of care everywhere in the world,” Ogburn remembers telling an anesthesiologist. “And you’re telling me you can’t treat an ectopic?”

A majority of women didn’t know that the laws had changed, and many of those who did know were not in a position to seek care out of state. A somewhat simpler solution was to cross the border into Mexico and buy abortion pills over the counter. Misoprostol, which causes uterine contractions, often comes in blister packs of twenty-eight. Women would call the hospital to ask if the twenty-eight pills should all be taken at once. The answer was no—four was typically the recommended dosage. But even such vital counsel could now be construed as aiding and abetting.

Ogburn referred patients to his former colleague Eve Espey, who had gone on to lead the University of New Mexico’s ob-gyn department. She, too, was feeling the effects of S.B. 8: the majority of her patients now came from out of state. But it took weeks, if not months, for many women to secure the money and the free time to travel hundreds of miles for care. When patients made it to Albuquerque, Espey said, the most vulnerable of them presented hemorrhages so severe that only a hysterectomy could keep them alive.

In the coming months, a new reality set in for ob-gyns in Texas. As Ogburn told his colleagues, “The standard of care can now be construed as a felony.” Many of the doctors had moved cross-country to join him at the university, but now the law complicated their work. “I see horrible things go wrong all the time in people’s pregnancies, and the law has made it so that there’s no guarantee that the right thing can be done,” Serapio told me. Even after getting all the mandatory clearances from lawyers and administrators, she added, “you still don’t know if you’re going to have an anesthesiologist who will agree to do it. By that time, the person has bled out and could die.”



*Cartoon by Greg Nussbaum*

Some of Ogburn’s colleagues were applying for their board certifications in complex family planning. What if they didn’t meet the requirements after operating in such a constrained environment? Residents who were interested in family-planning programs had similar concerns. To minimize the damage for them, Ogburn reached out to colleagues around the country and found rotations in states that offered clinical abortion training, like California or Connecticut.

But the new laws were already having an effect on the health-care system. Across Texas, residency applications in ob-gyn dropped significantly. Data from the Gender Equity Policy Institute revealed a fifty-six-per-cent spike

in maternal deaths in the state between 2019 and 2022. When the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, Texas was no longer an outlier; in the weeks after the ruling, thirteen states moved to ban abortion. By then, Serapio and Salcedo had already left Texas. Another ob-gyn at the practice, Pam Parker, would follow soon.

A year after the fall of Roe, Ogburn sat in his office surrounded by empty cardboard boxes, which he was filling with the records of his work in the Valley. D.H.R. was ending its partnership with the medical school. The hospital didn't offer an official explanation, but the motives weren't hard to guess. "Our healthcare mission no longer aligns with a for-profit, physician-owned health system like DHR Health," the university's president, Guy Bailey, declared at the time. The residents were dismayed. Many had purchased homes there; some had signed mortgages shortly before the decision was announced. Ogburn convened an all-hands meeting to discuss what to do.

No other hospital in the region had as high a volume of patients as D.H.R., so the program couldn't simply be transferred elsewhere. Besides, Ogburn had already lost half his full-time faculty to S.B. 8. He spent weeks making a new round of calls to medical leaders outside the Valley, to find hospitals where his residents could finish their training. Nearly all of them would end up leaving Texas.

The clinic was uncharacteristically quiet when I visited; Ogburn had stopped seeing new patients. No one was comparing notes in the hallway or hustling from one examination room to another. The offices adjacent to Ogburn's, which had belonged to three ob-gyns who had followed him to the Valley, were all empty. The doctors had relocated to New York, California, and Arizona. On a shelf facing Ogburn's desk was a pile of unopened dilators, which are used to perform D. & E.s. He arranged them in a box and taped it shut.

Down the corridor, in a room ringed with computers, two residents were typing in the records of their last patients. Martha Chapa, a thirty-year-old with long brown hair, was the only member of her class to pursue a practice in Texas. Chapa had been born in the border town of Laredo, and remained committed to improving health care in the Valley.

During her youth, Chapa explained, whenever there was a family medical emergency, her parents would drive across the border into Nuevo Laredo. That's what they had done when, as a toddler, she dropped her father's machete on her foot, and when, years later, she developed an ovarian cyst. "I ended up having surgery in Mexico, as a medical student in the United States," she told me. Now her parents had insurance, but it was still cheaper for them to see a doctor across the border, she said. They were the reason why her reaction to D.H.R.'s decision wasn't "Fuck Texas, I'm out."

That night was Ogburn's last time on call at D.H.R. He put on scrubs and toured the hospital's corridors. At the fishbowl, he waved to the residents, who would also be gone the next day. He and his wife had just put their house on the market. He planned to take a yearlong break, then move to San Antonio, where his daughter was doing a residency in orthopedics. He would work at a hospital there part time, caring for women who came to deliver—his version of an easy schedule.

His cell phone rang: it was Kornberg, who was also on call. A patient had come in through the E.R. with severe bleeding and cramping, but, when Kornberg asked a nurse what her cervical check had shown, she got a blank stare. The nurse admitted that she hadn't examined the woman. Did she feel comfortable doing so? Kornberg asked. The answer was no—so Kornberg took over the patient's care. Ogburn thanked her warmly. Neither mentioned that in twenty-four hours they would both be gone.

Close to midnight, I caught up with Kornberg. There were three women in the antepartum unit whose amniotic sacs had ruptured before the fetuses were viable, she told me. Their babies had little chance of surviving, and elsewhere the women would have been given the option to terminate their pregnancies. "I can't do that in this state," Kornberg said. Instead, the women were all told, "We're going to give you these medications, to give the baby the best chance, though it may not survive." The reality, Kornberg added, was even bleaker: "You have a baby that's probably not going to survive, and we're going to keep you here. And you're going to sit alone in this room for three, four months, and maybe you'll die of sepsis."

Kornberg was moving to Los Angeles to finish her residency. Like the doctors who had left before her, Kornberg had come to see herself as "part

of the problem,” she said. “I have the knowledge, all the support staff, everything to be able to help this person avoid one of these horrible outcomes—and they’re begging me to do it, but I’m not allowed to.” The bans felt like a personal attack, she said: “The state sees you as a felon.” When the act of caring for pregnant women in Texas could carry the same penalty as murder, the inevitable conclusion for Kornberg was “You don’t want me here? Fine, I’ll leave.”

Texas authorities are not keeping track of the exodus of doctors, at least not officially. Yet among practitioners there is a quiet sense of doom. “The pipeline is drying up,” Charles Brown, a maternal-fetal expert and a former Texas regional chair of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, said. A growing number of residents who trained in the state were leaving, Brown told me, and many established doctors were contemplating it, too. “We’re just not going to have enough people to take care of women in this state,” he said.

A report released last month by Manatt Health, a health-care consultancy based in Los Angeles, confirmed Brown’s fears. Manatt surveyed hundreds of ob-gyns in Texas to examine the impact of abortion bans. Seventy-six per cent of respondents said that they could no longer treat patients in accordance with evidence-based medicine. Twenty-one per cent said that they were either considering leaving the state or already planning to do so; thirteen per cent had decided to retire early. The report found “historic and worsening shortages” of ob-gyns, which “disproportionately impact rural and economically disadvantaged communities.” As in the Rio Grande Valley, the bans were shrinking the field’s future workforce: residency programs across Texas have seen a sixteen-per-cent drop in applications.

Texas is among the twenty-one states where abortion is banned or severely restricted. In Idaho, nearly a quarter of the state’s ob-gyns have left since the ban went into effect, and rural hospitals have stopped providing labor and delivery services. In Louisiana, three-quarters of rural hospitals no longer offer maternity care. Half a year after Ogburn left the Valley, another doctor submitted her resignation. The school’s Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology was folded into a new unit: the Division of Women’s and

Children's Health. By then, the department had shrunk to three doctors, one of whom plans to leave next spring.

After the departures, I sat down with Efraim Vela, the chief medical officer, to talk about D.H.R.'s future. A burly, clean-shaven man of seventy, with graying hair and a slight limp, Vela compared the severed relations between his hospital and the school to a tumultuous divorce. "The kids will obviously suffer," he said.

Patients had shown up at Ogburn's clinic only to find a closed door. Others had come for appointments and learned that the residents they knew had moved on. "They're going to be an asset to someone else, somewhere else," Vela said, fighting tears.

After more than four decades of practicing in the Valley, Vela understood that it was singularly difficult to draw people there. Ogburn had managed to do it, and, Vela said, doggedly, "I'm hoping to rebuild." D.H.R. had attempted to start its own ob-gyn residency program twice since Ogburn's departure, and on the second attempt the organization that accredits such programs had approved the application. Even so, it would be five years before the residents could graduate and start a practice in the Valley.

Until then, with the residents gone and so many specialists departed, it was unclear how high-risk pregnancies would be handled at D.H.R. Vela had initially asked seven doctors to take turns covering night shifts, and then brought in a hospitalist to work full time. D.H.R.'s Level IV status is set to expire next year, but Vela was adamant that the hospital would not lose it—"as long as I sit here," he said, gripping the sides of his chair. Where, I wondered, would uninsured patients turn now? Vela said that D.H.R. was still accommodating those with Medicaid, and doing what it could for the rest. But, he concluded, echoing the most skeptical voices at D.H.R., "we can't run a charity hospital." ♦



*[Stephanie Taladrid](#) is a contributing writer. She was named a Pulitzer Prize finalist in 2023 for her reporting on the fall of Roe v. Wade.*

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# How Old Age Was Reborn

“The Golden Girls” reframed senior life as being about socializing and sex. But did the cultural narrative of advanced age as continued youth twist the dial too far?

By [Daniel Immerwahr](#)

November 25, 2024



*With artificial joints, cataract surgeries, hearing aids, supplemental oxygen, Viagra, and maybe a squirt of Botox, seniors stay in the game. Illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty*

It started, like many good things, as a joke. NBC was filming a preview of its 1984 lineup, and Selma Diamond, a comedian in her sixties, had been tasked with introducing “Miami Vice,” a flashy affair of Ferraris, cocaine cartels, and designer sports jackets. She pretended to misunderstand.

“‘Miami Nice?’” At last, a show about retirees, with their mink coats and

cha-cha lessons. She got a laugh. And some execs thought it might not be a terrible idea.

The network proposed Diamond's concept to two producers, Paul Junger Witt and Tony Thomas. The show, an executive explained, should feature ostensibly "over the hill" characters who were nonetheless "young in attitude." Witt brought the idea to the writer Susan Harris, his wife, who came up with a pilot script. Harris had already pushed television's limits with a show featuring an openly gay character ("Soap"), a show about a lusty divorcée ("Fay"), and a controversial story line about abortion (on "Maude"). Having written four seasons of "Soap" episodes, she was drained and planning to leave television. Still, a sitcom about older women was hard to resist. Here was another barrier to smash, Harris felt—"a demographic that had never been addressed."

"I was figuring women who were sixty to seventy," Harris later recalled. She gulped when she realized that the network expected to see women in their forties—her age. A compromise was reached. When "The Golden Girls" debuted, in 1985, one of the lead actors, Rue McClanahan, was in her fifties, and the others—Bea Arthur, Betty White, and Estelle Getty—were in their sixties. Usually, television consigned such women to unflattering supporting roles. Here, they were the stars, with nary a young or male co-star in sight. (A gay live-in cook appeared in the pilot but promptly vanished. Coco, you are not forgotten.) The feminist Betty Friedan praised the show for defying the "universal grayout of older women on network TV."

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It was the right moment. The President, [Ronald Reagan](#), was a septuagenarian who made a show of chopping wood and riding horses. More generally, healthy seniors—the “wellderly”—were on the rise. Popular culture’s usual parade of toothless codgers and crones increasingly seemed obsolete. “The Golden Girls” (1985-92) joined a silver surge of television shows featuring energetic older protagonists, including “Murder, She Wrote” (1984-96), “Matlock” (1986-95), and Susan Harris’s “Empty Nest” (1988-95).

“The Golden Girls” was particularly adored. It ranked among the ten most watched shows for six of its seven seasons. Emmys rained down: three awards for best actress in a comedy, in three consecutive years, for White, McClanahan, and Arthur, and a supporting-actress award for Getty. In ratings and acclaim, “The Golden Girls” blew “Miami Vice” and its speedboats clear out of the water.

Not bad for a show that was almost militantly unglamorous. The Golden Girls had old-lady hair, wore loose clothes, and joked about their faltering bodies. A much loved scene, written by Harris, has the Girls considering the effect of various body positions on the sagging of their faces and breasts. There was a burlesque quality to this but also defiant pride. Here was a senior subculture, with its own fashion, politics, and humor.

It also had some continuities with what the historian Steven Mintz calls the “youthquake” of the postwar years. The baby boomers developed “intense generational self-consciousness,” Mintz writes, as they came to identify more with their peers than with their parents. Something similar happened at the other end of the age spectrum—a geriatric rumble. “Older Americans are now historically in the process of changing from a category into a group,” the sociologist Arnold Rose observed, presciently, in 1965.

The emergence of senior politics is chronicled in James Chappel’s new book, [“Golden Years”](#) (Basic). Chappel, who’s a historian at Duke (I overlapped with him briefly at another university), describes how older people changed the narrative about aging and created “perhaps the most powerful interest group in twentieth-century America.” Today, he notes, they receive about a third of federal spending. “Golden Years” is a highly

perceptive account, the most substantial one we have, of how seniors rose to become a dominant force in the United States.

“The Golden Girls” captured this gung-ho spirit. Estelle Getty recalled letters from older viewers who found the show “tremendously liberating.” Yet, with the boomers now fully in the Golden Girl age range—the youngest are now turning sixty—it’s worth asking where this liberation leads.

In 1932, the journalist Walter B. Pitkin published the best-seller “Life Begins at Forty.” With better technology and working conditions, he imagined people living well even into their sixties. Pitkin himself lived to seventy-four. His son, Walter B. Pitkin, Jr., published a follow-up, in 1965, “Life Begins at Fifty,” and lived to nearly ninety-four. Other books pushed further: “Life Begins at 60,” “Life Begins at 70.” Is there a limit? Politicians today seem unsure whether life begins at conception or at eighty.

This is the so-called longevity revolution. Medical advances, reduced child mortality, and life-style improvements have increased life expectancy by three decades since 1900, from forty-seven to more than seventy-seven. Back then, one in twenty-five Americans was over sixty-five. Now it’s one in six. The number of Social Security beneficiaries nearly equals the combined populations of California and Texas.

We are taking longer to die. This is perhaps a dubious achievement; “flogging the patient” is what some doctors call the invasive procedures that keep people going in groggy, intubated misery. The main story isn’t the prolongation of death, though. It’s the prolongation of life. With artificial joints, cataract surgeries, hearing aids, supplemental oxygen, Viagra, and maybe a squirt of Botox, seniors stay in the game. The [pickleball](#) years, as some think of them, can last decades.

No group has trumpeted this truth more loudly than the American Association of Retired Persons, founded in 1958. Fifty years earlier, the very idea of a national league for the retired would have made little sense. But by 1988 the A.A.R.P. claimed nearly half of the age-eligible population as members, and its magazine was the widest-circulating in the country. “Only the Roman Catholic church had more Americans on its rolls,”

Chappel notes. In the late nineties, Washington insiders ranked the A.A.R.P. as the country's most powerful lobby, over the N.R.A., the A.F.L.-C.I.O., and *AIPAC*. It's "similar to the Mafia," the humorist Dave Barry wrote, "but more concerned about dietary fiber."

And about travel discounts. The A.A.R.P.'s growth was a triumph of consumerism more than advocacy. The organization started by offering insurance deals to seniors; this blossomed into the country's largest group insurance plan. The A.A.R.P. mentioned its members' hardships when lobbying Washington to protect Social Security, but it ultimately "saw itself less as a pressure group" than as a "lifestyle organization," Chappel writes. To its corporate partners—selling hotel stays, cruises, and the like—it presented its members as hedonistic, affluent buyers who (in the words of an A.A.R.P. media kit) were "spending on self-fulfillment *NOW*" rather than "leaving large sums behind." Of course, only a fortunate fraction, largely white, had the health and the wealth to live their later years as hyper-consumers. But the A.A.R.P. flourished on the strength of that market.

If Chappel is critical of the A.A.R.P., he has more sympathy for the Gray Panthers. They were, in the words of their founder, Maggie Kuhn, the only national old-age group that "also speaks out against the size of the defense budget." The Gray Panthers formed, in 1970, to protest mandatory retirement but soon took on the Vietnam War, nuclear arms, and student loans, too. The Panther organization was smaller and more pugnacious than the A.A.R.P.—a Chihuahua to the A.A.R.P.'s St. Bernard—but shared the larger group's fixation on highly active seniors. The white-haired Kuhn was a spark plug: she appeared on "Saturday Night Live," joined picket lines, and got herself thrown out of a Social Security commission hearing. At rallies, she'd have followers stand up, raise their arms, and growl.

Both groups recoiled at the image of old people as frail or needy. Seeing them that way was "ageism," a term invented in 1969. "Anything young people can do, you can do too" is how Chappel summarizes the A.A.R.P.'s message to its members. The Gray Panthers ran a Media Watch that scolded television shows for portraying the elderly as helpless, confused, or decrepit. "The Golden Girls" scored high marks. "You're only as old as you

feel,” the eldest Golden Girl, Sophia, insists, after staying up late dancing with the residents of a retirement home.

The fight against ageism, like the one against racism, required repeatedly updating terms. Chappel explains that, at the start of the twentieth century, seniors were “the aged” or sometimes “the aged and infirm.” A less stigmatizing term, “senior citizens,” entered common use in the middle of the century. Yet even this failed to capture the A.A.R.P. vision, because it suggested the old were categorically distinct from their juniors. The A.A.R.P. preferred “older people,” which strategically blurred the line. After the organization successfully lobbied to end mandatory retirement, in the nineteen-eighties, it soft-pedalled talk of retirement, too. In 1999, it shortened its name from the American Association of Retired Persons to just AARP, a string of letters standing for nothing. AARP has the same relationship to retirement that KFC has to chicken.

For Susan Harris, “The Golden Girls” was a chance to speak for the marginalized. Yet old people were moving rapidly from the margins to the center. It’s not hard, given this, to understand why NBC’s executives loved the show. It was a bid for a lucrative, untapped demographic.

The opening credits of “The Golden Girls” start with a shot of a plane flying, presumably to Florida. The characters have moved there from New York, Minnesota, and Georgia. This pattern is familiar but possibly, on reflection, bizarre. Why should old people congregate in the same state? Shouldn’t they, instead, live near their children?

Apparently not. The late twentieth century saw an unprecedented separation of the generations. The old and the young drifted apart when middle-aged people moved to the suburbs in search of new homes, or to different regions in search of new jobs. Or when their parents headed south in search of new lives. Maggie Kuhn, of the Gray Panthers, complained of college students “who have never known an old person.”

Kuhn exaggerated, but she had a point. The historian Katherine Otis has studied expert advice given to grandparents and found that, in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, at the apex of the nuclear family, seniors were chided for meddling. “Advice books cautioned grandmothers against babysitting more

than once or twice a week,” Otis writes. (Alfred Hitchcock’s 1960 thriller, “*Psycho*,” sounded a more dramatic alarm about overinvolved elders.) Yet by the seventies the generations had parted so thoroughly that experts tended to accuse seniors of neglect. “One of the reasons we have as bad a generation gap today as we do,” the anthropologist Margaret Mead explained, “is that grandparents have copped out.”

With the exception of the mother-daughter pair of Estelle Getty’s Sophia and Bea Arthur’s Dorothy, the *Golden Girls* were conspicuously disconnected from their descendants. Their children and grandchildren appeared occasionally but quickly passed from view. The show’s writers, like distracted parents, lost track of their names and how many there were. Clearly, the bonds that mattered weren’t the vertical ones, linking the *Golden Girls* to other generations, but the horizontal ones, linking them to one another. The show’s memorable theme song, “Thank You for Being a Friend,” commends older women for supporting each other, not their grandchildren.

There are undeniable pleasures to being free of family and surrounded by peers. Hence, for those who can afford them, retirement communities. The first development to prohibit residents below a certain age, ironically named Youngtown, was built in Arizona in the nineteen-fifties. Within decades, there were thousands of age-restricted developments, especially in the Sun Belt. Just as legal racial segregation was falling in the South, legal age segregation was rising. The new towns were, by design, communities without children.

MEET THE GRINCH'S BEST FRIEND...  
**THE GRUNCH!**



Cartoon by Roz Chast

The largest is an hour northwest of Orlando, and now nearly half Orlando's size. What was once a small community called Orange Blossom Gardens ballooned when a new developer renamed it the Villages and made it into something he billed as "Disney World for active retirees." Instead of monorails, though, the Villages has golf carts. The vehicle is suggestive of the proverbial "active life style," having a sport in its name. But it's basically a compromise between a car and a mobility scooter, available for those too old to drive. The Villages is a low-speed gerontopia of golf-cart rallies, golf-cart drill teams, and golf-cart overpasses.

Andrew D. Blechman interviewed a veteran of the retirement-community industry for his 2008 book about the Villages, "[Leisureville](#)." Typical homes feature widened doors, floor lighting, and showers without steps. But these aren't marketed as accommodations, the man explained: they are "lifestyle features" or luxury upgrades. "Tell them that it'll make life easier when their parents visit," he advised. The central fact of selling retirement homes to seniors is handled lightly. Officially, "these folks aren't seniors, and they're not retired either."

An urban myth holds that the Villages has the country's highest rate of sexually transmitted infections. Not true, but the snickering about the Villages corresponds to a lingering squeamishness about senior sex. At mid-century, Chappel explains, there was a powerful taboo against the subject.

Susan Harris met the taboo head on. The Golden Girls had sex, Byronic quantities of it. "You know, Dorothy, there is a thin line between having a good time and becoming an obvious wanton slut," Rue McClanahan's Blanche says. "I know—my toe's been on that line." Blanche boasts of having had a hundred and forty-three paramours. The writer Erin Donnelly watched every episode and counted a hundred and sixty-five depicted or referred to, though questions remained about the precise number of Flying Fanelli Brothers. "Oh, back off, Blanche. Not all of us are classified by the Navy as a friendly port," Dorothy harrumphs. Yet, by Donnelly's count, Dorothy clocks in at forty-three, and even her mother, Sophia, an octogenarian, does respectably, at twenty-five.

Any discussion of later-in-life sex must acknowledge an immense double standard. A few months before "The Golden Girls" débuted, Roger Moore starred as James Bond in "A View to a Kill." As Bond, Moore snowboarded, raced in a steeplechase, and played love scenes with actresses twenty, twenty-two, twenty-nine, and thirty years his junior. Few took this as a can-do message about aging, but maybe they should have. Moore was fifty-seven—exactly the right age to be a Golden Girl. He was just four years younger than Estelle Getty, who played the purse-clutching great-grandmother, Sophia. Frankly, James Bond was a less interesting romantic lead than Sophia Petrillo. Audiences were inured to older men with attractive younger women, but it meant something when Sophia, in Season 2, went out with Burt Reynolds.

The Golden Girls' sexuality was subversive. At the height of the *AIDS* crisis, they lived in a chosen family and had nonmarital, nonreproductive sex of the sort that society found discomfiting. Unsurprisingly, the show gained a queer following. A performer who played Dorothy in a long-running San Francisco drag tribute explained the allure: "Four strong female characters with questionable fashion sense who sit around and talk about sex over cheesecake? Any gay man can relate."

It was, in truth, hard for older women to have fulfilling love lives within socially acceptable bounds. The longevity revolution had extended their lives more than men's. Combine this with the propensity of straight men to date younger women and the result was a dating pool drained of men. On the show, three of the Golden Girls are widows, and the fourth, Dorothy, had been left by her husband for a much younger woman. Reality did not lag far behind. When the show débuted, only one of its actors, Getty, was married. McClanahan had divorced five times, White's husband had died, and Arthur's ex had married a woman twenty-five years her junior.

What were their options? The Older Women's League, a spinoff of the Gray Panthers, suggested masturbation, lesbianism, and group sex. Maggie Kuhn bragged that, while in her seventies, she'd dated a twenty-one-year-old. ("There was a spark between us.") Betty Friedan had been notoriously hostile to sexual nonconformity within the women's movement. But, by the nineteen-nineties, her ex-husband had married a woman forty-four years younger than her, and a worn-down Friedan conceded that heterosexual monogamy was serving older women poorly. Might it not be better, she ventured, to find several "intimate people" to supply "the physical touching we need"?

The Golden Girls rose to that challenge, dating widely without necessarily seeking new husbands. Yet, for all the show's high spirits, Chappel perceives "a sadness at its core." Retirement communities, sitcoms, the A.A.R.P., and the Gray Panthers all promised that "active" seniors could work, love, play, travel, and raise hell better than anyone. This ebullience, however, required keeping bleak thoughts at bay. Friendship aside, the Golden Girls had moved in together because they were aging and had lost husbands. "It may not be too long," Blanche observes in a rare moment of introspection, "before we're elderly ourselves."

Loss of independence is the repressed horror that haunts "The Golden Girls." In the pilot, Sophia arrives on Dorothy's doorstep as a refugee from the Shady Pines nursing home, which had caught fire. It was an allusion to a recent spate of fires and other harrowing scandals in such places. (The show later introduces the possibility that Sophia burned down the nursing

home herself.) Whenever Sophia acts out, her daughter reins her in with a threat: “Shady Pines, Ma.”

Sophia won’t go back. “The Golden Girls” conjures a fantasy of old age that is not only largely free of children but also largely free of doctors. Chappel notes how often the show expresses animosity toward medical institutions and, instead, solves problems with friendship. An episode about a friend languishing in a state-funded nursing home ends when the Golden Girls finance her move to an upscale facility and then resolve to “take care of each other” to the end. “The show was a celebration of self-care as an alternative to physicians’ care,” Chappel writes.

Self-care works for seniors who are basically healthy. But they aren’t always, not in real life. Estelle Getty started suffering from Lewy body dementia during the show and struggled to memorize scripts. When she flubbed lines, White would turn to the studio audience, point to Getty, and make a “she’s been drinking” gesture. When Getty requested cue cards, McClanahan remembered the cast being “appalled” by the unprofessionalism. Getty’s character, Sophia, was in her eighties yet essentially impervious. Getty herself died at eighty-four, after a long slide into incoherence.

Susan Harris had watched her own parents die protracted deaths, and she herself suffered from a disabling adrenal condition. As “The Golden Girls” entered its final season, she created a darker sitcom, “Nurses,” in 1991, about an understaffed hospital. The first episode joked about a patient lying in his own feces. Will people watch “jokes about death and decay and impotence and paranoia week after week?” a critic asked. “My guess is no.” The show scraped by for three seasons before being cancelled.

Harris had hit the limits of what viewers would accept. Older women with boyfriends, yes; older women with bedpans, no. Susan Jacoby, who spent two decades writing for magazines that targeted older readers, arrived at the same conclusion. Seniors have been sold “a concept of aging that ends where the more disabling, restrictive stage of old age begins,” Jacoby argues in her book [“Never Say Die”](#) (2011). Even media that celebrate seniors engage in what Jacoby calls a “selective form of ageism”: they exalt the healthy and scorn the rest.

This messaging is now aimed straight at the baby boom, a generation identified strongly with youth. (It has the word “baby” in its name.) As teens, the boomers didn’t trust anyone over thirty; after thirty, they found their inner child. Now they are seniors, with enormous generational wealth, and a vast media and marketing apparatus is trained on them. Predictably, the old-age experience sold to them is not about maturation. It is, rather, a deadline extension, more years of not getting old.

One sees this in films. In 1986, the year after “The Golden Girls” premiered, Martin Scorsese released “The Color of Money.” It was a sequel to the 1961 film “The Hustler,” which had starred Paul Newman as a cocky young pool shark, Fast Eddie Felson. “The Color of Money” features the baby boomer Tom Cruise as a similarly brash upstart. (He brought the same irrepressible energy to “Top Gun,” also released that year.) Yet even the luminescent Cruise can’t outshine Newman, as Felson again, now handsomely wrinkled and gray. Felson can no longer dominate at pool, and so he must come to grips with his place as a mentor. Newman won an Oscar for his portrayal of the tormented elder.

“The Color of Money” has a twenty-first-century counterpart, the critic Wesley Morris has pointed out: the 2022 blockbuster “Top Gun: Maverick.” There, Cruise is around sixty, as Newman had been in “Color.” Cruise plays a flight instructor, Maverick, charged with preparing the next generation of élite Navy pilots. But Maverick refuses to step aside. Instead, he leaps into action, cheerfully elbowing his juniors out of the frame, and saves the day. This isn’t a reflection on age so much as a repudiation of it. Cruise looks eerily boyish in the film, more rubbery but otherwise unchanged since the first “Top Gun,” thirty-six years earlier.

Tom Cruise in his sixties is the face (the otherworldly, well-moisturized face) of an aging society in denial. The effects are spelled out in institutions. Chappel observes that, although the United States boasts “a relatively developed and successful” system for healthy older people, its support for those requiring long-term assistance is “catastrophically underdeveloped.” Families that don’t qualify for Medicaid pay small fortunes, not infrequently draining their savings, to get professional care. Nursing homes, meanwhile, are understaffed and poorly regulated. Their

inadequacies became clear with *COVID-19*. Fourteen states saw more than ten per cent of their nursing-home population die of the virus in the year 2020 alone.

One might expect politicians to do something. They are, after all, quite old themselves. The average age in the Senate is now sixty-seven. Recent Presidents have been older. The baby boom refers to those born within an eighteen-year span, yet there was a twenty-eight-year run of boomer Presidents, broken only by Joe Biden, a pre-boomer. (We will now return to boomers.) But age has not compelled action, and federal long-term care remains essentially what it was in the sixties, even as the elderly population has ballooned. Politicians seem as afflicted with age denialism as everyone else.

Or maybe they have it worse. The Democratic Party, particularly, is prone to shipwrecking on the shoals of unretiring seniors. One thinks of the octogenarian [Ruth Bader Ginsburg](#) gambling on her own longevity and losing. Or the octogenarian [Biden](#), with his aviator sunglasses and wolfish “Still got it!” grin, refusing to acknowledge his own obvious decline, no matter the cost to the country.

What people said about Biden is that he was too old. Maybe he wasn’t old enough: he lacked the putative maturity of an elder. Since “The Golden Girls,” we have reinterpreted old age as continued youth. No longer a time of decline, it is one of dancing, dating, and travel. But it is possible that we’ve twisted the dial so far as to lose touch with the other virtues of age, those that come from reckoning with finitude.

The closest the Golden Girls get to this is in the episode about the nursing home. After the characters vow to always support one another, a realization dawns. “But what happens when there’s only one of us left?” Betty White’s Rose asks. Sophia, a generation older than the rest, replies nonchalantly, “Don’t worry, I can take care of myself.” The audience roars, and the credits roll. ♦



*Daniel Immerwahr*, a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*, teaches history at Northwestern University and is the author of “[How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States](#).”

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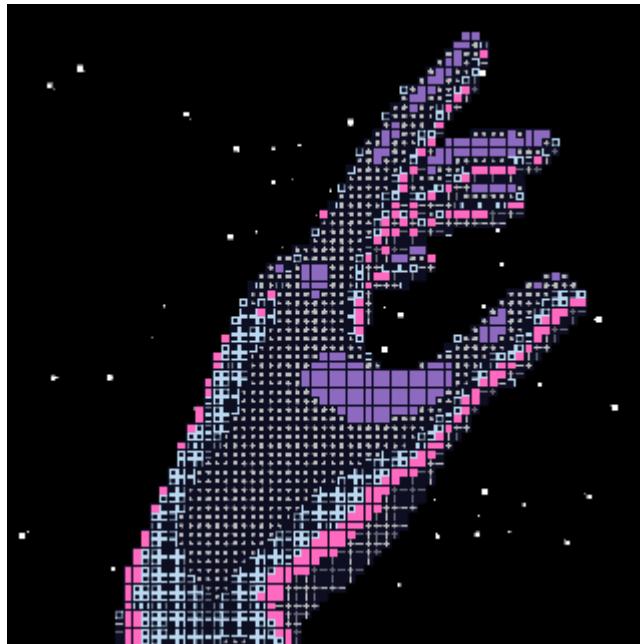
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# A Revolution in How Robots Learn

A future generation of robots will not be programmed to complete specific tasks. Instead, they will use A.I. to teach themselves.

By [James Somers](#)

November 25, 2024



*“This is the year that people really realized that you can build general-purpose robots,” Carolina Parada, the leader of the robotics team at Google DeepMind, said recently. Illustration by Tameem Sankari*

In the first days of my son’s life, during the fall of 2023, he spent much of the time when he wasn’t sleeping or eating engaged in what some cognitive scientists call “motor babbling.” His arms and legs wiggled; his eyes wandered and darted, almost mechanically. One night, as he was drifting off to sleep, he smiled for the first time. As I admired him, wondering what he might be thinking about, his expression suddenly went blank—and then, in quick succession, he looked upset, then surprised, and then happy again. It was as if the equipment were being calibrated. That is apparently the

purpose of motor babbling: random movements help the brain get acquainted with the body it's in.

Our intelligence is physical long before it is anything else. Most of our brain mass exists to coördinate the activity of our bodies. (Neuroscientists have found that even when you navigate an abstract space—contemplating, say, your company's org chart—you use the same neural machinery you'd use to navigate a real space.) A disproportionate amount of the primary motor cortex, a region of the brain that controls movement, is devoted to body parts that move in more complicated ways. An especially large portion controls the face and lips; a similarly large portion controls the hands.

A human hand is capable of moving in twenty-seven separate ways, more by far than any other body part: our wrists rotate, our knuckles move independently of one another, our fingers can spread or contract. The sensors in the skin of the hand are among the densest in the body, and are part of a network of nerves that run along the spinal cord. “People think of the spinal column as just wires,” Arthur Petron, a roboticist who earned his Ph.D. in biomechatronics at M.I.T., said. “No. It’s also brain tissue.” The hand, in particular, is so exquisitely sensitive that “it’s a vision sensor,” he said. “If you touch something in the dark, you can basically draw it.”

I remember the week that my son’s hands came online. We had a spherical toy with a rattle inside, and for weeks he limply ignored it. One day, though, as if by accident, he managed to paw at it. The next day, he could hold on. Within a week, he grasped for it with some intention, and after two weeks he was turning it over in his hand. The remarkable thing about this progression is its extreme rapidity. How can one learn to use so complex a piece of equipment in just two weeks? My son himself seemed impressed. He would look at his palm and flex his fingers, as though wondering, What is this thing, and what else can it do?

In the nineteen-eighties, Hans Moravec, a Canadian roboticist, described a paradox: the tasks that are easiest for humans to perform, such as using our hands to grasp things, are often the hardest for computers to do. This is still true even now that many refined tasks, such as writing prose or computer code, have practically been conquered already. In my job as a programmer, I use an A.I. to quickly solve coding tasks that once would have taken me

an afternoon; this A.I. couldn't type at my keyboard. It is all mind and no body. As a result, the most "A.I.-proof" professions may actually be old ones: plumbing, carpentry, child care, cooking. Steve Wozniak, the co-founder of Apple, once proposed a simple test that has yet to be passed: Can a robot go into your house and make you a cup of coffee?

Until a few years ago, robotics seemed to be developing far more slowly than A.I. On YouTube, humanoid forms developed by Boston Dynamics, an industrial-robotics company, danced or leaped over obstacles, doing a sort of mechanical parkour. But these movements were scripted—the same robots couldn't make you a cup of coffee. To fetch a coffee filter, a robot might need to navigate around a kitchen island, recognize a cupboard, and open the cupboard door without ripping it off its hinges. Simply peeling apart the sides of a coffee filter was long considered a feat of unfathomable difficulty. A hopelessness hung over the whole enterprise.

Then some of A.I.'s achievements began spilling into robotics. Tony Zhao, a robotics researcher who started his academic career in A.I., at U.C. Berkeley, remembers reading about GPT-3, a large language model that OpenAI introduced in 2020, and feeling that he was a witness to history. "I'd seen language models before, but that was the first one that felt kind of alive," he told me. Petron, the M.I.T. researcher, was working on another project at OpenAI—a robotic hand that could delicately spin the faces of a Rubik's Cube. In August, 2022, researchers from Google showed that L.L.M.-powered robots had a surprising amount of common sense about physical tasks. When they asked a robot for a snack and a drink, it found a banana and a water bottle in the kitchen and brought them over.

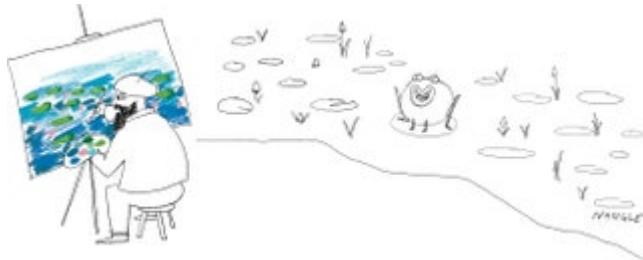
Roboticians increasingly believe that their field is approaching its ChatGPT moment. Zhao told me that when he ran one of his latest creations he immediately thought of GPT-3. "It feels like something that I've never seen before," he said. In the top labs, devices that once seemed crude and mechanical—robotic—are moving in a way that suggests intelligence. A.I.'s hands are coming online. "The last two years have been a dramatically steeper progress curve," Carolina Parada, who runs the robotics team at Google DeepMind, told me. Parada's group has been behind many of the most impressive recent robotics breakthroughs, particularly in dexterity.

“This is the year that people really realized that you can build general-purpose robots,” she said. What is striking about these achievements is that they involve very little explicit programming. The robots’ behavior is learned.

On a cool morning this summer, I visited a former shopping mall in Mountain View, California, that is now a Google office building. On my way inside, I passed a small museum of the company’s past “moonshots,” including Waymo’s first self-driving cars. Upstairs, Jonathan Tompson and Danny Driess, research scientists in Google DeepMind’s robotics division, stood in the center of what looked like a factory floor, with wires everywhere.

At a couple of dozen stations, operators leaned over tabletops, engaged in various kinds of handicraft. They were not using their own hands—instead, they were puppeteering pairs of metallic robotic arms. The setup, known as *ALOHA*, “a low-cost open-source hardware system for bimanual teleoperation,” was once Zhao’s Ph.D. project at Stanford. At the end of each arm was a claw that rotated on a wrist joint; it moved like the head of a velociraptor, with a slightly stiff grace. One woman was using her robotic arms to carefully lower a necklace into the open drawer of a jewelry case. Behind her, another woman prised apart the seal on a ziplock bag, and nearby a young man swooped his hands forward as his robotic arms folded a child’s shirt. It was close, careful work, and the room was quiet except for the wheeze of mechanical joints opening and closing. “It’s quite surprising what you can and can’t do with parallel jaw grippers,” Tompson said, as he offered me a seat at an empty station. “I’ll show you how to get started.”

I wrapped my fingers around two handles. When I pushed or pulled with one of my hands, its robot-claw counterpart followed suit. Tompson put some toys and a highlighter on the table. With my right hand, I pawed weakly at a small plastic diamond, hoping to push it through a diamond-shaped hole in a block. “This is kind of tough,” I said. My brain had decided with impressive speed that these claws were my new hands, but hadn’t yet wired them up correctly. The diamond would not do what I wanted. I felt for my son, who’d had the same trouble with one of his first toys.



*“Relax, you’re not in it.”*  
Cartoon by Jared Nangle

“Passing it back and forth between hands makes reorienting things much easier,” Tompson suggested.

I had forgotten I even had a left hand. I practiced opening and closing the left claw and found that I could easily pass the diamond back and forth. Driess chimed in: “You see it has no force feedback, but you realize that it doesn’t matter at all.” When I closed the grippers around the diamond, I couldn’t feel anything—but I finally managed to fit the shape through the hole.

Gaining confidence, I grabbed a highlighter in my left claw and pulled the cap off with my right. Tompson said that they’d given a similar task to their operators. Near my feet were two pedals, one labelled “Success,” the other “Failure.” You might cap and uncap highlighters for hours, tapping the right pedal if you got it and the left if you fumbled. Then the A.I., using a technique called imitation learning, could try to mimic the successful runs without anyone behind the claws. If you’ve ever seen a tennis instructor guide a student’s arm through a proper backhand, that’s imitation learning.

I eyed a computer underneath the table. Driess explained that there are four cameras that gather data, along with sensors that track the orientation of the robot in space. The data are distilled by a series of neural networks into what’s called a policy—essentially a computer program that tells a robot what to do. An assembly-line robot arm might have a very simple policy: rotate ten degrees clockwise, pick up an item, drop it, rotate back, repeat. The policies being trained here were far more complex—a summation of all the operators’ successful runs.

Driess began typing at a console nearby. He wanted to show me a policy that put shirts on clothes hangers. “This policy was trained on how many

demonstrations?” Tompson asked.

“Eight thousand,” Driess answered.

I imagined an operator hanging a shirt eight thousand times. Behind us, someone arrived for a new shift and shook his wrists out. “They never operate for more than an hour at a time without an hour break in between,” Tompson said.

When the policy was ready, Tompson laid a child’s polo shirt on the table and Driess hit Enter. Suddenly, the *ALOHA* I’d been driving began driving itself. The hands came alive and moved with purpose toward the shirt, like the magic broomsticks in “Fantasia.”

The right claw grabbed one corner of the shirt, motor whirring, and lifted it toward a little plastic coatrack with a hanger on it. The other claw grabbed the hanger. The next steps were to thread the hanger into one shoulder, secure that side, and do the same with the other shoulder. The robot halted a moment, then recovered. Finally, it placed the shirt and hanger on the rack.

“I’ll call that a success,” Tompson said, tapping the right pedal. I could see the intricacy of the task: your eyes help your hands make tiny adjustments as you go. *ALOHA* is one of the simplest and cheapest sets of robotic arms out there, yet operators have pushed the boundaries of robotic dexterity with it. “You can peel eggs,” Tompson said. Zhao had managed to fish a contact lens out of its case and place it on a toy frog’s eye. (Other precise tasks, such as sewing, remain difficult.)

In the early days of Google Books, roomfuls of contractors turned millions of pages by hand in order to unlock the knowledge inside. The roomful of *ALOHAs* was unlocking the subtle physical details of everyday life, arguably one of the last expanses of unrecorded human activity. The data they generate will help to train what roboticists have taken to calling “large behavioral models.”

I asked Tompson and Driess to show me the policy that their robot had become famous for. “There is a professor, a very good professor, who said

that he will retire as soon as a robot policy can tie shoes,” Driess said. Tompson plunked a shoe down on the table.

When the claws came alive, they grabbed the two ends of the shoelace, formed them into loops, and wove them through each other. As the claws came apart, we cheered: the robot had tied a shoelace.

“So did he retire?” I asked. Apparently not. One of the ultimate dreams of A.I. is generalization: how does your policy do when pushed beyond its training data? They’d trained the policy on only two or three shoes.

“If I gave it my shoe,” I ventured, “would it just totally fail?”

“We could try,” Tompson said. I removed my right sneaker, with apologies to anyone forced to handle it. Tompson gamely placed it on the table, while Driess reloaded the policy.

“To set expectations,” Driess said, “this is a task that is thought of as being impossible.”

Tompson eyed his new experimental subject with some trepidation. “Very short shoelaces,” he said.

The policy booted up, and the claws set to work. This time, they poked at the shoelace without getting a grip. “Do you give consent for your shoe to be destroyed?” Driess joked, as the hands grabbed at the tongue. Tompson let them try for a few more seconds before hitting the Failure pedal.

Experts in child development like to say that at around nine months old babies develop the pincer grip, or the ability to hold something small between their thumb and forefinger. That frames the problem in terms of the hand. Equally important, though, is the knowledge the maneuver requires. Children have to learn how hard you can squeeze a piece of avocado before it slides out of your fingers, or a Cheerio before it crumbles.

From the moment my son was born, he’s been engaged in what A.I. researchers call “next-token prediction.” As he reaches for a piece of banana, his brain is predicting what it will feel like on his fingertips. When

it slips, he learns. This is more or less the method that L.L.M.s like ChatGPT use in their training. As an L.L.M. hoovers up prose from the Internet, it hides from itself the next chunk of text, or token, in a sentence. It guesses the hidden token on the basis of the ones that came before, then unhides the token to see how close its guess was, learning from any discrepancies. The beauty of this method is that it requires very little human intervention. You can just feed the model raw knowledge, in the form of an Internet's worth of tokens.

As grownups, we have an indescribably rich model of the physical world, the result of a lifetime of tokens. Try this: Look at any object or surface around you and imagine what it would taste like. You are probably right, and that has something to do with the years you spent crawling around, putting everything in your mouth. Like all adults, I practice dexterity without even meaning to: when I manage to put a duvet into its cover; when I open a sealed bag of dog treats with one hand. The difference between me and my son is that most of my predictions are accurate. I don't reach for a stream of water thinking I might be able to hold on to it. The exceptions stand out. Not long ago, at a restaurant, a friend told me to poke a sculpture that appeared to be made of glass, and it wobbled, almost like rubber.  
Model updated.

We can tie shoelaces better than *ALOHA* not because it has primitive, unsensing claws but because every shoe—every arrangement of laces, the way they bend and fall each time you lift them—is different. There is no Internet-size archive of the ways in which physical objects interact. Instead, researchers have come up with several competing methods of teaching robots.



*“His poetry is good—but a little dark.”*

*Cartoon by Edward Koren*

One camp is betting on simulation. Nvidia, the giant A.I. chipmaker, has made software for creating “digital twins” of industrial processes, which allows computers to practice motions before robots actually try them. OpenAI used simulated data when training its robotic hand to spin a Rubik’s Cube; copies of the hand, practicing in parallel, carried out simulations that would have taken a real robot ten thousand years to perform. The appeal is obvious: all you need to generate more data is more computing power, and robots can learn like Neo in “The Matrix,” when he downloaded kung fu. Robot hands and Rubik’s cubes can’t be simulated perfectly, however. Even a paper towel becomes unpredictable when you crumple or rip it. Last year, Nvidia published a paper showing that researchers could teach a simulated robot hand to spin a pen in its fingers, the way a bored student might, an action that essentially requires the pen to be in flight most of the time. But the paper makes no mention of whether an actual robot could perform the trick.

For this reason, imitation learning seems to have an edge over simulation. Figure, an American startup, has raised more than six hundred million dollars to build an elaborate “humanoid” robot with a head, a torso, arms, legs, and five-fingered hands. Its most impressive feat of dexterity so far is “singulating a pepperoni,” according to Brett Adcock, Figure’s founder: it can peel one slice from the rest of the sausage. “If you want to do what humans can do,” Adcock told me, “then you need a robot that can interact the same way humans can with that environment.” (Tesla, 1x, Agility, and dozens of Chinese competitors have built humanoids.) Geordie Rose, a co-founder of Sanctuary AI, a robotics and artificial-intelligence startup based in Vancouver, argued that it’s easier to collect data for robots that move like us. “If I asked you to pick up a cup with, say, an octopus robot with eight suction-cup tentacles, you’d have no idea what to do, right?” he said. “But, if it’s a hand, you just do it.” Sanctuary’s sleek humanoid, called Phoenix, learns partly by being tele-operated by humans. The “pilot” dons haptic gloves, an exosuit that covers the upper body, and a virtual-reality headset that shows what the robot “sees.” Every movement, down to the slightest bend of the pilot’s pinkie, is replicated on the robot. Phoenix learns in much the same way as *ALOHA*, but it’s far more expressive.

Of course, if robots have to be taught every skill by hand, it's going to take a long time, and a lot of exosuits, for them to become useful. When I want to bake bread, I don't ask Paul and Prue from "The Great British Bake Off" to come over and pilot my arms; I just watch an episode of the show. "It's the holy grail, right?" Tompson, from the *ALOHA* project, said. "You can imagine a model watching YouTube videos to learn basically whatever you want it to do." But a YouTube video doesn't tell you the precise angle of a baker's elbow or the amount of force in her fingers as she kneads. To take advantage of demonstrations at a distance, a robot would need to be able to map its hands onto a person's. That requires a foundation: a mental model of the physical world and of the body in it, and a repertoire of simple skills.

Early in our lives, humans learn how to learn. A few months ago, my son was sitting on a rocking horse, disappointed that it wasn't moving. He looked over his shoulder and saw a girl on her own horse kicking her legs to make it rock. Monkey see, monkey do. After a few tries, the horse started going, and a smile broke out on his face. Practitioners of A.I. like to talk about "the flywheel," an analogy to a disk that, once it gets going, is hard to stop. When the flywheel is really spinning, robots explore the world more efficiently, and they start to improve more quickly. That is how a robot might leap from one regime, like needing to be puppeteered, to another, like learning on its own.

One of the older buildings on the Google campus contains a Ping-Pong table with a big industrial robot arm on one side—the kind you'd see in a car factory, but in this case holding a paddle. On the afternoon of my visit, Saminda Abeyruwan, a research engineer, was sitting at a computer console on the other side of the net, and Pannag Sanketi, a software engineer, told him to "turn on the binary." The arm whirred to attention.

Videos of this robot from 2022 had not made me excited to play against it. In the lingo of my middle-school tennis team, the robot appeared to be a "pusher"—cheaply returning the ball, with no ambition, and barely challenging beginners. But apparently the system had improved in the past two years. Fei Xia, another researcher, warned me, "Be careful with the forehand."

Abeyruwan hit a practice serve to the machine. The whole apparatus—the arm was mounted on a gantry—moved like a printer head, loudly, and faster than seemed plausible. The paddle swung through the air with a lovely, rising stroke, shooting the ball back across the net. Abeyruwan, quick on his feet, rallied, but on the third shot the arm ripped a forehand at an angle. 0–1.

“I don’t want to play it too much,” Abeyruwan said. “It’s going to adapt to my weaknesses.” He offered me the paddle.

One downside of not being a robot is that you can’t just load a policy into your memory. It usually takes me about fifteen minutes to find my rhythm at a Ping-Pong table. I lobbed a ball to my opponent, hoping to warm up. Back came a deep, fast crosscourt shot, which sailed just past the end of the table.

“It’s pretty savage, this thing,” I said. It seemed to be trying to paint the corners.

“We changed it to make it more competitive,” Sanketi said. “In the process, what happened is that it’s more aggressive.”

A lot of its balls were going long. I took some pace off my own shots, and suddenly it found its range. Now that it was getting into rallies, it went for steeper and steeper angles. More balls were going to my backhand side.  
“You can feel it adapting to you,” I said.

As it exploited my weakness, I tried to exploit back, putting some cut on the ball. It blew its return into the net. “Spin it doesn’t like,” I said. The team had tried to use a motion-tracking system to estimate the tilt of paddles as players struck the ball, but it wasn’t sensitive enough.

There were other limitations. “It’s very risky to get close to the table,” Sanketi said, so the robot always hovers at least two inches above the table, which reduces the amount of topspin it can put on its returns. A lot of my balls were coming in fast and low, thank you very much, and the robot had a hard time getting under them. Sanketi suspected that this explained many of the long misses. But there was also just the fact that it had never played

me before. In the lingo, my playing style was “out of distribution,” like shoes with unusually short laces.

“The way that we would fix this is, we have all the balls that it missed,” Sanketi went on. “We put it in the flywheel and train again. Next time you come, it will play better.” In the course of four weeks this summer, with data from only a couple of dozen players, the robot had progressed from dopey beginner to high intermediate. “Is the goal to get it to superhuman performance?” I asked.

“Yeah,” Sanketi said. Behind him, there was another Ping-Pong table with a similar setup, except that there was a robot on each side. I could see where this was going.

DeepMind, which was founded as a London-based A.I. research laboratory in 2010, is best known for a model called AlphaGo, which beat the world champion in the ancient board game Go. AlphaGo was originally fed a database of matches so that it could imitate human experts. Later, a newer version trained solely via “self-play,” sparring with a copy of itself. The model became an astonishingly efficient learner—the crowning example of a technique known as “reinforcement learning,” in which an A.I. teaches itself not by imitating humans but by trial and error. Whenever the model chanced onto a good move, the decisions that led it there were reinforced, and it got better. After just thirty hours of this training, it had become one of the best players on the planet.

Collecting data in the physical world, however, is much harder than doing so inside a computer. Google DeepMind’s best Go model can play a virtual game in seconds, but physics limits how fast a ball can ping and pong. The company’s Ping-Pong robots take up an entire room, and there are only three; the researchers had to invent a Rube Goldberg contraption using fans, funnels, and hoppers to feed loose balls back into robot-vs.-robot games. Right now, Sanketi explained, the robots are better at offense than defense, which ends games prematurely. “There’s nothing to keep the rally going,” he said. That’s why the team had to keep training their robots against people.

A Ping-Pong robot that could beat all comers sounded like classic DeepMind: a singularly impressive, whimsical, legible achievement. It would also be useful—imagine a tireless playing partner that adjusts as you improve. But Parada, the robotics lead, told me that the project might actually be winding down. Google, which acquired DeepMind in 2014 and merged it with an in-house A.I. division, Google Brain, in 2023, is not known for daring A.I. products. (They have a reputation for producing stellar and somewhat esoteric research that gets watered down before it reaches the market.) What the Ping-Pong bot has shown, Parada told me, is that a robot can “think” fast enough to compete in sport and, by interacting with humans, can get better and better at a physical skill. Together with the surprising capabilities of the *ALOHAs*, these findings suggested a path to human levels of dexterity.

Robots that teach themselves, by way of reinforcement learning, were long thought to be a dead end in robotics. A basic problem is what’s called curriculum design: how do you encourage learners to stretch their abilities without utterly failing? In a simulated game of Go, there are a finite number of moves and specific conditions for victory; an algorithm can be rewarded for any move that leads there. But in the physical world there are an uncountable number of moves. When a robot attempts to spin a pen, where there are so many more ways to fail than to succeed, how does it even determine that it’s making progress? The Rubik’s Cube researchers had to manually engineer rewards into their system, as if laying bread crumbs for the robot to follow: by fiat, the robot won points for maneuvers that humans know to be useful, such as twisting a face exactly ninety degrees.

What’s mysterious about humans is that we intrinsically want to learn new things. We come up with our own rewards. My son wanted to master the use of his hands because he was determined to taste everything in sight. That motivated him to practice other new abilities, like crawling or reaching behind his back. In short, he designed the curriculum himself. By the time he attempts something complicated, he has already developed a vocabulary of basic moves, which helps him avoid many obviously doomed strategies, like twitching wildly—the kind of thing that an untrained robot will do. A robot with no clear curriculum and no clear rewards accomplishes little more than hurting itself.

The robots of our imagination—RoboCop, the Terminator—are much sturdier than humans, but most real robots are delicate. “If you use a robot arm to knock a table or push something, it is likely to break,” Rich Walker, whose company, Shadow Robot, made the hand that OpenAI used in its Rubik’s Cube experiments, told me. “Long-running reinforcement-learning experiments are abusing to robots. Untrained policies are torture.” This turns out to profoundly limit how much they can learn. A breakable robot can’t explore the physical world like a baby can. (Babies are surprisingly tough, and parents usually intervene before they can swallow toys or launch themselves off the bed.)

For the past several years, Shadow Robot has been developing what looks like a medieval gauntlet with three fingers, all of which are opposable, like thumbs. A layer of gel under the “skin” of the fingertips is decorated with tiny dots that are filmed by an embedded camera; the pattern deforms under pressure. This helps the robot’s “brain” sense when a finger touches something, and how firmly. Shadow’s original hand needed to be re-started or serviced every few hours, but this one has been run for hundreds of hours at a time. Walker showed me a video of the fingers surviving blows from a mallet.



*“Awfully strange coincidence that you spot a distress signal every time I try to talk about us.”*  
Cartoon by Ellie Black

On a recent video call, I saw a few of the new Shadow hands in one of Google DeepMind’s labs in London, hanging inside enclosures like caged squid. The fingers were in constant motion, fast enough that they almost blurred. I watched one of the hands pick up a Lego-like yellow block and attempt to slot it into a matching socket. For a person, the task is trivial, but

a single three-fingered robotic hand struggles to reposition the block without dropping it. “It’s a very unstable task by construction,” Francesco Nori, the engineering lead of DeepMind’s robotics division, explained. With just three digits, you frequently need to break contact with the block and reestablish it again, as if tossing it between your fingers. Subtle changes in how tightly you grip the block affect its stability. To demonstrate, Nori put his phone between his thumb and forefinger, and as he loosened his grip it spun without falling. “You need to squeeze enough on the object, but not too much, because you need to reorient the object in your hand,” he said.

At first, the researchers asked operators to don three-fingered gloves and train their policy with imitation learning, *ALOHA* style. But the operators got tired after thirty minutes, and there was something un-ergonomic about operating a hand that was only sort of like your own. Different operators solved the task in different ways; the policy they trained had only a two-per-cent success rate. The range of possible moves was too large. The robot didn’t know what to imitate.

The team turned instead to reinforcement learning. They taught the robot to mine successful simulations in a clever way—by slicing each demonstration into a series of sub-tasks. The robot then practiced the sub-tasks, moving from those that were easier to those that were harder. In effect, the robot followed its own curriculum. Trained this way, the robot learned more from less data; sixty-four per cent of the time, it fit the block into the socket.

When the team first started running their policy, the block was bright yellow. But the task has been performed so many times that dust and metal from the robot’s fingers have blackened the edges. “This data is really valuable,” Maria Bauza, a research scientist on the project, said. The data would refine their simulation, which would improve the real-life policy, which would refine the simulation even more. Humans wouldn’t have to be anywhere in the loop.

At Google, as at many of the leading academic and industrial research labs, you can start to feel as if you’re in a droid repair shop in “Star Wars.” In Mountain View, while I was watching one of the *ALOHAs* in action, a friendly-looking little wheeled bot, reminiscent of something from “*WALL-E*,” stood by. Around the corner was a gigantic pair of arms, which a

researcher on the project described as capable of breaking bones “without too much difficulty.” (The robot has safeguards to prevent it from doing so.) It was stacking blocks—a sort of super-ALOHA. The London lab is home to a team of twenty-inch-high humanoid soccer bots. Historically, every make and model of robot was an island: the code you used to control one couldn’t control another. But researchers are now dreaming of a day when a single artificial intelligence can control any type of robot.

Computer scientists used to develop different models to translate between, say, English and French or French and Spanish. Eventually, these converged into models that could translate between any pair of languages. Still, translation was considered a different problem than something like speech transcription or image recognition. Each had its own research teams or companies devoted to it. Then large language models came along. Shockingly, they could not only translate languages but also pass a bar exam, write computer code, and more besides. The hodgepodge melted into a single A.I., and the learning accelerated. The latest version of ChatGPT can talk to you aloud in dozens of languages, on any topic, and sing to you, and even gauge your tone. Anything it can do, it can do better than stand-alone models once dedicated to that individual task.

The same thing is happening in robotics. For most of the history of the field, you could write an entire dissertation about a narrow subfield such as vision, planning, locomotion, or the really hard one, dexterity. But “foundation models” like GPT-4 have largely subsumed models that help robots with planning and vision, and locomotion and dexterity will probably soon be subsumed, too. This is even becoming true across different “embodiments.” Recently, a large consortium of researchers showed that data can be shared successfully from one kind of machine to another. In “Transformers,” the same brain controls Optimus Prime whether he’s a humanoid or a truck. Now imagine that it can also control an industrial arm, a fleet of drones, or a four-legged cargo robot.

The human brain is plastic when it comes to the machinery it can command: even if you have never used a prosthetic limb, you have probably felt a wrench or a tennis racquet become like an extension of your body. Drive past a double-parked car and you know, intuitively, whether your passenger-

side mirror is likely to get clipped. There's every reason to believe that a future generation of A.I. will acquire the motor plasticity of a real brain. "Ultimately, what we will see is like one intelligence," Keerthana Gopalakrishnan, a research scientist who works on robots at Google DeepMind, told me. To this end, Figure, the humanoid startup, has partnered with OpenAI to give large language models corporeal form; OpenAI has begun hiring a robotics team after a years-long hiatus.

Chelsea Finn, a Stanford robotics professor who contributed to the early development of *ALOHA*, worked at Google for several years. But she left the company not long ago to co-found a startup called Physical Intelligence, which aims to build software that can control any robot. (Driess, who'd shown me the *ALOHA*s, joined her.) About a month ago, Physical Intelligence announced its first "generalist robot policy." In a video, a two-armed robot empties a clothes dryer into a basket, wheels the basket over to a table, and then folds shirts and shorts and places them in a stack. "The first time I saw the robot fold five items in a row from a laundry basket, it was probably the most excited I've been about a research result," Finn told me. The A.I. driving this remarkable display, called  $\pi_0$ , can reportedly control half a dozen different embodiments, and can with one policy solve multiple tasks that might challenge an *ALOHA*: bagging groceries, assembling a box, clearing a dinner table. It works by combining a ChatGPT-esque model, which has broad knowledge of the world and can understand images, with imitation learning. "It's definitely just the start," Finn said.

When we think about a future with robots, we tend to imagine Rosie, from "The Jetsons": a humanoid doing chores. But the robot revolution isn't going to end with people-shaped machines folding shirts. I live in New York City, and almost everything I can see was made by human hands. Central Park looks natural, but it was once a mostly featureless swamp. Thousands of laborers spent years creating the reservoir, the lake, the rolling hills. Their hands pushed shovels into the ground to build hillsides, lit fuses to blast rock away, and nestled saplings into the soil.

A few years ago, at a recycling center near the airport in Zurich, Switzerland, a very large hand was at work. It was an autonomous

excavator, developed by researchers at ETH Zürich, and it was building a retaining wall. With a hydraulic gripper on the end of its arm, it picked up a boulder, turning it as if contemplating a piece of fruit. The excavator motored toward a growing pile—the wall-to-be, which followed a plan laid out in software—and an algorithm predicted how the new stone would settle onto the others. The excavator, loosening its grip, placed the stone just so, then lumbered back to pick up another. When the sixty-five-metre wall was finished, it contained almost a thousand boulders and pieces of reclaimed concrete. It formed the edge of a new park. The robot worked about as quickly as an experienced laborer with an excavator.

Ryan Luke Johns, a lead researcher on the project, runs a company called Gravis Robotics, whose motto is “Tap your finger, move a mountain.” He foresees that “adaptive reuse” of materials could displace concrete, and that construction will become cheaper and more charming. Robots could make new Central Parks. It’s easy to see the appeal—and to imagine the risks of loosing so much strength upon the world. Already we have found A.I. difficult to control. For safety reasons, chatbots are restricted from producing certain kinds of content—misinformation, pornography, instructions for building bioweapons—but they are routinely “jailbroken” by amateurs with simple prompts. If an A.I. that talks about weapons is dangerous, picture an A.I. that *is* a weapon: a humanoid soldier, a sniper drone, a bomb that can think. If robotics models turn out to be embodiment-agnostic, the same kind of policy that today beats people at Ping-Pong might someday shoot somebody. “The drone manufacturers are dealing with this now,” one M.I.T. scientist told me. “They can say, ‘We will only sell to certain folks, and we will never sell a drone with a weapon.’ That doesn’t really stop somebody from, you know . . .” In the war in Ukraine, consumer drones designed for aerial photography have been turned into remote-controlled explosives. If such drones become autonomous, militaries could claim that they did not order this or that attack—their robots did. “You cannot punish an inanimate object,” Noel Sharkey, an emeritus professor of computer science at the University of Sheffield, in England, has written. “Being able to allocate responsibility is essential to the laws of war.” It is estimated that more than ninety countries have military robot programs, mostly involving drones. Several of the world’s

leading military powers have not agreed to a U.N. resolution that could constrain their use of these robots.

Peaceful robots could unsettle our lives, too. I spoke to the founder of a small startup that is developing a semi-autonomous humanoid housekeeping robot. The idea is that, when you're at work, the robot could wheel out of your closet and tidy up; if anything goes wrong, an operator in India or the Philippines could take over. This approach could save a lot of time and money. On the other hand, it could take jobs away from people. When I asked what would become of housekeepers who make a living doing such work locally, the founder said that they could apply to receive dividends. "There is an incentive within capitalism to replace labor by capital, to replace people by machines," Mark Coeckelbergh, a philosophy professor at the University of Vienna, who specializes in the ethics of A.I., told me. He pointed out that the word "robot" comes from the Czech *robo*ta, for "forced labor." "But not all tasks should be taken over by robots. We have it in our hands. It's kind of an exercise to think, What kinds of jobs do we want humans to do?"

Speculating on the future of A.I.-powered robots is like trying to imagine the Industrial Revolution from the perspective of a nineteenth-century hatmaker. We are just too used to physical know-how being confined in one body. I remember where I was when I first learned to spin a pen: in an empty classroom in Mason Hall, on the University of Michigan campus. I had seen a friend do it, then practiced. It took a few hours. If other people want to learn the same trick, they also have to practice. But, if roboticists lift physical know-how into the virtual plane, they will be able to distribute it as easily as a new smartphone app. Once one robot has learned how to tie shoes, all of them can do it. Imagine copying and pasting not just a recipe for an omelette but the very act of making it.

Early in my son's life, he had a blood test come up wonky, and we had to take him to a series of blood draws. It is not easy to draw blood from the arm of an eight-week-old. In the midst of one fairly horrific episode, we protested so much that one phlebotomist said to another, "Should we get Marsha?," speaking of a nurse who was particularly good at finding a vein.

In Marsha came, and she found the vein without further fuss. She should have her hands insured.

One day, an A.I. will guide a whirring hand made of metal, perhaps with gel in its fingertips, toward a newborn's arm to draw blood. It's hard to know whether to celebrate or fear that day. I may never have to reckon with it. I suspect my son will, though. When the thought occurs to me, I put his little hand in mine, and squeeze. ♦

*James Somers, a writer and a programmer, first contributed to The New Yorker in 2018.*

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# Lake Tahoe's Bear Boom

*The vacation hot spot has been overrun by people—whose habits are drawing fast-moving animals with sharp claws and insatiable appetites.*

By [Paige Williams](#)

November 25, 2024



*Wildfires, overdevelopment, and easy access to garbage have brought Tahoe's bears into increasingly close contact with their human neighbors. One local described a bear as “a five-hundred-pound police battering ram.” Photographs by Corey Arnold for The New Yorker*

Lake Tahoe, “the jewel of the Sierra Nevada,” is an unusually clear, deep alpine lake that is twelve miles wide and twenty-two miles long. It straddles two states: California on the west shore, which is damper and greener, and Nevada on the east, which gives way, almost immediately, to high desert. “A kind of heaven,” John Muir called Tahoe, in 1878, after raving about the diameter of its snowflakes and “lusty exercise on snow-shoes.” Tahoe is about a third of the size of Yosemite National Park, yet attracts three times the number of annual visitors. During the pandemic, several thousand people, including a lot of Bay Area tech types, fully relocated to the lake, joining seventy thousand or so locals. Tahoe couldn’t handle it. The traffic, the noise, the illegal parking—the trash. Last year’s Fourth of July crowds left an unprecedented four tons of garbage on the beaches alone. Fodor’s named Lake Tahoe one of the world’s “natural attractions that could use a break in order to heal and rejuvenate,” and suggested that outsiders avoid

visiting for a while. The other day in Tahoe, I learned a new word: “touron,” a combination of “tourist” and “moron.”

The Tahoe basin is also home to one of the continent’s densest populations of black bears, *Ursus americanus*. The species flourished after its chief predator, the grizzly, was extirpated there, in the early twentieth century. Grizzlies are not to be fucked with. Black bears, which can be brown, reddish, or blond, are defensive and lazy, smart and resilient, ravenous and opportunistic. All they really want to do is eat. They lived mostly on grasses, berries, and insects until humans showed up. Why spend all day dismantling a yellow-jacket nest for the paltry reward of larvae when there’s dumpster pizza to be had?

Even if something is not edible, bears will try to eat it—scented air fresheners, cherry lip balm. The black bear is the terrestrial equivalent of a shark, the sharpest nose in the ocean; its sense of smell is seven times better than a bloodhound’s, several thousand times better than a human’s. A bear that detects so much as a Tic Tac will remember the location of that score forever—and teach it to her cubs. “Think about the wrappers in your car, the candy in your pocket, in your backpack, in your tent, the stuff behind your garage door—they can smell *all* of that, even if it’s unopened cans, unopened wine bottles, beer bottles,” a California State Parks employee said in September, at Tahoe’s inaugural Bear Fest, a public event about how not to be stupid in bear country.

It is illegal to feed a bear, no matter how cuddly or sickly it looks, or how strong the impulse to Instagram. Unsecured trash exposes bears to the intestinal torments of metal and glass. One recent afternoon, a bear advocate named Kathi Zollinger and I were walking in the woods at the south end of Lake Tahoe when she pointed out what resembled a giant chocolate-oatmeal cookie with silver sprinkles—bear poo, flecked with tinfoil. Bear scat also often contains plastic. (Bears “aren’t opening the bag gingerly to get what’s in it,” Zollinger said.) Dozens of bears are hit by cars every year in Tahoe. A bear that gets comfortable around humans may become increasingly brazen—one day it’s at the hummingbird feeder, the next it’s at your fridge. Through no fault of its own, the bear could become

a target for euthanasia. “A fed bear is a dead bear,” wildlife biologists like to say.

In autumn, bears enter hyperphagia: they must eat at least twenty thousand calories (the equivalent of thirty-six Big Macs) a day before they den. The females are on a deadline to store enough fat to sustain themselves, and a pregnancy, until spring, though in Tahoe, where there’s plenty of touron food year-round, bears hardly have to hibernate anymore. Bears have learned how to unscrew lids. They know how to open sliding glass doors. They’ll prowl from car to car, trying handles. Ryan Welch, the founder of Tahoe’s oldest bear-deterrant company, Bear Busters, told me about a woman who reported her Prius missing; the police found the car at the bottom of the hill that she’d parked it on, with a bear inside. Bears have learned that they can wander onto a crowded beach and help themselves to picnic food, with humans standing feet away, casually videoing, and that they can spook hikers into dropping their snack-filled packs. This spring, a bear snatched a construction worker’s cooler from the bed of a pickup and ate the man’s lunch in front of him. A Tahoe friend of mine once turned her back while unloading groceries and lost a fifteen-pound Christmas roast; the bear left nothing but a greasy scrap of butcher paper in the driveway.



Devon Barone, of BEAR League, checks a crawl space for signs of a break-in.

A black bear's short, curved claws function as miniature crowbars, capable of leveraging the slightest crevice to pry open a window or shred a garage door. An unsecured crawl space is an invitation. A bear will make confetti of a doorjamb. In vacant houses—which are plentiful in resort communities like Tahoe—bears turn on faucets and burners, usually by bumbling into them. Last year, a utility-company employee noticed a spike in water use at one home; bears had moved in. “They had defecated everywhere. The walls and carpet were covered in mold,” another state employee said at Bear Fest. Bears that den beneath homes and businesses can dislodge insulation and wiring, some of which keeps the pipes from freezing. Bears are “capable of breaking down anything they want” in their quest for calories, Welch told me. “There's *nothing* bear-proof—I don't care how thick a door is, or if it's metal. I describe a bear as a five-hundred-pound police battering ram.”

The person who clued me in to “tourons” was Devon Barone, a Marin County native who recently finished her graduate studies in natural resources at Oregon State University, with a special interest in human-wildlife conflict. Barone, who is thirty, has mermaid hair and a tattoo of diving penguins. She wears balloon pants from Kathmandu and drinks yerba maté out of a handmade granite cup that she brought home from Chile, where she used to live. In May, Barone began working as the executive assistant to Ann Bryant, who co-founded a Tahoe nonprofit called *BEAR* League, in 1998, after a government trapper enraged the community by killing a mother bear and her cub and then lying about it. (The animals had not been “relocated,” as the trapper had claimed.) Bryant introduced Barone to the league’s hundred and forty-six thousand Facebook followers by saying that she had “studied and traveled all over the world, learning about people’s complex relationships with everything from elephants to mountain lions” and other “large and sometimes misunderstood (and often feared) animals.”

*BEAR* stands for Bear Education Aversion Response. Bryant, who is in her seventies, has spent the past twenty-five years showing Tahoans how to avoid attracting bears, and what to do if they fail. About two hundred of the league’s twenty-five hundred members are trained to respond to calls. “We answer twenty-four-frickin’-seven,” she told me. Bryant herself may show up: to fire a paintball gun, flush a bear from a crawl space, harangue a human to keep a clean grill and bring in the birdseed at night.

Bryant worked in wildlife rehabilitation before starting *BEAR* League, but these days she’s more likely to lean on her college studies in psychology. When someone sees a bear on their lawn, or at their door, or in their kitchen, it can be hard to remember, in the moment, that the average black bear can be treed by a Chihuahua, and that a bear’s huffing, bluff-charging, grunting, and teeth-clacking are usually nothing more than messages to back off. The correct human response is confidence and noise. Yell. Raise your arms—look big. Never turn your back on a bear. Stand your ground but also slowly retreat. Never block a bear’s exit—bears leave the same way they came in. Bryant tells people, “You gotta be aggressive, dominant, mean.”

Around Tahoe, Bryant is known as “the bear lady,” because she is always talking about bears or being talked about for talking about bears. She has appeared on PBS, the BBC, Animal Planet, National Geographic, and in countless local newscasts. Her bright blond hair, worn long, with bangs, is so distinctive that I wondered if it was a wig, until the wind blew and I saw scalp. (Bryant is a native Minnesotan of Scandinavian heritage.) Every time I visited her, she had on black leggings, a black hoodie, black Crocs. Even indoors, and always on TV, she wears gold-rimmed sunglasses and fingerless leather gloves—beige one day, black the next. They reminded me of bear paws.

One California elected official told me, of *BEAR* League, “Politically, they’re very powerful.” The state euthanizes fewer bears today than it has in generations past, in part because *BEAR* League, and other organizations like it, has pushed wildlife agencies to be more judicious. “They kill, we save,” Bryant said.

Bryant implores humans to adjust their own behavior instead of expecting wild animals to change. At the end of her driveway stands a steel garbage bin that resembles a large safe—a bear box. *BEAR* League has long advocated for the boxes to become standard throughout Tahoe, often encountering resistance from residents who dislike the way they look. In Tahoe Keys, a private marina community, the H.O.A. rejected bear boxes because homeowners were worried about parking and snow storage in their small, densely spaced lots, and because they didn’t want to see a “wall of steel.” Then, in late 2021 and early 2022, dozens of Keys homes had break-ins. Neighbors blamed a five-hundred-pound bear that everyone called Hank the Tank. Hank turned out to be female, and she wasn’t the only culprit—two other known bears were in the area. They had been drawn there at the start of the pandemic, when garbage pickup was suspended, and when, in 2021, a bullet ignited a wildfire that destroyed nearly two hundred and twenty-two thousand acres of nearby forest. After the entire town of South Lake Tahoe evacuated, bears wandered through the orange haze, searching the hastily abandoned buildings for food.

Bryant lives in Homewood, on the west shore, in a bungalow with a verdigris copper roof. Her property is lakefront once removed, the water

just visible from her deck. She moved to Tahoe decades ago, with her husband at the time, who later decided that high altitudes and wild animals weren't for him and decamped to South Padre Island, Texas. Much of Bryant's front yard is eternally and perfectly green, because it is golf-course turf. You don't mow it—you vacuum it. She installed the lawn because the forest canopy was too thick for grass to grow, and she got sick of mud. Around the property are little seating areas, as in a cemetery. In summer, Bryant can often be found beneath a massive cedar, drinking a Red Bull or a margarita. Lots of Tahoans have festive white globe lights strung across their outdoor spaces; Bryant's are red.

Nearly all of *BEAR* League's finances come from donations. Years ago, major contributors, along with the group's treasurer, encouraged the creation of an endowment, which has grown to nearly two and a half million dollars. Bryant, who takes no salary, told me, "Our plan was to not break into this piggy bank until I'm gone." She has been called "the Mother Teresa of bears"—and a fanatic. Twice, the league has been sued for harassment and defamation. In 2015, a Tahoe couple claimed to have received death threats from people associated with the league after a Nevada Department of Wildlife official euthanized a bear that had broken into their car. In 2017, the agency official in charge of bear trapping and euthanasia, Carl Lackey, accused the league and the administrators of two Facebook pages (*Lake Tahoe Wall of Shame* and *NDoW Watch: Keeping Them Transparent*) of participating in a smear campaign against him. In one of the Facebook comments cited in the suit, the league claimed, without evidence, that Lackey took "under the table cash for bringing trophy bears into the hunt zone." (Both Nevada and California allow seasonal bear hunting in designated areas.) Another commenter wrote, "Maybe time for assassination." Lackey dropped his case against the league, but went on suing the other defendants, and lost. The Nevada Commission on Ethics reprimanded him for trying to use his government position to crowdfund his legal bills, and, last year, a judge ordered him to pay more than a hundred and fifty thousand dollars to cover his opponents' expenses and various court costs. This and other conflicts have contributed to an undercurrent of old beefs in Tahoe's bear community.

The league's only full-time staff member is Barone, who lives, rent-free, in a tiny house to the side of Bryant's driveway. A studio apartment above Bryant's two-car garage serves as *BEAR* League headquarters. The league used to train dozens of volunteers each year. Bryant now selects only a handful; she says this allows her to get to know (and better manage) the people she's working with. Her denlike domain reflects what she calls her "reclusive" personality. Before founding the league, she said, "I did my grocery shopping during the dead of night, because I didn't like crowds of people."

One Sunday morning, I got a text from Bryant saying that the league had just received a call about a bear that had nearly been hit by a car on the road that rings the lake. "It's Bernardo," she wrote.

A state wildlife biologist recently told me, "We don't name bears." Tahoans do name them—Clementine, Tiny Tim, Buddha Mom, Julie, Baldy, Lupita, Sunny, Za. Bryant claims to recognize individual bears the way we humans recognize one another. A bear may have a distinctive muzzle or a patch of colored chest fur. A bear with an old injury may limp. "They have *personalities*," Bryant said. "Each one of them is unique in their own way, intelligent in their own way, goofy in their own way, just like we are."

Bryant dispatched a volunteer, Mason Balison, to shoo the bear deeper into the forest. By the time he arrived, the bear had moved near the trailhead of a popular mountain-biking corridor. When I got there, cyclists were unloading gear from their vehicles and setting out on rides, and Balison was sitting behind the wheel of a small S.U.V. marked "*BEAR* League," its hazards flashing. Thirty yards away, a large bear lay in the woods the way a Labrador might rest between fetches. "I've been watching him rip apart pinecones," Balison told me, after we got out of our cars. "This is good behavior for him, to be over here eating all these nuts and stuff."

The bear heard us, lifted his head, stood up, sat down, scratched his chin with a hind paw, then got back on his feet and went on eating. Balison walked toward him, clapping and yelling, "Come on, Bernardo!" The bear bounded off.

Afterward, Balison stopped by the league's office to grab a bear mat: a strip of rubber and metal wired to a small transformer box. This is also called an "unwelcome mat." Balison loaded it into his trunk and drove it to a house nearby. I followed him through a cluttered side yard to where the property owner, whose name was Greg, stood staring up at a broken window. Enormous paw prints climbed the wall.

Greg, a general contractor in his seventies, lived at the house and among other properties that he and his wife, Kathy, were remodelling. Their dog, which reliably scared bears away, had died over the summer. On Friday, a bear had tried to get into the house. On Saturday, Greg had run a bear off by using bear spray and throwing rocks. This morning, he had come home to find that a bear had finally succeeded. "The kitchen is just strewn," he told me. "It got a forty-pound bag of cat food, a thing of roasted garlic, my package of cookies. It got into the coffee. It got into a five-gallon bucket that Kathy saves butterscotch and chocolate chips and stuff in. Didn't eat a lot of those, but it spread them all over the floor. It didn't get into the honey. It got into the olive oil. I've come into houses where a bear has torn the range hood off, torn the microwave off. The shelves are all broken and everything's collapsed, or the doors are gone and the whole cabinet's off the wall. Turned over refrigerators. A house here burned down because a bear broke in and knocked the stove over. The electric igniters went off. It tore the gas line open—gas started spewing. I heard this snapping and popping. It's ten-thirty at night, and I'm going, What the hell? I walked out in the street and could see the flames. By then, the whole house was engulfed. The fire department saved the foundation."

Insurance companies usually cover property damage caused by bears, though it is becoming harder to get some types of insurance in California, because of wildfires. Recently, an insurer received a claim that a bear had vandalized a Rolls-Royce; investigators showed security footage of the incident to a wildlife biologist, who determined that the perpetrator was a human in a bear costume. (Additional claims were filed for other luxury cars; four people have been charged with fraud.)



*“The Rock God era is over—you have to go back to just being God.”*  
Cartoon by David Borchart

Greg’s bear had used its upper-body strength to reach the window, which stood about seven feet off the ground, with nothing below it. Greg said, “If it got its head up high enough to butt the window, it would have shattered it immediately.”

“They have the strength of, like, ten football players,” Balison offered.

“They could probably lift a car up if they wanted to,” Greg said. “I mean, they can tear a door off a car.”

“And they can fit their bodies into anything they can put their heads through,” Balison said.

Greg told me, “You’d be absolutely amazed at how fast they move. See that fence? See the stump? I’ve seen a bear, at a full-tilt run, jump on that, vault its back legs onto the fence, and then roll over the top of it—that fast.” Usain Bolt topped out at 27.8 miles an hour; bears can hit thirty. Greg was awed, not angry. Bears were “just trying to live, and this is free food. So, if you don’t protect it, it’s your fault.”

Greg now had no choice but to fortify his property. Holding a cordless screwdriver, he said, “I should have done this years ago, but I was trying to make a living and handle two kids going to college.” He climbed a teetering metal ladder, wearing a cannula in his nose and a portable oxygen tank on his belt. He’d just told me, “Let’s see, I have neuropathy, kidney disease, diabetes, P.T.S.D., C.O.P.D., tinnitus. My eyes are almost shot.” Balison handed up rectangles of plywood, sheet by sheet. Greg bolted the panels to the window like a triptych. Balison had brought the bear mat from his trunk; he now positioned it beneath the window, and showed Greg how it worked.

An animal that steps on a bear mat receives a nasty zap. So does a barefoot human. Welch, the Bear Busters founder, an electrical contractor in his forties, came up with the device fourteen years ago, when he was servicing and repairing hot tubs for a living and kept finding the aftermath of bear break-ins at clients’ unoccupied houses. Home remedies, such as Pine-Sol and “these ridiculous motion-sensor dog-barking machines,” were no longer effective. One day, Welch noticed an electric fence—the kind that ranchers use to contain livestock—and parlayed that principle into the bear mat. He said, “People would tell me, ‘What are you gonna do when this kills my kid?’ I’d look at them and say, ‘I’m a licensed and insured contractor. Do you think I’d be insured if this was dangerous?’ We do not have fried tourists all over the place.” The shock wounds only the pride.

A bear mat typically goes for a few hundred dollars. Welch has sold around five thousand of them, and is now on the third iteration. The mats are getting lighter, prettier, and more customizable. Black bears can be found throughout the United States, and lately Welch has been shipping mats to Connecticut and South Carolina. Customers place them anywhere that they don’t want bears—stairs, doorsteps, garages, surrounding a parked car. On the Bear Busters YouTube channel, home-security videos of notable jolts have been viewed nearly two million times. (One shows a man on all fours, searching for a house key and recoiling—“Son of a *bitch!*”—when he gets zapped. In the comments, someone suggested using bear mats to thwart porch pirates.) BEAR League buys electric mats in bulk, then loans and sometimes delivers them, for free, to anyone who asks. The devices should work until bears figure out how to wear shoes.



*Ann Bryant, who has been called “the Mother Teresa of bears,” implores humans to adjust their own behavior instead of expecting wild animals to change.*

Welch also created bear wires—thin, electrified cables that are strung horizontally across windows and doors. They attach like bungee cords and, like the mats, can be switched on and off from inside or outside a residence. Welch drove me around the lake’s west shore and showed me some of the thousands of places that he has wired, from a property so exclusive that I’m not allowed to say more to cabins that appeared abandoned. People don’t always love how the wires look, but the alternative is a bear in your house. Zollinger, the bear advocate, who oversees the league’s volunteers in South Lake Tahoe, told me, “I heard someone say, ‘We shouldn’t have to turn our houses into fortresses because of bears.’ To me, yeah—if you want to live in Lake Tahoe, you need to secure the home so that bears don’t come in. That’s the responsible thing to do. We live in the forest! People call and say, ‘I’ve lived here thirty, forty, fifty years and I’ve never had a problem with bears.’ I’m, like, Well, now we have fires, and they have no habitat anymore, and we continue to develop.”

A small wiring job might cost a couple of thousand dollars, a large one tens of thousands. Bear Busters stays busy. I spent most of one Monday watching Welch count entry points on dwellings and fill out cost estimates on an iPad. He has only eight employees but struggles to keep them. Tahoe lost a lot of its affordable housing during the pandemic. Many lower-wage earners now have to commute from Reno and Carson City if they choose to continue working in Tahoe. Businesses have had to cut back their hours for lack of staff. Welch said, “Our cost of living here has quadrupled in the past five years, since COVID started and the tech industry decided they’re living up here full time.”

Welch is lanky, with stick-straight blond hair and light eyes. He had on jeans, a big-buckled belt, a long-sleeved T-shirt, a baseball cap, and hiking boots, and was driving an unmarked white utility truck. I followed him to a scrum of boxy white clapboard rental cottages with forest-green trim which the owner, Erik Mason, described as “old-school Tahoe.” Mason lives in Sacramento and sells chargers for electric vehicles. When his parents bought the cottages, in 1973, bears rarely came around. Now they regularly show up at the windows and doors. Welch looked at several bungee cords that had been stretched across the cottages’ stairs and politely avoided saying how pointless they were. Another D.I.Y. solution looked medieval: plywood sheets spiked with nails.

Welch and Mason walked around, searching for outlets. Bear mats and wires have to be plugged in. We passed an apple tree, and, on one stoop, a potted vine loaded with cherry tomatoes, which were now impossible to see as anything other than bait. I wondered aloud whether bears ever go in through the roof. “I’ve seen ‘em go in through a *skylight*,” Welch said. “Dropped twenty feet through the house, then ransacked it, and broke a window to get out. Like, how’d they not break a leg with that?”

“They’re very athletic,” Mason said.

Between 2017 and 2020, humans in Tahoe reported, on average, six hundred and seventy-four encounters with bears per year. That number more than doubled between 2021 and 2022. (It’s possible that more people are reporting their experiences.) Last year, when Bogdan and Stephanie Yamkovenko moved to Tahoe from Washington, D.C., their next-door neighbor, Randall Tobey, warned them about bears, which had broken into his house a few years back and made a mess. The Yamkovenkos considered bears a bonus. They work from home, for Khan Academy, the online education company, and had chosen Tahoe because they wanted to live in a place where they could easily take long walks with their hundred-pound dog, a Bouvier des Flandres named Balthasar. Their rental house, in South Lake Tahoe, backed up to the forest that had been devastated by the wildfire in 2021. On the day that I visited, this part of the woods lay golden and still.

The Yamkovenkos had a second-floor deck with a barbecue grill and an umbrellaed table, where they liked taking calls and eating meals. Next door,

they could see Tobey's place, a one-story cottage with antlers mounted over the entrances. Tobey, a semi-retired landscaper in his sixties who used to work ski patrol at some of the local resorts, had lived there since the early nineties. The Yamkovenkos liked him well enough until they heard him refer to bears as "pests" and describe them as "worse than gophers." It surprised and dismayed them to find themselves living alongside the kind of Tahoan who showed no interest in coexisting with wildlife.

By law, a property owner can ask the state for a depredation permit to kill a problem bear, though in 2022 the California Department of Fish and Wildlife began prioritizing a nonlethal approach and attempting to educate residents about alternatives, such as keeping doors and windows either electrified or locked. (Relocating bears doesn't work; they just come back.) The state was issuing fewer and fewer permits—three hundred and twenty-eight in 2017, fifty-three last year—and permit holders hardly ever killed as many bears as they were authorized to. The Yamkovenkos could not fathom killing even one. "We're very much O.K. with bears, because they're not aggressive," Bogdan told me. "They run away. They don't come to you, they don't antagonize you."

This spring, a blond yearling started sniffing around the Yamkovenkos' back door. Yearlings are bears that have just separated from their mothers. A California wildlife official recently described them as "really clueless, young teen-age bears getting kicked out of the nest and doing whatever they can to survive." The couple took photos and videos, but kept their distance, marvelling at the fact that this bear was smaller than their dog.

On Memorial Day, the Yamkovenkos spent the morning watching the yearling sleep on a high branch of a lodgepole pine in Tobey's back yard. They were about to sit down to lunch when they saw the bear scamper down the tree and stroll over to Tobey's house, then poke its nose through the open door. Bogdan banged on the lid of his grill to scare it off. The yearling looked up, but didn't leave. Bogdan saw the bear inch forward, then back out of the house and run. "That's when I heard the first shot," he said.

Bogdan sprinted over to Tobey's place, screaming, "What are you *doing*?"

A second shot.

The yearling scrambled back up its tree, then let go and fell, landing with a sickening thud. Bogdan saw the bear lying, conscious, on the ground, bleeding from a hole in its side. By then, Stephanie was on the phone, trying to reach a wildlife veterinarian and the police. “Don’t do *anything*,” Bogdan said that he told Tobey, who replied, “No, I gotta put him out of his misery.” As Tobey raised his rifle, Bogdan turned his head.

A state game warden arrived, along with a deputy from the El Dorado County Sheriff’s Department. Tobey had already called 911 to report that he had just shot a bear that had come into his home and threatened him and his dog. “He scared me!” Tobey reportedly told the dispatcher. (The sheriff refused to release the 911 audio to me.)

It is a felony to intentionally kill a bear without a hunting license for any reason other than self-defense. Investigators concluded that Tobey had had no choice but to shoot because the bear was inside his house—a finding that did not fully match what the Yamkovenkos had witnessed. They’d never lost sight of the bear’s hind legs.

The couple tried to put themselves in the mind-set of someone who panicked at the sight of a bear at the door, and concluded that, even if rattled, Tobey might have made other choices. “He could have just thrown his shoe, or the remote control, or a water bottle,” Stephanie told me. (*BEAR* League would have provided electric mats for free.) She and Bogdan had been hoping to buy a house in the neighborhood, but now they just wanted to move. Seeing bears in their back yard was no longer “this magical thing,” Stephanie said. The Yamkovenkos hung a sail shade on their deck, to avoid having to look at Tobey. It bothered them that his version of the story became accepted as fact in the media based on what they considered a flawed investigative report. They worried that others would emulate him.

One afternoon, I went to Tobey’s house and found his storm door propped open. The inner door—wooden, with a brass knocker shaped like a fish—was closed. I knocked with the fish, and Tobey came to the door with a shy mutt named Rosie. Tobey has white hair and brown eyes; he stood with a

slight bend in his knees, like a skier still in his boots, chewing on a shard of venison jerky. When I asked about the bear, he reflexively looked away, raising his hands like a person under arrest, and said, “I just didn’t feel good about it at all. It was bad news, all the way around.” For a second, this tracked as regret. I asked Tobey if he’d kill the bear if he had it to do over again. “Yeah!” he said. “Fuck, it was in my *kitchen!*” I asked why he kept his door open. He said, “When it’s eighty degrees out and you don’t have air-conditioning, you’ve gotta open up *everything.*”

Last year, throughout the spring and summer, bears were strolling around Downieville, an old gold-rush town, seventy miles northwest of the lake, that has reinvented itself as a mountain-biking destination. Downtown, where the North Yuba River forks, there is a grocer, a theatre, a bike shop, and, above a hair salon, the offices of the *Mountain Messenger*, California’s oldest continuously operating weekly newspaper, where Samuel Clemens supposedly published a few items before becoming Mark Twain. The bears in town “weren’t necessarily showing aggression toward people,” Mike Fisher, the sheriff of Sierra County, said recently. “But they weren’t *afraid* of people.”

That fall, a retired contractor named Patrice Miller, who rented a yellow frame house on a wooded lot near downtown, swatted a bear away from her window, describing it as “a big bastard.” Miller was seventy-one and lived alone. She grew orchids and dyed her own knitting yarn with chrysanthemums and tree bark, and, in her aboveground basement, she had set up a woodshop. She had moved to Downieville a decade earlier, from the Coast. Miller was aware of bears because, early on, a couple who lived across the street—Robert Hall, a co-captain of the fire department, and his wife, Patty—had warned her about them. “She said, ‘Oh, it’ll be fine. I have my air horns,’ ” Patty told me.

One day, a neighbor was reporting a problem bear to the state’s wildlife hotline and mentioned that Miller may want help, too. A game warden contacted Miller to see if she was interested in a depredation permit. Miller ultimately declined. “She liked all animals,” Patty told me. The warden, having learned that Miller’s house was dilapidated and full of garbage, cautioned her to keep the property clean and to stop feeding her cats on the

porch. Instead, Miller installed iron bars on her kitchen window. She apparently also leaned a heavy beam against another entrance.

Miller routinely walked to the grocery, which a friend owned, to buy alcohol. In early November, the grocer called the sheriff to say that she hadn't seen Miller in days. The Halls were already wondering why Miller's porch light no longer came on at night. A sheriff's deputy, Malcolm Fadden, went to the house on the afternoon of November 8th. On the front steps, he found a punctured garden hose, spurting water. He turned off the spigot and went to the door. When he looked through a window and saw blood on the floor, he drew his service weapon and stepped inside.

In the living room, Fadden found bear scat, a foot in diameter. In the kitchen, he found Miller dead. Her naked body was gashed with claw marks; her left arm and most of her right leg had been eaten down to the bone. The security bars on the window hung by a single bolt. The cabinets were destroyed. In the bedroom, Fadden saw paw prints and soil, and, on the bed, feces and urine. Miller's laptop was still plugged in and open. Fadden wrote in his report that she appeared to have been dragged off her bed after she was already dead.

That afternoon, the Department of Fish and Wildlife sent a game warden, Zeke Awbrey. Game wardens are sworn peace officers who primarily enforce conservation laws but may also handle matters involving public safety. Awbrey and Fadden met at the sheriff's office, where Fadden explained what was going on and, according to Fish and Wildlife case notes, raised the possibility that a bear had "potentially killed Miller." They went to the scene, where Miller's body still lay in the kitchen, next to a couple of crushed soup cans. Awbrey noted "large pools of blood and bloody drag marks" in the living room, and the presence of fat and skin throughout the house. He sent the soup cans and swabs from three of Miller's wounds to a forensics lab for DNA testing.

In the days that followed, neighbors reported that a bear was still hanging out around Miller's house. On November 13th, Fisher, the sheriff, called a state wildlife official to ask permission to set a trap there, and was told that only the homeowner or the tenant could make such a request. Fisher explained that the tenant was dead. He assigned Fadden to track down the

owners, who lived an hour away, in Grass Valley. In the meantime, Fisher, who also functions as the county coroner, announced Miller's death on Facebook, writing, "Preliminary investigation indicates that she passed away prior to the bear's involvement," adding that the bear may have been "drawn by the scent or other factors." Fisher's working theory was not implausible: Miller had had significant health problems, and no one on record had ever been killed by a black bear in California. Black bears had killed about sixty people since 1900 in all of North America.

Miller had been dead for nearly a week, but her body still awaited autopsy in the morgue in Placer County, which encompasses part of Lake Tahoe. "Any update on the bear lady?" Fisher asked the medical examiner, Kelly Kobylanski, in an e-mail on November 15th. "I'm fighting with Fish and Wildlife regarding the bear. They are dragging their feet wanting confirmation she didn't die as a result of a bear attack." By this point, Fadden had found the landlords, who requested a depredation permit. Fish and Wildlife granted it, and a trapper planted a ventilated cage baited with marshmallows and fish in Miller's driveway.

The following morning, Kobylanski replied to Fisher, writing, "I think the bear 'attack' was most likely postmortem. He's probably been eating her garbage that she leaves outside her window every night and this night maybe she forgot (maybe because she was dead) to put the beam against it and he noticed she was lying peacefully on her bed." The examination had shown heart disease, renal failure, cirrhosis, a "NASTY liver," Kobylanski added. "Not to mention terrible teeth (or 'tooth' I should say)."

The trap at Miller's house caught a bear the next day. Fisher met the trapper and a state wildlife biologist there. The lab had found that the DNA on Miller's body belonged to a male bear; the biologist said that the bear in the trap appeared to be female. Tranquillize it, lift its leg, and check, the sheriff suggested.

The biologist wasn't certified in what Fish and Wildlife calls "chemical immobilization," and, according to the agency, "was not able or authorized to tranquilize the bear." It became clear that the state intended to let the bear go, so the sheriff seized and padlocked the cage. When the state ordered him to release the bear, Fisher said that he'd do so only after calling a TV

station to document what was happening. “I was told that I was grandstanding, that I was being inhumane to this bear, and that I needed to release it immediately,” he later said during a radio interview. Fish and Wildlife sent for a properly certified biologist, who, after administering the tranquilizer, revealed that the bear was male. (Its testicles were undescended, which may have explained the confusion.) The bear was shot that night. Fisher said, “Public safety is No. 1. Wildlife management is No. 2.”

The biologist swabbed the bear’s cheek and drew a blood sample, then sent the materials to the forensics lab, to see if the bear that they’d just euthanized was the one whose DNA had been found on Miller. Fisher was still waiting for the results when, on December 4th, Kobylanski, who hadn’t yet signed off on her autopsy report, e-mailed again, to say that a colleague had reviewed some of Miller’s injuries: “We both agree that, while most of the injuries appear to be inflicted postmortem, the hemorrhage in the neck wound(s) make that more suspicious. It is possible the one swipe at the neck killed her and then he enjoyed his ‘cache’ in the following days. I can’t be positive but I’m prepared to call it probable bear mauling with extensive postmortem predation or something to that effect.”

Kobylanski signed her report on January 4th, listing Miller’s cause of death as “perforating sharp and blunt force crushing injuries consistent with bear mauling and subsequent predation.” The report did not indicate whether death was instantaneous, only that Miller was alive when the bear struck. (Kobylanski is no longer employed by Placer County, and she did not respond to my attempts to reach her.)

Fisher was looking at evidence of the first confirmed killing of a human by a black bear in California, and he still didn’t know for sure whether they had put down the right animal. Fish and Wildlife was requesting a copy of the autopsy report, but he didn’t want to provide it until the agency sent the DNA results. The impasse was ongoing—and the public was unaware of it—when, in mid-May, an elderly man woke up from a nap and found a bear standing in his living room. Fisher, having flashbacks to Miller, declared the bear a threat to public safety. Then a bear tried to get inside a Downieville school while kids were present; deputies tracked it down and shot it. Fisher

was irritated with Fish and Wildlife, later saying, “It shouldn’t have to fall on the local sheriff to do *their* job.”

On May 21st, the *Mountain Messenger* published a front-page story about Fisher’s frustrations. The next day, state wildlife officials sat down with the sheriff, in a meeting attended by Sierra County’s assemblywoman, Megan Dahle. Only then did they exchange information about the bear that had been euthanized at Miller’s house: it was, as Fisher had suspected all along, the one that killed her. The state appeared to have known this since November, 2023. According to lab notes that I obtained through a public-records request, a lab tech wrote, on November 20th, “Complete profile of male bear, consistent with profile detected on deceased!” The public, and the sheriff, began to learn the fuller story six months after the fact.

Devon Barone had just started her job at *BEAR League*. She and Bryant wondered why the pathologist’s conclusions didn’t match Fisher’s original statement. (Autopsies and other forensic findings can contradict conclusions drawn by a county coroner.) The inconsistencies and the long wait for answers convinced Bryant and Barone that someone was hiding something; they didn’t know that part of the murkiness was due to the communication breakdown between the sheriff and the state.

Fisher, who grew up in Downieville and has worked for the Sierra County Sheriff’s Office for twenty-four years, was contending with a more intense bear situation than he had ever seen. In June, a bear turned up at a wedding and destroyed a car, ran off with somebody’s luggage, and came back for the reception. Between July 18th and August 2nd, his office received thirty-four calls about one or more bears in Downieville, Sierra City, Loyalton, and other communities in his jurisdiction. Bears were trying to get into homes, and into a resort cabin at Sierra Shangri-La. A caller who reported a bear trapped inside his Chevy Equinox got mad when the 911 dispatcher, who had no available deputies to send, suggested opening the door and letting the bear out. A woman found a bear swimming in a neighbor’s pool. A bear walked up to a barbecue and ran off when someone rang a cowbell. At about three o’clock one morning, a woman fired a rifle at her front door after a bear tried to get inside. “She could see the door being pulled,” the dispatcher noted.

The sheriff and state wildlife officials started meeting every other week. Their relationship vastly improved. (A spokesman for Fish and Wildlife told me that the agency's complex task of protecting both humans and animals—and preventing deaths like Miller's—depends, in part, "on educating and encouraging Californians.") In late October, nearly a year after Miller's death, state biologists and game wardens travelled to Downieville to appear with Fisher at a town hall. Fisher assured the audience, "Do I think that every bear that comes into our town is a threat to public safety? No." A state supervisor explained that the "crux" of the problem was access to human food. Bleach your garbage cans, he said; take in your Halloween pumpkins. Fisher, without mentioning Miller, suggested that residents encourage one another to keep their property clean. "We, the people, need to take responsibility, and we need to speak up if our neighbors are, you know, living like slobs," he said.

I'd been in Downieville weeks earlier and had not seen or heard of anyone using bear mats or wires. I saw only a couple of bear boxes; both were downtown, and one had been left ajar. A well-defended property would have mats, wires, and a bear box, which altogether would cost upward of several thousand dollars. The per-capita income in Sierra County is less than thirty-eight thousand dollars a year.

Miller's house was still boarded up. It had been gutted by a hazmat team hired by the owners' insurance company. The yard was overgrown. The cats were gone. Miller's body had been cremated by the Chapel of the Angels. "I am still convinced that the bear did not kill her," Bryant said when I called her in November. But the bear did kill Miller, according to the autopsy report, even if it hadn't come for her. Bryant was as heartbroken for Miller as she was for the bears. "People are gonna be more fearful, rather than getting a grip on their fear," she said. She ended our call as she often did: "Stay safe." ♦



*[Paige Williams](#), a staff writer, writes U.S. Journal, a series that Calvin Trillin created, in The New Yorker, in 1967. She is the author of “[The Dinosaur Artist](#)” and the winner of a 2024 Mirror Award.*

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## Shouts & Murmurs

- **Protest or Principle: Withholding Sex from My Wife**

By John Kenney | I vow to go without sex to prove that I am in support of what my wife is in support of, politically, and also in terms of not wanting to have sex with me that much.

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[\*\*Shouts & Murmurs\*\*](#)

# Protest or Principle: Withholding Sex from My Wife

By [John Kenney](#)

November 25, 2024



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

In the wake of [the] election, progressive women, who are outraged over Donald Trump's victory at the ballot box, have taken to social media with public, vengeful vows of chastity.

—*The Free Press*.

**Day 1:** So it begins. Call it a protest if you like. I call it principle. We'll see who cares more about this election. And by election I mean sex. And by sex I mean me withholding it to make a point. That point being . . . I'm not exactly sure. Maybe that I can go without sex to prove that I am in support of what my wife is in support of, both politically and also in terms of not wanting to have sex with me much.

**Day 4:** Still no sex, which of course is fine by me. That's the plan. Surprised it's been only three days (feels longer?). Is my wife aware of the

plan? Hard to say. Last night, I was reading in bed as she entered the room, engaging in our usual foreplay banter. “It would kill you to switch the clothes from the washer to the dryer?” she said. “Seriously?”

I heard what she was saying. But I also heard sexual tension. Or maybe just tension. Come to think of it, it was definitely more annoyance. But I think buried way down under that annoyance (and quite a bit of drawer slamming) was a longing for sex. Which is why I was trying to maintain a look that said, “I am a sexual man but also will not be used for your pleasure, because I have principles, but please know that I will make exceptions.”

My wife did not appear to see me as she put away clothes, but then a quick glance suggested that she had, in fact, seen me and was drawn to me sexually (or possibly not), when she said, “What’s wrong with your face? Are you sick?”

She got into bed, turning her back to me (a sign?), and, sighing loudly, muttered, “I’m so tired I could kill myself.”

**Day 7:** I feel I’m doing what I must, even if I don’t understand what I’m doing. I haven’t even thought about sex much over the past six days and ten hours. Has my wife? Her coquettish behavior would suggest that she has. When I enter our room, wearing just a towel, I sense, from my wife’s mud mask and Invisalign mouth guard, that the sexual energy is palpable but that I will have to say no. Or maybe make an exception. “What are you doing?” I ask seductively. Maybe not seductively. Maybe just regular.

“What?” she asks, looking at her phone, drooling a bit from the mouth guard. I’ve been standing with one arm leaning against the doorframe. My wife does not look up. My arm begins to tingle from the reduced flow of blood. I revert to a tactic I know she can’t resist: taking handfuls of my stomach fat, pushing them together, and speaking in the voice of Belly Man, who this evening has chosen the lyrics to Rod Stewart’s “Do Ya Think I’m Sexy?” She looks up and appears to have developed a resistance to Belly Man, then resumes texting.

**Day 10:** She hasn't cracked yet, but that could be because she's on a business trip in Miami, from which she texts photos of herself by the pool. In a bathing suit. But I will not be lured. Well, I would. But she's in Miami. I consider flying there. But principles cannot be broken. Also, I would have to connect through Phoenix, with a six-hour layover.

**Day 14:** The conversation starts innocently. But I know my wife. And I won't budge. Because I want to make the point that I, too, believe in whatever she believes in, which is something I know but am spacing on at this moment.

"Oh, I meant to tell you," she says casually but also sexually, if you listen very closely, as she unloads bags from Trader Joe's. "You know Howard and Vivian?"

It's so funny to me, because she asks this as if sex isn't on her mind. Her body all but screams sex, underneath her flannel shirt, sweatshirt, and fleece.

"No," I say, having no idea who Howard and Vivian are.

"Don't be dumb," she says. "Two streets over. Older couple. Always gardening."

It turns out I do know them. "Oh, sure," I say, knowing we'll most likely be having sex soon, because although I want to stand by my principles, I also want to be a good husband when my wife clearly wants to have sex.

"Howard died yesterday," she says.

(Sure he did.)

"So you want to have sex," I say.

"What? What is wrong with you?"

"Wait. You're serious? Howard died?"

“He had a heart attack in the garden and fell into a wheelbarrow, which rolled into the street, where he was hit by a car.”

“Oh, my God.”

“I know!”

“So do you want to have sex or not? You’re sending mixed signals.”

**Day 18:** I decide to test her resolve by luring her, as she sometimes lures me, by wearing form-fitting clothing. (“I’m just wearing yoga pants,” she protests at these times. Protests too much, methinks.)

At breakfast, I say, casually, “How about that election and my principled stand against the things you are against?”

“What are you even talking about?” she asks. “And why are you wearing my yoga pants? Are you drunk?”

**Day 21:** Wait. Is my protest still valid if I forgot to vote? ♦

*John Kenney has contributed to the magazine since 1999. His books include the novel “I See You’ve Called In Dead.”*

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2024/12/02/protest-or-principle-withholding-sex-from-my-wife>

# Fiction

- **[“Paris Friend”](#)**

By Shuang Xuetao | So you get on well? he said. You could say that, I said. You could say that, for a while now, she's been my only reason to go on living.

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[Fiction](#)

# Paris Friend

By [Shuang Xuetao](#)

November 24, 2024



Illustration by Joey Yu

Xiaoguo had a terror of thirst, so he kept a glass of water on the table beside his hospital bed. As soon as it was empty, he asked me to refill it. I wanted to warn him that this was unhealthy—guzzling water all night long puts pressure on the kidneys, and pissing that much couldn't be good for his injury. He was tall, though, so I decided his insides could probably cope.

Even though he was a Beijinger, Xiaoguo didn't have a hint of an accent. He told me he'd sung Peking opera for a few years as a kid, but then he got too tall and his voice broke. It was a shame because not many kids can sing Lord Guan the way I did, he said, as he shuffled a deck of cards. You need an air of dignity. Unfortunately, even Lord Guan isn't allowed to be as tall as I got.

And so, at the age of twenty, he went to study film in France, where he lived in Versailles. Each day, he headed out with one of the school's cameras and shot a bunch of footage, then went back to the studio and tried to edit it into sense. After doing this for a while, he began getting asked to take wedding videos for Chinese people living in France. Mostly Wenzhou people, he said. They love weddings. Perhaps because of his height, everyone seemed to think they were getting their money's worth; such a substantial person came with an elevated point of view. One of the Wenzhou women noticed that he always captured unforgettable moments: a groom's fleeting anxiety, a bride inadvertently revealing her hatred for another woman. Once, he even caught someone stealing a stack of red envelopes from a bridesmaid's handbag. He didn't raise the alarm right away, just sent the footage to the client. That's called letting the film speak for you, he said. The Wenzhou woman was forty-seven years old and owned three antique shops in Paris. Her husband, a Korean gangster, had died of a stroke when she was forty.

[Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.](#)

She once shot someone and took a lot of drugs, he said. But she was quite healthy when I met her. After her husband died, she started running marathons. She asked me to go jogging with her once. It was raining heavily, but we set out anyway. I made it ten minutes, then I got a taxi to the end point and waited for her there. Even though I couldn't run a marathon, she still believed in my talent and gave me the cash to shoot my first feature. She said I could do anything I liked, as long as I made a film. When her husband was still alive, they watched movies every day. Sometimes at the art-house

cinema near their place, sometimes DVDs at home. Since he passed, she hasn't seen as many. Turns out it wasn't the movies she liked—it was watching them with her husband. I lost all the money she gave me playing cards. I made an ultra-low-budget reel of street scenes, dubbed in a voice-over, and sent it to her. Marguerite Duras made a film like that. The Wenzhou woman never responded, and I never saw her again.

As for how I ended up in a hospital room in Paris talking to Xiaoguo: two years ago, I got to know a Chinese girl on MSN who was studying in France. Like me, she was from the northeast and liked writing. After chatting for a couple of months, we realized that our parents had worked in the same factory, though in different workrooms. When she was ten, her parents had sold everything they had in S—and gone to work in New Zealand. After they got settled there, they opened a swimming school. Your father liked to swim? I asked. He learned in New Zealand so he could make a living, she replied. In the first half of his life, he was a fitter; in his early forties, he became a decent athlete.

I sent her a short story I'd been writing, and she gave me some notes. I was stunned by her Chinese fluency—she was even able to sort out some confusion I'd had with personal pronouns. How could someone who'd left China in fifth grade have kept up her mother tongue so well? I couldn't understand it. I'd been struggling with this story for the better part of a year; it was now ten thousand words long, and I had no idea how to end it. She said, What if the girl walks into the sea and swims across the strait to a different country, where she starts a new life? How is that possible? I said. I could do it, she said. As long as I didn't encounter any sharks or jellyfish. You could swim dozens of kilometres? I asked. Yes, she said. I can swim for a day and a night. If I hadn't loved swimming so much, my ba would never have become a coach. I only swim occasionally these days, she added. I prefer literature. I'm writing a five-hundred-thousand-word novel. Does it need to be that long? I said. It didn't start out that long, she said, I just kept going. If I didn't give myself a limit, it would end up even longer. Can I see some of it? I asked. Wait till I'm done, she said. O.K., I said. Thanks for your suggestions for my story. Some of the details reminded me of our city when I was a kid, she said. You wrote about trucks full of cabbages parked by the hutongs, and people would come up with their carts to buy vegetables for the winter. I remember all that. Some people ripped the rotten leaves off

the cabbages so they'd weigh less. Your writing isn't good enough yet. If it were better, I'd help you translate it. If I manage to write another story, I said, I'll send it to you.

All this time, I had no idea what she looked like, which pained me. Each day, I looked up flights from Beijing Capital to Charles de Gaulle. Ten hours, eighteen thousand yuan round trip, an astronomical sum to someone who'd just started interning at a newspaper. Then there'd be the cost of a few days in Paris, where I'd heard a bottle of beer costs five or six euros. If I sat down for a chat with her, even if she had only one beer, I'd need at least five to get sufficiently relaxed. That was almost four hundred yuan just on booze, even if we didn't eat anything. Yet, for some reason, I couldn't shake the thought of visiting her. I had no clear goal in mind. I was single at the time—it had been a year since I'd split up with my college girlfriend. Apart from going to the office, interviewing people, and cranking out articles, all I did was sit in my rented Dongba apartment, writing away. Whenever I finished a story, I'd submit it to a magazine and immediately start a new one. If I didn't have some success within five years, I'd walk away from literature altogether, quit journalism, and go back home to open a convenience store or noodle restaurant or something. A trip to Paris would obviously disturb the rhythm of my work. I'd never even left the country; the farthest I'd gotten was a visit to Hong Kong with my girlfriend after graduation. The air-conditioning there gave me a fever and I didn't get to do anything, though my girlfriend had a pretty good time. She went on all the rides at Disneyland.

Paris. The city of Hemingway, Stein, and Camus. Of Godard and Jean-Pierre Melville. That's not the main point, just some context. The main point was that Li Lu (that was her name, Li Lu) lived in Paris. I couldn't stop thinking about having a cup of coffee with Li Lu who lived in Paris, each of us talking about our lives. One evening, I suddenly remembered an older Peking-opera performer I'd interviewed who'd happened to mention that her son was studying in Paris. Her name was Han Fengzhi, and she'd been retired for five years. She occasionally made a cameo, but mostly she stayed at home, watching TV. So I summoned up my courage and phoned her. She said, Call his dorm late at night his time, to make sure you get him. His name is Xiaoguo. Tell him you're one of my fans and we hang out talking about opera. He'll do anything for you.

I got up very early the next day. It was the middle of April, still a little chilly in Beijing. It had been a while since I'd been awake at six in the morning. I opened the window for some fresh air, brushed my teeth, and washed my face, then tapped the number Han Fengzhi had given me into my cell phone. It rang a couple of times, then someone picked up and said something in a foreign language. I said, in Chinese, I'm looking for Xiaoguo. Xiaoguo? the voice said. Yes, I said, Xiaoguo. The voice shouted, Xiaoguo! Then more foreign words, though the person's pronunciation of Xiaoguo was quite accurate. Someone else picked up and said, Who is this? Hi, Xiaoguo, I said. I'm a fan of your mother— That's not possible, he interrupted. My mother doesn't have any fans left. Who are you really? My name is Li Mo, I said. I'm a reporter from Beijing. I interviewed your mother. I was hoping you could help me have a look at a woman I know in Paris. Can't you just ask her for a photo? he said. No, I said, It's too awkward, and also this isn't about her appearance. I just want to check that this person actually exists, and if she does whether her life is how she described it to me. If everything is O.K., then I'm going to apply for a visa and buy a plane ticket.

So you get on well? he said. You could say that, I said. You could say that, for a while now, she's been my only reason to go on living. I shocked myself with those last words. They didn't sound like something I would say, but perhaps this utterance had left my lips because I was talking to a stranger. He paused for a moment and said, Getting the visa will take a while. Write down this number. It's a friend of mine who can help you out. What's the woman's name? Li Lu, I said. She's studying comparative literature at the Sorbonne Nouvelle. Which Lu? he asked. Lu as in jade, I said. She should be easy enough to track down, he said. I'll give you a call when I have news. How's my ma doing? Not too bad, I said. When I went to see her, she was having dinner with her neighbors. When you have a moment, help me hire a cleaner to give her place a good going over, he said. Especially the fridge. And her bedding will need changing. She injured her leg training when she was young, so she should walk around more. She can't just sit around watching TV all day. All right, don't worry, I said. I'll go visit her again tomorrow.

That afternoon, I phoned the number he'd given me and introduced myself as Xiaoguo's friend who needed a French visa. O.K., the guy said. No charge for Xiaoguo's friends. Give me your e-mail address and I'll send some forms over, let me know if there's anything you don't understand. I feel like I ought

to pay you, I said. It's O.K., he said. When you go to France, you can help me take something to Xiaoguo. Just a small thing, less than two kilograms. I might not end up going, I said. You can do it whenever you do go, he said. All right, I said, I won't insist. What's your name? Zhou Cang, he said. You can call me Zhou. You mean like Lord Guan's sword-bearer? I said. That's the one, he said. It's not the name I was born with. Xiaoguo used to sing the part of Lord Guan, and since my surname is Zhou and we hung out all the time as kids, I got the nickname. Then, one day, I thought, Why not change it? So now Zhou Cang is the name on my I.D. After hanging up, I marvelled at Xiaoguo's social circle. It looked like I'd picked the right person to go searching for Li Lu.

The next day was Saturday, the day of the week when I usually found Li Lu online. She sometimes popped up on a weekday, but always at random times and never for long. We chatted on Saturday at two or three in the morning, Beijing time. Maybe I was just one of many people she chatted with, I don't know, but she always showed up punctually. That afternoon, I went to see Han Fengzhi with some cleaning supplies: washcloths, a broom, fridge deodorizer, toilet spray. She opened the door for me and made her way back to the sofa. I watched her walk, and this time noticed the limp in her right leg. My head hurts, maybe I caught a draft last night, she said. The couple across the way had an argument in the middle of the night, and I watched them from the balcony for a while. Have a rest, I said. I'll help you clean the apartment. If you don't feel better soon, I'll take you to the doctor. No need for all that, she said. Xiaoguo asked me to hire you a cleaner, I said. I thought about it, but you probably don't want a stranger here messing with your stuff. If you trust me, I'll do it. Now I know Xiaoguo, we're friends.



*“And they lived happily ever after, so long as he listened to her problems without trying to solve them, and she laughed at his tired jokes in front of company.”*

*Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen*

Within fifteen minutes, she had dozed off on the sofa. She was very thin, with slender legs and sparse hair. Age spots showed on her neck and the back of her hands. She didn't look great, perhaps from lack of exercise, and she let out little whimpers as she slept, as if she ached somewhere. I tried not to make too much noise as I cleaned and didn't open any of the drawers so as not to invade her privacy; I just tidied up the things she had out. The fridge was full of expired food and frozen meat that didn't have a date on it, plus some cooked food that had been put in without any kind of covering. I tossed it all. There was so much grease caked on the extractor fan that I could barely see the switch, half the chopsticks had mold on them, and I spotted some cockroaches scurrying along the water pipes. On her bedside table were some Zoloft pills and a bottle of melatonin, as well as a notebook containing notes on certain individuals:

A: 68, 178cm, 78kg. Likes cycling, cancer survivor, talkative.

B: 66, 170cm, 75kg. Handsy. One child—civil servant, department level, works in Tianjin.

C: 75, artist, amateur opera singer. Walks with a limp, heart disease. Wife and child have emigrated. Lives with 40-year-old housekeeper.

I propped the front door open with a slipper and went to the mini-mart across the road to buy Mr. Muscle, roach repellent, gloves, and a mask. Ms. Han was still asleep when I got back, in exactly the same position, and I returned to cleaning. Before I knew it, it was dark, and I was out of energy—I felt like I might faint if I kept going. I sat in the living room and downed half a bottle of mineral water, then went to wake Ms. Han. She opened her eyes and said, Have you had dinner? I'll have something at home, I said. I put out roach repellent in your kitchen—watch out for it. Get home early and don't drink too much, she said. All right, I said. Then her eyes shut and she dozed off again.

I felt sad on the metro, then quickly fell asleep. When I woke up, I'd gone five stops too far and was in a neighborhood I didn't know at all. I went back

to sleep until the train reached its terminus, then struggled to my feet and crossed the platform to board a train in the opposite direction. I glanced at my watch: almost ten. Normally, I'd be full of beans at this time, and either reading or writing, but that night I felt exhausted. When I got home, I set my alarm and collapsed into bed without even getting undressed. Then I jerked awake five minutes before my alarm went off, drenched in sweat and at full strength again. I splashed some water on my face, made Cup Noodles, booted up my computer, and logged into MSN.

Li Lu was already there, earlier than usual—had she realized something was up? Did she want to say something to me? I lifted the plastic lid of my noodles. I would take three mouthfuls, and if she hadn't said anything by then I would say hello. I was on my second mouthful when Li Lu typed, Are you there? Yes, I replied. I thought of something, she said. I phoned my ba today to check and he confirmed. What is it? I said. I saw you as a kid, she said. That's not possible, I said. Our parents worked at the same factory, but so did a few thousand others, and they never knew one another. That's right, she said, but we did meet. You can meet without knowing each other, can't you?

When? I said. You were ten and I was nine, she said. July, 1993. That's even less likely, I said. I was seriously ill that summer, I spent two months in a hospital in Beijing. Yes, she said, that's where I saw you. You'd stopped eating because of your parents' separation? That's right, I said. How did you know? Your ba asked his boss for a loan to pay for your treatment, she said. His boss didn't want to pony up, so he started a donation drive instead. My ba put in five yuan, even though he was in a different workroom. He can't remember how he heard about this or why he gave money to a stranger. Anyway, that July we set off for New Zealand. Our flight left from Beijing, and my ba somehow remembered that was where you were and asked if I wanted to see you. I said O.K., and he asked another co-worker for the name of the hospital—I remember it was a psychiatric facility. It was in Huilongguan, I said. All summer long, I hoped my ma would come and see me, but she never showed up. We brought fruit and milk, she said. Your door was ajar. I saw you, all alone in that room, hooked up to a drip and skinny as a stick. I was twenty-five kilograms at my lightest, I said. I went right up to you, she said. You were asleep. Your name was at the foot of your bed: Li

Mo, Food Avoidant, Emotional Disorder, Six Weeks. We didn't wake you, we just left our gifts.

Why didn't you wake me? I said. To be honest, she said, the way you looked frightened me. I didn't know what I'd say to you if you were awake. I see, I said. I was close to death all that month. When you get to the last stages of hunger, it doesn't hurt at all. You lose all the strength in your body, but your brain keeps churning, and when you're asleep you dream non-stop. Many things that would never normally have come to mind popped into my head, like how I learned to walk, my ma humming a tune in the kitchen, pissing my bed. I forgot all these things again after I got better, and now I can't recall those moments at all—I only know that they happened. How did you get better? she said. I ate the fruit you left behind, of course, I said. Bullshit, she said. O.K., I said, it wasn't really anything in particular, I just had a dream of myself as an adult, obviously not looking the way I am now, but I knew it was me as a grownup. Then I woke up and wept because I wanted to grow up, I wanted to know how my life would turn out, I wanted to see the world of the future. My ba was staying at a small hotel next to the hospital. I asked the doctor to call him and say I was turning a corner. The first thing I ate *was* fruit, a green tangerine, very sour. It was on my bedside table, I'm not sure if you left it. I seem to remember we bought green tangerines, she said. My ba said green tangerines got rid of heatiness. We sat before our respective screens in silence for the next five minutes.

It was late night in Beijing. Occasionally, someone would speed by outside on an e-scooter. Trucks full of gravel rumbled by my window. They accompanied me each night, the *brr* of their engines branded on my heart, part of the rhythm of the city. Your short story was actually O.K., she said. There's no need to say that, I said. It's not a mature work, but there are good things in it, she said. I've tried writing in English and French, but neither worked. I can live my life in those languages, I can even write my dissertation in them, but I can only manage fiction in Chinese. Chatting with you has improved my mother tongue. I typed slowly when we first started talking, maybe you thought I was being aloof, but actually I just couldn't think up the right words. I cried at my computer several times. It's embarrassing to admit this now.

I'm happy to be your guinea pig, I said.

She laughed. I could sense through the screen that she was laughing.

Should we exchange pictures? she said. I don't mean anything by that. I just think it'd improve our chats if we each knew what the other looked like. You go first. Sure, I said. That would definitely be an improvement. A moment of silence. I'm very short, she said. I'm not tall either, I said. How tall? she said. A hundred and seventy-five centimetres, I said. That's not short, she said. I'm truly short, and my skin has been bad recently. I seem to be allergic to every season in France. I understand, I said. Beijing is full of pollen these days. I have no idea why they plant so many trees.

Like I said, I sort of remember you as a kid, she said, though obviously those were special circumstances, I'm not going to let them set a precedent. "Special circumstances" and "set a precedent"? I said. For someone who left China as a kid, you sure know a lot of fancy words. I need to go write my dissertation, she said. I'm only a couple of months from finishing my master's. Bye. Sure, I said. What are your plans for after graduation? I haven't thought about it, she said. Maybe I'll find a newspaper or a publishing house in Paris to work at for a while, and write my novel on the side. That sounds like a plan, I said. I'm off to work on my dissertation, she said. See you. Let's swap photos first? I said. No, she said, and went offline.

I had trouble falling back asleep that night, which didn't really matter—I didn't have any interviews the next day, so I'd just be writing at home. Maybe I'd slept for too long on the subway, or maybe my conversation with Li Lu had stirred up a bit of self-awareness. The person I'd been as a child felt like a box I owned, whose contents only I knew—a jumble of objects. I'd never considered how I'd come across to other people back then, or rather I should say I'd never thought I would be observed and remembered by them. But isn't it perfectly natural that I would? As long as you're alive, you'll enter other people's consciousnesses, turning into a film clip, or at least a collection of stills.

Before my ma left, she told me that I would be a man, which meant I had to rely on myself. I remember how, after work, she liked to lounge on the kang reading the papers, or sometimes she'd read an old book from the factory library. I thought, But I don't want to be a man, I want to rely on you, I want you to love me and take care of me forever. Instead, I said, Ma, I'm already a

man. She smiled and said, That's my Little Mo, I knew you'd be the best. I never saw her again after she left. She was still quite young at the time—she was only twenty-one when she had me. One day, my ba told me she'd been working in Ningbo, but she was in a bad way after being exposed to toxic metals; half a year after that she moved on to some other place and broke off contact with us. My ba said they'd never actually divorced. I thought, This has nothing to do with me. But what I said to him was, Yes, you did the right thing. I thought, To this day, I still haven't become a man. I need love, I need to be taken care of. I need someone to stay put so I can love them, that's the only thing that could bind me to this world. Was I really a hundred and seventy-five centimetres? More like a hundred and seventy-three. It was almost dawn. I went back to my computer and started editing my short story. Or, really, rewriting it. I imagined myself as Li Lu the child had seen me, standing by the bed of a ten-year-old, unable to communicate, able only to describe her own observations and feelings. Li Lu was offline, but I sent her the story anyway.

The next day, I slept till the afternoon, then had breakfast and went for a walk in a nearby park. My method of working out was to walk as fast as I could for an hour or so, then slow down and have a stroll. After half an hour, around two o'clock, Xiaoguo phoned and said, I couldn't find Li Lu. What do you mean? I said. Either she's been out of town for a few days, he said, or she was lying to you. The second possibility is more likely. If she were in Paris studying at the Sorbonne Nouvelle, I'd have found some trace of her. No one at the university has heard of her. Comp Lit has only had two Asian students in the last two years, one Japanese and one Vietnamese. The Japanese student graduated and returned home. I spoke to the Vietnamese guy for a while, and he was certain that there wasn't a Chinese woman named Li Lu in their department. Maybe I got the name of her school wrong, I said. Thanks for cleaning my ma's apartment, he said. I thought you'd just hire a cleaner. It's fine, I said, I needed the exercise. Your ma's always been so friendly to me, I wanted to do it myself. Did Li Lu ask you for money? he said. No, I said. Did you brag about how much money you have while you were chatting? he said. No, I said, I have no money to brag about. I just sent her a short story. I'm sure she's around my age and from S—. Are you sure she's a woman? he said. I feel like she's female, I said. Can't prove it, though. How old are you? he said. Thirty-five, I said. O.K., he said, I'll scour Paris for a thirty-five-year-old northeasterner, preferably from S—.

More soon. If Ms. Han wants me to come visit, I can pop by one afternoon, I said. No need, he said. I'll do everything I can to help you. These are unrelated, I said. I'm happy to hang out with Ms. Han or take her shopping. Why don't you ask her yourself? he said. I will, I said, as long as she doesn't find me annoying. I'll call when I have news, he said. Bye.

That weekend, I took Ms. Han to a vegetable market, and then we had dinner together. She seemed much less friendly than before, but after all I didn't really have any connection to her. Tell Xiaoguo I'm doing well, she said after the meal. She'd ordered a bottle of beer and had half of it; I finished the rest. Sometimes I wish he'd spend more time with me, she said. But what's the point of him staying by my side? A mother and her child only share a destiny up to a certain point, from when she gives birth to him to when he's ready to leave the nest, that ought to be enough. I should go back to the way I was before I had him, to when I was single. If only I could find my way back there, but I'm old now, I can't go back. Don't think I'm suffering. I have enough to eat and drink. I have friends—if I want someone to have a beer with, I only have to make a phone call and three people will come round. It just all seems meaningless. Being close to people, being separated from them, it's too much hassle—that's the worst thing at my age. Xiaoguo really misses you, I said. He's a good son, she said. It's just that we don't talk much on the phone—he doesn't know what to say and neither do I, so it ends up feeling awkward. I've always known he doesn't like Beijing or our home. The words that come out of his mouth just tell me what's on his mind, not what's in his heart. His actions speak volumes—look how far away he ran. I grew up here and I'll die here. I've accepted my fate. It takes a bit of intelligence to accept your fate, did you know that? I wanted to know what Xiaoguo was learning in France, so he sent me some pictures he'd taken of a Wenzhou couple's wedding, that rascal. Just call me if you need me, I said. My time is flexible. Let's not put pressure on each other, she said. Whatever you do, don't think of me as a friend. Cheers.

Zhou Cang came through with my visa: multiple entries into the E.U., expiring in a year's time. He also sent me a little parcel of three books. They're not banned, he said. I just need you to take them over. I figured that he'd hardly tell me if they contained drugs or anything like that, only an idiot would accept a package from a stranger. Meanwhile, Xiaoguo still hadn't tracked down Li Lu and suggested that I feel her out on MSN. He'd

checked every university in Paris, and there were no Chinese students by that name in any of them. That Saturday, I logged onto MSN and saw that Li Lu had left me a message: she had bronchopneumonia and needed to spend a week in the hospital. Nothing to worry about, but she was going to be offline for a while. There was something sloppy about this message—she didn't even mention the story I'd sent her—which felt quite different from her previous behavior. If you'd asked me to sum up her personality—I mean her online personality—I'd have said she was artless and open, yet there was something oddly glib about this last message. I lay in bed reading for a while. After two hours, I grabbed my phone and bought a plane ticket to Paris, leaving the following night.

First thing the next day, I phoned my boss and said that I was going on a trip. Where to? he asked. And how long? Paris, I said. Maybe a week. What are you doing in Paris? he said. Visiting a friend, I said. He thought for a moment. If you see anything interesting, write an article about it. Then I can cover part of your expenses. I'll see what I can find, I said. You can have a week off, he said. Take one day more than that and you can forget about coming back to my department.

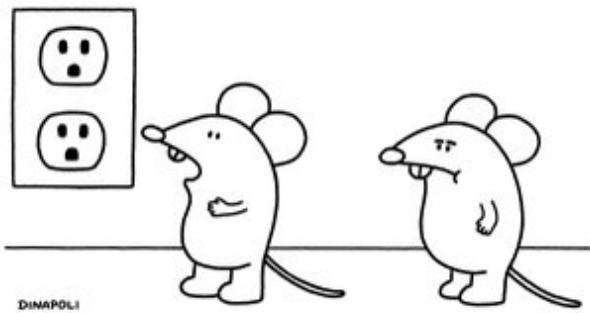
I pretty much passed out on the plane, though the cabin was chaotic. There were a lot of migrant workers on my flight, speaking all kinds of languages, stuffing plastic bags of foraged vegetables and cooked food onto the luggage rack. Some of the older folks kept getting up to walk around and chat with their friends. Even so, I was able to sleep, perhaps because I was so anxious, perhaps from the worry of not knowing what I was doing. My body was filled with exhaustion, which had possibly been accumulating ever since I'd gotten to know Li Lu online.

We landed at Charles de Gaulle around noon. I hadn't checked a bag, so I was one of the first passengers to leave the airport. A strapping man stood outside with a sign that said, in Chinese, "Mr. Li Mo." I went over to him and said, Xiaoguo? Yes, the large man said, as he took my luggage. And that's how I met Xiaoguo. Startlingly, he really did look a lot like Lord Guan. I couldn't have told you exactly how—Lord Guan is traditionally bearded and red-skinned, whereas Xiaoguo was clean-shaven and pale, and he lacked a horse between his legs. Still, something about him had an air of Lord Guan. Maybe it was the sheer dignity visible in his narrow eyes or the

faint arrogance he had every right to feel. He wore a black T-shirt, white trousers, and white sneakers, moved with loose-limbed ease, and had gel in his hair.

Did you get any sleep on the plane? he said. Plenty, I said. So you're full of energy, then? he said. Pretty much, I said. My butt and back ache a bit, though. O.K. then, he said, let's go play cards. I don't know how, I said. I want to put down my luggage and go to the Sorbonne Nouvelle. Listen to me, he said. The person you're looking for isn't at the Sorbonne Nouvelle. I have another lead, I'll take you there tomorrow. Walking fast alongside him, I said, What lead? Can't you tell me now? There's someone who might have seen her, he said. We'll go and talk to them tomorrow. Did you bring Zhou Cang's package? It's in that suitcase, I said. He immediately laid my carry-on on the ground and asked me to unlock it. Right now? I said. Yes, he said. I opened the suitcase, and he ripped open the package. Inside were twenty identical sets of playing cards, which he put in a plastic bag he'd brought. I only play with this kind of card, he said. The set I had was completely worn to pieces, so I asked Zhou Cang to send over twenty more. This isn't cheating—it's an art. How do you do it? I asked. By touch, he said. I can feel the aces as I'm shuffling, which gives me an advantage, though only when it's my turn to deal. I've been doing this since I was a kid.

The card game went on all night long. Apart from Xiaoguo, there were two Koreans, two Frenchmen, and a Moroccan, all of them young. They played Texas hold 'em with a five-euro small blind. The game took place in the back room of Le Cercle Rouge, an independent bookshop owned by one of the Frenchmen. I'd seen the film it was named after, something about French people's understanding of Buddhism. There were two clerks, both twentyish Parisians, a man and a woman. They seemed to know Xiaoguo well, though I couldn't understand a word of their conversation. Xiaoguo went into the back room around half past one, while I browsed the bookshelves. They didn't carry a single Chinese book.



*“Maureen says I need glasses, but I don’t know. What do you guys think?”*  
Cartoon by Johnny DiNapoli

Li Lu definitely existed—I believed this sincerely. I also firmly believed that she had met me before. The way that she had described seeing me in my hospital bed couldn’t simply have come out of thin air. Those detailed truths, the atmosphere of my childhood—no one who hadn’t been there could possibly have described them so accurately. She was somewhere in Paris. Maybe she hadn’t gotten into the university she’d mentioned, maybe she wasn’t a writer like she claimed to be, but she was here.

I’d felt this as soon as I stepped off the plane. This was the Paris she’d talked about, an ancient city of art, a place that championed *égalité* while hoarding power. Surprisingly, I hadn’t felt out of place or wary here, perhaps because of Xiaoguo’s ability to set people at ease, perhaps from the knowledge that this was where Li Lu lived and studied. Looking through the shelves of the bookstore, I felt that I could write every bit as well as these authors. I have no idea where this bizarre confidence sprang from. The female clerk was in charge of keeping the place tidy and engaging with customers, while the man dealt with accounts and occasionally patrolled the shop, looking for anything else that needed doing. The woman asked, in English, if I was Xiaoguo’s friend, and I said yes, though this was my first time meeting him. She told me that she’d seen one of his short films, an interesting piece about a wedding ceremony. Oh, I said, maybe it was truth? (I couldn’t think of the English word for documentary.) Maybe, she said. Anyway, it was fascinating. What are you here for? To find a friend, I said. A girl. I cannot contact her. Your girlfriend? she said. No, I said. Just friend, good friend. She nodded and said, You’ll find her. No one can stay hidden in Paris.

That night, I watched the card game for a while, then curled up in a chair and fell asleep. It was dawn when Xiaoguo woke me, and through the windows I could see old people walking dogs in the street. I followed Xiaoguo from the room as the other cardplayers left, too. How did it go? I asked. Normal, he said. I have a friend who's out of town, and you can stay at his place. I have a key. As long as it's no trouble, I said. I'll get an Uber, he said. A few minutes later, we were in a car. Do you need money? Xiaoguo asked. I'm O.K., I said. I got some euros before I left. I mean in general, he said. I can pay you monthly to go see my ma and keep her company. I hope you're not offended. What I mean is I'd like you to see her more often, but I don't want to trouble you. Do you know what I'm saying? She doesn't need my company, I said. I'm a burden to her. You shouldn't worry so much. I've met her a couple of times, and she may be a little unhappy, but that's normal. She's not a pathetic person. He nodded and said, You're right, she's always been like that. My friend's place is large, or at least it feels large because of the high ceiling. There's a short staircase leading up to the loft bed. You won't be sharing with anyone. He handed me a key and said, I'll come get you this afternoon. It'll take us about a half hour to get to this person who may have met Li Lu. We can all have dinner together. That gives you five or six hours to sleep. Is that enough? Yes, I said. Everything you need should be in the apartment, he said. Use whatever you want. You can drink the tap water here.

I slept for two hours and woke up with my heart thumping. I came down from the loft and opened the curtains to let some sunlight in. After pacing the apartment for a while, I felt a little better. Close to noon, a phone in the living room rang, startling me. They still had landlines here? I saw a black, wall-mounted phone. I hesitated a moment before picking it up, but there was no sound. Then I realized that it was purely decorative, and the ringing was actually coming from an alarm clock on the coffee table. Three o'clock came and went, but Xiaoguo never showed up. I kept calling him, but he wasn't answering. It didn't seem feasible for me to go search for Li Lu alone. I wasn't scared; I just had no idea where to start. Instead, I opened my laptop and reread our recent chats, even though I'd already pored over these repeatedly, trying to work out how she felt about me.

Something she'd said a month ago caught my eye: I'd asked where she went to write, and she'd said that the dorm was too noisy, so she usually went to

the university library or occasionally to a nearby Chinese restaurant. Why? I'd asked. It was a café by day and a restaurant by night, she'd said, but, because she was Chinese, they would make her a bowl of noodles at lunchtime. There probably weren't too many places like that. I grabbed my passport and wallet, and went out to hail a taxi. I told the driver, Restaurant night, coffee day, Chinese food. The driver shook his head. Non, I don't know. I searched for Le Cercle Rouge on my phone and showed him. You go to watch movie? he asked. No, I said, bookstore. He nodded. Google map, he said. It didn't take him long to drive me over. The owner and salesclerks were all there. Before I could speak, the owner came over and shouted something I didn't understand. Two Eastern European-looking men came out from the back room and stood behind me. I held up both hands and said, I want to find a woman. I need you help. A woman? the owner said. Yes, I said. A friend. I fly here to find her. Your wife? the owner said. No, I said. Old friend.

One of the Eastern Europeans, a Polish guy, had been to the restaurant before and offered to take me there. He drove a red Chevrolet, and the passenger seat smelled pungently of a woman's perfume. Why are you so angry? I asked. Nothing, he said. Do you love her, your old friend? I thought about it. Yes, I love her, I said. I never see her, but I love her. Not Internet love, true love, family love. He nodded. I see somebody every day, he said, but I don't love her. She no love me, too, but we see each other every day.

We arrived at the restaurant. He gestured for me to get out and drove off the second I shut the door. The restaurant wasn't too large, maybe a dozen tables, only a couple of them empty—business was brisk. The owner, an Asian woman, came over and said something in French. Do you speak Chinese? I asked. Sure, she said. I'm looking for a Chinese woman, I said. She often comes in here to write. Around my age, probably living nearby. Do you remember her? Are you a northerner? she asked. Yes, I said. You, too? Yes, she said. I moved here ten years ago. Is your name Li Mo? How did you know? I asked. The person you're looking for told me, she said. If someone named Li Mo came here, I was to give him this magazine. She started flipping through the little notebook she took down orders in. It's a well-known literature magazine, she said. Everyone in France who loves Chinese literature reads it. She translated your short story and published it

there. I don't know anything about all that. I'm just telling you what she said.

The owner went behind the counter and, after rummaging around for a while, handed me an exquisitely designed magazine in a clear plastic sleeve. I recognized the author featured on the cover: Maupassant. Flicking through the pages, I found my story through the illustration. It took up three pages, accompanied by an image of a very scrawny Chinese guy lying in bed. What's she like? I asked. How can I find her? Could you call her and tell her I'm here? No, she said. She came in for the final time a week ago and told me that she and her husband were leaving France. They move to a different country every few years. She asked me not to tell you anything about her; she values her privacy. Husband? I said. Yes, she said. Were you close? I said. We knew each other well, she said, but I wouldn't say we were good friends. Could I have a coffee? I said. Take a seat, she said. What kind of coffee? Anything, I said. I don't know much about coffee.

I sat there till evening. The owner came over and said, Would you like something to eat? Sure, I said. Noodles? she said. Great, I said. With tomatoes or greens? she said. Both, I said. I phoned Xiaoguo again, and this time he answered. Where were you? I said. I've just woken up, he said. You were asleep for fifteen hours? I said. I got stabbed, he said. I had a little surgery. I've just woken up from the anesthetic. Did you go looking for your friend? Who stabbed you? I asked. Are you still in danger? I almost died this afternoon, he said, but now I'm fine. As I lay dying, all I could think was that I hadn't helped you get this done. I'm not being melodramatic—it's just that my mind was so clear in those few seconds. I don't know why I didn't think about my ma, only you. She's left Paris, I said. I'm going back to China tomorrow. Which hospital are you in? Are you giving up? he said. Yes, I said. She's covered her tracks well. At least you didn't come here for nothing, he said. I'll text you the hospital address. Buy me a pack of cards on your way here. Any brand.

The noodles were made in the northeastern way: cook them in boiling water with a little chicken broth, and when they're almost done add tomatoes, greens, salt, chopped scallion, and cilantro. I had a bowlful and asked for a little more. I was drenched in sweat, completely recovered from my jet lag, light and at ease, as if someone had given me a shot in the arm. I could have

run five kilometres right then. The owner cleared my plate, and I went over to the counter to pay my bill. She taught me how to make noodles like that, the owner said. Who did? I said. The person you're looking for, she said. She was about my age, fifty-six or seven. I hadn't expected that, I said. She's suffered quite a lot, she said. She's only been able to enjoy life these last couple of years. What does she look like? I said. I can't describe her, she said. And there wouldn't be any point if I did. She just sat there writing. I often saw her weeping.

My tears were also flowing, and no wonder: I'd had these noodles as a kid, and I knew only one person on earth who made noodles that tasted like this. A group of Chinese tourists with several noisy infants entered, and the owner went to seat them. I walked out with the magazine and squatted by the side of the road until I'd calmed down. There was a supermarket across the street. In a moment, I would go in and buy a packet of tissues, a bottle of water, and a set of playing cards for Xiaoguo. Maybe he'd let me interview him for the newspaper. Maybe he'd teach me how to play his game. ♦

*(Translated, from the Chinese, by Jeremy Tiang.)*

*Shuang Xuetao* is a fiction author whose books include the story collection “[Hunter](#)” (2025).

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# The Art Dealer Who Wanted to Be Art

Asher Wertheimer was a Jewish tycoon who asked John Singer Sargent to paint him. The results are strange, slippery—and some of the artist's best work.

By [Jackson Arn](#)

November 21, 2024



*In works like “Asher Wertheimer” (1898), Sargent seems to capture both glamour and the strain of those trying to sustain it. Art works courtesy Tate / Presented by the widow and family of Asher Wertheimer in accordance with his wishes, 1922 / Photographs by Tate*

If you remember anything about this painting, may it be that the dog's name is Noble. The black poodle in the bottom left greets us as a silhouette with a few shiny parts: teeth, eye, damp nose, pink tongue. The teeth could crack bone; the tongue wants to be friends. Not a very dignified pose for a creature called Noble, but humans love to saddle animals with teasingly grand names—Rex, Princess, King, Queenie. It's one of our many little ways of being modest and boastful in the same breath, of displaying our possessions and hinting that we are, in both senses, *above it all*.

The man girthily looming over Noble is not a noble. You might be able to tell by his coat, which blends into the blackness as easily as his pet's fur. But his hands are the bigger giveaway—he's no manual laborer, yet you sense that he uses them all the time. They speak every language, know classical rhetoric and differential calculus, have interesting opinions about the Berlin Conference. One sinks a thumb in his pocket. The other pokes at us with a cigar. Wordlessly, both announce, "We know exactly what we're talking about." They belong to a man named Asher Wertheimer, and in the years leading up to this portrait's unveiling, in 1898, he became fantastically wealthy by dealing art. To celebrate his talent for persuading people to buy expensive objects, he has hired the famous John Singer Sargent and done what nobles do: converted himself into an expensive object.

What does Asher Wertheimer think about all this? He's too smart to miss the ironies of an art dealer made art, but whether they taste sweet or bitter he won't say. His red lips are freshly licked, and his eyes shoot out at us as vigorously as his cigar. People have stared at his stare and found warmth, or greed, or amusement, or wickedness, but there is a deliberateness to that expression, whatever it is. Some interpreted the painting as a Jewish caricature, and condemned or praised it accordingly, which did nothing to stop Asher from paying Sargent to give his family the same treatment. "What a tiresome thing," the artist wrote, "a perfectly clear symbol would be."

## What We're Reading

*Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.*



“Family Romance: John Singer Sargent and the Wertheimers” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), Jean Strouse’s new book about Asher, Asher’s portrait, and the eleven that followed, is neither the trough nor the crest of our current wave of Sargentolatry, which so far has seen major shows at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the National Gallery, the National Portrait Gallery, the Jewish Museum, the Gardner, and Tate Britain. Next year, the centennial of the artist’s death, the Met opens its second Sargent blockbuster in a decade; to these we can add things like “The Man in the Red Coat,” the 2019 study of the surgeon Samuel-Jean Pozzi that Julian Barnes was moved to write after laying eyes on Sargent’s portrait, and HBO’s “The Gilded Age,” starring precisely the kinds of socialites Sargent painted and, come Season 3, Sargent himself.

He has never really gone away. That’s the mixed blessing of painting everyone from Gilded Age to Progressive Era: Henry James, Robert Louis Stevenson, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Fort Knoxes’ worth of Morgans and Rockefellers and Vanderbilts. If you were fumbling for conversation with an heiress, it used to be said, you could always ask her, “And how do you like your Sargent drawing?” As modernism bloomed and the Gilded Age became a punch line, so, inevitably, did its premier portraitist. D. H. Lawrence thought that his stuff was “nothing but yards of satin.” Picasso made him look antique. Even at the end of the twentieth century, when modernist aesthetics had long since gone the way of whalebone corsets, Sargent’s cheerleaders mostly seemed to accept the premise that he was a docile ennobler of rich oafs, if a very talented one. “He had no interest in politics past or present,” Robert Hughes wrote, in 1999, “was completely without class resentment and seemed to be devoid of irony.”

“No interest” . . . “completely without” . . . “devoid of”—it’s easy to talk about the past in all-or-nothing formulations. When we laud an artist for

being “a shrewd observer of his times,” say, we usually mean that he stood apart from them and, if they’re as easily mocked as the Gilded Age, sneered. This is a roundabout way of putting the present’s ultimate compliment: that the artist is one of us. Even if that were possible, I don’t know why we’d prefer it. Aren’t the most interesting people the ones who can’t make up their minds about their world, who sometimes sneer and sometimes grovel? Each of Strouse’s previous books is about a person like this: J. P. Morgan, the pitiless financier, who said, “I owe the public nothing,” but donated entire museums of masterpieces anyway; Alice James, who saw the hollowness of marriage in her social circle yet believed that matrimony was “the only successful occupation that a woman can undertake.” Seeing through their age’s markers of value was no barrier to being seduced.



“Can we be done camping?”  
Cartoon by Tyson Cole

“Looking back on one hundred years of its own history in 1876, the United States did not yet have much aesthetic tradition or taste; it did have ardent cultural nationalism, and its cities were becoming vital centers for the arts.” This sentence, from “Morgan: American Financier,” would be equally at home in Strouse’s other books. Where some have found stuffiness in the decades leading up to the First World War, she sees flux, ambition, a sociopathic need for recognition—more precisely, she sees stuffiness as the truest sign of these things, revealing them by stubborn denial. Nothing was steady in those years. Not the American economy, which twitched from panic to triumph to panic and, in 1907, had to be bailed out with private funds from Morgan and his associates. Not the European aristocracy, which

surrendered much of its wealth to industrialization and estate taxes. At times, beautiful objects must have seemed the only constants: porcelain, pearl necklaces, Louis XIV furniture, Old Master oils. A well-trained artist could make himself useful on both sides of the Atlantic, confirming with his brush that a new-money banker suddenly had real status and that a penniless duchess still hung on to some.

Not that beautiful objects were steady, either. Strouse tells of how the Cartier mansion, in midtown Manhattan, was purchased, in 1917, with a pearl necklace valued at \$1.2 million. A few years later, when cultured pearls were becoming popular, the necklace had to be sold for a pathetic fraction of that sum. (Today, the Cartier mansion is worth well over a hundred million dollars.) The only stable currency was human insecurity, and those who trafficked in it did very well for themselves. It seems almost superfluous to add that the late nineteenth century saw the birth of our current, jumpy art market.

“Family Romance” swats away easy summary. Its barely two hundred and fifty pages are not a biography of Sargent, or a definitive history of the Gilded Age or its trappings, or a definitive account of anything. The inciting incident is Asher’s decision to leave Sargent’s portraits of his family to the British state (ten reside at Tate Britain), and most of the rest orbits the little we know of his life the way big, bright stars orbit a black hole.

He was born in London in 1843 and completed his formal schooling in Paris. His father, Samson Wertheimer, was born in Bavaria, at the time one of the few parts of Europe where Jewish business flourished, but he moved to England when he was a young man. While his children were still coming of age, Samson made his reputation selling chairs and cabinets to the Rothschilds. In 1874, the year he turned sixty, the Duke of Edinburgh commissioned him to decorate his mansion; had the gig come earlier, he might have sent Asher to Oxford instead.

The second-generation tycoon, classically, mimics the founder’s work ethic but adds polish. (Generation three is when things start getting sad.) At the age of twenty-seven, Asher made what they used to call “a brilliant marriage” to Flora Joseph, the daughter of another Jewish art-dealer dynasty, and when his father died, in the eighteen-nineties, he inherited the

contemporary equivalent of tens of millions of dollars. By this point, he was selling Old Masters to William K. Vanderbilt, in New York, and to the major national collections in Berlin. The market for beautiful objects had changed so much in a generation that it barely counted as the same job. Authenticity was hot, hot, hot: the Rothschilds who hired Samson had been satisfied with shiny new furniture in the style of the eighteenth century, but the robber barons adding to Asher's fortune wanted to pad their pedigrees with originals. For that they needed authenticators, and for those they had to rely on dealers who could convey a suave, chummy trustworthiness. Polish was half the job, minimum.

Not everyone liked that about it. Art dealing, Edmond de Goncourt wrote, in 1877, "is no longer, in the person of the seller, in a position of inferiority vis-à-vis the buyer, who on the contrary seems beholden to the seller." Another way of putting this is that the material rewards for bending the truth about old art could have made the Dalai Lama a con man. In the most acidly delightful chapters of "Family Romance," we're told how a whole generation of elegant weasels, from the art historian Bernard Berenson to the dealer Lockett Agnew, of Thomas Agnew & Sons, paid for their summer houses by suckering clueless patrons. Agnew's favorite trick was to acquire a painting attributed to the "school of" an Old Master, give it a clean, persuade some hired gun with a doctorate to recategorize it as an Old Master, and sell. Berenson charmed Isabella Stewart Gardner into spending thirty thousand pounds (something like six million dollars today) on a trio of Dutch oils she could have got for twenty-five. After the sale went through, Berenson pocketed the difference, plus a two-thousand-dollar bonus for his integrity. Later on, he accepted a contract with a firm that gave him "a financial incentive to 'upgrade' attributions." Whether he actually did, Strouse does not say and doesn't need to. If you're still inclined to trust him, or at least to pray that this kind of mischief no longer goes unpunished, I can think of a certain painting—bought for four figures, cleaned, promptly bumped from "school of Leonardo" to genuine article, and sold, in 2017, for half a billion dollars—that might be of interest.

Where was Asher in all this? It's not always easy to know, Strouse acknowledges, since his firm's records have been lost. By and large, though, her suspicion is that he was "playing by gentlemanly rules in a

newly cutthroat market.” It’s the same problem that every minority pioneer faces—how to conduct yourself in a society that already expects you to misbehave—with the further, infuriating twist that lying very nearly *was* the rule in Wertheimer’s industry. *Devious, new money, rootless, greedy:* what bothers us most about other people is, usually, what we hate most in ourselves. Reading Strouse, you get the impression that the antisemitic slurs that Wertheimer tried to avoid were secret self-portraits of a society that had resorted to inventing roots for itself, one bogus Old Master at a time. By the early twentieth century, Asher seems to have decided that the simplest way to insure continuity of business, besides acting honorably, was to remove his name from deals his firm secured. It worked, too well. Within a few decades, “Wertheimer” had disappeared from art dealing, and the firm along with it. Agnew’s is still going strong in 2024.

“Cosmopolitan,” another key antisemitic word of the era, was often applied to Sargent. He was born in Florence in 1856, grew up all over the continent, spoke English, French, Italian, and German, and seemed to be at ease anywhere, as long as there was a butler. Strouse doesn’t do too much huffing and puffing to acquit him of prejudice, which is merely to say that he was innocent in some ways and guilty in others. He painted a large number of Jewish sitters and took his lumps from Jew-haters for doing so. He took them from Jews, too, after he painted a mural of a feeble hag who represented their religion. In his thrilled insistence that the skin of his patron Sybil Sassoon was “positively green,” it is hard to hear much but garden-variety exoticizing.



“It’s sad—he used to be able to blow down a whole straw house.”

*Cartoon by Zachary Kanin*

We are about halfway through a big Sargent rethink, I hope. The yards of satin are still being excavated: the rediscovery of steamy nude portraits of the young Black model Thomas Eugene McKeller inspired “Boston’s Apollo,” at the Gardner, the most revelatory recent Sargent show and one of several determined to slay his reputation for squareness. The best comparison here is his friend Henry James, whose image as cold-blooded Master began to thaw with the rise of queer theory, in the eighties. We now open “The Portrait of a Lady” and chuckle at big, stiff Caspar Goodwood and Ralph Touchett, who ogles his cousin from behind and shows her his candlestick, and wonder how anybody ever missed the obvious. We still look at Sargent and miss away. He can be so *naughty*, flinging filthy jokes at an audience unsure if it’s allowed to laugh. His portrait of Pozzi, the playboy gynecologist who insisted on manually examining his patients, shows the “Love Doctor” (his actual nickname!) fingering the string of a scarlet dressing gown. “The flashiness,” Elaine Kilmurray wrote, in 2015, “is offset by the refinement of his finely drawn surgeon’s hands.” Until distinguished art historians catch up with puerile eighth-grade boys, I’m afraid, Sargent will stay square.

If pressed to sum up his paintings in a word, you could do worse than “instability.” Not an obvious, overpowering kind—something much subtler, like a little cut that refuses to heal. Often, the instability is spatial; no matter how many times I return to Sargent’s “Staircase in Capri,” there is always a split second in which I can’t tell whether we’re at the top staring down or the bottom staring up. In 1896, he completed a portrait of Adèle Meyer and her two children; in a cartoon version, published in *Punch* the following year, she’s about to slide off the couch and out of the picture entirely. Just a parody, of course, but, as with any good parody, it exaggerates what was already in the original, which does indeed get slantly stranger the longer you spend with it. Adèle clutches her son’s hand, while her daughter’s hand keeps *him* steady. All three, you begin to sense, hold on for dear life.

“Devoid of irony”? Only if you’re not looking for any to begin with. Sargent has plentiful similarities with Henry James, but the figure he most reminds me of is the seventeenth-century Dutch portrait-*meester* Frans Hals, whose work he studied up close on a trip to Holland in 1880. Hals,

too, painted the faces of a new secular élite that sought to flatter itself with the permanence of oil painting; Hals, too, caught the abundance as well as the wobbling precarity of his clients' world, the sense that all this could tumble down tomorrow. The big irony, for Hals and Sargent: expensive stuff is a splendid way of demonstrating that you matter but also that, in the long run, you don't. Surrounding yourself with luxury implies that you are rich enough to afford it, and even that you resemble it—posing with a blue porcelain vase, say, is supposed to mean that you're a beautiful, delicate heiress; sitting in an authentic eighteenth-century chair means that your family is old and respectable. And yet you are not your stuff, and the fancier it is the more likely it is to outlive you, remorselessly. It honors your achievements and mocks your mortality. The vases in Sargent, I am not the first art critic to observe, would make rather chic funeral urns.

Strouse has an astute eye for the era's swerves and twists—Gentiles aping their stereotypes for Jews, old money mocking new money, new money aping old money by mocking newer money—and she's at least as good at spotting pathos. Early in "Family Romance," we encounter a young, struggling Samson Wertheimer, who has been reduced to sending one of his patrons a delicately worded bill for twenty-seven pounds; a hundred and thirty-two pages and fifty-four years later, just as Asher is collecting a tab worth twenty-three million contemporary dollars, Strouse reminds us of the earlier incident, and there is a real sense of history unfolding, not just time passing. I read and shivered and tried, unsuccessfully, to think of other sub-three-hundred-page works of nonfiction that deserve to be called epic.

It's strange, though, how un-strange the art is made to seem. Strouse approvingly quotes Max Beerbohm's claim that Sargent was the "supreme interpreter" of a "restless, nervous age," and yet the man behind the paintings she describes—such wonky, uneasy things when you explore them for yourself—comes off as a mix of Hughes's irony-allergic virtuoso and Lawrence's soulless fogy. We are treated to one too many helpings of satin: when introducing, for example, "Ena and Betty, Daughters of Asher and Mrs. Wertheimer" (1901), the double portrait that gives her book its cover image, Strouse notes the "Chinese jar lustrous with gilt highlights" and tall, lovely Ena, who "radiates vitality, her chin raised, lips parted, color high," and, but of course, the "satin skirts," so vivid they're "practically

audible.” It’s not that these things aren’t there. They are, but each casts its own shadow. I get the vitality but also the desperate little strain of that chin trying to lift itself prettier. I get the satin rustle but also the glamorous self-torture of posing for hours, itching and sweating under your clothing. Ena’s left hand—always study the hands in Sargent—grips the top of that lustrous jar, and I feel the swagger of the gesture but also the hissed insinuation of frailty: she’s holding the fanciest cane money can buy.

Turn-of-the-century high society is a hard place to get comfortable in. Few Sargent sitters seem completely at home there, though not so distressed as to up and leave. Few seem at home in their own clothes, even. The jewels pull, the gowns prickle and squeeze. Everyone seems to be breaking in a brand-new costume. Their only way out, since they refuse to walk out, is to acknowledge the charade and no longer try quite so hard to impress. Which is why the most comfortable-seeming Sargent figures are those like the actress Ellen Terry, who is dressed in the literal costume of Lady Macbeth, or the two children in “Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose,” who are still young enough that any article of clothing is a kind of costume, or Ena Wertheimer in “A Vele Gonfie” (1904), whose billowing cloak Sargent told her to hold up with a broomstick, “simulating the volume and motion of her original entrance.” You can see the stick toward the lower right side of the painting, and Ena sees it, too, since this time her gaze points down and over instead of up and out. She has nothing she feels a need to hide, which isn’t the same as freedom but is in the vicinity.



*“Ena and Betty, Daughters of Asher and Mrs. Wertheimer” (1901).*

We could add Asher to this bunch. His coat and cigar and gold watch chain are, make no mistake, as much of a costume as anything Ellen Terry ever wore, and when I see the glint in his eyes I suspect that he knows it. As for whether he is going as “stereotypical avaricious Jew” or “completely uncontroversial modern businessman,” by this point in his career, surely, he has figured out that they are one and the same—the confusions of a society so muddled in its prejudices that it can barely decide if “cosmopolitan” is a compliment or an insult. The honest, by-the-book Asher Wertheimer whom Strouse has reconstructed, you will have noticed, is not much like the cunning Asher Wertheimer of the painting. He couldn’t afford to be, not in a milieu that distrusted him even when doing business with him. But, in a painting, cunning was safe enough. For all we know, it may have been his favorite part.

Self-awareness doesn’t last very long. You can acknowledge that you are in on the joke of your costume, and even preserve the moment in oil on

canvas, but after that you are free to fall in love with the costume all over again. You can understand, by the same token, how meaningless social respectability is—how flimsy its symbols, how bogus its rituals, how cheap its entrance fees—and still care, desperately, about being respectable. Sausage-makers do not always renounce the consumption of sausage. It does and it doesn't make sense, in other words, that Asher Wertheimer bequeathed his Sargents to Britain, with the expectation that they hang immortally in a museum, basking in attention.

Legacy can make even an ironical man do sentimental things. It seems to have done so with Wertheimer, and it may have had a similar effect on Sargent, who later renounced portraiture and poured his talents into Large, Important, Historical paintings and murals. The results, visible at the Imperial War Museum, in London, and the Boston Public Library, among other places, are large and historical, at least. As for important, "Gassed," completed in 1919, shows armed soldiers with bandaged eyes staggering over duckboards in the evening. The blind leading the blind, a cold little sun —what was it the man said about perfectly clear symbols?

Asher died in 1918 and left the equivalent of a hundred and forty million dollars in his will. His youngest child, Ruby, lived long enough to find out how little her society cared about them. For most of the nineteen-thirties, she lived in the luxurious Hotel Excelsior Gallia, in Milan, but by August, 1940, she had been sent to an internment camp. She died the following year, aged fifty-two, and left behind an impressive collection of dresses, hats, furs, and gold bracelets. How she held on to them nobody knows. ♦



*Jackson Arn*, a staff writer, is *The New Yorker's* art critic.

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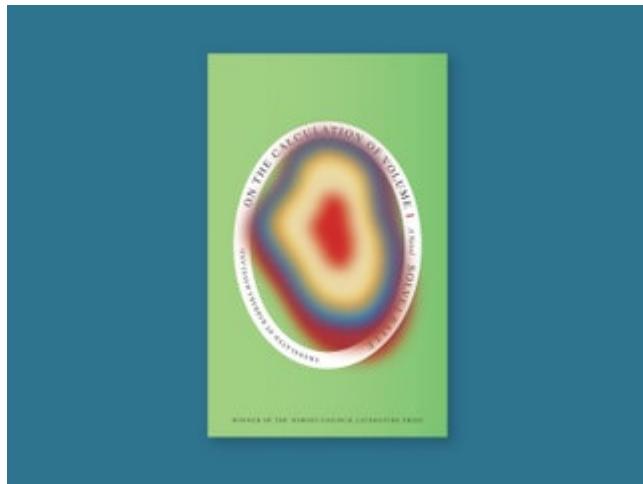
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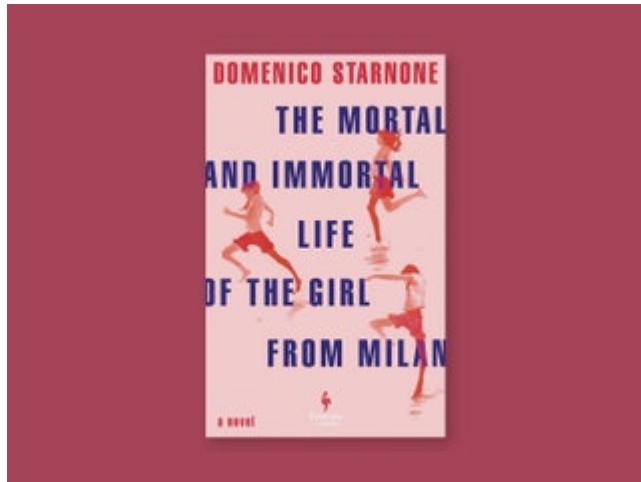
# Briefly Noted

“*On the Calculation of Volume (Book I)*,” “*The Mortal and Immortal Life of the Girl from Milan*,” “*Burdened*,” and “*Linguaphile*.”

November 25, 2024



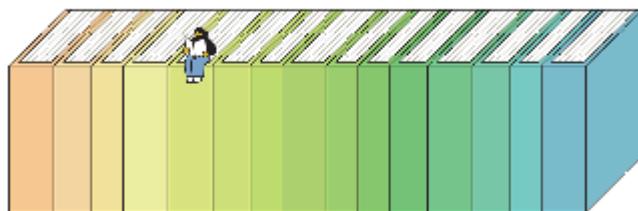
[\*\*On the Calculation of Volume \(Book I\)\*\*](#), by Solvej Balle, translated from the Danish by Barbara Haveland (New Directions). This philosophical novel consists of the diary entries of a woman for whom the days have ceased to pass. After a seemingly quotidian afternoon in Paris, the antiquarian bookseller Tara Selter wakes up in her hotel room the next morning only to find the same day happening again. As Tara relives the day—November 18th—she tinkers with variations, considers possible explanations, describes her plight to her husband, and writes. At once a meditation on climate change (because Tara’s calendar never turns, neither does the weather) and an experiment with fictional form, Balle’s novel is also a startling exploration of profound questions about language, human connection, and time.



**The Mortal and Immortal Life of the Girl from Milan**, by Domenico Starnone, translated from the Italian by Oonagh Stransky (Europa). The narrator of this wonderfully off-kilter novel, an elderly man, recalls his doting grandmother and his boyhood infatuation with a girl who danced on the balcony opposite his family's apartment, in Naples. Starnone's prose captures the feverishness and weird juxtapositions of a child's inner life. "Coherence doesn't belong to the world of children, it's an illness we contract later on, growing up," he writes, and indeed, as a boy, the narrator spent a season searching for a "pit of the dead" evoked by his *nonna*. Now he tries to cement his experiences in words: "The problem, if there is one, is that the pleasure of writing is fragile, it has a hard time making it up the slippery slope of real life."

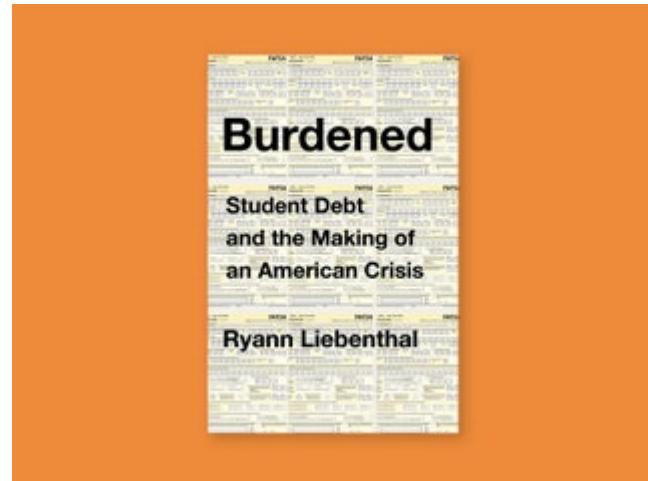
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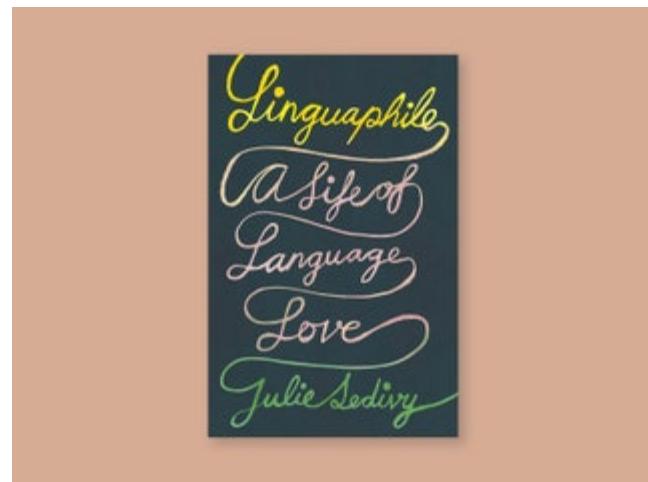


*Illustration by Rose Wong*

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**Burdened**, by *Ryann Liebenthal* (Dey Street). This granular history of education policy traces a century of decisions that caused American college education to become as expensive as it is today. The book's sometimes surprising list of villains includes the G.I. Bill and Joe Biden, who, as a senator, argued for bankruptcy legislation that would "reward corporate creditors" instead of debtors. Its heroes—to the extent that Liebenthal has patience for incremental progress—include Maxine Waters and Elizabeth Warren. The book lingers on how student debt came to be thought of as a matter of consumer protection rather than of basic rights, and dismissed as a problem for unserious young people rather than seen as a barrier to a flourishing society.



**Linguaphile**, by *Julie Sedivy* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). The author of this engaging memoir is a linguist who focusses on the relationship between

language and psychology. In explorations of language acquisition, ambiguity, and linguistic creativity, Sedivy transforms academic observations about language—a “daily miracle”—into broadly relevant insights. For instance, verbal fillers such as “um,” she explains, do not impede fluent communication but, rather, sharpen a listener’s alertness by signalling the complexity of the upcoming thought. She applies the conclusion to her encounters with sexism in the scientific community—where she might have benefitted, she suggests, from being clearer about the difficulties she faced.

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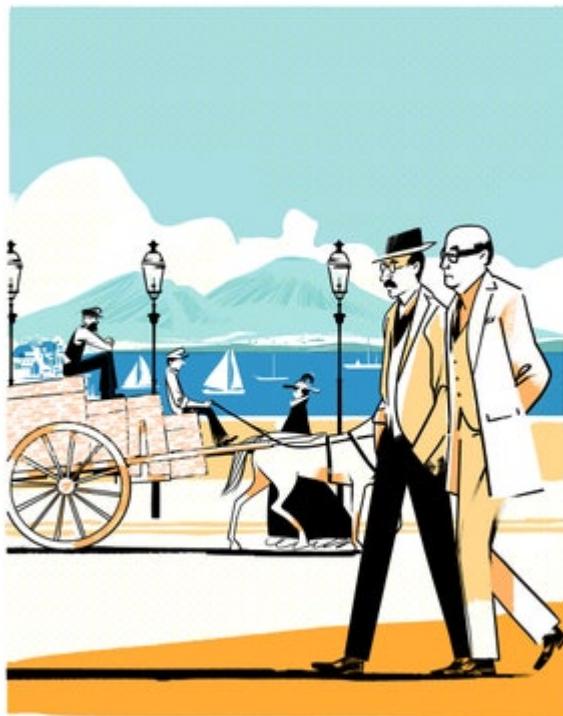
**[Books](#)**

# The Surprisingly Sunny Origins of the Frankfurt School

When a group of German Marxists arrived in Naples in the nineteen-twenties, they found a way of life that made them rethink modernity.

By [Thomas Meaney](#)

November 25, 2024



*For German intellectuals between the wars, Italy offered a different view of life. Illustration by Simone Massoni*

One of the more reliable chemical reactions in European culture occurs when particles of German mental matter enter Italy. Suddenly, German writers discover that life is worth living again, as they succumb to the view from the veranda. For going on three centuries, the Italian scene has

disarmed some of the most distinctive spirits from the north. Goethe, Heine, Johann Joachim Winckelmann, and Theodor Fontane were each its willing captive. Even Nietzsche, master exposer of escape fantasies, treated Italy as a life preserver. “How have I merely endured living until now!” he wrote. Beholding the sky over Naples, tears welled in his eyes; he felt like someone approaching death, yet “saved at the last moment.”

When, in the mid-nineteen-twenties, a group of German academics took a series of extended holidays in southern Italy, they knew they were following in a distinguished tradition. Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Siegfried Kracauer, Ernst Bloch, and other figures, many of whom would come to constitute the body of Continental thought known as the Frankfurt School, all felt stymied in the inflationary pressure cooker of the Weimar Republic. They were young, Jewish, and Marxist, and they wanted to take a work holiday in a better climate, to get away from family obligations, and to see how far their Reichsmarks could go. In particular, they were attracted to Naples and also to Capri, where, earlier in the century, Maxim Gorky and a faction of Bolsheviks had founded a Communist academy that briefly made the island a hub of revolutionary activity.

Martin Mittelmeier’s “[Naples 1925: Adorno, Benjamin, and the Summer That Made Critical Theory](#)” (Yale), translated by Shelley Frisch, is a kind of intellectual history by way of Vitamin D synthesis. He examines how this group of thinkers was changed by the Italian environment. Although they had projects planned (Mittelmeier gives a rundown of the vast personal libraries they lugged along), they could not anticipate how Italy would operate on them. Coming from Germany, one of the most advanced industrial countries in the world at the time, Adorno, Benjamin, and the others witnessed a society that stubbornly resisted modernization as they knew it—or, as they came to feel, that found its own way through. “The experience of the city of Naples became an essential checkpoint for the analysis of modernity,” Mittelmeier writes. His book claims that the landscapes and the peoples of Naples and Capri are the forgotten “source code” for some of the most influential diagnoses of modern life.

## **What We’re Reading**

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For Benjamin, the time on Capri was decisive. In a grocery shop on the island, he encountered the Latvian Bolshevik and theatre director Asja Lācis. She did not know the Italian word for “almonds,” which Benjamin handily supplied. He insisted on carrying her shopping home for her, which he dropped on the piazza. She knew she had attracted an intellectual, complete with “spectacles, which cast light forth like small headlights”; he knew he was in love. Lācis, as a disciple of Brecht’s radical political theatre in Munich, was dismayed to learn that her new admirer spent his days studying Baroque German tragic drama and was considering immigrating to Palestine. “I was speechless,” she recalled in her memoir years later. She instructed him, “The path of thinking, progressive persons in their right senses leads to Moscow, not to Palestine.”

Ultimately, it would be the attractions of Paris more than Moscow that kept Benjamin from Jerusalem, but the “liberation of vitality” he received from Lācis, as well as “the extremely powerful forces that emanated from her hands,” marked him for the rest of his life. She seemed unburdened by the petrified cultural heritage of Europe and came to represent for him the possibility of building a new culture out of next to nothing. In restaurants, Benjamin was thrilled by the savage way she would lick her knife or the plate. Lācis taught him that, no matter how progressive he might claim to be, his political commitment would continue to be regressive as long as his solidarity with the working people was simply a matter of conviction—or of social performance—and not grounded in his actual experience.

Together, Benjamin and Lācis toured Paestum and Pompeii, and co-authored the essay “Naples,” which appeared in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, in August, 1925. The piece inaugurated one of the most original series of urban portraits of the last century, with Benjamin later applying the techniques he developed in it—what he called a *Denkbild*, a thought-image—to his native Berlin, as well as to Weimar, San Gimignano, Moscow,

Marseilles, and, most sustainedly, to the Paris of his “Arcades Project.” “Benjamin’s Naples essay is extraordinary,” Adorno wrote to Kracauer, before going on to belittle Benjamin’s co-author: “And who is Asja Lācis? . . . A cabbalistic ibbur conjured up by Walter’s schizophrenia?”

Benjamin and Lācis’s “Naples” gives its readers a glimpse of a unified world of cross-relationships, in which discontinuous elements are somehow all implicated in one another and intermingled. In their telling, Naples, with its “rich barbarism,” blissfully flouted the bourgeois norms of northern Europe without knowing it. Streets were treated as living rooms and living rooms were treated as streets; festivals invaded every working day; the division between night and day was never neatly observed. To Benjamin and Lācis’s delight, Neapolitans had not received the news about the evacuation of the sacred from the modern world. In one of the article’s scenes, a Catholic priest accused of indecent offenses is described being led down a street while a crowd shouts insults at him. Suddenly, when a wedding procession passes by, the priest gives the sign of a blessing, and his pursuers fall to their knees.

As Mittelmeier notes, the “Naples” essay is best known for making “porosity”—the style of dialectically attuned analysis that resists resolution—a significant concept in critical theory. The city, built near Mt. Vesuvius, sits on a bedrock largely made of a substance known as tuff, a compacted form of volcanic ash which allowed Neapolitans to build without great strain into their natural environment. As Benjamin and Lācis write:

As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything they preserve the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations. The stamp of the definitive is avoided. No situation appears intended forever, no figure asserts its “thus and not otherwise.”

The concept of porosity might seem like a wispy metaphor for the kind of comprehensive operation that Benjamin and Lācis—as well as Adorno and their other companions—wanted to perform on European philosophy and art. Mittelmeier does not help matters with exaggerated claims on behalf of tuff, as when he writes, “A significant aspect of the great appeal of Benjamin’s writings—their antisystematic nature, the openness of their

compositional style, which allows for various interpretive possibilities—originated in the porous Neapolitan stone.” The idea of porosity was not only Benjamin and Lācis’s way of explaining how Naples did not accept modern capitalism’s strict distinctions between work and leisure, personal and communal, and public and private. In an important respect it was also what set their thinking at odds with the twin traditions that they, Adorno, and the others opposed. The first was the rigidities of fascism, which divided the world into the vital and the decadent, the essential and the discardable, the us and the them. The second was the rigidities of liberalism, with its emphasis on the individual at the expense of the network of relations in which that person was embedded. Fascism encouraged its followers to worship a concocted, false social whole; liberalism, they contended, encouraged its adherents to banish the idea of any social whole in favor of abstractions like “the economy,” as if they were entities existing independently of human life. Ernst Bloch, when asked what the opposite of porosity was, had a ready reply: “The bourgeoisie and its culture.”

The “Naples” essay set off a lively competition among Benjamin and Lācis’s circle for who could write the best essay about southern Italy. Bloch, one of the more mystical members of the group, produced an account of his time in Naples and its environs in which there are stirrings of his later concept of “simultaneous non-simultaneity,” the idea that people—including Neapolitans—could live in different temporalities in the same place, at the same time: seventeenth-century social life but with telephones. He, too, was impressed by the porousness of life in the south. Watching a group of Neapolitans arrive at a restaurant and effortlessly enter the conversations already under way, he said, was “a true lesson in porosity; there is nothing aggressive about it, rather all is friendly and open, a diffuse, collective, gliding.” (One cannot help thinking that the observation reveals more about Germany than about Italy.) Adorno, in his own writing about his time in Italy, was more sensitive to the kind of willful projections his countrymen were making onto the place, which was already overrun by tourism. There was a Capriote fisherman named Spadaro, who had been photographed so many times for postcards that, Adorno wrote, “he himself has been symbolically lit up . . . [and] made the sea and stars unnecessary.”



*“Baby-led weaning is a start, but my goal is baby-led revolution.”*  
Cartoon by Liana Finck

The most formidable follow-up essay produced by the group—the only one that rivals “Naples”—was written by a hanger-on among them, Alfred Sohn-Rethel, whom Mittelmeier brings sharply into focus. Sohn-Rethel was the most thoroughgoing Marxist of the bunch. The child of a storied family of painters, he had requested the complete edition of Karl Marx’s “[Das Kapital](#)” for Christmas while a teen-ager, and proceeded to spend two monastic years in a line-by-line study of the text. By the time he met Adorno and Benjamin, he had determined to devote his life to, as he put it, placing Marx on a firmer foundation in the twentieth century.

In Naples, Sohn-Rethel discovered, to his astonishment, a kind of Technicolor supplement to “Das Kapital.” The very nineteenth-century manufactories that Marx described—with a different worker manually forging, shaping, and finishing metal in a long line to produce a product for sale—were still in operation on the streets of Naples. Workers were heavily exploited, as they were elsewhere, but Sohn-Rethel also detected a remarkable aversion to commodification and alienation in everyday Neapolitan life. In one neighborhood, for instance, people distrusted milk in

bottles, and wanted the cow to be milked in front of them. In his essay “The Ideal of the Broken-Down,” he describes how Neapolitans mocked light bulbs for working too hard.

The point for Sohn-Rethel was not to indulge in northern stereotypes about the indolent, easygoing life in the south, but something far stranger. He was fascinated by how Neapolitans refused to be overwhelmed and remade by industrial commodities that flooded their city. He gave the example of a motorized wheel he saw, which, “liberated from the constraints of some smashed-up motorbike, and revolving around a slightly eccentric axis, whips the cream in a *latteria*.” It was the kind of practice that the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss would, in another context, popularize decades later as “bricolage.” The Neapolitans fixed up their cars without manuals, jerry-rigging them to go the next mile, substituting in a piece of wood where it suited, and generally shunning “technical presumptuousness.” “The violence of incorporation has to be acted out every hour in a victorious crash,” Sohn-Rethel writes. Because, after all, “one never really owns something until it has really been knocked around, otherwise it is just not worth it; it has to be used and abused, run down until there’s practically nothing left of it.” The career of a commodity in Naples rarely went according to plan. According to Sohn-Rethel, “Mechanisms cannot, in this city, function as civilization’s continuum, the role for which they are predestined: Naples turns everything on its head.”

It is tempting to sense a touch of Romanticism in Sohn-Rethel’s essay; the same goes for Benjamin and Lācis’s view of cheerful Neapolitan poverty. But what most retains its force in Sohn-Rethel’s writing of the time is his assault on functionalism; namely, the idea in sociology that form follows function, and that the evolution of the market in modern societies is driven by the need to produce ever more sophisticated solutions for our increasingly complex needs. For Sohn-Rethel, progress was not merely a technical problem of satisfying desires; the struggle between opposed interests in society was unavoidable. A cohort of thinkers currently responsible for a small reconsideration of Sohn-Rethel’s Italian essays are writers about digital technology, such as Evgeny Morozov, who experienced firsthand what came to be memorialized as the quasi-Naples of the pre-monopolized Internet, and then witnessed its transformation into a

blasted heath of wealth extraction, where the profit motive reaches down into the last private zones of individual life.

From a late-in-life interview that Sohn-Rethel gave to a radio station in Bremen in 1977, his long discussions with his philosophical elders sound as if they were an interminable seminar on Hegel. Mittelmeier points to the one unmistakable subject on which Adorno, Benjamin, and Sohn-Rethel all converged. Each of them wanted to reckon with how deftly capitalism concealed its dark side. A buyer could purchase an industrial good without thinking of the late-night labor, the unattended children, the workplace injuries involved in producing it. For Sohn-Rethel, the exchange of goods, along with the advent of coinage, was itself the origin of all abstract human thought—a deeply radical claim that continues to kindle the interest of some contemporary Marxists.

Adorno, for his part, was more interested in the ways in which the brute facts of commodity exchange were bolstered by myths that naturalized the capitalist world order, making any challenge to it seem as pointless as challenging the laws of motion. “Existence in late capitalism is a permanent rite of initiation,” Adorno later wrote. “Everyone must show that they identify wholeheartedly with the power which beats them.” Benjamin, too, believed capitalism was “a purely cultic religion, perhaps the most extreme that ever existed.” But the tack he took toward it differed from Adorno’s. In the talismanic quality of certain commodities, Benjamin spied the buried dreamworld of the bourgeoisie—symptoms of utopianism in denial—which, despite its conscious avowals to the contrary, could not do without longing for a new collective life, and whose energies, if somehow awakened by the proletariat, could still bring that life into existence.

Adorno and Benjamin were, however, far from political revolutionaries. They were what became known as Western—as opposed to Eastern—Marxists. For their generation, the failure of the military gambits of the German Communists after the First World War had spelled out the idea that revolution in Western Europe was not an immediate, or even near, prospect. In the East, Lenin and Trotsky had established the Soviet Union, and the Chinese Communists were not far behind, but in the West the forces of the left had been checked in their ambitions. What was the job of the Western

Marxist, then, if revolution was off the table? The answer for both Adorno and Benjamin was making connections, writing in such a way that showed their contemporaries, in ever new constellations, that the social whole might no longer be visible, that it might be denied, that it might not even be conceivable, but that it could still be a subject of thought. “Thinking dialectically means nothing more or less than the writing of dialectical sentences,” the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson once wrote. It was this kind of relentless critical project that Adorno called “negative dialectics”—to keep the idea of the social whole alive while dispelling the pretensions of any actually existing systems.

Mittelmeier’s “Naples 1925” is part of a wave of historical writing that has lately swept over the German reading public. In books such as Volker Weidermann’s [Ostend: Stefan Zweig, Joseph Roth, and the Summer Before the Dark](#), Florian Illies’s [1913: The Year Before the Storm](#), and Philipp Felsch’s [The Summer of Theory: History of a Rebellion, 1960-1990](#), European thinkers are gathered into group biographies that leisurely unspool their thoughts while supplying piquant details from their personal lives. It is always summer in these books, which seem aimed at German feuilleton readers who like to have a little Kant or Adorno with their morning coffee. Mittelmeier doesn’t make up interior dialogues for his subjects—his impulse toward the beach-read-ification of the Frankfurt School doesn’t extend that far—but in his bald claims about how the Italian landscape infiltrated the thought of Adorno and Benjamin he privileges poetic license at the expense of trying to grasp how the mind might actually digest physical experience. It may be diverting to consider how the lack of hierarchies in the streets of Naples influenced Adorno’s thorny syntax, but “Naples 1925” makes Adorno and his companions into much more comforting figures than they need to be.

Still, that their time in the south marked them is undeniable. Adorno would go on to be the postwar conscience of Germany, where, more than twenty years later, he helped reestablish the Institute for Social Research, which became the headquarters of critical theory. Many of the insights of his later years—into philosophy, music, and art—were sharpened by encounters in his Italian journeys. Sohn-Rethel spent the nineteen-thirties working as a Communist spy in a German business association that allowed him a

stunning view into how the Nazi war economy coördinated its conflicting industrial sectors. In 1937, in England, where he'd had to take refuge, he was commissioned to supply economic information about Nazi Germany to the clique around Winston Churchill. Sohn-Rethel's thinking briefly came back into fashion in the sixties, when it was revived by the same left-wing students at Frankfurt who maligned his former mentor Adorno as an insufficient supporter of the protests of 1968.

Asja Lācis maintained an on-again, off-again affair with Benjamin. After their first summer together, she was shocked one day to find him standing at her door in Riga unannounced. Lācis spent a decade in Stalin's Gulag before returning to Latvia to resume her work in theatre. She died in obscurity in 1979, and Adorno, the first editor of Benjamin's works, took her name off the essay that they had written together. Yet, of all Benjamin's companions at the time, she may have been the most transformative, and Benjamin, of all the young German academics clustered in Italy in the mid-twenties, was the most deeply influenced by his time there. He returned to images and memories he had forged in Naples right up until 1940, when, in flight from the Nazis, he died, presumably by suicide. The "prodigious beauty" of Capri and the "unprecedented splendor" of its cliffside villas and cerulean sea filled his correspondence. Even before he reached the island, he had decided it was his "most vital" journey, and after returning from the trip he noted with satisfaction that "people in Berlin are agreed that there is a conspicuous change in me." ♦

*Thomas Meaney* is the editor of *Granta*.

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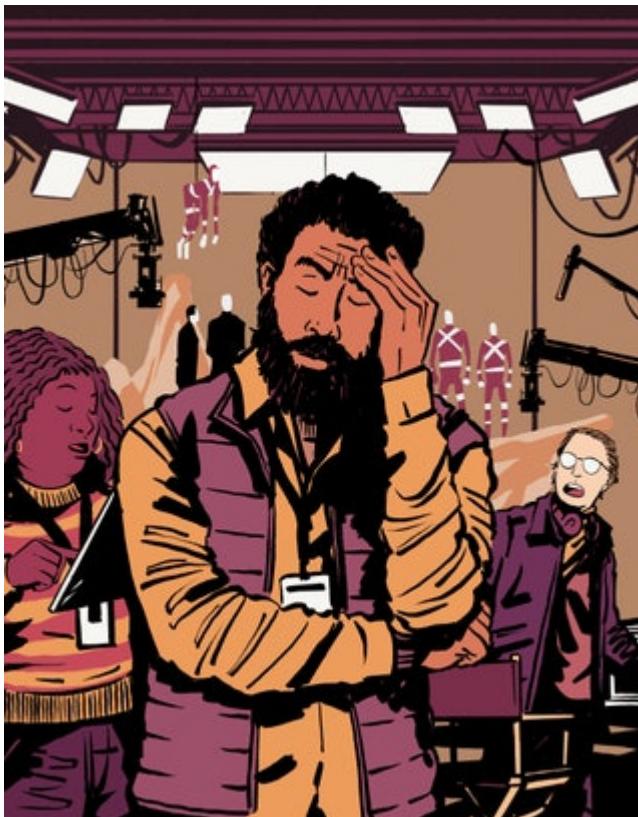
[On Television](#)

# “The Franchise” Gives Hollywood the “Veep” Treatment

Satirizing the superhero-blockbuster business, HBO’s new comedy finds mostly easy targets, but eventually something more.

By [Inkoo Kang](#)

November 22, 2024



*Himesh Patel stars as a harried assistant director in a comedy series created by the “Veep” alumnus Jon Brown. Illustration by Gustavo Magalhaes*

It’s fitting that the title of the new HBO comedy “The Franchise” makes no direct reference to the superhero movie around which it revolves. That would be “Tecto: Eye of the Storm,” a hundred-and-fifty-million-dollar work in progress that has already been deemed an also-ran by its Marvel-

like studio. The executives view it as a money grab—an opportunity to dangle before fans a three-minute cameo by a character from one of the studio's more popular tentpoles in the hope that they bite. Accordingly, no one actually working on "Tecto" is thrilled about being there, regarding it, instead, as a means to an end. The film's lead actor, Adam (Billy Magnussen), is betting that it'll be the vehicle that catapults him onto the A-list. The producer, Anita (Aya Cash), wants its success to open doors for her to make "actual movies," with the likes of Sofia Coppola. The very German director, Eric (Daniel Brühl), nurses fantasies that the film, which is set on a distant planet populated by fish-human hybrids, will offer meaningful commentary on fracking, or feminism—he hasn't really decided, but perhaps he'll have done so by the time he figures out the ending, a feat he attempts, sporadically, between takes. Most of the people ostensibly in charge are just there to pay their dues, meaning that no one sees it as his or her responsibility to insure that "Tecto" is any good.

If "The Franchise" 's premise of small-time machinations on the fringe of the big time makes it sound like a Hollywood version of "Veep," that may be by design. The show's creator is Jon Brown, a former "Veep" producer, and it counts among its executive producers Armando Iannucci, the creator of the earlier series. The two shows share plots of frenzy amid insignificance, and both abound with florid insults, rapid-fire banter, and acid appraisals. (One of Adam's co-stars bristles at having been given little to do in front of the camera that day except "silently nodding, like a wife at a party.") Above all, the two comedies are united in a bone-deep cynicism that can be unexpectedly invigorating; "Veep" seldom saw anything worthwhile in politics, and "The Franchise" doesn't bother asking what kinds of pleasures comic-book tales might provide, which itches they may scratch. Across eight episodes, the début season doesn't furnish enough details about "Tecto" to add up to a logline. It doesn't care. It's a series for the haters.

Is its appeal too narrow? That's a question I kept returning to as I watched the first few episodes, which sometimes felt as if they were primarily meant to elicit grim chuckles of recognition within the industry itself. (I thought it strained credulity that Eric would have begun rolling the cameras on such a costly production without finalizing the script, but friends in the business,

instant fans of the show, have told me that this wasn't unrealistic at all.) The subplots feature a litany of labor issues, some ripped from the headlines: overworked VFX artists, car accidents after long days on set, skin inflammation from costumes attached with toxic adhesives. An episode in which Anita has to "woman the woman problem"—that is, clean up the mess that her male predecessors made in sidelining female characters so often that the studio became notorious for it—tackles a quandary that's less overt but more pernicious.

The show ingratiates itself with viewers by displaying undiluted contempt for how Marvel and DC have diminished the movies, but, at this phase in the franchise-fatigue cycle, satirizing superhero clichés feels like shooting fish-people in a barrel with Homelander's laser eyes. The targets are accurate but well worn: the male stars are pressured to look inhumanly chiselled, the fandom's over-the-top misogyny would be funny if it weren't so scary, and, for all their narrative convolutions, these films mostly exist to get to the B.F.O.G.T.—the Big Fight Over Glowy Thing. The territory is so familiar that "The Franchise" initially feels like part of the same Hollywood ouroboros it's mocking: a phenomenon gets big, copycats rush in and flood the zone until diminishing returns set in, a lazy parody takes aim at the laziness of the phenomenon's tropes. You might agree with the show's points, but it's not much fun having your disdain spat back at you.

One reason "The Franchise" gets off to a slightly disappointing start is that it takes a while before the characters get fleshed out into something beyond archetypes. Anita's liaison to the studio, Pat (Darren Goldstein), is a proud philistine who mistakes Ingmar Bergman for an unknown superhero named Berg Man. The actors are stupid and vain or stupid and greedy. Adam takes experimental steroids prescribed by a doctor peddling his own cryptocurrency, and the actor who plays his onscreen nemesis, Peter (Richard E. Grant), uses his time off to film commercials for the Libyan tourism board. (In a running joke, neither star is able to describe the plot of the movie.) The thankless task of corralling all these personalities falls on the first assistant director, Daniel (Himesh Patel), who's too busy trying to keep the production on schedule to let himself care about the story they're telling. When the film's new third assistant director, Dag (Lolly Adefope), notes that Adam looks asinine miming the invisible jackhammer wielded by

his character, Daniel quickly shuts her down. “We don’t have an opinion, O.K.?” he insists. “We just keep the trains running. Who cares what’s on them?”

Of course, he has to care, eventually. Usually, when stamping out the various fires that flare up on set, his preferred method is just to lie, but he gradually lets slip the fact that he’s probably the only person on the project who feels an attachment to Tecto lore. It’s with this belated blossoming, about halfway through the season, that “The Franchise” reveals its real aspirations: to be not a series of easy jabs at superhero silliness but a tragicomic portrayal of a workplace overrun by fear and paralysis, in which initiative is discouraged and compliance enforced. “The Franchise” never stops lampooning the superhero stuff, but as the characters evolve their world starts to feel less insular. “The Office” was about an environment that demanded teeth-grinding patience; one had to grin and bear it while the boss made an ass of himself and forced everyone to watch. Here, the power hierarchy is much more unyielding. Anita gets her orders via Pat from an offscreen studio exec who won’t take her calls anymore; if she doesn’t obey, she risks never working again. The same exec unilaterally decides that the fish-people are to be killed off in the film that precedes “Tecto” in the franchise, leaving Eric scrambling, as the finned folk were to carry much of the “thematic luggage” in his script. From Pat on down, the cast and crew are made to feel as if they have little to no control; they’ll also be punished for screwing up.

One of Iannucci’s signature moves is to explore how far people are willing to go along with something they know to be absurd, until they end up in some pretty dark depths. In certain ways, “The Franchise” is no exception. But it’s not unremittingly pessimistic, either, granting Daniel the possibility of real input in a genre notorious for stifling idiosyncrasy and authorship. Other characters develop alongside him—in particular, Adam, whose softness shines through his insecurities, and Dag, whose incessant, often delusional cheerfulness finally clinches her a true win. Even the unseen studio bigwig has some of his godlike impregnability chipped away. Hearing that Martin Scorsese has said franchise movies “killed cinema” (a fictional exaggeration of views that Scorsese has expressed in real life), the

exec is stricken with guilt. Pat concedes, “We ran the data, and we think he might be right.” ♦



*Inkoo Kang*, a staff writer, has been a television critic for *The New Yorker* since 2022.

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[The Theatre](#)

# Faustian Bargains in “Death Becomes Her” and “Burnout Paradise”

The audience gets what it paid for in both the musical adaptation of the 1992 film, with Megan Hilty and Jennifer Simard, and a new show about the treadmill of life.

By [Helen Shaw](#)

November 22, 2024



*Megan Hilty and Jennifer Simard are comic divas of the first order. Illustration by Eero Lampinen*

In a Faustian bargain, there’s little suspense about how things will end. The Devil doesn’t hand anything over—beauty, knowledge, power—withou

first laying down some heavy hints. And so it goes as the lights dim for the musical “Death Becomes Her,” by the songwriters Julia Mattison and Noel Carey and the book writer Marco Pennette, at the Lunt-Fontanne. As thunder rumbles and lightning flickers, Isabella Rossellini’s disembodied voice, insinuating and delicious, purrs a warning: “Silence your cell phones.”

The camp-o-meter is already overloading, and the show, directed by Christopher Gattelli, hasn’t even begun. (Soon to come: a quick change for an actress into a Judy Garland-as-Dorothy costume, complete with a stuffed Toto tossed up into her arms from the orchestra pit.) Rossellini is not physically in this show—she played the Mephistopheles figure in the Robert Zemeckis film, from 1992, on which the musical is based—but her vocal cameo reverberates. As with so many of these adaptations of movies, the makers want to summon our nostalgia for the source, without necessarily jogging our memory of its flaws.

The narrative bones of the Zemeckis film, which starred Meryl Streep and Goldie Hawn as homicidal frenemies, remain intact. The self-obsessed actress Madeline Ashton (Megan Hilty, escaping Streep’s ice-queen shadow by running hot) greets her old chum and rival, the drab wannabe writer Helen Sharp (Jennifer Simard), backstage after a Broadway show. Madeline instantly hankers after Helen’s fiancé, the plastic surgeon Ernest Menville (Christopher Sieber), and, when Ernest allows himself to be stolen away, Helen snaps.

She reappears years later, in Los Angeles, after a (magically) extreme makeover, and the two women do battle. Michelle Williams, from *Destiny’s Child*, plays Rossellini’s part, the witchy purveyor of an elixir of eternal youth, which she sells to both Madeline and Helen. Freshly gorgeous and now unkillable, the two women inflict “Looney Tunes”-level damage on each other, and Ernest finds himself forced into service as a kind of pit-stop mechanic, spackling gunshot holes and spray-painting dead flesh.

The musical retains touches of the film’s dialogue, which was written by Martin Donovan and David Koepp: certainly no one would dare cut the deathless gibe “En garde, bitch,” first snarled by Hawn as she and Streep brandished shovels at each other. A zillion other jokes—many of them

packed into Mattison and Carey's deft, sometimes filthy or fourth-wall-breaking lyrics—are new, though, each one given thrilling life by Hilty and Simard. “Love her like a twin—who stole my nutrients in the womb,” Helen murmurs to Ernest, explaining her “friendship” with Madeline. For her part, Madeline is unapologetically self-serving. “Let’s look at me!” she trills at every opportunity.

Both actresses are Tony-nominated comic divas of the first order. Hilty, a superb, silvery soprano, is basically playing Madeline as Miss Piggy in Mae West mode, abetted by the costume designer Paul Tazewell, who briefly puts her in a leopard-print peignoir-and-pant outfit just so she can match her leopard-print couch. (Derek McLane designed the set, which recalls a Gothic pop-up book, often lit, by Justin Townsend, in deep electric purples.) Meanwhile, Simard’s paranormal upgrade turns her into Rita Hayworth in “Gilda,” if Gilda had occasionally played her own breasts, bongo style, for emphasis. A veteran of “Forbidden Broadway,” and one of our finest physical comedians, Simard has developed a stunning Bernadette Peters impression, and we hear a brassy whisper of that in her no-holds-barred performance, which also includes deadpan shadings of Madeline Kahn and —especially when Simard does a weird little broken-robot toddle—Kate McKinnon.

Gattelli’s production makes a pact with us early on. It will use body doubles for special effects—from tricks played in Madeline’s first big dance number, we know that if she turns her back we should assume we’re watching a doppelgänger—and we will choose not to notice. By the time the cartoonish violence begins, we’re delighted for the stage “magic” to be as obvious as possible. In Zemeckis’s C.G.I.-larded movie, a gruesome fall down a marble staircase required various cinematic interventions. Here, good old stagecraft suffices: Madeline enters from offstage, curiously unwilling to move her hair out of her face, and then “Madeline” somersaults *tumble-bumble-CRACK* down the stairs in slow motion. This is part of the fun—we look at a patently fake surface and collectively agree it’s the real thing.

Speaking of that ability, it’s not “Death Becomes Her” ’s fault that you cannot swing a mascara wand on Broadway right now without hitting a

woman who hates her face. “Tammy Faye” is crying makeup all over the Palace; Norma Desmond, in the new version of “Sunset Blvd.,” is weeping blood. In movie theatres, the body-horror film “The Substance” imagines that Demi Moore would rather rip off her skin than see it in closeup. Clearly, “icon” status for women of a certain age requires them to turn gorgon, at which point the audience can scream both for and at them. Crepey skin—so monstrous! Smoothed skin—so uncanny! It’s humiliation disguised as elevation, the all too common Faustian deal that’s made when a woman over forty lands a good part.

Still, “Death Becomes Her” fights hard to keep its bitter humor sweet. The musical takes several important strides away from the original: it cuts the fat jokes, and it recalculates the central relationship. (Also, because neither woman actually changes much on taking the potion, the secret to supernatural glamour here seems to be avoiding a bob haircut.) Most important, instead of binding Madeline and Helen together as a kind of hellish punishment, this team reimagines them as, eventually, discovering that they are soul mates. “You’re my person,” Madeline sings, finally, as Ernest falls by the wayside. “Oh no,” Helen protests, but you can tell she’s going to come on board. I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Simard has recorded her own podcast about “The Golden Girls,” that canonical text on aging in America. Simard’s shoulders square into a familiar Bea Arthur line, as Hilty flutters at her à la Rue McClanahan. We would spend another hundred hours with these gals if given the chance, so why would they blink at eternity?

“Burnout Paradise,” at Brooklyn’s St. Ann’s Warehouse, also strikes a bargain with its audience, but it’s rather more explicitly laid out. Four actors in the Australian experimental collective Pony Cam introduce themselves and their treadmills, each labelled with an aspect of life that they struggle to keep in balance: Survival, Admin, Performance, and Leisure. In rotating ten-minute bursts on the machines, the actors—Claire Bird, William Strom, Dominic Weintraub, and Hugo Williams—attempt four ambitious tasks (on the Survival treadmill, preparing a three-course meal; on Admin, completing and submitting a grant application) while jogging. If they can’t hit their goals and surpass their collective personal-best mileage, the time-keeper, Ava Campbell, promises our money back.

I watched most of this goofy show applauding, quietly and delightedly. No one could hear me, because the room was in utter mayhem. The actors require the audience's constant assistance: when, racing along on Leisure, Williams needed someone to wash his hair, a guy hopped up to help; other theatregoers were dashing forward to offer Weintraub their C.V.s to beef up the grant application. I hate to overclaim for a show that's seemingly just a very silly, very escapist hour with a bunch of clowns. But lately I have been feeling a little burned out, too. I found it hugely useful to be reminded of two things. First, whether it's ten minutes or four years, time passes more quickly when you're counting it down together. And, second, if a group of strangers can rally for a bit of collective action, they have a chance at beating the clock—not to mention the Devil. ♦



*Helen Shaw, The New Yorker's theatre critic, joined the magazine in 2022.*

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[The Current Cinema](#)

# “Wicked” and “Gladiator II” Offer Nostalgic, Half-Satisfying Showdowns

*With a musical return to Oz and a bloody epic of ancient Rome, Hollywood studios double down on blockbuster spectacle.*

By [Justin Chang](#)

November 20, 2024



*Jon M. Chu directs the first installment of a two-part adaptation of the Broadway musical. Illustration by Anna Degnbol*

One of the movie industry’s many recent laments is that 2024 has given us no [Barbenheimer](#)—no box-office showdown between two thrillingly brainy blockbusters, cemented together in the cultural imagination and in the commercial stratosphere. And yet, just in time for Thanksgiving, here come two wishfully galumphing epics, “Wicked” and “Gladiator II.” One is a revisionist fantasy of Oz, the other a revisionist history of Rome, and both are chockablock with political conspiracies, authoritarian abuses, and foul-tempered monkeys, none of which adds up to a full-blown phenomenon. If “Barbie” and “Oppenheimer” struck blows for risk and originality in Hollywood, the slickly refurbished wares of “Wadiator”—or, if you prefer, “Glicked”—suggest a safe retreat to known quantities. Choose your own

adventure, but, whether it leads to the Colosseum or to the Emerald City, you've surely been there before.

In “Wicked”—or, as it appears onscreen, “Wicked: Part I”—that familiarity is entirely the point. The movie, directed by Jon M. Chu with some of the whirligig showmanship he brought to “[In the Heights](#)” (2021) and “[Crazy Rich Asians](#)” (2018), kicks off a two-part adaptation of a hit Broadway musical, which was itself loosely based on Gregory Maguire’s 1995 novel, “[Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West](#).” All yellow brick roads lead back to L. Frank Baum’s “[The Wonderful Wizard of Oz](#),” though the classic 1939 film adaptation exerts the mightiest influence, having immortalized the Wicked Witch as a green-skinned, broomstick-riding cackler—played by Margaret Hamilton, in one of the most primally terrifying movie-villain performances.

Evil this delectable can no longer be simply savored; it must be deconstructed, and lucratively prequelized, in the manner of sympathetic villain origin stories like “Maleficent,” “Joker,” and “Cruella.” It makes sense that “Wicked,” a forerunner of this trend on the page and the stage, has now found its place on the screen, where the story can shoulder its full weight in cinematic Baumbast. And so the real Wicked Witch steps out from behind the curtain—and, lo, she is Elphaba Thropp ([Cynthia Erivo](#)), an intellectually gifted, morally courageous, and grievously misunderstood outcast, whose only crime is having been born with a complexion of chlorophyll.

Much of “Part I,” scripted by Winnie Holzman (who wrote the book for the musical) and Dana Fox, unfolds at the ill-named Shiz University—Hogwarts with Munchkins—where Elphaba arrives as a caregiver for her newly enrolled sister, Nessarose (Marissa Bode), who has a disability. But Elphaba’s irrepressible talents catch the attention of the school’s headmistress, Madame Morrible (Michelle Yeoh), prompting a rivalry with Galinda ([Ariana Grande](#), billed as Ariana Grande-Butera), a shallow, self-absorbed classmate who will eventually become Glinda, the Good Witch of the North. Elphaba and Galinda are forced to be roommates, and they go together like asparagus and bubble gum. But Galinda is more than just a walking dumb-blonde joke: she’s the secret seriocomic weapon of

“Wicked,” and Grande balances her delightful queen-bee insouciance with a porcelain vulnerability worthy of Baum’s own China Princess. Beneath every exaggerated hair toss, she unleashes a poignant frisson of panic.

When the two witches finally set their differences aside (cue “Popular,” the deftest and funniest of Stephen Schwartz’s songs), Galinda’s joy is unfeigned; her friendship with “Elphie” fills a real void. Erivo makes you believe it. Her coolly magnetic stare is her onscreen superpower, and here it serves to modulate the narrative clutter swirling around her. As a fastidiously retconned “Wizard of Oz” prequel, “Wicked” has its puzzle-box pleasures: the uninitiated can muse over the narrative significance of, say, a terrified lion cub, a bicycle basket, or a hunky prince (an assured Jonathan Bailey) who foretells his future with the lyric “Life is painless / for the brainless.” As a parable of political radicalization, however, the movie soon turns lumbering and obvious. Oz is in the grip of creeping totalitarianism, and the more Elphaba grasps the stakes, the more pointed the hats she has to wear become: she’s a feminist crusader, an animal-welfare activist, and, in time, a full-blown resistance leader, with the not so wonderful Wizard of Oz (a well-cast Jeff Goldblum) as her target.

Given the story’s insistence on not judging a witch by her color, is it churlish to say that I wish “Wicked: Part I” looked better? (And also that, at two hours and forty minutes, there were less of it to look at?) The visual bar here is admittedly high; no new movie can be expected to match the dazzling Technicolor brilliance of “The Wizard of Oz,” a picture I’ve seen so many times that even its flaws feel like old friends: the lopped-off lines, the mismatched edits, the shot in which Hamilton’s Witch, about to vanish in a poof of smoke, misses her mark by a second or two. These imperfections, far from diminishing the experience, give the older film a material weight, a conviction about its own magic, for which the pristine digital surfaces of “Wicked” can conjure no equivalent. It’s not easy being green screen, but, even so, there is little in this movie’s muted palette and washed-out backlighting to make you muse, even for a second, “What a world, what a world.”

Near the end, though, “Wicked” does surge to a kind of life. The climax is protracted but darkly thrilling: ugly secrets spill into the open, winged

monkeys screech and scatter, and Elphaba comes into full possession of her powers. “It’s time to try defying gravity,” she belts to the skies, and the film shrewdly follows suit, with a vertiginous airborne number that doesn’t just feel like Oz—it feels like Vegas. You’d want to see it projected onto the Sphere, perhaps with Elphaba soaring on a rhinestone-studded broomstick and then leaving the MGM Grand—sorry, the Emerald City—in the dust. “Part II” looms next year; until then, Elphie has left the building.

The lesson of “Wicked,” should you happen to miss it, is that the appearance of villainy can be deceiving. “Gladiator II,” in its own punchy, stabby, neck-chomping way, upholds the same principle. Directed by [Ridley Scott](#), nearly a quarter century after he steered the first “Gladiator” (2000) to smash returns and Oscar glory, this is the sword-and-sandal epic as both sequel and shell game. Clean good-vs.-evil demarcations are a thing of the past, and motives and alliances can be murderously tricky to suss out. The hero, at least, is no mystery: he is Lucius (Paul Mescal), a fierce young warrior of Numidia, who, after experiencing crushing defeat and tragic personal loss, is hauled off to Rome as a prisoner of war. Soon he will be a gladiator in the Colosseum, where a bloody quest for vengeance begins.

But vengeance against whom? Is his enemy Marcus Acacius (Pedro Pascal), the general who inflicted his particular agony—or do Pascal’s soft eyes and grave sighs signal us to look elsewhere? Perhaps Lucius should blame the emperors Geta (Joseph Quinn) and Caracalla (Fred Hechinger), monstrous twin tyrants who have sent the empire spiralling into decadence. And what of Macrinus ([Denzel Washington](#)), a wily slaveowner who casts Lucius into the arena, recognizing a total killer when he sees one? What’s his long game?

After a while, it barely seems to matter, and “Gladiator II,” following a propulsive opening stretch, recedes into the long shadow of its predecessor. If the first “Gladiator” still retains much of its visceral and emotional force, that’s because it serves us our revenge-thriller poison straight; to see the mighty general Maximus (Russell Crowe) smack down the unambiguously loathsome emperor Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix) remains an irreducible pleasure. As “Gladiator II” opens, Maximus has been dead for fifteen years, and, though his fighting spirit becomes a guiding light of sorts for Lucius,

their bond never feels more than circumstantial. The lead role is a stretch for Mescal, but a good one. After the art-house melancholy of “All of Us Strangers” and “Aftersun,” he tears into Lucius’s red-meat physicality with voracious fury, as if it were his first and possibly last meal; all the sadder, then, when that fury suddenly evaporates in the face of narrative expedience.

Even so, we are not *not* entertained. There is, for one, the invigorating if empty-calorie flash of Denzel Washington, who will play Othello on Broadway next year, and who might have seen, in the warrior-whisperer role of Macrinus, an opportunity to channel his inner Iago. The arena battles have an agreeably batshit, can-you-top-this conceptual absurdity; you won’t soon forget a scene in which Lucius fends off a deranged baboon, or when the Colosseum is reconfigured into a kind of third-century Sea World, complete with snapping sharks. In planting us squarely in the splash zone, Scott and his collaborators pander so unabashedly to our bloodlust that it rings all the more hollow when “Gladiator II” suddenly fancies itself a civics lesson, entreating its characters to mourn their failing empire and dream of its glorious rebirth. We get it, we get it: there’s no place like Rome. ♦

*An earlier version of this article misstated the time frame between the death of Maximus and the opening of “Gladiator II.”*



*Justin Chang* is a film critic at *The New Yorker*. He won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

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# Poems

- **“Homage to Willie Mays”**

By Larry Levis | “I didn’t like or dislike baseball, I simply / Didn’t understand it.”

- **“The World”**

By Jorie Graham | “At / first it / didn’t change // much.”

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[Poems](#)

# Homage to Willie Mays

By [Larry Levis](#)

November 25, 2024

I used to go to games in Candlestick Park  
Just for a little rest, a little solitude  
Away from her voice so I could write  
A poem for her. The poem I never finished.  
I didn't like or dislike baseball, I simply  
Didn't understand it. It was a good place  
To work until it got too exciting. I mean,  
Sometimes the game got too exciting: you'd  
See Mays trotting in from the outfield,  
This relaxed look on his face, & suddenly  
You knew the exceptional was about to happen.  
Even after we broke up, agreeing we were just  
Too different (she liked money; I preferred,  
In those days, drugs), I still went out there,  
Such was the nature of my devotion to  
This task, all readiness with my fountain pen—  
Modest in size but everlastingly erect—  
A Parker 51 with a gold nib where  
My angel resided, & a yellow legal pad  
With no left margin, the pages faded a little  
By the sunlight, just the way I liked them,  
And I was in the middle of saying something  
Important about the way her bare shoulders  
Looked in sunlight as she strolled up Telegraph  
In the bottom of the seventh when Mays stepped up  
And connected, & mailed one to Oakland,  
And then another, later, to the mudflats

On the river beyond Martinez, & then  
Everyone was standing up, cheering him,  
And suddenly I was aware that I, too,  
Was standing up, whistling & applauding  
A man whose swing was sweet dignity,  
And one who'd liberated me forever  
From writing a lament so unforgettable  
Soft light fell through that perfect air  
And the English language had no words for it.

—Larry Levis (1946-96)

*This is drawn from “Swirl & Vortex: Collected Poems of Larry Levis.”  
[Larry Levis](#), who died in 1996, was an award-winning poet. His volume of collected poems, edited by David St. John, is “Swirl & Vortex” (2026).*

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# The World

By [Jorie Graham](#)

November 25, 2024

didn't change much  
at first. At  
first it  
didn't change

much, at first I  
didn't—I don't—  
change much.  
At first we

didn't & they  
didn't & the atmosphere  
stayed the same  
or enough to seem

the same. The same.  
I say the word  
out loud to my-  
self. Who changed I

think. What started out & then  
disappeared without  
actually dis-  
appearing. It's so quiet

in here. It's so  
quiet now. The *now*

used to be a noisy  
place & now

it is so  
still. Where is everyone  
I think. What is it  
that is dis-

possessed. Can it ever be re-

possessed. Never?  
Now and again your soul  
wakes up in  
spurts asking

what is—or is there—a just  
struggle. Then you,  
then I, cry out  
where are you  
everyone. We were in one world

& then was it u or  
us or them or no one in  
particular—*in  
particular* my heart

leaps at that—oh  
in particular—but no one  
answers & no one  
came along in the end.

And that was when  
the end began.  
I only just realized  
it. Only just heard

no one survived—or is it they  
still hide, above  
the cries, no  
child, no one

replies, no one not  
blind, confined,  
lined up, wired up, piled  
up, made to

comply, des-  
pised, compromised, the soul perpetually dis-  
guised, the words even  
the right words

cannot be un-

furled from breath from  
mind oh  
memory no cannot be  
dug up dug up from

this buried world.

*Jorie Graham teaches at Harvard. Her books include the poetry collection “[To 2040](#).”*

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By Robyn Weintraub | A beginner-friendly puzzle.

[\*\*Crossword\*\*](#)

# The Crossword: Wednesday, November 20, 2024

*A beginner-friendly puzzle.*



By [\*\*Robyn Weintraub\*\*](#)

November 20, 2024



[\*\*Robyn Weintraub\*\*](#) has been constructing crosswords since 2010 and began contributing puzzles to *The New Yorker* in 2020. Her puzzles have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *American Crossword Puzzle Tournament*.

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