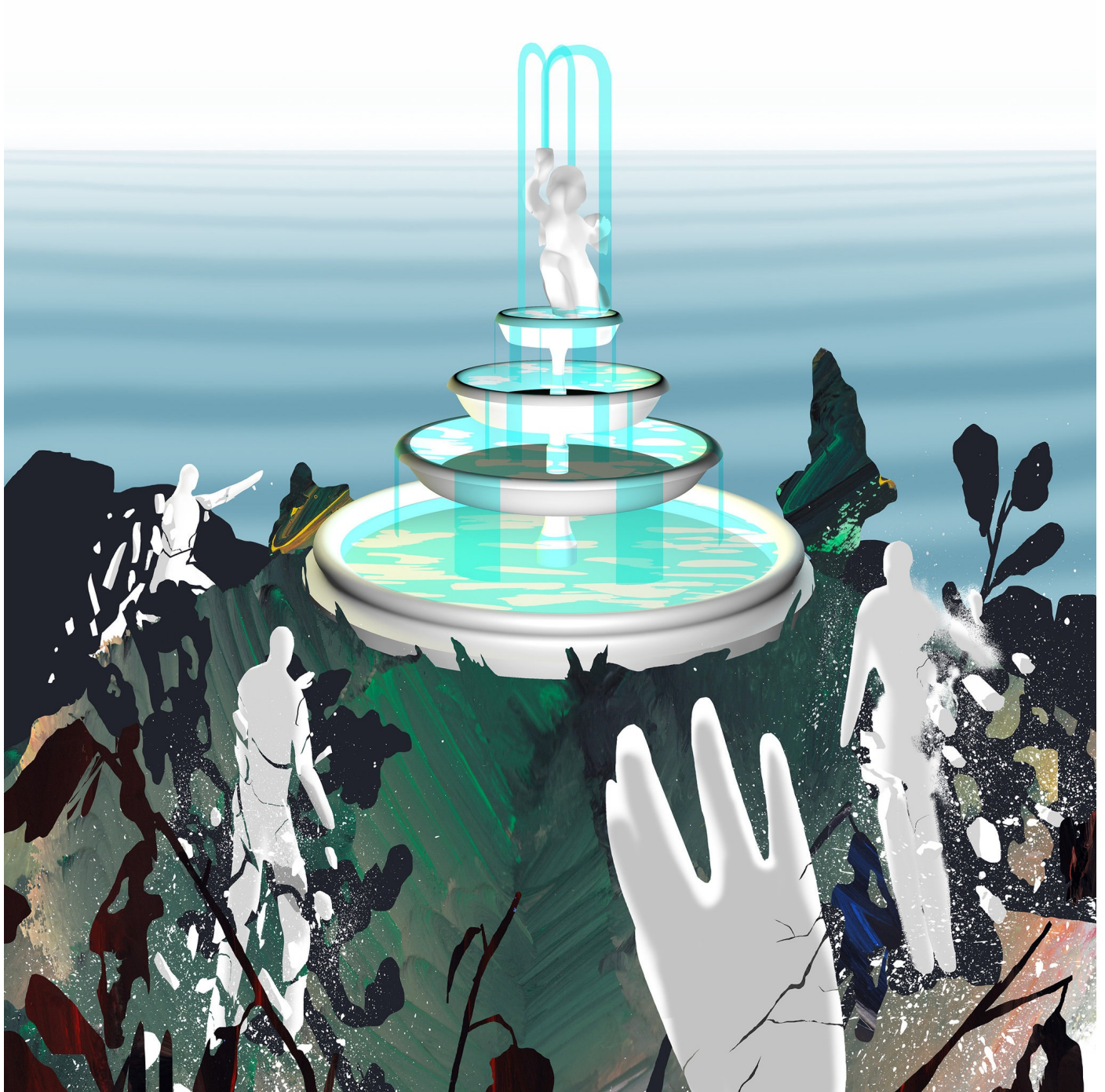


# The Men Who Want to Live Forever

By Dara Horn Jan. 25, 2018

## Opinion



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Would you like to live forever? Some billionaires, already invincible in every

other way, have decided that they also deserve not to die. Today several biotech companies, fueled by Silicon Valley fortunes, are devoted to “life extension” — or as some put it, to solving “the problem of death.”

It’s a cause championed by the tech billionaire Peter Thiel, the TED Talk darling Aubrey de Gray, Google’s billion-dollar Calico longevity lab and investment by Amazon’s Jeff Bezos. The National Academy of Medicine, an independent group, recently dedicated funding to “end aging forever.”

As the longevity entrepreneur Arram Sabeti told *The New Yorker*: “The proposition that we can live forever is obvious. It doesn’t violate the laws of physics, so we can achieve it.” Of all the slightly creepy aspects to this trend, the strangest is the least noticed: The people publicly championing life extension are mainly men.

Not all of them, of course. In 2009, Elizabeth Blackburn received the Nobel Prize for her work on telomeres, protein caps on chromosomes that may be a key to understanding aging. Cynthia Kenyon, the vice president for aging research at Calico, studied life extension long before it was cool; her former protégée, Laura Deming, now runs a venture capital fund for the cause. But these women are focused on curbing age-related pathology, a concept about as controversial as cancer research. They do not appear thirsty for the Fountain of Youth.

Professor Blackburn’s new book on telomeres couldn’t be clearer. “Does our research show that by maintaining your telomeres you will live into your hundreds?” it says. “No. Everyone’s cells become old and eventually we die.” Ms. Kenyon once described her research’s goal as “to just have a healthy life and then turn out the lights.” Even Ms. Deming, a 23-year-old prodigy who worked in Ms. Kenyon’s lab at age 12, points out that “aging is innately important to us.”

Few of these experts come close to matching the gaudy statements of the longevity investor and “biohacker” Dave Asprey, who has told journalists, “I

decided that I was just not going to die.” Or those of Brian Hanley, a microbiologist who has tested an anti-aging gene therapy he developed on himself, who claimed: “There’s a bunch of things that will need to be done to achieve life spans into at least hundreds of years. But we’ll get there.” Or of the 74-year-old fashion mogul Peter Nygard, who during a promotional clip receives injections of his own stem cells to reverse his aging while declaring: “Ponce de León had the right idea. He was just too early. That was then. This is now.”

I came across Mr. Nygard’s ode to human endurance three years ago while beginning research on a novel about a woman who can’t die, and watching that video allowed me to experience something close to life extension. As Mr. Nygard compared himself to Leonardo da Vinci and Benjamin Franklin while dancing with a bevy of models — or as a voice-over explained, “living a life most can only dream of” — nine minutes of YouTube expanded into a vapid eternity, where time melted into a vortex of solipsism.

At that time I was immersed in caring for my four young children, and this paean to everlasting youth seemed especially stupid. I recall thinking that if this was eternal life, death didn’t seem that bad.

But now, as powerful men have begun falling like dominoes under accusations of sexual assault, that video with its young women clustered around an elderly multimillionaire has haunted me anew. As I recall my discomfort with the proclamations of longevity-driven men who hope to achieve “escape velocity,” I think of the astonishing hubris of the Harvey Weinsteins of the world, those who saw young women’s bodies as theirs for the taking.

Much has been said about why we allowed such behavior to go unchecked. What has remained unsaid, because it is so obvious, is what would make someone so shameless in the first place: These people believed they were invincible. They saw their own bodies as entirely theirs and other people’s bodies as at their disposal; apparently nothing in their lives led them to believe otherwise.

Historically, this is a mistake that few women would make, because until very recently, the physical experience of being a woman entailed exactly the opposite — and not only because women have to hold their keys in self-defense while walking through parking lots at night. It's only very recently that women have widely participated in public life, but it's even more recently that men have been welcome, or even expected, to provide physical care for vulnerable people.

Only for a nanosecond of human history have men even slightly shared what was once exclusively a woman's burden: the relentless daily labor of caring for another person's body, the life-preserving work of cleaning feces and vomit, the constant cycle of cooking and feeding and blanketing and bathing, whether for the young, the ill or the old. For nearly as long as there have been humans, being a female human has meant a daily nonoptional immersion in the fragility of human life and the endless effort required to sustain it.

Obviously not everyone who provides care for others is a saint. But engaging in that daily devotion, or even living with its expectation, has enormous potential to change a person. It forces one to constantly imagine the world from someone else's point of view: *Is he hungry? Maybe she's tired. Is his back hurting him? What is she trying to say?*

The most obvious cure for today's gender inequities is to put more women in power. But if we really hope to create an equal society, we will also need more men to care for the powerless — more women in the boardroom, but also more men at the nurses' station and the changing table, immersed in daily physical empathy. If that sounds like an evolutionary impossibility, well, it doesn't violate the laws of physics, so we can achieve it. It is surely worth at least as much investment as defeating death.

Perhaps it takes the promise of immortality to inspire the self-absorbed to invest in unsexy work like Alzheimer's research. If so, we may all one day bless the inane death-defiance as a means to a worthy end.

But men who hope to live forever might pause on their eternal journey to consider the frightening void at invincibility's core. Death is the ultimate vulnerability. It is the moment when all of us must confront exactly what so many women have known all too well: You are a body, only a body, and nothing more.