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# The New Yorker Magazine

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## Goings On

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## [Goings On](#)

# The Astonishing Images of Diane Arbus

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By [Vince Aletti](#), [Brian Seibert](#), [Jane Bua](#), [Hilton Als](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Jennifer Wilson](#), and [Bill McKibben](#)

June 20, 2025

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 inbox.

**“Constellation,”** a Diane Arbus exhibition at the [Park Avenue Armory](#) (through Aug. 17), includes more than four hundred and fifty famous, little-known, and unknown photographs from her brief career, cut short by suicide in 1971, at the age of forty-eight. Controversy dogged her posthumous shows and publications, and though it has mostly been replaced by a profound appreciation, Arbus isn’t easy to love. The work remains tough, provocative, and brilliantly dark. The curator Matthieu Humery’s installation turns the Armory into what looks like a construction site—a dense network of metal structures hung with framed pictures at every height and mirrors at strategic spots. The immediate effect is at once overwhelming and thrilling: an amusement-park ride you never want to get off, with an astonishing image at every turn.



*Detail of “Diane Arbus: Constellation,” 2025, Park Avenue Armory.*

*Art works © The Estate of Diane Arbus / Courtesy Collection Maja Hoffmann / LUMA Foundation; Photograph by Nicholas Knight*

All the photographs at the Armory—now in the collection of Maja Hoffmann’s *LUMA* Foundation, based in Arles, France—are printer’s proofs, made by the photographer Neil Selkirk, the only person authorized to make posthumous prints from Arbus’s negatives. Selkirk retained one image from every edition of Arbus’s work he reproduced—an invaluable cache, considering his long and dedicated involvement with the material. Because “Constellation” includes every one of those pictures, it’s not just the largest Arbus show to land in New York but the most eye-opening and eccentric.

Humery makes the most of that eccentricity, grouping pictures of different sizes and periods and juxtaposing series (of nudists, circus performers, psychiatric-hospital patients) with lesser-seen magazine work and with images from the 1972 Aperture monograph that continues to define Arbus. The result can be unsettling, which is as it should be. The small “Self-portrait, pregnant, N.Y.C. 1945,” of Arbus looking at herself, stripped to underpants, in a full-length mirror, is hung near her picture of James Brown backstage at the Apollo in 1966, flashing a wide, alarming show-biz smile. Celebrities, including Mae West, Norman Mailer, Jayne Mansfield, and Susan Sontag, most shot on assignment, crop up alongside anonymous men, women, and children at Coney Island, in Central Park, on Fifth Avenue, and at summer camp. Arbus gives them all a focussed attention—a look that feels more like curiosity than concern. But Arbus’s curiosity isn’t idle—it’s

intense, consuming. That her appetite was voracious is especially evident at the Armory, where she's everywhere you look and where mirrors mounted on the backs of framed pictures reflect your own prying eyes. (Another huge mirror serves as the show's rear wall and doubles it, for a fun-house effect.) Selkirk, who studied with Arbus before she died, has said that she was not judgmental. The challenge for us is to see her work in the same way.—*Vince Aletti*

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## About Town

### Dance

Starting with “Four Quartets,” in 2018, the works that **Pam Tanowitz** has made for Bard SummerScape have been notable for a level of execution nearly as high as their vaulting ambition. Formally brilliant, the pieces have been in love with beauty and have cautiously flirted with representation. This time, Tanowitz is taking on Beethoven. For “Pastoral,” she has choreographed a dance to the symphony of the same name, or nickname—No. 6—but that music has been replaced with a new response score by Caroline Shaw. Paintings by Sarah Crowner add to the production’s interplay of the abstract and the programmatic, nature and art.—*Brian Seibert ([Fisher Center at Bard](#); June 27-29.)*

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### Classical

The Dutch composer Simeon ten Holt saw each of his compositions as “the reflection of a quest for an unknown goal.” In 1976, he embarked on what would become his most well known, “**Canto Ostinato.**” The piece is sweeping and exploratory, but with a persistent mathematical undercurrent —qualities that should maybe be oxymoronic working in tandem. “Canto Ostinato,” though originally brought to life by multiple pianos, has been performed by a vast range of instruments, including strings, harps, organs,

and trumpets. The Grammy-nominated ensemble Sandbox Percussion, in co-production with the American Modern Opera Company, performs the work as part of the Run AMOC\* Festival, and Lincoln Center's "Summer for the City." The ever-evolving quest continues.—Jane Bua ([David Rubenstein Atrium](#); June 25.)

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## Art



“*Suburb in Havana*,” 1958.

Art work © The Willem de Kooning Foundation / ARS / Courtesy Gagosian; Photograph by Owen Conway

Curatorial confusion hangs like a cloud over “**Willem de Kooning: Endless Painting**,” a big bang of a show that displays the incredible power, imagination, and sheer visual force of de Kooning’s artistry. As arranged by Cecilia Alemani, who is the chief curator at the High Line, twenty-two intellectually robust, soulful paintings are linked, at [Gagosian](#), not by any spiritual or intellectual clues but by repeated motifs found on the surface, or buried just below: eyes, nose, teeth. By limiting what’s shown of de Kooning’s palette—and treating all the creations like marquee works—the installation ends up feeling confusing rather than helpful, but so what? It’s an honor to be amid what amounts to a return to the New York School in

New York, where it has been absent for ages.—*Hilton Als (Through July 11.)*

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## Movies

The grim spectacle of bullfighting is displayed with an unflinching, intimate glory in Albert Serra's documentary "**Afternoons of Solitude**," which follows the torero Andrés Roca Rey through fourteen corridas in the course of three years. Serra details the ritualized battles, from the wounding of bulls by picadors to the matador's climactic kill, and observes Roca being dressed in his elaborate costumes by a skilled associate. But the core of the film involves extended scenes of Roca in the ring, taunting and luring and evading the enraged beasts with death-defying maneuvers—turning his back on bulls, wiggling his hips at them—that are as graceful as dance but as dangerous as combat, sometimes leaving Roca bashed and bloodied, yet unyielding. The aesthetic of bullfighting is revealed to be as exquisite as it is terrifying.—*Richard Brody ([Film at Lincoln Center](#).)*

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## Soul



Photograph by Sylvain Chaussée

The singer Jasmine Rose Wilson first teased a full-bodied soul sound in 2017, when she released the mixtape “From Dusk ’Til Dawn,” as **Baby Rose**. Her music is built around her distinct voice, which is husky yet smooth, exuding both subtlety and power. Rose’s début album, “To Myself,” from 2019, set the terms of her sound with measured post-breakup reflections, and in its songs a growing command of her singular instrument gives her music its own gravity. Four years later, the follow-up, “Through and Through,” showed greater mastery over this force, now in service of sumptuous, lounge-ready songs about budding romance. Baring classic R. & B. and funk overtones, its hazy ballads draw you into their embrace and don’t let go.—Sheldon Pearce ([Sony Hall](#); June 27.)

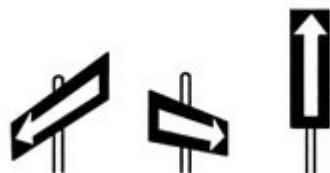
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## Art

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, more than two million Swedes, Danes, Norwegians, and Finns migrated to the U.S., many of them settling in the upper Midwest. The exhibit “**Nordic Echoes**” explores the

quirky, forest-forward legacy of Scandinavian folk culture on contemporary artists in the U.S.’s northern heartland. On display is a birch-bark guinea-pig carrier, à la BabyBjörn (replete with bite marks); a *COVID*-era painting depicting masked North Dakotans at a farmers’ market; and a stunningly intricate paper cutting of animals fleeing a forest fire, a nod to recent climate catastrophes. Among the lighter fare, standouts include a polychromatic, aurora-esque abstract drawing, by a Minneapolis-based artist of Sami and Finnish descent; and a pair of ale hens—bird-shaped special-occasion carved drinking gourds. *Skål!* (Cheers!)—*Jennifer Wilson* ([Scandinavia House](#); through Aug. 2.)

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## Pick Three

*Jennifer Wilson on three new poetry books.*

1. The poetry of Bernadette Mayer (1945-2022) is as whimsical and difficult as raising children, one of her main subjects. In 1978, Mayer published “[The Golden Book of Words](#)”—newly reissued by New Directions—a few years after she moved from New York City to Massachusetts, to start a family (with the fellow-poet Lewis Warsh). Mayer’s avant-garde, fragmentary language echoes the cacophony of a full house, or is it the other way around? “Broo ah ha ha / thoughts unravel / run after her.”
2. In life and on the page, the Palestinian poet Nasser Rabah searches through rubble. In “[Gaza: the Poem Said Its Piece](#),” a new translation of his work that includes writings from the onset of the current war and humanitarian crisis in Gaza, he offers, “There you are, giving a silent sermon over a heap / of the dead and move on, just like when you ask the grocer / for something, and move on.”



Illustration by Derek Abella

3. The title of “[The Wickedest](#),” the latest collection from the Nigerian British poet Caleb Femi, comes from a long-running house party in South London’s “shoobs” scene. The party’s history is narrated in verse by an Uber driver picking up a young woman, perhaps taking her home to a working-class council estate—the setting for much of Femi’s poetry, including his début, “Poor.” “The Wickedest” finds poetry in all corners of the club. Someone types lonely verses on his Notes app. The d.j. spits love poetry on the mike: “big up the couple lipsing by the window / you lot been there all night though / you’re blocking the breeze.”

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## What to Watch

*Bill McKibben on the best nature shows.*

The new documentary “[Ocean](#)” (on Disney+) is vintage David Attenborough, and not many vintages have aged better; he turned ninety-nine last month, which means we should be savoring whatever he produces. But what made this movie so powerful was one scene: the up-close video of the damage done by a trawler as it lawn-mows the sea bottom, over and

over. It's a reminder that at its best—all the way back to Jacques Cousteau—nature filmmaking does its job when it captures not just abundance but absence.



“My Octopus Teacher,” 2020. Photograph from Netflix / Everett Collection

For those who need more underwater content, “[My Octopus Teacher](#),” from 2020, is streaming on Netflix. The story of a South African diver who falls under the spell of an octopus in a kelp forest, it’s the micro-view to Attenborough’s wide angle. Coming onshore at least a little, the 2024 documentary “[My Mercury](#)” (for rent on Prime, free on Pluto) chronicles a conservationist who spends eight years on a tiny island off Namibia, chasing away—controversially—an invasion of seals, who endanger the penguins, gannets, and cormorants that have long inhabited its cliffs.

On HBO, you can watch “[All That Breathes](#),” a 2022 documentary account of a pair of Indian brothers who run a bird hospital focussed on rescuing black kites, a common New Delhi species increasingly falling victim to the city’s incredible congestion. The cinematography, the soundtrack (by Roger Goula), and the sound recordings (of, among other things, a band of dump-dwelling rats) are intense; you get an Attenboroughian sense of the sprawling human wilderness that is the Indian capital city.

Another sterling account of an urban bird, this one from the National Film Board of Canada and available, in an abbreviated version, as a *Times* Op-Doc, “[Modern Goose](#)” follows Canada geese through Manitoba (from which thousands of people recently evacuated, to escape vast forest fires). Urban development has made it hard to be a goose; the director Karsten Wall tracks them through strip malls, highway off-ramps, and an awful lot

of parking lots. There's no English accent to guide you—no narration at all, except the soft honking of the geese, somehow carrying on amid it all.

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

- [Cole Escola's favorite song](#)
- [The cocktail of the summer](#)
- [Keira Knightley and Rosamund Pike together again](#)

[Vince Aletti](#) is a photography critic and the author of “[Issues: A History of Photography in Fashion Magazines](#).”

[Brian Seibert](#) has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2002. He is the author of “[What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing](#),” which won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. His writing appears in the *New York Times* and the *New York Review of Books*. A Guggenheim fellow, he teaches at Yale University.

[Jane Bua](#) is a member of *The New Yorker*'s editorial staff who covers classical music for *Goings On*. Previously, she wrote for *Pitchfork*.



[Hilton Als](#), a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He is the editor of “[God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin](#).”



[Richard Brody](#), a film critic, began writing for *The New Yorker* in 1999. He is the author of [“Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard.”](#)



[Sheldon Pearce](#) is a music writer for *The New Yorker's Goings On* newsletter.



Jennifer Wilson is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* covering books and culture. In 2024, she received a Robert B. Silvers Prize for Literary Criticism.



Bill McKibben is a contributing writer at *The New Yorker* focussing on climate policy. His books include “*The Flag, the Cross, and the Station Wagon: A Graying American Looks Back at His Suburban Boyhood and Wonders What the Hell Happened.*”

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[The Food Scene](#)

# Cactus Wren Is Doing Its Own Thing

*A new restaurant from the chef duo Samuel Clonts and Raymond Trinh puts caviar in unpredictable places.*

By [Helen Rosner](#)

June 15, 2025



*An appetizer of fruits de mer, at Cactus Wren, where the menu is tight and snacky, elegant and gimmicky, high and low. Photographs by Heami Lee for The New Yorker*

[You're reading the Food Scene newsletter, Helen Rosner's guide to what, where, and how to eat. Sign up to receive it in your inbox.](#)

The chef duo Samuel Clonts and Raymond Trinh first worked together at the Dove Mountain Ritz-Carlton in Arizona, a high-end hotel, then both made their way to New York, where they worked under the acclaimed chef César Ramírez, at [Chef's Table at Brooklyn Fare](#). The pair eventually struck out on their own, in 2021, with a laid-back, excellent tasting-menu restaurant on the Lower East Side. Called 63 Clinton, it is one of those places that I hesitate to ever mention in public, lest it become impossible to get into, or the chefs ratchet up the hundred-and-twelve-dollar price, a relative steal for seven thrilling courses. What I love about it most is its idiosyncrasy, its total confidence in itself, its relentless lack of interest in playing the fancy-schmanciness game that seems to steer so many high-end restaurants toward a kind of anodyne, luxury sameness. Despite opening

just a few years ago, 63 Clinton feels—wonderfully, soothingly—like a throwback to the auteurish, rock-star-chef heyday of the early twenty-tens. You get the sense that it is run by people who are interested in chasing down ideas, in playing around, and in adhering to a dangerously loosey-goosey sort of business model entirely dependent on their taste, skill, and self-assurance, which in the case of Clonts and Trinh are blessedly high.

Cactus Wren, a new spot that the two opened in February, on Ludlow and Rivington Streets, is similarly sui generis, in that it seems broadly divorced from trends and totally uninterested in capturing any sort of Zeitgeist. It tells a bit of a story, with recurring references to the American Southwest (the restaurant is named after the state bird of Arizona, a wee brown blob of fluff known for its sputtering-motor call), but mostly it's a kitchen that's doing its own thing. The menu is tight and snacky, elegant and gimmicky, high and low. In its pursuit of, well, whatever the hell it's pursuing, Cactus Wren explodes categories, in a way that feels unaffected and invigorating. Ingredients and techniques are woven and swapped from dish to dish, as if in a kitchen-pantry game of Mad Libs. Of course a whopping scoop of osetra caviar should top a bowl of seven-layer bean dip, which includes a ruffly collar of tiny potato chips; it's no fussier or higher-concept than presenting a quenelle of roe with crème fraîche and blini. Why not fry chicken wings in an airy batter and sprinkle them with jalapeño powder? They taste both intense and beautifully light, and look like giant matcha-colored beignets. Meanwhile, the actual beignets at Cactus Wren are filled with hunks of langoustine, *takoyaki*-style, and seasoned with Old Bay, very Maryland; the Maryland shrimp, in turn, get piled on small triangles of sandwich bread and deep-fried, as an homage to shrimp toast, the dim-sum classic, which comes with a very non-dim-sum side of green-goddess sauce for dipping.

Every dish feels like a big swing, or contains a little wink. An entrée of pork ribs—short-cut, massively meaty, rubbed with southwestern spices and slow-cooked to collapsing tenderness—comes atop a pool of bittersweet salsa roja, with a side of jalapeño-studded corn bread baked into the shape of a saguaro cactus. I might be tempted to call it TikTok bait, except that the restaurant wears the gag so lightly that it feels scrappy and sincere. Not a single bite, in any of my visits, elicited a note of regret: sure, the wood-fired

pizzas read a tad more like flatbreads, with yeasty crusts that lack a pizza's proper snap and chew, but I nevertheless adored a seasonal pie topped with soft morel mushrooms and a pesto as green and lush as the woods in a rainstorm, and a simpler one dressed with gooey Comté and a drizzle of honey. (You can add caviar to that one for an extra forty-five dollars—a far nicer home for little luxuries than the slightly busy bean dip, and the caviar is ladled out in another obscene portion.)

### Helen, Help Me!

[E-mail your questions](#) about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

The space is bright and open, with high ceilings and large windows that highlight the eternally terrific people-watching of the Lower East Side. The mint corner location is the former home of an outpost of Serafina, a chain known for its wood-fired pizzas, which explains the enormous domed oven taking up a quarter of the dining room. The oven, with its colorful tiles is somewhat visually cacophonous, given the understated rusticity of the rest of the room. Glowy porcelain light fixtures, translucent white streaked with rivers of darkness, give the impression of the nacreous interiors of oyster shells, or molded slices of Gorgonzola. They're the work of the artist Nicole Pilar, who also made the interestingly multi-textured, organic-shaped platters on which many of the courses at 63 Clinton are served. At Cactus Wren, these platters show up beneath the appetizer of *fruits de mer*, a dish appealingly sized for one, featuring a rotating selection of composed bites that on my visits included dressed raw oysters and clams, Jonah-crab claws, and a Gilda skewer of raw tuna and shiso leaf. Indeed, the restaurant strikes me as a perfect choice for solo dining: belly up to the bar for a glass from the strong wine list, which foregrounds small producers, and order something to nibble on, or dive into, or bask in. On one of my visits, I found myself seated next to a woman indulging, with exquisite poise, in a glass of wine, a book, and what seemed to be every single caviar dish on the menu. There's a lesson there for us all: it's important, sometimes, to do exactly what you want to do, and to let yourself enjoy it. ♦



*Helen Rosner*, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, received a 2025 James Beard Award for her [Profile of the food personality Padma Lakshmi](#).

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# The Talk of the Town

- **Donald Trump and the Iran Crisis**

By David Remnick | It's not easy to trust the President to make an optimal decision. For one thing, he is suspicious of nearly every source of information save his own instincts.

- **The DOGEfather Part II**

By Charles Bethea | Joe Gebbia, a RISD grad and an Airbnb billionaire, may soon lead the federal cost-cutting effort known as DOGE. Could there be clues to his methods in his art-school days?

- **Could New York City's Next Comptroller Be a Punk Rocker?**

By Dan Greene | Justin Brannan, a city councilman from Bay Ridge running in the Democratic primary, used to play guitar for the hardcore bands Indecision and Most Precious Blood.

- **Mark Hamill Considers the Odds**

By Sarah Larson | The actor who became famous as Luke Skywalker now plays a math-obsessed grandfather in “The Life of Chuck.” At MoMath, he studied fractals and rode a square-wheeled tricycle.

[Comment](#)

# Donald Trump and the Iran Crisis

It's not easy to trust the President to make an optimal decision. For one thing, he is suspicious of nearly every source of information save his own instincts.

By [David Remnick](#)

June 21, 2025



*Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty*

“History doesn’t repeat itself, but it rhymes.” Whether or not Mark Twain ever really said that line, it fits and resonates loudly as President Trump shuttles between the Oval Office and the Situation Room, weighing if he should dispatch bombers on yet another American sortie to the Middle East.

First, the necessary caveats. Since seizing power, in 1979, Iran’s theocracy has menaced its more than ninety million citizens and the wider region. The ayatollahs have deprived the country of a prosperous civil society, channelling resources instead into militarism and messianic fantasy. The regime relies on repression—crackdowns, imprisonment, torture,

executions—to maintain control of a stifled and restive population. Many among the country's educated élite have emigrated. The ranks of the leadership are staffed, in large measure, with satraps and mediocrities. Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons in tandem with its nuclear-energy project has proved a pointless catastrophe—most of all for the Iranians themselves. As Karim Sadjadpour, an Iran expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, notes, the nuclear program has been a practical and a strategic “albatross”; it supplies only about one per cent of Iran's energy needs but has cost up to five hundred billion dollars in construction, research, and the penalties of international sanctions.

Meanwhile, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei—the Supreme Leader since 1989 and now eighty-six years old—pursues his regime's martial goals and ominous fantasies. In 2015, he vowed that Israel, which shares no border with Iran, would disappear by 2040. The regime has projected force through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and has bankrolled proxy militias throughout the region: Hezbollah, in Lebanon; Hamas, in Gaza; the Houthis, in Yemen; and, in Iraq, the Islamic Resistance. Armed and advised by Tehran, these groups have all carried out lethal operations.

For decades, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has called the Iranian nuclear enterprise intolerable, both for Israel and for the world. In many ways, Netanyahu is a flagrantly duplicitous politician; there is little he won't say or do to maintain his coalition and his power. But he is right in this: a nuclear-armed Iran would threaten Israel (which has had nuclear weapons for decades) and could provoke Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and others to pursue such a weapon, too.

No American President has ever disputed the peril of a nuclear-armed Iran. Yet when the Obama Administration managed to forge a nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, Netanyahu denounced it as weak. Donald Trump concurred, if only to show disdain for Obama. In 2018, Trump walked away from the J.C.P.O.A.—a heedless move, since he had no alternative to offer. That has left a dangerous vacuum.

In the wake of the Hamas attacks of October 7th, the political psychology of Israel has changed immeasurably. The original promise of the Israeli state was to end, once and for all, the dependency and the powerlessness of

an exilic people who had suffered antisemitic persecution for centuries—a dark history that reached its nadir in the Nazi death camps. For Israelis, the Hamas attack represented not only the bloodiest day in the country since its founding but also the nightmarish return of vulnerability. On October 7th, the state failed: intelligence reports on Hamas’s intentions were ignored or dismissed; the Army was largely deployed elsewhere. That day, Hamas sought to inflict maximal suffering on Israel; it also aimed to rouse all of Iran’s proxies, perhaps even Iran itself, to join the fight.

But what Yahya Sinwar, the Hamas leader in Gaza, hoped would be the final battle for liberation ended in defeat and misery. Israel, in its fury, decimated Hamas and wiped out its leadership—including Sinwar—and also killed tens of thousands of Palestinian civilians. Entire cities and towns—Rafah, Khan Younis, Jabalia—have been flattened, or nearly so. Moshe Ya’alon, once Netanyahu’s defense minister, called the operation “ethnic cleansing” and accused the government of abandoning the hostages taken by Hamas and “losing touch with Jewish morality.”

While the Israeli government absorbed international condemnation for its excesses and crimes in Gaza, its forces fought with relative precision in Lebanon, killing nearly all of Hezbollah’s leadership and thousands of its fighters. Not long afterward, the Assad regime in Syria—having slaughtered hundreds of thousands of its own people with Iranian support—collapsed.

This was the moment of weakness in Tehran that Netanyahu had been waiting for. Israeli intelligence appears to have penetrated the Iranian regime and its security bureaucracies even more thoroughly than it had Hezbollah. In the past two weeks, Israel has eliminated the uppermost ranks of Iran’s military and intelligence leadership and of its nuclear scientists. But it did not take long for Netanyahu’s rhetoric and tactics to shift—from a focus on the attacks against military and nuclear sites to broader, more perilous ambitions. Israel has attacked Iran’s main television center and the Greater Tehran Police Command; these are symbols of the government, not military targets. Netanyahu, asked by ABC News if he was targeting Khamenei himself, replied, dryly, “We are doing what we need to do.”

But history insists on its own lessons. The early triumphal days of “overwhelming force” and toppled monuments are nearly always followed

by the unforeseen: sectarian conflict, insurgency, terrorism, chaos. We have been here before often enough to have realized that the fantasy of regime change is rarely, if ever, realized. No people, it turns out, welcome their “liberation” by foreign invaders. And, as a recent report in the *Wall Street Journal* notes, should Khamenei be toppled or killed, it is the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which maintains enormous economic as well as military influence, that could be in position to name a new ruler and “assume unprecedented power.”

So what will Trump do? Israel has already struck and badly damaged the uranium-enrichment facility at Natanz, the Isfahan Nuclear Technology Center, the heavy-water reactor at Arak, and other sites. Yet most experts agree that the crucial target is the enrichment center at Fordo, which is embedded deep inside a mountain. It is widely assumed that the sole weapons capable of destroying Fordo are the Massive Ordnance Penetrators—American-made “bunker-buster” bombs weighing thirty thousand pounds each. Only American B-2 bombers are capable of carrying them. Netanyahu has hinted that Israel might have its own ways of degrading Fordo, perhaps with some sort of ground operation, but he clearly prefers that Trump order U.S. pilots to do the job.

There is not an American President—Bill Clinton, George H. W. or George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Joe Biden, or Donald Trump—who has dealt with Netanyahu and not, sooner or later, come away with a lingering sense of resentment. Netanyahu exudes preternatural confidence in his powers of manipulation. In 2001, during a meeting with Israeli victims of terrorism, he assured them that he could always bring the United States around. “I know what America is,” he told them. “America is a thing you can move very easily, move it in the right direction.”

It’s not easy to trust Donald Trump to make an optimal decision. For one thing, he is suspicious of nearly every source of information save his gut. He revels in uncertainty. (“Nobody knows what I’m going to do.”) He has hollowed out the staff and the expertise of the National Security Council. He appears to disdain his director of National Intelligence, Tulsi Gabbard, and her conclusion that Iran’s pursuit of a nuclear bomb is not nearly as advanced as Netanyahu claims. He fired his national-security adviser Mike

Waltz but, rather than replace him, merely handed the additional duties to the Secretary of State, Marco Rubio. Trump's Metternich is Steve Witkoff, a modestly accomplished New York real-estate developer; his Defense Secretary, Pete Hegseth, formerly a weekend Fox News host, has, at last, struck the President as an empty suit with a pompadour. (According to the *Washington Post*, Hegseth has been sidelined.) In the meantime, Trump must pay attention to the insights provided by rival camps in his *MAGA* universe: the isolationism of Steve Bannon and Tucker Carlson versus the interventionism of Mark Levin and Laura Loomer.

Trump has set a deadline of two weeks for rumination and negotiation. History offers cold comfort and little clarity. Philip Gordon, a senior foreign-policy adviser to President Obama and Vice-President Harris, once reflected on the dismal outcomes of recent U.S. military interventions in the Middle East. Writing in Politico, in 2015, he noted:

When implying the United States can "fix" Middle Eastern problems if only it "gets it right," it is worth considering this: In Iraq, the U.S. intervened and occupied, and the result was a costly disaster. In Libya, the U.S. intervened and did not occupy, and the result was a costly disaster. In Syria, the U.S. neither intervened nor occupied, and the result is a costly disaster. This record is worth keeping in mind as we contemplate proposed solutions going forward.

Now, a decade later, yet another Middle Eastern crisis is here, and it rests in the hands of the American President and the Supreme Leader. In nearly all things, military matters included, Trump is hardly a model of discernment. He recently dispatched marines to cope with "insurrectionists" protesting his immigration policies in downtown Los Angeles, even as he cast the actual insurrection at the Capitol, four years ago, as "a day of love." Meanwhile, Khamenei must now consider backing down as never before. His predecessor, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, once likened signing a truce with Iraq after a decade of war to "drinking poison."

The self-intoxication that can accompany the early days of battle—the euphoria of "shock and awe," the dreams of frictionless regime change—once again stands in the way of rational negotiation. To avoid a wider conflagration in Iran, Israel, and beyond, the American President will have

to temper his worst impulses for a “quick win” and negotiate. The Ayatollah, for his part, like his predecessor, will have to lift the chalice to his lips and take a sip. ♦



*David Remnick has been the editor of The New Yorker since 1998 and a staff writer since 1992. He is the author of seven books; the most recent is “[Holding the Note](#),” a collection of his profiles of musicians.*

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**Designer Brain**

# The DOGEfather Part II

Joe Gebbia, a *RISD* grad and an Airbnb billionaire, may soon lead the federal cost-cutting effort known as *DOGE*. Could there be clues to his methods in his art-school days?

By [Charles Bethea](#)

June 23, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Who will help lead the Department of Government Efficiency now that Elon Musk has left the scene? News reports have mentioned Joe Gebbia, a Tesla board member and a co-founder of Airbnb, as a possible replacement. Gebbia is forty-three. Like Musk—his close friend—he is a billionaire, a resident of Austin, Texas, and the rumored recipient of a hair transplant. Gebbia formally announced his political conversion on X in January, posting that, after years of supporting Democrats, he finally “did [his] own

research” and concluded that Donald Trump “deeply cares about our nation.” His feed has a *MAHA* flavor: Big Food exposés (“The truth about Ketchup”) alternate with digs at liberals suffering from “TDS,” or Trump Derangement Syndrome.

Unlike Musk, Gebbia was trained not as an engineer but as a designer. Upon joining *DOGE*, in February, he pledged to bring his “designer brain and startup spirit” to the task of cutting two trillion dollars from the federal budget. One of his early projects: digitizing the retirement process for federal workers. He mused to Fox News’ Bret Baier that, under *DOGE*’s influence, interacting with the government could soon resemble “an Apple Store-like experience.”

At the Rhode Island School of Design, where he earned degrees in industrial design and graphic design in the early two-thousands, Gebbia was known as a gregarious, prematurely balding student with a signature pair of machine-shop safety glasses. “Joe always had a finger in every pie,” Chris Saltzman, a former classmate, recalled. Gebbia worked in the dining room at the University Club and gave tours for the admissions office. “I was, like, ‘Whoa, this guy is so on point. He’s going places,’ ” Loren Klein, a freelance graphic designer in Denver, said of his Gebbia-led *RISD* tour. Gebbia also knew how to have fun. One night, Klein found himself with Gebbia and two female students, “eating Krispy Kreme doughnuts and running into the ocean in our underwear.”

Gebbia’s reformist streak showed up early. He was president of the *RISD* student council, which at one point formed a *DOGE*-like “committee to investigate the effectiveness of the faculty advisor program.” “This is not some high school council that has no real impact or influence,” Gebbia’s council announced, according to a report in a student paper. “I don’t remember this investigation,” Saltzman said. He added, “The council was a nonentity.”

Like Musk, Gebbia demonstrated a flair for showmanship. “He always walked around campus toting these butt pads,” Saltzman recalled. The pads —called CritBuns—were brightly colored, cheek-shaped cushions meant to ease the pain of long critique sessions on hard floors. Gebbia sold them online, for twenty dollars, and at the *MOMA* Design Store. (A review in

*Wired*: “It feels like I’m getting a perpetual, gentle ass massage.”) The school commissioned eight hundred as graduation gifts for Gebbia’s class.

But Gebbia’s most lasting contribution to *RISD* may have been reviving the school’s defunct basketball team, the Balls. They were not the only provocatively named team on campus. *RISD*’s athletics also included the Nads (hockey), the Sacks (men’s soccer), and the Jugs (women’s soccer). But drumming up enthusiasm for the enterprise wasn’t easy. “It presented one of the world’s greatest marketing challenges,” Gebbia told the hosts of the “Clever” podcast in 2017. “How do you get art students to a sporting event on a Friday night?” His roommate, the future Airbnb C.E.O. Brian Chesky, helped devise a solution: a seven-foot-tall anthropomorphic penis mascot named Scrotie.

Gebbia filed the paperwork, booked gym time at a local high school (*RISD* had no athletic facilities), and recruited a team—thirteen men, one woman. They played a J.V. squad from Worcester, Massachusetts, in their opening game. The Balls lost, 94–49, in front of a reported hundred and fifty fans (and a cheer squad, the Jock Straps). They went on to lose every game that season. “We took some beatings,” Matt Corrado, a muralist in Maryland who played guard with Gebbia, recalled. “Not much height. Nobody could dunk. Joe was an old-school guard, like John Stockton.” Still, Gebbia remained optimistic. In a 2002 article for a *RISD* publication, titled “We’ve Got Balls,” he compared the team’s budding rivalry with Cooper Union to “U.N.C. vs. Duke.” (The piece included a photo of Gebbia peering into his warmup sweats.)

If Gebbia does become the driving force at *DOGE*, scholars might examine “The Balls Initiative,” a guide on how to run the team, which Gebbia claims he wrote for future *RISD* athletes. Corrado has no recollection of it. “Though that does sound like Joe,” he said.

“It was a magical and simpler time then,” Saltzman said, reflecting on his art-school years—before Trump, *COVID*, and the era of billionaires minted by Airbnb. “It’s strange seeing Joe in a conservative, Republican space now. He was never that way at *RISD*.♦



*[Charles Bethea](#), a staff writer, has contributed to The New Yorker since 2008. He covers crime, politics, food, local media, and the American South.*

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[Hardcore Dept.](#)

# Could New York City's Next Comptroller Be a Punk Rocker?

Justin Brannan, a city councilman from Bay Ridge running in the Democratic primary, used to play guitar for the hardcore bands Indecision and Most Precious Blood.

By [Dan Greene](#)

June 21, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

A candidate meets voters wherever they can. The other day, Justin Brannan, a burly Democratic city councilman from Bay Ridge who's running to be

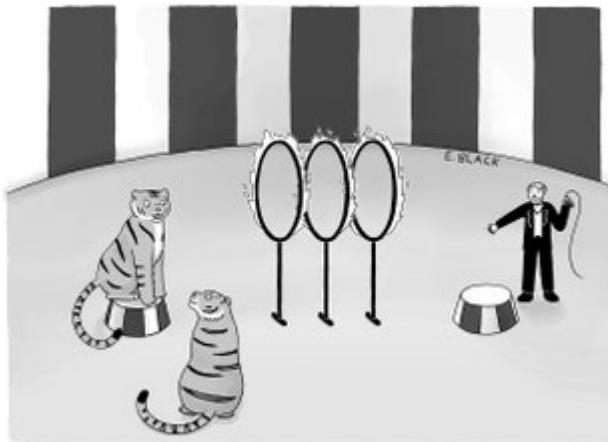
the Party's nominee for city comptroller, surprised one constituent by opening a papered-over door at a vacant retail space in Tribeca. The man, wearing a black polo and slacks, looked up from a table saw, alarmed. "This used to be the Wetlands," Brannan explained, referring to the rock-inclined night club that occupied the space until 2001. The man with the saw smiled and nodded, and the candidate introduced himself.

Brannan, who's forty-six, played the Wetlands at least a dozen times in the late nineties, as a guitarist for the hardcore bands Indecision and Most Precious Blood. These days, as the Bernie Sanders-endorsed comptroller contender, he's looking to bring some punk edge to the office. "We don't have that killer instinct," Brannan said of Democrats. "We're too worried about decorum, you know?" He was following a day of chairing city-budget hearings by revisiting haunts from his past life. The Wetlands, he recalled, had a VW bus parked inside that acts would slap their stickers onto. The bus is now stored in the Rock Hall, in Cleveland. "So, technically, we're in the Hall of Fame," Brannan said.

He climbed into a blue S.U.V., a Gen Z aide at the wheel. Brannan, seizing the aux, put on some Minor Threat. Tattoos peeked out from under the cuffs and collar of his suit. "The dark corner of punk rock that I came from was very positive," he said. "We were straight edge. We were vegetarians. It might have sounded like Iron Maiden to your dentist, but we were singing about social issues." In addition to strumming the customary three chords, he was the bands' finance guy: dealing with booking agents, exchanging currency while touring pre-euro Europe. One time, before Indecision opened for Run-D.M.C. in Holland, a truck backed into their rental van, which wasn't legally allowed to leave France. The experiences hardened him for city politics. "Once you've been strip-searched in Austria for no reason, or slept on concrete floors in Basque country, it's, like, I can deal with the mayor," he said. "It gives you this sense of 'fuck it.' "

Between tours, Brannan worked a number of temp jobs, most of them finance-related, too. Eventually, he landed a full-time gig as a clerk at Bear Stearns. He stood out a bit. "I have a 'meat is murder' tattoo on my neck," he said, gesturing to his nape. "On Wall Street, half the deals are done in steak houses. I was eating a lot of iceberg-wedge salads." In other ways, he

felt at home. “They said, ‘We don’t care if you have an M.B.A. We want you to be P.S.D.: poor, smart, and determined,’ ” he recalled. “I was, like, This is me. I don’t know what the fuck I’m doing, but I’m determined, and I need to pay my rent.” After the firm collapsed, during the 2008 financial meltdown, he landed a job in his local councilman’s office. He also married his wife, another ex-Bear Stearns clerk, in their former employer’s lobby.



*“He said that if I nail this trick he’ll let me eat a clown.”*

Cartoon by Ellie Black

The car pulled up to a John Varvatos shop on the Bowery. It used to be CBGB, the famed underground venue, where Brannan’s bands played dozens of shows. In the window, a mannequin was sporting an ochre sheepskin jacket. Price: twenty-six hundred bucks. “It probably couldn’t be more insulting than it is,” Brannan said.

He gestured to the former locations of the entrance desk (now a trio of mannequins, one clutching a black leather tote, behind a propped-up guitar) and the stage (now changing rooms). On one wall, a mounted glass case preserved a loose collage of posters and flyers from the room’s prior incarnation: skulls, goblins, red anarchist “A”s. Most were so tattered that the bands’ names were incomplete. “They did a good job of leaving some shit alone,” Brannan said. He looked for Indecision and Most Precious Blood. No luck. The latter moniker was lifted from a Catholic high school that had been a local basketball powerhouse. “They would just wipe the floor with us, so that name had an ominous connotation,” he said.

Back in the car, Brannan reminisced about his brief time as a bouncer on Rivington. He spent most nights listening to news and talk on 1010 WINS. “They had the little doot-doot-doo-doo-doot—the little xylophone thing,” he said, turning wistful. “They don’t do that anymore.” On East Fifth, Brannan pointed out where he had once lived with a girlfriend. There had been a major squatter encampment across the street. One day in 1997, after a fire, the Giuliani administration sent a wrecking ball to topple the building. At least one resident was still inside. Others were blocked from rescuing their pets. “It was really fast, and really fucked up,” Brannan said. “That was, like, ‘The party’s over.’ ”

On the other hand, he noted, adverse political conditions can produce great art. Here was yet another Trump-era disappointment. “We had a decade of amazing punk rock when Ronald Reagan was President,” Brannan said. “Where the fuck is that music now? I guess everybody’s just so depressed.” ♦

*Dan Greene* is a member of *The New Yorker’s editorial staff*.

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[\*\*Truth and Beauty Dept.\*\*](#)

# Mark Hamill Considers the Odds

The actor who became famous as Luke Skywalker now plays a math-obsessed grandfather in “The Life of Chuck.” At MoMath, he studied fractals and rode a square-wheeled tricycle.

By [Sarah Larson](#)

June 23, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

On the morning of the New York première of the new sci-fi movie “The Life of Chuck,” in which Mark Hamill plays a grizzled, alcoholic, math-loving accountant, the actor visited MoMath, the National Museum of Mathematics, near Madison Square Park. Hamill has accurately described his look in the film—white hair, walrus mustache, sweater vest—as

“Geppetto.” In real life, Hamill, who is seventy-three, with blondish hair and a boyish face, looks more like a gracefully aging Luke Skywalker, as one might hope. In a gallery facing Fifth Avenue, he sipped a blueberry-and-spinach smoothie and contemplated “Topological Crochet,” an array of geometric yarn sculptures by the artist Shiying Dong. “People think about math as being numbers, arithmetic,” said MoMath’s executive director and C.E.O., Cindy Lawrence. She wore a lacy flowered top and stood next to a crocheted trefoil knot on a pedestal. “‘I hated that when I was in school’ is something a lot of people say.” MoMath, which “doesn’t make you feel stupid,” reminds visitors that math can be beautiful.

Mysteries abound in “The Life of Chuck,” which the director Mike Flanagan adapted from a Stephen King novella. Amid dystopia, soft-shoe, and a life story told in reverse, Hamill’s character, Albie, believes that answers can be found in the night sky—and also in numbers. “Statistics or probability, it could tell you stuff about your future,” he tells Chuck (Benjamin Pajak), his young grandson. “The world loves dancers, it truly does, but it *needs* accountants.” Chuck, a gifted dancer doing his math homework, looks pained. “That might hurt, but it’s the truth,” Albie goes on. “Math is truth.” He encourages the boy to become an accountant.

“Yeah, he has the stats,” Hamill said of his character. “So he’s sort of a buzzkill. But, fortunately, he doesn’t prevent Chuck from doing what he wants.” (The adult Chuck, played by Tom Hiddleston, does become an accountant.) In his own childhood, Hamill, the middle of seven kids with a Navy-captain father, moved often—learning about samurais and kendo in Japan helped prepare him for lightsabre-wielding—and he was encouraged to be practical, too. “Comics were verboten in my house, unless it was *Classics Illustrated*,” he said. He found ways to be creative—impressions, comedy, ventriloquism, “King Kong” research. He was a good student, but math could be a struggle. “By the time we got to Algebra II, I had to go to the teacher and say, ‘Can you give me some guidance here?’ ” He studied theatre in college, and at the age of twenty-four, undaunted by statistics or probability, he auditioned for roles in “Star Wars” and “Carrie” on the same day. Soon enough, he was blowing up the Death Star.

Shooting “Star Wars” with Carrie Fisher and Harrison Ford, in 1976, was a good time. “Running around the Death Star was so much fun, and Carrie was so funny, and it was like being paid to just play make-believe,” he recalled. “The middle one, ‘The Empire Strikes Back,’ was much more cerebral. Especially with the Yoda plot.” (George Lucas, he said, was clever to come up with the Force, a spirituality stand-in that didn’t make people uncomfortable.) “I was sorry to be separated from Carrie and Harrison, but that’s the way the plot went. I even lost 3PO in the second one,” he said. “I’d be walking toward my set and see Carrie and Harrison and Peter Mayhew, who played Chewbacca, walking the other way, laughing and having fun, and I thought, *Oh!*” He growled and made an aw-shucks gesture. “I was the only human being on the call sheet. The rest of it was props—snakes, lizards, puppets.”

Hamill took a spin around MoMath, followed by a bodyguard. Lawrence showed him an algebra-themed pirate ship, complete with doubloons (“Accounting is all about balancing”), and a Spirograph-like floor projection (“You can make new planets as you walk”). Hamill walked, creating new planets. “This is a galaxy far, far away,” Lawrence observed. Next: an exhibit where visitors can ride a Seussian tricycle with square wheels around an undulating yellow track. “Math tells you how to make the track that makes it perfect for you to ride smoothly,” Lawrence said. “You’re welcome to hop on if you like.” Hamill hopped on, looking mischievous. A young attendant said, “Please don’t go backwards, and keep your feet on the pedals.” Hamill pedalled the square-wheeled trike, waving to onlookers. “Math is keeping you on that thing!” one said.

“Math is allowing it to move!” Lawrence said. Hamill explored a “human tree,” involving fractals and tiny branching images of himself, then, beaming, rolled around in a Magis Spun chair that swerved like a wobbling top. (The bodyguard looked anxious.) Lawrence showed him a series of complex, bisected 3-D shapes, then reassembled them into weirder shapes. She pointed at the Spun chair. “Guess what shape it started with,” she said. “A star!”

“I wouldn’t have guessed a star,” Hamill said.

Before he left, Hamill posed for a picture with a giddy visiting math class. “Say ‘Star Wars!’ ” an amateur photographer called out. “Star Wars!” they yelled. “Star Trek!” Hamill said. ♦



*Sarah Larson*, a staff writer, has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2007.

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By Jay Caspian Kang | Pro sports have long seemed like the closest thing we have to a true meritocracy. But maybe not anymore.

- **How Donald Trump Got NATO to Pay Up**

By Joshua Yaffa | The Administration is strong-arming European nations to do more on behalf of their own defense. Is the strategy working?

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By Rachel Monroe | Supporters saw the Mütter Museum as a celebration of human difference. New management saw an ethical and political minefield.

**Personal History**

# Your Hip Surgery, My Headache

Getting Hugh home after his hip replacement involved a thick cushion and a car with legroom. “Ow!” he said whenever I tried to help. “You’re making everything worse!”

By [David Sedaris](#)

June 23, 2025



*Illustration by Jack Smyth*

The year my sister Amy was invited to play Mrs. Claus in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade was the same year Hugh had his hip replaced.

“It somehow makes sense that these two things are happening within a week of each other,” I said.

“Except I’m not doing it,” Amy told me.

It was nearly midnight, and we were in my apartment in New York, gathered in the living room. The view from the window looked like the backdrop of a talk show—a jumble of tall buildings with thousands of lit

windows, some of them winking. “How can you *not* play Mrs. Claus?” I asked.

Amy ticked the reasons off on her fingers. “One: they want me there at 3 a.m. Two: it’s supposed to rain. And three: they’re not paying me anything.”

“Macy’s doesn’t pay Mrs. Claus?” I asked, surprised in the same way I’d be if I’d learned that she—Mrs. Claus—had been married before, maybe to another woman, like, “What? That can’t be true!”

With us in the living room were two Frenchmen whom Hugh and I know from Normandy: Olivier, who owns a donkey and had been teaching himself English with Duolingo, and David, who also has a donkey but spoke no English whatsoever. Still, he could understand by my tone that something outrageous was happening.

“*Qu'est-ce qui se passe?*” he asked.

“The department store that calls itself the House of Macy will not give money to the bride of Father Christmas,” I said in French. “For us, this is unacceptable!”

Olivier and David had arrived a week earlier and were staying with us until the Saturday after Thanksgiving. It was their first trip to New York, and they were overwhelmed by how loud and crowded the city was. My sister Gretchen, who lives in North Carolina, was also staying with us, and while I was happy to see her and our French friends, I’d just returned from a long tour and had not had any time alone—or alone with just Hugh—since mid-September. We have a good deal of room in our New York apartment. It’s not like anyone was sleeping on a sofa or hanging wet towels off the doorknobs. I just resented having to adjust my schedule. House guests meant less time at my desk, both in the morning and in the evening, when, mainly because of Gretchen, we had to eat dinner earlier than usual. I can put up with a lot, but when my work schedule is interrupted I get antsy. It didn’t help that just four days after Gretchen was due to leave, Hugh would be checking into the hospital for hip surgery. “And don’t think I’m not going to need you,” he said over Thanksgiving dinner.

A whiz in the kitchen, Hugh makes all our meals, and when I suggested that he could probably still manage—"I'm sure other people have. Can't you cook, like, from a wheelchair or something?"—he said, "No, you're going to do it. Three times a day and for as long as I need you to." He poured himself a glass of wine. "I could be out of commission for months!"

"Yes, but you don't know that for a fact," I reminded him. "I'm sure there are people who recover from a hip replacement in a matter of days. You just don't hear about them."

David asked what we were talking about, and I said, in French, "After the hospital, he wants to make a strike!"

However difficult Hugh's operation would be, I doubted that it could be worse than the year and a half leading up to it. There was no one day he started complaining about his pain—he's always done that to some degree. Rather, it shifted from his back or his sciatica to his hip, then stayed there and intensified.

"Ow!" he'd cry, wincing as he sat down at the lunch or dinner table, as he bent before the oven or even looked at a stepladder. Hugh never says anything so simple as "I have a headache," or "My finger hurts." Instead, he describes his pain in detail, the way he might to a doctor who'd just said, "Tell me everything, and I want you to be as specific as possible."

I know when Hugh is on the phone with his mother because all his talk will be about his sore wrist, his swollen joint, the cut on his foot. When I offer to get him an ice pack, an ibuprofen, a Band-Aid, he'll say in a voice that is weak but also bitter, "That's O.K. I'll get it myself later if I need to."

"They don't hand out medals for needless suffering," I'll remind him.

"You don't know what it's like," he'll tell me.

I know all about kidney stones and gum surgery. I know about broken ribs and urinary-tract infections. When it came to hip pain, though, he had me.

His groaning would sometimes wake me in the middle of the night.

“Listen,” I’d tell him, “if I could take your pain and suffer it myself, I would, if only to get a decent night’s sleep.”

This went on day after day, until I could no longer remember its absence.

Hugh became a non-stop grouse. Ghosts in movies moaned less than he did. Still, it took a lot to get him to see a specialist. “The doctor said it’s bone on bone,” he reported after returning from his appointment. “Do you have the slightest idea of what that feels like?”

Two months after Thanksgiving, Hugh would turn sixty-five and be eligible for Medicare, but even that was too long to wait. Luckily, we have health insurance, and it appeared that our plan would cover the brunt of the cost. And so, in what seemed like very little time, he was scheduled for surgery at one of the hospitals within a short walking distance of our apartment. There are a number of them, so many that when our friend Tracy was looking for a place on the Upper East Side, and we suggested our part of it, she instead chose to get something thirty blocks north. “All the Google Street Views I looked at in your neighborhood showed people who were crying,” she told us.

It’s something I hadn’t noticed until she said it. Then I thought, *She’s right!* If our sidewalks are clean, it’s likely due to a steady downpour of tears, mostly in the vicinity of Memorial Sloan Kettering.

The place Hugh went to was called the Hospital for Special Surgery. “It’s the best,” his doctor said, as did many of the retired residents in our building who’d had their hips and knees and shoulders replaced there. “If you need a walker or a wheelchair, just ask,” any one of them would tell us. “I’ve got one in the basement!”

A neighbor said that she still had some painkillers left. Another offered to loan us her comfort-height toilet seat. Hugh passed, but wound up buying his own. “The doctor says I’ll need it,” he told me.

The sight of the puffy, foot-tall toilet seat in our home was too much for me, a spectre of death no less chilling than the Grim Reaper himself. I said, “Next, bring in a coffin, why don’t you.”

The day before his surgery, Hugh talked to his older brother John in Washington State, then limped into my office to recap their conversation. “He said he really wished he was here to help take care of me.”

I looked up from my laptop. “Call him back.”

“I don’t know that he really *meant* it,” Hugh said.

I handed him my phone. “Sure he did, call him. Do it now.”

“John can’t afford a last-minute ticket across the country,” Hugh told me. “And I know for a fact that he won’t want to drive three hours from his house to the Seattle airport.”

“He won’t have to,” I said. “Call him.”

That was at 3 p.m. New York time. By five, a hired car was heading to Port Angeles to collect Hugh’s brother, and by midnight John was in a first-class seat to J.F.K., where another car would be waiting to deliver him to our apartment.

I said to Amy, “It’s worth every penny.”

I like all of Hugh’s siblings. Each is creative in his or her own way. John, for instance, can make a sculpture out of anything. Hand him an empty sardine tin, three chopsticks, and a broken calculator, and he’ll turn them into something remarkable. He’s a wonderful writer as well, and a huge reader. John is warm and inquisitive. He’s bighearted and energetic, and I’d always looked forward to his visits, especially now. “He can cook, right?” I asked.

“Well, sure,” Hugh said, “but it’s just regular stuff he makes for his grandkids. Pork chops, macaroni and cheese, that kind of thing.”

“That’ll do,” I told him. “At least until you can stand on your feet long enough to pan-fry scallops.”

John hadn’t yet arrived when I collected Hugh’s overnight bag and accompanied him to the hospital for his operation. For years, I’d heard

horror stories about American health care, but this place was first-rate. After checking in, we were led to a small, spotless room with curtains for walls. There was an examining table set up, and, once Hugh had changed into a medical gown, we were visited by six staff members, starting with a nurse who inserted an I.V. into the back of his hand and cleaned out his nose with iodine. An aide shaved and then washed the hip that needed replacing. Then came another nurse, who took a vial of Hugh's blood and asked a series of questions, including "When did you last have a bowel movement?"

I put my fingers in my ears and made the noise of a hundred thousand bees.

"Are you O.K.?" the young woman asked.

"We don't do things like that," I told her, rocking back and forth, my fingers still in my ears.

"Things like what?"

"We don't have bowel movements," I explained. "The bathrooms at our house are for soaking in the tub and brushing our teeth—that's it. Nothing else has ever happened there."

I know couples who sit on the toilet with the door open, who merrily pass gas in front of each other and discuss their evacuations in graphic detail. But Hugh and I are not those people. Hearing his answer to the nurse's question could have possibly destroyed me, and so I kept my fingers in my ears until she left and the anesthesiologist arrived. Then came another nurse and, finally, the surgeon—Dr. Reif—who, we learned, had just amputated a leg.

Sitting in the curtained-off room, listening as patients to the left and right of us were asked about their bowel movements, too, I realized that I had never seen Hugh frightened before. "You'll be fine," I told him, patting his hand and noticing for the first time that it had age spots on it.

At 11 a.m., right on schedule, a gurney pulled up. Hugh was outfitted with a bonnet, and, after he was wheeled away, I went home to meet John, who has visited us in France and England but, like Olivier and David, had never

before been to New York. All the Hamrick brothers are handsome, though in slightly different ways, like dogs born in different litters to the same purebred parents. John's jaw is squarer than Hugh's and Sam's, and his thick hair, even as he turns seventy, has hardly any gray in it. His gait is looser, and he's more affectionate, always ready to lay a hand on your shoulder, and perhaps surprise you with a kiss on the cheek.

"Ick," I said, when we greeted each other. "Get off me!"

Walking from my apartment to the Morgan Library, where we would have lunch, took three times as long as it normally would because John kept stopping in the middle of the sidewalk to look up: "Wow. Did you see the detail on that building?"

A woman slammed into his back, the way I myself have done a thousand times when a tourist, oblivious to the people around him, quits moving in order to gawk and point.

"You could at least apologize!" John shouted after her once she'd skittered around him, muttering.

We were eating when the surgeon called to say that he had finished, and that there had been no complications.



*"And the mustache."*  
Cartoon by Edward Steed

It hadn't occurred to me that anything might have gone wrong, though I suppose it easily could have. Eight years earlier, John's wife—a woman

he'd been with since he was fourteen, the mother of his child—died of a blood clot after breaking her leg. Totally unexpected, and his entire life was derailed. I'm still not sure how he makes it from one day to the next, and in such good humor. Time helps, I imagine, as do all the philosophy books he reads. For a while, he saw a therapist. Now he dates a woman who lives down the street from him and makes her own greeting cards.

It's amazing how quickly doctors can get hip-replacement patients back on their feet. The morning after the operation, John and I entered the hospital and found Hugh shuffling down a hallway. He had a physical therapist by his side and was using a walker—but still!

Getting him home a short time later involved a thick cushion and a car with plenty of legroom. “Ow!” he said whenever I tried to help. “You’re making everything worse!”

In the apartment, he steered his walker toward the bed. “I’m going to need you to take my shoes off,” he said to me, adding, as I began to do so, “Slowly! Now put my slippers on—not like that!! Get me my shoehorn!”

He needed a blanket, his phone, a glass of water. “Not *that much* water!” he complained when I handed it to him. There were prescriptions to be picked up, and sickroom equipment—for instance, an adjustable stool he’d need when getting in and out of bed. I went to four different places looking for one. At CVS, I came upon a well-dressed white-haired woman who had in her shopping cart a pack of wet wipes and eight quart-size cartons of half-and-half.

“God, that’s a lot of half-and-half,” I said to her. “Who on earth needs that much?”

“I’m having guests,” she snapped, and I scurried away.

That evening, I went with Amy to our friend Mike’s for dinner.

“I can’t believe you’re abandoning me,” Hugh said as I dressed to leave.

I reminded him that it had been on the calendar for months. “And I’m not abandoning you—John is here.”

It was nice to get away, if only for a few hours. To have someone bring *me* bowls of nuts and glasses of water. At the table, I mentioned the lady who’d growled at me at CVS. Then Mike told us about a woman who’d spotted Ted Koppel carrying a basketful of avocados at a farm stand in Maryland.

“Making guacamole?” she asked.

“None of your goddam business,” he reportedly answered.

I recapped the evening for Hugh the following morning, saying that there were plenty more parties coming up. “Hopefully, you can come with me to Antonio’s Christmas lunch in two weeks. We had so much fun last year, remember?”

“Two weeks!” Hugh gestured toward his outstretched leg. “Look at me! Are you out of your mind?”

John, who had gone that morning to buy a juicer, set a glass of something that poured like wet cement in front of his brother and raised his voice, which was unlike him. “My God, David. He’s just had major surgery!”

I raised my voice in return. “Well, excuse me! I thought that eventually he *might get better!*”

By outsourcing Hugh’s care, I had shut myself out of his recovery. Now I wanted back in, but it was too late. After saying, “Whatever you do, don’t give him a bell,” Amy brought Hugh an empty can she’d put a few quarters in.

*Clang, clang, clang*, I’d hear while sitting at my desk. *Clang, clang*.

“How can I help?” I’d ask, racing into the bedroom.

“John is downstairs,” Hugh would say. “Go get him and tell him I need to put my socks on.”

I'd roll up my sleeves. "I can do that for you."

"Just go get John."

The two were inseparable, and would convene each morning to dissect their dreams. "So I'm back in Port Angeles under a pitch-black sky, frying—get this—pennies in a skillet," I caught John saying a week after his arrival, as he sat on the edge of the bed, massaging oil into Hugh's feet. "I might be wrong, but I'm interpreting this to mean I could use more copper and iron in my diet."

At meals, the brothers would reflect on their childhoods in Africa.

"Remember that C.I.A. agent who had a crush on Mom in Djibouti?" "What was the name of that Belgian nun in Ethiopia who we gave our monkey to?"

It made it hard to join the conversation. This as opposed to when Amy would visit. Shortly after Hugh's operation, she had her elderly rabbit, Tina, put to sleep. A few days later, nose stuffed up and with puffy eyes, she came to dinner.

"Is it a cold?" John asked.

"Actually," Amy said, "I think I'm allergic to Tina's ghost."

Hugh has a sister named Ann, and one morning I walked into the dining room and found him talking with her on speakerphone. "Do you have comfortable enough chairs?" she asked.

The answer would normally be yes, but, on account of his hip, he had to be raised up while sitting. "There are a few that are O.K. if I put a cushion on them," Hugh told her, gesturing for me to refill his coffee cup. "At my doctor's office yesterday, I saw one that would be perfect, but there's no way David would allow it into the apartment. It's too ugly."

"Well, screw him," I heard Ann say. "We're talking about your health here!"

The next morning, she sent a text that read "Is David any help to you?"

Before Hugh could answer, I picked up his phone and typed, “None at all,” adding an emoji—my first time ever—of a skunk.

I expected her to respond with “You’re kidding,” or “I don’t believe that for one second.”

Instead, she wrote, “That sort of angers me. But then, he’s so self-involved.”

Rather than texting her back, I returned to my office and resumed writing in my diary. *Self-involved, indeed*, I thought. Hugh hadn’t shown me the chair he was talking to Ann about, but, if it was truly that ugly, I’m sure he wouldn’t have wanted it, either. Why was I the villain here?

Hugh went off his painkillers after the third day. After the eighth, he cast aside his walker and was able to get around using a cane. He made it to the lobby, slowly, then all the way to the corner. Now that he didn’t need quite as much attention, I started taking John to see a bit of the city. One afternoon, on the C train, we came upon a man who had peed on himself—and had likely been doing so for quite a while. The stench of old urine was so intense that it had emptied half the subway car. Neither awake nor asleep, he sat slumped beside a dribbling vodka bottle, muttering.

*Check*, I thought, since that’s something every visitor to New York needs to see. After looking at this man for a moment or two, John remarked not on the smell or on the ridiculous Santa hat the man wore but on his hands. “Did you notice how beautiful they are?” he asked.

I took him to lunch at a deli in Carnegie Hill. Just as our orders arrived, I heard someone ask, “Can we get a picture?”

*Must I?* I thought, looking to my right and realizing that the person was talking not to me but to Kevin Spacey.

“Hasn’t he been cancelled?” John asked much more loudly than he needed to.

“It still counts as a star sighting,” I told him, thinking, *Check!*

We went to the Met and MoMA, then to the most garish of souvenir shops so that John could buy sweatshirts for his grandsons. In Times Square, he stood stock still and took photos of billboards as people who work in that neighborhood cursed the pair of us. I said to Hugh when we got home, “I even took him to see the tree at Rockefeller Center.”

That was huge, as no one in their right mind goes anywhere near Rockefeller Center from Thanksgiving to mid-January or so.

“What do you want, a medal?” Hugh asked.

I tried to remember that he was still in pain, and that, trapped inside for all but thirty minutes a day, he was going a little stir-crazy. It was hard for both of us, but became surprisingly easier when, shortly before Christmas, John returned to Washington State. On that morning, I accompanied Hugh to his surgeon’s office for a follow-up appointment.

“Any questions?” Dr. Reif asked after removing Hugh’s bandage to examine the wound.

“Yes,” I said. “Do you see any reason why he can’t cook Christmas dinner? We have nine guests coming, and he’s threatening to have it catered.”

The doctor replaced the bandage. “Oh, I think he’s up to it. That said, you might want to take a few shortcuts, use Stove Top stuffing rather than homemade, that sort of thing.”

“Stuffing *from a box?*” I said when we were back on the street. “Stuffing, *period?* As if we’d have turkey on Christmas Day! That man did *not* know who he was talking to, did he?”

“No, he did not,” Hugh sniffed, raising his cane to hail a cab. And, with that, he was back. Christmas nearly killed him, but no shortcuts were taken. He made a second entrée for the vegetarians and two desserts. Given a few more days, he might have even churned his own butter.

I left New York in early January to go back on tour, and when I saw Hugh again, six weeks later, he was fully recovered. Walking, swimming, going

up and down stairs. “It’s a miracle!” he said.

I once met a young man who’d discovered by accident that one of his kidneys was dead inside him. Doctors removed it, and when I asked what happened to the cavity he said that his other organs had shifted slightly to occupy it. That’s what happened to the space Hugh had filled with his pain. It’s not like we now devote it exclusively to politics or art appreciation, though both subjects grew larger, as did talk of our families, and our friends. As he became his old self again, the pleasantness of our life together just sort of swelled, crowding out everything but half a bottle of OxyContin and a really tall toilet seat now gathering cobwebs beside an aluminum walker in our building’s dank, uninviting basement. ♦

*David Sedaris has contributed to The New Yorker since 1995. His books include the essay collection “Happy-Go-Lucky.”*

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# Heir Ball: How the Cost of Youth Sports Is Changing the N.B.A.

*Pro sports have long seemed like the closest thing we have to a true meritocracy. But maybe not anymore.*

By [Jay Caspian Kang](#)

June 23, 2025



*Marcus Spears, Jr., left, with his father, a former N.F.L. lineman. His mother, Aiysha Spears, played in the W.N.B.A. Photographs by Peter Yang for The New Yorker*

American sports come with implied narratives. The story of baseball is fundamentally nostalgic, connecting us to childhood and to the country's pastoral beginnings. Football tells a story of manly grit, with echoes of the battlefield. Basketball is the city game, as the sportswriter Pete Axthelm called it half a century ago, and its chief narrative, for decades, was about escaping the ghetto. Religious metaphors run hotter in basketball than in other sports: when Spike Lee set out to make an ode to New York City hoops, he named his protagonist Jesus Shuttlesworth, for the N.B.A. Hall of Famer Earl (Jesus) Monroe; LeBron James appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* at the age of seventeen as "The Chosen One." Every tall and prodigiously skilled teen-ager feels like an act of God. And no sport, perhaps other than soccer, with its *pibes* and *craques*—the impoverished dribbling and juggling machines who hope to become the next Maradona or

Pelé—so deeply mythologizes the search for talent. The savior of your N.B.A. franchise might be getting left off his high-school team in Wilmington, North Carolina, or he might be selling sunglasses on the streets of Athens, Greece, to help his Nigerian immigrant parents make ends meet, or he might be living with his mother in a one-bedroom apartment in Akron, Ohio. You just have to find him.

At least, that was the story. On a recent episode of “Mind the Game,” the podcast that LeBron James hosts with the coach and former point guard Steve Nash, James spoke with the young N.B.A. superstar Luka Dončić about how different James’s hoops upbringing had been from that of kids today. On the playgrounds of Akron, James said, he would play 21, in which the person with the ball tries to score against everyone else. Such games taught him how to improvise, how to get around multiple defenders and create scoring opportunities out of nothing. James is a father of two sons, who mostly learned how to play basketball “indoors,” in a “programmed” environment, he said. They were taught the game by a fleet of coaches and other professionals. “I didn’t have a basketball trainer until second, third, maybe fourth year in the N.B.A.,” James went on. “My basketball training was just being on the court.” Last year, Dončić founded a nonprofit that focusses on youth basketball; in December, the organization published a report arguing that, as youth sports have professionalized, they have become more exclusive, sucking the “joy” out of the game.

A video clip of the podcast was posted on TikTok, and the top comment beneath it reads, “Lebron will be one of the last superstars that’s from the ghetto, basketballs like golf now it’s a tutelage sport.” That might not be entirely true; if a seven-foot-two teen-age Kareem Abdul-Jabbar were walking around any neighborhood in New York today, he wouldn’t get far without a wannabe agent stopping him in the street. But, putting aside such once-in-a-generation talents, the landscape of the league has subtly changed. James and his older son, LeBron (Bronny) James, Jr., made N.B.A. history last year by suiting up as teammates, for the Los Angeles Lakers. And, while that was a first, being a second-generation N.B.A. player is becoming almost unremarkable. In 2009, ten players in the league had fathers who’d played for N.B.A. teams; this past season, there were thirty-five. The future promises even more hoop legacies. The likely No. 2

pick in the upcoming draft is Dylan Harper, whose father, Ron, played with Michael Jordan on the Chicago Bulls. Lists of top high-school recruits include the names Anthony, as in Carmelo, and Arenas, as in Gilbert.

James's younger son, Bryce, has committed to play for the University of Arizona and could also reach the N.B.A. soon.

Genetics is the most obvious explanation: if your dad is six feet eight and your mom is six feet two, you stand a better chance of guarding Kevin Durant—or Durant's kids—than my children will ever have. But the N.B.A. has been around for almost eighty years, and the number of roster spots in the league has barely changed since the mid-nineties. If all that mattered were good genes, the influx of second-generation players would have shown up thirty years ago. Why the spike now?

To answer that question, one N.B.A. executive told me, you probably have to look at the economy of basketball development. The children of pros are generally wealthy and well connected; they have access to “better training, coaching, and the right people who can put them on the right lists,” the executive said. “Those early edges accumulate.” Increasingly, players are made as much as they are born, and making those players costs money. A star prospect requires a set of physical gifts that might as well be divine in origin. But, to compete now, he will also likely need the kinds of resources that you have to buy, and a small industry has arisen to sell them.

“It’s getting too expensive for some kids to even play, and the pressure to be perfect takes away the love for the game,” Dončić told me. “I think about my daughter and wonder what sports will feel like for her one day.” Jay Williams, a basketball analyst at ESPN who was the second pick in the 2002 N.B.A. draft, said to me, “When I came into the league in the early two-thousands, player development was mostly raw talent, repetition, and survival.” Now, he said, “development starts younger, it’s more specialized, and it’s driven by business.” Jermaine O’Neal, a six-time N.B.A. All-Star who recently founded a basketball-centered prep school, told me, “The cost of everything has changed.” O’Neal, like James, grew up with a single mother in a working-class area of a small city. Sports in general, O’Neal said, are “pricing out a percentage of athletes raised in communities like mine.”

The professionalization of youth sports has changed not only who reaches the N.B.A. but how the game is played when they get there. Watching the post-season this year, I found the level of play to be possibly higher than ever. But I felt little emotional connection to the game. Like many fans, I complain about the number of three-point shots that teams are taking, which turns so many games into an almost cynical exercise in playing the odds. Today's style is also more rehearsed, more optimized. This, I believe, can be traced to the way that the players are learning the game from an early age—to the difference between a childhood spent outdoors with your friends, competing against grown men, and one spent as a customer, with a cadre of coaches who push you only in the ways that you or, in most cases, your parents approve of.

“What used to be driven by someone’s hunger to improve, to figure it out and work to get better, becomes a job for a lot of these kids so early,” Steve Nash told me. This, he added, meant “essentially trading their enjoyment and motivation for a calculated approach that may be more suitable to young adults than young kids.”



*“You know that stupid thing that you said at a party when you were in your twenties that you thought made everybody hate you and it kept you up at night for years after? You were right to be concerned.”*

*Cartoon by Ivan Ehlers*

Does this shift also help explain why the N.B.A. has struggled to find its next superstars, successors to James, Steph Curry, and others of their generation? Perhaps. It's true that a number of today's best players—

Dončić, Nikola Jokić, Giannis Antetokounmpo—are from other countries, and many Americans crave homegrown heroes. But the leading players in this year’s finals, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, of the Oklahoma City Thunder, and Tyrese Haliburton, of the Indiana Pacers, are North American.

(Gilgeous-Alexander is from Canada.) The former plays a throwback game that involves a lot of slithering through tight spaces; the latter makes surprising, lightning-quick passes and fires his jump shots with an awkward motion that resembles an old man pushing his grandchild on a swing. Yet neither player has caught the public imagination in the manner of a James or a Curry or a Durant. When fans argue about the next face of the league, they usually bring up Anthony Edwards, the charismatic guard on the Minnesota Timberwolves, or Ja Morant, of the Memphis Grizzlies, who floats through the air like his bones are hollow before exploding into some of the most violent dunks the league has ever seen. They are the basketball equivalents of James Brown: undeniably virtuosic, always on point, but with so much confidence and brio that they feel unpredictable and capable of anything. The new N.B.A. archetype, in contrast, feels more like an “American Idol” singing machine—technically flawless and with unlimited range, but ultimately forgettable for everyone except the vocal coaches on YouTube.

What happened? Once, a serious basketball prospect might simply play on his local high-school team and then head off to college. Nowadays, he will likely attend multiple schools, seeking exposure, playing time, and competition. The trend began slowly, in the nineteen-eighties, when secondary schools with big-time basketball programs—notably, Oak Hill Academy, in rural Virginia, the alma mater of Rod Strickland, Anthony, and Durant—began recruiting the country’s best players. Soon, explicitly sports-centered schools emerged. The talent agency IMG purchased the Nick Bollettieri Tennis Academy, in Florida, and expanded it to include other sports, adding basketball in 2001. Five years later, Cliff Findlay, a Las Vegas businessman who had made his money in car dealerships, opened Findlay Prep, which was, arguably, just a basketball team—a dozen or so boys from all over the world who played games around the country and took classes at a private school a few minutes away from the gym where they practiced. Findlay Prep won three national high-school titles in four years and produced eighteen N.B.A. players. It closed down, in 2019, when

the nearby private school ended the partnership. Suddenly, Findlay's students had nowhere to go to class.

This spring, I flew to Dallas to visit Dynamic Prep, the school that Jermaine O'Neal founded in 2022. It has eleven students, all of them Division I basketball prospects. Monday through Friday, the students gather at a twenty-four-thousand-square-foot training facility just north of the city. In the morning, they sit in a classroom and take an N.C.A.A.-approved curriculum of online courses. Then they head to the gym for strength training and conditioning, before basketball practice in the afternoon.

When I arrived, Dynamic's student body was on the court. The team had recently been ranked tenth in the country by ESPN, helping it qualify as a late addition to the Chipotle Nationals, an annual tournament that unofficially crowns the country's high-school champions. But Dynamic would face long odds against more established programs, including IMG Academy and Montverde Academy, another Florida school that consistently produces N.B.A. draft picks. And practice wasn't going well. O'Neal, who is the head coach of the team in addition to being the school's founder, stood on the sidelines, his arms crossed. He is nearly seven feet tall, with a high forehead and a dimpled chin; he still appears to be more or less in playing shape. The team had been running half-court sets for nearly thirty minutes, but nobody was where he was supposed to be—not even Jermaine O'Neal, Jr., the team's small forward. O'Neal, Sr., had spent the first half of practice quietly simmering; then one player missed a defensive rotation and asked his flummoxed coach what was wrong. “Your demeanor!” O'Neal yelled, before ordering the player off the court. Another kid replaced him, and the ball was passed back to the top of the key. The drill began again.

O'Neal grew up in Columbia, South Carolina, and counts thirty-two siblings among his relatives. His mother taught him almost everything; he didn't meet his father until he was thirty years old. At seventeen, just a few years after growing about nine inches in three months, he became one of the youngest players ever to reach the N.B.A. when he was drafted in the first round by the Portland Trail Blazers. He was part of a generation who skipped college entirely; the sports media was largely skeptical of kids who turned down college scholarships in favor of N.B.A. dollars, and these teen-

agers often found themselves competing for playing time against men more than a decade older. O’Neal rode the bench for four years. But veterans on the team made sure that he understood his place on the roster and how to act like a professional. When he was traded to the Indiana Pacers, after his fourth season, he flourished.

O’Neal credits the playgrounds of his childhood with giving him instincts on the court and helping instill the resilience to endure what felt like an ignoble start to his career. He knows that the kids he coaches aren’t getting that kind of real-world instruction, and so he looks for ways to simulate it. “I’m taking a little bit of the hardship mind-set of how I grew up, and I’m bringing it to this new-school mind-set and mixing it,” he told me. The team’s intense practices and his focus on defense are partly meant to create an experience of adversity. He believes that his job is not only to prepare his players for what comes after Dynamic in college or in the pros but also to protect them from it. “Your coaches won’t love you—you’re just getting them closer to another win,” he yelled at one point during practice. “Once you get on campus, your parents will never be able to help you.”

In O’Neal’s view, a school like Dynamic is more sensitive to the needs of young athletes than traditional options are. Before founding the school, he created Drive Nation, a home for youth basketball and volleyball teams which was headquartered next to the car-rental center at Dallas Fort Worth International Airport. Drive Nation’s teams were affiliated with the Amateur Athletic Union, or A.A.U., an umbrella organization for club teams which, in the past twenty-five years, has become a major part of youth sports. At the time, O’Neal’s daughter, Asjia, was one of the top high-school volleyball players in the country. But, during her junior year, she told her parents that she was burned out: full-time school followed by practice and training—plus the travel and stress that came with playing for a club team and the United States youth program—had been too much. O’Neal began reading about other approaches to youth sports, and he talked to coaches in Europe. He learned about the Continent’s academy system, which plucks promising athletes at an early age and gives them a more specialized path, organizing their lives largely around their sport. Dynamic is his attempt to bring that system to the U.S.

Most of the kids at Dynamic won't make the N.B.A., but all of them could play for major college programs—and big-time college basketball is a lucrative endeavor in itself. In 2021, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that N.C.A.A. restrictions on the payment of student athletes were a violation of antitrust law; now student athletes can make money by selling their name, image, and likeness. Bronny James reportedly earned nearly six million dollars from such N.I.L. deals—with Nike, Beats by Dre, and other companies—before he left college. And you don't have to be LeBron James's son, or even a top N.B.A. prospect, to do well. R. J. Davis, a talented but undersized guard, spent five seasons at the University of North Carolina, becoming the second-highest scorer in the program's history; he may not get an N.B.A. paycheck anytime soon, but he racked up at least twenty-five N.I.L. deals last year, which paid him more than two and a half million dollars. Players like him are staying in college longer than before, and many of them move around to pursue the best and most profitable opportunities by registering with the N.C.A.A.'s transfer portal, which notifies coaches at other colleges about the players who are newly available for recruiting. The day I visited Dynamic, the transfer portal had just opened up, and O'Neal informed his kids, early in practice, how many players had entered it. This, he was suggesting, is what they were up against: hundreds of young men vying for a limited number of spots that could be worth millions of dollars.

After practice, he gathered the team around him. "What do you all want?" he asked. The players hung their heads. "I'm going to be real with you," he said. "Today was not good enough." If the team hoped to succeed at the Chipotle Nationals, they would have to put in more effort. O'Neal pointed out that the number of players in the transfer portal had gone up since that morning. "Seven hundred in the portal now," he said. "It's a record. Every year, it's a fucking record." Then he repeated his question. "What is it you want?"

It's an old complaint, but it's still true: kids who have been given everything may end up lacking motivation. "I wish I'd had the access my kids have—the trainers, the recovery tools, the mental-health support," Jay Williams told me. "It's a smarter system now, but what I want to pass down to them is the hunger, the grit." O'Neal made more than a hundred and sixty-seven

million dollars in his playing career, and he has struggled to impart the lessons he learned in his childhood to Jermaine, Jr. “I had this thing where I’d say to him, ‘Man, you don’t understand how good you got it,’ ” he told me. “ ‘The only thing you’re missing is hardship. You fly on private jets. You drive a Range Rover. You’ve had a chef your entire life.’ I have literally missed meals. I’ve literally had one pair of shoes that were my school shoes, my basketball shoes, and, if I went to church, they were my church shoes.”

“I never wanted my kids to live like that, and I didn’t want to live like that,” he went on. “So I would ask Jermaine, Jr., ‘What are you starving for?’ And he couldn’t answer the question.” Eventually, Jermaine, Jr., came up with a response: he needed an emotional break from living in the shadow of both his dad and his coach. O’Neal has been trying to give him one.

Youth basketball is not an outlier in its trend toward professionalization. You can see the same story in countless aspects of American life. Fierce competition breeds cottage industries that promise advantages to the children of parents who can afford them. Those children crowd out their peers, and the path to upward mobility narrows. The kids playing sports at big-time college programs are examples of this trend, but so are many of the straight-A students who attend classes at those same colleges, whose parents may have paid for private tutors and consultants to help secure admission. Children from poorer families have to be extraordinary or they will fall behind.

The most highly touted prospect at Dynamic Prep, according to ESPN, is not Jermaine O’Neal, Jr.—the twenty-second-ranked small forward in the country—but another child of professional athletes. Marcus Spears, Jr., is the son of a retired N.F.L. defensive lineman and a former W.N.B.A. player, Aiysha Spears. June, as his parents call him, is six feet eight, with long arms and the lankiness of a teen-ager who is still growing. He can shoot from outside, defend at the rim, and trigger a fast break after a rebound. If he grows a few more inches, he’ll be the same height as Durant, one of his favorite players; his loping but graceful gait calls to mind a young Antetokounmpo. It may be ludicrous to invoke such superstars when discussing a kid who just turned sixteen, but scouting is an exercise in

imagination, one in which the most salient inputs are limitations—if a prospect has T. rex arms or shoots like he’s angry at the ball, his spectrum of possibility shrinks. June was averaging fewer than seven points a game, but he has uncapped potential: you can map his body, skills, and movements onto many of the best players in the N.B.A. He’s currently the third-ranked high-school sophomore in the country, at any position in the game.

He’s also, for now, younger and skinnier than most of his teammates. At practice, I watched him get pushed around while his father paced the sidelines. Marcus Spears, Sr., was a football star at Louisiana State University before playing eight seasons for the Dallas Cowboys and another for the Baltimore Ravens. He’s now one of ESPN’s premier football analysts. On TV, he is self-deprecating and exceedingly likable, but on the sidelines he was like every other anxious basketball dad: muttering to himself when June didn’t rotate fast enough on defense, staring morosely at the floor when June took a spill onto the hardwood. When June declined to shoot an open jumper, he yelled, “Take the shot!”

Later that day, I visited Marcus and Aiysha Spears at their seven-thousand-square-foot house in a gated community near where the Cowboys practice. Aiysha grew up in Detroit—“the city,” she told me, “not the surrounding areas”—and was reared, in her early years, by a mother who wanted her to become a swimmer. Her mother died when Aiysha was thirteen, and she decided to take up basketball, mostly playing for her local school teams, with some A.A.U., too. “I was travelling by myself to tournaments,” she told me. “My mother passed away, my father wasn’t in my life, and my grandparents didn’t know what to do, so they trusted my coaches to handle it and make sure that I was O.K. I would be in Indiana or Chicago, and they definitely couldn’t pay to come watch me play in a tournament. The hundred and fifty dollars or whatever it would cost to see me, that was our electricity bill.”

Marcus, whose extensive array of barbecuing equipment sat on the back patio, grew up in a blue-collar family in Baton Rouge. His mother was a telephone operator for Bell South, and his father worked as an electrician before getting a job at the Georgia-Pacific paper mill. Spears echoed the

other former pros I talked to when he described how he learned to play sports: “outside,” mostly in pickup games with older boys. Now he’s trying to teach toughness to his son. “I was super hard on June when he was young,” he told me. “I was looking at it from a prism of knowing what he was going to actually be. Like, ‘Your mom is six foot two, bro, and I’m a pro football player. She’s a pro basketball player. You’re going to be the one per cent of the one per cent of what you’re doing.’” He prodded his son to work harder, even cursing at him the way he knew June’s coaches someday would. “But I probably started a little too early with him, at seven or eight years old,” he said. “I still have to check myself at times now and realize he’s still fifteen years old, because when I was fifteen I wasn’t even close to what he is doing now.” Spears wants his son to succeed, and he knows that college sports have changed. “When I got to L.S.U., I was developing as a player,” he said. “Kids can’t sit on the bench and learn how to play anymore. They need to produce immediately or they’re gone.”

Kids who are serious about sports now don’t just spend hours practicing; they also spend hours building their brands. Today, just about every notable college prospect has dozens of tightly edited YouTube highlight reels and tens of thousands of Instagram followers. Top prospects used to meet one another at camps or at the annual McDonald’s All-American Game; they might have scanned one another’s names in the infrequent updates of high-school player rankings. Now those same players meet through social media and the booming youth-sports content business.

This is true across all kinds of activities. If you’re the best twelve-year-old chess player in a big city, you’ve probably competed in hundreds of online games against the other top twelve-year-olds across the world—you might even live-stream your matches and feed some of that content into the algorithms of TikTok and Instagram. Yogi Roth, an analyst at the Big Ten Network, has tracked the development of N.F.L. prospects for the past twenty-five years, and he believes that social media has fundamentally changed the experience of learning to play football. Roth played in college and coached for several years before going into television; in 2009, he became a producer and the host of “Elite 11,” which has been likened to “American Idol,” but for high-school quarterbacks. The show has featured sixteen future Heisman Trophy winners and was once a rare opportunity for

players at that level to meet one another and compete. Now those connections are made online. “They find one another early,” Roth said. “And then they all get on the same club team, which draws even more connections.”

There are benefits to this hypervisibility—scholarship offers, attention from skilled trainers and coaches. But it also attracts predatory figures and creates additional pressure. Cautionary tales abound. The canonical basketball example is Julian Newman, whose highlight reels went viral when he was a fifth grader and not yet four and a half feet tall. He was written up in the *Times* and featured on “Good Morning America”; an online marketing machine was built around him, much of it orchestrated by his father. But Newman was just five feet seven when he finished high school, and no big-time college program wants a tiny shoot-first point guard who might arrive with a long list of demands. He spent the next five years as a fading YouTube celebrity, challenging other content creators to one-on-one battles.



*The Spears family, in Texas.*

Marcus Spears, Jr., does not have a large social-media following, nor does he spend much time with influencers—relative to other top prospects, he has little online presence, which is mostly by design. “I’m not going to monetize my fifteen-year-old,” his father told me. “I’m not interested in him having three hundred thousand followers.” But he and Aiysha understand that this is a privilege: parents who need the sponsorship money will understandably want to turn the hype around their talented children into funds, and some may even view it as the best choice for their kids. Spears said that he and his wife can see the downsides of that attention because of their experiences as pro athletes. “Also, if I need to fly to L.A. because the best knee doctor is out there, I can do it,” he added. “But, if I wasn’t in this position, and monetization on Instagram was going to allow my kid to go to the best doctor, then I would do that for them.”

All the former pros I talked to were frustrated by the intensity of youth sports as it exists now, but they still participated in the system because, well, what good parents wouldn't do the same to insure that their children kept up with other talented kids? If I had a child who could potentially play basketball in college or the pros, I would pay for all the trainers everyone else was paying for—and then, if I could, I would send them to play at Dynamic for Coach O'Neal. Most people probably would. As O'Neal put it to me, "Wherever there's kids, there's parents. Wherever parents and kids go, they're going to spend money."

Not everyone at Dynamic, or at the programs it competes against, has money. The established schools offer scholarships; Dynamic is in an "incubator" phase, O'Neal told me, and so, for now, is not charging tuition. But the student athletes at these schools have all learned to play ball through careful instruction. In early April, a couple of weeks before the N.B.A. playoffs, the Chipotle Nationals began. The kids in these games had a long way to go, but they already played a facsimile of the pro game. Big guys shot threes, guards drove the lane and kicked the ball out for more threes. Gone are the days of novel high-school offensive sets or, at least on this level, wild invention.

More than a decade ago, I travelled to Oak Hill Academy to watch some practices. Most of the kids I saw went on to play big-time college hoops; the school drew a level of talent similar to Dynamic's today. But, watching Dynamic practice, I was struck immediately by how fast they moved; I felt almost as if I were watching a different stage of evolution. "The game has become faster, more positionless, and more physically demanding," Bill Duffy, a former N.B.A. draft pick and one of the top agents in the league, told me. "Players are training at a high level from a much younger age, and that's changed not only how they move but how they think about the game. The style of play has evolved to match the speed and specialization that comes with early development."

All that training has also led to a uniformity of play. "I absolutely hate it," Marcus Spears, Sr., told me. That sameness comes from learning the game in a controlled environment, he said. "I think that's why so many players from overseas are the top names in the N.B.A. now, because not only do

they learn the technical side—they play the game with the old-school principle of playing against people who are older than you.” At the turn of the century, there were thirty-six foreign-born players in the N.B.A. Last year, there were a hundred and twenty-five. The top European teens play in pro leagues, against veterans. “You develop instincts in those situations,” Spears went on. American kids, no longer learning on the playground, were losing theirs, he believed. “You hear N.B.A. players that have been in the league a while say these young players suck. It’s not that they suck—it’s just they can’t do anything if you don’t tell them to. You need to make reads in the game, you need to deviate away from the play because it didn’t work. Now everybody just looks around, like, ‘What do I do now?’ ” One coach told the authors of the report published by Luka Dončić’s foundation, “Players don’t know how to anticipate where the ball will fall because they’re so used to their trainers getting their rebounds.”

Steve Nash told me that his effort “to be creative and imaginative” as a player was driven in large part by what he didn’t know—and that, as much as he envied some of the tools that young prospects now have, constant training likely would have altered that. O’Neal, too, saw this as a problem with the way basketball is now taught. “They are literally training these kids like robots, and the players don’t have any feel anymore,” he said. “That’s why all the players look alike now. Hell, half these kids don’t even watch basketball—they watch YouTube.”

At the Chipotle Nationals, O’Neal’s focus on defense, at least, seemed to pay off. Dynamic’s first game was against the vaunted Montverde, and his squad jumped out to an early 12–2 lead, largely owing to the players’ defensive effort. June, who came off the bench, was conspicuously the tallest person on the floor and also conspicuously among the youngest. He finished the game with respectable numbers—five points, five rebounds, and a block in sixteen minutes—and Dynamic managed an upset. The next day, Dynamic blew out Link Academy, the second-ranked team in the country. (The most recognizable name on Link’s roster is Andre Iguodala, Jr., whose father is a four-time N.B.A. champion.) Dynamic won again in Round Three, reaching the finals against Christopher Columbus High School, a Catholic prep school in Miami. Columbus was led by Cameron and Cayden Boozer, the twin sons of the two-time N.B.A. All-Star Carlos

Boozer. In the title game, Cayden scored twenty-seven points, Cameron chipped in eleven with eight rebounds, and Columbus got another twelve rebounds from Jaxon Richardson, whose father, Jason, played fourteen seasons in the N.B.A. Columbus won by eighteen points, ending Dynamic's unlikely run.

There's no inherent reason that silver-spoon players have to produce an inferior product on the court. And a certain kind of basketball purist—the sort who hates any talk of narrative and is interested only in what happens between the lines on the floor—would roll his eyes at questions about where the handful of players who make the N.B.A. come from.

Still, let's indulge in one last metaphor. Basketball is like jazz in so many ways that the analogy has become a cliché. As Wynton Marsalis once wrote, "Both reward improvisation and split-second decision making against the pressure of time." Both are also Black art forms that require incredible discipline and a lifetime of study but which, when performed at their highest levels, encourage a freedom of expression that can take the audience into an ecstatic state. Every hoops fan can think of at least one such moment. For me, it was watching LeBron try to single-handedly beat the Golden State Warriors in the 2015 N.B.A. Finals after his two most talented teammates went down with injuries. James broke from the established tempo of the game and birthed a moment of ugly genius, walking the ball up the court, ordering his overmatched teammates around like a conductor, and almost breaking the spirit of their opponents, one of the best teams of all time.

Maybe this is nostalgia on my part. Perhaps athletes trained in state-of-the-art gyms can bring as much drama and charisma to the court as those who learned to play by trying to score against older guys on a run-down playground. But I'm not sure that basketball can survive as a major sport if it loses all connection to the narrative that has woven it so deeply into American culture. Basketball's past may not be as virtuosic or as technically sound as its future, but part of why we watch the game is to witness the come-up—the pain of losing followed by the moment when years of work produce an instant of ingenuity that finally gets the superstar to the top. And, because we are sentimental, we want to know that the

journey started on the blacktops of Akron, or in some dusty church gym in Indiana, or on the playgrounds of Coney Island. Every great American story is sentimental in the same way: instincts born out of struggle, the triumph of the schoolyard over the classroom, uncommon creativity driven by necessity. ♦



*[Jay Caspian Kang](#), a staff writer at The New Yorker, is the author of “[The Loneliest Americans](#).”*

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# How Donald Trump Got NATO to Pay Up

*The Administration is strong-arming European nations to do more on behalf of their own defense. Is the strategy working?*

By [Joshua Yaffa](#)

June 23, 2025



*“Trump’s election as President has been considered a bigger threat to our security than Putin’s invasion of Ukraine,” a former secretary-general said. “That’s embarrassing.” Photograph by Rafał Milach / Magnum for The New Yorker*

The headquarters of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, in Brussels, with eight crisscrossing glass-and-steel wings, was designed to resemble a set of interlocking fingers—a reference to what its architect called “the coming together of all nations in one common space.” Inside, the allocation of that space reflects certain geopolitical realities. The nine-person delegation from Iceland, the alliance’s only member without a standing army, occupies a half-dozen offices; France has a whole floor; Germany has two. The U.S. mission, with a staff of more than two hundred, representing a global force deployed in nearly a hundred and fifty countries, takes up an entire five-story wing.

One morning this spring, on an outdoor walkway that leads to what is known as the building’s Public Square, I passed a twisted knot of rusted steel, a remnant of the World Trade Center’s North Tower which was collected after the 2001 terrorist attacks. *NATO* dubbed the artifact the 9/11 and Article 5 Memorial, a testament to the sole instance in the alliance’s history in which its leaders have invoked the collective-defense clause in its founding charter. Article 5 is the core principle of the alliance, stating, “The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all.” During the next two decades, twenty-nine non-U.S. *NATO* militaries deployed soldiers to Afghanistan, more than a thousand of whom died.

When the *NATO* building was officially unveiled, in 2017, Donald Trump, as the recently elected U.S. President, gave a dedication speech for the Article 5 memorial. During his Presidential campaign, he had seized on the fact that, though *NATO* members had committed to spending two per cent of their G.D.P. on defense, only five of them were hitting that target. Trump called the situation “unfair,” saying at one rally, “We’re protecting countries that most of the people in this room have never even heard of.” In Brussels, he gestured at “the commitments that bind us together as one,” but never explicitly endorsed Article 5. Privately, he expressed disapproval of the *NATO* building itself. John Bolton, who was then Trump’s national-security adviser, recalled the President once saying, “All this glass—one shot from a tank, the whole thing would collapse.”

In 2022, after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, *NATO* formally identified Russia as the “most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area.” In response, its members pledged hundreds of billions of dollars in additional defense spending and deployed tens of thousands of troops to what the alliance calls its eastern flank—countries near Russia’s borders. The U.S. alone moved twenty thousand additional soldiers to Europe. But Trump has often expressed a more complicated view of Russian aggression, at times even seeming to treat the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, more as a potential partner than as a threat. On the campaign trail last year, he suggested that, if a *NATO* ally underspent on defense, the U.S. would not provide military support in the case of a Russian attack. “I would encourage them to do whatever the hell

they want,” he said of Russia. “You don’t pay your bills, you get no protection. It’s very simple.”

Since returning to the Presidency, Trump has sought to dramatically rewrite the terms of America’s commitment to European security. He is now pushing for member states to spend five per cent of their G.D.P. on defense. In February, during a visit to *NATO*, his Secretary of Defense, Pete Hegseth, said that European leaders “should take primary responsibility for defense of the Continent.” This spring, NBC News reported that the Trump Administration was preparing to move a sizable portion of American forces stationed in Europe to Asia and other regions, and that it might not fill the position of Supreme Allied Commander Europe, or *SACEUR*, *NATO*’s top military position, which has been held by an American since the founding of the alliance.

Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the former Prime Minister of Denmark, who was *NATO*’s secretary-general from 2009 to 2014, told me that the alliance is in an “existential moment,” on par with what it went through at the end of the Cold War. Only now, he said, “the tectonic plates moving beneath our feet are first and foremost in Washington, D.C.”

Trump’s chief interlocutor in *NATO* is its current secretary-general, Mark Rutte, who took up the job in October, after fourteen years as Prime Minister of the Netherlands. Rutte is fifty-eight, with rimless glasses, a sweeping side part, and a wide politician’s smile. He has long cultivated an image as a modest and hardworking public servant. Upon arriving in Brussels, he declined to live in the grand town house that has served as the secretary-general’s residence since the nineteen-eighties, preferring to stay in an apartment elsewhere in the city and use the official residence for meetings and receptions. Rutte’s relationship with Trump is informed by his instincts for cautious disagreement and diplomatic finesse. One of his advisers told me that the secretary-general believes his primary responsibility is to “keep the family together.” The U.S., the adviser went on, “is the member of the family we all need to stay safe.”



*"I think I would like to have a baby, if it was the right baby."*

*Cartoon by Barbara Smaller*

Rutte agreed to speak with me at the town house this spring, as he was preparing for a meeting with Kaja Kallas, the European Union's top diplomat. I joined him on a cream-colored couch in a sunny room facing a garden. A selection of cookies was set out; coffee was poured from a silver carafe. I asked Rutte how he planned to satisfy an American President who seems to scoff at the whole notion of collective security. Rutte was, as usual, in a chipper, buoyant mood. After a self-effacing take on his own job ("I always laugh to myself when anyone calls me secretary-general—that is a title usually reserved for Communist Parties"), he repeated a line he's used many times, in various forms, during the past few months. Trump, he assured me, is "totally committed to *NATO*."

The President, he went on, is merely saying something that Rutte himself has often told *NATO*'s member states: "If we want to stay safe from threats and adversaries like Putin or China or North Korea or Iran, then we have to spend more." The pressure from Washington, Rutte said, is an "opportunity" for *NATO* members to build the defense capabilities they have neglected for decades. "There is a realization in Europe that we have to shift some of the burden between what the U.S. is doing and what Europeans can do more of themselves."

In late June, Rutte will preside over a summit of *NATO* leaders in The Hague, his home town. The main subject will be new targets for defense

spending, but European leaders hope the Americans will clarify their own commitments to the alliance. At the official residence, I told Rutte that many of them had expressed concerns about the speed and scale with which the Trump Administration might draw down forces in Europe. “We agreed with the White House that there will be no surprises,” he said. “We’ll do it in a structured way.” He added, “I’m not responsible for everyone’s anxieties. I can take them into account, but I’m not led by them.”

Still, Rutte has attempted to minimize the opportunity for drama at the summit—proceedings will be kept short, and the final communiqué, expressing an agreed-upon conclusion, will be limited to a few paragraphs. The narrow focus is Rutte’s way of acknowledging the world-altering stakes. “This will be one of the most consequential *NATO* summits since the fall of the Berlin Wall,” he said. “To use Trump’s language, ‘huge.’ ”

The idea of a defensive alliance linking the United States and Europe began to percolate in the aftermath of the Second World War. European cities had been destroyed, their populations scattered; entire economies were on the brink of collapse. Across the Atlantic Ocean, however, the United States had become Europe’s de-facto hegemon. In 1946, Winston Churchill spoke of the U.S. as being “at the pinnacle of world power,” a position that came with “an awe-inspiring accountability to the future.”

The following year, President Harry Truman outlined the principles of what would become known as the Truman Doctrine, calling on “the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures.” The Soviet Union, in the confusion and wreckage left by the war, was wasting little time installing client regimes in Eastern Europe. Truman hoped that, with U.S. military and economic support, a fractured and war-weary Continent could both achieve peace and hold off the Communists. General Hastings Ismay, Churchill’s chief military adviser during the war, who became *NATO*’s first secretary-general, is credited with a remark that captured the alliance’s initial goals: “Keep the Soviet Union out, the Americans in, and the Germans down.”

With just fourteen articles, the North Atlantic Treaty, signed by twelve founding members in Washington, D.C., in April, 1949, is among the more concise documents of its kind. The United Nations charter has more than a

hundred articles; the treaty governing the European Union has nearly three hundred and sixty. But *NATO* was not concerned with fisheries law or judicial processes; its goals were both more limited and more profound—to turn the world’s bloodiest landmass into its most peaceful, and to usher in an era of prosperity and social welfare unprecedented in human history. The signatories agreed to “eliminate conflict in their international economic policies” and to maintain an “individual and collective capacity to resist armed attack.” Article 5, on collective defense, defined the alliance’s purpose. “For those who seek peace, it is a guide to refuge and strength,” the U.S. Secretary of State, Dean Acheson, said in a speech at the signing ceremony, held in the State Department’s auditorium. “For those who set their feet upon the path of aggression, it is a warning.”

From the outset, however, American leaders were wary of becoming permanently entangled in European security affairs. In 1950, Dwight Eisenhower, who had commanded Allied Forces in Europe during the Second World War, became *NATO*’s first *SACEUR*. He was adamant that the presence of U.S. troops in Europe should be a mere stopgap until European states could muster their own forces. “We cannot be a modern Rome guarding the far frontiers with our legions,” he wrote in 1951. Less than a decade later, Eisenhower, by then the U.S. President, lamented that American troops appeared destined to undergird peace in Europe forever. “The Europeans now attempt to consider this deployment as a permanent and definite commitment,” he told his successor as *SACEUR*, an American general named Lauris Norstad. They were, he added, close to “making a sucker out of Uncle Sam.”

The nuclear age added immense gravity to the American commitment. If war erupted with the Soviet Union, and *NATO* forces were quickly outmatched, the U.S. would be risking not only the lives of troops stationed in Europe but also the lives of people at home, who were now within reach of Soviet ballistic missiles. This uncomfortable fact gave rise to debates over the trade of Boston for Berlin. As Henry Kissinger, who would become Richard Nixon’s Secretary of State, put it, no American President was likely to risk the life of a housewife in Kansas to protect that of one in Hamburg. In 1966, Charles de Gaulle, the French President, pulled France out of *NATO*’s unified military command so that the country could develop its

own nuclear deterrent, with the proverbial button situated in Paris, not Washington. (France only fully rejoined *NATO* in 2009.) “There is an inherent tension in an alliance in which the major security provider is located three thousand miles away from where conflict is most likely,” Ivo Daalder, who served as U.S. Ambassador to *NATO* from 2009 to 2013, told me. “The core problem is the same today as it was in the Cold War.”



*A young conscript in the trenches of Operation Hedgehog, a large-scale international military exercise led by the Estonian Defence Forces. Photograph by Rafał Milach / Magnum for The New Yorker*

The collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and the fall of the Soviet Union, while an obvious victory for *NATO*, raised new questions about the alliance’s necessity. “I expected *NATO* to dwindle at the Cold War’s end and ultimately to disappear,” Kenneth Waltz, an influential political theorist of Realpolitik, later wrote. Instead, Waltz observed, *NATO* had become like the March of Dimes, which was initially founded to fight polio: “Having won the war against polio, its mission was accomplished. Nevertheless, it cast about for a new malady to cure or contain.” In the case of *NATO*, that meant extending the alliance to the newly free parts of Europe. “You could imagine *NATO* members deciding, Job’s done, let’s go home,” Daalder told

me. “But they thought, Wait a minute, *NATO* didn’t just deter war—it provided a security blanket for prosperity. If we did that for Western Europe, why can’t we do the same for Eastern Europe?”

For the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland, all of which entered the alliance in 1999, it wasn’t just the benefits of joining the global economy that looked attractive but also the promise of protection against Moscow. That was even more true for the Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—which joined *NATO* five years later, after being occupied by the Soviet Union for half a century. Among the new members, *NATO*’s mission became one of reassurance. “To bring about economic and political transformation, they couldn’t be worrying about security problems to their east,” Daalder said. “And, at the time, it felt like that project could be achieved relatively cost-free.”

Ahead of the 2008 *NATO* summit, in Bucharest, the Bush Administration strongly backed the ascension of Georgia and Ukraine to the alliance. Members in Central and Eastern Europe—united in their suspicion of Russia—supported the idea, but a bloc of *NATO*’s older members, led by France and Germany, were skeptical. They feared that the countries had not yet met the necessary political conditions and were wary of destabilizing relations with Moscow. During the summit, a compromise was hashed out. Rather than offer Georgia and Ukraine an actionable plan for membership, the alliance issued a declaration promising that they would “become members of *NATO*” in the indeterminate future. Putin became fixated on this promise, however unlikely it was to be implemented, as a prime example of what he considered Western encroachment on Russia’s sphere of influence. In hindsight, the declaration “put Ukraine in the worst possible position,” Daalder said. “It offered something to Ukraine that was completely meaningless but put it squarely in the crosshairs of the Kremlin.” Meanwhile, he said, the alliance was setting itself up “to appear to be making decisions on which it couldn’t follow through.”

The Supreme Allied Commander Europe is what’s known as a dual-hatted position. The person who holds the role also serves as the head of the U.S. European Command, so the *SACEUR* is, in other words, a commander for *NATO* and the U.S. at the same time. Strictly speaking, other *NATO*

members deal with the *SACEUR*. But the power and import of the role stems, in large part, from the occupant’s job at *EUCOM*. “*SACEUR* is the big man, the demigod, the embodiment of American military power in Europe,” a European diplomat stationed at *NATO* headquarters told me. General Philip Breedlove, who was *SACEUR* from 2013 to 2016, said that European diplomats and military officials would often visit his command headquarters, in Mons, Belgium, and tell him, “I’m not here to visit the *SACEUR*—I need to talk to the commander of U.S. European Command.”

In 2014, less than a year into Breedlove’s tenure, Russian soldiers without insignia on their uniforms—“little green men,” as they were popularly known—infiltrated and eventually occupied Crimea. *NATO* members in Eastern Europe pleaded for a meeting with Breedlove. “They were asking, ‘O.K., Mr. *SACEUR*, what are you gonna do? We’re next,’ ” he told me. “They were scared.”

Breedlove presented a range of possible options to *NATO*, none of which were adopted. The alliance operates according to consensus; an objection from any single member is enough to block an initiative. At the time, many European countries were still attached to the post-Cold War status quo, in which Russia was considered more of a trade partner than an adversary. France had an active deal worth hundreds of millions of euros to sell amphibious assault ships to Russia; Germany was the largest consumer of Russian gas in Europe and relied on those imports to fuel its manufacturing and industrial base. “There was quite a division,” Breedlove told me, between older members “who wanted to keep things, let’s say, *tranquilo*,” and the Eastern European states that joined in the nineties and two-thousands, “who were saying, ‘Invasion is imminent!’ ”

In the end, Breedlove came up with a compromise, not as the *SACEUR* but as the head of *EUCOM*. That March, with the approval of President Barack Obama and the Pentagon, he pulled U.S. F-15C Eagle fighter jets from a base in the United Kingdom to police airspace above the Baltic states. Within hours, the first planes were in the sky, while others waited in Lithuania to replace them, forming what is known as a combat air patrol. “The truth is,” Breedlove said, “most European forces were not ready for that kind of deployment, that fast.” Other *NATO* members, in particular

Denmark and the U.K., decided to join the mission and sent their own planes. “The rest of *NATO* got a bit anxious that they weren’t involved,” Breedlove said. After a few weeks, the air patrols became part of an ongoing *NATO* operation, still led by Breedlove, only now as *SACEUR*.

Later that year, *NATO* ran a simulation to see how long it would take European militaries to move reinforcements, especially armored brigades, in the event of a Russian advance. Fabrice Pothier, then *NATO*’s director of policy planning, told me that officials confronted a thicket of bureaucracy and regulations governing the movement of military equipment across European borders. “To get these brigades across Germany, it would take basically a year just to get the paperwork done,” he said. Jens Stoltenberg, who was then secretary-general, was incredulous. He had *NATO* planners create a map of Europe using three colors—red, amber, and green—to designate the amount of time required to move military forces across each member state. The result was “horrendous,” Pothier said. “It’s not that the Russians would win outright, but, rather, we would lose for what amounts to administrative reasons.”

That summer, at the *NATO* summit in Wales, leaders agreed on a new readiness plan, which increased troop rotations to Central and Eastern Europe and instituted new measures to improve coördination and efficiency. Members also pledged to spend at least two per cent of their G.D.P. on defense. At the time, only three countries—the U.S., the U.K., and Greece—met this threshold; three years later, as Obama was leaving office, Poland and Estonia brought the number up to five. Obama spoke of the two-per-cent benchmark as “a goal that we have consistently set but not everybody has met.”

According to *NATO*’s estimates, in 2016, the U.S. defense budget accounted for seventy-two per cent of total military expenditures among all *NATO* allies. On the campaign trail, Trump was arguing that, in the post-Cold War era, *NATO* had become “obsolete.” “Big statement to make when you don’t know that much about it,” he said, “but I learn quickly.” Most of his criticisms were about money. He told the *Times* that, if the U.S. was not “reasonably reimbursed for the tremendous cost of protecting these massive nations with tremendous wealth,” he would tell *NATO* allies,

“Congratulations, you will be defending yourself.” In April, 2017, three months into Trump’s Presidency, he hosted Stoltenberg at the White House. Stoltenberg told him, “We are already seeing the effect of your strong focus on the importance of burden-sharing in the alliance.” Trump then said of NATO, “It’s no longer obsolete.”

The following year, at the *NATO* summit in Brussels, Trump joined the assembled heads of state for breakfast, where he called out Germany’s gas trade with Russia. “It certainly doesn’t seem to make sense that they paid billions of dollars to Russia and now we have to defend them against Russia,” he said. He widened his critique to the rest of Europe, saying, “They’re delinquent as far as I’m concerned.”

The next morning, during a meeting with his top foreign-policy officials, Trump asked Bolton, his national-security adviser, “Are you ready to do something historic?” (When I spoke with Bolton recently, he told me, “I just knew this was going to be bad.”) Later in the meeting, Trump declared, “We’re out.”



*“I thought the show was only fine. I’m just standing up so I can leave faster and beat the traffic.”*  
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

That afternoon, before a session devoted to the prospective membership of Georgia and Ukraine, Bolton implored Trump, “Go up to the line, but don’t cross it.” At the session, Trump launched into another critique of European underinvestment in defense and said that the U.S. was ready to “go our own way.” Bolton told me, “If I was a Catholic, I would have been doing my rosary.” Seemingly out of the blue, Trump declared that the two-per-cent spending target should be raised to four. Stoltenberg cleared the room,

instructing only heads of state, ambassadors, and a handful of advisers to remain. “It was very important that the summit didn’t end in chaos,” he told me.

Rutte, then the Dutch Prime Minister, stepped in to pacify Trump. He suggested that the President look at the latest statistics on European defense spending, which was going up. “You can take credit for that, tell people it’s because of you,” Rutte told Trump, according to Timo Koster, a former Dutch diplomat and *NATO* policy official who was in the room. Trump quieted. “You could feel the relief,” Koster told me. Rutte, he said, “put the pin back in the grenade.”

At a post-summit press conference, a journalist asked Trump if he was considering a withdrawal from *NATO*. “I think I probably can, but that’s unnecessary,” Trump said. In the end, he cited an additional thirty-three billion dollars that *NATO* allies had promised to spend on defense—partly a reflection of budget decisions made before he became President—as vindication of his approach. “The United States’ commitment to *NATO* is very strong,” he told reporters. “The spirit they have, the amount of money they’re willing to spend, the additional money that they will be putting up has been really, really amazing to see.”

Bolton told me that Trump’s hostility to *NATO* was simple: “As he sees it, we defend you, we don’t get anything out of it, and you won’t pay—so what’s the point?” Bolton himself has little patience for what he called “the airy-fairy stuff of our shared ideals.” Instead, he argued, the alliance offers both a strategic buffer—“It’s better to fight in Poland than in New Jersey”—and a way to project American power. He brought up the fact that Iceland, a *NATO* member since its founding, has no military. An agreement from 1951 allows the U.S. to maintain a significant military presence on Iceland, a well-positioned staging point for the Arctic; in exchange, the U.S., through *NATO*, is responsible for Iceland’s defense. “Iceland spends zero-point-zero per cent of its G.D.P. on defense,” Bolton said. “Should we kick Iceland out of *NATO*? So you have no problem with Russia and China putting their own naval and airbases on Iceland once we leave?”

For many *NATO* countries, the election of Joe Biden as President represented a return to a calmer, more predictable relationship with the

United States. At the 2021 *NATO* summit, in Brussels, Biden referred to Article 5 as a “sacred commitment,” and spoke, like Trump, of the 9/11 attacks, only this time he completed the thought. “*NATO* stepped up and they honored Article 5,” he said. “And I just want all of Europe to know the United States is there.”

In February, 2022, little more than a year into Biden’s Presidency, Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Suddenly, *NATO* was faced with an actual land war in Europe. Individual member states dispatched military aid to Ukraine, an effort coördinated by the U.S. Defense Secretary, Lloyd Austin. (A *NATO* official close to Rutte told me that the Biden Administration “resisted quite robustly” the notion of other alliance members playing such a coördinating role.) *NATO* members, including the U.K., France, and Germany, increased the number of troops they had based in Eastern Europe. But the total number was still less than the twenty thousand soldiers the U.S. has sent, mostly to bases in Poland and Romania.

The deployments marked what a senior *NATO* official called a “fundamental shift” away from an organization designed for regional security missions—sending small numbers of troops to do stabilization operations, with logistics and intelligence provided by the U.S.—to one dedicated to collective defense. “You’re defending your own homeland, your own territory,” the senior official said. “And it’s that much more intense because you’re potentially going to have to deal with a nuclear-armed peer opponent.”

Germany, for example, committed to increasing its presence in Lithuania from roughly a thousand soldiers to a full brigade, eventually reaching nearly five thousand soldiers. More significantly, the troops were stationed there permanently, on rotations lasting several years—the first long-term basing of German troops beyond the country’s borders since the Second World War. “We haven’t done anything like this in seventy years,” Falko Drossmann, a member of the German parliament’s defense committee, told me. “And to be honest no one wanted us to.”

For years, Germany has invested only modestly in its military. Carlo Masala, a professor at the University of Bundeswehr, in Munich, told me of

a *NATO* exercise in 2021 in which the Bundeswehr, the German Army, deployed a brigade to Norway. “The rest of the German Army was left without winter gloves,” Masala said. “If you give the Bundeswehr a mission, they will fulfill it, but at the cost of readiness for the rest of the Bundeswehr.” Marcus Faber, the chair of the parliament’s defense committee, told me that, in the case of the brigade in Lithuania, “it may be hard for them, but it will be hard for the brigades in the rest of Germany, because they will be the ones giving up their equipment.”



*Two soldiers during Operation Hedgehog. Photograph by Rafał Milach / Magnum for The New Yorker*

Part of America’s outsized influence in *NATO* stems from what are known as strategic enablers, such as intelligence gathering and surveillance, targeting for long-range strikes, and air transport and air-to-air refuelling. “It’s not a question of whether or not you have enough bullets or tanks,” Julianne Smith, a former U.S. Ambassador to *NATO*, told me. “The enablers are the big systems that will allow you to use those types of weapons.”

According to *NATO*’s defense-planning principles, no one ally should provide more than fifty per cent of any given capability. But Rachel

Ellehuus, a Pentagon representative to *NATO* during the Biden Presidency, told me that the rule was regularly broken, with the U.S. providing, for example, the majority of heavy air transport and ground-based air-defense systems. The thinking, Ellehuus said, was “We’d rather you invest your limited defense dollars in something like fighter aircraft.” At times, the reliance has revealed vulnerabilities. In 2022, after Russia’s invasion, France prepared to move several hundred troops to Romania, but its military planners needed the U.S. to provide transport. The episode was “deeply troubling,” Smith said. “It’s not like we were asking them to deploy to the South China Sea.”

Europe’s biggest shortfall is in air defense. This spring, the Dutch chief of defense, General Onno Eichelsheim, told an audience at a panel on European security in Estonia that the Netherlands has only three Patriot air-defense systems—far fewer than is required to defend the entire country. In the case of a large-scale war, he said, “I can’t protect all the vital infrastructure in the Netherlands, so we have to make choices.” Amsterdam, Eichelsheim said, “is not important for me,” whereas Rotterdam is a major port and logistics hub. “So I’m going to protect that.” Germany has fewer than ten operational Patriot batteries at any one time, enough to cover the airspace over Berlin and one other city. “We can’t protect everyone,” Masala told me.

When Biden was President, deficiencies in European readiness did not always seem urgent. Constanze Stelzenmüller, an expert on transatlantic security at the Brookings Institution, told me that the “strategic mind meld” between the Biden Administration and European governments meant that both sides could convince themselves that America’s role in *NATO* could be largely preserved. “Let’s be fair,” Ellehuus said. “The U.S. didn’t disabuse other *NATO* members of the idea that it would underpin the alliance.” Liana Fix, an expert on Europe at the Council on Foreign Relations, tried to persuade Biden Administration officials to push Germany on defense issues. The response, Fix said, was “We don’t want to overpressure them. They should do it on their own time.”

Meanwhile, Fix also offered to help officials in the German Chancellery think through the implications of a possible second Trump Presidency. “We

can hold workshops, write papers—we should prepare somehow,” Fix told them. The response, she said, was “stonewalling.” She added, “They didn’t want to talk about it, afraid of it becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.”

The Biden Administration did, in fact, voice concerns that other allies were not spending enough or hadn’t developed sufficient defense capabilities. “They had a tone of frustration with people they thought weren’t pulling their weight,” a diplomat from a longtime *NATO* member state told me. “But they never issued direct threats. Rather, they appealed to a sense of allied kinship, that we should do better.” Inside the North Atlantic Council, the deliberative chamber in *NATO* headquarters, there was little action taken to, as the diplomat put it, “fireproof the house” for a second Trump term.

Some members of the U.S. Congress, however, were alert to the threat posed by another Trump Presidency. In December, 2023, Biden signed a bill that prevented any U.S. President from withdrawing the country from *NATO* without congressional approval. The legislation had originated in the Senate, where its Republican sponsor was Marco Rubio, who would go on to become Trump’s Secretary of State and national-security adviser.

Less than a month into Trump’s second term, Hegseth, the Secretary of Defense, visited *NATO* headquarters and told the other members that Europe needed to take charge of its own security. “Values are important,” he said. “But you can’t shoot values. You can’t shoot flags, and you can’t shoot strong speeches. There is no replacement for hard power.” Trump, he continued, “will not allow anyone to turn Uncle Sam into Uncle Sucker.” A Pentagon official said that John Healey, the British defense secretary, had seen a copy of Hegseth’s speech in advance. “He thought it would blindsight a lot of folks,” the Pentagon official said. “He asked to tone it down.” (A Pentagon spokesperson said, “Secretary Hegseth did not soften his planned remarks . . . nor was he asked to soften his planned remarks.”)

*NATO* ambassadors may have been alarmed by Hegseth’s language, but few were surprised by its central message. “It basically fit with what we thought would come one day,” the European diplomat said. “That the U.S. decides it cannot do everything everywhere.” When I asked Rutte about Hegseth’s speech, he brought up the acclaimed pianist Arthur Rubinstein: “You know what Rubinstein said—‘If I go onstage and I’m totally terrified, I cannot

play. But if I go onstage and don't have a little bit higher anxiety than when I was sitting at the dinner table, I will not be at my best.' " Rutte went on, "So there's always a reason for us all to have a slightly elevated heartbeat."

A day after Hegseth's speech, Vice-President J. D. Vance appeared at the Munich Security Conference, an annual gathering of Western politicians and leading defense officials colloquially known as "Davos with guns." The audience might have expected a speech outlining the new Administration's defense policy for Europe, or even a plan for ending the war in Ukraine. Instead, Vance delivered a nearly twenty-minute lecture on what he described as a culture of anti-conservative censorship in Europe. It increasingly appeared, he said, that the Continent's "old, entrenched interests" were "hiding behind ugly, Soviet-era words like 'misinformation' and 'disinformation'" to suppress anyone who "might express a different opinion, or, God forbid, vote a different way—or even worse, win an election." He mentioned a British man who was arrested while praying outside an abortion clinic; he also referenced Alternative für Deutschland, an ascendant far-right-wing party in Germany whose representatives were excluded from the Munich conference. "There is no security," Vance said, "if you are afraid of the voices, the opinions, and the conscience that guide your very own people."

Wolfgang Ischinger, a former chair of the Munich conference, described the reaction in the hall. "There was a degree of stunned silence," he said. "If we don't agree on what our fundamental values are anymore, why would America continue to offer us a security umbrella?" For European officials, the back-to-back speeches by Hegseth and Vance made it clear that Europe couldn't just wait out the second Trump term and hope for a course correction in four years. "This Administration sees us Europeans as decadent, weak, woke," the European diplomat told me. "What if what they really want is to undermine us? Honestly, the fact we even have to ask this question at all about a U.S. Administration already freaks a lot of people out."

In a sense, the Pentagon official told me, that was the plan. "It was all highly choreographed," he said. The Hegseth speech was meant to demonstrate that "the American security relationship with Europe is

changing—not ending, but it does need to change.” Vance’s address was designed to push back on the moralizing of European leaders about matters in the U.S. The Pentagon official noted that the European Parliament had publicly rebuked the Supreme Court’s 2022 ruling overturning the right to an abortion in the U.S. “You’re lecturing us about this at the same time you’re banning political parties and outlawing certain types of speech,” he told me. “It’s all deeply hypocritical.”

Several European officials I spoke to compared Vance’s speech to one delivered by Robert Gates, the Defense Secretary under George W. Bush and Obama, at the Munich conference in 2007. “NATO is not a ‘paper membership,’ or a ‘social club,’ or a ‘talk shop,’ ” Gates had said. “It is a military alliance—one with very serious real-world obligations.” Four years later, during a farewell speech in Brussels, Gates was even more blunt, warning of “dwindling appetite and patience” in the U.S. for European nations “that are apparently unwilling to devote the necessary resources or make the necessary changes to be serious and capable partners in their own defense.” Future U.S. political leaders, Gates said, “may not consider the return on America’s investment in NATO worth the cost.”

At the time, Gates’s message barely registered, whereas the speeches this spring led to a prolonged cycle of anguished debate. “Gates asked nicely as a friend and was ignored,” Gideon Rose, the former editor of *Foreign Affairs*, who has been researching U.S.-European security coöperation, said. “Vance acted like a dick and abused them and got everybody’s attention.” A. Wess Mitchell, a top official at the State Department during Trump’s first term, told me, “I don’t share the fear of some Europeans that the United States is out to abandon them, but if that fear leads them to finally take defense more seriously, then maybe it’s not a bad thing. I’ve yet to see anything else that works.”

Across Europe, governments have been announcing defense investments that dwarf those made in the immediate wake of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. In late February, after elections in Germany returned the center-right Christian Democratic Union to power, the party’s leader and presumptive Chancellor-elect, Friedrich Merz, said that the current U.S. Administration “does not care much about the fate of Europe.” As

Chancellor, Merz continued, “my absolute priority will be to strengthen Europe as quickly as possible so that, step by step, we can really achieve independence from the U.S.A.” Three weeks later, the German parliament voted to suspend the country’s so-called debt brake for defense spending, undoing a key pillar of German fiscal policy and freeing up hundreds of billions of euros for military expenditures.

A week after the German election, the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, visited the White House. At the time, the Trump Administration was attempting to negotiate a ceasefire between Ukraine and Russia, with terms that heavily favored Putin: Ukraine would concede all the territory that Russia had occupied and give up its effort to join *NATO*. Zelensky had rejected the proposal outright; in the Oval Office, Trump and Vance berated him. “Have you said thank you once?” Vance scolded. Afterward, the Administration briefly froze military aid to Ukraine. Within hours, the European Commission president, Ursula von der Leyen, proposed a plan to increase European defense spending by eight hundred billion euros.

Rasmussen, the former *NATO* secretary-general, acknowledged that European defense was entering a new era, which came with certain discomforts. But he welcomed the change. “For too long, we have relied on an old model that doesn’t work any longer,” he said. “Namely, a combination of cheap Russian energy, cheap goods from China, and cheap security from the United States.” In Europe, he added, “Trump’s election as President has been considered a bigger threat to our security than Putin’s invasion of Ukraine. That’s embarrassing.”

The Russian Army has suffered an estimated one million casualties since the invasion of Ukraine, and yet, because of the Kremlin’s accelerated conscription drive and recentering of the economy on the defense industry, it is now fifteen per cent larger than it was at the start of the war. Rutte often notes that Russia produces more ammunition in three months than the whole of *NATO* does in a year. Estimates vary for how quickly Russia could ready its forces to mount a challenge to *NATO*. Rutte has spoken of a time horizon of five years, though much depends on the scale of the attack. This spring, Eichelsheim, the Dutch chief of defense, said at the conference in

Estonia that, once the current phase of the war in Ukraine ends, Russia “will be capable of at least giving us a dilemma within a year.”

Putin’s ambitions aren’t necessarily dependent on military capability. “The goal of weakening *NATO* is key,” a high-ranking European intelligence officer told me. “If Putin makes the decision to pursue that militarily, they don’t need much regeneration time; the capabilities are basically there.” But, the intelligence officer explained, Putin would likely try a host of other measures—political influence, sabotage—before turning to raw military force: “We assess war is the last option.” In June, Bruno Kahl, the head of Germany’s foreign-intelligence service, told an interviewer, “There are people in Moscow who no longer believe that *NATO*’s Article 5 works. And they would like to test it.” Kahl continued, “They don’t need to send tanks for that. They just have to send ‘little green men’ to Estonia.”

The geography of the region would dictate Putin’s options if he wanted to pursue an attack. In Lithuania, Russian forces would likely try to close off the Suwałki Gap, a forty-mile stretch of land that separates the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad, on the Baltic Sea, from Belarus, a Russian ally that offers a staging point for its military. In Kaliningrad alone, Russia has permanently stationed more troops than Lithuania possesses in its entire armed forces. In Estonia, Russian forces could overtake the city of Narva, which is separated from Russia by a river, and march onward to the capital, Tallinn. A decade ago, in a series of war games run by *RAND*, it took Russian forces no more than sixty hours to reach Tallinn. Breedlove cautioned that the assessment needed updating. “That was before *NATO* started deploying capable forces forward,” he said. “And even more important than the number of people is the enabling kit that goes with them”—artillery, air defense, logistics, intelligence, and reconnaissance. “They’re quite prickly pears now,” Breedlove said of the Baltic states.

On a rainy afternoon in Tallinn this spring, I met with Hardi Lammergas, a lieutenant colonel in the Estonian Army, at the headquarters of the general staff. Lammergas was overseeing a large-scale exercise, code-named Hedgehog, to test the country’s defense plans. The Estonian Defence Forces had called up more than seven thousand reservists for the exercise, and a dozen other *NATO* countries and allies had also contributed forces. Sweden

sent a battalion from a base in Latvia; France and the United Kingdom deployed reinforcements to Estonia by sea and on heavy trucks, as they would in the case of a real conflict. Lammergas explained that the exercise was premised on an end to the war in Ukraine. “If Russia wins, they emerge bruised but confident, and they might have the appetite to test *NATO* coherence,” he told me. “Or they lose—which also means they’re bruised, but also angry, and they’ll want payback. The most logical place to try will be in *NATO*’s weakest spot: the eastern flank in the Baltic states.”



Cartoon by Roz Chast

The armed forces currently stationed in the region are meant to repel a limited Russian attack. In a larger invasion, like the one envisioned in Hedgehog, *NATO* forces would likely choose to cede ground and try to hold defensible positions until reinforcements arrived—presuming Article 5 had been triggered—and mount a counterattack. This is the strategy Ukraine pursued in the early days of the war, especially around Kyiv, when Russian units quickly advanced and then became bogged down, cut off from their logistics and vulnerable to drone and artillery strikes. But Estonia is less than a tenth the size of Ukraine; there is only so far defending troops could pull back before they either surrendered the capital or ended up in the sea. “Our strategic rear is Sweden,” Lammergas said.

I paid a visit to an Estonian infantry battalion, whose soldiers were defending the Valgejõgi, a river fifty miles from Tallinn, which, for the

Hedgehog exercise, was used as a proxy for the Narva River, on the Russian border. “If Russia wants to enter Estonia, they need to cross the river line,” Eero Aija, an Estonian officer who served multiple tours in Afghanistan, told me. “That’s obviously their first objective.” His radio crackled with English voices; Estonian soldiers communicate in English, for the benefit of the British soldiers embedded in their brigade, but also as a training measure for a wider conflict, when units from dozens of *NATO* militaries would presumably be in the fight. Estonia effectively has no air force and, despite its position on the Baltic Sea, a navy of less than ten ships, most of which perform police and coast-guard functions. “There are no Estonian defense plans and *NATO* defense plans,” Aija said. “*NATO* defense plans are Estonian defense plans.”

Deeper in the woods, the Estonian forces were pushing through dense vegetation, “trying to get behind the enemy,” Kristjan Muuli, an Estonian captain, told me. Drones were circling overhead. Muuli, whose grandparents were banished to Siberia in the early forties by Soviet authorities, said that Estonia was incorporating lessons from the war in Ukraine: don’t make yourself an easy target (“Always park vehicles well away from defensive positions”); be aware of counter-drone strikes (“Don’t launch the drone from your position—go six, seven hundred metres away”); keep batteries on hand (“We always have to charge them—we never have enough”). Every now and then, a drone would drop a training grenade. Muuli tells the soldiers under his command, “If you’re within a fifteen- or twenty-metre radius, you’re dead.”



*Mark Rutte, the secretary-general of NATO. Photograph by Jimmy Kets for The New Yorker*

The next day, I travelled to the southeast, where a sprawling area of thick forest and farmland, wet and muddy with rain, had become a training ground. A mobile rocket launcher was parked behind a barn; soldiers in combat gear studied maps in the aisle of a village grocery store. The idea was that, in case Russia invades, the locals and *NATO* soldiers should be accustomed to dealing with each other. Near a copse of pine trees, I met Brian Looper, a captain in the U.S. Army. He was commanding a company of armored fighting vehicles, which have been stationed in Estonia since February; for the exercise, Looper's company was on the "red" team—that is, the invading army. (The defending side was the "blue" team.) "I tell my guys to pay attention to these roads, this mud, these forests," Looper told me. "This is the ground where, if need be, you're meant to fight."

Looper was talking over the chugging rumble of a Bradley command vehicle. He pulled out a laminated map and gave an update on his unit's movements to William Branch, a U.S. Army lieutenant colonel. Branch had come to Estonia from Poland, where he heads a *NATO* multinational battle

group that is integrated into a Polish brigade. Around a thousand soldiers, from Croatia, Romania, the U.K., and the U.S., serve under him. Branch is subordinate to a Polish general. “In the event of an Article 5 scenario,” he told me, “I would fall underneath my *NATO* commanders and move out to the Suwałki Gap.” During training missions, he added, he and the soldiers under his command often call out, “*Dla Polski*”—“For Poland.”

As part of the red team’s objective of capturing southeastern Estonia and isolating Tallinn, Looper’s units had taken a series of key bridges and transport crossings. Early on, they also took out a mortar team of French troops. “We pissed them off pretty bad,” Looper said. The red team benefitted from what Branch called a “capabilities overmatch”—they had more heavy armor and more long-range fire than the defenders. “That’s very realistic,” Branch said, given the presumed capabilities of a Russian invasion force. But the point of Hedgehog wasn’t for the blue team to prevail; it was to identify vulnerabilities in the country’s defenses and correct them. Branch told me, “You want to learn those lessons in exercises, not during an actual fight.”

In March, when Rutte visited the White House, Trump greeted him warmly. “It’s great to be with a friend of mine,” Trump said, adding that Rutte was doing a “fantastic job” as secretary-general. Rutte praised Trump for his efforts to broker a ceasefire in Ukraine. “You broke the deadlock,” he said. “I really want to commend you for this.” He mentioned the upcoming *NATO* summit in The Hague, saying, “I’d love to host you there in the summer and work together to make sure that it will be a splash, a real success, projecting American power on the world stage.”

Since the election, Trump has repeatedly stated his desire for the U.S. to annex Greenland, a territory of Denmark. “I think it will happen,” he told a journalist during Rutte’s visit. “I’m sitting with a man that can be very instrumental.” He added, pointing to Rutte, “We will be talking to you.” Rutte appeared unruffled at the suggestion that he might help one *NATO* member annex the territory of another. “When it comes to Greenland,” he said, unfurling a tight smile, “yes or no, joining the U.S., I would leave that outside this discussion, because I don’t want to drag *NATO* in that.” But, he added, Trump was “totally right” when it came to his concerns about

security in the Arctic and the need to address Chinese and Russian activity in the region. When I asked Rutte about the exchange, he said, “If I want to be effective, in some discussions, it’s better for me to stay quiet when the cameras are rolling.”

The White House visit revealed a central dilemma facing not only Rutte but the alliance itself: even as Europe rearms, it is impossible to contemplate replacing the United States as the guarantor of Europe’s security. Alienating an American President, especially one as prone to impulsive outbursts as Trump, isn’t an option. “We try to cut him a lot of slack,” a diplomat from northern Europe stationed at *NATO* headquarters said of Rutte. “He has a very difficult task and, well, perfect might not be on the menu.”

But it’s also true that Rutte largely agrees with Trump that Europe should become more self-reliant in matters of defense. “It’s not simply that Trump became President and all of a sudden people woke up,” he said. Rutte brought up the U.S. air strikes in Yemen in March, a response to a sustained campaign of attacks by Houthi rebels on international shipping vessels in the Red Sea. Jeffrey Goldberg, the editor of *The Atlantic*, was accidentally added to a Signal group of Trump Administration officials who were coördinating the strikes; he later published screenshots of the conversation. “I just hate bailing out Europe again,” Vance wrote in one message. Hegseth replied, “I fully share your loathing of European free-loading. It’s PATHETIC.”

In advance of the strikes, Rutte got a call from Mike Waltz, who was then Trump’s national-security adviser. (“It’s a tradition,” Rutte said. “The U.S. informs me as secretary-general before these big things start.”) Rutte’s reaction was not dissimilar to Vance’s. He knew that the shipping lanes in the Red Sea were used more by European companies than by American ones. “So why is the U.S. doing this?” Rutte recalled thinking. “Well, because the Europeans can’t.” The view is widely shared across the Continent. When I asked a top European foreign-policy official about the Signal chat, the official replied, “Frankly, it *is* an issue that only Americans are able to carry out an operation like that. It doesn’t seem healthy.”

In the meantime, most European governments have embraced the fact that they will have to spend more on defense. Twenty-two *NATO* members now

meet the two-per-cent target, compared with just eight in 2021. Poland is expected to spend 4.7 per cent of its G.D.P. on defense this year. (The countries closest to Russia tend to spend the most on defense, rendering Trump's repeated claim that he will assist only those *NATO* members who meet the alliance's spending pledges functionally moot.) Spain, with the lowest spending in all of *NATO*, at 1.24 per cent of its G.D.P., has indicated it will hit the two-per-cent threshold this year, after previously promising to do so by 2029. Even Iceland has formed a parliamentary committee to revamp the country's defense policy. (Last year, Russia spent an estimated seven per cent of its G.D.P. on defense.)

The Trump Administration has yet to clarify its plans to remove troops and equipment from Europe. "The United States is going to start pulling back forces, probably this year," the Pentagon official said. "But I want to be clear: that doesn't mean a complete withdrawal." The official suggested that U.S.-force levels in Europe could end up resembling what they were before Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea. "It has to be orderly," the official said. But, he added, "it's not like we're withdrawing from Iraq or Syria or Afghanistan—if we don't replace the rotational brigade in Romania, does that mean the Russians are going to be in Bucharest the next day? No, that's absurd."

Trump's current Ambassador to *NATO* is Matthew Whitaker, a former U.S. Attorney from Iowa who, after a failed run for Senate, served as an acting Attorney General in Trump's first term. "He's a great guy, folksy, personable," the diplomat from a longtime *NATO* member state said. "His job is clearly to deliver on defense spending."

In May, at the defense conference in Estonia, Whitaker told a roomful of Europeans, "I'm going to shoot with you straight." The U.S. was going to reduce its troop presence in Europe, and Europe was expected to insure its own security. "This is going to happen, and it's going to happen now," he said. "This is going to be orderly, but we are not going to have any more patience for foot-dragging in this situation." Later, Bruno Tertrais, the deputy director of a French think tank, quipped onstage, "Saying 'orderly' and 'Trump' in the same sentence is only mildly convincing."

After the Trump Administration set its five-per-cent target for *NATO* members, Rutte voiced support for a spending formula in which countries would agree to a target of three and a half per cent for strict military spending—tanks, missiles, new troop formations—and an additional one and a half per cent for infrastructure projects that contain a military component, such as trains, roads, and cybersecurity. The proposal will be the subject of the upcoming *NATO* summit in The Hague. Whitaker has endorsed the new terms, though he has warned that the smaller category of spending can't be “a grab bag for everything that you could possibly imagine.”

This spring, multiple *NATO* officials told me that any sense of anxiety about America’s contribution to European security was unfounded: after all, nothing has changed in terms of the allocation of hard power. “It’s been several months and not a single American boot has left these shores,” the official close to Rutte said. “If they intended a completely chaotic, mass withdrawal, then what are they waiting for?” In May, Ischinger, the former chair of the Munich conference, travelled to Washington for another event with Vance. This time, Vance came off as conciliatory, saying, “It’s completely ridiculous to think that you’re ever going to be able to drive a firm wedge between the United States and Europe,” whom he described as “on the same civilizational team.” Trump recently nominated Alexus Grynkevich, a lieutenant general in the U.S. Air Force, to serve as the next *SACEUR*. The job will stay filled by an American after all. “It was never a real thing,” the Pentagon official said of rumors that the U.S. might hand over the role.

In June, I talked to Whitaker about his mission in Brussels. For the past seventy-six years, he said, *NATO*’s other members “have oftentimes relied on the United States to pay for European security.” Trump “wanted to equalize that relationship and sent me over here to do that.” This was not an ultimatum, Whitaker said. “We’re just pointing out that some countries are still underspending based on their commitments from eleven years ago. And we have to be honest with people—we have to say this is no longer acceptable.” He spoke of Russia’s “hot war” in Ukraine and America’s “hundred-year competition” with China: “This is not a time to be comfortable.” He sounded like a champion of *NATO*, rather than a critic.

His boss feels the same way, he said. “NATO is going exactly in the direction that President Trump would like.” ♦



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# A Medical-History Museum Contends with Its Collection of Human Remains

*Supporters saw the Mütter’s preserved fetuses, skulls, and “Soap Lady” as a celebration of human difference. New management saw an ethical and a political minefield.*

By [Rachel Monroe](#)

June 23, 2025



*The Mütter is crowded with specimens of physical anomalies and pathologies: wax models of wounds, stillborn fetuses in jars, slices of faces suspended in an alcoholic solution, a wall of nineteenth-century skulls. Photographs by Jonah Rosenberg for The New Yorker*

When Anna Dhody was growing up in Philadelphia, in the nineteen-eighties, her mother used the city’s museums as a kind of babysitter. “She would just drop me off at the Penn Museum and be, like, ‘Don’t touch anything, I’ll meet you at the totem poles in an hour,’ ” Dhody told me. One

day, when she was in elementary school, her mother took her to the Mütter Museum. “I don’t think she knew what she was getting into,” Dhody said.

The Mütter, a museum of medical history, is stranger and less clinical than that description implies. Its dimly lit rooms are crowded with specimens of physical anomalies and pathologies: stillborn fetuses in jars, slices of faces suspended in an alcoholic solution, a wall of nineteenth-century skulls. One display case features the livers of Chang and Eng Bunker, conjoined twins who were widely exhibited as curiosities during the nineteenth century; in another is the corpse of a woman whose fat transformed after death in an unusual form of natural preservation called saponification. The Soap Lady, as she is known at the Mütter, has rough, blackened skin, and her mouth is open, as if in a scream. A banner outside the museum, which was founded more than a hundred and sixty years ago, reads “Disturbingly informative.” Every so often, a visitor faints.



*“At what point are we just cosplaying ourselves from the nineties?”*  
Cartoon by Emily Flake

Dhody is fifty, with a mobile, expressive face that she uses to comic effect. When she talks about her early visits to the Mütter, her eyes widen in wonder. “It was just so . . . interesting,” she said. On a trip to Belize as an undergraduate studying archeology, she excavated her first grave and was hooked: “You could read the bones, and it was like reading another

language.” She went on to get a master’s degree in forensic science, intending to become a crime-scene investigator, but then the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, at Harvard, hired her to help it comply with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, which requires institutions to return Indigenous human remains and other culturally significant items to tribal nations. In her late twenties, she interviewed for a short-term position at the Mütter. She ended up working there for nearly twenty years, most recently as the museum’s curator. “I was there before we had security cameras, and I would walk around in the mornings and talk to the babies in the jars and ask them how they were doing,” she said. “It’s not for a lot of people. But if it’s for you it’s really for you.”

During Dhody’s tenure, staff and invited guests often ate lunch at a communal table in the basement, under a large inflatable pteranodon. “It became a thing you didn’t want to miss,” Robert Hicks, a former director of the museum, said. They made Monty Python references and discussed the news or the reproductive systems of fish. People drawn to the Mütter often share a frank, forensic fascination with the human body and the stranger aspects of science. When the writer Mary Roach went to visit the Mütter offices, Hicks greeted her with one of his pet leeches hanging from his arm. “I asked what its name was, and he told me that it depended on the week, because apparently leeches change genders,” Roach recalled. “I just thought, This is my kind of place.”



*“Specimens are the ways in which physicians in the nineteenth century were communicating ideas,”*  
*Erin McLeary said.*

Dhody was proud of her work cultivating people willing to donate their own skeletons or other body parts to supplement the museum's core collections, which mostly date from the nineteenth century. One of them, Robert Pendarvis, is a goateed man in his early sixties with a no-bullshit air. When Pendarvis was a young man, his ring size expanded from ten to fourteen, and his forearms got so beefy that his fellow construction workers called him Popeye. He went to see a former high-school classmate who had become a cardiologist. "Everyone else from high school looks the same, just older," his friend told him. "But your face looks completely different from how it does in the yearbook." Pendarvis was eventually diagnosed with acromegaly, a rare endocrine condition in which a pituitary tumor produces growth hormone into adulthood—"the gift that keeps on giving," as Pendarvis put it.

Pendarvis learned that the Mütter had a skeleton of someone with acromegaly on display. After visiting it, he decided that he wanted to donate his own. It seemed like a fitting tribute to his extraordinary body and the ways it had shaped his life. When he looked into the idea, though, it sounded complicated. "There's a whole process—you gotta find someone that'll boil the skin off your bones, yada yada yada," he said. A few years later, he was preparing for a heart transplant. When he asked Dhody if the museum would be interested in his original heart, "she just freaked," he said. By the time the surgery took place, Pendarvis's heart was roughly the size of a football, more than twice the average. When the heart was delivered to the Mütter via FedEx, Dhody filmed an unboxing video and posted it on YouTube. She told me, "There's no other place like the Mütter is—or was."

It's well understood among museum professionals that people like to look at bodies. "We did a mummy exhibit in San Diego and attendance tripled," Trish Biers, a former associate curator at the San Diego Museum of Us, told me. She now manages a human-remains collection at the University of Cambridge, where the skeleton of a Roman woman, on display in a lead-lined coffin, is one of the most popular attractions.

But such exhibits are coming under increased scrutiny. A recent wave of institutional reexaminations, accelerated by George Floyd's murder, in

2020, has had a “seismic” impact on museums holding human remains, according to the anthropologist Valerie DeLeon. It’s increasingly acknowledged that racism, colonialism, and eugenics have played a role in whose bodies end up on display. High-profile news stories have exposed the ugly provenance of items in élite institutions. The Smithsonian held a “racial brain collection,” amassed by a curator in the early twentieth century, purporting to prove the superiority of white people; the University of Pennsylvania owned hundreds of skulls collected by a man who came to be known as “the father of scientific racism.” Ethically questionable behavior isn’t just an artifact of the past: as recently as 2019, an anthropologist at Penn was using the remains of someone killed in the 1985 police bombing of the *MOVE*headquarters as a teaching tool, without the consent of the family. (The anthropologist has said that the bones had not been conclusively identified.)

A new movement called for taking human remains that had not been obtained with explicit consent out of public view. In the past few years, the Rhode Island School of Design has returned a mummy to its sarcophagus, and the Hunterian, a medical museum in London, has replaced the seven-foot-seven skeleton of Charles Byrne, “the Irish Giant,” with an artwork. After consulting with native groups, Chile’s National Museum of Natural History has substituted realistic 3-D reconstructions for mummified bodies. Repatriation, which used to be confined largely to Indigenous communities, is now being considered more broadly; the Smithsonian’s Human Remains Task Force recently recommended that any of the collection’s tens of thousands of remains that were taken without permission—which is to say, the vast majority of them—should be offered “to their descendants and descendant communities, organizations, and institutions.”

In 2023, Dhody was on medical leave for a shoulder injury when she heard from colleagues that things were changing at the Mütter, too. Many specimens in the museum were obtained during surgeries and autopsies at almshouses, prison wards, and military field hospitals; few were collected with a contemporary understanding of consent. The museum had a new C.E.O., Mira Irons, and a new executive director, Kate Quinn, who told interviewers that she wanted the Mütter to focus more on well-being and

public health. She instructed the staff to avoid “any possible perception of spectacle, oddities, or disrespect of any type.”

By the time that Dhody returned from leave, the museum’s leadership was midway through an ethical review of the collection’s provenance. But Dhody had already anticipated a different kind of risk. “In my opinion, one of our greatest threats is our own fan base if they feel the museum is being somehow threatened,” she cautioned in an internal memo she sent her bosses. “I don’t think it has been properly articulated how passionate these individuals are.”

In 1831, a recent University of Pennsylvania medical-school graduate named Thomas Mutter travelled to Paris, which was then a center of the emerging field of plastic surgery. When he returned to Philadelphia, a year later, he added an umlaut to his name and irritated his colleagues with his incessant chatter about the superiority of French surgeons.

In the early nineteenth century, surgery was performative and brutal. “Time me, gentlemen, time me!” a British surgeon bellowed to his students before amputations. (Once, during a hasty operation, he accidentally cut off an assistant’s fingers.) At the University of Pennsylvania, the nation’s first medical school, patients who agreed to be operated on in public could get their care for free, and physicians sometimes traded insults with their colleagues during operations, according to a biography of Mütter, by Cristin O’Keefe Aptowicz. Mütter was known for his colorful silk suits and for his skill in treating patients deemed “monsters”: people with proliferating tumors, say, or severe facial burns. The theatrical nature of the work suited him but, perhaps because of his own ailments—he was ill for much of his life and died in his late forties—he “appeared at operations to be painfully sympathetic with the suffering of the patient,” a fellow-physician noted. When anesthesia came into vogue in this country, in the eighteen-forties, he was the first surgeon in Philadelphia to use it.

Like many physicians of his time, Mütter amassed specimens for use in teaching, including realistic wax and plaster models and preserved human tissue and bones. After his death, in 1859, he left his collection—some two thousand objects—to the College of Physicians of Philadelphia, a fellowship organization for doctors, with the stipulation that it be presented

as a museum. Mütter's bequest was eventually supplemented by donations from other physicians and scientists. One otolaryngologist provided thousands of objects that he had extracted from patients' throats and lungs: toys, coins, keys, and a medallion that read "Carry me for good luck." Joseph Leidy, a paleontologist and an early enthusiast of forensics—he was reportedly the first person to help solve a murder using a microscope—was a prominent contributor. In the eighteen-seventies, he obtained the skeleton of a seven-foot-six man and the corpse of the saponified woman, which he acquired, as he noted on the receipt, via "connivance." (Leidy donated his own brain to the American Anthropometric Society, as did Walt Whitman.) The Mütter collection came to include Grover Cleveland's jaw tumor, a piece of one of John Wilkes Booth's vertebrae, and slides of Albert Einstein's brain.



*Gretchen Worden, the director of the museum until 2004, said, "It's everything. It's art, it's science, it's bones, it's anatomy, pathology, it's contemporary medicine."*

This spring, I visited the Mütter, situated inside the grand Beaux-Arts headquarters of the College of Physicians, which still owns the museum. Erin McLeary, who was hired as the senior director of collections and

research last year, met me in the lobby. We walked past high-ceilinged reception rooms toward the entrance to the Mütter, which was marked by a disclaimer. “You are about to enter a gallery containing human remains,” it cautioned. “If you wish to avoid this, please do not enter.”

McLeary wore a silk scarf tied around her neck and had an air of scholarly flutter. “Specimens are the ways in which physicians in the nineteenth century were communicating ideas,” she told me. “There’s a repeated phrase they use—that these are ‘nature’s books.’ As in, they can be read, they reveal information.” Around the nineteen-thirties, as the science of pathology evolved, such collections began to fall out of favor. “People are looking less at gross pathology—the big specimens—and more at microscopic changes. And there are different techniques for preservation,” McLeary said. We paused in front of a pale, fleshy object in a glass jar blurry with condensation. “Like this—this has lost some fidelity, right?” McLeary leaned in to read the label more closely; it was a foot.

Many institutions got rid of their specimens, likely disposing of them as medical waste or, in some cases, passing them on to the Mütter. Collections of pathological specimens came to be associated more with P. T. Barnum-style sideshows than with medical scholarship, although the two categories hadn’t always been clearly delineated. “There’s been a lot of resistance to the idea that medical schools even had collections like this,” McLeary said. “Someone at Penn was, like, ‘I don’t believe we ever had a collection like the Mütter’s.’ ” (They did.) “I think they’ve been memory-holed.”

The Mütter might have become an obscure collection, of interest mostly to historians, if not for a woman named Gretchen Worden. In 1974, Worden wrote to the Mütter’s curator asking for a job. She had a degree in anthropology from Temple University and no full-time work experience. “As for vital statistics, I was born in Shanghai, China, on September 26, 1947. I have since grown to a height of five feet, eight and three-quarters inches and can get things down from a seven-foot shelf. I am fairly proficient in English, barely proficient in French, and have forgotten most of my Russian,” she wrote. In lieu of a résumé, she included her college transcript. Worden was hired, and spent the rest of her life at the museum.

Anatomical collections like the Mütter's had long inspired feelings of fascination and shame about the human body. In Victorian London, the proprietors of anatomical displays were sometimes prosecuted for indecency. For many years, the Hunterian museum was open only to medical professionals, “learned men,” or “respectably dressed persons.” But Worden, who became the Mütter’s director, promoted the museum through multiple appearances on David Letterman’s late-night talk show, where she showed off objects that made the audience groan or erupt in shocked laughter. (“Good Lord,” you can hear someone say, after she shows Letterman a photograph of a wax model with gnarly facial lesions.) She and the publisher Laura Lindgren invited artists, including William Wegman, to photograph the collection for a calendar distributed in bookstores around the country. Worden also cultivated the museum’s distinctive Victorian atmosphere: heavy velvet drapes, red carpets, wooden cases packed with specimens. As some institutions got rid of their anatomical collections, Worden snapped them up. “I am almost totally fulfilled here in this job. It’s everything. It’s art, it’s science, it’s bones, it’s anatomy, pathology, it’s contemporary medicine. I just couldn’t be happier,” she once told the Philadelphia *Daily News*.

Regal and unapologetically odd, Worden shaped the museum in her image. Questions of spectacle and propriety circled the Mütter even then, but Worden’s ample charisma, her confidence in the validity of her own fascination, seemed largely able to keep them at bay. She saw the museum as a place for “humans looking at humans,” somewhere that “treats people as if they’re grown up enough to take a look at what’s under the hood.” By the end of her tenure, attendance had grown more than tenfold.

Worden died in 2004, at fifty-six, after a brief illness. An article in the *Times* noted the “motley crowd” that gathered for her memorial service at the museum, which included “dignified-looking surgeons,” “Philadelphia society matrons,” and “a couple of sideshow impresarios.” The mourners sang “Babies in Jars,” a song composed to the tune of “My Favorite Things.”

Valerie DeLeon, the anthropologist, began a two-year stint as the president of the American Association for Anatomy in 2021, as her field was coming

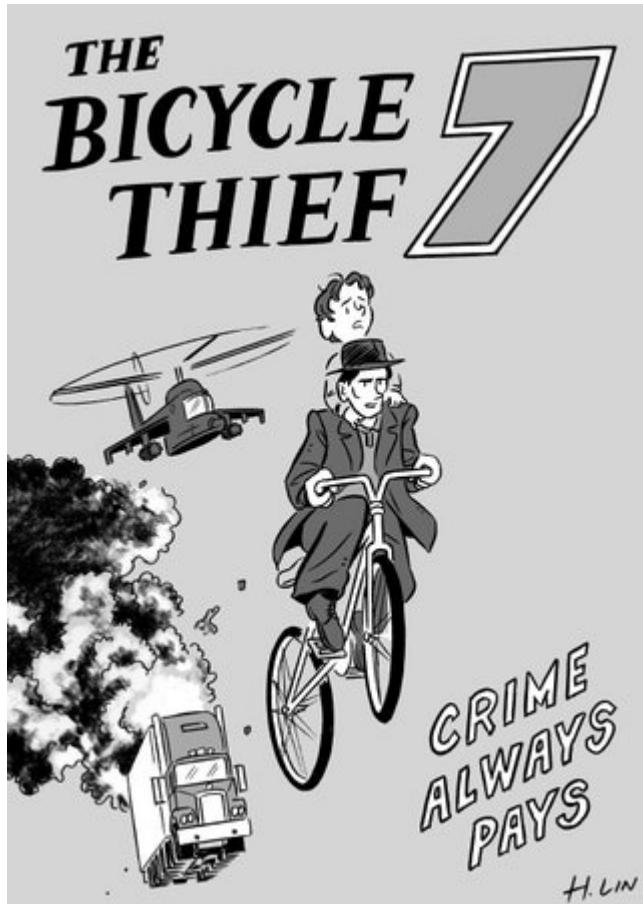
under intense scrutiny for its treatment of human remains. DeLeon convened a task force to devise best practices for institutions with historical collections of remains, an area with hardly any regulatory guidance. She felt that it was important to move quickly. “The members that I represent needed help now,” she told me. (The University of Florida, where she is a professor, was weighing how to handle its own anatomical teaching collections.) The task force included anthropologists, anatomists, and museum professionals. They agreed that it was important to treat human specimens with dignity and respect, but they disagreed about what that meant in practice. Some argued that, given the presumptive unethical taint of such collections, human remains should be buried or otherwise respectfully disposed of. Another faction argued that the societal benefits of continuing to research, teach with, and display human remains outweighed the harms to people who were, after all, long dead.

Human tissues “hold an ethically intermediary place between inanimate property and living beings,” the members of the task force wrote in a report, which was published in *The Anatomical Record* last year. First, the group had some thorny discussions, DeLeon said. Just how much of a body counted as a person? Did a bone shard have the same level of personhood as a full skeleton? What about teeth, or tumor cells? Should fetal remains be considered part of the mother or a separate person? Did the long dead occupy a different status from those who had died more recently?

In the report, the group laid out its guidelines, which recommend taking cultural context into account when determining how to display or dispose of remains, given that practices such as cremation or postmortem display may be considered traditional by one culture and taboo by another. Whenever possible, the A.A.A. recommends consulting with “communities of care”—descendants or others with an interest in and a connection to the remains. But it’s not always clear who is best positioned to speak for the dead. “For many remains, even within my own institution, we literally have no idea where they came from,” DeLeon said. “So what do you do with those?”

In Philadelphia, I met Kate Quinn, the Mütter’s executive director, in one of the College of Physicians’ anterooms, whose walls were lined with mahogany bookshelves and oil paintings of eminent physicians. Quinn had

an air of guarded professionalism, and for most of the interview she was flanked by both a P.R. representative and her new boss, Larry Kaiser, a thoracic surgeon who had recently been named the president and C.E.O. of the College of Physicians.



*Cartoon by Hartley Lin*

After Quinn's hiring, in 2022, she quickly moved to professionalize the Mütter, helping to establish policies for ethics and beginning the process of applying for accreditation from the American Alliance of Museums. She sometimes received calls from people who had been told by Dhody that the Mütter might acquire their body parts; Quinn told them that the museum wasn't doing that at the moment. She oversaw an audit of the collection, the first in more than eighty years. "I had the expectation that we would find that maybe two or three per cent of the collection had been given to us with consent," she told me. "But we're finding it's much, much less than that."

Stacey Mann, a consultant who was brought in by Quinn, told me it seemed that the collection was haphazardly catalogued, with some things apparently acquired because of their value as curiosities rather than as medically informative specimens. “They found two of these baby skulls in the library that were linked to this woman who was, I guess, a murderer,” Mann said. (The bodies were discovered in a trunk after the woman, Stella Williamson, died, in 1980; the exact circumstances of their deaths are unclear. The museum is helping to arrange a reburial.) “Every month, there’d be another thing that was, like, ‘Are you kidding me?’ ”

Quinn also spearheaded something called the Postmortem project, an example of the kind of institutional self-critique that has become popular in the museum world in the past few years. At the Mütter, this has meant providing visitors with visual annotations to the existing collection in the form of green signs. Near the entrance, for example, a sepia-tinged photograph shows the back of a woman’s head. A matted lock of hair trails down her back in calligraphic spirals, an example of plica, a rare disorder. Like many objects in the Mütter’s collection, it is unsettlingly compelling, the distance of time imbuing the pathology with a kind of poetry. “This photo comes from a book of hair samples doctors took from patients with different ethnic backgrounds,” the Postmortem sign affixed to the display reads. “Is this just a picture of hair when you know that it was used to perpetuate racism?” One of the museum’s temporary galleries is devoted to the Postmortem project, and its atmosphere—white painted walls; bright, clean light; exhibits with clear, legible signage—feels like a portal into an entirely different institution. Next to a display about power and consent, visitors are invited to contribute their responses on butcher paper: “SCARY PEOPLE,” “acknowledge the ugly past,” “Wokeness destroys truth.”

Quinn walked me through an exhibit that had been on display for more than a decade, and which linked items in the collection to Grimms’ Fairy Tales. In a broad wooden case, a small, brownish object that resembled a piece of ginger root rested on a shelf. “That’s the bound foot of a Chinese woman,” Quinn said. “It’s on display to talk about Cinderella. And it’s a question, you know—is that something we should be doing more or less of? Whose story is being prioritized there? It’s not her story. Her background is not even part of the display at all—it’s all about Cinderella, and foot-binding,

and it's next to a book with illustrations of shoes. This doesn't mean that we don't share that specimen moving forward, but maybe we're telling a different story about it."

Under Quinn and Irons's leadership, the museum cancelled its annual Halloween party and stopped hosting a popular goth-tinged craft bazaar. Then, in early 2023, the museum removed hundreds of videos from its YouTube channel and took down a digital exhibit featuring images of human remains. The videos, most of which were made by Dhody, were often irreverent and sometimes involved staff members goofing around in the museum. The YouTube channel was popular, with more than a hundred thousand subscribers. Dhody, sounding wounded, told me that Quinn had characterized it, disparagingly, as "edutainment." According to Quinn, the museum planned to review the videos for accuracy and tone. (Eventually, about a third of them were reposted, although none that included human remains.) But some of the museum's fans saw their sudden disappearance as a harbinger of worse things to come. Online, rumors spread that the new leadership planned to remove the fetal remains, or to close the museum to the public altogether.



*Models of heads, intended for use in obstetric training.*

A half-dozen or so of the Mütter's most ardent enthusiasts—members of the “weird little parasocial network attached to the museum,” as one described it to me—formed a group called Protect the Mütter, to protest the changes. They handed out flyers around town, sold T-shirts that read “Censorship is the enemy of science,” and kept up a regular cadence of outraged social-media posts “looking out for the well being of our deceased friends” and

criticizing the new leadership's "sweeping, judgmental, reactive moves." More than a dozen employees departed, including Dhody, who resigned last year, saying that she felt "shuttled off to the sidelines." A woman who had donated her uterine fibroid to the Mütter demanded it back, saying that she had lost confidence in the institution's leadership. Robert Hicks, the former director, accused Quinn and Irons of being "elitist and exclusionary," and removed the Mütter from his will.

Protect the Mütter was run by a self-described "scrappy group of neurodivergent queers" who posted land acknowledgments on the organization's Instagram page. Their campaign attracted some unexpected allies. In an op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal*, a former trustee of the College of Physicians blamed "cancel culture" and "a handful of woke elites" for jeopardizing the museum's future. "Two women put in charge of *TOTALLY COOL* museum of oddities, The Mütter Museum, think the exhibits are icky and plan to destroy it," the conservative pundit Ann Coulter posted on Twitter. "Is there anything women can't wreck?" Pendarvis, who had donated his heart, told me that he was disgusted by the new leadership's "wokeness and the bullshit about D.E.I.;" he, too, asked for his specimen back. "When I saw that Ann Coulter thought I was on the right track, I sat there and said, 'My God, what is happening?'" the Protect the Mütter member told me. "But you know how a broken clock is right two times a day."

Protect the Mütter created a petition—signed by more than thirty thousand people, including Roach, the magician Penn Jillette, and the novelist Neil Gaiman—that called for the dismissal of Irons and Quinn, among other measures. Irons resigned in September, 2023. When I met with Quinn, she spoke of that period with a kind of brittle diplomacy. "It was a solid year of recognizing that there are a lot of folks who have strong passions for this place, and rightly so," she said. She was eager to "facilitate the discussions" and "get folks engaged in the conversation." The one moment when Quinn's composure wavered was when I asked her if she thought gender had played a role in the ire directed against her. "I do, I do think that," she said with surprising vehemence. "I had a lot of attacks on the way that I look. Someone called me a bland blond normie. Someone said that I must be conservative and anti-abortion because I would roll up the sleeves on my

blazer. And someone else said that I wore minimalistic 2011 makeup.” Then she seemed to catch herself. “But we carry on and continue forward.”

McLeary has been leading the effort to learn more about the people whose bodies and body parts have ended up at the Mütter. Non-experts often assume that DNA analysis can provide the solution to all mysteries, supplying a name and a family tree. But such testing is often prohibitively expensive and, when dealing with historic specimens, not consistently precise. Instead, the Mütter has relied largely on archival research. Last year, after McLeary was hired, she went looking for the nineteenth-century collection catalogue, which she found in the College of Physicians’ library. “Maybe it was when Gretchen died, I don’t know, but at some point staff just ceased knowing about this,” she told me. She set the book on a stand and began to page through it with me. It was dense with notes, some typewritten and some in tiny, precise handwriting: “skull of a typical mouth breather,” “a Chinese skull,” “a heavy skull.” Many of the listings included lengthy case reports from the physicians who had donated the specimens. Owing in part to prevailing nineteenth-century ideas about how certain diseases tracked with race, class, and life style, the entries are often rich in sociological detail, which—when cross-referenced with newly digitized historical archives—has helped McLeary and her team attach context, and in some cases a name, to hundreds of specimens.

This research is just the first step in a process that may eventually involve contacting descendants, a project that would have its own set of complications. McLeary paused at an entry describing the skull of a man sentenced to death for murder. “You think about these what-ifs—what if you contacted these descendants? The crimes he committed were horrible,” she said. “ ‘Did you know that your great-great-grandfather might have sexually assaulted his daughter and then killed her? Do you want his skull back?’ ”



*Thomas Mütter, whose collection of medical specimens formed the origin of the museum.*

I followed McLeary into the museum's main room, past a group of teen-age girls transfixed by an exhibit on teratology, the study of congenital abnormalities. We stopped in front of a child's skeleton, about three feet tall, with an enlarged skull and bones blackened with age. "Hydrocephalus has caused this child's head to grow to a circumference of over 27 inches," the label read. "After six years of expanding rapidly, the skull has numerous wormian bones—small, irregular bones between the bones normally present in the skull." The child's name, McLeary had determined, was Thomas Jeff, and he had died of complications from the condition in 1882, when he was six or seven years old. He had lived with his family in a low-income neighborhood in Philadelphia. During his lifetime, he'd occasionally been put on display for money. After his death, his mother sold the body to a doctor, for some six hundred dollars in today's money. "There's a short newspaper article about his sale, in which his mother says, If we buried him, he would just be grave-robbed—it was going to happen either way," McLeary said. She said that focussing on contemporary notions of consent could risk reading the present into the past—essentially looking for "something that simply didn't exist," as she put it—but that archival work

could build a better understanding of individuals' agency and bodily autonomy, both during life and afterward, and that this understanding could help guide the museum's decisions.

With that in mind, the research team had selected Jeff as a case study; they were seeing how much of his life they could piece together beyond his name. McLeary found that Jeff's mother, Letitia, died not long after her son; records list her place of burial as Jefferson Medical College, which means that her body may have been used to teach dissection. With help from the African American Genealogy Group, in Philadelphia, the team was able to trace the path of Jeff's two younger brothers to a Quaker orphanage. Afterward, one brother was placed in indenture at a farm in Delaware and the other was sent to a residential school for Black and Native children, where he was second in his class, according to a report card that a researcher at Haverford College tracked down. I glanced at the small skeleton, now freighted with a name and a history. It seemed to demand a different kind of looking. "You know, Thomas Jeff's father voted in 1870, as a newly enfranchised Black man," McLeary said. "There's a whole history of the American Black experience that we can tell, and to me that's a far more interesting thing to think about than hydrocephaly."

In the past two years, the Mütter's attendance numbers and gift-shop sales have declined, and the College of Physicians, which relies in part on the museum's income, is running a deficit. Kaiser, who became the College's C.E.O. earlier this year, told me that he has a "broader view" of the ethics of display. "Look, from the business perspective, I depend on admissions to the museum and the gift shop," he said. "I like people coming here for whatever reason, whether it's morbid fascination or education or simply entertainment. I'm O.K. with that." Kaiser spent most of my interview with Quinn looking at his phone. He spoke up when I asked her if visiting the museum should be fun. "Yes!" he said emphatically, before she could reply.

A week later, I heard that Quinn's position had been eliminated. On Instagram, Protect the Mütter declared victory and posted an image of two skeletal hands, their bony fingers pressed together to make a heart shape. The museum will now be run by McLeary and Sara Ray, a historian of science. Both women stressed to me their love of the institution, as well as

their understanding that it needed to evolve. Ray mentioned that she'd been a volunteer tour guide a decade ago. "When I came back in January, I was shadowing a docent, and I was, like, 'Oh, my God, this docent is giving the same—literally the same—tour,'" she said. "For all of the talk about changes to the collection, really there's not that much in the core gallery that has changed." The turmoil surrounding the museum's direction ultimately seemed to be less about major alterations to the space than about a shift in emotional tone, a movement away from celebration and toward something like penance.

McLeary and Ray see the research into the collection's origins as a form of appreciation; what is the Mütter, after all, if not a place where people go to be disturbed? "The way this controversy has been depicted is that you either need to commit yourself to ethics or you need to commit yourself to being a place of morbid fascination," Ray said. "We think there's a secret third way, which is that you can actually do both of those things."

One of the Mütter's most ambivalent defenders is the Chicago artist, writer, and disability activist Riva Lehrer. "I have a really deep love of the variance of anatomy—all the ways you can be human, all the different ways you can live in a body," Lehrer, who has spina bifida, told me. She has taught anatomy and has been a visiting artist in a cadaver lab, where she donned scrubs and observed as medical students wielded their scalpels. "And, then, I've had quite a few surgeries, so I've done a lot of medical research on my own," she added.

On Lehrer's first visit to the museum, in 2006, she found it "immediately fascinating," but the moody lighting and sideshow atmospherics struck her as both offensive and trite. "I was feeling sniffy about the whole thing," she said. Downstairs, she entered the exhibit devoted to teratology. Preserved fetuses hung submerged in jars, swollen from preservation fluid and bleached to a uniform, milky white. "I know people with a vast amount of variance, so I'm looking at all these bodies and thinking, Oh, this reminds me of John, this reminds me of Mary Lou, but I wasn't thinking about myself. You find out how defended you are when you can't be anymore. And then I turned the corner—I mean literally and figuratively," she said. "It was like my armor fell off." On display was a small, pale body that

appeared to have spina bifida lipomyelomeningocele, the rare variation that Lehrer has. She felt as if she were encountering herself. She longed to slip the jar in her pocket. “Nature does all this stuff—it’s such a bag of chaos, you know?” she said. “We’re born into this chaos, and we grow up, and then we’re, like, Well, now what do I do in this body I landed in?” she said. “What am I supposed to do with this?” ♦



*Rachel Monroe* is a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*, where she covers Texas and the Southwest. She is the author of “[\*Savage Appetites: True Stories of Women, Crime, and Obsession\*](#).”

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# Takes

- **[John McPhee on His Childhood Appearance in The New Yorker](#)**

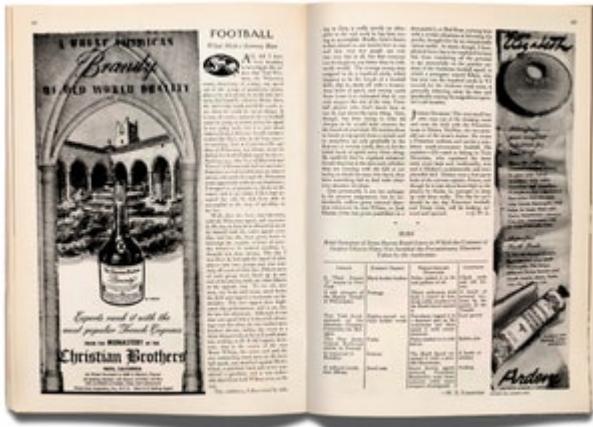
By John McPhee | The little boy in the piece was definitely me, and the moment I saw it I developed a lifelong affection for the magazine.

[Takes](#)

# John McPhee on His Childhood Appearance in *The New Yorker*

By [John McPhee](#)

June 22, 2025



November 22, 1941

[New Takes on the classics. Throughout our centennial year, we're revisiting notable works from the archive. Sign up to receive them directly in your inbox.](#)

The first piece I ever read in *The New Yorker* was by Rogers E. M. Whitaker, under the rubric “[Football](#),” in the November 22, 1941, issue. I was ten years old. Subscribers called my parents, who were not subscribers: “Johnny is in *The New Yorker* and they have his name wrong. They call him Mickey.” My father—Harry R. McPhee, M.D.—was called Mickey all his life, and I was called Johnny in 1941, and Johnny only. But the little boy in the piece was definitely me, and the moment I saw it I developed a lifelong affection for the magazine. I was the mascot of Princeton’s football team, my father its doctor. At practices, held a block from my grade school, and at all games in Palmer Stadium and at places like Harvard and Yale, I was on

the sidelines, wearing an orange-and-black custom-made football shirt with tiger-striped sleeves and the number 33 on my chest and back.

I would come to know Whitaker as a colleague. We called him Pops. His football columns were signed “J.W.L.” letters that stood for nothing. He just liked the look of them. His famous pieces about railways and railroad trains were signed “[E. M. Frimbo](#).” His preoccupation with trains was chronicled in hardcover (“[All Aboard with E. M. Frimbo: World’s Greatest Railroad Buff](#)”) by Tony Hiss, a *New Yorker* staff writer who had come along shortly before I did. Whitaker lived in Philadelphia so that he could commute by train every day to the magazine’s offices.

In the nineteen-seventies, across the Hudson River from West Point, I rode the Mt. Beacon Incline Railway with Frimbo, Tony, and Tony’s mother, Priscilla Hiss, the wife of Alger Hiss (try Google). We went up the mountainside fifteen hundred vertical feet without much lateral motion. The locomotive was made by the Otis Elevator Company. Our editor Bob Bingham, who joined us, had arranged the day and a picnic lunch on the summit. ♦

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[\*\*Read the original story.\*\*](#)



### [What Makes Sammy Run](#)

*John McPhee*, a staff writer since 1965, has published more than thirty books, including “[Tabula Rasa, Volume 1](#).”

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# Shouts & Murmurs

- **[Amazon's New James Bond](#)**

By Nathan Heller | The secretary Miss Moneypenny will now be known as Miss Money One Hundred Billion Dollars Money Money Money. Or Alexa.

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

# New Bond



By [\*\*Nathan Heller\*\*](#)

June 23, 2025



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

Amazon MGM Studios has agreed to a deal with the Broccoli family behind James Bond to take over the creative rights of the movies. . . . Mike Hopkins, head of Prime Video and Amazon MGM Studios, told Bloomberg last year that while the business was careful with intellectual property, it also wanted to be creative producing new

content with older brands. “So if you’re gonna do things, we think you have to do it with a different angle, a different take,” he said.

—*The Financial Times*.

In line with our new take on the 007 character—or, as we call him around here, Double-O-Prime—please be aware of certain minor changes to the franchise.

*The emblematic line* “The name is Bond, James Bond” will now be followed by “And I love my Kindle Fire!”

*The villain*, after ensnaring 007, will strap him to a table and, having placed him in this seemingly inescapable situation, slowly reduce his market capitalization while he squirms.

*Instead of being* equipped with a belt that fires pitons and a watch that fires darts, Bond will be able to order overnight delivery of toilet paper wherever he goes.

*When making love* to glamorous strangers, he will confine his conversation to two pillars: personal liberties and free markets.

*Bond will refer* to the successful completion of both his missions and his sexual activity as “fulfillment.”

*Every credits sequence* will start and end with Katy Perry in zero gravity.

*Instead of spending* money at the baccarat table, 007 will impulsively order lamps online at 1 a.m.

*His confidant, the* secretary Miss Moneypenny, will now be known as Miss Money One Hundred Billion Dollars Money Money Money. Or Alexa.

*In a crucial chase sequence*, Bond will have to deliver two hundred packages in a Honda Civic by 7 p.m. or risk unemployment.

*He will occasionally* drive a forklift through a factory wall—but only for the purpose of breaking picket lines and getting to work.

*Rather than having his clothes made on Savile Row, Bond will order them based on five-star customer recommendations on Amazon. They will arrive from Croatia in parcels wound with packing tape, and will fit fine, except for being bizarrely pouchy at the hips. What body type are these for? he'll wonder. They will make him look like a mime.*

*In a major twist, the M.I.6 headquarters has become a Whole Foods. When you scan your palm to enter, you buy tomatoes.*

*Bond will now request that his Martini be shaken “like a fragile package with two-day shipping.”*

*A lot of Bond’s espionage will be done over Signal, and will consist of his typing “Excellent.”*

*Bond’s cover employer, Universal Exports, will henceforth fly him in coach —it’s more economical and a better look for a company in growth mode. Still, he will frequently travel to outer space in Blue Origin rockets.*

*There will be no suggestion that technical devices (such as virtual assistants) are used to listen in on conversations, because of course they aren’t. Honestly, why worry about it?*

*A backstory will establish that Bond used to be a gangly bald man with an annoying laugh but is now feared and also muscular.*

*He will continue to encounter mysterious women in faraway lands, but from now on they will all be called Melania.*

*It will be made abundantly clear that the villain lives under a volcano on a fortified private island not because he is antisocial and out of touch but because he has nuanced and poorly understood views about corporate regulation.*

*In the villain’s lair, Bond’s drink will be drugged, and he will become unconscious. When he wakes, he will be watching “Call the Midwife,” which somehow started auto-playing, it’s not clear how.*

*Previously, Bond partnered* in his exploits with such redoubtable figures as Honey Ryder and Pussy Galore. His latest co-adventurer and rescuer will be his trusted chief tax lawyer, Dickhead Vox.

*The villain's defeat* will seem, maybe, a little unfair, given that he started his global empire out of a garage, worked really hard at it for years, and has an amazing sense of humor.

*SPECTRE, after all,* is just an anagram for *RESPECT*.

*When you think about it, what's actually so bad about a bald billionaire on a yacht who wants to take over the world? ♦*



*Nathan Heller* began contributing to *The New Yorker* in 2011 and joined the magazine as a staff writer in 2013.

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# Fiction

- **“Happy Days”**

By Han Ong | Why shouldn't Matthew Lim play Winnie? Inside his body, the role would be no spoof at all but the purest of incarnations.

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**Fiction**

# Happy Days

By [Han Ong](#)

June 22, 2025



*Photo illustration by Johanna Goodman; Source photographs from Getty*

Matthew is behind the curtain when the announcement comes: Ladies and gentlemen, the role of Winnie, played by Aira Wilson, will be performed at this first preview by Matthew Lim.

He hears the audience go crazy, their version of crazy, being an older crowd—whispers rising, falling, rising again. This is worrisome to him. Also, thrilling. Toggling from one reaction to the other induces vertigo, and he has to use deep breaths to calm the sudden onset of body chills.

Willa, the twenty-four-year-old stage manager, has the biggest smile on her face. This helps Matthew to understand that tonight's audience has accepted the happy logic of the house manager's announcement. After all, it's not Aira but Matthew who is the theatre company's resident diva, celebrated for his portrayals of Lady Macbeth, Hedda Gabler, and Medea. (Matthew is that gratifying phenomenon: a star who didn't hit his stride with audiences or with critics until he was in his forties.) And what is Winnie but a great diva's part—Beckett's greatest? (To balance things out, Aira, with her easy sonority, led the company's "King Lear" twenty years ago.)

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

Matthew gets into the "mound of earth" just left of center stage—it's a hollow shell that opens and is secured with a latch, like a carriage door, its hinges and seams hidden from the audience.

He closes his eyes. A minute later, Willa is reassured by his thumbs-up.

But the serenity is short-lived. People are texting and posting! Willa's assistant, Aidan, tells her, alarmed.

Matthew has to problem-solve for them. Get Aira to make an announcement!

Luckily for everyone, Aira is just out of sight in the wings. She is alerted, and gamely steps in front of the curtain. Her unfitness for tonight's performance is demonstrated by an aluminum walking cane. There is applause. Please, she says. We ask that you not post about Matthew on social media. For those of you who have just done so, can I ask you please to delete those posts? You understand that, given the estate's . . .

What word will she choose?

. . . tetchiness, she says, and everyone, including Matthew, laughs. Good: audience participation, a common project.

Given the Beckett estate's tetchiness, Aira repeats, this is for the best.

It's an Off Off Broadway run, in the East Village; the ninety-nine-seat theatre has been rented for cheap and the building it's in is falling apart. Adding to the litany of shabbiness is the fact that the company is in its twilight. It has been in existence for nearly five decades. Three of the six founding members have passed. In the entirety of the last ten years, the company has put out only a measly four productions. Aira is seventy-one, and Matthew, the youngest of the second wave of company members, just turned sixty-two.

**Podcast: The Writer's Voice**

[Listen to Han Ong read "Happy Days."](#)

A select few have come to tonight's show because they were tipped off in advance: Matthew's star turn—which had been the plan all along—was an open secret.

Aira's announcement has ramped up the evening's tension, deliciously. What was broadcast to tonight's audience is actually the opposite of the truth: Aira is the "understudy," and Matthew the (stealth) main attraction. Aira will cite illness or incapacity nearly every night—her poor health is no lie—so that Matthew can play Winnie, in direct contravention of the stated wishes of the playwright. The Beckett estate allows no substitutions or alterations to the playwright's scripts or stage directions, and it lives to catch out bad-faith interpreters trying to smuggle in their racial agendas, their postmodern tricks and gender swaps.

•

The curtain is raised and everyone holds their breath. Matthew's drag is minimal: a wig, false lashes, and a bright slash of red on the lips. He has not adhered to the zaftig requirements for the role. The team has made no emendations to his board-flat and stick-thin physique, no fake tits in sight.

Can he pull it off? He snaps into his body at the sound of the bell: an alarm to wake Winnie, who surveys her unchanged predicament. Like yesterday, and the days before, she is interred in the ground up to her waist, the afterthought of some unnamed apocalypse. Producing objects from a nearby handbag, Winnie lays out her day—each prop an occasion for a remembered phrase, a memory. This routine of taking out and putting back in is her circumscribed version of aerobics. There's a second character, but it takes a while for him to be physically revealed, and even then only fragmentarily—the back of his head, an arm. It's Willie, Winnie's husband. They're the End of Days vaudeville team. After all, what is Laurel without Hardy? Bugs Bunny needs Daffy Duck. The abyss is looked at directly and smiled upon.

*Why did I insist on playing this part?* The briefest of flashes in Matthew's head. Anyway, it's too late now. And, if he wasn't able to answer the question previously, how can he be expected to in this highly charged moment?

One advantage of the hot, hot lights: he is blind to the audience, though he hears his director, Marla, scratching away on the yellow legal pad she carries with her at all times. It's not a good sign if she has found mistakes of his to jot down this early. Still, they may be notes for his colleague Andreas, who is playing Willie, or for the lighting and set designers.

Marla directed his *Hedda Gabler*. Though she is two decades younger than him, they are sympathetic theatre creatures, sharing mostly the same likes (Beckett, Chekhov) and dislikes (Ionesco, Strindberg). She is a Yale Drama School graduate, whereas he describes himself as a “creation of the streets,” by which he means an autodidact, self-taught, self-invented.

Concealed by the mound, Matthew is standing with his bare feet on cushions atop a wooden platform; his knees and thighs can lean against the inner walls, which are lined with sweat-wicking fabric, pleasurable as silk. He will spend the entire hour of Act I like this.

The more Matthew uses his voice's upper register, the more the laughs come. Still, the people in the audience are not yet his friends, or, rather, are only intermittently friendly—though they're not *unfriendly*.

In rehearsal, he struggled with the play's fragmented lines. In a regular play, your memorization is tied to your co-actors' words: you're either responding or prompting. Winnie, on the other hand, is a flibbertigibbet of stream-of-consciousness. Her present state of immurement is defeated by visitations of willful memories: a perfect summation of old age. Although Matthew knows better, his fears recur: Does his fumbling with the lines signal the beginning of Alzheimer's, dementia?

Some days, his spin on life is triumphant, if willed: *Still kicking!* He has skirted dangers in his personal life: his coming-to-sex, forty years ago, coincided with the tail end of the first, most tragic phase of the *AIDS* epidemic; there is coronary disease on his father's side of the family.

A former Winnie wrote about being surprised by Beckett's lines, which, out of nowhere and all too suddenly, pertained to her own life—each night, a different part of the script proved relevant, prescient. She was frequently caught short by the playwright's winking ambush. This was, of course, a mistake. Winnie must never tear up. Or, rather, when it happens, it should be judicious and sparing. But then, flying toward the conclusion of Act I, Matthew finds that he, too, is being pulled down by unrehearsed emotion.

Speaking about Winnie's toothbrush, he flashes to the original bag lady in his life: his paternal grandmother, who trawled through the garbage cans of New York's Chinatown, where he grew up. After a day's harvest on the streets, she would open the maw of one of her bags and out would tumble amputated plastic dolls, chipped miniature Buddhas, recyclable cans and plastic cups, uneaten pastries—or sometimes half eaten, but, in his grandmother's words, "still good." He loved this woman. If her world was haphazard detritus, so, too, would his be. This had been his approach to reading books, to his self-education: for example, he had only the most glancing acquaintance with Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky, but you could dig the deepest trench for his Chekhov expertise. Still, it would not be accurate to say that he has undertaken Winnie as a tribute to his grandmother. The truth is that, like all actors, he is motivated by greed and hunger—the best roles, and more.

Is anybody wise to the catch in his voice as Winnie speaks of her belongings, and as Matthew remembers his Mahh-Mahh? Marla must be alert. So, too,

must Aira, who, like Marla, is watching from the back of the house.

Marla has two charges for this production. Aira will go on, eventually, on select nights. She will get her opportunity, although playing Winnie is Matthew's dream, not hers. Still, the production was not made by fiat. The other company members all said more or less the same thing: everyone respected Matthew's great passion for the play, for the character, but why should the company put itself in legal jeopardy for what was, essentially, one man's fancy? Aira, Matthew's best friend, won enough of them over for the boondoggle to proceed: What had the group been, in this last decade or so, but an ailing patient, every so often given new breath by a company member's ministrations—a lifelong ambition for a part, for example? And why shouldn't Matthew Lim play Winnie? Inside his body, the role would be no spoof at all but the purest of incarnations. Fuck. The. Estate.

The only question left is when the estate will get wise to their shenanigans—when will the proverbial shit hit the fan? Matthew and the company's nervousness is also delight: the roller coaster is still on its ascent, the plunge far, far off.

•

End of Act I. The curtain can't go down fast enough. Willa's hands on Matthew's arm, guiding him out of the mound, make him understand that he's shaking. Given that there are only two actors who have to clear the stage, and that the only major set adjustment involves the substitution of the platforms underneath the mound (when he comes back for Act II, the platform will have been switched for a lower one so that the audience sees a direr interment: Winnie will be buried up to her neck), there is surprising tumult everywhere. Matthew's eyes are closed, the better to gauge the crowd by their sound. They're bustling, but he can't tell if they're delighted or disappointed. Aira is before him—the fastest woman on a cane! Marla will not make an appearance until after the show, and, as is her usual style, will be withholding parental love, strict with her reminders about Matthew's bad acting habits—"too self-aware," "not everything is a vaudeville skit."

He has boasted of being the only actor to mine the hand-washing scene in "Macbeth" for laughs. Imagine the bar of soap slipping, and slipping again.

Picture Lady Macbeth distracted by her own beauty in the mirror before remembering that there is blood on her hands. And hear the surprised applause when she settles on the chicest solution: a pair of red gloves to conceal the undissolvable stains of murder. These choices involved a tussle with the director, who was not Marla but another of the company's frequent collaborators.

You're doing good, Aira says.



*"That looks fabulous and I love you for making such a fuss, but remember, my parents hate you."*  
Cartoon by Harry Bliss

There—his breath is back in his lungs. Did I skip over a section? he asks.

Willa is trying to not show her impatience, but it's vital that Matthew sit down to relax his legs and knees. He understands, and they begin moving offstage.

Aidan walks ahead of them and is ready with the open dressing-room door, a cushion on the ottoman to further elevate Matthew's feet.

Matthew brushes aside the bottled water in the young man's hand. I'm sweating too much. Am I sweating too much? he asks Aira.

You're cool as a cucumber to me.

Matthew checks his armpits, his groin. Is this a sign of a stroke? he asks. Feeling nonexistent wetness?

How's your heart? Willa puts her hand on Matthew's chest. You're fine, she says. We'll come to get you in fifteen.

The young people close the door behind them.

•

Six months ago, lower edema from diabetes landed Aira in the hospital. For fifty years, she had managed her condition through the vicissitudes of an acting life: with loans when needed, and then through Medicaid. Now it was Medicare, but the same bullshit pertained: the price of insulin went up and down on pure corporate whim.

Wanna see Ruby's new boyfriend? she asked Matthew from her hospital bed.

Not really, but Matthew smiled, and she showed him on her phone. When is she back? he asked.

Next week.

Aira's daughter, Ruby, played bass in an all-girl rock group, the Limoncellos. When their current tour concluded, she would stay with her mother in the apartment that they shared on the Lower East Side. For the week that she was home, Aira's friends would be off the hook, although they didn't really mind lending a hand.

Ruby's father, long dead, had been Aira's co-star on an Italian production in which she'd had the sole lead film role of her illustrious career. She'd been abroad for five years, and, when she returned to the U.S., the theatre company was introduced to little Ruby.

Aira was semi-retired now. Being a good friend, Matthew had learned how to play mah-jongg so he could squire her to her favorite Chinatown game parlors.

Why am I not dead? Aira inquired of the ceiling of her private room.

Matthew asked if she wanted to pick up from where they'd left off in "Anna Karenina," him reading to her. Diabetes had started to affect her vision.

I know you don't want to talk about this, she said. But you have to let me . . . It took her a while to settle on a phrase. Air this out, she said.

Go ahead.

I don't want to continue being a drain on Ruby, on you guys.

Has your condition worsened? Matthew asked. If it has, your doctors sure know how to keep a secret.

This is my third hospital visit in three years—what do you think?

It's managed. You're managing. And then it was as if Matthew had been slapped. Are we having the death talk? he asked.

We've been having it for years, she replied.

I mean, the I-want-you-to-help-me talk.

No, she said. And then she said, I don't know. It wasn't just that she was suffering from diabetes, which had had a knock-on effect on her liver, and on her kidneys; and soon, her doctors had warned, her heart would carry the toll as well. There were also age-accelerated incapacities, the psychic strain along with those, the many returns to a dark interior place.

Matthew mimed picking up the receiver of a manual phone. Hello, Dignitas on line one. This was a bitter joke—the Swiss organization made you jump through so many hoops to qualify for assisted suicide that you might as well continue living. But he and Aira understood each other: if she wanted to, she could stop taking her insulin. The death wouldn't be pain-free, but there was a good likelihood of her perishing in a coma, the second-best thing to dying in your sleep, apparently everyone's favorite death scenario.

She sighed. I just want to underline . . . how late in the day it is.

It was worth noting that the person who had the lightest spirit of any of his friends should be so grimly firm when it came to her own death.

Matthew put the iPad with “Anna Karenina” away. Can I ask—is there anything that would root you to this side of life, for at least a couple of years? And, before she could answer, he told her about his own reason for living: to play Winnie in “Happy Days.” Not that he was dying—not that he needed a reason.

•

Aira asks, Do you want to know who’s out there tonight?

Anyone we know? Matthew replies, before changing his mind. Better not.

Angela’s in the house.

She might as well have said, Your dead grandmother’s in the front row. Suddenly he’s tearing up. Angela Rune had promised to attend, but Matthew had assumed that that was bullshit. Although she is a frequent butt of their in-jokes, Angela is a patron saint of battle—the totem they want in an enterprise like this. After a moment, he asks, How is she liking it? Do I wanna know?

In truth, “Angela Rune,” to Matthew’s circle, was shorthand for a kind of self-appointed aristocrat. While Matthew and his theatre company continued to “toil in a country with a laughable arts infrastructure and no arts support”—Angela’s words—she directed productions only in Europe. Once every three years, she turned up at the Salzburg Festival. Her big hit was a “Così Fan Tutte” set in an Amazon warehouse. She had been asked by Ariane Mnouchkine to oversee workshops in Paris. And there were directing master classes undertaken at the Academy of Dramatic Arts in Stockholm. Thanks to these paydays, she had been able to buy a loft in Tribeca.

But, thirty years ago, in San Francisco, she had set an interpretation of “Krapp’s Last Tape” in an insane asylum, violating Beckett’s stage directions. Her title character had barricaded himself in the asylum director’s office and was making free with hours of recorded spools of inmate interviews. A court injunction had sought to stop the production. By the time

the judge made his ruling, there were only a handful of performances left, which were allowed to conclude, as a matter of practicality. But the production's scheduled tour to the East Coast was cancelled. Angela's more severe and lasting punishment was that she was barred from future engagements with the great Irish bard. She had made nearly her entire livelihood up to then directing his plays, as well as appearing on Beckett panels, and writing both academic and general-interest essays on all things Beckett; her holy text on directing "Waiting for Godot" was included in nearly every college theatre-history syllabus. At fifty, she had had to start over.

Six months ago, at Aira's suggestion, Matthew took Angela to lunch in her neighborhood. When he confessed that Winnie was his Mt. Everest, she picked up her cup of espresso.

My advice, she said, is lie. Swear all collaborators to secrecy. Don't advertise. Don't do press. How you square that with attracting an audience will be your great challenge. But I suppose you haven't worked for decades without cultivating a fan base that will show up to your productions regardless.

Book a short run, Angela continued. The publicity cycle may be ramped up by social media, but, hopefully, the wheels of bureaucracy still turn slowly. By the time the estate's injunction comes in, you'll already have got away with it—fingers crossed.

Angela asked if Matthew had any questions for her, but he couldn't think of any.

I'll say this for you, Angela told him. You're original. I would say ninety-nine per cent of the interventions to Beckett are "Godot"-centered: all-Black casts, all-women casts, Godot in a space station, Godot in a submarine.

Matthew bit his lip to keep from saying, Godot in an Amazon warehouse? (Another knock on Angela was that she tended to be a one-trick pony.)

Your choice of Beckett play? Angela said. Bravo. She clinked her demitasse cup against his glass of iced lemonade. Here's to your success. And here's to

screwing Edward Beckett. She was referring to the playwright's (to some, much hated) nephew and executor.

•

No, Matthew says to Aira, changing his mind. Don't tell me.

She's enjoying herself.

What did I say?

Come off it, Aira says. You're dying to know what the great Angela Rune thinks.

I can tell her laugh anywhere, Matthew says. And I don't think she's laughed once.

You need to have your ears checked, Aira says. Or your memory. She's one of the laughers.

Good. I trust her laugh. You're sure I didn't skip a section?

Not by my ear, Aira says.

There's a knock on the door. It's Andreas, Matthew's Willie. He's in his forties, but made up to be a couple of decades older. He sits on the floor. The crowd seems into it, he says.

I can't tell, Matthew says.

There's probably residual shock from the unexpected switcheroo, Andreas says.

Guess who's out there, Matthew says to Andreas. Angela Rune.

No shit, Andreas says. Do you think this production is putting ideas in her head? Maybe we'll be treated to a "Happy Days" set in an Amazon warehouse? Or a Boeing factory? (Angela's "Carmen" at Glyndebourne.) He and Matthew laugh, high-five each other.

You forget, Aira says. She's barred from Beckett.

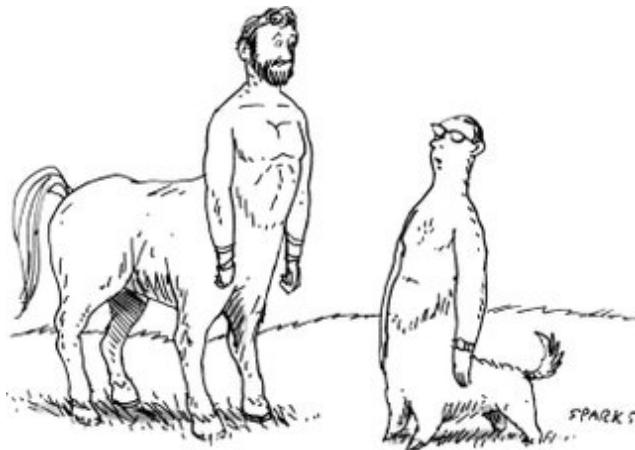
Can Angela keep cool about our production? Matthew asks.

Andreas rephrases the question. You mean will she blow our cover by posting?

You have a show to finish, Aira tells Matthew. Don't get worked up about nonexistent sabotage. Why would Angela do something like that? And please have a sip of the water. It'll make me feel better.

Matthew uncaps the water bottle, takes a sip. After a moment, he asks, If Angela didn't get her victory over the estate, why should we?

Allyship? Aira asks.



*"There isn't a cool name for a part man, part corgi."*  
Cartoon by Rich Sparks

Will the press show up by tomorrow night? Matthew asks. Does everyone already know what we're up to?

It's Andreas who answers. As far as people know, Aira's really out of commission. He turns to Aira. When do you make your return to the show? He puts "return" in air quotes.

Are you ready to go on, if need be, say, on the third night? Matthew asks Aira.

How are your legs? Andreas asks.

Are we really having this discussion *now*? Aira says.

•

The apocalypse has advanced onstage. And the visual gag can't be beat. The first sighting of a woman who is all and only head, the rest of her swallowed by the earth, is always, always a hit with the audience. There is alarm—but there are also smiles, and a strange peacefulness.

How surprisingly freeing it is—acting from only the neck up!

But how fluty Matthew's voice has become since Act I—this was not rehearsed. (He knew he shouldn't have drunk that water! It was a mistake to relax.) He dreads Marla's scolding—how much or how little she has to say will determine whether he'll show up to the bar where some of tonight's attendees will buy him a drink and dinner. After-play gatherings, featuring far-flung friends who've travelled for the occasion or who are suddenly available after months or years of being incommunicado: actors engage themselves for weeks and months in the theatre for these very evenings. The hugs and kisses and bad-breathed gossip and confidences and heart-to-hearts—all life-extenders. He will walk Aira home tonight, or Ruby will come and pick her mother up from the bar, from the restaurant—there are a handful of favorites to choose from. Some of the barkeeps and the waiters are former acting colleagues. It's the world on the head of a pin, these few square blocks of the still shaggy East Village. *AIDS* cleared the streets for a while, but now there is Ruby's generation, as well as a new cohort of theatre students, living in nearby university dorms. They are keepers of the flame, attending the company's shows in the hope of catching the performers recalled to their protean best. The question is: Will the actors be matched with the right roles? But, at their ages, most of the best roles are behind them.

A sudden taste of beer suffuses Matthew's mouth. He's thinking of his post-performance treat at the bar, getting ahead of himself, and, as a result, he transposes a couple of lines. Here's the advantage of "Happy Days": no one can tell!

Again, his Mahh-Mahh, dead for forty years now, hoves into view, complementing Winnie's use of the word "sunderings." He doesn't understand why this word in Act II should call up his grandmother—but she is there, and then gone. There's the tenderest smile on his lips.

He lands the few spots of Act II's gloom with aplomb. A secret: he's gone to sleep onstage before, behind open eyes. This last stretch is not quite that, but he's made a mental note: This is where my energies start to flag. It's like jogging again after months of indolence. Your lungs and legs can't yet carry you the whole way. He looks forward to mastering this lethargy, this lack of conditioning. He gives himself till his third or fourth performance. He expects to sleep terrifically tonight.

•

Angela Rune, in Matthew's dressing room, bursts into tears, and so, too, does Matthew. Seeing this, the line of well-wishers freezes at the dressing-room door. This includes Aira and Marla, Willa and Aidan. It's Marla who takes charge and closes the door, announcing, We'll give them a few minutes.

After some time, Marla knocks and Matthew opens the door. He and Angela are composed, smiling. But they can't let go of each other, their hands clasped.

Matthew heads judgment off at the pass, telling Marla, I know. I hit the wall with fifteen minutes remaining.

He holds court in his dressing room for another hour. His energy spikes once more.

•

You convinced me, Henry says. His hangdog face has got him cast as many Chekhovian butlers and retinue captains, and one of his moments of company glory was playing the Margaret Dumont-inspired dowager in their quasi-Marx Brothers spoof, "A Day at the Soups." To see Henry's butcher's shoulders peeking out of a diamanté slip dress was a gag that kept on giving.

That was twenty-five years ago. Closer at hand, Henry, until tonight, was on the fence about Matthew's venture as Winnie.

Did I, though? Matthew asks.

Are you asking me or are you asking yourself?

Mostly myself.

I can't help you with that, Henry says. You've managed a tricky line—are you able to cross from stunt and into transcendence?

Transcendence, Matthew repeats, raising his eyebrows. Thank you, my friend. Your vote means the world to me.

All the company members have shown up—this might be their only chance, before the Beckett estate's shutdown notice. Some of the younger actors—quick thinkers all—have been tasked with turning the legal document, if it comes, into a comedy, a spoof on the company's outlaw status. After all, the rental contract is for three weeks, and something has to be put onstage.

Matthew? Tatiana, a fortysomething Black actress with a day job at the local Con Ed payments office, gives him a buss on the cheek.

Matthew kisses her back. Tatiana, my darling!

So thrilled for you, she says. That I get to live in the same time as your Winnie—I'm going to write about it some day!

Be kind, he says, doing his best Vivien Leigh-as-Blanche DuBois.

You slut. Rosa gently boxes him on the upper arm. She's one of the company's founders, and didn't need much persuading to approve Matthew's gambit.

There's a sudden flare of laughter from across the room. Aira is the befuddled target of some ribbing from a group of other company members, Ching, Mia, Jessica, Fabian, Orlando, Loy, Ralph, Jorge, who are here to show support and, most important, to catch up with one another.

The bar lights expose an interesting facet of Henry's profile, and Matthew thinks that Henry may have "King Lear" 's Fool in his future. Also, maybe, Regan, the king's poisonous middle daughter.

It's a half hour's walk from the bar back to Aira's, but her edema adds ten extra minutes. Periodically, she and Matthew stop so that she can do some deep breathing. She performs a visualization exercise where the blood flow to her bum left leg turns vigorous. They run lines from "Happy Days," alternating lines between them, all the way to Ludlow Street, where he helps her up three flights of tricky stairs. Ruby is not home.

•

From the second night on, the house manager makes two announcements: the substitution of one actor for another, and would the audience please not post on social media about it.

Again, Matthew can't seem to get over the final hurdle (with profuse apologies to Andreas, his scene partner). Marla waits for the dressing-room fans to depart, and then there is a half hour of notes. To Matthew's surprise, she does not characterize the last section as "anemic," as she did the first night. It's much better, she says. More than you know—keep going.

There were Broadway people and modern-dance people in the crowd that night. And no stirrings, as far as anyone can tell, of estate trouble. Some good news, conveyed by Willa at the start of the evening, buoyed everyone: there had been no social-media spoilers about their "Happy Days," only a handful of posts that hinted that attendees would be "in for a treat."

Later, Matthew and Aira argue on the way back to Ludlow Street. She chews him out for grandstanding in his dressing room with the congratulating fans.

After he calms down, he asks her, Can I not be giddy for myself?

•

Aira's scolding the previous evening has chastened him. He successfully blocks out thoughts of who might be in the audience tonight. Looking into the mirror to apply makeup, he uses the word "sunderings" for vocalization

exercises. He exaggerates the first and last sibilance, making the pleasurable sounds over and over. His grandmother doesn't make an appearance during the performance. And, for some reason, when the word pops into his head during the infamous final leg, it galvanizes him, and he delivers a fresh burst of energy. The first thing that both actors do when the curtain goes down, and before it's raised for the curtain call, is hug each other, to acknowledge the strongest iteration yet of the play's concluding minutes. When the curtain is lifted, Matthew is crying, and Andreas is beaming.

More stars pay tribute in the dressing room—art-world folk, members of the publishing community. It's a small world, so Willa reminds Marla to take the book people aside and enjoin them to keep mum, lest word get back to the offices of Grove Press, Beckett's American publisher. Matthew, receiving fans, is on his best, most modest behavior. He can feel Aira, seated in a far corner and turned away from him, somehow watching.

•

Tonight, Aira is the sole speaker of lines on the way back to Ludlow Street. She will be making her first appearance as Winnie tomorrow, a few days earlier than planned. Matthew told Marla he had a feeling that the estate was on to them, and even after scouring the social media of the last few days with Willa and finding no red flags he could not be talked out of his nerves.

In the morning, Aira is in the rehearsal space on Great Jones Street, being put through her paces by Marla. After they come back from lunch, and without Marla's prompting, Aira does a breathtaking stunt: she recites the first half of Act I standing alternately on one leg and then the other. There are many failed attempts before she finds a kind of shaky balance.

Later, when they turn up at the East Village stage, Marla shows Aira the accommodations the stage crew has installed inside the Winnie-swallowing mound. Footrests to hold her, to be removed on nights when Matthew performs. She steps into the mound and puts her socked feet into the attachments. Per her instructions, they are moved to more comfortable positions for her and reinforced with more screws.

She asks for an hour alone, to be inside the mound, the stage dark, the auditorium empty. I'll be right outside if you need me, Marla says.

To get through the evening's show, Aira has to employ all her recently learned tricks: deep breathing, visualization, the yoga she watched on YouTube that started her alternating her balance between one leg and the other. This has the effect of slowing down her Winnie, but no matter—she is mesmerizing. The revelation of her cane at curtain call brings to their feet those in the audience who weren't already inclined to join the standing ovation. She has to have ten minutes to herself in the dressing room to regain her composure.

•

Ruby showed up to watch her mother. At some point, Matthew was watching Ruby watch her mother more than he was paying attention to Aira, who earned laughs on lines that Matthew had thought were perfectly straightforward. He vowed to dig in his heels and never draw laughter on those lines—a sign of petty jealousy.

And yet Matthew understands how necessary those laughs are, because Aira's Winnie is heavy-souled. You can feel her gritting her teeth to manufacture her daily cheer. So, after all, at this late date in their friendship, he discovers that he has misjudged Aira, or that she has contrived to be misjudged, always quick with hugs and humor. Her hospital self is closer to her true spirit, with its bottom of mortal fatigue and clear-eyed nihilism. It took seeing her onstage for Matthew to finally believe his best friend. He shudders at the flip side: What truths has he been exposing to others nightly with his Winnie?

Joining Ruby and Aira on the walk to Ludlow are their upstairs and downstairs neighbors. Matthew informed them in advance of the evening's significance, and he secured their seats. Also in the late-night procession is Priscilla, Ruby's godmother, a former peer of Matthew and Aira's who retired from acting when she married a successful endocrinologist and moved with him to Princeton. Matthew made the call to her as soon as it was decided that Aira would be stepping into the role.

But, scanning the crowd that night, he was glad to see nobody who was plausibly lawyerly or resembled what a suit from a literary estate looked like in his imagination.

Marla doesn't press him to elaborate on his fears. To be extra safe, Aira goes on the next night as well. And then it's the weekend, with two shows on Saturday and a Sunday matinée, and Matthew is back as Winnie for all of them.

•

Monday is no day off for him. This is his afternoon for accompanying Aira to her mah-jongg game in Chinatown. She favors a senior center on Mott, which can accommodate only three tables but has the most convivial players, and a school gym lent monthly to a local church, which attracts nearby residents as well as busing in affiliate members from New Jersey and Rhode Island. Today, Matthew and Aira have chosen the latter site. There are at least a dozen tables in the gymnasium, and walking in to the sound of all those clattering tiles is like being inside a machine of obscure but pleasing purpose.

Matthew begs off playing. He wants only to observe Aira's moves. His policy at the gymnasium is to choose seats for them next to the player with the grouchiest face—usually a woman—and spend the next two hours trying to tease out her life story, her situation. He has never been successful. Grouchy faces tend to favor grunts as their code of exchange. And, also, these are mostly Cantonese speakers joined by recent Fujianese immigrants, and he speaks neither language—or, rather, his childhood fluency in Cantonese is a dim memory, a present embarrassment.

Today, Matthew points to two empty seats next to the grouchiest Chinese woman on earth.

As usual, his friend's luck with the tiles is middling—she loses more than she wins. And, as usual, he is defeated in his campaign to befriend the scowler next to him, although he does get her to acknowledge him with a nod, and then, miraculously, to return his smile with a gesture of one hand over her mouth, seemingly to screen her shy teeth from his eyes.

The next night, Winnie makes a coquettish signal with her hands, trying to conceal a smile. Not all art is a theft from life, and not all thefts work onstage—but there are audible sighs of pleasure from the audience.

•

There are private messages from Willa sent to a half-dozen Twitter accounts, asking them to scrub their too explicit enthusiasms for “Happy Days.” One of these belongs to a former Yale professor of Marla’s, who paid his respects after the show. He was another crier, like Angela Rune. You’ve incarnated my mother! he exclaimed to Matthew, and he and Matthew spent the next few minutes comparing their family matriarchs: the professor’s mother and Matthew’s grandmother. Indomitable women! the professor said.

Tonight is an Aira night. She is waiting inside the mound for ten past eight—curtain is usually held for an extra ten minutes—and then, suddenly, she is waving Willa over, arms frantic. She’s escorted back to the dressing room. Her heart palpitations will not calm down. This time around, the house manager’s announcement is no lie: Ladies and gentlemen, the part of Winnie, played by Aira Wilson, will be performed tonight by Matthew Lim. There are in-the-know people in the audience, and their shock and surprise are entirely performative.

Such is the rush of Matthew’s preparation that he’s caught with an askew wig, and the crowd won’t stop laughing and applauding. He has to wait for their cheer to subside.

Aira doesn’t want to be sent home to an empty apartment. She watches the show from the back of the house, as usual. She sticks around while Matthew sees guests in the dressing room. And she accompanies him afterward to their restaurant hangout.



*“You know the rule about TV. We start with one episode and then see how many times I cave.”*  
Cartoon by David Ostow

At the end of the evening, as Matthew unlocks the door to the Ludlow apartment, it occurs to him to ask Aira, Do you want me to spend the night?

She says no, then yes, then no.

I'll spend the night, he says.

He texts Ruby as soon as he gets back to his apartment, in the West Village, the next morning. How's your mother's health? he asks her.

It's not improving, Ruby replies.

•

At his nightly pre-show dinner with Marla that evening, he brings up the subject of a role for Aira in their next production. He tells her he wants this to happen in six months' time. Already he's thinking of writing grant proposals, raising money from wealthy donors. Maybe a revival of the "King Lear" they staged twenty years ago? There is no question in his mind that Aira would be equal to the task: a Shakespearean marathon every night that her failing body cannot help but improve for. Aliveness needs its occasion. Also, there are many characters who could support Aira bodily: Cordelia, Lear's favorite daughter, and also the Fool, who, in Matthew's mind, is more

and more Henry, with his broad shoulders, his comical shrug. And Marla could be inspired to do an innovative staging, to reduce the physical strain on Aira, so that she is free to simply “be” Lear. There is no overlap between the play and Aira’s life; certainly there’s no anger against the dying of the light in Aira. Rather, her beautiful, beautiful voice will get its proper vehicle. Even the final act’s raging storm, when the blinded king is reunited with his loyal daughter, will not tamp down her clarion diction. What wind, what rains? As before, there will be only Aira’s contralto to command the spectators’ ears, and to pierce their hearts with the king’s regret, as he seeks pardon from what remains of his life. No such dilemma for Aira, long the company’s peacekeeper. For her own last act, there is sure to be a line out the door of her hospital room, everyone waiting to pay respects.

Marla did not helm their original production, but isn’t “Lear” a colossus and a coup for any ambitious director?

Let me think about it, Marla says.

Matthew holds his tongue about time being of the essence.

Marla’s note for that evening’s show: Your Winnie is maybe too sad tonight?

•

It’s only on the walk back to Ludlow with Aira later that evening that he realizes: he was so busy worrying about Aira that he didn’t think once about being ousted to the estate, a rare reprieve from these anxious weeks. There are only five performances left, and he may be jinxing them, but he has to ask: Are we going to get away with it?

He has found himself at the center of an entirely surprising group project, with an uncharacteristically reticent New York City in the role of his abettor. Always, along the chain of hectic audience gossip, there was one person who decided to nip in the bud the talk about a too iconoclastic Beckett, and the relay to the estate was stopped; someone—more than one someone—who decided that Matthew and his crazy dreams were worth shielding. Or that’s how he thinks of it. Still, viewed another way, New York is simply being

itself: out to shaft the big guy (Edward Beckett) and ease the hardship on one of its little people (Matthew Lim).

The next evening, on the jaunt back to Ludlow with Aira, he says just two words to her: King Lear.

What King Lear, Aira replies.

She is only stalling—she knows this as well as he.

He repeats himself, King Lear.

Get that out of your head, Aira says. She's stopped walking. She sighs. She puts out a hand and he mistakes it for a request for support. She brushes him aside, and he allows her to place an affectionate hand on him—a hand of entreaty.

You don't want to? he asks.

Want and can—these are two separate issues.

You can.

You and my doctors need to have a talk, Aira says.

You can. I don't have to tell you this, but, if you just start living with it inside your head, soon your body will warm to the task.

Have you run this by the others? You and I are hardly the only parties who get to decide. I am, despite your beliefs, more a liability than not. What happens when I can't go on?

You'll have understudies.

You?

Everyone. Matthew is beaming.

What do you mean everyone?

Every senior member of the company will learn the role. If you can't go on, a name will be drawn from a hat. Once someone has gone on as Lear, their name will be withdrawn from the hat.

You're crazy, she says. How long has this been planned?

Just now.

You're crazy, she repeats. They resume walking.

He puts a coy hand in front of his smile.

Beautiful words that appear in “Happy Days”: sunderings, mercies. Repeating them in front of the mirror each night has been a vocal warmup and a self-hypnosis for Matthew. Deep breath in: *sunderings*. Breath fully out: *mercies*.

Words that don't appear in the text but which he also utilizes for voice exercises: apocalypse, indomitable. ♦

*Han Ong* is a playwright and a novelist. His novels are “*Fixer Chao*” and “*The Disinherited*.”

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# Do We Need Another Green Revolution?

As the global population grows, we'll have to find ways of feeding the planet without accelerating climate change.

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

June 23, 2025



*A few months ago, more than a hundred Nobel laureates released an open letter predicting that “we are not on track to meet future food needs. Not even close.” Illustration by Alëna Skarina*

The Green Revolution got off to a rocky start. In the fall of 1944, Norman Borlaug, who would become known as the revolution’s father, moved to Mexico to set up a plant-breeding program. Right away, he came down with a stomach crud. It was, he would later tell an interviewer, “the usual tourist thing,” except that it lasted for weeks. Though he had found his previous position, with DuPont, to be boring, in those weeks Borlaug decided that maybe it hadn’t been so bad. “If I could have gotten my job back at DuPont, I would have,” he said.

Borlaug had gone to Mexico specifically to work with wheat, which was being devastated by a fungal disease called stem rust. When he got well enough to travel around the country, he became depressed by what he found. In the Bajío, a region northwest of Mexico City, the farmers were desperately poor. Their wheat didn't seem to grow so much as "fight to stay alive," Borlaug wrote to his wife. "These places that I've seen have clubbed my mind."

Borlaug threw himself into an effort to produce a new variety of wheat—one that would be both rust-resistant and higher-yielding. With the help of two Mexican agronomists, he gathered seeds from thousands of local varieties, planted them, and waited for them to mature. Most of the resulting plants succumbed to rust; the few that made it were crossed with one another to produce the next generation. To maximize his workdays, Borlaug often slept in a shack near his test fields, and, to speed up the breeding process, he shuttled between central Mexico, where wheat was grown in the summer, and northwestern Mexico, where he could get in a second crop in the winter.

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This went on for years. Progress was made; then it was unmade when a different "race" of stem rust swept through. Meanwhile, a new issue emerged. Mexican wheat varieties tended to send up tall, slender stalks. If they were dosed with fertilizer, they became more productive but grew so top-heavy that they fell over—a problem known as lodging. Borlaug began

experimenting with a variety of dwarf wheat from Japan. He crossed the Japanese wheat with some doubly rust-resistant varieties he had developed. Finally, he got lucky. The transpacific crosses proved to be not just vigorous and high-yielding but also surprisingly versatile. They grew well across a range of climate zones and light conditions. In 1960, Borlaug invited farmers in the northern state of Sonora to visit a plot planted with a number of his best-performing dwarf wheat strains. The farmers went wild. They had been instructed to remain at a distance from the plot, but they refused to listen. Some grabbed at the wheat heads and pocketed the seeds. According to Charles C. Mann's "[The Wizard and the Prophet](#)" (2018), Borlaug—the wizard of the title—was secretly pleased by all the tumult. It was to him the "soundtrack of success."

In later years, Borlaug liked to recite statistics illustrating his seeds' superiority. In a speech he delivered in Australia in 1968, the year the term "Green Revolution" was coined, he noted that average wheat yields in Mexico, which had been around seven hundred and fifty kilos per hectare when he'd arrived, had since climbed to almost twenty-eight hundred kilos per hectare—a roughly fourfold increase. In western Pakistan, where versions of the Mexican varieties had been introduced in 1965, the results were similarly dramatic: average yields had risen, he found, by almost fifty per cent in just two years.

But, as proud as he was of his seeds, Borlaug also saw their limits. When he received the Nobel Peace Prize, in 1970, he used his Nobel address to caution against complacency. The new varieties of wheat he had bred, along with new strains of rice and corn which had subsequently been developed, represented, he said, only a "temporary success in man's war against hunger and deprivation." The world's population, he predicted, would continue to grow, and eventually the demand for food would again outstrip the supply. "Perhaps the term 'green revolution,' as commonly used, is premature," Borlaug worried out loud.

Today, there are some 8.2 billion people on earth, more than twice as many as there were when Borlaug won his Nobel. This figure is expected to rise to almost ten billion by 2050. A few months ago, more than a hundred Nobel laureates released an open letter that echoed Borlaug's concerns.

They predicted “a tragic mismatch of global food supply and demand by mid-century.” By their reckoning, “we are not on track to meet future food needs. Not even close.”

Do we need a second Green Revolution? And, if so, what form should it take? Two new books, Michael Grunwald’s “[We Are Eating the Earth: The Race to Fix Our Food System and Save Our Climate](#)” (Simon & Schuster) and Vaclav Smil’s “[How to Feed the World: The History and Future of Food](#)” (Viking), pursue these questions with varying degrees of urgency.

Grunwald is a journalist whose previous books include a history of the Everglades. Humanity, he says, is facing “some terrible math.” On one side of the equation is the growing need for food; Grunwald estimates that, to keep pace with demand, agricultural production will have to increase by fifty per cent over the next twenty-five years. On the other side is climate change. Agriculture is a major source of greenhouse gases; depending on how you calculate it, the sector is responsible for between a tenth and a third of global emissions. To stabilize the climate, this figure has to drop to pretty much zero. We need to “feed the world without frying the world” is how Grunwald puts it.

Grunwald spends a lot of “We Are Eating the Earth” interviewing people who have ideas about how this balancing act might be brought off. One group is pushing what’s called “regenerative agriculture.” Grunwald visits a ranch in Northern California co-owned by the billionaire investor and former Presidential candidate [Tom Steyer](#). Instead of rotating his cows among fields every few weeks, Steyer restricts them to a small area and moves them more frequently. The practice, known as “adaptive multi-paddock grazing,” is supposed to increase the amount of carbon stored in the ranch’s soils. This, in turn, is supposed to counteract some—or all—of the emissions from the operation’s ruminants, which are constantly burping out methane, a powerful greenhouse gas. “If we can show scientifically that this stuff really works,” Steyer says, “that would be priceless.”

A second group wants to take agriculture indoors, thereby freeing up land to plant carbon-sucking forests. Grunwald tours a “vertical farm” built on the site of an abandoned steel mill in Newark. The farm—which is, in fact, an enormous warehouse—is filled with lettuce seedlings growing under banks

of lights in a mist of chemicals. The plants will never see the sun or touch soil. “The future is happening a lot faster than we expected,” David Rosenberg, then the C.E.O. of AeroFarms, the company that owns the warehouse, assures Grunwald.

A third group wants to eliminate farm animals, or at least reinvent them. Chickens, pigs, and especially cows consume many more calories in the form of plants than they yield up in the form of eggs, chops, and burgers. Getting rid of the middleman—or, really, middle creature—will, it stands to reason, make the food system that much more efficient. Grunwald talks to Ethan Brown, the founder of Beyond Meat, and Pat Brown—no relation—the founder of [Impossible Foods](#), both of whom have created beef substitutes out of plant-based ingredients like apple extract and pea protein. Grunwald samples ice cream that has been made without any cream, “egg whites” that have been produced without any eggs, and chocolate mousse made from microbes. (The ice cream, he reports, is tasty; the mousse, “bland.”) He interviews entrepreneurs who are trying to produce meat from animal cells grown in vats. These include a twentysomething from Australia named George Peppou, who wants to culture meat from exotic species, like Galápagos tortoises. “Let’s create brand-new experiences!” Peppou urges.

Grunwald began his reporting for “We Are Eating the Earth” pre-COVID. What exactly he was expecting to discover is hard to say, but he seems to have set out on writing the book optimistically. The “good news is that remarkable people are working on the eating the earth problem,” he writes in his introduction.

Most of the ventures Grunwald tours, however, turn out to be duds. Steyer hires a research group to monitor his ranch. He learns that though some metrics are improving—there’s less erosion, for example—the soil is not absorbing more carbon. On the contrary, it is absorbing less carbon. “Those results are a bummer,” a member of the group acknowledges.

Vertical farming and fake meat prove, if anything, more disappointing. Even with highly efficient L.E.D. bulbs, it takes an awful lot of energy to mimic the sun. Grunwald calculates that to grow just five per cent of America’s tomatoes indoors would require “every megawatt” of the country’s renewable-electricity supply. This has financial as well as climate

implications. AeroFarms ends up going bankrupt in 2023 (though it has since emerged from Chapter 11). Many of its competitors follow suit.

Grunwald interviews Beyond Meat's Ethan Brown just a few months after the company has gone public. Thanks to investor enthusiasm, it has a market capitalization of more than ten billion dollars. This figure has since dropped by ninety-eight per cent. Impossible Foods is privately held; what little information is available about its finances suggests that its value, too, has crumbled. Many other fake-meat ventures, meanwhile, have gone the way of AeroFarms. SCiFi, a company that wanted to create burgers out of a combination of plant-based ingredients and cultivated cells, went belly-up in 2024. Motif FoodWorks, a company that was using yeast to produce a meaty-tasting protein called Hemami, went out of business the same year. (Motif's problems were caused, in part, by a patent-infringement lawsuit filed by Impossible.)

"Carbon farming and vertical farming are wildly overhyped," Grunwald concludes. "Plant-based meat has floundered in the market, while cultivated meat hasn't really made it to market." He adds, "I'm sorry about all that."

Grunwald is an engaging storyteller, and, to his credit, he sticks with the "terrible math" even as it turns terribler and terribler. A reasonable takeaway from "We Are Eating the Earth" is that the feeding-without-frying equation is the sort that can be solved only with imaginary numbers.



*Cartoon by Brendan Loper*

In the absence of breakthroughs, what's to be done? A good first step, Grunwald counsels, would be to stop making things worse. We could start with biofuels. Every year in the United States, some fourteen billion gallons of so-called conventional ethanol—most of which are produced from corn—get blended into gasoline. The practice is federally mandated, and one of the justifications for the policy is that it's supposed to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions. Almost certainly, though, it has the opposite effect. Diverting corn from grocery stores to gas tanks pushes up commodity prices—which, in turn, encourages farmers to convert forests and marshes into cropland. Since forests and marshes store a lot of carbon, cutting down or draining them increases atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub>. Higher commodity prices also, of course, pose more immediate problems, especially for the world's poor. Grunwald quotes an anti-ethanol protest song by the Jamaican reggae singer Livebroadkast:

Biofuel use is gonna burn up all my food  
Deforestation can only mash up our nation.  
Evil men with that wicked intention  
What is your plan? Is it life or destruction?

Another ostensibly green idea that needs rethinking, according to Grunwald, is organic farming. Reducing fertilizer and pesticide use, raising

cattle on grass instead of grain—these may sound like community-minded, environmentally friendly options. But if such practices diminish yields—and Grunwald argues convincingly that they do—then they’re the reverse. To hold the globe’s food supply steady, not to mention increase it, any drop in one farm’s output has to be made up somewhere else. And that somewhere may well turn out to be a field cut out of a rain forest.

It’s “trendy to romanticize small family farms where soil is nurtured with love and animals have names rather than numbers,” Grunwald writes. But “organic, local, and grass-fed are often worse for the climate than conventional, imported, and feedlot-finished.” Grunwald travels to Denmark and Brazil with Tim Searchinger, a researcher at Princeton who has written extensively on the climate impacts of agriculture. “Bad accounting destroys the world,” Searchinger tells him.

Vaclav Smil is a professor emeritus at the University of Winnipeg and the author of more than forty books, several of which also focus on farming. “How to Feed the World” is a typical Smilian work in that it is dense, declarative, and dismissive of lots of other work. “Over the past decade I have been repeatedly exasperated by people’s poor understanding and sheer ignorance of life’s many basic realities, be they concerning organisms or machines, crops or engines, food or fuels,” he writes.

In his introduction, Smil waves aside climate change, saying that he is not going to take up such “fashionable topics.” Nevertheless, he, too, worries about agriculture’s ecological impact. The global food system, he observes, needs to “accommodate the nearly 2 billion people that will be added to today’s population by the middle of the 21st century” at the same time that it needs to “reduce its multitude of environmental burdens.”

Smil is a number cruncher. His premise is that he doesn’t need to visit laboratories or sample ice cream to know what is going to work—and, just as important, what isn’t. Take lab-grown meat. Such meat is produced in bioreactors, which are sterile vats filled with a growing medium. Bioreactors are widely used in drug manufacturing. Smil calculates that to grow just one per cent of the globe’s current meat output would require something like a hundred times the bioreactor capacity of the world’s entire

pharmaceutical industry. “Ambitions and aspirations are one thing, realities another,” he writes.

Or consider efforts to improve on photosynthesis. Photosynthesis is woefully inefficient—even some of the most productive crops convert less than one per cent of the solar energy that hits them into calories—so streamlining the process, via gene editing, could produce significant gains. But Smil is skeptical that this can actually be accomplished. Photosynthesis has been around for hundreds of millions of years and is phenomenally complicated. “Prospects for any early commercial breakthroughs” on this front are, in his view, “meager.”

The good news, according to Smil, is that breakthroughs aren’t necessary. The world could go a long way toward keeping up with food demand simply by better managing the supply. A report commissioned by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that, globally, about forty per cent of fruits and vegetables, thirty per cent of cereal grains, and twenty per cent of meat and dairy products wind up uneaten. The problem is worst in affluent countries like the U.S., where more than two hundred pounds of food per person get thrown away each year. “Even modest food waste reductions would translate into considerable cumulative savings,” Smil observes.

Then, there’s the waste that results from improvident eating habits. If photosynthesis has a low conversion rate, feeding crops to animals compounds the problem many times over. According to Smil, corn “embodies” about 0.7 per cent of the solar energy that hits it; when corn is used as cow fodder, the resulting steaks embody only about 0.002 per cent of the original energy. Pigs and chickens do better at turning grain into flesh. Still, producing a pound of pork or chicken takes many more resources than producing the same amount of, say, cornmeal. Reducing meat consumption, Smil argues, would be “both rational and highly desirable.”

Rates of meat-eating vary widely around the world. At the low end are countries like India and Ethiopia, where the average person consumes just thirteen pounds of meat per year. The U.S. lies at the upper end, weighing in at more than two hundred and sixty pounds per capita. Chinese rates of

consumption are now also high—around a hundred and fifty pounds per person—after having doubled in just the past three decades.

Some of these differences reflect cultural and gastronomical traditions. But economics also plays a big—and ethically awkward—role. From a global perspective, the U.S. diet is too meat-heavy. But how do you get Americans to cut back, or the Chinese to hold steady? And how do you persuade any country to take on food waste? Smil offers a few possibilities, including measures to raise the price of groceries. Though he acknowledges that this would be unpopular, he says that this isn't really his concern, as his book is “more interested in science than politics.” The strength of “How to Feed the World” is its emphasis on realism. How realistic is it, though, to leave politics out of the calculation?

When Norman Borlaug died, in 2009, at the age of ninety-five, his *Times obituary* praised him for having done “more than anyone else in the 20th century to teach the world to feed itself.” The Associated Press called him “equal parts scientist and humanitarian,” and *MIT Technology Review* described his life as one of “heroic proportions.” Were it not for Borlaug and the Green Revolution, the world in the late twentieth century would have been a very different place. Food prices probably would have been a lot higher, the number of people who are malnourished would have been greater, and even more millions of acres of forest would have been transformed into fields.

And yet, by the time of Borlaug’s death, his accomplishments were looking increasingly equivocal. The Green Revolution, critics pointed out, may have alleviated some problems, but it created additional ones, and these tended to impose the highest burdens on precisely those communities the new seeds were supposed to help.

Borlaug’s wheat varieties were highly productive. They were also fussy. They performed well only when showered with nutrients, pesticides, and water. This meant that the gains from planting them went disproportionately to those who could afford such “inputs”—which is to say, those farmers who were already relatively well off. The poorest farmers, for their part, often found themselves forced to sell out. Even if the Green Revolution reduced the price of a commodity like rice by sixty per cent, Raj Patel, a

research professor at the University of Texas at Austin, [has written](#) that this would have been “little consolation” to those farmers who “lost 100% of their income.”

Increased water, pesticide, and fertilizer use, meanwhile, led to a host of environmental problems. In India, for example, the government encouraged farmers to irrigate their thirsty new crops by drilling into underground aquifers. Some thirty million so-called tube wells were sunk. Now, after several decades of pumping, many aquifers are running dry. According to a recent editorial in the [\*Deccan Herald\*](#), “India is facing its worst groundwater crisis in history.” Adding to this crisis, much of the groundwater that remains is contaminated. A [report](#) issued last year by the Indian government found that twenty per cent of the samples taken from around the country contained unsafe levels of nitrates. (Nitrates in drinking water are particularly dangerous for infants, who can develop what’s known as blue-baby syndrome.) The report blamed the problem on “excessive use of fertilizers.”

In the eighty years since Borlaug arrived in Mexico, farming in much of the world has been transformed. New tools that could make farms even more productive are constantly being developed—from *CRISPR* to remote-sensing drones and weeding machines that shoot out lasers. At the same time, the world, too, has been transformed, by such things as climate change, groundwater depletion, and soil contamination. The new tools and the new threats are bound up in each other—two sides, as it were, of the same leaf. If it is reasonable to imagine that we will, somehow or other, find ways to feed ten billion people, it is also reasonable to fear how much damage will be done in the process. ♦



*Elizabeth Kolbert*, a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1999, won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction for “[\*The Sixth Extinction\*](#).” She is also the author of “[\*H Is for Hope\*](#).”

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**Books**

# Briefly Noted

“*Toni at Random*,” “*How Things Are Made*,” “*The House on Buzzards Bay*,” and “*Endling*. ”

June 23, 2025



**Toni at Random**, by Dana A. Williams (Amistad). This study of Toni Morrison’s tenure as a senior editor at Random House draws on interviews, archival research, and correspondence to cast her as a formidable driver of cultural change. Williams, a literary scholar at Howard University, delves into Morrison’s projects—including works by Toni Cade Bambara, Gayl Jones, Lucille Clifton, Angela Davis, and Muhammad Ali—to reveal her editorial and commercial acumen. Working in an overwhelmingly white publishing world, Morrison fused professional excellence with cultural advocacy, using her own books’ critical acclaim to push for acquisitions that reflected a wide range of Black perspectives across genres.



**How Things Are Made**, by *Tim Minshall* (*HarperCollins*). In this lively book, Minshall, the head of Cambridge University’s Institute for Manufacturing, assumes the role of an excitable engineer as he illuminates the intricacies of mass production. Alighting on a range of scenarios, from brownie-baking to bicycle assembly, he delineates the web of processes by which commercial goods are produced, including natural-resource management, logistics, and consumer-data gathering. Among his most striking examples is a square of toilet paper—designed for softness, tearability, and integrity, and produced using trees from both hemispheres which have been pulped, dried, re-moistened, glued, and pressed before being shipped away.

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## What We’re Reading



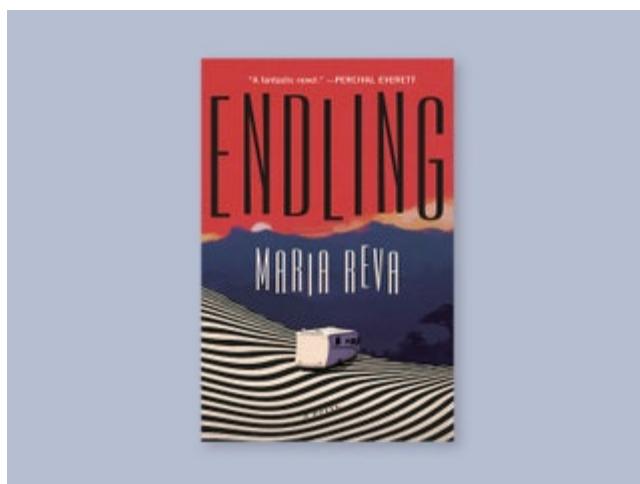
*Illustration by Ben Hickey*

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**The House on Buzzards Bay**, by *Dwyer Murphy* (*Viking*). The narrator of this atmospheric thriller, an excursion into the uncanny, is a lawyer based in New Haven who inherits a large house on the coast of Massachusetts. Initially, he shares it with a close group of college friends, “hoping to improve my odds of having company on vacations.” Years later, when he is married with young children, he and his friends reunite at the house for a summer filled with strange events and omens. They arrive to find that there has been a break-in; then one of the guests disappears; then there is a séance. These gothic elements enhance the book’s central preoccupations of trust, fidelity, and the difficulty of fully knowing another person—or oneself. “You get bits and pieces,” the protagonist observes. “The signal is never quite clear.”



**Endling**, by *Maria Reva* (*Doubleday*). Animated by dark humor and cool fury, this début novel takes place largely in Ukraine during the period

following Russia's invasion. Its three heroines are employees of a romance-tour company, whose clients—wealthy foreigners who pay to date Ukrainian women—are known as “bachelors.” When the invasion begins, the women are racing across the country, having kidnapped a trailer full of bachelors in an effort by two of the women, who are sisters, to get their missing mother’s attention. As Reva relates the stories of her three main characters—including one whose true passion is snail conservation—her novel hums with bruised faith in the irrational power of hope, whether for peace, love, endangered species, or familial reconciliation.

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**Books**

# Are Young People Having Enough Sex?

*Confronted with a Vegas buffet of carnality, Generation Z appears to be losing its appetite.*

By [Jia Tolentino](#)

June 23, 2025



*There is a hypersexuality to online life, which is largely built around images—and which turns individuals into commodities. Photograph by Lauren Greenfield / Institute / Fahey Klein Gallery*

The virgin allegations emerged about a decade ago. Young people “are so sexually inactive that it practically boggles the mind,” a writer for *Bustle* proclaimed, in 2016, invoking a then recent study that suggested that celibacy had lately doubled among people in their early twenties. Two years later, *The Atlantic* gave this evident trend its working name, with a cover story on “The Sex Recession.” (The illustration: a bird and a bee turned away from each other, looking both sullen and shy.) The youth had stopped fucking. They were a “new generation of prigs, prudes, and squares,” a blog declared; they were “anxious, lonely and addicted to porn,” according to the *Telegraph*. They were dragging the rest of the population down with them, the *Washington Post* argued, blaming the “Great American Sex Drought” on young people, and particularly young men, for being losers, more or less—having no girlfriends, living with their parents, preferring video games and social media to real, live, naked bodies.

This, it should be noted, was not your typical kids-these-days hand-wringing. Traditionally, it is the role of the old to worry that the young are having sex too much. In the nineteen-twenties, society's elders panicked about flappers fornicating in speakeasies; the sixties prompted fears of love cults and orgies; the eighties brought a new wave of *AIDS*-centered gay panic. More recently, millennials were harangued for "hookup culture," exemplified by frat parties and "Girls Gone Wild." But the statistics since then have consistently suggested a genuine sex recession, one that includes young millennials, though it has become attached in the public imagination to Gen Z—roughly speaking, those who are currently in their teens and twenties. In 2018, a survey of eighteen- to twenty-four-year-olds found that nearly a third of the men in that group, and about a fifth of the women, had gone without sex for a year—a significant jump from the numbers in the early two-thousands. The pandemic didn't help: in 2021, nearly forty per cent of Californians aged eighteen to thirty had had no sexual partners the previous year.

### **What We're Reading**

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The Zoomer sex recession is puzzling in part because sex has seemingly never been less stigmatized or easier to procure. The electronic devices in our pockets contain not only a vast universe of free porn but also apps on which casual sex can be arranged as efficiently as a burrito delivery from DoorDash. Today, it is a mainstream view that desire isn't shameful, that kinks can be healthy, that a man should make an effort to give a woman an orgasm, that people can do what they want in the bedroom as long as

everyone involved is pleased. And yet, presented with a Vegas buffet of carnality, young people are losing their appetite. How should we understand this? And what, if anything, should we do?

According to Louise Perry, a British journalist in her early thirties, we should celebrate. Perry, who styles herself as a pragmatic apostate from liberal groupthink, recently published “A New Guide to Sex in the 21st Century,” a young-adult adaptation of her first book, “The Case Against the Sexual Revolution.” The new title exemplifies one of Perry’s favorite moves, which is to present reactionary conservatism as simple common sense. Chapter titles include “Sex Must Be Taken Seriously,” “Men and Women Are Different,” “Not All Desires Are Good,” “Violence Is Not Love,” “People Are Not Products,” “Marriage Is Good.” These are reasonable statements, meant to lead the book’s intended reader—a young, straight woman with more fears than experience—to be equally persuaded by Perry’s broader conclusion: that, rather than hope to change anything about our society, we can only individually compress ourselves into a defensive crouch against the very worst that could happen.

Perry’s book is less a guide than a warning. It is important, she cautions readers, to remember that “almost all men can kill almost all women with their bare hands, but not vice versa.” Biological differences between men and women create an ineradicable mismatch between male and female sexual desire, she maintains; unless a woman is in the “small minority” of her kind who appreciate sexual variety, “the risks of casual sex will outweigh the benefits.” She also advises that, “while most women assess their short-term and their long-term partners based on the same criteria, most men do not,” a snippet I considered texting to many female friends who, before settling down with men you’d go to Pottery Barn with, enthusiastically bedded d.j.s and floor-mattress degenerates for years.

Perry repeatedly bolsters her argument by misrepresenting the territory at hand. She writes that “the need for consent is the only moral principle left for sexual liberals,” which is not true whatsoever; progressive feminists have been pointing out for years that consent often exists within a context of exploitation. (Katherine Angel wrote a particularly sharp critique of “consent culture” in her book “Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again,” which

was published in 2021.) Perry argues elsewhere in the book that the tenets of sexual liberalism “inevitably tend towards legalising child sex,” hinting at the old, offensive comparison between homosexuality and pedophilia—even though “age gap” critiques, which typically lambaste men for dating much younger women, are omnipresent in contemporary online discourse, proliferating especially among nominally left-leaning Zoomers. Perry also likes to set things in opposition rather than examine the relationship between them—“We should prioritise virtue over desire,” for example—and she loves to weld a common-sense suggestion to a fundamentalist one. “My advice to young women has to be this: avoid putting yourself in a situation where you are alone with a man you don’t know, or a man who gives you a bad feeling in your gut.”

“A New Guide to Sex in the 21st Century” is, by Perry’s own admission, addressed “almost exclusively to heterosexuals,” and so it ignores one of the most significant changes to sex in the twenty-first century: that it increasingly takes place between (or among!) people who are not straight. Nearly a quarter of Zoomers, almost double the percentage of millennials, identify as something other than heterosexual. Slightly more than five per cent of people under thirty identify as trans or non-binary, more than three times the proportion of people in their thirties and forties. Perry mentions gay people six times: thrice to acknowledge the existence and validity of gay relationships, once to note that a British public figure known for her homophobia also did great work fighting against pedophiles, and twice—in a section about how rape is primarily an expression of sexual desire rather than power—to note that gay men commit rape, too. Trans people are not mentioned at all, which is to be expected, as Perry once wrote an article for the *Daily Mail* with the headline “Her Foolish Critics Can Cancel Quidditch . . . But They’ll Never Cancel JK Rowling’s Rare and Precious Courage.” Last year, Perry wrote a piece for her Substack about how “transgenderism” is a “political trend that is now reaching the end of its lifecycle,” and a movement “made up of a combination of fetishists and the mentally ill.”

At the very end of the book, Perry nods to the fact that Gen Z is already following her counsel to fuck less. Then she leaves the reader with a list of advice that she would offer her own daughter, which includes, among other

things: get drunk or high only with female friends, don't use dating apps, avoid men who are “aroused by violence”—a category in which she includes things such as spanking and choking—don't have sex with anyone until you've known them for a few months, and don't have sex with a man unless you think he would be a good father to your children. I have been with my partner for sixteen years, and we have children together; I agree with Perry that there are goods other than freedom, that desire does not automatically validate one's sexual choices, and that committed partnerships are socially and sexually important. It is also clear to me that this central relationship in my life—not to mention so much of my post-adolescent experience of friendship and fun and adventure—would not have happened if I had followed any of her advice.

Despite her protestations of centrism, Perry's reactionary positions place her squarely on one side of a culture war that is described in another new book by a journalist in her early thirties: “The Second Coming: Sex and the Next Generation's Fight Over Its Future.” The author is Carter Sherman, a reporter for the *Guardian* who previously worked at Vice News. Sherman interviewed more than a hundred people in the process of documenting what she calls “the second coming of the sexual revolution,” an idea that gives the book its title and that trades some accuracy for a middling pun—what Sherman documents is not, after all, a revolution, but a tortured dance between backlash and progress. She takes the Gen Z sex recession as her primary subject and explains it, convincingly, as a result of Zoomers being caught in the middle of “enormous and oppositional forces, powered by changes in politics and technology, that no birds-and-the-bees talk can fix.” On one side there are the sexual conservatives who convert views like Louise Perry's into public policy. On the other side, basically, is the internet.

The internet, Sherman writes, is a “TikTokian carousel of porn” and also a “mass social experiment with no antecedent and whose results we are just now beginning to see.” Its seeming bias toward novelty and expansion—and, crucially, its ability to connect disparate people of similar inclinations and tastes—has made it a locus for sexual progressivism. One activist tells Sherman that it was the internet that helped her “gain the confidence that I needed to demand transition.” Another woman recalls learning the term

“compulsory heterosexuality” on Tumblr and creating a Google doc titled “Am I a Lesbian?” to help other girls realize that their lack of interest in male classmates might have deep roots. A third identifies herself as a “biromantic demisexual, leaning AFAB and transmasc partners.” Sherman “prioritized interviewing Gen Z individuals who are engaged in activism,” as she notes, and her sources are mostly highly knowledgeable, all of which adds clarity to her argument while often eliding the crucial question of how confusion actually feels to those currently experiencing it.



*“Today, we begin our frog-dissection unit, which is a great way to learn which of you are psychopaths.”*

*Cartoon by E. S. Glenn and Colin Nissan*

After all, the internet contains its own oppositional forces. What passes for liberation is often just liberalization—the freedom of the market, in other words, which not only differs from existential freedom but sometimes negates it. We are free, on the internet, to sexually valorize anything and anyone; we are free to sexualize ourselves for any audience; we are not and never will be free from the hypersexuality of an online world that is built around images and videos and that relentlessly turns individuals into commodities—a world in which it is possible to view just about any act imaginable, on demand, in perpetuity. Nearly three-quarters of young Americans have watched porn by their eighteenth birthday; fifteen per cent

encountered it at age ten or younger. Common sense—if I may wear my Louise Perry hat for a moment—suggests that a person’s odds of developing a healthy relationship to the hardcore Times Square in their pocket, and to sex in general, may be hampered by watching double-anal-penetration videos years before they’ve had the chance to smooch someone at a party. And many members of Gen Z do feel scarred by pornography: nearly half of adult Zoomers regard porn as harmful, compared with thirty-seven per cent of millennials, who are less likely to have encountered online porn sites as very young children. Meanwhile, social media has trained Zoomers since childhood to receive regular, quantified measurements of their market appeal, a kind of pseudo-self-knowledge that does not prepare a person well for the undefended confrontation with the Other that enjoyable sexual congress requires. In general, Sherman writes, young people feel “stranded before the maw of a vast and dehumanizing internet.” All the more so, she notes, “because their school-based sex ed pretends sexual pleasure and porn don’t exist or dismisses them as shameful.”

One may find exceptions in this Zip Code or that one, but, by and large, American sex ed has changed fairly little since its widespread implementation after the First World War, when the goal was to educate young adults into choosing a life of “continence” until marriage. In fact, if anything, sex ed has recently got less educational, with the percentage of adolescents who say they’ve been taught about birth control dropping from more than eighty per cent in the mid-nineties to less than sixty-five per cent in a recent survey. Several states have passed so-called “Don’t Say Gay” legislation, aimed at restricting the ability of educators to speak about sexual orientation or gender identity.

All of this makes for a stunning cultural whipsaw. On phones, there’s bukkake and dick pics and hookup apps and arcane sexual sub-identities; in the world shaped by conservative grownups, sex is invisible or forbidden unless it’s between a married heterosexual couple, ideally one that’s procreating. The previous decade brought us pop feminism, SlutWalks, the Good Men Project, and a nationwide reckoning over sexual assault in #MeToo. This decade has seen the end of Roe v. Wade, the reëlection of a man found liable for sexual abuse, the attempted federal erasure of trans people, the apotheosis of violent online misogyny in the form of gurus such

as Andrew Tate, and the type of airless online zombie-woke discourse in which the choreographic and aesthetic decisions of the pop star Sabrina Carpenter stand in for feminist progress, or lack thereof.

Sherman's sympathies are clearly on the side of sexual freedom, but she, like Perry, is concerned about the mainstreaming of B.D.S.M. and rough sex. The non-abstinent Zoomers, you may have heard, are all choking one another: in a recent college-campus survey, nearly two-thirds of women said they'd been choked during sex, and forty per cent of those said that it had happened for the first time when they were between the ages of twelve and seventeen. Perry pins this trend on "Fifty Shades of Grey," published in 2011; Sherman rightly traces it back to online fan fiction, which was the original form taken by "Fifty Shades." Erotic fan fiction is, for many young women, a baptism into the world of being horny, and Sherman points out the popularity, on fan-fiction sites, of story tags such as "noncon" (nonconsensual) and "dubcon" (dubious consent). The young people that Sherman talks to describe this kind of erotica working "in tandem with video porn to normalize 'rough sex,'" i.e., B.D.S.M. without the explicit boundaries and communication that are a part of the adult kink scene.

Perry, of course, insists that all rough sex is pathological, both on the part of men, who are presumed to dominate, and women, who are presumed to submit. (She acknowledges that a third of men consistently prefer submission—then mostly ignores this.) Sexual liberalism "cannot convincingly explain why a woman who hurts *herself* should be understood as mentally ill, but a woman who asks *her partner* to hurt her is apparently not," she writes. Sherman, by contrast, doesn't pathologize these desires. But she does pay attention to the grief that young people can feel when they realize that they don't know why no one ever asked them if certain acts were O.K.—or whether or not they actually like certain things, or why they expect their partners to do them, or why they feel they're expected to do them.

I am not personally inclined to wring my hands about what young people are doing with their genitals. There's some locker-room shaming in the Zoomer sex panic, and some suspiciously coded pro-natalism, and also a displaced longing that the critic Mark Greif wrote about nearly two decades

ago in the essay “Afternoon of the Sex Children,” which Sherman quotes. When it comes to sex, Greif writes, young people are “the biologically superrich whose assets we wish to burgle,” the only people who stand a chance of having sex free from the diminishing effects of commerce and time. Maybe, then, the impulse to control how young people have sex comes partly from a desire that their potential not be squandered, whatever that might mean to any given person. Still, it seems fine that Gen Z is having less sex, and fine also that, when they do have it, they are doing so in more arcane arrangements.

As long, of course, as this is what Gen Z actually wants. But what do they want? Or, put another way, why do we fuck in the first place? Part of the Gen Z sex recession is a relationship recession: Sherman writes that partnered people have more sex than single people, and young people are more likely to be single than those who have come before them. The real problem at the heart of this matter is less about sex and more about loneliness. Depression and anxiety are now so commonplace among young people as to be taken almost as a given—and there is a concomitant disinterest in, or discomfort with, intimate relationships, even ephemeral ones, a situation that inevitably leads to less sex in less satisfying iterations. Zoomers are also drinking less alcohol than previous generations, eschewing a traditional if unreliable shortcut to human connection—i.e., getting wasted and taking someone home. It’s a healthy change, in certain respects, and also, perhaps, another indication that, to many young people, real connection feels too elusive to chase.

On social media, there’s a certain kind of influencer who specializes in attracting lonely, unhappy people by brandishing mantras and principles that will allegedly lead them to more fulfilled and successful lives. These ideas are not always presented as explicitly conservative, but they often include the sort of guys-be-like-this, girls-be-like-that thinking that suffuses Perry’s book. On Reddit, you’ll find young guys advising one another that any girl with male friends is a whore rather than a wifey, and you’ll find young women who coach each other into extracting commitment from boyfriends the way a dentist extracts teeth. TikTok is full of viral paranoid suggestions for ways to test your relationship and ludicrous theories about the One Way to know if any relationship will work.

The reality—that relationships are based on the idiosyncratic magic and complexity of any particular pairing and must be continually navigated and negotiated across time—is arguably learned in the purest way through sex. Sex is one of the few arenas in life in which the hyper-mediation of contemporary existence can vanish completely, one of the rare infinitely repeatable experiences of unadulterated human presence and instinct and responsivity. It can be a form of discovery, especially but not only for young people—a zone in which we might, if we’re lucky, learn how to be partners and friends and citizens, how to find ourselves and one another worthy of love and respect simply for being people with desires. Sex often leads us to a greater understanding of what we want in life, whether that is missionary-style monogamy till death do us part, something more dungeon-based, or anything in between. Almost nothing is perfectly knowable about sex; almost no act is always thrilling or always unpleasant; almost everything depends on context, and context can always change.

“In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial,” Audre Lorde wrote. Sherman invokes this passage in her book, but, like Perry, she’s primarily interested in all the things that can go wrong and have gone wrong with the sex lives of the young. Sex in Perry’s book is a drive that must be controlled to insure emotional stability for women; Sherman addresses it as a pawn for political conservatives, as an exploitable market commodity, and as a tool for expressing individual self-interest. They’re both describing reality as many people see it. But I found myself wanting to read something about desire, and pleasure, and connection—and what it feels like to be a person who’s still learning how to be a person when those things begin to flicker and disappear. ♦



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**Pop Music**

# Haim Sets Off on a Rampage

The band members discuss when to leave a relationship, hoping people slide into their D.M.s, and their new album, “I Quit.”

By [Amanda Petrusich](#)

June 18, 2025



*“I Quit” is a carnal, sure-footed rebuttal of the idea that our lives should inevitably orbit around some eternal romantic commitment. Photograph by Robbie Lawrence for The New Yorker*

This month, Haim—a three-piece rock band from Los Angeles, featuring the sisters Danielle, Alana, and Este Haim—will release “I Quit,” its fourth album and a carnal, sure-footed rebuttal of the idea that our lives should orbit around some eternal romantic commitment. Haim has always been interested in the ways that relationships transform, burn out, or begin anew;

the band's best songs address all the clumsy and complicated intermediary feelings, that vast and chaotic stretch of road between "No, thanks" and "I do." On "Now I'm in It," a tense, pulsating single from the 2020 album "Women in Music Pt. III," Danielle sings about the impossibility of the entire enterprise, how we move helplessly from being strangers to lovers and then back again, often obliterating ourselves along the way: "We cannot be friends / Cannot pretend / That it makes sense," she chants, her voice high and breathless.

"I Quit," which was co-produced by Danielle Haim and Rostam Batmanglij, is about submitting to the wild and mercurial whims of the universe—accepting that we can't control when love comes, or when it goes. In a way, the album's primary feeling is one of deep relief. Perhaps it takes breaking out of something to understand the myriad ways in which it was suffocating you. (Danielle was previously in a nearly decade-long relationship with Ariel Rechtshaid, a producer on the band's first three albums.) On "Gone," a quivering, spacey rock song that samples the ecstatic chorus of George Michael's "Freedom! '90"—Haim has never been particularly subtle—Danielle preaches liberation: "I'll do whatever I want / I'll see who I wanna see / I'll fuck off whenever I want." "Gone" features a spindly and unencumbered guitar solo. Over and over, Danielle makes the case for just leaving:

You can hate me for what I am  
You can shame me for what I've done  
You can't make me disappear  
You never saw me for what I was.

Haim is unusually good at pairing confessional lyrics with propulsive, playful rhythms, making unguarded music that also feels optimistic. My favorite track on the record, "Everybody's Trying to Figure Me Out," was co-written with [Justin Vernon](#), of Bon Iver. It's a rhythmically unpredictable song, with a dry and itchy snare sound—which is to say, it feels organically jittery, with just the right amount of "fuck it" thrown in. Periodically, Danielle's voice goes raspy, a choice that's consonant with the numerous allusions to cigarettes on "I Quit"; I caught myself replaying the bits where she inhales sharply and hungrily at the end of a line, like a smoker huddled

in a doorway, fumbling with a matchbook before finally landing a flame. The song exists in a strange liminal period, the terrifying gap between the recent past and some unknowable future. Danielle’s vocals move from shouty to supple:

Smoked out, bought a pack of Lights  
Oh, and I ain’t done  
Built a jacked-up time machine to prove I was right  
Oh, and clean it up.

I like that verse, in part because the steadiness in her voice seems to capture something about the tension between desperately wanting to say “I knew it!” and recognizing that there’s no way to neutralize or declutter the past—at some point, the only thing a person can do is reorient and move on. The track reminds me, in both sound and vibe, of Modest Mouse’s “3rd Planet,” another tender and brambly song about trying not to lose your mind in the midst of a crisis (“Everything that keeps me together is falling apart,” the vocalist Isaac Brock sings). Deciding for yourself who you are and what you want—those themes could be corny, in a self-help, “I choose me!” sort of way, but here they feel profound, heavy, true. “There are things I’ve done I can’t deny / They might have saved my life,” Danielle sings.

In the closing minute of “Everybody’s Trying to Figure Me Out,” Haim gets very close to summing up both the tragedy and the miracle of heartache, which is, of course, that it’s surmountable:

You think you’re gonna die  
But you’re not gonna die.

There was a brief period during the making of “I Quit” when all three members of Haim were simultaneously single, an event that, in the band’s telling, felt charged and freaky, nearly celestial, a once-in-a-century planetary alignment. “We ended our relationships almost at the same time,” Este told me recently. “And then we all set off on this rampage, if you will.” A frothy, libidinous energy has been central to the album’s rollout. In May, the band posted a video to Instagram of Danielle doing a celebratory shimmy to Prince and the Revolution’s “Kiss,” a song about pleasure and control (“I want to be your fantasy, maybe you could be mine / You just

leave it all up to me, we could have a good time,” Prince squeals). The caption was exultant: “D got some d.” When I spoke with the band, a few days later, it felt only proper to acknowledge the milestone: *Congratulations, you got laid!*

“I’m not gonna lie, I thought it’d be way sooner,” Danielle said, laughing. “I’ve been telling the world that I’m single since my birthday—and, like, not one person has slid into my D.M.s. Not one! I thought it’d be a big coming-out party: ‘I’m single, y’all!’ No.”

“I don’t get it,” Este said. She leaned in. “*New Yorker* readers: Shoot. Your. Shot. And *that* you can print.”

“This is a last-ditch effort,” Alana added. “This is it! If this doesn’t happen, it’s done! We quit!”

These days, both Danielle, thirty-six, and Alana, thirty-three, remain unattached; Este, thirty-nine, is engaged to Jonathan Levin, the C.E.O. of a tech company focussed on cryptocurrency analysis. “Rediscovery, self-discovery, those things kind of permeated the album,” Danielle said. “Being single at the same time also brought up a lot of nostalgia. We were listening to shit that we were listening to in high school, a lot of Cat Power, Animal Collective, Strokes. The stuff that we loved when we were teens, smoking in our cars.”

That feeling—of wanting to return to a simpler and more carefree era, when the stakes were lower and the future was wide open—is at the center of “Take Me Back,” a track about driving around Los Angeles, looking for a spot to kiss, doing drugs, wondering if your crush is ever going to make a move: “Take me back to ditching / Take me back to getting off,” Danielle sings. There’s an urgency to both the production and the songwriting on “I Quit” that seems to mirror the adolescent purity of that longing; some of the album’s most potent tracks, like “Try to Feel My Pain” (a song about accepting that something is going to be difficult and painful, and then doing it anyway), are less than three minutes long. “We finally stripped away a lot of . . . stuff,” Danielle said. “Rostam would say, ‘Sing softer.’ And I’d be, like, ‘Really?’ On ‘Try to Feel My Pain,’ I originally had kind of a Motowny delivery, and he was, like, ‘I have an idea. We’re gonna re-sing it,

and you're gonna have a handheld mike, and you're just gonna whisper it.' I was, like, 'Mick Jagger wouldn't have done that.' And then it was 'Oh, actually, Mick Jagger would have totally done that.' ”

“That’s why you and Rostam work so well together,” Alana added. “Watching them produce together is so interesting. They bounce ideas off of each other so well, and it’s such a collaborative environment. Making an album should be fun. This album, we had so much fun. I think you can hear it.”

“Relationships,” the album’s first single, is another giddy, liberated song. On the chorus, Danielle sings, “Baby, how can I explain / When an innocent mistake turns into seventeen days?” Her voice sounds gently exasperated. “People take that lyric and think about it in different ways,” she said. “For me, it’s about when you get into a fight over something dumb. But I think people think of it as a seventeen-day situationship. Like a whole-ass relationship in seventeen days! But for me it was just ‘I hate being passive-aggressive. Can we just get over this?’ ”

There’s a deep well of exhaustion and ennui at the song’s core. “Don’t they end up all the same / When there’s no one left to blame?” Danielle wonders in the chorus. That question appears and reappears on “I Quit”: Are there only two ways love can go? Either you crash and burn, or you settle into a kind of grim and sexless codependency?

“Oh, my God,” Alana said, laughing.

“I mean, I still believe in love!” Este said. “But before this I was in a five-year relationship where we basically became roommates. That’s kind of what we’re talking about in the song—what do we do here? I can continue this way, probably forever, but I’m not gonna be happy, and I don’t think that it does anyone any good. It’s the hardest thing to do, because there’s nothing wrong. It was just that we’d become like friends.”

“I Quit” is full of hyperspecific references, which give it a satisfying temporality; the songs were written in the course of several years, but they feel immediate and cohesive, a snapshot of a particular moment of transition. “This album specifically was, like, no rules,” Alana said. “That’s

kind of where the ethos of ‘I Quit’ came from: you just gotta put it all out there. Listening to Joni Mitchell, I felt so close to her, because I felt like I was living in her life. Being extremely vulnerable is actually really healthy, and there was an inner healing on this album—the idea was: If I get it out, it won’t stay in. There were a lot of wounds that were healed while making ‘I Quit.’”

“Down to Be Wrong,” another of the album’s best songs, is about refusing to commit to misery, even if it means disappointing someone else: “You’re the greatest pretender / So just keep pretending,” Danielle sings on a verse. Her voice is cool, with an overlay of vague disdain. She lets out an “Ooooh!” at the top of the chorus which contains a whole panoply of emotions: wounded, pissed off, euphoric. It is the sound of someone finally being set free. ♦



*Amanda Petrusich* is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of “[Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World’s Rarest 78rpm Records](#).”

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**Musical Events**

# Bach's Colossus

Pygmalion's visceral rendition of the B-Minor Mass.

By [Alex Ross](#)

June 23, 2025



*Illustration by Raven Jiang*

Bach's Mass in B Minor begins with a majestic howl of pain—four adagio bars that combine formal grandeur with writhing interior lines, as if figures in a cathedral frieze of the Last Judgment were coming to life. The text is “Kyrie eleison,” or “Lord, have mercy,” and the distribution of the words in the chorus suggests the flailing of a desperate crowd. Half the sopranos sing “Kyrie, Kyrie, eleison, eleison,” the other half sing “Kyrie, eleison, eleison, eleison”; the altos sing “Kyrie, eleison, Kyrie, eleison,” the tenors and basses “Kyrie, Kyrie, Kyrie, eleison.” Only the first and last chords in the sequence are solid triads, the rest tinged by dissonance to one degree or

another. The orchestration is a touch grotesque, with the first violins given a shrill D two octaves above middle C. The bass line retreats toward the treble, creating further instability. After a moment of repose on F-sharp major, an immense fugue on “Kyrie eleison” unfolds, in two gradually cresting and subsiding waves—ten minutes of sublime churn.

A new recording of the B-Minor Mass by the French ensemble Pygmalion, under the direction of Raphaël Pichon, delivers that four-bar exordium with maximum force. The weight of the sound—incorporating five vocal soloists, thirty choristers, and thirty-three instrumentalists—harks back to lumbering mid-twentieth-century accounts by Otto Klemperer and Hermann Scherchen, before the original-instrument movement dictated light textures and fleet tempos. Yet period style still adheres, the timbres pungent rather than plush. Urgency animates each component of the whole, whether it’s the punchy “K”s in the male voices or the penetrating chants of “eleison” in the sopranos. A sharp intake of breath before the first chord heightens the impact. The plea for mercy is dire: arms are held up to ward off a blow.

Pichon, a former countertenor, founded Pygmalion in 2006, when he was still a student at the Paris Conservatory. The group began issuing recordings in 2008, first on the Alpha label and then on Harmonia Mundi. One early project was to document Bach’s “Missae Breves,” or short masses, among which is the Missa 1733, the source of the Kyrie and the Gloria sections of the B-Minor Mass. (Bach completed the full version of the Mass in 1749, at the end of his life; he never heard it whole.) From the start, Pygmalion’s musicians stood out, not so much for their pristine intonation and liquid legato—today’s early-music ensembles have transcended the scrawniness of yore—as for their vibrant phrasing, their bold colors, their air of spontaneous excitement. Lately, they’ve been tackling pinnacles of the sacred repertory: Monteverdi’s 1610 Vespers, Bach’s St. Matthew Passion, Mozart’s Requiem, and now the complete B-Minor Mass.

Pygmalion’s recording of the Mass has many stretches of sonic splendor, which bloom in the acoustic of the Cathédrale Notre-Dame-du-Liban, in Paris, where Harmonia Mundi’s sessions took place. Purists may feel that Pichon and company have gone overboard, but, given that the Kyrie and the Gloria were intended for the glittering Dresden court, a bit of opulence

seems apt. If the “Kyrie eleison” casts a chilly shadow, the closing movements of the various sections erupt with joyful noise, all skirling trumpets and banging drums. “Cum Sancto Spiritu” has a dancing drive; “Et expecto” is a virtual stampede; and “Dona nobis pacem” builds to sonorities so monumental that they threaten to put Bruckner out of business. (Play it loud.)

At the same time, this B-Minor Mass is notable for its intimacy, its confiding humanity. It’s not one of those self-serious endeavors in which everyone genuflects before God’s chosen composer. In “Laudamus te,” Sophie Gent, Pygmalion’s concertmaster, delivers her violin solos with an almost folkish twang, as if sauntering around while she plays. The flutist Georgia Browne brings conversational warmth to “Domine Deus,” with Thibaut Roussel strumming sympathetically on the theorbo. Alongside the radiant climaxes, the chorus achieves spells of shivering inwardness. In the nebula of chords that ushers in “Et expecto,” the prospect of the resurrection of the dead engenders an awed pianissimo on the word “mortuorum.”

As I followed along with the 2010 Bärenreiter edition of the score, I noticed how the musicians heed the dynamic and tempo markings that appear in the so-called Dresden parts—materials that Bach prepared for a prospective Dresden performance of the Kyrie and Gloria. The glacial pace of the “Kyrie eleison” introduction, for example, is justified by the indication “molto adagio”—“very slow”—in the cello part. (For whatever reason, Bach wrote only “adagio” elsewhere.) In “Laudamus te,” Gent syncopates the reprise of her opening line with a Lombard rhythm, in which a quick short note precedes a longer one; this, too, can be found in the Dresden parts. Such discrepancies in Bach’s manuscripts show that no definitive version of the Mass exists and that modern performers are free to follow their intuition.

Pygmalion’s effort, thrilling as it is, falls short of perfection, as every recording must. The vocal soloists are impeccable, yet only the mezzo-soprano Lucile Richardot arrives at a really personal approach, her haunted, aching “Agnus Dei” setting the stage for the “Dona nobis pacem.” An oddly aggressive “Crucifixus” lacks mystery. The fast tempos verge on the hectic.

Among latter-day accounts of the Mass, I'll continue to revisit the devotional precision of the Bach Collegium Japan, the austere blendedness of the Netherlands Bach Society, and the chiaroscuro glow of the Collegium Vocale Gent. I also treasure the effusive pomp of Karl Richter, who led the first live performance of the Mass I heard, in 1978. But Pygmalion's rendition, with its passionate embrace of human extremes, belongs among the greatest.

At the onset of this dark American summer, I've gone back and forth between Bach's colossus and a contemporary creation of radically different character: Timothy McCormack's hour-long piano work "mine but for its sublimation," which has been recorded by Jack Yarbrough and released on Another Timbre. According to the composer's program notes, the piece is "about letting go; othering; finding presence through evaporation. Obliteration." The music is, for the most part, quiet and slow, often hovering at the edge of silence. Yet it has a cumulative power that left me a little dazed the first time I listened.

McCormack, who uses the pronoun "they," was born in 1984, in Cleveland; studied at Oberlin, the University of Huddersfield, and Harvard; and is now based in San Diego. At first, their music tended toward density and frenzy, echoing the maximalist aesthetics of Helmut Lachenmann, Brian Ferneyhough, and Chaya Czernowin, one of McCormack's teachers. In recent years, they have adopted a sparser, if not simpler, style. The gently rocking, softly cryptic chords that inaugurate "mine but for its sublimation" bring Morton Feldman to mind, yet that impression dissipates as the soundscape grows more variegated and unpredictable: bell-like single tones, rumbling clusters, plinks and thumps from inside the piano, showers of harmonics produced by deploying e-bows, or electric bows, to vibrate the instrument's strings without touching them. By the end, Yarbrough's piano seems less a physical machine than a zone of resonance. "Presence through evaporation," indeed.

About nineteen minutes in, after a meditative string of A-flats, a halting procession of some two hundred and seventy-five chords begins—permutations of eight basic types, containing up to twelve notes. It is opaque music, numbing at times, yet the ear soon picks out patterns. A

rising line of B, D-flat, and E-flat makes itself felt, and before long those notes are ringing out in a short-long pattern, like a languid Lombard rhythm. The harmonies disperse and gravitate toward tonal nodes, until, suddenly, stunningly, pure E-flat major materializes. I thought of the “Et expecto” from the B-Minor Mass, which wanders from D major to the verge of oblivion. Here, something like the opposite happens, though only for a moment. The tonal mirage vanishes. Perhaps the proximity of the Mass affected my thinking, but I heard that E-flat chord as a spiritual event. It was as if no such chord had existed before or would exist again. ♦



*Alex Ross* has been *The New Yorker's* music critic since 1996. He is the author of “[Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music](#).”

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[The Current Cinema](#)

# “F1” is a Well-Tooled Engine of Entertainment

*The destination of this comeback narrative starring Brad Pitt may be predictable, but Joseph Kosinski’s direction insures thrillingly tight turns en route.*

By [Justin Chang](#)

June 20, 2025



*Brad Pitt stars as a racecar driver attempting a return to Formula 1, in Joseph Kosinski’s film. Illustration by R. Kikuo Johnson*

In “F1,” a snazzy piece of blockbuster engineering, Brad Pitt plays Sonny Hayes, a devotee of fast cars, beautiful women, and simple living. A professional gambler and an occasional speed demon for hire, he lives in a beat-up van that he hauls from one racetrack to another. Strapping himself into a car at Daytona International Speedway, he applies just the right proportions of velocity, swagger, and insider know-how to hint at a once great racing career. About thirty years ago, Sonny was an ascendant Formula 1 star—cue many hilarious, grainy video clips of a younger Pitt, with a resplendent golden mullet—until his dreams were dashed by a near-fatal accident, during an attempt to overtake the three-time Formula 1 world champion Ayrton Senna. The invocation of an actual legend and martyr of the sport—Senna died in 1994, after a crash at the San Marino Grand Prix

—is meant to supply a jolt of gravitas. Beneath the slick paint job of this movie’s crowd-pleasing fiction, we’re expected to believe, whirs a tough, reality-driven engine. For some, it may also stir memories of the documentary “Senna” (2011), one of the finest of all racing movies. “F1,” directed by Joseph Kosinski, with a script by Ehren Kruger, aspires to the same pantheon.

Does it get there? “F1” is hugely enjoyable and astoundingly well made, but I will leave the question for posterity and for more committed motorheads in the audience to decide. A few will gravitate toward the still cherished spectres of “Grand Prix” (1966) and “Le Mans” (1971); others will invoke such classics of unleaded testosterone as “Days of Thunder” (1990) and “Rush” (2013). Like the latter two films, “F1” is an epic of male aggression. At the urging of an old friend and ex-rival, Ruben (Javier Bardem), Sonny reluctantly agrees to return to Formula 1 and drive for APXGP, a battered team that can barely hold its own against the likes of Ferrari and Mercedes. Sonny strides onto the track with unruffled cool—a Pitt signature—and is laconic enough to endure a series of press conferences at which journalists are quick to label him a has-been. He isn’t much of a team player, and neither is his much younger teammate, Joshua Pearce (Damson Idris), a clout-chasing hothead who refuses to play the deferential protégé to Sonny’s geriatric comeback kid.

Underdog sagas and cross-generational pissing contests are nothing new. Neither are head-turning female love interests, even if the one here, Kate (the splendid Kerry Condon, of “The Banshees of Inisherin”), is APXGP’s technical director, and thus knows the racers’ hardware better than they do. Again and again, “F1” finds fresh pathways into familiar material; it keeps its surface-level moves unpredictable even though its overarching trajectory isn’t. At nearly every race—the locations include Silverstone, U.K.; Monza, Italy; Francorchamps, Belgium; Las Vegas; and Abu Dhabi—Sonny manages to rejigger the rules of the game, to the understandable irritation of Joshua and the rest of the team. The secret to success, he insists, lies in looseness, spontaneity, and thinking so unconventional that it approaches the paradoxical: setbacks are advantages, penalties beget opportunities, and a terrifying crash can hold the key to victory. “Slow is smooth, and smooth is fast,” Sonny tells the mechanics, and his tortoise-and-hare logic applies to

the film’s own pacing, which is at once patient and brisk. The editing, by Stephen Mirrione, has a hyperkinetic elegance; the quicker the cutting, the more convincingly the action coheres. The images, shot by Claudio Miranda, alternate between dazzling eagle-eye views of the track and closeups so intense that at times all you can see can is a driver’s fist clenching the wheel.

Kosinski made his feature début with the sci-fi sequel “*Tron: Legacy*” (2010), and some of that movie’s sleek monochrome world-building persists, amusingly, in APXGP’s white-on-white Apple-store aesthetic. The director’s most salient credit is “*Top Gun: Maverick*” (2022), which did for Tom Cruise what “*F1*” seeks to do for Pitt: assemble a grand Hollywood throwback, rife with high-stakes mischief and mentorship, that will affirm the mojo, but also the beneficence, of a gracefully aging star. For all that, it’s when the film slows down to allow Sonny a moment of misty-eyed career introspection that the proceedings slacken, leaving you suddenly impatient to get back to the track. Sonny is never more expressive than when he’s behind the wheel, and this is no time for a Pitt stop.

There are two car scenes of note in “*Sorry, Baby*,” neither of which involves busted tires or burning vehicles, although both are nonetheless shot through with an unbearable tension. In the first of them, Agnes (Eva Victor), a graduate student at a small New England university, is driving home in shock; something terrible has happened, and what we see behind the windshield is a silent scream of incomprehension and disbelief. In the second, set roughly three years later, a freshly triggered Agnes suffers a full-blown panic attack behind the wheel—one that doesn’t subside until after she pulls over, with a screenwriter’s convenient timing, in front of a kindly stranger’s sandwich shop.

The neatness isn’t a bad thing (and neither, it turns out, are the sandwiches). “*Sorry, Baby*,” which marks Victor’s début feature as writer and director, unfolds with a precision that never feels persnickety. It consists of five chapters, plucked from across a five-year span of Agnes’s life, and presented out of chronological order. In the first but not earliest chapter—it’s essentially year four—Agnes, now a full-time English professor at the same university, is visited by her former roommate and classmate, Lydie

(Naomi Ackie, superb), who lives in New York. They've remained close friends, and their bond, intimate and unfailingly loyal, becomes the key to the entire picture. ("Sorry, Baby" is as bound by female friendship as "F1" is by male rivalry.)

Almost immediately, Agnes and Lydie slip into waves of bawdy banter that, although delightfully spontaneous, carry a faint anxiety—as if the two were eager to assert an atmosphere of sexual normalcy. You can already guess at the reason for this, but it becomes emphatically clear in the next chapter, which returns us to year one. Agnes, a student again, is getting notes on her thesis from her adviser, Preston (Louis Cancelmi), who deems her work extraordinary. Indeed, Agnes's brilliance is already the stuff of campus legend, but his assessment is motivated by more than purely academic considerations. Their last session is held not in a classroom or an office but, by Preston's last-minute arrangement, at his house. The terrible thing happens, and Victor films it from outside the building, in three hushed, static shots. The swiftly darkening sky tells all.

If "Sorry, Baby" has a thesis of its own, it's a fluid, liberating, non-deterministic one: simply put, pain and healing assume a range of unique forms, and the tales we tell about them should follow suit. Victor's script, which won a prize at this year's Sundance Film Festival, has an understatedly self-reflexive quality: Agnes, whose academic expertise is in short stories, is fascinated by narrative niceties and unorthodox plot structures. The ultra-discreet visualization of Agnes's assault is merely one respect in which the film sidesteps the usual strategies of so much trauma fiction. The gentle shuffling of multiple time frames is another, reminding us that the course of emotional repair is neither swift nor strictly linear. Notably, Agnes's suffering doesn't give her a desire for revenge or send her packing. Her decision to take a job in the English department—thankfully sans Preston, who leaves the school of his own volition and suffers no legal or professional consequences—reads as a quietly principled refusal to let her worst fears taint her greatest joys. Nor does Agnes's experience sap her, as a lesser film might suggest, of sexual appetite, thanks in no small part to the proximity of an adorkable neighbor (Lucas Hedges).

The film's most productively destabilizing element is its humor. Victor has a background in improv comedy, and came to fame, in part, through video routines that went viral on social media: here is Victor muddling through an awkward blind date, or riffing on the contents of a hardware store. Some of the funnier scenes in "Sorry, Baby" suggest a refinement—but also an audacious retooling—of the same offbeat rhythms: here is Agnes dressing down an insensitive doctor the day after her assault, or, in a morally reflective scene, carefully explaining to a court why she might not qualify for jury duty. Agnes has a gawky, floppy-haired beauty, a gently appraising stare, quizzically arching eyebrows, and a tendency to listen with her mouth half open, as if in anticipation of a punch line that will take her, and us, by surprise. She isn't above making light of her trauma, but notice how she responds even to good news—like Lydie's announcement that she's pregnant—with a quick joke; she takes the piss out of life's highs as well as its lows. She's a true original, and so is "Sorry, Baby": in structuring itself around the onset and aftermath of a monstrous betrayal, this quietly heroic movie refuses to let its heroine be defined by the same. ♦



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

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# Poems

- **“South Carolinian American Sonnet for Independence Day”**

By Terrance Hayes | “The comfort in the smell of bacon in the morning / is mostly burning fat & salt, but the taste is sweet / as the part of the pig that stores the soul.”

- **“God”**

By Campbell McGrath | “It makes sense notionally, a painless hypothesis / for our predicament, crayoned face to bridge / the gulf between grace and the lightning storm.”

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[Poems](#)

# South Carolinian American Sonnet for Independence Day

By [Terrance Hayes](#)

June 23, 2025

The comfort in the smell of bacon in the morning  
is mostly burning fat & salt, but the taste is sweet  
as the part of the pig that stores the soul.  
“If you don’t bless it, it might choke you,” Ma likes  
to say over the plates. My definition of family  
includes the sense kinfolk know & think they know  
things about you, but only share these things  
with family members when you ain’t in the room.  
Last time I was home, my cousin offered me hash,  
a ground-up, boiled, antebellum mash of leftover  
hog—liver & lung, brain to snout & skull—covered  
in hot sauce & served on a bed of instant rice.  
I said, “Hell no,” but I let a bit touch my tongue  
to be polite, before saying “Hell no” twice.

[Terrance Hayes](#), a former MacArthur Fellow, is the author of “[So to Speak](#)” and “[Watch Your Language](#),” among other books.

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[Poems](#)

# God

By [Campbell McGrath](#)

*June 23, 2025*

It makes sense notionally, a painless hypothesis  
for our predicament, crayoned face to bridge  
the gulf between grace and the lightning storm.  
But why should God be imagined as human—heavens,  
dogs are nobler creatures, to say nothing of whales  
or oak trees—and why as a man? Why should God  
be gendered any more than potassium or gravity?  
If a coconut falls on your head, you don't question its  
sexuality. You curse, flail, you might even die,  
poor donkey of the body tapping out, farewell.  
Death doesn't scare the body because all the body wants  
is to lie on the couch with a golf tournament on TV  
but the mind is drip, drip, drip, drip, relentless.  
It wants God to be more than a notion, it wants God  
to be real so it can escape the hairy carcass  
and rise—eternity seems always to be an ascension—  
the mind wants to climb that ladder while the body  
prefers to bask in a confetti of chatter,  
the mind wants to study the stars from the roof  
and imagine an afterlife it understands  
deep down, in its python coils, to be nothing  
but a metaphor, a hunger for reassurance, a telescope  
resolving the night into a zodiac of consolation.

[Campbell McGrath](#) is the author of “[Fever of Unknown Origin](#)” and “[Nouns & Verbs](#),” among other books.

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By Brooke Husic | A challenging puzzle.

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

# The Crossword: Monday, June 23, 2025

*A challenging puzzle.*



By [\*\*Brooke Husic\*\*](#)

June 23, 2025



[\*\*Brooke Husic\*\*](#) is the crossword editor at Puzzmo.

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