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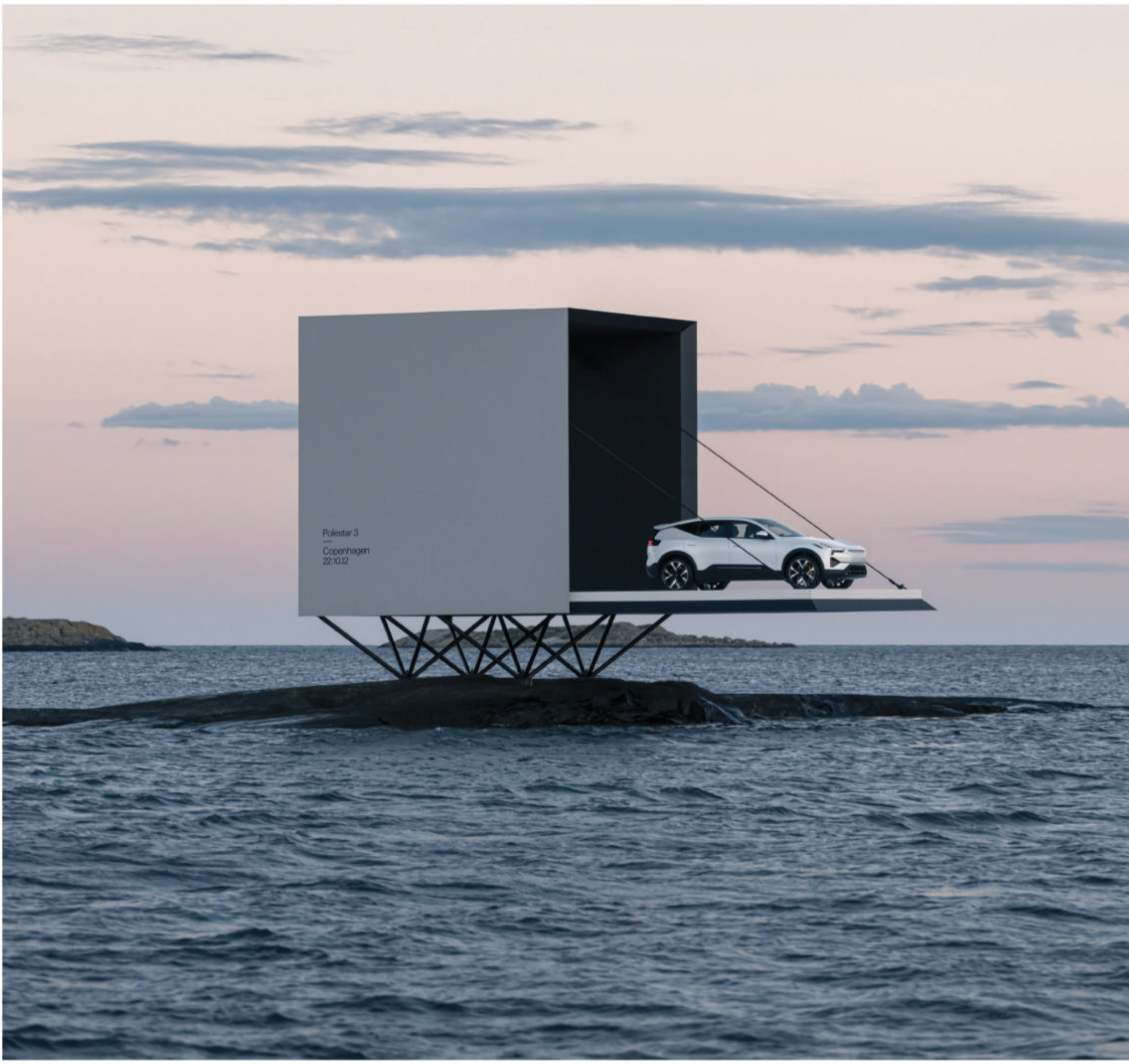




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CONTRIBUTORS



Jonathan Blitzer (*"No Limits," p. 32*) became a staff writer in 2017. He is working on a book about the U.S. and Central America.

Jiji Lee (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 25*) is a humor writer based in New York City.

Edward Koren (*"Envisioning Extinction," p. 68*) has contributed cartoons to *The New Yorker* since 1962. His exhibition "Down to the Bone" is on view at the Peabody Essex Museum, in Salem, Massachusetts, through February 5th.

Katie Hamill (*"Comedy of Errors," p. 53*) has made puzzles for the M.I.T. Mystery Hunt, the American Values Club Crossword, and other outlets.

Joon Pahk (*"Pattern Recognition," p. 48*) is a puzzle-maker and the author of "Triple Decker Trivia."

Patrick Berry (*"Bagel Shop," p. 46*) constructs crosswords for the magazine. His puzzles have also appeared in the *Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Liz Maynes-Aminzade (*"Sight Gags," p. 54*) is *The New Yorker's* puzzles-and-games editor.

Seth (*"Picturing the Cove Inn," p. 62*) is a cartoonist whose work has appeared in the *Times Magazine*, "The Best American Comics," and *McSweeney's Quarterly*. He is the author of "Clyde Fans."

Lily Geller (*Cryptic Crossword, p. 49*) began constructing puzzles in 2020, and has been published in the Browser.

Ian Frazier (*Poem, p. 42*) has contributed to the magazine since 1974 and has written "Greetings, Friends!" annually since 2012.

Roz Chast (*"Roz and Emily Eat Their Way Through Midwood," p. 22*), a longtime *New Yorker* cartoonist, published, with Patricia Marx, "You Can Only Yell at Me for One Thing at a Time."

Chris Ware (*Cover*) has contributed graphic fiction and covers to the magazine since 1999.

Kevin Wald (*"Comedy of Errors," p. 53*) has made crosswords for the M.I.T. Mystery Hunt and the *Times*.

Emily Flake (*"Roz and Emily Eat Their Way Through Midwood," p. 22*), a *New Yorker* cartoonist, most recently published "That Was Awkward."

Lisa Hanawalt ("*Choosing Horses," p. 26*) is the creator of "Tuca & Bertie," an animated series for Adult Swim/HBO Max, and is the production designer for and a producer of the Netflix series "BoJack Horseman." She has written and illustrated four books of comics.

Edward Steed (*"There Goes the Neighborhood," p. 44*) has contributed cartoons to *The New Yorker* since 2013.

Andy Kravis (*"Sounds About Right," p. 52*) is the magazine's associate puzzles-and-games editor.

Paolo Pasco (*Cover Crossword, p. 47*) is the assistant crossword editor at *The Atlantic* and contributes to the American Values Club Crossword.

Robert Pinsky (*Poem, p. 37*) most recently published the memoir "Jersey Breaks: Becoming an American Poet."

Suerynn Lee (*"Sight Gags," p. 54*) is a cartoonist and an illustrator who has contributed to the magazine since 2018.

Neville Fogarty (*Cryptic Crossword, p. 49*) is a mathematician at Christopher Newport University. He has been creating crossword puzzles since 2007.

ILLUSTRATION BY JOOHEE YOON

THE MAIL

IN THE CRISIS

Elizabeth Kolbert, in her sweeping survey of climate change ("A Vast Experiment," November 28th), makes a stimulating contribution to the national conversation about this challenge. I especially appreciated her discussion of the role of narratives in spurring (or stalling) action. As Kolbert points out, pessimistic narratives can be limiting. But, in the U.S., examples of making radical change to curb or adapt to the climate crisis are hard to come by. If we incorporated instances of progress into our story of the crisis, perhaps our culture would be more deeply engaged with transitioning to sustainable energy.

One generative source of alternative narratives is Europe, where many communities, cities, and regions have taken transformative measures. Copenhagen, for example, has one of the world's most successful district-heating systems, which supplies energy to ninety-eight per cent of the city's buildings, largely by capturing waste heat from electricity plants. The system cuts household bills by nearly fifteen hundred U.S. dollars a year, and saves Copenhagen—which plans to become carbon-neutral this decade—more than seven hundred thousand tons of CO_2 emissions annually. Austria offers another encouraging case. Twenty-five years ago, the town of Güssing was one of the poorest in the country, a forgotten frontier along the former Iron Curtain. Since 2001, when the town began producing all of its heat and power from renewables, its economy has been revitalized, and the municipality of four thousand people has become a model for how to transform a place with green energy.

Hervey Scudder
Brattleboro, Vt.

Although Kolbert rightly focusses on questions about the electrification of emissions-heavy modes of transportation, I'd like to discuss some of the alternatives that are not mentioned in her piece. One of these is high-speed rail, which can provide long-distance travel at great speed and in comfort. The other is micro-mobility vehicles; for most people in the world currently without cars, the technological leapfrog they perform in the upcoming years may well take them not to electric cars but to electric bicycles and other micro-mobility E.V.s. In my retirement, I have spent part of my time trying to encourage more people to cycle by converting their standard bikes to electric at a low cost—in large part because I believe that, in the U.S., we need to change our habits, not just electrify the technology of the high-carbon élites.

Alan Wright
Roslindale, Mass.

Kolbert presents numerous examples of climate interventions that have been thwarted or curtailed by greed, inertia, or lack of political will. Another noteworthy case is the Department of Energy's Weatherization Assistance Program (WAP), which has helped low-income applicants to insulate homes and install energy-efficient devices since 1976. (I have worked on WAP-funded projects in Ohio since 2010.) The WAP tackles an important facet of the country's carbon output—buildings produce more greenhouse-gas emissions than cars, planes, and ships combined. But, historically, the program has been targeted as low-hanging fruit during budget renegotiations.

Thankfully, the newly passed Bipartisan Infrastructure Law directs $3.5 billion to the WAP. Ideally, Congress would appropriate funds annually, in order to continually expand access, rather than give them out as a lump sum. Weatherizing multifamily buildings can produce not only energy savings but also drastic reductions in carbon emissions.

Patrick Stuart
Columbus, Ohio

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Radiant soprano Sonya Yoncheva stars opposite Piotr Beczała, Rosa Feola, and Lucas Meachem in David McVicar's dazzling new production of Giordano's melodrama, conducted by Marco Armiliato. **The drama begins 12.31.22.**

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GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



The origami menagerie that graces the tree at the **American Museum of Natural History** (through Jan. 8) includes beetles, butterflies, and grasshoppers, in both a nod to the past and a preview of coming attractions. The museum's holiday tradition dates back to the early seventies, when the entomologist Alice Gray began folding paper-bug ornaments for the staff. This year's specimens are inspired by the insectarium and the butterfly vivarium opening, on Feb. 17, in the new Gilder Center for Science, Education, and Innovation.

PHOTOGRAPH BY LUCIA BURICELLI

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

MUSIC

"El Niño: Nativity Reconsidered"

CLASSICAL When American Modern Opera Company streamlined John Adams and Peter Sellars's Christmas oratorio, "El Niño," at the Cloisters, in 2018, it cut an hour of music, eliminated the chorus, and whittled down the orchestra to a quarter of its size. The efficiently impactful realization, conceived by the soprano Julia Bullock, revealed the work's audacious core and retained the lyricism, if not the jangly splendor, of Adams's musical language. This revival of Bullock's version expands to fill the vast Cathedral of St. John the Divine, with additional instrumentalists and the Choir of Trinity Wall Street. Bullock, Davóne Tines, and Anthony Roth Costanzo reprise their roles, joined by Rachael Wilson; Christian Reif conducts.—*Oussama Zahr (The Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine; Dec. 21.)*

Louis Hayes

JAZZ There are a lot of great musicians to be heard at the tenth annual Coltrane Festival, at this uptown club, but the drummer Louis Hayes has one distinct advantage over them all—he alone played with John Coltrane. The exemplary eighty-five-year-old stylist's late-fifties encounters with the master saxophonist were relatively brief, but his extended associations with the likes of Horace Silver, Cannonball Adderley, and Oscar Peterson cemented a reputation as a hard-driving swinger, which has only solidified in the course of an eight-decade career. He honors Coltrane in a quartet that's co-led by the pianist Eric Reed and the saxophonist Vincent Herring.—*Steve Futterman (Smoke; Dec. 26-27.)*

Kush Jones

HOUSE As a producer, Kush Jones makes beats with a unique style—his recordings usually have the dusty flair of early, sample-based hip-hop while still hewing to house music's classic four-to-the-floor rhythm. The combination makes Jones's tracks instantly identifiable when others spin them. As a d.j., Jones brings off a similar kind of mixture. For a set on the London radio station Rinse FM, aired in November, his selections are heavy on hip-hop tropes—vinyl crackle, scratched-in hooks—that detonate delightfully.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Nowadays; Dec. 23.)*

Phill Niblock

EXPERIMENTAL A New York winter is not unlike a glacial work of minimalist drone. The ice slows us, the cold seems to induce repetition, the snow blankets the streets—and noise remains. Fittingly, to mark the winter solstice, Phill Niblock, an eighty-nine-year-old fixture of the avant-garde, stages a six-hour concert of microtonal drones, filling the longest night of the year with acoustic and electronic dissonance. Niblock, who is also the director of the arts foundation Experimental Intermedia, supplements the atonal meditations with mixed-media film, as the entire performance charts the progression of the planets toward frost. Through the decades, the artist has been inspired by Rothko canvases and the music of Morton Feldman; he has collaborated with Arthur Russell and with Sonic Youth. No stranger to mammoth commitments of time, Niblock spent about twenty years accruing footage for his 2003 film, "The Movement of People Working," and he has presented this solstice ritual since the nineteen-seventies.—*Jenn Pelly (Roulette; Dec. 21.)*

SZA: "SOS"

R. & B. SZA's "Ctrl" was a landmark record for R. & B. Its slow-rolling, psychedelic sound breathed new life into a stilted form, and her music volunteered deeply personal insights into modern dating, its casualness and its complexity. Her follow-up, "SOS," is over it: across twenty-three songs that span rattling trap and wraithlike indie rock, she sets harder boundaries and is ready and willing to pull the rip cord on a relationship in free fall. In the past, her lyrics were familiarly plainspoken, bringing an almost shameless gall to toxic romantic situations. In these songs, she is a bit more exasperated at facing the same prospects at thirty-three. The writing doesn't quite have the same dramatic quality as the scene-setting of her striking début, but what this album lacks in punchiness and fluidity it makes up for with sweeping atmospherics.—*Sheldon Pearce (Streaming on select platforms.)*

ART

Yun-Fei Ji

This Beijing-born artist, who lives in New York and Philadelphia, has long mirrored and messed with the conventions of classical Chinese painting—the landscape genre especially. In the past, Ji has depicted scenes of mass displacement (caused by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, for example) in panoramic works on paper, in watercolor and ink. His wonderful new exhibition, "The Sunflower Turned Its Back," instead features mid-size canvases, quietly humming with color, in thickly applied acrylic. Sturdy lines and opaque shapes efface the details in these busy compositions, with their flattened picture planes. In "Bunk Bed," from this year, streamer-like vertical brushstrokes form the wall of a small room, its sunny sense of order undercut by three crooked clothes hangers. Also from this year are "Satellite Dish on a Bed" and "The Fan with Cloth on It," two beauties, whose dappled light and dynamic clutter recall early Matisse. But as a shared subject comes into focus—jumbles of personal belongings on the street, the disarray of hasty departures—gravitas overwrites gaiety.—*Johanna Fateman*

Alex Katz

"Gathering" is the title of the Guggenheim's triumphant retrospective of this nonagenarian painter, but it might easily have been "Conversations with Friends"—and not just because a stylish detail of a Katz double portrait graces the cover of Sally Rooney's novel by that name. (That daffodil-yellow canvas, from 2009, is among the more than a hundred and fifty works here.) Two subjects have absorbed the ninety-five-year-old native New Yorker across his eight-decade career: the people he loves—above all, his wife, Ada, and such close pals as Frank O'Hara, John Ashbery, and Meredith Monk—and the landscapes of Maine, where he has summered for some seventy years. One bright outlier in the exhibition,

CABARET



Patti LuPone's lacerating line deliveries, pointed belt, and zeal for chastising those audience members she finds discourteous are the stuff of Broadway lore. But this fall she revealed that she had given up her Equity card, declaring that she was "no longer part of that circus" in reply to those who tried (and failed) to pull her into a Twitter debate about diva behavior and the nature of privilege. La LuPone is very much still around, though: her sold-out run at 54 Below, "Songs from a Hat" (select dates Dec. 20-Jan. 8), features a live stream on New Year's Day. At the residency, she dips into songs from her career, including, surely, the barn-burning "Ladies Who Lunch," from Sondheim's "Company," for which she nabbed her third—and final?—Tony in June.—*Oussama Zahr*

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Theaster Gates, a conceptual archivist of Black culture, gathers objects with the reverence of both an animist and an aesthete. "Young Lords and Their Traces," the Chicago-based artist's majestic survey at the New Museum (on view through Feb. 5), demonstrates his signature talent for illuminating the spiritual dimension of both materials and labor by creating contemplative spaces. Gates also makes sculptures (such as "Black Madonna," pictured above, from 2017), which derive some of their power from salvaged elements: a bronze bell from a demolished church on Chicago's South Side is presented here as a holy relic. His recent geometric reliefs, which resemble Frank Stella's Black Paintings, from the mid-twentieth century, are fashioned from weathered wood milled by carpenters at the Rebuild Foundation, a Chicago nonprofit founded by Gates. (Activism addressing the systemic disinvestment in Black communities is a key to his overarching project.) Elsewhere, clay appears as a life force. Around forty of the artist's anthropomorphic vessels, which draw from pottery traditions of both the African diaspora and Japan, are gathered in a striking installation, suffused with the sounds of experimental gospel music, provided by Gates's 2013 film "Billy Sings Amazing Grace." The mood turns more intimate in a dim, red-carpeted room, where Gates enshrines a poetic array of objects in antique vitrines. Art works by his forebears (a storage jar by the enslaved potter David Drake) and mementos of the recently deceased (the artist Sam Gilliam's paint-spattered boot) are among the personally significant treasures. It's a moving moment, distilling the essence of this numinously beautiful show.—*Johanna Fateman*

"Round Hill," from 1977, finds his friends in the endless now of a Caribbean getaway. For years, Katz was something of an outlier himself, a figurative painter who favors the flatness of Ab Ex. His style is singular, neither Pop nor Photo-Realist. His sharp eye for fashion (a chic red lip, a patterned scarf, a snazzy pair of sandals) can be deceptive. Such details are to Katz what apples were to Cézanne (whom Katz has called "the first artist I understood"): an invitation to eye the interplay of color and light, load a brush with oil, and master the depths of a painting's surface.—*Andrea K. Scott (Guggenheim Museum; through Feb. 20.)*

"New York: 1962-1964"

This spectacular historical show of art and documentation addresses an era of season-to-season—at times almost monthly or weekly—advances in painting, sculpture, photography, dance, music, design, fashion, and such hybrid high jinks as "happenings." With Pop art and nascent Minimalism, New York artists were turning no end of tables on solemnly histrionic Abstract Expressionism, which had established the city as the new wheelhouse of creative origination worldwide. Instrumental to the moment was a brilliant critic and curator, Alan Solomon, who, as the director of the Jewish Museum during the years bracketed here, consolidated what he called "The New Art," mounting the first museum retrospectives of the trailblazers Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns and elevating such newbie Pop phenoms as Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and James Rosenquist in tandem with radically formalist abstract painters like Frank Stella and Kenneth Noland. The eruptive early sixties launched many folks on all sorts of trajectories. Some artists, at the margins of fame, hung fire for unjustly belated recognition, as demonstrated here by the achievements of the Spiral Group, a cadre of stylistically diverse Black artists who banded together in 1963. Few women at the time were given their due, which should accrue to them in retrospect. A garish relief painting, from 1963, by the underknown Marjorie Strider, of a glamour girl chomping on a huge red radish, could serve as an icon of Pop glee and sexual impertinence crossed with proto-feminist vexation.—*Peter Schjeldahl (Jewish Museum; through Jan. 8.)*

DANCE

Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre

The final week of Ailey's season offers a few more chances to catch the company's new works. Kyle Abraham's "Are You in Your Feelings?," which features a breakout performance by Ashley Kaylynn Green, grooves playfully and sensually to contemporary songs about relationships. It's easy to love, whereas Jamar Roberts's "In a Sentimental Mood," a noirish duet about a failed affair, is more troubling and challenging, even semi-opaque. The company also performs Twyla Tharp's high-flying "Roy's Joys" and revives Ailey's 1986 tribute to Nelson and Winnie Mandela, "Survivors."—*Brian Seibert (New York City Center; through Dec. 24.)*

Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo

What was once subversive has become traditional. Hence this beloved all-male troupe's current run at the Joyce. It isn't holiday-themed, but like many holiday programs it's heavy on old favorites. "Swan Lake, Act II" is a slapstick sendup of gender conventions; "ChopEniana" is a knockabout farce. Both are funny if you don't know the source ballets and even funnier if you do. That's true as well of "Dying Swan," in which the ballerina milks her final exit, molting absurdly.—*B.S. (Joyce Theatre; through Jan. 8.)*

Music from the Sole

This ensemble of dancers and musicians, like a *samba bateria* during Carnival, is quickly gathering fans who are attracted by its percussive call to good times. The group's 2021 piece "Partido," reprised at the 92nd Street Y on Dec. 22 and available on the Y's Web site Dec. 23-26, explores the shared musi-

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cal interests of its founders: Afro-Brazilian rhythms for the affable tap dancer Leonardo Sandoval; funk, soul, and house for the bassist Greg Richardson. In tap shoes or barefoot, playing all kinds of instruments, Music from the Sole is precise and loose in the right places.—*B.S. (92NY; Dec. 22.)*

THE THEATRE

Becky Nurse of Salem

Becky Nurse (Deirdre O'Connell) is a descendant of Rebecca Nurse, who was killed in the Salem witch trials. Becky, sixty-two, lives in Salem, and at the beginning of this haunted comedy—a new play by Sarah Ruhl, directed by Rebecca Taichman, for Lincoln Center Theatre—she works as a guide at a historical museum. She's obsessed with her ancestral past and, like the play that spins around her, constantly draws contemporary meanings from it. (She's an ardent critic of Arthur Miller's "The Crucible," which makes this play, in parts, a wary reassessment of that troubled forerunner.) Becky's granddaughter Gail (Alicia Crowder) has been in and out of a hospital for her mental illness, and Becky's running out of money. When she engages a witch (Candy Buckley) to help change her fortunes, an ever-thickening web of correspondence with the past envelopes her. It's a fun, smart play, unafraid to bluntly bang the drum of its themes.—*Vinson Cunningham (Mitzi E. Newhouse; through Dec. 31.)*

A Christmas Carol

This superb adaptation of Charles Dickens's Yule-themed memento mori, by Jefferson Mays, Susan Lyons, and Michael Arden, who also directs, goes all in on atmosphere, fully tapping the parable's prominent vein of gothic horror (complete with jump scares) without shortchanging its humor. The designs—including Dane Laffrey's sets, Joshua D. Reid's sound, and Lucy Mackinnon's projections—offer a dazzling showcase of stagecraft, especially Ben Stanton's lighting, which begins with a single candle flame fighting the Victorian gloom and builds slowly and thrillingly from there, in an increasingly expressionistic style. But the show's most impressive special effect is the predictably marvellous Mays, who plays nearly every role (with Danny Gardner providing supplementary spectre services). Mays's emphasis on Dickens's language makes the story surprisingly fresh again, even if you feel like you've seen it a million times.—*Rollo Romig (Nederlander; through Jan. 1.)*

Kimberly Akimbo

"Getting older is my affliction. / Getting older is your cure," the teen-age Kimberly Levaco sings to her high-school classmates. That she is played by the extraordinary sixty-three-year-old Victoria Clark is a tell of what ails her: Kimberly is sixteen going on seventy-two, thanks to a condition that ages her at four times the regular pace—death beckons, and she has barely lived. This sounds like a heartbreak of a show, and it is. But "Kimberly Akimbo," with a book and lyrics by David Lindsay-Abaire and music by Jeanine Tesori, is also howlingly funny, hopscotching among emotions with virtuosic fluidity. The cast—which includes Steven Boyer and Alli Mauzey as Kimberly's overwhelmed parents, Bonnie Milligan as her con-artist aunt, and Justin Cooley as her anagram-loving best friend—is even more finely tuned on Broadway than it was when Jessica Stone's production premièred at the Atlantic Theatre Company, last year.—*Elisabeth Vincentelli (Booth Theatre; open run.)*

The Piano Lesson

LaTanya Richardson Jackson's star-studded Broadway revival of August Wilson's exquisite play is, not to mince words, magnificent. She has known this Pulitzer Prize-winning text since its première, at the Yale Repertory Theatre, in 1987, when her husband, Samuel L. Jackson, originated the character of Boy Willie; there are moments in this thrilling production (which again stars Jackson, this time as Doaker, one of the play's elders) when she seems to have known it in some deeper, stranger way even before that. John David Washington plays Boy Willie, the astonishing Danielle Brooks is his sister, Berniece, and Jackson and Michael Potts (both in incredible form) play the feuding siblings' uncles. The setting is Pittsburgh, 1936; at issue is whether to sell an elaborately carved piano that contains (both artistically and supernaturally) the suffering of their enslaved ancestors. To escape a wound or to treasure it? Balance, measure, the weighing of excellence and opposites—"The Piano Lesson" contains these in its smallest and its largest gestures. Despite Wilson himself putting his thumb on the scale (his sympathies clearly lie with Boy Willie), the production has, by casting the charismatic Brooks, evened out the argument.—*Helen Shaw (Barrymore; through Jan. 29.)*

PODCAST DEPT.



Do you ever glance up at the vastness of space and wonder what it all means? Does thinking about black holes make you feel both delirious and overwhelmed? The stars have held humans rapt for as long as we have existed, so, naturally, the subject has spawned a galaxy of cosmological podcasts. There's "Houston We Have a Podcast," the official podcast of NASA; "The Supermassive Podcast," whose host, Izzie Clarke, brings listeners the latest news in astrophysics; and "Astronomy Cast," a long-running show in which the scientists Fraser Cain and Pamela Gay break down astronomical concepts into comprehensible chunks. But no star stuff has been as auditorily compelling as the new **"Pale Blue Pod,"** a show that attempts to make complex conversations about the universe feel intimate, emotional, and profound. In it, the comedian Corinne Caputo turns to the astrophysicist Moiya McTier with her most pressing questions about comets and planets; no question is too big or too small. What you get is an honest, clear-eyed, funny, smart exchange about how eclipses work, or what the big-bang theory is all about. The show's tagline says that it's "for people who are overwhelmed by the universe, but want to be its friend," and even just a few episodes in you feel that Caputo and McTier are here to gently take your hand and guide you across the constellations.—*Rachel Syme*

ILLUSTRATION BY JAM DONG

MOVIES

Dark Matter

Chen Shi-Zheng's first feature, from 2008, is a downbeat melodrama of frustrated passion and grim forebodings. The action, loosely based on a true story, concerns Liu Xing (Liu Ye), a brilliant young astrophysicist from Beijing who travels to the United States for graduate study under Jacob Reiser (Aidan Quinn), a scientist whose work Xing admires but whose best years and ideas are behind him. Xing's delight is soon tempered by the discovery that Reiser's research team is a sort of scientific sweatshop, staffed with other Chinese recruits; by the shock of seeing his main rival from Beijing arrive to compete with him; and by the horror of finding that the apparently welcoming Reiser deeply resents being outshone by his protégé's brilliance. Chen and his screenwriter, Billy Shebar, deftly sketch the university's hothouse environment, the strained comedy of town-gown relations (Meryl Streep does a strong supporting turn as a rich local dilettante), and the cultural gap that plagues international students. Despite cavernous plot holes and some unabashed Chinese nationalist speechifying, the spectacle of intellect thwarted in mid-flight has a moody resonance.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Tubi, Prime Video, and other services.)*

Empire of Light

The writer and director Sam Mendes's drama, centered on employees at a provincial English movie theatre in 1980 and 1981, is cooking-show cinema: Mendes gives himself a list of required ingredients and creates a movie to contain them, however awkwardly. Olivia Colman plays Hilary Small, the theatre's associate manager, who returns to work after a stay in a mental hospital. She lives alone and is having an affair with the general manager (Colin Firth); a young new employee, Stephen Murray (Micheal Ward), soon becomes her friend, then her lover. Stephen, who is Black, is subjected to racist harassment from local white supremacists. Meanwhile, Hilary, taking stock of her own life, finds the daily veneer of decorum and civility increasingly hard to maintain. Mendes tells the story mainly in intimate dialogues that often start promisingly but end quickly after dispensing useful snippets of information. The film devotes closer attention to the nostalgic setting than to the characters' lives, and its sentimental paean to the glory of movies is as incongruous as it is superficial.—*R.B. (In theatrical release.)*

RRR

This explosively energetic historical fantasy, written and directed by S. S. Rajamouli, is also a dazzlingly inventive action film. Based loosely on the real lives of two early-twentieth-century Indian revolutionaries, Alluri Sitarama Raju and Komaram Bheem, the film imagines that they joined forces and led a spectacular uprising. Bheem (N. T. Rama Rao, Jr.), of the rural Gond people, travels in disguise to Delhi to infiltrate the British governor's palace and recover a Gond child whom the colonial overlords have kidnapped. Raju (Ram Charan), who serves the British as a uniquely ferocious police officer, becomes best friends with Bheem and, when ordered to capture him, has a crisis of conscience. Along the way to a predictably (yet nonetheless thrillingly) apocalyptic conflagration, Bheem battles a tiger with his bare hands, Raju single-handedly fights a crowd of thousands, and the two men galvanize an upper-crust British crowd with a hectic yet precisely choreographed dance-off. Bloody violence abounds—much of it administered with a phantasmagorical visual audacity, spotlighting astounding feats of acrobatics, marksmanship, and strength, and conveying the joyful fury of long-delayed revenge.—*R.B. (Streaming on Netflix.)*

The Truth About Charlie

Jonathan Demme's 2002 remake of "Charade" (which paired Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn) keeps tightly to the story, although you could argue that it was only the stars who made the story worth considering in the first place. We are still in Paris, but this time we get Mark Wahlberg and Thandiwe Newton; she plays the young widow, and he is the mysterious friend, or agent, who apparently comes to her aid. Newton has no problems with the stylish panic of the role, but Wahlberg seems ominously out of his depth; however many berets you clap on his head, he still looks like a man who would rather be on the planet of the apes. Fortunately, the surrounding landscape has its pleasures; Demme's manner is looser and funkier than Donen's, and his Paris is a jamboree of teeming streets and suspicious citizens, hopped up on a soundtrack of world music. The film is hilariously indifferent to the conundrum of the plot, but it is sustained, just about, by the buoyancy of its mood.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 11/4/02.) (Streaming on Prime Video, Vudu, and other services.)*

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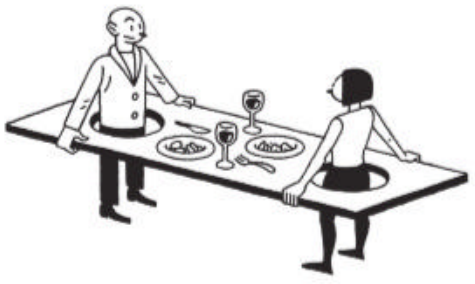
ON THE BIG SCREEN



COURTESY SIDESHOW / JANUS FILMS

The Iranian director Jafar Panahi—who has been making movies clandestinely since 2010, when the regime banned him from filmmaking and from travelling abroad, after his arrest on political charges—dramatizes his own absurd situation, and that of his country, in his new, metafictional feature, **"No Bears"** (which opens Dec. 23 at Film Forum). Panahi plays a character with his name, a filmmaker from Tehran who temporarily moves to a remote village near the border with Turkey in order to tele-direct a movie about two Iranian exiles living in a nearby Turkish city. When the fictionalized Panahi seeks to document the villagers' lives, he gets entangled in a young couple's broken engagement—and is soon confronted by a jilted suitor, an angry mob, the local sheriff, and the religious authorities. Meanwhile, the character finds himself tempted by the proximity of the border. In portraying his fictional tribulations, Panahi exposes the underlying social pathologies that Iranians endure; he sees religion, tradition, domestic surveillance, and legal repression uniting to deny sexual freedom—especially that of women. (In July, Panahi was arrested again and, as of this writing, remains imprisoned.)—*Richard Brody*





TABLES FOR TWO

Björk Café & Bistro
58 Park Ave.

If there's a more cheerful person in New York City than the chef Ulrika Bengtsson, who grew up in the Swedish countryside, eating moose hunted by her father and prepared by her mother, I'd like to meet her. "I was born full of energy," she writes in the surprisingly stirring "About" section of her LinkedIn profile, and I don't doubt it for a second. At her newest restaurant, a café called Björk, in the lobby of Scandinavia House, a Nordic cultural center in midtown, Bengtsson bounds around the dining room beaming, with a buoyancy that can't be learned.

A good personality doesn't necessarily translate into good food, of course, but at Björk it feels like the secret ingredient. Patrons of Ulrika's, the homey Upper East Side restaurant that Bengtsson ran from 1999 to 2006 (before that, she cooked at the Swedish consulate and at Aquavit), will be thrilled to reunite with her bisque: Arctic char, salmon, cod, and crunchy cold-water shrimp are nestled with fingerling potato, carrots, and leeks and then bathed tableside in a light, creamy saffron-and-fennel broth. During a recent meal at Björk, the air became heady with the powerful perfume of bacon, which emerged from the kitchen moments later, paired with lingonberry preserves atop a thin, golden-edged waffle, made from a grated-potato-based batter, that could be broken into heart-shaped quarters.

When I tried the same waffle topped with seaweed roe and dairy-free sour cream, I suspected that there had been a mistake; had I been given the whitefish roe and regular sour cream instead? "No, that's the seaweed!" Bengtsson said, laughing, as she made her rounds. "Isn't it amazing?" When I inquired about the provenance of the tiny, gently briny orange orbs, indistinguishable from tobiko, she leaned in and mock-whispered, "IKEA."

The *smørrebrød*, or open-faced sandwiches, such as one spread with "Gentleman's delight," a salad of herring and hard-boiled egg, are lovely and light. The open-faced *tunnbröd*, similar to Norwegian *lefse*, here a pan-fried, mashed-potato-based flatbread, is much heavier, topped with more mashed potato, pickled cucumber, fried onions, mustard, and two charred hot dogs, their ends split open like flower petals. Heartier still is a beautiful plate of tender, fatty brisket, sliced into batons and strewn with bits of roasted carrot, zucchini, and potato and a tangy parsley cream sauce.

In the Scandinavia House gift shop, among miniature-woollen-sweater Christmas-tree ornaments and Pippi Longstocking dolls, there's a book that purports to teach you how to achieve *hygge*, the Danish concept of coziness, in your home. If that sounds like too much work, Björk's rotating menu of *dagens* (Swedish for "dishes of the day") provides a potent dose. A seeded roll, with a saucer of dimpled butter balls, precedes a wooden tray holding a cup of black coffee, a tiny mug of sweet-and-sour borscht, a bowl of mixed lettuces dressed lightly in lemon and olive oil, and something wonderful as the centerpiece: on Tuesdays, it's a neat square of *laxpudding*, a gratin layered with sliced potato, onion, and gravlax, finished with brown butter and shaved horseradish. The smorgasbord plate is *hygge*, too, an array of treats including Swedish meatballs, two types of herring, a triangle of Priest XO cheese, and a ramekin of "Jansson's temptation," a casserole of shredded potato and marinated sprats, sealed with crispy bread crumbs.

For dessert, the waffle-maker is employed again: a sweet version made with milk and vanilla is topped with whipped cream and raspberry jam. There are cakes, pastries, and cookies, too, such as *kolakakor*, a snappy shortbread that tastes of salted caramel, plus, in the gift shop, the next generation of Swedish fish, in flavors like elderflower and sour blueberry and in shapes like turbot and pike. Kolsvart, the brand that makes them, in Malmö, donates part of the proceeds to promote healthy waters and fish stocks. *(Dishes $9–$29.)*

—Hannah Goldfield

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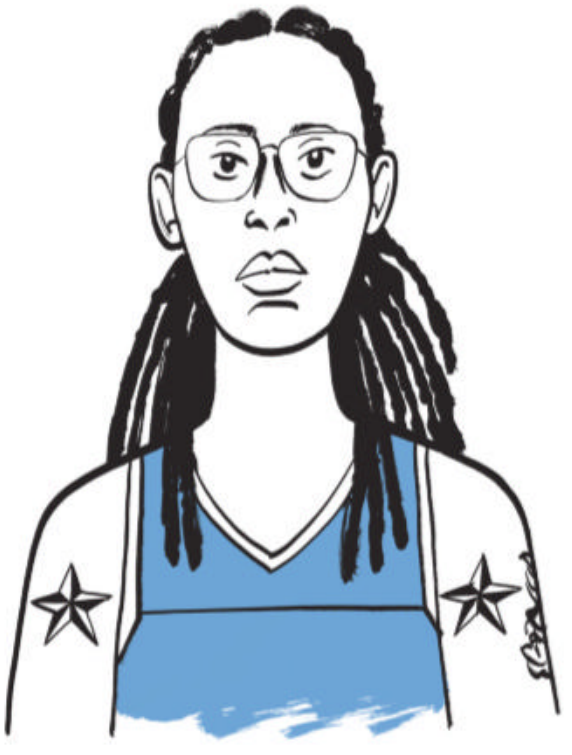
THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
RACE AND DIPLOMACY

Thirty-nine years ago this month, an African American Navy bombardier-navigator named Robert Goodman was taking part in a mission to destroy Syrian munitions in Lebanon when his plane was shot down. The pilot, Mark Lange, died, and Goodman, who was twenty-seven, suffered fractured ribs and other injuries. Syrian soldiers found him and took him to a military compound in Damascus. His capture immediately provoked a complex international standoff. The Syrian government viewed him as a prisoner of war and said that he would not be released until the United States withdrew its forces from Lebanon. (Hundreds of Americans were stationed there, as part of a multinational force deployed to stabilize the region.) The incident presented a dilemma for the Reagan Administration, which had come to power in part by attacking President Jimmy Carter's failed efforts to release fifty-two American hostages held in Iran. The White House's inability to negotiate Goodman's release also fostered an impression that Ronald Reagan, who had a long record of antipathy toward civil-rights causes, was unconcerned about a Black P.O.W. As the civil-rights leader Jesse Jackson saw it, according to his biographer, Marshall Frady, Reagan's policy was in effect "just to leave Goodman there to rot."

Later that December, in an effort to secure Goodman's freedom, Jackson himself left for Syria with a sprawling retinue that included his personal physician, a number of reporters, and the Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan. After three days of negotiations, the Syrian President, Hafez al-Assad, agreed to release Goodman, as an act of good will. But, despite that triumph, Frady wrote, Jackson returned home to a cascade of criticism. Reagan invited Goodman, Jackson, and their families to the White House, but an Administration official reportedly said that Assad had released Goodman to Jackson mostly to embarrass Reagan—a possibility that likely did not escape Jackson, who made his first Presidential run the next year.

The Goodman case highlights both the potential of citizen diplomacy and the complications that race can impose on foreign relations. The latter issue came to the fore again on December 8th, when Brittney Griner, an American basketball player and two-time Olympic gold medallist, who had been held in Russian custody for nearly ten months, on drug-possession charges, walked across an airport tarmac in Abu Dhabi, as part of an exchange that also freed Viktor Bout, a notorious Russian arms dealer serving a twenty-five-year prison sentence in the United States. As with Goodman's case, some activists had feared that, in the midst of a foreign conflict, Griner's identity—she is Black and queer—would make her a low priority for U.S. diplomatic efforts. The circumstances, of course, are very different: many African Americans viewed Reagan with suspicion, whereas support from Black voters was key to Joe Biden's election. But La-Tosha Brown, a founder of Black Voters Matter, a group that has been key to recent Democratic victories in Georgia, echoed Jackson when she told NBC News that, absent efforts to keep Griner's name in the news, she might "rot in jail." And, as with the Goodman case, Griner's release inspired a tide of criticism—from Republicans, at least.



Donald Trump, Jr., denounced Griner as "awful" and "America hating"—an apparent reference to the fact that in 2020, following the deaths of several African Americans at the hands of police, Griner, like many other athletes, had protested the playing of the national anthem at games. Trump, Sr., who later said that his Administration had refused to swap Bout to secure the release of Paul Whelan—a former marine who, since 2018, has been held in a Russian prison on espionage charges, which he denies—called the deal "a stupid and unpatriotic embarrassment." Representative Kevin McCarthy, of California, who has been struggling to wrangle his colleagues' votes to become the Speaker

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA; ABOVE: JOOHEE YOON

of the House, dismissed Biden's deal as "a gift to Vladimir Putin."

The main theme of the Republican criticism was a supposed weakness in releasing an international war criminal to bring Griner home. Making this argument required a profound tolerance for hypocrisy, given that those huffing about the necessity of keeping an arms dealer in prison belong to a party that has made access to firearms so obscenely sacrosanct that guns have become the leading cause of death for American children. Yet there was an obvious asymmetry in the scene in Abu Dhabi, as the thirty-two-year-old Olympian ambled past the fifty-five-year-old arms trafficker. They had both been convicted of violating laws, but only one of those convictions had a body count attached to it.

By comparison, the U.S. brokered a deal with Russia in April that freed Trevor Reed, a former marine serving nine years on charges of endangering a Russian police officer during an altercation—charges he denied—in exchange for Konstantin Yaroshenko, a Russian pilot serving twenty years on charges related to attempts to smuggle cocaine into the U.S. Those offenses were not equivalent (the Biden team was acting in part on reports of Reed's declining health), but the deal was not nearly as lopsided as trading a man known as the Merchant of Death for a basketball player who said that she had unintentionally carried a vape cartridge with hash oil in her luggage.

So the exchange was a victory for Griner, her family, and her supporters, but also, to a significant degree, for Putin, who, amid his blunders in Ukraine, can placate his nationalist critics by proclaiming that he played hardball with the U.S. During a press conference after Griner's release, the White House press secretary, Karine Jean-Pierre, confirmed the Russian intransigence, saying that American negotiators had not been able to secure the release of Whelan because "the choice became to either bring Brittney home or no one." Putin, having been shaped by a Cold War-era K.G.B. that specialized in manipulating U.S. racial tensions, was almost certainly aware that a perception that Griner might receive insufficient attention could be used to his advantage. The activism that resulted from that perception no doubt helped push the Biden Administration to make a deal rather than to risk repeating the miscalculations of the Reagan Administration.

Still, the Griner affair may yet reiterate a crucial lesson of December, 1983—that inequality, or even the appearance of inequality, is not only a liability at home but an impediment in foreign affairs. The irony is that Putin, in the most cynical way possible, has demonstrated that Black lives really do matter, by highlighting just how much you can achieve by placing one in jeopardy.

—Jelani Cobb

ASTRAL PLANE DEPT.

STARSTRUCK



The astrologer Susan Miller perched on a wooden cube in the basement of what used to be Barneys. "I'm going to start a museum for taxpayers," she said, "and I'm going to be the blockbuster exhibit." There's no truth to the rumors that Apple partially owns Astrology Zone, the Web site that Miller founded in 1995, where her monthly horoscopes draw 1.3 million unique readers. The I.R.S. has audited her seven times, she said, without finding a single error.

Miller was at the Madison Avenue space to give a talk, gratis, in connection with Louis Vuitton, which has installed a pop-up display called "200 Trunks, 200 Visionaries." The company asked two hundred somebodies (including Miller) to design a trunk to mark the malletier's second centennial. Archivists passed her Vuitton's birth information, and she drew up his chart. "If I was in the hospital when Louis was born," she said, "I would tell his mother that her son would be very successful." The Miller trunk looks like an haute school science project: space-blue on the exterior, with a circular aperture that reveals the inside, where orbs representing Saturn and Pluto hang. Saturn, she said, "is very similar to Balanchine. He was a hard teacher, but the things you get with Saturn you never lose."

Miller does not disclose her age or birth date. (A fair guess would place it sometime in the nineteen-fifties.) Readers would have a field day if they could draw up her astrological chart, she explained. The reticence about her age enhances her Upper East Side grand-dame élan. The spirit of Barneys was alive in her look: flesh-toned flats, a rose-printed sheath, drop earrings peeking through her blowout. "I love Dolce & Gabbana," she gushed, pronouncing it "*dol-say*," thumbing a crucifix hanging from a necklace. Celebrities (Pharrell, Kerry Washington) are her friends. Machers in fashion come to her for counsel. "Cynthia Rowley, she had a bad date for the fashion show. Mercury's turning, too many models cancelling," Miller recalled. Rowley took her advice and changed the date. Miller also helps novelists flesh out characters when they get stuck.

Her verbosity is legend. Each horoscope tends to run more than three thousand words. She writes from her couch or in bed, with "Law & Order" playing in the background. An unspecified illness, at fourteen, kept her in bed for a year. She lifted the hem of her dress to reveal a scar on her leg. When her health problems cause her to be late with her horoscopes, which happens often, her followers can get miffed. "I've had forty blood transfusions," she said.

Her mother, whom readers know as "Little Mom," practiced the astrologi-



Susan Miller

cal arts. She told her daughter that she would be a writer, and that, around the age of forty, she'd begin working with a new form of technology. Susie chased her mother around as she vacuumed, hungry for more information. "She said there are little invisible dots or lines that go through the air that have something to do with your writing," Miller recalled. "She predicted the Internet!"

As a young woman, Miller abandoned her dream of becoming a photographer, and became a photo agent instead. Directed in part by Little Mom, she studied astrology, and became accredited in 1995. She recently launched an online community called Susan Miller's Stars. To become a member, you must buy one of her N.F.T.s, for $199.99. She also sells a Cosmic Beauty box of "mostly full-size products," for forty dollars.

Once thirty-odd people had assembled, Miller picked up a microphone and asked, "Did anybody have a terrible day today?"

A security guard nodded, as did some audience members. "First of all, this isn't a girl thing," Miller said. She talked about a meeting she'd had with Time Inc., in the nineties, and bristling at an executive's suggestion that she write her horoscopes with women in mind. In ancient Mesopotamia, she said, male leaders consulted astrologers to protect their citizens. "I'm friends with a mathematician from Harvard," she said.

Returning to her question, she said, "I had a very hard day. Someone at the company left and still has the company computer. We haven't backed it up yet."

A Capricorn raised her hand: "My partner told me he may be moving to London."

"I think moving to London is exciting," Miller replied. The Capricorn looked chastened by Miller's optimism. An Aquarius with a topknot raised a hand: "My best friend of eight years, we just had our first fight."

Miller asked where she was from. "Kazakhstan? You're the first person I ever met from your country." She suggested that the friends go on a vacation to "a happy place, like New Orleans." She advised a lovelorn Sagittarian publisher to "get away from your computer and socialize until the month of May." To a Libra in hot pink who needed real-estate advice: "Don't close until January 18th."

Miller was surprised that not many Pisces had shown up. She says that they're generous. "Barron Trump is a Pisces," she said. "He's going to give away his father's money to philanthropy."

—*Doreen St. Félix*

DEPT. OF FATTY MEATS
A SIDE OF BORSCHT BELT



A lot of funny things have happened at Katz's Delicatessen since it opened, in 1888—most famously, the "I'll have what she's having" scene in "When Harry Met Sally." But, until last month, the Lower East Side shrine to pastrami had not hosted a comedy show. The milestone came courtesy of David Levine and Ethan Mansoor, two twenty-four-year-olds who are determined to produce standup comedy in inhospitable environments, akin to planting tulip bulbs in the Sahara. In the past twenty months, they've put on pop-up shows in a laundromat, a flower shop, and a tattoo parlor. But Katz's, they said recently, was their Madison Square Garden.

"We asked everybody, 'Has there ever been a comedy show here before?' " Levine said, over a corned-beef sandwich at Katz's, the day before the big event. He and Mansoor, both native Manhattanites, met at a chess tournament in kindergarten. Levine got into comedy his senior year of high school; Mansoor went into finance. Early last year, with comedy clubs closed because of the pandemic, Mansoor saw a socially distanced set in a hotel lobby and realized that comics were desperate for gigs. Levine knew a trainer who was about to open his own gym right before the shutdown. "I said to him, 'Hey, before you put equipment in there, can we do a grand opening?' " Levine recalled. They borrowed folding chairs and held their first show for some thirty people.

Not long afterward, Mansoor persuaded the manager of La La Laundry, in Alphabet City, to let them do a show. "It was, like, sixty-five kids. People were sitting on washing machines," he said. "We were wearing robes and pajamas,



"Mrs. Ritterhouse hit high C and the cat hit the wall."

like it was laundry day." Calling themselves Underground Overground, they charmed their way into a music studio in Chelsea, a hair salon in NoHo. They spread the word through Instagram and amassed an eleven-thousand-person waiting list. "I would reach out to TikTok-ers, comp them two seats," Levine said. There were logistical hurdles. A mochi store was so cramped that people had to climb over chairs to get to their own. At a leather shop on Orchard Street, they worried about beer getting spilled on expensive coats, but the problem wound up being a door guy who got blackout drunk. At Economy Candy, they cleared away heavy metal racks to squeeze in fifty-five spectators. "The comedians performed right in front of the jelly beans," Mansoor said.

After the leather-shop show, the duo celebrated at Katz's and started dreaming big. The meat slicers directed them to the head of catering, who eventually led them to David Manheim, who handles the deli's strategic partnerships. Katz's had hosted events, such as a cast party for the movie "Uncut Gems," but never standup. "I was, like, They're fucking idiots, but they're passionate," Manheim recalled at lunch. He was joined by Katz's owner, Jake Dell, who inherited the place from his father and grandfather. (He had his bar mitzvah there, in 2000.) "I was a little skeptical at first, I'm not going to lie," Dell said. "But then I met these two knuckleheads, and it all made sense." Katz's has had plenty of comedian regulars (Jackie Mason, Jim Gaffigan), he reasoned. "If this store had an identity, it would be Don Rickles."

The next night, around nine, Mansoor and Levine returned with an army of volunteers. They had an hour to convert the venue, after shooing out the last of the customers. "Someone got very nasty with me—'I came all the way from Houston to eat here!'" Levine said. He was nervous but prepared: "We all did guided meditation tonight."

After the deli staff mopped the floors, Mansoor and Levine set up sound equipment and arranged the chairs. "Think Spirit Airlines," Mansoor told a friend who was spacing out the rows. They placed a small, semicircular stage in front of a wall of celebrity-patron photos (Abe Vigoda, Dennis Franz) and set out paper bags of fries at the entrance; the hundred-and-fifty-dollar tickets included drinks and a post-show sandwich. With a restless line outside, Levine gathered the volunteers for shots of tequila. "Let's bring the energy," he told them. "I love you all."

The lineup of seven comics included Dave Attell and the "Daily Show" correspondent Roy Wood, Jr. Chris Turner, a British comedian who does freestyle rap, had performed at a bunch of Underground Overground shows. "You have the frisson of the unexpected," he said. Just after ten, the producers welcomed the young crowd, which included business owners they had tried to woo. (Mansoor: "The guys from Down Dog yoga are somewhere here!") One comic, Jessica Kirson, complained onstage, "I got here, like, fucking twenty minutes ago, and my sandwich hasn't come out." Afterward, everyone lined up for pastrami. Mansoor was elated, having conquered his Madison Square Garden. "Now we gotta be like Billy Joel and keep doing it," he said. "We have our eyes on the Intrepid."

—Michael Schulman

THE BOARDS
MIXED MEDIA



Alex Ross Perry, the filmmaker, was pacing the stage of the Sheen Center, on Bleecker Street, the other day, flanked by Broadway actors. He was directing a workshop of "Slanted! Enchanted!: A Pavement Musical," about the Stockton slacker-rock quintet. Perry created the piece to feature in a screwball movie about the band which he is also directing, and which he has described variously as "a semiotic experiment" and "like throwing spaghetti at the wall." The scene at hand was the show's climactic finale, inspired by the medley that concludes "The Phantom of the Opera." He was unhappy with the a-cappella coda. "I need it to be like 'My World,'" he explained. (He was referring to the final song on the Guns N' Roses album "Use Your Illusion II," in which Axl Rose pivoted the band to a more industrial sound.) The cast looked at him blankly.



Alex Ross Perry

Michael Esper, the show's flannel-shirted lead, who'd starred in Green Day's "American Idiot" on Broadway, was the only one who got Perry's reference. "We should rap?" he said.

"This is not a joke," Perry said, and asked the composer Dabney Morris to play the Guns N' Roses track.

"I feel like I'm being punked right now," Morris muttered, as he cued it up.

On the set, which was bedecked in Pavement totems (nineties tour posters, cutout stars, grimy pink bathtub tile, a fire-breathing dragon, llamas), the cast and crew listened as Rose's guttural screeching rattled the proscenium. Someone interrupted to mention a burning smell onstage. "That's just dust on the lights," a production designer yelled from the mezzanine.

It was the company's second full run-through at the Sheen Center, and the next day they would present the show to an audience. When tickets for the two performances went on sale, buyer interest crashed the Web site.

"No one knows what they're doing," Perry, who is thirty-eight, said. He doesn't play an instrument, and he had just learned the difference between upstage and downstage the previous week. The closest thing to a musical that he'd directed was his last film, "Her Smell," which starred Elisabeth Moss as a self-destructive musician. "But we do have two leads from Broadway rock musicals who can tell us what we're doing wrong"—besides Esper, there was Kathryn Gallagher, from Alanis Morissette's

"Jagged Little Pill." The rest of the cast was more familiar with Andrew Lloyd Webber than with Pavement.

Three years ago, Pavement's label, Matador Records, approached Perry about a collaboration. The band wanted a movie, but Stephen Malkmus, the front man, said he wasn't interested in hiring a documentary filmmaker. He wanted to hire a screenwriter. But he didn't want a screenplay. "No one knew what that meant," Perry said.

Perry resolved to approach the impossible assignment from impossible angles: "Legitimate, ridiculous, real, fake, idiotic, cliché, illogical," he said, and offered a Bob Dylan analogy. "You take the Todd Haynes Bob Dylan movie, the Scorsese documentary, the Pennebaker documentary, and the movie Dylan himself directed that everyone hates"—"Renaldo and Clara"—"and put them all in a blender." The resulting film will be a mélange of bio-pic, museum footage, bits of "Slanted! Enchanted!," tour doc, farce, and paean. Perry formulated his own thesis: What if Pavement, the Pynchonian rock group that never had a platinum record, was the most important band of all time?

Watching his actors rehearse an elaborate tap number in Santa costumes, Perry said, "Malkmus is neck and neck with Sondheim in terms of his narrative storytelling, his sense of allusion and wordplay." ("Maybe someone's going to save me / my heart is made of gravy.")

For a scene set to "Date with IKEA," Esper was being wheeled around in a blue Toys R Us shopping cart.

"Michael looks extremely displeased," Perry said. He asked the actor how he felt about being pushed in the cart.

Esper responded enthusiastically. He paused and said, "And then I'm, like, Uh-oh, I'm in an IKEA coffin."

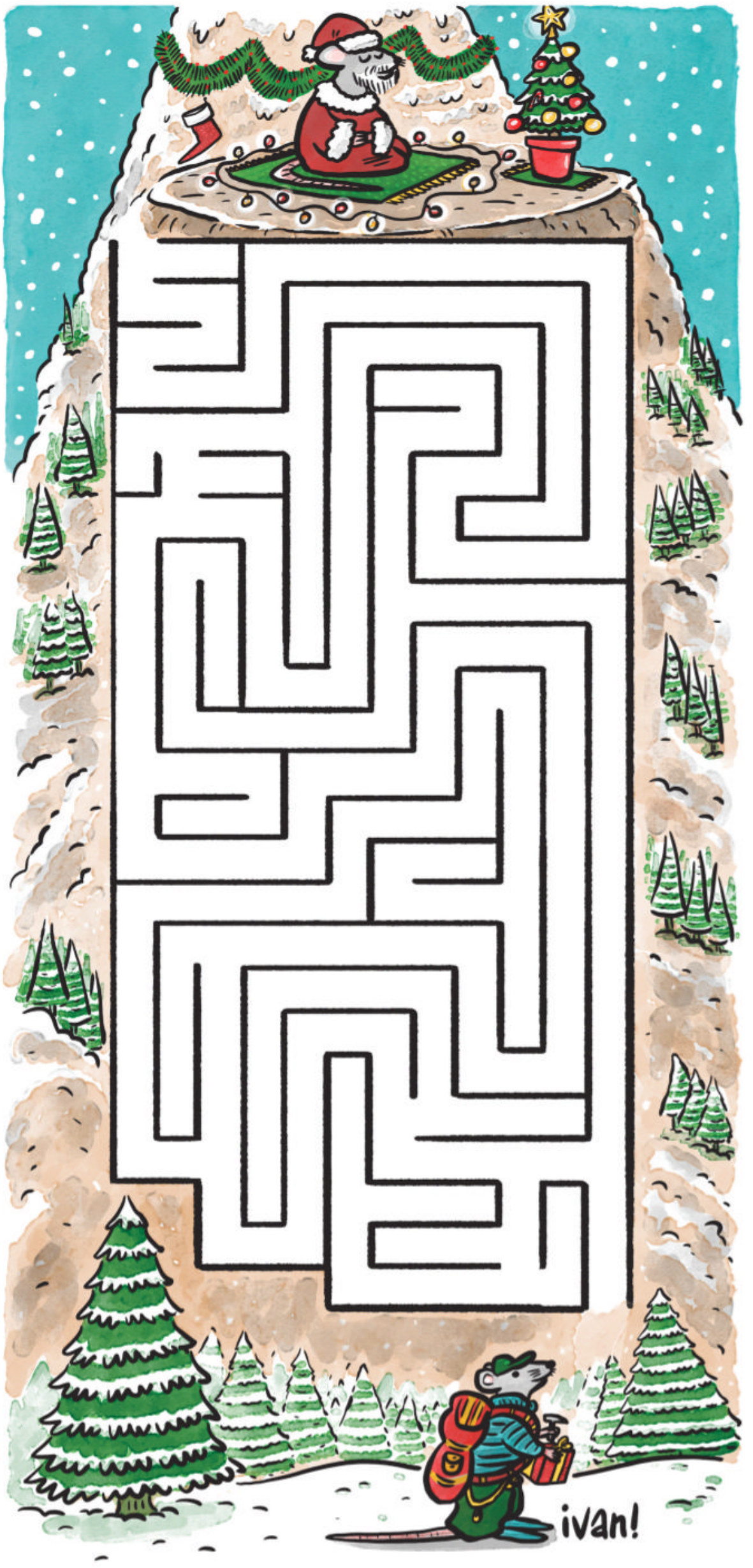
"We're wondering, is it better if you're out of the cart? If you're pushing the cart?" Perry asked. "Or if we're maybe overthinking the cart?"

"It's a long time in the cart," Esper said.

On opening night, the cart carried Esper triumphantly into the spotlight. During the bows, people threw bouquets and the audience gave a standing ovation. Perry looked contented. "The ultimate joke is that it's actually good," he said.

—Hannah Seidlitz

SKETCHPAD BY IVAN EHLERS



ROZ AND EMILY EAT THEIR WAY THROUGH MIDWOOD

BY ROZ CHAST AND EMILY FLAKE





















We spend a long time in a store that sells candles, crystals, oils, and special rocks. A group of teen-age girls comes in.

Oh, my GAWD! Everything is so bee-you-ti-ful!

My birthday is coming up, so...

I must buy it all.

They are loud and energetic. We are invisible and can observe unnoticed.

WHEN WE SEE A RESTAURANT CALLED MOLDOVA, WE CANNOT HELP OURSELVES.

POLENTA BALLS

FETA CHEESE

A THIN SOUR CREAM

On the wall hangs a tapestry of Stephen the Great, one of the most beloved rulers of Moldavia.

ALL I KNOW IS THAT HIS MUSTACHE IS A 10/10.

WE ARE BOTH EXCITED ABOUT THE DRUGSTORES THAT SELL EVERYTHING INCLUDING SETS OF CHINA, AND SHOES.

АПТЕКА

I CAN BUY SHAMPOO AND SMOKED FISH?! THIS IS LITERALLY A PERFECT STORE.

...and, once again, there is interesting food.

A MILLION KINDS OF HALVAH

STURGEON-HEAD SOUP

Sturgeon Head Soup

UNCLE VANYA PICKLES

This is humiliating.

UNCLE VANYA

OUR HAUL!

AN OLD MAN ONCE TOLD ME HALVAH WAS GOOD FOR ME AND I WILL NOT HEAR ARGUMENTS TO THE CONTRARY.

THIS DOES NOT COUNT AS A BOOSTER.

I'VE ONLY EVER HAD CHEESE CURDS IN POUTINE AND I AM EXCITED TO BRANCH OUT.

SMOKED SPRATS IN OIL

OOOH, SHINY!

Evil-eye pin

I WILL NEVER NOT BUY TINY COOKIES.

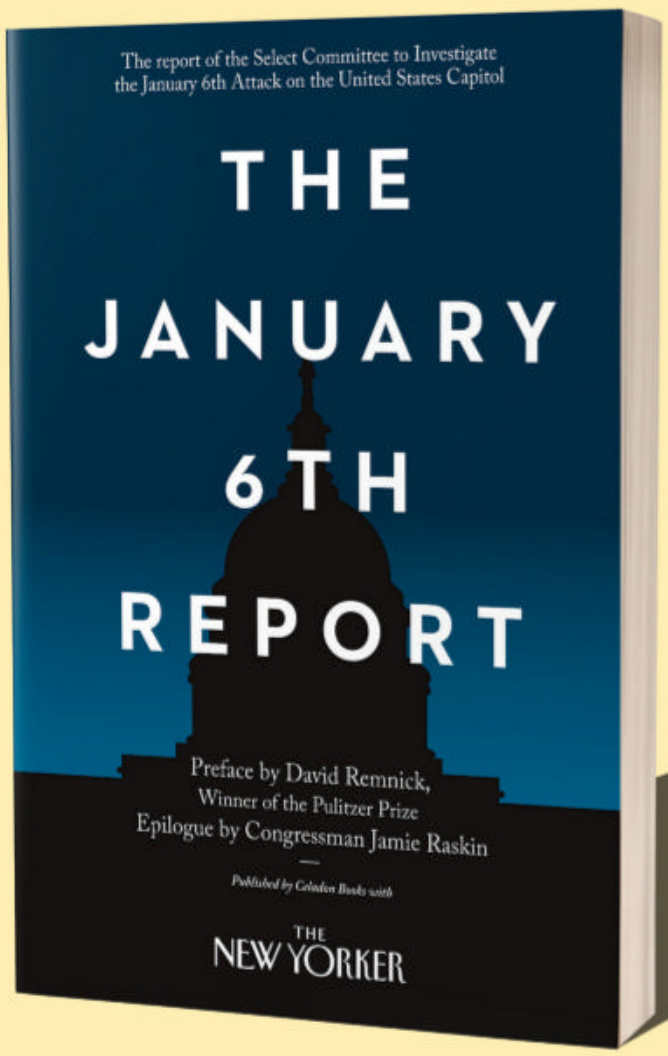
Special rock: "MARIAM"*

*A.K.A. "calligraphy stone"

NEXT TIME, WE CAN GO TO MY HOME TOWN AND EAT CONVENIENCE-STORE GRINDERS.

I'm in!

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R.S.V.P. REGRETS GENERATOR

BY JIJI LEE



Dear _____ (NAME OF FRIEND),

Thank you so much for inviting me to your wedding. I was incredibly touched to be included. Regretfully, I am unable to attend, owing to a _____ (TYPE OF EVENT) in _____ (GEGRAPHIC LOCATION).

Congrats, and hope to celebrate with you soon!



Dear _____ (NAME OF FRIEND),

I was reflecting on my previous e-mail while taking a long, hot _____ (NOUN). I'm sure you've been wondering why I couldn't cancel my _____ (SMALL WHITE LIE) to attend your special day. I wanted to explain, and tell you about my _____ (MEDIUM WHITE LIE).

Last month, I was _____ (PARTICIPLE) in Prospect Park, listening to _____ (SLIGHTLY PROBLEMATIC PODCAST TITLE), when suddenly I crashed into a group of _____ (PLURAL NOUN). Don't worry, I'm totally fine, but I did end up injuring my _____ (BODY PART). So now not only do I have to deal with _____ (SMALL WHITE LIE) but I also have to get surgery. _____ (INTERJECTION)!

I'm _____ (ADVERB), _____ (ADVERB) sorry I can't attend. Let's do a _____ (LOGISTICAL NIGHTMARE) soon!

Hey, _____ (OVERLY FAMILIAR GREETING),

I just realized that your fiancé is a _____ (BODY PART) surgeon, who might realize that surgery is unnecessary. Which is why I feel the need to share my _____ (POINT-OF-NO-RETURN LIE).

I haven't been feeling well recently, and I think it has something to do with all the _____ (NOUN) I've been eating. I wouldn't want you to worry about me and my _____ (ADJECTIVE) illness on your big day.

On top of everything else, my father is travelling all the way from _____ (NEARBY GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION), and he's arriving the week of your wedding. He's been in poor health. (I think it also has something to do with all the _____ (NOUN) he's been eating.) So unfortunately I must decline.

I am a _____ (ADVERB) _____ (ADJECTIVE) _____ (NOUN) _____ (CONJUNCTION) _____ (NOUN)!

Sending my warmest wishes.





Hey, _____ (OVERLY FAMILIAR GREETING),

Today's the big day! Even though I can't attend, I look forward to seeing you and _____ (MISSPELLING OF COMMON NAME) soon. In fact, keep an eye out for an invitation to my son's _____ (WOODWIND INSTRUMENT) recital. It will be a chance to enjoy _____ (OBSCENELY HIGH NUMBER) hours of _____ (ADJECTIVE) music.

Let me know if you can make it!

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

CHOOSING HORSES BY LISA HANAWALT





I love children, but maybe I don't need my own. I'm satisfied by interacting with my friends' kids (and trying to convert them into horse-lovers).

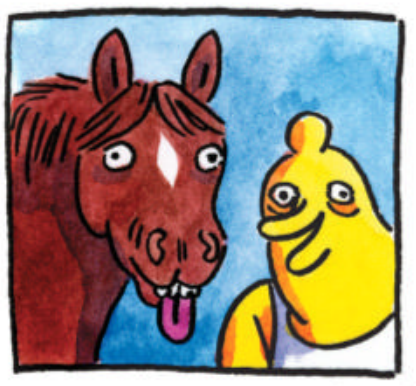


But I worry. Will this become SAD at some point? While everyone else watches their babies grow up, will I seem like a stunted weirdo?


HAPPY BIRTHDAY!


WOW, MAGNA CUM LAUDE!


MY BABY'S WEDDING DAY!


TODAY MR. NOODLES SPOOKED AT A TREE AND ALMOST BRAINED US BOTH!

So I keep my eye out for positive models of childless adulthood, to reassure myself that I'll continue to be happy with my choice.

One of my favorite people I've met at the barn is a woman named Molly. She's brave, thoughtful, and also very funny.



Molly owned a handsome bay gelding named Durango.

He and my horse, Juni, loved to groom each other.

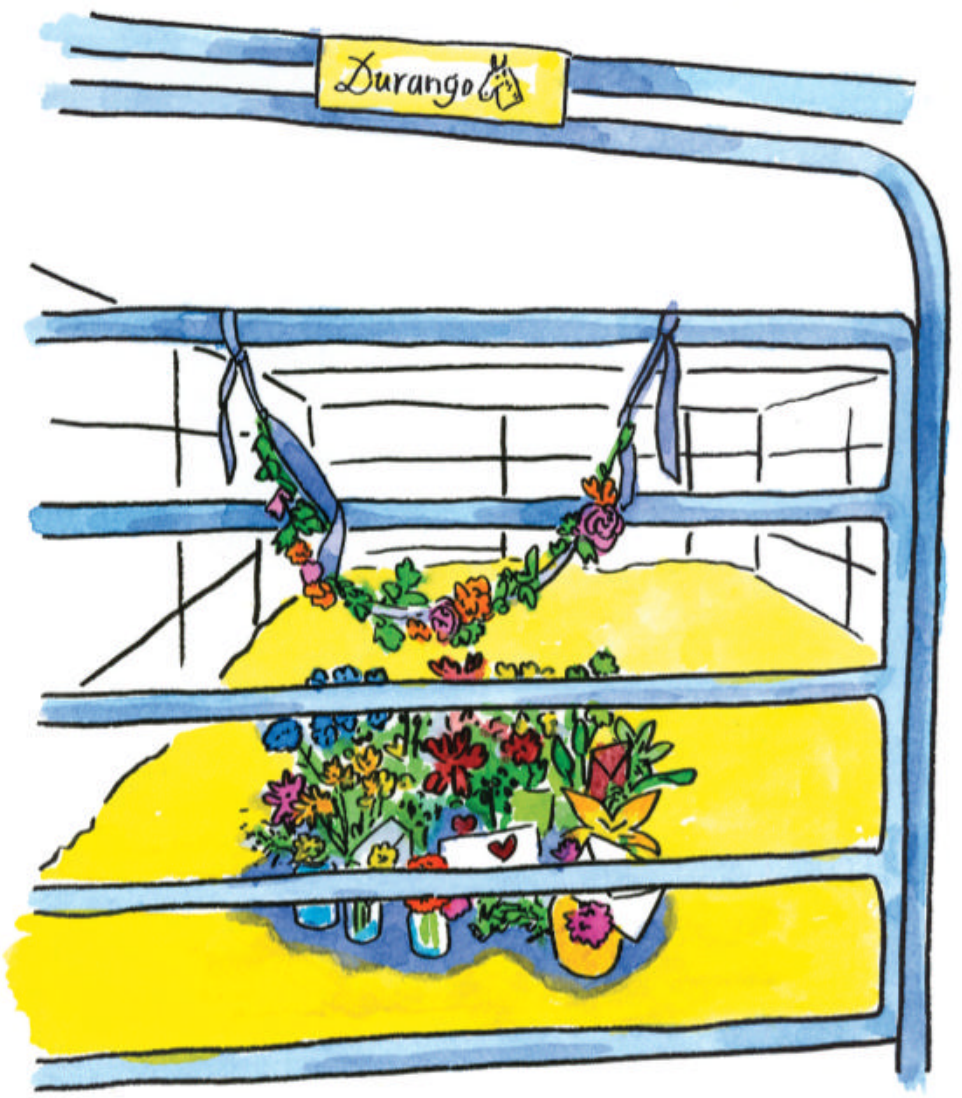


Last year, Molly had to make the tough decision to put him down.

She had a little ceremony so we could all say goodbye.

It was a dignified sendoff for a beloved animal.





When a horse passes away, everyone at the barn fills the empty stall with flowers.

Losing a horse is intense. It's the loss not only of a pet, a partner, and a best friend but also of one's daily routine of going to the barn and connecting with this special place and community.

While caring for a horse is different from raising a child, horses can fill up your life in similar ways, if you let them. Their loss leaves a huge hole.

One time, when we were out riding, Molly expressed some ambivalence about never having children of her own.

YOU JUST WANT SOMETHING TO LOVE AND NURTURE.

SHRUG

I realized that my goal of feeling ZERO regret about any of my life choices might be unrealistic.

I try to comfort myself by pretending that the door will stay open.

We could always adopt later!

Or freeze eggs?

Yuck! I assume mine are all rotten!

THAT'S A FAMOUSLY SIMPLE PROCESS, RIGHT?

I joke about choosing animals instead of babies, but how will it feel in a few years, when they die?

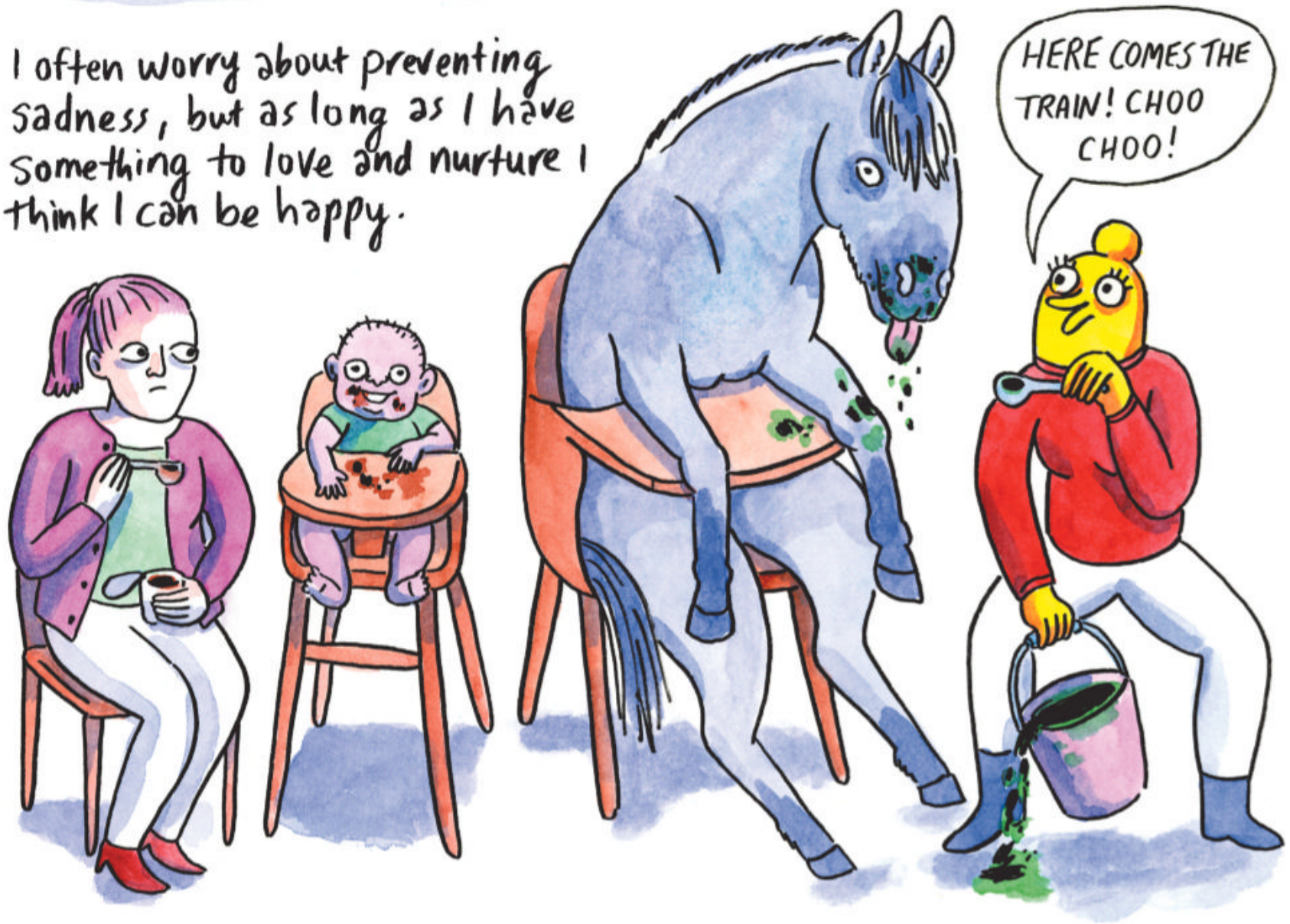
I expect you guys to break the record for the WORLD'S OLDEST HORSE AND DOG and also possibly be the first horse and dog to LIVE FOREVER, O.K.?!

Choosing animals instead of babies means that I'll be perpetually losing my loved ones. But having kids isn't insurance against loneliness. At least my animal companions won't grow up and move away.





I often worry about preventing sadness, but as long as I have something to love and nurture I think I can be happy.



NO LIMITS

What Kevin McCarthy will do to gain power.

BY JONATHAN BLITZER

On the afternoon of November 15th, a congressional intern in a suit and tie sprinted down a wing of the Capitol carrying a cardboard box with a slit on the top for paper ballots, then disappeared into an auditorium. Inside, the House Republican conference was electing its new leaders. This was the first of two votes. The second will come on January 3rd, on the floor of the House of Representatives. There still wasn't a clear majority for either party, but it was likely that the Republicans would flip the chamber, and the winner of the voting would become the front-runner for Speaker, second in line for the Presidency. Dozens of journalists sat on the floor outside, preparing for a long afternoon. Two more staffers carrying ballot boxes ran past. "Stop the steal!" a reporter shouted after them.

Four hours later, Kevin McCarthy, a fifty-seven-year-old congressman from Bakersfield, California, emerged with an exaggerated smile. McCarthy, who has more than a decade of service in the G.O.P. leadership, has feathery gray hair and was wearing a tailored navy suit. He had received a hundred and eighty-eight votes, about eighty-five per cent of the conference. "I'm proud to announce the era of one-party Democrat rule in Washington is over," he said.

For the past two years, his colleagues had been calling McCarthy the "Speaker-in-waiting." "Nobody knows the inside game better," Paul Ryan, the previous Republican Speaker, has said. When Kevin Spacey was preparing for the role of Frank Underwood, the Machiavellian schemer on the Netflix show "House of Cards," he shadowed McCarthy. (McCarthy joked that he agreed to it after learning that Underwood would be a Democrat.) Outgoing and personable, he is intensely social, "a happy warrior," in the words of his friend the pollster Frank Luntz. Patrick McHenry, a House Republican and a confidant of McCarthy's, once asked, "If Kevin McCarthy is alone, does he exist?" From the start of his career, in the late nineteen-eighties, as a congressional staffer at a district office in the Central Valley of California, his ambition was to reach the House; once he arrived in Washington, it was to become Speaker. The House is where he's most himself. He likens spending time there to "having breakfast at a truck stop."

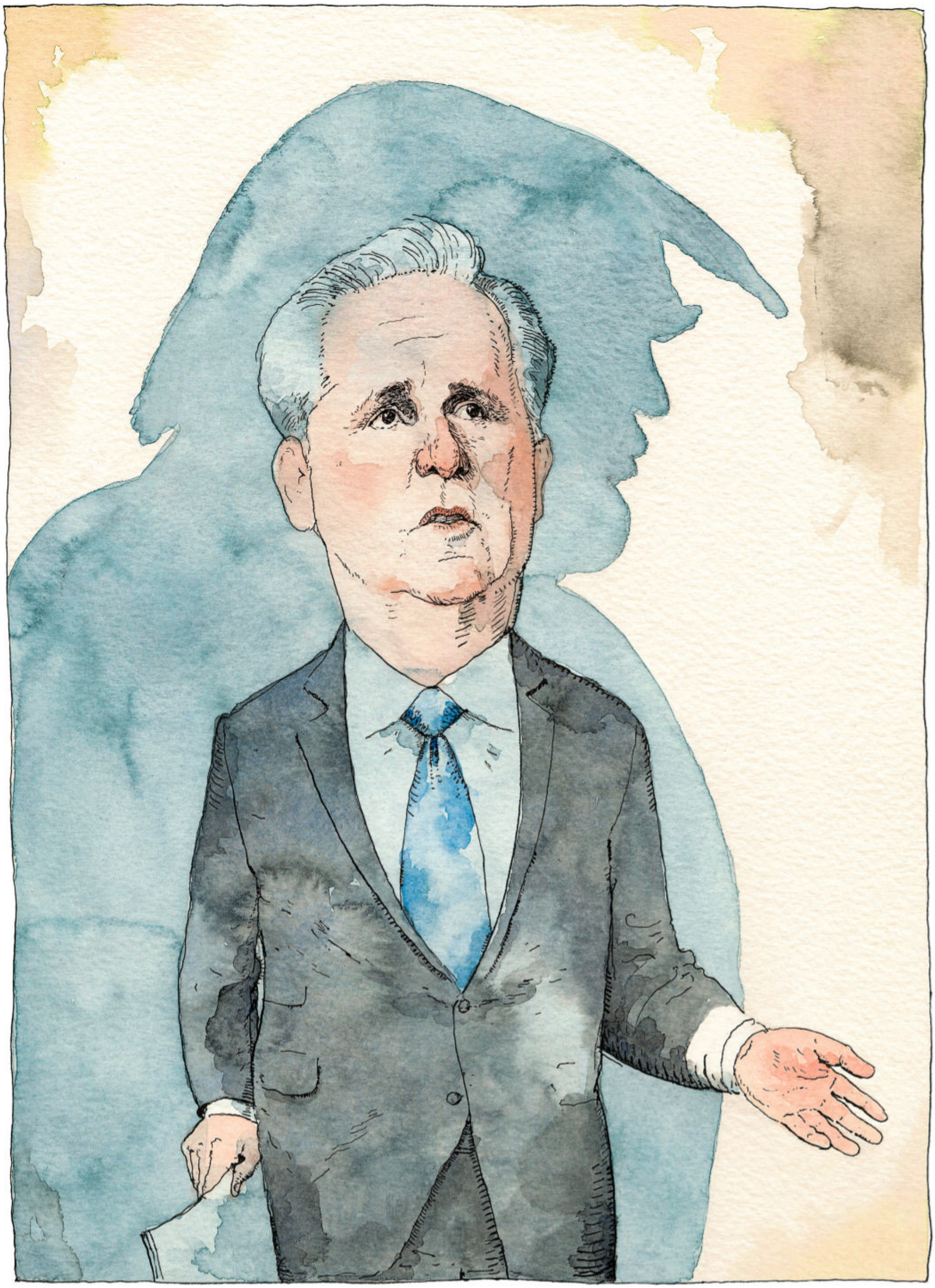
"Everyone knows the joke," a former House staffer told me. "All Kevin McCarthy cares about is Kevin McCarthy. He is the man for this moment." His main strength has always been his malleability. There are no red lines, core policy beliefs, or inviolable principles, just a willingness to adapt to the moods of his conference.

It is perhaps for this reason that no one in the Republican leadership has tied himself to Donald Trump more closely than McCarthy. In 2016, McCarthy supported Trump for President unwaveringly, even when the rest of the Party establishment had doubts. On October 8th, the night before the first Presidential debate, he joined a conference call with prominent Party members. The "Access Hollywood" tape had just leaked, and the Republicans were discussing whether to pull their endorsements. "What the hell are you guys doing?" McCarthy asked, according to an account in "The Hill to Die On," by Jake Sherman and Anna Palmer. "How can you do this and hurt our nominee?" Soon, he and Trump were speaking multiple times a day. Trump called him "my Kevin."

Two years later, after the Democrats took the House, forcing the Republicans into the minority, McCarthy became the Party's leader, one of its youngest ever. In 2020, though the G.O.P. lost the Presidency and the Senate, House Republicans picked up fourteen seats. Very few Republicans disputed Trump's claims about the election having been stolen; the majority stayed silent. McCarthy went on Fox News to say, "President Trump won this election. . . . We cannot allow this to happen before our eyes." That December, when the Texas attorney general petitioned the Supreme Court to contest the results in four states, McCarthy initially declined to sign an amicus brief in support of the lawsuit, but reversed himself hours after the list of signers went public and Trump got angry; McCarthy cited a "technical glitch." On the night of January 6, 2021, after the insurrection at the Capitol, he voted against certifying the election. A week later, he voted against impeachment. "I'll take this to the grave—Kevin McCarthy is responsible for the rise of Donald Trump again," Adam Kinzinger, the outgoing Republican congressman from Illinois, told me. "He was so close to being dead."

A President's party typically suffers midterm losses in Congress; this year, the combined effect of high inflation and low approval ratings for Joe Biden led strategists to believe that Republicans could gain a twenty- to thirty-seat advantage in the House. "I look at Democrat incumbents right now," McCarthy told Punchbowl News, in October. "I think they're in denial." On Election Night, however, McCarthy was forced to delay his appearance at a victory party in Washington, emerging at two in the morning to speak to a sparse crowd.

An election that was supposed to be about Biden had turned into a referendum on Trump and G.O.P. extremism. "Kevin and Trump, they're not going to be separated by much," Fred Upton, the retiring Michigan congressman and one of ten Republicans in the House who voted to impeach



No one in the Republican leadership has tied himself more closely to Trump. Now McCarthy's bid for Speaker is in peril.

ILLUSTRATION BY BARRY BLITT



"Can Billy come outside and break some bones with us?"

• •

Trump in January, 2021, told me. "Like it or not, Trump's the face of our party right now. He's still very angry."

The Speaker's race is McCarthy's to lose, and yet he could lose it still. During the first round of voting, McCarthy's only official competitor was Andy Biggs, a legislator from Arizona, who received thirty-one votes but who vowed to fight on. Biggs is part of a far-right faction called the Freedom Caucus. The group, which has about forty members, has been a wrecking ball since its creation, in 2015, when it forced out John Boehner as Speaker and sabotaged McCarthy, who was running to replace him. Two years earlier, congresspeople who became core members of the Freedom Caucus had shut down the government and tried to force a federal default, in order to make a point about excessive federal spending. Its ranks have grown with election deniers, QAnon conspiracists, and diehard Trumpists. Sarah Longwell, a Republican strategist, told me, "The Dems' extreme people are extreme on progressive policies. The Republicans' extreme are extreme on the level of the insane taking over the asylum."

When the full election returns started to come in, later in November, the Party looked to have a razor-thin majority—five votes. Five outer-fringe Republicans immediately said that they'd block McCarthy from becoming Speaker. The Freedom Caucus wants McCarthy to make changes to House procedure that will allow them to obstruct future legislation. Even if McCarthy concedes, members of the Freedom Caucus profit from attacking him: the far right is no longer beholden to the Party for money, since it raises its own online by going nuclear. All of them represent increasingly conservative districts where their constituents don't want them to compromise. Although McCarthy has done more than any other top Republican to accommodate Trumpism, he is still the establishment. "The thin ice that he's been on is even thinner than he thought," Norman Ornstein, of the American Enterprise Institute, told me. "When your margin is small, the problem is you're held hostage."

In front of the cameras last month in the Capitol, McCarthy put on a brave face. "We got to listen to everyone in our conference," he said. "I respect each and every one. I respect them equally." He continued, "One thing I've always learned—they don't hand gavels out in small, medium, and large."

A few minutes later, the size of McCarthy's gavel was on display, whether he accepted it or not. Marjorie Taylor Greene—the Georgia congresswoman, QAnon true believer, and fanatical Trump acolyte—stepped up to the microphones in tan heels and a black flared coat. Last year, after journalists uncovered a string of racist and anti-Semitic comments that Greene had made, the House stripped her of her committee assignments. (Among other things, she suggested that California wildfires were ignited by a space laser fired by the Rothschilds, the Jewish banking family.) McCarthy responded by threatening Democrats that he'd come after them once Republicans retook the majority. After Democrats sanctioned Paul Gosar, of Arizona, for tweeting a video depicting him killing the New York congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, McCarthy said he'd give Gosar and Greene "better" committee assignments.

The antic cast of the Republican Party makes it easy to overlook just how flexibly McCarthy negotiates and renegotiates his position. Trent Lott, the former Mississippi senator, who held top Party jobs in both chambers of Congress, used to say that he led "by being led." McCarthy has made an art of this mantra; in a world of professional survivors, he has a special talent for staying alive. "I think he's underestimated," Eric Cantor, the former Republican House Majority Leader, told me. Along with Paul Ryan and McCarthy, Cantor was a member of a photogenic triumvirate of conservative ideologues known as the Young Guns, who, in 2010, were meant to represent a new generation in Congress. Cantor aligned himself with the insurgent members of the Party, frequently at the expense of his boss, John Boehner. Still, Cantor lost a primary in the spring of 2014, to a candidate from the Tea Party. Four years later, Ryan was gone, too, a casualty of Trumpism. "Think about the transformation and what has occurred in the time that he's been in Congress," Cantor said, of McCarthy. "Any kind of criticism of him falls short in terms of recognizing the ability to keep standing and to keep going and to keep leading in this kind of environment."

For months, Greene had hinted that

she might oppose McCarthy when he ran for Speaker. At the very least, she wanted to extract something in exchange for her support, which McCarthy likely needed if he wanted to win over the Trump wing of the Party. Now she had decided to endorse McCarthy for Speaker. "He is listening to all of our voices," she told the assembled press. Many of her talking points were identical to his, down to the phrases he'd used.

As Greene finished, she said, "We have to have the gavel, because the gavel means subpoena power." G.O.P. hard-liners are pushing for two years of revanchism to set the stage for 2024: unrelenting investigations into the Biden family, inquiries into Cabinet members, threats of impeachment. These actions will probably play poorly with voters. McCarthy knows it. Yet he now has a Speaker's race to win, and a small and fractious majority to hold together. "You're not there because people see you as a tough guy or because they see you as a strategist or as brilliant," Ornstein told me. Many of McCarthy's members "are happy to have a Speaker who's this weak."

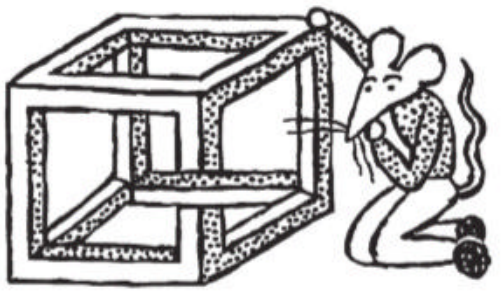
I followed Greene after her speech and asked what McCarthy had promised her. We were walking briskly in the direction of the House floor. Her press aide was filming our exchange with his phone. "I'm looking forward to serving on the Oversight Committee," she said, naming a House committee likely to lead congressional investigations into the Biden Administration. "That'll start in January."

McCarthy was one of three children born to modest, middle-class Bakersfield Democrats. His mother was a homemaker and his father was an assistant fire chief, whose job in the public sector offered generous health insurance. Kevin's brother had glaucoma and needed multiple operations before he turned two. Until the fifth grade, Kevin suffered from a speech impairment that required therapy.

Bakersfield is an oil and agriculture town, one of the reddest parts of the state; its flat, desiccated landscape, just west of the Sierra Nevada, more closely resembles that of the Oklahoma plains or the scrublands of West Texas than the rest of California. As a teen-ager, McCarthy was affable and athletic. At Bakersfield High School, he played tight end for the football team, the Drillers.

His political awareness began after he graduated, when he won five thousand dollars in a state lottery. It was 1984, the height of the Reagan era. McCarthy had been enrolled in community college in Bakersfield, but he dropped out, investing part of his winnings in the stock market and using the rest to open a deli he called Kevin O's. Later, he said that the experience showed him "what all small businesspeople learn: that the work is hard, the margins are thin, and the government is too often an obstacle, not an aid, to success." When he sold the business, some two years later, he used his earnings to pay for college and business school at Cal State Bakersfield, where he joined the California Young Republicans, eventually becoming the organization's chairman.

"Walking through campus, he was always chitchatting with people," Susie Aspeitia, a friend who met him in a marketing class, told me. "His personality was so inviting. Everyone knew him. And, if you didn't, before you knew it you knew him." Aspeitia, whose family is Mexican American, had grown up surrounded by Democrats but considered herself largely apolitical. McCarthy, who was dating his high-school girlfriend and future wife, Judy, brought Aspeitia and her boyfriend into the Young Republicans. "He was right there with all of us, cleaning up



glasses and dishes after events," she said. "He was the president, but it didn't feel like we were in a big political group."

It was inevitable that someone like McCarthy would find his way to the office of Representative Bill Thomas, a former political-science professor at Bakersfield College and a Republican, who entered the U.S. House in 1979. Bright and acerbic, Thomas was a dealmaker and a pragmatist with a reputation for having more enemies than friends. But he was regarded as a serious legislator in Washington, where he later became the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee and mentored Paul Ryan, Eric Cantor, and Devin Nunes, who headed the House Intelligence Committee before leaving Congress to work for Trump.

In California, where moderates and conservatives were battling for Party primacy throughout the nineties, Thomas's office was an influential hub. "The fight was usually over guns, babies, and taxes," Ray Haynes, a former Republican assemblyman and state senator, told me. "Thomas tended to take the more moderate side." His chief of staff, Cathy Abernathy, turned McCarthy down when he applied for a position in Washington, in 1987, but she gave him a chance as an unpaid intern in the district office. He was twenty-two. Within three months, she told me, "I had to hire an intern to be his intern."

In October, Abernathy and I met for French toast at Pappy's, a diner in Bakersfield with an oil theme—hard hats, gas pumps, miniature rigs. On the wall behind her, photographs of George W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, and John Wayne hung beside an antique rifle and the mounted head of a buffalo. When McCarthy worked for Thomas, his district extended from east of Bakersfield to San Luis Obispo, near the coast. McCarthy's job, Abernathy said, "was working the district": attending meetings as Thomas's emissary at local clubs, fixing problems, helping constituents. "He genuinely likes people. People like him," Abernathy said. "He wants to be your friend. If there's friction, he tries to smooth it out."

McCarthy worked for Thomas for fifteen years. During that time, he climbed the ranks of the national Young Republicans, becoming the chairman in 1999. "He was someone with that boardroom presence," Mike Madrid, who served as the political director of the California Republican Party in the late nineties, told me. "He'd walk into a meeting and the conversation would stop. He spoke for Bill Thomas. Everyone respected him."

California was in the midst of a political realignment. In 1994, Pete Wilson, the Republican governor, was trailing his Democratic challenger by double digits when he embraced an anti-immigrant ballot measure called Proposition 187, which barred undocumented immigrants from using certain public services. The

state was rapidly diversifying, and, though the passage of the proposition paid off in the short term by capitalizing on white anxiety (Wilson won reëlection), it contributed to a long Republican decline. "The California Republican Party is as conservative and white and rural as any party in the country," Madrid said. "It's seventy per cent white in a state that is thirty-five per cent white, not counting Hispanics." Thomas and McCarthy were "fierce advocates for moderating the Party" and "making it more inclusive" in order to win. "They revelled in fighting with conservatives," he said. "They knew California was not Bakersfield."

With Thomas's endorsement, McCarthy ran for the state assembly in 2002, and, when he won, his warm, conciliatory style endeared him to his new colleagues, including conservatives who distrusted his former boss. Dick Ackerman, a veteran state senator and assemblyman, took him aside to offer some friendly advice. "Kevin was using 'Bill' every other word," he said. "I told him, Kevin, half the people here hate Bill Thomas. I wouldn't use that to sell yourself."

In Sacramento, a few weeks after the election, there was an orientation for incoming members of congress. It was held at a hotel and lasted a few days. One evening, a Democrat named Fabian Núñez, who'd just been elected to a district representing Los Angeles and the San Fernando Valley, went to the bar with McCarthy. "We didn't know each other until we got elected, but we hit it off right away," Núñez told me. "Kevin says to me, 'I think I'm going to be Republican leader and you're going to be Democratic leader.' I asked him what made him think that. He said, 'Look, people gravitate toward us. People look up to us.' There was no arrogance to it. It was just an observation of someone with a real political lens."

About a year later, McCarthy ran for leader of his party in the assembly, against Ray Haynes, who was older, more experienced, and more conservative. When Haynes tried to strike a deal with McCarthy, offering to alternate in the job, McCarthy replied, "No, let's just fight." There were thirty-two members, nineteen conservatives and thirteen moderates; to win, McCarthy needed four conservatives. "He knew how to deal with them," Haynes said. Once Haynes realized that McCarthy had their votes, he withdrew his candidacy. "I was a rival, but not an enemy," he said.

In an assembly dominated by Democrats, McCarthy faced a bind. Because conservatives outnumbered moderates in the minority, there wasn't a strong appetite for compromise. Yet the Republicans lacked the power to pass legislation. Jim Brulte, who was the minority leader in the state senate at the time, told me, "When you're the minority leader in the California State Assembly, you can only lead by sheer force of personality." McCarthy distributed books (Newt Gingrich on politics), iPods, and watches; he planned Party retreats and organized weekly bipartisan basketball games at a Sacramento gym. He had presents ready for members' birthdays and their children's graduations. When Núñez, the Democrat, became the speaker of the assembly, he kept a binder with biographical information on his members. McCarthy paged through it once, while the two were chatting in the state capitol. "I have the same thing," he told Núñez. "Except I have wedding anniversaries in mine. You don't."

Three months before McCarthy took over as the Republican leader of the assembly, the Democratic governor, Gray Davis, who was almost a year into his second term, was recalled. The winner of the vote to replace him was Arnold Schwarzenegger. "All of a sudden, the government changes and all the people Kevin knows are on the executive staff," Richard Costigan, Schwarzenegger's secretary of legislative affairs, told me. "The whole field shifted with the recall." For McCarthy, a moderate Republican governor who happened to be a celebrity was a political lifeline. It helped that McCarthy was telegenic and celebrity-obsessed. Republican members used to rib him for not wearing a hat at softball games because it would mess up his hair. He also had a habit of collecting photos with celebrities on his cell phone. Schwarzenegger kept a nine-pound sword from the movie set of "Conan the Barbarian" in the governor's office; his staff was too nervous to touch it. But one day McCarthy led some constituents into the office, picked up the sword, and started waving it around. Schwarzenegger walked in on him through a back door. "Conan the Barbarian was standing next to the minority leader," Costigan said. "People wanted to be around the Governor, and Kevin helped to facilitate that."



McCarthy served as minority leader in the assembly until 2006, when Bill Thomas announced his retirement from Congress and McCarthy ran for his seat, winning it handily. By then, he'd amassed a record in the assembly of helping pass budgets and securing modest legislative concessions, which the Republicans and the Democrats I spoke to seemed to praise equally, albeit for different reasons. "The Republicans went through leaders like I go through black flat shoes," Susan Kennedy, a Democrat at the time, who served as Schwarzenegger's chief of staff, said. "Kevin was one of the only ones who knew how to find compromise and still win politically. His DNA was tactical." Dick Ackerman said that McCarthy helped "remind Schwarzenegger that he was a Republican."

Bill Thomas, who is eighty-one years old and lives in Bakersfield, is still capable of making news. Last year, a week and a half after the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, Thomas went on a local TV station to blast his longtime protégé as a hypocrite. McCarthy, he said, "built his new credentials as best he could" by parroting Trump's "phony lies" about a stolen election.

Two days before Thomas spoke, McCarthy gave a brief speech on the House floor. "The President bears responsibility for Wednesday's attack on Congress by mob rioters," he said. It was the first and last time McCarthy publicly crossed Trump. On the broadcast, Thomas said he hoped that "the Kevin who spoke during the impeachment, notwithstanding the fact he didn't vote for it, will be the Kevin leading the Republicans on the floor of the House and not the 'my Kevin'" who "had been supporting, nurturing the lies of the President."

On a warm October afternoon in

SOUL MAKING

Galactic broth visible light-years away
Brews the first suns. Familial, I feel
I know these lights. I see their pre-biotic
Geometries of purpose the way I impose

Human, nearly literary intentions
Onto the microscopic animals, flexing
Bizarre mandibles, that patrol my eyelids
And guts. Brothers and sisters electronically

Revealed, arcane mute dynasties of being:
Darkling I too perform the turns and bits
Of my assigned proportions. Feigning
Rapt comprehension, I know you the way

An infant pretends amazement each time
The mother with a spoon tip searching
Under the jar's rim finds more and yet
More of the strained *Apricots and Apples*:

Infant, the sunflower turns toward her, deep
Egypt of shared attachment and concealment,
Tangy preserved sweetness forging in turn
The courtly generation of—call it a soul.

—Robert Pinsky

Bakersfield, Thomas picked me up in a red BMW Z3, and we went out for lunch at a fish-and-chips restaurant attached to a bowling alley. A Washington magazine that ranked Congress members by intelligence and temperament routinely gave Thomas high marks for "brainiest," "meanest," and "hottest temper." He was proud of all three. "Meanest?" he said. "The reason was I said no. You have a cockamamie idea, I'm not going to put it up at midnight or at noon. The most popular people have round heels. They'll roll over for anything." When we arrived, he sat with his back to the front door so that we wouldn't get interrupted by people who might recognize him and come over to chat.

"The Kevin McCarthy who is now, at this time, in the House isn't the Kevin McCarthy I worked with. At least from outward appearances. You never know what's inside, really," Thomas said. "Kevin basically is whatever you want him to be. He lies. He'll change the lie if necessary. How can anyone trust his word?" He went on, "At some point, you have to look at where you started and how you got to where you are, and I would ask you, How do you feel about yourself? I know what his answer would be, but it wouldn't be the truth." What would the answer be? I asked. "It was all worth it."

When McCarthy served in the California assembly, it was common knowledge among state pols that he had national aspirations. "I can't recall a time when he came into the office to talk about a substantive political issue," Thomas told me. "The political goal as he moved up the district structure" was "to build up" relationships. "He's the guy in the college fraternity that everybody liked and winds up selling life insurance, convincing people they need it."

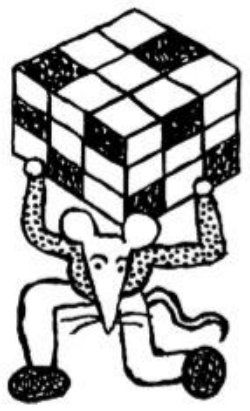
At lunch, Thomas preferred talking policy to politics, mostly because he was passionate about the details, but also because it illustrated his conviction about the nature of true influence and longevity in Congress. A terminal of the Bakersfield airport is named for him, as is a large public fund financing ongoing construction of highways and freight corridors in the region. Thomas refers to legislation as "product" and so can sound like a drug dealer when discussing road-improvement programs. In his view, the business of legislating is foreign to McCarthy. "He's already said, 'As soon as I become Speaker, I'm going after the Attorney General,'" Thomas told me. "Why would you want to spend your whole life trying to be Speaker to go after somebody? What are you *for*?"

Thomas had been willing to use his power not just to pass bills but to settle partisan scores. What struck him now was a tactical dilemma: if everyone in the conference knew that McCarthy would do anything to hold the Speakership, then he'd have no way of enforcing discipline. "Everything is focussed on becoming Speaker," Thomas said. "What do you do after?" As the Party's chief congressional fund-raiser, McCarthy could help get members elected. "You can't hold the money over them anymore," Thomas went on. "Now you're in. What have you got that keeps them tied to you?"

On April 15, 2009—Tax Day—McCarthy took John Boehner to a Tea Party rally in Bakersfield, where thousands of anti-government demonstrators had gathered near the town's full-size replica of the Liberty Bell to protest high taxes and government spending. One of their principal targets was the seven-hundred-and-eighty-seven-billion-dollar federal stimulus bill, passed two months before by a Democrat-controlled Congress, but their rage was broad, bipartisan, and generally anti-establishment. Boehner was seen as the last man standing from the Newt Gingrich era. In 1994, the Republicans had won the House for the first time in forty years, led by Gingrich, the Georgia congressman, who campaigned on a platform he called the Contract with America. Boehner told Republican politicians to go to Tea Party rallies—not to stand up and make speeches, but to listen. He tasked McCarthy with drafting a Pledge to America. Forty-eight pages long, it outlined the Republicans' top priorities: repealing Obamacare, ending tax increases, and cutting federal spending by a hundred billion dollars.

McCarthy had quickly joined Republican leadership in the House by applying a lesson he'd learned from his

years on Thomas's staff: since his was a safe seat, he generated good will by plowing much of his campaign money into other candidates' races across the country. In California, where a Republican governor was comfortable striking deals with Democrats, McCarthy had positioned himself as a more moderate dealmaker. But now, at the national level, the path to power ran through redoubled conservatism and strong opposition to President Obama. On the night of Obama's first Inauguration, a group of influential Republican Party members had met for dinner at a Washington steakhouse to plot the course. "If you act like you're the minority, you're going to stay in the minority," McCarthy said, according to "When the Tea Party Came to Town," by Robert Draper. "We've gotta challenge them on every single bill and challenge them on every single campaign."



For the 2010 election cycle, McCarthy worked with Paul Ryan and Eric Cantor to recruit candidates and to lead the campaign effort. Each was part of the Republican establishment, yet they sold themselves as outsiders with big ideas. After a conservative journalist anointed them the Young Guns, in an article in the *Weekly Standard*, they published a book with the same name; its precepts, which were based on slashing federal spending and rewriting the tax code, became their template for signing up candidates who were motivated by the rising populist tide to enter politics. "Boehner hadn't even been told about the Young Gun manifesto," a senior G.O.P. staffer told me. "They tried to be the three amigos." Ryan was the policy expert, Cantor the political leader, and McCarthy the strategist. "It really was all Kevin," Cantor told me. "He was always, again, playing on his strength of understanding where members are, knowing their families, understanding what their districts were like."

That November, the Republicans retook the House by winning sixty-three additional seats, and conference members chose Boehner as Speaker and Cantor as Majority Leader. McCarthy became the Whip, whose job was to corral votes for Boehner and Cantor. Boehner wanted to lower spending by reaching a grand bargain with President Obama involving tax increases, a strategy that many Republican freshmen abhorred. Cantor and McCarthy supported the insurgents' position. "There weren't a lot of people back then who wanted us to deal with the White House," Cantor told me.

McCarthy had a compulsion to be liked, and he identified with the freshmen he'd helped recruit. In his office, according to Draper, he put up black-and-white photos of the new congresspeople next to those of senior members. He hosted movie nights and took the congress members on field trips to the office building that housed the Bureau of Public Debt. During an election, he pulled aside Scott DesJarlais, a bald Tennessee physician who ran in 2010, to give him some pointers on his facial hair. "Michael Phelps shaves his entire body to get one-tenth of one second faster," McCarthy told him. "I think that goatee is costing you five per cent of the vote."

While the Republicans remained divided, Congress passed a series of temporary measures to keep the government open. But the tension grew, in large part because McCarthy and Cantor were stoking unrealistic expectations. "Boehner's view was, You're not going to repeal Obamacare. Stop telling the Tea Party people that you can," the G.O.P. staffer said.

McCarthy played both sides. He was protective of the new members, but he had a job to do. In March, 2011, according to reporting by Draper, McCarthy tried to rally the members to compromise by pitching a provisional spending deal as a way for Republicans to keep the pressure on Obama. "When you're coming around a corner and you see your friend in a fight, what do you do?" he said. "First, you jump in and you help beat up the other guy. And then when it's all over you can ask, 'Hey, what was that fight about?'"

The next few years were unstable and rancorous. In an effort to emphasize that Republicans had ideas of their own, Mitt Romney chose Paul Ryan as his running mate in the 2012 Presidential campaign, elevating a hyper-conservative agenda on spending and tax cuts. "We didn't just want to be against what Obama was doing," Cantor told me. "It turns out we were rebuffed." By now, the forces he and McCarthy had indulged in the Republican conference were becoming unmanageable. "I forget how many times they voted on repealing Obamacare, but that was never enough," the staffer lamented. At one point, in December, 2012, Boehner opened a Party meeting by reciting the Serenity Prayer. In October, 2013, the government shut down for sixteen days, and a large faction of House Republicans refused to raise the debt ceiling, risking a default. To reopen the government, Boehner was eventually forced to find votes among Democrats. After that, it became impossible to regain control of the Party. At a G.O.P. retreat at a hotel in Maryland, in January, 2014, Boehner presented a set of Republican principles. "It didn't go well," one attendee told me. "I could see McCarthy staff and Cantor staff celebrating. They were huddled in the corner kind of laughing over the failure."

The Freedom Caucus emerged at the start of 2015, partly as a consequence of the growing rift between Tea Party members and the House Republican leadership. On July 28th, one of its founders, Mark Meadows, the North Carolina congressman who later became Trump's White House chief of staff, walked onto the House floor and filed a motion to "vacate the chair," initiating a vote to oust Boehner as Speaker. After Boehner stepped down, the vote to replace him, which took place in October, was supposed to be pro forma and uneventful. With Cantor no longer in the House, McCarthy was the obvious front-runner.

Republican members had already gathered to vote when McCarthy appeared with his wife and family and announced that he was withdrawing from consideration. "The meeting was immediately adjourned," Carlos Curbelo, a former two-term Republican congressman from Florida, told me. "Everyone was shocked. No one saw it coming." Speculation about what the precipitating event might have been persists to this day. One explanation was that McCarthy had committed a significant gaffe

in an interview with Sean Hannity, in September, when he suggested that the House's special committee on Benghazi was trying to sink Hillary Clinton. This was common knowledge, but in Washington you weren't supposed to say it out loud. Ultimately, though, it was the Freedom Caucus that blocked him. It opposed anyone from the Party's existing leadership structure, and McCarthy hadn't yet consolidated enough support among other members to compensate for the lost votes. "He called Paul Ryan right before the press conference and said, 'I'm dropping out of the race and endorsing you for Speaker,'" a former senior Hill staffer told me. Ryan was in good standing with the Party's different factions, making him the most viable alternative. "In order for Kevin to stay in his role and stay relevant, it had to be seamless," according to the staffer. But Ryan, who didn't want the position and hadn't yet conferred with his family, was blindsided. It took more than two weeks—and a pressure campaign mounted by Boehner and others—to persuade him to take the job. The staffer told me, "Paul said, 'You cannot do that. You can't put me in that position.'"

On January 6, 2021, when Capitol Police evacuated the House chamber, McCarthy went to his office, accompanied by Bruce Westerman, a Republican congressman from Arkansas. Once the rioters breached the building, security officers took McCarthy to a military base, where he joined Mitch McConnell, Nancy Pelosi, and Chuck Schumer. Westerman, who stayed behind, grabbed a Civil War sword from a display in McCarthy's office and hid in the Minority Leader's private bathroom.

Of the top four leaders in the House and the Senate, McCarthy was the only one on regular speaking terms with Donald Trump. Members were texting McCarthy, begging him to tell the President to call off the rioters. When he reached Trump by phone, the President reportedly said, "Well, Kevin, I guess these people are more upset about the election than you are."

Before the insurrection, McCarthy had told his members that the vote to certify the election would be a "vote of conscience": there wasn't a party-line position, so no one would be punished for how he voted. But this also meant that members were on their own at a time when many of them were receiving death threats from constituents. The only member of the Republican House leadership to take a strong stance against the President's lies was Liz Cheney, of Wyoming. At first, McCarthy refused to clarify his position and wouldn't answer when members asked him for direction. The factions weren't clearly divided along ideological lines. A group of fierce conservatives, including Chip Roy, a congressman from Texas and a member of the Freedom Caucus, thought it was a bad idea to oppose certification. When another congressman asked McCarthy how the leadership saw the vote, he responded sharply, "You want me to give you your voting card?"

On January 3rd, McCarthy made his position clear—and went a step further. According to "Unchecked," by Rachael Bade and Karoun Demirjian, he allowed staffers for Jim Jordan—a former nemesis from the Freedom Caucus, a rabid Trumpist, and a vociferous election denier—to set up a special area next to the House floor to recruit votes against certification. When House moderates and some of McCarthy's own staff objected, the journalists write, he "dismissed their concerns out of hand." (McCarthy's office denies this.)

In private, McCarthy criticized Trump for inciting the insurrection, according to recordings obtained by the *Times* reporters Jonathan Martin and Alexander Burns. On a conference call with House Republican leaders, on January 8th, McCarthy said, "What the President did is atrocious and totally wrong." Two days later, he said, "I've had it with this guy. What he did was unacceptable. Nobody can defend that and nobody should." At one point, he broached invoking the Twenty-fifth Amendment, telling colleagues that he might ask the President to resign.

For most of January, Trump's standing in the Party teetered. Moderate members were ready to break with him, and those on the far right had dug in. But the majority weren't sure how to position themselves. "At this point, we don't know where this is going to go," Adam Kinzinger told me. "So let's take the middle, 'Let's just all get along, I just want to get elected to my little district in Kentucky' guy. He's our bellwether. He's kind of sitting there, keeping his head down, trying to figure out what's going to happen." Then, on January 28th, McCarthy travelled to Mar-a-Lago to pay obeisance and pose for a photo. "As soon as he went to Mar-a-Lago, you felt that person shift," Kinzinger said. "That person shifted to begrudgingly defending Donald Trump, and from then it was just off the cliff."

Peter Meijer, a freshman Republican from Michigan, joined the group of ten Republican congresspeople who voted to impeach. "I would love it if leadership shared my minority views. But they are minority views," he told



"Has the jury reached a crescendo?"

me, a few months after losing his primary. "There are times when followers look to leaders, and there are times when leaders look to followers."

Kinzinger had entered Congress with the Tea Party class, in 2011. He was an Air Force pilot who flew missions in Afghanistan and Iraq; McCarthy featured him in an extended profile in the book "Young Guns." "We had a great relationship until recently," Kinzinger said. McCarthy repeatedly told him that he considered Trump crazy and that his job was "to keep him from doing something super-duper crazy," Kinzinger went on. But it wasn't lost on him that McCarthy would "light up talking about how often Trump called him."

On February 3rd, the Republican conference gathered in the auditorium of the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center. Onstage, McCarthy sat in the middle of the leadership team, taking questions and comments on two orders of business. The first was whether Liz Cheney should be kicked out of the Party leadership for insisting that the election had not been stolen. The second was what to do about Marjorie Taylor Greene, then a new freshman. A week before, evidence had surfaced that she had called for the execution of Nancy Pelosi and claimed that the 2018 massacre of seventeen people at a high school in Parkland, Florida, had been staged.

The meeting lasted more than four hours. "We're expecting Kevin McCarthy to say some stuff about Marjorie Taylor Greene," Kinzinger said. "I didn't expect that he was going to kick her out of our committees, but I did expect that he was going to take a stand that Jewish space lasers was a bit of a line too far." Cheney survived her vote by a secret ballot, with McCarthy giving a perfunctory speech in her defense. He made a more spirited pitch on behalf of Greene. "They're going after Marjorie for things she said before she even got here," he told the crowd, according to an audio recording obtained by Draper. "They're coming at you next." Kinzinger walked up to one of the corner microphones. "I unleashed," he told me. "The Party has lost its damn mind," he said to the group. McCarthy spent "more time defending Marjorie Taylor Greene than saying a word about Liz Cheney." McCarthy sat with his arms folded while Kinzinger spoke. "He just didn't give a shit," he told me.

Months later, Kinzinger was in the middle of a conversation near the House floor when McCarthy bumped him hard from behind. "He shoulder-checks me," Kinzinger told me. "This is the most junior-high place since junior high. And he's the most junior-high leader." Kinzinger went on, "I thought it was a good relationship, but you also realize he's a pretty vacuous, hollow guy who makes everyone think they have a great relationship with him." (A spokesman for McCarthy called Kinzinger "ridiculous" and "outlandishly vitriolic toward Kevin," referring to Kinzinger's criticisms of McCarthy as "unhinged tirades.")

When congresspeople raised concerns about the Party's increasingly violent extremism, McCarthy blocked them. Steve Womack, a conservative and a military veteran, resigned from a Republican leadership committee in protest. In the spring of 2021, McCarthy deputized John Katko, a moderate from a pro-Biden district in upstate New York, to negotiate the terms of a bipartisan January 6th commission with House Democrats. The idea had never appealed to McCarthy, but he floated it to keep his options open. In May, Katko came back with a deal: the commission would have subpoena power, and there would be five members from each party. "Katko got a hundred per cent of what Kevin asked for," Fred Upton told me. (Katko declined to speak to me.) But, after Trump criticized the commission as a "Democrat trap," McCarthy withdrew his support and voted against it. "I had one Republican tell me the day or two before, 'Fred, you won't believe me, but I'm actually going to vote for this. I think that it's fair,'" Upton said. "At the end of the day, he voted no because of Trump—Kevin wasn't going to take him on."

Cheney brought up her opposition to Trump any time she could, and because she was the third-highest-ranking Republican she frequently appeared alongside McCarthy when she did so. The last time they spoke together in public was after a press conference in late February, when a reporter asked if Trump should speak at an upcoming meeting of the Conservative Political Action Conference. "Yes," McCarthy said. Cheney said, "I don't believe that he should be playing a role in the future of the Party or the country." "On that high note, thank you very much," McCarthy said, and walked off.

In a second vote that May, with McCarthy in the majority, Cheney was ousted from the leadership. He then campaigned against her in her primary that summer. "McCarthy went out of his way to make an example out of Liz," a Republican who is close to both of them told me. "He did so because he knew she was going to lose. It was unprecedented to back the opponent of a member of the leadership team. The message was, If you go against Kevin, there are going to be consequences."

It's easy to imagine a scenario in which Kevin McCarthy was the Republican hero of 2022. Had the Party won more seats in the House, he could have claimed that he built a decisive majority by controlling the middle and the extreme right, defying the laws of political gravity. Last winter, he confronted an old friend, Jaime Herrera Beutler, of Washington, who voted to impeach Trump and eventually lost to an election denier in the primary. McCarthy had told her about the call he'd had with the President on January 6th, which she later shared with the press. "I alone am taking all the heat to protect people from Trump!" McCarthy told her. "I alone am holding the Party together!" (Herrera Beutler and McCarthy disputed this account when it was first reported, by Bade and Demirjian.)

Just as he had in 2010, McCarthy recruited a diverse and promising class of candidates in 2022, uniting them under a broad and usefully nondescript platform called Commitment to America. He also helped raise five hundred million dollars, including two hundred and sixty million dollars for the Congressional Leadership Fund, the Party's largest House super PAC. It spent heavily to support moderate candidates against far-right challengers. Herrera Beutler received money, as did David Valadao, a McCarthy ally, who represents a largely Hispanic district next to his that went for Biden in 2020. The bet made by the Republican establishment, Peter Meijer told me, "was that you can split the difference between traditional Republicans and pathways to the majority while also humoring Trump. I don't think that's a bet that

paid off." Although Valadao became one of only two of the ten Republican impeachers to win reëlection, after McCarthy persuaded Trump not to attack him, Herrera Beutler's seat went to a Democrat for the first time in eleven years.

McCarthy has spent the past seven years, since he last ran for Speaker, working to shore up his support on the right. Previously, Freedom Caucus members were not given the top jobs on committees, because Party leadership considered them too extreme. McCarthy has brought figures such as Jim Jordan into the establishment—Jordan will soon have one of the most prestigious jobs in the conference, the chairmanship of the Judiciary Committee, where he'll have the power to harass the Administration.

"The way he maneuvers is he gives everyone what they want," the senior Hill staffer said, of McCarthy. "It's all about member management. His constituents are the members of the Republican conference."

Yet now McCarthy is going to the January 3rd floor vote on a knife's edge. The day that he won the first round of voting for the Speakership, Don Bacon, a pragmatic Republican congressman from Nebraska, issued a threat of his own. Why should the Freedom Caucus be calling all the shots? Bacon considers McCarthy the only serious contender for Speaker. But, if the conference failed to coalesce around him, Bacon said, "I'm going to work with like-minded people across the aisle to find someone agreeable for Speaker."

McCarthy had recruited Bacon to run for Congress in 2015, after hearing him give a speech in support of a candidate who went on to lose his race. The day after the election, Bacon told me, "I got two calls, one from the county chairman. Got another guy said he wanted to be my campaign manager. I wasn't even thinking about running." Bacon is a member of the bipartisan Problem Solvers Caucus and the Main Street Republicans, whose numbers, Bacon said, are larger than those of the Freedom Caucus. The problem is that their unwillingness to wreak general havoc makes it harder to "flex our muscles." He said, "We're not going to let a minority of a minority of our party—it's a small number—just hold the rest of Congress and the country hostage. At some point, people like me are going to say, Enough is enough!"



"Oh, great. More teeth."

• • •

McCarthy seized Bacon's threat to strike a deal with Democrats as a way of scaring the far right into backing him; it may be the strongest argument he has. "If we don't do this right, the Democrats can take the majority," he told Newsmax. "If we play games on the floor, the Democrats can end up picking who the Speaker is."

In October, when the prospective majority looked bigger, McCarthy was careful not to oversell an agenda based on vengeance. He was sending a message to congresspeople such as Bacon, who badly wants to legislate. Before the midterms McCarthy said, "I think the country doesn't like impeachment used for political purposes at all. . . . I think the country wants to heal and . . . start to see the system that actually works."

Since then, he's issued threats about investigating Biden and his Cabinet, signalled that he's willing to oppose raising the country's debt ceiling, and suggested that he'll investigate the January 6 Committee. On November 22nd, he travelled to El Paso to deliver a menacing speech about immigration and the Secretary of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas: "If Secretary Mayorkas does not resign, House Republicans will investigate every order, every action, and every failure to determine whether we can begin impeachment inquiries." A number of Republicans I interviewed said that impeaching Mayorkas would count as a "moderate" outcome in the 118th Congress.

"The debt limit scares the shit out of me," Kinzinger told me. "Because here's the thing. In the past, Boehner or Ryan can eventually cut a deal and rely on fifty of us to vote for it. . . . It's going to be hard for McCarthy to cut deals. That freaks me out."

It is an indication of the state of the Republican conference that McCarthy's most clear-eyed critics still see him as the only rational check left. He may embody a vast range of contradictory identities and principles, but at least one set of them dates to the pre-Trump era. Mike Madrid, who worked with McCarthy in California and went on to cofound the Lincoln Project, the anti-Trump group, told me that McCarthy was "the last person I felt comfortable being critical of." He had trouble believing that "my Kevin" was his Kevin, he said. "Which guy was he all along?"

Recently, McCarthy has been in marathon meetings with members of the Freedom Caucus, trying to reach agreements on changes to the House rules. The one demand he has actively resisted is the "motion to vacate the chair," the strategy that pressured Boehner: it would allow a single member to force a vote on McCarthy's ouster. It's the only deal breaker for McCarthy because it's the only one that directly threatens his Speakership. He appears to be flexible on nearly everything else. ♦

GREETINGS, FRIENDS!

One more weirdly hot November
Slid us onward to December,
Where, jubilant, we wait to greet you;
Please stop by, we do entreat you!
Meeting friends in actuality,
And not in cyber irreality,
Is pleasure heretofore unguessed at;
Face-to-face is what we're best at.
This venue's at-home lasts all day;
The first one here, David Suchet,
De-Lyfts in front with Roman Hrybov,
Snake Island hero: bearing beef plov,
To supplement our entrées (plural).
Meanwhile, near some mountains (Ural),
A guy named Roizman—grim occasion—
Gets detained for saying "invasion."
And, speaking of, we gotta shout:
Brittney Griner was just let out!
To her, and to her wife, Cherelle,
We're glad she's back at home, and well.
Out, out, out, out, out, out, out—
Out of that country! Out, no doubt!
The YouTube maven Yury Dud
Has jetted here, and it's so good
To see him standing at our door.
He's in a crowd with Daniel Roher,
Austin Tice, Eve Best, Bad Bunny,
Patton Oswalt (super funny!),
Dusty Baker, maestro royal,
Rattan Lal, who studies soil,
Machine Gun Kelly, Kaity Tong,
And plus-ones who have come along.
Thus we remark to Andy Yen,
Zlatko Burić, Amartya Sen,
Jamaal Bowman, Jamelle Bouie,
Brandon Nimmo, Cousin Louis,
Feryal Özel, and Roman Mars,
Who've just arrived in different cars:
"How 'bout that NASA? Did you hear
The dazzling thing they did this year?"
Then we speak about the rocket
That smacked an asteroid to shock it,
As if to get the rock's attention,
X million miles away! We mention—
Coming back to Earth—our fandom,
Choosing, in no way at random,
Sadie Sink and Bong Joon-ho,
Susan Cain, Willem Dafoe,
Drake (the rapper), Emma D'Arcy,
Professor Morgan (hello, Marcy!),
Data wizard Newsha Ghaeli
(One to be in touch with daily),
And Aaron Judge, our long-ball champ,
Who'll still be ours come training camp.
Hey! Look how we have been ignoring
Hosting tasks as guests are pouring
In and giving us their coats.
We should be on it, taking notes:
This one belongs to Colleen Hoover;
These to Will Forte (he's MacGruber),
Ja Morant, Guillermo del Toro,
Mark Levine, who leads our borough,
Emilia Sykes, new congressperson
(Proof that things don't always worsen:
Thirteenth District in Ohio,
Won because she's great, is why-o!).
Where were we? Checking coats—that's right.
Now we ascend to greater height,
To reach the topmost balcony,
Whose views are steep and falcon-y,
While strewing good will like confetti
On the economist Raj Chetty,
San Fran's Mayor London Breed,
Indie star Olivia Reid,
Björk, Chris Smalls, Derrick Palmer,
Khaby Lame (TikTok charmer),
Yahya Abdul-Mateen the second
(Actor of resources fecund),
Bill Belichick, the wily coach,
And gorgeous baby Hazel Roche!
Indulge us, friends, as we remember
Colleagues we lost since last December:
Roger A., this ode's Babe Ruth,
Lee Lorenz, Peter S., George Booth,
And let us here aver again it
Rocked to work with wise John Bennet,
Martin B., Sempé, and Brenda Phipps.
As you're hearing from our lips,
Each was a brick; we hum their praises
In these fond and clumsy phrases.
Dear friends, we're shelving '22.
It brought some good that shineth through:
Freedom's reboot, if just a sample,
In Zelensky's grand example;
Democracy got off the mat
(Turns out it wasn't quite that flat);
Add a mild return to reason,
Reinforced by this, the season
Rich in prompts to love our fellows.
Leave the coda to the cellos—
Measures deep and rich in tone
Sing that we are none alone.
Love kerns us all as words that rhyme,
Reset once more this Christmastime.

—Ian Frazier





Victoria Roberts





THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

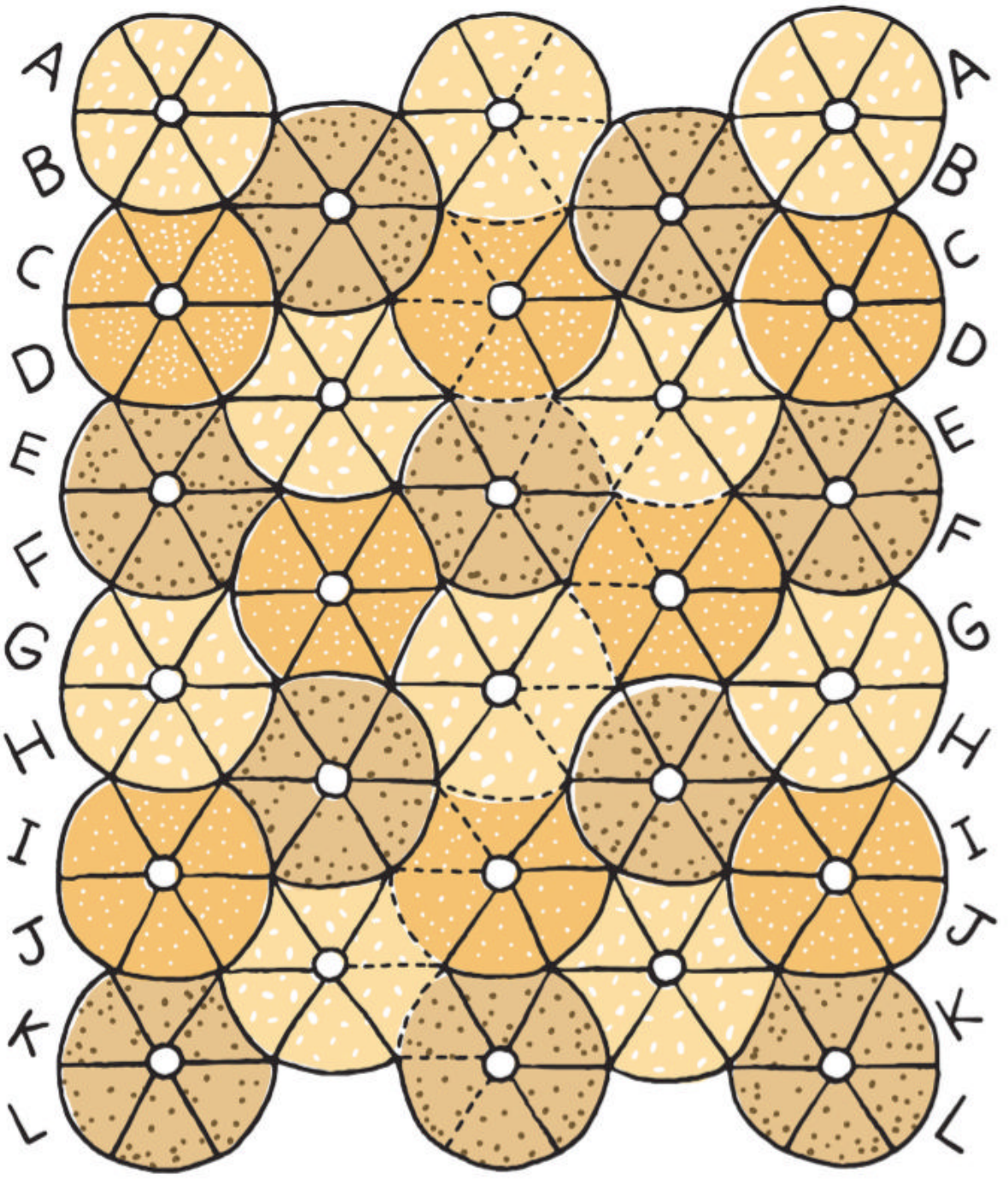
Nothing says the holidays like jokes (ideally not told by a drunk relative) and puzzles (hopefully not of the how-am-I-related-to-these-people variety). Jokes, puzzles, and—oh, yes—the demolition of a city by a bevy of ferocious creatures. So rejoice: *The New Yorker* is delivering another issue full of presents this year, starting with this scene of monstrous proportions. But wait, it's also a game! Reassemble the city at newyorker.com/cartoons-and-puzzles, or visit The New Yorker Store to pick up the five-hundred-piece, ink-and-pulp jigsaw. Bonus points if you can spot the eight famous New York City buildings scattered throughout the image. (Find the solution to this puzzle, and to all the others in this issue, beginning on page 88.)

ILLUSTRATION BY
EDWARD STEED

BAGEL SHOP

BY PATRICK BERRY

Each Row contains two consecutive answers reading left to right, except Rows A and L, which contain one answer apiece, reading across all nine wedges. Each Bagel contains a six-letter word or phrase that can start in any wedge, and can read either clockwise or counterclockwise. Bagel clues are grouped into three sections, which correspond with the three types of Bagels in the grid; the clues in each section are listed in order, from left to right and top to bottom. Solve the puzzle to reveal the cartoon's caption, spelled out by the letters in wedges with dashed borders.



ROWS

A Justified by the circumstances

B Obstinate scrivener in a Herman Melville short story
Electronic-music genre that uses wobble bass

C It connects the cerebrum to the spinal cord
___ E. (drummer nicknamed the Queen of Percussion)

D What often follows a close election
"Fasten your seat belts, everyone!": 3 wds.

E Sharp bend, as in a fairway
Central parts of arches

F Enthusiastic
Family surname in "Home Alone"

G Novelist who wrote "Exodus" and "Trinity": 2 wds.
Feline activity that's ruinous to furniture

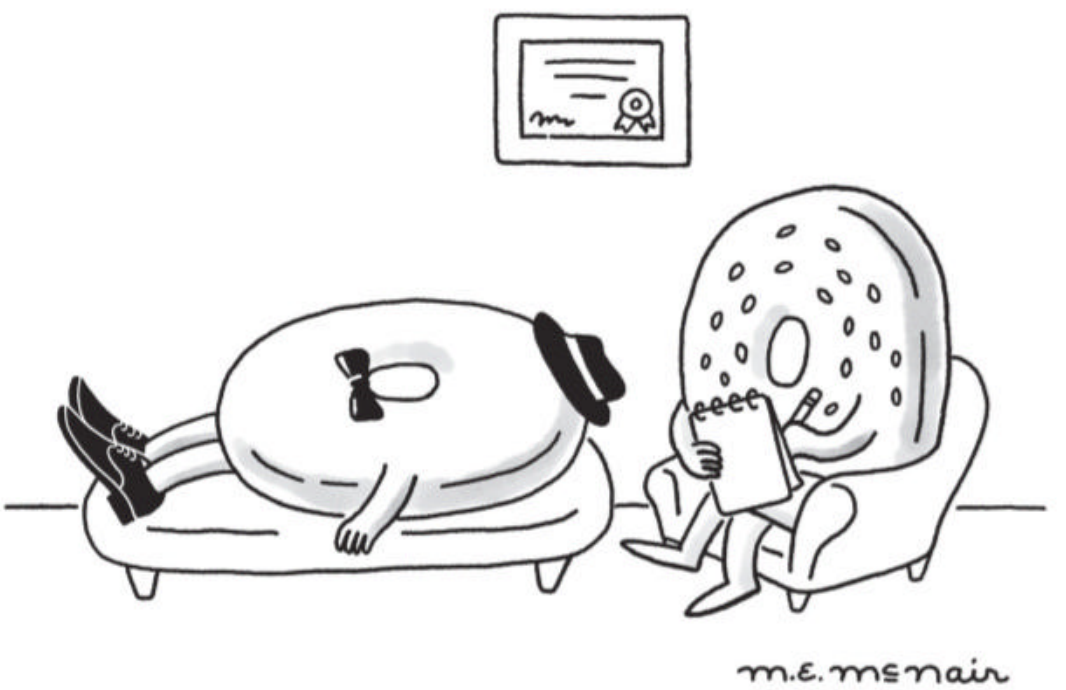
H *"Ay, ___!"* (Bart Simpson catchphrase)
Sport whose name is French for "the hooked stick"

I NBC time-travel series revived in 2022: 2 wds.
In apple-pie order

J Liquid skin-care product
Posting in a lonely-hearts column: 2 wds.

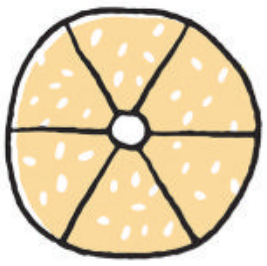
K Be connected in a significant way
Musician called the Master of the Pan Flute

L Arouses anew, as romantic feelings



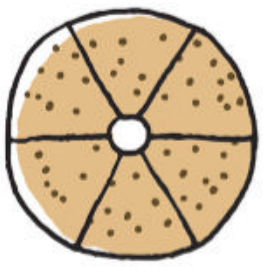
" "

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELISABETH McNAIR



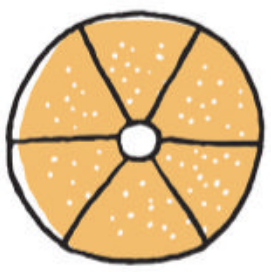
SESAME BAGELS

Spot that serves uncooked oysters: 2 wds.
Liquor often added to eggnog
Stroked
Room connected to the conservatory via secret passage, in Clue
Castle features
___ of Delphi (ancient soothsayer)
French city closest to England
Lightly burns
Muss
Subject of the book "The Everything Store"



WHOLE-WHEAT POPPY-SEED BAGELS

Sparkly Christmas-tree décor
Topiarist's targets
"The Godfather" actor Abe
Sycophantic follower
Crosses the threshold
Underground Railroad conductor Harriet
One taking prisoners
Doozy, in British slang
Keep in custody
Hunting equipment



SALT BAGELS

Stiff drink
Opera house at Lincoln Center, briefly: 2 wds.
Masked figure on a rink
"My Adidas" and "It's Tricky" hip-hop trio: Hyph.
Simpson for whom Edward VIII abdicated the throne
Shape of most crossword grids
Glue brand with a bull mascot
The People's Princess, familiarly: 2 wds.



COVER CROSSWORD

BY PAOLO PASCO

The clues in italics refer to the ups and downs of ● and ■ on this issue's cover.

ACROSS

1 *What ● is making en plein air*
4 Boob tubes
7 Tom and Jerry, Sonny and Cher, and ● and ■, e.g.
9 Crying sound
10 What ● is taking, in the grid below
11 Heart's desire
12 Any of several non-textual clues in this puzzle
14 Window-pane makeup
15 Nada
16 Spherical vegetables
17 Periphery

21


22 *Piece of jewelry on a billboard*
23 *Vessel from which ■ is pouring coffee*
24 *Vessel from which ● is drinking*

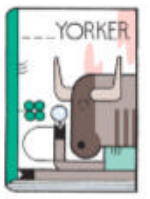
DOWN

1 *The billboards, for example*
2 Where you might be stuck
3 What ■ has stubbed, in the grid below

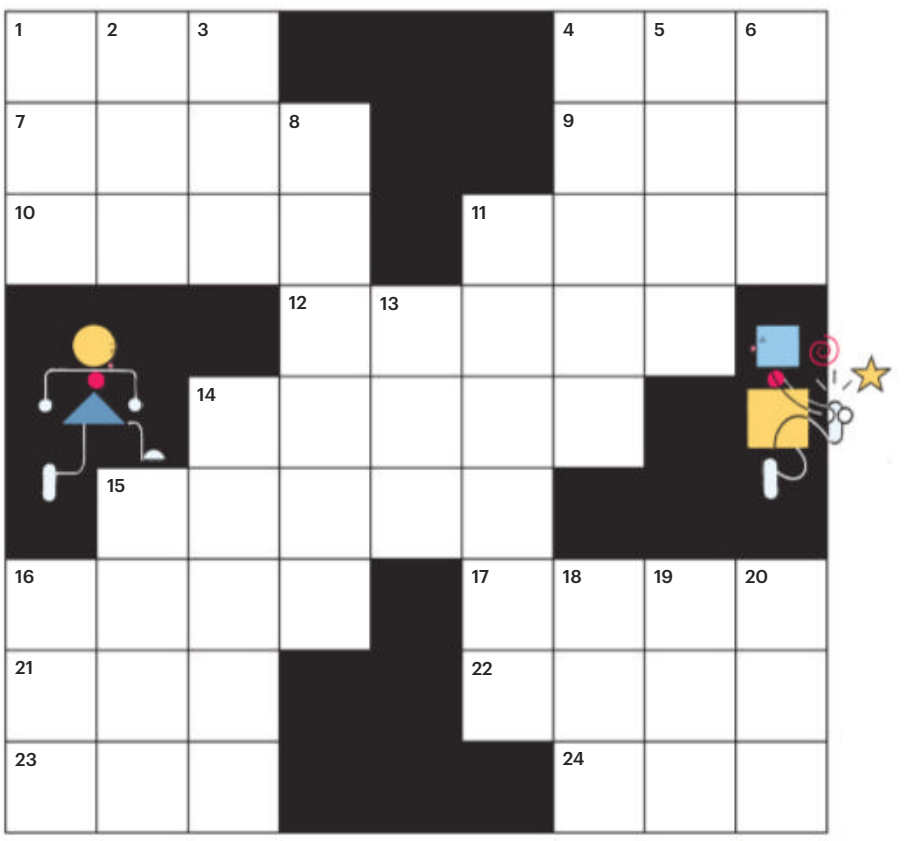
4


5 *Vessel holding ■'s flowers*
6 "I'm trying to draw in peace and quiet!"
8 Mishaps that may stain cartoonists' desks
11 *Household appliance on a billboard*
13 Bub
14 Like an elephant, compared with an ant
15 Nada
16 *Furry pal on a walk with ■*

18


19


20 *What ● is frying for breakfast*



ILLUSTRATIONS BY CHRIS WARE

PATTERN RECOGNITION

BY JOON PAHK

Figure out what the answers to each set of trivia questions have in common, then figure out what unites those four connections.

A1. Which Upton Sinclair novel, whose one-word title ends in an exclamation point, inspired the 2007 film "There Will Be Blood"?

A2. What is the common term for the upper part of a carapace?

A3. In materials science, what adjective describes materials that are neither ductile nor malleable? Such materials fracture rather than deform in response to applied stresses.

A4. On a Zoom call, what is the name of the layout in which participants are displayed in a rectangular grid of thumbnail images, as opposed to an enlarged view of the person speaking?

B1. J. Robert Oppenheimer is the title character of a John Adams opera about the Manhattan Project, called "Doctor ____." What word fills in the blank?

B2. The plot of the novel "Left Behind," which was co-written by an evangelical minister, is set in motion by an event known as the what?

B3. What first name is shared by the lead female characters in two Best Picture-winning movie musicals of the nineteen-sixties, one of which was remade in 2021?

B4. In the last stanza of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven," the narrator says of his winged tormentor, "And his eyes have all the seeming of a demon's that is ____." What word fills in the blank?

C1. Which airport, serving the Washington, D.C., area, has the I.A.T.A. code DCA?

C2. Complete the analogy: First Lady of Song is to Fitzgerald as Ol' Blue Eyes is to ____.

C3. What was the maiden name of the mother of the actors Lionel, Ethel, and John Barrymore? It also was the middle name of John's son and the first name of his granddaughter, both actors as well.

C4. Dukes and duchesses in the United Kingdom, and also Anglican archbishops, are addressed as "Your ____" (or "His/Her ____," in the third person). What word fills in the blank?

D1. What is the two-word name of the arena that's home to both the N.B.A.'s Brooklyn Nets and the W.N.B.A.'s New York Liberty?

D2. What is the northernmost and westernmost state of Mexico? Its largest city, with a population of roughly two million, is Tijuana.

D3. Which Newbery Medal-winning children's-book author created the characters Ramona and Beezus Quimby?

D4. For what purpose did the Food and Drug Administration approve the oral pharmaceutical Enovid, in 1960? Medications later approved for the same purpose include Norinyl and Ortho-Novum.

A1: _____

A2: _____

A3: _____

A4: _____

Connection A: _____

B1: _____

B2: _____

B3: _____

B4: _____

Connection B: _____

C1: _____

C2: _____

C3: _____

C4: _____

Connection C: _____

D1: _____

D2: _____

D3: _____

D4: _____

Connection D: _____

What do the four connections have in common?

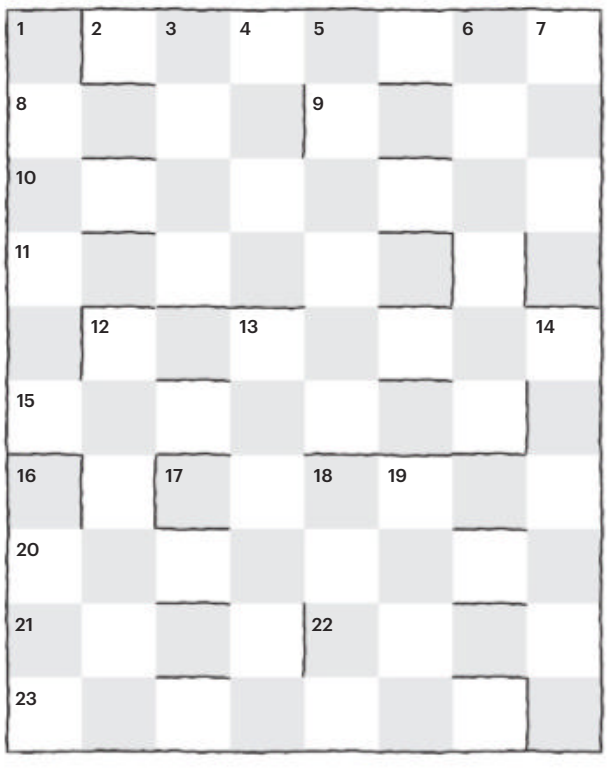
_____

CRYPTIC CROSSWORD



BY LILY GELLER AND NEVILLE FOGARTY

A puzzle worthy of Rowan and Martin.



ACROSS

2 Winter Olympian stifles a giggle producing more “Insecure” (7)
8 Wild reaction in extraordinary comeback (4)
9 Belzer regularly read a book from the Old Testament (4)
10 Being noted for his tongue, Arnett improvised around outskirts of Estonia (8)
11 Popular shows inspiring joyful noise—they may contribute to a “ba-dum-tss”? (2-4)
12 Rests or relaxes, creating “The White Lotus” and “The Grand Budapest Hotel,” among others (7)
15 More than one “Instant Mom” episode needed to show intros (7)
17 Vegas hotel performer Gilbert garners a guffaw (6)
20 Dratch and I capably accommodated betting advantage (8)
21 “Ni!” comes round full circle; that’s dope (4)
22 Most of “Glee” covers “A Mighty Wind” (4)
23 Uh . . . Ali G messed up new sketch show that aptly describes five of this puzzle’s clues (5-2)

DOWN

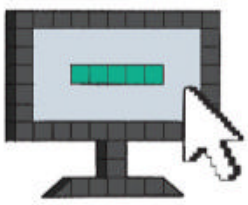
1 Irish comic Norton’s nan gets a chuckle (6)
3 Has old-fashioned Chaplin accessory atop Hardy’s head (4)
4 “Community” is, for many, top-grade (4)
5 Buster’s take on slapstick (6)
6 Sets up *Mad* secret (6)
7 Leads in “Resident Alien” meet about special (4)
12 Defoe’s “Fortunate Mistress” wows “Pitch Perfect” star Kendrick in audition (6)
13 “Popeye,” for one, aged so badly (3,3)
14 Edited chortle into shot (6)
16 Hartman’s feed on “NewsRadio” (4)
18 Refined, like Harold and Kumar seeking White Castle (4)
19 “Brazil” production involves air-conditioning and artificial intelligence (4)

MY LIFE IN FIVE GUESSES OR LESS

BY ELLIS ROSEN AND WILL WINFREE



How about that Wordle? It's great, right? Right?! I sure do love it. And each morning, when I'm done playing it, I move on to Nerdle, Quordle, Tradle, Heardle, Artle, and Framed. I'll do anything to delay starting my day. I'll admit that I get a little depressed after finishing my morning games. A profoundly sad feeling rises up from my gut as I desperately seek out new Wordle imitators. But I've found a solution. I realized that Wordle is everywhere, if you're looking for it. My whole life is a guessing game now, and yours can be, too!

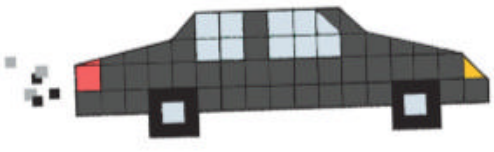


PASSWORDLE

Type your password in five tries or less!

W	H	I	S	K	E	R	S	1	#
$	W	H	1	S	K	=	R	S	!
!	W	H	1	S	K	3	R	S	2
!	W	H	1	S	K	3	R	S	3

You are allowed one more incorrect guess before you are locked out of this game and your Amazon account.



UBERDLE

Correctly enter your friend's address into Uber in three tries or less!

1	3	5		E	6	2	N	D		S	T
9	3	8		E	7	3	R	D		S	T
3	3	0		E	7	4	T	H		S	T

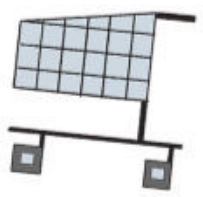
You are being redirected to a text-message thread with Lizzie.

CARDLE

Remember your CVV number without taking out your credit card!

2	8	9
1	5	7
7	1	4

Your session has expired. Please log back in to complete your purchase.



CURDLE

Determine the expiration date of the milk you drank that tasted "just a little off"!

1	2	/	2	2	/	2	2
1	2	/	1	0	/	2	2
1	2	/	0	9	/	2	2
1	2	/	0	8	/	2	2
1	2	/	0	7	/	2	2

What does "sell by" mean, anyway?

NEEDLE

Three tries to guess that one thing you said you wouldn't forget the next time you went to the grocery store!

S	P	A	G	H	E	T	T	I
R	E	D		O	N	I	O	N
O	L	I	V	E		O	I	L

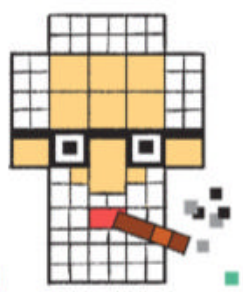
That's it! And they said you needed a list.

FREUDLE

Why are you this way?

M	O	T	H	E	R

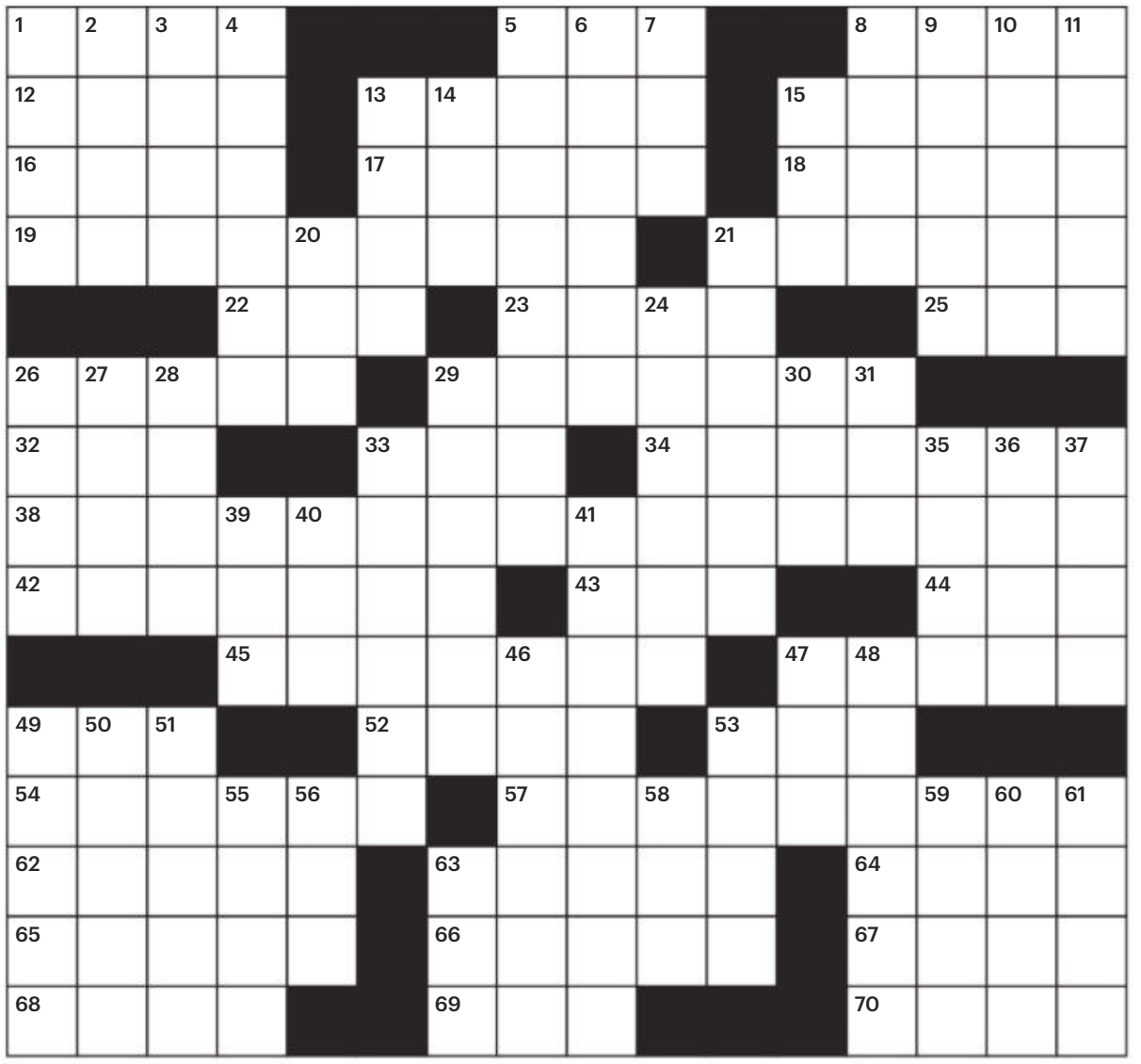
Sorry, but we're out of time.



SOUNDS ABOUT RIGHT

BY ANDY KRAVIS

A themed crossword that's a little absurd.

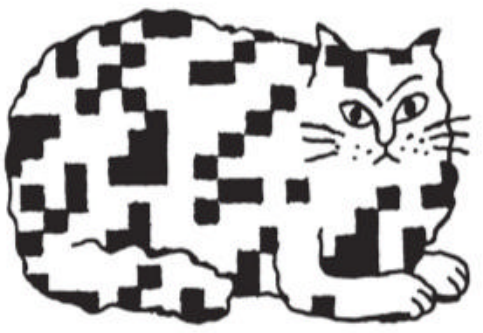


ACROSS

1 Disappoint a stage mom
5 Fell, as a yew
8 ___ things up (cause trouble, as it were)
12 Tea, in Mumbai
13 Possessive adjective for a pair
15 Animal that, per a simile, is loose
16 Dot-___ (businesses once advertised with free CD-ROMs)
17 "Where's ___" (British book series whose title character might be found near a red-and-white striped brolly)
18 Thousand, in Lille
19 N.B.A. legend O'Neal
21 Appalled
22 It aired "Star Trek: Voyager" and "Moesha" way back when
23 In gay slang, a big man with lots of hair
25 Digs for a piggish guy
26 Makes cakes
29 Parts of automatic soap dispensers
32 Per a Robert Frost poem, substance that "for destruction . . . is also great and would suffice"
33 Unit of fun
34 Receptacle that doesn't let waste fall
38 What every answer in this puzzle will do
42 Fires
43 Start to stress?
44 One in the Paris Commune?
45 Arboreal prey for a feral cat
47 Figures indicated by chimes
49 2020 hit with the lyric "Bring a bucket and a mop"
52 Requirement to succeed
53 Keats ode concern
54 Effaces
57 Cheek swab, for example
62 Like a poem beginning "Once upon a midnight dreary . . ."
63 Holey footwear often worn without socks
64 Greeting from a cabin boy
65 Ring, as a bell
66 Name said twice before "pumpkin eater"
67 Stock in a home-improvement store's flooring aisle
68 Fell in rank
69 Leave with a slackened jaw
70 What fills wells and shells?

DOWN

1 Adds to an e-mail, unbeknownst to the other addressees
2 "I know! I know!"
3 Bahama ___
4 Thick soup whose roux can be prepared with a whisk
5 More than intent
6 Brennan of stage and screen
7 Ironic or dry
8 Spoil
9 Coins put in booths' holes
10 Possible emergency landing site for a transatlantic pilot
11 Tall and weedy
13 Identical kin
14 Shakespearean prince who's Falstaff's pal
15 ABC rival of "Today"
20 Co. for shipping express
21 Hulled oats
24 Statistic tracked by a sports analyst
26 According to a 1963 surf song, it's "the word"
27 Suffer from heartbreak
28 Ebonies and ivories
29 "Yes, that's obvious to me"
30 Wheels with built-in cooking and sleeping facilities
31 Dry, as a Malbec
33 Target audience for *Ranger Rick* and *Highlights* magazines
35 After commencement, what a student will become
36 "Clair de ___" (Debussy title meaning "Light of the Moon")
37 Some dungarees
39 Where Ben Bernanke got his Ph.D.
40 Act without care
41 Brief summary preceding what the court wrote
46 Sketched anew
47 ___-la-la
48 One in the custody of the state
49 Seven-day streaks
50 The Panathenaic Stadium, for one, which hosted games dedicated to Athena
51 Char. in the equation 2 × (3 + 2) = 10
53 Country that came about after the overthrow of the tsar
55 Brand of soy milk
56 Creature that might be carried in a creel
58 Hit a serve in the perfect place
59 "Groundhog Day" role for Bill
60 Lie like a rag doll
61 Spies
63 Pro who's busy in the months leading up to Tax Day



COMEDY OF ERRORS

BY KATIE HAMILL AND KEVIN WALD

It looks as though Shakespeare's publisher was having an off day: there's an extra letter in each of these lines from the Bard's comedies. Weed out all the typos to reveal an apt motto.



1. I like this palace, / And willingly could waste my time in it.

2. Sweep on, you flat and greasy citizens.



3. If music be the flood of love, play on.

4. You shave such a February face.

5. If we shadows have offended, / Think but this and wall is mended.

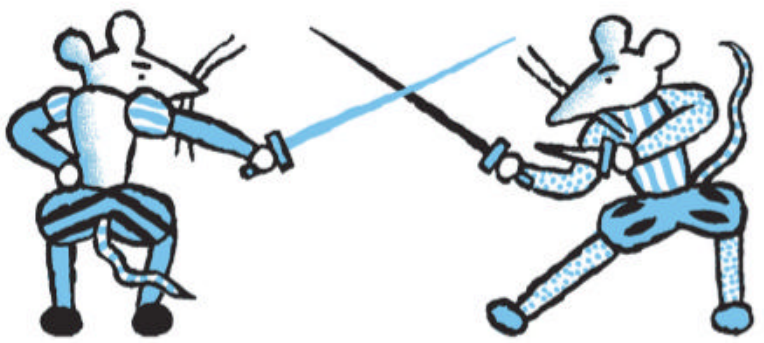
6. Who chooseth me shall gain wheat many men desire.



7. Love thoughts lie rich when canopied with bowlers.

8. Do not these fair yokels / Become the forest better than the town?

9. To diet is to be banished from myself.



10. And run through fire I will for thy sweet shake.

11. Tell me where is fancy bread . . .

12. O, brave newt world / That has such people in 't!

13. Cupid is a knavish lad / Thus to make poor females mead.

14. Some rinse by sin, and some by virtue fall.



15. Lord, what fools these mortals bed!

16. That which I would discover / The slaw of friendship bids me to conceal.

17. Everyone can master a grief but he that has wit.



18. 'Tis but a three years' feast. / The mind shall banquet though the body pine.

19. I do desire we may be better stranglers.

20. And I am such a tender lass, if my hair do but tickle me, I must scratch.

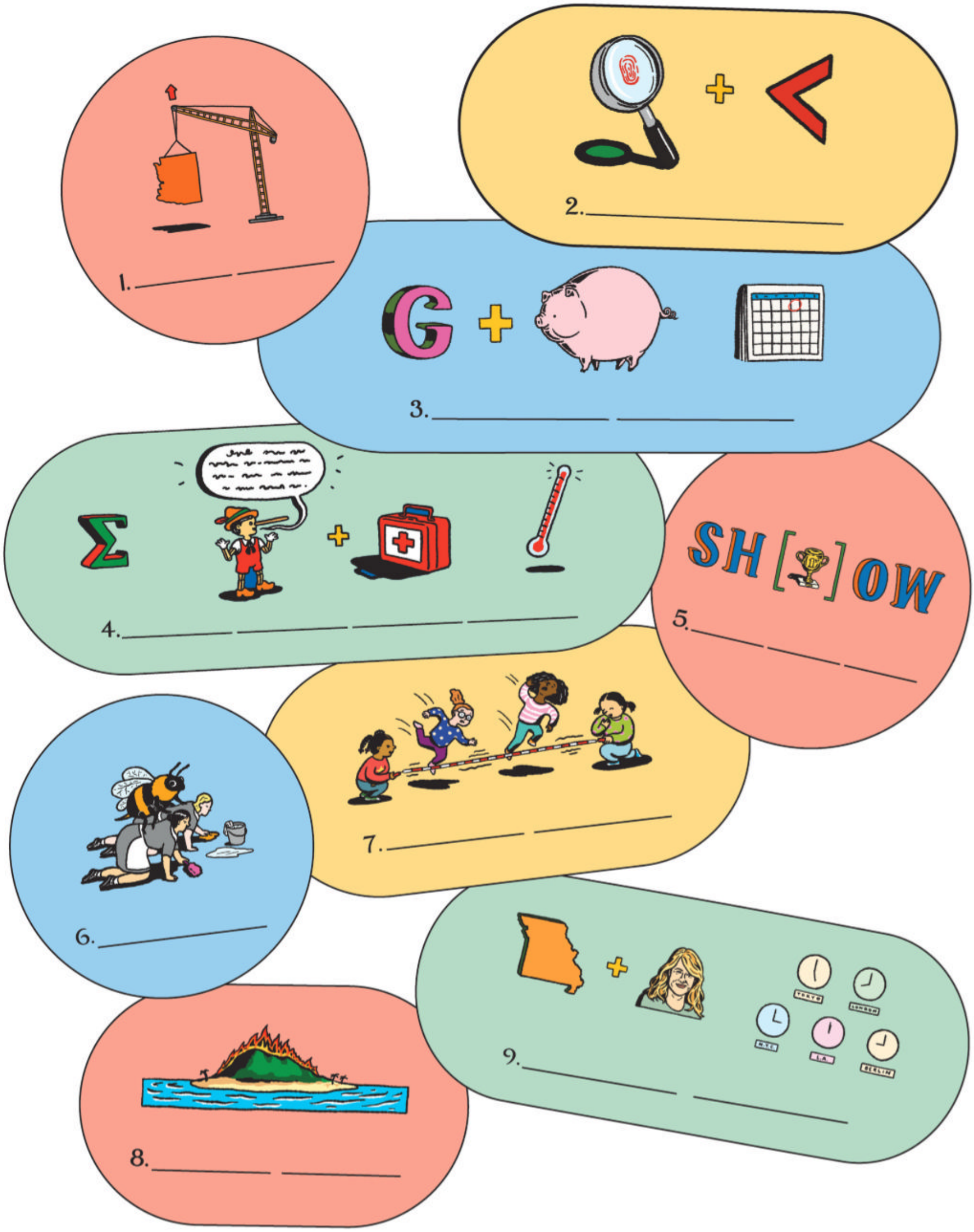
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

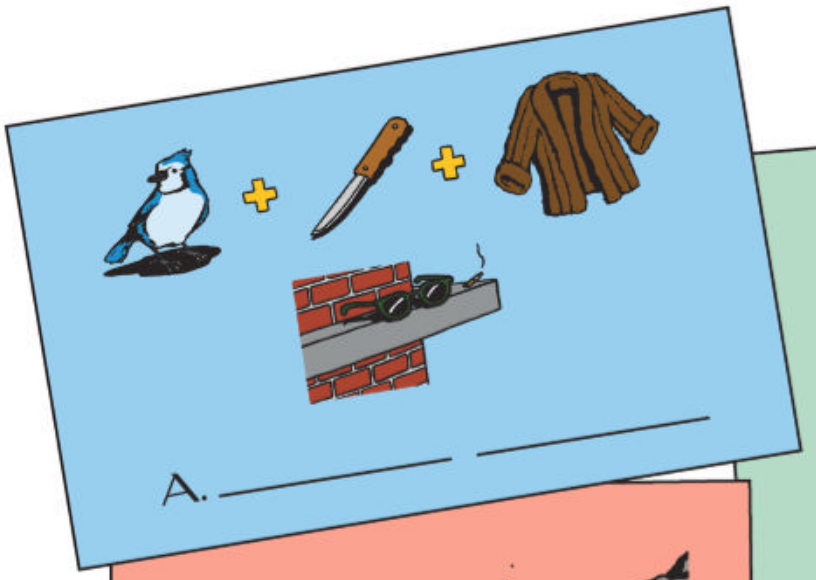
ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOOHEE YOON

SIGHT GAGS

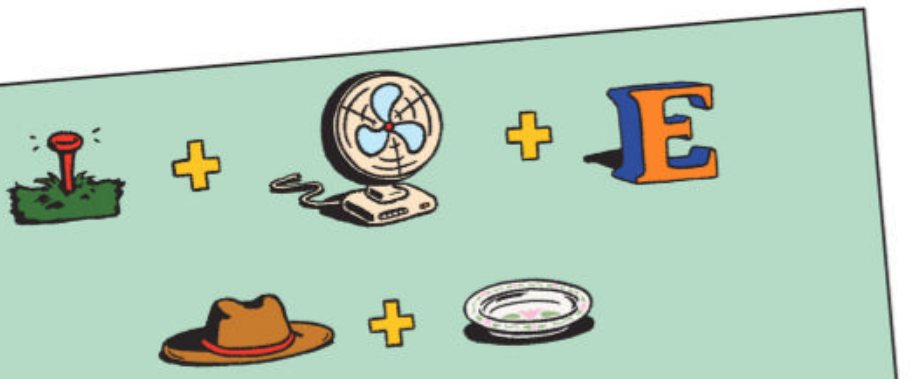
BY LIZ MAYNES-AMINZADE AND SUERYNN LEE

The drawings on the left page represent the titles of nine comedies; the drawings on the right represent the names of nine actors. Decipher the images, then match each movie with its star.





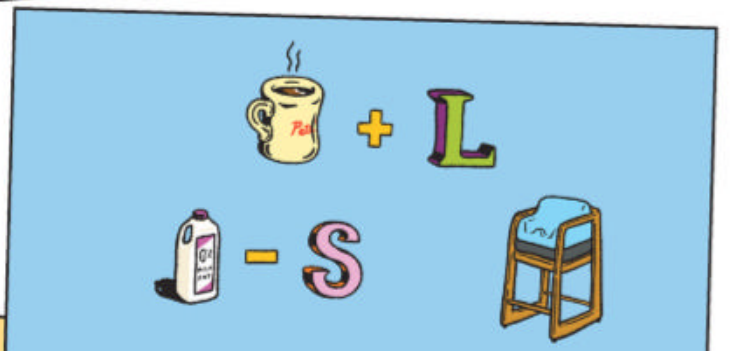
A. _____ _____



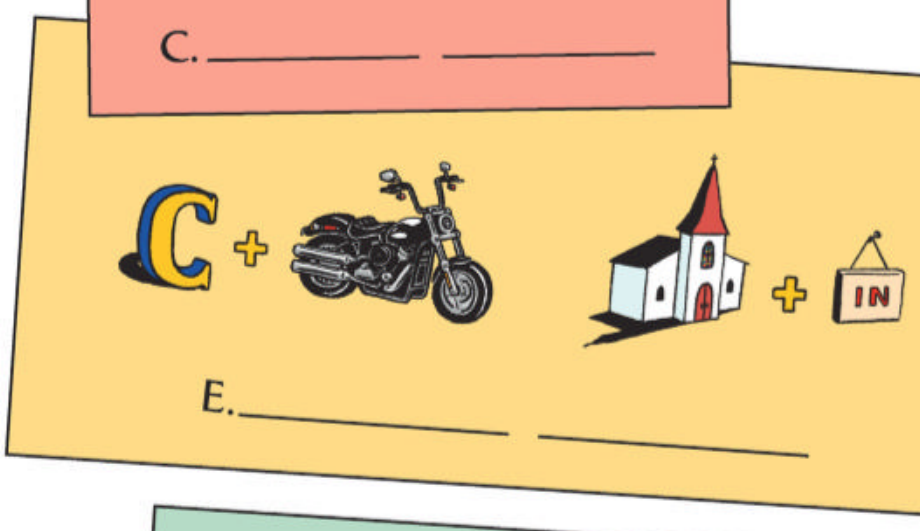
B. _____ _____



C. _____ _____



D. _____ _____ _____



E. _____ _____



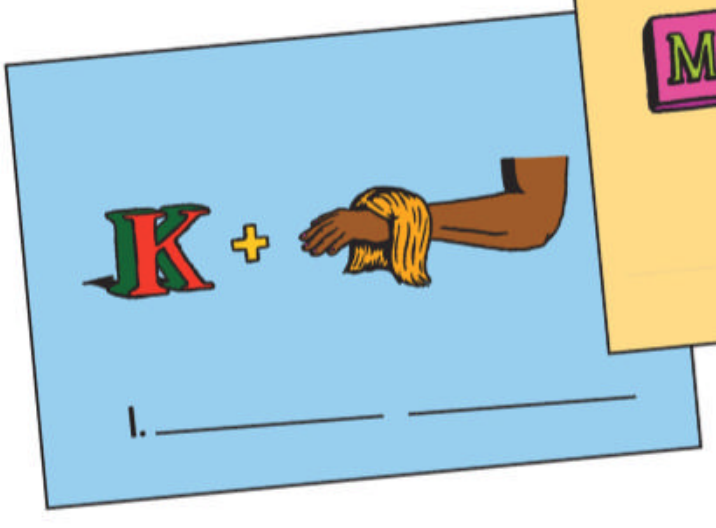
F. _____ _____



G. _____ _____



H. _____ _____



I. _____ _____

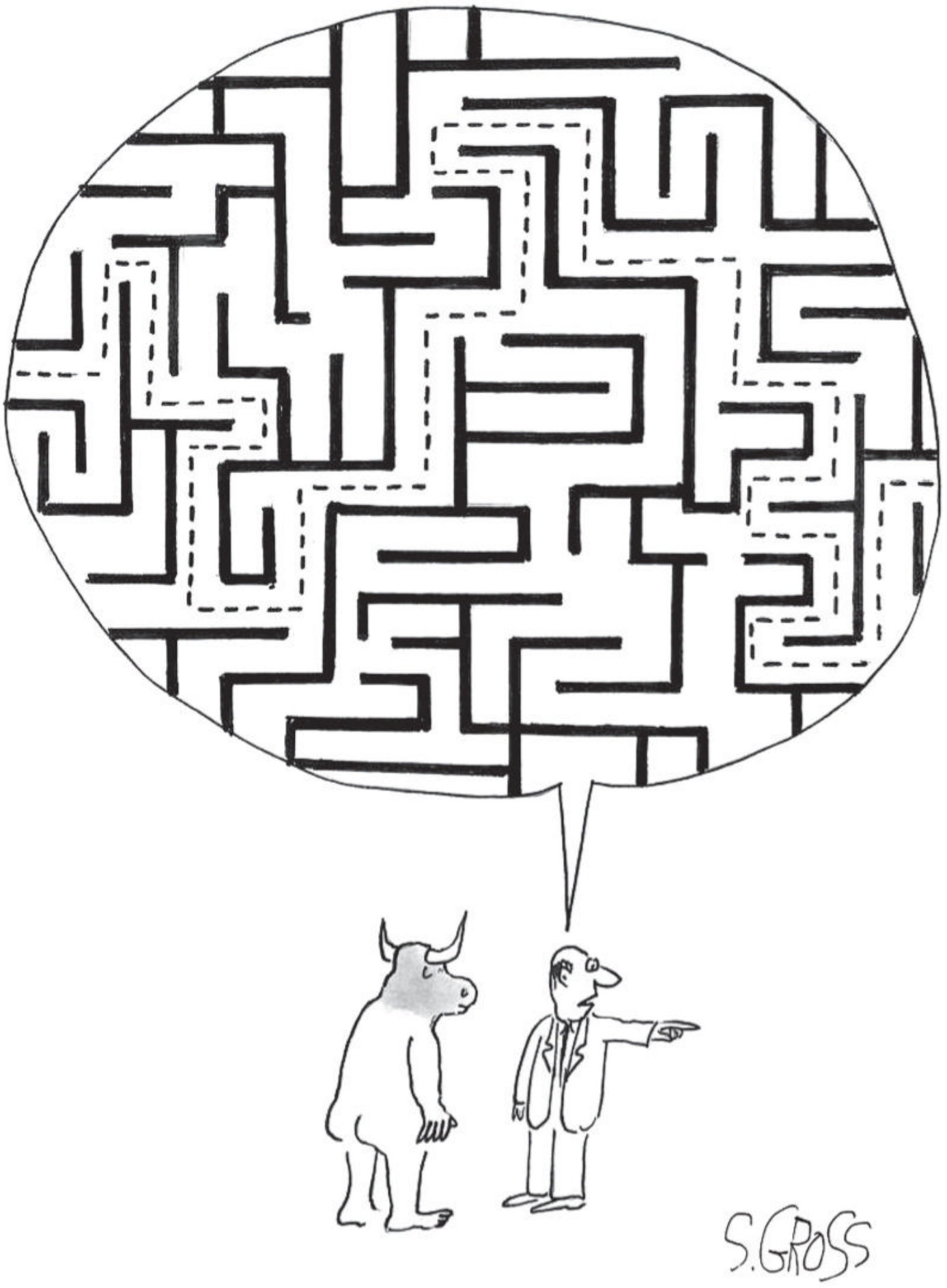
Match the movie with the star:

1. ____ 2. ____ 3. ____ 4. ____ 5. ____

6. ____ 7. ____ 8. ____ 9. ____

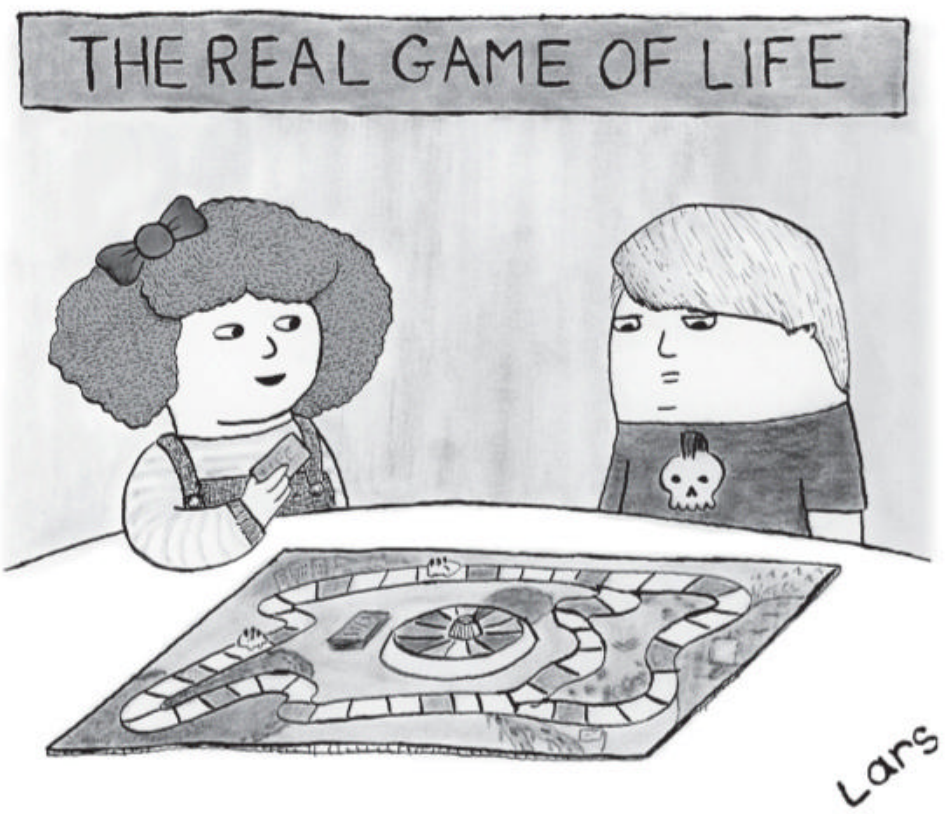
THE FUNNIES

For readers ready to chuck this issue
out the window upon failing to solve a puzzle,
here is some comic relief.

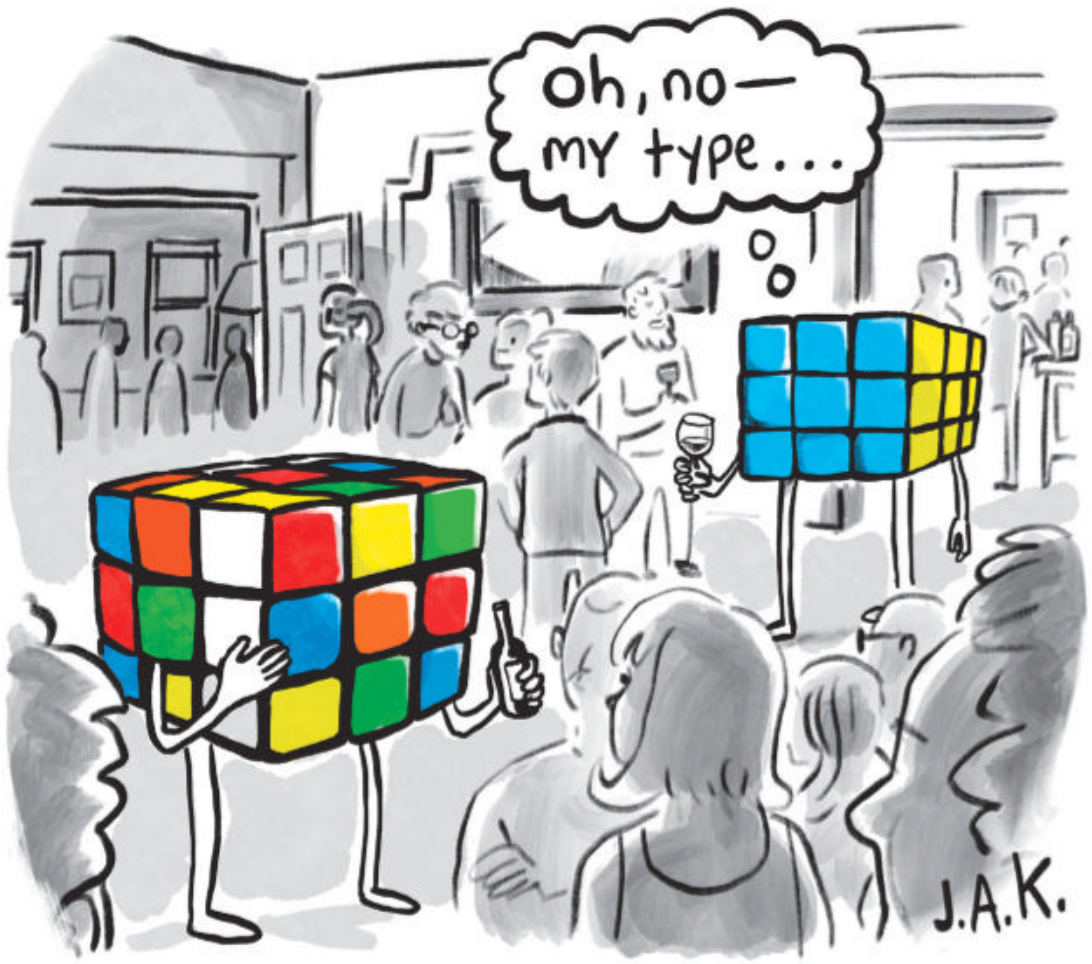




"I may look goofy, but I'm in the New York 'Times' crossword puzzle way more than Alan Alda."



"Uh-oh! You forgot to circle back with Ravi and Jess about weekend plans. Spend the next turn seeing if Sunday is a possibility."

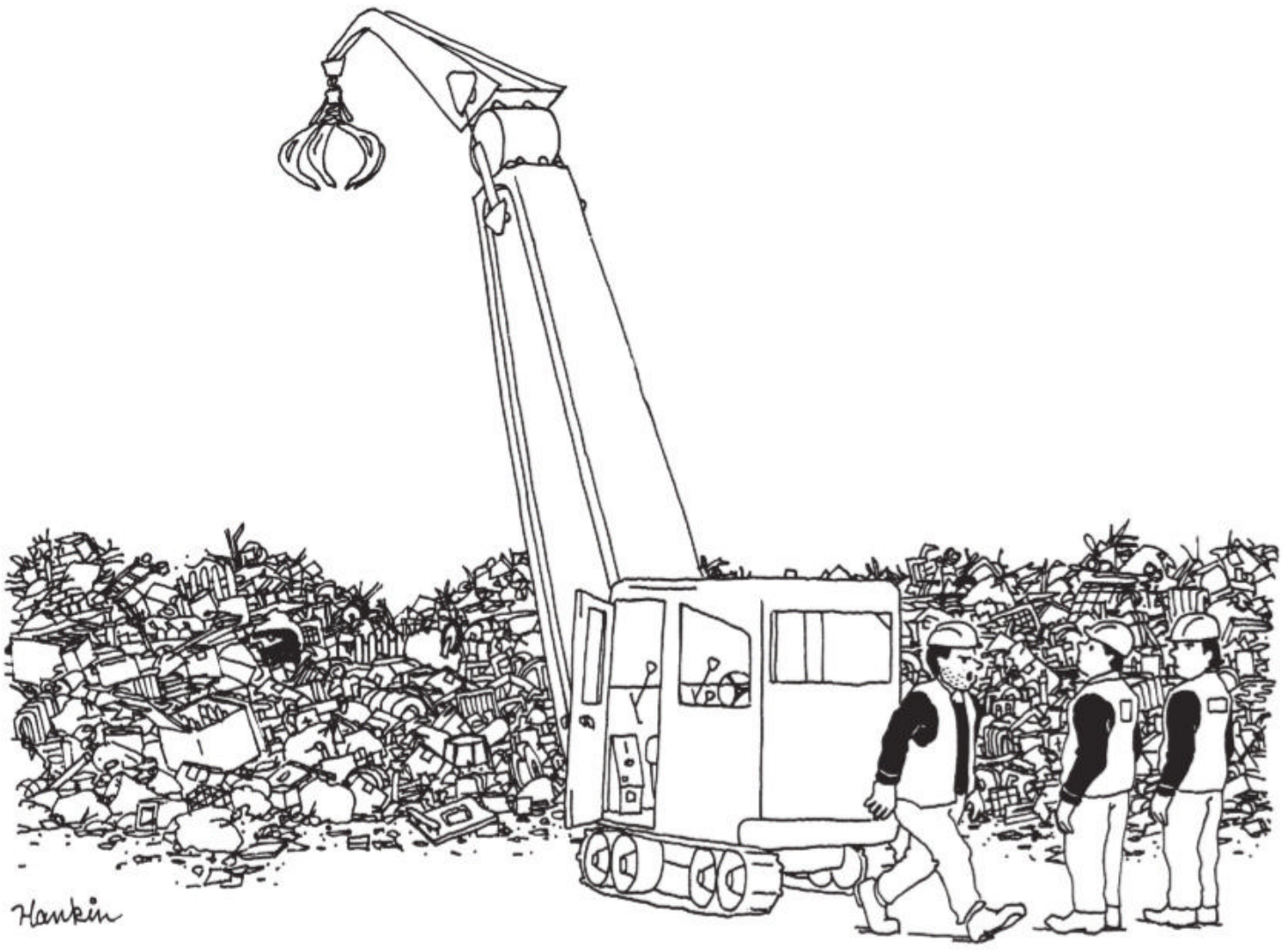

Oh, no—
my type...
J.A.K.


meredith

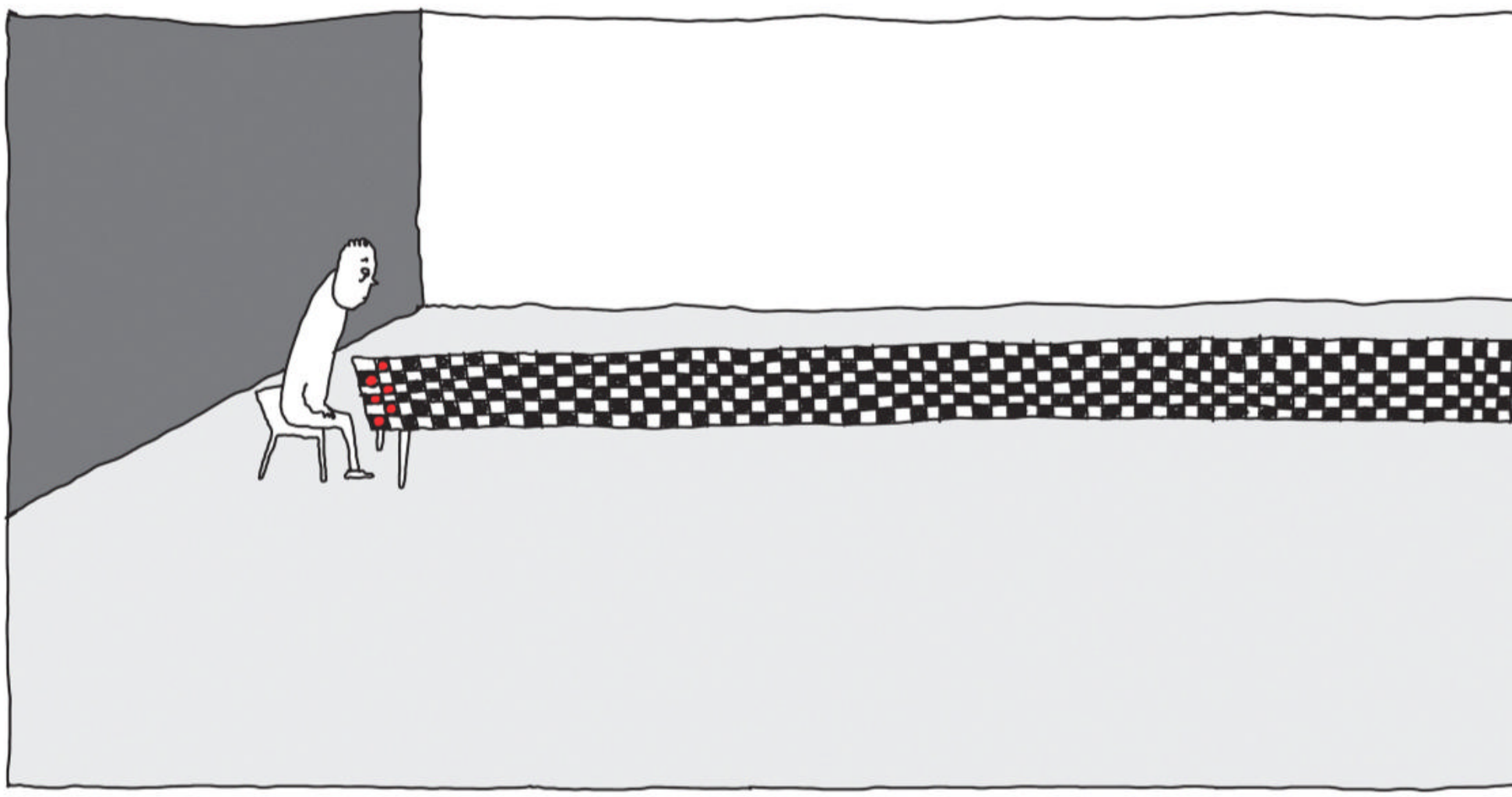


"My hippo is working on eating more mindfully."





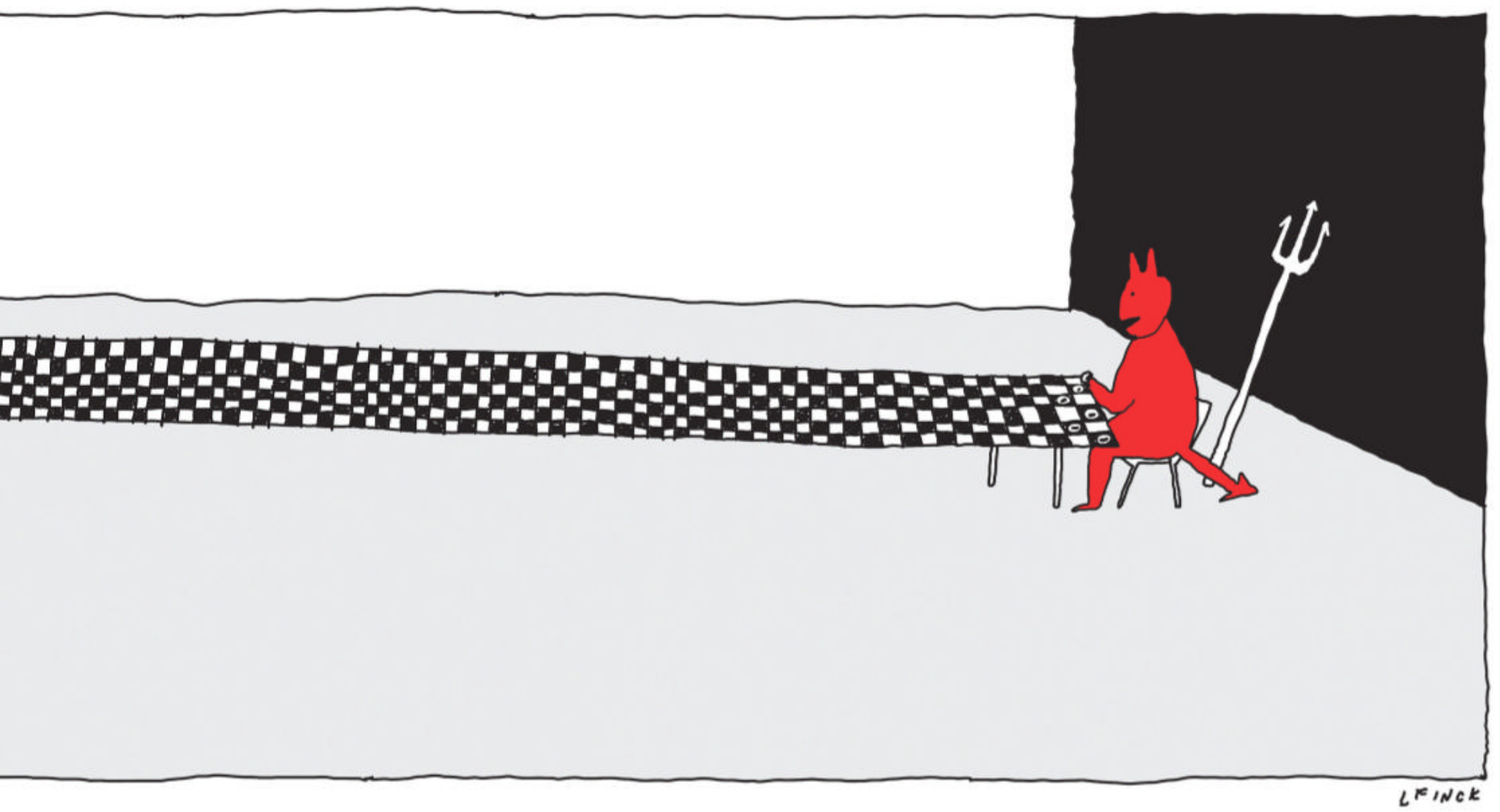
"I ran out of quarters."



"Best 50,000,000,001 games



"Once your schooling is done, you'll only need puzzles and word games to maintain your brainpower."



out of 100,000,000,000 wins."

PICTURING THE COVE INN

SETH

LATE IN HIGH SCHOOL...

I TOOK A PART-TIME JOB...

AT A LOCAL SEA-FOOD RESTAURANT.

COVE INN →

A WELL-KNOWN PLACE OUT BY THE LAKE.

A FIFTEEN- OR TWENTY-MINUTE DRIVE FROM TOWN.

AN OLD PLACE. ITS HISTORY WENT BACK TO THE FORTIES.

I THINK.

COVE INN

THE COVE INN WAS OWNED BY THE BAKER FAMILY.

COVE

JACK BAKER AND HIS WIFE, EILEEN.

EILEEN WAS KNOWN AS "BIRDY."

I DON'T KNOW WHY.

THEY HAD A LITTLE BOY, ALSO NAMED JACK.

THE MATRIARCH OF THE CLAN WAS JACK'S MOTHER.

THE STERN MRS. BAKER.

SHE SCARED ME.

THE COVE INN...

HAD BEEN HIRING TEENS...

FROM THE NEIGH-BORING AREA...

FOR DECADES.

NOTE: NAMES AND APPEARANCES HAVE BEEN CHANGED.

EVERY SUMMER, SCORES OF TEEN-AGERS WORKED THERE.

WAITRESSES, SALAD GIRLS...

COOKS, BUSBOYS, BARTENDERS...

DISHWASHERS.

THAT WAS SUMMER.

I STARTED IN WINTER.

I DIDN'T KNOW IT THEN...

BUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN WINTER AND SUMMER...

WAS NIGHT AND DAY.

IN WINTER, THERE WAS ONE COOK, ONE WAITRESS...

AND ONE DISH-WASHER.

I WAS THE DISHWASHER.

THE INN WAS PERCHED AT THE POINT...

WHERE A BIG RIVER MEETS A LAKE.

AN OLD RAMBLING BUILDING...

LACKING CHARM.

I CAN'T SAY WHAT IT LOOKED LIKE WHEN IT OPENED...

BUT BY THE TIME I WORKED THERE...

IT WAS AN UN-GAINLY PILE.

A SPRAWL OF SQUAT BOXES.


IN WINTERTIME, THE COVE INN SEEMED A VAST PLACE.
DARK. CAVERNOUS.
THE DINING ROOM STOOD ICY AND ABANDONED.
NEVER USED IN THESE MONTHS.
LIGHTS OUT.
ALL THE ACTION TOOK PLACE UP FRONT.
IN THE BAR.
IN MEMORY, THE BAR WAS A LIGHTED ISLAND...
IN A LARGE SEA OF BLACKNESS.
THE PLACE, OF COURSE, WASN'T ALL THAT BIG.
RETURNING YEARS LATER, I WAS STRUCK...
!
BY HOW MUCH SMALLER IT WAS...
THAN I HAD REMEMBERED.
THE CLIENTELE IN WINTER...
MOSTLY LOCALS.
FOLKS FROM THE FEW COTTAGES DOT-TING THE LAKESHORE.
OR FISHERMEN IN SEARCH OF A DRINK.
WE CLOSED EARLY MOST NIGHTS.
ABOUT 9:30.
I THINK.

WHEN I THINK OF THOSE WINTER NIGHTS...

I SEE...

A DARK CORRIDOR...

LINKING KITCHEN TO DINING ROOM TO BAR.

EXIT

I HEAR...

AN ALMOST PHYSICAL QUIET...

BROKEN ONLY BY MURMURED VOICES...

OR MUFFLED FOOTSTEPS.

THE WHISTLE OF THE WIND OFF THE LAKE.

THE OPEN AND CLOSE OF A DISTANT DOOR.

WET

THE CRUNCH OF SNOW.

THE START OF A CAR ENGINE.

PEGGY'S VOICE CALLING FOR PICKEREL OR PERCH...

OR OUR SIGNATURE "SHORE DINNER." *

THE "TING" OF THE COOK'S BELL.

WHICH MEANT "ORDER IS UP."

I SEE MYSELF, PAUSED A MOMENT...

IN THE DARK HALLWAY.

WAS SOFT MUSIC PLAYING?

I'M NOT SURE.

* SCALLOPS, SHRIMP, PERCH & FROGS' LEGS.


FUNNY, I DON'T RECALL APPLYING FOR THE JOB.
NO MEMORY OF A JOB INTERVIEW, EITHER.
I DO KNOW WHY I SOUGHT THE JOB.
DIERDRE.
YES, I WAS STILL CHASING HER.
SHE WAITRESSED THERE PART TIME.
I FIGURED WORKING TOGETHER...
WOULD BE A GOOD WAY TO GET HER TO LOVE ME.
BUT, Y'KNOW, I CAN BARELY PICTURE HER THERE.
I ONLY RECALL HER AT SCHOOL.
I DOUBT WE EVER WORKED TOGETHER.
OR HARDLY EVER.
IN THE KITCHEN, I WORKED WITH LILY OR BRAD.
THEY WERE THE COOKS.
I CAN BARELY PICTURE THEM, EITHER.
IN WINTER, I MEAN.
WHEN I THINK OF THE SUMMER...
THEY SPRING TO LIFE.
BEFORE SUMMER, I HARDLY SPOKE A WORD TO EITHER.
THAT WINTER, I WAS SHY.


I WORKED THE DISH MACHINE IN SILENCE.
I WASHED THE POTS IN SILENCE.
I ATE MY FREE MEAL IN SILENCE.
I SAID HELLO WHEN I CAME IN...
HEY.
AND GOODBYE WHEN I LEFT.
I'M OFF!
SLAM!
IN WINTER, PEGGY WAS ALWAYS ON SHIFT.
AT LEAST, THAT'S HOW I REMEMBER IT.
I SAW PEGGY AS AN OLDER LADY...
BUT LOOKING BACK...
I BET SHE WAS ONLY IN HER MID- TO LATE TWENTIES.
SHE WAS VERY KIND TO ME.
SHE LIKED TO TEASE ME.
HA HA!
BLUSH!
ONE COLD NIGHT, SHE SAID,
DON'T YOU EVER SPEAK?
I NEVER FORGOT THIS!
I AM NOT A QUIET PERSON.
I TALK ON AND ON.
THAT THROWAWAY COMMENT OF HERS...
WAS LIKE A GRAND TRIBUTE.
CLUG
SOMETHING I'D ALWAYS SECRETLY WISHED FOR.
CHUG CHUG
TO BE THOUGHT OF AS QUIET.
EVEN ONCE!

ENVISIONING EXTINCTION

ART BY EDWARD KOREN

Tragicomic creatures of a terrifying future.

For several years, until the pandemic and declining health dictated otherwise, Edward Koren, who turned eighty-seven this month, made a point of trading life in northern New England for a few weeks in Paris, where he set up shop at Idem, the still thrumming nineteenth-century printing studio in Montparnasse. A contributor to *The New Yorker* for sixty years—more than a thousand cartoons and thirty-one covers, and counting—Ed has always been an eclectic cottage industrialist, bringing forth sui-generis art and artifacts (drawings, lithographs, books, utilitarian ceramics, wood sculptures, repurposed household objects), each of which bears the Koren quintessence: exquisitely textured draftsmanship, an insatiable eye, perfect pitch, and a droll empathy for earnest overthinking.

Ed's more frequent nineteenth-century habitat is the farmhouse in Brookfield, Vermont, where thirty-five years ago he settled full time with his wife, Curtis Ingham Koren. Radiating from the village center are intermittently paved roads that nurtured in Ed a passion for cycling that inevitably found its way into his work. More than two decades ago, he began producing scores of pencil drawings, usually in color, of his familiar hirsute *Homo sapiens* on bicycles, soon joined by even more gloriously fantastical kindred quadruped and avian creatures of indeterminate taxonomy. As time passed, these figures shed much of their hair and flesh, and then their wheels.

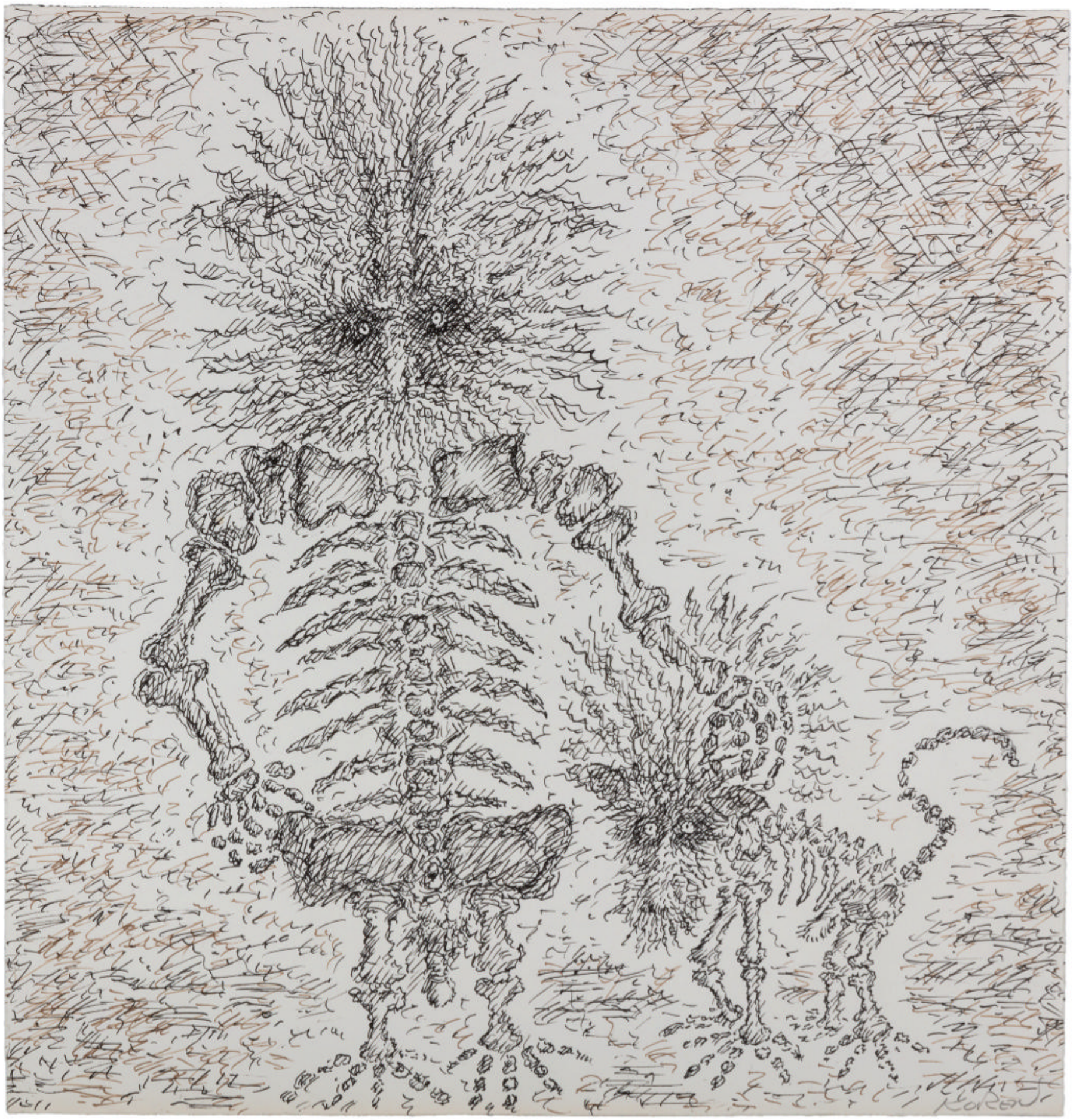
In 2018, a show of this new work opened at a museum in Bennington, Vermont, and among its viewers was the photographer Stephen Gorman, who has made arduous trips to the Inupiat village of Kaktovik, on the northern coast of Alaska, within the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. There he photographs the effects of climate change upon polar bears. Because of retreating sea ice, the bears have lost access to their primary prey, ringed seals and bearded seals, and have been reduced to scavenging the



"Line of Succession" (2018), indigo-blue pencil on paper.



"Thinking About Extinction VI" (2015), lithograph.



"Companions for Life," pen and black sepia ink on paper.

skeletons of whales hunted by the Inupiat. Ed became acquainted with Gorman's work, and, with those stunning images in mind, he returned to Idem in 2019.

Shown here is a selection of lithographs and drawings, some of which emerged from that endeavor, currently on view in "Down to the Bone," an exhibition at the Peabody Essex Museum, in Salem, Massachusetts, curated by Trevor Smith and Jane Winchell, which brings together twelve Koren images and twelve Gorman photographs.

"It's vague to me how my work transformed into these skeletal figures with their melancholy, and the tragicomic gaze in their eyes," Ed said recently. "The tragedy is climate change and its effects. What's comical—that might seem like a shocking word—is the link between these woebegone creatures, their fate in the world, and ours. The hopelessness and haplessness of it all. We're pulling the trigger on them and, we don't yet seem to understand, upon ourselves."

—Mark Singer



"Thinking About Extinction VII" (2019), lithograph.



"Thinking About Extinction II," lithograph.

THE CRITICS



A CRITIC AT LARGE

FLESH WOUND

Norman Mailer went to war and wrote a big novel about it. Did he ever really come back?

BY DAVID DENBY

When Norman Mailer was inducted into the Army, in March, 1944, he was a freshly married twenty-one-year-old Harvard graduate, a slight young man of five feet eight inches and a hundred and thirty-five pounds. In the previous few years, he had published some stories and written a play and two novels (one of them published, in a typescript facsimile, as "A Transit to Narcissus," in 1978). Even as a student, he thought of himself as a professional writer, and from the day that Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, in December, 1941, he had wanted to write a big book about the war. He was sent for basic training to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, where many of the men were from Pennsylvania, the South, and the Upper Midwest. Mailer was from middle-class Jewish Brooklyn; he had landed in the great working-class Gentile world, and was eager to observe. He canvassed the recruits about their sex lives, taking notes on a yellow legal pad. (He discovered that many of them did not believe in foreplay.) Mailer knew that tough Jews served in the war, including criminals, louts, and bitterly determined, hardworking men, but he was without physical skills. He had never worked a thresher, or manhandled heavy goods into a truck, or tinkered with Dad's jalopy.

In early January, 1945, General Douglas MacArthur landed with an enormous invasion force on Luzon, the largest of the Philippine islands; Mailer, after waiting in a troopship, went ashore a few weeks later. He was thrown as a rifleman into the 112th Cavalry Regiment, out of Texas. The 112th had been in combat in the Pacific for more than a year, and many men in the unit had died. Mailer described those who remained as a little crazy, and physically messed up—some with open ulcers from jungle rot. The Texans were joined by men from other parts of the country, some of them bar fighters and casual anti-Semites (not by theory but by habit). "I didn't open my mouth for six months in that outfit," he later said.

"The nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn"—that was the one image of himself that Mailer said was "absolutely insupportable." It was insupportable because, for a while, it was true. A picture of him in uniform from early in his service shows a young man with soft lips, large ears, a gentle gaze. He did indeed write his big war book, "The Naked and the Dead," and it presents a fascinating paradox. A tough, even pessimistic work, filled with sordid sensuality—muck and detestable odors; bodily discomforts and mutilations; the tedium, exhilarations, and cruelties of an army fighting in the jungle—it may also have been a book that only a nice Jewish boy could write. A nice Jewish boy, that is, in flight from his background.

It requires some effort to recall the young Mailer across the intervening years of turmoil. Beginning in the nineteen-fifties, as doggedly as an earlier puny American, Theodore Roosevelt, Mailer transformed himself into a barrel-chested macho—a man six times married, the father of eight children and an adopted son, and the author of more than forty books, some of them American classics ("The Armies of the Night," from 1968, and the supremely abundant and sympathetic "The Executioner's Song," a "true life novel," from 1979), some of them clogged and nearly unreadable. Attentive and sweet-natured much of the time—his letters to friends and even to strangers are generously supportive—he also brawled and headbutted at parties. He was decked, hammered, billy-clubbed; his eye was gouged. He believed that physical courage was necessary equipment for a great writer (Hemingway was the model), and that Jewish men in particular had to overcome all sorts of weaknesses. "In the first week / of their life / male jews / are crucified," he wrote in a poem. His recklessness encompassed an abominable act: at the end of a drunken party, in 1960, he twice stabbed Adele Morales, his second wife and the mother of two of his children. "I let God down," Mailer later told Betsy Mailer, one of his daughters with Adele.

For good and for ill, that was the Mailer the world knew for more than fifty years. When he died, in 2007, at the age of eighty-four, his reputation was at a low ebb. His temperament and preoccupations seemed artifacts of a bygone and benighted era. And not without reason. His reactionary sexual politics, expressed at length in the rapturously composed but morally preposterous polemic "The Prisoner of Sex," published in *Harper's*, in 1971, have been at the center of searing critiques for a half century.

Still, writers have a way of losing their labels. In the nineteen-forties, T. S. Eliot, Lionel Trilling, Edmund Wilson, and George Orwell all wrote



THE NORMAN MAILER ESTATE ARCHIVES; OPPOSITE: JOOHEE YOON

"The Naked and the Dead" is the work of a fiercely ambitious man fleeing an identity as a "nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn."

essays about Rudyard Kipling, retrieving what was aesthetically and emotionally satisfying from the bitter effusions of a rank imperialist and racist; some four decades later, Edward Said and other post-colonial critics and scholars continued the effort of defending the art embedded in the toxic mesh of Kipling's attitudes. Mailer is a very different writer, but a similar kind of sorting out may be in the works, especially now that a major revival of interest in him has begun. The Library of America, which has brought out two volumes of Mailer's writing from the sixties, is now reissuing "The Naked and the Dead," in honor of Mailer's hundredth birthday, on January 31st. The volume is edited by J. Michael Lennon, whose many-sided biography, "Norman Mailer: A Double Life" (2013), is by far the best that the author has received. Lennon has accompanied the novel's text with a selection of the extraordinary letters that Mailer wrote from the battlefield to his first wife, Beatrice Silverman. Many additional projects devoted to Mailer are under way or have been proposed, including selections from his mid-fifties philosophical and erotic journal, a collection of his writings on democracy, a Showtime documentary, two TV series, and extended critical studies by Christopher Ricks and David Bromwich. In a new book, "Tough Guy: The Life of Norman Mailer," the British literary scholar and biographer Richard Bradford has produced an almost entirely negative portrait of a man whose life is "wonderfully grotesque," and yet the book's very existence attests to a more complicated reality. It would be naïve to suppose that the renewed attention on Mailer has nothing to do with the scandals attached to his name. It would also be naïve to pretend that he was not a great American writer.

Mailer's father, Isaac (Barney) Mailer, was born near Vilnius, Lithuania, but moved with his family in 1900 to South Africa; he served in the British Army during the First World War. In America, he spoke with a punctilious English accent. In all, he was a strange bird—a mock Brit, a Jewish accountant, and a passionate gambler, frequently in debt. In 1922, Barney Mailer married Fanny Schneider. She had grown up in Long Branch, New Jersey, the daughter of a Lithuanian rabbi who never officially practiced in America. (According to a relative, the elder Schneider believed that "rabbis were *shnorrers*.") At home in Crown Heights, just east of Prospect Park, Fanny, a loving, capable woman, raised Norman and his sister, Barbara, while managing a home-oil-delivery business by telephone. The Jewish-folkloric combination of a weak father and a strong mother evidently benefitted Fanny's son, who drew power from the devotion of his parents, aunts, and uncles throughout his seventy-year writing career.

As a child, Norman was quiet and obedient, too preoccupied with his studies to spend much time among the neighborhood *bonditts*, with their pranks and their passion for stickball. On the way to school (Boys High, in Bedford-Stuyvesant), he kept his head down, avoiding fights with the local Italian and Irish street gangs, and with the local Jewish toughs as well. He built model airplanes, some of them extremely impressive, and spent his summers, with Barbara, in a resort hotel in Long Branch, run by one of his aunts. In a spare room, he would write fiction.

In September, 1939, Mailer showed up at Harvard in an outfit of orange-striped trousers, a gold jacket, and saddle shoes. He was sixteen, and found himself as ignorant about ruling-class undergraduates and the social rituals of the college as he was, five years later, about the habits of working-class Americans. The clothes were soon discarded, though some of his regular laundry was sent home, washed by the family's Black maid, and mailed back. In his first year on campus, he ate dinner with other Jewish boys at the Harvard Union and began to feel his way around. Until the end of his sophomore year, he lived almost entirely within the protected boundaries of the American Jewish middle class.

At the time, Latin was a prerequisite for English majors at Harvard; Mailer had never studied it, so he became an engineering major, learning much that would serve him well when he reconstructed the liftoff of the Saturn V rocket in "Of a Fire on the Moon" (1970), his impassioned report on the Apollo 11 moon landing. His main occupation at school was reading,



"If it's horizontal, he's watching a movie. If it's vertical, he's watching a book."

particularly the American realists he discovered as a freshman—James T. Farrell (the Studs Lonigan trilogy), John Dos Passos (the U.S.A. trilogy), John Steinbeck ("The Grapes of Wrath"). Faulkner and Fitzgerald and Thomas Wolfe came afterward, and Hemingway served as a (distant) spiritual mentor. Hemingway's hunting, fishing, and boxing, his war exploits, his courageous and soulful physicality—boastful yet wounded—bore little resemblance to the habits of Crown Heights Jews. Mailer fell in love.

His own problem as a writer, he believed, was a lack of experience. Escaping from Harvard's rich preppies and ambitious Jews, he rode the subway around Boston, taking notes on working-class behavior, clothes, and accents. In the summer after his sophomore year, he left his hotel room on the Jersey shore with just a few dollars in his pocket and hitchhiked his way down to North Carolina, sleeping outdoors at night. Voluntarily, and for only two weeks, he became that familiar Depression-era figure, a hobo. When he returned home, Fanny made him take off his clothes before coming inside.

His lack of sexual experience was particularly mortifying. "You bore a standard of shame," he later said of himself and his friends. He at least lost his physical inhibitions. He played football in front of Dunster House, and loved the bone-jarring contact. At a Boston Symphony concert during his junior year, he met Beatrice (Bea) Silverman, a lively music major attending Boston University. She was argumentative, a passionate lefty, and a proto-feminist; she was also profane and, in the appreciative slang of the day, "earthy." They carried on in the mattressed trunk of a Chevy given to Mailer by his uncle, and, at Dunster, they became known for their lovemaking in Mailer's dorm room. Bea would talk dirty in front of his friends; they were both showing off. They got married in secret, in January, 1944. His draft notice arrived a week later.

What Mailer did in the war was not heroic. At first, working at headquarters on Luzon, he typed reports, laid wire, built a shower for officers. Humiliated and bored, he volunteered for a reconnaissance squad. He went on twenty-five patrols, many of them fifteen miles long, and he finally saw some combat: nothing much, as he admitted, but he knew what it was like to climb up a damp, rocky hill in the heat while burdened with a rifle, ammunition, grenades, two canteens, a steel helmet—perhaps forty pounds in all. His real mission was to see the worst and make an account of it. He wrote long letters to Bea (who had joined the Waves), some of which were detailed and harrowing. He was not just creating the book but creating himself as a man. In February, 1945, he entered a Japanese-held town that the Americans had overwhelmed with artillery and tanks. A letter to Bea chronicled what he saw:



> Right before us was a destroyed Japanese armored half-track and a tank. The vehicles were still smoldering, and the driver of the half-track had half fallen out, his head which was crushed from one ear to the jaw lay reclining on the running board, and the pitiful remaining leg thrust tensely through the windshield. The other leg lay near his head on the ground, and a little smoke was still arising from his chest. Another Japanese lay on his back a short distance away with a great hole in his intestines which bunched out in a thick white cluster like a coiled white garden hose. . . .
>
> After a half hour or so we descended to the road, and mounted the Jeep again. As we drove along the road the destruction was complete. Fragments of the corrugated steel from the warehouses had landed everywhere, and the wreckage formed almost a pattern on the road. Everything stunk, and everything, the road, the wreckage, the mutilated vehicles had become the two colors of conflagration—the rust red and the black. The whole vista was of destroyed earth and materiel—that battlefield looked like a hybrid between a junk-yard and a charnel house; it was perhaps the ugliest most dejecting sight I have ever seen. You wished acutely for rain, as the quick hand-maiden to time.

Some of the writing wound up in "The Naked and the Dead." The impressions are fresh: war meant the destruction of the body's unity, the collapse of physical structure, color, intactness.

After the Japanese surrendered, in August, 1945, Mailer became part of the American force occupying the home islands. He worked mainly as an Army cook, which he enjoyed. He attained the rank of sergeant, and sent his family a picture of himself in uniform looking much older than in the earlier photograph—now darkly handsome, with square shoulders and a full head of hair in the style of the actor John Garfield. Soon after that picture was taken, though, he got into a humiliating quarrel with a superior and turned in his stripes. He left the Army in 1946 as a private, after a little more than two years of service. He and Bea settled in Brooklyn and Provincetown. He wrote "The Naked and the Dead" at a rate of five thousand words a week, finishing in about fifteen months, including new and rewritten sections. The book received rave reviews and was an overnight best-seller, remaining on the *Times* list for more than a year. The Brooklyn Jewish boy was no longer abashed, no longer inadequate, and certainly no longer quiet.

In 1960, looking back on the book, Mailer described his state of mind in a letter to his friend Diana Trilling, the literary critic. "There is no meaning but the present," he wrote. "So of course I could do *The Naked and the Dead*. I had no past to protect, no habits to hold on to, no style to defend. My infirmity is that I had no emotional memory." This is an attempt at mythmaking. He sounds as if he were creating himself as he went along, though what he actually meant by "no emotional memory" was no memory he was proud of. Henry Roth, in "Call It Sleep" (1934), and Alfred Kazin, in "A Walker in the City" (1951), had done a great deal with the furtive behavior of a Jewish boy on the streets, but Mailer saw his childhood as something not to explore but to transcend. He drew heavily on the American realists, especially Dos Passos, in constructing his own version of wartime naturalism, piling up endless physical detail and moments of emotional suffering.

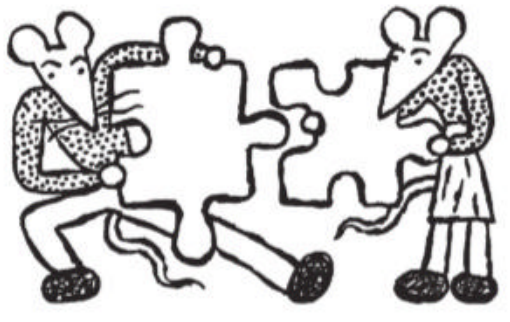
"The Naked and the Dead" is set on the fictional island of Anopopei, an irregular kidney-shaped blob in the Pacific with trackless vegetation and withering wet heat—and also thousands of Japanese defenders, though they hardly

figure in the novel. Mailer never tells us how the Anopopei campaign fits into the Americans' strategy. The absence is intentional: strategy is left to officers, who, in Mailer's estimate, are mainly self-important stiffs. What matters most in the book is the day-to-day lives of fourteen soldiers in a reconnaissance platoon, who find themselves trapped between the obsessions of two pathological egotists—the island commander, General Edward Cummings, a MacArthur-like military intellectual who thinks that men can be controlled only through fear ("the natural role of twentieth-century man is anxiety," he says), and, at the platoon level, Staff Sergeant Sam Croft, a nerveless warrior who "could not have said . . . where his hands ended and the machine gun began." For Croft, killing seems a natural expression of his being. In a limited way, he's intensely admirable. Writing to Bea, Mailer described his creation of Croft as "an archetype of all the dark, bitter, inarticulate, capable and brooding men that America spawns." Capability meant a great deal to the young writer.

Mailer wrote a terrifying combat scene (armies firing across a river at night), but much of the novel chronicles the routine work of men at war: unloading supplies, building a road, cleaning weapons, "harsh eventless days" followed by such exertions as pulling 37-mm. anti-tank guns down a jungle path in darkness. (Seen in the light of a flare, "the guns had a slender articulated beauty like an insect reared back on its wire haunches.") In the central action of the novel, General Cummings, eager to show off his tactical prowess, sends the platoon on a recon mission that turns out to be foolish, even superfluous, and Croft, ready to test himself, willingly carries it out, sacrificing men en route. He tries to take the platoon over the island's big mountain, Anaka—which he thinks of as *his* mountain, as Ahab thinks of the whale. But the labor of ascending Anaka is far from exalting, and the men curse it the whole way. In the end, Croft's mountain worship goes nowhere. Somewhere near the peak, he stumbles into a hornets' nest, and the enraged insects cause the men to abandon their packs and rifles and scatter down the slope like children. Cummings's regular infantry, under the command of a mediocre officer (Cummings is away), wipes out the remaining Japanese garrison.

When Mailer worked on the book, right after the war, jubilation was a large part of the national mood—a cheerfully militant atmosphere of gallant warriors and sleeves-rolled-up citizens fighting Fascism in "the good war." During the war and just after, Hollywood movies portrayed the democratic unit—an ethnically mixed platoon or bomber crew—as a vessel of a great national cause. But Mailer writes without the slightest elation over American victory and Japanese defeat, and his platoon is less a common cause than a group of ornery, banged-up soldiers hoping to survive. Unlike Kipling, who overcame a miserable, bullied childhood in part by identifying with the strong (especially those of the British Empire), Mailer expressed contempt for powerful men bereft of human understanding. He was attracted to violence as an exploration of personal will, while despising authority in any institutional form.

The over-all emotion of the novel is one of futility. Accident, not strategy, rules. Cummings and Croft could be seen as incipient postwar American Fascists, highbrow and lowbrow, but both of them wind up stymied. The book asks, What is the point of endless effort and repetition? Is persistence life's only meaning? The postwar celebratory mood was shadowed by disillusionment and absurdism. As Mailer was bringing out "The Naked and the Dead," in 1948, Samuel Beckett was in Paris writing "Waiting for Godot." As a war novel, Mailer's book looks back to Stephen Crane's "The Red Badge of Courage" (1895), with its confused, even incoherent battle scenes—all smoke and noise—and forward to Joseph Heller's "Catch-22" (1961), in which the war and Army bureaucracy are rendered as a malign joke, dissolving any possible purpose into contradiction.



Mailer wrote "The Naked and the Dead" in an omniscient floating third person, moving from the mind of one man to that of another. The coarseness of the soldiers' thoughts and speech shocked some readers in 1948, though now it seems to us the way men in combat have always talked. As we discover in lengthy, bristling flashbacks, many of the men had been knocking around in Depression America, working on farms, in stores, in ordinary jobs, or not working much at all. Vaguely rebellious yet defeated, they are callous and cynical about women, and routinely contemptuous of "Yids" and "Izzies." These hard-luck guys have little purpose in their lives. Lieutenant Hearn, a Harvard graduate like Mailer, appears, at first, to be the hero of the novel, a liberal in revolt against his wealthy family. But Hearn is unfocussed and diffident, pulled by his own narcissism into confrontations with General Cummings that will destroy him. This war book has some courageous fighters and some generous acts, but it has neither heroes nor innocents. Unlike "the youth" in "The Red Badge of Courage," no one has any illusions to lose.

For all Mailer's hard knowledge of failure, his prose is little like that of his hero, Hemingway. It is not spare, stoic, and flowingly lyrical (from "A Farewell to Arms": "Late in the afternoon the rain stopped and from out number two post I saw the bare wet autumn country with clouds over the tops of the hills and the straw screening over the roads wet and dripping") but abrupt, obsessional, and grimly material. Mailer, describing men attempting to carry a wounded buddy on a stretcher back to safety, unleashes the enduring achievement of the book, his portrayal of the male body at the outer edge of fatigue:

> Through the afternoon the litter-bearers continued on their march. About two o'clock it began to rain, and the ground quickly became muddy. The rain at first was a relief; they welcomed it on their blazing flesh, wriggled their toes in the slosh that permeated their boots. The wetness of their clothing was pleasurable. They enjoyed being cold for a few minutes. But as the rain continued the ground became too soft, and their uniforms cleaved

uncomfortably to their bodies. Their feet began to slip in the mud, their shoes became weighted with muck and stuck in the ground with each step. They were too fagged to notice the difference immediately, their bodies had quickly resumed the stupor of the march, but by half an hour they had slowed down almost to a halt. Their legs had lost almost all puissance; for minutes they would stand virtually in place, unable to co-ordinate their thighs and feet to move forward. . . . The sun came out again, inflamed the wet kunai grass and dried the earth whose moisture rose in sluggish clouds of mist. The men gasped, took deep useless breaths of the leaden wet air, and shambled forward grunting and sobbing, their arms slowly and inevitably bending toward the ground.

On a bad day, a soldier will know every wretchedness of skin, lungs, arms, legs, bowels, kidneys. "The Naked and the Dead" is repetitive but at times very moving; the men carrying the stretcher reach a state, beyond exhaustion, in which "they were reduced to the lowest common denominator of their existence," and meet it with acceptance. As Mailer's letters to Bea reveal, he was shocked by the corrupted materiality of jungle war: the spilling corpses, the breakdown of physical integrity. But his writing about the living male body amounts to a full-throated humanist response: the body under stress is heroic, living in its wholeness, with consciousness remaining intact, even when vibrating with pain.

At the same time, "The Naked and the Dead" is surprisingly delicate in feeling. The rare moments of solidarity among the men give way to scraped emotions and anger, followed by distance and bitter hurt. The two Jews in the platoon, Roth and Goldstein, struggle especially hard for dignity—an obvious point of concern for Mailer, who had his own anxieties to resolve. Roth has been to City College in New York (the home of New York Jews in the thirties); he's married, but he's not getting anywhere. An irritable guy, he's snobby, morose, and too weak to survive—clearly Mailer's disapproving version of himself. Mailer endowed Goldstein with greater physical and moral strength. Like some earlier Jewish writers, Mailer saw virtue in a life of physical activity and advanced moral adventure: what Max Nordau, at the Zionist Congress in 1898, called *Muskeljudentum*, or "muscular Judaism"—a disavowal of endless study and effete intellection. Goldstein, along with a very serious Christian, attempts to carry the wounded soldier out of the jungle. As a boy, Goldstein heard his grandfather talk of Jewish suffering in the back of the family's candy store in Brooklyn. It meant nothing to him at the time, but when he's bearing the stretcher the words of the medieval sage Judah Halevi jump into his head: "Israel is the heart of all nations." Goldstein's consciousness as a Jew keeps him from letting go, for, if he fails, the men will think badly not just of him but of all Jews. In the character of Goldstein, Mailer's fear that he was not tough enough for the Army ends in a portrait of formidable endurance.

The enormous success of "The Naked and the Dead" left Mailer uneasy. He had no idea how he was going to live up to it. Seemingly on top of the world at twenty-five, he feared many things. In his novel, the Harvard-educated liberal allows himself to be trapped by power. Mailer, in his own eyes, needed to escape the traps not only of his soft middle-class Jewish background but also of postwar America—the desire for "security," the endless consumerism, and what he took to be the country's humiliating spiritual mediocrity. It's as if he were still in the jungle, pulling artillery through the night. He had made himself into a novelist in the Pacific, and now he brought the war home, fighting on two fronts—against what he disliked in himself and against those menaces of the nineteen-fifties, "conformity" and "adjustment." He acted out his rebellion in a continual performance with phallus, fists, booze, and sustained ass-in-chair writing sessions—a pressure at times noble, at times foolish, and certainly rough on other people as well as on himself. He became an egotist of a peculiarly self-afflicting sort, both calculating and spontaneous, provoking many blows, all of them deserved, all of them welcomed. For the author of "The Naked and the Dead," the truce never arrived. ♦



"I am the Ghost of Christmas Past—here to remind you that you were once young and thin."

• •

FAMILY ALBUM

Robin Coste Lewis travels to the past in her second book.

BY HILTON ALS



Lewis's elegiac, haunted volume was inspired by a collection of family photographs.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ERIK CARTER

The poet Robin Coste Lewis's second collection, the exquisite "To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness" (Knopf), is a book about how the dead do not stay dead. Not only because the author believes, or wants to believe, that she can awaken the deceased with her pen—"I am trying to make the dead clap and shout," she writes—but because those who are gone are determined not to stay put. Not in the heart, and certainly not in memory.

In a sense, Lewis's elegiac and haunted volume, filled with both words and photographs, found her long before she conceived it. Twenty-five years ago, Lewis was living in Rhode Island, teaching at Wheaton College and writing fiction. (She had received a B.A. from Hampshire College, where she compared African and South Asian diasporic literature, in 1989, and studied Sanskrit and comparative religious literature at Harvard's Divinity School, where she earned a master's degree in 1997.) But she returned home to Los Angeles after the death of her maternal grandmother, Dorothy Mary Coste Thomas Brooks, to empty out her house, which was going to be razed. Under Brooks's bed, Lewis found a suitcase containing hundreds of photographs—some in black-and-white, some in color, some posed, others candid—that were a record not only of Lewis's large extended family but of worlds that had vanished, of decisive moments that had come and gone during the Second Great Migration, of which Lewis's family, which originated in Louisiana, had been a part. It was unclear who had taken the photographs, but, by collecting the images and storing them together in that suitcase, Brooks had created a kind of narrative. It fell to her granddaughter to place it within the larger history of humanity.

Rather like Pilate, in Toni Morrison's 1977 novel, "Song of Solomon," who carries around the bones of her father because doing so, she says, "frees up your mind"—which is to say, frees you from the burden of history so that you can think about other things—Lewis has now been carrying her forebears with her for a quarter century. These bones don't so much free up her mind as feed her imagination—and quarrel with the usual ways in which history gets told. "To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness" assembles a hundred and seventy-nine photographs from Brooks's collection; interspersed with the images are short poems, sometimes just a line or two, that look like ticker tape from a ghostly world and read like messages in bottles cast out to sea by an emotionally marooned person with a surfeit of longing, hoping for love.

Lewis is no stranger to psychological or physical injury. When I first spoke to her, for a radio interview in 2015, she recounted a terrible accident she'd had in 2001: after dining at a restaurant in San Francisco, she got up to get her coat and fell into a hole in the floor that had not been cordoned off. She suffered brain damage, to the extent that doctors told her she wouldn't be able to write more than one line a day. So she worked on a line every day in her mind. Other lines followed. This was when she transitioned from writing prose to writing poetry.

The title of "To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness" is taken from a line by the Black Arctic explorer Matthew Henson, who is the subject of a long narrative poem that falls in the middle of the collection: "The effect of such storms of wind and snow, or

rain, is abject physical terror, due to the realization of perfect helplessness." The Henson poem is not accompanied by images and, unlike the rest of the volume, is printed on white paper, rather than black: Henson's polar snow sprinkled with his Black life in Lewis's words. The book's design is important, as it raises questions about what the eye sees and what the mind retains. Printing the images, shorter poems, and isolated lines against a black background evokes old-fashioned photo albums and drives home how modern technology has robbed photographs of their tactility, even as it has saved them from destruction. Those black pages also represent Lewis's interest in blackness—as a color, as a symbol, as a race, and as a defining element of her own heritage.

Like many readers, I admired Lewis's first collection, "Voyage of the Sable Venus and Other Poems"—a meditation on, among other things, women's bodies, family lore, and Black slaveowners in the antebellum South—which was awarded the 2015 National Book Award for poetry. A large part of my approbation had to do with her seriousness about the past, her understanding of how it both weighs us down and lights the way in all the moments we share with the living and the dead.

In a sharp prose prologue, Lewis listed the rules she set for herself when writing the volume's title poem—a nearly eighty-page work. "Voyage of the Sable Venus," she explained, is "comprised solely and entirely of the titles, catalog entries, or exhibit descriptions of Western art objects in which a black female figure is present, dating from 38,000 BCE to the present." Then:

> 1. No title could be broken or changed in any way. While the grammar is completely modified—I erased all periods, commas, semicolons—each title was left as published, and was not syntactically annotated, edited, or fragmented.
>
> 2. "Art" included paintings, sculpture, installations, photography, lithographs, engravings, any work on paper, et cetera—all those traditional mediums now recognized by the Western art-historical canon.

Lewis also incorporated, as she noted, "titles of art *by* black women curators and artists, whether the art included a black female figure or not," and "by black queer artists, regardless of gender, because this body of work has made consistently some of the richest, most elegant, least pretentious contributions to Western art interrogations of gender and race."

"Voyage of the Sable Venus" is part history and part homage, an epic song built from shards, a reflection of the Black women Lewis saw in art work after art work who had been broken into pieces by Western eyes. From the opening section, titled "The Ship's Inventory":

> Four-Breasted Vessel, Three Women
> in Front of a Steamy Pit, Two-Faced
> Head Fish Trying on Earrings, Unidentified.
>
> Young Woman with Shawl
> and Painted Backdrop, Pearl
> of the Forest, Two Girls
>
> with Braids People
> on a Ship with Some Dancing
> Girls. Our Lady of Mercy, Blue.

Through these titles, Lewis captured the ways in which Black women had been aestheticized across the millennia, pinned to a history that found them interesting for various reasons—their skin color, their hair, their culture—without ever letting them live their lives. And what were those lives? Burned, choked, fired, glazed on a vase. "Voyage of the Sable Venus" gives those women a new life and the freedom to voyage away from art, even as Lewis creates it.

"To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness" is another voyage. But the view is different, as is the destination: what Lewis is resuscitating here is a community, a family she knew or wishes she'd known—although they might have been suspicious of her. (Artists are often viewed with skepticism by their families, since part of their job is to rip at the fabric of relationships, the better to reveal the truth of being. Lucille Clifton wittily captured that skepticism in her poem "here rests," in which she recalled her sister saying, "when you poem this / and you will she would say / remember the Book of Job.")

"Black people are part of everyone and everything," Lewis, who has Afro-Creole roots, told me in 2016, when her second book hadn't yet fully taken shape in her mind. I was visiting Los Angeles, and we were sitting near her home in Silver Lake. It was the golden hour, and Lewis's brown freckles stood out against her toffee-colored skin. Her family had left New Orleans for California in the nineteen-fifties, and she wanted to delve deeper into the history of human migration. Louisiana, she said, had been "a mythical place" for her when she was growing up. "My family's history, for sure, but the history of that place, the beauty of that place, period, is so intense to me," she said. "And it's the lost country. We were raised that way: this place is far, and we'll never get back. It definitely felt like I was a child of exiles."

In her new book, she wanted to marry her feelings about the omnipresence of Blackness to a kind of history of photography. She told me then, with great excitement, that she had discovered that the first Black poetry anthology "published on the North American landmass" had been put out in New Orleans in 1845, in French, by freemen of color, and that the first daguerreotype in the American South is thought to have been produced by a man of color, in 1839. White supremacy, she said, had necessitated Black nationalism. But what saddened Lewis about looking at art history solely in the context of a Black-nationalist agenda was that it tended to minimize the contributions of the artists of color who produced work on flowers or other traditionally "beautiful" subjects. "Nationalism is a sneaky little bitch," she said. "Because how it affected our scholarship is people saying that those brothers"—the nineteenth-century freemen who made books and images—"had fucked-up politics, they had slaves, some other people were passing, and meanwhile I'm, like, No, no, no, that's what's so interesting, because you're getting to see just how fluid and elastic Blackness really is. In 1845, it's almost two decades before Emancipation, and they're publishing a fucking poetry anthology? And in French? And you don't give a shit 'cause they want to write about flowers? I say fucking congratulations to a motherfucker who's writing about flowers in

the antebellum South. How did you pull off that psychological feat?"

Nearly everything Lewis talked about that afternoon shows up in "To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness," but it has been transmogrified by time, and by Lewis's long search for a self that belongs to artistic, intellectual, and ethnic tribes but doesn't allow a political stance to limit her defiantly Black and female creative vision. The poet opens her new book with childhood photographs of her three older siblings. Soon after that, accompanying a snapshot of Lewis, days old and squalling in a hospital crib, comes this text:

> I snuck in next, taking up home
> inside her salty red grave,
> and here I became alive and suspicious.

Lewis's tone in the short poems in "To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness" brings to mind other writers, including Muriel Rukeyser and Ai and early Toni Morrison, who had a special interest in women's bodies, and in rendering sensuality on the page as something deep and evolutionary. Lewis is a romantic, greedy for love, but wary of it, too, because love is the first thing that life hurts. Life disrupts even the ultimate forms of closeness: with one's mother and with Mother Earth. Through birth, we leave one salty red grave for another.

The next photograph in the book is of a Black woman posing at a studio. She wears a long dark skirt, and her hair is tied back. Her impassive face, the studio backdrop: Could we be in New Orleans, before Lewis's family journeyed west? We can't know, because time has robbed us of so much, even of the origin of *us*. (Lewis names the people in the photographs, where possible, in an appendix, but does not identify their relationship to her.) Lewis has the ardor and the delicacy of an archeologist who knows that these totems, these relics of the past, these tombs dug in warm earth crawling with worms and sunshine, could, with patience, reveal an entire city—a metropolis of the self.

A picture of Lewis's mother from the fifties—a thin, vibrant-looking woman with cropped hair, holding a bouquet (Is it her wedding day? The beginning of the story that will lead to Robin?)—is accompanied by this lyric:

> I have been
> thinking about you
> again today,
>
> as I do—
> so often—think of you,
> wondering
>
> if people can see the sky
> of our childhood
> the way we still see (the sky)
>
> whenever we think
> of each other.
> Well, not see, but feel—
>
> the way
> every feeling
> has a trillion eyes.

Lewis's love of women—she is openly queer—is one of the incredibly sweet (but never saccharine) elements of this book. It's the matriarchs, with their strength, their mystery, their complications, who have a hold on Lewis and will not let her go, just as her grandmother's visual treasure trove will not let her go. Turn the page in "To the Realization of Perfect Helplessness" and you'll find Lewis's mother now standing at what appears to be a banquet. A young couple separate her from an attractive young man. Are they the hosts of the party? Are they the bride and groom, embarking on a grand adventure? By this point, you understand that Lewis is doing something different with captions. Hers are filled not with factual information but with emotion. Her words direct us to the beauty of what she sees in her mother's face:

> There are days
> when all I want
> is to hold your hand
>
> and walk down Wilmington—
> two girls who can feel
> all the galaxies inside
>
> and no one
> to understand—
> or even fathom—that

Words change pictures, just as pictures expand on words. Sometimes, going through Lewis's book, I was reminded of Walter Benjamin's wonderful 1931 essay "Little History of Photography," and, in particular, his take on loneliness in photographs. The wedding-banquet photo has all the signs of what I call "Negro specificity"—elegant place settings, flowers, hair, and suits just so—that speak of what has been achieved, and of what will be achieved by the generation that follows. But isn't achievement, by definition, a lonely thing? One that separates you, economically and otherwise, from those who came before you?

That "beauty in order," as the playwright Adrienne Kennedy described it in her scrapbook-as-memoir "People Who Led to My Plays" (1987), can be disrupted, too. In Los Angeles, Lewis talked to me about the sexual abuse she had suffered as a child: "I came out to my mother about my [maternal] grandfather's pedophilia against me from my dorm at Hampshire, and my mother said, 'That never happened,' and then, 'Guess what I bought at Saks?' She was in shock, I discovered later. She'd hoped I didn't remember. I began to ask questions about several incidents—and that destroyed her. I didn't tell my father what had happened until after my grandfather died—because I was raised by men who believed in honor and retribution, and I didn't want my father or brothers or uncles to go to jail. But the gift of all this is that both my parents embraced me then, and their honesty and rage and sorrow and company reduced the impact that my grandfather's mental illness had on my life." Part of the strength of Lewis's new book is that little is explicitly described; you won't get any standard revelations here. Lewis tells stories through metaphor and the language of longing. Her urge is to reach out to the dead, to revitalize them, to make history notice them. Abuse is embedded in the danger and the power of the words. (Lewis's grandfather appears in several images.)

Lewis is fierce in her advocacy for her parents, both of whom are now dead. "I idolized my father," she told me. "It was hard for me to accept that he was just a man. He was a fantastic man." Lewis's father was, she told me, "a closet mathematician." Unfortunately, his parents could afford to send only one child to college—his older brother, who became a pediatrician. After serv-

ing in the Second World War, Lewis's father worked as a janitor, and then as a forklift operator, for decades. Dreams don't die. They live on in your children, or in family lore, until they become questions—Why didn't Dad do this? Why did Mom do that?—that amount to a kind of haunting.

For Lewis, this haunting extends beyond her immediate family to the many folks in these photographs who dreamed of being something different in a changed world. Henson, the subject of the longest poem in the book, "The Ark: Self-Portrait as Aphrodite Using Her Dress for a Sail," was reportedly one of the first men to reach the North Pole, in 1909. His ferocious determination to fulfill his ambitions is mirrored by Lewis's; the two are linked by parallel desires to be free, an impulse that makes them family. At first, they are father and daughter, and then, because Lewis is the writer and has the last word, she becomes the parent of the story, she and all her Black female ancestors at once, a kind of buoy riding and never sinking on the sea. Saying adieu to Henson, to that part of history, before returning to her family photographs, Lewis writes:

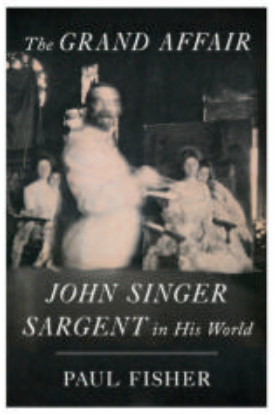
> And here I am—still—at home,
> bobbing on top of this endless white sea,
> batting my lashes
>
> toward every beacon—on any remaining shore—ignited
> and burning brightly throughout all the black worlds.

Lewis carries Henson's dream—and the dreams of all the family members she knew or didn't know—into the world of her imagination, which also begins with a dream. She writes in "The Ark":

> When no one is speaking French, I hear people speaking
> French. When no one's speaking Spanish, I hear someone
> call out to me in Spanish. In my sleep I hear languages
> I have never heard. And answer back.

What is writing but listening for what you've never heard before? And exploring—sometimes in words, sometimes in words and images—the hitherto unknown regions of your mind and, God willing, the minds of all the people who made you? ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED



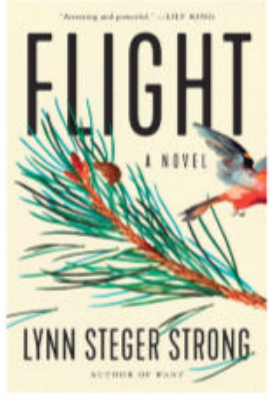
The Grand Affair, *by Paul Fisher (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. As one of the premier portraitists of the Belle Époque, John Singer Sargent lived a life befitting his status: garnering praise at the Paris Salon, painting such figures as Isabella Stewart Gardner and Teddy Roosevelt, and socializing with luminaries like Henry James and Oscar Wilde. But, as this sensitive biography makes clear, Sargent also pursued less socially acceptable interests; he had an abiding fascination with the male nude and was involved in intimate, somewhat ambiguous relationships with same-sex friends and models. Fisher wisely avoids making sweeping claims about Sargent's sexuality, choosing instead to examine how "the protected and sanctioned camaraderie of the studio" enabled the painter's art and social life to take on quietly unconventional forms.



We Are Not One, *by Eric Alterman (Basic)*. In this fearless account, Alterman, a journalist and a historian, sets out to describe the complex relationship between Israel and the U.S., at a moment when the former, having just elected the most conservative government in its history, is a distinctly red state, while, in the latter, Jews make up one of the bluest constituencies. He provides a scrupulous history of the crucial debates over Zionism, anti-Zionism, Palestine, the role of memory and the Holocaust, and America's interactions with Israel. Alterman's aim is not to flatter readers, no matter their ideological camp, but, rather, to scrutinize mythologies and fairy tales in order to make greater sense of why Israeli and American Jews, particularly in non-Orthodox communities, appear to be drifting farther apart.



Scatterlings, *by Rešoketšwe Manenzhe (HarperVia)*. Set in South Africa in 1927, this powerful novel chronicles the unravelling of a biracial family in the wake of the Immorality Act, which outlawed sexual relations between white and Black people. A winemaker of Dutch and English heritage; his wife, who was born to formerly enslaved parents in Jamaica; and their two daughters are "tumbled into chaos" by the new law. In despair, the mother makes a decision that costs two family members their lives; the surviving pair flee the country. Manenzhe situates this tragic tale within the broader context of the displacement and abuse of Africans caused by colonialism and the slave trade, but her achievement is to humanize the victims of that legacy, in a story that feels like an act of restoration.



Flight, *by Lynn Steger Strong (Mariner)*. In this compact, minutely observed novel, the fate of a house in Florida—in which the three adult children of a recently deceased woman were raised—becomes the subject of delicate debate. Taking place in the lead-up to the first Christmas after the mother's death, the story centers on her gathered offspring, their spouses, and their own children, employing a roving perspective to tease out each character's response to loss and kinship. One of the sons considers his tribe "a small good gift," whereas his wife is bewildered by the use of the word "family" in a way that "didn't necessarily portend some sort of altercation."

MUSICAL EVENTS

STICK FIGURES

The divergent conducting careers of Klaus Mäkelä and Xian Zhang.

BY ALEX ROSS



We need more conductors who focus on a single city and put down roots.

Some years ago, when I was interviewing the pianist Mitsuko Uchida, she poked fun at the idea of a youthful star conductor: "Do you want yourself to be operated on by a genius twenty-year-old heart surgeon? Do you want to go to the theatre and see a teen-ager play King Lear?" Uchida's point was that practitioners of the arm-waving profession tend to grow better and wiser with age. Orchestras register not only the gestures a conductor makes in front of them but also the history of music-making that those gestures reflect. Herbert Blomstedt, who is ninety-five, can mesmerize a jaded first-tier ensemble with a gentle wave of his hands. It's more than a question of personal mystique: it's trust in a cumulative record of collective work.

That said, conducting isn't simply an old person's game. Willem Mengelberg, a major figure in early-twentieth-century music, assumed control of the Concertgebouw Orchestra, in Amsterdam, when he was twenty-four. Zubin Mehta and Gustavo Dudamel both took the helm of the L.A. Philharmonic when they were in their twenties. The City of Birmingham Symphony helped launch the careers of Simon Rattle, Andris Nelsons, and Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla. Now comes Klaus Mäkelä, a twenty-six-year-old Finn who has shot to podium fame as precipitately as anyone in history. He leads the Oslo Philharmonic and the Orchestre de Paris, will become chief conductor of the Concertgebouw in 2027, and is being eyed by several American orchestras. He made his New York Philharmonic début in early December.

With high cheekbones and sleekly styled hair, Mäkelä looks the part of the dashing European maestro, particularly if you are seeking a Generation Z reboot of Herbert von Karajan. Perhaps with that resemblance in mind, the Decca label signed Mäkelä and, earlier this year, released his first recording: an entire cycle of the Sibelius symphonies, with the Oslo Philharmonic. The idea that someone in his mid-twenties could have mastered these complex and elusive scores is improbable on its face, and Mäkelä, for all his obvious talent, shows his immaturity on nearly every page.

Take the Sibelius Fifth—a marvel of continuous transformation in which colossal themes gestate from atmospheric textures. Mäkelä has an excellent ear for sonority, especially in the string section. (He started out as a cellist.) All manner of fascinating details emerge: for example, regimented bumblebee activity underpinning the desolate bassoon solo in the first movement. Yet clarity often comes at the price of momentum. More than a few passages sound like those moments in rehearsal when a conductor asks players to slow down so that nuances can be checked. The movement never accelerates into full, thundering flight. Throughout the symphony, there is too much string legato, too little terracing of dynamics, and an awkward grasp of structural transitions. The same critique can be levelled at most of the rest of the cycle, with the notable exception of the Fourth Symphony, which makes a virtue of lugubrious stasis.

I suspect that in later years Mäkelä will be embarrassed by this premature début. Anyone of his age would have gone similarly astray; most conductors make their mistakes outside the international glare. Karajan, for one, spent many years in the German cities of Ulm and Aachen before moving on to Berlin. Only after repeated efforts can a conductor discover which choices capture the attention of audiences and which ones bore them. Let's hope that Mäkelä can ignore the oddly cultish aura that surrounds him and learn from his inevitable wrong turns. Otherwise, he will fade into the ranks of photogenic prodigies past.

Mäkelä has one substantial gift: he seems to win the respect of almost every

ILLUSTRATION BY LUIS MAZÓN

orchestra he works with. The New York Philharmonic, which has a history of disdaining hot-shot young conductors, proved to be no exception. From the start, I had the impression that the players liked the slender Finn and were responding to him alertly. Seldom in recent years have the strings sounded as warm and rich as they did under Mäkelä, who, despite a fair amount of calisthenics on the podium, gives a crisp beat.

At the Friday-morning matinée, Mäkelä achieved mixed results. Jimmy López Bellido's "Perú Negro," a tone poem based on Afro-Peruvian traditions, was vivid but monochromatic. Shostakovich's Sixth Symphony, with its tragic opening movement and two ironic scherzos, exhibited some of the same issues that mar Mäkelä's Sibelius: atmosphere swallowed up momentum, and the finale fell short of the required hysteria. Tchaikovsky's "Pathétique," though, received a performance of exceptional cohesion, with organically flowing tempos and finely controlled balances. (The Philharmonic seems to be compensating well for the acoustic shortcomings that have troubled Geffen Hall since its renovation.) Even if high passion was lacking, the reading had considerable impact, above all in the great lamenting Adagio.

Mäkelä made an unfortunate choice in the "Pathétique." After the bombastic coda of the third movement, which all but begs for applause, he plunged straight into the Adagio, with the result that the first couple of bars were drowned out by audience noise. The custom of remaining silent during pauses between movements took hold only after Tchaikovsky's death; the composer would have expected clapping after the third movement, and, I've always felt, planned to dispel that jubilation with the sobbing first bars of the Adagio. If he had wanted no pause, he would have indicated as much. Mäkelä is hardly the only conductor who attempts an irritating form of crowd control at this moment; he should discard the pretension and trust in the music.

In November, the New Jersey Symphony celebrated its centennial with a gala concert at Prudential Hall, at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center, in Newark—a venue that opened in 1997 and immediately proved superior to Avery Fisher Hall, as Geffen was then known. The New Jersey Symphony dwells in the shadow of the New York Philharmonic, but it has long displayed an adventurous, progressive spirit. The conductor Henry Lewis, who was based there from 1968 to 1976, was the first Black music director at a major American orchestra. The ensemble is now led by Xian Zhang, a forty-nine-year-old Chinese-born conductor who first won wide notice when she held an associate position at the Philharmonic, in the Lorin Maazel era.

Diminutive but dynamic, Zhang is an immaculate podium technician who incites playing of uncommon vitality. Last season, at the L.A. Phil, she facilitated the most flat-out electrifying account of Beethoven's Seventh I've ever heard. At the Newark gala, she elicited an exuberantly violent version of Ginastera's Four Dances from "Estancia," with members of the New Jersey Ballet performing in tandem. Zhang is also a strong proponent of contemporary scores, emphasizing those of nonwhite and female composers. Perhaps most important, she is an empathetic musician who mediates among the players more than she dictates to them. The main attraction of the gala was Yo-Yo Ma, who delivered Dvořák's Cello Concerto with his usual authority and spontaneity. Zhang not only followed Ma's freewheeling, ruminative approach but also internalized it, so that there was no evident tension between orchestra and soloist.

Although Mäkelä garners more publicity, Zhang strikes me as the likelier future of the art. We don't need more itinerant maestros who draw big salaries in multiple cities, carrying their putative genius in their hand luggage. We need more directorships along the lines of Marin Alsop's, at the Baltimore Symphony, or Osmo Vänskä's, at the Minnesota Orchestra—ones in which a conductor focusses on a single city and puts down roots. This is how American orchestral culture unfolded before jet travel. George Szell, during his storied tenure with the Cleveland Orchestra, conducted up to three-quarters of its concerts in a given season. The culture of lyrical perfection that he fostered remains his monument. ♦

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THE THEATRE

NEW AGAIN

"Merrily We Roll Along" and "Some Like It Hot."

BY HELEN SHAW



Lindsay Mendez, Katie Rose Clarke, Jonathan Groff, and Daniel Radcliffe.

"It's our time, breathe it in," the friends Frank (Jonathan Groff), Charley (Daniel Radcliffe), and Mary (Lindsay Mendez) sing ecstatically at the end of "Merrily We Roll Along," Stephen Sondheim's much beleaguered musical about three artists and their deteriorating relationships and ambitions. Time in the musical goes backward: we first meet the trio during their lowest point (basically, their forties), so the youthful optimism of those last, hopeful lines is meant to sound false. In this "Merrily," though, it rings sincere, as if claiming a long-delayed triumph on the musical's behalf. Anticipation for the new production has been frantic. "I heard the whole run sold out in eight minutes," someone whispered behind me at the New York Theatre Workshop, as we waited for the show to begin.

"Merrily" has traditionally been painted as not just a minor work but a clunker in Sondheim's catalogue. Opening on Broadway in 1981 to a disastrous reception, it closed after only sixteen performances, and, in the decades that followed, both the book writer, George Furth, and Sondheim kept tinkering with it. Versions abound. The critical shellacking temporarily wrecked the composer's relationship with the director Hal Prince, rupturing an incredible streak of collaboration that included "Sweeney Todd" and "Company" and altering everything that came after. But yesterday's flop is today's juggernaut: we're already on the third high-profile New York revival of "Merrily" in ten years; a documentary, Lonny Price's "Best Worst Thing That Ever Could Have Happened," came out in 2016; and there's a Richard Linklater movie in the works. The "Dickensian child in the corner" (as Sondheim called the musical) has grown into the colossus in the doorway.

Frank, Charley, and Mary's story starts in 1976, with the disappointments of middle age—material success but a broken friendship for Frank and Charley, destructive alcoholism for Mary—and finishes on the day the three met, on a rooftop, in 1957. Scene by scene, moving in reverse chronologically, we see first the betrayals and humiliations, *then* the innocence that preceded them. Frank and Charley write musicals, but Frank's attention is too easy to divert: he's left his first wife, Beth (Katie Rose Clarke), for the glamorous Broadway star Gussie (Krystal Joy Brown) and ditched the ambitious artistic plans he had with Charley for the suntanned sheen of Hollywood. Mary, too, is a creative person, though her unrequited passion for Frank has vaguely stymied her. (Her underwritten story line is one of the show's entrenched flaws.) Of course, every hopeful moment we see in the three friends' twenty years together, from a wedding to a reunion to a jubilant opening night, has already had its promise extinguished by the time it rolls merrily around. We know how everything ends.

The music tries to make this bleakness bearable. Sondheim's songs for "Merrily," including "Not a Day Goes By," "Good Thing Going," and "Opening Doors," are some of his lushest and most richly colored. Gussie's puzzle of a character is a repository for some rather nasty prejudices about actresses, but at least she gets to sing your socks off, which Brown absolutely does. Frank and Charley's spiky exchanges with their commercially minded producer, Joe (a scene-stealing, vowel-purring Reg Rogers), hint at Sondheim's own

ILLUSTRATION BY DIEGO MALLO

irritation about being told by critics and lazy-eared listeners that "There's not a tune you can hum / There's not a tune you / go bum-bum-bum-di-dum." To show those philistines, Sondheim wrote a score that bum-di-dums you into next week.

Sondheim's contagious, compelling music alone has never quite sufficed, though, and directors have often been tempted to cut or carve the musical into a more pleasing shape. Here, the director, Maria Friedman, barely touches the text. Has her production made Furth's plot (loosely borrowed from a 1934 Kaufman and Hart play about a callous playwright of boulevard comedies) suddenly logical—that is, do we ever believe that a Broadway composer has somehow turned into a ritzy L.A. movie producer? No. Has the musical grown softer in the years since audiences rejected it for its bitterness and unlikability? Certainly not. Instead, Friedman bypasses narrative logic for what's deeply true.

Her hyper-energetic staging, based on a 2013 "Merrily" staged for the tiny Menier Chocolate Factory, in London, imagines the musical as a flashback for Frank. A callow jerk is now a *conflicted* jerk, who has a whole choir of regret singing inside him. (The gifted ensemble, more than a dozen strong, haunts him at every turn.) Soutra Gilmour's set design places the show inside his bland Los Angeles mansion, where a nine-piece mini-orchestra is ensconced on the second floor; this is a "home" so personality-free it can also stand in for a television studio, an alleyway, and that final (first) rooftop. How can we blame Frank for his shallowness? He's a product of his future environment.

Friedman unearths the potential that Sondheim-heads have always suspected was in "Merrily" by infusing it with enthusiasm, sympathy, and (not to be cheesy about it) love. The show's three central performers are emotional fire hoses who all palpably adore one another. Radcliffe has a common or garden voice, but he fizzes like a cartoon fuse: any time he moves, he ricochets, and his past as the boy wizard Harry Potter helps the audience fill in the outlines of his boy-genius character. Groff's silky tenor and angelic face elevate a part that can sometimes be contemptible—for the first time, I could see Frank as both the dreamer who believes in greatness and the glib charmer who believes every lie he tells. And the Tony-winning Mendez, whose staggering, trumpetlike mezzo could be used on battlefields, becomes the heart of the show, even when the lines betray her or scenes exclude her. "Beware! Retreat! Save yourselves!" Mendez's clarion call peals forth, when the script says she's just asking for another drink.

Friedman and her cast are attuned to the ways in which Sondheim and Furth were trying to frame the hapless tenderness we feel for our present selves, not just our past ones. The pair lit their dark project with lightning bolt after lightning bolt—compromise, responsibility, human frailty, the desire to make a living—any one of which can vaporize an ideal on impact. So is this production finally, forty years later, the definitive "Merrily"? It wouldn't be the first time that a triumphant story started in middle age.

Uptown at the Shubert Theatre, another nostalgic musical—this one set during jazzy, woozy Prohibition—looks backward, too. "Some Like It Hot," though, likes what it sees. The elegant, frequently wonderful production is a frothy adaptation of Billy Wilder's 1959 classic film about two jobbing musicians (here, Christian Borle and J. Harrison Ghee) who, after witnessing a gangland shooting, hide out with an all-girl band.

Adaptations of movies about cross-dressing have been like buses lately: if you missed "Tootsie," in 2019, "Mrs. Doubtfire" was right behind it, waiting in line. It's odd, isn't it, that Broadway producers keep picking source material that operates by the same core equation: men + dresses = gags. What a choice to keep making! As much as the original movies pushed boundaries and tweaked prejudices, we now hear in them various notes of misogyny and transphobia. Muting these has led to some uncomfortable creative pretzel-twisting—which is the shape you make when you're covering your ass.

Although those earlier two musicals accepted their source materials' basic premises, "Hot"'s many creators—the composer, Marc Shaiman, who also co-wrote the lyrics; his fellow-lyricist, Scott Wittman; and the book writers, Matthew López and Amber Ruffin—have dislodged the beloved Wilder treasure from its sprockets. There's a multiracial cast, for one thing, including the Black bandleader Sweet Sue (NaTasha Yvette Williams, driving her astounding voice through songs like a fist through paper) and her lead chanteuse, Sugar Kane (Adrianna Hicks, the powerhouse from "Six"), who here is based more on Lena Horne than on the film's Marilyn Monroe. And, instead of the original's winking attitude toward gay panic ("Why would a guy marry a guy?" "Security!"), the rewriters take a new tack. The nonbinary Ghee plays Jerry, and, as Jack Lemmon did in the film version, blossoms when assuming the Daphne identity. But in this version Daphne emerges as a true self, and Jerry is forgotten. "You could have knocked me over with a feather," Ghee sings in one of the show's finest numbers (while wearing one of the costume designer Gregg Barnes's finest numbers), because "that lady that I'm loving is me."

Too much comparison with the fleet Wilder staging in the film will get you nowhere—in this sumptuous, everything's-a-showstopper version, the director and choreographer, Casey Nicholaw, and company have chosen mass over velocity. Nicholaw goes big, but he isn't quite as inventive as we have seen him before (a slamming-doors chase scene wastes several opportunities for farce), and the throwback musical pastiche by the songwriters, Shaiman and Wittman—songs trying to sound like standards from long ago, but written yesterday—suffers from overamplification, which drowns out the lyrics. (Thankfully, we can hear all the details in Sugar's stunning rendition of "At the Old Majestic Nickel Matinee," the show's wisest, quietest song.) Borle, usually full of demonic energies, keeps his manic light under a bushel. But Ghee soars and soars, glowing every time the show's follow spots pivot around to Daphne. Who says you shouldn't go back? Perhaps there was someone beautiful you missed the first time around, and you want a chance to look again. ♦

THE CURRENT CINEMA

THE LOWER DEPTHS

"Avatar: The Way of Water" and "Living."

BY ANTHONY LANE

Another blue movie. Thirteen years after "Avatar," we have a sequel. The director, as before, is James Cameron, who has promised (or threatened) further installments. The new film is subtitled "The Way of Water," which sounds like the memoir of a celebrity urologist. Once again, the center of operations is a moon called Pandora, whose inhabitants, the Na'vi, have azure skin, luminescent freckles, and magic ponytails that they plug into plants and animals. They are at one with nature and at sixes and sevens with encroaching humans, most of whom are nasty, brutish, and so short that they barely come up to the Na'vi's navels.



James Cameron's sequel to his 2009 film stars Sam Worthington and Zoe Saldaña.

The hero of the first movie was a mortal man, Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), who went rogue, native, and nuts for a Na'vi named Neytiri (Zoe Saldaña). In the end, he became a full-fledged Pandoran, in body, mind, and all-round spiritual oomph. The big news, in "The Way of Water," is that he and Neytiri have been busy in the intervening period, spawning three children and adopting a couple more. (Cameron is too prim to reveal exactly how the spawning works, but I'm sure it must be heavy on the ponytails.) They all live together in a forest, bathed in bliss, until, one day, descending spaceships signal the return of *Homo sapiens*—specifically, a military task force, led by General Ardmore (Edie Falco), which wastes no time in churning up the soil and setting fire to innocent trees.

These early scenes of destruction recall the nuclear inferno that Cameron dramatized in "Terminator 2: Judgment Day" (1991), and they verify the strange—one might say pathological—contradictions in his instincts. On the one hand, we have Cameron the vegan, as green as the Na'vi are blue, who likes nothing better than to plumb the mysteries of the deep in a submersible. On the other hand, we have Cameron the hard-core weapons guy and tech fetishist, whose works resound to stuttering guns and the whirr, shunt, and click of metal upon metal. It's as if Sir David Attenborough divided his time between birds of paradise and monster trucks.

The split is all too visible in the look, and in the structure, of Cameron's latest film. To nobody's surprise, Jake becomes the chief of the anti-human resistance, riding his mount—a dragonfly the size of a dragon, sporting pretty wings—into battle against a thundering train. (Had he been around in 1962, he would have seen Peter O'Toole pull a similar stunt in "Lawrence of Arabia.") Opposing him is Quaritch (Stephen Lang), a marine colonel who has taken on Na'vi form: a cunning disguise, rendered utterly useless by his telltale crewcut. The only solution is for Jake, Neytiri, and the kids to quit the woods and make for the seaside; the central phase of the movie tacks back and forth, over and over, between the splashy utopia of their new home and the dark machinations of Quaritch and his ilk as they prepare to hunt Jake down.

Life by the shore is a shock. The local Na'vi are of a turquoise tint, with thick and finny tails, and they can swim as smoothly as they can run. Think of them as Na'vi seals. Jake's children get picked on for being landlubbers, but there are compensations: the sea abounds with funky creatures, including a whale that understands sign language, and there's a splendid moment when Jake's adopted daughter, who is super-attuned to all sentient things, fends off a hostile human, beneath the waves, by urging a spindly invertebrate to wrap the attacker in its tendrils. Now you know: my enemy's anemone is my friend. What, however, is the point of these marvels? Do they really advance the plot, or could it be that the film is an excuse, or at least an opportunity, for the refining of Cameron's craft? Remember "Finding Nemo" (2003), which was a showcase for what Pixar could do with water, ripples and all? Well, this movie gives off the same proud gleam, magnified to the max.

The original "Avatar" inspired a resurgence of 3-D, which soon subsided, in less audacious hands. Now it's back for the sequel, and if you've missed the rare sensation of being poked in the eye by an arrow tip, or of 3-D spectacles slipping sweatily down your nose, enjoy the ride. The film is more than three hours long, some of it dangerously close to dawdling; not until the final third does Cameron apply the whip and remind us that, in the cho-

ILLUSTRATION BY LEONARDO SANTAMARIA

reographing of action sequences, he remains unsurpassed. We are treated to a straight fight between Quaritch's men, who are on board a flying boat equipped for the slaughter of whales, and Jake's oceanic troops, roused to fury from their love of peace. The moral combat could not be more simplistic, yet all the Cameron trademarks are in play: the thrill of the chase, the eruptions of flame, the near-feral rage to protect the young—Neytiri is akin to Ripley, in "Aliens" (1986), shielding a little girl from a beast—and, as in "Titanic" (1997), the vertiginous tilt as a vessel is sucked down into the gloom. Factor in "The Abyss" (1989) and you have to ask: What *is* it with James Cameron and H_2O? Did he almost drown in the bath as a boy? Is he part sponge? "The way of water has no beginning and no end," Jake is told. Brace yourself, and breathe in.

There is a poem by William Empson, "This Last Pain," in which the poet imagines that we could "learn a style from a despair." Useful advice, I have always found, and it certainly comes to mind, crystallized in the glint of minor gestures, whenever Bill Nighy appears onscreen. His manners—the fidgety languor, the politesse, the way that he delivers a line of dialogue as if trying to cross a busy road—would be mannerisms, were it not for the pressure of feeling that gathers behind them. All of which renders him fit for "Living," in which he plays a very British civil servant, Mr. Williams, who receives a diagnosis of terminal cancer. Or, as he prefers to phrase it, "This is rather a bore, but the doctors have given me six months." His last pain, indeed.

The movie is directed by Oliver Hermanus and written by the Nobel laureate Kazuo Ishiguro. It is adapted from "Ikiru," Akira Kurosawa's sorrowful tale of a doomed Tokyo bureaucrat, which was released in Japan in 1952. Hermanus's version is set in the nineteen-fifties, largely in London, where Mr. Williams heads a Department of Public Works. Custom demands that any private works—the unpleasantly dramatic fact of mortality, for instance—be kept under wraps. Even the journey to the office requires discretion: when a new employee, Mr. Wakeling (Alex Sharp), meets his colleagues on a suburban station platform, all of them clad in suits and topped with bowler hats, he is advised against conviviality. "Bit like church," someone says. Amen.

So diffident is the care with which "Living" is arranged that I began to wonder if it was actually *made* by Mr. Williams, in secret, from beyond the veil. "Mr. Zombie," he is called by Miss Harris (Aimee Lou Wood), the cheeriest member of his staff, when he ventures to take her out for lunch. "Sort of dead but not dead," she adds. He seems unoffended. Only gradually do we realize that he's a widower; the film sidles up to him, in lieu—or in fear—of confronting him head on. In contrast to the starkness of "Ikiru," which opens with an X-ray of a diseased stomach, it takes a while before we even notice Mr. Williams in a doctor's waiting room, sitting quietly and preparing for bad news. We keep approaching him via other people, including his son, his daughter-in-law, Mr. Wakeling, Miss Harris, and the lone bohemian of the story, a fellow named Sutherland (Tom Burke), in whom our hero confides on a trip to the coast, and who drags him along on a nocturnal binge. So compelling are Nighy and Burke that I will watch them in anything, yet their spree, drenched in rich and hazy colors, doesn't quite ring true. Maybe Mr. Williams is dreaming the whole thing.

"Living" carries echoes of "The Remains of the Day," the 1993 film of Ishiguro's famous novel, in which Anthony Hopkins stars as a butler whose soul has been ironed flat, like a tablecloth. Both films face the same challenge. When actors as resourceful and as intuitive as Hopkins and Nighy play wilted or limited men, do we honestly believe in the result, or are we spectators at a brilliant show? Mr. Williams asks Miss Harris if his new hat will "go down a storm," and takes her to see "I Was a Male War Bride" (1949)—Cary Grant in drag!—at the pictures, but those are hardly Williams-like activities. They speak of something more precious: a gentleman dandy with one foot, beautifully shod, in the grave. The end is Nighy. ♦

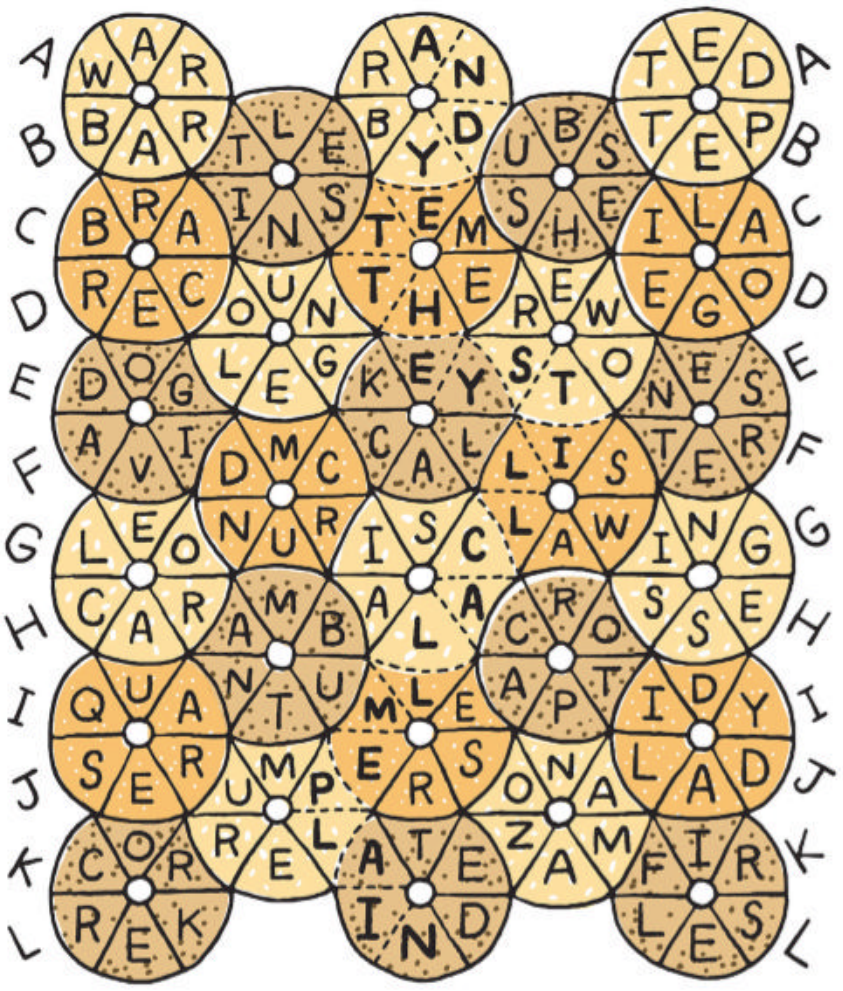
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ANSWER KEY

BAGEL SHOP

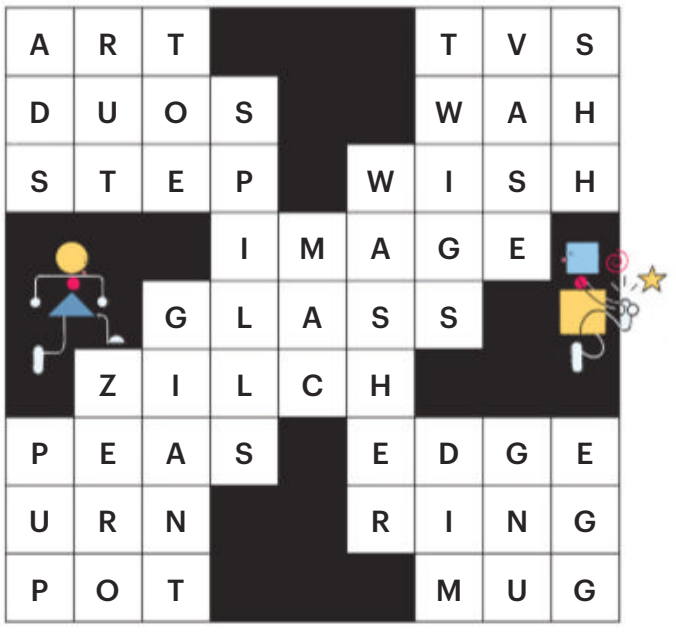
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Cartoon caption:
"And yet they still call me plain."

COVER CROSSWORD

page 47



PATTERN RECOGNITION

page 48

A1. "Oil!"
A2. Shell
A3. Brittle
A4. Gallery

B1. Atomic
B2. Rapture
B3. Maria
B4. Dreaming

C1. Reagan
C2. Sinatra
C3. Drew
C4. Grace

D1. Barclays Center
D2. Baja California
D3. Beverly Cleary
D4. Birth control

Connection A: Peanuts (All can follow "peanut" to make a familiar two-word phrase.)

Connection B: Blondie (All are singles by the band Blondie.)

Connection C: Nancy (All are surnames of famous Nancys.)

Connection D: B.C. (All have the initials B.C.)

Final Connection: "Peanuts," "Blondie," "Nancy," and "B.C." are all long-running newspaper comic strips.

CRYPTIC CROSSWORD

page 49

ACROSS

2 S(HA)KIER
8 ROAR (hidden rev.)
9 EZR + A (even letters of *Belzer*)
10 ANT(EA)TER (*Arnett* anag.)
11 HI-(HA)TS
12 RESORTS (anag.)
15 MOM + ENTS (first letters of *episode needed to show*)
17 SA(HA)RA
20 HANDICAP (hidden)
21 IN + F + O (*Ni* rev.)
22 G(A)LE(e)
23 LAUGH-I + N (*Uh . . . Ali G* anag.)

DOWN

1 GRA(HA)M
3 HAT + H
4 ARE + A
5 KEATON (anag.)
6 ERECTS (anag.)
7 RA + RE
12 ROXANA (*rocks Anna* hom.)
13 SEA DOG (anag.)
14 S(HA)PED
16 PHIL (*fill* hom.)
18 HIGH (2 defs.)
19 A.Ç. + A.I.

COMEDY OF ERRORS

page 53

1. I like this p[a]lace, / And willingly could waste my time in it. —"As You Like It"
2. Sweep on, you f[l]at and greasy citizens. —"As You Like It"
3. If music be the f[l]ood of love, play on. —"Twelfth Night"
4. You [s]have such a February face. —"Much Ado About Nothing"
5. If we shadows have offended / Think but this and [w]all is mended. —"A Midsummer Night's Dream"
6. Who chooseth me shall gain wh[e]at many men desire. —"The Merchant of Venice"
7. Love thoughts lie rich when canopied with bow[l]ers. —"Twelfth Night"
8. Do not these fair yoke[l]s / Become the forest better than the town? —"The Merry Wives of Windsor"
9. To die[t] is to be banished from myself. —"The Two Gentlemen of Verona"
10. And run through fire I will for thy sweet s[h]ake. —"A Midsummer Night's Dream"
11. Tell me where is fancy bre[a]d . . . —"The Merchant of Venice"
12. O, brave new[t] world / That has such people in 't! —"The Tempest"
13. Cupid is a knavish lad / Thus to make poor females m[e]ad. —"A Midsummer Night's Dream"
14. Some ri[n]se by sin and some by virtue fall. —"Measure for Measure"
15. Lord, what fools these mortals be[d]! —"A Midsummer Night's Dream"
16. That which I would discover / The [s]law of friendship bids me to conceal. —"The Two Gentlemen of Verona"
17. Everyone can master a grief but he that has [w]it. —"Much Ado About Nothing"
18. 'Tis but a three years' f[e]ast. / The mind shall banquet though the body pine. —"Love's Labour's Lost"
19. I do desire we may be better strang[l]ers. —"As You Like It"
20. And I am such a tender [l]ass, if my hair do but tickle me, I must scratch. —"A Midsummer Night's Dream"

The motto spelled out by the typos is "All's well that ends well."

SOUNDS ABOUT RIGHT

page 52

B	O	M	B				H	E	W			S	T	I	R
C	H	A	I		T	H	E	I	R		G	O	O	S	E
C	O	M	S		W	A	L	L	Y		M	I	L	L	E
S	H	A	Q	U	I	L	L	E		G	A	L	L	E	D
			U	P	N		B	E	A	R			S	T	Y
B	A	K	E	S		S	E	N	S	O	R	S			
I	C	E			T	O	N		S	A	V	E	A	L	L
R	H	Y	M	E	W	I	T	H	I	T	S	C	L	U	E
D	E	S	I	R	E	S		E	S	S			U	N	E
			T	R	E	E	R	A	T		T	I	M	E	S
W	A	P			N	E	E	D		U	R	N			
E	R	A	S	E	S		D	N	A	S	A	M	P	L	E
E	E	R	I	E		C	R	O	C	S		A	H	O	Y
K	N	E	L	L		P	E	T	E	R		T	I	L	E
S	A	N	K			A	W	E				E	L	L	S

SIGHT GAGS

page 54

1. "Raising Arizona"
2. "Clueless" (Clue + less)
3. "Groundhog Day" (G + round hog + day)
4. "Some Like It Hot" (Sum + lie + kit + hot)
5. "Best in Show"
6. "Bridesmaids" (Bee rides maids)
7. "Girls Trip"
8. "Fire Island"
9. "Modern Times" (Mo. + [Laura] Dern + times)

A. Jennifer Coolidge (Jay + knife + fur + cool ledge)

B. Tiffany Haddish (Tee + fan + E + hat + dish)

C. Bill Murray (Bill + moray)

D. Joel Kim Booster (Joe + L + skim - S + booster)

E. Charlie Chaplin (C + Harley + chapel + in)

F. Holly Hunter

G. Alicia Silverstone (A + lease + Sia + silver + stone)

H. Marilyn Monroe (Mare + *Elle* in MON row)

I. Kristen Wiig (K + wrist in wig)

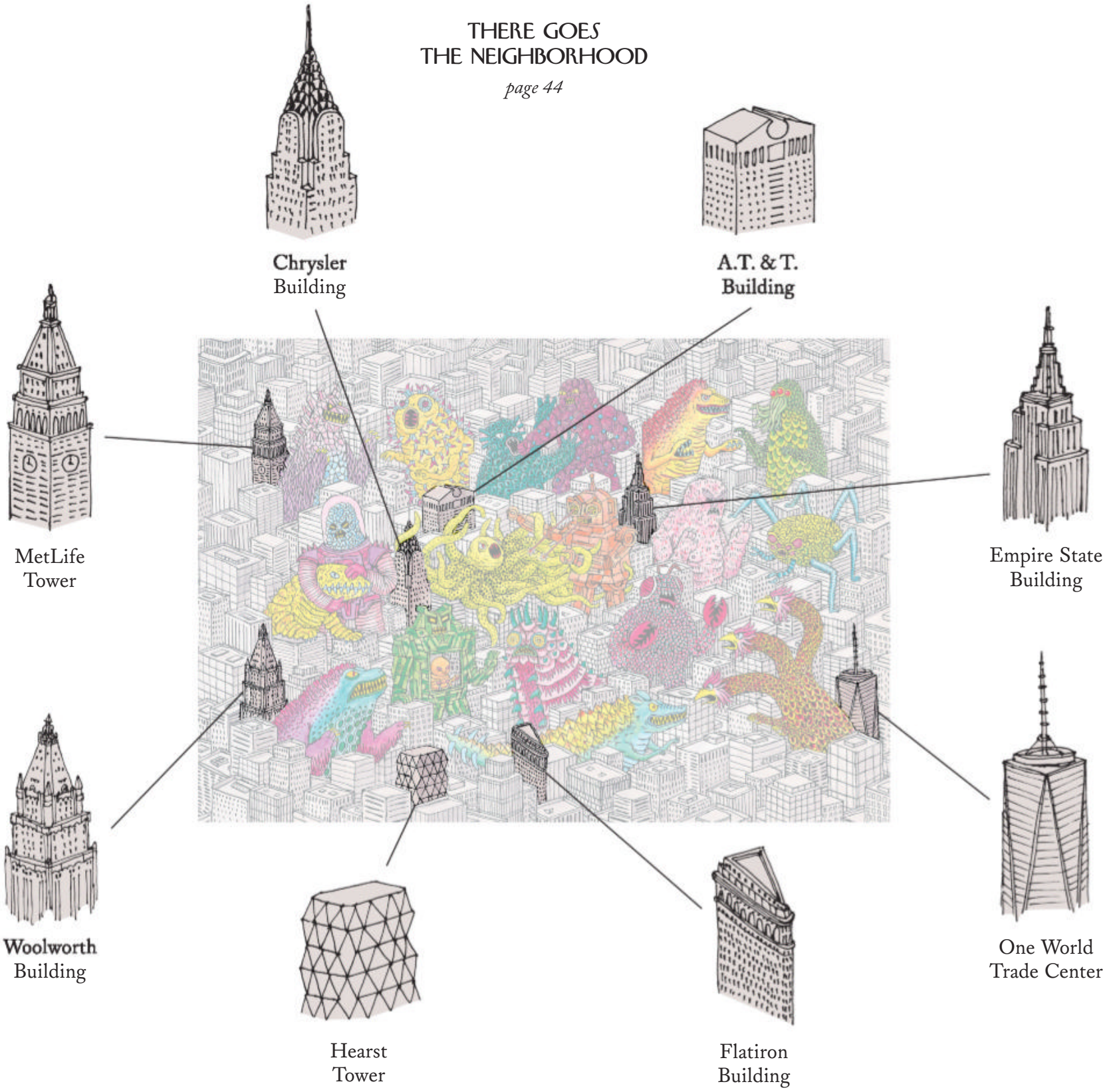
1. F; 2. G; 3. C; 4. H; 5. A; 6. I; 7. B; 8. D; 9. E

ANSWER KEY

(Cont'd.)

THERE GOES THE NEIGHBORHOOD

page 44



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