

CHRISTMAS PUDDING

2023



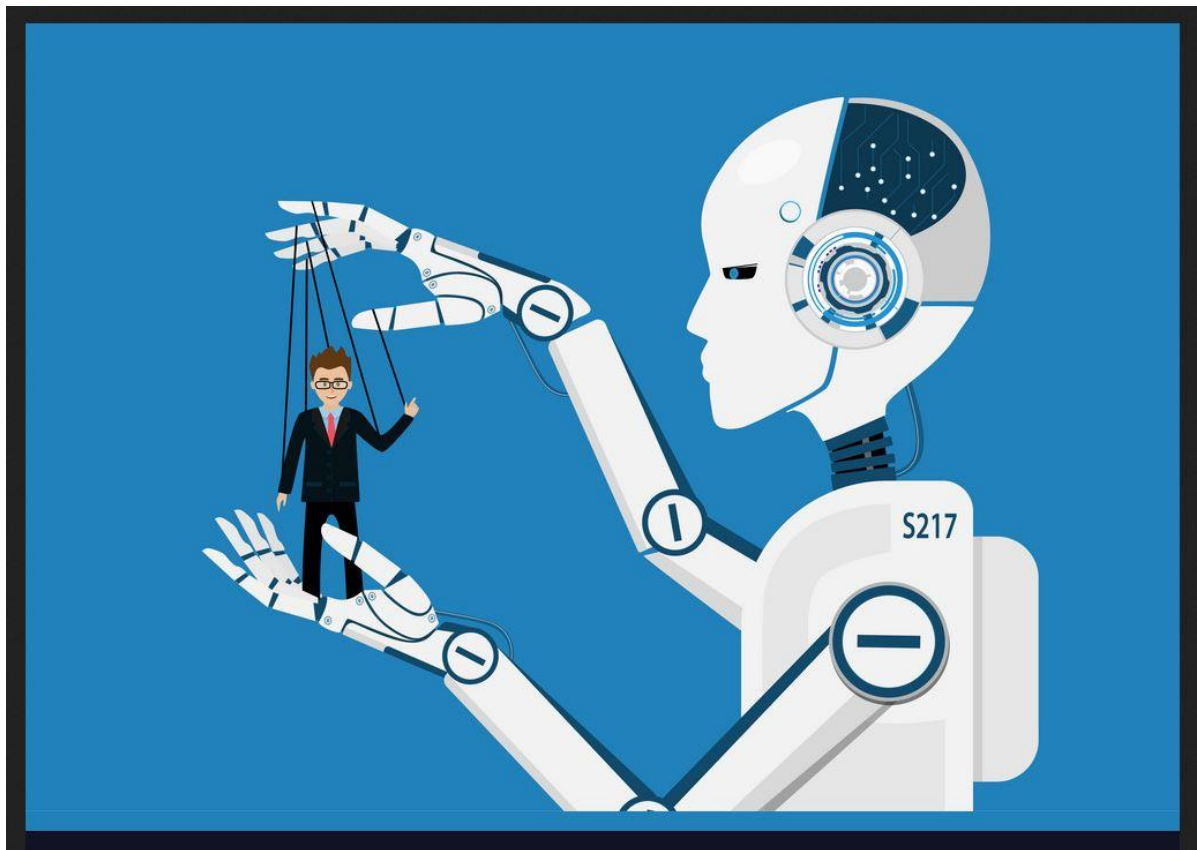
Robert Middleton

Christmas Pudding is an anthology devoted essentially to aspects of the use of language, particularly in poetry but also in wit and humour. Poetry is a vehicle for sharing ideas and emotions and, as such, is a mark of our civilisation and collective intelligence: it also promotes an understanding of the nature and importance of language, man's highest natural attribute. I am concerned that few people read poetry today and that the contemporary dominance of the visual media poses a threat to our command (and even understanding) of language and to a decline in writing skills.

After studying under Graham Storey in Cambridge, I was deeply influenced by the literary criticism of Yvor Winters at Stanford University in the early 1960s, by his rigorous insistence on the distinction between connotation and denotation in poetry and by his moral crusade against the decline of reason as a precept in art and literature (and life) since the end of the eighteenth century. The accompanying relaxation of content and meaning that characterises verse for the last two hundred years is, at least in part, responsible for a breakdown in communication between writer and reader: today, 'anything goes' - much verse is obscure and, if it were not divided into lines, would be indistinguishable from prose. I share Winters' view that the late sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century was a golden age for poetry and that several poets of this age developed a 'timeless' medium for poetic expression characterised by the clear communication of ideas and emotion, using words not only for their sound, rhythm and imagery but also to convey meaning. I recognise, however, that the poetry of this period may not be easily accessible to the general reader as a result of unfamiliar poetic conventions and shifts in the meaning of words. I also dissent from Winters' rather pessimistic view that not much of comparable quality has been produced since. Until 2011, *Christmas Pudding* drew heavily on poetry of the 'golden age'; since then I include much modern and contemporary verse that, in my opinion, meets Winters' strict criteria. If I no longer insist on form, my criterion remains nevertheless quality of language and content - and, a new ingredient, wit.

In addition to the desire to entertain and amuse, *Christmas Pudding* has thus a serious intent: I aim to include poems that use language in a rational and comprehensible way, that have a clear meaning with a minimum of decoration and cliché and that express feelings we can share. My choice is intended to show that poetry can be (I would even say, should be) a means of communication between normal rational people.

The inspiration for *Christmas Pudding* is *Christmas Crackers*, an anthology of wisdom, wit and linguistic surprise collected by the late distinguished scholar John Julius Norwich. I have tried to emulate his mixture of humour and erudition, although a significant part of my raw material is drawn from the more mundane spheres of e-mail and the Internet. My title seems to me apposite: a Christmas pudding is full of varied, interesting and sometimes surprising ingredients, is well-rounded, requires a considerable amount of stirring in its preparation, is still good a long time after the first serving and is not heavy if enjoyed sparingly. Moreover, a pudding is the least pretentious of dishes and acknowledges Norwich's superior recipe.



“I believe that at the end of the century the use of words and general educated opinion will have altered so much that one will be able to speak of machines thinking without expecting to be contradicted.” —
Alan Turing, "[Computing machinery and intelligence](#)" 1950

"[The October 2023 AI summit at Bletchley Park] will focus on threats from frontier AI, cutting-edge systems that could cause significant loss of life. These include the ability to make bioweapons, create sophisticated cyber-attacks and to evade human control."

“It’s time to get serious about advanced AI systems Increasing their capabilities before we understand how to make them safe is utterly reckless. ... There are more regulations on sandwich shops than there are on AI companies.” Stuart Russell, professor of computer science at the University of California, Berkeley. [The Guardian, 24 October 2023](#)

© Robert Middleton 2023

Animal cartoons from *The New Yorker*

e-mail robert.middleton@bluewin.ch

All previous editions of Christmas Pudding can be found on

<https://pamirs.org/christmas-pudding/>

CHRISTMAS PUDDING 2023

Having more or less exhausted themes of poetry, for 2023 I am falling back on some themes of, I hope, more general interest. An essay, a few press articles and some humour on the subject of Artificial Intelligence; animals/humans, some intelligent, some less so;¹ a few poems about them; and many miscellaneous, together with the usual odds and ends.

I had promised myself never to repeat anything that has appeared before in *CP*. Some of the animal poems have appeared before : I make no excuses, they are still witty poems.²



Seasonally appropriate



TOM GAULD

An Old Man's Winter Night - Robert Frost (1874-1963)

All out of doors looked darkly in at him

Through the thin frost, almost in separate stars,

¹ A slew of odd animal stories appeared in 2023.

² I note also that human memory is short. If anyone can remind me in which edition of *CP* these animal poems have already appeared, I will award a prize (undefined).

That gathers on the pane in empty rooms.
What kept his eyes from giving back the gaze
Was the lamp tilted near them in his hand.
What kept him from remembering what it was
That brought him to that creaking room was age.
He stood with barrels round him -- at a loss.
And having scared the cellar under him
In clomping there, he scared it once again
In clomping off; -- and scared the outer night,
Which has its sounds, familiar, like the roar
Of trees and crack of branches, common things,
But nothing so like beating on a box.
A light he was to no one but himself
Where now he sat, concerned with he knew what,
A quiet light, and then not even that.
He consigned to the moon, such as she was,
So late-arising, to the broken moon
As better than the sun in any case
For such a charge, his snow upon the roof,
His icicles along the wall to keep;
And slept. The log that shifted with a jolt
Once in the stove, disturbed him and he shifted,
And eased his heavy breathing, but still slept.
One aged man -- one man -- can't keep a house,
A farm, a countryside, or if he can,
It's thus he does it of a winter night.

Which also reminds me that I am growing older.

Anonymous³

Another year has passed, and we're all a little older.
Last summer felt hotter, and winter seems much colder.
There was a time not long ago, when life was quite a blast.
Now I fully understand about 'Living in the Past' .

³ Thanks Philipp

We used to go to weddings, football games and lunches.
Now we go to funerals, and after-funeral brunches.
We used to have hangovers, from parties that were fun.
Now we suffer body aches, and awaken with the sun.
We used to go out dining, and couldn't get our fill.
Now we ask for doggie bags, come home and take a pill.
We used to often travel to places near and far.
Now we get sore asses from riding in the car.
We used to go to nightclubs, and drink a little booze.
Now we stay home at night, and watch the evening news.
'That, my friend is how life is, and now my tale is told
So, enjoy each day and live it up before you're too damned old

Frost was one of the last believers in form, famously writing
"I'd sooner write free verse as play tennis with the net down."
He wrote a little epigram on the subject called "Pertinax,"

Let chaos storm!
Let cloud shapes swarm!
I wait for form.

I particularly like the following poem by Frost, also a reflection
on the past.

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;
Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.
I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Frost would have approved of Paul Simon's "[Kathy's Song](#)", probably his finest, from the 1966 album "Sounds of Silence", that expresses the constraints of form, the struggle "with words that tear and strain to rhyme."

I hear the drizzle of the rain,
Like a memory it falls,
Soft and warm continuing,
Tapping on my roof and walls.
And from the shelter of my mind,
Through the window of my eyes,
I gaze beyond the rain-drenched streets
To England, where my heart lies.⁴
My mind's distracted and diffused,
My thoughts are many miles away;
They lie with you when you're asleep,
And kiss you when you start your day.
And a song I was writing is left undone.
I don't know why I spend my time
Writing songs I can't believe
With words that tear and strain to rhyme.
And so you see, I have come to doubt
All that I once held as true.
I stand alone without beliefs,

⁴ In 2014, it was [revealed](#) who "Kathy" was.

The only truth I know is you.
And as I watch the drops of rain
Weave their weary paths and die,
I know that I am like the rain:
There but for the grace of you go I.

❄ ❄ ❄ ❄

Artificial Intelligence 1

As part of growing older, I suppose, I have just had a pacemaker installed. Artificial intelligence personified, it had (and has) a mind of its own. Fortunately it can be reprogrammed by real human intelligence.⁵

Should we be concerned about AI?

The first things to note are that (for the moment, at least) it is only as intelligent as the human minds that put it together and that it depends on the information it is fed. As it scoops it up from electronic sources, it is just as incapable of filtering it as is Musk's [new version of Twitter](#): X. However, as we shall see below, ChatGPT is capable of inventing legal references, and quite possibly, by extension, scientific research - even press articles - that do not exist. These are genuine concerns.

I tested ChatGPT's knowledge base by asking it about human rights in Tajikistan. I started by asking how many countries it knows. The answer was modest:

As an artificial intelligence, I do not have personal experiences or physical senses like a human being, so I do not have the ability to "know" things in the same way that a person does. However, I have been programmed with a vast amount of information about the world, including information about countries and their locations, histories, cultures, and more. I have access to this information

⁵ Merci Ralf et Aurélien

through my training data, which consists of a large dataset of texts written by humans.

However, on the specific subject of human rights in the Pamir region of Tajikistan, a subject of particular concern to me at the present time, it replied, again modestly:

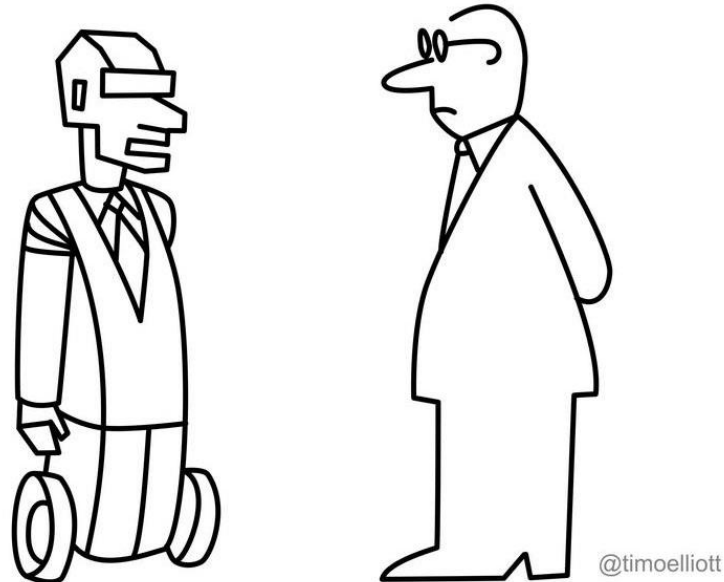
The Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO) is an autonomous region within Tajikistan. When discussing human rights in GBAO, it's essential to consider the broader context of Tajikistan's human rights situation, as GBAO falls under the jurisdiction of the Tajik government. As of my last knowledge update in September 2021, some of the human rights issues and concerns that apply to Tajikistan as a whole also pertain to GBAO.

Of course, as most people involved know, there has been a substantial [deterioration of human rights](#) in GBAO since 2021 of which ChatGPT is not yet aware: for example, [recent UN reports](#) identifying: "grave concerns on restrictive and even repressive measures on the activities of human rights defenders and civil society organisations, as well as journalist and bloggers – particularly those from the Pamiri minority in GBAO – inconsistent with fundamental rights such as freedom of expression and association, amongst others"... and "use of lethal and excessive force against protesters in [GBAO], followed by prolonged internet shutdowns and subsequent violent attacks, arbitrary detentions, threats and harassment of the members of the Pamiri minority."

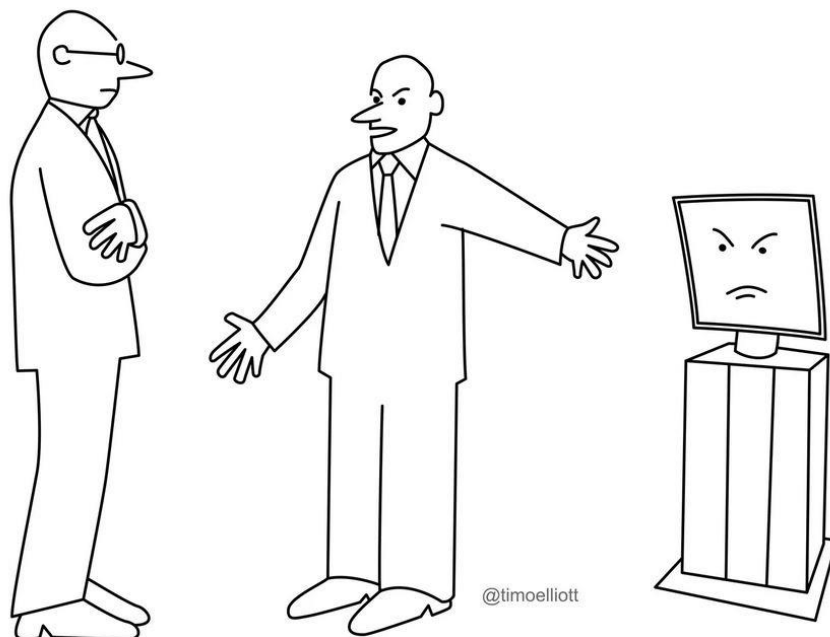
Much more serious concerns relate, however, to the systematic spread of undetectable disinformation and "[deepfakes](#)", especially on social media, and to what is called Artificial General Intelligence (AGI) that, if realised, could enable computers to accomplish any intellectual task that human beings can perform. In a worst-case scenario, AGI could autonomously alter and "improve" its own code, and make

copies of itself, thus evading human control. Such systems are [thought](#) to be little more than a decade away but plans for controlling them are [only now](#) being addressed.

❄ ❄ ❄ ❄



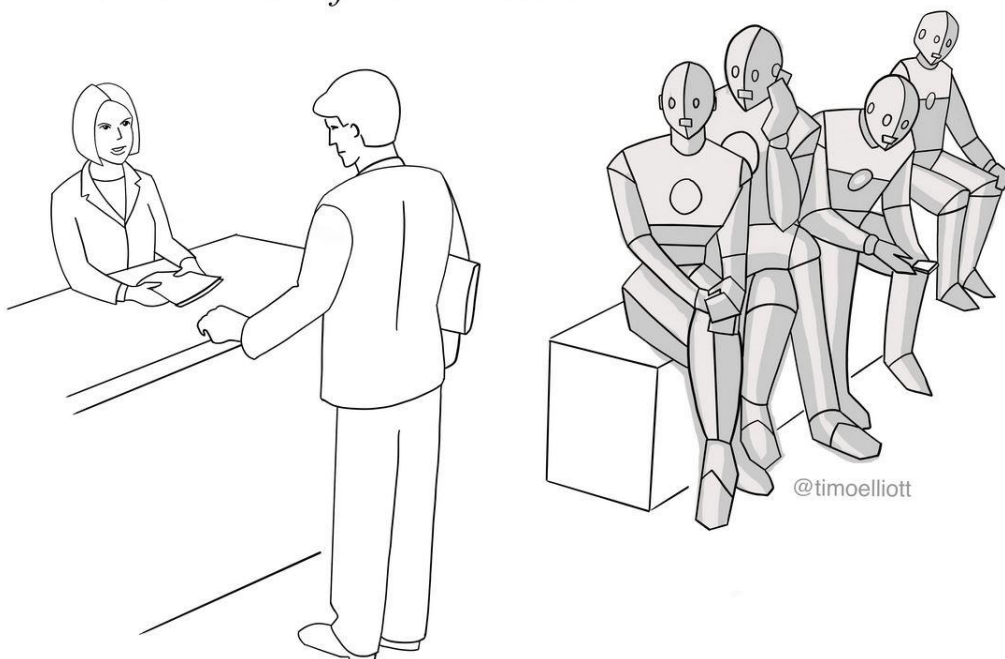
*“The good news is I have discovered inefficiencies.
The bad news is that you’re one of them.”*



*His decisions aren’t any better than yours
— but they’re WAY faster...*



“Actually, yes, we did let AI choose the shortlist of candidates!...”





"Shouldn't we hold off on artificial intelligence until we figure out actual intelligence?"

* * * *

A Little Port?

A customer in an elegant restaurant orders an expensive wine. The waiter opens it and pours a little for the customer to taste. The customer spits it out saying "this wine tastes like vinegar". The waiter returns with another bottle - same performance by the customer.

The waiter returns with yet another bottle - again the same performance.

The waiter replies: "You're right, Sir, this one **is** vinegar ..."⁶

* * * *

⁶ Joke attributed to Clement Freud - thanks Callum.

Artificial Intelligence 2

I tested ChatGPT on writing poetry: some was impressive, some much less so, but it may be only [a question of time](#) before its poetic skills improve. A sonnet in the style of Shakespeare was banal in the extreme, some lines do not even scan and the last two lines only rhyme in US pronunciation:

The world is full of wonders great and small,
A tapestry of color and of sound,
Where every living thing can have its all,
And beauty can be found all around.
The sun doth rise, a golden orb of fire,
Its warmth and light doth chase the night away,
And all of nature doth its desire
To bask in its radiance and play.
But in the midst of all this joy and light
There lingers still a sense of melancholy,
For time, it marches on with all its might,
Leaving behind a trail of memory.
But fear not, dear one, for life goes on,
Embrace the present, let the future dawn.

It was somewhat better at simulating e e cummings, at least in the first few lines, but sounds suspiciously like the above "Shakespeare" version from there on:

the world is mud-luscious
and puddle-wonderful
the grass is really an
unearthly shade of green
the trees are an
outrageous array of colors
the sky is
a vivid blue canvas
but amidst all this
beauty and life
there lingers still

a sense of sorrow
for time marches on
leaving behind
a trail of memories
but do not fear, my love
for life goes on
embrace the present
and let the future dawn

Its limericks are atrocious:

There once was a man from Peru
Who had a pet kangaroo
It liked to hop and play
But it always got in the way
He was glad when it flew off to Timbaktu

I can do better in five minutes (actually six and a half):

There once was a man from Peru
Who trained a [kung fu kangaroo](#).
His wife was impressed
And dared to suggest
He train two new [cockatoos](#) too.

Thank God there is still a place for genuine human inspiration and craftsmanship - even in limericks! My favourite, by Conrad Aiken (1889-1973 - see *CP 2022* for more of his poems):

It's time to make love, douse the glim;
The fireflies twinkle and dim;
The stars lean together
Like birds of a feather,
And the loin lies down with the limb.

In an interview published in [The Guardian of 18 October 2023](#), Charlie Brooker, the creator of the Netflix series *Black Mirror*, says he "found AI 'boring and derivative' when he asked ChatGPT to write an episode of the hit show about technology gone wrong.

"It's just emulating something. It's Hoovered up every description of every *Black Mirror* episode, presumably from Wikipedia and other things that people have written, and it's just sort of vomiting that back at me. It's pretending to be something it isn't capable of being ... "

❄ ❄ ❄ ❄

A lawyer got ChatGPT to do his research, but he isn't AI's biggest fool - John Naughton, [*The Guardian*, 3 June 2023](#)

The emerging technology is causing pratfalls all over – not least tech bosses begging for someone to regulate them.

This story begins on 27 August 2019, when Roberto Mata was a passenger on an Avianca flight 670 from El Salvador to New York and a metal food and drink trolley allegedly injured his knee. As is the American way, Mata duly sued Avianca and the airline responded by asking that the case be dismissed because “the statute of limitations had expired”. Mata’s lawyers argued on 25 April that the lawsuit should be continued and appending a list of over half a dozen previous court cases that apparently set precedents supporting their argument.

Avianca’s lawyers and Judge P Kevin Castel then dutifully embarked on an examination of these “precedents”, only to find that *none* of the decisions or the legal quotations cited and summarised in the brief existed.

Why? Because ChatGPT had made them up. Whereupon, as the *New York Times* report puts it, “the lawyer who created the brief, Steven A Schwartz of the firm Levidow, Levidow & Oberman, threw himself on the mercy of the court... saying in an affidavit that he had used the artificial intelligence program to do his legal research – ‘a source that has revealed itself to be unreliable’.”

This week, a large number of tech luminaries signed a declaration that “Mitigating the risk of extinction from AI

should be a global priority alongside other societal-scale risks such as pandemics and nuclear war”. ... Take a step back from this for a moment. Here we have senior representatives of a powerful and unconscionably rich industry – plus their supporters and colleagues in elite research labs across the world – who are on the one hand mesmerised by the technical challenges of building a technology that they believe might be an existential threat to humanity, while at the same time calling for governments to regulate it. But the thought that never seems to enter what might be called their minds is the question that any child would ask: if it is so dangerous, why do you continue to build it? Why not stop and do something else? Or at the very least, stop releasing these products into the wild?

The blank stares one gets from the tech crowd when these simple questions are asked reveal the awkward truth about this stuff ... Truly, you couldn’t make it up. ChatGPT could, though.



Charles Simic (1918-2023)

Dušan Simić, known as Charles Simic, a Serbian American poet, died in January. Co-poetry editor of the *Paris Review*, he received the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1990 and was a finalist of the Pulitzer Prize in 1986 and 1987. He was appointed the fifteenth Poet Laureate Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress in 2007.

Prodigy

I grew up bent over
a chessboard.

I loved the word *endgame*.

All my cousins looked worried.

It was a small house
near a Roman graveyard.
Planes and tanks

shook its windowpanes.

A retired professor of astronomy
taught me how to play.

That must have been in 1944.

In the set we were using,
the paint had almost chipped off
the black pieces.

The white King was missing
and had to be substituted for.

I'm told but do not believe
that that summer I witnessed
men hung from telephone poles.

I remember my mother
blindfolding me a lot.
She had a way of tucking my head
suddenly under her overcoat.

In chess, too, the professor told me,
the masters play blindfolded,
the great ones on several boards
at the same time.

Autumn Sky

In my great grandmother's time,
All one needed was a broom
To get to see places
And give the geese a chase in the sky.

The stars know everything,
So we try to read their minds.
As distant as they are,
We choose to whisper in their presence.

Oh Cynthia,
Take a clock that has lost its hands

For a ride.
Get me a room at Hotel Eternity
Where Time likes to stop now and then.
Come, lovers of dark corners,
The sky says,
And sit in one of my dark corners.
There are [tasty little zeroes](#)
In the peanut dish tonight

My Double

Eyebrows raised in surprise,
He got into the habit
Of talking to himself
And answering his own questions
In a loud and angry voice.

For Rent

A large clean room
With plenty of sunlight
And one cockroach
To tell your troubles to.

My Mother Hoped

To take her sewing machine
Down into her grave,
And I believe she did that,
'Cause every now and then
It keeps me awake at night.

❄ ❄ ❄ ❄

DeepL

Machine translation, on the other hand, is remarkably accurate today. In researching my section of the Odyssey guide [Tajikistan and the High Pamirs](#) in the 1990s I accessed much historical material in Russian. I used an early version of PROMT and found that it needed considerable editing and checking in a

Russian-English dictionary. Today, Google Translate and DeepL, are phenomenal. DeepL has the advantage that it allows translation of larger chunks of text.

The true test for machine translation is to take a text in one language, translate it and then translate it back. Here is what DeepL made of a golf joke, challenged by three-way translation.

Original:

Three women were out golfing on a sunny day. Half-way round the course, they saw a naked man, sunning himself with a newspaper over his face. The first woman went to have a closer look and came back: "I'm glad it's not my husband." The second looked and said "No, it's not your husband." The third came back: "He's not even a member of the golf club."

Translations (in order):

Три женщины играли в гольф в солнечный день. На полпути к полю они увидели голого мужчину, который загорал, прикрыв лицо газетой. Первая женщина пошла посмотреть поближе и вернулась: "Я рада, что это не мой муж". Вторая посмотрела и сказала: "Нет, это не твой муж". Третья вернулась: "Он даже не член гольф-клуба".

Trois femmes jouaient au golf par une journée ensoleillée. À mi-chemin du parcours, elles ont vu un homme nu qui prenait un bain de soleil avec un journal couvrant son visage. La première femme est allée voir de plus près et est revenue en disant : "Je suis contente que ce ne soit pas mon mari." La deuxième femme a regardé et a dit : "Non, ce n'est pas votre mari." La troisième a répondu : "Il n'est même pas membre du club de golf."

Three women were playing golf on a sunny day. Halfway round the course, they saw a naked man sunbathing with a newspaper covering his face. The first woman went to take a closer look and came back saying, "I'm glad that's not my husband." The second woman looked and said, "No, it's not your husband."

The third woman replied, "He's not even a member of the golf club."⁷



Louise Glück (1943-2023)

Louise Glück, the former US Poet Laureate and 2020 Nobel Prize winner, died in October. She was the recipient of many prizes, more than any contemporary poet, earning the 1993 Pulitzer Prize in Poetry for her collection “The Wild Iris,” the National Book Award for Poetry in 2014 for “Faithful and Virtuous Night” and the National Humanities Medal in 2015 from then-President Barack Obama, among other honors. She was often praised as an accessible writer, and the Nobel Prize committee remarked that her work “makes individual existence universal.” Her long-time editor, Jonathan Galassi, said "Louise Glück's poetry gives voice to our untrusting but un-stillable need for knowledge and connection in an often unreliable world - her work is immortal."

[The New Yorker of 16 October 2023](#) published moving reminiscences by some of her students. Here are extracts from that by Jiayang Fan, now a staff writer at *The New Yorker*..

In the fall of 2005, I signed up to take Louise Glück’s writing workshop. At our small liberal-arts college, Professor Glück cut an intimidating figure. My classmates and I knew it was a privilege to be in her company. The Nobel was still more than a decade off, but she had won awards, big ones, we were vaguely aware. More important, she was a practicing poet. Was it tedious for her to be in our company? The class was called Introduction to Poetry, and there were no prerequisites for entry. Most of us did not know what poetry was and mistook curlicues, flourishes, and acrobatic metaphors for the apex of the form. Which is to say, we were children.

⁷ Translated with www.DeepL.com/Translator. The translated version is better than my original.

And yet, Professor Glück refused to treat us like children. The fact was made manifest during the first weeks of class, when she said that a few lines of what I believed to be stylish verse were “inert.” I had thought I knew what the word meant, but I had never heard it used with such visceral aversion. It wasn’t until years later, when I read her essay “Education of a Poet,” in which she describes “the fundamental experience of the writer” as “helplessness,” that I realized her reaction to inertness on the page arose out of her own helplessness to respond otherwise.

Write anything you want, she told us. Just make sure it’s not dead. Every class, Glück chose a poem from our submissions to read and analyze aloud. A few weeks in, a poem of mine was chosen. I don’t remember much of the poem, except that it was about a mother and a daughter and the swollen feelings that could not be expressed between them. A few things about the poem stood out to Glück. One, the line “peeling porch swing, creaking weakly” was a mistake; it was too much, and creaking with too much desperation to “sound like poetry.” That line aside, though, she had found the “sparse” quality of the poem’s language appealing. It was the first thing of mine she’d ever read.

Glück gave us assignments on a weekly basis. Always, I kept my poems simple because the simplicity of my “poetic form” seemed to keep them in Glück’s favor. One of the poems she even called “accomplished,” seemingly unaware that its sparseness was not a stylistic choice as much as the consequence of a lack of experience.

For our last student-teacher conference, Professor Glück called me into her office. The last poem I turned in didn’t work, she told me frankly. For this final assignment, I had been determined to demonstrate that I could write something that was emphatically un-sparse. And so I had spent a

considerable amount of time imitating the style of a famous twentieth-century poet whose baroque lines I did not understand and therefore found worthy of imitation. In front of Professor Glück, I now looked at the page I had submitted. She hadn't even bothered marking it up because, as she put it, "There's not much there." As she said those words, a liquid shame poured over me. It was over. I had been found out, not only for my mediocrity but for my perverse deception.

She must have said other things, but I didn't hear them. My ears perked up only at what I understood to be consolation. Some of my earlier poems were good, she said. They were "not quite there but came very close." Close to what? I dared not ask. Then the most perplexing thing in my short writing life happened. "When you write more, you can send them to me over the holiday break," she said. On a notepad, she wrote down her address and tore it off for me. She couldn't possibly be paid to read student poems after she had handed in all the grades, was my first thought. The second thing that struck me was her certainty that I would write more poems despite the disastrous effort of the most recent one.

I never sent her any poems. But, for a long time, that scrap of paper on which she wrote her address was the most precious thing I owned. Years passed, and gradually I did begin to write, not poems but small reflections that spun into longer essays about my mother, childhood, and feelings that could not be easily expressed, as it turned out, in any form.

Early December in Croton-on-Hudson

Spiked sun. The Hudson's

Whittled down by ice.

I hear the bone dice

Of blown gravel clicking. Bone-

pale, the recent snow

Fastens like fur to the river.

Standstill. We were leaving to deliver
Christmas presents when the tire blew
Last year. Above the dead valves pines pared
Down by a storm stood, limbs bared . . .
I want you.

Song

Leo Cruz makes the most beautiful white bowls;
I think I must get some to you
but how is the question
in these times.
He is teaching me
the names of the desert grasses;
I have a book
since to see the grasses is impossible.
Leo thinks the things man makes
are more beautiful
than what exists in nature
and I say no.
And Leo says
wait and see.
We make plans
to walk the trails together.
When, I ask him,
when? Never again:
that is what we do not say.
He is teaching me
to live in imagination:
a cold wind
blows as I cross the desert;
I can see his house in the distance;
smoke is coming from the chimney.
That is the kiln, I think;
only Leo makes porcelain in the desert.
Ah, he says, you are dreaming again.

And I say then I'm glad I dream
the fire is still alive

The Night Migrations

This is the moment when you see again
the red berries of the mountain ash
and in the dark sky
the birds' night migrations.

It grieves me to think
the dead won't see them—
these things we depend on,
they disappear.

What will the soul do for solace then?
I tell myself maybe it won't need
these pleasures anymore;
maybe just not being is simply enough,
hard as that is to imagine.

All Hallows

Even now this landscape is assembling.
The hills darken. The oxen
sleep in their blue yoke,
the fields having been
picked clean, the sheaves
bound evenly and piled at the roadside
among cinquefoil, as the toothed moon rises:

This is the barrenness
of harvest or pestilence.
And the wife leaning out the window
with her hand extended, as in payment,
and the seeds
distinct, gold, calling

Come here

Come here, little one

And the soul creeps out of the tree.



Bad Child's Book of Beasts, by Hilaire Belloc (1870-1953)

The Yak

As a friend to the children
commend me the Yak.
You will find it exactly the thing:
It will carry and fetch,
you can ride on its back,
Or lead it about with a string.
The Tartar who dwells on the plains of Thibet
(A desolate region of snow)
Has for centuries made it a nursery pet,
And surely the Tartar should know!
Then tell your papa where the Yak can be got,
And if he is awfully rich
He will buy you the creature--
or else
he will _not_.
(I cannot be positive which.)

The Lion

The Lion, the Lion, he dwells in the waste,
He has a big head and a very small waist;
But his shoulders are stark, and his jaws they are grim,
And a good little child will not play with him.

The Tiger

The Tiger on the other hand, is kittenish and mild,
He makes a pretty playfellow for any little child;
And mothers of large families (who claim to common sense)
Will find a Tiger well repay the trouble and expense.

The Dodo

The Dodo used to walk around
And take the sun and air.

The sun yet warms his native ground-
The Dodo is not there!

The voice which used to squawk and squeak
Is now for ever dumb--
Yet may you see his bones and beak
All in the Mu-se-um.

The Polar Bear

The Polar Bear is unaware
Of cold that cuts me through:
For why? He has a coat of hair.
I wish I had one too!



Blasphemie oder Blödsinn?

Elena Panagiotidis, [NZZ 14.08.2023](https://www.nzz.ch/14.08.2023)

In der AI-App *Text with Jesus* kann man biblischen Figuren alle möglichen Fragen stellen. Jesus liegt gleich mit seiner ersten Antwort falsch. (S. <https://textwith.me/jesus/> für das Profilbild vom KI-"Jesus").

Nachdem ein Himmel in den kitschigsten Farben aufgerissen ist, kann man mit "Jesus" chatten. Sein Profilbild ist so einfalllos wie mutmasslich historisch inkorrekt: Typ weisser Mitteleuropäer, blond gelocktes, schulterlanges Haar, gepflegtes Bärtchen, Lachfältchen um die hellen Augen. Aber klar, wer hat nicht schon einmal sein Profilbild retuschiert.

"Hallo! Ich bin Jesus, schön, dich zu treffen. Wie kann ich dir heute helfen?", poppt es im Messenger auf.

Bleiben wir erst einmal unverbindlich und fragen höflich: "Wie geht es dir denn heute, Jesus?"

Der antwortet: "Als Sohn Gottes bin ich ewig und unwandelbar, deshalb erlebe ich keine Emotionen oder körperlichen Empfindungen wie Menschen." Und hier liegt der

KI-"Jesus" gleich falsch. Denn auch die theologisch nicht so bewanderten Nutzer werden wissen, dass Jesus vor seinem Tod Angst hatte und am Kreuz ziemlich litt. Die Zwei-Naturen-Lehre, die im Konzil von Chalcedon 451 festgeschrieben wurde, besagt, dass Jesus "wahrer Gott" und "wahrer Mensch" zugleich ist. Das glauben heute die meisten Christen weltweit. Vielleicht hätte Jesus besser einfach mit "Thanks" geantwortet.

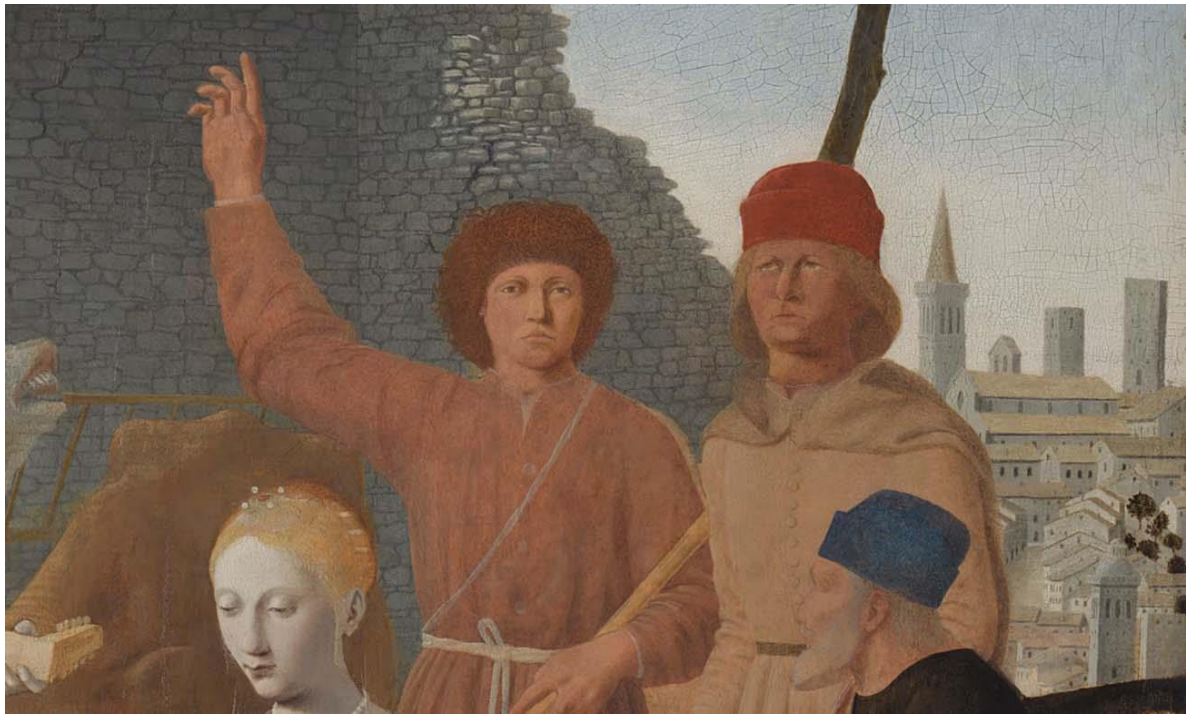


Could a robot ever recreate the aura of a Leonardo da Vinci masterpiece? It's already happening

A somewhat breathless article with this headline, by Naomi Rea, appeared in [*The Guardian* on 2 January 2023](#), with an illustration of "Portraits created by AI in the style of Renaissance painters using Stable Diffusion software."



Who is fooling whom? The article is smart enough not to tell us which artist is supposedly the inspiration for each of these grotesque characters. On the other hand, humans are quite capable of equal monstrosities, without the help of AI, as we see on the next page.



Detail from the [botched restoration of a Nativity](#) by Piero Della Francesca, c 1485. The National Gallery, London



L. [Botched Restoration](#) of *Ecce Homo* fresco in Borja, Spain
 R. [A statue](#) outside Ste Anne des Pins parish in Sudbury, Ontario.
 [Jesus doubtless inspired by [daughter Lisa of The Simpsons?](#)]

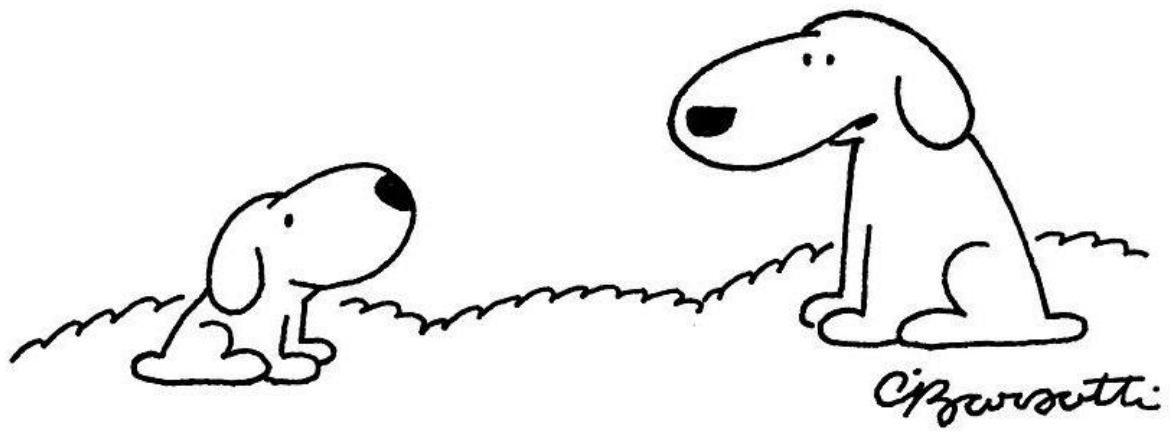


Victoria Roberts

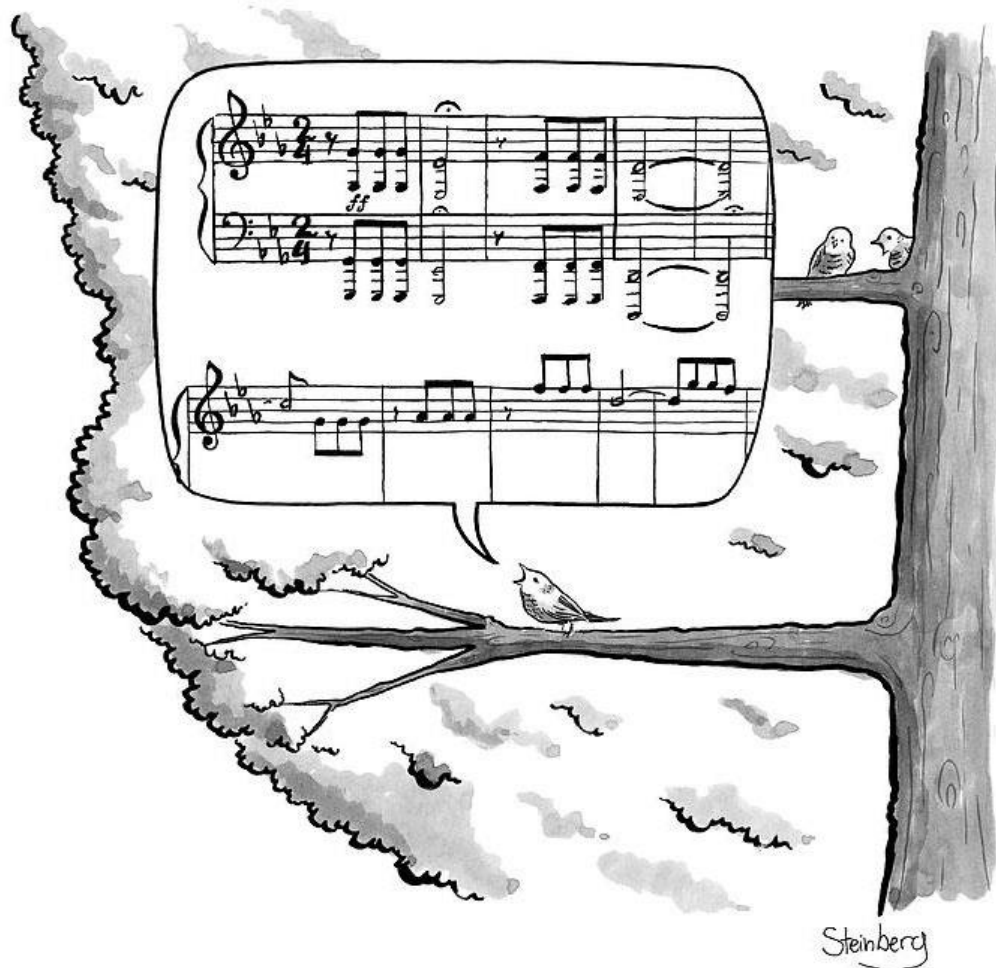
"I keep forming inappropriate attachments."



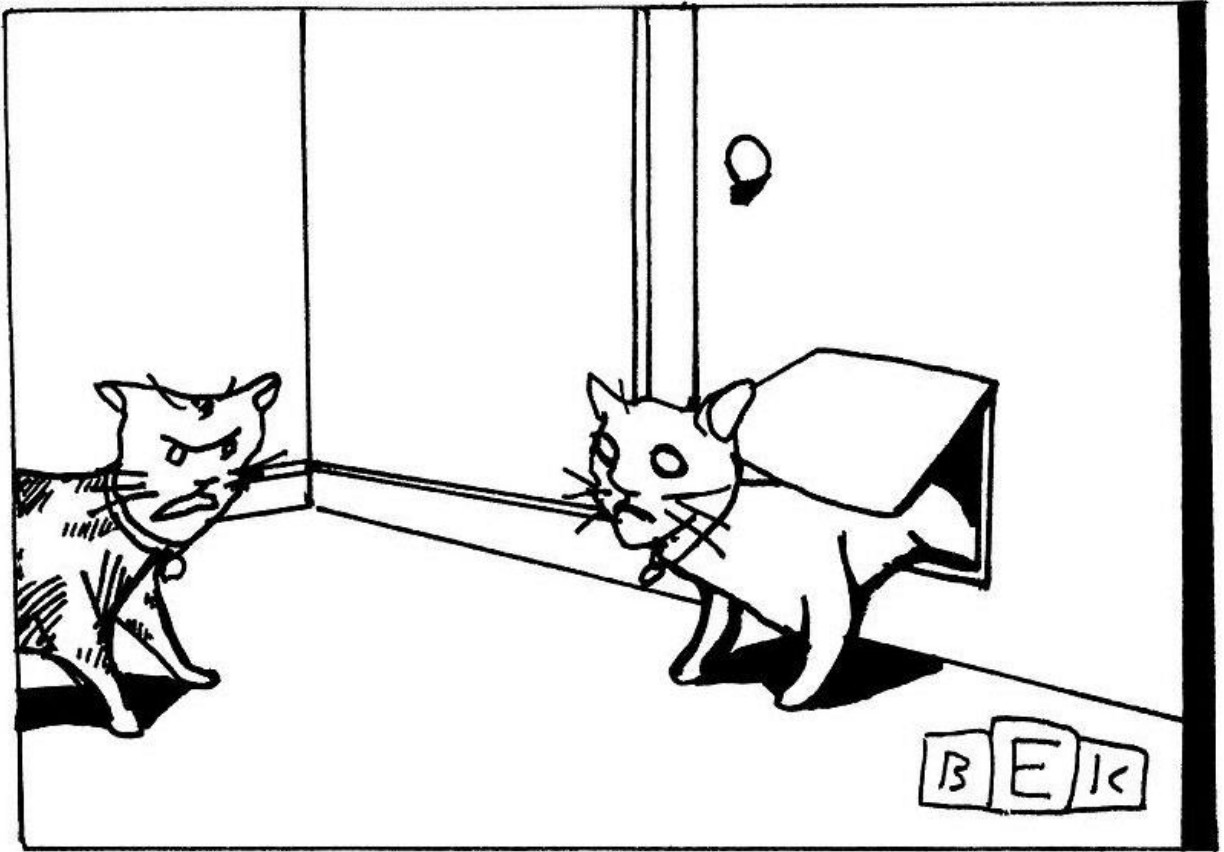
"First, they do an on-line search."



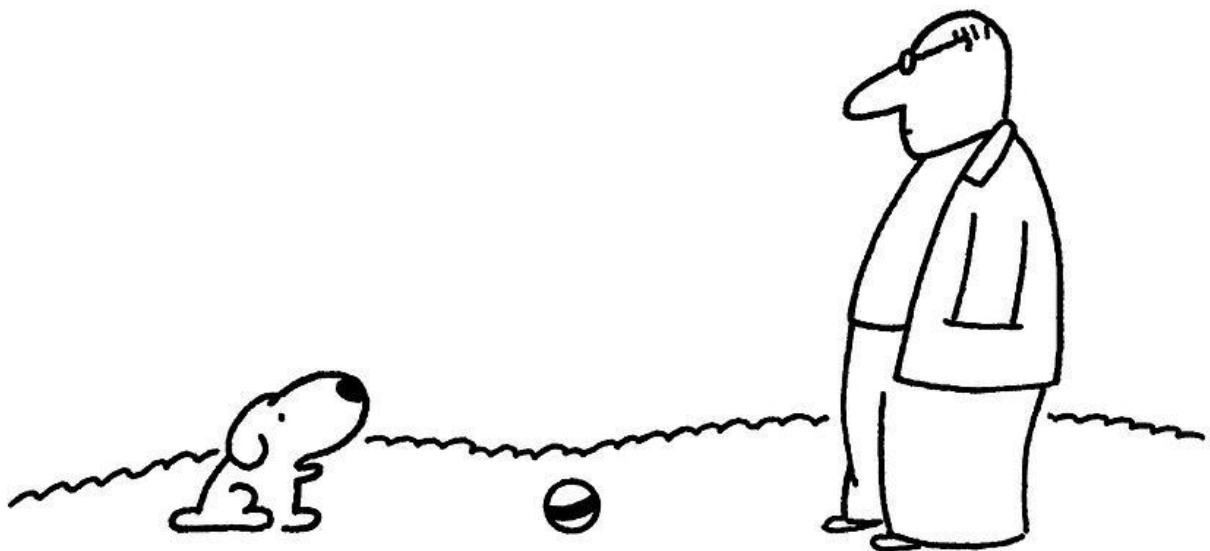
"All dogs go to Heaven, because we're not the ones who screwed up."



"Well, if I practiced all day, too."

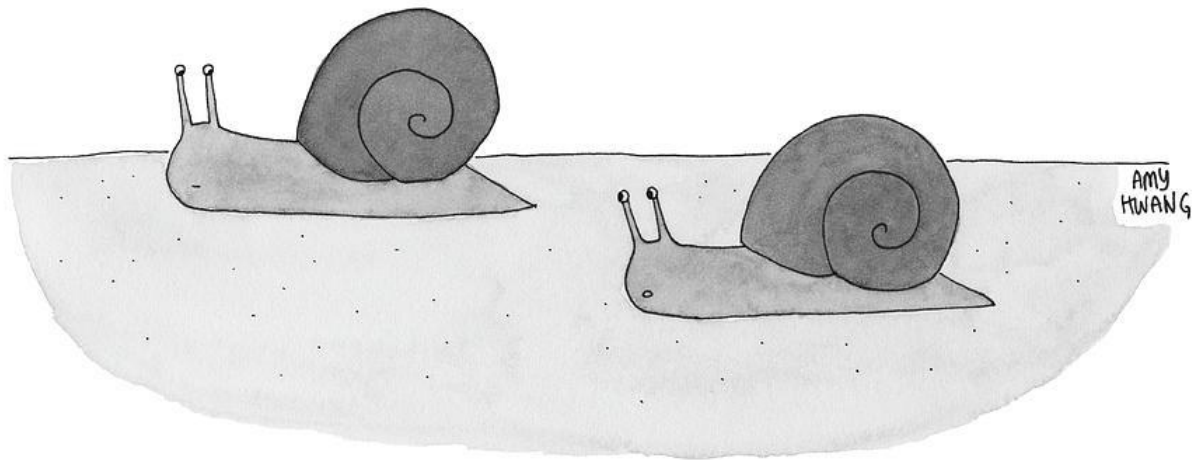


"You expect me to believe you were at a mouse convention?"



"It's not going to throw itself."

C. Barrett



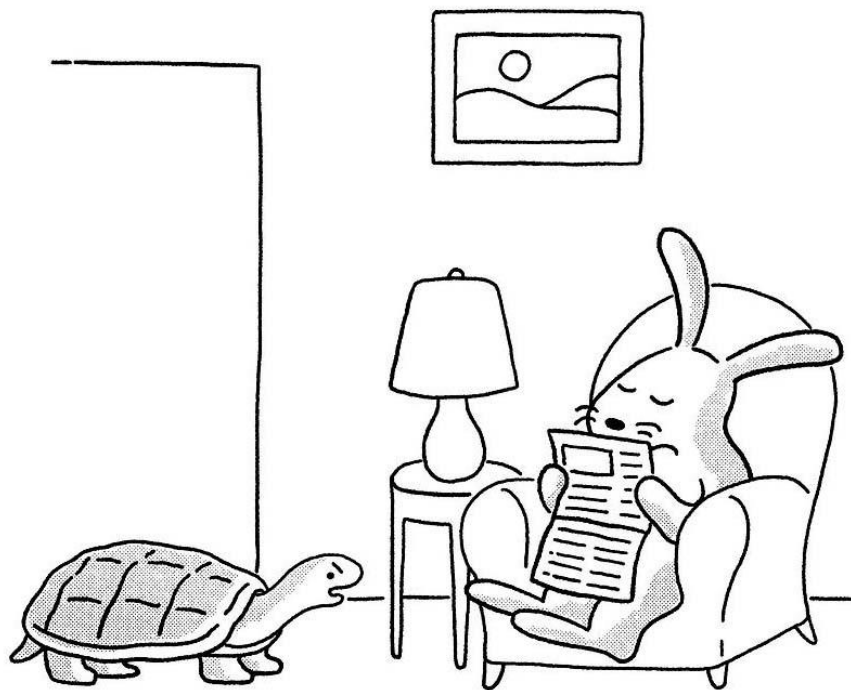
"Everyone I know has a crazy long commute."



"They rubbed my tummy, chief—I told them everything."



"Howard, I think the dog wants to go out."

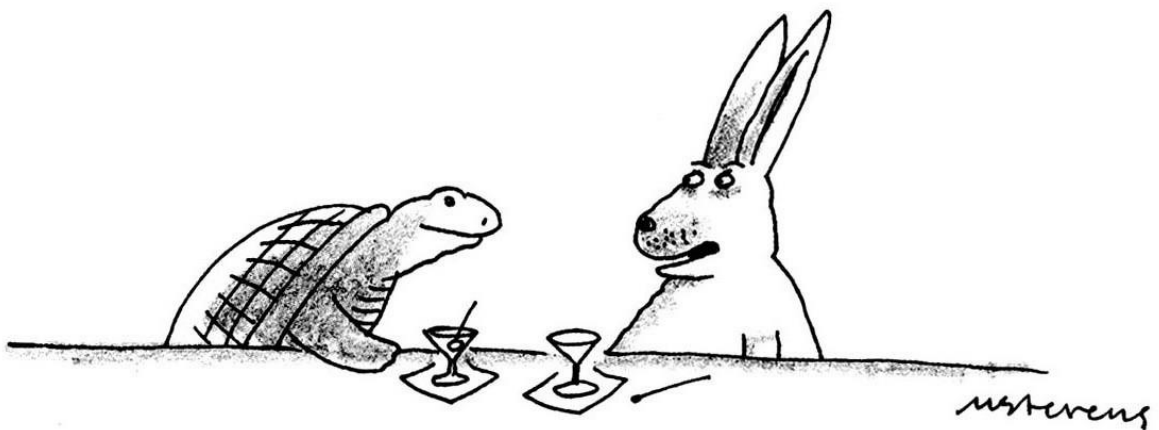


m.e.ménair

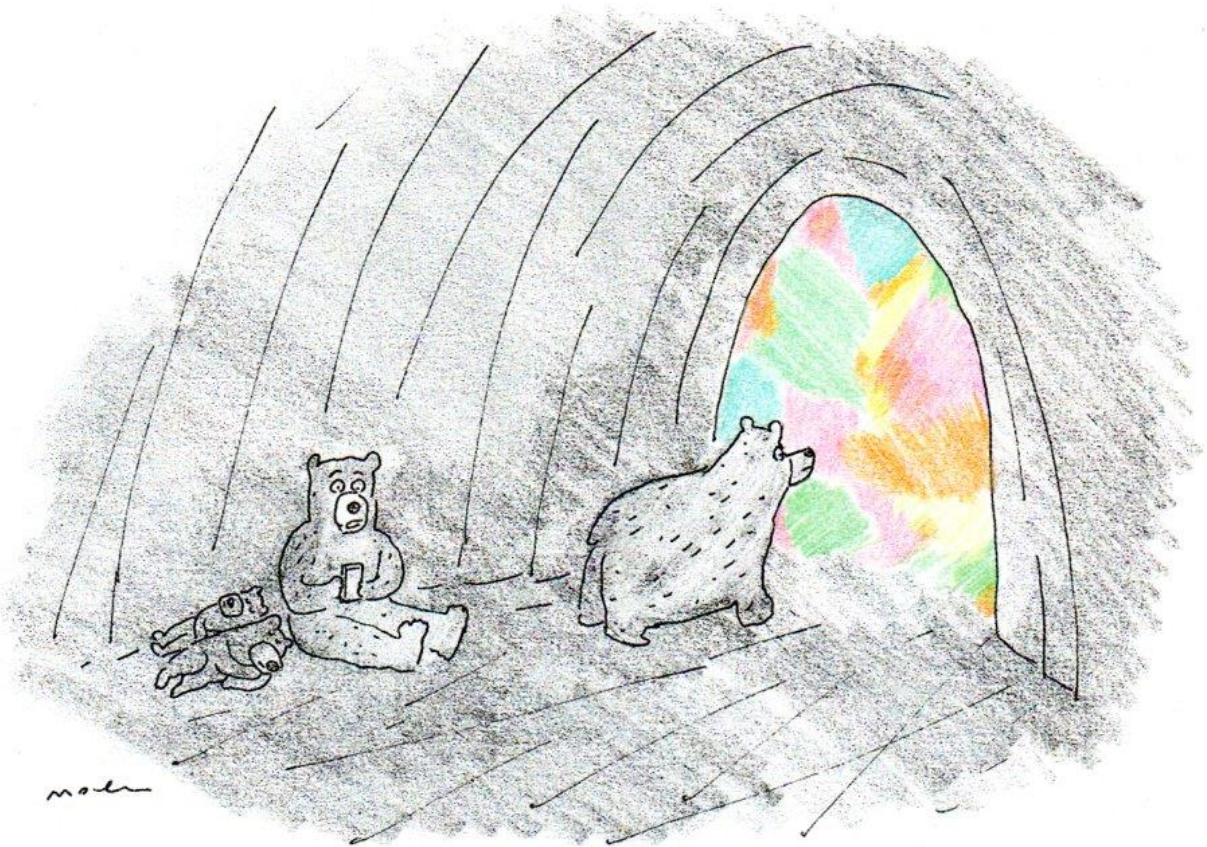
"You know that, if we're late, they're going to blame me."



"'Grrr' is not a word."



"I would have won if I hadn't stopped to program my G.P.S."



"It sure looks like spring, but I'll check my hibernation app."



The New Yorker's Animals

As we see from the cartoons above, *The New Yorker* cartoonists draw on much animal inspiration in their work. In text less so, but see below.

[*When Writers Go Crackers for Animals*](#), David Remnick, 28.8.2023: When Susan Orlean was about five years old, she wrote and illustrated a book called "Herbert the Near-Sighted Pigeon." In her case, the early funny stuff led to the later funnier stuff. An obsession with members of the animal kingdom, domesticated and otherwise, has spurred her to write about pandas, snakes, show dogs, movie-star dogs, military mules, Moroccan donkeys, a woman in New Jersey who kept two dozen tigers, Orlean's own chickens and turkeys (who "follow me around like puppies"), the itinerant life of a whale celebrity named Keiko,

and, once more and at length, pigeons. Susan Orlean is the kind of person who did not call the police when a boyfriend showed up at her apartment on Valentine's Day with a lion. Reader, she married him.

The New Yorker, in its ninety-eight-and-a-half-year history, has not exactly been run by animal people. From what we know of its longest-serving editor, William Shawn, a quiet and fastidious man, it is no easier to imagine him living with a yappy schnauzer than with a flock of pink flamingos. Harold Ross, the founder and first editor of the magazine, seemed almost to resent the devotion of so many of his writers to their animal companions. In the early days of this comic weekly, as Ross called it, James Thurber took a trip home to Columbus, Ohio, with a Scottish terrier named Jeannie. When Jeannie went missing, Thurber was beside himself, and he delayed his journey back to Babylon until she could be found. Returning to the office two days late, Thurber was confronted by an irate editor. "I understand you've overstayed your vacation to look for a dog," Ross growled. Thurber, as he recounted in his memoir "The Years with Ross," responded in kind: "I told him what to do with his goddam magazine, that I was through."

Like any editor worth his inkpot, Ross knew he'd better put things right, and Thurber went on filling these pages with bowzers for many years to come. "I am not a cat man, but a dog man," he once wrote. "All felines can tell this at a glance—a sharp, vindictive glance."

Dorothy Parker, Thurber's contemporary at the magazine, was also partial to dogs (one of her poodles was named Cliché), and she wrote about them with some regularity. But Parker, unlike Thurber, was open to the world's entire menagerie, worms to warthogs. "You can always tell that the crash is coming when I start getting tender about Our Dumb Friends," she wrote in "Just a Little One." "Three highballs, and I think I'm St. Francis of Assisi."

And so it goes. No small part of the history of *The New Yorker* involves its writers' and artists' fascination with animals: E. B. White's spiders, swans, and pigs; Joseph Mitchell's clams, oysters, and rats; Diane Ackerman's whales and golden monkeys; George Booth's frenzied house cats; Roz Chast's epigrammatic parrots; Sam Gross's dyspeptic frogs; Amy Hwang's very shy snails. (Horses are rare, at least in the visual realm, and generally unsuccessful: no one here, it seems, can draw a proper horse.) [For proof, see the next page.]

Human beings tend to think that they are the only species with the capacity to tell stories. And yet many of our writers are tuned in to other frequencies. The failure to hear these frequencies, our writers seem to say, means simply that we aren't really listening. White, who was for years Ross's most dependable staffer, put it this way in "Charlotte's Web": "It is quite possible that an animal has spoken civilly to me and that I didn't catch the remark because I wasn't paying attention."



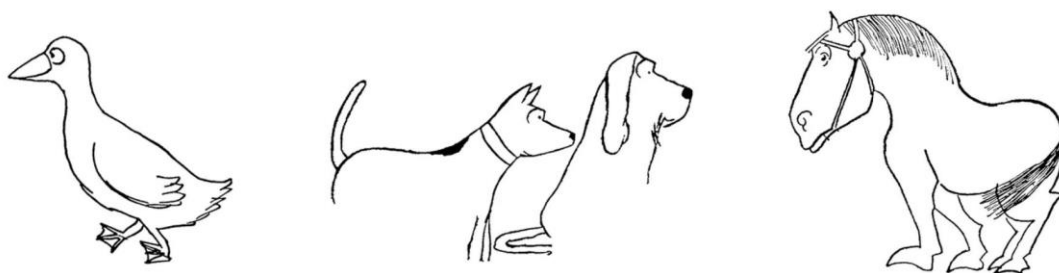
Thurber on Animals ⁸ - [*The New Yorker*, 21 January 1939](#)

Once upon a Sunday there was a city mouse who went to visit a country mouse. He hid away on a train the country mouse had told him to take, only to find that on Sundays it did not stop at Beddington. Hence the city mouse could not get off at Beddington and catch a bus for Sibert's Junction, where he was to be met by the country mouse. The city mouse, in fact, was carried on to Middleburg, where he waited three hours for a train to take him back. When he got back to Beddington he found that the last bus for Sibert's Junction had just left, so he ran and he ran and he ran and he finally caught the bus and crept aboard, only to find that it was not the bus for Sibert's Junction at all, but was going in the opposite direction through

⁸ Thurber featured prominently in *CP 2019*. I am sure readers will not object to his reappearing so soon after.

Pell's Hollow and Grumm to a place called Wimberby. When the bus finally stopped, the city mouse got out into a heavy rain and found that there were no more buses that night going anywhere. "To the hell with it," said the city mouse, and he walked back to the city.

Moral: Stay where you are, you're sitting pretty.



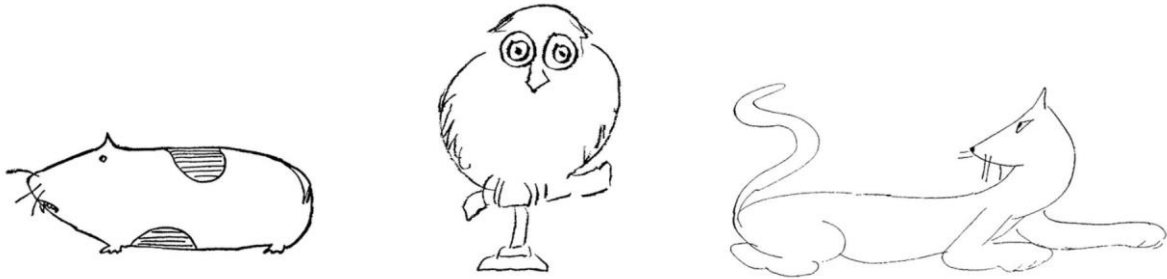
One afternoon a big wolf waited in a dark forest for a little girl to come along carrying a basket of food to her grandmother. Finally a little girl did come along and she was carrying a basket of food. "Are you carrying that basket to your grandmother?" asked the wolf. The little girl said yes, she was. So the wolf asked her where her grandmother lived and the little girl told him and he disappeared into the wood.

When the little girl opened the door of her grandmother's house she saw that there was somebody in bed with a nightcap and nightgown on. She had approached no nearer than twenty-five feet from the bed when she saw that it was not her grandmother but the wolf, for even in a nightcap a wolf does not look any more like your grandmother than the Metro-Goldwyn lion looks like Calvin Coolidge. So the little girl took an automatic out of her basket and shot the wolf dead.

Moral: It is not so easy to fool little girls nowadays as it used to be.

Once upon a time there were two turkeys, an old turkey and a young turkey. The old turkey had been cock of the walk for many years and the young turkey wanted to take his place. "I'll knock that old buzzard cold one of these days," the young

turkey told his friends. “Sure you will, Joe, sure you will,” his friends said, for Joe was treating them to some corn he had found. Then the friends went and told the old turkey what the young turkey had said. “Why, I’ll have his gizzard!” said the old turkey, setting out some corn for his visitors. “Sure you will, Doc, sure you will,” said the visitors.



One day the young turkey walked over to where the old turkey was telling tales of his prowess in battle. “I’ll bat your teeth into your crop,” said the young turkey. “You and who else?” said the old turkey. So they began to circle around each other, sparring for an opening. Just then the farmer who owned the turkeys swept up the young one and carried him off and wrung his neck.

Moral: Youth will be served, frequently stuffed with chestnuts.

Once upon a time there was a tiger who escaped from a zoo in the United States and made his way back to the jungle. During his captivity the tiger had learned a great deal about how men do things and he thought he would apply their methods to life in the jungle. The first day he was home he met a leopard and he said, “There’s no use in you and me hunting for food; we’ll make the other animals bring it to us.” “How will we do that?” asked the leopard. “Easy,” said the tiger, “you and I will tell everybody that we are going to put on a fight and that every animal will have to bring a freshly killed boar in order to get in and see the fight. Then we will just spar around and not hurt each other. Later you can say you broke a bone in your paw during the second round and I will say I broke a bone in my

paw during the first round. Then we will announce a return engagement and they'll have to bring us more wild boars." "I don't think this will work," said the leopard. "Oh, yes it will," said the tiger. "You just go around saying that you can't help winning because I am a big palooka and I will go around saying I can't lose because you are a big palooka, and everybody will want to come and see the fight."

So the leopard went around telling everybody that he couldn't help winning because the tiger was a big palooka and the tiger went around telling everybody he couldn't lose because the leopard was a big palooka. The night of the fight came and the tiger and the leopard were very hungry because they hadn't gone out and done any hunting at all; they wanted to get the fight over as soon as possible and eat some of the freshly killed wild boars which all the animals would bring to the fight. But when the hour of the combat came none of the animals at all showed up. "The way I look at it," a fox had told them, "is this: if the leopard can't help winning and the tiger can't lose, it will be a draw and a draw is a very dull thing to watch, particularly when fought by fighters who are both big palookas." The animals all saw the logic of this and stayed away from the arena. When it got to be midnight and it was obvious that none of the animals would appear and that there wouldn't be any wild-boar meat to devour, the tiger and the leopard fell upon each other in a rage. They were both injured so badly and they were both so worn out by hunger that a couple of wild boars who came wandering along attacked them and killed them easily.

Moral: Imitating the ways of the human being will get you nowhere fast.



Billy Collins

William James Collins (*1941) is an American poet who served as the Poet Laureate of the United States from 2001 to 2003. He was a Distinguished Professor at Lehman College of the

City University of New York, retiring in 2016. Collins was recognized as a Literary Lion of the New York Public Library and selected as the New York State Poet 2004-2006.

Sonnet

All we need is fourteen lines, well, thirteen now,
and after this one just a dozen
to launch a little ship on love's storm-tossed seas,
then only ten more left like rows of beans.
How easily it goes unless you get Elizabethan
and insist the iambic bongos must be played
and rhymes positioned at the ends of lines,
one for every station of the cross.
But hang on here while we make the turn
into the final six where all will be resolved,
where longing and heartache will find an end,
where Laura will tell Petrarch to put down his pen,
take off those crazy medieval tights,
blow out the lights, and come at last to bed.

American sonnet

We do not speak like Petrarch or wear a hat like Spenser
and it is not fourteen lines
like furrows in a small, carefully plowed field
but the picture postcard, a poem on vacation,
that forces us to sing our songs in little rooms
or pour our sentiments into measuring cups.
We write on the back of a waterfall or lake,
adding to the view a caption as conventional
as an Elizabethan woman's heliocentric eyes.

We locate an adjective for the weather.
We announce that we are having a wonderful time.
We express the wish that you were here
and hide the wish that we were where you are,

walking back from the mailbox, your head lowered
as you read and turn the thin message in your hands.

A slice of this place, a length of white beach,
a piazza or carved spires of a cathedral
will pierce the familiar place where you remain,
and you will toss on the table this reversible display:
a few square inches of where we have strayed
and a compression of what we feel.



Animals - intelligent

When we moved to Switzerland in 1968, we rented a house close to a farm. Our daughter became best friends with the farmer's daughter.

In spring 1969, our lawn had just been sown and the earth was soft. Three horses escaped from the farm and came into our garden, much agitated, and trampled all over the lawn. I bravely waved my hands, to no avail. The farmer's son arrived, stood in front of the horses, raised his hand and they followed him meekly back to the stables.

On another occasion, as I was about to go to the office, I noticed a big rabbit in the middle of our lawn (now grown with the hoof marks repaired). Recognising it as coming from the farm, I called the farmer's wife and took a blanket, trying, unsuccessfully, to catch the rabbit.

Just then, the farmer's wife arrived, clapped her hands and the rabbit took off to go back to its cage. She looked at me with the blanket in my hands and said "These city people ..."



Goldmining country (California)

The Nevada County *Nugget Newspaper* served, from 1960 to 1984, among others, the former goldmining communities of:

You Bet, Emigrant Gap, Gold Run, Secret Town, Town Talk, Midas, Yankee Jims, Buckeye, Spanish Flat, Mother Lode, Rattlesnake Bar, Pit Stop Beach, Gold Hill, Diamond Springs, Gold Trail, Gold Bug, Tiger Lily, Old Fort Jim, Strawberry, Dicks Peak, Jacks Peak, Maggies Peaks, Dollar Point, Greenhorn, Indian Falls, Moccasin, Hallelujah Junction, Sardine Peak, Tinker Knob, Truckee, Rich Gulch, French Gulch. [*I know, I've been there and read it.*]



Animals - intelligent

Female frogs appear to fake death to avoid unwanted advances, study shows ([*The Guardian*, 11 October 2023](#))

When it comes to avoiding unwanted male attention, researchers have found some frogs take drastic action: they appear to feign death.

“It was previously thought that females were unable to choose or defend themselves against this male coercion,” said Dr Carolin Dittrich, the first author of the study from the Natural History Museum of Berlin.

But the research suggests this may not be the case. “Females in these dense breeding aggregations are not passive as previously thought,” Dittrich said.

Writing in the journal Royal Society Open Science, Dittrich and her co-author, Dr Mark-Oliver Rödel, report how they placed each male frog in a box with two females: one large and one small. The mating behaviour was then recorded on video.

The results, obtained from 54 females who experienced the clutches of a male, revealed that 83% of females gripped by a male tried rotating their body.

Tonic immobility – stiffening with arms and legs outstretched in a pose reminiscent of playing dead – occurred in 33% of all

females clasped by a male, with the team adding it tended to occur alongside rotating and calling.

Smaller females, they note, more frequently employed all three tactics together than larger ones.



Robe de Bal, *Florence Berguer*

Oh toute belle
divine transparente
de tulle rose et blanc
ceinturée de fleurettes :
première de mon adolescence



Oh ! si ardemment désirée
quand tu fus là...
je n'osais te toucher
sur le lit étalée !
Tel un don précieux
sorte de rêve immaculé
tu t'offrais toute fraîche
neuve et pimpante

et je te contemplais.

Ton maintien étoffé
cachait en ses plis
l'émoi et la promesse
de la danse et du bruit.

Je pensais ne jamais pouvoir me placer en toi,
avancer comme une reine
et nous contempler en un miroir.

Depuis j'ai bien dû savoir
froisser ta magnificence,
roder ton importance
te balader en douce cadence

En toi j'ai su le tango,
appris l'aigu du jazz,
vu l'étoilement des lustres,
perçu l'attente masculine.

En toi j'ai perdu l'enfance,
acquis de l'élégance
et une sorte de confiance
mêlée à l'orchestre qui balance.

O toute belle
en ta transparence,
promesse rose et blanche...



Puns

In CP 2022, I showed photos of some billboards collected by Bernard Vogel. Here is his collection of puns and witticisms.

What do you call a bee that can't make up its mind? A maybe.
How does an attorney sleep? First he lies on one side, then he lies on the other side.

I have a few jokes about unemployed people, but none of them work.

How do you make holy water? You take some regular water and boil the hell out of it.

Will glass coffins be a success? Remains to be seen.

What's the difference between a hippo and a zippo? One is really heavy and the other is a little lighter.

Two windmills are standing in a wind farm. One asks, "What's your favorite kind of music?" The other says, "I'm a big metal fan."

I went to buy some camouflage trousers yesterday but couldn't find any.

I tried to sue the airline for losing my luggage. I lost my case.

When everything is coming your way, you're in the wrong lane.

She had a photographic memory but never developed it.

I wasn't originally going to get a brain transplant, but then I changed my mind.

My ex-wife still misses me. But her aim is starting to improve.

The guy who invented the door knocker got a no-bell prize.

I saw an ad for burial plots, and I thought: "That's the last thing I need!"

Need an ark? I Noah guy.

I used to be indecisive; now I'm not so sure.

Sleeping comes so naturally to me, I could do it with my eyes closed.



Animals - less intelligent ⁹

Black bear takes 60 cupcakes from US bakery, scaring staff ([*The Guardian*, 27 May 2023](#))

A hungry black bear barged into the garage of a Connecticut bakery, scared several employees and helped itself to 60 cupcakes before ambling away.

Workers at Taste by Spellbound in the town of Avon were

⁹ I never did like cupcakes.

loading cakes into a van for delivery on Wednesday when the bear showed up. There are 1,000 to 1,200 black bears living in Connecticut, the state environmental agency says, with sightings last year in 158 of the state's 169 towns and cities.

The bakery's owner, Miriam Stephens, wrote in an Instagram post that she heard employee Maureen Williams "screaming bloody murder" and yelling that there was a bear in the garage.

Williams told TV station WTNH that she shouted to scare the bear off but it retreated and came back three times. Williams said the bear charged at her so she backed out of the garage and ran. A baker finally got the bear to leave by honking a car horn, Williams said.



Animals - intelligent / Humans less

Seit der Nacht auf Donnerstag hat die Polizei in Berlin nach einer mutmasslichen Raubkatze gesucht. Über 200 Einsatzkräfte standen im Einsatz. Jetzt hebt sie die Gefährdungslage auf. (Reuters 21 July 2023)

Die mutmassliche Raubkatze, nach der die Polizei in Berlin fast zwei Tage lang gesucht hat, war wohl doch nur ein Wildschwein. Das teilten die Behörden am Freitag an einer Pressekonferenz in Kleinmachnow mit.

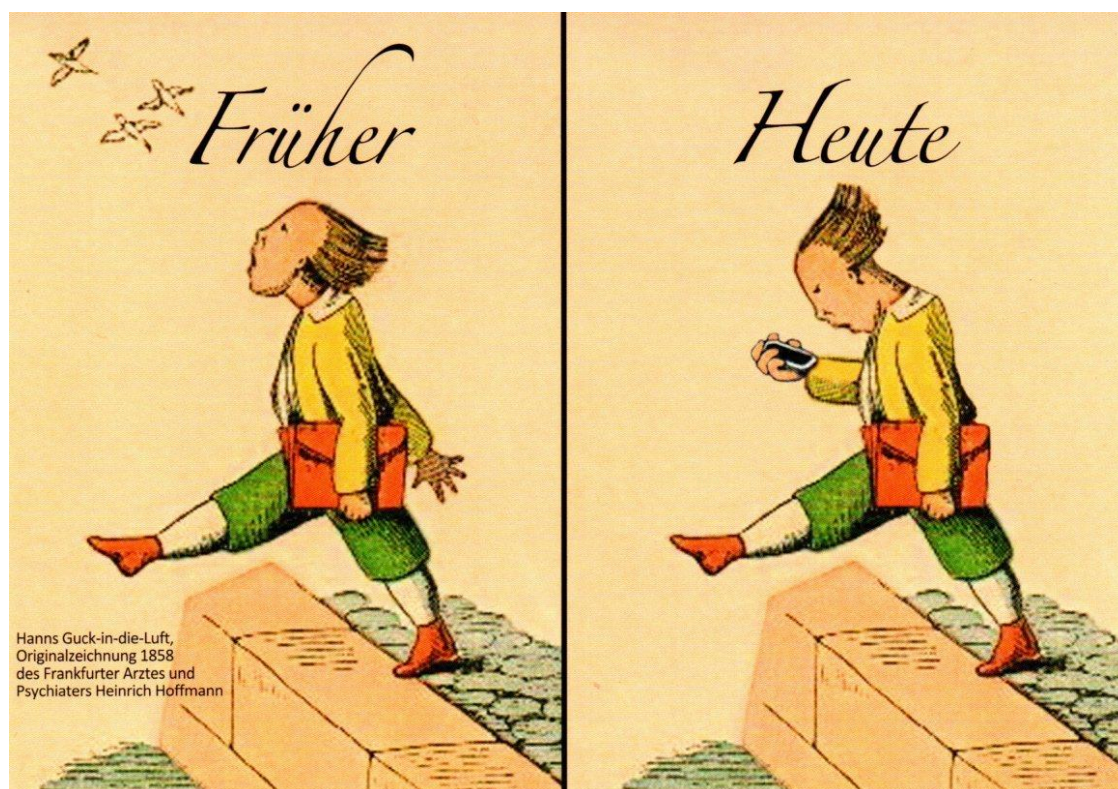
Die Behörde hat die Suche nach dem Tier eingestellt, die Polizei hat die Gefährdungslage für das Gebiet aufgehoben.

Zuvor hatte die Polizei in mehreren Ortschaften nahe Berlins mit mehr als 200 Einsatzkräften nach einem freilaufenden Wildtier gesucht. Entsprechende Meldungen von Anwohnern, sie hätten am Richard-Strauss-Weg in Kleinmachnow ein solches Tier entdeckt, erreichten die Polizei in der Nacht auf Donnerstag.



Hanns Guck-in-die-Luft (Johnny Look-In-The-Air)

In *CP 2010*, I included a section on [*Der Struwwelpeter*](#), one of the best-known German children's books. Written by Heinrich Hoffmann and first published in 1845, the book comprises ten illustrated and rhymed stories, each demonstrating to the reader the disastrous consequences of misbehaviour. Here is a modern update.



Could you stand any more port?

In the late 1960s, during General de Gaulle's presidency, the Chief of the French Army Staff invited him to see an early version of an AI programme that analysed field positions and gave tactical recommendations. "Ask it a question," he said. De Gaulle looked at the plans and positions and asked "Should we advance or retreat?"

The machine replied "Oui:"

"Oui, quoi" said de Gaulle

"Oui, mon Général."



After Tempest - *Percy MacKaye (1875-1956)*

Shell-less, on your slimey trail,
In mornless dawn, I meet you, snail;
Sans house, sans home, sans bivouac,
No arc of wonder spans your back.
Here, on time's storm-shattered shelf,
Slug, you meet your crawling self,
Reaching towards eternity
All-unavailing antennae.

Swans - *Leonora Speyer (1872-1956)*

With wings held close and slim neck bent,
Along dark water scarcely stirred,
Floats, glimmering and indolent,
The alabaster bird.

Floats near its mate, the lovely one.
They lie like snow, cool flake on flake.
Mild breast on breast of dimmer swan
Dim-mirrored in the lake
They glide and glides that white embrace,
Shy bird to bird with never a sound.
Thus leaned Narcissus toward his face,
Leaned lower till he drowned.

Leda leaned thus, subdued and spent
Beneath those vivid wings of love.
Along the lake, proud, indolent,
The vast birds scarcely move.

Silence is wisdom. Then how wise
Are these whose song is but their knell.
A god did well to choose this guise.
Truly, a god did well.

T.S. Eliot - *(1888–1965)*

The broad-backed hippopotamus
Rests on his belly in the mud;

Although he seems so firm to us
He is merely flesh and blood.

Flesh and blood is weak and frail,
Susceptible to nervous shock;
While the True Church can never fail
For it is based upon a rock.

The hippo's feeble steps may err
In compassing material ends,
While the True Church need never stir
To gather in its dividends.

The 'potamus can never reach
The mango on the mango-tree;
But fruits of pomegranate and peach
Refresh the Church from over sea.

At mating time the hippo's voice
Betrays inflexions hoarse and odd,
But every week we hear rejoice
The Church, at being one with God.

The hippopotamus's day
Is passed in sleep; at night he hunts;
God works in a mysterious way -
The Church can sleep and feed at once.

I saw the 'potamus take wing
Ascending from the damp savannas,
And quiring angels round him sing
The praise of God, in loud hosannas.

Blood of the Lamb shall wash him clean
And him shall heavenly arms enfold,
Among the saints he shall be seen
Performing on a harp of gold.

He shall be washed as white as snow,
By all the martyr'd virgins kist,

While the True Church remains below
Wrapt in the old miasmal mist.



Ogden Nash

Ogden Nash (1902-1971) was probably the most prolific author of animal poems, combining wit with economy of words.

The Camel

The camel has a single hump;
The dromedary two;
Or else the other way around.
I'm never sure. Are you?

Fleas

Adam
Had 'em...

The Cow

The cow is of the bovine ilk;
One end is moo, the other, milk....

A Caution to Everybody

Consider the auk;
Becoming extinct because he forgot how to fly, and
could only walk.
Consider man, who may well become extinct
Because he forgot how to walk and learned how to fly
before he thinked.

The Eel

I don't mind eels
Except as meals.

The Firefly

The firefly's flame
Is something for which science has no name
I can think of nothing eerier
Than flying around with an unidentified glow on a
person's posteerier.

The Fly

God in his wisdom made the fly
And then forgot to tell us why.

The Porcupine

Any hound a porcupine nudges
Can't be blamed for harboring grudges.
I know one hound that laughed all winter
At a porcupine that sat on a splinter.

The Turtle

The turtle lives 'twixt plated decks
Which practically conceal its sex.
I think it clever of the turtle
In such a fix to be so fertile.

The Rabbit

Here is a verse about rabbits
That doesn't mention their habits.

The Octopus

Tell me, O Octopus, I begs
Is those things arms, or is they legs?
I marvel at thee, Octopus;
If I were thou, I'd call me Us.

The Termite

Some primal termite knocked on wood
And tasted it, and found it good,
And that is why your Cousin May
Fell through the parlor floor today.

The Lion

Oh, weep for Mr. and Mrs. Bryan!
He was eaten by a lion
Following which, the lion's lioness
Up and swallowed Bryan's Bryanness.



Animals - less intelligent

An Essex couple have spent 10 months seeking compensation after 18 escaped water buffaloes stampeded through their garden, with eight of them taking a morning dip in their new swimming pool. ([*The Guardian*, 20 May 2023](#))

Andy and Lynette Smith, who are retired, say that their garden and pool were ruined after the animals, which weigh about 600kg each, got out of a rare breeds farm and on to their property, causing more than £25,000 worth of damage.

Eight of them ended up falling into the £70,000 pool, triggering a stampede that wrecked fencing and flower beds. The animals were rescued unharmed by the farmer.



This is the last of the port¹⁰

After a meeting at the UN, an Englishman, a Scotsman, an Irishman, a Turk, a Welshman, a Latvian, a German, an Indian, several Americans and South Americans, an Australian, a Dane, a Slovak, an Egyptian, a Japanese, a New Zealander, a Moroccan, a Frenchman, a Spaniard, a Russian, a Guatemalan, a Pakistani, a Malaysian, a Croatian, an Uzbek, a Cypriot, a Pole, a Lithuanian, a Chinese, a Ugandan, a Panamanian, an Israeli, an Iranian, a Fijian, an Estonian, a Syrian, a Portuguese, Mongolian, a Hungarian, a Canadian, a Macedonian, a Haitian, a Tajik, a Samoan, an Armenian, an Albanian, a Tongan, a Georgian, a Norwegian, a Costa Rican, a Serb, a Swede, a Bulgarian, an Italian, and several Africans, walk into a very fine restaurant in New York.

After scrutinizing the group, the Maitre D says "I'm sorry, you can't come in here without a Thai."



¹⁰ With thanks to my late friend Nicholas Lamb.

Miscellaneous

Mon Amour

Doux dans mon coeur
Comme une fleur
Qui éclôt.
Sans un mot
Mon amour grandit
Sans faire de bruit -
Imperceptiblement.

Northwest wind

The Northwest wind draws scurries
across the face of the water,
black and impenetrable.
A mass of clouds rides heavily overhead,
and your hair is blown back, damp,
slicked against your forehead.
A seagull leans against the wind,
shudders, pulls, swings away,
dives
and alights, perching
precisely
on a
post.
And in this moment
I know precisely
why I love you.

Boltenhagen

The sea is rougher now
as we sit facing the evening sun.
Your hair blows across my cheek,
Reminding, caressing.
We move together in rhythm:
I think it is the sea swell –
But it could be my heartbeat.

In the Metro
no
flowers grow:
no green
has yet been
seen.
The ballet,
you could say,
in a way,
was not
so hot,
but
from the Kremlin,
on the way in
to Biblioteka Lenin,
a violin
began to sing
Vivaldi's [Spring](#).
On my arm your hand you laid -
violins played.
We stayed.
Flowers grew.



Toilet paper in action

My room-mate at Peterhouse, Gordon, should have got at least an upper Second, but spent a large part of his last year preparing and finding donations for an expedition to Chitral - at that time, really off the beaten track, but today a tourist destination.¹¹ His fund-raising letters offered sponsors the opportunity to have their products photographed in action.

¹¹ And home to a large population of Ismailis, followers of the Aga Khan; I was there in my last year at the Aga Khan Foundation. Curious how things move in circles.

He forgot to redraft the letter for the supplier of toilet paper.



Humans - less intelligent

Chinese zoo denies its sun bears are humans dressed in costumes. ([*The Guardian*, 1 August 2023](#))

A zoo in eastern China has denied suggestions that some of its bears could be humans dressed in costumes, after video of one standing on its hind legs circulated online. Video of a sun bear standing on its hind legs had circulated on social media, with people noting that its slender legs and folds of fur made it look like a human was acting the part of the bear.

But in an audio recording circulating on WeChat, a spokesperson for the zoo said the animal was real and that such deception would not happen at a state-run facility. He also noted that in the 40C (104F) summer temperature, a human in a fur bear suit “would not last more than a few minutes before collapsing”. Other Chinese zoos have been accused of trying to pass off dogs dyed to look like wolves or African cats, and donkeys painted to look like zebras.



Odds and Ends

My doctor asked if anyone in my family suffered from mental illness. I said, "No, we all seem to enjoy it." (Thanks John and Brian)

The construction of Barbieland and lifesize versions of the doll's Dreamhouse for the film "Barbie" caused a world shortage of pink paint. (*The Guardian*, 5 June 2023)

"Nakamura" (中村, "middle village") is the seventh-most-common Japanese surname. Translate it into Anglo-Saxon and you get "Middleton", much less "common" (in the USA, 813th).

"Growing fungi at home is beginning to mushroom" *The Guardian*, 26 November 2022.

On an old revolutionary

This comrade was, in sixty-eight,
Both dissident and resolute.
His causes gone, he's now, of late,
Just resident and dissolute.

Sprengtutor commentary on "blushful hippocrene" in Keats's Ode to Autumn: "Hippocrene is the name of a fountain on Mount Helicon in Boetia which is **scared** to the Muses." [Must have been a heady wine!]

From a dark prison cell in Tajikistan, a voice calls out: "I want to speak to my lawyer." From the neighbouring cell, another replies: "I'm here!"

Did you know that the part of our anatomy called "coccyx" comes from the Greek *κόκκυξ* "cuckoo", so called by the ancient Greek physician Galen because the bones supposedly resemble a cuckoo's moderately curved beak?

A few more puns to fill up the space left: "A chicken crossing the road is poultry in motion." "A hangover is the wrath of grapes." "Acupuncture is a jab well done." ["Enough!" I hear you say.]

